In an old preacher’s story, a repentant congregant comes to the sinner’s bench to confess that “the cobwebs of life” have trapped him again into its gluey sin. The pastor, with a caring arm draped over the penitent’s shoulder, hears the confession and pronounces freedom from his sins in the name of Jesus Christ. Sunday after Sunday the pattern repeats, with the faithful minister listening intently to the man’s confession and hearing the details of his fall from grace always into “the cobwebs of life.” Having listened hard enough, having prayed long enough, and seeing the remorseful failure again repenting his heart out, the pastor shouts, “Kill the damn spider!” Perhaps the pastor had attended a family systems theory workshop led by Rabbi Edwin Friedman or Ron Richardson or Peter Steinke.

In this paper will examine the essential concepts of Dr. Murray Bowen’s “family systems theory” (or “Bowen theory”) and make comments as his theory intersects with the life of church leadership and particularly conflict within the church. I will also rely upon Edwin Friedman, a prolific writer and teacher, who is a protégé of Bowen and a proponent of Bowen theory in religious institutions.

Murray Bowen has become a potent force in our understanding of the church and its leadership if one looks at popular books and academic treatises that are available in theological bookstores and libraries. Murray Bowen’s Family Therapy in Clinical Practice (1985) is a gathering of Bowen’s treatises, lectures and articles between the years 1957-1977. While it contains his seminal work, one can observe the maturity of his theory as it progresses. The co-authored work by Bowen and Michael Kerr entitled Family Evaluation (1988) is considered to be the primary resource for those seeking to understand family systems theory from the mind of the progenitor of the theory. Edwin Friedman’s Generation to Generation: Family Process in Church and Synagogue published in 1985 has become a staple in the training of professional ministers in many faiths and denominations. Ron Richardson’s 1984 self-help guide, Family Ties that Bind: A Self-help Guide to Change Through Family of Origin Therapy owes its popularity and many reprints to its easily accessible format and creative problem-solving approach. Richardson was mentored by David Freeman, a family therapy researcher and author of Techniques of Family Therapy (1981), but owes his theory allegiance to Murray Bowen. Richardson followed his self-help book with an “other-help” book, Creating a Healthier Church (1996), where he applies family systems theory to congregational life, much in the way that Friedman had done earlier. Peter Steinke, a Lutheran minister, church consultant and Friedman student, authored How Your Church Family Works (1993) and Healthy Congregations (1996), both employing a family systems theory perspective to the challenges of church life. Paul Stevens and Phil Collins co-wrote The Equipping Pastor: A Systems Approach to Congregational Leadership in 1993 with a particular persuasion of understanding the role of the whole congregation in church renewal. Roberta Gilbert authored Extraordinary Relationships (1992) and applied family systems theory to psychoanalysis and psychotherapy. In a somewhat different systems venue, George Parsons and Speed Leas published (1993) a systems theory-based questionnaire and manual for church consultants entitled Understanding Your Congregation as a System. This has been used both by consultants and church leadership wishing to understand their “church family system.” Norman Shawchuck and Roger Heuser wrote Managing the Congregation: Building Effective Systems to Serve People (1996) as the third in a trilogy for church leaders. The focus is on the relationships, structures and processes common to a religious congregation.
While Murray Bowen originated the concept of family systems theory, a broader “systems” thinking had developed since the early 1930s with the teaching of Ludwig von Bertalanffy, the founder of general systems theory. (In a humorous comment, Bowen mentioned that he knew nothing about general systems theory apart from attending “one lecture by Bertalanffy, which I did not understand, and another by Norbert Wiener which was perhaps a bit more understandable.” Bowen 1978, 63). Peter Senge is the author of The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization in 1990 (reissued and updated in 1994) and called himself “an incurable systems thinker” (Senge 1990, ix). His understanding of systems is that “each has an influence on the rest, an influence that is usually hidden from view. You can only understand the system … by contemplating the whole, not any individual part or pattern” (Senge 1990, 7). In Margaret Wheatley’s Leadership and the New Science (1999), the author applied general systems theory to business and corporate life. Donna Markham works as a consultant on organizational change in various venues including religion and women’s issues, and has applied systems thinking to her work in Spiritlinking Leadership: Working Through Resistance to Organizational Change (1999).

Somewhat closer to the Christian’s theological home, Ray Anderson and Dennis Guernsey wrote a social theology of the family entitled On Being Family (1985) with an emphasis on systems ideas. Jack and Judith Balswick (The Family: A Christian Perspective on the Contemporary Home, 1991) also use system theory as their relational trope. E. Mansell Pattison’s Pastor and Parish: A Systems Approach (1977) was the earliest attempt to understand the life of the church using general systems theory. There have been many other attempts in addition to these.

Bowen’s family systems theory focuses on eight interlocking forces that shape the functioning of families and organizations (Kerr and Bowen 1988, 13): (1) differentiation of self which originated with the idea that all human problems exist on a single continuum; (2) the family emotional process; (3) emotional triangles which Bowen originally called “the interdependent triad”; (4) multigenerational transmission process; (5) family projection process; (6) sibling position that was influenced by the research of William Toman (1961); (7) emotional cutoff; and (8) societal regression. Prior to his death in 1990 Bowen was working on his ninth concept he called “spirituality” (Friedman 1991, 139). According to Bowen, “the main part of this family systems theory evolved rapidly over a period of about six years, between 1957 and 1963 … (and) [N]o part was first” (Bowen 1976, 355). The first six of these concepts became the loci of family systems theory when Bowen published a chapter article entitled “The Use of Family Therapy in Clinical Practice” (1966). The remaining two concepts (emotional cutoff and societal regression) were added in 1975 and the theory was then called “Bowen theory” (Bowen 1976, 355). Bowen theory is sometimes confused with general systems theory (first defined in the 1930s) and the popular non-specific word “systems,” hence, the name change to Bowen theory. All of Bowen’s concepts are tied together by the underlying premise of emotional functioning and that chronic anxiety is omnipresent in life. While it may manifest itself differently, and with differing degrees of intensity, depending on specific family situations and differing cultural considerations, chronic anxiety is an inevitable part of nature—a biological phenomenon that Bowen believed humans have in common with all forms of life. For Bowen, “chronic anxiety is transmitted from past generations, whose influence remains alive in the present, as families grapple with the balancing of togetherness and the self-differentiation of its members”(Goldenberg and Goldenberg 1996, 169).

“Wholism” or the Idea of a System

Prior to looking at the interconnected principles of Bowen’s theory, it is worthwhile to understand the concept of a system from a family systems theory point of view. Bowen’s theory is derived from the view of the human family as one type of natural system. Bowen’s theory is not fundamentally about families, but about life or what Bowen referred to as the “human phenomenon” (Kerr and Bowen 1988, 23). Family systems theory recognizes the interplay between biological, genetic, familial, psychological, and sociological factors in producing individual behavior. It identifies some of the ways that human functioning is similar to the functioning of all other forms of life, and postulates that certain principles
governing behavior are common to all life forms including humans. The human being is seen as a participating member of natural processes in the same ways that govern all biological creatures. Mankind does not stand outside of the effects of maturity, progress, evolution, and change. An important family systems corollary of the natural process assumption is that clinical disorders are rooted in the part of man that are held in common with lower animals. “The human being’s elaborately developed cerebral cortex and complex psychology contribute to making him unique in some respects, but despite these specializations, systems theory assumes that Homo sapiens is far more like other life forms than different from them” (Kerr 1988, 36). Thus, the family system concept of wholism relates to our rootedness in the created order and our interdependency with all parts of the created world.

Rather than focusing on the psyche of a particular person (what might be called the intrapsychic system), for family systems theory the point of orientation becomes the entire family as a system of relationships out of which each person functions. In therapy terminology, the family is in treatment, not only or especially the identified problem person. In an early article Bowen defined what he meant by the family as a system.

