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Preaching in an Age of Anxiety

By

Roger Neil Williams

A Dissertation Submitted to

the Faculty of Covenant Theological Seminary

in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Ministry

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Anxiety today is rising and building, one crisis after another, and yet the church remains an important refuge for many, serving to mediate that anxiety. Preaching in particular, as a central function of the church, plays a significant mitigating role. The purpose of this study is to explore how senior pastors preach Christ-centered sermons to lower anxiety in congregational systems.

The literature review focuses on four key areas: Jesus' teaching on anxiety in Luke 12, anxiety in family systems perspective, the experience of anxiety in the person, and modern sources of anxiety.

This study utilizes a qualitative design using semi-structured interviews with eight pastors who have served congregations for five years or longer in the role of senior pastor. Four research questions guided this qualitative study: 1. How do senior pastors describe the presence of anxiety in the congregational system? 2. How do senior pastors understand the impact of their presence on anxiety in the congregational system? 3. How do senior pastors negotiate their own anxiety as a part of the congregational system? 4. How do senior pastors describe sermons that lower anxiety in the congregational system?

The findings of this study reveal four components required to preach Christ-centered sermons that lower anxiety in the congregational system: discerning systemic realities of the congregation, practicing a non-anxious presence, shaping interpretive frameworks, and communicating in a manner that is challenging yet not coercive. Several practices and attitudes are suggested that best contribute to preaching in a manner that lowers anxiety in the congregational system.

To my wife Carmen, for her love, support, and sharing in the work of life and ministry.

Contents

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Finally, I would like to thank my New City Church family, whom I consider it a pleasure to shepherd. Thank you for allowing me to take this journey. By God's grace, we will keep growing together!

Abbreviations

DSM Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders

BSFT Bowen System Family Therapy

IU Intolerance of Uncertainty

Chapter One

Introduction

W.H. Auden won the Pulitzer Prize in 1948 for an extended poem which chronicled the anxious search for meaning amid the isolation of an increasingly industrialized, post-World War II America. The poem's title, "The Age of Anxiety,"[1] coined the phrase still in use today. Reflecting on this unease shortly thereafter, historian Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. argued that Auden had captured the spirit of the age in his 1949 book, *The Vital Center*, with the words:

> We look upon our epoch as a time of troubles, an age of anxiety. The grounds of our civilization, of our certitude, are breaking up under our feet, and familiar ideas and institutions vanish as we reach for them, like shadows in the failing dusk.[2]

Current data suggests that Auden's and Schlesinger's insights may look less like an analysis of post-World War II America and more like a prophetic psychological profile of the early twenty-first century. Seventy years later, no abatement to this "age of anxiety" has come along, and instead anxiety has taken deep root in American life. By many metrics, it is intensifying.

One institution still sought out in this anxious time is the church. While some sectors of the American church are, in Schlesinger's words, "vanish[ing] as we reach for

[1] W.H Auden and Alan Jacobs, *The Age of Anxiety: A Baroque Eclogue* (Princeton:, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011), xli.

[2] Arthur Meier Schlesinger, *The Vital Center: The Politics of Freedom* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1949), 1.

them,"[3] the conservative and evangelical church remains stable, in spite of much reporting to the contrary.[4] These evangelical and conservative institutions, which tend to value preaching and the authority of scripture, remain a potential source of grounding for those seeking to navigate life in an increasingly anxious age. Of particular interest to this study is the weekly worship gathering and the sermon, since weekly worship is the most attended event of the local church and the sermon is its main communicative event. The literature consulted for this study revealed little consideration of how the sermon may address the anxiety of its hearers. Consequently, this study will explore ways in which preaching can address anxiety in the congregation.

Anxiety

The *APA Dictionary of Psychology* defines anxiety as, "a mood state characterized by apprehension and somatic symptoms of tension in which an individual anticipates impending danger, catastrophe, or misfortune. The future threat may be real or imagined, internal or external. It may be an identifiable situation or a more vague fear of the unknown."[5] More generally, "Anxiety is an unpleasant emotional state characterized by apprehension, worry, and fear."[6] In this sense, anxiety is an emotion common to all

[3] Schlesinger, *Vital*, 1.

[4] Landon Schnable and Sean Bock, "The Continuing Persistence of Intense Religion in the United States," *Sociological Science* 5 (November 15, 2018): 711-721. https://doi.org/ 10.15195/v5.a30.

[5] Gary R. VandenBos, *APA Dictionary of Psychology* (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2006), 63.

[6] Susan B. Gall, Bernard Beins, and Alan Feldman, *The Gale Encyclopedia of Psychology* (Detroit, MI: Gale, 1996), 24.

people and present situations as diverse as war, a first-date, or giving a public speech. The commonplace discussion of anxiety is owing to Sigmund Freud's coining of the term "anxiety neurosis." Freud, widely considered the father of modern psychology, wrote in German and used the word *angst.* Angst can be translated as many words including fear, fright, alarm, or anxiety. Consequently, the English usage of "anxiety" may not comprehend the breadth identified by Freud. Modern treatments of anxiety also reflect this breadth as it defies precise description and is clustered with "fear" and "stress."[7]

The presence of anxiety is not necessarily detrimental and increases survival when real danger is at hand or physical intensity is required. Intensely anxious situations are marked by activation of the sympathetic nervous system, increasing the heart rate, respiration, and muscle tone.[8] This physiological response normally passes when the stressor is no longer at hand. For some, the experience of anxiety is so acute and persistent that normal functioning is inhibited, and clinical intervention is needed. The latest edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* lists no less than a dozen subcategories of clinically treatable "anxiety disorders."[9] In 2017, Ronald Kessler, professor of Health Care Policy at Harvard Medical School, and a team of researchers demonstrated that 22.2 percent of adult Americans have suffered some form

[7] Daniel Freeman and Jason Freeman, *Anxiety: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 4.

[8] Alan E. Kazdin, *Encyclopedia of Psychology* (Washington, DC.: American Psychological Association, 2000), 209.

[9] *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders: DSM-5* (Arlington, VA: American Psychiatric Association, 2017), 189-233.

of clinical anxiety in the prior twelve months[10] and 33.7 percent have experienced this at some point in life.[11] Thus, one out of every five people in a worship gathering may have experienced crippling anxiety in the recent past, and one out of every three has experienced such episodes at least once.

Even still, the more common problem in the culture is a general sense of anxiety lacking a specific stressor. This type of anxiety is often self-reported and leaves people with the experience of unease, apprehension, and worry. Social psychologist Jonathan Haidt writes that, in duration, this type of anxiety "changes the brain in pervasive ways such that threats seem to jump out at the person, even in ambiguous or harmless circumstances." [12] Relationally, this hypervigilance can manifest in what Haidt calls "hostile attribution bias," in which persons are "more likely to see hostility in benign or even benevolent people, communications, and situations. Misunderstandings are more likely and more likely to escalate into large-scale conflicts." Such outcomes may explain the strong relationship between anxiety and depression and a sense of helplessness.[13]

These relational stressors, from general anxiety to the aforementioned 22 percent of church goers likely to have suffered from acute anxiety in the last year, must alert church leaders to the potentially crippling effects of anxiety on a church congregation.

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[10] Ronald C. Kessler et al., "Twelve-month and Lifetime Prevalence and Lifetime Morbid Risk of Anxiety and Mood Disorders in the United States," *International Journal of Methods in Psychiatric Research* 21, no. 3 (2012), 179.

[11] Kessler et al, "Twelve-month and Lifetime Prevalence," 179.

[12] Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt, *The Coddling of the American Mind: How Good Intentions and Bad Ideas Are Setting up a Generation for Failure* (New York: Penguin Press, 2018), 158.

[13] Lukianoff and Haidt, *Coddling,* 159.

Rising Rates of Anxiety

A longitudinal study of the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory (MMPI) found "large generational increases in psychopathology among American college students…between 1938 and 2007…and high school students …between 1951 and 2002."[14] These researchers also found that, within this trend, "general symptoms of anxiety are also on the rise."[15] Thus, the general level of mental health for high school and college students has degraded significantly since 1938, and anxiety is a key component.

More recently, in 2017, the American Psychiatric Association's national poll of American adults revealed that a majority of Americans consider themselves to be "extremely" or "somewhat" anxious over several important life factors. The leading sources of anxiety were keeping self or family safe (63 percent), health (63 percent), paying bills and expenses (56 percent), impact of politics on daily life (51 percent), and relationships with family, friends, and coworkers (46 percent).[16]

Of those interviewed, 36 percent reported being more anxious than last year, while 20 percent reported being less so. Millennials, born between 1981-1999, were 41 percent more likely to have more anxiety than the previous year, and Baby Boomers, born

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[14] Jean M. Twenge et al., "Birth Cohort Increases in Psychopathology among Young Americans, 1938–2007: A Cross-temporal Meta-analysis of the MMPI," *Clinical Psychology Review* 30, no. 2 (2010): 145.

[15] Twenge et al, "Birth Cohort Increases," 152.

[16] "Majority of Americans Say They Are Anxious about Health; Millennials Are More Anxious than Baby Boomers," News Release, American Psychiatric Association, May 22, 2017, https://www.psychiatry.org/newsroom/news-releases/majority-of-americans-say-they-are-anxious-about-health-millennials-are-more-anxious-than-baby-boomers.

between 1946-1964, were 32 percent more likely. This data shows that, for a majority of Americans, anxiety is a regular occurrence and is increasing.

Dr. Jean Twenge, a professor at San Diego State University and psychologist specializing in researching generational differences, contends that the rates of anxiety are even higher in another population subset she labels "iGen," those born after 1995. Twenge's research shows this group, upon entering college, is significantly more likely than even Millennials to report anxiety that impaired functioning in the prior six months.[17] This study has led Jonathan Haidt to conclude that these students "were part of a much larger national wave of adolescent anxiety and depression [that is] unlike anything seen in modern times."[18]

Systemic Transmission of Anxiety

One subject not often addressed in the psychological literature consulted for the study was the nature of anxiety transmission in relationship systems. Based on a twenty-year longitudinal study, Harvard Medical School Professor Nicholas A. Christakis and University of California Political Scientist James Fowler concluded in the *British Journal of Medicine*:

> Emotional states can be transferred directly from one individual to another by mimicry and "emotional contagion," perhaps by the copying of emotionally relevant bodily actions, particularly facial expressions, seen in

[17] Jean M. Twenge, *iGen: Why Todays Super-connected Kids Are Growing up Less Rebellious, More Tolerant, Less Happy and Completely Unprepared for Adulthood and What That Means for the Rest of Us* (New York: Atria Books, 2017), 104.

[18] Lukianoff and Haidt, *Coddling,* 145.

> others. People can "catch" emotional states they observe in others over time frames ranging from seconds to weeks. [19]

Christakis and Fowler found this "clustering" of happiness and unhappiness to be effective even up to three degrees of separation -- for example, the friend of a friend's friend.[20] Christakis and Fowler also teamed up with five other researchers in 2013 to produce a paper called "Detecting Emotional Contagion in Massive Social Networks."[21] Here, they conclude, "Our estimates of the social contagion of emotional expression suggest that there may be large-scale spillovers in online networks." Additionally, online social networks may "magnify the intensity of global emotional synchrony." That is, emotion, whether positive or negative, can travel over social media networks, and social media networks themselves shape the emotions of the users.

The church congregation is also a social system and is referred to in scripture with words richly descriptive of connection. The New Testament describes the church as a body,[22] family,[23] house,[24] household,[25] and temple of connected stones.[26] This systemic dynamic will be explored further in the transmission of anxiety and its opposite.

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[19] James H. Fowler and Nicholas A. Christakis, "Dynamic Spread of Happiness in a Large Social Network: Longitudinal Analysis over 20 Years in the Framingham Heart Study," *BMJ* 337 (December 05, 2008), https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj.a2338.

[20] Fowler and Christakis, "Dynamic Spread of Happiness," 337.

[21] Lorenzo Coviello et al., "Detecting Emotional Contagion in Massive Social Networks," PLOS ONE, accessed May 16, 2019, https://journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0090315.

[22] Romans 12:4-5; 1 Corinthians 10:17, 12:12, 12:27; Ephesians 4:12, 5:23, 5:30; Colossians 1:24.

[23] Matthew 12:49-50, 2 Corinthians 6:18, 1 Timothy 5:1.

[24] Hebrews 3:6.

[25] Ephesians 2:19, Galatians 6:10, 1 Timothy 3:14-15, 1 Peter 4:17.

[26] 1 Corinthians 3:16-17, Ephesians 2:19-22, 1 Peter 2:5.

The Christian Gospel and Anxiety

Jesus has much to teach about anxiety, fear, and worry for trusting believers in him and in his message. For instance, in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says:

> Therefore, I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, nor about your body, what you will put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And which of you by being anxious can add a single hour to his span of life?[27]

Jesus was teaching his followers how to manage anxiety. This study will explore several similar teachings and note the need to trust in the gracious and loving care of their heavenly Father. The imperative call, "Do not be anxious," is rooted in the indicative reality of having a "heavenly Father."

The Reformed Christian tradition brings such teaching directly to bear upon hearers through the preached word in the context of gathered worship. "The Second Helvetic Confession," a statement of faith for Reformed churches written shortly after Protestant Reformation, says of preaching:

> The preaching of the Word of God is the Word of God. Wherefore when this Word of God is now preached in the churches by preachers lawfully called, we believe that the very Word of God is preached, and received of the faithful; and that neither any other Word of God is to be feigned nor expected from heaven: and that now the Word itself which is preached is to be regarded, not the minister that preaches; who although he be evil and sinner, nevertheless the Word of God abides true and good."[28]

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[27] Matthew 6:25-27.

[28] John Haddon Leith, *Creeds of the Churches: A Reader in the Christian Doctrine from the Bible to the Present* (Atlanta, GA: John Knox Press, 1982), 133.

According to this Confession, Christians can hope that sermons may have the same effect as the words of Jesus did on his original hearers – calling them to the requirements God gives with the motive God provides. One modern expression of such preaching is called "Christ-centered preaching." Former seminary president Dr. Bryan Chapell, author of *Christ-Centered Preaching*, describes this style of preaching as the kind that "not only establishes God's requirements but also highlights the redemptive truths that make holiness possible."[29] This study will explore the role of the personal of presence of the preacher in the preaching of Christ-centered sermons and the way the preachers' personal presence in this preaching may address anxiety.

Purpose Statement

> Leaders in chronically anxious America today—whether they are black or white, Jewish or Christian, liberal or conservative, young or old, male or female—tend to support or adapt to the most incessantly demanding members of their following.[30]

Rabbi and counselor Edwin Friedman thus identified the problem as chronic anxiety and the usual response pattern that exacerbates the problem, which is conforming to anxious members. The senior pastor in a local church congregation has the weekly privilege of leading people from scripture in the sermon. In light of this warning from Friedman, this study aims to explore preaching that addresses anxiety in the congregational system without conforming to the most anxious members therein.

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[29] Bryan Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching: Redeeming the Expository Sermon* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005), 19.

[30] Edwin H. Friedman, Margaret M. Treadwell, and Edward W. Beal, *A Failure of Nerve: Leadership in the Age of the Quick Fix* (New York: Seabury Books, 2007), 79.

The purpose of this study is to explore how senior pastors preach Christ-centered sermons to lower anxiety in the congregational system. There are four main areas. These areas are identifying sources and presence of anxiety, recognizing one's emotional presence in the system of the congregation, negotiating personal anxiety, bringing rich biblical content to bear on the challenge of anxiety, and delivering sermons in a manner that lowers anxiety. To that end, these research questions guided the qualitative research.

Research Questions

The following questions guided the qualitative research:

1. How do senior pastors describe the presence of anxiety in the congregational system?
2. How do senior pastors understand the impact of their presence on anxiety in the congregational system?
    a. How do senior pastors understand the impact of their emotional presence on the anxiety in the congregational system?
    b. How do senior pastors understand the impact of their leadership on the anxiety in the congregational system?
3. How do senior pastors negotiate their own anxiety as a part of the congregational system?
4. How do senior pastors describe sermons that lower anxiety in the congregational system?
    a. How do senior pastors describe the preparation of sermons that lower anxiety in the congregational system?

b. How do senior pastors describe the content of sermons that lower anxiety in the congregational system?
c. How do senior pastors describe the delivery of sermons that lower anxiety in the congregational system?

Significance of the Study

This study offers two primary benefits. First, the findings will equip pastors and leaders to understand the sources and nature of the transmission of anxiety in the congregation system. Systemic considerations are often unaddressed in literature that instead focuses on individual experiences of anxiety. Thus, considering the church as a "system of anxiety" or its opposite, "a system of peace or calm," will be helpful in understanding the overall health of the congregation.

Second, this study will aid senior pastors in preaching sermons that address, subvert, and relieve anxiety in hearers. This study will help these preachers understand effective preparation, content, and delivery methods, the ways anxiety causes resistance to what is being preached, and how the role of the senior pastor's own differentiated emotional presence shapes the experience of the hearers.

Definition of Terms

In the context of this study, the terms are defined as follows:

Anxiety – an unpleasant emotional state characterized by apprehension, worry, and fear.

Christ-centered Preaching – a redemptive-historical approach to preaching that is expository in nature and seeks to draw out both biblical imperatives and the motivations centered in the redemptive work of Christ.

Senior Pastor – A pastor serving a local church with primary leadership responsibilities.

System – any group of people who have "developed interdependencies to the point where the resulting system through which they are connected (administratively, physically, or emotionally) has evolved its own principles of organization."[31]

[31] Friedman, *A Failure of Nerve*, 197.

Chapter Two

Literature Review

The purpose of this study is to explore how pastors preach Christ-centered sermons to lower anxiety in the congregational system. Church consultant and pastoral counselor Ronald W. Richardson contends that church leaders can be either like a "step-up transformer" and "increase the level of anxiety within the emotional system [of the church]" or like a "step-down transformer" and "operate in a way that decreases the level of anxiety; they tend to absorb or dampen it so that the level of anxiety in the congregation is stepped down rather than up."[32]

The literature review for this study begins by examining Jesus' teaching on anxiety in Luke 12. Then, three especially pertinent areas of literature were reviewed to provide a foundation for the qualitative research. The areas of focus are a consideration of chronic anxiety from a family systems perspective, the experience of anxiety in the person, and modern sources of anxiety.

Jesus' Teaching on Anxiety in Luke 12

Jesus's practical teaching on anxiety in Luke 12:13-34 directs his followers to immediate concerns in their life and gives a simple, clear direction of how to deal with

[32] Ronald W. Richardson, *Creating a Healthier Church: Family Systems Theory, Leadership, and Congregational Life* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1996): 50-51.

anxiety. Following the general outline of David Powlison, former editor of *The Journal of Biblical Counseling*, Jesus taught three perspectives on anxiety.[33] First, there are legitimate reasons to worry. Second, worry is addressed through faithful trust. Finally, faithful trust is rooted in the character of God.[34]

Literary Context

This teaching of Jesus intersects with the Lukan themes of stewardship of possessions and the danger of riches, both of which are identified by theologians Tom Schreiner and Wayne Grudem in the *ESV Study Bible*.[35] It also aligns with Jesus' announcement of his ministry intent in Luke 4:14-16, where he declares that he "came to bring good news to the poor." Part of the "good news to the poor" in Luke 12 is that "One's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions," and "Life is more than food or clothing" which can be purchased. Therefore, according to verse 21, one can be "rich toward God" without earthly treasure. Additionally, this passage has a close connection with Jesus' teaching commonly known as "The Parable of the Soils" in Luke 8. There, Jesus describes people of faith but people whose faith had gotten choked out. Jesus says, "And as for what fell among the thorns, they are those who hear, but as they go on their way they are choked by the cares and riches and pleasures of life, and their

[33] David Powlison, *Seeing with New Eyes: Counseling and the Human Condition through the Lens of Scripture* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 2003), 115.

[34] Edward T. Welch, *Running Scared: Fear, Worry, and the God of Rest* (Greensboro, NC: New Growth Press, 2007), 64-67.

[35] Wayne Grudem and Tom R. Schreiner, study note on Luke, in *ESV Study Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008), 1938.

fruit does not mature." The word "cares" in our English translation is the same Greek word typically translated "worries" or "anxieties" in 12:11, 22, 25, and 26.[36] Thus, Jesus alerts his followers to the adversarial relationship between chronic anxiety and faith.

The immediate context of this teaching is encouragement for a certain type of fearlessness that would empower followers to face persecution.[37] This fearlessness would mean they need not to be anxious about defending themselves before persecutors.[38] For some reason, this teaching prompted an audience member to request that Jesus arbitrate an inheritance dispute. Jesus' responded by warning them of covetousness, using a parable about a rich man who built bigger barns to store his crops, only to discover that he would soon die.

Three Perspectives on Anxiety

Jesus offers three perspectives on anxiety against the backdrop of his parable of the rich man who had needlessly built bigger barns.

There are Legitimate Reasons to Worry

Jesus does not teach his followers that worry is baseless or faulty. He affirms their inability to perfectly manage their lives by addressing them as a "little flock,"[39]

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[36] Dirk Jongkind, ed., *The Greek New Testament* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2018), 164, 182-183.

[37] Luke 12:4-12.

[38] Luke 12:11.

[39] Luke 12:32.

hearkening back to the rich Old Testament metaphor that identifies them as "fragile yet cared for by God," according to New Testament scholars David Pao and Eckhard Schnabel.[40] This fragility is described by historian N.T. Wright:

> Many of Jesus' hearers only just had enough to live on, and there was always the prospect that one day they wouldn't have even that. Most of them would have perhaps a spare garment, but not more…one disaster…could mean instant destitution.[41]

Therefore, Jesus' cautions against worrying about what they will eat, wear, or drink recognize the real threat. They also lived in an environment where this type of anxiety was commonplace. Hence, "the nations of the world seek after these things."[42]

Worry Is Addressed Through Faithful Trust

Jesus does not direct his disciples to better strategies to fend off threat or harm. Rather, he challenges them to repentance and trust through three *a fortiori* examples that highlight God's power and care for every aspect of life and their relative helplessness.

Jesus argues that ravens, which New Testament scholar Darrel Bock says are types of "unclean" crows,[43] are cared for by God. Though they do not store things up, God feeds them through the implied instrumentality of their scrounging for food in their normal course of life. Jesus argues that if God cares for the ravens, he will care much more for his people. Likewise, God cares for flowers, beautifully adorned even though

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[40] Gregory K. Beale and Donald A. Carson, *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009), 330.

[41] N. T. Wright, *Luke for Everyone* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 152.

[42] Luke 12:30.

[43] Darrell L. Bock, *Luke*, vol. 2, The IVP New Testament Commentary Series (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008), 1160.

they are short-lived. Given such generous care for flowers, how much more would he care to adorn his people? In the middle of these two illustrations, Jesus poses the question, "Which of you, by being anxious can add a single hour to his life's span?" He assumes the answer when he then says, "If, then you are not able to do a small thing as this, why are you anxious about the rest?" Again, if through worry Christians cannot add an hour to their lives, why should they practice worry to better the whole of their lives?

In this midst of this teaching, Jesus calls his hearers, "you of little faith." He was not saying they lacked all faith, but that their faith was small, perhaps akin to the faith of the aforementioned soil choked by weeds. The alternative, then, is a growing faith, free of weeds. Here Jesus appends a gracious motivation to drive this needed growth in faith.

Faithful Trust Is Rooted in the Character of God

Jesus does not point his hearers back to themselves to generate the needed growth. Rather, he highlights the character of God when he says in 12:32, "Fear not, little flock, for it is your father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom." Here Jesus draws together three metaphors of the role of God as shepherd ("little flock), Father ("your Father's"), and King ("kingdom"). He suggests that as the followers meditate and rely on these realities, they are empowered to "fear not" and avoid anxiety.

God as "shepherd" is deeply rooted in the Old Testament classic Psalm 23, which highlights the Lord's presence, guidance, provision, and protection. Jesus' designation of God as "father" is strongly characteristic of New Testament terminology, and about this designation, theologian J.I. Packer remarks:

> You sum up the whole of New Testament religion if you describe it as the knowledge of God as one's holy Father…for everything that Christ taught,

> everything that makes the New Testament new, and better than the Old, everything that is distinctively Christian as opposed to merely Jewish, is summed up in the knowledge of the Fatherhood of God. 'Father' is the Christian name for God.[44]

Jesus also gives great encouragement that the "Father" is not merely willing to provide for his children but that is it is his "good pleasure" to do so. Here Jesus chooses a word otherwise used only by God the Father announcing his pleasure in the God the Son.[45] This phrase communicates to the followers of Jesus that the heavenly Father, with intense passion, is dedicated their good. Finally, by alerting them to God's intention to give them the kingdom, Jesus communicates that their heavenly Father is a king who has authority over a kingdom that he will share with them.

The logical imperative of this teaching follows in verse 31, "Seek his kingdom and these things will be added to you." Bock notes that the verb tense indicates "that this is to be the disciple's habit: that is, 'Keep seeking his kingdom.'"[46] Ostensibly, this type of seeking leads to a more clear understanding of God for who he is, greater faith, and a reduction in anxiety as confidence in God's character grows.

Summary of Jesus' Teaching on Anxiety in Luke 12

Jesus addresses anxiety in a straightforward fashion in Luke 12 by acknowledging the many uncertainties and potential dangers that exist for his people. He does not pretend there is no problem. However, he does call his followers to anchor their hope and

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[44] J. I. Packer, *Knowing God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 201.

[45] This occurs at Jesus' baptism (Matthew 3:17, Mark 1:11, Luke 3:22), Jesus's transfiguration (Matthew 17:5), and the announcement of God's joy in the Isaianic servant (Matthew 12:18).

[46] Bock, *Luke*, 1164.

trust in the character of their Heavenly Father who guides them, loves them, and has authority over his kingdom. This command appears to be an ongoing community effort.

Anxiety in Family Systems Perspective

Family systems theory is the second area of literature reviewed in this study. Family systems theory was formalized by psychiatrist Dr. Murray Bowen in the 1950s and has been subsequently refined and applied in multiple contexts.

Systems Theory Framework

The Bowen Center in Washington, D.C. describes Bowen Family Systems Theory, sometimes referred to as "BFST" or "Bowen theory," as "a theory of human behavior that views the family as an emotional unit and uses systems thinking to describe the complex interactions in the unit."[47] The word "emotional" in systems theory is used differently than in daily conversation relating to "feelings." Rabbi Edwin Friedman, a student of Murray Bowen and a systems theory expert, says the word "emotional" in BFST ought not be "equated with feelings," and, while it may include feelings, "The word refers primarily to the instinctual side of our species that we share in common with all other forms of life."[48] Bowen says this emotional functioning is "distinctly different" from intellectual functioning and includes the "automatic forces" that govern all life,

[47] Michael E. Kerr, "One Family's Story: A Primer on Bowen Theory," The Bowen Center for the Study of the Family, 2000, thebowencenter.org/theory.

[48] Friedman, *A Failure of Nerve*, 3.

including what people normally refer to as "instinct, reproduction, the automatic activity controlled by the automatic nervous system."[49]

Dr. Michael Kerr, emeritus director of the Bowen Center, calls Bowen theory a "radical departure" from previous psychological theories because it conceptualizes the family as "an emotional unit and the individual as part of that unit rather than an autonomous psychological entity."[50] Peter Steinke, author of several books on systems theory, suggests that people view this emotional unit in light of "field theory" in physics in which a "field" comes into being when matter comes close to other matter. Subsequently, once that field is established, "It determines the functioning of the parts more than any part influences the field, even though the presence of the parts is necessary for creating the field."[51] Dr. Israel Galindo, professor at Columbia Theological Seminary and author of several church-focused resources on systems theory, notes that this emotional field can be the biological family but "bona fide theory grounded in study and practice" also demonstrates effective application to other relational systems, including congregations.[52]

Part of the "radical departure" from traditional and individual psychological theories Kerr mentions above is BFST's answer to the question, "Where does the problem lie?" Ronald Richardson, author of several standard books on BFST explains,

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[49] Murray Bowen, *Family Therapy in Clinical Practice* (New York: Aronson, 1983), 304-305.

[50] Michael E. Kerr, "Chronic Anxiety and Defining a Self," *The Atlantic Monthly*, September 1988, 35.

[51] Peter L. Steinke, *Uproar: Calm Leadership in Anxious Times* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2019), 67.

[52] Israel Galindo and Betty Pugh Mills, "Long-Tenured Ministry and Systems Theory: Bowen Systems Theory as a Resource for the Long Haul," *Review and Expositor* 13, no. 3 (2016): 342-343, https://doi.org/10.1177/0034637316656601.

"The individual model suggests that the problem is within particular people…[but] Bowen theory enlarges the field of vision. It recognizes the interconnectedness of people in emotional systems and how each person affects the others."[53] Kerr and Bowen together contend that "traditional psychological concepts" are more helpful to "describe rather than account for human functioning."[54] BFST is more interested in the relational disturbance that permits the pathogenic process to unfold. Friedman notes this understanding is particularly important for long term health since making "changes in the toxicity of the environment" not accompanied by healthy relational response patterns still means that it is a "problem that is likely to endure and recycle," whether with the same presenting problem or another.[55]

In systems theory, individuals are never considered apart from the system in which they exist and are always seen as a product of that system, though retaining personal responsibility for their roles therein. Galindo notes that purists of BFST tend to "eschew all notions of individualistic perspectives to therapy" like personality types or traits.[56] Indeed, Friedman speaks critically of what he calls a "social science construction of reality" that "focuses on classifications such as the psychological diagnosis of individuals or their 'personality profiles' and sociolegal and anthropological niche." He

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[53] Ronald W. Richardson, "Bowen Family Systems Theory and Congregational Life," *Review & Expositor* 102, no. 3 (2005): 384-85, https://doi.org/10.1177/003463730510200304.

[54] Michael E. Kerr and Murray Bowen, *Family Evaluation: An Approach Based on Bowen Theory* (New York: Norton, 1988), ix.

[55] Friedman, *A Failure of Nerve*, 155.

[56] Israel Galindo, *Perspectives on Congregational Leadership: Applying Systems Thinking for Effective Leadership* (Richmond, VA: Educational Consultants, 2009), 44.

considers this approach to be a fixation on pathology that is itself pathological.[57] Yet, Galindo does find some value in considering the capacities of the individual since one main feature of the system is "differentiation of self," which is "a product of the individual rather than the system."[58]

Friedman highlights two benefits of systems theory for contemporary life. First is its universal application as it focuses on the "underlying natural systems principles that all families share," which frees people from the burden of primarily "trying to understand families in terms of their cultural, class, or ethnic distinctions."[59] Without dismissing real cultural differences, Bowen theory acknowledges deeper human processes at work common to all human institutions and "families." Second, systems theory is uniquely suited for an environment with increasingly connective technology. Friedman cautions that since this "technologically advanced society constantly keeps us in often-simultaneous touch with one another," technology may be used to exacerbate distressing relational tendencies.[60] The effect is that persons may more easily get caught up in the surrounding anxious system.

Bowen theory is comprised of eight interlocking concepts whose full exploration exceeds the scope of this paper. Helpfully, Dr. Robert Creech, Baylor University professor and systems theorist, gives a thumbnail description. The eight concepts are:

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[57] Friedman, *A Failure of Nerve, 108.*

[58] Galindo, *Perspectives on Congregational Leadership*, 44.

[59] Friedman, *A Failure of Nerve,* 56.

[60] Friedman, *A Failure of Nerve*, 52.

Triangles – The 'molecule' of the emotional system, formed when one person becomes uncomfortable in relationship to another and so pulls in a third to manage the anxiety in the original relationship.

Differentiation of Self – A person's capacity to remain true to their deepest principles, to be thoughtful rather than reactive, while remaining emotionally connected to others who are important to oneself. Differentiation is the capacity to separate our intellectual and emotional systems and to choose between the two.

Family Emotional Process – The ways in which a family 'binds' or focuses its anxiety in one of four symptoms: conflict, distance, over-functioning/under-functioning (including 'dysfunctional spouse"), and projection of anxiety onto a child.

Family Projection Process – The intense positive or negative focus of parents on a child as a way of managing the anxiety of their own marriage, often resulting in the child becoming more emotionally dependent or symptomatic.

Multigenerational Transmission Process – The way in which one generation transmits levels of emotional maturity and ways of responding to anxiety to the next generation, resulting in branches of the family that are increasing in differentiation over time and others that are regressing.

Emotional Cutoff -- a common symptom of anxiety in a system; an extreme expression of distancing, in which people completely break off relationships, especially between generations.

Sibling Position – The unique place one occupies in the family of origin, based on one's birth order (for example, oldest, or older brother of sisters, or younger sister of sisters). This position teaches one about relationships with both sexes and affects the way one functions in the system.

Societal Emotional Process – The ways in which anxiety and reactivity occur and function in a society, following the same pattern as in an individual family.[61]

[61] R. Robert Creech, *Family Systems and Congregational Life: A Map for Ministry* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2019), 185-189. For a fuller explanation see Michael E. Kerr, "One Family's Story: A Primer on Bowen Theory." The Bowen Center for the Study of the Family. 2000. http://www.thebowencenter.org.

Main Variable #1: Differentiation of Self

In his primary text on family systems theory, Bowen summarizes, "The Bowen theory involves two main variables. One is the degree of anxiety, and the other is the degree of integration of self."[62] These "variables" are considered alongside the above mentioned eight concepts, and integration of self, also called self-differentiation, is a distinct concept that overlays anxiety. While these variables are different, Kerr and Bowen suggest they are also inextricably related, saying, "Anxiety increases as level of differentiation decreases,"[63] and, conversely, "Reduction of…anxiety is a by-product of increasing one's basic differentiation."[64] Therefore, in order to understand the functioning of anxiety in a system, people must first understand the importance of differentiation.

Defining Differentiation

In any given emotional field, Bowen describes two forces always at work, "togetherness" and "individuality" forces.[65]

> The togetherness forces are derived from the universal need for "love," approval, emotional closeness, and agreement. The individuality force is derived from the drive to be a productive, autonomous individual, as defined by self rather than the dictates of the group.[66]

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[62] Bowen, *Family Therapy in Clinical Practice*, 361.

