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James Knill

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EFFECTIVE LEADERSHIP IN SMALL GROUP MINISTRY
THROUGH THE APPLICATION OF FAMILY SYSTEMS THEORY
TO THE GROUP PROCESS

James R. Knill

December 15, 1994

Concordia Seminary
Saint Louis, Missouri

~~Advisor~~ Dr. Joseph H. Barbour

8 March 1995
DATE

~~Reader~~ Dr. Glenn A. Nielsen

6 March 1995
DATE

Director, Doctor of Ministry Program
Dr. Arthur D. Bacon

22 February 1995
DATE

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TO THE GROUP PROCESS

A MAJOR APPLIED PROJECT
SUBMITTED TO THE DOCTOR OF MINISTRY COMMITTEE
AND DIRECTOR IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF MINISTRY

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BY

JAMES R. KNILL

TRIANGLE, VIRGINIA

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PREFACE

This project combines two primary interests of the author: small group ministry and family systems theory, with a distinct emphasis on the latter. Although family systems theory developed primarily in the course of clinical research and practice in the fields of nuclear and extended family systems (Goldenberg and Goldenberg 1991), it is a principle of the theory, particularly as expressed by Murray Bowen (1985), that family systems theory applies to any natural system. Edwin Friedman (1985) and Peter Steinke (1993) have demonstrated the usefulness of the theory in the life and operation of the church.

On the basis of a search of the literature and interviews with knowledgeable representatives in the field of systems theory and in the field of small group ministry, the author knows of no other attempt to join the concept of systems theory and the operation of small groups in the church. Subjects of the interviews included Edwin Friedman (1993), author of Generation to Generation: Family Process in Church and Synagogue, Lyman Coleman (1993), leader in the field of small group work for more than twenty years and founder of Serendipity House publications, Bob Logan (1993), identified by a representative of Fuller Theological

Seminary as the foremost authority in the field of church planting, and Lester Stroh (1993), founder of Cornerstone Consulting, former special assistant to Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod President, Ralph Bohlmann, and nation-wide conductor of seminars on how groups work.

The goal of the project is to develop a means to improve the effectiveness of small group leaders through the application of elements of family systems theory. The thesis of the author is that no matter how effective a small group leader may be, he or she will have the opportunity to be even more effective as a caring leader through the informed application of family systems theory in the small group setting.

Although systems theory should apply to any small group, the particular expression of small group ministry that will serve as the focus of the author's emphasis on leadership development is the kind found in a growing number of congregations at the present time. These are the gatherings that take place when congregations encourage their members to come together on a regular basis in groups of approximately ten individuals for the purpose of mutual support, growth in the Word, encouragement in the Christian life and, often, for outreach or some other form of Christian service. Others have used this approach to start new missions. The author will explore the concept further in the Why Small Groups? section of Chapter I.

The specific methodology the author employed in support of this thesis is the development of a manual for training small group leaders. The manual includes background information on family systems theory for the benefit of the instructor. The section for the instructor also includes a theological basis for the application of family systems theory to the small group process in a Christian setting.

The rest of the manual consists of four training modules for small group leaders. The first is a general introduction to family systems theory and its application to the small group process. The three other modules emphasize the application of principles of self-differentiation, homeostasis and emotional triangles in groups. Each module has a training outline for the instructor to reproduce and distribute to all trainees.

The author developed the modules that appear in the training manual in consultation with small group leaders in his congregation. Following an introductory orientation to family systems theory, reproduced in large measure as the first of the four training modules in Chapter III, the leaders and the author selected three elements of the theory for the author to present as training modules for small group leaders.

The author developed those modules and presented them during regular small group leader monthly meetings. Leaders

responded to each presentation through an evaluation form prepared by the author. Appendixes A through C present composite evaluations of the training modules on differentiation, homeostasis and emotional triangles.

During the month following each presentation the leaders were to apply the principle addressed in the training session in their small groups, to the extent they were able and circumstances permitted. At the next monthly meeting leaders provided oral feedback to the author on their experiences. The author used information from the evaluation forms and from leader oral feedback to revise and further develop each of the three modules involved in that process.

ABSTRACT

The premise of this project is that small group leaders can become more effective and caring through the application of family systems theory, specifically Bowenian theory, to the leadership process. The author developed a four-part training manual that provides a general orientation to family systems thinking for group leaders, with a specific focus on self-differentiation, homeostasis or balance, and emotional triangles. All leaders indicated improved ability to work with groups and in other settings as self-differentiated persons, though some wanted to understand the concepts more completely. All felt they were more effective leaders following the training process.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Why Small Groups?

In recent years it has been demonstrated once again that it is appropriate for the church, meaning the body of believers, to meet in the face-to-face context of small group settings as well as in the larger community for public worship services (Snyder 1975 and Wuthnow 1994). Howard A. Snyder (1975) was one of the pioneers in the latter part of this century to promote small group ministry. Snyder called the attention of the church to a need to develop new ways to structure itself that would involve Christian lay persons more directly in the Christian life and mission. He saw the development of cell groups as a way to meet this need.

About the same time Oscar E. Feucht (1974), Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod Secretary for Adult Education, referred to cell ministry as a way to develop the ministry of the laity. He wrote of the "paramount importance" of the ministry of the laity for the contemporary situation: *"The church is facing a losing battle unless it equips its laity for mission where they are in life"* (italics his) (Feucht 1974, 123-124).

The precedent for worshiping in house settings as well as in the larger community goes back to the Old Testament. Abraham worshiped God outside his tent (Genesis 15:5-6). Yet when he was to offer the special sacrifice of his son, Isaac, God directed him to Mount Moriah (Genesis 22:2), which, nearly a thousand years later, became the site of the temple God directed Solomon to build for public worship gatherings. The Israelites of the Exodus called upon God for deliverance from Egypt and sacrificed the lambs of the first Passover in their homes (Exodus 12:21-28). Yet during the Exodus journey God directed Moses to construct a "tabernacle" (Exodus 26:1 NIV) where the people gathered for prayer and sacrifice and to hear words from God delivered through their leader. Following the construction of the temple there was a rhythm to the worship life of the people. They carried out their faith life in their homes scattered throughout the land for most of the year. Intermittently they came together for large festival celebrations.

We know from the Book of Acts (Acts 2:46-47) that the first Christians met daily in the temple courts and also met and worshiped in their homes. When, through persecution and isolation, the existing public gathering place was no longer available, the Christian church continued to grow through the first two centuries as it gathered in the homes of individuals. According to church historian Walter Oetting,

If you had asked, "Where is the church?" in any important city of the ancient world where Christianity

had penetrated in the first century, you would have been directed to a group of worshipping people gathered in a house. There was no special building or other tangible wealth with which to associate "church," only people!

When Justin Martyr, (c. 150) was executed because of his Christian faith, the Roman official asked him to reveal the homes where the Christians worshiped. Justin answered, "Where each wills and can. Do you really think that we all meet in the same place?" (Oetting 1964, 25.)

According to Oetting, the first traces of special places for worship occurred in the writings of Clement of Alexandria, from around the year 200 (Oetting 1964), although Snyder (1975) writes of larger public gatherings under the streets of Rome in the catacombs. Christians gathered there in groups up to fifty in number to celebrate the Eucharist in connection with the burial and remembrance of the dead.

It was not until the middle of the third century that Christians began to build special structures for worship in significant numbers (Snyder 1975). Apparently this construction began under the protection of the Persian empire as a way of encouraging Christian loyalty to the Persians rather than to Rome. After the year 300, many of these buildings were destroyed under persecutions carried out by the Emperor Diocletian.

Following the conversion of the Emperor Constantine to Christianity and the Edict of Milan in 315, Christianity became a recognized, sanctioned and protected religion. According to Snyder (1975) it was from this time that the

Christian community began to shift its center for worship gatherings from private homes to public buildings. Snyder suggests that this shift, including the design of public worship buildings with separate sections for preaching and other functions performed by the clergy, began to foster a separation between the clergy and the laity. This separation worked against the sense of warmth, closeness and unity that had existed among believers in small house group settings.

Martin Luther wrote favorably of the concept of small house or cell group gatherings of Christians. In 1526, in a work called "The German Mass and Order of Service," he proposed the following concept:

Those who want to be Christians in earnest and who profess the gospel with hand and mouth should sign their names and meet alone in a house somewhere to pray, to read, to baptize, to receive the sacrament, and to do other Christian works. According to this order, those who do not lead Christian lives could be known, reproved, corrected, cast out, or excommunicated, according to the rule of Christ, Matthew 18 [:15-17]. Here one could also solicit benevolent gifts to be willingly given and distributed to the poor, according to St. Paul's example, II Corinthians 9. Here would be no need of much and elaborate singing. Here one could set up a brief and neat order for baptism and the sacrament and center everything on the Word, prayer, and love. Here one would need a good short catechism on the Creed, the Ten Commandments, and the Our Father.

. . . . If I should be requested to (begin such a[n] assembly), . . . I should gladly do my part and help as best I can. (Luther, American Edition 1965, 53:64.)

This brief survey indicates that small group settings for worship and for nurturing the faith pre-date public gathering places in both the Old and New Testaments and

often continued in complementary fashion with large public gatherings following the construction of temple or church locations. The concept of bringing small groups of Christians together for nurture, accountability and fellowship continued to find favor over the centuries.

Christian fellowship is two-dimensional. It is an expression of our relationship with God and our relationship with one another. Fellowship with one another grows stronger when there is a clear and open opportunity for communication between believers. The traditional worship setting provides a significant measure of fellowship as we share in our prayers, in our singing, in communion and in the passing of the peace. However, this setting is not well-designed for more than the briefest personal intercommunication among believers. Small groups provide a better context for meeting that need.

Snyder (1975) draws four conclusions with respect to *koinonia*, or the special kind of fellowship God has created for Christians to enjoy: (1) The church must make sufficient provision to be gathered together if it is to experience *koinonia*. (2) The church must meet together in a way that permits and encourages *koinonia* to flourish. The traditional worship service is not designed for significant intercommunication. (3) There must be a measure of freedom in terms of opportunities for interaction and communication. The church must provide structures which are sufficiently

informal and open to permit this freedom. (4) Church structure must provide for Bible study and the context of community.

Carl C. George, writing in Prepare Your Church for the Future, spells out in some detail the advantages of small group gatherings as expressions of the fellowship of the body of believers. His understanding of the nature of the church would be more complete with a clear reference to the church's Word and Sacrament base (Tappert 1959, 32), but he makes a strong case for the incorporation of small group ministry into the life of the church. He writes:

(The *small group* or the *cell group*) is, I contend, the most strategically significant foundation for spiritual formation and assimilation, for evangelism and leadership development, for the most essential functions that God has called for in the church." (George 1991, 41).

The incidence of small group ministry as an expression of congregational life appears to be on the rise (Wuthnow 1994). A number of denominational and independent congregations in this country and throughout the world have begun to put the concept into practice in recent years. Examples include Calvary Baptist Church, Keene, New Hampshire; Cornerstone Church (Mennonite), Broadway, Virginia; Jersey Shore Evangelical Free Church, Brick, New Jersey; The Open Fellowship (Nazarene), Houston, Texas; New Hope Community Church, Portland, Oregon; Willow Creek Community Church, South Barrington, Illinois; Prince of

Peace Lutheran Church, Carrollton, Texas and Trinity Lutheran Church, Jackson, Michigan.¹

The world's largest congregation, the Yoido Full Gospel Church, in Seoul, Korea, is reported to have a membership of over 600,000, with the members gathering regularly in more than 55,000 small groups or cell groups (Schaller 1990a). Other large congregations with a small group orientation exist in Australia, Ethiopia, the Ivory Coast, South America, Russia, and England (Egli 1993).

In addition to providing an effective means for personal interaction, caring and growth in large congregations, the small group concept has been recommended as an instrument for growth and outreach in small congregations and in mission development (Hadaway, DuBose and Wright 1987). The Board for Mission Services of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod has employed elements of small group ministry, specifically the meta-church concept.² Dr. Robert Scudieri, Area Secretary for North America in the LCMS, values small group ministry because the small group model provides an "extended family" setting for spiritual growth, nurture, love and service (Scudieri 1992). Scudieri identifies nine strengths of the small group:

1. Smaller units provide caring and accountability
2. Higher quality of learning

¹Some of these churches are known to the author. Others are documented in Beckham (1993).

²Developed by Carl George (1991).

3. Meaningful participation in ministry
4. Support system for leaders
5. Built-in process for assimilating new members
6. Avoids attendance plateaus
7. Better system for supervision
8. Size not limited by money or size of building
9. Not culture specific (Scudieri 1992).

The small group approach allows a personalized approach to ministry in large congregations as well as in small congregations. Pastors with larger congregations simply are not able to provide the kind of personal attention to members most would like to offer. According to Scudieri (1992), one pastor can minister with reasonable effectiveness to one hundred people. Beyond that, effective ministry calls for additional volunteer or paid staff, unless the church becomes a congregation of small groups.

A program-based approach to congregational ministry does not readily meet the personal needs of members for nurture and growth any more than a pastoral or staff-based ministry. Church programs that engage larger numbers of members in activities frequently do not offer the occasions for caring mutual support, healthy accountability and encouragement people find in small groups.

Robert Scudieri appears to be convinced that the program-based approach to ministry is inadequate. He believes the program-based church will "go the way of the polyester leisure suit" (Scudieri 1992).

Small group ministry has the potential to enable a congregation to involve a higher percentage of its lay

members directly in occasions for Christian growth and service than is ordinarily possible through a program-based ministry. Programs designed to involve lay members often reach only limited numbers of members, or they reach larger numbers for a limited time. Some programs, particularly those of an instructional nature, involve members in ways that are more passive than even the organizers may prefer.

Dr. Alvin Barry, President of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, has written of the potential for small groups to enhance pastoral ministry. He points out that developing groups of caring, loving Christian friends can be a way of "combatting the tendency toward individualism that we notice more and more in our society, and in our church" (Barry 1993, 5-A). Barry also noted that small groups, specifically the meta-church concept, offer "a refreshing change from the tendency that sometimes develops in a parish of simply maintaining the physical facilities and of forming committees to do nothing but the 'business' of the church" (Barry 1993, 5-A). He identified this ministry as a way for lay people to bring friends, relatives and co-workers into the church and even as a possible way to start new congregations (Barry 1993).

According to Feucht (1974), Snyder (1975), George (1991) and others, incorporation of the laity in the mission of the church is a most appropriate expression of the Body of Christ. A trained, supportive ministry of the laity

provides a valuable way to enlist the many talents of this large group in the full mission of the church.

A congregation that actively develops a small group ministry opens the door for a very high percentage of its members to come into contact with God's Word and with one another in this special setting that has been common to Christians since the days of the early church. Elements of fellowship, witness, nurture, worship and service touch all members in a small group across a spectrum as broad as all of life and as individualized as the persons gathered in the setting of that group.

Groups pray together and for one another. They share the Word of God as it relates to the lives of the individuals in their groups. They reach out to others in the love of Christ that has been nurtured in them through the small group process. They often engage in service projects for the benefit of the larger church community or for the mission of the church beyond the congregation.

Small groups can involve up to 80% or more of a congregation's members (George 1991), whether the church is large or small. Yet every gathering is personal and personalized, with ordinarily no more than ten individuals coming together in any given time or place.

At the same time group members join with other church members, usually on Sunday mornings, in public worship centered around Word and Sacrament. These corporate worship

experiences are a vital part of a complementary balance of the vertical and the horizontal dimensions of the Christian life. Robert Wuthnow, Director of the Center for the Study of American Religion at Princeton University, identifies this complementary relationship when he says:

People get (the vertical dimension) in traditional religious worship services. The best use of small groups occurs in a balanced church program. Small groups provide a little Bible study, a time to pray together. But people also go to Sunday School class, where they're getting hard-nosed instruction, or participate in the worship service, which is designed to give glory to God. They are also active in some kind of service program either outside the church or connected to the church. The small group is then just one piece of a larger religious package. (Broadway 1994, C7).

A congregation that incorporates small group ministry and the best larger gathering programming it can offer is positioned for a balanced ministry that can meet the needs of individual members and equip them to meet the challenges of daily Christian living and witnessing. The benefits of this complementary approach to congregational ministry seem significant for the life and well-being of the church.

A model for the design, structure and implementation of small group ministry in a congregational setting exists in a four-part video series, Church Extension Through Leadership Development, by Robert Scudieri (1992). Scudieri relies heavily on material developed by Carl George (1991). Those two resources provide an excellent foundation for any congregation interested in the development of a small group ministry.

With the potential to accomplish so much in, through and for the Body of Christ through small groups, it is clear that a need can develop for a significant number of group leaders. It is likely that most small group leaders will be lay persons, at least for the reason that the potential number of groups very likely exceeds the number of professional staff in any congregation. Leaders will serve as important assistants in the total caregiving ministry of a congregation.

Whatever the reservoir that will provide the pool of leaders for small groups, it will be important for group leaders to have good training. The church will want group leaders to be as well-equipped as possible and as effective as possible in their leadership positions.

A number of programs for training lay group leaders exist. Two of the most effective known to the author are "Groups, Groups, Groups," a program developed by Les Stroh of Cornerstone Ministries, in St. Louis,³ and the Stephen Ministries Small Group Ministry System. The Stephen Ministries organization is also based in St. Louis.⁴

Neither of these organizations use the family systems concept in their training at the present time. It is the author's belief that an orientation in the basic elements of

³Cornerstone Consulting, 431 Longview Blvd., St. Louis, MO 63122.

⁴Stephen Ministries, 8016 Dale, St. Louis, MO 63117-1449.

family systems theory will help well-trained leaders become even more effective in their position as leaders of small groups.

Why Family Systems?

The principles of family systems theory apply across a broad spectrum of relationships, including relationships in families, in businesses and in institutional settings, such as the church (Preister 1985, Friedman 1985). It is the author's contention that relationships in small group settings also lie within that spectrum.

Murray Bowen (1985) developed the particular expression of systems theory that provides the foundation for this paper. Edwin Friedman (1985) applied the theory to relationships in religious institutions. The author has relied heavily on Friedman's work for the application of family systems theory to leadership in small groups in the church.

Friedman (1985) asserts that the continuum of the family process extends from nuclear and extended family relationships into every avenue of life where or when a number of individuals engage in a relationship long enough for that relationship to become a system. He shows how the emotional and interactive processes at work in the home and across generational lines assert themselves in work systems, school systems, social systems, church hierarchy systems, and congregational systems. All human systems behave like

families in certain fundamental ways. Since Friedman (1991) believes the family is the basic system in the human experience, he maintains it is consistent to describe and express the processes at work in families as functional in all human systems.

Congregations behave like families (Steinke 1993). According to Steinke (1993) and Friedman (1985), congregations are sets of individuals that have been together long enough to become a unique system or field. The field continues even though specific individuals move in or out of the system over time. It is a premise of this paper that when small groups of four to fourteen⁵ come together around a common interest over a period of time, those groups become identifiable systems with their own unique characteristics. The unique character of the group tends to remain, even though different individuals move in and out of the system. Principles of systems theory apply to small groups as they do to congregations and other systems.

A second, and critical, premise of this paper is that group leaders who have a basic understanding of family systems theory and who can apply principles of systems thinking in the context of their group experience will have the opportunity to be more effective leaders. Leaders who understand the concept of self-differentiation (Bowen 1985)

⁵The best number is ten (George 1991).

and who can define themselves clearly while remaining relatively nonanxious, that is, not caught up in others' or their own stress (Bowen 1985), will be able to lead their groups more effectively. The basis for their leadership will not be so much what they know or what they can do. The basis for their leadership will be who they are (Friedman 1985).

Self-differentiation and a number of other family systems concepts, including homeostasis, or balance, and emotional triangles (Bowen 1985) are explained in the following chapters. Leaders who understand that any established group becomes an organic system that works hard to keep itself in balance and tends to resist change will be equipped to help facilitate change without manipulation or coercion (Friedman 1985). Leaders who can identify emotional triangles within the system of a group can learn to "detriangle" relationships and help individuals address stress in their relationships in ways that will benefit everyone who is involved (Friedman 1985). Understanding the concept of emotional triangles will produce a carry-over benefit that will help leaders and group members address triangles that reach across the boundary (Minuchin 1981) of the group system to include other individuals, families, groups, or the congregation itself (Friedman 1985).

CHAPTER II

AN ORIENTATION TO FAMILY SYSTEMS THINKING

The Development of Systems Thinking

Family systems theory has its roots in the field of cybernetics (Goldenberg and Goldenberg 1991). In the 1940's a series of conferences sponsored by the Josiah Macy Foundation in New York focused on communication in terms of feedback mechanisms in machines and in humans. Until that time the mechanical world and the psychodynamic world were thought to be governed by laws of linear causality, as demonstrated in Newtonian physics and Freudian psychology (Goldenberg and Goldenberg 1991).

The Macy Conferences proposed a new way of looking at how systems work. The new theory proposed that systems retain their stability through a process of feedback or self-regulation by reinserting the results of past performance into current functioning.

Norbert Wiener (1948), a mathematician and major contributor in the development of computers, coined the term *cybernetics* to express the feedback process. "Cybernetics" is from the Greek word for steersman. The word suggests the process of guiding a ship through feedback mechanisms.

Applications of cybernetic-feedback principles in systems theory led to the development of the computer and its use in sophisticated naval, air and space guidance systems (Goldenberg and Goldenberg 1991). In addition to the fields of mechanical and electronics engineering, utilization of systems theory has led to an understanding of the functioning of the brain and of interpersonal relationships in the human sphere of existence (Guttman 1991).

Gregory Bateson (1987), an anthropologist and ethnologist who attended the Macy Conferences, applied some of the mathematical and engineering concepts introduced at those conferences to the social and behavioral sciences. He was particularly interested in the application of those cybernetic principles to the process of human communication.

Bateson (1987) introduced the idea that a family might be its own cybernetic system. If a family achieves its stability, either functional or dysfunctional, through a feedback process that incorporates and acts on information from all other parts of the family's system, then change can affect future performance by altering the system's feedback information.¹

¹As in the use of paradoxical interventions in psychotherapy to bring about change by prescribing, in very specific ways, that a person remain unchanged. See, for example, Weeks and L'Abate (1982).

Family relationships and family health are a matter of feedback or interactive processes among all constituents. The family relationship picture consists of much more than simple linear connections between two members of a family (Bowen 1985). Individuals or parts of a system are understood by their position in the system or by the function they serve in the system (Friedman 1985).

Issues between individuals or within families are functions of process much more than functions of content. Rather than A causing B, which acts upon C and causes D, A and B "cause" each other, as neither "is" exactly what they are without the existence of the other (Goldenberg and Goldenberg 1991).

Perhaps the first person to present a theoretical construct that recognized the importance of transactional processes in explaining and understanding how a system works was a biologist, Ludwig von Bertalanffy. Bertalanffy (1968) advanced the idea that the life of a system is more than a simple combination or addition of the components of the system and what each contributes to it. The whole of a system, as Bertalanffy proposed, is greater than the sum of its individual parts. Understanding the *interaction* between the various components of a system is crucial and necessary for understanding the operation of the system as a whole.

According to this way of thinking, it is not structure that defines an object but the way an object is organized,

as understood by the interactive pattern of its parts. A human being, for example, is a living demonstration of a holistic integration of a set of interacting systems. A person is much more than an organism consisting of a number of systems regulated through a linear relationship with the brain. According to Bowen (1985), a human being is defined as a number of interacting systems whose interactive processes give it a singular character that is more than the sum of its parts and includes spiritual as well as material or mechanistic elements.