The family is a system in that a change in one part of the system is followed by compensatory change in other parts of the system. I prefer to think of the family as a variety of systems and subsystems … the functioning of any system is dependent on the functioning of the larger systems of which it is a part, and also on its subsystems ... The family is a number of different kinds of systems. It can accurately be designated a social system, a cultural system, a games system, a communication system, a biological system, or any of several designations ... I think of the family as a combination of emotional and relationship systems. The term emotional refers to the force that motivates the system, and relationship to the ways it is expressed. (Bowen 1966, 156, 159)

This construct called “system” was used to identify what Bowen considered to be the most basic, automatic, and instinctual of life processes and involved all life forces from the most rudimentary to, and including, humans and human groupings. Bowen came to use the term “family” as synonymous with the idea of an “emotional system” (Friedman 1991, 144). Again, his understanding of family is rooted in biology more than sociology or psychology. In fact, “the emotional system is conceived to be the function of the life forces inherited from his (man’s) phylogenetic past, that he shares with the lower forms, and that governs the subhuman part of man. It would be synonymous with instinct, if instinct is considered to include forces that operate automatically” (Bowen 1978, 423). The family as a natural system is a naturally occurring phenomenon in all forms of life that “enables an organism to receive information (from within itself and from the environment), to integrate that information and to respond on the basis of it” (Kerr and Bowen 1988, 27-28). The emotional system enables the life form to find food, reproduce, flee enemies, raise their young, and other instinctual or automatic aspects of social relationships.

In Bowen’s thinking, organizational life is a whole composed of interconnected and interdependent members that are all the time influencing one another (see Illustration #1).

Systems thinkers use the term “wholism” to describe the family or social organism as something more than the sum of the members. According to Friedman, “the most outstanding characteristic of systems thinking is its departure from traditional notions of linear cause and effect” (Friedman 1985, 15) in the ways that systems influence one another. Almost all scientific endeavor and pastoral strategies operate on the linear assumption that a singular cause generates a singular effect. “Most how-to books (on everything from how to make your church grow, to how to start a lay pastoral care program) assume this Newtonian causation” (Stevens and Collins 1993, 23). In systems thinking, the forces are interdependent where all elements are linked in a mutual impact relationship with all other members.
Within the emotional system are “two counterbalancing life forces” (Kerr and Bowen 1988, 59) that animate the family. The first is the growth force towards individuality (where the “I” is at centre) and the equally intense and opposing force towards togetherness (where the “we” is at centre). Richardson calls these the forces of “individuation and congregation” (Richardson 1996, 30) but they are more frequently called “differentiation” and “togetherness” in family systems literature. These two internal forces are of the same necessity and force as are the needs for food, shelter, water and nurture. While these forces motivate us—some would say, “drive us”—they also exist in ongoing tension with one another. These forces coexist within any system or in an organization (say, for example, a church). When the tension increases, anxiety is the fundamental by-product. This anxious state is caused by one of the coexisting life forces going out of balance. The imbalance of the tension necessitates change within the system. The anxiety is an indication of this change as well as an indication of the urgency of one force to move back into the previous coexistent equilibrium.

The need for differentiation, as the need for togetherness, is rooted in instinctual drive. To be an individual and autonomous from the community pressures of family and society, is as much a core force as is the togetherness and community urge. The force to be an individual is seen in the adolescent’s demand to think, feel and act independently of his parents or his parents’ peer group or system. The differentiation demand is not simply an adolescent phenomenon; it is evident in all forms of life where the conforming pressures of community interact with the differentiating forces of individuality. Thus it can have evidence in any social gathering: a church elders meeting or an extended family Christmas vacation, as examples. It is especially evident when the resident systemic anxiety is heightened by the dismissal of one of the countervailing urges. When anxiety is aroused, the demand for differentiation or community is aroused as well.

The togetherness, community or “congregate” force is rooted in the innate need to be in a people group. It is a “biologically rooted life force that propels an organism to follow the directives of others, to be a dependent, connected, and indistinct entity” (Kerr and Bowen 1988, 65). It is why people marry, birth children and, perhaps, feel lonely watching television alone on a Friday night. This community force “is reflected in the striving to act, feel and think like others, as well as in the striving to have others act, feel, and think like oneself” (Kerr and Bowen 1988, 65). This is the family systems reason that we join churches or community centers that psychologically “match” our needs.

The drives for individuality and community coexist in careful tension of “dynamic equilibrium,” with the tension rising or declining depending upon several context variables. For some, extended family meetings with “group think” conformity produces tension for the opposite drive—to differentiate. It is the imbalance of the emotional system that increases the tension. Times of imbalance in the emotional system of a church include times of abundance and want. Times of abundance might involve increasing
numbers of newcomers on Sunday morning worship services such that the founding members feel slighted or displaced; it might include increased offerings and the challenge of how to dispense with such largesse; abundance also includes increased joyfulness and celebration that permeates the life of the membership—though this may well be appreciated by most, some will resent the change in churchly tone.

Just as increases have their downside and cause “wafting of the congregational mobile,” so do the times of want and need. When the greatest days of the church were generations prior, retrospection takes the place of vision. In these circumstances leaders often form groups around the process of change. Some members will long for days gone by and will advocate for homeostasis or “no change.” The often asked question is “why do we have to be relevant?” or stated flatly, “we’ve never done that here before.” On the other side is the argument for change (“morphogenesis”) where there is predictably less appreciation for history, tradition, and the way it was done back then. So the rebuttal often heard is “this is not back then; this is now.” The tensions of change are often manifest in church “worship wars” as frequently as “curfew hours” for families of teenagers.

Ron Richardson illustrates a conflict that is current in Canada: the ordination to church ministry of professed homosexual Christians. The United Church of Canada decided in favor of ordination of homosexual ministers causing a violent shaking of that religious system. Some churches withdrew from the United Church communion forming the Congregational Church of Canada. Other churches drafted an evangelical “covenanting agreement” that does not permit the ordination of homosexual persons and affirms a more traditional view of Biblical interpretation. According to Richardson the ideal process outcome was that some “argued strongly for their own position but respected other people’s positions and beliefs. They learned from and maintained a friendly relationship with their opponents, without compromising their own beliefs” (Richardson 1996, 31).

The forces of differentiation and community exist irrespective of age, gender, race, nationality, religion, intelligence, level of creativity, personality type or socioeconomic status. Friedman comments:

Culture does not cause family process. It stains it (that is, makes it visible). Culture, rather than being the formative process, is the medium through which family process works its art … using Bowen theory it is possible to develop laws of family process regarding such factors as loss replacement, cutoffs, pain thresholds, secrets, triangles, chronic conditions and the like that have the same relevance for all families irrespective of culture. And to the extent that there is divergence between two families with respect to these laws, these differences cannot be traced back to cultural, or environmental or gender differences, but to factors that involve levels of chronic anxiety and differentiation. (Friedman 1991, 145)

Humans are guided by the forces that are common to nature. Like all natural systems (ant colonies, the tides) the family emotional system is rooted in the creational mandate. The force that dominates at any given time is determined by the level of one’s own emotional maturity or, as Bowen called it, the level of self-differentiation.

Bowen theory views most of human life as being guided by emotional forces, which to a varying degree, can be regulated by individuals. It postulates that the degree to which individuals may be able to exercise some choice regarding how much they respond to their automatic emotional input can be predicted by understanding the functioning of the originating family unit. It indicates that people are able to modify their responses to the automatic emotional input by undertaking a study of their own patterns of behavior and their link to patterns of behavior in their multi-generational family.

Thinking systemically is complex. Pastors and church leaders often cannot see how their leadership behaviors affect their congregation. An anxiously preached sermon (due to exhaustion or under-preparation, as examples) or a thoughtless comment travels the church system’s emotional
highway faster and further than a carefully reasoned theological homily. During conflict or difficulty, should the leader or leadership group remain relatively calm and “dial down” their anxiety, the congregation reciprocates. Calmness pervades the system and reason wins out. Participating as one of a whole where our leadership effect is more our being than our doing, more of our relationships rather than our initiative—this is the essence of wholism in the family system.

**Family Emotional System: Individuality and Togetherness Forces**

An essential concept in Bowen’s theory is that of the “nuclear family emotional system.” This concept describes the patterns of emotional functioning in a family or other system in a single generation. “Bowenians believe individuals tend to repeat in their marital choices and other significant relationships the style of relating learned in their families of origin and pass along similar patterns to their children” (Goldenberg and Goldenberg 1996, 176). Bowen therapy understands the multi-dimensions of family as a single emotional unit composed of interlocking relationships existing over many generations. “One of the most important concepts of this theoretical system is the pattern that emerges over the generations as parents transmit varying levels of the immaturity to their children” (Bowen 1966, 165). It suggests that individual behavior is closely related to the functioning of one’s family of origin. “Certain basic patterns between the father, mother, and children are replicas of the past generations and will be repeated in the generations to follow” (Bowen 1976, 376). These patterns are predictive to the degree that the present generation represents those patterns of the past and provides for transmission of them for the future.

