

DAVID A. ROOZEN & JAMES R. NIEMAN, EDITORS

CHURCH, IDENTITY, AND CHANGE

THEOLOGY AND DENOMINATIONAL
STRUCTURES IN UNSETTLED TIMES

National Denominational Structures' Engagement with Postmodernity: An Integrative Summary from an Organizational Perspective

David A. Roozen

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CHURCH, IDENTITY, and CHANGE

*Theology and Denominational Structures
in Unsettled Times*

Edited by

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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

National Denominational Structures' Engagement with Postmodernity: An Integrative Summary from an Organizational Perspective

David A. Roozen

Significant changes in religion typically come, historians tell us, during times of momentous social change. As suggested in the introduction to this volume, there is a pervasive literature across a wide spectrum of disciplines that indicates we are indeed in the midst of a major social transition. It is a transition driven by a constellation of technical, social, demographic, and culture changes. It is transforming the very nature of human association, cognition, psychology, and knowing. It is also changing the way organizations function.

Literally hundreds of books have been written describing the characteristics, consequences, and proper labeling of this change. For present purposes I am uninterested in the arguments over the label — I will use “postmodern”; and it is beyond the constraints of this essay to present more than a cursory list of characteristics. Given the general thrust of my analysis which identifies the politicization of national denominational structures as a major concern, let me present here only the following modest list, taken from different sections in N. J. Rengger's *Political Theory, Modernity, and Postmodernity*:¹

- axial shifts in the material basis of industrial societies associated with the enormous technological advances in communications, information technology, and computing;
- the globalization of financial markets and the transformation of the global political economy; the globalization of consumerism and computer networks; the spatial and temporal shrinking of the globe;
- institutionalized pluralism; variety, contingency, ambivalence, and complexity;

1. N. J. Rengger, *Political Theory, Modernity, and Postmodernity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995).

- the scrambling of traditions; de-traditionalization, understood as the routine subjection of traditions to critical interrogation; and
- an increasing sense of personal responsibility for the possibility of choice and the kinds of choices made.

Continuing in the current literature on political science, one finds the further suggestion that these changes are having a pronounced effect on civil government. Although articulated in a variety of ways, the general ideal is captured in the following: *Diversity supported by emerging electronic technology erodes strong power pyramids, erodes singular ideologies, and erodes confidence in the political process and traditional forms of political participation.*

Given the often perplexing unsettledness of our transition to postmodernity, how could someone interested in the human carriers of religion in the United States not be interested in the interrelated questions of how this change is affecting the identity, purpose, and structure of denominational systems, and how denominations are trying to respond? These were the interests that stimulated this book. The following essay is an attempt to provide a general and integrative answer to the questions by putting the contributions to this volume into dialogue with each other and with the broader organizational literature. Before turning to this, however, let me alert the reader to my major conclusions.

The Challenges of Unsettled Times: An Overview

Paraphrasing the above statement about civil government, the most significant long-term effect of postmodernity on religious institutions is the emerging and evolving de-traditionalization and pluralization within the broader society that seeps down into denominational systems. Once inside, it challenges the cohesion and strength of denominational identities, of authority and power in national denominational structures, and of the loyalty and commitment of constituent congregations and members.

The severity of these challenges in some denominations notwithstanding, it is clear that the situation of national denominational structures is one of transition, not demise. To reiterate what was stressed in the introduction, the issue for American denominations as they move into the new millennium is not death, but rather how they can and how they are trying to faithfully and effectively carry their particular legacies into a changing future. The issue is not death, but rather how denominations think anew about God and then structure that thinking into organizational identity and practice. Those who use the

banners of death and demise typically do so to advance a political agenda of their own. Nevertheless, the challenges of the current social-cultural transition should not be taken lightly. They are organizationally corrosive. They can be explosive. Some denominations appear up to the challenge, some struggle to cope. All are affected.

To understand and appreciate the challenges, it is important to keep in mind several characteristics of all denominations that follow from those already discussed in the introduction. By its very nature as a national, organizational carrier of a religious tradition, a denomination is intrinsically segmented into a variety of different and potentially different constituency groups. These include national staff and local congregations, large congregations and small congregations, new converts and tenth-generation pillars, traditionalists and innovators, Gen-Xers and pre-boomers, and called clergy and graduate-educated clergy, to mention just a few. By its very nature as a historical and human institutionalization of a religious tradition, a denomination also is, necessarily, theologically compromised. Takayama reminds us that more than any other social system, religious organizations are the repository of "ideals," that is, of truth, symbolic value commitments, and aspirations.² Yet they are equally subject to the conventional rules, norms, and procedures that make orderly, human interaction feasible and enable an organization to affect people and stay viable. Convention and ideal seldom coincide, and intraorganizational strains arising from the discrepancy between ideal and actual are ubiquitous, pervasive, and systemic.

Difference and theological imperfection always contain the potential for tension and conflict. Additionally, the ultimate worldly authority for all American Protestant denominational systems is their national assemblies, all of which act through some form of participatory democracy. That is, their decision-making process is intrinsically political. Still further, American denominationalism is constitutionally voluntary. The theoretical meaning of this was discussed in the introduction. One of its more important implications, Johnson reminds us, is that there is no formal denominational system of taxing individual members.³ Most denominations, however, have a formal or informal apportionment system, which, in Johnson's words, "allocates national and regional denominational budget quotas to the local congregations." Nevertheless, "It is possible for a congregation to ignore these requests and not pay its 'fair

2. K. Peter Takayama, "Strains, Conflicts, and Schisms in Protestant Denominations," in *American Denominational Organization: A Sociological View*, ed. Ross P. Scherer (Pasadena, Calif.: William Carey Library, 1980), pp. 298-329.

3. Douglass W. Johnson, "Program Dissensus between Denominational Grass Roots and Leadership and Its Consequences," in *American Denominational Organization*, pp. 330-45.

share' to the denomination or to send only partial payments."⁴ Indeed, this is operative in several of our denominational case studies. It is what the author of the Episcopal case calls the "green vote."

What happens when you put together the broad and pervasive social-cultural transition to postmodernity with national organizations that are intrinsically segmented, theologically compromised, voluntary, and political? Three consequences, all evident in the contributions to this volume, are critical, and all are pointed to in the civil government paraphrase. First, some of the postmodern forces external to a denomination find their way into it. Generational differences in music preferences and understanding of authority are classic examples. The result is increased segmentation and intensification of the political nature of the formal and informal negotiations across segments. Second, at least some specific value issues or movements that are widely and vehemently contested outside of a denomination attach themselves to existing segments within it and turn otherwise manageable internal tensions into major crises for the denomination. Sexuality issues provide a ready and pervasive example. Third, the impact of such externally reinforced crises depends to a large extent on the strength of a denomination's identity. To oversimplify, in strong identity denominations an external threat is much more easily manageable. There is typically sufficient clarity about the group's theology to name the threat as "deviant," and sufficient agreement to either sanction the deviance or at least minimize any political organization of it.

The consequences could not be more dramatically opposite in weak identity groups. These groups tend to be theologically diffuse, precluding a definitive theological assessment, often even to the point of contesting whether an issue is a grace-filled movement of the spirit or an aberration of the gospel. Without a consensual theological case the contestation of any issue becomes visibly political. It is not untypical for already contesting segments to take on a new issue as further fuel for their internal political mobilization. Still further, accountability, much less sanctioning, is already too weak in these denominations to mitigate the corrosive potential of American individualism and voluntarism. Still further, a moderate middle, with its potential mitigating presence, is difficult to organize because of the middle's lack of strong, effectual ties to a core group and identity, which fosters indifference to national fights or preoccupation with one's own, often locally and segmentally diffuse, interests.

