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Navigating Reactive Sabotage in Clergy Leadership:
Cultivating Courage and Resilience amid Conflict through Self-Differentiation and Emotional Intelligence

By
David M. Richmon

A Dissertation Submitted to
the Faculty of Covenant Theological Seminary
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Ministry.

Saint Louis, Missouri

May 2025

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Abstract

This research study examines the phenomenon of reactive sabotage in congregational leadership and its impact on clergy and their ability to maintain self-differentiation amid conflict. Reactive sabotage, in a clerical setting, can be defined as an immediate process designed to bring the emotional system back to homeostasis, often occurring when ministers initiate change within their communities. Findings in the literature reveal that such conflict causes significant emotional, physical, cognitive, and relational distress for clergy, creating a leadership crucible where they may experience what Edwin Friedman referred to as a "failure of nerve," the temptation to forsake their self-differentiation under the pressure of togetherness.

Through in-depth qualitative analysis, this study identifies key competencies that enable clergy to navigate sabotage effectively, including emotional intelligence, spiritual resilience, cognitive clarity, and relational adaptability. These attributes assist leaders in clarifying their vision while fostering meaningful connections with opponents. Additionally, the research emphasizes courage as an essential trait for pastoral leadership. Grounded in a deep relationship with Jesus Christ, courage serves as an emotional process that empowers clergy to confront fear, persevere through trials, and uphold their convictions in the face of adversity.

This research provides insight into the challenges and strategies associated with reactive sabotage and offers practical guidance for clergy navigating leadership conflicts. Ultimately, it aims to equip pastoral leaders with the tools to endure opposition while fostering resilience, peace, and unity within the church.

Ad maiorem Dei gloriam

"The capacity of a leader to be prepared for, to be aware of, and to learn how to skillfully deal with this type of crisis (sabotage) may be the most important aspect of leadership. It is literally the key to the kingdom."

— Edwin H. Friedman, *A Failure of Nerve*

"Courage is not simply one of the virtues but the form of every virtue at the testing point, which means at the point of highest reality."

— C.S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters*

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And, to my grandmother, Margaret, thank you for the gift of education.

Abbreviations

BFST	Bowen Family Systems Theory
EI/EQ	Emotional Intelligence

Chapter One

Introduction

In her 2021 book *High Conflict: Why We Get Trapped and How We Get Out*, investigative journalist Amanda Ripley compares the dynamics of social conflict to Los Angeles's famed La Brea Tar Pits. "The La Brea Tar Pits is a living quagmire, a place where natural asphalt has been gurgling up from the ground since the last Ice Age."[1]

Researchers theorize the Tar Pits result from a rather "diabolical cycle." The story goes like this. "One day tens of thousands of years ago, a large creature like an ancient bison lumbered into the Tar Pits. It quickly became stuck, hooves anchored in the sludge of the asphalt, and began grunting in distress […] The bison's alarm attracted the attention of predators like, say, the now extinct dire wolf."[2]

Like humans, dire wolves are social creatures and would have approached the bison as a pack seeking easy prey. Entering the Tar Pits, they, too, found themselves quickly stuck and howled in frustration, eliciting attention from additional creatures. "Eventually, the wolves died of hunger or other causes, and their rotting carcasses drew scavengers—some of whom also got stuck. A single carcass could remain visible for up to five months, attracting more unwitting victims, before sinking out of sight, into the murky, underwater crypt. To date, scientists have pulled the bones of four thousand dire wolves out of the Tar Pits."[3]

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[1] Amanda Ripley, *High Conflict: Why We Get Trapped and How We Get Out* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 2023), 26.

[2] Ripley, 27.

[3] Ripley, 27.

Ripley amplifies her conclusion with this observation:

> Conflict, once it escalates past a certain point, operates just like the La Brea Tar Pits. It draws us in, appealing to all kinds of normal and understandable needs and desires. But once we enter, we can't get out. The more we flail about, braying for help, the worse the situation gets. More and more of us get pulled into the muck, without even realizing how much worse we are making our own lives.[4]

Through storytelling and critical observation, Ripley astutely identifies what churches and organizations have long experienced and intuitively understand. The "diabolical cycle" of conflict is deeply embedded in the individual and relational psyche of our institutions, carrying the potential to jeopardize the missional capacity and effectiveness of the organization.

Researchers Sal Capobianco, Mark Davis, and Linda Kraus write,

> It is hard to escape the conclusion that conflict is an inevitable feature of social life, and that this is especially true in organizations. A quarter century ago, researchers identified the handling of interpersonal conflict as one of a manager's primary tasks, accounting for as much as 30 percent of the typical manager's time. More recently, similar findings have been reported.[5]

Ministry and Organizational Conflict

What makes ministry susceptible to conflict, and why do we get mired in it? In their book *The Politics of Ministry: Navigating Power Dynamics and Negotiating Interests,* researchers Bob Burns, Tasha Chapman, and Donald Guthrie observe, "Ministry work is people work, and people work is messy."[6] People work is messy because all social life is inherently *political*, encompassing themes like power, interests,

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[4] Ripley, 27.

[5] Sal Capobianco, Mark H. Davis, and Linda Kraus, "Good Conflict, Bad Conflict: How to Have One without the Other," *Mt. Eliza Business Review.* 7, no. 2 (2004): 31–37.

[6] Bob Burns, Tasha Chapman, and Donald Guthrie, *The Politics of Ministry: Navigating Power Dynamics and Negotiating Interests* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2019), 5.

negotiation, and ethics. Of course, these political realities are not ahistorical, nor do they exist in a relational vacuum. Instead, they unfold within a specific context of shared stories, traditions, and values that converge and are reinforced by a complex interpersonal emotional system.

Authors Speed Leas and Paul Kittitas observe that,

> Conflict happens when two pieces of matter try to occupy the same space at the same time. The two pieces of matter attempting to enter the same space at the same time will conflict, or strike together. This analogy can be used in looking at conflicting goals of a group. Conflicting goals are two purposes or objectives that cannot occupy the same group at the same time.[7]

Considering the wide-ranging political dynamics discussed earlier and the deeply personal nature of the church, the question is not *if* conflict will arise but rather *when* it will happen and to *what* degree it will challenge and affect the community's emotional balance.

In their 2002 book *Leadership on the Line: Staying Alive Through the Dangers of Change*, authors Ronald Heifetz and Marty Linsky explain how conflict disrupts leaders and their organizations. They suggest that conflict and organizational change are inextricably linked. In this context, Heifetz and Linsky distinguish between "technical problems" and "adaptive challenges." Technical problems rely on existing organizational know-how and trusted authorities to provide quick solutions, allowing the system to return to its usual operations. In contrast, adaptive challenges take the organization off script and push it beyond its comfort zone. They necessitate experiments, new discoveries, and adjustments from various parts of the organization or community. "Without learning new ways—changing attitudes, values, and behaviors—people cannot

[7] Speed Leas and Paul Kittlaus, *Church Fights: Managing Conflict in the Local Church* (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1977), 28.

make the adaptive leap necessary to thrive in the new environment."[8] This type of systemic change often results in a sense of personal loss; it requires persuading "people to give up the love they know for a love they've never experienced," along with the stability that previously anchored the stakeholders' identity and sense of belonging within the organization.[9]

Hugh F. Halverstadt, Professor of Ministry at McCormick Theological Seminary, agrees with Heifetz and Linsky's observations. Concerning the relationship between adaptive change and conflict, he states,

> [The] parties' core identities are at risk in church conflicts. Spiritual commitments and faith understandings are highly inflammable because they are central to one's psychological identity. When Christians differ over beliefs or commitments, they may question or even condemn one another's spirituality or character. Their self-esteem is on the line.[10]

What accounts for this deep, visceral reaction? Heifetz and Linsky suggest that it is important to understand that a person or group's habits, values, and attitudes come from somewhere, and to abandon them means being disloyal to their origin. Indeed, our deeply held loyalties serve as a keystone in the structure of our identities.[11] When self or group identity faces a threat, conflict becomes inevitable.

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[8] Ronald A. Heifetz and Martin Linsky, *Leadership on the Line: Staying Alive through the Dangers of Leading* (Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press, 2002), 13.

[9] Heifetz and Linsky, 26.

[10] Hugh F. Halverstadt, *Managing Church Conflict*. (Louisville, KY: Westminster-John Knox, 1991), 2.

[11] Heifetz and Linsky, *Leadership on the Line: Staying Alive through the Dangers of Leading*, 28.

The Leader and Conflict

What is the pastor's role vis-à-vis the adaptive change process and the potential congregational conflict that may arise as a result? It is important to acknowledge that congregations rarely hire pastors to guide them through the adaptive change process. Instead, pastors are hired primarily for their technical expertise and godly character. They are called to preach, shepherd, and manage an effective, albeit not always predictable, ecclesial organization. Referring to their marketplace counterparts, Heifetz and Linsky note, "People expect [leaders] to use their authority to provide them with the right answers, not to confront them with disturbing questions and difficult choices […] People hire someone to provide protection and ensure stability, someone with solutions that require a minimum of disruption."[12]

Technical competency and strong character are essential for a pastor's professional repertoire. These qualities foster credibility and trust among key stakeholders and congregation members. However, like the leaders typically depicted in the Christian scriptural tradition, a vital aspect of the pastor's role is to continually realign the church with the priorities and values of God's Kingdom. While many congregations and their members may agree with this idea in principle, few realize that if actively pursued, such recognition would inevitably disrupt the organization's status quo.

To this end, Heifetz and Linsky point out that one risk associated with leading adaptive change is exceeding one's authority. "People rarely elect or hire anyone to disrupt their jobs or lives […] Adaptive work brings risk, conflict, and instability because

[12] Heifetz and Linsky, 20.

addressing the underlying adaptive problems may involve overturning deep-rooted norms."[13] As pastors challenge stakeholders to let go of firmly held beliefs about themselves, it often triggers a sense of personal loss, thereby increasing the potential for conflict. As a result, negotiating change, managing loss, and navigating conflict frequently fall within the pastor's leadership domain.

A Family Systems Perspective

In the early 1940s, psychiatrist and professor Murray Bowen applied the emerging field of systems theory to his clinical work with schizophrenic patients and their families. "The most outstanding characteristic of systems thinking is its departure from traditional notions of linear cause and effect."[14] Like a game of billiards, linear thinking seeks a cause for every effect. However, in systems theory, dynamics are viewed in loops rather than lines. "A and B are both influence and influenced. They are 'co-causal.' Every cause is an effect; every effect is a cause. We look, therefore, at how A and B mutually maintain their interaction, not for who causes what."[15]

Bowen argued that family members exist within a broad "emotional system," in which relationships are interdependent and influence one another. This emotional system is defined by its "'Automatic functioning and reactivity expressed in habitual processes that are expressed beyond conscious choice or control. It is the existence of a naturally

[13] Heifetz and Linsky, 20.

[14] Edwin H. Friedman, *Generation to Generation: Family Process in Church and Synagogue*, The Guilford Family Therapy Series (New York, NY: Guilford Press, 2011), 15.

[15] Steve M. Lyon, "Leading in Congregational Conflict: A Family Systems Model," *Southwestern Journal of Theology* 43, no. 3 (2001): 46.

occurring system in all forms of life that enables an organism to receive information (from within itself and from the environment), to integrate information, and to respond on the basis of it."[16]

Organizational consultant Jim Herrington, psychotherapist Trisha Taylor, and professor R. Robert Creech, describe this system and our consequent interdependence as our "wired-togetherness."[17] Within a systems perspective, "The symptom is seen as an imbalance in relationships rather than an imbalance in the individual."[18] Bowen theorist Kathleen Kerr writes,

> A system view sees what is going on in the individual as inseparable from the network of relationships in which he is embedded, the emotional process in that system, and the way the system was balanced before symptoms appeared. The way the system has maintained balance leads to it being more or less adaptable or vulnerable when events or forces push it out of balance.[19]

Since its formation, Bowen theory has reimagined not only organizational functioning but also the underlying dynamics of conflicts, as well as the leader's role within the system in which those conflicts arise. As Kerr highlights, an emotional system relies on maintaining balance or homeostasis among its members. When homeostasis is disrupted, anxiety enters the system. As anxiety levels rise to intolerable heights, system members will reactively strive to return to the previously established state of

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[16] Angella Son, "Anxiety as a Main Cause of Church Conflicts Based on Bowen Family Systems Theory," *Journal of Pastoral Care & Counseling: Advancing Theory and Professional Practice through Scholarly and Reflective Publications* 73, no. 1 (March 2019): 11, https://doi.org/10.1177/1542305018822959.

[17] Jim Herrington, Trisha Taylor, and R. Robert Creech, *The Leader's Journey: Accepting the Call to Personal and Congregational Transformation*, 2nd, ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2020), 40.

[18] Kathleen B. Kerr, "An Overview of Bowen Theory and Organizations" in Ruth Riley Sagar and Kathleen Klaus Wiseman, *Understanding Organizations: Applications of Family Systems Theory* (Georgetown University Family Center, 1982), 2.

[19] Kerr, 3.

homeostasis. This reactivity often manifests as conflict directed toward the member of the system who takes a uniquely self-defined stance (typically, the senior leader). Self-definition is most evident when leaders act according to their convictions rather than the togetherness impulses of the group. When a leader's vision, values, and change initiatives diverge from the group's status quo, it leads to disequilibrium and uncertainty within the emotional system. Thus, change, disruption, and loss are likely to generate anxiety, reactivity, and conflict within the organization's emotional system. This phenomenon is referred to as reactive sabotage.

Jewish Rabbi and Bowen theorist Edwin Friedman suggests that conflict lies at the core of the leadership task. He notes that leaders face two types of crises. The first type, Friedman points out, "has little to do with the [leader's] own functioning: a health crisis, for example, or a problem that bursts upon the scene, as if randomly, from the environment."[20] However, the second type of crisis is a direct result of the leader's own leadership. When a leader initiates change within their organization, the change itself is merely one part of the process. Once the change has been set in motion, the leader must prepare for the reactivity that will follow.[21] Friedman writes,

> It is simply not possible to succeed at the effort of leadership through self-differentiation without triggering reactivity. This is a systemic phenomenon and a highly subtle problem that is generally not accounted for in leadership theory. Yet the capacity of a leader to be prepared for, to be aware of, and to learn how to skillfully deal with this type of crisis (i.e. sabotage) may be the most important aspect of leadership. It is literally the key to the kingdom.[22]

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[20] Edwin H. Friedman, Margaret M. Treadwell, and Edward W. Beal, *A Failure of Nerve: Leadership in the Age of the Quick Fix*, 10th anniversary ed. (New York, NY: Church Publishing, 2017), 261.

[21] Jack Shitama, *Anxious Church, Anxious People: How to Lead Change in an Age of Anxiety* (Earlville, MD: Claris Works, 2018), 74.

[22] Friedman, Treadwell, and Beal, *A Failure of Nerve*, 261.

Friedman's insight here is instructive. The "systemic phenomenon" that drives reactive sabotage relates to the emotional processes within the organization, rather than the content of the change itself. Pastor and leadership consultant Jack Shitama states, "It doesn't matter whether it's a new worship service, a new outreach ministry, a change in staff configuration, or a new Sunday School curriculum. It is the change that precipitates resistance." Shitama observes that as members of the organizational system undergo change, they seldom confront their discomfort directly; instead, they displace their sense of loss by attacking the leader or by being passive-aggressive. He concludes,

> They will attack you for something other than the challenge at hand, or they will cause dysfunction somewhere else in the system, even as they smile at you and say how great the change is. Again, this is most often unwitting. But it is how people deal with their discomfort.[23]

The Crucible of Sabotage

Complicating the concept of reactive sabotage is its multifaceted nature. Its presenting features, intensity, and scope vary significantly from case to case. For instance, a typical sabotaging episode might manifest as a *crucial* or challenging conversation. In their book *Crucial Conversations: Tools for Talking When the Stakes Are High*, authors Joseph Grenny and others define a crucial conversation as "a discussion between two or more people in which they hold (1) opposing opinions about a (2) high-stakes issue and where (3) emotions run strong."[24]

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[23] Shitama, *Anxious Church, Anxious People: How to Lead Change in an Age of Anxiety*, 75.

[24] Joseph Grenny et al., *Crucial Conversations: Tools for Talking When Stakes Are High*, 3rd ed. (New York, NY: McGraw Hill, 2022), 3.

In a church or ministry setting, such conversations are common. Pastor J.R. Briggs provides numerous examples in his Christianity Today article, "That Discussion You're Dreading Is a Ministry Opportunity." He lists:

- "You pull into a restaurant parking lot to meet a friend for lunch. You're about to discuss why he and his family are considering leaving the church."
- "You are preparing for tonight's elder meeting regarding the direction of the expansion project. It's a meeting poised to be tense and divisive."
- "You are about to ask a key volunteer to step down. Her immaturity is hurting the rest of the team."
- "You're responding to an email of a long-time member who expressed deep disappointment because he 'isn't being fed anymore.'"[25]

Anecdotally, Briggs summarizes his experience of negotiating crucial conversations, stating,

> I've entered these situations dozens of times feeling ill-equipped and unsure. I've often walked out of these meetings kicking myself, wondering why I said this or didn't say that. As important as they are, crucial conversations cause those of us in ministry angst, pain, and emotional drain.[26]

Perhaps more significant than the one-off, crucial conversation, Ronald Heifetz and Marty Linsky describe various "Faces of Danger" that await leaders as they lead their organizations through adaptive change. They write,

> The dangers of leadership take many forms. Although each organization and culture has its preferred ways to restore equilibrium when someone upsets the balance, we've noticed four basic forms, with countless ingenious variations. When exercising leadership, you risk getting marginalized, diverted, attacked, or seduced. Regardless of the form, however, the point is the same, their goal is to shut down those who exercise leadership in order to preserve what they have.[27]

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[25] J. R. Briggs, "That Discussion You're Dreading Is a Ministry Opportunity," *CT Pastors*, May 8, 2018, https://christianitytoday.com/pastors/2018/may-web-exclusives/that-discussion-youre-dreading-is-ministry-opportunity.html.

[26] Briggs.

[27] Heifetz and Linsky, *Leadership on the Line: Staying Alive through the Dangers of Leading*, 31.

One of the central tasks of this project is to ascertain the question: *What happens to a leader before, during, and after incidents of reactive sabotage?* What's happening *to them* and *in them*—cognitively, emotionally, spiritually, relationally, and physically?

For example, picture a scenario similar to those presented by Briggs above. A leader starts an adaptive change process, disrupting the homeostasis of the organization's emotional system. As a result, anxiety within the system begins to increase, and resistance to the change initiative becomes inevitable.

As expected, the leader quickly receives several emails or text messages from stakeholders that require an important conversation. The leader recognizes that these discussions represent a subtle form of reactive sabotage, an effort by the system to pull the leader back into alignment with the organization's established emotional equilibrium. Even if the leader understands the emotional dynamics at work, he is likely confronted with a series of personal, emotional stressors that may hinder his leadership effectiveness during this critical moment in ministry. These emotional stressors often manifest as physical symptoms, such as an increased heart rate, neck or shoulder stiffness, or an upset stomach.

Peter L. Steinke, a pastor and leadership consultant, suggests leaders are never at their best as they engage in these moments of stress and sabotage. He writes,

> When anxiety intensifies, multiplies, and paralyzes, we are dumber. We cannot see options, the big picture, or objective reality. We forfeit that which most defines our humanity. Since transitional times are incredibly random, uncertain, and disorienting, anxiety finds fertile ground. Then, feeling insecure, vulnerable, or at risk, nature provides the automatic reactions of fight, flight, or freeze, all in the service of survival. But if we cannot get beyond the emotional processes, calm reflection is not available to us. Uncertain, we tend to replace thought with emotion.[28]

[28] Peter L. Steinke, *Uproar: Calm Leadership in Anxious Times* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2019), 8.

This observation is critical: under stress, the human body and brain are hardwired to maintain personal survival, which makes emotional regulation and relational connection difficult. Researcher Daniel Goleman adds, "One of the oldest laws in psychology holds that beyond a moderate level, increases in anxiety and worry erode mental abilities."[29] Furthermore, "Distress also makes people less emotionally intelligent. People who are upset have trouble reading emotions accurately in other people—decreasing the most basic skill needed for empathy and, as a result, impairing their social skills."[30]

Negotiating The "Moment of Truth"

Due to the multi-dimensionality of reactive sabotage and the various stressors it places on leaders, Edwin Friedman suggests that such crises precipitate a so-called moment of truth, when leaders become susceptible to a "failure of nerve."[31] In this moment, they may be tempted to forfeit either their gains toward self-definition or their emotional connection with opponents. Successful leadership can, in part, be determined by a leader's ability to maintain "self-differentiation" during sabotage. Bowen Systems Theory defines self-differentiation as the ability to maintain one's sense of self (self-definition) while simultaneously staying emotionally connected with those in the emotional system. It also emphasizes an individual's capacity to respond to reactivity through thought processes rather than succumbing to anxiety.

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[29] Daniel Goleman, Richard E. Boyatzis, and Annie McKee, *Primal Leadership: Unleashing the Power of Emotional Intelligence*, 10th anniversary ed. (Boston, MA: Harvard Business Review Press, 2013), 13.

[30] Goleman, Boyatzis, and McKee, 13.

[31] Friedman, Treadwell, and Beal, *A Failure of Nerve*, 262.

As a leader develops the ability to self-differentiate, they cultivate a non-anxious presence that can absorb the anxiety of the emotional system. However, in moments of sabotage, leaders are tempted to lean toward one side of the equation at the expense of the other, resulting in a "failure of nerve." They may either maintain their self-definition at the cost of emotional connection (leading to emotional "cut off") or forfeit their sense of self because of surrounding togetherness pressures (leading to "fusion").

This "failure of nerve" can be costly for both the organization and the leader. If a leader forfeits their own self-definition to the prevailing reactive emotional processes of the system, it will inevitably lead to emotional regression and a sense of "stuckness" within the organization. Friedman observes that "No society can continue to evolve as long as it makes cloistered virtues supreme."[32] He means that a system cannot mature if it continuously caters to the demands of its least emotionally mature members. He notes that such regression is "characterized principally by a devaluing and denigration of the well-differentiated self […] with the result that comfort is valued over the rewards of facing challenges."[33] Consequently, the organization will inevitably languish in emotional gridlock and missional stagnation.

However, the "failure of nerve" that Friedman describes is also detrimental to the leader himself. Ongoing sabotage that is not confronted and managed through resilient self-differentiation will undermine a leader's sense of self-efficacy, making him more vulnerable to additional stress and burnout. In their book, *Resilient Ministry: What Pastors Told Us About Surviving and Thriving*, researchers Bob Burns, Tasha D.

[32] Friedman, Treadwell, and Beal, 52.

[33] Friedman, Treadwell, and Beal, 59.

Chapman, and Donald G. Guthrie share the response of a pastor regarding the demanding nature of ministry. He remarked,

> The relentless nature of ministry means that fatigue is a constant companion of leaders in the church. While lay leaders joke about ministers only working on Sundays, the truth lies on the other side of the continuum. A pastor's work is overwhelming because it wears upon the body and soul.[34]

Further research by Christianity Today, LifeWay Research, and the Flourishing in Ministry Project confirms the widespread impact of conflict and stress on a leader's physical, mental, and emotional well-being.[35]

The Need for Courageous Leadership

How can leaders persevere not only under sabotage but also emerge from its effects without burning out or acting out? As noted above, it is essential to recognize that reactive sabotage and its accompanying "moment of truth" both precipitate and entail personal risk and vulnerability in a leader's life. Researcher Brené Brown defines vulnerability as "uncertainty, risk, and emotional exposure." She observes, "The word vulnerability is derived from the Latin word *vulnerare*, meaning 'to wound.' The definition includes "capable of being wounded" and "open to attack or damage."[36] Brown

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[34] Bob Burns, Tasha Chapman, and Donald Guthrie, *Resilient Ministry: What Pastors Told Us about Surviving and Thriving* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2013), 16.

[35] Cf. Kate Shellnutt. "The Pastors Aren't All Right: 38% Consider Leaving Ministry." *Christianity Today*, November 16, 2021. https://www.christianitytoday.com/2021/11/pastor-burnout-pandemic-barna-consider-leaving-ministry/. Scott McConnell. "Are More Pastors Quitting Today?" *Lifeway Research*, May 13, 2021. https://research.lifeway.com/2021/05/13/are-more-pastors-quitting-today/. Tish Harrison Warren. "Opinion | Why Pastors Are Burning Out." *The New York Times*, August 28, 2022, sec. Opinion. https://www.nytimes.com/2022/08/28/opinion/pastor-burnout-pandemic.html. Matthew C. Bloom. Flourishing in Ministry: How to Cultivate Clergy Well-Being. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group, Inc, 2019.

[36] Brené Brown, *Daring Greatly: How the Courage to Be Vulnerable Transforms the Way We Live, Love, Parent, and Lead* (New York, NY: Avery, 2015), 38.

concludes that vulnerability, rather than being perceived as a form of personal weakness, is a quality of strength and courage.

Brown's contemporary observation places her in historic company. Traditionally, philosophers such as Plato and Aristotle, along with theologians like St. Thomas Aquinas, have linked vulnerability—especially the concepts of "woundedness" and suffering—with the cardinal virtue of courage or fortitude. The German philosopher and Aquinas scholar Josef Pieper wrote,

> Fortitude presupposes vulnerability; without vulnerability there is no possibility of fortitude. An angel cannot be brave, because he is not vulnerable. To be brave actually means to be able to suffer injury. Because man is by nature vulnerable, he can be brave. By injury we understand every assault upon our natural inviolability, every violation of our inner peace; everything that happens to us or is done with us against our will; thus everything in any way negative, everything painful and harmful, everything frightening and oppressive.[37]

The literature indicates a significant correlation between a leader's ability to acknowledge their vulnerability during stress or attack and their capacity to lead through difficulties with courage. This form of leadership is considered courageous for its ability to endure challenging situations, manage discomfort, and maintain confidence amid uncertainty. Furthermore, research professor Craig Steven Titus has highlighted a salutary relationship between the virtue of courage and one's capacity for resilience.[38]

Author and leadership expert Tod Bolsinger states, "All the best leadership literature emphasizes the need for courage" to overcome the natural tendency toward a

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[37] Josef Pieper, *The Four Cardinal Virtues: Prudence, Justice, Fortitude, Temperance* (Alexandria, VA: Alexander Street Press, 2019), 117.

[38] Craig Steven Titus, *Resilience and the Virtue of Fortitude: Aquinas in Dialogue with the Psychosocial Sciences* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2006).

failure of nerve.[39] He concludes, "It takes courage to stay calm and connected in the face of friendly fire. And it takes enduring, repeated acts of courage to stay the course and keep others on course when they are disappointed in you as a leader."[40]

Courageous leadership often evokes images of the quintessential "hero leader" who uses their position to "call the shots" and "carry the team on their back."[41] Despite this oversimplification, authentic courageous leadership encompasses moral and emotional elements that surpass conventional models. For instance, following Thomas Aquinas, Catholic theologian Josef Pieper asserts that courage is primarily demonstrated through endurance and suffering. Pieper writes,

> Enduring comprises a strong activity of soul, namely a vigorous grasping and clinging to the good; and only from this stouthearted activity can the strength to support the physical and spiritual suffering of injury and death be nourished. It cannot be denied that a timid Christianity, overwhelmed and frightened by the un-Christian criteria of an ideal of fortitude that is activistically heroic, has smothered this fact in general consciousness, and misconstrued it in the sense of a vague and resentful passivism.[42]

Pieper's theological construction of courage proffers a potential model for pastoral leadership that is not only "thick" but also conducive to the types of reactive sabotage and crises mentioned above. It assumes strength in the form of vulnerability—one that can evaluate and manage fear while pursuing the good and remaining steadfast before, during, and after moments of extreme challenge.

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[39] Tod E. Bolsinger, *Canoeing the Mountains: Christian Leadership in Uncharted Territory* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2015), 181.

[40] Bolsinger, 181.

[41] Mitch McCrimmon, "Is Heroic Leadership All Bad?," *Ivey Business Journal*, January 28, 2024, https://iveybusinessjournal.com/publication/is-heroic-leadership-all-bad/.

[42] Pieper, *The Four Cardinal Virtues: Prudence, Justice, Fortitude, Temperance*, 128–29.

Problem Statement

Despite the prevalence of reactive sabotage in congregational ministry, pastors are often unprepared for its challenges. In fact, it is the unexpected nature of sabotage that may be more unsettling to pastors than the actual content or event itself.[43] Moreover, the literature within ecclesiastical leadership—especially in the areas of pastoral ministry, pastoral psychology, and practical theology—has not sufficiently examined the impact of reactive sabotage on the pastoral practitioner. It has also failed to explore potential connections between courage as a virtue and the emotional and spiritual development of leaders, connections that could enhance self-efficacy and personal resilience.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this study is to explore the processes that contribute to courageous pastoral leadership during reactive sabotage. Four main areas inform this inquiry: leadership through conflict, systems theory, emotional intelligence, and a biblical-theological survey of courageous leadership.

To this end, the following research questions guide this study:

1) How do pastors experience reactive sabotage?
    a. Before the event
    b. During the event
    c. After the event

[43] William N. Grosch and David C. Olsen, "Clergy Burnout: An Integrative Approach," *In Session: Psychotherapy In Practice* 56, no. 5 (2000): 619–32.

2) What capacities are necessary for pastors to negotiate reactive sabotage successfully?
    a. Emotionally?
    b. Spiritually?
    c. Cognitively?
    d. Relationally?
3) How do pastors exercise courageous leadership during reactive sabotage?

Significance of Study

This study aims to achieve a threefold impact. First, pastoral ministry, particularly for senior and solo pastors, can be isolating work. Church conflict and the frequency of reactive sabotage reinforce this sense of isolation. Research suggests that leaders can spend upwards of 25% of their time engaged in conflict resolution.[44] It is an overlooked and under-appreciated aspect of pastoral ministry. This project seeks to provide practitioners with the language and frameworks to better understand their experiences, partly to alleviate the loneliness and despondency that are so closely associated with leadership fatigue.

Second, as often as pastors face reactive sabotage, it is essential to humanize and dignify those involved in the conflict. As mentioned, sabotage is a symptom of personal loss and the accompanying grieving processes. This project aims to enhance pastoral empathy and patience for those they encounter in conflict.

[44] "Workplace Conflict Statistics 2025 | Pollack Peacebuilding," January 23, 2018, https://pollackpeacebuilding.com/workplace-conflict-statistics/.

Finally, conflict and reactive sabotage jeopardize the bonds of peace among the pastor, the church officers, and the congregation. Our Lord prayed that his disciples would be one, as He is one with the Father.[45] This project aims to foster mutual understanding, reconciliation, and peacefulness within the church.

Definition of Terms

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

Adaptive challenge—A problem that requires learning, innovation, and systemic change beyond technical fixes, demanding new mindsets and behaviors.

Anxiety—The emotional and physiological response to a threat, whether it is real or perceived.

Conflict—A common symptom of anxiety within a system, where many individuals insist on their own perspectives and clash with others who hold the same emotional stance.

Differentiation of self—A person's capacity to remain true to their deepest principles, to be thoughtful rather than reactive, while staying emotionally connected to those who matter to them. Differentiation is the ability to separate our intellectual and emotional systems and make choices between them.

Emotional intelligence—The ability to recognize, understand, manage emotions, and navigate relationships effectively through self-awareness, empathy, motivation, self-regulation, and social skills.

Emotional reactivity—The automatic, unthinking, emotional response human beings make to real or perceived threats in their environment.

[45] John 17:21

Emotional system — The emotional bond that forms when people participate in long-term, intense, and meaningful relationships.

Fortitude/courage—Fortitude is steadfast courage to endure trials virtuously, resisting fear and audacity through divine grace.

Opponent—An interlocutor who represents opposing viewpoints within a conflicting situation. The term does not suggest an interpretation of personal character or motive.

Reactive sabotage—Part of an emotional process that aims to restore a person or system to its previously established state of emotional homeostasis, often through disruptive methods.

Systems thinking—The capacity to see both the whole and the individual members of a system together. This includes recognizing the symptoms of rising anxiety, observing emotional processes, and noting one's role in the system's reactivity.

Technical problem—A problem within an organization that has a clear solution, solvable by existing expertise, authority, and standard operating procedures.

Chapter Two

Literature Review

This study aims to understand the emotional and spiritual processes contributing to courageous pastoral leadership during moments of reactive sabotage. To provide a broad foundation for this study, the literature review explored four related categories: congregational conflict, systems theory, emotional intelligence, and a biblical-theological evaluation of courage.

Section 1: Negotiating Congregational Conflict

Introduction

The New Testament scriptures utilize various metaphors to describe the Body of Christ, the church. The Apostle Paul, for instance, refers to the church as a temple, a body, a family, and a bride.[46] Similarly, the Apostle Peter describes the church as a "living house," "a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a people for [God's] own possession."[47] These images of the church were later embraced and expanded upon by early ecclesiastical authorities and theologians. For example, Saint Cyprian of Carthage envisioned the church as a maternal presence, strongly asserting that "You cannot have God as your Father unless you have the church for your Mother."[48] Cyprian's exhortation suggests that

[46] 1 Cor. 3:16; Rom. 12:4-5; Eph. 5:25-27.

[47] 1 Pet. 2:5, 9.

[48] Saint Cyprian, *The Lapsed; The Unity of the Catholic Church* (Westminster, MD: Newman Press, 1957), http://archive.org/details/lapsedunityofcat0025cypr., Sec. 6.

the church, along with God the Father, is a vital nurturing force in the life of the Christian, responsible for birthing and maturing believers in their faith formation.

In addition to these metaphors, it's equally important to note that the early church quickly established robust systems to institutionalize and fulfill this vision. For instance, in the Book of Acts, the Apostles implemented policies for distributing goods and resources;[49] governance systems were developed, church officers were appointed,[50] and theological councils were convened to resolve issues of doctrine and church mission.[51] These institutional anchors, in turn, provided the essential framework for Christians to worship, build strong communal bonds, and share their faith in a highly oppositional context.[52]

Like our ancient counterparts, it is through the institutional church that "the vast majority of U.S. residents ritualize core life events such as birth, marriage, and death."[53] Furthermore, the functions of the church, including worship, prayer, and pastoral care, instill social bonds that extend across typical racial, ethnic, and socio-economic boundaries. Robert Putnam, Professor of Public Policy at Harvard University, supports this observation, stating, "Faith communities in which people worship together are arguably the single most important repository of social capital in America."[54]

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[49] Acts 2:42-47.

[50] Acts 6:1-6.

[51] Acts 15:6-29.

[52] Cf. Rodney Stark, *Rise of Christianity: A Sociologist Reconsiders History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2023).

[53] David R. Brubaker, *Promise and Peril: Understanding and Managing Change and Conflict in Congregations* (Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, 2009), 1.

[54] Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 2020), 66.

Given this positive assessment of the church's foundations and psychosocial benefits, how can we reconcile it with the prevalence of conflict within the life of the church? In their book *Mastering Conflict & Controversy*, Edward G. Dobson, Speed B. Leas, and Marshall Shelley write, "Conflict in the church is unavoidable […] The church began with a remarkable blend of close community and simmering conflict."[55] In addition to metaphors describing the unity of the church, the New Testament scriptures detail its tensions and multifaceted conflicts. For example, the Apostle Paul begins his first letter to the church at Corinth by exhorting the community to abstain from its many divisions. "I appeal to you, brothers, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgment."[56] These divisions arose from leadership disputes, social practices, and theological convictions—the same challenges we might encounter in contemporary churches.

The National Congregations Study found that approximately 28 percent of surveyed congregations experienced a conflict "for which a special meeting was called" in the previous two years, while nearly 27 percent reported a conflict that "led some people to leave the congregation" during the same period.[57] David R. Brubaker summarizes this data, observing, "Although the number of congregations facing these serial conflicts is unknown, one could safely hypothesize that the majority of U.S.

