



Family Systems and Congregational *Life*

A MAP FOR MINISTRY

R. ROBERT CREECH

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To Melinda,
who has walked patiently and lovingly with me in marriage,
a partner in ministry,
a faithful friend,
a scholar in her own right,
a mother and grandmother extraordinaire,
without whom . . .

An abstract geometric design in the top left corner of the page. It consists of several interconnected lines forming various polygons and triangles. Some of these shapes are filled with a light gray color. Scattered throughout the design are several small, solid black dots of varying sizes, some of which appear to be at the vertices of the lines. The overall effect is that of a network or a map's skeleton.

MAPS

Antique maps, with curlicues of ink
As borders, framing what we know, like pages
From a book of travelers' tales: look,
Here in the margin, tiny ships at sail.
No-nonsense maps from family trips: each state
Traced out in color-coded numbered highways,
A web of roads with labeled city-dots
Punctuating the route and its slow stories.
Now GPS puts me right at the centre,
A Ptolemaic shift in my perspective.
Pinned where I am, right now, somewhere, I turn
And turn to orient myself. I have
Directions calculated, maps at hand:
Hopelessly lost till I look up at last.

—Holly Ordway

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Preface

Writing clarifies thinking like few other activities. Francis Bacon famously claimed that “writing maketh an exact man.”¹ That, as much as anything, accounts for why I sat down to write this work. I wanted to know more clearly what I think about offering congregational ministry from the perspective of Bowen Family Systems Theory (BFST). I also suspected that it might make a difference to others engaged in that work.

A colleague first introduced me to the theory in 1987, soon after I had accepted the call to be senior pastor at the University Baptist Church in Houston, Texas. He asked me if I had read *Generation to Generation*, by Rabbi Edwin Friedman. I had not. I found a copy of the book and read it through, unclear about what to make of this family systems perspective on congregational life. On the one hand, it made good sense to me. Friedman’s stories demonstrated the power of such an approach. On the other hand, I was clueless as to what to do with it in my own family and congregation, and I did not know where to find out. So I placed the book on my shelf and forgot about it.

A few years later a round of congregational chaos and a simultaneous series of family crises sent me back to the book. Friedman’s perspective, as I recalled it, might have something to say about the confusion swirling around me. I pulled *Generation to Generation* off the shelf and reread it. Motivated by my own misery, I sought out a Bowen-trained coach and educational program in my city and slowly learned to see my part in the mess and began, by God’s grace and much effort, to modify the situation. I attended clinical conferences on Bowen theory in Houston and Washington, DC, read Bowen’s *Family Therapy in Clinical Practice*, studied books and articles about the theory, kept journals, developed a family diagram, engaged research on my own family,

visited the Bowen Center in Georgetown, watched many hours of Bowen on video, and met regularly with a coach. Bowen's understanding of human behavior began to make more sense to me as I tried to engage it in my life.

The move from applying the theory in my own family to applying it in the congregation I served was a natural one. What I was learning was shaping my way of doing pastoral work. Eventually, I offered these ideas to others in a pastoral training program in Houston called LeadersEdge. A collaborative project with colleagues Jim Herrington and Trisha Taylor resulted in a book dealing with BFST: *The Leader's Journey*, in which we encourage congregational leaders to seek personal transformation as they work at leading change in their churches.²

My own attempts to understand and apply BFST now span two decades. I have had opportunities to present my thinking before both clergy and academic biblical scholars, as well as therapists and scientists who are interested in the theory. Through this exchange, my ideas about the theory have been questioned, expanded, modified, and enriched.

The work of writing this book is really an attempt to clarify my own thinking about BFST and the work of ministry. I intend the book itself to fill a gap I perceive in the literature. Most books for clergy have focused on understanding congregational systems from the perspective of leadership. However, I have discovered that when one begins to use this theory to think through the work of ministry, it affects everything we do: from strategic planning to bereavement visits to preparing next week's sermon. BFST can help us better understand spiritual formation and may even offer insights into our reading of the Bible. This book provides clergy with a more comprehensive connection between BFST and the work we do each week.