[63] Kerr and Bowen, *Family Evaluation*, 117.

[64] Kerr and Bowen, Family Evaluation, 127.

[65] Bowen, *Family Therapy in Clinical Practice*, 277.

[66] Bowen, *Family Therapy in Clinical Practice*, 277.

Kerr notes that Bowen theory "does not assume that one life force is better or more important than the other," but that good levels differentiation "allow people to choose to act based on individuality or togetherness depending on the realities of the existing life situation."[67] This differentiation may be conceived as a process wherein a person balances these two forces and remains an individual without being overwhelmed by the togetherness force or becoming isolated. According to Steinke, it is "the ability to be a separate self in a relationship system."[68] This ability includes remaining in contact with the system without being fused to the system. Kerr writes, "The more differentiated a self, the more a person can be an individual while in emotional contact with the group."[69] Drawing on a biological analogy, Friedman says differentiation is "the capacity to be one's own integrated aggregate-of-cells person while still belonging to, or being able to relate to, a larger colony."[70] This individuation, however, must be aware of the tendency to be cut-off from the emotional system and becoming too distant. It is, as Friedman says, "The capacity to be an 'I' while remaining connected."[71]

Bowen conceived of both "basic" and "functional" levels of differentiation. The basic level of differentiation, according to Kerr and Bowen, is "not dependent on relationship process" and "is fairly well established by the time a child reaches

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[67] Michael E. Kerr, *Bowen Theory's Secrets: Revealing the Hidden Life of Families* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2019), 68.

[68] Steinke, *Uproar*, 9.

[69] Kerr and Bowen, *Family Evaluation*, 94.

[70] Friedman, *A Failure of Nerve*, 184.

[71] Friedman, *Generation to Generation*, 27.

adolescence."[72] Functional differentiation, by contrast, is the operational level of differentiation in a relationship process and can fluctuate. Kerr writes, "People can function at levels that are higher or lower than their basic level, depending on the relationship system in which they are operating."[73] Given the right environment, a person with low basic differentiation can function somewhat healthily. However, even those who are highly differentiated can be overwhelmed if they are in a toxic environment long enough and subjected to enough stressors.

Variables Influencing Differentiation

Bowen initially did not hold out much hope for changing one's level of basic differentiation and thought it unlikely "ever to make more than minor changes in one's basic level of self."[74] However, he added, if one did the slow, hard work of making even a small change, it would result in a "new world of a different lifestyle."[75] Subsequent theorists were more hopeful about changes in level of differentiation. In *Family Evaluation*, a book co-authored by Bowen, but in a section written by Kerr, Kerr writes that this process is dependent on learning:

> The learning depends on having the courage to engage emotionally intense situations and to tolerate the anxiety and internal emotional reactivity associated with that engagement…The learning that can lead to a reduction in chronic anxiety is contingent on recognizing the difference between feeling and thinking responses in oneself and others and on

[72] Kerr and Bowen, *Family Evaluation,* 98.

[73] Kerr, "Chronic Anxiety and Defining a Self," 42.

[74] Bowen, *Family Therapy in Clinical Practice*, 371.

[75] Bowen, *Family Therapy in Clinical Practice*, 371.

> recognizing the mechanisms …by which these feeling responses are triggered and communicated.[76]

For this learning to take place, a person would have to deal faithfully with the reality of their "pseudo-self" vis-à-vis their "solid self." The "solid-self" is "made up of clearly defined beliefs, opinions, convictions, and life principles," while the "pseudo-self" is "created by emotional pressure and can be modified by emotional pressure."[77] This "pretend self" is in play most of the time, and Bowen warns that "the level of solid self is lower and…the pseudo-self is much higher in all of us than most are aware."[78]

If this learning takes place, differentiation of self can be a dynamic reality in a person's life. Creech writes, "Work on differentiation of self is a lifelong project of becoming progressively less emotionally fused to others so we can remain in relationship with them,"[79] without reacting to them and without being cut off. Steinke also calls this a "lifelong process" of learning and challenges people to growth "aided by a high level of motivation and doses of courage."[80] Kerr and Bowen warn, however, that numerous feedback loops sabotage this effort, and "societal reinforcement of a togetherness and feeling orientation is considerable."[81] Therefore, even the most earnest attempts at differentiation will likely be challenged by numerous variables in the existing culture.

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[76] Kerr and Bowen, *Family Evaluation*, 130-131.

[77] Bowen, *Family Therapy in Clinical Practice*, 365.

[78] Bowen, *Family Therapy in Clinical Practice*, 366.

[79] Creech, *Family Systems and Congregational Life,* 45.

[80] Steinke, *Uproar*, 141.

[81] Kerr and Bowen, *Family Evaluation,* 132.

Description of Differentiated Functioning

Kerr and Bowen identify the characteristic that best defines increasing levels of differentiation as "the degree to which [persons] are able to distinguish between the feeling process and the intellectual process."[82] This distinction is not to confuse differentiation with an intellectual activity, however. As Friedman reminds us, "Differentiation is an emotional concept, not a cerebral one, but it does require clear-headedness."[83] Kerr further adds that, because this is an emotional process, intelligence is not a necessary predictor of differentiation.[84]

Dr. Daniel Popero of The Bowen Center describes differentiation as finding expression along four axes in the person's life. These axes are: developing principles used to guide behavior; regulating behavior in the pursuit of goals; managing anxiety, stress, and fear; and maintaining contact with important other people who may have different goals and objectives.[85] Friedman is careful to point out that this expression of differentiation is not an objective level or a place that people master. He writes that it "refers more to a process than a goal that can ever be achieved."[86] Galindo, in summarizing the work of several, has developed a list of "components" of differentiated functioning that move in the direction of health. They are:

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[82] Kerr and Bowen, *Family Evaluation,* 97.

[83] Friedman, *A Failure of Nerve,* 183.

[84] Kerr, *Bowen Theory's Secrets*, 63.

[85] Daniel Papero et al., "Natural Systems Thinking and the Human Family," *Systems* 6, no. 2 (January 2018), 4. https://doi.org/10.3390/systems6020019.

[86] Friedman, *A Failure of Nerve*, 183.

- Having and keeping boundaries; knowing where one ends and others begin;
- A lifelong process of growing in capacity to become yourself in relationship to others;
- Maintaining self-regulation: being non-reactive in the face of reactivity and in the midst of anxiety;
- Charting one's own course; setting one's own standards;
- Having the capacity to take a stand;
- Having the capacity to say "I" (taking personal responsibility) when others insist on "we" (herding, enmeshment);
- Taking responsibility for oneself and for one's position rather than for others.[87]

Differentiation is usually presented on a continuum. Consequently, low levels of differentiation are experienced as the opposite of the above components. In addition to these descriptors, Bowen says poorly differentiated people tend to be marked by being "feeling-dominated," investing a great deal of energy into "seeking love and approval," spending time in "withdrawal or fighting," and making important life decisions "on the basis of what feels right."[88] Kerr, while admitting a "broad generalization," notices that people with lower levels of differentiation tend to have trouble in both work and family, those with moderate levels tend to have trouble with family, but not work, and those with high levels tend to have trouble with neither work nor family.[89]

[87] Galindo, *Perspectives on Congregational Leadership*, 141.

[88] Bowen, *Family Therapy in Clinical Practice*, 367.

[89] Kerr, *Bowen Theory's Secrets*, 62.

Main Variable #2: Anxiety

Anxiety is the second main variable in Bowen theory, and it "interlocks" with differentiation of self, according to Kerr.[90] Bowen theory does not treat anxiety as a "disorder" as much as a naturally occurring part of every system.[91] It is, however, a variable and, on the individual level, Bowen and Kerr explain, "the lower a person's level of differentiation, the less his adaptiveness to stress."[92] Greater differentiation, then, brings a heightened ability to respond well to a broad range of stressful stimuli.

Describing Anxiety

BFST describes anxiety as "the reaction of an organism to a real or imagined threat." A "real threat" is distinguished by the label "acute anxiety" while "chronic threat" is used to describe anxiety related to "imagined threat."[93] Kerr and Bowen say that "acute anxiety" is generally experienced as time limited and adapted by most people because it is generated by "specific events or issues" that can be recognized in their presence and absence.[94] Chronic anxiety, however, is different. It is not "caused" by any one thing and is "fed by the fear of what might be." Even though there may be an inciting event or thought that gives opportunity for chronic anxiety, Kerr and Bowen say chronic

[90] Kerr, *Bowen Theory's Secrets*, 108.

[91] Kerr, *Bowen Theory's Secrets*, 108.

[92] Kerr and Bowen, *Family Evaluation,* 112.

[93] Kerr, *Bowen Theory's Secrets*, 109.

[94] Kerr and Bowen, *Family Evaluation*, 113.

anxiety can take on a life of its own and "quickly provides its own momentum and becomes largely independent of the initial triggering stimuli." This chronic anxiety is governed most by "people's reaction to a disturbance in the relationship system."[95] The self-sustaining nature of chronic anxiety may have a biological component. Creech explains that the physiological nature of chronic anxiety can be the same as that of acute anxiety. Under both conditions, the body experiences the same chemical changes. At the level of reactivity, he says, "Our brains do not know…the difference between a real threat and an imagined threat, and so they respond as programmed."[96] Kerr contends that chronic anxiety is usually referred to as "anxiety" in much of the literature outside of BFST, as opposed to "acute anxiety," which is often called "fear." In citing the work of neuroscientist Joseph LeDoux, Kerr writes, "LeDoux terms Bowen theory's concept of chronic anxiety as simply anxiety" and that he "equates Bowen theory's concept of acute anxiety with fear."[97]

The Process of Chronic Anxiety

Symptomatic Expression of Anxiety

As Bowen and Kerr emphasize, BFST "links *all* clinical symptoms to the emotional system."[98] This emotional system, which influences basic and functional

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[95] Kerr and Bowen, *Family Evaluation*, 113.

[96] Creech, *Family Systems and Congregational Life,* 17-18.

[97] Kerr, *Bowen Theory's Secrets*, 171.

[98] Kerr and Bowen, *Family Evaluation*, 256. Emphasis mine.

levels of differentiation has direct bearing on experienced anxiety. Richardson describes the consequence of a person emerging from an emotional system which fosters healthy differentiation, or not:

> Ideally, by the time most people reach young adulthood, they discover they have most of the emotional resources they need within themselves to be on their own without feeling too overwhelmed by life. They have a sense of safety and self-support and are less anxious as adults. If this normal process has been interfered with for any number of reasons, the young adult will have a higher level of chronic anxiety and feel more easily threatened by life events and relationships.[99]

Thus, the historical system from which the person emerges can exert powerful influence on the current symptomatic expressions of anxiety.

As noted earlier, if a person liable to high chronic anxiety because of low basic differentiation subsequently exists in an emotional system that is stable, he or she may be able to live with a higher level of functional differentiation and thus lower anxiety. That is, an anxiously oriented person may be able to function less anxiously in a calmer system. However, if the individual with high chronic anxiety resides in a system also marked by higher anxiety or numerous stressors, expression of identifiable symptoms of anxiety may result in reaction to any perceived stressor. Again, Kerr and Bowen say, "Symptoms are rooted in the undifferentiated or togetherness aspects of human functioning." A poorly differentiated system catalyzes anxiety in those influenced by its field, if those individuals do not have enough basic differentiation to withstand it.

[99] Ronald Wayne Richardson, *Creating a Healthier Church Family Systems Theory, Leadership, and Congregational Life* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1996), 46-47.

This understanding means BFST resists a "cause-and-effect model" that assigns symptoms as effects of "the overwhelming impact of a pathogenic process."[100] Kerr and Bowen do warn that the "lure of cause-and-effect thinking is seductive and ever-present"[101] because it posits that problems on one level can be understood by investigating a prior level and posing the question, "What has caused this disease?"[102] However, the systems question is: "How has the harmonious balance of relationships within the 'sick' person and within his central relationship network been disturbed?"[103] This disturbance allows for the pathogenic process to run its course, manifesting in the experience of and symptoms of anxiety.

Thus, according to BFST, the things people become anxious over are not necessarily the "causes" of the anxiety but the trigger to which a person responds poorly. Others, experiencing the same stressors, but with a higher level of differentiation or in a less chronically anxious system, may not respond with the same symptoms. Most critical, then, is neither the strength nor the nature of the initial disturbance, but the way in which the individual or the family "adapts effectively" to it. Friedman notes, "Our response is always far more influential than our chronically anxious society leads us to believe."[104] If this response is directed away from mature differentiation, "The disturbance may become

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[100] Kerr and Bowen, *Family Evaluation*, 258.

[101] Kerr and Bowen, *Family Evaluation*, 260

[102] Kerr and Bowen, *Family Evaluation*, 258.

[103] Kerr and Bowen, *Family Evaluation*, 258.

[104] Friedman, *A Failure of Nerve,* 155.

self-perpetuating and provide the impetus or 'energy' for the full expression of whatever…defect may be present."[105]

Triangles

Key to understanding individual and systemic processing of anxiety is the concept of the triangle. The "triangle" is a central concept in Bowen theory and is defined by Creech as "the 'molecule' of the emotional system, formed when one person becomes uncomfortable in relationship to another and so pulls in a third to manage the anxiety in the original relationship."[106] This expansion happens, according to The Bowen Center, because, "The tension can shift around three relationships"[107] and thus hold more tension than a two-person relationship. This movement of including a third party, called triangling, is normally not conceived of as intentional in BFST and is often seen as inevitable. According to Dr. Jenny Brown, family therapist and trainer for The Family Systems Institute, "triangling" provides a "detour for the anxiety" that is said to be "inevitable…in a dyad."[108] Friedman points out that these members of a triangle can be composed of people, issues,[109] or even the past![110]

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[105] Kerr and Bowen, *Family Evaluation,* 258-259.

[106] Creech, *Family Systems and Congregational Life,* 187.

[107] Michael E. Kerr, "Triangles" in "One Family's Story: A Primer on Bowen Theory," The Bowen Center for the Study of the Family, 2000, https://thebowencenter.org/theory/eight-concepts/.

[108] Jenny Brown, "Bowen Family Systems Theory and Practice: Illustration and Critique," *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Family Therapy* 20, no. 2 (1999): 95, https://doi.org/10.1002/j.1467-8438.1999.tb00363.x.

[109] Friedman, *Generation to Generation*, 35.

[110] Friedman, *A Failure of Nerve*, 217.

Triangles are naturally occurring and not necessarily negative. According to Galindo, "As with all concepts in BFST, triangles are neither 'good' nor 'bad.' They are merely a natural functional dynamic in any relationship system."[111] For instance, a wife, husband, and daughter exist in a *de facto* triangle. When tension is low, the triangle functions normally with each pursuing healthy levels of differentiation. However, tension between husband and wife can also be "bound" by focusing on the daughter and creating an unhealthy triangle.

Psychiatrist Roberta Gilbert notes that the triangling process is also a connective tissue which links the individual to the rest of the system and smaller units in the system to each other because of the "interlocking" nature of the triangles. This web of complex relational connections within a particular emotional field allows for the escalation and transmission of chronic anxiety.[112]

Emotional Regression

If this chronic anxiety escalates in a relationship system, writes Kerr, "The system becomes dominated by less thoughtful and more reactive ways of interacting."[113] Dr. Jane De Matteis of the Family Systems Institute describes regression occurring "when the family…begins to make important decisions to allay the anxiety of the moment."[114]

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[111] Galindo and Mills, "Long Tenured Ministry," 352.

[112] Roberta M. Gilbert, *The Eight Concepts of Bowen Theory: A New Way of Thinking about the Individual and the Group* (Lake Frederick, VA: Leading Systems Press, 2013), 51.

[113] Kerr, *Bowen Theory's Secrets*, 65.

[114] Jane De. Matteis, "Societal Regression and Donald Trump," (blog), The Family Systems Institute, July 31, 2017, http://www.thefsi.com.au/2017/07/31/societal-regression-donald-trump/.

These adjustments, according to Kerr, create "a vicious circle of increasing anxiety and emotional reactivity [which] propels a relationship system into an emotional regression."[115] This vicious cycle, with nothing to interrupt it, can increase anxiety in the entire system.

Regression in Society

The anxiety-driven regression in emotional process present in families may also take root in a culture at large—thus functioning as a result, sustainer, and driver of chronic anxiety. Bowen noticed "striking analogies between regression in a family and regression in larger social groups and society."[116] From his vantage point, writing in the late 1970s, Bowen predicted cultural decline marked by intense society-wide regression in which culture in the West "mov[es] into crises of unparalleled proportions" and that these crises will "recur and recur, with increasing intensity for decades to come."[117] Gilbert describes this time of societal regression as one in which, "There is more and more anxiety in all people, firing chaos and irresponsible behavior…[and] the chaos and irresponsibility create more anxiety, leading to more problems…in an escalating cycle."[118] Steinke categorizes the present age as one of societal regression and indicts several modern social ills as evidence thereof:

> We are in a period of societal emotional regression wherein anxiety undermines our objectivity (fake news), sets up bogus enemies (white

[115] Kerr, *Bowen Theory's Secrets*, 68.

[116] Bowen, *Family Therapy in Clinical Practice*, 277.

[117] Bowen, *Family Therapy in Clinical Practice*, 281.

[118] Roberta Gilbert, *The Eight Concepts*, 102.

> supremacy), denies tradition (custom-made reality), imports anti-science (climate change denial), lavishes attention on the weirdest image-makers (conspirators), and magnifies differences (racial, immigrants).[119]

These ills, often the source of the regressive tendencies and anxiety, are identified by many systems theorists as expression of anxiety already present.

Friedman, in summarizing Bowen, suggests an entire society could lose its ability to cope with change when two factors occurred simultaneously. Namely, if, "Anxiety escalates as society is overwhelmed by the quantity and speed of change" and if, "The institutions or individuals…traditionally used to absorb or bind off society's anxiety are no longer available to absorb it."[120] For instance, an environment in which unlimited, constantly changing information is available to nearly everyone and in which traditional institutions like government, church, and the family come under doubt and scrutiny could be such an environment. In this context, Friedman says chronic anxiety can "envelop, if not actually connect people."[121] When this happens, the environment, whether family or society, is marked by four characteristics:

1. Reactivity – a condition of reciprocal response resonance of automatic responses that seem to bypass the cortex and perpetuate a supercharged emotional atmosphere. Here, playfulness and humor disappear, and families become a "panic in search of a trigger."

2. Herding – the togetherness forces triumph over the forces for individuality and move everyone to adapt to the least mature person or those most unwilling to take responsibility for their own self. This "hinders, if not cripples, the capacity to be decisive."

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[119] Steinke, *Uproar*, 20.

[120] Friedman, *A Failure of Nerve*, 57.

[121] Friedman, *A Failure of Nerve*, 58.

3. Blame Displacement – an emotional state in which family members focus on forces that have victimized them rather than taking responsibility for their own being and destiny. This state entails a consistent focus on pathology rather than strength.

4. A Quick-fix Mentality – a low-threshold-for-pain attitude that constantly seeks symptom relief as fast as possible rather than fundamental change. This attitude is more concerned about "sureness" or "certainty," than growth.[122]

Friedman also argues that these four characteristics create a fifth which, in turn, helps to sustain them. This fifth element he calls a "failure of nerve" or "the lack of a well-differentiated leadership."[123] No member can escape the anxiety of the system. Friedman contends that in chronically anxious families this condition prevails, and he has "never seen an exception to this rule."[124]

Friedman further contends that the only way out of regression, whether on the societal or family level, is through well-differentiated leadership, wherein a person is "in contact with, but outside of, an emotional system" and "is not telling others what they should do." Rather, this person has "well-thought out positions that are calming and useful to an anxious system," even though others in the system may react strongly to their stand.[125] Friedman is more specific than Kerr in the types of leadership principles required to stand against an emotionally regressive system. He includes:

- the capacity to separate oneself from surrounding emotional processes;
- the capacity to obtain clarity about one's principles and vision;
- the willingness to be exposed and be vulnerable;
- persistence in the face of initial resistance; and

[122] Friedman, *A Failure of Nerve*, 62-88.

[123] Edwin H. Friedman, *Reinventing Leadership: Change in an Age of Anxiety: Discussion Guide* (New York: Guilford Press, 1996), 23.

[124] Friedman, *Reinventing Leadership Discussion Guide*, 23.

[125] Kerr, *Bowen Theory's Secrets*, 69.

- self-regulation in the face of reactive sabotage.[126]

This type of leadership, according to Friedman, does not mitigate anxiety by trying directly to do so. for that would be a "focus on pathology" and "adaptation to immaturity."[127] This focus risks further exacerbating the regressive and anxious tendencies of a system. Rather, healthy leadership focuses on self-differentiation and non-anxious presence. As Friedman describes:

> The basic concept of leadership through self-differentiation is this: If a leader will take primary responsibility for his or her own position as "head" and work to define his or her own goals and self, while staying in touch with the rest of the organism, there is a more than reasonable chance the body will follow. There may be initial resistance but, if the leader can stay in touch with the resisters, the body will usually go along."[128]

Such leadership gives the system the best opportunity for health, which, in turn, gives the members the best opportunity for healthy functioning and lower chronic anxiety.

Congregational Implications

Robert Creech contends that BFST has enduring benefit for congregations and congregational leaders for two reasons. First, BFST will stand the test of time because it is "unlimited by time or culture."[129] So, even though the ministry context may radically change, "human reactivity and emotional processes will not."[130] Secondly, "Bowen

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[126] Friedman, *A Failure of Nerve*, 89.

[127] Friedman, *A Failure of Nerve*, 78-79.

[128] Friedman, *Generation to Generation*, 229.

[129] Creech, *Family Systems and Congregational Life,* 10.

[130] Creech, *Family Systems*, 10.

theory provides a way of thinking about and understanding…anxiety" that gives churches and leaders a better change of thriving in an increasingly anxious environment.[131]

The Congregation as an Emotional System

Friedman defines an emotional system as "any group of people who have developed interdependence to the point where the resulting system through which they are connected…has evolved its own principles of organization"[132] and contends that congregational and family emotional processes are "identical." [133] Creech concurs and adds that congregations "form emotional systems as well, perhaps not as formidable as nuclear families, yet intense at times."[134]

Friedman further points out that a multi-generational process can be present in a congregation's emotional field. Because system dynamics operate independently of the individuals functioning in the system, a change in individuals does not necessarily mean a change in the system. Therefore, he encourages institutional leaders to understand "the past as a continuous process"[135] that endures. This continuity is particularly the case with malignant processes, which he likens to cancer in the human body and notes, "a change-

[131] Creech, *Family Systems*, 10.

[132] Friedman, *A Failure of Nerve*, 197.

[133] Friedman, *Generation to Generation*, 1.

[134] Creech, *Family Systems and Congregational Life,* 16.

[135] Friedman, *A Failure of Nerve*, 199.

over in 'cells' from year to year or from generation to generation will not necessarily affect a change in a malignant process."[136]

Leadership in the Congregation

The nature of leadership in systems leads Friedman to claim, "The overall health and functioning of any organization depends primarily on one or two people at the top, and that this is true…[of] a congregation."[137] Galindo points out that because clergy "find themselves perpetually a part of the emotional triangles in the congregational system,"[138] they affect the system most. This means, as Creech warns, "The pressure in times of chronic anxiety is for the pastoral leader to share the fears and anxieties of others, to yield to their demands for a quick fix, to abandon beliefs and principles, to blame others for problems, and to demand that others change their behavior."[139] This may take the form of "over-functioning" with the congregation in which the pastoral leader may "encourage the congregation to depend on them for thinking" or even engage in a form of triangling where "the Pastor steps between God and the congregation."[140] Creech adds that, if this begins to happen, anxiety in the system can rise "unconsciously" as:

[136] Friedman, *Generation to Generation*, 198.

[137] Friedman, *Generation to Generation*, 221.

[138] Galindo, *Perspectives on Congregational Leadership*, 130.

[139] Creech, *Family Systems and Congregational Life,* 54.

[140] Creech, *Family Systems and Congregational Life,* 71.

> an anxious congregant can easily pass that anxiety on to the pastor, who reacts automatically… the congregant notices the pastor's anxiety…and will likely react by becoming even more anxious.[141]

This suggests that the pastor occupies a position in the system that can result in great personal challenge.

However, this position in the system also places the pastor in a unique position of opportunity. In fact, Friedman suggests that a pastor is more suited than any other member of a system to foster positive growth because of multigenerational forces behind religious traditions, involvement during rites of passage, length of time over which intimacy develops, and the fact that clergy are identified leaders.[142]

For the pastor to be effective in these opportunities requires him to focus his own presence and being. That is, "a leader must separate his or her own emotional being from that of his or her followers while still remaining connected." [143] This dual state is what Friedman calls maintaining a "nonanxious presence" and "leadership through self-differentiation," which he describes as "the ability of a leader to be a self while still remaining a part of the system." [144]

Three components required are staying in touch, as opposed to becoming disconnected; the ability and willingness to take nonreactive, clearly defined positions; and dealing with sabotage that comes from less differentiated members in the system.[145]

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[141] Creech, *Family Systems and Congregational Life,* 18.

[142] Friedman, *Generation to Generation*, 5-6.

[143] Friedman, *A Failure of Nerve,* 18.

[144] Friedman, *Generation to Generation*, 229.

[145] Friedman, *Generation to Generation*, 229-230.

This leadership style means not being autocratic, coercive, or manipulating, "but being *rooted* in the leader's own sense of self rather than focused on that of his or her followers."[146] This stance does not mean a well-differentiated leader is free from the experience of anxiety. Rather, the leader recognizes the anxiety and, as Steinke says, "The non-anxious presence means we are aware of our own anxiety and the anxiety of others, but we will not let either determine our actions."[147] Richardson admonishes the pastor to make this his central task in leadership or risk a declining congregational environment:

> The leader's main job, through his or her way of being in the congregation, is to create an emotional atmosphere in which greater calmness exists—to be a less anxious presence…When a leader cannot contribute to that kind of atmosphere, the thinking processes in the group are short-circuited, and people become more anxious and more emotionally reactive and make poorer decisions.[148]

Friedman likens this type of leadership to being a "step-down" transformer who reduces the anxious "current" in a system "without zapping [the leader] or fusing [him] to the rest of the circuit."[149] This posture, warns Friedman "is not easy," but it "is within the capability of most leaders" and "has far more to do with their presence than their actions."[150]

This solitary position and responsibility are a great weight on the pastoral leader and a profound opportunity to exercise leadership. In healthy cases, Friedman suggests

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[146] Friedman, *A Failure of Nerve*, 230. Emphasis original.

[147] Steinke, *Uproar*, 52.

[148] Richardson, *Creating a Healthier Church*, 173.

[149] Friedman, *A Failure of Nerve*, 232.

[150] Friedman, *A Failure of Nerve*, 232.

that the pastor may gain the capacity to "not only to accept the solitariness that comes with the territory but also to come to love it."[151] This growth requires the pastor to rise to the challenge of well-differentiated leadership.

Preaching as Congregational Leadership

Dr. Steve Lawson, professor of preaching at The Master's Seminary, contends that preaching is the first priority in the church and helps every other activity find its appropriate place.[152] Though some traditions would dispute this, most still include sermons in nearly every worship service, and Religion News Service reports that 83 percent of American churchgoers rate preaching as what they most value in a church.[153]

This critical function of the primary leader or pastor may then be the greatest opportunity to exercise well-differentiated leadership. A BFST approach to understanding preaching that fosters lower chronic anxiety, suggests that, as Galindo says, "The sermon is as much about the preacher, the congregation, and their relationship in the context of being the church, as it is about the text."[154] While not dismissing the power or authority of the text, systems theory may allow preachers to better understand the "ethos" and

[151] Friedman, *A Failure of Nerve*, 18.

[152] Steven Lawson, "The Priority of Preaching the Word," (blog), Ligonier Ministries, March 21, 2016, https://www.ligonier.org/blog/priority-preaching-word/.

[153] Lauren Markoe, "Top of the Church Shopper's List: Strong Preaching," Religion News Service, August 23, 2016, https://religionnews.com/2016/08/23/top-of-the-church-shoppers-list-strong-preaching/.

[154] Galindo, *Perspectives on Congregational Leadership*, 128.

"pathos" dynamics of the preaching event,[155] or what Keller calls the "third text," or, "the message under your message."[156] In other words, the message is far more than words.

Friedman contends that preaching is not only, or even primarily, about words or other "mental" variables. Rather, it depends on what he calls "direction, distance, and anxiety."[157] Distance is described as the capacity of the leader to get outside the system to observe the processes in the system. Anxiety, he calls the "static" in the system that distorts everything. Direction depends on who is moving toward whom. He says:

> Others can only hear you when they are moving toward you, no matter how eloquently you phrase the message. In other words, as long as you are in the pursuing, rescuing, or coercive position, your message, no matter how eloquently broadcast, will never catch up.[158]

The implications are that effectiveness in preaching includes much more than the time in the pulpit and that the preacher who places the burden of convincing others on himself makes it less likely that he will succeed.

The aforementioned concept of the triangle may be a key to understanding this dynamic in preaching. Creech notes, "The essential triangle at work in the congregation is that of the spiritual leaders, the congregation, and the God they worship and serve." He adds that this triangle is "as basic to the life of the congregation as the father-mother-child triangle is to the nuclear family."[159] In applying this triangle to preaching, theology professor Walter Brueggemann says of preaching, there is the "interpretation of three

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[155] Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching*, 34-41.

[156] Keller, *Preaching*, 201.

[157] Friedman, *A Failure of Nerve*, 128.

[158] Friedman, *A Failure of Nerve*, 128.

[159] Creech, *Family Systems and Congregational Life,* 68.

voices, that of the text, of pastor, and of congregation."[160] Thus, the communicator shoulders the opportunity or burden of being in a triangle in the pulpit.

If the pastor can maintain a well-differentiated, non-anxious presence in the pulpit, he can remain in this naturally occurring triangle without bringing anxiety-causing pressure upon the congregation. Creech describes this preaching as "finding ways to stay in touch with the people while pushing them back toward taking responsibility for their relationship to God and Scripture."[161] However, the poorly differentiated preacher may "triangle with the text against the congregation," as Brueggemann says, so that the voice of the pastor and the text "gang up" on the congregation.[162] Pastor James Lamkin, trainer in systems theory for pastors, captures the ideal of well-differentiated alternative description when he says "The preacher is present to what is happening between God and the listener, *but the preacher is not responsible for that relationship*."[163]

Brueggemann points out that lack of differentiation in the pulpit is often a temptation because the preacher understands people may take offense at the strong words of scripture and that, "The text, when rightly uttered, will still offend."[164] Better-differentiated preachers, Creech says, become "spokespersons" for these challenging texts, "confronting the congregation with difficult truths, while simultaneously taking the

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[160] Walter Brueggemann, "The Preacher, the Text, and the People," *Theology Today* 47, no. 3 (1990): 239, https://doi.org/10.1177/004057369004700302.

[161] Creech, *Family Systems and Congregational Life*, 69.

[162] Brueggemann, "The Preacher, The Text, and the People," 239.

[163] James E. Lamkin, "Systems Theory and Congregational Leadership: Leaves from an Alchemists Journal," *Review & Expositor* 102, no. 3 (2005): 471, https://doi.org/10.1177/003463730510200309. Emphasis original.

[164] Brueggemann, "The Preacher, The Text, and the People," 247.

posture of a humble listener to the text." He adds that such preaching focuses less on "you" or "they" and more on "we."[165]

The literature also suggests that poorly differentiated preaching reveals itself by a style that highlights the preacher's ability or expertise rather than the text. Galindo suggests that this shift reveals an underlying need for the preacher to be affirmed by the congregation and warns:

> When a pastor of a congregation stands before the flock with the messages that communicate, "I will take care of you," "I need you to validate my worth and ministry," "You need me and would be lost without my worth and ministry," "You need me and would be lost without me," "I bear your burden," or, "I know it all, I'm the expert," he or she reflects not only a lack of self-differentiation, but may reveal a neurotic relationship between pastor and congregation.[166]

Creech also cautions against poorly differentiated preaching that seeks to win approval by capitalizing on a form of tribalism: "When Pastors feed the polarization of our society with sermons about some group or person 'out there' who is threatening our lives or lifestyle, our values, our beliefs, they are probably expressing their own anxiety."[167]

Consequently, when this type of poorly differentiated preaching occurs, even though the content of the message might have been largely faithful to scripture, "People leave worship more anxious than when they arrived, more reactive, less able to think for themselves, and more likely to act based on feeling."[168] Poorly differentiated preaching, then, may be full of rhetorical skill, salient to the congregation, motivating, and have a

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[165] Creech, *Family Systems and Congregational Life,* 73.

[166] Galindo, *Perspectives on Congregational Leadership*, 128.

[167] Creech, *Family Systems and Congregational Life*, 71.

[168] Creech, *Family Systems and Congregational Life*, 71.

form of scriptural accuracy. However, it may still drive anxiety higher or weaken the immune response of the congregation to fend off the anxious pathogenic process.

The alternative is well differentiated, non-anxious preaching that is inseparable from the leader's person and his relational position as leader in the congregational system. This position, according to Creech, "is what gives [preaching] abiding power in the life of the church and makes it a vulnerability in the life of a preacher."[169] If the preacher can do the hard work of self-differentiation in and out of the pulpit, the result may likely be a congregation well positioned for lower levels of chronic anxiety and, as Brueggemann encourages, "repositioned for a listening they thought not possible."[170]

Summary of Chronic Anxiety in Family Systems Perspective

BFST provides an integrated approach to understanding anxiety that takes as many systemic variables as possible into account and does not assume any one stressor is a necessary cause. While this may be complex, it may also be encouraging. As Creech notes, for those within the emotional field, "The good news is that if anything chronic is occurring in a system in which I participate, I can make changes in the part I play that will have some impact on the system. I am not simply a victim of other's behaviors."[171] BFST gives the congregational leader a hopeful perspective in engaging systemic anxiety in the congregation because it does not require him to understand every single variable in

[169] Creech, *Family Systems and Congregational Life*, 65.

[170] Brueggemann, "The Preacher, The Text, and the People," 247.

[171] Creech, *Family Systems and Congregational Life*, 16.

the system or trace out every potential pathogen. Rather, it allows him to begin by focusing on his own non-anxious presence.

