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**SOCIETAL EMOTIONAL PROCESS,
EMOTIONAL REACTIVITY, AND THEIR
INCREASING CHALLENGE FOR
MINISTRY LEADERSHIP**

Abstract: The increasing anxiety and reactivity across society witnessed in elections, responses to COVID-19, and even within personal posts on social media platforms is a phenomenon that is growing invasively and pervasively present in ministry leadership. Murray Bowen's family systems theory (1978) seminal concepts of societal emotional process and emotional reactivity describe the phenomenon with acumen. This article outlines these two concepts and provides current examples of how they are being experienced by ministry leaders. Biblical examples demonstrate that the phenomenon has always been present in ministry leadership. Practical guidance is provided for ministry leaders to address this growing challenge by means of their own self-differentiation, thus providing an accessible response and strategy to this pervasive leadership issue.

Keywords: *societal emotional process; emotional reactivity; family systems theory; differentiation; leadership; ministry*

Leadership is difficult. Taking others from "here" to "there" in their personal lives, in a family, or in a business, school, team, or church requires the ability to coalesce vision, articulate strategy, motivate others, and negotiate roadblocks, hurdles, and detours. Leadership has always been difficult. However, in the present day, leadership has become especially challenging due to a rise in generalized chronic anxiety in society and a smoldering emotional reactivity that is easily incited. Contemporary ministry leadership in the Western context requires particularly robust emotional health and a theoretical framework to build corresponding health in the ministries being led.

Using a foundation of understanding from Murray Bowen's Family Systems Theory (FST), this article will define and identify tangible examples of the decline of the societal emotional process (SEP) and the heightening of emotional reactivity (ER) in the current Western context. Biblical examples of these con-

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cepts will be provided. Finally, this article will provide avenues of response for ministry leaders.

By their very nature, SEP and ER generate relationship patterns and leadership styles that exacerbate the anxiety of both leaders and the relational systems of which leaders are a part. Almost without fail, this makes situations worse and creates derivative issues that were never part of the original problem. These rabbit trails of anxiety and conflict distract leaders and pull systems off track, all while degrading levels of trust, thereby negatively impacting a system's sense of well-being and calm. It doesn't have to be this way. FST offers a model for the differentiation of leaders that can bring greater functional health to the system they lead. This model provides a pathway forward, not only for the leader but also for the system being led and ultimately to society at large.

Challenge and Context

Ministry leadership has always had its challenges and associated anxieties. Any leader can name them: finances, managing staff, dissatisfaction with the leader, the growth or survival of the organization, tension between tradition and new ideas, managing a facility, an indiscretion by a staff member, disagreements between members of the organization, identifying and agreeing on priorities—these all quickly come to mind. No person is a leader for long before she or he acquires a story or two that will have colleagues nodding their heads in recognition. While anxiety and reactivity are not new, they have greatly intensified in recent years. Ministry leaders face unprecedented levels of chronic anxiety amid a culture where emotional maturity is declining. The year 2020 provides a poignant case in point.

In 2020, the COVID-19 global pandemic brought ministry leaders to uncharted waters. Congregational leadership provides a specific example of some issues shared by many ministry leaders during this time. Governments limited public gatherings, and churches were closed at Easter. Pastors had to immediately address how to offer worship services when the congregation could not gather in person. For some, having kept up to date with technology eased the transition to online worship. For others, their congregations had historically been so resistant to all change that cash and checks collected on a Sunday morning were the only means of gathering donations; thus, without a time to meet together, there was no money. Anxiety was high. Pastors were bombarded with stress—both their own and that of their congregation. The stress easily manifested into negative behaviors such as accusations, lashing out, personal attacks, and conflict between members. These experiences were not only limited to congregations.

