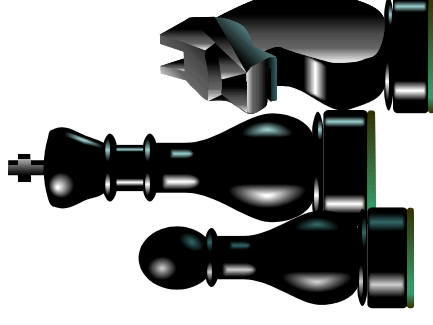


A **Systems** **Primer**



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Systems Checklist

What is a System?

A system is an organized, integrated network of generally diverse, different parts which interact as an identifiable operating whole. Any alteration to its parts or any addition to or subtraction from its parts changes the system.

What are some examples of a System?

- A. A drop of water is a liquid interaction of two parts hydrogen and one part oxygen in a stable system. The introduction of an additional oxygen atom changes the system into an unstable liquid
- B. The human body is a complex interaction of the product of a number of interdependent systems. As St. Paul puts it, a hand cannot say it is a foot nor the eye an ear, but each acts in support of the other. The loss of a part or the entrance of a virus into one of the parts changes the system.
- C. Human organizations such as nations, corporations, societies, churches and families bring together individuals in interdependent

trained associates. Information on times and places of these seminars may be available through judicatory offices.

Among the many book resources available, some of the most reader-friendly include:

O'Connor, Joseph & McDermott, Ian. *The Art of Systems Thinking*. Thorsons, 1997.

Papero, Daniel. *Bowen Family Systems Theory*. Prentice Hall, 1997.

Richardson, Ronald W. *Creating a Healthier Church*. Fortress, 1996.

Steinke, Peter L. *How Your Church Family Works*. Alban, 1993.

To order books please visit www.interimministry.org and click the Amazon.com link.

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their own sense of loss but also to recognize a different sense of loss in other groups and see how they can be fitted together is anxiety-reducing for the entire congregational family. It is hardly an overstatement to say that in times of pastoral transition, a knowledge of systems, particularly Family Systems, is a critical tool for pastoral leadership. The transitional pastor often discovers that the greatest reward comes as a result of his/her, a) ability to think systemically within the context of the congregational family system and, b) patience to minister within and through the congregation's anxieties.

How may I learn more about Systems and Family Systems?

One of the better resources for clergy to experience Bowen Family Systems in combination with Friedman's teachings in a systems learning environment are the *Clergy Clinics in Family Emotional Systems* offered by the Lombard Mennonite Peace Center, 101 W. 22nd St., Suite 206, Lombard, IL, 60148.

A resource available for both clergy and congregations is the *Healthy Congregation Seminar* developed by Dr. Peter Steinke on the basis of Friedman's teaching and offered nationwide by his

networks with definable characteristics. In national politics the biennial election process introduces new elements that change the system.

How is a System described graphically?

- A. A simple graphic is a triangle, such as used to describe the Holy Trinity.
- B. A more complex example is a web describing the interactive relationships in a congregation.
- C. Judicatories, nations and the macrocosm are infinitely more complex systems made up of multiple systems.

Why is the knowledge of Systems valuable in understanding and working with societal groups such as families and churches?

To be able to think and visualize how events and people interact with one another in a living setting provides the knowledge of how best and when to intervene, engage and effect change where helpful.

Is there any organism that exists non-systemically?

No. If there were only two people alone together on a desert island so that their personal relationship would be linear, that is, simple cause/effect, they will not be free from the influence of their environment as it impacts on their individual responses to each other.

What are Family Systems?

Dr. Murray Bowen in his work with schizophrenic patients at the Menninger Clinic in Topeka, Kansas, began to understand families as emotional units. He observed that the behavior of patients was influenced by the degree to which parents were able to balance interacting harmoniously with one another while retaining their own individuality apart from each other. He labeled this phenomenon **self-differentiation**. As he also saw the basic family unit as a **triangle** in which each action or reaction by one person affected the response from other persons, any imbalance in a parent's level of self-differentiation created **anxiety** in the entire system and was reflected in the patient. He also determined that the influence of grandparents and great-grandparents had a measurable impact on how the family functioned. In working with a family system, Dr. Bowen determined that intervention best begins

the transitional pastor, clearly not available for call, helps the congregation prepare for a new pastor, and the congregation cooperates in the process. The triangle becomes unhealthy if the transitional pastor begins to fill the role of a called pastor and hints to the congregation a desire to be considered for call. A portion of the members act on the hints and petition the Bishop on behalf of the transitional pastor. The bishop's recommended candidate is rejected by a split congregational decision. Or the bishop appoints a candidate without recognizing the congregation's expressed needs or the work of the transitional pastor. The congregation's search committee rejects the Bishop's recommendation.

