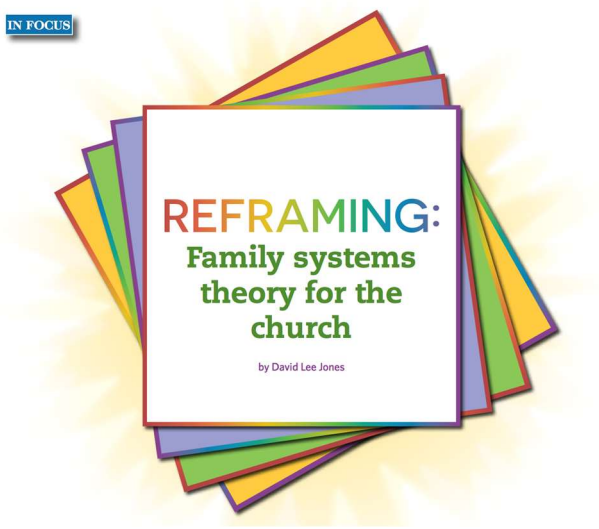
Reframing: Family systems theory for the church
By David Lee Jones, appeared in the October 4, 2017 issue of The Presbyterian Outlook



One of family systems theory's most helpful concepts and practices is "reframing." I love this concept because it is so elegantly simple in theory and provides ecclesial leaders with helpful, practical resources for their pastoral tool kits. I define reframing as: *A practice that opens up previously undiscovered choices by viewing current problems from different perspectives in order to foster alternative, healthier solutions.*

A creative response to anxiety
Family systems theory notes that human beings are chronically anxious, and when they are presented with change, conflict or threat, their anxiety increases. Increased anxiety produces heightened emotional reactivity. Anxiety activates the primitive brain, which decreases calm and rational thinking and severely limits a person's repertoire of choices. When stressed or threatened, people often become myopic to the point where they perceive only two choices: fight or flight.

Offering someone who is stressed a creative chance for reframing opens possibilities in situations that are intensely conflicted or polarized. When persons can imagine and embrace (or at least live with) new ideas and outcomes, new possibilities for agreement and mutual compromise are brought to life. Here's how it works.

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I live on a cul-de-sac. The house on the left corner is rented by a family that does not maintain the lawn or trim the bushes. This upsets all my neighbors, but especially one man. The bush on the corner got so thick and tall that it spilled across the sidewalk, blocking both the sidewalk and the sightline for a driver making a left turn. This outraged neighbor approached me one day about the problem, soaring into a roiling tirade about our recalcitrant neighbor. He asserted that he has written repeated letters about the problem to the homeowners association, but nothing happens. This neighbor is correct to be concerned about the traffic danger. I have had several close calls myself when making a left turn.
He became red-faced and his blood pressure surely spiked as his acerbic diatribe

escalated. I offered the following "reframe" by first intentionally asking these questions and then offering a simple solution: "Have you gotten to know this family? Do you know that they have five children under the age of 10? Did you know that the father just left the mother? Do you know that she is a nurse and has been working double shifts to pay the rent? Do you know how overwhelmed she is?"

Now here's the reframe: "Why don't we both go get our lopping shears right now and trim that bush to a safe height? Then I'll ask another neighbor if he can mow her lawn."

An amazing transformation happened right before my eyes. You could actually see compassion beginning to bud. His countenance changed. The crimson color drained from his ruddy face. He went from "reasoning in his heart" (Mark 2:8) to "feeling compassion" in his heart. He humbly replied: "Let's bang this out right now." And we did.

