Hitting the wall: clergy encountering the emotional system in their first parish.

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Abstract

This paper summarises a research project which explored the lived experiences of Anglican clergy as they encountered their church's emotional system in their first incumbency. Eleven vicars from three Australian dioceses were asked, in a phenomenological study, to describe the main challenges they faced as they led a congregation for the first time. All the participants identified the uncooperative and uncivil behaviour of influential church members as their chief concern. They also disclosed their own stress responses to the behaviour they encountered and these were distilled into five core themes: shock, inadequacy, alienation, relinquishment and hopelessness. Insights from Murray Bowen's Family Systems Theory were introduced in the analysis phase in order to extract the emotional and systemic dimensions of the data. The study concluded that more highly differentiated clergy achieved lasting, systemic change even though they encountered the most intense conflict. Moderately differentiated clergy achieved temporary change while lower differentiated clergy, who faced the least intense conflict, were changed by the system. The findings in this study are applicable to church authorities, theological training institutions, clergy formation curricula, and aspirants to the pastorate in that they confirm that the emotional system constitutes a major challenge faced by modern church leaders.

Introduction

In a qualitative study, eleven Anglican clergy, who were newly inducted vicars to their first parish, were selected from three Australian metropolitan dioceses (Brisbane, Sydney and Melbourne) and asked to relate their experiences of leading a church for the first time. The aim was to extract rich descriptions of their lived experiences, giving particular attention to the most difficult challenges they faced. Their stories, recounted in semi-structured interviews, centred around human conflict and can be summarised by one participant who said "the way people related" was the most challenging aspect of his new pastorate. Two notable aspects emerged from their stories. The first concerned the content of the narratives which focussed on anti-social and uncivil behaviour among church members including aggression directed towards the minister. The second concerned the participants' reactions to that behaviour which crystallized into the five core themes of the study: shock, inadequacy, alienation, relinquishment and hopelessness. Bowen Family Systems Theory (BFST) was introduced as a diagnostic tool used to conceptualise the human drama in terms of emotional systems, as well as to estimate the level of differentiation displayed by the clergy and how it impacted on their responses.

Background

The impetus for this study sprang from four sources:

1. My own experience in church leadership experience, spanning over twenty five years in various types of churches, had generated a desire to explore more deeply why church people functioned uncivilly, especially when stressed. That sin was the culprit was too clichéd and vague an explanation and I wanted to understand sin's dynamic - how and why it is played out, often with strong passion. BFST provided a tool that helped him monitor the trajectory of sinful behaviour through emotional systems in my own setting but I also wanted to compare my experiences to those of others.

2. Informal discussions with the researcher's ministry colleagues over many years revealed stories of trauma and hardship that often centred on relational dynamics. These stories suggested a pattern of something happening 'out there' in local churches worth investigating.

3. Roberta Gilbert, author and exponent of Bowen theory, asked a bishop in the U.S.A. to identify the primary challenges facing American pastors today (Gilbert, R., 2009, pers. com).

    they come out of seminary all enthusiastic and ready to do ministry. But sooner or later, they come up against a wall that knocks all the steam out of them. From then on, they lose their enthusiasm. They either leave the ministry or just wait out the time until retirement.

    Gilbert commented,

> It is my guess that that 'wall' is the emotional system of the congregation. Nothing in their training has prepared them for dealing with it…that is the research I would like to see done. Just asking pastors what is most difficult for them about ministry.

> I wanted to discover if the American phenomenon was replicated in an Australian setting.

4. There was a paucity of literature documenting clergy experiences. There had been studies which researched clergy burnout and attrition rates etc., but most of these studies were quantitative and did not provide rich descriptions of what it was like to lead a church, especially for the first time.

Methodology

According to Denzin and Lincoln (in Swinton and Mowat, 2006, 29), "qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them" Qualitative research is a means for exploring and understanding the meaning that individuals or groups ascribe to human problems (Creswell, 2009, 294). Hence, it was deemed appropriate for studying clergy in their settings and for extracting the meaning they ascribed to their challenges.

