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**DENOMINATIONAL, CONGREGATIONAL, AND LEADERSHIP  
INFLUENCES ON THE CHURCH'S EFFECTIVENESS AS A SUPPORT  
SYSTEM TO FAMILIES EXPERIENCING INCEST:  
A FAMILY SYSTEMS APPROACH**

**By**

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## **ABSTRACT**

### **DENOMINATIONAL, CONGREGATIONAL, AND LEADERSHIP INFLUENCES ON THE CHURCH'S EFFECTIVENESS AS A SUPPORT SYSTEM TO FAMILIES EXPERIENCING INCEST: A FAMILY SYSTEMS APPROACH**

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The local congregation exists as one of the systems that influence families and communities. The processes within a living system are both bi-directional and co-directional. The history, decisions and the actions the church pursues have an impact on the individuals, families and surrounding environment. In like manner, the surrounding environment influences the development of the families and other systems, such as the local congregation.

Many times, in crisis, a family will seek out the church, looking for solace, guidance, and support as it processes the event(s). The church's ability to respond is based on the level of differentiation which has developed over the life of the congregation up to the point of crisis. No matter what the issue or crisis is, the anxiety level within the church will shape the efficacy of the church's response as a support system.

When an event such as familial sexual abuse surfaces, the congregation has an opportunity to be an effective support system to the concerned families, as well as the surrounding community. The differentiation-based anxiety will inform the church's

ability to respond effectively. The patterns of response will be similar in any crisis-producing event, because of the ability or inability of the system to maintain a position and yet stay connected.

This body of research focuses on specific issues that inform the anxiety level of the church in a crisis-producing event. Using Family Ecosystemic Theory and Bowen's Family Systems Theory as a backdrop, the research investigates specific internal and external influences that contribute to the level of anxiety as the church responds to the family in crisis because of incest. These specific influences are: the differentiation-based anxiety that drives the church's response; the church's perspective on women's roles; incest-related history of the local congregation; status of families within the congregation who have experienced incest; self-perception of the church's role within the community, including the denominational philosophy of community presence; and the pastor's perception of resources available to the local congregation.



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## **DEDICATION**

I dedicate this body of work to God, my Rock and my Home. The life He has given me is precious; the drive He has placed within me is amazing; and the hunger for understanding He has endued me with is insatiable. Anything I have accomplished or will ever accomplish I owe to Him.

## **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

It would be presumptuous to assume we ever accomplish a task such as this without input from many sources. Few complete a project of this magnitude without the help of significant people. My committee has been invaluable in this process.

Dr. Marsha Carolan met with me frequently, guiding me through qualitative research for a better understanding of the methods and appropriate considerations. She has generously shared her expertise. She encouraged me to hone my skills in order to be a more thorough researcher. Dr. Robert Griffore has been careful and thoughtful, urging me to attend to measurement methods in a more precise manner. He has encouraged me to be meticulous in data collection and to examine results scrupulously. His quality as a scholar has been a tremendous model for me. Dr. Robert Lee challenged me to dig deeper. His willingness to dialogue with me as I worked through Bowen's Family Systems Theory challenged me to constantly expand my understanding. His sense of humor as we grappled with theory and application made the process fun as well as educational.

I was blessed indeed to have Dr. Robert Boger as my advisor and major professor. His belief in me inspired me to strive for excellence. He related to me as an equal and treated my research with respect and excitement. He encouraged me when I lost focus or got discouraged. The hours we spent in conversation inspired me to develop as a researcher and not be satisfied with good enough, but instead to strive for excellence.

The process has been a joy. These four individuals have made it so.

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**- Images in this dissertation are presented in color -**

## **KEYS TO SYMBOLS OR ABBREVIATIONS**

**AOG – Assembly of God (Springfield, Missouri)**

**CHR – Christian Churches (both Disciples of Christ and Churches of Christ)**

**COG – Church of God (Anderson, Indiana)**

**MSLC – Missouri Synod Lutheran Church (St. Louis, Missouri)**

**NAZ – Church of the Nazarene**

**PRES – Presbyterian Church (USA)**

**UMC – United Methodist Church**

## INTRODUCTION

Experiences of incest would fill many pages in the books of family histories. Stories of intergenerational and transgenerational sexual abuse have become all too common in therapists' files and court records. Every day, newspapers report the arrest of a family member who has been charged with criminal sexual conduct with a minor.

Families who experience incest are all affected by the abuse. It is reckless and wrong to state that those who were not directly sexually victimized by the perpetrator(s) have encountered no damage. All are victims. The experience of one individual affects the organisms and the microsystems within the larger system. Anecdotal evidence indicates that even distant or absent family members bear the scars of familial sexual abuse. Reflecting the transactional character of systems, even those surrounding systems that are not in direct contact with the victims or perpetrators are constantly influencing and being influenced by the family that is experiencing incest.

Churches (after this, also referred to as the local congregation) are often in the peculiar position of being well acquainted with the perpetrator and victim, as well as the nuclear and extended family. Knowledge of inappropriate sexual behavior between family members may become public to the leadership or congregational members in a variety of ways. When the local congregation does become aware of the presence of incest within the constituency, it is obligated to acknowledge the behavior. The legal dimensions of child abuse and neglect often clash with the concept of the church as a place of refuge. The challenge of addressing the wrong is particularly complicated to an

institution that encourages, and is, in fact, built on the concept of forgiveness. Yet if it is to be true to the teachings of Jesus Christ, the church must speak to all issues of abuse.

Due to the necessity to address childhood sexual abuse in any form, anxiety is frequently a byproduct of the process of response or reaction. This is true whether the response is from an individual or an institution, such as the church. The measure of anxiety is partially determined by the levels of emotional differentiation within the interacting systems. The levels of differentiation of both the denomination and the parochial congregation, as well as the individual leadership of the local church, influence the response in a variety of ways. At the same time that denominational, congregational, and leadership anxieties are driving response of the local church to the family, because of the transactional nature of relationships, the family who is experiencing incest also has an impact on the response and is influencing the local congregation.

## **Chapter I.**

### **STATEMENT OF PROBLEM**

This study will examine the pastor's perception of the influences that affect the congregation's motivation and ability to respond, in an efficacious and appropriate manner, to families experiencing the trauma brought about by incest. The research will involve a qualitative investigation, interviewing pastors regarding their perspective of the issues that influence the local church's effectiveness as a support system to families who are experiencing incest. It will also include an investigation in the form of a survey to these same pastors. Specifically, this investigation will explore the pastor's perception of the influence of the following constructs on the provision or non-provision of programs for families experiencing incest: 1) the anxiety of the local church in responding to issues of incest, 2) the congregation's perspective on women's roles in family and leadership, 3) incest-related history of the local congregation, 4) status of families, within the congregation, who have experienced incidents of incest, 5) self-perception of the local church's role within the community, including the denominational perspective on community presence, and 6) perceived resources available to the local congregation. The investigation will be drawn from seven different faith communities across a four-state area in the Midwestern United States.

### **IMPORTANCE OF PROBLEM**

Clinical experience and leadership in local and national church polity have brought into focus, for this author, the large gap between stated theory and process, in the area of abuse. Although wanting to protect the innocent, the church often has difficulty

addressing sexual abuse perpetrated by its own members. Unless confronted with the tendency to reabuse the victims, it seems likely that the church will continue this kind of corruption of justice. The church has the opportunity to be an influential voice within the community, decrying mistreatment of the innocent. In order to be a strong support system within its community, it is imperative that the church realizes the issues that influence the ability to confront sexual abuse within families.

Because there is a dearth of solid research in the area of issues influencing ability to address incest effectively within the faith communities, more specific studies of the relationship between the six constructs and programs of response to families is needed. It is expected that the research will identify specific denominational, congregational and leadership issues that either hinder or facilitate the development of such programs. A more effective support system to families may expedite the healing process and promote more healthy family functioning, thus stopping the cycle of abuse that is so often the sequel to familial sexual abuse.

## OVERVIEW OF STUDY

The research for this project will be done in three different areas. Theoretically, an overview of human ecosystems conceptualizations will be presented. The transactional processes of churches (both locally and across national denominational lines) and families, is taken into consideration when discussing the topic of incest. Narrowing the field to Bowen's Family Systems Theory for the major theoretical paradigm, with particular focus on anxiety, the church will be viewed through that lens, overlaid with a Feminist Informed Perspective.

Intergenerational issues, (as discussed in Family System thinking), and cultural paradigm will be addressed, as the influences related to response to incest are considered. A short discussion of the ramifications of incest and its effect on the involved family will be included.

To date, there is a paucity of research on incest and the local congregation's response. As far as this author is aware, there is no present empirical data that studies the dynamics influencing the local church's response to families experiencing incest. Special care must be taken to build checks and balances into this research process. Therefore, this study will be accomplished in two different manners.

This project is a qualitative study, interviewing forty-six pastors of protestant churches who may or may not have a program in place for families of incest or sexual abuse survivors. From a Family Systems perspective, the interviews will focus on anxiety that is produced by the presence of incest within families who have some relationship to the church, and issues that may contribute to that anxiety. Challenges presented in both creating and administering a sexual abuse support program will also be explored.

The second element of this project will be a survey sent to these same pastors from the seven different types of faith communities in the Midwest states. Using questions reflecting human ecosystemic thinking and Bowen's Family Systems concepts, the researcher anticipates that issues influencing response will surface. By both interviewing and surveying pastors of different denominations, the researcher hopes to identify differences in the influencing issues between the denominations.

## Mode of Inquiry

The ethnographic mode of inquiry will be both interpretive and analytical. In the initial part of the research – through interviews with both pastors of congregations that have a program for abuse support in place, and those that do not have such a program – issues that influence presence of these programs will be explored. Through examination of the cultural history and denominational paradigms of the individual congregations, the author expects to discover some of the issues that influence effectiveness of address.

What is the church's position on abuse in families? How is the term 'sexual abuse' interpreted? What level of anxiety is produced by the revelation of incestuous activity within the local church family? Is the drive for homeostasis so strong it inhibits the ability of the local church to be a healing agent? How does the patriarchal culture in which the church, and, in fact, our whole society, is imbedded, impact the response to persons who are part of an incestuous family? What effect has the intergenerational history of the local congregation had in determining the response to families traumatized by incest? Does the local congregation recognize resources within the church or community that can facilitate the process of healing for the family? This study will focus on issues that have strong influence on the local church's position. It will encompass interpretation and evolution of the local congregation's stand on abuse within the family, and will investigate the anxiety that surrounds the process.

The second part of the research will be a survey to these same pastors, which will contribute collateral support for the interviews. Six different areas will be explored, from the pastor's perspective: the differentiation-based anxiety that drives the church's response; the church's perspective on women's roles; incest-related history of the local



congregation; status of families within the congregation who have experienced incest; self-perception of the church's role within the community, including the denominational philosophy of community presence; and the pastor's perception of resources available to the local congregation.

## Research Rationale

This study has been undertaken to help protestant churches understand dynamics that contribute to ability to be a support system to families who are in turmoil because of familial sexual abuse. Conventional wisdom states that if a person or group can discover the obstacles that prevent them from intentionally responding positively to a presenting issue, the person or group is more likely to be alert to these obstacles and perhaps change course of action. Education is one way to examine facts, uncover prejudices, and adopt positive changes in response to need. By focusing on subjects that color the reply of this system to the crisis of sexual abuse within the family, awareness will be heightened and the local congregation can become more effective as a support system in this and other areas.

The local church is one system within the community that is often sought out by a family in times of crisis. Because the church ministers within the community and has an historical reputation of being a place of solace and hope, individuals in the family may naturally assume it is a place where they can find succor, an oasis away from the events dominating their lives. As any living system does, the church responds to the circumstances as well as the individuals involved. This response is both bi-directional

and co-actional (Goldhaber, 2000), affecting both the local church and the individuals involved, directly and indirectly.

In the experience of incest within the family, research indicates that the church, both locally and nationally, is less than effective (Dinsmore, 1991; Fortune, 1983; Heitritter and Vought, 1989; Langsberg, 1997; Summit, 1987). This microsystem, which could provide strong social support for families at this time of trauma, often revictimizes the family, abandoning the ones who turn to it in a critical time of need. These families may go elsewhere for the much-needed support, or may withdraw even further into their alienation and dysfunction, assuming no one can be trusted.

If a local congregation can provide positive social support for families who suffer from the trauma of incest, it can facilitate the families as they process the integration of the experience in a more efficacious and healthy manner. Studies reveal that positive support systems often reap positive results in helping traumatized families adjust (Herman, 1997; Vaux, 1988; Whittaker and Garbarino, 1983). Therefore, equipping these systems to respond to sexual abuse in an intentional and informed, as well as compassionate and forthright manner, can ostensibly help families to develop healthy and abuse-free lifestyles.

Because there is a scarcity of solid research in the area of issues influencing ability to address incest effectively within the faith communities, more specific studies of relationship between various constructs and the response to families is needed. The goal of this study is to examine barriers, within the local congregations, to facilitative behavior in responding to families who are experiencing incestuous activity. By encouraging the church to examine its own emotionally binding issues, the author intends to stimulate

awareness of limitations to positive support. As the local church finds different ways to minister in an efficacious manner, it can be a more effective support system to the family experiencing abuse.

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Six specific research questions will be addressed in the research of the processing of possible issues and interactions that influence the church's response to families experiencing incest.

- 1) Does the level of anxiety, as defined by Bowen and reflected by the pastor's responses during the interview, drive the response of the congregation to families experiencing incest?
- 2) Does the pastor's perception of the congregational position regarding women's roles in the home and society - including the position on female leadership in the church - influence the response, within the congregation, to issues of incest?
- 3) As far as the pastor is aware, does the history of incest within the local congregation influence the church's process of the responding to families with the presenting crisis of incest now?
- 4) From the pastor's perspective, does the local congregation respond differently to families experiencing incest, according to the families' status within the congregation? Is the church, in fact, more or less likely to be an effective support system if the family is actively involved in the life of the congregation?

- 5) How does the congregation, as reported by the pastor, perceive its role within the community, including its denominational role, in regard to being a support system to families experiencing incest?
- 6) How does the congregation's perception, as reported by the pastor, of the availability of resources (human, professional, educational and financial), have an impact on the local congregation's response to families experiencing incest?

## CONCEPTUAL MODEL

### Introduction

The local congregation is not an island. It has developed, and continues to develop, within the context of its environment. The climate of influence surrounding the congregation is a patchwork of sexism, patriarchalism, Victorianism, cultural attitudes regarding sex, cultural attitudes about the church's role with individual families, philosophy about providing resources for programming of support, and many other considerations. It is deeply embedded in its historical environment, which includes both male and female voices in leadership, relationship to the community, attitudes toward new leadership, ability to forgive, fear of change, incidents of incest, and convictions about responsibility to its membership and its community. Add to that, the educational, cultural, political, socio-economic, religious, and ethnic milieu of the larger system, and one begins to see the diversity of influences that have a voice in the prevailing attitude of the local congregation.

It is an ever-evolving process. The church membership is always changing...the alteration in membership affects the church...the community influences the congregation and the individual families, who also return influence to the system. The process is never stagnant, always changing. Bronfenbrenner states "...the ecology of human development is the scientific study of the progressive mutual accommodation, throughout the life course, between an active, growing human being, and the changing properties of the immediate settings in which the developing person lives, as this process is affected by the relations between these settings, and by the larger contexts in which the settings are embedded." (1989, p.188)

All persons are in relationship. The person is partially defined by the process that takes place within the surrounding context (Bronfenbrenner, 1992) and cannot be understood properly out of context of the relationship. In the same way, systems develop their definitions. The Person-Context-Process Model helps to understand how development takes place.

### Ecosystemic Rationale

Ecosystemic rationale works from the premise that each subsystem has an influence on the other systems it touches, directly or indirectly. Any person or event is in relationship to all of the persons and events it touches psychologically and all the persons and events they touch. It is not possible to totally separate the parts because they take form in context to the existing relationships. An organism functions in the way it does because of the presence of the other organisms and the subsequent, evolving influence of each on the other (Vaux, 1988). A influences B, who influences C. C influences A and the relationship of B and C influences the relationship between B and A. There is a circularity of influence within the relationship. An entity, in its systemic form, is a web, not a chain. Adaptive behavior is a dynamic whereby one part of the system is responding to another part, which is, itself, responding to all the other parts.

The whole, then, is not merely a sum of the parts, but also includes the process of connecting the separate parts. The response created by linking the parts is an important element of the whole. This includes the response of the wedded organism as well as the separate entities, both to each other and to the world at large (Bronfenbrenner, 1989; Goldhaber, 2000). The whole is more than a sum of its parts.

## Systemic Nature of Community

A system is a collection of parts or organisms. Whether observing the human body or a fast-flowing river, the process of plant growth or the functioning of an organization, the aggregate is an ever-evolving reflection of the organisms that comprise the specific system, and the continual process of evolution within and around both the specific organisms and the larger system.

Energy within the system is, in part, a result of information constantly being exchanged. Communication is a major concept of systemic philosophy, because interactions influence all subsystems within the system, directly or indirectly (Bronfenbrenner, 1989; Kerr & Bowen, 1988). Although the level of impact varies, each part is touched by information exchange within the larger system.

Systemic thinking focuses on the interrelatedness of parts, both in the present and across time (Bronfenbrenner, 1989). A systems approach is a holistic study of transactions and interactions whereby each component reciprocally affects the other, thereby changing both continuously overtime. These become patterned within the system. As a stone thrown into a pond causes a ripple effect in the surrounding water, a change in one part of a system produces a change in another part – even in the whole. That change, in turn, influences the process of development of the constantly emerging system. Basic scientific theory is that every action has an equal and opposite reaction.

In relationship systems, the emotional process is the distinguishing portion from other ecosystems (Bubolz & Sontag, 1993; Kerr & Bowen, 1988; Friedman, 1985). This process is an integral piece of the system that contributes to the continual process of

development. Systemic thinking in relationships addresses the impact of connection on human functioning – the transactional nature of parts.

### Support Systems

Research indicates that a strong support system is critical in the recovery from a crisis event (Pierce, Sarason, & Sarason, 1996). Support is a transactional process. Response by the surrounding microsystems and mesosystems help determine the ultimate impact of the trauma an organism is experiencing (Herman, 1997; Vaux, 1989). Herman discusses the cathartic advantage of simply being permitted to share the traumatic experience with others. The response does not only affect the traumatized organism, but the dyads and the microsystem itself also are changed by the interaction.

Often, a local faith group is a critical support system for families in the community. This organization has the opportunity to contribute to the rebuilding of a sense of order and justice for a family who has been entangled in incest. Because a family often alienates itself from the community when abuse is taking place within, the local congregation may be one of the few support systems that has recurring contact. How the congregation responds, then, is likely to be critical to the ability of the family to enter back into the community in a healthy manner.

### Bowen's Family Systems Approach

Balance in a living system contributes to a healthy symbiosis. In many situations, the balance determines the survival of the system itself. The theoretical formulations in



Bowen's Family Systems Theory are centered in the balance of togetherness and individuality (Kerr & Bowen, 1988; Nichols & Schwartz, 1998).

Bowen's theory teaches that three systems contribute to human functioning and relating. These three – the emotional, the feeling, and the intellectual systems – determine most behavior. The *emotional* system comprises the forces that guide a person's behavior. It is the driving impetus through life, and includes ways of perceiving and of relating to others and to objects. The *feeling* system is influential in social processes. This system takes into consideration relationship and perception of self. The *intellectual* system refers to the human's ability to know and to comprehend. The human being supercedes all other animals in this system in ability to comprehend abstractly and to associate meaning.

Family Systems Theory emphasizes multigenerational influences. These influences have an impact on all three systems, but most critically affect the emotional system. Forces, past and present, produce models of thought and behavior. Bowen suggests that, while events and attitudes in the immediate family heavily influence actions, these defining practices have been handed down through many generations of thinking and acting, responding and reacting.

When people grow up, they do not leave their families, but instead, bring those influences with them into their adult relationships. An individual is never totally free of family influences. In fact, Bowen contributes the theory that unresolved issues with our original families is the most important unfinished business of our lives (Nichols & Schwartz, 1998, p.142). As we move away from our families, emotionally or physically,

the patterns of behavior and ways of relating follow us into school, church, the workplace, social life, and all other formal and informal relationships.

Anxiety over relationships drives attachment. Anxiety can be defined as response to a real or perceived threat (Kerr & Bowen, 1988, p. 112). This anxiety often undermines reason and self-control. A continuum exists between anxious attachment (which is caused by an 'imbalance' or fusion in relationship), and functional attachment, which Bowen defines as self-differentiation. Each individual is somewhere on that continuum. There is no human being that is completely self-differentiated (Friedman, 1985; Kerr & Bowen, 1988; Nichols & Schwartz, 1998). Bowen asserts that anxiety is directly related to the organism's level of self-differentiation. The lower a person's level of differentiation, the less his adaptivity will be to stress and the higher his anxiety will be (Kerr & Bowen, 1988).

Healthy family development happens when members are relatively well-differentiated, anxiety is low, and when parents are in good emotional contact with their own families of origin. The highly differentiated family will stay effectively connected from one generation to the next (Friedman, 1985; Kerr & Bowen, 1988). People with good differentiation, who remain in contact with previous generations, are more stable than people from enmeshed or splintered families. Emotional attachment between spouses is likely to resemble the families of origin relationships.

### **Feminist Informed Perspective**

While there have been many theories regarding marriage and family, they have largely been driven by voices of power (McGoldrick, Anderson & Walsh, 1989). The

understandings that have been bequeathed down through the years come from the privileged minority - who is the Caucasian male (Hesse-Biber, Gilmartin & Lyndenberg, 1999). As the male gender has been the predominant creator of this 'reality', it has been expressed reflecting the masculine understanding only.

What has been presented as truth, was developed by the entitled few of society (Bordo, 1999), not the majority. Because of this, feminist scholars suggest that scientific research is biased and limited in its ways of interpretation (Martin, 1999; Spalter-Roth & Hartmann, 1999). If gender inequalities are ignored, some of the primary factors are overlooked.

A feminist informed perspective is concerned with examining the 'truth' within the context of the environment. Because of the very narrow definitions of truth being derived from the fortunate few, feminists' concern is not only with the female gender, but also with interactions among race, class, age, sexuality, ethnicity, and differing abilities (Daly, 1995; Hesse-Biber, Gilmartin & Lyndenberg, 1999; McGoldrick, Anderson & Walsh, 1989). As scholars look at truth, it is critical to understand that perspective is important, and not all definitions of reality are the same. It is here that we must begin communication. Effective communication demands that, not only the privileged minority, but also the 'voiceless ones' must be heard.

The patriarchal paradigm is a salient issue that influences the local church's functioning. The value which women and men are given within individual families, the role the genders have played down through the history of the church, the leadership's understanding and commitment to the importance of all voices being heard, the role of men and women in the local community...these issues are influential in the day to day

operations of the church. All of these considerations baptize the local church's character and help to form the commitment to the growth process of each individual. Both male awareness of historical oppression in word and deed, and the need for all perspectives to be given a voice, make a grave difference in the behavior of a congregation.

### **The Church as Family**

The church is an emotional system, functioning, in many ways like a family. Due to the unique role of the church in the American culture, families experiencing incest often turn to it for healing, comfort and counsel. As an emotional system, the congregation often reacts emotionally to issues of discomfort such as sexual abuse. This anxiety chokes the ability of the congregation to respond in a healthy manner when families seek them out for guidance and assurance. Unfortunately, the church has often abandoned these same families, leaving them to find their own way through the morass of legal, psychological, social, spiritual and emotional experiences that follow public knowledge of the incest. At a time when this organism could be efficacious as a support system, often the local church responds inappropriately, because of anxiety over the issue and potential ramifications, causing further damage and victimization of the survivors.

Looking at the church as a family system is a relatively new concept. Two decades ago, Rabbi Edwin Friedman, a peer of Murray Bowen, began writing about the functional similarities of the church and the family (Friedman, 1985). Since that time, others have begun to see the challenges of church functioning in relationship to Family Systems thinking, incorporating the Ecosystemic approach, with the specific focus on the role of emotional relationships and the anxiety that drives the action.

As in Bowen's model of the family, the local church functions according to its level of differentiation. Level of differentiation is directly related to anxiety over emotional and conceivably controversial issues. Expanded studies indicate this level is determined by four areas (Daly, 1985; Fortune, 1989; Friedman, 1985; Kerr & Bowen, 1988; McGoldrick, Anderson & Walsh, 1989; Rampage, 1995; Richardson, 1996; Steinke, 1993): a) the individual families and their own levels of functioning, b) multi-generational issues in the makeup of the congregation, c) the leadership's differentiation, and d) the environment in which the congregation ministers, and the emotional level of the local culture. Because of the impact of the historical, denominational influence within a local congregation (Smith, 1985; Tracy & Ingersol, 1999), the researcher adds the denominational component to the level of differentiation.

Although consideration of the first area will be mentioned, in accordance with Bowen's concept of the role of anxiety in family functioning, the focus of this research will target anxiety which drives the local church's response to families who are experiencing incest, and issues that may prompt that anxiety. This anxiety will be addressed from each of the three positions; denominational, congregational, and leadership differentiation levels. Denominational and local community environment in which the congregation ministers, multigenerational issues of the congregation and the leadership, and patterns, in each of the areas of concern, of addressing anxiety-laden issues, as reflected in Bowen's Family Theory concepts, will be examined.

**Denominational:** A church aligns itself with a denomination because of the similarities of doctrine, theological position, administrative practices, and even social policy. The reputation of denominations and their traditional practices within the world

influence the local congregations. A sense of political obligation and social responsibility varies from denomination to denomination. Thus, anxiety surrounding precarious issues, such as sexual abuse and incest, deviates among different denominations and shapes denominational position (Daly, 1985; Fortune, 1989; Friedman, 1985).

**Congregational:** The local congregation is, to some degree, a reflection of the larger denominational organization. It also echoes local culture, including political, socio-economic, educational, ethnic, historical and moral events and attitudes. The families who are involved and the families in the community all influence and are influenced by the local congregation, as are the patriarchs and matriarchs who helped shape the congregation (Friedman, 1985; Richardson, 1996; Steinke, 1993). Anxiety in dealing with sexual abuse will reflect all of these voices that have shaped and continue to shape the congregation.

**Leadership:** It is well documented that an organization takes on the personality of the leadership (Steinke, 1996 Friedman, 1985; Smith, 1985). The local church is no exception to that rule. Not only the pastor(s), but also the informal leadership – the patriarchs and matriarchs of the congregation – help to shape the way in which the congregation functions. Steinke states that “the congregational leaders are the key stewards of the congregation...by virtue of their positions in the system, can most promote congregational health” (1996, p.26). Respect, communication and good stewardship of resources by the leadership will facilitate a congregation to address stress-laden issues - an element of daily functioning - in a mature, well-differentiated manner.

The researcher is aware that interviewing the pastor is, in and of itself, fraught with risk. While the pastor traditionally speaks for the congregation, and is generally thought to have his or her pulse on the heartbeat of the flock, it is possible that the pastor's interpersonal and intrapersonal dynamics are so overwhelming that his/her level of differentiation precludes an honest evaluation (Friedman, 1985; Richardson, 1996). This is a limitation of this research.

In spite of this limitation, generally there is no more qualified person to assess the influences that drive the congregation's response than the pastor. A pastor is more likely to know a wider breadth of congregational members, and the inner workings of the congregation, than is any other church member, and certainly more than an outsider.

### Respect for All Voices

The local congregation has a responsibility to minister to each member of a family. This includes the voices of power and those traditionally perceived as insignificant. In most areas of society the women and children are powerless. As they are most often the victims of sexual abuse, this voiceless majority is victimized even further.

If it is to be healthy, the local church must take proactive measures to be a support system to those who experience discrimination. This will include education, self-examination, and courage. It will involve taking an unpopular stand in some circumstances. It will involve allowing the transactions and interactions with each person and family unity to inform the process. In order to facilitate healing and integration into the community, however, if the local church is to be an effective support system, it will

honestly make intentional efforts to listen to and speak for all persons, including the unempowered.

## Summary

Regardless of the subject, conflict is an inevitable element of relationships. It is based on anxiety level of the organisms involved in the relationship (Kerr & Bowen, 1988; Friedman, 1985, Shawchuck, 1983; Steinke, 1993). This particular study has used the highly stressful subject of incest to illustrate the church in conflict. When theory meets process, the organism often chaffs. Whether dealing with sexual abuse within the church or the building of a new edifice, level of anxiety, based on self-differentiation will inform the communication and the action. If the church can take a non-anxious position, yet remain connected to each individual, she is more likely to be an effective support system to families, no matter what the family is experiencing. As the church is constantly evolving, the ability or inability to maintain a non-anxious position in this particular situation, contributes to the level of anxiety for the conflict, both now and those conflicts that will arise the next time.

The researcher examines several areas that may contribute to the level of anxiety within the congregation. These areas are not exclusive, yet may give an indication to the plethora of issues that complicate level of self-differentiation.



## CONCEPTUAL AND OPERATIONAL DEFINITIONS

- Family Systems, as defined by Murray Bowen (Kerr & Bowen, 1988)

Conceptual definition – An integrative theory that describes human emotional functioning, looking at the family as an emotional unit that is a collection of interlocking relationships, continuously influenced by a number of variables and by the interrelationship of those variables. Each individual contributes to the overall level of ability to define self and family, and can only be defined in context to the family and other intimate relationships.

Among the variables are intergenerational and multigenerational relationships and ways of functioning that inform the present, evolving generation, further clarifying patterns of behavior. The system's level of anxiety is an illustration of the compilation of each individual's level of anxiety, and helps to determine the ability to define itself in the presence of stress.

Operational definition - The church functions as an emotional family system that is a collection of intergenerational and multigenerational family relationships. Type of response to stimulus, such as the presence of sexual abuse or incest, is determined in part by the combined level of anxiety of each individual and each family system, including the level of functioning and relationships of earlier generations of family members and church families, leadership, and denominational organization.

- **Human Ecosystems, as defined by Urie Bronfenbrenner**

**Conceptual definition – A theory of human psychological development wherein the organism is considered in the context of the external influences that interact with each other and the developing human. The theory includes the transactions and linkages between the family and other major settings influencing development. It also includes events and transitions over the life course and the course of the family and setting in which the organism is in the process of developing. The transaction first develops between two individual organisms, which is the dyadic relationship. Each organism is influenced by the other, and by every other dyad in the microsystem, and their relationship influences. Recognizing the family as principal context of human development, the ecosystemic philosophy is that all other systems that touch the family, as well as the dynamic of time and the organism itself, influence the continuing development of the organism and is influenced by the organism. It takes a person/process/context form that is continuously evolving.**

**Operational definition - The concept of the local congregation as an organism made up of a plethora of Microsystems, which is continuously developing , impacted and affected by external influences that interact in relationship – either directly or indirectly. These influences could include, but are not limited to the socio-economic conditions, educational level of community, financial climate, cultural mores, ethnic climate, presence of other faith**

assemblies, denominational headquarters, and population of the congregation. The transactional dynamics of the patriarchal paradigm within the community and the congregation, as well as each individual member and family unit and the history of abuse within the congregation as well as the history of the congregational presence within the community, also have an influence on the development of the individuals, the family units, and the congregation during the life of the church and up to the present time. The various dynamics influence each individual relationship (dyad), as well as the relationships with other dyads and Microsystems.

- Sexual abuse support within the church program, for family members experiencing incest:

Conceptual definition - The presence of programs supporting families who are experiencing familial sexual abuse. This may include individual counseling, support groups for survivors, perpetrators, counseling and/or support, child protection statements or a sexual abuse procedural policy.

Operational definition – The presence of any sexual abuse support in the church program. This will be ascertained by a series of questions regarding individual, group, or family counseling by trained counselors; sexual abuse support groups for individuals or families; risk and abuse prevention programs - such as Christian Education classes, teacher training classes, or the presence of a procedure policy regarding any incidence of sexual abuse

or incest that surfaces within the congregation. Each pastor will be asked to confirm the presence of any of these programs made available by the congregation.

- Constructs that may affect the presence and level of support of the local church to the family experiencing incest:

1. Patriarchal paradigm

Conceptual definition - The local church's perspective on women and women's roles

Operational definition – Pastor's observations of congregation's perspective regarding women in families, church, and society - includes leadership, ordination, position on submission of women to men. Data will also be gathered regarding the denominational perspective on women and gender issues and inclusion of women in leadership in the congregations.

2. History of incest related issues

Conceptual definition – The presence of a history of incidents of incest within the local congregation.

Operational definition – Pastor’s understanding pursuant to the history of incest within the families of the congregation. Have there been any incest-related experiences within the history of the local congregation? Questions will survey number of incidents and whether they occurred within the last one month to twenty years, according to Pastor’s knowledge.

3. Family experiencing incest; status in the local congregation

Conceptual definition - Does the history of incest related incidents involve active members of the congregation? Are they circumstances involving non-members or visitors to the congregation?

Operational definition – Pastor’s observations regarding position of families who have reported incest. What best describes the families who have experienced incest – (both perpetrators and victims): Within the leadership of the congregation; active members of the congregation; peripheral attendees; new to the church, possibly because of seeking abuse support; persons related to members of the congregation, or those not at all involved with the local congregation?

4. Self-Perception of Church Role

Conceptual definition – How does the church see its role in the community? Does it line up with denominational policies in the area of abuse ministries?

Operational definition – Does the pastor use any of the following definitions to identify the congregation: evangelical, liturgical, conservative, liberal, radical, social agent, or advocate? How is that definition comparable to sister churches of the same denomination or faith group? Is it comparable to the national denominational policy regarding sexual abuse? From the pastor's perspective, does the local congregation see it as the church's responsibility to provide support to the local families of the community?

5. Resources available to the local church.

Conceptual definition – Does the pastor consider the local congregation rich in resources that can facilitate ministry to families experiencing incest?

Operational definition – According to the pastor's evaluation, are there trained and licensed individuals available to facilitate ministry to families experiencing abuse? Does the community have adequate resources to respond to familial sexual abuse? Has the leadership of the church (including Sunday School teachers and Youth Workers) been trained to recognize signs of childhood sexual abuse? Is there a risk management program in place in the church? Is a police check partial requirement for people working with children and youth within the congregation? Has all pastoral staff been trained to counsel and refer appropriately in the areas of

sexual abuse? What are the local educational opportunities? Are there local facilities and organizations that address sexual abuse or incest?

**6. Denomination.**

**Conceptual definition -** A religious group, including many churches, bound by common beliefs, doctrines and practices. Often the denominational organization of a faith group controls or influences expressions of faith practices within the community.

**Operational definition –** The organization with which the faith community officially aligns. Is often acknowledged by title of denomination being included in the name of the church, in official literature, governing materials of the congregation or other publications referencing the church.

**7. Congregation.**

**Conceptual definition -** An assembly of persons formed for the purpose of providing for worship of God, for religious education, and for other church activities; local faith group that reflects the culture and systemic characteristics of the community.

Operational definition – Any local faith assembly which meets at a specific place at a specific time for worship. This would include people who identify this assembly as the one with which they worship.

#### 8. Leadership.

Conceptual Definition – The understood authority and influence within a congregation - acknowledged and unacknowledged leadership. Includes pastors, other ministerial staff or non-staff leadership.

Operational Definition – Pastor(s) on staff. Other clergy within the congregation, CEO of church, board chairpersons, treasurer, the governing body of the congregation, emotional matriarchs or patriarchs, and any persons who hold influential position – either formal or informal.



TERMS USED IN THIS STUDY  
(defined)

1. Church – A faith-based community; synagogue, parish or temple; this study focuses on protestant, Christian faith groups
2. Liturgical and Classical Faith Community - Emphasis on beauty of worship and grace of God; social activism; progressive sanctification; often called ‘main-line’ churches. Generally understood to be more liberal in theology (Tracy & Ingersol, 1999).
3. Evāngelical Faith Community – Emphasis on sinfulness of human beings and need for salvation of souls. Accepted pietism emphasis; missionary minded, generally understood to be more conservative in theology (Tracy & Ingersol, 1999).
4. Effectiveness – Ability to influence; competent and operative
5. Family – Related by blood or marriage to the victim. In this research, the study focuses on individuals living within the same house or near proximity
6. Incest – Involves inappropriate sexual activities with a child or adolescent by an adult family member, or one considerably older than the victim (Finkelhor, 1994) this may include physical contact, such as touching portions of the child’s body, having intercourse, or having the child touch the abuser in a sexual manner. Incest also includes non-contact sexual abuse, such as exhibitionism, voyeurism, or having a child pose for pornographic pictures; also familial sexual abuse

7. **Intentional** – Deliberately enacted with specific purpose
8. **Prominent** – Visibly active within the congregation...easily recognizable to the parishioners; also may be in a position of power and authority
9. **Status** – Position of influence within the congregation or the community
10. **Support System** – An assemblage of relationships - formal or informal, that provide instrumental and affective functions, which may include education, resources, meeting needs for identity and acceptance, feedback and socialization.

## **Chapter II.**

### **REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

#### **INTRODUCTION TO INCEST**

In most cultures today, incest is considered deviant behavior. Sexual relationships between persons closely related by blood, particularly within the immediate family, are forbidden in many societies. In the United States, most states have specific laws setting parameters for acceptable relatedness of sexual partners. Parent/child sexual relations are one of the few universal taboos today. Crossing all world cultures, it has been historically forbidden throughout civilization (Trepper & Barrett, 1989). The perspective of this study, in agreement with Finkelhor (1979), Dinsmore (1991), and Russell (1994), is that incest is always wrong, because it is coercive and entered into from a position of power.

In spite of these universal prohibitions, studies reveal that incidence of incest has quadrupled in the past century (Trepper and Barrett, 1989, p.2). Incidence rates vary greatly, from a 1950's estimate of incest with children involving only one in one million children to one 1980's estimate as frequent as one in three. Authorities in the area of abuse today, conservatively estimate that 1 in 10 families are experiencing familial sexual abuse (Heitritter & Vought, 1989). Presently, estimates of familial sexual abuse in some form, are approximately 20% of females and 5-10% of males (Dinsmore, 1991; Pellauer, Chester, & Boyajian, 1987). While 1 in 3 girls, and 1 in 11 boys are sexually molested by 18, 50% of these are familial sexual abuse (Pellauer, Chester & Boyajian, 1987;

Stringham, 1998). Estimates of duration of incestuous abuse average 3 to 5 years (Langberg, 1997).

## Definitions

Childhood sexual abuse is defined by David Finkelhor (1994) and Dan Allender (1995) as sexual contact or interaction with a child or adolescent by an adult or someone who is considerably older than the victim or is in a position of power or authority, for the purpose of sexual stimulation of the perpetrator or any other person. This definition includes contact and non-contact sexual abuse, such as touching sexual portions of the child's body, genital, oral or anal intercourse, having the child touch the abuser in a sexual manner, exposing child to pornography, voyeurism, exhibitionism, verbal sexual interactions, having a child pose for pornographic pictures, physical/sexual boundary violation or sexual/relational boundary violation (Allender, 1995; Finkelhor, 1994; Langberg, 1997; Luster and Henry, 1999; Stringham, 1998). Incest is sexual abuse by a relative (either step-family member, or blood relation) who is older than the victim, or is in a position of emotional or physical power over the victim.

It is well documented that childhood sexual abuse is damaging. Issues of self-worth, trust, and relationship development are at risk with victims of abuse. Abuse sets off a series of emotional and developmental disruptions that, if they are ever to be overcome, require a strong and nurturing environment. In the case of incest, that environment is often unavailable or has been betrayed. The victim's inability to trust is proportionately related to the extent that parents or family failed to protect and nurture

the child (Allender, 1995; Russell, 1986). Thus, incest has the potential to become more damaging than other childhood sexual abuse.

While recognizing that victims of incest are both male and female, as are perpetrators, both clinical and descriptive research indicate females are more likely to be victimized and males are more likely to be the perpetrator (Dinsmore, 1991; Langsberg, 1997). The researcher will endeavor to refrain from assuming a gender for either perpetrator or victim, but when compelled, will generally describe the victim as 'she' and the perpetrator as 'he'.

### Emotional Abuse

Emotional abuse is usually an element of incest (Allender, 1995; Finkelhor, 1994; Luster & Henry, 1999; Luster & Small, 1997). Typical emotional abuse that exists alongside incest is activity such as name calling, derogatory comments, persistent shaming and ridiculing, acts of indifference, threats of harm, as well as bribery, manipulative conversation, spiritual abuse, and gross inconsistencies of behavior and relationship (Herman, 1997; Morriss, 1998; Stringham, 1998). These behaviors reduce the victim's feeling of self-worth, while at the same time bringing confusion, keeping the victim from being able to anticipate a consistent relationship that can be trusted.

