



**The ELCA Natural Systems Academy:  
The First, Second, and Third Years in Review  
(Updated May 2018)**

When elected, Presiding Bishop Elizabeth Eaton found the ELCA facing two impacting effects on synods and congregations resulting from a 2009 policy change and a downward slide in the economy. Budgets, staffs, and ministries were challenged practically and emotionally. Synod bishops faced congregational votes on whether to stay or leave. Churchwide staff faced uncertainty in their positions. Several deaths occurred among staff. Previous presiding bishops also encountered many contextual challenges along the way. Changes in society and the church are part of the reality presented to gospel ministry and the church over time. Our generation is part of the ongoing parade, and next year we celebrate 500 years in that parade.

Bishop Eaton inaugurated a family/natural systems orientation that she found especially helpful as a synod bishop in responding to her responsibilities to rostered ministers and congregations. Bishops and rostered ministers are familiar with a continuum of high to low functioning capacities in their charges. Numerous programs have been offered in the market as aids to leaders—some more lasting than others. Bishop Eaton saw a more comprehensive frame of reference for leaders stemming from natural/family systems research and application.

The appeal of natural systems thinking about human behavior and leadership functioning has taken on more relevance in addressing the larger and deeper processes that resist quick fixes. Among ministers, the natural systems theory of Murray Bowen, M.D., and his student Rabbi Ed Friedman has gradually become a more effective resource and way of thinking about emotional process in families and congregations. In the therapy field, a major shift in the study of human behavior has occurred and is still in the early stages where the focus is on the relationship system as an emotional unit instead of the focus being on the individual alone. Each individual is understood as being part of a larger field of interaction in natural family systems thinking.

In December of 2014, a Conference of Bishops retreat was held in Chicago where participants had been asked to read Friedman's *Failure of Nerve* and Luther's *Small Catechism*. The retreat focused on: 1) an exchange of experience among the bishops, 2) interviews of representatives of the three merged traditions, and 3) observations about rostered ministers' and bishops' family challenges. A churchwide staff retreat was held in February 2015. Again, observations and concerns were exchanged using a structured, interactive style. As a result, a request was made to design a proposal for an academy process that would present natural systems concepts and thinking (Bowen theory and Friedman's application of theory) along with family of origin work, case studies, and noteworthy presenters. Synod bishops were invited to select a staff or synodical representative regarded as high-functioning under pressure to be part of a four-year commitment to the Academy's goals. Invitations are now sent to synod bishops prior to the start of a new academic year for a new cohort of bishops' appointees who join the Academy roster each October.

In broad overview, the participants enter the Academy with a variety of experience and levels in understanding theory and its application. Judicatory appointees and churchwide staff experience major presentations by Bowen Center faculty members, enter small family of origin groups, write papers between sessions, consult with coordinators, and report some conscious shifts in their dealing with difficult situations amidst their church positions and in their families.

A major proposed project outcome from the Academy work is the development of a synod resource team similar to the Northeastern Ohio Synod team which has become an important ministry to the congregations of that synod. In June 2016 that team presented an overview of their effective work in the synod during the last ten years. In addition to resource team development, a number of other projects are also available for synodical and leadership consideration.

The ELCA Natural Systems Academy is a pathway initiative. A milestone has been established with the appointment of a Natural Systems Coordinator to the churchwide staff with a curriculum and development process underway. Others in the broad field have taken problems and put their stake in the ground to address them. Bowen theory and Rabbi Friedman's application of this thinking has become a path to effective capacities beyond therapy and technique. Toward this effort, the Academy curriculum aims include:

1. The ability to observe how things work in a relationship system
2. An understanding of how anxiety affects relationships and how people think
3. The impact of "mature" behavior on institutions and ministry
4. The challenge to think differently
5. An understanding of the challenge and the importance of how we treat one another
6. The practice of taking time to think
7. The way theory makes theology concrete