Phenomenology was chosen as the appropriate qualitative research method because it "seeks to illuminate the specific and describe phenomena through the perceptions of the actors and, as such, provides a powerful tool for understanding subjective experience" (Lester, 1999). Furthermore, Hans-Georg Gadamer's hermeneutical brand of phenomenology was employed because it acknowledged the inevitable influence that the researcher brings to the phenomenon. Rather than bracket out the researcher's pre-understanding, as in Husserl (LeVasseur, 2003, 413), Gadamer believed that interpretation is an essential and inescapable feature of human existence. The moment one uses language to describe a phenomenon, one has interpreted the phenomenon. Thus, Gadamer included the researcher as an integral part of the research and developed a symbiotic concept he called the 'fusion of horizons', a process whereby participant and researcher collaborate in a joint learning effort in order to better understand the phenomenological essence (Wilding and Whitford 2005, 101). In addition, LeVasseur's revised concept of bracketing was adopted, whereby the researcher brackets out the everyday assumption that things are only as they appear to his or her unreflective consciousness, an approach she labelled as the 'natural attitude'. It needs to be replaced by an attitude of curiosity and astonishment (LeVasseur, 2003, 417).

Each of the eleven participants (two female and nine male)[1] were interviewed either face to face or via video conferencing in sessions lasting between sixty and ninety minutes. Some required a second

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[1] The gender mix resulted from the restrictions set by the selection criteria being: Anglican vicars in their first parish, presiding in the three allocated dioceses and who were available and willing to participate. Since Sydney diocese does not appoint female incumbents only Melbourne and Brisbane contained prospective female candidates which limited the sample.

interview for clarification, additional information or member checking. The nature and type of research undertaken arose from the researcher's epistemology which also shaped the research question (Van Manen, 1990, 2; Groenwald, 2004). The main research question asked of the participants was, 'what was it like for you to take charge of your first parish? What did you experience?'. The following subsidiary questions were asked to keep responses focused on the research design:

- What were the major challenges and difficulties you faced?

- Can you describe any stand out moments or flash points you remember which were significant for you?

- What did you observe and experience of parishioner's responses and reactions to your arrival, either active or passive?

- Has your experience in any way and at any time caused you to question or doubt your calling to this parish or to ministry generally? If so, can you describe what that was like?

Data from the interviews were recorded, transcribed and examined using analytical software and by following Moustakas's research procedure steps, consisting of epoché, textural representation, preliminary grouping, reduction and elimination, clustering into themes, textural-structural representation, imaginative variation synthesis and essences (Moustakas, 1994, 120). Creswell's eight stage strategy for checking data accuracy and consistency was also followed (Creswell, 2007, 251).

Stories of conflict

The participants' descriptions focused on conflicts of various types and intensities. Speed Leas categorised conflict into five types with increasing levels of intensity and the narratives in this study described conflicts that aligned with level III, IV or V type conflicts on Leas' list (Leas, 1985, 19).[2] Table 1 below outlines the eleven narratives and assigns the level of conflict, a tag word, and a summary of each case. The tag word was articulated by each participant and was thought to capture the theme succinctly.[3]

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[2] Leas' five levels of conflict types are: Level I - problem to solve; Level II – disagreement; Level III – contest; Level IV - fight or flight; Level V – intractable situation.

[3] Pseudonyms are used in this article to preserve the anonymity persons mentioned.

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Figure 1: Narrative summaries

	Tag word	Description
Contest *(Level III)*		
David	*Drained*	*A church plant in rented premises with no prospect of their own church building. A tired congregation that drains its vicar.*
Wayne	*Lame duck*	*A warm and loving church but resistant to vicar's attempts at culture change.*
Ron	*Apathy*	*A church that lives in the past and leaves ministry to the professionals and overworks its pastor.*
Fight-flight *(Level IV)*		
Alan	*Annus horribilis*	*An assistant minister reluctantly takes the lead when the vicar morally defaults. Congregation is shocked, angry and grief-stricken. Vicar bears the brunt of outrage.*
Malcolm	*Carnage*	*The youth worker is given notice and rallies supporters against the vicar.*
Robert	*Dysfunctional*	*Church lay officials constantly fight and intimidate others to maintain power.*
Neil	*Cannibalised*	*A branch church started life as an independent church plant then was absorbed into the parish. Intense animosity towards the main church and it's leader.*
Tina	*Bullet-makers*	*Vicar victimised by an abusive church officer whom the congregation protects.*
Intractable situations *(Level V)*		
Michelle	*Aggressive-aggressive*	*A branch church matriarch with a sense of ownership antagonises the vicar and others.*
Tom	*Wild*	*Stories of incest, drugs, criminal activity, internal fights challenge an ex-army vicar.*
Don	*Pruning*	*A church held captive by a small group that threaten and intimidate others.*

Three stories are expanded below, representing a level three contest, a level four fight-flight struggle, and a level five intractable situation, respectively.