The book comprises three parts. The first part, "Orienting the Map," introduces BFST as a tool for ministry, surveys the role it has come to play in clergy training over the past thirty years, and projects its usefulness in the future. I describe the theory in enough detail in chapter 2 to introduce a newcomer or to refresh the memories of those who may not have thought about it much since a seminary class. The chapters in part 2, "A Map for Practical Theology," apply systems thinking to the central aspects of pastoral ministry: leadership, proclamation, pastoral care, spiritual formation, and the life of the community of faith. Part 3, "A Map for Reading Scripture," addresses the possibility of employing BFST as a tool to provide a fresh perspective on biblical texts. After outlining the challenge of applying a psychological theory to biblical texts, I explore the stories of the patriarchs, the life of Jesus, and the teachings of Paul from a natural systems perspective.

Appendix A offers an additional biblical case study in the story of King David. Appendix B addresses the question of integrating BFST and Christian theology. In appendix C you will find key terms to know in BFST, and appendix D provides information on BFST training programs in North America. Finally, appendix E contains a thorough bibliography of works related to BFST and congregational life for your further study.

A set of reflection questions follows each chapter. I encourage you to use these questions to consider what the theory says about the territory you are attempting to negotiate, or perhaps about times in your ministry that continue to puzzle you.

Acknowledgments

Although a book may bear the name of one author, it is seldom the work of a single mind. I am grateful for Victoria Harrison's patient guidance, shared wisdom, and pointed challenges. She has played the roles of coach, teacher, gadfly, colleague, and friend for many years. The time, energy, and money she has personally invested in coaching and in developing educational programs through the Center for the Study of Natural Systems and the Family in Houston has affected the lives of many families over time, including my own. I am especially grateful for her interest in the issues faced by clergy, both in their families and in their congregations.

I have also learned much from others associated with the Bowen Center in workshops, clinical conferences, and conversations. Randall Frost, Roberta Gilbert, Michael Kerr, Anne McKnight, Dan Papero, Louise Rauseo, as well as many fellow students of theory along the way have enriched my understanding of both theory and life. The works of writers and thinkers such as Edwin Friedman, Israel Galindo, Margaret Marcuson, Ronald Richardson, and Peter Steinke have been a help. I appreciate their contribution to my understanding of this theory.

My own students at the George W. Truett Theological Seminary and pastoral colleagues in a variety of training settings have taught me with their questions and insights. Katie Long generously applied her pastoral wisdom, her knowledge of BFST, and her skills as an editor to the early versions of this work, making it clearer, more concise, more accurate, and more practical. The errors that remain in my thinking or writing are no fault of any of these good folks—I will take full credit. In addition, I want to thank Baker Publishing Group for their support, advice, and editorial guidance. I am especially grateful to executive acquisitions editor Robert N. Hosack, whose advocacy and confidence made this project possible.



PART ONE

Orienting the Map

1

Always Take a Map

The Value of Bowen Family Systems Theory

Then thought I with myself, who that goeth on Pilgrimage but would have one of these Maps about him, that he may look when he is at a stand, which is the way he must take.

—John Bunyan, *The Pilgrim's Progress*

Always take a map.” That was one of a dozen “notes to self” that my wife and I made after a near-disastrous canoe trip down Arkansas’s Buffalo National River. The Buffalo flows unhindered for 135 miles, without any bridges, roads, fences, dams, or people around. For a day and a half, Melinda and I floated in solitude down this picturesque stream, enjoying the mountains, fishing for smallmouth bass, and absorbing the beauty and quietness of the surroundings.

Halfway through the second day, the shallow river, about fifty feet wide, suddenly narrowed to an S-shaped chute about ten feet wide and four feet deep. The water rushed through in a noisy, powerful current. No one had warned us of any dangerous places. The canoe rental agency billed this route as a “float trip” for families, not a whitewater adventure. We could have taken our canoe out of the water and, with some effort, carried it around this spot, but after surveying the scene, we agreed to navigate the

chute. The only hazard appeared to be a large stump, about three feet in diameter—the remainder of a tree on the bank of the river. The soil had eroded around it, leaving an enormous root system hanging down. We needed to enter the chute, evade the stump, and negotiate a ninety-degree turn. Then we would be back on a wide and gentle part of the river. It looked like fun.

