

JOURNEYING THROUGH TRANSITION:
A CASE STUDY IN THE APPLICATION OF
BOWEN FAMILY SYSTEMS THEORY FOR PARISH MINISTRY

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ABSTRACT

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Bowen Family Systems Theory (FST) provides a perspective to help leaders responsibly enable change in their faith communities. This case study considers how FST can characterize the emotional reactivity of a three church parish leading to an appreciation of multigenerational projection of anxiety in a worshipping community. The concept of projected anxiety across several generations was pivotal to understanding how past events continue to have a subtle but lasting effect on the parish's present emotional response to anxiety.

Each community of faith has its own story, and this is the story of an unexceptional little parish in regional Victoria, in which something remarkable was achieved that people doubted could ever happen. The Vicar led a change project that broke a twenty-year decision impasse and enabled the parish's worshipping arrangements to be updated to create a unified identity. After time in transition, the parish has accepted the changes and displays hopeful signs of reinvigoration. Throughout the project, anxiety related to the changes was managed using FST principles, and as a result, the incidence of observed anxious behavior was low. These principles were: remain clear on the plans and desired outcome; remain curious; be responsible for one's anxiety, and remain in

contact with the parishioners. It was noted that the possession of significant emotional maturity is a critical factor required by leaders for the successful implementation of change as there is inevitably some sabotage to be overcome before the project can be considered complete.

The perspective provided by FST permitted the leader to access a new sense of forgiveness for those who caused hurt through their anxious reactivity triggered by a change in the church family system. Appreciation of the parish narrative enabled the leader to make responsible decisions to support the parishioners. FST was applied to enhance the self-differentiation of the leader. When a self-differentiated leader manages their response to anxiety, they can instead focus their energy on leading their community and bringing about proposed change while remaining in contact with the group. This paper provides a model for other faith communities when embarking on their significant changes.

DEDICATION

*God did not give us a spirit of cowardice
but a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline.*

May we rekindle the gift of God within us.

Amen. (From 2 Tim. 1:6–7¹)

To David, my guiding light.

NOTE: Memory can be a subjective thing, and the author begs the indulgence of the parish if her recollection of some events varies slightly from the recollections of others.

¹ The Anglican Church of Australia, *A Prayer Book for Australia* (Mulgrave, Victoria, Australia: Broughton Publishing, 1995).

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INTRODUCTION

When the current Vicar, Elizabeth Breakey, joined the Bellarine Gateway Anglican Parish in 2015, there were three churches within the parish boundaries. For twenty years, the parish had struggled to decide on the future of the smallest, poorly maintained third church, which was only a short drive from the well-resourced second church. The parish anxiety had become chronic, and there was no energy left for any meaningful or sustained mission work. With the parish council's support and Family Systems Theory (FST) principles, the Vicar led a change project that broke the impasse, resulted in the third church being closed, and enabled the whole parish's worshipping arrangements to be updated to create a more unified identity. The result was the transition from a chronically anxious parish to one that accepted the changes and displayed hopeful signs of reinvigoration. This paper's thesis is that in a time of transition, a responsible leader can mitigate anxiety so that the parishioners can accept the change.

Anecdotally, church leaders have feared that making significant changes in a parish community would result in conflict, splits, or general dysfunction and warn others that this is not for the faint-hearted. This fear has caused many leaders to falter before a change has even commenced, and instead, they have settled for leading unwieldy and sometimes increasingly dysfunctional parishes that they do not dare to alter. Accordingly, when the Vicar announced the plans to reorganize this parish, her colleagues' response was doubtful, but on the contrary, she felt hopeful and inspired. The Vicar decided to use FST to consider the parish narrative to identify their patterns of anxious reactivity when faced with disruption to everyday parish life. Subsequently, the same FST principles were applied to mitigate the inevitable anxieties the proposed changes would generate.

Edwin H. Friedman, congregational rabbi, and family therapist, suggests that a faith community functions like a family system or an interconnected emotional system. In a fashion similar to Dr. Bowen's observations in anxious families, he observed that "clergy and congregations were being led by the most dysfunctional members"¹ of the parishes. Chapter one explores how a parish functions more like a family system than as a family, which lays the groundwork for applying FST to the parish in this research. In chapter two, extending the family system analogy further than is commonly found in FST literature, the multi-center parish narrative is reconsidered in terms of a balanced family system with the different congregations as siblings and their constituent parishioners as cousins. The theory's application provided some new perspectives on critical moments in parish history and aided in understanding and predicting how the parish would respond to the stress of change in the present time.

Some of the FST principles were employed to focus more on pastoral caring for the parishioners through the changes. For as Friedman states, the challenge for clergy is "not to change their congregations or their techniques of leadership, but to alter their way of being a leader."² Changing the attitude towards leadership to become a more responsible leader is the topic of chapter three. The chapter recounts how the parish's anxiety was mitigated during the transition by following principles that changed the leader's attitude and approach. Two particular examples demonstrate how the responsible actions of the leader can make a difference to the parish. Turning to the parish members,

¹ Edwin H Friedman, *Generation to Generation: Family Process in Church and Synagogue*, Kindle Edition ed. (USA: The Guildford Press, 2011; repr., 2011), p2.

² Friedman, p 2.

chapter four reflects on the qualitative research results to discern whether the parishioners accepted the change by their responses and subsequent actions.

This project considers how leaders can perform their role responsibly, not succumbing to the stresses and strains present during a time of change. This case study considers the application of Bowen Family Systems to a parish in a time of change, but it is by no means the only method that leaders can use to find a way to understand the motivations and actions of the people that they lead. FST is an accessible theory, which can easily be translated or explained to community members by connecting with recognizable anxious experiences. The research results showed that people are instinctively aware of how anxiety shapes and distorts a community, even if they have not previously had the vocabulary to name it. This case study illustrates how to use FST to identify the disruptive effects of change and to appreciate how the personal changes motivated by the same theory lead to more responsible leadership, resulting in a manageable level of anxiety within the family system and the best opportunity for the change to be successfully accepted.

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCING FAMILY SYSTEMS THEORY IN A COMMUNITY OF FAITH

The concept of a faith community defining itself as a family is a fundamental element of Christian identity when Christians regard each other as beloved children of God (Eph. 5:1, 1John 3:2, Gal. 3:26, NRSV). Often faith communities, church congregations, or parishes are referred to as a family, and it is critical for this paper's purpose to clarify what is implied by family and family systems. This chapter discusses how a faith group can be understood as a family system and then introduces Bowen Family Systems Theory (FST) concepts. However, this paper does not aim to present an exhaustive exposition of FST, just the concepts pertinent to this case study. FST is a means by which a leader can change how they respond to anxiety, become a more responsible leader, use it as a lens to approach the parish narrative, and gain a deeper understanding of how a family system responds to situations of change.

UNDERSTANDING A PARISH AS A FAMILY SYSTEM

This section explores an early Christian expression of the family to consider whether the term 'family system' would serve the case study better than trying to hold in tension two understandings of the term 'family.' Contemporary Christians often refer to their church as a big family, which is church code for indicating that they consider their congregation to be a supportive or friendly environment, or perhaps a place where children will be welcome. It is an aspirational catch-all laden with hopes and dreams, for it is evident that church 'family' is not a replica of the relationships individuals experience in their primary or personal family group. Nevertheless, there is a strength in

the term that has endured since the earliest spread of Christianity. The Gospel of Mark has an account of Jesus turning from his family's summons towards those who believed in his teachings. Jesus described his followers who actively believed in God as his family (Mark 3:34, 35) when he turned to the gathered group and declared that whoever did the will of his father in heaven was "his brother and sister and mother." (Matt. 12:49, 50) In his epistle to the church in Galatia, St Paul develops this idea of the family further that the new believers were baptized into Christ and were "all children of God through faith." (Gal. 3:26-29) They became adopted heirs of the covenant that God gave to Abraham, and nothing else mattered, not their gender, their ethnicity, their social standing, just this – that they believed in God and Jesus had received them into the family of Christ (Gal. 3:26-29). Christians believe that through their baptism, they join God's family of faith in Jesus Christ.

In that remarkable time after the Day of Pentecost, the apostles and gathered believers formed a new faith family. The concepts of sharing resources, caring for each other, and eating together as though brothers and sisters in a family were not new but would have strengthened and supported the new believers' faith. Despite the inherent dangers of publicly demonstrating their belief in Christ, they began to meet in increasing numbers in the temple in Jerusalem (Acts 2:44-47). It must have been exhilarating, for, through their faith, they were accepted into the family of God. This close and intimate way of co-existing may have contributed to the early church's growth, gathering some unlikely mixtures of people within them.

Contemporary Western family structures, though, are individual, diverse, and complex. A modern family's function is difficult to generalize, but individual family

members could expect to receive, in one degree or another, support, safety, sustenance, intimacy, and even love. The difference between the ancient church family and contemporary understanding of a domestic family may cause tension in a parishioner's expectations. Unless parishioners can use the same word for two different meanings, it would be better to use a more appropriate phrase that effectively describes the function of a congregation.

There are some alternatives: instead of 'family,' the social science term 'family system' or the Christian term 'Body of Christ' could be used to describe how a church congregation functions as a group. Bowen suggested that a family group can be described as a system when "a change in one part of the system is followed by a compensatory change in other parts of the system."¹ A family system is defined as a group in which each member of the family system is connected and dependent upon each other's actions in a way that can seem quite mysterious. Often, the connections are experienced by their effect rather than by an awareness of the connection. It is evident that "family interactions are extraordinarily complex and deep."² However, it remains that a family system is a social construct and does not capture the deeper spiritual associations implied in the term 'Body of Christ.'

The implication in the term of 'Body of Christ' is of a gathered group of Christians filled with the Holy Spirit and charged by Christ to provide mutual service and love. Reading the Epistles sent to members of the early church for instruction, correction,

¹ Murray Bowen, *Family Therapy in Clinical Practice* (Oxford, UK: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc, 2004), p154.

² Friedman, p 130.

and encouragement, there are only a few references to the term ‘family’ as an analogy for the early church. In contrast, St Paul and the other writers made extensive use of the term ‘Body of Christ.’(Rom.12:4, Eph. 4:11-16)³ Paul writes in Romans, “For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another.” (Rom. 12:4)

At its most basic level, the Body of Christ is an analogy for an emotional system, with each member interconnected and interdependent upon each other, which is very similar in function to a family system. The text in Romans describes an image of the diverse gathering of people who pray, worship God, and share their lives.

Interconnectedness and even interdependency are family system group characteristics that continue across the ages. In the letter to the community in Ephesus, a descriptive passage paints an image of church congregations still familiar today(Eph. 4:11-16⁴). It describes people in the group with different roles, gifts, ministries, and levels of responsibility and what unites them is their faith in Christ, the Son of God, not their homogeneity or social connections. It hints at people’s tendency to group, be swept up by persuasive arguments, and the possibilities of suffering at the hands of people plotting or

³ Rom.12:4, Eph. 4:11-16 refer to the early gathered believers as the Body of Christ.

⁴ **Eph. 4:11-16** : The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, ¹²to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, ¹³until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ. ¹⁴We must no longer be children, tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine, by people’s trickery, by their craftiness in deceitful scheming. ¹⁵But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, ¹⁶from whom the whole body, joined and knitted together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body’s growth in building itself up in love.

scheming within the group. To one extent or another, most contemporary faith communities have undercurrents of dissatisfaction and moments of conflict. It does not stop them from worshipping God nor cause them to be so anxious that the church fails to function, but it can make visiting a new church a perplexing or uncomfortable experience when the ‘family’ turns out to have a few underlying issues.

There are common elements to every group identifying as being part of the Body of Christ. Christ is always the *Head of the Body*, and the members are closely connected, joined tightly “by every ligament with which it is equipped.” (Eph. 4:16) This Body of Christ is not just a social gathering of people who rather like Jesus, nor a co-operative of Christians working and praying together. This group has a supernatural quality, or as Craig Nesson puts it, “this community is not entirely of human origin but also of divine origin.”⁵ Some people would find it difficult to conceive that something as imperfect or flawed as a regular Sunday congregation could be considered divine, but that is the gift and responsibility Christians have received from God. That together, they are blessed to be so much more than their individual parts. Nesson suggests that through the liturgy of the church, the gathered believers as one group become the embodiment of Jesus Christ.

“confessing sin and receiving absolution, praising God, attending to God’s Word above all things, praying for the things of God, sharing the peace of God, and partaking of Christ’s own body and blood—all in the process of becoming conformed to Christ. And the church is sent at the conclusion of worship with the divine blessing to live and serve as the body of Christ in the world through word and deed.”⁶

⁵ Craig L. Nesson, "What If the Church Really Is the Body of Christ?," Article, *Dialog: A Journal of Theology* 51, no. 1 (Spring 2012 2012), <https://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-6385.2011.00653.x>.

⁶ Nesson p 3.

Understanding the Body of Christ in this profound and spiritual way demonstrates how precious those moments of worship on Sunday can be and that every person present is essential in creating a unique version of the Body of Christ. Lydon Shakespeare was inspired by St Paul and Thomas Aquinas's teaching and reflected that "the sacraments make that body present to us and make us present as that body."⁷ It is wonderful to consider how that will vary every time people gather in every church across the world and every time they share the sacraments. The Body of Christ is a particularly special subclass of family systems. The groups form dynamic emotional systems in which the members "unconsciously monitor those around us and automatically react or respond without thinking."⁸ Seeing a church group as an emotional or family system means that every member affects the outcome or actions of the system. It can be hard to imagine that congregations can be so interconnected, but it can be observed by considering how another's absence is experienced by the remaining members when that person leaves. Members of the family system are often unaware of the emotional connections stretched between them across the chasms of age, gender, or life experience and only belatedly recognize it through its loss by absence. The blessing of the Holy Spirit infuses their gatherings, and they need only recall Jesus telling the disciples then and now: "When two or three are gathered in my name, there am I with them."(Matt 18:20)

⁷ Shakespeare The Rev'd Lyndon, *Being the Body of Christ in the Age of Management*, Veritas (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2016), p11.
<http://ezproxy.drew.edu/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=edsebk&AN=1359721&site=eds-live&scope=site>.

⁸ R Robert Creech, *Family Systems and Congregational Life: A Map for Ministry* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2019), p15.

Furthermore, the stakes in a Christian community are high: when members falter or behave ungraciously, there is so much spiritual risk for them and those around them. Through the liturgy, congregations can corporately (as a Body) find forgiveness, and consequently, they have a responsibility to live in peace with each other. As a Body of Christ, Jesus commands believers to love and serve others, modeling God's Kingdom here on earth, for the world outside of the church to experience Christ in their midst. Even though parishes are not always aware of it, society outside the church intuitively grasps that the local parish church represents the local Body of Christ, so when congregations fail to reach the mark, society sees Jesus failing too. Each member of the congregation has a responsibility to work with others, remaining interconnected and interdependent, to form a strong, prayerful, and cohesive Body of Christ. Through this essential effort so that the Body of Christ may function according to God's desires, the group's emotional maturity may be revealed.

Nevertheless, within families and family systems, people continue to be emotionally immature and act out anxieties or behave in a manner that they would not countenance in almost any other social setting. It shocks congregation members to see this behavior within church families, and it disappoints them too because members continue to have high expectations of life as baptized members of the Body of Christ. Each new parishioner anticipates that they will be welcomed into the family and loved for who they are without question or judgment, but this is not everyone's experience. The truth is that each constituent member carries a lot of "inhumanity and muddle within"⁹

⁹ Rowan Williams, *Being Christian: Baptism, Bible, Eucharist, Prayer* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2014), p 5.

them, but it is easier to see the problems within everyone else than within themselves. In his humanity, Jesus knew this weakness (Luke 6:41,42), yet still offered believers forgiveness from their sins.

Acknowledging the individual's constituent part in the poor behavior or even dysfunction observed in church family systems is part of the journey to Christian maturity and is recognized as an essential factor in accepting change. The muddle that is experienced within a group means that the Body of Christ will need someone to take the lead to guide the church family in navigating a faithful daily life. It would be wonderful if the Body of Christ had only one leader, Christ, but in practical terms, groups need to be lead, overtly or otherwise. In the turbulent times of change, leaders must find ways to consider, understand, and talk about the tensions experienced within family groups without resorting to blaming others. When a group of believers embraces the spiritual expectations of the interconnected family system commonly called the Body of Christ, it provides the whole group with principles, a sense of responsibility, and the opportunity to form an identity beyond church services. Understanding FST provides a framework and perspective to help leaders cope with these expectations, especially when the group balance is disrupted.

AN INTRODUCTION TO FAMILY SYSTEMS THEORY

This section takes a closer look at FST developed by the psychiatrist and researcher Dr. Murray Bowen. It briefly looks at some of the background and the FST concepts applied in this paper. Using the language of systems provides a “different way of conceptualizing human problems. It offers a more realistic evaluation of the difficulty

in changing basic patterns in any human dilemma.”¹⁰ In short, FST provides a way of understanding how whole emotional systems react to a disruption to the balance of a group often brought about by a change. Through developments in Chaos Theory¹¹, it is possible to appreciate that all things are interconnected, and even minor events can have a significant knock-on effect on larger events. Perhaps because group members are attuned to each other, or just physically closer, but each person’s actions in a family system may affect another member of the same group in a way that can be surprising or seem out of proportion. This assertion is particularly true when the action is conducted by someone in a position of influential leadership. This case study considers what happens in a group that experiences disruption and whether a person in a leadership position can mitigate the corresponding emotional response.

Bowen developed FST in the 1950s and 60s, drawing on over twenty-five years of observing relationships between family members and patients with specific clinical psychiatric symptoms. He invited families with young schizophrenic family members to live as a family unit in a hospital ward. The research was notable for its focus on relationships of the whole family rather than on a specific diagnosis or symptom bearer. The change in focus revealed connections in family relationships following predictable patterns that aided or hindered how people live. It seemed that “each family member

¹⁰ Bowen, p 415.

¹¹ The often-quoted cliché of chaos theory is the idea that a random flutter of a random butterfly at just the right moment can cause a tornado hundreds of miles away. The suggestion is that all actions have the potential to be consequential, or not, depending on a random set of variables as presented by chaos theory.

participated in a reciprocal (circular) process of making compensations for others,”¹² and the response of family members varied depending on which member of the family was with them. The observed patterns of behavior confirmed his theory that the families functioned as interconnected systems which were sometimes so intensely intertwined that they were able to “accurately know the other’s feelings, thoughts, and dreams.”¹³ As a result of the research, when considering their response to an event, it seemed more appropriate to consider them not as individuals but instead as one system or organism – the family unit, or as Bowen described them, as an “emotional unit.”¹⁴ Calling a family a system or emotional unit may sound like a clinical way of stripping the family members of their autonomy, but Bowen demonstrated¹⁵ that their actions had a foreseeable effect on the entire family group’s actions. In summary, a family system is not a group of individuals with individual symptoms, but rather the interconnected family system is an emotional system in which separate actions affect the whole.

SOME CONCEPTS OF BOWEN FAMILY SYSTEM THEORY

The last part of this chapter introduces some of the principles of FST, which describes how a family group and its members respond in predictable ways to anxiety and tension to maintain the emotional balance they have achieved over time. FST also

¹² Jenny Brown, "Church Unity and Anxious Togetherness Forces: Discerning the Difference.," in *Bowen Family Systems Theory in Christian Ministry: Grappling with Theory and Its Application through a Biblical Lens.*, ed. Lauren Errington Jenny Brown (Sydney, Australia: Family Systems Practice & Institute, 2019), p54.