The Experience of Anxiety in the Person

Anxiety, while held generally in an emotional field, is experienced specifically by the individual.[172] What is this experienced anxiety? Graham Davey, former president of the British Psychological Society, calls it a "slippery customer" that defies easy definition,[173] in part, because of the breadth of terminology used in the description of the experience of anxiety. The research reveals that several terms, such as "stress," "worry," and "fear" tend to cluster together with "anxiety" and challenge precise definition. Psychologist and educational researcher David Putwain notes that these anxiety-related words are often "used interchangeably in the literature as if they referred to the same phenomenon."[174] David Barlow, director of the Center for Anxiety and Related Disorders at Boston University, describes the challenge, saying, "The profusion of meanings and flavors surrounding the key words 'angst,' 'anxiety, and 'dread'…have all resulted in an understandable vagueness surrounding the term 'anxiety' in English."[175] Cognitive behavioral therapists Melisa Robichaud and Michael Dugas describe "worry" as a

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[172] Kerr, *Bowen Theory's Secrets*, 110.

[173] Graham Davey, *The Anxiety Epidemic: The Causes of Our Modern Day Anxieties* (London: Robinson, 2018), 12.

[174] David Putwain, "Researching Academic Stress and Anxiety in Students: Some Methodological Considerations," *British Educational Research Journal* 33, no. 2 (2007): 207, https://doi.org/10.1080/01411920701208258.

[175] David H. Barlow, *Anxiety and Its Disorders: The Nature and Treatment of Anxiety and Panic* (New York: Guilford Press, 2002), 7.

"cognitive process" that "involves mentally anticipating and preparing for potential negative outcomes in the future."[176] and, is, according to psychologists David Clark and Aaron Beck, a "very common feature of anxiety."[177] "Stress," according to Oxford Professor Daniel Freeman, is "what we feel when we believe we can't cope with the demands facing us"[178] and can "trigger a range of emotional responses including, very often, anxiety."[179] Finally, Beck writes that fear "is the appraisal of danger" whereas "anxiety is…evoked when fear is stimulated."[180]

In spite of this definitional overlap, Davey notes that when anxiety is mentioned, people intuitively understand the meaning: "Most of us seem to understand what other people mean when they use the word 'anxiety,' and most people know when they are experiencing anxiety." [181] Thus, as Davey suggests, people consider anxiety to be a "socially constructed label that conveys some form of meaning between those who use the term,"[182] even though a cluster of other terminology may be invoked.

Anxiety itself is described as an unpleasant emotion experienced in the body regarding future-oriented possibilities. The *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental*

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[176] Melisa J. Robichaud and Michael J. Dugas, *The Generalized Anxiety Disorder Workbook: A Comprehensive CBT Guide for Coping with Uncertainty, Worry, and Fear* (Oakland, CA: New Harbinger Publications, 2015), 5.

[177] David A. Clark and Aaron T. Beck, *The Anxiety and Worry Workbook: The Cognitive Behavioral Solution* (New York: Guilford Press, 2012), 48.

[178] Freeman and Freeman,*Anxiety: A Very Short Introduction*, 11.

[179] Freeman and Freeman, *Anxiety: A Very Short Introduction*, 11.

[180] Aaron T. Beck, Gary Emery, and Ruth L. Greenberg, *Anxiety Disorders and Phobias: A Cognitive Perspective* (New York: BasicBooks, 2005), 9.

[181] Davey, *The Anxiety Epidemic*, 12.

[182] Davey, *The Anxiety Epidemic*, 12.

Disorders describes anxiety as, "The apprehensive anticipation of future danger or misfortune accompanied by a feeling of dysphoria or somatic feelings of tension. The focus of anticipated danger may be internal or external."[183] Barlow suggests that a better term for anxiety might be "anxious apprehension" because anxiety is a "future-oriented mood state in which one is ready or prepared to attempt to cope with upcoming negative events."[184] Further, as John Tsilimparis, therapist and professor at Pepperdine University, explains, anxiety is a "chronic and collective general feeling of discomfort" that may outlast a specific stress episode or not be associated with an identifiable stressor.[185]

The Intensity of the Anxiety Experience

The line between normal anxiety and clinical/diagnosable anxiety is "fuzzy,"[186] according to Roubichaud and Dugas. They describe the stress that produces anxiety as experienced on a continuum between "little to no worry" and "severe or disabling worry," which would yield a clinical diagnosis.[187] Because this information is based on self-reported levels of distress and experienced differently from person to person, more specific definitions are hard to come by. Clark and Beck concur and note that even though *The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* gives clear definition

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[183] *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders: DSM-IV-TR* (Washington, DC: American Psychiatric Association, 2000), 820.

[184] David H. Barlow, *Anxiety and Its Disorders*, 62.

[185] John Tsilimparis and Daylle Deanna Schwartz, *Retrain Your Anxious Brain: Practical and Effective Tools to Conquer Anxiety* (Don Mills, Ontario: Harlequin, 2014), 11.

[186] Roubichaud and Dugas, *The Generalized Anxiety Disorder Workbook*, 13.

[187] Roubichaud and Dugas, *The Generalized Anxiety Disorder Workbook*, 13.

of each type of clinical anxiety disorder, actual diagnosis is difficult because no physical test can be administered to predictably reveal anxiety.[188] Further, symptoms "change over time and across situations," and people differ in their own personal tolerance of anxiety.[189] In an earlier work, Beck notes the difficulty in diagnosis by admitting, "Drawing a precise line between normal and abnormal anxiety…is difficult and governed to some degree by social norms."[190] While admitting the challenging subjectivity of the process, Clark and Beck report six characteristics therapists look for in considering whether self-reported anxiety warrants diagnosis. They contend clinical anxiety can be any of the following: exaggerated in intensity, longer in duration, disruptive of work and relationships, sudden in its onset, spreading from a particular object or situation to a broad range of situations, catastrophic in its thinking, extensive in its avoidance of potential triggers, and disruptive of feelings of calm and safety.[191]

Roubichaud and Dugas report that any of these characteristics may fall in a normal range, but that if people self-report that their symptoms cause them "significant distress" that "interferes with life," then they often receive a clinical diagnosis, although "There is no real difference between people on either side of the line; diagnosis is a matter of degree."[192] The experience of anxiety may therefore be spoken about in degrees of experienced intensity per individual, in their own context.

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[188] Clark and Beck, *The Anxiety and Worry Workbook*, 22.

[189] Clark and Beck, *The Anxiety and Worry Workbook*, 2.

[190] Beck et al, *Anxiety Disorders and Phobias*, 30.

[191] Clark and Beck, *The Anxiety and Worry Workbook*, 23-24.

[192] Roubichaud and Dugas, *The Generalized Anxiety Disorder Workbook*, 13.

Aaron Beck, widely considered the father of cognitive behavior therapy, developed a cognitive model to describe the perceived level of anxiety that Paul Salkovskis, clinical psychologist at Oxford University, later expressed in the form of an equation:[193]

$$\text{Anxiety} = \frac{\text{perceived probability of danger x perceived cost/awfulness}}{\text{perceived ability to cope with danger + perceived rescue factors}}$$

This model suggests perception plays a key role in the experience of anxiety. Intensity is increased by perceived likelihood of some negative combined with how bad that possibility is imagined to be. The experienced intensity can be mitigated by perception of the ability to cope or anticipation of rescue variables in the environment. The literature will show that this perception is influenced by several biological and cognitive factors.

Two Pathways: Amygdala and Cerebral Cortex

The sources consulted for this study revealed that the experience of anxiety in the body is driven by a complex relationship of different areas in the brain. These different areas communicate with, modify, and overrule each other, depending on several variables. The complexity of the relationships means that many factors driving anxiety operate outside the direct consciousness of the individual.

[193] Paul M. Salkovskis and Elizabeth Forrester, "Responsibility," in *Cognitive Approaches to Obsessions and Compulsions: Theory, Assessment, and Treatment,* eds. Randy O. Frost and Gail Steketee (Oxford: Elsevier, 2002), 46.

Dr. Catherine Pittman, professor of psychology at Notre Dame, writes, "two fairly separate pathways in the brain can create anxiety."[194] These pathways may interact and inform one another, but one pathway begins in the cerebral cortex the other in the amygdala. According to LeDoux, these pathways are primal and pre-historic "survival circuits in the brain which are activated in situations in which well-being is potentially challenged."[195] LeDoux suggests that these survival circuits may have profound benefit in an environment fraught with danger. Pittman notes that even though these life-threatening dangers have been reduced greatly in modern life, this survival circuit is still "operating on the lessons it learned in prehistoric times."[196] Consequently, people have mental processes that allow them to be more anxious and defensive than is warranted.

The Role of the Amygdala

The amygdala is the small almond-shaped structure near the center of the brain which "both forms and recalls emotional memories…and identif[ies] any threat you see, hear, smell, or feel and then send[s] a danger signal."[197] Psychologist Bessel van der Kolk, calls the amygdala the brain's "smoke detector," whose central function is "to identify whether incoming input is relevant for our survival."[198] This region of the brain

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[194] Catherine M. Pittman and Elizabeth M. Karle, *Rewire Your Anxious Brain: How to Use the Neuroscience of Fear to End Anxiety, Panic and Worry* (Oakland, CA: New Harbinger, 2015), 4.

[195] Joseph E. LeDoux, *Anxious: Using the Brain to Understand and Treat Fear and Anxiety* (New York: Penguin Books, 2015), 44.

[196] LeDoux, *Anxious*, 16.

[197] Pittman, *Rewire Your Anxious Brain*, 21.

[198] Bessel van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score: Mind, Brain and Body in the Transformation of Trauma* (London: Penguin Books, 2015), 60.

is not passive. Goleman uses the word picture of a "threat radar"[199] for the amygdala that is always active and "scans for safety or danger."[200] Another function of the amygdala is to encode what LeDoux calls "implicit memory," sometimes called "emotional memory." LeDoux writes, "Not everything is remembered in a way that allows conscious access to it,"[201] whether for storage or retrieval. Further, this type of memory is "typically expressed as behavior."[202] The amygdala "remembers" events and experiences that may be inaccessible to the conscious brain and which shapes the response patterns of the amygdala. Consequently, Pittman says, people sometimes have anxious reactions to events without a conscious awareness of why they are reacting so strongly.[203]

The Role of the Cerebral Cortex

The cerebral cortex is a larger front section of the brain that is "the perceiving and thinking part," which allows people "to use logic and reasoning, produce language, use [our] imagination, and plan ways of responding to situations."[204] Van der Kolk, who used the shorthand "smoke alarm" for the amygdala, calls the cortex the "watchtower"[205] that makes rational assessment about the amygdala's impulses. Extending van der Kolk's

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[199] Daniel Goleman and Richard J. Davidson, *Altered Traits: Science Reveals How Meditation Changes Your Mind, Brain, and Body* (New York: Avery, 2017), 170.

[200] Goleman and Davidson, *Altered Traits*, 87.

[201] LeDoux, *Anxious*, 188.

[202] LeDoux, *Anxious*, 188.

[203] Pittman, *Rewire Your Anxious Brain*, 32.

[204] Pittman, *Rewire Your Anxious Brain*, 17.

[205] Van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score*, 62.

illustration, if the amygdala says there is smoke, the cortex determines if there is a fire. He writes, "The executive capacities of the prefrontal cortex enable people to observe what is going on, predict what will happen…and make a conscious choice."[206] Goleman points out that the cortex sets human beings apart from other animals and allows for creative thought. However the imaginative and creative capabilities of this same cortex allow people to be disturbed by worrisome possibilities.[207]

The Interaction of Amygdala and Cerebral Cortex

Through his original research in the 1980s, LeDoux demonstrated that sensory stimuli reach both the amygdala and cerebral cortex, but they reach the amygdala first and get processed by the amygdala the fastest. He calls this the "low-road" by which information travels a "shortcut to the amygdala that bypasses the cortex" and thus activates the amygdala's defensive system.[208] This defensive system is often called the "fight, flight, or freeze response"[209] because of the actions for which it primes the body. LeDoux calls it a "quick and dirty" route which "allows you to respond with speed rather than accuracy in a situation of danger."[210] For instance, this involuntary process is why a person may see a stick in the grass and react immediately by jumping out of the way or freezing in place as if it is a snake. Then, usually, the information received by the

[206] Van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score*, 62.

[207] Goleman and Davidson, *Altered Traits*, 128.

[208] LeDoux, *Anxious*, 209.

[209] Pittman, *Rewire Your Anxious Brain*, 25.

[210] LeDoux, *Anxious*, 211.

cerebral cortex moderates the experience and allows people to eventually determine that they are seeing a stick. This "high-road," LeDoux's term for the processing pathway of information through the cerebral cortex, is "longer and slower but provides more information."[211] Ideally, the amygdala issues an appropriate threat concern, and the cortex responds by assessing the concern so as to "inhibit, organize, and modulate" it. However, "when that system breaks down," says van der Kolk, "we become like conditioned animals" and shift into fight or flight mode.[212]

This phenomenon has often been called "amygdala hijack."[213] Cognitive behavioral therapist Arlin Cuncic writes, "The amygdala triggers a sudden and intense, unconscious emotional response that shuts off the cortex, making it hard for you to think clearly about the situation."[214] In this state the amygdala paralyzes rational and reflective thought,[215] as people fixate on the perceived threat at hand with intensity of focus and memory that recalls any potentially related details, while ignoring everything else.[216]

Research suggests a window of opportunity exists just before or at the onset of this "amygdala hijack," in which the person can regain some control through any one of three cognitive processes. These processes are known as "distraction," "reappraisal," and "labeling," according psychologists Natali Moyal, Avishai Henik, and Gideon Anholt, of

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[211] LeDoux, *Anxious*, 210.

[212] Van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score*, 62.

[213] For instance, see Daniel Goleman, *Emotional Intelligence* (New York: Bantam Books, 1995), 13-29.

[214] Arlin Cuncic, "Amygdala Hijack and the Fight of Flight Response," Verywell Mind, October 16, 2019, https://www.verywellmind.com/what-happens-during-an-amygdala-hijack-4165944.

[215] Goleman, *Altered Traits*, 127.

[216] Daniel Goleman, *Focus* (New York: Harper Collins, 2014), 36.

Ben Gurion University in Israel.[217] They define "distraction" as "the deployment of attention away from a negative aspect of a situation" either externally, into the surrounding environment, or internally, to a negative or positive thought. "Reappraisal" is described as a cognitive reframing of "the meaning of an emotion-eliciting situation, in order to reduce negative feelings" and is helpful before the full amygdala hijack. Finally, "labeling" is "the linguistic processing of the emotions that arise in a certain situation." Here, emotions are defined as precisely as possible. [218] These three processes, according to Moyal, Henik, and Anholt, are associated with decreased amygdala activation or increase regulatory control.[219]

Should these processes prove ineffective or fail to be engaged, other somatic changes will occur. Coinciding with this "hijacked" situation, the amygdala instantaneously activates the hypothalamus to ready the body for immediate actions by flooding it with the stress hormones cortisol and adrenaline.[220] Freeman notes that this process can yield elevated heart rate, pupil dilation, and suspension of digestive system.[221] Pittman adds that the resulting increased blood pressure and muscle tension can be experienced in as little as a tenth of a second.[222] Robichaud and Dugas point out that a chief problem with this physiological response pattern is that it helps only when

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[217] Natali Moyal, Avishai Henik, and Gideon E. Anholt, "Cognitive Strategies to Regulate Emotions-Current Evidence and Future Directions." *Frontiers in Psychology* 4 (January 2014): 1019, https://doi:10.3389/fpsyg.2013.01019.

[218] Moyal, Henik, and Anholt, "Cognitive Strategies," 1019.

[219] Moyal, Henik, and Anholt, "Cognitive Strategies," 1019.

[220] Pittman, *Rewire Your Anxious Brain* 23.

[221] Freeman and Freeman, *Anxiety: A Very Brief Introduction*, 9.

[222] Pittman, *Rewire Your Anxious Brain*, 14.

there is actual physical danger, and it is "less than ideal" when dealing with social threat or daily worries and may actually make daily worries worse over time.[223]

How is this experienced? Pittman warns that when "you're experiencing the fight, flight, or freeze response, the amygdala is in the driver's seat and you're a passenger."[224] Cuncic adds, "You find it increasingly hard to problem solve and concentrate."[225] Dr. Jonathan Davidson of Duke University cautions that in this situation one may react to normal daily pressures as if they are "life and death" situations.[226] This over-active amygdala state is also what Davidson describes as the "hallmark" of unhealthy anxiety:

> The hallmark of unhealthy anxiety—as opposed to necessary and useful healthy anxiety that spurs us to self-productive action—is a sympathetic nervous system in overdrive, which leads to irritability, exhaustion, and chronic states of fear. When we're always readying ourselves to fight of flee, whether from tough bosses, crowds of people, terrifying memories, or neighborhood dogs, our lives become dramas in which we are constantly shadowboxing—ducking, dodging, or battling our worst fears. Both our minds and our bodies suffer almost continuously.[227]

These reactions may be experienced with varying levels of intensity. According to therapist Christine Wilding, the physical manifestations of the poorly mitigated amygdala response may be poor concentration and memory, sleep disturbance, short temper, irritability, tiredness and lethargy, and feelings of despair.[228]

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[223] Robichaud and Dugas, *The Generalized Anxiety Disorder Workbook*, 11.

[224] Pittman, *Rewire Your Anxious Brain*, 25.

[225] Arlin Cuncic, "Amygdala Hijack and the Fight or Flight Response."

[226] Jonathan R. T. Davidson and Henry Dreher, *The Anxiety Book: Developing Strength in the Face of Fear* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2003), 165.

[227] Davidson and Dreher, *The Anxiety Book*, 166.

[228] Christine Wilding, *Cognitive Behavioral Therapy* (London: Hodder Education, 2012), 189.

Trauma: A Unique Case

Those who have experienced trauma may be especially susceptible to unhealthy anxiety. After conducting a brain scan study of trauma survivors, van der Kolk concludes, "When traumatized people are presented with images, sounds, or thoughts related to their particular experience [of trauma], the amygdala reacts with alarm."[229] This reaction was found even if the trauma was years before. Further, he notes that the insula, which transmits information to the amygdala which can activate the survival circuit, is abnormally activated in nearly all brain-imaging studies of trauma patients and leaves them feeling "on edge and unable to focus," with no awareness of an inciting problem. [230]

Those who experience childhood trauma may have the added challenge of having no recollection of any particular events that make them susceptible to anxiety and possibly have their neural circuitry changed by it. Davey writes, "Childhood adversity can often lead to altered connectivity in the brain's fear circuitry" and notes research showing that even normal childhood adversity can bias the amygdala toward negative stimuli and prime the brain for anxiety vulnerability.[231] Daniel Keating, professor of psychology at the University of Michigan, also indicates that childhood malady can have a further effect on the experience of anxiety. Keating shows that low maternal nurturing early in life could even lead to an epigenetic change known as "methylation," which "shuts down a key gene that is designed to tell the stress system to turn off when a threat

[229] Van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score*, 42.

[230] Van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score*, 249.

[231] Davey, *The Anxiety Epidemic*, 103.

has passed."[232] According to Keating, the result is what he calls "Stress Deregulation Syndrome," which leads to a regular oversupply of the stress hormone cortisol.[233] A child in this condition is often described as one who "[sees] threats everywhere" and could not control attention and emotion. Adults with this same dysregulated stress response experience stress more frequently than the normal population and in a manner that is out of proportion to the problems they face.[234]

Cognitive Distortions Corresponding to Anxiety

Pittman writes that the cerebral cortex can be its own source of anxiety through cognitive processes that initiate anxiety or responses that "worsen anxiety that originates in the amygdala."[235] This reaction can involve the way external stimuli such as sights and sounds are processed or can arise independently of any external stimuli, through distressing thoughts or worries.[236] Beck contends that the "main problem" in elevated anxiety is not creation of anxiety itself, which would be a normal and helpful process, but in "overactive cognitive patterns…relevant to danger that are continually structuring external and/or internal experiences as a sign of danger."[237] These patterns may continue, with a person perceiving threat where no threat exists.

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[232] Daniel P. Keating, *Born Anxious: The Lifelong Impact of Early Life Adversity and How to Break the Cycle* (New York: St. Martins Press, 2017), 10.

[233] Keating, *Born Anxious*, 10.

[234] Keating, *Born Anxious*, 11.

[235] Pittman, *Rewire Your Anxious Brain*, 51.

[236] Pittman, *Rewire Your Anxious Brain*, 52.

[237] Beck and Emery, *Anxiety Disorders and Phobias*, 15.

The literature points to three classes of cognitive processes common to the experience of anxiety. These classes may be described as cognitive dispositions, cognitive biases, and cognitive errors.

Cognitive Dispositions

"Intolerance of Uncertainty," reports Dugas, "represents a key cognitive process involved in both non-clinical and clinical worry."[238] This cognitive process manifests in an "excessive tendency to find uncertain situations stressful and upsetting," the belief that "unexpected events are negative and should be avoided," and an attitude that facing uncertainty is "unfair." Richard Heimberg, professor of psychology and director of the Adult Anxiety Clinic at Temple University, reports that people high in this Intolerance of Uncertainty (IU) often find uncertainty so distressing that they would often prefer a negative outcome to one that is uncertain.[239] High IU can also lead persons to worry without any specific situation over which to worry. Psychologists Charlene Chen and Ryan Hong, of Columbia University and The National University of Singapore, respectively, say, "Individuals with high IU tend to focus on future events regardless of the probability of their occurrence and cannot help but worry because 'they could occur.'" [240] They suggest that high IU can trigger several "what if…?" questions in the

[238] Michael J. Dugas et al., "Intolerance of Uncertainty and Information Processing: Evidence of Biased Recall and Interpretations," *Cognitive Therapy and Research* 29, no. 1 (2005): 58, https://doi.org/10.1007/s10608-005-1648-9.

[239] Richard G. Heimberg, Cynthia L. Turk, and Douglas S. Mennin, eds., *Generalized Anxiety Disorder: Advances in Research and Practice* (New York: Guilford Press, 2004), 146.

[240] Charlene Y. Chen and Ryan Y. Hong, "Intolerance of Uncertainty Moderates the Relation between Negative Life Events and Anxiety," *Personality and Individual Differences* 49, no. 1 (2010): 52, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2010.03.006.

absence of immediate stimulus and conclude that no specific problem is necessary for worry to emerge.[241] In summary, Heimberg says that Intolerance of Uncertainty is "a key worry process in nonclinical samples" and functions as a superior predictor of worry in adolescents, adults, elderly and across genders.[242]

Another anxiety-related cognitive disposition referenced in somewhat older anxiety literature is "locus of control." Locus of Control refers to one's perception of who or what determines control of life. Jean Twenge, psychology professor and researcher at San Diego State University, writes, "People who believe they are in control of their destinies have an internal locus of control ('internals')." In contrast, "Those who believe that luck and powerful others determine their fate have an external locus of control ('externals')."[243] After reviewing the relevant literature in the 1970s, Robert Archer of the Florida Mental Health Institute concluded that a "firmly established" [244] relationship between internal locus of control and lower anxiety and external locus of control and higher anxiety exists.[245] Oxford psychologist Katharine Parkes notes a particular anxiety-related difference between "internals" and "externals" emerges in coping with situations perceived as changeable. Namely, "internals" appear to engage in higher levels of "direct coping," rational, problem-focused attempts to manage the situation, and lower levels of

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[241] Chen and Hong, "Intolerance of Uncertainty," 52.

[242] Heimberg, Turk, and Mennin, eds., *Generalized Anxiety Disorder: Advances in Research and Practice*, 146.

[243] Jean M. Twenge, Liqing Zhang, and Charles Im, "Its Beyond My Control: A Cross-Temporal Meta-Analysis of Increasing Externality in Locus of Control, 1960-2002," *Personality and Social Psychology Review* 8, no. 3 (2004): 308, https://doi.org/10.1207/s15327957pspr0803_5.

[244] Robert P. Archer, "Relationships Between Locus of Control and Anxiety," *Journal of Personality Assessment* 43, no. 6 (1979): 619, https://doi.org/10.1207/s15327752jpa4306_10.

[245] Archer, "Relationships," 624.

"suppression," suppressing thoughts and inhibiting action, than "externals."[246] Thus, the patterns of coping reported by "internals" tend to be more adaptive to threat appraisal.[247]

Cognitive Biases

Laura Eagan, a neuroscientist teaching at St. Francis College in New York and her colleague, psychologist Tracy Dennis-Tiwary of Hunter College, in summarizing three decades of research, report, "Both clinical and non-clinical anxiety are associated with an attentional threat bias" that may be described as "selective and exaggerated attention" to potentially threating stimuli, while ignoring cues that would suggest safety.[248] Dr. Courtney Beard of Harvard Medical School says these attentional biases may take the form of paying more attention to threat stimuli than those which would signal safety or interpreting stimuli as more threatening than they actually are.[249] Egan and Dennis-Tiwary note that a simple and frequent example is paying undue attention to ambiguous facial expressions or potentially hostile words and attributing more negativity to them than necessary or intended.[250]

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[246] Katharine R. Parkes, "Locus of Control, Cognitive Appraisal, and Coping in Stressful Episodes.," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 46, no. 3 (1984): 664, https://doi.org/10.1037//0022-3514.46.3.655.

[247] Parkes, "Locus of Control," 664.

[248] Laura J. Egan and Tracy A. Dennis-Tiwary, "Dynamic Measures of Anxiety-Related Threat Bias: Links to Stress Reactivity," *Motivation and Emotion* 42, no. 4 (February 2018): 546, https://doi.org/10.1007/s11031-018-9674-6.

[249] Courtney Beard, "Cognitive Bias Modification for Anxiety: Current Evidence and Future Directions," *Expert Review of Neurotherapeutics* 11, no. 2 (2011): 300, https://doi.org/10.1586/ern.10.194.

[250] Egan and Dennis-Tiwary, "Dynamic Measures of Anxiety-Related Threat Bias," 546.

These biases, according to Barlow, can operate unconsciously. "Data…has begun to suggest that biases…occur both explicitly and implicitly (out of awareness) in individuals experiencing anxiety"[251] It should be noted that a "negativity bias" seems to be common to most people. Roy Baumeister of Case Western Reserve University and a team of researchers, in an often-cited paper entitled, "Bad Is Stronger Than Good," makes the generally accepted case that "Bad information is processed more thoroughly than good," and "Bad is stronger than good, as a general principle across a broad range of psychological phenomenon."[252] For those with higher anxiety, this natural bias is exaggerated. Both Beard and Egan/Dennis-Tiwary use the term "vicious cycle" to describe this exaggeration. Beard warns that because there is almost always more information available than people are able to process, this "habit" of selective attention creates a vicious cycle in which an ambiguous world is experienced as threatening.[253] Egan and Dennis-Tiwary say this "vicious cycle" means that environmental cues that would disconfirm fear and reduce anxiety are minimized and ignored.[254]

Cognitive Errors

Aaron Beck, who has been researching and writing about anxiety for nearly fifty years, has identified six common maladaptive thinking processes, which he calls "cognitive errors," as common to people experiencing more than normal anxiety:

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[251] Barlow, *Anxiety and Its Disorders*, 94.

[252] Roy F. Baumeister et al., "Bad Is Stronger than Good.," *Review of General Psychology* 5, no. 4 (2001): 323, https://doi.org/10.1037//1089-2680.5.4.323.

[253] Beard, "Cognitive Bias Modification for Anxiety," 300.

[254] Egan and Dennis-Tiwary, "Dynamic Measures of Anxiety-Related Threat Bias," 545.

1. Catastrophizing, or, overestimating threat or danger: focusing on the worst possible outcome in an anxious situation

2. Jumping to conclusions: expecting that the worst possible outcome is most likely outcome that will be experienced

3. Tunnel vision: focusing only on possible threat-relevant data while ignoring evidence of safety or help in the environment

4. Nearsightedness: assuming that a potential threat is imminent

5. Emotional reasoning: assuming that the more intense the anxiety, the greater the actual threat

6. All-or-nothing thinking: viewing threat and safety in rigid, absolute terms as either present or absent. [255]

Beck does not say these cognitive processes are "causes" of anxiety, but he does note that they predispose a person to interpret events, whether inside or outside a person, as threatening.[256]

Summary of the Experience of Anxiety in the Person

Taken together, the literature affirms what Davey writes about anxiety. Anxiety "is a hybrid emotion built out of a combination of fear reflexes and higher-level cognitive processes."[257] This internal state is a result of processes in the body which, when functioning rightly, allows one to assess and respond wisely to appropriate threats. However, when the threat is attended to or appraised inaccurately, when the biological processes of the amygdala overwhelm the mitigating attempts of the cortex, or when

[255] David A. Clark and Aaron T. Beck, *Cognitive Therapy of Anxiety Disorders: Science and Practice* (New York: The Guilford Press, 2011), 169.

[256] Beck and Emery, *Anxiety Disorders and Phobias*, 86.

[257] Davey, *The Anxiety Epidemic*, 16.

cognitive processes foment concern or fail to temper amygdala response, the response in the body can be subconscious and powerful enough to change the mental, emotional, and physical environment of the person.

Modern Sources of Anxiety

Graham Davey, editor-in-chief of the *Journal of Experimental Psychopathology*, calls the current collective psychological climate an "anxiety epidemic" because of the negative impact of anxiety on the welfare of so many. "Do we have an anxiety epidemic?" he asks. "Yes," he says, "but then so have most previous generations. The difference, he says, is that in our modern era we have a whole set of new and evolving anxieties and a growing awareness of anxiety as a potentially distressing and disabling state."[258]

What are these modern "new and evolving anxieties" of which Davey speaks? What rose to prominence in the literature were three broad cultural trends and a host of challenges related to connective technology.

Widespread Cultural Change

The literature revealed an increased experience of anxiety with shifting psychological and relational realities in modern culture.

[258] Davey, *Anxiety Epidemic*, 375.

Locus of Control

Locus of control, briefly mentioned above, is the extent to which people believe their destiny is controlled by themselves or by forces outside themselves, and it has undergone a significant shift since the 1960s. In 2002, Twenge reported that American college students have become much more "external" in their locus of control. In fact, "The average college student in 2002 was more external than 80 percent of college students in the early 1960s."[259]

As Professor Julian Rotter of the University of Connecticut demonstrated in the 1960s, a person high in an internal locus of control is more resilient against anxiety because of a likelihood:

> To (a) be more alert to those aspects of the environment which provide useful information for his future behavior; (b) take steps to improve his environmental condition; (c) place greater value on skill or achievement reinforcements and be generally more concerned with his failures; and (d) be resistive to subtle attempts to influence him.[260]

This finding comports with psychologist Herbert Lefcourt's analysis describing externality as the tendency to fail "to act in one's own behalf in trying to remedy an unpleasant situation, in the face of potential stress, or in trying to bring about rewarding outcomes."[261] Twenge concludes that this externality "encourages a victim mentality and

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[259] Twenge, Zhange, and Im, "It's Beyond My Control," 315.

[260] Julian B. Rotter, "Generalized Expectancies for Internal versus External Control of Reinforcement.," *Psychological Monographs: General and Applied* 80, no. 1 (1966): 25, https://doi.org/10.1037/h0092976.

[261] Herbert M. Lefcourt, "Locus of Control," in *Measures of Personality and Social Psychological Attitudes: Measures of Social Psychological Attitudes*, vol. 1, eds. John P. Robinson, Phillip R. Shaver, Lawrence S. Wrightsman (San Diego, CA: Academic Press, 1991), 413.

attributes negative experience to outside sources."[262] While careful not to declare a causal link, Twenge suggests that increases in externality may be related to the more recent increases in both depression and anxiety.[263]

Twenge suggests that one of the contributing factors to the increasing externality in the United States is the home environment and offers, "If parents become more external over time, they may pass attitudes along to their children."[264] Twenge's research with college students concluded in 2002. Those students, who had become increasingly "external" in their locus of control orientation are now 35-39 years old, and many are likely parents themselves. If these attitudes are indeed passed along to children, it could be a further contributing factor in an increase in self-reported anxiety.

Changes in Parenting Norms

Social psychologist Jonathan Haidt of New York University reports that parenting styles have changed significantly in the last few decades. Commenting with writer Lenore Skenazy, Haidt writes, "Beginning in the 1980s, American childhood changed." He contends that, driven by several factors including heightened fear of abduction, "Children largely lost the experience of having large swath of unsupervised time to play, explore, and resolve conflicts on their own." What is the effect of this? Haidt answers,

[262] Twenge, Zhange, and Im, "It's Beyond My Control," 316.

[263] Twenge et al., "It's Beyond My Control," 316.

[264] Twenge et al., "It's Beyond My Control," 315.

"This has left them more fragile, more easily offended, and more reliant on others." [265] Peter Gray, psychologist at Boston College, concurs with this assessment and documents several reasons he believes there is a "causal connection" between the decline of free play and the rise of psychological problems, including anxiety, in young people. Gray notes that free play is the context for children to learn "the social and emotional skills that are essential for healthy psychological development" because it is where they learn emotional regulation and problem solving without adult involvement.[266]

Haidt and Craig Lukianoff, CEO of the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education, in their 2018 book, *The Coddling of the American Mind*, further contend that many parents and other authorities, operating from a position of fear, have consistently fallen into three errors in judgment leading to greater anxiety in minors, many of whom are now young adults. These three errors in judgment are what they call the "untruth of fragility,"[267] "the untruth of emotional reasoning,"[268] and "the untruth of us-versus-them."[269] By the "untruth of fragility," they mean the belief that "failures, insults, and painful experiences will do lasting damage."[270] This leads to an environment of "safetyism" in which protection is sought from anything that presents a challenge and

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[265] Lenore Skenazy and Jonathan Haidt, "The Fragile Generation," Reason.com, April 12, 2019, https://reason.com/2017/10/26/the-fragile-generation/.

[266] Peter Gray, "The Decline of Play and the Rise of Psychopathology in Children and Adolescents," *American Journal of Play* 3, no. 4 (2011): 458, https://www.journalofplay.org/sites/www.journalofplay.org/files/pdf-articles/3-4-article-gray-decline-of-play.pdf.