Over time, theorists developed a view that the cybernetic-feedback understanding of system functioning was not limited to intrasystem phenomena. Some proposed multi-layered schema that indicated the inter-connectedness of all systems, from cells to satellites. Behavioral scientist J. G. Miller (1978) proposed that all phenomena described by the biological and social sciences exist in a multi-layered and interconnected hierarchy of systems. The continuum increases in complexity from cells to organs, then on to organisms, groups (including families), organizations, societies or nations and supranational systems.²

The Development of Family Systems Thinking

Nathan Ackerman may have been the first person in the field of mental health to incorporate systems interaction in

²See Sundberg, Tyler and Taplin (1973, 102, figure 4-2).

therapeutic work, although Freud treated "Little Hans" through the supervised efforts of Hans' father (Goldenberg and Goldenberg 1991). Ackerman broke with the psychoanalytic regimen of dealing only with individuals as early as 1937. In a posthumously published work, he wrote:

Over a period of some thirty-five years I have extended my orientation to the problems of behavior, step-by-step, from the inner life of the person, to the person within family, to the family within community, and most recently to the social community itself. (Ackerman 1972, 449.)

Goldenberg and Goldenberg (1991) identify two probable "firsts" in the field of family therapy by lesser-known and lesser-recognized individuals. Christian Midelfort, a psychoanalyst at Lutheran Hospital in La Crosse, Wisconsin, presented a paper at the 1952 American Psychiatric Association that reported on the treatment of psychiatric patients and their families. Less than a decade later John Bell, a psychologist at Clark University in Worcester, Massachusetts, was the first to report therapeutic work with an entire family on a regular basis.

In the 1960's, Jay Haley, Don Jackson, Virginia Satir, and others, at the Mental Research Institute (MRI) in Palo Alto, California, began to incorporate treatment from what would be called a systems perspective (Haley 1971). Therapy focused on a family's structure and its members' interaction rather than on intrapsychic phenomena and linear relationships between individuals.

Salvador Minuchin (1974) developed a structural family therapy that relies on changing the family or group structure to relieve symptoms within the system.³ Virginia Satir contributed to the growth of the family approach to therapy with the publication of Conjoint Family Therapy (Satir 1967).

Murray Bowen (1985) developed an approach to family systems thinking that expressed concepts of general systems theory in multi-generational relationships. He described the effects of multi-generational processes on the functioning of individuals in their present-day family systems (Goldenberg and Goldenberg 1991). Since Bowen's theory is much more encompassing than general family systems theory, he chose to distinguish his work by calling it Bowen theory (Bowen 1985).

The Contribution of Bowen Theory to Family Systems Thinking

Bowen (Kerr and Bowen 1988) saw all natural systems as interconnected, both across space and across time. He elaborated the family systems approach from a therapeutic regimen in the field of mental health to a theoretical construct that provides an integrated way of looking at the whole world and, in fact, all of creation.

There are three fundamental characteristics of Bowen theory that are truly distinctive. One of these

³See also Minuchin and Fishman (1981).

characteristics is its breadth of perspective (Friedman 1991). According to Friedman, the fact that Bowenian theory can be applied to families is almost incidental to its wider focus that includes the entire human family and, beyond that, "all of protoplasm, if not all of creation" (Friedman 1991, 135).

A second fundamental characteristic of Bowen's theory is its perspective of universals (Friedman 1991). Bowen theory tends to place the full range of phenomena on a continuum that eliminates or distinctly reduces the significance of categories such as nature/nurture, illness/health and even past/present (Bowen 1985). Friedman believes Bowen theory has the potential for being "a true paradigm shift" that challenges the thinking in all the social sciences, particularly because of the way it "reformats traditional dichotomies in the field" (Friedman 1991, 135). In terms of the subject of this paper, those "traditional dichotomies" include thinking/feeling, one decision/another decision, and leader/follower.

A third characteristic of Bowenian theory is its emphasis on the emotional being of the therapist (Friedman 1991). The person whose function is to help others become whole is more effective as he or she becomes more whole. In Bowenian theory, the differentiation of the therapist is technique (Friedman 1991). The continuum of the helper being helped also incorporates the client in the healing

process. The helped client, in turn, helps those around him or her through his or her new level of differentiation, and on, and on, and on, across interlocking systems and across time.

The connections are interactive, but the method of growth through contact with one who is differentiated is more than simple modeling. It is closer to *experiencing the being* of the differentiated person (Bowen 1985).

In terms of feedback and systems operation, Bowen's work is reminiscent of Bateson (1987), the anthropologist who introduced the idea that a family might be its own cybernetic system, and Miller (1978), who described all living systems as interconnected in a hierarchy of systems. However, Bowen's scope is more universal than the constructs of either of the other two. Bowen (Kerr and Bowen 1988, and Friedman 1991) demonstrated the continuity of all creation in the fields of astronomy and immunology, as well as in the family. He has shown how his theory applies in all forms of institutional life and work systems, as well as in all the social sciences.

Friedman (1991) points out interesting implications of this alternative way of thinking for the revitalization of institutions. He professes that changing the structure and organization of an institution, such as the church, will not bring about lasting change, but that change in the way the

leader defines himself will bring real change to the institution.

According to Bowen theory, the same principle will hold for the introduction of lasting change into a small group. Change in the position of the constellation of leadership in the system of the institution or the group is the most effective way to bring change to the organization.

Basic Concepts of Bowen's Family Systems Theory

Families, clubs, sports franchises, corporations, churches -- and small groups, according to Bowen theory, are all systems that lie somewhere on the spectrum of the same continuum. Constructs which apply to one will apply to another and to all (Friedman 1991).

Bowen theory identifies four "seminal constructs" or interlocking concepts (Friedman 1991) that are basic to the operation of all systems. They are differentiation of self, emotional system, multi-generational transmission and the emotional triangle. Bowen (1985) developed four other concepts that grew out of the first four but are less fundamental to the theory. They are: nuclear family emotional system, family projection process, sibling position and societal regression.

Bowen started to develop a ninth concept, spirituality, that might have provided a helpful complement to the other elements of the theory in terms of a truly holistic perspective on life. His attention was diverted to

a more extensive examination of the disintegration of society (Friedman 1994), a nagging inconsistency for anyone committed to belief in evolutionary development.

For Bowen and Friedman evolutionary development is a given (Bowen 1985, Friedman 1985), but a given the author believes is not crucial to the viability of systems theory. This paper attempts to demonstrate, although only in passing, a basis for systems theory derived from an investigation of God's revealed Word.

The author will elaborate on three of Bowen's "seminal" constructs in the next chapter and in the training modules that follow. Multi-generational transmission, though perhaps the most uniquely Bowenian dimension of Bowen theory, will receive only passing attention in the leader introduction section of the manual and in the training modules. It is the author's opinion that understanding the concept of multi-generational transmission is not central to a small group leader's introduction to family systems theory.

An orientation to multi-generational transmission, the "presence of the past" (Friedman 1991, 147) would be extremely useful as part of an in-depth follow-up to the basic introductory material that constitutes these training modules. The purpose for an additional module on this subject would be to develop a greater understanding of the intricate mix of influences that impact each individual in

the group from across generational lines. The principle focus of this series, however, is the present context of the small group setting, apart from much attention to the past circumstances of participating individuals. The author will alert the instructor and the leader-trainees to the reality of influences from the past without going into much detail.

The Broad Applicability of Bowen's Family Systems Theory

It is an assumption of this paper that the principles of Bowen theory or family systems theory apply to small group life. The reason is not just that group life mirrors family life in some ways but that the principles of family systems theory apply to any emotional field (Friedman 1991).

Gurman and Kniskern describe the Bowen approach as "extraordinary in its differentness from so much of the field" (Gurman and Kniskern 1991, 137, footnote) in its belief in the universal applicability of the theory. Speakers at several Georgetown Family Center symposia have presented papers that apply the theory to many other fields, including ethnology, sociobiology, whales, and slime molds, as well as to subjects that deal specifically with the family (Friedman 1991).

The unified field theory offers a connection between all life forms and systems. Bowen theory suggests that humans, "being colonies of cells, colonize like their cells" (Friedman 1991, 136). The parallel is that all systems develop the same kind of emotional fields.

According to Bowen theory, just as there is a continuum between all life forms and a continuum between components within a structure (Bowen 1985), so there is a continuum in a group between the leader and the members of the group. The leader assists the group most effectively by creating a vision for its existence and in defining its goals and reaching them as he or she remains differentiated and nonanxious in the midst of any reactivity that might exist in the system.⁴

Theological Dimensions of Bowen Theory

Bowenian theory is a field theory that, in the author's opinion, reflects the realities of the created order revealed in Scripture at least as well as any other natural systems theory. Bowen (Kerr and Bowen 1988) and Friedman (1985) do not attempt to make a direct connection between their view and the revealed Word about creation, as far as the author knows, although Friedman (1985) does refer to creation. Both work instead with interpolations of observable earthly and celestial data (Bowen 1985 and Friedman 1985) and the limitations of that approach in their quest for ultimate causes or primal events. Yet both come remarkably close to an understanding of revealed truth. They posit, for instance, that the first cell with a nucleus (rather than the first created beings) provided the locus

⁴More on this in the leader's introduction in the manual.

that defined the condition basic to the concept of differentiation, "giving rise to the existential, and perhaps biological, category of *self*" (Friedman 1991, 135).

Although Friedman's description fails to take into consideration what God has revealed about the origin of the first creatures, Bowenian theory is viable, in that it can apply to the creatures of Genesis 1. Adam certainly did incorporate the first human nucleated cells. It would seem that Friedman's conclusion remains valid, particularly to the human condition after the Fall:

Therefore, what we observe in families today -- the opposing forces for togetherness and self, the perpetual reactivity that undulates through any emotional system, the chronic anxiety that is transmitted from generation to generation, . . . -- are all a kind of background radiation that goes back to that "biological big bang." (Friedman 1991, 135).

Bowenian theory assumes that all humans are part of an emotional process that goes back to the beginning of time (Friedman 1991). The adjective "emotional" in Bowen's theory is intended to reflect a combination of physical and psychological properties or activities that are triggered into action through an instinctive or limbic reaction rather than through a cerebral or an intellectual determination (Bowen 1985).

The description of this "instinctive" emotional process that extends to the beginning of time in some ways seems to parallel the biblical description of original sin. Original sin extends back to a point near the beginning of

time. It is "instinctive," or basic, in the fallen nature of the human species. As Bowen identifies emotional processes with a reactivity or anxiety that debilitates human relationships, his observations can remind us of the effects of original sin.

While it is clear that original sin is far more serious and deadly than any inference in Bowen's theory recognizes in terms of its spiritual consequences for fallen humanity and its other debilitating effects on every aspect of creation (Psalm 51:5; John 3:6; Romans 5:12), his recognition of a flaw in the human condition that spoils personal relationships is an accurate observation of one of the consequences of original sin (Genesis 4:8). In biblical terms, since the Fall "all creation has been groaning . . . as we await eagerly for . . . the redemption of our bodies (Romans 8:22-23 NIV).

The field theory element of Bowen's theory subsumes a space-time connection that links the emotional fields evident in families today with experiences from the past (Friedman 1985). The Scriptures assert the effects of this connection when they remind us that God "punish(es) the children for the sins of the fathers to the third and fourth generation" (Exodus 20:5 NIV). The Romans 8 passage, cited above, puts us in touch with other realities that span space and time, including the multi-generational "groaning" of all creation.

The space-time dimension of Bowen's theory may seem unusual, but there are many ways to illustrate our connection with events that preceded us in time. Participation in the liturgy of the church links the worshiper with those who said and sang the same words in the Gelasian Sacramentary thirteen hundred years ago (Reed 1947).

A visit to the city of Nuremberg in the Land of the Reformation provides the traveler with the opportunity to hear the same church bells heard in 1518 by Albrecht Duer and Martin Luther. This experience unites the contemporary hearer with that 16th century resident and his visitor (von Loewenich 1986) and provides a shared auditory, visual and perhaps even spiritual experience that spans the centuries.

Our contact with God, the eternal and omnipresent Trinity, is the primary way we are in touch with the reality that crosses space and time and through which all are connected. God touches us, and we are privileged to touch Him, through the Scriptures, through the sacraments and through the process of prayer.

The Therapeutic Dimension of Family Systems Theory

While the small group leader is not a therapist, and need not attempt to function as one, there is value in understanding that family systems theory developed in a therapeutic context. An awareness that interpersonal and intrapersonal difficulties exist will be useful to the

leader. With a family systems orientation the leader will be free from (a) a need to "fix" any of those difficulties and (b) anxiety or personal responsibility for any stress those difficulties might generate (Friedman 1985).

A family systems approach to group leadership is truly therapeutic in that it promotes a context for healthy relationships in the group. As Peter Steinke has said, "The (differentiated) leader is the key to health within the group" (Steinke 1993).

The next chapter comprises the training manual. Each section following the introductory section for the instructor includes a training outline for use by those taking the course. Appendices A through C contain evaluations of presentations by the author of initial drafts of the modules on three specific areas of family systems theory to a group of four⁵ small group leaders in his congregation. Appendix D is an evaluation of the entire presentation and feedback session process by those four leaders.

⁵In one instance, five.

CHAPTER III

EFFECTIVE LEADERSHIP IN THE SMALL GROUP "FAMILY":

A TRAINING MANUAL

The purpose of this manual is to help group leaders become more effective in their leadership position. This will be accomplished by training current or potential leaders of small groups within the Christian community in principles of family systems theory. The manual consists of five sections: an introduction for the instructor and four training modules, with a training outline for each of the modules.

The first part provides information in five different areas to prepare the instructor to lead the course. Those five areas are: (1) A family systems approach to leadership, (2) the development of family systems thinking, (3) an elaboration of some major family systems principles, (4) a theological basis for employing family systems theory in a specifically Christian context, and (5) some practical details for presenting the course.

The first training module orients class members in family systems thinking and provides a general introduction to six key principles of family systems theory. The three remaining modules equip leaders to employ specific family

systems concepts as they lead small groups. Those concepts are: self-differentiation, homeostasis or balance, and emotional triangles.

An Introduction to Family Systems Training Modules
for the Instructor: Getting Started

The goal of this program is to provide a way to improve the leadership of everyone who participates, trainees and instructor. What you are about to begin has the potential for influencing the lives of many people. Beginning with your leadership you will influence current or potential leaders of small groups. Those leaders, in turn, will influence members of their groups. Many small group members will carry what they learn, and what they become in their groups, into other relationships in their lives.

The exciting thing about the process you will learn, called family systems theory or family systems thinking, is that it is not so much a *technique* as it offers a way to help you *to be* in relationship with others. At the same time, if you are more comfortable with nuts and bolts matters of technique, you will also find that here. As you conduct the course, you will discover that, in family systems, the techniques you introduce simply are expressions of a way of being in relationship.

From the perspectives of technique and being in relationship, family systems is something like the Christian life. To an outside observer it may appear that

Christianity is nothing more than a set of rules to follow or a series of "techniques," or things to do. In fact, the Christian life is an expression of a person's relationship with God through Jesus Christ. A certain way of life does not determine that a person is a Christian. The fact that a person is a Christian determines his or her way of life. In family systems, techniques do not determine systems thinking. Systems thinking determines the techniques that express it.

Instead of catechisms, commandments and creeds, in this series we will be talking about differentiation, homeostasis (ho-mee-oh-STA-sis) or balance, and triangles. As the former have become familiar and workable terms for you, so will the latter.

We will spend time looking into differentiation, homeostasis, emotional triangles and other family systems concepts later in this chapter. For now we will focus on a family systems orientation to leadership.

A Word about Leadership

Family systems sees everyone in a group in the same field, as stalks in the same corn field. Everyone in the group is in the same field. And everyone in the field is connected in some way to everyone else.

This means that in a group there is no division between "us and them" when it comes to the leader and the others. There is a difference, but there is no division.

The group is a whole organ, a whole system, that includes both the leader and all other members.

Rather than seeing the leader and the group as acting on one another, family systems sees the concept of leadership as leader and group functioning together as *integrated parts* in the same system. Everything the leader does, and everything the group does, is part of the activity of the whole system.

That the leader affects the group is not so much related to his or her personality or measure of authority. The leader affects the group primarily because of his or her *position* in the whole interconnected system.

This does not mean that what you or the leaders you train say or do is unimportant. It means that what you say or do becomes important because it comes from the *position* of the leader in the system. You and all other leaders use whatever personal leadership skills you have, but you do not need to think you must have a highly developed technique or a charismatic style in order to be an effective leader.

Understanding leadership from a family systems perspective frees a leader from any need to believe it is up to him or her to create a posture of leadership. There is no need for pressure to "succeed." Your position exists. You *will* have an effect on the group simply because of your position.

As a Christian, you have the additional advantage of prayer. You can bring your requests to your Heavenly Father for His guidance and support in your leadership role.

The leader is connected to the group as an organic part of the whole, just as a head is connected to the body. It may be a big head or a small head in proportion to the rest of the organism. It still affects the whole. It may be an attractive head or a homely-looking head. It still affects the body. The head affects the body *because it is connected*. The head affects the body because it is the head.

The head is connected to the body, but it is not stuck together with the body in some way that makes it impossible to distinguish the head from the rest of the body. The head maintains its distinctive function. Each member of the group, including the head, keeps his or her integrity as a self even though all are joined together in one group.

The effective leader, according to family systems thinking, is a "self-differentiated" leader. Edwin Friedman, author and lecturer in family systems work, expresses the concept of the self-differentiated leader in the following way:

If a leader will take primary responsibility for his or her own position as "head" and work to define his or her own goals and self, while *staying in touch* with the rest of the organism, there is a more than reasonable chance that the body will follow. There may be initial

resistance, but, if the leader can stay in touch with the resisters, the body will usually go along.¹

The most important feature of the self-differentiated leader is that he or she stays in touch with the group. An organic system, such as a cat, or an elephant or a person, remains effective as long as its parts are connected. In the same way a group remains effective as long as its "parts," including the head, remain connected.

A second basic feature of the self-differentiated leader is that the leader is able and willing to express his or her ideas, thoughts, positions and vision for the group clearly and without anxiety. The leader defines *himself* or *herself* and does not try to manipulate, control or "define" the followers. By following this process the leader expresses respect for the integrity of the others in the group but is also able to express his or her own position. The leader remains faithful to what he or she thinks or believes is an honest expression of his or her "self." Both elements need to exist side-by-side: connectedness and self-definition, before the leader can begin to have a positive effect on a group.

Initially, not everyone will be able to respond to a leader's clear expression of his or her own position without becoming anxious. A nonanxious response to the leader's

¹Edwin H. Friedman, Generation to Generation: Family Process in Church and Synagogue (New York: Guilford), 1985, 229. Much of the material on leadership in this section reflects Friedman's writing.

position may not be easy to achieve, if the leader's position is different from a member's position or from what the group expects. It seems part of human nature that we want others to think the way we do. If there is a difference between us, we tend to become anxious about that difference instead of simply stating our own position as clearly and freely as we can. Mutual expression of our own position is a goal of family systems thinking.

We also like to keep things the way they are. When others, including a leader, express a different position, we tend to resist that position or try to change it. Our reaction is not necessarily thought out. It is an emotional process that is almost automatic, like a reflex action.

It is in just such a situation that a leader can help a group member grow. The help comes not so much through modeling a better behavior. It comes as the leader continues to *be the person* who, in the midst of the anxious reactivity of the member, is able to express or define his or her position without getting caught up in the anxiety or reactivity of the other.

When the leader remains in contact with the reactive member and continues to define his or her position clearly and in a nonanxious manner, the member also is more likely to practice the same kind of self-definition. Simply being in the presence of such a well-defined person often leads to

better defined and less anxious behavior on the part of others.

When Mary, the leader, expresses her belief that it would benefit the group to meet on a different night and gives the reasons for her idea, some members might become upset about her suggestion. One member might say, "You always want to change things just when they start to work!" Another might assume a victim's role and say, "Whatever you say. After all, you're the leader." Someone else might respond, "You didn't like the idea I brought to the group last week!" While it may not be easy to remain calm in the face of any of these comments, the leader who can remain nonanxious and maintain the integrity of his or her own position while remaining connected with the others will help the group learn another way of relating.

By making it known that she welcomes others' expressions of their own positions, Mary can help less well-defined group members grow in the practice of expressing their own positions in a caring and connected manner. When all feel free to express their own positions, the decision-making process will be much more straightforward and decisions much more satisfying.

As the instructor in this leadership training series, you will have your own opportunity to be a self-defined, or a self-differentiated, leader. You will have the opportunity to express your own clearly thought-out ideas.

You will have the opportunity to maintain the integrity of your own position and at the same time remain connected to your group of trainees. You will be able to practice remaining nonanxious in the presence of anxious reactions in other group members. You will help the members in your group grow in their ability to define themselves, remain connected and nonanxious. And, perhaps the most important point of all, you will help your trainees most effectively not by *teaching* these principles but by *being* that kind of leader.

A Word about Family Systems

The introductory training module you will use contains some background material on family systems theory. You might want to read the section with the title, "Family Systems," now to help you become familiar with some of the basic elements of the concept.

As you can see from reading that section, the "family" element of family systems includes any group that has been together long enough to begin to develop its own identity. Friedman describes the concept of family in terms that will be familiar to groups that call themselves cells. He identifies a family as any colony of cells that exists in a natural system. Natural systems include biological families, but they also include business organizations, church denominations and small groups.

Any system is made up of its parts. Small groups are made up of their members, but the group has an identity that is more than the combination of its individual members. The system itself is larger than the sum of its parts. The group takes on its own identity through the interactions, interrelationships and intercommunications of all its members in different combinations. The group's identity continues to be shaped each time it meets. The mass of identifying characteristics grows over the life of the group and serves in an ongoing way to define the group's identity.

The way of describing how a group develops its identity and direction through the feedback of all its activities and communications into its own "system" comes from the cybernetic revolution that gained strength through the decade of the 1940s. The first training module provides more information on that development.

Those interested in the influence of cybernetics, such as Norbert Wiener, W. Q. Buckley, a social scientist, and Don Jackson, a family communications specialist, emphasized more of a mechanical feedback process than family systems theorist Murray Bowen. Bowen focused on what he called emotional systems as a "field" for interactions within a group system.²

²See Murray Bowen, Family Therapy in Clinical Practice (Northvale, N.J.: Jason Aronson), 1985.

An emotional system includes all the physical and psychological elements at work in a system. Emotional reactivity describes the way people within a system react in an anxious way to one another instinctively rather than rationally, particularly under conditions of stress.

The principles of emotional systems apply at all levels within the system. A person's psychological state can affect his or her physical well-being. Our spiritual condition affects our psychological state. A physically healthy body is less likely to become emotionally depressed. A spiritually healthy person is likely to maintain physically and emotionally higher levels of health.

Groups function in much the same way. Every part of a system affects every other part and touches every level of the group's experience. The spiritual climate of a group affects its social functioning. The physical setting affects its intellectual functioning. Every transaction in some way touches everyone else.

Group leaders can function more effectively as they become aware of how every element of the group process touches everyone in so many ways. Leaders can operate with a heightened awareness of the effect they have on the group at every level as they function in their position as leader in the system. This heightened sensitivity can elevate the level of leaders' caring connectedness with their groups. Their eyes can be open to see many opportunities for contact

at the various levels of group interaction. The whole process of leadership can be an especially rich experience from a family systems perspective.

A Look at Six Principle Concepts of Family Systems Theory

The initial training module will provide you with basic information about these six concepts. Three additional modules will elaborate further on self-differentiation, balance or homeostasis, and emotional triangles. You may find it helpful to orient yourself in each of these areas by reading the appropriate section in the introductory training module before you look at the material under the same heading in this section.

