
THREATS TO THE FORMATION OF PASTORAL LEADERS IN THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION: INSIGHTS FROM THE TAVISTOCK MODEL OF GROUP RELATIONS

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Abstract: This article examines group processes in theological classrooms, looking specifically at conscious and unconscious dynamics which threaten the formation of pastoral leaders. Identifying the formation of pastoral leaders as a central component of basic theological education, the author introduces the Tavistock model of group relations to examine interactive learning processes of theological education, identifies ten threats to the formation of pastoral leaders in theological education, and explores consequences of these threats for the processes of learning and the vocational formation of pastoral leaders.

Introduction

In the spring of 1994, I completed a 302-page doctoral dissertation on *Threats to the Formation of Pastoral Identity in Theological Education: Insights from the Tavistock Model of Group Relations*.¹ That summer and until 2000, I served as executive director of North Central Career (now, Ministry) Development Center in New Brighton, Minnesota, where I worked closely for five and a half years with seminarians, pastors, and other church leaders around issues of vocational formation and development, the discernment of call, and leadership effectiveness. In 2000, I joined the faculty of Union-PSCE and in this capacity engage in a variety of teaching and administrative responsibilities—my multiple roles have offered me significant opportunities to

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¹ Kenneth J. McFayden, "Threats to the Formation of Pastoral Identity in Theological Education: Insights from the Tavistock Model of Group Relations" (Ph.D. diss., Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1994).

design courses in leadership and to work toward the development of assessment processes for master's students. These three contexts have shaped significantly my understanding of threats to the formation of pastoral leaders in theological education, as well as the content of this article.²

The purpose of this article is to examine group processes in the classroom, looking specifically at conscious and unconscious dynamics which threaten the formation of pastoral leaders in theological education. This purpose will be accomplished by (a) recognizing historical studies that identify the formation of pastoral leaders as a central component of basic theological education in North America, (b) introducing the Tavistock model of group relations to examine conscious and unconscious group dynamics that offer shape to the interactive learning environment of theological education, and (c) exploring the perspective of the Tavistock model in theological classrooms to improve the scope and accuracy of its understanding of interactive learning processes which pose threats to theological students. This article does not propose to offer a cure for the threats that will be identified—it does intend, however, to utilize these three components to understand better a number of threats to the formation of pastoral leaders in the very educational process that seeks to nurture leadership.

Assumptions Beneath the Purpose

Several key assumptions underlie the purpose of this article. First, students begin studies in theological institutions for a variety of reasons—some of these reasons seem to be “healthier” than others. Regardless, this article assumes that the varying motives of students for beginning theological studies shape the learning processes of students as well as the manner in which their identities as pastoral leaders develop.

² The dissertation has provided a significant foundation for my understanding of this topic. My experiences in the ministry development center and in a theological seminary have deepened my sensitivity to its importance.

Second, students begin their processes of formal theological education as contextual learners, not as “blank slates.” Each student not only comes with a unique motive for ministry but also with a unique combination of life experiences—relationally, educationally, and vocationally—and with a particular learning style and manner of relating to individual peers, to peer groups, to authority figures, and to organizations. These relational dimensions of learning are often overlooked, especially as the challenge to give adequate attention to theological students as individual learners is great.

Third, theological education takes place in community, not in isolation. Relationships with other members of that community, including students, faculty, and administration, as well as the institution itself, provide shape to the learning experiences of students as does any explicit curriculum.³

Fourth, the conscious and unconscious dynamics of individual students and of groups, of which theological educators may be unaware, contribute to the shape of the learning experiences of students. As students enter communities of theological education, relations of dependence and interdependence, of leadership and followership, and of authority and intimacy press to the fore. Caught between their desires to rebel against authority and their desperate needs to be “told,” some students may experience a sense of overwhelming anxiety that results in excessive dependency on theological faculty to protect themselves from the discomfort of their psychodynamic processes. When anxiety levels are high, it is easy for students to do exactly what is expected of them, but this

³ This article does not explore the different experiences of residential and commuter students or the manner in which online courses create communities of learning that impact the formation of pastoral leaders. Perhaps scholars who have explored these dynamics could amplify the topic of this paper, particularly as theological schools continue to grow in their diverse student populations and utilize online methods in the education of persons for ministry.

