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Attachment Theory, Pastoral Ministry and Health: A Teaching Case Application

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In the practice of ministry, clergy encounter numerous examples of how the quality of relationships affects people's well-being. John Bowlby developed a theory that states that the drive in human interactions is to form relationships or what he called attachments. According to his theory, some attachments have positive effects on well-being while other kinds have negative effects. Health is no longer viewed solely as a state where no physical symptoms are manifested. Medicine now has a proclivity to the preventative by anticipating potential health problems before they occur, thereby, maintaining a person's state of good health or healthfulness.

Attachments can be formed not only with people but also with objects such as institutions, memories, concepts and ideas. A person could have an attachment to a church, for example. By examining the type of attachment that a person exercises, clergy and pastoral care workers may gain insight into a person's spiritual health. Attachment behaviour toward humans is likely congruent with the kind of attachment a person extends to a relationship with the deity.

The case teaching method is utilized to bring the vitality of actual situations into a conversational forum. Here, learners can process the information, conduct background study, assemble the pertinent facts and apply their wisdom, experience and newly found knowledge in order to reach a decision about the situation presented. This method is most commonly used in a seminar, workshop or other forum in which learners meet as a group with a case leader. The case is distributed beforehand. Questions may be assigned. The learner reads the case and, then, background readings are undertaken. The learner then conducts a detailed analysis of the case as outlined later. This paper gives a brief summary of John Bowlby's attachment theory. Then a case, based on composite real-life situations, is presented followed by

questions that focus Bowlby's theory in relation to the case. Finally, there is a summary.

John Bowlby's Attachment Theory

In this section, there is a brief summary of John Bowlby's attachment theory. In a previous work, I have utilized Bowlby's attachment theory with Supervised Pastoral Education (SPE).¹ This summary provides highlights of attachment theory and begins an initial elucidation of its usefulness as a resource for ministry, teaching and supervision. Readers, who are interested in deeper exploration of the links between attachment theory and the practice of ministry, supervision and teaching, may refer to the various works cited.

The emphasis of John Bowlby's conceptual framework in attachment theory presents a number of unique and enlightening features not present in previously applied theories. These are particularly important to those engaged in the process of practical ministry, field supervision and Supervised Pastoral Education.² Bowlby's attachment theory was developed by studying the effects experienced by young children who had been, for various reasons, placed away from their mothers into unfamiliar environments. The initial basis of his study was undergirded by classical psychoanalytic theory,³ particularly with reference to objects relations theory,⁴ and Bowlby's own interest in the process of mourning. As his research continued over the years, he began to recognize certain shortcomings in this traditional framework. This led to his formulation of a new paradigm.

First, it is important to recognize that, in this new paradigm, the primary goal for human beings is the forging of affectional bonds or attachments. The ability to form healthy attachments is influenced by the separations and losses experienced by an individual. Healthy attachments are also influenced by how, and with what support, an individual has coped with these experiences inherent in the human condition. It requires an ability to venture forth from mother (and family) and address the later losses of life.

Moving beyond classical drive theory, Bowlby places the need for affectional bonds to be distinct from feeding behaviour or sexual behaviour.⁵ Affectional bonds are at least of equal significance to feeding or sexual behaviour. The need for formulating these attachments is no longer relegated to the, heretofore, restrictive label or stigma of *dependency needs*. In other words, the need for affectional bonds is

a key element in human growth and development. From a clinical theological perspective, this component of Attachment Theory evokes a notion of “holy ground” and the open sharing of being as at the Burning Bush (Exodus 3:1-6).

Second, Bowlby does not see a person’s early life formation and experiences to be a once-and-for-all photograph that forever imprints one into a certain form of behaviour. Rather, he sees the life process as being one that can bring growth, change, and development based on *feedback* and *learning*. This *feedback* and *learning* facilitate the person *to understand* one’s early experiences and their effects and, thereby, to create new goals. All of this affects change. Again, from a clinical theological perspective, Bowlby’s assertion introduces the theological concept of hope as well as the realities of grace and of forgiveness. Hope, grace and forgiveness are catalysts that support growth in response to the conflicts inherent to the pilgrimage of life.

