

CLERGY LEADERSHIP & RESILIENCE
A CLERGY RESILIENCE PRACTICE

Systems Awareness

Recognizing Patterns, Discerning
Disruption, and Staying Steady

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CLERGY LEADERSHIP AND RESILIENCE SERIES

Returning reader? [Skip the Series Introduction and go directly to Beginning Here.](#)

About the Clergy Resilience Series

Ministry can be deeply life-giving. It can also wear you down.

The work asks us to enter people's grief, conflict, fear, hope, illness, joy, disappointment, and change. We preach and teach, lead organizations, respond to crises, manage conflict, accompany people through suffering, celebrate with them, make decisions, and carry responsibilities few people in our congregations ever fully see.

Sometimes we do all of that while trying to make sense of what is happening in our own lives.

Over time, ministry leaves its mark.

You may notice that you are more tired than you used to be. Criticism stays with you longer. You carry other people's problems home. Saying no produces guilt. Conflict occupies your mind long after the meeting ends. Prayer has become something you do professionally rather than something that nourishes you. Perhaps you feel lonely, spiritually dry, cynical, constantly hurried, or simply beaten up.

These experiences do not necessarily mean you are failing at ministry.

They may mean that something deserves your attention.

Resilience Is More Than Endurance

Clergy resilience is sometimes understood as the ability to withstand the pressures of ministry—to become tougher, develop thicker skin, recover more quickly, and keep going.

But resilience is not simply endurance.

Nor is it another name for self-care.

Resilience is the developing capacity to remain personally healthy, relationally connected, spiritually grounded, and vocationally faithful through the ordinary and extraordinary stresses of ministry.

That capacity develops over time.

Emotional awareness helps us recognize what is happening within us. Differentiation helps us distinguish what belongs to us from what belongs to someone else. Boundaries protect what matters. Relationships keep us from practicing ministry alone. Prayer reconnects us with the source of our vocation. Rest and recreation restore capacities that ministry consumes. Attention to sleep, nutrition, movement, and physical health reminds us that our bodies are not separate from our spiritual and emotional lives. Systems awareness helps us remain grounded when congregations become anxious. Reflection and discernment help us recognize when something needs to change.

These are not techniques for making us invulnerable.

They are practices that help us remain available to God, to others, and to ourselves.

Self-Giving, Not Self-Erasure

Christian ministry involves sacrifice.

There will be nights when someone is dying and sleep will have to wait. There will be seasons when the needs of a congregation require more from us than usual. Love costs something. Vocation costs something. Following Christ has never promised a life protected from sacrifice.

The question is not whether ministry will ask something of us.

It will.

The more important question is what kind of sacrifice faithfulness requires.

Jesus' life was profoundly self-giving, but it was not indiscriminately available. He withdrew to pray. He rested. He received food and hospitality. He lived in relationship with companions. He left places where people were still looking for him. He sometimes moved toward one need while passing by another. The existence of a genuine need did not, by itself, determine what he was called to do.

That matters for pastors.

People may genuinely need us and yet their need may not always be ours to meet. Someone may be disappointed by a boundary we establish without that boundary being unfaithful. Rest may sometimes be more faithful than another meeting. Prayer may take us away from people who want our attention precisely because we need to remember whose ministry this is.

Christian ministry calls us to self-giving, not self-erasure.

Resilience helps us give ourselves faithfully without losing the self God has given us to offer.

The distinction matters because suffering itself is not evidence of faithfulness. Exhaustion is not proof of devotion. Being indispensable is not the same as being called. Allowing ourselves to be consumed by every legitimate need around us does not necessarily make us more Christlike.

Faithful sacrifice is ordered toward life.

Sometimes it asks a great deal of us. Sometimes it stretches capacities we did not know we possessed. But resilience helps us recover, learn, mature, and return. It preserves and develops our capacity to love, serve, discern, and give again.

So one question runs quietly beneath every resource in this series:

Is this helping me become more capable of faithful self-giving, or am I simply being consumed?

Start Where You Are

This series is not a training program to complete.