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[55] Ed Dobson, Speed Leas, and Marshall Shelley, *Mastering Conflict & Controversy*, Mastering Ministry Series (Portland, OR: Multnomah Press, 1992), 15.

[56] 1 Cor. 1:10.

[57] Mark Chaves et al., "The National Congregations Study: Background, Methods, and Selected Results," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 38, no. 4 (December 1999): 458–76.

congregations encounter significant conflict each decade."[58] While the nature of these conflicts varies, the "Faith Communities Today" Report (FACT), which surveyed over 14,000 congregations in 2001, indicates that worship expression and financial crises are among the primary causes of congregational conflict.[59] Roy W. Pneumen, Senior Consultant for the Alban Institute, identifies nine common sources of conflict in congregations. [60] These sources include:

- Disagreements about congregational values and beliefs.
- A lack of clarity about the roles and responsibilities of clergy, staff, laity, or committees.
- The role of clergy within ministry and congregational life.
- Church size dynamics and related operational procedures.
- Philosophical alignment between clergy and other church leaders.
- Change dynamics amidst pastoral transitions.
- Communication dynamics within the congregation, particularly between leadership and laity.
- Poor conflict management skills.
- Broad struggles for church resources, particularly financial.

The literature generally confirms that conflict is likely to occur in congregational settings. Despite its divine commission and promise, congregations consist of individuals who have diverse and sometimes conflicting interests, goals, needs, and ideas. Burns, Chapman, and Guthrie state,

> "Our interests can be described as deep-seated values, goals, and beliefs. Often, interests sit in the back of our consciousness, strongly yet secretly influencing our opinions and decisions. They steer us like the rudder of a ship. At other times our

[58] Brubaker, *Promise and Peril: Understanding and Managing Change and Conflict in Congregations*, 2.

[59] Carl S. Dudley and David A. Roozen, "Faith Communities Today 2000 Study | Faith Communities Today," October 3, 2009, https://faithcommunitiestoday.org/faith-communities-today-2000-study/.

[60] David B. Lott and Speed Leas, eds., *Conflict Management in Congregations* (New York, NY: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014), 45–53.

> interests propel us like the noisy motor of a speedboat, leaving large wakes that rock everyone around us."[61]

Consequently, there is an inherent tension between God's redemptive design for the church and the common, vulnerable situations it often encounters.

This tension between ideals and reality often leads to disillusionment—experienced by both leaders and congregants—and frequent accusations of hypocrisy. In his article, "The Basics of Conflict Management in Congregations," consultant Speed B. Leas shares a conversation he had with a vestry member whose congregation was "in the midst of a painful and protracted battle with the school board that ran their parish day school." Leas remembers how the vestry member—a lawyer by profession—remarked,

> 'I thought the church was different from other organizations—especially with regard to conflict' […] He went on to say that he had joined the church hoping that he would learn to love others in a more fruitful way—more profoundly influenced by the gospel. He said, 'The church should be special; there should be more forgiveness here; people ought to try harder to express love and care for one another. It seems like we have failed at all that.'[62]

Leaders often experience disillusionment as well. "Studies have found leaders spend 20-40% of the workday careening from one conflict to the next."[63] Researchers William N. Grosch and David C. Olsen note,

> Most clergy began their careers with high ideals, enormous optimism, idealism about their ability to be helpful, and a commitment to help people. They believed that the right combination of quality training, compassion, and commitment would enable them to bring healing to a wide variety of individuals. They entered the field not to make money, but to help as many individuals as possible.[64]

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[61] Burns, Chapman, and Guthrie, *The Politics of Ministry: Navigating Power Dynamics and Negotiating Interests*, 13.

[62] Lott and Leas, *Conflict Management in Congregations*, 20.

[63] Robert Feirsen and Seth Weitzman, "Conflict-Competent Leadership," 38.

[64] Grosch and Olsen, "Clergy Burnout: An Integrative Approach."

As well-intentioned as these desires are, many ministerial efforts are met with resistance or apathy, leading to discouragement and, potentially, burnout and despair. Grosch and Olsen conclude, "Most [pastors] never dreamed that so much time would get caught up in dealing with committee meetings, bureaucracy, difficult parishioners, and routine, boring matters. This is not the career for which they went to school. In addition, actually being helpful turned out to be more difficult than they anticipated."[65]

Research indicates that conflict is a major reason clergy contemplate leaving the ministry. Shaun Joynt, a Professor of Practical Theology at North-West University in South Africa, states: "In short, conflict contributes to the shortage of clergy. Their experience over time either supports or diminishes the call into ministry, with some considering leaving because of the accumulation of conflicts, struggles, unmet expectations, and difficult people."[66]

Conflict and Its Sources

Given the prevalence of conflict within the church, social institutions, and marketplace, researchers Capobiano, David, and Kraus conclude, "It is a rare organization indeed that would not benefit from more systematic attention to how conflict is created and resolved among its members."[67] To pursue this inquiry, the literature offers a range of definitions and frameworks. For instance, Runde and Flanagan define conflict

[65] David C. Olsen and William M. Grosch, "Clergy Burnout: A Self Psychology and Systems Perspective," *The Journal of Pastoral Care* 45, no. 3 (1991): 297–304.

[66] Shaun Joynt, "Exodus of Clergy: 'When the Fight Is Just Not Worth It Anymore' – The Role of Conflict in Responding to the Call," *In Die Skriflig/In Luce Verbi* 52, no. 1 (July 23, 2018): 3, https://doi.org/10.4102/ids.v52i1.2331.

[67] Capobianco, David, and Kraus, "Good Conflict, Bad Conflict: How to Have One Without the Other," 36.

as "Any situation in which people have incompatible interests, goals, principles, or feelings."[68] A similar definition is embraced by Capobiano, David, and Kraus.[69] Here, conflict is seen as a dynamic process involving behaviors such as arguments, disagreements, aggression, or avoidance.

Dean Tjosvold, a Professor of Management at Lingnan University, suggests that this understanding of conflict has overly emphasized its negative aspects rather than identifying the many constructive ways conflict can contribute to individual learning and organizational performance.[70] Instead, Tjosvold proposes, "Defining conflict as incompatible actions is a much stronger foundation for research than defining it as opposing interests." This approach, Tjosvold argues, centers on team decisions and enables members with differing goals or actions to express their various reasons for the collective action their team should undertake.[71]

Leas and Kittlaus frame conflict dynamics in a similar way. They state, "Another way to look at conflict is to see it as behavior that produces a barrier to another person's attempt to meet his needs."[72] Johannes Zimmermann also refers to this conflict theory, noting, "The characteristics of social conflict are that (a) in a social structure, two opposing tendencies of action occur, and (b) these are experienced as alternative ways to

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[68] Craig E. Runde and Tim A. Flanagan, *Becoming a Conflict Competent Leader: How You and Your Organization Can Manage Conflict Effectively*, 2nd ed. (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2013), 25.

[69] Capobianco, Davis, and Kraus, "Good Conflict, Bad Conflict: How to Have One without the Other," 36.

[70] Dean Tjosvold, Alfred S. H. Wong, and Nancy Yi Feng Chen, "Managing Conflict for Effective Leadership and Organizations," in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Business and Management*, August 28, 2019, 3, https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190224851.013.240.

[71] Tjosvold, Wong, and Chen, 4.

[72] Leas and Kittlaus, *Church Fights: Managing Conflict in the Local Church*, 29.

achieve a goal."[73] In these perspectives, conflict arises when each competing side views the actions of others as obstacles to their own. Thus, like the definitions above, incompatible actions, ideas, and values strive to occupy the same space concurrently.

Other viewpoints enhance and broaden the definitions above. They consider the wide range of conflicting interests and activities, as well as the psychological and emotional motivations behind these conflicting actions. For example, in her book *When Christ's Body Is Broken*, Leanna K. Fuller, an Associate Professor at Pittsburgh Seminary, writes,

> My thesis is that at the heart of congregational conflict lies anxiety triggered by encounters with difference. I argue that when persons encounter significant differences between themselves and others, they often feel that their sense of self or identity is threatened. In turn, this experience of threat generates anxiety.[74]

Interestingly, Lot and Leas observe that "About 46 percent of the time we encounter situations that do have a high degree of interpersonal difficulty and emotional conflict."[75] This suggests that conflict is not merely a matter of "content" but also involves emotional processes. Heifetz and Linsky offer a similar perspective as they diagnose conflict concerning adaptive change efforts initiated by leaders within organizational contexts. They write, "Adaptive work creates risk, conflict, and instability because addressing the issues underlying adaptive problems may involve overturning

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[73] Johannes Zimmermann, "Change, Grief, and Conflict in Church Development in East Germany," *International Journal of Practical Theology* 13, no. 1 (January 2009): 54, https://doi.org/10.1515/IJPT.2009.4.

[74] Leanna K. Fuller, *When Christ's Body Is Broken: Anxiety, Identity, and Conflict in Congregations* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2016). xii.

[75] Lott and Leas, *Conflict Management in Congregations*, 15.

deep and entrenched norms."[76] This insight draws important attention to the connection between interpersonal conflict and an individual's attempt to prevent anxiety when core elements of identity are threatened.

To summarize, the literature presents a broad array of conflict definitions. The consensus is that conflict arises from differing positions of opposition, stemming from varying interests or actions. Additionally, conflict can also emerge from real or perceived threats to one's identity. When an individual's identity is threatened, anxiety follows, leading to various forms of conflicting behavior.

Conflict Perspectives: Conflict as Process

Researchers Capobianco, Davis, and Kraus have developed what they call the Conflict Dynamics Model (CDM). The model monitors the progression of a developing conflict from "precipitating events" or "hot-button" issues to conflict type, and then to various constructive or destructive behavioral responses. They observe,

> The key to successful conflict management in organizations does not lie in preventing all conflict, because not only would this be impossible, it would also be counterproductive if it were possible. Instead, the ultimate goal is to shape and guide conflict as to minimize its hurtful and destructive forms, and to encourage its more positive, constructive forms.[77]

In their model, Capobianco, Davis, and Kraus differentiate between "cognitive conflict" and "emotional conflict." Cognitive conflict refers to the relatively healthy, task-focused forms of conflict, while emotional conflict, in contrast, is more volatile,

[76] Heifetz and Linsky, *Leadership on the Line: Staying Alive through the Dangers of Leading*, 20.

[77] Capobianco, David, and Kraus, "Good Conflict, Bad Conflict: How to Have One Without the Other," 32.

personal, and destructive.[78] These pathways are largely shaped by the precipitating event. The authors define a precipitating event as anything that places individuals' interests in apparent opposition to one another.[79] The initial moments of a disagreement are disproportionately significant to the eventual outcome; thoughts, emotions, decisions, and behaviors at the earliest stages can lead either to constructive and beneficial forms of conflict or to destructive and painful behavioral spirals. Responses to conflict can be constructive or destructive and may manifest as either active or passive. For instance, active-constructive responses may include perspective-taking, creating solutions, expressing emotions, or reaching out. In contrast, active-destructive responses might involve winning at all costs, displaying anger, demeaning others, and retaliating.

The value of the CDM model lies in its ability to conceptualize conflict as a process. This perspective does not diminish the events or content of the conflict; rather, it enables leaders to cultivate a deeper appreciation for how people's perceptions, emotions, and behaviors affect the way conflict unfolds.[80] Additionally, it helps participants, especially leaders, to comprehend their role in the conflictive process. Runde and Flanagan state,

> It is not enough, though, just to understand the [conflict] concepts. A second step is to become aware of how an individual's personal preferences and approaches differ from those of others and to reflect on how they can become a source for conflict or a basis for resolution.[81]

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[78] Capobianco, Davis, and Kraus, 32.

[79] Capobianco, Davis, and Kraus, 32.

[80] Runde and Flanagan, *Becoming a Conflict Competent Leader: How You and Your Organization Can Manage Conflict Effectively*, 45.

[81] Runde and Flanagan, 45.

Conflict Perspectives: Organizational Change Dynamics

The literature identifies change dynamics as a significant factor related to organizational conflict. Paul DiMaggio and Walter Powell define organizational change as "a change in formal structure, organizational culture, and goals, programs, or mission."[82] Supporting this definition, Brubaker notes, "When an organization changes its structure, culture, or strategies, we can declare that organizational change has occurred."[83] Given the fluid nature of congregational life, organizational change is common. Frequent and significant transformations may include shifts in congregational size, worship practices, church culture, and/or formal leadership transitions.

According to Heifetz and Linsky, these change processes have one thing in common: they are adaptive in nature. Heifetz and Linsky differentiate between a technical problem and an adaptive challenge. A technical problem is one where the problem definition is clear, and a solution readily exists within the organization's functional repertoire; moreover, it relies on and utilizes current know-how, and is executed by institutional authorities.[84] Bolsinger elaborates on the typical technical problems encountered in a ministry context, noting,

> For pastors, typical technical problems include preaching effective and faithful sermons; leading the people of God in worship, prayer, and devotion; offering pastoral care; managing the church program, ministry, and budget; counseling; and teaching the doctrines of faith.[85]

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[82] Paul J. DiMaggio and Walter W. Powell, "The Iron Cage Revisited: Institutional Isomorphism and Collective Rationality in Organizational Fields," *American Sociological Review* 48, no. 2 (1983): 149, https://doi.org/10.2307/2095101.

[83] Brubaker, *Promise and Peril: Understanding and Managing Change and Conflict in Congregations*, 14.

[84] Heifetz and Linsky, *Leadership on the Line: Staying Alive through the Dangers of Leading*, 18.

[85] Bolsinger, *Canoeing the Mountains*, 41.

Technical problems are "deeply important and at times difficult tasks. They require education, experience, and expertise. They are critical to the life, health, and faith of a community and of individuals."[86] However, adaptive challenges take organizations and their constituencies "off-script" and outside the bounds of what is familiar and comfortable. The problem definition within an adaptive challenge is not immediately clear, and technical solutions are not available.

Heifetz and Linsky summarize the adaptive process as such:

> [They] are not amenable to authoritative expertise or standard operating procedures […] They require experiments, new discoveries, and adjustments from numerous places in the organization or community. Without learning new ways—changing attitudes, values, and behaviors—people cannot make the adaptive leap necessary to thrive in the new environment.[87]

The literature indicates that adaptive challenges are integral to leadership. Heifetz contends that if a leader can affirmatively answer the question—*"Does making progress on this problem require changes in people's values, attitudes, or habits of behavior?"*—then they are likely navigating adaptive challenges.[88] Since adaptive challenges directly confront deeply held beliefs and values, any change or disruption to the cultural norms or equilibrium within the organization often leads to increased anxiety or conflict. Heifetz and Linsky suggest that this may involve overturning deeply rooted norms. Therefore, effective leadership requires disturbing people—but at a rate they can absorb."[89]

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[86] Bolsinger, 41.

[87] Heifetz and Linsky, *Leadership on the Line: Staying Alive through the Dangers of Leading*, 13.

[88] Ronald A. Heifetz, *Leadership without Easy Answers* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 1994), 87.

[89] Heifetz and Linsky, *Leadership on the Line: Staying Alive through the Dangers of Leading*, 20.

Within the adaptive context, what creates conflict is not necessarily the change itself but the perceived sense of loss because of the change. Author and executive consultant Jack Shitama notes, "By definition, all change is loss. The new reality means the old reality is gone […] And with loss comes grief."[90] Jaco J. Hamman, Assistant Professor of Pastoral Care at Western Theological Seminary, agrees with Shitama's observation. He writes, "Grief is the normal emotional, spiritual, physical, and relational reaction to the experience of loss and change."[91] Leaders must then realize that others will experience the adaptive process as a threat to their well-being. Hamman writes, "Your congregation will experience a vocal or silent grief reaction with every change you intentionally initiate or that occurs 'naturally' in the life of the church."[92]

A leader may believe they are acting for the organization's benefit. However, their benevolent intentions are likely to be perceived by their followers as challenges to both their individual and collective identities. "You appear dangerous to people when you question their values, beliefs, or habits of a lifetime […] Although you may see a promising future of progress and gain, people will see with equal passion the losses you are asking them to sustain."[93]

Since adaptive change leads to loss and grief, it's understandable and unavoidable that a leader's efforts are often met with resistance. The literature describes this resistance

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[90] Jack Shitama, *If You Met My Family, You'd Understand: A Family Systems Primer* (Earlville, MD: Charis Works, 2020), 21.

[91] Jaco J. Hamman, *When Steeples Cry: Leading Congregations through Loss and Change* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2005), 12.

[92] Hamman, 12.

[93] Heifetz and Linsky, *Leadership on the Line: Staying Alive through the Dangers of Leading*, 12.

in various ways. For instance, Heifetz and Linsky discuss what they call "Faces of Danger." These "Faces of Danger," which encompass marginalization, diversion, attack, and seduction, seek to "shut down leadership in order to preserve what they have."[94] Other terms include "sabotage,"[95] "assassination,"[96] "patient noncompliance,"[97] and "work avoidance mechanisms."[98] "These forms of resistance reduce the disequilibrium that would arise if individuals were to confront the adaptive issue. They strive to remove the adaptive issues from consideration, maintain the familiar, restore order, and protect people from the hardships of adaptive work."[99]

Pastoral Leadership and Conflict Management

Leanna K. Fuller notes that "Conflict in faith communities is a ubiquitous feature of contemporary religious life."[100] Despite its prevalent nature, most pastoral leaders are unprepared to manage the diverse conflicts they will face. This stems from two main factors. First, there is uncertainty about the roles they fulfill, whether formally or informally. Second, pastors often lack essential skills needed to resolve conflict constructively.

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[94] Ronald A. Heifetz and Marty Linsky, "Surviving Leadership," *Harvard Management Update* 7, no. 3 (March 2002): 3.

[95] Friedman, Treadwell, and Beal, *A Failure of Nerve*.

[96] Heifetz, *Leadership without Easy Answers*, 235.

[97] Heifetz and Linsky, *Leadership on the Line: Staying Alive through the Dangers of Leading*, 12.

[98] Heifetz, *Leadership without Easy Answers*, 37.

[99] Heifetz and Linsky, "Surviving Leadership," 3.

[100] Leanna K. Fuller, "Anxiety, Emotions, and Encounters With Difference: Exploring the Roots of Conflict in Congregations," *Journal of Religious Leadership* 13, no. 2 (Fall 2014).

One of the challenges in managing organizational conflict is defining the leader's role. In fact, leaders often hold multiple or dual roles in a conflict situation. For instance, Hugh F. Halverstadt notes that the pastor is frequently one of the "principals" in any church conflict. He writes, "A principal in a church conflict is a party whose interests—purposes, needs, desires, responsibilities, and/or commitments—are in collision with those of at least one other party. Principals are involved in a conflict because they have stakes in the differing issues. It is the differences between principals that must be resolved for the conflict to be settled."[101] Halverstadt further distinguishes between three different types of principals: structural, cultural, and political:

> When parties are principals because of institutional responsibilities, they are structural principals. When parties are principals because of their status, they are cultural principals […] When people are principals primarily because of their ideological or social group memberships, they are political principals.[102]

Distinguishing between types of principals is necessary because of the power dynamics they bring into the conflict. For example, a pastor who is relatively new to a congregation but is immediately thrust into a high-conflict moment is a structural principal with formal power. "Formal power is a person's capacity to act and to influence others through socially-constructed relationships due to a position."[103]

Despite a pastor's formal position, cultural and political principals can have more influence via their relational power within the congregation. Researchers Bob Burns, Tasha D. Chapman, and Donald C. Guthrie write,

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[101] Halverstadt, *Managing Church Conflict*, 46.

[102] Halverstadt, 46–47.

[103] Burns, Chapman, and Guthrie, *The Politics of Ministry: Navigating Power Dynamics and Negotiating Interests*, 39.

> Relational power is the capacity to act and to influence others based on interpersonal associations between people apart from roles and titles. People gain relational power when they build long-term, strong relationships. This implicit and relationally-based power can be even stronger than formal power. Through the development of trust and respect in relationships, people earn the right to be heard and thus gain relational power to lead.[104]

A critical function of conflict management is discerning its principals and their corresponding levels of power. Again, Burns et al. note,

> Ministry leaders must be sensitive to and proactive about the relationships they have with other staff, officers, participants, and people in the community. Those who are effective in ministry tend to be aware of the strength and health of relationships within their organization and the effect those relationships have on their overall ministry.[105]

What complicates a leader's position within a conflict, however, is when they must serve as both a structural principal and the conflict's manager or "referee." While in some situations it is advisable to seek a third party to act as a conflict manager, in most cases, it is more practical for the senior leader to fulfill this role. Serving in this dual capacity can create ambiguity and dissonance, particularly in situations involving interpersonal relationships where the emotional intensity of the parties undermines their rational capabilities.[106] Halverstadt notes, "Often the greatest difficulty of principals who become managers lies in their abandoning their own issues in order to be 'neutral' managers."

This, of course, is a false proposition. "A principal/manager may abandon his or her interests in exchange for other principals' cooperation. Or a principal/manager may

[104] Burns, Chapman, and Guthrie, 43.

[105] Burns, Chapman, and Guthrie, 46.

[106] Halverstadt, *Managing Church Conflict*, 51–52.

abandon her or his interests to appease other principals. Whenever a principal/manager abandons his or her interests, however, a false peace results. One's interests do not dissipate. The solution is for a principal/manager to fight first for fair fighting, then to fight for his or her interests along with the other principals."[107] Gaining clarity on role and responsibility is critical to a leader who is serving as both a structural principal and conflict manager.

Considering the various leadership dynamics at play—the nature of disagreements, the stakeholders involved, and the many roles leaders must assume—it is easy to recognize the inherent challenges and tensions that leaders navigate due to their positions. Leas writes,

> Clergy and other paid staff often find it difficult to be helpful managers of conflict in a disrupted situation because their high stake in the solution to the problems prompts them to function as an advocate rather than as a facilitator. Further, the clergyperson is often the one about whom the rest of the organization is fighting. The pastor finds it difficult, if not impossible, to get and keep enough distance to be helpful as the leader of the process for healing unless it happens on his or her terms.[108]

Therefore, it is essential for pastoral leaders to recognize their limitations and frequently conflicting interests. This necessitates both self-awareness and a high level of conflict competence. These competencies encompass both personal and interpersonal aspects, along with a range of technical skills.

In their book *Building Conflict Competent Teams*, authors Craig E. Runde and Tim A. Flanagan emphasize the significance of trust as a vital competency for effectively negotiating conflict. They state, "Without trust, intentions are misunderstood, aspersions

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[107] Halverstadt, 52.

[108] Lott and Leas, *Conflict Management in Congregations*, 21.

are cast, attributions are made, and assumptions become real. With trust, there is seldom 'intention invention' among teammates. Misunderstandings, when they occur, are investigated. Therefore, aspersions and attributions are seldom cast or made.

Assumptions are explicitly stated, and when they are incorrect, they are quickly resolved."[109] The reason trust is essential to conflict resolution is that it demonstrates a posture of vulnerability free from a predetermined outcome.

Researchers Roger C. Mayer and Mark B. Gavin define trust as "a person's willingness to be vulnerable with another, even though he or she cannot control the other person's responses."[110] Author and leadership consultant Stephen M. R. Covey concludes, "The ability to establish, grow, extend, and restore trust with all stakeholders—customers, business partners, investors, and coworkers—is the key leadership competency of the new global economy."[111] Conversely, "untrustworthy people are exploitative, manipulative, and dishonest […] Either deliberately or indirectly, untrustworthy individuals undermine others' efforts, success, authority, and feelings of self-worth."[112]

As leaders build or sustain trust with other principals involved in the conflict, their ability to effectively manage the situation increases significantly. Trust is largely

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[109] Craig E. Runde and Tim A. Flanagan, *Building Conflict Competent Teams* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2008), 15.

[110] Roger C. Mayer and Mark B. Gavin, "Trust in Management and Performance: Who Minds the Shop While the Employees Watch the Boss?," *Academy of Management Journal* 48, no. 5 (October 2005): 874–88, https://doi.org/10.5465/amj.2005.18803928.

[111] Stephen M. R. Covey and Rebecca R. Merrill, *The Speed of Trust: The One Thing That Changes Everything* (New York, NY: Free Press, 2008), 21.

[112] Sal Capobianco, Mark H. Davis, and Linda A. Kraus, *Managing Conflict Dynamics: A Practical Approach*, 6th ed. (St. Petersburg, FL: Eckerd College Press, 2013), 103.

based on two key factors: personal credibility and behavior. Researcher Dr. Danya Moore identifies the following core competencies essential for conflict leadership: conflict comprehension, calm, compassion, curiosity, creativity, communication, commitment, and courage.[113] Seven of the eight competencies listed by Dr. Moore are personal or interpersonal in nature, which, when established and applied, secure the trust of others. Similarly, Stephen Covey highlights "integrity, intent, capabilities, and results" as the four pillars of personal credibility.[114]

In addition to trust and credibility, emotional intelligence is a crucial competency in conflict management, especially the ability to "slow down" and understand what is happening as the conflict process unfolds. Runde and Flanagan highlight the importance of gaining perspective, not only regarding one's thoughts, emotions, and interests but also those of others engaged in the process. "Much of the literature on conflict management focuses on how people should behave when they face conflict. While this is important, a necessary prerequisite is the ability to manage one's emotions. As long as a person is under the grip of strong negative emotions he or she will find it difficult to use constructive conflict responses.[115]

In their book *The Emotionally Intelligent Manager,* researchers David R. Caruso and Peter Salovey articulate four competencies essential for leading with emotional intelligence. They state, "Emotional intelligence, then, consists of these four abilities: to

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[113] Danya Moore, "Conflict Competent Leadership," Mediators Beyond Borders International, accessed February 14, 2024, https://mediatorsbeyondborders.org/what-we-do/conflict-literacy-framework/leadership/.

[114] Covey and Merrill, *The Speed of Trust: The One Thing That Changes Everything*.

[115] Tim Flanagan and Craig Runde, "Creating Conflict Competent Organizations," *Chief Learning Officer* 10, no. 6 (June 2011): 64–69.

identify how people feel, to *use* emotions to help you think, to *understand* the causes of emotions, and to include and *manage* emotions in your decision making to make optimal choices in life."[116] Together, these competencies enable leaders to listen more effectively and ask better questions, assess how emotions affect their own thinking and that of other individuals, and analyze the causes of specific emotions that have contributed to the conflict. Often, the group's feelings are at the heart of the issue; they hold the key to the challenges the participants face.[117]

Conflict Resolution and Outcomes

In 2005, an article from *Leadership* surveyed 506 pastors regarding conflict dynamics in their churches. The findings revealed a range of both negative and positive conflict outcomes. Negative outcomes included damaged relationships (68%), a decline in attendance (32%), and a noticeable loss of trust in church leadership (31%). Positive outcomes featured a perceived increase in wisdom (72%), a clearer church vision (42%), and relational reconciliation (16%).[118] Broadly speaking, the literature supports a similar spectrum of outcomes.[119]

Considering the variety of potential outcomes, what expectations should leaders and stakeholders hold as they work toward a resolution? Interestingly, Edwin Friedman

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[116] David Caruso and Peter Salovey, *The Emotionally Intelligent Manager: How to Develop and Use the Four Key Emotional Skills of Leadership* (San Francisco, Calif. [Great Britain]: Jossey-Bass, 2004), 26.

[117] Caruso and Salovey, 29.

[118] Eric Reed, "Leadership Surveys Church Conflict," Christianity Today, October 1, 2004, https://www.christianitytoday.com/2004/10/leadership-surveys-church-conflict/.

[119] Leas and Kittlaus, *Church Fights: Managing Conflict in the Local Church*.

observes, “Most crises cannot by their very nature be resolved (that is, fixed); they must simply be managed until they work their way through.”[120] As mentioned earlier, organizational change leads to loss, and loss results in grief. Therefore, achieving a resolution that is equally satisfying for all parties is unlikely. Bernard Mayer, a professor at the Werner Institute, Creighton University, writes,

> The image of disputants coming together to consider a major conflict, arriving at an agreement that adequately satisfies their essential concerns, and thereby fully resolving the conflict suggests a very misleading goal for conflict interveners. Most serious conflicts do not have such neat resolutions. Often the disputants cannot even imagine an outcome that would constitute such a complete and liberating resolution.[121]

That said, it is possible for conflict-competent leaders and well-intentioned stakeholders to collaborate to maximize positive outcomes while minimizing adverse consequences. Researchers Robert Feirsen and Seth Weitzman state, “As groups flex their ‘conflict agility’ muscles, they become more adept practitioners of collaborative problem solving.”[122]

Collaborative problem solving can lead to numerous potential benefits. Runde and Flanagan identify several, including “Creativity and problem solving,” “Improved social relationships,” and “Reflective thinking and open communication.”[123] Thus, a shift in mindset is likely necessary for both leaders and stakeholders. Total resolution and

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[120] Edwin H. Friedman, Margaret M. Treadwell, and Edward W. Beal, *A Failure of Nerve: Leadership in the Age of the Quick Fix*, 10th ed. (New York, NY: Church Publishing, 2017), 29.

[121] Bernard S. Mayer, *The Dynamics of Conflict: A Guide to Engagement and Intervention*, 2nd ed (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2012), 124.

[122] Robert Feirsen and Seth Weitzman, “Conflict-Competent Leadership,” *Kappan* 105, no. 4 (December 2023): 40.

[123] Runde and Flanagan, *Becoming a Conflict Competent Leader: How You and Your Organization Can Manage Conflict Effectively*, 32.

satisfaction for all parties may be impossible. However, what ensures positive outcomes is the group's mutual collaboration and willingness to pursue creative solutions to the challenges at hand. Mayer notes, "Resolution has many aspects, and serious conflicts are seldom resolved simply. Resolution occurs through various activities over time, usually with many setbacks along the way."[124]

[124] Mayer, *The Dynamics of Conflict: A Guide to Engagement and Intervention*, 124.

Section 2: Conflict and Family Systems Theory

Overview of Bowen Family Systems Theory

Bowen Family Systems Theory (BFST) was developed and formalized by Dr. Murray Bowen (1913-1990) in the mid-twentieth century and provides "one of the first comprehensive theories of family systems functioning."[125] Trained as a psychiatrist within the psychoanalytic tradition, Bowen, during his time at the Menninger Clinic (1946-1954), the National Institute of Mental Health (1954-1959), and finally at Georgetown University's Department of Psychiatry (1959-1990), increasingly shifted from individual-focused therapy to an "appreciation of the dimensions of families as systems."[126] Perhaps the key insight of systems theory is the recognition that "Each component, rather than having its own discrete identity or input, operates as part of a larger whole."[127] Within this framework, the focus is on identifying how various elements within the system "mutually maintain their interaction, not who causes what."[128]

For Bowen and his later interpreters, all forms of life function within stated "emotional systems." Edwin Friedman, a protégé of Bowen, writes that an emotional system refers to any group of people or other colonized forms of protoplasm (herds, flocks, troops, packs, schools, swarms, and aggregates) that have developed emotional

[125] Jenny Brown, "Bowen Family Systems Theory and Practice: Illustration and Critique," *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Family Therapy* 20, no. 2 (June 1999): 94, https://doi.org/10.1002/j.1467-8438.1999.tb00363.x.

[126] Brown, 94.

[127] Friedman, *Generation to Generation*, 15.

[128] Peter L. Steinke, *How Your 21st-Century Church Family Works: Understanding Congregations as Emotional Systems*, Second edition (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2021), 8.

interdependencies to the point where the resulting system through which the parts are connected (administratively, physically, or emotionally) has evolved its own principles of organization.[129] Consequently, instead of viewing pathology primarily through the lens of autonomous, individual actions, BFST argues that human responses are driven by the dynamics of the emotional systems to which they belong. Moreover, our reactions to one another are instinctive and largely outside our conscious awareness.

Psychiatrist and clergy consultant Roberta M. Gilbert writes, "Much of the behavior, thinking and feeling of any member of the emotional unit such as a nuclear family, is actually determined by the togetherness of the group."[130] Herrington, Taylor, and Creech refer to this phenomenon as our "wired togetherness."[131] They suggest that an emotional system resembles a gravitational or planetary field. In this scenario, one cannot necessarily see gravity nor the emotional field; however, "We can infer the presence of both gravity and the emotional field by the predictable ways planets and people behave in reaction to one another."[132] In the case of the family, the functioning of the members within the field influences the emotional responses of each person.

BFST suggests that behavioral responses become predictable within a system as anxiety levels rise. Herrington et al. define anxiety as "Our response to threat, whether real or perceived. The response is physiological; it is chemical. It occurs because of brain

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[129] Edwin H. Friedman, *The Myth of the Shiksa and Other Essays* (New York, NY: Seabury Books, 2008), 163.

[130] Roberta M. Gilbert, *The Cornerstone Concept: In Leadership, in Life* (Falls Church, VA: Leading Systems Press, 2008), 5.

[131] Jim Herrington, Trisha Taylor, and R. Robert Creech, *The Leader's Journey: Accepting the Call to Personal and Congregational Transformation*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2020), 40.

[132] Herrington, Taylor, and Creech, 41.

activity that is outside our awareness; we never even have to think about it."[133] The literature notes that anxiety within systems can be either acute or chronic. Acute anxiety involves a real threat. In this scenario, anxiety serves a positive function, moving us into a fight or flight state to react to a given stressor. Once the stressor is alleviated, we can return to a state of well-being. Chronic anxiety, however, is different. "When we are experiencing chronic anxiety […] we merely imagine or distort the threat. It is not real. Consequently, it is not time-limited either; it does not simply go away."[134] "A key generator of anxiety in families is the perception of either too much closeness or too great a distance in a relationship […] If family members cannot think through their responses to relationship dilemmas and instead react anxiously to perceived emotional demands, a state of chronic anxiety or reactivity may be established."[135]

The literature suggests every emotional system sustains a variable state of chronic anxiety.[136] Herrington et al. write, "Some incident or issue may trigger anxiety in a system, but once underway, the reactivity develops a life of its own, independent of the triggering mechanism."[137] The amount of reactivity, however, is dependent on two variables within the emotional system—e.g., "The level of emotional maturity (or differentiation of self) and the level of anxiety."[138] R. Robert Creech suggests, "Systems

[133] Herrington, Taylor, and Creech, 44.

[134] Herrington, Taylor, and Creech, 44.

[135] Brown, "Bowen Family Systems Theory and Practice," 95.

[136] Creating a Healthier Church, 42, The Leader's Journey, 45.

[137] Herrington, Taylor, and Creech, *The Leader's Journey*, 45.

[138] R. Robert Creech, *Family Systems and Congregational Life: A Map for Ministry* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2019), 18.

with more emotionally mature members (capacity) can manage more anxiety (content) before producing a symptom. Less emotionally mature members of the system are more vulnerable to symptoms when anxiety rises."[139]

As anxiety rises within the system, members default to a basic repertoire of responses or processes to regulate the disequilibrium they are experiencing. These processes include fight, flight, over-functioning, under-functioning, and/or engaging in emotional triangles. Creech suggests these processes are a prelude to impending family conflict. "When [conflict] emerges in the face of rising anxiety in a family or other emotional unit, its very presence increases the anxiety. So things can quickly begin to spiral out of control."[140]

BFST expert Ronald W. Richardson observes that church communities are particularly ripe for chronic anxiety. In his book *Polarization and the Healthier Church*, Richardson suggests factors that affect the spread of anxiety in a congregation.[141] He lists:

- The severity and magnitude of the stressor
- The degree of perceived threat
- The state and condition of the relationship network in the church
- The average level of fusion of the group members
- The ability of leaders to act in a more mature and non-reactive manner in the face of pressures that are feeding anxiety.

[139] Creech, 18–19.

[140] Creech, 22.