Third, Bowlby believes that healthy attachments in one’s early life produce the consequent enhanced capacity to continue to formulate healthy attachments in the journey of life. This is a dynamic process that continues throughout the life cycle. Other theories, such as classical drive theory, tend to limit an individual’s potential for healthy or unhealthy attachments solely to the base fostered in childhood. Linking this insight to a clinical theological perspective, people of faith are called to become new creations and to aspire to the potential that God’s love beckons. They are called by name and possess inherent value.

Bowlby postulates that there are three distinct patterns of attachment. First, there is the pattern of secure attachment. In this pattern, the individual is confident that his/her parent (or parent figure) will be available, responsive, and helpful should the child encounter adverse or frightening situations. With this assurance, the child feels bold in the exploration of the world. In the early years, a parent, especially mother, promotes this pattern by being readily available, sensitive to her child’s signals and lovingly responsive when the child seeks protection and/or comfort.

A second pattern is that of anxious resistant attachment in which the individual is uncertain whether the parent will be available, responsive or helpful when called upon. In this uncertainty, the child is always prone to separation anxiety, tends to be clingy, and is anxious about exploring the world. In this pattern, conflict is evident. Anxious resistant attachment is promoted by a parent being available and helpful on some

occasions but not on others. Here, clinical findings indicate that the parent attempts to control by separations and threats of abandonment.

A third pattern is that of anxious avoidance attachment in which the individual has no confidence that there will be any helpful response to his/her search for care. On the contrary, the child expects to be rebuffed. When this anxious avoidance attachment is in a marked degree, the individual attempts to live her/his life without the love and support of others. Such a person seeks to become emotionally self-sufficient and may later be diagnosed as narcissistic or having a false self. This pattern, in which conflict is more hidden, results from the child's parent constantly rebuffing the child, especially, when the child approaches the parent for comfort or protection. Such a condition stems from repeated rejections.⁶

The pre-requisites to the formulation of healthy attachments are the conditions inherent in what Bowlby calls a "*secure base*".⁷ The characteristics of such a *secure base* are acceptance, trust, encouragement, challenges and non-judgement which are each modeled in the relationship. The notion of a *secure base* *does not* entail the introduction of some kind of protective shield that suggests absolute safety. The child does not have to be hermetically sealed from risks, challenging feedback, fear, anxiety, and other human feelings that are the natural product of family background, past experience, and on-going inter-actions with others. *Rather*, the *secure base* provides a relationship in which, and because of which, a person is better able to cope with these experiences and learn from them. The person is able to attain growth through increased self-esteem, enhanced skills, and personal autonomy.

Bowlby's attachment theory and his notion of a *secure base* provide a scientifically measurable framework to examine the otherwise rather nebulous concept of love practiced in the context of faith. For Christians, the admonition for us to love one another (John 15:12) can be brought to the pastoral relationship through the application of the insights derived from attachment theory. Bowlby's theory actually uncovers details of the tenets of faith that have been espoused throughout the ages by many faith groups.⁸

Case Illustration

Preparing for a Teaching Case⁹

A case written for the case-teaching method contains all the information available to the participants who are called upon to make a specific decision in the situation presented.¹⁰ It is a “re-presentation” of a real-life situation, although, certain facts and details may be disguised. For the purposes of the teaching session, the material presented in the written case is the only information available. As in other real-life situations, we do not always have all the required information immediately at hand. Accordingly, the facts of the case, as written, become the facts with which we must struggle. Some relevant information may be lacking which may signal us to dig deeper in the case and/or to acquire specific knowledge required for us to handle the case effectively. The latter possibility suggests further background reading and other sources of learning about the issues presented.

We may also derive information by “reading between the lines” of the case. However, the speculations explored must maintain a certain integrity with the case facts as presented. We may choose to make assumptions reasoned from these facts. We must be aware that, in some situations, certain material may appear in the scene to “fog” our focus and to divert our attention from essential core details. These reflect similar challenges that anyone faces in actual situations.

One prepares by reading the case from beginning to end. One must relax and take time to ponder the case and to think about the presented situation and let the material “float” in the mind as one explores the case. Later, one should re-read the case carefully a couple of times. In this process, the main points are underlined or highlighted. Details that may seem puzzling should be noted. For example, there might be details to explore in greater depth or about which to consult background readings. It is important to develop points that are emerging as key factors in the case.