may postpone their facing the questions upon which their personal growth depends.⁴

Finally, the dynamics of theological education are different from other forms of professional education. In theological education, H. Richard Niebuhr, Daniel Day Williams, and James M. Gustafson suggest that:

The student cannot be content to master a set of objective principles and data which he can then objectively apply to the various pastoral situations in which he finds himself. The ultimate data of theological study are fundamentally personal and social beliefs about the nature of reality, divine, human, and physical, on which the life of the student rests. What he must in part objectify, evaluate, and make decisions about are not historical cases of legal precedent, or anatomical and chemical phenomena, but the fundamental assumptions of his personal existence and those of the historical community in which he professes loyalty.⁵

Theological education, therefore, involves the whole person. Consequently, if theological educators desire to understand their students, they must be able to analyze the lived experience of such students during this process of learning and maturation called “theological education.”⁶ Furthermore, if a goal of theological education is to help students to develop their own resources and to become interdependent, lifelong inquirers, then theological educators must attend to the issues surrounding the formation of pastoral leaders as well as those conscious

⁴ H. Richard Niebuhr, Daniel Day Williams, and James M. Gustafson, *The Advancement of Theological Education* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1957), 137.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 159-160. The writer of this article is committed to inclusive language. Writers in other times and places have not always written in an inclusive style. Inserting “sic” where descriptions and quotations contain non-inclusive language would undoubtedly interrupt the flow of the article; consequently, this writer has chosen to modify non-inclusive language when paraphrasing but to leave direct quotations in their original form.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 160.

and unconscious classroom processes which threaten this formation.

The Formation of Pastoral Leaders as a Historic Emphasis of Basic Theological Education⁷

My doctoral dissertation traces the evolution of Protestant theological education⁸ in North America by identifying five major crises which have reshaped its character from its origins in colonial America to its development as a highly specialized institution of professional education. These crises, from my point of view, include (a) the crisis of an *orthodox* ministry, (b) the

⁷ Significant resources for examining the formation of persons for ministry as a historic component of basic theological education include Robert L. Kelly, *Theological Education in America: A Study of One Hundred Sixty-One Theological Schools in the United States and Canada* (New York: George H. Doran, 1924); William Adams Brown and Mark A. May, *The Education of American Ministers*, 4 vols. (New York: Institute of Social and Religious Research, 1934); H. Richard Niebuhr, Daniel Day Williams, and James M. Gustafson, *The Advancement of Theological Education* (New York, Harper & Brothers, 1957); Charles R. Feilding, *Education for Ministry* (Dayton, OH: American Association of Theological Schools, 1966); James W. Fraser, *Schooling the Preachers: The Development of Protestant Theological Education in the United States, 1740-1875* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1988); Glenn T. Miller, *Piety and Intellect: The Aims and Purposes of Ante-Bellum Theological Education* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1990); Edward Farley, *Theologia: The Fragmentation and Unity of Theological Education* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983), and *The Fragility of Knowledge: Theological Education in the Church and University* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988); Joseph C. Hough and John B. Cobb, *Christian Identity and Theological Education* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1985); and David H. Kelsey, *Between Athens and Berlin: The Theological Education Debate* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1993), and *To Understand God Truly: What's Theological About a Theological School* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992).

⁸ In my dissertation research, I made several decisions about the parameters of the research. First, I chose not to narrow the topic of theological education to Protestant theological education or to theological education as it is exercised by any one denomination or theological institution. Second, I wrote with the member institutions of The Association of Theological Schools in the United States and Canada in mind. Third, I admittedly wrote from the perspective of Protestant theological education and attended only to its evolution in my research. Finally, I presupposed that the insights of the research are not limited to Protestant theological education in North America.

crisis of an *educated* ministry, (c) the crisis of a *professional* ministry, (d) the crisis of *fragmentation* in theological education, and (e) the crisis of *liberationist perspectives* for theological education.⁹

In each of these crises, issues related to the formation of the church's ministerial leadership have been of primary concern to theological educators—their response has been to modify their understanding of the type of ministry most needed to guide the church in a changing world. Such re-visioning, however, has not come without debate. With each crisis, the “traditionalists” and the “reformers” have debated different perspectives on how future ministers might best be prepared for pastoral leadership in the church and world.