Because of the relationship between victim and perpetrator, it is not uncommon for the victim to feel obligated to allow incestuous activity to occur, not trusting instinctive feelings of inappropriateness or betrayal. The perpetrator exploits this bewilderment, consciously or unconsciously recognizing the advantage this gives him.

## LONG TERM EFFECTS OF INCEST

### Consequences of Incest

It has long been understood that incest reaps long term effects to the development of the survivor (Allender, 1995; Alexander, et.al., 1998; Burkett, 1991; Cole & Woolger, 1989; Dinsmore, 1991; Draucker, 1989; Herman, 1997; Lloyd & Emery, 1993; Roth & Newman, 1993). As it relates to adult functioning, the effect of incest is impacted by three specific things: 1) search for meaning from the traumatic event(s), 2) regaining a sense of mastery – not only over the event, but life itself, and 3) self-esteem issues raised by comparison with others (Draucker, 1989). Details such as age of onset, type of abuse, duration, frequency, presence of physical abuse and relationship to perpetrator all seem to have some bearing on the long term effect to survivors. Events following disclosure also have an impact on the ability to heal from the trauma of incest (Luster & Small, 1997; Langberg, 1997).

In comparisons with non-abused adolescents, research shows some consequences of childhood sexual abuse to be higher levels of fearfulness, anxiety, anger, depression, feelings of inadequacy, nightmares, murderous fantasies, suicidal ideation, intrusive memory, withdrawal and early interest in sex (Herman, 1997; Luster & Henry, 1999). Characteristics commonly reported among incest survivors are helplessness, rage, fear, loss, shame, guilt, diffuse affect, aggressiveness, strong need for control, self-blame, alienation, and troubles with feelings of legitimacy (Dinsmore, 1991; Herman, 1993; Roth & Newman, 1993). Often, perhaps because of a history of attention and affection conditional on performance, an abused child will have a tendency to set impossibly high standards for herself (Cole, Woolger, et.al., 1992).

Lloyd and Emery (1993) report that childhood sexual abuse has a direct effect on the subsequent life course of the developing individual. Pervasive disturbances are more likely to surface in the personality of the victim who has been abused by a relative. A profound sense of badness and self-contempt often follows a survivor of incest (Herman, 1997).

Because of the blurring of boundaries in incest, diffuse role distinctions are common in the developing individual. An incest survivor is developmentally affected in areas of basic trust, autonomy and initiative (Alexander, 1993; Herman, 1997; Langberg, 1997). Lack of appropriate role models has an impact on the ability to develop into a responsible, autonomous individual who is able to relate in a healthy manner to others (Cole & Woolger, 1989).

Both Diane Russell's study (1989) and Judith Herman's work (1997) with survivors indicates profound deficiencies in self-protection, particularly in the context of intimate relationships. Well-learned dissociative coping styles can lead the survivor of incest to ignore social cues that would alert them to impending danger in developing a relationship. Russell reports the risk of rape, sexual harassment, and battery doubled for survivors of sexual abuse. When the abuse is incest, the risk is higher for dysfunctional social role functioning, particularly on an intimate level (Alexander, 1993; Draucker, 1989). Self-care is impaired and the ability to form stable, healthy relationships is diminished.

## A Family Affair

It is not uncommon for a family that is experiencing incest to be headed by at least one parent who has been abused. Because of the high degree of interpersonal problems - including revictimization, vulnerability to manipulative persons, tendency to develop unhealthy relationships, and poor role models in family of origin - a victim may be susceptible to exploitative intimate partnerships (Alexander, et.al, 1998). Hence, the statistics that show approximately 1 in 4 homes where incest occurs have at least one parent who has been a victim of sexual abuse (Cole & Woolger, 1989) .

Survivors of sexual abuse report homes as being conflicted, inconsistent, and lacking in cohesion. Boundaries are inconsistent and ill-defined. The individual who has grown up in such a home may have few resources from which to draw adequate internal models of partnering and parenting (Cole & Woolger, 1989). Poor self-protection abilities and inability to recognize manipulative or exploitative behavior may lead to sexually abusive mate selection (Herman, 1997). Thus, the pattern is likely to continue and sexual abuse may occur from one generation to the next.

### FAMILY AS VICTIMS

*"There is no doubt that living with an incestuous family leaves scars on all its victims/survivors."  
- Dinsmore, 1991, p.31*

It is, by now, commonly accepted that incest has long-term developmental effects on the victim. What is not as easily accepted is the recognition of the damage experienced by the family that is living in a home where incest exists.



Family context should be an accepted part of sexual abuse conceptualization (Alexander, 1993). Much research within recent years has focused on the families wherein incest exists. Alexander, in researching the families of origin with victims of incest, reports that family functioning has a profound impact on the long-term effects of incest. Some symptoms long attributed to incest, may actually be more related to the family context.

Incestuous families often look very similar. Generally, they are considered by most researchers to be enmeshed (Cole & Woolger, 1989; Burkett, 1991; Carson, Gertz, Donaldson & Wonderlich, 1991). Overly strong external boundaries, inadequate internal boundaries, crossover of function and parent/child roles, and lack of personal privacy are found to be the common denominator among many families who are experiencing incest. Lack of trust of outsiders is frequently an issue, as they may pose unwanted threats to the dysfunctional family behavioral patterns that are in place (Burkett, 1991). The family frequently is a closed system in which one parent or guardian, is ill, alcoholic, battered, emotionally or physically absent, and the other parent is divisive, domineering and/or manipulative (Dinsmore, 1991, p.30). The family is often ruled with intimidation and fear tactics. Many times, they are isolated socially, and authoritarian in family government. The abusive parent may betray tendencies such as difficulty in control with aggression, self-isolation, and aversive or angry response to distress in others (Main & Goldwyn, 1984).

Recent research has targeted dysfunctional family patterns in families of incest. The research has a chicken and egg quality about it. Does incest occur because the family is dysfunctional, or is the family dysfunctional because incest has occurred? It

appears from studies that the former is more likely to be the case (Cole, et.al.1992, Draucker, 1989). There is evidence that a family in which incest is occurring has highly permeable boundaries, where role reversal is common (Burkett, 1991). Dysfunctional boundary patterns are fertile field for offenses, such as incest, to occur.

Disturbances in functioning patterns, for family members, are a result of the internal self that has evolved from a family life of dysfunction, abuse, and secrets (Cole & Woolger, 1989). Because replication of patterns is a function of homeostasis (Kerr & Bowen, 1988), the cycle of abuse is not unlikely to continue with children who grow up in incestuous homes (Frank, 1998; Herman, 1997). Due to the alienation of an abusive family from society, without adequate support systems to provide education or healthy role models, the dysfunction snowballs, and the survivor may, in fact, repeat the intergenerational patterns. Unhealthy relationships are formed in the succeeding families, or, tragically, another abusive family may be formed.

### Compulsion to Stay

When an individual finds that one or more of the family has been abused by another member of the family, why does the person not simply leave? This is particularly bewildering in the case in which a child may be endangered. There is no easy answer...it is, in fact, incredibly complicated. For many, the belief system confuses the issue. In Christian homes, for instance, an acculturation of caring and goodness, and articles of faith demand going the extra mile. Victims may misinterpret these characteristics and remain in the abusive home with the idea that they can rescue the perpetrator from himself. They may feel that to leave is 'more wrong' than to stay. Other reasons may

include the idea that somehow the victim caused the abuse and if she would change her behavior, the perpetrator would change. A need for connectedness or affiliation may be involved with the reasons to stay. Often, the victim states to leave is to fail – the family, the perpetrator, the church, or one's self.

On a more practical level, many children and women report they simply have no place else to go, no resources, and no emotional support from other sources. A victim or spouse of a perpetrator may speak to such issues as power and control, security, legal resources, cost/benefit ratio, lack of healthy role models, family systems and expectations, and low self-esteem as reasons leaving was not considered (Griffin & Maples, 1997; Herman, 1997). Feelings of shame and fear of public exposure, as well as censure from other systems within the family's environment, may also contribute to the compulsion to stay in spite of an abusive, incestuous relationship.

Why then do the children of incest not report the abuse? Many reasons are given by victims of incest; including disloyalty, fear of incarceration of the parent, fear that the abuse will escalate, fear of angering the rest of the family (Cole & Woolger, 1989), and loss of connection.

## Summary

And so the cycle continues. An abused child becomes an abused adult, or even an abusing adult. The rationalizations about abusive behavior are handed down to the ensuing generations. The way of functioning in the family of origin is passed on to the newly created family. The new generation inherits patterns of behavior and ways of

processing certain issues, so that when children come along, the context of the relationship continues to help shape the process. Abuse becomes multigenerational.

#### ECOSYSTEMIC NATURE OF COMMUNITY

*“The ecology of human development is the scientific study of the progressive mutual accommodation, throughout the life course, between an active, growing human being, and the changing properties of the immediate settings in which the developing person lives, as this process is affected by the relations between these settings, and by the larger contexts in which the settings are embedded.” Bronfenbrenner, 1989, p.188*

Direct observation alone will not give a complete picture of human development.

Including context in the development of human relationships is essential to building a holistic model of behavior. Human development is a transaction between the growing (changing and evolving) human organism and its growing (changing and evolving) environment. Development is a process that must always be viewed in context. Bronfenbrenner defines development of an organism as a function of the interactions of the periods during which the two factors of person and environment are joined together to produce the outcome of that moment (1989).

Roles are critical in the microsystem of an individual or family. In his monogram (1979) Bronfenbrenner discussed the dyads within the microsystem. In every microsystem, each person is involved in a dyadic relationship with each other person. A dyad is a two person system wherein both individuals interact., An observational dyad is one where one person watches or observes the other in activity; while a joint activity dyad involves both persons in the activity. These dyads are influenced, in turn, by the relationship of every other dyad within the microsystem. This influence Bronfenbrenner calls the second order effect. The second order effect takes place when there are more

than two people within a microsystem. For instance, a child and mother are a dyad, a father and child are a dyad, and a mother and father are a dyad. These three dyads are in the same microsystem of the child. But the relationships of each dyad affect the relationship of the other ones.

This system, which Bronfenbrenner calls the N+2 system, is also influenced by role expectations, other microsystems of each individual, as well as the mesosystems in which they are imbedded, the exosystems that affect the microsystemic relationship (example; mother's workplace, child's school), and the chronosystems of each of the former, across time. The values, mores and events of the macrosystem also influence the activities, roles, and experiences of the developing child.

Over time, the transactional effect of these interconnected systems continue to change the shape of interactions, relationships, expectations, and responsibilities. The developing child learns early that she has a role in the systems in which she is involved. Though there is no conscious understanding, the way she lives her life and responds to the world illustrates unconscious awareness. She learns to relate, and early in her life, begins the process of interacting with the world and individuals within her microsystems.

The work of Vygotsky and Kurt Lewin helped to form Bronfenbrenner's theoretical philosophy of the constantly changing macrosystem in which the developing child is placed. Lewin (1932), in his Field Theory of the individual, speaks of a field of experience that continually changes with age ability and experience. As a child who cannot read cannot enter the field of studying reference books or reading long novels, so the adult cannot enter the field of kindergarten as a student with other four and five year olds. Because of ability or experiences, size, or age, gender or understandings, different

fields are constantly opening or closing for each person. As a result of these fields, each paradigm is distinctive, shaped, in part by individual boundaries and open fields. These ever evolving fields of experience, unique to each individual, determine the choices the person makes as life progresses.

#### SUPPORT SYSTEMS

*"The institution has the power and responsibility to protect the people it is called to serve, thereby safeguarding its own credibility. Once it accepts this responsibility, it has the capacity to name the evil in its midst and to act justly in order to rectify harm done."*  
(Fortune, 1989, xiv).

Social support may surface in a variety of forms. S.B. Crockenberg (Vaux, 1988) identifies three types of social support: emotional, instrumental or informational. Emotional support refers to the range of expressions that are communicated to the individual or family. These may be messages of empathy or encouragement delivered in a myriad of ways. The communication of this emotional support may be articulated vocally or physically. Instrumental support is more practical in nature. It targets the concrete help of specific actions. Informational support is educational in nature and facilitates understanding for the party being supported.

Regardless of the reality of a support system's presence in the life of an individual or family, perception (or individual appraisal) is critical to the effect of those systems on development (Lerner, 1986, 1992; Vaux, 1988). Ability to perceive support is based on contextual issues, such as historical, cultural, ethnic, religious, educational, political, gender, and familial processes, and is determined partially during the early developmental stages of life (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 1997; Erikson, 1968; Gilligan, 1982; Vaux, 1988).

The ability to form partnerships through childhood, adolescence, and even into adulthood, and the perception of support of those partnerships, is shaped by systems surrounding the developing individual and the unique experiences of the person, within those systems. Research suggests that marriage partnerships and other adult associations are influenced by early experiences and responses, and by discernment of support (Vaux, 1988). A support system is bound, to a great degree, by the ability of the individual to appreciate the quality of the system.

### Ecological Model of Support

In his ecological model of support, Vaux (1988) lists three determinants of support systems effectiveness to the individual:

The first is the resource network, which includes financial, material, educational, and humankind. Resources include the mores and understandings across time. Resources in a third world country that is gripped by political and ideological enslavement or exploitation will have a different network than resources in a culture which encourages and empowers individuals in their search for fulfillment. From Bronfenbrenner's perspective, this includes the macrosystem, with its ideologies and values, as well as the smaller mesosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1986, 1989). These networks are constantly changing – never static, because the microsystems that comprise the mesosystems are in continuous process of development.

The second determinant is the number, depth and richness of the support systems available to the individual. This incorporates the organizational supports in the

community, and the ethnic and cultural support within access range - including family, school, church, neighborhood, community programs, etc. Bronfenbrenner discusses this in his model of microsystems of the individual and the mesosystems and exosystems which feed the microsystems (1979). Also included would be the dyads and N+2 systems that produce second order effects, and higher third and fourth order effects within the microsystem. Relationships are always in process, both within the dyad and within the N+2 systems. The effect of the different dyads on the microsystem (as well as on the other dyads within the microsystem) is never static.

The third determinant contributing to the support system's effectiveness is the appraisal of support. There are two different ways to look at this appraisal. First, because others shape the individual's attitude within the microsystems (as well as the broader mesosystems and macrosystem), their appraisal is critical in determining ability to support the individual. Questions such as: Is the individual worth supporting? Can the individual contribute anything to the system? Vaux addresses the issues of overuse; has the individual depleted the support available? Is the individual too needy of support and never a contributing member herself? These considerations contribute, he proposes, to the support system's appraisal of support.

Also crucial is the individual's perception of the support. Is it worthwhile? Is it doing what she needs? Will it require too much of her? Do her other microsystems value that particular support system? Do the cultural, ethnic or economic mesosystem in which she is a participant view the potential support system as valid? For example, has the macrosystemic patriarchal paradigm communicated to the individual child that a female



doctor is not as good as a male doctor” If that is so, will the individual perceive female medical support as legitimate support?

These three determinants are salient to the ability of the available support system to provide effective support. The strength of all three determinants combines to result in the degree of efficacy.

Research cited in Pierce, Sarason & Sarason (1996, p. 460) finds that appraisal of support also is partially dependent on perceiver – supporter interaction. This may be a result of similarities, such as religion, ethnicity, social class, gender, and personality. Friendship formation will increase perception of similarities, even if there are observably few.

### The Church as a Support System

The previous discussion introduces issues that are critical in the ability of the local congregation to support a family in time of crisis. Appraisal of support, on the part of both the church and the family, contributes to the effect the church will be able to have as a support system.

First, the resources of the congregation must be considered valuable (Vaux, 1988). Healthy evaluation of the social, educational, financial, emotional, and spiritual resources within a congregation will give the congregation a sense of confidence in their ability to offer effective support.

Secondly, the local church must be able to see the individual or family as worthy of support. The church’s ability to be an effective support system is predicated on its

appraisal of the organism. Although the casual observer might contend that the church is the place where all are welcomed and none are turned away, the reality suggests this organization comprised of human beings, like any other, many times makes judgment calls regarding people's worthiness and usefulness.

Third, it is not enough to be able to give practical, concrete, or emotional support. A family must be able to perceive the support of the church as valid. Is the church valued in the community and with the family's other surrounding systems? Ryan and Solky (1996) discuss the element of trust as critical in social support biases and effectiveness. Trust is identified as confidence and security in the perceived character of, and relationship with the support system. If the church is traditionally perceived as trustworthy, the family reeling from the trauma of incest, may turn to her for support, which may include emotional coping, resourcing, education, spiritual strength, or legal advice.

If perceiver-supporter interactions are another critical element in appraisal of support, as Lakey and Lutz report (Pierce, Sarason & Sarason, 1996), it behooves the church to be intentional about forming relationships with families. Trust is a byproduct of friendship formation. In times of crisis, the family that has had positive interactions with the church will be able to use the church for needed support.

## BOWEN'S FAMILY SYSTEMS THEORY

*"When two individuals come together, a crowd of other people are with them emotionally." – Murray Bowen*

Balance in a living system often contributes to a healthy symbiosis. In many situations, the balance determines the survival of the system itself. The theoretical formulations in Bowen's Family Systems Theory are centered in the balance of togetherness and individuality (Kerr & Bowen, 1988; Nichols & Schwartz, 1998).

Bowen's theory teaches that three systems contribute to human functioning and relating. These three, the emotional, the feeling, and the intellectual systems determine most behavior. The *emotional* system comprises the forces that guide a person's behavior. It is the driving impetus through life, and includes ways of perceiving and of relating to others and to objects. The *feeling* system is influential in social processes. This system takes into consideration relationship and perception of self. The *intellectual* system refers to the human's ability to know and to comprehend. The human being supercedes all other animals in this system in ability to comprehend abstractly and to associate meaning.

Using this definition of behavior determination, people are described as linking to others on these three different channels:

1) Emotional channel – This system provides the color and vitality to relationships. According to levels of anxiety, it will work effectively or not. If it is weak, relationships will be unstable.

2) Operating channel – This system addresses the way people communicate their thoughts and feelings. Patterns of communication are influenced by societal and cultural

habits. These patterns are developed from past generational models of operation and utilize both the feeling and emotional systems .

3) Thinking channel - This system functions in relationship to knowledge accumulated. It manifests dysfunction to the degree that fact is confused with feeling.

Family Systems Theory emphasizes multigenerational influences. These have an impact on all three systems, but most critically affect the emotional system. Forces, past and present, produce models of thought and behavior. Bowen suggests that, while actions are heavily influenced by events and attitudes in the immediate family, these defining practices have been handed down through many generations of thinking and acting.

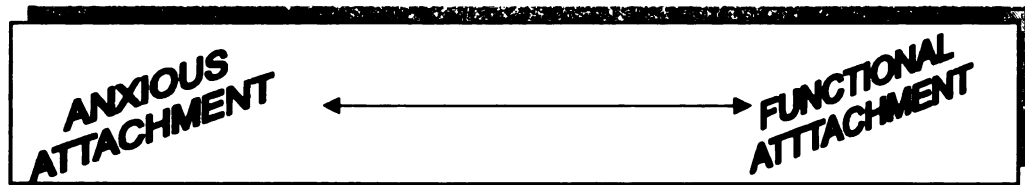
As persons create a new family, they gift this new organism with patterns of behavior and attitudes toward life and relationships, which were developed in their families of origin. The voices from other generations have a major impact on the shape of the functioning of the newly created family. (Nichols & Schwartz, 1998, p.142).

## Anxiety

Anxiety over relationships drives attachment. This anxiety undermines reason and self-control. A continuum exists between anxious attachment, which is caused by an 'unbalance' or fusion in relationship, and functional attachment, which Bowen defines as self-differentiation (See Figure 2.1).

Anxiety, as defined by Bowen, is the response to real or imagined threat (Kerr & Bowen, p.112). A person's ability to adapt to a situation, is partly determined by the

level of anxiety the person has. Response to stress is decided by adaptive capabilities within the individual. These capabilities are developed as patterns, based on the individual's level of differentiation. Bowen suggests that the lower a person's level of differentiation is, the less is the individual's adaptivity to stress. This lack of adaptive ability adds to anxiety.



**Figure 2.1**  
**Continuum of Anxious Attachment, based on level of Self-Differentiation**

Nichols & Schwartz, (1998)

The goal of Family Systems Therapy is to decrease anxiety and increase the level of differentiation of self. This is the balance between togetherness and individuality. The major problem is emotional fusion. Emotional fusion is an unhealthy magnification of a need for others. Often manifested as a need for togetherness, fusion may also be expressed by a façade of independence, which is emotional distancing. The well-differentiated person can stay connected to others while maintaining personal integrity. The individual exhibits rational objectivity and individuality (Nichols & Schwartz, 1998, p.150).

Healthy family development happens when members are relatively differentiated, and anxiety is low. Even in stress inducing situations, the persons are able to respond appropriately rather than to react emotionally. The highly differentiated family will stay effectively connected from one generation to the next (Friedman, 1985; Kerr & Bowen, 1988), and will function effectively, even in crisis.

## BASIC CONCEPTS

### Homeostasis

Homeostasis is balance. Systemic philosophy holds that within any set of relationships is the tendency to maintain the organizing principles of its existence (Friedman, 1985; Kerr & Bowen, 1988; Rampage, 1995; Richardson, 1996). For a system to exist, it has to have attained some kind of level of continuity. The very existence of the unit, and the fact that it has been named as an entity, means it has to achieve a degree of balance to maintain its identity. There is a plateau effect that permits continuity.

The idea of homeostasis helps to explain why a system is resistant to change. In family functioning, a unit with an alcoholic member will go to extreme lengths to maintain balance. As one client quoted, “It’s better the devil you know than the devil you don’t!” Family members develop what seems to them to be workable solutions to achieve some semblance of normalcy, in spite of the atmosphere. Often these solutions are enabling, serving to enmesh the family system more tightly.

The most important idea of homeostasis in family theory is that it places emphasis on position rather than personality. The system is more important than the person. When a system is too rigid, the same qualities that allow for stability are actually the ones that hinder change. To change it would cause stress and destruction of balance. This would result in unwanted anxiety. A symptom does surface when a family does not have the capacity to maintain homeostasis as it is presently functioning.

## Differentiation of Self

Differentiation of self is the goal for healthy human functioning (Kerr and Bowen, 1988; Rampage, 1995). Best described as self-awareness within the system, this is both an intrapsychic and an interpersonal phenomenon (Nichols & Schwartz, 1998). Not only is the person able to define self, but also is able to define self within the context of the system. This includes considerations of what forces affect her, and what forces she affects. On an intrapsychic level, the differentiated person balances thinking and feeling. The individual is capable of strong emotion, but is also able to restrain self and retain objectivity. This is the ability to think things through, decide, and act on beliefs.

Interpersonally, differentiation describes the ability to take definite stands on issues, and yet remain in intimate contact with others. The well-differentiated person refrains from being reactively shaped by others, and still is able to stay connected. This person is able to define personal goals and values apart from the surrounding pressures of family personalities and expectations (Friedman, 1985). On the other end of the spectrum, an undifferentiated person will react emotionally to the dictates of family members or authority figures.

Guerin describes differentiation as the process of partially freeing oneself from the emotional chaos of one's family. Calling this an 'adaptive level of functioning', he characterizes it as an ability to continue functioning in the face of stress (Nichols & Schwartz, 1998, p.145).

This capacity to differentiate is directly related to previous generations and their particular levels. If self-differentiation is low, anxiety tends to be high, emotions control

actions and attitudes, and extreme positions of relationship, such as fusion or total detachment, usually become the pattern.

Self-differentiation is not ignorance or indifference to the other. Instead, it is knowing one's position in the midst of voices, either opposing or agreeing. The higher a person scores on the scale of differentiation, the more likely is that person able to maintain functioning without being infected by the surrounding stressors (Kerr & Bowen, 1988, p.99). The key is to be both non-anxious and present in relationship.

### Extended Family Field

The family is not just comprised of the ones living in the house. Instead, it is an extended field, including nuclear family, the family of origin, and relatives today and in the past, who have contact with the individuals, and therefore influence the functioning of the family. The intergenerational influence is critical to the functioning of the family. There are specific patterns of behavior, perceptions, and thinking which has derived from the family of origin practices. As one therapist noted, "The problem with the parents is they had parents!" (Friedman, 1985, p.35). In assessing a problem, it is important to trace the patterns, paying attention to emotional process and the structure of the extended family.

The most significant role the extended family has is its contribution to the level of self-differentiation. Bowen refers to a multigenerational transmission process (Kerr & Bowen, 1988, p.333) in the development of an individual's ability to differentiate. The stability of each spouse's family of origin plays a highly influential role in the outcome of a couple. Clinical research shows there is value in assessing the earlier generations to



predict outcome (Kerr & Bowen, 1988). A part of what we are is what we have experienced and what our parents experienced, as well as how each responded to the experience.

An individual will usually inherit the multigenerational emotional processing patterns. Problems are understood to inhere in the system – not the person (Nichols & Schwartz, 1988). Specific problems reoccur. The way in which the family functions during conflict, the way it resolves and expresses anger, the way stress is acted out... all of these patterns of functioning are taught by example.

A part of the family field is sibling position. Bowen supports the theory that certain fixed characteristics of the personality are determined by the original family configuration in which a child grows up (Kerr & Bowen, 1988, p.314). Each family member is raised in a microenvironment or subsystem of the larger family unit. Position in the family dictates such attitudes as feelings of responsibility, self-worth, and expectations. When an adult creates another family and leaves the family of origin, those messages of obligation or privilege do not disappear. Instead, the individual brings the characteristics into the next family unit.

## DEVELOPMENT OF BEHAVIORAL DISORDERS

### The Role of Anxiety

Behavior disorders proceed from emotional fusion that is transmitted from one generation to the next. Fusion is the opposite of differentiation. The fused person makes decisions based primarily on feelings rather than on rational thought. The person reacts to stress.

Symptomatic behavior results from a level of stress that exceeds a person's ability to handle it (Kerr & Bowen, 1988; Nichols & Schwartz, 1998). Symptom development depends especially on the amount of stress and on the adaptivity of the individual or family to stress. Stress may cause anxiety. Symptoms develop as the level of anxiety exceeds the system's capacity to offset it. These symptoms have the desired effect of neutralizing anxiety for a temporary period. It effectively stops the pain for the moment.

The ability to handle anxiety is directly related to the level of differentiation. The more well differentiated the person, the more resilient and more flexible is the individual. As a person develops more resilience, she is able to tolerate a higher level of stress. A poorly differentiated - or fused person - however, will be vulnerable to stress and rigid in the face of other systems. The most vulnerable individual is the most likely to develop symptoms. This symptom bearer is usually in the center of the relationship conflict.

Anxiety is not necessarily unrealistic or unhealthy. Acute anxiety is a response to a real threat. It is usually time limited and situation specific. Chronic anxiety, however, is a response to an imagined threat and is neither time-limited nor situation specific. It often transfers to the next situation. Once triggered, chronic anxiety provides its own momentum and becomes largely independent of the initial impetus (Kerr and Bowen, p.113).

Because the nature of anxiety tends to be 'contagious', an individual is likely to become infected with the basic level of chronic anxiety of the system in which the person develops (Kerr & Bowen, p.116). There are other issues and influences, (such as family position, and individual systemic influences), that contribute to the level of chronic anxiety as well. Thus, each member of a family has a slightly varied level of

differentiation, and, consequently, anxiety. A pattern of functioning emerges through the continual process of evolution of the individual.

Anxiety works much the same in a group situation. The higher the level of chronic anxiety in a relationship system, the greater the strain on people's adaptive capabilities (Kerr and Bowen, p.112). Once balance is disturbed within a system, chronic anxiety is agitated more by people's reactions to the disturbance than by the reactions to the event itself.

### Manifestations of Anxiety

Anxiety can be bound in a number of different ways. Distance, conflict, and adaptation for harmony preservation are some of the most obvious manifestations. Triangling (page 58) is perhaps the most common effort utilized to manage anxiety. On an individual level, emotional relationships, chemical dependency, eating disorders, over-achievement or underachievement, preoccupation with physical health, extremes on spending money are all efforts to bind anxiety. Kerr and Bowen (1988, p.120) list personality traits that are associated with anxiety; obsessiveness, hysteria, impulsiveness, indecisiveness, passivity, aggressiveness, shyness, obtrusiveness, procrastination, perfectionism, paranoia, grandiosity, optimism, and pessimism. As the level of anxiety rises, the traits become more pronounced.

The amount of anxiety a person is trying to bind or manage cannot be adequately discussed unless one considers the context of the relationship processes of which the person is a part. As the level of stress rises in the lower differentiated person, this person reacts, based on anxiety, to each of the other system members. The person becomes more

intent on doing things in a specific way. The person becomes more rigid – the higher the level of anxiety becomes, the more sure the person becomes of what is right. This rigidity based on anxiety is communicated to the rest of the system.

Bowen and Kerr speak of a ‘togetherness force’. Within a system, during high stress periods, human beings have the tendency to strive for oneness (1988, p.121). However, this often has the opposite effect. We-they factions result from the pressure for oneness and intolerance for differences. The more people respond based on anxiety, the less tolerant they are of an opposing position. They are less able to allow others a differing posture. In a system, when a crisis event causes stress levels to rise, the less differentiated people are intimidated by the disagreement of others.

When people are under low stress, they are more able to allow each other to be individuals. Disagreement is not a threat. When reactions to stress are low, those who are unsettled are free to communicate thoughts and concerns. Emotional support is healthier, and issues can be more objectively considered.

### Emotional Triangles

All emotionally significant relationships are colored by third parties (Kerr & Bowen, 1988). Triangling explains one of the most common ways in which humans react to anxiety. When any two parties are uncomfortable with their relationship, they will bring in or focus on a third party, as a way of stabilizing the relationship and relieving the anxiety, once again maintaining homeostasis. This occurs within individuals, families, organizations, or between issues. The process allows the participants to release anxiety, but paralyzes conflict. It can become a chronic diversion that corrupts and undermines

family relationships, setting a pattern of dysfunctionality that will be handed down to future generations.

The process of triangling is accomplished by specific steps. First, the person experiencing the most discomfort in a relationship connects with someone else to gain an ally. In this way, confrontation with the individual is avoided. This third person allows herself to be positioned between the two parties. This can be done in a number of different ways; by talking to each individual separately, by acting out, by allowing oneself to be a confidante or by defining one party the 'victim' and the other party the 'villain'. The person caught in the middle is triangled.

If the third person in a triangle stays in contact with the other two, but is able to remain neutral, anxiety will be reduced and symptom development will be less likely to occur. However, if the third person becomes emotionally involved and takes sides or becomes the focus of displaced emotion from the other two, there is a likelihood of development of symptomatic behavior.

Related to the concept of emotional triangles is pain and responsibility. Perhaps the most uncomfortable point about the triangled person's role is that increasing one's own capacity to allow another to withstand pain is an empowering tool (Kerr & Bowen, 1988). Augmenting the threshold for another's pain can help the other person sustain personal pain. It is critical that the third person does not jump in and rescue, thus becoming a part of the problem. By holding back, it is possible that the functioning of the other person, and consequently the level of differentiation, will increase.

## Emotional Cutoff

Emotional distancing is a method people employ to solve problems and relieve anxiety. Physical distance is often utilized, but is usually temporary and results in transferring the problem to another system (Kerr and Bowen, 1988). Cutoff is practiced to manage low self-differentiation and emotional intensity. The key to evaluating emotional distancing techniques or cutoff is to recognize that the more polarized things seem to be, the more connected they are (Nichols and Schwartz, 1998). The greater the emotional fusion is between generations, the more likelihood there is of cutoff in the face of anxiety.

Lack of differentiation in the family of origin may lead to emotional cutoff from parents. As a child grows up, he or she may try to be more assertive or demanding. Displeasure may be dealt with by giving in. This often results in fusion and/or emotional cutoff. It does not solve the issue, only transfers it to another relationship. Emotional cutoff from one's parents may precede fusion in marriage. Usually the problem is projected onto another person or issue.

## Nuclear Family Emotional Process

Levels of differentiation and maturity are transmitted to children from the family. When a family is anxious a projection process takes place with one or more of the children, in an unconscious effort to reduce pain. A child who is the object of this process becomes the most attached and has a lower level of differentiation than the others.

### **Multigenerational Transmission Process**

As the child most involved in the family's fusion moves toward a lower level of self-differentiation, the child least involved moves toward a higher level (Kerr and Bowen, 1988). This process, which can lead to emotional instability or illness, goes back several generations. The identified patient, or the person in the family who is the designated symptom bearer functions partially as the result of relationship processes with parents and surrounding systems, who function partially as the result of relationship processes with their parents and surrounding systems, who function partially as the result of relationship processes with their parents and surrounding systems, etc.

### **Societal Emotional Process**

The emotional process that takes place in society influences emotional processes within the community families (Nichols & Schwartz, 1998). Particularly with lower differentiated families, the anxiety reflected is often a model of the local community. Prolonged social anxiety can result in a gradual lowering of the functional level of differentiation. A crisis in the community that affects a significant number of people, if protracted over time, can change the anxiety level and produce symptomatic behavior. For example, anecdotal reports of broken marriages, suicides, and other family dysfunctions have accumulated in the years following the 1996 bombing in Oklahoma City. The societal emotional process influences and is influenced by other systems in the larger mesosystem.

## Identified Patient

This identified patient, or symptom bearer, is usually the part of the organism that is perceived as the problem. The individual is the part of the system on which all the stress or pathology of the family has accumulated (Kerr & Bowen, 1988; Nichols & Schwartz, 1985; Steinke, 1993). Usually the most vulnerable individual in the family, this one is also the most triangled, and emotionally caught up in the family's emotional process.

The identified patient plays an important role in keeping the homeostasis. If the focus can be placed on one member, the family can deny the issues and processes that cause the person to be symptomatic. In this way, anxiety stays controllable and balance (homeostasis) can be maintained (Nichols & Schwartz, 1985). The theory is that no one will have to change.

The problem with this philosophy is that when one part of the system is treated in isolation, fundamental change is not likely to happen. Shifting within the roles does not alleviate the problem, it only postpones the symptoms for a period of time. When a part of the system is diseased, the whole system is affected. The roles themselves have to be changed for positive growth to take place. "The suggested expanded goal of therapy, (beyond Bowen Family Systems Theory) is to increase differentiation by developing the feeling and intellectual systems, while also fostering reciprocal experiences of togetherness and separateness." (Knudson-Martin, 1994, P. 44)



## Summary

Bowen's Family Systems Theory is a comprehensive explanation of development and behavior. Murray Bowen's theory of human functioning extends to relationship with all of life. He theorized that the family operates in a way similar to systems and to the principles of systemic functioning in nature. Because of this, he proposed that studying human behavior is incomplete without studying both the systems in which the individual developed, and the ones in which that person functions today. This theory separates Bowen from traditional explanations of psychological behavior, which historically has looked at the individual alone.

## FEMINIST INFORMED PARADIGM

*"Therapy that ignores sexism is like rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic."  
– Betty Carter*

A feminist informed perspective is concerned with examining the 'truth' within the context of the environment. Because of the very narrow definitions of truth being derived from the fortunate few, feminists' concern is not only with the female gender, but also with interactions among race, class, age, sexuality, ethnicity, and different abilities (Daly, 1995; Hesse-Biber, Gilmartin, & Lyndenberg, 1999; McGoldrick, Anderson & Walsh, 1989). As scholars look at truth, it is critical to understand that perspective is important, and not all definitions of reality are the same. It is here that we must begin communication. To do that, not only the privileged minority, but also all voices must be heard.

## CONCEPTS

The major issues of a feminist informed understanding could be categorized into four areas. These areas are a.) Gender as topic, b.) Context of patriarchal value system, c.) Egalitarian relationships, and d.) Affirmation of women and women's ways (Nichols & Schwartz, 1998; Rampage, 1995).

### Gender as Topic

Culture is imbedded in the political and moral influences of the environment. The human being evolves from the surrounding environment and systems. This includes the economic, educational, ethnic, political, religious, and sociological systems. A feminist perspective suggests that the environment of sexism, racism, and classism in which a

person develops, creates a harmful impact on the psychological well-being of the individual (Knudson-Martin, 1994; Nichols & Schwartz, 1998; Rampage, 1995).

Whether the individual is functioning in a personal or a professional role, the understandings of expectations and identities have a direct influence on the person, and individual performance. It is critical to recognize that the personal and the professional lives are interconnected (Whipple, 1996). The lack of congruity creates an anxiety in relationship and conduct.

Rampage observes that the tasks women traditionally have done, are more private tasks - raising children, facilitating others' development, and supporting others in their goals. Bordo (1999) even suggests that, because of the woman as the child bearer, and the emphasis on placing the child with the mother for physical nourishment at birth and traditional responsibility of mother for physical and nutritional growth, a woman's contributions to society are bodily. They are of a private nature. Modesty and sense of privacy regarding the body and bodily functions, further increase the messages of invisibility and shame. This way of interpreting humanity places men, simply because of the anatomy with which they are born, as more qualified to control and rule domains of both public and private lives (deBeauvoir, in Rampage, 1995, p.261)

Meanwhile, the male observes from a distance. His contributions are usually high profile, publicly observed and rewarded. Men have taken the high profile positions - breadwinner, major decision-maker, head of the family. This has served to demean women's tasks, while at the same time elevating men's operations. The subtle message of body as the major area of contribution of women and mind as the major contribution of men is set in motion.

To present gender as topic is to address the political and contextual aspects of the understandings of males and females in society. It is not enough to deal with the person, but it is crucial to recognize the impact the historical position of gender has had down through history. The personal becomes the political.

### **Patriarchal Value System**

Perhaps no single experience has shadowed the way people look at each other, as has the sociocultural philosophy of patriarchal privilege (Daly, 1985; Dinsmore, 1991; Gilligan, 1993; Rampage, 1995). This perspective permeates every aspect of society. Daly speaks of sexist socialization as being ‘unspeakably deep and self-perpetrating’ (1985, P.42), contaminating everyone through structures, such as the church, literary history, and contribution to ignorance of women’s ways of being. Even rhymes, fairy tales, educational texts, songs, theological texts, and the media have been tainted to insure the oppression of women, in favor of the white male (Daly, 1985).

Male life has been unquestionably accepted as the norm (Gilligan, 1993), which leaves women’s ways as deviant, or other than the norm. Closer inspection of that understanding reveals that all other perspectives apart from the white male are considered second class, or less than sound. This way of observation degrades any other interpretation of reality.

So intricately woven into our historical context is this perspective, that until the last three decades, even social researchers have not been aware of their own discriminatory positions (Bordo, 1999; Gilligan, 1982; Walsh & Scheinkman, 1989; Wheeler, Avis, Miller & Chaney, 1989). Theorists and therapists have, without question,

taken the male value system as the acceptable, legitimate way and any other as marginal. Categorizing in this way pathologizes the 'other'. Not only women, but also children, and non-whites become voiceless. The feminist perspective, however, is to give voice to all participants in therapy.

As the institution of marriage is considered, feminists suggest that traditional marriages have privileged men at the expense of women (Daly, 1985; McGoldrick, 1989). Historically, women have been defined by the men in their lives; their roles have been supportive and facilitative to the others in the family, even the children. The irony is that the accepted myth is women are the main beneficiaries of marriage. Daly, and other feminists declare marriage as the primary vehicle of female subordination. The patriarchal value system has supported this pattern of relationships.

The feminist perspective is that each participant in a marriage should be able to freely explore individual goals and dreams, while facilitating the other in his pursuit. Marriage should be a partnership of equality and love, which encourages individual growth as well as a rich dyadic relationship.

### **Egalitarian Relationships**

Empowerment comes through relationships of balance. Therapists encourage mutual empathy and teach skills such as mutual respect and active listening techniques to promote true partnership in relationship. There are two different elements of commitment to egalitarian relationships – each person has responsibility to enter into this covenant relationship.

Recognizing each person has wisdom and knowledge of life and self to contribute, feminist informed therapists model their commitment to empowerment by collaboration. Jones (1998) suggests the use of interview as one method of collaboration. Encouraging the client to narrate her own story gives the message of regard for a diversity of ways of knowing (Gilligan, 1993). It is possible that the employment of the interview method reveals information, understandings, and ways of functioning that cannot always be quickly perceived through a traditional intake session. It is a positive way to reinforce appreciation for where the client is and how she got there.

