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Understanding the System

You can easily enough see how this kind of thing works by looking no further than your own body. Your body has many parts—limbs, organs, cells—but no matter how many parts you can name, you're still one body. It's exactly the same with Christ. By means of his one Spirit, we all said goodbye to our partial and piecemeal lives. We each used to independently call our own shots, but then we entered into a large and integrated life in which *he* has the final say in everything.

—St. Paul, 1 Corinthians 12:12–13 (Message)

Systems theory focuses on what man does and not on his verbal explanations about why he does it.

—Murray Bowen, *Family Therapy in Clinical Practice*

We've used the term "living system" several times in the first two chapters. By now, you may be wondering just what we're talking about. Whenever we engage in relationships that are long-term, intense, and significant, we become emotionally connected to one another in an "emotional system," or a "living system." Each person who is part of this interaction begins to affect, and be affected by, the anxiety and behaviors of the others. The better we understand the functioning and implications of a living system, the more effectively we undergo personal transformation and learn to lead with integrity.

In this chapter, we introduce a systems approach for understanding our interconnected lives. Understanding how people connect to each other in a living system and how that connection affects us and our congregations is vital to transformational leadership. The reason for this is simple: leadership always takes place in the context of a living system, and the system plays by a set

of observable rules. If we are to lead in that context, we need to understand the rules.

Our "Wired-Togetherness"

Our culture's focus on the autonomy of the individual easily blinds us to the reality of our emotional connection to one another as human beings. Although we believe that we are acting autonomously most of the time, we are far more often reacting to one another, almost instinctively. We do not even think about it; we just do it. We do it because we live our entire lives as parts of living systems.

A flock of blackbirds flies across a rice field at full speed without any organized formation, without any clearly discernible leader. Yet, in a fraction of a second, the entire flock can turn ninety degrees without one bird crashing into another. Then, within another few seconds, the flock can make a U-turn and not leave behind a single bird. Just as suddenly, the whole flock can "decide" to settle on a power line and then, in unison, decide it is time to fly again, all in the same direction. How do they do that?

If we can see these creatures as "wired together" in a living system—their flock—then we can better understand their behavior, and ours. The living connectedness of these animals is vital for their survival. If they do not behave in just that way, they perish. A straggler could easily become dinner for a hawk. So their Creator has endowed them with a high sensitivity to one another that allows them to respond instantaneously to a threat perceived by any one of them. This is a living system.

We human beings do not possess the same high level of sensitivity to one another. We are, however, also emotionally wired together in systems such that we react to one another, often without even being aware that we are doing so. Michael Kerr describes the human family as an "emotional field."[1] The term "field" is apt, as it suggests the complexity of emotional stimuli that family members are contributing and responding to on many levels. The emotionally determined functioning of the family members generates a family emotional "atmosphere" or "field" that, in turn, influences the emotional functioning of each person. It is analogous to the gravitational field of the solar system, where each planet and the sun, because of their mass, contrib-

ute gravity to the field and are, in turn, regulated by the field they each help create. One cannot "see" gravity, nor can one "see" the emotional field. We can infer the presence of both gravity and the emotional field, however, by the predictable ways planets and people behave in reaction to one another.

We can observe human wired-togetherness in a family, workplace, or church. When anxiety rises, we become rather predictable. Our thinking becomes less clear and more reactive. Some of us withdraw; others engage in conflict. We begin to place or accept blame to avoid taking responsibility for making personal changes. We begin to see ourselves as the victim of others' actions. We assign motives to others' behavior, or we take it personally. Demand for conformity in thinking and behavior increases. We look for a quick fix to the symptoms that develop. The least mature members among us begin to attract most of our attention. Leaders feel a tug in many directions and find it increasingly difficult to think for themselves. The gravitational pull of relationships has its effect on the behavior and response of each person in the group; the behavior and response of each person affects the emotional gravity of the system.

Understanding this fact furnishes a helpful perspective as we attempt to lead a congregation. To say that we are part of a living system is to say that there are forces at work among us that transcend a naive focus on the cause of a problem (as though we could label any one person as "the problem"). Whenever a problem in a living system is chronic, just about everyone has a part to play in keeping it going.

A Personal Example

I (Robert) frequently encounter the need to learn about the system and my part in it the hard way. As a thirty-something pastor of a growing urban congregation, I was practicing the best I knew of leadership toward change—which, at that time, was not much. I knew some things had to change if the church was to pursue its mission most effectively. I believed I could identify what some of those changes ought to be. As best I could, I led toward those changes by engaging congregational leaders in conversation about the changes, sharing both my sense of urgency and the rationality of the proposed solution.

I had never heard of the systems approach, and I did not appreciate the level of anxiety created in the congregation by the series of changes we made. The anxiety surfaced in the life of Henry, a leader in the church whose own family system was in turmoil.

Henry was a corporate executive. He had two grown children. One, a daughter, struggled with substance abuse; in and out of relationships, she left two small children for Henry and his wife to raise. His son, a navy pilot, had deployed to Iraq for Operation Desert Storm. At work, economic conditions forced Henry to lay off dozens of employees. He had undergone open-heart surgery twice.

As a young pastor, I did my best to be present with him and his wife during those crises, and I thought I had done a good job. News that Henry was calling a meeting of disgruntled older church members in his home stunned me. As soon as I got word of the meeting, I reacted in my own instinctive way. Angry and nervous, I gave him a call. He was surprised that I knew of the gathering. I insisted on an invitation, believing I could deal with their complaints, answer their questions, and all would be well.

With fear and some bravado, I arrived at his home that Sunday evening and went in prepared to face a hundred angry parishioners. I found only eight. I listened to their complaints and offered responses. What I could not hear was the expression of fear and anxiety these members of my congregation were attempting to communicate. I was not aware of how much my own fear and anxiety drove my behavior. Instead of being a calmer presence, I reacted emotionally, as did they. The result was that everyone's emotions escalated and the emotional system became even more volatile.

Eventually, Henry, his wife, and four of the others left our church. At the time, I piously regarded that as a healthy loss, since "they" obviously did not share the vision "we" were pursuing. I have since come to regard the experience as a nearly predictable series of emotional reactions. With so many changes in a relatively short time, anxiety and tension had increased in the congregation. That a symptom of anxiety arose ought not to have been surprising. Although there was no way to predict that Henry would be the focus, the tension in his own family life left him susceptible to the growing anxiety among some of his fellow church members. His "immunity" to the anxiety was low, and

he came down with the symptom. But Henry was not the problem.

Our congregations are living systems. Christ has emotionally wired us together with our brothers and sisters in the family of God (Rom. 12:3–21). Our behavior and choices affect each other in ways of which we are often unaware. What are some of the roots and components of a living system? Let's begin with two key variables: emotional maturity and anxiety.

Emotional Maturity and Anxiety

According to systems theory, two variables work in tandem in every emotional system, governing its function. One is the level of emotional maturity of the people in the system and of their leaders. The other is the level of anxiety and tension to which the system is subject. The greater the level of emotional maturity in a system, the better equipped it is to handle a spike in the level of anxiety when one comes. The higher the level of emotional maturity, the lower the level of constant and chronic anxiety.

You might think of the level of emotional maturity as a reservoir and of anxiety as the water level. The larger the reservoir (that is, the greater the degree of emotional maturity), the more anxiety it can contain without spilling over and producing a problem for the system. The higher the level of water (anxiety), regardless of the size of the reservoir, the closer the system is to overflowing.

Emotional Maturity: It All Starts in the Family

God has lovingly and wisely placed us in families. This is God's intended means of caring for us and launching us into life. The most immediate experience of family, of course, is our nuclear family—our parents and siblings. But we also step into this world as part of a larger system: a river that has flowed through history as our multigenerational family. We are both a genetic and an emotional product of the system. In this system we learn about who we are, how to relate, and how to survive. Family also teaches us that the world is a safe place or a fearful place. We gain from family a perspective that leaves us either more or less secure or anxious.