The unique challenges of weak identity denominations notwithstanding, it is important to recall that there are stress and unsettledness caused by increasing internal diversity and fragmentation of identities in all eight of the de-

4. Johnson, "Program Dissensus," p. 333.

denominations studied. The severity of stress, however, varies considerably from “annoying but manageable” in denominations that retain stronger identities to “perplexing and paralyzing” in denominations whose identities have significantly eroded. Increasing diversity and the fragmentation of identity creates stress and unsettledness because it escalates the contested politicization of all decision making — including “decisions” about identity. Of special note (and perhaps irony) for groups that advocate pluralism is that increasing diversity and fragmentation is often due to minority viewpoints claiming and organizing their “voice,” although oftentimes this gets mixed with the infiltration of “new” viewpoints.

The above conclusions lead to the more foundational observation that the “problem” is foremost a matter of identity, and only derivatively a matter of the role and process of a denomination’s national structures. Such a conclusion is reinforced by the fact that one can find struggle and paralysis, as well as at least some moments of vitality, across the full spectrum of polities. Focusing the diagnosis on identity raises two intriguing questions: the first is addressed in part below, but the second is yet to be studied. The first question is: The loose connection between strength of identity and structure notwithstanding, can some kinds of structure help strengthen identity? Second: Who or what within a denomination has major responsibility for sustaining and developing identity, and how does this identity work get infused across the denomination as a total system?

In response to, and arguably in proportion to, the stress of increasing diversity and fragmentation, national denominational structures are giving increasing emphasis at this time to their more internally focused economic (e.g., resourcing congregations), political, and fellowship functions, as can be seen in the preceding case studies and essays. Conversely, their more externally focused, goal-seeking (evangelism, social mission), and accountability functions receive increasingly hesitant attention because they are becoming increasingly more problematic.

Consistent with the above point, structures that optimize the participatory and relational work of working across diversity tend to be more adaptive at this time than structures that optimize efficiency and control. Correspondingly, schism (or other means of reducing diversity) may be a good thing for denominational systems that place a premium on the purposeful action of nationally directed mission or purity of identity.

Liturgical and Pentecostal traditions appear to be more adaptive than more Calvinist or cognitive traditions, at least at the scale of national structures, to the conditions of the emerging postmodern period. There are several reasons for this, all having to do with the ability to handle the ambiguity and

politicization of grand narratives. Liturgical and Pentecostal denominations tend to have more distinct and stronger identities. They also tend to give priority to noncognitive bases of religious authority and practice. And they tend to give priority to "being" with its strong relational predisposition rather than "doing" with its strong task orientation.

Within relatively established denominations, the intentional pursuit of denominational narrative practices appears to be a more effective method of strengthening and sustaining denominational identities than the effort to create or maintain high boundaries. The centrality of parish clergy both in sustaining denominational connections and in producing and reproducing denominational identity is reinforced by their role expectations, training, and financial investment. Strategic thinking about strengthening denominational connections and identity, therefore, must give serious attention to such related things as, for example, theological education and the balance of lay, parish clergy, and nonparish clergy representation in national and regional denomination structures.

The Challenges of Unsettled Times: A Deeper Conversation

The introduction to this volume concluded with a brief review of the literature on American denominations. I draw upon it without repeating it here, so one interested in that may want to make a slight detour in one's reading to freshen one's familiarity with it. In doing so one will note that the recent, reflective literature is dominated by a focus on oldline Protestantism and a virtual consensus about the notion of "the declining significance of denominations." One will also recall that I basically agree with this assessment for oldline Protestantism, and that while I believe most denominations in America are challenged by the same sources of stress affecting oldline Protestantism, I also believe the strength of identity typical of denominations outside the oldline mitigates against the corrosive effects, at least in the short term.

Implicit in the review of the literature is the fact that there are two somewhat distinct streams of literature. One is dominated by sociologists and stresses the corrosive effect of diversity and individualism on a sense of connection. The second stream is dominated by historians and stresses the loss (more appropriately, the erosion) of purpose and identity, especially of a denomination's theological center. Both are critically important and intimately related. Indeed, diversity and identity are my two major diagnostic points, and I elaborate on them in the immediately following two sections. Following that are four sections that deal with how denominations are responding or might respond.

They include the priority of internal over externally focused functions; the adaptive advantage of noncognitive sources of religious authority; the intentional pursuit of narrative practices; and the undervalued role of clergy in sustaining denominational identities.

1. *Diversity and the Intensification of the Political Process*

The best resource I have found for helping church leaders understand and appreciate the political dimension of religious organizations is Bolman and Deal's "political frame."⁵ Among other things, Bolman and Deal succinctly summarize the political perspective in terms of the following five propositions:

- Organizations are coalitions composed of varied individuals and interest groups.
- There are enduring differences among individuals and groups in their values, preferences, beliefs, information, and perceptions of reality.
- Some differences are irreconcilable, and limited resources preclude the resolution of others.
- The combination of enduring differences and scarce resources makes conflict central to organizational dynamics, and power the most important resource.
- Organizational goals and decisions emerge from bargaining, negotiating, and jockeying for position among individuals and groups, i.e., from the competition of the political process.

Many religious leaders are hesitant, at best, about the nature of politics. Accordingly they will be especially ambivalent about Bolman and Deal's assertion that more than occasionally present, *politics is always present in organizations*, including the church. But I have to agree, as Gustafson noted nearly half a century ago, that whatever else the church is as an earthen vessel, it is also a political community.⁶

It is important to note that the political frame does not attribute politics to individual selfishness or incompetence, but rather to the fundamental organizational properties of interdependence, enduring differences, and scarcity.

5. Lee G. Bolman and Terrence E. Deal, *Reframing Organizations* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1991). For a summary of Bolman and Deal's political frame and its application to a case study oriented to church leaders, see my on-line "The Political Frame," at http://hirr.hartsem.edu/bookshelf/roozen_article2.html.

6. James Gustafson, *Treasure in Earthen Vessels* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1961).

Politics, most fundamentally, involves the mediation, coordination, and ordering of difference, and therefore will be present in any and every organization regardless of the individuals involved. It is also important to note that the political frame does not view politics or power as "bad," although both can be used for exploitation and dominance. Both also can be a means of creating vision and reaching collective goals, and channeling human action in cooperative and socially valuable directions. However, Bolman and Deal are absolutely clear that politics dominates the scene under conditions of diversity and scarcity, and when power is diffuse.

I accept it as axiomatic that by its very nature as a national, organizational carrier of a religious tradition, a denomination is intrinsically segmented into a variety of different and potentially different constituency groups. I also suspect that most readers will have a special awareness of (and most likely a self-interest in) one or more such intragroup differences. To borrow a scriptural description — in today's world they are legion. One of the more prominent in the "declining significance of denominations" literature is the difference between national leaders and the local church. More specifically, the contention is that national leaders are out of touch, and the contention is universally advanced as a negative. In our case studies, for example, one of the major goals of the UCC restructuring was to make the national setting of the church more responsive and accessible to the local setting of the church.

Powell and Friedkin identify several tendencies internal to the functioning of national leaders that push toward a national/local gap.⁷ Perhaps the most familiar and general of these is Michel's "iron law of oligarchy" — namely, the tendency of national leaders to focus energies on self-serving rather than organizational, goal-directed activities.⁸ Indeed, in several of our case studies one even finds significant "turf" wars between national agencies, let alone between national and regional or local. But as Powell and Friedkin also point out, one can find many examples in which national staff are significantly more intense in their advocacy of and commitment to organizationally espoused goals than are other settings of the church. Without denying that there are inevitable organizational dynamics that constantly push toward a national/local gap, I believe that our case studies, especially in conjunction with the regional judicatory and local church findings of the broader ORW (Organizing Religious Work) project, are more supportive of Johnson's hint from nearly a quarter-century ago,

7. Walter W. Powell and Rebecca Friedkin, "Organizational Change in Nonprofit Organizations," in *The Nonprofit Sector: A Research Handbook*, ed. Walter W. Powell (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), pp. 180-92.