#### Affirmation of Women and Women's Ways

Closely related to pursuing egalitarian relationships is affirmation of women (Bordo, 1999; Rampage, 1995). Women must learn to value their own characteristics and thus validate their female-centered view of the world (Sands, 1998). This includes respecting what is traditionally considered as female characteristics of empathy, cooperation, intuition, interdependence, and relationship focus.

Too long strengths have been interpreted as weaknesses, because of the male view of the world and relationships (Gilligan, 1993; Whipple, 1996). Historically, many women have been socialized to be relationship oriented, as a way of defining themselves. While this is traditionally seen as a weakness, feminists suggest that this perspective is often promoted by a white male value system. Working for social change, which encompasses recognition of different ways of knowing, is a way to empower clients whose voices have historically been seen as insignificant and 'other'. Appreciation of

women and different paradigms legitimates the experiences of the voiceless ones and depathologizes behavior (Sands, 1998).

#### CRITIQUE OF TRADITIONAL FAMILY SYSTEMS THERAPY

As feminist therapists turned their focus on family systems therapy, a need for change was observed. Gender bias was found to be inherent in the existing models. For a discipline that has prided itself on sensitivity and awareness, family therapy has been blind to sexism (Nichols & Schwartz, 1998; Terry, 1992). The role of gender socialization had not been included in any of the major models of Family Systems Therapy.

#### The Personal As Political

One criticism of family therapists is their negligence in using the therapy moment as a teaching opportunity for gender bias. Terry charges that omission of gender in Marriage and Family Therapy theories and practices, completely misses the context in which the organization of role definition, pattern, and meaning is developed. All realities are not created equal (Nichols & Schwartz, 1998). The problem lies in the cycle of experience and interpretation of the relationship. Definition of power within relationships is influenced by the contextual history of the family. Awareness of this, however, must taught as part of therapy.

Marriages are often based on inherent imbalances. This idea must be introduced in the therapy moment. Objective and data-based neutrality is not possible. Family systems theories have often emphasized changing performance within the roles rather

than examining the roles and changing appropriately (McGoldrick, Anderson & Walsh, 1989; Terry, 1992). While process is critical – gender philosophy behind the process must be examined.

An accurate perception of issues is critical in assessment. In therapy, an informed professional will observe the manifestation of power differences in the family relationships (Rampage, 1995; Wheeler, Avis, Miller, & Chaney, 1989). Looking at the sociocultural context in which the family develops encourages awareness of inequality of influences (Terry, 1992). Use of collaboration or coercion is appraised. Position and process are both important factors.

It is important to not assume equal relationships. Observed behavior has meaning (Terry, 1992; Wheeler, Avis, Miller & Chaney, 1989). Helping family members explore what meanings are evident in family interaction, facilitates comprehension and sets the stage for reframing of realities. The parts contribute to the whole and the family functions within its own cultural context, derived from each member's background environment. Because each family's belief system is exposed during communication, the process of therapy can help make them cognizant of gender biases (Terry, 1992).

Social analysis of the family is another way of accurate perception of gender equality. Considering gender bias in the relationship and cultural expectations makes gender a topic in family counseling. Restraints in family members based on age, gender or position are considerations which assist in assessment of the functioning of the belief system the family uses. It points out flexibility vs. rigidity, omissions vs. commissions, and the overall congruency of the belief system.



## Sex Bias of Therapists

The goals of feminist informed family therapy have an emphasis on considering social context as a prime determinant of behavior. The mission is to develop a value-free human continuum of behavior and thought (Bordo, 1999). To do this, Nichols and Schwartz caution therapists to examine their own biases (1998). Inherent in each person is a conditioned gender understanding. The therapist must be continually re-examining personal attitudes and biases. Being aware of personal emotional response to an issue helps the therapist integrate feminist informed values into the therapy moment.

Another consideration is the recognition of sociocultural stressors that influence females in their development (Sands, 1998). It is important to see the differences in expectations, cultural environment, social roles, economic oppression, and social restraints have contributed to the development of symptom bearing gender, so considered because of the restraints of a traditional marriage contract and nuclear family pattern. Symptomatic women are reflecting their acculturation to the one-down, or secondary position in society.

Unfortunately, everyone is raised in a value-laden, subjective culture. We are each a result of our environment, including biases, distortions, and myths. Therapists, too have been raised in a patriarchal milieu, which is not sensitive to power differences (Rampage, 1995). If ignored, these differences can contribute to further abuses in the therapy experience.

A common goal for the therapist is to encourage 'complementarity'. However, this implies all roles and tasks are chosen freely and divided equally. This ignores deeply

imbedded understandings, which have been woven into the fabric of familial relationships.

### Attacking the Patriarchal Paradigm

Feminist informed therapists often take issue with the theory that attitudes and behaviors are continuous or without cause. This recursive view of relationships does not take into consideration the history of influences of social forces in general and the patriarchal value system in particular (Black & Piercy, 1991; McGoldrick, Anderson, & Walsh, 1989; Nichols & Schwartz, 1998; Rampage, 1995). To ignore the impact of history on relationships is only to maintain status quo; this action contributes to blaming and revictimization of those already maltreated.

Circular causation overshadows power differences and the gender role understanding that is a part of the client's histories (Black & Piercy, 1991; Dinsmore, 1992; Gilligan, 1993). While responsibility of one's own behavior is a critical part of therapy, assigning equal responsibility for problems could reabuse the victim, in which case the therapist would become a partner with the abuser. Although systemic theorists do attend to relationship systems, the traditional assumptions are apt to assign the problem source, placing the crux of the problem without looking at the gender understandings (Walsh & Scheinkman, 1989). To diminish the influence of the patriarchal environment of the client, or to ignore it altogether is to miss a major piece of the problem.

## Egalitarian Relationships

An examination of therapeutic techniques unfortunately does not always show a commitment to relationships of equality. Family Systems therapists have been known to evaluate family relationships without assessing the state of the family in respect to balance of power and respect (Knudson-Martin, 1994). Feminist informed therapists are committed to providing an atmosphere wherein equality in personal power and freedom of expression between men and women exists. This requires actively working to change the culturally prescribed roles (McGoldrick, Anderson & Walsh, 1989; Rampage, 1995). It includes hearing not just women, but all of the traditionally voiceless ones. It promotes an environment where equal opportunities and rewards, as well as equal sacrifices and responsibilities thrive.

Examining the relationship of each family member to the other helps to determine the commitment to egalitarianism. Who makes the decisions? Do all members get a chance to exercise their voices? How much respect is given to women? To children? To the aged or the infirm in the family?

An awareness of the gender intensification process that goes on among peers, within cultures, and even behind gender lines helps to assess the commitment of the family to egalitarian relationships (Dinsmore, 1991; Gilligan, 1983; Martin, 1999). Women and men are pressured to adapt to culturally stereotypical gender roles. There is a price to pay for deviation from these roles. Facilitating awareness helps to shift the conceptual paradigm with which the family or couple enters therapy, and to examine the legitimacy of those stands.

## Conduct of Therapy - A Judgment on Women and Women's Ways

Wheeler, Avis, Miller, and Chaney (1989) have also concentrated on the role of therapy and the ways in which professional therapists not only express, but also advance gender bias in practice. One of their observations is that women, because of their socialized tendency to seek relationship, are more likely to pursue therapy and are more comfortable with the process. Men, because of the interactional patterns involved, may not be normally prepared to respond to therapy. With this understanding, it is easy to see why therapists unconsciously may turn to the woman to search for and implement the solution to the issue that brought the couple or family into therapy. This serves to place the locus of blame, as well as the responsibility for resolution on the woman. Again, the therapist has contributed to the woman being accountable for the maintenance of the relationship.

Walsh and Scheinkman (1989) observe that, because the woman is more likely to be the one to seek counseling, she is equally more likely to be diagnosed, resulting in overpathologizing. The therapist must be aware of these tendencies to foster the patriarchal methods of analysis. Diagnosis indicates a value judgment. If therapists and those who work with abused families can refrain from labeling behavior, they will depathologize other ways of being, rather than what has traditionally been the accepted norm – which derives from a male paradigm.

## Autonomy

Another area of concern is the stated goal of independence for family systems theorists. Indicating that autonomous functioning is the ideal for a healthy, balanced

lifestyle is a gender-biased assumption (Daly, 1985; Gilligan, 1993; McGoldrick, Anderson & Walsh, 1989). Some individuals, women in particular, may be apt to define themselves partly by their relationships. Sensitivity and regard for the feelings of others has been found to be an integral part of many women's development (Gilligan, 1993).

From the other end of the spectrum, the male goal for healthy emotional development, has traditionally been one of independence. They are frequently taught to distrust relationships, and thus may be generally suspicious or uncomfortable with intimacy (Wheeler, Avis, Miller, Chaney, 1989). Research has shown perspectives and decision-making strategies of many women are often based on consideration for other people's concerns (Gilligan, 1993). To consider this a less mature style of interaction, is to buy into the male-dominated acculturation of personality development.

## Summary

Therapists and researchers must be aware of sexism in family therapy theories, and be constantly examining the environment and culture related to the therapy and research (Whipple, 1996). Be willing to try intervention strategies that are outside of the prescribed gender biased methods and to study new strategies and approaches to understanding family dynamics. It is possible to be systemic and reject sexism at the same time.

Feminist informed theory encourages mutual accountability for relationship development and maintenance. The integration of research and social activism promotes a partnership of equals, where relationships between men and women are examined honestly, both in society and in families (McGoldrick, Anderson, & Walsh, 1989;

Rampage, 1985). It is critical to note that science is not the truth, but a way of looking at truth...a social construct that has been developed by the voices in power, within an historical context (Terry, 1992). Reality is only a perspective, a representation of those who have walked the paths previously. Reality is not an objective, unchangeable phenomenon, Terry says.

#### INTEGRATION WITH BOWEN'S FAMILY SYSTEMS

*"To ignore gender inequalities is to ignore some of the primary forces that keep people trapped in inflexible roles." - Rampage*

#### Neutrality

There is a need to use the systemic lens of Bowen's Family Systems Theory, but to edit that with a focus from the feminist informed perspective for the sociocultural history. This aids in further exploration and encouragement of articulation of feelings and cognitive understandings of the contextual meanings. Bowen Family Systems Theory addresses the need for neutrality to approach relationships in counseling. However, feminist therapists contend that neutrality is not possible. What is masked as neutrality is a masculine model – highly cognitive, therapist's role of coach, and encouragement of emotional reactivity control (Nichols & Schwartz, 1998; Terry, 1992).

Utilization of this model sends mixed messages between healthy balance and emotional functioning. Addressing the wider family context of inequalities of gender and class is critical, whether considering family or a larger system, such as educational or religious institutions. The example of economic inequality within a family unit sends messages to the family of control, as well as self worth. It is a powerful context of marriage and family. Because of these and other messages imbedded in practices of the

family and other systems, the inherent imbalances in marriage and family must be addressed by introducing gender equity values.

### Female Connection

Knudson-Martin (1994) discusses the female challenge in Bowenian terms. This is to become different or independent while maintaining connection, which is part of her way of defining self. The focus for all should be on togetherness needs, which encourages self-responsibility and facilitates empowerment. Traditional Bowen Family Systems Theory seems to suggest that maturity is developing autonomy and self-directed behavior. This demeans other ways, because of the tendency of some, particularly women and children, to define by connection. It seems Bowen indicates low level differentiation is expressed by a need for togetherness. Feminist theorists, however, say women often integrate the other into definition of self. The expanded model would say that differentiation involves attending to other voices while learning to express one's own voice (Knudson-Martin, 1994). This does not conflict with Bowen, for his theory considered dysfunctionality as a fused, reactive emotional position, being dominated by emotions and overdependent on others. Differentiation was promoted to achieve a deeper, richer relationship with others (Nichols & Schwartz, 1998).

### Differentiation

Bowen's goal of therapy is to increase level of differentiation (Kerr & Bowen, 1988). A part of this is to reduce the anxiety by controlling emotional reactivity. Critics say Bowen does not clearly articulate the connection to others and self. It is possible to

focus inward and yet still acknowledge others' needs. Individuals are born in a 'shared emotional field', and continue to go from one field to another as they enter into relationships (Knudson-Martin, 1994). Anxiety is the tension between the two needs...for differentiation , but also for connection.

While Bowen may be guilty of too much emphasis on the side of cognitive control, he still values the importance of maintaining connectedness and repairing cutoff relationships in family. The interpretation of feminists sympathetic to Bowen Family Systems is that healthy differentiation involves ongoing maintenance of self in relation to one's family (Walsh & Scheinkman, 1989).

Helping men and women to balance and value intellectual and emotional functioning and differentiation with relatedness is the ultimate point of relationship. In this place, self and connection to others can learn to live together.



## THE CHURCH AS FAMILY: A BOWEN'S FAMILY SYSTEMS APPROACH

As in Bowen's Model of the Family, the local church functions according to its level of differentiation. Expanded studies indicate this level is determined by four areas (Daly, 1985; Fortune, 1989; Friedman, 1985; Kerr & Bowen, 1988; McGoldrick, Anderson, Walsh, 1989; Rampage, 1995; Richardson, 1996; Steinke, 1993): a) the individual church families and their own levels of functioning, b) multigenerational issues in the makeup of the church, c) the leadership's differentiation, and d) the environment in which the local church ministers, and its societal emotional level (See Figure 2.2).

The local church, families and leadership are all imbedded in the environment of the community. Because this community influences all aspects of life, all subsystems within the environment take on many of its values. Even geographical factors and climate have an impact on the connections of families and groups. For example, these characteristics may determine the frequency of contact, and thus the amount of influence a local church has, and vice versa. Ethnic culture also sways the family's attitude toward the religious groups in the vicinity, and their influence. Whether the local culture is highly differentiated, or, because of anxiety, is greatly enmeshed, this will help shape the families and organizations within.

This not only takes place in the present generation, but is also reinforced throughout subsequent generations. Patterns strengthen as generations hand down ways of functioning. However, this is not a one-way transmission of characteristics. The families and groups that move into the community also color the local environment over a period of time.

## CONCEPTUAL MAP

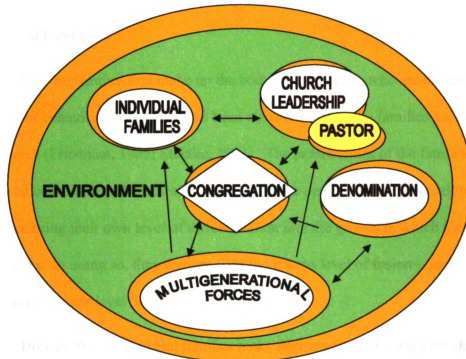






Figure 2:2

### Elements Determining Level of Differentiation within the Church

Legend:

-  = Mesosystems Influencing Church's Level of Differentiation
-  = Environmental Interaction within the Church Community
-  = Anxiety Issues
-  = Local Congregation's Microsystem

Friedman, Edwin (1985) Generation to Generation. New York, NY: Guilford Press

Kerr, Michael & Bowen, Murray (1988). Family Evaluation. New York, NY: W.W. Norton and Co.

Leonard, Juanita (ed.) (1989). Called to Minister, Empowered to Serve. Anderson, In: Warner Press.

Richardson, Ronald (1996). Creating a Healthier Church. Minneapolis, Mn: Fortress.

Steinke, Peter. (1993). Healthy Congregations. New York, NY: Alban Institute.

Vaux, Alan (1988) Social Support: Theory, Research, and Intervention. New York, NY: Praeger

Images in this dissertation are presented in color.

## DISCUSSION OF FIGURE 2.2

### Individual Families

It is the families that make up the body of the church, who are the main sources of behavioral patterns. It has been observed that as the families go, so goes the church (Friedman, 1985; Steinke, 1993). The personalities of the families involved contribute to the characteristics that make up the church personality. Families bring their own level of differentiation into the groups in which they participate. In doing so, they forever slant the groups level of fusion – and consequently their level of functioning.

How do these individual families make decisions? What happens during conflict? Are the individuals able to disagree, and yet remain a calm presence, while taking their individual stands? How does the family react in crisis? The local congregation is comprised of the combined personalities of all the families involved, both present and past generations.

### Multigenerational Forces

Bowen's Theory of Family Systems heavily emphasizes the impact of multigenerational influences on patterns of thought and behavior in the family (Kerr & Bowen, 1988, p.221; Nichols & Schwartz, 1998, p.141). The church functions in a similar way as she interacts within the system. The organism resembles closely the family's ways of processing emotionally (Friedman, 1985, p.195). The relationships are multigenerational and the patterns of behavior develop over a period of years. Patterns of behavior are handed down from generation to generation within a church

family. A church will be likely to continue her multigenerational patterns of choosing leadership, dealing with crisis, setting boundaries, grappling with conflict, and confronting abuses.

The fusion of the body of the congregation is also a multigenerational issue. Practices of empowering or crippling members are set by the previous generations. As in a nuclear family, a congregation that is highly enmeshed will have the potential for becoming more fused with each successive generation (Friedman, 1985; Richardson, 1996; Steinke, 1993).

#### Church Leadership

The church is also influenced by her individual leadership. However, even the process of choosing leadership is often executed in such a way as to continue the level of differentiation the church has developed. Anxious systems are less likely to allow for differentiated leaders (Friedman, 1985, p.29; Kerr & Bowen, 1988,p.368).

When a person does take leadership, such as a pastoral position, this individual's level of interdependent thinking begins to have an impact on the congregation's way of processing. To some degree, the congregation takes on the personality of the pastoral leadership. The way the leader functions in relationship to his or her position in the system influences the congregation. It is not so much the stand that the leader takes on a certain issue that is critical, but the way in which the leader communicates that stand.

It would be a mistake to ignore the influence of the patriarchs and the matriarchs of the congregation. Leadership is not necessarily announced. Some of the

most influential persons in the church may not be on a board. They may not even be alive!

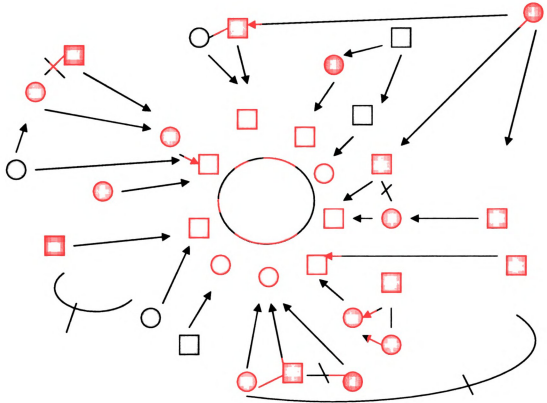
Not only within the congregations, but also family members who have no direct connection to the church, propel the decisions made and action taken.

Richardson (1996) suggests that at every church board meeting there are more than just the present board members at the table (See Figure 2.3). Parents, spouses, past ‘movers and shakers’ within the congregation, as well as present congregation, all attend the meeting.

Board members bring unresolved issues from their families of origin into the encounter. Even if past generations of family have had no connection to the church or are not in the vicinity, they impact the proceedings. Members’ patterns of triangling, distancing, emotional cutoff, and fusion are exercised as they confer with the other participants. Projection and avoidance are often utilized.

### Anxiety

Anxiety surrounding each of these systems determines the functional capability of each system. As the systems function in connection to each other, the systems’ levels of differentiation, hence the anxieties of each, collide. Thus emerges the functional ability of the combined systems – a continually changing environment in which decisions and actions are determined.



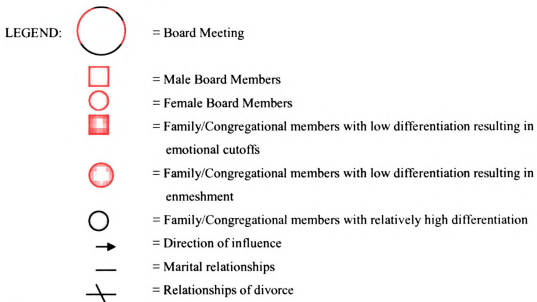
**Figure 2.3**

**Multigenerational Influences within a Board Meeting**

Friedman, Edwin (1985) Generation to Generation. New York, NY: Guilford Press

Richardson, Ronald (1996). Creating a Healthier Church. Minneapolis, Mn: Fortress.

Steinke, Peter. (1993). Healthy Congregations. New York, NY: Alban Institute.



Images in this dissertation are presented in color.

## DISCUSSION OF FIGURE 2.3

When a board meeting convenes, the members bring other members with them to the table. Multigenerational patterns of differentiation, including ways of handling conflict, levels of anxiety, and gender-specific values come from parents, spouses, and other significant influences in the members' lives. Family events such as divorce, emotional cutoff, and enmeshment of family members impact the proceedings. Whether or not the parents or partners are within the local church, they provide motivation for the attitudes expressed. Figure 2.3 illustrates the decisions made by the board are driven by voices of leadership within and outside of the local congregation and the histories of processing conflict and crisis.

### Community Influences

There is also evidence to show that the environmental background in which the church is set makes a large difference in the functioning of the church. Bowen discusses, albeit briefly, social emotional processes (Kerr & Bowen, 1988; Nichols & Schwarz, 1998) and the impact on the individual families in the community. In the same way that emotional process in society influences the family, the local church is influenced by the degree of differentiation of the community. Culture, intergenerational influences, geographical characteristics, socioeconomic status, and ethnicity, all may contribute to the level of differentiation of a community, and of the local congregation.

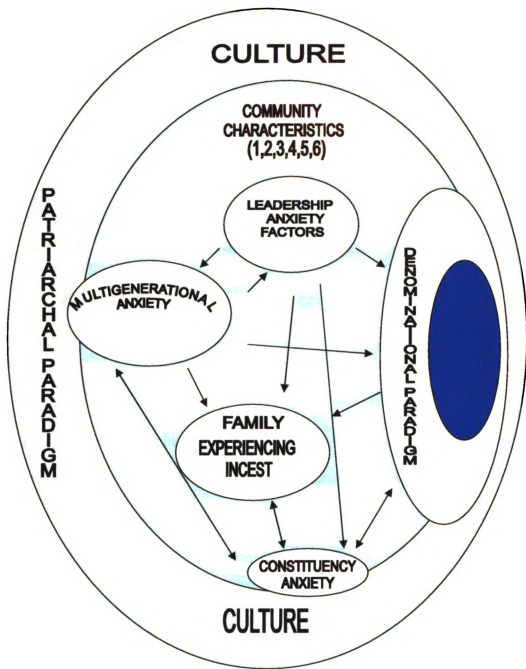
As communities process crisis, anxiety increases. If the social anxiety continues to increase over an extended time period, a gradual lowering of the functional level of differentiation in the families in the community could take place (Kerr & Bowen, 1988, p.334). Unsuccessful social emotional processing may result in such symptomatic behavior as elevated crime incidence, high divorce rate, increased neglect of responsibility, sexism, classism, and ethnic prejudice.

The local church reflects these levels of anxiety that manifest themselves in the community. As a crisis occurs, then, the influence of the community's differentiation has an impact on the way the congregation handles the crisis.

#### **Influence of Patriarchal Value System**

In all four of these areas, the patriarchal paradigm is a salient issue that influences the church's functioning (See Figure 2.4). The value which women and men are given within individual families, the role the genders have played down through the history of the church, the leadership's understanding and commitment to the importance of all voices being heard, the role of men and women in the local community.... these play a critical part in the day to day operations of the local church. All of these considerations baptize the congregation's character and help to form the commitment to self-differentiation of each individual. Male awareness of historical oppression in word and deed, and of the need for all perspectives to be given a voice makes a grave difference in the behavior of a local congregation.





**Figure 2.4**

**Issues Determining Local Congregation's Ability to be an Effective Support System to Families Experiencing Incest**

- Daly, Mary (1985). The Church and the Second Sex. Boston, Ma. Beacon Press.
- Friedman, Edwin (1985) Generation to Generation. New York, NY: Guilford Press
- Kerr, Michael & Bowen, Murray (1988). Family Evaluation. New York, NY: W.W. Norton and Co.
- Leonard, Juanita (ed.) (1989). Called to Minister, Empowered to Serve. Anderson, In: Warner Press.
- Steinke, Peter. Healthy Congregations. New York, NY: Alban Institute.
- Vaux, Alan (1988). Social Support: Theory, Research, and Intervention. New York, NY: Praeger.

Figure 2.4

LEGEND:



= Historical Culture (Literature, Patterns of Gender understanding, Events)



= Local Community Characteristics

1 – Ethnicity

2 – Economic and Employment Issues

3 – Educational and Political Environment

4 – Local Congregational Attributes

5 – Level of Differentiation

6 – Prolonged Anxiety Issues



= Other Systems which Influence Church's Level of Anxiety



= Systemic Anxiety of the Local Church

Images in this dissertation are presented in color.

#### DISCUSSION OF FIGURE 2.4

The local church is imbedded in the community, but it is also set within the denominational paradigm. The local community functions within the overall sociopsychological culture. Each person and every culture through history has been influenced by the patriarchal value system. All systems operate within the historical culture.

The family needs healthy models as they process abuse, dealing with such issues as legal proceedings, therapy, public exposure, redeveloping family relationships, and adjusting to transition and new family structure.

The degree to which the local church is able to differentiate, determines its ability to effectively support families. This is shaped, in part, by the constituency, leadership, multigenerational issues, and the local community, as well as history.

Contextual

Map

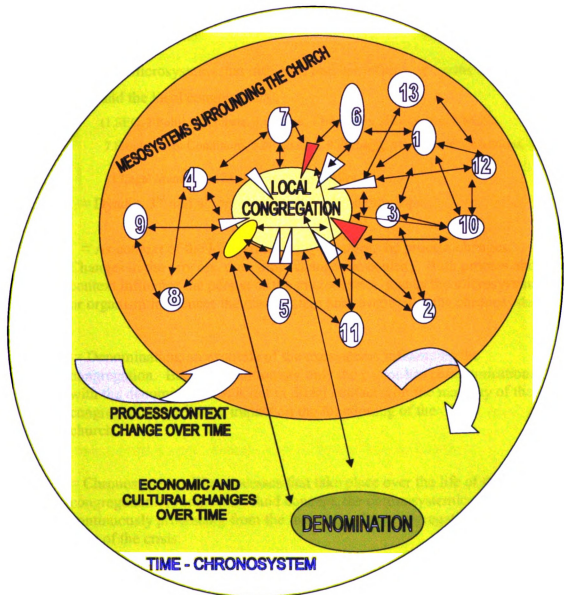











Figure 2.5  
The Church as Illustrated by Human Ecosystemic Theory  
Bronfenbrenner, 1986

- Legend:
-  = congregational families
  -  = families experiencing sexual abuse or incest
  -  = Pastor of congregation
  -  = Other Microsystems that influence and are influenced by the family and the local congregation  
(1.SEC, 2.Political Climate, 3.Culture, 4.Education, 5.Resources, 6.Media, 7.Employment Conditions, 8.Population, 9.Ethnicity, 10.Financial Conditions, 11.Legal Mandates, 12.Other Faith Assemblies, 13.etc.)
  -  = Dyadic, 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> order transactional relationships
  -  = As context of the local community changes, the process changes. Changes in the process, over time, change the context. Both process and context influence the person or the microsystem, just as the microsystem or organism influences the mesosystem and, eventually, the chronosystem
  -  = Denomination; an example of the exosystems influencing the congregation. Because traditionally only the pastor has communications with the denomination, it is not in direct contact with the majority of the congregation, yet has an impact on the functioning of the church.
  -  = Chronosystem – The processes that take place over the life of the congregation. A somewhat fluid concept, the chronosystemic changes are continuously processing from the founding of the congregation until the time of the crisis.
  -  = Local Congregation – A complex set of microsystems made up of a plethora of individual units, dyads, and smaller microsystems. The local congregation is influenced by the mesosystemic influences in the community, and its sphere of relationships along the course of time

## DISCUSSION ON FIGURE 2.5

Behavior has meaning. All transactions and interactions are in relationship to each organism that they touch and to the dyads and second order events. Families are microsystems made up of dyads and N+2 systems. The church is a plethora of microsystems, which are the families. The church exists in the midst of the mesosystemic influences, comprised of all the microsystems, exosystems, and mesosystems it touches, directly and indirectly. Decisions and behaviors are influenced by each of those many systems, as well as by the changes that have taken place in each of those systems over the life of the congregation. Response to crisis is always in context to the relationships and the processes that have taken place.

## SUMMARY

People differ in their tendency to invest their 'life energy' in a relationship. This concept is called differentiation of self (Kerr and Bowen, 1988, p.68). Anxiety level rises as differentiation level lowers. Therefore, as differentiation decreases, the probability of anxiety being generated within relationships increases. Human beings react to stimuli – either internal or external – according to their self-differentiation level. The lower their differentiation level is, the more reactive the human beings will be. Theoretically, the person on lowest end of differentiation (on a continuum), would react 100% of the time to the relationship process, and never on an objective level. In contrast, the person on the highest end of differentiation (on a continuum) would choose an objective response 100% of the time.

The level of differentiation will be manifested on intellectual, feeling and emotional planes. On an intellectual level, the less differentiated person will be heavily influenced in their thinking by feeling and emotion. The feeling plane, often the most obviously manifested, is an automatic response. The emotional level makes itself known in the person's articulation of values, beliefs, and attitudes. Emotional reactivity is manifested by sadness, preoccupation with lack of self-efficacy, aggressive facial expressions, anger, self-righteous attitude, closed, rigid stands, and often, withdrawal. Withdrawal takes the person reacting out of the field of influence of the other person, thus lowering the anxiety. The lower the level of differentiation, the more anxiety is manifested by the above symptoms.

One of the assumptions of family systems theory is that human beings align with groups partly on the basis of an emotional process that attracts people to one another (Kerr and Bowen, 1988, p.63). That attraction is determined to a degree, by a similar investment of life energy from the other person or group. Verbalizations, actions, emotions and dreams reflect this investment, which people direct at others in anticipation of energy that will be reciprocated.

It is not a great leap to propose that people gravitate to groups (microsystems) that have a similar level of differentiation. This would mean that an individual would gravitate to a church or congregation that appears to have the similar level of differentiation. Like a family, church congregations exhibit a level of differentiation. One church may insist on setting the rules for each member, while another congregation is more likely to encourage the membership to set their own course. In each congregation, however, the level of differentiation is uncovered in a crisis situation.

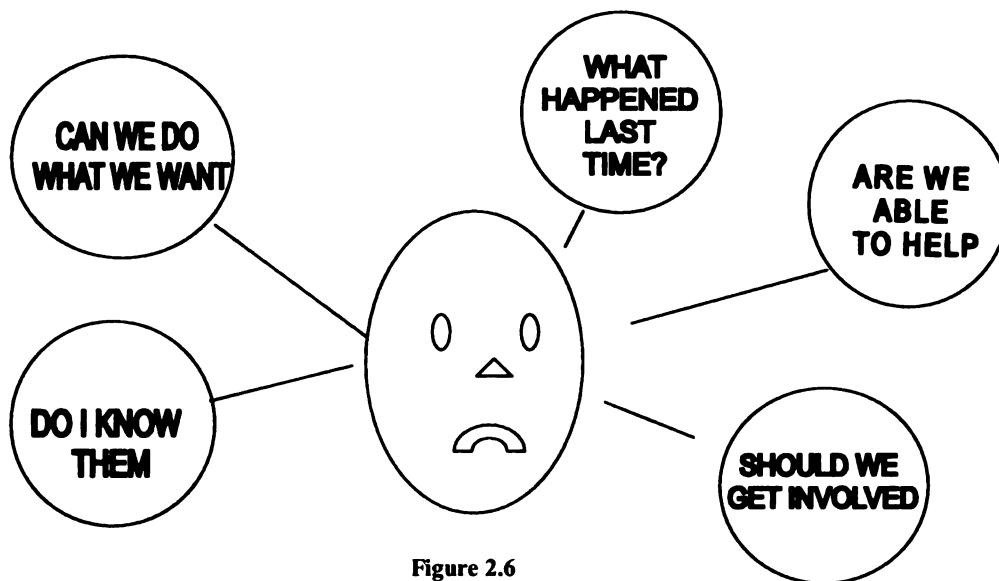
During crisis, such as disclosure of sexual abuse within a church family unit, the response will be in direct relationship to the level of differentiation. The lower the level, the less tolerance for anxiety and the quicker they try to relieve it – keeping the relationship in balance. Intolerance for differences of perspectives increases, because the goal is to maintain homeostasis. Pressure to adapt and to conform is increased in an effort to relieve anxiety that is generated by the crisis.

Exacerbating the presenting crisis of incest, certain issues are crisis opportunities creating anxiety-potential. These issues are transgenerational and embedded within the culture. Among these, the researcher proposes, are as follows; patriarchal paradigm, history of incest within in the church, relationship of family experiencing incest, denominational and congregational perspective of the role of the church in the community, and identification of resources in the community.

Stimulus comes from every angle. The family involved in incest may approach the leadership in the church. The leadership, in response to these stimuli, may bring the situation to the church council. Each one of the council members will respond according to their perspectives based on the influences of the stimuli from each of the above mentioned issues. Figure 2.6 illustrates the questions that address these five areas of influence. In addition, each board member is also motivated by the process that is contained within the relationship system. The members also each carry an intergenerational process to the council meeting, which influences the process of the moment.

The processing is continual, reciprocal, and is combined with stimuli from presenting family as well as intergenerational influences that are swirling within the

individual, the council, the church congregation, and the denomination – all at the same time.



**Figure 2.6**

**Questions illustrating stimuli that challenge individual's self-differentiation level**

Because the church 'family' relates as an emotional unit, in much the same way as a biological family (Friedman, 1987), the processes that occur within the unit or mesosystem, are also occurring within the smaller unit (or microsystem). "The function of behavior is within the emotional system" (Kerr and Bowen, 1988, p.71). It is not possible to separate these two simultaneous and continual processes.

Neither is it possible to separate the functioning of the group from the functioning of each separate individual. They are, to some degree, regulated by relationship. Family systems focuses on this context of the relationship process.



## **Chapter III.**

### **METHODOLOGY**

#### **RESEARCH OBJECTIVES**

The objective was to complete a qualitative exploratory research project, utilizing in-depth interviews of pastors of churches, and corroborative surveys regarding the anxiety driving the absence or presence of programs for families experiencing incest. This triangulated study is exploratory in nature, investigating the differences in congregational programs, in order to determine the denominational, congregational, and leadership influences on the church's effectiveness as a support system to families experiencing incest.

In order to meet the overall objective, the following, more specific objectives were:

- To complete a qualitative investigation of pastoral perspective on influences that have challenged the development of support programs for families experiencing incest.
- To develop an exploratory survey for pastors that would incorporate denominational, congregational, and leadership issues influencing the presence of programs for families experiencing incest
- To investigate the assumption of anxiety, as defined by Bowen, driving the local church's response to incest.

- To investigate the relationship of the pastor's perception of patriarchal paradigm within the local church, to the presence of programs for families experiencing incest
- To investigate the relationship of incest history within the local church family, with the presence of programs for families experiencing incest
- To investigate the relationship of status of families within the local church experiencing incest, with the presence of programs for families experiencing incest
- To investigate the relationship of the pastor's perception of the congregational role in the community, including denominational understanding, with the presence of programs for families experiencing incest
- To investigate the relationship of the pastor's perception of availability of resources, with the presence of programs for families experiencing incest

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

In order to obtain the above-mentioned objectives, six specific research questions were addressed to the pastors of these churches:

- 1) Does the level of anxiety, as defined by Bowen and reflected by the pastor's responses during the interview, drive the response of the congregation to families experiencing incest?
- 2) Does the pastor's perception regarding the congregational position on women's roles in the home and society, including the position on female leadership in the church, influence the presence of response, within the congregation, to issues of incest?
- 3) As far as the pastor is aware, does the history of incest within the local congregation influence the church's response to families with the presenting crisis of incest now?
- 4) From the pastor's perspective, does the local congregation respond differently to families experiencing incest, according to the families' status within the congregation? Is the church, in fact, more or less likely to be an effective support system if the family is actively involved in the life of the congregation?
- 5) How does the congregation, as reported by the pastor, perceive its role within the community, and its denominational role, in regard to being a support system to families experiencing incest?

- 6) How does the congregation's perception, as reported by the pastor, of availability of resources (human, professional, educational and financial) have an impact on the local congregation's response to families experiencing incest?

## RESEARCH MODEL

This research involved two phases. First, an in-depth interview with pastors explored the processing of issues that have had an influence on the ability to develop a program that would facilitate healing and empower individuals and families who have experienced incest. Anxiety stemming from the issues that may have influenced decisions to create such programs and to provide support for these families was investigated.

The second phase was a measurement collected in the form of a survey (appendix A). The poll was given to the forty-six pastors who were interviewed. The questions addressed influences of denominational, congregational, and leadership characteristics that impacted ministry to families experiencing incest, according to level of anxiety within the local congregation. This, as well as observational and archival data, produced a triangulated survey, designed to enhance the richness of the data collected in the interviews.

The research included data collected in these two different phases. Initially, the qualitative in-depth interviews reflected perspective grounded in Bowen's Family Systems thinking. As pastors deliberated on the process of developing ministries to

families experiencing incest, they were encouraged to consider the core values that provided impetus for action. The survey they were asked to complete also used this philosophical perspective for reflection on choices regarding response to incest within the faith community.

## Interviews

The first component of the research involved a qualitative study, with in-depth interviews of forty-six pastors who may have or may not have developed and administered programs within their congregations to families who have experienced familial sexual abuse. The interviews included questions that reflected a Family Systems approach. Questions targeted the need for homeostasis, multigenerational issues, differentiation levels and anxiety in addressing sexual abuse and incest. Also addressed was the patriarchal paradigm of denominational and local church doctrine and practices. The focus was directed at how the anxiety surrounding these issues have influenced ability to minister to families who have experienced incest. Influences that are related to the development of such programs would include the following: reluctance to address anxiety-producing issues such as incest, congregational perspective on women's roles and women in leadership, history of incest incidents within the congregation, the incest-involved family's relationship with the congregation, resources available and utilized to develop existing programs, and other issues that may have presented an obstacle to or facilitated the development of these programs.

A pattern of functioning develops within every system, in order to establish order and balance. This homeostatic tendency contributes to regulating anxiety. Kerr and

Bowen (1988) address the impact of these systemic elements in the modus operandi of the family and Friedman (1985) argues that the church functions emotionally in a similar way to the family. Therefore, to suggest that the church unconsciously incorporates these concepts when processing decisions regarding traumatic occurrences, such as the experience of incest, would undergird the concept of pragmatic validity (Miles and Huberman, 1994).

### Interview Guide

Each interview reflected the research questions in an effort to ascertain the pastor's understanding of the issues that influence each particular congregation's ability to be an effective support system to families who are experiencing incest. The following questions were part of this guided interview. The research question(s) each inquiry addresses is in parentheses:

1. Has the church ever addressed the issues of sexual abuse or incest since you have been here? If so, what happened? (Research question #1, #3)
2. Sexual abuse is often a very volatile issue, particularly with friends and acquaintances of the victims and/or perpetrators. Are you aware of any time when there has been heightened anxiety within the congregation because of sexual abuse or incest? If so, could you explain. (Research question #1)
3. How would you define sexual abuse? Is there any document in the church policy or bylaws that addresses sexual abuse? What does that include? (Research questions #2, #5, & #6,).

4. In regard to your denominational policy (or that of your headquarters), has there been a public statement regarding childhood sexual abuse or incest? Does your church closely follow the policies of the denomination? (Research Question #5)
5. Does the church have female leadership? Is there a female on the ministerial staff? Do you feel it should have female leadership? Is there anything wrong with females in leadership? Does the church espouse traditional gender roles within the family? (Research questions #2, #3, & #6)
6. In your opinion, does this congregation have an obligation to provide programs that minister to the needs of the surrounding community? If so, would those programs include counseling and support groups to people not within the constituency of your church? (Research questions #4 and #5)
7. Do you have any programs that support families who are experiencing incest (such as individual counseling, support programs, risk management policies, staff directives, etc.)? If so, could you describe them? If not, do you feel there is a need for such programming? (Research questions #4, #5, #6)
8. Could you describe the role of elected and informal leadership within this congregation? Would you describe this congregation as pastor-driven or more of a shared leadership-style? (Research questions #1, #6)
9. Would you define the congregation as liberal or conservative? What do you mean by that term? (Research questions #2, #5)
10. Is there a screening system for youth or children's workers that is a part of formalities in recruiting helpers? If so, what does it entail? Was this screening system put into effect before you came as pastor? (Research question #5, #6)

## Data

Ethnographic data was collected from the audiotapes and researcher's notes of forty-six individual interviews, conducted with pastors of seven different faith communities. Because the personalities of denominations are different, each faith group is expected to have incurred different challenges to developing programming for families who have experienced incest. Half of the pastors represented liturgical faith communities that are generally considered to have a more active involvement in social concerns. The other pastors were drawn from a more evangelical paradigm, generally understood to have a more conservative involvement in ministries to the community.

