

## **“Your Church Family on the Road to Missional and Healthy”**

Based on what the Bible tells us about the church as the Body of Christ and the Family of God, leaders are finding insight and understanding about Compelling Christian Community through the study of what has been called Family Systems thinking. The Family Systems approach (sometimes known as Bowen Family Systems Theory) helps churches along the Vitality Pathway at several points. Here are three examples:

**1. Developing your Behavioral Covenant.** How do we unpack the scriptures about what makes for healthy community? We know that being a lone ranger is a bad thing, but is it possible to be too close? Family Systems offers a lens for exploring distance. In a church where individual ideas are minimized for the sake of unity at all costs, a good Behavioral Covenant can help give individuals a constructive voice. If we are used to speaking for one another or about one another and not to one another, we don't help each other take responsibility for our own actions, words and attitudes. The Family Systems approach outlines what a healthy self looks like and can help us craft a Behavioral Covenant that encourages connections that balance freedom in Christ and responsibility to the Body.

**2. Taking the PULSE instrument and working with your results.** Data is helpful, but data is often connected with anxiety, and anxiety shuts down the very parts of our brains that should be used when we are working with new information and challenges, e.g. thinking, reflecting, nurturing, and creating. While we work with PULSE results, the Family Systems framework shows how anxiety is contagious and how the peace of Christ can be equally contagious, even when we are tempted to find a quick fix or a scapegoat. Getting a handle on how our church family handles anxiety historically can help individuals to function better in the middle of tough discussions, and last longer in leadership. In fact, it looks a lot like what Paul says in 1 Corinthians 13 about “putting away childish things.”

**3. EPIC** When the time comes to roll out a something new, criticism - through the Family Systems lens - is inevitable and can even be a sign of health. While our automatic emotional response is to get locked into discussions aimed at fixing or dismissing detractors, the Family Systems approach tries to keep the whole system in view and incubates a “non-anxious presence” that is able to stay in touch, stay on track, and develop emotional resilience, even in times of disequilibrium.

### **It's important to remember that the Family Systems approach-**

-is not a set of techniques, terms and methodologies, but a way of thinking that can help individuals function better.

-doesn't have to be “adopted” by the whole church. Like the leaven in a loaf in Jesus' parable, a few leaders who raise their basic level of functioning have the potential to influence the whole church/system.

- is not a magic wand, but offers hope for churches, pastors and leaders that feel stuck in unhealthy patterns.

-takes the long view.

Besides *Compelling Christian Community*, other Healthy Missional Markers that can be strengthened by Family Systems thinking are *Culture of Godly Leadership* and *Fruitful Organizational Structures*.

If you're ready to learn about Family Systems thinking as a part of your church's journey to healthy and missional, here are some resources and groups to consider:

### **Books**

Robert Creech, Jim Herrington, Trisha Taylor, *The Leader's Journey*, Jossey Bass 2003

Edwin H. Friedman, *Failure of Nerve: Leadership in the Age of the Quick Fix*, Seabury Books, 2007

Roberta M. Gilbert, *Extraordinary Leadership: Thinking Systems, Making a Difference*, Leading Systems Press, 2006.

Margaret J. Marcuson, *Leaders Who Last*, Seabury Books, 2009.

Peter L. Steinke, *Congregational Leadership in Anxious Times*, The Alban Institute, 2006

### **Organizations**

Lombard Mennonite Peace Center [www.lmpeacecenter.org](http://www.lmpeacecenter.org)

Covenant Pastor Don Holmertz has studied and received extensive training in Family Systems and its relationship to congregational leadership and Christian spirituality for over 25 years. He has developed a workshop called "Healthy Me/Healthy We" which he has led for several groups of pastors and lay leaders. His approach finds numerous dynamic connections between the Bible, Family Systems principles and the Vitality Pathway. Don is available to consult with leaders and facilitate for a single church or clusters of churches, adapting his material based on scope, setting and wherever you are on the Pathway. He also works alongside your Conference Director of Congregational Vitality. Contact Don at [dholmertz@gmail.com](mailto:dholmertz@gmail.com) or 815-985-6634.