

## Dissertation Proposal

### **Introduction**

Murray Bowen, in his development of Family System Theory, posited 8 core concepts that he believed transcended time, culture, and space to describe how humans interacted with each other in the world on an emotional systems level. The explanatory power of these 8 concepts has spawned a wide variety of expressions, including certified clinical practices, grassroots movements, pastoral practitioners, and hundreds and hundreds of testimonies to how systems thinking has aided individuals, marriages, and families. The hope for this dissertation would be to gather data from participants of one of these movements, Emotionally Focused, to ascertain the transformational effectiveness of their philosophy and methodology as they leverage spiritual formation and Family Systems principles in encouraging the church to greater degrees of health.

Emotionally Focused began in the Vineyard Church movement at Mile High Vineyard under its original name, Faithwalking, in Arvada, Colorado. It was born out of the collaborative work of pastor Jay Pathak and his team to see transformation in the heart of their city. As the intensive weekends grew in number, many other Vineyard pastors flew to Arvada to experience healing and are trained in Faithwalking principles. A staff team from the Vineyard church in Delaware, Ohio, Delaware City Vineyard, was part of a group that found an incredible degree of freedom in their lives because of their experience and began to offer intensives in Delaware, Ohio starting in 2015.

### *Context*

Delaware, Ohio is a city 18 miles north of Columbus that is growing at a steady rate due to its proximity to the growing state capital. Though it has traditionally been known as a rural

town on the outskirts of central Ohio, it has risen to prominence in the last several years through a revitalization as a “bedroom community” for those who work in Columbus. It has grown by over 50% in the last 20 years and sits as the highest per capita income county in the state. Because of this, it is an interesting mix of “old town” citizens and “new town” citizens, and regular conflicts break out between those who oppose the changes that are being made and those who support them, as well as the new values brought in by those who are new to the city. It has become a very influential swing county in a swing state in elections, and it is often featured during presidential elections when ballots are counted for Ohio.

The ministry of Emotionally Focused has been influential in Delaware, Ohio as a means of ministering to individuals, marriages, and families, especially around communication, anxiety, conflict styles, and identity formation. With a combination of being a semi-rural suburb of Columbus, very affluent economically, and very young demographically, there is potency for a great deal of emotional unhealth to come to the fore in different areas of public and private life. While Delaware does not seem unique in the broader population in terms of emotional health or unhealth, it is uniquely situated to expose a broad range of generations and spiritual and socio-economic backgrounds to principles of emotional health taught through Emotionally Focused. It is likely that Emotionally Focused, for most of those in Delaware being exposed to it, would be the most intentional exposure to healthy emotional processes most individuals would have, regardless of age or background.

## **Conceptual Framework**

### *Theological Foundations*

Emotional health and healing have their theological foundations in the beginnings of creation in Genesis 1 & 2. As God set the foundations of and boundaries for creation, defining

for each piece how it would thrive within his order, there was an expectation for peace and *shalom* amongst all aspects of creation. For humankind especially, being made in his image (Genesis 1:27) there was peace in four ways: between one another, between humankind and God, between humankind and themselves, and between humankind and creation. Each of these was an expression of image-bearing as humans were given the freedom to be fruitful, multiply, and steward creation in partnership with their creator (Genesis 1:28).

In Genesis 3, we see the interruption of each of these as sin enters the world. In choosing to define good and evil for themselves, humankind rejected God's will and marred aspects of their image, leading them to lose *shalom*. There is a breaking of peace with one's self in the shame introduced in their nakedness, with one another as the man blames the woman for his actions, with God as they hide from him in the garden (Genesis 3:7-13), and with creation as the introduction of death makes work and family life difficult (Genesis 3:17-19). We see, then, the introduction of the *need* for healing as God's original intention is departed from and the widening gap created by human sin has catastrophic repercussions for members of creation, including a great deal of physical, emotional, spiritual, and mental harm.

Sin, now residing in the human heart, created a duality of nature in humankind, and while the Lord sought to redeem them through the people of Israel, repeatedly humanity failed to live up to the covenant God made with them. The prophet Jeremiah declared that the human heart "is deceitful above all things and beyond cure" (17:9). The shame, anger, fear, and despair present in sinful foundations continued to make the relationship with God, others, oneself, and creation difficult, to the point of God rebuking his people through captivity and exile by the Assyrians, Babylonians, and Romans. God's means of revelation, the Law, did not bring about the change needed for a new heart; he would need to "put the law in their minds, and write it on their hearts"

(Jeremiah 31:33). In so doing, he would once again bring about the original intention of creation in humanity, living in some measure of *shalom* with them again.