Ron's contest: Apathy

Ron almost immediately sensed that his new church was characterised by indolence due to two factors. First, it was a mostly aging, Anglo-Saxon church set in a rapidly changing socio-ethnic, multi-faith community. The church had struggled to retain newcomers in what had become a transient suburb. "It's just devastating because you've got people who are trying to be more friendly…but then people just walk out on them", Ron noted. A certain "numbness" and "callousness" had descended on the church which translated into a lack of interest and involvement by the membership. He said it was something he had "grieved over" and had caused him "a lot of pain".

Second, a period of rapid and dynamic growth had occurred under the leadership of an enterprising minister twenty years previous. But, the minister's strategy for growth had depended heavily on diocesan grants which he used to multiply paid staff. This had energised the church but also had the negative effect of professionalising the ministry. Consequently, the congregation became over-dependent on staff and Ron faced a "tired" and "apathetic" church which was still living in the glory years of old and had learned to leave ministry to the "professionals". "To get people to move is really hard and time consuming and, so far, we have really struggled", he said. Ron had tried to introduce a new vision and new idea strategies to inject some enthusiasm, but the congregation response was "whatever...we'll just continue doing what we're doing anyway". He worked hard, averaging 55-60 hours a week, and his wife is "the kind of person who doubles your ministry", indicating her own dedicated involvement. They struggled to cope with both a young family and Ron's mother-in-law who had moved into the rectory suffering a serious illness. Ron's wife was admitted to hospital due to exhaustion. "I couldn't get her to slow down" and "she was fatigued", he said. The congregation was very caring toward his family during this time, but he was frustrated at his inability to mobilise the congregation in other areas.

Tina's fight-flight: Bullet makers

Tina's honeymoon in her new church lasted two years and was brought to an abrupt end by two women who were the cause of "rumours or conflicts". They were "like poison to each other", she said. For example, when another woman in the parish fell ill, Tina cared for her regularly, including during her holiday leave. However, the two "poisonous" women rumoured that Tina had neglected the sick woman and didn't care.

Tina also spoke at length about Ivan, the parish treasurer, of whom she said, "I think he fell in love with me". But Tina really felt he was using the relationship to control her. As a previous warden, Ivan had been a very "controlling person". He would send her "mean and abusive emails" or make "nasty phone calls" if she didn't do what he wanted, she reported.

The two afore mentioned women, "got in Ivan's ear" and complained to him about a range of issues. They were trivial matters, but inferred that Tina lacked integrity and they delved into areas that had breached her privacy and that of her family. Ivan wrote these grievances down in a letter which Tina was never meant to see. However, she accidentally discovered the letter and learned that it had been circulated among the congregation even before she knew it existed. "It was horrible...it was like a punch to the face...I was so upset...I cried...", she admitted. Furthermore, Tina's brother-in-law had died of cancer around the same time and she took time off to attend the funeral. Ivan circulated a note among parishioners stating, "I don't see why she needed any time off for her brother-in-law's demise". Tina was "just torn apart", and she said,

> I cried, I went home and I didn't show my husband how angry I was, but he knew how angry I was, I came home and I was so upset. Unfortunately, it caused a lot of conflict between me and my husband.

Tina's husband refused to return to the church and demanded that Ivan step down from parish council. Tina had similar feelings saying, "I felt like walking out and telling them all to shove it...they can all shove it up their...".

On another occasion, Soon after, Ivan approached Tina after a service and said, "look, you don't like me anymore". He then chastised her because she had broken confidentiality with him by reading the complaints letter. Tina was outraged and knew that "he was trying to control me". She exploded saying that Ivan had repeatedly broken her confidentiality and undermined her. "He said nothing, he just hugged me", she said. On another occasion, Ivan "put his hand on my leg", she reported with tears.