Based on ecosystemic theory, research data and anecdotal examples from clinical studies on support systems, the researcher expected that pastors would report a variety of influences that have had a strong impact on the planning and administration of programs that support families experiencing incest. The paradigms of the denominational, congregational and leadership systems interact with the community and the families with whom the local church is ministering. The multigenerational dynamics of all the systems provide an ever-changing character to the unfolding circumstances of church life and policy, on both a national and local level.

The anxiety caused by the presenting crisis of familial sexual abuse, then, is colored by all of these aforementioned systems. The method with which the church chooses to address this anxiety depends on influences within the denomination, the local congregation, and the leadership. It is understood that both the family experiencing incest and the other church families contribute to the anxiety as well as to the



development of efficacious programming. This is an example of the transactional nature of systems.

Data was collected from the survey (appendix A) that each pastor was encouraged to complete. Miles and Huberman (1994) discuss the benefit of evaluating data by noting recurring patterns or themes. This proposed method of research has been designed to provide consistency in the research and to faithfully represent each pastor's responses. Noting relationship between the answers in the interviews and the survey responses helped the researcher to more accurately report the influence of each issue within the body of research on effective support programs of the church to families experiencing incest.

Archival data was collected from policies and official statements of each denomination. Pamphlets, conference resolutions, web page information and communication to clergy were investigated to ascertain denominational positions on sexual abuse within families.

Observational material, based on clinical counseling techniques, was examined in the interview process. The rich information that can be gleaned from body language, tonal quality, and verbal expressions was noted. Both the atmosphere within the office and the attitude of the respondent toward the questions was noted.

## Design

The first phase is exploratory and analytical in nature. Forty-six in-depth interviews with pastors of seven different-faith congregations, within four Midwestern

states, were conducted. The setting was partially controlled, as these were both pastors who already have functioning programs for families experiencing incest or sexual abuse and those who do not have such programs. The interviews were one and one half-hours in length, and focused on systemic challenges that influence discussion and or development of intentional programs for or counseling services to families experiencing incest.

In order to carry out the objectives of this research, both an exploratory and an experimental research design in a partially controlled setting is necessary. The second phase forged the triangulated study, in an effort to more effectively evaluate the material collected. Each pastor was asked to complete a questionnaire.

This questionnaire was composed of a 43-item survey, utilizing a Likert scaling format. The questions were grounded in the Bowen Family Systems approach by addressing homeostasis, multigenerational influences, differentiation of the leadership and church family, and anxiety that impacts the ability to minister effectively to families who have experienced incest. These issues were questioned from a denominational, congregational, and local leadership perspective, reflecting the family systems theory.

The survey questions were designed in such a way as to reflect the assumptions based on research and clinical experience.

The goal of this survey was to detect the nature of faith community influences that impact the ability to develop programs of healing and empowerment to families who are experiencing incest, as reflected by the pastor's responses. Because of the lack of research in the area of challenges to facilitating support programs for families experiencing incest, the survey was both exploratory and observational in nature. It was

designed to uncover issues that influence the ability to be an effective support system to families who are experiencing the crisis of incest.

The data was collected from the forty-six pastors, analyzing the individual 90-minute interviews in relationship to the survey responses. Answers are examined by denomination, to establish contrasting patterns of behavior among the differing faith communities. This clustering attempts to strengthen the soundness of the research assumptions and initiates the effort to establish external validity.

## RESEARCH ASSUMPTIONS

### Assumption #1

When incest takes place, each member in the family is a victim, whether or not the perpetrator has directly victimized each one.

*“It is by now a commonplace that families in which child abuse occurs are socially isolated. It is less commonly recognized that social isolation does not simply happen; it is often enforced by the abuser in the interest of preserving secrecy and control over other family members. (Herman, 1992, p.100).*

### Assumption #2

Families who have experienced the trauma of incest and the ensuing legal ramifications will turn to their traditional support systems to facilitate them as they go through the process of resolution.

*“Coplan emphasized the importance of support systems in protecting individual wellbeing in the face of everyday demands, situational crises, and life transitions. (Vaux, 1988, p.7)*

### Assumption #3

Social support has the opportunity to influence the trauma processing the family goes through as a result of experiencing familial sexual abuse.

*“Supportive behavior may influence each critical point of the stress process: event occurrence, primary appraisal (and reappraisal), secondary appraisal of coping options, and actual coping efforts aimed at resolving the problem or managing the emotional fallout.” (Vaux, 1988, p.143)*

### Assumption #4

The response of the local congregation to the family who has been involved with incest, has the power to influence the families’ way of processing the experiences.

*“Because traumatic life events invariably cause damage to relationships, people in the survivor’s social world have the power to influence the eventual outcome of the trauma.” (Herman, 1992, p.61).*

### Assumption #5

As a patriarchal paradigm is deeply imbedded into society, utilizing feminist informed perspective helps to clarify some of the dynamics involved in the local church’s response to families who have experienced incest.

*“Theories formerly considered to be sexually neutral in their scientific objectivity are found instead to reflect a consistent observational and evaluative bias.” (Gilligan, 1982, p.6).*

### Assumption #6

The manner in which a local congregation addresses issues regarding its constituency, is influenced directly and indirectly by both the elected and the assumed leadership.

*"Families, churches, business, and governments become sick by refusing to face painful realities". (M. Scott Peck, 1983)*

#### Assumption #7

The pastor is the best representative for a local congregation's perspective on issues surrounding incest.

*"The pastor is in a position to provide a voice representing the local congregation."* (Friedman, 1985; Turnbull, 1970).

### INSTRUMENTATION

A semi-structured, guided interview, one and one half hours in length, was conducted with forty-six pastors from seven different faith communities, in four mid-western states. The interviews used the research questions as a springboard to encourage the pastor to discuss the denominational, congregational, and leadership issues which influenced the development of programs for families who have experienced incest.

Because there are presently no standardized instruments which measure the aforementioned variables influencing the response of churches to families experiencing incest, an instrument has been developed, utilizing the concepts of Bowen Family Systems and incorporating family ecosystemic philosophy with a feminist informed paradigm. A survey in the form of a questionnaire inquired of pastors, using a Likert scaling format. These questions reflect concepts based on Bowen's Family Systems and also reflect concerns of denominational, congregational and leadership character. The survey

considers the influence of the six constructs (the church's perspective on women's roles in family and leadership, incest-related history of the local congregation, status of families within the congregation who have experienced incidents of incest, self-perception of church tradition, including its relationship to its denominational organization, and resources available to the local congregation), on the decision-making process regarding programs for families experiencing incest.

With the exception of introductory and definitive questions regarding ethnicity and racial differences of each congregation, at least five questions were concentrated on each research question, while reflecting the denominational, congregational or leadership paradigms.

#### Pastoral Survey

As an example of questions that were presented in the pastoral survey, in the area of the church's perspective on women's roles in family or leadership, one item in the survey is the following statement:

*"When a couple disagrees on an issue, the husband should be the one to make the final decision."*

The pastor was given the following options of answering:

1) always, 2) usually, 3) I am not sure, 4) not usually, or 5) never.

This question reflects denominational and leadership paradigm and speaks to the gender research question (#2).

In the area of status of families within the congregation who have experienced incest, a response to the following statement was sought:

*“When an active person within the congregation is accused of sexually abusing one of his family members, he is relieved of his position and responsibilities until further exploration of the charge can be done.”*

The pastor again was given the following responses from which to choose:

1) always, 2) usually, 3) I am not sure, 4) not usually, or 5) never.

This question reflects congregational and leadership paradigm, and addresses the research question regarding history of incest within the congregation (#3), as well as impact of position of family experiencing incest (#4).

In the research area of history of incest-related incidents within the congregation, the pastor was asked to respond to the following statement:

*“Incidents of incest within the congregation have historically been addressed by the pastoral staff only.”*

The response choices are:

1) always, 2) usually, 3) I am not sure, 4) not usually, or 5) never.

This reflects research questions regarding anxiety driving process (#1), and impact of status within congregation (#4) as well as perception of resources (#5).

A follow up question is:

*“Persons not on the pastoral staff or elected to a board or church office have some official input on the response toward families experiencing incest.”*

The response choices are:

1) always, 2) usually, 3) I am not sure, 4) not usually, or 5) never.

These questions reflect the leadership paradigm of the congregation (#3) and resource perception (#5).

## SAMPLING PROCEDURES

Forty-six semi-structured interviews were conducted with pastors from seven of the denominations or faith communities who were also surveyed in the questionnaire. These pastors were identified in various manners. The researcher belongs to one faith community. Because of personal knowledge of the congregations within the Midwestern states, some congregations with a supportive program for families experiencing incest or sexual abuse were chosen. Other congregations, of different denominations, have been identified by clergy acquaintances of the researcher. The remainder of clergy was identified by an inquiry to denominational headquarters regarding congregations with or without programs or counseling for families experiencing incest, internet inquiry and the telephone directory within certain targeted towns and cities in a four state area. The survey was given to the forty-six pastors of churches from seven different faith communities, within the midwest states of Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, and Ohio.



## DATA ANALYSIS

The data analysis process was a three-step process of cross-case analysis. These three steps, accomplished concurrently, are data reduction, data display and conclusion drawing and verification (Miles and Huberman, 1994). The semi-structured, guided interviews were transcribed from audio-tape. Observations collated from the researcher at the time of the interviews, included detailed notation of body language, affective tone, facial expressions, perceived willingness to discuss the various issues, and other anecdotal observations.

Interpretive coding was done to identify distinction among the areas of influence in the decision-making process of a church that has developed a program of support for families experiencing abuse. This labeling of “chunks” of information, (Ary, Jacobs, & Razavieh, 1990) facilitates the assigning of meaning to information compiled.

The data collected in the interviews were grouped together, according to themes. This process of data reduction is thematic clustering (Miles and Huberman, 1994). At first, the clusters were organized into five research areas of a) patriarchal paradigm, b) history of incest within the church, c) status, within the church, of families who have experienced incest, d) perception of role of denomination and relationship to the denominational policies, and e) resources available to the church. Because of the small number of interviews, analysis of race and ethnicity were not included. It is, however, noted in the body of the interview results.

In order to retain the richness of the data, the information was also organized into data displays in the formats of both antecedent matrix and context charts. The matrix included all reported influences that impacted each church’s response.

Throughout the process of analysis, with the tools of faithful transcription, coding and displaying, conclusion drawing was continually executed. The researcher examined data for patterns, interpretive analyses of the pastors, and intervening variables that may arise. The goal of analysis was to ascertain the influences that facilitated or hindered the church's development of programs of support for families experiencing incest or sexual abuse.

The willingness or reluctance to respond to an issue as critical and delicate as familial sexual abuse may indicate a faith community's ability to address anxiety-laden issues. If a specific faith community does not wish to respond, a lack of response may be significant. This may be an indication of Bowen's concept of level of differentiation.

#### Written Policies and Actual Practices

Another form of triangulated data is the written policies of denominations. The rules that define the structure of denominations appear to indicate level of differentiation, as it is defined by Bowen. There is an assumed continuum of differentiation that can be speculated through doctrine. If autonomy is a measure of differentiation, then it can be assumed that the denomination that encourages a higher level of autonomy would have more healthy and differentiated congregations, and therefore, would be less anxious when stress filled situations, such as discovery of incest within the church families, must be confronted. This is a large leap of assumption. Research was designed to indicate if this assumption of relationship is valid. Specific denominational policies or statements as well as congregational policies and practices were examined.

It must be noted, however, that feminist informed paradigm would not necessarily agree with autonomy as a measure of differentiation. Therefore, other ways of measuring the influences that contribute to the local church's effectiveness also needed to be incorporated.

### Measurement of Anxiety

Assessment of anxiety is problematic. Because a self-report does not always indicate the degree of anxiety, other indications were used for measurement. The benefit of a face-to-face interview includes such clues as body language, tension in voice and body, hesitations in answering, nervous ticks, agitated or repetitive movements, shifting of the body, closed or open body stance and quick eyelid movement. To a careful researcher, the observation of such characteristics of the interview is valuable in assessing anxiety.

Words used in the interview also provide evidence of anxiety. Recurrence of such words as 'fear', 'stress', 'afraid', 'problems', 'bad', 'anger', and 'reluctance' are important. Higher pitched timbre or aggressiveness in voice, change in voice inflection, and defensive tone also provide valuable information during the interview. While recognizing this reading is subjective, the researcher believes this method is helpful in building an accurate understanding and measurement of anxiety.

## GROUNDING THEORY

Refinement of a theory is often accomplished partially by grounding the theory. Grounded theory lends credence to the research by beginning with a conceptual framework, and placing it in the proposed setting. Using the proposed theory or theories, the researcher then applies them to the arena of study, illustrating the reasoning behind adoption of that theory or theories. Grounding a theory is specifying how, where and why it is going to be used and explaining the reasoning behind applying that theory to the particular set of circumstances. Miles and Huberman (1994, p.27) describe grounding a theory as “putting flesh on the bones of general constructs and their relationships.” The use of code systems directly related to the research questions and interview questions, and reflecting the research questions will contribute to grounding this theory. The process is never stagnant, but is progressive in nature – developing as the researcher continues investigation. This process strengthens the precision, validity and stability of the findings (Miles and Huberman).

In the study of influences that affect the congregations’ ability to be a support system to sexual abuse survivors, two methods were used. An interview with a pastor or associate pastor of each congregation was executed. After the interview, each pastor responded to a survey. This survey was completed to get a more comprehensive understanding of the interviews and to substantiate the theories. Looking at cross case examples and between case examples further confirmed hypotheses. This is grounding the theory.

## **The Family as an Emotional Unit**

The family develops certain patterns of adaptivity to stress. This adaptive capability is based on each individual's ability to respond to stress and the process of the family as they interact collectively on a daily basis. It is influenced by multigenerational patterns of life energy investment in crisis producing situations (Kerr & Bowen, 1988; Nichols & Schwartz, 1998). The ability to expend life energy in the presence of a stressor is directly related to level of differentiation.

Anxiety is a function of differentiation. It is manifested in the face of stressors. The lower the level of differentiation is, the higher the level of anxiety in crisis. In the same way, the higher the level of differentiation is, less anxiety is manifested by the above symptoms. In crisis situations, the level of differentiation is brought into sharp focus by the level of anxiety demonstrated. It is apparent in the person's daily functioning, but is clarified with the crisis.

One of the assumptions of family systems theory is that human beings and families align with groups partly on the basis of an emotional process that attracts people to one another (Kerr & Bowen, 1988, p.63). That attraction is determined to a degree, by a similar investment of 'life energy' from the other person or group. Verbalizations, actions, emotions and dreams reflect this investment, which people direct at others in anticipation of energy that will be reciprocated.

## **The Church As an Emotional Unit**

People seem to gravitate to groups, developing mesosystems that have similar levels of differentiation as the family microsystems that comprise them. This would

mean that an individual would gravitate to a church or congregation that appears to have an equivalent level of differentiation as the person's family. Like a family, church congregations exhibit levels of differentiation. In each congregation the level of differentiation is uncovered in a crisis situation. No matter what the crisis-inducing opportunity is, the manifested anxiety will demonstrate the level of differentiation.

During crisis, such as disclosure of sexual abuse within a church family unit, the response will be in direct relationship to the level of differentiation. The lower the level, the less tolerance for anxiety and the quicker they try to relieve it – keeping the relationship in balance. Intolerance for differences of perspectives increases, because the goal is to maintain systemic equilibrium, which Bowen terms homeostasis. Pressure to adapt and to conform is increased in an effort to relieve anxiety that is generated by the crisis.

### Crisis Opportunities

Exacerbating the presenting crisis of incest, certain issues are crisis opportunities creating anxiety-potential. These issues are multigenerational and embedded within the culture. They inform the level of differentiation and help determine the response. Among these, the researcher proposes, are as follows; patriarchal paradigm, history of incest within in the church, relationship of family experiencing incest, denominational and congregational perspective of the role of the church in the community, and identification of resources in the community.

When a crisis such as incest occurs, the level of differentiation is sharply illustrated by the response of the congregation to the crisis. Low levels of differentiation

may be manifested by cut-off (or distancing from the crisis), or enmeshment (becoming overly-involved and controlling). The triangling process is intensified as participants jockey for position and hasten to appoint an 'identified patient'.

The processing is continual, reciprocal, and is combined with stimuli from presenting family as well as intergenerational influences that are swirling within the individual, family, pastor, the church council, the church congregation, and the denomination – all at the same time.

Because the church 'family' relates as an emotional unit, in much the same way as a biological family (Friedman, 1987), the processes that occur within the unit or microsystem, are also occurring within the smaller unit, the family. "The function of behavior is within the emotional system" (Kerr and Bowen, 1988, p.71). It is not possible to separate these two simultaneous and continual processes for they function in the context of the relationship.

Neither is it possible to separate the functioning of the group from the functioning of each separate individual. They are, to some degree, regulated by relationship. Family systems focuses on this context of the relationship process.

## **Chapter IV.**

### **RESULTS OF RESEARCH**

Responses were collected from pastors and associate pastors of forty-six different congregations in seven denominations over a four-state area. Each respondent spent approximately one hour with the researcher, answering ten interview questions and completing a forty-three-item inventory, which was conducted orally by the researcher.

#### **Including Information about Sexual Abuse**

It became obvious very early that few congregations had any formal response to incest. Among the forty-six congregations, there were no programs uniquely designed for incest survivors or families of incest. As the interview process evolved, the researcher widened the area of questioning to include sexual abuse both of an incestuous and of a non-incestuous nature in several of the questions. In this way, it became possible to determine the presence of even modest levels of support to incest survivors.

#### **Level of Anxiety**

Level of anxiety is analyzed to ascertain its influence on the ability of congregations to effectively support families experiencing sexual abuse. This can be partially determined by address, within congregational life, of stress-inducing events or circumstances. Address can be done in a variety of ways. The subject may be introduced from the pulpit, training and education seminars may be provided, risk management policies, background checks, or an application form may be incorporated as a portion of



the process of recruiting volunteers. Focused support groups are also deliberate forms of address of sexual abuse. Even introducing the issue of sexual abuse in a general manner in small groups, Bible studies, or during times of corporate prayer could be a way of confronting the issue.

Presence of a congregational policy for confrontation of persons with abusive backgrounds is also an indication of levels of anxiety. Because putting a policy in effect and implementing a course of action for protection of children and youth can be time-consuming, expensive, and potentially controversial, congregations would have to intentionally set aside resources for these procedures. The process seems to be intimidating to many congregations, and, as will be illustrated, is often met with resistance by both the leadership and the congregational members

It is possible, also, that the gender of either the researcher or the respondent would influence the interview. A matrix of the responses by gender and according to presence of different gender on the pastoral staff will illustrate the findings.

Anxiety is also measured in this research by the willingness of a congregation to tolerate differing perspectives. Openness to the laity and their opinions regarding governance, recognition of differing positions among the congregants, or written process in place for disagreement with the staff and governing council, all are examples of respect for diversity of opinion. A lack of flexibility is a manifestation of low self-differentiation and results in high anxiety (Kerr & Bowen, 1988). A low level of differentiation could be evidenced by an unwillingness to countenance disagreement among the parishioners. An atmosphere of control and disallowance for congregational involvement in the decision-making process indicates high anxiety within the organism.

Another point to consider is the anxiety level of the individual pastor. Conflict is an inevitable part of leading a congregation of people. There are pastors who are able to effectively manage conflict, and there are those for whom confrontation is intimidating. An organism functions at its best when its leader is well-differentiated (Friedman, 1985). A high-investment issue, such as sexual abuse, can be a good measure of the pastor's self-differentiation. The researcher is aware that the responses to any of the research or survey questions could easily have a crisis-producing potential for the pastor. Individual conviction, lack of education, sexual history, and sense of appropriateness, all will influence the pastor's reply, among other issues. Although this area is mentioned, the researcher does not feel there is enough investigation of the pastor's anxiety level in this study to warrant any conclusions.

The length of time the pastor has been at that particular congregation also has some bearing on the responses. It takes a period of time for the pastor to establish himself or herself as the leader. In his book on family systems and the church, Friedman mentions the anxiety level of a group without a leader (1985). Those groups may tend to be more reactive and the anxiety at a higher level.

Finally, consistency of response by each pastor has been noted. In cases where there seems to be a discrepancy with interview responses and survey responses, it is possible that the more pointed the questions became, the more divergent were the replies. Because of the high-stress potential of the subject of incest, the pastors responding with inconsistency to questions about screening systems for volunteers with children and youth ministries, education and training of volunteers, child protection policies, and other support measures could be manifesting anxiety with their replies.

## Organization of Results

The interview responses are arranged by research question. For the first five research questions, denominational information is offered first. It was found that denominational responses to interview questions did imply a difference in the way the various denominations interpret and respond to crisis opportunities, such as sexual abuse or incest within the church family. With the first five research questions, each denomination is separated to more clearly delineate differences between groups. As each research question is analyzed by denomination, issues and processes are examined through the lens of the specific question. This helps formulate the between-group analysis.

For the sixth research question, the congregations have been analyzed by resources. This was done to ascertain the responses according to size, observation of educational opportunities in the community, ability of leadership to address crisis situations, and community opportunities, such as local universities, interfaith organizations, and women in leadership as resources. Cities that are over 100,000 are also noted, with the assumption that these may be more likely to have a wider variety of resources. This method gives form to the within-group analysis of the data.

Forty-six congregations were researched in a four-state area. Eleven pastors were interviewed in Illinois, thirteen in Indiana, eleven in Michigan, and eleven in Ohio. Thirty-eight males and eight females were interviewed. Six Assemblies of God, seven Christian Churches, eight Churches of God, six Missouri Synod Lutheran Churches, seven Nazarene Churches, six Presbyterian Churches and six United Methodist Churches were investigated. Thirty-eight congregations were at least 90% Caucasian, six

congregations were at least 90% African-American, and two were a mixture of African – American, Caucasian, and Hispanic.

*Research question #1: Does the level of anxiety, as defined by Bowen and indicated by the pastor's replies, drive the response of the congregation to families that have experienced sexual abuse or incest?*

This question is central to the whole project. All other research questions feed into this main question, because the researcher sees the other five issues – roles of women, including inclusion of women in leadership, history of abuse, status of affected family, community outreach philosophy and perception of resources – as symptoms of the anxiety level of the congregation.

#### **Personality of Denomination**

A thumbnail sketch of the personality of the denomination, as observed from the churches researched within that denomination, introduces the responses to this question. While recognizing this gives an incomplete and seriously limited understanding of each denomination, the researcher nevertheless believes a basic character of the denomination helps inform the manner of looking at the results of the research, particularly in reference to this question.

### **Anxiety Level of Denomination as determined by Congregation**

The anxiety level of the congregations researched is then observed. Peter Steinke, in discussing anxiety and the church (1996, p.62), explains that relationship systems settle into their own levels of comfort. When a crisis arises to threaten that comfort, those persons or microsystems that have a low threshold of pain become reactive. The individual organisms of the system often try to triangle with each other to relieve anxiety. They scramble to alleviate their anxiety by minimizing, anesthetizing, or relocating the anxiety.

If, as has been suggested (Kerr & Bowen, 1988, p.63), the person gravitates toward microsystems that parallel the person's own level of self-differentiation, then it is reasonable to suggest that churches are formed with people who have loosely the same level of self-differentiation. Because of the transactional nature of microsystems, the congregation influences the person and the person also affects the character of the congregation. Anxiety is contagious (Kerr & Bowen, 1988). It tends to infect the organisms around it. Therefore, a congregation with high anxiety and low self-differentiation would be more likely to be made up of individuals with relatively similar levels of self-differentiation and anxiety. The congregants would continue to re-infect each other, building the level of anxiety. They also could influence other congregants by their effective adaptability to stressors.

### **Provision of Protection for Innocent People**

After a general understanding of the denominational organization and its anxiety level, the researcher looks at the data regarding provision for protection of innocent

people. One indication of low anxiety - intentional address - illustrates the Bowenian concept of providing a non-anxious presence. If a non-anxious presence is presented, the congregation is able to take a stand against sexual abuse, without losing its connection to the family or perpetrator. Intentional address also demonstrates a willingness to grapple with uncomfortable and controversial issues, which is a characteristic of a high level of self-differentiation. The leader (or leaders) is willing to define self and continue to stay in touch (Friedman, 1985), taking a nonreactive, clearly conceived and clearly defined stand. This provides an atmosphere of safety for the family who may have been victimized by sexual abuse.

The presence of a screening system, risk management policy, or child protection procedure is further indication of disposition to effectively address issues of abuse. The interpretation of the phrase 'screening system' would best be understood as on a continuum. Among the pastors interviewed, there is a wide divergence of opinion as to what this would entail. One pastor interpreted a screening system as his 'gut feelings' about a person – "I go with my intuition". While the researcher affirms the value of a subjective analysis, there are serious limitations to using this system exclusively. Another pastor interprets the term screening system to mean a background check, application form and references.

As research evolved, the question was also included – "If I had gone to your church for six months, was very active and enthusiastic, and volunteered to serve in either of the youth, children's or nursery department, would I be allowed to serve, even if I refused the screening system process?" This question was posed to ascertain the commitment of each congregation to its policy.

## Response to Experiences of Sexual Abuse or Incest

Another indication of anxiety level is the willingness to pro-actively address abuse when it becomes apparent that a member or family within the congregation is experiencing it. Does the congregation confront an abuser and minister to a family experiencing abuse? Being a support system to the individual or family, as the process of absorbing all the ramifications of abuse is being experienced, is a manifestation of being a non-anxious presence in the event of a crisis opportunity.

In contrast, ignoring the topic, refusing to engage in discussion, minimizing the damage, pretending that the event has not taken place or that the congregation should not confront the issue, could all be manifestations of high levels of anxiety. Contacts with the family or survivor are often kept 'brief and superficial to reduce the discomfort' (Kerr & Bowen, 1988). When people use this technique, it may lower their anxiety for the short term, but usually results in raised anxiety within the family.

Blaming the victim, isolating the family, or summarily evicting the perpetrator from the congregation, further indicates low self-differentiation, as addressing the problem threatens homeostasis within the congregation. Kerr and Bowen (1988, p.79) explained that the 'lower the level of differentiation, the less people's tolerance for anxiety in themselves and others and the quicker they are to do things to relieve it.'

These are the areas of consideration in analyzing the data to determine if the level of anxiety drives the response of congregations to families experiencing sexual abuse or incest. Each denomination is examined separately.

## Denominational Responses

### Assemblies of God

The pastors of the Assemblies of God consider their congregations to be loosely connected with the denominational headquarters. Each pastor described the character of the congregation to be conservative. Their definitions relied basically on strict theological and moral stands, and a faithfulness to Biblical principles, as interpreted by the Assemblies. Although all six pastors interviewed considered themselves to be reflective of the typical Assembly of God congregation, there is not a great deal of communication with the headquarters. According to the survey, the denominational headquarters are not perceived as having great control over the local congregations. However, it was clear the denomination has some influence over the functioning of the congregation.

The pastoral leadership in Assemblies of God seems to be CEO in nature – casting vision, choosing and training leadership, delegating ministries, and having veto power. Though the congregation is free to voice disagreement, and constructive criticism is valued, the pastor appears to have the final say in issues of management. Each pastor indicated that pastoral leadership drives the congregational decision-making process. This method of functioning may be more indicative of a lower level of differentiation within the denomination. The researcher noted the terminology when one associate pastor stated, in confronting issues of sexual abuse, “The people trust us. They know the staff will handle it.”

Between denominations there is a variety of levels of address. Among the Assemblies of God (AOG) interviewed, 6 of 6 congregations have addressed sexual



abuse publicly, either in training sessions, support groups, hurt groups, through prayer in services and as a part of the prayer and healing ministries, as well as from the pulpit. It has also been addressed in a preventative training program called 'good touch/bad touch', developed for the children's department in one suburban congregation. A different congregation incorporates sexual abuse counseling within its small group program. Three congregations have a specific program for survivors or perpetrators of sexual abuse.

All of the Assemblies of God pastors confirmed that there is a screening system within the congregations in regard to recruiting volunteers in the children and youth programs. This screening is mandatory. Criminal checks are required in 5 of 6 congregations and three have a document that outlines policy in case of perpetration. These policies may include references, background checks, staff directives, procedural steps or risk management manuals. Two congregations send a memo to all involved leadership in case of an event of sexual abuse or harassment of any kind. Application forms for all child care and youth volunteers are required in four of the congregations.

Each of the six pastors admitted being aware of an incident of sexual abuse which has taken place among the parishioners. Five of the pastors are aware of incidents that have been of an incestuous nature. One pastor reported that his church has a reputation for dealing with the issue pro-actively after the knowledge comes to their attention.

Incidents involving active church members in four of the six congregations were recalled. One church reported heightened anxiety with one event. This pastor recounted the incident which gravely affected the whole church – because the mother and step-father (who was the perpetrator), both active members of the congregation, each talked to many people in the church, gathering support. During the subsequent court case and

divorce that took place, both parents continued to recruit persons in the congregation to their own positions. This polarized the congregation. The pastor took the leadership role in confronting the situation and eventually suggested one of the members find another congregation to attend.

Conservative in nature, the AOG churches show areas of healthy differentiation in their choice of address of crisis opportunities. A high percentage of congregations interviewed have put preventative measures for safety of children and innocent persons in place. This indicates willingness to accept the reality of abuse among the parishioners and to prepare for ministry to persons who are involved. While the evidence is that the pastoral leadership has a more influential role in decision-making process than many other denominations, pro-active measures of addressing abuse in each of the congregations indicates a willingness to tackle the difficult issues surrounding sexual abuse, and thus, a higher level of self-differentiation.

### Christian Churches

The Christian Churches are a little more loosely connected, with an independent character. The Christian Church – Church of Christ has a reputation for being the more conservative side, and the Christian Church – Disciples of Christ is reputed to be the more liberal congregational fellowship. Not all of the Christian Churches align with either of these groups, which have actually separated into two different denominations, but in fact are independent from both of them. Because of this variation, there is less homogeneity in the responses.

Perhaps because of the autonomous nature of the denomination, this group appears to value conflict as a growth opportunity, and in general, seems to encourage diversity of opinion and dialogue. Pastors report the congregations are not afraid to state convictions or take a public stand in the community. A process is in place for disagreement in 5 of 7 congregations. Among the Christian Churches interviewed, the congregations are included in the decision-making process when a crisis arises. The majority of the congregations seem to engage in the exercise of process, and there is an implication of trust and strong reliance on wisdom of the lay leadership. The pastor takes the role of senior partner in discussions, with the congregations actively involved in the dialogue.

Two of the seven pastors have addressed sexual abuse or incest from the pulpit. One congregation has standards for protection of children and youth already in place, two have policies that are pending, and three do not have any written standards. Two of those congregations have a staff-only set of guidelines. One pastor thought the congregational policy is that of the region, but does not know. There is one risk management policy that has been adopted. Two of the Christian Churches refer survivors of abuse to a professional counseling center. Five of the pastors report following child protection guidelines informally. Only one is a written procedure.

Within the Christian Churches, all pastors interviewed reported having dealt with incidents of sexual abuse either in the present or the previous congregation. Six of the pastors have ministered to perpetrators within their congregations. One pastor, sought out by the state headquarters, came to his congregation because of sexual abuse by one of the youth workers. This worker had allegedly molested or harassed at least thirteen youth

in two congregations and a state youth camp. Indicating a low level of self-differentiation, if not something more ominous, the senior pastor had resigned immediately upon revelation of this youth worker's perpetration. In the two years since this abuse has been made known, the congregation has not yet taken any formal steps to make the congregation safe. Though they dismissed the youth worker and he is no longer a part of the congregation, the congregation has buried it now that they have a new pastor – no policy has been developed, no background check is yet required and no child abuse education is offered. This also points to a very high level of congregational anxiety - distancing and anesthetizing.

One church has adopted a written child protection policy, as well as guidelines for steps in cases of perpetration. In this congregation, the guidelines were drawn up specifically because of incidents of sexual harassment and abuse by a former pastor. The responding pastor reported that their present screening system developed out of a need as the leadership went through the process of addressing the damage that had been done to parishioners. They subsequently put protective measures in place.

In another congregation, the pastor had to ask a convicted perpetrator to find a different church because he denied everything and wouldn't abide by any precautions that had been developed. The pastor expressed a feeling of disappointment at the inability to reclaim the person.

It may be that part of the reason for the wide divergence of operations is the high mobility of the pastors within the churches. Within these seven Christian churches interviewed, four respondents are new pastors who have been employed by the

congregation for less than a year. They inherited teaching staff and old policies and feel they ‘do not have enough clout to change policies without a fight.’

Although the strong congregational inclusion of the Christian Churches would indicate a high level of self-differentiation and low levels of anxiety, the reality does not seem to match the model. As stated previously, only one congregation has a risk management policy, one conducts a background check and one congregation provides abuse education to volunteers of children and youth. It appears that the level of anxiety within the Christian Churches is more likely to make itself manifest in the tendency to distance from the issue and neglect the opportunity to be a support system to families. With the exception of two congregations that adopted policies, one of them directly because of the pastoral abuse that took place, among the congregations researched, there appears to be no other congregation within the Christian Churches that has made formal efforts for protection or for address of abuse.

### Churches of God

The Churches of God (COG) are not literally a denomination. They are an interdependent faith group without formal membership. Because of their non-denominational nature, the Churches of God each determine their own government. Five of the pastors describe the congregation as one that has a shared leadership style and two define it as collaborative. There is no general agreement regarding the degree of conservative or liberal tendencies. On issues of inclusion of all believers the theology tends to be fairly liberal, however, the churches hold to a Biblical call to purity and holiness, which most would see as conservative.

The congregational polity has no one format for government within churches. However, the congregation has a very influential voice. “Our philosophy is a lay governed church, but staff managed.” Conflict of opinion is valued in 7 of 8 congregations, as normal, healthy and necessary for growth. “A concerned voice would be equal to any other voice in this congregation”, one pastor stated, as he was explaining the government of his congregation. The doctrine of the ‘priesthood of all believers’ is critical here. There seems to be great respect for the spiritual maturity and wisdom of lay persons in the church, and a high reliance on the ability of lay leadership.

Of the eight Churches of God (COG) pastors that were interviewed, five have intentionally addressed sexual abuse from the pulpit, and four have hosted training sessions – with one congregation hosting Marie Fortune, the acclaimed researcher and author on the subject of sexual abuse within the church. Two pastors report conducting regular abuse education for volunteers and church staff. In one congregation, the pastor reported a yearly sexual abuse preventative training program in the youth department. Another pastor has preached a series of sermons from the gospel of Luke, explaining to the researcher that the whole gospel of Luke deals with people in the context of dysfunctional and abusive backgrounds.

Within the COG, 5 of 8 churches have a child protection policy. These include background checks and policies of treatment with events of perpetration. Six pastors utilize background checks and seven have policies of varying degrees of stringency, which were put in place while the present pastor was on staff. Three reported their congregations as having what they would consider risk management policies.

One congregation also has a charter school and follows state guidelines for that. One congregation does not have an official policy, but offers a mandatory seminar that addresses child abuse every autumn for all child care and infancy department workers, however has none for Sunday School or youth departments. Two pastors indicated a need for more preventive programming.

Two congregations address incest and sexual abuse through their cell ministries. The cell leaders are trained in areas of sexual abuse and have guidelines for procedure if the situation arises. One church in Ohio joined with other inner city churches for a program called “Focus”, which provides shelter for battered or abused women and children, housing for homeless and women’s programs, including support groups and counseling for sexual abuse. They intentionally address incest and sexual abuse. In one congregation, former perpetrators are informed that if they leave the worship service they will be watched and followed by an unnamed individual.

In addressing background checks, one of the pastors said all pastoral staff and ministry leaders are required to lead the way by modeling. Each one has a background check when assuming his or her position. This policy was met with resistance when it was first introduced. Several families left the congregation. According to the pastor “These were good families - not willing to give up their innocence in believing such a thing (as sexual abuse) could not happen in this congregation.”

The pastors in the COG report 5 of 8 congregations having screening systems. One pastor who said there is no screening system, nevertheless provided a copy of the Policy for Prevention and Management of Child Abuse and Communicable Diseases.

Sexual abuse has been an issue in all eight of the congregations. Two of these have included pastors or a member of the pastor's family. One pastor reported he became the senior pastor after two pastors were investigated for clergy sexual abuse. One of these pastors was released from his position while one was given a severe reprimand and eventually left. This caused uneasy alertness and ramifications of anxiety within the congregation, which eventually blended with another congregation. Five pastors have confronted incidents of incest.

One pastor reports that a person had to be removed from responsibilities while an investigation took place, and then a call was made to the authorities. In one church, a young man, who has served prison time for molestation was found to be working in the children's school, with indirect contact to the children. Because the television and other media were called in, the congregation became aware of the situation. However, the crisis was addressed honestly, which gave the congregation a sense of trust in the leadership and the safety level of the church, the pastor reports.

Within the COG congregations researched, there does not appear to be high anxiety. Although four pastors stated there were incidents that caused heightened awareness within the congregation, it appeared from the responses that the concern was appropriate to the fact that the congregation was kept well informed. In one church, two or three individuals who had been abused by a local pastor in another denomination, started coming to this suburban church. This incident caused some awareness within the community and heightened the anxiety within the congregation. One congregation also experienced an affair between one of the associates and a parishioner, both of whom were



married. The pastor reports the congregation still is reflecting the turmoil from that incident, ten years later.

The presence of preventative and procedural policies within the majority of congregations indicates a willingness to take a non-anxious stance in potentially anxiety-producing situations. This is a characteristic of a relatively well-differentiated microsystem. Tendency to include the leadership in both training and wrestling with the dynamics of sexual abuse within a congregation, is an indication of healthy functioning of the organism.

#### Missouri Synod Lutheran Churches

The Missouri Synod Lutheran Churches (MSLC) have a congregational polity. The congregation has the final authority and a Voters' Assembly is all membership – to whom the ministry boards are accountable. “Our authority is our Voters' Assembly” one pastor explained. In spite of this, four of the pastors described their congregation as pastor or staff-led. Two pastors report a shared leadership style, but the two largest congregations are pastor-driven.

The six pastors of the MSLC seem to perceive conflict as a healthy part of congregational life – at least in theory. All six stated there is a process for disagreement in place, as opposed to the other six denominations researched. There was some difference of opinion as to whether constructive conflict is valued as a necessary characteristic of growth of a congregation.

However, there appears to be less differentiation within the denomination. The doctrine and policies are narrower and there is little room for variance within the

parameters set by denominational polity. There is an indication of lack of fellowship and interfaith worship with other faith assemblies.

Within the Missouri Synod Lutheran Churches (MSLC), three of six congregations have addressed sexual abuse from the pulpit or in group settings. The largest Lutheran church researched has a counselor on staff part time that has done training of leadership and the Stephen's Ministry program in sexual abuse. One pastor has mentioned it in the pulpit in response to a news story, but has done no other training or preaching on sexual abuse. One inner city congregation has a parish nurse program that has had to address sexual abuse on occasions.

Child protection policies are present within 2 of 6 Lutheran congregations. One church is presently revamping a risk management policy and one has a policy entitled "Special Considerations in Cases of Sexual Misconduct". However, this document deals specifically with staff behavior. The researcher was surprised to find that one congregation that has a pre-school does not have a background check for the teachers. Their only guideline is a requirement that parents physically check children in and out of school.

Two pastors report screening systems within the congregations. One church requires a background check for volunteers. However, five pastors reported that formal efforts have been made for protection of children and innocent people in the life of the congregation. When pressed to explain, there was comment that the general recommendation of a board was considered a 'formal effort.'

One pastor reported no need for such a system. "We are so small, we're like a big family. Everyone knows everyone and everything about everyone." The three largest

churches have directors of different programs who perform the interviews with prospective workers. Veto power is granted to the pastor.

The MSLC churches link with counseling services, but none of the six provide any specific programs for victims or families of sexual abuse, other than the aforementioned risk management policies of two of the congregations. One expressed a probable need for providing services, stating “If we offered it, they would come.”

In the MSLC congregations, two pastors in separate communities discussed heightened awareness when local teachers were indicted for sexually abusing students. Two pastors mentioned the impact of the Catholic Church’s crisis, on the church’s re-evaluation of risk management policy and sexual misconduct policy. Another pastor discussed having to confront a defrocked former pastor of this congregation who wanted to become more involved within the congregation and the former pastor was given parameters for his area of service.