As we grow up in our family, we also develop some degree of emotional maturity. We express that maturity through emotional separation from our parents. To the degree that separation occurs, we gain a level of "differentiation of self," determining our capacity to offer a thoughtful response rather than react emotionally, the ability to remain connected to important people in our lives without having our behavior and reactions determined by them. The nuclear family is the fire in which we forge our level of emotional maturity. Eventually we leave that family to seek out life on our own. We leave with a level of differentiation close to that of our parents. Murray Bowen observed that when we leave the family of origin and find a spouse, we are likely to marry a person whose degree of emotional maturity matches our own. We then form a new nuclear family, rear children, and send them out. That is the plan.

God told the children of Israel that their behavior would produce either a blessing or a curse on future generations (Exod. 20:5–6). The genealogies of the Bible, though frequently skipped over in reading, are rich with the truth that God works through the generations of a family to accomplish a divine purpose and to raise up leaders. The book of Genesis organizes around

ten genealogies. Realistic family stories fill its pages (Gen. 5:1; 6:9; 10:1; 11:10, 27; 25:12, 19; 36:1, 9; 37:2). Even the New Testament opens with a description of Jesus's genealogy and a story about the family into which God sent Jesus, the Son (Matt. 1–2).

A family operates in a pattern consistent with a few observable principles. Since we learn from our family how to relate, we carry these same behaviors directly into the work system and congregation of which we are part. So does everyone else who is part of the system. Understanding these principles and developing a capacity to observe them in action is an important first step on this transformational journey of learning to lead calmly and thoughtfully rather than reactively and emotionally. It is easier to know and do the right thing if we can be clear on what is going on emotionally for us and for the people God has called us to lead.

Anxiety: Blessing and Curse

Anxiety, most simply described, is our response to threat, whether real or perceived. The response is physiological; it is chemical. It occurs because of brain activity that is outside our awareness; we never even

have to think about it. Thankfully, we can respond to threat in the blink of an eye. Our Creator has hardwired this capacity into our brains and bodies.

We experience anxiety in two forms: acute and chronic. Acute anxiety is our reaction to a threat that is real and time limited. We react to the threat, respond to it, and then eventually return to a normal state of mind and body. At its most basic level, our response to a perceived threat prepares us either to fight for our lives or to run for our lives. In a critical moment when the threat is real, the anxious response can be lifesaving.

When we are experiencing chronic anxiety, however, we merely imagine or distort the threat. It is not real. Consequently, it is not time limited either; it does not simply go away.

Consider the importance of acute anxiety. When a child steps from between two parked cars into the pathway of your automobile, very little thinking takes place. Instinctively your foot moves to the brake with the full weight of your body. You quickly check your side mirror and jerk the steering wheel to the left, steering away from the child. Your heart pounds; your breath becomes shallow. You may even have to pull over to the side and compose yourself afterward. But

soon, your body and mind return to normal, and you go on. This is a response to acute anxiety.

If you trace the actual physiology of this response, the interaction of hormones and neurotransmitters, you will be amazed by the design evident in your mind and body. So much happens within you in a matter of a split second. When you feel threatened, your muscle cells instantaneously receive additional energy. Your heart rate increases, your sensitivity heightens, and your digestive process shuts down so that blood can flow to the large muscles. Your thinking becomes focused on the threat in a kind of tunnel vision. The threatening event is immediately stored in your long-term memory so that whenever you encounter another like it, you will be prepared to respond even more rapidly. Your Creator has programmed these lightning-quick responses into you for your survival.

Clearly, these responses to threat are necessary to protect us and those important to us. However, not all the anxiety we experience is a response to an actual threat. Much of our anxiety is chronic rather than acute. Some incident or issue may trigger anxiety in a system, but once under way, the reactivity develops a life of its own, independent of the triggering mechanism. Our

reactions to one another and to the disturbance in the relationship system continue to generate anxiety. Once chronic anxiety hits the system, we live in a heightened chemical state of anxiety that prevents us from functioning at our best and sets us up to escalate additional symptoms of one sort or another.

Unfortunately, as effective as the threat response is in keeping us alive during a moment of crisis, it creates a terribly ineffective state for a person to live in for any length of time. Under the influence of those powerful chemicals, our brain does not do its best thinking. We are narrowly focused and unable to think calmly. We react rather than respond. We take things personally; we become defensive. Such reactions are not helpful to a leader.

These anxious reactions take place in a leader before and during a conversation with a coworker, a committee, or members of the congregation. When we view a crisis as threatening, we are not calm and thoughtful. As the chemicals God gave us to protect us flood the body and brain and keep us from solving the problem, we instead wound and bruise one another.

Every emotional system sustains some level of chronic anxiety. Ed Friedman compares it to electricity

flowing through the wires that connect the people in the system.[2] In an anxious system, it has a greater voltage. The flow "surges" more easily when the system loses its ability to deal with stress. The anxiety can shock a person, through which it "grounds off." Like electricity, chronic anxiety is known primarily by its manifestations. Also like electricity, it is transmittable from person to person, institution to institution, and generation to generation.

To the degree that we are part of a family system that has learned to deal with the world either as a threatening place or as a secure place, we operate in life with a given level of chronic anxiety. We are more or less likely to experience the world as a threatening place. Our congregation behaves in the same way. Some congregations see the world as a safe place to be and are much freer to take a risk, pursue a goal, and respond calmly to crisis. Others see and feel the world as threatening and dangerous; anxiety dominates that congregation. The higher the level of chronic anxiety in a system, the more difficult it is for that system to function in a healthy way. (Later we will explore the specific ways in which anxiety operates among us. For now, it is suffi-

cient to note that this is one of the principles by which an emotional system operates.)

The Calming Effect of a Calm Leader

Karen sent an email to Kelly, her pastor:

> I would like to schedule a time to talk with you. I am a traditionalist resisting contemporary church. Help! I hope to hear from you very soon.
>
> Thanks, Karen

At one time, such a message would have sent Kelly into a highly anxious mode. She would have easily become the positive pole necessary to Karen's negative one, and the sparks would have begun to fly. Old behavior might have included a conversation with the worship leader, in which she would mention Karen's note and her dreading the meeting with her, all offered in a complaining tone of voice. She would delay responding to the request for an appointment, stonewalling her. When Karen finally came in, Kelly would be defensive

and argumentative, trying to convince her how right the contemporary flavor of the congregation's life was.

Fortunately, Kelly was already beginning to understand something of the way her congregation functioned as a living system. So instead of reacting automatically, she paused to think. She knew Karen; Karen and her husband had been faithful members for almost fifteen years. Kelly recalled that Karen had dropped out of her usual place in the choir and her role as occasional soloist a little more than a year earlier. Kelly suspected that the stated issue—contemporary versus traditional church—was not the real one (often it is not). She determined that when they met she would try to think with Karen through the processes that were taking place, trying to be a calm presence rather than becoming defensive. She wrote back:

> Name the time. When do you get off work? Or would you like to come by here on a lunch break or off period? A Sunday afternoon? After 7:30 on a Wednesday PM? Let me know. I'd love to think about this with you.
>
> Kelly

This proved fruitful. Together they were able to describe what was occurring in Karen's experience. A new worship leader, Mark, had arrived. New people were now involved in the church and in the worship ministry, attracted to Mark's leadership and charismatic personality. Consequently, Karen did not have the opportunity to sing as frequently as before. She began to feel a sense of loss, as if she were not so important. During this same period, her husband's job was requiring him to travel overseas for weeks at a time, leaving her to care for two teenage children. Her anxiety increased.

She responded to the rising anxiety by distancing herself, dropping out of active participation in her congregation. Others thought she was just too busy with her teaching job and did not pursue her. She read this response as further evidence that the music ministry did not want or need her. Soon, nothing in the church seemed to please her; she became critical about it all.