There is no prescribed sequence. There is no expectation that you work through every resource. You may never need some of them.

Begin instead with what is wearing on you now.

Perhaps you need stronger boundaries. Perhaps you need to understand why a particular situation makes you so angry. Maybe you need relationships in which no one needs you to be their pastor. Perhaps you need a way to recover after demanding weeks, or help sorting out what belongs to you and what you have been carrying for someone else.

Perhaps ministry has hurt you and you need to tend the wound.

Perhaps you have stopped doing things that give you joy.

Perhaps your body is telling you something you have been too busy to hear.

Perhaps you are beginning to wonder whether something about your vocation needs to change.

Start there.

Each resource in this series focuses on one dimension of clergy resilience. It is designed to be read in about an hour and practiced for approximately a month.

The reading introduces the practice.

The month is where the learning happens.

You will be invited to notice what happens in ordinary ministry, experiment with a few practices, reflect on what you discover, and gradually decide what is useful enough to carry forward.

There is nothing to complete here.

You are practicing, not performing.

If you miss several days, begin again. If a practice doesn't fit, adapt it. If you discover that the issue you started with isn't really the issue, follow what you are learning.

The purpose is not to become proficient at another program. It is to become more attentive to yourself, your relationships, your vocation, and the presence of God within all of them.

You Were Never Meant to Do This Alone

Personal practices matter, but clergy resilience is not solely an individual responsibility.

Sometimes pastors become depleted because we have developed unhealthy patterns. Sometimes we are depleted because we are serving within unhealthy systems. Often both are true.

No amount of emotional intelligence can make an abusive situation healthy. Better boundaries cannot eliminate every unreasonable expectation. Prayer cannot substitute for sleep. A vacation cannot repair chronic organizational dysfunction. And resilience should never become an excuse for asking clergy to endure circumstances that need to change.

Healthy resilience includes knowing when we need someone else.

A trusted colleague, friend, clergy cohort, coach, spiritual director, therapist, physician, mentor, or denominational leader may sometimes be part of what faithful resilience requires.

Seeking support is not evidence that resilience has failed.

Relationship is one of the ways resilience develops.

One Practice at a Time

You do not need to become perfectly resilient before you can practice healthy ministry.

Resilience develops as we live.

Notice one thing.

Practice one thing.

Pay attention to what changes.

At the end of the month, you may decide to continue the practice. You may choose another resource because something else now needs attention. Or you may simply return to your life and ministry carrying one new capacity with you.

That is enough.

Read for an hour. Practice for a month. Then ask what you need next.

Beginning Here

You walk into a meeting and sense almost immediately that something is wrong.

No one says anything directly.

One person makes a passing comment. Another becomes quiet. Someone changes the subject. After the meeting, two people remain behind to tell you what they think is *really* happening.

Or perhaps a decision needs to be made.

Everyone looks at you.

You offer an opinion, and somehow, before you quite realize what has happened, the decision has become yours.

Or you make what seems like a modest change.

You establish a clearer boundary. You ask a committee to take responsibility for work it has routinely handed to the pastor. You suggest that two people in conflict speak directly with one another. You change a worship practice. You ask a question about something everyone seems to know but no one discusses.

Suddenly the congregation becomes anxious.

People who seemed content are upset.

Someone says:

Why are you creating problems where there weren't any?

And you begin to wonder whether you made a mistake.

Perhaps you did.

But perhaps something else is happening.

You may have disturbed a system that had learned how to remain stable by functioning exactly as it was functioning.

Congregations are relational systems.

Over time, they develop patterns for managing anxiety, authority, closeness, conflict, responsibility, change, and belonging. Some of those patterns are healthy. Some are not.

But even unhealthy patterns can become familiar.

And what is familiar can feel safe simply because everyone knows how it works.

Systems tend toward equilibrium.

When something disturbs that equilibrium, the system often responds by trying to restore what was familiar.

That means faithful pastoral leadership will sometimes create discomfort.

Not because discomfort is the goal.

Not because resistance proves the pastor is right.

And not because every established pattern needs to change.

But sometimes a system cannot become healthier without first becoming uncomfortable.