¹³ Bowen, p71.

¹⁴ Michael E. Kerr, and Murray Bowen, *Family Evaluation* (New York, USA: WW Norton & Co, 1988), p 7.

¹⁵ Kerr, and Bowen, p9.

encourages leaders to become more self-differentiated, or in other words, to find the skills to maintain their principled individuality while keeping in contact with the group without distancing themselves from the group. Bowen proposed in his theory that the observed behaviors of a family system could be formulated into clear concepts found within any family group regardless of class, nationality, or even gender; the main point of variation was the group's functionality. This case study's important concepts are anxiety, self-differentiation, fusion, homeostasis, family projection process, multigenerational transmission process, sibling position and birth order, Cut-off, triangling, sabotage, and reciprocal over and underfunctioning. These will be introduced in this chapter and then discussed further in the case study.

Anxiety

Anxiety is the automatic biological response to a perception of threat. In terms of FST, there are two types of anxiety: acute and chronic. Acute anxiety is a physical and emotional response to a threat to each person's safety. The physiological response to the threat is a *fight or flight* response that most living creatures display. It is time-limited, and once the threat has been mitigated or removed, that level of anxiety will dissipate. However, chronic anxiety describes a long-term high level of anxiety that triggers a similar response to a perception of an imaginary threat. As the imaginary threat cannot be easily removed or resolved, it is difficult to ease the physical or emotional experience of the resultant chronic anxiety. Chronic anxiety is an "exaggerated sense of potential threat that generates a continued sensitivity to and scanning for the presence of the feared

outcome”¹⁶ and is present within individuals and each family system to one degree or another. All families exist with some level of chronic anxiety, but the individual member’s emotional maturity determines their response to it.¹⁷ When chronic anxiety spreads through a group, it occurs at an instinctive level and builds in intensity. Bowen Family System Theory suggests that anxious group behaviors have evolved to reduce the tension and discomfort associated with chronic anxiety.

Differentiation of Self

Self-differentiation and anxiety are recurrent central concepts when considering group dynamics in terms of FST. Self-differentiation is a measure of emotional maturity, expressed by the ability to have an awareness of self and independence while remaining in a friendly and genuinely interested relationship with others. Bowen stated that the central part of his theory, self-differentiation, had such universal applicability that “it could be used as a way of categorizing all people on a single continuum.”¹⁸ After doubting whether this could be so, people swiftly began requesting a test to understand where they lay on the theoretical scale of emotional maturity or function. Bowen observed that almost everyone’s response is on the lower half of the scale, with the highest rank representing “complete emotional maturity.”¹⁹ The position on the self-

¹⁶ Jenny Brown, and Lauren Errington, *Bowen Family Systems Theory in Christian Ministry: Grappling with Theory and Its Application through a Biblical Lens*. (Sydney, Australia: Family Systems Practice & Institute, 2019), p4.

¹⁷ Creech, p18.

¹⁸ Bowen, p362.

¹⁹ Bowen, *ibid*.

differentiation scale indicates how resilient or flexible a person will be when presented with a challenge or disruption. Family members who would be ranked closer towards the middle of the scale could be described as emotionally mature or displaying a noticeable amount of self-differentiation. Their repertoire of responses to disruption is extensive; they can think independently and demonstrate resilience to anxiety. At the same time, they can connect with the group without succumbing to the forces of consensus or togetherness.

The lower a family member's position on the scale of self-differentiation, the less resilience they possess, and the smaller their repertoire of responses will be when confronted with a disruption. People with lower levels of self-differentiation are "vulnerable to emotional pressure," and in turn, use "emotional pressure to get what they want."²⁰ They are more likely to identify closely with the group, for instance, using the pronoun 'we' rather than 'I.' They lack confidence in their autonomy and feel more secure existing with others, seeking others' approval to replace their lost sense of self. Accordingly, they are less likely to make personal assertions and be uncomfortable breaking away from the group consensus. These same family members respond in a range of predictable ways to increasing anxiety levels, and in the extreme, this person is incapable of functioning alone, but that is a rare occurrence.

²⁰ Peter Titleman, "The Concept of the Triangle in Bowen Theory: An Overview," in *Triangles: Bowen Family Systems Theory Perspectives*, ed. Peter Titleman (New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2008), p71.

Predictable responses to anxiety: Fusion

In his theory, Bowen suggests that many of the behaviors observed in a group reduce the discomfort of tension caused by anxiety, which is more clearly identified among family members with a low level of self-differentiation. One of those behaviors is known as fusion. In searching for a sense of harmony or balance under stressful conditions, Brown describes fusion as the act of giving up a person's sense of individuality in preference for the sense of security they gain in being part of a tightly bound group.²¹ Low self-differentiated individuals will often remain in a fused group presenting a collective identity in word and deed, generally referred to as *groupthink*. As anxiety levels rise with perceived risk, this collective mind's ability to think clearly will become inhibited. Neuroscientists confirm that this inhibition "of ongoing behaviors is the first behavioral manifestation of an anxious or fearful state."²²

Bowen described a family group as an "undifferentiated family ego mass" to illustrate his idea of fusion and "family emotional oneness."²³ He imagined a group of egos with various levels of self-differentiation, some on the group edge and others entirely fused in the middle. An apt metaphor to describe the undifferentiated family ego mass cluster would be the tightly fused bundle of freshly hatched spitfire wasp larvae²⁴,

²¹ Brown, in *Bowen Family Systems Theory in Christian Ministry: Grappling with Theory and Its Application through a Biblical Lens.*, p103.

²² Thierry Steimer, "The Biology of Fear- and Anxiety-Related Behaviors," *Dialogues in clinical neuroscience* 4, no. 3 (2002), <https://dx.doi.org/10.31887/DCNS.2002.4.3/tsteimer>.

²³ Bowen, p122.

²⁴ Spitfire wasp larvae form grotesque writhing balls that children are warned not to approach. The name itself carries a warning. <http://lepidoptera.butterflyhouse.com.au/none/dorsalis.html>

in which it is almost impossible to discern where one body ends and the next begins. There is no need to understand each larva to appreciate the actions and unpleasant effect of the whole heaving mass; the viewer understands it as having a self-protective character of its own that supports and sustains the discreet members of the group. Bowen probably did not imagine anything quite so unpleasant when he thought of an undifferentiated ego mass, but it explains how individuals form a group system with its own ego or emotional characteristic. A less extreme example of an undifferentiated ego mass would be the congregation of a church, with various self-differentiation levels amongst its members but still identifiable as a particular congregation from a particular church.

However, it is worth noting that the members of a faith group identifying as the Body of Christ have not necessarily surrendered all sense of self to be part of the group. Although both the family system and Body of Christ are considered interconnected and interdependent systems (1Cor.12:26), there is no need for the Body of Christ to become so tightly fused that they act and speak as one. Quite the opposite, St Paul is clear that the Body of Christ possesses many gifts (1Cor. 12:14-25) with which to serve Christ and each other, and he implies that a bland uniformity is not God's desired outcome. When a group reacts to stress or anxiety by becoming so tightly fused that autonomy is lost, there is no room for the working of the Holy Spirit.

Homeostasis: the emotional balance of a family group

Bowen describes the constant balance made by the group members, and the group with its own ego, to keep in tension the two life forces of togetherness and individuality. The force of togetherness encompasses the need for "love, approval, emotional closeness and agreement," and the individuality force is a competing desire to be a "productive,

autonomous individual as defined by self, rather than the dictates of the group.”²⁵ Bowen describes how these two forces would be equally balanced in a calm situation, and the group would not react particularly to either force, but this is rarely the case. Instead, as anxiety rises and the need for people to fuse or group together increases, a new balance is achieved, and when conditions change once more, so will the balance to achieve a new form of “emotional harmony.”²⁶ Such a delicate balance only takes small changes to set off a series of reactions within the group.

Friedman used the term “homeostasis”²⁷ to describe the emotional balance of a family group. Homeostasis is a term more commonly found in biological sciences to describe a dynamic balance of life forces, defined as “maintaining internal viability and the defense of physiological events essential for bodily well-being.”²⁸ When a parish is considered a complex family system of members, each with a mix of abilities, self-differentiation, dreams, and anxieties, it is a simple step to imagine that system repeatedly needing stability. Like balancing oddly shaped rocks on top of each other, the group’s balance is sometimes precarious. Minor dynamic adjustments might be needed to permit variations in the rock pile and surrounding conditions to maintain a sense of stability.

²⁵ Bowen, p277.

²⁶ Bowen, p 277.

²⁷ Friedman, p130.

²⁸ Jay Schulkin, *Rethinking Homeostasis : Allostatic Regulation in Physiology and Pathophysiology* (Cambridge, Mass: A Bradford Book, 2003), p xi.
<http://ezproxy.drew.edu/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=78089&site=eds-live&scope=site>.

Depending on the group's inherited and learned emotional reactivity, it may be sensitized to react to a disruption to the group's homeostasis. The lower the level of self-differentiation, the greater the reactivity to the perceived threat, which will indicate the presence of predictable anxious behaviors. In an environment of a perceived threat to the group homeostasis, the togetherness force is dominant and inhibits "clear thinking by individuals,"²⁹ causing the group to fuse more tightly. They lose the best chance of using their available skills to find a new way of coping with the change or even ultimately existing. Ironically, the togetherness force is sometimes called the herd instinct, an evolutionary response to keep the group safe from the threat of danger. Bowen observed that in high anxiety or low self-differentiation situations, family members sacrifice some of their individuality to maintain that homeostasis and a sense of peace within the group.³⁰ There may be a moral and ethical risk to members who conform to the group's implicitly agreed behavior to keep the peace. The recognition of that risk will increase their sense of anxiety, possibly resulting in a split from the group or even further fusion. From outside the group, the homeostasis can look skewed or imbalanced without taking a closer look at the constituent family members to appreciate how a balance is maintained to keep the unpleasant effects of anxiety at bay, at least for a while.

²⁹ Creech, p16.

³⁰ Bowen, p84.

Family Projection Process

The “family projection process” describes a method by which “parent’s insecurities are detoured through a focus on the next generation.”³¹ Family projection provides a way of understanding how one family can have different maturity levels transferred across the generations and amongst its offspring. Typically, the focus lands on one child more than on the rest, and the result of this imbalance of focus affects the self-differentiation of that child. It is possible to practice and improve one’s self-differentiation, but only a few people are given the awareness or support to change.

Multigenerational transmission process.

Each family adapts or evolves its response to the anxieties of life and relationships: for instance, some families resort to conflict, while others relieve anxiety by cutting off all communications between them. This response is learned from previous generations, and Bowen Family Systems Therapists usually begin therapeutic conversations by gathering as much information as possible about the family in question for a couple of generations, including information on relationships, distancing, and illnesses. The multigenerational transmission process must be considered in tandem with the family projection process and birth order to form an idea of how a family might deal with and respond to anxiety. These concepts were essential in developing this case study, which considers the emotional response to anxiety by the three church families. By considering their historical narrative, it was possible to understand why different family

³¹ Brown, and Errington, p5.

groups can respond differently to the same set of disruptions and how they may have been affected by past events.

Birth order and sibling position

Bowen adopted the work of Walter Toman in regards to his understanding of birth order and sibling position. In his book *Family Constellation*³², Toman developed his ideas on how “one’s position as a sibling in the family affects such things as how one relates to people of the same and opposite gender, and how one relates within a marriage and other social settings.”³³ Bowen’s interest was in how one’s birth order affected how a person interacted within the family group and their reactivity in anxious environments or relationships. Taken in conjunction with the family projection process and the multigenerational transmission process, it becomes possible to understand why a person may respond to a set of circumstances in a particular way. That said, Bowen is clear that birth order is not deterministic of a person’s fate but helps build a picture of the factors that help shape a family system’s reactivity.

Predictable responses to anxiety: Cut off

Cut-off is a response to an anxious group that has become increasingly fused. For some, the togetherness force becomes unbearable, and they will cut off either physically or emotionally from the group to create distance or even entirely withdraw from the

³² Walter Toman, *Family Constellation : Its Effects on Personality and Social Behavior*, vol. 4th ed (New York: Springer Publishing Company, 1993).
<http://ezproxy.drew.edu/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=246095&site=eds-live&scope=site>.

³³ Creech, p121.

group. It is possible to remain within the family but still create distance by potentially avoiding conflict; this is a less dramatic but no less anxious form of emotional Cut-off when people “walk on eggshells”³⁴ around a person to avoid upsetting them, thus triggering a confrontation. Bowen himself felt that the appropriate emotional distance was “a point between seriousness and humor,”³⁵ where he could adapt to different members of a group or family. In other words, finding the appropriate distance needs a light touch. When things become serious, it is a good indicator that the group’s underlying tension and anxiety have increased, and the leader must remain watchful and aware of the predictable responses to anxiety.

Predictable responses to anxiety: Triangling

In a world that can seem so keen to pair people up, it is curious to think that the most stable relationship structure is the triangle. The emotional triangle may be “the building block of any relationship system.” As such, the family system may then be a “collection of interlocking triangles”³⁶ It does not take long for a pairing to become emotionally unstable when faced with the challenges and stresses of life, and without even realizing it, two will automatically become three, thus allowing the tension to move about within the grouping of three. The three-sided relationship structure has a “much higher level of flexibility and adaptability with which to tolerate and deal with anxiety.” Bowen even contends that most “so-called two-person relationships are the calm side of

³⁴ Creech, p22.

³⁵ Bowen, p229.

³⁶ Kerr, and Bowen, p ix.

an already functioning triangle in which the calmness is maintained at the expense of a negative relationship with the other corner of the triangle.”³⁷ If they are so intrinsic to social relationships, why do triangles have such a poor reputation? That is because they get confused with the anxious concept of triangling: this occurs when a third person enables the original (unstable) pair to shift the responsibility for their actions onto that third person, who then carries their anxiety for them.³⁸ It is possible to be part of a non-anxious triangle, but this takes effort and awareness of how anxiety moves around the grouping. These triangles tend to be stable until one party tries to make changes. Friedman noticed that attempts “to change the relationship of the other two sides of an emotional triangle are not only generally ineffective but also homeostatic forces often convert these efforts to their opposite intent.”³⁹ It is worth keeping in mind that if the third member of the “emotional triangle tries to change the relationship of the other two unsuccessfully, the more likely it is that the third party will wind up with the stress for the other two.”⁴⁰

Predictable responses to anxiety: Reciprocal over and underfunctioning.

Beware the overfunctioner, for around them will be a group of passive underfunctioners! These two groups form a reciprocal pair, for “the anxiously helpless

³⁷ Bowen, p400.

³⁸ Peter L. Steinke, *Uproar: Calm Leadership in Anxious Times* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2019), p126.

³⁹ Friedman, p37.

⁴⁰ Edwin H Friedman, *A Failure of Nerve: Leadership in the Age of the Quick Fix* (New York: Church Publishing, 2007), p37.

and the anxiously helpful play into each other's hand. Anxiety connects people."⁴¹ Friedman reflects that overfunctioning is "an anxious response in both senses of the word, 'anxious' as in anticipatory and 'anxious' as in fearful."⁴² The overfunctioner assumes a strength or capability beyond them as they assume or accept more roles and responsibilities, while the underfunctioner surrenders all agency to the other. In large family groups, there are enough people to counter or temper the overfunctioner's anxious attempts to take on much more than they can comfortably handle, but when the group size diminishes and the number of people available to take on a role in the group reduces, an overfunctioner will often rise to fill the gap.

None of the FST concepts are entirely discrete. For example, there is a cross-over between triangles and over-functioning; the third (uncomfortable) person in the triangle may respond to their increasing levels of anxiety by doing more and more. They become an over-functioner. After a while, they are persuaded by their self-talk that 'no one else can do what they do,' thus justifying why they cannot stop.

LEADERS OF CONGREGATIONS USING FAMILY SYSTEMS THEORY

The appeal of FST to church leaders is partly due to its ease of applicability to church congregations. Even in a high functioning church group, it will be possible to find minor variants of the behaviors identified by Bowen. Having identified behaviors caused by a need to relieve tension and anxiety, the leader can then remain in interested contact with those people to provide pastoral care for them. It empowers leaders to see the value

⁴¹ Peter L. Steinke, "When Congregations Are Stuck," *Christian Century* 116, no. 11 (1999): p386.

⁴² Friedman, *Generation to Generation: Family Process in Church and Synagogue*, p211.

in developing their self-differentiation, which is directly beneficial to the leader and the group. Developing their self-differentiation skills causes leaders to become more emotionally aware, more mature, and improve their well-being. It empowers leaders by defining their role and assisting them to be aware of the anxious behaviors that can sidetrack a leader from achieving their mission.

CONCLUSION

Considering a congregation through the lens of FST can bring some clarity to an otherwise complicated mix of competing needs, anxieties, and spiritual imperatives. Leaders can employ FST as a powerful and insightful way to understand how church families function so that when anxious or ungracious behavior is observed, the leader will be alerted to the presence of underlying issues in a parish. The leader can then begin to determine how to address the situation using the principles of FST. Friedman warned that significant changes made in a congregation, such as closing a church or reducing Sunday services, could result in significant anxious behaviors.⁴³ Leaders who are already under pressure and exist in a reactive mode, as many are, may be tempted to tackle each of the seemingly unrelated issues as they appear, instead of standing back and seeing a pattern arising in response to the anxiety caused by the significant change.

⁴³ Friedman, *Generation to Generation: Family Process in Church and Synagogue*, p203.

CHAPTER TWO: A PARISH NARRATIVE THROUGH THE LENS OF FAMILY SYSTEMS THEORY.

This chapter explores the parish narrative and uses Family Systems Theory (FST) to consider the parish dynamics and its emotional reactivity. Key to this process is Bowen's observation that a family group, an "undifferentiated family ego mass,"¹ has an ego of its own. This realization enabled the Vicar to think about the parish family groups' interactions in an entirely new way. She was curious to test Bowen's observations and decided to characterize each congregation in light of their theoretical sibling order and their observed emotional reactivity that may have been affected by a multigeneration transmission process or a family projection process. In the last one hundred and sixty-five years, the three churches that constitute the Bellarine Gateway Anglican Parish have gone through the process of joining and splitting three times. If this change had occurred in a human family, it would be fair to assume that it would adversely affect the family members' character traits and emotional reactivity.

The parish family discussed in this project is the Bellarine Gateway Anglican Parish, located on the outskirts of Geelong, a regional city in the Australian state of Victoria. When the Vicar joined the parish in 2015, the parish was composed of three churches². For many years, they have all worshiped using a similar liturgical style, and they all receive a similar sermon based on the same readings each week. Despite this similar liturgical treatment, the church congregations who met at the three sister churches

¹ Bowen, p122.

² There were three churches, and four congregations as one of the churches, St Marks, supported two services on a Sunday morning.

were quite distinct in their outlook and their way of coping with unexpected changes to the weekly worship service. Pushing the family analogy further, the members of those separate congregational families behaved like cousins; they recognized their parish connection but were distinct from each other.

The parish^{3 4 5 6} in this case study contained three discrete church buildings across a geographic area locally known as the Bellarine Gateway that leads into the Bellarine Peninsula. A map in Appendix A, figure 1, shows the relative positions of the three churches in the parish.⁷ A parish timeline from 1856 to 2019 in Appendix A, Figure 2 provides a visual guide to the historical connections for the three churches. Photographs

³ The Anglican Diocese of Melbourne has historically understood itself to be ‘episcopally led,’ that is led by bishops, and ‘synodically governed,’ in that a representative body of clergy and laypeople gather in the context of synod to consult together and to vote on matters of importance to the life of the church. In a parish setting, this same principle finds expression in the form of the parish council, wherein the vicar of the parish shares leadership, decision making, and matters requiring general consultation and consensus, with the laypeople who make up the parish council led by three wardens.

