

# Laying the Foundation

Session One

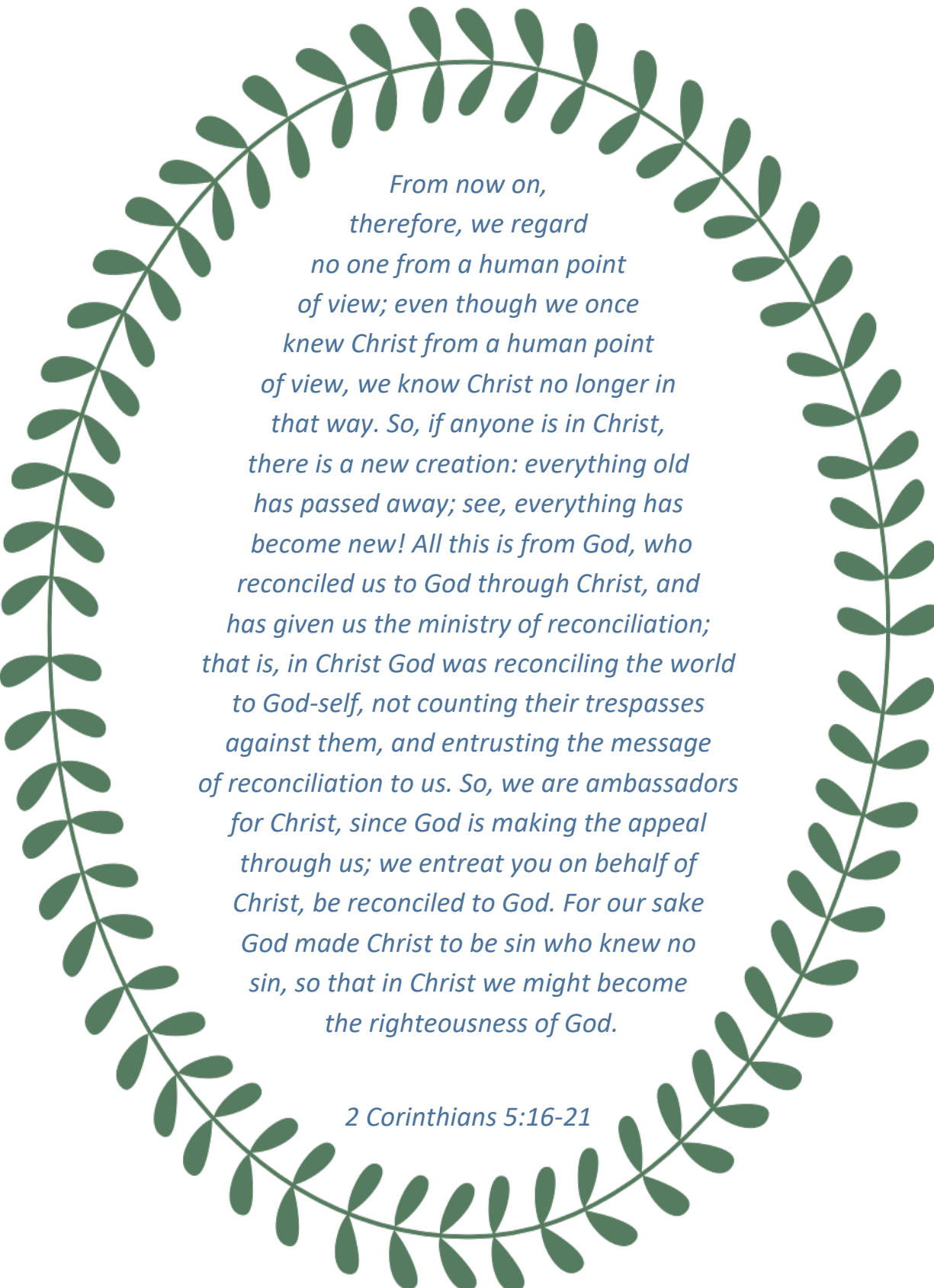
Online 2020-21



Rocky Mountain Synod, ELCA

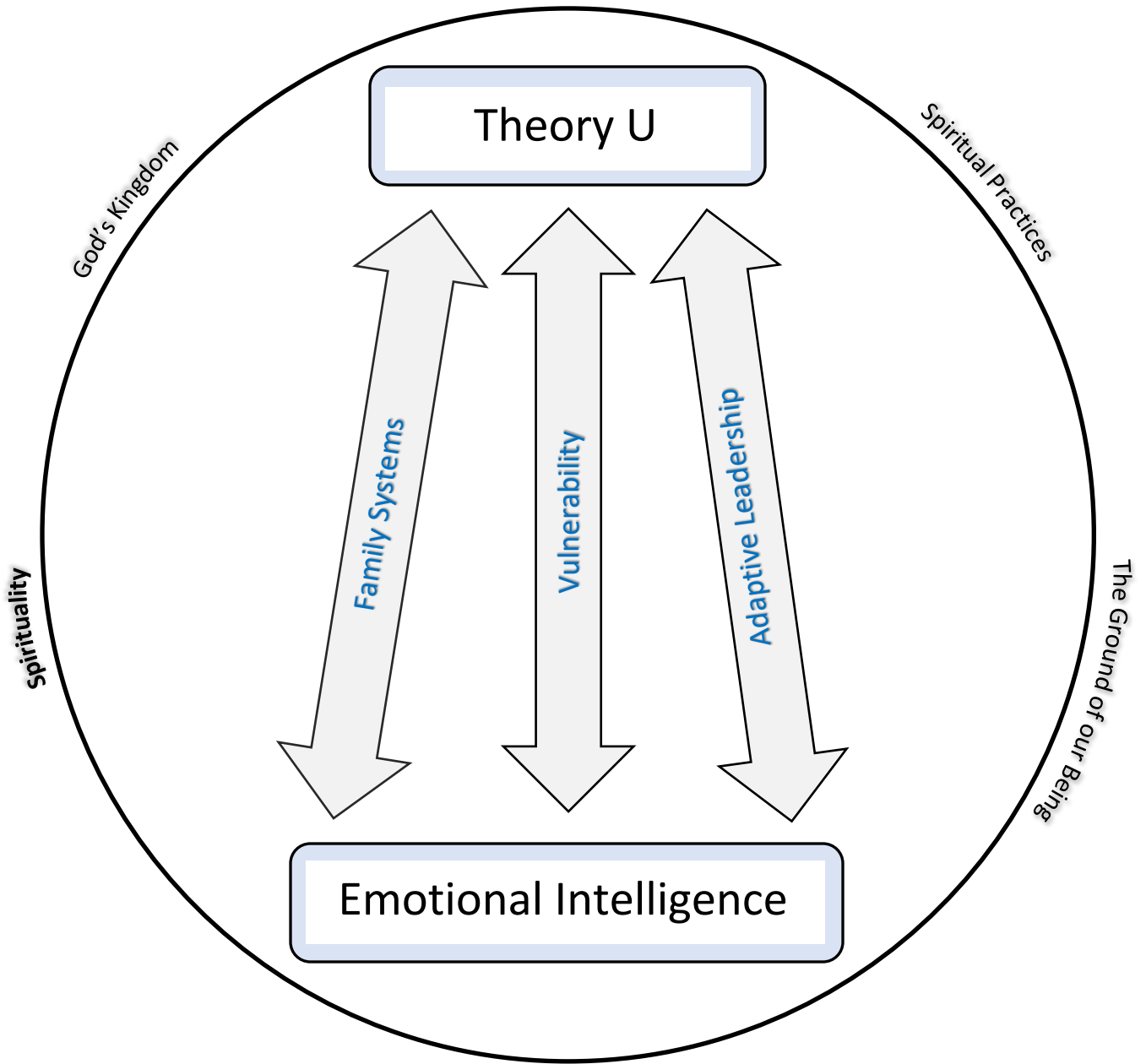
Courageous, resilient, and faithful leaders for the sake of the world

## Excellence in Leadership



*From now on,  
therefore, we regard  
no one from a human point  
of view; even though we once  
knew Christ from a human point  
of view, we know Christ no longer in  
that way. So, if anyone is in Christ,  
there is a new creation: everything old  
has passed away; see, everything has  
become new! All this is from God, who  
reconciled us to God through Christ, and  
has given us the ministry of reconciliation;  
that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world  
to God-self, not counting their trespasses  
against them, and entrusting the message  
of reconciliation to us. So, we are ambassadors  
for Christ, since God is making the appeal  
through us; we entreat you on behalf of  
Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake  
God made Christ to be sin who knew no  
sin, so that in Christ we might become  
the righteousness of God.*

*2 Corinthians 5:16-21*



# Laying the Foundation

## Session One Participant Outcomes:

1. Articulate emotions felt and expressed when in a group conversation.
2. Propose a plan for better self-awareness and self-expression that may be contributing to unwanted behavior.
3. Analyze relationships using family systems concepts of self-differentiation, anxiety, and triangles.
4. Practice spiritual behaviors of silence, self-reflection, breathing, and journaling.
5. Document self-reflective practices by journaling progress of silence and prayer.

## Preparation for this Session:

- Read this section of the manual and bring it with you.
- Purchase Bradberry, Travis and Jean Greaves, *Emotional Intelligence 2.0*, Talent Smart, 2009. **Participants need an original copy to access the EQ Appraisal found at the back of the book.**