The pastoral question is:

How do I recognize the system I am part of, understand the role I am playing in it, and respond without becoming consumed by the system's anxiety?

That is the work of system awareness.

You Are Already in the System

Pastors can imagine themselves standing outside the congregation, observing its dynamics and deciding what to do about them.

But you are not outside the system.

You are part of it.

From the moment you enter a congregation, people begin relating to you through patterns that existed before you arrived.

- Some may look to you for authority.
- Some may distrust authority.
- Some may want you to rescue them.
- Some may want you to leave things alone.
- Some may expect you to resolve conflict.
- Some may recruit you into existing alliances.
- Some may compare you with your predecessor.
- Some may want you to become like a beloved former pastor.
- Others may want you to be nothing like that pastor.

And you bring your own patterns with you.

You have your own relationship with conflict.

You have your own need to be liked, respected, competent, needed, independent, helpful, or in control.

You have your own responses to anxiety.

- Perhaps you move toward conflict.
- Perhaps you move away from it.
- Perhaps you become more controlling when you are anxious.
- Perhaps you become quieter.
- Perhaps you rescue.
- Perhaps you explain.
- Perhaps you work harder.
- Perhaps you become defensive.
- Perhaps you try to make everyone feel better.

The system is not only happening around you.

You are participating in it.

System awareness begins when we become curious about that participation.

Systems Seek Equilibrium

Every congregation develops a way of functioning.

- People learn who makes decisions.
- They learn whose anger matters.
- They learn which subjects can be discussed and which should be avoided.
- They learn who can challenge whom.
- They learn who gets consulted before a decision is made.
- They learn who carries anxiety for everyone else.
- They learn what happens when conflict appears.
- They learn how much change can be tolerated.

They learn what the pastor is expected to do when something goes wrong.

Eventually, these patterns become ordinary.

That does not mean they are healthy.

It means they are familiar.

One congregation may maintain equilibrium by avoiding conflict.

Another may depend upon the leadership of one influential family.

Another may depend upon the pastor to resolve every disagreement.

Another may move from crisis to crisis because crisis has become its familiar way of organizing itself.

Another may blame one person whenever anxiety rises.

Another may talk endlessly about change while resisting every actual change.

Another may keep the peace by allowing the most anxious or angry person in the room to determine what everyone else does.

These patterns may be costly.

But they are predictable.

And systems often prefer a familiar unhealthy pattern to an unfamiliar healthy one.

This helps explain why change can produce surprising resistance.

You may not simply be changing a policy, program, meeting structure, or expectation.

You may be changing the way the system has learned to maintain its balance.

Disruption Is Not the Enemy

The word *disruption* can sound destructive.

Sometimes it is.

Leaders can create unnecessary conflict. We can move too quickly, misread situations, force changes people are not ready to make, or mistake our own preferences for faithful leadership.

But disruption can also be constructive.

A triangle is disrupted when the pastor refuses to carry messages between two people who need to speak directly.

Overfunctioning is disrupted when the pastor stops doing work that belongs to others.

Secrecy is disrupted when appropriate information is brought into the light.

Avoidance is disrupted when someone names the question everyone has been avoiding.

Dependency is disrupted when ministry is entrusted to others.

An unhealthy expectation is disrupted when a pastor establishes a reasonable boundary.

Sometimes healthier functioning begins because someone stops participating in the old pattern.

That will not always feel peaceful.

The system may become more anxious before it becomes healthier.

So resilience cannot simply mean becoming skilled at keeping the congregation calm.

Sometimes faithful leadership requires enough steadiness to tolerate discomfort without immediately restoring the pattern that created the problem.

But there is an equally important caution.

The goal is not disruption. The goal is healthier functioning.

And we should be humble about our ability to know exactly what healthier functioning requires.

Resistance is information.

It should be listened to.

Resistance does not prove that you are wrong.

Resistance does not prove that you are right.

The task is discernment.

The Practice

For the next month, work with four movements:

- **See.**
- **Locate.**
- **Disrupt.**
- **Stay Steady.**

Think of these as practices rather than weekly assignments.