We entered the chute but found the current so swift that we were unable to steer. We crashed into the roots. The impact knocked Melinda down into the canoe. We were unharmed, but the bow of the canoe had lodged in the roots. As we tried to pry it loose with our paddles, without warning the canoe turned sideways in the fast stream and capsized. Both of us spilled into the rapid flow with a lot of debris. All our possessions floated down the river. The canoe wedged sideways in the root system, held there by the powerful stream. Suddenly a huge piece of the tree broke loose and fell on me, pushing me to the river bottom. I thought I might die.

The current finally pushed the stump off me, and I surfaced. The canoe broke loose from the roots, sending Melinda downstream, pinning her leg against a protruding log. A canoe full of rapidly rushing water held her tight. She thought her leg was breaking. We struggled to move the canoe enough to free her leg. She was uninjured except for bruises. But the strong current still trapped our canoe fast against the log.

Miles from civilization, we did not know where to find help. With excruciating effort, we turned the canoe enough so that the water worked with us, straightening it out. We beached the vessel, emptied it, pounded out a dent created by the log, and gathered our remaining gear.

We were both exhausted from battling the canoe and the current and by the quick drop of the adrenaline rush from our bodies. With no idea how far we were from our end point, we began to paddle what proved to be but a short distance to our take-out spot.

Driving back home to Texas, we brainstormed what we had learned that would help if we attempted such a journey again (which we did, with friends, a couple of years later). We recently came across that scrawled list. At the top was the admonition, “Always take a map.”

Anytime we engage unfamiliar territory, a map is a useful companion. Someone has been there before us. We can navigate unfamiliar territory by using their observations and experience. The map is not the territory, but if it is accurate, we have a way to think about the territory and to make our way through it. We can circumvent obstacles. We can avoid dead ends. We may discover shortcuts. The territory is less formidable.

Mapping the Territory of Congregational Ministry

The territory of ministry is often unfamiliar terrain, even to the experienced. More than one minister facing a difficult, unforeseen scenario has lamented, “They didn’t teach me about this in seminary.” In fact, the territory of congregational life is so diverse and so unpredictable that no education could prepare one for every possibility. Pastors require a map, a way of thinking about that territory, so that we can find our way through it successfully.

We can think of navigating some of the territory of congregational ministry in terms of competencies, skills, or programs. We usually feel prepared to offer these. And the more we practice them, in reflective ways, the more confidently we apply them in the future. We can float down these parts of the river.

The whitewater of congregational life, however, occurs in the rapids of relationships. This truth is not self-evident. Pastors may enter congregational ministry like newlyweds, starry-eyed and convinced that “love is all you need.” It is not. What congregational life and marriage have in common is that they both require a lot more than warm feelings, communication techniques, and good intentions when anxiety rises like a flash flood. These relationships, so beautiful and satisfying when the system is calm, can become terrifying in a moment. Clergy may point to the church’s governance system, or a building program, or the budget as a problem. That is a bit like blaming the canoe for the rapids. We can navigate these intense relational events successfully in most cases, but seldom will we accomplish this accidentally.

If the territory in ministry that is most unpredictable—and potentially the most dangerous—is human relationships, what map might we rely on? How do we learn to think about our relationships in a way that, despite the uniqueness of each one, allows us to understand ourselves and others?

Bowen Family Systems Theory (BFST) has served as such a map for me for nearly two decades. Honestly, I did not engage the study of Bowen theory because it seemed like a nifty idea or because I wanted to become a more effective pastor or because it was trendy. My family was suffering symptoms of extended stress and anxiety, and I wanted to find a way forward. A strong wave of emotional process threatened what was most dear to me and held us in its current. I was ready to do whatever was necessary to get free. What I learned was lifesaving. Only later did I discover the obvious: what was true about managing myself in the anxiety and emotional process of my own family was also true about managing myself in the emotional current of the congregation I served as pastor. Bowen theory became for me a map, a way of thinking about myself and about how relationships worked. That map, when I managed to follow it, helped me find my way through the twists and

turns of each new part of the exciting, treacherous, and rewarding territory of human relationships.

