A CHRISTIAN THEOLOGICAL ALIGNMENT
WITH BOWEN FAMILY SYSTEMS THEORY

by

Douglas U. Schonberg, BA, MDiv

A dissertation submitted to
the Faculty of McMaster Divinity College
in partial fulfilment of the requirements
for the degree of Doctor of Practical Theology

McMaster Divinity College
Hamilton, Ontario
2025

DOCTOR OF PRACTICAL THEOLOGY   McMaster Divinity College
Hamilton, Ontario

TITLE: A Christian Theological Alignment with Bowen Family Systems Theory

AUTHOR: Douglas U. Schonberg

SUPERVISORS: Dr. Lee Beach and Dr. Phil Zylla

NUMBER OF PAGES: viii + 215

ABSTRACT

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Douglas U. Schonberg
McMaster Divinity College
Hamilton, Ontario
Doctor of Practical Theology, 2024

Family Systems Theory as conceived and developed by Murray Bowen has shown strong versatility in its ability to expound upon the functioning not just of families, but any emotional-relational system that represents a congregate of individuals. Edwin Friedman, a Rabbi and family therapist, imported Bowen Family Systems Theory (BFST) into the congregational context, and demonstrated how BFST ideas and concepts could be applied by leaders for the improvement of their own function and for the greater health of congregations. In this dissertation, I provide an orientation and introduction for those being introduced to or considering BFST for a congregational context and offer Christian readers a method of theological reflection that can facilitate a sense of confidence and conviction in using BFST in and for the Church. For example, there exists a robust theological conversation partner for BFST in trinitarian theology. Using a proposed theological reflection method of alignment for animation, BFST and the doctrine of the Trinity can provide both a theory of human functioning and a theological basis for shaping ministry practices, which together can facilitate healthier functioning of both congregational leaders and the congregational system as a whole.

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INTRODUCTION: THE NEED FOR EMOTIONALLY, RELATIONALLY,
AND SPIRITUALLY INTEGRATED LEADERS

Leadership is challenging. Taking others from "here" to "there" requires the ability to

coalesce vision, articulate strategy, motivate others, and negotiate roadblocks, hurdles,

and detours. This is the case whether related to self-leadership in one's personal life,

leadership in a family, a business, school, sports team, politics, or—for the purposes of

this project—in a Christian congregation.

Leadership in a faith context is especially challenging. Clergy face discrete

expectations, contexts, and a diverse combination of tasks. Adams et al. note the broad

range of the typical clergy job description citing six categories: "(a) preacher, (b)

deliverer of rituals and sacraments, (c) pastor, (d) teacher, (e) organizer, and (f)

administrator."[1] They note that these roles have "highly diverse competencies with

numerous stressors. Clergy must frequently transition between roles, sometimes many

times during a single day resulting in potential role overload."[2]

Making things even more complex is the reality that the above-mentioned tasks

are deeply intertwined with interpersonal relationships within a congregation. This

creates a particularly unique leadership tapestry for clergy. Within the boundaries of one

relationship, clergy may hold the varying and shifting roles of preacher, teacher,

chairperson, innovator, employment supervisor, counselor, spiritual advisor, and even

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[1] Adams, "Clergy Burnout," 149.
[2] Adams, "Clergy Burnout," 149.

friend. Adams et al. also make reference to Lee and Iverson-Gilbert's proposal of "four essential ministry stressors for clergy and their families: (a) personal criticism, (b) boundary ambiguity, (c) presumptive expectations, and (d) family criticism," concluding that "overall the stressors that clergy experience are interpersonal in nature."[3]

Thus, in their leadership capacity, clergy must negotiate the overlap of diverse tasks and diverse relationships and must do so in a societal context that is increasingly anxious, reactive, and polarized. Pastoral leadership is daunting. Influential management author Peter Drucker is quoted as saying he "once told a pastor friend that he viewed church leadership as the most difficult and taxing role of which he was aware."[4] As far back as thirty years ago there was recognition that clergy struggle in their leadership. Roy Oswald, a lead consultant with the then Alban Institute noted "approximately twenty per cent of clergy with whom I've worked in seminars score extremely high on the Clergy Burnout Inventory. Among clergy in long pastorates (ten years or more) the number jumps to fifty per cent."[5]

There is evidence that clergy's sense of well-being is diminishing. In its October 2021 study of the health of Protestant American Senior Pastors, the Barna research group found that 24 percent were "unhealthy."[6] This designation of "unhealthy" was given when pastors self-scored themselves below excellent or good in half of six well-being categories: relational, spiritual, physical, emotional, vocational, and financial well-being.

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[3] Adams, "Clergy Burnout," 150.
[4] Burns et al., *Resilient Ministry*, 15.
[5] Oswald, *Clergy Self-Care*, 3.
[6] "38 percent of U.S. Pastors Have Thought About Quitting Full-Time Ministry in the Past Year," November 16, 2021.

Only one in three clergy were designated "healthy," scoring themselves as excellent or good in all six of the well-being categories.[7] According to David Kinnaman, president of Barna Group, "There is a growing crisis for church leaders in America . . . Pastors, too, need to proactively guard their health and well-being, taking a holistic assessment of how they are doing."[8]

Given the complex and boundless combinations of tasks, interpersonal relationships, and societal context, clergy need considerably more than honorable motivation, a pure sense of call, and natural leadership abilities to navigate what can all too easily become a vortex of reflexive behaviors, emotional reactivity, and spiritual languishment, which together can evolve into emotional-relational patterns that are harmful both to the leader and those being led.

Leadership has always been challenging. But in the present day, leadership has become especially demanding due to a rise in generalized chronic anxiety in society, and a latent emotional reactivity that is readily incited and easily leads to polarization.[9] In the presence of this gestational reactivity and anxiety, contemporary Christian ministry leadership now includes a requisite challenge of understanding the emotional-relational functioning of oneself, in addition to the people led. A robust emotional and spiritual resilience has potential to be efficacious when derived from both a theoretical and a theological foundation and framework that creates and supports emotionally and spiritually healthy leaders who could then import this health into their ministries.

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[7] "38% of U.S. Pastors Have Thought About Quitting Full-Time Ministry in the Past Year," November 16, 2021.

[8] "38% of U.S. Pastors Have Thought About Quitting Full-Time Ministry in the Past Year," November 16, 2021.

[9] Schonberg, "Increasing Challenge," 80.

None of this is new information to those involved in congregational leadership. Stressors upon clergy are oft discussed and well known by those associated with congregational work and research. There is a wide range of material available to support and develop clergy leadership and resilience. However, what is arguably lacking is an understanding of faith leadership that has a panoramic view that accommodates the entirety of a leader's landscape, tasks, and relationships (including with themselves), as well as a robust theological understanding of the inter-relationship between themselves, those being led, and the Triune God.

A Christian leader who is unable to understand and recognize the dynamic emotional-relational functioning taking place within themselves and around them is vulnerable to succumbing to anxiety and reactive behavior themselves. A Christian leader who can identify and understand the emotional-relational dynamic and functioning, but also understand and include themselves in the emotional-relational functioning occurring with the Triune God could find themselves with an even more robust resilience than what a theory of ministry practice solely provides.

What the present research project seeks to explore is the question, "How can Christian faith leadership be supported and strengthened by relating and aligning the vibrant theoretical understanding of leading within emotional-relational systems as described through Bowen Family Systems Theory (BFST), with a robust theological understanding of emotional-relational leadership developed and understood through trinitarian theology?" This project seeks to empower the well-being of individuals such as a clergy leader named Allen. Allen was a former student of Israel Galindo and is introduced in Galindo's book *The Hidden Lives of Congregations: Discerning Church*

Dynamics.[10] Allen was in his first church following seminary; a small, rural congregation that had welcomed him with open arms. Two years later, "at the end of Wednesday evening Bible study, the deacons presented him with a list of grievances and asked for his resignation. Allen was taken completely by surprise."[11] Galindo notes that Allen's pain was compounded by his confusion that came with reviewing his work and interactions and realizing he had not done anything wrong. There are dynamic emotional-relational processes at work. If these processes are not identified and understood, a leader will be vulnerable and subject to them, rather than exercising leadership within them.

It is the intent of this project to demonstrate that understanding emotional-relational processes is not only a viable undertaking, but has the potential to provide Christian faith leaders with a leadership orientation and health that encompasses all dimensions of their person and role, allowing them to lead more effectively in their personal lives and in their leadership roles and tasks—and all while doing so in a manner that is fully integrated with their Christian faith. This theoretical and theological relationship has the potential to nourish leaders' faith while leading. Moreover, it is a posture that stands in contrast to much Christian leadership material, which is skills, task, and practice oriented, and often contains unspoken assumptions regarding how the act of leading will primarily be a draw down on faith, leaving leaders drained. A practice of leadership that is nourishing and enhancing to a leader's faith is attainable. The theoretical and theological alignment I will propose will allow leaders to develop emotional-relational awareness and ability that, when broadly applied across the range

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[10] Galindo, *Hidden Lives*, 11.
[11] Galindo, *Hidden Lives*, 11.

of tasks, contexts, relationships, and spiritual vitality expected of them, will sustain robust, resilient, and even enjoyable leadership.

Context of the Research Project

The author is an ordained pastor in a mainline, Canadian denomination. I have served two congregations over a period of twenty-five years. The first congregation I served with had three to four hundred in attendance for worship. I served there as the associate minister for approximately three years before moving to a congregation of approximately one-hundred and twenty in attendance for worship as a solo pastor. I served with this second congregation for twenty-two years. My Master of Divinity degree was completed with a major in counselling. It was in the counselling courses of this degree that I was first introduced to Bowen Family Systems Theory (BFST) as a theoretical frame for individual and family counselling. Exercises developed for the training of clinicians using BFST were helpful in building a growing self-awareness of my own emotional-relational functioning.

Throughout my time in congregational ministry, I have encountered and experienced many of the classic congregational conflicts including but not limited to: villainization by congregants who maintained loyalty to a pastoral predecessor; conflict between clergy and key church stakeholders, including the organist, treasurer, matriarch, patriarch, or major donor; conflict arising from the tension between nostalgia for the past and a desire to engage with the future; tension from within extended families spilling into the life of the congregation; and frustration with beloved staff who were underperforming. As the ordained leader, much of the anxiety, reactivity, and energy derived from these situations was channelled toward me. This was especially the case

when I became the sole pastor of a congregation. Because of my exposure to BFST in my MDiv. programme, I knew I would need support and coaching to understand the emotional- relational dynamics happening both in the congregation and within myself.

I engaged a counselor conversant in BFST and met with him every two months for over a decade. The work of seeking awareness of the emotional-relational process, and the unpacking of BFST concepts at play in those dynamics, helped me self-regulate and empowered my leadership of the congregation. It allowed my leadership to come from a posture of understanding the emotional-relational process in play beyond any presenting problem or issue. The perspective provided by BFST and the work I undertook to understand how the concepts were manifesting in myself and in the congregation gave me resilience, calm, and a general well-being in my ministry and ultimately engendered better overall health for the congregation. This is not to say I was without frustrating, discouraging, and anxiously reactive moments or even seasons. However, I had a theoretical frame of understanding that ultimately gave me a path through these times towards better functioning. I retired from congregational ministry appreciated and well-regarded by my congregation and colleagues, and now serve as a consultant and coach to individuals and congregations, basing my assessments and coaching from a BFST foundation.

Structure of the Project

It would seem that there are minimal resources that introduce and provide critical reflection of BFST, its application in congregations, theological reflection, and subsequent ministry practice. This project is intended to serve as an introduction and orientation for practitioners in Christian ministry contexts who wish to develop and

grow in their personal functioning and leadership abilities. It will serve the person who has never heard of BFST and wants an introductory understanding of it. It will also serve the person who has encountered BFST and wishes an orientation to and reflection upon the field of work that has applied BFST into congregational contexts. And it will serve the person who knows BFST, who has used it to inform and guide their ministry practice, but who desires to further inform and develop their practice with a theological frame of reference.

In order to build my argument, and thereby be able to serve each of the above audiences, I will provide introductory descriptions and orientations in three areas; BFST, BFST as applied to congregational contexts and leadership, and the theological conversation partner of the historic doctrine of the Christian Trinity. This project aims to bring the three discrete areas into dialog with one another with the ultimate goal of providing a robust Christian theological animating alignment with Bowen Family Systems Theory as a means of guiding ministry practice and personal and spiritual development. There are four primary sections to the project. First, there is a section to introduce and orient the reader to BFST. Second, there is a section to orient and introduce work that applies BFST into congregational contexts. Third is a section that provides an introduction and orientation to a theological reflection method that I describe as 'alignment for animation,' which can be used by BFST practitioners in congregational contexts. The project will finish with example practices of how the alignment of BFST theory and trinitarian theology can shape ministry from both a theoretical and theological frame. These sections are more fully described in the paragraphs that follow.

The first section of the project consists of BFST's source and derivative material. Murray Bowen's seminal work *Family Therapy in Clinical Practice* along with a second work written with Michael Kerr, *Family Evaluation*, provide the foundational thinking behind BFST. Subsequent authors explain, extrapolate, and explicate Bowen's foundational work and core concepts, including a concept important for this project: the "emotional-relational system." Examples of these authors include Michael Kerr, Peter Titelman, and Roberta Gilbert.[12] Together their works provide a comprehensive understanding of BFST as well as examples of application of the theory into the therapeutic context. My research in this area has been further informed by my continued enrolment in the Bowen Center for the Study of the Family's "Postgraduate Program in Bowen Family Systems Theory and Its Application," which I started in September of 2022. This post-graduate program is for "professionals in the fields of psychiatry, counselling, education, ministry, research, and organizational consulting."[13] Membership with The Bowen Center for the Study of the Family provides access to archived video instruction from Murray Bowen himself.

The second section addresses the application of BFST in congregational contexts. Edwin Friedman's work *Generation to Generation* was seminal in bringing BFST to congregations. Friedman, a Rabbi and leadership consultant who trained with Murray Bowen, extrapolated BFST concepts into the congregational setting, noting that a congregation functions like a family in many ways. Spring boarding from Friedman's work are other practically focused, foundational authors such as Jim Herrington and Peter Steinke. This genre of work continues to be published with authors such as Steve

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[12] Kerr, *Bowen Theory's Secrets*; Titelman ed., *Clinical Applications*; Gilbert, *Eight Concepts*.
[13] "Learning and Development," [n.d.].

Cuss and Ken Reeves offering up practical application of BFST into congregational contexts as recently as 2019.[14] Second editions of the foundational authors have also been released in recent years. Together, these works coach congregational leaders how to leverage BFST concepts for both personal and congregational development. Related to their work are initiatives that have sought to measure and quantify key BFST concepts for congregational use. While some of the works also endeavour to provide biblical anecdotes as support for BFST concepts, generally speaking, there is a lacuna of Christian theological thinking in these works, with the ideas being touched on but in a cursory fashion. My understanding of BFST application into congregations has been made more vigorous through participation and completion of the "Faith Leadership Seminar" at the *Bowen Center for the Study of the Family* in 2021–2022.

The third section, and the pivotal and unique section of research and review for this project, will bring Christian theological thinking into dialog with the above two areas. I will argue there is strong alignment between the Christian doctrine of the Trinity and BFST's core premise of the family being the primary unit of the human being, as well as a related subset of concepts such as emotional process, togetherness, and individuality forces. Using the lens of an emotional-relational system to examine the relational nature of the Trinity bears fruit in understanding the Trinity itself, the position of the church within the relational system of the Trinity, and the place and role of the Church and Christian leader in those emotional-relational systems.

The amount of theological work explicating the Trinity is enormous. Due to this, project will be necessarily limited to a very broad understanding of this doctrine. Dialog

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[14] Herrington, *Leader's Journey*; Steinke, *Congregational Leadership*; Cuss, *Managing Leadership Anxiety*; Reeves, *Whole Church*.

for this project regarding the Trinity as an emotional-relational system will pull from three areas. First, the theological reflection method of alignment will be explained, informed by a review of current theological conversations that exist in relation to BFST. An understanding of the historical doctrine of the Trinity shall be informed by an exploration of the biblical theology of the Trinitarian relational system. *Father, Son and Spirit* by Köstenberger and Swain provides an exemplary entry point for this task. Second, the doctrine of social trinitarianism as elucidated by the likes of Moltmann, Volf, Grenz and Gunton[15] will be shown to provide a social relational frame for understanding the Trinity. The doctrine of perichoresis, "mutual indwelling without confusion,"[16] will be explored as an additional alignment for understanding the parallels between BFST and the Trinity. There is initial work that has already taken place in this area by scholars such as Horsthuis, Mosier, and Twombly[17] exploring the connection of perichoresis, individuality, and community. Finally, I will develop a theological reflection method I describe as *alignment for animation*, through which I will show how ministry practices inspired by either BFST and or theology can be used as a bridge between theory and theology, with the practices themselves providing a path toward a broader understanding of both. Examples will be provided of how practices can be utilized in ministry and will conclude with the path I use as a consultant and coach for ministry leaders and congregational coaching.

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[15] Moltmann, *Trinity and the Kingdom*; Volf, *After Our Likeness*; Grenz, *Rediscovering the Triune God*; Gunton, *Promise of Trinitarian Theology*.

[16] Horsthuis, *Perichoretic Pastoral Theology*, 44.

[17] Horsthuis, *Perichoretic Pastoral Theology*; Mosier, *Relationship and Differentiation*; Twombly, *Perichoreis and Personhood*.

With the provision of a fulsome understanding of each of these three areas; BFST, using BFST as a theory of practice in Christian congregations, and the traditional theology of the Trinity, my intent is to create a robust theological correspondence and alignment with BFST and its derivative ministry practices for those in the Christian leadership community. My hope and intent is to engender healthier, more productive, visionary leaders who are secure in their understanding of their place and role in a variety of relational systems, with an end result of healthier clergy and healthier congregations. This will be done by providing a solid theoretical and theological understanding of their place and role in a system, accurate ownership of the responsibility they carry for the relational dynamic within a system, and a vision for how that can be manifested in emotional-relational dynamics.

Design and Methodology

The primary exercise of this project is one of introduction and orientation to BFST with the goal of aligning it alongside theological reflection in order to strengthen ministry practices. As such it is a work of Practical Theology. Swinton and Mowat offer a provisional definition of Practical Theology, stating that "Practical Theology is critical, theological reflection on the practices of the church as they interact with the practices of the world, with a view to ensuring and enabling faithful participation in God's redemptive practices in, to and for the world."[18] In this project the practices of the church, derived from the practices of BFST, will be examined. Swinton and Mowat propose that it is the critical theological reflection upon these practices that ensure and

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[18] Swinton and Mowat, *Practical Theology*, 7.

enable faithful "participation in God's redemptive practices."[19]. Aligning theological interpretation and reflection with BFST and its practices as adopted by the church meets Swinton and Mowat's definition of Practical Theology.

This research project will provide a Christian theological expression and animation that demonstrates analogous alignment with BFST, thereby enhancing the use of BFST in a Christian theological context. Swinton and Mowatt make the point that whereas

> systematic theology can be understood as the interpreter of doctrine and tradition, and biblical studies as the interpreter of the sacred Scriptures of the Christian faith, Practical Theology should be understood as that aspect of the theological enterprise that focuses on the interpretation of the practices of the church and world as an ongoing sources of theological interpretation and understanding.[20]

As will be shown later in this work, BFST thinking and practices have been readily adopted in some church contexts for the development of healthier congregations and healthier leaders. Reflecting on these practices through a theological lens offers the opportunity to show that there is an alignment of functional truths arising from the theoretical and theological alignment of BFST and the Christian doctrine of the Trinity. There exists a notable theoretical and theological alignment between Christianity and BFST. When elucidated, this alignment provides justification for existing practices shaped by BFST, including Christian leadership formation and congregational development. This alignment arises from the functional truth revealed in practice in one context, namely BFST, which resounds and aligns with truth found in the Christian theological context.

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[19] Swinton and Mowat, *Practical Theology*, 7.
[20] Swinton and Mowat, *Practical Theology*, 11.

Theological interpretation will be facilitated through two primary means of theological reflection. Work will begin with what Ward describes as a "doctrinal way of doing practical theology."[21] In Ward's view, this doctrinal way of doing practical theology means "ordering knowledge theologically such that all things, including academic disciplines, are regarded as having their origins in Jesus Christ."[22] While BFST can helpfully inform congregational practice, theological knowledge has a priority position. I concur with Helen Collins when she argues "the frequently used theological reflection methods do not understand the Bible as Scripture, do not attend explicitly to the agency of the Holy Spirit, and do not adequately account for Christian experience."[23] It is the intent of this work to show that a primary position can be given to biblical theology and Christian tradition while still supporting the premises of BFST. Biblical accounts that describe and allude to the emotional-relational system of the Trinity, the relationship itself and the functioning within the Trinity, as well as the Trinity's relationship and function with the church will be presented. This biblical exegesis will then be expanded with the addition of Christian tradition and the church's historical understandings of the Trinity. Further theological reflection will be facilitated by means of a literature review which will introduce and summarize work that has been done in social trinitarianism and the concept of perichoresis, both of which have a particularly strong alignment to BFST concepts.

The project will conclude with a section of descriptive analysis of how ministry practices seen to be derived from BFST can correspond to the traditional Christian

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[21] Ward, *Introducing Practical Theology*, 5.
[22] Ward, *Introducing Practical Theology*, 5.
[23] Collins, *Reordering*, 8. In paragraphs prior, Collins specifically mentions the pastoral cycle method and critical correlational methods, referring to methods that begin from a location of experience.

doctrine of the Trinity, allowing ministry practitioners to align themselves from a place

of traditional theological understanding, and thus will give a robust basis of faith for

practices introduced into congregational practice informed by BFST.

CHAPTER ONE: HISTORY AND CORE CONCEPTS OF
BOWEN FAMILY SYSTEMS THEORY

The Rationale for Understanding Bowen Family Systems Theory

This project begins with the intent to provide an introductory presentation, explanation, and summation of Bowen Family Systems Theory (BFST). Even a cursory literature review of Bowen's theory easily demonstrates that there are very fulsome works in existence that outline the emergence and development of BFST. There are works that provide extensive explanation of the major components and concepts of Bowen Theory.[1] Part of the struggle of a project, such as mine, is knowing that there is a plethora of resources available for the studying and researching of BFST. It is a temptation to try and replicate those endeavours here. However, this project is not necessarily an endeavour to further advance the theory of BFST, nor is it an endeavour to further understand or advance BFST concepts into novel contexts or applications. Instead, it is my hope to bring BFST, which has already seen its concepts and practices used in the life of congregations, into dialog with theological thinking and have that dialog further strengthen and enhance the work of congregational practitioners.

Fruitful dialogs can happen when one has a good grasp of who is speaking, their context, the historical development of their thinking, how they explain their ideas, and how they see their ideas translating into practice. Bowen himself was a strong advocate

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[1] See Kerr, *Bowen Theory's Secrets*; Rakow, *Making Sense.*

for therapists having clarity of mind when it comes to theory, given his conviction that theory leads to practice, and that without theory a clinician is vulnerable to losing objectivity while working with a family. He observed that "There are striking discrepancies between theory and practice in psychotherapy," and that "the therapist's theoretical assumptions about the nature and origin of emotional illness serve as a blueprint that guides his [sic] thinking and actions during psychotherapy."[2] Bowen expressed the need for therapeutic approaches that were consistent with theory while showing concern for how the psychoanalytic view of the person and the therapeutic relationship had become so ingrained into the field that it produced "professionals who are oriented around the therapeutic relationship, who assume they know the nature and origin of emotional illness, who are unable to question the theoretical base on which the field rests."[3]

Bowen argued that Freud's discrepant models left psychoanalysis as a compartmentalized body of knowledge, unable to be researched, tested, and developed with scientific rigor, thus creating followers rather than scientists and scholars.[4] The lack of connection between theory and therapeutic practice leaves the clinician vulnerable. The vulnerabilities include postures such as an overconfidence in theory that disregards new observations and new learning, or a devaluing of theory to the point where the clinician operates in the therapeutic context from a place of relational instinct, without a clear framework, methodology, or therapeutic goal. Bowen stated this with great clarity, "The emotional response of the therapist will define the therapy if a theory does not

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[2] Bowen, *Family Therapy*, 337.
[3] Bowen, *Family Therapy*, 340.
[4] Bowen, *Family Therapy*, 341.

direct the clinician."[5] Michael Kerr who worked closely with Murray Bowen states it this way, "A basic thesis would say that if one knows theory, then family therapy comes automatically."[6]

Thus, this work begins with an introductory, cursory history and explanation of Bowen Family Systems Theory, its components, and its concepts. It is my conviction that BFTS's practices have been used in congregational life, but not necessarily with reflection as to the sources of the theory that leads to the derived concepts and eventual practices. Having practices without a lack of theoretical understanding is akin to having a toolbox full of tools without understanding the intent and most efficacious use of these tools. In short, theory shapes the therapist and, in Bowen's words, "A therapist is what his [sic] theory tells him [sic] to be."[7]

Ultimately, it is my hope to show that what is true for therapy and therapist is also true for theology and theologian. There is helpful analogous alignment between BFST concepts and some Christian theological doctrine that might provide an even more robust foundation and support for congregational practitioners who wish to use Bowen's theory in their work.

The Emergence of Bowen Family Systems Theory

Murray Bowen (1913–1990) was an American medical doctor, trained at the University of Tennessee, having received his MD in 1937. In 1938 he served as Project Physician for the Cumberland Homestead Project, in Cumberland County, Tennessee. From there

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[5] Rakow, *Making Sense*, 188.
[6] Kerr and Bowen, *Family Evaluation*, 339.
[7] Kerr and Bowen, *Family Evaluation*, 365.

he undertook an internship in neurology at Bellevue Hospital in New York and then at Grasslands Hospital in Valhalla, New York with a primary interest in surgery.[8] He began his medical career anticipating that he would work in surgery having been granted a residency in surgery at the Mayo Clinic. However, Bowen was called into military service in 1941 and was sent to Fort Bragg in North Carolina and from there was positioned in Europe. Serving in the registrar post in Fort Bragg, his area of responsibility included "securing and returning soldiers to active service."[9] It was in this context he noted "a high correlation between psychosomatic problems and soldier disabilities."[10]

During his time serving through World War Two, Bowen's interest shifted from surgery to psychiatry. Bowen himself wrote that a wider "orientation to the human changed during five years in Army hospitals . . . psychiatrists were hopeful about a 'new psychiatry' based on the discoveries of Freud that would change the practice of psychiatry."[11] With the completion of his military service, rather than assume the surgical residency that had been held for him at the Mayo Clinic, Bowen made the move into the field of psychiatry. Upon his return to the United States, Bowen was accepted for a residency at the then newly established Menninger School of Psychiatry in Topeka, Kansas. Psychiatry's emerging work, the pressing need for mental health support in soldiers returning from the war, along with Bowen's "conviction that the human mind

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[8] "Murray Bowen in His Time and Place," [n.d.].
[9] Rakow, *Making Sense*, 24.
[10] Rakow, *Making Sense*, 24.
[11] Kerr and Bowen, *Family Evaluation*, 348.

could be as much of a science as the rest of the human,"[12] captured Bowen's energy and attention.

It was in the field of psychiatry that Bowen would display his propensity and inclination for innovative, science-based, and holistic thinking, thinking that arguably arose from his history with community-based medical care, the experienced relevance of familial context in providing health care, and his exposure to medical and mental health issues found in those who served in the military. Bowen expressed his appreciation that leadership in the Menninger clinic "played a vital role. They were more interested in helping young people develop their own capacities than in communicating a fixed body of knowledge. The early motivation toward theory and science might not have occurred in another setting."[13] Thus with family, community, science, and a holistic definition of health in mind, the stage was set for Bowen to develop his theory of family systems.

Catherine Rakow, an archivist of Murray Bowen's work, has written a comprehensive work on the era during which Murray Bowen was actively developing his theory. In *Making Sense of Human Life*, Rakow argues that it was during his time at Menninger that Bowen "formed the foundation on which his theory rests today."[14] The Menninger approach to psychiatric treatment was holistic and relationally based with expectations that all staff—from physicians, through to clerical and cleaning staff—were considered part of the therapeutic team. Bowen realized that any and or all staff interactions would have an impact on patient functioning. The Freudian emphasis on the concept of transference brings the dynamic of a two-person relationship to awareness to

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[12] Kerr and Bowen, *Family Evaluation*, 347.
[13] Bowen, *Family Therapy*, 348.
[14] Rakow, *Making Sense*, 2.

clarify a self was part of all relationships: medical staff, clinic staff, and patients. Bowen began to work from the premise that an individual's personal and relational functioning and sense of well-being was developed and influenced not only by internal psychological dynamics, but by the relationships and functioning of those surrounding the individual. Bowen was primed to view psychiatric treatment with a wide lens that allowed a broad focus that included not only the individual presenting for treatment but also those present in the individual's context.

As Bowen learned Freudian theory, he came to appreciate what he called the genius behind Freud's ability to develop "the first clear psychological theory about the origins of neurotic illness . . . His discovery was revolutionary. His ability to remain outside the emotional process with the patient enabled him to observe and define the total process."[15] Bowen aligned with Freud's concept of transference, whereby the patient-therapist relationship serves as a "replication of the patient's childhood relationship with the parents."[16] This concept of the establishment of early life patterns through relating to others in the family was seminal in the development of Bowen's theory.

However, Bowen also began to realize that despite Freud's genius in the development of a psychoanalytic theory, the theory was not being supported by science. Bowen noticed that Freud was using "the literary history of mankind"[17] for the development of his psychoanalytic concepts, noting that the Oedipus and Electra complexes both came from Greek mythology and that even the concepts of the id and

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[15] Bowen, *Family Therapy*, 352–53.
[16] Bowen, *Family Therapy*, 353.
[17] Bowen, *Family Therapy*, 357.

ego also came from literature.[18] Despite his respect for Freud's therapeutic logic and objective observation, Bowen also realized these were not scientifically provable concepts. Bowen began to articulate the distinction between a human being's feeling state as demonstrated and expressed in literature and the state of a human as a scientific being, able to be understood by science in the way other living species are understood. In a desire to understand the human being's functioning scientifically, Bowen began an extensive literature review, reading books on the beginning of fields that included "psychiatry, psychoanalysis, psychology, medicine, sociology, anthropology, ethology, physiology, biology, philosophy, social work, religion, mathematics, physics, botany, chemistry, evolution, systems theory, astronomy, palaeontology, and others."[19] He was seeking a way to objectively understand the human being's functioning in a manner that was scientifically explainable and predictable.

Bowen concluded that the scientific facts of evolution could "replace many of the ideas in Freudian theory."[20] He was working toward a theory that would explain human behavior, not from a place of psychological motivation but from a scientific understanding of the functioning of a human being. He captures this thought succinctly writing, "What the *brain is* differs from what the *brain thinks*."[21] This distinction, the objectivity of scientific thinking, and the function of the human as opposed to a subjective feeling state would become prominent in his subsequent theory. Bowen's definitive criteria of a maturing, well-functioning human being, came to be understood

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[18] Bowen, *Family Therapy*, 357.
[19] Bowen, *Family Therapy*, 359.
[20] Bowen, *Family Therapy*, 360.
[21] Bowen, *Family Therapy*, 360. Emphasis original.

as a person who could differentiate the functioning of their thinking self over and above their feeling self, and thus regulate their behavior and responses.

Bowen was a staff psychiatrist at the Menninger Clinic in Topeka, Kansas from 1946 to 1954. His time at the Menninger Clinic linked together his experience of Freudian theory, his therapeutic work, and his careful observations of patients. With the growing realization that Freudian theory was scientifically insufficient, Bowen offered a research proposal to the Research Committee at Menninger to study how transference worked within families, moving the observation and therapeutic work of transference out of the relationship between therapist and patient, over to the relationship between the patient and the patient's parents. His proposal was rejected. In her effort to understand the rejection of the proposal, Bowen archivist Catherine Rakow posits that "Replicating a family's transference contradicted established practices. Altering a person's trajectory by having the offspring work out transference in relationships with the parents was beyond the committee's grasp."[22]

Bowen was moving toward a new way of understanding the functioning of a person, and he would need a new theory and a methodology to confirm the theory in order to build on that understanding. This opportunity became available to Bowen through the *National Institute of Mental Health* (NIMH). Established in 1953, the NIMH in Bethesda, Maryland included a Clinical Center that, as Rakow describes, "promised a boundless opportunity for experimentation and original ideas pioneering progress in studying body and mind while supplying a home for pure research that extended the clinical dimensions of the existing Public Health Service programs."[23] Bowen had

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[22] Rakow, *Making Sense*, 124.
[23] Rakow, *Making Sense*, 126.

searched across the United States looking for a position that would allow him to combine research and clinical practice. Making connection through his relationship with a former resident he had supervised at the Menninger Clinic, Bowen interviewed at NIMH and accepted a position in January 1954. The position was as a full-time research psychiatrist with time given for private practice. Upon beginning his work at NIMH, Bowen was appointed Director of the Psychotherapy Division. The latitude given to him as a researcher was exceptional. "Autonomy here is complete. No half-way measures . . . This place comes as near to my concept of a psychiatric utopia as can be devised."[24] This freedom allowed Bowen to continue developing his nascent theory with the incorporation of researched facts arising out of the therapeutic context.

It was in this context of exploration, research, and freedom that Bowen developed what would become his iconic NIMH research project that served a both seminal and consolidating role in the articulation of Bowen Family Systems Theory. The project began with the hypothesis, "Manifest symptomology, in the patient, psychosis; in the mother, psychosis and other symptomatic modes of adaptation, appears when the gratification of their needs are threatened," and that "If the environment can treat the patient as an adult, there is a chance for recovery."[25] Thus symptoms in individuals were understood as outcomes or expressions of the functioning of the relationship within a relationship unit, particularly so in the presence of threat or anxiety. Bowen was now seminally working with a premise that the primary unit of human beings was the family unit, as opposed to psychoanalytic theory's primacy of the individual. His research at

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[24] Rakow, *Making Sense*, 135.
[25] Rakow, *Making Sense*, 147.

NIMH would be geared to observing whether there was evidence of how individuals and families functioned to support his premise that the family was a singular unit.

While still being open to psychoanalytic theory and its possible development, Bowen was also beginning to work from the belief that the behavior of an individual could not be understood apart from the contextual environment and functioning of the family unit. In the design of his research work at NIMH he included features that were unprecedented and innovative in mental health work at that time. His research parameters included bringing entire families of a symptomatic patient into hospital, having all staff take on a resource posture toward patients and families rather than a role of treatment provider. All staff, psychiatrists, nurses, and support workers were coached to assume a detached, observational role to better observe and understand the behavior patterns and functioning of not only the presenting patient, but the full family unit. Staff were also coached to encourage the activation of a family's inner strengths through the building of self. Hospital staff would not perform tasks that members of the family could accomplish themselves. The ability to define oneself in the context of one's family unit was considered an efficacious path to improved functioning and the reduction of symptoms.

Through 1954 and 1955, Bowen admitted three partial family units, mother-daughter dyads, into the NIMH for observation and treatment. This was a step forward from admitting only the individual identified with the illness. Bowen instructed the staff to keep their neutrality when family members sought staff direction around treatment, but also around behaviors within and between the family members and the staff themselves. This refusal to enter the family's dynamics through offering expertise, advice, direction, and counsel was designed with the intention to reveal both a family's

behaviors when anxious and reactive, as well as instigate the beginning of growth to the sorting and reorganizing of family behaviors and patterns in response to the presented illness. Rakow notes that the dynamic of the mother-daughter dyad, the disruption from father's visits, and the shifting attachments to various staff provided the observations that lead to the epiphany that would become foundational to Bowen's theory. "Bowen brilliantly integrated all these observations to advance a new theory of the human. Introducing the family as a unit reorganized the entire trajectory of the research."[26] In 1955 Bowen admitted a complete intact family to NIMH for treatment and research. This era at NIMH and the work with these families was a time Bowen's observations and ideas began to congeal into expressed theory. Understanding the family as a biologically evolved unit changed the direction of his work. Bowen began to intentionally focus his attention and research toward family therapy, prioritizing it over individual psychoanalysis.