Cases are discussed in a case-teaching session. This approach, known as the case-teaching method, is active, dynamic, and high on participation. Learning and discovery flow from each person’s interactions with the thoughts and ideas expressed by fellow participants. Participants need to come to the teaching session prepared to discuss the information that has been gleaned from the case itself, from the background reading and from other sources of learning. Participants

in this method must be willing to express their points of concern and their analysis of the case. They also must be able to support their ideas and thoughts from material in the case. Finally, participants ought to have fun in becoming immersed in the use of the case-teaching method.

Attachment and Justification by Faith¹¹

On 18 June 1996, The Reverend Chris Yee, pastor at Calvin Methodist Church, visited the home of John Wesley, a former parishioner. John reminisced at length about his life. Previously, in 1994, Chris had studied attachment theory during clinical pastoral training. Now she asked herself how she could apply the theory pastorally to John's story.

Calvin Methodist Church

Calvin Church was a large, vibrant and caring community of faith that stood as a long-time religious, social and community landmark in the history of Port Trafalgar, a small fishing village of 3,500 permanent residents. As a popular resort town, the population tripled during the summer months with the influx of cottagers and vacationers. People of various denominations attended Calvin Church during these holiday times. The parish council, representative of both the summer and permanent constituency of the church, met every third Sunday during the months from May to September after the worship service.

The Reverend C. P. Yee

Upon her graduation with a Master of Divinity in the spring of 1995, Chris Yee was called to be pastor of the Calvin flock. As most new pastors, she was full of enthusiasm. She felt that she had become endeared to members of the community, many of whom were very open to new avenues of worship and ministry. Before her graduation, Chris had undertaken a summer program of clinical pastoral training at Sister Mary Oliphant Health Care Centre located about 150 miles away in a large metropolitan area where Chris spent her teenage and university years. During this training time, Chris began to get in touch with her own story and experiences of life that she endeavoured to integrate with her experiences of faith. Her early years had been very "rocky". She lived in a series of foster homes after she had been placed for adoption by parents still unknown to her. She did know that she had come from north-western Ontario. But, that was all.

In her mid-teens, she had found a new home with a couple who she fondly refers to as “mom” and “dad”. This marked the start of a new life for her. She began to excel at all her endeavours. She remembers clearly how difficult it was for her to leave for Port Trafalgar.

The Parish Council Meeting

The meeting dealt with the usual church business and pressures of finance. The council voted to replace the church heating system and tabled the question of a new organ for the sanctuary, as was the habitual pattern, until a later meeting. At the end of the meeting on Sunday, June 16, 1996, Anna Pabst, Senior Elder, asked Chris about John Wesley, who had been a long-time, active member of the church but who had left suddenly to become deeply involved at the Centre for Truth and Life. The pastor of this centre favoured a literal interpretation of the Scriptures and saw it as his mission to seek out the lost in order to add them to his flock.

- A1:** “You know, Chris,” Anna began, “I think you’re just the person to help John. He was very active at Calvin for years; but then, a lot of things happened for him and your predecessor couldn’t even get John to talk about what had happened. Now, I understand that he has left the Truth and Life group and has become really despondent. I’m quite worried about him. There, for a while, he was just elated, it seemed. I don’t know a lot of his background because I’ve only been here a few years since we retired. Anyway, I remember he was here every Sunday for all the years that we were coming for our summer vacations.”¹²
- C1:** With a puzzled but caring look on her face, Chris replied simply, “Hmm.”
- A2:** “Well, I know that John has had a lot of losses in the last few years. It really seems to have hit him hard. More hard than you’d think,” Anna continued, “Could you please go round to see him this week?”
- C2:** “OK, I will,” Chris responded. She had high respect for Anna and knew intuitively that there was something significant in this concern for John.

John Wesley and the Visit from Chris

Chris had decided to make it her standard practice, in the summer months, to drop around to the various cottages in town in order to make an initial contact with new vacationers. Chris figured that this would be her means to see John and to try to enter into some conversation with him. She knew that he did not know her so that could be an advantage in 'opening the door.'