This is an excellent example of how good reframing is theoretical, effective, practical and potentially fast and simple. A family systems professor once told me that one of the greatest things about family systems theory is that *it is a theory.* His point is well-taken. We who lead are helped when we have a good theory that frames both our thinking and praxis. A theory must be applied and tested to be useful. In the encounter with my neighbor, my mind immediately searched through my mental family systems' filing cabinet, seeking an alternative solution to his ineffective letter-writing campaign. That's what good theories do – they offer alternative ways of understanding a problem, with a view towards seeing yet undiscovered options and solutions. Reframing is not just theoretical; it is equally practical. Good praxis must have viable and helpful applications. My neighbor was stuck in his surging anger – and paralysis is one of the predictable byproducts of intense emotional reactivity. He felt helpless because he thought he had exhausted all his choices. Instead of viewing this family as an entrenched adversary, I offered him another option – another way of seeing. It never occurred to him to get to know this family he despised from afar or to view them instead as "neighbors in need." This is beginning to sound biblical!

Jesus as "reframer"

Jesus was the master "reframer." In Mark 2:1-12, we see the Master at work. You know the story. Four friends bring their paralyzed buddy to a house where Jesus is teaching. The crowd is so large they cannot enter. They break through the roof and lower the poor fellow right at Jesus' feet. Incidentally, this constitutes a rather radical reframe! Instead of pronouncing divine healing, Jesus forgives the man's sins, which predictably infuriates the scribes.

We are then treated to how Jesus artfully reframes the situation by his use of a disarming question. It has been said "there is no substitute for the use of a well-timed, well-placed question." Jesus is the master of well-timed, well-placed questions. Insightful questions are almost always involved in well-crafted reframes. Jesus asks:

"Which is easier to say this this man, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say 'Get up, take your pallet and walk?'"

I was essentially asking my irate neighbor: "Which is easier, to keep writing acerbic, ineffectual letters, or to take a few minutes and help a single mother in need?" He immediately saw both the spiritual wisdom and practical value of my reframe.

Effective reframing

Allow me to share with you some helpful tips about how to craft and implement effective reframes by unpacking this exchange with my upset neighbor.

First, I have learned that in order to imagine and implement effective reframes, you must be relatively free of the system's "emotional field." That term, "emotional field" is one that family systems theorists use to describe the emotional gravitational pull that any system exerts on its members. Think of that sixth-grade science experiment where your teacher dumped iron particles on the desk and then slowly moved a magnet toward the particles. There comes a point where the particles get sucked into the magnet's field and are drawn to the magnet. Similarly, there comes a point where we can lose emotional objectivity and get sucked into others' emotional fields because their anxiety is contagious. Although I was also concerned about the danger of the size of the bush, I was not emotionally invested in the problem. I did not catch my neighbor's escalating anxiety. Effective reframes demand a high degree of creativity, and creative forces are compromised when one is being involuntarily pulled into another's gravitational anxiety.

Effective reframes focus on the solution, not the problem.

Second, effective reframes should be easy to understand and simple to apply. Because anxiety has compromised the capacity of the person you are attempting to help, the reframe you are suggesting by offering alternative perspectives must be easy to grasp. My neighbor immediately understood my idea and its application (i.e., what it would cost him), which meant he was suddenly free to consider it.

Third, effective reframes are best executed when they present a "win-win" scenario. Not only did my neighbor immediately understand my idea, he also understood instantly its inherent wisdom and the value (both practical and moral) that it offered for him and the whole cul-de-sac. My suggestion solved the safety issue; it included asking another neighbor to mow the grass and my offer to help trim the bush (bringing more resources to the solution); it offered doing a "good turn" for a neighbor in need; and the problem could be solved in 15 minutes. Mathematics employs the term "elegant solution" to describe problem solving that offers a solution in the simplest and most effective manner. Effective reframes must be elegant.

Fourth, effective reframes focus on the solution, not the problem. I did not view this encounter with my neighbor as an opportunity for pastoral counseling. I did not spend any time asking him how he felt about our negligent neighbor. I already knew. In my doctoral classes I show a brief clip from the movie "Apollo 13" — the oxygen levels are dropping and carbon monoxide levels are increasing in the spaceship. The best engineers in Houston are told they must craft a customized filter made only from materials that are available to the astronauts. The message is clear: Focus on the solution, not the problem! Remarkably, the engineers craft an effective filter just in time to save the mission. Today, that filter resides in the NASA Space Museum in Houston and is considered its most prized artifact.