Orienting himself to his emerging theory, shifting his practice to include complete families in therapy, using research methods of observation and data gathering put Bowen in a position that was out of alignment with the NIMH's research work in the field of schizophrenia. While Bowen was gathering data, building his theory, and designing methods of treatment based out of his theory, what he was not doing was publishing in the area of schizophrenia. "[While] other researchers 'had already turned out reams of papers which were very impressive' Bowen's project had not."[27] Bowen himself recounted a director saying to him, "Since your findings do not apply to schizophrenia alone, your research should be terminated and replaced by a study

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[26] Rakow, *Making Sense*, 180.
[27] Rakow, *Making Sense*, 252.

designed specifically for schizophrenia."[28] Bowen's family project was terminated in 1959.

Bowen searched for a place where he could continue his research. His criteria included that it be a medical school. He wanted stability in the administrative leadership to give his research work a level of permanence and funding so there would be time for it to develop and grow. Finally, he sought a place where his emerging theory would have the freedom to be further explored using the research model Bowen conceived of at NIMH. Motivated by the encouragement of the chairman of Georgetown, who Bowen recounts saying "you have discovered a lot about the family that will always be important to psychiatry. I would like to have that at Georgetown,"[29] Bowen moved to the department of psychiatry at Georgetown University Medical Center where he served as an adjunct professor, conducted research, and held a private practice. It was a fortuitous move for the development of his theory. His out-patient practice grew to include families with less severe symptoms than full psychosis. Bowen began to observe that "relationship processes that were first observed in seriously dysfunctional families (those with a schizophrenic member) were present in *all* families."[30]

During his time at Georgetown University Bowen continued to build out and define his theory. With the insights gained from his work at NIMH, and the support of the Georgetown University Medical Center, Bowen began to publish and a series of papers presenting the details of his theory in the early 1960s.[31] The family program at Georgetown grew. A symposium began in 1964 and a post-graduate program was

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[28] Kerr and Bowen, *Family Evaluation*, 366.
[29] Kerr and Bowen, *Family Evaluation*, 373.
[30] Kerr and Bowen, *Family Evaluation*, 11. Emphasis original.
[31] Kerr and Bowen, *Family Evaluation*, 346.

instituted in 1969. In 1975, having been awarded a grant from the NIMH for fellowships in family psychiatry, Bowen founded the Georgetown University Family Center and the entire family faculty was moved off-campus to the Family Center. Interest in the Center's programs by ecclesial, organizational, and financial professionals and other disciplines continued to grow. The Center offered post-graduate training opportunities, research seminars, and clinical conferences, all in the effort to elucidate and grow Bowen's theory and derivative therapeutic practices. Through these years, Bowen Theory and its concepts were taught, explored, and examined, and BFST was becoming more widely known. In 1990, the Family Center left Georgetown University and incorporated as a nonprofit organization, becoming The Bowen Center for the Study of the Family. The Center continues to operate today, offering learning and development programs, coaching in BFST application, an annual symposium, a clinical conference series, professional lecture series, as well as a faith leadership seminar and conference. Bowen had successfully developed his research, observations, experiences, critical thinking, and inspiration such that it was evolving into an established theory of human behavior. It was being taught and disseminated and used, with users of the theory being supported with training, coaching, and the encouragement to continue its progression.

Bowen Family Systems Theory: A Summative Survey and Key Concepts

In his summation of Bowen's theory, Patrick Stinson states, "I have found [Bowen Theory] to be a tightly integrated theoretical system of interrelated concepts which define predictable patterns of human behavior."[32] Bowen intentionally desired to

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[32] Stinson, "To what extent," 131.

understand the functioning of human behavior from a science-based foundation. While appreciating the genius of Freudian theory and in particular its helpful concept of transference, the inability of Freudian and psychoanalytic theory as understood at that time to move into researchable, demonstrable, and provable premises prompted more questions from Bowen. He provides a rather straightforward example of the puzzle of explaining how Freudian theory posed maternal deprivation as being a cause of emotional illness, yet it could not explain why individuals who had experienced even greater maternal deprivation did not fall ill.[33] Bowen sought logical and predictable explanations for behaviors he was observing in his patients. In his estimation, psychoanalytic theory was not making verifiable progress, so he extended his reading into the foundational literature of all the sciences "especially in evolution, biology, and the natural sciences in an unsuccessful search for some clue that might provide psychiatry with solid membership among the accepted sciences."[34] It was in this search that Bowen came to rest upon evolutionary science as a vehicle that could lead toward a verifiable understanding of the functioning of human behavior.

The following sections will provide a summative understanding of Bowen's Theory and its key concepts. This is done with the humble awareness that there is substantive work available covering any one of these sections, and that Bowen theorists, scholars, clinicians, and practitioners are in ongoing dialog concerning these terms and concepts through Bowen's original writings, his recorded research, conferences, publications, and through the work of the Bowen Center and other research networks. The literature review that is part of this chapter can lead those wishing to further

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[33] Bowen, *Family Therapy*, 353.
[34] Bowen, *Family Therapy*, 416.

understand the theory and its concepts toward paths that provide a much fuller

explanation and specific dialog. It is beyond the scope of this project to present the case

for the use of Bowen Theory, nor is this my intent. The purpose of this project is to

provide a Christian theological conversation partner to Bowen Theory in order to further

resource and strengthen Christian congregational leaders and practitioners who wish to

use Bowen Theory in their ministries. Thus, this project provides a basic review of the

theory and its concepts so that the conversation is based on an accurate, albeit

introductory, understanding of BFST itself.

One of the criticisms laid against Bowen Theory is the ease with which its

concepts are misappropriated and misapplied due to the familiarity of terms within it.

Bowen was quite particular in his understanding of the theory and its concepts, and the

terms he used were intended to reflect the theory and its function. He was also adamant

the concepts he articulated were to be understood as functioning collectively in relation

to each another as part of a system. Thus, each concept is best understood when seen in

relationship and through the lens of the other concepts. The theory is intended to be a

unified whole. Yet it is readily acknowledged that Bowen Theory's concepts can be and

often are extrapolated into individual tools or highlighted one above another. Bowen

identified this phenomenon early and explained it by leveraging a core concept in his

theory called differentiation of self.

> The concept is the heart of the theory and also one often misinterpreted. In the
> early years I assumed it had been my failure in communicating clearly when
> others failed to understand. Later I learned that much of the failure was in the
> thinking bias of the listener or reader. I became over-simplistic in presenting it as
> the differentiation of self *scale* . . . People responded to the term *scale*. I began to
> get letters asking for copies of the scale . . . The misinterpretation of

"differentiation" is so great I often wish I had never heard of the term, but the problem is with the emotional process the term defines and not with the term.[35]

Providing a foundation of understanding of Bowen Theory and its concepts is necessary for entering into the theological dialog that will come later in this project. As will be shown later in this work, there is a considerable body of work that took Bowen Theory and developed practices for ministry from it. As these works were developed, Bowen's concepts were applied and occasionally morphed into something that superseded Bowen Theory itself. Having the fundamental and historical understandings of the theory will allow a greater awareness of how the theory and its concepts were imported into, and used in, congregational leadership, and for the purpose of this project, provide an original voice for a theological conversation partner.

<p style="text-align:center">Family Systems Theory</p>

One of the primary, endemic challenges in teaching, explaining, comprehending, and implementing any academic work is the need to define terms with clarity and precision, such that what is being discussed, researched, and/or developed can be appropriately understood. The particular challenge with Bowen Family Systems Theory is the common use and familiarity of its terms. For example, consider the term family. We all have a family and experience family to some degree. Therefore, someone studying Bowen Family Systems Theory may prematurely jump to a conclusion that they fully and completely understand what is meant by family. It is so familiar a word that what readers bring to mind, including that related to their lived experience of biological family, can cross disciplines well beyond what the theory intended. The word theory

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[35] Bowen, *Family Therapy*, 402–4. Emphasis original.

also has a continuum of meanings, from a hunch all the way to a current understanding

of how the universe functions. Bowen used words that are common and familiar but did

so intending to describe something particular. Because of this, scholars of Bowen

Theory are careful to make the distinction between Bowen Theory and other systems

theories and family therapies.

Theory

As previously stated, Bowen himself realized the ease of misunderstanding him was a

problem when trying to explain his theory. He even struggled with using the term

theory, given that he was initially looking to identify concepts within Freudian theory

and psychoanalysis. In fact, he was not looking to create a theory. Reflecting on this,

Bowen wrote how his colleague Jackson urged him to use the term theory. Bowen

initially resisted believing what he had at this point was simply a partial theory or

concept.[36] However, as multiple concepts emerged in his family research, he came to

believe he had enough material that articulated a new way of understanding, a new

theory. Coupled with the concurrent emergence of other general systems theories, and

other family therapies as his theory was consolidating, Bowen made the decision to

move away from the term family systems theory given the generality of the term.

Bowen's protégé and colleague Michael Kerr explains "By the time Bowen first

published his theory in 1966, the phrase "family systems" was beginning to be widely

used by mental health professionals. Use of the phrase further increased over the next

ten years and began to mean quite different things to different people. Bowen, in an

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[36] Bowen, *Family Therapy*, 357.

effort to distinguish his concept of a family system from the concepts of others, changed the name of his theory from family systems theory to the Bowen Theory. This change was made in 1975.[37] Despite this formal change to Bowen Theory, one will still see "Family Systems Theory," "Bowen Family Systems Theory," and "Bowen Theory" used interchangeably in the literature—including this dissertation.

Family

Interestingly, Bowen himself does not seem to explicitly define the term family; that is, he does not clarify what constitutes a family. This may reflect a mid-twentieth century western assumption that the nuclear family of parents and children are the definitive configuration of a family. Phrases such as "chosen family", "found family," or "family of choice" were not part of the lexicon of that time. Bowen paid particular attention to the biological family in his research, and the families used in his research were biologically related and consisted of parents and children. "The theory was developed from family research that focused on the entire nuclear family unit."[38] It was as his theory expanded that Bowen began to develop concepts that addressed families across generations. Furthermore, the development of the family diagram tool, a graphic tool used to map one's family through generations as well as map the family's functioning, did allow for the inclusion of individuals significant to the functioning of the family of origin.

For Bowen, more significant than what defines a family was the understanding of the family as the primary unit of human functioning. This was and still is a considerable

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[37] Bowen, *Family Therapy*, 357.
[38] Bowen, *Family Therapy*, 529.

departure from a western propensity to see the individual as the primary unit of human functioning. Those in the West tend to see and conceive of themselves as "individuals who have a family," ahead of a "family containing individuals." In his work with mother-daughter dyads, Bowen came to the conclusion that "the mother-child relationship was a dependent fragment of the larger family unit."[39] Thus it was a major breakthrough in Bowen's thinking when he began to conceptualize the family as the primary, natural unit of human life. Michael Kerr provides an excellent summation of this concept of the family as a unit.

> Family systems theory, on the other hand, viewed the family as a unit, as a network of interlocking relationships. These interlocking relationships, which were assumed to be governed by the same counterbalancing life forces that operate in all natural systems, were seen to have an enormous impact on the thinking, feelings, and behavior of each family member. Each person was not an autonomous psychological entity, but, instead, was strongly influenced by the family relationship system. These family concepts were developed from the study of relationships and pertained to relationships. The psychology of the individual was not ignored, but was simply placed in a larger context. The traditional psychological concepts were seen to describe rather than to account for human functioning.[40]

There is significance to understanding the family as the primary unit of human beings over and above the individual. Essentially, an individual's functioning is best understood through an understanding of their way of functioning in the family unit. Reciprocally, an individual's functioning cannot be understood without understanding the functioning of the family unit. "Systems theory assumes that all important people in the family unit play a part in the way family members function in relation to each other and in the way the symptom finally erupts."[41] Bowen also made the effort to emphasize that while many

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[39] Bowen, *Family Therapy*, 324.
[40] Kerr and Bowen, *Family Evaluation*, location 65.
[41] Bowen, *Family Therapy*, 259.

might speak of the family system, they were generally speaking of the family as a group or collection of individuals. Family Systems Theory, and Bowen Theory, encourages one to look at and consider the whole family functioning as a unit in order to understand how the relationships intersect.

There are further implications to conceptualizing the family as a unit. First, an individual, within and as part of the family unit, is both a source of, and subject to, the functioning of the family unit. Kerr points out, "People have less autonomy in their emotional functioning than is commonly thought. The thoughts, feelings, and behavior of each family member, in other words, both contribute to and reflect what is occurring in the family as a whole."[42] Second, there are implications for therapy, as a family systems therapist is now no longer treating just an individual but is addressing an individual's functioning as it manifests within the context of the family unit. A family systems therapist will assist an individual by means of consideration of the family unit. Third, was Bowen's discovery and observation arising from work with families at the NIMH that "the relationship patterns in the live-in families were also present in less disturbed families, and even in normal families."[43] This means that, according to Bowen Theory, all families have common observable and predictable patterns of functioning. This commonality means that patterns of functioning can be anticipated and understood, providing a lens for understanding any family, not just those presenting with problematic symptoms.

As will be discussed later in this work, the conception of the family as a unit, and the derivative implications, has been imported toward the consideration of a

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[42] Kerr and Bowen, *Family Evaluation*, 9.
[43] Kerr and Bowen, *Family Evaluation*, 366–67.

congregation as a unit. Moreover, congregational leadership may be better understood when considered within the context of the functioning of the leader's family unit in addition to the leader's functioning within the context of the congregational unit.

Systems

Like the word theory, the word systems has a broad range of meaning and application, from a method for completing tasks or providing training, to understanding ecosystems and economic models, to technical explanations of the interaction of created mechanisms. Bowen strongly argued that his family systems theory did not arise from general systems theory and that general systems theory was inadequate for application to what he describes as the emotional functioning of a family. He writes, "It is grossly inaccurate to consider family systems theory as synonymous with general systems, although it is accurate to think of family systems theory as somehow fitting into the broad framework of general systems theory."[44] He furthers his point saying, "My family systems theory is a specific theory about the functional facts of emotional functioning."[45] Rooting his theory in evolutionary science, Bowen saw the family emerging as a natural system. Kerr provides further explanation of a family system's comparative status to other natural systems, as evolved, not created.

> The principles that govern a natural system are written in nature and not created by the human brain. The solar system, the ant colony, the tides, the cell, the family of homo erectus, are all natural systems. The human family system sprung from the evolutionary process and not from the human brain. We did not create it. We did not design human relationships anymore [sic] than the elephant or gibbon designed their family relationships. Family systems theory assumes that the principles that govern such things are there in nature for us to discover.[46]

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[44] Bowen, *Family Therapy*, 359.
[45] Bowen, *Family Therapy*, 359.
[46] Kerr and Bowen, *Family Evaluation*, 24.

Bowen Theory, and Family Systems Theory, addresses what is conceived of as the natural system that is the human family, it being the primary unit in human functioning, with individuals within it connected in a network of interlocking relationships. Bowen Theory arose from observational research of families, not analogous understandings of family, nor from principles of general systems theory. However, while family systems is descriptive, Kerr and Bowen realized the description did not provide an explanation of what created, sustained, and impacted these interlocking relationships—the energy, so to speak, that created the dynamic within a family unit. Kerr explains, "Bowen eventually dealt with this problem by making a distinction between the family relationship system and the family emotional system. The relationship system was a description of what happened, and the emotional system was an explanation for what happened."[47] By bifurcating the family system into relational system and emotional system—description and explanation—Bowen developed eight concepts that help identify the means of functioning of the family unit.

Bowen Family Systems Theory's Eight Concepts

Having come to see the family as the primary unit of functioning, Bowen started to conceptualize how this functioning manifested as he observed families in his research project. He describes a period of approximately six years between 1957 and 1963 when the the initial six concepts were consolidated, publishing his findings in 1966, with the final two concepts added in 1975. It is an important aspect of Bowen's theory to understand that the functioning described by these concepts do not stand alone in the

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[47] Kerr and Bowen, *Family Evaluation*, 11.

functioning of a family—they are all in play at the same time, concurrently interacting and influencing the family unit and the individuals within it. In addition to the eight primary concepts, there are derivative concepts emerging from them that further describe how the concepts function, relate to, and influence each other.

Given that these concepts and their derivatives are imported into the practice of ministry literature that later arises from Bowen Theory, it is necessary to understand the concepts and their derivatives as originally conceived to understand how and why they were applied in practice. This chapter's introduction to Bowen Theory and its concepts will facilitate tracing the origins of Bowen Theory based ministry and will provide a leverage point that will assist in making future analogous applications. As previously stated, the key goal of this project is to provide a theological conversation partner for Bowen Theory. Credible dialog requires adequate understanding of the partners. This section of the project will introduce the eight concepts and their derivatives, with the caveat that there are seminal sources and further resources available that offer more detailed examinations and explanations, which can be utilized for deeper conversation and study. Thus, the present brief literature review will provide the reader with starting point resources to facilitate exploring Bowen Theory more deeply.

Bowen's primary writings, publications, and explanations of his theory's concepts are quite broad, as might be expected for something that was being newly conceived and described. While Bowen was adamant that his theory be understood as science based, rooted in evolutionary science, it should be noted that it has yet to be proven with evidence that reaches beyond observation and internal logic. Patrick Stinson provides a needed admonition as the concepts are described:

The field of Clinical Psychology has no broad, predictive theory to diagnose and guide the treatment of behavioral problems. Bowen Theory is one attempt to organize all observations of human behavior into a single, integrative, and predictive framework. Bowen theory also stands alone as a conceptual system grounded first in evolution, with an emphasis on logical coherence in a world of divergent species. However, Bowen theory has yet to enjoy scientific critique from outside the network of professionals who are already interested in it. With no formal explicit predictive models or comprehensive data set to support its claims, even good faith critics are left with mere mental logic and insufficient attention to evaluate its complex ideas. Further, a lack of explicit predictive models leaves the ideas vulnerable to erosion through a group process, a problem articulated by Murray Bowen himself.[48]

A most helpful organization and presentation of Bowen Theory's concepts and its derivations comes from the work of Israel Galindo. In his presentation "Rethinking the Theory," Galindo gathers and presents Bowen Theory concepts in two ways. First, Galindo simply names the eight concepts, and identifies seven subsets or derivatives. Second, Galindo presents the eight concepts, with two variables, and two 'life forces.'[49] All these concepts and their derivatives or variables are to be understood as interwoven and interactive with one another, making an explanation of each dependent on understanding the others. It is possible to get caught into a web of explanations of how one concept or its derivative manifests in the others, and indeed, some authors attempt this, unfortunately and ultimately tangling the reader into a morass of ideas. Therefore, for this project the concepts will be presented broadly and independently, with this preestablished understanding of their interconnectedness.

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[48] Patrick Stinson, "Barriers to Science for Bowen Theory: Markers of Pseudoscience and Applications," lecture presented at the Symposium on Family Theory and Family Psychotherapy, Kensington, MD, November 4, 2023.

[49] Israel Galindo, "Rethinking the Theory" presentation given to the January 24, 2022 cohort of the Bowen Center Faith Leadership Seminar.

(1) Nuclear Family Emotional System

Bowen described the family unit as an emotional system. The word emotional is, as previously discussed, a word that in Bowen Theory is distinctive and particular, and therefore open to misunderstanding because of the familiarity of the word in general society. "Emotional" in Bowen Theory does not mean being easily affected by emotion. Instead, the emotional system "is considered to include all the above functions, (states of contentment, agitation, fear, weeping and laughing) plus all the automatic functions that govern the autonomic nervous systems, and to be synonymous with instinct that governs the life process in all living things."[50] The emotional system is akin to the instinctual system. Randell T. Frost describes the emotional system as "behavior governed by the part of the human that we share with the rest of life . . . The emotional system includes automatic functioning within an individual and his or her relationships with others."[51] In her explanation of the nuclear family emotional system, Roberta Gilbert uses the example of her grandfather's herd of cattle. She describes a scene where peacefully grazing together, one cow brushes against the electric fence, is startled, vocalizes, and moves away quickly. This cow's response becomes a shared response through the emotional system and suddenly all the cows are agitated. This transmission of a shared response is the emotional process found in the emotional system.[52] In the words of Daniel Papero, the emotional system is the shared "force or energy that both produces and results from interaction between discrete living entities and between a living thing and [their] environment."[53]

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[50] Bowen, *Family Therapy*, 356.
[51] Frost, "Challenges," 304.
[52] Gilbert, *Eight Concepts*, 6.
[53] Papero, "Family Emotional System," 18.

(2) Differentiation of Self Scale

Bowen called the differentiation of self scale a cornerstone of his theory.[54] His use of the word "differentiation" was specifically for its analogous association with the biological phenomenon of cellular differentiation. Cells are discrete and distinct from one another, having cellular membranes which provide a boundary distinguishing them from other cells. However, the cells also function as a collective, with the membranes being permeable to allow for the reception of nutrients and removal of waste. For Bowen, differentiation in the human emotional system can be described as being on a scale, with varying degrees of differentiation of self being possible. Bowen writes, "The differentiation of self scale is an effort to assess the basic level of self in a person."[55]

At the low end of the scale is ego fusion, or the lack of a distinct self. An individual at this low end of the differentiation of self scale is in a position of dependence on the feelings of those around them.[56] Bowen divides the emotional system into two halves, a feeling system and a thinking system. The feeling system is instinctual, governed by subjective awareness and unprocessed reactions. For the person on the low end of the scale, "the inner feeling state is the most accurate possible expression of truth."[57] The thinking system or the intellectual system is how Bowen describes a human being's ability to use the neo cortex, and thus logic and reasoning, rather than be governed by their feelings. An individual at the lower end of the differentiation of self scale tends to be governed by the feeling system, or by their emotional system's reactivity to the wider system's emotional process, as opposed to the

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[54] Bowen, *Family Therapy*, 306.
[55] Bowen, *Family Therapy*, 473.
[56] Bowen, *Family Therapy*, 162.
[57] Bowen, *Family Therapy*, 473.

rational objectivity found in the thinking or intellectual system. For a person on the low end of the scale, thoughts and behavior tend to be externally determined.

At the higher end of the scale are individuals who have less emotional fusion in their relationships. They have a higher level of differentiation of self. The feelings of others are not primary determiners of one's own feeling state. There is the ability to distinguish between what one is feeling and the ability to use the intellectual system and objectively reason, logically evaluate a situation, and choose a response rather than simply react with an unconsidered response. Individuals at the higher end of the differentiation of self scale are better able to separate and distinguish between their thinking and feeling systems. Bowen describes the method of moving up the differentiation of self scale as "defining a self, to become clear about her own beliefs and convictions, and especially to maintain a stand on important family issues without losing 'self' in the family emotional field."[58] Peter Titelman effectively summarizes the scale with these two thoughts, "Differentiation of self can be described as the variation in an individual's capacity to be an individual while functioning as part of a group."[59] Also, "differentiation can be described as the variation in one's ability to act for oneself without being selfish while being able to act for others without being selfless."[60]

(3) Triangles

Another concept of Bowen Theory is that of the triangle. Bowen Theory uses the metaphor of triangle to describe the fundamental, and most stable unit of emotional

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[58] Bowen, *Family Therapy*, 143.
[59] Kerr and Bowen, *Family Evaluation*, 63.
[60] Titelman, "Concept of Differentiation," 25.

process. As previously discussed, emotional process in Bowen Theory is a term "to describe the emotional responsiveness by which one family member responds automatically to the emotional state of another, without either being consciously aware of the process . . . It runs silently beneath the surface between people who have very close relationships."[61] A triangle occurs in the emotional process between three people; it is emotional flow and counter-flow. Bowen states that "the emotional forces within a triangle are in constant motion, from minute to minute and hour to hour in a series of chain reaction moves as automatic as emotional reflexes."[62] While the emotional process between two people can be stable when things are calm, with the introduction of a stressor, and the raising of anxiety, a two person relationship becomes unstable, and emotional process has a default to the inclusion of a third. It is the presence of a third that creates stability in the emotional system. One might think of the difference between a bicycle and a tricycle. A bicycle can travel well on two wheels, but when a stressor or interruption is introduced, one will put their foot down for stability. A tricycle is stable enough to stand on its own, having a triangle of wheels, even when stressors are present. Bowen described it this way:

> the triangle, a three-person emotional configuration, is 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. When tension in the triangle is too great for the threesome, it involves others to become a series of interlocking triangles.[63]

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[61] Bowen, *Family Therapy*, 66.
[62] Bowen, *Family Therapy*, 470.
[63] Bowen, *Family Therapy*, 373.

Triangles have immense significance in Bowen Theory for they are the primary means for understanding and mapping the emotional process in a family system. It is by observing when, and how individuals are brought into a triangle that one can begin to objectively describe what happens to and in a family when a stressor or perceived threat is introduced. The concept of the triangle also serves to identify where anxiety is being held in the system. Bowen noted that should anxiety grow unabated, triangles can continue to be generated from beyond the original triangle, creating what is referred to as interlocking triangles.

By way of example, we can use a hypothetical instance of the relationship between a mother and daughter. When the relationship is calm, the two are able to relate and function in a normal matter. But with the introduction of a relationship stressor—perhaps the mother is insisting on the completion of a chore that the daughter has neglected—anxiety will cause instability in the relationship. There is an unresolved tension. In an act that will stabilize the emotional system, the mother communicates her frustration to the father, bringing the father into the emotional process of the dyad, creating a triangle between the mother, father, and daughter. The mother and father's alignment serves to reduce the mother's experience of anxiety and generates an alliance with the father in dealing with the daughter. Conversely, the daughter may complain to her sister, generating alignment and reducing the daughter's experience of anxiety, and so now the family system includes two interlocking triangles. Bowen notes that one's position within a triangle is an indicator of insider or outsider status. The two who are aligned experience togetherness, the person in the outside position is distanced from the tension and, as a result, is in a more comfortable position. The emergence and generation of triangles is generally an automatic process, part of the nature of an emotional system

and serves to bring the family unit, or emotional system, back to its place of familiarity and balance.

(4) Cutoff

When the intensity of emotional process in a system rises to a high level, it is possible that a cutoff will be created. A cutoff is an extreme form of internal or physical distance. It is a strategic mechanism for addressing intense emotional processes, particularly between generations such as with parents and children. Bowen says, "The life pattern of cutoffs is determined by the way people handle their unresolved emotional attachments to their parents."[64] By distancing, one can separate from the emotional process.

Cutoff refers to the distancing from emotional processes and can manifest in a variety of ways. Bowen uses descriptors such as "separation, isolation, withdrawal, running away or denying the importance of the parental family."[65] Cutoff can be a move to another country. It can be refusal to speak to another individual. It can be avoidance of any conversations of meaning or significance. It can manifest as divorce. Physical distance and amount of contact are not the determiners of cutoff, but rather distance from the emotional process. One can be physically far away and connected to emotional process. One can be physically near, yet cutoff because of disengagement from emotional process. Because cutoff is a reactive strategy to fusion occurring in the emotional process, an unresolved emotional attachment to parents, it does not provide a means for the development of differentiation of self in an individual. Cutoff may appear to be good boundaries and principled behavior, but because of its source in reactivity to

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[64] Bowen, *Family Therapy*, 381.
[65] Bowen, *Family Therapy*, 382.

emotional process, it tends to leave individuals with limited access to additional strategies for addressing intensity in emotional systems. Kerr notes that "Reducing cutoff from the past is one of the most important elements of therapy."[66] Bowen says, "The person who runs away from his [sic] family of origin is as emotionally dependent as the one who never leaves home."[67]

(5) Family Projection Process

Bowen noticed that despite sharing parents, siblings could present with strongly disparate levels of functioning and levels on the differentiation of self scale. Logic would suggest that having the same parents would produce siblings with similar levels of functioning, but that is often not the case. The family projection process is a child-focused triangle, specifically, parents to symptomatic child, "one child is more involved in the intensity of the nuclear family."[68] Bowen observed "Tension between parents appears to decrease when both join in an anxious perception of the child as inadequate or weak. In efforts to support the child, the parental disagreements fade into a posture of joint concern and cooperation in their efforts for the child."[69] The child's symptoms serve as both a distraction and unifier for the parents. With anxious attention being directed to a symptomatic child, that child becomes the holder, or location, of anxiety for the emotional system. Siblings outside of the family projection process have a greater opportunity to develop a higher level of differentiation of self because of freedom from parental projection of anxiety within the system.

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[66] Kerr, *Family Evaluation*, 281.
[67] Bowen, *Family Therapy*, 382.
[68] Noone, "Multigenerational Process," 88.
[69] Papero, "Family Emotional System," 18.

(6) Multigenerational Transmission Process

An expansion of the family projection process concept, the multigenerational

transmission process is the concept that accounts for the way in which the family

projection process moves through generations. A child who has been the focus of the

family projection process is more likely to reach adulthood lower on the differentiation

of self scale. An individual with a lower differentiation of self tends to partner with

individuals who are at a similar place on the scale. This partnering with someone who is

on a similar place of the scale is also true of those mid-scale and at the higher end of the

scale. Thus, in multigenerational transmission process one can follow the progress of

differentiation levels through generations of a family. Bowen describes it in this way:

> If we follow the most impaired children through successive generations, we will
> see one line of descent producing lower and lower levels of differentiation . . . If
> we followed the line through the children who emerge with about the same levels
> of differentiation, we see a remarkable consistency of family functioning through
> the generations. If we follow the multigenerational lineage of those who emerge
> with higher levels of differentiation, we will see a line of highly functioning and
> very successful people.[70]

To aid in developing a lineage, family diagramming began to be used to

articulate the multigenerational transmission process. A family diagram is a method of

collecting and presenting information on the family unit across multiple generations.

The family diagram has the capacity to convey a great amount of factual information

about the family unit, such as dates of birth, marriages, divorces, deaths, migrations,

level of education, career, and other decidedly pertinent information. Family diagrams

also present an opportunity to chart triangles, relationships with high intensity, fusion,

cutoff, and nodal events that may have affected the functioning of the family, such

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[70] Bowen, *Family Therapy*, 384–5.

economic depressions or war. With a family diagram, one is better able to visualize emotional process and many of the concepts I have already describe in this section.

(7) Sibling Position

Acknowledging and crediting the work of Walter Toman in his book Family Constellation, Bowen incorporated sibling position as one the concepts of his theory.[71] It has become recognized that there are certain traits commonly associated with sibling position. The first born, middle, and youngest each have behaviors that are attributed to birth order. For example, first born children often carry responsibility, middle children accommodate, and youngest children are given latitude. Bowen Theory recognizes this phenomenon but frames it within the emotional system and the emotional process, calling each a "functional position."[72] Kerr explains, "The consistent association of certain personality traits with specific sibling positions results from the fact that the expectations of functioning for the various positions are similar in all families."[73]

Sibling position is a significant consideration in the development of differentiation of self but must be considered in connection with the family projection process. For example, if a first-born child is the focus of the family projection process, carrying the anxious weight of parental expectations for success in post-secondary education and their professional career, the first born may actually experience lower differentiation of self while the youngest has freedom from the family projection process and is therefore better able to differentiate themselves.

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[71] Bowen, *Family Therapy*, 168.
[72] Kerr and Bowen, *Family Evaluation*, 54.
[73] Kerr and Bowen, *Family Evaluation*, 55.

(8) Societal Emotional Process

Originally coined by Bowen as "Societal Regression,"[74] this concept addresses what Bowen observed to be emotional processes happening not just in the family but at a societal level. The concept was initially described as regression because what Bowen observed was principally a diminishment of society's functioning and an increased prevalence of the feeling system over the intellectual system. He was noticing an increased reactivity and anxiety in society that was impeding the ability for individuals within the society to make logical, principled decisions. This correlates with a lowering score on the differentiation of self scale. However, in this concept, the scale score reflects the functional level of differentiation of society as a whole. Yet, if societal regression is possible, so is societal progression, which is why Bowen relabelled the concept. As is true with all the other concepts, the functioning of societal emotional process is interwoven with the function of the other concepts of Bowen Theory. In brief, this concept takes seriously the fact that the functioning of society as a whole factors into the functioning of the family unit.

<div align="center">Derivative Concepts</div>

Bowen was explicit in naming the eight concepts of Bowen Theory summarized above. However, within Bowen Theory are what Galindo calls derivative or subset concepts.[75] Bowen does not list these derivative concepts as such, but they appear repeatedly throughout Bowen's writing and are essential to understanding the functioning of the theory. Galindo comments, "I find it interesting that these derivative concepts are often

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[74] Bowen, *Family Therapy*, 358.
[75] Galindo, "Rethinking the Theory."

talked about more than the eight core concepts."[76] Generally speaking, the derivative

concepts describe the conveyance and operation of the eight core concepts. If the eight

core concepts answer the "what" of Bowen Theory, the derivative concepts could be

understood as helping answer question "how"—as in, by what means does the family

experience its functioning.

(a) Reactivity

Reactivity is a derivative of the functioning of the emotional system. Remembering that

in Bowen Theory the emotional system is "synonymous with instinct that governs the

life process in all living things,"[77] reactivity describes responses across the emotional

(instinctual) feeling and intellectual systems. By way of example, if an individual

perceives he or she has been insulted, there can be reactivity in the emotional system,

expressed biologically with a flushing of the skin, raised heart rate, and faster breathing.

The feeling system might react with the experience of hurt, or offence, the intellectual

system might react with attempts to understand or rationalize the behavior of the one

giving insult or evaluate the merit of the content of the insult. Any and all of these

responses are reactivity. The ability to regulate one's reactivity, by giving primacy to the

intellectual system over the feeling system, is considered a measure of one's

differentiation of self. Those higher on the differentiation of self scale are better able to

manage their reactivity. Those lower on the scale will be more likely to succumb to their

feelings and instinctual reactions. A feature of reactivity is its fluidity between human

beings, analogous to how an electric charge moves through anything that is able to

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[76] Galindo, "Rethinking the Theory."
[77] Bowen, *Family Therapy*, 356.

conduct electricity. Emotional reactions affect all those connected to one another in a family system. The opposite of reactivity in a system is calm.

(b) Anxiety

In Kerr and Bowen's seminal works, they often speak of anxiety, its presence, its transfer, its movement through the emotional system, and its management. But Kerr and Bowen seem to assume a knowledge of what is meant by anxiety. It is secondary sources within Bowen Theory that provide clarification. Frost writes, "Anxiety refers to the degree of emotional response to a real or perceived threat. Threat can range on a continuum from real to imaginary. Anxiety related to a genuine, time-limited threat can be adaptive. Anxiety related to an unlikely or imaginary threat can become more chronic and long term."[78] Roberta Gilbert's description of anxiety is also helpful: "At base most intense emotion is simply, and can be referred to as, anxiety. Emotions are automatic physiologic reactions. When they become conscious, they are feelings. Anxiety is automatic and most of it is out of awareness."[79] Interestingly, she also makes the point that in Bowen Theory informed systems thinking it is not necessary to become overly specific as to the nature of the anxiety—its presence and how the system addresses it is the prevalent issue. Anxiety's cause is less significant than the fact that it is present.

Bowen Theory notes a distinction between acute anxiety and chronic anxiety, and their respective impacts upon a system. Acute anxiety arises in the presence of a real or perceived immediate danger or threat. It results in an automatic physical response, with the release of adrenalin or epinephrine into the body in preparation for a fight,

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[78] Frost, "Challenges," 309.
[79] Gilbert, *Eight Concepts*, 7.

flight, or freeze reaction. Acute anxiety can be experienced during epic events such as events in a war, a car accident, or a fire. But the body's response to threat can also be experienced during interpersonal conflict, a physical injury, or simply reading an account from the news. What is distinctive about acute anxiety is its onset and its passing are both relatively quick. The threat is dealt with and the body calms. Chronic anxiety is an ongoing 'background' anxiety. It is a stress that is continuously and automatically carried. Chronic anxiety releases the stress hormone cortisol into the body. A system that is suffering from chronic anxiety will exhibit diminished resilience and higher reactivity. Those suffering chronic stress may notice a decline in the functioning of the system with an increase in the appearance and severity of symptoms when anxiety is chronically present.

(c) Distancing

In Bowen Theory, distancing is another mechanism in the functioning of the emotional system. In scenarios where there is a movement toward what Bowen refers to as fusion, when the identity of the system (as a whole) begins to overwhelm individuality, distancing is a means by which individual identity can be re-established. As such, it is a reactive measure. Distancing can be physical, literally moving away from the system, leaving the room, the house, or even the country. But distancing can also be emotional, "a retreat to sufficient aloofness and distance from each other to maintain as much identity and autonomy as possible."[80] Whereas cutoff is a complete separation with no contact whatsoever, distancing is considered a similar, albeit less severe means of

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[80] Bowen, *Family Therapy*, 93.

gaining separation from too much togetherness in the system. Ideally, greater differentiation of self would be the preferred avenue of growth for the individual and the system.