The Lord made this first possible by sending Jesus, his son. Jesus' perfect life and eventual death made for positional *shalom* for humankind, known as justification and atonement. His perfect sacrifice made way for peace with God, the original intention of creation. In taking on the sins of mankind, he "took up our infirmities and bore our diseases" (Matthew 8:17), making possible the physical healing in his name, in the same manner in which he healed many during his earthly life. Further, he gave humanity the Holy Spirit, and through his sacrifice allowed the divine to dwell in us as a temple (1 Corinthians 6:19). Now, through the Holy Spirit's ministry, in submission to the Father as Christ was, we are being sanctified and in every way being made like Christ and to do the works the Father has established for us (Ephesians 2:10). Darkness and sin remain in the human heart by various means: trauma, habits, unrepented sin, identity wounds, generational sin, and the demonic. However, various means of healing are also available to us, including wisdom identified in professional settings like counseling, psychiatry, and spiritual formation. I believe that Emotionally Focused, as an expression of wisdom, is leveraged by the Holy Spirit in people's lives to help make them well and restore aspects of God's original intention for humankind in the lives of individuals, marriages, and families.

### *Theoretical Foundations*

#### **Family Systems Theory**

As mentioned above, Emotionally Focused is based on the work of Murray Bowen's Family Systems Theory, designed in the 1960s as he practiced family therapy successfully for many years. His observations in family therapy lead him away from some aspects of

psychotherapeutic counseling that focused on the individual who was displaying dysfunction, whom he called the *symptom bearer*, and instead caused him to focus on the family unit as a whole. He believed the one bearing the symptoms was often not the cause or root of the dysfunction, but instead was simply displaying the anxiety or dysfunction of the whole family through their symptoms. He built from this simple foundation 8 concepts that he believed would help any emotional unit find a greater degree of health.

### **Emotionally Focused: Foundations**

Methodologically, Emotionally Focused has 5 iterations of exposure to the work of Family Systems and spiritual formation practices. The first piece is a 2-day intensive called Emotionally Focused: Foundations, which the Delaware City Vineyard hosts 3 times a year. In this two-day intensive there are seven sessions, and each session has the same three parts. There is a teaching and content portion done in a group setting, a 30–40-minute guided solitude time, and a 30-minute debrief of what was revealed during that solitude time in a small group. Each of these three portions is designed to be formative in unpacking aspects of first formations and soul issues.

The content is based on a mixture of Family Systems Theory and spiritual formation, facilitated by a leader. The solitude time is facilitated by an accompanying packet that has guiding questions based on the content. The small group, then, is meant to be a means of formation, accountability, confession, and safety. The small group is assigned at the beginning of the intensive and stays consistent throughout, giving each participant multiple opportunities to go deeper with group members who will hold their revelations in confidence.

Each aspect of content, solitude, and small group time, is meant to reveal aspects of first formations that perhaps had not been revealed before, or that need a new light shone upon them.

Past wounding, traumatic experiences, and positive identity-forming moments are all meant to be brought together as the Lord reveals wisdom to the participants through the lens of the content being shared.

An example of content that is shared is the concept of “Integrity Gaps.” Integrity gaps are spaces in formation where our words and actions do not line up; basically, we do not do what we said we would do. In this area, Emotionally Focused provokes us to ask questions around these areas of dysfunctional behavior and look for patterns in the present, memories from the past, emotions that show up in integrity gap moments, and reasons for why keeping our word in this area is difficult. These things are discerned in solitude, and then, hopefully, expressed in the small group community with the opportunity for feedback.

All of this leads to a “capstone” expression of formation and reflection, known as a “vow.” Vows are meanings that have been made through singular or repeated traumatic events about how to be safe in the world. These vows are often identity lies participants have unknowingly chosen to believe that affect their view of themselves and lead to dysfunctional behavior in their relationships. A participant might identify that, due to family pressures, they must always be emotionally steady and solid for the sake of those around them, no matter what happens. This would be the result of a past event(s) that had caused them to believe that this was the only way to be safe in the world around them.

## **Methodology**

### *Intervention*

Emotionally Focused in and of itself is an appropriate intervention for emotional unhealth within family systems in two ways. For one, it utilizes the principles of a method of psychological counseling that is backed up by decades of research and analysis. Its principles are

time-tested and proven to be effective over the long run by a multitude of practitioners.

Secondly, Emotionally Focused utilizes Spirit-led spiritual formation principles. Engaging in solitude, confession, and fellowship in the midst of reflecting on content revolving around these principles leads to breakthroughs as the Holy Spirit engages participants in revelation about their past experiences and present behavior.