⁴ Bradley S Billings, *The Parish Council Handbook for Old and New Members* (Melbourne: The Anglican Diocese of Melbourne, 2014), p6.

⁵ Billings, p10.

⁶ The Anglican Church of Australia, like the Episcopal Church in the USA, is part of the worldwide Anglican Communion and recognizes the Archbishop of Canterbury as its spiritual head. A parish in the Anglican Church of Australia describes a geographical area where it conducts mission and ministry. It is the “smallest unit of organization” within the Anglican church and is “inherently local. Accordingly, many Anglican parishes will include their location as part of their name—for example, St Mark’s Leopold. The Anglican Church of Australia’s decision-making process is clearly defined from the Synod, the main governing body, down to each parish council. It is increasingly common in regional Australia to see large parishes formed by amalgamating smaller or less viable ones, resulting in more than one church building within one geographic parish.

⁷ Map of the Parish of Bellarine Gateway. Downloaded 21 Feb 2020, From <<https://maps.windows.com/?form=WNAMSH&lvl=13.353583&cp=-38.170789~144.422551&sty=r&trfc=1>>

for the three very different churches are included in Appendix A: the bluestone⁸ heritage-listed St Mark's Leopold, the modern and spacious St Barnabas' Newcomb, and the little weatherboard St Paul's Whittington.

St Mark's Leopold

St Mark's church was located close to the top of a hill in the middle of the Bellarine Peninsula. It was opened in 1856 and provided a Church of England place of worship for the British pioneer families in the area. It still regards itself as the mother church of the district. The church was an essential building in new settlements; it was a place of social connection, spiritual support, and continuity in a strange land. Constructed in a time of exciting new growth and struggle, the pioneers wanted to create public buildings that would anchor them to this unfamiliar place, to help them find a way to belong, while paradoxically reminding them of 'home,' their connection with Europe, and particularly Britain. The Church of England sent out priests to minister to the emerging communities, and the remotely located Bishops created large geographic but sparsely populated parishes. The parish on the Bellarine peninsula encompassed a few small settlements and farms, and within it, the parishioners built at least six buildings (some more temporary than others) that were used as schools during the week and spaces to gather for worship on Sundays. It was only a matter of a few years before some of the settlements became small villages big enough to support a church, and the Bishops frequently had to redraw the parish boundaries to reflect these developments.

⁸ Stephanie Trigg, "Bluestone and the City: Writing an Emotional History.," *Melbourne historical journal* 44, no. 1 (2017). The bluestone used to build St Mark's is heavy, brittle basalt rock that is dark grey when wet. It was not considered fine enough for many churches, but in the early pioneer days, this convict-mined stone was plentiful and created solid buildings reminiscent of 'home' in England.

From the materials used to build St Mark's, their goal was to create a more permanent presence. Heavy, inflexible bluestone, quarried by convicts, form the walls of St Mark's built on clay ground on the side of a steep hill with regrettably insufficient foundations. Thirty years later, the large unstable cracks in the church walls caused it to be closed. The determination of the people who gathered there refused to give up. It had taken them several years to raise the money to build the traditional English-style bluestone church, and they were not ready to walk away from their investment. It took nine years to plan and fundraise for the renovation work, but eventually, long steel bolts knitted the walls back together.

There is an account in the history of St Mark's that typifies the pioneer determination to dominate the land rather than let it beat them, revealing a lot about the character of those early St Mark's parishioners. Parishioners transported cartloads of sand and shells from the nearby beach to stabilize the church's sodden, muddy ground. They dug the sand into the clay to help it drain, and the repaired church was then accessible without balancing on a network of planks. Without this considerable effort, the land would have been a quagmire, and the damage to the church would have continued at a significant rate. Even today, tiny seashells can be found around the church, confirming this part of the church mythology.

In terms of FST sibling order characteristics, this is the most responsible, serious, and steady sibling. St Mark's would be the oldest sibling who has found reassurance in tradition and value in hard work. This church is the most serious of the three churches, and seriousness can indicate an anxious system trying, even struggling to maintain its

emotional balance⁹. When an anxious system responds to anxiety by fusing, the group's attitude becomes more serious as their repertoire of responses to disruption reduces. Bowen believed emotional problems of immaturity could transmit down family lines through multigenerational transmission, as discussed in Chapter One.¹⁰ This process is reflected in the character of the contemporary St Mark's congregation: the direct descendants of those original pioneer families have now all died or are no longer in the parish, yet the sense of seriousness and anxiety that results from taking on more than their proportional amount of responsibility across the entire parish continues. Quite often, the older sibling in a family will tend to over-function to ease their anxious sense of responsibility and duty, which St Mark's demonstrates. The parishioners' average age is in their late seventies, and many St Mark's parishioners have attended the church for most of their adult life. So if a parishioner generation is forty years, that would result in about four generations since the church's completion in 1856. That is not too many generations to maintain or subtly hold to a principle of valuing tradition, treasuring the building, and carrying more responsibility than is necessary.

The bluestone's heaviness seems apt for a strong group of people who have formed a community that found balance and self-worth in tradition and stability.

⁹ Bowen, p228.

¹⁰ Bowen, p161.

St Paul's Whittington

In 1899, a small wooden church with a tin roof and three windows on each side, St Paul's church, was commissioned to serve the artisans, market gardeners, and woolen mill workers of Whittington at the city edge of the rural parish¹¹. These were not pioneers or landowners but working-class people who looked towards the growing city of Geelong for their income, not to the formidable task of clearing and creating farmland. St Paul's church was considered a 'daughter' or 'little sister' church of St Mark's, and the Vicar took monthly Sunday evening worship services while lay readers lead a prayer service on the other weeks, for this was just one of the many¹² small outlying churches under his care. It was built in response to a sustained call to establish a Church of England church in the area, and for some time, the group of what were then Church of England Christians¹³ gathered in the nearby Temperance Hall. Despite this passionate call to locate a church in the neighborhood, it was never independently a single church parish. It began as a church plant supported by St Mark's Leopold, and during the second world war, the responsibility for the church moved to a new neighboring parish closer to the city. The change in parochial responsibility was due to the general shortage of clergy, funds and close to half of the potential congregation being at war.

¹¹ I am grateful for the research work done by Mr Alf Eagle of St Mark's church and Mr Jack Butterworth of St Paul's church that was shared with me in 2017 and was used to form the timeline that is included in the Appendices.

¹² Jack Butterworth, *The Centenary of Saint Paul's Anglican Church Whittington 1898-1999* (Geelong, Vic: Rowick Printers Pty Ltd, 1999, 1999).

¹³ The Church of England in Australia changed its name to the Anglican Church of Australia in 1976.

Sadly, the little church seemed to be regarded as a resource, and its protests were rarely heeded. For instance, in the 1940s, those in authority decided to dismantle the wooden Sunday School and relocate it to a new suburb to house a newly formed congregation called St Philip's. The leaders in St Paul's were encouraged to comply with this request. They reluctantly agreed to accept a very modest compensation offer from the new church should they need a new hall within ten years. A while later, St Philip's requested a long list of items they would like on a long-term loan basis¹⁴, and the Vestry Minutes gleefully reported that the overlooked or forgotten items, such as the baptismal font, were stored away in a parishioner's shed.

Ultimately after several instances of overstretched priests failing to turn up for services, the church was closed in 1943. Those in authority decided to lease St Paul's church to the Russian Orthodox Church, and that should probably have been the end to a local presence of the Church of England in Whittington. Those men in authority, however, had not experienced the tenacity and faith of Deaconess Moore. For years, she encouraged the parish women to hold informal Sunday Schools for the local children and maintain an identity as St Paul's church Whittington. Deaconess Moore was instrumental in exerting a prolonged pressure campaign through letter-writing to have the church returned to the Church of England people. It took almost sixteen years, but eventually, the Russians moved elsewhere, and all the loaned and stored furniture was returned. The

¹⁴ Despite the support provided by St Paul's, it seems that the new congregation in St Philip's did not flourish, for the old relocated and converted Sunday School hall has been a private dwelling for at least thirty years.

tenacity and determination exhibited in the 1950s were still evident characteristics of St Paul's sixty years later.

In terms of FST, the tiny, run-down St Paul's behaves like the youngest child in a family system; this is the one who escapes most of the anxiety and attention focused on other family members. Roberta Gilberts has considered why individual family members turn out so differently, and she noted that "projected-on children do less well."¹⁵ There are two sides to this proposition; the first is that the child at their parents' center of attention for good or ill becomes more anxious than the other siblings who exist only at the edge of the spotlight of attention. The second side is the freedom that the other siblings have to "explore, relate to and learn from the world around them."¹⁶ St Paul's experienced the freedom to grow: its church family needs were overlooked many times in its history. Indeed, the current poorly maintained appearance of the church and hall reflects this too; they were often last on the maintenance budget list. Instead of forming a resentful group character, they were less anxious than others in the larger family parish group. They presented as a calm and grounded congregation who offered a relaxed welcome to all. Its family members were still active in volunteering at many events but did so from a desire to offer service and hospitality, not out of an anxious sense of duty. In times of difficult changes, they expressed their sorrow and then faced up to the problems with maturity and resilience.

¹⁵ Roberta M. Gilbert, *Extraordinary Leadership: Thinking Systems Making a Difference* (Lake Frederick, Virginia USA: Leading Systems Press, 2006; repr., 2011), Chap 3, location 592 of 2883.

¹⁶ Gilbert, Chap 3, location 605 of 2883.

St Barnabas, Newcomb

When the Russians eventually left St Paul's in 1959, the newly combined parish of St Mark's Leopold and St Paul's Whittington confidently launched into an ambitious church hall building project. It was an optimistic time for the church, reflected in the size of the newly built halls. The new halls at both ends of the parish were large enough to house growing Sunday Schools, each big enough for a badminton court, and had kitchens suitable for frequent large-scale parish social events. The parish borrowed money to fund part of the building projects, but the popular social fundraising events made this debt seem less onerous and less concerning to many parishioners. It seemed that each church was responsible for paying the loan for its hall; this was not a shared responsibility.

The city was changing too, and the combined churches began to welcome the influx of new British and some European migrants to the area. In the Sixties and Seventies, Geelong swelled to accommodate new migrants who worked at the Ford car plant and the new Alcoa aluminum plant. Many of these new arrivals were 'Ten Pound Poms'¹⁷ who came to Australia on a subsidized travel and settlement scheme, which stipulated a stay in Australia of at least two years to avoid repaying the full fare. They were mostly working-class people fleeing post-war Britain for a promised new life of sunshine and employment opportunities. The parish anticipated that these new residents would need a church as a community hub. They invested in a large hall with a small attached chapel in a brand new suburb called Newcomb in a remarkably prescient move.

¹⁷ A million immigrants came to Australia between 1945 and 1972 on the assisted passage scheme, which was actively promoted by the Australian government.

The new suburb, Newcomb, formed the third corner of a long narrow triangle with Leopold and Whittington.

The small chapel was called St Barnabas', a companion to St Paul. It soon turned out to be too small for all the immigrant families' requirements, and within twenty years, the worship space extended. The Newcomb residents who worshipped in St Barnabas' had very different needs from those who filled the pews at St Mark's and St Paul's. These people needed to create a new extended family to replace the support system they had left in Europe. They were seeking a home from home. Like the early pioneers at St Mark's, the style and words of worship offered at St Barnabas' were comfortably familiar to those arrivals.

If the other two churches are the older and younger children in the family system, then by default, St Barnabas' takes on the middle child's mantle. In research conducted on siblings and birth order¹⁸, the middle child generally assumes a mix of characteristics associated with older and younger siblings, depending on the family group's unique dynamic balance. In other words, the middle sibling's character can be a blend of responsibility, independence, and anxiety. Considering the narrative of a church family such as St Barnabas' is rather interesting in terms of sibling order, for it was the last church built in the parish, and it should have been the youngest. It also had the potential for eldest child traits, for as a church in a new suburb filled with new residents, it seemed to be repeating St Mark's experience as another pioneer church. There would have been a strong focus at St Barnabas' to become a viable proposition by attracting new

¹⁸ Toman, p21.

parishioners, and this may have caused it to display characteristics more often associated with the elder sibling. It had to succeed for the sake of those new people who came with an existing faith, who needed to find familiarity and meaning in this new place. It had to succeed to justify the money invested in it.

However, St Mark's was built almost a hundred years earlier, and Australia was vastly different in the 1960s and 1970s. These new immigrants from Britain were not coming to tame a wilderness. The Australian migration agents had systematically encouraged the new migrants to have optimistic expectations of finding a good job and a house. When the 'Ten Pound Poms' realized that demand outstripped supply for permanent houses and the main occupation on offer was manual labor, many families were disappointed by their decision to emigrate and felt trapped¹⁹. Disappointed, too embarrassed to return to their home country, and somewhat discouraged by the meager welcome from the broader Australian community, the church had a significant role in their social assimilation.

Through church activities, they met Australians (and fellow migrants) and began to find meaning in their new community. The St Paul's and St Mark's parishioners built St Barnabas' to express their faith and hospitality, but the newcomers often joined for social²⁰ rather than spiritual reasons. So, where 'big sister' St Mark's was characterized as responsible and traditional, St Barnabas' was an older-leaning middle sister, a bit

¹⁹ A.J. Hammerton, and A. Thomson, *Ten Pound Poms: A Life History of British Postwar Emigration to Australia* (Manchester University Press, 2005), p343.
<https://books.google.com.au/books?id=hOG48C875pIC>.

²⁰ Hammerton, and Thomson, p145.

anxious, a bit lost and desperately needing to connect. Bowen recognized that the “Family Projection Process” was “the most important way a family emotional process is transmitted from one generation to the next.”²¹ The process is demonstrated in this local context by how each church family’s anxious behaviors could be partly attributed to the external and social expectations initially placed on them.

Completed in 1962, the church of St Barnabas’, a nondescript blonde brick building, is not easily identified as a church at first glance. Although the unadorned brick style is commonly found in Sixties public buildings, it certainly provides a blank canvas on which the parishioners could project their faith. Inside the church, it is an entirely different matter. It is a mixture of comfortable pews²², heritage church fittings, and contemporary liturgical decoration. A large stained glass window scatters a rainbow of color across the floor, and the high ceilings have good acoustic qualities. In short, it is a hidden gem.

The parish splits into two

In 1977, the Parish of St Mark’s Leopold with St Paul’s Whittington and St Barnabas’ Newcomb decided to part ways, with St Mark’s becoming a separate parish. There is no clear, definitive, or explosive reason why they split, so perhaps they had all reached a level of confidence that they could form two independent, viable parishes despite their separate financial concerns in repaying their building loans. For attendance numbers were high, and there did seem to be a sense of optimism within the parish.

²¹ Bowen, p425.

²² Yes, comfortable pews can exist!

Despite the positivity, though, the obligation to contribute to the multi-center parish running costs while struggling to service their building loans was a recurring issue in the minutes of St Paul's²³. It may have been a source of anxiety for the whole parish leadership.

A fundamental principle of Family Systems is that predictable actions are taken to relieve anxiety and tension in a family group; this includes fusing closer or splitting apart. Bowen described splitting or “emotional isolation”²⁴ as Cut-off. Cut-off occurs when two family members or groups withdraw or create distance between them emotionally or physically. Whole congregations can experience Cut-off when the church splits or a large group leaves. In the case study scenario described for St Mark's and St Barnabas', both were aware of a need to perform and achieve results, but with different priorities and ways of regarding the world, there was talk of splitting for three years before it finally happened. The uncertainty would have caused its disruption, increasing anxiety and providing one more reason to split. A family group who experiences Cut-off will feel grief expressed as loss, sadness, or incomprehension about the leavers' action. They may also experience a sense of relief because the disruption or challenge has been alleviated. Creech talks of a “gulf” between two sister congregations when a church splits that may remain for so long that:

“members of each congregation may have no personal memory of the split or the ‘issues’ that provoked it. The emotional system, however, is not dependent on

²³ Butterworth.

²⁴ Bowen, p379.

those memories or that knowledge. These two have learned to live without a relationship with each other, and the Cut-off remains.”²⁵

Instinctively, parishioners know that splitting apart will not fix the original anxiety, yet when emotions drive decisions, people default to actions that best relieve anxiety in the short term and repeating cycles of splitting and cut-off. A source of tension is rarely straightforward; there are often connections with people on the group’s edge, and the narrative is rarely linear or causal. The anxious pressures exerted on an entire group when it edges towards a split are immense and reveal why leaders need a healthy level of self-differentiation. Self-differentiation is an ability to think for oneself while still being aware of the needs of the whole group, and it also means resisting the emotional whirlpool when the togetherness forces in a family are out of balance. It is impossible to change another’s mind, but a sense of calm and purpose in one person can be infectious.

Following Cut-off, it can be observed that these newly formed remnant groups can be quite tightly fused and have a heightened sense of threat. A new balance will be achieved as the group redefines itself, building a new identity while looking out at the world, vigilantly watching for further threats. When St Mark’s Leopold split from St Paul’s Whittington and St Barnabas’ Newcomb, the two parishes developed new, yet symmetrical, family groups; both had their own well-defined Ladies Fellowship Group, Mother’s Union, and op shop or charity shop²⁶. Forming new groups is part of a herding reaction, finding a need to gather for support, reflecting a sense of increased anxiety in

²⁵ Creech, p110.

²⁶ Charity shops in Australia are called opportunity or op shops. Although the two parishes were separate entities, their names suggest some sharing of ideas and puns amongst the original organisers. The op shop in Leopold was called “Pearly Gates” and the one in Newcomb was “Heaven Cent”.

their new independent cut-off identity. When the parish split, the effect on the family churches' characters was that St Mark's became an only child, and the larger St Barnabas' took on the role of St Paul's older sister. It is not recorded whether St Paul's and St Barnabas' realized that the responsibilities had switched or whether it became another source of tension.

After the worship space of St Barnabas' was increased and St Paul's approached its centenary, it would have been a good time to begin talking about closing the wooden church and focusing all their energy serving their surrounding community from St Barnabas'. However, having already split from St Mark's, the people's identity and sense of belonging in St Paul's was tightly bound with the desire not to let the church be closed again. During this period, St Barnabas' and St Paul's held several themed fundraising events that would have further encouraged social bonding, and from the photos, they involved fun, food, laughter, skits, and fancy dress costumes. One particular set of photographs showed a skit honoring the work of Deaconess Moore. She was the lady who had galvanized the congregation around St Paul's in the 1950s to insist that the Diocese return the church to them after it was closed and loaned to the Russian orthodox church. Perhaps there was a need to recall some of the pioneering strength of past congregations to bolster the new post-split congregation. Some of the parishioners' determined actions, particularly some of the ladies, demonstrated the church family version of a multigenerational transmission of anxiety. There were still parish members whose relatives had helped build the St Paul's church, and this little place had a part in their complicated multigeneration interconnecting triangles of church and family life. It was so much more than just an involvement on Sunday morning: the parish ladies

provided the refreshments for their husbands helping at the working bees to keep the building maintained; they took part in fundraising social events; assisted in after school activities, and they may have even taught a class when their children were in Sunday School. It was thirty-five years since Deaconess Moore had been cycling around the parish encouraging the parishioners to write letters to the Bishop, and that determined attitude remained. With the struggle of past congregations fresh in their minds, they prepared to dig in should others threaten the church's future. It is easy to say now that it probably should have been shut, but many prominent and vocal parishioners of the small congregation²⁷ fought strenuously to stop both the Diocese and Vicar from closing it. The Vicar and church leaders backed down from their plan, the church was not closed, and the resources in the parish continued to be shared with St Barnabas'. The St Paul's parishioners also learned a lesson; *resistance will be rewarded*.