In addition to the pandemic, on May 25, 2020, the killing of George Floyd, a

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Black man, by White police officers in the city of Minneapolis and the subsequent widespread viewing of the video of his death instigated protests around the world. The responses, layers of anxiety, and derivative topics were powerful. Adding to these were the issues of systemic racism, the appropriateness of mass protests in a pandemic when public health officials were calling for restrictions of other gatherings, calls for defunding of police forces, the eruption of countless painful stories of individual experiences of racist acts, and questioning the validity of including voices of other minority groups in conversations about systemic racism. These issues polarized many. Ministry leaders were pulled into the storm of wider events and had to navigate the storm so as not to capsize their organizations as those they led reacted.

As the pandemic abated through the summer of 2020, congregations, non-profits, and businesses were faced with the decision of whether—and how—to reopen, given various public health guidelines. Ministry leaders had to moderate passionate conversations about whether to meet in person and decide how to approach issues of church capacity, social distancing, mask wearing, cleaning, and contact tracing.

While these decisions and their derivative anxieties were being managed, the United States of American's election began gathering momentum. Although this is an article written from a Canadian perspective, the U.S. election even energized Canadians as they followed the respective campaigns. Again, people threw down the gauntlet for ministry leaders with the question, "What do you think of . . . ?" Any answer would only be considered a challenge with the idiom "walking on eggshells" coming to mind. With reactivity at a high level and trust at a low level, objective and civil conversation grew elusive.

However, as troublesome as these 2020 examples were for ministry leaders, the events themselves are not the main source of concern to be addressed in this article. External events have impacted ministry leadership in every generation. What has changed and continues to accelerate, and what the events of 2020 show, is that there is an increasing degree of what Murray Bowen (1978) in Family Systems Theory identified as a regression of societal emotional process (SEP) and an increase of emotional reactivity (ER). Coupled with difficult events and traditional leadership challenges, these add another onerous and significant layer of complexity to ministry leadership. The emotional functioning of relational systems is quickly becoming essential knowledge and a key priority for contemporary leadership. Addressing root issues is becoming nearly impossible otherwise. Those leaders who are not aware of SEP and ER may find themselves unable to navigate their way out of the storms of the present and those yet to come.

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Societal Emotional Process and Emotional Reactivity: Definitions and Examples

Bowen's FST has, at its foundation, the premise of relational systems. Western culture is steeped in psychoanalytic language, where individuals are encouraged to deeply examine one's interior life of motives, feelings, and personal history, so thinking in terms of "systems" can seem somewhat novel. FST asserts that "human beings function in relationship to one another" (Creech, 2019, p. 15). When people come together, they interact and influence one another and affect one another's behaviors (Steinke, 2003, p. xi.). These interactions are objectively observable, revealing the functioning of the system. They can be named and addressed with practical observational questions of, "How?," "When?," and "What?" rather than the hypothetical question of "Why?" "Why?" is a question that encourages indeterminate theories about another's motives, emotions, and personality. These answers accomplish little for problem solving or systemic health. In contrast, practical questions such as, "How?," or, "When?," offer a tangible understanding of the process.

Societal Emotional Process

While Bowen's FST was generated from his work with families, it became apparent that human beings are connected in relational systems beyond just the family system. The principles uncovered in family functioning were easily applied to other relational systems. Thus, Bowen observed that even society can be understood as a relational system in its functioning. Edwin Friedman applied this systemic thinking to his work with synagogues and congregations in his seminal work, *Generation to Generation* (1985).

In FST, the greatest influencer on any system's function is anxiety. Anxiety, as defined in FST,

refers to the degree of emotional response to a real or perceived threat.

Threat can range on a continuum from real to imaginary. Anxiety related to a genuine, time-limited threat can be adaptive. Anxiety related to an unlikely or imaginary threat can become more chronic and long term. (Frost, 2014, p. 309)

Unlike the specificity of fear, anxiety is "generalized, subjective, and anticipatory" (Steinke, 2019, p. 17); it negatively affects functioning. Steinke provides some examples of these negative functions: defensive behaviors, blaming others, an increased need for certainty in ambiguous situations, a decreased ability to hear and learn from others, exaggerating differences, as well as others (Steinke, 2019, p. 19). Being in a system rife with chronic anxiety is akin to standing amid gasoline fumes. A single spark can unleash a reaction that is grossly disproportionate to the spark itself.