Process Versus Content

When we see all emotional systems as part of a field where every part is connected with every other part in the field, we can see that every action that touches any single part in that field affects every other part. That is the *process* of interaction in a system. When you throw a pebble in a pond, the action of the pebble on the water where it strikes sets up a wave-effect that stretches over the water well beyond the point of initial impact. When you consider that the effect of your pebble striking the water extends far beyond what the eye can see in terms of depth and even in terms of distance, you can understand how your action has affected and changed the relationship of the molecules of

water in the entire pond -- or even the entire ocean, if that is where you were standing when you sent off your projectile.

Our actions affect all others in our field, some more noticeably and some less noticeably. There is no such thing as simple linear contact. One billiard ball striking only one other ball affects the relationship of all the balls on the table. This concept helps leaders understand that every contact of one member of a group with any other member affects, in some way, all members of the group and the group itself as a system. Actions by the leader have a similar effect, except the leader's action carries special "weight," because of the position he or she occupies.

In terms of process versus content, the interrelationship of all elements in a system indicates that all communications in a group, all contacts, all conflicts, all decision-making, is part of a process that touches all members. There is much more than the simple "content" of a transaction, whether it is a friendly conversation, an instruction, an argument, a vote, or a prayer. The content of that transaction becomes part of the process that affects the entire system.

An informed leader can be sensitive to the "ripple-effect" of group processes on all members and on the system itself. An alert leader will understand how his or her comments or actions will have an impact on the whole system,

whether those comments or actions initially touch the entire group or only one member. All members are in the same interactive field.

Overfunctioning/Underfunctioning

This concept is easy to understand. It follows the rhythm of opposites. If one thing is in, something else is out. If one thing is up, another thing is down. If something is hot, somewhere something is cold. If one person overfunctions, that is, does more than he or she needs to do for a balanced life or relationship in a system, one or more other elements in the system will underfunction.

Systems like to be in balance. The surface of a pond "likes" to be even. When a pebble makes a depression in the surface, the surrounding water rises in essentially an equal and opposite reaction. This rhythm repeats itself, forming a bull's-eye pattern, until the energy from the impact of the pebble dissipates, and calm returns to the surface.

When someone introduces extra energy into the group's system by overfunctioning, others will work to preserve the balance of the system by underfunctioning. They may not know what they are doing, but the effect is the same as if they did.

The person who overfunctions in a group is often the leader or other member of the group with a specific responsibility who has become anxious about carrying out that responsibility. The harder a person in that position

"tries," the less good it seems to do in terms of raising the functioning level of the others.

The wave concept of family systems can help anyone who is overfunctioning understand the futility of that anxious approach as a way to raise the functioning level of a group. Waves do not continue to rise to ever new heights. They fall back toward the original surface and even sink below the original surface line.

What this theory indicates is that a planned approach of *underfunctioning* is much more likely to result in an elevated level of functioning in the group than energy devoted to overfunctioning. In this instance, doing less in a planned way leads to the group doing more, as a whole.

By contrast, if a person in a position of leadership continuously underfunctions with respect to the normal responsibilities of a leader, eventually the functioning level of the entire group will decline. A poorly functioning head can have a crippling effect on the entire body. After compensating for a while by overfunctioning, the group is likely to decline in its overall level of functioning, perhaps to the point of its death.

Another possibility is that the group will generate its own new head. The new head will fulfill the leadership function either in name or in practice. If the old head remains, it will do so only as a "figurehead."

Symptom-bearer

Some people become lightning rods for trouble. You probably know people who fit that description. Sometimes they are the direct cause of their problems, but not always. They bear the effects of problems all around them. These people are symptom-bearers.

In the world of family systems counseling, such a person is called an "identified patient." For example, if there is stress between a mother and a father, the child may become upset and act out in inappropriate ways at school. The child is identified as the "problem" rather than the relationship between the parents. He or she becomes the scapegoat for the family's problems. It often takes a professional counselor to help the identified patient and his or her family system deal with their situation in a healthy way.

A group leader will not and should not function in the role of therapist or counselor for symptom-bearers or other troubled people. Most small groups are not therapy groups. The groups your trainees will lead probably will not focus in any special way on the mental and emotional health of their members. Their interaction and activities are more likely to concentrate on the four basic elements of small group life in a Christian context: loving, learning,

deciding and doing.³ Even so, an orientation in family systems thinking will create in leaders and groups an environment that will assist symptom-bearers toward a more healthful position in their own lives.

Symptom-bearers almost always accept and manifest other people's stress, whether they do it consciously or unconsciously. A symptom-bearer who can grow in the practice of defining and expressing his or her own "self" is a much less likely candidate for accepting someone else's stress. The group member who can begin to express just who he or she is apart from undue influences from others, will be taking a big step toward a healthier life.

Often issues in a symptom-bearer's life have a foundation in another emotional system apart from the person's small group. Other emotional systems most often include biological and extended families, the church, school or business. The emotional field of a family brings past elements of the family's life in touch with present members just the way every member of a group "system" touches and affects every other member of the group. The principle holds across time and demonstrates that a family's field, or a system's field, includes elements that take place over time.

³Articulated by Stephen A. Wagner in a course he taught at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, Missouri: "Church Growth Through Small Groups and Lifestyle Evangelism."

If an individual does command a great deal of the group's energy and attention on matters related to his or her personal problems, it is appropriate to assist that person to find help in another setting geared more to his or her individual needs. The symptom-bearer and the group will benefit from the leader's caring assertiveness that gently but firmly directs this person to other resources.

Self-differentiation

The next three concepts receive more detailed attention in the training modules. The primary focus of the material in these sections will be to show the consistency of these concepts with the field theory or wave theory of the family systems perspective on life and relationships.

The differentiated person is the person who stands in the field with all others but knows he or she is a unique self. The differentiated person knows he or she is touched by everyone else in the field and touches everyone else but continues to have his or her own integrity. The differentiated person is a self who knows who he or she is but remains connected to others in the emotional system of his or her existence. A differentiated person will not bear others' symptoms, though he might choose to share another's pain.

The more differentiated a person is, the less it is likely that he or she will develop symptoms under stressful conditions. A certain amount of stress in the life of a

poorly differentiated person will produce more symptoms of poor functioning than an equal amount of stress in a well-differentiated person.⁴

A leader will function much more effectively under the stresses and strains of leadership if he or she is able to remain relatively nonanxious and well-differentiated. The higher a person's level of differentiation, the less it is likely that he or she will become anxious under stressful situations.

The leader's level of differentiation will be "caught" by others in the group rather than taught to them, though a leader can coach his group members in principles of differentiation. The leader will influence others' levels of differentiation in a proportionately higher measure than any other individual because of his or her position in the group.

Homeostasis (Balance)

"Homeostasis" is perhaps the most unfamiliar family systems term you will see. The word means, "Standing as it is." The concept means keeping things the way they are. An even simpler way of expressing the idea is to talk about keeping things in balance.

"Balance" is a satisfactory substitute for the term, homeostasis. However, the concept is a little more

⁴See Bowen's scale of differentiation (Bowen 1985, 472-475, and Friedman 1991, Figure 5-1, 142).

inclusive than the kind of balance you might associate with the balance scale the figure of justice holds in the famous statue.

Balance from a family systems perspective involves many dimensions. When waves ripple on a pond the forces at work that produce those waves go much deeper than the surface. Forces of energy are at work in all three standard dimensions of height, breadth and depth. In homeostasis the dimension of time is also a factor. Systems like to keep things the way they are now but also the way they "always were."

The newlywed puzzled her husband when she routinely cut off the end of the Sunday roast before sticking it in the oven. She knew her mother had always performed the same operation on roasts, and she had learned to cook from her mother. The newlywed's mother had, in turn, learned the same procedure from her mother. When the ladies interviewed the grandmother about this special step in the roasting process, she answered their question by pulling her old pan from her cabinet. It was easy to see that its small size required cutting off the end of the roast for her Sunday dinners. Years passed, and daughters married, owning larger pans for roasting, but the practice of cutting off the end of the roast remained for three generations. Things have a tendency to stay the same over time, even if we do not always know why.

Just as forces of friction and gravity in a pond work to return its waters to their previous state when they are stirred up, so natural forces in a group work not only to keep things the way they are but to return them to their previous state. Often without knowing why, groups resist when someone wants to "make waves" in the system.

As the training module indicates, a well-differentiated leader has the best chance to introduce change into a group. The leader is as much a part of the group as anyone else, but because of his or her position in the system, the leader will exert a greater influence. Others in the "field" of the group are more likely to change or to express their own differentiated positions in the presence of a well-differentiated leader. Either way the process benefits the group.

Emotional Triangles

Differentiated individuals stand separate yet connected in a system. Triangulated individuals are linked together by stress in three-sided, stuck-together relationships. The formation of triangles is an emotional process because it involves an automatic response to a stressful situation.

When two individuals become uncomfortable in their relationship with one another, one or both will seek to relieve their stress by passing it along to a third entity. The third object could be a person, a pet, a project, or

anything else. It could be an activity, such as drinking, or work, or sports, or church involvement. Connections with most persons or activities can be beneficial, but when those connections become objects for re-directed stress, the process is not beneficial.

Emotional fields are filled with many triangles that cross space and time. They exist in groups. They exist in families. They exist across generational lines. Some are long-lasting, such as a mother who draws her son into an alliance "against" her husband that lasts for years. Many triangles last only minutes or even seconds, as when a group member becomes annoyed when another spills coffee and looks for eye contact with a third member to communicate the message, "That klutz!"

If the third member in that situation receives the second member's message, he may also receive his stress. If the third member remains differentiated and just smiles back, he receives the message, but not the stress. He effectively sends the stress back to the second member, where it belongs. The klutz-message communicator then at least has the opportunity to face his own stress and deal with it in a responsible manner.

A well-differentiated leader works to keep himself or herself de-triangled. His or her influence in the "field" of the system will discourage unhealthy triangles between other members.

As the training module illustrates, a leader may intentionally enter into a triangle, from time to time. Intentional triangling can be helpful, as long as the leader remains nonanxious. The purpose is to help two others resolve the stress that exists between them.

In some ways the concept of balance and the process of dealing with stress are connected. People develop patterns for handling their stress. It becomes uncomfortable to change the pattern. Yet a simple change in the pattern of a person's life can affect the amount of stress in his or her life. The school teacher who changes the seat of the trouble-making boy finds that his new position in the class room results in a reduction of stress, not only in his own life, but also in everyone else's.

Self-differentiation, balance, and emotional triangles are three concepts of family systems thinking that you and your trainees can employ to become more effective leaders. More than that, these concepts, especially self-differentiation, can become a way of life for you and, through you, for those whose lives you touch.

A Theological Basis for Applying Family Systems Theory
to Small Group Ministry in A Christian Setting

The work of Murray Bowen and Edwin Friedman⁵ in the

⁵See Murray Bowen, Family Therapy in Clinical Practice (Northvale, N.J.: Jason Aronson), 1985, and Edwin H. Friedman, "Bowen Theory and Therapy," in A. S. Gurman and D. P. Kniskern, Handbook of Family Therapy, vol. 2 (New York: Brunner/Mazel), 1991, 134-170. Friedman provides an

field of family systems thinking demonstrates that careful investigation into the substance and operation of God's creation can and will lead to legitimate discoveries that reflect, in some measure, the truth of God's revealed Word.⁶ A number of elements of family systems theory express some degree of understanding of God's created order and how it works. That understanding is certainly less than complete, yet those discoveries give glory to God for the work He does even through those who may not know or acknowledge Him. The following items illustrate this point.

1. Creation. Family systems thinking, particularly as developed by Bowen and Friedman, believes there is a connecting link or "field" for all humanity that goes back to creation. Friedman, a rabbi, even asserts that God is the Source of creation and that, through creation, all humanity is linked to God.⁷

A major problem for Bowen and for Friedman, however, is their belief in an evolutionary process for the development of humanity and all other life forces. From the

excellent summary of Bowen's family systems thinking in this chapter.

⁶See, for instance, Romans 1:19 on the natural knowledge of God. See also Luther's comments on a natural knowledge of the working of creation in Jaroslav Pelikan, Helmut T. Lehmann, and Joel W. Lundeen, eds., Luther's Works, American Edition, vol. 25 (St. Louis: Concordia, 1972), 156-157, and on the natural knowledge of the wise men when they followed the star. Ibid., vol. 52 (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1974), 162.

⁷Friedman (1985, 1991).

Scriptures we know that God created everything "in the beginning" (Genesis 1:1 NIV) and by the word of his mouth (Psalm 33:6), rather than over an extended period of time.

All of created humanity is linked to God. In the Book of Acts St. Paul refers to the Athenian "Unknown God" as a way to introduce the true God, who "is not far from each one of us" (Acts 17:22-28 NIV). The true God promises to continue to be in touch. Jesus promised to "be with you always" (Matthew 28:20 NIV).

2. Original sin. A premise that underlies Bowen's expression of family systems thinking is the existence of a *chronic anxiety* that manifests itself in all of life.⁸ According to his theory, this anxiety is the source of spoiled human relationships and the primary source of all human problems.

Another premise of the theory is that this chronic anxiety has been transmitted from generation to generation from the beginning of time. Bowen and other family systems theorists are "on target" in this analysis, even though they may not understand or use the term, "original sin."

Sin does produce anxiety and spoil relationships:
"(The man) answered, 'I heard you in the garden, and I was afraid . . . so I hid. . . . The woman you put here with me -- she gave me some fruit from the tree, and I ate it'"
(Genesis 3:10, 12 NIV). Sin is transmitted from generation

⁸Bowen (1985).

to generation. "Sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all men, because all sinned" (Romans 5:12 NIV).

Because the very world social scientists observe is the same world created by the Lord of the universe, it is reasonable to understand that a practitioner in that profession, or any careful observer of human nature, will be able to note elements of the human condition, such as a "chronic anxiety," that are the effects of the sin that connects all human beings to our first ancestors. The Scriptures point out that human beings naturally are able to grasp the nature of sin and its consequences, to some extent. St. Paul wrote of "the law . . . written on their hearts, their consciences also bearing witness, and their thoughts now accusing, now even defending them" (Romans 2:14-15 NIV).

Although Bowen and Friedman have observed some of the consequences of original sin, what they do not recognize, and what they cannot appreciate apart from God's revealed Word, is that this depravity is total, touching every part of our being. Human beings are born corrupted by sin and are incapable of improvement, either through evolutionary process, or in any other natural way (Psalm 51:5, Genesis 8:21, John 3:6, Romans 5:12). Luther's Small Catechism expresses this truth well: "Original sin is that total

corruption of our whole human nature which we have inherited from Adam through our parents."⁹

The universal nature of original sin demonstrates human interconnectedness in a negative way. The universal nature of God's saving act in Christ expresses in positive terms the hope God has given us for a restored connectedness on the basis of His love and forgiveness. "He died for all" (2 Corinthians 5:15 NIV).

3. The nature of humanity. Bowen expressed a belief that humans are more than predictable reactors to life forces. A human "self," according to Bowen, is a dynamic reality capable of maturation.¹⁰

Bowen acknowledges, at least implicitly, a special quality to "the human species" that sets humankind apart from other life forms. What Bowen is unable to identify is the source of a human being's ability to correct himself or herself. He seems to rely on an internal potential for goodness, in keeping with his evolutionary perspective, but that view is inconsistent with his own understanding of the universal nature of chronic anxiety. Reality, as God's Word lets us know, is that while most human beings are capable of a certain level of moral behavior, because of the activity of their conscience (Romans 2:14-15), true goodness and the

⁹Luther's Small Catechism: with Explanation (St. Louis: Concordia, 1991), 96.

¹⁰Bowen (1985).

deepest kind of maturity come only through a change in heart brought about by the transforming power of God's Word received in faith (1 Corinthians 6:11, Ephesians 2:8-10, 4:11-13, Colossians 1:28).

There are additional elements of Bowen theory that reflect revealed truth. The following paragraphs identify three of those elements: emotional triangles, differentiation of self, and the process of change.

Emotional triangles have existed since the Fall. Adam triangled Eve when he told God it was she who had given him the forbidden fruit. Eve reacted in the characteristically undifferentiated manner of someone caught up in her own anxiety when she attempted to triangle the snake: "The serpent deceived me" (Genesis 3:13 NIV). (The wily serpent, by the way, did not "bite" at the invitation to fall into the triangling trap.) The passing of stress from one to another in this way does no good, other than to provide temporary relief.

The invitation from God is to "Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you" (1 Peter 7:7 NIV). God invites Himself to be triangled into our lives and relationships for the purpose of relieving our stress, especially the stress brought about by our sin and the effects of sin in our relationships. God takes this stress because He is able to take it. He takes it away (2 Samuel

24:10, Romans 11:27, 1 John 23:5) through the work of Christ and the cross.

The finest example of the well-differentiated person is Jesus Christ. The training module on that subject gives a number of illustrations. As a nonanxious person, Jesus was able to take the stress of others without becoming caught up in that stress. An example is the occasion when Martha, the sister of Lazarus, seemed to chide Jesus for being "too late" to save her brother from dying (John 11:21). Jesus did not allow Himself to be caught up in Martha's apparent stress. Rather, He unfolded His plan to teach her about the resurrection. He then went to the tomb and brought Lazarus back to life.

It is Jesus' will that His followers remain nonanxious and "stand firm in all the will of God, mature and fully assured (the prayer of Epaphras)" (Colossians 4:12 NIV). It is also His will that they "speak . . . the truth in love" (Ephesians 4:15 NIV), a characteristic of a well-differentiated person. Caring and connected self-differentiation is exhibited in the finest way in the process of living out the Christian life.

The concept of change in the family systems perspective is that true change is more than the reorganization of homeostatic forces in a system. It is more than bringing the same old elements into a new balance. True change affects a system by introducing new elements or

energy in such a way that once the system settles into a new "balance," it is realistically at a new level that affects all its parts.

The Christian faith also understands that true change only comes from "without." The change agent in the lives of God's fallen creatures is the Holy Spirit working through the means of the gospel and the sacraments.

When a person is changed by God's redeeming action, he or she is truly changed. When a group, or any other system, is molded and changed under the influence of God's Holy Spirit, working through His Word, that group arrives at new levels of balance that elevate everyone in the system.

Practical Details for the Training Sessions

The following thoughts and information may help you as you plan your sessions. Please use whatever approach you think will provide the best environment for the members of your group to "catch" what you will share with them.

The General Setting

Prayer at the start of every gathering sets a tone for what you will be doing. Beginning in this way places you intentionally in the presence of Him who brings the Creator's touch to our present moment.

Introductions help when class members do not know each other well. They also help the class know you. You might also want to engage in a typical small group bonding

exercise as you begin. You could say, "Since we will be looking at leadership and some qualities that help make an effective leader, it might be a good time to think about who has been the most influential person in your life. Share that with us, if you will, and what qualities or characteristics made that person influential to you."

Your meeting area should be reasonably comfortable. Even more important than comfort will be the availability of some sort of writing surface for note-taking on the outlines you will provide. It will also be good to have a little space to move around. There will be opportunities for participant activities.

Allow at least an hour and a half for each training session. A mid-point break in each session might be a good idea. Light refreshments, probably at the break, can help establish and maintain a friendly environment. It is almost always good to start on time and end on time.

Schedule Options

One choice is to meet on consecutive weeks or months, coinciding with any regularly scheduled meetings you might have for your leaders. An advantage for consecutive meetings is continuity. A disadvantage is that group leaders will have fewer opportunities to make use of the concepts they are learning between sessions. Trainee feedback can be an important part of the learning process.

Another choice is to meet on alternate weeks or months with feedback sessions in between. Feedback sessions give leaders an opportunity to share how things have been going with them as they incorporate family systems concepts into their small group leadership experience.

A one-day or weekend workshop might work, but that format would call for absorbing a large amount of material in a relatively short period of time. One or more follow-up sessions might be useful if you try this approach.

Instructor Preparation

Become familiar with the material ahead of time. Make the presentations "your own" as much as possible. It will probably take about two hours of preparation time for each module. Know what is in the **NOTE TO INSTRUCTOR** sections so you can do what is suggested in them smoothly.

Duplicate enough copies of the outline for each participant to have his or her own copy. Feel free to illustrate your presentation on a chalkboard or with an overhead projector or flip-chart.

Remember that *you are the leader*. The more differentiated and connected you are, the more likely it is that the members of your class will themselves *be* that kind of leader. Blessings!

Further Resources

The following three resources will be helpful, if you want to explore family systems further. They will assist you in your work with small groups or in your own differentiation in any other "family."

1. Edwin H. Friedman, Generation to Generation: Family Process in Church and Synagogue (New York: The Guilford Press), 1985, offers an excellent introduction to family systems concepts. The book will be a challenge for most readers but almost certainly worth the effort. Friedman was a student of Murray Bowen, who developed the approach to family systems thinking that served as the primary theoretical resource for this training series. Friedman is a rabbi, therapist, lecturer and author.

2. Peter L. Steinke, How Your Church Family Works ([Washington, D.C.]: The Alban Institute), 1993, provides a specifically Christian application of family systems theory to congregational life. Steinke is a Lutheran Church - Missouri Synod pastor, therapist, consultant for churches in conflict and author.

3. James R. Knill, "Effective Leadership in Small Group Ministry through the Application of Family Systems Theory to the Group Process" (D. Min. project, Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, 1994), presents these training modules plus two additional chapters, one primarily on small group ministry and a second that provides additional background

information on the development of family systems theory. Knill is a Lutheran Church - Missouri Synod pastor and a doctoral candidate at Concordia Seminary. He developed these modules as part of a training program for small group leaders in his congregation.

Training Module 1
An Introduction to Family Systems for Small Group Leaders

Goal for This Module

Present a general introduction to the concept of family systems thinking.

Objectives

- that the students will have a clear understanding of the concept of family systems theory and a basic familiarity with the six elements of the theory introduced in this module;
- that the students will be eager to apply principles of family systems thinking in their small groups and be ready to learn more about the three elements identified as subjects to be elaborated in more detail in the next three training sessions;
- that the students will be equipped to observe principles of family systems theory at work in their small groups.

Definition of Concept

Family systems theory is a way of looking at how a group of individuals connected in some sort of "family" relate to one another and how they, together as a group, take on a unique character as a distinct unit that has its own life beyond the individual lives that make up its being.

(NOTE TO THE INSTRUCTOR: It would be good if you could present this material as if it were "your own." However, you may read it, if you are more comfortable sharing the information that way. Use as much expression as you can. Invite and welcome questions and other feedback during your presentation. Keep in mind your timetable and the amount of material you want to cover in this session. Answer questions as you can, making use of information in this module and in the introductory section of this manual. Assure class members you will provide more information about the various elements of family systems thinking and how they apply to small groups as you share succeeding modules with them. May God bless you as you inform and train your leaders.)

The longer you have served as a small group or cell group leader, the more likely it is that you have noticed how people are "different" from one another. For some of you, understanding that there are differences between the

way people think and act is nothing new. Others have become much more aware of this fact of life since you have begun to serve as a small group leader. If you are now preparing for your first group leadership experience, you will soon discover from a new perspective just how different people are. Each person is truly unique.

Each individual expresses his or her unique characteristics in different ways in a group setting. That's one feature of group life that makes it so interesting.

Just as each individual is uniquely different, you find that groups themselves develop a character of their own with the passage of just a little time. Each group becomes its own "system" with its own personality.

Another thing that will be different about your experience in your group is that you are the leader. You will continue to have your own unique characteristics. You will share those characteristics with the others in the group, as you did when you were a member of a group in your past experience. But now you are in the group in a different position. You are the leader. You are now in a *different* relationship with those around you. Now, at least in some way, these are "your" people. You sense a certain responsibility to them. You may be especially sensitive to a desire to relate to the others in a caring way. These are

the people of God. They are learning to trust you as a person of God who will have their best interests at heart.