[141] Ronald W. Richardson, *Polarization and the Healthier Church: Applying Bowen Family Systems Theory to Conflict and Change in Society and Congregational Life* (Tucson, AZ: Ronald W. Richardson, 2012), 37.

At this point, BFST proffers a contrast and departure from standard conflict management. As we've seen above, conflict management, in general, is often *content-oriented*; its focus concerns negotiating competing interests, values, and beliefs. However, from a systems perspective, this addresses a conflict's symptoms, not its fundamental source. Creech adds, "Since anxiety drives conflict, even if we suppress the conflict around the current issue, another issue will soon arise to take its place."[142]

From a systems perspective, the conflict is largely an issue of *process* rather than *content*. Shitama underscores the relevance of this thinking. He writes, "What's important is that the way people respond helps us to understand the processes at work in the system. And understanding these processes can help us to be most effective as a leader."[143] Herrington et al. make a similar observation, noting the leadership benefits of "thinking in systems" and "watching the process." They write, "This way of thinking [e.g. observing emotional systems and processes] requires learning to recognize how anxiety holds chronic symptoms in place and how each person in the system has a role to play in keeping things in balance."[144] "The main goal of BFST is to reduce chronic anxiety by 1) facilitating awareness of how the emotional system functions; and 2) increasing levels of differentiation, where the focus is on making changes for the self rather than on trying to change others."[145]

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[142] Creech, *Family Systems and Congregational Life: A Map for Ministry*, 22.

[143] Shitama, *Anxious Church, Anxious People: How to Lead Change in an Age of Anxiety*, 103.

[144] Herrington, Taylor, and Creech, *The Leader's Journey*, 58.

[145] Brown, "Bowen Family Systems Theory and Practice," 95.

Self-differentiation and Leadership

Within human emotional systems, there are two oppositional forces—the individuality of self, and the togetherness pull of the group. Each force exerts a pull on our attention and energy, and within each member, there is an individuality/togetherness balance. Gilbert notes in some persons, the balance is pulled more towards togetherness, while in others, it is oriented towards individuality.[146] "If the pull is towards togetherness, the person is less able to think for self and more tied into what the group thinks."[147] However, the individuality force allows one to maintain a solid self and be in touch with relationships while not overly bound to them.

Between these two forces, Bowen scholars suggest that "Most of us are balanced more towards togetherness (and that immaturity brings in most of our own troubles)."[148] If the togetherness force is disproportionally experienced within an individual or system, "There is more anxiety and more tendency to take on the anxiety of others […] At times of higher anxiety, this person is guided more by trying to feel good and by relationship influences and considerations than by objective reality."[149]

Within systems theory, a host of terms—including togetherness, fusion, herding, immaturity, and undifferentiated—are used to "Describe the automatic drive to join with others in relationships, being less of an individual, able to think and act for self."[150]

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[146] Gilbert, *The Cornerstone Concept: In Leadership, In Life*, 6.

[147] Gilbert, 6.

[148] Gilbert, 7.

[149] Gilbert, 6.

[150] Gilbert, 5.

Edwin Freidman wrote, “The universal problem for all partnerships, marital or otherwise, is not getting closer; it [is] preserving self in a close relationship.”[151] He also suggests that preserving the self in a close relationship is difficult because of the emotional system’s drive to promote homeostasis. If a member overly self-defines, the system will exert togetherness forces to bring the individual back in line with the group. Friedman writes, “The chronically anxious, herding family almost seems to develop a ‘self’ of its own to which everyone is expected to adapt. As its regression deepens, it will turn the togetherness principle into the supreme goal that rules every member and transcends all other values.”[152]

So what role does the leader play within the system, especially concerning conflict situations? First, the leader must realize that they belong to the system they lead. Herrington et al. suggest leaders often identify the problem as “out there”—“in the external environment or in the behavior of the people within the organization.”[153] From a system’s perspective, however, leaders must ask two fundamental questions. First, “What is my role in keeping this problem in place?” Second, “How can I change my role?”[154] This observation suggests a leader’s functioning and position within the system play a significant role in conflict outcomes.

Edwin Friedman notes leaders can serve as a modifying presence in the systems to which they belong. He draws an analogy to a transformer within an electrical circuit.

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[151] Friedman, Treadwell, and Beal, *A Failure of Nerve*, 8–9.

[152] Friedman, Treadwell, and Beal, 74.

[153] Herrington, Taylor, and Creech, *The Leader’s Journey*, 58.

[154] Herrington, Taylor, and Creech, 58.

"Transformers," Friedman writes, "can activate or deactivate a circuit that runs through them."[155] In other words, like transformers, leaders, through their own presence, can modify anxiety within a system depending on how they react. He remarks, "Reactive leaders function as a step-up transformer."[156] That is, through their presence and reactivity to the emotional processes at play, leaders can elevate and exacerbate the anxiety within the system. Conversely, Friedman notes, leaders also have the capacity to be a "step-down transformer." Here, leaders "Function in such a way that lets the current go through [them] without zapping [them] or fusing [them] to the rest of the circuit."[157] Richardson writes similarly, "The job of effective church leaders is to help keep down the level of anxiety in the emotional system of the congregation […] They do this *primarily* by managing their own anxiety, and then, secondarily, by staying in meaningful contact with other key players in the situation."[158]

Richardson's final observation—e.g. managing oneself and maintaining meaningful connections with others—touches on the core of BFST by highlighting one of its main principles: self-differentiation. Gilbert points out that among BFST's eight core concepts, "Seven are concerned with describing the characteristics of the family or group. The scale of differentiation is the only one that considers in depth those of the

[155] Friedman, Treadwell, and Beal, *A Failure of Nerve*, 246.

[156] Friedman, Treadwell, and Beal, 246.

[157] Friedman, Treadwell, and Beal, 246.

[158] Ronald W. Richardson, *Creating a Healthier Church: Family Systems Theory, Leadership, and Congregational Life*, Creative Pastoral Care and Counseling Series (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1996), 51.

individual."[159] The primary aim of this concept is to separate the self from one's emotional system while still remaining emotionally connected to it.

Self-differentiation has been defined in various ways within the Bowen tradition. For example, Friedman defines it as "The lifelong process of striving to keep one's being in balance through the reciprocal external and internal processes of self-definition and self-regulation."[160] Herrington et al. define self-differentiation as "The effort to define oneself, to control oneself, to become a more responsible person, and to permit others to be themselves as well."[161]

Gilbert writes that within an anxious environment, "Humans […] vary in their ability to adapt to all that life brings."[162] Under acute or chronic anxiety those less adept at self-differentiation are more personally fused into their relationships. They also demonstrate a fusion between their emotional (automatic) and intellectual functioning. She notes, "The more we operate in relationship fusions, the greater the anxiety load affecting intellectual functioning."[163] Alternatively, those who demonstrate more significant degrees of self-differentiation give up less of themselves into relationships. "They also have more ability to separate their emotional and their intellectual functioning. They have more ability to separate thinking from feeling, and to choose

[159] Roberta M. Gilbert, *The Eight Concepts of Bowen Theory* (Falls Church, VA: Leading Systems Press, 2018), 25.

[160] Friedman, Treadwell, and Beal, *A Failure of Nerve*, 194.

[161] Herrington, Taylor, and Creech, *The Leader's Journey*, 28–29.

[162] Gilbert, *The Eight Concepts of Bowen Theory*, 26.

[163] Gilbert, 26–27.

which will predominate at a given time."[164] Bowen posited that if these two points—e.g., lower and higher levels of self-differentiation—were set on a 100-point scale, most of the population would scatter below 30. "If one ever met a 50, it would be unusual. A 75 would come along only once in several hundred years."[165]

This research suggests that, at best, leaders and their counterparts will react in a self-differentiating manner less than 50 percent of the time during a conflict. If this is true, both parties will tend to act out of the system's prevailing anxieties. In these scenarios, Gilbert writes, "Thinking is often 'flooded' with emotion, making the thinking unreliable, biased, and based on subjectivity rather than on objective fact."[166]

For the leader, the work of self-differentiation is twofold. First, leaders must become increasingly self-defined. They must have personal clarity regarding their vision, values, and emotions, as well as an ability to think and act out of these values as anxiety increases within the system. To this end, Friedman writes, "The key to successful spiritual leadership … has more to do with the leader's capacity for self-definition than with the ability to motivate others."[167]

Second, leaders must stay emotionally connected to those around them. Shitama writes,

> Emotional connection values others as persons, even if they disagree (or are disagreeable). It is showing care and concern for the other, apart from the issue at

[164] Gilbert, 27.

[165] Gilbert, 27.

[166] Gilbert, 29.

[167] Edwin H. Friedman, *Generation to Generation: Family Process in Church and Synagogue*, The Guilford Family Therapy Series (New York, NY: Guilford Press, 2011), 221.

> hand. It is NOT kowtowing to the will of others. It IS respecting that the other is a SELF and honoring that self, without letting them define you.[168]

The difficulty is simultaneously maintaining self-definition and emotional connection during periods of intense stress and conflict. "It is easy to define a self and easy to stay in touch with the other members of an emotional system, and it is the hardest thing in the world to define a self while staying in touch."[169] Shitama makes a similar observation, noting, "Self-defining without emotional connection is not leadership; it is narcissism. If you just say what you believe but cut yourself off emotionally from the rest of the group, they will stop sharing their opinions."[170] A self-differentiated leader must jointly exercise each of these capacities.

Emotional Triangles

A key component of BFST is emotional triangles. An emotional triangle refers to any three parts of an emotional system, either three individuals or two persons and an issue. Murray Bowen called triangles the molecules or building blocks of systems and families and posited that through triangles, emotional processes are made observable.[171]

Triangles exist due to the emotional connections made when we enter a relationship system. BFST posits that a two-person relationship is inherently unstable. Friedman writes that "[Triangles] form out of the discomfort of people with one

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[168] Shitama, *Anxious Church, Anxious People: How to Lead Change in an Age of Anxiety*, 11.

[169] Leander Harding, "Misreading Family Systems Theory," May 29, 2008, https://leanderharding.com/2008/05/28/misreading-family-systems-theory/.

[170] Shitama, *Anxious Church, Anxious People: How to Lead Change in an Age of Anxiety*, 11.

[171] Friedman, *The Myth of the Shiksa and Other Essays*, 175.

another."[172] Hence, Richardson writes, "Generally, triangles serve two purposes: (1) absorbing anxiety, and (2) covering over basic differences and conflicts in an emotional system."[173]

It is through triangles and interlocking triangles that anxiety is transmitted from one relationship system to another. "When people are not functioning in self-differentiated ways, they are less willing to take responsibility for themselves. They are unable to tolerate tension in their relationships before resorting to triangling a third person or issue for stability. This ultimately leads to triangles."[174] Interlocking triangles occur when the original triangle can no longer contain the level of anxiety and reactivity – a reality for people in any relationship system.

Edwin Friedman makes an astute observation when he notes that stress is positional.[175] In other words, one's perception of stress is proportional to their position within a triangle. One person is always uncomfortable in a triangle. In relatively calm scenarios, there are two comfortable insiders and one uncomfortable outsider. Being in the outside position creates anxiety because it can feel like rejection. "Thus secrets and gossip that keep a person in the dark will have an avalanche effect on any community, polarizing those in and out of the secret and inhibiting the communication between them."[176] In congregations, triangles serve as a mechanism for conflict. "It is the network

[172] Friedman, Treadwell, and Beal, *A Failure of Nerve*, 219.

[173] Richardson, *Creating a Healthier Church*, 116.

[174] Shitama, *If You Met My Family, You'd Understand: A Family Systems Primer*, 32.

[175] Friedman, *The Myth of the Shiksa and Other Essays*, 176.

[176] Friedman, Treadwell, and Beal, *A Failure of Nerve*, 227.

of interlocking triangles that accounts for the compensatory homeostatic forces that provide stability, determine communication pathways, and keep things stuck when a leader tries to bring change."[177]

Consequently, an understanding of triangles is the first step in conflict mediation for congregational leaders. Pastor and Bowen Theorist Margaret J. Marcuson writes,

> Leaders cannot stay out of triangles: they are a fact of life. Moreover, triangles are not necessarily bad—they are simply part of human experience. Yet how we manage ourselves within the triangles we face at church can make or break a pastoral encounter, or even our entire ministry.[178]

Similarly, Israel Galindo wryly notes, "Assume that whenever you are speaking with someone in your congregation you are in a triangle. That just comes by virtue of your position in the system. As a pastor and leader in the system, that's a given."[179]

Given the pervasive nature of relational triangles, the leader's understanding of the system, their role in it, as well as their ability to manage themselves within various relational triangles is paramount. Friedman writes,

> For leaders, the capacity to understand and think in terms of emotional triangles can be the key to their own stress, their health, their effectiveness, and their emotional binds. Almost every issue of leadership and the difficulties that accompany it can be framed in terms of emotional triangles, including motivation, clarity, decision-making, resistance to change, imaginative gridlock, and a failure of nerve.[180]

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[177] Friedman, Treadwell, and Beal, 230.

[178] Margaret J. Marcuson, *Leaders Who Last: Sustaining Yourself and Your Ministry* (New York, NY: Seabury Books, 2009), 52.

[179] Israel Galindo, *Perspectives on Congregational Leadership: Applying Systems Thinking for Effective Leadership* (Richmond, VA: Educational Consultants, 2009), 27.

[180] Friedman, Treadwell, and Beal, *A Failure of Nerve*, 219.

Reactivity and Sabotage Within Emotional Systems

As noted above, emotional systems are designed to maintain homeostasis. For this reason, a family or emotional system will always vigorously resist change. "One phenomena of the power of homeostasis is that whenever a leader attempts to bring about change he or she will most certainly encounter sabotage."[181] In other words, whenever a member of the system asserts a self-defined stance, togetherness forces within the system will attempt to bring the member back to previously established relational norms. Galindo writes, "Homeostasis resists change. Every move toward change seems to be met with a countermove in the form of resistance, sabotage, entrenchment, confrontation, opposition, passive-aggressive strategies, or sheer stubbornness. Experienced leaders never underestimate the power of homeostasis to reestablish systemic equilibrium."[182]

> Of course, this makes conflict inevitable. Herrington et al. observe,
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> > Conflict is perhaps the most obvious of the symptoms in a living system. Conflict emerges during the time of anxiety when togetherness forces combine with all-or-nothing thinking. People begin to insist on their own way as the only way. As others disagree, the level of anxiety rises, and the conflict spirals upward.[183]

In this scenario, conflict is always the product of some degree of reactivity or emotional backlash. Friedman observes that it is not possible to lead successfully without triggering reactivity.

In his seminal volume *Generation to Generation: Family Process in Church and Synagogue*, Friedman describes two "Paradoxical Triangles of Resistance" frequently

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[181] Galindo, *Perspectives on Congregational Leadership*, 36.

[182] Galindo, 37.

[183] Herrington, Taylor, and Creech, *The Leader's Journey*.

encountered by clergy as they lead their congregants through change processes. The first paradox, *inertial passivity,* occurs when followers remain passive to leadership requests and initiatives. In these scenarios, leaders simply assume they did not try hard enough and "Respond to a lack of change by trying harder to push, pull, tug, kick, shove, threaten, convince, arm-twist, charm, entice, cajole, seduce, induce guilt, shout louder, or be eloquent. The resulting treadmill of trying harder is usually energized by an absolute belief in the 'power of the word.'"[184] Friedman concludes that even if such efforts produce short-term change, due to the nature of emotional triangles, further efforts will not only fail but further serve to reinforce the emotional processes of the system, thus rendering the process counterproductive.

In addition to passivity, *active sabotage* is another danger facing leaders who disrupt the system's homeostasis. Friedman writes, "Another paradox facing people at the top is the predictable fact that followers will work to throw them off course precisely when they are functioning at their best."

Friedman suggests that leaders endure two kinds of crises. He notes one type of crisis has little to do with the leader's own functioning, such as, "a health crisis or a problem that bursts upon the scene, as if randomly, from the environment."[185] "The second type of crisis," Friedman posits, "is precipitated by the leader's own leadership; it is not due to failure or incompetence but to his or her success at self-differentiation."[186]

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[184] Friedman, *Generation to Generation: Family Process in Church and Synagogue*, 223.

[185] Friedman, Treadwell, and Beal, *A Failure of Nerve*, 261.

[186] Friedman, Treadwell, and Beal, 261.

This type of crisis is part and parcel to the task of leadership itself. It is referred to as *reactive sabotage*. Sabotage is "A systemic phenomenon connected to the shifting balance in the emotional processes of a relationship system."[187] It is the system's attempt to undermine the change process, prevent loss, and support the status quo. Bolsinger, writes, "All change, even necessary change, brings loss. Loss heightens anxiety, and anxiety can lead people to do things that even hours before they wouldn't have considered. Expecting sabotage enables us to stay calm when it comes."[188] Friedman adds, "The capacity of a leader to be prepared for, to be aware of, and to learn how to skillfully deal with this type of crisis (sabotage) may be the most important aspect of leadership. It is literally the key to the kingdom."[189]

Both Shitama and Friedman argue that sabotage precipitates "a moment of truth" for the leader. Due to the surprise and intensity of the sabotaging event, there is a temptation for leaders to forfeit gains previously made through their work of self-definition. Friedman observes,

> In the moment of sabotage, the tendency of any leader is to cease doing all that had brought it (the crisis) on, that is, all that had gone into differentiation. This is the moment when the adaptive pattern is likely to reverse itself and go in the direction of the most dependent and scared. This is the moment when a leader is most likely to have a failure of nerve and experience a strong temptation to seek a quick fix.[190]

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[187] Friedman, Treadwell, and Beal, 12.

[188] Bolsinger, *Canoeing the Mountains*, 174.

[189] Friedman, Treadwell, and Beal, *A Failure of Nerve*, 261.

[190] Friedman, Treadwell, and Beal, 261.

According to Shitama, this "moment of truth" typically leads to a "failure of nerve" in one of two ways. He writes,

> One failure is for the leader to maintain her stand, but to withdraw emotionally […] When a leader is self-defined but not connected, it heightens anxiety and symptoms in the system. Because there is no emotional connection, the anxiety from the system's shakeup has no outlet except through greater and greater dysfunction.[191]

Leaders who are prone to narcissistic tendencies—such as high self-definition and low emotional and relational awareness—are especially susceptible to this type of leadership failure. When under attack and stress, they often resort to emotional distancing or cutoff. Shitama notes, "Leaders who simply say, 'This is what I believe,' without showing care for those who are upset are missing the point of leadership through self-differentiation."[192]

Leaders can also fail on the opposite end of the spectrum. This occurs when leaders prioritize emotional connection over self-definition. "When a leader does this, she is folding her cards amidst the surrounding togetherness […] This is the 'peace at all costs' leader."[193] In this scenario, power within the system is given to its least emotionally mature members, sabotage can take hold, and the system reverts to its previous state of homeostasis.

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[191] Shitama, *Anxious Church, Anxious People: How to Lead Change in an Age of Anxiety*, 76.

[192] Shitama, 76.

[193] Shitama, 76–77.

How does a leader respond to these "moments of truth" without suffering "a failure of nerve"? The solution offered by BFST is leadership through self-differentiation Arthur Paul Boers writes,

> While sabotage may feel off-putting and distancing, the behavior actually is intended to bring us back into a togetherness mode: the separation of differentiation is too uncomfortable for the system. Leaders must not be surprised, hurt, or offended by this reaction. Leadership includes the willingness to be misunderstood. Our differentiation is not assured until we can respond to sabotage in a healthy way without retribution, rigidity or dogmatism, cut-off, or withdrawal.[194]

Predictors of Sabotage

The literature highlights an array of predictive factors systemic to reactive sabotage. These predictors may include:

1. *Fueled by acute anxiety.* The anxiety level of those in the system. If things have changed, how are they functioning? If there is anger, blaming, resentment, or other negative behaviors, it's possible that it's sabotage. [195]
2. *A lack of rationality.* Shitama notes most sabotaging initiatives are mindless. He writes, "It is a function of those who are less self-differentiated responding to change in the homeostasis of the system. It is unwitting pushback."[196] The result is often reactive, emotional appeals rather than well-defined, articulated beliefs and values. This helps leaders to understand that, despite appearances, sabotage is

[194] Arthur P. Boers, *Never Call Them Jerks: Healthy Responses to Difficult Behavior* (Washington, D.C.: Alban Institute, 1999), 100.

[195] Shitama, *If You Met My Family, You'd Understand: A Family Systems Primer*, 62–63.

[196] Shitama, *Anxious Church, Anxious People: How to Lead Change in an Age of Anxiety*, 74.

rarely personal. It is simply an attempt by the system to manage loss and restore homeostasis.[197]

3. *A lack of differentiation among members of the system.* It is important to observe who within the system is being defined. Are members defining themselves or other people? One indicator of differentiation is whether members use "I" or "we" statements. "I" statements indicate a self-defined position; "we" statements represent prevailing togetherness pressures. It is common for leaders to receive comments such as "we" believe "you" should do this or that. These comments often serve to erode a leader's self-definition.
4. *The result of displacement.*
    a. Friedman observes that chronically anxious systems encourage blame rather than ownership.[198] Shitama notes similarly, writing, "The less differentiated persons in the system will displace their pain in ways that refuse to take responsibility for themselves. The more people in a system who are less-differentiated, the greater the overall resistance, or sabotage, will be."[199]
    b. In *Generation to Generation*, Friedman suggests that a congregation's hyperfocus on a minister's performance typically signals a form of blame

[197] Herrington, Taylor, and Creech, *The Leader's Journey*, 102.

[198] Friedman, Treadwell, and Beal, *A Failure of Nerve: Leadership in the Age of the Quick Fix*, 83.

[199] Shitama, *If You Met My Family, You'd Understand: A Family Systems Primer*, 59.

displacement.[200] This is one reason anxious systems frequently turn over their clergy.

5. *The presence of triangles.*

   Steinke observes that leaders are the most frequently triangulated member within a system and, thus, the most vulnerable.[201] In BFST, the third member of the triangle assumes the most anxiety and is commonly referred to as the "burden bearer," "scapegoat," or "identified patient."

6. *Polarization.*

   a. Richardson writes that emotional triangles frequently result in polarization. He argues that to maintain one's "side" of the triangle, there is a need to disparage the other, "That way we feel more righteous in our own position."

   b. He concludes, "We rarely engage in any direct, open, nonconfrontational communication with people on the other side. It feels more comfortable to talk with the people who agree with us and share negative stories about the other side. That is a clear, polarized social triangle."[202]

The Contexts of Reactive Sabotage

The terms "reactive" and "sabotage" are worth further definition. Reactivity is a self-corrective and self-protective process designed to bring the emotional system back to

[200] Friedman, *Generation to Generation*, 208.

[201] Steinke, *How Your 21st-Century Church Family Works*, 52.

[202] Richardson, *Polarization and the Healthier Church*, 58.

its original place of homeostasis. Sabotage suggests that the reactivity leaders encounter comes from those they are attempting to lead.[203] It is an inside job. Sabotage is frequently perpetuated by those closest to the leader or key players within the emotional system. Saboteurs are typically invested constituents, allies, or confidants. As a result, it is not surprising that leaders experience sabotage as betrayal or personal attack.[204]

Given the above, the literature suggests numerous contexts within which reactive sabotage commonly takes place. Bolsinger notes that expecting and understanding the range of reactive responses enables leaders to stay calm when sabotage occurs.[205]

1. *Compliance.* Ronald W. Richardson notes that "Compliance is an outward and perfunctory appearance of going with the wishes of the other, while inwardly (maybe unconsciously) resenting being 'forced' into this behavior."[206]
2. *Marginalization*. Marginalization can happen via several different tactics. Sometimes, it can mean not backing key initiatives instituted by the leader. It can also mean a diminishment of influence. Either way, the leader and their influence are pushed to the margins. Heifetz and Linsky note that "Marginalization often comes in seductive forms." One such example is telling a leader they are special, "That you alone represent some important and highly valued idea, with the effect of keeping both you and the ideas in a little box."[207]

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[203] Bolsinger, *Canoeing the Mountains*, 172–73.

[204] Heifetz and Linsky, *Leadership on the Line: Staying Alive through the Dangers of Leading*, 12–13.

[205] Bolsinger, *Canoeing the Mountains*, 175.

[206] Richardson, *Creating a Healthier Church*, 93.

[207] Heifetz and Linsky, *Leadership on the Line: Staying Alive through the Dangers of Leading*, 36.

3. *Emotional Distancing.* Richardson writes, "In this case, people just refuse to engage with the other; they make themselves unavailable. People using this strategy may stop attending either the worship service or group they were once active in, or they may show up but not be as active a participant as they once were, or they may stop talking to the person with whom they were once more involved."[208]
4. *Diversion*. Heifetz and Linsky note, "There are many ways in which communities and organizations will consciously or subconsciously try to make you lose focus. They do this sometimes by broadening your agenda, sometimes by overwhelming it, but always with a seemingly logical reason for disrupting your game plan."[209] The key to diversion is sidetracking a leader's agenda. "People in top authority positions can easily be diverted by getting lost in other people's demands and programmatic details."[210]
5. *Personal Attack.* As a sabotaging event, a personal attack attempts to turn the subject of the conversation from the issue a leader is advancing to their character or style.
6. *Rebellion.* "The rebellious person makes a point of doing or saying exactly the opposite of whatever is requested. The rebel has a strong sense of his or her own

[208] Richardson, *Creating a Healthier Church*, 96.

[209] Heifetz and Linsky, *Leadership on the Line: Staying Alive through the Dangers of Leading*, 38.

[210] Heifetz and Linsky, 39.

freedom and 'rights,' and is sensitive to any demands or requests that seem unfair."[211]

7. *Power Struggle*. This form of sabotage contains elements of rebellion, such as "I'm not going to do that!" but it also includes a pull to the opposing side: "But you'd better do this!" "In the power struggle, each side evaluates the other as wrong and tells the other what to do. In a sense, both parties become pursuers […] Frustration and anger are the major subjective experiences for people engaged in a power struggle."[212]

Leadership Within Hostile Environments

Hostile environments demand a non-anxious leadership presence. Shitama writes, "A non-anxious presence means you contain your own anxiety while staying emotionally connected."[213] This does not mean a leader will not feel varying degrees of fear and anxiety while engaged in reactive sabotage—quite the opposite. Shitama observes, "The higher the emotional stakes, the more anxiety you are likely to feel. If there is nothing emotionally at stake, it's easy to be non-anxious."[214] A non-anxious leader, however, can acknowledge their vulnerability without being overcome by it. Friedman writes, "The capacity of members of the clergy to contain their own anxiety regarding congregational

[211] Richardson, *Creating a Healthier Church*, 94.

[212] Richardson, 94–95.

[213] Shitama, *Anxious Church, Anxious People: How to Lead Change in an Age of Anxiety*, 13.

[214] Shitama, 13.

matters, both those related to them, as well as those where they become the identified focus, may be the most significant capability in their arsenal."[215]

Pastor and author Mark Sayers observes this approach is somewhat novel within traditional leadership models. He writes, "Traditionally our understanding is that leaders leverage influence and inspire and direct others through unique attributes. We imagine that someone is suited to leadership because of their charisma, drive, intelligence, training, or achievements. Instead, Friedman argued that the most vital attribute to lead, especially in anxious human environments and systems, was a non-anxious presence."[216]

How does a non-anxious leadership presence function within a hostile environment? Friedman offered several metaphors to describe his understanding of the leader's presence. First, Friedman compared anxious systems to fighter jet environments. Recounting General Chuck Yeager's flight that broke the sound barrier, Friedman observed that before Yeager, pilots would experience intense turbulence as their aircraft approached the barrier due to increased speeds. Many pilots, afraid of the intense shaking, would back off the throttle before breaking the barrier. Yeager, however, was assured by a physicist that the plane would cease shaking on the other side of the barrier if he maintained his speed instead of backing off. Ultimately, the physicist was correct, and Yeager broke the sound barrier.[217]

Friedman argued that initiating change within hostile environments posed similar leadership challenges. Under pressure, rather than maintaining a non-anxious posture

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[215] Friedman, *Generation to Generation: Family Process in Church and Synagogue*, 208.

[216] Mark Sayers, *A Non-Anxious Presence: How a Changing and Complex World Will Create a Remnant of Renewed Christian Leaders* (Chicago, IL: Moody Publisher, 2022), 100.

[217] Shitama, *Anxious Church, Anxious People: How to Lead Change in an Age of Anxiety*, 79–80.

when turbulence threatens the organization's stability, most leaders back off the throttle and abort their mission. In Friedman's estimation, Yeager was successful because he regulated his emotional reaction to the situation; he was a non-anxious presence. Similarly, if leaders can withstand the stress and discomfort of sabotage, they will usually experience calm on the other side. In a related passage, Friedman writes, "Hostile congregational environments never victimize automatically. The response of clergy to their environment is almost always the main factor that determines how harmful it will be."[218]

The second metaphor Friedman uses to describe the leader's presence within hostile environments is that of the body's response to pathogenic entities, such as viruses and malignant cells. He argued that pathogenic forces share two common attributes. First, they cannot self-regulate and, consequently, "will be perpetually invading the space of their neighbors." Second, "Organisms that are unable to self-regulate cannot learn from their experience, which is why the unmotivated are invulnerable to insight."[219] For example, Friedman notes, "Viruses do not regulate their own behavior at any stage in the process. Their invasiveness is not symptomatic of an attribute they possess. It is due, rather, to what they do not possess: the ability to be self-determined in any purposeful way."[220] Furthermore, "Pathogens do not have the power to create pathology on their own. There must also be a lack of self-regulation in the host […] In other words, it is not

[218] Friedman, *Generation to Generation: Family Process in Church and Synagogue*, 210.

[219] Friedman, Treadwell, and Beal, *A Failure of Nerve*, 147.

[220] Friedman, Treadwell, and Beal, 148.

merely the presence of the pathogen that causes pathology, but also the response of the organism that 'hosts' it."[221]

Friedman maintains that this functioning of pathogenic entities is present in every form of life, including human relationships and institutions. Consequently, the presence of persons who lack self-definition and self-regulation creates a hostile environment for leaders. Friedman observes, "Their intent is often 'innocently provocative'; they do not see themselves as bent on destruction. The pathology they promote is rather a byproduct of their doing what comes naturally, so they never see how they contribute to the conditions they complain about."[222] Similar to the body, a leader's immune response is largely a matter of integrity. "The key to survival is the ability of the 'host' to recognize and limit the invasiveness of its viral and malignant components. If lack of self-regulation is the essential characteristic of organisms that are destructive, it is the presence of self-regulatory capacity that is critical to the health, survival, and evolution of an organism or an organization."[223]

A leader maintains integrity by having a strong sense of self. The more self-defined leaders are—confident of their values and functioning—the less permeable they will be to intruding pathogens. Again, for Friedman, the focus is on the leader's presence. He writes, "Self is not merely analogous to immunity; it is immunity."[224] The role of the leader is to know himself and his organization to the point he can look at intruding forces

[221] Friedman, Treadwell, and Beal, 159.

[222] Friedman, Treadwell, and Beal, 154.

[223] Friedman, Treadwell, and Beal, 160.

[224] Friedman, Treadwell, and Beal, 193.

and say, “You’re not me,” and consequently stop the malignant presence from overtaking the system. Again, Friedman notes, “The immune response is the capacity to distinguish self from non-self […] A leader functions as the immune system of the institution or organization he or she ‘heads.’”[225]

[225] Friedman, Treadwell, and Beal, 194.

Section 3: Emotional Intelligence

Defining Emotional Intelligence

What is emotional intelligence and why is it critical to the task of courageous leadership? To assist this inquiry, it's important to delineate various conceptions of human intelligence. Researchers Peter Salovey, Marc A. Brackett, and John D. Mayer, for example, distinguish between intelligence *per se* and "models of intelligence."[226] The former is a broad set of abilities, such as an individual's global capacity to act, think, and engage meaningfully with their environment.

Salovey, Bracket, and Mayer suggest that "models of intelligence" are typically more "restrictive organizations of the field that serve to describe interrelations or causes of mental abilities."[227] Researcher Daniel Goldman, one of the fathers of modern Emotional Intelligence (EI) studies, concurs with Salovey et al.'s proposals. In his book *Emotional Intelligence: Why It Can Matter More Than IQ*, Goldman advocates for multiple forms of human intelligence. He notes that recent research "Pushes way beyond the standard concept of IQ as a single, immutable factor [of intelligence]."[228]

Intelligence categories have historically included Abstract (Verbal), Mechanical (Visual/Spacial), and Social intelligences. A "models" framework suggests, however, that all mental abilities are intercorrelated. Goleman concludes that "Emotional aptitude is

[226] Peter Salovey, *Emotional Intelligence: Key Readings on the Mayer and Salovery Model* (New York, NY: Dude Publishing, 2007), 3.

[227] Salovey, 3.

[228] Daniel Goleman, *Emotional Intelligence*, 10th ed. (New York, NY: Bantam Books, 2006), 33.

meta-ability, determining how well we can use whatever other skills we have, including raw intellect."

Goleman's findings align with Howard Gardner's work, *Multiple Intelligences: New Horizons*. Gardner proposes that human society organizes individuals into various *domains* based on their expertise and occupations. He argues that each of these domains can involve multiple intelligences.[229] The literature suggests that EI is an essential capacity in many cultural domains, particularly those related to leadership and people management.

Salovey et al. define emotional intelligence as "the subset of social intelligence that involves the ability to monitor one's own and others' feelings and emotions, to discriminate among them and to use them and to use this information to guide one's thinking and actions."[230] Complimentary definitions include:

1. "'Emotional intelligence' refers to the capacity for recognizing our own feelings and those of others, for motivating ourselves, and for managing emotions well in ourselves and in our relationships."[231]
2. "EI is the ability to understand the feelings and reactions of both yourself and others, and then use this insight to skillfully avoid or solve relational problems."[232]

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[229] Howard Gardner, *Multiple Intelligences: New Horizons* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 2006), 31–32.

[230] Salovey, *Emotional Intelligence: Key Readings on the Mayer and Salovery Model*, 5.

[231] Daniel Goleman, *Working with Emotional Intelligence* (New York, NY: Bantam Books, 2006), 317.

[232] Jeannie Clarkson, *The Emotionally Intelligent Pastor: A Guide for Clergy and Other Church Leaders* (Indianapolis, IN: Wesleyan Publishing House, 2019), 25.

3. "EI involves the ability to perceive accurately, appraise, and express emotion; the ability to access and/or generate feelings when they facilitate thought; the ability to understand emotion and emotional knowledge; and the ability to regulate emotions to promote emotional and intellectual growth."[233]

The Need for Emotional Intelligence Within Pastoral Leadership

Reason 1: Emotional Labor

Several studies have established a fundamental link between pastoral leadership, emotional labor, and high levels of empathic workloads.[234] Researchers Amy Lawton and Wendy Cadge write,

> Emotional labor, defined as the management of one's own and others' emotions by paid workers, is one insight that has important potential for conceptualizing how members of the public interact with religious leaders. Such interactions occur in houses of worship as well as in individual relationships inside and outside of local congregations.[235]

Researchers Gail Kinman, Obrene McFall, and Joanna Rodriguez concur with this observation, writing, "There is evidence that clergy are more frequently approached for help and consolation during times of psychological distress or trauma than counsellors or mental health professionals."[236] Kinman, McFall, and Rodriguez also suggest that

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[233] Peter Salovey and David J. Sluyter, eds., *Emotional Development and Emotional Intelligence: Educational Implications* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 1997), 10.

[234] Cf. Amy Lawton and Wendy Cadge, "'Ministry of Presence' as Emotional Labor: Perspectives from Recipients of Care.," *Religions* 15 (2024), https://doi.org/10.3390/ rel15091135.

[235] Lawton and Cadge, 1.

