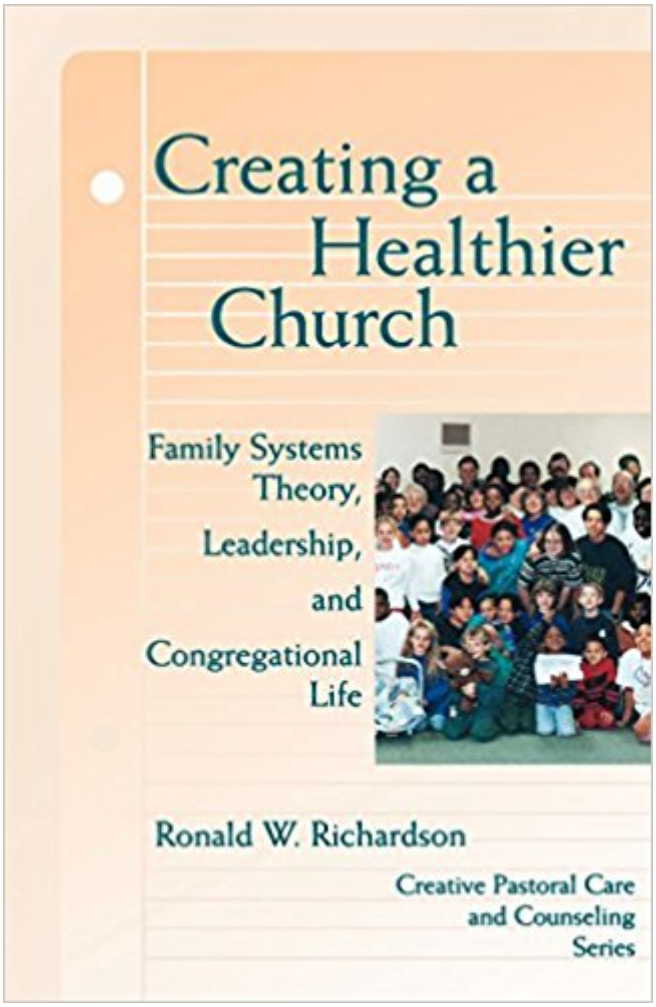
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Creating A Healthier Church: Family Systems Theory, Leadership And Congregational Life (Creative Pastoral Care And Counseling Series)



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Synopsis

Ronald W. Richardson helps us to understand how congregations function emotionally. Without being simplistic, he gives clear directions on how to improve their quality of life together and function more effectively in achieving mission goals. This book offers: A theory about human behavior that will aid understanding of how things can get out of control in the human community of the church; A practical set of leadership ideas and behaviors; Guidelines for how to behave in the midst of upsetting and conflictual circumstances; Personal steps that leaders in the church can take to become more positive forces for healing and cooperation.

Book Information

Paperback: 188 pages

Publisher: Fortress Press (August 1, 1996)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0800629558

ISBN-13: 978-0800629557

Product Dimensions: 5.5 x 0.4 x 8.5 inches

Shipping Weight: 10.7 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.4 out of 5 stars 45 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #75,164 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #42 inÃ Â Books > Christian Books & Bibles > Churches & Church Leadership > Church Institutions & Organizations #133 inÃ Â Books > Christian Books & Bibles > Ministry & Evangelism > Counseling & Recovery #195 inÃ Â Books > Christian Books & Bibles > Churches & Church Leadership > Pastoral Resources

Customer Reviews

Drawing on the work of Murray Bowen, Richardson presents a valuable discussion of the emotional system that is part of a congregation’s life. The book begins with an introduction titled "When Bad Things Happen in Good Churches," in which he paints a portait of two different congregations dealing with similar issues. One of the portraits is laced with anger, hostility, resentment, and blame. The other portrait demonstrates responsible deeds and words on the part of all parties in the system. The difference between the two is stark, and Richardson attemps to describe in these pages what healthy congregations actually look like, and how a congregation can become one.The book incorporates the learnings of family systems theory and applies them to a congregational setting. Richardson discusses anxiety, forces for togetherness and individuality, pursuers and distancers, fusion and differentiation, patterns of reactivity (including compliance, rebellion, power

struggle, and emotional distancing), triangles, and leadership. One chapter is devoted to "signs of serious problems in a church" (which includes a section on overfunctioning and underfunctioning). Along the way, Richardson offers some reflection on biblical passages to support the theory, though it felt to me as if this material were added in later, after the bulk of the book had been presented; the biblical material did not feel integrated into the whole of the book.One chapter is devoted to birth order and leadership style, drawing on the work of Walter Toman. Personally, I have not found Toman's work as helpful (or as "on-target") as I have found Bowen's family systems theory.The final two chapters, which are very helpful, are devoted to "assessing your congregation's emotional system" and "becoming a better leader" (which includes a discussion about self-differentiation and the negative reactions that differentiation usually leads to, initially).All in all, this is a very helpful book. I found it to be a useful summary of what I had learned about family systems theory and its applicability to congregational settings from other writers, notably Edwin Friedman. Richardson does not write with the wit and passion that Friedman writes with, making this book to be somewhat more bland, but Richardson's book may be more organized than Friedman's books are. After soaking in Friedman, I did not find much here that was new. Also, if I hadn't soaked in Friedman, I'm not sure I would have fully grasped the power of the model that Richardson offers. This is a very helpful book; I just wish that reading it were a bit more exciting!

