

Doctor of Ministry Program - Ministry Development  
The Virginia Theological Seminar

DRAFT

**Preliminary Project Thesis Proposal**

July 2, 2006, *Revised July 4, 2006*

**The Rev. William Carl Thomas**

A. NATURE OF THE PROBLEM/ISSUE/CONCERN ON WHICH THE PROJECT FOCUSES

Clergy spouses and children are rarely prepared to recognize and effectively handle the problems that arise from the promise made at a priestly ordination to “do your best to pattern your life and that of your family in accordance with the teachings of Christ, so that they maybe a wholesome example to your people.” The Litany of Ordinations makes public the expectation that the priest’s family “may be adorned with all Christian virtues.” This public role of the priest’s family is assured when the rubric is followed in the Celebration of a New Ministry that calls for the family of the new minister to be presented. Offering sensitive education to clergy and their families with concrete examples of how clergy family life is intertwined into the health of the parish church would translate into developing loving, trusting relationships that support the goal for all church members, not just the clergy family, to live in accordance with the teachings of Christ.

B. ACT OF MINISTRY ENVISIONED AS PROJECT

The 1949 movie, *Adventure In Baltimore*, is about the family and parish of an Episcopal rector in 1905 North Baltimore, Maryland. Robert Young plays Dr. Sheldon and a teenage Shirley Temple is his free spirited oldest daughter Dinah. The interaction among Dr. Sheldon, Dinah, their family (mother/wife, two sons and another daughter), the senior warden and vestry, and the various members of the congregation gives concrete examples of the eight concepts of Bowen Family Systems Theory. Furthermore, the movie offers lessons in dealing with anxiety in a congregation and the dangers of the scapegoat mechanism in church conflict.

The act of ministry is to create curriculum for ten teachings that use appropriate dialog and

scenes from the movie to give participants insight into the topic. The topics are:

1. Differentiation of Self (Scale of Differentiation)
2. Triangles
3. Nuclear Family Emotional System
4. Family Projection Process
5. Multigenerational Transmission Process
6. Sibling Position
7. Emotional Cutoff
8. Emotional Process in Society (Societal Regression)
9. Anxiety in a Congregation
10. The Scapegoat Mechanism in church conflict

Each topic would be subject to a twelve page case study from information provided by the movie, *Adventure in Baltimore*, using the Virginia Theological Seminary Doctor of Ministry Case Study Model. Thomas Groome's approach to teaching called *shared praxis* is the overt method grounded in the exposition and interpretation offered by the case studies. The participants in the project would be recruited from clergy and spouses who have an active interest clergy family wellness. The following are two examples of a presentation method:

#### SHORT PRESENTATION

Day 1 (evening meeting): present project focus, show the complete movie, solicit comment

Day 2 (all day meeting): Review movie with vestry and note plot highlights. Use predominate plot highlights to choose one or more the topics to discuss during the day. Always include the teachings on Differentiation of Self and Triangles. Connect to parish issues as shared by participants. Review learnings with computer aided (PowerPoint) presentation that incorporates selected excerpts from

the movie.

#### EXTENDED PRESENTATION

Day 1 (evening meeting): Present project focus and show the complete movie, solicit comment.

Day 2 (all day meeting): Morning: Break clergy and spouses into five groups. Equip each group with a laptop computer capable of showing selected excerpts from the movie. Give each group a case study with discussion questions for one of the ten topics. Afternoon: Have the groups report to the larger group. Then give each group another case study with discussion questions from one of the five topics not previously discussed. Evening: Have the groups report to the larger group. Watch the movie again.

Day 3 (morning meeting): Recap the learnings with computer aided (PowerPoint) presentation that incorporates selected excerpts from the movie. Agree on a date to report on use of learnings.

Consideration will be given to including teenage children of clergy depending on the willingness of the clergy and spouses to include their children.

#### C. INTENDED OUTCOME OF THE PROJECT

Clergy family members would be better able to articulate and understand the stress placed on the clergy family system by the church institutional system. A language that promotes a healthy family system would be learned supported by accessible images from the movie. The clergy family will be better equipped to model a healthy family system whether or not the church institutional system is healthy. A healthy clergy family system is a way for them to be a “wholesome example” to the people in the care of the family’s ordained member.

#### D. THEOLOGICAL ISSUES INVOLVED IN THE PROJECT

The theological issues involved in this project begin by asking: What does it mean for a church institutional system to expect that the non-ordained members of a clergy family “be adorned

with all Christian virtues” and that the ordained person “do his or her best to pattern his or her life and that of his or her family in accordance with the teachings of Christ, so that they maybe a wholesome example to his or her people.” In other words, what standard would God expect of a person or persons drawn into the life of an ordained person by marriage or birth to uphold. Is this standard any different for non-ordained people who have a family and have chosen to pattern their lives in accordance with the teachings of Christ? What, then, does it mean for anyone to be “adorned with all Christian virtues?” Is our ecclesiology one where the priest (and by extension the priest’s family) be the people who should be the wholesome example or should such an expectation be placed on all who are baptized?

#### E. MEANS OF EVALUATION

Questionnaires will be sent to participants after two months have passed from the date of the presentation. The questionnaire will list scenes from the movie, *Adventure in Baltimore*, and ask the recipient if a scene is similar to an event in their life. If yes, a brief description of why will be asked. Persons responding to the questionnaire will be called by telephone for follow-up interviews. These interviews will ask a series of questions to ascertain how well a presentation participant integrated Bowen Family Systems and Friedman Institutional Systems theory and application. A question will be asked as to whether or not “anything has changed in the parish.” This data will be compiled to learn if the movie was useful a teaching tool.