- Five additional books are listed in the syllabus as “recommended” reading throughout the two-year program. An extended bibliography is located on the *Excellence in Leadership* website at <https://www.rmselfca.org/leaders/bibliography-and-additional-reading>.
- Acquire a journal to keep for the course and bring it with you.

## Found in this Session:

Introduction to Excellence in Leadership	page 2
Philosophy of Excellence in Leadership	page 4
Introduction to Theory U	page 5
Emotional Intelligence Framework	page 7
Discovering and Improving Emotional Competence	page 8
Spiritual Practices Supporting Excellent Leadership	page 11
Johari Window	page 13
Family Systems Theory – Brief Overview	page 14

## Introduction to Excellence in Leadership

We are at a crossroads. We know that the old way of making disciples of Jesus no longer works. Many books over the last two decades have given us theory, statistics, and anecdotal evidence of this reality. We don't even need to rely on the books; we just need to attend a familiar church to know that something has changed significantly. Knowing that we are at the crossroads, however, doesn't give us a roadmap or specific instructions for how we move forward. Those of us firmly planted in the institutional Church are unsure of what our spiritual home will look like in fifty years. If we are honest with ourselves and our siblings in Christ, this uncertainty can lead to grief and anxiety. Although we may not be able to see too far down the road, I do believe that we have a way forward if we are willing to both let go of comfortable assumptions and remain open to a future not yet visible.

So, what if we shifted the story we are telling ourselves about the impending demise of mainline religion? What if we see this crossroads as an opportunity to realign our expectations of Church to be in line with the teachings of Jesus? Living during this historical intersection, we can recalibrate our aim toward Gospel values. We can let go of primarily focusing on institutional preservation and begin to listen deeply to where God is calling us as the body of Christ in the world. Today is a fine time to be the Church.