C3: "Hello, I'm Chris Yee, the new pastor at Calvin. I'm dropping around the neighbourhood and just wanted to say hi and have a chance to get to know one another a bit. How are you doing?" John seemed somewhat wary but he also portrayed a sense of wanting to talk.

C4: "What's your name?", Chris ventured a little uncomfortably.

J1: "John . . . John Wesley is my name."

C5: "I'm happy to meet you," she answered with a smile.

J2: "Uh huh," John replied and then after a pause said, "I've just poured some ice tea. I don't suppose you have time to sit down for a bit and have some."

C6: "I'd love to."

With a reflection of pleasant surprise, John invited Chris to sit on the summer porch where there were already two glasses beside the jug of ice tea. After getting settled and some conversation about the 'good old days' in the lake fishery, to which Chris listened attentively and interjected appropriate questions, John started to recount his story.

J3: "I don't even know if I should get into this stuff. You see I was a long-time member at Calvin. I pretty well grew up there."

C7: "I see", Chris said and then added, "You must have some pretty significant memories from those years."

J4: "Yeah, well, a lot of things changed in the last few years. It's all pretty hard for me to understand. Makes you wonder."

C8: "How do you mean?"

J5: "I don't know . . . Everything just changed. I'd been fishing on the lakes for about thirty years, maybe more. Then they closed the fish plant. I remember I went to work one day and they said, 'Your job is gone. You don't work here anymore, John'."

C9: "That sounds like a pretty shocking thing to go through."

- J6:** “Yep, and since then, which is over two years ago, I’ve done a lot of thinking. You know you get feeling pretty insignificant, worthless, no value. Lost. Nobody cares. It brings back a lot of memories.”
- C10:** “How so?”
- J7:** “I never was married but I went out with a woman for a lot of years. Well, to tell you the truth, we lived together. . . You think there’s something wrong with that?”
- C11:** “No, I don’t. It really has to do with the commitment, I guess.”
- J8:** “We both came from broken backgrounds. Her father took off when she was really young. Her mother had a series of bad relationships and we both were never very sure about marriage. My father was killed in a marine accident. He was a diver. My mom did the best she could but she was really never the same again. I pretty well looked after my brother and sister. They’ve been in California for years. Just went away to start a new life. I hear from them once in a while. I kind of gave up calling them. They have families and so much on the go. I guess they don’t have the time to call me. Anyway”, John continued, “Jill was killed in a car accident about a year after I lost my job.”
- C12:** Chris waited and then said, “Jill was your friend, eh...” John nodded and after a brief pause, Chris added, “I’m very sorry to hear that, John. That kind of loss hurts a lot.”
- J9:** “Thanks. . . It really does,” John said tearfully. He then added, “And on top of all that crap, if you don’t mind me saying ‘crap’.... ?”
- C13:** “I understand,” Chris replied with a smile.
- J10:** “On top of all that *crap*, they said I couldn’t be on the parish council any more. I just walked outta there. I really felt empty. Like I’d lost a family. No father, no mother, no Jill, no job. I really wanted all that. I think those are the kind of things that really count for me. I’ve always been looking for that. . . So even saying or thinking ‘God the Father’ anymore just awakens all the hurt again.”
- C14:** Chris lowered her head slightly and gazed at the porch floor. Then she said quietly, “Yeah, John, I think I understand what you mean.”

After a few moments of quiet, accompanied only by the rhythmic sound of the waves breaking on the-not-too-distant beach and the

plaintiff song of a cardinal, the conversation moved to positive memories about Jill and some other happy times at Calvin Church. They laughed and continued to talk for more than an hour.

When Chris was leaving, she knew that she'd be back and that some important healing had begun.

J11: "Come back any time, Chris," John said with a warm smile and wave.

Chris' Reflection and Questions

At home, Chris began to think of how she had worked through her own history and how her development had shaped her feelings and relationships. It had been quite a while since she had thought about Bowlby's attachment theory. Now, she had a clear example of how she could apply these insights to her pastoral ministry.

C15: She thought to herself: "Challenging, that's for sure, but I wonder what sense I can make of all this in working with John. And what did all that he said really mean, especially what he said about family and 'God the Father' and searching?"

