Strengthening Christian Education Departments by Utilizing Family Systems Theory
by Danielle J. Buhuro

Danielle J. Buhuro is a CPE Supervisory Candidate, Office of Mission and Spiritual Care Advocate, Illinois Masonic Medical Center, Chicago, IL

What makes a Christian education department exciting? Are Sunday Schools still a relevant part of Christian education? What is the pastor's role in creating an excellent Christian education department? If Christian education is still significant, why do so many Christian education departments suffer from poor participation?

These are just some of the questions that plague clergy and laypeople when they reflect on the state of Christian education in churches today. I believe these questions speak to a much deeper, all-encompassing issue——what congregants *really* want from Christian education.

Let's take the Sunday School department for example, since it is the best-known Christian education area/department in black churches. Often churches experience low Sunday School enrollment as a result of misunderstanding what congregants want. I educate chaplain interns based on principles grounded in Family Systems Theory. I believe clergy and laypeople can utilize Family Systems Theory to inform how they develop and maintain healthy and exciting Christian education departments, including Sunday School or Sabbath School as they are called in some faith communities.

I believe that members of congregations really want Christian education departments that intentionally and actively support members to develop their own spiritual identity, while at the same time helping them remain in relationship with the Church. Christian education departments help members accomplish this goal by offering support through safe environments, empathy, education, and empowerment. At the same time, Christian education departments must understand and accept that members may take a long time to develop their own spiritual identity and that some members may choose not to engage this goal at all.

Utilizing Family Systems Theory as it relates to Christian education students, I am clear that people think certain thoughts and live specific behaviors based on ideas and actions passed on to them at a very young age (or at the beginning of their spiritual journey if they began it as an adult) from influential church family members. Family systems theory asserts that even though Western culture tells people that they are autonomous individuals capable of making independent choices, "we are born into families . . . where we discover who we are; we develop and change; and we give and perceive the support we need for survival."[1] The same applies to each of us as members of churches.

When people join churches after some time, they as members of the church family develop, maintain, and live by unspoken rules in order to keep the church family unit functional. Murray Bowen adds that it is even possible to pass on these unspoken rules throughout multiple

generations.[2] Na'im Akbar, a clinical psychologist who studies African family systems, calls these unspoken, multigenerational rules family *codes*.[3] In my personal history, an example of a church family code passed on through generations of my church family was an understanding that one never questioned the teachings of his or her Sunday School teacher. If my Sunday School teacher taught that Adam and Eve sinned in the Garden of Eden because they ate an apple, then that was what I believed. It was not until I was older and learned through personal study and reflection that the fruit consumed by Adam and Eve was likely not an apple."[4] However, the Christian education department of the church in which I was reared did not encourage me to research and reflect on what I believed. My Sunday School department taught me to chew the information offered by teachers and regurgitate it to others in the name of evangelism. However, I really wanted more! I wanted the opportunity to develop my own spiritual identity. Today, I believe members of congregations want the same from Christian education.

Although congregants who grew up in church think certain thoughts and live specific behaviors based on ideas and actions passed on to them at a young age from influential church family members, members of congregations (old and even new) desire and are capable of developing their own unique spiritual identity, just as children can develop their own identities as they mature. Bowen calls this process *differentiation of the self*. According to Bowen, "Differentiation of the self involves both the psychological separation of intellect and emotion and independence of the self from others.[5] In other words, people have freedom of choice, referred to by Alfred Adler as *free will*, to establish their own spiritual identity. This is what Christian education departments should aid.[6]

At the same time, in the course of developing spiritual independence, it is unhealthy for people to develop an emotional distance from their church family unit, commonly referred to as *emotional cutoff*.[7] Akbar asserts that people resist the urge to disconnect from their family unit, in this case their church, and desire to remain in community.[8] People need to become accountable for their own spiritual thoughts, feelings, perceptions, and actions, and at the same time maintain healthy relationships with their church family. Thus, as a Christian Education teacher, I encourage students to embrace their spiritual individuality and, at the same time maintain accountability to and communion with their faith community.

