

RESEARCH REPORT 5

CONNECTIONS AND UNITY AMONG AND BETWEEN CONGREGATIONS, MIDDLE (REGIONAL) JUDICATORIES AND THEIR NATIONAL CHURCH

By

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Foreword: This is the final research report in this series for the Judicatory Web-Based Learning Community. These reports have been based partly on findings from a 1999 survey of 1,077 regional leaders in seven denominations*, but primarily on subsequent open-ended telephone interviews conducted between the fall of 2000 and the summer of 2001 with about eighty-five of these regional leaders. Most of those interviewed have been part of this Learning Community.

This report also uses insights and information from Nancy Ammerman and David Roozen (2002, 2003), whose research has focused on the congregational and national levels respectively of these denominations.

The first research report, “*The Middle Judicatory as a System of Congregations Connected to the Regional Office*,” first posted in the fall of 2001, focused on the question: What are the issues, problems and possible solutions regional leaders have found in getting congregations in their jurisdictions to become more involved in covenant and connection in mission and ministry with one another and with the judicatory central leadership?† This final report focuses on issues, problems and some suggested solutions to connection and cooperation among congregational, judicatory and national church leaders.

THE IMPORTANCE OF CONNECTIONS

Neither congregations nor regional judicatories are going to flourish unless their constituent members and organizations have some connection to one another. For the whole denomination to thrive, there also have to be connections and some unity in mission and ministry between the congregational, regional and national church levels. Shared religious beliefs and preferred worship practices, similar perspectives on social and political matters, compatible interests and goals among church members, clergy and congregations can facilitate denominational loyalty and unity of purpose, survey results

* These denominations are: The Assemblies of God, the Association of Vineyard Churches, the Episcopal Church, the Lutheran Missouri Synod, the Reformed Church in America, the United Church of Christ, and the United Methodist Church.

† Direction how to access these research reports and essays on the regional judicatory are given at the end of this Report.

suggest. However, diversity among members and congregations appears more the norm than the exception. The greater the theological diversity regional leaders surveyed report among their congregations, the less likely they were to perceive that in the last five years their denomination had become better at “maintaining a denominational identity in local churches” or in “keeping a unity of purpose within the denomination.” Differences among denominations were also evident from regional leaders’ responses, for reasons discussed elsewhere.¹

A great deal of diversity in religious beliefs or stances on social issues evident among local churches is going to make it difficult for their regional leaders to get the congregations to work together with each other and the judicatory staff in mission priorities, regardless of their own predilections. According to regional leaders surveyed, not only did the existence of substantial diversity among congregations hamper connection and cooperation within the judicatory, but also such diversity resulted in lay leaders being similarly divided about the value of national church programs, policies and pronouncements. Regional denominational officials, who either did not use and/or value national church resources, had little interest in trying to improve their congregations’ identity with the national church. Such officials tended to be in judicatories where there was substantial diversity among congregations in stances on social issues, theology, and worship preferences.

Substantial diversity among congregations does create difficulties for unity and covenant relationships within a judicatory. However, diversity does not preclude the development of strong connections among congregations or with the judicatory office. Unity in diversity can be achieved through the leadership abilities of congregational and judicatory leaders. On the other hand, even near isomorphic overlap in beliefs, worship preferences, and mission priorities among clergy and regional leaders will not necessarily eventuate in strong connections and covenants throughout the regional judicatory. Value congruence alone has minimal impact on the vitality of local churches and regional judicatories. Individuals must want to belong to the particular congregation for it to thrive; congregations must retain affiliation and in some way contribute to the judicatory or the national church for these denominational systems to be effective.

Competition for resources is more destructive than congregational diversity to connections and unity within a particular judicatory or wider denomination, especially when congregations, judicatories or national church offices are apprehensive about their survival.