You might spend approximately a week with each one. One may require considerably longer. You may discover during the third practice that you misread something during the first and need to return to it.

That is not failure.

It is part of learning to see a system.

Systems become visible slowly.

Take the time you need.

You are practicing, not performing.

The goal is not to become the person who can diagnose everyone else's dysfunction.

The goal is to become a more thoughtful participant in the relational system of which you are already a part.

Practice One: See the System

When something difficult happens in ministry, our attention naturally goes to the people involved.

- *Why is she behaving this way?*
- *Why won't he cooperate?*
- *Why does that committee keep creating problems?*
- *Why is this family always at the center of conflict?*

Those questions may reveal something useful.

But system awareness asks us to widen the lens.

Instead of looking only at the person, begin looking for the pattern.

Ask:

What keeps happening here?

Perhaps the names change, but the pattern remains.

A committee chair becomes frustrated. Members complain privately. No one speaks directly to the chair. Eventually, someone asks the pastor to intervene.

Two years later, there is a different chair.

The same thing happens.

The problem may be larger than either chair.

The system may have developed a predictable way of managing dissatisfaction.

Watch What Happens When Anxiety Rises

Systems often become most visible under stress.

Notice what happens when there is disagreement, uncertainty, financial pressure, declining participation, staff change, criticism, or an important decision.

- Who becomes louder?
- Who becomes quieter?
- Who starts calling whom?
- Who is expected to fix things?
- Who gets blamed?
- Who gets protected?
- Who disappears?
- Who suddenly becomes very important?
- Who speaks directly?
- Who speaks through someone else?
- Who tries to restore calm?

- Who increases the anxiety?
- What becomes difficult to discuss?

Do not begin by deciding who is right.

Observe.

Look for Repetition

Choose one situation in the congregation that feels difficult.

Draw a simple map.

Write the names or roles of the people involved.

Then ask:

- **Who moves toward whom when anxiety rises?**
- **Who moves away?**
- **Who gets pulled in?**
- **Who gets left out?**
- **Where does responsibility move?**
- **Where does conflict go?**
- **What usually restores calm?**

Then ask:

Have I seen this pattern before?

You are learning to see the choreography rather than only the dancers.

A Common Pattern: Triangles

One of the most common patterns in congregational life is the triangle.

Two people experience tension.

Instead of addressing it directly, one involves a third person.

Mary is frustrated with John.

Mary tells the pastor.

The pastor speaks with John.

The original relationship between Mary and John has not necessarily become healthier.

But the anxiety has moved.

Or a committee is frustrated with its chair.

Members complain privately to the pastor.

The pastor is now carrying tension that belongs partly within the committee.

Or someone is angry with the pastor.

Instead of speaking directly with the pastor, the person calls an elder.

The elder approaches the pastor carrying someone else's concern.

Triangles are not necessarily malicious.

They are one of the ways human systems manage anxiety.

Sometimes a third person genuinely needs to become involved. Power differences, safety concerns, serious misconduct, or other circumstances may make direct conversation inappropriate.

So the point is not to label every three-person interaction a dysfunctional triangle.

The useful question is:

What function is my involvement serving?

- Am I helping people address the problem?
- Or am I becoming part of the way they avoid addressing it?

Sometimes a constructive pastoral response is:

“Have you spoken with them directly?”

Or:

“I want to help, but I don't want to become the third point in a conversation the two of you need to have.”

That small response may begin changing a pattern.

It may also teach you more about what is actually happening.

Practice Two: Locate Yourself in the System

Once you begin seeing patterns, turn the lens toward yourself.

This can be uncomfortable.

It can also be freeing.

Ask:

What role does this system invite me to play?

Perhaps you are invited to become the rescuer.

Everyone brings problems to you.

You solve them.

People are grateful.

You feel useful.

And gradually, the congregation becomes more dependent upon you.

Perhaps you are invited to become the peacemaker.

Whenever tension rises, people expect you to make everyone comfortable again.

Perhaps you become the expert.

People stop trusting their own judgment because the pastor always has the answer.