[267] Lukianoff and Haidt, *Coddling*, 19-32.

[268] Lukianoff and Haidt, *Coddling*, 33-51.

[269] Lukianoff and Haidt, *Coddling*, 53-77.

[270] Lukianoff and Haidt, *Coddling*, 22.

what is cultivated is "an obsession with eliminating threats, both real and imagined, to the point at which people become unwilling to make reasonable trade-offs demanded by other practical and moral concerns."[271] The "untruth of emotional reasoning" is submission to the cognitive distortion of "letting your feelings guide your interpretation of reality," without investigating what is true.[272] Finally, the "untruth of us-versus-them" is framing cognitive patterns around the human tendency for "living in tribes" and propensity to "readily divide the world in 'us' versus 'them'" categories—even on trivial matters or by arbitrary criteria.[273]

Haidt and Lukianoff claim that the net effect is a generation marked by the inclination toward "eliminating or avoiding anything that feels 'unsafe'" instead of rising to challenges, "trusting…initial feelings" instead of examining themselves for cognitive distortions, and "assuming the worst about people within a simplistic us-versus-them morality" instead of taking a generous, nuanced view of others.[274]

This net effect leaves an emerging adult generation primed to perceive danger in a range of non-dangerous situations and have their "threat-response system set on high alert" where they more likely to see hostility in non-hostile people and situations.[275]

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[271] Lukianoff and Haidt, *Coddling*, 32.

[272] Lukianoff and Haidt, *Coddling*, 38.

[273] Lukianoff and Haidt, *Coddling*, 76.

[274] Lukianoff and Haidt, *Coddling*, 14.

[275] Lukianoff and Haidt, *Coddling*, 158-159.

Changing Public Image of Anxiety

A final large trend noted in the literature was an increasing public embrace of high anxiety as a normal part of life. Historian Ian Dowbiggin, writing in the *Canadian Journal of Psychiatry*, assesses the growth in anxiety prevalence as less due to specific stressors and more because of a "prevailing social ethos that teaches people that anxiety-related symptoms are a socially and medically legitimate response to life in the modern age."[276] Davey concurs and even argues that social affirmation of anxiety sets it up as a type of modern status symbol in which "We can even boast about our anxiety as an index of importance of our lives and the significance of the demands it places on us."[277] Dowbiggin traces this to an historical trend of describing normal negative feelings as "sickness" and laments that this trend, which began in the 1940s, has now become a "stampede."[278] Davey argues that this trend has been increasingly codified by the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM)* and has "led to what many would call a 'proliferation' of anxiety disorders which run the risk of medicalizing most people's conception of anxiety."[279] Allen Frances, former chairman of the task force for *DSM-4* even shares a similar concern. Frances calls this "diagnostic inflation," which expands the boundaries of psychiatry.[280]

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[276] Ian R Dowbiggin, "High Anxieties: The Social Construction of Anxiety Disorders," *The Canadian Journal of Psychiatry* 54, no. 7 (2009): 429, https://doi.org/10.1177/070674370905400703.

[277] Davey, *Age of Anxiety*, 49.

[278] Dowbiggin, "High Anxieties," 431.

[279] Davey, *Age of Anxiety*, 40.

[280] Allen Frances, "The New Crisis in Confidence in Psychiatric Diagnosis," *Annals of Internal Medicine* 159, no. 3 (2013): 221, https://doi.org/10.7326/0003-4819-159-3-201308060-00655.

Three effects of this type of inflation have been noted. First, according to Davey, *DSM* diagnosis shapes "the public's conception of anxiety as a medical condition that implies a medical solution: 'If your anxious, take a pill!'"[281] Second, Davey argues this has led to the widespread assumption that everyday anxieties are a medical problem.[282] Finally, Haidt and Lukianoff argue that liberalized application of these labels can create what he calls a "looping-effect," where the "labelled" person deeply embraces the description and it functions as a self-fulfilling prophecy."[283]

Connective Technology and Personal Disruption

Connective technology, particularly television and the internet, was often implicated in the literature as a source of increased anxiety. A chief anxiety-generating tendency associated with connective technology is the normalizing of disruption and distraction. This pattern shows up prominently through multitasking and sleep disruption.

Multitasking

Multitasking is simply "the performance of multiple tasks at one time"[284] and is another potentially stress-inducing effect of digital connection and technology. Constant connectivity and interruptive media like texting, email, and instant messaging services

[281] Davey, *Age of Anxiety*, 51.

[282] Davey, *Age of Anxiety*, 52.

[283] Lukianoff and Haidt, *Coddling*, 150.

[284] *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, s.v. "Multitasking," https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/multitasking.

create ongoing opportunity for "multi-tasking." In 2010, the Kaiser Family Foundation found that nearly one-third of kids aged 8-18 multitask "most" of the time they are doing homework.[285]

Neuroscientists point out that the term is a misnomer because what actually happens in the brain is a rapid switching back and forth between tasks rather than doing multiple tasks at one time. Earl Miller, MIT professor of neuroscience, explains that each of these switches has a "switch cost," which "is when it takes your brain a short while to realign for a new task." The brain expends energy when it backtracks to figure out where it was before switching tasks.[286]

While this switching is a burden to brain efficiency, it is experienced as pleasurable in the moment. Daniel Levitin, professor of psychology and behavior neuroscience at McGill University, reports that the brain is primed to seek new information. Activities like answering a phone call, checking email, or sending a text "tweaks the novelty-seeking, reward-seeking centers of the brain" and causes a burst of pleasurably experienced endorphins.[287] However, Levitin warns, "Multitasking has also been found to increase the production of the stress hormone cortisol as well as the flight-or-fight hormone adrenaline," which can overstimulate the brain and cause a mental fog

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[285] Victoria J. Rideout, Ulla G. Foehr, and Donald F. Roberts, *Generation M²: Media in the Lives of 8- to 18-Year-Olds* (Menlo Park, CA: Kaiser Family Foundation, 2010), 34, https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED527859.pdf.

[286] Today Show, "Multitasking Doesn't Work: Why Focus Isn't Just Hocus-Pocus," TODAY.com, January 27, 2016, https://www.today.com/health/multitasking-doesn-t-work-why-focus-isn-t-just-hocus-t69276.

[287] Daniel J. Levitin, *The Organized Mind: Thinking Straight in the Age of Information Overload* (New York: Dutton, 2014), 97.

or scrambled thinking.[288] Multitasking, therefore, accesses the brain's pleasure center in the seeking of new information and also deposits cortisol as a result, thus creating an addiction-like cycle driven by pleasure but leading to feelings of emotional distress.

Multitasking can also lead to stress generated from a lack of efficiency in execution and learning. Researchers report that an interruption, even if the interruption is initiated by the person, results in an average delay of over 23 minutes before returning to the original and intended task.[289] If the task is something being learned, multitasking can have a further detrimental effect. Russell Poldrack and his colleagues at UCLA's Brain Research Institute show that "declarative learning" and "habit learning" depend on different neural circuits. According to Poldrack, "declarative learning" supports the acquisition of knowledge that can be accessed flexibly and "habit learning" involves learning behavioral tendencies.[290] While it is not clear how these systems function together, research shows that when there is distraction in the learning environment, the brain struggles to store the learning in the region appropriate to the type of recall required. That is, facts and ideas may be deposited in the part of the brain usually reserved for skills and activity and vice-versa. Poldrack warns that the result is less flexibility in learning, recall, and application.[291] Mark adds that people in this often-

[288] Levitin, *The Organized Mind*, 96.

[289] Kermit Pattison, "Worker, Interrupted: The Cost of Task Switching," Fast Company, July 30, 2012, https://www.fastcompany.com/944128/worker-interrupted-cost-task-switching.

[290] K. Foerde, B. J. Knowlton, and R. A. Poldrack, "Modulation of Competing Memory Systems by Distraction," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 103, no. 31 (2006): 11778, https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.0602659103).

[291] Foerde, Knowlton, and Poldrack, "Modulation of Competing Memory Systems," 11778.

interrupted state experience a higher workload, more stress, higher frustration, and a greater sense of time pressure.[292]

In summary, interrupted work leaves the modern American multi-tasking worker working harder and getting more stressed to accomplish the same amount of work. For youth, Graham Davey speculates that one of the possible causes of epidemic levels of anxiety among the younger generation of students is the "constant switching of attention to the demands of a smartphone while trying to learn." Here, Davey suggests, multitasking generates anxiety, and the switching disrupts learning.[293]

Sleep Deprivation

"Insufficient sleep is a known trigger of anxiety,"[294] according to University of California Berkeley neuroscientist Andrea Goldstein-Piekarski. While women tend to be affected more negatively than men by sleep deprivation, for both men and women, "a lack of sleep amplifies anxiety and subjective negative emotional responses in otherwise healthy individuals."[295] Through sleep-study research, Goldstein-Piekarski has determined that sleep loss "amplifies preemptive amygdala…responding during the anticipation of potentially aversive experiences." This worsening was especially the case

[292] Gloria Mark, Daniela Gudith, and Ulrich Klocke, "The Cost of Interrupted Work," *CHI '08: Proceedings of the Twenty-Sixth Annual CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems*, April 2008, 110, https://doi.org/10.1145/1357054.1357072.

[293] Davey, *The Anxiety Epidemic*, 35.

[294] Andrea N. Goldstein-Piekarski et al., "Sex, Sleep Deprivation, and the Anxious Brain," *Journal of Cognitive Neuroscience* 30, no. 4 (2018): 565, https://doi.org/10.1162/jocn_a_01225.

[295] Goldstein-Piekarski et al., "Sex, Sleep Deprivation," 565.

for those with high trait anxiety.[296] Being tired makes the amygdala, the anxiety-producing area of the brain, more reactive to potentially negative situations.

Noting that most Americans, and especially teenagers, do not get the recommended amount of sleep, Dr. Matthew Walker, director of the Center for Human Sleep Science, has stated that this "sleep loss epidemic" is the greatest public health challenge in the twenty-first century.[297] Walker references data reporting up to 90 percent of Americans using "some form of portable electronic device sixty minutes or less before bedtime." The problem, he says, is that LED light used by these devices blocks naturally rising melatonin levels by up to 23 percent if used within two hours of bedtime.[298]

Loss of Solitude

Cal Newport, professor of computer science at Georgetown and popular writer on educational and productivity issues, chronicles a significant historical shift with technology such as the iPod and, later, the smartphone. He notes that, while previous technology allowed people to be occasionally disrupted, technology like the iPod "provided for the first time the ability to be continuously distracted from your own mind."[299] He calls this state of distraction "solitude deprivation," and describes it as "a

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[296] Andrea N. Goldstein et al., "Tired and Apprehensive: Anxiety Amplifies the Impact of Sleep Loss on Aversive Brain Anticipation," *Journal of Neuroscience* 33, no. 26 (2013): 10612, https://doi.org/10.1523/jneurosci.5578-12.2013.

[297] Matthew P. Walker, *Why We Sleep: Unlocking the Power of Sleep and Dreams* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2017), 340.

[298] Walker, *Why We Sleep*., 269.

[299] Cal Newport, *Digital Minimalism: on Living Better with Less Technology* (New York: Penguin, 2019), 100.

state in which you spend close to zero time alone with your own thoughts and free from input from other minds."[300] Hara Estroff Marano, editor-at-large of *Psychology Today*, praises solitude as "the state of being alone without being lonely" and considers it the "positive and constructive state of engagement with oneself." Solitude is desirable, "a state of being alone where you provide yourself wonderful and sufficient company."[301] Solitude, Estroff Marano says, directs people toward a peacefulness stemming from a state of inner richness and furnishes a sense of renewal and replenishing.[302]

Without this replenishment of solitude, Newport warns that people miss out on the development and refining of anxiety-reducing skills such as the ability to clarify hard problems, regulate emotions, and build moral courage.[303] Historically, solitude was considered a primary context in which people worked out challenging thoughts. Seventeenth century mathematician and philosopher Blaise Pascal, extoling the virtue of solitude famously said, "All unhappiness of man arises from one single fact, that they cannot stay quietly in their own chamber."[304] This classic wisdom is affirmed by the modern researcher Thuy-vy T. Nguyen at the University of Rochester. Nguyen and colleagues report, "Solitude generally has a deactivation effect on people's affective experiences, decreasing both positive and negative high-arousal affects." This effect holds true as long as the solitude is "without communications, stimuli, activities, or

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[300] Newport, *Digital Minimalism*, 103.

[301] Hara Estroff Marano, "What Is Solitude?," Psychology Today, July 1, 2003, https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/articles/200307/what-is-solitude.

[302] Marano, "What is Solitude?"

[303] Newport, *Digital Minimalism*, 104.

[304] Blaise Pascal, *Penseés*, trans. W. F. Trotter (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2003), 39.

devices that might facilitate virtual communications such as text messaging or social media."[305] Solitude, therefore, affords people the opportunity to work out hard problems on their own and calm a natural or induced reactive state. Nguyen's research began with defining solitude as a 15-minute minimum, non-distracted state. However, as Michael Winnick from the research firm dScout, Inc. reports, this experience is unlikely to happen in everyday life. He writes that the average smartphone user has seventy-six separate interactions with his or her phone per day. Users check their phone every twelve to thirteen minutes, on average.[306] Nonetheless, solitude can be achieved, if one is intentional. However, Newport warns, the prioritizing of communication over solitude makes this unlikely.[307]

Connective Technology and Pervasive Negativity

New technology, by its nature, "connects" people to information in the world. The literature warns that when that information is often negative, it can have troubling consequences. Nobel Prize winner and Harvard psychologist Daniel Kahneman and his colleague Amos Tversky coined the term "availability heuristic" in the 1970s to describe the typical mental shortcut by which a person "evaluates the frequency of classes of the

[305] Thuy-Vy T. Nguyen, Richard M. Ryan, and Edward L. Deci, "Solitude as an Approach to Affective Self-Regulation," *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 44, no. 1 (2017): 92, https://doi.org/10.1177/0146167217733073.

[306] Michael Winnick, "Putting a Finger on Our Phone Obsession," dscout (blog), July 16, 2016, https://blog.dscout.com/mobile-touches#1.

[307] Newport, *Digital Minimalism*, 104.

probability of events… by the ease with which relevant instances come to mind."[308] That is, if something comes to mind more easily, people often think it to be more probable. More recently, Kahneman has applied this heuristic to news media and concludes, "People tend to assess the relative importance of issues by the ease with which they are retrieved from memory—and this is largely determined by the extent of coverage in the media."[309] Consequently, if one's mental environment is populated by examples of negative events about the world, a person may be more likely to think negative events will occur and can experience anxiety as a result. Pinker, in applying this heuristic, suggests news is likely to lead to a distorted view of the world, not only because of frequency of negativity but also because it provides images that are attention-getting because they "vivid, gory, distinctive, or upsetting" and thus become more available to the memory.[310]

Two areas of negativity that receive particular mention are negative news media and negative social media.

Negative News Media

Kalev Leetaru, senior researcher and data scientist at the University of Illinois, led a research team in a "sentiment-mining" analysis of every article in *The New York Times*

[308] Amos Tversky and Daniel Kahneman, "Availability: A Heuristic for Judging Frequency and Probability," Cognitive Psychology 5, no. 2 (1973): 207, https://doi.org/10.1016/0010-0285(73)90033-9.

[309] Daniel Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011), 8.

[310] Steven Pinker, "The Media Exaggerates Negative News. This Distortion Has Consequences," *The Guardian,* February 17, 2018, https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/feb/17/steven-pinker-media-negative-news.

from 1945-2005. Sentiment-mining examines positive and negative words to determine overall emotional tone of an article. Letaru's team concluded that *The New York Times* became steadily more negative in the 1960s to the early 1970s, recovered slightly in the 1980s and 1990s and moved steadily downward from 2000-2005. In total, *The New York Times* grew more negative by over two standard deviations from 1945 to 2005. Likewise, a summary of world news broadcasts from 1979-2010 revealed news all over the world is becoming more negative.[311]

Research suggests that this negative trend in news coverage may be explained by market forces responding to human preference. Syracuse Professor of Political Science, Shana Gadarin, says, "Media competition means that journalists and editors have incentives to use emotionally powerful visuals and story lines to gain and maintain ever-shrinking news audiences."[312] This enduring market reality is taking a significant toll on the mental health of the news observers.

Connective technology's enablement of near constant exposure to traumatic events can have a direct effect on the stress of observers. Health psychologist Alison Holman and research colleagues from University of California, Irvine researched those who had been present at the Boston Marathon bombings in 2013 and those who had consumed six or more hours of coverage about the bombings for a week afterward but had not been physically present at the bombing. They found that those who consumed six

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[311] Kalev Leetaru, "Culturomics 2.0: Forecasting Large-Scale Human Behavior Using Global News Media Tone in Time and Space," *First Monday* 16, no. 9 (September 2011), https://firstmonday.org/ojs/index.php/fm/article/download/3663/3040.

[312] Shana Gadarian, "How Sensationalist TV Stories on Terrorism Make Americans More Hawkish," *The Washington Post*, April 18, 2019, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2014/10/09/how-sensationalist-tv-stories-on-terrorism-make-americans-more-hawkish/.

or more hours of news media had higher acute stress levels over the bombing than those who had been personally present for it. These same people were also "nine times more likely to report high acute stress than those respondents reporting minimal media exposure."[313] These findings held true even if the observers were in a different city. Consuming excessive news coverage about a negative event can thus elicit as high or higher levels of anxiety than personally experiencing the event.[314]

There is also evidence that exposure to negative news can generate other stress beyond direct exposure to events. Davey and colleague Wendy Johnson at the University of Sussex examined the psychological impact of negative TV news stories in the late 1990s. They found that participants who watched a fifteen-minute negative news report "showed increases in both anxious and sad mood."[315] Of additional interest was the finding that an anxiety-induced state from viewing negative TV news was also associated with an "increase in catastrophizing of personal worries."[316] Thus, negative TV news is likely not only to create anxiety in the moment but is also likely to exacerbate a person's worries about things unrelated to the content of the news. Jonson and Davey further find that negative TV news can facilitate worry in those who tend to worry about other things and those who tend to be relatively worry-free.[317]

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[313] E. Alison Holman, Dana Rose Garfin, and Roxane Cohen Silver, "Media's Role in Broadcasting Acute Stress Following the Boston Marathon Bombings," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 111, no. 1 (September 2013): 95, https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1316265110.

[314] Holman, Garfin, and Silver, "Media's Role", 93.

[315] Wendy M. Johnston and Graham C. L. Davey, "The Psychological Impact of Negative TV News Bulletins: The Catastrophizing of Personal Worries," *British Journal of Psychology* 88, no. 1 (1997): 85, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.2044-8295.1997.tb02622.x.

[316] Johnson and Davey, The Psychological Impact of Negative TV News, 89.

[317] Johnson and Davey, The Psychological Impact of Negative TV News, 90.

Negative Social Media

Numerous popular media sources such as *Forbes*, BBC, *Inc. Magazine*, Vox, and the "Harvard Big Blog" have included subjective opinion pieces lamenting the negative demeanor of social media in subjective opinion pieces.[318] However, the social media monitoring company Medium applied data to this lament and performed a sentiment analysis of over 11 billion social media mentions across a broad range of social media platforms from 2013-2017. Director of Content Patrick Whatman, reporting on their findings concludes, "According to our data, social media has become considerably more negative over the past five years. Between 2013 and 2017, social media users went from largely upbeat to feeling blue."[319] Whatman notes that the vast majority of social media content is neutral, but things are changing. In 2013, of all social media mentions, 13.04 percent were positive and 2.71 percent were negative. However, by 2017, negative mentions outpaced the positive mentions 6.86 percent to 5.57 percent. Thus, in 2017, though most content was still neutral, the social media analyzed was also 250 percent more negative than it was five years earlier. The increasing negativity was also matched by a rapid decline in positive sentiment. Given that the average person in 2018 spent 142 minutes per day on social media,[320] people are giving themselves plenty of exposure to negativity.

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[318] Patrick Whatman, "Social Sentiment Online: Yes, Social Media Is Becoming More Negative," The Mention Blog, May 23, 2019, https://mention.com/blog/social-media-mentions-analysis/.

[319] Whatman, "Social Sentiment Online."

[320] Jessica Wonder, "2018 Global Web Index's Flagship Report on the Latest Trends in Entertainment," Digital Marketing Community, accessed November 14, 2019, https://www.digitalmarketingcommunity.com/researches/2018-globalwebindexs-flagship-report-on-the-latest-trends-in-entertainment/.

The negative mood generated by this media plays a particularly strong role in worry. Davey says, "Most chronic or pathological worrying happens when we are in a negative mood,"[321] and this negative mood "contributes to perseverative worrying in a number of different ways and helps to make our worry seem uncontrollable."[322] He claims the negative mood state causes persons to process details more thoroughly, thus thinking in depth about every problem, and increases self-demand that people succeed in completing their task of worrying. A person may thus worry more and never feel finished in the task of worry.[323]

Connective Technology and Relational Impact

Loneliness

The literature suggests that people are inheriting an historical trend of growing loneliness and that connective technology can exacerbate the experience. Loneliness has been described as an associate of anxiety which leads to the immediate experience of anxiety and sets in motion processes that further increase anxiety. Louise Hawkley and John Cacioppo of the University of Chicago's Center for Cognitive and Social Neuroscience warn, "Perceived social isolation is tantamount to feeling unsafe, and this

[321] Davey, *Age of Anxiety*, 212.

[322] Davey, *Age of Anxiety*, 212.

[323] Davey, *Age of Anxiety*, 213.

sets off implicit hypervigilance for (additional) social threat in the environment."[324] This perceived social isolation also "heighten[s] feelings of vulnerability while also raising the desire to connect."[325] Real loneliness may also be experienced "hypothetically" since humans often "perceive social isolation when social opportunities do exist but we lack the capacity to harness the power of social connectedness in everyday life."[326] That is, people often feel lonely not only when they have become disconnected but also when they perceive the possibility of connection but do not have it. So, apart from the actual negative feeling of loneliness, people who feel lonely may also find themselves succumbing to a cognitive bias of appraising other environmental stimuli as more negative and threatening than necessary. Hawkley and Cacioppo call this a "self-reinforcing loneliness loop," where a person expects loneliness, interprets others' intentions as exclusionary, and withdraws into loneliness—thus creating a type of self-fulfilling prophecy.[327] Loneliness, then, can beget anxiety, which can beget loneliness and so on.

A historical loneliness trend appears to be growing in American culture. Sociologist Miller McPherson and colleagues from Duke University reported in 2006, after examining data from the two decades prior, that "The number of people who have

[324] Louise C. Hawkley and John T. Cacioppo, "Loneliness Matters: A Theoretical and Empirical Review of Consequences and Mechanisms," *Annals of Behavioral Medicine* 40, no. 2 (2010): 221, https://doi.org/10.1007/s12160-010-9210-8.

[325] Hawkley and Cacioppo, "Loneliness Matters," 219.

[326] Hawkley and Cacioppo, "Loneliness Matters," 228.

[327] Hawkley and Cacioppo, "Loneliness Matters," 228.

someone to talk to about matters that are important to them has declined dramatically."[328] This data amounted to a 30 percent reduction in the number of people who could be described as "confidants." They also note, "The modal number of discussion partners has gone from three to zero."[329] In other words, in the previous twenty years, the average number of confidants people trust has dropped from three to zero. In 2018, the Cigna Health and Life Insurance Company's "2018 U.S. Loneliness Index," though using a different data set and approach, confirms that loneliness is still a problem for Americans and reports, "Nearly half of Americans report sometimes or always feeling alone or left out." This report also reveals that adults ages 18-22 have the highest loneliness score.[330] Since this 18-to-22 age demographic in 2018 would not have been included in Hawkley and Caccioppi's 2006 research, the experience of loneliness has likely grown.

What is connective technology's role in this? Though the Cigna report says, "Social media use alone is not a predictor of loneliness,"[331] it does acknowledge the demographic with the highest loneliness also uses social media the most, and the demographic with the lowest loneliness, those aged 72 and older, use social media the least, suggesting a correlation. Social media use leads to what McPherson calls a wider network of "weak-ties." While weak ties expose a person to a wider range of acquaintances than strong, close ties, it is the strong ties that offer the "wider array of

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[328] Miller McPherson, Lynn Smith-Lovin, and Matthew E. Brashears, "Social Isolation in America: Changes in Core Discussion Networks over Two Decades," *American Sociological Review* 71, no. 3 (2006): 371, https://doi.org/10.1177/000312240607100301.

[329] McPherson, Smith-Lovin, and Brasheras, "Social Isolation in America," 358.

[330] "The State of Loneliness in America - Cigna.com," accessed November 18, 2019, https://www.cigna.com/assets/docs/newsroom/loneliness-survey-2018-fact-sheet.pdf.

[331] "The State of Loneliess in America."

support, both in normal times and in emergencies."[332] So-called weak-ties, Davey notes, may lead to loneliness because it is the "quality of your social interactions not the quantity that defines loneliness."[333] Davey thus cautions that "Social media such as Facebook have become surrogates for seeking connectedness, and as a consequence our connections grow broader but shallower."[334] Stephen Marche writing in *Atlantic Monthly,* summarizes this current challenge with the warning that, in this hyper-connected age, "We are living in an isolation that would have been unimaginable to our ancestors, and yet we have never been more accessible."[335]

Social Comparison/Exclusion

Baumeister and Tice write, "One major cause of anxiety is exclusion from social groups—that is, the fact or threat of the breaking of social bonds."[336] Further, they identify three causes for social exclusion: failure to make adequate contribution to the group welfare; failure to maintain certain rules and conventions, including morality; and unattractiveness in physical traits and personality.[337] While this dynamic has existed in all of human society, social media exerts a new kind of constant pressure to respond to this

[332] McPherson, Smith-Lovin, and Brashears, "Social Isolation in America," 373.

[333] Davey, *Anxiety Epidemic*, 79.

[334] Davey, *Anxiety Epidemic*, 79.

[335] Stephen Marche, "Is Facebook Making Us Lonely," *The Atlantic Monthly,* May 2012, 60.

[336] Roy F. Baumeister and Dianne M. Tice, "Anxiety and Social Exclusion," *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology* 9, no. 2 (1990): 165, https://doi.org/10.1521/jscp.1990.9.2.165.

[337] Baumeister and Tice, "Anxiety and Social Exclusion," 168-169.

"threat." Writer Donna Freitas, drawing on surveys from thirteen American college campuses, describes the pressure of maintaining online image:

> Students feel they must maintain a perfect, happy veneer on Facebook and other profiles attached to their names. They must be that high-achieving, do-no-wrong, unstoppable, successful young woman or man with whom everyone would be proud to associate, to have as a son or daughter, to boast about as a resident assistant or member of a team, and, eventually, to hire.[338]

Davey, a seasoned counselor and researcher, says this posture is inevitably "doomed to failure, and most young people become anxious lest they portray themselves as being less than perfect or unwittingly post something online that they'll later come to regret."[339] The desire to posit an image, and the threat of doing so poorly, can itself produce anxiety. Baumeister and Tice say that any presentation of self that raises the possibility of social exclusion can produce anxiety. Further, if exclusion is driven by any form of incompetence or unattractiveness, then anxiety can rise from the risk of linking the self to these in any way.[340]

Summary of Modern Sources of Anxiety

The literature reveals a trend of increasing anxiety and several modern sources as contributing factors. Common to these potential sources is the role of connective technology. This technology, while not necessarily an anxiety-producing agent itself, does bind itself to other human propensities that lead to anxiety. The cognitive bias that

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[338] Donna Freitas, *The Happiness Effect: How Social Media Is Driving a Generation to Appear Perfect at Any Cost* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 12.

[339] Davey, *Anxiety Epidemic*, 75.

[340] Baumeister and Tice, "Anxiety and Social Exclusion," 190.

rewards finding new information can serve people poorly if there is so much new information that it leads to distraction and lack of solitude. In the current digital age, far more information is available than can be managed. Consequently, technology often drives anxiety by constant distraction. The human cognitive bias that privileges negative stimuli and potential negative threat, including the threat of social exclusion, functions helpfully when there is an actual threat. However, when hyper-connectivity brings people into frequent interface with more negative stimuli than they would encounter personally, that threat level increases and anxiety results. Thus, people believe there is more chance of harm than actually exists. This cognitive distortion, in turn, increases anxiety in social interaction online and in person, including parenting.

Summary of Literature Review

In light of the literature examined, there are four primary themes senior pastors must be aware of when preaching Christ-centered sermons to address systemic anxiety in the congregation. These themes include identifying sources and presence of anxiety, bringing rich biblical content to bear on the challenge of anxiety, delivering sermons in a manner that lowers anxiety, and recognizing his or her emotional presence in the system of the congregation.

Chapter Three

Methodology

The purpose of this study is to explore how pastors preach Christ-centered sermons to address systemic anxiety in their congregations. Its assumption is that effective preaching pastors have learned important principles and methods for addressing issues of anxiety from the pulpit.

In order to address this purpose, the research identified four main areas of focus. These include identifying sources and presence of anxiety, bringing rich biblical content to bear on the challenge of anxiety, delivering sermons in a manner that lowers anxiety, and recognizing his or her emotional presence in the system of the congregation.

To examine these areas more closely, the following questions served as the intended focus of the qualitative research:

1. How do senior pastors describe systemic anxiety in their congregations?
2. How do senior pastors shape the content of Christ-centered sermons to address systemic anxiety in their congregations?
3. How do senior pastors shape the delivery of Christ-centered sermons to address systemic anxiety in their congregations?
4. How do senior pastors describe the importance of their emotional presence in the daily life of the church community for the delivery of Christ-centered sermons to address systemic anxiety in their congregations?

Design of the Study

This study employed a basic qualitative research design, as described by Sharan B. Merriam, in her book *Qualitative Research: A Guide to Design and Implementation*. Merriam describes a qualitative researcher as being "interested in understanding how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences."[341]

Qualitative research, then, is chiefly interested in understanding the meaning people have constructed. Merriam contends it is marked by four primary characteristics.[342] First, qualitative research focuses on process, understanding, and meaning. The primary concern is to gain understanding from the perspective of the participant, rather than the researcher. Second, the researcher is the primary instrument of data gathering and analysis. Critical to this process, then is the researcher's acknowledgement of biases and perspectives and attention given to how they may shape data collection. Third, the process is inductive. That is, "researchers gather data to build concepts, hypotheses, or theories, rather than deductively testing hypotheses…build[ing] toward theory from observations and intuitive understanding gleaned from being in the field."[343] Finally, the outcome of qualitative research is marked by the robust description of words and pictures of what has been learned about the phenomena in all phases of

[341] Sharan B. Merriam and Elizabeth J. Tisdell, *Qualitative Research: A Guide to Design and Implementation* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2016), 6.

[342] Merriam and Tisdell, *Qualitative Research*, 15.

[343] Merriam and Tisdell, *Qualitative Research*, 17.

research and analysis. This qualitative method provides for the discovery of the most descriptive data from participant perspectives.

Participant Sample Selection

For this study, a purposeful-sampling strategy and criterion-based selection process was used. The researcher decided the attributes crucial to the study and then found participants who met the criteria.[344] In this study, the research required that participants meet four criteria.

First, participants needed to be preachers familiar with the Christ-centered method of preaching. This distinctive ensured the same general willingness to bring all scripture to bear on the congregation, a unified approach of motivating behavior change by the grace of God in the redeeming work of Christ, and a willingness to provide practical application of the biblical text to life.[345]

Second, participants needed to be experienced preachers, having preached five years or more in the capacity of a senior pastor. This experience increased the likelihood that participants were flexible and intentional regarding their preaching style.

Third, only senior pastors were considered because of the freedom a senior pastor has to set direction and tone in the congregation, the regular exposure designed to lead the congregation, and the position the senior pastor occupies in the "family-system" of the church.

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[344] Merriam and Tisdell, *Qualitative Research*, 97.

[345] Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching*, 219-222.

Fourth, the participants needed a familiarity with the systems theory of Edwin Friedman, as it is applied to congregations.

Fifth, participants had to be in the Reformed Presbyterian or Reformed Baptist tradition, adhering to the *Westminster Confession of Faith* or the *London Baptist Confession*. This criterion minimized theological variables beyond this analysis.

Finally, in order to minimize other personal variables beyond the perspective of this research, only male senior pastors were selected.

The final study was conducted through personal interviews with eight pastors who met the above criteria and were identified through a networking selection technique.[346] The researcher invited participants to take part in the study via an introductory email, followed by a personal phone call. All potential participants who expressed interest were invited to participate. In addition, each participant signed a "Research Participant Consent Form" to respect and to protect the human rights of the participants.

Data Collection

This study utilized semi-structured interviews for primary data gathering. The open-ended nature of interview questions facilitates the ability to build upon participant responses to complex issues in order to explore them more thoroughly.[347] Ultimately,

[346] Merriam and Tisdell, *Qualitative Research*, 98.

[347] Merriam and Tisdell, *Qualitative Research*, 124-125.

these methods enabled this study to look for common themes, patterns, concerns, and contrasting views across the variation of participants.[348]

The researcher performed a pilot test of the interview protocol to evaluate the questions for clarity and usefulness in eliciting relevant data. Initial interview protocol categories were derived from the literature but evolved around the explanations and descriptions that emerged from doing constant comparison work during the interviewing process. Coding and categorizing the data while continuing the process of interviewing also allowed for the emergence of new sources of data.[349]

The researcher interviewed eight participants for one hour each. In order to accommodate participant schedules, the researcher audiotaped the interviews with a digital recorder. By conducting two interviews in a week, the researcher completed the data gathering in the course of four weeks. Directly after each interview, the researcher wrote field notes with descriptive and reflective observations on the interview time.

Interview Protocol Questions

The interview protocol contained the following questions.

1. Tell me about a time when you perceived anxiety to be high in your congregation.
2. Describe for me a sermon you preached in response to that high stress season in your church or community.

[348] Merriam and Tisdell, *Qualitative Research*, 297.

[349] Merriam and Tisdell, *Qualitative Research*, 208.

3. Please tell me a story about a time you were aware that your sermons to a stressful church season seemed to make things better.