8. Powell and Friedkin, "Organizational Change," p. 181.

that the problem lay in shifting sensitivities and goal expectations between and among both national staff and church members within other settings of the church.⁹

Writing in the same volume as Johnson over twenty years ago, Takayama succinctly describes what was and remains a generally accepted sociological generalization about one of the major differences between national staff and local congregations.¹⁰ He begins by reminding us that religious organizations are, ideally, "purposive." Accordingly, the major incentives for participation should derive from the stated purposes of the organization's theological tradition. He continues by noting that in contrast, local congregations are in practice predominantly "solidarity" or communal organizations — that is, organizations whose dominant inducements are things such as socializing, congeniality, and a sense of group identification — that they are covertly, not overtly so; and that as such they are predominantly oriented toward harmony, not toward issues and causes.

With this as background, Takayama then turns to what for present purposes is the critical point. The existence of two such different incentives, solidarity and purpose, within a denominational system is inevitably a source of strain and potential instability. More specifically, he argues that denominational executives (as well as, he notes, seminary professors and other church professionals) not only give priority to the purposive, but work in settings unfettered by community constraints that give them the freedom to do so. Not surprisingly, this can make them appear to the grass roots as excessively "independent" and "authoritarian." The reverse is, of course, also true, according to Takayama. Specifically, the communal constraints of local congregations can make them appear to denominational executives as overly passive, if not downright resistant to the denomination's purposeful goals.

The communal orientation of local congregations is of course at the heart of sociologist Stephen Warner's new paradigm for understanding religion in America described in the introduction. Central to his perspective and our argument is his emphasis on the new group vitality he sees in American religion and the fading of national denominational structures and the rise of "de facto congregationalism," the latter grounded in the growing prominence of "affectively significant associations under local and lay control." Given that Warner's "new" paradigm was published thirteen years after the above-cited work by Takayama, one wonders what is so new about it. Certainly it is not the communal nature of local congregations. Perhaps it's the acknowledgment by a leading academic

9. Johnson, "Program Dissensus," p. 338.

10. Takayama, "Strains, Conflicts," pp. 306-7.

that, especially in the context of increasing diversity, a communal orientation could be a significant cause of congregational vitality. I return to the issue of what might be new about a national/local gap in a moment.

That the communal side of the equation may not be the total story of today's surge of attention to congregational localism is suggested by the second "new paradigm" reviewed in the introduction. It is the perspective of church consultant Loren Mead, and it shares with Warner the sense that the vital center of American religion has shifted from the national to the local. But the reason given is different. For Mead it is because the mission field is no longer some national frontier or international adventure. Rather, it is the community right outside each local congregation's doors. Vitality has shifted to the local congregation because the locus of mission has, according to Mead, become local. It is not lost on at least some observers, consistent with Takayama's argument, that the difference in perspective between the two new localism paradigms may be related to the fact that the author of one is a church professional and the author of the other is a sociologist.

One thing that does appear to be clear, however, is that any national/local gap and related tension between the national structures of a denomination and its local congregations is not new. It is a major theme, for example, in Johnson and Cornell's *Punctured Preconceptions* of the 1970s, and the extensive church survey work conducted a half-century before them by the Institute for Social and Religious Research, during the 1920s, prompted the same conclusion.¹¹ If not new, could it be that the social and cultural changes related to postmodernity exacerbate the tension and even push the balance of attention back toward the local? I believe that this is precisely the case, with several identifiable factors contributing to it.

Many readers will recall the 1950s mantra of "mass society" and its business equivalent, "mass marketing." Today these have been replaced by the now taken-for-granted presumption of diversity and market niches. Even theologians and missiologists currently take the contextual nature of interpretation and ministry for granted. Different situations and settings require their own unique approaches, particularly at the strategic level, the latter being of greatest urgency for local congregations. Accordingly, local settings appear better positioned to understand and respond to their particularity than some planning office a thousand miles away with a half-dozen staff trying to serve five thousand congregations. The pluralistic nature of the emerging postmodern situation

11. Douglas W. Johnson and George W. Cornell, *Punctured Preconceptions* (New York: Friendship Press, 1971). H. Paul Douglass and Edmund deS. Brunner, *The Protestant Church as a Social Institution* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1935).

emphasizes and heightens our awareness of difference, and consistent with Warner's new paradigm, pushes the locus of vitality toward the local. For those with theological investments in mission, this emphasis includes the local's responsibility for mission, à la Mead's new paradigm, especially in denominations that for financial and other reasons have de-emphasized national and international mission programs. When national staff can no longer assume a singular model of the local congregation, nor even any simple set of congregational models, it becomes much more difficult for anyone in the system to be aware of the needs and aspirations of congregations across the multiple contexts, much less develop the necessary diversity of resources for them.

One consequence of the lack of diverse denominational resources is that many congregations are turning to sources outside of their national denominational structures for ministry resources, and fewer and fewer congregations restrict their search for ministry resources to those produced by their national denominational structure. The trend away from an automatic reliance on denominational resources is reinforced by several additional factors. First, the judicatory and local congregational studies conducted as a part of the larger ORW project are consistent with two proprietary surveys of congregations conducted by the Hartford Institute for Religion Research. They all indicate that in most ministry areas congregations rate the quality of denominational resources lower than that of extradenominational resources. The only two exceptions appear to be international ministry and clergy support. Second, although I am not aware of hard data that proves it, it is a common perception in the field that there are more persons and organizations providing ministry resources than ever before. Third, electronic technology has provided even remotely located congregations direct access to a vast array of resource options. Accordingly, even if there are in fact no more providers of congregational resources, congregations are certainly much more aware of the options available to them.

The more people and organizations are aware that they have and have to make choices, the more they become attentive to and aware of their selves, and correspondingly, of their differences with others. Such a reality, in turn, reinforces and is reinforced by the pervasive societal shift to expressive individualism discussed in the introduction and the general trend toward an increasing acceptance of pluralism as both a valid descriptor and social value. Why? Because both expressive individualism and pluralism place a premium on difference and thereby serve to legitimate the self-interested pursuit and development of one's difference — whether as an individual or subgroup. Link this back to Bolman and Deal's framing of the essence of politics, and there should be little doubt why the current period is one characterized by the intensification of the political.

For many denominations, especially those within oldline Protestantism, financial pressures further escalate the general intensification of internal politics resulting from the increased awareness and legitimacy of difference. The reader will recall that one of Bolman and Deal's presuppositions about the political arena is that scarcity is a prime cause of conflict. Unfortunately, particularly oldline Protestantism has had a continual run of numerical decline since the mid-1960s. As congregations feel economic pressure, they tend to send less money "up" to their regional and national denominational bodies.¹² One result has been several rounds of downsizing of national staffs, beginning in earnest in the early 1970s. As Takayama put it in 1980, "denominational environmental contexts of the 1950s and 1960s were characterized by the 'politics of abundance,' in that adequate economic resources allowed denominations' dominant leaders to pursue organizationally initiated programs without much visible conflict. Since the end of the 1960s, however, the 'politics of scarcity' has been set in motion."¹³ Presaging Bolman and Deal, Takayama then quotes a 1970 article by Zald to make his point perfectly clear. "Organizations changing in a system of scarcity are likely to experience greater conflict and discontent than those in an 'economy of abundance.'"¹⁴ Takayama then adds two important nuances to Zald's general conclusion. He first notes that during periods of scarcity, actions and programs "invisible" in the past become "visible," and formerly uninterested and apathetic groups and individuals become concerned. Relatedly, power balances shift "as different groups within the denomination assume greater or lesser salience as a point of reference for leaders' decision making."

