
Spiritual Abuse in the Church:

Power to Harm, Power to Heal

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An anxious time for the church...and an anxious time for clergy



NEWS

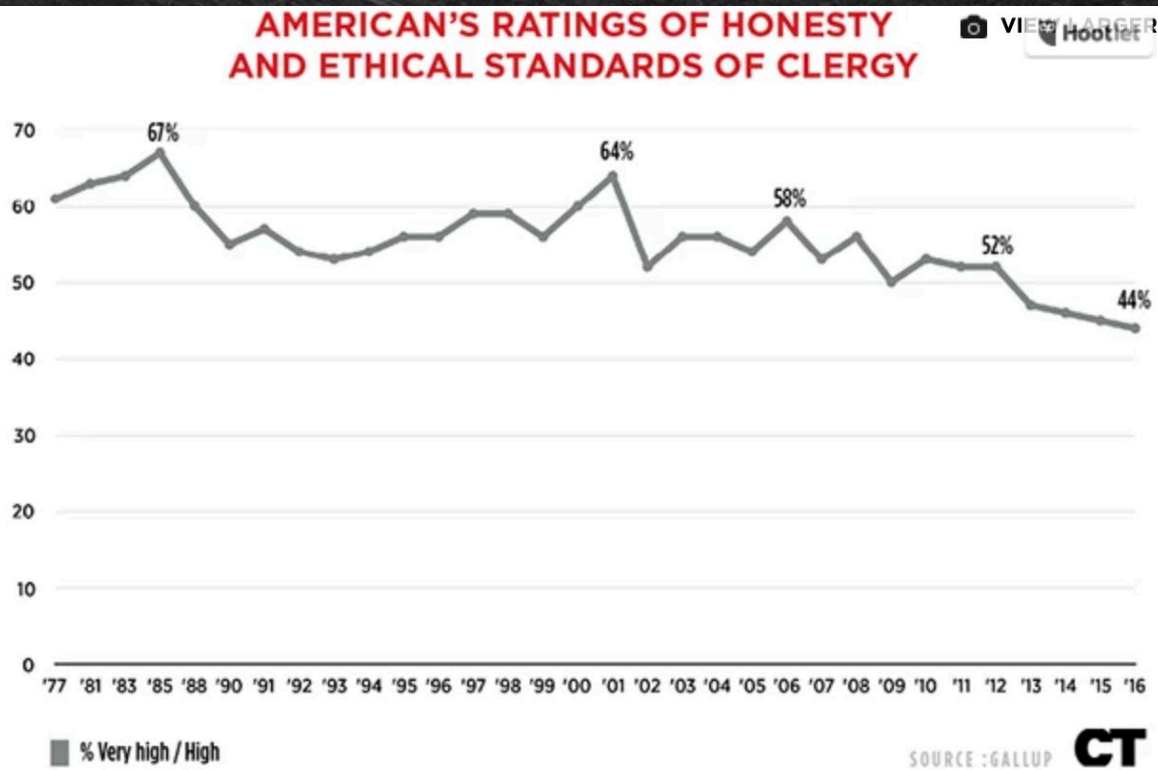
Ravi Zacharias' Sexual Misconduct Confirmed By Independent Investigation



Willow Creek pastor, elders step down, admit mishandling allegations against Bill Hybels



Clergy Trust



CT
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GLEANINGS

The 7 People Christians Trust More Than Their Pastors

-Less than half of the country—just two out of every five Americans—believe clergy are honest and have high ethical standards (Gallup)

Clergy Trust + Spiritual Abuse

- Dr. Lisa Oakley and Justin Humphrey's extensive research (IVP book Escaping the Maze of Spiritual Abuse) breaks down sub-categories of spiritual abuse including those who experienced feeling **shamed** in current church (17%, but 49% in a previous church), **manipulated** (70%), Scripture being used for **controlling** purposes (45%), and **damaged** as a result (74%).
- Their 2018 Bournemouth University study commissioned on behalf of the Churches' Child Protection Advisory Service (CCPAS), a British safeguarding charity, received 1591 responses from Christians, 1002 of whom said that they had personally experienced spiritual abuse.
- Some hopeful news - Dr. Michael Langone of the Spiritual Safe Haven Network (SSHN) has noted that while there are likely larger numbers of spiritual abuse survivors in our churches than we realize, his research finds that many want the church to be a *safe and welcoming place and believe that educating clergy and congregations* is an important pathway to increasingly safe ecclesial contexts.