[236] Gail Kinman, Obrene McFall, and Joanna Rodriguez, "The Cost of Caring? Emotional Labour, Wellbeing and the Clergy," *Pastoral Psychology*, no. 60 (October 2011): 671–80, https://doi.org/10.1007/s11089-011-0340-0.

research has increasingly shown a strong positive link between emotional labor and psychological distress, particularly emotional exhaustion, as the mental effort needed to manage emotions can drain emotional resources.

Those employed in emotional labor fields often take on public-facing roles that directly cater to customer needs. Social science researcher Karla McLaren observes, "Workers who do a lot of emotional labor require a lot of emotional support, but sadly, very few high-emotional-labor workplaces provide this support. As a result, burnout is common for emotional laborers."[237]

In their book *Pastors in Transition: Why Clergy Leave Local Church Ministry*, researchers Dean R. Hoge and Jacqueline E. Wenger write, "In our research we encountered numerous ministers who told us they left because of strain, weariness, burnout, and frustration."[238] Similarly, researcher John Lee West observes, "Three pastors working in North America leave vocational ministry each day to move into different career paths … One of the main reasons for this exodus is due to a lack of preparation for the stress and adversity endemic to the pastorate."[239]

Pastoral leaders regularly engage in emotionally demanding and empathic work. Research demonstrates that without high EI and resiliency skills, pastors are frequently subject to personal distress and burnout, which contributes to their leaving the ministry.

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[237] Karla McLaren, *The Power of Emotions at Work: Accessing the Vital Intelligence in Your Workplace* (Boulder, CO: Sounds True, 2021), 82.

[238] Dean R. Hoge and Jacqueline E. Wenger, *Pastors in Transition: Why Clergy Leave Local Church Ministry* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2005), 115.

[239] John Lee West, "An Analysis of Emotional Intelligence Training and Pastoral Job Satisfaction," *Journal of Pastoral Care & Counseling: Advancing Theory and Professional Practice through Scholarly and Reflective Publications* 70, no. 4 (December 2016): 228–43, https://doi.org/10.1177/1542305016680629.

Reason 2: Conflict Management

As established, conflict negotiation is part and parcel to the task of ministry leadership. Psychologist and researcher Jeannie Clarkson writes,

> "Clergy and other leaders face five common problems—criticism, conflict, unrealistic expectations, resistance to change, and stress … The best strategy for negating the debilitating effects of these leadership challenges is to develop one's emotional intelligence to the highest degree possible."[240]

Of the four primary domains associated with EI, two—social awareness and relationship management—are associated with how leaders manage relationships. For example, social awareness is primarily associated with a leader's ability to be empathic to the feelings and thoughts of those in their sphere of influence. Goleman et al. write, "Empathy means taking employees' feelings into thoughtful consideration and then making intelligent decisions that work those feelings into the response."[241]

Applied to a congregational setting, pastors who are able to listen to their constituents empathically are not only better equipped to handle the immediate crisis, but they are also able to stay emotionally connected to those with whom they are in conflict before, during, and after the event. Clarkson concludes, "Conflict can be managed, leveraged for growth, and sometimes prevented. Emotionally intelligent pastors who learn to manage conflict will reduce their overall stress, enjoy their ministry more, and develop more overall effectiveness and influence."[242]

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[240] Clarkson, *The Emotionally Intelligent Pastor: A Guide for Clergy and Other Church Leaders*, 43–44.

[241] Daniel Goleman, Richard E. Boyatzis, and Annie McKee, *Primal Leadership: Unleashing the Power of Emotional Intelligence*, 10th ed. (Boston, MA: Harvard Business Review Press, 2013), 50.

[242] Clarkson, *The Emotionally Intelligent Pastor: A Guide for Clergy and Other Church Leaders*, 53.

Reason 3: Discernable Weakness

In his book, *The Emotional Intelligence of Jesus: Relational Smarts for Religious Leaders*, author Roy M. Oswald states, "Pastoral ministry is all about relationships. You may be a brilliant theologian, excellent at biblical exegesis, an outstanding preacher, a great pastoral care provider … but if you are not emotionally intelligent, your ministry as a parish pastor will be difficult."[243]

Despite the pressing need for ministry leaders who are EI savvy, recent research may suggest that it is a discernable weakness among practitioners. At the conclusion of his longitudinal study on EI competency among Anglican clergy, researcher Kelvin John Randall wrote,

> "It seems surprising that a profession which calls for the personal and pastoral care of others should produce the kind of scores on a measure of EI which indicate people who are less able than others to perceive emotions accurately, to access and generate emotions so as to assist thought, to understand emotions and emotional knowledge, and to reflectively regulate emotions so as to promote emotional and intellectual growth."[244]

Similarly, Jill Anne Hendron, Pauline Irving, and Brian J. Taylor concluded their study examining levels of EI amongst 226 Irish clergy, observing, "The clergy role may in fact have difficulty in recognizing, understanding, and using emotional information."[245] This finding aligns with research describing the clergy's personal sense of felt needs. Kinman

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[243] Roy M. Oswald, *The Emotional Intelligence of Jesus: Relational Smarts for Religious Leaders* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015), 136.

[244] Kelvin John Randall, "Emotional Intelligence: What Is It, and Do Anglican Clergy Have It?," *Mental Health, Religion & Culture* 17, no. 3 (March 16, 2014): 268–69, https://doi.org/10.1080/13674676.2013.796916.

[245] Jill Anne Hendron, Pauline Irving, and Brian J. Taylor, "The Emotionally Intelligent Ministry: Why It Matters," *Mental Health, Religion & Culture* 17, no. 5 (May 28, 2014): 476, https://doi.org/10.1080/13674676.2013.848424.

et al. write, “Many members of the clergy believe that they lack the skills and support required to effectively manage the emotional demands of their work.”[246]

Summary

Given the potential disparity between the need for EI within pastoral ministry and the capacity of those actively engaged in the profession, research suggests that clergy would do well to invest in further training and personal growth. Oswald writes, “Probably no skill is more important to a priest than the interpersonal grace and comfort that comes with EI, and those who appear eccentric, aloof or uncomfortably shy will have difficulty.”[247] Furthermore, “Research suggests that increasing the emotional intelligence of pastors would have a dramatic and positive effect on them and their congregations.”[248]

The Challenge of Emotional Intelligence

Perhaps the biggest obstacle to EI is the concept of emotional hijacking, also known as Diffuse Psychological Arousal (DPA) or emotional flooding. Our emotions can easily get the better of us, particularly during periods of acute stress or anxiety. Take a moment of conflict, for example. Perhaps a crucial conversation or a disagreement over differing values takes place. Whatever the case, conflict can trigger intense emotions that often lead to emotional hijacking. This is when impulsive feeling overrides the rational

[246] Kinman, McFall, and Rodriguez, “The Cost of Caring? Emotional Labour, Wellbeing and the Clergy.”

[247] Randall, “Emotional Intelligence,” 269.

[248] Oswald, *The Emotional Intelligence of Jesus: Relational Smarts for Religious Leaders*, 4.

functions of our brain. “Whenever we perceive a threat (this perception is instantaneous, requiring very little complex or cortical thought), a series of processes happen in one’s body, preparing one for an emergency.”[249] Goleman notes,

> The amygdala, part of the feeling or limbic system, serves as a psychological sentinel. Incoming signals from the senses let the amygdala scan every experience for trouble. It challenges every situation, every perception, with one kind of question in mind, the most primitive: ‘Is this something I hate? That hurts me? Something I fear?’ If so—if the moment at hand somehow draws a ‘Yes’—the amygdala reacts instantaneously, like a neural tripwire, telegraphing a message of crisis to all parts of the brain.[250]

This neural tripwire is the body’s alarm system to help you escape a perceived threat. Therapist Kari Rusnak observes, “When physical harm threatens you, like a speeding car through a crosswalk, your body goes into fight-or-flight mode. Adrenaline surges through your body to prepare to fight the threat or get away quickly.”[251] As the adrenaline surges, the body experiences various physiological responses, such as increased heart rate and blood pressure, sweaty hands, and irregular or shallow breathing. Rusnak continues, “If a car is about to hit you, this is especially useful as it gives you extra strength and focus to get out of the way. Once you are safe, the adrenaline leaves your body and you begin to relax.”[252]

But what if there is no immediate threat of physical harm? Researchers Julie Schwartz Gottman and John Gottman suggest that our brains respond to psychological stress with similar physiological reactions. In their book *Fight Right*, they describe a

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[249] Connie Feutz, *What Do We Mean When We Said Someone Is “Flooded”?* (blog), December 7, 2024, https://nwmarriagecounseling.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Flooding-Protocol.pdf.

[250] Goleman, *Emotional Intelligence*, 15.

[251] Kari Rusnak, “Does Flooding Play a Role in Your Perpetual Conflict?,” *The Gottman Institute*, January 28, 2021, https://www.gottman.com/blog/does-flooding-play-a-role-in-your-perpetual-conflict/.

[252] Rusnak.

situation where a conversation between two individuals escalates to a state of contention. Gottman and Gottman write, "Now you feel attacked, misunderstood, wronged, angry, trapped, or all of the above."[253] As mentioned earlier, our amygdala detects a threat and prepares the body for a fear response. "It's rapidly priming our system to outrun a tiger, rather than to have a calm and compassionate conversation with the partner right in front of us."[254]

Of course, leaders frequently find themselves in these types of crucial conversations. Researchers have found that DPA can damage the body over time. Adrenaline accumulates without release, leaving individuals feeling anxious and stressed and unable to focus, listen, or speak clearly. "If in the middle of a conflict with your partner, flooding can derail what the problem is and create more problems. It's common to say things you don't mean when flooded, and this can cause a new conflict."[255] Goleman et al. add, "Distress not only erodes mental abilities but also makes people less emotionally intelligent. People who are upset have trouble reading emotions accurately in other people—decreasing the most basic skill needed for empathy and, as a result, impairing their social skills."[256]

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[253] Julie Schwartz Gottman and John Mordechai Gottman, *Fight Right: How Successful Couples Turn Conflict into Connection* (New York, NY: Harmony, 2024), 150.

[254] Gottman and Gottman, 151.

[255] Rusnak, "Does Flooding Play a Role in Your Perpetual Conflict?"

[256] Goleman, Boyatzis, and McKee, *Primal Leadership: Unleashing the Power of Emotional Intelligence*, 13.

The Domains of EI: Self-awareness

Of the four functional domains of EI, two focus primarily on self-management. The first of these is Self-awareness. Complimentary definitions of self-awareness exist within EI literature. Goleman, for example, defines the domain of self-awareness: "Self-awareness [is] knowing what we are feeling in the moment, and using those preferences to guide our decision making; having a realistic assessment of our own abilities and a well-grounded sense of self-confidence."[257] In a similar vein, Researcher Hera Antonopoulou suggests "Self-awareness refers to an individual's capacity to acknowledge and comprehend their emotions, capabilities, limitations, principles, and objectives."[258] Both definitions describe the capacity to reflect on one's emotional states and utilize the information for decision-making purposes.

It is essential to discuss the purpose emotions serve in human functioning. Emotions play a significant role in human survival, communication, and problem solving.[259] Clinical Psychologist Stephanie Catella writes, "Emotions are information signals generated by the mind's observations and interpretation of what's happening within and outside us."[260] Researcher Daniel Goleman adds, "I take emotion to refer to a

[257] Goleman, *Working with Emotional Intelligence*, 318.

[258] Hera Antonopoulou, "The Value of Emotional Intelligence: Self-Awareness, Self-Regulation, Motivation, and Empathy as Key Components," *Technium Education and Humanities* 8 (April 11, 2024): 80, https://doi.org/10.47577/teh.v8i.9719.

[259] Leslie S. Greenberg, *Emotion-Focused Therapy: Coaching Clients to Work through Their Feelings* (Washington, D.C.: American Psychological Association, 2022), 14.

[260] Stephanie Catella, *The Emotional Intelligence Skills Workbook: Improve Communication and Build Stronger Relationships* (Oakland, CA: New Harbinger, 2024), 15.

feeling and its distinctive thoughts, psychological and biological states, and range of propensities to act."[261]

Emotions, then, serve an adaptive function by motivating and organizing persons for action. Professor Marsha Linehan refers to emotions as full-system responses because they include physiological reactions and thoughts and the actual feelings we experience.[262] She writes, "Emotions prepare our bodies to act. The action urges connected to specific emotions are largely hard-wired in our biology."[263] "They offer messages that one is in danger, that one's boundaries are being crossed, that one is feeling close to someone safe and familiar, or that this safe and familiar person is absent."[264]

While emotions serve important adaptive purposes, they can also be maladaptive. Professor Leslie S. Greenberg observes,

> "Although emotions evolved to enhance adaptation, there are several ways in which this system can become maladaptive. We all know that at times, against our best intentions, we worry ourselves sick, explode at provocation, feel like we hate our children, and rage at those to whom we are close … We often regret the emotion we experienced, the intensity with which we experienced it, or the way we expressed it."[265]

Maladaptive emotions frequently develop in contexts that trigger fundamental emotional responses, such as anger in reaction to perceived violations, fear in the face of threats, or

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[261] Goleman, *Emotional Intelligence*, 255.

[262] Sheri Van Dijk, *Calming the Emotional Storm: Using Dialectical Behavior Therapy Skills to Manage Your Emotions & Balance Your Life* (Oakland, CA: New Harbinger Publications, 2012), 51–52.

[263] Marsha Linehan, *DBT Skills Training Manual*, 2nd ed. (New York, NY: The Guilford Press, 2015), 327.

[264] Greenberg, *Emotion-Focused Therapy: Coaching Clients to Work through Their Feelings*, 14.

[265] Greenberg, 16–17.

sadness in response to loss. Once organized within an individual's emotional schema, "These feelings then become maladaptive responses to the present situation."[266]

Emotions, therefore, are neither simple nor infallible guides. The promise of EI in general, and the domain of self-awareness in particular promotes the competency for individuals to assess their emotional states and then choose how best to respond to them. Catella suggests, "Without full awareness of your inner experience, you're unable to harness your feelings for the clarity they can provide, nor use them to connect with others or express them in healthy ways to communicate."[267]

Competencies: Self-awareness

The literature associates a broad range of competencies to the EI domain of self-awareness. These competencies include:

- The ability to recognize, name, and express emotions
- Reading one's own emotions and recognizing their impact
- Understanding the root cause of one's feelings
- The ability to distinguish between feelings and actions
- Accurate self-assessment, e.g., knowing one's strengths and limits

As pastoral leaders grow in self-awareness, they will become increasingly adept at observing and describing their emotions. Dr. Marsha M. Linehan observes that an individual's ability to observe and describe their emotional life leads to two positive outcomes. First, it allows people to regulate their emotions (self-management) better. Linehan writes, "Research suggests that in processing an emotional experience, it is more

[266] Greenberg, 17.

[267] Catella, *The Emotional Intelligence Skills Workbook: Improve Communication and Build Stronger Relationships*, 15.

effective to be very specific about the emotion and emotional event than to try to regulate the emotion in overly general non-specific ways."[268] For example, Linehan notes that anxiety is reduced by "observing and describing the specific fear-producing cues, in contrast to general impressions regarding cues prompting fear and anxiety."[269]

Put into a practical context, such as a stressful conversation, if a leader can consciously cultivate the ability to observe their emotional state—e.g., to pause their reactivity and specifically name what they're feeling—it psychologically positions them to be mindful of the given emotion and engage with it according to their values. Second, observing one's emotions allows individuals to learn to be separate from them.[270] This is an essential aspect of controlling one's emotional responses. It allows individuals to engage in thinking and coping strategies properly. The goal here is to integrate one's reason with their emotion, "being neither compelled by emotion nor cut off from it."[271]

Linehan summarizes a method for helping leaders observe and describe their emotions.

1. *Prompting Events*: "For each specific emotion, these are typical prompting events that set off the emotion—events that occurred right before the emotion started."[272]

[268] Linehan, *DBT Skills Training Manual*, 346.

[269] Linehan, 346.

[270] Linehan, 346.

[271] Greenberg, *Emotion-Focused Therapy: Coaching Clients to Work through Their Feelings*, 19.

[272] Linehan, *DBT Skills Training Manual*, 347.

2. *Interpretations of Events That Prompt Emotion*: "For each specific emotion these are the typical interpretations, thoughts, and assumptions about the event that prompt the emotion."[273]
3. *Biological Changes and Experiences*: "For each specific emotion these are typical biological changes and experiences, feelings, body sensations, and action urges. The focus is on body changes that you sense (or that you can sense if you pay attention)."[274]
4. *Expressions and Actions*: "Typical facial expressions, body language, verbal communications, and actions associated with specific emotions. A primary function of emotions is to elicit actions to solve specific problems. Attend to the actions associated with each emotion."[275]
5. *Aftereffects of Emotion*: "Aftereffects are what happened to your mind, your body, and your emotions just after your first emotion started."[276]
6. *Name of the Emotion*: "Correctly identifying and naming the emotion in themselves."[277]

The Domains of EI: Self-Management

Self-management is the second EI domain that deals with how we manage ourselves. Researchers Travis Bradberry and Jean Greaves define self-management as

[273] Linehan, 347.

[274] Linehan, 347.

[275] Linehan, 347.

[276] Linehan, 348.

[277] Linehan, 348.

"[The] ability to use your awareness of your emotions to stay flexible and direct your behavior positively. This means managing your emotional reactions to situations and people."[278] Across the literature, the primary goal of self-management is regulating one's emotions and emotional responses. Emotional regulation is particularly important in situations of acute stress or anxiety, such as conflict. As noted earlier, the brain is susceptible to emotional hijack, where impulsive emotional states override clearer rational processes.

In his book *Brain Savvy Leaders*, Pastor Charles Stone details the brain's operational processes. He writes, "The brain's overall operational process incorporates two subprocesses: the *X-system*, from "x" in the word *reflexive* and the *C-system*, from the "c" in the word *reflective*."[279] Stone observes that the X-system represents the "low road" of the limbic system. Driven by our emotional reactions, it is typically impulsive, spontaneous, and faster processing.[280] In contrast, the C-system represents the "high road" of the prefrontal cortex. Guided by thinking processes, the C-system is intentional, controlled, and slower processing. In situations of stress or perceived threat, "The low road provides the quick response, needed at times, and the high road response, although slower, more accurately assesses the situation."[281] The goal of self-management or emotional regulation, then, is to keep disruptive emotions and impulses under control.

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[278] Travis Bradberry, Jean Greaves, and Patrick Lencioni, *Emotional Intelligence 2.0* (San Diego, CA: TalentSmart, 2009), 29.

[279] Charles Stone, *Brain-Savvy Leaders: The Science of Significant Ministry* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2015), 52.

[280] Stone, 52.

[281] Stone, 55.

John Lee West provides an example describing the need for self-management. He relays the experience of one pastor who confided,

> People can be really aggravating and get me really upset. I've got to pull myself out of the situation most of the time, and reflect and pray. I think it's one of those difficult situations, especially where anger is something I struggle with. When I want to change people through my own strength, I have to realize: 'No, no, I can't do that.'[282]

By slowing down our emotional processes, we can increase our emotional agility and the repertoire of our emotional responses.

Competencies: Self-Management

The literature associates a range of competencies to the domain of self-management. These competencies include:

- The ability to keep disruptive emotions and impulses under control
- Demonstrating flexibility in adapting to changing situations or overcoming obstacles

Building on the EI Domain of self-awareness, self-management equips leaders to regulate their emotional reactivity to stress stimuli. It does so in a twofold manner.

First, emotional regulation assists in slowing the response between the activating event and one's actions. Catella, for example, distinguishes between *reacting* and *responding* to uncomfortable emotions. When we react, we encounter an uncomfortable emotion, thought, physical sensation, or urge, and immediately after, a reaction follows.

[282] John Lee West, *Emotional Intelligence for Religious Leaders* (Lanham, MD: Alban Books-Rowman & Littlefield, 2018), 39.

She writes, "Notice there is no space in between them. You experience something and automatically and without thought or consideration, you quickly react."[283]

In contrast, when we respond rather than react, a pause is inserted into our emotional processing. Here Catella observes,

> A response is considered, thought out, and deliberately chosen, with guidance from your values. It allows you time to reflect on what matters most to you in the moment and/or within the context so you can choose your response accordingly.[284]

One way to move from quick, emotional reactions to slower, healthy responses is to implement personal coping thoughts. "In the same way that self-instruction can help you learn a new task, research has shown that coping thoughts can be a way to encourage and coach yourself through intense emotional waves."[285] Examples of coping thoughts could include:

- "This, too, shall pass; emotions don't last forever."
- "I've been through other painful experiences, and I survived."
- "I can be anxious and still deal with the situation."
- "This is an opportunity for me to learn how to cope with my emotions."

Remembering and reciting scripture can also serve to slow our emotional responses. The goal with coping thoughts such as these is to create an emotional pause, to remind oneself that the situation is ultimately safe, and to disengage our fight-flight apparatus.

Self-management also equips leaders to become more emotionally agile by increasing their repertoire of potential emotional responses. In her book *Emotional*

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[283] Catella, *The Emotional Intelligence Skills Workbook: Improve Communication and Build Stronger Relationships*, 14.

[284] Catella, 14.

[285] Catella, 75.

Agility: Get Unstuck, Embrace Change, and Thrive in Work and Life, Harvard Psychologist Susan David argues that most leaders respond from a narrow set of emotional and mental *heuristics*, "rules of thumb" that help us navigate situations quickly and fluidly.[286] While these heuristics simplify our worlds, they can also become rigid and "inflexible responses to ideas, things, and people, even ourselves."[287]

In other words, it is both predictable and comfortable to stay within our familiar and narrow range of emotional responses. However, self-awareness pushes us to admit that our premature cognitive commitments limit the range of our emotional choices, and self-management pushes us to increase the repertoire of potential emotional responses.

In her book *Widen the Window: Training Your Brain and Body to Thrive During Stress and Recover from Trauma*, Researcher Elizabeth A. Stanley writes, "We can't control our stress arousal, emotions, distressing thoughts, or physical pain. At the same time, however, I don't want you to assume that what we choose to do or not do is irrelevant. We can't control what arises, but we can always choose what we do with it."[288] David and Stanley argue that it is incumbent upon leaders to increase their capacity for emotional responsiveness beyond their familiar heuristics if they are to increase their capacity to regulate their emotions in stressful situations.

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[286] Susan A. David, *Emotional Agility: Get Unstuck, Embrace Change, and Thrive in Work and Life* (New York, NY: Avery, 2016), 30.

[287] David, 30.

[288] Elizabeth A. Stanley, *Widen the Window: Training Your Brain and Body to Thrive during Stress and Recover from Trauma* (New York, NY: Avery, 2019), 296.

The Domains of EI: Social Awareness

The EI domain of social awareness is the first to deal broadly with social competence. The literature varies in its description of this domain. Bradberry and Greaves term it social awareness[289], as does Goleman, Boyatzis, and McKee[290]; Goleman's early work terms it Empathy[291]; and Clarkson terms it relational insight.[292]

Despite the range of terms, the definitions of the domain are relatively uniform. Bradberry and Greaves define social awareness as "[The] ability to accurately pick up on emotions in other people and understand what is really going on with them."[293] Adjacent to Bradberry and Greaves, Clarkson defines relational insight from within an ecclesial context, writing, "[Social awareness] is the ability to be in tune with others, to hear their hearts, read their moods, feel their pain, and understand their perspective. At a group level, it is an awareness of the dynamics and mood 'in the room.' It is understanding at a deep level the culture of the congregation."[294]

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[289] Bradberry, Greaves, and Lencioni, *Emotional Intelligence 2.0*, 36.

[290] Goleman, Boyatzis, and McKee, *Primal Leadership: Unleashing the Power of Emotional Intelligence*, 48.

[291] Goleman, *Emotional Intelligence*, 251.

[292] Clarkson, *The Emotionally Intelligent Pastor: A Guide for Clergy and Other Church Leaders*, 40.

[293] Bradberry, Greaves, and Lencioni, *Emotional Intelligence 2.0*, 36.

[294] Clarkson, *The Emotionally Intelligent Pastor: A Guide for Clergy and Other Church Leaders*, 123.

Competencies: Social-Awareness

Leaders who excel at social awareness possess a range of core competencies. These include:

- Listening
- Tuning in to others
- Perspective-taking
- Improved empathy and sensitivity to others' feelings

At the core of social awareness is empathy and, by extension, the task of empathic listening. Antonopoulou defines empathy as "The cognitive and affective capacity to comprehend and establish a connection with individuals' emotions, requirements, and viewpoints and subsequently react suitably to their emotional states."[295] Greenberg observes that "People who can see the world from others' points of view and sense some of their emotional responses are more likely to be able to work with others in collaborative ways."[296] While leaders often cannot directly identify with another's personal experience, Researcher Brene Brown observes that the task of empathy is not necessarily connecting with the experience itself but rather to the feeling under the experience.[297]

As a leader develops the competencies of social awareness, Greenberg notes it will inevitably shift how the leader interacts with the people he leads, allowing him to be empathically present for those he serves. Greenberg writes,

> Successful leadership depends as much on the leader's 'way of being' in a situation as on what the leader does. Presence, which involves the ability and experience of being fully in the moment with another without judgment or

[295] Antonopoulou, "The Value of Emotional Intelligence," 80.

[296] Greenberg, *Emotion-Focused Therapy: Coaching Clients to Work through Their Feelings*, 341.

[297] Brené Brown, *Dare to Lead: Brave Work, Tough Conversations, Whole Hearts* (New York, NY: Random House, 2018), 140.

> expectation, facilitates trust and communication that allow the other to feel safe, to open up and explore issues, to express himself or herself in an unguarded manner.[298]

To become such a presence, however, leaders must undergo a significant paradigm shift. Management Consultant Stephen R. Covey writes, "Most people do not listen with the intent to understand; they listen with the intent to reply. They're either speaking or preparing to speak. They're filtering everything through their own paradigms."[299] This approach, Covey suggests, neither engenders trust with others nor does it position the leader as a safe and empathetic presence. The paradigm shift Covey suggests is this: "Seek first to understand, then to be understood."[300] He concludes, "This principle is the key to effective interpersonal communication."[301] Covey states that this paradigmatic turn occurs within a leader as they fully engage in empathic listening. He writes,

> Empathic listening involves much more than registering, reflecting, or even understanding the words that are said. Communications experts estimate, in fact, that only 10 percent of our communication is represented by the words we say. Another 30 percent is represented by our sounds, and 60 percent by our body language. In empathic listening, you listen with your ears, but you also, and more important, listen with your eyes and with your heart. You listen for feeling, for meaning. You listen for behavior.[302]

Leaders who engage in this paradigm shift are able to empathetically enter the space of others because of their self-awareness and self-management. They are guided by

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[298] Greenberg, *Emotion-Focused Therapy: Coaching Clients to Work through Their Feelings*, 341.

[299] Stephen R. Covey, *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People: Powerful Lessons in Personal Change* (Ashland, OR: Blackstone Publishing, 2023), 487.

[300] Covey, 484.

[301] Covey, 484.

[302] Covey, 490–91.

curiosity, perspective-taking, and a keen interest in genuinely hearing others before arriving at a conclusion.

The Domains of EI: Relational Management

The second domain of social competence is relational management. Bradberry and Greaves define relational management as "The ability to use your awareness of your own emotions and those of others to manage interactions successfully."[303] Related, Antonopoulou terms this domain as social skills. She writes, "Social skills encompass communicating effectively, establishing, and sustaining interpersonal connections, and engaging in collaborative efforts with others."[304] The literature broadly suggests that within the domain of relational management are the most visible tools of leadership. This is because "Managing relationships skillfully boils down to handling other people's emotions."[305]

As a result, leaders must be aware of their emotions and empathetically attuned to those they lead. Goleman, Boyatzis, and McKee note the dissonant relational impact of leading without emotional group awareness. They observe, "If a leader acts disingenuously or manipulatively, for instance, the emotional radar of followers will sense a note of falseness and they will instinctively distrust that leader."[306] Similarly,

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[303] Bradberry, Greaves, and Lencioni, *Emotional Intelligence 2.0*.

[304] Antonopoulou, "The Value of Emotional Intelligence," 80.

[305] Goleman, Boyatzis, and McKee, *Primal Leadership: Unleashing the Power of Emotional Intelligence*, 51.

[306] Goleman, Boyatzis, and McKee, 51.

Oswald and Jacobson write, "Clergy need to be aware that their credibility and behavior are central to pastoral effectiveness."[307]

Leaders who excel at relational management can find common ground and build rapport with their colleagues and constituents. "That doesn't mean they socialize continually; it means they work under the assumption that nothing important gets done alone. Such leaders have a network in place when the time for action comes."[308] Tod Bolsinger calls this capacity "relational congruence." He writes,

> Relational congruence is the ability to be fundamentally the same person with the same values in every relationship, in every circumstance and especially amidst every crisis […] Relational congruence is about both constancy and care at the same time. It is about character and affection, and self-knowledge and authentic self-expression.[309]

Relational management refers to a leader's capacity to foster robust, positive, and supportive relationships, establish and maintain appropriate boundaries, and articulate clear expectations while remaining aligned with the organization's core values and overarching mission.

Competencies: Relational Management

The literature associates a range of competencies within the domain of relational management. These competencies include:

- Guiding and motivating others with a compelling vision
- Utilizing a range of tactics for persuasion

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[307] Oswald, *The Emotional Intelligence of Jesus: Relational Smarts for Religious Leaders*, 126.

[308] Goleman, Boyatzis, and McKee, *Primal Leadership: Unleashing the Power of Emotional Intelligence*, 51.

[309] Tod E. Bolsinger, *Canoeing the Mountains: Christian Leadership in Uncharted Territory* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2015), 67.

- Bolstering others' abilities through feedback and guidance
- Initiating, managing, and leading in a new direction
- Resolving disagreements
- Cultivating and maintaining a web of relationships
- Fostering cooperation and team building

Fostering Trust

Central to the domain of relational management is the core competency of personal and organizational trust. Leadership Consultant Charles Feltman defines trust as "Choosing to risk making something you value vulnerable to another person's actions."[310] Feltman notes that what we risk can vary from concrete rewards to less tangible values "Such as a belief you hold, a cherished way of doing things, your good name, or even your sense of happiness and well-being."[311] The key concept within Feltman's definition is trust places the things we care about in the hands of others, ultimately making us vulnerable to the person's actions.

On the contrary, distrust represents the decision to avoid making yourself vulnerable to another person's actions. In his book *The Speed of Trust*, business consultant Stephen M.R. Covey discusses what he refers to as "A Crisis of Trust." Covey states that "Only 45% of employees have trust and confidence in senior management" and "Only 18% of people trust that business leaders tell them the truth (it's only 13% for government leaders)."[312] Using Feltman's definition, fewer than half of employees would voluntarily place their goals, beliefs, and emotional well-being in the hands of senior

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[310] Charles Feltman, *The Thin Book of Trust: An Essential Primer for Building Trust at Work*, 3rd ed. (Oakland, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2024), 4.

[311] Feltman, 5.

[312] Covey and Merrill, *The Speed of Trust: The One Thing That Changes Everything*, 11.

leaders; they lack trust in their ability to safeguard these aspects against the actions of those in leadership.

One of the core features of relational management is increasing trust—personally and culturally—within the organization. Both Feltman and Covey proffer four cores of credibility. Feltman writes, "The choice to trust consists of four distinct assessments about how someone is likely to act. These assessments are care, sincerity, reliability, and competence. Together they define what we consider to be a person's trustworthiness."[313] Similarly, Covey suggests integrity, intent, capabilities, and results as the foundational competencies of establishing trust. Leaders who engage in relational management will inevitably seek maturity in these baseline trust competencies.

Feltman observes that viewing trust as a collection of assessments "Frees us from the limiting belief that trust is all or nothing."[314] For example, one might determine that a leader is not trustworthy in the domain of reliability because he is often late or misses deadlines, "But you may still be able to trust that he is sincere, is competent in his area of expertise, and cares." A leader who demonstrates both self-awareness and empathy should have the desire to look at his shortcomings and make necessary corrections for the sake of regaining trust and congruence.

Resonant Leadership

An increasing body of literature suggests leaders with higher levels of EI create resonant environments for those they lead. Researchers Richard Boyatzis and Annie

[313] Feltman, *The Thin Book of Trust: An Essential Primer for Building Trust at Work*, 6.

[314] Feltman, 16.

McKee write, “Resonant leaders are in tune with those around them. This results in people working in sync with each other, in tune with each others’ thoughts (what to do) and emotions (why to do it). Leaders who can create resonance are people who either intuitively understand or have worked hard to develop emotional intelligence.”[315]

Boyatzis and McKee suggest that what makes resonant leadership compelling is it utilizes the EI domains of self-awareness and self-management to “manage others’ emotions and build strong, trusting relationships.” They suggest resonant leaders “Know that emotions are contagious, and that their own emotions are powerful drivers of their people’s moods and, ultimately, performance.”[316]

Bolsinger offers a complementary paradigm, one he calls transformational leadership. According to Bolsinger, one of the core capacities of transformational leadership is *relational congruence*. He writes, “Relational congruence is more than consistent behavior; it is constancy that comes from genuine affection, warmth and indeed love for followers and colleagues.”[317] Central to relational congruence are competencies such as integrity, maturity, emotional health, spirituality, and authenticity. These competencies allow leaders to build trust with their constituencies. Bolsinger writes, “Relational congruence builds trust because it answers the two fundamental questions that every follower has for a leader: What are this person’s intentions towards me? And is he or she capable of acting on those intentions?”[318]

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[315] Richard Boyatzis and Annie McKee, *Resonant Leadership: Renewing Yourself and Connecting with Others Through Mindfulness, Hope and Compassion* (Boston, MA: Harvard Business Review, 2005), 4.

[316] Boyatzis and McKee, 4.

[317] Bolsinger, *Canoeing the Mountains: Christian Leadership in Uncharted Territory*, 68.

[318] Bolsinger, 68.

Section 4: Courage—"A Theological and Biblical Appraisal"

Defining Virtue

What does it mean for a leader to be virtuous? It is not uncommon to speak or think in terms of virtues, particularly as we describe someone's character or personality. For example, we might say, "John is a kind man," or "Susan is generous with her time." When we speak this way, what do we mean? We are not simply saying that Susan has completed a generous action or that she had a generous feeling. Both could certainly be true, but in neither case is *she* generous. We say that Susan is generous with her time, we are observing something about her character; something that is predictably true about her in a habitual sense.

Philosopher Julia Annas describes virtue as a "deep feature" of the individual as a whole, e.g., a feature that is "persisting, reliable, and characteristic."[319] She adds, "A virtue is a disposition which is central to the person, to whom he or she is, a way we standardly think of character."[320] It's important to note that virtues are not substances. It's common to imagine an individual possessing generosity like they might possess a phone or another object. However, virtues are seen primarily as habits within the broader Western philosophical and theological traditions. Author Andrew Whitmore writes, "Philosophically, a virtue can be defined as a habit of performing good actions that makes the one who possesses it good."[321] The Catechism of the Catholic Church teaches,

[319] Julia Elisabeth Annas, *Intelligent Virtue* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 8.

[320] Annas, 9.

[321] Andrew Whitmore, *Saintly Habits* (West Chester, PA: Ascension, 2023), 6.

> A virtue is habitual and firm disposition to do the good. It allows the person not only to perform good acts, but to give the best of himself. The virtuous person tends toward the good with all his sensory and spiritual powers; he pursues the good and chooses it in concrete action.[322]

In summary, we might say, then, that a virtue is a disposition of the person to be a certain way, which expresses itself in acting, reasoning, and feeling.[323]

The Formation of Virtue

The formation of virtue resembles the acquisition of a specific skill. Skill development may begin with an inclination or disposition. Once this disposition is activated, it evolves into a desire to acquire the skill. After we achieve the skill, we can say that our desire has been satisfied or fulfilled. Throughout this continuum of inclination, desire, and fulfillment, every acquisition of skill, including virtue, requires habituation and experience.