Karen was not content to remain in that state, however, and took personal responsibility to change by contacting Kelly. Her pastor listened, questioned, and helped her develop a plan of action. The next day, Karen scheduled a conversation with Mark, the worship

leader, to talk about her future in worship ministry. The fact that Kelly chose not to be a positive pole to sustain Karen's negative reaction increased the possibility that Karen would take a calm presence into her conversation with Mark. Karen could not sustain her anxiety without some sort of feedback from the rest of the system.

As I reflect on my encounter with Henry and his friends described earlier, I have come to understand that I made at least two mistakes in that experience. The first was thinking that I could answer the why questions about Henry's behavior, attributing to him and his followers a whole list of less-than-admirable motives. What I failed to see—because my paradigm would not permit me to see it—was that my approach to leadership played a huge role in the whole series of events. Jesus's instructions about dealing with the log in my own eye rather than the speck in my brother's (Matt. 7:1–5) ought to have informed my reaction. That the complaints and charges leveled were not the real issue became clear when Henry and his wife joined a congregation that had already incorporated most of the same changes for which I was advocating. Recently, as a somewhat more mature fortysomething pastor, I

visited Henry at home and talked with him about what we had experienced together a decade ago. He proved to be most gracious and understanding.

My second mistake was in not thinking through the possible reactions to my effort of creating urgency for change. One pastor I know kept on his computer desktop a helpful slogan: “You didn’t expect applause, did you?” Creating urgency was one of the right things for me to do.[3] However, I failed to recognize that doing the right thing could set off a series of anxious reactions that needed a calm, thoughtful response from the leader.

All of us might have benefited in that situation had I been a less anxious leader. Such a leader might maintain a sense of vision with great calmness, not reacting to the complaints of those upset with the changes required by the vision. The distress of these members might not disturb more emotionally mature leaders, might not push them to make the calls, to worry over the confrontation, or to feel a need to answer every charge. Yet they might remain connected to those who level their charges and complaints, perhaps even increasing contact with them rather than avoiding them because they oppose the vision. In time, many of them

might themselves calm down and find a way to stay connected with the congregation and its future.

Leaders who want to understand the context in which they carry out their role learn to pay attention to the presence of anxiety in their system. It is one of the two key variables that determine how well the relationships in a congregation are functioning.

Two Powerful Forces: Individuality and Togetherness

Another piece of the emotional process that powerfully affects the capacity to do the right thing is the interaction of two opposing forces. One force pushes hard from the inside out, toward being a distinct, unique individual. Another force pushes just as strongly from the outside, pressuring you to conform, to be part of the group, to lay aside your personal principles and commitments. You can see the effects of these two powerful life forces in your behavior and experience them in your relationships.

Individuality

Creation is incredibly diverse. Judging from the uniqueness of each of the billions of snowflakes and the complexity of the human DNA that makes every one of us distinguishable from the other, we would say that our Creator loves diversity. Paul observes that within the church God has preserved this diversity by gifting each of us differently, allowing everyone to make a novel contribution to the body (1 Cor. 12:4–30).

We long to express our own God-given uniqueness, to be the person God created us to be, to be responsible for our own choices. We each answer to God for our lives. The desire to discover and enhance that God-given distinctiveness is appropriate; it is one of the forces at work within and around us. In less mature and sinful expression, however, it may push selfishly, putting self at the center of life and treating the other as an object rather than a person. When this happens, doing the right thing becomes impossible.

Togetherness

The other force pushes from the outside in. It is the force exerted by our relationships, pushing us to conform, to please others, to fit in. In its most mature

form, this pressure helps us be sensitive to the needs of people around us, choosing to serve them. The same God who created us in our diversity calls us to community (Eph. 4:1–3). God teaches us a mature love that knows how to care for others without being determined by their demands (1 Cor. 13).

The togetherness force can inhibit our leadership in a variety of ways, however. Just as self-expression can become an expression of selfishness, the push toward togetherness can become a demand for conformity. Our need for others can lead us to become so dependent on keeping the others who are in the system calm that we compromise our leadership. The togetherness force can serve as water to quench the fire of our true self, the one whom God created us to be. In our emotional immaturity, this togetherness force is often what keeps us from doing the right thing.

Expressed properly, the togetherness force is an important and meaningful aspect of our lives. We experience it as a need to be together, to be alike, to connect—to have others accept, affirm, and love us. God created us for relationship. The two Great Commandments, on which hang "all the Law and the Prophets" (NIV), are about relationship—with God and with each other

(Matt. 22:35–40). However, to the degree that we make our decisions exclusively in response to this force rather than in response to our own thinking and acting on principle, our leadership expresses emotional immaturity.

Steve and John: Individuality versus Togetherness

Let's consider how the interaction of these forces can affect congregational leadership. The stories of Steve and John, pastors who were both recently forced out of their churches and who now have new positions, provide examples of these forces at work. Although Steve and John seem at first glance to be operating differently, their experiences are quite similar.

During a retreat, Steve and John gather in a circle with four other pastors. It's the third time the group has met that week. This is the first time either has openly and honestly shared with other pastors the pain they experienced in their journey through forced termination. As they tell their stories, it becomes clear that their personalities and approaches to leadership issues differ

considerably. What strikes the other members of their group, however, is how remarkably similar their experiences are.

Steve's Story

Steve considers himself a "strong" leader. He tells the congregation at Piney Drive Church exactly what he thinks, without regard for how some might react. He insists on a rigid doctrinal uniformity and preaches the final word to the congregation on complex ethical issues. He believes that, as the pastor, he is the head of the congregation and that people are responsible to follow his leadership.

He feels that, like Moses, he is responsible to get a vision for his church from God and deliver that vision to the people. They are responsible for accepting it and making it happen. He calls for personal commitment to the vision, though he often sees only regimented compliance. He sometimes speaks to the congregation in military terms, as if he is their general, leading them into battle. His ideas for the congregation are often good, and the people he leads implement many of them.

The church grows numerically, reinforcing Steve's understanding of himself as an independent thinker and a strong leader. Other signs, however, indicate that his mode of leadership leaves something to be desired. The pastor becomes terribly defensive and exhibits angry behavior when lay leaders challenge his ideas, privately or publicly. Negotiation over differences, building consensus, and compromising are not in Steve's repertoire. It's "his way or the highway."

Several families have left Piney Drive during Steve's tenure. Some are leaving with bitterness over their encounters with him, and they unite with other congregations whose pastors lead with greater sensitivity to the feelings of the members. Some are simply dropping out of participation in church altogether. Others have gradually burned out, responding repeatedly to the challenges and demands of their pastor. Many of those who remain bear emotional, spiritual, and relational wounds from the collateral damage inflicted by the pastor's behavior. On occasion, the pastor's leadership style polarizes the congregation into those who are "with him" and those who are "against him." Outwardly, Piney Drive appears to be growing. Beneath the

surface, however, glows the magma of resentment and passive-aggressive rebellion.

When police arrest Steve's teenage daughter for shoplifting, some of the rebellion erupts. Rumors surface, complaints multiply, tempers flare, and Steve finds himself the victim of the congregation's decision to terminate their pastor. The issues they rally around include his lack of preparation in preaching, his failure to conduct pastoral visitation, and the excessive time he spends on the golf course. As he tells his story to the support group this week, he wonders aloud, "How can they do this? I don't understand. I've done so much to help the church grow."

John's Story

John views leadership quite differently. He even expresses contempt for the kind of authoritarian pastoral leadership that he sees in many of his peers. He describes himself as a "participative" leader. Nothing happens at Eastside Church unless he has "buy in" from literally everyone. Consequently, little happens.

John carefully conceals his own thinking about controversial theological or ethical issues, for fear of divid-

ing the church. Nor does he express his ideas about the church's future, worrying that some church members will not share his vision. He often finds himself waiting for key leaders in the church to take the initiative in setting direction or in beginning a new ministry. These leaders seldom feel the need to take such initiative, other than perhaps to champion the newest denominational program. Really creative ideas are almost frightening at Eastside.