Utilizing attachment theory, a series of questions arise about Chris and John. The following questions are meant for reflection and discussion in a group:

1. In terms of Chris, what is her personal development from the standpoint of attachment theory?
2. What kind of attachments are likely to have been part of Chris' journey? What long-term residual effect could this have for future relationships? What kind of attachment is probable with Chris and her 'mom' and 'dad'?
3. How could her attachment experiences affect her agreeing to the call from Calvin Church?
4. What are the possible 'danger points' in her relationship with John in terms of attachment theory?

In terms of John, there are also many questions:

5. What effect would leaving the parish council have had on John based attachment theory?
6. What behaviour could this trigger in him?

7. Why would John have been drawn to the Centre for Truth and Life?
8. What behaviour could underlie his dynamics with Chris? What might Chris re-present for John? How could Chris apply her insights about attachment theory in her pastoral care for John?
9. Working from Chris' standpoint, develop a long-term pastoral plan and be prepared to discuss your reasoning. What is John's likely attachment with God? How would you relate the whole notion of attachment theory to the theological concept of justification?

Some Reflections¹³

Based on the information provided in the case, it seems quite probable that, in early life, Chris would have been prone to anxious attachment behaviour. This can be deduced from the fact that she would have been subjected to emotional abandonment as a result of her shifts from one foster family to another – without also considering the harmful dynamics likely in each of those family settings. We may not know the particulars but we can deduce that all was not right by the fact that Chris moved on often. Another contributing factor would also be the fact that she was not familiar at all with her biological parents, a fact that would have tended also to impart feelings of loss, separation, and abandonment. In her own words, she describes that whole period of her life as being “very rocky”.

However, again as based on the information in the case, we can see that finally Chris was fortunate to become part of a family with whom she could feel at home. She speaks *fondly* of these adoptive parents as *mom* and *dad*. Furthermore, given the fact that she began to excel at all her endeavours, it is reasonable to deduce that she had found a secure base in her new home. A secure base enables a person to venture forth with confidence, to undertake new activities and risks which she was able to do in her theological training and, then, in her move away from home to become the pastor at Calvin Methodist.

Also, the case indicates that, through her clinical pastoral training, she took the initiative to reflect seriously on her life and to learn from it. She began to integrate her experiences of life in the context of her experiences of faith. There is ample evidence in the case that would support the conclusion that her attachment with her family was a healthy one that would improve her capacity to form subsequent healthy attachments in her relationships and interactions with others.

We know that Chris had learned about attachment theory in her studies and that she was well enough aware of its potential as a pastoral tool to want to apply it in her ministry to John. It is worth examining her dialogue with John, how she responds to him, and the impact of her responses. In the initial moments of contact, although we do not have the verbatim details of their conversation, we can note that Chris listened attentively to John and spoke with him in such a way that John felt comfortable enough to recount his story. In attachment terminology, this would indicate the likely development of a secure base where a person feels able to be oneself, to take appropriate risks, and to be open and vulnerable. We can note in the ensuing dialogue that on several occasions, Chris conveys her understanding and empathy for John. Also, she is not judgemental. These denote additional hallmarks of a secure base which enable John to go further in recounting his story.

We know from the case that Chris also has suffered significant losses in her earlier life. However, while she may use those insights as potential connecting points for empathizing with John, she does not fall prey to recounting her own story. If she were not operating out of an internal secure base, she could be triggered to anxious attachment behaviour in order to quell her own unconscious needs related to her own losses and separations if they had not already been resolved. At this point, we can therefore reasonably assert that Chris demonstrated healthy attachment behaviour and that she is functioning with the secure base that she has internalized in her pastoral function and person-hood.

Conclusion

While most of Bowlby's work and studies were based on the relationship formed between mother and child, attachments are obviously not restricted to that relationship alone. There are also attachments between father and child. In adult life, people tend to respond to authority figures in a similar manner to how they first related to their fathers. And the ultimate authority figure is God.

The theological concept of justification by grace through faith, it seems to me, is congruent with the notion of experiencing a secure base from which a person can forge a secure attachment. Justification has to do with a right relationship with God. In attachment theory, such a right relationship would be a secure attachment.