This book is about that map and how we can use it to make our way through those aspects of ministry in which relationships most impinge on us, in which emotional currents bind us, preventing us from moving forward: how we lead our congregations, how we preach, how we offer pastoral care, and how we read and understand Scripture. We may know the skills involved in each of these. But knowing how to paddle a canoe is different from knowing how to steer when it threatens to capsize amid dangerous debris and a strong current. The rapids of relationships can also easily overturn a ministry.

Bowen Theory Meets Congregational Life (1985–2018)

Since the publication of Edwin Friedman's *Generation to Generation: Family Process in Church and Synagogue* in 1985, many pastors have discovered that the eight concepts of BFST help them understand their own lives and families as well as those of their flocks. Friedman, a student of Murray Bowen, demonstrated how the emotional system of the clergy's own nuclear and extended family interconnects with the emotional systems of the families of the congregation as well as the family that *is* the congregation. Friedman applied BFST in a way that made sense to many who were engaging congregational life daily.

Clergy training programs in BFST soon spread across North America, beginning in 1990 with Friedman's own organization, the Center for Family Process, in Bethesda, Maryland. Larry Matthews's Leadership in Ministry workshops, Roberta Gilbert's Extraordinary Leadership Seminar, Peter Steinke's Healthy Congregations, and Doug Hester's Ministry Leadership Concepts are a handful of some of the more well-known programs.

Other congregational leaders turned to educational programs not specifically designed for clergy, such as the postgraduate program of the Bowen Center for the Study of the Family in Washington, DC, and others. The Center for the Study of Natural Systems and the Family provided Defining Leaders, a three-year program in the Houston area geared toward ministry leadership. (See appendix D for information on these and other programs across the country.)

Mainline seminaries frequently include at least some exposure to the theory as part of theological education. Clinical pastoral education programs often incorporate it into their training regimen as well. In addition, a modest

collection of resources is available, as practitioners and scholars continue to engage the intersection of Bowen's theory and the life and ministry of the clergy. Writers such as Roberta Gilbert, Israel Galindo, Peter Steinke, Ron Richardson, Margaret Marcuson, R. Paul Stevens, Jim Herrington, Trisha Taylor, and myself have addressed aspects of clergy leadership, congregational emotional systems, and the clergy person's family. For nearly three decades, Bowen's thinking has influenced the way many pastors function in proclamation, pastoral care, and leadership.

So why yet another book on the subject? Other books on BFST and ministry tend to focus on *explaining* the theory in the context of congregational life so that clergy may understand it. Those that focus on application of the theory tend to address the topic of pastoral leadership. The application of BFST to such pastoral tasks as biblical interpretation, spiritual formation, proclamation, and pastoral care is more often ignored. Additionally, the focus on leading in a regressed society (one of Bowen's eight concepts, and in his mind one of the most important) is omitted from most works on BFST and leadership. This book is an effort at a more comprehensive engagement of BFST and congregational life—from issues of leadership, especially during crises and times of societal regression, to issues of pastoral care, spiritual formation, proclamation, and biblical interpretation.

The Popularity of Bowen Theory among Clergy

Why have congregational leaders found this theory so attractive? I have no scientific survey of clergy responses to that question. However, based on observations from my own engagement with the theory as a pastor and from working with scores of students and colleagues in classes and workshops, I offer the following:

1. Thanks to the programs and resources mentioned earlier, the theory is *readily available* to clergy in forms directly applicable to their work.
2. The theory is *understandable*. Pastors can learn and practice these ideas.
3. The theory is *compatible* with the biblical perspectives and theological categories held by mainline religious traditions.
4. The theory *helps clergy focus on self*, rather than on others, whom they cannot control.
5. The theory provides ways for clergy to think about a variety of issues in the congregation, *without having to develop separate expertise* in counseling, management, conflict resolution, or other fields.

6. Clergy daily encounter family and congregational issues that are *relational*. Bowen theory applies directly to questions we face.
7. Clergy find that the theory provides a way of thinking about life in congregations and families that makes a *practical difference*.