In understanding the effect of previous generations on the functioning of the present generation, Bowen developed the genogram to permit a graphic representation of the family over two or more generations. Illustration #2 is an intergenerational drawing of a nuclear family with a husband/father, wife/mother and two children, a son and a daughter. Conceptualizing the organizational structure of the system and subsystem in this way is common among family systems therapists. The drawing indicates the family hierarchy (parents prior to children) and the equality of male to female, husband to wife, sons to daughters. System thinking is a way of seeing how the circle of influence becomes patterned and how the pattern is maintained by the arrangement of the functioning parts.

**Illustration #2: Nuclear Family System with a Husband / Father, Wife / Mother, Male and Female Children**

According to Bowen, symptoms in the family can show up in one of three locations (see illustration above): (1) the marital relationship (as conflict, distance, or divorce), (2) in the well-being (physical or emotional) of the husband and or the wife, or (3) in one of the children. The various multigenerational forces exert influence at any of these three positions on the genogram. The Bowen
concept that the family is the unit of observation means that what is important is not the location or even the form of the problem but getting to the systemic forces that are being transmitted generation to generation.

Bowen theory attempts to move beyond the linear cause-and-effect thinking (or “blaming” as in “whose fault is it?”) to a more comprehensive understanding of the multiple causative factors that interact across time to produce problems or symptoms. The theory is applied to various communities, including churches, schools, businesses and the like, that adopt “family” as its metaphor for its organization.

When tension builds within families and organizations, when they have not learned the basics of working out interpersonal complexities, and when finding a way out means finding some sort of scapegoat, then that organization may well avoid impending disintegration by projecting its anxiety onto one of its members or group of members. This particular intensity of triangulation is called “family emotional process” and its purpose is to understand the relationship patterns that govern the location of problems or sickness within the family. The three patterns observed by Bowen (1976, 377-79) include (1) repeated cycles of marital conflict in which neither partner is capable of an adaptive role; (2) physical or emotional dysfunction in one spouse as an alternative to dealing directly with the family or marital conflict (as seen in alcoholism, depression, physical health difficulties, and social problems); (3) psychological impairment in one or more of the children such that the focus is diverted from the married couple onto the problems of the dependent children. Bowen notes that “the last mechanism is so important in the total human problem it has been described as a separate concept, the family projection process” (Bowen 1976, 379).

It is interesting to note the place of chronic conflict in Bowenian thought. Bowen argues that ongoing conflict serves a relationship dilemma—how to be connected while not being engulfed in the relationship. In conflict, “The focus on one another provides emotional contact, and the anger and stubborn refusals to do what the other wants provide emotional distance. The result can be a relationship that, though tumultuous, is enduring” (Kerr and Bowen 1988, 83). This leads to an interesting conclusion: The conflict in the relationship serves to keep individual dysfunction in the relationship rather than in the people involved. Thus the externalization provides some protection for the people involved.

Friedman adapts Bowen’s ideas of the nuclear family emotional process to the church and observes four basic relationship patterns (Friedman 1985, 41-43): (1) leadership conflict between leadership groupings (e.g., parents or church leaders); (2) dysfunction in one person or group; (3) impairment of one or more of the members; and (4) emotional distance.

Family emotional processes operate in every kind of family system: stable and satisfying intact families, single parent families, step-parent arrangements, and other family configurations including church family organizations. Clinical problems or symptoms usually develop during periods of heightened and prolonged family or group tension. This can be marital stress or clergy-congregation anxiety, as examples. The level of tension depends on the stress the family encounters, how the family adapts to the stress, and on the family’s connection with extended family and social networks. Tension within the system increases the activity of one or more of the four relationship patterns. Where symptoms develop depends on which patterns are most active. The higher the tension, the more chance that symptoms will be severe and that several people will be symptomatic.

1. Leadership conflict between leadership groupings. As church family tension increases and the various leaders or leadership groupings (say, elders, deacons and pastors) get more anxious, each leader externalizes his or her anxiety onto the partnership or onto one of the partners of the leadership partnership. One partner becomes a dumping ground for the anxiety of the other partner as he or she projects his or her anxiety in blame. Each focuses on what is wrong with the other, each tries to control the other, and each resists the other’s efforts at control. This is especially obvious in a church family where some recent crisis has occurred, as when the pastoral family decides to move to another church in
another city or another denomination. (In the nuclear family this can happen when an adult child returns to live at home, destabilizing the marital dyad and precipitating angry blaming.)

2. Dysfunction in one leader or leader group. When the more dominant leadership partner or group pressures the other to think and act in certain ways and the other (usually the less dominant partner) yields to the pressure, a stable synchronicity develops. For example in the clergy dyad, a verbal pastoral spouse (both leaders in the church system) will answer her husband’s difficult questions, occasionally asking for his confirmation, as she defines his life, goals, and inner world. Both partners accommodate to preserve the level of harmony or disharmony that they have adjusted to, but one (in this case, the pastor/husband) does more accommodating. The interaction is acceptable for both people up to a point, but if family tension rises further, the subordinate spouse may yield so much self-control that his or her anxiety increases significantly. Alternatively, the subordinate spouse may respond in uncontrolled anger or emotion with other family members commenting that “this is just not like him to become so hysterical.” If the system remains stable and the anxiety within the system continues and if other necessary factors are present, the subordinate spouse may develop a psychological, medical, or social impairment.

3. Impairment of one or more members. The leadership partners focus their anxieties on one or more of their member’s needs (“sinners”) or accomplishments (“saints”) so as to avoid their own growing difficulties such that there are always new sinners and saints to be found. They may worry excessively and will often have an idealized (“she could have become a national figure skater …”) or negative (“… but she just is too distractible and self-centered …”) view of the member. The more the clergy couple focuses on their needy child or their EGR (“extra grace required”) congregant, the more the needy focuses on them. This “Identified Problem” becomes more reactive than his siblings to the attitudes, needs, and expectations of the parents and pastors. The process undercuts the child’s differentiation from the family and makes him vulnerable to act out or internalize family tensions. The child’s anxiety can impair his school performance, church relationships, and even his health.

4. Emotional distance. This is probably the most common pattern seen in church families, where family members distance from each other to reduce the intensity of their relationships. The risk is that the members become isolated from each other and are cutoff from further growth together. Cutoffs do not produce the emotional distance desired; instead, they internalize the worst aspects of the intimacy that existed. Rather than get away, the person runs carrying the troubles that he or she hoped to exclude from his or her life, potentiating it in each intimate relationship.

The basic relationship patterns result in family tensions coming to rest in certain parts of the family. The more anxiety one person or one relationship absorbs, the less other people must absorb. This means that some family members maintain their functioning at the expense of others. People may not want to hurt each other, but when anxiety chronically dictates behavior, someone usually suffers for it.

**Differentiation and Defining a Self**

Bowen’s family systems theory is best understood in the balance / imbalance of the two forces, togetherness and individuality that we have been considering. Self-differentiation describes people in terms of their ability to keep their intellectual and emotional systems from coalescing into what Bowen called “fusion.” “The core of my theory has to do with the degree to which people are able to distinguish between the feeling process and the intellectual process” (Bowen 1976, 355). People who are fused are dominated by their emotional reactivity and the urge for togetherness. People who are able to balance their intellectual and emotional systems are able to make choices about how they will deal with life experiences even though their decisions might isolate them from the prevailing opinion. At the same time that differentiation describes a capacity to make a choice, Kerr and Bowen (1988) made it clear that capacity does not determine the correct or best choice. The purpose of such differentiation is in the ontology of choice-making rather than a standard or ethic associated with individual choices.

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Bowen introduced the term “self-differentiation” to depict the capacity of maintaining the two counter-balancing life forces of togetherness and individuality in dynamic equilibrium. “Differentiation is the lifelong process of striving to keep one’s being in balance through the reciprocal external and internal processes of self-definition and self-regulation” (Friedman 1991, 140). A more highly differentiated person has the capacity to secure a self in the tension of these two systems. Bowen found that “those with the most ability to distinguish between emotion and thinking, or who have the most differentiation of self, have the most flexibility and adaptability in coping with life stresses, and the most freedom from problems of all kinds” (Bowen 1976, 355). It is “the ability to be in emotional contact with others, yet still be autonomous in one’s own emotional functioning” (Kerr and Bowen 1988, 145). The level of a person’s self-differentiation can be best observed while the family system is most anxious. When anxiety is high within the system and the person can maintain his or her direction and focus on his or her purpose in spite of contextual controls, he or she displays a high level of differentiation.