The case studies in this volume describe the situation of national denominational structures in the late 1990s, a period of relative financial stability for most denominations, including those of the oldline. Scarcity, therefore, is not a dominant theme, although it does appear as a subtext in a couple of the cases (e.g., RCA, UCC). Unfortunately, especially for oldline Protestantism, "scarcity" has been more the norm than the exception over the last quarter-century, and the downsizing of national staff an all too frequent reality. I am not aware of hard statistics that compare the size of national denominational staffs today with what they were in the 1950s, but one denominational executive told me that the number of their national staff had dropped from around five hundred

12. See, for example, *Church Membership Statistics: 1970-1980* (Washington, D.C.: Alban Institute, 1983). This is research from the Hartford Seminary Foundation and the Alban Institute.

13. Takayama, "Strains, Conflicts," p. 314.

14. Mayer N. Zald, *Organizational Change: The Political Economy of the YMCA* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), p. 227.

in the 1950s to a current number around fifty. I suspect the drop is not quite as dramatic in most denominations that have downsized over the last fifty years, but there is seldom any less sense of pain and unsettledness. One of the few comments I hear as consolation in light of the recent downsizing is: "Perhaps we are finally reaching the point when we will acknowledge that we can no longer do the same work with fewer people, but rather need to change the way we work and what we do." Most executives who hear this nod their agreement.

Scarcity intensifies tension and conflict. One wonders if it also intensifies the mean-spirited and aggressive nature that most observers see in current denominational conflicts. How the often personalized, bitter, and negative character of today's conflicts compares with those of previous generations is a judgment I will leave for the historians. That it is present seems undeniable. Indeed, it is not uncommon for religious commentators to draw parallels to the broader, highly partisan "culture wars" being waged in American politics. For example, a recent issue of the *Review of Religious Research*, a sociologically oriented, academic journal, contains an excellent four-article case study of the homosexual ordination conflict currently consuming the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).¹⁵ Not only does it present a nuanced picture of the interrelationship of social, political, and theological factors. It also provides a solid sense of the emotional pitch of the seemingly no-win debate;¹⁶ and at the same time provides what strikes me as a healthy critique of those with a vested interest in "culture war" rhetoric.¹⁷ One of the more helpful reminders about denominational conflict at the turn of the millennium is the following from Weston's contribution to the set: "Struggle in the church (and other institutions, too), is usually described as 'left' and 'right' in conflict, or perhaps in dialogue. What really goes on in a church fight, though, is less a conflict between two parties, and more of a competition between two extreme minorities for the vast middle. The two extreme parties have few direct relations with one another, and rarely win one another over. All the action, for good or ill, decline or renewal, comes in the movement of the middle."¹⁸

Wellman's introduction to the above set of articles also reminds us that the homosexuality debate in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) is appropriately understood as only one manifestation of recent tensions within the wider field

15. *Review of Religious Research* 41 (December 1999).

16. The contributing authors all played a role in the ideological discussions within the denomination.

17. See, for example, James K. Wellman, Jr., "Introduction: The Debate over Homosexual Ordination: Subcultural Identity Theory in American Religious Organizations," *Review of Religious Research* 41 (December 1999): 184-206.

18. William J. Weston, "The Presbyterian 'Fidelity and Chastity' Competition as Loyalist Victory," *Review of Religious Research* 41 (December 1999): 207.

of American contemporary culture.¹⁹ This is a prime example of the prior observation that value issues and movements that are widely and vehemently contested outside of a denomination can attach themselves to existing lines of fragmentation within it and turn otherwise manageable internal tensions into major crises for the denomination. The observation is based on the case studies in this book, but was previously noted by Takayama, who elevates it to the following taken-for-granted axiom about schisms: "In our view, a structural change in a denomination will result from the dynamic interplay of *both* internal and external uncertainties (strains), not just internal uncertainties alone. In other words, *internal strains themselves are not likely to cause splits of denominations*. Rather, *external environmental changes act as catalysts to internally generated and unresolved strains*, producing crises."²⁰ Building on Takayama's further analogy to the effect that semipermeable membranes surround denominations, I would qualify the above axiom with the following. The degree to which environmental changes and tensions penetrate denominational boundaries varies with the strength of a denomination's identity, weak identity denominations having more easily permeable boundaries.

I especially commend to the reader the above-noted *Review of Religious Research* articles on homosexual ordinations because I believe that gender and sexual issues, tending to split along relatively traditional "liberal/conservative" lines, will likely remain the major fault lines within oldline Protestantism until one or another of the contesting extremes leaves or goes underground. The retention and enforcement of boundary-maintaining and distinctive practices (e.g., closed communion in the LC-MS, initial evidence in the AG) will likely continue to define the major fault lines within conservative Protestantism.

Increasing diversity, especially when coupled with increasing fiscal constraints, intensifies the intrinsically political nature of denominational structures. The infiltration of new perspectives from outside a denomination is one source of increasing diversity. Popular seeker and growth-oriented evangelism appears to be one of those "new" viewpoints infiltrating and finding vocal supporters in all Protestant denominations. Not only is it highly visible throughout American culture, especially in its megachurch clothes,²¹ but it is also touted by many of the most visible church consultants. Clearly this popular or pragmatic evangelicalism is present in all eight of the denominational case studies in this volume, although somewhat less prominent in the LC-MS, Episcopal, and UCC

19. Wellman, "Introduction," p. 185.

20. Takayama, "Strains, Conflicts," p. 311.

21. See, for example, the multiple on-line articles about megachurches by Scott Thumma: http://hrr.hartsem.edu/about/thumma_writings.htm.

cases. Donald Miller's *Reinventing American Protestantism* presents a particularly thorough and relatively objective analysis of the phenomena. It is a particular challenge for denominational structures and those with a doctrinal bent because in these "new paradigm" churches, "pragmatism substitutes for bureaucratic and procedural oversight."²²

The internal diversity and fragmentation that characterizes today's Protestant denominations prompts Scherer to remind us that, organizationally speaking, the majority of denominations are federations, with most others being more loosely structured coalitions. He further reminds us, consistent with our findings, that "because of the lack of consensus and the amount of uncertainty built into such organizations of organizations, coalitions and federations can be very fragile — constituent members can withdraw at any time and pull out staff and funding overnight. This means such organizations are essentially political (like state or federal legislatures) and can involve constant negotiation." He then wonders "if it is true that organizations today are having more and more to deal with a changing environment, if the internal order which results is more and more only a temporary 'negotiated' one, how can we characterize various kinds of organizations in terms of their internal unity, their looseness or tightness?" He wonders this specifically in terms of structure and for organizations in general, but makes the point especially poignant for religious organizations by noting that they generally, "because of their voluntary character, are more centralized than business or government." He finally solves his own puzzle by concluding that religious organizations "are held together less by structure and apparatus, and more by sentiments and commitments of members and by organizational ritual and ideology ('faith')."²³ I agree, but only with the qualification that one can find more or less coherence in the latter (sentiments, etc.) within Protestant denominations and that those denominations with more tentative and loose identities have nothing to mitigate the fragility of loose structures, especially in a politicized world.

2. The "Problem" Is Foremost a Matter of Identity

In their history of the brief history of social scientific research about congregations, Stokes and Roozen note that it is an unfolding story of pragmatic prob-

22. Donald E. Miller, *Reinventing American Protestantism: Christianity in the New Millennium* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), p. 141.