(d) Solid Self/Pseudo Self

Bowen determined that there are two levels of self. One he labelled the solid self. The solid self is "made up of firmly held convictions and beliefs . . . it is never changed by coercion or persuasion by others."[81] The solid self might be described as one's true self, or one's core self. Awareness of one's solid self is generally correlated to the differentiation of self scale. The stronger one's differentiation of self, the stronger the experience of a solid self. The other self that Bowen described was the pseudo-self. The pseudo-self is a composite self, made up of "knowledge incorporated by the intellect and of principles and beliefs acquired from others. The pseudo-self is acquired from other, and it is negotiable in relationship with others. It can be changed by emotional pressure to enhance one's image with others or to oppose the other."[82] A pseudo-self is shaped by the questions, "Who do you need me to be? or Who do I need to be right now?" In the dynamic of an emotional system, the presence of strong pseudo-selves and weaker solid selves can produce an outcome where one individual becomes what Bowen calls the functional self and the other a no-self. The functional self becomes responsible for the functioning of the relationship, the other goes along, neither are necessarily operating from a position of solid self. This leaves a system less resilient and more reactive in the presence of higher anxiety.

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[81] Bowen, *Family Therapy*, 200.
[82] Bowen, *Family Therapy*, 200.

(e) Reciprocity Dynamics

Reciprocity dynamics is a mechanism Bowen used to describe the level of functioning by various persons in a family or emotional system. To explain the mechanism in a general sense, if one member of the system is symptomatic or under functioning, another or other members in the system will begin to over function, taking on additional responsibilities on behalf of the one who is symptomatic. Bowen also calls this "overadequate-inadequate reciprocity."[83] This dynamic can be appropriate and helpful, as may be the case with physical illness, or in times of unusual (temporary) stress. In this unique circumstance, one member of the system who is less able receives additional support from somewhere else in the system. The dynamic can become problematic when over functioning restricts the development of the member who is under functioning. For example, a parent who continues to do things for their child when that child could do them for themselves (such as dishes, cooking, or laundry). The overadequate parent takes on responsibility for the functioning of the child, to the child's detriment, as the chronic under-functioner may become stuck or dependent on the over-functioner. Indeed, left unchecked, mechanisms such as distancing, reactivity, the development of a pseudo-self can all engage in an effort to provide some separation.

(f) Togetherness-Individuality Forces

The reciprocity dynamics bring to the surface what Bowen described as the togetherness-individuality force. The emotional system is continually adapting and adjusting to a polarity within each individual. There is a draw toward togetherness, to

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[83] Bowen, *Family Therapy*, 156.

the "we" of the system, which is the attraction of shared identity, values, principles, and the prioritization of the whole over the self revealed in values such as being there for others and demonstrating selflessness in seeking the well-being of others. These are the positive aspects to the togetherness force. Negatively, togetherness can lead to putting the individual's locus of control and sense of responsibility for self on the group. Thus, one's feelings, functioning, and place in life are understood to be the responsibility or fault of others. In reverse, others can end up assuming responsibility for the outcomes in an individual's life. There can be confusion as to where responsibility lies.

On the other side of the togetherness-individuality polarity there is the draw to individuality or differentiation. The pull is toward defining a self. Movement toward the "I" is where an individual can be found to be developing his or her own principles, thoughts, and actions, apart from, and possibly different from, the group. An individual who leans into the individuality force can assume more responsibility for self and build the solid self that "is not negotiable in any relationship system."[84] It is the true self unaffected and able to resist pressures from others for togetherness. Kerr explains that the force may be unobserved until the system is stressed.

> When a relationship is calm and in a fairly comfortable balance, the interplay of individuality and togetherness may be barely visible. The adjustments people are making to one another are so subtle and automatic that they are not obvious. When the relationship moves toward a significant imbalance, however, the pressure for adjustment is more intense and more easily observed.[85]

Thus, the interplay within the emotional system can be understood as the effort to establish balance between the togetherness and individuality force. When the system is

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[84] Kerr and Bowen, *Family Evaluation*, 104.
[85] Kerr and Bowen, *Family Evaluation*, 66.

balanced, the system can be considered calm. When the system is disturbed, mechanisms previously described will come into play.

Bowen Theory Forces and Variables

Israel Galindo organizes Bowen Theory in two different ways.[86] In the first way, he adds to the eight established concepts by identifying the derivatives that arise from the concepts and thus contribute to the functioning of the theory. In the second, he gives primacy to the eight concepts but then identifies two variables and two life forces. The two variables are the differentiation of self and the level of anxiety. The two forces, as just described in the previous section, are togetherness and individuality. This second way of organizing Bowen Theory is quite helpful for understanding the ways in which the variables, the forces, and concepts exert influence on each other and manifest in the behaviors that appear in the emotional system that is the family unit. For example, the introduction of a threat that produces a high level of stress in a system where differentiation of self is low, can increase the togetherness force, generating a reactivity of conflict, cutoff, or distancing. Conversely, in a system where there is a high level on the differentiation of self scale, the introduction of a threat may be met with a lower level of anxiety, allowing the intellectual system to engage in the work of problem solving from established principles, thereby allowing the emotional system to effectively adapt to or manage the stressor. Paying attention to the interplay of variables, forces, and concepts can facilitate a fulsome understanding of the emotional process and the functioning of a family unit or emotional system. This provides a therapist, consultant,

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[86] Galindo, "Rethinking the Theory."

family member, or organization leader with points of entry to gain an understanding of the functioning of the system. With understanding of the processes in play, points of intervention can be created to improve the functioning of the system and the individuals within it.

Literature Review of Bowen Theory Resources

This project has the broad goal of equipping ministry leaders with both a theoretical and theological foundation that is sourced in the alignment between Bowen Theory and social Trinitarianism. A reservation expressed by some Bowen theorists is that ministry practitioners who have adopted Bowen Theory have, so far, misrepresented the theory.[87] I strive to answer this reservation and facilitate ministry leaders' growing in understanding of Bowen Theory by giving introductory summations of its historical development, key ideas, and concepts. For ministry leaders who wish to pursue further understanding, in the following section I will review key primary and some secondary resources for understanding Bowen Family Systems Theory.

Murray Bowen published *Family Therapy in Clinical Practice* in 1978. It is the seminal work of Bowen Theory, a collection of his papers published from 1957 to 1977. Given that it is a compilation, and reflects growth in Bowen's thinking and the theory, the resource is somewhat challenging to access. If one is looking for a particular understanding of a concept, one will need to hunt through the book as it will be found in multiple locations, reflecting Bowen's various papers and presentations over the years. It is an essential resource in order to hear Bowen's thinking in his own words. However, it

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[87] McKnight, "Bowen and Friedman: Two Systems Thinkers."

is likely more helpful to read secondary summary works of Bowen Theory ahead of using this resource. In a similar vein, *The Origins of Family Psychotherapy: The NIMH Family Study Project* published in 2013, is an edited volume of Murray Bowen's unpublished and published papers written when he was working at the National Institute of Mental Health. The work reflects the development of his thinking in the period of 1955 to 1959 and as such is likely most useful to Bowen Theory researchers seeking to understand the growth and development of Bowen Theory and Murray Bowen's thinking.

Michael Kerr worked closely with Bowen for many years. Published in 1988, his book *Family Evaluation* provides a methodical and detailed explanation of Bowen Theory and its concepts. It is written as a frame of reference for the family therapist, providing a means of assessing family functioning using Bowen Theory. While intended for the expressed purpose of providing family evaluation, it is just as useful as a fulsome introduction to Bowen Theory. Similarly, over 20 years later, in 2019, Kerr published *Bowen Theory's Secrets: Revealing the Hidden Life of Families.* This too, is a primary, yet contemporary resource for understanding Bowen Theory and its interlocking concepts. Kerr effectively intersperses his explanation of core concepts and their interactive interplay with case examples and diagrams. Similarly helpful, and perhaps the most accessible, is Kerr's 2003 work *One Family's Story: A Primer on Bowen Theory*. In this book Kerr briefly explains each of the eight concepts and gives his reader real life examples of the concept as demonstrated in family life. The simplified explanation of the concepts read alongside Kerr and Bowen's works will provide a strong grasp of Bowen Theory concepts. Given his close proximity to Murray Bowen over the years, in addition to his leadership in the establishment of, and the directorship

of the Bowen Center for the Study of the Family, Michael Kerr's works could arguably be considered as seminal as Bowen's work. After listing his extensive exposure to Murray Bowen and his work Kerr states, "as far as I can determine, no substantive differences exist between Bowen's thinking and my own."[88]

A newer work of significance is Catherine Rakow's book *Making Sense of Human Life: Murray Bowen's Determined Effort Toward Family Systems Theory* (2023). Rakow is an archivist and researcher who has had extensive and extended exposure to the archival material of Murray Bowen. Her work has almost immediately become the definitive voice of the early historical development of both Murray Bowen and his theory. With a particular focus on his mid-life years from 1946 to 1955, Rakow provides a deep look into the evolution of Bowen's thinking via his medical work placements, research, and therapy with individuals and families. She is able to depict the progress toward his theory and how his personal and professional history interacted and impacted its advancement. This historical work is conducive to providing a greater understanding of how Bowen's perspectives developed, allowing the reader to share the journey, observations, and logic that lead to the conclusions he made in his completed theory.

For the committed researcher, *The Murray Bowen Archives Project* (murraybowenarchives.org) is a fulsome resource providing not only his professional papers, but recorded video lectures and oral histories given by those close to Bowen. The Archives Project also provides means for accessing Bowen's training videos and the physical collection of his writings held at the National Library of Medicine.

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[88] Kerr, *Bowen Theory's Secrets*, xxiv.

Secondary, derivative resources can be helpful in either summarizing or further explicating Bowen's concepts. Roberta Gilbert wrote *The Eight Concepts of Bowen Theory* in 2004. Her work is a summative introduction to the eight concepts and is particularly useful in showing how the eight concepts and their derivatives intermesh with one another by providing real world examples of the functioning of an emotional system. Significant to my project is an article written by Edwin Friedman, "Bowen Theory and Therapy" in the *Handbook of Family Therapy vol.2*. 1991. As will be seen later in this project, Friedman went on to apply Bowen Theory into congregational and leadership contexts where it was readily received and took on a significant momentum of its own.

For the researcher ready to explicate Bowen Theory, a number of helpful compilations of articles have been published. Peter Titelman has edited a number of such works themed around Bowen Concepts. *Differentiation of Self: Bowen Family Systems Theory Perspectives* (2014) is key in that Bowen considered differentiation of self a cornerstone concept of his theory, directly impacting and interacting with all the other concepts. These compiled works also serve as an expansion of Bowen's thinking and provide avenues for further research. Titelman has also edited additional compilations to address the Bowen concepts of cutoff and triangles. For the therapeutic practitioner, Titelman has edited *Clinical Applications of Bowen Family Systems Theory* published in 1998, addressing how Bowen Theory might be accessed and utilized in the treatment of issues from family assessment, to dysfunction in children, phobias, alcoholism and others.

Researchers and theorists seeking to expand the reach of Bowen Theory would benefit from Robert Noone and Daniel Papero's edited collection *The Family Emotional*

System: An Integrative Concept for Theory, Science and Practice, published in 2015. In his later years at the Bowen Center for the Study of the Family, Bowen sought to establish a stronger connection to his premise that Bowen Theory describes a natural system with a scientific base sourced in evolutionary science. Looking to the natural systems of other living species, seeking to understand the epigenetic effects that are produced in an emotional system, to understanding the physiological functioning of individuals and how that connects to the functioning of the system are all areas that researchers in Bowen Theory are exploring, of which Noone and Papero provide examples. More recently, Mignonette Keller and Robert Noone edited the *Handbook of Bowen Family Systems Theory and Research Methods: A Systems Model for Family Research* (2020). While not the direction of this particular project, Keller and Noone have gathered together contributors who are working with and from Bowen Theory toward a science of human behavior. Each of the above these seminal works provide a solid base from which to understand Bowen Theory. Moreover, derivative works provide a good introduction to directions Bowen Theory is taking and areas of continuing and proposed research.

Despite its readily apparent efficaciousness, and the enthusiasm of Bowen theorists, BFST is not beyond critique. Murray Bowen intended for the theory to be a science of human behavior, somewhat akin to studies in ethology. Stinson observes that Bowen was able to provide the field of clinical psychology an attempt at a "broad, predictive theory to diagnose and guide the treatment of behavioral problems."[89] Stinson notes however that "Bowen theory has yet to enjoy scientific critique from outside the

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[89] Stinson, "Barriers to Science."

network of professionals who are already interested in it."[90] What this means is the theory tends to be reinforced by those who are invested in it. It continues to build upon observational data and mental logic rather than empirical evidence of the processes observed. To its credit, the Bowen Center for the Study of the Family does welcome and invite researchers from other fields at its annual symposium in an effort to further inform the theory from a scientific base. Work and research proceed with an assumption that future work will be generative, providing scientific knowledge in support of the theory. Patrick Stinson is a leading voice in this endeavour.

Israel Galindo provides another important critique. Galindo argues that BFST is theory as axiom, that is, it is self-evident and therefore taken to be true based on observation and proposition.[91] He further argues that theory as an axiom requires precision of language which BFST lacks arguing that Bowen is guilty of a repeated vagueness in his effort to explain what he observed in clinical research. Galindo has a collection of vague phrases from Bowen's work including "for want of a better term, a kind of energy system, to some degree, the average family, much of the time, all kinds of things."[92] The vagueness stands in contrast to Bowen's stated desire for making "psycho-therapy as scientific and predictable as possible."[93] Galindo also notes that the line between theory and metaphor can be easily blurred in BFST. Galindo has observed that in the effort to explain BFST, metaphorical language can be overused to the detriment of the aim of making BFST a scientific theory. He argues by way of example that a central premise in BFST, anxiety, has been anthropomorphised. It is spoken of as

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[90] Stinson, "Barriers to Science."
[91] Galindo, "Rethinking the Theory."
[92] Galindo, "Rethinking the Theory."
[93] Bowen, *Family Therapy*, 470.

an objective existence with agency. One can read in BFST about anxiety giving, causing, moving, etc. as opposed to it being an internal response of individuals. An objectified external anxiety that can be passed is a helpful metaphor when using the therapy in practice. Metaphorical language, which BFST consistently uses, does not promote an objective scientific rigor for the theory.

Stinson and Galindo have identified primary concerns and barriers for moving BFST toward an accepted science of human behavior. Stinson uses the term pseudoscience to refer to "knowledge systems mistakenly regarded as being scientific"[94] Until the scientific research from outside sources reaches a level of accepted rigor, BFST will continue to find itself identified as a pseudoscience.

With a foundational understanding of Bowen Theory and its concepts now established, this project is ready to look at how Bowen Theory emerged into and was used by practitioners in the context of congregational ministry.

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[94] Stinson, "Barriers to Science."

CHAPTER TWO: UTILIZING BOWEN FAMILY SYSTEMS THEORY
IN THE CHURCH

Bowen Family Systems Theory was and continues to be well received and utilized as a

lens for understanding the structure and life of faith communities. It has also served and

continues to serve as a resource and tool to empower leadership development, and to

encourage healthier patterns of functioning in both the leader, and in broader

congregational systems. While not the goal of Murray Bowen's research, nor his

intended audience, his theory of human functioning has proved readily and easily

adaptable to faith communities and congregational contexts. In this chapter I will show

how this is the case by providing an overview of the emergence and appropriation of

BFST into and for the congregational context. I will do this by identifying and

discussing adaptations and interpretations of the theory for congregational leadership.

Christian theological perspectives brought into dialog with BFST in the primary works

that apply BFST to faith communities and congregational contexts will also be

examined. This will be done using a selective literature review of some key works.

These key works have been selected chronologically from early to later as a way to show

the expansion and development of the use of BFST in congregational contexts. Key

works have also been selected according to different theological postures authors take to

justify and inform the use of BFST in a faith setting. This provides some perspective on

how others have approached BFST and theology.

Reference will also be made to lectures and interviews given by those within the Bowen Center for The Study of the Family network who have been part of, observed, promoted, interacted with, and continue to promote the use of Bowen Family Systems Theory in faith contexts.

Using the existing literature to provide a foundational understanding of how BFST use is encouraged in congregational contexts will show how the present project is providing an additional and unique perspective for understanding how BFST can be theologically aligned, particularly from a traditional Christian faith context. Showing the development of BFST within the Christian context will also facilitate another step forward for those using BFST, namely, by offering a theologically based paradigm for using BFST in congregational leadership.

This project will argue that BFST can function within traditional Christian theology by grounding it in social trinitarianism. In doing so, the rationale for using BFST in Christian leadership and congregational development is strengthened both theologically and practically. For Christian leaders and communities in particular, a theological base and alignment offers additional, alternate, and arguably even stronger merit for using BFST for ministry practice. Guided by the desire and intent to provide a practical leadership resource by using BFST, much of the congregational and leadership development literature based in BFST is missing this opportunity for more robust theological reflection. There are many biblical anecdotes and examples which can be illuminated using BFST. However, there is an opportunity to do even more. By ultimately demonstrating the alignment of Bowen Theory concepts, variables, and forces with Christian theology, Christian congregations and leaders could experience not only anecdotal models but an orientation and way of being in their relationship with the triune

God and God's church. Moreover, they may then move beyond a simple leadership or ministry technique or practice and, instead, toward a way of being that benefits the leader, the faith community, and God's *missio dei*. Thus, while BFST has proven to be of great utility and value in Christian leadership and congregational well-being, there is a further opportunity to strengthen the health of leaders and congregations using BFST by reinforcing the BFST with a traditional Christian theological alignment. This argument will be continued in the theological and application chapters of this project. It has been introduced here as an explanation and justification for providing a fulsome look at the emergence and appropriation of BFST for faith leaders and communities.

Edwin Friedman's Groundbreaking Application of Bowen Family Systems Theory to Congregational Life

Murray Bowen wanted Bowen Family Systems Theory to be science based. A scientific materialist, he envisioned a day when the concepts, forces, and variables he coalesced into theory would become identifiable, explainable, and understood by following a path of continued research that would evidentiarily demonstrate the veracity of the theory. Bowen envisioned a process unfolding for Bowen Theory that would parallel the manner in which aspects of Einstein's or Darwin's theories became observable and measurable over time as technology developed and scientific methods were refined. Bowen encouraged and welcomed dialog from scientific fields. Thus, one will find Bowen theorists exploring and researching work in fields such as epigenetics, biofeedback, ethology, and even cosmology. The goal in interrelating these fields of research is to pull the veil back on the natural systems functioning of the human as a species, and particularly how that functioning is revealed in families through emotional process.

What Bowen did not anticipate was Bowen Theory's ready introduction and effective utilization beyond family therapy into the world of faith communities. This introduction and subsequent appropriation began prominently through the work of Edwin Friedman.

Locating Edwin Friedman[1]

Edwin Friedman was born in 1932 and grew up on the upper west side of Manhattan. He was the only child of his parents, who were cultural but not practicing Jews. He took on undergraduate studies in the early 1950s, majoring in history and literature. Following his undergraduate studies, he went to Hebrew Union College during which time he also went to Israel for a year, returning fluent in Hebrew and in Jewish culture. He received his rabbinic ordination in 1959 and became the rabbi of Temple Shalom in Washington DC that same year. His congregation was complex, as it had been established as a break off from another congregation, with a resulting complex relationship between the rabbi, congregation, and the location of power. His work in the congregation started well. But in the last two of his five years it was characterized by politics and anxiety. He married in 1961, shifting the emotional process both in himself and in his congregation. In the same year he married he also began psychoanalysis. This was done not only with the desire to work on self and his functioning in his congregation, but also with a view to becoming a therapist himself. As described by Beal, conflict in the congregation grew through Friedman's tenure, culminating in a "huge fight."[2] He was ultimately expelled,

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[1] Beal and Jeunnette provide a fulsome picture of Edwin Friedman's entry into Bowen Family Systems Theory context. This section of the project summarizes their works. See: Beal, "Retrospective," 407–24; Jeunnette, "The Rabbi and Bowen Theory."

[2] Beal, "Retrospective," 410.

but many in the congregation disagreed with the decision and left with him. The group

who left with Friedman became the core of his second congregation.

Friedman finished his psychoanalysis training and, in addition to serving as a

rabbi part-time, took on the role of Community Relations Specialist in fair housing for

the Johnson Administration from 1964 to 1966. During this time, he also had a third

part-time job in family counselling. Friedman was dissatisfied with the posture of the

psychoanalytic therapist. He preferred to relate to clients in a peer-to-peer manner, the

way he would relate to friends. A congregant introduced Friedman to the work of

Murray Bowen, noting that Bowen also had the desire to "find concepts to replace the

terms *therapy* and *therapist* in work with the families."[3] Bowen writes, "I have found

terms such as *supervisor, teacher*, and *coach* to be the best. The *coach* is probably the

best."[4] Friedman went to meet Murray Bowen, and in him found a coach.

Friedman began meeting with Bowen in 1966, receiving private supervision from

Bowen for the therapy Friedman was offering through his private practice. Friedman

also began attending seminars that Bowen was conducting at the Georgetown University

Medical Center. Friedman made his first presentation at the Georgetown University

symposium on family theory and family therapy, titled "Ethnic Identity as Extended

Family in Jewish Christian Marriage." This presentation would later become the basis of

an article included in the book, "Systems Therapy: Selected Papers: Theory, Technique,

Research," published in 1971. This was edited by other Bowen students, Carolyn

Moynihan, and Jack Bradt. At this time, Bowen Theory was still new and developing.

The theory, and the therapeutic posture and practices it encouraged, stood outside the

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[3] Bowen, *Family Therapy*, 309.
[4] Bowen, *Family Therapy*, 309.

mainstream of family therapy research. The community around Bowen was small with

most clinicians, therapists, and researchers in Bowen Theory having a direct one to one

relationship with Murray Bowen either through receiving direct supervision from him,

by attending his seminars, or being involved in research groups. Bowen Theory was, and

in many ways still is, very much linked to Murray Bowen the person. Even today, there

is still a high level of status given to those at the Bowen Center for the Study of the

Family who knew Murray Bowen personally, and their assessments, opinions, and

interpretations of the theory carry weight in the Bowen Theory research community.

This is an important observation, for as will be shown later in the project, as Bowen

Theory was later appropriated into use for faith communities, Bowen's lack of

endorsement, and preference for a science-based orientation meant that Bowen Theory's

use in faith communities became the awkward, unintended dinner guest at Bowen

gatherings. Arguably, Friedman had a key role in taking Bowen Theory and applying it

to faith communities. He would also expand the theory's scope.

Guided by Bowen's teaching and coaching, Friedman began to interact with

Bowen's concepts using them to understand his own family of origin, how his family

functioned, and how his family shaped his own functioning. As a means of illuminating

both his own family's functioning and Bowen Theory, Friedman took it upon himself to

plan his mother's seventieth birthday party, and to make it a surprise. Friedman took a

Bowen styled research posture using an observational method with his own family. He

put Bowen Theory's concepts into motion by disrupting the emotional process through

the action of stepping out of his usual roles and taking responsibility for planning the

birthday party. In the coordination of this event, Friedman had to contact family

members who were not in regular relationship with his nuclear family. Disrupting his

usual patterns, Friedman had opportunity to observe emotional process, that is, how his family members behaved, reacted, and functioned given the introduction of his new way of functioning within his wider family. Like the study of his own family that Murray Bowen published in 1967,[5] Friedman provided "the first paper about efforts to study the emotional system in one's family of origin published in a national journal."[6] This article, "The Birthday Party," was published in *Family Process* in 1971. Friedman began to publicly share his personal work with his family of origin and showed emotional process at work in his own life and context.

Through the 1970s, Friedman continued his private family practice and as a rabbi in his second congregation. Although his personal one-on-one supervision with Murray Bowen ceased, Friedman continued to be involved at the Georgetown University Medical Center. He also began speaking across the United States, presenting the concepts found in Bowen Theory to a broader audience. In this era, Murray Bowen was keen to have Edwin Friedman join the faculty of the Georgetown University Medical Center, and the the Georgetown University Family Center he founded. Friedman had indeed applied. However, Dr. Richard Steinbeck, then head of the department, considered Friedman too controversial to be on faculty.

Bowen suffered a serious physical illness in the spring of 1981, requiring him to face two life-threatening surgeries within three months, followed by a six-month recovery.[7] The seriousness of the illness had significant outcomes, not just for Bowen, but the Center as an organization and the center's faculty. It would appear that in

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[5] Bowen, *Family Therapy*, 467–528.
[6] Beal, "Retrospective," 411.
[7] Boyd, ed., "Commitment to Principles," 7.

considering the future of the Center should he not survive the surgeries, Bowen was

prepared to advocate to have Friedman on faculty. He attached a memorandum to

Friedman's application for Steinbeck the week before he went in for his first surgery.[8]

The letter reveals Bowen's opinion of Friedman as he went into a season of precarious

health and uncertain future.

> I want Edwin Friedman appointed to the faculty because he brings a new thinking to mentioned to family theory and family therapy I have never heard in others. The different dimension is important in our teaching programs of the development of research projects. Now to some very personal and private comments, rabbi Friedman has been loosely associated with my family programs for almost 15 years. He's grown in stature locally and nationally. He's much in demand as a teacher and speaker. All of his positive qualities can be served in his present loose association with a family center he wants something more definite. I do not want to lose this genius type expert I have helped to create. I want him here and I will somehow manage any adverse professional reactions.[9]

Bowen clearly thought well of Friedman and saw a place for him at the Georgetown

University Family Center.

However, when Bowen recovered from his surgeries and returned to the Center,

something had changed. In reflecting on this time in Bowen's career and the

development of the Center, Michael Kerr noted that it seemed to him that Bowen came

back from his surgeries and recovery in a new position.[10] Kerr perceived the shift to the

new position to include relying more on others for leadership of the Center and the

research, and in turn having the faculty accept more leadership responsibility. Bowen

grew more openly frustrated and outspoken about misunderstandings of his basic ideas

and began advocating with more intensity to keep his theory on track. There was a

renewed focus on theory and science at the Center. In Kerr's words, "Family therapy

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[8] Jeunnette, "The Rabbi and Bowen Theory."
[9] Jeunnette, "The Rabbi and Bowen Theory.".
[10] Boyd, ed., "Commitment to Principles," 7.

and differentiation of self in one's own family were extremely important contributions, but he thought the importance of theory was getting lost."[11] Kerr further explains that not everyone on faculty was entirely happy with the shift to science and that conference and training programs declined. The preservation of theory became a priority, and for those who embraced Bowen's 'new position', it was understood that having better outcomes with families and other groups, while rewarding, would not necessarily prevent the theory from "disintegrating into a set of techniques."[12] The impetus was to move the theory forward, not generate therapy techniques. It is of note that Bowen's memorandum of support and Friedman's application were never forwarded after Bowen's surgeries. Friedman was not going to be part of the center's renewed orientation towards theory and science.

This shift is significant. In a sense, at Bowen and the faculty at the Center's leading, BFST was undergoing its own kind of 'differentiation of self,' determining what principles would define and guide how the theory and the Center would function going forward. What Bowen had observed and articulated in his clinical research could become an overarching theory of human behavior, or it could, to repeat Kerr's words, "disintegrate into a set of techniques."[13] Bowen chose to emphasize the theory and to engender means that would move the science forward. He believed he had tapped into something that could one day provide a lens for understanding most aspects of human behavior, something beyond psychoanalysis, or biological or cultural determinism; something that could potentially incorporate evolutionary biology, biology, and social

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[11] Boyd, ed., "Commitment to Principles," 8.
[12] Boyd, ed., "Commitment to Principles," 9.
[13] Boyd, ed., "Commitment to Principles," 9.

sciences into a single unified theory. His premise was that if you knew the theory, and focused on theory, technique would derivatively follow.

Friedman had a different perspective. He was focussed on practice and method. For Friedman, Bowen Family Systems Theory was a lens to guide practice. In addition, the theory and its concepts provided a leverage point for additional analogies and metaphors for the understanding and description of human behavior and human systems beyond the family. It is unknown, or at least unpublished, whether this difference caused a rupture in the relationship between Bowen and Friedman. Whether it was this issue of next steps for the theory and Center, or something else, there are hints that something occurred that changed the dynamic of their relationship. Friedman discontinued his contact with the Center through the 1980s, and Bowen never put Friedman's name forward for faculty appointment.

There is limited documentation of their difference in perspective when it came to the theory. Friedman was a pragmatist and a practitioner. Kerr recounts that when his book *Family Evaluation* was published, a book which is now considered canonical for those who wish to understand BFST, Friedman came up to Kerr and said to him, "It's a good book, but you don't explain anything in there about *how* you do it."[14] A letter to Bowen written by Friedman was found in the late 1980s. In it, Friedman wrote, "Your theory will never be based in science. You're all hooked on science. You need to get away from all that and all you have is method of therapy and you need to spend more time helping people learn how to do this."[15] In turn, Bowen called Friedman "the

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[14] Kerr, interview by Frank Gregorsky. Emphasis added.
[15] Kerr, interview by Frank Gregorsky.

metaphor man."[16] Kerr describes Friedman's ability to connect with an audience and his

charisma as "a problem."[17] Given Kerr's alignment with Bowen's desire to advance the

theory, Friedman's work to popularize the theory into an accessible method of practice

for therapists, clinicians, and, increasingly, congregational leaders was interpreted as

diverting focus away from moving the theory forward. Despite all this, it was

nevertheless Friedman who was invited to write the chapter on "Bowen Theory and

Therapy" for the second volume of the *Handbook of Family Therapy,* published in 1991.

Friedman's knowledge of the theory, his private practice, his leadership coaching, and

his publications, all of which emphasized the utilization of the theory were justifying

criteria for the editors to select him for writing the chapter that would explain Bowen

Theory and its use in family therapy.

For this project, there is relevance to this rupture and difference between Bowen

and Friedman, their approach to the theory, and its purpose. It is an example early in the

history of BFST of the effect that purpose, principles, and intent have on outcomes.

Bowen's move toward science-based research encouraged and opened conversations

with other science-based disciplines such as ethology, biofeedback, and epigenetics. One

can find researchers associated with the Bowen Center looking at gut microbiomes and

arthropod biosystematics. As will be described shortly, Friedman leveraged Bowen

Theory into the realm of utilitarian practice, preferring to focus on how the concepts in

Bowen Theory could be shaped into strategies used not only in family therapy, from

whence the theory arose, but also in the understanding the functioning of larger groups

of people, primarily congregations. This difference of motives for development and use

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[16] Kerr, interview by Frank Gregorsky.
[17] Kerr, interview by Frank Gregorsky.

of the theory, and the resulting distinction in outcomes, are also evident when a

theological focus is introduced conjointly with Bowen Theory, which is the purpose of

this project. Bowen emphasized "that a therapist's theoretical perspective determines the

way he or she conducts therapy."[18] Michael Kerr explains,

> The way a therapist thinks about what energizes or drives the process he [sic] observes in a family will govern what he addresses in therapy. Many family therapists, for example, talk about the family being a "system" but they have many different ideas about what makes the family a system. The ideas about what it is that makes the family a system govern what a therapist addresses in psychotherapy. The therapy that evolved from Bowen's theory about families was guided by the conceptualization of the family as an "emotional" system. The therapy that evolved from other therapists' ideas about families was guided by different conceptualizations. In fact, family therapists can perhaps most profitably be distinguished on the basis of how they think about the family, rather than on the basis of what they do in therapy.[19]

What is true for theory is readily true for theology, with congregational practice and

their outcomes being shaped by theological thinking. Again, this project is intended to

provide a theological conversation partner to Bowen Theory, offering ideas that align

theory and theology, and thus provide a way of thinking about the divine, the church,

and the church's leaders, and then have this thinking shape practice.

Generation to Generation: Friedman's Introduction of Bowen Theory into the Congregational Context

Roughly concurrent with Murray Bowen's recovery from his surgeries, his renewed

emphasis on making Bowen Theory science based, and the presumed rupture in his

relationship with Friedman, Friedman began to establish a path of his own which

included some distance from Murray Bowen and the Georgetown Center. It was in this

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[18] Bowen, "Bowen-Kerr Interview Series #3 – Systems Therapy."
[19] Kerr, *Family Evaluation*, 11.

season of the early to mid 1980s that Friedman went through his own surgery, having a cardiac bypass in 1980. At this time, he also resigned from his second congregation in order to focus more time to his writing, speaking, and private practice. Along with two papers, he wrote the chapter "Systems and Ceremonies: A Family View of Rites of Passage" for the book *The Family Life Cycle: A Framework for Family Therapy* published in 1980. With this work, which looked at rituals and ceremonies from a religious perspective and how they impacted family systems, Friedman had begun to publish ways that BFST had relevance and could be adapted in practice to wider systems than the family unit. He set to work on what would become a seminal and paradigm shifting work in the understanding of congregational functioning through the lens of an appropriated and adapted Bowen Theory. It was in this season that "Friedman's greater interest lay in finishing *Generation to Generation.*"[20]

Generation to Generation

On the twentieth anniversary of the 1985 publication of Friedman's book, *Generation to Generation,* Israel Galindo and Timothy Brock—both professors of Christian Education—described the significance of Friedman's work:

> Friedman's book has, arguably, been one of the most influential non-theological works in the life and work of the clergy in the past generation. Yet only relatively recently has it come to the forefront as one of the 'core' texts in pastoral ministry, congregational studies, and pastoral care in seminaries and divinity schools."[21]

They also suggest it deserves the title "modern classic."[22]

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[20] Beal, "Retrospective," 418.
[21] Galindo and Brock, "First Words," 365.
[22] Galindo and Brock, "First Words," 365.

This portion of the overall project will offer a listing of the guiding principles that Friedman used in constructing his book. An overview of the book's content and how that content parallels and extends Bowen Theory will show Friedman's forays into understanding congregational functioning and the function of congregational leadership in light of Bowen Theory, and will provide a segue into some subsequent derivative works that emerged because of Friedman's thinking shown in *Generation to Generation*.

Generation to Generation: Principles

Drawing from his experiences as a congregational rabbi, his connection to Murray Bowen, his intimate understanding of Bowen Theory, along with the personal work done in his own family from the BFST frame, Friedman was able to see, translate, and generate application of Bowen Theory's concepts, variables, and life forces into the congregational context. He did so to enhance the well-being of the congregation, primarily through providing congregational leaders with a lens with which to interpret the functioning of families within the congregation, the ways in which the functioning of the congregation mimicked the functioning of the nuclear family, as well as understanding the functioning of the leader as an outcome of their personal experience in their own family of origin.

Friedman's work is guided by principles that can be sourced in Bowen Theory. However, Friedman modified the description of these appropriated principles to such a degree that Anne S. McKnight, a subsequent director of the Bowen Center for the Study for the Family, would openly argue that Friedman's work was "not Bowen Theory."[23] In

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[23] McKnight, "Bowen and Friedman: Two Systems Thinkers.".

fact, the suffusion of Bowen's work throughout *Generation to Generation* is not credited as such. Michael Kerr recounts Murray Bowen's private complaint, "I think Ed loses sight of where he heard the idea in the first place and thinks it really is his idea."[24] For the student of Bowen Theory, the modifications and parallels Friedman offers are readily evident. In a personal letter to Bowen, Friedman himself recognized the distinction asking the question, "Is what I am doing contributing to Bowen Theory's erosion, or as time may tell, it's evolution?"[25] Examples of these appropriated and expanded principles can be found in Friedman's introduction where he describes his orienting guideposts for his book.

First, Friedman notes the "extraordinary similarity" amongst all clergy, ministers, rabbis, priests, and nuns when it comes to the entanglements and conflicts within their congregations, but also with the relationship with their own relatives.[26] It leads him to the conclusion that "The family is the true ecumenical experience of all humankind."[27] Bowen named the family as the basic unit of human functioning. Bowen described the transmission of shared response as the emotional process that is located within the emotional system. As with Bowen, Friedman also used the family as the base for understanding human functioning. Friedman labelled the equivalence to emotional process as family process. But unlike Bowen, Friedman did not need this to be a scientifically, evidentiarily provable fact. The external evidence of extraordinary similarity of family process was a sufficient observation for developing therapeutic and

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[24] Kerr, interview by Frank Gregorsky.
[25] Jeunnette, "The Rabbi and Bowen Theory."
[26] Friedman, *Generation to Generation*, 1.
[27] Friedman, *Generation to Generation*, 1.

leadership practice. For Bowen, his observations and theory were the initial steps to establishing a wide arching theory of human behavior. This was not Freidman's concern.