Jesus prioritized the commandments of love; love God with your whole being and love your neighbor as yourself. Jesus, in all that he said and did during those short, yet world changing three years of ministry, lived out the Creator's unconditional love for all of creation. Jesus embodied what God intended for humanity in order to be fully human. Jesus embodied what God intended for humanity. As followers of This One, love is our starting point, love is our ending point, and love must be the process by which we move through the in-between. And yet . . . loving is a complicated, complex, nuanced human endeavor. Culture, economics, racism, history, the wounds of our parents, the systems we humans built all muddy our real-world experience of loving. As Jesus, the crucified and risen Savior of the world, ascended into heaven to sit at the right hand of the Father, he commissioned his followers "to go and make disciples of all nations." (Matthew 28:19) A daunting task!

Too often, Christians have seen this charge through the very human lens of the ends justifying the means. Consequently, we used very unloving methods to convert, subdue, and conquer those who didn't 'know' Christ. We Christians have also used judgment, shame, and a narrow litmus test to decide who is inside the Christian fold and who remains outside God's salvation. The irony throughout much of Christian history is that we have used broken and damaged human lenses to define or dole out God's salvation.

God's salvation, however, is the abundant life that comes when we find our lives "interrupted by and reinterpreted by the crucified and risen Lord,"<sup>1</sup> when we experience the peace of Jesus Christ, the peace that surpasses all human understanding. The truth of God's salvation is unchanging. The opportunity of our time in history is to hear this truth in a way that transforms our own hearts and then begins to shift the systems we humans have created; systems that have become obstacles to making disciples in this generation, systems that have led to oppression and harm to so many. When we live out of a story of scarcity, when we argue over power and money, when we are stuck grieving the loss of the way it has always been done, God's salvation goes out of focus.

From my own experience, which comes from my own life-long personal spiritual journey and my twenty years of work in the Church, I believe God's salvation, abundant life, the kingdom on earth as it is in heaven is the process, the way we experience God. How we interact with one another, the quality of our relationships, living and acting congruent with who God is calling us to be, is our experience of God's salvation, our immersion into the Kingdom of God. Attending to relationship – honest, humble, courageous relationship – is the work of the kingdom and therefore the work of every faith community. Strong, healthy leadership is knowing ourselves well, and from that place of deep knowing, reaching out to others in life-giving and world changing ways.

Christianity, being the Church, the Body of Christ in the world is a communal event. God calls each and every one of us to be our best selves. We only become our best selves when we authentically engage with the world around us. We need supportive, deeply loving relationships that will encourage and challenge us to become who God is creating us to be. Following Jesus begins with spiritually connecting our true identity with our surrounding communities - friends, family, work, faith, and civic. From that connection we learn how to use ourselves as primary agents in practicing God's kingdom on earth, embodying God's unconditional love for the sake of the world.

As we move forward as the Rocky Mountain Synod, and throughout the ELCA, we are creating learning opportunities for people to explore their own self-awareness, their own reactions to the people around them, becoming aware of their own communities so that they may become change agents in the world. These learning opportunities are called "*Excellence in Leadership*." These opportunities are not just for identified leaders – in fact, our deep hope is that others will engage these opportunities and be inspired to make a difference in the places they inhabit, becoming leaders in their communities.

Loving God and loving neighbor begin with a journey toward emotional and spiritual wholeness. This journey is simultaneously inward toward our true self and outward to the world God so loved. Please join us in becoming the people God is creating us to be.

*Reverend Sarah Moening*

---

<sup>1</sup>Alison, James, *Jesus the Forgiving Victim: Listening for the Unheard Voice*, p. 72.

## Philosophy of Excellence in Leadership

Our capacity to lead depends on our ability to maintain strong, healthy, life-giving relationships. Emotional intelligence is one lens through which we might reflect on our own capacity to engage others in meaningful ways. The better our relationships, the better we will be at embodying and proclaiming God's love for the world. Emotional intelligence is shorthand for knowing ourselves, handling our responses, understanding our communities, and knowing how to inspire and motivate the people around us to make a positive difference in the world.

Certainly, we can do this self-awareness work on your own. In the wider world, new books, podcasts, and conferences on EQ are frequently offered. Motivated people also have the opportunity to work with a coach one-on-one or in small groups. We, in the Rocky Mountain Synod, are offering a third option. *Excellence in Leadership* uses an experiential learning model for gathering, reading, and exploring with real people across both geography and life experiences. We all have something to share and something to learn. *Excellence in Leadership* is a two-year program offered by the Rocky Mountain Synod and available to anyone who is interested in growing in emotional and spiritual well-being.

Much has been written about leadership in business and in the church. As I have read and studied leadership, five frameworks have captured my imagination. The five theories overlap and intersect in ways that have been transformational for me personally and professionally. All five come from outside the world of institutional church, and yet, all five resonate from a deeply spiritual place and are congruent with Gospel values of caring for all our relationships; from the most intimate family and friend relationships to our broader, and too often, tumultuous world at large. The five frameworks are:

- **Murray Bowan and Edwin Friedman's work on family systems**
- **Brené Brown's work on vulnerability**
- **Ronald Heifetz's theory of adaptive change**
- **Otto Sharmer's work on transformational change**
- **And of course, numerous works on emotional intelligence**

As the people of God in the Rocky Mountain Synod and across the ELCA, we believe that we lead best when we authentically know who we are and engage the world from the confidence that we are beloved by God. Whether you are working on your own, with a small group, or with a particular program, attending to your own spiritual journey is critical for the health of the world around us. For those who would like an experiential learning community, consider joining us this year in *Excellence in Leadership*.