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By the very definition of the word, a system is comprised of components that interact, are interrelated, and are interdependent. FST notes that human beings are in relational systems up to the societal level, hence Bowen's decision to add the concept of SEP into FST. In seeking the well-being of individuals and systems, FST focuses on the process and how well the system is functioning. Function can be understood on a continuum, from low-level functioning to high-level functioning. A system's function is measured by its ability to handle stressors and anxiety without succumbing to emotional forces and emotional reactivity.

Whether it be a family, a ministry, or an entire society, any system, when living in chronic anxiety and its resultant reactivity, will regress in its ability to function. Over time, the system will lose its capacity for principled approaches, non-reactive responses, and will deteriorate into behaviors and strategies that seek relief from the anxiety itself rather than addressing the presented issues. It becomes a spiral into unhealthy, unhelpful reactivity. The presenting issues are left aside, and the new issues of focus become relationally reactive behaviors. Bowen notes that "the same process is evolving in society" (Bowen, 1978, p. 386). With this understanding, it can be argued that we are in the midst of rather significant societal regression. Steinke describes that some of its manifestations are that anxiety undermines objectivity, differences are magnified, blaming is endemic, patience is an alien trait, and certainty is demanded (2019, p. 29). These manifestations have become all too familiar to ministry leaders.

Emotional Reactivity

"Emotional reactivity is our capacity to react to threats without thinking" (Creech, 2019, p. 17). It is reflexive and immediate. In a situation of immediate danger, acute reactivity can be beneficial. Grabbing a person and pulling them out of the path of a moving car, immediately calling 911 when a person begins to slurs his or her speech, and fleeing a scene when gunfire is heard are examples of reflexively reacting to an acute threat. Acute anxiety prompts action that could literally save a life. Anxiety causes physiological responses, including changes in heart rate, breathing, and visual focus. The effects of acute anxiety resolve relatively quickly as the crisis passes, and the individual's body returns to its resting state.

In contrast, chronic anxiety is a general and pervasive response to perceived threats, whether real or imagined. Although the same physiological responses are present, they do not resolve. A relational system in regression has often been operating at a chronically high level for a long time. The higher the level of anxiety, the lower the functioning level of the system. The higher the level of anxiety, the greater likelihood of ER revealed in such emotional behaviors. ER is almost reptilian in its instinctive responses and inability for

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paced, reasoned thoughtfulness. This phenomenon is also increasingly familiar to ministry leaders.

The Prevalence of Regressive SEP and ER

When considering the prevalence of SEP and ER, the examples are easy to find. A cursory look at any social media feed or news outlet is all one needs to do on any given day.

For example, on December 5, 2020, the Toronto Star published an article entitled, “Why talking about Covid-19’s ‘comorbidities’ is so controversial.” The article addressed the decision of the Alberta government to release statistics on the comorbidities occurring with COVID-19 deaths. It then described the SEP and ER experienced by a small-town, rural Saskatchewan pastor named Bradley Robertson. Robertson is one of many examples of ministry leaders negotiating ER and SEP provoked by an external event. The article states he “hears his fair share of community chatter about COVID-19—from those who fear the virus, to those who say it’s all blown out of proportion” (McKeen, 2020, n.p.). The article identified some public health officials’ mistrust of the public’s ability to handle comorbidity information, fearing that this information would be used by some to minimize the risk of COVID-19 to otherwise healthy people. There was a fear of reactivity, leading to an ER instinct to withhold information. This is an example of the regression of SEP.

Regressive SEP function and ER infect and appear in smaller local systems. Again, the examples are easy to find. At the time of writing, an acquaintance of the author, an ICU nurse, identified himself on social media as having tested positive for COVID-19. He assured his contacts his symptoms were manageable and that he would be okay. Before people even wished him well and good health, his comments section immediately became a debate about the level of threat from COVID-19, given that this individual was experiencing only flu-like symptoms. This nurse had to provide rebuttal with his accounts of what he had seen and treated in the ICU. A simple publication of information, though accurate, quickly devolved into reactivity. We see this reactivity experienced at a personal, provincial, and national level.

