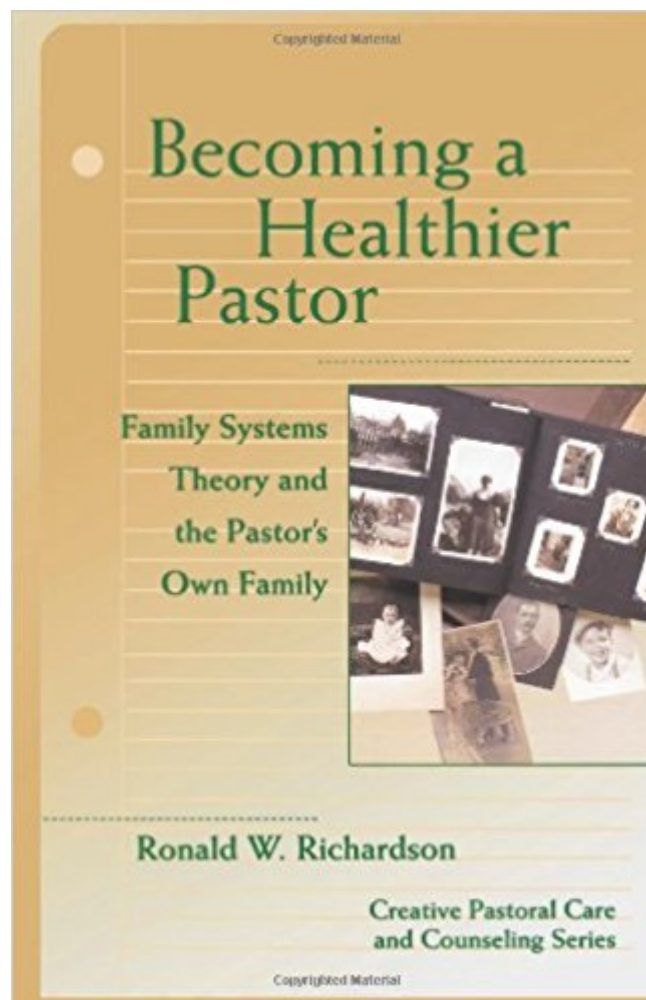




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# Becoming A Healthier Pastor (Creative Pastoral Care And Counseling) (Creative Pastoral Care & Counseling)



## Synopsis

Among the most helpful and widely acclaimed resources for addressing church conflict and the quality of church life is Richardson's groundbreaking volume *Creating a Healthier Church* (Fortress Press, 1996). His application of family systems theory to congregational life has enormously clarified its operative systems and especially its emotional system. In this sequel, Richardson employs the same methodology to address the roots of personal issues that may hinder pastors' ability to function effectively as leaders within their congregations, and may in fact cause them deep difficulties. He especially addresses pastors' own families of origin, a major but often hidden component in how they function emotionally in their congregations. When anxiety arises, unresolved familial issues and old family patterns return, often unhelpfully. Richardson explores these patterns, how they operate in church situations, and how pastors can do their own family-of-origin assessment. His volume will become a standard tool for analysis of patterns in ministerial behavior and developing strong personal effectiveness.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Ronald W. Richardson is former Clinical Director of the North Shore Counseling Center, pastoral counselor, author of many books on family systems theory and is currently a retired pastor living in West Vancouver, BC, Canada. He is a member of various groups including North Puget Sound Presbytery, a Diplomat for American Association of Pastoral Counselors, and Clinical Member and Approved Supervisor for American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy. He also held many

workshops for his work in many different organizations. Ronald is author of *Family Ties That Bind: A Self-Help Guide to Change through Family of Origin Therapy* (Self Counsel Press 1984), *Birth Order and You: How Your Sex and Position in the Family Affect Your Personality and Relationships* (Self Counsel Press 1990), and *Creating a Healthier Church: Family Systems Theory, Leadership, and Congregational Life* (Fortress Press 1996).

The proverb which states "If all you have is a hammer, every problem looks like a nail" comes to mind when reviewing this book. Family systems theory has its place and this little book does a competent job introducing pastors to the concept. Personally, I have a hard time swallowing all the benefits claimed for what must be a tedious exercise of going over one's family history with a magnifying glass. I can't see it being of much use in a church setting either. Getting people to voluntarily be part of a small group where you drag the skeletons out of the family closet strikes me as fanciful; it must be a hard sell. Richardson asks the reader to assume his personal experience is normative and to accept his claims about the benefit of systems theory. I remain unconvinced. For example, the notion of "triangulating" seems static. Are there really only ever three people involved? Or is this an over-simplification? With this key concept, the theory seems to precede the data. The observation that anxious people tend to either overfunction or underfunction is a helpful diagnostic tool, but I found little else of use in this theory that seems to combine genealogy and psychology.

