

DAVID A. ROOZEN & JAMES R. NIEMAN, EDITORS

# CHURCH, IDENTITY, AND CHANGE

THEOLOGY AND DENOMINATIONAL  
STRUCTURES IN UNSETTLED TIMES

## **The Theological Work of Denominations**

**James R. Nieman**

Pp 625 – 653 in Roozen and Nieman (eds), *Church, Identity and Change: Theology and Denominational Structures in Unsettled Times* (Eerdmans, 2005). Also in *Church, Identity and Change*: “Introduction” by David A. Roozen and “National Denominational Structures’ Engagement with Postmodernity: An Integrative Summary from an Organizational Perspective” by David A. Roozen.

Resources from the *Organizing Religious Work Project* of the Hartford Institute for Religion Research  
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# CHURCH, IDENTITY, and CHANGE

*Theology and Denominational Structures  
in Unsettled Times*

Edited by

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Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.  
255 Jefferson Ave. S.E., Grand Rapids, Michigan 49503 /  
P.O. Box 163, Cambridge CB3 9PU U.K.

Printed in the United States of America

10 09 08 07 06 05      7 6 5 4 3 2 1

## Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Church, identity, and change: theology and denominational structures in unsettled times /  
edited by David A. Roozen & James Nieman.

p.      cm.

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 0-8028-2819-1 (pbk.: alk. paper)

1. Protestant churches — United States — History. 2. Protestant churches —  
Doctrines — History. 3. United States — Church history.

I. Roozen, David A. II. Nieman, James R., 1956—

BR515.C526      2005

280'.4'0973 — dc22

2004060785

# Contents

Introduction	1
<i>David A. Roozen and James R. Nieman</i>	
"More Than Evangelical": The Challenge of the Evolving Identity of the Assemblies of God	35
<i>Gary B. McGee</i>	
Charisma and Structure in the Assemblies of God: Revisiting O'Dea's Five Dilemmas	45
<i>Margaret M. Poloma</i>	
The Challenges of Organization and Spirit in the Implementation of Theology in the Assemblies of God	97
<i>William W. Menzies</i>	
A Short History of the Association of Vineyard Churches	132
<i>Bill Jackson</i>	
Routinizing Charisma: The Vineyard Christian Fellowship in the Post-Wimber Era	141
<i>Donald E. Miller</i>	
Theological Perspective and Reflection on the Vineyard Christian Fellowship	163
<i>Don Williams</i>	
Anglican Mission in Changing Times: A Brief Institutional History of the Episcopal Church, USA	188
<i>Ian T. Douglas</i>	
A Primacy of Systems: Confederation, Corporation, and Communion	198-
<i>William H. Swatos, Jr.</i>	
Crisis as Opportunity: Scandal, Structure, and Change in the Episcopal Church on the Cusp of the Millennium	227
<i>Jennifer M. Phillips</i>	
Structuring a Confessional Church for the Global Age: Admission to Communion by the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod	253
<i>Paul Marschke</i>	
Fellowship and Communion in the Postmodern Era: The Case of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod	263
<i>David L. Carlson</i>	
The Theological Meaning and Use of Communion: The Case of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod	294*
<i>Eugene W. Bunkowske</i>	

## Contents

How Firm a Foundation? The Institutional Origins of the National Baptist Convention, USA, Inc.	327
<i>Quinton Hosford Dixie</i>	
The National Baptist Convention: Traditions and Contemporary Challenges	336
<i>Aldon D. Morris and Shayne Lee</i>	
Becoming a People of God: Theological Reflections on the National Baptist Convention, USA, Inc.	380
<i>David Emmanuel Goatley</i>	
The Reformed Church in America as a National Church	400
<i>John Coakley</i>	
National Engagement with Localism: The Last Gasp of the Corporate Denomination?	410
<i>Donald A. Luidens</i>	
No Longer Business as Usual: The Reformed Church in America Seen through Its Mission Statement	436
<i>Steve Mathonnet-VanderWell</i>	
The United Church of Christ: Redefining Unity in Christ as Unity in Diversity	458
<i>Barbara Brown Zikmund</i>	
Strategy and Restructure in the United Church of Christ	466
<i>Emily Barman and Mark Chaves</i>	
Faith and Organization in the United Church of Christ	493
<i>Roger L. Shinn</i>	
Methodism as Machine	523
<i>Russell E. Richey</i>	
Leadership, Identity, and Mission in a Changing United Methodist Church	534
<i>James Rutland Wood</i>	
Practical Theology at Work in the United Methodist Church: Restructuring, Reshaping, Reclaiming	565
<i>Pamela D. Couture</i>	
National Denominational Structures' Engagement with Postmodernity: An Integrative Summary from an Organizational Perspective	588
<i>David A. Roozen</i>	
The Theological Work of Denominations	625
<i>James R. Nieman</i>	
Contributors	654

# The Theological Work of Denominations

*James R. Nieman*

Are denominations really *theological*? The answer to that question probably betrays what one imagines *denominations* really are, especially at the national level. For some, denominations are simply large-scale organizations bent on their own survival. For others they are the scandalous residue of ethnic or class interests, or the bearers of other profanely derived values. For a few they are elite cliques of religious bureaucrats manipulating resources and ideas. For still others they are program-driven structures located far from the actual lives of the faithful. When denominations are seen in these ways, cynicism about the place of theology in them is a natural result. Such depictions keep theology at a distance from the real work of denominations. In such a view, theology serves only an additive rather than an integral role, a later rationalization for decisions made by other means, or perhaps a persuasive warrant that renders denominational work legitimate and palatable.

One of the chief unheralded insights from the theologians who joined in the Organizing Religious Work (ORW) project was their repudiation of the basis for such cynicism. This insight did not, however, emerge from naive optimism or untested ideals. With simple realism these theologians fully recognized the many other forces, roles, structures, and principles that shaped the work of their own denominations. Yet this same realism also led them to see that, at the national level, theological work was truly a crucial activity, often vastly more so than appearances might first suggest. Beyond this, their study showed the true dimensions and contours of this work and what it might mean for denominations to be yet more deeply theological in their efforts.

To venture into these conclusions, however, is to move prematurely to the end of a journey of discovery. My intent in this essay is to retrace that journey on the basis of the evidence gathered by the project theologians. Doing this re-

quires selecting a cross section from the entire collection of articles in this book, focusing mainly upon the eight theological essays in order to summarize and analyze what theology illumines about the work of denominations today. The journey itself has five stations. First, I will explore how the task of examining theological work was conceptualized at the national level of the research. Second, I will review the results of the eight project theologians, with special attention to the themes, methods, genres, and concerns they surfaced. Third, I will use these results to revisit a general claim about the place of theology within denominations. Fourth, I will explore specifically how this theological work seems best to be done at the national level. Finally, I will suggest what this might imply for the resiliency of denominations and their enduring theological purpose.

### Conceiving the Task

When the ORW project began, the theologians at the national level of the study were invited into a task whose course was largely uncharted. To be sure, their work could have remained rather conventional. For example, they might simply have taken the events and issues presented in the sociological case studies of their respective denominations and judged them against the overt doctrines, creeds, and belief statements of those same groups, looking for instances of consistency or deviation. This approach would have preserved the traditional notion that "theology" is the same as "systematic theology."<sup>1</sup> As such, it becomes primarily a *speculative* enterprise, an engagement with cognitive ideas that are then subject to academic reflection. Moreover, in the specific setting of a denomination, this sort of theology would then serve a largely *regulative* role in which such ideas are applied to establish rules for behavior, boundaries for the group, and legitimations for action. The problem with this approach, however, was its failure to bring to light the many other ways the project theologians knew that theologies were expressed within denominations. Worse still, it tended to distort and exaggerate the actual way official theologies work within these complex organizational ecologies.