Consider, for example, a young pianist. A child typically develops an inclination toward playing the piano, often through the encouragement of a parent. At some point, through increased exposure and practice, the student's initial inclination to play evolves into a deeper-rooted desire. They identify a good and seek to fulfill it. However, to do so, they must practice and habituate themselves with the art of the piano. This usually requires the guidance of a tutor—someone to learn from, observe, and imitate. Duke University ethicist Stanley Hauerwas notes,

> For Aristotle, as well as Aquinas, any account of the virtues requires that virtues be exemplified in concrete lives. We become just by copying the deeds of just people, but "copy" is not some mechanical imitation, though that might not be a

[322] *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd ed. (Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor, 2023), 443.

[323] Annas, *Intelligent Virtue*, 9.

> bad place to start, but rather it involves having the same feelings, emotions, desires that the virtuous person has when she acts.[324]

The concept of *habitus* or habit is a consistent factor in the formation of virtue. William C. Mattison, Associate Professor of Theology at Notre Dame, notes, "Habits perfect individuals by stably changing individuals and therefore influencing their activities."[325] Similarly, Bonnie Kent, Associate Professor of Philosophy at the University of California, Irvine, writes,

> [Habits] can indeed signify those characteristics which become natural and enduring through long practice, thereby making the individual, in one way or another, the person she is: a brilliant mathematician, a brave soldier, or a faithful wife.[326]

Similarly, Mattison suggests "Habits qualify what already exists … They qualify the sort of creature their possessor is."[327] The goal is that through habituation, the virtue becomes "second nature" to its possessor. Again, Mattison states, "As second nature, habits and virtues may not be as stable as their possessor's nature but they qualify the powers of nature in an enduring manner that is difficult to change."[328]

In 1 Corinthians 9, the Apostle Paul makes a comparative point about Christian discipleship. He writes,

> Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one receives the prize? So run that you may obtain it. Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable. So I do

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[324] Stanley Hauerwas, "The Difference of Virtue and the Difference It Makes: Courage Exemplified," *Modern Theology* 9, no. 3 (July 1993).

[325] William C. III. Mattison, *Growing in Virtue: Aquinas on Habit*, Moral Traditions (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2023), 7.

[326] Bonnie Kent, "Habits and Virtues" in Stephen J. Pope, ed., *The Ethics of Aquinas*, Moral Traditions Series (Washington, D.C: Georgetown University Press, 2002), 117.

[327] Mattison, *Growing in Virtue: Aquinas on Habit*, 8.

[328] Mattison, 15.

> not run aimlessly; I do not box as one beating the air. But I discipline my body and keep it under control, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified.[329]

Here, he emphasizes that spiritual formation demands purpose, self-control, and discipline, all of which nurture a Christian's devotion to Christ. The works of Eugene Peterson, Dallas Willard, and Richard J. Foster present modern evangelical theories of Christian formation within this biblical framework.

Two additional points should be noted regarding virtue formation. First, virtue formation enhances the ability to improvise in various ethical situations. Samuel Wells, Vicar of St. Martin-in-the-Fields Anglican Church in London and Visiting Professor of Christian Ethics at King's College, writes:

> 'The battle of Waterloo was won on the playing fields of Eton.' The Duke of Wellington's famous reflection on the climax of the Napoleonic wars was not a statement of personal modesty. It was a recognition that success in battle depends on the character of one's soldiers. It was a statement that Britain had institutions that formed people with the kind of virtues that could survive and even thrive in the demanding circumstances of war.[330]

Wells' observation is that formation comes before "the moment of attack." Formation prepares individuals to improvise their ethical responses based on the needs of the situation. Consider courage, for instance. In a crisis, a person cannot afford to calculate a series of odds to determine success or failure. Instead, much like a trained pianist, they improvise within their practiced repertoire. Annas states, "Virtues, which are states of character, enable us to respond in creative ways to new challenges."[331]

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[329] 1 Cor. 9:24-27.

[330] Samuel Wells, *Improvisation: The Drama of Christian Ethics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2018), 53.

[331] Annas, *Intelligent Virtue*, 15.

Second, it is important to note, particularly from a Christian theological perspective, that grace enhances and completes virtue formation. The Catechism of the Catholic Church teaches that "Human virtues acquired by education, by deliberate acts and by a perseverance ever-renewed in repeated efforts are purified by divine grace. With God's help, they forge character and give facility in the practice of the good."[332] It continues, "It is not easy for man, wounded by sin, to maintain moral balance. Christ's gift of salvation offers us the grace necessary to persevere in the pursuit of the virtues."[333]

While the Catholic tradition speaks of infused virtue—meaning grace perfecting virtue in the lives of God's people—the Reformed tradition places this form of grace within the doctrines of regeneration and sanctification. For instance, theologian John M. Frame writes, "A virtue ethic that is Christian will focus on a description of the regenerate heart. It will describe the biblical virtues and show how they motivate us to good works."[334] Frame then proceeds to center his account of virtue through the Ten Commandments.

Nonetheless, in contrast to the broader Western philosophical tradition that emphasizes virtue as solely the outcome of human will and effort, Christian teaching maintains that virtue develops through an individual's cooperation with the sanctifying activity of the Holy Spirit and its accompanying fruits.[335]

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[332] *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 445.

[333] *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 445.

[334] John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of the Christian Life*, A Theology of Lordship (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Pub, 2008), 326.

[335] Galatians 5:22-24.

Charity and Friendship with God

All virtue is oriented toward happiness and human flourishing. That is its goal. For Christians, happiness and flourishing are identified and sought in God alone. The first question the Westminster Shorter Catechism asks is, "What is the chief end of man?" The response is, "Man's chief end is to glorify God, and enjoy him forever."[336] Duty and happiness are inextricably linked. Similarly, the Catechism of the Catholic Church states,

> The practice of all the virtues is animated and inspired by charity, which 'binds everything together in perfect harmony,' it is the form of the virtues; it articulates and orders them among themselves; it is the source and the goal of their Christian practice.[337]

Charity, then, is the form and telos of Christian virtue and action. Cistercian monk Aelred of Reivaulx calls charity "the Lord's yoke." He writes, "Charity, then, begins in faith, is exercised in the other virtues, and is perfected in itself."[338]

Although arranged differently, these catechetical statements ground a Christian's moral life in relation to the Triune God. In other words, virtuous formation and the pursuit of flourishing are not independent tasks. Instead, virtue thrives within one's relationship with God, especially through his love and friendship. Paul J. Wadell, Associate Professor of Ethics at Catholic Theological Union, writes,

> We must understand that, because of the love of God, to will God *for* me does not mean to love God *for the sake of myself*, but rather to will that I myself be for God. If I want the divine good for this friend of God that I am, it is in order that I

[336] "Shorter Catechism: The Orthodox Presbyterian Church," accessed December 26, 2024, https://opc.org/sc.html.

[337] *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 449.

[338] Aelred of Rievaulx, *The Mirror Of Charity*, trans. Elizabeth Connor, Cistercian Fathers Series 17 (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publishers, 1990), 141.

> might *belong to* God and *be for his sake*. He is the ultimate end I have in view, not myself.[339]

Angel Perez-Lopez, makes a similar observation, "Priestly formation in the human virtues should be approached from the perspective of charity as friendship with Christ and from its logic […] Charity as friendship with God is the mother of the virtues."[340]

Thomas Aquinas grounded his theology of virtue on the concept of charity or friendship. Jesus' teaching in John 15:15 was instrumental to Aquinas. Here, Jesus tells his disciples, "No longer do I call you servants […] but I have called you friends."

For Aquinas, friendship with God in Christ initiates the Christian into deep and lasting communion with the Divine. The Christian is no longer a stranger to God's will, but through friendship with Christ, his will is made known. Wadell writes that for Aquinas, charity is "God sharing with us God's very happiness."[341] Furthermore, within charity or friendship with God, there is reciprocity of love. Aquinas also cites 1 John 4:16, which reads, "God is love, and whoever abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him." Perez-Lopez asserts, "In the natural realm, the more we love something, the more we are willing to endure and to sacrifice for its sake."[342]

This principle is assumed and elevated in the supernatural realm as well: the more we love God, the more we are willing to sacrifice for his sake."[343] This insight is

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[339] Jean-Pierre Torrell, *Christ and Spirituality in St. Thomas Aquinas*, trans. Bernhard O. P. Blankenhorn, Thomistic Ressourcement Series 2 (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America, 2011), 57.

[340] Angel Perez-Lopez, *The Priest as a Man of Fortitude*, vol. 3, Priestly Formation in the Human Virtues (Charlotte, NC: TAN Books, 2019), 10.

[341] Paul J. Wadell, *Friendship and the Moral Life* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame, 1991), 20.

[342] Perez-Lopez, *The Priest as a Man of Fortitude*, 3:22.

[343] Perez-Lopez, 3:22.

fundamental to Christian moral formation. Out of reciprocal love and generosity of self the Christian gives their "yes" to God in Christ, pursuing his will and desires as their ultimate happiness. Perez-Lopez ties this directly to the Lord's self-donation on the cross. He writes, "Out of love, we must unite our loves to the Lord's sacrifice on the cross (see Mt. 16:24; Lk. 9:23)."[344]

This becomes more significant in the face of difficult circumstances and emotions, such as danger and fear. As we will see, the virtue of courage is chiefly identified by its capacity for endurance. Jean-Pierre Torrell, Dominican priest and Professor of dogmatic theology at the University of Fribourg, writes, "It is a fact that the certitude of loving and being loved radically transforms a person's existence and gives him or her the steadfastness of a rock in adversity."[345]

Defining Courage

The Christian tradition defines courage or fortitude in a reasonably consistent manner. Examples include:

1. Fortitude is the moral virtue that ensures firmness in difficulties and constancy in the pursuit of the good. It strengthens the resolve to resist temptations and to overcome obstacles in the moral life. The virtue of fortitude enables one to conquer fear, even fear of death, and to face trials and persecutions. It disposes one even to renounce and sacrifice his life in defense of a just cause.[346]

2. Courage is a habit of heart and mind that overcomes fear by clinging to (or reaching for) what is good in the face of hardship, pain, and danger.[347]

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[344] Perez-Lopez, 3:14.

[345] Torrell, *Christ and Spirituality in St. Thomas Aquinas*, 63.

[346] *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 444.

[347] Joe Rigney, *Courage: How the Gospel Creates Christian Fortitude* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2023), 35.

3. Fortitude […] signifies firmness of spirit in enduring and resisting things in which it is most difficult to have firmness; namely, in the face of grave dangers.[348]

4. Courage clings to the good in the face of pain or pleasure. Courage resists the impulse to retreat or to flee in the face of hardship, difficulty, pain, even death. It also refuses to be drawn away from its post by promises of lesser reward. This we call fortitude or endurance.[349]

Courage is the virtue that allows individuals to cling to the good while enduring or overcoming fear or difficulty for the sake of what is loved.

Notice that this definition consists of three parts. First, an individual clings to what is good. Of course, this good, or end, varies depending on the circumstances, but it is always governed by prudence and justice. Aquinas argues that the virtues exist in unity with one another; they are interdependent. For example, a person who is brave but lacks prudence or justice is not fully virtuous. Prudence informs courage by applying sound reason to situations. It involves knowing what to do, when to do it, and how to do it in a way that aligns with the good. Justice requires giving each person what they are owed. It's about fairness and treating others with respect, providing them their rightful due—whether that's in terms of rights, obligations, or fairness in relationships.

Second, the individual seeks to endure or overcome difficulty in pursuing the good. Noted Thomistic scholar Joseph Pieper suggests this inevitably creates tension for the individual. He writes,

> Fortitude presupposes vulnerability; without vulnerability, there is no possibility of fortitude […] To be brave actually means to be able to suffer injury […] By injury, we understand every assault upon our natural inviolability, every violation of our inner peace, everything that happens to us or is done with us against our

[348] Thomas Aquinas, *The Cardinal Virtues: Prudence, Justice, Fortitude, and Temperance*, ed. Richard J. Regan (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing, 2005), 107.

[349] Rigney, *Courage*, 30.

> will; thus everything in any way negative, everything painful and harmful, everything frightening and oppressive.[350]

A courageous individual makes himself vulnerable to harm or injury as he endures for the sake of the good he seeks.

Finally, connecting to the previous discussion of virtue and charity, "Fortitude involves the moral firmness one possesses to endure all things for the sake of our friendship with the Lord. It is, above all, a matter of ordered love." Perez-Lopez writes, "The brave or courageous seminarian loves God to the extent of enduring the loss of lesser goods for him." This sentiment echoes St. Paul's teaching in 1 Corinthians 13. In verse 7, he states, "Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things." Following Paul's lead, St. Augustine concludes, "We learn that we should endure all things rather than forsake God."

Courage, Emotions, and Virtuous Responses

Thomas Aquinas divides human emotions into two categories: the "concupiscible" or "affective" emotions and the "irascible" or "spirited" emotions.

Concupiscible emotions represent our relationship to something insofar as it is either good or evil. Aquinas lists six concupiscible emotions: love, hatred, desire, aversion, joy, and sorrow. Love, desire, and joy move us close to that which is good, while hatred, aversion, and sorrow lead us away from evil.

Related, Aquinas lists five irascible emotions: hope, despair, fear, courage, and anger, which has no contrary. The irascible emotions "Spring into action to facilitate our quest for the good at exactly those times of temptation and doubt when we begin to

[350] Pieper, *The Four Cardinal Virtues: Prudence, Justice, Fortitude, Temperance*, 117.

suspect the purpose we have set for our life is not worth the struggle attaining it demands."[351] Wadell writes,

> There is much within and without us that frustrates our love; there is so much working against us, whether that be our own weakness, our divided hearts, or the misfortune that can so powerfully undermine our belief that what we love can be truly had.[352]

Courage helps individuals manage fear and temper boldness. It prevents extremes on either end of the fear and boldness spectrum, standing in opposition to both cowardice and recklessness. Rigney highlights the paradoxical nature of courage, stating, "On one hand, there is the danger, the threat, the thing that provokes fear in us. On the other hand, there is the reward, the prize, the thing we desire so much that we overcome our fear and face the danger."[353] This is where courage is informed by the other cardinal virtues: prudence, wisdom, and temperance. "These virtues facilitate moral action by ingraining the emotional capacities to tend toward the true and toward obeying God, right reason, and the guidance of the will."[354]

The literature on this subject predominantly views endurance, rather than aggression, as the primary aspect of courage. For example, Aquinas writes, "The chief activity of courage is not so much attacking as enduring, or standing one's ground amidst dangers."[355] Similarly, Pieper argues:

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[351] Wadell, *Friendship and the Moral Life*, 101.

[352] Paul J. Wadell, *Primacy of Love: An Introduction to the Ethics of Thomas Aquinas* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2009), 98.

[353] Rigney, *Courage*, 22.

[354] Paul C. Vitz, William J. Nordling, and Craig Steven Titus, eds., *A Catholic Christian Meta-Model of the Person: Integration with Psychology & Mental Health Practice* (Sterling, VA: Divine Mercy University Press, 2020), 366.

[355] Saint Thomas Aquinas, "Summa Theologiae: Secunda Secundae Partis," New Advent, accessed December 27, 2024, https://www.newadvent.org/summa/3.htm.

> The fact remains that that which is preponderant of the essence of fortitude is neither attack nor self-confidence nor wrath, but endurance and patience. Not because (and this cannot be sufficiently stressed) patience and endurance are in themselves better and more perfect than attack and self-confidence, but because, in the world as it is constituted, it is only in the supreme test, which leaves no possibility of resistance than endurance, that the inmost and deepest strength of man is revealed.[356]

Consequently, courage is the ability to deal openly with one's emotions, particularly fear and despair. Courage is not the absence of fear. To lack a proper awareness of fear would be tantamount to foolhardiness. It would result from a false understanding and evaluation of reality. Pieper writes, "Fortitude presupposes in a certain sense that man is afraid of evil; its essence lies not in knowing no fear, but in not allowing oneself to be forced into evil by fear, or to be kept by fear from the realization of the good."[357]

The Christian Leader and the Practice of Courage

In his book *Courage: Jesus and the Call to Brave Faith*, Pastor Tom Berlin writes, "Courage is dependent on the commitment of our heart toward the object of our attention."[358] From here, Berlin suggests a model of leadership oriented toward courageous action. Of note is Berlin's concept of courage vis-à-vis the emotion of fear, which he argues is prevalent in leadership contexts. He suggests,

> Fear convinces us that we're alone and cannot handle the pressure of what God has asked us to do. It tells us to abandon our calling and save ourselves. Our brains are uniquely wired to motivate us to fight, flight, or freeze when we experience fear. When we are wholehearted (e.g. courageous), we override the

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[356] Pieper, *The Four Cardinal Virtues: Prudence, Justice, Fortitude, Temperance*, 130.

[357] *Pieper, 126.*

[358] Tom Berlin, *Courage: Jesus and The Call to Brave Faith* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2021), 104.

> primal urge of self-preservation and honor our intention to serve other people or a broader community. Fortitude can only exist in such an environment.[359]

Gayle D. Beebe, the President of Westmont College, makes a similar point in his book, *The Crucibles That Shape Us: Navigating the Defining Challenges of Leadership*. In a chapter titled "The Crucible of Enduring Challenge," Beebe emphasizes the necessity for leaders to remain vigilant, or they may struggle to persevere and stay the course. Beebe argues that resilience and perseverance—key qualities of courageous leadership—"grow out of our life with God." He asserts, "Religious and moral values are essential. They provide guidance and structure to our lives. They nurture the courage to act in the face of incomplete information."

Tod Bolsinger offers a complimentary perspective to Berlin and Beebe. In his book *Tempered Resilience: How Leaders Are Formed In the Crucible of Change*, Bolsinger recalled a conversation with a colleague, psychologist Cynthia Erikkson, who noted, "Courage requires a Christian identity of knowing you are loved and affirmed by God, and that your identity is not in your achievements or titles. *Then*, you can take risks and risk failure."[360] Bolsinger goes on to suggest that it is out of this God-given identity that leadership courage and resiliency can flourish. He writes, "Resilience for faith leaders is the ability to wisely persevere toward the mission God has put before them amid both the external challenges and internal resistance of the leader's followers."[361]

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[359] Berlin, 105.

[360] Tod E. Bolsinger, *Tempered Resilience: How Leaders Are Formed in the Crucible of Change* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2020), 38.

[361] Bolsinger, 35.

Bolsinger concludes that such resilience is formed through intentional reflection and practice.

Biblical Reflection

In scripture, one of the most significant commissions of a leader comes with the Divine charge to be strong and courageous. After Moses' death, God appoints Joshua to lead the Israelites into the Promised Land. Before Joshua assumes command of the officers of the people, God admonishes Joshua to act with courage on three occasions (Chapter 1, verses 6, 7 and 9). In verse 9, God recapitulates his instructions to Joshua with these words: "Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be frightened, and do not be dismayed, for the Lord your God is with wherever you go." Interestingly, Moses gives these exact words to the Israelites three times before his death (Deuteronomy 31:2-6, 7-8, 23).

Given the broad leadership and pastoral contexts surrounding these events, the charges issued by God, Moses, and later Joshua are fitting. All manner of threat is present. Moses and Joshua faced open conflict with the people of Israel and the soon-to-be enemies found within the Promised Land itself. Yet, despite surrounding threats, God admonishes Joshua not to be afraid or dismayed. As a leader, this does not mean that Joshua did not feel fear, worry, or anxiety. Rather, God is saying, "Do not let fear keep you from accomplishing the good at hand."

Two principles were meant to aid Joshua as he engaged in the threats around him. First, the reason Joshua was not to be overcome by fear was the Lord's presence. "Do not be frightened […] for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go." This is the

promise of charity or friendship. God has befriended Joshua and Joshua is being called on his own accord to donate himself, reciprocating God's act of love and communion.

Here, we perceive the uniqueness of biblical or theological courage. "Natural courage is a strength and resoluteness of mind that overcomes fears. Biblical courage is a strength and resoluteness of mind that overcomes fear *in the strength of another*. Biblical courage is a dependent courage."[362] Perez Lopez makes a similar observation, writing, "I propose to spiritually exercise in the virtue of fortitude, not as a sheer workout in willpower, but above all, as a spiritual exercise of love within the context of prayer."[363]

Second, God's charge to courage calls for Joshua to moderate his emotions by exercising virtue. Joshua must endure physical, emotional, and spiritual vulnerability to realize the good of the Promised Land. This vulnerability presupposes a type of death on Joshua's part, a willingness, though perhaps not ultimately, to be wounded for the sake of God's friendship and the good it entails. This is a type of quiet martyrdom. A readiness to witness to the truth that there are greater goods than the good of one's personal well-being. Pieper writes,

> "Readiness proves itself in taking a risk, and the culminating point of fortitude is the witness of blood. The essential and the highest achievement of fortitude is martyrdom, and readiness for martyrdom is the essential root of all Christian fortitude. Without this readiness there is no Christian fortitude."[364]

Although the redemptive-historical context differs from Moses and Joshua, Christian leaders are called to manifest similar capacities in their ministry. Calls to

[362] Rigney, *Courage*, 51.

[363] Perez-Lopez, *The Priest as a Man of Fortitude*, 3:22.

[364] Pieper, *The Four Cardinal Virtues: Prudence, Justice, Fortitude, Temperance*, 118.

strength and courage are found in 1 Chron. 22:13, 28:20, and 2 Chronicles 15:1-7, 32:6-8. Other texts commend God's people to "fear not" and put their trust in the presence of the Lord (i.e., Isaiah 41:10; Psalm 112:1, 7-8). One of the most instructive biblical references is Romans 5:3-5.[365] Here, Paul writes,

> Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.

One implication from this text is that endurance, formation, and resilience are necessary competencies for Christian leaders. Fear and difficulty, if navigated courageously, usher Christians into a fuller manifestation of character, leading to resiliency and hope. The ability to rebound after facing difficulty is a hallmark of Christian maturity. Romans 5 grounds the Christian's ability in the present outpouring of God's love via the Holy Spirit and the eschatological force of biblical hope. Biblical hope is predicated on the sure victory of God over Satan, sin, and death. Later, in Romans 8:31, Paul writes,

> What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things.

Paul emphasizes God's commitment to his people through his *argumentum a fortiori*. Christian resilience is founded on the premise of God's love in giving his Son. If God in Christ has conquered our greatest fear, death itself, how much more will he empower us to endure lesser threats and evils?

[365] Cf. also portions of 2 Cor. 4-5 wherein St. Paul argues similarly.

Constructing a Biblical Paradigm

This section uses narratives from Passion Week and post-resurrection encounters in John's Gospel to determine how courage as a theological construct translates to the biblical text and, more specifically, how it actively shapes and functions within a leadership context. This investigation will focus on two primary actors—Jesus and Peter—but will utilize other figures within the narratives to highlight additional responses to given events.

Exposure

Courage is an irascible emotion designed to mitigate against various threats or difficulties. It accomplishes this task by counteracting two opposing tendencies: timidity and audacity. From a psychological perspective, timidity and audacity relate to our instinctive flight or fight responses. The Passion Week narrative introduces key actors to numerous threatening events or exposures. The week is a crucible for Jesus and his disciples, testing prior spiritual formation and personal resolve. While the events of John 12-19 contain numerous exposures to stressful or threatening circumstances, Chapters 18 and 21 provide clear test cases to demonstrate the theological competencies associated with the virtue of courage.

John 18 contains two pivotal scenes. Verses 1-13 portray the events of Jesus' betrayal and arrest, while verses 15-40 contrast Jesus and Peter's testimony before authorities and onlookers. Each scene is ripe with difficulty and meets Pieper's definition of potential injury noted above. They also include various forms of physical, emotional, and relational distress that ordinarily elicit personal fear, vulnerability, and insecurity. It is also worth noting that Chapter 18 should not be viewed in isolation; instead, it is part of a

more extensive sequence of events that begins in Chapter 12. These include Jesus' Triumphal Entry, the Last Supper, and the teaching known as the Farewell Discourse. These provide insight into the mounting pressures Jesus and his disciples incurred during the Passion Week.

For example, in John 12:20-27, Jesus confides to the disciples what will occur in the coming days. He states,

> [23] And Jesus answered them, 'The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. [24] Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. [25] Whoever loves his life loses it, and whoever hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life. [26] If anyone serves me, he must follow me; and where I am, there will my servant be also. If anyone serves me, the Father will honor him.'

Here, Jesus' teaching encapsulates not only his impending test—namely, his crucifixion and death—but also that of his disciples. Will they lose their lives to find them in obedience to the Christ? The reader is meant to imagine the developing psychological and spiritual stress as the text reaches its climax in Chapter 18.

Chapter 18 begins with Jesus' betrayal at Gethsemane. Judas has procured Roman guards and officers of the chief priests and Pharisees. John relates this band arrives at night with "lanterns and torches and weapons" (verse 3), which intensifies the moment. While Jesus is privy to their arrival, the disciples are not. This creates a moment of surprise and decision. Additionally, based on Luke's account of the narrative, we know Jesus is in a state of significant physiological, psychological, and spiritual stress. Luke writes that before the guard's arrival, "Being in agony [Jesus] prayed more earnestly; and his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down to the ground" (22:44).

Given the concurrent nature of John and Luke's accounts, it is reasonable to conclude that, upon Judas and the guard's arrival, Jesus is in a high state of arousal.

Furthermore, the disciples are also experiencing significant emotional distress and dysregulation. They are confused by the night's events (Jn. 13:22, 36; 14:5, 22), tired (Lk. 22:46), and likely in shock as they witness their friend's suffering.

The purpose of highlighting Jesus and the disciples' emotional and physiological states suggests that contexts for courageous action often place individuals in less than optimal physical, mental, and emotional conditions. Fear, distress, and anxiety transform us from the inside out, influencing our moments of action and decision making. These "injuries," as Pieper describes them, even if not ultimately fatal, are "prefigurations of death." They leave us vulnerable, insecure, and uncomfortable.

Consequently, as noted above, our instinctive, natural response is to flee or fight against these discomforts. These default responses also represent broad moral temptations. Flight is oftentimes the counterpart of timidity, wherein, rather than facing our fears, the temptation is to withdraw emotionally. The same is true when we are tempted to fight. However, rather than withdrawal, the temptation becomes reckless daring or aggression. Both timidity and reckless aggression are anxious responses to fear and danger. They often represent quick fixes to difficulty rather than the stability of soul to engage fear virtuously.

Part of the pastoral intent of John 18 is to contrast Jesus and Peter's responses to fear, particularly as they negotiate the temptations of timidity and aggression. Even under intense duress, Jesus' response to Judas' betrayal and the guard's arrest is *complex* or multifaceted. It contains self-awareness, prudence, and a willingness to endure for the sake of the greater good. Of note, Jesus actively embodies Aquinas' definition of

endurance, e.g., "Standing immovably in the midst of dangers."[366] One reason Jesus remains steadfast is that courage moderates his emotions. While fear is undoubtedly present, he is not overcome by it. He does not withdraw, nor does he engage in reckless daring. Instead, he endures fear; he is patient amidst difficulty. Relevant is the fact that Jesus' endurance is the opposite of passivity. Endurance is an active psychological and moral response. Mattison writes, "[Endurance] is a resilient clutching to what is precious even when it is threatened and one is suffering. It is truly a part of fortitude because it is prudently and justly facing a difficulty well."[367]

In contrast, Peter's response to the events is *simple*. Rather than moderating his emotions, Peter is overcome by them. Unlike Jesus, who patiently endures his difficulty, Peter is swept up in his fear and the vulnerability it creates and succumbs to the temptation of reckless daring. We are told Peter takes his sword and strikes the high priest's servant, cutting off his right ear (Jn. 18:10).

Aquinas makes two interesting observations regarding fear and boldness. First, he suggests that "Every fear derives from love, since one fears only the contrary of what one loves."[368] While this doesn't validate Peter's response, it does provide insight into his motivation. The object of Peter's love—Jesus—was threatened. Therefore, he quickly sought to eliminate the threat. But this doesn't make Peter's response virtuous. Describing the type of boldness that overcame Peter, Aquinas writes, "Boldness, like fear, is an emotion, and emotions should be subject to reason. And so excessive boldness in

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[366] Aquinas, "Summa Theologiae: Secunda Secundae Partis." II-II 123,6.

[367] William C. III Mattison, *Introducing Moral Theology: True Happiness and the Virtues* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2008), 187.

[368] Aquinas, *The Cardinal Virtues: Prudence, Justice, Fortitude, and Temperance*, 113.

attacking the cause of a mortal danger is a sin and contrary to fortitude."[369] What led to Peter's reckless behavior was a lack of reason—reason guided by prudence and justice. In this regard, Perez-Lopez likens fortitude to "A personal 'bodyguard' of the truth about the good. It looks after the future priest and protests him against disordered emotions, which could lead him astray from the path of virtue and happiness."[370]

Interestingly, John 18:12-27, while also contrasting responses from Jesus and Peter, this time does so through the perspective of Peter's timidity and withdrawal. After his arrest, Jesus is brought first to the high priest, Annas (v. 13), and we are told that Peter and another disciple, presumably John, follow closely behind. Upon arriving at Annas' house, Peter stands outside the door within the eyesight of Jesus.

The scene's tension heightens in verse 17 when a servant girl says to Peter, "You are not one of this man's disciples, are you?" Again, Peter finds himself in a familiar scenario: danger, fear, and increasing anxiety. The reader is meant to ask, "How will he respond this time? Did he learn from his encounter with the guards?" Unfortunately, Peter responds negatively to the servant girl, "He said, 'I am not' (verse 17)."

The backdrop for Peter's denial is John 12:36-38 and 15:13-14. In John 12:36-38, Jesus predicts Peter's threefold denial, but not until Peter audaciously announces, "Lord, why can I not follow you now? I will lay down my life for you" (verse 37). To this statement, Jesus responds, "Will you lay down your life for me? Truly, truly, I say to you, the rooster will not crow till you have denied me three times." Peter boldly declares his

[369] Aquinas, 116.

[370] Perez-Lopez, *The Priest as a Man of Fortitude*, 3:51.

willingness to die a martyr—*a witness*—for the sake of Christ. Jesus seems skeptical of Peter's self-proclaimed boldness.

Nevertheless, Jesus carries this motif into the Farewell Discourse. In John 15:13-14, Jesus states, "Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends if you do what I command." As we noted earlier, fortitude is an ordered love. It is born from charity, friendship with God, and the willingness to reciprocate the love we have received from the Father through the self-donation of the Son. In John 15, Jesus not only offers his life for the sake of his disciples, but also invites them to courageously offer their lives in love for him and for one another. Regarding this theme, Perez-Lopez remarks, "Out of love, we must unite our lives to our Lord's sacrifice on the cross […] Because the priest is a man of charity, he becomes a man of fortitude."

The above illustrates that John 12 and 15 offer insight into Peter's timidity and withdrawal. Not only does Peter fail to uphold his promise to faithfully witness to Christ, but he also does not identify with Jesus' friendship when it is needed most. It would not be inaccurate to suggest that Peter's reactions to the onlookers were cowardly. However, it's essential to delve deeper than this. Peter's retreat into fear represented a withdrawal from his friendship with Christ—one he was adamant about just hours before.

Conversely, Jesus' testimony before Annas, Caiaphas, and Pilate (Jn 18:19-24, 28-32, and 33-38) emphasizes his commitment to the Father, his kingdom, and his disciples. Jesus does not withdraw in the face of fear and difficulty. Instead, as he did before the soldiers and guards, Jesus exemplifies a firmness of the soul, which remains unmoved by the fears of danger. Unlike Peter, Jesus is not overwhelmed by fear or the threat of danger; his fear does not lead to personal disintegration. Instead, Jesus integrates his fear

through a rational ordering of his emotions. Psychologically speaking, we might say that Jesus can regulate his emotional response to the stressors he faces. Theologically, and more poignantly, we can say that Jesus, "Who for the joy set before him endured the cross, despising the shame" (Heb. 12:2).

Building Resilience

A question inherent to The Passion sequence is, "How do leaders 'bounce back' after experiencing difficulties or failures?" Or, perhaps more theologically, how do leaders maintain a resilient posture? How do they persevere and endure before and after moments of crisis? How do they maintain motivation and hope?

Researchers Nathan H. White and Christopher C.H. Cook suggest that "Resilience in human beings is generally understood to include three core components: (1) the experience of significant risk or adversity, (2) the utilization of resources to cope amidst adversity, and (3) a positive outcome."[371]

In the narrative, the actors involved provide a range of responses to the questions above. Using White and Cook's definition, this study will focus specifically on Peter's responses to adversity to identify experiences and qualities that contribute to leadership resilience.

After Peter's denial of Jesus in John 18, he disappears from the narrative until he reemerges in Chapter 20. However, in Matthew's account, Peter's denial and Judas' death are closely linked in the storyline. Both have faced significant risk and adversity through their individual acts of betrayal. Rhetorically, Matthew juxtaposes Peter and Judas's

[371] Christopher C.H. Cook and Nathan H. White, eds., *Biblical and Theological Visions of Resilience: Pastoral and Clinical Insights* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2021), 3.

actions, comparing not only their similar stressors and subsequent lack of courage but also their contrasting approaches to coping and resilience.

In their book *Stress, Appraisal, and Coping*, Researchers Richard S. Lazarus and Susan Folkman, suggest one's commitments increase their vulnerability to psychological stress. They write,

> The most important ways commitments influence [stress] appraisal is through their relationship to psychological vulnerability. This relationship has a curious two-edged nature. On the one hand, the potential for an encounter to be psychologically harmful or threatening, or, for that matter, challenging, is directly related to the depth with which a commitment is held. The deeper a person's commitment, the greater the potential harm or threat. On the other hand, the very strength of commitment that creates vulnerability can also impel a person toward a course of action that can reduce threat and help sustain coping efforts in the face of obstacles.[372]

Additionally, Lazarus and Folkman reference a research study indicating, "The more public a commitment is, the more threatening it is to have it challenged."[373]

Applying these insights to the text, Peter and Judas exhibit similar levels of vulnerability due to their shared and public commitments. Both were members of Jesus' inner twelve, openly expressed degrees of belief in Jesus' messiahship, and supported Jesus' cause by ministering in his name. These commitments made them vulnerable, particularly when faced with challenging circumstances. What is striking, however, is that Peter was able to leverage his commitments to endure and cope, while Judas was not. The text is silent regarding Peter's motivations, including his mental and emotional state, after his betrayal. Consequently, the text does not fully resolve *how* Peter used his

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[372] Richard S. Lazarus and Susan Folkman, *Stress, Appraisal, and Coping* (New York, NY: Springer, 1984), 58.

[373] Lazarus and Folkman, 60.

commitments to cope. Lazarus and Folkman note, "The depth with which a commitment is held determines the amount of effort a person is willing to put forth to ward off threats to that commitment."[374]

Returning to White and Cook's model of resilience, it is essential to remember that resilience encompasses not only the use of resources to cope with adversity but also achieving a positive outcome. This resolution is initially demonstrated for Peter in John 21. In this instance, Peter meets the resurrected Christ and is recommissioned by him for gospel ministry. Key to this event is a twofold process where Jesus recommits himself to Peter, and Peter recommits himself to Jesus.

