

OLD WINE IN NEW SKINS

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Centering Prayer and Systems Theory

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This book is dedicated to Bo, whose courage in facing his learning disabilities gave me the courage to face mine, and to Duffy who belled the cat. I would like to thank the following people: Carol Froom, who took care of all the details, Kathleen Dale, who introduced me to systems theory, Thomas Keating who taught me to listen to God, and Gail Graham and all the teachers at Mission High in San Francisco.

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Chapter 1 – Introduction

Assessment of Need

For five years I worked in the office of the Episcopal Bishop of the Diocese of Los Angeles as a member of his executive staff. While clergy deployment was not part of my duties, the topic of troubled congregations and clergy would often come up during senior staff meetings and in conversations with the bishop. At one time eighteen congregations, out of thirty-two vacancies in the Diocese of 150 congregations, were euphemistically classified as “unique.” In other words, there were major problems with leadership transition in these eighteen congregations.

The eighteen congregations were classified as unique in spite of the fact that the diocese was reluctant to classify congregations, as classifications complicated filling clergy vacancies. That is not to say that problems were routinely swept under the rug; rather, without overwhelming evidence of a presenting problem, the Diocese assumed the congregation was in good shape. One congregation was represented to me as needing just a little more dynamic leadership, as the current minister was more interested in counseling rather than congregational ministry. Later, that minister would sign a confession admitting to eight instances of sexual misconduct with members and over thirty-six instances with prostitutes.¹ Before this position was filled, the Diocese began to

uncover some of the problems; but the Diocese did not delay in filling the position, nor did it recommend an interim minister.² Years after being called, the new minister of this congregation was still uncovering severe problems with this church and attempting to work with those problems to bring about health and healing in the congregation.

There were two reasons, I believe, that the diocese sought to fill positions as quickly as possible. The first was the shortage of trained interim ministers and the belief that keeping trained interims on call was prohibitively expensive.³ The second reason was the deeply held belief that the best way to fix a broken congregation was to find the right minister and get that minister in place as quickly as possible.

Placing responsibility for the solving of the problems of a community on the shoulders of one individual is a core belief of Western culture. This understanding of problem solving is ancient—Akhilleus and Odysseus in Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* respectively present this image. More modern versions of this understanding are found in today's cinema in movies such as *High Noon* and *Rambo*. Unfortunately, what works in the plots of books and movies does not necessarily work in churches and synagogues. The fact that this is a program that does not work has not caused church administrative bodies to abandon it, the thought being that, after all, the right person just needs to be found. This is a theory that carries its own explanation for failure; that is, "We did not have the right person." Whether the theory works or doesn't, no outside explanation is necessary.

During the time I worked for the Diocese, it was not unusual to see clergy, after having been sent into troubled congregations, terminated after a year to eighteen months, or quitting or taking a disability retirement. Since the Episcopal Church has a plethora of clergy, there was never a shortage of people to send into the breach. Those who were unsuccessful were categorized as incompetent, and

those who were successful were extolled as being paragons of virtue and worthy of advancement.

The View from Space

The view of congregations, when working for an adjudicatory body, is significantly different from the view held by individual churches and synagogues. It is perhaps analogous to the view from space as compared to the view standing at a particular spot on the Earth. On Earth, you see whatever is before you: mountains, plains, rivers, or oceans. Sometimes you can see two or more of these features together when the visibility is really good. But, from space, you can see it all, the whole Earth with all of its topographical features and all its constituent parts forming an interrelated whole. The view from a diocese or synod office is much like the view from space. It is an opportunity to see patterns and features that are not visible from an individual congregation.

The view was staggering. From the Diocese one could see a constant running balance of between seven and eighteen congregations that were in various types of upheaval; six priests at one time were under suspension; two priests were in jail; and congregations that, just fifteen years previously, had thousands of members were struggling with fewer than one hundred. Not all of this could be blamed on shifting demographics or dangerous liberal policies driving away membership.

Anomalies

While working at the Diocese, I noticed several anomalies in clergy placement. The first was that prior performance was not an indicator of success when placing clergy in troubled churches. Clergy who had done well in past calls went down in flames at the same rate as did mediocre clergy. Clergy who in the past had no aberrant behaviors on their record were suddenly assaulting lay

leaders, while others were developing a fondness for barnyard animals.

The second anomaly was that, in many cases, there was no direct cause for clergy resignations or terminations. Often in such cases, the behavior of the congregation or clergy was no different in the period leading up to their termination than it had been over the previous year in which no termination had taken place, nor could any behavioral change be projected over the upcoming year. Why then, had the separation taken place at that time and not some other time if there was no precipitating cause?

The third anomaly was the inability of dioceses to see that sending clergy into troubled congregations was much like the fabled charge of the Light Brigade.