Within the six MSLC congregations, three pastors have addressed experiences of sexual abuse or incest since they have been there. One of the incidents was incest that became known to the constituency. The pastor of one congregation stated he has addressed both incest and sexual abuse in his private counseling. In another setting, his board also had to confront a perpetrator and refuse to allow him to transport youth to church events.

A pastor of one of the larger churches explained that the congregants would probably not come to him because reputation is very important in this congregation. This is the reason they hired a part time counselor and train Stephen’s Ministers. “We are at a church where looks are everything – reputation is everything – success is everything in

this community. They are going to be more likely to talk to lay people about this than the pastor. They do not want the pastor to know.”

The theme of the MSLC seems to be to leave the subject of sexual abuse alone unless the situation arises. With only one church with a background check and two with screening systems, there is an indication of reluctance to address this issue which occurs with approximately one out of five females.

This reluctance, as well as the somewhat narrow denominational stand may be a symptom of low self-differentiation. When sexual abuse arises within the congregation, however, the pastors indicated there is confrontation and an effort at ministering to the affected individuals. They appear to take the reins and act responsibly. “None of us wants to confront these issues,” one pastor honestly opined, and yet this particular pastor has had to take the initiative in several incidents.

### Churches of the Nazarene

The Churches of the Nazarene seem to be governed by the pastor’s preferred style. One pastor reported “All Nazarene churches are similar in makeup. It is a pastor driven church.” Although three report the church as a shared leadership style, three pastors tend to describe it as pastor driven and one (the largest congregation) is described as ministry driven. Each pastor described his congregation as conservative in nature.

There is an elected church board in each congregation and the congregation is active in decision-making activities. The larger congregations vote on (or ratify) a board of elders or stewards to take responsibility for compassionate ministries and evangelism. This could include address of sexual abuse events.

The congregation is actively involved in ministry and governance. Within the congregation, dialogue and diversity of opinion is encouraged. Though the pastor seems to be the pivotal person, major decisions are made by the total leadership with a great weight placed on congregational input.

Five pastors reported heightened awareness at some time since they have been pastors. One community school district dismissed two teachers for sexual abuse of minors and the pastors reported the churches became more cautious and anxious.

Within the Churches of the Nazarene, there was a wide range of address. Pastors in 2 of 7 congregations have addressed sexual abuse in preaching, training, and setting policy. One congregation, a mega-church of over three thousand in weekly attendance, has a disciplinary committee that specifically deals with moral infractions- such as sexual abuse – of lay or leadership personnel. This congregation intentionally ministers to perpetrators as well, and employees a full-time counselor on staff.

Two of the congregations have a screening policy. One also emphasizes confidentiality in situations of accusation or perpetration. The three smallest congregations, all under one hundred in attendance, have no formal structure for placing volunteers in leadership with children or youth. Two pastors reported a background check. One pastor states the workers must sign permission for a background check, which may or may not be performed.

One congregation showed an insurance video as education and address of abuse a few years ago, but has done nothing else for protection of innocent people or education of volunteers. Another pastor said “No one talked about the issue, even though it was common knowledge within the congregation. Don’t drag the family name through the

mud, that's the rule." When asked to define sexual abuse, one pastor was not even willing to discuss it, though the subject was clearly explained in the contact letter (appendix b). "I know what it is, but would rather not say."

Pastoral leadership appears to take the responsibility with dealing with actual reports or complaints – particularly in two churches. Four pastors reported risk management policies, but only two have written guidelines and one church is developing a policy presently. The largest congregation has a discipline committee that handles reports, complaints, or charges.

There are no specific support programs in these seven churches, for families experiencing abuse or incest. Within the Churches of the Nazarene, 3 of 7 pastors refer parishioners to therapists in the congregation. One church has a full time therapist and three part time counselors on staff. Each of these congregations was above five hundred in membership. Two churches fully or partially pay for counseling outside of the congregation.

Within the Churches of the Nazarene, six pastors have addressed incidents of sexual abuse and all five have also ministered to parishioners who have experienced incestuous situations at their present congregations. Three of the pastors have worked with numerous incidents of sexual abuse. One church had a family that openly discussed, with other congregational members, sexual harassment of a minor by a stepfather.

One congregation seems particularly vigilant – recognizing names from a visitor registry as convicted molesters, perusing internet lists of sexual offenders, a policeman within the congregation recognizing convicted offenders, and a parent reporting a member who had been an offender. The pastor reported families of incest who are being

ministered to by the congregation. A pastor of another congregation explained “We dealt with it publicly, let the television station know when an incident happened at school, and that is how people learned to trust us, we confront and deal. That is part of our growth.”

In one congregation where the associate pastor was reporting, he seemed to indicate the former senior pastor did not report any of the three child molestation incidents (all of them incest) that had been reported to him. This associate pastor had personally reported the cases to the pastor.

The Nazarene congregation seems to look to the pastor somewhat as a benevolent dictator, and allows him or her to take the active role in making sure this response to abuse takes place. At the same time, the churches researched, except for one, seem content to let the pastor handle the matter and stay uninformed about issues and ramifications of abuse, as is evidenced by the lack of abuse education in spite of the high reporting of abusive households.

Level of anxiety does appear to inform the response of the Churches of the Nazarene in circumstances of sexual abuse. Indicating a willingness, on their part, to take a non-anxious stand, three churches that were researched have been intentional about trying to keep the congregation safe through methods of risk management, child protection policies, and screening. The pastors of the larger congregations take a proactive stance, confronting abuse when it happens and setting up parameters for perpetrators to be ministered to while keeping the congregation safe from sexual abuse or harassment.

In spite of all the incidents of sexual abuse reported within the Churches of the Nazarene, abuse education is a part of leadership training in only two congregations. Six

responded affirmatively that formal efforts have been made for protection of children and innocent persons, however those policies only appear to be written procedures in two of the congregations. This, and the somewhat extreme vigilance in the one exception, may give evidence of a lower self-differentiation and high anxiety.

### Presbyterian Churches

The Presbyterian churches are congregational in nature. “The power is in the session.” The elders are the elected leaders that govern. They set the policies. The pastor is a member of the governing board. “Everything about this church comes to this table” one pastor explained. There appears to be some ambivalence toward the value of conflict of opinion. Three pastors deemed it necessary for growth and outreach, however 2 of 6 said the congregation would value peace above voicing issues of disagreement within the church or community. Two pastors said they could not answer the questions regarding conflict. There appears to be little consistency of commitment to the value of conflict and diversity of opinion, in spite of the commitment to a more democratic form of governing. There does appear to be a consensus that the congregations are pastor-driven, in spite of the well-organized lay leadership.

More than any other denomination in this study, the Presbyterian Church was more diverse in character and in different values. The pastors seem comfortable with their differences. This observation was made from the opinions articulated, the willingness to poke gentle fun at themselves, the openness to the interviews, and the willingness to discuss their diversity within the denomination.



In the Presbyterian churches, all but one pastor stated if there was any heightened awareness at any time, it was only within the staff. The one church that seemed to have anxiety was thrown into the middle of a crisis situation when their acting interim pastor was charged with sexual misconduct within his previous congregation. While he was at the present congregation, he was actually free to serve in his capacity, and did in fact complete his assignment. Although he admitted to a history of sexual abuse within his former churches, the congregation stood by him. He was eventually convicted. Later, when a young woman returned home from out of state, she was made to feel unwelcome enough to leave after she was accused of sexual abuse outside of the congregation. This congregation has not changed its lack of child protection policy or screening volunteers, even after these two events which took place over two years ago.

Among the Presbyterian pastors interviewed, 5 of 6 have addressed sexual abuse or incest in either training seminars or from the pulpit. One pastor is on the board of directors for the city's Center Against Sexual Assault and hosts training events, frequently having volunteers and staff speak in services. Another church has brought in a nationally known specialist in the field of sexual abuse, who addressed ministry to the sexually broken.

Only one of the Presbyterian Churches researched has a program of intentional address, other than a risk management policy. This congregation, the largest one, has a fully staffed counseling center, staff directives, mandatory sexual abuse training for all staff and a sexual misconduct workshop offered for all volunteers. It provides continuing opportunities for further abuse education for volunteers and church workers. Two have risk management programs and screening systems within the children's departments, if

not within the youth departments. Two others have limited guidelines for their child care centers, but not for the regular church programs. The two smallest churches have no system for screening.

Of the six Presbyterian churches, four have a policy of protection. The associate pastor interviewed, who is the director of the Family Ministries Center within a congregation of over four thousand members, could not say if there is a document within the congregation, though he has been there fifteen years. He did, however, affirm that there is a screening system for volunteers of children. One of the Presbyterian churches has a policy it reviews every year. Three of the churches have background checks and/or fingerprinting.

From the six pastors interviewed, four answered affirmatively for being aware of sexual abuse having taken place within the congregational constituency. However only three pastors said it had been addressed within the congregation.. One pastor reported a case of sexual abuse within the offices by a newly hired support staff member. This caused turmoil within the staff and resulted in a court case and the victimized employee suing the church.

In spite of only one pastor reporting heightened anxiety, three reported sexual misconduct cases that directly affected the congregation. One church involved two separate cases of a pastor (25 years apart), becoming sexually involved with a parishioner. The church chooses not to discuss these cases. "I've only heard bits and pieces," the pastor, who had been there eighteen months, stated, "the congregation does not talk about these stories. I actually stumbled on them while reading some past

documents of the congregation.” This church has not adopted any risk management policy, child protection document or screening system for volunteers yet.

While the Presbyterian churches appear to welcome dialogue, there seems to be a sense of preferring not to acknowledge the abuse when it is exposed. The congregation that chose to stand by the pastor and has yet to install any precautionary measures within its children and youth departments, seems to be an example of low self-differentiation and high anxiety - choosing to distance rather than to confront the clearly crisis-producing opportunity.

Level of anxiety does appear to influence the ability to be an effective support system to families experiencing sexual abuse within the different congregations. However, within the Presbyterian Churches, there seems to be a wide spread on a continuum showing differentiation level. The largest congregation provides various opportunities for staff and volunteers, requires background checks, and has addressed abuse in many venues. The smallest two Presbyterian congregations have no background check or risk management policy, have never had child abuse training. Nor, to the pastor’s knowledge, have they addressed sexual abuse from the pulpit or in classes, though, in fact, both of them are aware of incidents of sexual abuse within the congregational constituency.

#### United Methodist Churches

The Methodist Churches function as a representative organization. “We are democratic to a fault. We try to get as many people as we can involved.” Although clergy members are assigned to pastorates by the bishop in the United Methodist Church,

the congregation runs in a fairly democratic style. The pastoral leadership works with the administrative boards in a collaborative manner.

Three pastors called their congregations pastor-driven. Two described theirs as a shared leadership style. “Here the pastor is not king,” one pastor said. “There is a respect for the wisdom within the body.” Two pastors discussed keeping the call of Christ prominent as one of the pastors’ roles, including what that entails in meeting the needs of the community.

The pastors report 3 of 6 congregations with a detailed process in place for disagreement. Five pastors say the congregation is free to voice disagreement, however there was not a clear agreement about the congregation feeling that they can disagree.

Within the United Methodist Churches (UMC), 2 of 6 pastors interviewed have addressed sexual abuse from the pulpit or in a mandatory training seminar. In one church, there are two one-hour segments of training for youth. One congregation partners with Wesley Foundation within its facilities, to do training, which does include abuse issues. A fourth church has adopted a new policy, to become effective the beginning of 2003, which requires volunteers in Sunday School and Children’s Ministries to go through compulsory training on sexual abuse.

Three churches have a background check for workers of children and youth. One church does perform criminal checks with the attached school, however, has not carried the procedure over into the Sunday School, nursery, or youth program. Two of the other congregations have a policy defining harassment and sexual abuse, outlining guidelines for working with children 18 years or younger, or giving directives for reporting abuse. One pastor reported the congregation’s anger at the extensiveness of the policy.

Methodist pastors report in two congregations addressing sexual abuse incidents privately with people in the congregation or on staff. However, only two pastors reported public awareness of incidents

Heightened anxiety was reported in three of the congregations. Two of these churches have addressed sexual abuse events. One situation involved a local pastor who had molested minors. This became known to the bishop's office, and other local congregations of the denomination were affected by the ensuing anxiety. The reporting pastor addressed it from the pulpit to the consternation of the older people, who wanted silence, and the outrage of the younger people, who wanted more information.

In the second example, the associate pastor discussed a young man arrested and investigated on child pornography charges. It was on television, so the parishioners were aware. The young man was expelled from the university. The pastor reported anxiety within the congregation.

Another pastor, in a former church, reported to authorities, a case of paternal incest, only to find that other youth counselors and the senior pastor had all known about it, but had done nothing. Many of the congregational members were aware of the incestuous relationship.

The United Methodist Churches appear on the surface to be relatively well differentiated as a denomination. There is wide diversity, and articulation of conflict of opinion is encouraged in addressing issues. However, there are symptoms of distancing – a sign of anxiety. According to the surveys and the interviews, four disagree that there have been incidents of either incest or sexual abuse that their present congregation has had to address. One pastor did mention she had counseled women who have had a

history of sexual abuse. Two pastors recalled incidents in a former parish. Two pastors indicated their Stephen's ministry would address such situations, if need be. When the most recent estimates of women who have been sexually abused are between 20% and 33%, it seems curious that only two pastors could recall an incident within the congregation.

Other evidence of distancing is the pastor who mentioned a former female associate that seemed to have had a sexual abuse background. Her relationships, both professionally and privately, were chaotic. The pastor finally terminated the associate's position, without ever researching his suspicions.

These reports, as well as the lack of pastoral awareness of any other incidents, indicate low toleration for anxiety-causing situations. Four of the pastors did not seem to feel sexual abuse was an issue that their congregation had any need to address.

## Summary

Level of anxiety informs the dynamic of response to crisis opportunities within churches. Situations such as sexual abuse of an incestuous nature are anxiety-producing events. When the church is called upon to respond, it does so according to its level of self-differentiation. Highly differentiated congregations will be more likely to engage in the uncomfortable discussion of the situation, come to a consensus regarding response, and act accordingly. It is also possible that the more differentiated a congregation is, the more likely it is that there will be procedures in place for risk management. As the researcher interviewed pastors from the seven different denominations, this understanding influenced the findings.

Another response of note was the overwhelming majority of pastors who reported their congregation was working on child protection procedures, screening systems, and risk management policies. In each denomination, at least two pastors answered the question of such documentation and preventative activity with an indication that this is an area they are presently working on. Some pastors stated they have been gathering information for the past year or two. Several told the researcher these policies would be in place by the beginning of the next year. This response seems to indicate an acknowledgement of the need, yet a low priority rating of the actual action that is required to fulfill the need.

*Research Question #2 - Does the pastor's perception of the congregational position regarding women's roles in the home and society – including the position on female leadership in the church – influence the response, within the congregation, to issues of incest or sexual abuse?*

The sensitivity to listen to the concerns of the 'voiceless ones', such as women and children, and the ability to value the contributions of both genders, will advise congregations in areas of abuse. Perceptions of women's roles also inform the understanding of the type of behavior that is considered abusive, even between husband

and wife. Because of this, the pastor was questioned about the role of women, as understood by the denomination and local congregation.

### **Women in Leadership**

The use of women in leadership within the congregation exposes the level of respect for women, both as equal partners and as resources for ministry. Congregations that have multiple staff positions show their intentionality to utilize the contributions of women by choosing to employ both genders. Congregations that have only one staff member manifest their acceptance of the leadership of women by the positions on boards or in ministry capacities that the women may hold, or by a woman as the senior pastor.

### **Gender Roles within the Home**

The perspective of gender roles within the home, may also give information to the general understanding of the value of women, and the awareness of issues of patriarchal paradigm. Pastors are questioned regarding the congregational espousal of traditional gender roles. This term is discussed, particularly among the African-American pastors to get a better definition. As one pastor stated, “Traditional gender roles are different according to the culture.”

### **Attitudes and Statements**

To measure the position of women and their roles in home and society, the researcher also analyzes the responses as well as the observed attitude of the respondent. A less tangible evaluation, attitudes and statements, enhance the general opinion of



women. While recognizing the pastor's statements do not necessarily reflect the congregation in attitude toward women, nevertheless, the researcher cannot ignore the toleration of discriminatory language. The use of such language may indicate permission from the congregation for inequities.

### **Definitions of Sexual Abuse**

A definition of sexual abuse may give some clue of the sensitivity of the pastor. There are areas of relationship and behavior that are not considered sexually abusive by some cultures, yet are defined as such by law or by another community. Denominational statements or understandings of abuse also vary. As each denomination is examined, the definitions, by the pastors, of sexual abuse are noted.

### **Provision of Response to issues of Incest of Sexual Abuse**

The discussion of the pastors of each denomination is then examined with the provision of response to families experiencing sexual abuse or incest. In this way, the research will expose the correlation between issues and process. Does the theory align with the action of the congregations? Is there any relationship between perception of women's roles and understanding of sexual abuse? Is the church more likely to be sensitive to issues of abuse with the presence of a woman on staff or in a leadership position?

These questions are considered in relationship to this research question. The results are reported by denomination.

## Denominational Responses

### Assemblies of God

The Assemblies of God use women in all areas of leadership. All six congregations the researcher visited had women on the ministry staff. Two of the pastors interviewed were female. There is a female on staff in the national headquarters. However, none of the six congregations researched employed a female senior pastor.

It was implied that women are used in leadership but not in a senior pastorate role. On a multi-staff, the senior pastor is typically a male. One pastor stated that women are used in ministerial positions mainly for children's ministries, women's ministries, and Christian education.

A part of this assumption also comes from the statements about traditional family roles (ie.- the husband is head of the household as a scriptural mandate). Roles within the family are clearly defined, but three of the pastors state that they believe in equal partnership within marriage. However, the pastors all indicated that man is considered Biblically to be the head of the household. Three pastors delineated between the husband as head of a family and the male as head of a congregation, stating they were not the same concept.

The general statement of the Assemblies is that they believe in giftings and edifications. "We go by giftings, not gender." The gender is not the major issue, but the mix of spiritual gifts, which determines the ministries. This denomination appears to value women and welcomes them as partners in ministry, but seems to have some semblance of ambivalence regarding women at a head, CEO, or senior pastor position. One pastor stated "If it wasn't for women, the Assemblies of God wouldn't be in

existence. They come in and start churches and get them on their feet and then some man comes in and says, ‘Well, we better take it over now.’”

The researcher was treated with respect and as an equal in ministry in three of the congregations. The other three pastors inferred an inequality by language and actions. When one female associate pastor was interviewed, she appeared to speak freely until her husband, another associate pastor, came into the room after the first thirty minutes. It was noted that after he sat down to take part in the interview, his wife referred all other questions to him.

When asked to define sexual abuse, one pastor stated “I could sexually abuse by never touching, but speaking to my secretary in an inappropriate way, and because she’s paid, she would be being abused because she couldn’t do anything about it without losing her job. When persons feel they have no choice, it is sexual abuse...too many times, the woman has no choice but to take it.”

Sexual abuse was defined by other pastors as ‘violating the will through means of sexual connotation or pressure...any violation of a boundary that an individual would set – speech, insinuations, touch against persons, or anything that makes the person not comfortable. It doesn’t have to be physical.’

Among the denominations researched, the AOG were the most active in providing a variety of venues for training of volunteers, protection for children and youth, and ministry to survivors of abuse. One pastor (who referred to the researcher as ‘girl’ several times) supervised installation of more precautionary measures than had any other church of the same size, and more than most of the other churches in any of the denominations.

Among the AOG congregations, 5 of 6 congregations have mandatory background checks. The sixth congregation gets permission for a background check but does not always make one. They keep the option open, however. Four have incorporated a written child protection policy and four require a written application process for volunteer workers with children and youth. Three congregations provide support groups for survivors or perpetrators of abuse, and all six provide sexual abuse education for volunteer workers.

### Christian Churches

The Christian Churches are likely to use females in roles of pastoral and congregational leadership. Two of the pastors interviewed are senior pastors. Three of the seven churches researched have females on staff, with one church having just hired a female staff member. One pastor reported his wife is an ordained minister and serving in a local ministry outside of the congregations. In the more conservative arm of the Christian churches (Christian – Churches of Christ), one congregation does not allow women on the board of elders, yet a woman can be pastor of the congregation, which appears to be an inconsistent policy. The pastor of this congregation replied affirmatively to women in staff positions, but stated mostly they are for children, youth or women's ministries.

One pastor of the more liberal element of the Christian churches pointed out that "Christian Churches (Disciples of Christ) were one of the first denominations to ordain women". The two female senior pastors interviewed are from the Disciples of Christ.

In 6 of 7 congregations, the pastors do not claim to espouse traditional gender roles. One pastor stated their denomination does not make any public statement like that.

With each interview, the researcher was treated with respect and as a partner in ministry. There was discussion about the need to utilize women on a more consistent basis. The concerns about making the church a safe place for every person - child and adult, woman and man, were stated.

In defining sexual abuse there was an awareness of the damaging effect of words. When asked to define sexual abuse, several pastors spoke of inappropriate language and sexual innuendo. One pastor used the definition of 'anything negatively affecting the sexual identity of persons, brought on by an other outside presence.' The understanding of sexual abuse as an attitude as well as an action was prevalent in the definitions of each of the Christian Church pastors.

In spite of the inclusion of women in leadership roles in the ministry of the Christian Churches, there seems to be very little intentional preventative effort with regard to child abuse. It seemed as if other issues take precedence in the life of the congregation. Even in the one congregation where there were multiple charges of abuse by one youth leader, there appears to be no effort to create protective measures for children or youth.

Only two of the congregations offer minimal risk management policies. One congregation incorporates a background check and one has a written child protection policy. Two congregations offer abuse education for volunteer workers with children and youth. These congregations both have women on their staff.

One female pastor and one male pastor seemed to recognize the seriousness of statistical research and to be pro-active. However, only the male pastor had policies that included laity as well as clergy, regarding sexual abuse. There is no clear indication that the inclusion of women in leadership in this denomination has an influence on the response to issues of incest or sexual abuse.

### Churches of God

Within the Churches of God, all pastors claimed the congregations have female leadership. From the congregations researched, 7 of 8 have females as senior or associate pastors. This non-denominational fellowship has a strong history of females in ministry. At its inception as a movement in the late 1800's, over 30% of the clergy were female (Leonard, 1989). All eight congregations researched have females in ministerial staff positions.

Four pastors stated they espouse the traditional gender roles within the family. However, as one African-American pastor said "What is traditional? In our culture many of our families have only ever had a female head of household, so I would say – yes, we espouse traditional gender roles within the family – as our culture considers traditional." As four of the congregations interviewed were predominantly African-American, it is likely that the term 'traditional gender role' is interpreted differently within the eight congregations of the Church of God.

The attitudes of the pastors interviewed were consistent with inclusion of women in leadership roles. There was a sense of equality and understanding for need of

intentionality in using both genders in leadership roles. The general impression was that the church can minister more effectively to everyone if women are used as partners in ministry.

Definitions of sexual abuse were inclusive of ideas such as imbalance of power, contact or non-contact advancement of a sexual nature, and improper wording or pressure. There seems to be an understanding of sexual abuse including conversations and taking advantage of the authority position. One pastor discussed abuse as “any violation (of a sexual nature) done to an individual against a person’s will or when a person is powerless to resist because of power role or dominating role that would compromise consensuality.”

Congregations researched within the Church of God are pro-active about support for abuse. Although only one has a support group for survivors or perpetrators of abuse, three more provide financial support for counseling for families who may be experiencing abuse. Six congregations require background checks and five have a written child protection policy.

The position regarding women’s roles in home and society may influence the response to abuse incidents within the congregations. As there is strong female leadership and 6 of 8 congregations have addressed sexual abuse, with four congregations having provided training sessions, it may be that the influence of women within the movement actually makes the response more pro-active. There is a variety of support measures within the congregations. Three of the congregations that state they espouse traditional gender roles have child protection or risk management policies in place.

## Missouri Synod Lutheran Churches

The Missouri Synod Lutheran Church is the only denomination researched that does not ordain women. That said, there appears to be some difference of opinion regarding women in staff or leadership positions. In two of the churches, elders can be women – and are. Two pastors have women in ministerial staff positions. In one of those two congregations, a woman is chair of the governing board. The pastors that reported women in ministry positions admitted the uniqueness of the practice within the denomination. These were the two largest congregations interviewed within the denomination. The other congregations do not have women in positions of leadership.

Five pastors report espousing traditional gender roles within the family. Two of the pastors seemed uncomfortable with the position and made qualifying statements about women working outside the home. One pastor reported not supporting that position, but added, “We believe that the BEST family setting is where there is a husband, wife and children.” One pastor stated “The Spiritual head of the family would be the husband...women carry so much of the burden elsewhere. The husband should do something!”

In three of the MSLC congregations, the pastors seemed defensive about the position of women in leadership. They indicated they did not feel women belong in any leadership position. These three pastors were very cautious with their responses and spent the least amount of time with the researcher of any other pastors interviewed.

In the MSLC, one pastor defined incest, saying it is “any inappropriate behavior or speech that betrays the God-given order of the family. We think of sexual abuse as touch, but language also could be sexual abuse.” The definitions included harassment,



betraying trust, touching, speaking, insinuation, and pervasive activity. One pastor included “Obtaining sexual favors by using power. It could happen between a husband and wife...and has.”

Only one of the congregations conducts a background check. Two pastors stated there is no need for any kind of formal risk management policy. Two pastors have a screening system. Four congregations provide sexual abuse education for volunteer workers. The largest congregation, a church of over two thousand parishioners, is working on a full screening system with background check and referrals. The proposed date for incorporating this policy is by the end of 2003.

It is curious that the denomination that does not ordain women and limits women in leadership is also the one where the research shows less intentional efforts for formal protection of children or youth. This could be a product of the denominational and congregational position toward women, but there are many other issues that would need to be discussed. The influence of the patriarchal paradigm within the MSLC is likely to have some influence on decisions about sexual abuse issues.

#### Churches of the Nazarene

All seven of the Church of the Nazarene pastors reported they do use women in all roles of leadership. However, I spoke to no females. The three congregations that employee associate pastors have women on staff. The pastor of the largest congregation researched, reported that almost one half of the ministers on his staff of twenty-two are female.

One pastor spoke to the difference between leadership in the church and leadership in the family. He spoke of the husband being head of the family, but a male does not especially have to be head of the church. Although intellectual assent to diversity in leadership was given, there is homogeneity within six of the congregations. Men appear to be in the major leadership roles in those six congregations

All reported espousing traditional gender role and all reported being a conservative church. The Nazarenes appear to be a traditional, family oriented denomination.

The atmosphere was more guarded within the Nazarene interviews, and the discussions with the researcher were carefully sustained, with an air of discomfort from 4 of 7 pastors. In two of the interviews, the pastors spoke in a condescending manner to the researcher.

The pastors defined sexual abuse as both verbal and physical. It was in this denomination that perhaps the least eloquent definitions were given. One pastor hesitated and stuttered before saying “I know what it is, but I don’t want to say.” These pastors’ lack of clear understanding about sexual abuse in its many forms may be related to the interpretation of women’s roles. If the denomination believes the husband is the clear head of the household, it is possible that what could be referred to as abuse is interpreted as the man’s right as a husband.

However, there were also definitions that seemed to show an understanding of the broad scope of behavior that could be considered sexually abusive. One pastor explained it could be any sexual activity that is unwanted. He continued that abuse can take place within marriage. Another pastor said there are other areas of sexual misconduct that are

inappropriate if not abusive and that the church has a responsibility to be aware and careful.

In spite of five pastors reporting publicly known circumstances of sexual abuse within their congregations, only two churches reported having a mandated background check, one seeks permission for a background check, two have policies, and four use an application procedure for volunteers. Two congregations provide sexual abuse education for all volunteer workers and staff. The one church that has all of the afore-mentioned controls has a large ministerial staff that is half comprised of females.

As it is in the MSLC, this more conservative denomination has a minority of congregations with preventative measures in place in the congregations. It is possible that the interpretation of a woman's role in the home and society has some impact on the presence of child protection and support programs within the congregations

### Presbyterian Churches

Within the Presbyterian Churches, 5 of the 6 congregations researched have female leadership, although only three of the churches have more than one person on ministerial staff. One pastor offered the information that the session, presbytery, regional and general assembly organizations all have females in leadership roles.

All pastors interviewed were male. None of the churches has ever had a female senior pastor. One pastor stated concern that his congregation is very conservative and minimizes the influence of a woman in leadership. As an example, he reported an incident where the church committee had to go before a lawyer on a legal issue, and the

congregation insisted a man must be the one to represent the congregation, because their position would then be one of weakness if a woman was the spokesperson.

Neither the congregation, nor the denominations espouse traditional gender roles, according to 5 of 6 pastors. The pastors spoke of the preponderance of nontraditional parishioners in four of the congregations. One congregation has an active ministry to gays and lesbians and one congregation is made up almost entirely of single parents.

Among the Presbyterian churches, there is an impression of an egalitarian organization. The pastors spoke freely to the researcher, expressing concern over the issues of sexual abuse and discussing the questions in a collegial manner.

The pastors used the concept of unequal power to define sexual abuse. All pastors mentioned the inability of the other person to be consensual. "When power or authority that is unequal is wielded over someone else who cannot engage the other with an equality or mutuality, it is sexual abuse."

There is concern that the safety and protection of children is not a priority. Among the six congregations, though there is a commitment to women in leadership, only three congregations have a policy addressing sexual abuse and three perform mandatory background checks. One congregation fingerprints all volunteers with youth and children. Sexual abuse education is offered in five of the congregations in a variety of forms. However, only one congregation requires a written application process for volunteers with youth and children. There is not enough data to support the concept of the congregational position regarding women's roles in home and society greatly influencing the response to issues of sexual abuse or incest, although it may have an impact on the provision of sexual abuse education.

## United Methodist Churches

All six United Methodist Church pastors have female leadership. Three of the pastors interviewed are female, all senior pastors. All six congregations have presently or have had previously a female on the pastoral staff. The four congregations that have multi-staff all have women on staff. One congregation only has a woman on staff, employed at three-fourths time. One church has daughtered another congregation on the other side of the city. This congregation has a female senior pastor.

None of the six pastors answered affirmatively to espousing traditional gender roles. One church has a gay/lesbian ministry and so has drawn families from households that have same gender parents. Two pastors discussed having churches with more single parent households than double parent households. Four of the pastors defined their congregations as feminist, and theologically and politically liberal.

One female senior pastor informed her congregation of child molestation that had occurred by a local pastor of the same denomination. She reported polarity between the generations regarding the report. The older members were appalled at the mention of the incident and stated the belief that such discussion was inappropriate. The younger members were outraged about the situation. The pastor wondered if her gender had anything to do with the response by the congregational members. "Because I am a woman, maybe they felt uncomfortable talking about it. You don't discuss that stuff."

The UMC included unwanted comments, harassment with a sexual tone, flirting, discrimination, and unwanted attention in the definition of sexual abuse. There was a sense of understanding from each of the six pastors that sexual abuse is often about

taking unfair advantage of a female. “It’s a power event at its basest level,” one pastor said.

In spite of the intentionality of including women in all roles of leadership and treating women with equality and respect, there is not evidence that the UMC makes preventative measures for children and youth a strong priority. Two churches have a document for child protection and three congregations have incorporated a background check, at least on a limited basis. Five congregations require a written application process for volunteers with children and youth. However, this policy does not address sexual abuse.

Two pastors reported that women had discussed sexual abuse by their fathers. Both of these pastors were female. It is possible that a survivor of incest would be more comfortable discussing their history with a person of the same gender.

Five of the pastors spoke of counseling parishioners who had experienced sexual abuse in this or a former congregation, but only three indicated making efforts to instill child protection. There is not enough data to support the theory that attitudes toward women in leadership influence the response to issues of incest or sexual abuse.

(From the congregations, number in each category)	Churches with Women as Senior Pastors (6)	Churches with Women on Pastoral Staff ( 30 )	Churches in which Women were Interviewed (8)
<b>Background Checks of Volunteer Workers with Children and/or Youth</b>	2	21	4
<b>Guidelines in Cases of Perpetration</b>	1	11	3
<b>Written Child Protection Policy</b>	1	17	3
<b>Written Application process for Volunteer Workers with Children and/or Youth</b>	3	15	4
<b>Counselor (other than pastor) or Parish Nurse on Staff</b>	0	7	2
<b>Financial Support for Counseling of survivors, perpetrators, or families</b>	0	6	0
<b>Support Groups for Survivors or Perpetrators of Abuse</b>	0	5	2
<b>Sexual Abuse Education provided for volunteer workers (sermons, seminars, training days, etc.)</b>	5	22	7
<b>Community Resources Accessed (lawyers, Therapists, social workers, ecumenical org., etc.)</b>	6	21	7

Figure 4.1  
Between Case Matrix of Women in Leadership - Provision of Support Services

The matrix of women in leadership illustrates the possible influence of women in leadership positions on the provision of support measures within a congregation. As is shown in column three, the sensitivity to such issues as sexual abuse education and background checks for volunteer workers as an effort to provide a safe place for families who may or may not be concerned about abuse does seem to be influenced by the presence of women on the ministerial staff and community resources accessed.

*Research Question #3 – As far as the pastor is aware, does the history of sexual abuse or incest within the local congregation influence the church's response to families with the presenting crisis of incest now?*

The experience of sexual abuse or incest within a congregation may make the leadership more aware of a need for safety precautions, particularly within the children and youth programs. This question probes the background of the congregations to ascertain the influence of historical experience on intentional measures for prevention and ministry.

#### History of Abuse within Congregations

With each denomination, the incidents of incest and sexual abuse were reported. It is noted whether the sexual abuse is of an incestuous nature. These analyses were done to set the background for the question of history within the congregations.

#### Preventative and Support Measures within Congregations

The presence of background checks, educational opportunities and preventative measures were then checked to determine the correlation between history and response within each denomination. This is to ascertain the influence of history of sexual abuse on response to families experiencing abuse. There is some discussion on relationship between history and policy per denomination.



## Denominational Responses

### Assemblies of God

Within the Assemblies of God, four pastors reported incidents of incest and five recalled at least one cases of sexual abuse became known within the congregations. There were several stories of people who had come individually to the pastors for counseling that did not become known to the rest of the staff or to the congregation at large.

Of the AOG congregations, 5 of 6 have background checks, all six congregations provide abuse education to some degree, and three mentioned addressing sexual abuse from the pulpit. One pastor commented, “We are very pro-active, very open, not reactionary.” That statement is supported by the presence of training, address of abuse, support groups, and incorporation of controls within the congregations.

The education of volunteers may include training on ‘reason to suspect’ abuse, what to look for in potential abuse situations, and limit of access. There are support groups and hurt groups that have been trained to address the subject of abuse as it arises. Three congregations have sexual abuse focus support groups. These three churches are over one thousand in regular attendance each Sunday. These all developed in response to a need voiced from the parishioners.

In developing support groups, four of the churches have found they have given support to families experiencing incest. Because of the expressed need, in order to effectively minister to the families, more training became necessary. One pastor stated, “I believe that is what causes many problems, not dealing with an issue.”

One congregation had an incest experience that became very well known among the parishioners. Because guidelines were already in place, the pastor and the congregation dealt with it according to their checks and balances. Throughout the crisis, they also tried to show grace and love, in spite of the level of anxiety that was heightened within the congregation by the family members' reactionary behaviors.

The strong statement of protection within the Assemblies of God may be in response to the history of all six of the congregations. The heavy proportion of parishioners within the AOG who have revealed histories of sexual abuse or incest, and the evidence of supportive response within the AOG may be indicative of the history influencing the response. It could also be that the installation of protective policies and abuse education opportunities makes the Assemblies of God that were researched a safer place to worship for individuals experiencing incest.

### Christian Churches

In the Christian churches, though the history of sexual abuse is strong within the congregations, the responses, including protection, education, and confrontation seem to be less than adequate. Pastors reported in 3 of 7 congregations, sexual abuse experiences that became known to more than just the pastor. Within 2 of the 7 congregations, pastors reported relationships of incest that became known.

One church conducts a background check for volunteers and workers in children's ministries. Two female pastors have addressed abuse in sermons. Two congregations have incorporated abuse education into its program. There were no reports of support

groups within the churches. “There is too much of a hangup,” one pastor noted, “People are afraid others will find out.”

“What I’ve noticed about church folk is that nobody is on high alert unless it specifically is of importance to them,” one pastor stated. Yet even that is not always the case. One pastor was recommended to a congregation by the regional office because of sexual abuse that had occurred within the youth group by one of the youth leaders. Their response since has not been pro-active, but rather has been to deny the risk. It is possible the level of anxiety could have influenced the response, which was to get rid of the youth worker and then to ignore that there might be a problem, either for the abused youth or with their preventative policies. In this case the worker became the identified patient. Once he was dismissed, the congregation went back to pretending all is well, thus maintaining the homeostasis. This distancing indicates high anxiety level.

Conversely, one Christian Church had some critical incidents, and developed precautionary measures and guidelines as they processed these incidents. Background checks and policies were created specifically because of the awareness of need. The pastor reported no dissension in drawing up the policies, just “Disgust that such a thing had to be done. To tell you the truth, it just made us sick, having to struggle with the reality of this issue among us.”

The lack of address in sermons as well as incorporation of either abuse education or background checks is not congruent with the report of abuse within the congregations of the Christian Churches. Other priorities seem to take precedence, despite the history of sexual abuse and incest.

## Churches of God

The pastors in 6 of 8 Churches of God report sexual abuse incidents becoming commonly known to some members of the congregation. Three of the pastors also indicated relationships of incest that the congregation had to address.

Within the Churches of God, 6 of 8 have background checks. Three pastors have preached sermons on abuse, partially in response to sexual abuse that had taken place within the community and congregation. Four churches host training sessions to educate volunteers on dangers, concerns, results of sexual abuse and what behaviors or symptoms to watch for.

Support groups, cell groups and small groups that do not specifically address abuse, but where the leaders have been trained for response, are present in five congregations. One pastor explained that the small group setting is more likely to be the arena for recounting abuse than is the larger congregational setting. A group of ten or twelve that meets weekly is bound to become more intimate than is a congregation of several hundred people, and often that group has an opportunity to minister more effectively.

A different pastor, who reported a situation where a young child was accused of sexually abusing another child, evidenced this theory. The pastor informed the cell group leader. After meeting with the family and the leader together, the pastor secured counseling for the child and follow-up for the family, through the leader.

Both the address of sexual abuse in training and congregational policies that were created seem to have become reality in many of the congregations partly because of the presence of sexual abuse among the parishioners. As persons would share their stories it

became obvious to the leaders that they would need training in order to facilitate the survivors in their healing process. In one congregation the presence of a perpetrator within the school housed in the church facility became public knowledge. The pastor described the crisis, explaining that the congregation allowed the television crews to come in and report the situation. The church dealt with the situation quickly and honestly, creating a relationship of trust with the community.

The intentional address of abuse within the Church of God congregations here researched appears to provide a safe place for survivors to come for healing. Deliberate efforts to alert and train volunteers in sexual abuse issues, have resulted in the knowledge of hurting families within the constituency.

#### Missouri Synod Lutheran Churches

Of the six MSLC pastors that were interviewed, two indicated experiences of sexual abuse had become known within the congregation and one pastor had been confronted with a situation of incest that became public. To date there have been very few formal efforts at preventative measures among the six congregations.

One church has a background check, for leaders volunteering for overnight work with youth and children. One congregation is presently working on a policy that would include a background check. Four churches have incorporated abuse education into their training programs for boards, committees and teachers. Two of those pastors have mentioned abuse in sermons and provided training within group settings. One church has developed a policy they call 'Special Considerations in Cases of Sexual Misconduct'. Three churches have no screening system at all. "We're like a big family." One pastor

related. “Everybody knows everyone, so if someone takes a role within the church, everyone know the person.”

Two churches have a Stephen’s Ministries program and within that program the ministers are trained in circumstances where issues of sexual abuse arise. In another congregation a parish nurse program is in effect. The nurse informed the researcher that she deals with sexual abuse when it comes up.

Two pastors spoke of utilizing Lutheran Child and Family Services. These pastors refer any issues of a serious nature to this counseling agency. Lutheran Social Services is also called in to help in one inner city congregation.