A slow decline

As the Eighties and Nineties rolled on, attendance numbers for both parishes began to fall. In the Sixties and Seventies, St Mark's had also enjoyed growth in numbers due to the influx of white-collar professionals to the area when the original farming families sold their land to property developers. As the century came to an end, church-going habits had changed in Leopold, in the less affluent Newcomb and low socio-economic Whittington. The new Vicar at St Paul's and St Barnabas' worked to resolve many of the tensions between the people of the two churches, and he combined the previously separate church leadership teams for St Paul's and St Barnabas' into one

²⁷ It could only hold 60 people if they all squashed in.

Vestry, or what is now called parish council. This strategy of improving communication and understanding within a family system is a straightforward and effective way to reduce tension, and he reported that it made a difference to the relations between the two close sister churches.

There were moments of tension in the three church families, causing people to fall out and leave, as still happens in many parishes. Sometimes when individuals leave a parish family, the residual effect can be very similar to a death in the group. The members are distressed by their absence and find it hard to let go of them. They still think about that person, sometimes to such an extent that there can be (alive or dead) a ghostly presence in the group still exerting influence on others' actions. The residual effect of Cut-off on those who remain is revealed in the way parishioners choose their seats on Sundays: they leave spaces for the absent (sometimes deceased) friends they still miss.

Over- and Under-functioning

As the numbers of regular attenders at church services steadily reduced, it exposed a source of tension that had probably existed for some time, over and under-functioning. Church families can often include strong personalities who try to exert influence over the group in a manner that might not be available to them in other parts of their lives. Bowen observed that over- and under-functioning is a "reciprocal relationship" of "equally immature family members." One "denies the immaturity" and overfunctions, the other "accentuates the immaturity"²⁸ and underfunctions. The overfunctioner assumes a strength or capability beyond their abilities as they assume or

²⁸ Bowen, p53.

accept more roles and responsibilities, while the underfunctioner surrenders all agency to the other. In large family groups, there are enough people to counter or temper the overfunctioner's anxious attempts to take on much more than they can comfortably handle, but when the group size diminishes and the number of people available to take on a role in the group reduces, an overfunctioner will often rise to fill the gap to the initial relief of many.

As Bowen describes²⁹, when the group's emotional maturity and general confidence are low, there is a substantial risk that the rest of the group will enable the creation of overfunctioners by surrendering their responsibilities and subsequently losing any remaining confidence in their abilities. It is a common and disappointing phenomenon found in many churches. Rather often, it is the clergy who are the overfunctioners in a parish, tending to have a personal belief that only they can do the task in question³⁰. As the numbers reduced at St Barnabas', this tense and uncomfortable situation was evident, and it made it even harder to encourage prospective parishioners to remain in the congregation.

Although difficult, it is possible to interrupt the cycle of over and underfunctioning. Bowen suggests that "it is far easier for the overfunctioning one to tone down the overfunctioning than for the poorly functioning one to 'pull up.'"³¹ This assertion may be true, but it requires the overfunctioner to acknowledge the anxious

²⁹ Bowen, *ibid.*

³⁰ In my awareness of FST, I try to delegate and to be aware of overfunctioning self-talk.

³¹ Bowen, p155.

emotional imbalance and an awareness that an issue exists. While their self-talk remains dominant with the message “*I am the only one who can do...*” then there is no chance that the overfunctioner can initiate a change in the status quo.

For the over and underfunctioning cycle to reduce, the underfunctioner might need to step up and overcome their anxious self-talk of “*I am useless at...*”. Stepping up in this way takes courage from both the leader and the underfunctioner and requires extended support for the underfunctioners. In direct opposition to the overfunctioner, the leader can support the chronically uncertain family members to achieve simple tasks that had become the sole domain of the overfunctioner. The best strategy for this is to remain as calm as possible, for any signs of heightened emotion could escalate the situation, and to be honest, this is not for the faint-hearted! Friedman called this attitude a “non-anxious presence,”³² and Steinke explains that for the leaders, it involves “engagement, being there and taking the heat if need be, witnessing the pain and yet not fighting fire with fire.”³³ The leader needs to have sufficient self-definition to stand up to the overfunctioner while supporting the nervous underfunctioner to attempt a particular task. It takes courage³⁴ to face up to an anxious parishioner, who feels the weight and undue responsibility of so many tasks resting on their shoulders alone, who complains about their workload but cannot work out how to share the load. It is an indicator of an overfunctioner that when offered assistance, they see it as a personal slight and respond

³² Friedman, *Generation to Generation: Family Process in Church and Synagogue*, p2.

³³ Steinke, *Uproar: Calm Leadership in Anxious Times*, p51.

³⁴ The dedication of this paper includes a passage adapted from 2 Timothy 1.6–7 that has given me strength in serving a parish. It begins with the phrase “*God did not give us a spirit of cowardice...*”

in a defensive, even aggressive way. Although facing up to the overfunctioner is a daunting prospect, it is not an impossible situation, and that with time and small steps, the emotional balance in the group can become more stable and less prone to reactive actions. Friedman has a less confrontational but cruel suggestion for a chronic overfunctioner; he suggests “paradoxically loading [the person] up for more involvement and quoting them publicly at every turn,”³⁵ Friedman noted a high likelihood that the person would eventually decide to slow down. Perhaps Friedman hopes that even the overfunctioner will change their self-talk and begin to look for someone else to take some of their tasks. There are other kinder and less daunting means of changing the skewed emotional balance in a family, which will be discussed later. However, this paradox's introduction is reminiscent of Friedman’s advice to leaders to avoid stumbling into inflexible seriousness, ultimately increasing anxiety.³⁶

The two parishes recombine

In the early 2000s, the people of St Mark’s were searching for a new vicar, and they approached Reverend Phil, the incumbent Vicar of St Paul’s and St Barnabas’ with a proposition. Since attendance, and therefore income from giving, was beginning to reduce in both parishes, they found it hard to support a full-time vicar, so why not share the same vicar across two parishes? Recombining was an antidote to the growing financial pressure each parish was beginning to experience as costs went up and attendance numbers went down. Both Parish Vestries (the previous term for Parish

³⁵ Friedman, *Generation to Generation: Family Process in Church and Synagogue*, p210.

³⁶ Friedman, *Generation to Generation: Family Process in Church and Synagogue*, p50.

Council) supported this idea, and at first, the vicar divided his time between the two parishes and chairing a Vestry in each parish. Three churches were sharing one vicar once again, but very little else.

There was a high degree of duplication in the two parishes; Vestries, op shops, community halls, and social groups, and it made sense to unify the parishes once more to make the whole parish run more efficiently. Two years later, the three churches formally combined into one parish under an umbrella name that reflected the three churches' geographic location. In the pioneer days of 1856, St Mark's was the central church in a parish that stretched eight miles across the entire Bellarine Peninsular and back towards Geelong. With frequently redrawn parish boundaries, St Mark's location was now at the furthest point of the parish away from the city of Geelong, and it spread across the neck of the peninsular, so they called it Bellarine Gateway Anglican Parish.

Unification still in progress

The parish had a unified name, and a single Vestry managed it, but the unification seemed to stop at the level of parish leadership. The motivation for recombining was an economic, not spiritual, decision, and the two parishes may never have considered it if they had not been under financial anxiety. Perhaps this is why the idea was not wholeheartedly embraced by either of the two original parish congregations. They had been successfully independent parishes for many years, the previous cut-off was complete, and the recombination may have felt artificial, even imposed on the congregations. The present Vicar joined the parish thirteen years after the reunification, and apart from the Parish Council, there were still two sets of everything; social clubs, Sunday morning services, and even two op shops. Although the parish had combined to

save on the cost of two full-time vicars, the two sets of competing Sunday morning services meant that an additional part-time priest was required to cover all of the worship services. The parish still offered double Easter and Christmas services so that it was entirely possible to worship at one end of the parish and have minimal awareness of the church family cousins just down the road. There was also a Sunday worship team moving between four Sunday services to ensure that the vicar spent equal amounts of time at all three churches each month. The plan was that the Vicar took two services in St Mark's one week and one service at St Paul's, followed by one at St Barnabas' on the second week. The part-time priest covered the services that the Vicar was not rostered take on a particular week. Swapping from one end of the parish to the other each week meant that preaching and pastoral care were disjointed at best.

It takes a lot of effort and commitment for parishes to integrate and begin considering themselves more than just a group of distant cousins. Fifteen years after the parish had officially combined, a few parish council members were asked how they related to the parish. Most said that they belonged to St Mark's, St Paul's, or St Barnabas', and it was only the two lay ministers who served in all three churches who identified as being part of the Bellarine Gateway parish. The parish seemed content that as a combined parish, they held four annual services all together on the fifth Sunday of the month, and about half of the regular Sunday worshippers attended them. These might as well have been ecumenical services when different churches or denominations get a chance to meet, worship together, then go their separate ways, and they did very little towards forming a more cohesive joint identity.

It is a fair assumption that there was tension at the level of parish leadership. The bulk of the parishioners had no sense of belonging to the combined parish, but the Vestry was trying to serve them all. The Vestry formation also reflected the elder sister dynamic once again, with more Vestry members elected from St Mark's than the other two churches. In the Vicar's first year serving the parish, she suggested holding combined services at Christmas, thinking that this was a natural and friendly time to be together to worship. Instead, she unleashed anger from both ends of the parish. She had stumbled upon and disturbed a finely tuned parish balancing act!

A three church parish, a perfect triangle

In many ways, St Mark's was emotionally distant from St Paul's and St Barnabas', and the tensions associated with tribalism were not far from the surface. The difficulties between the three churches, or two churches and the vicar, can be understood using one of the more famous principles of FST; triangulation.

Bowen defined the concept of triangling³⁷ for three people but continuing with the case study analogy of considering the sibling churches as emotional units, each with their particular mass egos; the same concept can be applied to three churches. Bowen describes how a "triangle is a natural way of being for people."³⁸ On a "broad descriptive level, a two-person relationship is emotionally unstable, with limited adaptability for dealing with anxiety and life stresses. It automatically becomes a triangular emotional system with a

³⁷ Roberta M Gilbert, *The Cornerstone Concept: In Leadership, in Life* (Stephens City, VA, USA: Leading Systems Press, 2014), p253.

³⁸ Bowen, p399.

much higher level of flexibility and adaptability with which to tolerate and deal with anxiety.”³⁹ Triangles can function quite well, up to a point. When an anxious pair brings a third party into their conversation or activities to help relieve their discomfort, the tension or anxiety is passed onto the triad’s new member. Once the triangle becomes established, the tension tends to move around the triangle. It is possible to be part of a triangle, resisting the anxious energy, and still acknowledge its existence. Resisting, though, requires tact and an awareness of one’s own ability to be part of the group but not be pulled into dramas or taking sides.

One member of the triad will often be excluded from a previous pair in favor of a third, which effectively happened to St Paul’s. For over ten years, St Barnabas’ and St Paul’s had worked through their tensions, but when St Mark’s recombined with them, the dynamics changed. Between St Barnabas’ and St Mark’s, it appears that the leaders tacitly decided that the hundred-year-old St Paul’s was too small, too old, and too expensive to maintain. It was never official policy, but the result was that St Paul’s was not used to host the other two churches for combined services or parish events. It would have been a tight fit, but the numbers gathered for the combined services were not huge. Expenditure on St Paul’s maintenance was minimal, and it began to look badly neglected. It is not clear whether that the parish leaders had entirely thought through their strategy. They blocked spending on the heritage-protected building, and their success caused them to forget their parish and community responsibilities for the place. It was not their stated intention to allow the building to crumble, but perhaps they hoped the place would

³⁹ Bowen, p400.

become too run down to use as a worship center and that it would simply close. The parish leaders, however, had forgotten about the legacy of Deaconess Moore. She was the determined lady who ensured that the St Paul's people did not forget their identity and campaigned to reopen the church in the post-WWII years. The people in St Paul's were an equally determined group, and they kept on meeting in the church and kept on welcoming people into their midst. The lack of focus and expectations laid on St Paul's continued to ensure that they would act like the youngest sibling, free of anxious burdens and able to welcome new people with a lightness that neither of the other two churches was able to provide.

In situations of triangling, the group who feels excluded will respond to their increasing sense of anxiety following their emotional maturity. Where a low emotionally mature family group might fuse to repel all strangers, a more mature group can find strength in a renewed sense of identity and a common cause. As a group who previously exhibited the resilience of an independent younger sibling, St Paul's family group pulled together and managed to continue welcoming visitors. The seriousness exhibited in the other more anxious congregations was not present; in fact, St Paul's prided themselves on their ability to adapt when there were last-minute changes in the weekly worship service. This emotional maturity helped them face the inevitable closure of their church discussed but not finalized for over twenty years, and the group's higher self-differentiation helped them function as generous leaders when a new congregation was ultimately formed.

The parish considers splitting once more

Only one year after beginning in the parish, the Vicar was absent from the parish for an unplanned and extended period of several months. When she returned, she experienced some problematic emotional reactivity as the group responded to her abrupt cutoff from them. Anxieties were increasing, and the Vicar's absence compounded the tension. The dramatic result of this was another threatened split of the parish family. It makes intuitive sense, which Bowen confirms,⁴⁰ that once a group such as a parish has cut itself off from the rest of the family group as a means to control their anxiety, there is a strong likelihood that they will employ this strategy as a repeated pattern in following generations. Faced with the parish splitting once more, the Vicar pulled out the parish histories and, in an attempt to discover past patterns generated the timeline included in Appendix A, figure 2. The timeline shows two or three repeated cycles of splitting and rejoining, and it appeared that if the same pattern was going to repeat itself, then the parish in 2017 was about due for another split.

The parish engaged an external facilitator from the Diocese and called a meeting to address the situation. The anxiety was chronic and high. The Vicar was aware of several parishioners who openly discussed splitting the parish despite the financial, almost suicidal, impracticalities. It took almost nothing to upset people in the preceding weeks, and anxious triangles formed as parishioners huddled together to discuss what would be the *right* way to proceed. Parishioners felt pressured to take a stand 'for' or 'against,' and there was no space for calm conversation about the implications of such a

⁴⁰ Bowen, p382.

move with St Mark's going its own way and St Paul's and St Barnabas' remaining together.

The parish, as an emotional family system, was in trouble. The balance had skewed towards fusion, and the togetherness force was displayed through herding behavior, with people forming 'camps'. This type of anxious behavior is an indicator of low levels of self-differentiation, with people giving up their independence to conform with their group's opinion on the situation. A leader needs to be aware of the rigidity of thought, lack of independent decision making, and the undercurrent of pressure to be part of a group and consider them signposts to predictable responses in a high anxiety environment. The worst thing to do is to attempt to resolve the series of complaints and criticism as they occur. However, when the leader is in the middle of the same emotional maelstrom, it is tough to see much at all. The Vicar could sense the pressure to pick a side, and it was hard to resist the strong togetherness force. Friedman recommends that before making decisions, a leader needs to collect as much information as possible,⁴¹ which she tried to do. The Vicar created a booklet of background information, parish history, and some attendance and financial information to permit informed conversation. By focusing on the problem's symptoms, the document fed the anxiety, and some of the parish leaders queried its veracity instead of using it as a conversation starter. The Vicar had tried to *fix* the problem instead of addressing the underlying emotions in the system, and when she began to defend her booklet, she also joined the tense ranks of anxious parishioners. It was not her greatest hour as a leader.

⁴¹ Friedman, *A Failure of Nerve: Leadership in the Age of the Quick Fix*, p246.

One positive aspect of the booklet has remained visible for three years. The timeline, included in Appendix A, was first used in the information booklet. It was later printed as a two-meter-long mural and is now on display in St Barnabas' church. At the outset of its creation, the Vicar had expected to create a diagram reminiscent of an underground transportation map, with new churches joining the 'main line' across the parish's lifetime. Instead, having never been told about the twists and turns of the parish history, she discovered a very different pattern that has remained a useful teaching tool. Although the Vicar had a lot to learn about being a self-differentiated leader, there was an instinctive desire to connect and hear the parishioner's stories. She wanted to hear from those who had witnessed the repeated cycle of Cut-off and reconciliation and invited the veteran parishioners⁴² to share photographs and stories that helped bring the dry historical reporting to life.

Cutoff averted

At the meeting led by the Diocesan-appointed facilitator, parishioners were split into groups and asked to provide recommendations on the parish's structure and future. Some participants recalled speaking for the first time to fellow parishioners who worshipped at one of the other churches. The Vicar was disappointed to realize how strongly people had resisted mixing in the past, despite multiple opportunities for so many years. The parish roll had ninety names, the Vicar knew them all, but many parishioners did not. The tentative conversations began in the groups, but the forces of anxious fusion were so dominant on that day that some people were too nervous about

⁴² In a parish with an average age is 78, one must be careful with terms like 'veteran' parishioners.

speaking out, so only the loudest and most confident opinions in the gathering were heard. The strong cutoff emotions were resisted, but not desires to stay together, but by the fear of the unknown. No decisions on revising the structure or on strategy were possible. The facilitator, who saw that very little could be achieved, recommended that the parish continue trying to talk and ended the meeting.

The meeting felt like a failure. In hindsight, managing not to split the parish was a good result, but the inconclusive finishing point highlighted that the parish was chronically fused and powerless to move forward. The acute anxiety of the day increased the background levels of chronic anxiety. Something had to change.

It was hard to discern the next move when the parish felt beset by problems. The Parish Council and Vicar agreed to let things calm down for a while and focus on worship and pastoral care. Steinke has seen many congregations with these challenges; "congregations that are focussing too much on their conditions expect to see problems, deficiencies, and deficits. [...] They are too anxious to be able to see clearly and function differently."⁴³ The parish needed to find a way to see more clearly; avoiding the topic provided some temporary respite from the high drama, but the problems and issues were still there.

The issue that seemed to block many decisions at Parish Council and minimized the potential for any outward-looking mission was that of St Paul's future use. The small church was in a poor state of repair, but for years a small subgroup (formed mainly of St Mark's people) in Parish Council had repeatedly countered and diverted the issue of

⁴³ Steinke, "When Congregations Are Stuck," p388.

spending money in St Paul's. Their issue was why did the parish need St Paul's and St Barnabas' when they were physically only a few minutes apart by car? It was a valid question that the Parish Leaders had asked with no resolution for over twenty years, and no one wanted to make the fateful decision to close St Paul's. It remained a valid question, but it did not consider the faithfulness of the people who worshiped in the church, the fact that it was the most vibrant of all four Sunday services, and the parish group's goodwill that spread within the parish.