As theological education embraces its heritage and moves toward its future, the crises which have been identified in my dissertation research continue to shape the identity and function of theological education. Related to these crises are multiple issues which theological educators increasingly face as they prepare persons for ministry in the church and world: the changing role of mainline denominations in North America in light of the chronic decline of their memberships; the realization that the elitist paradigm of professional education does not meet the needs of racial/ethnic communities, a rapidly growing segment of North American religious life; the globalization of theological education as institutions seek to respond to the realities of global interdependence and polarization; and the demand of marginalized persons for the reformation of the content and process of theological education. If theological education is to move out of its

⁹ Two seminal liberationist perspectives on theological education are found in The Cornwall Collective's *Your Daughters Shall Prophecy: Feminist Alternatives in Theological Education* (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1980), and The Mud Flower Collective's *God's Fierce Whimsy: Christian Feminism and Theological Education* (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1985). Were I writing the dissertation at this point in time, I likely would consider adding at least three recent developmental crises: the crisis of *globalization* for theological education, the crises of *multiculturalism* and *pluralism* for theological education, and the crises of *postmodernism* and *postdenominationalism* for theological education.

elitist paradigm of professional education, it must develop new conceptual frameworks, pedagogical approaches, and organizational patterns which attend to the social, cultural, intellectual, economic, political, and ecclesiastical contexts in which theological students both live and learn.

From the research presented in my dissertation, it is evident that theological educators have attended to the formation of pastoral leaders as a central component of basic theological education. Of interest to me is the extent to which the emphasis of theological educators has been on pastoral leadership formation as a *product* of theological education rather than as a *process* of theological education. Viewing the formation of pastoral leadership more as product than process has led theological educators to emphasize the formation of persons for leadership through curriculum development. As a result, much more attention has been paid to what is taught than to how it is learned.

Conscious and Unconscious Dynamics of Groups Shaping the Interactive Learning Environment of Theological Education

The Tavistock model of group relations traces many of its theoretical origins to the work of British psychoanalyst Wilfred R. Bion in his treatment of troops during World War II in the training wing of the Northfield Military Hospital, a military psychiatric hospital involving several hundred patients.¹⁰ Subsequent work with therapeutic groups at the Tavistock Clinic in London provided a basis upon which he devised his theory of group behavior. His initial reports, described in *Experiences in Groups*, showed that there was a great deal of boredom and uncertainty in the groups:

At the appointed time members of the group begin to arrive; individuals engage each other in conversation for a short time, and then, when a certain number has collected, a silence falls on the group. After a while desultory conversation breaks

¹⁰ Wilfred R. Bion describes the nature and results of his work in *Experiences in Groups, and Other Papers* (London: Tavistock Publications, 1961), 11-26.

out again, and then another silence falls. It becomes clear to me that I am, in some sense, the focus of attention in the group. Furthermore, I am aware of feeling uneasily that I am expected to do something. At this point, I confide my anxieties to the group, remarking that, however mistaken my attitude might be, I feel just this.¹¹

The group members seemed to have one thing in common; namely, they were not getting what they expected and Bion was not behaving in the way they had hoped.¹² Rather than directing the group in carrying out its task, Bion was playing the classic role of the psychoanalyst giving interpretations of behavior in order to make conscious what had been unconscious. The unique difference in his approach, however, was in his treatment of the whole group as the patient, giving interpretations to the group and not to individuals.¹³

With the specific purpose of helping these therapeutic groups to clarify the tensions that appeared to oppose the formal task, Bion began to build hypotheses about the group phenomena he was observing.¹⁴ Of particular fascination to him was the relationship of the behavior of individuals in the group to the emotional climate that seemed to characterize the group as a whole. From his observation, Bion began to recognize the impact that the group's mentality¹⁵ and culture¹⁶ had on the interactions of individuals within the group.

¹¹ Ibid., 29-30.

¹² Robert de Board, *The Psychoanalysis of Organizations: A Psychoanalytic Approach to Behaviour in Groups and Organizations* (London: Tavistock Publications, 1978), 37.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Bion's work in *Experiences in Groups* reads like a series of case studies in which he constructs and modifies his theory. While his early work reflects a strong focus on the relationship between group members and leader, he gradually broadens his vision by focusing more on how the climate of the group affects the multiple interpersonal relationships within the group.