Fifth, effective reframes employ the effective use of questions. Notice how I immediately employed the use of questions intended to elicit compassion from my irate neighbor. Good questions change how our brain functions. Insightful questions can help move entrenched persons from the lower, more primitive parts of the brain to the higher parts of the brain. My neighbor instantly moved from a stance of fight-or-flight to a position of empathy and altruism. In the end, he not only wanted to help himself, but saw the value in helping a single mom in need.

Sixth, effective reframes are dialectical. They are not simply thinking into a new way of behaving – they are behaving into a new way of thinking. They are both/and. I intentionally offered to help trim the bush so my neighbor and I could enjoy the fellowship of working together on a project that helped our entire cul-de-sac. By offering to help him trim the bush the cost of the solution was shared equally. Ultimately, our combined behavior helped imagine and cement new thinking.

Lastly, the best reframes are quick and easy. For years I have been frustrated when I pump gas and the gas sprays out of the tank, soaking the gas cap dangling from the car. It always seems to happen on the way to a wedding or some other occasion where I'm a little dressed up. I hate touching gas-soaked caps! This happened recently on a family outing. My wife heard me growling and said: "Why don't you just do what I do? Put the cap behind the little gas-cap door, and if the gas splashes out the cap stays dry."

It was one of those life moments that gives you pause. "How long have I been pumping gas, yet this simple solution never occurred to me?" Elegant reframes are like that – simple but sometimes hidden from our view, blocked by frustration. Often we cannot see nor imagine them, even when we are not particularly stressed or reactive. They are often obvious to others, but not to us. We must learn to invite in the fresh wisdom of outsiders.

Bright spots

Allow me to conclude by sharing the story of a far more complicated and sophisticated reframe from a book I highly recommend: "Switch: How to Change Things When Change

is Hard," by Chip Heath and Dan Heath. "Switch" is actually a book about teaching business leaders the art of reframing, although the writers don't label it as such. This story illustrates that the solution to the complicated problem of malnutrition in Vietnam villages existed in the organic wisdom of certain mothers, but it took outside eyes to identify and implement that solution in the broader community.

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In 1990, Jerry Sternin worked for Save the Children, an organization that works to help children around the world, and was asked to open an office in Vietnam. The government had invited Save the Children to Vietnam to fight malnutrition, but the invitation from the foreign minister came with quite a challenge: "You have six months to make a difference."

Sternin did extensive reading on the problem. Malnutrition was seen as a systemic problem, with contributing factors including poor sanitation, poverty, lack of clean water and ignorance about good nutrition. Because Sternin only had six months to work, he immediately started visiting rural villages. Instead of focusing solely on the problems, he asked if there were any healthy kids from very poor families. The answer was a resounding "yes!" When his team discovered well-nourished children in very poor villages, the researchers wanted to learn what these families *were doing right.* The authors of "Switch" call this "focusing on the bright spots." If some kids are healthy despite their disadvantages, then malnutrition is not inevitable.

What they learned is that the mothers of the healthy kids were doing simple things to supplement their kids' diet. They were adding small shrimp and crabs they gleaned from the rice patties. Others mixed sweet potato greens into a bowl of rice, adding much-needed protein and vitamins. These same moms used the same amount of food as other moms but spread it over four meals a day instead of two, giving the children a more consistent stream of nourishment.

Sternin then began teaching whole villages these nutritional secrets. Families were asked to bring shrimp, crabs and greens to the food preparation sessions. Mothers learned better hand-washing skills. The change was homegrown change — rising organically from the collective wisdom of their villages. Sternin's genius was to help these families see a yet unrecognized solution by reframing the problem. One of the best things about focusing on the bright spots in any system is that they are not imported solutions, but emerge from the system itself. If I have yet to convince you of reframing's potential for change consider this: Sternin's program ultimately reached 2.2 million people and 265 villages.

Why not try reframing in your neck of the woods, your own villages and cul-de-sacs, and see what happens?