A pivotal moment

This paper's thesis explores how responsible leadership can mitigate anxiety caused by a change of some sort in a church family. The first step in achieving the acceptance of change is to empower the leader to become more confident, more self-aware, and therefore more responsible. As was mentioned previously, the leader has a significant role in maintaining a family system's emotional balance, so even small changes to the leaders' performance will assist the parish as a whole. Bowen's clinical experience affirms the strategy of working on the leader's performance and differentiation as a starting point to managing anxiety in a family group. In his book *Family Therapy in Clinical Practice*⁴⁴, Bowen talked about his change of approach when he stopped attempting to treat the most symptomatic person in a highly anxious and emotionally reactive family group. Instead, he focused his energies on the person with the best potential, who already displayed some self-awareness and emotional resources. "The basic notion of this has to do with finding a way to start some change in the deadlocked

⁴⁴ Bowen, p177.

family; with finding a way to get into contact with family resourcefulness and strength and to get out of contact with the sickness morass; and with getting some differentiation to rise out of the family quagmire. Actually, if it is possible to get some differentiation started in one family member, it can loosen up the entire family system."⁴⁵

Shortly after the fateful Consultation that almost resulted in the parish splitting, the Vicar committed to improving her performance as a parish leader. She began working with a coach trained in FST and engaged in formal ministry education at Drew University to improve her parish leadership skills. The parish had agreed some months previously to join a Diocesan Parish Renewal project, and as part of the project, each parish leader met regularly with a coach. It seems that the strategy of working with the leader to improve the whole parish group was straight out of Bowen's playbook. Although the parish was still slowly working through renewal ideas, coaching the leaders was a very effective strategy for the parish and Vicar. As the Vicar learned more about FST, she became aware of the anxious forces around the Vicar in the parish family system. She had an opportunity to become more aware of the whole parish's homeostatic emotional balance, which included herself. It quickly became evident that the parish needed to do some structural reorganization before launching into any missional renewal project that would need the emotional resources that were engaged in internal struggles.

⁴⁵ Bowen, p177.

Beginning to lead the parish through change

In 2019, the situation was a little different from previous years. However, some things had not changed: St Paul's was now in need of a large amount of money to bring it back into a state of good repair; the tensions in the over /underfunctioning cycle at St Barnabas' had reduced the congregation to single figures most weeks; the parish still attempted to act as two discrete parishes under the leadership of one Vicar; the retention or conversion rate of visitors to potential parishioners was low, and the average age was now mid-seventy years old. That was the bad news, but there were glimmers of hope too. Despite the low retention rate, those newly committed to the parish unsurprisingly possessed more energy than many long-term parishioners. On the parish electoral roll for that year⁴⁶, twenty percent had joined the parish in the preceding four years, and they effectively formed over forty percent of the council.⁴⁷ The Parish Council in 2019 had a higher level of self-differentiation than had been apparent for some years: that is a shorthand way of describing a group of wise and independent thinkers. At the beginning of the year, the Vicar encouraged them to be the bravest Parish Council for at least twenty years. She felt optimistic that they would finally resolve some of the chronic anxiety present in the parish and decide St Paul's future. Initially, the Parish intended to use the available Diocesan strategies to kick start some parish growth but quickly realized that nothing would change unless the Council had the support of the parishioners. So the Parish Council agreed to start with some less ambitious steps. As

⁴⁶ The numbers were staying steady despite the 20% of new members. In that year, eleven left or died, and twelve joined as parish members.

⁴⁷ At the start of the year, nine councillors were appointed. Three were relatively new parishioners, and two others were absent for most of the year.

Anglicans, the Parish Council makes decisions on behalf of the parish in consultation with the Vicar,⁴⁸ but there was a sincere desire to know the parish's mind. Using skills learned through the Vicar's DMin course work, Council decided to talk with the parishioners using World Cafe⁴⁹ Conversation techniques. This technique is a recognized method to enable large numbers of people to propose and share ideas in small conversational settings in groups of four; the participants move tables after each round of question and resulting conversation. This deliberate mixing technique makes it possible to discern and agree on goals and strategies for the whole group. Although somewhat doubtful, Parish Council agreed to use this technique to receive feedback from the parish in a less anxious environment. A meeting was set for June 2019 and was intentionally named the Parish Conversation, underlining the desire to hear from as many people as possible without raising anxiety levels. The goal was "*to provide Parish Council with three recommendations that will breathe God's Holy Spirit into the renewed mission and purpose of the Parish.*"

Defining the goal was a deliberate part of the Parish Council's preparations. FST suggests that clearly stating a group's principles and goals is an essential step towards reducing collective anxiety and improving the sense of self-differentiation.⁵⁰ For the

⁴⁸ Ken Spackman, *Anglican Diocese of Melbourne: Parish Governance Act 2013* (Anglican Diocese of Melbourne, 2014).

⁴⁹ Juanita Brown Brown, and David Isaacs, *The World Café: Shaping Our Futures through Conversations That Matter* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc, 2005).

⁵⁰ Craig Foster, "Conflict Resolution in the Workplace: A Case Study on Using Bowen Theory in Collaboration with the Bible," in *Bowen Family Systems Theory in Christian Ministry: Grappling with Theory and Its Application through a Biblical Lens.*, ed. Lauren Errington Jenny Brown (Sydney, Australia: Family Systems Practice & Institute, 2019), p181.

Parish Conversation, the goal statement indicated that this was not another pointless talkfest and that the outcomes would trigger some action. For weeks before the Conversation, the Vicar called the parish to pray actively and earnestly for the process, for everyone's contribution, and called for the Holy Spirit to be present within the group. The collective prayers were answered that day, and the Conversation was an excellent start to re-energizing the parish and regaining their trust. Ideas and themes emerged from the conversations around the small tables, and the participants voted for six topics that they would like to discuss in greater detail. An afternoon pop-up conference explored the topics, and the parish voted on the three recommendations sent to the parish council for further development. The groups were small enough to have the freedom to dream, and importantly, they had the courage to share those dreams.

The recommendations made to Parish Council

Two of the three recommendations made that afternoon called for significant changes to the parish's worship arrangements. There were currently four Sunday morning services: the popular 8am service in the run-down St Paul's Whittington; the barely viable 8am service in St Mark's Leopold; the dwindling 10 am in St Barnabas' Newcomb, and a well attended 10 am service at St Mark's Leopold. The recommended changes proposed that there would be one 8am service in St Barnabas' Newcomb and one 10am service in St Mark's Leopold. The new service times would cause all but one of the four weekly services to be changed, and implied disruption to everyone apart from those who met at 10am St Mark's. The parish would cease worshipping in St Paul's Whittington and amalgamate three Sunday services. In one afternoon, the parish had ended twenty years of indecision about St Paul's and resolved the question of what to do with two services

that had run out of energy. Without implicitly meaning to do so, the parish took a big step toward becoming a more integrated parish.

The third recommendation to the parish council was a call for unity that would provide opportunities to deepen the relationships across all four worshipping congregations, soon to be combined into two. Those who voted to make these changes would have been anxious about the anticipated backlash from the decision. Therefore, the call for unity was an anxious, fearful response to the proposed changes. Without analyzing their reasons, the parishioners felt the need to re-establish the parish family system equilibrium, and they instinctively wanted a focus on rebuilding parish unity and stability. The desire for stability is a desire for predictability and lower levels of anxiety. Therefore establishing a new balance in the family system when faced with a dramatic change justified the togetherness forces creating a new balance. Leaders need to be aware of this unconscious need to maintain a group's emotional balance, making it difficult to achieve lasting change in parish family system groups. It is also why there can be moments that are understood as sabotage when change occurs: the family system organism tries to maintain a known and familiar balance.

There was a real concern about the risk of an angry backlash, which was worrying. On the following Sunday morning, the Vicar had to gather her courage and control her anxiety when she announced the Conversation's decision to the 8am St Mark's congregation. It must be one of the most confronting ways that a leader must mitigate the anxiety of a group; to not flinch from explaining challenging and unpleasant situations to anxious people. Self-differentiation is considered a balance between becoming too entangled in the family's emotional togetherness forces and becoming too

distanced, and the leader's balance is revealed when sharing some difficult news of change. Ducking the issue would cause anxiety to build very quickly. For several years and as a group, 8am St Mark's family group had seemed wary of the Vicar's ministry, and they generally avoided activities with the other parish congregations. They were a serious but dwindling group who generally maintained the inherited St Mark's family characteristic of being suspicious of change. The avoidance tactic meant they had the least representation at the Conversation, which was disappointing. Consequently, there was no clear way of knowing how they would respond to the news that their church service would soon cease to exist in its current form.

Naturally, they were disappointed. For some, it was the last straw, and they stopped attending church, citing ill health or the desire for a different church style. The physical cutoff was distinct for some, while for others, it was more of a slow emotional cutoff, as they found the thought of driving an extra ten minutes to the other church too big a hurdle to jump. The Vicar was prepared for this and was relieved that almost three-quarters of that small congregation remained to worship in St Mark's church, and most later joined the new 8am service at St Barnabas.

At the Conversation, there had been an expectation that there would be some form of a decision to stop worshipping in St Paul's, but reducing four services to two services on a Sunday was a surprise. Regardless, the Vicar was determined to proceed through this change in as calm a manner as possible, but she was dubious about the potential for the three diverse groups of worshippers to form a new community. The Parish Council agreed on a date for the final day of worship services at St Paul's, and the hard work

began towards the thirteenth of October 2019 and the start of the new services on the following week.

Summary

Using Bowen FST to re-examine the parish narrative, it was possible to detect anxious behavior patterns that had passed down through generations of parishioners. When this understanding was applied to the ongoing change process, it became possible to anticipate their anxious behaviors and adapt the change process to their emotional maturity. This model may serve other faith communities who recognize that their congregations' character has developed over generations of worshippers.

CHAPTER THREE: RESPONSIBLE LEADERSHIP

This chapter continues the account of the parish changes, but with a different focus. In this section, the parish narrative illustrates how the vicar and her team completed the change process and reduced the parish's collective anxiety. The chapter concludes with two examples of how the leader of a community in change made personal changes that, although not necessarily apparent to anyone else, resulted in positive effects for the wider community.

Anecdotally, clergy observe that changes in churches often end in disaster, conflict, splitting, or acrimony. Friedman qualified this observation; “efforts to bring about change by dealing only with the symptoms, rather than process, never will achieve lasting changes”¹ in a family system. The Vicar decided to use FST in the context of the proposed parish change, and with her coach's assistance, to focus on the process rather than individual incidents. FST requires a leader to take responsibility for their self-differentiation, which has a positive effect flowing out across the community. The efforts made by the leader have several outcomes; the parish can accept change in a healthier, more lasting way, and the vicar can focus on fulfilling their assigned role of ministry instead of being hampered by stress and anxiety. The factors identified to aid the mitigation of anxiety were being the less anxious presence in a family system group and taking responsibility for one's anxiety, which incorporated developing an attitude of forgiveness and being aware of inevitable sabotage acts.

¹ Friedman, *Generation to Generation: Family Process in Church and Synagogue*, p202.

BEING A LESS ANXIOUS PRESENCE

FST does not provide a quick answer to leaders' ambitions, nor is it a leadership theory that will fix all the parish problems. It does, however, help the leader to become the less anxious presence in a group. Creech explains that "Bowen theory provides a way of thinking about and understanding anxiety."² It takes hard work and concerted effort to change how a leader approaches a situation and not succumb to the forces of anxiety that can prevent clear thought or responsible actions. Bowen's FST provides some principles for this different way of thinking, so people often refer to their self-differentiation journey as developing an FST mindset. In approaching the parish change process, some operating principles were proposed, and both the parish council and Vicar agreed to follow them to reduce the anxious response to various situations.

The primary principle that determined any other action is to '*take responsibility for your anxiety and emotional reactivity,*' but at the same time '*remain in thoughtful contact with the parishioners*' and '*be curious, ask questions.*' The final two principles address how the leaders interact with the rest of the parish: they must remain '*clear about the plans and their personal principles*' and, when possible, '*maintain a light touch and resist seriousness.*'

Be clear about the plans and personal principles

The leadership team committed to the proposed changes: stopping the worship services in St Paul's and beginning a new 8am service at St Barnabas'. Parishioners were encouraged to understand that change takes longer than one day and that the transition

² Creech, p10.

period takes much longer. Preparations were made for the weeks leading up to the last worship service in St Paul's, known as the Big Day (the pivotal moment of change), and the time of transition in the weeks after the Big Day when people would begin the work of settling into new or strange routines. The Vicar and council wanted to begin mending some of the previous hurt caused by Cut-off, so ex-parishioners and clergy were invited to visit and participate in the day. Many took the chance to return and catch up with people they had not seen for years.³ It was appropriate to have a Diocesan presence to give weight to the changes, and the Wardens welcomed Archdeacon Jill McCoy and the regional Bishop, Bishop Kate Prowd, to officiate.

The Vicar directly communicated to the parishioners through sermons and the weekly newsletter reflections as decisions were made about the planned change. In making the change, the Vicar described how the whole parish was traveling towards an unknown destination that would take firmer shape as the Big Day approached. William Bridge's book "*Managing Transitions*" used the story of the Israelites being led by Moses through the Wilderness to the Promised Land.⁴ Inspired, the Vicar used the theme of Moses and the Israelites approaching the Red Sea as a metaphor for the process of change and transition. "*We are getting closer to the Red Sea; today is the day when we walk on dry land with the sea towering on both sides; today we begin walking up the beach on the far side of the Red Sea into an unknown future,*" and so on. In the weeks

³ Some healing work was achieved to restore those who had cut off and ultimately a couple of those guests return to worship in the parish.

⁴ William Bridges, and Susan Bridges, *Managing Transitions: Making the Most of Change* (Boston, USA: D Capo Press, 2017), p49.

preceding the Big Day, the plan continued to be refined, and people felt sufficiently confident to submit ideas for The List. The List was a dynamic document that grew and developed as parishioners gave the leadership team ideas of how they would like to see the change happen and specific ideas for the Big Day. It moved the ownership of the change into the middle of the family system, and some excellent ideas were suggested. The List's transparency helped reduce the anxious triangles that form when information is seen as privileged or limited in access.

Take responsibility for personal anxiety

As a parish leader in an environment of change, the Vicar encouraged the parishioners to know that their anxious feelings were acceptable and expected. Privately, she was concerned that there could be problems, but the Vicar kept up a brave face and maintained the mantra of taking responsibility for her anxiety. The learning curve of putting the FST concepts into practice was rugged and steep, but the personal investment made in this transition time was worth it. This case study's critical point was that in the Vicar keeping her anxious response in check, a calming effect was achieved among the parish. The sense of reduced anxiety or calm enabled the parishioners to be less fused and more open to the ideas presented to them.

As a consequence, the reactivity of the parish was less than had been feared. As Creech notes, "a calmer leader can help others react less anxiously."⁵ What Bowen, Friedman, and other FST practitioners say is that calmness is catching. The Vicar kept in calm contact with the parishioners and did not succumb to efforts to draw her into

⁵ Creech, p39.

anxious triangles nor allow herself to self-soothe by overfunctioning anymore than possible. She found writing and preaching on the theme of transition particularly helpful, clarifying her thoughts through theological reflections, and also resorted to a great deal of praying. Roberta Gilbert talks of a leader who lives responsibly with their anxiety and reactivity, describing it thus: “When anxiety rises, the leader works harder than usual to be the calm logic at the table. Speaking after others have been heard, she is firm, defining self clearly and logically. Where the leader is not sure of the way to go, one can honestly say that, and ask for more time for the issue to simmer in people's thinking.”⁶ This image appealed to the Vicar and provided an aspirational goal. The atmosphere at Parish Council meetings reflected the effort of the whole council, they were calm and consistent, and no one was deliberately shamed, belittled, or excluded. For this way of working together to be effective, everyone needed to remain calm, but the pressure was still immense on some days.

Remain in thoughtful contact with the parishioners.

The Vicar remained in thoughtful contact with the parishioners and made herself available for any conversations that the parishioners desired. The List was one way to ensure clear communications with the parishioners. The priority was to maintain frequent contact with the Wardens and Parish Council members, and consequently, they provided a remarkable service to the parish. It was not an easy time for them, and they received criticism for both their's and the Vicar's actions. This classic form of triangling caused

⁶ Gilbert, Chap 2, location 513 of 2883.

them to experience a subtle anxious force when some of their church friends, who were disappointed about the changes, needed them to remain on *their* side.

The four congregations were supported through their different needs, and the Vicar recorded their diverse responses to demonstrate how leadership needs to be sensitive and flexible in maintaining contact with different groups.

The people who met each week for the 8am St Mark's service were upset about losing their service and could not understand why it had to stop. They were a serious group who loved their early morning traditional service, using the standard prayerbook liturgy in a chilly and poorly lit church, with about eight or nine worshippers. Due to the small number of attendees, they were each able to sit on an individual pew, quietly praying and relishing the absence of music and other distractions. The prospect of moving ten minutes down the road to a modern light-filled worship space to share time with the friendly St Paul's and St Barenabas' people, who loved singing and also used a large screen for the words (that enabled the Vicar to tinker with occasional liturgical variations), was challenging even to contemplate. Some newer members to 8am St Mark's encouraged them to be open to the change, but it was the influence of a long-term parish stalwart who sealed the deal. He had occupied parish leadership positions for so many years that very few others would have dared to go against him if he had not moved to the new service. Until the day itself, it was hard to gauge what they would do for, as a group, they were silent and guarded in their response. Unsurprisingly, this group displayed the most emotional reactivity and emotional Cut-off in their silent way, as these were the people who had not taken part in the original Conversation decisions. They may have felt disempowered and somewhat swept along by the process. To engage them, the

Vicar asked what items they wanted to be included on the List that was developing as part of the process of creating a new 8am service. “No singing” was their uncompromising response. They were asked to provide names of past parishioners and clergy that should be invited, but in their mode of emotional cutoff from leadership, they declined to help. Unfortunately, some former parishioners later chastised the Vicar that they had not received an invitation, but it was too late to remedy. A few of the 8am St Mark’s group cut off entirely from the parish, and it was best to let them go, as this was their way of dealing with an excess of anxiety regarding the changes.

The atmosphere at 8am St Paul’s was very different. They grieved the church closing, but the decision to close had lifted a load of uncertainty from their shoulders. Their response was similar to that of a family who has watched a sick person dying for years before realizing that they only have a few days left before the family member dies. There is sadness, but there is also a burst of energy to finish outstanding issues in time. The St Paul’s people accepted the long-overdue decision and resolved to make a good ending. Like the dying person’s family, they focussed on the immediate tasks ahead of them. They made some constructive contributions to the List of ideas about the liturgy for the Big Day. They listed the things to be done before the doors were permanently closed, and it revealed that although they had deeply desired to keep the church open, the St Paul’s folk were sufficiently mature to accept the decision of closure. The elderly congregation was still cheerful, faithful, and healthy, but the building was not. A few years before, some ideas had been suggested to the whole parish by the Vicar and Wardens to redevelop the St Paul’s, but basically, there were insufficient emotional, physical, or financial resources to follow them through.

As a family group, St Paul's had already worked out what they would do if the little church closed, and now they were ready! They quickly requested the relocation of the St Paul's centenary stained-glass windows to St Barnabas' almost as a condition of their acceptance. The St Paul's family were enthusiastically supportive of the idea to invite past parishioners and clergy and put effort into tracking down people who had cut off many years before. They displayed a sense of hope, even excitement for whatever God had in store for them. The difference between the singing St Paul's and the silent St Mark's was highlighted for the Vicar repeatedly. How on earth would these two sets of cousins get on?

In some ways, it was not immediately apparent that the 10am St Barnabas' church family had lost anything in the change, but of course, they had lost their usual time slot of 10am, and the anticipated influx of people would drastically change their dynamic. The older members of the parish demonstrated their anxiety regarding the change by worrying out loud – would they manage to get up in time for church when the weather turned cold? The group, which rattled around the generous worship space, was a diminishing family of nervous under-achievers with one anxious over-achiever and a few emotionally mature members who had resisted joining the anxious reciprocal cycle of over and under-functioning. The St Barnabas' church family agreed to give it a go; what did they have to lose?

