Narratives of Leadership Anxiety:
Constructing a Story-formed Conversation
For Managing Pastoral Dynamics.

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"But what I felt most was my being a stranger to the ship; and if all the truth must be told, I was somewhat of a stranger to myself. The youngest man on board (barring the second mate), and untried as yet by a position of the fullest responsibility, I was willing to take the adequacy of the others for granted. They had simply to be equal to their tasks, but I wondered how far I should turn out faithful to that ideal conception of one's own personality every man sets up for himself secretly."
(The Captain in Joseph Conrad's "The Secret Sharer").[1]

So begins the portrayal of an anxious young captain, commanding his first ship, coping with the intimidation he feels in relation to his new crew. Will they respect his authority? As the second youngest on board the ship will his youth and inexperience be questioned by the more seasoned veterans of the sea? In the end will he have proven, even to himself that he is capable of being the leader he has always imagined himself to be? The brilliance of the story by Conrad is in his presentation of the captain facing the insecurity of his new role vacillating between extremes of self-doubt and self-protection. As the story unfolds the self-protective strategies of the captain only serve to reinforce his self-doubt creating

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[1] Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness and Selected Short Fiction* (New York: Barnes & Noble Classics, 2005), 155.

a crisis in his role as the ship's commander and threatening the safety of the entire ship and its crew.

> *"The man for Tecumseh was the Reverend Theron Ware.*
> *The choice was an admirable one, from points of view much*
> *more exalted than the local congregation. You could see*
> *Mr. Ware sitting there at the end of the row inside the*
> *altar-rail – the tall, slender young man with the broad*
> *white brow, thoughtful eyes, and features moulded into*
> *that regularity of strength which used to characterize the*
> *American Senatorial type . . . ."*
> *The Damnation of Theron Ware* by Harold Frederic[2]

Poised and self-assured, a gifted orator, confident in his abilities to lead the most prominent congregation in the Nedahma Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, Theron Ware's crisis comes when he is instead assigned to an undesirable congregation, or as his wife perceives it "poked off to that miserable Octavius . . . a worse place even than we've got now."[3] For Theron the anxiety of leadership is not in self-doubt, but rather in a tension between alternating extremes of bitterness and feelings of entitlement and intellectual superiority. As the story unfolds, the strategies of managing his disappointment by insisting on what he feels he deserves creates a crisis that threatens the survival of his marriage, the congregation, his mental stability, and his faith.

Reader-response theory

This article proposes that the exercise of reading and discussing these and similar stories can engage the reader in a process of interaction and identification with the plight of the stories' characters that has the potential to illumine the reader's own struggle when faced with similar dynamics. The andragogical

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[2] Harold Frederic, *The Damnation of Theron Ware* (New York: Penguin Books, 1986), 5-6.
[3] Ibid., 10.

assumption behind this use of story is based on a rather dated, yet respected voice in the field of teaching literature, Louise Rosenblatt, proponent of a theory commonly known as "reader-response" or "transactional" theory. In the seminal work of her career, *Literature as Exploration*, Roseblatt suggested that the reader's response to a story is an "event" in which

> The special meaning, and more particularly, the submerged associations that these words and images have for the individual reader will largely determine what the work communicates to him. The reader brings to the work personality traits, memories of past events, present needs and preoccupations, a particular mood of the moment, and a particular physical condition. These and many other elements in a never-to-be-duplicated combination determine his response to the peculiar contribution of the text.[4]

For a period during the 1940's and 1950's, textual analysis attempted a positivistic, disengaged, and systematic reading of literature in which the reader's relation to the text was discounted. Then in the 1970's, due in part to the influence of Rosenblatt, the importance of reader-response theory re-emerged as analysts began to affirm the subjectivity of reading of texts and of the importance of the reader's response.[5] In the move toward the postmodern, with its emphasis on the narrative construction of reality, scholarly approaches to literary analysis continue to recognize the value of the "cognitive, emotional, and psychological responses set in motion by words on the page in the reader during the act of reading."[6]

From the standpoint of teaching pastoral leadership, the "event" of the reader's response is an integral moment in helping students apply important principles of leadership to their own life situations. While the two stories