¹⁵ Group mentality, for Bion, "is the unanimous expression of the will of the group, contributed to by the individual in ways of which he is unaware, influencing him disagreeably whenever he thinks or behaves in a manner at variance with the basic assumptions." In *Experiences in Groups*, 65.

Bion's principal hypothesis, therefore, is that in every group, two groups actually are present: the *work group* and the *basic-assumption group*. In his view, any group of individuals meeting together functions explicitly as a work group by using mental functions to address the task at hand.¹⁷ Such work, however, is sometimes hindered and occasionally furthered by emotional drives of obscure origin. These emotional drives, of which the group is usually unaware, propel the group as it seeks to meet the demands of its primary task. Operating on one of three covert basic assumptions (*dependency*, *fight-flight*, or *pairing*), the group implicitly behaves as a basic-assumption group with emotional aims different from the primary task. The nature and purpose of these hypothesized groups, a critical feature of the Tavistock model of group relations, are described as follows.

The Work Group

The work group, as Bion perceives it, is that aspect of group functioning that has to do with the real task of the group.¹⁸ Every group, no matter how small or large, has a specific, overt task to perform. To achieve the defined task, members of the group must utilize their skills and resources cooperatively. Employing rational thinking and a "scientific" method, as well as efficient structures of organization and administration, the work group constantly seeks new knowledge, learns from its experience, and questions how it may best achieve its goal. It is aware of

¹⁶ Group culture is "a function of the conflict between the individual's desires and the group mentality." In Bion, *Experiences in Groups*, 66.

¹⁷ This description of Bion's principal hypothesis is drawn from *Experiences in Groups*, 188-189.

¹⁸ In addition to Bion's reports on his therapeutic groups in *Experiences in Groups*, three sources summarize well his theory on groups: Anthony G. Banet and Charla Hayden, "A Tavistock Primer," in *The 1977 Annual Handbook for Group Facilitators*, ed. John E. Jones and J. William Pfeiffer (La Jolla, CA: University Associates, 1977); Robert de Board, *The Psychoanalysis of Organizations*; and Margaret Rioch, "The Work of Wilfred Bion on Groups," *Psychiatry* 33 (1970): 53-66. Collectively, these four sources guide this research in describing Bion's hypothesis concerning the *work group* and the *basic-assumption group*.

processes of learning and development, as well as of the passage of time. In Bion's view, the function of the work group is to a group what the *ego* is to an individual.

As the work group pursues its task, members seem to function together in rational, civilized, and task-oriented ways. While each member comes as a separate and discrete individual, belief in the common task leads each member to equate his or her interest with the interests of others in the group. The group, consequently, is focused away from itself and toward the task that unites its members.

In a work group, therefore, the expectation is that the result of the group's efforts will be growth and development. Consequently, individuals perceive that they must continue to develop their personal and interpersonal skills. While the work group utilizes leaders to guide individual members in pursuing their desired result, their leadership continues only to the extent to which it remains effective. After all, the leaders are not the point around which the group defines itself. The task fulfills that function.

The Basic-Assumption Group

If the work group functions as the *ego* of the group, then the basic-assumption group certainly must be its *id*. In contrast to the rational, civilized, and task-oriented work group, the basic-assumption group comprises "unconscious wishes, fears, defenses, fantasies, and projections."¹⁹ In describing characteristics common to all basic-assumption groups, Bion writes:

Participation in basic-assumption activity requires no training, experience, or mental development. It is instantaneous, inevitable, and instinctive.... In contrast with work-group function basic-assumption activity makes no demands on the individual for a capacity to co-operate but depends on the individual's possession of what I call valency—a term I borrow from the physicists to express a capacity for instantaneous involuntary combination

¹⁹ Banet and Hayden, "A Tavistock Primer," 157.

of one individual with another for sharing and acting on a basic assumption.²⁰

A critical dimension of Bion's theory of group behavior is that basic-assumption groups do not function in the sensible and rational ways described as characteristic of the work group. Although each basic-assumption group has its own unique characteristics, all have in common great concern for preserving the group and little concern for making the group worth preserving.²¹ Consequently, basic-assumption groups do not orient themselves to formal structures, rational thinking, processes of learning and development, or time. Instead, they orient themselves inwardly toward fantasy, which is then acted on impulsively.²²