G. Lloyd Rediger in his book, *Clergy Killers*, states that a minister is fired every six minutes in the United States and twenty-five percent of all ministers have been fired at least once. Yet minister after minister is sent in to work in a troubled congregation without a clear understanding of the work to be done or the risks involved.⁴ There was a heavy price to be paid in terms of lost vocations, yet no alternatives to “business as usual” were ever discussed. My attempts to open this discussion, both formally and informally, were sometimes met with resistance, but more often were just ignored; and I was told to stay in my own area of expertise. There was a lack of openness to change.

In the summer of 1993, a new Canon to the Ordinary was appointed, The Reverend Canon Anne Sutherland Howard. After one of her first staff meetings, I continued to make a point about clergy placement and the way troubled congregations were handled by the diocese long after the discussion had been closed. She suggested that perhaps I might like to take a church that was experiencing difficulties and try out my theories of church leadership. It seemed to me a good idea at the time, and I decided to take her up on her offer. I believed that if I had a working model

of the theory I had been talking about, it would be easier for others to understand. I further believed that, if I was successful, the work I was doing could provide a blueprint for work in congregations with chronic problems. Neither of those beliefs proved to be accurate. This book is a result of the work that I did at the diocese and then at the congregational level.

Thesis

The purpose of this book is to offer an alternative way of looking at leadership in congregations. In the past, leadership has often involved hierarchical models, a mechanistic worldview, a fix-it-or-replace-it understanding of church management and clergy deployment. The alternative includes understanding the congregation as a whole and concentrating on the relationships within the congregation rather than concentrating on the individual parts that make up a congregation. Natural systems theory provides a framework and a method for such an understanding.

But understanding alone is not enough to effect change in leadership. Centering prayer provides a powerful tool to help transform this understanding into a reality. Centering prayer can lower overall reactivity which, in turn, lowers anxiety in the congregational system, fosters responsibility, encourages openness, and provides the security that is necessary to promote self-differentiation.

The thesis of this book is that a combination of systems theory and centering prayer provides a way to apprehend the functioning of congregations that is closer to a modern understanding of the way the world works than are current methods of management and leadership. Applied together, these two disciplines, one new, the other old, provide a more effective and productive way of understanding and working with leadership at the congregational level.

The Argument

Congregations have been increasingly experiencing major problems in the area of leadership over the last decade. There has been a growing awareness of reactivity within congregations. Reactivity can be behaviors by both clergy and congregations that are based on emotional feelings rather than thought-based actions. These behaviors can range from personal attacks and aggressive behavior to total withdrawal from the community. These actions are a non-thought based attempt to displace anxiety. This increased reactivity has resulted in a decline in membership; loss of revenue; cutbacks in programming; early involuntary separations; and, in some cases, even the closing of churches within many denominations and different religions. This is not a phenomenon that is restricted to the Christian faith. Whether this increase in reactivity is caused by the failure of medieval church structures in a twenty-first century world or just an overall increase in societal anxiety is immaterial; the effects being felt in the congregations are the same.

In an attempt to solve the problems created by this increased reactivity and anxiety, the church has without a lot of success turned outside itself for help to a variety of psychological and managerial models. Each year brings new methods to solve these problems taught in books and through seminars that have little effect on the overall functioning of the congregations.

The road to success in healing a congregation and lessening reactivity begins with understanding the causes of the reactivity. Natural systems theory provides an effective method to do this. The road to healing begins with an understanding of anxiety and its causes that produce the reactivity within the congregation. Once anxiety is understood as a normal part of life, working constructively to bind anxiety within the congregation becomes an attainable goal. Understanding what triggers anxiety, and learning to discriminate between the causes and symptoms of anxiety, can lead to healing.

Differentiation, which is a process of self-regulation and self-organization, can help individual leaders regulate their own responses to anxiety. Their responses are ultimately the only things they can regulate, but self-regulation of anxiety response by the leadership can lead to self-regulation on the part of the congregation.

Natural systems theory provides new and more accurate ways of thinking about congregational emotional problems. It provides a way of understanding congregational relationships and the forces that animate life. Natural systems theory helps leaders to understand the processes of mutual interdependence within the congregational system.

Centering prayer provides the method that helps individuals and congregations change patterns of behavior that are generational. It is divine therapy. As motivations and behavior change, the reactivity within a congregation lessens, individuals take more personal responsibility, and more time can be devoted to ministry and less to corporate regulation of the anxiety of a few individuals. The end result of all of this is congregations equipped for ministry instead of conflict.

Method and Resources

The focus of this book is three areas. The first is observation and reflection on myself as a congregational leader in relation to the theory and practice of centering prayer and natural systems theory, and the effects the implementation and integration of these theories had on my practice of congregational leadership. The second is my experience with two congregations that I have served that have had a history of conflict and severe dysfunctional behavior resulting in the abrupt termination of the pastoral relationship with their clergy and a concomitant drop in membership and revenue. The third is my experience and

observations at the diocesan staff level, as a senior staff member of a large diocese overseeing one hundred and fifty congregations.