A well-differentiated leader has the ability to separate feeling and thinking. Differentiation of self is demonstrated by the degree to which one is able to avoid having his or her behaviour automatically driven by feelings. Undifferentiated people have difficulty in distinguishing between the two capacities. As well, they find it difficult to separate their own experience from other people’s experience. Their sense of self is more amorphous and other-determined.

The differentiated ideal is not to be clinically detached or fiercely objective or without empathic responses to the needs of others. In fact, “The higher the level of differentiation of people in a family or other social group, the more they can cooperate, look out for one another’s welfare, and stay in adequate contact during stressful as well as calm periods” (Kerr and Bowen 1988, 93). Bowen posited that mental well-being and the goal of self-differentiation had to do with a right balance of both emotions and cognition. “Increasing one’s ability to distinguish between thinking and feeling within self and others and learning to use that ability to direct one’s life and solve problems is the central guiding principle of family psychotherapy” (Kerr and Bowen 1988, 98). A differentiated person does not confuse thinking and feeling and has a greater capacity to separate the two, especially during anxious or conflictual times. The cognition system does not dominate the emotional system, and each is functional to the service of the other. A person who is less differentiated has relatively indistinct boundaries between thinking and feeling and the systems are more fused.

Relating self-differentiation to leadership, Friedman (1999, 30) summarizes six interlocking characteristics: (1) clarity about one’s own beliefs; (2) self-definition in relationships; (3) toleration of solitariness; (4) preservation of connectedness; (5) stamina and persistence; and (6) self-regulation in the face of sabotage.

Friedman comments about the differentiated leader:

I do not mean someone who autocratically tells others what to do or coercively orders them around, although any leader who defines him or herself clearly may be perceived that way by those who are not taking responsibility for their own emotional being and destiny. Rather, I mean someone who has clarity about his or her own life goals, and therefore, someone who is less likely to become lost in the anxious emotional processes swirling about. I mean someone who can be separate while still remaining connected, and therefore can maintain a modifying, non-anxious, and sometimes challenging presence. I mean someone who can manage his or her own reactivity to the automatic reactivity of others, and therefore be able to take stands at the risk of displeasing. It is not as though some leaders can do this and some cannot. No one does this easily, and most, I have learned, can improve their capacity. (Friedman 1999, 13)

As Bowen used the term, differentiation refers more to a process than to an achievable goal—a direction in life rather than a state of being. Differentiation is characterized as a continuum. At a given time, any individual, family, church, or other group lies somewhere along this continuum of differentiation.
There is no perfectly differentiated person or community. (The continuum is represented in Illustration #3 below.) If the anxiety in the system increases, the person’s manifest level of differentiation decreases relative to the original point on the continuum. Likewise, a decrease in anxiety moves the person to a more differentiated point; usually back to what is normal for that person. The potentiating factor is the anxiety not the actual circumstance or experience.

Illustration #3: Scale of Differentiation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>(0) Low differentiation</th>
<th>— Mid-Range —</th>
<th>(100) High differentiation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fused: high confusion of emotional and cognitive capacities.</td>
<td>Differentiated: functional separation between emotional and cognitive capacities.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The scale has distinguishing increments from “0” to “100.” Bowen referred to a subject on the extreme low end of the differentiation scale as “fused” (see Illustration #4); by this he meant that emotion and reason merged such that the person has difficulty in distinguishing between them. The fused person derives most of his or her sense of self from others in the family or primary identity group. On the other end of the continuum, the highly self-differentiated individual derives his or her sense of self from within; that is, his or her character, covenants, thoughts, and personal integrity. The more differentiated person is therefore more able to choose emotional and physical separation from the family or identity group by means of a healthy combination of emotion and reason.

The continuum does not measure mental health or normalcy; it is to identify levels of functioning. The higher levels (say 75-100) are theoretical, as Bowen did not think that our society produced this degree of differentiation. He thought that a highly functional person in our current level of human evolution would attain readings in the upper 60s on this continuum.

Illustration #4: Low Differentiation vs. High Differentiation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Fused / Low Differentiation</th>
<th>Differentiated / High Differentiation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Emotion dominates over thinking confusing decision-making.</td>
<td>• Experiences emotion without losing rational control.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Sense of self comes from others.</td>
<td>• Sense of self comes from within.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

“The concept of self-differentiation was introduced by Bowen to give interpretive language to a person’s capacity of maintaining balance in the two forces of connectedness and separateness” (Hirsch 1998, 36). It has to do with clarity of internal systems. It focuses on the internal horizons. (1) The ability to perceive more accurately the reality of situations. (2) The ability to identify his or her own opinions, beliefs, values and commitments. (3) The ability to think clearly and wisely about possible options for action and the likely consequences for each of these options. (4) The ability to act flexibly. These are the qualities of maturity and the highest definition of what it is to be human in Bowen systems thought. “In all events, chronic anxiety is understood to be the primary promoter of all symptoms, from schizophrenia to
cancer, from anorexia to birth defects. The antidote, and the preventative medicine, always is differentiation” (Friedman 1991, 140).

**Emotional Cutoff and Emotional Fusion**

What happens in the family or church system when emotional stress predominates and when the rational and relational processes of differentiation are lost? Family systems theory speaks of emotional cutoff and / or emotional fusion when the togetherness factors run havoc over differentiation. Cutoff, a theoretical concept added by Bowen in the 1970s, describes how people manage their unresolved emotional anxiety with parents, leaders, siblings, and other members by reducing or cutting off emotional contact with them. This is sometimes called “quitting.” The higher the anxiety in the emotional system, the more the person attempts to achieve emotional isolation from others in his or her family. The intensity of emotional gridlock is reduced by one or more members of the family physically distancing from their families of origin and only rarely returning home (cutting off). This geographic isolation involves physical flight from the family of origin or from a circumstance that provokes unresolved family of origin issues (for example, an engagement or a job change). Relationships may look or feel better if people handle their stresses by such cutoffs, but the precipitating problems lie dormant and unresolved, waiting for another opportunity for expression. Psychological isolation is a fiction in family systems theory. According to Bowen: “The person who runs away from the family of origin is as emotionally dependent as the one who never leaves home. They both need emotional closeness, but they are allergic to it” (Bowen 1985, 382). According to Bowen, unresolved emotional attachments are equally manifest in emotional fusion and relational cutoffs to one's family of origin. Such “clinging” and “running” prevents an individual’s authentic and mature differentiation from the growing up family (see Illustration #5).

In some churches, we cutoff our own members when conflict is high. We seldom cutoff those who are working at being more differentiated. We more frequently cutoff those who are on the fusion or clinging side. Friedman comments:

> I have been struck by how families, corporations, and other kinds of institutions are constantly trying to cure their own chronic ills through amputations, “strong medicine,” transfusions and other forms of surgery, only to find that, even when successful for the moment, the excised tumor returns several years later in “cells” that never knew the “cells” that left … malignant cells that appear to be dead can often revive if they receive new nourishment. Or, to put the problem another way, when we say something has gone into remission, where do we think it has gone? (Friedman 1999, 5)

Illustration #5: Fusion—Cutoff Continuum

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Emotional Closeness</th>
<th>Emotional Distance</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Fusion</strong></td>
<td><strong>Togetherness</strong> pull</td>
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<tr>
<td>“Clinging”</td>
<td>“Clinging” pull</td>
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In a second form of cutoff, intrapsychic distancing, the subject remains on the scene physically but avoids sensitive issues (cutting back). Relationships become a surface caricature of what relationships could be. A persona of connectedness covers the personal disquiet of the family members. The cost of this form of cutoff will often manifest in some dysfunction within the person or within the person’s social network. It is thought that such dysfunction may take the form of a physical illness, psychological depression, or some social ineptitude such as episodic anger.
Kamila Blessing uses the term “fugue” (Blessing 1996, 40) in place of emotional cutoff referring to the way individuals separate themselves from the past in an attempt to begin their lives over again in the present. The attempted change is not voluntary in the sense of striving toward something positive. It is precipitated by family stresses. (Fugue originates from the Italian “fuga” meaning “flight,” and is a musical composition in which one or two themes are repeated or imitated successively and contrapuntally.) A cutoff appears like a musical fugue in that the previously unresolved emotional attachments to parents in the family of origin continually cycle in other primary relationships. The fugue predicts that some such current conflict relates to an unresolved attachment that has been a determinant part of the person’s past.