SURVIVAL GOALS, MEANS GOALS AND END GOALS

Survival at all or as a particular kind of congregation, agency, or regional office within a denominational system, is often as much a goal priority as meeting evangelism, education, or mission goals. Sometimes the means chosen for trying to meet survival or valued ends become goals in their own right. In other words, sometimes the methods used to attain organizational goals are chosen not as much on how effective these means may be in obtaining stated objectives, but rather on why “*doing it this way*” rather than another is more consistent with other organizational values or with what is preferable to individual leaders.

Survival and Means Goals of National and Regional Judicatory Offices

Leaders in both national church and regional judicatory offices face three major **survival goals**. How to:

1. Keep congregations and members committed to being part of the denomination.
2. Attract new members and “grow” churches in vitality and in numbers.
3. Secure and increase revenue to the religious organization for staffing, buildings, programs and mission.

Loren Mead warns (1993:16) that “Any human institution that does not develop an effective way of recruiting new members (and leadership) will die; there are no exceptions.” However, recruiting new members, as Mead notes (1998:77) is not as easy now because “established Christian denominations” no longer have the “faith franchise in most communities.” Keeping members is as big a problem as recruiting them. Keeping members actively contributing their presence, time and money is likely a bigger problem. Denominations are also experiencing problems in sustaining the expected level of financial support coming from congregations to the judicatory and to the national coffers, and more difficulty in stopping congregations from exiting.

National and regional denominational offices in the major Protestant denominations appear from our research to have common concerns with these survival goals, and have developed similar, but slightly different **means priorities** for meeting these survival goals.

1. **National denominational leaders** promulgate three basic means for achieving the goals listed above, which some have presented as key goals:

- a. Reclaim and extend the reputation of their denomination as one with a uniquely valuable set of beliefs, polity or worship.
- b. Put primary focus on the national church policies and programs serving the needs of its congregations.
- c. Improve the communication and sharing among offices, agencies and committees on the national level, and between the national level and its regional judicatories and congregations.

2. **Regional judicatory executives** are more likely to advocate addressing the survival goals by the following preferred means:

- a. Obtain good clergy who can “grow churches” and who are denominationally loyal, particularly to the judicatory.
- b. Put a primary focus on being seen as helpful by and important to their congregations.
- c. Increase the amount of “connection” or “covenant” among their congregations and with their judicatory leadership.

Preferred national means to achieve denominational survival goals are more focused on strengthening the national church; and conversely, middle judicatories prefer those strategies which increase their strength and centrality in ensuring denominational survival.

Mission Efforts as Ends and as Means to Achieve Other Denominational Goals

Mission priorities are the major “cultural resource” Fred Kniss (1996) argues that denominations can use “in the pursuit of other interests” because mission priorities “are more ambiguous and manipulatable.” Domestic and overseas mission goals, as “cultural resources” are more evocative inducements for congregational and judicatory leaders to contribute to their denomination, than their being exhorted to simply increase numbers of members and dollars per se. Further, mission priorities that are accepted enthusiastically within and between congregations, judicatories, and national church offices can be the strong ties uniting these denominations levels. The regional leaders surveyed who reported more growth in the effectiveness of their denomination’s overseas mission efforts within the last five years, were also more likely than other judicatory officials to believe that “unity of purpose” within their denomination had increased as well.

Unfortunately, the development of consensual mission priorities within denominations is becoming increasingly problematic; and moreover, there is crescent lack of effective communication to remedy this situation, as Loren Mead (1998:57-58) observes:

The gap between what leaders see and what members see as the mission priorities is significant in every denomination...There is no way to guess what this gap “costs” in reduced giving, but ...the greater cost may be the long-term one of trying to rebuild trust.... The real problem is that in too many cases the loss of trust has gone so far that people who oppose each other on mission strategy have stopped being able to talk with each other.

Mead (1998) sees the loss of trust and this growing gap between leaders and members as interconnected with the “financial meltdown in the mainline.” Competition for decreasing funds is engendered by different priorities for mission. Similarly, diminishing funds in the denominational pot raises fears of dissolution or being “merged” into a larger unit or congregation of the denomination.