Friedman took the principle of the family being an ecumenical experience common to all clergy and expanded the number of locations where clergy will experience and participate in family process functioning beyond the nuclear family. Bowen did see emotional process at work in wider society and labelled the concept societal emotional process, as I have already discussed. But Friedman's work was specifically aimed toward the congregational family system and the clergy's influence and interaction within it. Friedman also argued that the emotional process, or, as he labelled it, the family process, is at work in three locations: families within the congregation, the congregation itself as a family, and the clergy within their own family. Friedman argues that greater understanding of functioning in one location can be translated into greater understanding in the other two, and ultimately promote better functioning in all three locations. Alternatively, poor functioning in one location can be evidenced by poor functioning in the other locations. Friedman therefore understands ministry stress as being primarily caused not by workload issues, or a style of leadership issues, or management issues, but a capacity for understanding and inability to modify one's own functioning in relation to these three family locations. BFST, or as Friedman titles his appropriated version of it, the Family Model, "brings together in one perspective counselling, administration, officiating, preaching, personal growth and leadership." As such it "has the effect of reintegration rather than disintegration," and "offers something beyond an approach to problem solving."[28]

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[28] Friedman, *Generation to Generation*, 2.

Another principle Friedman highlights in *Generation to Generation* is the principle that that "leadership is itself a therapeutic modality."[29] In a sense this statement can be matched to the maxim, "As goes the leader, so goes the organization." As a leader does the personal work of self-definition—what Bowen describes as differentiation of self—and does this work in relation to their family of origin, the work allows the leader to be calmer, more objective, and less influenced by anxious emotional processes in others. This in turn can reduce the contagion and uptake of anxious reactivity in the locations previously named. Friedman was writing the book *A Failure of Nerve* when he died. Published posthumously in 1996, the failure of nerve Friedman referring to with this title is the lack of courage to step toward and address those individuals generating anxious reactivity and maladaptive reactions in organizations. It is the willingness to address these reactions from a place of self-definition—or again, in Bowen's terms, from differentiation of self—that will result in better functioning in a family or congregation. Thus, leadership refers to leadership of self by way of differentiation, which then, as a better differentiated leader, becomes a therapeutic modality. With a focus on differentiation of self, leadership and the roles and responsibilities of clergy can move beyond issues, strategies, techniques, or expertise, to the place of knowing, being, and doing. Said another way, the development of differentiation of self, understanding how emotional or family processes impacts differentiation of self gives a leader freedom from being a leadership expert so they can grow as a person, knowing that their growth will have a direct outcome in the systems of which he or she is incorporated. Friedman, as a rabbi, therapist, and leadership

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[29] Friedman, *Generation to Generation*, 2.

consultant, was able to have a front row view to this principle, and by leveraging Bowen's ideas he brought it to the congregational family.

Finally, knowing that he was intentionally writing a book for the Guilford Family Therapy series, and specifically about family process in faith-based congregations, Friedman needed to express a theological perspective in his book. What theological posture would this rabbi take? Friedman was part of Reform Judaism, which is a progressive form of Judaism. What kind of theological thinking would allow those of other faiths, Christians and otherwise, to be included into and adapted for the family process perspective? Or in a more fundamental sense, and in a phrasing that incorporates the purpose of this project, how does one combine BFST, or Friedman's version or other derivatives of it, and theology? In her presentation "The Rabbi and Bowen Theory", Carol Jeunnette shared her experience of attending Friedman's seminar and getting the opportunity to ask him where she could do her PhD in order to combine theology and systems thinking. She recounts, "He responded abruptly, 'It can't be done!' and turned around and went up the stairs." It was only the next day that Friedman softened his response and said to her "Let me think about it." Jeunnette shares that Friedman died a week after this encounter.[30]

In *Generation to Generation*, Friedman gives a short two paragraph clarification of his approach to the combination of family process and religion. In short, he advocates for a posture of distinct and separate mutually informative paradigms. His question of how to relate BFST and its practices with matters of theology and faith is directly related to the goal of this project. Work exists in this regard; indeed the Bowen Center has a

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[30] Jeunnette, "The Rabbi and Bowen Theory."

program for faith leaders and has hosted "Faith and Functioning" conferences. Faith

based organizations have readily embraced BFST and its concepts. Organizations have

emerged specifically using a BFST paradigm for the training and developing of clergy.

The question of the relationship between BFST and theological thinking is not a

new one. However, what Friedman reveals is that right from the conception of using

BFST in congregational contexts, the question of whether it *should* be combined or

integrated into faith-based doctrine and practices has been asked. Moreover, if one

answers yes to the above question, what manner should this integration take? Friedman

argued that BFST and his Family Model,

> not only has the capacity to potentiate natural aspects of our healing position, it
> does so without doing violence to religion's metaphor . . . There is a fundamental
> difference between benefitting from new approaches and buying wholesale into
> another conceptual system's paradigm. The first approach increases
> understanding; the second is simply conversion.[31]

Friedman saw the benefit of using family process in practice, while not feeling the need

to let it impact theological thinking. He states, "the book is not filled with quotations

from Scripture or other Holy Works. This is so in part because it is ecumenical by

nature, and I have left it to each reader to supply the appropriate words from his or her

religious tradition."[32] This has been one way of approaching the relationship between the

two. However, it is not the only way. Chapter four of this project will examine the

evolution of this conversation, discuss how various postures have been taken, and show

that there is a place that does not require combination or integration but simply

alignment with BFST. In the case of the present project, alignment with the orthodox

Christian doctrine of the Trinity will be evidenced. This alignment can provide the

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[31] Friedman, *Generation to Generation*, 6.
[32] Friedman, *Generation to Generation*, 7.

twofold benefit of increasing understanding of both BFST and trinitarian doctrine, while retaining Christian belief in a privileged position. This means congregational leaders are not required to abdicate their belief system to a theory that has emerged from the social sciences, helpful as it is, making BFST more useable in Protestant contexts specifically.

Generation to Generation: Content

Believing that a clergy leader is located within three systems of families—the families within a congregation, the congregation as a family, and the clergyperson's own family of origin—Friedman structured his book to examine the functioning of each of those systems, informed by a section wherein he explains his understanding of family process, which is akin to Bowen's emotional process. In his section on family theory, Friedman establishes what he calls the five concepts of family theory and the ten 'laws' of family life. While credit is not explicitly given to Murray Bowen, the similarities of the concepts and laws to ideas expressed in BFST is undeniable. To Friedman's credit, or if a Bowen purist, to his shame, Friedman's work expands, clarifies, and describes specifics emerging from core Bowen concepts. While beyond the scope of this project to examine the developments in depth, it is useful to see Bowen concepts at play, for how they are used and developed will have a bearing on their use and development in the theological thinking of chapter four.

Friedman's five concepts of family theory include: the identified patient, homeostasis or balance, differentiation of self, the extended family field, and the emotional triangle. The first concept of the identified patient includes the ideas of the family being the primary unit of treatment and the family projection process, both of which are Bowen ideas. However, what Friedman makes explicit is that given that the

family is the unit of treatment, this allows a therapist or pastoral counselor to work from any position within the family. In fact, the pastoral counselor may have the best outcome by working with the least symptomatic person who exhibits the most influence or leadership in the family system. As Friedman's work evolved, this particular perspective grew into a strongly held premise that the identified leader has the greatest influence and impact on the functioning of a system and its capacity to change for the better or worse. His book *Failure of Nerve* was written specifically on that premise.

Friedman's second concept is homeostasis or balance. Bowen never used the word homeostasis, but he did describe forces of togetherness and individuality. These forces work conjointly to keep a family functioning in familiar mannerisms and patterns. Should any individual in the system seek to change their functioning, the system will endeavour to return the individual to the previous forms of function. Friedman termed this homeostasis. Ultimately, a system seeks to regulate itself to established norms of behavior.

Friedman credits Bowen with his third concept of family theory, differentiation of self. Friedmans adopts Bowen's definition and description with minimal alteration. What Bowen and others describe as a cornerstone concept is given a central role in Friedman's work. The ability of an individual, particularly a clergy leader to define a self in the presence of homeostatic forces, or in the pull toward togetherness, is an indicator of the functional ability of a family system, nuclear or congregation.

For the fourth concept Friedman identifies the extended family field, or in Bowen's terms the family of origin. An individual is shaped by more than just parents; the family system, including parents, siblings, aunts, uncles, grandparents, and further up into previous generations, influences current family functioning. By making contact with

extended family, one has the opportunity to consider how family process manifested in one's family of origin, and how that has shaped one's current functioning.

Friedman's final concept for family therapy is the emotional triangle. Again, this is a Bowen concept, but Friedman understands triangles as "operationalizing the previous four concepts."[33] Friedman adds seven laws of triangles, which in effect describe how triangles function in a family system. Friedman's exposition of triangle functioning is a summative expansion of Bowen's concept. In providing working examples of the operation of triangles, Friedman allows the reader to visualize this dynamic of family process.

From these five concepts, Friedman then builds out "ten 'laws' of family life."[34] These ten laws include Bowen concepts, references, and allusions Bowen made but which weren't articulated as concepts, and some reflection from Friedman's own work as a therapist, rabbi, and leadership coach. They include emotional distance, loss and replacement, chronic conditions, pain and responsibility, the paradox of seriousness and the playfulness of paradox, secrets and systems, sibling position, diagnosis, symmetry, and survival in families.

The significance of Friedman's work was his ability to take Bowen's conceptualization of emotional process, and the premise that the family is the primary unit of human functioning and expand it into the life of congregations. Relabelled family process, the identified concepts and laws could be shown at work in the families within congregations, in the family that is a congregation, and in the family of the clergy leader. The rest of *Generation to Generation* shows the concepts and laws manifesting in each

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[33] Friedman, *Generation to Generation*, 35.
[34] Friedman, *Generation to Generation*, 40.

of these areas, with an assumed circularity of learning—in other words, what is true in families in congregations can be applied to a congregational family and can be learned from a congregational leader's family.

Leveraging Bowen theory, Friedman unlocked a whole new paradigm for understanding the functioning of a congregation, and the functioning of the leader within it. This was more than leadership or management techniques, more than thinking symptomatic individuals were a source of congregational conflict, and more than someone having leadership skills or capacity. This was about a way of being as a self and a way of being with others, shaped from and by family process. Rather than asking "What am I doing wrong? or What are they doing to cause this?" new questions arose, such as, "How does the system I am in function? How do I function in the system?" It was a revolutionary paradigm for congregational leaders. Carol Jeunnette shares about having experienced a difficult context in her first parish and recalls hearing Friedman's material for the first time. She says, "Jesus saved my soul. Friedman saved my ass."[35] The passion I have for this project comes from sharing this sentiment.

Expansion of Bowen Family Systems Theory into Congregational Leadership Resources

Friedman's book *Generation to Generation* powerfully resounded in faith communities that adopted its core ideas. It was a new paradigm for thinking about the functioning of congregations, families, and for those leading, offering counsel, and endeavouring to function at their best within them. It served as an awakening to new ways of being and doing for congregational leaders. Guilford Press, while admittedly biased in the

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[35] Jeunnette, "The Rabbi and Bowen Theory."

promotion of a book they published, describe the work as a "best-selling clinical guide and text with more than 115,000 in print" and as "an acclaimed, influential work . . . [and] widely used" text.[36] The *Review and Expositor* journal set aside a large portion of a 2005 volume to honor the twentieth anniversary of the book's release. What Bowen proposed, Friedman applied, and others adopted. R. Robert Creech describes the phenomenon:

> Clergy training programs in BFST soon spread across North America, beginning in 1990 with Friedman's own organization, the Center for Family Process in Bethesda, Maryland. Larry Matthew's Leadership in Ministry workshops, Roberta Gilbert's Extraordinary Leadership Seminar, Peter Steinke's Healthy Congregations and Doug Hester's Ministry Leadership concepts are a handful of some of the more well-known programs. Other congregational leaders turned to educational programs not specifically designed for clergy, such as the postgraduate program of the Bowen Center for the Study of the Family, (which the author of this project attends) . . . Mainline seminaries frequently include at least some exposure to the theory as part of theological education.[37]

In the following paragraphs, I will outline how the work of Bowen and Friedman was incorporated into congregational leadership material by sampling notable related works. In addition to providing a context for some of these principally derivative works, this section will illustrate how each of these works used or adapted Bowen Theory for the purpose of faith communities. Given that most published works using BFST in faith communities have been for the Christian community, and given the parameters of this project, works developed for the Christian context will be prioritized. In addition to examining how BFST was incorporated into a congregational leadership and clergy development conversation, this section will conclude by exploring the ways these derivative works address the incorporation of theological thought into their material.

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[36] Guilford Press, "Generation to Generation."
[37] Creech, *Family Systems*, 6.

Peter L. Steinke

A parish pastor and therapist, Peter L. Steinke first heard Edwin Friedman present at a

three-day continuing education workshop in Austin, Texas. In conversation with

Steinke, Friedman mentioned his newly established post-graduate seminar "Family

Emotional Process" in Bethesda, Maryland. Steinke attended in 1988 intending to be

present just the one time. He repeatedly returned, attending nine years in a row.[38] In

1991, Steinke suggested Friedman write a short version of *Generation to Generation* to

make it more accessible. In reply, Friedman encouraged Steinke to write the short

version. Steinke did and *How Your Church Family Works* was published by the Alban

Institute in 1993. A tribute to the material's resilience, the second edition, *How Your

21st-Century Church Family Works* was published in 2021 nearly 30 years later, shortly

after Steinke's death. *How Your Church Family Works* was followed up by two

additional books, *Healthy Congregations* in 1995 and *Congregational Leadership in

Anxious Times* in 2006. These publications increased Steinke's profile and, in response

to demand for training, he established two organizations, Bridgebuilders and Healthy

Congregations, that are dedicated to "training, consultation, and education around

emotional process."[39] By developing congregational leaders as well as propagating

trained facilitators, *Bridgebuilders* and *Healthy Congregations* became sources for the

dissemination of both congregational development and the development of

congregational leaders from a systems perspective. In 1999, Steinke was also a founding

member of *Voyagers*, a network of clergy and faith leaders who met regularly to

"explore Bowen Family Systems Theory and its application to congregations and

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[38] Steinke, *How Church Works*, xi.
[39] Healthy Congregations, "Our History."

leadership by Rabbi Edwin Friedman."[40] This group continues to meet into the present day.

Steinke's use of BFST is best understood when seen through Friedman's lens of application of the theory. Arguably, Steinke is more aligned with Friedman's interpretation and work with BFST than he is with Bowen's original work. Steinke himself writes,

> I learned Bowen theory from Rabbi Edwin Friedman over a period of nine years. I have distinguished how Friedman understood the theory and how Bowen presented it. Also, I inserted my own experiences and perception of the theory. You may find some explanations or verbiage advanced by Friedman or myself. One reviewer of the manuscript voiced what others mentioned: "You put legs on the theory." [41]

This is seen in how Steinke's publications prioritize utilization and application of systems theory over explanation and development of BFST. Steinke aligns with Friedman's posture of making the theory into something that is workable. And so in the three works previously mentioned, as well as Steinke's 2019 leadership book *Uproar: Calm Leadership in Anxious Times,* which is a modification of his congregational leadership book, the primary themes readers encounter include: leadership, the church being a place of emotional process impacted by variables such as anxiety and reactivity (a BFST variable), separateness and closeness (BFST's individuality and togetherness), stability and change (Bowen's "change back" observation and Friedman's homeostasis concept), and clarity and compassion (BFST's defining a self). Like Friedman, Steinke gave greatest priority and emphasis to the influence and impact of leadership. It can be argued that Steinke's work progressed from a priority on congregational functioning to a

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[40] Voyagers, "Welcome."
[41] Steinke, *Uproar*, xi.

prioritization of leadership. This parallels Friedman's path of writing *Generation to Generation* first, which addressed congregational functioning, but then progressed to *Failure of Nerve* and a stronger focus on leadership.

Like Friedman, Steinke applied Bowen theory concepts and ideas into the functioning of congregations, but as previously stated, over time, put greater attention and emphasis to how those concepts and ideas functioned within the leader. Thus, while the variables of anxiety and reactivity are expounded upon, the more important practical lesson from Steinke and Friedman's work is how the leader chooses to adapt and function in the presence of anxiety or reactivity and in their various manifest triggers. As already discussed, Friedman's title *Failure of Nerve* is a reference to leaders abdicating their role and opportunity to bring a principled, clear, differentiated, regulated, and responsible self, to the people or organization being lead. It takes nerve to stand before an emotionally reactive body with a calm, principled, and regulated self. It is easier to appease. Friedman would say this failure of nerve is what allows the least differentiated and most reactive individuals to shape the functioning of a system.

Steinke aligns with Friedman, and so uses much of his work, especially his later works, to describe the ways in which the better functioning of an organization is contingent on the better functioning of the leader. Steinke is critical of what he refers to as leadership resources' reliance on the "old paradigm of data, technique, and expertise"[42] over the development of the leader's self. By virtue of the designated role of leader, it is therefore the leader's regulated, differentiated, principled, calm "self" that has the greatest influence over the ability and capacity of an organization to achieve

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[42] Steinke, *Uproar*, x.

calm and rationally consider problems, reactions, opportunities, decisions, and choices rather than react out of a place of undifferentiated and unregulated emotional process.

Steinke's work is a helpful and unique lens for those in congregational leadership. It does indeed move beyond the leadership materials of "data, technique and expertise." Using the concepts of emotional process and differentiation of self, and with an emphasis on self-regulation, self-awareness, and self-management in the midst of anxiety and reactivity, those with responsibility for leadership are provided with a path toward greater effectiveness and outcomes. In short, it is a transformative paradigm shift for those who embrace it—the present author included. Ironically, however, learning emotional process, working on differentiation of self, learning the skills of self-regulation, self-awareness, and self-management could arguably be considered another technique or approach for leadership development. To adhere to Friedman and Steinke's insights and teaching is to adopt another leadership or pastoral counsel strategy, albeit one that focusses on the personal development of the leader rather than some external techniques applied to the organization or family. This is not intended to be a pejorative statement. BFST is a life and career shifting paradigm for leaders who encounter it. It has saved ministers and ministries, including mine.

However, for those in a faith context, or more specifically in a church, there is an opportunity, or possibly even a necessity, to include a theological conversation partner to add a grounding into the divine and sublime. Friedman and Steinke created a doorway of possibility with an approach that allows for a theological conversation partner to add spiritual gravitas to this unique perspective on leadership and leadership development. However, without the theological conversation partner, BFST and its derivatives are at risk of becoming reductionistic, simply giving leaders another new approach, albeit

internally directed through differentiation of self and understanding emotional process. This risk of reductionism that appears in Friedman and Steinke is also apparent in other subsequent works.

Ronald W. Richardson

Ronald W. Richardson is perhaps the greater purist of BFST when it comes to applying it in congregations and congregational leadership. This is despite the fact he learned of BFST without having initial direct contact with either Murray Bowen or the then Georgetown Center. Richardson encountered BFST by virtue of his role as an individual and family therapist, pastoral counselor, and marriage and family therapist supervisor. In using the theory with his clients, he discovered that his clients were making application of the theory in other areas of their lives with noticeable improvement in their functioning. Richardson experienced the merit of BFST in working with clients, and reflected on his experience by saying:

> His (Bowen's) theory is a milestone in ways of working in family therapy and in understanding human relationships generally. A few family therapists began to discover that the concepts Bowen developed applied not only to themselves and their own families generally. I first discovered this when clients began to report that the therapy we did in relation to their families had an impact on how they performed in their workplace and volunteer settings and that those aspects of their life were getting better as a result.[43]

Given that Richardson had previously served as a parish pastor, the application of BFST from a therapeutic posture for clergy was a natural progression. Richardson gives overt credit to Murray Bowen for the creation of BFST and its concepts, and for inspiring

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[43] Richardson, *Healthier Church*, 22.

Richardson's own work as a therapist and the subsequent publications Richardson produced.

Of his many books, the two most relevant to this project are *Creating a Healthier Church: Family Systems Theory, Leadership, and Congregational Life* (1996) and *Becoming a Healthier Pastor: Family Systems Theory and the Pastor's Own Family* (2005). In both works, Richardson remains true to BFST and its concepts, avoiding distillation or adulteration. Thus, when reading Richardson, one can imagine that what is being offered to clergy and congregations in his work is also what a ministry leader might encounter from a Bowen trained therapist at the Bowen Center. Like Bowen, Richardson prioritizes the emotional system, teaching his readers that the emotional system is determinative of the other systems present in a congregation, and that these subordinate systems are the structural, communication, decision-making, economic, and cultural systems. It is in these five systems that Richardson encapsulates his understanding of the functioning of a congregation. His focus on the actual operating of the system, the emotional system and the other five system functions, shows that Richardson endeavours to improve the health of the clergy and the congregation by understanding the relational functioning of the system in all of its complexity. This too aligns with Bowen's therapeutic posture.

Thus, Richardson encourages pastors to undertake family of origin work to better understand and increase awareness of their patterns of functioning. Richardson's chapters are directly tied to BFST. He encourages objective observation of the emotional process in a congregation to reduce reactivity and anxious responses, which was also Bowen's therapeutic posture. Richardson writes of the forces of individuality and

togetherness present in a congregation, the phenomenon of closeness and distancing, triangles, birth order and leadership style.

Overall, Richardson's work offers the cleanest and most direct application of Bowen Theory into the practice of ministry. Even so, for the most part, Richardson does not address theological questions. However, he does provide a seed of what a theological conversation could look like when he discusses the togetherness and individuality force and sees them operating within the relationship that is the Christian Trinity. With only three sentences Richardson encapsulates the purpose of this project. "Theologically, even within the doctrine of the Trinity, which emphasizes the unity of the three persons of the Godhead, there is also an emphasis on the separateness of each person. We affirm in that doctrine that each person in the Godhead is fully separate and fully an individual 'person,' as well as fully God."[44] Thus, Richardson is aware that there is potential for theological alignment, and in this particular example, through the persons of the Trinity.

<div align="center">Roberta Gilbert</div>

Roberta Gilbert is a psychiatrist whose post-graduate training included two years in the Family Program at the Menninger Clinic, then five years at the Postgraduate Program at the Georgetown University Family Center from 1982 to 1987. She joined the faculty of the Bowen Center in 1988 as a supervisor and presenter. She developed what became known as the Extraordinary Leadership Seminars, "based on Bowen theory which leads to improved individual functioning and leadership effectiveness in all important relationship systems of life."[45] These seminars were eventually published as a three book

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[44] Richardson, *Heathier Church*, 63.
[45] Gilbert, *Eight Concepts*, 104.

series, *Extraordinary Leadership*, *The Eight Concepts of Bowen Theory*, and *The Cornerstone Concept.*

Where Friedman and Steinke were willing to add to the thinking of Bowen Theory, Gilbert stays close to Bowen Theory. While Bowen Theory is not specifically about leadership, Gilbert says, "Bowen theory nudges people slowly but surely into positions of leadership."[46] The first book addresses emotional systems and how a leader is both impacted by and an influencer of emotional systems. Here, like Friedman and Steinke, Gilbert focuses on the leader. The second book is an introduction and overview of the Bowen Theory eight concepts. The third book of the series addresses differentiation of self, both what it is and how it can be further developed in a leader.

Ironically, although clergy were the impetus for the creation of the seminars and the writing of the books, and while the functions unique to clergy are addressed directly in the last third of the first book, and while there is a chapter titled "Jesus and Differentiation of Self" by R. Robert Creech as the closing chapter of the final book, these three books are not solely applicable to clergy. They speak much more broadly to the issue of leadership in organizations in general. Gilbert describes her journey toward assisting clergy.

> When asked, several years ago, by a leader in a major denomination to design a program for the clergy, I wondered what I had to offer . . . I could teach them to "*think systems*." My experience with clergy and other leaders had shown that systems thinking was exactly what they desperately needed. *I decided that I would try to devise a way for them to obtain the purest and most accessible form of family systems theory that I could.*[47]

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[46] Gilbert, *Extraordinary Leadership*, xiii.
[47] Gilbert, *Extraordinary Leadership*, iv. Emphasis original.

Gilbert does state that she feels clergy are uniquely positioned in society and have an opportunity to improve their own functioning, and through their own growth improve the functioning of not only the individuals and families in their congregations, and the organizations they lead, but ultimately through the spread of improved functioning of congregants, society as whole. Gilbert also presents how classic pastoral functions such as preaching, marriages, baptisms, funerals, visiting the sick, and reaching out into the community have a direct correlation to the dynamics and concepts within Bowen Theory.

All this being said, despite making some specific, important, and helpful correlations to the work of the clergy, the resources created by Gilbert could be resources for any leader—church ministry and otherwise. They are not theologically informed, nor faith specific. They are functionally based. As such, correlations of Bowen theory could be made to leadership functioning in other relationship-based professions such as teaching, medicine, politics, or any non-profit helping organizations. Again, Gilbert's work is commendable and an extremely helpful, accessible, and a useful resource for any leader who wants to learn Bowen Theory and its application, but as with Steinke and Friedman, theological thinking, while acknowledged, is secondary to the focus on leadership function in her work.

Israel Galindo

Israel Galindo published the first and the primary of his books addressing congregational functioning using the lens of BFST, *The Hidden Lives of Congregations* (2004). Galindo followed this book with *Perspectives on Congregational Leadership* (2009), a compiled collection of short blogs and essays he wrote to address questions about BFST and

leadership. More recently he has served as editor for *Leadership in Ministry: Bowen Theory in the Congregational Context* (2017), and for the 2023 publication *Reframing Ministry Leadership: New Insights from a Systems Theory Perspective*—both of which feature contributors from the faculty of the Leadership in Ministry workshop program established in 1992 by Lawrence Matthews, a student of Edwin Friedman, as well as other authors writing about congregational function using BFST. Galindo has also directed the "Leadership In Ministry" workshops.

Galindo is ordained clergy and served congregationally in Christian education. He moved into the academy, having served as the Dean and Professor of Christian Formation and Leadership at Baptist Theological Seminary in Richmond, Virginia from 1999–2013, and then as Associate Dean for Lifelong Learning and Director of Online Education at Columbia Theological Seminary to the present. Galindo was introduced to BFST by Lawrence Matthews when he was hired onto the staff of Vienna Baptist Church in suburban Washington, DC as the Associate Pastor of Christian Education. Matthews, a student of Edwin Friedman, gave Galindo a copy of *Generation to Generation*. The book resonated with Galindo and aligned with Galindo's pedagogical training recognizing that theory and frames of reference are determinative in facilitating how and what is perceived in a context, and resulting practices that arise out of those perceptions.

Galindo's work has important significance for the conversations that take place among those using BFST as a lens for understanding congregations and ministry leadership. Galindo enters the conversation from the position of educator and trainer and as such writes and trains with a practice focus. He is not a Bowen nor a Friedman acolyte or advocate. He encourages those who would adopt a BFST lens to take a step

back and consider the function of theory in one's practice of ministry, and specifically

how BFST manifests in ministry practices. Given that Bowen himself encouraged efforts

at a rational, intellectual detachment, and an observational posture to emotional process,

it is fitting that Galindo encourages that same type of posture in considering BFST and

its uses. In so doing, Galindo provides a path forward for the further development and

broadening of the theory which is helpful when up against "the phenomenon of BFST

orthodoxy."[48] Galindo writes,

> However, the search for a 'pure' Bowenian theory is, I think misguided, and
> dismisses the richness of Bowen's genius in positing a theory. Theories are not
> set in stone, and are not meant to be. Theories by their nature develop, grow in
> their nuance, are open to scrutiny, incorporate new information and adapt to new
> truths as they are revealed or discovered. Because theories eventually lead to
> application they are shaped by the contexts in which they are applied, and, by the
> contributions of the innovators who then carry the theory forward over time.[49]

In this quote is a tacit endorsement for the intent of this project, which is to not only

provide an orientation to BFST, an exposure to the history of its entry and its use in the

field of congregations and congregational leadership development, but to add to its use

and understanding as a theory by providing a theological conversation partner with the

hope of providing growing insight for both theory, theology, and then, practice.

Galindo's writings encourage this approach. In the words of Galindo, "Theories are

schemas that help understand the world more accurately by getting to the essential ways

that 'things actually are."[50] With an understanding of how things are, even if not

especially theologically informed, practices and outcomes can provide a path for both

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[48] Galindo, "On BFST Orthodoxy."
[49] Galindo, "On BFST Orthodoxy."
[50] Galindo, *Hidden Lives*, 8.

identity and function that become best thinking and best practice. This project is intended to show that theory and theology can cooperate to achieve this end.

Coupled with this objective posture toward theory and its implementation, Galindo, from his point of view as a Christian educator, effectively works to define identity, purpose, and outcomes for the local and global Church.[51] This work toward defining identity, purpose, and intended outcomes for the Church and congregations parallels Bowen's encouragement that individuals work toward a better differentiation of self, and being self-defined as a means to mitigate reactivity to emotional process, particularly in contexts that are experiencing high levels of anxiety. It is from this foundational understanding of the identity, purpose, and outcomes of Church and congregation that Galindo then introduces how BFST can be used as a lens to gain greater insight to how identity, purpose, and outcome can be furthered.

Galindo educes Bowen's concept of emotional process, building out what he calls "hidden life forces" by positing that "a congregation is subject to fundamental hidden life forces that inform how relationships work in the system."[52] These five dynamics are: systemic anxiety dynamic (reactivity), energy dynamic (intensity), organizing dynamic (pattens and networks), controlling dynamic (administration of the forces), and relational dynamic (relationships among members and groups). These five dynamics are a furtherance of, and more detailed observation and description of, what Kerr and Bowen referred to in a more basic form as family process or emotional process. As such, these dynamics are insights and descriptions of the ways the emotional process

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[51] Galindo, *Hidden Lives*, 9.
[52] Galindo, *Hidden Lives*, 51.

is at play in a congregation. These observed five dynamics could readily be applied back to families or other organizations; Galindo has applied them to congregations.

Like Friedman, Steinke, and Gilbert, Galindo also identifies the key role of leadership in the function of an emotional system. The last section of his book *The Hidden Lives of Congregations* concerns the role and function of leadership in an emotional system. Galindo notes that leadership is not about the person of the leader, but of the function of leadership in a relational system. He writes,

> what effective congregational leaders provide for the church are the specific functions for the system relationship processes in the congregation . . . it has more to do with the leader's function in the system than it does with the leader's personality or even with the ability to motivate others . . . The three broadest corporate functions particular to pastoral leadership in the congregation are: (1) providing theological interpretations of meaning, (2) the formation of a local community of faith, and (3) institutional development.[53]

So here again, as with other authors, is the recognition that there is an important role for leadership in the function of the emotional system. Galindo also selected the role of theological interpretation as being a primary function of the pastoral leader in the emotional system of a congregation. With this particular author, one can see a genesis for developing and keeping theological thinking in relationship with the BFST-described emotional process of a congregation and its leadership. Galindo's work serves as an effective primer and model for the positioning of BFST, theology, and subsequent practice.

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[53] Galindo, *Hidden Lives*, 138–39.

R. Robert Creech

R. Robert Creech has not only written about and taught BFST and congregational leadership, he epitomizes and encapsulates the journey many clergy have taken when they are introduced to and begin to implement BFST into their leadership repertoire. In the preface to his book *Family Systems and Congregational Life* (2019), Creech shares that he first encountered Friedman's *Generation to Generation* in 1987. Friedman's book was given to him by a colleague shortly after Creech accepted a senior pastor role with a large congregation in Houston, Texas. He read it, then put it on a shelf not sure of its relevance. He writes, "A few years later a round of congregational chaos and a simultaneous series of family crises sent me back to the book."[54] Creech found a coach in Bowen Theory and through his reading and learning of BFST, his personal family of origin work and further coaching for use of BFST in congregational leadership, he began to shift his perspective on congregational and pastoral leadership to what he calls a "a third way for leaders in congregations—neither a set of principles nor a bag of tricks, but a way of thinking about human relationships."[55] This third way is another manifestation of how BFST can be a focussing lens for understanding congregational functioning and the functioning role of the leaders in congregations.

As with other authors and congregational leaders, Creech found in BFST both a way of seeing as well as a way of being that improved his own functioning personally, in his family, and in his congregation. Unique to Creech, however, is his explicit use of BFST as a lens with which to view and understand the classic pastoral functions of leadership, preaching, pastoral care, and spiritual formation. This point of view enables

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[54] Creech, *Family Systems*, ix.
[55] Creech, *Family Systems*, 33.

pastors and those studying for pastoral ministry to understand these classic functions in a fresh way. For example, Creech compares preaching to Bowen's relational triangle concept. In preaching, God, the preacher, and the congregation are the three participants. Overfunction as a preacher, by taking all responsibility for interpretation and application, one reduces the congregation's responsibility to listen for God and translate what is heard into active obedience. Underfunction as a preacher, by diminishing or diverting from the text, one causes the congregation to miss its opportunity to hear God speak to them. In both examples, the congregation triangles with the pastor, rather than relating directly to God. Creech makes a comparison to the people of Israel saying to Moses in Exod 20:19, "You speak to us and we will listen; but do not let God speak to us, or we will die."[56] Here we have a practical outcome of Creech's overlay of BFST into one of the primary functions of the pastor. Using BFST theory as a lens, Creech has developed another way of thinking about the task of preaching, bringing this practice into BFST's realm of relationships and emotional process.

Creech openly recognizes this overlay of theory into practice as a primary task of practical theology. "Practical theology deals with the way we think about our work as pastors while considering the truth of the gospel—how we *theologize* about our *practice*. We do practical theology when we attempt to make sense of our individual ministry experiences by considering them in relationship to God's revelation in Jesus Christ."[57] By taking BFST and addressing four primary areas of pastoral ministry, Creech does indeed develop a way of thinking about ministry tasks, using BFST to frame, guide, and shape pastoral functions and pastoral development. However, as with the other resources

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[56] Creech, *Family Systems*, 68.
[57] Creech, *Family Systems*, 31. Emphasis original.

named in this chapter, and present in the majority of the literature discussing BFST and congregational function and leadership, primacy and privilege is given to BFST as a way to define ministry. It is a theologizing of practice, rather than theology shaping practice. It is the very scenario described by Pete Ward when he problematizes the field of practical theology, noting that the field of practical theology prioritized experience and builds practice from experience and data.[58] In many cases, theological reflection serves as an addendum. If Bowen were to build a triangle of theory, practice, and theology for reflecting on the practice of ministry, theology would be on the outside of the triangle.

This is not to disparage the work of Creech. His resource is articulate, practical, and helpful. Pastors and congregations are vividly represented, and the ministry strategies and resources are powerfully presented. Pastors and those preparing for ministry would be very well served to read Creech's work and implement his proposed practices. The argument about the privileging of theory over theology is presented here because even here, with Creech's necessary and admirable work, we have an example and archetype of the approach of the more recent publications that seek to put BFST and ministry into conversation. *Family Systems and Congregational Life* is a prime example from an author and seminary professor who is actively and effectively preparing pastors using natural systems. However, even for Creech it is still the case that theological reflection is in a secondary position. There is an opportunity here for doctrinal and theological reflection to provide a primary place for the interpretation of BFST in the work of the Church, rather than BFST being used to interpret the work of the Church.

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[58] Ward, *Introducing Practical Theology*, 4.

Creech recognizes that theology and its role has been underrepresented in the practical theology field and seeks to name this as such. In his work, Creech does place God in a posture of relational engagement with the pastor and the congregation. As BFST is overlaid upon the ministry practices of leadership, proclamation, pastoral care, and administration, Creech brings God into the relational milieu. But there is opportunity to make this explicitly theologically driven.