For a couple of years, a mid-week service held at St Barnabas' had already been mixing members from the different church families, and that group was excited to create a new family in St Barnabas'. The spirit of welcome and hospitality was genuine and heartfelt. Perhaps the St Barnabas' people felt rescued from the threat of closure

themselves. The St Barnabas' people added an excellent idea to the List: a symbolic guard of honor to welcome people when they arrived from St Paul's on the day of the last service. The plan was to begin the service at St Paul's and then halfway through the service, in a moment heavily laden with symbolism, the people and items of liturgical importance would move across to St Barnabas' to complete the service. When the Bishop, guests, and parishioners arrived carrying the important symbols of worship, the 10am St Barnabas' folk would line the aisle and form a guard of honor. It was a joyful moment after months of preparation. Interestingly, the overfunctioner sat it out, perhaps feeling a little unsure about this considerable change to her environment.

In preparation for the new 8am, and 10am congregations, the 10am St Mark's people were encouraged to consider how to welcome some of their 8am brothers and sisters. It was anticipated that the *place* of worship would have a stronger pull on where the people would gather to worship rather than the *time*, but in fact, time was the most important factor in how they organized their Sunday worship. Parishioners were challenged to mix up the seating, not be fixed to their favorite pew, and welcome the new arrivals so that the distinction between 8am and 10am would begin to fade. Many churches have experienced some form of amalgamation in which a person's seating location inferred which church or social group the person originated from, and the only new things created in those situations were closed cliques. As it turned out, not many 8am'ers moved to the 10am service preferring the service time over the location, but those who did go to St Mark's sat in precisely the same position they had once occupied in the earlier service and obliged the 10am folk to adapt around them.

Some of the St Mark's 10am'ers found the change hard to accept. They sent a few letters of protest to the parish council on behalf of the 8am St Mark's people and caused some anxious triangles. Their balance was somehow knocked off too, but perhaps because they had no requirement to make as many changes as the other three groups, they had no way of relieving their anxiety and therefore responded with more reactivity than was anticipated.

Be curious, ask questions.

This whole episode in the parish narrative had started with curiosity, wanting to know what the parish wanted to do. The parish council and Vicar had designed a way of discerning the parish's thoughts through the Conversation and had acted on the people's recommendations responsibly. The leadership team wanted to be seen as trustworthy and not disappoint people, but the question remained: how to best communicate to parishioners that only God was in control of the whole change process? After prayer, the leaders agreed to keep trusting the ideas of the people and also their own. At several points, the people were asked, "what would you like to see happen during this process?" As they answered, their ideas were placed on the List.

The Vicar repeatedly wondered how to ensure that all four groups could experience a sense of welcome and inclusion. One of the wardens called the Vicar up in the month after the Big Day: the stained-glass window installer asked which way round to place the windows. That was a good question with many answers which served different purposes. The initial response was to place them in an internal glass wall that separated the church worship space from the entrance narthex so that the text was readable as one approached for worship. Facing the glass with the writing on the exterior

side seemed to be a good way of signaling how welcome the St Paul's people were into the St Barnabas' space. However, in the longer term, it was preferable not to reinforce a message that those St Paul's people were guests rather than an integral part of the new church family, so the windows were installed such that they were readable from the inside of the church.

Perhaps an addendum to this guideline of *Be curious, ask questions* would be the advice, *Be open to other people's questions*. Before the Big Day, someone asked the Vicar if it was possible to change the name of St Barnabas' to reflect the change in progress. Her response was, "Why not? Great idea!" A spectator at the next Parish Council would have laughed to see a room full of adults mumbling "St Paul and St Barnabas", "St Barnabas and St Paul", as they tried to work out which combination of names worked best. In the end, for biblical and historical reasons, St Paul came first in the name. The church was renamed, The Anglican Church of St Paul & St Barnabas, thus removing all those pesky apostrophes. The name change was welcomed by the new 8am St Paul & St Barnabas congregation as a positive and healing move.

Maintain a light touch, resist seriousness.

Humor was used to lighten the mood and reduce the anxiety-induced seriousness lurking in the Parish Council meetings. The parish council received a few letters containing requests, opinions, and objections. The parish council received the communications while maintaining a playful attitude and regarded them as opportunities to learn about the parishioner's concerns and perhaps find another idea to add to the list. The letters provided the Parish Council and Vicar with opportunities to work together and value the Parish Council's capabilities. They were determined to make the most of all

comments, positive or negative, realizing that even the complaining letters contained useful ideas and feedback, every correspondent was thanked, and any fresh ideas were added to the growing List of ideas.

Through the intention to maintain a light touch, an alternate way of approaching an over/underfunctioning cycle was revealed through the creation of reading rosters. In different parishes, the assignment of regular ministry roles on a roster for reading or praying, for instance, can have different weights or meanings. At St Mark's, the roster sometimes indicated a level of status and belonging in the church family. At St Barnabas', the pool of people with the confidence to face the overfunctioner's wrath for doing something 'wrong' was so small that no formal roster existed for the three potential readers. At St Paul's, it was used for indication purposes only: if the scheduled reader was absent, they were confident that another would step in and do their best at short notice without any risk of condemnation.

One of the ex-St Paul's people was asked to pull together a roster. The ex-St Paul's roster writer moved lightly between the three groups, encouraging, empowering, and even laughing them onto the roster. The roles and people were mixed, and no cliques or groupings were evident. The roster was displayed on a beautifully decorated page, which somehow helped people accept it. Nervous underfunctioners found themselves on the roster to do tasks that they had felt inadequate to do for many years, and the overfunctioner was included on the roster too - now just another person in the ministry team. The message was that everyone was valued for their contribution to the worship service, whatever their skill level. Without any of the previous emotional and anxious

responses, the overfunctioner calmed down, relaxed, and found that they were now part of the team.

The narrative of the changes to worshipping arrangements in the parish was used to demonstrate how a leadership team following a set of FST principles can effectively reduce anxiety experienced by the whole parish.

TAKE RESPONSIBILITY FOR ONE'S EMOTIONAL REACTIVITY.

It is encouraging how small changes on the leader's part can have a trickle-down effect on the leadership team and the rest of the congregation. Sometimes, the leader needs to make personal changes that may not be obvious to anyone else, but the results may be experienced more widely through their change in demeanor. Those small personal changes for the Vicar included becoming aware of inevitable acts of sabotage and developing an attitude of forgiveness. To conclude this chapter, two examples of the effect of those changes are presented.

Sabotage, when no good deed goes unpunished

A responsible leader who manages their emotional reactivity will mitigate the parish's anxiety, but what happens when the well-laid plans for change are sabotaged? Towards the end of the project, the Vicar was asked whether she had experienced any sabotage. Her impression of sabotage was from movies when bridges are blown up and so on, so she replied that she was unaware of any acts of sabotage. However, following further reflection and reading on the topic, the Vicar realized that sabotage had indeed occurred, but she had not been aware of it in those terms. Sabotage in a family system is a subtle yet predictable behavior with the potential to derail the whole planned change

process. However, the saboteurs do not act out of a sense of ill will but are mindlessly trying to restore their previous sense of homeostatic balance.

In the weeks leading up to the last day of worship at St Paul's, the Vicar heard a rumor that the elderly part-time assistant priest was planning to offer an alternate service to the 8am St Mark's people so that they would not need to move to the new 8am St Barnabas' service. The Vicar's initial response was anger and disappointment at his apparent disloyalty and subterfuge when it had been explained clearly to him that there would only be two services each Sunday and that this was one of the non-negotiable aspects of the proposed changes. At that moment, it was not recognized as anxious reactive sabotage but instead as Treason!

Friedman warns that there is a darker aspect to leading a community through change; somewhat wryly, he observed that "no good deed goes unpunished. A major difficulty in sustaining one's mission or vision is that others who start with the same enthusiasm will come to lose their nerve."⁷ Accusing others of losing their nerve is an uncompromising description of the anxious backlash experienced as part of the change process. However, this phenomenon of sabotage needs to be recognized, and preparations made for its occurrence. Recalling the existential struggle for stability exerted by a homeostatic system, leaders must anticipate some degree of pushback to their well-laid, clearly enunciated, and yet pastoral plans. Friedman reassures the beleaguered leader that sabotage is a "systemic part of leadership - part and parcel of the leadership process."⁸ He

⁷ Friedman, *A Failure of Nerve: Leadership in the Age of the Quick Fix*, p189.

⁸ Friedman, *A Failure of Nerve: Leadership in the Age of the Quick Fix*, p247.

explains that any change is only complete after the leader has “endured the resultant sabotage.”⁹ This systemic understanding of sabotage may place doubt in a leader's mind; if no push back is experienced, then can it be assumed that no change was made at all, and did the leader unwittingly comply with one faction's desires over another?

Responding from a place of anger, when she initially heard the rumor of the proposed extra service led by the retired priest, the Vicar was overcome by emotional reactivity and momentarily lost touch with her self-differentiation, her ability to forgive or even empathize. All the effort to be the less anxious presence succumbed to emotion, and she was rendered incapable of clear thought. As a form of subtle sabotage, it was effective and briefly diverted her from completing the goals stated in the change process.

In her heightened emotional response, the Vicar forgot that the retired priest was about to lose his income, his connection to the parish, and his role as a priest. In her snap anger at the situation, she forgot that he too was probably triangled by the emotional and disappointed 8am St Mark's people when they talked to him about finding another solution that would ease their anxiety. He was trying to help by suggesting that he could serve the parish by leading an alternate 8am service. It is quite likely that he was easing his anxiety by agreeing to help them, regardless of whether it was against the clearly stated plans or not. He lost his nerve to stay on course, choosing a course a path of lower anxiety rather than assisting the parish to achieve the new changes. Anxious sabotage attempts to protect the family system's homeostasis and is a mindless reaction to a sense

⁹ Friedman, *A Failure of Nerve: Leadership in the Age of the Quick Fix*, p247.

of threat or disruption. The Vicar wryly observed that her response was so predictable that Friedman could have been writing about her.

“The tendency of any leader when faced with this kind of crisis is to cease doing all that which had gone into differentiation. This is the moment when the adaptation pattern is likely to reverse itself and go in the direction of the most dependent and scared. This is the moment when a leader is most likely to have a failure of nerve and experience a strong temptation to seek a quick fix.”¹⁰

All the good work encouraging the parishioners to follow through with the changes ceased for a couple of weeks. In her anxiety and anger, she fused with the Wardens and insisted that they stop the retired priest from disrupting the change process. In the last year, though, the Vicar and the retired priest have remained in contact and have found new ways to rebuild their professional connection that was so severely tested.

In training given to clergy in the Anglican Diocese of Melbourne, there is a session on FST. Unfortunately, perhaps even ironically, it did not seem relevant or connect with the Vicar at the time, and therefore even if sabotage was mentioned, she had no reason to sit up and listen to the advice. Sabotage is seen in FST as a necessary part of the change process, and clergy are subject to sabotage frequently in their ministry life, yet this seems to be a dirty little secret that only a few people are willing to discuss. As a consequence, the Vicar was unprepared for this highly anxious and distressing part of parish ministry. This disappointing example of sabotage has been included in the case study to show how easily things can go wrong in a project that makes significant changes. Using FST is not a quick fix solution but positively affects a whole parish, given the leader's time and commitment to learning from their mistakes.

¹⁰ Friedman, *A Failure of Nerve: Leadership in the Age of the Quick Fix*, p247.

Developing an attitude of forgiveness

Christianity is a religion that recognizes the suffering of its imperfect people. Their corporate experience is that they form a huge Body of Christ, one big worldwide family, and part of learning to love neighbors, especially immediate neighbors, is to find a way to be reconciled with each other. There is a need to forgive people for the hurts they have caused, inadvertently or otherwise, rather than holding onto corrosive grudges. Complete reconciliation does require at least two parties, but individuals can make a start by being responsible for their actions. For in truth, that is all they are able to change. However, through an individual's low level of self-differentiation and their high emotional reactivity, they may have no concept of causing hurt to another by their actions.

When people feel threatened, off-balance, or affected by a change that they cannot control, there is a risk that they will react emotionally. FST suggests that just as the leader's actions significantly affect a family's homeostasis, when a group member lashes out in frustration or anger, the target will likely be that same leader. The feelings of anger or frustration about the balance-changing issue are rarely expressed, and instead, the questions, grumbles, or outright complaints will focus on their expectations of the leader, which may be unrelated to the change in question. Friedman refers to these as "content issues,"¹¹ and the complaints can be hurtful: questioning the leader's actions, their performance in ministry, or even the actions of the leader's family. Friedman lists the various themes of content questions, and ironically, they are as predictable as the reactive

¹¹ Friedman, *Generation to Generation: Family Process in Church and Synagogue*, p205.

behavior of a family group. They can include the leader's appearance, liturgical or preaching style, frequency of pastoral visits, or even the actions of the leader's family.

A leader can find themselves trying hard to *fix* the issue raised, feeling hurt or misunderstood in the process. It is easy to fall to the temptation of holding onto grudges for current and sometimes longstanding hurts, ultimately hampering or even preventing change from being successfully achieved by retarding the growth of healthy relationships within the family system. Some of those grudges can limit a leader's ability to connect with the very people who most need to be in a healthy relationship within the family system. As some of those hurts and slights compound over a length of time, leaders become increasingly reluctant to confront some of the parishioners or spend time with them to understand what in the parishioner's life had caused them to lash out in this way. Their unmanaged anxiety compromises their ability to be responsible pastoral leaders for the whole congregation.

As a leader learning about FST, the Vicar realized that the first step in becoming more effective and less anxious was to honestly face up to the grudges she had held so tightly. For her Christian integrity and the health of her soul, the Vicar needed to confront the hurts within her. Turning to FST, and with the help of a coach, she applied the rule to herself that a self-differentiated person must manage their reactivity while remaining in thoughtful contact with their community. After reading and praying on the subject, she realized that it was essential to forgive the people who had hurt her to begin to heal. Creech suggests that "forgiveness can be an act of differentiation. When we forgive, we go beyond the instinctive reactions that might demand revenge or justice. Forgiveness is a way of choosing to do the right thing, to act according to principle, regardless of what

others are doing to us.”¹² Although that is a helpful way of understanding forgiveness, the Vicar tried a different way. She spent time thinking and praying for the person who had hurt her. What did she know about them, her relation to them, and their connection within the parish family system. ? How had their connection become unbalanced?

The Vicar noted that FST did not create a forgiving heart within her, but it gave the Vicar the means to reconnect with some of her parishioners, be curious once more, find empathy, and enabled her to have the courage to let go of those anxiety-building grudges. William Temple said that forgiveness is relationship building and that it all comes down to building relationships with God *and* each other. He suggested that believers' attitudes need to be reconsidered, “not towards God, but towards His other children. He is always ready and eager to forgive, but how can He restore us to the freedom and intimacy of family life if there are other members of the family towards whom we refuse to be friendly?”¹³ Temple was right; it is all about a change of attitude or way of thinking. To truly forgive another, there needs to be a change in a person’s whole attitude, how they see the world, how they recognize God’s effect on us, and equally importantly, how they build relationships with others.

In finding forgiveness for others, the Vicar found a strategy to manage her anxiety and was no longer so fearful of their company. In short, she was able to be the effective and responsible leader that she desired to be. For as Charles Wesley wrote in his hymn

¹² Creech, p113.

¹³ William Temple, "Personal Religion and the Life of Fellowship, 1926," in *Love's Redeeming Work: The Anglican Quest for Holiness*, ed. Geoffrey Rowell, Kenneth Stevenson, and Rowan Williams (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2003), p583.

And Can It Be, “My chains fell off, my heart was free; I rose, went forth and followed Thee.”¹⁴ When a leader is no longer distracted or burdened by nursing grudges or avoiding difficult situations, then they can focus on the ultimate purpose of their ordination, to point others towards Christ. Their subsequent ministry, mission, teaching, and visiting becomes a blessing for the whole parish as they act as responsible leaders focusing on the *cure of souls* instead of being distracted by personal burdens due to broken relationships in the family system.

Summary

In summary, this chapter has demonstrated how a leader can mitigate anxiety by changing their attitude or way of leading. Although FST does not provide an exclusive framework for making these personal changes, FST is straightforward and relatively simple to put into action, particularly with the aid of a coach. It took a while and some practice for the Vicar to change the impulse to dive into the fray of emotional drama or be drawn into fixing problems that were not of her making, but progressively the results were tangible. The Vicar found that she stopped reacting defensively to challenging situations; the heat was removed from her interactions with the anxious parishioners, which lowered anxiety throughout the community.

¹⁴ Charles Wesley, *And Can It Be That I Should Gain*, ed. Wesley Milgate (Together in Song: Harper Collins, 1738).

CHAPTER FOUR: ACCEPTING THE CHANGE.

In previous chapters, the concept was explored whether a parish can behave analogously to a family system. With this understanding, Bowen Family System Theory (FST) was used as a lens to consider the reactive character of the four constituent congregations that formed the parish. By considering the congregations' response to disruption in terms of multigenerational emotional transmission, family projection processes, and the effect of sibling order, it was possible to see patterns in the reactivity of each of the three churches and their congregations. Having taken the time to form this awareness, leaders can use FST to act appropriately and responsibly within each interlocking family system. According to FST, this form of leadership reduces the adverse or distracting effects caused by anxious family group members. This chapter moves from theoretical considerations of FST to the parishioners' lived experiences and considers the next part of the thesis; when a parish accepts the changes. This chapter poses a question to the people who lived through the change: were the parishioners better able to accept the changes due to the leader's actions? This chapter discusses the qualitative research results gained by combining observations of the parishioners' actions with interviews of a relatively small sample of parishioners to answer that question.

INTERVIEWS WITH THE PARISHIONERS

Seventeen active members of the parish took part in separate interviews. Sixteen were white of Anglo-Australian or British background, and one was Asian-Australian; there were five males and twelve females. The gender split of five males and twelve females represented the gender distribution in the wider parish. Seventeen interviews may seem relatively modest, but in the middle of a Covid-19 lockdown, it represented close to half of the church's active members.

The people interviewed included seven members of the original leadership team¹, three clergy members associated with the parish, and seven parish members who had minimal input into the decision-making process. An attempt was made to select an equal number of interviewees from each of the original four worship services, but it was slightly skewed towards St Mark's congregations due to the parish council's makeup that had more St Mark's parishioners within it.

The hour-long conversational interview, based around a set of questions, followed the Drew University Institutional Review Board guidelines for ethical research, ensuring the respondents' anonymity and providing them with information at various stages in the interview process. The combination of interviews and observations did not fall into a particular qualitative research model; instead, it used narrative and ethnographic research techniques but was neither purely one nor the other. Given this mix of techniques, the comment made by Swinton and Moffat was reassuring. They observed that the “most effective way that practical theologians can use qualitative research methods is by developing an eclectic and multi-method approach which seeks to take the best of what is available within the accepted models of qualitative research, but is not necessarily bounded by any one model.”² This eclectic cherry-picking best describes the mixture of techniques used in this case study. It is helpful to appreciate that there needs to be a degree of flexibility when gathering information to understand a particular population. As part of this flexible approach, sufficient time was allowed in each interview to listen to each person's story and to give space for their responses to the set questions. The interview questions were

¹ Of the nine original parish council members, one was deceased and the another declined to take part in the interviews.