Major recent divisions among leaders on the national level over mission priorities and strategies have occurred in ABC, RCA, UCC, and UMC. These are denominations which do not have a strong, centralized national church body. These are also denominations which have been undergoing major restructuring nationally, driven at least in part by diminishing of funds coming up from judicatories and congregations to fund national church general operation and mission priorities.

The Episcopal Church is not presently in a major reorganization phase nationally. However, it has been in continuous organizational flux over the last several decades, in part because the national church is really several organizations, relatively autonomous one from the other.² The national structures of most other denominations could also be characterized as a conglomeration of variously communicating and competing agencies and offices. This loose coupling on the national level increases the probability of “gaps” between leaders of these national bodies in their views on mission priorities and how best to allocate resources.

Two denominations with very different polities, the Assemblies of God and the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod, have perhaps less “gap” in mission priorities among offices and agencies on the national church level than others. Yet similar to the other denominations named above, these denominations too have “gaps” between their national offices and their regional judicatories in perspectives on what should be mission priorities for the denomination and how these should be met.

Congregations: Survival Goals, Means and Mission Goals

Congregations want to survive and grow, and do this without losing power of self-determination. For lay leaders, the future of their congregation is apt to be considerably more important to them than the fate of their judicatory or even denomination, and certainly more important than the particular interests of their national church offices and agencies. No matter how much congregations may value the assistance they have received from judicatory or national offices and staff, congregations want a measure of autonomy in being able to set their own mission and ministry priorities. This is true even in those denominations which have a more hierarchical authority structure and formal control over their congregations.

Regional leaders interviewed often attributed congregations' desire to regulate themselves, as well as congregations' lack of interest in covenanting in joint endeavors with their judicatory or larger denomination, to the deleterious influences of the values of *individualism* and *self-determination* within society and other church systems. In illustration, national and regional leaders in the United Methodist Church, who take particular pride in their "connectional polity;" now deplore what many term "*creeping congregationalism*." They see this as the insidiously growing expectations of congregational lay leaders that Methodist congregations should have as much autonomy as say, ABC and UCC congregations, in selecting their pastor, allocating their church budget, and particularly deciding the amount of their annual contribution to the conference.

Whatever the denominational polity, congregations are composed of voluntary members. These members may endorse the societal value of "*freedom of choice*" in many areas of their lives. These values can result in lay leaders seeking to "*challenge the authority*" of their regional or national executives to decide what their congregation should accept or do. Sometimes congregations leave the denominations. A less drastic and favored means that members and local churches use to retaliate against what they see as unfair demands imposed, or unacceptable positions promulgated, by their regional or national leaders is to withhold money from these bodies in favor of their own charities and church programs. Regional leaders interviewed report the following common types of rationales explicitly or implicitly used by congregations in cutting their voluntary giving to judicatory or national church causes: *What are we really getting for our bucks from the judicatory or national church? Maybe we could better use the money here in strengthening our own congregation's educational programs or running our own soup kitchen? Maybe we as a congregation should build a mission school in Africa ourselves,*

without going through our judicatory or the national church mission boards because then we could do it the way we want to do it.”

Although regional executives would prefer that all their congregations to be connected, contributing members to their judicatory, this is especially the case for their larger, wealthier congregations. The big, richer congregations, as discussed in Research Report 2.B, give considerably more money and goods than other churches to the judicatory and to the wider denomination. Still, according to many regional leaders, these larger congregations give proportionately less to the judicatory and national missions than their other congregations with more modest budgets. Further, a number of regional officials complain that the largest congregations are least likely to work in covenant with other congregations and the judicatory offices.

Clergy and lay leaders of large, wealthy congregations are depicted as less likely than either their judicatory or national church to be concerned with the survival goals described held by their national church or middle judicatory. These *sovereign churches, tall steeple congregations, or cardinal parishes*, as they variously termed in several denominations, have the financial resources to hire the cream of the clergy and professional staff, and often have larger professional and support staff than does their judicatory office. Large, wealthy churches are the most autonomous bodies across denominations. It is the national and regional levels that need the connections to their large wealthy congregations, not vice versa.