The Star article provided further evidence of the phenomenon impacting politicians and clergy.

When Lethbridge MP Rachel Harder shared a *Toronto Sun* column to her Facebook page, quoting the line about only 10 “otherwise healthy” COVID-19 deaths, the backlash was swift. Almost 1,000 comments followed the article, and most appeared to be people criticizing the MP for lack of sensitivity toward those hundreds with comorbidities who died in her province... ‘At the end of the day, I’m simply posting an article that

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presents to the Canadian public the stats,' Harder told the *Star*. (McKeen, 2020, n.p.)

In a regressive, reactive system, even statistics are no longer neutral; instead, they raise issues about sensitivity, compassion, and minimizing or diminishing death. In this same article, the *Toronto Star* asked, "Is it dangerous to focus on comorbidities?" (McKeen, 2020, n.p.). "Dangerous" is a word that suggests a threat. Thereby, a threat increases anxiety and reactivity, decreasing the likelihood of helpful and strategic conversation about how best to use neutral information until given nuance. How many ministry leaders have seen an issue quickly and angrily devolve into what was said, how it was said, and who said it?

ER behavior has become normalized and even monetized. In the recent Netflix documentary *The Social Dilemma*, former social media executives reveal how their designs intentionally utilize behavioral psychology to create reactivity in users. ER keeps users on-screen. Unforeseen implications are feeding the regression of SEP and increasing ER.

In this documentary, Tristan Harris, a former design ethicist for Google, describes the degeneration of emotional and relational functioning that social media apps are causing.

We're training and conditioning a whole new generation of people . . . that when we are uncomfortable or lonely or uncertain or afraid, we have a digital pacifier for ourselves that is kind of atrophying our own ability to deal with that. (Rhodes, 2020, 43:30)

Social media apps and news media leverage ER to draw and hold attention because in the current culture, capturing attention and holding it has monetary value. In the words of Steinke, "Stirring up reactivity keeps them riveted" (2019, p. 12). We are becoming a society that has within it structured, intentional patterns of communication that keep us at heightened anxiety and reactivity. For example, the weather channel does not just report a winter storm. It reports "the storm of the century." It does not report a hurricane. It reports a "climate bomb." These methods work, and through their prevalence, have diminished the abilities and skills for careful, reasoned, and calm second thought, thus affecting individuals, families, ministries, and society.

Harris notes the societal regression from his vantage point as a social media designer. He reflects on conversations he has had as to when we will need to worry about artificial intelligence overriding human strengths. Yet, he identifies a greater concern: social media apps have already overridden us in our weakness.

There's this much earlier moment . . . when technology exceeds and overwhelms human weaknesses. This point being crossed is at the root of addic-

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tion, polarization, radicalization, outrage-ification, vanity-ification, the entire thing. This is overpowering human nature, and this is checkmate on humanity. (Rhodes, 2020, 53:40)

Finding accurate information that has not been catastrophized or uses language as an accelerant, entering into thoughtful, respectful dialogue with a person with a differing view, listening to others, and working with facts instead of emotional forces are becoming increasingly rare. The increased pervasiveness and power of regressive SEP and ER is a ministry leader's daily context and continuing challenge.

Theological Perspective

While this challenge is currently heightened, it is not new; thus, ministry leaders are not without faith resources. For the Christian ministry leader, there are many examples of regressive SEP and ER in the Bible, providing a faith basis for understanding what FST delineates. Perhaps the overarching theme of Christian Scripture is the conflict between a calm trust and faith in God and humanity's reactive, anxious nature. Story after story provides contrast between a life of obedient faith and that of a short-sighted reaction. Using the breadth of biblical witness, from Pentateuch to Gospel to Epistle, the Christian ministry leader has a Scriptural framework of example and support for the challenges of SEP and ER.