² John Swinton, and Harriet Mowat, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research* (London, UK: SCM Press, 2016), p48.

closed “predictive puzzle”³ style questions, testing whether the parishioners had accepted the changes by searching for behaviors they had observed during the transition period. If the changes had not been entirely accepted, then the Vicar was prepared to see several incidences of the anxious behaviors predicted by FST, but instead, only a low level of anxious behavior was reported. Instead, most parishioners took the opportunity to reflect more deeply on their experiences. Moschella reflects that “most people want to be heard. The aim of pastoral listening in ethnography is that speakers [...] become empowered.”⁴ Ironically, one interviewee felt sufficiently empowered to take the chance to be heard and to express their disappointment that they had felt unheard during the change process.

Conducting an ethnographic style of qualitative research requires the interviewer to remain reflexive. Moschella defines reflexivity as the need to “take seriously our own role in the research and our influence on the results.”⁵ In this particular situation, the questions were sent out in advance due to the need to conduct remote Covid-19 safe interviews using Zoom or telephone. The delay between receiving the questions and participating in an interview meant that the respondents had time to reflect and even rehearse their responses. The delay was not necessarily a negative, but it may have affected whether the parishioner gave a thought-out response that they considered the *right* answer instead of the more impulsive immediate answer they would have given if they had been asked the question with minimal notice. The interviewer needs to be aware of how people may self-correct their responses to their vicar-interviewer and

³ Mary Clark Moschella, *Ethnography as a Pastoral Practice: An Introduction* (Cleveland, Ohio, USA: The Pilgrim Press, 2008), p173.

⁴ Moschella, p141.

⁵ Moschella, p32.

may be reluctant to reveal to the interviewer that they had acted in (what one parishioner described as) an “ungracious” manner. Some people are anxious that their religious leaders only see them behaving in a loving, Christian manner and could edit their responses accordingly. This parish promotes a welcoming and less judgemental theology, but the social expectations of how to behave in front of the clergy are deeply ingrained. The interviewer can also affect the interviewee as a result of the interview itself. As an example of this influence, several weeks after the interview sessions, a parishioner was overheard by the Vicar reflecting on the change process with a new appreciation, using terminology gained through their participation in the interviews. As is often the case in qualitative research, the population itself is changed by engaging in the research.

During the transition time, the Vicar had generally not been aware of significant instances of anxious or ‘ungracious’ behavior, and the results of interviews confirmed that impression. Overall, the incidence of observed anxious behaviors was moderate to low, and none of them were so highly dysfunctional that they threatened to derail the changes. Female parishioners seemed more aware than the males of incidences of triangling when two parties would blame or exclude a third to relieve their stress. While more men reported being aware of fusion activities described as huddled conversations in car parks, feeling stuck or unable to speak out against the group consensus. The minimal reports of disagreements or conflict reflected that this is not a parish that quickly resorts to anger or conflict in anxious moments. It was surprising how few people reported observing over and under-functioning when the Vicar believed that this behavior had risked one of the congregations’ viability. It seemed to be an almost embarrassing secret; people avoided talking about it or only saw it as a series of unpleasant incidences rather than as systemic long-term anxious behavior.

In contrast, naming the behavior as over/under-functioning as defined by FST enabled the Vicar to step back and look at the behavior pattern rather than individual symptoms and people. Once the pattern had been described as over/under-functioning, it was no longer about one person seeming to throw their weight around. Instead, it was a rather tragic situation co-created by those involved to form a reciprocal cycle of over/under-functioning. It takes several well-meaning members of an anxious family system to load more and more responsibility onto one person, who increasingly is the only one available or capable of a particular task. Sadly, over time the over-functioner is pushed beyond their capability but finds themselves unable to let go of those responsibilities and tasks.

After the festivities of the last day of worshipping at St Paul's, when the door was shut on that chapter of the parish narrative, the work began to form two new worship service congregations. From the research results, St Mark's 10 am people found the change hardest to accept, which was interesting as the changes appeared to have a less direct or obvious effect on them. It is interesting to observe that St Mark's people gave responses that were more sensitized to the leader's actions, and they displayed slightly less resilience than their fellow parishioners who had joined the new congregation of St Paul & St Barnabas. One respondent observed that the opposition at St Mark's, particularly in the old 8am St Mark's, was systemic and had become their default response to any proposed change for many years. Although not as suspicious of change, responses in the interviews confirmed that their sister service St Mark's 10am shared some of this multigenerational resistance to change and was only a little less wary or anxious in its behavior. Perhaps participating in the actual labor of change and adaptation made it easier for the new 8am service members at St Paul & St Barnabas to work together and accept the change

than the less involved 10 am service members. Upon reflection, the challenge of change inevitably changes those affected, so naturally, those who are untested remain unchanged.

Overall, the interviews revealed a low incidence of anxious behavior, suggesting that the parishioners had accepted the changes lead by the Vicar, Wardens, and Parish Council. It was not, however, a unanimous acceptance. Some of the mistakes or missteps made showed how easily an ambitious project could go wrong, and the interviews gave people a pastoral moment to express their feelings of hope and disappointment. A couple of St Paul's parishioners lamented at the closing of their church. They had known that it was inevitable, but the interview was their chance to express their sadness. They did reflect that once the decision to close was made, they found a way to accept it and make the most of the situation. One parishioner summed it up as being both sad and exciting.

A regrettable mistake was made on that last day regarding closing the door at St Paul's. As described in the previous chapter, there had been careful attention paid to the important symbols of worship in St Paul's. Extensive plans were made regarding who would carry which items from St Paul's to St Barnabas' so that the symbols from St Paul's would be ceremonially carried up to the St Barnabas' altar through a welcoming guard of honor at the church. This part of the plan worked well, but a few disappointed parishioners mentioned the missed symbol of who closed St Paul's door. The Vicar had sent the Bishop and leaders of St Paul's ahead with the symbols of worship and thoughtlessly asked one of the Wardens to ensure that the place was locked before he left. That particular Warden had been part of the sustained campaign to close the church and block the maintenance of St Paul's. The Vicar could not have picked a worse person than him to be the one to be photographed shutting the door. The misstep was compounded when the photograph was printed with other images from the day. Their response to

the Vicar's mistake illustrated the St Paul's congregation; they had the resilience to recognize their disappointment, but it did not deter them from creating a new and positive congregation. If the family group had been more reactive or less emotionally mature, it could have instigated a large-scale cutoff and the new congregation's failure to thrive. This example demonstrates how critical emotional maturity is to whether change can be accepted and needs to be kept in mind when a leader begins to plan the change process.

One parishioner was absent from the parish from the day after the decision was made at the Conversation until the last service. That person did not 'travel' with the parish through the transition, and a year later, was still struggling with unresolved grief regarding the closure. Although one person does not prove a rule, it illustrates what could have happened without the vicar and parish councils' determination to lead responsibly and reduce the associated anxiety.

Summary of this section

The interviews revealed that the parishioners were aware of the vicar and parish leaders accepting the responsibility of leading through the changes. They reported being pleased about the opportunities to discuss and share ideas; they were generally satisfied with the ceremonies and actions in the last service at St Paul's and appreciated the chance to be reacquainted with folk who had left the parish; they were clear about the changes and aware of permission given to respectfully disagree with the plan. Affirming the interview results, one of the parish council members noted that there was no dissent in the council, and by the end of the process, there was no dissent in St Paul's either.

OBSERVED ACTIONS OF THE PARISHIONERS

As a parish leader, the Vicar had a unique perspective over different aspects of community life during the transition process. Researchers using ethnography as their qualitative research method need to be well embedded in a community to reflect on their image of the observed community. The parish felt familiar to the Vicar after serving for four years, so the research challenge was to “hold both the position of *outsider* and *insider* within the particular setting.”⁶ The parish recognized that the Vicar was recording the change process as a participant and *insider*, and the coaching she received on self-differentiation assisted in the process of stepping back and observing as an *outsider*. Over the past year, the Vicar observed that the parishioners were able to accept the changes aided by the parish leadership’s actions, despite a few problems or missteps along the way. Some of the signs of acceptance were almost immediate, while others revealed themselves during a challenging year in the parish. Overall the parishioners have found a new way to belong and a new way of worship, building this new group's character.

A Parish in Covid-19 Shutdown

It was indeed a challenging year: St Paul’s was closed for worship in October 2019, and the new 8am St Paul & St Barnabas congregation was still finding its feet and making significant progress when the first lockdown for Covid-19 took place with a week’s warning in March 2020. Both churches were closed entirely, and all services went online to zoom. In June 2020, churches opened for twenty people at a time spaced across the church's interior. The people had to wear masks, every touched surface cleaned after each service, singing was forbidden, and anxiety was

⁶ Swinton, and Mowat, p157.

high. It did not last long before the state of Victoria was locked down again by the end of July, and the church doors were only cautiously reopened in early December 2020. In March 2021, it is easier to meet once more, but many restrictions remain, and the parish continues to offer an online worship option for both services. Despite the loss of income and parishioner isolation due to the Covid-19 lockdowns, the Vicar observed at least one positive aspect of the situation. In a parish that historically had resisted mixing, six months of just one online or in-person service each week ensured that the whole parish got a chance to know each other in a more personal if virtual way. However, for those who were unable to use a computer or were physically incapable of getting to church, connections had to be maintained in other ways using a printed newsletter and forming a network of delivery volunteers. The delivery network action has reduced the potential for cutoff to occur. As the Covid-19 vaccine begins to roll out in Australia, people are slowly returning to church, and the two Sunday morning services have recommenced. The Vicar's ethnographic awareness of the parish has helped the parish council determine what action to take in the coming months.

A sense of belonging

Joining a church family is similar to joining a tight-knit social group or marrying into a large family: in time, the person has to feel that they belong in the family group, that they are accepted, despite their faults, and can grow to love the other equally peculiar family members. It is a slow process, and sometimes it is hard to feel accepted. In an anxious congregation such as 8am St Mark's, where some of the group's actions and expectations followed long-held customs, the homeostasis was well defined. The sense of being an outsider was the experience of one of the newer parishioners, who felt that they had no agency within the 8am St Mark's congregation, whose members had known some of the others for decades. She observed that taking part in the

Conversation broke down many of those relational barriers: the small table conversations meant that she got to know more about her fellow parishioners in one day than she had managed in the previous year. She felt that she had participated in discerning a new direction for the whole parish and was inspired to help make it a reality. In terms of FST, when a system's homeostasis is disrupted, there is room for innovation to flourish. That was the beginning of her finding her place in the community; she no longer felt like a long-term visitor but is now a valued member of the new 8am St Paul & St Barnabas family. The newly formed church family saw her as she was and accepted her with no fuss or pretense. It has been a joy to see the open acceptance she now offers new arrivals. After engaging in the time of change, other parishioners reported having similar experiences of feeling accepted.

Returning Parishioners

An unexpected effect of the worshipping changes was the quiet return of past parishioners, cut off for a long time from the parish. Their return was supported by a combination of factors, including a generous welcome, a chance to reconnect with friends, the lack of recrimination for years of absence, and a friendly Vicar leading the welcome. When these people were last at church, one of their reasons for attending was to provide family support and connection for their young families in a new country. Now, after twenty years of absence, these older people are returning for their own sake. These 'empty nesters' may be searching once more for a church family to belong to, this time for encouragement and companionship in a different stage of their lives. It has been interesting to hear their stories as their families have grown up. They have become more aware of aging and have a renewed desire to get involved once more.

Integrating symbolic items into a new space

The slowly accepted changes would always have taken time, even if covid-19 had not happened. Following FST principles of being responsible for one's anxiety and remaining in contact with the parish can be interpreted in this environment to stay steady and not rush to make too many changes too quickly. After researching the early days of St Paul's, it was evident that a complicated history was associated with the fixtures and fittings. To acknowledge that history, some of the familiar St Paul's elements were thoughtfully incorporated into the existing arrangement at St Barnabas' without overwhelming the original St Barnabas' parishioners' balance. The first step was to fulfill the promise to relocate the St Paul's stained glass window, but it took several months before the treasured St Paul's stained-glass windows, one of which was installed to celebrate 100 years in 1999, were relocated in St Paul & St Barnabas. The delayed installation gave the parish a chance to pause and note how far they had come in this time of transition. To underline that significant and symbolic step, the parish council agreed to also relocate the carved wooden altar from St Paul's to a new home in St Paul & St Barnabas. Before that could happen, delicate negotiations were conducted with the existing St Barnabas' altar fabricator. Anglican ecclesiology prefers that there is only one altar in a church, so the more modern altar was retired with the fabricator's generous permission. Continual and careful conversations with stakeholders were part of the three congregations' blending process, and they continue to require a light touch to avoid causing unnecessary hurt or generating additional anxiety. This approach has been successful, and the old St Paul's altar is fully integrated into the contemporary worship space, as is shown in the photographs in Appendix A.

Finding new ministry roles in a new family group

The previous chapter discussed the part played by the rosters in forming a new congregation: those beautifully decorated pages listing names, dates, and ministries now grace notice boards where utilitarian dog-eared lists previously languished. Receiving the latest nature-decorated roster has become a feature of serving in St Paul & St Barnabas. Somehow, the people from three congregations, despite their varying attitudes to rosters, have found a way to work together. The decoration on the roster reflects the lighter approach to serving in this congregation: it is no longer a heavy obligation to be reading; there are enough people in the ‘pool’ that reading scripture is no longer a chore; it is now joyful, and it provides a way to belong that does not seem to have the added complication of status conferred by a spot on the roster. Although the paper rosters were unused during the COVID-19 lockdowns, a similar method intentionally invited people from different parts of the parish to participate in the online Zoom liturgy. It helped maintain the sense of church family in difficult times. It did more than merely sustain the sense of church family; it enhanced connections across the parish during a time of isolation. Zoom church is a surprisingly intimate style of worship, and the closest equivalent would be worshipping in the round; for, in both instances, the worshippers are visible to the rest of the congregation in a way that is not possible when seated in a pew looking at the back of another’s head.

Negotiating differing aspects of worship style

Music was a complicated issue to negotiate in the newly formed 8am and 10am congregations. When asked before the Big Day about music, it was clear that there were different needs and expectations around worship styles, particularly music. One group wanted no singing, and the other two wanted plentiful and lively opportunities to sing. A compromise came out of

the blue in a most God-given way: a 10am St Mark's parishioner offered to play two hymns each week at the new St Paul & St Barnabas service. He had not identified himself as a musician before, probably because there was already an organist appointed to the 10am St Mark's service. Since he originated from St Mark's, the 8am St Mark's folk may have agreed to sing during worship as a sign of appreciation for a 'close family member' who was generously offering his help, while the others were too delighted to have a live musician to protest at the reduced number of hymns. They agreed to sing just two hymns, and that seemed like a fair compromise on all sides. The tension over the 'music issue' dissipated before it caused any problems. Unfortunately, the chap was only available for the first few months, but his actions had a lasting effect, such that they are now singing three hymns to recorded music.

Making new connections

There are other positive signs. As they grew more familiar with their new worship space, leaders from each of the previous three congregations worked together and discovered new strengths and friendships. As illustrated previously, the most obvious of these actions is the roster, but ladies drawn from the four original congregations are working together to make new church decorations designed for use in either church as a shared resource; they call themselves the Big Banner Band and are creating new connections within the family system. People who were previously in the vulnerable underfunctioning group have gained back some of their self-confidence, as the overachiever's influence has diminished.

Observed anxious behaviors.

Regardless of the positive good news stories, there have been some difficulties experienced during the year. As mentioned previously, the retired priest who had faithfully provided two Sunday services felt squeezed out of his role when the number of weekly services was halved, and he reacted in a way that has been defined as sabotage. The actions that Friedman defines as sabotage⁷ are mindless subconscious reactions rarely conducted in the open. In trying to restore the whole group's emotional balance, people react in sometimes surprising ways, and the work done by Friedman supports leaders to see what he calls “content issues,”⁸ or rather to see through those content issues to understand what triggered them. He encourages leaders to address the minor content issue complaints if possible (for example, not enough pastoral visiting, being too cheerful in church, or absent children from worship), but not to create a big fuss about the issues. Friedman stresses that it is better to connect with the complaints’ instigator to understand the anxieties behind or beyond the complaint. In the case of sabotage, content issues can distract or derail a leader’s resolve, resulting in them backing away from the bigger project of change altogether.

Sabotage can knock a project off course by causing the Vicar to doubt their abilities. During the Covid lockdown last year, seven parishioners died, three of whom were strongly associated with St Mark’s church, the congregations most sensitized to change. In each of those three deaths, the widow asked a few of their fellow parishioners not to tell the Vicar. One way or another, the secrets leaked, the Vicar heard about each of the deaths and the awkward fact that

⁷ Friedman, *A Failure of Nerve: Leadership in the Age of the Quick Fix*, p11.

⁸ Friedman, *Generation to Generation: Family Process in Church and Synagogue*, p205.

they did not want the Vicar not to know about the situation. At first, she was puzzled, and by the third death, it was becoming a professional embarrassment causing her to doubt her position in the parish. It took the Vicar some time and reflection to recognize that these were anxious content issues. Bowen understands keeping secrets as an indicator of high anxiety.

“The basic problem is the relationship pattern in the family rather than the subject matter of the secrets and confidences. A goal in family therapy is to reduce the level of anxiety, to improve the level of responsible open communication within the family, and to reduce the irresponsible, underground communication of secrets and gossip to others.”⁹

Keeping secrets in a group requires a strong anxious fusion force to ensure that all those involved maintain the secrecy. However, for the grieving and naturally anxious widows who initiated the secret-keeping, there was a mix of possible motivations for this action that was unlikely to be related to the eventual fusion. Perhaps in their moment of bereaved shock and grief, they were operating from an emotional basis rather than intellectual, and their requests not to tell the Vicar were expressions of their disappointment with the one who changed the stability of the family system. Having the opportunity to see this embarrassing and hurtful action as simply a content issue requires the luxury of time and a good level of self-differentiation. Self-differentiation requires a person to remain in thoughtful contact with the rest of the family system so that when some form of content issue arises, for they will, the previous connection made with family system members will help clarify the motivations behind the current action. The leader needs to look beyond the problem and see what patterns appear. It is essential to appreciate that content issues may be entirely unrelated to the big challenge to the family system balance but arise from the anxious breakdown in the relationship between the leader and the other. That anxious tension effectively hangs around, waiting for a way to be expressed or relieved. When the secret holding

⁹ Bowen, p290.

parish council members¹⁰ were asked why they had colluded with the secrecy around the deaths, they reported a strong compulsion (fusion) to be loyal to the widow against their own better instincts to talk to the Vicar. They also reported their rising anxiety over the issue and a sense of feeling conflicted about the struggle to keep the secret or not. Friedman could have helped them understand this internal confusion:

The “herding family will wind up adopting an appeasement strategy towards its most troublesome members while sabotaging those with the most strength to stand up to the troublemakers. The chronically anxious, herding family will be far more willing to risk losing its leadership than to lose those who disturb their togetherness with their immature responses.”¹¹

Unless they were in the *circle of secrecy*, most parishioners did not know what was happening, and the sad result was that they were also effectively excluded from knowing about the death of one of their fellow parishioners. Secret keeping is a form of sabotage, where mindless action attempts to reestablish stability in the group without counting the cost or thinking through the action’s ramifications. The antidote is for the leader to continue improving their level of self-differentiation, thus reducing pockets of anxious behavior and ensuring good connections across the parish.