According to Bion, there are three distinct emotional states of groups from which three basic assumptions can be deduced: *dependency*, *fight-flight*, and *pairing*. While only one basic assumption can be operant at any given time, it can shift rapidly during any given meeting or remain dominant for an extended period of time. While any of these three basic assumptions typically remain outside the group's awareness, members act as if they are aware of the prevailing assumption as evidenced by their behavior as a group.²³

The basic assumption of dependency. When a group is working on the basic assumption of dependency, it functions as if the group has met "in order to be sustained by a leader on whom it depends for nourishment,

²⁰ Bion, *Experiences in Groups*, 153.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 63.

²² It is important to note that Bion's understanding of group behavior has been influenced heavily by Melanie Klein's concept of projective identification and the way in which adult behavior can regress to infantile mechanisms characteristic of the paranoid-schizoid and depressive positions. As Bion interpreted these concepts as applicable not only to individual processes but also to group phenomena, he placed them at the center of his theory of group behavior. In de Board, *The Psychoanalysis of Organizations*, 45.

²³ Bion, *Experiences in Groups*, 94.

material and spiritual, and protection.”²⁴ Members of such a group act as if they are inadequate and immature, as if they know nothing and have nothing to contribute. Their basic assumption seems to be that an external object exists whose function is to provide security for them—consequently, one person is always felt to be in a position to supply the needs of the group, and the rest in a position in which their needs will be met.²⁵

Naturally, the leader is depicted as being the ideal object of dependence by members who act as if the leader is able to solve all of their problems and difficulties. Idealized as a kind of deity who will take care of the members, the leader may be tempted to go along with the basic assumption of the group.

When the leader fails to meet the impossible demands of the group, group members often express their disappointment and hostility in a variety of ways. At times members desperately attempt to manipulate the leader into taking proper care of them.²⁶ Other times, the group searches for alternative leaders. Some members seem eager to fulfill such a role to prove that they can do what the original leader was unable to do—when they fall for this temptation, however, they usually meet the same fate as the original leader.

The emotional environment of the basic assumption of dependency, in its endless search for an ideal leader, takes various forms of expression. Disappointment and hostility may be directed at the leader who is unable or unwilling to

²⁴ Ibid., 147. Influenced by the work of Sigmund Freud in *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, Bion suggests that the Church manifests phenomena similar to the “dependency” group. In *Experiences in Groups*, 156-157.

²⁵ Ibid., 74.

²⁶ Margaret Rioch recognizes that one of the most frequent maneuvers is to put forth one member as especially sick and requiring the special care of the leader. Such a member may be actually pushed by others into a degree of distress which previously had been unfelt. The interesting thing, she notes, is that whereas the group seems to be concerned about this person, it is actually more concerned about getting the leader to take care of the problem, thereby relieving its feelings of inadequacy and insecurity. In “The Work of Wilfred Bion on Groups,” 59.

meet the expectations of the group. Jealousy may be directed when one or more members sense that they are not getting their fair share of the leader's parental care. Greed may characterize the drivenness of some members who compete to have the most exclusive relationship with the leader.²⁷ At the heart of these emotions, perhaps, is fear—fear of being left out, left behind, or confronted if thoughts and feelings are truly expressed.

The basic assumption of fight-flight. When a group is working on the basic assumption of fight-flight, it behaves as if the only way for it to preserve itself is through *fight* (active aggression, scapegoating, physical attack) or *flight* (withdrawal, passivity, avoidance, ruminating on past history).²⁸ In its preoccupation with this basic assumption, the group typically acts as if it has met either to fight something or to run away from it.²⁹ The individual in such a group is of secondary importance to the preservation of the group—both in battle and in flight, the individual may be abandoned for the sake of the group's survival.³⁰

Leadership in a fight-flight group takes on a heightened sense of meaning in comparison with the other basic-assumption groups. Characteristics of the member who demonstrates the capacity for leadership by mobilizing the group for attack or by leading it in flight may be described as follows:

²⁷ Rioch notes that the dependency group's frequent concern with fear is understandable since, in manifesting the kind of childlike dependency characteristic, group members are perpetuating a state appropriate to an earlier stage of development. In "The Work of Wilfred Bion on Groups," 59-60.