Perhaps you become the parent.

Adults begin asking permission for decisions they are fully capable of making themselves.

Perhaps you become the enforcer.

Church leaders make a difficult decision but expect you to confront the person who will not like it.

Perhaps you become the emotional container.

Everyone brings anxiety to you, and you carry it home.

Perhaps you become the hero.

The congregation begins believing that its future depends upon you.

Or perhaps you become the problem.

An anxious system may eventually organize itself around the conviction that everything would be fine if only the pastor were different.

Notice What Fits You

Systems are particularly powerful when the role they offer us fits something already present within us.

If you need to be helpful, a system that wants rescuing may feel rewarding.

If you dislike conflict, a system organized around avoidance may feel comfortable.

If you value competence, a system that repeatedly hands you responsibility may reinforce your sense that it is simply easier to do things yourself.

If you need approval, you may become highly responsive to whoever is most disappointed with you.

If you are comfortable with authority, you may accept decisions that properly belong to others.

If you enjoy being needed, dependency may initially feel like successful ministry.

This is not an invitation to shame yourself.

It is an invitation to become curious.

Ask:

What does this congregation invite me to become?

Then:

Why might that role be attractive to me?

And finally:

What happens to the congregation when I accept it?

When the Identified Problem May Not Be the Whole Problem

Anxious systems sometimes locate their difficulty in one person.

- *The problem is the pastor.*
- *The problem is the music director.*
- *The problem is that family.*
- *The problem is the session.*
- *The problem is the new members.*

Sometimes a particular person really is behaving destructively.

System awareness should never be used to minimize harmful behavior or avoid accountability.

But sometimes one person becomes the place where a system locates anxiety that is more widely distributed.

So remain curious.

Ask:

What would we have to look at if this person were not available to carry the problem for us?

Perhaps conflict about the music director is also conflict about worship.

Perhaps anger at the pastor is carrying grief about congregational decline.

Perhaps conflict involving one family exposes longstanding questions about authority.

Perhaps an argument about a program is carrying anxiety about the congregation's future.

Notice the language here.

Perhaps.

Systems awareness should enlarge the questions we can ask, not give us premature certainty about the answers.

The presenting problem and the larger pattern are not always the same.

But neither should we assume there must always be a deeper systemic explanation.

Observe first.

Stay curious.

Before You Disrupt: Do Not Practice Alone

Systems are complicated.

Even people who have spent years studying congregational and family systems can misread what they are seeing.

A pattern that looks like triangulation may be something else.

A person who appears to be carrying the system's anxiety may also have a legitimate concern that needs to be heard.

What looks like resistance to change may actually be important feedback.

What appears to be overfunctioning may have developed because no adequate structure exists for sharing responsibility.

And what looks like a small intervention from the pastor's perspective may not feel small to the system.

For that reason, system awareness begins with humility.

You are developing a way of seeing, not acquiring the ability to diagnose a congregation with certainty.

When we first learn systems concepts, patterns can suddenly appear everywhere.

- We begin seeing triangles.
- We notice overfunctioning.

- We recognize anxiety moving through relationships.
- We see people being recruited to carry conflict.
- We begin noticing how a congregation restores equilibrium.

That new awareness can be illuminating.

But awareness is not expertise.

And a partially correct understanding can still lead to an unhelpful intervention.

Especially while you are learning this practice, do not make significant systemic interventions alone.

Find Someone Who Can Walk with You

Find a trusted person who understands enough about ministry and systems to help you think.

That might be a coach, an experienced pastor, a trusted colleague with systems training, a therapist familiar with organizational or family systems, a mentor, or another wise person who understands congregational dynamics.

Describe what you are observing.

Draw the relationships if that helps.

Explain what you think may be happening.

Then ask:

- **What am I missing?**
- **What other explanations could account for what I am seeing?**
- **Where might my own anxiety be affecting my interpretation?**
- **What role might I already be playing in this pattern?**
- **What could happen if I intervene?**
- **Is an intervention even necessary yet?**
- **What is the smallest intervention that might help me learn more without unnecessarily escalating the system?**

The purpose of consultation is not to find someone who agrees with your interpretation.