When a creative idea does make it to the table for discussion, one opposing voice can stifle it, at which point John ceases the initiative and tries to calm down everyone in the room. The slightest difference of opinion may as well be a shouting match as far as the pastor is concerned. Conflict is out of the question. Peace, harmony, and love must prevail—no matter what.
It is as though John is driving a bus in which he has equipped every seat with a brake pedal. It is not that the church fails to make planning efforts; Eastside engages in a process of strategic planning, but the process has stalled repeatedly.

Sometimes disagreement on the planning task force triggers the stall. Endless discussions ensue, and the church postposes decisions. Sometimes the process

gets stuck in analysis paralysis, as the group finds studying the data of their church and community a safer activity than moving forward. The planning efforts bear little fruit.

Several families have left Eastside during John's tenure. Some leave with frustration over the anemia of the congregation and unite with some other congregation that appears more vital, whose pastor exerts more dynamic leadership. Some simply drop out of participation in church altogether from sheer boredom. Others gradually burn out, after repeatedly trying harder to do what they have always done, although that effort did not seem to be making a difference in the church or in themselves.

The mission of the Eastside congregation suffers, as does the morale of the people. They continue to do what they have always done, but with less and less to show for their effort. Because of the church's decline, the members develop a low-grade resentment and passive-aggressive rebellion. People grow tired of giving themselves to an organization that is planning to go nowhere. Weariness creeps in from seeing their best ideas swatted down repeatedly in the name of unity.

When members of the congregation learn that the middle school has expelled John's youngest son for possessing drugs, some of the rebellion erupts. Rumors circulate, congregational murmuring increases, tempers flare, and John finds himself the victim of the congregation's decision to terminate their pastor. The issues they rally around include his lack of preparation in preaching, his failure to conduct pastoral visitation, and the excessive time he spends at the lake. As John shares his journey and pain with this group of peers, he asks, still in disbelief, "How can they do this to me? I don't get it. I've done so much to maintain a spirit of unity in the church."

What Is the Systems Perspective?

These two pastors operate with completely different goals and proceed with different means. They produce contrasting outcomes in their organizations. In truth, however, their two leadership styles have much in common. They are both expressions of a low level of emotional maturity that reacts emotionally in its relationship with others rather than responding thought-

fully as a mature self. Seeing the emotional dependency and immaturity of a people-focused leader like John is simple. Emotional reactivity to the group governs every decision; the approval and disapproval of others is the determining factor in all that happens. Feeling liked, accepted, and loved can take precedence over goal-directed activity to the point of allowing the mission of the organization to wither. The leader's hypersensitivity to the demands, wants, needs, desires, and whims of others paralyzes both the leader and the organization.

On the surface, relationships look smooth and calm, which is the leader's driving goal. The organization, however, operates without the benefit of vision. Moreover, people are so highly dependent on each other emotionally that they cannot engage in the healthy conflict that is essential for any group of people to identify and pursue a shared vision (Acts 6; 15).

The congregation grows susceptible to the anxiety produced by any financial, social, or relational crisis among them, in their own lives, or in the life of their leader. In their anxiety, they attempt to justify and explain the actions they take by focusing on issues such as preaching, pastoral visits, or the amount of time devoted to a hobby. The invisible emotional process

operates inexorably while the congregation and their pastor focus on ever-changing issues.

When we see things through a systems perspective, however, we find these actions generated not by objective evaluation of the pastor's performance but by the anxiety of the congregational system. The evidence of this is that fixing the issues raised does not change things. John can react to congregational complaints by working more diligently on sermon preparation, giving more time to pastoral visitation, and cutting back on his fishing, but the anxiety in his home and congregation will not diminish.

The reason is that in our anxiety we react to one another and then later devise what we call a rational explanation for our behavior. An aphorism in the recovery movement defines "rationalizing" as telling rational lies, and that is a fairly accurate description of our behavior. The supposed content of our explanation diverts our attention from the emotional process that is at work. Alleviating the symptoms does not cure the disease. So, most likely, the congregation's blaming will take some other form, and the outcome is eventually the same: the pastor is out of a job.

A task-focused leader like Steve might contest the thesis that he is operating out of a lack of emotional maturity. From all external appearances, the leader is strong, autonomous, and independent. What we miss when we look at such leaders, however, is their dependence on others for their own functioning.

Emotional dependence on others drives the autocratic leader. Others are there to serve the leader's purpose. The compliance of others makes the leader appear successful. The overfunctioning of the leader matches perfectly the underfunctioning of his or her constituency. They are looking for a strong leader rather than thinking for themselves. The autocratic leader is looking for willing followers who allow him or her to think for them.

Difference of opinion is a threat to meet with anger and to eliminate should it persist. Relationships are distant (when one opposes the leader) or close (when one supports the leader) but always tenuous. The task-focused leader is as emotionally reactive to others in the organization as is the people-focused leader in another system. The followers of such leaders play their part in keeping the dependence alive. When the leader stumbles in life or becomes anxious, the anxiety

spreads quickly to those who are dependent on him or her. All of this happens well outside of people's own awareness. Issues such as ill-prepared preaching, infrequent pastoral visits, or excessive time devoted to a hobby surface as a rational explanation for the congregation's action, instead of attending to the members' anxiety that is generating the symptoms.

Seeing the Systems Paradigm

John's and Steve's stories illustrate leadership types you have likely encountered more than once—perhaps you recognize some of John or Steve in your own leadership style. Their stories reflect the tragedy of the struggle in many congregations that has left both pastor and church in turmoil. Leaders often experience the tension of staying connected to the system and offering responsible leadership without entangling themselves in the congregation's emotional processes. Leaders struggle to find a way to disengage the system sufficiently to foster their own personal health and growth without cutting off from the congregation they seek to

lead. The challenge is always to stay in the system yet do the right thing as a leader.

Effective leadership comes from someone with enough emotional maturity to call a congregation to discern and pursue a shared vision, to remain connected with those who differ with the leader or the majority, and to remain a calm presence when the anxiety rises. This represents a model of leadership demonstrated by both Jesus and the earliest leaders of the church. Such leadership requires learning to understand the principles by which a living system operates and the context in which we exercise our role as leader. The presence of chronic anxiety and the tension between the forces of individuality and togetherness are key variables in how the system functions.

Such leadership requires a maturity that comes through practicing disciplines that allow one to differentiate self from important others without attempting to control them, cutting off from them, or being determined by them. In other words, we leaders can deliberately incorporate some actions into our lives that over time radically shape how we are able to relate to those we lead. It is possible to lead without controlling. It is also possible to learn to resist the demands to surrender

vision and principle without giving up our connection to those who exert the pressure.

A few years ago, a home remodeling project led to an anxious moment for me (Robert). The big, empty room that would become our kitchen contained stacks of unassembled cabinets and drawers in large, flat boxes labeled with Swedish words. To some, this would simply represent a challenge. To me, lacking the "engineering gene," it looked like a near impossibility. Had I walked alone into the room with a power screwdriver in my hand, facing the boxes and the cryptic instructions, I might have suffered a paralyzing anxiety attack. Fortunately, I had partners in the enterprise—a son who is an architect, a daughter-in-law and a wife who enjoy such projects, and two friends with engineering degrees. We opened the boxes, organized the pieces, and, in a reasonable amount of time, constructed a new system of kitchen drawers and cabinets.

The powerful emotional systems to which we belong can be intimidating as well. Unpacking the boxes and being able to match the various components of the system with their names—anxiety, reactivity, maturity, the togetherness force, and the individuality force—is a good beginning. But if you want to harness the

power inherent in a living system, if you desire to grow in the capacity to lead without compromising your principles, you must learn to see your world anew—with a systems paradigm. You must learn to be able to see what is going on around you, observe the anxiety, note your own part in it, and manage yourself amid the pressure. You need to learn the skill of "thinking systems and watching process," which is the subject of the next chapter.

SELF-ASSESSMENT QUESTIONS

1. Describe in your own words the difference between acute and chronic anxiety. Can you give an illustration of each?
2. How would you argue for the necessity of anxiety in our lives? What are the dangers it raises?
3. How would you describe the level of chronic anxiety in the family system that you emerged from? Were you led to think of the world as basically secure or basically threatening? What did people in your family fret over?