When people reduce the anxious tensions of family conflict by cutting off, they risk making their other or new primary relationships too important. For example, the more a church leader cuts off from his family of origin, the more he looks to his spouse, or his church, or his friends to meet his needs and to be his family that he may have felt he never had. This makes him vulnerable to coercing his church to behave certain ways for him. It may also lead him to accommodating too much to their expectations of him out of fear of jeopardizing their newfound relationship. New relationships are typically smooth in the beginning, but the patterns people are trying to escape eventually emerge and generate increased tensions.

Everyone has some degree of unresolved attachment to his or her original family, but well-differentiated people have much more resolution than less differentiated people. An unresolved attachment can take many forms. For example: (1) an adult feels more like a child when he returns home and looks to his parents to make decisions for him that he can make for himself; or (2) a person feels guilty when she is in more contact with her parents and that she must solve their conflicts or distresses; or (3) a person feels enraged that his parents do not seem to understand or approve of him. An unresolved emotional attachment relates to the immaturity of both the parents and the adult child, and both undifferentiated people typically blame or cutoff rather than face the problem and work it through.

In counselling, therapists work alongside people who look forward to going home, hoping things will be different this time. But the old interactions usually surface within hours. It may take the form of surface harmony with powerful emotional undercurrents, or it may deteriorate into shouting matches and hysterics. Both the person and his family will feel exhausted even after a brief visit. It may be easier for the parents if an adult child keeps his distance. The family gets so anxious and reactive when he is home that they are relieved when he leaves. The siblings of a highly cutoff member may become furious at her when she is home and blame her for upsetting the parents. People do not want it to be this way, but the emotional reactivity of all parties precludes comfortable contact.

How do we understand such chronic and acute anxiety in our churches? How do we relate this family systems theory idea to our communities of faith? It might be helpful to look at the story through the lens of family systems theory. Jesus told a parable (Luke 15) about a single parent family (one might assume). The family was composed of a prodigal father (exceedingly generous) and his two sons, one being prodigiously excessive and the other prodigiously compliant. The story speaks primarily about the love of the “waiting father” but it also illustrates some of the complexities of anxiety within the family of faith (see Luke 15:11-32).

As the story goes, the younger son cuts off from his family and he travels to a far country where he wastes his prodigious inheritance. In this strange land, a great famine arises and, not recognized as the father’s son but as a migrant laborer, he is given the worst of jobs—caring for swine. Without the generosity of a father and having lost his early-gained fortune, the son finds himself knee-deep in self-pity and misery. Finally, having thrown away all that he has and having cutoff his family and his rights as a son, he is driven to consider the fairness of his father’s care. It is interesting that death does precede resurrection or at least, in this case, some insight and imagination. The younger son has sufficient capacity to manage his adversity and still maintain some imagination of what the world could be: “I will
offer myself to my father as a servant.” According to Kamila Blessing, “at this point in the text, the
Prodigal arrives at the moment of increased differentiation … he came to himself means he has ‘grown
up’” (Blessing 1996, 43). The boy returns home, rehearsing his sales pitch. But before this renegade
reaches his father’s home, his father’s joy is already bursting into gracious gestures—a ring, a robe, a
pair of sandals, and the centerpiece for this homecoming celebration, the fattened calf sacrificed for the
pleasure of family restoration.

Hearing the noise, the older and equally undifferentiated brother hurries from the field and is
found at the back door inquiring about the boisterous activity when he discovers that his carousing
brother has returned. He broods. We, of course, sympathize with the super-responsible firstborn who
excommunicates himself from the festivities and the father’s acceptance. He might be reasoning,
“Without my grueling work, there never would be a calf to sacrifice!” Whatever he might be thinking, we
do hear a complaint exposing his chronic anxiety: “for all these many years have I served you, and I’d
never disobeyed your command” (Luke 15:29 NIV). Blessing comments: “In any such family group, the
inertia against even healthy change is so strong that any small step toward differentiation is met with
vigorous disapproval” (Blessing 1996, 43). Anxious of his father’s acceptance and affection, he thought
that he could control his family system by being the obsessive and carefully compliant child in the overly-
anxious family system. Unaware that he, like his younger brother, had emotionally cutoff from his father’s
affection, he thinks of himself as the slave that the father would not permit the younger brother to be.
Resentment spills out and he lashes out at his prodigiously loving father: “You never sacrificed as much
as a goat for me and my friends”(Luke 15:29 NIV). This older son, of course, is not much of the partying
type.

Robert Farrar Capon imagines what the father’s response is to this older son hearing such
anxious blather:

The only thing that matters is that fun or no fun, your brother finally decided to
(come home) and now he’s alive again—whereas you, unfortunately, were hardly alive
even the first time around. Look. We’re all dead here and we’re having a terrific time.
We’re all lost here and we feel right at home. You, on the other hand, are alive and
miserable—and worse yet, you’re standing out here in the yard as if you were some kind
of beggar. Why can’t you see? You own this place, Morris. And the only reason you’re not
enjoying it is because you refuse to be dead to your dumb rules about how it should be
enjoyed. So do yourself and everybody else a favor: drop dead. Shut up, forget about your
stupid life, go inside, and pour yourself a drink. (Capon 1988, 144)

Chronic anxiety producing undifferentiation may show up in spotless obedience as well as
mindless outbursts of rebellion. We see this with both the older and younger son being equally
undifferentiated and anxiously trapped. Emotional triangles abound. It is not until the younger rebel
begins to think, really think rather than just adapt, that he begins to fathom his father’s generosity. At this
point he stops playing the victim to his father’s freedom and goodness (Gal 5:1 NIV—“It is for freedom
that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of
slavery”). He takes personal responsibility and begins to imagine what it could be like living with his
father’s acceptance rather than working against it. His reasoning restored his capacity to control his
reactivity, though, as in this parable, this can take some time and distance. But the chronically anxious,
as in the older brother, is not self-regulating as far as his anxiety goes and he is clearly not imaginative
about solutions other than trying ever harder to be obedient and good. Note that the father also goes out
to him and invites him to think and reason with him. What excommunicates the older son from the
father’s affection is his insistence on seeing life the way he sees it rather than seeing his father who is
standing open-armed in front of him. He rejects the party but also the ring, the robe, the sandals and
every other expression of the father’s prodigious generosity.
Emotional Triangles and Chronic Anxiety

Differentiation of self is the first of two forces used by family systems theorists to explain the level of a person’s functioning. The other is chronic anxiety or, as it is sometimes called, “emotional pain.” Bowen thought of anxiety as a pervasive, natural systems phenomenon rather than a diagnostic category that only a few experience. Chronic anxiety is a magnification of this basic rhythm of life where the instinctual, non-thinking response necessary for survival is exaggerated. Chronic anxiety constricts (limits) and constructs (forms) a person or system’s daily living. It has the same effect on a family or any collective. Chronic anxiety can become endemic to the system such that members of the system will bear the anxiety without much awareness of its function in one’s life. It is experienced as “normal,” has no definite focus and, in its ever-present manner, enervates the individual or family from coping effectively.

While acute anxiety is fed by a fear of what is (for example, learning how to cope when one’s spouse leaves or when one’s child dies) chronic anxiety is fed by fear of what might or might never happen (for example, fear of how to cope if one’s spouse leaves or if one’s child dies) (Kerr and Bowen 1988, 113). Note that the objects in both examples are the same. The difference is that in chronic anxiety, one is anxious about what has not occurred and might never occur. There is no frightening assailant, there is no great loss, yet the anxious alarm system in the person continues to sound. Why does this warning device continue without an objective reason for alarm? While specific events are the principle generators of acute anxiety, the generators of chronic anxiety are the person’s reaction to a disruption in the balance of a relationship system.