Data Analysis

As soon as possible and always within one week of each meeting, the researcher transcribed each video interview using computer software to play back the digital recording and typed out each transcript or using "Descript" software to transcribe digital recordings. When "Descript" software was used, each transcript was checked for consistency with the field notes of the interview. This study utilized the constant comparison method of routinely analyzing the data throughout the interview process. This method provided for the ongoing revision, clarification, and evaluation of the resultant data categories.[350] When the interviews and observation notes were fully transcribed into computer files, they were color-coded. The analysis focused on discovering and identifying (1) common themes, patterns, and responses across the variation of participants and (2) congruence or discrepancy between the different senior pastor participants.

Researcher Position

Because the researcher is the primary data gatherer and there is room for subjectivity, Merriam cautions that "related to the integrity of the qualitative

[350] Merriam and Tisdell, *Qualitative Research*, 32.

research…investigators need to explain their biases, dispositions, and assumption regarding the research to be undertaken." Identifying these potential biases "allows the reader to better understand how the individual researcher might have arrived at the particular interpretation of the data."[351]

Accordingly, the researcher is an ordained teaching elder in the Presbyterian Church in America and has spent eighteen years in a full-time senior pastor capacity, which has included regular preaching. Like all the participants, the researcher is male, identifies himself as "theologically conservative" and "Reformed," and intends to preach in a manner that would be described as "Christ-centered." Consequently, the researcher's experience in preaching is much like the participants, and this helped the researcher gain more thorough understanding of the interview data. The researcher's common experience also presented a liability because it allowed for potential assumptions of understanding without necessary clarifying questions.

The researcher has also been deeply influenced by the systems theory of Murray Bowen and Edwin Friedman and has sought to bring it to light in several leadership contexts at the local church and presbytery level as well as in several mentoring relationships. These mentoring relationships included bringing an understanding of systems theory to issues of congregational vision, financial shortfall, untimely death, job loss, job transition, church planting, racial strife, family breakdown, and staff conflict.

[351] Merriam and Tisdell, *Qualitative Research*, 249.

Study Limitations

Due to limited resources and time, this study is limited to eight male pastors. Further research is needed to broaden the participant selection to include women. As stated in the previous section, participants interviewed were also limited to senior pastors serving in Reformed Presbyterian and Reformed Baptist churches. Therefore, some of the study's findings may be generalized to other similar theological or ecclesiastical contexts. Readers who desire to generalize some of the particular aspects of these conclusions on preaching Christ-centered sermons to address systemic anxiety in the congregation should test those aspects in their particular context. The results of this study may also have implications for those serving in leadership positions other than senior pastor. However, readers who desire to transfer particular aspects of these conclusions beyond the role of senior pastor should test those aspects in their particular context.

As with all qualitative studies, readers bear the responsibility to determine what can be appropriately applied to their context. The results of this study may also have implications for smaller systems within a congregation, but more research is needed to confirm this.

Chapter Four

Findings

The purpose of this study is to explore how senior pastors preach Christ-centered sermons to lower anxiety in the congregational system. The assumption is that these senior pastors have some working knowledge of systems theory and are adept at lowering anxiety in their congregational system. This chapter utilizes the findings of the eight pastoral interviews and reports on common themes and relevant insights pertaining to the research questions for this study. In order to address the purpose of this study, the following research questions served as the intended focus of the qualitative research.

1. How do senior pastors describe the presence of anxiety in the congregational system?
2. How do senior pastors understand the impact of their presence on anxiety in the congregational system?
    a. How do senior pastors understand the impact of their emotional presence on the anxiety in the congregational system?
    b. How do senior pastors understand the impact of their leadership on the anxiety in the congregational system?
3. How do senior pastors negotiate their own anxiety as a part of the congregational system?
4. How do senior pastors describe sermons that lower anxiety in the congregational system?

a. How do senior pastors describe the preparation of sermons that lower anxiety in the congregational system?
b. How do senior pastors describe the content of sermons that lower anxiety in the congregational system?
c. How do senior pastors describe the delivery of sermons that lower anxiety in the congregational system?

Introductions to Participants and Context

Eight senior pastors were selected to participate in this study. All of these senior pastors had been the primary pastoral leader of a congregation for at least five years, were self-described as Reformed in their theology, had some working knowledge of family systems theory, as advocated by Edwin Friedman, and were advocates of the "Christ-centered preaching" model taught in *Christ-Centered Preaching* by Bryan Chapell. Seven of these pastors were in a Presbyterian tradition, and one was a pastor in the Southern Baptist Convention. In order to encourage open and honest responses from the participants, the researcher promised to conceal their identities and to secure all recordings and transcripts during and after the entire process. Consequently, the names and, at time, specific details of participants have been altered to conceal identity.

Mark is a pastor in his early sixties who has been at his church for nearly thirty years. What began as a renewal work has grown to a congregation of several hundred people in a Midwestern suburb. He is a respected leader in his denomination and often teaches and coaches younger pastors through a local seminary. Among other things, he

has led his congregation through the anxiety connected to several staff transitions in his church as ordained and non-ordained staff have moved on or been terminated.

Jordan is a 50-year-old pastor who planted a Southern suburban church in the mid- 2000s and has overseen its growth into a church of 250 members. He has navigated the anxiety associated with changes to multiple services, a small group of people who sought his dismissal, and unexpected tragedy in the congregation.

Rob is in his late forties and is the pastor of a church he planted several years ago in a Southern urban center. The church has grown rapidly over the last five years to nearly 1000 attendees, and he has led his church through a major building program as well as a power struggle in the earlier years of the church, when a small group of people were actively questioning his leadership.

Eric is in his early fifties and has been the pastor for several years of a larger, historic church in an upscale urban environment. He oversees numerous staff and led his church through a tumultuous time following an instance of abuse in which a staff member abused a minor. This incident became known to the wider community and included police involvement and press coverage.

Dennis is in his late thirties and is the senior pastor of a mid-sized church in a mid-sized Northern college town. The history of this church is marked by frequent conflict between its session and senior pastor. This church is facing the anxious prospect of becoming an “aging” congregation and losing touch with its environment. He also led through a politically charged 2016 Presidential election that alienated African American members from Caucasian members.

Aaron is in his early fifties and is the pastor of a West Coast congregation of 150 members in a small university city. Like Dennis, the anxiety in his congregation peaked in the 2016 Presidential election and its aftermath. He worked to lead his more politically progressive congregation to a peaceful presence, even though they were unsettled by the larger denomination, which they perceived to be much more politically conservative. This tension was symptomatic of several other concerns the congregation tended to have about its denomination.

Brian is in his mid-thirties and is the pastor of a church he planted seven years ago in a hip Midwestern urban area. This church has grown rapidly to 500 attenders and has planted two other churches, over which Brian also functions as a "network leader." A chief anxiety driver in this congregation is the unfolding conversation about race and politics in our culture. The congregation is young, diverse, and politically split. Brian has chosen to address these issues directly.

Nate, in his early forties, is the pastor of a church he planted eight years ago in an artsy area of a major Midwestern city. This church grew rapidly, declined rapidly in the context of conflict, and has now stabilized with steadier growth at about 250 attenders. Nate navigated his church through anxiety connected to several thorny relational issues surrounding the termination of a popular staff member.

Describing Anxiety in the Congregational System

The first research question sought to determine how senior pastors described anxiety in the congregational system when they perceived that anxiety to be high. During

this interview process, a number of questions were asked of the research participants to encourage good reflection. These included such questions:

- Could you describe a time when you perceived anxiety to be high in your congregation?
- What differences do you notice between seasons where you perceive anxiety to be high in your congregation and seasons where you do not perceive it to be high?
- Could you describe what you perceive to be signs of higher anxiety in your congregation?

Aversion to Loss

In various ways, all of the participants described anxiety in their congregational system as related to a desire to avoid loss—whether that loss was actual or potential. They indicated that this actual or potential loss was met with anger, fear, or grief and identified anxiety as positively correlated to each. The types of loss specifically identified by these research participants were losses of safety, familiarity, status, or unity.

Loss of Safety

Brian pastors a congregation with a large demographic in their twenties. In describing the challenges to what he called "relational safety" created in the congregation in the aftermath of the 2016 Presidential election, he noted that many of the congregants were unwilling to talk about their political opinions. This unwillingness was related to what they perceived as potential threat to relationships. Brian said:

> There was a real hesitancy in our church for politically conservative people to come clean about their true convictions because that's not cool with millennials. So, even if they voted, they would not tell anyone or be extremely hesitant and anxious to do so. And, even if they didn't speak, they knew there was a suspicion from others that they had voted for Trump.

This same congregation, which is largely Caucasian, was pulled from another direction as well when several minority members stopped coming to church after the election because "They did not feel safe around white people." This anxiety was further exacerbated by the noticeable growing absence of this minority population in the congregation. Many attenders were left with a sense of cynicism and despair over this loss.

Nate identified anxiety around the loss of "relational safety" in the congregation through observing that many parishioners were afraid to approach an elder with questions about the elder's marriage. Because this leader was so well regarded, the potential threat of losing this relationship deterred people from addressing him directly. Many chose instead to gossip, and Nate believed this further fueled anxiety. Nate, feeling himself unable to speak openly because of privacy concerns, encouraged people to speak frankly to the elder. But, he said, "Almost nobody would actually talk directly with this elder or his wife" because the elder was "celebrated" and his wife was a "powerful woman." Risking loss of relationship because of questioning or confrontation was apparently too high for the parishioners to bear.

Loss of financial safety also surfaced as a driver of anxiety, according to Rob, who was pastoring a fast-growing urban congregation. Just before a vote on purchasing a new building, a group of people became destabilized because they did not believe "enough" due diligence on the property had been done. This objection came in spite of a robust building committee, numerous professional consultations, architects, question and

answer sessions, and congregational explanations. However, Rob perceived the financial risk to be so anxiety-inducing for this group that they would "never be satisfied" with the amount of due diligence exercised.

A final area of safety-related anxiety mentioned by these pastors was personal safety. Eric navigated his church through a tragic situation where a child was abused by a staff member. He said that as the congregation began to understand the fullness of the situation, they were paralyzed with questions and concerns such as, "Has this ever happened before…has this happened to my child…and, how can we guarantee this never happens again?" He understood these to be natural questions. However, the constancy of these questions did bring a sense of paralysis to decision-making among leadership. It also played a key role in nurturing congregational distrust of the leadership when trying to move forward. Jordan likewise noted that concerns for personal safety often kept his congregation anxiously on edge, since they live in an area that had been affected by forest fires and floods in the recent past. He believed the news media's constant and negative coverage made this problem worse and even recently predisposed his people to be "unreasonably" afraid of natural disaster.

Loss of Familiarity

The subjects also described anxiety in the congregation in response to a loss of familiarity with both the church and the wider culture. The current political landscape, and especially the election of 2016, was perceived to be an inflection point of anxiety. Aaron, who is in a congregation he describes as "probably 80 percent Democrat" and Jordan whose congregation is "likely 80 percent Republican" both describe the same type

of anxiety in which many in the congregation understood the country's landscape to be changing profoundly. Both pastors reported congregants to be unsettled with questions like, "What is going on here?" and "What will happen if the other candidate wins?" Dennis, pastoring a church that is more evenly divided politically, yet leaning conservative, knew people were unsettled by a sense of "What is happening to my country…because my country and my culture are not the way they used to be!" Brian said the congregation's anxiety surrounding the change from President Obama to President Trump was "palpable" and something you could "just feel" as a leader, and he longed for people to "take a step back from all the crazy happening around us!"

Anxiety was also reported when people were faced with a loss of familiarity in congregational context, particularly with respect to staff transition. Mark, who leads a larger staff and has experienced several transitions, recalls the anxiety caused by four staff all leaving in a short time. Though all transitions were healthy, and none was occasioned by scandal or conflict, the change brought about by losing known and loved staff caused several people to become what Mark described "frantic" and grasping for immediate solutions to the staffing problems.

Dennis experienced this loss of familiarity as anxiety in his older members who mourned the change in the church culture. Over two decades ago, they had been pastored for several years by pastors who had an attitude he described as "I have to know every single person…I have to be in their homes…I have to be shepherding and discipling them." This attitude was even the case when the church was over 500 active members and the pastors were living lifestyles often characterized by their friends as "workaholic and self-destructive." A group of members remains "who want their senior pastor to

personally shepherd them." The aversion to losing this kind of personal shepherding has been a contributing factor in conflict with two former pastors before Dennis. In spite of this pain and the unsustainability of the pastoral model, many still carry the anxious frustration that, according to Dennis, is a "generational problem," and can be summarized with the sentiment, "Where did my church go?"

Loss of Status

Eric described the potential loss of status of the congregation in the eyes of the community as a source of anxiety in the congregation and among the leadership. While leading through a scandal that had become public and was increasingly known in the wider community, he was faced with congregation members and elders who expressed a desire to close ranks and protect the reputation. Eric had adopted a transparent position but was in continual conflict with those who said, "This needs to be completely quiet. You're ruining the reputation of the church. How dare you!" On the other hand, other members demanded he bring forth "everything" including more details than he thought wise. These members desired this complete reporting of details to portray the church in a positive light, especially in view of recent well-publicized scandals in the Catholic Church. Eric said he heard numerous times from both sides, "You are not protecting the [church name] brand in the community!" These competing narratives contributed to an anxious climate Eric thought was far too concerned about community status. This climate made decision-making challenging and kept suspicion high.

Losing status as a particular "type" of church in the eyes of the church itself was also identified as a source of anxiety. Rob noted that a factious time in the congregation

was exacerbated by a general sense of unease with the possibility that their church would be exposed as one that "did not have it all together or have all the answers" or did not have unity. He perceived that for several years the reality of the church's "brokenness" caused anxiety when it was exposed.

Nate reported a desire for status that he lamented as "being in the system in seed form from day one." He described this desire to the need to be seen as relevant. Admitting he played a key role in the anxiety it caused, Nate now says:

> Relevance was probably the main word we used and an attempt to create an environment of 'relevance' is always going to create anxiety because there is always something that is not relevant, someone who is not beautiful, something that is not perfect, and some other church who is more relevant.

Nate said that, for a season, they were indeed "cool," "hip," and "trendy" and conceived of themselves as such. This "relevance" was also affirmed by many others in their region and denomination and became what they were "known for," according to Nate. This reputation led to a great deal of anxiety and "obsessing" over what he now calls "external" realities based on "performance, attractiveness, and quality"— all to maintain the status of "relevant." Nate now laments, "This sounded shallow because it was!" However, he admitted that they did not see their shallowness at the time and the anxiety generated over the threat of potentially losing relevance kept them pursuing it. But, when the congregation faced difficulty and public errors were exposed, the frustration over no longer being considered as "relevant" and "hip" caused high anxiety, and many reacted with distance and refusal to be associated with their new lower status. Because of the anxiety caused in the system by the pursuit of "relevance," Nate now characterizes such a chasing of status and fear of losing status to be "from the pit of hell."

Loss of Unity

A final area of anxiety-related loss was threatened or potential loss of unity over controversial issues or loss of harmony in the congregation. This type of aversion to loss especially impacted leaders.

Several pastors mentioned noticeable anxiety about potential and actual disunity over politics and politically sensitive issues. For instance, Brian described the experience of the minority culture members as having a "general sense of being betrayed" by other members in the congregation for their political choices—even if they were making political choices on different criteria. He also noticed that many people in the church were "bothered," "angry," and "frustrated" by the lack of unity over political ideology. Aaron reported several people with honest and well-meaning questions about a cluster of "hot-button" issues around gender, gender roles, and sexuality. Though most had "no ax to grind about the issues," he did note a general sense of anxiety causing "dissonance" among those who differed on the issues and between a group of congregants and their denomination.

Leaders were often affected by a lack of unity in harmony in the church. Rob, for example, dealt directly with a handful of families who were issuing general complaints about the leadership. After a conversation Rob described as "thorough," he suggested this group attend a different church. However, his elders grew anxious over this counsel:

> My elders were not in agreement with these families, but they were frustrated with me because I had tried to directly deal with these families and say, 'Well, maybe this isn't the best church for you.' They felt like I had been too dismissive and too quick to challenge. What I came to learn was the loss associated with defending our vision [to these families] was uncomfortable for them.

Mark experienced a similar tendency in his elder team to engage in a leadership style that sought to pacify all parties, which he described as an "I like everybody" or "Be nice to everybody" kind of style. While he realized these leaders meant well, he also acknowledged that it was not necessarily helpful.

> I find these elders tend to over-function in the anxiety of the system in times like this and it is understandable. They are wanting to do the right thing. Most of my guys are corporate executives and want to fix things rapidly.

Mark believed this over-functioning in the system, born out of a desire for unity, did not give the system long enough to adjust to natural stressors. Hence, it short-circuited a healthy, unifying process and caused anxiety to remain higher than necessary.

Destructive Communication

The participants also described anxiety in the congregational systems as expressing itself through destructive communication. In particular, they noted communication that was private, marked by suspicion, full of criticism, and tending to cross boundaries.

Destructive Private Communication

This type of communication was described with terms like "gossip," "whispering," "murmuring," and "parking-lot conversations." It was often assumed to be present in times of high anxiety, but several participants did not have much first-hand knowledge of its expression. Nate, however, was aware of conversations that should have been happening with people about whom there was concern. However, these

conversations were, instead, happening about those same people with others after church services.

> What was going on at church at the time were a lot of parking-lot conversations about the relationship of a member of an elder's family and another man in the congregation. There was suspicion of inappropriate behavior but there was only conversation about it and about my relationship with that elder and about my supposed favoritism toward him and the session's unwillingness to do anything about it.

Nate was aware of this destructive type communication but felt unable to address it directly since he rarely directly observed it, though he believed he could observe the effects of it. Rob also was aware of gossip in the congregation in response to a decision of the session. He resolved to watch who was getting drawn into it in order to determine the intensity of his resolve to deal with it.

Suspicion

The aforementioned destructive private communication was often suspicious toward leadership about hiding information or an unseen flaw in personal character.

Even though the church Eric was pastoring dealt openly with a public scandal of a staff member abusing a child, some in the congregation became deeply suspicious that the church had covered up scandals like this in the past and "demanded all kinds of information." This suspicion fostered an ongoing information quest by several to "uncover truth" to "get to the root of things" and to "find the other bad guys," even though the perpetrator had been identified. It also drove suspicion about the current situation deeper. Eric said:

> We had suspicious people watch the news and look for information that was out of sync with the information the church was communicating. If they found something that was not exactly the same, they would try to stir

> people up with statements like, ‘See, there is a cover up here!’ That kind of activity was pretty pronounced.

Eric perceived that this suspicious questing expressed anxiety and served to keep it in place by helping to cement a past event it in the foreground of communication.

Political agendas of the pastor or leadership team also came under suspicion. Dennis joked that several in the congregation would quip, “Hey, you want to know a liberal? Don't look any further than the preacher.” This comment came in spite of the fact that Dennis was intentionally vague about his political opinions and was, in fact, a registered Republican. The effect of this suspicion, however, was to make it difficult to talk constructively about political issues and address the anxiety surrounding them.

Mark also expressed that anxiety-fed suspicion is often directed at the character of the leaders. In the aftermath of the departure of several staff on good terms, he recalled multiple people who came to the session and said, “We have seen this before. There simply must be some kind of sin in Mark’s life for so many people to leave at one time.” When the session simply reiterated the history of the departures, the suspicious questioners replied, “That’s just not the case; there must be something more.”

Rob added that he, too, had experienced suspicion of his character but added that suspicion can lead to the development of a “full-blown narrative” to confirm it. In spite of any evidence to confirm the suspicion, a small but vocal group of people grew cynical toward Rob:

> They thought I was authoritarian and not collaborative. For this to be the case, several things had to be true at the same time in their minds. I had to be a dictatorial leader, the session members had to be passive receptors who rubber stamped everything I said, and I must not be telling the congregation the whole story.

Like Eric's example above, this narrative appeared to be formed by anxiety, and then the anxiety-created narrative functioned as an agent to keep anxiety in place in the system.

Criticism

The pastors also identified anxiety expressing itself through criticism of leaders and leadership decisions. Jordan writes that a particularly tumultuous season unfolded when several disgruntled people became unified around criticism of his leadership and were bound together by "simply being against me." Brian relates that the structure of his leadership makes him a convenient scapegoat because he is the senior pastor of a central congregation and gives oversight to two other sites When tensions are high, he is the recipient of a lot of "immaturity" and "anxious" criticism, and this criticism is made easier at the sites he oversees, since he is less present.

Leadership decisions were another target of anxious criticism. Eric writes that his refusal to disclose all sensitive information made him a "villain" in the eyes of some, and his decision to talk publicly about some information made him a "villain" in the eyes of others. Further, his and his session's decision to hold a staff member accountable and involve legal authorities drew criticism from many with the claim that the leadership "doesn't understand the gospel" and "doesn't know anything about forgiveness." In this time, the leaders and the session were in a situation where all of their decisions would be met with some vocal criticism, regardless of the decision.

Boundary-crossing

A final way anxiety expressing itself through communication was in communications which may be considered "boundary-crossing," in that it did not respect culturally appropriate contextual boundaries.

Jordan, for instance, navigated a disruption in the youth ministry in which the session had to make a decision on the employment status of a staff member. He reports that he and the elders received several unsolicited and strong suggestions that they should "fire the guy" or "keep the guy." Mark, in a similar time of transition in youth ministry, noted, "Key people were anxious and [attempted] to take over congregational meetings or small group meetings."

A second type of anxious boundary-crossing communication was criticism of leadership by former church members to current church members. Rob reports that a former anxious elder who left six years ago still continues his narrative of negativity about him with church members. Eric notes that a few people who left the congregation as a result of conflict "still write letters to hundreds of people in our church castigating me." These "poison pills," as Eric calls them, invite the congregation members to distrust the leadership.

Fueled by External Stressors

These senior pastors were of the opinion that anxiety in the congregational system did not exist in a vacuum and was often fueled by the external stressors in the lives of the congregants. Dennis gave the example of a woman who often creates anxiety over the worship and music of the church by complaining to Dennis and others. When this

happens, Dennis, says, “I can almost guarantee something's going on at home.” This woman does not allow herself to be mad at her husband so “She takes it out on the church,” Dennis says. When these things are understood, Dennis can engage the congregant with the disposition of, “Well, it’s not personal.” He can then enter into the life of the particular congregant and begin to lovingly address the situation.

Mark furnishes the helpful word picture of a train with several cars hitched together. He talks with his staff often about the dynamic of people “whose hurts over the years get put together like a train of cars” that develops “incredible momentum.” In times of tension, he helps people “uncouple their cars” and for the staff to understand that the anxious energy the persons may be bringing to a situation is “not from the issue” at hand, but “It’s from the train of hurt.” Mark’s experience is that, in his context, this momentum is most often from marriages that are struggling or children who “aren’t turning out the way I hoped.” Rob concurred that marriage and parent-child stress were the biggest external stressors contributing to anxiety in the congregational system. He noted that many younger parents have a “fear of missing out” so they are “hyper-involved in the lives of their kids,” and the kids are “involved in every single thing.” Alternately, other parents do not involve their kids in as much but still fear they are “negatively affecting their child” by limiting opportunities.

Nate and Jordan reported congregants are often pressured by more typical materialistic pursuits. Nate’s congregants tend to be younger and are often consumed with “having everything now” while performing flawlessly in their careers. The desire for flawless performance, Nate reports, also shows up in their spiritual pursuits, as when they are overly critical of the “spirituality” of their spouse or the “lack of fruit” they see in

their own lives. Further, he discerned this criticism to be augmented by comparison and virtue signaling on social media. Jordan's more mature and upwardly mobile congregation is often pressured to conserve money and lives what he calls "the Jefferson Country Dream," referring to the area in which they live, and they "arrive" at a highly successful station in life and ensure they stay there.

Aaron, Nate, and Brian also mentioned that these stressors are so easily active in congregants' lives because the pace and structure of life are unhealthy. Brian describes it as a "fragmentation" caused because "People don't have the structures in their life…the practices or habits to really strengthen and support their [godly] longings." Nate describes this tension as an overall "hurriedness that prevents dwelling in God's presence," and Aaron calls it a "captivity to freedom," where people are isolated, uncertain, and unanchored in direction and daily practices. Brian summarizes that the lack of structures and presence of hurry leaves people "too fragile and too weak and vulnerable—psychologically, spiritually, communally." Jordan and Dennis lamented that this fragmentation is exacerbated by the persistent negativity of news and social media, which, as Jordan says, "just makes all the anxiety worse."

Summary of Describing Anxiety in the Congregational System

Anxiety, as described by these senior pastors, was fueled by specific stressors in the lives of congregation members and variously characterized as some form of aversion to loss—whether that loss was real or potential. The uncertainty generated by loss or potential loss to safety, familiarity, status, or unity expressed itself through many negative processes in the congregation.

The most obvious characteristic was unhealthy communication within the church and about the church leadership. This communication was manifested through gossip or slander, was often connected with a suspicious attitude or harsh criticism and was frequently demonstrated by communicative acts that transgressed culturally appropriate boundaries. As this type of communication was expressed, it functioned as a symptom of anxiety in the congregation system and as a means of perpetuating its anxiety.

Senior Pastor's Impact on Anxiety

The second research question sought to explore how senior pastors perceive their personal presence in the life of the congregation to be affecting the anxiety in the system. Since pastors spend most of their week outside of the pulpit and outside of Sunday morning, the researcher sought to determine how these pastors perceived this time during the week and in various other settings to affect anxiety in the congregational system. Questions posed included:

- What types of things do you do in daily interactions with congregants to lower anxiety in the congregation?
- What advantages does being the recognized leader of the congregational system give you in lowering anxiety through daily interactions with congregants?
- What role does your own personal presence in daily interactions with congregants play in the anxiety level of the congregation?

The pastors highly valued daily and personal presence with congregants outside of the pulpit and considered it critical to their success in ministry and in the pulpit. Jordan identified his "circulating among the people" as the "x-factor" in his preaching. He

admitted that he thought himself as only an average preacher, but the people considered him a "superstar" because of his time spent with them during the week and his attitude that "You cannot pastor from a desk." Brian, who currently pastors a church of over 500 attenders, says his "real core" is eighty people, and he strives to stay in "constant communication" with them through dropping in on meetings, coffee conversations, and short phone calls. He therefore believed, "People let me preach on [hard subjects] because they know me and trust me." Aaron pastors a church that does not own a building and consists of busy professionals, so he carved out "regular office hours" at a local coffee shop to have face-to-face interaction with them. Dennis, who is significantly younger than much of his congregation said, "You just have to be with them" on a regular basis and reports that as he is with them, they have learned to trust him and his leadership.

The Emotional Presence of the Senior Pastor

Since all of these pastors were familiar with the work of Edwin Friedman and conversant with his understanding of differentiation, they interpreted this question first in terms of their emotional presence and their level of anxiety, which several termed a "non-anxious presence," reflecting their familiarity with Friedman. As Nate mentioned, it has to do with being "connected" to the system but not "overly-connected" or "enmeshed." Mark described "good boundaries" and not "reacting" to the things about which others are anxious. He also warned that his seminary and pastoral education postured him to believe that "Good leadership was about providing answers in a crisis." However, after several decades of ministry, he has now learned that it is his "presence with the assurance

of Christ's presence" that is key to leadership, especially in crisis—for the congregation and leadership team.

Non-Anxious Presence

The participants anticipated that if they could maintain a presence in the congregation free from anxiety, or at least honest about their current level of anxiety, that such presence would shape the congregational response to the current situation. In this way, they fostered a contagious nature to their non-anxious presence. Three common contexts in which these pastors were especially aware of maintaining a non-anxious presence were in crises, while receiving criticism, and in expressing their own feelings.

Non-Anxious Presence in Crisis

Eric did confess that he anticipated his reaction to a public crisis in the church to be the most important factor in how the whole system of the congregation eventually responded. "People's responsiveness or reactivity," Eric thought, "was going to be pretty much tied directly to their experience of my responsiveness or reactivity." Jordan added that his own non-anxious response to crisis is "vitally important" because, "If you get sucked into the anxiety, then you are part of the problem" and exacerbate the unhealthy response of the system.

Dennis noted that his non-anxious presence is important for the congregation because it is important for the staff, which has direct contact with the congregation. He said, "I am really aware that when I am anxious, my whole staff is anxious." He then noted that this anxiety gets passed from the staff to the session to the congregation. While

agreeing with this, Eric also added that calmness can be spread like anxiety. “Calm is contagious,” he said. He noted that during a crisis, his non-anxious presence was intentionally demonstrated in various leadership team contexts so that those teams began to decrease their anxious reactions too. The effect on the congregation was noticeable in a time when the church was under much public scrutiny:

> I saw the effect of mirroring in the body life, as a whole. The congregation as a whole responded to information they were getting from the church rather than the salacious narrative that was being reported in the newspaper or on television.

The result of this non-anxious presence with the leadership team and the session was a contagious process that increasingly immunized the church against disruptive and anxious outside temptations and increasingly supported trust in its leadership.

Crisis events in the lives of congregation members were also reported as important contexts for the pastor to exercise non-anxious presence. Dennis thinks more pastors should take advantage of marriages, births, and funerals of congregation members because so many other congregation members tend to be present and affected by them. In these, he considers himself a “manager of anxiety” and treats them as opportunities to “address” or “shape” everyone present. Jordan considers himself “old-school” because he takes advantage of hospital visitations. He believes that bringing his presence to bear on the situation enables his people to “willingly follow” his leadership.

A final point of identified crisis was the conversation around sensitive issues. Here, daily non-anxious interactions with congregation members was also reported as critical to lowering the overall anxiety level of the congregation. Aaron noted that non-reactivity to sensitive issues such as politics, gender roles, and sexuality can have a disarming effect on potentially nervous members who may spread that nervousness to

others. He reported that he works hard on communicating in person that "There's room for diversity on issues like [these]…nobody's calling you a heretic…I am happy to have the conversation." This message, he says, often convinces people that there is no need to have anxiety over differences of opinion on issues he deems "important, but secondary."

Non-Anxious Presence While Receiving Criticism

It was ironically reported that mild hostility toward the pastor is an opportunity for decreasing anxiety in the system, if the pastor can remain non-anxious in response. Mark recalled a time when he had to terminate a staff member. She had friends and family in the church who were angry with him. His response was to express understanding at their anger and say, "If I was in your shoes, I would probably be angry with me too!" Though they were mad, he said the process of going to them and letting them be mad at him, disagree with him, and not grow defensive was critical to the future health of the congregation. "Being there and letting it happen and not reacting…was indispensable." Dennis added, "When you respond anxiously to criticism, it seems to make it bigger," but if you can have a "lighthearted, less anxious response," it gives everyone around the opportunity to be less anxious.

Rob noted that his non-anxious response to criticism gave people permission to relax. When a group of disgruntled people publicly criticized his leadership, he responded by affirming that they were not a church "that was going to be able to address every issue." He said this response and others like it began to "introduce a new vocabulary" into the church and leadership, namely that "people will not be happy all the time," which had previously been hard for the church to confront.

Non-Anxious Presence and Expressing Feelings

For these senior pastors, a non-anxious presence did not mean pretending or hiding feelings. Rather, it meant the freedom to be wisely honest in appropriate contexts. Jordan recalled during a particular anxious time around a building campaign that he would freely admit, "That's a big payment…I'm nervous too!" This admission depressurized the situation and allowed more free and honest conversation about the mortgage. Eric added that being consistent is just as important as being honest. Following a tumultuous event in their church, he readily admitted to people that he wrestled with being "angry." He added that it gained trust of the congregation that he did this the same in private and in the pulpit, though the level of disclosure was different.

The Leadership Presence of the Senior Pastor

Operating with an intentional, non-anxious presence was also a key part in how the participants perceived their daily leadership effectiveness. The data revealed several leadership functions positively impacted the anxiety level of the congregation. They include offering hope, shepherding grief, shaping ideas, and discerning appropriate intensity of response to problems.

Offering Hope

Though holding a Ph.D. in leadership and interning under two well-known mega-church pastors, Brian expressed surprise that senior leadership in pastoral ministry had taught him that "99 percent of my job…is just being able to put a hand on the shoulder

and pray for people….and to say to them 'You are chosen, you are blessed, you are in Christ.'" This hopeful presence he likened to "somewhat of a representation of the divine presence." Jordan also thought of his role as reminding people of God's presence by being reminded of it himself when he was with them. He added that if he can remind himself of God's presence, it alleviates anxiety for both him and those with him. Aaron added that this only comes by pointing beyond himself:

> I embrace and totally support the idea that the leader has to strive to be that calming presence in an anxious system. But the only way I can do that is to the point beyond myself, to Jesus. He's really the one who actually gives rest to a nervous system… Christ is the ultimate non-anxious presence in the anxious system.

Nate summarized this hopeful inclination well in saying that he "just want[ed] to be with Jesus with people," meaning that he desired to have an experiential awareness of Christ's presence while being physically and emotionally present with people.

An often-mentioned element of the non-anxious presence related to hope was the judicious use of humor and levity. Such humor did not dismiss the concerns of others but admitted personal frailty and limitation while also communicating a confident outlook. Mark described this kind of non-anxious presence as part and parcel of "Calvinistic leadership"— a tongue-in-cheek way of saying that bad things may happen because sin is real, and all things will eventually be okay because God is sovereign and good. Dennis recalled a recent experience of how someone mentioned the Presidential impeachment proceedings in an offhand comment at a particularly stressful budget meeting. Dennis took opportunity to humorously ask, "Is the impeachment as fun as what we are doing here tonight?" At that point he noticed a tension break where everyone seemed to think, "Dennis doesn't seem rattled; maybe I don't need to be rattled either."

Whether it was direct joking, light sarcasm, or simple laughter, all the subjects affirmed the importance of sensitive humor in daily interaction. Good cheer was specifically important in church contexts known for their denominational serious demeanor. Jordan lamented, "You will not find a denomination with any more serious people than ours!" Aaron, who is in the same denomination, said it was characterized by many who believed in what he jokingly called "the absolute importance of every single thing in the world." In these contexts, humor was reported as even more important because it brought with it the element of welcome surprise.