Spiritual Abuse is not a new problem

The word of the LORD came to me: ² “Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel; prophesy and say to them: ‘This is what the Sovereign LORD says: Woe to you shepherds of Israel who only take care of yourselves! Should not shepherds take care of the flock? ³ You eat the curds, clothe yourselves with the wool and slaughter the choice animals, but you do not take care of the flock. ⁴ You have not strengthened the weak or healed the sick or bound up the injured. You have not brought back the strays or searched for the lost. You have ruled them harshly and brutally.
(from Ezekiel 34)

Spiritual abuse is about power and authority – how we, as spiritual leaders, inhabit and steward our roles and relationships with those entrusted to our care. Ezekiel prompts us to ask: Have we “ruled them harshly and brutally”?



Is power the problem?

“Remove power and you cut off life, the possibility of creating something new and better in this rich and recalcitrant world. Life is power. Power is life. And flourishing power leads to flourishing life. Of course, like life itself, power is nothing—worse than nothing—without love. But love without power is less than it was meant to be. Love without the capacity to make something of the world, without the ability to respond to and make room for the beloved’s flourishing, is frustrated love. This is why the love that is the heartbeat of the Christian story—the Father’s love for the Son and, through the Son, for the world—is not simply a sentimental feeling or a distant, ethereal theological truth, but has been signed and sealed by the most audacious act of true power in the history of the world, the resurrection of the Son from the dead. Power at its best is resurrection to full life, to full humanity. Whenever human beings become what they were meant to be, when even death cannot finally hold its prisoners, then we can truly speak of power.” (Andy Crouch, *Playing God*)

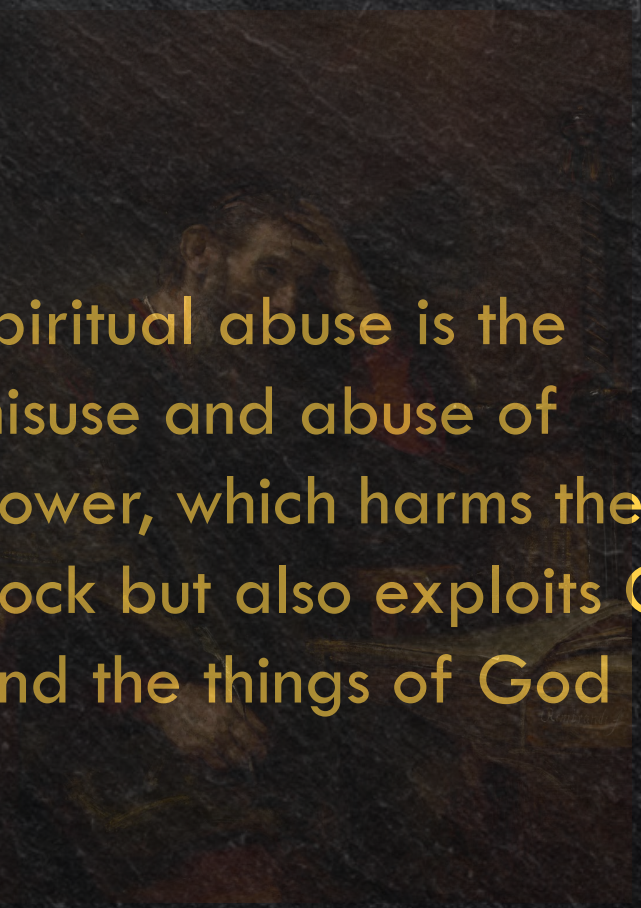
Spiritual abuse is about the misuse of our power and authority. St. Paul offers Jesus as a paradigm of cruciform power:



Rembrandt, The Apostle Paul

³ Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. ⁴ Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. ⁵ Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,
⁶ who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be grasped (or exploited),
⁷ but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form,
⁸ he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross. (from Philip. 2)

Spiritual abuse is about the misuse of our power and authority. St. Paul offers Jesus as a paradigm of cruciform power:



Spiritual abuse is the misuse and abuse of power, which harms the flock but also exploits God and the things of God

