

Healthy Congregations Develop Generous People

by THE REVEREND FRED D. MILLIGAN JR.

So much of what is written about stewardship focuses on individual response to the call of Christ to be generous with the gifts we are given. And yet, we know that the overall health of a congregation affects those individual decisions. When people feel good about their experience in a congregation, they are more likely to respond with gratitude by supporting their congregation financially. When there are issues such as divisive conflict, lack of consensus about vision and direction or malfeasance on the part of those entrusted with the church's funds, giving goes down.

This might be merely a matter of individuals voting with their pocket books, but Bowen Family Systems thinkers would argue that it is more than that. Psychiatrist Murray Bowen discovered how the treatment of schizophrenics was tied to the health of the patient's family as a whole. He developed these concepts in some ways that I am finding extremely helpful in my thinking about financial stewardship in the congregation.

Until the relationship system of the congregation is brought to a higher level of functioning, or healing, any progress in generosity for individuals within the system will be minimal, leading to frustration and burnout of those who lead our congregational efforts to encourage increased financial stewardship.

According to Bowen theory, this is attributable to the ways anxiety is handled in relationships and groups. We could say that anxiety is passed along like a *hot potato* until it rests with one individual who unconsciously accepts the burden of letting it affect their lives in often-unhealthy ways. In financial stewardship terms this would be a lack of generosity. In other words, anxiety and fear grips a whole system and is then manifested in the stinginess of individuals within the system.

In the book, "Lifesigns," the late Henri Nouwen explores his conviction that most of us spend most of our lives living in what he refers to as the *house of fear*. In using this image of a house, Nouwen is implicitly acknowledging that the fear/anxiety of individuals is a manifestation of dwelling within a system that is larger than any one person.

He writes: "Though we think of ourselves as followers of Jesus, we are often seduced by the fearful questions the world presents to us. Without fully realizing it, we become anxious, nervous, worrying people caught in the questions of survival; our own survival, the survival of our families, friends and colleagues, the survival of our church, our country and our world.

"Once these fearful survival questions become the guiding questions of our lives, we tend to dismiss words spoken from the *house of love* as unrealistic, romantic, sentimental, pious or just useless."

When love is offered as an alternative to fear we say: Yes, yes, that sounds beautiful, but... "The but reveals how much we live in the grip of the world, a world which calls Christians naïve and raises realistic questions: 'Yes, but what if you grow old and there is nobody to help you? Yes, but what if you lose your job and you have no money to take care of yourself and your family? Yes, but what if refugees come to this country by the millions and disrupt the ways we have been living for so long? Yes, but...'"

Nouwen recalls the promise of scripture that "perfect love casts out fear" (1 John 4:18). He then proposes suggestions for moving out of the house of fear and into the house of love. While the house imagery is certainly a metaphor for an individual's spiritual condition, it can also refer to the spiritual condition of an entire congregation that can either inhibit or enhance our spiritual growth.

The usefulness of Bowen theory is that it helps us realize that if we direct all our efforts toward inspiring individuals toward greater generosity without also taking action to remove the cause of anxiety in the system or addressing the reasons they accept the burden of serving as the release valve for the church's dysfunction, then little long term progress will be made in increasing the generosity of either these individuals or the congregation as a whole.

When, however, we begin to treat individuals in the church, not as discrete and isolated entities but as parts of a larger system, we begin to see how change in one person's capacity to manage anxiety in relationship to others sends ripples throughout the entire system. Change in an individual can impact on the whole system just as the whole system can impact the individual. As my colleague, Dick Craft puts it, "it is like touching a spider web in one place and seeing the whole thing vibrate."

This process of individual change in capacity to manage system anxiety is called *differentiation of self*. This means gaining clarity about my personal boundaries so that I know what I feel and think apart from the relationship pressures of those around me. In his workshop titled "Healthy Congregations Develop Generous People," Peter L. Steinke calls stewardship "close to the concept of differentiation of self."

He says: "The first thing one must manage or hold in trust is oneself.... To be a self is to be accountable for the well being of one's own creaturehood.... The concept of differentiation of self captures what theology claims – we are stewards, responsible managers of self in relation to others, neither too dependent on others nor too distant from them."

When we are clear about where we begin and end within the context of our relationships, we are less apt to accept the anxiety of others as our own. By doing this, we cease being part of the problem of anxiety in the church and begin becoming part of the solution. We serve as *dampening rods* in the anxiety chain-reaction that leads many congregations toward the fear-based scarcity mentality and away from the faith- and love-based mentality of abundance. Edwin Friedman calls this maintaining a *non-anxious presence*.

But how is this kind of self-differentiated non-anxious presence achieved? By achieving greater clarity about who we are and what we believe in the context of our relationship pressures of family and church. Bob Williamson, a staff member at the Lombard Mennonite Peace Center has developed a process that attempts to help participants accomplish this. He calls it the *Here I Stand* process. While it does not limit the focus to money and possessions, it could assist participants in achieving the non-anxious presence that comes through greater differentiation of self.

Another process was developed by Robert Hoffman (see the 2006 issue of Giving magazine) while serving for several years as a stewardship consultant. Called *Journey Into Freedom*, Hoffman's process was used with groups of pastors, who over a period of several weeks or months, delved into something he calls a *money genogram*. His money genogram is a combination of the money autobiography first introduced by Elizabeth O'Conner some years ago and the Family Systems diagram used to chart one's family dynamics. Hoffman uses the money genogram to trace the ways money and possessions have been dealt with over the generations within one's family.

Finally, another concept from Bowen theory that holds some promise for our thinking about stewardship is the idea of reciprocity in relationships. Bowen found that within the dynamics of the family system, one member's over-functioning would elicit another member's under-functioning.

Most pastors and stewardship committee chairs are familiar with the 80/20 rule. In fact it is not a rule at all but rather the experience of most voluntary group experience that 80 percent of the members do only 20 percent of the work while 20 percent of the members do 80 percent of the work and contribute 80 percent of the funds to cover organizational expenses. Family Systems thinking prods us to ask, "Could it be that the 80/20 rule only

applies because the 20 percent continue to over-function in ways that are often unhealthy to themselves failing to challenge the 80 percent to grow into the generous people God intends?"

Bowen theory would predict that a refusal of the 20 percent to continue to carry out their part of this bargain would lead to a crisis. This crisis would then be the first step toward real change on the part of the 80 percent. However, as one pastor with whom I discussed this problem correctly concluded, such a crisis could, if not handled very intentionally, result in the pastor being fired so as to reestablish the old pattern with which everyone is comfortable.

A perhaps less dangerous option for the leadership might be to challenge the entire congregation with a vision for ministry that is large enough that the 20 percent can no longer achieve it without a more substantial contribution from the 80 percent. What would it take to make this happen? What does our resistance to doing it say about our own congregation's stewardship practices? Vision?

These are just a few of the ways in which understanding the church's financial stewardship from the Bowen Family Systems perspective can help us to live less in the house of fear and more in the house of love -- to cultivate increased generosity by recognizing the presence of our cloud of witnesses.

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For further reading:

Steinke, Peter L., *How Your Church Family Works: Understanding Congregations as Emotional Systems*, The Alban Institute, 1993, 2002.

Nouwen, Henri, *Lifesigns: Intimacy, Fecundity, and Ecstasy in Christian Perspective*, Doubleday Image Book, 1986, reprint, 2003.

Joiner, Donald W., *Creating a Climate for Giving*, Discipleship Resources, 2001

Miller, Jeffrey A.; *The Anxious Organization: Why Smart Companies Do Dumb Things*, Facts on Demand Press, 2002