Emotional systems are, by their nature, anxious. There is an ever-present tension between the congregating force and the force for differentiation. How well this tension is managed depends on the level of chronic anxiety in the system and one’s level of self-differentiation. If anxiety is too high and if the level of self-differentiation is too low, the system will seek someone onto whom it may bind his or her anxiety. Relationships provide the most effective venue for binding anxiety. The person who is targeted to receive the anxiety is normally the one in the emotional system who is least able to protect herself from it. Projecting of the anxiety onto the most vulnerable person or object or group, reduces anxiety in the other parts of the system resulting in “simulated” security and stability.

The projection of anxiety onto its weaker members introduces the idea of triangles. Bowen began working on the concept of triangles in 1955 (Bowen 1976, 373). At that time, family therapy was mainly dyadic-based because of the influence of psychoanalytic theory. Even the three-person family was seen in terms of dyads: three two-person units, mother-child, father-child, and husband-wife. Bowen thought that the prevalent psychodynamic view of dyadic relationships blinded therapists to understanding triangles and that a two-person system under stress automatically forms itself into a triangle (Bowen 1978, 373). Bowen saw the triangle as

... a three-person emotional configuration … (and) the molecule or the basic building block of any emotional system, whether it is in the family or any other group. The triangle is the smallest stable relationship system. A two-person system may be stable as long as it is calm, but when anxiety increases, it immediately involves the most vulnerable other person to become a triangle. (Bowen 1976, 373)

According to Bowen, the most stable intrapsychic relationships are triangular: As a three-legged stool is more stable than a two-legged structure, three members of a relationship group, rather than two people in relationship, enhance stability. Dyads are inherently unstable as people in dyads teeter-totter between closeness and distance. A two-person system is unstable because it tolerates little tension before either collapsing or involving a third person. A triangle can contain much more tension without involving a fourth person or group because the tension can shift around three relationships. If the tension
is too high for one triangle to contain, it spreads to a series of “interlocking” triangles. Spreading the
tension throughout the triangles can stabilize a system, while keeping it from making significant change.

Writing about triangles in the evangelical church, Hirsch comments:

Triangles are ubiquitous and automatic in emotional systems. They are neither
right nor wrong, neither good nor bad. They describe the what, how, when, and where of
relationships, but not the why. They are observed as descriptive with systems thinking and
not used to impute motive. The goal of life is not to get out of them but to learn to manage
one’s self in and through them. (Hirsch 1998, 44)

The major determinant on the activity of a triangle is the anxiety of its members. When the level of
anxiety is low, a relationship between two can be calm, comfortable and satisfying. Anxiety expedites
change within a stable system. When anxious, dyads become distanced or conflictual and one or more of
the members triangulate a third party into the relationship to decrease anxiety and to promote a return to
previous experiences of stability. The lower the adaptive level of functioning in a system, or ability to
cope with stress, the more likely the people in the system will triangulate. The person with the least
differentiation of self, the most vulnerable, will be the person most likely to get triangulated into some
other dyad.

Three interconnected people or groups can contain more anxiety than three relationships without
the connections because existing pathways between the members allow for an off-loading of anxiety
onto other members through blaming, functional impairment (e.g., sickness or “burnout”), or
overfunctioning. “The ability to spread and shift tension, as well as to contain more of it, means that a
triangle is more flexible and stable than a two-person system” (Kerr 1988, 53). While the triangle is
exceedingly flexible, it can also withstand the challenges of time and change. Family systems theorists
consider triangles to be “forever” when they are involved in families or family-based organizations. “Once
the emotional circuitry of a triangle is in place, it usually outlives the people who participate in it. If one
member of the triangle dies, another person usually replaces him” (Kerr and Bowen 1988, 135). This
“chip off the block” idea of attribution explains much of the “ongoingness” or chronicity of problems in
dysfunctional families and organizations. Through the generations the family members may be involved
in acting out a conflict that was never resolved between grandparents or great-grandparents. A member
of a church can carry on and be loyal to the mandate of a long forgotten (but often remembered!) pastor
and curiously can promote a level of trouble that is persistently upsetting to the current leadership.

The emotional system, with its force towards togetherness, drives triangles. People form triangles
for three reasons: (1) to ensure the stability of their emotional attachments to important others; (2) when
anxiety or other discomfiting emotional experience with an intimate other is too intense such that one or
other “triangles in” another to disperse the anxiety; (3) when taking sides in the conflicts of two or more
others and reinforcement is needed. Paradoxically, a triangle is more stable than a dyad, but a triangle
creates the “odd man out” phenomenon, which is anxiety provoking for the individual on “the out.”
Anxiety generated by anticipating or being the odd one out is a potent force in triangles. The first person
in a triangle may “triangle in” another to ensure that he is not left in abeyance. The patterns in a triangle
shift with increasing tension. In calm periods, two people are comfortably close “insiders” and the third
person is an uncomfortable “outsider.” The insiders actively exclude the outsider and the outsider works
to get closer to one of the insiders (which one is less important than being “on the in”). Someone is
always left out in a triangle and therefore pushing for change. The comfortably close insiders solidify their
bond by choosing each other in preference to the less desirable and less comfortable outsider. Someone
choosing another person over oneself arouses particularly intense feelings of rejection. The most
profound ontology is to be chosen; the most profound rejection is to be left unchosen.

Switching is common in triangles when anxiety increases (see Illustration #6).
If mild to moderate tension develops between the insiders (A and B), as indicated by a broken line, the most anxious member (B) will move closer to the outsider (C) (as illustrated by the broken arrow) thereby reducing the insider anxiety. One of the original insiders (A) now becomes the new outsider and the original outsider (C) is now an insider. The new outsider (A) will make predictable moves to restore closeness with one of the insiders (B or C). At moderate levels of tension, triangles usually have one side in conflict and two sides in harmony. The conflict is not inherent in the relationship in which it exists but reflects the overall functioning of the triangle.

At a high level of tension, the outside position becomes the most desirable. If severe conflict erupts between the insiders, one insider opts for the outside position by getting the current outsider fighting with the other insider. If the maneuvering insider is successful, he gains the more comfortable position of watching the other two people fight. When the tension and conflict subside, the outsider will try to regain an inside position.

The corners of the triangles are not necessarily people, however. They may be significant events (losses or gains), organizations (church or school), or any other group of people (in-laws or former friends) or events that constitute personal significance to the person. For example, a husband (A) and wife (B) will go to their favorite restaurant (C) and while there will drop their arguing in favor of romance. The restaurant serves as the couple's stabilizing third party in the triangle. Couples will sometimes use their church in the same way. When they are focusing on the needs, successes or adventures of their church community, they focus less on themselves, thus stabilizing their dyadic relationship. The triangle exerts a controlling influence upon relationships and upon the person’s sense of identity. In fact emotional triangles often function to keep pathological behavior “stuck” in place.

More positively, if there is sufficient maturity and commitment in the dyad, triangles can stabilize these mature relationships when there is a crisis of some kind. As a church community can serve for avoidance of difficulties, it may also form one corner of the triangle that stabilizes a relationship until greater resources are at hand. There are many available experiences and people that a twosome can incorporate into its tension. It may be a graduate school, a romantic memory of an adolescent friendship, or an unexpressed (though much dreamed of) ambition of an athletic career. To an outsider, the pivotal power of one or more parts of the triangle may seem incongruous. To the person within the triangle, the power is innate to his experience, memory and dreams.

Illustration #7: An Emotional Triangle with an Emotional Cutoff
The triangles in which a person is involved are often related in a significant way to the cutoffs of a person’s life (see Illustration #7). In cutoffs, the individual (B) does not escape the family and triangles (A, C) of which he was and continues to be a part; he merely stretches the sides of the triangle (B-A, B-C), remaining within its elastic reach. The pain endemic to the “stretched relationship” serves as an omnipresent reminder that the cutoff person powerfully exists. The system adapts to its real (though distant) presence. Stretching the triangle is another way of stating that the degree of emotional dependence remains even though the person has superficially (e.g., geographically) departed the grasp of the family system.

Triangles are thought to contribute significantly to the development of clinical problems in individuals and systems. Getting pushed from an inside to an outside position can trigger a psychological upset, depression, or perhaps even a physical illness. Two parents intensely focusing on what is wrong with a child can trigger serious rebellion in the child. A congregational system that perennially rescues the “down and out” can become “burned out,” self-preoccupied, or disdainful of its members. Hence, the ambivalence society has with “charity” work.