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[4] Louise Rosenblatt, *Literature as Exploration* (New York: Appleton-Century; 1968), 30-31.
[5] Charles M. Anderson and Martha Montello, "The Reader's Response and Why It Matters in Biomedical Ethics," in *Stories Matter: The Role of Narrative in Medical Ethics*, ed. Rita Charon & Martha Montello (New York: Routledge, 2002), 86.
[6] Ibid., 86.

considered here serve well as illustrations or examples of the principles being taught they more significantly can lead the reader to examine her/his own personal relationship and leadership struggles within those principles by identifying or not identifying with the situation of the stories' characters. Based on the andragogical opportunities of reader-response theory this article turns now to a presentation of leadership dynamics that serve as a framework for the reader-response interaction with these stories.

System anxiety and self-defined leadership

Although markedly different in character and circumstance when examined through the lens of some of the primary assumptions of the principles of self-defined leadership, both the Captain in "The Secret Sharer" and Theron Ware have much in common. Analysis of these patterns and our responses as readers of these stories offers a most valuable opportunity for examining the systemic dynamics of leadership.

The idea of a self-defined leader is grounded in the work of one of the founding fathers of family systems theory, Murray Bowen of Georgetown Medical School. Bowen's most significant contribution to the field of family therapy is his theory of self-definition. An important aspect of this concept is the idea that the processes of emotional systems occur along a continuum ranging from togetherness forces to differentiating forces.[7] Togetherness forces are explained as those processes that bind us to others. Seen positively these forces encourage us to be connected and responsible to one-another. In negative form these forces pressure individuals to acquiesce to the group and deny the individuality of the person. Differentiating forces are explained as the elements of the emotional system that in positive form encourage personal responsibility and independence. Their negative expression is disengagement and isolation.

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[7] Murray Bowen, *Family Therapy in Clinical Practice* (New York: Aronson, 1978).

Within an emotional system these dynamics often create a pattern in relational interaction between the extreme of being so close that individuality is lost, and being so independent that togetherness is lost. Bowen portrayed healthy relationships and thus healthy leaders between these two extremes – where people are able to stay connected, yet retain their individuality. This ability to manage oneself within the pressures of closeness and independence is a key to the theory of self-differentiation.

It should be noted at this point that Bowen's work has received the criticism of some as having "hidden gender biases"[8] against women. These critiques argue that the theory prefers the stereo-typically male characteristic of differentiation while disparaging the stereo-typically female characteristic of connection with others. Knudson-Martin makes a valuable contribution to Bowenian theory by recasting this dichotomy in a way that is consistent with the awareness of systemic dynamics as elaborated by Bowen, while also honoring the female experience. In an expanded model of Bowen's theory Knudson-Martin proposes "conceptualizing the feeling and the intellectual systems as parallel and mutually reinforcing. This means more emphasis on distinguishing the emotional system – which is the source of reactivity – from the feeling system, which can be developed to higher levels of awareness."[9] This expansion of Bowen's theory seems particularly relevant to a discussion of pastoral education, with an emphasis in this field on the importance of pastoral presence in people's lives. Helping ministers, female or male, to manage themselves both intellectually and emotionally in ways that strengthen their capacity to be sensitive and available to others is a laudable goal.

An important figure in applying the concepts of Bowen's theory to synagogue and congregational leadership is Edwin Friedman, author of *Generation to Generation: Family Process in Church and Synagogue*. Friedman

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[8] Carmen Knudson-Martin, "The Female Voice: Applications to Bowen's Family Systems Theory," *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy* 20:1 (1994), 35–46.
[9] Ibid. 40.

proposes that Bowen's theory of emotional processes in families is "equally applicable to emotional processes in churches, synagogues, rectories, and hierarchies."[10] He goes on to conceptualize leadership within the polarities of togetherness and individuation by recasting these extremes as "consensus" leadership and "charismatic" leadership.