As a result, the theologians plotted a different course. Instead of beginning with explicit doctrines or focusing their attention solely on trained theologians, they looked at how various activities, procedures, rituals, habits, and structures revealed the operative theologies of a denomination, or at least illus-

1. Gerben Heitink, *Practical Theology — History, Theory, Action Domains: Manual for Practical Theology*, trans. Reinder Bruinsma (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), p. 108.

trated an important dimension of that group's work. Their aim was to gesture at the broadest sense of the theological character of the entire group in its primary actions, rather than the much narrower use of approved documents, acknowledged experts, and intellectual labor that functions mostly at a secondary level of remove. In this way they conceptualized theology as a *practical* enterprise, deeply attuned to the concrete, theory-laden actions of a group.<sup>2</sup> Within the specific setting of a denomination, this sort of theology serves a profoundly *discursive* role, a "telling" or public account of God's ways with humankind and the whole creation. This account then operates as the basis for the pivotal group work of orienting, explaining, and discerning. It is important to notice that this conceptualization of the task locates theology mainly in its ecclesial rather than academic home. Theology so conceived is the native language of the church as "ekklesia," the people who have been called into being by God and who then speak of (discourse) the one who so calls them.

The implications of this conceptual shift were immense, and immediately affected the breadth and depth of the research facing the theologians. Instead of limiting themselves to the customary and comfortable components of theology, they turned to several important and frequently unappreciated dimensions of theology within their denominations. Four of these are particularly significant to notice at the outset. As implied above, theology came to be seen in and through *practices*. Influenced by and contributing to the recent rich discussion of practices, Rebecca Chopp has spoken of practices as "socially shared forms of behavior that mediate between what are often called subjective and objective dimensions. A practice is a pattern of meaning and action that is both culturally constructed and individually instantiated. The notion of practice draws us to inquire into the shared activities of groups of persons that provide meaning and orientation to the world, and that guide action."<sup>3</sup> To discern these patterns the theologians therefore learned to listen for the implicit, subtle, and unofficial discourses carried by a range of actions, rather than only for the explicit, obvious, and formal expressions of theology. The latter were surely not ignored but took their place within an overall pattern of meaning and action, being seen as one of many kinds of theological practices.

This practice-centered dimension also called for appreciating that theology was vitally *social*. At heart this meant that greater attention was given to the work of groups as the agents of theology, rather than simply to the efforts of in-

2. Donald S. Browning, *A Fundamental Practical Theology: Descriptive and Strategic Proposals* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), p. 7.

3. Rebecca S. Chopp, *Saving Work: Feminist Practices of Theological Education* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1995), p. 15.

dividual, isolated actors. Beyond this, it also meant that theology was assessed within the dynamics of interaction, rather than being limited to rare opportunities for private thought and abstract deliberation. The theologians became keenly aware that theologies emerged inductively, required mutual effort for their maintenance, were borne by interpersonal relationships, and might reflect the contested social situations in which they developed.<sup>4</sup> All of this demanded the careful, rigorous use of social research tools in the course of examining theologies at the national level, which often resulted in an essential partnership between theologians and sociologists on the various denominational teams.

Given its dynamically social quality, theology was also recognized in its *multiplicity*. This was partly the natural outcome of the many practices and groups within even the national level of a denomination, so that no one theological assertion could possibly encompass them all. At another level, however, this reflected the fact that theology was being deployed strategically to address practical concerns and particular situations, rather than operating abstractly where standards of consistency or coherence might rank more highly. The lack of a solitary let alone constraining theology did not however disintegrate into confusion or relativism. Instead, the project theologians came to the paradoxical realization that several theological strands could still somehow hold together and serve the larger purposes of the group.

Closely related to this, theologies in denominations retained the capacity to exert a significant kind of *particularity*. As a discursive activity, theology could offer a “denominated” telling that operated bilingually, both within and beyond the group. Within the denomination theologies provided a recognizable, relatively stable sense of identity that enabled adhesion to the group by its own members. Beyond the denomination theologies conveyed a range of distinctions that highlighted not only differences from other groups but also the very means for interaction or even collaboration with them. Such particularity in theology thereby gave the denomination an adaptive fluidity that might be useful in diverse situations.<sup>5</sup> Because this kind of particularity suggests how theological work might be more fully grasped and carried out in denominations, I will return to it several times in what follows. For now it is enough to note that these four dimensions of theology (as practical, social, multiple, and particular) redefined the work of the project theologians and led them into new insights and emerging challenges.

4. George Casalis, *Correct Ideas Don't Fall from the Skies: Elements for an Inductive Theology* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1984), pp. 36-41.

5. Robert Bruce Mullin, “Denominations as Bilingual Communities,” in *Reimagining Denominationalism: Interpretive Essays*, ed. Robert Bruce Mullin and Russell E. Richey (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), pp. 168-70, 173.



## Overview of Results

When the inquiry into theologies at the national level of denominations was conceived more broadly, these theologians began to surface a bewildering array of particular observations. When all eight of their essays are read as a group, however, certain trends are noticeable throughout this body of research. These have been organized below in terms of the several *themes, methods, genres, and concerns* that cut across the entire collection. As each of these areas is explored in turn, I will also highlight what they suggest about any future efforts to study the theologies of denominations in this fashion, with special attention to those places where sociological approaches were valuable or could be exploited further.

### *Themes*

A wide range of focal themes can be seen across the entire collection of theological essays, a matter that was already made clear in the précis to those essays found in the introduction to this collection (pp. 1-34). For example, some treated a practice as an important theme, such as the LC-MS essay's examination of communion and the Lord's Supper or the UMC essay's attention (in part) to care for children in poverty. Procedural themes were more dominant in other essays, notably with UCC efforts toward restructuring the national level of the denomination, a theme that also occupied a different portion of the UMC essay. One essay used a document as the central theme, namely, the recent RCA mission statement. Other essays were drawn more toward themes that showed emerging challenges to the denomination, such as maintaining the distinctiveness of the AG or losing the founding leader of the Vineyard. Still others looked more closely at crises, such as the presidential scandal treated in the NBC essay or the treasurer scandal mentioned in the Episcopal essay.

This bare sketch of the thematic focus for each essay in no way subverts the earlier claim that denominational theology came to be recognized in this research project by its multiplicity. Instead, each essay actually incorporated several subsidiary themes that were thoroughly intertwined around its more central focus, thereby revealing the multifaceted theological character of the denomination in question. The RCA essay, for instance, looked beyond the content of the new mission statement to the procedures for its creation and the practices for its acceptance. Similarly, the public scandals presented in the NBC and Episcopal essays were closely tied to procedures for decision making in the denomination as well as practices of confession and forgiveness. The UMC es-

say began by exploring three distinct themes in separate sections (care for children in poverty, organizational restructuring, and theological unity in the denomination) that were drawn together at its conclusion. By contrast, the AG essay initially offered a more interwoven narrative of procedures, practices, and documents that were then deployed in facing successive waves of challenges to denominational distinctiveness.

This thematic analysis therefore suggests that the effort to convey the theological character of a denomination requires incorporating several interacting areas, each of which offers a glimpse of a larger picture. Strikingly, none of the essays merely reduced the theological portrait of the denomination to a simple core of overt, ideational theological claims. Instead, a multiplicity of theological expressions was oriented around an identifiable core instance (practice, procedure, document, challenge, crisis) that the theologian felt would best convey the theological character of the entire denomination. These themes or core instances pretended neither to be comprehensive (encompassing the entire theological reality of the denomination) nor archetypal (a timeless pattern slavishly reproduced throughout the whole). Instead, they functioned more like a synecdoche (a part that gestures to a sense of the whole) or a prototype (a primary instance that generates recognizable variation). As such, these themes carried within themselves a web of relationships to other theological themes, offering a way into the network of overlapping and crisscrossing features that constituted the theological "family resemblance" of the denomination.<sup>6</sup>

The risk in using such themes, of course, is whether they accurately and plausibly convey the sense of the whole as fully as they implicitly claim to do. Treating a theme as a theological synecdoche or prototype begs the question of whether it truly holds representative significance across the denomination, and for what period of time. By what means might this be assessed? The theological essays would likely have been strengthened in this regard had there been adequate occasion to compare their respective focal themes with other strong instances of theological activity or expression within the denomination. A broader cross-checking might have been conducted not only at the national level of the denomination but also at its judicatory and congregational levels. This would have required a higher degree of cooperation and interaction with the sociologists on the denominational teams than the project allowed. More importantly, this points to the need for such collaboration in future studies of denominational theology.

6. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe, 3rd ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1958), pp. 32-34.

### *Methods*

The social quality of theological practices in denominations meant that the project theologians became more attuned to groups of actors in their relationships and interactions. This called for using methods that were more appropriate to that social object, instead of classic theological approaches better suited to isolated academic reflection. These newer strategies were evident in both the gathering and analysis of research materials. In gathering information, personal interviews were perhaps the most frequently used social research method. At times this included formal contacts, as in the structured discussions with Episcopal leaders, but at other times this simply involved informal conversations, as in the casual chats with LC-MS convention participants. Some attention was also given to group observation, a strategy seen most extensively in the UMC essay that relied on attendance at various meetings of decision makers. Even the examination of written records had the potential to lead into interviews or group observation, as when the RCA and UCC essays used a close reading of documents as the catalyst for exploring the group procedures leading to the development of those documents.

In analyzing information, socially oriented methods again were evident. That is, analysis was rarely the private work of a lone scholar arranging research results into abstract ideational categories for comparison and assessment. More typically, it had the character of a collaborative, team effort of review. This team effort in turn sought the social and experiential frameworks within a denomination that might best clarify what had been gleaned during the research phase. For instance, the commonly understood historical challenges of the past provided that framework for the AG materials, while widely felt present and future challenges did this in relation to the UCC materials. In the Vineyard and NBC essays, interpersonal relationships and close social bonds were the larger structure in which particular theological practices seemed to make the most sense. Similarly, shared culture and ethos offered an orienting configuration for interpreting information gathered by the Episcopal team.

All of this can be summarized in two conclusions. First, when the focus of theological attention is a social reality, a more socially oriented research method is required not simply in gathering information but also in analyzing it. Second, because the focal themes of the essays incorporated a range of related theological themes, multiple social research methods adequate to the density and complexity of those themes must be planned from the start. The UMC essay is but one example of how the method of group observation led into personal interviews and record examination strategies, all of which then required analysis by being placed within a widely known social framework of Wesleyan

theology and recent challenges facing that denomination. From beginning to end, therefore, discerning theology within denominations calls for diverse research methods that are thoroughly social.

At the same time, although many different methods for gathering and analysis of denominational theologies were used in this project, one particularly important strategy was underutilized. Ethnographic, participant observation approaches would likely have been quite fitting even for a short- or medium-term study of the operative theologies at the national level of denominations or with occasional groups associated with that level. This kind of rich, ongoing, grassroots approach to qualitative data gathering would have significantly complemented the other methods used in the various theological essays, giving yet another test for the significance of the focal themes they highlighted. Although the literature in anthropology and sociology is replete with practical guides in this area,<sup>7</sup> adapting these methods to the group settings of the national offices and staff of a denomination, for instance, has yet to be explored fully.

Unexpected complications in the ORW project sometimes made it more difficult for the theologians and sociologists on denominational teams to work together as closely as had originally been hoped. However, the strong record of those teams that were able to plan together from the start and remained committed to this interaction throughout the research augurs well for such cross-disciplinary work in the future. This is simply to underscore James Gustafson's observation, made over forty years ago, that theology and sociology need a much closer cooperation in order to interpret what actually happens in churches, regardless of the organizational level.<sup>8</sup> The lingering issue, however, comes in respecting what each discipline stands to offer the other in order to be mutually enriching. As already noted in this discussion of methods, sociology stands to offer theology a disciplined and multifaceted approach for paying attention to the particular groups in which theological practices are evident. At the same time, theology stands to offer sociology a way of more fully appreciating the distinctive discourse native to the church as church, i.e., theology itself. For the purpose of further research into denominations at all organizational levels, the partnership between these two disciplines therefore seems essential and worth exploring further.

7. For but one concise resource in this area, see John Lofland and Lyn H. Lofland, *Analyzing Social Settings: A Guide to Qualitative Observation and Analysis*, 3rd ed. (Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth, 1995).

8. James M. Gustafson, *Treasure in Earthen Vessels: The Church as a Human Community* (New York: Harper and Row, 1961), pp. 99-112.

## *Genres*

It was somewhat fitting that the range of focal themes and the range of research methods were also matched by the range of literary genres in which the theological essays were finally presented. In this instance, "genre" means simply a conventional and repeatable pattern of language that, by virtue of that pattern, conveys meaning for a particular audience. It achieves this by establishing a set of expectations that are themselves meaningful and may then be satisfied or subverted to evoke still further meaning. A familiar example is the conventional narrative genre of "religious conversion." Its predictable pattern traces the life of a character from negative conduct through epiphanic encounter to reformed behavior. The pattern itself creates the expectation of such a journey regardless of the specific character involved or the particulars of the conversion. If this genre follows its usual plan, then our expectations about conversion are satisfied and the meaning is reinforced. If, however, this plan is interrupted or later negated by backsliding, then our expectations of the genre are subverted and we are left to puzzle anew about the meaning of conversion. Genres are a way of recognizing that the way material is presented contributes to its meaning as much as does the substance of that material.

The theological essays used many different kinds of stock genres in order to present a fuller sense of the operative theology in denominations. In both the NBC and AG essays, the genre of history provided a basic framework through which more recent theological issues were to be interpreted. Presentations of the Episcopal scandal or a crucial UMC meeting exemplified an episodic narrative genre, retelling how a more narrowly delimited event actually unfolded. The Vineyard essay was distinctive for deploying the genre of biography, using the life story of founder John Wimber as the key to that denomination's theological self-understanding. The genre of commentary typified both the RCA essay's analysis of a mission statement and the LC-MS essay's examination of convention resolutions. Descriptive reports of practices, such as congregational worship in AG or national level decision making in UCC, showed yet another genre for conveying denominational theology. Even the simple genre of list or categorization was useful, as with the theological commitments of the Vineyard.

Although each of the theological essays was often governed by a primary genre, it is important to note that they were never limited to just a single pure genre. Instead, essays freely and fluidly used several literary approaches in often surprising combinations. The move from biography to categorization in the Vineyard essay provides but one striking example of this. In other words, minor or subsidiary genres, useful in presenting some particular aspect of denominational theology, were then nested within an overarching and dominant genre

that provided a more coherent structure to the entire essay. If an essay at its broadest level is imagined as a kind of theological narrative, then the use of subordinate genres implies that multiple literary strategies are needed to tell that overall narrative more fully.

This attention to genres also suggests that their value is much greater than being merely a stylistic convenience for the essays. Instead, they actually seem to point to something quite theologically significant and previously undervalued in other discussions of theology in denominations. In intriguing ways the project theologians used genres that themselves reflected the theological character of the denomination. Just as the substantive themes of the essays pointed to a larger theological reality, so the genres suggested a customary technique by which the denomination might express itself theologically. Moreover, these genres might also hint at the thought patterns one should adopt to reason theologically as the denomination natively does. In using particular genres well-suited to the groups in question, the theologians seemed to say, "If you want to understand this denomination theologically, then you not only need to know *about this theme*, but you also need to experience it *in this way*."