A basic tenet of family systems theory is that the tension in a two-person relationship will resolve automatically when contained within a system of three persons, one of whom is differentiated or emotionally objective. Bowen coined the phrase “detriangling” and by that he meant the capacity to be emotionally in-touch with the other two parts of the triangle while remaining mindfully separate from them. “Being workably objective in an intense emotional field” (Bowen 1976, 349) is not to be dismissive of the concerns or reactions of others. But it is the capacity to manage one’s own reactivity to the dramatics of the triangle. “The more one can be emotionally neutral about the relationship process between others, the more effective will be a detriangling maneuver” (Kerr 1988, 57).

Family of Origin, Family Projection Process, and the Identified Problem

Family of origin has to do with the family that surrounded our growing up years. This may include mother, father, other siblings, and extended family members as well as significant others in the growing up family. It is not only individuals that are significant in the family of origin. For faith families, the church or synagogues can function as pseudo parents in a family-like grouping. Less helpfully, the television, shopping malls, alcoholic parties or sexual friends of parents and siblings become factors in the early development of a child.

The family projection process was first described by Bowen in 1966 and delineates the primary ways that parents transmit (or “project”) their emotional problems to a child or susceptible member. He defines it as the “process through which parental undifferentiation impairs one or more children operating within the father-mother-child triangle” (Bowen 1976, 379). In later writings (Kerr and Bowen, 1988) this concept has been subsumed under the family emotional system or differentiation of self. The family projection process originally begins with anxiety in the mother regarding some aspect of her child’s functioning which the child responds to with some anxious behaviour. The child’s anxious response is interpreted by the mother as a problem with the child rather than a problem between the mother and child. When the child begins to act like the mother intends, the mother calms down and the child learns how to resolve the relational anxiety by being something defined by the mother. Thus undifferentiation is distributed to the child through the anxious pleasing by the child and the anxious demands of the mother. Once the child has internalized the mother’s perception and obeys this perception, anxiety is ostensibly reduced from the system. However, when and if the child comes to himself or differentiates or challenges the complicit behaviour of the parents, great anxiety erupts in the family system resulting in demands for the child to reestablish the pseudo-self that he or she previously assumed.
Bowen contended that the family projection process is part of every family, varying in content and degree. The anxious content within the family varies from child to child. Parents may become anxious about a characteristic in one child and about another trait in another. Kerr and Bowen stated that “the mother is not malicious; she is just anxious. She is as much a prisoner of the situation as the child” (Kerr and Bowen 1988, 201).

This person that receives the projection is called the “identified problem” in family systems theory. The projection process can impair the functioning of others and increase their vulnerability to clinical symptoms. Children inherit many types of problems through the relationships with their parents, but the problems they inherit that most affect their lives are relationship sensitivities such as (1) heightened needs for attention and approval; (2) difficulty dealing with expectations; (3) the tendency to blame oneself or others; (4) feeling responsible for the happiness of others or that others are responsible for one’s own happiness; and (5) acting impulsively to relieve the anxiety of the moment rather than tolerating anxiety and acting thoughtfully. If the projection process is fairly intense, the child may develop stronger relationship sensitivities than his or her parents. The sensitivities increase a person’s vulnerability to symptoms by fostering behaviors that escalate chronic anxiety in a relationship system.

Within a nuclear family, the projection process follows the steps of a self-fulfilling prophecy: (1) the parent focuses on a child out of fear that something is wrong with the child; (2) the parent interprets the child’s behavior as confirming the fear; and (3) the parent treats the child as if something is really wrong with the child. These steps of scanning, diagnosing, and treating begin early in the child’s life and may continue throughout his development. The parents’ fears and perceptions so shape the child’s development and behavior that he grows to embody their fears and perceptions. As the parents try to “fix” the problem they have diagnosed in the child, they further potentiate the problem. For example, the parents perceive their child to have low self-esteem, they repeatedly try to affirm the child, and the child grows dependent on their affirmation, seeking to continually live up to their expectations, all the while feeling like a failure.

It is axiomatic in most psychological circles that people who function poorly in life have not had enough love in their growing up years. Counsellors, pastors, and other paid and non-paid helpers adopt an attitude that if they could only engineer the person’s circumstances sufficiently to get more attention and appreciation, that the person would function better. Family systems theory takes a differing tack to this common problem. “The concept of differentiation places this assumption in a broader context—namely, that the neediest people have achieved the least emotional separation from their families of origin” (Kerr 1988, 45-46). An approach based on the subjective experience of feelings calls for sympathy or compassion from others and leads to a requirement for the provision of increasing responses of love to the unloved. In contrast, a family systems theory approach says that people who feel unloved are “addicted to love” (Kerr and Bowen 1988, 109) in a way that causes the person to replicate in current relationships what once existed in the early parent-child relationship (in reality or fantasy). “So much life energy goes into ‘loving’ and seeking ‘love’ and approval that there is littler energy left for self-determined, goal-directed activity. Important life decisions are based on what feels right” (Bowen 1966 163). The idea that poorly functioning people need more love to overcome an affection deficiency is challenged by family systems theorists with a call to maturity through self-differentiation.

Parents often feel they have not given enough love, attention, or support to a child manifesting problems. In reality, they may well have invested more time, prayer, money, energy, and worry in this child than in his or her siblings. Family systems theorists observe that the combined attribution is anxiety—that the child has received all that has been offered but has also received their motivation: anxiety. The other siblings, less involved in the family projection process, have a more mature and reality-based relationship with their parents that foster the siblings developing into less needy, less reactive, and more goal-directed people.
Both parents participate equally in the family projection process, but in different ways. The mother, if she is the primary caretaker, will be more prone than the father to excessive emotional involvement with one or more of the children. The father typically occupies the outside position in the parental dyad, except during periods of heightened tension in the mother-child relationship. “The father usually provides a support role to the projection process. He is sensitive to the mother’s anxiety, and he tends to support her view and help her implement her anxious efforts at mothering” (Bowen 1976, 381). Both parents are unsure of themselves in relationship to the child, but commonly one parent acts sure of himself or herself and the other parent goes along. The intensity of the projection process is unrelated to the amount of time parents spend with a child.

Examples of the projection process in the church are ubiquitous. In some society-resistant churches, the leadership defines itself as against the cultural changes of the surrounding city system (leading, perhaps, to decreasing Sunday church attendance) while blaming postmodernism or “Gen-X” people, or declining morality or whatever shibboleth corresponding to the anxiety of the church system. Leaders might also diagnose the problems within various other churches as creeping secularism and identify piercings and tattoos and sexualized relationships as evidence of the same. This projection can also be directed to other growing churches that have adopted “Natural Church Development,” “seeker sensitivity,” or “Alpha” evangelism programs, seeing them as being unbiblical. When a seeker comes to a society-resistant church and she or he is identified with a cultural taboo, the person might well be rejected along with her or his spiritual hungers and hopes. Not only has the person and the culture been rejected, the church has defined itself as irrelevant to the broader social world and their Sunday numbers continue the downward slide. Thus, the projection process extricates the system from the demands of growth all the while determining its future.

Extended Family Field or Multigenerational Transmission Process

The concept of the multigenerational transmission process describes how small differences in the levels of differentiation between parents and their offspring lead over many generations to marked differences in differentiation among the members of a multigenerational family. The information creating these differences is transmitted across generations through intimate family relationships. The transmission occurs on several interconnected levels ranging from the conscious (teaching and learning of information) to the automatic and unconscious (emotional reactions and behaviors). The idea is rooted in the notion that all generations are part of a continuous natural process. Each generation presses up against the previous and the next such that the concepts of “past” and “present” almost become false dichotomies. The past does not influence the present even though there are occasional incidents of similar behaviour. Instead, there is a seamless connection between the generations. “Past, present and future are all part of one family system. In emotional process transmission, there is no beginning and end. You cannot go home again because you never truly left” (Hirsch 1998, 51).

The next step in the multigenerational transmission process is people predictably selecting mates (marriages) or matches (match at work or in church, as examples) with levels of differentiation of self that correspond to their own. Bowen postulated that “parents project part of their immaturity to one or more children” (Bowen 1978, 477). This projection of immaturity profoundly impacts how a child selects and matches in their primary relationships. Family systems theory hypothesizes that people tend to marry and match with people who have an equivalent level of differentiation. “People who marry have the same level of differentiation of self” (Kerr and Bowen 1988, 225) says Bowen theory.