23. Ross P. Scherer, "The Sociology of Denominational Organization," introduction to *American Denominational Organization*, pp. 14-15.

lem solving. That is, one can trace the changing emphasis of congregational studies to the changing sense of what was the primary challenge being faced by local congregations. They argue that from the turn of the century through the 1960s, researchers examined the local church from *without*. They viewed its challenges in terms of the demographic changes of the social context.²⁴ The challenges were threefold, all missional: evangelism, social mission, and social justice. Continuing their history, they note:

Following the 1960s and parallel to the broader cultural turn from social idealism to self-fulfillment/realization/actualization in the early 1970s, contextual studies of the congregation gave way to examining the local church from *within*. "Renewal" became the new metaphor, and researchers began to view a congregation's challenges as issues of internal *process* and *program*. It was a time, as the title of James Anderson's book announced, *To Come Alive!* (1973), and congregational studies focused on planning, conflict, leadership, stewardship and a host of other organizational dilemmas.²⁵

Writing in 1991, Stokes and Roozen then note the current turn to identity:

Issues of context, process and program continue to draw the attention of both churches and researchers. But today, as congregations struggle with problems of *identity* in a world increasingly secular and pluralistic, a more holistic research approach is beginning to emerge. . . . It is in many ways a response to the challenge of the multiplicity of social and religious forces that erode a congregation's unity of vision, and it is an affirmation that a congregation's inherited and confessed, formal and informal, web of symbolic meaning, values, and commitments — that is, its culture — always consciously or unconsciously informs pragmatic choices made among the diverse alternatives of program, process, and context with which every congregation is continually confronted.²⁶

Denominations have not received nearly the social scientific attention that congregations have, and to the best of my knowledge there is no formal history that traces denominational studies' possible coherence as a field of study or its possible evolution. But if one takes Niebuhr's *Social Sources of Denominationalism*, published in 1929, and Carroll and Roof's 1993 *Beyond Es-*

24. Allison Stokes and David A. Roozen, "The Unfolding Story of Congregational Studies," in *Carriers of Faith: Lessons from Congregational Studies*, ed. Carl S. Dudley, Jackson W. Carroll, and James P. Wind (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1991), pp. 184-85.

25. Stokes and Roozen, "The Unfolding Story," p. 186.

26. Stokes and Roozen, "The Unfolding Story," p. 186.

tablishment: Protestant Identity in a Post-Protestant Age, one sees striking parallels to the evolution that Stokes and Roozen note for congregational studies.²⁷ Perhaps equally telling about a deepening concern about organizational identities beginning roughly in the 1980s is the emergence during this period of a significant secular literature about "corporate cultures."²⁸ Increasingly, organizational analysts were coming to the realization, as we have, that the "problem" is foremost a matter of identity.

Denominational identity properly understood, as noted in the introduction, is a property of a denomination as a total system, not solely nor in some instances even primarily the privileged domain of a denomination's national structure. Nevertheless, as a central part of the overall system, a denomination's national structures are intimately linked to, sometimes as cause and sometimes as beneficiary (or victim) broader identity issues. Building on the secular literature about corporate culture and recent studies of religious organizations, I understand denominational identity to be the unique combination of salient characteristics about the denomination's people, polity and structure, practices, theology and purpose that makes the particular denomination identifiably distinct and denominated (nameable) to its adherents. Note that in such a perspective any one of these possibly constitutive elements, not just beliefs or doctrine, can provide the linchpin of distinctiveness. Indeed, the eight denominations included in this volume provide a broad range of examples, including the Dutch ethnicity of the otherwise mainline Presbyterian RCA; the role of the gifts of the Spirit in the theology and practice of the AG among Protestants, and the role of doctrine and Scripture in the theology of the AG among other Pentecostal groups; the priority of mission within the UCC in contrast to the National Association of Congregational Christian Churches' focus on fellowship. During settled times, identity is a group's taken-for-granted but deeply formative understanding of "who we are" and "how we do things around here."

Such a conceptualization of corporate identity is relatively standard in both the secular and religious organizational literature. Equally standard in this literature is the presumption that a "strong" identity is "better" than a "weak" identity. Unfortunately, there is no clear, much less consensual, answer in the literature about how to define the strength of an organization's identity. There are only, and typically implicit, hints. But since our analysis suggests that denominational identity can become problematic for a variety of reasons, I be-

27. H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Social Sources of Denominationalism* (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1929); Jackson W. Carroll and Wade Clark Roof, eds., *Beyond Establishment: Protestant Identity in a Post-Protestant Age* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1993).

28. See, for example, Terrence E. Deal and Allen A. Kennedy, *Corporate Cultures: The Rites and Rituals of Corporate Life* (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1982).

lieve it is important to specify the distinct, although clearly interrelated, components of identity strength. Building on the hints in the existing literature, I suggest conceptualizing "strength of identity" in terms of the extent to which the above-noted combination of characteristics (1) is explicit and widely shared, (2) invokes commitment that provides group loyalty and cohesion, (3) has consequences discernible in the organization's strategies for action, and (4) provides distinguishable boundaries.²⁹

Unfortunately, hard survey data do not exist that would allow ranking the strength of identity across denominations using this full conceptualization. However, there are two recent surveys, each including a diversity of denominations, from which we can obtain an objective, albeit more limited, read on the strength of identity across the denominations examined in this book. One survey is the Faith Communities Today (FACT) national survey of 14,000 congregations in forty-one denominations and faith groups, conducted in 1999 and 2000.³⁰ The second survey was conducted in 1998 for the Protestant Church-Owned Publishers Association (PCPA). It surveyed 2,209 congregations in twenty-nine Protestant denominations.³¹

The FACT survey asked a congregation's key informant the extent to which the congregation expressed its denominational heritage. Scores could range from a low of 1 = not very much, to a high of 5 = to a great extent. The PCPA survey asked congregational leaders how important they felt their denomination was to them personally. Table 1 on page 606 presents survey results for several denominations. The reported figure for the FACT survey is the average response to the denominational heritage question, using a five-point scale with five being the highest. The reported figure of the PCPA is the percent of congregational leaders who said their denomination was very important to them personally. Denominations in bold are the focal denominations of this book. The other denominations are included for comparison. The denominations are listed in the table from strongest to weakest identity according to the FACT measure. At least two observations about the table are noteworthy. Despite the very different questions asked bearing on denominational identity, the rank order of the denominations in each survey is nearly identical. The only

29. See, for example, Fred Kniss, "Ideas and Symbols as Resources in Intrareligious Conflict: The Case of American Mennonites," *Sociology of Religion* 57 (1996): 7-23; and Nancy Ammerman, "Religious Identities and Religious Institutions," in *Handbook of Sociology of Religion*, ed. Michele Dillon (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 207-24.

30. Detailed information about the survey as well as access to several survey reports can be obtained at the FACT Web site: <http://hrr.hartsem.edu>.

31. Reginal W. Bibby, "The PCPA Congregational Resource Study: Summary Report" (June 1998).

Table 1: Strength of Denominational Identity

Denomination	FACT†	PCPA‡
Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod	*	74%
Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints	4.53	60%
Historically Black Baptist Denominations	4.17	*
Episcopal Church	4.10	58%
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America	4.00	51%
Assemblies of God	3.93	43%
Church of the Nazarene	3.61	65%
United Methodist Church	3.47	40%
Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)	3.35	40%
United Church of Christ	3.15	43%
American Baptist Churches USA	3.13	40%
Reformed Church in America	3.11	40%

† The numbers in this column measure the respondents' assessment of the degree to which their congregations express their denominational heritage, on a scale from 1 (= not very much) to 5 (= to a great extent)

‡ The numbers in this column measure the percent of respondents who said that their denomination was very important to them personally.

* Did not participate in the survey

major divergence in order is that both the Church of the Nazarene and the United Church of Christ ranked relatively higher using the "importance" question in the PCPA study than they did using the "denominational heritage" question in the FACT study. Second, in both studies one finds that the more sacramental and liturgically oriented Episcopal Church and Evangelical Lutheran Church in America rank considerably higher than their more Calvinist-oriented counterparts among oldline Protestant denominations; and that the latter — from United Methodist to Reformed Church in America — have a monopoly on the bottom of the rankings.