Self-awareness is the starting point for these learning opportunities. God has created us, gifted us uniquely and wonderfully. We are loved beyond price by the Creator of all that is! As people who know this love and grace, our journey begins with exploring our own identity, our own self-awareness and self-worth. As we learn more about who God continues to create us to be, we are invited to explore

communities and practice relationship with people who will love us enough to give us life-giving feedback. This journey takes great courage and humility. Daring relationships bring us abundant life beyond our imaginations. Knowing ourselves, being willing to undergo the grace of God changes us and therefore the world around us.

In *Excellence in Leadership* we will learn about ourselves in the midst of community. We will discuss concepts and theories, practice effective leadership tools, and plan and implement projects in our ministry contexts. As we present and discuss the leadership theories, we will weave in Biblical concepts and spiritual practices that keep our work focused on God's dream for humanity and all creation.

Jesus came so that we may have life and have it abundantly.<sup>2</sup> These words echo the promise of wholeness which is the very definition of salvation. We are created good – very good!<sup>3</sup> We are created for wholeness, for abundant life. When we attend to our integrity, the integration of our own life process, we find abundant life. As our awareness of ourselves and others expands, we increase our capacity to embrace the future to which God is calling us.

*Reverend Sarah Moening*

$$\text{Excellence in Leadership} = \int EQ (IC + LC + ELC)$$

Where:  $\int$  = the symbol for integration

EQ = emotional intelligence

IC = informal conversation

LC = one-on-one leadership coaching

ELC = Experiential Learning Communities

## Introduction to Theory U

Theory U is a leadership concept based on work by Otto Scharmer, Senior Lecturer at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT). Throughout *Excellence in Leadership*, Scharmer's revolutionary approach to learning and leadership is being adapted for the faith-based community. The primary resource for Theory U is Scharmer's *Theory U: Leading from the Future as it Emerges*. However, Dr. Scharmer has two other resources – *Presence: Human Purpose and the Field of the Future* and *The Essentials of Theory U: Core Principles and Applications* – that will provide a deeper understanding of Theory U. (See References for this Session, p. 17)

In Luke 12, Jesus explains the importance of being awake and ready for what might catch you asleep and unaware. Jesus cautions the disciples, "be dressed for action" and "have your lamps lit." Awakening to the world around us can be both a developmental and a spiritual experience. How we perceive the world and our place in the world changes over time and experience. Being awake, seeing through fully awake eyes, means shifting both **how** we are seeing and **what** we choose to look at. Shifting perspective, having the eyes to see and the ears to hear, is essential for the life of a follower of Christ.

---

<sup>2</sup>John 10:10b.

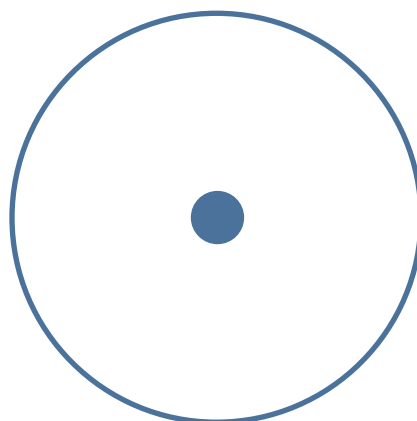
<sup>3</sup>Genesis 1:31.



## Fields of Perspective

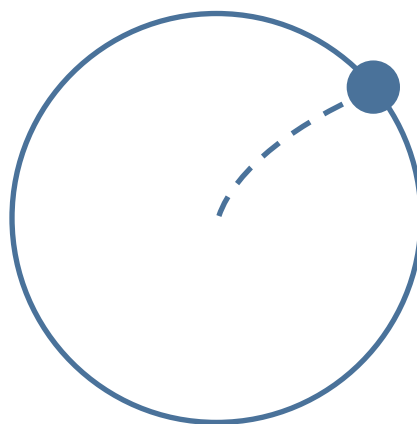
### Field 1

In the first field of perspective we see the system, the organization we belong to, the community that surrounds us as something that simply is. In the first field, I see my place in that system from an unexamined and unquestioned perspective. Because I haven't questioned my community everything appears fine... just fine. People are polite and tend to conform. We might even assume that compliance is the appropriate stance for people in a community or institution. Yet, Brené Brown reminds us that spiritual engagement is not built on compliance, it is the product of love, belonging, and vulnerability.<sup>4</sup>



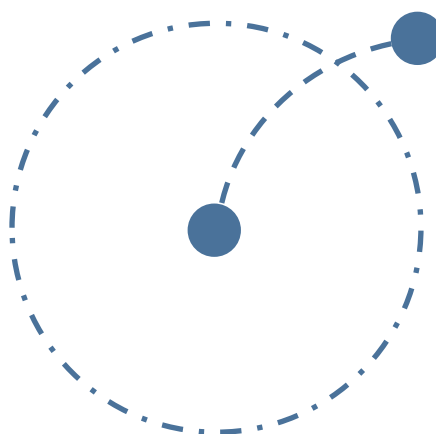
### Field 2

In the second field, the individual's perspective changes. I am no longer at the center of my community, but rather at the edge, the periphery. Now I can see the system in a more detached manner and with a more critical eye. I can begin to distinguish that my community is not a given and my place in the system cannot be assumed. I will question, debate, and even confront.



### Field 3

Seeing from the third field happens when my personal perspective shifts to seeing myself both a player within the system and the system as a thing. In this field, the individual sees from two perspectives at once. I can see my own place in the system and I see the system as a whole. From here, I can see others have valid perspectives and we can begin to dialogue together for even greater understanding.