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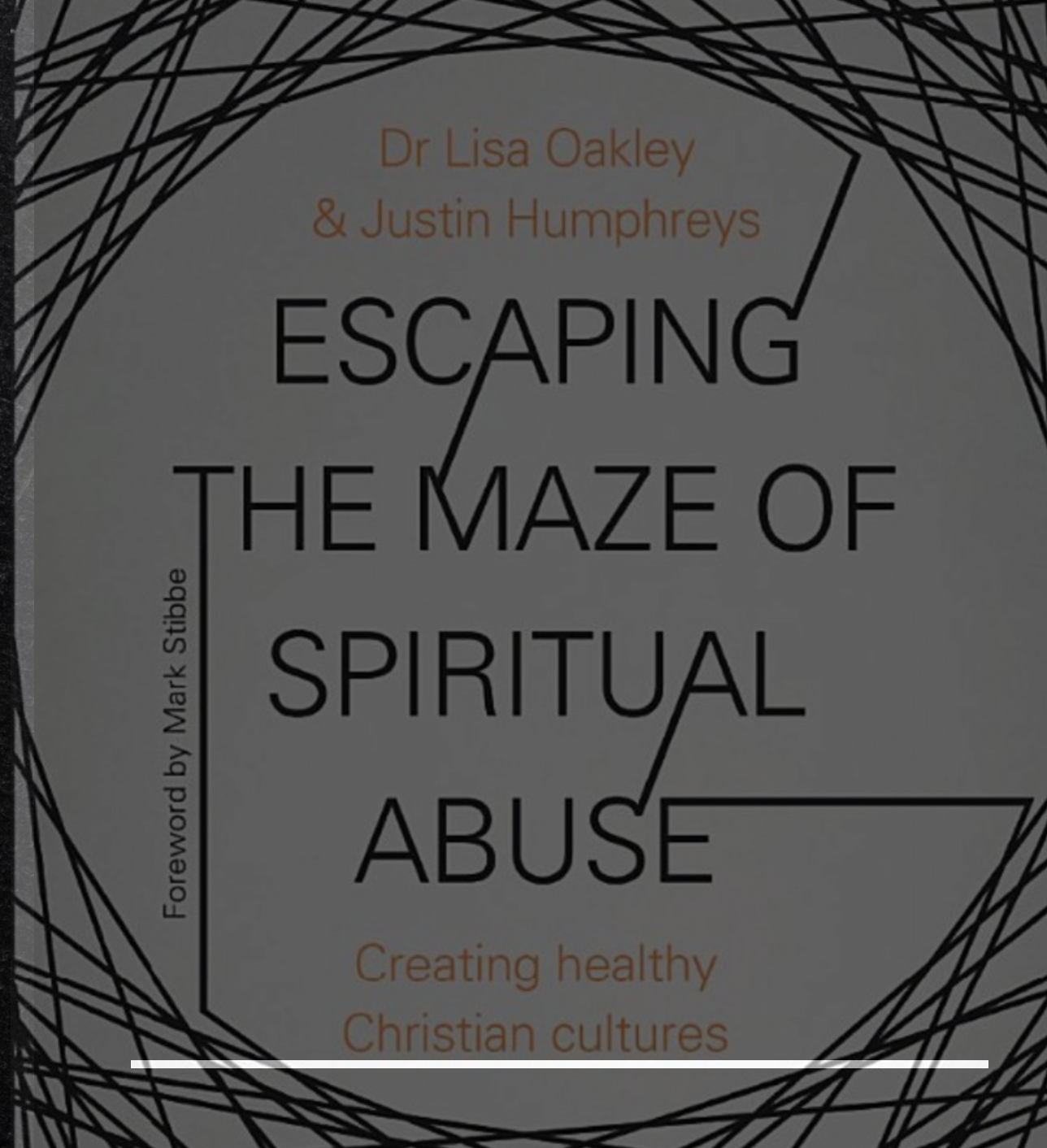
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Spiritual abuse defined:

Spiritual abuse is a form of emotional and psychological abuse characterized by a systematic pattern of coercive and controlling behavior in a religious context.

(Oakley and Humphreys)



Spiritual abuse defined:

Spiritual abuse is the use of religion or spiritual power and authority to control, coerce or perpetrate harm. It is a distortion or exploitation of God's power and authority.

Those in authority manipulate and control bodies, personhood, relationships, and autonomy.