The last section of his book has significance for work that addresses BFST and congregational function in that Creech endeavours to address the place of biblical interpretation using BFST as a lens or, to use Creech's predominate metaphor for the use of the theory, a map. This is indeed a significant move in the literature in that is a specific and intentional effort to align Christian Scripture with BFST. Creech shows how BFST and its concepts are observable in the biblical context of various families, in the differentiation of self demonstrated by Jesus, and in the theology of Paul. Speaking specifically to the theology of Paul, Creech rightly states that "One challenge in reading the New Testament epistles from a BFST perspective is that they [the letters] all bear a clearly theological perspective."[59] Thus, he directly names and confronts the challenge throughout the field of practical theology, which is defining the nature of the relationship between theory and theology. How should BFST, intended as a scientific, evolutionary-based explanation of human behavior relate to, inform, and be informed by Christian Scripture and theology? Ultimately Creech adopts a strategy where theory stands independent of theology, but is used to provide additional insight and knowledge with which to question and understand the texts of Scripture. "Consequently, in each

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[59] Creech, *Family Systems*, 152.

passage a reader may contend with at least two levels of interpretation."[60] This is not

new approach within the field of practical theology, as other social science conversation

partners have done as much. However, Creech has served those seeking to use BFST in

a Christian context by identifying and clarifying how BFST might interact with the

Christian texts. By way of example he asks, "How, for example, would BFST help us to

understand what Paul describes as the indwelling power of sin in human life?"[61] He asks

other similar questions of how BFST may inform our understanding of Scripture.

"Concepts we have understood only theologically might become clearer if we raise

different questions about them."[62] This has merit. This project, however, seeks to

prioritize the role of theology and reverse the question. How might BFST become

clearer if we raise theological questions about it? How might Christian theology further

inform and illuminate BFST, and then further inform congregational life and practice?

It might appear that this project is overly negative, critical, and focussed upon

Creech's work. This is not my intent. Creech's work has received a disproportionate

amount of attention in this project for the very reason that his work most closely and

clearly identifies the opportunity and further work necessary for moving the relationship

forward between BFST, congregational function, and theology. He arguably provides

the best, most recent, and most comprehensive effort to bring BFST and theology into

dialog in order to shape the practice of Christian ministry, and thus is a valuable

conversation partner.

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[60] Creech, *Family Systems*, 152.
[61] Creech, *Family Systems*, 152.
[62] Creech, *Family Systems*, 152.

Additional Works

While I have by no means compiled a complete list of authors who have used BFST to understand congregational functioning, key texts from Friedman, Gilbert, Steinke, Richardson, Galindo, and Creech offer a thorough overview of the ways in which the literature presents BFST in the pastoral context. In essence, those using BFST for congregational use must endeavour to address a complex set of concerns: to overlay BFST and its concepts upon congregational leadership and congregational functioning; to provide an emphasis on the differentiation of self and the functioning of the congregational leader in a relational system; to show how the functioning of the congregational system as illuminated by BFST concepts such as triangles, anxiety and reactivity, multigenerational transmission process; and, to describe how the church can observe BFST concepts at work in its mission and biblical interpretation.

There are many authors who have used and benefitted from BFST, and used it to present work on congregational leadership, congregational health, and pastoral development. Many works appeared within a decade of Friedman's publication of *Generation to Generation*, which demonstrates how significantly this book impacted thinking about congregational function and leadership. The former Alban Institute featured many authors who became familiar with, and had an affinity for, BFST and incorporated this theory into books and training events. These included R. Paul Stevens and Phil Collins' *The Equipping Pastor* (1993), George Parsons and Speed B. Leas's *Understanding Your Congregation As A System* (1993), Gilbert R. Rendle's *Leading Change in the Congregation: Spiritual and Organizational Tools for Leaders* (1998), and Arthur Paul Boers's *Never Call Them Jerks: Healthy Responses to Difficult Behavior* (1999). More recently, popular level authors have utilized the theory to great

effect. Three examples include Pete Scazzero's *The Emotionally Healthy Church* (2003),

Ken Reeves' *The Whole Church*, (2019) and Steve Cuss' *Managing Leadership Anxiety*

(2019). Within these works there are varying levels of credit given to Murray Bowen,

from none at all to a passing mention as a bridge to Friedman's work. Typically, it is

Generation to Generation that is cited. These derivative works, in distancing themselves

from BFST specifically but using it generally (that is, in the background of the works),

can move toward a general or natural systems theory. General systems theory is distinct

from BFST but some authors conflate the two. Alternatively, authors will leverage one

of Bowen's concepts, such as reactivity or anxiety, and make that the primary focus of

their work, hence topics emerge such as 'managing change,' 'healthy responses to

difficult behavior', 'diagnosing the system,' or 'managing leadership anxiety.' This

move to singular focus on concepts derived from BFST distances readers from BFST's

fundamental insistence that all humans are immersed in emotional process and relational

systems. The path forward is not techniques or tricks of leadership, but an understanding

of the functioning of self and others in an emotional system. To use a clumsy analogy,

BFST and its use is akin to a fish becoming aware of the water it swims in, and then

self-aware as to how it is responding and reacting when in the school of fish, and then,

intentionally choosing how to swim given its newfound awareness.

It is helpful, though not entirely necessary, for readers of these derivative works

to be familiar with the source material of Bowen and Friedman, so that they may have a

more fulsome understanding of concepts like emotional process, anxiety, triangles, etc.

Without the stronger rooting in BFST theory, the derivative works can end up being

reduced to strategies and techniques that arise out of simply considering everything

operating as a general system rather than with the specific awareness that Bowen was

posing something much more specific, namely an understanding of human functioning within an emotional process as observed and evidenced in human relationships. BFST is not just a general system akin to that of mechanical gears, or what is generally referenced as "cause and effect" relations, but is rather an organic view of the life of individuals and communities and their thinking, being, and doing together. It is a relational system. In the next chapter, I will introduce a theological conversation partner to the discussion, and in doing so begin to theologically interrogate BFST application.

CHAPTER THREE: THE CHRISTIAN TRINITY AS A RELATIONAL SYSTEM IN CONVERSATION WITH BOWEN FAMILY SYSTEMS THEORY

This chapter is intended to introduce BFST to a theological conversation partner, and in so doing, facilitate a conversation between theology and BFST with an ultimate goal of informing the practical theology of ministry practitioners, affirming practices arising from BFST in congregational contexts, and reinterpreting the purpose and intent of those practices from a theological frame of reference.

BFST has been broadly applied in a variety of contexts beyond its original context of family therapy. In addition to its use in the Christian Church, it has been brought into corporate contexts, into multi-faith contexts, and it has been used for ethological studies. BFST was not and has never claimed to be a theory for the Christian Church. BFST has been applied across a range of faith perspectives; after all, Friedman was a Jewish rabbi. BFST has been used in progressive, traditional, and unitarian Christian contexts. Thus, it is important to note, at the forefront of this discussion, the contextual nature of this project. This project is located in Christian tradition, and specifically in the traditional and historical stream of the Christian faith. The theology presented will generally be focused on what is considered, in mainline Canadian Protestant traditions, as being orthodox Christian theology.

This chapter also intends to align BFST with Swinton and Mowat's provisional definition of practical theology, which "is critical, theological reflection on the practices of the Church as they interact with the practices of the world, with a view to ensuring

and enabling faithful participation in God's redemptive practices in, and for the world."[1] This portion of the project seeks to facilitate critical theological reflection with the goal of giving greater presence to theology in the relationship between theory, practice, and theology within practical theology. There are strong works describing the relationship between BFST and ministry practice. Theology's presence is less significant. It would be helpful for both theory and practice for theology's presence to be brought to bear. The intent of this project is to demonstrate the suitability of traditional Christian theology as a robust conversation partner for BFST, and so influence and further inform the practical use of BFST by leaders in congregational and Christian ministry settings.

For the purpose of this work, the historic Christian doctrine of the Trinity will be the primary theological doctrine adopted for conversation with BFST for a comparative, analogous analysis. There are other Christian doctrines that could have been chosen and some authors have indeed seen the conversation potential between various doctrines and BFST. However, given the Trinity's foundation in the relationship of a three that is also one, there is an argument to be made that the doctrine of the Trinity has a foundational affinity to the pre-eminence Murray Bowen gives to understanding an individual through understanding the family. The Christian doctrine of the Trinity will be elucidated from the biblical witness and the historical development of the doctrine. More recent work in social trinitarian theology and the doctrine of perichoresis will also be included as aspects of the theological conversation partner, given their intriguing alignment with aspects of BFST.

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[1] Swinton and Mowat, *Practical Theology*, 7.

However, a caveat must be offered. The scope of work regarding the doctrine of the Trinity over the history of the Church is, without exaggeration, massive. Given its limits, this project can only provide what might pejoratively described as a simplistic or reductionistic introduction to this doctrine. The irony of this is not lost on me, as my critique of other authors in this field has been that they do not provide ample theological conversation in their effort to import BFST into congregational settings. Having said this, I expect that a simple, summative introduction to the doctrine of the Trinity will create an accessible and understandable beginning for relating theology and theory—Christian trinitarian theology and BFST—and their derivative practices. Because this project is an introduction and orientation for those who want to understand BFST, its use in theologically rich contexts, an introduction to the doctrine of the Trinity, similar to the summative introduction provided for BFST, is appropriate.

Thus, I have structured the following chapter in a straightforward way. I will begin by discussing the place for theology and elucidating the purpose and method of theological reflection being used in the project. Next, I will introduce the doctrine of Trinity as the theological conversation partner. Finally, I will present the interrelatedness and alignment of trinitarian theology and BFST with a conversation about the veracity of using "alignment" as a theological reflection method. Respecting that the field of Practical Theology encourages all three of theory, theology, and practice to be in relationship, with each area informing, illuminating, and assisting the others toward the goal of greater insight, understanding, and effective ministry, I acknowledge that this project does give a more privileged position to theology in order to introduce and give it a stronger presence in the conversation with BFST and ministry practices.

The Place for Theology

For those studying within the discipline of Practical Theology, as well as those working in the field of Christian ministry, the question of whether there is a need or place for theology when considering ministry practices will most likely be answered in the affirmative. Few would dare say theology does not matter. However, if a subsequent question was asked of how, or in what way, theology is guiding a particular practice, answers might be less forthcoming. Many clergy, and those in ministry roles, upon finishing their ministry degrees are immediately immersed into the world of the pragmatic and begin looking for "whatever works" in their congregational functions. Thus, they look for tips and tricks to help improve their practice of preaching, pastoral care, discipleship, administrative tasks, and other such practices. If it works, it is good; if it does not work, the practice is discarded for something that does. The theology behind a practice may not even be brought to bear. Using theology to guide ministry practice, while assumed, does not necessarily occur. The assumed positive place for theology in ministry practice does not always make the transition to a mindful and carefully articulated theology guiding practice. If theology is not given a primary role, or is sidelined into a role of afterthought, practices may be adopted without reflection based only on the pragmatic evaluation of their effectiveness. In a world where many fields and disciplines are guided by a desire to define "best practice," this adoption of effective practices exclusive of theological thinking is not necessarily foreign. And while theological thinking is desired, its absence does not automatically equate to negative outcomes. So why concern oneself with theology? There are those who indeed do not bother. The excitement of seeing positive outcomes precludes theological reflection. Positive outcomes are good for the Church; one might rest there.

The strong efficaciousness of BFST makes it particularly vulnerable to this phenomenon of overlooking theology when using it as a ministry practice. Ministry leaders rush to put it into practice because, quite simply, it works. This project is an effort to not only introduce and orient practitioners to BFST itself, to understand how it is being utilized for and by leaders in congregational contexts, but ultimately to invite Christian practitioners in Christian ministry contexts to be theologically guided and carefully reflect on their faith and the ways in which their faith interacts with and can justify their use of BFST.

Again, BFST's effectiveness makes it a temptation to rush past theological thinking in order to put the theory and its concepts into use. Friedman himself revealed this tendency to default to the practical with BFST by very quickly taking his learnings of it into the realm of the pragmatic. He said to Michael Kerr on the publication of Kerr's book *Family Evaluation,* which is a summation of BFST, "It's a good book, but you don't explain anything in there about how you do it."[2] From Michael Kerr's perspective as an advocate of BFST, he said of Friedman's work *Generation to Generation*, "Friedman's first book is astounding. He takes all of Bowen's ideas and runs off to this totally different world, which does not think of itself as scientific or clinical at all and describes, 'here's what I did. Here's the mistakes I made. I applied the theory, things are going great now.'"[3] These comments exemplify a distinction in focus between theory and practice.

There are frequent conversations at the Bowen Center about what constitutes genuine BFST, and what lies outside of the theory proper. Practical use of the concepts

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[2] Kerr, interview by Frank Gregorsky.
[3] Kerr, interview by Frank Gregorsky.

apart from seeing the theory as an integrated tapestry of functioning will often be disparaged as "cause-effect thinking." BFST advocates will often argue that the individual concepts are best understood, and arguably can only be understood, by virtue of their influence and integration with the other concepts. BFST is viewed as a system of understanding, not a list of concepts, ideas, and techniques. But those who follow more closely in the footsteps of Friedman see effective methods and techniques that can be put to immediate use. Theory and practice are in tension, even within the world of BFST. Bringing theology to the conversation adds a whole new dimension—and opportunity for tension. But for the practical theologian and practitioner coming from a Christian background, having a theological frame of reference is an opportunity to not only have something that works, but something that will provide a foundation for ministry, and that will support and develop faith. Bringing theology into the conversation with theory and practice enriches the practitioner, the practices, the theory and theology.

Theological Reflection Methodology: Alignment for Animation

The next portion of this chapter will introduce a methodology of theological reflection, which I am calling *alignment for animation*. The field of practical theology uses, and has used, a number of theological reflection methods in a variety of contexts and through many eras. The scope of Christian ministry is as vast as the worldwide Church itself. Rather than seeking uniformity in theological reflection methodology, there is merit in accepting that there can be strength in having a variety of methodologies which can be adapted for particular contexts and toward particular purposes. This project's concept of alignment will be positioned amongst other theological reflection methods, privileging the summative work of practical theologian and researcher Pete Ward in his book

Introducing Practical Theology. As well as positioning this concept of alignment for the purpose of animation, the merit of using alignment for animation as opposed to other theological reflection methods in relation to BFST will be discussed.

One of the bigger challenges and conversations within the field of practical theology is determining and finding consensus and standardization for a methodology of how to approach, integrate, incorporate, use, inform, shape, utilize, and/or develop the relationship between theology, theory, and practice. Many other verbs could easily be added to the previous sentence. The field of practical theology could be considered in a continual state of flux as it seeks to demonstrate and authenticate rigor in research and theological justification for conclusions, perspectives, outcomes, and derivative practices. Indeed, entire textbooks have been written about practical theology's effort to articulate the relationship between theology, theory, and practice and the methods used to articulate that relationship. This project will not resolve that effort but can perhaps add a small additional perspective on theological reflection methodology. Much of the discussion in the field sees either a conversation between theory and practice that is then theologized or a conversation between theology and practice that is then explained with theory. What is currently missing is a way of integrating theory, theology, and practice together into the primary conversation that they might jointly inform one another. By aligning BFST and trinitarian theology in relationship to one another, theological reflection can be animated in a way that leads to robust ministry leader formation, congregational development, and *Christian* practices that can be utilized from the perspective of either theory or theology.

Alignment for animation can admittedly get caught into the net of what Swinton and Mowat identify as the "common tendency to use the terms 'method' and

'methodology as if they were synonymous and interchangeable. In fact they are not, and it is important to be clear about the distinction between these two concepts."[4] Alignment for animation certainly has within it aspects of both methodology and method.

Swinton and Mowat explain methodology as "an overall approach to a particular field. It implies a family of methods that have in common particular philosophical and epistemological assumptions."[5] Following Swinton and Mowat's categorizations of research paradigms and methodological assumptions, alignment for animation falls into a constructivism paradigm. As they describe, "Constructivism assumes that truth and knowledge and the ways in which it is perceived by human beings and human communities is, to a greater or lesser extent, constructed by individuals and communities."[6] BFST was, in essence, established with a constructivism methodology, using observation and deduction to design a theoretical frame for understanding human behavior. Theology also uses the powers of thought and reason to construct a frame of understanding for the establishment of doctrine. Swinton and Mowat argue that in the constructivist perspective "meaning emerges from the shared interaction of individuals within human society."[7] Alignment for animation is a shared interaction of theory and theology for the purpose of enriching with additional perspective the relational functioning of the human, the divine, and between the human and divine.

Distinct from methodology, Richard Osmer describes methods as "the specific methods used to gather and record data."[8] For its methods, alignment for animation

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[4] Swinton and Mowat, *Practical Theology*, 69.
[5] Swinton and Mowat, *Practical Theology*, 69.
[6] Swinton and Mowat, *Practical Theology*, 34.
[7] Swinton and Mowat, *Practical Theology*, 34.
[8] Osmer, *Practical Theology*, 54.

primarily uses a comparative analysis of BFST and theology, seeking areas of similitude and comparability that are then placed in parallel. Alignment for animation asks the questions, "Are there places of alignment? And if so, how can those alignments inform and shape practices for each field?" To answer this, observed practices associated with each of the BFST and theological concepts are reviewed and considered for their correspondence to, and suitability for use in the other field. In this way, a constructivist methodology is enacted, creating additional frames of reference and opportunities for use of practices whereby theory can provide theology with practices, and theology can provide BFST with practices—and all while maintaining the integrity of theory and theology.

Theory, Theology, and Practice in Conversation

The scope of this project is to introduce, identify, justify, and put into use a particular method that will be best suited for putting BFST and theology into conversation in order to deliver meaningful and helpful outcomes for the Christian practitioner. Like the chapters on BFST, and BFST's use in congregational settings, this chapter will serve as an introduction and orientation for those seeking to explore this avenue for personal and congregational development. To provide this introduction and orientation to practical theology's theory, theology, and practice conversation, this project will use and refer to Pete Ward's helpful summation of the conversation from his aforementioned book. His introductory summation will provide the foundation for the introduction of the idea of using alignment between theory and theology as an animation that can generate practice. Additional helpful works introducing the interaction between theology and practice

include Helen Collins' *Reordering Theological Reflection* and Graham, Walton, and Ward's *Theological Reflection: Methods*.

Pete Ward has very helpfully provided a survey of key thinkers in the field of practical theology and organized these thinkers into four sections, recognizing "that there really are quite different approaches to these central issues within the discipline."[9] The four sections he has created are "'Practical Theology as Interpreting Action," "Practical Theology as Ministerial Education," "Correlational Approaches to Practical Theology," and "A Return to Theology and Tradition.'"[10] Again, within its limits, this project will not be taking the time to provide a deep examination of each of these sections. However, by providing a few summative statements, it can be shown that this project is dually affiliated with "Correlational Approaches to Practical Theology" and "A Return to Theology and Tradition." These two will be examined shortly.

Ward references Norbert Mette for his section "Practical Theology as Interpreting Action" and illustrates Mette's theological approach using the work of practical theologians Gerben Heitink and Elaine Graham. In this approach to practical theology, one finds "a shift away for theology defined as talk about God toward practical theology as the discussion of how communities, through their practices, express their understanding of God. Theology thereby becomes a kind of cultural or sociological study."[11] Thus, the practices of a community are given privilege and through studying and reflecting on these practices, a theology can be articulated. Richardson presents a similar scenario when he discusses a distinction between "functional faith," what a

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[9] Ward, *Introducing Practical Theology*, 70.
[10] Ward, *Introducing Practical Theology*, 70.
[11] Ward, *Introducing Practical Theology*, 83.

community or individual actually does in their practice of faith, and that of "professed faith," what a community or individual says they believe.[12] He describes functional faith as one's actual faith. This corresponds to the work of practical theologians such as Graham.

"Practical Theology as Interpreting Action" is a methodology that embodies the scriptural sentiment, "I will show you my faith by my deeds" Jas 2:18. Theology is uncovered in the practices of faith communities and individuals. However, using this methodology in relationship with BFST does not intuitively make sense. BFST is a theory that stands on its own, applied to an already existing faith community when adopted. Subsequently trying to derive a theology from how it functions in congregations or individuals seems to be theologically reactive, moving in reverse, or to use the idiom, an effort of putting a square peg into a round hole; endeavouring to make something fit where it was never intended to go.

"Practical Theology as Ministerial Education" can be described at its essence as deriving from the teaching and preparing of future clergy for the tasks and practices of ministry. It is exemplified by courses that can be found in the pastoral studies department and courses in seminaries—such as preaching, pastoral care, counselling, Christian education, spiritual formation, leadership, and so on. These areas are often collectively referred to as pastoral theology. Interestingly, the tasks are assumed, and theological reflection is appointed for the assumed task. For example, preaching is part of ministry, and students for ministry are often invited to reflect on a theology of preaching wherein they are to take time to consider the theological basis and nature of

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[12] Richardson, "Bowen Theory and Classic," 20.

the practice. Is preaching teaching? Is it proclamation? Is it declaration? Who or what is the preacher giving voice to? These are typical theological reflection questions for pastoral practice. Similar questions can be asked in pastoral care, spiritual formation, and other areas of pastoral practice. Were the conversation with BFST to be located here, in "Practical Theology as Ministerial Education," and it often is, it becomes a tool in the toolboxes of leadership formation and congregational management, and possibly pastoral care and counselling practices. Indeed, it was from this frame of reference of practical theology that I was first introduced to BFST. It was and has been a life-giving tool for personal formation, congregational management, and pastoral counsel. But while BFST readily serves clergy in this manner, placing it in the category of "Practical Theology as Ministerial Education" reduces it to having little more theological import than a debate about tools, such as which curriculum is best or whether software programs to guide pastoral care are appropriate. It becomes a discussion on the merit of the tool. There is nothing pejorative in finding a working methodology for such areas, and BFST is exceptional in its efficaciousness, but placing it here, in the section of "Practical Theology as Ministerial Education," diminishes it, and can lead to the elimination of the theological portion of the conversation. Ward states the the ministerial education form of practical theology and its tendency toward empirical forms of knowledge "has not been without its problems. Chief among these is the question of how theological forms of knowledge relate to methods and theoretical insights that have their origins in the social sciences."[13] This is a very accurate description of what happens if BFST utilizes this theological reflection method.

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[13] Ward, *Introducing Practical Theology*, 77.

In Ward's section "Practical Theology as A Return to Theology and Tradition"
he acknowledges that correlation and interpreting action are currently the dominant
methodologies in practical theology.[14] The return to theology and tradition can be seen
by those who adopt the method as a corrective to giving the social sciences and
psychological theories pre-eminence. Citing Thomas Oden's work as a prime example
of this method of practical theology, Ward highlights Oden's argument that the Church
has had its own frame of reference for pastoral practice for centuries and that it is only in
the last century that seminaries and practical theology have turned away from its
historical and traditional body of knowing through faith to embrace secular theories of
self and identity. In Ward's opinion, Oden is not rejecting contemporary secular theories
but instead seeking to have the theological tradition recover "its sense of self in relation
to secularizing forces."[15] When considering BFST for use in the Church, there is a
temptation to defer to the theory ahead of theology given the theory's desire and drive to
be science and evidence based—bases that are given high esteem in contemporary
western society, thus illustrating Oden's point that the Church's theological tradition has
been minimized. It is my contention that practical theologians would do well to raise
theology to the vertex for conversations—and in particular *this* conversation about
BFST, practice, and theology. By putting theology at the vertex, the use of BFST can be
seen less as a utilitarian tool and more as a way of seeing and understanding.

Ward's section "Correlational Approaches to Practical Theology" simplifies
theologian Paul Tillich thusly, "Correlation for Tillich is the process whereby
theological attention is paid to the questions that emerge from human cultural

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[14] Ward, *Introducing Practical Theology*, 86.
[15] Ward, *Introducing Practical Theology*, 88.

expression."[16] In its essence, human culture and experience guide questions that arise

from human existence, questions which theology further formulates. Theology then also

formulates an answer. Christian tradition and divine revelation are what provide the

response. In this manner of question and answer, theology is given priority in both

moulding the questions that human experience raises, and providing answers from a

theological position. David Tracy furthered the development of the correlational

approach, feeling that human experience needed to be given greater weight in the

question and answer cycle. In the words of Helen Collins,

> For Tracy, theologians who are committed both to the Christian tradition and to the insights of rational inquiry into the world must find a way to make these two accounts of reality cohere . . . this can only be done with a revisionist, critical correlation method where both perspectives interrogate, and inform each other . . . a dialectic is created between 'the Christian fact' and 'the contemporary situation where both are understood to be equally interpretative realities, constructed from their own theory-praxis dialectic.[17]

The task in this version of practical theology is to have both theology and other

disciplines inform and shape each other, the goal being to bring maximum insight, the

broadest perspective, and ultimately theologically informed coherence to the human

experience.

The critical correlational method has a certain appeal when considering the

relationship between BFST and traditional trinitarian theology in that they are both deal

with similar subject matter, namely relationships, the emotional process or dynamic

between beings, and the particular functioning of individuals and the influence of others

upon one's own function. Within this method of theological reflection, BFST is seen to

inform theology, and theology can inform BFST. Edited papers of the Bowen Theory

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[16] Ward, *Introducing Practical Theology*, 77.
[17] Collins, *Reordering*, 11.

and Theology conference published in 2016 provide examples of this method. However, a disadvantage of this method is a tendency toward conflation of purpose, context, intent, and content of both the theory and theology. In an effort toward making each cohere and ultimately integrate with the other, modifications and compromises can be made. Depending on one's perspective, this can be viewed as a progressive enrichment of theory and theology, or a corruptive syncretism that diminishes the integrity of each.

The Bowen Center intentionally and supportively invites and engages in theological conversations. In addition to conversation partners in fields such as family therapy, psychiatry, biofeedback, microbiomes, ethology, and others, the Bowen Center provides a training course in BFST specifically for clergy called "The Faith Leadership Seminar." The Bowen Center also episodically organizes and hosts conferences and clinical training days intended for faith-based practitioners. Most recently the Bowen Center hosted the "Faith and Functioning Conference" in 2024, wherein theologians, faith practitioners from a variety of faith traditions, and clinicians came together and were invited to engage in a dialog featuring BFST and theology as conversation partners. Many of the participants in the Bowen Center's post-graduate program are clergy. Friedman himself dabbled with theology giving a theology lecture in 1991 called "Family Process and Process Theology."[18] However it is not an area that he pursued, focussing more on BFST's application.

Following Friedman's death, Steinke and a group of clergy formed the group *Voyagers*, a professional development group for clergy who wished to grow in their use of BFST and further advance Friedman's work. In November 2014, the Voyagers held a

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[18] Homebrewed Christianity, "Edwin Friedman on Family Process & Process Theology."

one-day conference entitled "Bowen Theory and Theology: What's God Got to Do With It?" Presenters included Dr. John Haught, The Rev. Dr. Ronald Richardson, Dr. Carol Jeunnette, each of whom were theologians with strong connections to BFST. The papers presented at this conference were later published in a book of the same name. Interestingly, the current and most recently appointed director of the Bowen Center is the Rev. Randall Frost, an ordained Presbyterian minister, therapist, and long-time faculty member of the Bowen Center. Without him necessarily intending or seeking it, Murray Bowen's theory has been adopted as a ministry lens, strategy, and conversation partner for some in faith contexts.

Theological Conversations with Bowen Theory

This dissertation project began from a place of recognition that BFST, while eminently usable, helpful, and relatable to a congregational context and for ministry practice, could become even more robust in the traditional Christian context by strengthening the theological conversation. The situation has been noticed by others. Anna Moss writes, "Most pastoral resources which discuss Bowen theory are based upon a North American church context and for the most part do not articulate a robust theology of the church, nor provide a theological critique of Bowen theory (e.g., Friedman, 1985; Galindo, 2009; Richardson, 1996, 2005; Steinke, 1996, 2006a, 2006b.)"[19] This is not to say the conversations have not taken place and exist. They have, and they do. And individuals that have worked at these conversations have done so mindfully and intentionally. However, the conversations with theology are not at the forefront of the work that

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[19] Moss, "Can a Focus on Self," 44.

considers BFST in congregational contexts, nor have the conversations been considered collectively and understood collectively in a practical theology frame of reference. This section of the project will put the theological conversations that occur with BFST into a practical theology frame of reference.

As discussed, Ward's four sections categorizing the field of Practical Theology provide a way to organize work that has brought BFST into conversation with theology and practice. This portion of the chapter will provide a brief survey of literature from prominent voices who have engaged in this work, roughly aligned within the sections Ward identifies as framing the field of Practical Theology. Indeed, most of the published works regarding BFST and theology would fit into Ward's Practical Theology sections of ministerial education and correlation. There are also some scholars who are calling for a return to theology and tradition. There is little in the literature that could be said to show BFST being related to Ward's section of "Practical Theology Interpreting Action." As stated previously, this may be due to the fact that BFST is almost exclusively introduced and brought into faith contexts and was not derived and developed from them. However, in its development as a family therapy theory, it could be argued that the theory emerged as an outcome from observed family practices and therefore is a theory that interprets action. But this line of argument has not yet been applied to theological conversation. For those using and thinking about BFST in a congregational context, and wishing to also think about BFST and theology, the published works tend to group into one of two of Ward's practical theology sections: ministerial education and application, or correlation.

Ministerial Education Conversations

This approach to practical theology is the most pervasive among those who would use BFST in a congregational setting. Those who discuss how to use BFST in ministry are the most prominent voices and as such lead the conversations with explaining the theory and with showing practices that align with the theory. Despite claims of thinking theologically, typically what is described as theological thinking is more akin to simply finding biblical anecdotes of how the concepts of BFST can be seen in Scripture. The presence of a BFST concept in Scripture is then used as a rationale to say that BFST is biblical. Finding anecdotal examples of BFST concepts in Scripture is encouraging and helpful and there is merit to the exercise. Bowen's theory is a theory of human functioning, and so seeing evidence of Bowen's concepts of functioning in the biblical account is affirming for the theory and can provide a helpful boost of confidence to a practitioner who places value upon the biblical account. Having theory or practices that are in opposition to Scripture would be a non-starter. However, biblical anecdotal support for the theory does not put theology at the vertex or on the inside of the triangle. It also puts biblical interpretation at risk of eisegesis, reading into the text, looking for examples of the theory's presence, rather than the theory emerging from the text. At the risk of repetition, this observation is not intended to be pejorative of authors who have done this work. It is helpful work. However, it is useful to be able to make the distinctions between what has been theory driven, practice driven, and theologically driven.

A readily accessible resource for BFST and theological conversations, which offers a collation of authors and practitioners working with BFST, is the work edited by Jenny Brown and Lauren Errington, *Bowen Family Systems Theory in Christian*

Ministry: Grappling with Theory and its Application through a Biblical Lens. An added dynamic of this work is that these authors are Australian, offering a perspective that, while still western, is at least somewhat beyond a solely American context. Within this work are over a dozen voices offering insights into BFST, congregational work, and theological reflection. The Ministerial Education posture is prominent among the authors. To be fair, it seems that the book was collated with this intent. Three of the four major heading for the articles contained within have the titles, "Applying Bowen Theory in Different Ministry Contexts," "Working in Christian Ministries During Anxious Times", a section that is referencing Edwin Friedman's encouragement that leaders be a non-anxious presence and Bowen's observation that anxiety and reactivity have a direct relationship to emotional process outcomes, and for a third section, "Personal Accounts of Applying Bowen Theory." It seems to be a natural and almost instinctive posture to move directly toward the application of BFST.

Articles in these sections describe how BFST was utilized, usually beginning with a description of the Bowenian concept, how that concept manifested in a ministry context, what the practitioner did using BFST as a guide, and finishes with a biblical endorsement. For example, in her chapter "Applying Bowen Theory to Pastoral Care: From Rescuing Pastor to Coaching Pastor"[20] Tara Stenhouse begins by presenting the problem of being overly anxious when a parishioner presents her with a pastoral care problem, worrying about her given counsel, wondering how the parishioner was doing, and rehearsing what she would say next time she saw the parishioner. She describes being stuck. With the help of a professional supervisor who used Bowen Theory

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[20] Stenhouse, "Applying Bowen," 128–42.

Stenhouse saw the work "revealing my 'rescuing' tendencies and encouraging a more principle-directed, self-differentiated approach to pastoral care."[21] The language throughout the article is Bowenian: anxiety, over-functioning, avoidance, coach, etc. Stenhouse also develops a helpful comparative chart distinguishing between the behaviors and functioning of a rescuing pastor and an alongside, coaching pastor. She concludes the article with biblical support for her reflections, saying "This idea of being an alongside coaching pastor, rather than a rescuing pastor, resonates biblically, grouped here as five principles."[22] The principles include that God is the ultimate rescuer (not the pastor), maturity in Christ as the goal of pastoral care, pastors being under-shepherds to Jesus, those cared for equally bearing the image of God, and that all Christians are to care for others. Each one of these principles is extensively proof-texted.

There is not a single thing in the article that I found disagreeable. Bowen's theory is accurately reflected, helpfully applied, and the principles articulated are good principles with biblical support. The article also resonates with the seminal work of Seward Hiltner in pastoral theology. "Shepherding comes from the word 'pastor,' and it describes the function of the minister, but it also includes the study of those functions"[23]. Larry Matthews, a proponent of the use of Bowen theory in ministry, and a student of Friedman also makes reference to Hiltner's approach to pastoral care. Matthews says Hiltner "taught me that the unique function of theology is to inquire into and rethink the faith in the light of all available data, and to do so on behalf of all believers."[24] Unpacking the structure of the ministerial education type of article is merely to

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[21] Stenhouse, "Applying Bowen," 128.
[22] Stenhouse, "Applying Bowen," 136.
[23] Hiltner, *Preface to Pastoral Theology*, 15–16.
[24] Matthews, "Theology and Family Systems," 166.

demonstrate that theology is not at the vertex, nor on the inside of the triangle in these types of articles. Which leads us toward another section of practical theology as grouped by Ward, "Correlational Approaches to Practical Theology."

Correlational Conversations

Ward helpfully explains that there is no one well-defined and particular correlational approach to practical theology. Indeed, when reading his summaries, one might find what feels like a conflation with a ministerial education method or interpreting action method. Dialog and conversation, by their very definition, imply movement, a back-and-forth repartee that can grow and expand one's understanding and experience. In his summation of correlational approaches, Ward provides a helpful summary of original framers of the correlational method in theology including theologians Paul Tillich, David Tracy, and Don Browning.[25] In a concentrate distilled even further than Ward's summation, what one can notice in these correlational approaches are questions and answers, with distinction arising from where the questions and answers are sourced. Correlation from Browning, not unlike the interpreting action method, also seeks to speak and name the current praxis of the Church, and then offer "critical and corrective frameworks to help communities change and renew their praxis."[26] It is a correlation that starts from interpreting action, then entering into dialog with a critical framework, and then potentially modifying practice.

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[25] Tillich, *Systematic Theology*; Tracy, *Blessed Rage*, Browning, *Fundamental Practical Theology*.
[26] Ward, *Introducing Practical Theology*, 79.

The chosen framework for critique and correction could be theology. However, given that theology is a term that is expansively broad and deep, the framework needs to be defined. Thus, depending on the praxis being examined, and the framework being used for critique, the permutations within a correlational method are seemingly endless. For example, two dissertations will be reviewed below, showing that in the selection of a particular component of theory and practice, and in a selection of a particular theological perspective and doctrine, correlation can lead to quite discrete and particular perspectives as outcomes.

Carol Jeunnette is the current chairperson of *Voyagers*, a group established by students of Edwin Friedman. The *Voyagers* seek to apply Bowen Theory in congregational life, with a posture of building upon Friedman's work. In her doctoral dissertation, Jeunnette sought to develop a pastoral theology of congregational care—a pastoral care of the congregation as a whole—and uses the process theology as described by Alfred Whitehead as the correlational conversation partner for BFST. She writes,

> Whitehead's identification of the telos of the universe as maximizing beauty—the harmony of contrasts, multiplicity in unity, and the greatest complexity that can be held together without falling into chaos, violence, or homogeneity—is the theological context for Bowen's concept of differentiation. The process of being different-together is required for a response to the lure of the Divine toward beauty and emergence. Thus, to work on differentiation—whether as a healing or leadership phenomenon—is to respond positively to the lure of the Divine.[27]

From this critical correlation of Bowen's concept of differentiation of self, and Whitehead's process theology of the divine lure of beauty, Jeunnette develops practices that encourage a congregation to seek beauty as the means to emerge and develop into a particular manifestation of the divine. For her BFST was used "to better understand the

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[27] Jeunnette, "Pastoral Theology of Congregational Care," 257.

functioning of congregations and 'what is help.'"[28] In her concluding remarks she

writes, "I have come to believe that a view of reality as process, and an understanding of

the Divine as luring humans into an ongoing, creative process of maximizing beauty

may be a central variable in the future vitality of the church."[29] For Jeunnette, the

correlational method is to bring about concrescence, a biological term for things that

grow together. She uses the term as an analogue for the connections of theology and

BFST to see them "brought together in ways that enrich both BFST and process

thought."[30] However, what Jeunnette calls concrescence, some may call syncretism.