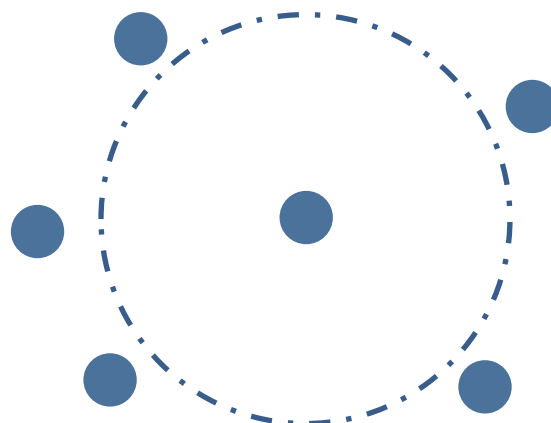


---

<sup>4</sup>Brown, Brené, *Daring Greatly*, p. 177.

## Field 4

Moving down to the fourth field allows us to access the much bigger picture. It opens the possibility of seeing the world as God sees it – connected, beyond one human understanding, beyond me and my community, beyond the confines of time. Reaching down to the fourth field allows me to connect to the breadth of life streaming through me and through the other.



## Emotional Intelligence Framework

All that Jesus did throughout his ministry, giving us commandments, tending to the most vulnerable, and offering us peace, brings us abundant life. When Jesus talks about abundant life or salvation, he is talking about all that brings us joy: identity, purpose, and belonging. These joyful aspects of being fully human come from our connectedness to the world around us, the people around us. Learning how to engage others in order to make a difference in the world is the power behind emotional intelligence.

Emotional intelligence encompasses a set of emotional and social skills that help us to be effective in all aspects of our lives. While the more common understanding of intelligence, that which can be measured with an IQ test, stays the same throughout the span of our lives, emotional intelligence can change. Emotional intelligence, or EQ, can increase by intentionally attending to our emotional and spiritual selves. EQ can also decrease by closing ourselves off when confronted by hardship, pain, and trauma. Emotional intelligent people are able to express their feelings in non-destructive ways in order to maintain mutually satisfying relationships. Healthy, life-giving relationships increase our effectiveness in the world as we participate in God's kingdom on earth as it is in heaven.

Two frameworks exist for emotional intelligence. The more common framework is a four-quadrant grid defined by **self** and **community** on the **y** axis and **awareness** and **management** on **x** axis (see Figure 1).

The more complex framework is illustrated by a circle with five composites which include **Self-Perception**, **Self-Expression**, **Interpersonal**, **Problem Solving**, and **Stress Management**. (see Figure 2, page 9) The first framework will be used throughout EIL to categorize the different skills and tools we will be playing with. The second framework allows for a deeper dive into emotional awareness and is commended to you if you are interested in exploring your own development further. There is a nuanced momentum from Self-Perception through Stress Management only in that knowledge of self or self-awareness is a good

	Awareness	Management
Self		
Community		

Figure 1

starting point, yet each composite and subcategory, intersects and interacts with other elements in non-linear ways. Attending to and intentionally thinking about these personal characteristics allow each of us to increase our effectiveness and engagement with the world.

If we are to make disciples of all nations/generations, how might we go about this work being as wise as serpents and gentle as doves?<sup>5</sup> How might we lead communities of faith in ways that participate in what God is doing in the world? How might we use our self and our influence to cultivate relationships in meaningful and life-giving interactions? As followers of Christ, we are called to proclaim the Gospel for the sake of the world, to make a difference in this world. Managing our lives, our families, our work, our faith communities is critical work and integral to the reign of God. We are commissioned to witness to and participate in God's work in the world. Witnessing is meant to influence people, to produce direct consequences that actually and positively affect the world around us.

## Discovering and Improving Emotional Competence

### The Theory of Emotional Intelligence

Emotional intelligence is a strong predictor of success in life, even stronger than innate cognitive intelligence often referred to as IQ. The good news is, unlike IQ, emotional intelligence or EQ changes with maturity and intentional social skill building. Current study of brain functioning teaches us that all rational thought travels through the part of the brain (limbic node) where emotions are experienced. Bessel Van der Kolk, noted psychiatrist and author of *The Body Keeps the Score*, writes, “emotions assign value to experiences and thus are the foundation of reason.”<sup>6</sup> He goes on to say, “sensing, naming, and identifying what is going on inside is the first step to leading a fully engaged life.”<sup>7</sup> Yet, sometimes mainstream North American culture has sidelined emotions, suggesting that there is a way to leave emotions out of rational discussions. What experience and research tells us is, the more aware we are of our emotions the better able we are to use them in and for positive personal, professional, and civic relationships.

In this session we are simply introducing the concepts of EQ. This session introduces the components of EQ for your deeper personal consideration. After reading this section, spend time observing yourself in natural situations and notice when you are implementing or ignoring aspects of emotional intelligence.

Table 1 (p. 9) shows the two frameworks of emotional intelligence combined to demonstrate how they intersect. Figure 2 (p. 9) shows the more complex framework using five composites with three subcategories within each composite.

---

<sup>5</sup>Matthew 10:16.

<sup>6</sup>Van der Kolk, Bessel, *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma*, p. 64.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid. p. 68.

Personal Competence	Awareness		Control or Management	
	Self-Awareness		Self-Control or Management	
	Self-Perception		Self-Expression	
	Self-Regard		Emotional Expression	
	Self-Actualization		Assertiveness	
	Emotional Self-Awareness		Independence	
	Community Awareness		Managing Community Relationships	
	Interpersonal		Decision Making	
	Interpersonal Relationships		Problem Solving	
	Empathy		Reality Testing	
Social Competence	Social Responsibility		Impulse Control	
			Stress Management	
			Flexibility	
			Stress Tolerance	
			Optimism	

**Table 1:** The highlighted yellow quadrants are based on the EQ model by Peter Salovey and John D. Mayer, 1997. The purple and green highlighted areas are the corresponding sub-scales and elements from the Reuven Bar-On Model (copyright 1997)



Copyright © 2011 Multi-Health Systems Inc. All rights reserved.  
Based on the Bar-On EQ-i model by Reuven Bar-On, copyright 1997.