Christian education departments help students accomplish the former goal by offering support through safe environments, empathy, education, and empowerment. First, safe environments and empathy. It is important for Christian education departments to create safe environments by covenanting with church members that abuse of any kind is unacceptable and not tolerated. For example, in Sunday school classes, teachers and students cannot allow inappropriate critique of other students' ideas. Creating a safe environment fosters trust. After trust is established, congregants can begin to develop their unique spiritual identities and this is aided if they receive empathy from church family.[9] For example, I, along with other members in the department in which I serve, provide a noncondemning, respectful presence with Sunday school students as they share stories from their personal history. We provide an empathic listening ear especially when students share sensitive or traumatic information.

Next, the development of spiritual identity occurs through education. Virginia Satir suggests that people be held responsible or accountable through education.[10] Do not be afraid to confront and challenge members of the church who want to stay in a religious or spiritual box. But confrontation must be done with care. How one employs care, while also holding students accountable, can be compared to feeding someone a sandwich. Care is the bread and the condiments of the sandwich and accountability is the meat of the sandwich. In most sandwiches, the meat is the most fulfilling part and provides the greatest nourishment. However, the meat (or confrontation) can be difficult to chew and swallow all by itself. The bread and condiments (or care) make the meat easier to consume. It is unhealthy and unnecessary for students to leave the house of worship feeling wounded because of a Christian education class.

Last, but not least, human beings desire empowerment. People want their gifts, skills, and talents acknowledged and affirmed. According to Adler, people need *limitless encouragement* to combat life stressors.[11] Continuous encouragement helps members of congregations develop their spiritual identities and combat the stress of their daily Christian walk in the real world. In Christian education, it is vital to offer encouragement particularly after giving constructive feedback. I always attempt to end constructive criticism of students on a positive note, highlighting their gifts, skills, and talents and encouraging students to continue their spiritual development. Encourage students by having them read books outside of class, all types of books that will aid in their growth. Encourage students to ask questions of teachers, of preachers, and anyone they meet on their spiritual identity development journey. Even encourage students to take classes at creditable Bible colleges and seminaries. Tell them that they are up to the task.

The process of differentiation of the self can be long. According to William R. D. Fairbairn, human development is a lifelong breaking away from the dependent bonds of early childhood to the adult stages of mutuality and exchange.[12] Relative to Christian education, people spend much of their lives attempting to break out of the limitations of spiritual dependency to reach the autonomy of spiritual adulthood. This can be due to the fact that people have spent so much time receiving gratification from influential church family members that it becomes very difficult to separate themselves from the psychological and emotional impact of the church.

So, the development of members' spiritual identities will not occur overnight. In fact, spiritual identity development is not a final destination but a process or actually a journey. I do not believe that anyone ever arrives as that would mean that one has accomplished perfection, and no one is perfect. Therefore, in Christian education, while I hope that students firmly develop their spiritual identity by the end of a season of training, I understand and accept that change may not happen at all. Some people may not even want to engage in this process of change; they do not desire to think anything different from what they have believed since childhood or their early days in the church. For these cases, the Serenity Prayer provides me solace as a Christian educator: *God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change; courage to change the things I can; and wisdom to know the difference.*

Notes

1. Corey, Gerald. <u>Theory and Practice of Counseling and Psychotherapy</u>. Rev. ed. Belmont, CA: Brooks/Cole, 2009. p. 412.

2. Bowen, Murray. <u>Family Therapy in Clinical Practice</u>. New York, NY: Jason Aronson, Inc., 1978.

3. Akbar, Na'im. <u>Akbar Papers in African Psychology</u>. New York, NY: Mind Productions, 2004.

4. Genesis 3:6.

5. Bowen, p. 415.

6. Adler, Alfred. <u>Understanding Human Nature</u>. Greenwich, CT: Fawcett Crest Publications, 1969.

7. Gilbert, Roberta M. <u>The Eight Concepts of The Bowen Theory: A New Way of Thinking about the Individual and the Group</u>. Falls Church, VA: Leading Systems Press, 2004.

8. Akbar, Ibid.

9. Fairbairn, William R. D. <u>An Object-Relations Theory of the Personality</u>. New York, NY: Basic Books, 1952.

10. Satir, Virginia M., John Banman, Jane Gerber, and Maria Gamori. <u>The Satir Model: Family Therapy and Beyond</u>. Palo Alto, CA: Science and Behaviors Books, 1991.

11. Adler, Ibid.

12. Fairbairn, Ibid.