Standing in opposition to Jeunnette's use of a correlation of concrescence

between BFST and theology is Ronald W. Richardson. Richardson speaks directly and

unequivocally against any convergence or concrescence between BFST and theology.

He says, "I don't believe in efforts to combine these two approaches of theology and

Bowen theory into a single unified theory or theological approach . . . efforts to combine

these two ways of knowing into one approach usually ends with significantly distorting

one or the other."[31] Richardson uses an insightful analogy to explain his perspective.

> For me these two approaches to understanding the human (BFST and theology)
> are like two different languages. They are simply two different ways of talking
> about the same phenomenon but from significantly different perspectives. We do
> not try to combine the German and English languages to make them one . . . each
> language describes reality in ways and with nuances that the other does not and
> leaves it at that.[32]

Richardson is prepared to let theory and theology each stay in their lane, with their own

criteria for knowing, leaving BFST to be a science-based theory as Bowen intended

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[28] Jeunnette, "Pastoral Theology of Congregational Care," 333.
[29] Jeunnette, "Pastoral Theology of Congregational Care," 339.
[30] Jeunnette, "Pastoral Theology of Congregational Care," 261.
[31] Richardson, "Bowen Theory and Classic," 17–18.
[32] Richardson, "Bowen Theory and Classic," 18.

while letting theology speak to the things of faith. He calls himself a "contraster" when

compared to theologians such as John Haught and Teilhard de Chardin who seek to

relate faith and science into a unified perspective. Richardson's perspective is shared by

Robert Creech. In his lecture "Thinking Systems as a Christian," delivered at the 2024

Faith and Functioning Conference hosted by the Bowen Center, Creech stated,

> BT (Bowen Theory) is a scientific theory operating with a characteristic and
> appropriate set of assumptions and practices. These differences create boundaries
> that must be respected . . . We can learn to accommodate scientific learning and
> our theological constructs so that they can occupy space next to each other
> without having to reject one or the other. We can closely observe how
> theologians and scientists use language to describe their thinking and concepts
> and work to use words unequivocally. The compatibility of BFST with historical
> Christian thought is one of the features that makes it a valuable perspective for
> leaders of Christian congregations.[33]

In his presentation, Creech notes the risk in correlation of using language equivocally,

that is, assuming that the meaning of words and terms in one perspective have

equivalence in the other. This assumption can lead to potential confusion,

misunderstanding, and at times appropriation of terms from one field to another.

By way of example, BFST and Christian theology have different anthropological

perspectives and answer the simple question of what it means to be human, or what a

human is, quite differently. Bowen theory, with its evolutionary biology frame of

reference comes to a considerably different perspective than the Christian theologians'

imago dei. So simply discussing what a human is starts from very different places.

Richardson and Creech would advocate to let each keep its own language rather than try

and create a new one.

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[33] Creech, "Thinking Systems," 17.

There are authors who endeavour to do just this. It is correlation done through comparison without conflation. In his dissertation, Michael Gillen coins the term "Conceptual Similarities."[34] Like Jeunnette, he seeks to bring BFST and theology into a correlational conversation, through what he describes as the conceptual similarities between BFST and theologian H. Richard Niebuhr's shared descriptions of "human experience in terms of responsibility, self, and systemic thinking."[35] As is the case with other authors looking at Bowen theory and theology, Gillen notes that little has been done to connect them. Using the word "connect' is of interest here. Gillen writes that Niebuhr himself warns that the the connection of psychology to theology is a "sterile union." He also notes that despite his posture that theology needs to recognize the influence of other disciplines can have on theology, the practical theologian Don Browning warns that there are "potential dangers inherent in uncritically accepting the conclusions made by sources that fail to share the same intellectual horizon."[36] Gillen addresses these concerns by having BFST and Niebuhr each define their frame of reference on their own terms, and then look for the overlap which he says can be understood in terms of responsibility, self, and systemic thinking. The term overlap is the helpful, delineating word of Gillen's method, explaining quite clearly his term, conceptual similarity. Ultimately, through case studies, Gillen lets Bowen and Niebuhr each independently interpret the work of the church. It raises the question of whether overlap, or conceptual similarities are even necessary. One could argue you can look at the work of the church with a Bowen lens, and then look at the work of the church with

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[34] Gillen, "Conceptual Similarities," 2.
[35] Gillen, "Conceptual Similarities," 2.
[36] Gillen, "Conceptual Similarities," 4.

a Niebuhr lens. Correlation is not necessarily required for insights and understanding. Richardson and Creech might say the separation is to be preferred.

Alignment for Animation: Another Theological Reflection Method

The ready adoption of BFST into congregational life, starting with Friedman, its rapid rippling out to clergy across denominations, the "aha" serendipities that happen for clergy when training in BFST, the ease with which BFST becomes a lens and framework for understanding congregational life and leadership development, all of this lends itself to an implication and assumption that BFST is "meant to be" and therefore should be part of the life of the church. I am personally one of the many who describe the theory as having saved their ministry and protected them from burnout, bad behavior in congregations, and lack of clarity in their ministry practices. The strong desire to see BFST connected to the faith it has supported through the improved functioning of congregations and leaders is understandable. It simply "feels" like BFST and theology must have some fundamental correlation and connection. To use Bowen terms, the emotional force of togetherness for BFST and theology is strong. Practitioners understandably want theology, and the biblical testimony, to affirm and support this social science theory that has been so crucially helpful to them.

I believe there is a way forward, a theological reflection method that can provide versatility to practitioners, facilitating understanding of BFST on its own terms, doing the same for a theological perspective, all while providing theoretical and theological bases for practice. I believe it is a method that while preserving the integrity of theory and theology will nevertheless allow for correlation and conversation. I have not seen the theological reflection method I will propose here explicitly described in the way I

will describe and present it, but as is the case with much in the field of practical theology, methods have concurrence and similarities and pull techniques from various disciplines and thus can look familiar. The method I would like to introduce is what I call "Alignment for Animation."

Alignment for Animation is not a terribly complicated methodology. The analogy of two lanes of highway comes to mind. One lane contains the ideas and concepts of theory. The parallel lane contains the ideas and concepts of theology. Ideas and concepts that have correspondence to one another can be aligned, side by side, but still stay "in their own lane." To restate it, it is lining up theory and theology in parallel, placing ideas and concepts that are in alignment with one another in a side-by-side position without requiring they merge or blend. In the space in between these side-by-side positions, practice is animated. Practices are better and more fully understood by the alignment of theory, and theology. No syncretism is necessary, nor is a modification of either theory or theology. Concepts and ideas may not perfectly align, but there can be enough of a correspondence, enough of a parallel to be able to look across to the other lane and see how concept or idea may be driving the middle space of practice. The movement that results from practice may then provide additional perspective for those in the other lane without requiring a lane change. Practices can be mutually beneficial. Theory and theology remain intact, while still being helpful to one another. To work with the analogy, a two-lane road has a wider, more expansive view of the horizon than a single lane road.

A few authors have identified alignments in theology and BFST. Perhaps the most comprehensive example comes from Craig L. Nessan in his article "Surviving

Congregational Leadership: A Theology of Family Systems."[37] In this article, Nessan

takes an approach of alignment by first introducing key BFST concepts such as the

family as a system of relationships, and Friedman's concepts of homeostasis, the

identified patient, the emotional triangle, self-differentiation, and non-anxious presence.

These are explained from within their own frame of reference without biblical or

theological reference. Then, recognizing that "the major formulators of family systems

thinking have given only cursory attention to the interface with theology"[38] he asks two

questions, "What are the contours of a theological approach that takes seriously the

concepts of family systems theory? How would family systems theory need to be

reconsidered if it were to take seriously theological insight?"[39] These are quintessential

practical theology methodology questions, but are also questions that reflect the desire to

preserve the integrity of both theory and theology while allowing one to help the other.

Alignment for animation can accomplish both.

What Nessan then does is "approach these questions by taking up several

theological loci and examine the implications for the basic concepts of family system

thought."[40] Rather than implications, perhaps a more accurate description of what

Nessan achieves throughout the rest of the article are alignments: God as

Trinity/creation as relationships; Creation/*homeostatis* and innovation in evolution;

imago dei/a self and connected; sin/cutoff, salvation/triangles; atonement/identified

patient; justification/non-anxious; Church/new family system. These are all alignments

that Nessan describes in good detail. Richardson also describes alignments of BFST with

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[37] Nessan, "Surviving Congregational Leadership," 390–99.
[38] Nessan, "Surviving Congregational Leadership," 393.
[39] Nessan, "Surviving Congregational Leadership," 393.
[40] Nessan, "Surviving Congregational Leadership," 393.

theological doctrine. He explains the intent of his work, "I will attempt to outline here some parallel ideas or correlations between the two approaches of (primarily biblical) theology and Bowen theory. In particular, I want to suggest how Bowen's idea of what he calls "the human phenomenon" can add to our doctrine of humanity."[41] Of note is a distinction between Nessan and Richardson in that Nessan has theology speak first. Richardson lets BFST speak first, saying "Bowen family systems theory can help us better understand and illuminate human functioning as part of the classic Christian doctrines: humanity, sin, the church, sanctification and teleology."[42] With alignment for animation, theory and theology share the inside of the triangle. Practice connects their conversation. For the Christian practitioner using BFST, theology can be the vertex, the first voice, as Nessan demonstrates. The Bowen theorist can privilege the theory should they prefer. It is the alignments themselves that provide extra insight and broaden the horizon of understanding without requiring either theory or theology to compromise. Bowen himself would be proud of the self-definition exhibited by theory and theology in this situation.

It is to be expected that some alignments will be stronger with some concepts and ideas more than others. Where there is a lack of alignment, or an absence of one, no effort need be taken to put a "square peg into a round hole." It can be observed, noted, and discussed, without requiring alteration to either. To change the metaphor, there is no added benefit to the practitioner by weaving theory and theology into a single tapestry. Or in sticking with the original metaphor, one does not have to be reduced to a single lane to broaden the view of the horizon.

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[41] Richardson, "Bowen Theory and Classic," 26.
[42] Richardson, "Bowen Theory and Classic," 17.

Exemplifying Alignment for Animation:
The Doctrine of the Trinity and Bowen Theory

The final section of this chapter will exemplify how a theological reflection method of alignment for animation can be implemented using BFST and the theological doctrine of the Trinity. This theological reflection method could be used for any number of Bowen or Friedman concepts, and for any number of theological doctrines. As previously stated, some concepts and doctrines will have stronger alignment than others. However, the doctrine of the Trinity has been chosen to serve as an example because of several strong, noticeable, and some might say even uncanny alignments with BFST. Anna Moss writes, "The doctrine of the Trinity, which presents the relationships in the Godhead as interrelated but not compromised by each other, offers a profound example to think about in light of Bowen's concept of differentiation of self."[43]

This portion of the chapter will provide a more considered look at the doctrine of the Trinity to illustrate how deliberate theological work can reveal alignments with BFST. Moreover, it will demonstrate how alignment for animation unfolds. By way of introduction, cursory examples of alignments for animation include the traditional and historical doctrine of the Trinity aligned with BFST's concept of individuality and togetherness. It is a foundational premise of BFST that all relationships in virtually any context can be understood systemically. Family Systems therapist Anna Moss summarizes, "It (BFST) is a theory of relationships, which postulates that there are predictable relationship patterns in all human emotional systems. The family is seen as an emotional unit, in which relationships and behaviors are shaped by reciprocity,

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[43] Moss, "Can a focus on self," 56.

symbiosis, and interdependence."[44] Relationally focussed trinitarian theology, the social

Trinity, appears to be in strong alignment with BFST's foundation of human emotional

systems and the family as the base unit for human functioning. There would seem to be

rich, fertile, and productive soil for Christian theological animation in the aligning of

these concepts. A derivative doctrine of perichoresis, the actual relating of the three

persons of the triune God to one another, aligns with Bowen theory's concept of

emotional process, reflecting a movement within relationships. Emotions such as

anxiety, reactivity, and even mood "dance around" relationships within a family.

Another place for alignment is the relationship the Trinity has with the Church. This

relationship has the potential for a richer understanding by aligning with BFST's

perspective on family functioning based on concepts such as generational transmission,

and birth order and roles.

Writings and reflections on the Trinity could fill libraries. Given the limiting

parameters of this project, I can only provide a cursory review of this doctrine with the

goal of providing an organizing orientation to demonstrate the principle of alignment.

The advantage for the practitioner, who may not have the resource of time to do deeper

theological study, is that this introduction can provide enough of an orientation to

provide fruitful reflection on ministry practice through alignment for animation. I will

begin by outlining the doctrine of the Trinity, reviewing the biblical witness to a

relational Trinity, and offering an overview of Social Trinitarian theology and the

doctrine of perichoresis. I will then describe the comparative BFST alignments,

concluding with some cautions needed when considering social Trinitarianism in

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[44] Moss, "Can a focus on self," 44–45.

relation to the historical doctrine of the Trinity in particular. The subsequent and final

chapter of this project will offer suggested practices that are animated by the alignment

that arises by placing theological reflection and BFST in parallel.

The Traditional Historical Doctrine of the Trinity

Van A. Harvey's *Handbook of Theological Terms* articulates the doctrine of the Trinity

clearly and succinctly:

> The doctrine of the Trinity states that in the being of the one eternal deity there
> are three eternal and essential distinctions, traditionally named Father, Son, and
> Holy Spirit. In Western Christendom, the classical formula has been "three
> persons in one substance" (*una substantia et tres personae*); in Eastern
> Christendom, "three hypostases in one being" (*treis hypostaseis, mia ousia*).[45]

In this concise statement one can immediately read the intent to pair distinction with

unity, or to use the words of BFST, to pair individuality and togetherness. An individual

cannot be fully understood apart from the relationship with the whole. The whole cannot

be fully understood apart from the individuals contained within it. The previous

statements could apply to either the Trinity or to the family in Bowen theory. In BFST

the individual cannot be understood apart from their family, the foundational unit of

human functioning. The family is understood through the functioning of the individuals.

One cannot understand the Christian god without understanding the Trinity as the

Trinity is the foundation of divinity. No single person of the Trinity is fully understood

without understanding the relationship with the other two persons of the Trinity.

As early as the end of the second century, theologian and apologist Tertullian

advocated for an economic Trinity, giving attention to the manifestations of the Trinity

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[45] Harvey, *Handbook Theological Terms*, 244.

over their internal relations. There is one God with three manifestations. Tertullian is explained by Erickson thusly, "there is a distinction (distinction) or distribution (disposition), not a division or separation (separatio) . . . The Father, Son, and Spirit are one identical substance; this substance has been extended into three manifestations, but not divided."[46] BFST theory easily aligns here as it speaks of individuals being manifestations of a family. Theology and theory both point to a common phenomenon, that there is an interconnection to one another that is also apparent in the divine, an interconnection that is distinctive yet unified.

Moving forward from Tertullian, the development of the doctrine of the Trinity in the western Church has some particularly pertinent alignments with BFST. Augustine also uses "the unity of the Substance"[47] as a starting point for understanding the Trinity. This point of understanding is a difference of understanding of the origin of the other two persons of the Trinity. The eastern Church expressed that the Son is generated from the Father and that the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son. By beginning from the unity of the Substance, Augustine established co-equality of the three persons. No one person of the Trinity stands apart from the others. They stand together. In the western tradition of trinitarian thought, the Trinity isn't a line descending from the Father, but instead, a triangle. The alignment with BFST's premise that it is the family which the singular and foundational unit of human beings, and that the fundamental structure of that unit is the triangle borders on the enigmatic.

Historically the church has grappled with this tension between distinction within one being. A move too far toward togetherness and unity was to move toward what

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[46] Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 333.
[47] *ODCC,* "Trinity."

became defined as the heresy of modalism, which "so emphasized the unity of God that all distinctions were rejected."[48] Move too far toward discrete individualism was to move toward what became the heresy of the subordinationists, who stated that Jesus was created by God, diminishing the status of the Christ being God incarnate. The Trinity is three and one, logically impossible, yet relationally true.

Aligned alongside BFST, an individual is a discrete person, and yet one is also an essential part of a family. A family is incomplete without an accounting of all the individuals who constitute it. Logically one cannot be both, an individual and a family, but relationally, one cannot be understood apart from the other. Move too far one way or the other, and BFST says you will be outside the boundary of what constitutes the balance between individuality and togetherness. Both must be present.

<div align="center">Biblical Theology and a Social-Relational Trinity</div>

In the past decades, the relationship between the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit has enjoyed a resurgence of attention in theological scholarship.[49] This renewed attention to the Triune God's interior relationship has been demonstrably provocative and generative in reinvigorating and refreshing consideration of the Triune God's external relationships. While ecclesiology has been the primary beneficiary of this attention, doctrines as wide-ranging as soteriology, missiology and pastoral theology have experienced its impact. Influential theologian Stanley Grenz notes "Whenever the story of theology in the last hundred years is told, the rediscovery of the doctrine of the Trinity . . . must be given

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[48] Harvey, *Handbook Theological Terms*, 245.
[49] See: Moltmann, *Trinity and the Kingdom*; Grenz, *Social God*.

centre stage, and the rebirth of Trinitarian theology must be presented as one of the most far-reaching theological developments of the century."[50]

When considering the question of what the Bible has to say regarding a social Trinity, Gijsbert van den Brink notes that "there is a considerable amount of unanimity among those who have recently addressed this question."[51] Even a cursory reading of the Gospel of John 14–17 provides a clear picture of a Triune God in relationship. Father, Son, and Spirit share the work of God. Jesus is quoted as saying "All that belongs to the Father is mine. That is why I said the Spirit will receive from me what he will make known to you" (John 16:15). Plantinga argues that a social theory of the Trinity is not limited to the gospel of John, "A person who extrapolated from Hebrews, Paul and John would naturally develop a social theory of the Trinity."[52] Thus the question is not whether the Bible reveals a social Trinity, but what deductions can be made about the nature of the relationship within the Trinity and the Trinity and humans.

Scripture gives some plain statements about the economic Trinity, and how this relationship functions. The Father sends the Son. The Father and the Son send the Spirit. The Son embodies. The Spirit enthuses. What rises for debate is what can be deduced about the immanent Trinity from this economic Trinity. Moltmann rejects what he sees to be the monotheistic, Zeus-like, "God the Father Almighty, Creator of Heaven and Earth"[53] and instead locates the term "Father" relationally within the Trinity. God is Father, only in as much as there is a Son. The relationship is what begets the identity.

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[50] Grenz, *Rediscovering the Triune God*, 5.
[51] Brink, "Social Trinitarianism," 342.
[52] Plantinga, "Social Trinity and Tritheism," 27.
[53] Moltmann, *Trinity and the Kingdom*, 162.

Moltmann then takes this relational identity outside the Trinity and applies it to humans. God is our Father, not because he is the Almighty, but because Christ is our brother.

Köstenberger and Swain have produced a key work of biblical theology related to the trinity, *Father, Son and Spirit: The Trinity and John's Gospel*, which provides both a deep look at the Johannine gospel as it pertains to the Trinity, as well as theological reflection derived from the text. They directly address the issue of the relationship between the economic and immanent Trinity.[54] From their historical review and exegesis of the relevant texts they come to the conclusion that "The Father is the *fons divinitatis*. Jesus is personally distinct from the Father as his one-of-a-kind Son. The Spirit eternally proceeds from the Father as 'the gift' who rests upon and indwells God's beloved Son, the one with whom the Father shares all things."[55] Köstenberger and Swain present a relational order within the Trinity but argue that the order in no way diminishes the glory of any part of the Godhead.

In emphasizing the relational nature of the divine, and in recognizing the relational nature of the human being, both the doctrine of the Trinity and BFST encourage locating oneself into the relational system to facilitate self-definition, self-understanding, and function. Bowen writes extensively of helping people differentiate a self as the primary means toward healthier functioning as a self, in one's family, and in larger relational systems generally. But what theological thinking offers, is the recognition that this is also the case in a person's relationship with the divine. Köstenberger and Swain point out that Christian salvation is much more than simply

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[54] Köstenberger and Swain, *Father, Son and Spirit*, 179.
[55] Köstenberger and Swain, *Father, Son and Spirit*, 184–85.

forgiveness of sin, while it is that too. They point out that salvation faith is faith that leads one to find one's place in the divine relationship.

> Eternal life consists in coming to know Jesus' Father as our Father. On the basis of the Father's eternal grant of a people to the Son; through the Son's incarnation, crucifixion, resurrection and joint sending of the Spirit to indwell believers subsequent to Jesus' exaltation, the foundational covenant promise 'I will be your God' has been fulfilled in a trinitarian way. Jesus' God and Father has become our God and our Father.[56]

Knowing who one is in relation to the divine, and within relationship with the divine, enables self-definition, self-understanding, and allows one to function within the fullness of the *imago Dei*. This alignment of finding, knowing, and being a self through recognition of one's connection to the wider relational system is present in the theory and in the theology, creating an allowance that practices from each can serve the goals of the other.

It is a foundational premise of BFST that, by means of emotional process, relationships function as a natural system. Bowen himself described the family as the primary emotional unit where emotional process is established. Subsequent therapists, authors, and theorists observed emotional process at work in other relational systems, including in congregations and their leaders. Relationally focussed Trinitarian theology, the relationship of the Father, Son, and Spirit and the corresponding functions are in strong alignment with BFST's foundational concept of the human emotional system through emotional process. There is rich, fertile, and productive soil for animation through alignment with two correspondingly central concepts; the human emotional system of BFST and the doctrine of the Trinity.

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[56] Köstenberger and Swain, *Father, Son, and Spirit*, 187.

Social Trinitarian Theologies

As one aligns for animation, it is possible to dig deeper into more doctrines and find

additional alignments, and fruit for reflection and resultant practice. In this section, an

introductory examination of doctrines of the social Trinity and perichoresis will provide

further evidence and examples of how ministry practices can be animated by the

alignment of theory and theology. Gijsbert van den Brink provides a helpfully

comprehensive yet accessible introduction to social trinitarianism.[57] In addition to

providing a list of authors who have "mapped and placed in its proper contexts"[58] what

he calls the "revival of Trinitarian theology,"[59] van den Brink helpfully describes three

approaches to make distinctions within social Trinitarianism. There can be a "social

analogy" of the Trinity in which social relationships are seen to be analogous to the

relationships within the Trinity, but only carry the weight of an analogy among

analogies. There is the "social model" of the Trinity, wherein the social analogy

becomes the key analogy. Finally as a third approach, doctrinal status is ascribed to the

model. Each of these approaches serve as useful categories when reading the work of

social trinitarians, as they provide a measure of the weight being given to the social

Trinity as justification for derivative doctrines. To demonstrate how social

Trinitarianism can shape theological output we turn now to three seminal authors, Jürgen

Moltmann, Miroslav Volf, and Stanley Grenz. They serve as examples of what can

transpire when three is prioritized over one, and when ecclesiology and the self are

rooted in Trinitarian relationship.

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[57] Brink, "Social Trinitarianism," 331.
[58] Brink, "Social Trinitarianism," 331.
[59] Brink, "Social Trinitarianism," 331.

Three Before One: Jürgen Moltmann

Any discussion of social Trinitarianism will need to interact with Jürgen Moltmann whose work *The Trinity and the Kingdom* (1981) is considered by some to be a "new orthodoxy"[60] when considering the Trinity. Moltmann begins by identifying the important distinction between the western and the eastern Church when it comes to exploring the nature of the Trinity. Very simply stated, the western church has tended to emphasize the 'one as three' of the Trinity, whereas the eastern church has emphasized the 'three as one.' This shift of primary focus to the three of the Trinity opened western Trinitarian theology to an abundance of social metaphors, proving generative for significant reflection when considering relational contexts such as the church, community, society, and the nature of God's interaction within the Trinity and with other relational systems.

In explaining the development of the doctrine of the Trinity in the western church, Moltmann says,

> ever since Tertullian, the Christian Trinity has always been depicted as belonging within the general concept of the divine substance: *una substantia – tres personae*. The one, indivisible, homogeneous, divine substance is constituted as three individual, divine persons. Consequently the converse also applies: the three persons are certainly different from one another, but they are one in their common divine substance.[61]

By starting with the 'one', he argues you lose the capacity for 'three' as they are subsumed into the substance of the one. He advocates for the eastern approach of the Cappadocian Fathers by beginning with 'three.' "We are beginning with the trinity of

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[60] Kilby, "Perichoresis and Projection," 433.
[61] Moltmann, *Trinity and the Kingdom*, 16.

the Persons and shall then go on to ask about the unity. What then emerges is a concept of the divine unity as the union of the tri-unity."[62]

In reflecting upon the Trinity, Moltmann also provides helpful thinking for those who are coming from "a sphere of practical application and are connected with the practicability of the truth." He notes, "The modern world has become pragmatic."[63] In addressing the pragmatism of the modern world, he is also addressing the primary posture of practical theologians and ministry practitioners. He is addressing the posture of Edwin Friedman who uses BFST because "it works." Practical theologians, ministry practitioners, and clinicians are almost by very definition pragmatists. This puts them at risk of overlooking theological reflection in their quest for what works. Moltmann argues that when theology is a theology of action, "practice takes precedence over reflection and theory."[64] He asks the question, "Is the doctrine of the Trinity a practical truth?"[65] Moltmann explains that it is Christian meditation on the crucified Jesus, and the passion of Christ that allows one to die to self, which in turn allows one to rise with Christ in resurrection. Thus "The theology of the cross becomes the theology of the resurrection."[66] Action then arises from this transformation from death to life, a transformation empowered by meditation on the life and resurrection of Christ himself. Moltmann notes that meditation and action are indelibly linked. "Practice can never become the flight from meditation because, as Christian practice, it is bound to discipleship of the crucified Jesus."[67]

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[62] Moltmann, *Trinity and the Kingdom*, 19.
[63] Moltmann, *Trinity and the Kingdom*, 5.
[64] Moltmann, *Trinity and the Kingdom*, 7.
[65] Moltmann, *Trinity and the Kingdom*, 6.
[66] Moltmann, *Trinity and the Kingdom*, 8.
[67] Moltmann, *Trinity and the Kingdom*, 8.

Moltmann's prioritization of the Trinity being 'three as one' leads him to a place where the relationship between the three persons of the Trinity becomes the formative understanding, not only of the Trinity themselves, but of the invitation of followers and the Church into relationship with them. The formative understanding of relationship is a pertinent guardrail for those who would primarily use BFST as a pragmatic technique for congregational management. He writes, "To represent the trinitarian Persons in the one, identical divine subject leads unintentionally, but inescapably to the reduction of the doctrine of the Trinity to monotheism."[68] Taking a step away from the Western tradition Moltmann says of his work "We are beginning with the trinity of the Persons and shall then go on to ask about the unity... This trinitarian hermeneutics leads us to think in terms of relationships and communities."[69] Although Bowen would describe the family as the primary and foundational unit of human behavior, thinking in terms of relationships is unquestionably Bowenian thinking. While Bowen's view of the family may align more closely with the Western tradition of seeing the Trinity first as a unity, Moltmann's emphasis on the three being in unity opens up reflection on the nature of the relationships within the tri-unity. This can provide fruitful reflection of the Christian practitioner who opts to use a BFST lens to understand their own and the Church's relationship to and within the Trinity.

Moltmann identifies that the persons of the Trinity "do not only combine or work together according to a single pattern."[70] He provides examples wherein the Father is an actor in sending the Son, the Son a receiver, the Spirit a means. But there is also the

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[68] Moltmann, *Trinity and the Kingdom*, 18.
[69] Moltmann, *Trinity and the Kingdom*, 19.
[70] Moltmann, *Trinity and the Kingdom*, 94.

lordship of the Son and the diffusion of the Spirit into the Church and creation. Escatologically, the Son becomes the actor along with the Spirit to bring and present a redeemed Creation back to the Father.[71] Moltmann argues that the trinitarian formula should not be limited to Father, Son, Spirit, but can legitimately be Father, Spirit, Son, or Spirit, Son, Father. He is identifying the movement of functions between the three persons and locates this as the foundation of their unity. "The unity of the divine tri-unity lies in the *union* of the Father, the Son and the Spirit, not in their numerical unity. It lies in their *fellowship*, not in the identity of a single subject."[72] Given that the basis of unity for the Trinity is fellowship, those who through mediation and reflection on the life, death, and resurrection of the Son, who are willing to die to self and be raised into the resurrected life of the Son are welcomed into this fellowship, becoming part of the divine intent for creation, living this intent in practice from a place of fellowship with the tri-unity.

For the practitioner wishing to capitalize on BFST as a frame of understanding the function of self and the function of a congregation as a relational system, this invitation into Moltmann's understanding of the fellowship with the divine tri-unity creates avenues of reflection for a theological identity as a source for understanding how to "work together" with Son, Spirit, and Father as Church, as congregation, and as a disciple.

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[71] Moltmann, *Trinity and the Kingdom*, 94.
[72] Moltmann, *Trinity and the Kingdom*, 95. Emphasis original.

Ecclesiological Relations: Miroslav Volf

Miroslav Volf's work *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity* published in 1998 has been an influential voice in more contemporary conversations about the Trinity. Coming from the free church tradition, Volf provides another perspective on how the ecclesial community, and derivatively all human community, can be modelled on the Trinity saying "It is precisely as the congregation assembling in the name of Christ that the church is an image of the Trinity."[73] He further states "if Christian initiation [i.e., baptism] is a Trinitarian event, the church must speak of the Trinity as its determining reality. Because churches, in the power of the Holy Spirit, already form a communion with the triune God, ecclesial correspondence to the Trinity can become an object of hope and thus also a task for human beings."[74] Volf illuminates his vision of this ecclesial correspondence by putting it in contrast to the ecclesiology presented by Roman Catholic Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger and Orthodox metropolitan John Zizioulas. While Volf is partial to the free church posture toward how the Trinity is present and manifesting in the church, his summations of Ratzinger and Zizioulas also provide helpful perspectives when considering the relationships within the Trinity and even more so when considering the relationship of the Trinity to the greater church and the individuals constituting the church. Regardless of one's preferred perspective on the relationship of the Trinity and the church, all the described perspectives show facets that end up parallelling elements of what Bowen describes as he endeavours to explain the relationship between the family as a unit and the individual within it.

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[73] Volf, *After Our Likeness*, 197.
[74] Volf, *After Our Likeness*, 195.

When describing Ratzinger's ecclesiology, Volf credits him with an irrefutable link to the Trinity saying, "*all* the crucial elements in his ecclesiology and entire theology are rooted in the doctrine of the Trinity. The entire life of the church, including its spirituality and structures, is shaped in correspondence to a certain understanding of the Trinity."[75] Ratzinger, in Volf's view, has an ecclesiology that comes from a basic category of *Christus totus* which translated means the whole Christ. In the way that Father, Son, and Spirit are from the one substance, the church is also one subject with Christ because the church exists in Christ. The church is therefore integrated into the life of God.

Standing in the orthodox tradition, Volf explains Ziziloulas' ecclesiology as arising from the Eucharist. Volf explains Zizioulas thusly:

> In the eucharistic celebration the many become one body of Christ, and do so in such a way that Christ takes them up "into himself." That is why in the Eucharist, the body of the one (Christ) and the body of the many (the church) are identical... The ecclesiologically crucial identification of church and Christ manifests itself in the identification of church and Eucharist. The Eucharist is the place where church and Christ become one body, the body *of Christ*, and thus "completely" identical[76]

So here in Volf's explanation of Zizioulas, we observe a strong unity and togetherness between Christ and the church, a unity so strong as to be indistinguishable. Christ is the church and the church is Christ. Volf further notes that Ziziloulas argued that ecclesiology shouldn't even be a separate chapter of theology, but "should become instead an organic part of Christology."[77]

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[75] Volf, *After Our Likeness*, 67. Emphasis original
[76] Volf, *After Our Likeness*, 98–99. Emphasis original.
[77] Volf, *After Our Likeness*, 99fn148.

In contrast to Ratzinger's ecclesiology of the church existing in Christ, and Ziziloulas' church being Christ, Volf takes a position regarding the Trinity that leads to a different view of the being, function, and structure of the church in what he labels a "polycentric community."[78] He raises the point that while trinitarian ideas can be converted into ecclesiological ideas, they are analogous, not substantive. "Notions of the triune God are not the triune God, even if God is only accessible to us in these notions."[79] Looking at human relationships, looking at the interior functioning of a human being between mind, body, and spirit, while giving us notions and a correspondence to the divine persons, are nevertheless only analogous to the divine persons. So Volf keeps the church separate from the Trinity. The church is brought into being through confession which is enabled by the Spirit. The church "is not a single subject, but rather a communion of interdependent subjects... the mediation of salvation occurs... through all other members of the church."[80]

Volf has provided additional and helpful facets for the ministry practitioner who wishes to use BFST but from a vertex of theological thought that begins with the Trinity. First is Volf's reminder that analogy is not actuality. In putting BFST and theology into conversation, alignments are only analogous or correspondences, not evidence of shared actuality or substance. Is it possible that in the relationships we see between the persons of the Trinity we will see similarities in the relationships of a family as BFST describes them? Absolutely. Is it then necessary to equate or conflate them? It is not. But

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[78] Volf, *After Our Likeness*, 224.
[79] Volf, *After Our Likeness*, 198.
[80] Volf, *After Our Likeness*, 224.

nevertheless the parallel lanes can provide insights that are shared and give a broader illumination.

Second, in emphasizing the polycentric community against the *Christus totus*, Volf demonstrates a dynamic present in theological thought that is replicated in BFST. Bowen describes individuality and togetherness forces. Individuals and families are working to be both discrete individuals while also being a cohesive unit. There is an active dynamic to finding a place of balance where one is a differentiated self while still being in meaningful emotional connection to the family unit. Bowen calls that dynamic emotional process. Volf has provided a theological version of this tension. Christ is indeed the whole and the church is one with Christ. However, the church is also a communion of interdependent subjects. Thus, we see a theological tension and truth, the tension and truth of being individuals and being together in a shared identity. This is a tension similar to BFST's "forces" of individuality and togetherness. The practice of identifying self and the self's place in the community of the church or the family, and the self's place in the divine is a shared practice in both the theology and in the theory.

Self in Relationality: Stanley Grenz

Written in 2001, Stanley Grenz's *The Social God and the Relational Self* is a work that provides a copious and thorough amount of material tracing the development of trinitarian theology in its various forms through the history of the Church. His work provides helpful and detailed orientations and summations. In this work Grenz brings the conversation about the Trinity into a modern context where the self is generally seen as a given inward identity. As a correction of this premise that the self is an inward given, Grenz moves the conversation toward an understanding of the Trinity that is socially, or

relationally based. In so doing, Grenz's social god and relational self arguably aligns more closely with BFST than other trinitarian theological work. With a focus on relationality, both within the persons of the Trinity, and for individuals and community with the divine, Grenz provides conceptual links between trinitarian theology and BFST that are quite pertinent. Grenz leans toward the Cappadocian fathers in his understanding of the nature and function of the Trinity. He prioritizes three ahead of the one. For Grenz, the one arises from the relationality of the three. He explains,

> According to this trinitarian communal ontology, the three members of the Trinity are "person" precisely because they are persons-in-relationship; that this their personal identities emerge out of the reciprocal relations... the goal of human existence is to be persons-in-relation after the pattern of the perichoretic divine life in Jesus Christ. A communal ontology, in turn leads to an understanding of identity that may be termed "ecclesial self."[81]

Take Grenz's quote above, change the word trinity to family and you have an explanation that could be Bowen's explanation of how identity emerges from family, and is defined over and against a unitary fusion with the family. For Bowen, one is bestowed an identity from their family, through generational transmission process, in sibling position, in triangles, etc. but one matures into a differentiated self by encouraging the growth and ability to make distinction between self and family, but only if doing this while still being emotionally connected to family. It sounds similar to Grenz's ecclesial self, an identity that emerges out of communal relations, and a communal ontology. Grenz says, "the personal identity that constitutes the ecclesial self is bound up with relationality."[82] Bowen was looking for a way of understanding human behavior that reached beyond the psychoanalytic, individual model. He came to

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[81] Grenz, *Social God*, 332.
[82] Grenz, *Social God*, 332.

understand that human behavior is best understood, to use Grenz's words, in relationality, in a family system. Grenz shares Bowen's repudiation of a stand alone individual. Grenz writes, "The concept of the "ecclesial self" undermines the idea that personal identity emerges solely or even primarily as the product of an inward turn, as important as inwardness may be to the construction of the self."[83]

Perichoresis

This term is still relatively obscure to the general population but has become essential vocabulary in social Trinitarianism. Derived from the Greek word *perikhoresis,* or 'rotation,' this term was initially used by patristic fathers to describe the hypostatic union, the relationship between Christ's divine and human natures. It is a word meant to describe blending without loss of distinction, infusion without assimilation, or unity without loss of diversity. It is a word of analogy meant to describe more than define. Horsthuis describes its purpose. "The doctrine of perichoresis expresses how the persons of the Godhead exist as a mutuality—the three persons as the one God."[84] Myk Habets, in the foreword to Charles Twombly's book *Perichoresis and Personhood* provides a necessary caution by way of introduction to the term.