4. How would you describe the level of chronic anxiety in the congregational system you are currently engaged in? Do leaders in the system see the world about them as threatening? Are there frequent emergencies and crises? When a crisis occurs, does the leadership take it in stride and solve the problem, or are they likely to develop symptoms?
5. How would you argue for the necessity of the togetherness force in our lives? What are the dangers it raises?
6. How would you argue for the necessity of the individuality force in our lives? What are the dangers it raises?
7. What is the difference, in your thinking, between taking responsibility and accepting blame?
8. What terms in this chapter are giving you the most difficulty?

4
Thinking Systems, Watching Process

Then the People of Israel violated the holy curse. Achan . . . took some of the cursed things. GOD became angry with the People of Israel.

—Joshua 7:1 (Message)

Thinking systemically has always been natural to chess champions. . . . Only the most unsophisticated football fans reserve their praise for the ball carrier alone, or blame the quarterback every time he gets "sacked." In meteorology, it has long been recognized that for a tornado to come into existence, the temperature, the barometric pressure, and the humidity

> all must reach certain thresholds in the atmosphere at exactly the same time.
>
> —Edwin Friedman, *Generation to Generation*

In the previous chapter, we introduced two variables that govern the behavior of a living system: the level of emotional maturity and the level of chronic anxiety. We can't observe these variables directly, but when we learn to "think systems" and "watch process," we can learn to observe the indicators of both in an emotional system.

What It Means to Think Systems and Watch the Process

The first step toward mature leadership is learning to think in a different way about how people in a living system affect each other and react to each other. This way of thinking requires learning to recognize how anxiety holds chronic symptoms in place and how each person in the system has a role to play in keeping

things in balance. This is thinking systems (that is, thinking from a systems point of view). It requires the leader to surrender the thoroughly ingrained tendency to accept cause-and-effect thinking, diagnose people, and place blame. Leaders often work in just this way, identifying the problem as "out there"—in the external environment or in the behavior of people within the organization. This kind of linear, cause-and-effect thinking keeps us from seeing our own part and leaves us virtually powerless to effect change, since changing others is ultimately impossible.

Learning to think systems means learning to ask and answer two questions: What is my role in keeping this problem in place? and How can I change my role? Thinking that the problem is "out there somewhere" is the problem. An old proverb has it that insanity is doing the same thing repeatedly but expecting different results. Another version affirms that if you keep doing what you've been doing, you'll keep getting what you've been getting. From a systems perspective, one might put it this way: "The system is perfectly designed for the present results." Someone must take the lead in changing the system by learning to respond to anxiety

rather than react to it. Leaders must think systems and watch the process.

The second step in being able to respond differently is the ability to see what is happening with clarity. Objective observation of the emotional processes at work in the system is a major change. In an anxious system, the leader tends to join others in focusing on symptoms (the complaints and problems) rather than process (the systemic issues and reactions that keep a problem in place). The symptoms, problems, issues, and people in the system get the attention of those who are unable to think systems. This second step is watching process, the ability to see the emotional processes as they play out.

Seeing the Nervous Water: A Fish Story

My wife, Melinda, and I (Robert) enjoy fishing. A few years ago, our church staff gave us a generous Christmas gift. They arranged for us to travel to South Texas and experience a guided fishing trip in the Laguna Madre, a beautiful, pristine bay off South Padre Island. This was a different kind of fishing trip, however. We

knew what it was like to fish in the surf or in a bay with spinning rigs, using live or artificial bait. What we faced was a fly-fishing trip, using equipment we had never touched before.

We met Kenny Brewer, our guide, one Wednesday afternoon on the beach and had our first and only fly-casting lesson. He assured us that if we could learn to cast the line forty feet with reasonable accuracy, we could catch fish. The wind was stiff and Kenny was patient, but we were frustrated. Finally, we met his requirements. He arranged to pick us up early the next morning for our expedition.

This new way of fishing was not just about unfamiliar casting skills. It also involved a whole new way of seeing. Our experience had been in fishing blind: casting out bait or a lure to a likely place and hoping for a strike. When we went out with Kenny, we were going to learn to fish by sight, not by faith! We waded into clear, ankle-deep water and began to search for fish.

We were not long in the water before Kenny pointed and said, “Look! About sixty yards out at one o’clock. There’s a red fish swimming across our path. Do you see it?”

“No.”

"Right there. See the nervous water?"

"No. What's nervous water?"

"Never mind. He's gone. Nervous water is when the surface of the water looks different in one place than in the water that surrounds it. You'll learn to see it."

We repeated that dialogue several times during the day. Eventually, we could spot nervous water with the best of them. But it required a new way of seeing what we had been looking at for years. We can also learn to develop a new capacity for seeing the nervous water of an emotional process (a coach or a guide like Kenny is helpful). It requires some new categories for thinking; it means practicing some new disciplines and skills. It entails change in how we relate to others, and it demands time and patience. But leadership in the kingdom of God is worth the effort.

The Emotional Triangle

We can think of the responses we make to life's threats as "emotional reactivity." This term makes it clear that the response occurs at a level of our being that is usually outside of our awareness. The reaction is an

instinctive response, like blinking our eyes or gasping for breath. We may later develop a detailed, rational explanation for what we have done so that we can justify our behavior to others. However, we are simply reacting in a part of our brain that operates outside of our awareness.

With some discipline and work, we can become much more aware of our reactions and learn to have more say about how they affect our behavior. “Emotional reactivity” and “anxiety” are nearly synonymous terms. Although we are constantly reacting to our environment, in the presence of anxiety we engage a specific repertoire of emotional reactions. Anxiety stirs the nervous water of our family and congregation. We begin by learning to see the nervous water.

Seeing Emotional Triangles

Emotional triangles are the “molecules” of an emotional system. A two-person relationship is notoriously unstable. If the relationship is calm, things remain steady. But all it takes is for one person to begin to feel uncomfortable with something about the other for the relationship to move toward instability. To manage the

increased anxiety, one of the two can bring a third person into the triangle.

How this works is so familiar that we usually fail to see it. Fran, the leader of a women's ministry, becomes upset with the church pastor, Virginia, for not attending their annual banquet. Instead of going to Virginia and talking about the issue, however, Fran expresses her upset to her friend Wanda, the wife of the congregation's worship leader. When Wanda engages Fran sympathetically, the triangle comes to life, and Virginia finds herself in the uncomfortable outside position. The next time Virginia and Wanda meet in the hallway, Virginia will wonder why Wanda seems so distant. Fran, however, has managed to calm down somewhat.

The more intense the issue, the more people will ultimately be engaged in the process. Triangles interlock. Wanda can catch enough of Fran's anxiety that she carries it home and spreads it to Mike, the worship leader. At the staff meeting the following week there could very well be an air of coldness as Mike brings his infection to the group.

Triangles are the building blocks of an emotional system. When the atmosphere is relatively calm and stable, the triangles are nearly invisible. But they have

not gone away. They are merely waiting for the charge of anxiety to flow through them and light them up again. By observing the triangles over time, the objective observer can begin to see how the emotional process works in the system.

It is important, though, to understand that triangles, like anxiety or the togetherness force, are an aspect of human behavior that is neither good nor bad. They just are. Triangles are in themselves neutral; they exist as a part of human behavior. Operating without our awareness, however, they can intensify the anxiety within a system and destroy its relational health. The greater the leader's capacity to see the system and watch the process by observing the triangles, the greater the leader's capacity to remain a calm presence and make a difference in the congregation's life. It is when we do not understand what is happening around us that we grow most anxious. Every family or congregational system has a myriad of triangles operating interdependently and simultaneously, thus making the dynamics in the system highly complex.