On the level of research being engaged here, intervention would involve interviews with recent participants of the Emotional Focused: Foundations intensive. The research in particular would focus on the nature of identifying vows for those who finished the intensive. Research around these vows, being the culmination of the intensive weekend, would provide quality data on a few aspects of the intensive. First, it would indicate what aspects of their methodology are effective in providing insight into the lives of participants. Secondly, it would help to identify if any extraneous factors inhibit vow identification, such as age, socio-economic status, gender, race, or the like. Finally, it could provide information on whether vow identification contributes to long-term change, given that the next iteration of Emotionally Focused, a 6-month program called Emotional Focused: Formations, has a specific process of renouncing these vows.

### *Evaluation*

#### **Procedures for Data Collection**

The primary method of data collection would be personal interviews. I have been given access to the database of participants of Emotionally Focused: Foundations for all of its locations. The hope would be to get 20-30 recent participants from the Delaware area to interview them about the process, culminating in questions about identifying vows, the impact of identifying vows for personal formation, and the impact of identifying vows for family relationships. The interviews would hopefully be conducted in person, and may perhaps even be

conducted over the next 2-3 years as more cohorts move through the intensive at Delaware City Vineyard. The interviews would be recorded at the discretion of the interviewee.

### **Procedures for Data Analysis**

Upon collecting the interviews from participants, I would analyze the data from the questions and attempt to find principles for best practices for working through past formation experiences, receiving insight from the Lord, and identifying vows that impact our way of being in the present. Having identified these, I would reflect on the results with the current director of Emotionally Focused, Chris Knudsen, to see if these outcomes are how he intends for formation to happen effectively in Emotionally Focused: Foundations. We would also reflect together on whether other formation practices would improve the long-term experiences of participants in Emotionally Focused: Formations.

### **Results**

I expect to find out that both solitude, reflection, and confession in a small group community will be considered pivotal for the sake of processing past experiences. However, why these are effective for provoking insights into past experiences is not clear to me, and how they cooperate with the insights of Family Systems Theory is interesting to me. In addition, why so much insight can be gained by some about their internal lives in just a one-weekend intensive is mystifying to me. I also expect to find that vows are important for present-day self-awareness. However, for those who do not go through Emotionally Focused: Formations, I expect to find that the vows that have been identified are still largely unprocessed and affecting participants, as awareness alone is rarely solely effective in bringing about long-term change. In addition, I am curious to find out how vows, as an expression of identity, affect individuals to determine present-day behavior and bring about emotional safety, despite them being identity lies.

## **Conclusion**

I will interpret the findings through the lens of the research I have done in both spiritual formation and Family Systems Theory. I would hope the results line up with the intentions of the discussed spiritual disciplines employed, as well as keeping in step with the principles of Murray Bowen's work in this unique expression of it. I would also attempt to interpret the efficaciousness of the intensive in the context of their whole program, which has 5 units in total. I would hope to find out if Emotionally Focused: Foundations plays the role they hope it does within the whole of the ministry, and whether their formation philosophy has merit in the long run for transformation.

If I do find out that this method of transformation has long-term success, it would be interesting to see how it can be replicated in other settings and with different emphases, and whether effectiveness has more to do with content or with the process. With emotional health across the board at a decently low level in America, for the church to have something at its disposal that can raise the water level so easily seems like a huge resource that many should invest in. It would be excellent for this ministry to have qualitative research to back up its claims for long-term transformation and give its ministry even more credibility than it already has.

## **Resources**

The two main resources employed will be time and people. I expect each interview to go for about an hour, meaning there is about a 30-hour commitment for interviews. Interpretation as well is a factor, and listening to each interview a second time for research, so likely another 30 hours. In terms of human resources, each participant will be a resource.

As a resource in terms of experts, both the pastor of Emotionally Focused, Robb Morgan and the director of Emotionally Focused internationally, Chris Knudsen, have offered to help in

various ways, including leading certain parts of Delaware Emotionally Focused: Foundations weekends. Chris has also offered to read certain parts of my thesis, giving feedback on mission philosophy, values, implications, and their work with different people groups. Both Chris and Robb will be invaluable for this process.

### **Outline of Thesis**

- I. Introduction
  - a. Problem and Purpose of Research
  - b. Dissertation Overview
  - c. Context
  - d. Hypothesis & Research Question
  - e. Model of Research
  - f. Summary
- II. Literature Review
- III. Methodology
  - a. Recruitment
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- VI. Works Cited