That the erosion of denominational identity is most pronounced within oldline Protestantism is certainly consistent with both the argument of this book and prior research. However, the need for distinguishing among different dimensions of denominational identity becomes evident when one considers the various factors pointed to as the primary "problem." The leading explanation in the literature appears to be that oldline Protestant denominations have

lost their distinctiveness because their embrace of the pluralism of the broader American culture has eroded their boundary with the secular. Roof and Carroll's *Beyond Establishment* and Wellman's perspective on the conflict over homosexual ordination in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) are representatives of this position. In contrast, my argument is closer to that of Wuthnow's *Restructuring of American Religion*, in my concern with internal diversity and the intensifying effect when internal and external factions and movements merge.³² Such an explanation merges concerns about distinctiveness with concerns about fragmentation and cohesiveness.

Another major explanation offered for the declining significance of denominationalism is the weakening ability of identity to invoke commitment. Weeks's study of national Presbyterian executives makes this point through a surprising twist.³³ He discovered that even an explicit and distinct denominational identity might not be the primary religious identity of those seemingly most invested in the denomination's national structures. Specifically, he found that even though the executives he interviewed for his study were articulate and largely in agreement about the specifics and distinctiveness of Presbyterian identity, most of them felt "that family, congregation, and general Protestant and/or Christian identity have become personally more important for them and, they speculate, for others in recent years. Presbyterian identity *per se* is less important."³⁴ That the executives Weeks interviewed in the early 1990s may have overestimated the distinctiveness and explicitness of Presbyterian identity is however suggested by Moorhead's study of the evolving Presbyterian national structure during the early twentieth century. He notes, for example, that at the very time the denomination was centralizing its national administrative functions, it decentralized its control over theological questions, one result being a steadily growing "confessional inclusiveness."³⁵ Turning his attention to a comparison among oldline Protestant denominations in his conclusion, Moorhead further asserts: "In each instance, reorganization pushed questions of distinctive theology and tradition into the background in the name of efficiency."³⁶

Unsettled times highlight and focus attention on identity and values. It

32. Robert Wuthnow, *The Restructuring of American Religion: Society and Faith Since World War II* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988).

33. Louis B. Weeks, "Presbyterian Culture: Views from the Edge," in *Beyond Establishment*, pp. 309-26.

34. Weeks, "Presbyterian Culture," p. 320.

35. James H. Moorhead, "Presbyterians and the Mystique of Organizational Efficiency, 1870-1936," in *Reimagining Denominationalism*, ed. Robert Bruce Mullin and Russell E. Richey (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), p. 277.

36. Moorhead, "Presbyterians," pp. 282-83.

appears that strong identities are more capable of weathering these storms; diffuse identities struggle because identity itself becomes politically contested. One of the intriguing insights in Bolman and Deal's *Reframing Organizations* is that serious conflicts about most things in organizations are ultimately appealed to the organization's values, culture, and identity. They are silent about what happens when there is conflict over the organization's values, culture, and identity.

It is our observation in the case material, as already noted, that denominations with stronger identities appear to be better able to handle the crises they face. It also appears that while strong identity groups clearly have tensions, ambiguities, and strains, they seldom have real crises. If I am correct about crises occurring when external tensions and threats attach themselves to internal strains and segmentation, then the suggestion of these cases that stronger identity groups are less likely to have crises is consistent with Coser's observation that strength of identity is a mitigating factor regarding outer conflict and inner cohesion.³⁷ Specifically, for strong identity groups an external threat tends to breed internal solidarity (e.g., our NBC case study), but in weak identity groups external threats exaggerate or inflame already existing strains of internal disunity.

However, not everyone writing about denominations agrees that the major problem is identity. Takayama, for example, argues that mainline denominations have been relying more on structure than on ideology since at least the 1960s, and that with an ecclesiastical and theological deficit this is probably exactly what they have to do.³⁸ Our rejoinder is that the reliance on structure did not work particularly well for the oldline in the 1960s, nor has it worked particularly well in the nearly half-century since! Reifsnyder, in perhaps the most detailed study to date of the changing organizational nature of an oldline Protestant denomination, makes our case most directly and simply.³⁹ After several paragraphs of abstract argument, Reifsnyder seals his disagreement with Takayama by quoting C. Daniel Little, executive director of the Presbyterian General Assembly Mission Board (GAMC) during the early 1980s. The quote is from Little's final report after seven and a half years of struggling with restructuring. Little said: "The essential assignment given to the GAMC was a spiritual one — that of searching for a strengthening of the bonds that tie the whole church together. The Mission Council was born in an atmosphere where it was

37. Lewis Coser, *The Functions of Social Conflict* (New York: Free Press, 1956), p. 93.

38. Takayama, "Strains, Conflicts," p. 313.

39. Richard W. Reifsnyder, "The Reorganization Impulse in American Protestantism: The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) as a Case Study, 1788-1983" (Ph.D. diss., Princeton Theological Seminary, 1984).

assumed that those bonds were managerial. A principal learning has been that helpful as management tools are, they are tools and not the actual bonds which hold the church together."⁴⁰ The problem was, according to Little, that the people disagreed on what the church should be doing, not on how it should be doing it.

3. Functions, Structure, and Cohesiveness

One of my favorite pieces on the kinds of work organizations do and how work is best structured is Dennis Young's unpublished "Strategic Vision as a Determinant of Association Structure." Its appeal to me is simple: it is the only piece I have seen in the literature on nonprofit organizations that relates particular strategic purposes of "national umbrella organizations" to optimal structures via the necessary transactional interactions required to carry out the strategy.⁴¹ Because of relatively comfortable parallels to the existing literature on denominations, I use his framework to frame my reflection on denominational functions. Young's framework includes the following, with my sense of denominational parallels added.

- The *goal-seeking system* relies on hierarchical authority and command and control (e.g., the corporate structure that denominations developed to optimize their purposeful missional activities).
- The *economic system* relies on reciprocity and exchange among sovereign participants who use the associative umbrella as a collective device to meet their individual resource needs (e.g., the contractual implications of servicing congregations).
- *Systems of accountability* are based on checks and balances between different parts of the overall system based on information flows and distributed authority, which range from "bottom to top" systems optimized by central organizations overseeing local members through participatory processes of standard setting and certification to "top to bottom" systems dependent upon an effective governing board that is responsive to local membership.
- *Polities* are forums for political discourse among members that have a common set of interests but diverse approaches to addressing these interests, structurally dependent upon persuasion and consensus building

40. Reifsnyder, "The Reorganization Impulse," p. 426.

41. Dennis R. Young, "Strategic Vision as a Determinant of Association Structure" (1998).

(e.g., the covenant ideal among UCC structural levels; the federal structure of many contemporary Reformed structures; the con-federal structure of the Episcopal Church).

To Young's four "ideal types" I would add, given this essay's denominational interests, *fellowship systems*, the purpose of which is identity-intensifying, social bonding that produces relational capital and a sense of belonging to a greater whole. Pastoral, hospitable, and covenantal processes and practices tend to optimize the fellowship system.

Within this framework, several points jump out of our case studies. First, national denominational structures currently and historically have typically served all five of these purposes, although with different emphases and priorities across denominations and time. In our essays there is evidence of increasing emphasis being given at this time to the economic (e.g., resourcing congregations), political, and fellowship functions, with the goal-seeking and accountability functions becoming more problematic. The ascendance of an internal focus following the external "mission" focus of the recent "corporate" period of America's denominations is consistent with the long history of such cycles of inward and outward attention documented in Richey's morphology of denominations and denominationalism.⁴²

Second, given that different purposes tend to have different optimal structures, it should be immediately evident that any single denominational structure will have less than optimal structures for some functions.