Jesus and Emotional Triangles

Here is an example of positive engagement of a triangle. Jesus called our attention to emotional triangles, and he encouraged us to use them to advantage in maintaining healthy relationships. He said that if our relationship with a brother or sister becomes unstable, we ought first to attempt to restore it on our own (Matt. 5:23–24; 18:15). Should we not make that attempt, we run the risk of dangerous and destructive triangles forming (Matt. 5:25–26). Should the attempt fail, however, he instructed us to bring others into the matter (form a triangle) with the goal of restoring the stability of the original relationship (Matt. 18:16–17).

Further, observe Jesus's own behavior in triangles. He refuses to become part of the anxiety that resides in the relationship between others, as when a man asks Jesus to arbitrate a dispute between himself and his brother over an estate. Jesus chooses to stay out of that one and calls the man to examine his own motives of greed (Luke 12:13–15). On another occasion, Jesus refuses Peter's attempt to focus his attention on John, instead keeping the spotlight on Peter's own relationship with him (John 21:22).

Sometimes Jesus finds himself in an unavoidable triangle and manages himself within it by maintaining

contact with both parties and taking a stand with each of them based on his principles. We can observe this in the triangle with a lame man he healed on the Sabbath and those who accuse him of violating the law (John 5), and in a similar triangle with a blind man healed on the Sabbath and those same angry religious authorities (John 9). Notice how he deals with the other two parties personally and focuses on maintaining his own position with each.

The Triangle in Congregational Life

Triangles take a variety of forms in a congregation's life, some of which may seem relatively innocuous. Here are a few common examples:

- We ask for a third person's advice or validation in a matter having to do with someone else, creating allies for our own point of view.
- A church member complains to one staff member about another.
- A church leader reinforces his own point of view by quoting others—"Pastor, everyone is talking about the new worship service, and nobody likes it!"

"Everyone" becomes the third side of the triangle, aligned against the pastor.

- A pastor listens sympathetically to a wife's complaint about her husband in a pastoral conversation and finds herself incapable of remaining neutral with the man when she encounters him at the Wednesday night fellowship dinner.
- Two members share gossip about one of the youth workers.
- Following the worship service on Sunday morning, as a couple passes by the pastor, the wife extends her hand and tells him, "That was the greatest sermon I've ever heard." The pastor does not realize she has just co-opted him into her side of an argument she has been having with her husband over an issue the pastor tangentially referred to in the morning message.

Thinking systems and watching process requires us to begin to see these triangles when the anxiety flows through the system like electricity and they light up. It requires recognizing how quickly others draw us into triangles and how easily we draw in others.

Like trying to catch red drum on a fly rod, spotting the quarry is only half the task. Then we must be able to respond with an accurate cast. What are we to do with the nervous water when we can finally see it? How do we respond to a triangle that we find ourselves invited into?

"Detriangling": Staying Connected and Clearheaded

How can you manage yourself within a triangle you encounter? We can offer no simple steps; that would be contrary to systems thinking, which asks us to see life in all its complexity. The key is to work seriously on the disciplines required to become more emotionally mature. No gimmicks or techniques are going to effect change in the system; change requires serious engagement in personal transformation.

It is the transforming person, not the clever person with a bag of tricks, who affects the functioning of the system for the better. Ironically, if we attempt to get out of the triangle to change the other people involved, our efforts are not likely to work. Our motives only reveal

our own emotional immaturity. We are still trying to assess blame and take responsibility for someone's behavior other than our own. However, if we take such action to express more clearly our own attempt to become emotionally mature, we can have a powerful effect on the entire system. The sooner we can recognize a triangle as it forms, the sooner we can decide how we will conduct ourselves in it.

When we become aware of our participation as the third person in an activated triangle, our aim is to stay emotionally connected to the other two players while attempting to remain emotionally neutral about the symptomatic issue. Murray Bowen referred to this move as "detriangling."[1] Although the term can sound like an effort to "get out of" the triangle, that is not entirely accurate. We remain in good contact with the other two, but we work to not allow the emotional current flowing between them to catch us up in it as well. Simply declaring, "I'm not getting involved with you two on this!" is not the same thing. One who says such a thing is likely already involved emotionally. Detriangling is remaining connected to each of the other corners but not getting in between them. When emotions are running high, this may be a bigger challenge

than we imagine. The effort to detriangle is an effort to “differentiate” ourselves from the emotionality of the other two, not an effort to distance ourselves from them.

Jesus’s simple response to an anxious Martha effectively removed him from the triangle she was forming to change her sister’s behavior (Luke 10:41–42). He called her to examine her own priorities and to allow Mary her choices.

The most strategic role in the system is that of the calm observer. Someone needs to be in the position of being able to see what is going on. Shouldn’t it be you, the leader?

As the anxiety in the system rises, so must our resolve to remain composed. As leaders, when we focus on the process, we learn not to automatically take sides on the presenting issue. Stay alert; the togetherness force will become intense, calling for you as leader to arbitrate. Instead, you must learn to stay focused on God, your principles, and your reactions. You must also learn to avoid taking responsibility for the relationship of the other two. Only by doing so can you ultimately be helpful.

This same process can unfold when a leader or a leadership team begins to articulate a clear vision for the congregation's future that will entail significant changes. This is especially true when those changes involve the congregation's "culture"—changes in the way they have always done things. Anxiety will predictably rise in any congregation facing such changes. The church will need a leader who is able to continue to hold on to the vision while maintaining good connections with both those who oppose it and those who support it. The togetherness force may intensify in both groups, both of whom will attempt to claim the leader for their position. Leaders who can keep their heads in such a storm can help a congregation steer its way into a future where the vision increasingly becomes reality.

Friedman observed that the more one tries unsuccessfully to change the relationship of two others, the more likely the person is to wind up bearing the stress that rightfully belongs to the other two.[2] Changing the lives of people is ultimately the work of God's Spirit. At times we feel compelled to take on that role ourselves, but to do so is foolish and fruitless.

Dallas Willard describes such behavior as an attempt at control, equating it with Jesus's warning against throwing pearls before swine (Matt. 7:6): "God has paid an awful price to arrange for human self-determination. He obviously places great value on it."[3] Ironically, we do not make others more responsible by taking responsibility for them.

Moses and Israel are a great example of just such a triangle. In an ideal setting, Moses would deal with his own relationship with God and with his own relationship with Israel. Israel, likewise, would take responsibility for their relationship with God and their relationship with their leader, Moses. But these two-way relationships are inherently unstable. So when the Israelites became uncomfortable with having to deal with God face-to-face, they triangled in their leader (Exod. 20:19). Moses found himself in the stressful position of mediator, going back and forth between God and Israel when Israel should have been dealing with God personally. Contemporary pastors can easily find themselves stuck in a similar triangle with God and their own congregations.

Gregg and Joyce, two associates on the pastoral leadership team at Northside Fellowship, are often at

odds with each other. The issues vary, but the behavior is consistent. Things are quiet for a time, but when tension arises in the church's life—when finances are tight, when attendance is down, when complaints are up—the behavior is predictable. Gregg begins to attack Joyce's work; her ideas are not creative enough to suit him. In his mind, she is the cause of the problems the church is facing. But Gregg never makes these accusations to Joyce; he always offers them in the context of a triangle with other team members. Sometimes he criticizes subtly and sometimes stridently.

Gregg frequently involves Taylor, the senior pastor. Initially, Taylor sides with Gregg on the issue and promises to do something about Joyce and her performance. The pastor is triangled. Gregg calms down, but Taylor now bears the stress.

Once Taylor began to get a sense of thinking systems and watching process, however, the nervous water became visible and the behavior predictable. The ability to "think systems and watch process" helps Taylor learn to anticipate Gregg's approaches and to see them not as the result of Gregg's bad behavior (implicitly siding with Joyce) or Joyce's poor performance (siding with Gregg) but as an expression of the anxiety in the

system. The pastor's calmer perspective makes possible more flexible, less anxious, sometimes even playful responses to Gregg, pushing him to work more directly on his relationship with Joyce. It also allows the system to cool down considerably.