Survival Strategies: Financial Assessment and Voluntary Contributions

One of the major differences among denominations is whether congregations can give what they choose to their regional and national offices annually, or rather are assessed a certain amount they are expected to pay based on their congregational income (as in UMC) or on the number of members (as in RCA). Regional judicatories can also have varying combinations of annual assessments and voluntary contributions within a denomination (as in the Episcopal Church). In ABC, LCMS, UCC and the Vineyard, although the judicatory may strongly suggest to its congregations an appropriate amount to send to denominational coffers yearly, the actual amount of money each congregations sends “up” is still voluntary. In the Assemblies of God both the national and regional judicatory offices are funded primarily by tithes on pastors’ salaries; however, congregations are also strongly encouraged to make voluntary contributions to the mission programs of both the district and the national church

The national level coffers are affected directly by the system through which the

judicatories are funded. Within denominations, the more voluntary the system of giving from congregations to the judicatory, the more precarious the judicatory yearly budget; and consequently, the greater the fluctuations in how much money each judicatory can or will send to the national church yearly. As described, congregations may curtail their giving to their judicatory or national missions because they are angry with some policy or practice of either or both bodies; or simply because there are other mission opportunities they prefer which are not those of their judicatory or national church. National church offices typically “ask” their regional judicatories for a certain amount yearly and hope for additional mission giving. Judicatories, like their congregations, can also use a “green vote” in trying to control national mission emphases, as Swatos (2002) notes, in both a voluntary and assessment system of yearly giving to the national church.

An empirical truism, adumbrated in interviews with regional leaders, is that each organizational level in a denominational system would prefer that they be able to designate the use of the money they send up to the next level, but that the money they receive from the lower level be used as they see fit, not designated by the donor. These “gaps” in perceptions of appropriate means to achieve denominational stability and mission priorities are illustrated in the remarks of three executives from different denominations:

regional executive: We have what we call designated giving, so the local church can designate what percentage goes to the conference and what percentage goes to the national. We are finding that many churches that were doing 50-50 have moved to 80-20; 80% for the conference and 20% for the national, just because they feel the national church is not doing anything for them. I think that one place they do see it is in the global area, which is a lot easier to see and give to.

regional executive: We have an assessment of congregations and an “asking”, the old fashioned way to do it. We get almost all our assessment and about 80% of our asking (an increase of 10% in the last five years). Part of the way we did this is by publishing a catalogue with all our (judicatory) ministries in it, and we allow congregations to determine which ones they want to support. Other judicatory executives when I tell them about this – they just go faint, and say; “Your congregations won’t support your better missions.” But we have found the opposite. My thesis is that boomers like to choose, and the more boomers we have in leadership, the more congregations want to choose... We asked the national church to allow us (the judicatory) to specify funding for national church programs in order to increase congregational support here for the national church. The national church has refused to let us do it! They just say, “All or nothing.”

national executive: “Our current process is that congregations decide basically independently on how much of their total income they will send to their

judicatory. Our (national) understanding with the judicatory is that this is our shared contribution from the congregations. It is not supposed to be the judicatory's right to independently decide how much they are going to send to the national church. Many of the judicatories operate as if it is their money, and we on the national level are one agency *among others* which this may benefit.