The largest church researched set up policies and training when it was smaller. The pastor indicated his concern actually influenced the procedures that were put in place, not a specific incident. Two pastors in different states referred to situations with public school teachers who were accused of child molestation. Because of the heightened anxiety the congregations addressed the issue of sexual abuse.

However, only four of the MSLC congregations have addressed abuse in any way. The others indicated they have seen no need for either education or preventative measures. This lack of address may be a result of the size of those smaller congregations as all three had less membership than the other churches in the MSLC.

#### Church of the Nazarene

Among the Churches of the Nazarene, 5 of 7 pastors have dealt with incest, two of which have become known to some of the congregational members. At least one case

of sexual abuse also has been brought to five of the pastors' attention, two of them exposed within the congregation.

In spite of this high revelation of sexual abuse, only two congregations require background checks, two have a screening policy, and two provide abuse education. One pastor reported addressing sexual abuse in a sermon. Two of the congregations utilize small groups or hurt groups and it is within these groups that leaders are trained to deal with the issue when it comes up.

Many congregations have funds to support people for counseling, as the pastors expressed their lack of qualification in handling such issues. This response has been directly related to the presence of sexual abuse within the constituency. One pastor addresses sexual abuse as it arises and stated the need has driven the process, while one pastor reported the church addressed it as a preventative issue, recognizing the reality of the presence of abuse within families.

The pastor of the largest congregation, with a weekly attendance of over three thousand parishioners related an incident that became public. The church actually approached the television stations with the information, so the true story would be told to the public. Because they had done so, the pastor stated the community became more trustful of the church.

One congregation seems especially hypervigilant about watching for perpetrators of abuse. This pastor reported several incidents of sexual abuse within the congregation. He also reported several times when a parishioner or staff member would recognize a name or a person from the newspaper or from the offenders list on the internet. The question arises – is the hypervigilance there because of the many incidents or are the

incidents becoming more commonly known because of the alert nature of the congregation? Has sexual abuse become an issue because the church has become known as a safe place to be ministered to for those who have been victimized by abuse? The transactional nature of relationships would indicate that the need feeds the response and conversely, the response creates a safe place for recounting of experiences.

However, within two congregations, although sexual abuse of minors became a public issue within the community, there was no address. Both of these smaller congregations reported heightened anxiety within the church. One of these situations was with a youth in the congregation. The associate pastor being interviewed stated the congregational policy was to report to the senior pastor and let him handle the situations. The abuse was reported to the senior pastor, but the pastor did not report to the authorities.

The lack of sexual abuse education in the presence of sexual abuse history within so many of the Nazarene congregations researched is alarming. It appears to be a church that invites people to share their concerns and tragedies, yet there is not clear evidence that the congregations make enough effort to respond to the abuse within families. The lack of background checks and child protection policies does not indicate intentionality in making the church a safe place for children and youth, particularly those who may have a history of abuse in the home.

### **Presbyterian Churches**

Four of the Presbyterian Church pastors report incidents of sexual abuse. One pastor recalled an incestuous relationship becoming known within the congregation. The



other two pastors knew of no examples of sexual abuse that had taken place within their congregations, although they had all been at the church for at least three years.

Four congregations have background checks, three have some form of screening system and five congregations provide abuse education in some form. One pastor recalled addressing abuse from the pulpit. Three congregations have support groups that do not necessarily address abuse. Three churches have psychologists or counselors within the congregation and stated they refer individuals needing counseling to those persons.

One congregation has addressed abuse because one of the staff members of the community's Center Against Sexual Assault is a member of the congregation. Because of that, the pastor states, the issue has come up in training sessions as well as during times of prayer.

Although the people are familiar with the risks and prevalence of sexual abuse, the church does not have a background check, nor does it have any written guidelines regarding protection of children or youth. This congregation has had two accused perpetrators, one of them an interim pastor. They supported the pastor until his conviction, though he had a history of sexual abuse of a minor. The later event, when a young woman was accused of abuse, resulted in emotional distancing, which eventually drove her to leave the congregation.

Interestingly, the congregation now requires references and background checks for all pastors, but not for any other workers in the church. The theory, according to the pastor, is if they are careful with checking the pastor, no other abuse can take place within the congregation. The high level of anxiety is once again illustrated by the distancing of the congregation.

The largest congregation, which has a counseling center, created the center to address mental health issues that would affect the family. This resource was not formulated specifically because of abuse, however abuse issues were addressed from the beginning. There is now a staff of counselors that work with families of abuse on a daily basis. The creation of a resource brought about the disclosure of the need.

#### United Methodist Churches

Two pastors within the United Methodist Churches reported having dealt with sexual abuse privately with parishioners. In one instance the pastor recalled counseling with victims who had been abused by family members. Only one pastor reported any time when sexual abuse became an issue known to some of the leadership or other congregational members.

Three congregations have background checks. Two pastors have preached against abuse. Although yearly training for pastors are required, and sexual abuse is addressed almost every year, according to two pastors, abuse education is a part of the training in only three of the congregations. Two congregations have support groups that deal with sexual abuse issues that arise.

One pastor stated that her experience in a former congregation prompted her to refer to abuse in sermons. She stated that her knowledge of the prevalence of sexual abuse has driven her to address it from the pulpit.

The pastor at an inner city church discussed a Community Ministries program where the associate pastor estimates 75%-85% of the women in the small groups have

experienced sexual abuse. This congregation is in the process of developing a policy that requires background checks for all volunteers.

The larger congregation, near a university has support groups and stringent risk management policies, in order to minister more effectively to its constituency. This was developed directly in response to articulated need. A pastor recalled a young man in a former congregation who had a background of incest. This gentleman was in a position of authority within the congregation and had an issue of inappropriate anger. Although the pastor (then an associate) was aware of the past, the congregation was not. Several uncomfortable scenes occurred because of the situation, but because of the issue of confidentiality, she could not share the information with anyone. She finally had to ask him to resign.

This former church, in which she was the youth pastor, also had two young women who had been abused by fathers. However, though she reported each situation to the pastor when she became aware of it, the pastor did not report it, expressing concern that reporting would drive the youth away.

The pastor who revealed these incidents expressed some concern that there is no background check or set of guidelines within her present small congregation. Her reasoning is that they are too small to incorporate screening policies.

There was not enough evidence to conclude that the history of sexual abuse or incest within the local congregation has influenced the United Methodist Churches in their response. In fact, what did seem clear, was that if it is not addressed, at least within this denomination, it doesn't seem to come up. Only in the congregation just mentioned was there an exception to this observation.

## Summary

The recital of support groups, hurt groups or programs such as Stephen's Ministries that found they needed to deal with incest should give some understanding of the universality of the experience of incest within families. As has been evidenced, when a resource is provided for a safe place to share crises, the need almost automatically seems to manifest itself – as if it had been waiting for the opportunity.

The pastors in each congregation expressed lack of expertise and training. Many of them spoke of a need to meet the demand for counseling so a few congregations provide partial pay or waive the fee with counselors on staff. Some congregations also have a contract with a local counseling center or mental health facility. This response is directly to the need for counseling in all areas that the pastor feels inadequate to address. In each denomination, at least one pastor expressed the sentiment that he or she was unqualified to counsel survivors of sexual abuse.

(Number Researched in each Denomination)	AOG (6)	CHR (7)	COG (8)	MSLC (6)	NAZ (7)	PRES (6)	UMC (6)	Totals (46)
<b>Pastoral Awareness of Sexual Abuse within Congregation</b>	5	3	8	2	5	5	2	30
<b>Pastoral Awareness of Incest within Congregation</b>	4	2	4	1	5	1	2	19

**Figure 4.2**  
**Between-Case Matrix of Pastor's Awareness of**  
**Sexual Abuse within Congregation; by Denomination**  
**(46 Pastors Interviewed)**

	<b>AOG</b>	<b>CHR</b>	<b>COG</b>	<b>MSLC</b>	<b>NAZ</b>	<b>PRES</b>	<b>UMC</b>	<b>TOTAL</b>
<b>Mandated Background Checks *</b>	5	1	6	1	1	4	3	21
<b>Guidelines in Cases of Perpetration</b>	4	2	2	2	2	2	1	15
<b>Written Child Protection Policy</b>	4	1	5	1	2	4	2	19
<b>Written Application process for Volunteer Workers with Children and/or Youth</b>	4	0	3	0	4	1	5	17
<b>Counselor (other than pastor) or Parish Nurse On Staff</b>	4	0	1	2	1	1	0	9
<b>Financial Support for Counseling of survivors, perpetrators, or families of abuse</b>	1	0	3	1	2	0	0	7
<b>Support Groups for Survivors or Perpetrators Of Abuse</b>	3	0	1	0	0	1	0	5
<b>Sexual Abuse Education provided (sermons, seminars, etc.)</b>	6	2	6	4	2	5	3	28
<b>Community Resources Accessed (ecumenical org's., therapists, etc.)</b>	4	3	7	3	3	3	4	27

**Figure 4.3**

Between-Case Matrix of Support Measures within Congregations;

by Denomination

46 Congregations Researched

\* - Two other churches obtain permission for background checks but do not do them unless reason to suspect

AOG – Assembly of God

COG – Church of God

NAZ – Nazarene

CHR – Christian Churches

MSLC – Missouri Synod Lutheran

PRES – Presbyterian Churches

UMC – United Methodist Churches

*Research Question #4 – From the pastor’s perspective, does the local congregation respond differently to families experiencing incest, according to the families’ status within the congregation? Is the church, in fact, more or less likely to be an effective support system if the family is actively involved in the life of the congregation?*

Is there a difference in response to survivors of abuse according to the family involvement within the congregation? Each congregation that had a reported incident of incest was investigated to determine the status of the family or survivor.

#### Status of Incest Survivors within Churches

The pastors’ stories were carefully scrutinized for status of incest-involved family and corresponding response. Each congregation is checked for preventative policies and support measures. The presence of a child protection policy, guideline in case of perpetration or background check is investigated. Responses to survey questions numbers 22, 28, 32, 38 and 39 (appendix a) were also studied to ascertain congregation’s awareness of incest relationships and course of action exercised.

#### Response to Families Experiencing Incest

Is there a difference in the way the congregation responds to a survivor or family of incest that is outside the congregation? Are they ministered to in the same way someone involved with the congregation would be? It is also noted if people from outside of the congregation are likely to be counseled in-house or if they are referred to outside resources.

Only responses to incest were considered. While pastors recounted several incidents of sexual abuse by former pastoral staff or other active parishioners, the question specifically targeted families who had experienced incestuous relationships. The responses are organized by denomination.

### Denominational Responses

#### Assembly of God

Although four pastors indicated in the survey that incest has been exposed to the congregation, all six pastors reported working with families in incestuous situations. Five pastors responded affirmatively to the survey question of only the pastoral staff addressing incidents of incest.

Ministers spoke of having sat with families as they have dealt with sexual abuse. Two pastors spoke about the survivors as being actively involved within the congregations. It appeared that each pastor had individually counseled survivors of incest.

One pastor spoke of a family that was intimately involved in the ministry of the congregation. The father, a member of the worship leadership, confessed to the pastor of incestuous activity years earlier. The pastor worked personally with the family during the ensuing months as they absorbed the tragedy. The pastor was diligent in helping the family find the emotional and spiritual help they needed, even assisting the father as he found another church home after the divorce.

One pastor talked about weekly prayer groups that worked hand in hand with counseling groups. He said that frequently abuse issues were addressed through prayer

Only responses to incest were collected. If this pastor remained neutral, incidents of sexual abuse by former pastors and other church personnel, the position specifically targeted families who had experienced incestuous relationships. The responses are organized by denomination.

# Episcopalian Responses

Assembly of God  
Although four pastors indicated in the survey that incest has been exposed to the congregation, all six pastors reported working with families in incestuous situations. Five pastors responded affirmatively to the survey question of only the pastor will address incidents of incest.

Minister spoke of having sat with families as they came down with sexual abuse. Two pastors spoke about the survivors as being actively involved within the congregation. It appeared that each pastor had individually counseled survivors of incest.

One pastor spoke of a family that was intimately involved in the ministry of the congregation. The father, a member of the worship leadership, confessed to the pastor of incestuous activity years earlier. The pastor worked personally with the family during the ensuing months as they absorbed the tragedy. The pastor was diligent in helping the family find the emotional and spiritual help they needed, even assisting the father as he found another church home after the divorce.

One pastor talked about weekly prayer groups that worked hard in first with counseling groups. He said that frequently these issues were addressed through prayer



for healing for the parishioners. This congregation hired a counselor for one day a week to counsel people. The pastor's implication was that the counselor was brought on staff specifically to counsel issues of abuse. "We have ministered to a lot of victims (of abuse) through counseling. We even have a professional counselor that uses our offices one day a week."

Two pastors spoke of their congregations having several confessed child molesters who have worshipped with them on a regular basis. Both of these congregations have installed strict guidelines for participation in the daily church life, including boundaries at the youth, children's and nursery level. Both pastors discussed vigilance within the staff and dispersal of perpetrator information on a need-to-know basis.

Three congregations have developed ministry to perpetrators or survivors of abuse. These ministries take the forms of individual counseling as well as support groups. Five pastors indicated the leadership would be more likely to invest in the emotional healing of a parishioner than a community member.

Three pastors recounted training for children and nursery workers, which includes warning signs, symptoms of abuse and other 'reasons to suspect'. These congregations also have directives for reporting in case of suspicion of abuse. Four pastors responded affirmatively to protective measures being taken if an active member is accused of incestuous sexual abuse. This question in the survey states that the persons would be relieved of official position and responsibilities until the charges have been further investigated.

These congregations each have a background check and a set of guidelines for responding to abuse. All of the pastors indicated that one of the pastoral staff took initiative to create these policies within their congregations. It is not clear whether the presence of these measures preceded knowledge of incestuous incidents or whether the presence of incest drove the creation of guidelines and preventative actions.

The indication is that an experience of incest often involves counseling with the pastor more than any lay counselor. It is then that the parishioner or family may be referred to a professional counselor. There is no indication that the action is different if the person is not a member of the congregation.

#### Christian Churches

Within the survey, two pastors reported that an incident of incest had been exposed within the congregation. Three pastors had counseled or been aware of incest on an individual basis. Only one pastor responded affirmatively to the pastor historically dealing with issues of incest.

It should be noted here that in the Christian Churches, 5 of the 7 pastors have been at that church less than one and one-half years. It may be that a trust relationship has not been built up with the pastor in that short time. With victims of abuse, trust is an element that has been betrayed (Ryan & Solky, 1996) within the family. It is not unreasonable to suggest it may take a long period of time to learn to trust a new pastor with information of familial sexual abuse.

Three pastors indicate there has been no report of incest in their present congregations. In none of these congregations is there a policy or background check.

One suburban congregation is involved in training for hosting homeless families in the nearby city. This congregation has become alert and attentive to issues of sexual abuse and incest because of this training, however has a background check only for the hired staff. There is no background check or application procedure for the lay ministers or other volunteers within this congregation. This pastor has counseled a family with an adult son who is a convicted perpetrator. This family is active within the congregation.

An inner city congregation has become aware of the presence of incest within the community through their newly organized women's challenges support group. This very small church (under one hundred parishioners), which is presently reinventing itself, has no existing policy or background check.

The one congregation that has a policy, mandatory background check, and application process for volunteers endured a high profile scandal with their former pastor who was a perpetrator. The pastor stated that the presence of this abuse drove the process of developing preventative procedures. He discussed having counseled on several occasions with women who had childhood memories of incestuous abuse.

Five pastors said the leadership would be more likely to invest in the emotional healing of a parishioner than a community member. Four pastors indicated that if an active parishioner were accused of sexually abusing a family member, the accused would be relieved of duties and responsibilities until the charges had been further investigated. It is not clear whether the leadership would be apprised of the situation or if the pastor would deal with the situation alone.

## Churches of God

Three pastors indicated there have been incestuous relationships that have been exposed within the congregation, however, four have privately counseled survivors of incest. Six pastors responded affirmatively that the pastors have historically dealt with issues of incest within the congregation.

One pastor recounted a young woman, not a minor, who told of years of sexual abuse by her father. This prominent person within the church did not want to confront her father, also a member, but needed counseling for the abuse. The pastor has addressed the abuse in sermons, held conferences within the congregation, and trained cell group leaders to respond to issues of sexual abuse. However, within the congregation, there is not a policy, a background check, nor an application process. It should be noted that the pastor reported the father has no responsibilities with children or youth within the congregation.

Other congregations do have policies on sexual abuse, an application process for volunteer lay workers, and a background check. One pastor reported there is a woman within the congregation who has led several midweek conferences about sexual abuse for the congregation. He noted several homes where incest has taken place have participated in the conferences.

One pastor discussed a development of a ministry that has been set up by physicians within the congregation that specifically helps secure and pays for psychological and medical help to those who have been abused. These physicians were responding to the need within their private practices and within the church. This congregation has found a pro-active method of bringing healing to those who need it.

A central city pastor has set up support for persons both within the congregation and ecumenically within the community. This pastor reports several cases of incest within the constituency of the congregation. He recalls both survivors and perpetrators who worship in the congregation.

One high profile circumstance was a young woman who was on the ministry team. The pastor became aware of a problem when she began resigning from all responsibilities. When she recounted a recently recalled history of sexual abuse by a male relative, which took place over a series of years, the pastor referred her to a therapist within the congregation. The ramifications for behavior and long term damage of the individual became evident to the pastor, who helped the young woman find professional help.

This pastor has also participated with local churches in setting up an organization of support for sexual abuse survivors. This organization serves people within all of the participating congregations as well as those with no congregational affiliation. The inference from the pastor was that the pastoral staff and therapists within the congregation serve individuals within the congregation, and those who are not constituents are eventually referred to this community organization.

When asked whether an accused person would be immediately removed from congregational responsibilities until the charges had been further investigated, all eight pastors responded affirmatively. All eight pastors stated the leadership would be more likely to invest in the emotional healing of a parishioner than a community member.

Once again, the senior pastor appears to be the person who deals with situations of incest within the constituency. This may be primarily because the pastor is the person

the parishioner approaches first for counseling. Because confidentiality is so highly valued and is often requested by the parishioners in issues of incest, the information may stop with the pastor, particularly if the parishioner is an adult.

#### Missouri Synod Lutheran Churches

Only one pastor stated that a relationship of incest had been exposed in his congregation. However, three pastors have privately counseled parishioners who have experienced abuse by a family member in the past. Four of the pastors stated that if incest has occurred the pastoral staff would deal with it.

One congregation leaves all counseling and referral activity to the parish nurse. This particular pastor seems to do no counseling himself. He is aware of no incestuous relationship within his congregation.

Two churches have employed counselors on staff for families, however one counselor was accused of abusing clients and was let go. In the other congregation the pastor stated that the parishioners would prefer to reveal that information to a counselor on staff and not the senior pastor. "They don't want the pastor to know. Reputation is everything here."

Because of awareness of the prevalence of sexual abuse, one congregation developed a sexual misconduct paper. This congregation also makes available a list of sex offenders within the vicinity. The congregation's policy states that when anyone comes forward with an allegation of misconduct "We must research it – we must!" This congregation is also the only congregation that has a background policy, even though it is only for workers with children.

Two of the pastors that have dealt with incest have a congregational policy and application process for volunteers with youth and children. One congregation has been used as a supervised visitation site for parishioners who have been convicted of sexual offenses. They work in partnership with the local police department to provide this service. Four pastors stated that if a person within the congregation was accused of incestuous sexual abuse, the person would be relieved of responsibilities and position until the charges have been further investigated. All six pastors indicated the leadership would be more likely to invest in the emotional healing of a parishioner than a community member.

The pastors who have encountered incidents of incestuous sexual abuse appear to have initially counseled the parishioners privately. However, two pastors stated they neither have the training nor the expertise to counsel people who have experienced sexual abuse. They explained they would refer to professionals. There is not enough information to make an assumption about the status of families who are experiencing incest influencing the church's response.

#### Churches of the Nazarene

Five pastors within the Churches of the Nazarene answered affirmatively to relationships of incest being exposed within the congregations since they have been there. One pastor did not address the issue except in personal counseling with the parishioner. Two pastors stated that if incidents of incest have occurred the pastoral staff would address them. Those congregations would be the two smallest ones within this denomination.

Among these five congregations, only three have guidelines regarding abuse or a policy for child protection. One incorporates a background check in the volunteer recruitment procedure, and one secures permission for a background check. Two congregations do not have a policy, guidelines, or a background check.

The pastors seem to have counseled both survivors and perpetrators of abuse themselves. One pastor recounted ministering to several families who are suffering from a history of incestuous abuse and who are adjusting to the removal of the perpetrator from the home.

Two pastors reported incestuous abuse of minors. None of these were reported. The perpetrators were not in the congregation. One associate pastor reported three incestuous relationships to the senior pastor, as is required in their specific church. The authorities were not notified, although minors were victimized in each situation. "It was as if it did not exist."

The largest congregation has a disciplinary committee that handles issues of abuse. Particularly if the perpetrator is a member of the congregation, the situation is referred to this committee. They adjudicate in these circumstances, setting boundaries when the perpetrator is released from prison and determining the activities and arenas in which the perpetrator may be involved. This congregation also has a full time counselor and two part time counselors on staff.

Four of the pastors responded that if a person was accused of incestuous sexual abuse he/she would be immediately relieved of official position and responsibilities until the charges have been further explored. One pastor reflected on the question, stating it depended on a couple of other issues. What position does the person have? What age



group does the person minister to? Is the accuser willing to report the abuse or confront the abuser? These questions help determine the action to be taken.

All seven pastors indicated the leadership would be more likely to invest in the emotional healing of a parishioner than a community member. There is not enough information to determine if the church is more likely to be an effective support system if the abused family is actively involved in the life of the congregation. It does appear, however, that in 4 of the 5 congregations that incest has been revealed the senior pastors have counseled the families and taken the responsibility for reporting to officials.

### **Presbyterian Churches**

Within the Presbyterian Churches only one pastor recalled any families who have experienced incestuous sexual abuse. Three of the pastors stated that if incest would occur the pastors would be the ones who would deal with it.

It appears that the pastors of the Presbyterian Churches take a less personal role with the families. Among the Presbyterian Churches researched, the pastor-as-educator seems to be the dominant role. Although the congregations were not larger than congregations within other denominations, 4 of the 6 pastors seemed to have a more distant relationship than do the pastors of the other six denominations. If this is the case, failure to recall incest relationships may be due to a lack of reporting from the parishioners.

The one pastor that recalled several circumstances of incest is head of the family counseling center within the church. He recalled one instance where the clergy and staff were made aware of the danger to one child from a divorced family. The staff was

alerted to the risk of abduction by the convicted perpetrator and was given a staff directive for pick-up.

Within the counseling center the pastor recalled several other incidents of familial sexual abuse. The counseling center is staffed with full time therapists. It offers counseling for both parishioners and community members. The congregation provides training for volunteers and requires a background check with all volunteer workers of children and youth.

Five of the pastors stated that the leadership would be more likely to invest in the emotional healing of a parishioner than a community member. Four of the pastors reported that if a person was accused of incestuous activity, that person would be relieved of official position and responsibilities until the charges had been further investigated. Three of them acknowledged this is the theoretical position. Because of the lack of experience with incestuous families, there is not enough information to ascertain whether the congregation responds differently to families experiencing incest according to the families' status within the congregation.

#### United Methodist Churches

Within the United Methodist Church the pastors stated that no incident of incest has been made known to the congregations they presently pastor. Two pastors recalled privately counseling with survivors of incest. One of the three pastors has had to confront a person who had been accused of incestuous activity. Two pastors stated that the pastoral staff would deal with accusations of incest and one responded affirmatively to the theoretical question.

A new pastor to one of the United Methodist congregations reported to authorities in her former church, a case of paternal incest with a youth in the congregation, only to find that other youth counselors and the pastor had all known about it, but had done nothing. Many congregational members knew about this incestuous relationship.

Among the congregations researched, three incorporate a background check, two have child protection policies and guidelines, and five use an application process for volunteer workers with youth and children. Four pastors said that the leadership would be more likely to invest in the healing of a parishioner than a community member. Two pastors stated that if a person was accused of incestuous sexual abuse that person would be immediately relieved of position and responsibilities until the charges have been investigated further. Other pastors stated it would depend upon the position of the person and the population that person ministered to within the congregation.

The Methodist Churches are assigned to congregations for a short period of time (usually 3 to 5 years). It is possible that the short length of time has an impact on the reticence of the congregational members to seek counseling from the pastor in cases of incest. It also is possible that the role of the pastor within the Methodist Churches is less of a shepherd role and more of an educator role. Research is needed to ascertain more specific information.

The congregation may respond differently to families experiencing incest according to their status within the congregation. One congregation employs a Community Ministries Director who ministers with the community surrounding the church. This director has stated that between 75%-85% of the women she works with are survivors of sexual abuse, most of them incest. This ministry does not specifically

minister to congregational members. That congregation has a pending background check and revamped policy statement for working with children and youth.

## Summary

Although statistics reveal that one in five women and one in twelve men (Pellauer, Chester, & Boyajian, 1987; Dinsmore, 1991) are likely to be survivors of incest, the church does not hear the stories as readily as they hear stories of sexual abuse by a non-relative. This observation supports the psychology of damage by an abusing relative. The double-bind characteristic of the incestuous relationship is manifested in the tendency to keep the family secret within the family. Even the pastor of the local congregation, who is in some cultures – extended family, is not to be trusted with the knowledge of betrayal by the family member. The survivor of incest tends to keep the experience to herself.

It seems that when incest is exposed within a family who is actively involved in the congregation, the pastor seems to take a more active role in responding. In cases of incest that are revealed, it appears that within all denominations, the senior pastors are more likely to deal with the situation alone. Pastors may personally minister to the needs of the congregational members who have experienced incest. If the family is involved in the congregation, many pastors do not immediately report, investigating the situation by themselves first. This observation was made within each denomination. Less reporting and more individual counseling may take place. Perhaps the pastor makes an effort to ‘fix’ the situation alone. Twenty-two pastors recalled individually counseling with survivors of incestuous sexual abuse.

There is, however, a difference in the size of the congregation. Pastors of larger congregations are more likely to bring in legal authorities immediately, while pastors of smaller congregations seem to handle the issue themselves at first. There are also more support measures, such as individual counseling and support groups for survivors or perpetrators, within the larger congregations.

Many pastors implied a method of handling issues of incest differently according to whether the person is a part of the community or a part of the congregation. Particularly in the inner city, several churches work in partnership with ecumenical organizations for community members who may be dealing with issues of abuse. Several congregations contribute financially to these interfaith programs. They will then refer nonmembers to professionals who are trained to deal with the ramifications of incestuous sexual abuse.

Among the pastors interviewed 40 of 46 stated the leadership would be more likely to invest in the emotional healing of a parishioner than a community member. This bears out the tentative assumption that there is a difference in response according to the status of the person seeking counsel.

*Research Question #5 - How does the congregation, as reported by the pastor, perceive its role within the community, including its denominational role, in regard to being a support system to families experiencing incest?*

Almost every church has a mission. It may not be articulated, and in fact, may not be known to the parishioners, yet is manifested by the way the congregation functions. Their priorities, their focus of time and human effort, and their allocation of monies, all illustrate the values and mission of the congregation – the reason for its existence. A congregation in a suburb may consider its task as evangelizing the community. The congregation in the country may feel part of its reason for existence is to provide an avenue of fellowship and connection. An inner city congregation may be focused specifically on supporting its members in their battle for day-to-day survival. The congregation may be in a fight for survival itself. If so, the survival is the mission.

There are arguably as many missions as there are denominations. This question targets the perception of the congregation's understanding one aspect of its mission as intentional social action. Does the church consider itself a support system to its community? Does it exist only to minister to its own members? Is it in partnership with the rest of the community to enhance the lives of those surrounding the church?

## Denominational Philosophy

It is the belief of the researcher that the denominational position on this question is also relevant to the local congregation when encountering issues of sexual abuse. Congregations that affiliate with a denomination do so because they support the doctrine and basic theology of the denomination.

In analyzing the data for this question, several specific areas were considered surrounding abuse issues. The first area was the position of the denomination and the pastors' perception of whether they are liberal or conservative as a congregation. To get a more specific understanding of meaning, the pastors were also asked to define the terms. It would seem that a denomination (and its congregations) that is vocal about its social action agenda is often perceived as liberal. While the denomination (and its congregations) that tends to take care of its own members or is focused on religious evangelism, is often seen as a conservative congregation. Either agenda will be communicated by the actions the church takes, the statements it makes, the way the business of the church is done, and where the money is spent. General opinion also seems to be that the liberal congregations would be more likely to address sexual abuse and its ramifications for parishioners and community than those congregations that define themselves as conservative. Is that the case?

Official statements addressing abuse which the denomination may publish are listed here. Intentional address of the issue gives some indication about the general philosophy of the denomination toward abuse and its role in ministering to a population that may have experienced such dysfunction.

## Social Action Agenda

It is in this question that the stark difference between theory and practice is best illustrated in this research. Many pastors stated they were committed to reaching out to the communities, however, when quizzed about specific programs or statements to that effect, they did not demonstrate the process correlating positively with the concept in every denomination. Did the people specifically go outside of their congregations to ascertain the needs? Do they intentionally work to make the church a safe place for all? Do they welcome nonmembers to take part in their support programs? Do they intentionally reach out to a different culture? Are they relevant to the culture surrounding the facilities? Do they have anything to offer other than traditional church services?

## Congregational Statements and Policies Regarding Abuse

Has the church made a statement about abuse or does it have a policy regarding the protection of children or other unempowered persons? Have they made public their position on sexual abuse? Does the church feel sexual abuse is not a topic they wish to deal with? It may be that the pastor and the congregation do not feel the church is the appropriate place for address. Or perhaps, in the opinion of the congregation, the job of the church is simply to evangelize.

## Abuse Education and Programs for Survivors or Perpetrators

Programming was then examined to determine the agreement of concept and process. Are the churches more likely to invest in a parishioner than a non-parishioner? Have formal efforts been taken for protection of the innocent or unempowered? Do the



congregations provide abuse education for the workers? If there is a multi-staff, is one of the staff assigned to community ministries? What are the support programs offered? Is qualified counseling available to people who need it? If not, are provisions made for securing that counseling? Does the congregation work in an ecumenical setting or with outside resources to provide support for those who need it?

These questions were considered in analyzing the data to ascertain the pastor's perception of the role of the church within the community. As with the first four research questions, the material is organized by denomination.

### Denominational Responses

#### Assemblies of God

"This is a Come-As-You-Are Church! We try to make all people welcome.... Whatever we can do to be a support system." The six congregations of the AOG are intentional about going outside of their own congregation to minister. One pastor described his congregation as being conservative in theology and progressive in methodology. In order to be more effective, their message of evangelism includes meeting the felt needs of the community.

None of the pastors could state with certainty that there is a written policy or statement regarding sexual abuse or incest, however assumed there must be. The denominational headquarters in Springfield, Missouri have actually drafted a statement against sexual abuse which is stated in their booklet "The Assemblies of God Perspectives: Relationships, Conduct, and Sexuality." This states:

congregations provide abuse education for the workers? If there is a multi-staff, board of the staff assigned to community ministries? What are the support programs offered? Is qualified counseling available to people who need it? If not, are provisions made for securing that counseling? Does the congregation work in an emotional setting or with outside resources to provide support for those who need it?

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Assemblies of God

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Pastors: Relationships, Conduct, and Sexuality." This stance

**“The Assemblies of God strongly oppose abuse and the many tragic forms of dysfunction now plaguing our world. It must grieve the heart of God, who cares greatly for the downtrodden, to see one human being abuse another. It must also grieve the heart of God too if His children observe abuse and sit idly by, allowing the evil to continue.**

**Abuse is the imposition of one person’s destructive will or actions upon another person which inflicts harm to the victim on a physical, emotional, or spiritual level. Ultimately the victim’s will or future well-being is neither considered nor respected. Abuse usually occurs because of the abuser’s misuse of his/her higher standing, position of authority, or psychological/physical strength. In inflicting the abuse the authority and/or strength of the abuser overpowers the will of the victim. In nearly all cases the victim is incapable of preventing the abuse.” (Bicket, Davis, & Purdy, 1997)**

**All six pastors acknowledged that social activity is one of the missions of the churches. There is evidence that confirms the mission. At least two congregations have a person on staff whose focus is outreach ministries. The churches welcome the community to support groups and try to provide groups that will be relevant to the community.**

**Support and/or recovery ministries are a part of each congregation’s programming, including, in different congregations, such tasks as putting siding on houses, feeding the homeless, cleaning houses, grief support, divorce recovery, addictions support and other relationship counseling. There is a further presence in the community in diverse ways, such as a childcare center, an independently run school within the church, a Saturday inner city program for children, an open gym, and a women’s ministry to prostitutes and women who work in a local topless bar. In the latter circumstance, specific women of the church take baskets of luxury toiletries to the women in an effort to connect with them and develop friendships.**

**In order to make the congregation a safe place, all churches get signed permission for a background check for all volunteers with children and youth. Four congregations**

have written child protection policies and guidelines in cases of perpetration and four require a written application process for volunteers.

The AOG follows through with this conviction of outreach in the community by providing sexual abuse support groups in three of the congregations. Abuse education is a part of the training in every congregation researched. All have made formal efforts to protect children and youth, including a teaching program for children called “Good Touch/Bad Touch.”

Although there is a lack of understanding regarding the intergenerational dynamic of sexual abuse within the family there is sincere effort to address the issue. “If someone is abusing his wife or children....let his momma talk to him. She’ll set him straight.” This pastor personally confronts abuse when it is made known to him.

Two congregations have counseling centers open to the community and four employee at least one counselor on staff. One congregation partners with a statewide ecumenical program to provide support for abuse survivors.

Though it is largely considered a conservative denomination, the Assembly of God congregations appear to try to involve themselves in serving as a support system to families who have experienced traumatic events, such as sexual abuse or incest. The congregations researched are vocal, intentional, and pro-active in making the church a safe place for all who would come to worship.

## Christian Churches

Because the Christian Churches have a more autonomous nature than most denominations, they are limited in tapping into resources of a larger denominational organization. There appears to be some administration between the states, but only minimal. The churches are divided into regions that help guide their local polity. There is a diversity of opinion regarding the issue of liberal or conservative. One pastor, who is from the Christian Church-Churches of Christ branch, state he was conservative – “typical of most Christian churches”, while another pastor, who defined her congregation as independent, labeled her congregation as liberal – “Like most Christian churches – democrat, outside of the mainstream.”

While the Christian Churches (Churches of Christ) denominational headquarters have a policy requiring training in sexual abuse and sexual conduct for all pastoral staff, none of the pastors reported any awareness of a policy regarding sexual abuse within the laity. There is a Sexual Misconduct Investigation Team in the regional organizations of the Christian Churches (Disciples of Christ). Two pastors reported becoming senior pastors at their present congregations directly because of sexual abuse incidents.

In the Christian Church-Disciples of Christ, there is a national staff person for children’s ministries, and one pastor indicated that this staff person has published statements regarding sexual abuse. The Christian Churches - Disciples do have a statement out of their headquarters in Indianapolis, Indiana. In a general letter to all the churches the General Minister and President of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) issued the following statement:

**“Statistics show that one in every five women and one in every eight men were sexually abused by the time they were 12. Most of these abused children knew the person who abused them. We simply cannot ignore the possibility that abuse of children can occur in any denomination or institution of the church. In view of this, we Disciples each need to recommit ourselves to doing all we can to avoid such tragedies.**

**As we seek to insure the safety of every child, we need to have a child protection policy in place in every congregation and institution of the church, and we need to be intentional about following that policy (having a policy and not following it is truly worse than having no policy at all both legally and because parents and others may be lulled into a false sense of security).” (in Disciples News Brief, June 5, 2002)**

**As there is no hierarchical authority within the Christian Churches, this strong statement speaking against abuse is the strongest mandate that can be given. A Child Abuse Prevention Packet is also offered to the congregations, sent upon request.**

**Some states have a Sexual Misconduct Team that is run on a regional basis. This addresses abuse of clergy, but does not address laity. The autonomous nature encourages a congregation by congregation interpretation of the policies of the denomination.**

**“We have an identity of outreach.” One pastor stated. All of the seven pastors agreed that they encourage their congregations to be active within the life of the community. Four of the seven facilities are open to be used for groups not within their constituency. These may include twelve-step programs, grief support, gay/lesbian support, and a homeless families host program – a community wide program which trains families to host homeless people in their own homes. They join with other churches in such ecumenical service organizations as Christian Services, which includes monetary support, provision of furniture and clothing, and teaching English as a second language.**

**Although the general offices have recommended each congregation draft a child protection policy, only one church researched has incorporated one. This document requires a background check for volunteers. Two congregations have drawn up**

guidelines in cases of perpetration. No congregations have a written application process for volunteers with children and youth.

Although the Christian Churches seem to be aware of the high incidence of incest, none of the congregations offer programs that support families who are experiencing sexual abuse. Only two of seven congregations train their workers in abuse education. No congregation employs a counselor, nor did any pastor indicate the church contributes to a person's counseling expenses. Three pastors do use outside resources to enhance the ministry of the church.

Although parishioners have approached at least three of the pastors with experiences of abuse, in the majority of the Christian Churches the response does not seem to be pro-active in the provision of support for the wounded family or individual. The claim of the pastors that their congregations encourage social activity is not supported in the provision of services to families experiencing either sexual abuse or incest.

### Churches of God

The doctrine within the Churches of God bespeaks their interdependent nature. They are actually not a denomination but a reformation movement. Because the fellowships do not believe in formal membership, but in fact hold that all believers are a part of the one church of God, each congregation is independent. Their headquarters exist to communicate the basic theology of the church, to empower congregations to minister more effectively and to administer the practical tasks of the business of the organization in a practical and orderly manner. However, the headquarters have no

formal authority over the individual churches. Some administrative tasks are accomplished on a state-by-state basis. The COG congregations have local church polity.

There is general agreement that the congregations are closely aligned with the doctrines and policies of the Church of God. They are diverse in style. Pastors defined their churches as open and progressive. Five pastors considered their congregations to be liberal and two labeled their congregations moderate in style.

The Church of God, whose headquarters are in Anderson, Indiana, issued a statement about abuse in 1992. Seven pastors were aware of a public statement against sexual abuse, however no one could recall what details are in it. The following is the resolution:

“Whereas abuse, whether sexual, emotional, or physical, is a growing problem in society; and whereas the effects of abuse create lifelong problems for the abused, attacking their very self-understanding and their relationship to God and the Church; and whereas we increasingly recognize that the church community includes both the abused and abusers in significant numbers; and whereas abuse is often a cycle where those who have been abused are more likely to become abusers; and whereas both persons who abuse and persons who suffer the abuse are in need of the redeeming power of the gospel and support from the church; and whereas we acknowledge that healing from abuse comes only as a gift from God; therefore be it resolved that ...the General Assembly urge churches to initiate programs to bring justice, healing, and restoration for the abused and the abuser; and be it further resolved, that the General Assembly urge all persons to support programs and efforts to end abuse and aid in healing from abuse in their communities and throughout their nations.”

“We determine needs (within the community) and focus our ministry on meeting those needs.” Seven pastors consider social activity to be one of its missions. All eight pastors maintain that the congregation has an obligation to provide programs that minister to the needs of the surrounding community. In two of the churches this has been done through their cell ministry program. These larger congregations break up the families



into different cell groups in order to meet the needs more effectively. Much address of abuse and trauma issues is facilitated there.

There is a variety of strategies for outreach into the community. Some pastors spoke of hosting after school programs, childcare centers, and charter schools. There are support programs in six of the congregations where the community is encouraged to take part. The church runs some of those programs and outside agencies or organizations use the facility for other programs. Two congregations employ a staff person for outreach ministries.

Seven of the eight congregations provide support program opportunities that are open to the community. These may include twelve-step programs, divorce and grief recovery groups, women's support groups, depression support, and other chronic illness or addiction programs. One congregation presently has a counseling center and one is negotiating the rental of a part of its facilities for another ecumenical counseling group. The congregations all seem to work actively with other faith groups and community organizations to provide support, shelter for homeless, protection for battered and abused persons, food, counseling and medical services to the community.

Statements and measures for protection of children and youth are written in five of the congregations researched. Background checks are required in six congregations and three congregations have a written application process for volunteers with children and youth.

All eight pastors agree that formal efforts have been made to protect the innocent ones in the congregation, and there are six congregations that make sexual abuse training a part of their training for workers. The congregations have pro-actively addressed

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sexual abuse, hosting abuse education conferences in four churches, and opening the facility for training. One congregation worked with the television stations when a person with a past conviction of child molestation had been mistakenly employed in the school on the premises. They kept the station informed of the facts and allowed the crews to come in and report the situation and the actions taken.