Recognizing Chronic Anxiety

How do we human beings typically deal with the anxiety that is inevitable in our families or organizations? We have developed a small repertoire of symptomatic behaviors. Four such symptoms recur in living systems:

1. Conflict
2. Distancing
3. Over/underfunctioning reciprocity
4. Projection onto a third person

This observation is one of the most insightful contributions of those who study living systems.[4] All over the world, in all types of systems, these behaviors occur consistently. These reactions become a symptom of the

presence of anxiety in our families or congregations. In other words, when we observe the presence of any of these four symptoms in a family or organization, we know we are dealing with an anxious system.

Some systems employ the entire repertoire. Usually, such a system manages to function a little better than one that chooses to “specialize” in just one reaction. When a system specializes, that symptom can manifest with great intensity.

Although each of these four responses manages to keep the anxiety spill contained in one place, each also contributes systemically to the level of anxiety in the system, causing it to rise. We are anxious, we react, and we produce a symptom. We become more anxious because of the presence of the symptom. The dance goes on.

Conflict

Conflict is perhaps the most obvious of the symptoms in a living system. Conflict emerges during the time of anxiety when togetherness forces combine with all-or-nothing thinking. People begin to insist on their way

as the only way. As others disagree, the level of anxiety rises, and the conflict spirals upward.

When it comes to dealing with a family or an organization, we often get stuck in a "medical model." Our cultural paradigm says that there is an individual or group of people in whom the problem resides. We diagnose the person or group as the problem and attempt to change them. Or we focus on the symptom (conflict) and require everyone to receive special conflict management training, learning new techniques to communicate their feelings to each other. All of this is to ignore the nature of the system that produces the symptom in the first place.

Systems theory predicts, however, that if we eliminate the conflict without dealing with the anxiety that produces it, the symptom is sure to recycle itself and show up in one of the other forms discussed here. Our effort becomes a "fix that fails." Contemporary approaches to organizational life, however, do not teach the leader to attend to other evidence of chronic organizational anxiety; conflict seems to get all the attention. But a congregation relatively free of conflict might simply be dealing with its anxiety in other ways.

If we understand conflict as a symptom rather than the problem, we ask different questions. We look at the processes taking place in the system of relationships rather than pointing a finger at the conflicting parties and trying to simply solve their problem.

The apostles took a systems approach in the conflict faced by the early church in Jerusalem. A systemic problem interfered with the proper care of the Hellenistic Jewish widows, resulting in conflict. Rather than dealing with the conflict and trying to get everyone to just communicate better, they restructured the system, putting seven Hellenists in charge of the ministry (Acts 6). The conflict was a symptom. The solution was in the system.

Distancing

Some people cannot tolerate conflict in relationships and find another way to deal with an increase in anxiety. As anxiety rises, they withdraw emotionally, keeping the relationships peaceful but superficial. Extreme expressions of distancing are known as "cutoff," in which the people break off relationships completely. Distant relationships in an emotional system are as

much a symptom of increasing anxiety as is intense conflict.

The New Testament presents the church as a community of intense relationships. God calls believers to share life, practicing love and forgiveness as indicators that they are true followers of Jesus (John 13:34–35). The "one another" commands of the New Testament imply that believers are to relate at a level of intensity that results in their offending one another occasionally! Distancing and cutoff make it impossible to fulfill that vision.

Superficial relationships keep conflict to a minimum, but they do not make the anxiety disappear. A congregation in which people refuse to interact at a more-than-superficial level is an anxious system.

Sometimes distance and cutoff transcend the local congregation. More than one church has formed out of the conflict that produced a split in another congregation. It is not unusual for years to pass without any interaction between the members of the original congregation and those of the splinter group. In the late 1990s, distance and cutoff became recognizable symptoms of the anxiety pervading several major denominations. Some congregations in those "extended

families" have distanced themselves or cut themselves off from their denominational roots. This symptom of anxiety has shown itself in strained, superficial relationships between leaders of congregations who find themselves on opposing sides of the dispute. A systems approach does not diagnose and place blame but sees this behavior as evidence of a highly anxious system.

Distancing can show up in a church in many ways. Cold worship services, pastoral-care needs that fall through the cracks, prayer requests that seldom go beyond the superficial, a problem with retention of new members, passive-aggressive behavior of a church leader or staff member, and a host of other behaviors may be evidence of a congregation dealing with its anxiety through distance.

Overfunctioning and Underfunctioning

Sometimes a system responds to anxiety by engaging in a scenario in which members unwittingly conspire to focus on one person (or part) who seems not to be doing so well (the underfunctioning one). To compensate for this underfunctioning, another member (or part) of the system works hard to make up the differ-

ence (overfunctioning), sometimes complaining the whole time.

We can see this easily in a family. One spouse (the underfunctioning one) may begin to drink heavily, for example. This results in loss of a job, a DWI charge, depression, or violence. Others in the family then over-function. They take a second job, make excuses to cover up the drinking problem, pay the fine, and accept every promise of the drinker to do better. The overfunctioning members play their part in keeping the condition of the underfunctioning member chronic. Everyone in the system, even the underfunctioning one, agrees on where the problem lies. What they do not see is that the symptom grows out of the relationship system. They do not see their own role in keeping the symptom in place.

Ann and her husband, Daryl, frequently clash over his driving. He has no regard for either the speed limit or the fear and anxiety that speeding creates in her (ten years earlier, her sister died in an automobile accident). Ann's complaining has not produced a change in Daryl's driving habits.

One evening Ann and Daryl are taking visiting family members across town for dinner. They are in two ve-

hicles, with Daryl driving the lead car and Ann following. True to form, he is driving fast and furiously, and Ann is doing her best to keep up with him.

Her anxiety is rising by the second. Then it dawns on her: she has a part to play in this silly chase scene. She has her own gas and brake pedals, and she can control them. She is responsible only for her vehicle and those who are with her. She slows down to the speed limit. When she does, her anxiety begins to subside. More than that, she can see in this episode of her life a kind of metaphor for how she has played the part of an overfunctioner in many of the chase scenes in her life—with Daryl and others—trying her best to control their behavior rather than changing her own.

In a congregation, overfunctioning or underfunctioning can show up in a variety of ways. We see it in the financial crisis that comes when a high percentage of congregational members underfunction, not giving their part to maintain the church's life and ministry, while a small portion overfunctions, giving more than their share and even increasing their giving when the "summer crunch" hits. It shows up when a pastor overfunctions, taking full responsibility for the success of the church's ministry, reinforcing the

underfunctioning of congregational leaders. The dance becomes evident when one member of the church staff continues to perform poorly and others on the staff cover for the underfunctioning one, making excuses and doing that person's work, even while blaming the underfunctioner as being the problem. The dance is manifest when congregational members insist on the pastor's thinking for them or when the pastor insists on telling the congregation what to think. It shows up when the Moses-God-Israel triangle develops—the people of God not being willing to take responsibility for their own relationship with God, pressuring the "clergy" to take responsibility for that. Pastors who become professional holy men or women play their part in keeping the symptom alive. In short, the overfunctioning-underfunctioning exchange is about someone in the system taking on too much responsibility for others and others allowing (or encouraging) them to do so.

Projection

We have one other means of reacting to chronic anxiety. Rather than engaging in conflict, distancing

ourselves from each other, or taking responsibility for others, we project our anxiety onto one member (or one part) of the system. Again, we can observe this clearly in a family. Rather than managing the anxiety in their own relationship, a husband and wife "project" it on a child. As tension increases in the home, Mom and Dad begin to observe, talk about, and worry over their son's performance in school. They talk to him about it, and they worry over him. They also worry in the presence of his teacher, who then begins to see the child differently. The child grows anxious as these important people worry over him (who would not?) and loses a sense of competency. His grades drop, reinforcing his parents' anxiety, his teacher's opinion, and his sense of incompetency. The feedback system is in place. By this time, everyone has a part to play in keeping the symptom alive.

Just such an anxious response as this can keep physical, emotional, and social symptoms in a child in a chronic state. Meanwhile, the marriage appears healthy and free of conflict since the anxiety in the system is bound up in the child's problem. The parents cannot see the part they play in the system.