**Figure 2**

Below are the definitions for each composite and subcategory based on the work of Rueven Bar-On.

**Self-Perception:** knowledge of your true self; your gifts, liabilities, and potential.

- **Self-Regard** – the ability and the tendency for you – in full light of both your positive and negative qualities – to both like and have confidence in yourself.
- **Self-Actualization** – your ability and tendency to want to grow, to stretch and to strive – to see your potential, set meaningful goals, and work toward your betterment and fulfillment.
- **Emotional Self-Awareness** – the degree to which you are in touch with your feelings and emotions, are able to distinguish one emotion from another and understand why that emotion has resulted.

**Self-Expression:** how you interact with the world around you.

- **Emotional Expression** – the degree to which you share, communicate, and remain transparent with your feelings and emotions.
- **Assertiveness** – your ability to put your needs, thoughts, and opinions out into the world – even when doing so invites opposition or conflict or causes you to take a stand.
- **Independence** – your ability and tendency to be self-directed in your thinking, feeling, and actions – to go it alone when needed.

**Interpersonal:** your ability to build relationships within your community.

- **Interpersonal Relationships** – your ability and tendency to give and receive trust and compassion and to establish and maintain mutually satisfying personal relationships.
- **Empathy** – your ability and willingness to take notice of and be sensitive to other people's needs and feelings.
- **Social Responsibility** – your ability and tendency to cooperate and contribute to the welfare of a larger social system, to have and act in accordance with a social consciousness, and to show concern for the group or the greater community.

**Decision Making:** using yourself in the work you do.

- **Problem Solving** – your ability and tendency both to solve problems that involve emotions and to use emotions as an effective problem-solving tool.
- **Reality Testing** – the ability and tendency for you to assess the here-and-now reality of any given moment or situation – what is actually going on – and compare that objectively to your fantasy of what is going on, thus avoiding being overcome by fantasies, daydreams, and biases.
- **Impulse Control** – the ability to resist or delay a drive or temptation to do or say something or to decide too quickly or rashly.

**Stress Management:** handling internal self as you engage your world.

- **Flexibility** – your ability and tendency to adjust your emotions, thoughts, and behavior to changing situations and conditions, to adapt – to take in new data and change your mind or approach.
- **Stress Tolerance** – the ability to function well in the midst of challenging and stressful situations – to shoulder stress without getting overwhelmed.
- **Optimism** – your ability and tendency to look at the brighter side of life and to maintain a positive attitude even in the face of adversity. Optimism gives you hope and enables you to see the future as a positive, inviting place.

**Happiness-** your ability and tendency to feel joy and satisfaction with the process of living and be able to embrace all aspects of life with cheerfulness and enthusiasm

The three subcategories in Stress Management actually bring us back to the beginning of self-awareness. Managing the stress of our daily lives is a constant, copiously written about topic in the fields such as psychology, business, leadership, and spirituality. Self-awareness and self-differentiation can positively affect one's ability to manage stress. Much of what we will be discussing, experiencing, and building in this workshop has to do with our impact on the world. In this last composite we are also talking about the world's impact on us. Here, in this area, our spiritual practices significantly influence how we show up in the world.

## Spiritual Practices Supporting Excellent Leadership

### Prayer

In his book on Prayer, Richard Foster says: "To pray is to change. This is a great grace. How good of God to provide a path whereby our lives can be taken over by love and joy and peace and patience and kindness and goodness and faithfulness and gentleness and self-control." Prayer is opening ourselves up to God, listening to God, and allowing God to create us in God's image. It is laying our hearts bare before our Maker and bringing those we love into the heart of God and inviting God into the places of our deepest concern. Prayer is being genuine and authentic, who we really are. As C.S. Lewis says: "May it be the real I who speaks. May it be the real Thou that I speak to." We need to make sure we are listening to God and not just some voice in our own heads that we think or hope might be God made in our image instead of the other way around.



Excellent leadership is grounded in prayer from beginning to the end. We lead as God directs, so we must learn to recognize God's voice in prayer, be honest and real about ourselves and our limits, and have the courage and will to follow. As Jesus was immersed in God's love, knowing through and through that he is God's Beloved, so must we know our true identity. Otherwise we will never have the courage and freedom to risk being a part of God's radical transformation of this world to God's realm of love. The systems of this world are too focused on the human, material perspective and are deeply threatened by God's freedom of love. Prayer is our pathway to God's perspective. We must immerse ourselves daily in prayer for the sake of the world.

## Self-Reflection and Journaling

Spiritual growth is concerned with our relationship with God (love of God) and also with our relationship with others (love of neighbor). If we only focus on love of God, we tend to spiritualize everything. Our love of God is realized in our love of neighbor. To get a realistic perspective on ourselves we need ways to distance ourselves from events, to observe ourselves as in looking in a mirror, and receive feedback. A trusted spiritual friend, soul mate, coach, or spiritual advisor is certainly helpful. Being in community where we receive feedback is also another way we can gain this perspective. Keeping a journal of what we think and feel is also a way to get some perspective on patterns and ways we get caught in unhealthy patterns. In this *Excellence in Leadership* program, we encourage you to keep a journal utilizing some of the methods and questions introduced throughout the course to help you with your own spiritual growth and self-reflection.