So you look at these people of God in a new and different way. You find that you are paying more attention to each person now that you are the leader. You observe each individual as he or she first comes into the group. You continue to notice each succeeding time you see him or her. You note everyone's general manner, whether each person seems to be happy or sad, talkative or quiet. You pay attention to body language and how it matches or does not match the words people are saying. You note how people interact with one another. You see if they seem to get along better with some than with others. You pay attention if someone reacts in a noticeably unusual way to a particular subject in a Bible study or discussion. You take note if certain proposals for group activities generate an unusual response from anyone.

The longer you serve as leader the more keen your sense of observation in these areas is likely to become. So what do you do with all this information you are absorbing? How should your observations affect the way you relate to the individuals in your group? In what ways can the things you observe help you help the people in your group relate to one another? How can those observations help you help the group function? What you will learn today

and in the next three sessions will help you answer these and other questions about leading a small group.

It is the goal of this series to equip you to become a more effective leader for your group. Through what you learn in these sessions you will be able to use the information you have observed about yourself and about other members to help your group function in ways that will be more satisfying to each individual and to the group itself.

The series of sessions we begin today will introduce you to a way of looking at the individuals in your group as unique just because they are part of your group. No other set of people is quite like them. They function, relate and interact as their own "system." As we learn how systems work, we will learn how individuals in those systems work. As we learn about the position of the leader in a system, we will learn how the leader influences and interacts with others in the system.

We will also see that in a number of ways groups are like families. To understand how group systems work, we will look at how any kind of family system works.

A Family Systems Approach to Understanding and Leading Groups

Every person in your group is part of a family. Some families are large. Some are small. Some family members live locally. Others are scattered all over the country or around the world. Whether near or far, well-known or hardly

known at all, family members affect one another. Even if some family members are no longer living, they still have an impact as part of that family's system.

It is also likely that most members of your group are also members of your church "family" or of some other church family. Your group itself, as you can probably tell, has become or is becoming its own family, as time goes on. There is a rich variety of other "family" possibilities for each individual: in the work place or school, in the neighborhood or in other social settings.

Each person is affected by every other person in each of his or her "families," including the family at home, usually called the nuclear family (father, mother, and children). Each person is also affected by extended family members, such as grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins. At the same time, each person affects other family members in some way.

Church family members also affect one another as they interrelate. Small group members certainly do, too, especially because small groups offer repeated opportunities for contact between a relatively limited number of people. It is this contact, this feedback, this interaction between members of a family that forms the basis of a "family system."

A family systems way of looking at how group members interrelate will help you understand how leaders affect

their groups and how they are affected by group members. Systems thinking will also help you understand how you, as leaders, can introduce change into the "system" of your group when that seems appropriate. You will be able to employ principles of systems thinking to help members within your group relate to each other and to the group in more satisfying ways.

For those interested in computers, it may be interesting to know that the concept behind the idea of viewing individuals not as isolated or unrelated units, but as parts of interacting systems, goes back to the beginning of the computer era. (For those who "hate" computers it may be comforting to know that we will deal only with interactions between humans and not between numbers or with machines.) Norbert Wiener, a mathematician who was instrumental in the development of computers in the 1940s, helped develop the systems concept. Wiener also coined the term, "*cybernetics*."¹¹ He chose the word from the Greek word for steersman, to suggest the idea of organizing the information for guiding a ship through a process of feedback from all the interacting parts of the ship's system.

Just as a top or a gyro-compass maintains stability through "feedback" from all of its movement, so any system -

¹¹A discussion of Wiener's selection of the term appears in Irene Goldenberg and Herbert Goldenberg, Family Therapy: An Overview, 3d ed. (Pacific Grove, Calif.: Brooks/Cole, 1991), 8.

- or family -- regulates itself through a process of feeding back or reinserting the results of its past performance into its current functioning. Anything that goes on in a group helps define the position of that group. All the combined thoughts, feelings and actions of the group system determine "where the group is." And all those thoughts, feelings and actions are interconnected.

This way of looking at how family systems, including groups, operate helps explain how groups tend to maintain the patterns they have grown used to following in the way they operate. All their activity and motion provides a sense of stability, like the motion of a gyroscope. They become like the large ship that tends to stay "on course." The steersman receives feedback information from the ship's activity and adds new information from his position in the wheelhouse. His (or her) input from the pilot's position affects the direction of the ship.

The pilot is only part of the ship's system, but his position in the wheelhouse gives him the opportunity to bring about change in the direction of the ship. He introduces new information into the system. In the same way the leader of a group is only part of the system, but the leader has the opportunity to affect the course of the group by the information he or she introduces from the position of the leader.

The idea of bringing about change by introducing something new into a person's life, or into a relationship, is not new to us in the Christian community. We sing, for instance, "Jesus, Savior, pilot me."

The greatest agent for change in our lives is the Holy Spirit. He works through the Means of Grace (the Word and the sacraments). First, He changes our heart of stone to a heart of flesh (Ezekiel 36:26) through conversion. Then He molds and shapes our lives through our daily walk in faith with Jesus Christ.

God first touches us from outside ourselves. But then He takes up residence within, and our internal "feedback system" is blessed with His power for a new and regularly renewed stability in Jesus Christ. The believer understands this encouragement for change, for example, from Luther's explanation of the commandments. In the eighth commandment, for instance, we are urged not to continue any sinful pattern we have discovered in ourselves of belittling someone's reputation but rather to "put the best construction on everything" or "explain everything in the kindest way."¹²

This change from without is effective for individuals and, through individuals, for the entire group system. It is a spiritual principle that will work for any system. It

¹²Luther's Small Catechism: with Explanation (St. Louis: Concordia, 1991), 11.

will work for the nuclear family, the step-family, and the extended family. It certainly will work in the church family. And it will work in the small group.

What we have described is the process for guidance and the power for change that you, as leader, are able to introduce into your group. As we are all people who are "on the way" in becoming what we can be in Christ, it is good for us to use all the resources that are available for our spiritual and group journey.

The family systems concept, though it was developed largely in the secular community, is useful as a way of understanding human interaction within all kinds of families or systems. It works because it reflects a good understanding of the human condition as revealed by God's Word. You will be able to see that as you look further at a number of elements of the family systems approach to working with groups. Among other things you will learn how individuals can remain true to themselves and still relate meaningfully to the others in a group. You will learn about maintaining a healthy balance within a system. You will discover a process for introducing change into a system. And you will learn about helping others improve their relationships with one another -- or with you.

Six Elements of Family Systems Theory for Leaders of Small Groups

This presentation will introduce six elements of family systems theory that can help you become a more effective small group leader. You will benefit as you learn to understand and employ these principles in the way you relate to your group and lead it. These elements are: self-differentiation, process versus content, balance, over-functioning/underfunctioning, the symptom bearer and emotional triangles.

This presentation will help you become familiar with these basic concepts and how to employ them as you work with your small group. Succeeding presentations will touch all these areas, but they will focus on three that are particularly appropriate to your work with small groups.

Self-differentiation

This concept is the key to everything else we will consider in this series. A well-differentiated leader contributes mightily to the well-being of a group and to its healthy functioning.

What *is a self-differentiated person*? The word itself helps us understand the concept. The self-differentiated person (1) knows he or she is a "self," that is, a distinct, separate individual. The self-differentiated person (2) knows he or she is "different" from every other person.

A differentiated person maintains the integrity of his

or her independent identity but still belongs to, or is able to relate to, a group of others. For the Christian this identity is based in who he or she is as an individual child of God. Relationships with others, in families or other groups, have a unique characteristic in the connection of the individual as a child of God.

The self-differentiated person is able to remain an "I," a well-defined individual with his or her own thoughts, ideas, values and goals, apart from any "pressure" to be something or someone else. As a self-differentiated person you can change your thoughts and goals, but you will do so only because you choose to do so and not because someone else manipulates you or circumstances press you to change. Even if other persons or circumstances force you to change some aspect of your life, you can still maintain the integrity of your position and express that position to the extent you are able. Even in that situation your identity will not be defined by what others want you to be. Your identity remains who you are as an individual being and a child of God.

While a self-differentiated person is a unique self, he or she is not isolated or detached from others. A self-differentiated person will give and receive benefits as he or she is part of a family, small group, church or other system. At the same time, while being truly connected, the person remains a unique self, with all the specific gifts,

qualities and characteristics God has given and is developing in him or her, often through contacts with others in his or her various families or others systems.

Self-differentiation involves maintaining the integrity of who you are. At the same time, self-differentiation allows you to be devoted to the members of your group. The self-differentiated leader also remains a "self," but at the same time he or she is connected to the others.

Jesus' primary mission was to be our Savior, and He did so as the ideal differentiated self. He loved His people deeply, yet He was not pressured into changing His position on anything for the sake of their weaknesses. He would not be swayed from His mission even by the passionate plea of Peter (Matthew 16:22-23), who was one of His favorite disciples. His mission was to give His life for all, yet He was able to "speak . . . the truth in love" (Ephesians 4:15 NIV) and call some of the leading citizens of that day a "brood of vipers" (Matthew 12:34 NIV) and "blind fools" (Matthew 23:17 NIV).

When Martha apparently attempted to lay some guilt on Jesus for arriving after her brother Lazarus had died (John 11:21), Jesus would not allow Himself to be caught up in that diversion. He continued with His mission, which was to show compassion to Lazarus' family and friends and also to bring Lazarus back to life and return him to his loved ones.

When His disciples were arguing among themselves about who was the greatest in the Kingdom, Jesus used the opportunity to teach them about service and sacrifice (Mark 9:33-35). When the crowds at the cross mocked, jeered and crucified the Christ, He called out, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do" (Luke 23:34 RSV).

Through Jesus' death and resurrection He freed us from the guilt of original sin, from the power of actual sin, and from entrapment by the evil around us. He released us from all that hinders us from what we can be in Him. In our redeemed and forgiven state we are now free to be little Christs to others.

In that way Jesus both frees us to be differentiated and is for us a strong model of the differentiated self. As you demonstrate those qualities of knowing who you are in Him, maintaining the integrity of your purpose and at the same time caring deeply for those you lead, you will grow in the level of your own godly differentiation.

The well-differentiated leader will lead his or her group more effectively. You will accomplish this improvement in the functioning of the group apart from any manipulative or heavy-handed effort to change another person. Change will come about *simply because of your self-differentiated presence and, of course, through contact with God and His Word, the greatest change agencies of all.* The impact of your differentiation will be particularly

effective as you express yourself without becoming anxious, stressed or "worried" about any feedback you might receive from others. Our heavenly Shepherd-leader was never anxious as He expressed Himself to His disciples or to others.

A well-differentiated group member will also contribute most effectively to the health and well-being of the group. As a well-differentiated leader, you will, by your position in the group, help other members become better differentiated.

As a well-differentiated leader you will be able to accomplish a number of additional things. You will be more able to resist being drawn into emotional and other disputes that will draw you off course, and you will be more able to introduce elements of change into the system. You will successfully resist feedback pressure that will come back to you as the system seeks to maintain its previous course. You will be able to be true to yourself and to your mission in the group. And the group will be more likely to respect you (though not necessarily always go along with you!) as its leader.

Process Versus Content

This concept is important for understanding how any system, such as a family or a group, works. When two children are fighting in a family, and Mom asks, "Who started this?" there is an implication that one child did something that prompted the other child to respond by

"fighting back." Most parents would be able to tell you it's not that simple. In this case, for instance, Mom could recall that Billy's Aunt Tillie recently gave him a special present which he dangles in front of Michelle's eyes at every opportunity. Michelle has complained to her father about her brother's "obnoxious behavior," but Dad has not paid much attention to her. And Billy, taking advantage of Dad's inattention, has repeatedly poked and prodded at his "sissy sister." Now, who started it? Was it Billy, Michelle, Aunt Tillie, Dad, Mom, all of the above or some other factor or combination of factors we know nothing about?

A "content" way of looking at relationships tries to explain human interactions in a simple cause-and-effect manner. According to this viewpoint a single action explains another action in much the same way as the striking of one billiard ball by another causes a straight line reaction, determined by the impact of the first.

Human beings rarely, if ever, relate in a simple machine-like manner. The entire process of the family or group system in which a person operates affects that individual. And the individual affects that family or system.

In a group setting, when one member responds in a certain way to another's actions or words, it is useful to realize that the response is not just a product of the

interaction that has taken place before you. A process is at work. The response you see is the product of all the experiences of that person with this particular other person. It also includes experiences with the other members of the group. And it includes similar experiences that person has had in other settings, and so on.

All communications activity in a group becomes part of the distinguishing features that define that particular system. As the leader it will be helpful for you to understand and appreciate the rich intertwining of that communications network. You will know that an individual's response to another individual involves more than a simple response to that one person. In some way, all the others are part of that process. Everyone affects everyone else. Everyone is affected by everyone else. And you affect everyone each time you interact with anyone -- or each time you express yourself on any matter.

Homeostasis (Balance)

"Balance" is a more recognizable word for the somewhat technical term, homeostasis. This is a special kind of balance, however. It is a multi-dimensional balance that involves every action, reaction and pressure exerted within the group system. As we mentioned earlier, elements in a system make use of the feedback they receive from other elements in the system to organize and maintain the stability of the whole. The concept of homeostasis or

balance describes the tendency of a system to maintain an overall *status quo*, to stay on its own course. Any system or set of relationships will strive to "keep things the way they are" and will take action (sometimes even "passive action" or resistance) to preserve itself as it has come to know itself.

Churches supposedly are notorious for saying, "We've never done it that way before." It does not take too long for a group, once it is established and operating, to have the potential to say the same thing. Small groups and all other family systems resist change. We are comfortable with what we know and uncomfortable with what we do not know. We also tend to be uncomfortable with what is new.

A certain amount of stability is a positive thing. It would be very disturbing for nearly everyone in the group if no one had any idea what the group would do each time it came together. It may seem that's the way things are sometimes, but usually there is at least some sort of plan for the gathering.

On the other hand, it might be equally disturbing for you to introduce an idea into the group that you are certain will help the group accomplish what it wants to do and then have the idea resisted or sabotaged from within. When that happens, you can be pretty sure the group perceived the new idea as upsetting to its balance.

As you recognize that you are dealing with homeostatic pressures (pressures to keep things in balance) you can modify the idea, show the group how the idea really fits in the system or be ready to address the pressure points as they appear. In any of these ways you can help the group achieve a new balance.

Sometimes resistance can develop to the addition of a new member to the group. The introduction of David to King Saul's court family brought resistance on the part of Saul to the point of mortal danger for the young musician-warrior (1 Samuel 18-20). Saul, though he was the king, was most sensitive to the imbalance in the system brought about by the addition of this new member -- even though it was Saul himself who had invited him!

A group will experience some level of upset when change brings the system temporarily out of balance. During those times a well-differentiated leader can help restore a sense of stability simply through his or her clearly defined presence. When the people know where you stand, it will help them consider where they stand.

Overfunctioning/Underfunctioning

Here is a concept you can identify from your own life experience. You probably know someone where you work, or in your neighborhood or perhaps in your own home who "overfunctions." Perhaps you are such a person! This is the person who does more than he or she needs to do to

fulfill his or her reasonable responsibilities. The overfunctioner readily takes on and does what someone else could or perhaps ought to do.

(NOTE TO THE INSTRUCTOR: Pause to allow for brief responses from the group.)

When this person OVERfunctions, how do the others with whom the overfunctioner is connected respond?

(NOTE TO THE INSTRUCTOR: Allow for a response.)

That's right. Others, who in most instances have the capacity to function adequately, will UNDERfunction when someone else overfunctions in their area of responsibility.

You can test this concept by examining the way you function in your own group. Who does most of the work of preparing for and carrying out your group meetings and activities? Are responsibilities for the group and what it does fairly well divided among group members? How is the system working? Do you find that you "have to" take on "more than your share" of responsibility for the way the group functions or else "nothing would get done?" If that is the case, it is very likely that you are overfunctioning. And it is very likely that the rest of the group is accommodating your needs in true homeostatic fashion (that is, in maintaining a balance) by underfunctioning.

One word of caution. If what you have just heard describes your situation, do not think you will be able to change things instantly. Just because suddenly you have

become wiser, do not think that you necessarily will be able to return to your group and "fix" this situation instantly by assigning a series of tasks to those sitting around the circle. Remember, it is another principle of homeostasis that systems tend to remain "as they are." They tend to resist change.

Once you have established a certain way of operating, the group, often without conscious intent, will work to keep things as they have been. This is where your knowledge of the principle of overfunctioning/underfunctioning, combined with your ability to be nonanxious in the face of a real or potentially stressful situation, can help you. If your overfunctioning has brought about a situation where others in the group are underfunctioning, the reverse will also hold true: your UNDERfunctioning will raise the functioning level of other members of the group. It may require some patience on your part, but it is likely that you will notice a shift in the functioning of the others, if you can wait them out.

Emotional Triangles

According to Edwin Friedman, a contemporary author and religious spokesman in the field of family systems,

The basic law of emotional triangles is that when any two parts of a system become uncomfortable with one another, they will "triangle in" or focus upon a third

person or issue as a way of stabilizing their own relationship with one another.¹³

Imagine that Sue, a member of your group, has come to disagree over an issue with Martin. Martin is another group member and the host responsible for the selection of homes where the group will meet. Sue's disagreement with Martin is about the way he makes his choices. The two have not resolved their differences, and each believes at this point that it is useless to talk with the other about the matter any longer -- though each continues to believe his or her thoughts about the selection process are better than the other's.

Sue comes to you as the leader of the group with her criticisms about Martin and suggests that perhaps "you could do something about it," meaning that you could "straighten Martin out," get him to change his faulty thinking and persuade him to accept Sue's ideas. You are happy enough with the way Martin has been operating, but you think Sue's ideas are pretty good, too, -- and you are interested in calming the mounting tension you have observed between these two. So, for the sake of what you think will promote harmony in the group, you agree to talk to Martin. You have been triangled!

Now the focus of the stress is on you, as you have assumed responsibility for a relationship between two other

¹³Friedman (1985), 35.

individuals. You will not win. Neither will Martin or Sue win. And the group will not win. Sue and Martin need to assume responsibility for their own relationship.

Friedman has identified seven "laws of an emotional triangle":

1. The relationship of any two members of an emotional triangle is kept in balance by the way a third party relates to each of them or to the relationship.

2. If one is the third party in an emotional triangle it is generally not possible to bring change (for more than a week) to the relationship of the other two parts by trying to change their relationship directly.

3. Attempts to change the relationship of the other two sides of an emotional triangle not only are generally ineffective, but also, homeostatic forces often convert these efforts to their opposite intent.

4. To the extent a third party to an emotional triangle tries unsuccessfully to change the relationship of the other two, the more likely it is that the third party will wind up with the stress for the other two.

5. The various triangles in an emotional system interlock so that efforts to bring change to any one of them is (sic) often resisted by homeostatic forces in the others or in the system itself.

6. One side of an emotional triangle tends to be more conflictual than the others.

7. We can only change a relationship to which we belong.¹⁴

We will look further at these seven "laws" in the training module on emotional triangles. That training experience will help you understand how to avoid becoming caught up in emotional triangles (or how to use them effectively!) in your relationship as a leader with "Sue and Martin" or with any two other persons or issues.

¹⁴Ibid., 36-39.

Symptom-bearer

Most small groups are not designed or intended to be therapy groups, although the sharing of the gospel is always therapeutic, especially as it brings healing from sin and its effects. If someone in your group is troubled by a mental, physical or spiritual problem to the point where that individual commands an unusual amount of the group's time on a regular basis, it would be good to suggest that he or she seek specialized care.

No one asked you to be a counselor when you accepted your leadership position. You will not want to function as a counselor, either. However, your differentiated and nonanxious presence will help you, as a leader, contribute to the general well-being of your group members.

There may be times when you will recognize an individual who functions as the focal point for emotional stress within the group. Stress can develop around the subject matter the group is covering. If one member is particularly susceptible to emotional pressures generated by a study of death and dying, that individual might become the "symptom bearer" for the group on that issue. Others may feel emotions related to death and dying, but, usually without realizing it, they will "let" the symptom bearer express the emotion connected with the discussion at a more intense level than themselves. There could be a different

symptom bearer for each issue that generates emotional pressure within the group.

Stress can develop in terms of the interpersonal relationships within the group. If stress develops between two or more members of the group, one of those members could become the symptom-bearer for that stress. Their stress could find expression in a verbal or emotional response or even in the development of physical symptoms.

As the leader you will want to avoid becoming the third point in an emotional triangle with two others. You can encourage two individuals in a stressful relationship to address their difficulties directly and to express themselves in a differentiated manner. You will not want to try to change either individual or the relationship directly. If you do try to bring about change in that way, it is likely that you will become the symptom-bearer. You will wind up with the stress for the other two, as we just learned a few minutes ago from Friedman's seven laws of an emotional triangle.

Through the sharing that goes on in the group, as members come to relate more openly with one another over time, you may also sense that a person is carrying stress from his or her family or from some other system in his or her life. If you become convinced that a person is functioning as a symptom-bearer in another emotional system, you might confer with your leader or supervisor to consider

whether or not it would be advisable to share your concern with that individual. Your purpose for that kind of sharing, done in private, would be to give the person the opportunity to seek help for his or her situation.

Conclusion

This has been an introduction to a family systems way of understanding the interactions and the processes that take place within a group. The six elements of family systems theory we have looked at briefly are: (1) self-differentiation, (2) process versus content, (3) homeostasis, or balance, (4) overfunctioning/underfunctioning, (5) emotional triangles and (6) symptom-bearer.

Over the next several training sessions we will examine three of these concepts in greater detail: differentiation of self, balance and emotional triangles. You will learn to apply those concepts directly in your work as a small group leader.

It is probably true that you already have enough understanding from this overview to be able to observe, at least in some measure, how these principles are at work in your group. Continue to observe your group in action between now and the next time we meet. Note any questions you might have, and come prepared to continue to grow as a more effective group leader.

Training Outline 1
An Introduction to Family Systems for Small Group Leaders

Goal for This Module

Present a general introduction to the concept of family systems thinking.

Objectives

- that the students will have a clear understanding of the concept of family systems theory and a basic familiarity with the six elements of the theory introduced in this module;
- that the students will be eager to apply principles of family systems thinking in their small groups and be ready to learn more about the three elements identified as subjects to be elaborated in more detail in the next three training sessions;
- that the students will be equipped to observe principles of family systems theory at work in their small groups.

Definition of Concept

Family systems theory is a way of looking at how a group of individuals connected in some sort of "family" relate to one another and how they, together as a group, take on a unique character as a distinct unit that has its own life beyond the individual lives that make up its being.