Conflict or behavioral problems that develop near the bottom of an organizational chart may be a projection of anxiety that would otherwise be expressing itself at the top. Replacing the people at the lower levels does not solve the problem. New people simply step into the old triangles and eventually find themselves replaced as well. It is far easier to diagnose a ministry assistant as the problem and focus on their incompetence or replace them than it is to deal with the tension between a pastor and an administrator.

Anyone who desires to think systems and watch process must become familiar with the nervous water of emotional reactivity. Conflict, distancing, overfunctioning and underfunctioning, and projection are all evidence that something is going on emotionally in a system that needs more than a quick fix. We must learn to observe the processes producing those symptoms and change our part in them.

Characteristics of an Anxious System

What does a highly anxious system look like? We have all been there. Ed Friedman focuses on five central

traits of a chronically anxious system: heightened reactivity, herding, blame displacement, demand for a quick fix, and poor leadership.[5] These characteristics simply describe how human beings tend to function when we perceive our world as threatening and we grow anxious. An emotionally mature leader who knows how to respond thoughtfully and calmly can make a difference in such anxious times.

Heightened Level of Reactivity

The first characteristic, a heightened level of reactivity, marks every anxious system. The responses of the group members to one another are automatic and instinctive, bypassing the thinking part of the brain and keeping the emotional atmosphere at a highly charged level. People are quick to interrupt each other, think for each other, and complete one another's sentences. Members are as quick to take things personally as they are to make things personal. The system can easily heat up with the slightest provocation over the most inconsequential issue. In this state, the system often organizes itself around the least-mature member rather than around its potential leader.

In such an environment, people confuse their feelings with their opinions. Those who tend to become hysterical and hyperactive do. Those inclined to be passive and withdrawn are that way. The life of the group is seldom (perhaps never) marked by objective, dispassionate discussion of issues. Perhaps the most easily discerned characteristic of an anxious system is the loss of playfulness and humor. Everything is dire and serious. In fact, we hear the word "serious" a lot in an anxious system. An anxious system is highly reactive.

The Herding Instinct

Second, an anxious system exhibits an increase in togetherness forces pushing for conformity—the "herding instinct." God values both unity and diversity; anxious congregations often find themselves dealing with the choice between uniformity or division. The greater the level of anxiety, the more we pressure one another to be the same, to think the same, to conform. When chronic anxiety permeates the system, the push toward togetherness discourages dissent. Feelings become more important to the group than ideas. The system consistently chooses peace over progress, com-

fort over experimentation, and the security of the port over the adventure of the open seas. Black-and-white, all-or-nothing thinking marks the system. The overall effect of this togetherness is to create a vicious cycle; as Friedman observes, increased anxiety produces increased reactivity, which leads to increased herding, resulting in increased anxiety, and so on.[6] In an anxious system, the herding instinct can take over.

Blame Displacement

A third trait of the anxious system is what Friedman calls “blame displacement.” This is the human tendency to look outward for explanations rather than inward. You can find this response as early as the opening chapters of the Bible. When God confronts Adam and Eve in their disobedience, Adam blames Eve and God, and Eve blames the serpent (Gen. 3:1–13). The blame game has been one of our favorite responses to anxiety ever since. Anxious systems produce a lot of finger pointing. People see themselves as victimized rather than taking responsibility for their own attitudes and behaviors. Members engage constantly in diagnosing others and focusing on what is wrong with others.

Ironically, this refusal to look inward and take responsibility also prevents us from looking inward to see the strengths God has given us to deal with life. The blame game keeps us from thinking about taking responsibility for ourselves.

A Quick Fix

Fourth, an anxious system spends much of its energy looking for a quick fix to its problems. Friedman sees this as the flip side of the tendency to blame others for a problem.[7] Anxious people expect others to solve their problems and to do it now. Anxious people have a lower threshold for pain and want solutions that are painless. They focus simply on eliminating the symptoms rather than on dealing with those underlying emotional processes keeping the symptoms alive. The door is open for books, seminars, and consultants who can offer how-tos, simple techniques, and "three easy steps." If the problem is systemic, however, focus on fixing one symptom only recycles the anxiety elsewhere. A quick fix is futile.

Poor Leadership

The fifth characteristic of a highly anxious system is that it lacks a leader who operates with clear vision and thoughtfully held principles. Friedman states, "The fact that chronically anxious families always lack well-differentiated leadership is absolutely universal. I have never seen an exception to this rule."[8]

Chronically anxious groups require someone who can offer a new kind of leadership if they are ever to pull out of their anxious regression. Such leaders are people who can hold on to their own sense of personal vision and principles despite the resistance and pressure of their relationships in the system. They are leaders who can do the right thing. At the same time, such leaders can stay in relationship with those they lead without having to control them or without entering the intensity of the emotional process with them.

Unfortunately, Friedman argues, a system that operates without well-differentiated leadership makes it extremely difficult for such a leader to develop.[9] The group's anxiety inhibits the leader's ability to get the distance necessary to discern vision with clarity. Instead, crisis after crisis buffets the leader about like a storm. The group's movement toward togetherness leaves the leader reluctant to take a well-defined posi-

tion that expresses a clear stand based on vision and principle. Under such pressure, the leader becomes indecisive, not wanting to offend any of the parties. As the blame game gets under way, those in leadership are a prime target for those doing the shooting. If the leader refuses to work on the quick fix that the anxious organization demands, the group turns to others who are less mature. The chronically anxious system is ultimately leaderless.

Part of the arsenal of effective leadership is the wisdom to see the anxiety in the system for what it is, the serenity to take a more objective view of what is transpiring, and the courage to act on principle rather than react to pressure. Learning to see the anxiety as it rises, as the triangles form, as clear thinking fades, as blame becomes the norm, and as demands for conformity increase is the challenge for a leader who thinks systems and watches process.

Taking Yourself Out of the Triangle

Finding the fish is one thing. Placing a fly in front of it with the wind blowing and the adrenaline pumping is

another. We can learn how triangles operate, how to see them, and how to manage ourselves wisely in them. We can learn to recognize the evidence that anxiety is rising in the systems we lead. We can learn to observe the symptoms of an anxious system and to understand the forces that keep them in place. We can discover a wider array of options and responses as we think systems and watch process. We can find a way of taking a more objective, less anxious stance amid the reactivity of others.

As we do so, the system can function better. A calmer leader who contributes to transforming the life of the congregation can emerge. Bowen wrote that "when any key member of an emotional system can control his own emotional reactiveness and accurately observe the functioning of the system and his part in it, and he can avoid counterattacking when he is provoked, and when he can maintain an active relationship with the other key members without withdrawing or becoming silent, the entire system will change in a series of predictable steps."[10] Jesus said,

> Don't pick on people, jump on their failures, criticize their faults—unless, of course, you want the same treatment.

> That critical spirit has a way of boomeranging. It's easy to see a smudge on your neighbor's face and be oblivious to the ugly sneer on your own. Do you have the nerve to say, "Let me wash your face for you," when your own face is distorted by contempt? It's this whole traveling road-show mentality all over again, playing a holier-than-thou part instead of just living your part. Wipe that ugly sneer off your own face, and you might be fit to offer a wash-cloth to your neighbor. (Matt. 7:1–2 Message)

The process of becoming such a leader will be the focus of our attention in the next chapter.

SELF-ASSESSMENT QUESTIONS

1. Think of an issue currently troubling your family or congregation. Reflect on these two questions: What is my role in keeping this problem in place? How can I change my role?
2. How would you describe the workings of one of the key emotional triangles you are a part of? Who are the other two players? What typically gets the triangle going? Do you usually find your-self on the inside or the outside during a time of

anxiety? If you wanted to get the triangle going, what would you need to do?

3. Of the four symptoms of chronic anxiety discussed in this chapter, which do you most typically see in your congregational system? How about in your own family?
4. If you were able to see the current issue in your congregation as a symptom of anxiety rather than as the problem, what additional options of response would be available to you?