Third, if I am correct about which functions are on the ascendance and which are increasingly problematic, then it would seem that structures that optimize the participatory and relational work of working across diversity are more adaptive than structures that optimize efficiency and control. Correspondingly, one could argue that schism (or other means of reducing diversity) may be a good thing for denominational systems that place a premium on the purposeful action of national directed mission or purity of identity.⁴³ Unfortunately, it appears that during unsettled times there is a trade-off within weak identity denominations between unity and mission. Both demand significant resources, and the more you direct resources to one, the less you have for the

42. Russell E. Richey, "Denominations and Denominationalism: An American Morphology," in *Reimagining Denominationalism*, pp. 74-98.

43. A recent study of 175 Baptist, Lutheran, Methodist, and Presbyterian and Reformed denominations between 1890 and 1980 found an average of more than one schism every two years during this period. Robert C. Liebman, John R. Sutton, and Robert Wuthnow, "Exploring the Social Sources of Denominationalism: Schisms in American Protestant Denominations, 1890-1980," *American Sociological Review* 53 (1988): 343-52.

other. Relatedly, the trade-off becomes more severe when a declining resource base compounds the situation.

Given my initial thoughts about the primacy of identity, the possibility that structure may help maintain or strengthen stressed or eroding identities is an intriguing idea. And again because of my current hunches regarding the increasing politicization of national denominational structures and that government may present the best organizational parallels to such structures, I find the political science literature providing helpful perspective. For one thing, one finds a general agreement in the literature that diversity erodes strong power pyramids, erodes singular ideologies, and erodes confidence in the political process and traditional forms of political participation.

But even more interesting is that one finds basically the same set of prescriptions for curing this erosion in the constructive theorizing of political scientists and in the recent restructuring of national denominations. There are two broad families. The first is an attempt to increase participatory democracy, both in inclusiveness of diversity and in direct participation. There are a positive and a negative plank to this argument. The negative is that existent representative forms of democracy at the national level typically are not working because the representatives and the bureaucracy the representatives support are too distant and unrepresentative of those they represent, and because the process of electing representatives does not provide a strong enough mechanism of accountability. The positive side is that direct participation increases ownership and commitment. Because of the scale of national structures, most political scientists taking this position combine it with some form of voluntary associationalism. The result is that national structures become a representation of networks of other voluntary associations. Participatory process is of course a fundamental of liberal Protestantism in general. It should not be surprising, therefore, that its strategic role in trying to stem the erosion of denominational identity is evident, for example, in the new national structure of the UCC.

The second general prescription found in the political science literature for stopping the corrosive effect of postmodernity is sometimes referred to as communitarianism. As the name suggests, it gives priority to communal commitments, with individual rights being derivative. Unfortunately, the majority opinion seems to be that communitarianism is antithetical to the late modern or postmodern situation. Except at a very small/local scale, any effort in a communitarian, ideologically singular direction requires strong measures of control. On the religious scene one immediately thinks of the Southern Baptists;⁴⁴

44. Nancy Tatom Ammerman, *Baptist Battles: Social Change and Religious Conflict in the Southern Baptist Convention* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1990).

and among our cases one sees some evidence of this dynamic in the LC-MS and to a lesser extent in the AG.

There is also, unfortunately, considerable skepticism among political theorists regarding the long-term efficacy of the participatory/associative response in a postmodern world. Such skepticism takes its cue from the reminder that procedural democracy is really an adversarial process. Recent evidence suggests that increasing diversity, especially accompanied by the postmodern emphasis on difference over unity, erodes the layers of tolerance that in earlier times soothed the aggressively imperialistic edges of any competition. With the erosion of tolerance each election becomes, the skeptics observe, increasingly plebiscitarian in character, the popular vote determining which party or coalition of parties shall have the exclusive control of the state machine for the next several years. Again, the Southern Baptists and the LC-MS come to mind.

If there is great skepticism among political scientists concerning associative communal responses to the erosive effects of postmodernity, what is one to think? There are at least two additional responses in the current dynamics of national denominational structures, one with some parallel in the political science literature, the other uniquely religious. To the extent that political science skeptics have any constructive thought concerning postmodernity's erosion of political process, it goes something like this: "We'll muddle through somehow, in part because our functional economic interdependence is a more critical factor today than is our political process."

The allure of economic codependence can be seen in our national denominational structures today in what, as noted above, has become the pervasive mantra of "servicing congregations." Consultants like Loren Mead and Lyle Schaller have made the primacy of the local congregation an article of taken-for-granted practical wisdom; sociologists like Steve Warner and Mark Chaves have attested to its reality; and theologians from a wide variety of traditional polities have given it their normative blessing.⁴⁵ Combining such awareness with a search for a new reason for being, many denominations (see, for example, the RCA and UCC case studies in this volume) have hit upon the idea that their primary business now should be servicing congregations. In many respects it represents a movement from covenant to contract as the basis of solidarity.

Only time will tell whether contractual interdependence is a viable path to national denominational vitality. However, there are any number of reasons to be skeptical. First, several congregational surveys suggest that a denomination's resources are just not as good as nondenominational resources.

45. See, for example, Darrel Guder and Louis Barrett, *Missional Church: A Vision of the Sending of the Church in North America* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998).

Second, there is what Jane J. Mansbridge calls the paradox of parochialism.⁴⁶ The paradox is that on the one hand the efficiency required of economies is best exercised in centralized institutions, but centralized institutions seem to erode meaningful participation. On the other hand, the participation most vibrantly exercised in local institutions seems to sap national identity and resolve. One sees a parallel argument in Farnsley's observed tension in the Southern Baptist Convention between increased organizational coordination and the demand for democratic voice.⁴⁷ Third, there are several kinds of theologically valued mission that are most appropriately dealt with through nonlocal structures. Fourth, servicing congregations seemingly reinforces a consumerist mentality among congregations that further erodes any lingering semblance of covenantal loyalty. And fifth, especially for those groups that believe in humankind's propensity to sin, a service orientation radically reduces any accountability that congregations have to any external referent. So, while servicing congregations is a pervasive, new "big idea," we will have to wait and see whether it in fact proves to be a good idea.

The final response to the corrosive effects of postmodern fragmentation on national structures that I see being attempted in many denominational structures today, but without parallel in the political science literature, is the attempt to de-emphasize the national structures' visibility or role in traditional forms of decision making. These efforts take one of three forms. One is to emphasize worship and celebration in a denomination's national assemblies and, correspondingly, to minimize business. A second is to call a moratorium on contested decisions. The third, and most interesting to us — both because of its intrinsically religious nature and its direct response to the postmodern philosophical challenge — is the effort to move from rational legal decision-making procedures to a process of spiritual discernment. Modernity's gift (or curse) of rational legal procedures stresses, of course, human agency. In contrast, discernment means to see and acknowledge what already exists by God's will and initiative.