The Wilderness Regression of SEP in Numbers 14

When Moses encountered God at the burning bush on Mount Sinai, God declared:

I have surely seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt and have heard their cry because of their taskmasters. I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey. (Ex. 3:7–8, ESV)

In Numbers 10, the Israelites set out for the final portion of their journey to the promised land. It should have been a time of hope, given God's promise and faithfulness—a time of confidence. But change prompts anxiety, and anxiety prompts reactivity. Despite the promise and God's presence, the people complained about their hardships. They cried out to Moses and infected one another with ER and experienced regressive SEP.

And the people of Israel also wept again and said, "Oh that we had meat to eat! We remember the fish we ate in Egypt that cost nothing, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic. But now

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our strength is dried up, and there is nothing at all but this manna to look at.” . . . Moses heard the people weeping throughout their clans, everyone at the door of his tent. (Num. 11:4–6, ESV)

Moses himself was infected with reactivity, blaming God for the situation.

Moses said to the Lord, “Why have you dealt ill with your servant? And why have I not found favor in your sight, that you lay the burden of all this people on me? Did I conceive all this people? Did I give them birth, that you should say to me, ‘Carry them in your bosom, as a nurse carries a nursing child,’ to the land that you swore to give their fathers? Where am I to get meat to give to all this people? For they weep before me and say, ‘Give us meat, that we may eat.’ I am not able to carry all this people alone; the burden is too heavy for me. If you will treat me like this, kill me at once, if I find favor in your sight, that I may not see my wretchedness.” (Num. 11:11–15, ESV)

Moses’s sister, Miriam, and his brother, Aaron, were so infected with reactivity that they spoke against Moses for having a foreign wife, which was previously a nonissue. However, in this context, it became a flashpoint in a context of regression.

Moses sent spies into the land of Canaan. Ten of twelve came back anxious.

“ . . . The people who dwell in the land are strong, and the cities are fortified and very large. And besides, we saw the descendants of Anak there. . . . We seemed to ourselves like grasshoppers, and so we seemed to them.” (Num. 13:28, 33, ESV)

The Israelites raised their voices, wept aloud, and grumbled against Moses and Aaron. “Would that we had died in the land of Egypt! Or would that we had died in this wilderness. . . . Would it not be better for us to go back to Egypt?” (Num. 14:2, 3, ESV).

These people of God, who had witnessed the plagues in Egypt, who were delivered to freedom, who had crossed the Red Sea, who had been given manna and quail in the wilderness, who had been led by a pillar of cloud and fire, were suddenly undone by anxiety. Unable to dwell within the promise of God or the assurance of God’s ongoing faithfulness, their anxiety and reactivity grew to the point of suggesting a return to slavery rather than stepping forward to God’s promised land. God’s law was ignored, panic took hold, behavior deteriorated, and faith evaporated. The Israelites forfeited their entry to the promised land and were consigned to forty years in the wilderness. Their reactive behavior and the subsequent SEP regression prevented them from moving forward. Again, many ministry leaders will recognize the phenomenon—it isn’t new.

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Jesus's Non-Reactive Presence

By way of contrast, in Jesus, we are given a picture of what a well-functioning, non-reactive person looks like. Even a cursory review of the Gospels reveals Jesus as mindful, grounded, calm, and well-differentiated. At the outset of his ministry, Satan tempted Jesus in the desert. Henri Nouwen identifies the three temptations as a temptation to be relevant (“turn these stones to bread”), a temptation to be spectacular (“throw yourself from the highest point of the temple”), and a temptation to be powerful (“all the kingdoms will be yours”) (Nouwen, 1989, p. 71). These are the temptations of an anxious person. They are temptations of a person who asks, “Am I needed? Am I being noticed? Am I effective?” They are temptations that would have one submit internal control to the tempter by following the tempter’s lead. By resting into the word of God, the reliability of God, and keeping Himself prioritized on God, Jesus kept not only His head but His heart and His soul in check.