It is to gain another set of eyes.

Someone outside the immediate system may see something you cannot see from within it.

Let the Larger Church Walk with You

If you are considering an intervention that may significantly disturb a congregational pattern, this may also be the time to involve those who have responsibility for supporting you and the congregation.

In a Presbyterian setting, that may mean your Commission on Ministry, Executive Presbyter, General Presbyter, or another person designated to support pastoral relationships.

Other traditions will have their own structures of oversight and support.

Do not assume you should wait until the situation becomes a crisis.

You might simply say:

I am noticing a pattern in the congregation that I think may be contributing to some unhealthy functioning. I am working with a coach or colleague as I try to understand it. I am considering a modest intervention and wanted you to know what I am seeing and what I am trying to do. I would value your perspective and support.

That conversation gives you another perspective.

It helps test your interpretation.

It allows someone outside the immediate system to understand what preceded any increase in congregational anxiety.

And it establishes a relationship you can turn to if the response becomes larger than you anticipated.

This is not evidence that you are unable to lead.

It is good systems practice.

Respect the Power of the System

A change in one person's functioning can sometimes provoke a surprisingly strong response from the larger system.

Stop rescuing, and people who have depended upon rescue may experience abandonment.

Interrupt a triangle, and people who relied upon that triangle to manage anxiety may intensify their efforts to draw you back into it.

Return responsibility to a governing board, and leaders accustomed to the pastor carrying difficult decisions may experience the change as a failure of leadership.

Name something the congregation has avoided, and anxiety that had been contained through silence may suddenly become visible.

The response can feel disproportionate to the intervention.

A pastor who is new to systems practice may be especially vulnerable at this point. You may correctly anticipate some resistance and still be unprepared for its intensity.

That is another reason not to practice alone.

Do not create more disruption than you are prepared to accompany.

Go slowly enough to observe what happens.

Stay curious.

Keep trusted people alongside you.

And remember that you can stop, reassess, and change course.

Courage matters in systems leadership.

So do humility, patience, and support.

Practice Three: Discern the Smallest Faithful Intervention

Once you begin recognizing a pattern and locating yourself within it, the temptation is to decide that you now understand what is happening.

Be careful.

You have developed a hypothesis.

That is different from having made a diagnosis.

Instead of asking:

How do I fix this system?

ask:

What small change in my own functioning might help me understand this pattern more clearly while encouraging healthier functioning?

That distinction matters.

You do not need to reorganize the congregation.

You may simply need to stop doing one thing that keeps an unhealthy pattern working.

Let the Intervention Help You Learn

Suppose you think you are repeatedly being drawn into triangles.

You do not need to announce that the congregation has a triangulation problem.

The next time someone brings you a complaint about another person, you might simply ask:

“Have you spoken with them directly?”

Then watch.

- Does the person have the conversation?
- Do they become more anxious?
- Do they try to recruit someone else?
- Do they tell you something you had not understood?
- Does the concern turn out to involve a power difference or circumstance that makes direct conversation unwise?
- Does the same pattern appear elsewhere?

Your response has done more than interrupt a possible pattern.

It has given you additional information.

Small interventions can help us learn as well as change.

Find the Smallest Faithful Intervention

Choose one pattern you think you are seeing.

Notice the tentativeness of that language.

Then ask:

- **What seems to be happening repeatedly?**
- **How might I be participating in it?**
- **What healthier functioning might be possible?**
- **Who have I consulted about what I am seeing?**
- **What other explanations should I consider?**

- **What small change could I make in my own functioning?**
- **What might that change teach me?**
- **What response might it generate?**
- **Who will walk with me as I observe what happens?**

The smallest faithful intervention might be a question.

It might be a boundary.

It might be declining to carry a message.

It might be returning a decision to the people who own it.

It might be allowing a moment of discomfort rather than immediately making everyone feel better.

It might be naming an observation without interpreting it:

“I notice that we keep returning this decision to the pastor. I wonder what is happening.”