When I asked her what everyone else in the church was doing while all this was taking place, Tina replied that their response was, "oh, that's just Ivan being Ivan", and they pretended that what she reported didn't happen. They wanted to "validate" Ivan, she said. They treated Ivan like he was the "victim" and had been "badly mistreated" when he was, in reality, the abuser. There was a lot of sympathy for Ivan and her side of the story was "never really heard".

Tina realised how much this conflict had consumed her emotionally and how much she had neglected other church members saying,

> it showed me how small this was and it showed me how I was directing all of my energy and emotions at what turned out to be a small group of people amongst a large group of contented to very happy people.

Don's intractable situation: Pruning

Don entered his first parish in a rural town at the age of twenty-nine. Even before he arrived, "there was a lot of tension from the start", due to his youth, he reported. One group of women, and especially Elsie their "ringleader", had been pastored by older clergy for decades and were dissatisfied with an inexperienced minister. Don sought tutelage from a retired minister in the hope that it would endear him to his detractors and stop any "kitchen talk". It didn't and there developed "a campaign by a few of them after only a few months to discredit me and get me out of the parish".

Prior to Don's arrival, during a locum's tenure, Elsie and her group "took control...it was their parish and they were used to doing things their way", Don said. He recalled how the women had offered a donation to the church. But, they earmarked the gift, specifying what the money could be used for. Don thanked them for the gift but added, "parish council will decide how those funds are to be used because they are the ones that are running the parish". He said they didn't like that "because they had lost control in their eyes", so they reneged on the offer saying, "if you're not going to do what we want you to do, you're not having the money". Don stood his ground and the donation was withdrawn.

The parish operated an Op-shop in town with Elsie acting as the unofficial coordinator. The proceeds from the shop helped to keep the parish afloat financially and was considered a vital ministry.

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However, from time to time, work, health and safety risks in the shop had been identified, but these were never addressed. So, Don decided to introduce some guidelines for the safety of the clientele and the volunteer staff. Elsie didn't like the new measures "because I was stepping on her turf", Don remarked. That's where the "real sort of nastiness started to come out from her and her friend", he said. Elsie tried "to get the police involved and the diocese involved with false accusations of lewdness on my part, saying that I had done the whole paedophile sort of stuff", he recalled. The allegations were serious enough for the bishop to intervene and conduct an inquiry but, with no evidence, "the accusations were not upheld", he reported.

Don felt this group were duplicitous and petty. Some of them held official positions on parish council and, in that capacity, they appeared polite and courteous but would "run things under-handed elsewhere". He noted, on one occasion, parish council decided to mow the church lawn on Tuesday, but these women turned up to mow it before Tuesday "so they could be praised and not allow others to be involved". Elsie's group also used to wash the dishes after morning tea on Sunday but the fellowship time regularly deteriorated into a "den of cliques and negative gossip".

At Easter, Don received a letter from Elsie outlining her decision to leave the parish. Don couldn't contain his delight saying,

> it was a true Easter for me, there was a death in her going and there was some grief for that, but there was a real sense of resurrection. Within a month the numbers had doubled".

After she left, Don watched the gossip, backstabbing and negativity evaporate and a new "warmth" enter the church. It was a palpable change that even Elsie's group noticed. At morning tea after the Sunday service, the cliques vanished and "everyone just flowed from one person to the next to become just one big group", Don said.

Two of Elsie's followers also left the church, but three remained and they "saw the change instantly and commented that the parish felt different". They became "great supporters" of Don and began to talk about their own lives whereas, previously, they only talked about what was on Elsie's agenda. Even the fringe group of people, who used to watch the mischief but never got involved, broke up because "there was nothing left to watch".

The church quickly grew from twenty-five to one hundred regular worshippers which Don attributed to the congregation's culture change after Elsie left. One woman from Elsie's group, remarked to Don, "I can't believe you stayed". Don replied, "God called me here for a reason and I think that was the reason, to do the pruning that was needed for the growth of this parish".