The emphasis of the "consensus" approach to leadership focuses on the will of the group in which the leader functions to create a cohesive following. Friedman notes that the problem with a consensus leadership style is that the voice of the leader often gives way to the fear of opposition from followers resulting in "group think" and even "blackmail" by those least willing to cooperate. The old saying that the "squeaky wheel gets the grease" illustrates the incapacitating danger of consensus leadership as the leader, anxious by possible rejection or conflict with the followers loses the voice of true leadership that can move the group to greater goals. The Captain in "The Secret Sharer" demonstrates the consensus style, fearing the criticism of the more experienced crew members he becomes polarized in the anxiety of needing approval.

At the opposite extreme "charismatic" leadership styles depend on the personality of the leader as she/he stands apart from the followers. "Lead, follow, or get out of the way" is the slogan for the charismatic leader. In relation to followers the negative aspects of the charismatic style can cause the leader to fall into a pattern of discounting the follower's perspectives, and of focusing on the goal at the expense of collective needs. In his resentment toward being placed for ministry in Octavius, Theron Ware loses his voice as a leader by cutting himself off from his followers to pursue his own personal goals.

Friedman proposes that a systemic approach to effective leadership relies on a third construct of "self-definition" in which the leader "First and foremost" is connected or "in touch" with those who are asked to follow.[11] A second

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[10] Edwin H. Friedman, *Generation to Generation: Family Process in Church and Synagogue* (New York: Guilford, 1985), 95.
[11] Ibid., 229.

component of effective leadership is the capacity to take "non-reactive, clearly conceived, and clearly defined positions" in the face of togetherness pressures. The ultimate challenge for the self-defined leader, according to Friedman, is being "able to differentiate self and still remain in touch despite the body's efforts to counter differentiation"[12] While a consensus style of leadership eases the anxiety of being isolated or rejected, and a charismatic style eases the anxiety of being overwhelmed by the group, managing the anxieties of staying connected and retaining an individual voice require a move toward self-differentiation.

In an effort to quantify and validate Bowen's theory of differentiation Skowron and Friedlander[13] developed the Differentiation of Self Inventory. This research resulted in four subscales, "Emotional Reactivity, I Position, Emotional Cutoff, and Fusion with Others" as "distinct dimensions of a single construct, differentiation of self." Analyses supported the internal consistency reliability and initial construct validity of the measure.

In the theory of differentiation "emotionally reactive" individuals have less capacity to function from reason and calm intellectual processes and are more controlled by the ebb and flow of the emotional aspect of their lives. Bowen notes, "At the fusion end of the spectrum, the intellect is so flooded by emotionality the total life course is determined by the emotional process of what 'feels right,' rather than beliefs or opinions"[14] In Skowron and Friedlander's study the "Emotional Reactivity" subscale includes 11 items that "reflect the degree to which a person responds to environmental stimuli with emotional flooding, emotional lability, or hypersensitivity"[15] Well-differentiated persons have the capacity to examine the validity of their emotions and to make decisions from reason rather than from emotional reaction. The anxiety of the Captain in

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[12] Ibid., 229.
[13] Elizabeth A. Skowron and Myrna L. Friedlander, "The Differentiation of Self Inventory: Development and Initial Validation," *Journal of Counseling Psychology* 45:3 (1998), 235-246.
[14] Bowen, 363.
[15] Skowron and Friedlander, 239.

"The Secret Sharer" is an emotionally reactive fear that causes him to feel threatened by the crew and thus react in self-protective maneuvers that further threaten his position of leadership.

In contrast an "I Position" is the capacity of the leader to calmly state personal convictions and beliefs and act on those convictions in a less-anxious manner. Skorwron and Friedlander's subscale includes 11 items that "reflect a clearly defined sense of self and the ability to thoughtfully adhere to one's convictions when pressured to do otherwise."[16] In the story of Theron Ware the protagonist clearly has the ability to "speak his mind" but Theron consistently does so in a manner that seems invested not in inspiring his followers but in emphasizing his superiority.

Both Theron and the Captain consistently portray a number of the 12 item features of the Emotionally Cut-off subscale such as "feeling threatened by intimacy, feeling excessive vulnerability in relations with others . . . fears of engulfment and behavioral defenses like overfunctioning, distancing, or denial."[17] In particular, the strategy of distancing can be seen in the choices that the characters in both stories make as they each develop unhealthy relationships that are used to keep those in their care from engulfing them.