Shepherding Grief

Most of the subjects also mentioned the importance of helping people grieve well, often in the form of lament. Nobody thought this was easy, but Jordan stated that a pastor has to be "comfortable just sort of showing up and figuring it out." And, if he does, it allows anxiety reduction because people have a sense of "making progress," even if that progress is simply processing the emotion. Mark learned this skill by entering first into lament in his own life. "My own journey is how I've gone from a guy who really didn't have an emotional life and am starting to have one …[including]…being sad and learning how to lament with God." This journey led him to understand that lament is a "critical part of relieving anxiety" and allowed him to see that the people in his church needed to learn how to lament after losing several staff at one time.

Dennis expressed that lamenting with people "dignifies" them because it honors their humanity and the reality of living in a fallen world. Lament, however, does not mean other leadership necessities or movement in life is sidelined. Dennis further noted

how Jesus wept over Jerusalem and said, “We weep, we care, we mourn…and it doesn’t destroy me and doesn’t keep me from doing what the Lord called.” He believes in shepherding people to lament while “walking into the humanity that Jesus purchased for them.” Lament has a redemptive function and is a critical part of living with Jesus, he implied.

Eric describes healthy lament as the willingness to honestly look at sin or sorrow, grieve it deeply, and “admit it is true but not be dominated by it.” The subjects also mentioned different levels of intensity for lament; from crisis surrounding tragic death to grieving the state of race relations in America, to the often-unnoticed necessity to, as Mark said, “help people sit in the mediocre until the good comes” after a loss. In all of these contexts, however, the senior pastors encouraged personal presence, honesty, vulnerability, and a willingness for the senior pastor to keep learning.

One warning also surfaced with respect to lament. Mark and Eric both mentioned that senior pastors must be aware that they will likely process things at a different pace than the congregation. They usually learn information well before the congregation, for instance, in a staff transition, and have processed things longer. Also, the intensity of the situation and the leadership demands prevent them from processing as quickly. This leaves the senior pastor in the position of working through grief in isolation, and given that self-awareness, he must make healthy accommodations to shepherd his congregation wisely through grief.

Shaping Ideas

These senior pastors often mentioned the need to remain connected to the congregation to be a shaping presence in the realm of ideas. They knew the need to understand how ideas were being processed and offer alternate grids or specific interpretations to lower anxiety.

Systems Terminology

Some of the pastors were intentional about bringing "systems" language into the vocabulary of the leadership and the congregation so that people would be less surprised and reactive to the anxious tendencies of others. Mark recalled how he trained his elders in identifying when to put good boundaries around people and not over-function by "helping" them when it would pre-empt their potential growth. Rather, he showed them that it was a type of shepherding to let them "grow in the life of the church," even if that growth mean they expressed anxiety in the short term. Rob took his elders through Peter Scazzero's *Emotionally Healthy Church* and writings by Edwin Friedman. He also revamped their basic church discipleship curriculum to include a section on systems thinking in which he "introduce[d] them to terms like emotional health, differentiation, congregational anxiety, and triangulation." Rob describes the congregation as having an "immune response" to the anxiety generated by some over the building purchase. He attributes this immune response to the growing understanding of systems theory in the congregation. Dennis, reports that training his leadership team in concepts of an "identified patient" has been immensely helpful in their responses. He was referring to the counterproductive habit of unconsciously selecting one person as the "cause" of the

problem but who is usually only symptomatic of a larger issue. Whether by training intentionally or by introducing concepts as conflict arises, systems terminology was beneficial. Mark used a sports analogy to describe its effectiveness and said it allowed them to be like "Peyton Manning, being able to see the defense before the play happened." This learned skill helped these senior pastors and many key leaders anticipate and understand the anxious actions and attitudes in the congregation.

Naming

All of the senior pastors interviewed identified "naming" or "labeling" experiences and emotions as critical to lowering anxiety in the congregational system. Dennis describes this diagnostic step as "being able to identify the issues as specifically as possible." Eric added that naming means being honest about "the brutal reality we are facing rather than pretending it's not there." Nate suggested that it externalizes emotion and allows people to "see the reality, talk about it, and move on." Eric explained that once a leader has named something, it can become a "model or a touch point" that others can refer to accurately. This accuracy removes uncertainty and allows for whatever is being named to be discussed with less anxiety.

This naming or labeling may take the form of giving accurate description to feelings, such as fear, frustration, and uncertainty, or specifically acknowledging the presence of tension over an issue. Dennis encouraged older members when he said that it must be "really frustrating when your days are spent going from doctor's appointment to doctor's appointment." Aaron gave the example of saying to a group of people, "Let's just be honest, there's a variety of opinions on women's roles in ministry and it can be

very fraught with emotion." This simple affirmation and clarification served to defuse anxiety and allow conversation.

Reframing Issues

Reframing issues means providing a different perspective on the same data. Brian told of how the congregation grew less anxious and more likely to listen to conversations around race when he explained that minority members sharing their experiences were "storytelling." He defined storytelling as an explaining narrative which others can learn from, rather than a list of propositions with which they had to agree. Aaron reframes issues of male/female authority in the church by showing how everyone is under authority, including himself. "No one," he says, "is a free agent, not even me!" Living in what he describes as a California culture of "radical individualism," he also reframes the concept of freedom for a congregation resistant to commitment and membership. He shows that freedom means being free to be what Christians have been created to be and then shows how "freedom means a rootedness and connectedness in community."

Aaron, Nate, and Rob all also take advantage of a diagram identifying primary, secondary, and tertiary theological issues. For instance, the deity of Christ would be a primary issue, predestination would be a secondary issue, and political affiliation would be a tertiary issue. Visual illustrations allow them to address issues that all people consider to be "important" and reframe them in terms of order of importance. It also allows them to show people how they can hold doctrinal distinctives and not "lead with them," according to Aaron.

Maintaining Systems Perspective

"Think systems and watch process," says Aaron in describing his leadership in maintaining a systems awareness of the congregation. This phrase reminds him to always understand the congregation as a system of interconnected relationships and that he should pay special attention to the relational processes in the system—as much or more than he pays attention to specific disruptions in the system. Maintaining a non-reactive posture enabled Aaron and the others in the study to more readily discern the nature of what was happening in the congregation and how to address it.

Dennis reported that if he can be in this posture, he can begin with the understanding that "it's not personal" and be resolved to understand:

> When you make a change or lead, people will unintentionally and unconsciously or maybe intentionally and consciously (but presume the best), try to sabotage what you are doing. You have to know that and expect it.

Mark reminds the elders and himself frequently "We expect key people who are anxious to just get crazy in times of transition" in the ways they react to information and people in the system. In a non-pejorative way, he says they cannot afford to forget that "fragile people become frantic."

This attentiveness also allows for wise decision making because it has predictive power. Again, Dennis says:

> Eventually folks are going to jump ship or they're going to stay and still try to sabotage you…and we expect it and lean into it and know it's going to get worse before it gets better….We try to move at a pace that brings as many people along as possible. But, at the end of the day, some folks are just going to choose to get left behind.

Mark says this perspective combats the alternative, which is a church succumbing to anxiety and learning to "adapt to their weakest members." Here, Mark adds, the church

will stay stuck because leadership will "get dragged into trying to persuade people" instead of calling them to make responsible decisions.

Discernment

The purpose of this study is to explore how senior pastors preach in order to lower anxiety in the congregational system. An interesting finding from the subjects was that they consider it just as important to discern when not to preach about it at all.

Rob called this a "delicate dance that requires a deft sort of conversation between pressing and being in a nonreactive posture." Sometimes tension in the system requires direct public communication, and sometimes it does not. Rob realized that his temptation to anxiety meant he may likely "over-function" and be too direct and public. Nate mentioned that being "too close" to the system would leave him paralyzed in knowing how to communicate. Maintaining a non-reactive posture, however, allowed these senior pastors to discern whether they should preach about the anxiety in the system or the source of stress, deal with it in some other way, or ignore it altogether.

Rob said that he was always seeking to discern the "immune response of the congregation," which he described as its "capacity to not entertain the anxiety" and get caught up in it. In his particular case, even though a group of disgruntled people were complaining, he thought it did not negatively affect more than 10 percent of the congregation and so would be unwise to preach directly about the situation. If he did, he thought he might "inadvertently increase anxiety because I would have been focusing on it from the pulpit." Dennis and Nate likewise expressed hesitancy in preaching about things not known by a critical mass of the congregation—though both also said it was a

subjective decision based on their pastoral relationship with the congregants. Dennis, for instance, in noting anxiety from a congregational meeting attended by eighty members reasoned, “If I preach about this on Sunday morning at this point, I will have 220 anxious people instead of eighty.” Eric, who had preached directly about an anxious situation, noted that he had to continually monitor the congregation to discern how fast to let it “recede to the background” of his public communication.

It is important to note that none of these pastors ignored the situations. “Inaction,” said Rob, “is not the response we are to have to anxiety. But the question is whether that action should take place in the pulpit.” When it did not, other avenues like congregational meetings, all church letters, small group presentations, and public forums were utilized.

Summary of Senior Pastor’s Impact on Anxiety

The subjects of this study understood their own personal emotional presence in the congregational system as being critical to the level of anxiety in the congregation. Many used the phrase “non-anxious presence,” reflecting their awareness of Edwin Friedman’s writings, to describe their intended demeanor. They found this non-anxious presence to be most necessary and effective when in crisis, while receiving criticism, or in expressing their feelings about challenging situations or issues.

These senior pastors were also aware of the impact they had on the anxiety of the congregation as the recognized leader of that system. They understood the opportunity to strategically offer hope, shepherd people in their grief and lament, shape and reframe ideas in categories that generated less anxiety, and maintain proximity for ongoing understanding of the systemic nature of the congregation. This proximity allowed these

pastors to discern how best to respond to anxiety in the congregation—including, at times, using other means to address anxiety rather than preaching.

Personal Anxiety of the Senior Pastor

The third research question explored how senior pastors negotiated their own anxiety as part of the congregational system. These pastors considered their own non-anxious presence in the system as of paramount importance, and therefore negotiating their personal anxiety as part of that system was critical. In order to elicit reflection on this question, several questions were asked, including:

- What types of anxieties do you often experience while leading the congregation during times of tension?
- What healthy avenues of dealing with anxiety have you pursued?
- What key ideas or concepts have been helpful in your dealing with your own anxieties about congregational leadership?

Recognizing Anxiety

As these senior pastors reflected on their own anxiety, three relationships emerged. None of the pastors considered these elements as causal per se, and all took responsibility for their own reactions. However, recognizing the related elements allowed them to see their own anxiety more clearly. These related elements were outside stressors, fear, and fusion with the congregational system.

Outside stressors

Sometimes anxiety was related to external stressors operating independently of the senior pastor. While "normal" in many ways, they still invited stress. Nate and Brian were navigating the challenges of raising young children in the city and the associated high price of urban living. They also had to deal with lease terminations and finding a place for their growing congregations. Brian experienced this particular stressor on multiple occasions.

Sometimes the intensity of these outside stressors was extremely high. Eric's situation was unique in that legal authorities had been involved because of a crime committed by a staff member. Because of Eric's senior leadership position, police took an aggressive interview approach with him. On more than one occasion, he remembers leaving a police interrogation room in order to comfort another family who was also at the police station. This series of events, he said, "was a total nightmare." He reported that he was scared personally, heartbroken for the families, and the stress of it led him to have panic attacks for the first time in his life. Even though he was a seasoned leader and knew "I am supposed to be the least anxious person in the room," he did have to ask, "How in the world will I be that?" Even though an elder told him, "You are at your best in the middle of a crisis," Eric lamented the toll on his emotional and physical health.

Fear

"Fear is my default," said Aaron, when asked what drives his anxiety. Even though he is a competent pastor and had a successful professional career before seminary, he reports that he experiences anxiety over:

> Fear of conflict, fear of saying something that's going to get me in trouble, fear of having to deal with this messy thing that I don't know how to fix, fear of taking on the responsibility of doing something that I can't do.

He does not seem weak or retiring, and he has led his church successfully. However, he is acutely aware of how fear can be a constant companion that drives anxiety in every decision, if it is not addressed.

Nate expressed a similar sentiment with respect to what the Bible calls the "fear of man." He said, "I don't want to be bound to caring about what my people think but unfortunately it is sometimes an issue." He finds himself asking, "What do they want to hear?" in order to please congregants and potential congregants. In this type of fearful anxiety, Nate says, "You cannot lead…you can appear like you're leading, but it is not real leadership." This lack of leadership, in turn, can further increase anxiety because as Nate says, you can "feel like a hypocrite."

Dennis likewise spoke about the fear of people but experienced it as anxiety related to not being able to provide for his family. Though he admits it is unhealthy, he says he often thinks "the wellbeing of my family…is tied up to how well I preach." He struggles with the fear to believe that if people do not like his preaching, they will not come to church, and he will lose his job. Therefore, he reports the temptation to be a "people pleaser" in his preaching and leadership. He finds himself having "imaginary conversations" with people to pacify them and unable to give challenging criticism to the people in actual conversations. In this way, Dennis says, "I can carry a lot of system anxiety," and it thwarts authentic leadership that could reduce it.

A final type of anxiety producing fear was self-doubt. Brian confessed often being tempted to despair with the thought, "Who am I to think that I'm going to do anything significant?" This doubt was strengthened by the fact that he was wrestling with what he

believed about some of the tense racial issues through which he was leading his people. He reported often "feeling like a hypocrite and hopeless" because he questioned, "Who am I to talk about this…I don't even know if I am living this out." This self-doubt caused Brian to wrestle deeply with anxiety and confidence.

Fusion with the Congregational System

"Fusion" is a word Rob used to describe his leadership style when he is highly anxious. He said he found himself "fused with [his] congregants in the effort to satisfy them or meet their needs." This lack of boundary between the church and the pastor is "unsustainable" because the pastor is constantly trying to "fix" people and "take responsibility for what …God is responsible for." Rob reported that when things are going well, all seems fine. However, when it "sours," it can become a bitter disappointment.

Over-functioning

One reported effect of being too closely connected with the congregation was the tendency to increase anxiety by over-functioning in the system, often in pastoral communication. Rob said that for him "Over-functioning usually is expressed through either over-communicating or chasing people in relationship and avoiding hard conversations." Mark and Dennis both confessed the tendency to over-function through giving "right" answers and believing those answers would be sufficient to "fix" things. The fused assumption is that if people think like the pastor thinks, things would be okay. Mark said, "I always thought that I will think of the right thing to say and I will reach into

your life and make you feel better." This approach only exacerbated anxiety for Mark because he was constantly getting dragged into situations trying to persuade people who did not want to be persuaded. Dennis, sharing a similar tendency, said he is often hamstrung by the belief that "If I just have enough knowledge and awareness, I can fix it." When thinking clearly, he pushes aside this tendency, which only increases anxiety every time since knowing answers does not "fix" the problem.

Over-functioning can also look helpful and healthy on the surface. Brian shared that he is sometimes a "carrier of anxiety" because he can have "such an overwhelming presence and a lot of confidence." He says it is not domineering but is a way of "amping things up" so everything gets accomplished. It also manifests when he is seeking comprehensive knowledge of every situation so he is "never caught off guard." The effect is constant anxiety because of feeling "responsible" for everything that happens. It can also zap the energy and motivation from the team he leads because he ends up taking responsibility for things that are not his.

Paralysis

A final anxious effect of fusion with the system was a form of paralysis mentioned by Nate. Because he experienced little boundary between him and the church for a long season, he felt as though he had to "protect" everything in the church and prevent all disruption because it was "part of him." "When you are 'one' with them," Nate said, "your mission is to not cause disruption." For several years, things appeared vibrant, so not causing disruption was affirmed. When crisis came, he lamented that he "really contributed to anxiety because [he] was carrying all that worry about trying to

protect it all" and continued to refuse to cause disruption when disruption was needed. On the other side of crisis, he admits, "I just didn't want to engage it." He further reported that this inability to engage drove his personal anxiety higher.

Strategizing Against Personal Anxiety

Differentiation

"Differentiation," according these senior pastors, was helpful in dealing with their own anxiety. Nate describes differentiation as the ability to "not be 'one' with the system…not totally connected...but not be cut-off from it either." It appears that recognizing the need for differentiation or remembering its importance plays a key role in managing anxiety for these pastors. In order to maintain this awareness, Dennis has a prayer card which he often reviews, and it reads "Lord, help me grow as a self-differentiated man, a non-reactive leader." He reports that God has answered that prayer, and he has experienced personal growth and less anxiety in his leadership and preaching. Aaron often mentally rehearses "pointing beyond himself to Jesus" in order to remind himself that he is not completely responsible for the church. Rob tells about a time in his ministry that a mentor began to share the concept of differentiation with him. "When I really began to understand differentiation," Rob said, "I really began to grow in my leadership understanding" so that he grew less anxious and he brought less anxiety into his family life. Now, Rob seeks to remain aware of the need for differentiation on an ongoing basis as central to understanding his own temptation to anxiety.

This differentiation was shown to be associated with clear change in leadership presence which helped pastors address their anxiety and served as a benchmark to which they may return. As a result of thinking through issues of differentiation, Rob publicly declared to the relatively sophisticated congregation, "I ain't your Jesus….I ain't tryin' to be Jesus for you anymore." The combination of humor and the pointedness of the public declaration of separation was profound. Rob said those who had been at the church the longest said it signaled a "shift in my leadership style." He concurred and declared it to be a "turning point" of less anxious leadership and an idea to which he returns often. Nate now speaks of positively embracing the "aloneness" of leadership and describes it as a healthy loneliness that makes him less anxious and able to "actually lead" the people.

Christian Spiritual Formation

Unsurprisingly, all the pastors engaged Christ-centered formational practices in negotiating their own anxiety, using self-reflection to understand their own sin tendencies and the need for grace.

Confession and Repentance

Ongoing confession and repentance were major themes in dealing with anxiety. Nate finds it necessary to confess his desire to be a "relevant church" and embrace the call to be a "normal church on the corner of 44th and Grand." A crisis brought him to the place where he had to come to grips with the reality that it might all "slip through [his] fingers," but confession helps him to see that it is now "a wonderful place" to pastor, even though "nobody is going to write a book about it." In the same vein of church

prestige, Rob and Dennis spoke of repentance of "the numbers game" in which they grew anxious about the attendance levels at weekly worship.

Specific personal tendencies were also often called out for repentance. Brian often confesses his desire for identity through achievement by praying, "Father, I confess that I want to do this in the part of me that wants to be an achiever" and then asking for freedom to serve with a clear conscience. He is learning to be more aware of how he can be "triggered" and seeing his other "weakness and limitations." Eric and Jordan confessed their temptation to cover their vulnerability by being away from people or acting differently in private than in public. Mark spoke of embracing the "humility of differentiation," how he describes letting go of the idea that he can persuade everyone. He realizes its pride, which can keep him locked in cycles of anxious conversation.

Connecting to the Specific Benefits of the Gospel

In addition to confession and repentance, these senior pastors intentionally exercised means of grace to bring particular benefits of the gospel to bear on their own life. Dennis, aware of his tendency to disbelieve the love of God, says he must return to this often. Even though he earned a Ph.D. in theology, he confessed the need for childlike faith and admits, "Seriously, the first thing I come back to is 'I am God's son, and he loves me, and he is proud of me.'" He keeps this visually before him with a copy of Rembrandt's "Return of the Prodigal" along with words from Isaiah 43 that read "You are precious in my eyes and honored and I love you" in his office and home. Dennis also ends family devotions by having him, his wife, and daughters say, "this is _____, your son/daughter, whom you love and with whom you are well pleased."

Nate realizes his anxiety is addressed best by a specific awareness of the presence of God. “I have an anxious soul,” Nate says, “and I want a simple, quiet presence with the Lord…and I want to return to it often.” He has begun to rearrange his life with intentional weekly Sabbath exclusively focused on renewal—a practice he had left off since having kids several years ago. Also, he now sets daily reminders on his cell phone at 9 a.m. and 3 p.m. At these times, he stops and engages Robert Murray M’Cheyne’s Bible reading plan and prays for an awareness of God’s presence. He admits he is “very human” in often failing to do this, but this spiritual discipline has deepened his thankfulness for each day, God’s presence with him in it, and lessened his tendency toward anxiety-driven performance.

Fellowship

Christian fellowship and counsel are also a means by which these senior pastors negotiated their own anxiety. Eric, Dennis, and Nate mentioned the crucial role their wives play in both support and not “carrying” their anxiety with them. Eric, additionally, was intentional about pulling together a support team to walk alongside him during and after the specific crisis their church faced, allowing him “a place to process anxiety” so that he did not “feel as isolated” as he had in the past. He also notes that he started seeing a professional counselor and counted it as a gift from God to have someone who was “outside the system.” Eric describes this Christian community as giving him a place to process his feelings without being dominated by them.

Summary of Personal Anxiety of the Senior Pastor

The senior pastors expressed awareness of their role in projecting and regulating their personal anxiety. As they led, particularly in times of heightened congregational anxiety, they were often aware of negotiating "normal" life stresses that made leadership difficult. Further, they reported often facing fear related to performance or opinion of others and a sense of fusion with the system of the congregation, which created the temptation to over-function and/or become paralyzed in decision making.

In order to combat these anxieties, these pastors maintained an awareness of their understanding of systems theory, particularly the concept of personal differentiation, which they understood to be related to their relationship with God in personal anxieties. Consequently, they engaged in Christian spiritual formation practices that especially addressed these anxieties.

Sermons that Lower Anxiety

The final research question sought to determine how senior pastors describe sermons that lower anxiety in the congregational system. These senior pastors were aware of the anxiety at work, had some understanding of their role as the leader, and were active in negotiating their own anxiety. Given these realities, the researcher sought to determine how these pastors compose sermons that lower anxiety. This decrease in anxiety could be to an immediate stressor or could be an overall reduction in the general anxiety level of the congregation. Given the pastors' general awareness of systems theory

and the concept of differentiation, several questions were asked in the second half of the interviews. These questions included:

- For you, what is the difference between a well-differentiated and poorly differentiated approach to sermon preparation?
- What kind of content is present in sermons that are well-differentiated as opposed sermons that are poorly differentiated?
- For you, what is the difference between a well-differentiated and poorly differentiated approach to sermon delivery?

Critical but not Sufficient

The senior pastors held preaching in the weekly service in high esteem. Rob said, "The pulpit is the public face of the ministry message of [our church]." While he noted that the entire worship service is important, he called the sermon the "apex" of the week. Jordan agreed and said that preaching, though not his lead gift, is still the "most significant moment" in the week and the "most impactful" aspect on their "church ministry culture." Aaron was thankful for the breadth of communication the sermon offers and calls preaching the best "regular opportunity to speak directly to a broad swath of the system on a routine basis." Eric, expressing a similar sentiment calls the sermon the "most direct connection…to the entire congregational system" and believes the pulpit to be the "best way…to capture the whole system at once." Brian said the preaching in the church captures the system during the week and can be "the catalyst for everything else that we do as a congregation in terms of following the way of Jesus."

Even with this elevated view of preaching, these pastors were clear that the sermon, while critically necessary, does not stand alone. They also strategically used announcements, pastoral prayers, times of open prayer and lament, Scripture readings, and testimonies as supplements or alternates to what they may preach. Dennis summarized this sentiment well when he said, "Preaching is the most important aspect, but it is only one aspect—the whole worship service is engaged" in addressing anxiety.

Preparation of Sermons that Lower Anxiety

As these senior pastors described the preparation required to preach sermons that lower anxiety, they noted, especially, that a sense of freedom was important. Along with this freedom, they expressed the desire to keep the audience in mind while engaging the content in a meaningful way.

Freedom

The chief descriptive terminology used while describing preparation, and later delivery, of sermons that lowered anxiety clustered around a sense of freedom.

Freedom from Concern of How People View Them

Brian expressed the need in his preparation to resist the temptation to "be seen as knowledgeable" and "somebody who knows what they are talking about." When he fails to resist this temptation, he experiences physical symptoms of stress in headaches and a stomach in knots when thinking, "How are people going to receive me in this message?"

The external manifestation is what he calls a "greediness" of reading and information gathering so that he "does not sound…too simple." Dennis wrestles often with a similar concern about how he is perceived and particularly if he is being perceived as giving offense. He says that he may engage in "obsessive thinking patterns where I cycle through conversations" he might have with people in response to the content of his sermons. These imaginary conversations can often leave him "disrupted" in his preparation and searching for the exact "right way" to say things. Both Brian and Dennis are highly educated, having received terminal degrees in their field, and both wrestle with how their acumen is perceived, whether that acumen is intellectual or personal. Likewise, both actively resist these temptations and seek freedom to, as Dennis said, "say things in the way the Spirit wants me to say it." With this freedom undergirding its content and delivery, each sermon is thus geared to decrease anxiety.

Freedom from Concern of How People View the Sermon

Nate's pursuit of freedom was with respect to how people perceive the sermon itself. When he is operating with a sense of freedom, he says he feels "less pressure to deliver a well-oiled, super engaging, relevant, polished" sermon. Since the pressure for polish and relevance kept anxiety high in the system, he owes it to his people to be free from this pressure and admits, "When you are trying to deliver a message like that, you are really missing the main point" of what the preaching should be. While Brian sought freedom by reading less to counter his desire to be seen as intelligent, Nate seeks freedom by reading more because it frees him from the burden of excessive craftsmanship and allows the content to be experienced with a greater personal richness. Whereas he can be

excessively concerned with the "smoothness" of sermons, when he is more free, he reports, "I am trying to communicate something of substance, and I don't know that I care that I start with a perfect illustration or have three points or one." While Nate admits the loss of the polish he once knew, the freedom he experiences in the preparation leads to sermons much more authentic and inspiring to the congregation.

Freedom from the Burden of Doing "Too Much"

The subjects also report a helpful freedom from trying to make the sermon do "too much." Brian says that he has learned to have "more of a freedom to really be flexible and do less with the sermon." For example, he has to tell himself, "I'm not going to solve injustice in the world in one sermon." Dennis, who has a deep personal knowledge of text and theology, is satisfied to isolate one major point from the text and bring it to bear upon the congregation in a way they can both understand and a way that teaches them to simply read their Bibles. This approach, he says, allows him to most easily express "his own preaching voice."

Such expression brings a "notion of safety" to people because they "know what they are going to get" in clarity of content and familiarity every time he is in the pulpit. Nate describes this freedom in preparation as "finding one sentence or one proposition" to communicate in a single phrase to his congregation. While he admits not always writing a "profound" sermon, he finds that when he is focusing on one point, that point is what he is "offering for them to become." If he can isolate this point in the preparation, he can preach a sermon that focuses people on their walk with Jesus rather than raising their anxiety through preaching a sermon they recognize as polished.

Keeping the Congregation in Mind

Sermons that lowered anxiety, according to these senior pastors, were prepared with the congregation in mind. Rob said the congregation "feels like they are getting help or clarity or advice" when he is intentionally aware of the struggles they face and considers how those struggles will shape how they hear the sermon. Sometimes people have even asked him, "Were you preaching that sermon to me?" He reported that responses like these are not generated by preaching specifically "to" people but rather by his intentional awareness of what they, and others in the congregation like them, were facing at the time. Jordan says he simply asks questions like, "What are they actually experiencing?" and "What is (this situation) honestly like for them?" He is not trying to first think how they should respond to a stressful experience but how they actually are responding. Then, from their perspective, he begins to "look at the text and see how the text addresses those type of concerns" in light of the gospel of Jesus Christ. This, Jordan says, can be anxiety-driven by sin or by calamity. He may address what he describes as the "idols" of "health, wealth, and time" or the sorrow the grief brought on by death. He contends that it is critically necessary that the pastor "just be with the people" and glean these insights in conversation about the anxiety-causing reality in their life.

These pastors report that intentional effort is required. Dennis uses a systematic approach. He breaks his preparation into three days and devotes the second day to what he calls "love the people" in which he considers the intersection of the text and any anxiety in the environment. He notes the "fallen condition focus" of the passage and then says:

> I write on the bottom of my notes the different age groups. If there are particular crises, I note them and write their names on there too. So I'm

> trying to think through what the folks are going through and how I can name it and how this text is peaking to them, In this application I am trying to make it really specific…and trying to think of an emotional vocabulary…which is really helpful.

Dennis also knows that as he does this, he may discover someone who will object to what he says. Here he reports attempting to think through the question, "How will [this person] hear this and how can I say it in a way that is faithful?" Brian also reported working hard to consider how people will hear the sermons in light of what may be bringing anxiety into their life. "I want to think through conversations I have had with them," he says, and let his preparation be shaped by "really being dialed into their heart and really thinking through the dynamics of the burdens they are carrying." Also, he wants to "imagine" the type of conversations he would like to have with them after the sermon and let that shape his preparation. Finally, Eric reports that congregational concerns are an ongoing part of his sermon preparation process and may cause him to revisit what he plans to say. In a particularly stressful time in the church, he said he "probably re-wrote that sermon five times" as he pondered how the gospel was impacting the daily life of the people. Such preparation is rare but sometimes necessary to be clear on how the gospel "frames" the reality of their experience.

These senior pastors did not prepare their sermons in a vacuum or only with the historical context of the text they were preaching. Neither did they only consider the normative responses of the congregation to the scripture. Rather, they began with the actual responses and experiences of the people and preached in light of that, toward an aspirational future.

Personally Soul-Stirring

Finally, these participants desired their sermon preparation to be personally soul-stirring. If it was, it had a much higher chance of reducing anxiety in the congregational system. Mark, for example, seeks wide range of experience in "meeting Christ." He then transmits this experience in the pulpit where he "unveils in the exposition of the scripture and the illustration where Christ meets me personally—in my intellect and emotion." He also noted this is especially important in situations involving lament.

Dennis says that he wants to complete his preparation with the confidence that "the Holy Spirit wants me to say this and I think I have appropriate love and concern" even if he is left "disrupted" by the effects of the sermon on the congregation. Nate reported a desire to "meet God" in the text and then "just read, think, ponder, pray, walk, read, think…and then write." He says that in his most useful sermons, he "does not have to communicate everything." He is looking for only "one thing" useful to him and to share that with his people. As Brian expressed this personal impact in the preparation phase, he noted, "There's just a lot more prayerfulness" and a "humility… less self-preoccupation and more self-forgetfulness." Jordan reported he knows he is ready to preach when the text has personally brought him to a place where he simply says, "Okay, I'm ready." By this he means that, along with these other senior pastors, the Scripture he is preaching is doing effective work in his own life, and he is ready to preach a sermon that may do that work in the lives of the congregation.

Content of Sermons that Lower Anxiety

These senior pastors all practice the approach to preaching expressed in Bryan Chapell's *Christ-Centered Preaching* and consider it critical for lowering anxiety. Mark, for example, extolled its virtues, saying, "The Christ-centered sermon…really is the answer to systemic anxiety." Rob agrees, because it "roots us deep in gospel dynamics…so that we might have a vision for human flourishing…and gospel freedom." Jordan adds that this preaching shows that "the gospel meets all our needs…and addresses our deepest desires, longing, and wants." Consequently, Eric adds that even for the most challenging situation, he is asking, "How do I frame this with a gospel lens for our congregation?" Within this approach, three distinct trends shaped sermons that lowered anxiety. These sermons were challenging, marked with clarity, and containing elements of subversion or reframing of ideas.

Challenging

As Aaron tells the congregation, "The gospel will always challenge some assumption you hold about the world and life." Even in highly anxious situations, these senior pastors brought challenging implications of the gospel to bear on the congregation. The hearers had to face the reality of their situations, sit in the tension created by following Jesus in the situations, and respond in trust.

Face Reality

Bringing the congregation face-to-face with the challenging reality of their situations was a clear marker of the sermons described—whether it was pointing out sin, lack, or hardship. Jordan realizes his upper-middle class congregation is plagued by the idol of money. Therefore, "I take those idols head on," he says. For instance, in the face of financial fear, in a sermon on Acts 17, he drew a comparison between the many idols of Athens and the idols of the "401k balance" and showed how the resurrection of Jesus challenges both. Brian boldly preached on anxiety using the Sermon on the Mount and made the daring move to suggest that much of the anxiety in the young congregation was anchored by "spiritual roots" and blinded by their "blaming …and…unwillingness to see their own complicity in it." Though he evoked some hostile responses, several others were able to face some hard truth and discover new freedom. Eric brought the congregation face to face with their hard situation in a sermon the week after Easter. Right after Easter Sunday, a public abuse scandal broke, and the church was rocked. Eric began his sermon the next week with the words:

> Good morning. It has been a hard week and a hard morning. There have been lots of tears already, and I cannot guarantee more tears won't flow as I speak to you this morning. In more ways than one, we as a people have gone through the darkest of the dark and the lightest of the light.

This introduction clarified for the congregation that things were indeed hard. However, it also powerfully connected the resurrection to what they were facing.

Sit in Tension

These Christ-centered sermons also did not hurry to give immediate solutions. Rather, they allowed the congregants to feel the tension created by living in a broken world. Eric, in the example just mentioned, went on to point out that God meets people where they are in pain "to form us into a people who [experientially] belong to him." However, he did not feel the need to answer how this happens in the middle of such pain. Brian adds that it is sometimes helpful to "normalize" the experience of the pain by pointing out that the anxiety and pain "result from the kingdom of darkness" and is shared by brothers and sisters in Christ through the centuries. He does not do this in a way that dismisses pain or anxiety but reminds the congregation that many know what it is to lament and would lament with them.

Even if there is a natural resolution to tension created in a sermon, Dennis says, sometimes he does not want to bring that resolution too soon. He said:

> I'm not sure I want people to feel "covered" too soon. I think that if I name vulnerabilities and we sit in them for a time, and then [after a time] I show how God addresses this. I think that's the place where transformation really happens. But we have to feel it a little bit, be raw and open…or otherwise the Word of God may not impact us right there.

This type of redemptive tension also characterizes Mark's preaching in times of anxiety because he knows "there is a desire for 'fix-it' solutions right away," which he says is a "preeminent characteristic of chronic anxiety." Waiting in the tension shows that the complexity and "lack of answers" are bearable and that better answers are not necessarily the solution. Rather, "God's presence," Mark says, is the promise yet to be experienced.