- Rachel Clinton Chen,
The Allender Center



Manifestations of spiritual abuse: (via Oakley/Humphreys, Chen, DeGroat)

manipulation and exploitation

enforced accountability

loyalty tests or oaths

restrictions / censorship of decision making

requirements for secrecy and silence

coercion to conform

control through the use of sacred texts or teaching

requirement of obedience to the abuser

the suggestion that the abuser has a 'divine' position

isolation as a means of punishment

superiority and elitism

Symptoms of “Religious Trauma Syndrome”

(coined by Marlene Winnel, PhD, additions/clarifications by Chuck DeGroat)

FUNCTIONAL/BODILY

COGNITIVE

EMOTIONAL

SOCIAL/CULTURAL

Perfectionism

Depression

Sleeplessness

Loss of community

Negative self-critique

Anxiety

Loss of appetite

Employment issues

Confusion

Grief

Digestive issues

Interpersonal conflict

Either/or thinking

Anger

Headaches

Financial issues

Doubt

Loss of meaning

Substance abuse

Lack of belonging

Poor critical thinking

Shame

Eating disorders

Hypervigilance to run into folks

Poor decision-making

Guilt

Somatization

Developmentally behind

Scapegoating

Suicidal Ideation

Derealization

Recovery from narrow beliefs

Dissociation

Panic

Nightmares

Social awkwardness

Identity Confusion

Loss of pleasure

Sexual dysfunction

Tagged w/ a bad narrative

Assessing the “Culture” of a Church or Organization

- Spiritual abuse can happen in individual relationships, but it is often supported by the culture of a church or organization (even the culture of a marriage)
- Culture isn't so much articulated vision, mission, or strategy, but the un-articulated, un-written, even implicit assumptions, values, beliefs, and practices that make your (marriage, church, org) what it is.

When spiritual abuse is uncovered in a church or org, it shouldn't be seen as a “one-off event” but explored within the larger culture.

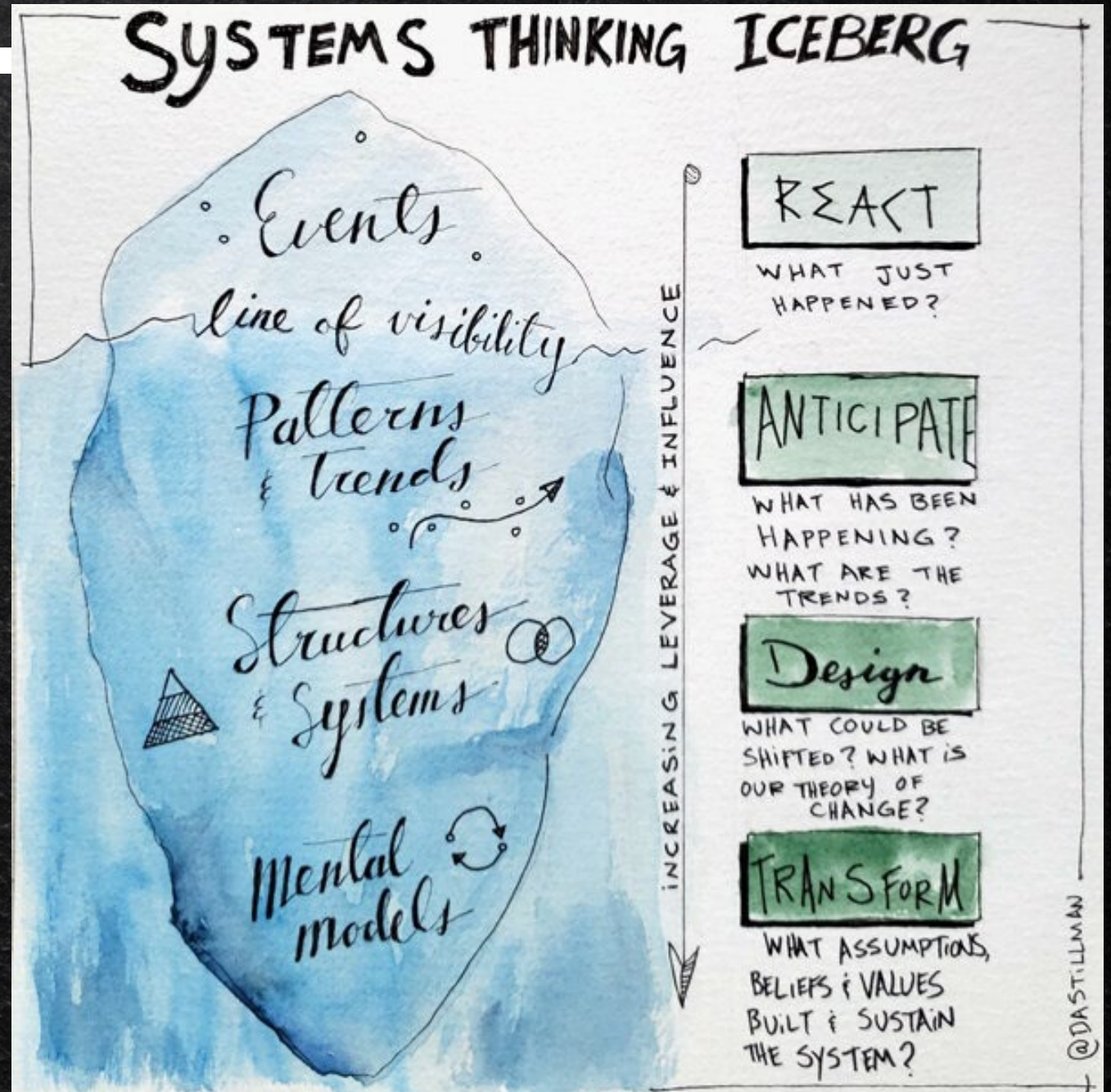
Addressing SA:

Attending to Cultures + Systems

(Systems model from Peter Senge,
diagram by Dan Stillman)

Often, spiritual abuse is reported as an **event** or **behavior**. Acknowledging the event allows us to name what happened, but should inspire us to curiosity about what lies beneath the surface.

Deep repentance requires us to move beyond shallow scapegoating or a quick apology for a misstep.

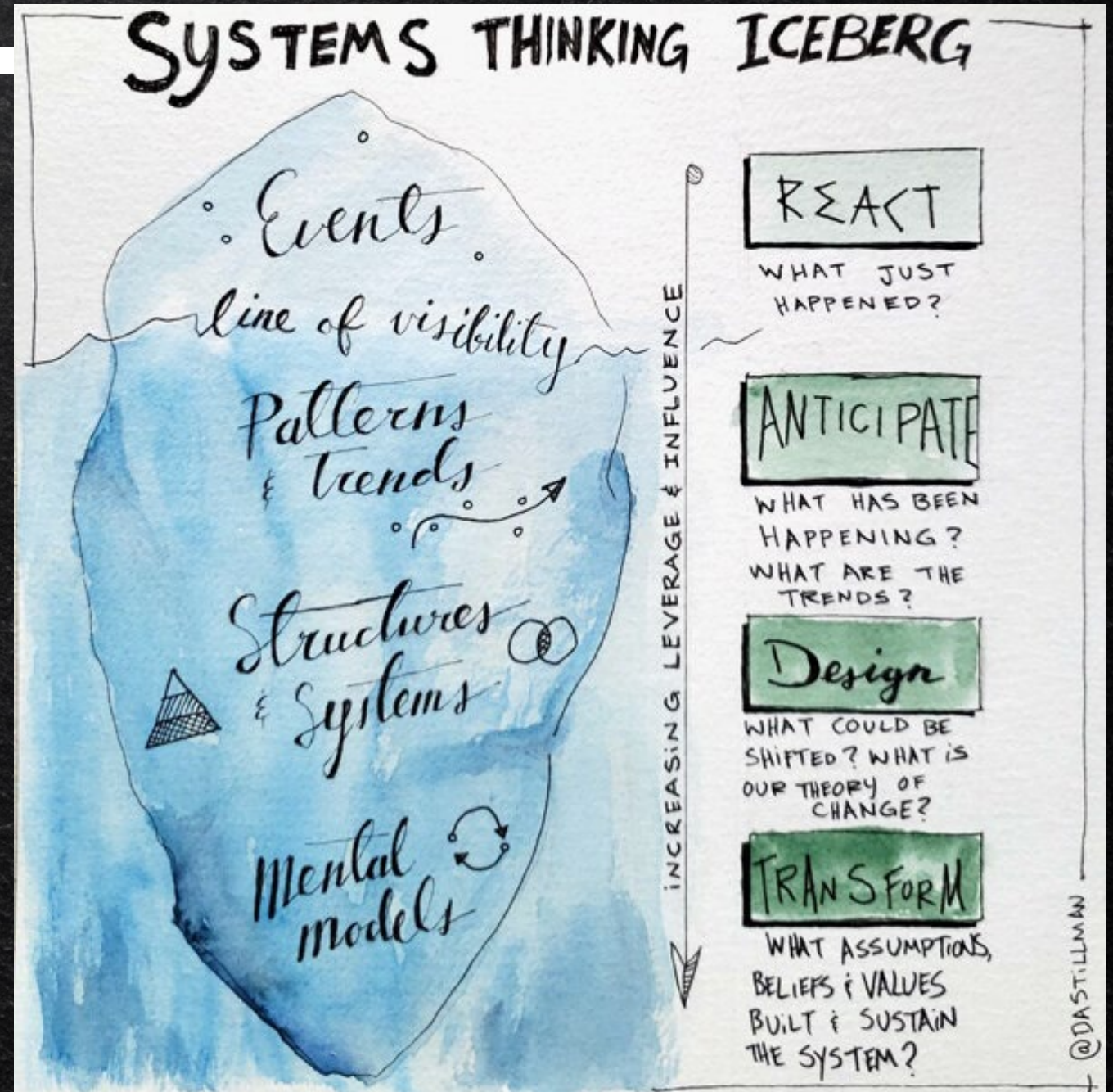


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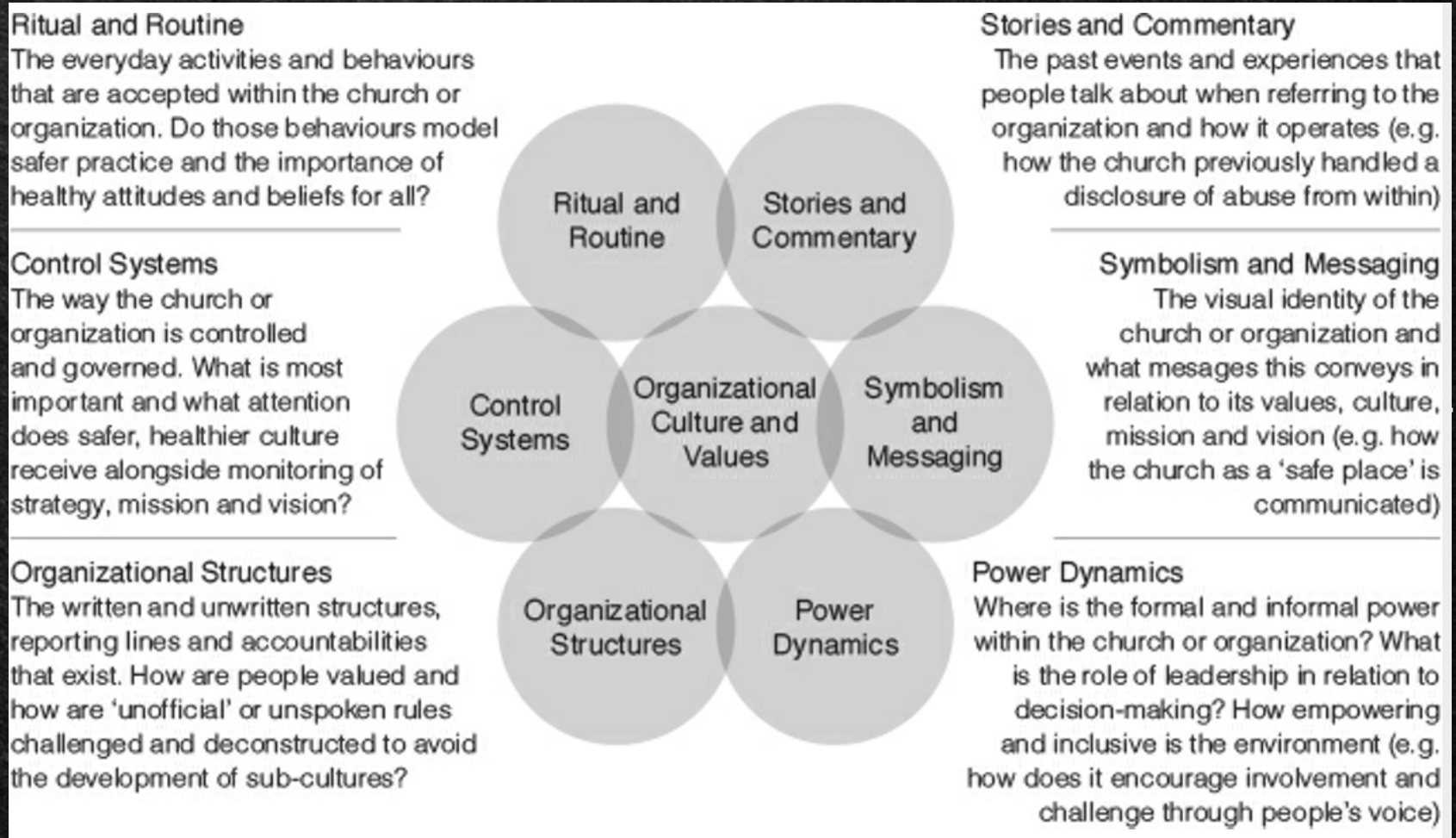
Attending to Cultures + Systems