The "distancing" maneuvers of the characters also clearly illustrate the "Fusion with Others" subscale with 9 items reflecting "emotional overinvolvement with others, including triangulation."[18] In the development of the theory of differentiation the concept of triangulation is an essential construct, particularly in these two stories, as it informs a perspective on emotional distancing. Friedman explains, emphasizing that the key to this concept is a focus on process not content, that when members of a system "use physical distance to solve problems of emotional interdependency, the result is always temporary, or includes a transference of the problems to another relationship

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[16] Ibid., 239.
[17] Ibid., 239.
[18] Ibid., 239.

system."[19] As is the case in many relationships both the Captain and Theron seek this emotional distance by finding refuge in a relationship outside the system for which they have responsibility. In both instances the "triangled" parties take on the role of a "secret" relationship where the leaders find solace and respite from the anxieties they feel in their leadership roles.

This "secret" relationship is the integral plot-line in "The Secret Sharer." For the reader it is a mysterious turn in the story when the Captain, wishing to be alone on board the ship orders the entire crew to retire for the evening. While fretting over the events of the day the captain discovers that the side ladder of the ship has not been hauled in. He wonders to himself if he should retrieve the ladder or if "My action might have made me appear eccentric. . . I was vexed with myself."[20]

Finally, deciding to retrieve the ladder he gives the rope a "vigorous tug, which should have brought it flying on board"[21] but the ladder is somehow restrained. Peering over the side of the ship the Captain is shocked

> I saw at once something elongated and pale floating
> very close to the ladder. Before I could form a guess a
> faint flash of phosphorescent light, which seemed to
> issue suddenly from the naked body of a man,
> flickered in the sleeping water with the elusive, silent
> play of summer lightning in a night sky.[22]

After an awkward interchange the captain raises the ladder and the stranger climbs onto the boat. Introducing himself as "Leggatt," the mysterious stowaway tells the story of how he was falsely accused of murder on board another ship and to save his own life escaped into the water and grabbed the ladder of the Captain's nearby ship.

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[19] Friedman, 41.
[20] Conrad, 157.
[21] Ibid., 157.
[22] Ibid., 157.

Out of his own anxiety and feelings as a "stranger" on the ship the Captain accepts Leggatt's story and begins an odyssey of measures to hide the stowaway on board. Secretly they move to the captain's quarters where he remains hidden as the Captain tries to appear normal to the rest of the crew. On occasion he sneaks back to his quarters and in whispered conversations develops a friendship and identity with the rescued fugitive.

A number of critical interpretations have been written in discussion of this odd story. Many literary critics view Leggatt as a psychological symbol of the Captain's inner personal struggle to come to terms with himself and his new role. In the context of systemic dynamics this secret relationship with Leggatt offers much to a discussion of emotional distancing and triangulation.

Triangulation

A triangle is a three-person relationship system that for Bowen is a building block of larger emotional systems. Friedman notes that the "basic law of emotional triangles is that when any two parts of a system become uncomfortable with one another, they will 'triangle in' or focus upon a third person, or issue, as a way of stabilizing their relationship with another."[23] A triangle can tolerate more tension by passing the tension between the three relationships. Triangles are easily observable in many human relationships. Though they are often simply a part of normal systemic functioning triangles can also become dysfunctional.

A common illustration of how triangles function is to think of two very strong magnets, each pulling the other until they are linked together by their magnetic force. This "magnetic attraction" makes it impossible for them to stay connected *without being fused to one another*, unless a third object, such as a sliver of paper is placed between them. In this "triangle" of magnet, paper, and magnet the magnets are connected, but not touching.

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[23] Friedman, 35.

In human relationships triangles regularly occur in families. For example children learn at an early age that if one parent refuses their request a secret appeal to the other parent will sometimes bring another outcome. As an argument between two family members escalates one member brings in another family member to support their side against the opposing member. Occasionally the "triangled" party is not even another human but instead an object, or activity, or symptom which functions to keep two individuals close without being fused. Spouses regularly arguing about how to spend money may be participating in a dynamic within the dyadic system that keeps the two partners connected, yet allows some space.