²⁸ Banet and Hayden, "A Tavistock Primer," 158.

²⁹ Just as Bion views the Church as a manifestation of "dependency" group phenomena, he perceives that the Army exhibits phenomena similar to the "fight-flight" group. In *Experiences in Groups*, 156-157.

³⁰ Rioch, "The Work of Wilfred Bion on Groups," 60. Rioch adds that whereas in a group with "the basic assumption of dependency" the sick person may be valued for his or her ability to engage the leader as a person who will take care of others, there is no tolerance for sickness in the "fight-flight" group. Casualties are to be expected!

He is expected to recognize danger and enemies. He should represent and spur on to courage and self-sacrifice. He should have a bit of a paranoid element in his makeup if he wishes to be successful, for this will ensure that if no enemy is obvious, the leader will surely find one. He is expected to feel hate toward the enemy and to be concerned not for the individual in the group but for the preservation of the group itself. An accepted leader of a fight-flight group who goes along with the basic assumption is one who affords opportunity in the group for flight or aggression. If he does not do this, he is ignored.³¹

The leader in this situation is entirely the creature of the group. Sacrificing a “loss of individual distinctiveness,” he or she has no more freedom to be himself or herself than any other member of the group.³²

The fight-flight group, in Bion’s view, is marked by the emotion of panic.³³ Unable to discharge emotions of rage and fear in the natural processes of the group, members seek an outlet for their building frustration. Fight and flight, therefore, become the available means for satisfying the urge to express the fear and rage that threaten the preservation of the members.

The basic assumption of pairing. When a group is working on the basic assumption of pairing, it functions as if two members of the group are pairing off on behalf of the whole group to create a new leader, a Messiah, a Savior.³⁴ This hoped-for act of creation is essentially sexual, although the gender of the pair is immaterial.³⁵ When this basic assumption is operative, the other members are not bored—instead, they listen eagerly and attentively to what

³¹ Ibid.

³² Bion, *Experiences in Groups*, 177.

³³ Bion’s discussion of panic in the “fight-flight” group may be found in *Experiences in Groups*, 179-180.

³⁴ To Bion, the aristocracy, with its emphasis on in-breeding, manifests phenomena similar to the “pairing” group, as the Church and Army did for the “dependency” and “fight-flight” groups, respectively. In *Experiences in Groups*, 158, 167.

³⁵ de Board, *The Psychoanalysis of Organizations*, 40.

is being said between the pair. An atmosphere of hopefulness pervades the group as members anticipate the “birth” of a new person or idea that will save the group.³⁶

Leadership in a pairing group has a different meaning from leadership in the other two basic-assumption groups. In this group, the leader is non-existent, unborn—the group, consequently, lives in anticipation of the creation of a new leader, a new thought, or something that will bring new life.³⁷ To Bion, it is essential that the leader of this group be unborn:

It is a person or idea that will save the group—in fact from feelings of hatred, destructiveness, and despair, of its own or of another group—but in order to do this, obviously, the Messianic hope must never be fulfilled. Only by remaining a hope does hope persist. . . . In so far as it succeeds, hope is weakened; for obviously nothing is then to hope for, and, since destructiveness, hatred, and despair have in no way been radically influenced, their existence again makes itself felt. This in turn accelerates a further weakening of hope.³⁸

The emotional environment of a group operating on the basic assumption of pairing also differs radically from the other basic assumption groups. Given the hope and optimism that permeate the group, feelings of warmth and affection between the individuals who have paired off carry over to the observing members of the group. Such a mood can change, however, if the failure of the pair to produce an acceptable Savior leads to insurmountable frustration in the group. When this happens, the basic assumption of the group is likely to shift from *pairing* to an assumption defined by *fight-flight* or *dependency* forms of functioning.

In conclusion, the Tavistock model of group relations is built upon the following premise: that, “when an aggregate becomes a group, the group behaves as a system—an entity or organism that is in some respects

³⁶ Bion, *Experiences in Groups*, 151.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 155.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 151-152.

greater than the sum of its parts—and that the primary task of the group is survival.”³⁹ With its emphasis on a group-as-a-whole approach to group behavior, the Tavistock model suggests that individual members have a limited capacity to act on their own behalf as they are unconsciously caught up in the emotional climate that largely defines the group.