### Concerns

One final trend across the collection involved the basic concerns to which each essay pointed. Among the essays, what were the places of deepest theological anxiety or the sources of greatest theological energy evident through the various themes, methods, and genres? Overall, two related theological concerns consistently occupied the attention of the national level of these groups. First, all the essays presented some sort of ambivalence about or even outright disjunction between two or more theological claims being asserted within the denomination at this time. Sometimes these differing claims were embodied by separate subgroups, such as the two or possibly three factions of LC-MS communion theology. More often the claims reflected the gulf between older and newer theological dispositions or commitments, which threatened eventually to splinter into separate subgroups. Attitudes toward congregationalism in the RCA were one example of this, while tensions between the Pentecostal and evangelical orientations of the AG were another. Yet another kind of ambivalence or disjunction involved different theological strategies called upon in stable versus extraordinary times. The Vineyard essay expressed the classic challenge of moving from the charismatic founder toward the ongoing maintenance of the movement, a challenge reflective of two distinct theological strategies. The Episcopal essay also suggested a strategic tension within a liturgical theology that was ordinarily

quite potent but seemed ineffective amidst a scandal. Of course, many other particular concerns were exhibited in these essays, worries about schism, purity, diversity, compassion, and mission, to name a few. Even so, these specific topics were usually more accurately understood when assessed against the horizon of the most basic and contested theological claims seen in competing subgroups, dispositions, or strategies.

Closely related to this was a second concern evident across the collection, the question of which theological account or temperament would finally center and orient denominational identity. Virtually every essay argued at some level for resolving this concern over identity by embracing a component of the denomination's theological heritage more strongly or applying it more thoroughly and consistently. In quite different ways the AG and UCC essays called for reclaiming a prized core value within the denomination in order to address present and future organizational concerns. A similar appeal was made in the LC-MS and RCA essays, but here it was by reemphasizing and drawing from explicitly theological documents and confessions of faith. The Episcopal and UMC essays asserted that the recovery of certain key practices could guide and direct the denomination, while the NBC and Vineyard essays argued that a comparable aim would be better met by rehearsing the group's founding narrative.

With both concerns — competing claims and orienting accounts — it is significant that the fundamental work of the denomination was understood to be theological identity formation. Naturally, the specific character and substance of these theological identities differed widely among the groups included in this collection. Despite these obvious differences, however, the essays represent something of a consensus that the work perceived to be most crucial at the national level has less to do with matters of structure, resources, or programs than with foundational responsibilities for clarifying and reinforcing theological identity. This does not mean that focusing on identity was promoted as an adaptive response to challenge or crisis. Imagining that internally shaped culture can effectively solve externally generated problems has rightly been critiqued elsewhere.<sup>9</sup> Instead, the essays imply that theological identity is simply a *sine qua non* of any denomination and its core project at the national level, regardless of circumstances. Through the range of situations presented by the project theologians, it became clear that their denominations cared deeply about the distinctive discourse of the church (theology) and saw the national level as uniquely equipped to engage this discourse. If these essays truly reflect

9. Donald A. Luidens, "Between Myth and Hard Data: A Denomination Struggles with Identity," in *Beyond Establishment: Protestant Identity in a Post-Protestant Age*, ed. Jackson Carroll and Wade Clark Roof (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1993), pp. 257-65.

the character of their respective groups and trends among others, then theological identity becomes a far more significant organizational task for denominations than has previously been realized. It is to this task at the national level that we now turn more directly.

### Theology in Denominations

Both in the anxieties they surfaced and the successes they retold, the theological essays repeatedly indicated that denominations were at their best when a strong and distinctive theological orientation was deeply owned by members, congregations, and other parts of the organization. Put another way, the very challenges and crises certain denominations were facing arose precisely from a corrosive contest over this same core identity. That active adherents and parties were willing to fight at times, committing significant resources and resolve to such conflict, only proves how important theological identity remains in denominations today. Taken seriously, then, what does this suggest about the work of the national level of denominations? Despite the many imaginable tasks at this level, such as providing resources, governance, regulation, connections, and so forth, there seems little to support the notion that national attention to any of these tasks would, by itself, contribute positively to denominational vitality. Far more significant in our study was the way the national level could ground, clarify, and reinforce a theological identity that catalyzed the denomination, to which other matters of structure, administration, planning, or program were but attendant considerations.

It is important to underscore at this point that the identity work we are describing is distinctively *theological* in nature. This is because theology, the public account of who God is and how God acts in relation to us and all creation, is the particular discourse native to the church as church. The kind of identity work needed at the national level is therefore not that of offering religious justifications for the cultural character of a denomination (such as ethnicity or class), as if this were of ultimate significance. Nor is it to be confused with doctrinal rationalizations for organizational preservation, program continuation, or strategic planning. Finally, it is not limited to the realm of ideas, as if theology were simply a matter of rediscovering and reasserting certain cognitive claims. Instead, the central identity work denominations can engage in is a rich, deep sense of the distinctive beliefs unfolding into, borne by, and manifested through a wide range of practices, such as the use of symbols, histories, narratives, habits, behaviors, words, and structures. At heart, theological identity in a denomination publicly declares in recognizable forms who these ad-



herents are as a group and what they do in light of a specific understanding of God's ways in the world.

Although denominations have historically displayed various organizational aims, from group cohesion to shared action to bureaucratic efficiency to more recent instances of loose networking, the essays pointed to a more basic recognition that theological integrity truly grounds structural considerations of unity, polity, or purpose. Formal aspects of identity are surely important, such as having a recognizable character over time, distinct values open to multiple interpretations, and flexible strategies that adapt to diverse situations. Yet these formal aspects would matter in the identity work of *any* group. What theology gives to a denomination is the *substantive* aspect of identity work that runs far deeper than any formal aspects, important as those may be. In other words, while formal aspects of organizational work do indeed contribute to denominational identity, they best derive from rather than drive the substantive aspect of identity that theology offers.<sup>10</sup> Two reasons for this deserve special mention.

The first has to do with the theological assumptions built into *how denominations come into being*. Since there is no historical blank slate, each denomination by its very founding concedes that it emerged from and was related to a larger and longer theological tradition of which it was neither the originator nor the sole franchise. Its authority and authenticity was negotiated and sometimes contested with an ecclesial reality beyond itself, thus stamping its nascent identity in a deeply theological way. Following upon this, each denomination must then legitimate itself as a valid expression of the church while at the same time granting at least some measure of ecclesial legitimacy to other denominations. The presumption of pluralistic toleration so basic to the American religious scene carries immense theological weight that further shapes every denomination, barring both sectarian tendencies and any wholesale repudiation of other religious groups. Finally, each denomination manifests collective action, using cooperative and translocal efforts both within and beyond itself. This commitment to being connected is not simply a result of how groups must function in a voluntaristic society but is also a serious theological claim about the church as group work rather than individual piety or abstract ideals, a claim that is once again at the very core of denominational self-understanding. In terms of its *founding, development, and cooperation*, then, each denomination

10. The relation between Presbyterian organization and theology was noted in David B. McCarthy, "The Emerging Importance of Presbyterian Polity," in *The Organizational Revolution: Presbyterians and American Denominationalism*, ed. Milton J. Coalter, John M. Mulder, and Louis B. Weeks (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1992), pp. 279-306.

already bears a profound theological identity that cannot be ignored without distorting the very nature of that group.

The second reason the substantive aspect provided by theology is so basic to identity has to do with *how denominations account for themselves publicly*. At heart, each denomination gives voice to its own understanding of God, connection to Christ, and experience in the Spirit. More than merely a cultural or functional task, this identity work overtly declares a transcendent relationship. To be sure, such an account need not be comprehensive and may not be very clear or coherent, but it does represent at least a shared version that the denomination treasures and wants to retain and assert. Building upon this, each denomination as a cooperative and translocal entity stands as a sign or metaphor of how all people can be affected by this divine encounter. Precisely in this group particularity, it makes an argument for a diversity and difference essential to Christian witness in the world. This sort of identity work is how a denomination claims its space in, as, and for the church in a way that enriches the ecclesial whole rather than being a sinful or schismatic embarrassment. Finally, each denomination at its best holds these divine and human accounts in tension, thereby allowing for the critique and adaptation of its own identity. That is, the public account of a denomination's theological identity includes the standards for discernment and examination both within and beyond itself. Therefore, struggles over which theological account would orient denominational identity (repeatedly noted in this collection) can actually indicate a vital denominational energy instead of a deadly drift and decay. In terms of its *transcendent, ecclesial, and critical* dimensions, then, every denomination shows an unmistakable theological identity in the ways it renders a public account.