> Perichoresis has become one of those plastic words bandied about the theosphere with reckless abandon . . . it quickly made its way into Trinitarian discourse as an analogy for the unity of the three divine persons in the one being of God. In recent theology the term has been applied to marriage, church, and even creation in ways that stretch the credibility of the term and threaten the ongoing usefulness of the concept.[85]

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[83] Grenz, *Social God*, 332.
[84] Horsthuis, "In Cadence With God," 56.
[85] Habets, foreword to *Perichoresis and Personhood*, ix.

Suitably warned against overreaching, and understanding that the word is used as analogy, it nevertheless provides a very helpful visualization to the relationship within the Trinity.

Horsthuis comes to his definition of perichoresis by bringing to the fore various comparative definitions of perichoresis of more contemporary theologians including Karl Barth, Gerald O'Collins, Catherine LaCugna, Miroslav Volf, and Paul Fiddes.[86] Upon reviewing the definitions of these theologians, Horsthuis offers a summative definition of perichoresis. "Perichoresis can be defined as the mutual indwelling without confusion of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit."[87] With his definition, he highlights the "two salient features"[88] of perichoresis. The first is the concept of co-inherence, or mutual indwelling, which expresses the idea that "[T]he three persons of the Trinity (Father, Son and Spirit) mutually dwell in one another."[89] To explicate this concept of co-inherence, Horsthuis uses the comparatives from the definitions of the previously names theologians; coinherence (Fiddes), mutually permeate (Volf), being-in-one-another (LaCugna), interpenetrate (O'Collins), and permeate one another mutually (Barth). Perichoresis can be understood as a doctrine that affirms the oneness of the Trinity.

The second feature is "that there is to be no confusion of the persons of the Godhead in this mutual indwelling of divine persons."[90] No confusion is a reference to a retained distinction and discretion despite oneness. Horsthuis explains, "despite their

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[86] Horsthuis, "Participants with God," 90–91.
[87] Horsthuis, *Perichoretic Pastoral Theology*, 41.
[88] Horsthuis, "Participants with God," 91.
[89] Horsthuis, "Participants with God," 91.
[90] Horsthuis, "Participants with God," 91.

mutual indwelling, the Father, Son, and Spirit are and remain distinct persons and, although they are one, are never confused: the Son is never the Father, the Spirit is never the Son and so forth."[91] In this second salient feature, perichoresis also affirms the threeness of the Trinity. In the identification of these two features, Horsthuis provides a definition of perichoresis that encapsulates both a historic and contemporary understanding of the doctrine.

The doctrine of perichoresis adds an important aspect to an understanding of the Trinity, moving the conversation beyond form and substance, to the consideration of function and dynamic, or to express it in a more personable way, to the nature of the relationship between the three. Perichoresis carries the connotation of movement. Grenz describes this concept of perichoresis can be utilized "to express the dynamic of the divine life."[92] Whether arising from the original Greek definition of rotation, or Eugene Peterson's more playful translation to 'dance around,'[93] the term suggests fluidity, dynamism, and motion. By leaning into the "choreography" portion of the word perichoresis, and the idea of dance, within the Trinity there can understood to be back and forth, moving round, give and take, sending and going, providing, and receiving, in short, a relationship. The Triune God, co-inherent without confusion, reveals a dynamic, moving relationship of unity while maintaining distinctiveness amongst the three.

Grenz observes that the doctrine of *perichoresis* describes, "the manner in which the trinitarian persons are constituted by the mutuality of relationships within the life of the triune God" which then "opened the way for the development of a dynamic ontology

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[91] Horsthuis, "Participants with God," 91.

[92] Grenz, *Social God*, 316.

[93] Peterson, *Christ Plays*, 44–45.

of the essential nature of personhood."[94] A personhood that arises from relationships resonates and aligns with Bowen's perspective that the family is the fundamental unit of the human species, and that personhood is derived and reflected in the functioning and dynamic that arises from and is facilitated by the emotional process of a family. The distinctiveness of an individual is formed and knowable by means of relationships within the family unit through generations. Bowen got to this perspective from a theoretical foundation of evolutionary biology and in a context of family therapy. Grenz points to theologian Colin Gunton who shows how a similar perspective of personhood can be reached from a theological vertex. Grenz quotes Gunton,

> An account of relationality that gives due weight to both one and many, to both particular and universal, to both otherness and relations, is to be derived from the one place where they can be satisfactorily be based, a conception of God who is both one and three, whose being consists in a relationality that derives from the otherness-in-relation of Father, Son, and Spirit.[95]

Bowen believed that one could find personhood by understanding his or her role and function within the family unit, and could further develop his or her personhood by differentiating a self while remaining in connection to the family unit. It is the BFST tension of the individuality and togetherness forces. Theologically, perichoresis within the Trinity extends into those welcomed into the divine relationship through redemption in Christ. Personhood can be found in one's reception into the person of Christ by the work of the Spirit, in unity with God, while remaining distinct as part of the body of Christ and the unique giftedness granted through the Spirit. The alignment between BFST and perichoresis is strong.

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[94] Grenz, *Social God*, 317.
[95] Gunton, *The One, The Three*, 163.

Keeping Caution with Alignment for Animation

In enthusiasm for alignment, it is important to be aware how both theory or theology can pull the other out of its lane, creating drift in either theory or doctrine. It is an advantage of alignment for animation that it has a built-in expectation that theory and theology would be defined on their own terms, and located within their own field. Being defined on their own terms, and being located within their own field, theory and theology are less likely to be diminished by syncretism.

The following brief literature review reflects how the conflation of concepts such as identity and relationship, when derived from social science, may affect theology. As the previous section discussed, there has been a recent, significant derivative movement toward the concept that identity is found not in substance of the persons of the Trinity but in the relationship itself. In *Participating in God: A Pastoral Doctrine of the Trinity,* Paul Fiddes extrapolates this thinking. "The being of God is understood as event and relationship, but only through an epistemology of participation; each only makes sense in the context of the other."[96] From this posture human identity is then located in and as the participatory relationship within the Triune God's relational identity. There is a helpful alignment with BFST, particularly with the aforementioned doctrine of perichoresis. However, boundaries are helpful.

Thomas Oord goes further into what is being identified as open and relational theology. Stepping further away from God and the persons of the Trinity as subjects, Oord identifies God as simply love, with love being influenced in form and extent by relationship with others. "The doctrine of God that I propose suggests that God's own

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[96] Fiddes, *Participating in God*, 38.

characteristics and God's relations with others influence the form and extent of divine love."[97] Oord argues that,

> God is not only present to all things, but God enters moment-by-moment into give-and-receive interaction with others. In this interaction, God is omni-relational. God acts in relation to others both as the Ideal Recipient and the Ideal Contributor As the omnipresent Ideal Recipient, God takes in the experiences of all others. God does so not by looking at creation from a distance, as if a spectator on the sidelines who only occasionally gets in the game. Rather God is present to all things, all the time, and God experiences the experiences of others.[98]

Oord describes what is an evolving relationship of shared experience, equality, and reciprocity.

It is perhaps the theologians such as Oord that Mosser has in mind when he expresses a strong caution against taking the biblical witness beyond an economic description of the Trinity. Gijsbert van den Brink provides a helpful summary of Mosser's concern.

> According to him, the 'chief problem' with social Trinitarianism from Scripture is that it turns talk about the distinct roles of Father, Son and Spirit in the New Testament narratives into 'direct descriptions of their immanent relations', thus, as he sees it, collapsing 'the distinction between the economy of salvation narrated by the text and the life of God in himself.[99]

In Mosser and Kilby[100] we find reminders and warnings that any social model of the Trinity is analogous. Analogies serve best when lightly held. The creation of immanent Trinitarian theology from analogy, and its derivative social relational models, are at risk of functioning as closed feedback loops, creating a social model for the Trinity that ends up looking very much like the social model one desires for society. As Holmes notes

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[97] Oord, "Relational God and Unlimited Love," 139.
[98] Oord, "Relational God and Unlimited Love," 141.
[99] Brink "Social Trinitarianism," 344.
[100] Kilby, "Perichoresis and Projection."

after reviewing the broad difference between the social Trinitarian derived ecclesiologies of Zizoulas and Volf, "the claim that a social doctrine of the Trinity is generative for ecclesiology and ethics is in danger of being cast into doubt if such wildly divergent implications can be drawn from the same doctrine."[101] It is a worthy caution.

Alignment for animation encourages theory and theology to stay in their respective lanes. The opportunity for a broader horizon and to learn from each is in no way diminished, and in fact seems to be enhanced by respecting the distinctiveness of each. From a broader horizon and multiple lanes comes strong support for practices that can be developed and brought from either theory or theology. This protects theology and theory from devolving into syncretism or concrescence while allowing for shared practices.

<div align="center">Social Trinity, Perichoresis, and Alignment with BFST</div>

BFST is a theory of relationships, paying close attention to relational patterns and human emotional systems. Because of this, it has strong alignment with social and relational Trinitarianism. BFST holds a core premise of two forces, togetherness, and individuality. Those in relationship must work to balance these forces, maintaining both a self and connection to others. This work of balancing can be described as the emotional process which is the movement the back and forth between individuality and togetherness. Perichoresis is also movement. These two key premises of BFST, the togetherness and individuality forces, and its partnered concept of differentiation of self, wherein individuals are encouraged to be connected but separate, are uncannily familiar

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[101] Holmes, "Three versus One," 82.

in the Trinitarian language of "co-inherence without confusion." The perichoretic relationship of the Trinity and the derivative relationship the Trinity has with the Church has the potential for further animation of human relational patterns. Its two salient features of mutual indwelling while retaining distinctiveness have a strong analogous alignment, which Moss identifies:

> The ontology of God provides a powerful example of the differentiation of self: each person of the Trinity being distinct in individual personhood and purpose, yet existing in intimate connection with the other, without loss of self. It is the very distinctiveness and individual fullness of the three persons of the Trinity that enables them to relate to one another in completeness of purpose and connection.[102]

Moss notes that the alignment with social Trinitarianism and perichoresis also corresponds to BFST's core concept of the differentiation of self, that is the ability to stay true to one's own purpose and principles while continuing in connection to the other. Thus, Social Trinitarianism provides ripe fruit for theological reflection in alignment with BFST. Mindful that while caution must be taken not to force social science or social analogies into theology's lane, to the point where they become definitive, determinative, and syncretistic rather than descriptive and supportive, social Trinitarianism nevertheless has the capacity to be a closely aligned partner with BFST broadening the horizon of insight with a theological vertex.

Practices can become the animation of this alignment. Bowen Theory has practices to improve one's differentiation of self. Traditional theology has practices to promote Christian maturity. Because of the alignment of theory and theology, the discrete practices can bridge the lanes. BFST practices can promote Christian maturity. Traditional theological practices can promote differentiation of self. While theory and

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[102] Moss, "Can a focus on self," 57.

theology maintain their distinction and separateness, with alignment they can come alongside each other and share the work of animating practices. The final chapter will demonstrate how this can be done.

CHAPTER FOUR: ALIGNMENT FOR ANIMATION:
USING BFST AND THEOLOGICAL ALIGNMENT TO ANIMATE
EMOTIONALLY, RELATIONALLY, AND SPIRITUALLY INTEGRATED
LEADERS AND SYSTEMS

It is a worthy question to ask why there is a need or what the purpose is to have theology

and theory align in order to animate ministry practice. Indeed, many use BFST and its

concepts in the Church to great effect without engaging in theological reflection. So why

this effort? In short, how one thinks about a subject will affect and shape outcomes and

practice. This is true with theory. It is true with theology.

It was theologian A.W. Tozer who articulated what he called "a secret law of the

soul."[1] The law analogy Tozer identified is not analogous to laws of public

administration or criminal laws. Instead, it is more akin to the laws of physics, such as

the law of gravity; laws that explain how things function. In identifying a law of the

soul, Tozer is speaking to the nature of how the soul works and functions at its

fundamental level. As such, it was Tozer's observation, so apparent that he considered it

a law of the soul, that "we move toward our mental image of God."[2] Thus he opens his

book *Knowledge of the Holy* with the definitive statement, "What comes into our minds

when we think about God is the most important thing about us."[3] He adds that what is

true of the individual is also true of the Church and that the most revealing thing about a

Church is "her [sic] idea of God, just as her most significant message is what she says

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[1] Tozer, *Knowledge of the Holy*, 1.
[2] Tozer, *Knowledge of the Holy*, 1.
[3] Tozer, *Knowledge of the Holy*, 1.

about Him or leaves unsaid."[4] Given this perspective on a "law of the soul," it would

follow that the practices of a person in ministry will be moving them toward their mental

image of God.

If a mental image of God can be aligned with the pragmatic possibilities of

BFST, an opportunity exists for the ministry practitioner to have what Bowen would

refer to as a solid self or what others describe as an integrated self. This alignment would

be an opportunity to conduct oneself, and to animate one's ministry from a grounded,

principled, and empowered position. Bowen writes, "The solid self is made up of clearly

defined beliefs, opinions, convictions, and life principles. These are incorporated into

self from one's own life experiences, by a process of intellectual reasoning and the

careful consideration of the alternatives involved in the choice."[5] Tozer would add that

the solid self includes what one believes about God. Theology, theory, and practice can

all come from the same integrated place, giving alignment to the soul, the self, and to

one's ministry and creating a more secure, focussed, mindful, intentional, calm, and

spirit-minded leader.

Akin to Tozer, Bowen himself, though not a theologian, recognized the impact of

one's thinking on practice and outcomes. He explicitly said as much when it came to the

practice of family therapy. As stated at the beginning of this project, Bowen was also of

the opinion that theory leads to practice—which for Bowen was in the field of family

therapy. To requote him from chapter one of this project, "The therapist's theoretical

assumptions about the nature and origin of emotional illness serve as a blueprint that

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[4] Tozer, *Knowledge of the Holy*, 1.
[5] Bowen, *Family Therapy*, 365.

guides his [sic] thinking and actions during psychotherapy."[6] A reframe of the substance

of Bowen's quote shaped into the pattern of Tozer's statement could read, "What comes

into our minds when we think about emotional illness and the family is the most

important thing about a family therapist." In Bowen's thinking, a therapist's practice is

shaped by their understanding of theory. And if there is not a clear understanding of

theory, which is to say without a strong theoretical foundation, the therapist will be

subject to their own emotional responses, intuitions, and engagement with the family

rather than being guided by the theory's principles. It makes the therapist vulnerable to

anxiety and reactivity, putting them at risk of entering into the system as one of the

participants rather than keeping an objective posture. Michael Kerr reinforces Bowen's

thinking saying simply, "A basic thesis would say that if one knows theory, then family

therapy comes automatically."[7] Practice follows theory. Practice follows theology.

Thus, right from the initial principles that theology will shape practice, and

theory will shape practice, both stated from within their respective fields, one can see the

significance of beginning with an alignment between theology and theory, a recognition

that how one thinks and what one believes will shape what one sees and what one does.

This occurs in both the theological and theoretical frame of reference. In this chapter, the

theological and theoretical alignments between the doctrine of the Trinity and BFST will

reveal how they can ultimately mutually inform practice, and in so doing, provide the

ministry practitioner a foundation for a solid, integrated self, based in a position of faith,

that can capitalize on all the knowledge and practices of BFST without requiring either

syncretism or a condescension of either theology or theory. The alignments will be

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[6] Bowen, *Family Therapy*, 337.

[7] Kerr and Bowen, *Family Evaluation*, 339.

shown using simple, summative tables charting a theological position, a BFST position, a derivative practice, and where appropriate, if the practice is a shared practice, how that practice can be understood theologically and theoretically in their respective contexts.

Table #1, on the following page, illustrates how practices can be shared between theology and theory by taking a central and neutral position. In the far left column are theological premises. These theological premises are unique to the Christian faith and stand apart from the theoretical concepts of BFST which are in the far right column. Using our lane analogy, they are in their own lane. In the second from the left column are examples of how theology may manifest into the church context. In the column second from the right are BFST concepts in operation. But in the center column, are practices pertinent and usable to both theology and theory. The practices are animations of some of the alignments between trinitarian theology and BFST.

Alignments

The Doctrine of the Trinity, The Family as the Base Unit of Human Functioning, and Differentiation of Self

Had Murray Bowen not been so clearly and specifically located in the world of medicine and psychiatry, one might be forgiven for reading his description of differentiation of self and wondering if he had been reading theology on the doctrine of the Trinity when he began articulating the concept. He describes a high level of differentiation of self in a marriage as "they can be emotionally close and each can maintain clear individuality and identity without the 'fusion of selfs' that occurs in marriages of less differentiated individuals."[8] Close and yet clear individuality, identity without the fusion of selves;

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[8] Bowen, *Family Therapy*, 91.

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Table #1: Alignment for Animation: The Trinity and BFST Relationship Systems, Table of Concepts and Practices

Theology Lane	How items from theology may manifest in the church context	Practices that arise and can be shared whether coming from the theology lane or the BFST lane	How items from the BFST may manifest in the family therapy context	Bowen Family Systems Theory Lane
The Trinity as the basic relationship unit and foundation of divine functioning	Biblical theology: Church in relation to the Trinity – Church as body of Christ, Church as bride of Christ, Church as children of God, siblings with Christ	Differentiation of Self (practice) Spiritual Disciplines: prayer, meditation, fasting, study, simplicity, submission, solitude, service, confession, guidance, celebration, worship	All BFST Concepts in Operation Sibling Position Triangles Multigenerational Transmission Process	The family as the basic relationship unit and foundation of human functioning
Perichoresis Indwelling of the Spirit in the Church	Discerning and movement of the Church in step with the Spirit Congregational functioning as an emotional relational system Historic and current functioning of the congregation	Family Diagram Church Diagram	Family Projection Process Cut-off	Nuclear Family Emotional System Emotional Process Anxiety and Reactivity
Professed Faith/Practiced Faith	Role of the Pastor Roles in the Congregation	Observation, delineation, and demarcation of a designated roles in the relationship system (position descriptions) Observation, and delineation of actual functioning in the relationship system (policies and protocols)	Individuality and Togetherness Forces	Differentiation of Self (concept) Solid Self/Pseudo Self

when compared to explanations of the Trinity these phrases are remarkably similar.

Anna Moss summarizes the doctrine of the Trinity as it "presents the relationships in the

Godhead as interrelated, but not compromised by each other."[9] She also quotes the early

church father John of Damascus who says of the Trinity, "with one another in one Being

in such a way that they have their being in each other and reciprocally contain one

another without coalescing or co-mingling with one another and yet without any

separation from one another."[10]

The foundational premise of BFST is that it is the family, not the individual, that

is the fundamental base for the understanding of human functioning. Bowen uses a

football team as an analogy. "A football coach knows his players as individuals but,

when he watches the team in action, he focuses first on the team as a functioning unit

and then on the functioning of individual team players."[11] In BFST, to understand the

function of an individual, one must understand the functioning of the family. In

Trinitarian theology, there is an acknowledgement of discretion in the functional roles of

the Father, Son, and Spirit. This can be heard in the Trinitarian formula of the economic

Trinity used in some Christian liturgies, "Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer." These terms

are descriptions of the historical operations of God, and while admittedly inadequate to

explain an ontology of the Godhead, and considered by some a doorway to the heresy of

modalism, the titles nevertheless describe functional distinctions within the Godhead.

Trinitarian theology does not accept functional, operational distinctions in the

Trinity as a sufficient description of the nature of the Godhead. Theologian Scot

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[9] Moss, "Can a focus on self," 55.

[10] Moss, "Can a focus on self," 55.

[11] Bowen, *Family Therapy*, 18.

McKnight writes, "Not all names of God are trinitarian names; some are names of operations. 'Creator,' 'redeemer,' 'sustainer' are operational or economic names. But trinitarian language is ontological language. It is the language of God's being, not of God's doing."[12] However, the ontological nature of God as relational found in the Trinity, and characterized by the relational terms of Father, Son, and Spirit nevertheless has alignments with Bowen's understanding of the family. Scot McKnight refers to Augustine's analogy of the Trinity providing the following summation, "Probably the most important analogy that Augustine drew was an analogy between the inner life of God and the act of love. The act of loving requires for its completion, a lover, a beloved, and the bond of love. In the inner life of the Trinity, the Father is the lover, the Son is the beloved, and the Holy Spirit is the mutual bond of Love that binds them."[13] This analogy establishes the aseity of God, the completeness of God within Godself apart from God's creation. Thus again, there is language that resounds in Bowen's theory, language of differentiated completeness of self while being part of the larger whole. Thus, God is completely relational within Godself, with aseity from his creation, yet has connection and relationship to creation.

Bowen felt that the perfectly differentiated person, scoring 100 on his scale of differentiation (a score which he stated was an ideation rather than an obtainable objective) was a person who was completely established in self, a solid self with mindfully chosen definitive principles that were unaffected by wider emotional process. Differentiation of self reflects an internal ability of the individual to differentiate the intellectual system and emotional system within self. Thus, in relationships, and

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[12] McKnight, "Father, Son, Spirit."
[13] McKnight, "Father, Son, Spirit."

regardless of emotional process, a highly differentiated individual will find themselves guided by rational, intellectual, principled thinking and decision making, rather than being driven by the emotional system's propensity to anxiety and reactivity. Such a person, strong in their differentiation of self, can fully be an individual, able to recognize and manage both their actions and responses in the systems of which they are a part, and be fully incorporated into said relational system. The observations, theory, and language of BFST echoes with theological thinking about the Trinity, "reciprocally contain one another without coalescing or co-mingling with one another and yet without any separation from one another."[14]

There are resonances of this phenomenon of connection without loss of distinction, relational unity while maintaining individuality evident in biblical theology. It is evident with allusions to the Trinity particularly in the Johannine works. The phenomenon of connection without loss of distinction is an invitation made from the Trinity to the Church. In the gospel of John, Jesus's words are words of both distinctiveness and inclusion.

> I am in the Father, and the Father is in me. The words I say to you I do not speak on my own authority. Rather it is the Father, living in me, who is doing his work . . . I will ask the Father and he will give you another advocate to help you and be with you forever—the Spirt of truth. You know him, for he lives with you and will be in you . . . On that day you will realize that I am in my Father, and you are in me, and I am in you. (John 14:10–11, 16–17, 20)

The Father, Son, and Spirit will be with Jesus's followers, and in Jesus's followers.

In chapter 15, John provides additional statements on the relationship between Father, Son, Spirit, and the Church or followers of Jesus. Using the analogy of a vineyard, Jesus describes himself as the vine, the Father as the gardener, and his

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[14] Moss, "Can a focus on self," 55.

followers as the branches. Jesus encourages the production of fruit by dwelling in the vine with the proviso that separated from the vine, a branch is useless for the production of fruit. Jesus then commissions his followers to go and bear fruit, to extend his proclamation and teaching. "When the Advocate comes, whom I will send to you from the Father – the Spirit of truth who goes out from the Father – he will testify about me. And you also must testify, for you have been with me from the beginning." (John 15:1–4, 26–27) In Jesus's prayer prior to his arrest he prays a prayer that both offers a picture of his distinction from the Father, the unique nature of his role, and his desire for connection and unity with both the Father and his followers, "I have made you known to them, and will continue to make you known in order that the love you have for me may be in them and that I myself may be in them" (John 17:26). It is a relationship characterized by both indwelling and distinction. To use Bowen language, there is individuality and there is togetherness and both are at work.

<div style="text-align:center">Biblical Theology: Body, Family, Bride</div>

A biblical theology of the Church also offers alignments with BFST. While there are extensive theological treatises on the ideas that follow, and extensive commentary and scholarly work on the passages cited, it is beyond the scope of this project to delve to that level of depth. An excellent summation of predominant alignments is captured in the 1994 journal article "Analogy or Homology? An Investigation of the Congruency of Systems Theory and Biblical Theology in Pastoral Leadership" [15] by R. Paul Stevens. In this article, Stevens notes that in the New Testament the Church is metaphorically

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[15] Stevens, "Analogy or Homology," 174–77.

referred to by the apostle Paul as the body of Christ. The apostle Paul develops this metaphor, describing Christ as the head, and discussing the significance of each body part to all the others, "so in Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others" (Rom 12:5). "Just as a body, though one, has many parts, but all its many parts form one body, so it is with Christ" (1 Cor 12:12). "We will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ" (Eph 4:15). The apostle Paul's analogous description of the Church's functioning has alignment to Bowen's conception of human functioning.

Bowen, in explaining the process of differentiation of self, used the analogy of cells in a body. "When we speak of the differentiation of self, we mean a process similar to the differentiation of cells from each other."[16] Kerr extrapolated Bowen's idea noting,

> Bowen borrowed the term differentiation from biology, but applying it to human emotional functioning and behavior was new. Cell differentiation and integration are key to the adaptive capacities of complex organisms; the differentiation of human beings is key to the adaptive functioning of complex family units.[17]

Cells are individual. Collectively, cells constitute a body. Either is best understood and perhaps can only be understood, when the relationship between them is clarified. Neither exists without the other. Both are distinctive, yet constitute a whole. The apostle Paul could have written his analogy of the Church in Bowenian language: *Distinction and integration with the Godhead and with one another are key to the adaptive functioning of the Church.* And so Paul from his theological lane, and Bowen from his science lane, were each able to observe and recognize a key characteristic about how people function,

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[16] Bowen, *Family Therapy*, 354.
[17] Kerr, *Bowen Theory's Secrets*, xv.

which is that individuals, while distinct, are nevertheless part of a larger whole and their function can best be understood in the context of the whole.

The Church is also referred to as family, "members of the household of God" (Eph 2:19) with "the right to become children of God . . . born of God" (John 1:12–13) with Christ being "the firstborn among many brothers and sisters" (Rom 8:29), who are "brothers and sisters in Christ" (Col 1:2), declaring that "Both the one who makes people holy and those who are made holy are of the same family. So Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers and sisters" (Heb 2:11). Perhaps the most definitive statement of the concept of the Church as family comes from the apostle Paul's letter to the Galatians, "So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith, for all of you were baptised into Christ have clothed yourself with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise" (Gal 3:26–29).

It is tempting to say that the Paul's use of the term family to describe the Church is, like the term body, analogous. However, it is intriguing to consider that perhaps rather than an analogous description, we are being presented with a theological reality, that with God as Father, a believer's adoption as a child of God, which derivatively creates a sibling relationship with Christ and with fellow believers, that theologically speaking, the Church is indeed an actual family. Jesus himself redefines the ties that bind the family of God together. The gospel of Mark includes this occasion where Jesus asked, "Who are my mother and my brothers?' Then he looked at those seated in a circle round him and said, 'Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does God's will is my brother and sister and mother" (Mark 3:33–35). Whether an analogous term or a

divine reality, the language of family is fundamental biblical language for understanding the Church, and the Church's relationship to the Trinity.

R. Paul Stevens names a third biblical analogy that aligns with BFST: the Church as the bride of Christ. More than a simple analogy of a marriage between two people, Stevens notes the immutable strength of the bond through reflection on the biblical concept of covenant. God gives himself to his people in unconditional covenant. Stevens notes the covenant formula present in a number of places in Scripture,[18] "'So you will be my people, and I will be your God' is a statement of irrevocable belonging."[19] In BFST, when mapping out a family diagram, there is recognition that one will always belong to family with a subsequent impact on the family and individual process and functioning. Thus though there may be cutoff, distance, divorce, and even death separating family members, all belong, and all are placed into the diagram. In fact, some of the more substantial breakthroughs for those in therapy come from the discovery of family who have been missing from the generally acknowledged family diagram. These can include children lost through miscarriage, unacknowledged children born outside the recognized marriage, someone learning that a child is actually a grandchild, and a presumed sibling actually a niece or nephew because a daughter's pregnancy was hidden and the new child was cloaked as being the mother's. Sometimes there are unmentioned siblings back in the "old country" or a first marriage that is never mentioned. Though hidden, they belong, and so effect functioning.

Stevens highlights the alignment between biblical covenant and irremovable family ties. "Remarkably, secular systems theorists use unconditional covenant thinking

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[18] For example, Jer 30:22; Exod 19:5; Deut 10:12–22.
[19] Stevens, "Analogy or Homology," 177.

without saying so, when they describe the effect of marriage break-up on the family

system. Galvin and Brommel argue that "divorce and death do not dissolve family

systems; rather they alter them."[20] For the theologian, God's covenant stands and God's

children cannot be understood apart from understanding the covenant that connects them

to God and to one another. For the family therapist, family is omnipresent, across

generations, whether acknowledged or not. For both, the irreducible tie of covenant

impacts functioning.

<center>Perichoresis and Emotional Process</center>

The alignment between perichoresis and emotional process is an ethereal one. Both

perichoresis and emotional process describe something that is incorporeal, invisible, and

immaterial. To review, emotional process is described by Bowen as

> the emotional responsiveness by which one family member responds
> automatically to the emotional state of another, without either being consciously
> aware of the process . . . non-verbal communication . . . is deep and it seems
> somehow to be related to the *being* of a person. It runs silently beneath the
> surface between people who have very close relationships.[21]

Of perichoresis, Horsthuis says it "can be defined as the mutual indwelling without

confusion of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit."[22] A reflection of the Latin composition of

the word, perichoresis is often referred to as a dance—*peri* meaning around, and

choresis meaning dance. Horsthuis adds this to his explanation too, "Perichoresis is

often understood as a divine dance where the persons of the Trinity, 'move in and

through each other so that the pattern is all inclusive.' . . . This vision comes into reality

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[20] Stevens, "Analogy or Homology," 177.
[21] Bowen, *Family Therapy*, 66.
[22] Horsthuis, *Perichoretic Pastoral Theology*, 41.

as ministering persons learn to move in cadence with the perichorectic rhythms of the triune God."[23]

Thus, in perichoresis and emotional process we are hearing described what is sometimes referred to in the vernacular as a "connection" or "synchronicity" between people, or in the theological context, mutual indwelling within the Trinity, or between God and people. In his therapeutic role, Bowen would watch for what he had labelled emotional process. He would observe the movement of anxiety, in particular, and see it move and shift or "dance" between family members, and even influence multiple members of the family. Thus influenced, the functioning of the family was impacted, adjusted, or altered. Learning to observe and reflect upon the emotional process occurring in a family often inspired Bowen's therapeutic approach for a family. Having self-awareness of how emotional process was impacting him personally allowed Bowen to be more strategic rather than reactive in his therapeutic approach.

One can hear allusions to perichoresis in the biblical witness, both within the Trinity and between the Godhead and the Church and individual followers of Jesus. There is a "dance" or process of sharing an emotional or feeling connections between the distinctive members of the system that then appears as an outcome of an emotional state for the whole system. At the baptism of Jesus, the Spirit descends upon the Son, and a voice from heaven, presumably the Father based on the declaration heard, "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased" (Mark 1:10–11) As Jesus approached his crucifixion, Scripture says he was in anguish, praying to the Father to "take this cup from me" (Luke 22:42). Then upon the cross Jesus voices his pain at the

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[23] Horsthuis, *Perichoretic Pastoral Theology*, 40.

cutoff and absence of the Father, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matt 27:46). These examples demonstrated that there is an emotional process, a perichoresis happening within the Trinity. Whether pride and joy, or anguish and loss, there is a connective sharing of the emotional state.

This is not a unique perspective; in his work *Most Moved Mover*, Clark Pinnock argues for what he calls the "openness of God."[24] The openness of God is an effort to acknowledge that God is affected by his relationship with human beings. Human beings can cause God joy, they can frustrate God, they can disappoint God, and they can delight God.[25] In short, God is a relational and emotional being, subject to the dynamic of the relationship with his created beings. Pinnock describes the openness of God "as a triune communion who seeks relationships of love with human beings, having bestowed on them genuine freedom for this purpose... freedom to cooperate with or to work against God's will for their lives and to enter into dynamic, give-and-take relationship"[26] Pinnock notes that what we see in Scripture is God using "anthropomorphic language in his self-presentation."[27] God, in presenting himself to his creation, interacts, and uses the language of relationship to describe the dynamic present within himself as Trinity, and with his created beings. In Pinnock's openness of God language, we see God himself engaged in emotional process, providing yet another example of alignment with BFST. Theology and BFST can remain completely independent of one another, theology can remain at the vertex and take priority, but from the parallel lane, we are nevertheless seeing a similar dynamic described.

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[24] Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover*, 3.
[25] Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover*, 55.
[26] Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover*, 3.
[27] Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover*, 63.

A caveat is necessary. In using relational language to describe God, there is a temptation and perhaps risk to anthropomorphize God, and as such ascribe to God human feelings, reactive behaviours, and relational patterns. Relational language for God can intimate equivocal experience. It is helpful to remember that God is wholly other and language is a human construction, and a limited method of attempting to understand that which is holy and apart. When used of God, relational language should be understood as analogous. That being said, Scripture does reveal a God who condescends, who climbs down to be with, revealing Godself in the language of relationship and emotion in Scripture, and most pertinently in the incarnation of the Son who did indeed experience human emotion, relationships, and reactions.

In his prayer in the Gospel of John, Jesus provides a more detailed description of perichoretic movement within the Godhead, a description which also includes the relationship between the Church and the Godhead. "My prayer . . . that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us. I have given them the glory you gave me. I want those you have given me to be with me where I am, and to see my glory, the glory you have given me because you loved me before the creation of the world" (John 17:20–24). Finally, the apostle Paul describes the potential for the Church to impact the emotional process of God with a warning to "not grieve the Holy Spirit of God" (Eph 4:30). There are many examples in Old Testament narratives where God expresses frustration, disappointment, and an emotional response to the people of God. While all of these biblical references to perichoresis are being presented in a cursory fashion and warrant deeper examination, the language of emotional connection, relational influence, shared feeling, and mutual indwelling is evident. There is an alignment between BFST's emotional process and perichoresis.

**From Alignment to Practice: Using A Theological Point of View
to Guide and Support BFST Practices**

It is a primary premise of this project that there can be an enhanced theological voice in

the conversation taking place between BFST and ministry practice. Table #1 in Chapter

#4 is an effort to show how by offering a visual construct to the lanes analogy which is

being used to articulate alignment for animation. The table endeavors to situate areas of

similitude and comparability between theory and theology in parallel alignment. Thus

theory and theology, the two lanes, are aligned yet remain distinct and discrete. Next to

the external lanes on the table are two interior columns. These columns provide

examples of some manifestations of theory and theology in their respective contexts.

Thus for those located in the context of BFST, the column adjacent to the BFST lane

presents manifestations of the theory by means of Bowen's concepts. Those located in

the context of theology may see manifestations of theology in biblical theology,

ecclesiology, and the historic development of a denomination and congregation in the

column adjacent to the theology lane. These manifestations of theory and theology give

rise to practices shown in the innermost center column, practices which can then serve as

animations of theory and theology. As described earlier with reflections from both

Tozer and Bowen, what is done in practice reveals what is thought and believed.