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

an example of biblical wisdom (80), which the author states is the basic requirement for all God's leaders (86). Another helpful metaphor used throughout was that of a mobile representing a congregation (of which the pastor is a part), the whole of which is affected by movement of a part, and also equally affected by calming of a part. This helped the reviewer grasp many of the new terms of family systems theory, such as reactivity and distancing, and connectedness balanced with separateness. The only weakness the reviewer saw was an analysis of birth order and resulting generalizations (144-157), which sounded more like horoscope reading than useful principles. Much more space would be needed to quote the vast preponderance of inspiring, instructional, and helpful elements, for example, "calmer churches usually have calmer leaders" (173). In *Becoming a Healthier Pastor*, the reviewer was impressed by the enthusiastic endorsement of the editor, one of the author's former professors, "I am struck by the amount I can learn from a former student" (v). Like the earlier volume, the central theme was using family systems theory to develop emotional maturity, but more specifically for pastors to attain a "higher, healthier level of functioning" (viii). This comes about through extensive research into the pastor's family of origin as having established his or her deep and overriding patterns of emotional functioning (ibid.). As an active proponent of systems theory, Richardson points out that the model uniquely encompasses all aspects of ministry and human function (3). While the reviewer is a counseling novice, the point was persuasive, and took note that the author practices only this model of therapy. With that said, however, and unlike the earlier, more general volume, several things in this work triggered caution flags for the reviewer. All the general Bowen's theory material as applied to pastors and ministry work seemed quite applicable and apropos, such as "all of us exist on a continuum of emotional reactivity" (20), which creates various levels of differentiation, which then manifests in the acting out of anxious patterns. All this and much more is well and good, and both helpful and informative, such as "The main way to increase involvement and commitment in the church is for pastors to be a safe, less anxious presence" (33). The reviewer thought, however, that Richardson attributed too much formative shaping to one's family of origin and not enough to other equally influential (sometimes more so) childhood arenas such as school, neighborhoods, extracurricular activities, and church. Reinforcing this view, his statement, "Nearly every sort of problematic behavior is most likely a form of reactivity to family" (72) seems to the reviewer to be overly attributed. The author strongly recommends for pastors to revisit parents and relatives multiple times, yet many cannot because of time, financial hardship, sickness, or death--often, both parents die while one is relatively young. He briefly mentions this possibility, but then suggests pursuing the research with other family members, or former friends and co-workers of one's parents. Such an exercise seems both unproductive and

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

I bought this for a grad school class and actually loved the book. For those interested in Family Systems Theory or who are interested in exploring their relationship with their family of origin, this book is for you! The book gives recommendations for finding a Family Systems Theory counselor as well, so if you are very interested in undertaking that feat, the book does have resources for you to do so.

I love this book and have bought about 6 to give away. Richardson does a great job telling his story and connecting to Family Systems theory. I think the word "pastor" could limit the audience but this book is for everyone who wants to understand how their family, and their reactions to their family, affect them. His story helps explain cut-offs and triangles in families. I'm not always a fan of non-fiction because I get bogged down but Richardson tells his own story and I couldn't put the book down. He keeps it simple and uncomplicated and yet captivating. I highly recommend this for anyone seeking help with family relationships.

So very pleased I purchased this valuable resource as it addresses the interesting issue of our changing congregation face, what people are needing, how to keep a Pastor healthy through creative pastoral care and counselling programmes being implemented etc

An excellent, insightful book. Richardson clearly knows his stuff. He applies family systems theory to the work of the pastor and, contrary to conventional wisdom, says that the pastor's ability to be a

healthy leader hinges on whether he/she has done the necessary work of being healthy in his/her own family. The book is full of helpful examples that are hard-hitting and realistic.

Don't buy this book unless you're willing and able to return to your family of origin and spend significant time working through your issues there. Half of the book is devoted to doing that work, so if you're looking for something to help you understand family systems theory on your own, this isn't for you.

This book was required for a class I'm taking, but I'm recommending it to everyone I know who is involved in church leadership. It also has excellent information for dealing with your own family system. It's very readable, so would be excellent for a church board, committee, or small group to work through.

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