During this same period (1985–2018), clergy of every tradition have witnessed seismic changes in congregations and society. Technological, geopolitical, environmental, moral/ethical, and economic issues have rocked the world, and their consequences have not spared the church. Bowen’s theory provides clergy a map for negotiating the terrain of social change as well. Thoughtful practitioners have engaged the theory to manage themselves amid anxiety generated in society, families, and congregations. Leadership in anxious times requires a way of thinking about both the world and oneself, and Bowen theory has offered a way forward. That Friedman’s offering of the theory to fellow congregational leaders coincided with the onslaught of such challenging times may have been a major factor in making the theory so attractive.

Bowen Theory, Congregations, and the Future

What of the future? Given scenarios of a surging world population, the growth of megacities, and the potential ecological crises we will face in the next forty years, how important might Bowen theory be for pastoral leaders in the mid-twenty-first century? The changes and challenges that lie before us appear to tower over those we have faced previously. What will the world of 2050 look like? To what will congregations and their leaders need to adapt?

The technology that will be part of the world forty years from now is unimaginable. Who can look ahead accurately when knowledge is doubling every year and a half to five years, depending on which field is considered and whom you believe? Although my imagination will not take me there, I know these technological changes will be a factor to which pastors will be constantly adapting.

Some aspects of the future are more predictable, such as demographics and ecology. More than 7.5 billion people occupy our world today, nearly twice as many as when I graduated from seminary in 1976. By 2050, that figure will likely reach 9.8 billion.¹ The current US population of 310 million will swell to 438 million by 2050, twice as many as when I received my seminary degree.² Where will most of them live, these 9–10 billion people worldwide, 438 million of them in the US? In cities. In huge, overcrowded cities. In 1900, only 150 million people in the world lived in cities. In 2007, for the first time, the world had more urban

people than rural, with more than 3 billion. In 2050, more than 6 billion people, 7 out of 10 on the planet, will live in huge cities under unimaginably crowded conditions. The number of cities of more than a million has exploded over the past century, from a mere dozen in 1900 to 83 in 1950 to more than 400 today. Eighteen megacities now have populations over 10 million.³

The challenges that go with urban crowding are well known: crime, disease, quality of life, transportation, food supply, adequate water, waste management, energy demands, and other social problems. These will grow exponentially. Most clergy in 2050 will minister in large, densely populated, urban settings.

Urban property will be scarce and therefore expensive. Models of church life dependent on large pieces of real estate and massive buildings likely will be unsustainable. How long before an increasingly secular culture decides that churches duly owe local and state governments the potential tax revenue from church property? Churches may no longer get a free ride. Owning property and facilities may become too burdensome for many congregations.

Environmental concerns add to the issues of population growth. Lack of adequate clean water, an increasingly serious problem worldwide, will become more so with the growth of cities. Food supply systems that depend on cheap oil leave large cities vulnerable. Global climate change remains a wild card for coastal cities. With up to 70 percent of the world crowded into cities, living in a world surrounded by asphalt, concrete, and glass, people will increasingly experience alienation from creation and from each other.

At the same time, rural populations will have their own challenges, as will their pastors and congregations. The “unsettling of America” that began in the postwar era began a move from the countryside to the cities that has now left small towns and rural areas depleted of economic resources, population, and a future.⁴ Well-educated, full-time clergy are less and less an option for these churches. Anxiety rises in the face of fears for survival, and yet these struggling and likely apprehensive congregations are often the first stop for a young seminary student starting out in ministry. The pastor’s survival may depend more on the ability to understand emotional systems than on skilled exegesis or preaching.

These parts of the future are predictable. Those who lead congregations will require a way of thinking that helps them keep their heads amid the swirl of reactivity, anxiety, and fear such changes inevitably generate. BFST can be a valuable and useful map for congregational ministry and leadership in a world growing progressively more anxious.