Findings

These three sample narratives are indicative of the tenor of the eleven stories. The stories centred around human behaviour that was unreasonable, uncooperative, volatile, manipulative and disrespectful. which unnerved the clergy. Clergy reactions were distilled into the five core themes which emerged by rating the data according their level of incidence among the participants. The level of incidence was determined by:

1. The frequency with which the theme appeared in the data. Higher frequency was rated as higher incidence.

2. The intensity of the data. Some comments were deemed highly significant though not frequent. For instance, an indication to leave the ministry rated a high incidence.

3. Non-verbal gestures, tone of voice, mood, body language, facial expressions, etc. which could not be conveyed in the texts alone received an incidence rating. For example, one participant wept openly when recounting a distressing interchange and the interview was suspended until the participant regained their composure.

The core themes which emerged proved significant in the following ways:

- Shock – major theme for six participants and moderate for four.

- Inadequacy – major theme for eight participants.

- Alienation – major theme for seven participants.

- Relinquishment – major theme for five participants.

- Hopelessness – major theme for two participants and moderate for five.

Theme 1: Shock

Most participants reported that they encountered difficult behaviour of a type described by Boers (Boers, 2002, 4) which shocked most of them.

Their responses can be further delineated into three groups.

- Those who endured severe and aggressive conduct but who responded with a 'thick skin', i.e. they functioned with more resilience. Two of the three participants in this category attributed their ability to cope to their vocational backgrounds. Tom had served in the army, and Don had worked in human resources. Tom, Don and Neil gave no indication that they had doubted their call to parish ministry or to ministry generally.

- Those who suffered aggressive behaviour and were personally affronted or injured. Five participants admitted they had experienced depression, burnout, loss of confidence and had entertained thoughts of resigning from their church or of leaving ministry altogether.

- Those who encountered more passive resistance, inertia and compliance[4] which shocked them. Although they did not experience a combatant style of opposition, these participants were still profoundly affected. Three participants struggled to cope at times, responding with burnout, depression or over-functioning.

The common thread through all the narratives was control-oriented behaviour, particularly the struggle to gain or maintain control over the minister, but also included the jostling for power between church members.

The following are some telling comments were expressed that underscored the significance of this theme:

- I had no honeymoon; I hated going to parish council, just dreaded it; I was flabbergasted, I was floored; I was in shock; it was dreadful. (Robert).

- I've had to take time out twice in that five years because of um......and I've had to step back and not allow myself to hit the wall…they were just unbelievable; I've never met people who behave like this". (Michelle).

- I never imagined that I was going to come out of college and doing what I was doing...it was a total contrast to my experience…it was chaos. (Alan).

- I had a two-year honeymoon…rosy…fantastic; then suddenly went from forward progress in the church to just carnage; no one wanted to have anything to do with me. (Malcolm).

- I was feeling nauseous all the time and I just wouldn't want to go to church...urgh! (Tina).

- It was wild; I thought, wow, I think she just called me Satan; someone actually said from the front 'we know that Neil doesn't love us as much as he loves the other congregation'. (Neil).

- Morale in the church is already low because there are four families, high maintenance, dysfunctional, confused, wild and are sucking the life out; the minister before me said, 'you need a psych degree to run this place!'. (Tom).

- My first year was absolute hell. (Don).

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[4] Richardson regards reactive compliance as an emotional reaction viz. the outward appearance of going along with the wishes of another, while inwardly resenting being "forced" to do so (Richardson, 1996, 93).

Theme 2: Inadequacy

Participants felt they lacked the skills, competence or energy to manage the variety or the intensity of the relational system. Some, faced with congregational inertia, believed it was their responsibility to fix the lethargy, but believed they had failed. Others felt at a loss to know how to handle aggression or manipulation. On the whole, although all participants were competent in many areas, all sensed they were ill-prepared to meet the challenges of the intra-relational conflict they encountered.

Michelle confessed to having come "close to burnout" and needing to take time out twice in five years. Neil was "overwhelmed" and admitted that he had no control over his recalcitrant branch church. Alan admitted, "I'm way out of my depth here". Malcolm had reached a stage where "we just don't know how to handle it. Leanne, my wife and I were at the point where we don't know where this is going". Wayne "didn't know who to turn to" and was "sort of floundering and at that point I think they thought 'well it's not all his fault but we've got a lame duck here!'". Tom led a "wild" and "volatile" church, and acknowledged his inability to "fix" family clashes. Ron's wife's admission to hospital was linked with the pressures of parish living. Tina was "just trying to deal with my emotions thinking well what do I do now?". Robert also felt "overwhelmed" and David remembered feeling "drained".