## Meditation

Meditation means putting on the mind of Christ as Paul writes: "Let that mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus". (Phil. 2:5) In meditation, we let go of our surface thoughts and sink into deeper levels of consciousness, Christ consciousness. We lean into Jesus sharing his outlook and attitude as we read, contemplate, and imagine with a passage of Scripture. We enter into Jesus' heart and will with a particular teaching, story, or parable to help us become more and more one with him. We allow the sights, sounds, smells of the scene enter our beings as it was with Jesus and become one with it all, allowing Jesus to transform us to his way of being in community. In our gatherings, we will have time for meditation on Scripture.

## Breathing

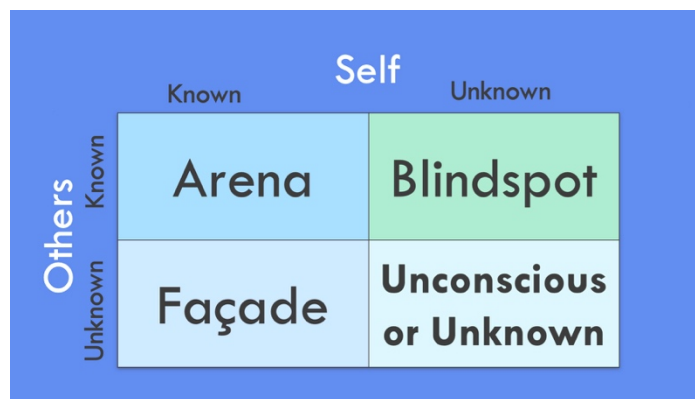
*"Every time you take in a breath, you are repeating the pattern of taking spirit into matter and thus repeating the first creation of Adam. And every time you breathe out, you are repeating the pattern of returning spirit to the material universe." Richard Rohr, The Universal Christ, p. 99*

The practice of slow, intentional breathing centers us. One way to engage this practice is to inhale to the count of four, hold your breath for four counts, exhale for four counts and hold for four counts. Repeat this pattern for three cycles. Intentional, slow breathing helps regulate our body physiologically and

calms us down. Focusing on our breathing allows us to stay in the present. After all, we cannot breathe in the past or in the future. Calming ourselves through intentional breathing helps us enter into God's presence.

## Johari Window

The Johari Window is a model created by Joseph Luft and Harry Ingham and used over many decades to examine social relationships. This model is a helpful way to begin contemplating self-awareness and our ability to interact with others. It is a simple graph with two axis and four quadrants. The four quadrants are delineated by what is known and unknown to self and what is known and unknown to others.



**The Arena** is that area which is known to both self and others which consequently allows for true interpersonal interaction.

**The Façade** is that area of our lives that we keep hidden or private. As trust is developed and we begin to know someone, we begin to share more of ourselves, thus increasing the size of the arena and decreasing our hidden self.

**The Blindspot** is that part of ourselves that we do not know, but others can see and experience in us. It is the part of each of us that we don't know we don't know. As trust is developed and others feel more comfortable with us, they may choose to help us see these hidden parts of ourselves. With this sharing or feedback, the arena grows and the blindspot diminishes.

**The Unknown or Unconscious** area is that part of ourselves we don't know and that others don't know. In this model, this area can seem finite, and yet what mystics teach us is, this area can almost be an unfathomable well. Through prayer and meditation, deep listening to God, we can begin to uncover the gift of ourselves that God is creating us to be.

In a new group, the Arena can be very small; there is not much free and spontaneous interaction. We often protect ourselves, taking time to size up the group, listening for hints of whether or not it is a safe place. As the group matures, hopefully the Arena expands in size. We are free to share more of our real self and to interact with others in authentic and generative ways.

In an atmosphere of growing mutuality there is less need for hiding pertinent thoughts and feelings. God calls us to bring our whole selves into the Arena where we engage in honest, authentic relationship. Strong leadership means intentionally growing and connecting with people in ways that offer God's love and purpose to the world.



## Family Systems Theory – Brief Overview

Family systems theory was developed by Dr. Murray Bowen, who became interested in psychiatry after serving as an Army doctor and seeing the varying effects of trauma on soldiers. In researching whole families at the US National Institute of Mental Health in the late 1950s, Bowen noticed patterns of managing anxiety in families that were similar to the instinctive ways other species dealt with threats in (or to) their herds and packs. The theory developed from there.

Systems thinking is also a response to the “information age,” in which we are faced with enormous amounts of data and the complexity of making sense of all that data and information. Systems thinking focuses less on content and more on the emotional processes that governs the data. *It focuses on the organizational principles that give the data meaning thus establishing new criteria about what data and information is important.* Systems thinking takes into account the relationships of the various components.

The components function according to their position and relationship in the network of the system. The components might function differently outside of the system or within a different system. We see this all the time when we behave differently at home than we do at work for example.

There are eight interlocking concepts of Family Systems Theory:

- 1) Differentiation of Self
- 2) Triangles
- 3) Nuclear Family Emotional Process
- 4) Family Projection Process
- 5) Emotional Cutoff
- 6) Multigenerational Transmission Process
- 7) Sibling Position
- 8) Societal Emotional Process

### 1) Differentiation of Self

Depicted with a theoretical scale, differentiation of self describes how people cope with life's demands and pursue their goals on a continuum from most adaptive to least. Variations in this adaptiveness depend on several connected factors, including the amount of solid self, the part of self that is not negotiable in relationships. For example, a person with well thought out principles enhances solid self and will not be swayed by fads or opinions. A person with less solid self will feel more pressure to think, feel, and act like the other. This fusion between two people generates more chronic anxiety as one



becomes more sensitive to what the other thinks, feels, and does. Acute anxiety also plays a role. A fairly well differentiated person can develop symptoms under acute anxiety but will probably return to adaptive functioning soon after. A less differentiated person may live in a stress-free environment and therefore function quite well for long periods of time.