I. Introduction

- A. Every individual is different
- B. Unique individuals make a unique group
 - 1. Its own character
 - 2. Its own "system"
- C. The unique place of the small group leader
 - 1. Different because a unique person
 - 2. Different because recognized by the group as in a different *position*
 - 3. Characteristics
 - a. In a special caring relationship

- b. Special interest in observing others in the group
 - (1) Characteristics
 - (2) Relationships
 - c. Help the group function in more satisfying ways
- II. A Family Systems Approach to Understanding and Leading Groups
- A. Each member part of one or more families
 - 1. Relative
 - 2. Church
 - 3. Small group
 - 4. Other
 - B. Family members affect one another
 - 1. Nuclear families
 - 2. Church families
 - 3. Small group families
 - a. Repeated contact between a limited number of people
 - b. Special influence in the *position* of the leader
 - C. The origins of systems thinking in the computer era
 - 1. Cybernetics -- about the steersman who guides a ship through organizing feedback information
 - 2. The feedback process
 - a. Helps the family system know where it is
 - b. Helps the family system know who it is -- self-definition
 - c. Provides stability for the system

- D. The process of change in family systems
 - 1. Through the addition of new information from the "pilot" -- the position of the leader
 - 2. Through the influence of the Holy Spirit and the Christian faith
 - a. The external Word
 - b. The internal presence of a living faith
 - E. The value of family systems principles as a resource for small group leaders
- III. Six elements of family systems theory for leaders of small groups
- A. A self-differentiated person -- the key
 - 1. A "Self"
 - 2. Different from every other person
 - 3. An individual child of God
 - 4. Can change
 - a. As chooses
 - b. Is not manipulated
 - 5. Connected with others
 - 6. The example of Jesus
 - a. With Peter
 - b. With the Pharisees
 - c. With Martha
 - d. With the disciples
 - e. With the crowd at the cross
 - 7. Jesus as Savior differentiates us
 - a. From the guilt of original sin
 - b. From the power of actual sin

- c. From the evil around us
 - d. To be little Christs to others
 - e. By His model
 - f. By His forgiveness of our sins
8. Benefits for the small group leader
- a. Will lead a group more effectively
 - b. Will help others become better differentiated
 - c. Will be able to resist being drawn off course
 - d. Will be able to deal effectively with resistance to change
- B. Process versus content
- 1. Content: linear cause and effect
 - 2. Process: the interaction of all the elements within a system
 - 3. At work in the communications network of a group
 - a. Members affect and are affected by one another
 - b. The leader affects and is affected by the members
- C. Homeostasis
- 1. Balance
 - 2. Stability
 - 3. Resistance to change
 - 4. The role of the leader
 - a. In addressing resistance to change
 - b. In helping the group achieve a new balance

- (1) Through the leader's self-differentiation
- (2) Through the leader's encouragement of self-differentiation in the group

D. Overfunctioning/underfunctioning

1. Characteristics of the overfunctioner
2. Response of others to overfunctioning in the group
3. Resistance to change
4. Planned underfunctioning by the leader to raise the level of functioning in the group

E. Emotional triangles

1. The basic law of emotional triangles
2. Occasions for "triangling"
3. The risk of assuming responsibility for relationships between others
4. Seven laws of an emotional triangle¹⁵
 - a. The relationship of any two members of an emotional triangle is kept in balance by the way a third party relates to each of them or to the relationship.
 - b. If one is the third party in an emotional triangle it is generally not possible to bring change (for more than a week) to the relationship of the other two parts by trying to change their relationship directly.
 - c. Attempts to change the relationship of the other two sides of an emotional triangle not only are generally ineffective, but also, homeostatic

¹⁵From a list that appears in Edwin H. Friedman, Generation to Generation: Family Process in Church and Synagogue (New York: Guilford), 1985, 36-39.

forces often convert these efforts to their opposite intent.

- d. To the extent a third party to an emotional triangle tries unsuccessfully to change the relationship of the other two, the more likely it is that the third party will wind up with the stress for the other two.
- e. The various triangles is an emotional system interlock so that efforts to bring change to any one of them are often resisted by homeostatic forces in the others or in the system itself.
- f. One side of an emotional triangle tends to be more conflictual than the others.
- g. We can only change a relationship to which we belong.

F. Symptom-bearer

- 1. Small groups not intended to be therapy groups
 - a. Leaders may assist especially troubled persons to find help in other settings
 - h. Leader self-differentiation contributes to general well-being of group members
- 2. Focal point for stress
 - a. From within the group
 - (1) Rooted in the discussion or subject matter
 - (2) Rooted in relationships
 - (3) The third point in an emotional triangle
 - (4) The leader can help
 - b. From systems outside the group

IV. Conclusion

- A. What we have covered

- B. What we will cover in the next sessions
- C. What leaders can do until the next session
 - 1. Observe family systems concepts at work in their groups
 - 2. Note any questions about what we have covered so far

Training Module 2
The Effective Leader: Separate and Together

Goal for This Module

Convey a working knowledge of the concept of self-differentiation.

Objectives

- that the students will have a clear understanding of the concept of self-differentiation;
- that the students will be eager to employ the concept of self-differentiation in their small groups;
- that the students will become better differentiated in their relationships, relatively nonanxious under stressful conditions and caringly connected with others in their groups.

Definition of Concept

Self-differentiation is a way of life where an individual knows who he or she is and is able to define or express that distinct "self" in a nonanxious way, while remaining connected with others in a group or other system.

(NOTE TO THE INSTRUCTOR: This module builds on the material you presented on self-differentiation in the introductory training session. Do not hesitate to review some of the information with your trainees to re-enforce the concept with them as you move through this session.)

Definition of Self

When you were in school, in spelling class, the teacher often asked you to define the words you were about to study. You were supposed to be able to learn the words and use them more effectively, if you knew what they meant. It was the same in other classes when you were to learn something new. You needed to know the definition of the terms you were going to be using.

Geometry made more sense -- at least a little more -- if you knew what an axiom was. In sewing class it was much

better to know what a bobbin was than to sit there with knots in your stomach because the teacher asked you to change the bobbin, and you had no idea what she was talking about. You may remember that some tests were almost completely about definitions. It was good to be able to define the terms you were using.

The same holds true today, doesn't it? If you are explaining a problem you are having with your car to your mechanic, it helps if you can define the problem in a way that will help the mechanic understand where he needs to begin to look. If you want to share the Christian faith with a friend, it helps if you can define some of the words Christians use, such as "grace" and "redemption," in order to explain some of the great things God has done for us.

In much the same way, if you are in a group, it helps if you can define *yourself* to the others in the group. It helps if the others know who you are, beyond the sharing of your name. It helps if they know what's important to you, what you think about things, how you feel about things. In short, it helps if others know "what makes you tick."

What does it mean to *define* yourself? Self-defined persons *know who they are and what their goals are*. They know their values, what is important to them. They are able to share this information about themselves with others. And at the same time they are able to remain "connected" to the others in the group in a caring and responsible way. In

their expression of who they are and what they think, they are identifying themselves as unique and different. They are unique, but at the same time they are part of the family of the group.

The value in being well defined or self-differentiated, as we mentioned in our first session, is that we make it clear who we are. Surprises about our beliefs and values are few, if any. We do not depend on others to define who we are. As we are part of the same group, we influence one another, but we remain who we are. We are the person God made. We are the person continually being shaped and molded by God into the creature He wants us to become.

It is good to share that person with others. They know who you are. And knowing who you are helps them respond with who they are.

Suppose within your group there has been some conversation about a social event. Most have talked about going to a football game. You don't know the difference between a tight end and a linebacker. Anyway, you would rather be *doing* something with your friends rather than sitting with them on cold bleachers watching others run around. So you say, "I would like to go ice skating. I think it would be fun to spend an afternoon together with you at Hartford's Pond." You have defined yourself. You have said what you think. At the same time it is clear that

you are still part of the group. Your interest and commitment remain with them. You are not going out "on your own."

It is also clear that you are not telling the others what they should do. Nor are you worried or anxious that you might not get your own way. You are simply stating your thoughts. By your action you are allowing, and even encouraging, others to define themselves according to what they think would be desirable. You are allowing yourself to be "different," yet still together with the others. And you are encouraging the others to express what might be "different" in their own view.

Self-definition is also self-differentiation. By either name, practicing the concept provides a healthy respect for each person. It also gives the group freedom to work out what it wants to do on the basis of straightforward information from its members.

The Importance of Self-differentiation to the Leader

(NOTE TO THE INSTRUCTOR: Emphasize the next point. It is **very important** that leaders understand how **very helpful** the concept of self-definition, or self-differentiation, will be (1) for their effectiveness as a leader and (2) for the well-being of their group.)

Beyond the fact that you come to your group as a *Christian* leader, with all the resources of the faith, there is another important asset you can contribute. In addition to the fact that you have the promise of the Holy Spirit to

guide you, with all the gifts God has given you, there is one special gift you can bring to your group. That asset, that contribution, is **your differentiation of yourself.**

Remember our discussion of self-differentiation in our previous session? Self-differentiation is your ability to know who you are as one who is different and distinct from the others in the group while you remain committed to the group. It is your ability to define yourself as the unique individual you are. As a leader the practice of self-differentiation **gives you the ability to identify and express your goals, your values, your interests and your vision** for the group.

All these qualities will make you a more effective leader. The group will know clearly the way you see things. It will know that you are able to express your thoughts on issues you want the group to consider. It will know that you are able to express your thoughts on issues others in the group want to consider.

You will be one the group will know it can trust to be open about your own perspective on things. At the same time it will know you are interested in and care about the perspective of others. It will know you as one who can express yourself without being anxious or uptight about what others might think or want to do. It will also know you as one who is interested in and able to hear what others think or want to do.

Other group members will learn from your example. As you express or define yourself on issues without being anxious about the outcome, others will be able to do the same thing. A remarkable openness, freshness of spirit and trust will develop as you lead your group in this way.

Self-differentiation and Leadership Style

What about leadership style? Will self-differentiation work for you even if your style of leading a group is not like everyone else's? Not only will it work for you, but it will make you a more effective leader, no matter what leadership style you prefer.

Some groups have leaders that are "gung-ho." It is almost impossible to keep up with them. Other leaders are so laid back you hardly know they are there. What the group decides is just fine with them. What kind of leader are you? Are you out there at the head of the pack, pulling the others along? Or are you happy to go along with everyone else?

(NOTE TO THE INSTRUCTOR: Have the members of the group talk about the kind of leadership style they think they use. Do this playfully. You could even have your leaders stand along an imaginary line (or a real one, if you like) between "Attila the Hun" and "Casper Milquetoast." Remember, you are not here to judge the "rightness" or "wrongness" of any approach to leadership. Instead, you are setting the stage where each leader will be able to feel confident that he or she will be able to lead through self-differentiation within his or her own style. Everyone will see this clearly in a few minutes as you continue your presentation.)

As you might imagine, there is no single "best" leadership style. Some groups work well with a dynamic and assertive leader. Others do not. Some groups work well when the leader always seeks to find out what everyone else wants to do. Others do not.

There must be another understanding of leadership we could discover that would help groups function in the best possible way. There is. It is the approach that looks at the group, leader and others, as one unit or family or system.

In this way of looking at a group, the leader and the group are connected. What one does or thinks or says affects the others. The leader influences, but not because of a particular leadership style. The leader influences the group, and the group influences the leader, because the leader and the group are connected. They affect one another simply because they are part of the same body.

In this way of looking at a group, your particular style as a leader is not critical to your effectiveness in the group. What is critical is the fact that you occupy the *position* of leadership in the group. The leader guides, motivates and influences by *position* rather than by personality. It can be very helpful for you as the leader to grasp that reality. You do not need to concern yourself with what kind of leadership personality you have. Your

importance to the group is not as much in your style as it is in your position. You are the leader.

The Function of the Head in A System

In an organic system what part functions as "leader?" It is the head. In your group you are the head. You are connected as a vital part of the group. You do not "make" yourself the head by what you do or by your style. You are only part of the organic whole, but you are a vital part. Without a head the rest of the group, or organism, will not function. Or it will function chaotically for a while, like a "chicken without its head." Then it will fall over, dead.

The head is naturally a critical part of the organism. It does not have to create itself in that role. It has it by *position*. Whatever the head does, it will influence the system. The head does not have to *try* to influence. It *influences because of its position as head in the organic system*.

With that understanding of leadership, you are free to influence or affect the rest of the organism, the group, in the way you believe will be best for the health and well-being of the whole system. As the head, your self-definition will influence the whole.

Influence is not the same as control. When the head sends out signals, the body feeds back more information that also influences what the entire organism will do. If the head says to the body, "Jump as high as you can," feedback

from the muscles, tendons, and the general energy level of the body will influence how high that jump will be. In some bodies when the head says, "Take a step," stiff joints send back a cry of resistance. There is not much movement.

Two-way connectedness between the head and the body means two things: (1) the body responds to the signal from the head with an effort to walk, and (2) the head receives feedback from the arthritic body's signals and modifies its request. Each part interacts with the other parts. Each affects the whole. Neither just the head nor just the body moves. The whole body runs, jumps, kicks, stumbles, halts or falls depending on the interaction of all the parts.

Groups are like bodies in the way they respond to their head. The leader sends out signals, and the group responds with feedback. The feedback lets the leader know where the group is and what it thinks it can do.

It could be the other way around. The group could send signals to the leader, and the leader would respond in one way or another. In "body language" it could mean that the foot sends out a signal that it has a corn, or the stomach could send a message that it is aching. Or the message could be that everything is great, and the body is waiting for a signal from the head on what it might do. Groups can be like that, too -- either aching or resisting or raring to go.

It is useful for those who lead through differentiation of self to remember that the head is not responsible for the whole body. The head is responsible to the body, but it is not responsible *for* the body. The head might say to the body, "We need some exercise. Let's take a walk." But the head is not responsible for the arthritis that has set in the joints, making walking difficult or even impossible.

Two Traps to Avoid

The sign of the well-differentiated leader is that he or she is able to be an "I" in the system while remaining connected to the "family" of the group. With this in mind, there are two traps that the well-differentiated leader will avoid. The first is the trap of believing or acting that self-differentiation is the same as self-centeredness. The head is a separate part of the body, but it is connected to the body. It is responsible *to* the body.

Dr. Murray Bowen, former professor at Georgetown University, introduced the term *self-differentiation* to describe a healthy combination of being separate and being *connected with the others in a system*. According to Dr. Bowen, self-differentiation is

- defining yourself and staying in touch with others
- being responsible for yourself and responsive to others
- maintaining your integrity and well-being without intruding on that of others

- allowing the enhancement of the other's integrity and well-being without feeling abandoned, inferior, or less of a self
- having an "I" and entering a relationship with another "I" without losing your self or diminishing the self of the other¹⁶

For the Christian the "self" is who we are in Christ. It is the new self we have become as Christ has come to live in us by grace and through the faith the Holy Spirit has worked in us. We are not talking about the "self" of the "Old Adam." We are not talking about selfishness. Self-differentiation is not autonomy or independent separateness from our group or family. A healthy self-differentiation is being who we are in Christ. It is being the person God has created and redeemed. And, as we have said, it is being the person He continues to mold through the shaping of His Word. A healthy self-differentiation avoids the trap of independence or self-centeredness.

There is a second trap for the leader to avoid. That trap catches us when our togetherness with the group becomes "stuck-togetherness." The self-differentiated leader is connected to the others in the group, but he or she is not *fused* with the group. Paint on a ceramic dish fuses to the surface when the dish is fired. From that point on the paint and the dish are one. There is no paint without a dish. There is no dish without paint. What happens to the one happens to the other.

¹⁶Derived from material in Murray Bowen, Family Therapy in Clinical Practice (Northvale, N.J.: Jason Aronson, 1985).

When the leader and the group become fused or stuck together, there is an unhealthy dependence of one on the other. There is no room for individuals to express who they are and what they think or believe. Everything and everyone must be "together."

(NOTE TO THE INSTRUCTOR: Do the following exercise as a playful break in the presentation: Have three or more members of the class demonstrate stuck-togetherness by pretending to be stuck-together, literally. Have them show what it is like to try to sit down, stand up, move around, or do anything else in that condition. Have one other member demonstrate what it is like to be differentiated: Have that person stand as a separate individual, connect with the others by touching them without becoming stuck to them, move away, and come back into the presence of the others while remaining separate and distinct from them. Let the others express whether they would rather be able to connect with the group, yet remain distinct individuals, or if they like it better being stuck together. See what your class thinks.)

The condition of being stuck together may develop so quietly and "naturally" that no one notices. Harry loved his group. Harry was a caregiving person who was eager to begin serving as the leader of his group. He soon found out what each person's needs were. He worked to meet those needs personally. The group loved Harry, and it told him so. They all had a great time together.

A couple of times Harry tried to introduce some new ideas into the group. They all said those ideas would change things, and they loved him and the way the group was working so much they did not want to change. Harry protested a little, but not too much. After all, they liked him and the way the group was going just fine. Maybe change

wasn't so important. Harry soon stopped saying anything about new ideas.

Harry had become stuck together with the group. No longer was he simply connected in a healthy way. He had become enmeshed with the others in the group. He no longer had a separate self in that setting. He had allowed himself to be flattered into losing his freedom to express himself. The group lost any freshness or new vitality Harry could bring to it to help it maintain its health and grow. In just a few months that group dried up and faded away.

Just as the leader can become stuck to the group, so group members can become stuck together with one another. We saw that with our own group demonstration a few minutes ago. The condition of being stuck together can happen any time a member of the group is pressured not to express or "define" himself or herself.

Pressure to fuse with the group can come in the form of less-than-pleasant coercion. It can also come through "seductive" flattery, as we saw in the case of Harry. In either case, when the leader or other group member submits to pressure to lay aside healthy expression of self, the group loses, and so do all the members. Everyone loses some of the God-given enrichment and variety He provides through individual personalities.

Differentiation Vs. Undifferentiation

Some people find it hard to express or define their own goals, interests and desires apart from what they believe others think. Some do not feel comfortable with what others think unless those thoughts are like their own. The people in both examples are not well-differentiated. It does not mean they are not gifted. It does not mean they are not able. It certainly does not mean they are not, or cannot be, Christian. It does mean that influences in life have affected them in ways that make it very hard for them to be who they are in relationships with others. Generally, it is also hard for them to allow others to be who they are. Sometimes it is nearly impossible.

Very often those influences have come through relationships and experiences in families, including parents and grandparents. It is possible for a counselor to help individuals discover some of those influences from family members, from other systems, such as work systems, or from the past. But that is not our job as group leaders. It is helpful for us just to understand that there are influences which make it harder for some people to relate in a differentiated and nonanxious way than it is for others.

The best thing we can do in those situations is to remain faithful to our own connected and nonanxious self-differentiation. Simply being in the presence of that kind of "other" person, especially when that person is a

Christian, offers one of the best opportunities for the less healthy person to grow in his or her own healthy differentiation of self.

All of us have some influences working on us that make it difficult for us to define ourselves clearly and still remain connected with the group. All of us have influences working on us that make it difficult for us to allow others to define themselves without our becoming anxious. We can identify some of the signals that will help you know when one or more members of your group are not functioning in a well-differentiated way. Dr. Peter Steinke has prepared a set of ten contrasting signals that will help us recognize when others (or we) are operating more in a differentiated or an undifferentiated manner.

Undifferentiated

1. Quickly offended, easily provoked, too sensitive, slow to recover
2. Reactive, instinctive, automatic
3. Underhanded, covert, flourishes in the dark
4. Demanding, willful, stubborn, resistant (especially to reason and love), unbending
5. Think in black/white or yes/no, intolerant of ambiguity, seek final solution, want all or nothing
6. Blame, criticize, displace, fault-finding, have poor discrimination
7. Uptight, serious, defensive
8. Competitive, either with or against, see life as a contest, contemptuous
9. Vague, non-specific, cloaked

Differentiated

1. Self-managing, shapes environment, resourceful
2. Responsive, intentional, thoughtful
3. Open, light-shedding, aware
4. Resilient, has sense of proportion
5. Have breadth of understanding, allow time for things to process
6. Take responsibility for self, learn when challenged, define self from within self
7. Relaxed, at ease, sensible
8. Take turns, collaborate, stay in touch even when tension grows
9. Clear, objective, purposeful

10. Create too much or too little space and one-sided solutions

10. Create space, options and common goals¹⁷

If you recognize situations of poor differentiation, you will understand some of the resistance you receive to your own attempts to express your interests, goals and values. You will also understand that as you continue to define yourself without becoming anxious about what you are saying or doing, you will help other members of the group feel more comfortable about defining themselves. You will even give those who have the most trouble taking responsibility for themselves the opportunity to "try it."

This is the strength of the Christian community "when each part is working properly," as St. Paul wrote in Ephesians 4:16 (RSV). That entire passage is a beautiful expression of self-definition and connectedness in a Christian community:

Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every joint with which it is supplied, when each part is working properly, makes bodily growth and upbuilds itself in love. (Ephesians 4:15-16 RSV)

Each "part" defines itself not merely by speaking the truth, but by speaking that truth "in love." All the "parts" are identifiable as separate, yet all are "joined and knit together" into one body that has a head. And that Head is

¹⁷Peter L. Steinke, How Your Church Works: Understanding Congregations as Emotional Systems ([Washington, D.C.]: The Alban Institute, 1993), 91-92.

Jesus Christ. If you want an ideal illustration of a self-differentiated group, this is it.

Review of Three Main Characteristics of the Self-differentiated Leader

There are three main characteristics of the well-differentiated leader. The most important of the three is that the leader stay in touch. Jesus is the Prime Model of self-definition, yet He remains connected with His followers through all time. The last words He left with His followers in the Gospel of Matthew are: "I am with you always" (Matthew 28:20 RSV). Being Christian places us in relationship with those around us. God connects us by love.

The second characteristic of the effective leader is to define himself or herself while continuing to stay in touch. Our salvation in Jesus defines us as free people who can be what we are in Him in the fullest measure. Sometimes that means expressing what we know to be right and true, even though our position may not be popular with those we love. Jesus took the strong step of throwing the money changers out of the temple (John 2:14-22), yet He continued to relate to the religious leaders. He told the mother of James and John He would not help her in her request for places of honor for her sons (Matthew 20:20-23), yet He continued to be close to His followers and called them friends (John 15:15).

To love our neighbor as ourself (Matthew 23:39) implies that we are also to love ourself. As we love ourself we will be able to express ourself to others. We will be able to let others know our thoughts, our goals, our interests, and how we feel about things. At the same time, in loving our neighbors as ourself, we will be able to hear their thoughts, their goals, their interests, and how they feel about things.

There is a third characteristic of effective leadership through self-differentiation. It is the most challenging. The challenge is for the leader to remain nonanxious in the presence of stress or tension in the group. The effective leader is able to continue to express himself and to remain in touch when group members relate in a reactive manner.

When the disciples argued among themselves about which of them was the greatest, Jesus maintained a nonanxious presence. Rather than become upset over their misdirected argument, He taught them a straightforward lesson about greatness through the person of a little child (Luke. 9:46-48).

When some members of the group are less able to love themselves or feel good about themselves, they are less able to allow others to express their own point of view freely. They become anxious. They resist. They do not make it easy for the other to lead. They think they will feel

comfortable only when the leader and others do not define themselves. They think they will be secure only when they see things as under control, when their apple cart is not upset.

It will be easy for you to become anxious when you experience an anxious reaction in others. The challenge will be for you to continue to define yourself and stay in touch without becoming anxious or uptight. Three things can be helpful for you at those times. One is to remember that these are people God loves and you love in Christ. A second is to remember that the best way for you to show your love for others and help them is for you to continue to express your thoughts in a nonanxious way. A third is to scatter the tension through genuine playfulness. Helpful playfulness is never at another's expense. It is issue-oriented: "Well, I'm glad we didn't break all the coffee cups when we decided to use china instead of styrofoam."

(NOTE TO THE INSTRUCTOR: Have your leaders participate in the following exercises. Divide into groups of six to ten. Tell everyone the exercises will help them experience some of the principles of self-differentiation. Be aware that you might encounter some resistance as you introduce the exercises. You will have your own opportunity to remain self-defined and yet connected.)

Exercise #1. Have each group leader express or define himself or herself in the area of his or her goals for small group ministry. Do not encourage response from other leaders. If there is any response, observe it, and ask the others to comment on how well-differentiated the response was. (Were the others able to express themselves without telling the first speaker what he or she "should" think?)

Exercise #2. Arrange a typical small group setting. Select an issue. The issue should focus on some moderately controversial aspect of the church, religion, society or politics. Have each member express or define himself or herself on this issue. Invite response. Observe to what extent the expressions and the responses are truly self-defined.

Exercise #3. Select a group leader. Have the leader define himself on an issue that is typical to your small group situation. Encourage group members to sabotage the leader in his or her effort. Some could respond with "you" statements instead of with "I" statements. Some could attempt to flatter or coerce the leader into abandoning his or her thoughts on the issue. Others could practice some of the other forms of undifferentiated response from Dr. Steinke's chart in their outline. Coach the leader to remain self-defined and connected to these challenging members. Have a good time with the exercise. Afterward ask the leader to comment on how he or she felt during the interaction. How easy or hard was it to remain defined and connected? Repeat the process with a different leader, if you have the time.