That is different from declaring:

This congregation has an unhealthy dependency problem.

One opens inquiry.

The other announces a diagnosis.

Especially while you are learning, prefer curiosity when curiosity will do.

Anticipate the Response

Before intervening, ask:

- **What does the system currently gain from the existing pattern?**
- **Who may become more anxious if it changes?**
- **Who may feel that something is being taken away?**
- **Who may experience the change as abandonment, loss of influence, or lack of leadership?**
- **What pressure might be placed on me to return to my old role?**
- **How much response am I prepared to accompany?**
- **Who knows what I am doing and can help me think if the response is larger than expected?**

Anticipating resistance does not mean dismissing it.

It means being prepared to listen without being surprised.

Practice Four: Stay Steady While the System Reorganizes

Sometimes the hardest part of changing a pattern comes after the intervention.

- You stop rescuing.
- Someone says:
I don't know why we even have a pastor anymore.
- You redirect a complaint.
- Someone says:
I thought you were supposed to help people.

- You establish a boundary.
- Someone says:
- *The previous pastor was always available.*
- You ask leaders to own a decision.
- Someone says:
- *You're supposed to lead us.*
- You name a longstanding problem.
- Someone says:
- *Everything was fine until you started stirring things up.*

Now the system may be inviting you back into the familiar pattern.

But there is an important distinction:

Staying steady does not mean stubbornly maintaining your intervention. It means remaining regulated enough to keep observing, listening, learning, and discerning what to do next.

This is where self-regulation, differentiation, humility, and support come together.

Do Not Confuse Anxiety with Failure—or with Proof

When a system is asked to function differently, anxiety may increase.

That does not necessarily mean the intervention was wrong.

But neither does it mean the intervention was right.

Ask:

- **What am I hearing?**
- **What part of this response might be predictable resistance to change?**
- **What part may be meaningful feedback?**
- **Did I move too quickly?**
- **Did I misunderstand the pattern?**
- **Was my intervention proportionate?**
- **Did I communicate clearly?**
- **Is healthier functioning beginning to emerge?**
- **What are my coach, colleague, or denominational support person seeing that I may not see?**

A systems perspective should make us more curious, not more certain of ourselves.

If everyone who disagrees with us becomes evidence that *the system is resisting change*, systems thinking has stopped being a tool for discernment and become a way of protecting ourselves from feedback.

- Sometimes you need to hold your position.
- Sometimes you need to slow down.
- Sometimes you need to modify the intervention.
- Sometimes you need to apologize.

Sometimes you discover that you were looking at the wrong pattern entirely.

And sometimes the response has become larger than you should navigate without additional help.

Resilience here is not the capacity to withstand whatever response the system produces. It is the capacity to remain sufficiently grounded, connected, and supported to continue discerning faithfully while the system is in motion.

Stay Connected

Differentiation does not mean emotional distance.

You can hold a position and remain in relationship.

You can listen to someone's frustration without accepting responsibility for eliminating it.

You can say:

- **“I hear that this feels different.”**
- **“I understand that you preferred the way we handled this before.”**
- **“I know this is uncomfortable.”**

And you can remain curious about what happens next.

Perhaps you continue the new pattern.

Perhaps you adjust it.

Perhaps you discover something you had not understood.

The work is not to become unaffected.

The work is to remain sufficiently grounded that neither the system's anxiety nor your own anxiety automatically determines your behavior.

When Disruption Is Costly

- Sometimes changing a dysfunctional pattern carries a real cost.
- Relationships may become strained.
- Influential people may become angry.
- Support may decrease.
- A pastor may become the focus of blame.

In some systems, efforts toward healthier functioning may expose deeper dysfunction rather than resolve it.

That possibility should not be romanticized.

Pastors should not be told that enduring escalating hostility is simply the price of courageous leadership.

There are situations in which the system's response becomes destructive.

There may be intimidation, harassment, retaliation, abuse, threats, persistent boundary violations, or attempts to isolate the pastor.

At that point, the question is no longer simply:

How do I stay steady?

It may become:

What support and protection do I need?

