



CENTERview: Thinking about Congregations: Using Bowen Family Systems Theory

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Ideas developed in one discipline can be successfully and widely applied in an entirely different field. During the 1950s, a psychiatrist named Murray Bowen created a new treatment plan for those with family members suffering from schizophrenia. A decade later, his Bowen Family Systems Theory found its way to the wonderfully sharp mind of Rabbi Edwin Friedman. After publication of Friedman's acclaimed book, *Generation to Generation*, the theory has become one of the primary ways that clergy think about congregational life.

This way of thinking about congregations is a systems view. It sounds cliché to us now, but when first introduced it was as if Friedman had discovered a new planet. Two generations of clergy have applied Bowen Theory's concepts, including self-differentiation, anxiety, triangles, multigenerational transmission process, and emotional cutoff. Before Bowen Theory, *congregational system* meant the denomination or theological tradition of the particular congregation. Since the introduction of Bowen Theory, *congregational system* has come to mean the way the parts of a congregation relate to one another to create a dynamic whole. A theory once used in a medical facility has been useful to all kinds of congregations.

Over the years, many Bowen Theory resources have been developed for congregational leaders. In addition to Edwin Friedman's works, Peter Steinke, Arthur Paul Boers, Ronald Richardson, and Roberta Gilbert (among others) have written books that apply Bowen Theory to congregational life. Consultants use Bowen Theory as a framework for their engagements with congregations. A variety of workshops, sometimes long-term, post-graduate seminars, utilize Bowen Theory resources.

The Center for Congregations tracks the use of Bowen Theory resources. We also record feedback after its use. Typically, we recommend such resources when something has gone awry. Say a pastor enters a new congregation and finds the dynamics of the congregation confusing (“these people don’t talk to each other!”). The Center for Congregations could recommend a local study group led by a pastor trained by Edwin Friedman. Or perhaps a moderator for a governing board is looking for a book that members can read together. Last year, the group had a “hard time making unpopular decisions.” A book by Peter Steinke is recommended. A pastor calls the Center for Congregations after the congregational meeting to approve a budget is marred by people accusing the finance team of misrepresenting bank accounts. The pastor is referred to a coach who has worked with others on maintaining a nonanxious presence. Use of Bowen Theory helps leaders see the congregation from a more objective perspective.

We know it is not necessary to teach the *theory* to congregations. The best Bowen Theory resources are those that help leaders try new behaviors, not just learn the theory. Spending too much time explaining Bowen Theory to a large number of congregants has the effect of a surgeon explaining in excruciating detail a procedure for a patient (“then I will take a hammer to your femoral head”).

Sometimes Bowen Theory is misused. Bowen Theory resources encourage *differentiation of self*. Differentiation of self is the lifelong work of developing the ability for both autonomy and closeness. All humans benefit from this ability. Congregational leaders must have this ability. Yet, leaders occasionally misunderstand what Bowen Theory means by self-differentiation. It is interpreted as license to take alienating individual stands with little attention to relationships. On occasion clergy declare themselves “self-differentiated” as they leave a dismantled congregation through the back door. In these cases, the theory is misrepresented.

In Bowen Theory, one of the markers for a well differentiated self is remaining nonanxious in difficult situations. This instruction functions like the command to “love thy neighbor;” easy to say and often hard to do. Being told to remain non-anxious sounds good, but can be difficult to manage in certain situations. Anxiety is not always harmful, nor is it possible for most of us to be non-anxious about important matters. Trying to maintain a non-anxious presence often has a paradoxical effect—it raises, not lowers, anxiety.

In some resources, Bowen Theory proponents have a propensity for overstatement. There is a tendency to speak assuredly of cause and effect. The Center finds congregations less predictable than most Bowen Theorists assert. They are more certain of the Theory than the word “theory” would imply. I wonder if, for example, self-differentiation as it is explained in Bowen Theory does not acknowledge the way leaders often need to imagine and manage opposing thoughts. Does this concept leave mental

space for the self to be transformed by divergent views within one's self? Self-differentiation, as explained by the Bowen Theorists, may not go far enough in describing the mental demands of leadership.

Certainly though, Bowen Family Systems Theory resources provide congregational leaders with a framework for understanding behaviors they are experiencing in congregations. Surely, congregations aren't families, though some small congregations function like an extended family. Yet, in congregations of all sizes the relationships within the congregation sometimes have family-like intensity. We allow behaviors in congregations that we would only allow in our family or (adversely) we allow behaviors in congregations that we would never allow in our family. Bowen Theory, when used well, builds awareness and confidence in the leader, provides a more objective view of the congregation, and calms anxiety. It allows thinking to catch up with praying and praying to catch up with thinking. Applied skillfully, Bowen Theory can be a powerful sense-making resource for congregational leaders.

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