The Chasm: Varying Perceptions of Financial Policies and Competition for Funds

National and judicatory executives often make statements proclaiming congregations as “mission stations” which need to be strengthened by an infusion of funds, “leadership training” and other resources. At least several judicatories in different denominations are experimenting with having congregations contribute to a general judicatory fund, and then giving the money back to formal or informal clusters of congregations to do special mission programs for which they have judicatory approval. This meets both the goals of getting congregations in better covenant with one another as well as addressing judicatory mission priorities. Elected leaders of such congregational clusters and subdivisions of judicatories are also typically senior pastors of the larger churches, who tend to be less enthusiastic about this arrangement than judicatory executives, e.g.: *Why can't the clergy and lay leaders of congregations in the cluster decide themselves what they want to do in mission rather than first sending it up to the judicatory?*

This scenario is echoed on the national level with judicatories. National church offices in at least three denominations have a unified or common mission fund to which congregations and judicatories are asked to contribute. At least part of the money from this national mission fund is then redistributed back to the judicatories to use for their particular mission interests. Judicatory executives generally would prefer to allocate all the mission money as they see fit. National church leaders probably perceive this perspective as insufficient interest on the part of their judicatories to covenant and connect with the larger denomination. In illustration, leaders from three different denominations comment:

judicatory elected leader (& senior pastor): I think the national is more take than give. ..They say, “We want more money out of you for missionaries, for this mission, and more for that mission.” ...Who is benefiting? It certainly is NOT the local church.”

judicatory executive: I think the national church needs to stop asking for over a fifth of our income. I would like to give them 10%, just like we ask the congregations to give us. I would like to use the other 10% to trust the local leadership in our (clusters of churches) to use the money more

wisely. This would be better than having the national church sort of massage the money and give it back to us and tell us what to do with it. I think we are at least as smart as the national church is on a lot of levels....It is an anathema to say what I have just said: you have to be loyal to the denomination and support it to the hilt. I do support it, I love it. I just have strong feelings on their approach.

national executive: Our middle judicatory people were feeling they were not getting enough back from the national for the ministries they were doing. They started saying, “Hey, we are not getting enough money...If we were to withdraw from this system, and have our congregations send us that money, then we can decide what percentage we will keep and how much we will send to the national.”

National offices have long sent out mailings to local churches and individuals asking for special mission offerings, which is an accepted practice on the whole by judicatories and congregations. However, less acceptable to judicatory executives is when national church offices and agencies go directly into their congregations to raise funds without the approval or often prior knowledge of the judicatory executive. The following comment is illustrative of feeling expressed by other regional leaders in several denominations:

regional executive: This is an area that has troubled me for a long time. I believe the National tries to make too much direct contact with the local congregation rather than working through the district office. So very often the National competes with the district, especially when National encourages direct contact with National rather than utilizing the services of the district.

Despite these value “gaps” between judicatories and their national bodies on appropriate means to finance operations and mission goals, judicatory executives interviewed basically concur that the national church has to raise money from other parts of the church if it is to serve any function.

MOVING FROM AUTNOMY TO COMMUNITY: HOLDING THE DENOMINATION TOGETHER IN UNITY IN DIVERSITY

Congregations, judicatories and national church offices and agencies each struggle for operating autonomy in defining their mission and ministry priorities. Although each level is concerned about their own survival and favorite programs, it is safe to say most officials on each level realize that they must communicate and work in concert to achieve common mission goals if the denomination itself is to survive. Because middle judicatory and national church leaders carry the major responsibility for sustaining a functioning system of connections among congregational, regional and national denominational levels, however, they likely care more about denominational survival per se than do many clergy and church members.

How can an effective system of connection be developed and maintained so that the denomination as a whole survives and thrives?

Regional executives in different denominations suggested the following strategies of developing better connections throughout their judicatories. Those strategies most often mentioned in interviews are ensuring that judicatory executives or their senior staff:

- Engage in face-to-face interaction with pastors and lay leaders regularly. This helps to demonstrate that the judicatory officials care what clergy and members see as important - so, as one regional leader put it, the judicatory is “not being seen as a distant denominational taxing agency”
- Give congregations some choice in which of a number of judicatory missions or programs they would most like to support.
- Help congregations get the kind of support that meets their basic survival goals, such as assistance in congregational renewal or growth, conflict resolution; and getting a good pastor. Then the judicatory staff will have more success in getting their congregations to support judicatory programs and fund raising drives.
- Explain to congregations that *if* they contribute money and people to exciting missions sponsored by their judicatory, their congregation may be energized in the process. Several mentioned their overseas mission project which had direct interaction among persons and churches in both countries as particularly helpful in increasing connections within their judicatory.