Theme 3: Alienation

All of the participants expressed feelings aloneness, loneliness, lack of support, isolation, friendlessness or ostracism with eight of them being deeply affected. Their sense of alienation was attributed to multiple causes such as:

- Geography – they were isolated by distance, especially those in rural areas,

- Emotion – they felt bereft of moral support, empathy or companionship,

- Function – due to brave decisions that resulted in distance from others,

- Vocation – lack of staff, volunteers, peer or ecclesiastical support.

Michelle was frustrated by the "lack of support from the bishop". Alan "felt incredibly isolated at the time" and "didn't really have much support at all". Malcolm was ostracised by a sizeable group of parishioners. Tina felt like telling them all to "shove it". Tom regretted, "you just don't have good friendships here". Robert had "no honeymoon". Wayne "was not at all well connected". David's drained congregation wouldn't "get involved". Neil learned from his assistant that his branch church was "just filled with loathing" for him.

Theme 4: Relinquishment

Some participants doubted their calling and had reconsidered their future in the parish or in ministry. While only half of the respondents expressed serious doubts in this way, but this was considered substantial enough to warrant consideration as a core theme.

Alan confessed that he had questioned his faith saying, "I remember sitting in study thinking 'am I really a Christian? Like, do I really believe in the resurrection?' Kind of crazy, isn't it? And I knew deep down there was something wrong".

Malcolm admitted, "my wife and I would say 'how much longer can we bear this?'". When he was asked, "do you mean you can no longer bear this parish or ministry?", he replied, "at all".

Theme 5: Hopelessness

Two participants held almost no hope for a positive future. Six reported experiencing diminished hope and optimism, but they had developed strategies for self-renewal. Three participants showed no signs of a sense of hopelessness and had remained optimistic throughout their ordeals. Some discovered that changes in their circumstances had lifted their spirits, such as:

- The departure of troublemakers from the church,
- External interests and relational support structures,
- Self-evaluation and change in attitude and personal routine,
- Pursuing medical or professional treatment,
- The pursuit of new energising parish ventures.

Data correlation with levels of conflict intensity and leader differentiation

The five core themes alone provided only a two dimensional view of the data. To give the study greater depth and insight, a comparison was then made between the core themes, the level of conflict intensity experienced, and the level of differentiation exhibited by each of the participants. BFST was introduced as a conversation partner in the research process at this point in order to examine each setting as an emotional system. It is not the intention of this paper to offer a comprehensive summary of Bowen theory, but the feature of differentiation deserves some explanation.

Bowen's concept of differentiation lies at the heart of his theory (Papero in Titleman, 2014, 65). It relates specifically to a person's ability to suppress emotional impulses in order to maintain rational objectivity. Bowen illustrated this graphically in his scale of differentiation which placed individuals with a greater ability to separate thinking and feeling on the higher end of the scale and those who confuse and fuse the two lower on the scale. According to Bowen, more highly differentiated individuals function from deeply held convictions and beliefs and are more able to restrain their

emotions in order to think logically and make objective decisions[5]. Conversely, lower differentiated individuals tend to operate from a sense of self which is borrowed from the opinions and expectations of others.[6] They react emotionally to external or internal pressure with little reflection and emotional reactivity tends to dominate objectivity and rationality. The pop song 'Love is all around', originally written by British rock band The Troggs, contains the lyric, "...my mind's made up by the way that I feel...", an apt portrayal of emotional reactivity dictating cognitive functioning.

In order to gauge the level of differentiation in this study, it was necessary to employ some measurable criteria that were not just arbitrary or subjective. Peter Steinke's three differentiation indicators (Steinke, 2006, 67ff) were considered appropriate and used:

- Courage – leaders who operate from their 'solid' self and challenge the system to change.

- Calmness – the leader's "non-anxious presence" by which he or she is able to maintain their composure in a nervous system.

- Contact – leaders who choose not to isolate themselves in an anxious system but remain connected to people, even with their antagonists.