Since theological concerns are already contained within any denomination's origins and accounts, this substantive aspect becomes vastly more significant for denominational identity than its formal aspects. This in turn leads to one of the most promising insights from this entire study, that *the effectiveness of a denomination's work (embodied in its structures, decisions, activities, and so forth) should be gauged chiefly in terms of serving its theological identity*. This assertion rests on a basic recognition that denominations exist first and foremost as expressions of the church and for the sake of that mission. If the church is primarily theological in its discourse and identity, then the question for any denomination as church is whether its organizational forms enhance that theological character or risk frustrating and subverting it.

I would go so far as to claim that every theological essay in this collection is concerned with whether organizational forms finally support or supplant theological character, lest the very identity of the denomination itself be compromised. This was not some clever way for those writing about ailing denomi-

nations to avoid accountability and thus excuse ineptitude and torpor. Essays about healthy and growing denominations raised the same issue in their own way as those about churches facing crisis or decline. The real issue concerns the assessment of denominational vitality and effectiveness. On the one hand, assessment by comparison to extrinsic values risks producing organizational success at the cost of denominational soul. Can such a group be deemed effective when it no longer retains the story it alone can tell? On the other hand, assessment rooted in theological identity provides an intrinsic standard based upon a denomination's own particular discourse. That distinctive story makes sense of all other work, even and perhaps especially during periods of stagnation and struggle when paradoxically it may become most valuable and sustaining.<sup>11</sup> Taken as a whole, then, this study supports the view that denominational vitality and effectiveness should be understood and assessed as more of a theological question than an organizational one.

### **Bearers of Identity**

To be realistic, most adherents in denominations are formed in their theological identity primarily through congregations. Aside from those few who are shaped by regular contact with specialized church institutions or judicatory and national offices, the rest are molded in local circumstances through regular contact with fellow members and clergy. Thus, while one might agree that the central, substantive work of denominations should be theological identity, it is quite another thing to presume that this should include the national level to any serious degree, let alone how. For some the national level even seems an impediment to identity formation, distant from the lives and concerns of ordinary believers. Therefore, we must be quick to note that theological identity work in denominations varies according to at least two interacting factors. First, the character of the identity work itself can be an important consideration. For example, an understanding of "belonging" is generally embodied more through local theological practices than through regional or national efforts. Yet second, the character of a denomination can also affect where a theological practice is

11. Of course, comparison within certain limits can map alternatives that clarify internal values and strategies. This is especially true when looking at other branches of one's theological family (RCA among the broader Reformed tradition) or groups sharing similar scale, regional orientation, or historic challenges (NBC among the historic African American denominations). In the same vein, the turn to an intrinsic standard is misguided if it presumes or contributes to separation and insularity. Adequate identity discourse never remains isolated. A denomination best explores identity by both knowing itself and staying in contact with others.

situated in denominational structures. In the example above, it is clear that belonging is a much more nationally attuned identity work for members of the NBC than for those in the UMC, while those in the LC-MS have shifted over the past half-century from a national to a regional and even local sense of belonging. Given these variations in how denominations attend to the work of theological identity, what significant role can the national level actually play?

The answer begins with a basic claim that the congregation, although an actual instance of the church, is not coextensive with the entire church and stands as church only insofar as it exists for witness in the world. Genuine formation in theological identity through a congregation therefore depends on a sense that an adequate witness includes other times and places. It is just this kind of scope that the national level of a denomination is distinctly able to offer. It can guard local efforts against the myopia and tunnel vision that insulate theological identity from the larger church and world, let alone even the local setting itself. Regardless of its structures or processes, a denomination at its best is able to do this work for four reasons. First, it *conserves the memory and hopes* of a particular theological identity far beyond the historical and geographic limits of any one congregation. Second, it *offers a range of connections* between congregations themselves and also with other religious and voluntary groups, all of which imply the globally embedded concern of the church. Third, it *presents a wealth of resources* that enable congregations amply to carry out the local work of forming members in this core theological identity. Finally, it *retains a diversity of voices* due to its national perspective, one that constitutes a broad theological identity rather than its reduction to narrow interests or monaural expressions. By lending an expansive horizon of history, connections, resources, and diversity to theological identity formation, the national level is uniquely positioned to promote those practices by which this identity can be gained and reinforced, including (and not least of all) the patient resolve to maintain that identity even amidst challenging and corrosive circumstances.

If this accurately suggests the opportune position of the national level of a denomination, then what kind of practices actually promote theological identity, and how are they deployed? Once again, this is where the overall study offers another valuable insight, that *the national level is most effective when using mediating mechanisms that indirectly contribute to multistranded identity narratives*. Before explaining the key terms of this insight, we need to remember that the national level can neither supply a theological identity fully formed for congregations nor supplant the efforts of congregations required for identity formation. Indeed, occasional attempts by denominations to provide and enforce such work explain the reluctance in some quarters even to employ a denominational label, reacting against the perception of centralized regulatory control. Any ef-

forts by the national level must be grounded in the ecclesiological affirmation that no form of the church (i.e., level, segment, organization, or other institutional expression) has primacy over another, since each has a distinct calling and gifts. It is no more satisfactory for the national (or judicatory) level to be seen as a resource supplier for congregations than for congregations to be seen as branch offices for a denominational brand name. Reciprocal respect between all forms of the church is essential here, along with a willingness to risk receiving what another expression has to offer. Our focus is necessarily limited here to but one dimension of that complex interaction, what the national level can bring to the mutual and open-ended process of theological identity formation.

Returning to the insight above, let us first explore these “mediating mechanisms” that are so important to what the national level of denominations can do. Simply put, they are the concrete means by which different levels of a denomination mutually interact to construct theological meaning. In form they are produced with resources originating at one level of the organization, but their predominant site of implementation is elsewhere. They aim therefore to connect different levels in some fashion by expending rather than conserving the mechanism itself. In substance, mediating mechanisms bear the potential to become theologically significant practices. The focus is therefore not on the mechanism itself but on what it does and the meaning it unfolds in action. To make the foregoing somewhat less abstract, consider the familiar case of a denominational hymnal. Although a hymnal often originates from human and material resources at the national level of a denomination, its primary purpose is to be used for congregational song at the local level. In that very use, a bond between denominational commitments and local capacities is forged. Without such use (for example, if it remained an untouched artifact), the hymnal would fail in its reason for being. The entire aim of a hymnal is that its contents are actually brought to particular enactment, and through this enactment theological claims sponsored by the denomination are voiced and claimed anew.

The existence of mediating mechanisms (although not using this specific term) was explored over a decade ago in several of the essays in *Beyond Establishment*.<sup>12</sup> Looking at denominational resources as varied as church schools, camps, women’s groups, fellowship events, hymns, ordination liturgies, and histories, the authors noted how denominational cultures were transmitted within and beyond locales. Although theological purposes were important in several of these examples, a consistent effort to examine how these mechanisms bore theological identity in reciprocal ways across levels of a denomination was

12. Jackson Carroll and Wade Clark Roof, eds., *Beyond Establishment: Protestant Identity in a Post-Protestant Age* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1993).

lacking. In a different sense, several of the faith practices identified by Dorothy Bass and her associates could also be understood as the local instances of possible mediating mechanisms.<sup>13</sup> With this treatment of such thoroughly theological matters as hospitality, testimony, discernment, or healing (to name a few) as a base, it would be intriguing to develop further how these individual and congregational practices might also become places of engagement with theological identity work initiated at the national level of a denomination.

The mediating mechanisms mentioned in the theological essays in the present collection can be grouped into three categories, by no means intended as an exhaustive typology. The first involves the *scripts* that establish some sort of coordinated basis for theological practices. Once again, hymns and liturgies are familiar examples of this (see the Episcopal and AG essays), but other examples include resolutions, procedural guides, and overt claims (see the LC-MS and RCA essays). Although often found as texts, scripts are not necessarily written. Appropriate worship behavior is a script preserved in familiar and repeated actions, while statements used in meetings may require nothing less than written form. Whether as plotted performances or inscribed declarations, scripts provide a concrete pattern for common work. Scripts are mechanisms that specifically mediate because they are also profoundly shaped by inputs from the national level, such as the approval or critique of specific practices or the language and limits that official documents give to local statements. At the same time, of course, congregations can affect these mechanisms in the opposite direction, as when worship resources are enriched by local recommendations or when resolutions are brought from the grass roots.