Respond with Trust

A final challenging characteristic of the sermons described by these senior pastors was the call to respond with trust in the tension and in the face of challenging situations. Rob said anxiety was reduced in the congregational system as people began to respond to grace and embrace the reality that "It's okay to be broken and that God works through weakness." Dennis noted that he often aims to move people to "remember that we serve Christ who is our King, and he is sovereignly reigning and doing something" in lives all over the world. He particularly aims at the anxiety over politics and believes that if people can see and savor this reality, their anxiety will decrease whether they are happy or distraught about the political situation. As a final example, Brian often calls people to respond with trust by marshalling robust language in the form of a question:

> What would it look like for you to bring all of your feelings, your memories, your shadow self, all these things that you know you were taught not to talk about somehow along the way, or you learned to silence…and bring that …wholeheartedly before the living God?

Brian employs such questions to prompt them to consider what he calls "Augustinian spirituality," longing for what is "good and true and beautiful" and see the gap between what they "long for" and how they live. He calls this the "compelling vision" offered in Jesus and believes that as people respond in trust, their anxiety will naturally be lessened.

Naming Specific Realities

The concept of "naming" or "labeling" was also described as an important part of preaching. Mark explains, "You have to say things out loud together in order for them to sink in." The pain involved is "why we as humans don't want to," but this aversion

makes it all the more important. He used the beginning of Joshua because it opens with the death of Moses, even though everyone already knew he was dead. Mark believes it is vitally important to "have a 'Moses is dead' moment" where the pastor names the hard reality for the entire congregation at once. In times of anxiety, these pastors practiced naming events, emotions, and particular sins or temptations while preaching.

Naming Events

When anxiety-inducing events known to a majority of the congregation were addressed, they were addressed as clearly as possible. Eric stated the name of a staff member who had been terminated for abuse and, without lurid detail, the nature of the abuse. As time has gone on and many new people have joined the church, Eric finds it wise to refer to the event with less detail and call it a "traumatic event in the life of the church." Upon the departure of beloved staff, Mark stood up and said in his sermon, "Michael has gone. We are going to miss him. We are now in a time of transition." As Nate said, "If there is an elephant in the room, you have to talk about it." For these pastors, the Presidential election of 2016 was one such "elephant." Dennis prepared people by telling them, "Many of you here are going to vote differently from each other, and we have to figure out how to navigate that." After the election, Aaron said, "Some of you are deeply concerned about a leader who appears to affirm views you may consider openly racist." He did this not to evoke hostility but to identify what was already present in the system because of events outside the system.

Naming Emotions

These pastors thought carefully about giving language to specificity to emotions the congregation may be experiencing to allow them to process those emotions accurately. With reference to the election mentioned above, Aaron said, "Some of you are feeling dismayed." Dennis added, "Some of you are ecstatic…some of you are disillusioned…some are angry…and some may be confused." Aaron even admitted that he himself was wrestling with "fear and concern." Brian, recognizing the uncertainty said, "Let's just admit it, things are tense here."

It also seemed wise to identify general anxiety-related emotions as accurately as possible. Eric mentioned he makes a practice of identifying temptations during grief, warning against "stuffing it" and "keeping a stiff upper lip." Dennis works hard to think through vulnerable populations and give specific language to issues like loneliness, marital stress, and aging. If prudent, he may even say something stark like, "It is hard to get old because your friends are dying and that can be really scary." He may also say, "I know many of you may feel left behind. You may not even feel like this is your church or town anymore." This public identification in a sermon, Dennis believes, allows the people to "deal with what is already there."

Naming Sin and Temptation

Finally, it was important to wisely name sin and temptation when it was perceived to be systemwide. Nate directly, clearly, and non-judgmentally addressed gossip from the pulpit. He did not name names but said, "I have noticed some gossip around the departure

of [a staff member]. Let's speak clearly to each other." Eric warned his people against the temptation to speculate over details of their traumatic staff event. He said:

> It is human nature to speculate…and we should expect that our hearts will rush toward speculation because that is the kind of hearts we have…but that is the call of the flesh, not the Spirit.

He named this clearly to "normalize" the experience and to highlight that it was not a mature response but one which would keep the anxiety high in the congregational system.

Subversive

Like "re-framing" or "subverting" issues in personal conversations mentioned above, these senior pastors also took opportunity to shape the collective mind of the congregation in sermons. They did this largely through coining phrases, asking questions, and re-casting things in biblical categories.

Coining Phrases

While preaching through the book of Joshua during a stressful congregational transition and focusing on God's presence, Mark came up with the phrase, "God doesn't promise to give us all the answers…but he promises his assurance through his presence." This phrase has been shortened to "We're looking at God's assurance and presence, not answers" and now functions as a known phrase in congregational life for trusting God's presence rather than seeking exhaustive answers and certainty. Jordan accomplishes a similar system-wide effect with respect to political tension by saying often saying "We are monarchists" meaning that Jesus is our king and not the president. Dennis often leads

with the phrase, “These are hard words” to help his people pre-process the anxiety that might be generated by the hard demands of the biblical texts. In all these cases, the phrases have migrated from the pulpit into the congregation and serve to subvert problem thinking with just a few words.

Asking Questions

Jordan says that preaching in anxious times “gives you an opportunity to ask the question everyone has... but no one is articulating or asking.” By asking the right questions, preachers have the opportunity to frame issues they believe people must address. Rob, when anxiety over leadership was high and people were questioning the elders’ leadership, asked the question, “What is true spiritual leadership...What is false leadership?” Mark, whose pastoral instinct told him that the congregation needed to lament loss, did not begin by saying, “We need to lament.” Rather, he asked questions like, “What are you missing right now and wish were different?” to uncover need. Aaron used this approach to lead people to deal with their idolatry of freedom, which was causing anxiety when they feared it being threatened. He asked his congregation what the signs of “legalistic fundamentalism” were. Then he went on to show how the “freedom of limitless choice” traps people in an impossible situation and leads to a “weird form of legalism.” Asking “disruptive questions” like this, according to Dennis, are ways pastors can “jar” people and leave them a “little more open.” These senior pastors expressed the thought that asking questions can engage the congregation with their own creative thoughts that lead in a direction helpfully addressed by scripture.

Recasting in Biblical Categories

Many of these pastors removed political concepts from the realm of public discourse and tied them more to the kingdom of God. Brian, for example, is aware of the anxiety-inducing possibility of "letting our imaginations be co-opted by the culture." He reasons that anxiety is the result of people processing information through media-directed categories—especially with regard to race, politics, and poverty. If this processing is not challenged, all conversations will be mentally filtered through categories that leave people in a tribal "us-vs-them" posture. He takes these issues and "ties them back to the gospel and scripture intentionally" so that he is talking about biblical shalom instead of "unrealistic utopian progressive visions" and biblical community instead of "American individualism." He adds, "If we don't define things carefully…they're just not going to get it." He warns pastors that they must "reframe everything in biblical categories" and not be "lazy to settle for words and categories that are pre-loaded with lots of meaning." This reframing is hard creative work, but as Aaron encourages, this type of effort can "bring some of the rest of the gospel into an anxious system" because it reshapes the interpretive lens the congregation is using to process the information.

Wise

Finally, this Christ-centered content was marked by measured pastoral wisdom. Dennis's goal was to "keep their emotional anxiety at a level where they can still hear you." He says the only ways to know this is through a pastoral presence in which "You know your people…and know where you can push them…and know where they are not going to hear anything." These pastors often sought balance in speaking of political

issues. Jordan, Rob, Dennis, and Brian make it a goal to not let the congregants know their political opinion on an issue and to speak to "both sides" if they mention anything. Jordan gave the example of referencing both "pro-impeachment" and "anti-impeachment" perspectives, even though he was not speaking directly about it and only addressing the anxiety that could flow from it. Aaron, in keeping the ear of people when discussing sensitive theological and cultural issues, says there is wisdom in letting your theological commitments "be like rebar" in that they "form all of our theological convictions but do not have to be seen explicitly."

Delivery of Sermons that Lower Anxiety

Brian recalls learning from the writings of Edwin Friedman that preaching is "my presence as much as my words." He adds that D.A. Carson has challenged him to think of a "cruciform manner of preaching" in which the Christ-centeredness extends beyond to the sermon to the "character and presence" of the preacher during the sermon. When these senior pastors thought of the delivery of sermons, themes of humor, authenticity, freedom, and a positive disposition emerged.

Humor

Appropriate humor was an important aspect of anxiety-lowering preaching. Jordan summarized nicely by saying he likes to keep a "playful tone" that is not "deadly serious." Eric added that he often "pokes fun" at himself in order to put the congregation at ease.

Authenticity

Eric gives deep thought to authenticity in the pulpit because he believes that, especially in times of anxiety, the congregation would "mirror whatever presentation I manifested in the pulpit." Brian says that he wants to be "emotionally connected to what I'm preaching." If this is the case, and it is "real" for him, he reports, his preaching is "deeply helpful" in bringing calm to his congregation. Nate reports this sense of calm in himself when experiencing the emotional connection to the sermon. From that calmness, he says he can "be on a journey of actually hungering and thirsting" for what he is speaking about. In this "journey," his own anxiety is being dealt with and thus makes it more likely to be similarly helpful to the congregation.

This authenticity can be demanding for the senior pastors interviewed. As Jordan lamented, "Transparency is demanding" because "it can be used against you." Mark agreed and reported several instances of people criticizing him for expressing this type of authentic vulnerability. However, he could withstand that criticism because he knew his vulnerability was useful for the rest of the congregation. Eric sought the help of a counselor to discuss how he could express his authentic reaction to the reality of a hard situation in the pulpit "and not be crippled by it." He said he was "learning the discipline of…being willing to weep in the pulpit and not apologize for it." Though this discipline was demanding for him, he reported that it was freeing for the people.

Freedom

The concept of freedom received the richest detail description by these senior pastors. They described preaching sermons in which they experienced the freedom to

enjoy their preaching as they were doing it and the freedom to paint a verbal picture and then invite others to embrace it. Likewise, they expressed a freedom from a sense of performance, freedom from the temptation to try to "force" people to believe, and freedom from preaching to specific individuals in the sermons.

Freedom to

Anxiety-reducing preaching is marked by the freedom to enjoy the preaching event. Eric says this type of preaching creates "a sense of release and joy in what I am doing." Dennis adds that this joy is a "means of grace" to him even when he is preaching it. Brian adds that his joy brings a deep "tranquility and peace" as he is in the pulpit.

This freedom is also experienced as the freedom to be satisfied with painting a rich verbal picture without the burden of convincing people to believe it. Brian says he is satisfied to "just describe the terrain of…the kingdom of God." He says it "really is beautiful" and he wants to preach in such a way that "They would want it to be true, even if they didn't believe it was." Nate, who preaches in a similar context as Brian says, "I am simply attempting to offer something beautiful." He knows that if he is faithful to that task, God may exercise a "drawing to grace" in the hearers by which they may feel compelled. While these pastors know they cannot force hearers to lay aside anxiety, they can describe the rich reality of the kingdom of God that would make it easier.

Inviting people to enjoy God and his work in the world was the expressed implication of the senior pastors in this type of freedom. Dennis said he simply wants to offer a "faithful picture" of what he is called to preach and invite response, even if a hearer might say "forget it!" Brian often pursues this by asking, "What is God inviting

you to?" Nate is sometimes more challenging, making statements such as "Here is where we are headed, and I want to invite you into something that is richer and deeper." At the same time, he wants to communicate personal responsibility and the sentiment, "It is your life, you have to figure out how to live it." He adds that pastors have to give people "space to work it out" and must also show there is a consequence for non-response.

Freedom From

This preaching was also marked by a freedom from crippling temptations that may increase anxiety. First, they were free from the temptation to be "performative" as Aaron says and "fall into the trap" of performing rather than preaching. For these pastors, performing was marked by an "anxiety about how the sermon is going to land," according to Dennis, and many reported physical symptoms of exhaustion after preaching or seeking affirmation from loved ones. As Aaron said, the problem for the congregation is that when he is "performing," he is pointing people to himself and forgetting that the sermon is to be a means to point people to Christ. Dennis remarks that if he can remember that he is "God's son, preaching in union with Jesus," he will be pointing people to Christ and free from an anxiety-inducing performance mentality.

Second, there was freedom in the persuasive task of the sermon. Namely, sermons that decreased anxiety were marked by delivery free from a burdened obligation to persuade and free from the need to persuade certain individuals. Rob describes the burdened obligation to persuade as "trying to take responsibility for what I know God is responsible for" as opposed to "taking responsibility for me and letting God be responsible for them." When Brian is in this mode, he finds himself preaching much

longer because he has to “cover all the angles.” Eric also reports longer sermons because of the application that “makes sure that people get this.”

Finally, if this burdened obligation has specific people in mind, Eric warns that it is likely coming from an anxious attitude in the preacher. “When I find myself preaching to particular people,” he says, “I know that I am not differentiated,” a hallmark of anxiety. His concern is that this lack of differentiation is often adopted in the hearers.

Solidarity

The final characteristic noted by these senior pastors was solidarity with the congregation. Dennis, Aaron, and Rob specifically mentioned being aware of not “triangling” people in their preaching, not joining text and preacher “against the congregation,” Dennis said, creating an adversarial relationship where the pastor communicates that it is he and the Bible against the congregation. Rather, he communicates that text is “against or for the preacher and congregation together” and may do this by saying things like, “This is a really hard word, but it's what it says here. I did not write this…this is the word of the Lord for us together.”

As Jordan emphasized, this attitude of solidarity requires “almost always saying ‘we’” and communicating “we’re in this together,” and that “I am on this journey with you.” Aaron added that he wants people to know “We all need this, including me.” Nate noted the critical importance of letting people know that he had been “challenged by the scripture first” and was now inviting all to journey together in it. Rob added the importance of being the “chief repenter” and showing how the scripture leads him to repentance along with them. If this can be accomplished, Dennis, said, “Congregants will

leave and…will not feel beat up" and will describe the preacher as "faithful and for them." This solidarity allows these preachers the authenticity to speak challenging words while receiving these challenging words themselves.

Summary of Sermons that Lower Anxiety

All of the senior pastors interviewed strived to preach expositional, Christ-centered sermons. Further, they held the preaching to be the leading expression of the church, importantly situated among other elements of worship. Preaching which lowered anxiety in the congregational system was marked by preparation that kept the congregation in mind and was yet soul-stirring for the pastor. The preparation was also free from various types of pressures to perform well or to expect the sermon to be more soul-stirring than it was likely to be. The content challenged the congregation to clearly face the situation before them with trust in God, and it also wisely subverted some ideas and reframed categories which lowered anxiety. Finally, these sermons were delivered with freedom, authenticity, appropriate levity, and with a sense of solidarity between preacher and congregation.

Summary of Findings

The purpose of this study was to explore how senior pastors preach Christ-centered sermons to lower anxiety in the congregational system. This chapter analyzed interview data from eight senior pastors who have led congregations through seasons of anxiety. These pastors demonstrated various levels of understanding of systems theory and its application to the congregational context. All of these pastors understood the

importance of personal differentiation and managing their own anxiety. Further, as seasoned preachers, they had reflected on the nature of sermon preparation, content, and delivery that lowers anxiety in the congregational system. While all took specific steps to address anxiety when there was a clear stressor within the congregation or within the culture, fewer expressed plans to create an intentionally less anxious environment that was prepared to meet future stressors.

The final chapter of this study will discuss these findings in light of themes that emerged from the literature review. In light of these finding and themes, several recommendations for practice and further study will be offered.

Chapter Five

Discussion and Recommendations

The purpose of this study was to explore how senior pastors preach Christ-centered sermons to lower anxiety in the congregational system. In chapter two, the review of literature shed insight on some of the teaching of Jesus regarding anxiety, the nature of systems and the function of anxiety and leadership therein, the experience of anxiety to the person, and several modern stressors that are often correlated with anxiety. In exploring how this is experienced in the congregational system and, specifically, how senior pastors preach Christ-centered sermons to lower anxiety, the research was guided by several questions. These questions were:

1. How do senior pastors describe the presence of anxiety in the congregational system?
2. How do senior pastors understand the impact of their presence on anxiety in the congregational system?
    a. How do senior pastors understand the impact of their emotional presence on the anxiety in the congregational system?
    b. How do senior pastors understand the impact of their leadership on the anxiety in the congregational system?
3. How do senior pastors negotiate their own anxiety as part of the congregational system?
4. How do senior pastors describe sermons that lower anxiety in the congregational system?

a. How do senior pastors describe the preparation of sermons that lower anxiety in the congregational system?
b. How do senior pastors describe the content of sermons that lower anxiety in the congregational system?
c. How do senior pastors describe the delivery of sermons that lower anxiety in the congregational system?

This chapter will bring together the literature reviewed in chapter two and the interview findings of chapter four in summary fashion. These findings will be discussed and recommendations for practice and further research will be suggested.

Summary of the Study and Findings

This study reviewed relevant literature in the four areas of Jesus' teaching on anxiety in Luke 12, anxiety in family systems perspective, the experience of anxiety in the person, and modern sources of anxiety. Then, interview data was analyzed from eight senior pastors who have primary preaching responsibilities, were committed to Christ-centered preaching, and had some working knowledge of family systems theory.

The literature review has shown that Jesus addressed anxiety in a direct, practical, and specific manner. He recognized that otherwise appropriate fears such as uncertainty and scarcity can lead to anxiety. His message was for his followers to entrust themselves to their Heavenly Father who cares for them and gives generously. This anxiety, whatever its source, was also shown by the literature to be related in experience to the relational system in which the person is situated. This systemic relation is reciprocal in nature. The individual can contribute to and modify the system's holding as well as

transmit anxiety. Likewise, the system can modify the individual's experience and expression of anxiety. The literature also showed that anxiety was experienced in predictable ways in the body and related to both physiological and cognitive processes. It is not always clear if these processes are causal to or correlational with anxiety. However, a reduction in these processes were also shown to be associated with a reduction in the experience of anxiety. Finally, several modern stressors function to exacerbate anxiety. These stressors may be historically stress-inducing variables, such as loneliness or relationship stress, that have continued or increased in intensity. Likewise, there may be variables connected to unique features of the modern age such as digital connectivity and an increasingly overmedicalization of anxiety.

The senior pastors interviewed reflected on the anxiety in congregational systems with various levels of family systems theory analysis and gave rich descriptive detail in describing anxiety to be related to aversion to loss and expressed by various symptoms. They also reflected on their own role in the system and concluded that they, as the identified leader, played a key role in the way anxiety was experienced by the entire system. Central to their leadership role was the ways they negotiated their own anxiety while functioning as the identified leader and fulfilling their role as the preacher. They reflected on their preaching and concluded that preparation, content, and delivery of sermons worked to lower anxiety in the congregational system.

Discussion of Findings

This study has examined the insights of contemporary writers on the subject of anxiety, the ancient wisdom of Jesus on the same subject, and the experiences of several

senior pastors who seek to wisely lead their congregations through preaching in an age of anxiety. In this section, I add my own experience as a senior pastor for two decades, synthesize the findings into four main areas, and then provide some recommendations for ongoing pastoral practice.

Two selection criteria are important for understanding this discussion. First, all the senior pastors interviewed were adherents to Christ-centered preaching as advocated by Bryan Chapell in his book, *Christ-centered Preaching*. Therefore, the following synthesis assumes an approach to preaching that "not only establishes God's requirements but also highlights the redemptive truths that make holiness possible."[352] Such preaching grounds the motivational structure for obedience in the grace of God as found in Jesus Christ. Second, each senior pastor had some working knowledge of family systems theory as conceived by Murray Bowen and later popularized by Edwin Friedman, Israel Galindo, and several others. This familiarity provided an initial common language and shared framework of understanding.

The literature reviewed in chapter two and my own experience as a senior pastor suggest some clear components to preaching that lowers anxiety in the congregational system. While perhaps not exhaustive, the literature and my experience conclude that senior pastors who effectively preach in this manner engage four elements. These four elements are: discerning systemic realities in the congregation, practicing a non-anxious presence, shaping the interpretive frameworks of congregants, and communicating in a manner that challenges but does not coerce hearers.

[352] Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching,* 19.

Systems thinking is described by Creech as:

> The capacity to see the whole and individual members of a system together, noticing the parts played by each and the effect of each on the other. This includes the ability to recognize the symptoms of increasing anxiety, to observe the emotional processes taking place, and to notice one's own part in the systems reactivity.

Steinke refers to this system as an "emotional field" which "determines the functioning of the parts more than any individual part influences the field, even though the presence of the parts is necessary for creating the field."[353] The system is not just a collection of individual parts. Rather, the parts come together to form something that, in turn, exercises powerful influence on each of the parts. This dynamic is especially obvious in a nuclear family, but the literature makes it clear that congregations function with the same dynamic, though not as strongly.[354] Since anxiety is a key aspect of systems theory, the literature would suggest that senior pastors will experience effective empowerment in their leadership and preaching as they discern the systemic realities in congregations.

Systemic Anxiety

The literature showed anxiety to be a central concept in systems thinking and described it as something experienced by the individual and also held and transmitted by systemic processes in the emotional field.[355] Discerning these processes gave explanatory

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[353] Peter L. Steinke, *Uproar: Calm Leadership in Anxious Times* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2019), 67.

[354] Creech, *Family Systems and Congregational Life,* 16.

[355] Kerr, *Bowen Theory's Secrets*, 110.

power in understanding anxiety and predicting its impact. While not always using specific systems language, these senior pastors often discerned systems concepts.

Anxious Process Concepts

Family Emotional Process is described by Creech as "the ways in which a family 'binds' or focuses its anxiety" through conflict, distance, over-functioning or under-functioning, and projection onto another.[356] Both Pastors Rob and Mark noted how their own leaders/elders were tempted to "over-functioning" in the lives of congregation members. They described the desire to "pacify" people at the cost of calling people to accountable responsibility for their own behavior, whatever the consequences of the church. My own experience is that this type of over-functioning, even if born out of a desire to treat people well, will cause anxiety to remain in the system because it does not foster mature reaction and can short-circuit the growth from difficulty and pain. Congregation members were also described as participants in this family emotional process by engaging in projection directed at attacking the leadership of the senior pastor. Mark noted this projection when anxiety over departing staff manifested in questions about his character and outright accusations of sin, absent any evidence. Eric used the term "scapegoating" to describe this projection process when he found himself the "villain" in the eyes of two groups of people—groups that were in complete disagreement with each other over every other issue.

[356] Creech, *Family Systems and Congregational Life*, 187.

Multigenerational Transmission Process was also identified by our participants. This process, according to Creech, transmits levels of emotional maturity and ways of responding from one generation to the next.[357] Friedman notes that making a change in the environment without a coordinate change in the processes that gave rise to the problem means that the problem will likely "endure and recycle."[358] Pastor Dennis noted an anxiety-based, unabated expectation for the senior pastor to function in the mold of two former workaholic pastors. These pastors had been gone for two decades, most of the people under their ministry had moved on, and nobody would articulate the desire for a workaholic pastor. However, the church expected faithful pastoral ministry to continue at the intensity those pastors had set. The result of this unseen force, when not recognized, was a subtle pressure on both the staff and congregation, especially when that type of ministry was not embodied. Nate pinpointed the value of "relevance" having a generational power in the congregation. He identified it as originating in the sending congregation and maintained by himself in the early days of the church. He has seen the folly of this, has taken steps to eliminate the expressions in the church that were particularly marked by it, and actively speaks against it from the pulpit. However, he notes that this value stubbornly remains and is a source of stress when not addressed.

Triangles were a third systems theory concept often identified by the senior pastors. Creech defines a triangle as relational function in which a third person or entity is drawn in to "manage the anxiety in the original relationship."[359] Friedman notes that the

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[357] Creech, *Family Systems and Congregational Life*, 187.

[358] Friedman, *A Failure of Nerve*, 155.

[359] Creech, *Family Systems and Congregational Life,* 187.

third relationship in the triangle can be composed of people, issues,[360] or even the past.[361] Rob understood a small group of people creating an entire negative narrative around his leadership as the pursuit of a third entity by which to "hold" the anxiety. In this case the entity was the narrative itself. Dennis experienced a similar triangling process when people labeled him "a liberal" rather than coming to grips with the discomfort of having political opinions challenged. Dennis was also able to identify this phenomenon at the individual level and noted, for instance, that a vocal critic of the music in the church was almost always having problems with her husband at the time. She often identified the music ministry as a third entity to stabilize the hostility between her and her husband.

Systems theory reminds us that anxiety is a naturally occurring reality in a system.[362] While anxiety is usually counterproductive and should be mitigated, it cannot be stopped. As some of these pastors expressed and as systems thinking predicts, some people will become anxious as a result of natural processes in the system. They may become far more anxious than others and may do so in response to things to which few others respond. A church congregation, particularly ones with long histories, may also have established anxiety patterns hard to change, even after a changeover in members. Wise observation and diagnosis of these anxious processes allows a pastor to understand what is happening in the congregation.

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[360] Friedman, *Generation to Generation*, 35.

[361] Friedman, *A Failure of Nerve*, 217.

[362] Kerr, Bowen Theory's Secrets, 108.

Clinical Response

Friedman advocates systems thinking because it focuses on the "underlying natural systems principles that all families share" and frees one from the endless burden of "trying to understand families in terms of their cultural, class, or ethnic distinctions."[363] Systems thinking grants senior pastors a confident and more "clinical" position toward anxiety in the congregational system, since the same dynamics show up consistently. Mark said he felt like he was "Peyton Manning being able to see the defense before the play happened." He was not surprised by the presence or strength of anxious responses and even came to expect them.

Rob expressed a more analytical orientation when he said he was keeping his eye on "the immune response" of the congregation to the criticism of his leadership by a small group of people. His hunch was that the congregation could absorb the criticism and render it harmless, and he felt no need to step in. This analytical disposition was also reported as useful before conflict. For example, Dennis said knowing this predictable process of anxious responses to change lets him begin with the attitude that "It's not personal." Mark reported preparing himself and the elders with the understanding that "We expect key people who are anxious to just get crazy in time of transition."

Since systems theory has great predictive and explanatory power, senior pastors need to be aware of the temptation to become callous in a clinical orientation to the congregation. However, maintaining appropriate analytical distance can keep them from getting caught up in the swirling emotions of the system and as Pastor Jordan said,

[363] Friedman, *A Failure of Nerve*, 56.

"becoming part of the problem" themselves. Rather, as Aaron said, he desired to be where he could love the people while "think(ing) systems and watch(ing) process."

Role of External Stressors

Systems theory does not treat any external stressor as a cause of anxiety but only a trigger. Several of the senior pastors identified the role of environmental stressors in relationship to anxiety in the congregational system. The three factors most mentioned were the role of connective technology, fragmented and hurried lives, and persistent negativity in the culture.

Eric and Rob both mentioned the role of email in enflaming congregational anxiety over stressful situations. John, Dennis, and Brian lamented what Baumeister and Tice would likely call "social exclusion"[364] resulting from social media engagement around the 2016 Presidential election. Nate and Brian suggested the hurried and fragmented nature of life, identified by Newport as "solitude deprivation"[365] and a continuous "distraction from your own mind,"[366] as a reason for the younger congregation's levels of anxiety. Allen and Dennis identified persistent media negativity as a source of stress and something "that just makes things worse." Johnson and Davey noted that negative news can create an increase in "both anxious and sad mood."[367]

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[364] Baumeister and Tice, "Anxiety and Social Exclusion," 165.

[365] Newport, Digital Minimalism, 103.

[366] Newport, Digital Minimalism, 100.

[367] Johnston and Davey, "The Psychological Impact of Negative TV News," 85.

In my estimation, the influence the senior pastors attributed to environmental stressors was somewhat at odds with systems thinking. Systems thinking resists what Bowen and Kerr call a "cause-and-effect model" in which a stressor causes anxiety because of its overwhelming strength.[368] Rather, the focus is on the upset of harmonious balance of relationships in the system that allows the stressor to produce such effect. Minimizing stressors can reduce anxiety. However, as Friedman points out, neither the strength nor the nature of the initial stressor is most important, but the way in which a person or system "adapts" to it, because "Our response is always far more influential than our chronically anxious society leads us to believe."[369]

The literature is at odds with itself here as well. Much of the psychological and medical literature operates on a cause-and-effect model, to identify and reduce stressors and thus reduce anxiety. A systems approach, however, would treat these same stressors not as "causes" of anxiety, but as triggers to which persons respond poorly. This tension was reflected in the responses of these senior pastors who often adhered to systems thinking but gave great weight to the role of stressors. Perhaps a way forward is to limit unnecessary stressors and foster mature growth in the congregational system to raise its capacity to respond well.

[368] Kerr and Bowen, *Family Evaluation*, 258.

[369] Friedman, *A Failure of Nerve,* 155.

Systemic Leadership Implications

Role of the Leader

Friedman contends that the "overall health and functioning of any organization depends primarily on one or two people as the top" and uses the metaphor of the head and body to describe leadership in systems theory.[370] Dennis, Rob, Mark, and Brian were univocal in understanding their level of anxiety to be the governor for the congregation and, especially, the leadership. Eric clearly said, "People's responsiveness or reactivity," during a time of deep church crisis, "was going to be pretty much tied directly to their experience of my responsiveness or reactivity" in the pulpit and in day-to-day relationship.

The experiences of these senior pastors matches my own. Namely, the leadership position is a burden and source of ministry confidence. It places the minister in a solitary position which brings with it a novel responsibility not often understood by others. This responsibility is weighty and challenging. However, it is also an incredibly influential and privileged position. If embraced with a willingness to practice healthy differentiation, the senior pastor may gain the capacity "not only to accept the solitariness that comes with the territory but also to come to love it."[371]

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[370] Friedman, *Generation to Generation*, 221.

[371] Friedman, *A Failure of Nerve*, 18.

Inseparability of Sermon from System

As part of the interview process, I listened to sermons preached by all the senior pastors and found most of them to be excellent homiliticians, an opinion shared by mutual acquaintances as well. Though they all existed in traditions with a high view of preaching, many intuited a systems understanding of preaching. They conceived of preaching as significant but not sufficient, in isolation, to lower anxiety. They also knew that the preaching could not be separated from the senior pastor's presence in daily congregational life. Galindo notes, "The sermon is as much about the preacher, the congregation, and their relationship in the context of being the church, as it is about the text."[372] Jordan called his presence with the people the "x-factor" in his preaching that made his sermons effective even though he did not consider himself a highly skilled or polished preacher.

Practicing a Non-Anxious Presence

The senior pastors also exhibited a range of understanding of the nature of anxiety in the system. However, for all of them, the most salient feature of systems theory was the concept of leadership as a "well-differentiated, non-anxious presence" in which the senior pastor embodies the differentiation and lack of anxiety healthy for the whole system. These terms are often used interchangeably in the literature to indicate their interlocking relationship.[373] Nate described being "connected" to the system of the

[372] Galindo, *Perspectives on Congregational Leadership*, 128.

[373] Kerr, *Bowen Theory's Secrets*, 108.

congregation but not "enmeshed" with it. Friedman refers to "leadership through self-differentiation" and makes the bold claim that:

> The basic concept of leadership through self-differentiation is this: If a leader will take primary responsibility for his or her own position as "head" and work to define his or her own goals and self, while staying in touch with the rest of the organism, there is a more than reasonable chance the body will follow. There may be initial resistance but, if the leader can stay in touch with the resisters, the body will usually go along.[374]

Such strategy may seem counterintuitive at first. Namely, the strategy *is* differentiation. These pastors saw this in light of Christ's presence with them. Mark related that his early training led him to believe that effective leadership in crisis was about "providing the right answers." He defines it now as displaying a non-anxious presence, a "personal presence with the assurance of Christ's presence." Brian has a Ph.D. in leadership and is well schooled in leadership strategy. Yet, he now articulates the first function of his leadership as being "a representation of the divine presence" through maintaining a calm, encouraging, blessing-giving demeanor. Aaron, a successful lawyer and businessman before becoming a pastor, says he "totally supports the idea that the leader has to strive to be that calming presence in an anxious system." However, he adds that he is always "pointing to Jesus," because "Christ is the ultimate non-anxious presence in the anxious system."

This type of leadership is not about putting on a good face. Steinke states, "The non-anxious presence means we are aware of our own anxiety and the anxiety of others, but we will not let either determine our actions."[375] Jesus taught in Luke 12 that several

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[374] Friedman, *Generation to Generation*, 229.

[375] Steinke, *Uproar*, 52.

things can be legitimately concerns and realities. In his context, these were things like the uncertainty of the future, a lack of sustenance, and a shortened life. Eric, Jordan, and Aaron all noted the importance of being radically honest about their own anxiety. Eric added that he has to be just as honest about anxiety in the pulpit as in daily conversation. Mark and Brian addressed this need for honesty by making room for lament in their own lives and in the congregation.

Non-anxious Presence in Own Self

The systems theory literature was often from a non-Christian perspective and offered little suggestion for growing in differentiation apart from sheer effort. Unsurprisingly, these senior pastors adopted Christian spiritual formation practices in pursuit of non-anxious and differentiated leadership. Jesus himself taught that the key to non-anxious life was admitting our frailty and entrusting ourselves to God, who is our father, and who had a deep delight to give us the kingdom.[376] The context of this teaching suggests that such trust occurs in community and on an ongoing manner.

Dennis was straightforward and has a prayer card he often reviews that reads, "Lord, help me grow as a self-differentiated man, a nonreactive leader." In order to remain in a conscious awareness of his heavenly Father's relationship to him, and thus, the Father's good pleasure to give him the kingdom, Dennis uses Rembrandt's *Return of the Prodigal* and written out words of scripture. Nate makes it a regular practice to confess his temptation to anxiety and pursue solitude. Newport remarks that one of the

[376] Luke 12:32

benefits of solitude is the development and refining of anxiety- reducing skills such as the ability to clarify hard problems, regulating emotions, and the building of moral courage.[377] Nate has found solitude to be the context where he has wrestled with and re-connected with the "quiet presence of the Lord." He has added regular Bible reading and prayer for an awareness of God's presence. All these disciplines serve his own leadership and are structured to subvert his "very anxious soul."