Participants who were thought to meet all three of these criteria were deemed to function with 'higher' differentiation. Those who met any two of the criteria were allocated 'moderate' differentiation and those who met one or none earned 'lower' differentiation.[7]

The following table (Figure 2) captures the correlations between the incidence of the core themes, the level of conflict intensity, the level of clergy differentiation and the amount of systemic change they achieved in their church.

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[5] Bowen labelled this the 'solid-self' that is "made up of clearly defined beliefs, opinions, convictions, and life principles". A solid-self can say, "'this is who I am, what I believe, what I stand for, and what I will do or will not do' in a given situation" (Bowen in Gilbert, 2008, 20-21).

[6] Bowen called this the 'pseudo-self' or 'pretend' self. Knowledge and beliefs are acquired from others and the pseudo-self is created and modified by emotional pressure. People "pretend to be more or less important than they really are", and one can "quickly change to enhance one's image with others" (Kerr & Bowen, 1998, 103). The pseudo self is defined by others.

[7] These ratings are only estimations of differentiation because observations were merely momentary snapshots. Bowen believed that a default position was only discernable over a long period of time.

Figure 2: Correlation between themes, conflict, differentiation and change.

Participant	Systemic Change	Conflict Intensity	Shock	Inadequacy	Alienation	Relinquishment	Hopelessness
Tom	Lasting	V	◆◆	◆	◆◆	◆	–
Don	Lasting	V	◆	◆	◆◆	◆	–
Neil	Temporary	IV	◆◆	◆◆	◆◆	◆	◆
Tina	Temporary	IV	◆◆◆	◆◆◆	◆◆◆	◆◆◆	◆◆
Michelle	Temporary	V	◆◆◆	◆◆◆	◆◆◆	◆◆◆	◆
Robert	Temporary	IV	◆◆◆	◆◆◆	◆◆◆	◆◆◆	◆◆
Alan	Changed by	IV	◆◆◆	◆◆◆	◆◆◆	◆◆◆	◆◆◆
Ron	Changed by	III	◆◆	◆◆◆	◆◆	◆	◆◆
Wayne	Changed by	III	◆◆	◆◆◆	◆◆◆	◆	◆◆
David	Changed by	III	◆◆◆	◆◆◆	◆◆◆	◆◆	◆◆
Malcolm	Changed by	IV	◆◆◆	◆◆◆	◆◆◆	◆◆◆	◆◆◆

Legend:	Higher differentiation	Moderate differentiation	Lower differentiation		◆◆◆ High incidence	◆◆ Moderate incidence	◆ Low incidence

The five themes exhibited higher incidence rates for clergy in the mid to lower differentiation bands. The three clergy in the higher differentiation band encountered level IV and V conflicts but conveyed little or no signs of depression, emotional paralysis, backing off or backing down, nor of entertaining thoughts of resignation. They were less shocked by bad behaviour even though they faced the worst it had to offer. They stayed in touch, even with their antagonists, challenged bad behaviour and endured with high hopes. Neil's sense of hopelessness only extended to his recalcitrant branch church. Beyond that he remained optimistic.

Four clergy in the lower differentiation band engaged in less intense conflict, however they still admitted to bouts of depression and burnout. Five had considered resigning from their role and one from ministry per se. All the clergy in this range scored higher incidences for inadequacy, alienation and hopelessness. This suggests that they risk greater distress if confronted with more intense conflict.

The two vicars in the moderate differentiation band scored high for all themes, yet they expressed a degree of hope. Perhaps their sense of hope strengthened their resilience.

Five conclusions were drawn from these results:

1. Higher differentiated clergy achieved lasting, systemic change. Lasting change only occurred with a more highly differentiated leader who challenged a low functioning system by their very presence and their solid self.

2. Moderately differentiated clergy achieved temporary change. They were able to achieve some change but were more prone to personalise the opposition. They were not as successful as the higher differentiated leaders at effecting culture change. Moreover, temporary change meant that the system was at risk of reverting to its old ways after a clergy person had moved on or succumbed to pressure.

3. Lower differentiated leaders were more prone to emotional paralysis in the face of intense conflict.

4. No lasting change occurred without conflict. Conflict was the catalyst for positive change but only when matched with a differentiated leader. The combination of conflict and a more highly differentiated leader brought systemic change that was astounding.