None of us is at 100% on the scale of differentiation. Most of us are not even close. But we can work at it. We can improve. As we recognize how much we will be able to help ourselves, the group and the group process through our own self-definition without independence, through our own closeness without stuck-togetherness, and through our nonanxious, self-defined expressions in the face of anxious reactions, we will find motivation to continue to grow in these areas. Through this simple way of looking at ourselves in relationship to others, we will grow in becoming more effective leaders. We will be "separate and together."

Training Outline 2
The Effective Leader: Separate and Together

Goal for This Module

Convey a working knowledge of the concept of self-differentiation.

Objectives

- that the students will have a clear understanding of the concept of self-differentiation;
- that the students will be eager to employ the concept of self-differentiation in their small groups;
- that the students will become better differentiated in their relationships, relatively nonanxious under stressful conditions and caringly connected with others in their groups.

Definition of Concept

Self-differentiation is a way of life where an individual knows who he or she is and is able to define or express that distinct "self" in a nonanxious way, while remaining connected with others in a group or other system.

I. Definition of Self

A. Defining words

1. When you were in school
2. Today

B. Defining yourself

1. Knowing your thoughts, feelings, values and goals
2. Expressing your "self" to others
 - a. It is clear who you are
 - b. Others do not control who you are
3. Helps others express themselves

C. Illustration: example of self-differentiation in planning a social event

II. The importance of self-differentiation to the leader

- A. You will be a more effective leader in your group

1. Your ability to define and express yourself
 2. Your ability to remain connected with the group
 3. Your ability to remain nonanxious in the presence of reactions from others
- B. The well-being of your group will improve
1. Members of your group will grow in their appreciation of you as a leader
 - a. Your openness
 - b. Your trustworthiness
 - c. Your care
 2. Members of your group will grow in their own differentiation
- III. Self-differentiation and leadership style
- A. Nearly any leadership style can be effective
1. "Gung Ho"
 2. "Laid back"
- B. Any leadership style can become more effective in a family systems perspective
1. Sees group leader and members as a unit or system
 2. What one does affects the others
 3. The importance of the leader is not in style but in the leadership *position*
- IV. The function of the head in a system
- A. A critical part of an organism
- B. Influences by its position
1. For the well-being of the body
 2. Not for control

- C. 1. A two-way connectedness
 - 2. The body responds to signals from the head
 - 3. The head receives feedback information from the body
 - 4. The body can originate a signal to the head
- D. Leaders and groups are like heads and bodies
 - 1. Two-way connectedness
 - 2. Responsible *to*, not *for* the group
- V. Two traps to avoid
 - A. Seeing self-differentiation as self-centeredness
 - 1. The head is a separate part of the body but connected to it
 - 2. Self-differentiation is:
 - a. defining yourself and staying in touch with others
 - b. being responsible for yourself and responsive to others
 - c. maintaining your integrity and well-being without intruding on that of others
 - d. allowing the enhancement of the other's integrity and well-being without feeling abandoned, inferior, or less of a self
 - e. having an "I" and entering a relationship with another "I" without losing your self or diminishing the self of the other¹⁸
 - 3. For the Christian our "self" is who we are in Christ
 - B. Having togetherness with the group become "stuck-togetherness"

¹⁸Derived from material in Murray Bowen, Family Therapy in Clinical Practice (Northvale, N.J.: Jason Aronson, 1985).

1. Connectedness is not fusion
 - a. Fusion creates an unhealthy dependence
 - (1) Enforced by flattery
 - (2) Enforced by coercion
 - b. Fusion kills freedom and vitality
2. Group members can become stuck together with one another as well as with the leader

VI. Differentiation vs. undifferentiation

- A. Some people are not well-differentiated
 1. Find it hard to express selves apart from what others think
 2. Uncomfortable when others' thoughts are different from their own
 3. Often influenced by family background
 4. Leader not to function as a counselor
 5. Best leadership response to remain connected, self-differentiated and nonanxious
 - a. Avoids enmeshment in the other's difficulties
 - b. Provides a context for the other person to grow in self-differentiation
- B. No one is completely self-differentiated
- C. Differences between undifferentiated and differentiated persons:

Undifferentiated

- Quickly offended, easily provoked, too sensitive, slow to recover
- Reactive, instinctive, automatic
- Underhanded, covert, flourishes in the dark
- Demanding, willful, stubborn, resistant (especially to reason and love), unbending

Differentiated

- Self-managing, shapes environment, resourceful
- Responsive, intentional, thoughtful
- Open, light-shedding, aware
- Resilient, has sense of proportion

- Think in black/white or yes/no, intolerant of ambiguity, seek final solution, want all or nothing
- Blame, criticize, displace, fault-finding, have poor discrimination
- Uptight, serious, defensive
- Competitive, either with or against, see life as a contest, contemptuous
- Vague, non-specific, cloaked
- Create too much or too little space and one-sided solutions
- Have breadth of understanding, allow time for things to process
- Take responsibility for self, learn when challenged, define self from within self
- Relaxed, at ease, sensible
- Take turns, collaborate, stay in touch even when tension grows
- Clear, objective, purposeful
- Create space, options and common goals¹⁹

D. Value of recognizing poor differentiation

1. Understand resistance to your own differentiation
2. Understand that your ongoing differentiation will help others grow in their own differentiation

E. The functioning Christian community is an expression of differentiation

VII. Review of three main characteristics of the self-differentiated leader

A. Stays in touch with the group and its members

B. Remains self-defined

C. Remains nonanxious in the presence of others' anxiety or stress

1. Anxiety heightens when a person is not able to express himself or herself freely
2. Anxious persons tend to resist another point of view
3. Anxious persons tend to feel secure only when they believe things are under control
4. Three helpful perspectives when working with anxious persons:

¹⁹From Peter L. Steinke, How Your Church Works: Understanding Congregations as Emotional Systems ([Washington, D.C.]: The Alban Institute, 1993), 91-92.

- a. Remember these are people of God
- b. Remember the best way to show your love is to continue to express your thoughts in a nonanxious way
- c. Respectful playfulness can scatter tension

VIII. Summary statements

- A. Self-differentiation helps ourselves, the group and the group process
- B. Self-differentiation helps make effective leaders

Training Module 3
"Balance" in Your Small Group

Goal for This Module

Equip leaders to understand the positive and negative aspects of homeostasis for the purpose of helping their groups maintain a healthy balance in the normal course of group life and in the face of change.

Objectives

- that the students will have an understanding of the natural inclination of groups to keep things the way they are and to resist change;
- that the students will develop a level of confidence in their ability to work with the forces of homeostasis and change in their groups;
- that the students will be prepared to help their groups overcome their natural resistance to change and to achieve a satisfying level of balance in their group life.

Definition of Concept

Homeostasis is the balance that exists between all the forces at work in a small group or in any other system.

If you were a tightwire walker, you would want to keep things in balance as you walk through life, especially when you are "on the job." Achieving and maintaining balance would be very important to you. You will find that balance is also important in group life.

At times it may seem as though you are doing a balancing act as you lead your small group. Relationships and the way the group sees itself will seem either in or out of balance. It will become clear that groups, just as tightwire walkers, want to remain in balance.

In this session you will learn about balance in small groups. You will learn about (1) the reality of balance in

groups, (2) the *importance* of balance in the life of the group, (3) resistance to change in a group's balance, and (4) the process of introducing *change* into the life of a group. You will see that, once again, the self-differentiated leader is a basic ingredient in the mix that produces a well-functioning group.

The Reality of Balance in Small Groups

You've heard the expression, "Bodies in motion tend to remain in motion and bodies at rest tend to remain at rest." Many parents have no problem understanding the first part of that expression when they think of their two-year-olds. Children that age are often "bodies" that seem like perpetual motion machines. Others believe they know the second part of that expression all too well when they think of their teenagers. This is true especially on Saturday mornings, when it's time to do household chores. In that instance the formal name for this concept makes perfect sense: inertia.

We could use another word to describe situations where people want to keep things "in balance," where they want to keep things as they are. That word is "homeostasis." Remember, we introduced the word in our first session. If you want to use it here, you can. Homeostasis means, literally, "stand alike."²⁰ It is a term that applies to

²⁰From the Greek *homoio*, like or similar, and *stasis*, stand.

the kind of balance we have described. It's the balance that exists between all the forces at work in a small group or in any other system. But it's a special kind of balance. It is a balance that takes into account forces from all directions: up, down, left, right, inside and outside, and even sooner or later.

All systems want to stay in balance. They want to stay as they are. Like the gyroscope that keeps its balance by turning at breakneck speed, the two-year-old is perfectly content running non-stop around the room, throughout the house, or out in the yard. He is in harmony with himself as things are. He feels everything in his life is "just right" at that moment. Everything is in balance even though there is a lot of motion.

To change anything in the child's life at that moment would upset the situation. It would destroy the balance, from the child's perspective. You know that's true when you call an active child into the house for a nap. Or, from the opposite perspective, when you try to get the sleeping teenager to get up.

Groups behave like individuals, with their own preference for balance. Even though a group has several people in it, it acts more like an "it" rather than like a "they." The combined personalities and interactions of the members of the group tend to give it something like a single personality. And just as the child or the teenager, or

anyone else, works to keep things the way they are in his or her life, groups work to keep things the way they are in the life of the group. That's balance.

The Importance of Balance in the Life of the Group

Perhaps the most famous tightwire walking family in the history of show business was the Flying Wallendas. What kept this family successful for so many years was an amazing ability among family members to keep their balance. Without that ability the family literally would not have survived.

Small groups also develop an amazing ability to maintain a balance in their group life. One difference between the Wallendas and a small group is that while a tightwire walker needs to practice to keep his or her balancing skills sharp, a small group finds and keeps its balance quite naturally.

If an existing group is out of balance in some way, it might restore its balance by selecting a new member whose presence would meet that need. A group that loses its Bible study leader might "find" a new member who will become the next study leader.

When individuals first come together to form a small group, there may be no balance. While the group is still in its forming stages, it may not yet be a recognizable system. The group is only beginning the process that develops a unique set of forces that will identify its special character over time. But the process is underway as soon as

you have your first contact with the individuals you invite to become part of the group. Balance-building elements include every experience related to the process of coming together and forming a group. Every thought, every action and every reaction of all those who will become part of the group contributes to its developing sense of balance. The way people respond to your invitation becomes part of the process. So does what those you invited think about being in the same group with the others you are asking to join.

When you start to come together, details, such as the order in which people arrive and the way they enter the room, become part of the balance. So does the way they leave. The setting, the time, the number of times per month the group meets, the personalities of the individual members, where each sits and next to whom or not next to whom each sits, all these things become part of the balance.

Balance in a group is an expression of the group's sense of itself. It is related to its own self-differentiation. The kinds of things the group does and the order in which it does them all contribute to the group's self-definition. All these factors become part of how the group develops and recognizes its own identity.

Now that you are thinking about the kinds of things that make up a sense of balance in groups, what are some of the elements of your group's balance that come to mind? Take a few minutes to share your thoughts.

(NOTE TO THE INSTRUCTOR: Give your leaders a little time to think about this, if they need it. If one or more faces "light up" right away, indicating they have examples to share, let them. Encourage group members to include examples of balance other than those you mentioned above. Any time the class shares experiences from their groups, be sure to remind them to be faithful to any agreement of confidentiality they may have entered into with their group members.)

Resistance to Change in the Balance of A Group

Most people appreciate the expression: "If it ain't broke, don't fix it." When someone tries to introduce change into our lives, we tend to think we don't need it. We can become annoyed or angry. We can see the change as a threat to our way of life. Perhaps we can see change even as a threat to our very existence.

Some potential changes *do* pose a threat to our existence. If you and your family are driving along the Interstate and another car suddenly crosses the median into your lane, the other driver has introduced a potentially life-threatening change into your family system. You will work hard to avoid that threat. You don't want your family or you to be killed.

Several years ago Karl Wallenda, a very competent aerialist and the father of the Flying Wallendas, lost his life in a fall from a wire stretched between two tall buildings. A few days before, while practicing in his backyard in Sarasota, Florida, he fell and injured his

shoulder.²¹ It may not be possible to tell whether or not that injury seriously affected Mr. Wallenda's ability to perform, but it did introduce a change into his "system" that would have required some adjustments.

As it is important for highwire walkers to keep their balance, so it is important to small groups that they maintain balance in their group life. A highwire walker will fall and perhaps injure or kill herself if she does not keep her balance. A small group that loses its balance completely will fall apart and no longer function as a group.

It is out of a sense of self-preservation that groups tend to think any change in the balance of their system will be a threat to their existence. The perceived threat can be major or minor, great or small, but it is still real for the group. Therefore groups will tend to resist change.

Perhaps you remember having heard the "seven last words in the church:" "We never did it that way before!" In the past you may have been exasperated with that reaction to proposed change -- or perhaps you were part of the chorus that was shouting out the refrain! Either way, now that you know something about homeostasis and how important it is to a group to maintain its balance, you may have a better understanding of a group's resistance to change.

²¹Reported in a conversation with a near-neighbor and acquaintance of the Wallenda family known to the author.

There are three things to know about groups and change. A group that is satisfied with the way it is functioning will: (1) try to keep things as they are, (2) resist change and, if change is introduced, (3) form a new balance that makes use of the newly introduced information. This section will focus on the natural tendency for groups to keep things in balance and resist change.

Groups will strive to continue the way they are organized and the way they operate. Two features of resistance are that: (1) most groups perceive their resistance as a positive action to preserve the well-being of the group, and (2) resistance to change can involve a great deal of internal change and movement in order to maintain the overall balance of the system.

Sally initially agreed to serve as her group's hostess only after no one else would take the position. When Sally moved away and could no longer meet that commitment, Jane volunteered to fill out Sally's term, even though earlier she "absolutely" would not take the job. The group had a need to maintain its balance by continuing to have a hostess, and one of the group members rose to the occasion.

Then there's the story of Overfunctioning Ed. Overfunctioning Ed was the leader of his group. Not only was he the group leader, but he was also the host, the Bible study leader, the worship planner and the prayer leader. He

set up before every meeting, and he cleaned up after every gathering of the group.

Ed often complained that "No one else will do anything." A better description of what was happening has to do with balance. The group was maintaining its balance by politely underfunctioning as a perfect compliment to Ed's overfunctioning. As you might have guessed, when Ed had to take a leave of absence from the group due to what he called burnout, four other members picked up most of his responsibilities, and the remaining members shared the rest.

The examples of Jane and Ed's group show how the desire to keep things going in a group can be beneficial. The departure of Sally and Ed from their groups disturbed the balance in those systems. In each case the perceived result of the change was that the group would function less well with Sally or Ed no longer doing his or her job.

Whether Jane or the others in Ed's group realized it or not, their actions show they chose to resist the threat of change brought about by the departure of the other group members. Their particular form of resistance to an upset in the balance of their systems illustrates the two features of resistance we mentioned earlier: (1) most groups perceive their resistance as a positive action to preserve the well-being of the group and (2) resistance to change can involve a great deal of internal change and movement in order to maintain the overall balance of the system. Both groups

would have functioned less well if other members had not significantly changed their level of involvement to help their groups maintain their balance. Their actions had a positive effect on the functioning of each group.

(NOTE TO THE INSTRUCTOR: Ask one or two members of the class to share examples of how their groups resisted change at some point in the past in order to maintain their balance. Did their resistance require a great deal of effort or only a little? How much internal change took place to help the group stay where it was? Were the overall results positive or negative? Be willing to share one example from your own experience, if you can.)

One of the most notable negative examples of all time of a group resisting change was the inability or the unwillingness of many of the people of Jesus' day to see Him as the promised Messiah. His appearance as the Suffering Servant did not match the militant messianic expectations of many of the Pharisees, priests and others. For most it was easier to resist changing their thinking than it was to receive a change in heart brought about by the Holy Spirit.

It could be that you have resisted change in your congregation, in your group, or in some other setting in your life. It may be that you could not even explain why you were opposed to change. Now you may understand.

Change upsets the balance in a group, or family, or congregation or any other system. New circumstances or new people or new ways of doing things mean the old patterns will have to change. Relationships within the group will have to change. The way of looking at who and what the

group is will have to change, even if only a little. Change means things will no longer be the same.

It is easier to maintain the balance that exists than to rearrange the way we look at things. It is easier to stay the same than it is to change the way we function. It seems much more comfortable to keep our relationships the way they were than to rearrange them into a new and different balance, even if the present balance is uncomfortable or undesirable in some ways. Generally we will prefer to hold on to the familiar patterns we know than to "risk" all that is involved in realigning the balance in our group.

The Process of Introducing Change into the Life of A Group

The introduction of change to a group comes from one of two sources. Ideas for change will come either from outside the group system, or they will come from within the system. Motivation for change can come in the form of encouragement, pressure or desire. Real change will come about only when pressure becomes desire. Even encouragement has to become internalized to become desire before change is complete. In all cases, the caring and connected, self-differentiated and nonanxious position of the leader sets the stage for the way the group will deal with the possibility for change.

When Ted's group learned it had to change its meeting room from the lounge to the Sr. High classroom, there was a

universal howl of protest from group members. There was no recourse for the group, however, since the property committee was about to begin a three month renovation of the lounge. The Sr. High room was the only remaining space that was anywhere near the right size.

The new room was far less comfortable. It had an assortment of chairs, some of them even those folding metal jobs, instead of the soft couch and lounge chairs the group had enjoyed during the entire time of its existence. The new room was "cluttered," the group said, with a soda machine, refrigerator and hot water maker, not to mention the "wild" bulletin board decorations on the walls. It definitely was not an aesthetically uplifting environment! The old room was just down the hall from the kitchen, where Edna always carefully prepared the coffee and brought it in on a serving tray. The new room had that old hot water maker!

Within two months of this forced move to a new setting a number of interesting changes took place within the group. Edna said she could no longer serve as hostess because she couldn't find anything in the Sr. High room. Judy, who had been too shy and disorganized to take on any position before, replaced Edna and thrived on the helter-skelter conditions in the room. She also found it easy to make coffee with the hot water maker.

Ted decided it was time to replace the more formal study format the group had followed since its beginning. He introduced a relational Bible study with the group sitting closer together in a circle. In the old room group members had sat around the outside of the room on the couches and lounge chairs.

The group began to dress more casually, laugh more often and more loudly, and call one another more often during the week to see how things were going. Two members left the group for another, more formal study, and three others joined, because they heard of the openness, acceptance and warmth in the group. When the lounge renovation was completed, the group asked if it could remain in the Sr. High room.

Groups will adjust to change. Forced change can be traumatic, because it is imposed from the outside. In this instance Ted helped the process simply by remaining nonanxious throughout the period of change. Others became upset, but he did not. He expressed his goals for the continued well-being of the group. And he adjusted his study format when that seemed the natural thing to do in their new situation.

Real change takes place only as the change is internalized. You can "force" your spouse or your child to come to church, but it is only when the Holy Spirit, working through the external Means of Grace, touches and converts

the heart, that your loved one will truly change from within. Real change in a group comes about only as group members take external influences for change and internalize them into a new and balanced arrangement. Sometimes the changes you see in the group are surprising and unexpected, as they were with Edna and Jane. But those changes can help you understand your people and minister to them with a new sense of understanding.

There will be times when you as the leader will want to introduce change into your group. When those times come, it will be important for you to remember that, just because you are the leader, no one guarantees the group will do what you want. It can resist you, go along with you or incorporate your ideas into its own thinking.

Your greatest potential for bringing about change in your group is through your own self-differentiation. Be the differentiated person you are called to be as a unique child of God. Let the group know your thoughts, goals, ideas, dreams and vision for the present and for the future. Because of your *position* as leader, the group is more likely to incorporate your thoughts and ideas into any changes it makes.

Another point to remember is to remain nonanxious. An increase in the level of anxiety in you as the leader almost certainly will generate at least an equal amount of anxiety within the group. Maintain a nonanxious presence even in the

face of high levels of anxiety or emotional upset on the part of others. Your lack of anxiety, sometimes tempered with a little appropriate humor or playfulness, provides a climate where others can feel more comfortable with reduced anxiety levels of their own.

Maintain a caring, connected relationship with your group. A leader who is not anxious about his or her position in the system is much more likely to communicate a caring interest in others. As you are a caring leader, your group is much more likely to listen to your ideas and make those ideas their own.

When you express yourself in a differentiated manner, you encourage others to do the same. When you relate in a nonanxious way, you open the door for honest interaction and the straightforward exchange of ideas. When you remain connected with your group, they know you are with them in their decisions and actions.

When an individual or circumstances has successfully introduced change into the life of a group, the group will begin to make whatever internal adjustments it believes will be necessary to help it come into balance once again. Previously reluctant Jane took over as hostess in her group when Sally moved away.

Another sign to look for is if the group alters the way it functions. Ed's group shared responsibilities for the group's life after Ed dropped out.

Members within the group may also change the way they relate. Ted's group changed to a closer seating arrangement, started a relational Bible study and called one another more frequently after the group moved from the formal lounge to the Sr. High room. When you see signs such as these, you can be sure some degree of change has been introduced into the group successfully.

Concluding Exercise

As a closing exercise for this session we will look at one of the more common calls for change many groups face. It's the challenge for one group to become two.

Some groups have a covenant that when they reach a certain size they will "multiply" and become two groups. This concept may sound nice in theory, but it is not always easy to bring about -- especially after the group has been together for a while.

Joe's group had grown to the point where it was no longer possible for each member to have enough time to share adequately his or her experiences in living the Christian life. There was not enough time for everyone to take part in the Bible study discussion as they had been able to do when the group was smaller.

When the group formed seven months ago, all had agreed that upon reaching a certain size it would be time to become two groups. That time had come. But there was a common look of upset and discomfort as Joe introduced the idea of

growth into two groups. Resistance was there! "Who will go?" "Who will stay?" "Who will be the new leader?" "We have come to know one another so well and to get along with such openness. How can we do this?"

Three things helped with this change: (1) the group knew it had made this agreement from the beginning, (2) there was enough flexibility for some to shift to the new day, and (3) the current study series had come to an end. The one remaining sticking point was the leader. Even though Sarah was trained to become an additional group leader, was competent and had led the group on some occasions, the group had come to feel comfortable with Joe. Joe knew he had to change the balance in the group so it would release him.

(NOTE TO THE INSTRUCTOR: Stop at this point. Explain to the class that you are going to read three different endings to this little scene. You will stop at the end of each ending for the group to give its evaluation of how Joe did as a differentiated, nonanxious leader. As you can tell, in Ending #1 Joe was pretty heavy-handed and not well-differentiated. He was telling the group what to do rather than expressing his own thoughts. In Ending #2 Joe became anxious and lost his positive connection with the group. Ending #3 provides one example of a differentiated response. The group might think of other examples of what Joe could have said or done.)

Ending #1. Joe came to the group the night after he had made the decision that it was time for the group to divide. At the end of the meeting he announced that the group was now too large to continue as a single group. It would have to divide. Starting the next week Al, Mary, Ed,

Sam and Gwyn would meet on Tuesdays with Sarah as the leader. The rest would stay with him at the regular meeting time and day.

Ending #2. Joe explained during the time in the meeting set aside for activity planning that the group had grown nicely over the last several months. He reminded everyone of their agreement that when the group reached this size it would multiply into two groups. He said he and Sarah had talked during the week. She had said she was a little nervous about becoming a regular leader, but she was willing to give it her best.

By now Joe was beginning to hear cries of resistance from the group. Suddenly his heart began to beat faster, he could feel the muscles in the back of his neck tense and a sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach. "All right, you guys!" he exploded, "this is what we said we are going to do, and we're going to do it! Don't give me a hard time. I don't want to do it either, but we have to. Who's going to meet with Sarah at Ed's next Tuesday?"