In the "Secret Sharer" the Captain, awkward and insecure in his relationships with the new crew finds sanctuary from his anxiety in his friendship with Leggatt in part because there is no fear of being criticized or threatened with rejection from the stowaway, whose life is in the Captain's hands. In diffusing the Captain's anxiety Leggatt functions as a third member of a triangle thus creating distance between the Captain and the crew. And, because Leggatt needs the Captain's protection of his secret presence as much as the Captain needs his uncritical favor they each serve as a buffer to the other from the crew. Finding a person to relate to other than the crew that he feels so threatened by, the captain manages and comforts his insecurity by relating to the unthreatening Leggatt. Protecting the "secret" becomes a dominating force in all of his decisions.

As the story unfolds the secret relationship becomes increasingly destructive to his leadership of the crew. In the systemic dynamics of the triangle the mysterious behavior of the Captain leads to more doubt and criticism from the crew, reinforcing his reliance on the safety he finds with Leggatt, reinforcing the vitality of the secret - ad absurdum. This cycle escalates to the point that the captain ultimately risks his leadership and the safety of the entire crew as he guides the ship too close to a corral reef, seeking to pass near an island where Leggatt can escape. As he successfully protects, and ends the secret

the reader is left to wonder about the future character of his leadership. What will he do now that there is no release for his anxiety? Has the Captain learned anything about his leadership and how he manages his need for assurance?

In the demise of his ministry Theron Ware's struggle begins soon after his disappointment at being sent to Octavius, rather than the prominent post he felt he deserved. In his first meeting with the trustees of the new church his disenchantment is confirmed by the inflexible demands of the trustees, one whom lays the ground rules for Theron's ministry that in this church "No new fangled notions can go down here" and later that we "jest kept to the old paths."[24] After this first meeting Theron confides his disappointment to his wife, suggesting even that he may consider "going off and learning a trade."[25]

Soon after the meeting Theron takes a long walk out of town, ruminating over his distressing circumstances he arrives at the innocuous decision to turn his attention to composing the book that he has long dreamed of writing. The decision to turn his energy toward writing seems to suggest to the reader that Theron has abandoned the hope of a fruitful pastorate. Ensuing events transpire that lead him to relationships where Theron is exposed to new and exciting ideas in a friendship with the local Catholic Priest, a Darwinian scientist, and a wealthy single socialite. These characters come to represent, for Theron, everything that the congregation of Octavius is not; including intellectual challenge, social interaction, and sophistication. In a description of this development the narrator of the story claims that for Theron,

> Nothing was clearer to his mind than the conclusion
> itself – that his meeting with the priest and the Doctor
> was the turning-point in his career. They had lifted
> him bodily out of the slough of ignorance, of contact
> with low minds and sordid, narrow things, and put
> him on solid ground. . . The prospect wooed him,

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[24] Frederic, 27, 28.
[25] Ibid. 34.

> and he thrilled in response, with the wistful and
> delicate eagerness of a young lover.[26]

In a similar fashion as the Captain in "The Secret Share," Theron has to maintain these relationships in clandestine meetings, a dynamic which once again functions as a triangle. To keep his job and his marriage, Theron goes through the motions of leadership while the estrangement from those in his charge widens.

As the relationships develop Theron eventually believes that he has fallen in love with Celia, the young socialite. As he pursues Celia and is ultimately rejected, Theron enters a downward spiral, despondent and on the verge of mental collapse.

Literary critics have noted that the author of this tale, Harold Frederic, may have preferred the alternate title *The Illumination of Theron Ware* for this work.[27] As the story ends the reader is left to wonder if Theron has actually discovered anything about himself. Has he been illumined about is need to feel superior to others and how that anxiety is comforted by avoiding his frustrations?