5. Low differentiated leaders and their families are at risk of psychological damage if they are situated in churches that have a history of intense conflict.

Theological connections

The figure of the good shepherd of God's people in scripture (Ps. 23; Ezek. 34:23; Jn. 10:11, 14; 1 Pet. 5:2) bears similarities with Bowen's description of a differentiated person. There is a correlation to be recognised here between 'good' and 'differentiated' because, without being differentiated, the shepherds of old would not have stood defiantly as God's representatives to protect, feed, nurture and guide God's flock. Conversely, bad shepherds cared little for the people under their care. Instead, they abandoned them, scattered them and exposed them to predators (Matt. 7:15; John 10:11-13). They resembled poorly differentiated leaders[8].

It is God's intention to furnish his church with good, differentiated shepherds. The qualifications for church leaders contained in the pastoral epistles list qualities that approximate Bowen's traits of a differentiated person. For example, a leader must "be temperate, self-controlled, respectable" (1 Tim. 3:2)[9], "manage his own family well" (1 Tim. 3:4), "be worthy of respect, sincere" (1 Tim. 3:8), "not share in the sins of others" (1 Tim. 5:22), "keep their head in all situations" (2 Tim. 4:5).

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[8] Bowen and Kerr associate low differentiation with selfish, aggressive and avoidance behaviours which break down cohesiveness, altruism, and cooperativeness (Bowen and Kerr, 1988, 93). Such behaviour patterns align with the bible's description of bad shepherds.

[9] New International Version (NIV).

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In 1 and 2 Timothy, Paul urged Timothy to advance in these qualities because Timothy was presented as a timid and poorly differentiated young man (2 Tim. 1:7) who had considered abandoning his post and leaving Ephesus (Frith, 2019). Paul's strategy was to encourage Timothy to strengthen his "solid self" so he could remain and lead more calmly, connectedly and courageously.

Although clergy differentiation can make a profound difference, the flip side is that congregations bear responsibility as well. This study revealed that the majority of church members assumed the role of passive bystanders while the wrangling of a few shaped the church's climate. A careful reading of the New Testament letters reveals that many of the instructions for correcting bad behaviour were directed to the congregation at large. Church members were expected to self-regulate. This cannot be dismissed by merely saying it was an embryonic church prior to the development of church hierarchies. Rather, it is an intrinsic theological principle that the congregation is responsible for "speaking the truth in love" and "growing and building itself up in love as each part does its work" towards maturity (Eph. 4:11-16). Corporate maturity is measured in relational terms as it mirrors the relations within the godhead (Eph 4:4-6). The dance of over-functioning clergy and under-functioning members not only registers as an unhealthy Bowenian reciprocity, but it does not reflect the biblical expectation either.

Conclusion

The five core themes of shock, inadequacy, alienation, relinquishment and hopelessness constitute key work areas for denominational authorities and clergy formation bodies to consider. The findings in this study will be uniquely useful to church organisations, clergy formation procedures, theological institutions and aspirants to the pastorate because of the focus on the emotional and systemic dimensions of church life. The study challenges a number of existing assumptions such as the adequacy of conventional training for parish leadership, the innate self-sufficiency of new incumbents and that emotional resilience is instinctive. It also challenges the assumption that problems, which are deeply rooted in generational patterns of emotional nervousness, can be quick-fixed with techniques, talent or programmes. The gravity of these new vicar narratives alone, regardless of the helpful insights of BFST, is enough to warrant strategies that better prepare prospective clergy.

Finally, the topic of church health has received increasing attention in the past decades and focus has often been placed on programmatic, technique-driven solutions that aim to achieve a balanced church life. However, the criteria for assessing church health need to be revisited because health that is defined by correct doctrine, successful programmes, inspiring worship, powerful preaching or enterprising mission is inadequate if these ventures are consistently sabotaged by the relational system. Quick-fix solutions by leaders that simply relieve hierarchical anxiety will not stem the tide of chronically dysfunctional congregations. Church authorities would do well to employ strategies that acknowledge the power of human emotional systems and deploy highly differentiated leaders who stand a better chance of producing deep, systemic change that results in biblically functioning churches.

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