Jesus had His intentions and methods repeatedly confronted, questioned, and challenged. Yet, He did not succumb to the anxiety, reactivity, or pressure of others. In every encounter, Jesus kept His focus, addressed the issue presented, or leveraged the conversation to a more important issue. He could confront, challenge, comfort, teach, be compassionate, and serve, all without becoming reactive. This pattern can be seen in Jesus throughout the Gospels.

Matthew 12 contains a quick succession of such encounters. When Jesus’s disciples picked grain on the Sabbath and were accused by Pharisees of doing what was unlawful on the Sabbath, Jesus essentially told them, “Something greater than the temple is here.” In the synagogue, again on the Sabbath, Jesus healed the man with a shriveled hand and asked, “Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?” (Matt. 12:10, ESV). The Pharisees began plotting to kill Him, yet He continued with His ministry. While talking to the crowd, Jesus’s mother and brothers stood outside, wanting to speak with Him. When someone made Jesus aware of this, He responded, “Whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother” (Matt. 12:50, ESV). Jesus’s interactions provide a sharp contrast to the anxiety and reactivity of the Israelites in the wilderness. The anxiety and reactivity of others did not infect His ministry. The pressure and anxiety of others did not claim His identity or ministry. This is the picture of differentiation.

In the Gospel of John, as Jesus prepared to wash His disciples’ feet, a task considered too menial for even household slaves, John writes this of Jesus:

Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into His hands, and that He had come from God and was going back to God, rose from supper. He laid aside His outer garments, and taking a towel, tied it around His waist. Then He poured water into a basin and began to wash the dis-

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ciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was wrapped around Him. (John 13:3–5, ESV)

These actions epitomize the idea of Christian leadership as service and the Christian leader as servant. However, it is not the actions alone that are significant, but that they are actions that arise from One who was unthreatened, grounded, calm, purposeful, focused, and perfectly well-differentiated.

The Antidote of 1 Corinthians 13

The apostle Paul wrote to a church in Corinth struggling with polarity, immorality, lawsuits within the church, and fights regarding worship practice and doctrine. In short, he wrote to a church that was reactive and regressing. While he addressed the list as mentioned above in particular ways, he added the statement, “I will show you a still more excellent way” (1 Cor. 12:31b, ESV). That “way” is agape love.

Paul taught that love supersedes the gift of tongues, prophecy, knowledge, faith, generosity, and austerity. Love contradicts classic reactive behaviors: envying, boasting, pride, dishonoring others, self-seeking behavior, becoming easily angered, scorekeeping, and delighting in evil. In contrast to reactivity, love is patient, kind, protective, trusts, hopes, perseveres, and never fails. Paul’s description of agape love is also a prescription; it is the most excellent way, a biblical mandate, and an antidote to the regressive control of ER.

The biblical witness to the FST concepts of SEP and ER is broad and infinitely rich. With both positive and negative examples, to calls to faith and trust, to the life of Christ and the teachings of Paul, the contemporary ministry leader has a solid biblical and theological base from which to show that while societal regression and emotional reactivity are part of the human experience, they are not hopelessly so. The Christian is called to calm, confident faith.

The Contemporary Ministry Leader’s Response

Given the pervasiveness and intensity of the regression of SEP and heightening of ER, it would be understandable for a ministry leader to feel helpless in the storms these phenomena cause. Fortunately, there is an accessible path forward, a path Creech (2019) labels “third way leadership” (p. 33). There is an abundance—arguably an overabundance—of material written about leadership. Most of these resources focus on leadership principles and techniques. However, in a regressive, reactive system buffeted by emotional forces, principles and techniques are quickly jettisoned as people grab for the immediate, instinctive, and reactive behaviors. Third way leadership is not a principle or technique. It is the growth and development of the leader her- or himself into emotional maturity characterized by self-awareness, differentiation, non-anx-

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ious presence, and objectivity. There is consensus amongst family systems theorists that the emotional maturity of the leader is the greatest factor in the functioning of a system. “Success has to do with a pastor’s level of emotional maturity” (Richardson, 2005, p. 2); “A system cannot rise above the maturity of its leaders” (Steinke, 2019, p. 88). “It is the transforming person, not the clever person with a bag of tricks, who affects the functioning of the system for the better” (Herrington, Taylor, & Creech, 2020, p. 62). Ministry leaders can be encouraged that it is within their capacity to bring significantly greater health into the systems of which they are a part through their own growth in emotional maturity. Following are features that can help a ministry leader along the third way of leadership.