Contributions of the Tavistock Model of Group Relations for Understanding Interactive Learning Processes in Theological Education

The Tavistock model offers several contributions for understanding interactive learning processes in theological education. First, it calls attention to the importance of clearly identifying the work-group function of preparing men and women for effective ministries in the church and world. Second, it challenges theological educators and students to become more aware of the presence of basic-assumption groups in theological classrooms and the extent to which assumptions of *dependency*, *fight-flight*, and *pairing* may lead the group to redefine its primary task as that of preserving the group. Third, it recognizes that such basic assumptions impact the capacity of students to engage the primary task of learning as they contend with their own anxieties in groups around issues of loyalty and commitment, rules and roles, boundaries, their exercise of authority in groups, and their personal responsibility for learning. Finally, it discerns the relevance of basic-assumption phenomena for faculty members in theological education in three areas: (a) the responsibility of faculty members for establishing appropriate boundaries in the learning environment, (b) the variety of roles for faculty members in the learning environment, and (c) the personal and interpersonal needs of faculty members in the learning environment.⁴⁰

³⁹ Banet and Hayden, “A Tavistock Primer,” 156.

⁴⁰ An in-depth exploration of the relevance of basic-assumption phenomena for faculty members is beyond the scope of this article. Nevertheless, it is

The work-group function of theological education.

The work-group function of theological education, as envisioned by the member institutions of The Association of Theological Schools in the United States and Canada, includes the following purpose as reflective of the primary task of theological education in the Master of Divinity degree program:

The Master of Divinity degree is the normative degree to prepare persons for ordained ministry and for general pastoral and religious leadership responsibilities in congregations and other settings.⁴¹

In light of this purpose, the Association states that the goals an institution adopts for the M.Div. degree should take into account four content areas: knowledge of the religious heritage; understanding of the cultural context; growth in spiritual depth and moral integrity; and capacity for ministerial and public leadership.⁴² Accordingly, the content of an M.Div. program

...should provide a breadth of exposure to the theological disciplines as well as a depth of understanding within those disciplines. It should educate students for a comprehensive range of pastoral responsibilities and skills by providing opportunities for the appropriation of theological disciplines, for deepening understanding of the life of the church, for ongoing intellectual and ministerial formation, and for exercising the arts of ministry.⁴³

With these overt educational purposes and goals in mind, the work-group function of theological education challenges theological faculty and students to utilize their skills and resources cooperatively as they seek to maximize opportunities for learning. With efficient structures in the

essential to identify that such phenomena have implications for faculty members as well as students in theological classrooms.

⁴¹ The Association of Theological Schools, *The Bulletin of the Association of Theological Schools in the United States and Canada*, 47, pt. 1 (2006): 187.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid.

theological institution and curriculum to support this level of functioning, the work group behaves in rational and task-oriented ways as it seeks to gain and transmit knowledge. In such a group, it is anticipated that participants will grow and develop as a consequence of the investment of their time and energy. Accordingly, the systematic evaluation of students honors learning that has occurred and suggests areas in which further growth and development are warranted.

This level of functioning, the level with which theological educators are most familiar, anticipates that students who successfully complete the formal task of theological education are reasonably well-prepared for ministry in the church and world. The Tavistock model of group relations, however, suggests that another level of functioning provides at least as much shape to the learning of theological education: the presence of basic-assumption groups.⁴⁴

The presence of basic-assumption groups in theological education. A central premise of this research is that the Tavistock model of group relations makes a significant contribution for understanding interactive learning processes in theological classrooms through its exploration of basic-assumption-group phenomena. In contrast to the rational and task-oriented level of functioning in the work group, basic-assumption groups are not oriented to formal structures, rational thinking, or processes of learning and development. Instead, unconscious wishes, fears, fantasies, and projections drive the group as a whole toward redefining its primary task as that of preserving the group.

While the Tavistock model of group relations tends to portray groups as functioning either as *work groups* or as *basic-assumption groups*, I do not perceive that one function necessarily precludes the other. Rather than seeing group

⁴⁴ It is important to note that the size of the group does not negate the presence of basic-assumption phenomena. It is possible that different basic-assumption (sub)groups may coexist in the context of group, thereby creating several conflicting emotional climates within the classroom.