An applied knowledge of Bowen theory will be an asset for clergy, first, because the theory describes “human” behavior that remains valid across

time and cultures. Approaches to ministry and leadership arise and disappear quickly in an anxious, often leaderless environment such as ours. The pressure to develop and employ quick, relatively painless “fixes” generates leadership snake oil by the trainload, and congregational leaders, like other anxious men and women, often eagerly pay for a bottle of the latest brew. The sheer multiplicity of “solutions” bears witness to their ineffectiveness. If there were a single dependable method to fix the problems, we would have adopted it long ago. We are often surprised when a strategy that appeared to work in one place does not seem to fit in ours. Or the approach we once employed effectively has become anemic, limp, and useless. To wait anxiously and dependently for the next new approach in the leadership market leaves congregational ministers without a way to anticipate the future, think their way into it, or learn their way through it. Dependence on leadership gurus leaves us vulnerable.

Bowen theory is not a leadership theory per se. Bowen attempted to study and describe human behavior scientifically and so did not limit his thinking to a current philosophical theory or perspective. We can illustrate his eight concepts from the study of ancient texts and stories as well as from contemporary human experience across cultures. Unlimited by time or culture, BFST has the potential to be one of the few aspects of clergy training that can accompany us into the future of the church and society. Church structures and practices certainly will change in the next forty years. Human reactivity and emotional processes will not. BFST will continue to offer accurate ways to understand ourselves despite radical contextual changes.

Second, as anxiety rises, Bowen theory provides a way of thinking about and understanding that anxiety. Congregations with high-functioning leaders stand a better chance of thriving despite the anxious environment.

Bowen himself used the term “societal regression” to anticipate the times in which we live, marked by overpopulation and the threats it creates. In a 1974 lecture he said, “I believe man is moving into crises of unparalleled proportions, that the crises will be different than those he has faced before, that they will come with increasing frequency for several decades, that he will go as far as he can in dealing symptomatically with each crisis, and that a final major crisis will come as soon as the middle of next century. The type of man who survives that will be one who can live in better harmony with nature.” He continued: “This prediction is based on knowledge about the nature of man as an instinctual being, and on stretching existing thinking as far as it can go. There are many questions about what man can do about his environmental crisis. The thesis here is that he might modify his future course if he can gain some control over his reaction to anxiety and his ‘instinctual’

emotional reactiveness, and begin taking constructive action based on his fund of knowledge and on logical thinking.”⁵ Bowen theory offers a way of thinking about the crisis itself, about the anxiety it generates, and about managing oneself as a leader in such regressive times.

Third, Bowen theory provides a way of thinking about the future that will help discerning men and women respond to and adapt to the changes around them rather than merely reacting instinctively. Leadership is inherently about the future. Leaders are “midwives” helping others give birth to their future. Congregations that do well through the next forty years, that learn to function at a high level amid changes and challenges, who manage to make it through these times with minimal destructive conflict or simple disintegration, will be those who can respond to their environment rather than react. These congregations will require leaders who can help them understand their unique calling, draw on their faith traditions, think and pray together about their future, hold on to their values, and remain faithful to their identity. If leaders are learning to work on themselves in these areas, to take responsibility for self, and to manage their own reactivity, they will be a powerful asset to these churches. Pastors who know their own values and faith, those who can think and pray through their challenges, will be in a better position to assist congregations in giving birth to the future.

Conclusion

The most perilous places in ministry lie in the realm of relationships. Clergy who “always take a map” will have an advantage in church budget meetings when finances are down, in conversations with parishioners about their life struggles, in the pulpit when a prophetic word is called for, in congregational planning sessions when the future is unclear, in the immediate aftermath of an unforeseen crisis, and in many other treacherous features of the terrain of congregational life. BFST can help us navigate successfully through this territory. Remember: “Always take a map.”

● Questions for Reflection

1. What is currently serving as your “map” for negotiating the important relationships in your life? What maps have you absorbed from family or others along the way? What thoughtful theoretical perspective have you used?

2. What has been the most intense experience of “whitewater” in your own relationships, either in your marriage, your family, or your congregation? What was it like to be caught up in the current? How did you find your way out? What do you wish you knew then that you know now?
3. What are your biggest concerns about the future of congregational ministry that you anticipate facing as a pastoral leader?