Level of differentiation refers to the degree to which a person can think and act for self while in contact with emotionally charged issues. It also refers to the degree to which a person can discern between thoughts and feelings. At higher levels of differentiation, people maintain separate, solid selves under considerable stress and anxiety. They manage their own reactivity and choose thoughtful actions. At lower levels of differentiation, people depend on others to function, and they develop significant symptoms under stress. They act, often destructively, based on anxious reactions to the environment. Their intellectual reasoning fuses with emotionality. Even highly intelligent people can be poorly differentiated.

Dr. Bowen said that if levels of differentiation could be measured on a scaled of 1-100, the highest levels most persons could achieve would be no higher than 35 (so don't be too hard on yourself!). One cannot actually measure level of differentiation because it requires observation of multiple areas of functioning over a life course. However, the scale gives a way of conceptualizing variability in coping among people. For example, the concept gives a way of thinking about variability in the functioning among children of the same parents.

Rather than Systems Theory being deterministic (as it may appear), it actually promotes personal agency and improving one's life, the life of one's children, and the life of one's family. The process of differentiating a self involves a conscious effort at strengthening or raising the amount of solid self by defining beliefs and principles, managing anxiety and reactivity, and relating differently to the system. People engaged in these efforts reap positive benefits for their own functioning, and they automatically raise the level of differentiation in the whole system.

## 2) Triangles

Triangles are the basic molecule of human relationship systems. A two-person dyad becomes unstable once anxiety increases. Then, one or both members of the dyad usually pulls in a third person to relieve some of the pressure. In a three-person system, anxiety has more places to go, and the relationship where it originated experiences some relief. When the three-person system can no longer contain the anxiety, it involves more people and forms a series of interlocking triangles. Bowen researchers consider triangles a natural function of living systems. Triangles can have either negative or positive outcomes depending on how their members manage anxiety and reactivity. Bowen postulated that if one member of the triangle remains calm and in emotional contact with the other two, the system automatically calms down. On the other hand, with enough stress and reactivity, members lock into a triangular position and develop symptoms.

### **3) Nuclear Family Emotional Process**

The nuclear family manages differentiation and anxiety with conflict, distance, over and under-functioning reciprocity, which at extremes can lead to dysfunction in a spouse, and child focus. People engaged in conflict fight, argue, blame, and criticize each other. Partners who distance tend to be emotionally unavailable and to avoid potentially uncomfortable, though important, topics. Reciprocity in relationships occurs when one person takes on responsibilities for the twosome. The two people slide into over-adequate and under-adequate roles. This can become so extreme that one partner becomes incapacitated either with an illness or a general lack of direction. Child focus is discussed more under the next concept.

### **4) Family Projection Process**

The fixed triangle is evident in the family projection process, where parents in a nuclear family focus anxiety on a child and the child develops problems. Parents then usually attempt to get the child to change or they ask an expert to "fix" the child. Experienced Bowen family systems consultants report that when parents can instead manage their own anxiety and resolve their own relationship issues, the functioning of the child automatically improves.

### **5) Emotional Cutoff**

An extreme distancing posture constitutes the concept of emotional cutoff, where family members discontinue emotional contact with each other. This has significant implications for the functioning of future generations, as the emotional family unit is severed in such a way that anxiety has fewer places to be absorbed in the extended family system. Consequently, chronic anxiety increases. People look for other relationships to substitute for the cutoff relationship. These new relationships intensify and people become vulnerable to symptoms.

### **6) Multigenerational Transmission Process**

Differentiation of Self is transmitted through the multigenerational transmission process. This concept describes patterns of emotional process through multiple generations. It offers a way of thinking about family patterns that goes beyond a dichotomy of genes versus environment. One of the ways family patterns are transmitted across generations is through relationship triangles.

### **7) Sibling Position**

Sibling position, a concept which Bowen adopted from the research of Walter Toman, affects variation in basic and functional levels of differentiation as well. Oldest, youngest, and middle children tend toward certain functional roles in families, influenced also by the particular mix of sibling positions in it and the sibling positions of parents and other relatives.

### **8) Societal Emotional Process**

The last concept Bowen developed is societal emotional process. It refers to the tendency of people within a society to be more anxious and unstable at certain times than others.

## References for this Session

- Bradberry, Travis and Jean Greaves, *Emotional Intelligence 2.0*, Talent Smart, 2009.  
**Participants need an original copy to access the EQ Appraisal found at the back of the book.**
- Foster, Richard, *Prayer, Finding the Heart's True Home*, Harper San Francisco, 1992.
- Friedman, Edwin, *A Failure of Nerve: Leadership in an Age of the Quick Fix*, Seabury Books, New York, 2007.
- Friedman, Edwin, *Generation to Generation*, Guilford Press, 1985.
- Le Clair, Arthur, *Living by Grace*, Spiritual Life Center, 1995.
- Lynn, Adele, *Emotional Intelligence Activities for Busy Managers*, American Management Association, 2007.
- Rohr, Richard, *Universal Christ*, 2019.
- Scharmer, Otto and Katrin Kaeufer, *Leading from the Emerging Future*, Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2013.
- Scharmer, Otto, *Presence: Human Purpose and the Field of the Future*, Doubleday, 2004.
- Scharmer, Otto, *The Essentials of Theory U: Core Principles and Applications*, Inc. Cambridge, Mass., 2018.
- Van der Kolk, Bessel, *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma*, Penguin Books, 2014.
- Vermont Center for Family Studies, *The Eight Concepts of Bowen Theory*.