Two congregations participate in programs that have been mentioned in the outreach efforts of other denominations in this research. These interfaith programs intentionally address sexual abuse and incest.

Though the concept of social action within the community and the process of carrying through is not always in agreement, the COG congregations do seem to work with other resources within the community to provide services. Abuse education does seem to be a priority for the volunteer workers, and there are many opportunities, hosted by the churches, for connecting with educational training in sexual abuse. There are no intentional programs that support families who are experiencing incest. However two congregations work in partnership with interfaith organizations to provide services to survivors of sexual abuse within the community.

#### Missouri Synod Lutheran Churches

The MSLC is less autonomous than are the three denominations previously discussed. From the responses of the pastors, the research shows less independence and a more narrow set of guidelines. Nevertheless, while all six of the Lutheran churches claim to have close denominational ties, there was a consensus of opinion that the denomination

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sexual abuse, hosting abuse education conferences in their churches and opening for

does not have great control over the congregations. One pastor summarized it by saying the focus of the synod is mainly advisory.

The MSLC appears to be mostly a conservative branch of the Christian faith. They hold to a confessional, biblically based theology and, in general separate themselves from other denominations. All six pastors described their congregations as conservative. The one pastor that described his congregation as liberal within the denomination, explained the term by saying they worship with other denominations and often have interfaith organizations with which they work.

All six of the pastors knew that there is a statement about sexual abuse from the denominational headquarters. One pastor was aware of a Commission of Awareness of Sexual Abuse and a Ministerial Health Group that addressed Sexual abuse of adults and children as well as clergy abuse. The local districts also hand down guidelines. One of the statements from the headquarters in St. Louis, Missouri follows:

Child abuse is ANY mistreatment or neglect of a child that results in harm or injury.

- Physical abuse--includes injury, neglect and abandonment.
- Sexual abuse--includes inappropriate touching, non-touching offenses (indecent exposure, showing a child pornographic material)
- Emotional abuse--includes threats, harassment and humiliation.

Possible warning signs include: Physical signs like bruises, broken bones, burns, difficulty walking, genital discomfort, headaches or stomachaches. Child's appearance, like dirty, torn clothing, inappropriate dress. Child's behavior, like weepiness or excessive sadness, frantic activity, aggressiveness or being withdrawn.

Our Purpose is to heighten the awareness of the critical needs of children and the issues that must be addressed so that ALL children daily experience the Gospel of Christ in their lives. What's in a Logo? The logo above focuses on Christ. Adopted by the Children at Risk Task Force of The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod this logo draws on contrasts in symbolism surrounded by the arms of the cross. The blossoms represent the promise and possibilities in each child. The swing draws a picture of isolation felt by many children experiencing the loss of hope and safety due to impoverishment, violence, neglect and lack of opportunity. Yet, as Jesus stretched out His arms on the cross, so He also stretches His arms out to children that they might be "rooted and built up in Him, strengthened in the faith." (Col 2:6)

“The basic job of the congregation is to minister to the spiritual needs of the congregation and NOT the community,” one pastor informed the researcher. However, three of the pastors responded affirmatively to considering social activity as part of the mission of the congregation.. On most of the moral issues, five of the pastors saw the congregation as needing to take a public stand within the community. Two of the pastors have addressed from the pulpit, local child molestation cases within the school system.

In spite of the inconsistency of response regarding social activity, four of the six congregations provide support groups and encourage non-parishioners to participate. Programs such as job networking, unemployed/ underemployed counsel, singles’ connections, pregnancy aid and a home welfare ministry are offered in an effort for outreach. One congregation has a pre-school and another church runs a high school ministry to link with youth. Two of the MSLC congregations open their facilities to public use. Four of the pastors indicated by their answers a use of the community resources to provide help for people.

Five pastors speak to formal efforts being made to protect innocent people. A list of sexual offenders residing within the community is available in one congregation. Two pastors discussed recent evaluation of their risk management and sexual misconduct policies in wake of the Catholic Church’s crisis. However, the one congregation that runs a pre-school does not use a background check for the workers. Only two congregations have a policy for child protection and no one has a mandatory background check for workers.

Abuse education is a part of the volunteer worker training for three of the churches. One pastor has created a sermon series, called the ‘911 Generation’ addressing

various crises in the lives of people. In this series, the pastor has included abuse within the family. One congregation employs a parish nurse and one has a counselor on staff.

Within the MSLC congregations there are no support programs for families experiencing incest. Although there is awareness of the pervasiveness of sexual abuse within the community, the churches have not addressed the need for recovery. Though one congregation does employ a qualified counselor, there is no evidence that the congregations partner with interfaith community organizations to provide other services for survivors of sexual abuse.

There is ambivalence in the responses from the pastors of the MSLC. At one extreme a pastor explains the needs of the community are not the church's problem, and at the other extreme a pastor opens up his facility for groups such as the YMCA and the police union to have meetings, intentionally going out of the congregation's culture to host a Spanish language class. It is not clear from the congregations researched whether the MS Lutheran Churches perceive their role as being a support system to the community. The concept is undecided among the six congregations, however the process indicates a more intentional effort to support the community.

#### Church of the Nazarene

There is agreement within the Nazarene denomination about the closeness of the headquarters to the congregations. Like the MSLC, the Nazarene Churches seem to be more closely aligned with their denomination than did the other five denominations in the study. The congregations act with independence, however, there was great similarity among the congregations. There is not clear agreement as to how much control the

headquarters have. All seven pastors reported their congregations as being conservative in nature.

The pastors were aware of a published statement about abuse in a chapter within the denominational Manual of the Nazarene Churches. Many of the pastors turned to it and read parts of this statement to the researcher. This chapter entitled “Abuse of the Unempowered”, addresses guidelines for safety of those who need protection. From the Board of General Superintendents in Kansas City, Missouri, the Church of the Nazarene has also issued the following statement:

“Recent media coverage of cases of clergy abuse has heightened our awareness of the delicate nature of the relationships which clergy and other Christian workers have with the people to whom they minister, whatever their age, gender, or circumstance.... Local churches and districts have always been encouraged to pursue allegations of sexual abuse rigorously, following the recommended procedures for removing the credentials of ministers who offend.... We encourage our people to carefully select those persons, whether clergy or lay, who work with children and youth. The necessary safeguards for workers should include requests for permission to do necessary background checks with appropriate legal authorities, policies regarding the presence of at least two adults with children at all times, and windows in all classroom and office or hallway doors.

The integrity of the Church of Jesus Christ must be protected at all times. Our holiness ethic will allow us no alternative but to protect those for whom we are responsible by insuring that all workers in the church, clergy and lay, both paid and volunteer, are above reproach.” (Statement of Concern, Board of General Superintendents, Nazarene.org)

The pastors were adamant about the obligation of the congregations to be socially active in the community. However one pastor stated, “There is sometimes a lack of knowledge as to how to act”.



Many efforts of outreach are manifested within the communities of the Nazarene churches. One suburb congregation ministers to homeless families in the nearby city. They make efforts to tie them into the church community. Another congregation has a downtown compassion center in a city with a high population of Mexican immigrants. This center feeds, counsels, and facilitates individuals in finding job opportunities. The largest congregation has a K-12 school that is approximately 50% neighborhood children. One of the smallest congregations runs a kids club one day a week for the community. There are food pantries, clothes closets, blended families counseling and support groups. One pastor stated the congregation has 'well over one-hundred ministries' that are available to the community.

There is a person on staff in one of the congregations whose major responsibility is community outreach. Support programs are offered in four congregations, which may include twelve-step programs, recovery groups. A staff of three counselors is employed in one congregation to handle the load. Three congregations work with interfaith organizations to provide physical needs and other support services.

Five of the pastors responded affirmatively to formal efforts being made to protect innocent people. However, two pastors spoke of issues of confidentiality that sometimes confused the procedural policies. These pastors spoke of the dilemma of confession from parishioners of past offenses, and protection of children and the unempowered. Four congregations require a written application process for volunteers with children and youth, but only two have written child protection policies, guidelines in cases of perpetration, or background checks.

One pro-active congregation discussed the commitment to the local community when dealing with a sexual abuse situation in the school. The pastor described informing the television stations and newspapers of the incident and the actions taken by the church, so the neighborhood would be able to trust the congregation to deal honestly and responsibly with such issues.

Another pastor spoke of addressing the issue of sexual abuse when there was a local attempted rape of a teenager by a teacher, and another discussed a time when two teachers were dismissed in a local school district. They both described the need of the churches to become more cautious and to be more intentional. One pastor recounted experiences of ministering to families outside of the congregation who had a family member convicted of incest.

Abuse education is a part of the training for volunteer workers in only two congregations. This figure does not coincide with the statement of intentionality and the denominational mandate to protect the unempowered.

Though there is ample evidence of sexual abuse within the communities of the Nazarene congregations, none of the congregations provide intentional programs for families experiencing incest. One congregation does employ three counselors on staff. Two congregations have a discreet scholarship fund to help with counseling for such issues as abuse. These pastors affirmed that they work with other churches for support of abuse issues, as well as other crisis circumstances. However, none of the pastors indicated they partner with other interfaith groups or organizations to provide services to survivors of sexual abuse.

The majority of the Nazarene congregations, as reported by the pastors, do consider their roles to be active in the community and supportive to families of abuse. It appears, however, that there is some confusion as to what shape that support takes. Outreach efforts are many, yet abuse education and protection for children and youth is sparse, and there are no specific measures for families experiencing incest. This conservative denomination at times seems conflicted about the methods to adopt in order to be an effective support system.

### Presbyterian Churches

The Presbyterian Churches assume a more autonomous character than do the other liturgical churches in this study. They seem to act independently, and differ greatly from congregation to congregation in regard to moral issues, public statements and types of worship. This is not to say the churches do not take stands on specific issues. “The Presbyterians have an opinion about everything,” one pastor stated.

Five of six pastors reported their congregations as having very close denominational ties and four responded affirmatively in being reflective of denominational doctrine and ideology. There was some ambivalence in the responses when asked to define the congregations as liberal or conservative. At one point in time, four of six pastors labeled their congregations as liberal, with one claiming neutrality, yet when asked if the congregation is conservative, three of six answered yes.

The pastors generally assumed there is a denominational policy on sexual abuse. One pastor said a statement of that kind would come down from the general offices and the local congregation’s policy is based on the larger denominational policy. However,

he could not tell what the policy is or even if the Presbyterian congregations publicly stated a position. In fact, the Presbyterian Churches (USA) whose headquarters are in Louisville, Kentucky have issued the following statements:

In 1991 -

“The absence of challenge within the church as well as the wider community contributes to a conspiracy of societal silence and denial regarding the prevalence of family violence. Male domination of women together with the collective refusal to respect the bodily integrity of children, provide implicit sanction of violations against individuals perceived as ‘permissible victims’...the social and religious requirement that children comply indiscriminately with the wishes of their parents and other adults contributes to their being violated. Despite our claim that children are our nations’ most important resource, we continue to treat children as if they are liars, manipulators and incapable of describing what is real for them (regarding their own abuse).

In 2001 -

For most abusers, violence is seldom a onetime occurrence. Quite often a pattern of violence is passed on from one family generation to another and becomes the customary way of family members to relate to one another and others...

Direct the General Assembly Council to establish cross divisional staff team with responsibilities related to domestic violence, ...through the office on domestic violence, incorporate sex abuse prevention training in child and teen education programs and curricula...direct the Child Advocacy Office to work for the eradication of the sexual and commercial exploitation of children...encourage all clergy, elders, church members, other church staff, and volunteers to always report to the appropriate authority the abuse of children, the elderly, and those disabled in ways that prevent them from reporting the abuse themselves; and after appropriate training, discuss with all victims/survivors their risk and safety options, and refer the victims/survivors to appropriate resources.” (Social Witness Policy Compilation, 1972-2001)

“The neighborhood is our mission.” The Presbyterian Churches like to think of themselves as a socially active denomination. Most of the congregations manifested an

intentionality about being an influential support system within the neighborhood. “This church is defined by its social outreach.” Another pastor stated.

From the responses of the pastors, it appears the congregations tend to think of themselves as liberal in culture social action, and theologically, with a healthy willingness to grapple with uncomfortable and controversial issues. The one pastor, who defined his congregation as conservative said that “in doctrine and social outlook we are clearly evangelical with a social witness.” However, there seemed to be more inconsistency among the Presbyterian churches between concept and process than with the other denominations.

Theoretically, five pastors reported the congregations feel strongly that they have an obligation to provide programs for needs of the surrounding community. Yet one pastor immediately added that not all churches are called to provide programs. Four churches have programs of outreach. In the survey, only on racism did all the pastors state the congregation felt they should take a public stand.

One Caucasian congregation “Thirty years ago, made an intentional decision to stay here (in the inner city) and minister to this community. 90% of the neighborhood is Black. Thursday nights we have a service totally for the neighborhood which is neighborhood attended. Every day there are people who come in from the neighborhood, seeking counsel.” Compare this with another pastor who stated, “We don’t know what the needs are. Practical issues get in the way. We’re not really a program driven congregation.”

The efforts of outreach within the community are diverse. One congregation has a day care center, one congregation has a free lunch program three days a week, and one

church hires a schoolteacher to provide a 'Rainbow Program' for community children. This program functions during the day, for twelve weeks in the summer. One pastor is on the board of directors for the Center Against Sexual Assault within the community.

One inner city congregation, which is totally Caucasian, hired an African-American social worker to coordinate provision of support for the needs of the community. There is also a Family Ministries Center in one congregation. There are tutoring programs, teen mother's support, caregivers' support, PFLAG (Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays) as well as twelve-step programs that are housed in the congregations. These are open to the community. The Presbyterian Churches seem to work actively with ecumenical organizations, helping to support women's shelters, and taking a role in a local Domestic Abuse Forum.

One of the pastors stated "We need to balance support with safety." Although most responded affirmatively to the question of formal efforts being made to protect, only two have sexual abuse education as part of the required training for volunteers. Two pastors have recently hosted a specialist in the field to address the whole church, as a preventative and healing measure. However, those two do not perform background checks.

In spite of the wide variety of outreaches, only three pastors indicated the congregation had addressed occurrences of sexual abuse, and only one replied affirmatively of knowledge of incest among the congregational members. "Need? I'm not aware of situations." There was an implication of status and reputation being important.

The Presbyterian churches researched do not provide support groups for families experiencing sexual abuse. Although one congregation does have a family counseling center and has various support programs for people, there appears to be no specific program for survivors of incest. Neither did the reporting pastors indicate they partner with other interfaith organizations to which they can refer families who are experiencing sexual abuse.

It seems there is a difference between being socially active and ministering to families who are experiencing incest. The three churches that recalled the highest profile sexual abuse situations (pastors or staff) did not have child protection policies, background checks, or support programs for sexual abuse. Nor did these congregations even indicate employing a qualified counselor on staff or support families with referral or underwriting of counseling services.

#### United Methodist Churches

The United Methodist Churches seem to have a comfortable relationship with the denominational headquarters. All six pastors stated the congregation has close denominational ties. Two pastors said they closely follow denominational policy and four articulated some ambiguity.

All six congregations disagreed that they could be called conservative and four stated they are liberal. Two pastors explained the church emphasizes both personal piety and social ministry. “For John Wesley, to respect the faith was both/and, not either/or. Here we have to deal with real life.”

The pastors all stated there is a denominational policy that addresses both sexual abuse and child protection. "We're Methodists. We do everything methodically," one pastor stated. There are publications and pamphlets of information regarding prevention of abuse and protection of children. The regional conference then has specific policies against sexual abuse. These are drawn up in agreement with the wider denominational position. A pastor reported that they are required to share this policy with all the staff annually and with the parish community. The staffs must sign a statement that this has been accomplished.

There are numerous statements and decisions that have been made by the UMC. A cursory glance at the web site shows hundreds of policy statements on sexual abuse. The denominational position from the official web site, as directed by the Nashville, Tennessee office is summed up in the following statement:

...The facts are grim: One out of three girls and one out of seven boys in the United States will be sexually abused before the age of eighteen. Fifteen million U.S. adults alive today were incest victims as children.

The church must reexamine the theological messages it communicates in light of the experiences of victims of domestic violence and sexual abuse. We must treat with extreme care the concepts of suffering, forgiveness, and the nature of marriage and the family. The Social Principles of The United Methodist Church affirm the family as "the basic human community through which persons are nurtured and sustained in mutual love, responsibility, respect, and fidelity" (§ 161A). Clearly, violence and abuse cannot be tolerated within such an understanding. The Social Principles "reject social norms that assume different standards for women than for men in marriage" (§ 161C), thus eliminating most of the tacit rationalizations that undergird spouse battering. The Social Principles also call for the protection of children from all forms of exploitation and abuse.

Situations of violence and abuse exist in families in virtually every congregation; tragically, no church or community is exempt. Numerous pastors have been asked, after asserting their conviction that there were no families experiencing violence or abuse in their congregations, to mention the issues from the pulpit, using words like *battering*, *rape*, *incest*, *child abuse*. Virtually without



exception, they have reported that members have subsequently come to them with current stories of abuse in their families. Clearly, church families are not immune, and many are waiting for a signal that these concerns are appropriate ones to share and struggle with within a Christian community.

The church is being challenged to listen to the stories of victims and survivors and to obtain information and guidance that will lead to wiser and more effective ways of ministry with persons who experience domestic violence and sexual abuse. The church must be a refuge for people who are hurting, and it is an entirely appropriate place for these issues to be addressed. We must find ways to demonstrate that the church is a place where people can feel confident in turning first, not last, for comfort and healing.

People of faith should take the lead in calling for a just response by the community in the face of domestic violence and sexual abuse. A just response involves several steps: righteous anger; compassion for the victim; advocacy for the victim; holding the offender legally and spiritually accountable for his or her sin against the victim and the community; treatment for the offender; and prevention of further abuse by addressing the societal roots and not merely the symptoms of violence and abuse.

(<http://infoserv.umc.org/faq/sexualethicsresolutions.htm>)

“We are socially liberal in that we believe in being active in social areas.” The United Methodist congregations seem to be proud of their identity of a social action church. All pastors of the congregations researched felt programs for the surrounding communities are vital. Homeless lunch programs, food banks, soup kitchens, a farmers market on the church property for the inner city community, summer day camp for children, and a center for seniors are provided in three of the churches.

One congregation runs a school within the facility. A congregation housed by the capital building in one state provides a wall phone at the main narthex for ‘street folk to use.’ One pastor said there is a four-page list of organizations that meet at his church.

Even the smallest congregation is pro-active, with an after school program, summer lunch program, and limited health services, partially funded by the government. However, when pushed for more illustration of that statement, it appears physical needs

are more the focus of activity for the congregations. Four out of six state they would provide mental health services for the community and the congregation equally. Two congregations do so.

There are numerous support groups within the United Methodist congregations. Twelve-step programs and support for divorce or grief recovery are present in two congregations. One congregation employs a Community Ministries Director. The pastors reported working with interfaith organizations to provide safe houses and domestic violence training to battered women and children, a student ministry for the local university, and with Christian Services, an ecumenical organization providing a wide variety of physical needs and job training opportunities to the local community.

Three of six congregations have made formal efforts to protect innocent persons. Background checks and a child protection policy are a part of the provisions for safety in three congregations. However abuse education is a part of the mandatory training for volunteer workers in only two of the congregations.

Apart from the Community Ministries program in one inner-city congregation, there appears to be no programs or support for survivors or perpetrators of abuse. The partnering with community resources may be the method of ministering to families, as there is no qualified person on staff to appropriate that task.

In spite of the involvement with the local community, none of the United Methodist congregations researched provide any programs that support families who are experiencing incest. Four pastors stated they saw no need for it. The other two expressed they knew there would be a response if it was offered. "I mean, it's out there, isn't it?"

## Summary

Although most of the congregations in each denomination considered ministering to the local community to be part of their obligation as a faith organization, only 5 of 46 congregations researched provide programs specifically for individuals or families who are experiencing sexual abuse or incest. At least four congregations link with other interfaith groups to provide an ecumenical program for the community to which they can refer survivors of sexual abuse or incest. A few pastors spoke of providing monies for therapy in areas they are not qualified to counsel. In spite of commitment to being relevant to the community, the congregations seem to distance themselves from the reality of the prevalence of sexual abuse within families in the community.

Assemblies of God	<p>"We do whatever we can to be a support system."</p> <p>"We've done more counseling outside of this congregation than within."</p> <p>"Let's not alienate, let's love."</p>
Christian Churches	<p>"There is too much of a hangup to have a support group. This is a small town."</p> <p>"Ten days ago we had a planning meeting. They want to do ministry within the community."</p> <p>"This church has an identity of outreach."</p>
Churches of God	<p>"We determine the needs of the community and focus our ministry on meeting those needs."</p> <p>"We reach out and do all of the above, because we recognized there was a great need."</p> <p>"We have an obligation to meet the needs when pressed – that is abusive situations, spiritual situations, financial and material needs as well."</p>
Missouri Synod Lutheran Churches	<p>"The basic job of the congregation is to minister to the spiritual needs of the congregation and NOT to the community."</p> <p>"It is good to have a resource available for the need."</p> <p>"The needs and concerns of the community... the church can address some of these things in a better way."</p>
Churches of the Nazarene	<p>"There is often a lack of knowledge as to how to act."</p> <p>"We try to reach out."</p> <p>"We do some (programs) ourselves and some in cooperation with other churches."</p>
Presbyterian Churches	<p>"Thirty years ago we made an intentional decision to stay in the community and minister..."</p> <p>"The neighborhood is our mission."</p> <p>"This church is defined by social outreach."</p> <p>"We don't know what the needs are. Practical issues get in the way."</p>
United Methodist	<p>"Our main focus of support is on grief recovery because we have an older congregation."</p> <p>"We are socially liberal in that we believe in being active in social areas."</p> <p>"There is a problem of identifying people. How do we do it?"</p>

Figure 4.4

"Does the Church have an obligation to provide programs that minister to the needs of the surrounding community?"

### Pastor's Perception of Obligation to be a Support System to the Local Community

*Research Question #6 –How does the pastor’s perception of availability of resources (human, professional, educational and financial) have an impact on the church’s response to families experiencing incest?*

Perception of resources is critical in providing services to people. If the organization is limited in resources, or if it does not value the resources it has, then there is a limitation to the range of support it will provide. As Salvador Minuchin once wisely said, “You can’t defeat helplessness.”

Resources may be evaluated in a variety of arenas. Size, community opportunities, educational culture and financial capital are all taken into consideration. Availability of warm bodies is often as important as capability of those bodies when assessing depth of supplies. Use of both genders gives a different understanding to availability of resources as well. Support measures specific to the need is also a consideration in assessing resources.

### **Size of Congregation**

The congregations are separated by size to extract information about awareness of abuse and provision of resources according to average weekly attendance of the congregation. It is assumed that the larger the congregation, the more ability there is to provide support measures for families experiencing abuse, because there would probably be more available resources among the congregants. These resources may be more education, more people not already involved in a ministry of the church, more funds

available, a larger facility in which to house the support measures, and a more diverse understanding of available community resources.

A cursory look at the matrix (Figure 4.5, p. 230) of support measures by average Sunday AM attendance would in fact back up this assumption. It seems that the larger the congregation is the more aware is the pastor of sexual abuse and incest within the constituency.

It is also the case in this body of research that the larger the congregation, the more likely are they to require background checks for volunteers with children and youth, and the more likely are they to have guidelines for perpetration, written child protection policies or a written application process for volunteers with child and youth. Churches with over one thousand will be more prone to have a counselor on staff and will incorporate sexual abuse education into the training for workers and leaders.

It is interesting to note that churches between 500 and 999, while not as likely to have a counselor on staff (3 of 9), will tend to financially support parishioners in securing counseling. Whether on or off campus, 15 of 19 congregations with over 500 in average attendance set aside resources to obtain counseling for survivors, perpetrators or families who have experienced abuse.

The only congregations that provide support groups specifically for survivors, perpetrators or families of sexual abuse are all over 500 in Sunday morning attendance. Four of them are above one thousand. The larger congregations also tend to access community resources, even when they are not in a metropolitan area.

Size of congregation does seem to have a significant influence on the perception and access of resources. Among the pastors interviewed, there seems to be a willingness

within larger congregations to delegate tasks to those more qualified. Support measures are put in place and allowed to function. Obligation to protect and support people who have less of a voice is more likely to be carried out, possibly because the opportunity is more likely to be available.

### Knowledge of Community Organizations for Sexual Abuse

A few communities have developed associations that specifically address issues of abuse. These organizations may have been created by a variety of community groups who recognized the need for protection and support of individuals or families experiencing abuse. In some of the metropolitan areas, the area churches answered the need by developing a house or support center that would extend the arm of the local congregations. They may include crisis counseling, safe houses, legal aid, and medical support. One such organization is state wide. The state of Ohio has developed a program by the name of 'Emerge'. This interfaith organization; ministers to victims of abuse.

However, knowledge of the support centers is not always readily available. While interviewing pastors in certain areas, the researcher noted that not all pastors were aware of the community resources that had been created. It would seem a priority of the organization to make this valuable resource available to all within the community. A higher profile among the churches is necessary.

## Churches with Women on Ministerial Staff

The understanding of women as resources in ministering to the community broadens the range of assets a congregation can have. If women are limited or hindered in their abilities to contribute in perspective, discernment and education, the resources of a congregation will be severely limited – as would be the case if men are limited in their abilities to contribute.

Data pulled from the second research question is also used here. The matrix shows the congregations with women on staff are more likely to have background checks for volunteer workers (21 out of 30) and are also more prone to provide some type of sexual abuse education (22 out of 30). Financial support for counseling of survivors, perpetrators and families, a counselor on staff, a written child protection policy, and a written application process for volunteers with children and youth also seems to be more prominent in congregations where a female is on staff.

In the congregations under one hundred in average attendance, the only written application process required for volunteers, of the nine churches in that category, is one where a female is pastor. Two of the three congregations of that size that both provide sexual abuse education and access community resources, have females on staff and the third one has a pastor whose wife is an ordained minister, though not serving on staff. This is rather significant when the observer will note that of all support measures, these are the only ones in congregations under one hundred in attendance. It is even more significant when two of these four congregations that provide support have never encountered sexual abuse in that congregation, and two that have no females on staff are aware of sexual abuse within the congregation yet provide no support.





There is no female on staff in any of the eight congregations that have between 100 and 250 average Sunday attendance. In those congregations, only one provides sexual abuse education and two access community resources, although five are aware of sexual abuse or incest within the congregation. There are no background checks and only one has a preventative policy or guidelines in case of perpetration. Two require a written application process for volunteers with children and youth. In spite of the increased size of the congregation, these churches which do not employ females have not incorporated a process for volunteers in 6 of the 8 churches.

#### Metropolitan Area

It is generally understood that the larger the city the more resources are available to the community. In looking at communities, the researcher defined a metropolitan area as any city or community that was over 100,000.

It does not appear that metropolitan congregations tend to utilize written policies or application processes in recruiting volunteers any more than do small towns or farming area congregations. Less than half use a written application process, as is the case with rural congregations.

However 22 of the 27 congregations within a metropolitan area do provide sexual abuse education. That is in comparison to 6 of 19 congregations that are not within a metropolitan area. Background checks are utilized within 16 of the 27 metropolitan congregations, while only 7 of 19 rural areas incorporate background checks into their recruitment process.

Eight of the twenty-seven congregations do provide a counselor on staff or financial support for counseling within a metropolitan area. In the more rural areas, only 4 of 19 do so. The availability of resources and awareness of such seems to be more prevalent in the metropolitan areas.

#### University in Close Proximity

It is not unreasonable to expect that a community with a university is going to have more understanding of the issues of abuse and the ramifications to all people who are involved. A university setting is often a more open environment where survivors can freely discuss their history, education about issues of abuse is offered, and counseling opportunities are available for the individuals and family.

The congregations were examined according to their proximity to a university. Twenty-three congregations utilize background checks for volunteers with children and/or youth. Twenty-one of those congregations are within ten miles of a university. The other two are not. This statistic show that .567 of the congregations close to a university do incorporate background checks while only .222 of the congregations further than ten miles from a university do so. Sexual abuse education is provided in 25 of the 37 congregations close to a university (or .657), while it is provided in only 3 of 9 congregations (or .333) further than ten miles away. Written application forms are required for volunteers in 16 of 37 congregations (.432) close to a university and only 1 of 9 (.111) congregations outside of the ten mile range. All of the congregations that provide guidelines in cases of perpetration are within a ten mile range of a university. While that percentage is low (40%), there is no congregation further than ten miles away

from a university that has drawn up guidelines. It should also be noted that all of the congregations that provide support groups for survivors or perpetrators of abuse are within ten miles of a university.

It seems clear from this data that the presence of an institution of higher learning is able to provide some direction to churches and other organizations in responding to the reality of sexual abuse within the community. The resources available in a university community can contribute to ministry to families experiencing sexual abuse.

	1-99 (9)	100-250 (8)	251-499 (10)	500-999 (9)	1000+ (10)
<b>Pastoral Awareness of Sexual Abuse within Congregation</b>	4	2	6	8	9
<b>Pastoral Awareness of Incest within Congregation</b>	0	3	5	5	6

**Figure 4.5**  
**Between Case Matrix of Pastors' Awareness of Sexual Abuse within Congregation:**  
**By Average Sunday AM Attendance**  
46 Congregations Researched

	1-99 (9)	100-250 (8)	251-499 (10)	500-999 (9)	1000+ (10)
<b>Background Checks of Volunteer Workers with Children and/or Youth</b>	0	0	7	7	9
<b>Guidelines in Cases of Perpetration</b>	0	1	4	4	6
<b>Written Child Protection Policy</b>	0	1	7	4	7
<b>Written Application process for Volunteer Workers with Children and/or Youth</b>	1	2	5	4	5
<b>Counselor (other than pastor) or Parish Nurse on Staff</b>	0	0	1	3	6
<b>Financial Support for Counseling of survivors, perpetrators, or families</b>	0	0	1	4	2
<b>Support Groups for Survivors or Perpetrators of Abuse</b>	0	0	0	1	4
<b>Sexual Abuse Education provided (sermons, seminars, training days, etc.)</b>	3	1	8	7	9
<b>Community Resources Accessed (lawyers, Therapists, social workers, ecumenical org., etc.)</b>	3	2	7	6	9

**Figure 4.6**  
**Between-Case Matrix of Support Measures:**  
**By Average Sunday AM Attendance**  
46 Congregations Researched

	Knowledge of Local Organiza- tions for Sexual Abuse *	Churches with Women on Ministerial Staff (30)	Metropolitan Area (Over 100,000) (27)	University within ten miles of church (37)
<b>Background Checks of volunteer workers with children and/or youth</b>	4	21	16	21
<b>Guidelines in cases of perpetration</b>	4	11	11	15
<b>Written child protection policy</b>	2	17	14	18
<b>Written Application process for volunteer workers with children and/or youth</b>	2	15	10	16
<b>Counselor/parish nurse (other than pastor) onsStaff</b>	3	7	8	9
<b>Financial Support for counseling survivors,perpetra- tors, or families</b>	1	6	4	6
<b>Support Groups for survivors or perpetrators of abuse</b>	2	4	4	5
<b>Sexual Abuse education provided (sermons, seminars, training days, etc.)</b>	7	22	22	25
<b>Community resources accessed (lawyers, therapists, social workers, ecumenical org., etc.)</b>	8	21	20	25

**Figure 4.7**  
**Resources Matrix and Provision of Support Measures for Congregations**

\*- There is no data available regarding actual functioning community organizations that address sexual abuse

## Chapter V.

### DISCUSSION

When using Bowen's definition of anxiety as 'the response of an organism to a threat, real or imagined' (Kerr & Bowen, 1988, p.112), the exposure of sexual abuse in a congregational family could certainly qualify as an event which has anxiety-producing potential. The ramifications of abuse are fertile ground for anxiety within the local congregation. What if the perpetrator is an active member of the congregation? What damage has been done to the survivors and how will that be manifested within the congregation? What will the community say if they find out that there has been sexual abuse within the constituency? How can the congregation be kept safe? Should the perpetrator be ministered to? Can we help? What can we do?

Friedman states that no issue, "merely by nature of its content is automatically more virulent than another. It is almost never the issue that is destructive, but the overall homeostatic conditions that give to any issue its destructive potential" (1985, p.204). Because the congregations have a need to feel safe, disturbance potential of homeostasis within congregations with low differentiation must be summarily dealt with – minimized, ignored, or cutoff. Rather than decreasing the level of chronic anxiety, this distancing actually maintains the level.

However, Kerr and Bowen (1988, p.131) suggest that to make an intentional choice to "engage people and situations one prefers to avoid and to make a decision to tolerate the anxiety associated with not doing things one normally does to reduce anxiety in oneself in those situations can, if done repeatedly over a long period of time, lead to a reduction in one's level of chronic anxiety." Therefore, if a congregation would address

the reality of sexual abuse within families, educate their volunteer workers, and put appropriate preventative and supportive measures in place, Family Systems theory suggests the level of anxiety with the emergence of an incident of sexual abuse would be reduced.

### Level of Anxiety and the Response to Sexual Abuse

The local congregation functions as a nuclear system. Of all work systems, emotionally the church is the one that most closely parallels the functioning of the family (Friedman, 1985). Family Systems philosophy is that the family responds to a crisis according to its level of self-differentiation, which informs the degree of anxiety. The presence of sexual abuse or incest within the church family has the potential of being highly emotionally evocative. While it is possible that the response of a congregation to sexual abuse may not be a function of its anxiety level, evidence from this research indicates that there is at least some relevance.

It seems from the pastors' reports that many of the congregations in this study prefer to ignore issues of sexual abuse – even if they are of an incestuous nature, rather than to effectively discuss ways of protecting the children and youth. Minimization of the damage done to the victim, the family, and in fact, the congregation, is a characteristic many of the congregations researched seem to make manifest.

### Denominational Results

The diverse results between the denominations indicated that there is a difference in degrees of anxiety when the churches are confronted with sexual abuse. While the



researcher does not claim that the research represents all congregations within these seven denominations, some observations are of note. If the assumption that organisms tend to align with microsystems that are similar in level of self-differentiation is correct, it is possible that the following results are germane to this discussion.

### Assemblies of God

The Assemblies of God that were researched have taken a non-anxious stand. Denominationally there have been clear statements regarding abuse of all forms. Sexual abuse education is a part of each congregation's agenda. The congregations have all put processes in place for screening volunteers to make the church safe for all. Among the congregations, there are clear directives for process and a variety of resources for facilitating in the healing process for both families and perpetrators. The AOG does not hide the issue of sexual abuse – which would be a symptom of anxiety – but addresses it within the congregations. There appears to be faith in the process and a trust in the leadership within the congregations.

Perhaps the inclusion of women in active ministry roles is directly related to the intentional stand on addressing sexual abuse. This intentionality may be a product of high inclusion of women in leadership within the Assemblies. Another theory is that the church considers part of its ministry as protection of women and the innocent – as the 'weaker' ones. However, there is not enough data to make that conclusion at this point.

## Christian Churches

While there are denominational statements regarding clergy abuse, the Christian Churches do not seem to have a general statement about abuse. The majority of the congregations researched seem to invest their life energy in maintaining homeostasis. There is a tendency to distance from the issue of sexual abuse. This distancing could be a manifestation of high anxiety. The impression of the researcher was that the efforts of the congregation are more focused on survival.

It seems that, although there were several incidents of sexual abuse reported within the congregations, other priorities have taken precedence. This may be directly related to the fact that five of the pastors had been at the congregations for less than eighteen months. New pastor adjustment may be the priority that usurps any other process. (Leaderless organism anxiety reference) The two congregations that have drafted measures for safety of individuals and have incorporated sexual abuse education into their programs have had the same pastor for at least five years.

## Churches of God

There seems to be a commitment to sexual abuse education and preventative measures within the congregations researched. There was a willingness to discuss perceived areas of weakness and an honesty regarding needed areas for improvement. There is a high trust level in the lay leadership which is directly related to the doctrine of the church. The pastors manifested an openness to address crisis situations and a willingness to tolerate congregational anxiety, yet an uncertainty as to how to proceed. Within the Churches of God, the pastors interviewed were pragmatic about the reality of

Within the Churches of God, the pastors interviewed were pragmatic about the reality of willingness to tolerate congregational anxiety, yet an uncertainty as to how to proceed. The pastors manifested an openness to address crisis situations and a high level of trust in the lay leadership which is directly related to the degree of perceived areas of weakness and an honesty regarding needed areas for improvement. There was a willingness to discuss measures within the congregations researched. There seems to be a commitment to sexual abuse education and preventative measures within the Churches of God.

Two congregations have had the same pastor for at least five years. The two congregations that have drafted measures for safety of individuals and have incorporated sexual abuse education into their programs have had the same pastor for at least five years. Now pastor adjustment may be the priority that needs any other related to the fact that five of the pastors had been at the congregation for less than eighteen months. Other priorities have taken precedence. This may be directly related to the fact that five of the pastors had been at the congregation for less than eighteen months. The two congregations that have drafted measures for safety of individuals and have incorporated sexual abuse education into their programs have had the same pastor for at least five years. The two congregations that have drafted measures for safety of individuals and have incorporated sexual abuse education into their programs have had the same pastor for at least five years.

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While there are denominational statements regarding clergy abuse, the Churches

sexual abuse and intentional about giving the church handles to process an issue that research shows is a part of every church and community. Even the smallest congregation, which is in the process of incorporating a screening process, that will include a background check and application form, has hosted sexual abuse seminars. This activity indicates a willingness to grapple with the difficult task of ministering to families of abuse. Among the congregations researched within the COG, the level of anxiety does appear to influence response to sexual abuse.

#### Missouri Synod Lutheran Churches

The MSLC indicated a reluctance to address the issue of sexual abuse until it erupts. The pastors interviewed within this very conservative denomination expressed inability to deal with the reality of sexual abuse. There was an indication of denying reality, with three of the pastors saying it simply is not an issue. The pastors of the two larger congregations have, however, been pro-active about developing processes and seeking outside resources to respond to abuse. Although the MSLC congregations have a process for disagreement in every congregation researched, strict controls seem to be the method of managing conflict. It is possible that the level of differentiation, which appears to be lower in the MSLC has an influence on the lack of ability to minister to families experiencing abuse.

#### Churches of the Nazarene

Although pastors of the Nazarene churches recounted many instances of sexual abuse within the constituency, there was ambivalence in provision of preventative

measures. The larger congregations seemed to have the more thorough policies and guidelines. The denominational statement is clear in condemning abuse and calling for protection of the unempowered, yet local congregations do not seem to make abuse prevention a priority.

A sense of high anxiety is underlying four of the congregations researched, and a fear of change or crisis was perceived. Sexual abuse education is only provided in two of the seven congregations. It is not clear whether the low level of self-differentiation that was observed within the smaller congregations has an influence on the ability to respond to families experiencing abuse.

### Presbyterian Churches

The preference of the Presbyterian churches, as defined by one of the pastors, is 'not to make waves'. One pastor stated the church is deliberate in being neutral about all perceived ethical and political issues. In four of the churches, the tendency to distance from the issue of abuse was evident. This may be a product of the role of the pastor within the Presbyterian Churches. It appears that the main function of the pastor is to be the educator. There is great faith in the process of education. This is evidenced in the data that five of the six congregations offer sexual abuse education to their congregations. Background checks and child protection policies are also a part of the procedural policies within the churches, however only one congregation offered counseling or financial aid to families experiencing abuse, and most pastors indicated the only knowledge of sexual abuse they had was with past childhood issues of women in the congregation.

The tendency to minimize the ramifications of sexual abuse was best illustrated with the congregation that continued to employ an interim pastor during his trial for sexual abuse of a minor even though he had confessed to having abused minors in the past. This manifestation of high anxiety is further evidenced with the lack of any preventative or supportive measures within the congregation two years later.

#### United Methodist Churches

Within the UMC, policy and theory are well defined regarding abuse of any sort. The hierarchy, which Bowen would define as the extended family (Friedman, 1985) and Bronfenbrenner (1989) would term part of the mesosystemic influence, hands down guidelines for training and congregational policy. The congregations have processes for screening volunteers and half of the congregations researched provide sexual abuse education.