Ending #3. As in Ending #2 Joe began to speak during the planning portion of the meeting. He pointed out the group's nice growth and reminded them of their covenant to multiply. He mentioned his conversation with Sarah. He noted they had just completed their current study series. Then he said, "It will be hard for me to leave this group. I will miss everyone who has been coming here at this time.

If I didn't believe in the idea of forming two groups when one reaches the size ours has reached, I would want to stay. But I do believe it's the right thing to do. I will look forward to seeing all of you at church and at some of the events we do together in larger gatherings.

(NOTE TO THE INSTRUCTOR: The following is an optional addition to your activities for this session. Ask the leaders in your group to identify some recent or current needs for change in their groups. How has their awareness of balance, resistance to change and the process of initiating change within groups helped them understand their past attempts to introduce change into their groups? How can what they learned help them introduce change in the present or the future? Tell the group you would like some feedback from them after they have an opportunity to observe and interact with their groups from the perspective of their awareness of the principles of balance. Close with a prayer for your leaders and their groups. Pray for a Christ-centered balance in their lives.)

Training Outline 3
"Balance" in Your Small Group

Goal for This Module

Equip leaders to understand the positive and negative aspects of homeostasis for the purpose of helping their groups maintain a healthy balance in the normal course of group life and in the face of change.

Objectives

- that the students will have an understanding of the natural inclination of groups to keep things the way they are and to resist change;
- that the students will develop a level of confidence in their ability to work with the forces of homeostasis and change in their groups;
- that the students will be prepared to help their groups overcome their natural resistance to change and to achieve a satisfying level of balance in their group life.

Definition of Concept

Homeostasis is the balance that exists between all the forces at work in a small group or in any other system.

I. Introduction

- A. The importance of balance in personal and group life
- B. Balance in relationships and in group life
- C. Elements of balance in small groups covered in this training session
 - 1. The reality of balance in small groups
 - 2. The importance of balance in group life
 - 3. Resistance to change in a group's balance
 - 4. How to bring about change in a group

II. The reality of balance in small groups

- A. Similarities between the law of inertia and balance
 - 1. Two-year-olds

- 2. Teenagers
 - B. Homeostasis
 - 1. A balance of all the forces at work in a system
 - 2. A condition that produces resistance to change in a system
 - C. The group as a self-contained unit or system
 - 1. Its own personality
 - 2. Its own inclination to keep things in balance
- III. The importance of balance in the life of a group
- A. A natural occurrence
 - B. Develops as a group becomes a distinct system
 - 1. Includes every experience related to the group-forming process
 - 2. Is an expression of a group's sense of itself
 - C. Has developed in your group
- IV. Resistance to change in a group's balance
- A. A natural reluctance to change
 - 1. "If it ain't broke, don't fix it"
 - 2. Change seen as a threat
 - a. To a way of life
 - b. To any system's existence
 - (1) A family on the highway
 - (2) Karl Wallenda
 - c. To a group's existence
 - B. The seven last words in the church
 - C. Three characteristics of groups that are satisfied with the way they are functioning

1. Will attempt to keep things as they are
 - a. Perceive resistance as a positive action to preserve the well-being of the group
 - b. Participate in significant internal movement to maintain the group's overall balance
 - (1) Sally and Jane
 - (2) Overfunctioning Ed
 - (3) Examples from the group
 2. Will resist change
 - a. The Pharisees and Jesus
 - b. Your experience with resistance to change
 - c. The experience of groups
 - (1) Upsets the balance
 - (2) Seems easier to keep the present balance than to change
 - (a) Even if present balance is undesirable in some ways
 - (b) Rather than risk all that is involved in the process of change
- V. The process of introducing change into the life of a group
- A. Sources of change
 1. Outside the system
 2. Inside the system
 - B. Motivation for change
 1. Pressure
 2. Encouragement
 3. Desire

- C. The most effective context for change
 - 1. A caring, connected leader
 - 2. A self-differentiated leader
 - 3. A nonanxious leader
- D. An example of forced change from outside the group
 - 1. Helped by a well-differentiated leader
 - 2. Is complete only as it takes place within
 - (1) The work of the Holy Spirit
 - (2) The example of Ted's group
- E. An example of change from within a group
 - 1. Leader-influenced change not guaranteed
 - a. Groups can resist change
 - b. Groups can go along with suggested change
 - c. Groups can modify suggested ideas for change
 - 2. Greatest potential for change with a differentiated leader
 - a. Communicate thoughts, goals, ideas, dreams and vision for the group
 - b. Remain nonanxious
 - (1) Diffuses anxiety in the rest of the group
 - (2) Helped by appropriate humor or playfulness
 - c. Maintain a caring, connected relationship with the group
- F. Signs that change has taken place
 - 1. Evidence of internal adjustments to achieve a new balance

2. Evidence of altered functioning

3. Evidence of altered relationships

VI. Concluding exercise

Training Module 4
It Takes Three: A Look at Emotional Triangles

Goal for This Module

Develop in the students an ability to recognize emotional triangles, to detriangle themselves from stress-producing relationships and to create triangles for the purpose of helping relationships in their groups.

Objectives

- that the students will understand the triangling process;
- that the students will become confident in their ability to employ the principles of emotional triangles in their small group relationships;
- that the students will be able to detriangle themselves or create triangles for the purpose of helping relationships in their groups.

Definition of Concept

An emotional triangle is a relationship in which a third party takes on the stress that develops between two other persons or between a person and an object or situation.

Jimmy was trying to store his dad's tall stepladder in the carport while the two of them took a break from their window washing chore to eat lunch. The ladder was too tall to stand up under the low roof, so he laid it on its side. Each time he moved away, the ladder would fall over. No matter how many times he tried, the long, thin ladder would topple over with the slightest breeze or brush of his pant leg.

When Jimmy's father spotted the trouble the boy was having, he pulled out the legs of the stepladder just enough to stabilize the ladder so it would not tip over. Always ready to teach his son some useful concept, the father pointed out how the spread legs created a triangle. "A

triangle is the most stable of all shapes," he noted wisely. "The ladder on its side is not steady enough to stand on its own if there is even the slightest pressure to push it over. Spreading out the legs to form a triangle adds a third point to relieve the pressure from the force of the wind or your pant leg." Jimmy understood how the triangle was a very sturdy shape. He saw that the ladder was now much more stable.

Human relationships are also much more stable in sets of three. We might *think* two-person relationships are "steady." Yet think of any one-on-one relationship you have with any person: your spouse, your child, your friend, your teacher, your attorney, your pastor, or another group member. How long are you ever in a conversation with any of them before you draw into the discussion another person or object or activity? We almost always stabilize our relationship with another by "leaning on" a third person or thing.

(NOTE TO THE INSTRUCTOR: If your trainees mention the doctor-patient relationship as a one-on-one experience, ask them what they and their doctors discuss. They will mention their medical conditions (or their bills!), and you can point out that their colds, or their broken arms, or their blood pressures are the third points of triangles in those relationships.)

Try it right now and see. Remember that triangles are not necessarily bad or something to avoid. They just "are" in relationships.

(NOTE TO THE INSTRUCTOR: Have the group divide into pairs. If there is an odd number, pair off with one of the members. Otherwise, direct and observe the process. Create enough distance between the pairs so they can speak and listen comfortably. Your only instruction is that the pairs should talk for one minute. The pairs choose the subject matter. Observe the conversations. At the end of the minute ask several pairs what persons or objects or activities they "triangled" - drew into the relationship - in the course of their conversations. If some think they created no triangles, ask them to describe their conversations. It is almost certain that you will be able to identify at least one other person or item they drew in as they talked.)

Perhaps you noticed in your conversations that there is an emotional connection between you and the person or object you drew in as the third point in your triangle.

(NOTE TO THE INSTRUCTOR: Ask, "Can you identify that connection and describe it?" Give your trainees a few minutes to respond. If they have trouble identifying an emotional connection, give them an example. You might say: "When I talk with my neighbor about the Dallas Cowboys [or some other team], I feel a certain excitement, because I like them as winners [or I feel a definite distress, because they seem to win nearly all the time].")

We have feelings about the persons and objects in our relationships. You also had some feelings about the person who was your conversation partner, even though you may not have given much thought to that fact. There is also some feeling you attached to the third person or item you triangled into your conversation.

We are not only thinking individuals. We also operate at a feeling level. Our connections with others have an emotional dimension to them. That's why the complete name for triangles is emotional triangles. There is an emotional

field that links and connects us with others in our relationships.

One of the most common experiences for us is the emotional field of our families. Another is the emotional field of our congregations. A third is the emotional field of your small group.

Within any of those emotional fields people will enter into triangling relationships. Think for a moment about your small group. Think of some of the triangled relationships you can recall from your experience there. Those triangles may involve only other people. Or they may include yourself.

If you are not in a group at the moment, think about triangles you have observed in your family or in the congregation. Do this silently. You do not have to share your thoughts out loud.

(NOTE TO THE INSTRUCTOR: Not all experiences with triangles are pleasant or positive. Right now you want your trainees to be free to think of any relationships that may come to mind, good or bad. Later you will talk with them about some negative dimensions of triangling. At that point they will have an opportunity to reflect out loud on this exercise. You can accept some thoughts about negative triangling experiences now, if trainees want to share, but remind them they will have a better opportunity later.)

Recall some of your observations of people triangling other individuals or issues into their conversations or relationships. It is likely you noticed that sometimes

people talk between themselves about another person, and sometimes they talk to a third party.

Sometimes one person will try to get another person to talk to a third individual about a relationship or an issue, as when Mom asks John to call Bill to eat supper. All are forms of triangling. Not all forms of triangling are bad. Not all are undesirable. They simply add stability to our relationships.

Balanced triangles exist when the distance between the three points is about equal. The best illustration of a triangle that functions in a balanced way at all times is the Trinity. All three Persons are equal to the others in their relationship. They exist and interact as distinct Persons, yet they join together as they act for common purposes in one Godhead.

In families, the most balanced triangles exist when family members join together in different relationship combinations. Dad and thirteen-year-old Harry work together on the lawn. Mom and fifteen-year-old Rachael prepare a meal together. Mom and Dad talk about family finances. Harry and Rachael play a little basketball at the hoop in their driveway. They all join in a board game of Jeopardy near the end of the day. Mom, Dad, Rachael and Harry also have their individual tasks to accomplish, but their family connection is much more than the tasks at hand.

Family members also connect in an emotional way. Each offers the other physical or verbal "hugs" as they greet one another and move through the activities of the day, as when one says, "Nice to see you this morning. How are you today?" Or there might be some emotional "bumps" along the way, such as, "Can't you hurry up in the bathroom? I'm going to be late for school!"

Ordinarily each can call on the other for help as needed, yet each is respected and appreciated as an individual. All family members are free to respond to the others in love and with respect, according to their specific "positions . . . duties and responsibilities."²² Each participates for the benefit of the whole. They all share the same emotional field in their family.

A small group functions in much the same way. Small group members join together in different relationship combinations to live out the emotional, spiritual and functional elements of their life together. The more small groups operate this way in the church, the more likely it is that the entire congregation will live in a climate of mutual acceptance, love and trust among its members.

Points on emotional triangles are not always equally distant from one another. Relationships are not always balanced. When there is stress between two individuals or

²²Luther's Small Catechism with Explanation (St. Louis: Concordia, 1991), 33.

3between an individual and an issue or an object, forces are at work to "tip the ladder" of stability in that relationship.

The person under stress seeks to relieve stress by diverting some of his or her stress to another. Most families move in and out of stress-diverting triangles many times in the course of a day. Much of the ordinary rise and fall of daily stress in life goes on under circumstances that are fairly normal. If Mom is making breakfast and Rachael's little brother spills orange juice, Mom may seek to relieve her stress by asking Rachael to clean up the floor. If Rachael is well-differentiated at that point (remember our last session?), she may respond, "Sure, Mom," and clean up the OJ. Or, if her ride is about to arrive, she could say, "It's about time for Becky to pick me up. I'll get Harry, if that's OK."

On the other hand, if she allows herself to accept her mom's stress, she may clean up the orange juice, even if Becky is blowing the car horn in the driveway. But she may very well pass along some of her own stress by yelling at little Tommy, who was already corrected by his mother. Persons who act in an undifferentiated manner tend to accept stress and pass it along to others.

When different persons occupy different positions in family triangles over a period of time, the family will still function fairly well. Things are not working well

when one person becomes the receiver of the family's stress on a regular basis. That person would be the symptom-bearer we described in our first session.

Relationships in your group would not be balanced in a healthy way if one individual would be the symptom-bearer for the group on a regular basis -- or even if he or she were the receiver of the stress that exists between two other individuals in the group.

Relationships are affected, for their harm and not for their good, when anyone seeks to divert stress from one relationship to another on a regular basis. It is much better when people face the challenges and difficulties of the relationship and work them out.

Detriangling

Remember the illustration from our introductory session, where Sue, a fictional member of your group, was experiencing some stress in her relationship with Martin, who was responsible for scheduling the homes where your group will meet. Sue disagreed with Martin's method for selecting host homes. She came to you as the leader and asked you to "do something" to correct Martin's faulty thinking.

In that illustration you allowed yourself to be triangled. You agreed to talk to Martin. By doing that you accepted Sue's stress and made it your own. Perhaps you could even feel your stomach tighten as you realized that

now you were going to be the one to take this issue to Martin. Your internal stress may rise to an even higher level when you realize that you allowed yourself to take up what really was Sue's cause.

(NOTE TO THE INSTRUCTOR: Give the trainees an opportunity to express the feelings they experience when they think about what it is like to assume or take on someone else's stress. Ask: "What was it like for you the last time you allowed yourself to be triangled? How did it feel? In what part of your body did you notice your feelings settle? [They could say their stomach, chest, or head, for example.] Would you like to learn how to avoid being drawn into those emotional triangles? Listen on." If they can experience a feeling of discomfort attached to allowing themselves to be triangled, they are more likely to be ready to absorb what you will tell them to help them avoid those situations. They will also be more ready to learn how they can turn the human tendency to triangle into a positive force for the well-being of their groups.)

Let's use another example beside Sue and Martin, for the moment. Emily, your group's person responsible for lining up refreshments, suggested the group make refreshment time special by having each person prepare her or his favorite dessert the next time around. The group decided against the idea, saying it wanted to keep refreshments simple, something like cookies and coffee, so no one would have to go to too much trouble. Emily said nothing during the discussion. Later she came to you, upset because the group has "rejected" her idea. She did not say she wants you to do anything. But she did come to you, when it is clear the decision was an action of the group.

Here you have a perfect set of ingredients for an emotional triangle: stress from Emily toward the group *redirected* from Emily to you. If you accept that stress, you are triangled.

What do you do? Do you take on Emily's stress, either by agreeing with her that she was right and the group was wrong or by trying to get her to change her mind about her suggestion for refreshments? If you do, you will have allowed yourself to be drawn into that emotional triangle.

(NOTE TO THE INSTRUCTOR: You might ask your trainees what emotional triangle already existed before Emily came to you. If they cannot figure out the answer, remind them that one part of a triangle can be an issue. Here the triangle links Emily, the group and the issue of the refreshments. The group in your illustration might not realize there is a triangle in that situation, but since Emily feels the stress, a triangle does exist.)

Do you want to cut Emily off by letting her know this is *her* problem with the group and not yours? Do you simply want to tell her she shouldn't try to involve you? With a response like that you would avoid a triangle that joins you, Emily and the group, but by cutting her off you would create another problem. You would not be demonstrating the kind of caring, compassionate connection you, as Emily's leader, rightfully want to keep with her. She is your fellow group member and a fellow believer.

Here is a way to show your care for Emily and for the group. At the same time you will detriangle yourself from the relationship that exists around the issue of

refreshments. Begin by indicating your support for Emily as a person. Then take her to the group. You will connect with Emily by standing by her. You will connect with the rest of the group by talking to it.

When you are all together, say something like this: "Remember just a little while ago when we were talking about how to plan our next round of refreshments? Emily would like to talk about that issue a little more." You will have helped Emily and the group get back into the subject. At the same time you will have avoided being triangled into the issue between them. You will have demonstrated your position as a caring, nonanxious presence who refuses to be drawn into an emotional triangle.

The same approach will work, no matter what the issue. It will work, because it is the *process that counts, not necessarily the resolution of the issue*. The purpose of the process is to help others relate directly to address any stress that exists between them. Emily and the group may still disagree, but both will have had the opportunity to express their positions. As they are differentiated persons, they will remain nonanxious and connected through the process. Each will be able to understand the other, and all parties will be able to decide how to continue from that point with the highest possible personal integrity and mutual respect.

(NOTE TO THE INSTRUCTOR: Take a moment to allow for feedback. Ask: "Do you have any questions about the detriangling process at this point?" "Do you understand how it is possible to avoid being triangled and still keep a caring connection between yourself and others?")

Creating A Triangle to Help A Relationship

Just as a stepladder on its side is not very stable and needs a third side in order to stand on its own, sometimes it is helpful to provide a third side in a relationship to help two other individuals achieve stability between themselves. That is the situation we will look into in this part of our presentation.

Let's return to Martin and Sue. After your experience with Emily and her group, you are now older and smarter. You are ready to learn another skill to help the relationships in your group.

You already know that taking on someone else's stress does not help you. And it certainly does not help the relationship between the other two. So what can you do? You know the better course is for Sue to work out her differences directly with Martin.

God wisely advises us to go directly to our brother or sister when something between the two of us needs to be addressed. In Matthew 18:15 (NIV) Jesus said, "If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you." He also said, "If you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, . . . first go and be reconciled

to your brother; then come and offer your gift" (Matthew 5: 23-24 NIV). People have the best opportunity to work out their differences when they meet face-to-face.

You also know that a two-person relationship is not very stable, just as a stepladder on its side is not very stable. A third side can help a stepladder stand. A third side can also help a relationship stand.

Jesus demonstrated the advantage of a third party in stabilizing relationships in the guidelines He offered in Matthew 18. If the two parties described in verse 15 are not able to resolve the matter between them, Jesus advises one to "take one or two others along" (Matthew 18:16 NIV). The purpose for the presence of an additional person or persons is to help restore a relationship between two others.

A leader or other person can choose to become the third person in a triangle to help establish a less stressful or conflicted relationship between the other two. There are two things to keep in mind if you are going to triangle yourself in a relationship with two others. First, in order to be equally distant from both other parties in a balanced triangle, it is almost always better to contact or "join with" both parties separately. Begin by joining with one and then the other.

The second point to keep in mind is that the position of the third person in a triangle works well only when that

person operates as a nonanxious presence. The person who is not anxious about the emotional distress between the other two parties in a triangle has a much better chance to effect a change in their relationship. He or she serves as a catalyst, an agent that brings about change in others without being changed in the process. The nonanxious presence helps reduce stress between others without absorbing any of the stress into its own system.

As we have mentioned earlier, the Christian has a most natural and a most wonderful reason to be a nonanxious presence even in the presence of others' anxiety. We live under the watchful and protective eye of Him who says to His sons and daughters, "Fear not." We live in the assuring care of Him who encourages us to "cast all your anxieties on him" (1 Peter 5:5 NIV) and to "have no anxiety about anything" (Philippians 4:6 NIV).

We know that even faithful Christians come under the influence of stress from time to time in their relationships with others. It is times such as these that other Christians can assist their friends in Christ. They can deliberately enter into balanced triangular relationships as a nonanxious presence to help reduce stress and restore a "right spirit" (Psalm 51:10 RSV) between the other two.

Let's see how a leader could triangle himself or herself in a nonanxious manner with Sue and Martin. We'll pretend that you are the leader. First, you will recognize

that these are people who are loved by God and who, as far as you can tell, also love Him. Even if someone were not a professing believer, you know that God loves that person and that He empowers you to give your best for him or her. Then you pray that God will guide the process of your relationship with the other two.

It is also important to remember that in situations of emotional stress the stated issue is often not the primary issue. The primary issue is often the relationship itself. You can speak in terms of the issue, in this case the method of selecting host homes for the group's meetings, but it is likely you will find that the relationship between the two others can improve whether or not there is any change in the method of selecting host homes.

Since Sue came to you, it might be better to "join" in a relationship with Martin first. You could say to him, in Sue's presence, "I wonder why Sue wishes you would change the way you select the homes where our group will meet." If Martin or Sue continue the conversation with each other, you need not participate, except to reflect back to either of them any comments they make that indicate other areas of stress in their lives.

If, for instance, Martin says to Sue, "You're nagging me just the way my mother did," or Sue says to Martin, "Why do you always have to be right?" you can let them know you heard their remarks. Your comment can help shift the focus

of their distress from the stated issue between them to other areas where their conversation will have an opportunity to be more productive for their relationship.

The two of them may or may not resolve the matter of host home selection. That issue may turn out not to be very important for them. But even if it is, you will have helped them talk about it directly with one another.

If Martin does not talk to Sue but continues to talk with you about Sue or about the issue, you can hear what he has to say without taking on any of his stress. Then, at another time, you can connect the other side of the triangle by "joining" with Sue.

You could say something like, "I wonder why Martin doesn't want to listen to your ideas about the way we select host homes for our group meetings." If you say that to Sue in Martin's presence, your comment might open the door for them to address the issue directly. From that point your participation would depend on Sue and Martin's response, just as it did when you connected the link of the triangle with Martin.

If you choose to join with Sue when Martin is not present, your question can prompt her to begin her conversation with him again. You can avoid any attempt by Sue to load her stress from this issue on you by redirecting her comments toward a renewed conversation with Martin. You would not tell her she "should" talk to him. That would

raise your own stress level as your well-being would then be determined by Sue's acceptance or rejection of your advice. However, you could "wonder" what would happen if Sue would take her thoughts directly to Martin.

Even if nothing seems to happen that would settle the matter between them at that point, you have introduced a process for connecting the two of them. It will be fairly easy for you to get the process going again at another time with only a word or two, since you have already established an unstressed connection with both of them.

By triangling yourself in a nonanxious connection with both Martin and Sue, you have introduced a process that will help them in their relationship. You have acted as a catalyst for the benefit of the others. You have functioned as a differentiated leader, as you learned you can do in our last training session. And you have remained connected with both Sue and Martin. You have learned that the issue that becomes the focus of the stress between two people is very often less important than the relationship itself.

Your presence with Sue and Martin has been nonanxious. That means you have neither adopted their stress nor made your own well-being determined by how they work things out. It will be easy to detriangle yourself from them in order that they might focus on their own relationship. Congratulations! You have functioned as a caring, connected, nonanxious, differentiated leader!

Now, if that looked easy because someone else worked it out for you, let's give ourselves an opportunity to see how easy it is when we apply the principles we have learned to situations where we are the actors.

(NOTE TO THE INSTRUCTOR: Give the trainees an option for the role play they are about to do. One choice will be the scene you set for them. Here it is: Each time your group gets into a Bible study, Tom questions the interpretation of the text that seems best to most of the members. When Tom asks questions, Mary reacts with noticeable agitation. She wants to know why Tom won't accept what others think is the right interpretation and move on. This pattern has occurred so often it has become quite noticeable to you. That is the situation you will present.

(Another choice will be for your trainees to use some of the details from stressed relationships they have observed in their own group or in other settings known to them. If the latter is their choice, have them mask any details that might jeopardize confidentiality.

(Remind the group of the following points to think about as they consider intentionally triangling themselves in a relationship where stress exists between two others: (1) The "issue" is almost never the issue when stress develops between individuals. The stress is almost always in the relationship. (2) The leader will function best when he or she refuses to accept the stress for either of the other two. (3) In an intentional triangle join first with one of the other two. If they begin to work out their stress, that may be all you need to do. If you think it will help the process, you can also join with the other after a few minutes, a few days, or whenever it seems helpful. 4) Detriangle yourself from the relationship when the other two begin to work out their stress.