Mirroring Peter's denial, Jesus asks him three times if he loves him. Each time, Peter responds affirmatively. However, in the last instance, we can sense Peter's grief and lament as he says, "Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you." Peter may be more insightful than he realizes. If Jesus knows all things, then he clearly understands Peter's motives and desires. So why ask Peter to vocalize his affection? Jesus doesn't need to hear Peter say, "I love you," but after his timidity and failure, Peter needs to hear himself say those words. Jesus reveals to Peter the commitments of his heart. Additionally, Jesus reaffirms his commitment to Peter. In John 21:19, Jesus says, "Follow me." Frederick Dale Bruner writes, "Calvin, correctly, saw in Jesus' words, 'Follow me,' not only the call to the courage of martyrdom but also Jesus' courage-enabling promise of death-defeating resurrection: 'This one consideration greatly soothes all the bitterness in

[374] Lazarus and Folkman, 61.

death: when the Son of God presents Himself before our eyes with blessed resurrection, which is our triumph over death.'"[375]

Summary

In summary, the virtue of courage aids our emotional responses to fear and difficulty. By virtue of the good it seeks, courage balances two extremes: timidity and recklessness. It does so primarily by equipping individuals to endure hardship. Christian courage finds its fulfillment in charity or friendship with God in Christ. Jesus no longer calls us servants but friends and demonstrates the quality of his friendship by freely enduring difficulty and death for those he loves. Within this dynamic of charity are the concepts of solidarity and reciprocity. Christians witness to the love of Christ by willingly laying their lives down for Jesus' sake.

As mentioned earlier, a Christian's commitment to Jesus renders them vulnerable to various stresses and injuries. At the same time, these commitments help ward off threats, supporting coping efforts in the face of obstacles. Consequently, courage makes its possessor both patient and resilient amid difficulty.

[375] Frederick Dale Bruner, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 2012), 1237.

Chapter Three

Methodology

The purpose of this study was to explore the processes that contribute to courageous leadership during reactive sabotage. The assumptions of this study were twofold. First, reactive sabotage is a common phenomenon in pastoral ministry. Second, pastors who have navigated reactive sabotage would have experiential knowledge, competencies, and character dispositions critical to establishing best practices for building resiliency in pastoral ministry.

The research identified three main areas of focus that are central to courageous leadership during reactive sabotage. These include the areas of leadership through conflict, systems theory, emotional intelligence, and a biblical-theological survey of courageous leadership.

To examine these areas more closely, the following research questions guided the qualitative research:

1) How do pastors experience reactive sabotage?
    a. Before the event?
    b. During the event?
    c. After the event?
2) What capacities are necessary for pastors to negotiate reactive sabotage successfully?
    a. Emotionally?
    b. Spiritually?
    c. Cognitively?

d. Relationally?

3) How do pastors exercise courageous leadership during moments of reactive sabotage?

Design of the Study

Sharan B. Merriam, in her book *Qualitative Research: A Guide to Design and Implementation*, defines a general, basic qualitative study as an "intensive, holistic description and analysis of a single instance, phenomenon, or social unity."[376] Merriam identifies four characteristics of qualitative research. First, qualitative research focuses on process, understanding, and meaning. The researcher desires to achieve an understanding of how people make sense of their lives, delineate the process of meaning-making, and describe how people interpret what they experience. Second, the researcher is the primary instrument of data collection and analysis in qualitative research. Third, the process is inductive, allowing the researcher to gather data to build a concept or theory. Fourth, qualitative research develops a richly descriptive product using words and pictures rather than numbers to convey what the researcher learned.[377]

This study employed a qualitative research design and conducted semi-structured interviews as the primary data-gathering method. This method revealed more comprehensive and descriptive data from participant perspectives on the narrow phenomenon of reactive sabotage in pastoral ministry contexts.

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[376] Sharan B. Merriam and Elizabeth J. Tisdell, *Qualitative Research: A Guide to Design and Implementation*, 4th, ed. ed., The Jossey-Bass Higher and Adult Education Series (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2016), 27.

[377] Merriam and Tisdell, 14–17.

Participant Sample Selection

This research required participants to be able to communicate in-depth about their experiences during reactive sabotage. The ability to reflect, analyze, and articulate one's emotional, physical, mental, and relational states during a critical ministry moment was significant in the selection process. Therefore, the purposeful study sample consisted of a selection of people from the population of pastors who experienced reactive sabotage and who maintained a resilient posture after the incident.[378]

Participants were chosen for a "maximum variation sample" to provide for common patterns in the data collected.[379] Participants varied in age from 36 to 62 and pastoral tenures ranging from three to 20 years, which provides a broad spectrum of best-practice data. For minimum variation in issues of theology and gender, which are not a focus of the study, the participants were all men who hold to historic Reformed Confessional Orthodoxy and either adhere to the *Westminster Confession of Faith* or the *London Baptist Confession*.

The final study involved personal interviews with 12 pastors. They were invited to participate via an introductory email or text message. All expressed interest and gave recorded informed consent to participate. According to the Seminary IRB Guidelines, the Human Rights Risk Level Assessment is "minimal" to "no risk." The following is a sample of this consent form.

[378] Merriam and Tisdell, 96.

[379] Merriam and Tisdell, 98.

RESEARCH PARTICIPANT INFORMED CONSENT FORM FOR THE PROTECTION OF HUMAN RIGHTS

I agree to participate in the research which is being conducted by Rev. David M. Richmon to investigate "how emotional and spiritual processes contribute to courageous pastoral leadership during moments of reactive sabotage" for the Doctor of Ministry degree program at Covenant Theological Seminary. I understand that my participation is entirely voluntary. I can withdraw my consent at any time without penalty and have the results of the participation, to the extent that they can be identified as mine, returned to me, removed from the research records, and/or destroyed.

The following points have been explained to me:

1) The purpose of the research is to investigate how emotional and spiritual processes contribute to courageous pastoral leadership during moments of reactive sabotage.
2) Potential benefits of the research may include increased awareness and understanding of conflictual patterns within the life of church congregation, increased emotional intelligence by senior leadership, and competencies associated with resilient ministry. Though there are no direct benefits for participants, I hope they will be encouraged by the experience of sharing their experiences with an eager listener and learner.
3) The research process will include video and audio recordings of 6 Pastors being asked questions by the researcher.
4) Participants in this research will participate in-person or via Zoom interview for 60 - 90 minutes.
5) Potential discomforts or stresses:
6) Potential risks: Minimal. Participants are asked to reveal personal information regarding individual viewpoints, background, experiences, behaviors, attitudes, or beliefs.
7) Any information that I provide will be held in strict confidence. At no time will my name be reported along with my responses. The data gathered for this research is confidential, and will not be released in any individually identifiable form without my prior consent, unless otherwise required by law. Audiotapes or videotapes of interviews will be erased following the completion of the dissertation. By my signature, I am giving informed consent for the use of my responses in this research project.
8) Limits of Privacy: I understand that, by law, the researcher cannot keep information confidential if it involves abuse of a child or vulnerable adult, or plans for a person to harm themselves or to hurt someone else.
9) The researcher will answer any further questions about the research, now or during the study.

_____

Printed Name and Signature of Researcher Date

_____

Printed Name and Signature of Participant Date

Please sign both copies. Keep one. Return the other to the researcher. Thank you.

Research at Covenant Theological Seminary which involves human participants is overseen by the Institutional Review Board. Questions or problems regarding your rights as a participant should be addressed to: Director, Doctor of Ministry; Covenant Theological Seminary; 12330 Conway Road; St. Louis, MO 63141; Phone (314) 434-4044.

Having completed the IRB requirements for human rights in research and the risk assessment in the Covenant Theological Seminary's "Dissertation Notebook," the Human Rights Risk Level Assessment is "no risk" according to the Seminary's IRB guidelines.

Data Collection

This study utilized semi-structured interviews for primary data gathering. The open-ended nature of interview questions facilitates building upon participant responses to complex issues to explore them more thoroughly.[380] Ultimately, these methods enabled this study to look for common themes, patterns, concerns, and contrasting views across the variation of participants.[381]

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.[382]

[380] Merriam and Tisdell, 124–25.

[381] Merriam and Tisdell, 110–11.

[382] Merriam and Tisdell, 203–10.

The researcher interviewed 12 pastors individually, either in person or through Zoom, for approximately 60 minutes each. Before the interview, the participants received an email about optional interview dates and times. Each participant was advised of the purpose and use of the research according to the policies of the Doctor of Ministry Program at Covenant Theological Seminary. Each person also gave verbal consent. To accommodate participant schedules, the researcher gave each participant multiple windows of time within a two-month period from which to choose. The researcher audiotaped the interviews with a digital recorder. Directly after each interview, the researcher wrote field notes with descriptive and reflective observations on the interview time.

Sample Interview Protocol Questions

1. Describe an incident of conflict that was caused because of an action, decision, or choice you made that altered previously established norms (in a relationship, ministry setting, etc.)
    a. What was the precipitating event?
    b. How was the conflict brought to your attention (e.g. email, text, meeting, conversation)?
    c. What was your initial reaction after the conflict was brought to your attention? Describe your emotional state and thought processes.
        i. Did your emotional state and thought processes shift in the ensuing days? If so, describe what changed and why.
    d. If you met with your counterpart, describe that event:

i. What was your physical, emotional, and mental state?

ii. Describe your inner dialogue as you engaged in the conflicting moment.

iii. What could you infer about the physical, emotional, and mental state of your counterpart?

iv. How did you communicate and maintain your core beliefs and values that initially precipitated the conflict?

v. Describe how you were able to maintain emotional connection with your counterpart.

e. How did your counterpart respond?

f. After your meeting, how did you process your experience?

2. How do you avoid blaming others during conflict? How do you avoid being controlled by the nature of your circumstances?

3. How did you stay emotionally connected to others as you experienced conflict?

4. What residual impact did the conflict have upon you?

    a. Did this experience shape future ministry interactions?

5. How have you learned to regulate your emotions?

6. Discuss your willingness to have difficult conversations.

7. What competencies do you believe contribute to successful conflict negotiation?

8. If you have experienced "positive results" from this conflict, describe them.

9. Research suggests clergy struggle with competencies related to emotional intelligence; from your perspective, why might this be the case?

10. How did you learn to challenge your own discomfort?

11. How do you handle the disappointment of others?

12. How do you remain in control of your emotions in heated situations?
13. How do you cultivate trust with those who oppose you?
14. How do you engage in self-reflection? What practices or habits have you benefited from?
15. As a leader, how do you negotiate ambiguity and change?
16. How do you stay optimistic? What keeps you motivated?
17. What did the conflict reveal about your character?
18. Can you describe in detail how you endured during this season of difficulty?

Data Analysis

The researcher transcribed each interview using computer software as soon as possible and always within one week of each meeting. The software allowed for the complete transcript to be typed out in its entirety while ensuring accuracy, fluidity, and grammatical precision. 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.[383] When the interviews and observation notes were fully transcribed into computer files, they were coded and analyzed using categories. The analysis focused on discovering and identifying (1) common themes, patterns, and personal experiences across the variation of participants; and (2) congruence or discrepancy between the different groups of participants. Lastly, interview participants were provided the computer-generated transcripts to evaluate for overall accuracy.

[383] Merriam and Tisdell, 201–4.

Researcher Position

In qualitative inquiry, the researcher is responsible for defining and collecting the data to be analyzed. The researcher plays a significant role in data processing and therefore, should note key biographical and philosophical commitments.

First, the researcher is a Christian who believes the Bible is the authoritative, infallible, inerrant, and inspired word of God. The Bible also informs the researcher's understanding of the church, its mission, the pastor's role in the church's life, and the moral and ethical imperative of pastoral leadership.

Second, the researcher has personally experienced reactive sabotage in several ministry and congregational settings. For this reason, it is important to acknowledge that the researcher is sympathetic to the challenges experienced by pastors who have experienced reactive sabotage during their ministry.

Study Limitations

Due to the limits of the research scope, the experimental protocol was necessarily limited to a small sample size, including male pastors with three or more years of senior leadership experience who serve within the bounds of historic Reformed Confessional Orthodoxy. Further research is needed to broaden the participant selection to include female pastors and those outside a Reformed Confessional tradition. Some of the study's findings may be generalized to other similar evangelical theological traditions. Readers who desire to generalize some of the aspects of these conclusions should test those aspects in their context. As with all qualitative studies, readers bear the responsibility to determine what can be appropriately applied to their context.

Chapter Four

Findings

This study explores what processes contribute to courageous pastoral leadership during reactive sabotage. It assumes that these ministry leaders have experienced conflict in a congregational setting and possess the necessary competencies to lead through highly reactive situations. This chapter utilizes the findings of 12 pastoral interviews and reports on common themes and relevant insights regarding the research questions for this study. The following research questions served as the intended focus of the qualitative research.

1) How do pastors experience reactive sabotage?
2) What capacities are necessary for pastors to negotiate reactive sabotage successfully?
3) How do pastors exercise courageous leadership during reactive sabotage?

Participants and Background Information

This section provides information about the research subjects and their ministry situations. Pseudonyms have been assigned, and the specific geographical locations of their congregations have not been identified.

Alfred is in his early 60s, married, and has three adult children. He has been a Presbyterian minister for 25 years and currently serves as the Executive Director of a regional church-planting network. Previously, he was the Senior Pastor of an urban church in the Northwest (USA). His conflict arose from leadership decisions related to worship style and missional engagement within the city.

Charles is in his early 40s, married, and has four children. He has been the solo pastor of a rural congregation in the Northwest (USA) for seven years, with a Sunday attendance of approximately 100 people. Charles's sabotaging event stemmed from leadership decisions made in response to COVID-19 mandates.

Duncan is in his mid-40s, married, and has five children. He is a Presbyterian minister who has been the Senior Pastor of a suburban congregation in the Northwest (USA) for the past ten years. Sunday attendance is around 200 people. Duncan's conflict arose from a relational shift with one of his congregants.

Edmund is in his mid-50s, married, and has three children. He has served as a Presbyterian minister for 20 years and is currently the planting and solo pastor of a suburban church in the Northwest (USA). Sunday attendance is around 150 people. Edmund's conflict arose from changes he made to the church's worship ethos that differed from those of his sending and planting church.

Edward is in his mid-40s, married, and has three children. He has been a Presbyterian minister for 15 years, including three years in his current role as a solo pastor. Edward's congregation is located in a large urban city in the Southern United States, with Sunday attendance averaging around 80 people. Edward's conflict arose from his newly appointed status as senior minister and involved a congregant who disagreed with decisions made regarding a church ministry.

George is in his mid-40s, married, and has three children. He has served as a Presbyterian minister for 15 years, including 10 years in his current position. George is involved in an urban church located in the Northwest (USA). Sunday attendance is around

350 people. George's challenging event arose from leadership decisions made due to COVID-19 mandates.

Harold is in his early 40s, married, and has four children. He has been a Presbyterian minister for 15 years and serves as the planting and solo pastor of a church in the Northwest (USA). Sunday attendance is around 125 people. Harold's conflicting event stemmed from staffing issues and interpersonal tensions with a fellow minister on his staff.

Henry is in his late 30s, married, and has three children. He has served as a Presbyterian minister for 11 years and currently pastors a congregation in the Northeast (USA). Sunday attendance is around 150 people. Henry's conflict involved a former church deacon and arose from changes to the church's leadership structure.

James is in his mid-40s, married, and has one child. He is the senior pastor of an urban church in Northwestern England (UK). Sunday attendance is about 350 people. James's incident involved the church's transition to a different worship venue and increasing its service options from two to three.

Malcolm is in his mid-40s, married, and has three children. He serves as the senior pastor of an urban church in Northwestern England (UK). Sunday attendance is about 350 people. Malcolm's conflict arose from disagreements about the organizational structure of the non-profit organization he served.

Richard is in his mid-40s, married, and has five children. He has been a Presbyterian minister for 15 years and is the planting and Senior Minister of a congregation in the Northwest (USA). Sunday attendance is approximately 200 people. Richard's conflict resulted from changing church values and missional priorities.

William is in his late 40s, married, and has four children. He has served as a minister for 20 years and is the Senior Pastor of a suburban church in the Northwest (USA). Sunday attendance is around 400 people. William's sabotaging event resulted from leadership decisions made in response to COVID-19 mandates.

How Pastors Experience Reactive Sabotage

The first research question sought to determine how pastors experienced the phenomena of reactive sabotage within their ministry setting. During this interview process, several questions were asked of the research participants to encourage personal reflection.

These questions included:

1. Describe an incident of conflict that was caused because of an action, decision, or choice you made that altered previously established norms (in a relationship, ministry setting, etc.)
    - What was the precipitating event?
    - How was the conflict brought to your attention (e.g. email, text, meeting, conversation)?
    - Did the event take you by surprise?
    - What types of resistance did you face?
    - What was your initial reaction after the conflict was brought to your attention? Describe your emotional state and thought processes.
2. How did you stay emotionally connected to others as you experienced conflict?
3. What residual impact did the conflict have upon you? Did this experience shape future ministry interactions?

Change as a Catalyst for Conflict

Each interview started with participants describing a conflict incident caused by an action, decision, or choice they made that changed previously established norms. This question aimed to determine whether there was a correlation between leadership change initiatives and reactive feedback from the emotional system to which they belonged. Each interviewee successfully recounted such an experience. Common incidents included changes in leadership structures, worship styles or emphases, and essential decision-making protocols.

For example, Alfred recalled a change initiative he and the elder board led that sought to alter the church's worship format and style. He stated the change's intent was to align the church's worship practices with its evolving missional and contextual priorities. Alfred explained the nature of the change process, saying:

> They hired me to help bring changes to the church's worship and mission, but the congregation didn't really feel it. So, coming in, we knew we would need to do a lot of work, and that's why we waited two years. We held several elder retreats, engaged in extensive intercession, meeting discussions and readings about the gospel and the spiritual dynamics of repentance and faith after conversion. We also focused on understanding the culture and its thoughts and feelings. We were aware of all this and had some idea of what the responses would be. However, it actually took a little over two years before we changed anything.

While Alfred and the elders agreed to numerous changes and an implementation pathway, once the plan was revealed to the congregation, a staff member, several deacons, and numerous longtime congregants immediately resisted.

James recounted a similar incident as his church moved from two to three worship services. Two precipitating factors led to this decision. First, while the church had experienced recent and steady growth, it had difficulty attracting and retaining young families. Due to the nature of its rented facility, the church's primary worship offerings

were held in the evenings, which was not ideal for young children. Consequently, the church's leadership prioritized identifying venues that could facilitate morning worship options.

Second, their current rental facility was scheduled to close for several years due to scheduled renovations. These factors led the church to identify a new worship venue, which required them to expand their services to meet their growing needs. Upon announcing the change, James said:

> Congregants were initially largely unanimous in their opposition, as were the non-pastoral staff. They already found it difficult to manage two services, so adding a third would be completely unfeasible in terms of energy and resources. There were concerns that a third service might divide the church and lead to disunity.

Surveying participants, the most common source of conflict resulted from the COVID-19 crisis. George, Charles, William, and Richard each recalled events where COVID policies and consequent leadership decisions formed the basis for reactive conflict.

Charles reported a particular incident where the state government passed a mandate forbidding congregational singing during worship services. The church's leadership team decided to abide by the restriction but offered congregational singing outdoors at the end of the service to maintain their core convictions and beliefs.

They received strong opposition from several families, including one who sent the church council a letter voicing their frustration. Charles said, "We were aware making the decision that it wasn't going to be popular. We were aware that pretty much any decision we made wasn't going to be unanimous in the congregation, so we were primed for that."

Each pastor noted being forced into "no-win" situations, wherein any decision made would be met by opposition from congregation members.

Surprise

Most of those participants noted how the conflicting event caught them off-guard or contained surprising elements. Pastors found that this resulted from a confluence of factors. Common themes included opponents within the conflict, how it was brought to their attention, and the degree of emotional reactivity the conflict engendered.

Most interviewed reported that the opponent in the conflict was a trusted ally or confidant. Opponents included pastoral colleagues, staff members, church officers or board members, lay leaders, and congregants, usually with whom the pastor and their family shared meaningful relationships.

Henry, for example, noted his opponent was a non-active deacon, a member of his hiring committee, and a recognized "core member" of the congregation. Duncan's conflict involved a family with whom he shared a satisfying social relationship. He had officiated the couple's wedding, later baptized their children, and served alongside them in several church ministries.

Pastors also mentioned their surprise often resulted from how they received news of the emerging conflict, which included the timing, method, and degree of perceived emotional reactivity. Several participants described the news of the emerging conflict as "shocking," "unexpected," "blindsiding." Edmund said he was "caught off guard," while Henry confided it was jarring on a "relational level." Edmund, whose conflict centered on changes to the church's worship culture, said, "I thought we had earned more trust … that we were not trying to abandon the Reformed [theological] tradition … I was a little caught off guard."

Henry said he was made aware of a developing conflict during the week of Thanksgiving. After a key decision was made by Henry's leadership team, his opponent, who held informal power within the congregation and was not involved in the decision-making process, voiced his frustration to numerous friends within the church before consulting the church's elders. Eventually, on the Monday of Thanksgiving week, Henry's opponent contacted an elder and "laid into him [about the decision], didn't really listen, and was just very, very, very angry."

Malcolm said his conflict was presented at an all-hands leadership meeting, which included elders, deacons, and staff. During the meeting, the deacon chairman presented plans to restructure the committee without notifying the rest of the team beforehand. Malcolm recounted that, although the chairman had planned extensively for the meeting, he did not include his fellow members. Malcolm said, "It was clearly quite a surprise to them." Furthermore, the chairman raised questions about the competency of fellow team-members, which directly heightened the stakes of the meeting.

Emotional Reactions

Participants recalled various emotional reactions to receiving news of the conflict. These responses included feeling:

- Hurt
- Frustrated
- Fearful
- Betrayed
- Anxious
- Rejected
- Worried
- Disappointed
- Annoyed
- Overwhelmed

- Pain
- A need to defend myself and respond

Similarly, respondents noted feeling a sense of:

- Trepidation
- Discomfort
- Being stuck
- Heightened stress
- Despair or catastrophizing
- Wondering "what else is coming" and "if things are going to be worse"
- Disbelief
- Despair
- Shame
- Self-doubt
- Being untrustworthy
- Aggression
- Desiring to respond, attack, retaliate, and argue
- Desiring to self-defend

Harold said, "I was a wreck. *I was a wreck*. I felt ashamed." Edmund echoed these words, relaying:

> I was a wreck. I mean, I was lying awake at night. I was completely swallowed up by it. I was fearful … *I was so fearful* … I felt fear, frustration, and self-pity. I thought, 'I don't deserve this. I'm working so hard. Can't these guys be more supportive? Don't they know my heart?'

Throughout the interviews, it was evident, on a whole, that the participant's emotional state was impacted upon receiving news of the conflicting event, as they negotiated it, and after it was resolved.

For example, Henry candidly shared, "Fear of rejection is one of my big concerns, and I had fear immediately because I knew this person well. So, fear. I was also anxious about the situation. I felt worried that his initial frustration was going to catch fire. I was also hurt that he didn't come and directly talk to me about it."

Duncan mentioned a sense of disbelief, saying he thought to himself, "I can't believe we're having this conversation. I felt disappointment and hurt, for sure, as well as a level of betrayal." Edward, whose conflict involved a congregant who disagreed with the direction of a church ministry, shared that he felt a heightened degree of stress as he tried to manage "expectations and personalities in the room." He also shared that internally, he felt a "high degree of alert," which gave way to a sense of annoyance and then fear. George's response was similar. He confided, "I felt a lot of frustration. Frustration with him for causing a lot of attention, but also a sense of self-doubt. My mind was racing, 'Does he represent a bigger contingency within the organization? A bigger pool of grievance.' I think you get in those head games where you project six months into the future and we've lost 25 percent of the congregation because of the decision we've made."

Reaction of Counterpart

It is important to note that while participants felt a range of emotions as the conflict ensued, so did their opponents. Each pastor was asked, "What could you infer about your counterpart's physical, emotional, and mental state?" George responded,

> He was very activated. It was a heightened emotional state. He was conveying a heightened sense of consequence. I think it would be accurate to say there was quite a bit of hyperbole and categorical statements […] There were heightened emotions and a desire to convey convictions at ultimate, ten out of ten levels.

Similarly, Edmund recalled, "With the [individual] I had a conflict with, he was experiencing a lot of angst and fear, and he was lonely and hurting. So those were high. Those conversations could be very tense, full of anxiety on both ends. Disagreement could be vehement." Alfred also noted the prevalence of anger. He said, "They were

angry and filled with conviction. They were working through the grief of change or woundedness or loss of influence. It was clear they were losing control." Edward said his counterpart was "blunt" and "crass" during their conversation.

Several participants noted passive-aggressive tendencies in their interactions. For instance, during the conflict with his opponents, James mentioned that they would often compliment him or qualify their concerns before delivering sustained criticisms. Charles observed something similar. Regarding the tone of the conversation, he stated, "It was respectful and began with gratitude for the elders in the church, then it mostly focused on two or three key reasons why they were frustrated with our actions."

Alfred suggested, "I would have been a better pastor if I had understood that my opponent, who was 83 at the time, was grieving his 50 years of involvement with the church, that the church was changing, and he was losing control. My opponents were really entrenched, and they held onto their control with a white-knuckled grip."

Forms of Resistance

As each conflict ensued, participants recalled how their opponents engaged in various forms of resistance to slow or thwart the implementation of change. Alfred reported "chronic resistance," "open criticism," and latent gossip. He stated,

> It became pretty severe; or extreme is probably a better word. My opponent would openly criticize me in front of the choir, and another person refused to take the communion bread from me. Another individual was the chairman of the deacons; when my computer broke, it took him over six months to buy me another one. So, for those six months, I did all my pastoral work on a legal pad. There was also a lot of innuendo.

Henry reported his opponent "Called a bunch of his friends … he triangulated in that way, which is part of what created the problem. He was also bullying. At a

congregational meeting a month later, he put a friend up to counter-proposing what the session had decided. Then he simply began to withdraw for the next year."

Malcolm said that the initial resistance he experienced at the onset of the conflict escalated and intensified "with a vengeance" over a five-month period. This included additional criticisms, casting aspersions, threats, ultimatums, and a non-responsive posture to overtures and requests. He said his opponent became "more frustrated, animated, and disparaging of us; there were quite a lot of threats early on which immediately skewed [the discussion]. [The situation] was volatile."

Duncan's opponent responded initially with passive-aggressive tactics, such as "Angling away when one walks past." His counterpart also tried to readdress the issue despite Duncan's repeated reminders that the topic was closed. Over time, though, Duncan said the tactics changed, saying, "[It became] more abrasive, almost hostile behavior toward theological tenets that we hold that are not popular. So, it's gone from passive-aggressive and private to a bit more vocal and actively aggressive."

Staying Connected

Despite high levels of emotional tension and various forms of resistance to leadership change, participants described how they remained emotionally connected to their opponents without relinquishing their core beliefs.

James said self-preparation, particularly spiritual reflection, played a significant role in staying emotionally connected with those he disagreed with. He noted, "That preparation does partly look like prayer. It does partly look like self-gospel in terms of

where does my identity sit? Is it with pleasing these people or actually doing what I'm called to do?"

James also noted the importance of taking an empathic posture. He suggested in a conflicting event there are often multiple reasons for people's criticisms, not just the immediate crisis at hand. He stated,

> I appreciate that there are several factors contributing to the anxiety they express in their complaint, which is truly a manifestation of other issues. I often engage in dual listening, tuning into what they're saying in the moment while also considering what may be happening beneath the surface. Being aware of these factors helps me depersonalize the conversation.

Duncan spoke of spiritual reflection and prayer too. He commented, "[When] I have no idea what to say while they're unloading [on me], I can pray with a cheerful affect." He also mentioned a lesson he learned from a seminary professor. He recalled, "I remember [a professor] saying, 'Be the least anxious person in the room.' I say it to myself a lot and often rehearse it."

In his situation, Henry said one helpful strategy was to help his counterpart separate reason from emotion. He recalled,

> I think one of the things we did do is we parsed out reasons from emotions. And we talked about that a lot. Like, 'What are your reasons? What are the convictions? Why are we wrong? And, we're happy to listen to those things, but we're not going to be just controlled by emotions or impressions.'

Malcolm mentioned numerous ways he has learned to stay connected to those who oppose him. He said, "Listening, not raising the stakes, trying to maintain emotional stability, while allowing space for people. Not setting ultimatums. Having a clear strategy for going forward with steps articulated and measurable. I think that avoids the risk of unhealthy escalation and emotional consumption."

Participants frequently attributed their ability to remain calm and connected to their own spiritual self-awareness and practices, such as prayer, whether before meeting with their opponent or as the meeting unfolded.

Residual Impact

Participants were asked, "What residual impact did the conflict have upon you?" Several interviewees noted ruminating on the conflict. These bouts of rumination included replaying the events of the conflict, usually conversations or responses from their opponent, as well as their own personal responses or lack thereof. Henry recalled,

> Often [the events] would come back up and I would just be so frustrated at him. I was really frustrated at the fact that he wasn't curious or that he wasn't listening. The fact that he just wanted his way. To this day, I still grieve … *I still grieve*. I feel like it was the right leadership and conflict decision, but I still grieve the relationship.

Similarly, William commented that his conflict led to PTSD-like symptoms. He recalled,

> It started to feel like watching a car wreck over and over—every day it's just the same car wreck. *It's the same car wreck.* And then you start to expect the car wreck […] It took a massive toll […] I started to experience what I would describe as panic or anxiety attacks […] My body would go into physical shaking anxieties. I would have tightness in my chest. Probably more often than any other symptom, this sensation of like electricity. Like electrical currents running through my chest and my back. The closest thing I can think of to describe it would be if you narrowly escaped a car accident, like a really nasty car accident. Right after that happens, your body has all this adrenaline, and it doesn't know what to do with it. That's what it was like. It was like my body was preparing for a fight that wasn't there. The physical symptoms then led to depression. You feel like you can't do anything about it.

Other participants spoke of how the conflict transformed their leadership capacities. For example, George said his conflict challenged his inclination to "run" or avoid complicated relationship dynamics. He recalled,

> I see in myself that the temptation in the moment is to run. The temptation is to pull back. The huge takeaway for me is leaning in when conflict flares up; you run toward it, and you embrace the person rather than treating them as the argument or [point] of tension. Running toward the person and seeing it as an opportunity: that the bond could deepen, even if the person ends up leaving. You will lay your head on the pillow at the night's end with a far clearer conscience.

Alfred spoke similarly, saying his conflict also led to personal growth and a greater sense of self-awareness. He said, "I think the conflict challenged me to act differently the next round, it pushed me to be self-aware about [my motivations], about why I was doing ministry."

The Capacities Necessary to Successfully Negotiate Reactive Sabotage

The second research question sought to determine the capacities necessary to negotiate reactive sabotage. During this interview, questions were asked of the research participants to encourage personal reflection. These questions included:

1. What competencies do you believe contribute to successful conflict negotiation?
2. Can you talk about the role emotional intelligence plays in your ministry?
3. Can you describe your typical responses to stress or anxiety?
4. How have you learned to make sense of your emotions?
5. How have you learned to regulate your emotions? How do you remain in control of your emotions in heated situations?
6. How do you cultivate trust with those who oppose you?

Conflict Competencies

Participants indicated numerous competencies they believe lead to successful conflict resolution. Responses included:

- Listening

- Making others feel heard
- Providing emotional stability
- Allowing space for people
- Not setting ultimatums
- Having a clear strategy for moving forward
- Allowing dissent
- Developing a high tolerance for conflict
- Not owning others' anxieties or problems
- Being prepared to adjust and change as additional information becomes available
- Humility
- Empathy

Charles stated the importance of staying grounded in one's convictions. He said, "Sticking to prior decisions, core principles, and not changing course of action" have been essential to his team as they've negotiated conflict within the congregation's life.

George made a similar observation, noting, "Sufficient, if not good, level of communication and intentionality around being on the same page with decisions." Malcolm, reflecting on prior conflicts, noted,

> I think trying to understand where someone is coming from, their perception of things, and recognizing that almost certainly it's not the same as my perception of the very same thing. And then working out how different experiences, and histories form them and make them respond to what we're talking about and how that's different from me, and then working out what the issue is and how to help them and help me come to an agreement in relation to the best way forward.

Duncan specifically attributed his ability to resolve conflicts to emotional intelligence. He said,

> Being able to adequately read others is a real gift. Related to that, being able to apologize without blinking and to be genuine about it. I think to hear someone's pain and realize somehow I contributed to this; they just need to hear that I care about that. I think those two things together have been useful.

Lastly, several noted the value of one's spiritual grounding and self-awareness. For example, during his conflict, Edward recalled, "Asking the Holy Spirit to give me pause [and] the willingness to see Jesus as present there. I have tried to learn the

competency of having a spiritual lens to what's happening—that Jesus is there and I am not left to myself."

The Role of Emotional Intelligence

Responses regarding the role of Emotional Intelligence (EI) varied. Approximately half of the participants were able to answer with relative ease and articulated that EI played a significant role in their ministry. James responded positively to the query, saying,

> [EI] is massive. I think it's probably one of the central essential facets of, I think, my ministry style and certainly my ministry priorities. I am increasingly aware of the necessity of caring for, nurturing and developing my own emotional health in order to sustain as high an emotional IQ as possible, in order to function well within the church.

He continued, observing EI is essential to his staff relations and lay leader recruitment. "Emotional intelligence is probably one of the critical factors that I'm looking for." Duncan said, "I would say emotional intelligence is like breathing for a successful ministry. It means an adequate appraisal of myself in relationship with the other across the table and with the Lord in the room as well."

Harold commented particularly on the value of self-awareness, saying, "I think it plays a significant role in an array of situations of me being able to recognize what's going on within myself. I think that's been one of the most important things." Alfred added, "To do ministry effectively, after knowing Jesus and the Bible, the most important skill is knowing what's happening inside of you in a given situation […] I think self-awareness is the most critical internal part of ministry."

George noted the importance of perspective-taking and understanding the other's story as much as possible. He commented, "It's knowing where the person is at and what

the issue at hand represents for them. [It's] being able to read between the lines, knowing where the person is at emotionally."

Edward responded more personally. He said,

> Lately I've been a little depressed and kind of spent […] Some of that is the tension of trying to be emotionally present and strong in my own family, as opposed to devoting so much of it to the church […] My teenage daughter has been kind of depressed a lot and so my wife has been asking me to share my own sense of depression and melancholy and investigate my parents and their experience with that in order to be more emotionally present. I think that obviously helps me as a pastor.

Edmund confided that EI was an area ripe for personal growth. He said, "I think I can grow a lot in that. I think I'm probably decent at being empathetic. I could probably do more self-evaluation, reckoning with my own sin, my own idols, and that kind of thing."

Responses to Stress and Anxiety

Participants noted a variety of personal responses to stress and anxiety. Answers included altered mood states, physiological symptoms, and hypervigilance within aspects of their ministry.

William reflected that when he experiences increased stress, he loses his playfulness and becomes more irritable. He said, "I'll get irritated by little things that I typically would just kind of shrug off […] I also struggle with sleep. I'll have sleepless nights where I cannot figure out what's going on. And then that leads to anger." Similarly, Edmund said he can respond to stress with anger and self-pity.

Over half of the participants reported physiological discomfort because of increased stress loads. Frequent responses included back and stomach pain. Charles said

he's prone to skin irritation. He said, "I have psoriasis. My skin breaks out in splotches. Sometimes, I genuinely don't recognize how or where my stress loads until I see this big spot on my chest and, like yeah, I'm carrying a lot of stress."

Several mentioned falling into patterns of self-rumination. For example, George spoke candidly about deeply internalizing stressful circumstances, leading to self-demoralization. He said, "[I'll say], 'I must be such a bad person because if I was better at my job, I wouldn't be this stressed out. I must suck at my job.' And then it just creates this grinding narrative of self-destruction and loathing everything else."

James recognizes a similar pattern. He shared, "I painfully overthink the situation. In retrospect, is there something I could have said? Is there something I could have done? You know, is this an indication that I'm a bad pastor?" Malcom also said he's prone to overthink issues when he's feeling stressed. "If I'm stressed or anxious about something I continue to think about it. I try to problem solve it. It will distract me and distract my attention from the issues that are more immediate and more needful of my attention."