#### F. RESOURCES AVAILABLE

Movie: *Adventure in Baltimore* (RKO - 1949). Turner Classic Movies

The Rev. Jack Hadler, faculty member of the Virginia Theological Seminary

Dr. Amy Geary Dyer, faculty member of the Virginia Theological Seminary

The Rev. Michael Jupin, faculty member of CREDO, who studied with Rabbie Ed Friedman

The Rev. J. Thompson Brown, retired priest who studied with Murray Bowen

The Rev. Richard Blackburn, Resource Leader and Presenter, Lombard Mennonite Peace Center

#### G. BEGINNING BIBLIOGRAPHY

Bowen, Murray. *Family Therapy in Clinical Practice*. Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson Inc., 1985.

Friedman, Edwin H. *Friedman's Fables*, New York: Guilford Press, 1990.

Friedman, Edwin H. *Generation to Generation: Family Process in Church and Synagogue*. New York: Guilford Press, 1985.

Gilbert, Roberta M. *Connecting with Our Children: Guiding Principles for Parents in a Troubled World*. New York, NY: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1999.

Gilbert, Roberta M. *Extraordinary Relationships: A New Way of Thinking About Human Interaction*. New York, NY: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1992.

Groome, Thomas H. *Christian Religious Education: Sharing Our Story and Vision*, San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row, 1980.

Kerr, Michael E. And Murray Bowen. *Family Evaluation: An Approach Based on Bowen Theory*. New York, NY. W.W. Norton and Company, 1998.

Kerr, Michael E. *One Family's Story: A Primer on Bowen Theory*. Washington, D.C.: Georgetown Family Center, 2003.

Richardson, Ronald W. *Creating a Healthier Church: Family Systems Theory, Leadership, and Congregational Life*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1996.

Steinke, Peter L. *Healthy Congregations: A Systems Approach*. Washington, D.C.: Alban Institute, 1996.

Steinke, Peter L. *How Your Church Family Works: Understanding Congregations as Emotional Systems*. Washington, D.C.: Alban Institute, 1993.

Titelman, Peter (ed.). *Emotional Cutoff*. The Hawthorn Press, Inc.: Binghamton, NY 2003.



## Synopsis of the movie - Adventure in Baltimore

from the Turner Classic Movies website  
(<http://tcmdb.com/title/title.jsp?stid=1197>)

In 1905, Dinah Sheldon, an enthusiastic art student, is expelled from Miss Ingram's Seminary for wearing two petticoats instead of five, attending political rallies and insisting that she be allowed to study nudes. When she is sent home to Baltimore, Dinah's understanding father, Dr. Andrew Sheldon, an Episcopalian pastor, easily forgives his headstrong daughter this latest calamity, but her mother Lily encourages her to be more conventionally feminine. Dinah's childhood sweetheart, Tom Wade, also believes that she should settle down and confesses that, since her absence, he has begun dating the more "continental" Bernice Eckert. Dinah feigns indifference to Bernice, telling Tom that her only ambition is to study art in Paris, and he agrees to help her fulfill her dream. When Dinah is arrested during a brawl in a public park, which starts after four loafers begin arguing over one of her paintings, the overworked Tom is asked to provide bail for all five. Out of gratitude, Dinah offers to write a speech for Tom on equality, which he is scheduled to deliver the next night at the Forum Society's Spring Dance. While preparing the speech, which is a modified version of one of her own debates, Dinah learns that her exit from jail was witnessed by two women, who then relayed the information to Dan Fletcher, Andrew's Scottish vestryman. Dan is upset by the scandal because Andrew has just become a candidate for the new bishop's post, and suggests that he punish Dinah. Instead, the less ambitious Andrew encourages Dinah's dreams by confessing that, as a youth, he had a short career as a ballroom dancer but gave it up to protect his father's reputation. That night, Dinah shows up late at the Forum Society, and Tom is forced to read her speech cold. He is shocked to discover that her "equality" topic is female emancipation and is laughed at by the large crowd. The humiliated Tom dotes on Bernice and informs Dinah that he no longer wants to be seen with her. Aware of Tom's rejection, Andrew offers to be Dinah's partner in a waltz contest, and father and daughter easily defeat Tom and Bernice. Later, Dinah visits Tom at the automobile garage where he works as a mechanic and begs him to pose for a portrait she intends to enter in a competition called "Spirit of Labor." Although Tom at first refuses to help, Dinah soon talks him into posing by promising to disguise his face in the finished painting. She then dresses him in a bathing suit and hammer and paints his likeness in the seclusion of the family greenhouse. Dinah enters the painting in the contest anonymously, but because Tom's face is clearly identifiable, her identity is soon surmised. In addition, because she painted Tom as half undressed, her reputation is called into question, and Andrew, who has been nominated to the bishop's job, is suddenly embroiled in yet another scandal. Tom is then fired from his job and dumped by a jealous Bernice. Pressured by Lily and Dan, Andrew reluctantly agrees to send Dinah to her aunt in Pittsburgh until his promotion is assured. Tom, meanwhile, finds himself hotly defending Dinah's honor to Bernice, and as the contrite Dinah is about to leave for the train station, he insists on riding with her in the family carriage. On the way there, a suffrage parade is harassed by a group of jeering men, and Dinah and Lily come to the women's rescue, causing a small riot. Just as a regretful Andrew is about to rush to the station to bring Dinah home, he learns of the incident and bails his family and Tom out of jail. The next day in church, Andrew tells Dan he has been "ruminating" about his future and delivers a critical, impromptu sermon on tolerance to his congregation. Andrew's stand moves his family to tears, and just as Tom finally confesses his love to Dinah, Andrew learns that he has been made bishop.