(Divide the group into sets of three. Participate if you are needed to complete a set. If one person is left over, have that person serve as an observer of one of the groups of three. Have the groups choose a Tom, a Mary and a leader, or have them use a situation of stress someone in their group has observed. Instruct them to change roles after three to five minutes. Have the groups move to relatively isolated locations with instructions to return in ten minutes. Monitor the interaction of one or more groups. Bring the groups back together after ten minutes. Discuss how their role

plays went. Use the four points outlined above as a guide for your discussion.)

A Review of the Seven Laws of An Emotional Triangle

As a review of our training in emotional triangles we will look once again at Edwin Friedman's seven laws of an emotional triangle²³ to see how they apply to our training experience.

1. *The relationship of any two members of an emotional triangle is kept in balance by the way a third party relates to each of them or to the relationship.* When Sue triangled you in our first session, her relationship with Martin was kept in balance, though not in a healthy way. Because you accepted Sue's stress, their relationship was not developing. They had no "reason" or motivation to address the stress that was between them. You were taking the pressure off them by taking it on yourself. After you became "older and smarter" you used the triangling process to help them achieve a new balance in their relationship.

2. *If one is the third party in an emotional triangle it is generally not possible to bring change (for more than a week) to the relationship of the other two parts by trying to change their relationship directly.* We did not test this "law" in our relationship with Sue and Martin. If you had followed through on Sue's request that you "do something" to correct Martin's "faulty thinking," you would have seen how

²³Friedman (1991), 36-39.

this form of intervention, or diving into the issue to "fix" things, would not have worked. Even if Martin would have changed his method of selecting host homes, it is very likely that the *relationship* issues between Sue and Martin would continue unresolved and even further stressed.

3. *Attempts to change the relationship of the other two sides of an emotional triangle not only are generally ineffective, but also, homeostatic forces often convert these efforts to their opposite intent.* Had you come directly to Sue and Martin and told them, "You have to work this out," it is almost certain that they would have joined together, without talking about it and even without thinking about it, to resist your suggestion and keep their old "comfortable" conflict between them alive.

4. *To the extent a third party to an emotional triangle tries unsuccessfully to change the relationship of the other two, the more likely it is that the third party will wind up with the stress for the other two.* If you had tried to intervene directly either with Sue and Martin or with Emily and the group and met with their predictable resistance, it is your stomach that would get knots in it and not theirs.

5. *The various triangles is an emotional system interlock so that efforts to bring change to any one of them (are) often resisted by homeostatic forces in the others or in the system itself.* It would take us beyond the purpose

of this training program to look carefully at this law. We had a look at a simple set of interlocking triangles when we saw you joined in a triangle with Martin and Sue, who were themselves triangled with the issue of host home selection. As you might imagine, interlocking triangles can include other relationships and other issues within the group.

Interlocking triangles also cross the boundary lines of the group and connect group members with individuals and issues in their lives outside the group. The pattern of interlocking triangles is very complex. Awareness of the reality of interlocking triangles helps us understand two things: (a) the amazing resistance there can be to efforts to introduce change into a relationship or a system and (b) the exciting, helpful and hopeful reality that real change in one triangle or part of an emotional system can bring about real change in other parts of the triangle or system.

6. *One side of an emotional triangle tends to be more conflictual than the others.* Sue expressed more stress than Martin. Emily expressed more stress than the group. The reality of interlocking triangles and emotional fields that connect individuals with their own family members and others outside the group and even across time almost always explains this tendency for one person to be more susceptible to stress than another.

7. *We can only change a relationship to which we belong.* This is why you chose to join with Sue and Martin and also with Emily and the group. It also explains the wonderful opportunity for growth that exists in the fellowship of the Christian community, where we are connected with one another in Christ.

Concluding Remarks

We have now concluded a four-part study designed to help us become more effective leaders in some very specific ways. We have come to understand the value of a leader who can differentiate himself or herself as an individual in a nonanxious manner and yet remain connected in a caring way with a group and its members. We have looked at how a group works to maintain balance and what it takes to introduce change into a system or a group. We have examined emotional triangles. We have discovered value in the ability to detriangle ourselves from relationships to avoid taking on others' stress. We have also seen how we can enter into triangles to help others in their relationships. We have seen how God can use these processes to help individuals and groups grow spiritually and in their fellowship relationships.

It is likely that you have come a long way in your understanding and growth as an effective leader in the course of these sessions. May God bless you in and through your ministry in small groups.

Recommended Further Reading

How Your Church Family Works, by Dr. Peter L. Steinke, published by the Alban Institute in Washington, D.C., would be a helpful resource for your group ministry or for your congregation. In this book Dr. Steinke addresses the topics of our series in greater detail, but from a different perspective. He focuses on problems congregations face and the processes for bringing about healing in troubled situations. At the present time Dr. Steinke is working on a book that will concentrate on the promotion of health and positive relationships in congregations through the application of the principles of family systems theory.

Training Outline 4
It Takes Three: A Look at Emotional Triangles

Goal for This Module

Develop in the students an ability to recognize emotional triangles, to detriangle themselves from stress-producing relationships and to create triangles for the purpose of helping relationships in their groups.

Objectives

- that the students will understand the triangling process;
- that the students will become confident in their ability to employ the principles of emotional triangles in their small group relationships;
- that the students will be able to detriangle themselves or create triangles for the purpose of helping relationships in their groups.

Definition of Concept

An emotional triangle is a relationship in which a third party takes on the stress that develops between two other persons or between a person and an object or situation.

I. Introduction

- A. The stability of a triangular shape
- B. Triangles in human relationships
 1. The instability of two-person relationships
 2. Stability through "leaning on" a third person, object or issue
 - a. Exercise in conversation
 - b. Results of the exercise
 3. Emotional triangles neither good nor bad in themselves
 4. The emotional connection
 - a. Emotional fields in families, congregations and groups

- b. Personal recollections of triangled relationships
 - (1) Talk to a third person
 - (2) Talk about a third person or issue
- 5. Balance in triangles
 - a. In the Trinity
 - b. In families
 - (1) In different relationship combinations
 - (2) With an emotional dimension
 - (3) Distinct individuals, but connected
 - c. In small groups
- 6. Unbalanced triangles
 - a. Diversion of stress to a third person or object
 - b. A normal occurrence in families and groups
 - (1) Function well when different persons occupy different positions in triangles over time
 - (2) Do not function well when one person is the receiver of stress for the family, group or other relationship, on a regular basis
 - c. Not healthy when one person is the symptom-bearer in the system on a regular basis

II. Detriangling

- A. The triangled person's acceptance of another's stress
 - 1. The example of Sue and Martin
 - 2. Your own feelings upon being triangled

3. The example of Emily and the group
 - a. Ingredients for an emotional triangle
 - b. Responses that result from taking on another's stress
 - (1) Agree with Emily; try to change the group
 - (2) Disagree with Emily; try to change her
- B. Inappropriate effort to detriangle: the cutoff
- C. Appropriate steps to detriangle
 1. Connect with both Emily and the group
 2. Maintain a nonanxious presence
 3. Generate a direct conversation between the other two

III. Creating a triangle to help a relationship

- A. The goal: help two others work out their difference directly between themselves
 1. The situation with Martin and Sue
 2. The example of Matthew 18:15
 3. The example of Matthew 5:23-24
- B. The process: add a nonanxious third side to the relationship
 1. The example of Matthew 18:16
 2. When a leader chooses to triangle into a relationship with two others
 - a. Join with each party separately
 - b. Maintain a nonanxious presence
 - (1) Brings about change without being changed
 - (2) Reduces stress in others without absorbing stress

- c. High Christian potential for functioning as a nonanxious presence
- 3. The example of Sue and Martin
 - a. Loved by the leader as children of God
 - b. The "issue" often is not the issue
 - c. Joining with Martin
 - d. Joining with Sue
 - (1) When Martin is present
 - (2) When Martin is not present
 - e. Setting the stage for further contacts
 - f. Summary of benefits of intentional triangling by an effective leader
- 4. Points to keep in mind for role play exercise
 - a. The "issue" often is not the issue; the relationship is the issue
 - b. Avoid accepting the stress for either of the other two
 - c. Join first with one and then, if necessary, with the other
 - d. Detriangle when the others begin to work out their stress

IV. A review of the seven laws of an emotional triangle²⁴

- A. The relationship of any two members of an emotional triangle is kept in balance by the way a third party relates to each of them or to the relationship.
- B. If one is the third party in an emotional triangle it is generally not possible to bring change (for more than a week) to the relationship of the other two parts by trying to change their relationship directly.

²⁴Friedman (1991), 36-39.

- C. Attempts to change the relationship of the other two sides of an emotional triangle not only are generally ineffective, but also, homeostatic forces often convert these efforts to their opposite intent.
- D. To the extent a third party to an emotional triangle tries unsuccessfully to change the relationship of the other two, the more likely it is that the third party will wind up with the stress for the other two.
- E. The various triangles is an emotional system interlock so that efforts to bring change to any one of them (are) often resisted by homeostatic forces in the others or in the system itself.
- F. One side of an emotional triangle tends to be more conflictual than the others.
- G. We can only change a relationship to which we belong.

V. Concluding Remarks

- A. Material covered in these sessions
 - 1. The value of a differentiated leader
 - a. Connected
 - b. Nonanxious
 - 2. Balance and change in a small group system
 - 3. Emotional triangles
 - a. The importance of detriangling
 - b. The value of entering into triangles
- B. Recommended further reading:
How Your Church Family Works, by Dr. Peter L. Steinke. Published by the Alban Institute, Washington, D.C.

CHAPTER IV
CONCLUDING COMMENTS

Analysis of the Effectiveness of the Training Modules

The author believes he achieved his goal of producing training modules that would improve the effectiveness of small group leaders through the application of principles of family systems theory to the small group process. It should be noted that this conclusion is based on his own observations and on subjective analysis by the leader-trainees themselves. This project included no instrument that would evaluate groups or group members themselves. It would be useful to develop such an instrument for a more objective analysis of the effectiveness of leaders who reflect a family systems approach to the leadership process in their work with small groups.

It should also be noted that the author asked the leader/trainees for incisive and critical reflections at each step of the process. He desired a strong measure of constructive criticism for the purpose of developing the most effective modules possible within his own personal limitations and within the time constraints and other parameters for the project.

The subjective analysis of the leaders indicated that all expressed a greater level of awareness of the concepts of self-differentiation, balance and emotional triangles following their exposure to the training modules. 75% indicated they devoted intentional effort to apply those elements of family systems thinking in their small groups. At least one applied the concepts he or she learned in a work setting, and one indicated useful application of the principle of emotional triangles in his relationship with his spouse.

Most gratifying to the author was a 100% response that all leaders believed they were functioning as more self-differentiated persons in their small group life and in their personal life following their exposure to the concept in this training program. See Appendix D for a complete list of leader responses to a post-course survey on the application of family systems principles in small group ministry. The final reflection of the leaders at the end of the process indicates they viewed the orientation to family systems thinking and the training they received in a positive way.

The process itself seemed to work, namely, the presentation of a module at one monthly meeting followed by a month to reflect on the experience and apply the principle in the small group setting. The group interrupted the process one month at Christmas.

There was at least one drawback to the relatively limited opportunity of only one month to apply the concepts from each module during the training process. The month devoted to a particular emphasis did not always provide an ideal context for the application of that specific principle. This was especially true for leaders who were looking for clear examples of the change process or the operation of emotional triangles in their groups. It will be important to return to those principles on occasion in group leader meetings to provide leaders with a more timely opportunity to see how specific principles of the family systems approach apply in their situations.

It seems to the author that the communication of concepts could have been enhanced with some well-placed diagrams to illustrate, for example, the notion of a leader being "separate and together" in relationship with his or her group. Other diagrams could have helped illustrate balance in a system, the stability of a triangle, and the process of triangling and detriangling in relationships.

These modules do not comprise a complete small group leader training program. Their primary contribution to the field of small group ministry, in the author's view, is the perspective on leadership they provide. That perspective centers in the concept of the differentiated person. The concept of self-differentiation blends most readily with other concepts within family systems theory, but the author

believes a well-defined, nonanxious person can serve as an effective leader within the parameters of nearly any training system.

Replicability of the Training Process

The author believes the training process can work in the context of other congregations and other small group leader training settings. The program is designed to be effective for those already functioning as leaders and also for those training to become small group leaders.

Instructors are given additional background information to supplement the material they will present in the training sessions. Trainers are free to present the sessions in their own words, or they may use the words printed in the training modules. The modules are written in a conversational style for ease of presentation. There are few space requirements, and there is great flexibility in the potential for the use of visual aids.

It should be noted that a relatively small number of leaders participated in the training experience with the author. However, the four regular participants (on one occasion five) provided a reasonably varied background. Two were men and two were women. The group included a retired widow, a teacher, a computer specialist and a Coast Guard officer.

The size of a training group may be immaterial to the effectiveness of the program. The process worked with a

smaller number of participants. It is designed to be effective for a larger group as well.

The author plans to use the modules again in his congregation when the time comes to train new leaders. He will also refer to information contained in the modules to reenforce principles learned by leaders already trained.

Contributions to Personal and Professional Growth

The author gained an improved sense of discipline, including a more effective use of time and a more rigorously prioritized task selection process in the course of this project. He also became more skilled in the management of resources available to him, material and human.

A residual benefit of working to meet ongoing needs in the congregation while continuing to pursue the project has been the intentional development of an increased level of lay involvement in ministry. The involvement of an individual to plan worship services, for instance, has been helpful during this time and will continue to be helpful.

The author plans to cultivate this approach of strong lay involvement in ministry. He believes that, in accordance with the thinking of Dr. Feucht (1974) from twenty years ago, greater lay involvement maximizes the efficient use of time and effort for the mission of the church and cultivates the gifts and talents of greater numbers of Christians. The more others participate actively in the ministry of the church, the more the author believes

he, as pastor, is able to serve as the point person to explore and develop new avenues for ministry while he supports and equips others in the maintenance of ministries already begun.

Exposure to family systems thinking, and particularly to Bowenian theory, as expressed by Murray Bowen and Edwin Friedman, has benefitted the author in his personal and professional relationships. He believes he has developed a higher level of competence and confidence as a pastoral counselor and in essentially all pastoral relationships. He has come to see the differentiated self as a way of being that expresses especially well in the context of the new person we are in Christ, with His nonanxious presence actively at work in us. The Holy Spirit gives us that faith as He works in us through the means of grace. The Holy Spirit brings the change into our lives that enables us to live as differentiated persons.

Recommendations

It would be useful to develop additional training modules based on other elements of family systems or Bowenian theory. Those modules would contribute to a more complete training program in systems thinking for small group leaders.

It would seem to be particularly useful to include complete modules on the concepts of process versus content and extended family fields. It might also be helpful to

equip leaders in more detail to understand how the symptom-bearing process can manifest itself in small groups and how a leader can minister effectively in those circumstances.

It could be beneficial to address some elements of family process as they relate to the "family" of the small group system. Some of those elements might be emotional distance, loss and replacement, the reality of family secrets and the benefit of playful paradox as a characteristic of effective leadership (Bowen 1985 and Friedman 1985).

A personal interest of the author triggered by his experience with Bowen theory is to look further into Bowen's pursuit of the spiritual ramifications of his systems theory. There seem to be fascinating implications for a field theory that crosses space and time and links all life in a way that places everyone "not far from" (Mark 12:34 NIV) the historic events of creation and redemption, as we are not far from the Divine Persons of those events.

The author would like to identify some of those implications. He would like to explore their ramifications for the spiritual and emotional health of individuals and people in relationships in their own families and across contexts into other emotional systems.

This has been a long and arduous process. The author is pleased to have had the experience of developing this project. He is also pleased to see its culmination.

APPENDIX A

EVALUATION SHEET

THE EFFECTIVE LEADER: SEPARATE AND TOGETHER

I found this training module

- 2 very helpful
- 2 quite helpful
- somewhat helpful
- not very helpful
- unhelpful

Comments: Helps to give a proper perspective as the role of leader. In a Christian atmosphere, leaders too often try to become embedded within the group.

The vocabulary was

- too complicated or hard to understand
- 4 about right
- too simple

Comments:

The sentence structure was

- too complicated or hard to follow
- 4 about right
- too simple

Comments: Sounded O.K.

The illustrations were

3 clear ___ not clear
3 helpful ___ not helpful
2 enough ___ not enough

Comments: There was one illustration where it wasn't initially clear where/how it was tied into the discussion.

The group participation opportunities were

3 very helpful
1 somewhat helpful
___ not helpful

Comments:

The number of group participation opportunities were

___ too many
4 about right
___ too few

Comments: The average attention span of an audience is about 7-10 minutes, therefore every 5-7 minutes the talker should provide an interesting change/group involvement.

The outline was

3 very helpful
1 somewhat helpful
___ not helpful

Comments:

Was there enough space to write your notes?

4 yes

— no

Comments:

I would like to have heard more about:

Defining yourself

Self-differentiation

Gifts as a Christian leader

I did not need to hear so much about:

Undifferentiation

I did not understand:

Independence trap

Importance of position especially in small groups

I found the following especially helpful:

Defining self

General comments:

APPENDIX B

EVALUATION SHEET

"BALANCE" IN YOUR SMALL GROUP

I found this training module

- 1 very helpful
- 4 quite helpful
- somewhat helpful
- not very helpful
- unhelpful

Comments: It wasn't until half-way through this presentation that I knew what "balance" was for the small group. Is there good/bad balance/change? I would have preferred more depth for later examples thus a somewhat longer session.

The vocabulary was

- too complicated or hard to understand
- 5 about right
- too simple

Comments:

The sentence structure was

- too complicated or hard to follow
- 5 about right
- too simple

Comments:

The illustrations were

4 clear ___ not clear
4 helpful ___ not helpful
1 enough 1 not enough

Comments: Would have preferred more to emphasize.
 Helped to focus on goals, how to achieve them, danger areas to avoid.

The group participation opportunities were

2 very helpful
2 somewhat helpful
 ___ not helpful

Comments: A bit rushed.
 It helps to know what other groups encounter or are doing.

The number of group participation opportunities were

___ too many
4 about right
 ___ too few

Comments:

The outline was

3 very helpful
 ___ somewhat helpful
1 not helpful

Comments: I think outlines for participants are very useful and help with understanding.

Was there enough space to write your notes?

4 yes

— no

Comments:

I would like to have heard more about: How I can better perform "change" in a group to move it toward a "better" balance.

How to bring about change in a group.

Perhaps more examples of how to go about making some specific changes.

I thought it was presented well.

I did not need to hear so much about: Everything was short enough.

I did not understand: What I should be looking for in my group to see if the balance should change.

Seemed clear.

I found the following especially helpful: How to ID change is happening in the group.

Balance in a group.

General comments: Like a road map - showed the road (or goals) ahead and how to get there.

Gained confidence by knowing what to look for and how to achieve specific results or reactions.

Help with getting a group going again.

APPENDIX C

EVALUATION SHEET

IT TAKES THREE: A LOOK AT EMOTIONAL TRIANGLES

I found this training module

- 3 very helpful
- 1 quite helpful
- 1 somewhat helpful
- not very helpful
- unhelpful

Comments: Good, useful concepts

It's the first time I've heard this material presented in a formal sense.

Of the modules I found this one the most interesting and useful.

The vocabulary was

- too complicated or hard to understand
- 5 about right
- too simple

Comments:

The sentence structure was

- too complicated or hard to follow
- 5 about right
- too simple

Comments:

The illustrations were

 3 clear 1 not clear
 3 helpful not helpful
 2 enough not enough

Comments: I could see the triangle with the ladder.
 Could not see the triangle, only saw the angle.

The group participation opportunities were

 3 very helpful
 2 somewhat helpful
 not helpful

Comments: Best opportunity of all modules, best set of
 illustrations, role playing exercises.
 More info/skill developments for leaders to defuse
 (nonanxious) issue(s).
 Some people do not like role playing. Like me.

The number of group participation opportunities were

 too many
 5 about right
 too few

Comments:

The outline was

 2 very helpful
 3 somewhat helpful
 not helpful

Comments: The outline indicates "what" needs to be done,
 need some bullets also on "how" to get it done.

Was there enough space to write your notes?

4 yes

— no

Comments:

I would like to have heard more about: More info/skill developments for leaders to defuse (nonanxious) issue(s).

I did not need to hear so much about:

I did not understand:

I found the following especially helpful:

General comments: Would prefer a simpler role play exercise (e.g. voters meeting discussion of small group budget increase).
An excellent session.

APPENDIX D

SMALL GROUP LEADER REFLECTION ON THE APPLICATION OF FAMILY
SYSTEMS PRINCIPLES IN SMALL GROUP MINISTRY

Over the past several sessions we have looked at, studied and even practiced application of family systems principles of self-differentiation, balance and emotional triangles. Please reflect on your experience with these principles as you complete the following inventory.

1. Since our training session I have been more aware of the principle of self-differentiation than I was before.

Yes 3 No 1

Comment opportunity: This area of "study" was the least understood as to the point being made.

2. I have been aware of the principle of self-differentiation as I prepared for my small group meetings.

Yes 2 No 1

Comment opportunity: Confidence in myself and the group.
No concerns about meeting.

3. I have been aware of the principle of self-differentiation during one or more of my small group meetings.

Yes 2 No 1

Comment opportunity: Volunteer personal information when
group seems reluctant to answer questions.

4. I have sought to apply the principle of self-differentiation during one or more of my small group meetings.

Yes 2 No 1

Comment opportunity: _____

5. I have sought to apply the principle of self-differentiation during other contacts with small group members.

Yes 1 No 2

Comment opportunity: More aware at work meetings.
Not understood.

6. Since our training session I have been more aware of the principle of "balance" in small groups than I was before.

Yes 4 No _____

Comment opportunity: Discussion reaffirmed what was known
of group dynamics.

7. I have been aware of the principle of "balance" in small groups as I prepared for my small group meetings.

Yes 3 No 1

Comment opportunity: Group will function similar to last
time.

8. I have been aware of the principle of "balance " in
small groups during one or more of my small group meetings.

Yes 4 No _____

Comment opportunity: Appear resistant to change. Would like
more prayer.

9. I have sought to apply the principle of "balance" in
small groups during one or more of my small group meetings.

Yes 3 No _____

Comment opportunity: _____

10. I have sought to apply the principle of "balance" in
small groups during other contacts with small group members.

Yes 1 No 2

Comment opportunity: Some use at work.

11. Since our training session I have been more aware of
the principles of emotional triangles than I was before.

Yes 4 No _____

Comment opportunity: Emotional triangles do not appear to
be a problem.

12. I have been aware of the principles of emotional
triangles as I prepared for my small group meetings.

Yes 1 No 2

Comment opportunity: _____

13. I have been aware of the principles of emotional triangles during one or more of my small group meetings.

Yes 2 No 1

Comment opportunity: Usually involves my spouse because I
"know" her better than the other members.

14. I have sought to apply the principles of emotional triangles during one or more of my small group meetings.

Yes 2 No 2

Comment opportunity: _____

15. I have sought to apply the principles of emotional triangles during other contacts with small group members.

Yes 2 No 1

Comment opportunity: Work place groups

16. I believe I function as a more self-differentiated person following this series of training sessions.

a. in my small group. Yes 4 No _____

b. in my life. Yes 4 No _____

Comment opportunity: More importantly in my life. Helpful
to re-do the lessons again.

Thank you for the time and effort you put into completing this inventory. May God bless your leadership in your small group and your growth as a differentiated person!

Comment from one group leader: My very small group is a very cohesive unit -- warm, sharing, kind, willing, generous, sympathetic, etc. Even in slight differences we may have as approaches or answers to questions or problems we generally arrive at consensus in our final solutions.

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