In Creating a Healthier Church, the reviewer was impressed with the early clarification to apply the book to oneself (as pastor or leader), not others, for maximum benefit (21). This was part of the book's goal in applying family systems theory, to reflect on one's own role in church, how past challenges have been handled, and how this might be improved. Inevitably, this would contribute to the secondary goal, which was a healthier church that would support the growth and healing of its members so they could better do their mission in the world. Throughout, Richardson maintained a clear focus on the target of both recognizing and improving one's own role and interaction with one's congregants, and not "fixing" others' problems, or fixating on "problem people."The writer appreciated the author's ongoing, consistent references to Scripture and biblical examples and images, such as Paul's own balancing of individuality with togetherness in 1 Cor. 9-13 (62), which Richardson also humorously illustrated with the image of porcupines trying to keep each other warm (66). The clear biblical grounding greatly helped the book's applicability to those who take issue with counselors who try to "secularize" Christianity with "human psychology." Emotional maturity itself, for example, clearly is an example of biblical wisdom (80), which the author states is the basic requirement for all God's leaders (86). Another helpful metaphor used throughout was that of a

mobile representing a congregation (of which the pastor is a part), the whole of which is affected by movement of a part, and also equally affected by calming of a part. This helped the reviewer grasp many of the new terms of family systems theory, such as reactivity and distancing, and connectedness balanced with separateness.The only weakness the reviewer saw was an analysis of birth order and resulting generalizations (144-157), which sounded more like horoscope reading than useful principles. Much more space would be needed to quote the vast preponderance of inspiring, instructional, and helpful elements, for example, "calmer churches usually have calmer leaders" (173).In Becoming a Healthier Pastor, the reviewer was impressed by the enthusiastic endorsement of the editor, one of the author's former professors, "I am struck by the amount I can learn from a former student" (v). Like the earlier volume, the central theme was using family systems theory to develop emotional maturity, but more specifically for pastors to attain a "higher, healthier level of functioning" (viii). This comes about through extensive research into the pastor's family of origin as having established his or her deep and overriding patterns of emotional functioning (ibid.). As an active proponent of systems theory, Richardson points out that the model uniquely encompasses all aspects of ministry and human function (3). While the reviewer is a counseling novice, the point was persuasive, and took note that the author practices only this model of therapy.With that said, however, and unlike the earlier, more general volume, several things in this work triggered caution flags for the reviewer. All the general Bowens' theory material as applied to pastors and ministry work seemed quite applicable and apropos, such as "all of us exist on a continuum of emotional reactivity" (20), which creates various levels of differentiation, which then manifests in the acting out of anxious patterns. All this and much more is well and good, and both helpful and informative, such as "The main way to increase involvement and commitment in the church is for pastors to be a safe, less anxious presence" (33). The reviewer thought, however, that Richardson attributed too much formative shaping to one's family of origin and not enough to other equally influential (sometimes more so) childhood arenas such as school, neighborhoods, extracurricular activities, and church. Reinforcing this view, his statement, "Nearly every sort of problematic behavior is most likely a form of reactivity to family" (72) seems to the reviewer to be overly attributed.The author strongly recommends for pastors to revisit parents and relatives multiple times, yet many cannot because of time, financial hardship, sickness, or death--often, both parents die while one is relatively young. He briefly mentions this possibility, but then suggests pursuing the research with other family members, or former friends and co-workers of one's parents. Such an exercise seems both unproductive and highly impractical. What would seem more useful and practical would be to focus on more readily available friends and acquaintances with similar

personality traits that trigger similar reactivity. The author seems to have either unlimited funds or his family remained in close proximity, and seems unaware that most families are widely dispersed, and most pastors cannot afford extensive traveling. A final negative was his virtual dismissal of the entire subject of forgiveness (145), as if immersion in family systems theory absorbs and replaces such obsolete ways of dealing with issues.A strong positive was Richardson’s illustration of the pastor as a coach, and all the many relevant parallels inherent in the concept. Another positive was the way he repeats and clarifies frequently for maximum comprehension. He has a knack for capturing the essence of issues, such as this on avoiding triangles, "The best way to be on their side is to be on everyone’s side" (139). Overall, the author met his goals, and the reviewer is genuinely intrigued to further explore family systems theory.

Practical guides and advises to church leaders re handling of conflicts and relationship issues. A great book on application of family systems theory in dealing with human behavior in church, and provides practical guidelines and suggestions for church leader to lead the church towards a healthier state

Great book, great information. Problem is getting the uninformed to read it.

After speaking with a friend about systems theory and its relation to churches, I decided to buy this book. Pastors who have no understanding of this topic need to read this work, which provides a good summary of how systems function within congregation. I have observed the dynamics of closeness/distance, triangles, and anxiety levels for years in churches, but now am able to understand them much better.I recommend this title highly as a good summary and overview of systems theory as it applies to churches. The knowledge gained is well-worth the price of the book!

ok

I bought this to use in putting together a Sunday class for my church. It had a wealth of information that I found very useful. Highly recommended.

This is a great book for Western church life. If you have ever been in a mainstream church this book is one to have on your reading list. It touches home on many issues, gives excellent comparisons and practical applications in our churches today. For any of us who have experienced division in

congregations, Richardson heads up a real life strategy for working through these tough situations. I enjoyed reading this book and would recommend it to anyone in a Pastoral or clergy role.

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