Differentiation of Self

Differentiation is a fundamental concept within FST. It refers to an individual’s “capacity to become oneself out of oneself, with minimum reactivity to the positions or reactivity of others” (Friedman, 2007, p. 183). It is being one’s own person but still in genuine connection with others. John Beck (2018) provides a helpful summary of the categories Friedman used to describe the self-differentiated person. She or he is one “who (1) manages boundaries, (2) self-regulates, (3) stays calm in the face of anxiety (coming either from either internal or external sources), and (4) sets goals and a direction in life” (p. 131). A well-differentiated leader “is less likely to become lost in anxious emotional processes swirling about . . . [and] can manage his or her own reactivity to the automatic reactivity of others” (Friedman, 2007, p. 14). A ministry leader who commits to becoming well-differentiated will be less vulnerable to regressive SEP and ER in the system.

Non-Anxious Presence

Friedman (2007) notes, “Leaders function as the immune system of their institutions” (p. 17). Ministry leaders infect the system with either reactivity or calm. With the management of oneself, a leader can subdue emotional reactivity and regression and orient a system away from emotional forces back to original presenting issues. The goal of a ministry leader is to be the least anxious person in the room (Creech, 2019, p. 39) and to bring calm so that principles and objectivity can lead to decision-making. Steinke provides a list of how a nonanxious presence should manifest in situations that typically become reactive. He suggests in crisis, move toward calm; in bewilderment, move toward focus; in stagnancy, move toward challenge; in a new situation, move toward change (Steinke, 2019, p. 53). Paying attention and having self-awareness of one’s own reactivity, taking the time to reflect and consider the

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“how” and “what” of the system before responding, and attempting to understand the emotional forces at work in a system are all strategies that will assist ministry leaders in finding the third way leadership path. Ministry leaders who grow into well-differentiated, non-anxious, calm leaders who “think systems and watch process” (Creech, 2019, p. 57) will reduce the reactivity of the system in which they find themselves; with reduced reactivity, they have a greater opportunity for healthier functioning in the system of which they are a part.

Spiritual Disciplines

Classic spiritual disciplines can support differentiation, non-anxious presence, calm, and reflective thinking. Solitude and silence move one away from reactivity to reflection. Intercessory prayer encourages emotional connection to others. Fasting teaches the discipline of managing physiological urges. Scripture study facilitates confident knowledge of God’s faithfulness, bringing trust when anxiety is high.

Corporate spiritual disciplines such as worship and celebration can serve the system, lifting attention away from reactive behaviors to the higher horizon of honoring and celebrating God’s goodness, faithfulness, and grace. They have the potential to give a necessary pause, slow reactions, and calm the system.

FST readily aligns with the ancient practices of the Christian faith. Faced with regressive SER and ER, ministry leaders can find strength and guidance from the spiritual disciplines in two ways: first, to reduce their own personal anxiety and reactivity, and second, to reset a system that has become anxious and reactive.

Conclusion

Examples of SEP regression and ER are increasingly prevalent and intense in the contemporary ministry context. Regressive SEP and ER have infected families, social organizations, the media, social media, and governments. They have infected ministry contexts and ministry leaders. They are not new, having been present since biblical times. However, we are in a season in which they have grown in prevalence and have become an unavoidable, detrimental emotional force. The challenge before contemporary ministry leaders is to understand how regressive SEP and ER impact and influence their ministries so that they or their systems are not caught and overturned in the storms that come. Growing into well-differentiated, non-anxious, spiritually disciplined leaders who are self-aware, emotionally mature, and emotionally connected to their system offers a third way of leadership. This way is, and will continue to be, a primary challenge and opportunity for the contemporary ministry leader to understand and implement.

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