Another kind of mediating mechanism involves the *contacts* that enable serious interaction with other people. Sometimes this happens through the informal channels of relationship building, fellowship, or organizations whose main purpose is to create interpersonal connections. The NBC and Vineyard essays show the importance of such contacts for members to be able to see themselves as part of the denomination. At other times, contacts occur through more formal occasions, such as national gatherings, meetings with national or judicial leaders, and informational events. These kinds of interactions are apparent in the UMC and LC-MS essays. Whether formally or informally structured, contacts like these are crucial for creating ordinary, accessible relationships for all participants. Contacts are mechanisms that specifically mediate because they require involvement by national level personnel not only so they might be known locally but also so they might in turn know people within congregations. Once

13. Dorothy C. Bass, ed., *Practicing Our Faith: A Way of Life for a Searching People* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1997).

again, the mechanism operates in a mutual fashion that humanizes the denomination and thus can prevent a sense of distance and disinterest.

One last kind of mediating mechanism involves the *visions* that evoke a shared direction and future for adherents. Although these may also involve scripts and contacts, their main focus is to create a horizon for action that leads to subsequent participation in a theological ethos. Such visions might be embodied as labor resources through service projects, social commitments, and movements, instances of which can be found in the UMC and AG essays. They are also embodied as ideational resources through orienting histories, originating purposes, and biographies of key figures, as the UCC and Vineyard essays demonstrate. Visions are mechanisms that specifically mediate because they give the national level a way to pass on the strongest commitments of the denomination in ways that ultimately must matter beyond that level. The challenge for such visions is that while they are easy to enunciate, they are difficult to put into specific practice. Without such enactment, however, the vision itself remains abstract and aloof, losing its ability to motivate and orient the entire denomination.

Other types of mediating mechanisms might be imagined, but for now a few summary comments merit emphasis. First, it is significant that these mechanisms have a *reciprocal* role, allowing different denominational levels mutually to affect each other. This study has focused on how the national level might deploy mediating mechanisms as a catalyst for building theological identity across the denomination. However, this should not prevent us from seeing how they can also become vehicles for congregations to influence, enrich, or even critique national practices. The entire network of relationships by which mediating mechanisms foster interaction between different levels in a denomination has yet to be examined, nor even have the specific features of these mechanisms and the categories into which they cluster been adequately described.<sup>14</sup> Such research would permit us to notice them more easily and thus give guidance at the national level for their use in strengthening theological identity. Related to this, we should next highlight that these mechanisms work in an *indirect* fashion. This is partly because, as already noted, they can only contribute to identity formation rather than deliver it fully formed. More than this, they mediate between levels of a denomination, not being under the complete control of any one of them. Because their use requires partnership between levels, they not only bear theological identity but also signify the type and strength of the relationship between levels. In this respect, mediating mechanisms are like Erving

14. Network theory could assist such research; see Martin Kilduff and Wenpin Tsai, *Social Networks and Organizations* (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage, 2003).

Goffman's "tie-signs," evidence about significant and complex anchored relations between participants.<sup>15</sup> Looking at such mechanisms for what they say about the state of relationships with the national level might be a valuable indicator of denominational vitality. Finally, it is important to realize that such mechanisms are never singular but are *compound*. We already know that theological identity in denominations cannot be reduced to just one feature or expression. Likewise, mediating mechanisms that bear such identity are also multiple, offering several avenues to orient and shape members. Sometimes they are mutually reinforcing, while at other times they are not so easily reconciled. Provided that they avoid basic inconsistency and can tolerate moderate tension, however, they offer flexible and durable strategies for the national level to convey theological identity.

Mediating mechanisms are not really ends in themselves but truly matter insofar as they contribute to "identity narratives" in denominations. This poses the prior question of why identity formation, theological or otherwise, should be seen as having a narrative quality. In short, narratives are cultural constructions with the distinct ability to shape language toward a compact, shared, but paradoxical story reality. On the one hand, narratives create a sense of home, using words that build a world of the familiar and predictable, with all the richness and alternatives we might expect there. On the other hand, they create a sense of possibility, using words that allow us not only to anticipate problems (subjunctive potential) but also to imagine new ones (subversive potential).<sup>16</sup> Put another way, good narratives have both a mythic and parabolic character. While the mythic side of narrative mediates and reconciles, resolving tensions and evoking stability, the parabolic side challenges and disrupts, shattering any complacency with unforeseen and even disturbing possibilities.<sup>17</sup> Narrative requires these two aspects since both are intertwined in all of life. Without both of them, narratives quickly sound dubious. Stories with only a mythic sense of home are rejected as tiresome morality tales or propaganda, while those with only a parabolic sense of possibility are avoided as intolerably confusing or chaotic. We simply prefer to open ourselves only to a sufficiently plausible reality.

Identity formation has a narrative quality, then, because it concerns just this sort of open discovery within a plausible reality that exhibits both stability and newness. The stuff of our lives is given a backdrop that provides two things

15. Erving Goffman, "Tie-Signs," in *Relations in Public: Microstudies of the Public Order* (New York: Basic Books, 1971), pp. 188-237.

16. Jerome Bruner, *Making Stories: Law, Literature, Life* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2002), pp. 3-13.

17. John Dominic Crossan, *The Dark Interval: Towards a Theology of Story* (Niles, Ill.: Argus Communications, 1975), pp. 51-57.



otherwise unavailable to us. One is the company of others, the belonging and mutual commitment that lend order and value to our lives. The other is coherent action strategies, an enriched inventory of tested ways to engage what we have not yet faced on our own. Identity is formed by narratives because these grant a broader terrain in which to find ourselves as ones who belong (sense of home) and act (sense of possibility). This is only amplified with theological identity formation, whether of individuals or groups, in which narratives must attend especially to ultimate realities about who we are and what we do as ones claiming a relationship with God. Such formation deploys narratives that tell the many tales of how a particular people of God, past and present, here and elsewhere, have voiced and enacted their theological commitments. Such narratives are therefore something like the repertoire of a dramatic troupe, a necessarily limited but nonetheless well-honed set of possible performances for different situations.<sup>18</sup>

This brings us back to how mediating mechanisms contribute to identity narratives in denominations. We saw that narratives supply the paradoxical basis for identity formation (sense of home and sense of possibility), but this is actually the result of quite specific raw materials.

First, a narrative relies on some form of selective appropriation of past events and characters. Second, within a narrative the events must be temporally ordered. This quality of narrative requires that the selected events be presented with a beginning, a middle, and an end. Third, the events and characters must be related to one another and to some overarching structure, often in the context of an opposition or struggle. This feature of narrativity has been variously referred to as the “relationality of parts” or, simply, “emplotment.”<sup>19</sup>

This simple trio of chosen elements (character, setting), ordered events (plot, direction), and structured relations (motive, energy) represents really the only materials needed by narrative to evoke its mythic and parabolic aspects. In large measure these are also the materials that mediating mechanisms provide for identity narratives in denominations. That is, such mechanisms are not only

18. Nancy T. Ammerman, “Religious Identities and Religious Institutions,” in *Handbook of the Sociology of Religion*, ed. Michele Dillon (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 207-24. Narrative identity in denominations is also discussed in Nancy T. Ammerman, *Pillars of Faith: American Congregations and Their Partners* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2005), chap. 7.

19. Patricia Ewick and Susan S. Silbey, “Subversive Stories and Hegemonic Tales: Toward a Sociology of Narrative,” *Law and Society Review* 29, no. 2 (1995): 200.

the *means* for conveying theological identity across levels and the *markers* of the quality of relationship between these partners, but they are also the *materials* that constitute identity narratives.