James went on to add that he tends to become hypervigilant and controlling when faced with stress. He noted,

> I will get disproportionately involved in a pastoral situation, so I'll drop boundaries. I will start micromanaging the staff team. There's a level of impatience there. And again, control. And then, thirdly, I'll normally identify a marquee project within the life of the church and throw myself into that. The other massive impact is that my decision making is very conservative. My thought process is generally to look at a number of worst-case scenarios and try and figure out what we should do in each situation.

Making Sense of Emotions

Participants were asked, "How have you learned to make sense of your emotions? How do you reflect on, narrate, and make meaning of your emotional life?" Alfred offered a thoughtful, lengthy answer regarding how he processes his emotional life and discomfort. He shared candidly,

> I think self-awareness is the most critical internal part of ministry. With that, you're able to listen less defensively to other people. The first response is acceptance. I'm aware that I'm anxious and that a situation is stressing me. It might be chronic, but simply acknowledging this is happening in me (these are mental, prayerful things). The second thing is to experience it. Then, I relinquish those things to God. These are all brief, verbal, powerful things. Then I start asking, 'What can I change? What can I effect in this situation?' What I find is that if I go into that process, then my responses are not as reactionary and impulsive.

William made a similar self-assessment, observing, "I think you have to know yourself, and you have to be honest about your tendencies." William described himself as a "fighter" and "cowboy." He concluded, "Being aware of that helped me to temper that and to listen to the wisdom of others."

Several participants discussed the need for others—friends, colleagues, coaches, and therapists—to help them process their emotional states. Reflecting on his conflict, Harold said, "I've done a lot of counseling work from that whole season, that whole affair." George agreed, "[There's value] in terms of intentionally seeking out coaching, seeking out counseling, seeking out accountability in community." Similarly, William added, "I think the most helpful thing, that is just a gift, is I have a relationship with an older gentleman […] He's very good at getting to my soul … to what's going on and it really helps me to see things."

James noted he's become more adept at noticing how his mood impacts his self-understanding and emotional responses. "The thing I hate or find more uncomfortable than almost anything else on an emotional level is feeling something that I'm not sure where it came from. So, if I have a critical conversation with someone, someone criticizes me and I feel bad about that, that is uncomfortable. But it's not as painful as if I feel low mood. Maybe a little down, maybe a little depressed, but I'm not entirely sure why. Or I feel like that mood is disproportional to my circumstance."

Regulating Emotional Responses

Participants were asked several questions regarding their emotional self-regulation. These questions included, "How have you learned to regulate your emotions?" and "How do you remain in control of your emotions in heated situations?"

Two participants noted the need for increased self-awareness. For example, Harold said how he's learned to sense if the moment is ripe for "amygdala hijack." He observed, "There an initial response of kind of like the cortisol drip." He continued,

> I've grown in wisdom, being aware that that's happening and consciously drawing that down and then asking, being curious with myself, 'What's going on? Why am I responding this way? What's needed in this moment to create a non-anxious response?'

George made a similar observation: "Just naming the ways that I avoid [conflict]. I need to say that out loud. 'I really want to run away right now. I really do not want to return that phone call. I really do not want to engage that person.'"

Malcolm said slowing down is key.

> I think pause and wait and develop patience—doing that prayerfully. Thinking about myself and how I respond to the issue, rather than the issue itself, and doing that work before addressing the issue, so I can check myself about what I'm

> bringing into it and whether I'm actually addressing the issue or addressing something else.

William also noted the need to slow down. "It's just God's grace that I had enough of an awareness to slow down and listen to elders and to listen to congregants."

Challenging Discomfort

Related to emotional regulation, participants were also asked how they've learned to challenge their sense of discomfort during conflict. Richard spoke openly about how he engages not only his pain and discomfort but also the discomfort of others. He said, "It's a regular, ordinary part of life. Situations are going to arise. People are going to be frustrated. People are going to be acting out of their own stuff, like just expect it." Richard went on to say,

> Even more than learning your own pain tolerance [is] learning a tolerance for other people's pain. [I learned to say to myself,] 'I'm okay with your pain, and I don't have to save you from this right now. This pain might be the most important thing that happens in your life and that God has appointed for you. And that's okay.' So maybe that's what I would say: patience and waiting for the Lord, not just having an initial reaction like, 'This person's upset, but just wait.'

Edmund noted a similar response in himself. He said, "I don't have to save the world. I don't have to save this church. I don't have to solve everybody's problems. I just need to look at the next moment in front of me and say, "What does a saved, forgiven man, who's confident about God's promises do next, given his role in this organization, and how can he be loving to other people?'"

Alfred said it is significant to understand that most conflict is not personal. He relayed, "If you read the story of the Bible and you look at the prophets and the apostles and certainly at our Savior, [conflict] is part of the broken ecosystem of the church. And

that makes it not personal. It's part of the system we're in. And so, to depersonalize [conflict] is a big part of [handling discomfort]."

Cultivating Trust

Most participants said interpersonal trust was a key component of conflict negotiation. To begin, Edmund mentioned the necessity of establishing a culture of trust as a prophylactic measure to combating the stress and strain of conflict. He said, "[You establish] relational capital, and you invest in them, and you ask them how they're doing, and you tell them you're praying for them. Hopefully, over the course of years, they know you love them."

Similarly, Malcolm talked about the leader's presence during conflict. "It has to be through [the leader's] presence, through maintaining a good relationship, emotional availability, and not withdrawing. [Ultimately], I'm wanting to spiritually go to that person and being able to disengage from the particular issue that's causing conflict." George said, "The medium [of trust] is the incarnation."

James and Duncan both spoke about how empathy cultivates interpersonal trust. James said, "I'm seeking to demonstrate I understand their position and can articulate their position, echo their position, and even understand the emotional temperature of their situation." In a similar manner, Duncan noted, "Listening, acknowledging their pain, their discomfort, making some commitments verbally to explore that further with them. I try to leave conversations less open-ended so there's the opportunity to do more."

Edmund spoke too about the necessity of open, honest, and empathetic conversations. "I think in the moment of the conflict, there are ways to talk about it.

There are ways to set up the conversation to say, 'I know this is really awkward, and I'm frankly even kind of worried about what this could do to our relationship, because I really highly value our relationship. But there's this topic we have to work through, and I hope we can do it in a way that doesn't damage our friendship.' There are ways to lean into it where they hopefully take it the right way."

Exercising Courageous Leadership During Reactive Sabotage

Participants were asked a range of questions related to the topic and capacities involved in exercising leadership. The literature suggests courageous results from clear convictions regarding a perceived good, a willingness to endure difficulty, and the ability to persevere and continue in one's vocation. The questions interviewees were asked, included:

1. How would you define courageous leadership? What specific traits or competencies do you attribute to courage?
2. What habits have you developed or seen in others that lead to virtuous formation in pastoral leaders?
3. Given the challenges of pastoral ministry, can you describe what makes you feel threatened or vulnerable?
4. When you experience heightened fear or anxiety, what are the common temptations you face? (timidity, withdrawal, overwhelmed, aggression, recklessness)
5. Can you describe in detail how you endured during this season of difficulty? How did you ultimately "bounce back"?
6. Talk to me about resiliency. What role does it play in pastoral leadership?
7. How do you stay optimistic? What keeps you motivated? How do you remain hopeful?

Defining Courageous Leadership

When asked to define courageous leadership, participants offered a significant range of answers. These included:

- Malcolm: "Walking by faith, not fear … To be courageous is not to fear what you will get wrong, but to trust the Lord to deliver what he's promised."
- James: "I think it's doing the right thing, even when it's hard."
- Richard: "A man who knows he's greatly loved and does not fear man."
- William: "It's doing the right thing for the right reasons. Even when there's great personal cost.
- Alfred: "I would say that the courageous leader is the man or woman who knows what they're doing will kill part of them but does it anyway."
- Harold: "I would say courageous leadership is doing the right thing even when it doesn't feel good.
- Duncan: "The wisdom to know when to advance and when to retreat. Courage is more than bravery. It is acknowledging your weakness and your strength in adequate measures."

Edmund and George provided further elaboration. Edmund said,

> Courageous leadership is … in the moment of choice, even if you're scared, even if it's a big impossible thing and you feel inadequate, you just do the next thing you think is honoring to the Lord. And you get counsel, and you move forward, and you trust him. Courage is closely linked with responsibility. A leader is one who says, 'I will do it. I will step up to the plate. I will be the one to help us face this challenge.'

Similarly, George's definition also linked courage to the presence of Christ. He commented,

> Courageous leadership: I would define it as an unflinching commitment to Christ and the truth, which expresses itself with a kind of divine courage coupled with otherworldly humility. [It] can hold on to the truth but also go low—be able to declare the truth of God's word while simultaneously washing people's feet. True courage is the result of a character that has been forged in suffering, forged in self-reflection, forged in a deep affection for the truth [and] brutal self-honesty. But also, a profound surrender to wherever the truth will take the person.

Capacities Belonging to Courageous Leadership

Participants stated a range of capacities they believed essential to the task of courageous leadership. Several mentioned the need for a clear sense of vision. James, for example, noted, "I think courageous leaders are those who have a clear vision of what the future could be and actually use their influence to tell the story of that future in a compelling way that moves people to action in that direction." He added,

> They appreciate the distinction between, 'What's the win of going fast; and, what's the win of slowing down?' [They are] those who can hold in their mind a variety of different worlds, depending on how they interpret that scale, and discern with clarity the best one to take. I think that's courageous leadership. I think the best leaders are those who can thrive in chaos and gray situations of high uncertainty. I think the most effective leaders are those with the ability to function with endurance and clarity in those low visibility environments.

Henry likewise mentioned the importance of vision and elaborated on what makes a vision compelling. He said, "I think having strong convictions and a sense of vision is really important. I think having internal fortitude, both spiritually and emotionally, to bear suffering, pain, hardship, loss, and the anxieties that go with that."

Similarly, Charles stated, "It seems to me the leaders that are courageous have a clear sense of their calling, both as an individual and as they're called in their organization. They have a sense of how that calling is serving God."

Harold and Henry each mentioned similar spiritual capacities. Harold shared, "I think groundedness in Christ [is important]. Being spiritually discerning, so that you're acting from a place of genuine conviction and love. That you're going to do the right thing because you love someone." Henry noted, "I think constantly reminding ourselves of God as Father is super important. And specifically a Father who loves his children and is inclined towards us in fatherly ways."

Edmund and Alfred noted sacrifice and a willingness to die to self as additional capacities of courageous leadership. Edmund stated poignantly,

> I think there has to be enough selflessness to realize I might get shot in the process, but Jesus called me to be sacrificial. I think confidence in the Lord's promises, that he's working these things out for his glory. And even if it's a minor setback in the short term, I still have confidence in what he's doing.

Alfred added, "I would say that the courageous leader is the man or woman who knows what they're doing will kill parts of them but does it anyway. They understand that leadership is about taking up your cross. And when I die in these ways, I will die with Christ and rise again."

Edmund agreed that courageous action is reflected in one's beliefs about God's promises. He said, "I think there has to be confidence in the Lord's promises, in that he's working these things out for His glory. And, even if it's a minor setback in the short term, I still have confidence in what he's doing."

Formative Spiritual Habits

Participants were asked to describe the spiritual practices that anchor them in God's love and friendship. The most common response was daily prayer and Scripture reading. Alfred said, "[A] rock solid, habitual prayer life is foundational. I think you'll see the fruit of that over decades, not years."

George made a similar comment, remarking, "Time in prayer. Abiding. John 15. 'Abide in me. As I abide in the father.' Going deep with Jesus. Reveling in his nearness, believing that he wants to be that close to me."

Edmund and James both mentioned establishing a morning routine to guide their spiritual practices. Edmund said,

> I have my little routine in the morning. I [have] this opening prayer that gets [to] my sense of identity. And then I listened to a psalm of praise. I think that's a huge one—filling your heart with praise for God. Listening to Christian songs. Praising Him is so, so super healthy for your soul. It just gives you a bigger perspective. And then I've been journaling. I've never been a journaler, but I'm writing down prayers each day just to seek the Lord.

James also described his practice. He shared, "I would have a daily quiet time that looks like getting up before anyone else in the house. I light a candle to remind me that Jesus is present with me in the room. I will typically listen to a kind of daily devotional which takes [me] through some Bible passages—Bible readings and some prayers that I find helpful, including the Lord's Prayer. And I would normally have a time about ten minutes or so of intentional silence with the Lord."

Several participants have found more historic, contemplative disciplines. In this regard, James said,

> I think those who seem to engage in more contemplative practices as part of their regular disciplines, I think, have a greater level of capacity and ability to notice and observe. Slow down. It gives you time and therefore it gives you better choices. So, I think they have those types of rhythms that makes a massive difference.

Malcolm mentioned cultivating "extended periods of quiet reflection." He said that during these times, "I'm working through my own heart response to issues and how to preach the gospel to myself in that."

Edward said he incorporates "silence, meditation, and lectio divina" into his daily disciplines. Harold mentioned his desire for contemplative prayer. He explained, "It's sitting in God's presence. It's more being than doing anything. It's having a normal relationship with God. In prayer, it's not so much coming in like a technical supplication, but more so in a conversation."

Harold mentioned similar personal practices. He said, “Three years ago, I really began to avail myself of resources from the historic contemplative side of Christianity and began to make meditation more a part of my devotional practice. One of the practical things I’ve used is like a 20-minute sit with God; practicing his presence enables me as I face the challenges through the rest of the day, even in stressful moments.”

Edmund noted how he has cultivated positive spiritual self-talk. He said, “For me, I have a habit, in the morning, of meeting with God and saying, ‘Lord, I am tethered to you, and you are the one who has given me standing in my identity. Lord, I want to be awake to who you are. And I want to live a life in response to your faithful call on my life, your grace, your truth. Thank you for redeeming me. Thank you for guiding me. Help me be responsive to you.’”

Feeling Threatened and Vulnerable

The literature suggests courage is a virtuous response to real or perceived threats and dangers. Consequently, participants were asked, “Given the challenges of pastoral ministry, can you describe what makes you feel threatened or vulnerable? Charles’ response was direct, “When I’m getting attacked. I feel most vulnerable when I’m getting attacked by somebody.”

Alfred said he feels vulnerable when he’s unable to accomplish the goals he has set for himself and if those goals are hindered by those he’s leading. He said this can trigger feelings associated with a lack of recognition and affirmation. George’s self-evaluation was similar. He said, “[Sometimes I think] I am my performance. Therefore, if

I doubt my performance, I have nothing, and you might as well kick me to the curb." He said this can lead to feelings of being unseen, unknown, and unappreciated.

George said what makes him most threatened is being rejected. Related to performance standards, Edward noted that he feels vulnerable under the weight of others' expectations. He said this can lead to a sense of loneliness. "[Sometimes], I definitely feel alone."

Common Temptations

When experiencing various difficulties or threats, it is common to succumb to fight or flight tendencies or temptations. Participants were asked, "When you experience heightened fear or anxiety, what are the common temptations you face?" Malcolm and Charles mentioned a tendency toward escapism or fantasy. Malcolm, a former lawyer, said he asks himself, "What am I doing? Couldn't [law] be a much easier life?" Charles also said there's "a heavy temptation to consider career changes or other jobs."

George mentioned a tendency toward self-doubt and avoidance, particularly "of the issue or the people who are at the center of the issue." He continued, "My weakness [is] people pleasing … so [I'm tempted] to run away, to allow the truth to be the casualty of the relationship."

Several participants noted falling into anxiety-driven habits. Henry shared, "I face heightened anxiety eating. I tend to eat emotionally. I tend to want to shut down and not do a lot of work. I tend to be a little bit lazy, or at least not efficient. Procrastinate in certain ways. And I also tend to doom scroll." Charles also admitted a temptation to "check out." He said he can fall into patterns of eating junk food and watching TV.

Enduring Difficulty

Courage is the ability to physically, emotionally, and spiritually endure despite difficulty and temptation. Participants were asked to describe in detail how they endured during their period of conflict.

Henry said,

> This was the first time where I consciously leaned more heavily into [healthy] patterns. I have a friend who—when I ask him how he's doing spiritually—one of his answers is always, 'I'm doing okay because my habits are intact.' So I kind of took that approach. I asked [myself], 'How do I feel emotionally right now? What is happening right now?' This helped me engage my [healthy] patterns [of coping].

Alfred talked about how his conflict revealed his need to "die to self." He said, "We're always trying not to die. And the problem is Jesus told us to die. We use our position not to die. We use our theological training not to die. We even use our character not to die. These are all what I call false selves. To die to pride, to ambition, to recognition, to all the stuff that was driving me [was important]."

Henry offered a similar perspective. He said,

> I think often of the beginning of Hebrews 12, where it says, 'We've not resisted evil men until the point of shedding of blood like Christ did.' [There are] a lot of New Testament passages that talk about sharing in [Jesus'] suffering. So, I think, if you're going to follow Jesus, you have to be emotionally healthy, particularly in a leadership role, to represent him to the congregation. You have to be willing to bear scars, and, I think, we have to be emotionally healthy enough and spiritually healthy enough that we can bear scars.

Developing Resiliency

A distinctive feature of courage is not only the capacity to endure difficulty, but also the ability to persevere and maintain a resilient posture. Consequently, participants

were asked to elaborate on the role of resiliency within their ministry and its importance to pastoral leadership.

Harold said, rather wryly, "Ministry *is* resiliency. Those could almost be like synonyms." William observed, "Resiliency is the ability to pick yourself back up and do it again. When you fail, when it's difficult, when it's not going the way that you want it to go. It's getting up every day. Doing it again. Doing it again. Doing it again. Taking the hits. Taking the shots. It's 'stick-to-it-ness,' where you just have to keep going, particularly in the face of intense opposition."

James made a similar comment, noting, "I think resiliency is the ability to consistently make right choices, even in the face of hostile opposition."

Harold and James shared how they believe leaders form a resilient posture. Harold said resilience is formed by "Having a distinct identity that is separate from ministry. That you're not going to determine your worth or your value or your happiness based on whatever's the latest thing going on." He also added, "I think it's also self-awareness, that if you have been wounded, if you've had to go through a hard situation, being able to slow down and do the work to understand what's happened. Understand what's going on inside of you so that you can be healed."

James offered a complimentary perspective. He said leaders must have a "high emotional immune system." He said leaders must ask, "How can I be protected from catching the anxiety of other people?" He also said leaders must be equipped "To hold a variety of different options together with relatively equal weighting. This keeps [leaders] somewhat immunized from their own biases."

Malcolm offered a more personal response. He attributed his ability to "bounce back" from his conflict to properly grieving what was lost because of the incident. Malcolm said, "I think learning to grieve things. Learn to grieve the losses that are there, that it was alright to feel really sad that I couldn't follow through. That's right. Feel sad that, in my estimation, I'd let down fellow trustees and let down staff in withdrawing. I think actually giving the space to grieve builds your resilience to move forwards and then looking to see the opportunity that it presents."

Charles also offered a personal reflection. He shared that resiliency may not mean returning to normal or to the conditions that were present before the conflict. He shared, "[Sometimes] batteries don't get back to 100% afterwards. Maybe 70% is the way it is. And that's, I think, how I feel less energy for new initiatives."

Maintaining Hope

Given that conflict and difficulty are part of courageous leadership, participants were asked how they remain optimistic, motivated, and hopeful. Unanimously, each participant described their hope as derived from the resurrection and the eschatological realities of the biblical narrative.

For example, James said, "I'm really confident about where we're heading to the new creation. And I'm also confident in the sovereignty of God. We have a God who specializes in 'backs against the wall situations,' which means every disaster is an opportunity." Malcolm noted similarly, saying, "The story at the end is going to be good, regardless of what the end of my story is. I know there's redeeming grace in every single situation. The things that bring me most low will also be the things that God most uses to

help me, to help other people. So ultimate victory, combined with the redemption of my greatest losses, even in this life, keeps me going."

Harold added, "I think spiritually, the Holy Spirit is carrying us through into the consummation of the kingdom. And there's a lot of hope in that."

William responded animatedly, "It's just a solid hope grounded in the resurrection, right? Jesus dies, and then he is raised again on the third day. That's why you can be resilient, right? By that, I mean it's a hope that that's where history is headed."

Chapter Five

Discussion and Recommendations

This study explores the processes that contribute to courageous pastoral leadership during times of reactive sabotage. By gaining a deeper understanding of this phenomenon, pastoral leaders and their churches will develop the skills needed to navigate conflict effectively in their ministry contexts. There were two assumptions in this study. First, reactive sabotage is a common occurrence in pastoral ministry. Second, pastors who have experienced reactive sabotage possess invaluable knowledge, competencies, and character traits essential for establishing best practices for resilience in ministry. Four main areas inform this inquiry. They included leadership through conflict, systems theory, emotional intelligence, and a biblical-theological survey of courageous leadership.

To examine these areas of inquiry, three questions guided the literature review and were the focus of the qualitative research:

1) How do pastors experience reactive sabotage?
    a. Before the event
    b. During the event
    c. After the event
2) What capacities are necessary for pastors to negotiate reactive sabotage successfully?
    a. Emotionally?
    b. Spiritually?
    c. Cognitively?

d. Relationally?

3) How do pastors exercise courageous leadership during reactive sabotage?

This chapter presents the study's conclusions. The research confirmed the assumption that reactive sabotage is a common phenomenon in pastoral ministry. First, this chapter will discuss how pastors experience reactive sabotage. Then, it addresses the competencies pastors use to navigate sabotage and how they lead courageously during these challenges. These competencies are believed to be transferable and will enhance the effectiveness of current and future ministry leaders. The chapter concludes with a summary of recommendations for ministry practice and further research.

The Prevalence of Ministry Conflict

The literature and interviews confirm that conflict is a common aspect of ministry leadership. Cosgrove and Hatfield suggest that the local church functions as a large family-like system and, like other family systems, "it is often the scene of fights."[384] We have observed that conflict arises from competing desires and opinions within human systems. When these competing desires emerge, especially between leaders and constituents, conflict becomes nearly unavoidable. Ministry leaders must recognize that "conflict is not a personal failure, nor is it a distraction from their calling. It is their calling."[385] Consequently, to effectively navigate the demands of ministry leadership,

[384] Charles H. Cosgrove and Dennis D. Hatfield, *Church Conflict: The Hidden Systems behind the Fights* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1994), 19.

[385] James P. Osterhaus, Joseph M. Jurkowski, and Todd Hahn, *Thriving through Ministry Conflict: A Parable on How Resistance Can Be Your Ally* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010), 100.

clergy must develop adequate levels of conflict competency as part of their overall leadership skills.

This study explored a leadership phenomenon known as reactive sabotage. Reactive sabotage is a form of relational conflict that arises from a disturbance in the homeostasis of an emotional system. Each emotional system has a set of established norms that maintain its equilibrium. When a system is disrupted, feedback in the form of anxiety circulates throughout to restore it to homeostasis. Change is a frequent source of anxiety and disruption. Change is disruptive because it signifies various forms of loss, and loss inevitably leads to grief. As members of the system experience loss and grief, they often "sabotage" or undermine either the leader, the change process itself, or both to avoid pain and discomfort. Friedman notes this type of crisis is not due to the leader's failure or incompetence but rather to his or her success at self-differentiation.[386]

How Pastors Experience Reactive Sabotage

How do pastors experience this reactive process? Participant inquiries focused on the pastor's subjective experiences before, during, and after the sabotaging event(s).

Before The Event

Each interview started with participants recounting a conflict incident that resulted from an action, decision, or choice that disrupted established norms. This question sought to identify a link between the leader's self-differentiation and reactive feedback in the emotional system. Participants provided various triggering factors that

[386] Friedman, Treadwell, and Beal, *A Failure of Nerve: Leadership in the Age of the Quick Fix*, 261.

ultimately led to conflict. Common examples included changes in church or leadership structures (James, Henry, and Harold), worship styles or focus (Alfred, Edmund, and Richard), and critical decision-making processes (Malcolm, Charles, George, and William).

Three factors unify these accounts: fundamental changes to the established emotional system, the surprising nature of the event, and the fact that they were prompted by opponents whom the leader viewed as allies or confidants.

First, each leader identified a scenario in which their self-differentiation and subsequent actions disrupted the balance within the emotional system. Alfred's story is particularly noteworthy in this regard. He was hired, in part, to lead a change process involving the church's vision and values. When these strategic changes were ultimately introduced, they were met with varying degrees of resistance. Alfred remarked, "[The church] hired me to help with those things, but the congregation didn't really feel it." This statement illustrates what Heifetz and Linksy term *patient noncompliance*, a form of passive resistance that values safety over disruption and change.[387]

Second, many participants conveyed how conflict caught them off guard. Interviewees described the news of the unfolding crisis as "shocking," "unexpected," and "blindsiding." The literature confirms that a leader's surprise at the resistance within the system not only intensifies the issue but also heightens anxiety. For example, Shitama writes,

> Will you be prepared for sabotage or surprised by it? To effectively lead change, you must be able to anticipate and prepare for this type of crisis. Convincing your church to do something new is not even half the battle. It can be hard, but it is

[387] Heifetz and Linsky, *Leadership on the Line: Staying Alive through the Dangers of Leading*, 12.

> possible. However, managing the sabotage that comes next is where most leaders fail.[388]

The literature suggests that leaders must understand two critical aspects of conflict: the impact their self-differentiation and change process will have on the system, and the resulting sabotage. Friedman, for example, describes sabotage as "the 'second half' of the story of leadership and crisis."[389]

Lastly, sabotage often arises from unexpected sources, which is one reason it catches leaders off guard. Leaders usually anticipate resistance from those outside their trusted network. However, many participants indicated that their opponents were actually allies or confidants—individuals who invested significantly in the leader, ministry, or the change initiative itself. Opponents included pastoral colleagues, staff members, church officers or board members, lay leaders, and congregants with whom their families shared important relationships.

For instance, Henry mentioned his opponent was a church officer, a member of his hiring committee, and a recognized "core member" of the congregation. Heifetz and Linsky observe, "People who oppose what you are trying to accomplish are usually those with the most to lose."[390] These losses might include positions, reputation, power, or safety. Bolsinger makes a similar point: "Saboteurs are usually doing nothing but unconsciously supporting the status quo. They are protecting the system and keeping it in place. They are preserving something dear to them."[391] Consequently, leaders must ask

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[388] Shitama, *Anxious Church, Anxious People: How to Lead Change in an Age of Anxiety*, 74.

[389] Friedman, Treadwell, and Beal, *A Failure of Nerve: Leadership in the Age of the Quick Fix*, 261.

[390] Heifetz and Linsky, *Leadership on the Line: Staying Alive through the Dangers of Leading*, 89.

[391] Bolsinger, *Canoeing the Mountains: Christian Leadership in Uncharted Territory*, 174.

themselves, “Who has the most to lose because of this change? And how can I appropriately anticipate their anxiety and resistance?” The data suggests it is likely someone close to the leader.

During The Event

Participants reported that they contacted their opponent to ensure proper follow-up once they received notice of the conflict—usually via text, email, or a third party. Often, follow-up involved either individual meetings or meetings that included additional stakeholders.

Participants reported a range of emotional reactions leading up to and during these meetings. These included hurt, frustration, betrayal, anxiety, rejection, disappointment, and heightened stress, discomfort, and trepidation. These emotional responses are generally linked to fear, difficulty, and challenge. Since emotions are primarily *felt* in the body, we gain valuable insights into a leader’s emotional processing and attending physiological states.

The literature widely acknowledges the emotional and physiological strain that individuals experience due to stress. The human body responds rapidly to both real and perceived threats to safety. Goleman refers to this phenomenon as “The Anatomy of Emotional Hijacking.”[392]

Speaking specifically of the amygdala, which Goleman describes as the brain’s “psychological sentinel,” he writes, “When it sounds an alarm of, say, fear, it sends urgent messages to every major part of the brain: it triggers the secretion of the body’s

[392] Goleman, *Emotional Intelligence*, 12.

fight-or-flight hormones, mobilizes the centers for movement, and activates the cardiovascular system, muscles, and gut."[393] In short, emotions shift our physiological state. These states provide both external and internal information. Clinician Babette Rothschild writes, "How an emotion looks on the outside of the body, in facial expression and posture, communicates it to others in our environment. How an emotion feels on the inside of the body communicates it to the self."[394]

Why is this important? When leaders face fear, threats, and stress, they are unlikely to perform at their best. Despite their best intentions, their brain and physiological states can hinder their performance. This phenomenon is known as the "hot-cold empathy gap."[395] The hot-cold empathy gap is a cognitive bias where individuals underestimate the impact of visceral drives on their attitudes, preferences, and behaviors. Hot-cold empathy gaps can be analyzed based on their direction, with the cold-to-hot direction being most common in the conflict scenarios presented by participants. When leaders are in a cold state, not under direct stress, they struggle to envision hot states, where their brain's psychological sentinel is fully engaged, and their cognitive faculties are impaired. Consequently, they tend to underestimate the strength of their visceral impulses (i.e., when they start to feel their emotions in their body). This leads to surprise, stress, and a lack of self-regulation. Therefore, leaders must learn to identify their emotional triggers and how they typically respond to stressful situations. Even if leaders have high hopes for how they might perform in a given situation, much of

[393] Goleman, 15.

[394] Babette Rothschild, *The Body Remembers*, Norton Professional Books (New York, NY: W. W. Norton, 2000), 56.

[395] Ivaylo Durmonski, "Hot-Cold Empathy Gap Explained and How It Affects You," *Durmonski.Com* (blog), September 26, 2024, https://durmonski.com/psychology/hot-cold-empathy-gap-explained/.

that clarity dissipates when they enter a "hot state," increasing their vulnerability to stress.

Likewise, leaders must acknowledge that their opponents are just as susceptible to the same cognitive and physiological dynamics. Participants were asked to infer their opponents' emotional states during their initial encounter. Edmund observed that his opponent appeared to feel "angst and fear." Alfred remembered that his opponent was "angry and filled with conviction." Leaders need to cultivate situational awareness, being not only aware of their own emotional state but also realistic and empathetic toward the experiences of their opponent.

The heightened emotional climate between the leader and the opponent complicates what Shitama describes as "the moment of truth," when a leader is most likely to experience a failure of nerve and forfeit the work of self-differentiation he has accomplished so far. Friedman argues that it is essential for the leader to maintain a non-anxious presence at this moment. This does not mean that a leader will be free from anxiety; quite the opposite: the "moment of truth" is inherently vulnerable. Instead, it suggests that a leader's *presence*—his ability to manage his emotional reactivity—serves as his greatest asset in navigating reactive sabotage.

Consequently, a leader must reckon with his emotional vulnerability and become increasingly comfortable with the discomfort of others. Bolsinger notes, "All the best literature makes it clear: to lead you must be able to disappoint *your own people*. But, even doing so well ('at a rate they can absorb') does *not* preclude them turning on you. In fact, when you disappoint your own people, they *will* turn on you."[396]

[396] Bolsinger, *Canoeing the Mountains: Christian Leadership in Uncharted Territory*, 173.

After The Event

After the initial event, participants noted that resistance and sabotage continued as they maintained their self-differentiated positions. Alfred shared that he faced "chronic resistance" and "open criticism" from his opponents. Henry reported that his opponent utilized various forms of triangulation, followed by distancing and cut-off. Malcolm mentioned that his conflict escalated over a five-month period, with his opponent resorting to criticism, threats, and non-responsiveness to overtures and requests. These experiences align with findings in the literature. For instance, Heifetz and Linsky referred to these types of resistance as "The Faces of Danger." They write,

> The dangers of leadership take many forms. Although each organization and culture has its preferred ways to restore equilibrium when someone upsets the balance, we've noticed four basic forms, with countless ingenious variations. When exercising leadership, you risk getting marginalized, diverted, attacked, or seduced. Regardless of the form, however, the point is the same. When people resist adaptive work, their goal is to shut down those who exercise leadership in order to preserve what they have.[397]

Leaders should, in some respects, normalize this degree of resistance and protracted conflict and, to the best of their ability, avoid taking it personally. Of course, this is easier said than done. Bolsinger writes, "The people following you may be shooting you in the back, but it's really not *you* that they are sabotaging, it's your role as leader. They are sabotaging the change you are bringing. And to be clear, they would do this to *any* leader."[398]

[397] Heifetz and Linsky, *Leadership on the Line: Staying Alive through the Dangers of Leading*, 31.

[398] Bolsinger, *Canoeing the Mountains: Christian Leadership in Uncharted Territory*, 176.

Residual Impacts of Sabotage

As participants reflected on their conflicts, they discussed how the events impacted their overall health. Four categories related to health emerged from the interviews: emotional, physical, cognitive, and relational well-being.

Emotional

It's important to note that many conflicts the participants experienced extended beyond their initial crisis points, often lasting for months. Participants reported lasting feelings of hurt, worry, trepidation, discomfort, despair, and shame during this time. Consequently, many grappled with heightened levels of stress that increased the emotional toll. For instance, Edmund expressed, "I felt like a wreck." He further stated, "I was lying awake at night. I was completely swallowed up by it." Harold's response was similar: "*I was a wreck*. I was a wreck in those initial four or five months. I was confused. I felt ashamed that it had gotten to this." Referring to a previous conflict, Richard commented, "It felt like getting hit by a truck, and then I would be a zombie for a day and get no work done."

One interviewee shared that the emotional load led to depressive symptoms. Resignedly, he said, "You feel like you can't do anything about it." Participants echoed this sentiment, sharing that they carried a heavy emotional load due to their pastoral duties.

Physical

In their book *Faithful and Fractured: Responding to the Clergy Health Crisis,* researchers Rae Jean Proeschold-Bell and Jason Byassee highlight the prevalence of

stress-related physical symptoms that clergy experience due to the emotional demands of their work.[399] These bodily responses include:

- Muscle tension in various places including shoulders, jaw, and back
- Cardiopulmonary arousal symptoms like a racing heart, irregular heart-beat, and rapid or difficult breathing
- Sympathetic arousal symptoms like having trouble sleeping, and sweating under pressure
- Gastroenterological symptoms like nausea, stomach pain, and diarrhea
- Upper respiratory symptoms like colds and having to clear your throat more often

In line with this research, many participants reported similar physical stress responses. Several mentioned chronic back pain (Malcolm) and insomnia (Henry and William), while another referred to ongoing stomach issues (Malcolm). Charles shared he experiences bouts of psoriasis during periods of heavy stress.

Researcher and therapist Sarah H. Wright states that these somatic responses are common when the brain feels chronically threatened or, as she puts it, reaches a point of "cortisaturation" (i.e. cortisol saturation). She writes, "Maintaining a state of cortisaturation for any amount of time becomes tiresome and is not sustainable. Without regular sleep to allow brain and body to heal and effective coping to address the issues, the toll can begin to compound."[400] She concludes,

> The body cannot sustain a heightened state of such stress before there are consequences. Essentially, a car's engine can only be revved up while in neutral for so long before the motor burns out. In the case of prolonged exposure to high levels of cortisol, weight gain, headaches, exacerbation of chronic pain, and elevated blood pressure are frequently seen.[401]

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[399] Rae Jean Proeschold-Bell and Jason Byassee, *Faithful and Fractured: Responding to the Clergy Health Crisis* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2018), 75.

[400] Sarah E. Wright, *Redefining Trauma: Understanding and Coping with a Cortisoaked Brain* (New York, NY: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2020), 29.

[401] Wright, 30.

William's case appears in line with Wright's findings. He reported what he called, "PTSD-like symptoms." He shared, "I began to experience what I would call panic or anxiety attacks. My body would physically shake in response to my fears. I would feel a tightness in my chest." William compared these symptoms to narrowly avoiding a car accident. He continued, "The closest thing I can think of to describe it is if you narrowly escaped a car accident, like a really nasty one. Right after it happens, your body has all this adrenaline, and it doesn't know what to do with it. That's what it felt like. It was as if my body was preparing for a fight that wasn't there."