It is thought that the level of differentiation of self can affect longevity, marital stability, reproduction, health, educational accomplishments, and occupational success. This impact of differentiation on overall life functioning explains the marked variation that typically exists in the lives of the members of a multigenerational family. The highly differentiated people have unusually stable nuclear families and contribute much to society; the poorly differentiated people have chaotic personal
lives and depend heavily on others to sustain them. A key implication of the multigenerational concept is that the roots of the most severe human problems as well as of the highest levels of human adaptation are generations deep. The multigenerational transmission process not only influences the levels of "self" people develop, but it also defines how people interact with others. Both types of programming affect the selection of a spouse. For example, if a family programs someone to attach intensely to others and to function in a helpless and indecisive way, he will likely select a mate who not only attaches to him with equal intensity, but one who reciprocally directs others and make decisions for them both.

Societal Regression

In this the last of Bowen theories defined in 1972 and formally added to the theory in 1975, Bowen hypothesized that the same process of gradual regression to lower functioning that occurs in families is also occurring in society. Through this concept he has viewed society as a family, that is, as an emotional system, complete with its own multi-generational transmission, chronic anxiety, emotional triangles, cutoffs, protection processes, and fusion/differentiation struggles. His idea is that all civilization goes through peaks and valleys in the curve of its own anxiety. In this view, phenomena such as increasing divorce rates, sexual abuse, wars and rumors of wars, inflation and rampant diseases can be viewed as symptoms of chronically anxious periods in society. "As with any emotional system, the 'family of man' also has its pet foci around which its free-floating anxiety will tend to crystallize: communists in one age, carcinogens in another; recombinant DNA in one generation, nuclear war in another; and so on through cholesterol, conservation issues and ozone holes" (Friedman 1991, 165).

When there is increasing chronic anxiety, society reacts with decisions based on emotional process rather than self-differentiated mindfulness. This is parallel with the fusion of the emotional and intellectually systems in a person that leads to lower levels of differentiation and inability to define a self. Bowen parallels the chronic anxiety of a family and the functioning of society.

... when a family is subjected to chronic, sustained anxiety, the family begins to lose contact with its intellectually determined principles, and to resort more and more to emotionally determined decisions to allay the anxiety of the moment. The results of the process are symptoms and eventually regression to a lower level of functioning. The societal concept postulates that the same process is evolving in society; that we are in a period of increasing chronic societal anxiety; that society responds to this with emotionally determined decisions to allay the anxiety of the moment; that this results in symptoms of dysfunction that the efforts to relieve the symptoms result in more emotional band aid legislation, which increases the problem; and the cycle keeps repeating ... (Bowen 1974, 386)

In 1978 Bowen published a text with a chapter titled “Societal Regression as Viewed Through Family Systems Theory.” In particular he pointed to the environmental crisis people have created, increasing crime and use of drugs, as well as new norms of sexuality as responses to chronic anxiety. He predicted a series of crises before a major final crisis prior when those who survive will be ones “who can live in better harmony with nature” (Kerr and Bowen 1978, 281).

Concluding Considerations

Recently I was involved in a “church abuse” consortium with people who named themselves “The Formerly Churched.” Many had experiences within the church that they claimed harmed them. They complained as well of banal preaching, legalistic expulsion, broken marriages judged by elders, and sexual harassment—the list is quite predictable to a therapist or reader of the local newspaper. Not all of their experiences related to the insensitivity of the church; much of it related to their unresolved family
issues from their upbringing: careless fathers who complain more than bless; broken families where the children absorbed the unintended anxiety; confused roles; lack of celebratory rituals of maturity and growth; moral and academic perfectionism. “The Formerly Churched” gave up on the Christian church when they judged it to be no better than the surrounding culture or their “traditional” families.

Family systems theory or Bowen theory can be applied to all systems, including “The Formerly Churched,” depending primarily on two factors: “(1) the degree of emotional interdependency in that relationship system and (2) the extent to which its business is ‘life’” (Friedman 1985, 197). Of all the systems—school systems, labor organizations, family businesses, hospitals and health care systems—the one that functions most like a family, according to Friedman, is the church. It is within the church that God is with his people. It is within the church that life purpose is so often discovered. It is within the church that marriages are consecrated, loved family members are prayed for, children are dedicated, adult faith commitments are celebrated by baptism, and where families gather in grief at the premature death of a friend.

It is no surprise that the clergy frequently find themselves incapable of differentiating between their professional and their personal lives. God has called them into a covenant to lead his people and to plead their experiences before him. It calls for profound spiritual multi-tasking: teaching, praying, disciplining, advocating, sacrificing, visiting, relinquishing, administrating, etcetera. It is also not surprising that the followership also displace their unresolved family matters onto the church leadership and onto the church more generally. When, inevitably, the church fails their idealism, disappointment can lead to conflict.

Conflicts in the church and family system have much to do with the togetherness-separateness forces that are foundational to all relationships. The two factors that operate within this force field are (1) the level of chronic anxiety within the system; and (2) the level of self-differentiation of the individuals involved. A self-differentiated leader is capable of being in touch with, or connected to, a complainant without being fused into his or her anxiety. Self-differentiation is the capacity to maintain an “I” stance all the while empowering the other to have an equally valid “I” stance. This works against the fusion of a coerced “we.”

The leader’s capacity to embrace a “nonanxious presence” has to do with his or her management of personal emotions prioritizing thinking over feeling. The nonanxious presence works to “dial down” the anxiety of individuals or groups that are fusing on an emotional issue. It has to do with personal management first; taking care of one’s self before taking care of a conflict or a highly reactive emotional circumstance. The nonanxious presence is the first tool in the leader’s arsenal.

When there is low differentiation within the anxious and conflictual church system, triangulation inevitably occurs. “When anxiety exceeds the level of healthy functioning, the togetherness force will win out and globbing together or fusion will take place” (Hirsch 1998, 64). When a dyadic relationship becomes strained such that the system calls for “binding” the anxiety this leads to the inclusion of a third member. The joining member to the stressed system, if he or she loses the capacity to be a defining influence, colludes with one or both within the conflicting dyad. The result of this triangulation is that the third joining member bears the anxiety with the other two, thereby becoming a contributing part of the anxiety within the system. This is a familiar paradigm in marriage therapy where one member of the marital dyad hopes that the independent counsellor will collude with him or her. Should this occur, the second member of the marital dyad stops attending the counselling sessions due to being “triangled out.” The client and counsellor commiserate in a newly formed dyad but little productive occurs for the marriage because of the prior triangulation.

Triangles multiply as excluded members of an anxious system triangle in others to maintain togetherness. These triangles interlock, overlap, and undermine all the while binding the participants into a homeostatic condition where growth and maturity are restricted. It is said that alcoholics stop maturing at the first drink, where alcohol becomes the third party in a triangle to cope with life, relationships, and
learning. In the same way, churches frustrate their possibilities by triangulation that results in no change. In consultation it is common to ask, “Who benefits by no change within this system?” In other words, conflict is often the third party in a triangulated system to produce a homeostatic condition. The second skill in the differentiated leader’s armory is the skill of detriangulation, that is, getting out of triangles you have been snookered into where you discover your leadership influence has been minimized.

Differentiated church leaders are conscious of the emotional atmosphere or “field” of the system and the subsystems. They are aware that such emotional fields “influence the emotional functioning of each person” (Kerr and Bowen 1988, 55). In fact, well-differentiated leadership mindfully define the emotional ethos of their church and home. For many churches “serious, urgent, and important” is the tone of worship, preaching, missions, business meetings, Sunday school, counseling, and all other aspects of churchly life. It is also the tone for church conflict. When worship and conflict play the same song, it is likely that the systems will conflict over how they worship. “Serious, urgent, and important” as a church ethos is unworkable for other reasons as well: It is not winning to the world; it does not reflect the gaiety and joy that God enjoys daily; it hoodwinks the primary leadership into potential burnouts. Burnout “serious, urgent, and important” takes over the psyche of the leader. Her thinking and emotions become fused and her ability to separate work and family/friendship relations lessens. Lack of differentiation leads to a lusterless life and a bleary ministry—the precise description of “serious, urgent and important.” Differentiated leadership can determine or influence the tone for the overall system (Sunday services), the various subsystems (leadership meeting, finance discussions, homegroups, and the like) as well as the family system. Being able to observe the various systems of church and family, and make necessary changes within them and between them is the definition of leadership for the differentiated church leader.