However, the tendency to distance from the issue is evident in that only two pastors recalled incidents of sexual abuse. The role of the pastor, which often appears to be one of visiting professor, may be the main issue in the lack of awareness of abuse. Perhaps the term-limit characteristic of the United Methodist Church pastorates precludes much divulging of family secrets. An observed preference to distance from a situation that has high crisis potential is indicative of high level of anxiety within the system. Evidence is inconclusive to suggest that the level of anxiety influences the response to families experiencing abuse.

## Summary

It is important to note that there is more than one right answer when discussing the response to sexual abuse within a congregation. Although several preventative and supportive processes were suggested within this study, as well as healing opportunities, the congregation with a high level of self-differentiation is unlimited in its range of possibilities for addressing sexual abuse. The congregations that had more elaborate measures for abuse education, protective measures, and response directives seem to be the ones that indicate strong congregational leadership and input. The goal is to be able to confront sexual abuse by taking a non-anxious position and yet staying connected to all individuals involved (Kerr & Bowen, 1988). The church must be that non-anxious presence.

The indication by many pastors of the intention to draft child protection policies and various methods of risk management procedures seems to be significant. When responding to questions of the presence of preventative measures, pastors in each denomination intimated it is an item on the agenda, yet has not been accomplished at this time. Several stated they hoped to have a policy in place within the next year. Yet there appeared to be a lack of urgency about the issue.

There could be a variety of reasons for this. Lack of knowledge about requirements for risk management, confusion regarding what steps must be taken and where to access resources, fear of broaching such a highly emotionally evocative subject with the leadership and parishioners, and a lack of available work hours to make it happen, all may contribute to the lack of action. It appeared obvious from the responses that the pastors are aware that measures to protect children and youth are critical in





providing a safe atmosphere. Yet other, more urgent issues take priority. This 'head in the sand' approach only illustrates the anxiety-producing potential of the subject. It is a manifestation of anxiety which has been bound within an organism (Kerr & Bowen, 1988).

If the leadership of the congregation makes an intentional effort to address the reality of sexual abuse and to work to make the church a safe place for all, when an incident of sexual abuse occurs within the church constituency, it will be less likely to threaten homeostasis, which each congregation strives to maintain. Developing a process for confronting abuse situations will give confidence to the leadership and create trust within the congregation. Efforts to reduce anxiety by dealing with the process and avoiding specific content generally will lead to fundamental change in the long run (Friedman, p.210).

Although there are other mitigating circumstances and influences within the surrounding systems cannot be ignored, the data suggests anxiety is a major influence on the ability of the local congregation to be an effective support system to families experiencing sexual abuse or incest. It seems that within these seven denominations in this four state area the level of anxiety does help drive the response to families experiencing sexual abuse or incest.

### Women's Roles and the Response to Abuse

Gender socialization of churches is critical to being able to recognize action that fosters abusive language or behavior. The presence of women on the staff may bring more of an awareness of potential abuse areas. A woman in leadership will surely be

more sensitive to recognize the nuances of gender bias (Terry, 1992). Ostensibly, the presence of a woman on staff will make the whole congregation more sensitive to all voices rather than just the privileged minority (Hesse-Biber, Gilmartin & Lyndenberg, 1999).

Data indicates women are often perceived as more approachable for counseling among abused persons (Langberg, 1997; Sands, 1998; Rampage, 1995). Of the eight female pastors interviewed, five recalled parishioners in past or present congregations who had come to them for counseling because of sexual abuse by a father or step-father. It is possible that women – who are the abused gender in 9 out of 10 cases - are more likely to seek out women for incest or sexual abuse counseling. Perhaps it is that women often tend to use collaboration in the counseling moment (Jones, 1998), by encouraging the client to narrate her own story. This indicates a respect for the experiences and the wisdom gained. Affirmation of women, particularly women who have been abused, facilitates the process of healing from damaging relationships (Dinsmore, 1992).

The presence of women on staff also seems to influence the provision of opportunities for sexual abuse education. Sands infers (1998) that what she terms as a female-centered view of the world may contribute to the provision of support measures. The female survivors can collaborate with congregations by using their stories to help develop strategies for ministry (Langberg, 1997). It is important not to re-abuse the survivor by exploitation. However, inviting the survivor to inform the process of learning to be more sensitive to families who have experienced abuse, can promote healthy relationships for each person involved. Pastors, counselors, and congregations can learn a great deal from those who have walked the path.

Because of the high percentage of sexually abused persons being female, it seems that women are more sensitive to the need for training regarding abuse and prevention. Education for females as well as males may decrease toleration for sexist attitudes which give permission to abusive behavior. From the research with these forty-six congregations it appears that the interpretation of the woman's role in the home and church does influence the sensitivity to abuse issues within congregations.

### History of Abuse within the Congregation

Perhaps more than any other research question in the study, the issue of history illustrates the level of anxiety of the local congregation. From the observations of the researcher, it is not so much a matter of history determining response as it is history pointing out ability of congregation to differentiate in a high-stress producing opportunity. Response at the crisis moment demonstrates level of chronic anxiety. Kerr and Bowen (1988) point out that when anxiety is low the organism is less likely to be reactive. It is during a circumstance where anxiety is potentially high that all people become more reactive and less thoughtful. If self-differentiation of a congregation is low, the exposure of sexual abuse within the constituency is likely to produce high reactivity and functioning will decline. Conversely, if the congregation is highly differentiated, the leadership will be more prone to maintain high functioning and thoughtful processing, even in a highly stressful situation (Kerr & Bowen, p.99).

The congregation that experienced multiple events of sexual abuse of minors by a youth worker, illustrated that crisis-producing events actually expose level of anxiety rather than encouraging the process of development of support measures. This

congregation illustrated low levels of differentiation as they expended their life energy in naming an identified patient, placing all the blame on him and taking no responsibility for providing precautions for the safety of children and youth within their congregation. Maintenance of homeostasis mandated that the congregation move as quickly as possible back to their normal *modus operandi*. Thus, to date, no sexual abuse education, no child protective policy, no application process for volunteers, no background checks, and no address has been incorporated into the functioning of this congregation. This is a prime example of Bowen's Family Systems process – level of differentiation determining response to crisis.

The question arises, does the church become vigilant because of incidences of sexual abuse that occur, or do the incidences of sexual abuse become disclosed more frequently because the church intentionally addresses the issue. It is possible that protective measures within churches, regardless of denomination or size, are developed in response to the exposure of events of sexual abuse. It could be, conversely, that the evidence of history in the churches is in response to the strong statement of protection. As the statistics indicate at least one in five females are victims of sexual abuse (Dinsmore, 1991; Pellauer, Chester, & Boyajian, 1987), then every congregation has a number of sexual abuse survivors. This information may not ever come to light unless the congregation is made to be a safe place, with protective measures, abuse education, and guidelines for action upon declaration of perpetration.

The responses of the pastors indicated that it is not just history within the congregation that drives the response of abuse by a church, but it also appears to be an outgrowth of a community crisis. Several pastors recounted school system scandals that

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providing protections for the safety of children and youth within their congregation. Maintenance of homeostasis mandated that the congregation move as quickly as possible back to their normal modes operating. There is little or no school abuse education, no child protective policy, no application process for volunteers or no background checks, and no address has been incorporated into the functioning of the congregation. This is a prime

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influenced their action on developing protective measures for the youth and children within their constituency, as well as counseling options for families who appear with the presenting issue of sexual abuse or incest.

The recent public events with the Catholic Church seem to have been an impetus for pro-active measures. Though some of them were not aware of any sexual abuse having taken place within their constituency, the pastors stated they began to formulate some intentional education for leaders and to address abuse in more public forums. Several pastors in all seven of the denominations mentioned this as an inducement to risk management or child protection policy development. One pastor told the researcher that the congregation was motivated to create a set of guidelines within the last two years only because of the Catholic Church.

Several pastors, particularly in Ohio mentioned being motivated to evaluate their risk management and child protection policies by insurance companies. Unfortunately, sometimes the law must impel organizations to take action to protect their own members.

Friedman states (1985, p.169) that the crisis state (such as incidence of sexual abuse) offers opportunities for working out of unresolved family issues that may not be possible at any other time. While the event of sexual abuse is a tragedy to all involved, it also presents an unusual opportunity for promoting emotional health. As an example, it would appear from the congregations researched that the Assemblies of God have utilized the crisis-opportunity of sexual abuse among families within the congregations to develop processes to be effective as a support system to victims and survivors of sexual abuse.

## Status of Family Experiencing Incest

Within this research, the responses to families, who are actively involved in the congregation, experiencing familial sexual abuse can be seen on either ends of a continuum. Either the knowledge is minimized or denied, or the reactivity is extreme and the congregation shifts into high gear. The congregation, illustrating enmeshment, usually seeks to do damage control. They may try to force one of the individuals (often the survivor) to take responsibility, or they work to acquit anyone of responsibility, blaming 'the circumstances'. This is done in an effort to maintain homeostasis, (Friedman, 1985, p.23) which the congregation sees as a laudable goal.

Four specific areas of note arose with the research of this question: Active membership appears to get more pastoral attention in incidents of incest, non-parishioners are ministered to in a different manner, questions of confidentiality cloud the issues for the leadership and personal investment of the pastor also has an impact. These concerns were articulated or intimated by the majority of the pastors interviewed.

### Individual Pastoral Attention

There could be several reasons that the pastor seems to address incest relationships among the active membership on a more personal basis. Among those reasons is the possibility that high-profile families involved in incest are more likely to cause a greater degree of concern among the congregational members. They know and are more well known to a greater number of people. They may be involved in the day-to-day functioning of the congregation, and they may have a higher level of influence over the members. Because of these reasons, there may be more to lose for the functioning





and ministry of the church if the issue becomes public. The presence of abuse in an active family within the congregation threatens to upset homeostasis within the congregation. The threat to the homeostatic condition of the congregation may threaten the pastor's sense of well-being as well (Friedman, 1985). By trying to take care of the situation alone, the pastor may unwittingly encourage burying the problem, which only results in sustaining the chronic anxiety of the congregation.

### Supporting Non-parishioners in Situations of Incest

Individuals or families who are not a part of the congregation seem to be treated differently when they approach the pastor for help. Many congregations are involved in community organizations that minister to families with various abuse problems. Non-parishioners are often referred to these organizations. Pastors may refer to a local counselor or therapist. Among the possible reasons for this is limitation of resources. There are so many crises in the day-to-day life of the congregation that the pastoral staff feels they must focus first on those situations. To be able to refer those families who are not a part of the local congregation is a practical allocation of time resources.

One United Methodist congregation in an inner city setting has effectively addressed this challenge by hiring a Community Ministries Director specifically to deal with issues such as this with the local community. In doing so, the church is enabled to minister to its own constituency, but at the same time effectively support the community. This seems to be a way of 'being my brother's keeper!'

## Confidentiality

Another issue at stake is confidentiality. A few of the pastors mentioned this issue, and discussed the role of the church in guarding the confidentiality of the parishioner, no matter what the issue. It became clear that some pastors consider part of their responsibility is to preserve the privacy of individuals and thus maintain the trust relationship. This concept of trust was evidenced in each denomination, where pastors spoke of parishioners telling pastors they've never told anyone, asking them to promise not to report it, or in requesting pastors to swear to 'take it to the grave'. Despite the requirements of law, many pastors choose not to report.

One element of the role of pastor, priest or rabbi in a faith assembly is traditionally that of 'father-confessor'. When the parishioner confesses a sin which has betrayed another, particularly a child, the pastor experiences a type of role confusion. The conundrum is in ministering to the confessing individual yet taking responsibility to see that justice takes place. The pastor is pastor over the whole congregation, not just the one individual. It is the pastor's role to make sure the church is safe for all.

## Personal Investment

The pastor finds it more difficult to follow procedures when he or she is more intimately involved with the person who is experiencing incest, either as survivor or perpetrator. It is not as difficult to be responsive and process oriented when there is little or no personal relationship. When a member of the leadership or part of the congregation is hurting, however, the tendency is to become more reactive. Ronald Richardson (1996) discusses this as the processes of fusion and differentiation. "Internally, the degree to

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which a person can separate thinking and feeling, and bring greater objectivity to his or her own inevitably subjective stance, and interpersonally, the degree to which a person can be clear or more objective about the emotional separateness between self and other, knowing what is self and self's responsibility and what is not" (p. 81). Family Systems philosophy states that a 'family tends to function best when its head is well-differentiated' (Friedman, 1985, p. 221). It is probably in this moment that the level of self-differentiation of the pastor is best illustrated.

Once again the status of the family experiencing incest does not so much seem to influence the provision of support measures to families experiencing abuse as it does illustrate the level of anxiety of the congregations. Those congregations that seem to indicate low levels of self-differentiation show enmeshed relationships with the individuals involved, by fusing with the survivors or perpetrators, minimizing the effects of abuse, or distancing from the issue. The congregations that show evidence of high levels of self-differentiation seem to indicate actions that are thoughtful and responsive, not reactive.

### Philosophy of Community Presence of Congregation

Denominational headquarters of all seven congregations indicate the need to be a presence of grace and love within the local communities. Whether the main focus is to evangelize, to disciple, or be a messenger of hope the denominations appear to call their congregations to make manifest the presence of God to their communities. All denominations have put a statement about abuse in print. The relationship between congregations and denominational headquarters, however, is not always clearly defined.

Therefore the statements or positions articulated by the general headquarters are not necessarily the positions of the local congregations.

The concept is clear but the process is nebulous. It seems the congregations want to choose how to be a support system to the community. While there is general agreement that the ideal is to be a presence within the local communities to provide healing and wholeness, churches do not always perceive the best way to exemplify that. Even if they do come to an agreement about the breadth and method of support, the family experiencing abuse, may not perceive that the congregation's support is the type they need (Vaux, 1988). Support that the congregations may feel comfortable in providing is not necessarily the kind of support the community needs. The perception of need as well as resources helps determine the support.

Crockenberg (in Vaux, 1988) discusses three types of social support; emotional, instrumental and informational. The latter two are easier to provide, because they awaken less anxiety. Both instrumental and informational supports usually require less life energy than does emotional support. Often though, families living with the reality of sexual abuse need the third type of support as well. Emotional damage executed upon survivors of incest is often the most protracted damage, and requires the more extensive support (Dinsmore, 1991).

The transactional effect of interconnected systems continually changes the shape of relationships, expectations and responsibilities (Bronfenbrenner, 1989). What the congregation may see as an established need for families experiencing abuse will change as the process continues. As an example, safety from the predator may be the first area of focus, however, that does not effectively take care of the situation. The survivors will

certainly benefit from emotional support as they gain a sense of respite from the abuse, but may soon feel the pinch of what has been the main breadwinner taken from the home. The congregation may continue to minister in a variety of ways until such time as they perceive their resources are being drained by this one family. This appraisal of support (Vaux, 1988) then changes the attitude of the congregation in ministering to the family.

This was illustrated by the remarks of some pastors who expressed desire to aid the families, but confusion regarding how to go about it. The danger is that confusion may lead to frustration and result in no effectiveness of support at all. Herman (1997) and Vaux (1989) both caution that the response by the microsystem and larger systems will help determine the ultimate impact of the organism experiencing trauma. The researcher would add that it will also have an influence on the impact of the abuse on the congregation, particularly over the chronosystemic processes in the subsequent generations.

According to the level of anxiety, the congregation may respond with thoughtful and careful action, or may ignore the family altogether. The congregation may, if functioning in a state of chronic anxiety, try to manage every aspect of the situation, or may seek to minimize the abuse, re-abusing the survivor and family.

An organism always functions within a relationship. That is as true about the local congregation with the family as it is about the local congregation with its denominational affiliate. Denominational influence is a fluid concept as well (Smith, 1985; Tracy & Ingersol, 1999). If the congregation is highly differentiated, it will assess the denominational stand and respond according to its own perception of the issue. If, however, the congregation is less differentiated, in an anxiety-producing situation the

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response to the denominational policy may be strictly followed, totally ignored at this moment, or adopted in pieces. The perception of the crisis at any given moment, determines the response.

Most pastors expressed commitment to ministry within the local community. The responses did indicate the perception of the congregational role within the community does influence the way the church wishes to respond to families. Process, however, does not always equal content.

### Perception of Resources

Within this body of research, it is by perceived resources that the level of self-differentiation is most impacted. The resource network available within and around a microsystem influences the ability to answer the need to be an effective support system (Vaux, 1988). Perhaps the clearest differences among the congregations in preventative and protective measures addressing sexual abuse are their understandings of available resources.

If a congregation feels bereft of resources, the self-differentiation of the parishioners will more than likely be low. They will feel ill-equipped to handle a crisis situation such as incest. Because of the high-stress potential of the issue, homeostasis may be threatened. The life-energy required to effectively address the situation and process it in a healthy manner will be more than the congregation can handle. The congregation then is more likely to react emotionally than to respond in a thoughtful manner. This only serves to heighten the anxiety. The reactionary behavior has effectively lifted the level of anxiety to a higher level. An identified patient is targeted,



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the people involved triangle with others, sides become polarized, blame is cast, and the perceived offender is summarily dealt with. In this way the participants can distance from the perceived crisis. The enmeshment of the relationships is now flourishing and once again, the real issue (inability to process) is pushed beneath the surface. The congregation can go on again, functioning in denial until another crisis rises to threaten homeostasis.

Conversely, a congregation that perceives itself rich in resources is more likely to have a higher level of self-differentiation. A crisis-opportunity such as incest will be processed using established measures and healing resources (Steinke, 1996). This does not mean there is a lack of anxiety. However, the leadership is able to regulate its own reactivity by thinking. Respect for others' abilities, communication of the felt need, allocation of the appropriate resources, and a non-anxious stand in the face of the high-stress potential of the issue are all a part of the process in effectively being a support system to families in crisis. The congregation is in a position to respond appropriately to the need rather than react emotionally. The transactional dynamic of the situation is that effective processing of the traumatic issue helps build up the level of self-differentiation, giving the congregation confidence in its ability to process such highly emotionally evocative events.

High anxiety inhibits thinking capacities and opens up doors to reactivity, closing the door to healthy response. On the other hand, low anxiety allows processing to take place and a thoughtful, effective response is possible, allowing the persons involved to stay connected in spite of the high-stress potential of the issue.

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## Size of Congregation

Of the many varieties of resources that contribute to a congregation's ability to be a support system to families experiencing abuse, it seems that the most significant is the size of the congregation. Churches with more people tend to see themselves as having more ability to respond to the crisis of incest. They may see their resource network as more extensive (Vaux, 1988). A quick look at the matrix (figure 4.6) on page 231 illustrates the discrepancy between churches under 100 in average weekly attendance and those over 1000. The more people there are, the more potential there is for persons committed to ministering to abused persons, more funds available for provision of programs and training, more education in the field of abuse, and more awareness of community organizations, it would seem. Financial, material, educational, and humankind resources give the perception of a more effective support system.

There are many reasons the larger churches are more likely to be aware of sexual abuse situations - tenure of pastor tends to be longer in larger congregations, the more people the more abuse is likely to be revealed. When searching for a safe place, families of abuse may trust the larger organization to have more checks and balances available.

The smaller congregations are consumed with survival. It is very hard to provide services of counseling and support when there are not enough people to do the job to keeping the machine running. The priority may be to survive. It is only when more warm bodies are present to share the load that the congregation can look to the unique needs of abuse.

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handle crisis situations alone, not knowing who to trust, not aware of outside resources, and afraid to lose the parishioners that are already there. Anxiety is high because of perception of low resources and inability to partner with others. The pastors of smaller congregations may also tend to be less educated, but that has not been established.

Research shows women on staff contribute to the development of preventative and support measures within a congregation. The differing perspectives of both genders are invaluable in addressing an issue so deeply embedded in the patriarchal paradigm of the culture. The church without a female in leadership is deprived of a priceless resource.

Metropolitan areas are more likely to have organizations that have been developed by a consortium that has pooled its various resources to address the needs of the community more effectively. Data gathered from the churches researched shows the larger, more populous areas used their collective assets to answer the challenge of support within their communities.

Education makes people more aware of the problem of sexual abuse. The congregations that were located in close proximity to a university seemed to have more of an understanding of the myriad issues involved in sexual abuse and were more intentional about protecting their parishioners. Research showed that using a variety of methods to educate the community about sexual abuse raised awareness and provided a number of resources for the local congregations.

Positive use of the rich and diverse mesosystemic influences, such as have been mentioned, provide a wide platform for addressing sexual abuse. Collaboration of the systems to attack an evil that oppresses the innocent and voiceless in our society is a necessary process for continuing development of a healthy environment. Sharing energy

to thwart dysfunction is an example of transactional dynamics in their highest, most noble processes. All systems benefit emotionally from the exercise.

The key is perception. If a congregation does not see itself as having the ability to be a support system, it will not invest its stockpile of life-energy into serving others in a supportive manner. Each congregation, no matter how small it is, has resources to be a support system. It may not have multi-staff, sophisticated programs or unlimited funds at its disposal, but there are warm bodies with abilities to respect the value of each human being and to listen to a hurting victim. Every congregation has a voice to speak out against atrocities between human beings and to address abuse of the unempowered. There is a telephone close at hand to call a police station or a hospital. Best of all there is the priceless resource of prayer and faith, which a church does best!

## **Chapter VI**

### **LIMITATIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH**

Because there has been, as far as is known, no other survey that has endeavored to measure the influences that impact the church's ability to respond to the crisis of familial sexual abuse, the survey will be given as collateral support to the interviews. In an effort to obtain a valid reading of the influence of each variable, a similar number of surveys was given to each denomination or faith community surveyed. Four states, within the midwest only, were surveyed in an endeavor to acknowledge regional differences in addressing issues of extreme sensitivity.

### **PROJECTIONS REGARDING LIMITATIONS**

There are, of necessity, limitations to this study. An area that would hamper the understanding of the seriousness of the issue, is that at least two states do not have laws regarding incest, although they do have laws against childhood sexual abuse. One of the midwestern states from which the sample is drawn, is just such a state. This contributes to the confusion regarding what must be reported and what the required laws are. It seems to this author that the lack of law sends a message regarding the perceived seriousness of sexual abuse within families.

A pastor's perspective is going to be different than the perspective of an elder or that of a patriarch or matriarch within the congregation. Self-reports are, by their very nature, biased. A pastor may be defensive in reporting, as he or she answers the survey.



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Because there has been, as far as is known, no other survey that has endeavored to measure the influences that impact the church's ability to respond to the crisis of familial sexual abuse, the survey will be given as sufficient support to the interview. In an effort to obtain a valid reading of the influence of each variable, a similar number of surveys was given to each denomination or faith community surveyed. From states within the midwest only, were surveyed in an endeavor to acknowledge regional differences in addressing issues of extreme sensitivity.

## PROJECTIONS REGARDING LIMITATIONS

There are, of necessity, limitations to this study. An area that would hamper the understanding of the seriousness of the issue, is that at least two states do not have laws regarding incest, although they do have laws against childhood sexual abuse. One of the midwestern states from which the sample is drawn, is just such a state. This contributes to the confusion regarding what must be reported and what the reported laws are. It seems to this author that the lack of law sends a message regarding the perceived seriousness of sexual abuse within families.

A pastor's perspective is going to be different than the perspective of an elder or that of a parent or minister within the congregation. Self-reports are, by their very nature, biased. A pastor may be defensive in reporting, as he or she answers the survey.

Insight may also be limited by length of pastorate, ability to discern issues correctly, or by the pastor's own background and intergenerational issues.

A pastor is understood to be an authority figure within a local congregation. The scope of influence includes the provision of programs, such as support to families experiencing incest. The pastor brings his or her own perceptions and biases in directing the response of the congregation (Friedman, 1985; Turnbull, 1970).

Do the Pastor's responses indicate an effort to influence the congregation, as pertains to providing services to the community, particularly families experiencing incest? In-depth interviews will question the pastor's agreement with denominational policies, regarding women in leadership, opinion of importance regarding the issues of sexual abuse, individual perception of the church's responsibility to provide support, and perception of pastoral role within the local congregation.

The anxiety level of the pastor was not investigated in this study. There can be no totally objective interview, by either the researcher or the respondent. Friedman (1985, p. 208) states that the capacity of the leadership to contain his or her own anxiety, particularly in the face of such a high-stress potential, may be the most significant capability in the arsenal. Kerr and Bowen (1988) and Friedman both discuss the importance of the level of differentiation of the leadership to an organism's response. Human ecological theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1989) would indicate that the organism influences the microsystem at the same time that the microsystem is influencing the organism. While it is highly unlikely that the knowledge of incest within a congregation will not raise the anxiety level of the leadership, if the pastor is able to sustain a calm yet firm position in the face of such a highly emotionally evocative moment, that steadiness

level position in the face of such a highly emotionally evocative moment, that standards

will not raise the anxiety level of the leadership, if the pastor is able to sustain a calm yet

openness. While it is highly unlikely that the knowledge of inner-world within a congregation

influences the microsystem at the same time that the microsystem is influencing the

human ecological theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1983) would indicate that the organism's

importance of the level of differentiation of the leadership to an organism's response

capability in the moment. Katz and Bowser (1988) and Friedman both discuss the

particularly in the face of such a high-stakes potential, may be the most significant

308) states that the capacity of the leadership to contain his or her own anxiety,

totally objective interview, by either the researcher or the respondent. Friedman (1983, p.

The anxiety level of the pastor was not investigated in this study. There can be no

perception of pastoral role within the local congregation.

sexual abuse, individual perception of the church's responsibility to grant its support, and

public, regarding women in leadership, opinion of importance to grant the church's

intensity. In-depth interviews will discuss the pastor's agreement with the emotional

persists in providing access to the community, particularly family's expectations.

The pastor's response indicates an effort to influence the congregation, as

the response of the congregation (Friedman, 1983; Tumbull, 1979).

responding incident. The pastor brings his or her own perspective and biases in discussing

scope of influence includes the provision of program, seeking support in funding.

A pastor is understood to be an authority figure within a local congregation.

by the pastor's own background and intergenerational relations.

might may also be limited by length of pastoral, which in different ways contribute

may lower the level of anxiety for both the congregation and the family. A focused study on the anxiety level of the pastor in these high-stress opportunities would contribute to the understanding of the congregation's ability to be a support system.

A follow-up study may be to survey families or victims who have experienced incest, regarding their perspective of the church's support to them during the crisis time. Perceived support is critical to the ability of the system to be effective in the role (Vaux, 1988).

There may be a difference in the way a church responds to abuse based on the type of abuse that has taken place, based on the legal ramifications, based on the financial situation or position of the family in the community, or based on how many people in the church know. Has the community become aware? Is this a high profile case?

It becomes clear that there is no one characteristic of a congregation that influences its ability to be a support system to families experiencing sexual abuse. Many areas that may well have a bearing on the issue, were not researched. Many other variables are possible mitigating influences to churches ability to respond as an effective support system to families experiencing incest. Among them may be the type of setting in which the church is located. A rural church may respond differently than would an urban or suburban faith community. Education level of the congregation or socio-economic circumstances would possibly affect the way the church would view the issues surrounding familial sexual abuse.

Local cultural understanding of resolving conflict would illuminate this study. The mesosystem in which the microsystem is embedded greatly influences the organisms

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economic circumstances would possibly affect the way the church would view the issues

surrounding familial sexual abuse.

Local cultural understanding of resolving conflict would illuminate this study.

The congregation in which the microsystem is embedded greatly influences the organization

within the microsystem. What is the response of the community in a highly stressful situation? How does that influence the local congregation's ability to respond?

How does the manner in which the family approaches the congregation for help affect the situation? Is there a difference when the perpetrator voluntarily confesses abuse? Is the church more likely to be punitive in its behavior if the child is discovered to have been abused? Does the age of the survivor and the number of people abused affect the ability to stay non-reactive? Are all of these issues merely functions of the level of self-differentiation of the congregation? From the knowledge that levels of anxiety are contagious (Friedman, 1985; Kerr & Bowen, 1988), the question arises; how does the level of self-differentiation of the family influence the level of self-differentiation of the congregation?

Do Caucasian congregations provide more or less preventative measures than Hispanic or African American congregations? Is one culture more likely to set up intervention programs or support groups for survivors of abuse? It would be enlightening to research the significance of culture in examining ability to be a support system to families experiencing sexual abuse.

Does the concept of women as subservient to men have an influence on the ability to be a support system? The inconclusive evidence from this study would indicate that there is some influence of patriarchal paradigm on effectiveness as a support system. However, whether the denomination is more or less likely to provide education and/or preventative measures regarding sexual abuse should be researched more thoroughly, looking at the denominations' understanding of male and female roles, and how that influence is manifested.

within the microsystem. What is the response of the community to a highly stressful situation? How does that influence the local congregation's ability to respond?

How does the manner in which the family approaches the congregation help affect the situation? Is there a difference when the congregation voluntarily confesses sin? Is the church more likely to be patient in its behavior if the child is discovered to have been abused? Does the age of the survivor and the number of people abused affect the ability to stay non-reactive? Are all of these systematically taken into the level of self-differentiation of the congregation? From the knowledge that comes of society and contagion (Friedman, 1985; Koss & Browne, 1985), the microsystem, how does the level of self-differentiation of the family influence the level of self-differentiation of the congregation?

Do Caucasian congregations provide more or less protective measures than Hispanic or African American congregations? Is one culture more likely to set up intervention programs or support groups for survivors of abuse? It would be enlightening to research the significance of culture in examining ability to be a support system to families experiencing sexual abuse.

Does the concept of women as *apostates* to men have an influence on the ability to be a support system? The inconclusive evidence from the study would indicate that there is some influence of patriarchal religion on a congregation as a support system. However, whether the denomination is more or less likely to provide education under preventive measures regarding sexual abuse should be researched more thoroughly, looking at the denomination's understanding of male and female roles and how that influence is reflected.

Finally, this research was conducted in a four state area with only forty-six congregations. Although it will give some indication of the various denominations that were researched, this research cannot be generalized to include all protestant denominations, or even all of the seven denominations researched.

## SUMMARY

The church is an organism built primarily on the concept of grace and mercy. Despite her frailties, in spite of her prejudices, because of her humanness, she continually struggles to minister with these twin concepts. Although the church does function emotionally as a family system, this particular priority of the church is uniquely different from the family system within the biological family.

The difficulty of confronting an issue as highly charged with emotion as is sexual abuse is that grace must be given in spite of the repugnant nature of the action. Grace involves forgiving the sin, but setting boundaries to protect the innocent. It includes taking a non-anxious stand in the presence of an anxiety-producing event.

This is the dilemma each congregation must face, as she struggles to be an effective support system to families – both perpetrators and survivors – who are experiencing abuse. The church must be pro-active and responsive. If she is to live out her purpose, she must speak against evil, protect innocent ones and work to rehabilitate those who have been damaged by sexual abuse, both the perpetrator and the survivor.



## **Appendixes**

## A.) SURVEY QUESTIONS

1) Strongly Agree, 2) Agree, 3) Am not sure, 4) Disagree, 5) Strongly Disagree

Code	Question	1	2	3	4	5
1. cg	It is a mission of this congregation to respect all voices, including children, women , and aged, handicapped, and minority groups.					
2. ci	This congregation sees part of its task as taking public stands on what is often perceived as moral issues - such as:					
2a.	- abortion					
2b.	- homosexuality					
2c.	- domestic abuse					
2d.	- sexual abuse					
2e.	- racism					
2f.	- discrimination					
3. dg	Women are ordained in this denomination or faith community.					
4. ci	This congregation has very close denominational ties.					
5. cl	Conflict of opinion is respected within this congregation as normal and healthy.					
6. cl	This congregation is driven by the pastoral leadership.					
7. cl	The pastor is readily accessible to this congregation.					
8. clh	If there is a major crisis in the church such as pastoral abuse – every effort is made to keep the whole congregation from knowing.					
9. ch	There is a detailed process in place for disagreement with the pastoral or elected leadership.					
10. cg	Women are involved in all roles in this congregation.					
11. dci	The congregation sees one of its missions as social activity within the community (such as facilitating the disenfranchised, and ministering to others outside the congregation)					
12. dc	Our denominational headquarters have great control over the local congregations					
13. cl	The pastoral leadership of the church has the final say on issues of conflict within the congregation.					
14. cg	The husband is considered head of the household, and as such, has final say in issues of contention.					
15a ch	This congregation values peace above voicing issues of disagreement: - within the congregation.					
15b	- within the community					
16. ch	If there is a major crisis in the church, every effort is made to keep the whole congregation from being informed about the situation.					
17. cr	This congregation has a variety of resources for counseling, education, and protection of innocent persons.					
18. dci	This congregation is reflective of the main denominational profile in doctrine and ideology.					
19. clh	Constructive conflict is valued as necessary for the growth and outreach of the congregation.					

20. clh	Major decisions in this congregation are made largely by the pastoral leadership, rather than by the whole congregation.					
21. hil	When the problem of sexual abuse has arisen within leadership meetings, the majority of the leaders do not want to discuss either the issue or the church role.					
22. chp	The congregation has had to confront a member of this congregation with a charge of incestuous sexual abuse.					
23. ci	The congregation is encouraged to be active in the life of the community.					
24. cpr	The congregation provides mental health services, in some form, for both the parishioners and the community, equally.					
25. cl5	It is the responsibility of the **leadership to address abuse issues.					
26. clr	Abuse education is a part of the **leadership training of this congregation.					
27. lh	The congregation is free to voice disagreement with the **leadership.					
28. cp lhg	When an active person within the congregation is accused of sexually abusing one of his/her family members, the person is immediately relieved of official position and responsibilities until the charges have been explored further.					
29. dg	The position of the denomination is that when a couple disagrees on an issue, the husband is the one to make the final decision.					
30. cd	The congregation is free to voice disagreement with the denomination.					
31. clh	Persons not on the pastoral staff or elected to a church office, have some official input on the response toward families experiencing incest.					
32. ch	To your knowledge, at least one incident of incest has been exposed within the church constituency in the last twenty years.					
33. clr	There is a risk management program in place in the congregation.					
34. cli	Based on your understanding of the term, the parishioners in this congregation would be defined as mostly conservative.					
35. cl gp	When a moral charge is made, there is every effort made to treat each person involved with respect, no matter what the position in the congregation.					
36. crg	Formal efforts have been made for protection of children and innocent people in the life of this congregation.					
37. dci	There would be formal consequences if the congregation were to deviate from the denominational ideology.					
38. clh	If incidents of incest have occurred within this congregation, they have historically been addressed by the pastoral staff only.					
39. cpi	The leadership would be more likely to invest in the emotional healing of a parishioner than a community member who is not a part of the congregation.					
40. cli	Based on your understanding of the term, this congregation would be defined as mostly liberal.					
41cli	This congregation is mission driven.					
42. hil	Within the leadership meetings, any discussion regarding the issue of incest, often ends in tabling the issue.					
43. ch	To your knowledge, this congregation has addressed at least one incident of sexual abuse within the last twenty years.					

**\*\*For this survey, unless otherwise specified, the term *leadership* is defined as formal or informal emotional and spiritual guides. This could include both pastoral staff and/or spiritual matriarchs/patriarchs, as well as accepted governing heads of the congregation.**

**Legend:**

Each of these questions reflect the source from which anxiety would be derived.

**D = Denominational issues**

**C = Congregational Issues**

**L = Leadership Issues**

**G = Gender Issues in the life of the congregation**

**H = Historical Issues in the life of the congregation**

**P = Position of the family/individual within the congregation**

**I = Perceived congregational image within the community, including responsibilities and services**

**R = Resources available within the congregation**

**Research Questions addressed by survey questions:**

**Research Question #1 – 5, 6, 9, 13, 15a,16, 19, 20, 21, 27, 30, 42**

**Research Question #2 – 1, 2a,c,d,f, 4, 9, 12, 13, 16, 18, 29, 36**

**Research Question #3 – 8, 22, 28, 31, 32, 38, 43**

**Research Question #4 – 22, 23, 28,35, 39**

**Research Question #5 – 2a,b,c,d,e,f, 4,11, 12, 15b, 18, 22, 24, 25, 30, 33, 36, 37, 39, 41**

**Research Question #6 – 7, 17, 24, 26, 33**

## B. Pastor's Contact Letter

June 27, 2002

Dear Pastor,

You have been asked to participate in a research project entitled "Denominational, Congregational, and Leadership Influences on the Church's Effectiveness As a Support System to Families Experiencing Incest", for a doctoral program. In an effort to find ways for the church to minister to families experiencing incest, I will be interviewing twenty pastors from six different faith communities in four mid-west states. I will also be asking you to fill out a 43 item survey regarding issues which may be influential to your church's policies and practices in regard to sexual abuse. This survey will take approximately 25 minutes to complete. My goal is to locate denominational, congregational, and leadership issues that may influence the church's effectiveness in developing ministries for families who have experienced incest.

I would like to involve you in this research project. Let me assure you that your responses will remain confidential; neither your name, nor the name and location of your congregation will be listed in any of the literature, including my doctoral thesis, or any future references to this research. Both the surveys and the audio-tapes will be kept in locked storage in my office at 1101 E. Cavanaugh St., Lansing, Mi., 48910. There will be no extra copies made. No other person will have access to either the surveys or the audio-tapes.

I will be contacting you by telephone within the next 30 days to discuss any questions you may have and to set up an appointment for a 60-90 minute interview, at your convenience.

I hope you will be willing to participate in this study. By signing the consent form, you are agreeing to participate in both the survey and the interview. You are able to withdraw participation from this research project at any time. If you choose to do so, the information gathered from you will be immediately destroyed. Otherwise, the interview and survey data will be kept until December 31, 2003, at which time all of it will be destroyed.

Hopefully, as we better understand the issues that affect our efficacy to minister to victims of abuse, we will be better equipped to address these issues.

Thank you,  
Sincerely,

Rev. Rebecca New Edson  
Pastor of Worship and Arts  
Pennway Church of God  
Lansing, Michigan 48864  
517-882-0223

### C. Consent Form

**“Denominational, Congregational, and Leadership Influences on the Church’s Effectiveness As A Support System to Families Experiencing Incest”**

## **CONSENT FORM**

You have been asked to participate voluntarily in both an interview and a survey, exploring the influences surrounding a congregation’s response to families experiencing incest.

In order to obtain more complete information about the congregation’s process of responding to incest within the church community, the researcher will be interviewing each participant in a 60-90 minute session, which will be taped for the researcher’s accuracy in reporting. All will be held in confidence and privacy will be protected to the maximum extent allowable by law.

Your identity, and that of the church, will be withheld. Neither your name nor the location of your congregation will be listed. The data collected will be destroyed no later than December 31, 2003. Should you decide to withdraw from participation, please contact me via telephone or email, and the data will be immediately destroyed.

If you have any questions or concerns regarding your right as a participant, you may contact Ashir Kumar, MD, Chair of the University Committee on Research Involving Human Subjects (UCRIHS), 202 Olds Hall, Michigan State University, East Lansing, Mi 48824-1046; phone 517-355-2180; Fax – 517-432-4503; Email UCRIHS@msu.edu.

By signing this consent form you are giving your permission to the researcher to use information collected for research on this project. You may withdraw consent at any time by contacting the person at the name and address below.

**Signature** \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

**Contact:**

Rebecca New Edson  
3969 W. Sunwind Ave.  
Okemos, Mi 48864

Phone: 517-351-6475 Email: [rebeccanew@voyager.net](mailto:rebeccanew@voyager.net)

"Denominational, Congregational, and Leadership Influence on the Church's Effectiveness As A Support System to Families Experiencing Loss."

## CONSENT FORM

You have been asked to participate voluntarily in both an interview and a survey, exploring the influences surrounding a congregation's response to families experiencing

loss. In order to obtain more complete information about the congregation's process of responding to recent within the church community, the researcher will be interviewing each participant in a 60-90 minute session, which will be taped for the researcher's accuracy in reporting. All will be held in confidence and privacy will be maintained to the maximum extent allowable by law.

Your identity, and that of the church, will be withheld. Neither your name nor the location of your congregation will be listed. The data collected will be destroyed no later than December 31, 2003. Should you decide to withdraw from participation, please contact me via telephone or email, and the data will be immediately destroyed.

If you have any questions or concerns regarding your right as a participant, you may contact Ashli Kumar, MD, Chair of the University Committee on Research Involving Human Subjects (UCRHS), 302 Olds Hall, Michigan State University, East Lansing, MI 48824-1046; phone 517-353-2180; fax - 517-432-4503; Email: UCRHS@msu.edu.

By signing this consent form you are giving your permission to the researcher to use information collected for research on this project. You may withdraw consent at any time by contacting the person at the name and address below.

Signature \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

Contact:

Roberta New Edison

3269 W. Sunnyside Ave.

Okemos, MI 48864

Phone: 517-351-6475 Email: [renew@msu.edu](mailto:renew@msu.edu)

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