On the national level, several denominations are embarking on a series of similar steps to improve connections with their judicatories. Among these strategies are having the national church offices and leaders:

- Fund speakers to come to regular denomination-wide meetings of middle judicatory executives or senior staff, to share their wisdom in areas that are seen by these regional officials as important to their job effectiveness or overall health and well-being.
- Go to regional judicatories and listen to what the regional judicatory officials feel their judicatory offices or congregations need, and what issues they would like (and not like) to have their national church address in policies, programs, and position statements.
- Offer a range of national church resources (consultants, publications, or funds) to their middle judicatory executives in areas such church growth and revitalization, clergy programs, lay leader training, youth ministries, and other programs. - but **not insist** that their judicatories make use of these resources.
- Develop mission endeavors that capture the interest (and participation) of regional leaders across the denomination. This can also be an opportunity to encourage the formation of new partnerships among these regional leaders in mission and ministry programs, as well as with national church leaders and offices.

These strategies may not always eventuate in closing the “gaps” in communication extant between congregational, judicatory and national church leaders. However, consistent and careful use of such procedures are likely to be seen by these leaders as at least positive steps in creating community and covenant within and between levels of their denominational system.

POSTSCRIPT: This series has included *Insight Essays* by Loren Mead and my research reports, which include:

- Report 1. ***The Middle Judicatory as a System of Congregations Connected to the Regional Office***
- Report 2. ***Strategies for Getting Congregations to Covenant with One Another and Better Connect with the Regional Office.*** Report 2.A *Strengthening Congregational Connection.* 2.B. *Encouraging Large, Wealthy Congregations to Share Resources with Small Congregations.*
- Report 3. ***Regional Leaders Ways of Working with Congregations as Consultants and Resource Providers.***
- Report 4. ***Getting the Best Possible Pastors for Congregations*** (|Reports 4.1, 4.2, 4.3-4.4 take up different aspects of this key task of judicatory leaders.)
- Report 5. ***Connections and Mission Unity Between Congregations, Middle Judicatories and the National Church.***

This complete series of *Insight Essays* on the middle judicatory by Loren Mead and the above Research Reports can be downloaded from the Hartford Institute of Religion web site location:

http://hartsem.edu/org/faith_judicatories.html

Other research papers I have written based on this judicatory study posted on the web are:

- ***What do Lay People Want in Pastors? Answers from Lay Search Committee Chairs and Regional Judicatory Leaders*** (for Pulpit and Pew, Duke Divinity, 2003).
- ***Brand Name Identity in a Post-Denominational Age: Regional Leaders' Perspectives on Its Importance for Churches.*** (for professional association conference, 2001),
- ***The Art and Science of Subtle Proactivity: Regional Leaders and Their Congregations.*** (For professional association conference, 2001).
- ***The Role of Judicatories in Interpreting Denominational Identity.*** (For professional association conference, 1999).
- ***Judicatory Niches and Negotiations.*** (For professional association conference, 1999.)

These can be downloaded from:

http://hrr.hartsem.edu/about/lummis_articles.htm

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¹ Least decline in maintaining congregational identity was reported by leaders in the evangelical, entrepreneurial denominations of the assemblies of God and the Association of Vineyard Churches. The Episcopal Church and the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod with distinctive liturgies and hierarchical polities were third and fourth in ability to stave off erosion of denominational identity. The United Methodist Church, which has strong regional control over congregations, but no central national authority, was fifth. Sixth and seventh were two denominations with much internal diversity and little formal authority over congregations on either the regional or national levels -- the United Church of Christ and the Reformed Church in America.

² As William Swatos (2002) observes in this denomination, the *national church* "refers to several bodies, loosely joined together."