This is more than just an experiential book. Added to my experience is a combination of theory and reflection. There are two primary theories put forth in the book. One is the theory of centering prayer and the other is that of natural systems. Both of these theories become actualized in practice. The process, I believe, takes place in the following order: experience or practice followed by an infusion of theory; reflection on the theory; and practice resulting in a new practice and experience. At this point, the process begins again. The following is a record of this process.

* * *

After I returned from overseas service as a missionary, I attended graduate school, since the average re-employment time for returning church missionaries was eighteen months and the church paid six months salary as a resettlement package. While I was at the university, a nearby congregation imploded on Christmas Eve. The rector either resigned or was fired after the evening service. The bishop asked me if I would take over for a few weeks. Ultimately this temporary assignment stretched into five years. It was only a matter of weeks before it was clear that oral prayer and petition were not adequate for me in this hot bed of reactivity. Someone suggested that I contact a Roman Catholic abbot, Thomas Keating, who was beginning to reformulate and repackage a traditional form of Christian prayer. I attended an introductory workshop in Austin, Texas, and began the practice of centering prayer.

After several months of practice, I went to St. Benedict's monastery at Snowmass, Colorado, for more intensive practice and experience of centering prayer. For ten days I did as much as six hours of contemplation each day, interspersed with periods of *Lectio Divina*, liturgies and lectures by Keating. This experience resulted in

a change in my understanding of life and also brought about a change in my lifestyle. My awakening to the drives for power, control, security, affection, and esteem in human life, and the afflicting emotions that accompany them, began a process that led me to understand my own behavior and the behavior of others. The theory of centering prayer led to practice of prayer which, in turn, led to new understandings, which led to different practice.

The practice of centering prayer led to a lowering of my overall reactivity to the chaos around me. This allowed for more objectivity in my decision-making process. Centering prayer not only lowered my stress level, but I noticed actual changes in my physiological responses to threat, aggression, and challenge. Through the unloading of the unconscious, or purgation, as part of the prayer process, I was able to separate my own reactivity and personal issues from those of the congregation in which I served. This resulted in a clearer and more objective leadership process. The security that I felt from a deeper relationship with God contributed to a willingness to take risks and be more open in my leadership of the congregation.

I was able to replicate these same effects that I experienced personally in the congregation through the formation of centering prayer groups. At one time, I had over sixty people practicing centering prayer in a congregation of 220. The overall reactivity of the congregation went down and the overall tolerance for differences went up.

Shortly after I began to practice centering prayer, I read in an article in *SPICE*, a newsletter for clergy spouses, about Edwin Friedman's book, *Generation to Generation*.⁵ My wife and I began to apply natural systems theory to our own immediate family and, later, to examine our relationships and positions in our families of origin. Through the lens of natural systems theory, patterns of behavior in our lives and our families became clear. Recognizing those patterns became the first step toward changing behavior. Following the same

pattern that I did with centering prayer, after first applying natural systems theory to my own life, I began to apply the theory in my congregational work.

This theory had a significant impact on my understanding of leadership. Having once subscribed to the Tiglath-pileser or “Pulu” school of management,⁶ and handing out eighteen unsolicited letters of transfer to a neighboring congregation for my most troublesome members, I now took a less reactive approach, recognizing my role in the congregational relationship system. I now understood that the individuals involved were only performing functional roles that would be performed by others if they were not available. Health came in understanding the mutuality of the relationship system and in working with the process rather than focusing on individual members or events. On the individual level, it meant teaching and practicing that leadership was defined as taking responsibility only for one’s own actions and reactions, while being in relationships with all others.

I later applied the pattern established in this congregation to other congregations and in my work with the diocese. In looking at congregations as a whole, patterns of behavior emerged that could be traced back through the history of the congregation, much as an individual’s behavior could be traced back to their family of origin.

Now I see that problems can be seen more objectively as systemic rather than the fault of any one individual or even any group of individuals. Natural systems theory can be used to understand the relationships and workings of a congregation, and to work at beginning the process of healing, utilizing the concepts of differentiation, triangles, generational transmission, projection process, functional position and emotional cut-off. Particularly important is the understanding of the role of the leader as one who maintains emotional clarity and acts rationally and encourages the same behavior in others. Centering prayer then is used to lessen emotional reactivity and to purge and heal those deep hurts that

cause emotional reactivity. Centering prayer also helps promote a value structure that is conducive to unconditional acceptance of others.

Together, natural systems theory and centering prayer provide the method and the tools to effect change in congregations today. They are compatible in promoting nonreactive leadership; they encourage responsibility and choice, provide emotional clarity, and encourage trust and openness. Natural systems theory provides a blueprint for change. The fruits of centering prayer enable people to amend life and to accept others unconditionally as you are accepted and loved by God unconditionally. These theories complement each other in that they help actualize and bring into reality the interior goals of each.