Homeostasis: the resistance to change; the desire to stay the *status quo*, may distort the congregation's perception of its history, its vision and its need for change.

Is a transitional pastor expected to restore a chaotic congregational system?

In most situations, the answer is "No." However, every congregation into which a transitional pastor is called will be experiencing a significant level of anxiety caused by the loss of a pastor. To help any group of persons in a congregation realize not only

the interests of one group or of an individual in a group separates from the ministry of others, the effectiveness of the total ministry of the congregation is reduced. Conversely, if one or more individuals or groups demand everyone else subordinate their individual ministries, the scope of the congregation's ministry is likewise reduced.

Triangles: The basic stable configuration of human relationships, describing the dynamic equilibrium among a triad of persons, groups or issues or a mix of any or all of the three. Triangles exist to manage anxiety in relationships by allowing it to be shared among the three parts. When the emotional relationship in the triangle is appropriately balanced, it is healthy and productive. A triangle becomes unhealthy and disruptive if the relationships become unbalanced so that two of the three parties stand together against the third.

For example, consider a congregation that has lost its pastor. The bishop appoints a transitional pastor to assist the congregation through the time until a new pastor will be called. The triangle of bishop, transitional pastor and congregation manage the anxiety in a healthy way when the bishop recognizes what attributes in a new pastor will serve the congregation's self-identified needs,

by working with the most well self-differentiated member of the family.

How did Dr. Bowen's Family Systems teachings become connected to the practice of Intentional Transitional Ministry?

Dr. Edwin Friedman, a psychological counselor in the Washington, D.C. area saw a connection between Dr. Bowen's work with families and his own work with clergy and their congregations. The Alban Institute, as it exposed the need for intentional guidance for congregations in transition, included many of Dr. Friedman's teachings which, in turn, were carried over into the creation of the Interim Ministry Network. Their use has since been further adapted by Dr. Peter Steinke.

What is that connection?

Consider an organized congregation as a complex family structure, with its own genealogical history: birth, pastor and charter members, growth and loss, festivity and tragedy, hidden skeletons and disagreements. Think of the many subsidiary family units, (each of which has its own genealogical history) as siblings in the congregational family, with all the potential for a variety of sibling

behaviors. In addition, the entering and exiting of pastors brings with it a changing variable of emotional family responses both to saying goodbye and to saying hello. With such a variety of levels of self-differentiation potential in a congregation and the tendency of organized groups to be **homeostatic**, that is, to resist change, the opportunities abound for **anxiety** to affect the health of congregational life.

Can any congregational system be healthy?

Most (if not all) congregations experience a degree of unhealth, if for no other reason than the complexity of the system. Most complex systems, however, have the ability to sustain and manage some disorder without becoming absorbed with anxiety and falling into chaos. This is especially true for congregations because of the homeostatic influence of the theological doctrines or dogma on which they are founded. However, perturbances, such as the loss of a pastor, may produce such pervasive anxiety that special consultation may be required for the system to regain its equilibrium. Interim consultants and/or transitional ministers may be called on to provide such consultation.

What are the key elements to identify in diagnosing and managing congregational anxieties?

Anxiety: Appears in two forms. Clinical anxiety appears when a congregation has a problem to solve that requires a healthy demand for a solution and brings the spiritual elements of a congregation together with a focus on an immediate need. Once the problem is resolved, the anxiety tends to diminish. Chronic anxiety, however, occurs when a congregation experiences the loss of its pastor and is present as a pervasive sense of grief, fear for the future and a lessened sense of stability. A transitional pastor skilled in helping the congregation work through its anxiety enables it to prepare and welcome confidently new pastoral leadership.

Self-differentiation: describes the management of two life forces –Separateness, which is the need to be alone within ones' self, and togetherness, which is the need to share ones self with others. In a well-differentiated congregation, each definitive group defines its ministry separately. At the same time they recognize that their individual ministries are part of a larger system that requires the coordination of all the ministries together. When a congregation becomes less well-differentiated,