Summary of the Section

It was reported that people had left the parish after the changes made to worshipping arrangements, but those reports were themselves anxiously inflated. After discounting those who had left through ill health, there were only a few people who left as an anxious act of cutoff. At the same time, others joined the parish, including those returning long-term cutoff parishioners.

¹⁰ It was not a universal secret, and each time only a few people were included in the circle of secrecy.

¹¹ Friedman, *A Failure of Nerve: Leadership in the Age of the Quick Fix*, p68.

Overall, the number of people gathering to worship at 8am is larger than the three previous congregations' combined average attendance. This case study recognizes that the process of moving and mixing small congregations will naturally affect the whole parish family's balance but does not necessarily need to generate harmful, anxious, or disruptive behavior. The key point that makes the difference in how a family group responds is their own mass ego emotional maturity and the ability of the leaders to act less anxiously and responsibly. Overall, the parishioners have adjusted remarkably well to the change in worshipping arrangements. Although the leader sets the tone, these people worked hard to achieve something that the parish had struggled with for so long.

SUMMARY OF THE QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

In the space of two years, from the disastrous parish consultation to the current worshipping arrangements, the tone of the whole parish has changed. The parish has changed from opposition and resistance to a place of support and encouragement. In summary, the leader's actions to guide people through the change and disruption were noticed and appreciated by most interviewed parishioners. The low incidence of anxious behaviors reported in the interviews and the generally positive observed effects of the leadership style demonstrate that a significant change can be achieved in a parish without the community falling into disarray or any other form of anxious dysfunction. From the experience of people who lived through the change, the research results confirm the thesis that collective anxiety caused by a change made within a faith community can be mitigated by responsible leadership so that the change can be accepted.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSIONS

The critical observation in this case study resulted from the Vicar following the FST principles to keep her anxious response in check while remaining in interested contact with the congregation. Her attitude and actions had a calming effect on the parish, which enabled them to be less anxious, less fused, and more open to the ideas presented to them. Consequently, the parish's level of emotional reactivity was lower than was anticipated, and the change was accepted. Thus the case study illustrates the stated thesis that in a time of transition, a responsible leader can mitigate anxiety so that the parishioners can accept the change.

This research ventured into a Christian community's messiness and observed how parishioners react under stress in times of change. Typically, stress prevents a church from functioning as it should, as part of the Body of Christ, gathered to joyfully worship God and serve God's Kingdom to benefit the surrounding community. Each group's stress response will vary from minor disputes to largescale departures or even a congregation rendered incapable of making any decisions. The response varies due to many factors, the least of which is the magnitude of the change. More often, a community's response to change will depend on the constituent members' life experience and the collective experience of generations of worshippers in that place.

Expectations and realities of leadership in ministry

A leader is appointed to a faith community to gather the people in prayer and point them, through word and deed, towards Christ. Nowhere in the ordination vows is there mention of conflict resolution or stress management, but as a member of the faith community, the leader is subject to the same amount of stress and anxiety, if not more,

than that experienced by the group. Their response, as leaders, will depend on their emotional maturity and what FST calls self-differentiation. When a self-differentiated leader manages their response to anxiety, they can focus their energy on leading their community and bringing about the proposed change while remaining in contact with the group. There is a spiritual risk for leaders, for if they are poorly self-differentiated or have a low level of emotional maturity, they will succumb to anxiety; to the forces that cause the group to fuse tightly and to think with one (anxious) mind, or to the forces that cause one to fight or flee. The leader, as a result, will be rendered useless in the service of God and the people of God. Although each person's emotional maturity depends on their life and family experience, it is possible to learn and improve using the principles of FST.

Retelling the narrative of an Australian parish in a time of change demonstrated this paper's thesis that a responsible leader's actions can help reduce anxiety and help parishioners accept that change. Thinking of a congregation as an interconnected family system instead of a group of individuals with individual symptoms, FST provided a "different way of conceptualizing human problems"¹ and a means of finding patterns in their response to anxiety. This project does more than look at a recent event in the history of a parish with the aid of FST to understand what happened; it also considered how FST was used to assist the leader to become less anxious and to have the capacity to act responsibly, caring for their parish during the time of change. Through qualitative research subsequently conducted in the parish, the results demonstrated how small

¹ Bowen, p415.

changes in attitude, language, and relationships by the vicar, which flowed across the leadership team, reduced the parish's anxiety.

Using Family Systems Theory to characterize the reactivity of a parish.

In the last one hundred and sixty-five years, the three churches that formed the Bellarine Gateway Anglican Parish have experienced the stress of combining and splitting three times. If this amount of turmoil had occurred in a human family, one could confidently assume it would adversely affect each family member's emotional reactivity. Their response would vary according to their sibling birth order or perhaps their degree of inherited multigenerational stress. Given the parish history, it was interesting to determine whether similar characteristics or emotional reactivity levels were present. This idea was explored by considering the multi-center parish narrative in terms of a homeostatically balanced family system with the three different churches as siblings and their constituent parishioners as cousins. From the lack of comparable studies in FST research literature, considering the past actions of a parish in light of FST concepts is not a common way to consider parish dynamics. However, by applying several concepts of FST to the parish narrative: the nuclear family emotional system; the scale of differentiation of self; family projection process; multigenerational transmission process; and functional sibling position, the narrative of the three churches revealed inherited patterns of reactivity to disruption. The insights gained were used to achieve change within the parish without adversely increasing anxiety levels.

When considering the church congregations as family members, it became apparent that the first parish church, St Mark's, was the eldest sister, the most responsible and the most sensitized community to the effects of change. It was also the community

that was most aware of its responsibilities as Christians within the wider community, reflected by many of its congregation members' involvements, occupations, and actions. Although chronologically the youngest, St Barnabas' displayed the characteristics of the middle child, with a character that tended to fill in the other two church siblings' character voids, namely it tended towards the serious older child anxieties in response to the heavy expectations laid initially on it when it was built, but without the heaviness and awareness of responsibility. By contrast, St Paul's reflected a youngest sibling's character who, by not receiving the focussed attention of the family's expectations (who in this case might be the Diocese or Parish Council), they had the freedom to grow and develop with less associated levels of anxiety or stress. As a result, this sibling church was more emotionally mature and resilient in the face of complex and challenging situations. This process of church characterization concurred with Bowen's thoughts on sibling birth order, the family projection process, and the effect of anxiety passed down over multiple generations.

The theory's application provided new perspectives on the entire parish as unique characteristics became apparent for each group, reflecting their emotional reactivity learned and passed down over many years. It could be surmised that this is not a unique situation and that every parish has its character or personality transferred through generations of worshippers. The concept of inherited response to disruption is an important one for this project, and the current emotional response to change or anxiety by the three church families indicates how past events in the congregations continue to have a subtle but lasting effect. When faced with content issues originating from a particular

congregation, the Vicar's appreciation of the 'emotional reactivity' narrative was taken into account when considering an appropriate response.

One way to discover where forms of tension quietly reside in even the calmest of parishes is to change the balance in a family system, and Friedman warns that significant changes made in a congregation could result in anxious issues becoming evident.² Leaders who are already under pressure are likely to address each of the seemingly unrelated issues as they appear, instead of attempting to stand outside of the situation to see predictable anxious behaviors responding to a change in the family system balance. In turbulent times of change, leaders must find ways to understand and talk about the tensions experienced within family groups without resorting to blaming or seeking victims or fall guys. FST provides a framework and perspective to help leaders achieve this within their parishes.

When the Bellarine Gateway Anglican Parish committed to making changes to their worship arrangements, the parish could be observed moving through a transition period similar to the one described by William Bridges in his book *Managing Transitions*³. He explains that there is a middle time, a time of transition, between the ending of activities and the moment when changes are accepted and functioning as anticipated. In the instance of the Bellarine Gateway Anglican Parish, the endings were well-defined with the closing of one church and the end of two other congregations in October 2019. The date on which the changes were fully accepted is more difficult to pin

² Friedman, *Generation to Generation: Family Process in Church and Synagogue*, p203.

³ Bridges, and Bridges, p5.

down, for each parish member would possibly give a different date. Each parishioner took their own time to work through their grief of loss before anticipating something new, and their grief holds within it their history of relationships inside and outside of the church family system. The time taken will also depend on their emotional maturity, and it is possible that for one or two parishioners, they will take years to recover from what they felt was a devastating blow to the parish.

When people feel hurt, confused, or their stability as they have known it in a group is knocked off, there will be a mindless response that Friedman defines as sabotage when minor content issues are raised against a leader. The leader needs to keep in mind that these issues are a smokescreen for deeper hurts or anxieties, which are only revealed by courageously listening to people who may have been hurtful in their actions. Through using the FST principles of remaining curious, keeping in contact, and listening for the story behind the immediate anxiety, it is possible to empathize with the parishioners. Listening and appreciating their story may be a route to forgiving them for the hurts and slights they cause the leader by their anxious behavior. Of course, it would be advantageous if the person can understand what effect their behavior has had and then desist from repeating it, but this is not essential for the leader to find release through forgiving the person. This responsibility to consider the forgiven person's subsequent actions is effectively summarized in a contemporary form of corporate absolution in the Sunday worship liturgy; "live by the Spirit's transforming power and forgive as you have

been forgiven.”⁴ When a leader is free to forgive, no longer distracted by nursing grudges, or avoiding difficult situations, their subsequent ministry becomes a blessing for the whole parish.

Being a trustworthy leader

There must be a period of transition for a change to be successfully achieved. For it is neither possible nor desirable for everything to change overnight, and even then, accepting the change is more than just seeing physical differences. Responsible leaders need to acknowledge that this time of transition is full of uncertainty and energy and has a potential for anxiety. The parish needs to see the leader as worthy of their trust. If the leader is honest and clear about entering a time where almost anything can happen, the parishioners will relax their expectations and hold their anxiety in check. For yes, there is uncertainty, but they have a subconscious assurance that their leader is still striding out in front. During the change process in this case study, the analogy of Moses and the Israelites in the wilderness⁵ was developed to compare the parish facing the change with the Israelites approaching and crossing the Red Sea. By reducing anxiety, thus freeing up the potential for fusion, the transition period became a time of free-thinking and creativity, as illustrated by the ideas discussed in this case study.

⁴ Anglican Church of Australia Liturgy Commission, *An Order for Holy Communion (Revised), Confession & Absolution* (<https://anglican.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/An-Order-for-the-Holy-Communion.pdf>: 2009).

⁵ Bridges, and Bridges, p49.

Using FST to develop group emotional maturity and resilience.

The Vicar led the parish through the uncertain transition period using FST principles and communicated those principles to the parish leadership team so that there was a trickle-down approach adding to the calming effect of just the leader following them. Namely, these were to be clear on principles and plans, remain curious, be responsible for one's anxiety, and remain in contact with the parishioners. A relatively unreactive emotional maturity is a critical factor required by leaders following these FST principles so that anxiety may be reduced and change successfully implemented. There will be a spectrum of emotional maturity in any family group, so following these principles will be easier for some than others. Bowen, as a family systems therapist, discovered that rather than treating the 'sickest' member of a family, it was more advantageous to support a more emotionally mature family member, who had the best potential to access "family resourcefulness and strength and to get out of contact with the sickness morass."⁶ The development of that family member would positively affect the whole system's balance, although they should be supported through the inevitable push back by less emotionally mature members. The new 8am service's overall emotional maturity benefitted from this strategy when the emotionally resilient congregation of one church combined with the other two generally more anxious congregations. There was minimal push back, apart from an instance of Cut-off, such that the newly combined congregation has become more emotionally mature and resilient, rather than dropping to a less mature level characterized by complaint or recrimination.

⁶ Bowen, p177.

Summary

The process described of applying FST in a real-life and complicated context confirms that it can be defined as a critical social science. Critical social science is a practical theory, one that is structured “towards helping practitioners inform themselves about the actions they need to take to overcome their problems and eliminate their frustrations.”⁷

As Murray Bowen himself would say, there is no magic⁸ to working with communities, but FST, although secular, feeds into the downfalls, desires, and frankly, frustrations of how many Christian communities function. Each community of faith has its own story, and this is the story of an unexceptional church in regional Victoria, in which something remarkable was achieved that people doubted could ever happen. The Vicar responsibly engaged the parishioners, made their recommended changes, survived the minor attempts at sabotage, and successfully kept the parish together. The anxiety caused by the changes was managed, and the parish subsequently accepted those changes. That is what turns an exposition of an idea about how to use a critical social science in a congregational setting into a story that is worth hearing and may have value for other people to hear too.

Although qualitative research provides a unique narrative that is not directly transferrable to other circumstances, there are techniques identified in this case study that can be applied to other settings. In particular, the technique of characterizing parish congregations using FST concepts and recognizing how groups react to anxiety may be of use to other leaders of faith communities. This project has proved to be very useful for

⁷ Wilfred Carr, and Stephen Kemmis, *Becoming Critical: Education, Knowledge, and Action Research* (London ; Philadelphia: Falmer Press, 1986), p145.

⁸ Bowen, p415.

the development of the leader in her ministry setting, providing new tools for assessment and reflection that will be used in future endeavors.

The critical observation in this case study resulted from the Vicar following the FST principles of keeping her anxious response in check while remaining in interested contact with the congregation. Her attitude and actions had a calming effect on the parish, which enabled them to be less fused and more open to the ideas presented to them. Consequently, the parish's reactivity was less than had been feared, and the change was accepted. It has been observed that both parish and leader have grown and matured through this process, proving the thesis to be true, but more significantly creating a healthier environment for Christians to mature and blossom.

– EMB,

Geelong - April 2021

APPENDICES

APPENDIX A – FIGURES AND DIAGRAMS

Figure A1: Map of the Bellarine Gateway Anglican Parish

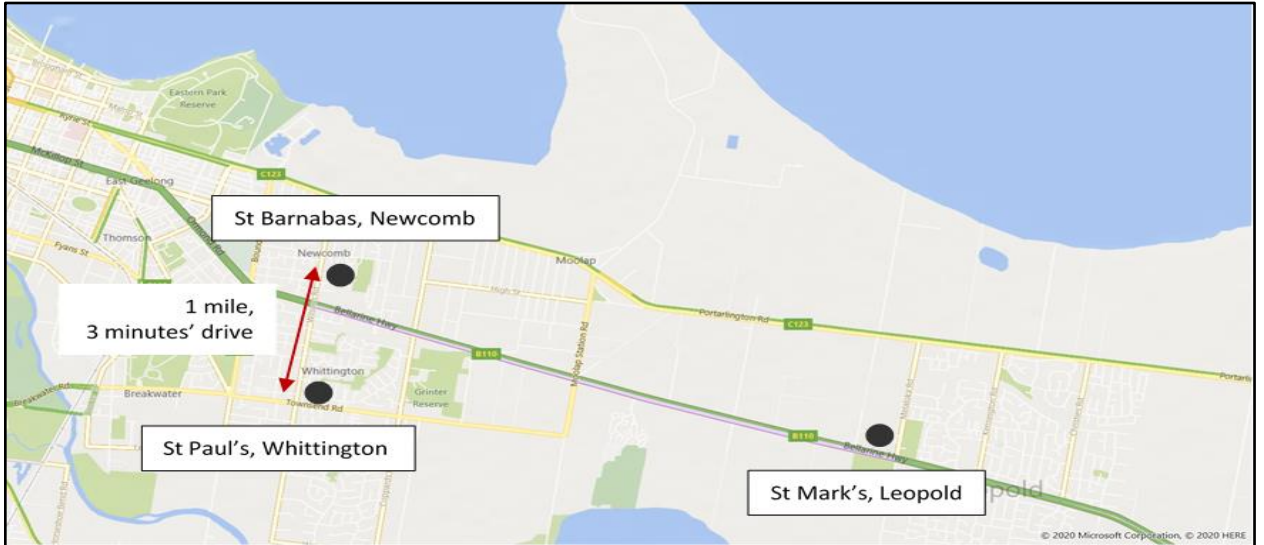


Figure A2: Bellarine Gateway Anglican Parish Timeline.

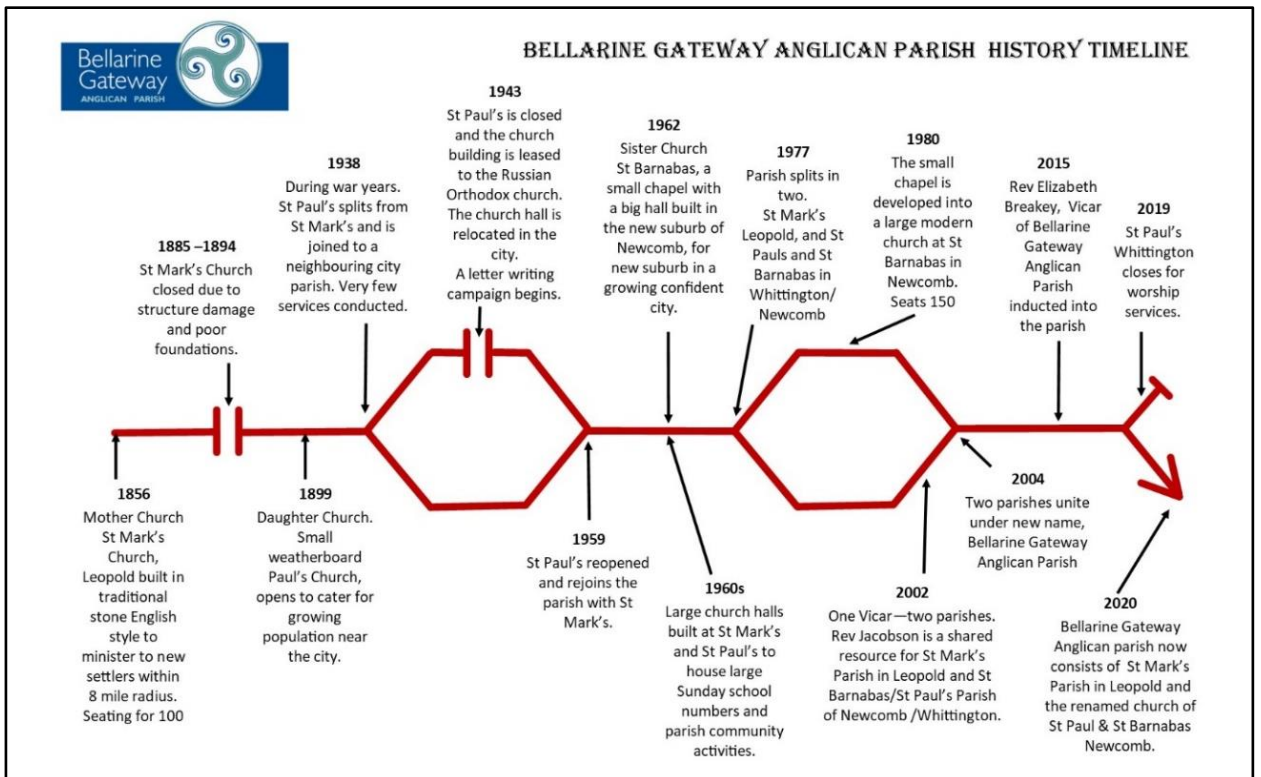


Figure A3 – The three churches of Bellarine Gateway Anglican Parish

St Mark's Leopold. Opened in 1856 in local volcanic basalt (convict-mined) bluestone.



St Paul's Whittington. Built in 1899 in weatherboard with a tin roof.



St Barnabas, Newcomb. Opened in 1980. It is unremarkable outside but contemporary within.



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