There were two major periods of transition during the time I was working with these theories and putting them into practice. The first was the transition from a church to diocesan level assignment. This provided an opportunity for me to get a wider view of congregational ministry. It also allowed me to put into practice some of the changes I had made in my understanding upon reflection on my experience. Usually, I was confined to giving advice and suggestions; but for one six-month period I was assigned to an American Baptist Church as a co-pastor. This allowed me to field test some of my new understandings.

The second period of transition was that from a supervisory capacity on staff to congregational ministry. While I had several years to develop the theory, I knew that the practice would be very difficult. I built in some safeguards to this transitional period. One was a five-year, no termination contract; another was money set aside by the congregation to hire a consultant to help me monitor my reactivity and objectivity. I correctly perceived that it was impossible for me, going into this particular highly reactive situation, to retain my objectivity and nonreactive state in the face of constant verbal attack.

Finally, I applied for and received a grant to form a group composed of clergy who worked in congregations that were considered highly reactive. The group consisted of twelve clergy from a variety of congregations throughout the diocese. The congregations were diverse in size, ethnicity, economic status, and viability. Each congregation had a history of problems often stretching back over generations. Some of these problems had involved inappropriate clerical behavior, acting out by church members, or involuntary separations. The approach of this group was to assume that the clergy would ultimately be drawn into the established cycles of conflict unless they could maintain a low level of personal anxiety and reactivity. Through monitoring and regulating the clergy leader's anxiety, the level of anxiety and reactivity in the congregation could also be regulated. The leader's refusal to participate in cycles of conflict would gradually lead to change. The group experienced a ninety percent success rate as opposed to the normal thirty or forty percent success rate previously experienced when working with conflicted congregations.⁷ Success was measured by increases in giving and membership, continued employment by the clergy, a decrease in identifiable reactive incidents, and anecdotal reports.

Definitions and Terms

The two major terms used in this book are natural systems theory and centering prayer. Both are terms that are often used imprecisely outside their own fields. Natural systems theory is a term that is often confused with systems thinking and used interchangeably with systems theory. Natural systems theory is an understanding of human nature based on evolutionary biological science.

Proponents of natural systems theory argue that it is not based on concepts of general systems theory. They say that general systems theory was influenced by man-made systems such as steam, electricity, rocket science, and computers. Mathematical concepts

were then applied to biology and other behavioral and social sciences.⁸ The “natural” in natural systems refers to the observation that families occur in nature and are not a construct of the human mind. They are, instead, a part of the evolutionary system. Humans don’t create family systems, they discover them. This fact sets natural systems theory apart from other family therapy theories such as Milan, Brief, or Structural. Murray Bowen believed that human emotional functioning extended beyond the human constructs of such theories in their relatedness to all life. Bowen also believed that in order to understand the behavior of an individual, it was not enough to consider only the individual. The individual’s relationship to the system needed to be an integral part of the equation.⁹

This understanding is not necessarily the understanding of all those who work with natural systems theory. Peter Steinke says that natural systems theory is a way of conceptualizing reality.¹⁰ Bowen and Michael Kerr would disagree with this and say that natural systems theory exists in reality.

Centering prayer is a term that came to be applied to a method of prayer taught in a workshop by Basil Pennington to a group of religious superiors under the sponsorship of the Major Superiors of Men.¹¹ The members of Pennington’s order had used the term centering prayer in reference to the book *The Cloud of Unknowing* and to the exercise of prayer that is described therein. Pennington suggests that the usage may have come about because Thomas Merton, who was a member of their order, often spoke of going to one’s center to pray. Those who practice this type of prayer suggest beginning the prayer by choosing one word such as “God” or “love,”¹² then repeating the word until it disappears. Pennington felt that this was a sign of a movement toward the center, so he called it centering prayer.¹³ This was a term that Thomas Merton had used in his writings.

The method itself was developed as an attempt to move people toward contemplation. Originally, this had been the function of *Lectio Divina* but over time, each part of *Lectio Divina* — *meditatio*, *oratio*, and *contemplatio*¹⁴ — had become compartmentalized and an end in itself rather than preparation for a deeper experience.¹⁵ Another consideration was that in the modern world outside the monastery, not everyone had the time to devote to *Lectio*. Centering prayer offered a method to move directly into contemplation without the large blocks of time that *Lectio* requires. In its modern form centering prayer is an ideal form of spirituality that can lessen the normal anxiety that exists in society today and particularly within congregations.

This project begins with a look at the role that anxiety plays in congregational ministry today. We live in a society where many of our institutions are in a state of change. This creates uncertainty and a variety of pressures focused on congregations and their ministers. In this situation, more is expected, and people have less tolerance for error.