This is one reason it is wise to establish supportive relationships before the situation reaches this point.

If a coach, trusted colleague, denominational leader, or governing body already understands what has been happening, you do not have to begin explaining the system while standing in the middle of its most anxious moment.

Do not navigate serious systemic dysfunction alone.

- Sometimes resilience means remaining present.
- Sometimes resilience means changing the strategy.
- Sometimes it means bringing others into the system.
- Sometimes it means stepping back.

And sometimes faithful discernment may lead to the recognition that the system is not presently willing or able to become healthier.

System awareness should never become an argument for remaining indefinitely in a destructive environment.

Looking Back

At the end of your time with these practices, look again at the congregation you serve.

- What patterns do you see now that you did not see before?
- Where does anxiety seem to travel?
- Who gets recruited when conflict appears?
- Where do triangles seem to form?
- Who tends to carry responsibility?
- Who tends to surrender it?
- What role does the system invite you to play?
- What makes that role attractive or difficult for you?
- Where might you be overfunctioning?
- Where might you be helping other people avoid work that belongs to them?
- Who or what tends to become the identified problem when anxiety rises?
- What happens when established patterns are challenged?
- What does the congregation do to restore equilibrium?
- Where might disruption actually be necessary?
- What other explanations might there be for what you are seeing?
- Who can help you test your understanding?
- What is the smallest faithful intervention you could make?
- What might that intervention help you learn?
- What response should you be prepared to accompany?
- What support will you need?

And perhaps most importantly:

What would healthier functioning actually look like?

- Do not try to fix the whole system.
- Notice one pattern.
- Locate yourself within it.
- Talk with someone you trust.

- Discern one modest response.
- Then pay attention to what happens.

A Word for the Journey

Congregations are living communities.

They carry stories, relationships, loyalties, wounds, habits, hopes, anxieties, and patterns that developed long before any current pastor arrived.

You did not create all of those patterns.

You cannot control all of them.

You will not fully understand all of them.

And you will not repair all of them.

But you will participate in them.

That is why system awareness matters.

You can learn to notice when anxiety is moving through the congregation.

You can recognize when someone may be inviting you into a triangle.

You can become curious about the role the system wants you to play.

You can notice when your own needs and vulnerabilities make that role particularly attractive.

You can resist the impulse to rescue.

You can return responsibility to the people who appropriately carry it.

You can name what others may be avoiding.

You can disturb an unhealthy equilibrium.

And you can remain connected while the system responds.

But you do not have to do any of that alone.

One of the wisest things you can do as you develop system awareness is invite someone else to help you see.

- A coach.
- A trusted colleague.
- A mentor.
- A denominational leader.
- Someone who can ask questions you have not thought to ask.

Someone who can tell you when your interpretation seems too certain.

Someone who can help you recognize when your own anxiety has entered the picture.

Someone who can stand outside the immediate system when you cannot.

You will not always get it right.

Sometimes you will disrupt something that did not need disrupting.

Sometimes you will move too quickly.

Sometimes you will wait too long.

Sometimes resistance will reveal that you have touched an unhealthy pattern.

Sometimes resistance will reveal that you need to listen more carefully.

That is why system awareness is a practice rather than a technique.

The goal is not to become an expert at diagnosing the congregation.

The goal is to become a more thoughtful participant within it.

- **Observe carefully.**
- **Interpret humbly.**
- **Consult wisely.**
- **Intervene modestly.**
- **Stay connected.**

Pastoral resilience does not require you to keep an unhealthy system comfortable.

Nor does faithful leadership require you to keep an unhealthy system continually disturbed.

The deeper question is:

What does healthier functioning require of me here?

- Sometimes it will require patience.
- Sometimes courage.
- Sometimes restraint.
- Sometimes a difficult conversation.
- Sometimes a boundary.
- Sometimes refusing to rescue.
- Sometimes asking for help.
- Sometimes changing your mind.

And sometimes it will require enough faithful disruption for something new to become possible.

The goal is not disruption.

The goal is healthier functioning.

And your task is not to control the system.

It is to learn how to participate in it faithfully without being consumed by it.