If a person demonstrates anxious attachment behaviour in relationships, it is likely that a similar attachment would be represented in their attachment or relationship with God. By examining a person's attachment behaviour, pastors can gain insight into a person's relationship

with God. By fostering a secure base in pastoral contacts, with the intention that a person can gradually internalize that secure base, not only will relationships with others become more fulfilling and healthy; but also, will a person's faith relationship with God become more healthy and *justified by grace through faith*.

Notes

- ¹ Glenn Empey, Thomas St. James O'Connor, Karen Ann Fox, Kathleen O'Neill "Quantitative and Qualitative Research on a Regional Basic SPE Program" *The Journal of Pastoral Care* 1997 51 (2) 195-206.
- ² John Bowlby MD., *Attachment and Loss, 3 Vols. Attachment, Separation: Anxiety and Anger, Loss: Sadness and Depression* (Great Britain: Penguin Books, 1986). See, especially: *Attachment and Loss Vol. 3, Loss: Sadness and Depression* 38-43. Here Bowlby states that his framework incorporates psychoanalytic thinking but adopts additional principles from ethology and control theory. He dispenses with abstract concepts such as drive and psychic energy. He asserts that his framework remains sound within the discipline of psychology, especially in the realm of developmental psychology. He subjects his work to the scrutiny of any scientifically based discipline. See also: John Bowlby, *A Secure Base: Attachment and Healthy Human Development* (New York: Basic Books, 1988) hereafter *Secure Base 1* and also John Bowlby, *A Secure Base: Clinical Application of Attachment Theory* (London: Routledge, 1988) hereafter *Secure Base 2*.
- ³ For a summary and bibliography of psychoanalytic theory and pastoral care read Charles Gerkin "Psychoanalysis and Pastoral Care" *Dictionary of Pastoral Care and Counselling* (ed.) Rodney Hunter (Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 1990) 979-984.
- ⁴ For a summary and bibliography of object relations theory see C. Kropp "Object Relations Theory" *Dictionary of Pastoral Care and Counselling* (ed.) Rodney Hunter (Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 1990) 796-798.
- ⁵ For a summary of drive theory and bibliography see L. Parrott "Motivation" *Dictionary of Pastoral Care and Counselling* (ed.) Rodney Hunter (Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 1990) 760-763.
- ⁶ Bowlby, Vol. 3. Loss and Depression.
- ⁷ See previously cited Bowlby, *Secure Base 1* and Bowlby, *Secure Base 2*.
- ⁸ For a comprehensive review of the literature of attachment theory and theology see Lee A. Kirkpatrick and Philip R. Shaven "Attachment Theory and Religion: Childhood Attachment, Religious Beliefs and Conversion" *Journal of the Scientific Study of Religion* 1990 29 (3) 315-334.

- ⁹ How to Prepare for a Teaching Case are the personal notes of Reverend W. Glenn Empey.
- ¹⁰ The methodology is often referred to as the case teaching method developed at the Harvard Business School and practiced at the Ivey School of Business, University of Western Ontario.
- ¹¹ This case is an abridged version of the original. It was written for the purpose of classroom discussion. All characters are fictitious and bear no intentional resemblance to any person whomsoever. I have used the popular phrase "Justification by Faith" to describe the case. However, I realize that the correct term within the Lutheran Church is "justification by grace through faith". The case was created and written by Rev. W. Glenn Empey and copyright permission has been given to *Consensus* for the purposes of the publication of this article. Copyright © 1999, 1998, 1997, 1996 by W. Glenn Empey. All rights reserved. No portion of this case may be reproduced by any method or means whatsoever without prior written consent of the author.
- ¹² Please note that in the case, the dialogue is represented by "C" for that of Chris, "J" for that of John, and "A" for that of Anna.
- ¹³ This case has been used by the author in numerous teaching situations with seminary students, other graduate students, and students engaged in pastoral education. Each teaching session has revealed new insights about the case since each different group of participants brings their unique perspectives to the material presented. I am deeply grateful to all those who have contributed to this process.

Those who make use of the case-teaching method have teaching notes associated with their cases. Those notes are continually enhanced as a product of the dynamics, inter-actions, and insight acquired in successive teaching sessions. It is not the purpose of this article to provide such teaching notes. Nor is its purpose to prepare the reader as a teacher competent in the application of the case teaching method.