As a broad example of this, let us recall the typology of mediating mechanisms as scripts, contacts, and visions. The contacts mentioned in some of the essays in this collection surely gave participants a way to expand their theological ideas and practices (mechanism as means). At times contacts disclosed the depth and vitality of relationships in a denomination (mechanism as marker). Beyond this, though, they also provided the people and places essential for later telling or enhancing an identity narrative (mechanism as material). Just as contact mechanisms are like chosen elements (character, setting) in narratives, so also script mechanisms seem similar to ordered events (plot, direction), while vision mechanisms resemble structured relations (motive, energy). What makes these mechanisms important for denominations is, once again, that they attend to ultimate concerns and emerge from and for theological practices. For this reason, mediating mechanisms play a fundamental role in shaping effective theological identity narratives particular to denominations. Due to their mediating quality, this naturally remains a process of mutual negotiation between levels in denominations. As an active partner in that process, however, and due to its expansive horizon of history, connections, resources, and diversity, the national level is well positioned to take the initiative with such mechanisms in forming and reinforcing theological identity. Failing to do so would both abrogate its distinctive role and diminish the identity narratives that result.

In a more specific way, let us consider one case of how a denomination used mediating mechanisms from the national level to shape theological identity at the grass roots. The case involves the promotion of a twenty-eight-minute videotape by the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), primarily through its women's organization.<sup>20</sup> In brief, the videotape traces the journey of a quilt originating from a women's group in a rural Minnesota congregation to its destination in a refugee camp in Angola. Not only was this resource promoted through national structures for eventual use in congregations, its very development resulted from the denomination's financial support of an independent international aid agency, Lutheran World Relief. The denomination therefore utilized its organization, resources, and connections to deploy a mechanism that no other level could provide. Moreover, the global scope of the videotape's message was yet another way the national level made a distinctive contribution to what this mechanism conveyed. At the same time, its

20. *Angola's Piecemakers: The Quilt*, prod. WDAY-TV, Fargo, N.D., 28 min. (New York: Lutheran World Relief, 1996), videocassette.

true aim was to be viewed and discussed in congregations, ideally by the very women's groups that sewed the quilts portrayed. Without this local level of engagement and ownership, the videotape would have lost its mediating role.

To understand how this videotape operates theologically, it is important to know more about how the narrative it tells intersects with the identity narratives of its intended viewers. At the outset, such viewers meet persons much like themselves who are dedicated to the theological practice of helping those less fortunate. Any retreat into typical, paternalistic charity is quickly blocked, however, when several commonsense questions are asked and answered. Why are these quilts needed? Because their Angolan recipients live in refugee camps. Why are they refugees? Because a lengthy civil war has stripped them of their livelihood. How did this war happen? Because the viewers' own nation played a part in supporting it and still refuses to face the problem of land mines that threatens Angolans today. The videotape's narrative is more extensive, of course, showing the many ways that local funds (again, given by intended viewers) support relief and advocacy efforts. The basic strategy, however, is to cause a vision of charity to collide with a vision of violence so that one's theological identity narrative is reexamined. Viewers then begin to question their own complicity in events that cause a need for their quilts in the first place. Beneath this moral insight, however, rests a deeper aim about the theological meaning of gift. Any true gift, both ours to others and God's to us, creates a bond between the parties that calls forth further responsibilities. Beginning with an ordinary practice of grassroots Lutherans, this videotape creates a broader horizon that invites viewers beyond "Golden Rule Christianity"<sup>21</sup> into a particularly Lutheran theological identity, one that narrates giving, human or divine, as a theological practice of selflessness and resistance. This case of challenging and rethinking identity narratives using a mediating mechanism was instigated by a denomination's national level. It thereby suggests the significant way that any denomination at this level might orient its work and assess its best efforts.

## Denominations and Resiliency

Beyond an initial review of insights from the theological essays, my argument thus far has been that all denominational work should be assessed in light of how it supports theological identity, and that the national level of a denomina-

21. Nancy T. Ammerman, "Golden Rule Christianity: Lived Religion in the American Mainstream," in *Lived Religion in America: Toward a History of Practice*, ed. David D. Hall (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), pp. 196-216.

tion is best situated to catalyze this through mediating mechanisms that contribute to identity narratives. In this closing section, I wish to develop the implications of that claim for our understanding of the resiliency of denominations and what their larger theological value might be. We began this chapter by asking whether denominations are really *theological*, and found ample evidence across this entire study of the significant theological work they can do. We now close by shifting that initial question just a bit, pausing to wonder what exactly denominations *are*, theologically speaking.

When denominations are subjected to criticism, fair or otherwise, it is not their strengths that are scrutinized, of course, but their weaknesses. Interestingly, the understanding of identity narratives presented herein not only accounts for the former but also anticipates and explains the latter. The most profound failures of denominations, which are actually theological rather than merely organizational, can be best understood in narrative terms. Narrative theorists have long recognized that every effort to emplot characters, scenes, and other story elements in a motivated and compelling tale is a matter of selection. Focusing on some materials at the expense of others naturally limits the frame of reference and creates unavoidable blind spots. It is in just this way that the vested interests and approved ideology of the one making these decisions are written into the story.<sup>22</sup> Theological identity in denominations is subject to the very same forces. By not examining selectivity and the interests that drive it, however, the resulting limited perspectives can produce more serious organizational weaknesses. For example, a denomination historically rooted in one narrative (whether ethnicity, piety, or whatever) offers few ways for newcomers to hear their own theological identity someplace in the larger discourse of that group. Should the theological story become yet more isolated, the denomination may be left with a monaural, triumphant, self-congratulatory identity narrative that eventually becomes implausible even from within. In summary, narrow narratives leave denominations exceptionally vulnerable.

We learned through this study not only that effective, adaptive denominations promote strong theological identity narratives, but also that they do so by facing the blind spots inherent in those same narratives. This seems to happen in at least three ways. First, they simply recall mistakes and failures as part of the full story of the denomination. An anticipatory honesty prevails in such groups, using earlier tales of woe to keep later hardships from being entirely unexpected. Failure in the past teaches the theological practices for addressing it in the future. The NBC could speak with unflinching candor about the Lyons

22. Mieke Bal, *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative*, trans. Christine van Boheemen (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1985), p. 104.

scandal, for example, because its identity narratives included a robust realism about human sin and the need for community solidarity. For the same reason, that scandal will doubtless be retold as a narrative theological resource in troubled times to come.

Related to this, a second way denominations deal with narrative blind spots is to retain or restore multiple narrative strands, especially those that have been marginalized or forgotten. By intentionally deploying different mediating mechanisms in diverse parts of the denomination, the national level can surface and conserve a wide range of stories about what it means theologically to be part of that group. Although some of these might not seem terribly important or equally relevant, they still represent a variety of theological strategies that may yet become useful in unexpected ways. When the UMC recovered a deeper appreciation of its specifically Wesleyan heritage, this underutilized narrative strand became a fresh theological resource for addressing contemporary social issues. If not by plumbing its historical roots, a denomination can also discover a range of identity narratives by attending to regional differences. Another option is to highlight a focal element whose rich symbolism allows for narrative variations among diverse adherents, as with the Episcopalian ritual aesthetic and concern for reconciliation. In any case, unsettled times seem to call for the development of multistranded identity narratives that together can bring durability to a denomination that might otherwise become quite brittle.

A third way denominations address their blind spots is by locating themselves within a larger ecumenical ecology of theological identity narratives. That is, such groups reject the pretense of theological self-sufficiency and, acknowledging their limited perspectives, seek connections with other denominations whose narrative resources supplement their own. Alliances are nurtured with groups whose complementary strengths offset internal weaknesses and thus enrich both denominations' practices and identities. The Vineyard showed a capacity for this through a network structure open to adaptive relations with others and an eagerness to absorb theological insights from outside groups into its own faith statements. The UCC also showed this capacity in its founding theological vision that guides its ecumenical commitments yet today. Whether capacities will translate into actual participation in a larger ecology remains uncertain. In principle, though, another strategy for greater resiliency is to rely on a diverse chorus of theological identity narratives to which each denomination adds its voice.