Cognitive

Cognitive impacts were significant. Some participants reported struggling with ruminating tendencies, such as overthinking events and catastrophizing. Malcolm, for example, stated, "If I'm stressed or anxious about something, I keep thinking about it. I try to problem-solve, but it distracts me and takes my attention away from issues that are more immediate and require my focus." James shared that during the conflict he often wondered, "What else is coming?" and "Are things going to get worse?"

Research indicates that ruminating tendencies like these lead to an increase in negative emotions and patterns. This was evident in statements from other participants who expressed feelings of self-doubt and self-pity. George confided, "I think to myself, 'I must be such a bad person; if I were better at my job, I wouldn't be this stressed. I must really suck at my job.' It then creates this relentless narrative of self-destruction and loathing." Edmund shared similarly, stating, "I felt fear, frustration, and self-pity. I thought, 'I don't deserve this. I'm working so hard. Can't these guys be more supportive? Don't they know how much I care?'"

The above illustrates a consistent feedback loop observed in several participants. This feedback loop generally consists of an initial stressor (the conflict), an attempted coping strategy, followed by rumination, and then an increase in stress. Each cycle through this process seems to intensify the emotional and cognitive distress, resulting in a more entrenched state of stress and anxiety.

Relational

Participants observed a range of relational outcomes stemming from their conflict. These dynamics encompassed typical relational strains, along with relationships considered irreconcilable.

Edward shared that his relationship with his opponent was immediately strained. He expressed feelings of "annoyance" and "trepidation." Later, he added that his opponent's personality was "hard to deal with" and noted an evident "personality clash" between them that he didn't expect to resolve quickly.

Henry's outcome was more somber, acknowledging that the relationship he once had with his opponent had dissolved. He confided, "To this day, I still grieve … *I still grieve*. It was the right leadership decision regarding the conflict, but I still grieve the relationship."

Harold's response was similar. "It was a ministry scar filled with regret, both for his wellbeing and my own." He added, "I tried to make a run at reorienting the relationship and tried to do things that would help rebuild our relationship, our understanding of one another." Ultimately, Harold's efforts were unsuccessful, and the relationship ended.

Duncan's interview revealed another outcome: the conflict represented a relational loss not only for him but also for his family. He stated, "As people become disgruntled with me, they naturally take it out on [my wife]." As Duncan's conflict persisted, the tension between him and his opponent affected the relationships among their spouses and children. He concluded, "My wife and kids benefited from those friendships, and now they don't have them anymore."

Leaders must recognize that casualties are an inevitable part of the politics of change. This will be a complex reality for leaders who are not only shepherds by vocation but have also committed themselves emotionally during the conflict. Heifetz and Linsky write, "An adaptive change that is beneficial to the organization as a whole may clearly and tangibly hurt some of those who had benefited from the world being left behind."[402] They conclude,

> Accepting casualties signals your commitment. If you signal that you are unwilling to take casualties, you present an invitation to the people who are uncommitted to push your perspectives aside. Without the pinch of reality, why should they make sacrifices and change their ways of doing business? Your ability to accept the harsh reality of losses sends a clear message about your courage and commitment to seeing the adaptive challenge through.[403]

Competencies Necessary for Successfully Negotiating Reactive Sabotage

Reactive sabotage presents significant challenges and risks for leaders. They must navigate the complexities of self-differentiation and the conflicts and dangers that result. Research indicates that leaders who develop and implement a range of emotional,

[402] Heifetz and Linsky, *Leadership on the Line: Staying Alive through the Dangers of Leading*, 98.

[403] Heifetz and Linsky, 99.

spiritual, cognitive, and relational competencies are more likely to manage the challenges posed by sabotage effectively.

Emotional Competencies

Self-awareness

The literature clearly highlights the importance of emotional intelligence in leadership roles. Caruso and Salovey write, "We believe to ignore [EI], to deny the wisdom of your own emotions and those of others, is to invite failure as a person, as a manager, and as a leader."[404]

Participants were asked, "How have you learned to understand your emotions? How do you reflect on, narrate, and make meaning of your emotional life?" Alfred provided perhaps the most thorough answer. He stated, "Self-awareness is the most crucial internal part of ministry. With that, you're able to listen less defensively to others." He then described his personal method for linking self-awareness to his ministry context, which included recognizing and accepting his emotional patterns. Harold made similar observations. He commented on the value of self-awareness in ministry, saying, "I think it plays a significant role in an array of situations, particularly my ability to recognize what's going on in myself."

As leaders develop their self-awareness, they increasingly gain the ability to manage their emotions and understand how they affect their leadership effectiveness. To enhance their self-awareness, leaders must learn to integrate reason with emotion. This enables leaders to be neither driven by their emotions nor disconnected from them.

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[404] David Caruso and Peter Salovey, *The Emotionally Intelligent Manager: How to Develop and Use the Four Key Emotional Skills of Leadership* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2004).

Self-regulation

Greenberg observes that "to act with emotional intelligence, people need to learn to regulate both their emotional experience and their emotional expression."[405] He continues, "Regulation means being able to have emotions when you want them and not have them when you don't. Being able to defer one's responses, know what they are, and reflect on them are quintessentially human skills."[406] Participants shared experiences that aligned with Greenberg's observations. For example, Harold said, "I've grown in wisdom, being aware of what's happening in me and consciously drawing that down and then asking, being curious with myself, 'What's going on? Why am I responding this way? What's needed in this moment to create a non-anxious presence?'" Malcolm responded similarly. He shared, "I think, pause, wait, and develop patience—doing that prayerfully. Thinking about myself and how I respond to the issue."

The research suggests that leaders must be able to slow down, pause, and reflect to regulate their inner world effectively. Burns et al. write, "Reflection is the discipline to stop and consider what we are thinking and feeling, as well as what we have been doing and saying to others. Growth in emotional intelligence requires the discipline of reflection."[407]

Developing and applying effective coping strategies is a crucial skill tied to self-regulation. Coping strategies enable leaders to effectively reduce the impacts of stress,

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[405] Greenberg, *Emotion-Focused Therapy: Coaching Clients to Work through Their Feelings*, 19.

[406] Greenberg, 20.

[407] Burns, Chapman, and Guthrie, *Resilient Ministry: What Pastors Told Us about Surviving and Thriving*, 111.

challenges, and difficult situations. Participants readily identified spiritual practices—such as prayer and scripture reflection—that helped them cope amidst difficulty. Several others shared additional adaptive responses, including exercise and peer mentoring.

Overall, participant responses in this area did not align with researched best practices. More often than not, participants relied on maladaptive coping strategies, including procrastination, fantasizing, and numbing behaviors such as eating, alcohol consumption, and excessive screen time.

Therefore, leaders should create a proactive self-care plan to promote healthy coping strategies. A 2019 research study from Duke University found that clergy who regularly engaged in self-care activities experienced more positive mental health outcomes than those without a clear self-care plan.[408] Burns et al. define self-care as "the ongoing development of the whole person, encompassing the emotional, spiritual, relational, physical, and intellectual aspects of life."[409] Effective coping strategies may include self-care practices such as therapy, spiritual direction, regular exercise, sufficient sleep, nutritious eating, and nurturing meaningful relationships.

It's crucial to understand that these strategies need to become habits *before* crises arise. Only then can the coping mechanisms offer the vital support and framework to help individuals manage heightened challenges.

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[408] Andrew D. Case et al., "Attitudes and Behaviors That Differentiate Clergy with Positive Mental Health from Those with Burnout," *Journal of Prevention & Intervention in the Community* 48, no. 1 (2019): 94.

[409] Burns, Chapman, and Guthrie, *Resilient Ministry: What Pastors Told Us about Surviving and Thriving*, 61.

Spiritual Competencies

In his book *The Emotionally Healthy Leader*, Peter Scazzero defines spiritual maturity as a "loving union" with God. He writes,

> In loving union … We allow God to have full access to every area of our lives, including every aspect of our leadership—from difficult conversations and decision-making to managing our emotional triggers. Cultivating this kind of relationship with God can't be hurried or rushed. We must slow down and build into our lives a structure and rhythm that make this kind of loving surrender routinely possible.[410]

Scazzero's observation emphasizes two essential competencies leaders must possess to demonstrate spiritual maturity: a vibrant and loving relationship with God, and various practices to support this type of loving surrender. More simply, leaders must cultivate a *being with God* that sustains their *doing for God*.

Friendship with God

Edmund and George openly discussed their friendship with God in Christ. For instance, Edmund shared one of his ongoing prayers:

> "Lord, I am tethered to you, and you are the one who has given me standing in my identity. Lord, I want to be awake to who you are, and I want to live a life in response to your faithful call on my life. Thank you for redeeming me. Thank you for guiding me. Help me to be responsive to you."

Similarly, George mentioned that "abiding with Christ" had become a driving paradigm for his devotional life. Referencing John 15, he stated, "Abiding. 'Abide in me, as I abide in the Father.' Going deep with Jesus. Reveling in his nearness, believing he wants to be that close to me."

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[410] Peter Scazzero, *The Emotionally Healthy Leader: How Transforming Your Inner Life Will Deeply Transform Your Church, Team, and the World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2015), 120.

However, approximately half of the participants appeared reticent to describe their immediate spiritual life in terms of vibrant friendship or communion. Charles seemed self-aware of this dynamic. He mentioned a gap between "reality" and "aspiration." He shared, "The aspiration is communion with Christ and friendship with God in a vibrant relationship, and that ministry is simply inviting others into this relationship. On the ground, it's different. Lately, I've been in a season of exhaustion where I haven't had an overwhelming sense of God's presence on a daily basis. I think this sentiment can be encouraging to people. It's difficult to discern God's presence sometimes."

Edmund, George, and Charles's stories illustrate a realistic spectrum of ministerial spiritual health, particularly during times of conflict. Conflict can either intensify one's sense of God's presence (e.g., spiritual consolation) or obscure it completely (e.g., spiritual desolation). These experiences are significant in scripture and Christian tradition, and it's common for individuals to experience the full range of this spectrum as challenges and difficulties arise.

Therefore, leaders must cultivate the ability to discern their spiritual experiences and their emotional responses to those experiences. This is a key aspect of spiritual self-awareness. In times of desolation, leaders need to accept their feelings of God's absence and draw upon earlier periods of consolation as well as God's promises in Christ.[411]

[411] Cf. Timothy M. Gallagher, *The Discernment of Spirits: An Ignatian Guide for Everyday Living* (New York, NY: Crossroad, 2005).

Formation and Disciplines

The research confirmed that a leader's spiritual formation and their engagement in historic Christian disciplines are closely interconnected. From a theological perspective, there exists a cooperative relationship between the Holy Spirit, who works to sanctify an individual towards greater degrees of Christlikeness, and that individual's participation in this work through various spiritual means or disciplines. Traditionally, these disciplines have included prayer, meditation, scripture reflection, and solitude. Following various Christian spiritual traditions, Scazzero suggests that leaders maintain a *Rule of Life*. He writes, "A formal Rule of Life organizes our unique combination of spiritual practices into a structure that enables us to pay attention to God in everything we do."[412] Following Scazzero, Henry referred to his self-care regimen as his "scaffolding." He said, "When I feel anxious about something, or I feel overwhelmed, I've learned to focus more on my scaffolding than on trying to resolve the anxiety. I 'lean back' into the things I need in my life to be a healthy person."

Participants shared a variety of disciplines they engage in to keep themselves close to God's presence. Alfred said, "A rock solid, habitual prayer life" is essential for a leader's growth and maturity. Others mentioned daily scripture reflection. James, Edward, Harold, and Duncan provided examples that fell within more contemplative traditions. James remarked, "I think those who seem to engage in more contemplative practices as part of their regular disciplines have a greater level and capacity to notice, observe, and slow down. It gives you time and therefore it gives you better choices."

[412] Scazzero, *The Emotionally Healthy Leader*, 136.

Cognitive Competencies

Self-definition

Research indicates that a leader's ability to define himself is essential for successful conflict negotiation. Self-definition refers to a leader's skill in articulating and acting according to well-established principles rooted in logic and fact. Leaders who are self-defined are comfortable taking "I" position stances, such as "This is what I believe" and "This is what I will do, or not do." He does not lose his sense of self amidst increasing anxiety or growing togetherness pressures. Scazzero summarizes, stating, "Differentiation involves the ability to hold on to who you are and who you are not."[413]

Charles spoke directly to the need to stay grounded in one's convictions. He shared that "Sticking to prior decisions, core principles, and not changing course of action" were essential to his team's ability to navigate their conflict well. Henry added, "I think having strong convictions and a sense of vision is really important."

Several others (James, Malcolm, and Alfred) pointed out that a leader's self-definition also includes allowing others to define themselves. As a result, leaders must become increasingly comfortable not only with their own level of discomfort—recognizing that self-definition may lead to reactivity and sabotage—but also with the discomfort of others as they potentially navigate grief and loss.

[413] Peter Scazzero, *Emotionally Healthy Spirituality: It's Impossible to Be Spiritually Mature, While Remaining Emotionally Immature*, Updated ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2017), 58.

Systems Thinking

Central to a leader's task of self-definition is the ability to conceptualize and navigate congregations as living emotional systems. Participants frequently made system-oriented observations, including recognizing emotional processes (Alfred, James, Malcolm, Henry), multi-generational transmission (Alfred, Edmund), and the leader's role as a non-anxious presence (Edward, Edmund, Harold). Research indicates that as leaders improve their ability to see and understand systems, they become more effective in managing their own functioning within the system. This encapsulates the promise of systems thinking, which empowers leaders to take primary responsibility for themselves while staying emotionally connected to others. Creech writes, "Such self-management is indispensable for a leader in anxious settings."[414]

Relational Competencies

Empathy

Empathy emerged as the key relational competency identified by participants. For instance, Malcolm shared, "I think trying to understand where someone is coming from and their perception of things [is critical]." Greenberg asserts, "Empathy, without question, is an important leadership ability. It allows one to tune in to how someone else is feeling or what someone else might be thinking."[415] The research indicates that empathy is a value that promotes commitment and cooperation. Researcher Mark Craemer writes, "As a team leader or team member, your ability to demonstrate empathy

[414] Creech, *Family Systems and Congregational Life: A Map for Ministry*, 53.

[415] Greenberg, *Emotion-Focused Therapy: Coaching Clients to Work through Their Feelings*, 341.

greatly enhances the entire team's overall effectiveness. This is because psychological safety—where everyone is able to be honest, have constructive conflict, and engage in respectful communication—relies on empathy."[416] Duncan's experience aligns with Craemer's observations. He shared, "To hear someone's pain and realize how I might have contributed to it—they need to hear that I care about that."

Leaders must be empathetic to the viewpoints and emotional states of their opponents. They must thoughtfully consider their feelings—along with other factors—in the process of making intelligent decisions. "For a leader, it doesn't mean adopting other people's emotions as one's own and trying to please everybody."[417] Rather, as George shared, "It's knowing where the person is at and what the issue at hand represents for them. It's being able to read between the lines, knowing where the person is at emotionally."

Trust

The research confirmed that trust is a crucial competency for leaders when negotiating conflict and sabotage. Covey states, "Trust is a function of two things: character and *competence*. Character includes your integrity, motive, your intent with people. Competence includes your capabilities, skills, results, your track record. And both are vital."[418] Participant responses supported Covey's assertion. Edmund, for instance, regarded trust as a necessary safeguard, ensuring relational capital during times of crisis. He remarked, "You establish relational capital, invest in it, ask how they're doing, and

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[416] Mark Craemer, *Emotional Intelligence in the Workplace: How to Use EQ to Build Strong Relationships and Thrive in Your Career* (Naperville, IL: Callisto Publishing, 2020), 70.

[417] Daniel Goleman, *The Emotionally Intelligent Leader* (Boston, MA: Harvard Business Review, 2019), 41.

[418] Covey and Merrill, *The Speed of Trust: The One Thing That Changes Everything*, 29–30.

tell them you're praying for them. Hopefully, over the years, they come to know you care for them." Covey suggests that leaders and organizations either incur a trust tax or enjoy a trust dividend. A trust tax occurs when leadership and organizational trust is low; in this case, relationships, interactions, communication, and decisions cost more than they would at higher trust levels. On the other hand, if trust is a well-established asset within the organization, as Edmund indicates, collaboration, engagement, and conflict resolution become much easier.

James and Duncan's statements highlight how leaders can enhance their trust dividend. James said, "I'm trying to demonstrate that I understand their position and can articulate it, echo it, and even comprehend the emotional dynamics of their situation." Similarly, Duncan mentioned, "Listening, acknowledging their pain and discomfort, and making some verbal commitments to explore this further with them. I strive to leave conversations less open-ended, so there's an opportunity for further engagement." It is essential for leaders to develop these trust-building dynamics with their stakeholders. Although stakeholders may strongly resist as a leader seeks further self-definition, trust provides leaders with a platform to listen to their constituency and navigate the political dimensions of change.

Presence

Empathy and trust foster presence. A central leadership task is to be present with those with whom you disagree. Research indicates that a leader's calm demeanor, or non-anxious presence, can alleviate the anxiety inherent in an emotional system. Greenberg writes,

> "Successful leadership depends as much on the leader's 'way of being' in a situation as on what the leader does. Presence, which involves the ability and

> experience of being fully in the moment with another, without judgment or expectation, facilitates trust and communication that allow the other to feel safe, to open up and explore issues, and to express himself or herself in an unguarded manner."[419]

Participants frequently discussed these dynamics, highlighting leadership competencies such as providing emotional stability, allowing dissent, avoiding ultimatums, and not absorbing others' anxiety or problems as essential conflict competencies.

These competencies are increasingly important as leaders participate in crucial conversations: discussions involving opposing opinions, strong emotions, and high stakes.[420] In these situations, leaders are susceptible to matching their opponent's reactivity and succumbing to a failure of nerve. Bolsinger states, "To stay calm is to be so aware of yourself that your response to the situation is not to the anxiety of those around you but by the actual issue at hand."[421]

How Pastors Exercise Courageous Leadership During Sabotage

Defining Courageous Leadership

The research presented various definitions of courageous leadership. Author Gus Lee describes courage as "backbone at the point of decision." He explains, "Leaders with courage lend backbone to their organizations. Then, when institutions face their Points of Decision—when serious crisis tests actual core values and therefore an institution's future—both leaders and institutions can act rightly and powerfully."[422] Edmund provides

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[419] Greenberg, *Emotion-Focused Therapy: Coaching Clients to Work through Their Feelings*, 340–41.

[420] Grenny et al., *Crucial Conversations: Tools for Talking When Stakes Are High*, 4.

[421] Bolsinger, *Canoeing the Mountains: Christian Leadership in Uncharted Territory*, 145.

[422] Gus Lee and Diane Elliott-Lee, *Courage: The Backbone of Leadership* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2006), 9.

a complementary perspective, stating, "Courageous leadership occurs in the moment of choice; even if you're scared, you do what you believe honors the Lord." Additional participant definitions encompassed elements of faithful living (Malcolm, Richard, George), persistence in the face of adversity (James, William, Harold), and a willingness to embrace vulnerability and suffering (Alfred and Duncan).

These definitions suggest that leaders frequently encounter adverse situations that require personal integrity and fortitude to accomplish institutional objectives. In his book *Choosing Courage*, Professor and Harvard Business Review author Jim Detert argues that leaders face vocational, social, and psychological risks as they guide their respective organizations. He concludes, "Unfortunately, these risks suppress courage even among the most powerful."[423] Considering the contours of leadership and associated risks, Lee states, "Courage is the single most decisive trait in a leader."[424]

Competencies of Courageous Leadership

Participants expressed various competencies they associate with courageous leadership. Several emphasized the importance of having a clear vision. James remarked, "Courageous leaders are those who possess a clear vision of what the future could be and effectively use their influence to narrate that future in a compelling way that inspires others to act." Henry and Charles also highlighted vision as essential to a leader's courageous skill set. These observations align with Friedman's belief that courage primarily arises from a leader's work of self-differentiation and their ability to maintain

[423] James R. Detert, *Choosing Courage: The Everyday Guide to Being Brave at Work* (Boston, MA: Harvard Business Review, 2021), 9.

[424] Lee and Elliott-Lee, *Courage*, 9.

clarity about their goals.[425] Leaders must therefore commit to continually refining their priorities, desires, and principles. These become the commitments leaders rely on when anxiety and stress increase within the system.

Harold, Edmund, and Alfred highlighted the spiritual competencies they viewed as aligned with courage. Harold's observation suggested competencies such as a Christ-shaped identity, wisdom, and love. He said, "I believe that being grounded in Christ is essential. It means being spiritually discerning and ensuring that you act from a place of genuine conviction and love. You will do the right thing because you care about someone."

Edmund and Alfred stated that courage involves a willingness to suffer for the sake of Christ and others. Edmund noted that courage encompasses traits such as sacrifice, selflessness, and a readiness to endure personal injury. Alfred added, "I would say that the courageous leader is someone who knows what they are doing may harm parts of them, yet they do it anyway. They understand that leadership is about taking up your cross." These perspectives closely align with Thomistic conceptions of courage. For example, Pieper states that courage presupposes vulnerability. He writes,

> To be brave actually means to be able to suffer injury […] By injury we understand every assault upon our natural inviolability, every violation of our inner peace; everything that happens to us or is done with us against our will; thus everything in any way negative, everything painful and harmful, everything frightening and oppressive.[426]

Research indicates that vulnerability, injury, and endurance provide thick theological and existential frameworks for understanding a Christian conception of courage. The Apostle

[425] Friedman, Treadwell, and Beal, *A Failure of Nerve: Leadership in the Age of the Quick Fix*, 14.

[426] Pieper, *The Four Cardinal Virtues: Prudence, Justice, Fortitude, Temperance*, 117.

Paul offers a paradigmatic example, writing, “I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church.”[427] Leaders embody Paul’s example as they assume a cruciform approach to their ministry.

Navigating Threat and Vulnerability

The essence of courage empowers its holder to overcome challenges in pursuit of a greater good. Research indicates that during times of conflict, various fears, threats, and temptations can leave leaders feeling vulnerable at critical decision-making moments. These difficulties often challenge a leader’s self-defined stance and threaten a failure of nerve.

Participants were asked, “Given the challenges of pastoral ministry, can you describe what makes you feel threatened or vulnerable?” Charles answered immediately and directly: “When I’m getting attacked. I feel the most vulnerable when I’m getting attacked by somebody.” Related, George said that rejection makes him feel most vulnerable.

Alfred, George, and Edward observed that not meeting self-imposed standards of success creates a sense of vulnerability. Alfred expressed that he feels vulnerable when he perceives a lack of recognition and affirmation from others. George noted that being unseen, unknown, or unappreciated can lead to feelings of self-doubt and self-criticism. Edward shared that the expectations of others often result in feelings of isolation and loneliness.

[427] Colossians 1:24.

Leaders must understand that perceived threats and vulnerabilities are precisely where they need to demonstrate leadership courage. Courage is primarily an *emotional* process. Wadell asserts that courage pertains to the impediments of action. He writes, "[The] focus of [courage] is the emotions, particularly when the emotions, instead of aiding the doing of good, make doing good difficult."[428] When vulnerability increases we are tempted to turn from the good because of fear or difficulty. "It is in such moments that we need the virtue of courage to enable us 'to be steadfast and not turn away from what is right.'"[429]

Charity and Commitments

As leaders encounter threats and vulnerabilities during a conflict, they must depend on previously established commitments, especially their friendship with Christ. Perez-Lopez writes, "From charity's perspective, fortitude has to do with the moral firmness one has to bear all things for the sake of our friendship with the Lord. It is, above all, a matter of ordered love." Love for Christ and friendship with him provides leaders the moral firmness necessary to endure difficulty. Aquinas called this phenomenon *firmitas animae*, or firmness of the soul.[430] "From the perspective of charity, fortitude and its virtues are the manifestation of the [leader's] love for Christ. Moreover, they entail a foundational attitude for one's configuration with Christ, the High Priest. Those animated by priestly charity will manifest their love in the willingness to offer

[428] Wadell, *Primacy of Love: An Introduction to the Ethics of Thomas Aquinas*, 132.

[429] Wadell, 132.

[430] Cf. James William Sanders, "Firmitas Anime: A Study of Fortitude in the Philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas" (Masters Thesis, Loyola University Chicago, 1958), https://ecommons.luc.edu/luc_theses/1530.

their lives as a spiritual sacrifice."[431] Consequently, within this relational dynamic, courage is not exercised as sheer willpower "but above all, as a spiritual exercise of love within the context of prayer."[432]

Alfred's personal statements closely aligned with Perez-Lopez's theological observations. Alfred candidly stated that courageous leaders must be willing to "die to self." He expressed, "We're always trying not to die and the problem is that Jesus told us to die. We use our position not to die. We use our theological training not to die. We even use our character not to die. These are all what I call false selves. To die to pride, ambition, recognition, and everything that was driving me was essential."

It is essential to recognize that, despite a leader's love for Christ and the commitments that accompany it, this love is often susceptible to weakness. Aquinas referred to this phenomenon as *akrasia* or incontinence.[433] He argued that incontinence represents a lack of power and strength in the rational faculties to resist passion. This aligns closely with the concept of self-differentiation. The less self-differentiated a leader, the more likely he will be to make decisions in a reactive, emotional manner rather than from a place of rationality.

In either case, for the Christian, the way to overcome moral weakness is through divine grace. Jesus teaches his disciples that apart from him we can do nothing.[434] Perez-Lopez writes, "We need grace as that 'oxygen' for the spiritual life. We can never forget

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[431] Perez-Lopez, *The Priest as a Man of Fortitude*, 3:23.

[432] Perez-Lopez, 3:22.

[433] As noted in the Passion Week survey above, this weakness of love likely contributed to Peter's threefold denial of Christ.

[434] John 15:5.

that a leader 'can avoid sin and do good, yet not without God's help.'"[435] Consequently, a leader must cultivate a spirit of *receptivity* and *faithfulness*, that through grace and prayer the Lord would aid their moral weakness.

Maintaining A Resilient Posture

Courage defined by endurance requires perseverance and resilience. Leaders must be willing and able to endure injury, vulnerability, and difficulty, but they must also persist. The word "perseverance" comes from the Latin *perseverare*, a compound word meaning to continue through something serious, grave, or severe.[436] This definition highlights a person's capacity to persist. This immediately brings us into the realm of resilience. Researcher Andrew Zolli defines resilience as "The capacity of a system, enterprise, or person to maintain its core purpose and integrity in the face of dramatically changed circumstances."[437] Here, one's circumstances may change, but the essence of the person remains unchanged. In other words, a leader who endures may be bent and stressed, but they are ultimately not broken—they possess the ability to bounce back.

The research demonstrated several ways clergy connect resilience to their ministerial work. Harold said, "Ministry is *resilience*. They could almost be synonyms." William added, "Resilience is the ability to pick yourself back up and do it again. When you fail, when it's difficult, when it's not going the way you want it to go. It's getting up every day. Doing it again and again and again. Taking hits; taking shots. It's 'stick-to-it-

[435] Perez-Lopez, *The Priest as a Man of Fortitude*, 3:39.

[436] Perez-Lopez, 3:95.

[437] Andrew Zolli and Ann Marie Healy, *Resilience: Why Things Bounce Back* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 2013), 7.

ness,' where you just have to keep going, especially in the face of intense opposition." While resilience does require the type of personal grit that William describes, research suggests the acquisition of particular skills to increase one's capacity is also needed.

In their article "Maintaining Personal Resiliency: Lessons Learned from Evangelical Protestant Clergy," researchers Rhoads Meek et al. identified three criteria that helped practitioners develop a resilient posture in turbulent situations.[438] These criteria included:

1. *Intentionality*: "46% of pastors mentioned the importance of being intentional about creating balance and maintaining strong, but flexible, boundaries in their lives," particularly regarding home and work.
2. *A Sense of Calling*: "42% of respondents experienced a distinct moment of calling. One senior pastor of a large evangelical church put it this way: 'I think the most prominent feature of being a pastor is not choosing the profession but being called by God.'"
3. *The Role of The Mental Health Professional*: "At the individual level, whether one-on-one or in group or seminar format, mental health professionals can help pastors engage in realistic appraisals of their situations and respond in proactive ways, they can help them reconnect with their original vision, and tell their stories."

Leaders who set boundaries, have a clear sense of calling, and engage the support of mental health professionals demonstrate higher capacities for resilience than their peers who lack these markers.

Courage, Witness, and Martyrdom

From a theological perspective, research reveals that courage entails the possibility of death. Pieper summarizes this viewpoint by noting that the greatest injury one can face in the pursuit of the good is death. He states, "Even those injuries that are

[438] Katheryn Rhoads Meek et al., "Maintaining Personal Resiliency: Lessons Learned from Evangelical Protestant Clergy," *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 31, no. 4 (2003): 339–47, https://doi.org/10.1177/009164710303100404.

not fatal are prefigurations of death; this extreme violation, this final negation, is reflected and effective in every lesser injury."[439] As demonstrated, leaders endure significant injuries—most notably, psychological, physiological, and relational distress—as they navigate conflicts and face reactive sabotage. Furthermore, leaders sustain injuries in their struggle against themselves, fending off threats, resisting temptations, and pursuing virtue over vice. According to Pieper, these injuries are prefigurations of death—the leader's death and the death they share in Christ. Consequently, courageous leadership embodies a form of martyrdom through its life-giving sacrifice that bears public witness to the death and resurrection of Jesus.

If the above is true, the category of martyrdom and witness proffers several comforts for courageous leaders. First, the leader's injuries assure him that he stands in Christ's company. It is a form of cross-bearing. The Lord promises, "Whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it."[440]

Second, the leader's wounds are not in vain. They are a form of teaching and proclamation. Martin Luther wrote, "The office of teaching in the church requires such a mind that despises all dangers. In general, all the devout should prepare themselves so that they are not afraid of becoming martyrs, that is confessors or witnesses of God. Christ does not want to hide in the world, but he wants to be preached."[441]

Lastly, martyrdom and witness point to the hope of resurrection. Participants were asked how they remain optimistic, hopeful, and motivated despite the difficulties

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[439] Pieper, *The Four Cardinal Virtues: Prudence, Justice, Fortitude, Temperance*, 117.

[440] Matt. 16:25.

[441] Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, ed. Hilton C. Oswald, trans. Herbert J. A. Bouman (Saint Louis, MO: Concordia, 1974). 12:383-384.

associated with ministry conflict. Unanimously, each described their hope as derived from the resurrection and the eschatological realities of the biblical narrative. Malcolm shared, “The story at the end is going to be good, regardless of what the end of my story is. I know there’s redeeming grace in every single situation. So ultimate victory, combined with the redemption of my greatest losses, keeps me going.”

Recommendations for Practice

First, reactive sabotage is a common issue that leaders face, yet it is often overlooked in leadership literature and training. Therefore, pastoral leaders must develop a strong understanding of systems theory to enhance their conflict competency. Pastors should seek continuing education opportunities that focus on navigating emotional systems. Such education will equip leaders with a vital framework for understanding their role within the system and categorizing their experiences in congregational conflict.

Second, research indicates that leaders who effectively navigate sabotage do so by demonstrating key competencies associated with courageous leadership. These competencies include the ability to endure personal injury, emotional agility to overcome fear and self-doubt, and the spiritual fortitude required to maintain resilience in challenging circumstances. Courageous leadership develops from habituation in these competencies. In other words, courageous leadership is not simply the result of a singular virtuous act or event. Instead, it is a predictable feature of the leader’s character and presence. Therefore, leaders must continually desire, practice, and refine these competencies as a function of their vocation and ministerial practice.

The research also concluded that charity, or one's friendship with God in Christ, was the primary factor contributing to a leader's sense of self-efficacy during conflict. Participants spoke openly about their devotional practices—including scripture study, prayer, and contemplative practices—that deepened their communion and solidarity with Christ. These practices shaped several vital processes, including participants' emotional self-awareness, vulnerability, willingness to take reasonable risks, and adaptive coping strategies. Consequently, despite challenging circumstances, they expressed that their vocational outlook was predominantly hopeful and that this hope was ultimately rooted in the person and work of Christ, particularly the resurrection. Pastors seeking to increase their capacity as courageous leaders must prioritize their friendship with Christ by engaging in the traditional means of grace and contemplative practices that deepen one's love for Jesus.

Finally, due to the significant impact of conflict on leaders, it is essential to prioritize clergy wellness and self-care. Clergy should develop a clear self-care strategy that thoroughly addresses their mental, spiritual, and physical health. Additionally, ecclesial institutions must recognize reasonable self-care as a critical aspect of a leader's responsibilities. Consequently, churches should ensure that leaders have the necessary time and resources to focus on self-care. This might include providing funded access to retreats, external counseling (coaches, therapists, spiritual directors), or physical wellness programs. Furthermore, personal wellness should be viewed as a crucial element of an organization's leadership culture. Not only should time and resources be allocated to leaders, but a sense of permission should also accompany this support.

Recommendations for Further Research

First, due to the limits of the research scope, the experimental protocol was necessarily limited to senior-level leaders with notable experience in successfully negotiating conflict. Given that conflict is a systems phenomenon, future research could benefit from insights provided by other leaders, including church officers and staff in non-pastoral roles. Moreover, the study did not seek to understand the perspectives of congregants, particularly those in opposition. Such insights would offer contrasting viewpoints and a more nuanced description of events. A case study centered on a specific conflict, gathering perspectives from key participants and stakeholders, would likely yield valuable insights into how different contributors perceived their roles in the system and managed the stress of the conflict, as well as how the event was resolved.

Second, if the findings of this study are accurate—that charity is a primary predictor of leadership courage and resilience—this aspect of ministerial formation warrants further research. Generally, there is a paucity of studies focused on virtue formation within evangelical seminaries. "Research conducted by ATS (2018) into how seminaries understood the terms 'personal and spiritual formation' revealed that over 40% of seminaries do not have a formal or working definition of personal and spiritual formation."[442] This suggests that many seminarians may graduate without the crucial spiritual and character development necessary to navigate the challenges of pastoral ministry. Therefore, further research is needed to explore how virtue, in general, and courage, in particular, can be fostered within evangelical seminaries. Research could

[442] David C. Wang et al., "Spiritual Formation in Theological Education: A Multi-Case Exploration on Seminaries and Student Development," *Christian Education Journal* 20, no. 1 (April 1, 2023): 66, https://doi.org/10.1177/07398913231177722.

include establishing structured approaches to virtue formation within institutions, as well as their implementation in pedagogical methods.

Conclusion

This qualitative research study confirms that conflict—especially reactive sabotage—is a common phenomenon that leaders must navigate in congregational settings. Sabotage aims to undermine a leader's efforts toward greater self-differentiation, particularly as they negotiate the politics of change in their ministry settings. Such conflict is costly for a leader. The research shows that leaders often endure various emotional, physical, cognitive, and relational "injuries" while navigating sabotaging events. These injuries create a leadership crucible ripe for Friedman's so-called "failure of nerve," where leaders are tempted to forfeit their self-differentiating stance in response to prevailing togetherness pressure.

The research demonstrated that leaders who successfully negotiate reactive sabotage possess a range of emotional, spiritual, cognitive, and relational competencies. These competencies aid leaders in clarifying their personal vision and values while fostering an emotional connection with their opponents. Additionally, the research indicated that courage is an essential leadership quality for pastors navigating crises. Courage is an emotional process that empowers leaders to endure fear and challenges due to their deep relationship with Jesus Christ. Courage allows ministers to overcome a "failure of nerve," persevere in trials, and remain resilient as they witness the truth of Christ through suffering.

In conclusion, the researcher hopes that this qualitative research will help pastoral leaders navigate the complexities of reactive sabotage and the leadership courage required to face such challenges, while also promoting peace and unity within the life of the church.

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