Using these stories in the classroom

Readers' reactions to these two stories can lead to a lively interaction of personal feelings, experiences, and application. As noted earlier, Rosenblatt's reader-response theory proposed that "The reader brings to the work personality traits, memories of past events, present needs and preoccupations, a particular mood of the moment, and a particular physical condition."[28] Guiding the discussion within the context of Bowen's theory of differentiation opens a flood of personal stories from student ministers who have different reactions to the

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[26] Ibid. 131.

[27] S. Donaldson, "Introduction," in *The Damnation of Theron Ware* (New York: Penguin Books, 1986), xxviii.

[28] Rosenblatt, 30-31.

characters and events in the two literary works. Within this framework the discussion leader doesn't need to create or push for personal sharing, but rather can assume that every reaction is at some level a personal disclosure. Rather, the discussion leader's job is to honor the individual responses and help the group members to process their individual reactions and experiences.

In this regard the wise discussion leader will be aware that the process of engaging these stories and other students is itself isomorphic to the topic being discussed. In other words, how the leader and discussion members manage the interactions around these stories takes place in a systemic process with triangles, consensus, charisma, distancing, emotional reactivity, anxiety management and other Bowenian constructs presenting themselves in the dynamics of the group. The task of discussion leadership is to manage oneself as a model of self-defined presence, paying attention to the group process and helping participants to manage their own anxieties in the group.

To function well in this role of leader, instructors must manage their own personal anxieties. Some instructors tend to feel anxious when students don't seem to be agreeing and so they push for consensus. Others may rely on a charismatic style of instruction speaking with authority and discounting other views. Knowing these personal tendencies, instructors can pay attention to their own feelings and reactions being careful to avoid creating triangles that support their position, or that are used to quell their anxiety.

An awareness of Knudson-Martin's distinction between the emotional system and feeling system is also important to the leader of the discussion, as she/he seeks to be sensitive and present to the members of the group. Friedman stresses that the responsibility of a leader is concentrated in the "position of leadership"[29] in which the leader manages that position in a self-defined manner, staying connected to followers while also taking "clearly defined" [30] positions.

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[29] Friedman, 228.
[30] Ibid. 229.

Knowing one's own emotional reactivity to the stories is thus vital to the process of leading the discussion.

More specifically discussion leaders may find the following "talking points" helpful in conducting a reader-response dialogue to these works from within a Bowenian model.

- How do you think the Captain would have reacted to the discovery of Leggatt if he had felt more secure in his relationship with the crew?
- How would Theron's leadership in Octavius have been influenced by seeking to understand and connect to the members of his congregation?
- What counsel would you give to both characters as a way to manage their anxiety in more constructive ways?
- Discuss how these stories can speak to pastoral leadership.
- How do we as ministers create relationships where we are able to relax and vent frustrations and yet remain accountable to those in our charge? In this regard is it possible to have "private" relationships where we receive honest feedback without those relationships being kept secret?
- Discuss the systemic dynamics in both of these stories in which the character's anxiety is reinforced by the attempts to relieve it.

Experience in assigning these readings to students, and asking just a few open-ended questions has shown that generating discussion is not a challenge. Students have strong and often wide-ranging responses to the stories and typically anticipate the opportunity to bring them to the group.

Conclusion

This article has proposed that the andragogical method of reader-response theory provides a beneficial approach to creating a dialogue where seminary students have the opportunity to examine how they manage the anxieties of

leadership. Two literary compositions, the short story "The Secret Sharer" by Joseph Conrad and the novel *The Damnation of Theron Ware*, have been recommended as useful resources for offering a meaningful context to frame this discussion. The two recommended works are particularly suitable to a discussion of the dynamics of leadership as proposed in the family systems theory of self-differentiation developed by Bowen, expanded on to honor the female voice by Knudson-Martin, and applied to pastoral leadership by Friedman.

It is hoped that readers of this article will add to these literary sources from within their own repertoire. Particularly this use of literature will benefit from the contribution of compositions that originate in the female experience, specifically those that relate to a discussion of systemic and leadership dynamics.

In conclusion, may we all grow in our capacity to be genuinely present as leaders, connected by the bonds of fellowship and community. And may this presence be experienced in the freedom to take well-articulated positions that bless others in their journeys toward holiness.