If resilient denominations promote their identity and minimize the debilitating effects of their weaknesses through the various narrative strategies mentioned in this chapter, this argues for retaining the distinctions and differences between denominations rather than viewing these as scandalous. The latter

claim was, of course, quite forcefully enunciated seventy-five years ago by H. Richard Niebuhr.<sup>23</sup> His familiar critique of denominationalism is worth recalling since its theoretical assertions still persist, resting upon two theological claims that the present study calls into question. On the one hand, he viewed denominations as a surrender and accommodation to the sinful social structures of class, ethnicity, and so forth. Every effort to rationalize the existence of denominations, including theological ones, masked a distorted enmeshment with these secular origins. On the other hand, he viewed denominations as nothing less than a sign of division, scandalizing the body of Christ and defeating the church's ability to carry out its mission. The existence of denominations was therefore responsible for the ethical failure of the church to confront the world's evils with a united voice.

To be sure, there are egregious examples that support Niebuhr's position yet today. Arguing from the weakest cases hardly seems fitting, however, when so much is at stake. It would be more appropriate to ask what the diverse and strong cases in this study indicate in relation to Niebuhr's central theological claims, and what this in turn suggests about any legitimate theological purpose for denominations. Should the social structures reflected in denominations be treated as an evil that corrupts the church's identity? Should the differences reflected by denominations be equated with a division that impedes the church's mission? The answer to these questions, expressing essentially the twin threats of stain by the world and schism in the church, can benefit from the foregoing discussion of identity narratives.

Concerning the threat of stain, we can concede the interrelation between denominations and social structures without demanding its blanket condemnation. The influence of social structures upon the church is indisputable, unsurprising, and certainly not limited to the relatively recent emergence of denominationalism in America. The more pertinent question on the basis of this study is how social structures contribute to theological identity narratives in denominations. In those cases where secular forces indeed affected denominational forms, the theological concern is less about this supposedly scandalous influence than about how it is used in the identity narrative of the group. The RCA today remembers its Dutch ethnic and immigrant roots mainly in order to admit its own limitations as it seeks to reclaim a more effective mission. The NBC today recalls the forces of slavery and racism because this heritage is still essential for its theological strategies of resistance and support. That a denomination originates from or persists because of the impact of social structures

23. H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Social Sources of Denominationalism* (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1929), pp. 3-25, 264-84.

surely merits critique only insofar as this legitimates an insular, self-serving identity narrative. To the extent that such a story engenders an honest engagement with the world, however, this more likely means that the denomination bears a distinctive theological identity narrative essential to the broader witness of the church.

Concerning the threat of schism, we can admit the distinctiveness of each denomination without this inevitably producing a rupture that undermines the church's witness. Clear differentiation between persons in a congregation is no predictor of disunion or disorientation, and may in fact give the strength to avoid just such pitfalls. The same is true for denominations. An important implication from this study is that denominations at their best construct distinct theological identity narratives when in relationship with other groups. In some respects this is simply the lesson of the New Testament canon, where multiple narratives create a powerful witness to Christ that resists homogenization into a single version. Indeed, it could be said that resilient denominations boldly witness to their trust in the sufficiency of God's ways when they honor precisely that which differs from their own theological identity narratives, even when this aspect of another group is disconcerting.<sup>24</sup> By contrast, a denominational narrative of self-reliant theological isolation is at first arrogant, then unsustainable, and ultimately powerless to witness to anything but internal preservation. At the same time, this should challenge denominations to remember that even their most cherished narrative strategies remain provisional. At a certain time, in a particular place, or for a special reason, distinct identity narratives may be required, while at another point they are no longer warranted. Denominations must always discern when, for the sake of mission, their theological identity narratives require separate organizational forms, and when they call instead for structural rearrangement, merger, or dissolution.

In the end, the theological value of denominations should be assessed on the basis of what they actually do (theological practices, especially those enabled by mediating mechanisms that contribute to identity narratives) rather than what they allegedly are (a priori suppositions of their stained and schismatic essence). Niebuhr built a surprising amount of his argument on the latter foundation, rejecting the theological legitimacy not just of denominations but of any social divisions. Interestingly, his assertions often deployed narrative strategies to support this, such as the compact claim "that East and West and South and North, Slav and Latin and Teuton, have parted the garment of Christianity among them, unable to clothe a single body of Christ with the seamless

24. Irmgard Kindt-Siegwalt, "Believing in Unity and Accepting Difference," *Ecumenical Review* 51, no. 2 (April 1999): 193-201.

vesture of his spirit."<sup>25</sup> The underlying story is, of course, the scene in Saint John's passion narrative when soldiers divide Jesus' outer garments and cast lots for his seamless inner tunic (John 19:23-24). Like Cyprian and Augustine and others before him, Niebuhr used this incident to create a tale of warning: dividing the church for whatever reason exceeds even the harm done by those who executed Jesus.<sup>26</sup> My intent in noting Niebuhr's brief account here (many others could have been selected) is to show that a different theological conclusion about church unity could be constructed on the basis of the same narrative materials. Not incidentally, this is exactly what this study has shown that denominations are able to do: promote distinctive identity narratives that enrich the witness of the church. Recasting Niebuhr's tale is therefore a useful demonstration of the theological purpose denominations can legitimately serve.

At its heart, Niebuhr used the incident of the seamless tunic to refer allegorically to the undivided church.<sup>27</sup> With the terms translated in this monovalent fashion, there is little choice but to say that church unity equals structural oneness, a claim that illumines one reason Niebuhr saw division as scandal. Is this, however, the only theological narrative that the seamless tunic can sponsor? Saint John already provided one alternative in verse 24, treating the incident as a fulfillment of Psalm 22:18. In that case the seamless tunic suggests the cry for deliverance embodied in that entire psalm, a psalm that in turn orients the theology of all the Gospel passion stories. Another narrative develops from noting that seamless weaving avoided mixing two kinds of cloth (Deut. 22:11), which meant that such garments were especially suited to the ritual strictness of the high priesthood.<sup>28</sup> In that case the seamless tunic suggests the role of Jesus as the pure mediator between heaven and earth in the very act of his execution. Both alternative narratives are rich with polyvalent meaning, turning away from a simple allegory about a tunic and toward a complex midrash about the significance of its wearer.

To be sure, Niebuhr used the incident of the seamless tunic to emplot not just any tale, but one that promoted an identity narrative about church unity. Intriguingly, the same possibility exists for the other narrative versions of this incident I just mentioned, although the implications are rather different. By di-

25. Niebuhr, *Social Sources of Denominationalism*, pp. 9-10.

26. Cyprian, *On the Unity of the Catholic Church* 7; Augustine, *Tractates on John* 118.4.

27. By way of further demonstrating narrative diversity, it is intriguing that Cyprian was more interested in how the tunic was woven (top to bottom, an allegory for how unity flows from heaven to earth) while Augustine focused on who received the outer garments (four Roman guards, an allegory for the church being entrusted to Gentiles and divided in all four directions).

28. Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* 3.7.4; cf. Exod. 39:27.



recting us toward the central person in that incident and not a mere prop, these alternatives tell of church unity found in a source, not a structure. In such a reading the unity of the church is unharmed by different forms, for it rests upon the one whose dying cry incorporates the whole cosmic cry for deliverance. In such a reading, unity is unsullied by contact with sinful society, for it rests upon the one whose solidarity with the dying is a pure offering that brings abundant life. Structural differentiation, denominational or otherwise, is insignificant in light of this gift of unity — or perhaps more accurately, it becomes invaluable whenever it results in diversity of witness to the source of that gift. Such organizational work can rightly find a place for many theological identity narratives, including Niebuhr's salutary tale of warning. It is just this kind of work that denominations are especially equipped to do.