Finally, several of the senior pastors involved Christian community in their pursuit. Brian and Mark made ample use of their leadership teams, and Eric went so far as to create a crisis response team of people outside the congregation, so he could learn to process his anxiety and not be dominated by it.

Non-anxious Presence in Daily Congregational Life

Chapell describes preaching as being made up of logos, ethos, and pathos aspects.[378] A systems perspective would suggest that ethos and pathos develop as an interactive process between preacher and congregation at every point of interaction. Therefore, the senior pastor's non-anxious presence in the daily life of the congregation may go a long way to lowering congregational anxiety and creating the context for sermons to be received more easily.

Dennis and Jordan took special care to be present with congregants in times of crises, like births, deaths, and weddings. Friedman notes that these events uniquely suit a

[377] Newport, *Digital Minimalism*, 104

[378] Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching*, 34-41.

pastor to foster growth in the congregation and solidify the pastor as the identified leader.[379] Beyond these crisis times, nearly all of the senior pastors placed a premium on being with the people. If the congregation was larger, leaders became the main objects of focus. But, as Jordan said, "circulating among the people" is critical to the people being impacted by the preaching. Galindo notes that clergy find themselves "perpetually part of emotional triangles in the congregational system."[380] However, if senior pastors can maintain a non-anxious presence as part of relational triangles, they can be a stabilizing presence. None of these senior pastors mentioned intentionally being part of triangles. However, it appears they intuited this reality and were intentional to take advantage of it.

Likewise, they often operated in a manner consistent with Friedman's principles for remaining non-anxious, which includes the capacity to separate oneself from surrounding emotional processes and the willingness to be exposed and be vulnerable.[381] Mark thought it important to be present with people and remain non-defensive, even while being criticized, often an uncomfortable vulnerability, but he said this posture has been "indispensable" to his leadership. Jordan added that he believed he was giving others opportunity to be less anxious when he responded with respectful lightheartedness to criticism. Brian and Nate both actively work to extricate themselves from the surrounding emotional processes and know they are failing to do so when they are over-functioning by taking responsibility for the energy level of others or under-functioning marked by paralysis in decision-making.

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[379] Friedman, *Generation to Generation*, 5-6.

[380] Galindo, *Perspectives on Congregational Leadership*, 130.

[381] Friedman, *A Failure of Nerve*, 89.

Non-anxious Presence in Preparation and Delivery of Sermons

All of these senior pastors had been preaching regularly for at least five years. Therefore, none reported a nervousness or anxiety about the mechanics of preaching. However, they were aware of the way anxiety threatened to affect their personal state during the preparation and delivery of the sermon. The key descriptive offered for lack of anxiety was a sense of "freedom." This comment reflects Bowen's identification of "togetherness forces" being a driver of anxiety, wherein the "need…for approval, emotional closeness, and agreement" overwhelms the force of individuality and autonomy.[382] Because preaching was such a highly valued activity in the traditions represented by these senior pastors, this need was a particular danger.

Non-anxious Presence in Preparation

Brian recognized, and sought to actively resist, the temptation to prepare sermons with the desire to be seen as intellectually superior. A "greediness" toward reading and information gathering resulted so he could earn approval for his learning. Nate was attuned to his individuality being overwhelmed by the desire for approval of the form of the sermon, and it manifested as excessive crafting and massaging of words. Both Brian and Nate engaged in productive preparation activities that would have made the sermon "better" to the hearer in some ways, whether with richer homiletic content or flair. They are also necessary activities in sermon preparation, since a sermon does include content and delivery. However, they had to be aware that this activity could slip into anxiety-

[382] Bowen, *Family Therapy in Clinical Practice*, 277.

driven behavior that could subtly increase anxiety in the congregation because it was born out of anxiety in them. When they were operating with a non-anxious presence in preparation, their experienced freedom from the "need" to study excessively or have every word perfect and the freedom to finish the sermon without it being "fully formed."

Dennis and Jordan expressed the intention to especially think through the specific situations of congregation members and consider how they will hear things. While this aids sermon application, they placed themselves in an imaginary situation in which they were in emotional contact with the group. Given Steinke's description of differentiation as "the ability to separate self in a relationship system,"[383] they experienced face-to-face the need to extricate themselves from the forces of togetherness in their own imaginations during sermon preparation. Otherwise, they could find themselves crafting a message where they had to say things the "exact right way" to be received with affirmation and agreement. Dennis noted the anxious temptation to have imaginary conversations with people during his preparation. When he had practiced differentiated functioning during preparation, he described the freedom to "say things in the way the Spirit wants me to say it." Jordan added that instead of thinking through endless iterations of responses, differentiated preparation gives the freedom to stop and say, "Okay, I'm ready."

Jordan and Rob identified an additional benefit of pursuing a non-anxious presence in preparation as accuracy in application. If they could avoid being "emotionally fused" with the congregation, as Creech says,[384] they experienced freedom from considering the congregation an extension of, or commentary on, themselves. Then they

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[383] Steinke, *Uproar*, 9.

[384] Creech, *Family Systems in Congregational Life*, 45.

could see how the congregation was actually dealing with things instead of how the pastors wished they were. Then they could craft a more accurate application of the gospel to life situations.

Non-anxious Presence in Delivery

Galindo says that preaching without self-differentiation sends the message, "I need you to validate my worth and ministry," "you need me," or "I know it all, I'm the expert."[385] Freedom from such attitudes was the hallmark description these senior pastors gave of non-anxious sermon delivery. In particular, they mentioned a freedom from seriousness, expertise, and performance.

Friedman describes anxious systems as ones in which playfulness and humor disappear as family systems become "panic in search of a trigger."[386] All of the pastors mentioned humor and the freedom from being gravely serious as an element in non-anxious sermon delivery. While none were joke tellers, all were free to poke fun at themselves or their tradition and desired to be light-hearted and warm-hearted. Jordan summed up the general attitude in saying that he liked to take a "playful tone…that was not deadly serious."

A second freedom mentioned was the freedom from detached expertise and a coordinate freedom as one who warmly experienced the truth of the text. Galindo notes that healthy differentiated functioning includes "the capacity to say 'I' when others insist

[385] Galindo, *Perspectives on Congregational Leadership*, 128.

[386] Friedman, A Failure of Nerve, 63.

on saying 'we'" and "taking responsibility for oneself and for one's position rather than for others."[387] Being a preacher who experiences the truth of the text, in spite of whatever the congregation may or may not be experiencing, communicates both of these components. Nate said of his preaching, that his goal is to publicly "be on a journey of actually hungering and thirsting." Mark and Jordan did confess that this type of transparency can be used against the pastor by immature people. Yet, as Eric discovered, it was immensely freeing for people, even if they had to watch him "weep in the pulpit and not apologize for it."

Finally, the freedom from a sense of performance and the freedom to enjoy the preaching event signified non-anxious sermon delivery. Brian said he knows that he is present to the congregational system but not enmeshed in it when he preaches with a joy that brings a deep "tranquility and peace" as he is preaching. Eric echoed this by describing it as a sense of release and joy." This aspect will be taken up in further discussion in the last part of this current section entitled "Challenging without Chasing."

Shaping Interpretive Frameworks

In Jesus's teaching on anxiety in Luke 12, he employed the use of rich language, story, and images such as ravens, flowers, and bigger barns to capture the imagination of his hearers to challenge their interpretive framework. Likewise, Aaron Beck, working

[387] Galindo, *Perspectives on Congregational Leadership*, 141.

from a secular perspective, developed a cognitive model of anxiety experience in which events are filtered through an interpretive grid. Salkovskis expresses it as the equation:[388]

$$\text{Anxiety} = \frac{\text{perceived probability of danger x perceived cost/awfulness}}{\text{perceived ability to cope with danger + perceived rescue factors}}$$

This model suggests perception plays a key role in the experience of anxiety. Therefore, ideas that shape perception or interpretation offer the possibility of lowering anxiety. While this strategy was never directly mentioned by the senior pastors, they did occasionally employ it, whether intentionally or not.

Language for Mitigating Anxiety

Communicating the Presence of God

Part of Jesus's strategy in Luke 12 was to communicate to his followers that God, who had kingly power, also had a present attentiveness to their needs. This presence of God, if kept in mind, offers strong interpretive power of the above mentioned "dangers," "ability to cope," and "rescue factors." Rob, Mark, Eric, and Brian were all careful to consistently communicate that the God of the universe was also a present reality in the life of the church. Mark, in fact, coined the phrase, "We're looking at God's assurance and presence, not answers," that worked into the fabric of the congregation.

[388] Salkovskis and Forrester, *Cognitive Approaches to Obsessions and Compulsions*

Conceptual Language

Intolerance of uncertainty was identified by the literature as a key element in all types of anxiety.[389] Whether intentionally or not, these senior pastors often employed diagrams, word pictures, or phrases to "hold" uncertainty in situations without offering the false hope of a quick-fix. My observation is that the uncertainty thus became less threatening while allowing the people to do the hard but good work of facing it. Aaron, Nate, and Rob made use of a diagram for explaining theological differences and how they could be held together in peace in one congregation. With his leaders, Mark consistently used the descriptive phrase of allowing a person to "grow in the life of the church" to help them be patient in the face of the uncertainty created by anxious or frustrated members. Rob accomplished a similar purpose by employing the phrases, "not going to be able to address every issue," and "People will not be happy all the time." Certainly, phrases like this could be used in a harsh manner. However, these pastors weren't being dismissive but rather honest about their goals and limitations.

Avoiding Anxiety-Generating Language

Creech writes that pastors can "feed the polarization of our society" by capitalizing on tribalistic and loaded language. This language focuses anxiety on others instead of leading people to do the hard work of managing themselves.[390] It can be easily affirmed because it reinforces the hearer's sense of what Friedman terms the "herding"

[389] Dugas et al., "Intolerance of Uncertainty and Information Processing," 58.

[390] Creech, *Family Systems and Congregational Life*, 71.

mentality. Though this type of communication is embraced by hearers, it drives the group toward immaturity and results in further anxiety.[391]

Several of the pastors mentioned the danger with respect to political speech, especially since the Presidential election of 2016. For this reason, these pastors refused to let the congregations know their political leanings. Jordan also adopted alternate language to begin every political conversation, saying, "We are monarchists here." Further, Brian actively sought to re-cast politically charged categories around race back into categories of biblical love and shalom. He further warned that we can be lazy and not do this but, if we neglect this, congregants' imaginations will likely be "co-opted by the culture."

Language for Processing Anxiety

Moyal, Henik, and Anholt define "labeling" as "the linguistic processing of the emotions that arise in a certain situation" done to reduce amygdala reactivity and thus mitigate rising anxiety. [392] They reasoned that clear, precise definitions of present discomfort crystalizes authority over their internal state. Dennis, Eric, Rob, Mark, and Aaron all mentioned labeling or naming emotions as important, especially when tensions were high. Eric added that it is sometimes a disquieting exercise, since it forces the leader to see what is really present. But once identified, the articulated clarity can become a "model or touch point" for everyone.

[391] Friedman, *A Failure of Nerve,* 91.

[392] Moyal, Henik, and Anhold, "Cognitive Strategies," 1019.

Communicating to Challenge Without Coercing

According to Bowen and Kerr, moving toward healthy differentiation resulting in lower anxiety "depends on having the courage to engage emotionally intense situations and to tolerate the anxiety and internal emotional reactivity associated with that engagement.[393] In Luke 12, Jesus demonstrated this type of teaching by highlighting several anxiety-producing possibilities. Then, as the singular application, he called his people to trust. He gave no other options, and the narrative moved on from there. Apparently, Jesus believed his role as teacher was then complete, releasing gospel power to lead his followers toward confidence. Such challenging of the hearers and trusting the power of the message was also normative for these senior pastors.

As mentioned earlier, a selection criterion for this study was that senior pastors had an understanding of the need for a redemptive focus in the sermon, to motivate people by grace rather than legalistic self-effort or moralistic thinking. However, listening to "Christ-centered preaching" for several years, including re-listening to some of my own sermons, has led me to believe that a sermon can conform to these goals and still have key attitudinal and aspirational deficiencies. These deficiencies can limit the sermons' capacity to lower anxiety in the congregational system. My observation from the literature and the interview data is that the unique combination of the challenge of the message and a confidence in the message was most effective.

[393] Kerr and Bowen, *Family Evaluation*, 130-131.

Communicating to Challenge

Evoking Longing

In Salkovskis's model mentioned above, he describes "perceived awfulness" to give an intensifying effect to the experience of anxiety.[394] Painting a picture of a beautiful and hopeful reality may counteract this. Brian said that in his preaching, especially in times of high anxiety, he longed to "describe the terrain of…the kingdom of God" in a way that was "so beautiful" people "would want it to be true, even if they didn't believe it was." Nate echoed this desire to bring about longing and "offer something beautiful." Dennis mentioned that the beauty he is portraying often comes after knowing they need it. For this reason, he does not rush to "cover" people too quickly with the gospel and first wants them to feel their need of it since they always know resolution is coming. The waiting, however, increases the existential aspect of the longing and eventual satisfaction.

In Solidarity with the Congregation

Brueggemann warns against the pastor "triangling" the congregation and "ganging up" by positioning the scripture and the pastor against the congregation.[395] The pastors avoided such divisiveness by being challenged by the text themselves, according to Nate, Brian, and Aaron. Nate added that he wanted the congregation to feel like they were invited on a journey with him into something that was already challenging him. Rob

[394] Salkovskis and Forrester, *Cognitive Approaches to Obsessions and Compulsions,* 46.

[395] Brueggemann, "The Preacher, The Text, and the People," 239.

said that this challenge meant he often showed in his preaching how he was exposed and needed to be the "chief repenter." Dennis said he was often confessing, "This is a really hard word" and "It is the word of the Lord for us together." In this way, these senior pastors become spokespersons for challenging texts and, in Creech's words, "confronting the congregation with difficult truths, while simultaneously taking the posture of a humble listener to the text."[396] Jordan summed this attitude simply by remarking that it means "almost always saying, 'we.'"

Clear Simplicity

Galindo cautions that communication that highlights the preachers performative ability is often born out of poor differentiation and functions to raise systemic anxiety.[397] After wrestling with the desire for approval for the complexity of preaching, Dennis, Brian, and Nate all reported the intentional move toward greater simplicity and focus as they grew in differentiation. As the "need for approval" from the congregation dissipated, they were happy to "do less with the sermon," in Brian's words.

A second noticeable area of clear simplicity was the willingness to name anxiety-related issues when prominent in the congregation. My sense is that it removed uncertainty in the mind of the congregation about the size of the problem and the response of the leadership.

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[396] Creech, *Family Systems and Congregational Life,* 73.

[397] Galindo, *Perspectives on Congregational Leadership,* 128.

Without Chasing

Friedman helpfully warns preachers that as long as pastors are in the "pursuing, rescuing, or coercive position, your message, no matter how eloquently broadcast, will never catch up."[398] This temptation is particularly strong for pastors who enter vocational ministry to help others because of a deep longing for people to know and follow Jesus. However, as Mark confessed, "the humility of differentiation," involves giving up the idea that we can persuade everyone. Rob says taking personal responsibility for himself in light of the scripture means "letting God be responsible for them." Nate, after seeking to paint the rich picture mentioned above, sometimes lays out a challenge and says, "I want to invite you into something that is richer and deeper." Yet, at the same time, he wants to communicate in a way that lays the responsibility on them.

In these ways, the senior pastors sought to not "over-function" in the lives of congregants through the sermons. In fact, pressing, chasing, manipulating, cajoling, or endless explanation have worked against the effectiveness of the sermon because such "chasing" activities also communicate that the message itself is not sufficient.

Recommendations for Practice

In light of the literature reviewed, the senior pastors interviewed, and my own personal experience, several recommendations for pastoral practice emerge. They fall in five categories: awareness of our context, understanding our churches, taking

[398] Friedman, *A Failure of Nerve*, 128.

responsibility for our own selves, shaping interpretive frameworks, and communicating with challenge.

Awareness of our Context

First, we must embrace the reality that we are in a society in the process of emotional regression, described by Gilbert as a time in which "there is more and more anxiety in all people, firing chaos and irresponsible behavior…[and] the chaos and irresponsibility create more anxiety, leading to more problems…in an escalating cycle."[399] Bowen, in the 1970s, connected this regression to much larger historical forces and predicted it would last, at least, several decades.[400] Friedman, writing in the 1990s, correlated it with the quantity and speed of change overwhelming many and a breakdown of trust in traditional institutions.[401] Kerr, in 2019, described the trend as the system becoming "dominated by less thoughtful and more reactive ways of interacting."[402] Current expressions of this regression can be witnessed in the immature state of discourse and hostile interaction on social media, in politics, and on college campuses. While lamentable, this societal emotional regression will be the context in which senior pastors will minister for several years, if not for the rest of their lives. They must understand this context and the powerful influence it exercises on congregants.

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[399] Roberta Gilbert, *The Eight Concepts*, 102.

[400] Bowen, *Family Therapy in Clinical Practice*, 281.

[401] Friedman, *A Failure of Nerve*, 57.

[402] Kerr, *Bowen Theory's Secrets*, 65.

Second, we must familiarize ourselves with modern stressors and the devastating toll connective technology takes on the life of modern Westerners. Without becoming haranguing or policing, we would do well to shepherd congregants into formational practices that move them away from digital media and connective technology. The literature highlights, especially, the benefit of solitude and silence. As Newport reports, people learn to clarify, regulate, and build internal realities in solitude and silence that make depth formation possible.[403] The seventeenth century philosopher Blaise Pascal famously said, "All unhappiness of man arises from one single fact, that they cannot stay quietly in their own chamber,"[404] which is more true today than ever.

Third, we must realize significant and real generational differences in the way anxiety is processed. Changes in parenting practices during this current societal regression have left people feeling significantly more helpless and victimized by things that would have been mere annoyances to previous generations, especially for those born after the late 1990s. While older senior pastors may not have an existential identification with such anxiety, they must grasp that it is a real experience for this younger generation, because it is. Rather than passing moral judgement on whether such anxiety *ought* to be present, pastors must understand that it *is* and proceed accordingly.

[403] Newport, *Digital Minimalism,* 104.

[404] Blaise Pascal, *Penseés*, trans. W. F. Trotter (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2003), 39.

Understanding Churches

Systems theory has consistent explanatory power across cultures and generations, particularly with respect to anxiety.[405] For this reason, senior pastors would do wisely to familiarize themselves with its basic tenets. Post-enlightenment thinking may leave us in a default position of understanding congregations as a collection of individuals. However, systems thinking recognizes that this collection forms a whole which then exercises great power on each person. This aligns nicely with the Bible's emphasis on the organic unity of the church and suggests the sobering implication that we cannot understand the church without understanding it as a system. The senior pastors demonstrated that even very few concepts, if recognized, can be useful. My own experience is that the concepts of differentiation, sabotage, "triangled" relationships, family emotional process, and multi-generational process will yield disproportionately useful returns for the time spent learning them. Edwin Friedman's *A Failure of Nerve* and chapters 1, 8, and 9 of *Generation to Generation: Family Process in Church and Synagogue* would likely bring a much-needed addition to most senior pastor's leadership training. Pastor and professor Robert Creech has synthesized much of Friedman's material for ministry leaders in *Family Systems and Congregational Life: A Map for Ministry*.

One salient systems implication is the call to understand sermons as something embedded in the life of the church rather than an independent entity. Though many homiletics books in my pastoral library suggests otherwise, simply "preaching the word" or a commitment to truth is not sufficient to faithfully address anxiety in the

[405] Friedman, *A Failure of Nerve,* 56.

congregational system. For preachers in the Reformed tradition, "The preaching of the Word of God is the Word of God."[406] My conclusion does not mean that sermons are to be devalued. Rather, they must be understood as intimately connected to the relationship of preacher and the congregation in the context of being the church, according to Galindo.[407] A sermon can be true, accurate, artistic, and convincing all while leaving untouched the fundamental structures which impact anxiety. The explosive power of the sermon to change lives is covenantally connected to senior pastors who are thoroughly and relationally integrated into the emotional life of congregations.

A strategic systems addition for the health of the congregation is biblical lament. As most of the senior pastors suggested, lament is a biblical category that must be forcefully reclaimed by churches. These pastors described anxiety in terms of aversion to loss or threat of loss. If biblical lament is taught, practiced, and embraced as a central part of church life, including preaching, the threat of loss will be reduced because of having a healthy and known avenue for dealing with it. In this counterintuitive way, practicing lament/complaint regarding anxiety-producing circumstances decreases the anxiety.

In addition to lament, a second strategic recommendation is to create and converse through a feedback loop for disgruntled, frustrated, uncertain, or otherwise anxious people. If practical, I recommend that the senior pastor receive feedback in a well-differentiated, non-anxious manner and regularly defuse the situation, as a "step-down transformer."[408] Systems theory predicts that anxiety will get expressed somewhere

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[406] Second Helvetic Confession, quoted in Leith, *Creeds of the Churches,* 133.

[407] Galindo, *Perspectives on Congregational Leadership*, 128.

[408] Richardson, *Creating a Healthier Church,* 51.

in the system. The senior pastor who has learned to receive it wisely, or can train other leaders, in a larger context, to do so, will mitigate the expression of that anxiety and add to the overall capacity and health of the congregation system.

Taking Responsibility for Our Own Selves

Anxiety is in an interlocking relationship with differentiation.[409] Because of the related nature of the system with its leadership, especially the senior pastor, differentiation in the senior pastor will be the single most powerful leadership dynamic in the congregation and the strongest mediator of anxiety. Friedman, in stark terms says, "The very presence of differentiation in the leader…is—beyond vision, beyond perspicuity, beyond stamina—the key to the kingdom."[410] Or, as Pastor Eric said, "Calm is contagious."

I believe the doctrine of union with Christ holds incredible resources for this disposition. It furnishes the spiritual possibility of being present in the system without being dependent on it, or seeking its approval, or fearing it, or attempting to be the system's savior. One hallmark is the ability to remain warm, open, and lighthearted. Both Friedman[411] and the senior pastors remarked about the danger of a "deadly serious" approach to life and ministry.

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[409] Kerr, *Bowen Theory's Secrets*, 108.

[410] Friedman*, A Failure of Nerve*, 186.

[411] Friedman, *A Failure of Nerve*, 63.

Senior pastors would do well to make regular and rigorous assessments of their role in the system and their emotional states to determine where they are becoming reactive, disengaged, or over-engaged in the church they pastor and their relative ability or inability to remain joyful. Because differentiation is such hard work, it may often be beneficial and necessary for senior pastors to seek outside counsel for insight into their attitudes, history, and patterns of interaction.

Communicating to Shape Interpretive Frameworks

Anxiety, even if "held" in a system, is experienced by individuals, and this experience is moderated by their perception of the events happening to them.[412] For this reason, it is wise for senior pastors to offer alternate, challenging, or subversive ideas for their interpretive frameworks.

To this end, I would encourage senior pastors to familiarize themselves with Beck's six "cognitive errors": catastrophizing, jumping to conclusions, tunnel vision, nearsightedness, emotional reasoning, and all-or-nothing thinking.[413] Like a basic familiarity with systems theory components, avoiding these errors will yield disproportionate benefit because they are painfully common to anxious thinking and can then be kept in mind for sermon application matrices and illustration. My experience has been that it is often most useful not to address this thinking directly but to let the understanding of these "errors" be present in the sermon preparation process.

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[412] Salkovskis and Forrester, *Cognitive Approaches*, 46.

[413] Clark and Beck, *Cognitive Therapy of Anxiety Disorders,* 169.

Additionally, avoiding cultural phrases and categories that come pre-loaded with polarized emotional meaning is wise, even if the pre-loaded meaning is positive, so it does not reinforce an "us-vs-them" attitude. This preaching may be applauded but also raises anxiety because it directs away from Christ and invites fusion with those who agree or hostility against those who do not. Pastor Brian was instructive here as he re-cast political conversation about race in terms of "biblical love," "shalom," and "generational sin," while avoiding anything that smacked of a left-right political distinction. Pastors in urban or heterogenous environments or who pastor younger congregations may need to exercise special creativity here. My observation of these contexts over the last few years is that when conversations around issues of biblical justice and love get cast in terms of "social justice," anxiety begins to rise. The same is true of the discussion of "systemic injustice," with the added difficulty that it may externalize the locus of control for those who consider themselves "victims" and thus further increase anxiety in the population.

A related suggestion for pastoral practice is to have a carefully worked out strategy of speaking about politics and, especially, from the pulpit. Several of the pastors interviewed had decided not to let their political leanings be known and were careful to present both sides of any issue that should arise. It may be useful to develop key phrases to use often. My own practice has been to say, like Pastor Jordan, "We are not first Republicans or Democrats, we are monarchists." Likewise, "We have a president, but first we have a king, so we will honor one and worship the other." And, "We are temporary citizens of a temporary nation and permanent citizens of a permanent nation." I have found phrases like this to be useful over four presidential administrations while serving a politically diverse congregation.

A final recommendation here is to develop a set of images or graphics to explain complex and potentially anxiety-inducing conversations. They can be disseminated in various venues including the sermon, particularly if projection is normal. Aaron and Rob mentioned making ample use of a diagrams that diffused anxiety by describing the difference between primary, secondary, and tertiary theological issues. I have found this diagram to be useful as well and have included several others in the appendix.

Communicating to Challenge but not to Coerce

Building on Friedman's warning that "pursuing, rescuing, or coercive" positions reflect poor differentiation in pastors and render sermons less effective,[414] regular preaching pastors would be wise to have diagnostic categories to alert themselves. Since differentiation is not ever fully achieved, from time to time, we must assess our relative lack. In my own preaching, I have noticed that a procrastination in preparation, because I want to get things "just right" or an excessive tiredness after preaching, because I have "pushed" too hard, is often indicative of this.

Finally, pastors must actively rely on the redemptive power of the message they preach. Bowen grounds his concept of differentiation in the secular vision of an identity based on a "solid self," rooted in principles and values we create and to which we must hold. The gospel furnishes us with a grander and richer picture and an identity gifted to us by God in union with Jesus Christ. We have only to hold to this, to rely on this message, to enjoy the fullness of its power and invite others to do the same.

[414] Friedman, *A Failure of Nerve*, 128.

Recommendations for Future Research

In the course of this research, four topics emerged that seem fruitful for future exploration. Two emerged from the literature review and two from the interview process.

From the literature, I think it would be fruitful to explore further dialogue between neuroscience and systems theory when it comes to anxiety in victims of trauma. Many of the dynamics of systems theory could be described as "unconscious" or "subconscious." Since several subconscious processes leave trauma survivors disrupted, it would be interesting to explore an intentional means of group interaction with a trauma survivor that best leads to "healing" processes. In a congregational context, adoption and orphan care would especially benefit.

Secondly, we are learning rapidly about the deleterious effects of connective technology. I am currently unaware of any Christian formational approaches that intentionally and *comprehensively* address this. Research into best practices and habits for formation in a digital age is probably underway. It will be a welcome benefit to the church.

In the interview process, one senior pastor made a comment I have often thought to myself for several years. Namely, differentiation is a lot like union with Christ. I think it would be fruitful to trace out the exact scriptural benefits associated with the doctrine of union with Christ in the New Testament and then compare and contrast those with the function of differentiation in the life of a leader. Further, it would be interesting to explore how the benefits of union with Christ give motivational power to withstand the pressures inherent in pursuing differentiation.

Finally, it has been my experience that some ministry leaders who claim to be pursing differentiation are actually defending narcissistic leadership. The concept of differentiation is powerful and has application in several contexts. Unfortunately, it can also be co-opted. Researching the dynamics of narcissism as it relates to differentiation may reveal how differentiation can be engaged so as to differentiate it from being sinful or harmful and instead agree with the mind of Christ.

Appendix

Included here are four simple diagrams effectively used in preaching and teaching to lower anxiety in the congregational systems. They allow persons to face uncertainty and not be disquieted by it.

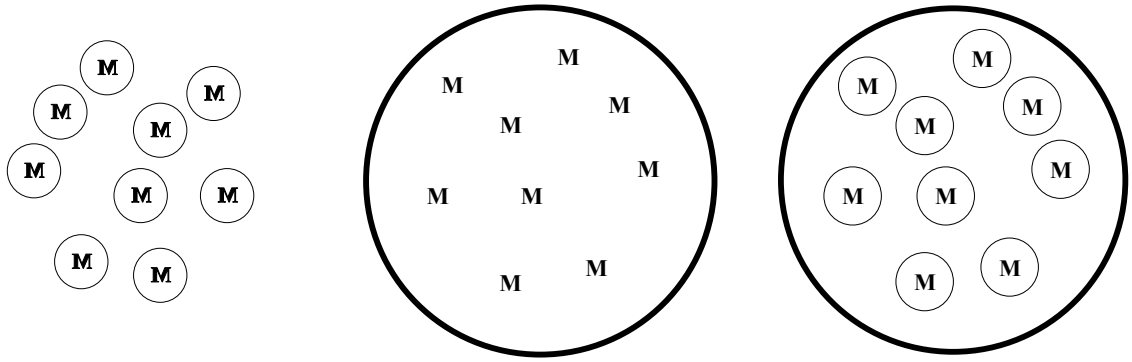

Figure 1: Differentiated Membership. It shows that within the covenant of membership, something binds the church together, but people are still individuals and retain personal boundaries. Therefore, though the church is bound together, people do not expect conformity on all, or even very many, things. It alleviates the tension of being "in community" with people who are different and even helps people to expect and enjoy it. It is also used as an illustration of the marriage covenant, to teach husbands and wives to respect each other's boundaries and not over-function in each other's lives.

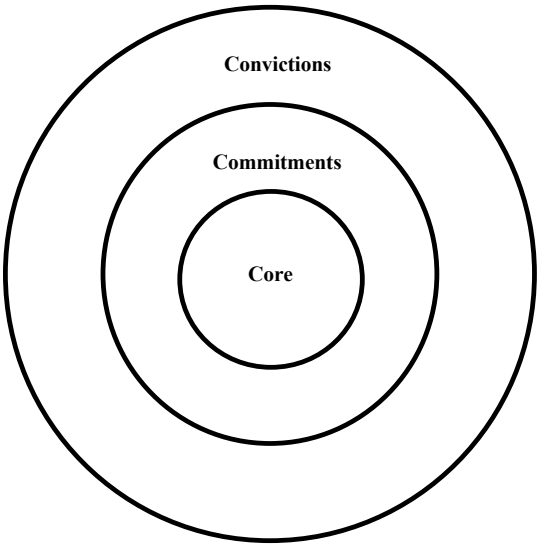

Figure 2: Three Circles. Mentioned by Aaron and Rob in the study and adapted from Tim Keller. People can discern between core issues (e.g. deity of Christ, authority of scripture, salvation by grace), commitments (e.g. denominational particularities like infant baptism, Reformed theology, and male eldership), and convictions (e.g. social drinking, type of schooling, and tattoos). It clarifies the relative importance of theological issues, articulates that only the "core" is required for membership, and shows that many have differing commitments than those in church leadership. However, people who differ ought not to "evangelize" on their differing commitments or convictions. Further, the more conservative a person tends to be, the more they are tempted to press everything one layer inward (e.g. add reformed theology to the core) and the more liberal a person is, the more tempted they will be to push everything out (e.g. make male eldership a conviction instead of a commitment). This diagram is used early and often, including in sermons and is especially helpful to alleviate anxiety for former Baptist and charismatic Christians who functionally placed baptism or charismatic gifts in the "core."

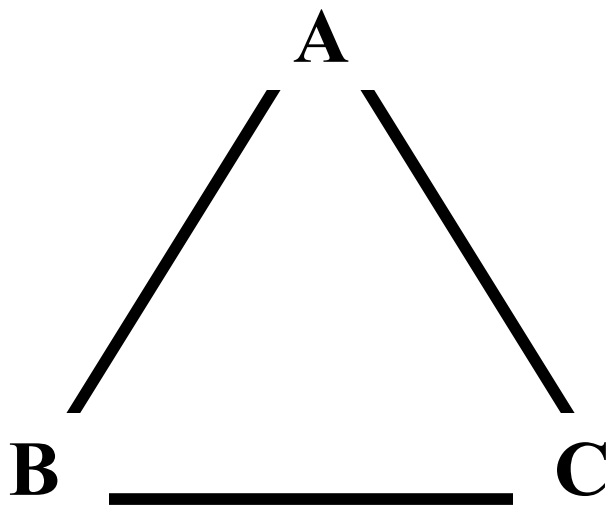

Figure 3: Triangle. This diagram, borrowed from Friedman, shows the nature of power in relationships and communicates that people can affect only a relationship of which we are directly a part. In the above, A can take responsibility for his response to B and C. However, A cannot manage the relationship between B and C. Trying to "reach across the triangle" (e.g. B trying to take responsibility for change in the relationship between B and C) is manipulation and brings only anxiety.

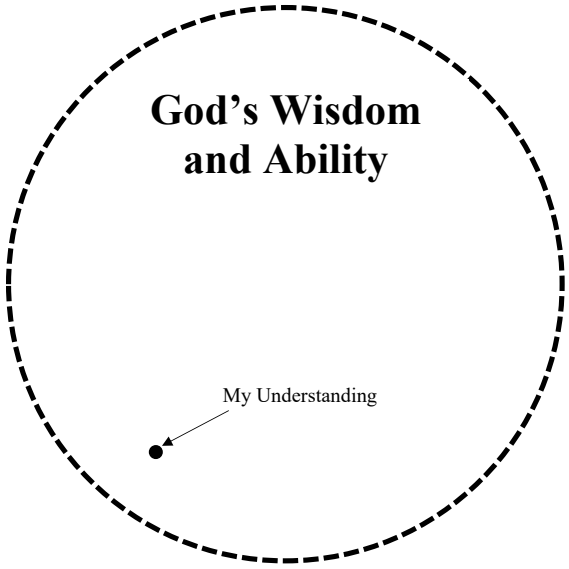

Figure 4. Sovereign Circle. This simple diagram reminds people that God's wisdom is larger than ours. The perforated circle indicates limitlessness. The small dot is anyone's understanding, vastly smaller than God's. It can encourage people in God's sovereignty and deliver them from the anxiety that arises from trying to exhaustively understand it.

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