Repentance and Repair

- An honest assessment necessarily leads people/systems to deep grief, profound regret and repentance, and real efforts toward repair.
- Just like we cannot reduce the process down to an event, so repentance and repair isn't a one-time effort (a congregational letter).
- Honest grief/repentance fuels an imagination for the good and beautiful community



Addressing SA: Attending to Cultures + Systems



Practices

Stories

Polity

ity

Organization

Power

Creating Healthy Church Cultures

1. Transforming a church culture takes time, a death to resurrection process which requires empathy, truth, patience, perseverance, profound loss, and the courage to make significant change.
2. There is not a “one-size-fits-all” solution, because patterns/structures/mental models differ.
3. In healthy cultures, leaders do their inner work.
4. While toxic cultures are inherently “anxious” systems, healthy cultures value safety, safeguard against abuse, and take trauma seriously.
5. Healthy cultures are born out of intentional processes of (re)evaluating mental models (including implicit beliefs/biases, etc.), (re)imagining structures that promote what is just and good, and (re)creating patterns of wholeness and health where people thrive and the mission flourishes

Cruciform power: To bless, to bring life

Life is power. Power is life. And flourishing power leads to flourishing life. Of course, like life itself, power is nothing—worse than nothing—without love. (Andy Crouch, Playing God)



What does love demand for such a time as this?

- Cruciform power is **courageous** – (latin root cor - "To speak one's mind by telling all one's heart.")
Abusive power is self-protective and exploitative, based in fear.

- Cruciform power is **compassionate** - splagchnizomai - moved to one's core (bowels – the seat of love and empathy in ancient thought) vs. a hard heart that can't be moved.

- Cruciform power is curious – how do you experience me?

- Cruciform power is **comprehensive** – how far does this go, and what does repair look like?

- Cruciform power is **costly** – While I may want to protect my power, ego, reputation, I'm called to risk losing it all for the sake of love, justice, and human flourishing.

God's initiative and our hope

¹¹ “For this is what the Sovereign LORD says: I myself will search for my sheep and look after them. ¹² As a shepherd looks after his scattered flock when he is with them, so will I look after my sheep. I will rescue them from all the places where they were scattered on a day of clouds and darkness. ¹³ I will bring them out from the nations and gather them from the countries, and I will bring them into their own land. I will pasture them on the mountains of Israel, in the ravines and in all the settlements in the land. ¹⁴ I will tend them in a good pasture, and the mountain heights of Israel will be their grazing land. There they will lie down in good grazing land, and there they will feed in a rich pasture on the mountains of Israel. ¹⁵ I myself will tend my sheep and have them lie down, declares the Sovereign LORD. ¹⁶ I will search for the lost and bring back the strays. I will bind up the injured and strengthen the weak, but the sleek and the strong I will destroy. I will shepherd the flock with justice.” (from Ezekiel 34)

RESOURCES

- Oakley and Humphreys, Escaping the Maze of Spiritual Abuse
- VanVonderen and Johnson, The Subtle Power of Spiritual Abuse
- Diane Langberg, Redeeming Power: Understanding Authority and Abuse in the Church
- McKnight and Barringer, A Community called Tov: Forming a Goodness Culture that Resists Abuses of Power and Promotes Healing
- Wade Mullen, Something's Not Right: Decoding the Hidden Tactics of Abuse--and Freeing Yourself from Its Power
- Steve Cuss, Managing Leadership Anxiety: Yours and Theirs
- Taylor and Herrington, The Leader's Journey: Accepting the Call to Personal and Congregational Transformation