The primary intent of the table is to reveal how practices which are derivate of

theory or theology, shown in the center column, can then serve as a bridge, linking

theory and theology by the very practices which emerge in areas that are aligned. In so

doing additional animation and insight can be brought to the corresponding parallel

theory or theology lane. As a result, theory and theology inform practices, practices

bring additional insight to theory and theology, and via the bridge of practice, both theory and theology can germinate richer perspective, complexification of concepts, additional ideas, and insights. It is a method which provides a strategy to David Tracy's dilemma described by Collins earlier in this project, "theologians who are committed both to the Christian tradition and to the insights of rational inquiry into the world must find a way to make these two accounts of reality cohere... where both are understood to be equally interpretative realities, constructed from their own theory-praxis dialectic."[28] However the advantage of alignment for animation, is there is no requirement to be revisionist or syncretistic to theory, theology, or practice. The three can stand independently, aligned and animating, without requiring conflation, yet offering additional richness of understanding.

There is the question of whether there is any need or merit to bring a theological lane alongside BFST for those in congregations and congregational leadership. Admittedly, the concepts and ideas in BFST can be used in practice without a theological lane and be effective. For many it has been and is. Richardson's work is a lead example of this. However, there are advantages to providing a theological lane. A primary advantage to alignment for animation is that it can contextualize BFST for use in the Church, using language and concepts that are indigenous to the Church but run parallel to BFST. This provides a location from which to base practices that while sourced in BFST can be validly used from a theological perspective. The Church can stay in its lane but benefit from the broader view of the horizon that comes from running parallel to BFST.

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[28] Collins, *Reordering*, 11.

Creech provides a fine example of alignment for animation at work when he puts spiritual formation theology and BFST into parallel positions.[29] Using the work of theologian Dallas Willard, Creech creates a conversation between Willard's "renovation of the heart", and Bowen's "differentiation of self." Creech notes alignments between the two. Just as everyone has a level of differentiation in Bowen's thinking, Willard states that everyone has a level of spiritual maturity. Creech observes,

> Both BFST and classical Christian spirituality hold out the possibility of personal transformation. Bowen called this change "differentiation of self," a relational and biological reality. Christian spirituality understands it as renovation of the heart, a rewiring of the human will (heart, spirit) so that it reflects more Christlike thought and behavior.[30]

The implication of this parallel positioning and alignment is that practices from each lane can be leveraged for animation of the other. Thus, BFST practices that are intended to improve differentiation of self, can assist in the development of spiritual maturity. Spiritual disciplines that are used to develop Christian maturity and Christlikeness can assist in differentiation of self. The practices serve as a bridge, linking theory and theology, bringing further understanding and insight to all three of theory, theology, and practice while maintaining the distinction of each.

By way of example, the post-graduate program of the Bowen Center for the Study of the Family has required exercises instituted by Murray Bowen himself, including some where the student leverages the elements of their understanding as they work towards differentiation of self. The post-graduate program is not faith based, but it sounds similar to a program that might be found in a seminary. One exercise includes describing one's beliefs and principles, reflecting upon how one came to those beliefs,

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[29] Creech, *Family Systems*, 89.
[30] Creech, *Family Systems*, 98.

how one's beliefs and principles have changed or grown, how work on differentiation of self may have influenced those beliefs, and identification of times when one's personal actions have been inconsistent with one's beliefs. While an anecdotal observation, when listening to participants read their belief paper to one another, it seemed that those in a faith context had an easier time with the exercise than those without a faith context. I think this may be due to those in a faith context being exposed to faith practices that are similar to this BFST exercise.

From my experience in the program, it seemed that those in a faith context swim in the water of beliefs and principles, and most have had the experience of having had to consider their beliefs. Some were raised in the faith and as part of coming of age had a time of reckoning with their faith. Others came to a place of faith later in life and had to weigh and consider adopting faith beliefs. Still others, through a life of discipleship, see their faith change through growth and development. As such, the program assignment can be somewhat familiar ground for those from faith communities. In contrast, some of those who were not from faith communities described the belief paper as a "new experience," and voiced the challenge it was to identify and articulate their beliefs and principles.

Comparatively, Christian formation calls upon disciples to personally transform to a greater likeness of Jesus in thought, word, and action. The language sometimes used to describe this is maturity. The more Christlike, the more mature one is (and is considered to be). Through spiritual disciplines such as prayer, fasting, solitude, meditation, and others, the disciple is encouraged to grow in mindfulness, intentionality, engendering a calm derived from a trusting faith, with reduced anxiety and reactivity. Additionally, a disciple is encouraged to grow toward principles that reflect the

teachings of Jesus. I could use Bowenian language and say that spiritual formation is an endeavour to strengthen the thinking system over and above the emotional system, through the defining of beliefs and principles. Creech, referencing Louise Rauseo, brings attention to the experience of Christian mystics who seem "to have experienced a significant leap forward in differentiation, making a major change in their functioning, usually because of some intense, conversion-like experience."[31] Rauseo herself describes the experience:

> Something in each life, early or late, changed their lives completely. It was often described as an immediate encounter with God. From that time on they lived their lives with a new integrity, steadily in one direction. In the process, the ability to live by principles, to recognize the limits of human togetherness, and to move toward greater individual integrity never changed.[32]

Christian maturity, though having a different meaning, purpose, and intent, from BFST's differentiation of self, nevertheless aligns with Bowen's vision of what constitutes a well-differentiated self. Coincidentally, Bowen also uses the language of maturity, "Theoretically, a mature person is a contained emotional unit who is able to maintain his [sic] ego boundaries under stress without becoming involved in emotional fusions with others."[33] Here is an example of how alignment for animation can be used. Practices from each field, the spiritual disciplines from the theological field, and the belief paper assignment from the theoretical field, can each provide a means of progression in the corresponding field, in the other lane so to speak, leading to the aligned purpose of maturity of self. Neither theology, nor BFST need be conflated, converged, or syncretized to accomplish this.

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[31] Creech, *Family Systems*, 98.
[32] Creech, *Family Systems*, 98.
[33] Bowen, *Family Therapy*, 107.

Animation Examples

One of the primary purposes of this project is to provide a theological as well as theoretical framework for the on-going development of practitioners and leaders within the Christian faith, particularly those in its traditional, theologically orthodox contexts. BFST has been shown to be an effective theoretical frame for personal development through its recognition of the critical significance of relational systems. So, as well as providing an orientation to BFST itself, how it is understood and utilized by those who would import BFST into congregational and leadership development contexts, and as well as seeing how the theology and theory align, ultimately, the goal of this project is to articulate practices that generate outcomes for leaders' and congregations' health and well-being. By showing that there can be an aligned theological frame of reference to BFST, the Christian ministry practitioner can approach practice from either the theology "lane" or the theory "lane" and know that they are using practices that come from a place of alignment. A Christian ministry practitioner can remain firmly grounded in their faith principles, in their relationship with the Trinity, the Church, and other believers without succumbing to syncretism or a solely secular frame of reference. The remainder of this project will outline how practices from each field of theology or theory could be used in a manner that honors the frame of reference of each field while moving the faith practitioner forward.

This project has provided insight and argument into the alignment between fundamental concepts in trinitarian theology and in BFST, namely the relational unit of the Trinity and the relational unit of the family, and how both generate a perspective that respects the reality of unity and distinction being fundamentally present in the divine and in the human. Not every subsequent practice described in the following pages will be

explicitly trinitarian, but rather will link to this fundamental posture that God is best understood as both a unity and community. BFST concepts and practices function to provide a lens to the function of the family unit and the individual's functioning within it. The family as an emotional unit undergirds the concepts. Similarly, trinitarian theology undergirds these same practices when put to work in the church context.

Differentiation of Self: The Practice

Differentiation of self is considered the cornerstone concept of BFST.[34] In fact, it could be argued that all of BFST's concepts ultimately serve toward the understanding and best functioning of self, which then improves the functioning of the fundamental relational unit of the family. Again, some of the key ideas expressed in Differentiation of Self include the ability to form a solid self over and above a pseudo self, the ability to take an I position out of places of fusion, the ability to navigate and manage the individuality and togetherness forces—all done with the ability to remain engaged and connected to the system as a whole and individuals within it. Differentiation of self is an endeavour to improve the function of self, not the functioning of the system, even as the improvement in the functioning of the family system is a derivative outcome.

The principle practice BFST advocates for improving Differentiation of Self is family of origin work. In essence, family of origin work is an opportunity to observe, diagram, and reflect upon the functioning of one's family of origin, and one's relational system, and how one has come to function within them. Through the process of mapping out a family diagram, one is brought to a place of greater awareness, which equips them

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[34] Gilbert, *Cornerstone Concept*, location 124.

to manage self from the thinking system rather than the emotional or feeling system.

Roberta Gilbert helpfully outlines some of the key efforts in family of origin work. She

provides a list that includes:

- An effort to understand the group as an emotional system and how and what each individual contributes to it, especially self;
- An effort to understand the position and function of each individual in the system – what it is like to be in each person's shoes;
- An effort to understand one's own contribution to the emotional system – how one poses a problem for others by triggering them, distancing from them, or in other ways;
- An effort to change one's own patterns that are not useful to self or the system;
- An effort to be less in the fusions, and thus, more of a self;
- An effort to 'be there' for the family – to be present and accounted for in and to it (this means being present at special events or at times of special need in the family);
- An effort to know how one takes on anxiety from the system, as well as learning how one spreads anxiety around the system.[35]

These efforts require observation of the system, understanding patterns of functioning,

consideration of alternate patterns of functioning for oneself, and experimenting with

alternate patterns of functioning and then repeating the process. The intent is to grow

toward a principled solid self that is fully able to be engaged and connect with the

relational system.

Given that the Trinity is also considered a relational system, and with the Church

and Christ followers being invited into relationship with God, the practice of family of

origin work—namely the creation of the family diagram—can be used to animate the

theology "lane." Bowen theory's exercise of diagramming one's place and function in

the family can be done in relation to the Godhead, the Church, and to a particular

congregation, bringing clarity to a leader's patterns of functioning in their relationship

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[35] Gilbert, *Cornerstone Concept*, location 859–66.

with God, their congregation, and self. Conversely, theological practices, namely the spiritual disciplines, are exceptionally useful practices in efforts of observation, reflection, and in imagining new patterns or ways of functioning for self, but also in the communal disciplines of how to be together. Prayer, meditation, solitude, silence, fasting, and confession are excellent practices to facilitate observation and reflection. Scripture study and worship create opportunities for considering new patterns and new strategies of relating as well as the development of guiding principles. Service, celebration, and worship can provide opportunities to try new patterns of functioning and relating in contexts of togetherness. All of these can facilitate the growth of differentiation of self. Thus, the alignment animates and is animated by the practices.

This can be exemplified with an anecdotal example from my experience in the pastorate. In a time of heightened leadership anxiety due to financial stressors that were impacting budgeting and potentially the ability to keep staff, I felt a large mantle of responsibility. I considered inadequate funding to be a failure of my leadership to inspire generosity and better attendance at Sunday worship. The nature of the staff's relationship with the congregation was on my shoulders if they should have their hours reduced. Staff had family members in the congregation. The potential for wider reactivity was present and it would all be my fault. My functioning became anxious, sourced in a fear of others' reactivity. Prayer and meditation, with time for solitude allowed for a time of self-observation, when I could consider the functioning of my faith but also to step back and observe the functioning of the congregation. In my diagram of my relationship with God, I considered that I had taken on what Bowen described as an "over-adequate reciprocity" position in my relationship with God. There is a colloquialism for what this looks like in practice: having a "Messiah complex," whereby

an individual sees themselves as the saviour in a given situation. Over-adequate reciprocity put me in a position of ownership that is rightfully assigned to the divine. It is God's Church, not the pastor's. Furthermore, it is the congregation's church, not the pastor's. Biblical reflection referred me to analogies such as God's vineyard, Jesus being the vine that sustains the branches, and God being the gardener. Biblical reflection also showed me that the pastor's role is that of shepherd, not owner, and that the primary mandate of the Church is not budget, staffing, and "successful" ministry, but proclamation of the gospel. A study of the early church in the New Testament's book of Acts revealed that nearly every mention of the Holy Spirit occurred in moments of proclamation of the gospel. These theological reflections allowed me to reorient my principles and alter my functioning.

Bowen theorists have noted that often family functioning improves when the person who is in an over-adequate reciprocity position reduces responsibilities, creating opportunities for those who are in an under-adequate reciprocity position to raise their level of functioning. Thus, with a freshened perspective, a commitment not to be in an over-adequate position for either God or the congregation, I was able to change functioning in two ways. First, to put responsibility for the outcome of the church into God's hands through prayer, and into the congregation's hands through a conversation about what was desired for the congregation, a smaller budget and reduced staffing, or a larger budget to staff ministry initiatives. Inviting congregational leadership into ownership of the congregation, the situation, and the questions needing to be addressed allowed me to adopt a neutral, less reactive position, not unlike a Bowen coach or therapist, and help the congregation make a principled decision rather than an anxious or

reactive one. As well as aligning with BFST, this allowed me to adopt a theological

alignment by taking the posture of servant and shepherd, rather than owner or leader.

<div align="center">The Family Diagram and Congregational Functioning</div>

In BFST, the primary tool used to develop awareness of a family's emotional system and

personal and family patterns of functioning is the family diagram. In the words of

Victoria Harrison, author of *The Family Diagram and Family Research*,

> A family diagram is a graphic depiction of facts of family functioning over
> several generations. It is a tool for seeing the family as an emotional system, for
> recognizing patterns of reactivity that govern the lives of family members, and
> for observing the family as it adapts to circumstances of life. It is a tool for
> working on differentiation of self.[36]

Victoria Harrison's book is an accessible how to guide for constructing one's family

diagram. She presents the use of standardized symbols, squares for males, circles for

females, as well as a standardized format for mapping lines of connection between

generations and siblings, to marking dates for significant family events such as

marriages, births, and deaths. The symbols are shown in figure 1 in Appendix 1. The

format is shown in figure 2 of Appendix 1. In the standardization of the family diagram,

clinicians are able to discern patterns and consider the family as a system.

In diagramming one's nuclear family, one's family of origin as well as the family

reflected in preceding generations, one is encouraged to look for the presence of

Bowenian concepts in one's functioning. Functioning that is related to sibling position,

fusions, cutoffs, multigenerational process, family projection, and especially relational

triangles can be shown on the family diagram. The family diagram provides a

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[36] Harrison, *Family Diagram*, 1. See Appendix 1 for an example legend and diagram format.

visualization of emotional process and allows for associations, clues, and connections to be made between the concepts, one's own functioning, and one's family's functioning.

By way of example, in presenting BFST material to a group of student hospital chaplains, I presented my family diagram. Never having met my daughter, not even knowing her name, they were nevertheless asked to describe what they anticipated in her functioning based on what they saw in the family diagram. The diagram showed that my daughter was a first-born, whose mother was a first-born daughter, and whose both maternal and paternal grandmothers were first born daughters, and whose paternal grandparents were immigrants. The group of students readily, quickly, and accurately described; high responsibility, high achievement, high initiative, a high desire to meet and exceed expectations that caused anxiety, while at the same time being highly independent, with a willingness to pursue goals that took her away from the family. It was a completely on point description.

Again, the practice of the family diagram animates the theory, but it also animates the aligned theology. As one can map a family, one can map a congregation using congregational roles such as the pastor, elders, finance and maintenance committee, other committees, matriarchs and/or patriarchs, denominational structure, and prominent or problematic personalities. How a congregation functions can be visualized through the practice of the diagram. An elder's board that conflicts with the pastor may set up a triangle with the patriarch. An under-adequate reciprocity pastor may find themselves generating an over-adequate reciprocity staff thus creating confusion on lines of responsibility and accountability. The diagram can also be multigenerational, mapped using the preceding pastors as a generational marker in the life of the congregation in order to establish a history of functioning, which Bowen

referred to as multi-generational transmission process. Most importantly, the congregational diagram can be used to understand the divine role in the life of the congregation. Some congregations have experienced cutoff or distancing from God in pursuit of other priorities. In the way BFST has noted that addressing cutoff can significantly help with the functioning of an individual and system, a regeneration of a leader's and a congregation's relationship with God, a restoration of the perichoretic movement with the divine, can significantly improve the state of anxious reactivity. Spiritual disciplines such as prayer, worship, Scripture study and others can be invaluable in this regard.

As an example of using the practice of creating the family diagram, in consulting with a congregation, I was able to diagram the functioning of a conflicted congregation. By diagramming the relationship between pastor, elders, ministry staff and administrative staff, over the "multigenerational transmission" of a number of generations of pastors, I was able to present triangles, over and under adequate reciprocity, and how patterns and functioning had solidified rather than adapting to new staff, new pastors, and the shifting societal context. The lack of adaptation was generating increased levels of anxiety and reactivity. In returning the congregation to an awareness of its place in relationship to God and the Church's mandate, by articulating and defining guiding principles, and by setting goals for patterns of functioning, anxiety levels were reduced, and the congregation could move away from a fixation on an emotional process that had become paralyzing. These practices were in alignment with the theological frame and a refreshed knowledge of the Church's place, defined principles, and setting goals for functioning which came from the biblical witness. Practice was the animation of both theory and theology.

Consulting and Coaching

This project has been prepared from a practical theologian's point of view, with the ultimate goal of improving the well-being and functioning of both Christian leaders and their congregations. BFST has been providing this avenue for growth for decades, but generally, those who have prepared materials have focussed on the theory and its concepts. While some have provided biblical support for using BFST, there is opportunity to continue building out a stronger theological conversation partner and to use aligned theological and theoretical perspectives to animate practice. In my role as a leadership coach and consultant to congregations, animated practices have emerged which are now consistently used.

What follows is a consultation strategy and process that the author uses, arising from alignment for animation between Christian trinitarian theology and BFST. In addition to presenting the major foci of a consultation, examples of how each aspect appears in practice are given. This process and these aspects can be used with an individual leader, but also with a congregation—and ideally, with both together. As with BFST concepts, these aspects are a tapestry, each one influencing and being influence by the other.

Family Diagram, Church Diagram, and Historical Functioning

Consultation begins with bringing participants to awareness of relational patterns of functioning. In one to one coaching, individual leaders are encouraged to begin this work through diagramming their own family in order to visualize their personal relational functioning. Concurrent to building their family diagram, leaders are invited to provide information for the consultant to diagram their congregation. The goal with the

congregational diagram is to learn how emotional process unfolds in the congregation and how Bowen concepts are at play by understanding such things as where triangles occur, how over and under adequate reciprocity is taking place, how projection processes may be happening, and so on. A multigenerational facet of the congregational diagram is explored by using successive pastorates as a "generation" based on the premise that each subsequent pastor's functioning had influence in the functioning of the congregational system. These are BFST practices overlayed onto a congregation. The process involves the consultant teaching the leader how to use a lens of relational system when looking at their own functioning, and to encourage taking ownership for having a role in how the system is functioning. The consultant is not present to solve a problem, but to improve the functioning of the relational system.

Within each of the developed diagrams, as part of the theological alignment, God's place and functioning in the relational system is also diagrammed. What role do the persons of the Trinity play in the relationship systems with the leader, the leader's family, and of the congregation? How does God function in the system? It is possible that the Spirit is in an under-adequate reciprocity role? Is it possible that God has been put in the role of problem in a projection process? Has God been triangled into an inside position with the pastor leaving the congregation in the outside position? It is possible God is in a cutoff position and that a congregation may need to reestablish connection with the divine?

With these diagrams, the consultant, leader, and congregational leaders can begin to visualize how the relational systems are functioning and what patterns are in place. With a more objective observation of what BFST refers to as functional facts, strategies for relating can be modified to improve relational functioning. Thus, the consultation

broadly follows Gilbert's suggested strategy of "observe, think/plan/rehearse, implement the plan."[37]

Beliefs and Principles

The manner in which a decision gets made, what issues are prioritized, and the posture one takes in interacting and responding to others, emerge either from a place of anxious reactivity or from a place of guiding principles. When the stances come from a place of anxious reactivity, decisions, issues, and responses may not be carefully considered. They may be automatic, come from a place of emotion, and lack reflective consideration of the optimal functioning of the system. In Bowen terms, the feeling or emotional system are taking precedence over the thinking system. Anxiety could spread, resulting in an increase in conflict, unhelpful triangles, and projection process. Predetermined, thoughtfully considered, and tested principles can provide guidance for an individual, and also for a system.

Consider the different possible outcomes of function from the following two contrasting principles. Principle one: God speaks to the pastor specifically and exclusively about the direction of the congregation. Principle two: God's spirit will bring consensus among the leaders of a congregation who are collectively seeking God's will. With the first principle, the pastor is responsible for the vision and direction of the congregation. Pastoral functioning could include time apart to listen for God, moments of inspiration, or Scripture study seeking direction. Leaders and staff could be expected to align with what the pastor has determined to be a God-given vision. Congregations

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[37] Gilbert, *Cornerstone Concept*, location 958.

can function well when this is an understood, shared, and accepted principle. With the second principle there is a shared responsibility among leaders for vision and direction. In this scenario, listening, inspiration, and study are a shared experience. Conversation, dialog, and shared times of worship and prayer could be part of the process. This too can lead to effective functioning when the principle is understood and accepted. However, a pastor working according to the first principle in a congregation that works according to the second principle *will* experience difficulty. The process of raising these principles to a surface awareness where they are observable and can be articulated is the beginning of a process that allows a leader and those being lead to move toward working from a shared principle.

Gaining clarity of clearly articulated principles that are widely known and accepted are critical for the successful functioning of the system. It is also critical for the functioning of the leader. Consider a scenario where a pastor works from a principle where the historical, orthodox view of Scripture is paramount, but who is working in a context where leadership are expecting the pastor to be a social progressive advocate. Again, articulated knowledge of beliefs and principles that are guiding function can lead to shared understanding and appropriate placements for pastors and appropriate selections for congregations. Having clearly articulated principles also helps set boundaries for leadership. Another example can speak to the primary role of the Church. A pastor and congregation that have come to a place of shared understanding of the primary role of the Church, such as for the proclamation of the gospel, which will define the principles of the congregation, even if there are those who have differing expectations or principles guiding them. Thus, a pastor confronted with what the congregation "needs to be doing" can rely on guiding principles to prioritize ministries

and activities that align with the principle, and thus reduce anxiety when there is anxious

pressure directed to them from those who do not (yet) share the principles. However, for

healthy functioning, the principles must be generally accepted and shared.

Defining Self

Closely related to articulating guiding principles is the exercise of defining self. One of

the challenges in ministry leadership is managing others' expectations. Expectations can

be varied and are rarely articulated until what had been unspoken is expressed in

dissatisfaction. Conversations of dissatisfaction tend to be characterized by anxiousness,

defensiveness, and reactivity. Generally, people struggle to negotiate disapproval. It can

be a tense experience that then spreads anxiety and reactivity through a congregation.

However, with an understanding of one's personal and congregational functioning from

the diagrams, with articulated guiding principles, a leader and congregation can then

begin to define self. Gilbert explains defining self: "Defining self says, 'This is how I

think about it,' or 'This is what I would like,' or 'This is what you can expect from me

from now on.' It is an 'I position,' not an attempt to get the other to change. It does not

explain, justify, defend, or punish. It is simply a statement that defines self to the

other."[38]

A defined self is less vulnerable to anxious reactivity and more able to lean into

what Bowen would call the thinking system. A classic complaint pastors of smaller

congregations will hear is that they do not visit, or do not visit enough. For some

congregants there is an expectation that the pastor will make personal visits to an

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[38] Gilbert, *Cornerstone Concept*, location 779.

individual's home or residence. For me, this was an impossible task. In a congregation with two hundred on the roll, at a rate of five visits a week, a pastor would still only see people once a year. My experience was a whirlwind of visiting, only for the congregation to see the minister for a visit once a year. With each visit taking sixty to ninety minutes, plus travel time, home visiting could represent up to 25% of a pastor's time—not including crisis or hospital visitation. It was a scenario of high anxiety and inevitable failure to meet expectations. Defining self was the strategy to bring resolution to this source of anxiety.

My family diagram showed a strong propensity to be the calm for an anxious system, which brought awareness of personal discomfort with disapproval. Guiding principles related to pastoring brought a visualization of the relationship of the pastor to God, a shepherd of God's sheep, and steward of God's house. Guiding principles were also worked out with leaders of my congregation, individuals who through their donations were paying to have a pastor, and who could share a decision about congregational priorities given my limitations on time as their pastor. So, a defined self was created in cooperation with the congregation's leaders. Thus, Gilbert's "This is what you can expect from me from now on," explanation of defining self was demonstrated through the following I statements: "I will visit those in crisis, hospital, and retirement residences. I will always visit any who ask for me." When a complaint came forward, I was able to point to this statement to help define self to the complainant. The language and functioning in the congregation shifted from, 'the pastor never visits,' to 'the pastor will visit anyone who asks for him.' Defining self improved my functioning as the pastor and the congregation could lean into defined expectations of the pastor.

For a congregation, the discipline of creating position descriptions for staff and key volunteers is an example of an exercise in defining self. The rather obvious question of where the resources of staff-time and budget will be directed encourages a pastor and congregation to define priorities, roles, expectations, and outcomes as well as providing a means to guard staff and volunteers from unarticulated and undefined expectations. Prayerfully considering God's call upon a congregation, its particular mandate in its context of time and place, selecting which principles will guide action and be allocated resources of budget and time can all be understood as a process of differentiation of self for the leaders and derivatively, the congregation.

Overadequate–Inadequate Reciprocity

With the animated practices of diagrams, an understanding of historical functioning, guiding principles, and a defined self, it then becomes possible to observe how BFST's observation of over adequate – inadequate reciprocity functioning may be at work in an individual or system. Bowen describes the idea of reciprocity this way: "The terms overadequate and inadequate refer to functioning states and not fixed states. Overadequate refers to a functioning façade of strength that is greater than realistic. Inadequacy refers to a functioning façade of helplessness that is as unrealistic as the façade of strength is unrealistic in the other direction."[39] Sometimes the words overfunctioning and underfunctioning will be used to describe these states. In essence, one person does too much, or what another can do for themselves, the other does too little, or takes on a helpless role.

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[39] Bowen, *Family Therapy*, 53.

What can then be seen in systems are parts of the system that are either overadequate or inadequate in their functioning. It could be a pastor who does more than the role asks for, perhaps even inserting themselves into the function of families and taking on a role that is beyond pastoring. It could be a pastor who is not fulfilling responsibilities defined by the role, not showing up to places or for people when expected, or not exercising diligence in preparing for sermons. In the example of overadequate functioning, families might not rise to adapt to a needed shift in functioning as the pastor inserts themselves into the family system. In the inadequate functioning, non-pastoral staff or congregational leaders may start taking on tasks that rightly belong to the pastor.

One can place oneself in an overadequate or inadequate reciprocal relationship with God, attempting to take on roles that belong to God, or putting onto God what could rightfully be done by a disciple. I have already shared my experience of overadequate and inadequate reciprocity with God in my ministry. In a season of feeling overwhelmed by the sense of responsibility for the well-being and future of the congregation, I had a moment of epiphany. I looked out my office window into the hallway. On the wall in the hallway were 18 pictures of my predecessors. The congregation was approximately 180 years old. I was clergy number 19. It was a moment of recognition that I was the leader not of the whole story, but merely a chapter. And further, that it was the congregation's story, not my story. And finally, it was God writing the story. The epiphany that God was authoring the congregation's story, and that the pastor(s) was merely a character in each chapter, freed me to do what Kerr refers

to as function down, or take a position of reduced responsibility.[40] This reduced my anxiety, but also let me adopt a posture of service toward God rather than ownership of God, or the congregation. It recalibrated my functioning as the pastor which in turn helped the congregation to function up in areas of care, funding, and volunteering and left room for God to do the work of bringing souls home and changing hearts.

<div align="center">Consulting and Coaching Summary</div>

The above practices used by a consultant or coach are aligned with the theological doctrine of God being a relational trinity, who in turn invites the Church into relationship. Thus, the functioning of relationships observed in BFST are easy to align. As a consultant or coach one can use either the concepts of BFST or biblical and doctrinal language to optimize the functioning of individual leaders, or congregations, including at a denominational level. Wherever God, individuals, and groups of individuals are in relationship, the practices of diagramming functioning, identifying guiding principles, defining self, and understanding levels of reciprocity can be used. Most importantly, they can be used from both a theological or theoretical position. There is no need to conflate the two in an effort that will lead to concrescence or syncretism.

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[40] Kerr, *Family Evaluation*, 222.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

This project arose from my deep appreciation for Bowen Family Systems Theory. Like many who were introduced to BFST and put it to work in their lives and in their congregations, it empowered me to have a strong, mindful, strategic, rewarding, and healthy ministry. When I heard Carol Jeunnette's presentation on Friedman where she said, "Jesus saved my soul. Friedman (and thus BFST) saved my ass,"[1] I knew exactly what she meant. Whether through Ed Friedman, Peter Steinke, Ronald W. Richardson, Roberta Gilbert, R. Robert Creech, or others, the introduction of BFST for understanding the functioning of oneself, one's family, and even one's congregation can be life giving to a leader and an organization. It was my desire to provide a work that could coalesce the field of BFST into a single work of introductory orientation, but for a specifically Christian, theologically oriented audience. This is a work for Christian leaders who want to learn what BFST is, how it has been used in congregations and by congregational leaders, and how they might put it to use for themselves.

The project was driven by two aims. As stated, the first aim was to provide an orientation and introduction for those being introduced to or considering BFST for a congregational context. Second, and significantly, the project is also intended for those who want to do intentional theological reflection in relation to BFST. To my knowledge there is no introductory summative work such as this that combines these two aims. The

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[1] Jeunnette, "The Rabbi and Bowen Theory."

first aim was achieved with both a history and overview of BFST, as well as an

orientation to how it has been used, adapted, and grown beyond Murray Bowen's intent,

for the purposes of congregational leadership and functioning. To that end, two literature

reviews were provided. The first review (Chapter 1) was a summative explanation of the

theory, the history of its development, and an introduction to the seminal works of

BFST. The second literature review (Chapter 2) provided an overview of the leap BFST

made into the congregational context through the springboard of Ed Friedman's work.

This second literature review, in addition to providing an orientation to the major

authors and works that adapted BFST for congregational use, also provided an

orientation to the various positions authors took in order to relate faith and theology to

BFST. The positions are varied, so this project was designed to assist someone new to

this field of work by articulating how the various authors how theology and BFST were

being relating to one another in the assorted works.

The second aim of this project was to provide Christian readers with a method of

theological reflection that would facilitate one's sense of confidence and conviction in

using a theory in and for the Church despite it having been developed in the field of

psychiatry, and for the purposes of family therapy specifically. Developing a method of

theological reflection that would allow BFST to remain uncompromised was also a key

guiding value. Reaching beyond more established theological reflection models in the

field of practical theology as summarized by Pete Ward; ministerial education,

correlational approaches, interpreting action, or theology and tradition,[2] I have sought to

articulate a theological reflection method that would respect the primacy of theology and

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[2] Ward, *Introducing Practical Theology*, 70–90.

tradition for the Church, while at the same time recognizing the genuine contribution, usefulness, and benefit of BFST. I aimed to do this without conflating theology and theory and thus reducing either to a syncretistic shell of their original intent. Thus, "alignment for animation" was presented as an alternate theological reflection method, a way to demonstrate that there are parallels between a traditional, orthodox theology of the Trinity and BFST, and that these parallels rest primarily on the shared premise of the Trinity and the family being relationally based. Theological relational foundations can be shown in the doctrine of the Trinity, the doctrine of perichoresis, and the biblical theological analogies (of family, body, and bride) that are used when describing God's relationship with the Church. Relational foundations are presented in Bowenian ideas such as the family as the primary unit of the human, emotional process, individuality, and togetherness forces, and the eight Bowen concepts. Along these parallel paths, from the place of alignment, comes the recognition that between these two separate but parallel paths are practices that can be shared. The practices serve as a bridge, and can themselves end up animating both theology and theory for the benefit of the other.

The project finished with an examination of how both theological thinking and faith-based practices and understandings, such as come from spiritual disciplines and biblical theology, can animate BFST aims, and, conversely, how BFST practices can animate theological goals and understanding. Differentiation of self can facilitate spiritual maturity, and spiritual maturity can facilitate differentiation of self. Through a process of defining self, understanding functioning through diagramming, the articulation of beliefs and principles, and an assessment of overadequate and inadequate functioning, using practices from the historic traditions of Christian discipleship, and from BFST practices, a coach or consultant can come to a place of being able to observe,

think/plan/rehearse, and then implement. This can be used for personal development as well as on behalf of the congregation.

Admittedly, this project has its limitations. My primary and frequent frustration was the recognition that there is so much material, and so much detail that could be further explored and discussed. To use the analogy of a map to describe the project, this work is a zoomed-out view—an overview and introduction to the theory of BFST, the use of BFST in a congregational context, theology, and derivative practices. If someone has never heard of BFST references this work, they will be well oriented to BFST, the derivative works that use BFST in congregations, and be able to think theologically about how BFST and theology can animate one another through their alignment. They will have the big picture. In that regard, it is a true effort in practical theology.

However, any chapter, as well as any specific idea within each chapter would also be well served by zooming in—as recent publications have shown.[3] Theological work regarding the Trinity literally spans millennia, and recent work on the social Trinity is plentiful and rich. This project is like a key/legend on the map that illuminates points of interests and possible paths to take. Works discussing practical applications of BFST in congregations are many. They too, have carefully considered and rich examinations of actions that can be taken for building a defined self, and articulating and strengthening guiding principles. BFST itself continues to be explored, considered, and studied through institutions such as the Bowen Center for the Study of the Family. The number of places one could zoom in are legion. So, for the reader who wants more

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[3] See discussion in Chapter 2.

detail, I am hopeful that this work will serve as a helpful guide for identifying places that can be explored further.

In the meantime, for the uninitiated to BFST who are interested in this theory's use in congregational contexts, and for those who wish to think theologically about how BFST functions, this work can be of assistance in ministry practice. It is my prayer that this work will open a path toward a rich ministry of knowing, being and doing—with God, with one's congregation, with one's family, and with oneself. And from that place, may readers have the privilege of seeing one's solid self moving perichorectically with God and congregation in a way that allows each to be fully self, fully together, and fully engaged with all God wants reveal, be, and do in and through them.

APPENDIX: FAMILY DIAGRAM,
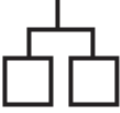# SYMBOL LEGEND AND DIAGRAM FORMAT[1]

Figure 1. Symbols

male	□	date born	b. m/d/yr	living together -----
female	○	date died	d. m/d/yr	marriage — M. date
twins	(twin symbol)	date adopted	ad. m/d/yr	separation — S. date
decendant	│	death	✕	divorce — Div. date

Figure 2. Family Diagram Format
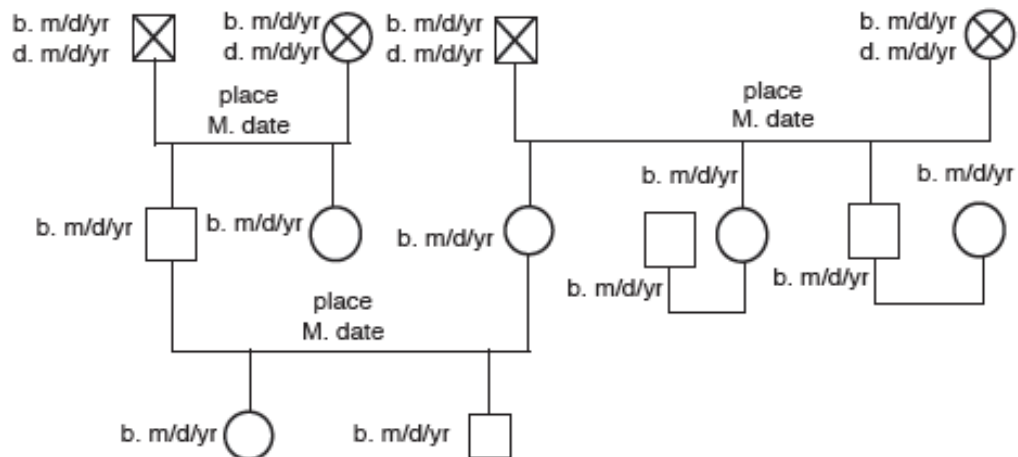
[1] Harrison, *Family Diagram and Family Research*, 9–10.

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