

**Ron Richardson, *Becoming a Healthier Pastor: Family Systems Theory and the Pastor's Own Family* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2005), 150 pp.**

There are a variety of venues clergy may take toward pastoral formation—from various therapies, spiritual direction, or reflective pathways to developing greater relational skill sets. In this second book (his first was *Creating Healthier Congregations*), Ron Richardson invites pastors toward the more personal and problematic task of entering the emotional field in which they were formed—the pastor's own family. Even as a pastoral counselor, Richardson eschews personal therapy in favor of the admittedly arduous path of family system's theory. As a systems practitioner, he is indeed a true believer, and certainly true to the teachings of Bowen, Kerr, and Friedman among others. Remarkably, Richardson translates a theory that is often presented in parochial, if not paradoxical, axioms into the everyday life and language of pastoral ministry. As the title suggests, this book is written to and for pastors in pursuit of a healthier (i.e., emotionally mature) way of relating to family and congregants. Central to his thesis is the notion that growth comes to those willing to “look at their own unresolved emotional attachments within their family of origin” (p. 6).

This venture moves forward steadily as the author charts his course in three parts. In “Part One: A Resource for Moving toward Greater Health,” Richardson presents unresolved emotional attachment in its myriad faces— anxiety (a sense of vulnerability to some threat), attachment (forms of dependency), and reactivity to unrecognized dependency. Richardson's gift is not his adept use of systems theory per se, but rather his capacity to make family systems dynamics visible in lived experience. For example, he illustrates how various unresolved emotional issues are acted out within familial relations (i.e., compliance, rebelliousness, power struggles, pursuing, and distancing). He also points out six common pitfalls in pastoral ministry that reinforce a “no-growth” homeostasis, which he then uses to further develop the reader's understanding of systems thinking. For example, he describes the tendency of pastors to focus on content rather than process, which seduces clergy into taking sides and thereby triangulating a stalled, no-growth stance. He astutely calls this “joining with the pursuer to pursue the distancer.”

“Part Two: The Pastor's Own Family” is the central and larger portion of the book. Here Richardson becomes more transparent and pastorally attuned as his tone shifts in telling more intimate and personal stories. Consequently, it is no surprise that the corrective stance of family system theory (self-differentiation) comes to the fore as the author reveals his own journey. To his credit, he aptly invites the reader to walk beside him as he navigates the emotional eddies of his family of origin. The vignettes of connections and communications with his mother, aunt, and cousin demonstrate his claim that systems work is doable through a process where he moves from a pseudo self (that is negotiated away in relationships) toward a more solid self, strengthened through non-anxious self-definition. Richardson

then rounds off the section with a call to pastors to take a stance as persons who “research, re-entry, and reposition” themselves in their own family of origin. He then details his own reentry and reposition in a triangulated relationship with his mother, his hometown friends, and her view of his “disloyalty” in visiting them rather than her. The tale illustrates his repositioned move to stay non-reactive in the face of his mother’s overattachment during visits home. Richardson guides the reader through his own family relationships while noting the tendency of pastors’ sympathy to calm anxiety through side taking, pursuing and distancing, and over/under functioning.

“Part Three: The Pastor as Coach,” shifts our attention from Richardson’s stance as researcher in his own emotional backyard to the familiar ground of parish and congregational life. In four short chapters, Richardson’s tone is more cautionary and directive as he shifts from his more tender and vulnerable researcher tone to that of an embodied coach. He seems to underscore and caution pastors to distinguish between coaching in the emotional field of the parish and merely processing the therapeutic release, such as when he says “Coaching is about thinking things through, not providing the relief of ‘catharsis’” (p. 122). He does provide two models of running family of origin groups in the church that encourage an expanding role of coach, contingent on the pastor’s own previous years of experience as a researcher.

In the book’s concluding chapters, I noted with appreciation a lovely nuanced perspective on anxiety. This gem, I believe, well illustrates Richardson’s encouraging touch through out the book: “Remember, we are dealing with two forms of anxiety. There is the anxiety that goes with reactivity, and that inhibits us from acting and keeps us stuck. We can explore this and learn from it. And there is the anxiety of growth. Growth anxiety occurs whenever we want to try out some new behavior that we have determined we want to do but, because it is new, we just don’t know how it will go or how we will manage it...No one does this work calmly or easily” (p. 144).

As I consider the book in its entirety and the central challenge issued by the author—to reenter the turbulent field of one’s own unresolved familial emotional attachments—I resonant with the imagery that bookends the text. Richardson draws on the image that working on differentiation is “like taking your little sailboard out on the lake when a storm is brewing, hoping to learn something about storms, and yourself, and about how to manage your boat in a storm” (p. 2). Concluding the book, Richardson evokes the biblical counterpart of Peter who could have “lowered his anxiety as he stepped out of the boat into the chaos of the violent waves. But taking his eyes off the goal, reverting to his old ways of functioning and fusing with his anxious imagination and fears, he began to sink” (p. 148). It is a reminder that no one does this work “calmly or easily.”

I recommend this book first to parish pastors to whom it is primarily addressed. Richardson’s book does not make any contribution to systems theory development, and so should not be read with an eye toward improving

upon the theory's primary concepts. There is nothing new in his use or understanding of system's theory, but that is not the author's aim. Instead, Richardson offers valuable encouragement and challenge to those in the throws of congregational life who are seeking personal formation that can benefit their pastoral formation. The work may also benefit spiritual directors who coach pastors. Finally, the book may be a useful text for educators seeking to provide an introduction to emotional systems in pastoral theology courses both in undergraduate and graduate theological schools.

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