Group discernment processes require time, patience, and a sustained intimacy, suggesting that discernment would be a particularly challenging process for most denominational national assemblies — strangers coming together for one week every two to four years. It is not surprising, therefore, that one sees in our cases experimentation with discernment at the national level only within

46. Jane Mansbridge, *Beyond Adversary Democracy* (New York: Basic Books, 1980).

47. Arthur Emery Farnsley II, *Southern Baptist Politics: Authority and Power in the Restructuring of an American Denomination* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994).

episcopal systems in which bishops have a continuing, mutual history. Nevertheless, the more recent experience of the RCA and the longer-term experience of the Disciples of Christ with discernment approaches to decision making will enable future research to judge the viability of such alternatives in more Calvinistic traditions.⁴⁸

4. Does Theology Make a Difference?

Organizing religious work is a theological task. By devoting the entire concluding chapter in this book to theological reflection, we seek to appropriately give that task the final word. Nevertheless, the empirical effect of theology on organizational adaptiveness as viewed across the eight cases in this volume is so distinct as to warrant note here. *Liturgical and Pentecostal traditions appear to be more adaptive than more Calvinist or cognitive traditions to the conditions of the emerging "postmodern" period, at least at the scale of national structures.*

Why this is the case is not entirely clear, but the following two related factors are strongly suggestive. First, as previously noted, liturgical and Pentecostal denominations in our study have more distinctive and stronger identities. Strong identities help mitigate the corrosive influences of postmodernity, at least in the short term. Second, and more directly theological, liturgical and Pentecostal traditions tend to give priority to noncognitive bases of religious authority and practice. Indeed, there is a growing body of literature that shows that at this time in the United States expressive forms of religious expression are more vital than cognitive. Based on his extensive study of new movements on the Pentecostal side of the expressive, liturgical-to-Pentecostal spectrum, Miller's *Reinventing American Protestantism: Christianity in the New Millennium* provides the most extended discussion of why this appears to be the case. Two quotes, the first from the perspective of individuals and the second from the perspective of organizations, cut to the core of his argument.

The faith of new paradigm Christians is empirically based. The Bible seems to assume authority for these individuals as they practice what it says and have prayers answered, see people healed, watch people being transformed morally, and experience the "leading" of the Holy Spirit in their lives. Reason plays a secondary confirming role as these Christians attempt to inter-

48. The RCA has contracted with church consultant Chuck Olsen for guidance in its experiment with denomination-wide discernment processes, and his book, *Transforming Church Boards into Communities of Spiritual Leaders* (Washington, D.C.: Alban Institute, 1995), provides a good introduction to his approach.

pret what God is doing in the world. Few of them claim to be able to prove God's existence through abstract arguments. It is one's "relationship" with God, they believe, that brings certitude.⁴⁹

New paradigm churches are experimenting with organizational change. They have latched onto the model of first-century Christianity, and it has provided a powerful point of reference for critiquing the institution of the contemporary Christian church. But new paradigm Christians have not only been critics, they have also accepted [corporate leadership guru Peter] Drucker's challenge to innovate. In my opinion they have created a form of human community that addresses many of the crises of our late-twentieth-century postmodern culture, and they have also established a perspective that endorses change in their organizational structure. Drawing on their vision of the role of the Holy Spirit, they have transferred authority from the socially constructed institution of the church to a divine presence, who can take them in unpredictable directions. . . . For new paradigm Christians, little is sacred except God. They are living out the "Protestant principle," which relativizes all human claims to absoluteness, thus allowing for bold and entrepreneurial experimentation.⁵⁰

The juxtaposition of unmediated encounter with God and testing with Scripture that Miller finds in new paradigm churches redefines the interrelationship between freedom and tradition, providing both openness and coherence. It is perhaps not surprising that the parallels are stark between Miller's "new paradigm" and the discernment processes noted above with which several oldline denominations are currently experimenting. Also not surprisingly, both the Vineyard and AG case studies in this book provide glimpses into Miller's new paradigm dynamics.

My own analysis of the Faith Community Today survey data from 14,000 congregations adds the liturgical side of the expressive vitality equation to Miller's Pentecostal and Holiness perspective. In appraising the shift in religious authority and vitality from "WORD to SPIRIT," I divide the forty-one denominations and faith traditions participating in the national study into those that give priority to expressive sources of religious authority and those that give preference to cognitive sources. I then look at the vitality of congregations first within oldline Protestantism and then again within conservative Protestantism. In both instances the analysis shows higher levels of congregational vitality among the more expressive denominations (e.g., Episcopal within oldline Prot-

49. Miller, *Reinventing American Protestantism*, p. 133.

50. Miller, *Reinventing American Protestantism*, pp. 155-56.

estantism) than among the more cognitive (e.g., Presbyterian and UMC within oldline Protestantism).⁵¹ One finds further evidence for and commentary on the current shift from WORD to SPIRIT in, for example:

- The “seekership” in Wade Clark Roof’s baby boom monograph, *A Generation of Seekers*.⁵²
- In Marler and Roozen’s use of the two Gallup surveys of unchurched Americans to connect the societal shift from an objective to a subjective locus of authority to the increasing phenomenon of “church as choice.”⁵³
- In the worry of evangelical Christian scholars about a shift from God as judge to Jesus as friend.

It is evident in these references that before becoming a foundational tenet of postmodernism, the societal shift to more expressive, experiential, and subjective forms of authority was prominent in the literature on the broad cultural shifts carried to prominence during the late 1960s and 1970s by the baby boom generation. Although a bit jaundiced in its appreciation of the change, Robert Bellah and associates’ engaging elaboration of the rise of “expressive individualism” in their well-known *Habits of the Heart* remains one of the classic treatments of the potential profundity of the change.⁵⁴ Indeed, from today’s postmodern vantage point one can only wonder how profound this change will be. Reifsnnyder suggests that “ecclesiology” was the central focus of twentieth-century theology, including an intensity of analysis about the nature and purpose of the church unmatched since the Reformation. More importantly, he argues that this analysis was accompanied, particularly within oldline Protestantism, with a radical shift in understanding about the purpose of the church. It was a shift “from viewing the church as the body of Christ in history to viewing it as an event, a movement of the pilgrim people across time and space to participate in the mission of Jesus Christ.”⁵⁵ The former gives priority to “being” and resonates with the geographically and monopolistically oriented parish

51. David A. Roozen, “Four Mega-Trends Changing America’s Religious Landscape” (paper presented at the Religion Newswriters’ Association Annual Conference, Boston, September 2001, available on-line at hrr.hartsem.edu/about/roozen_articles.htm).

52. Wade Clark Roof, *A Generation of Seekers* (San Francisco: Harper, 1993).

53. Penny Long Marler and David A. Roozen, “From Church Tradition to Consumer Choice: The Gallup Surveys of Unchurched Americans,” in *Church and Denominational Growth*, ed. David A. Roozen and C. Kirk Hadaway (Nashville: Abingdon, 1993), pp. 253-77.

54. Robert Bellah et al., *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (New York: Harper Collins, 1988).

55. Reifsnnyder, “The Reorganization Impulse,” p. 381.

forms of religious organization that are the historical legacy of most colonial American Protestant denominations. The latter gives priority to “doing,” which, as noted in the introduction to this book, was the strategic vision that gave rise to the “corporate” organization of most large American Protestant denominations today. The affinity between expressive forms of religious expression and postmodernity leads one to wonder if we currently live in the midst of another radical shift in understanding about the primary purpose of the church — a shift from “doing” to “experiencing.” Organizationally, such a shift would seemingly require a related change from asking how we best structure ourselves for doing mission to how we best structure ourselves for providing experiences of God.

5. Narrative Practices and Denominational Identity

The challenges of postmodernity make “identity” problematic. Relatedly, one finds increasing scholarly attention being given to the issue as it relates both to the construction and reconstruction of individual identities, and to corporate cultures or identities. One recurring theme in the sociologically oriented literature on the subject is the importance of narrative and narrative practices. Arguments like the following are not untypical: “The reflexive project of the self . . . consists in the sustaining of coherent, yet continuously revised, biographical narratives,”⁵⁶ and “[A]ll of us come to be who we are (however ephemeral, multiple, and changing) by being located or locating ourselves (usually unconsciously) in social narratives.”⁵⁷ From such a perspective, it should be no surprise that those denominations in our study that give priority to narrative practices over text, doctrine, and belief have stronger identities. Indeed, in her congregationally focused ORW complement to this book’s focus on national denominational structures, Nancy Ammerman finds that social practices that allow denominational narratives to become part of the ongoing life of a congregation are the most important factor in tying a congregation to its denominational tradition.⁵⁸ The 1998 PCPA survey of congregations discussed in section 2 above reinforces her conclusion. When congregational leaders were asked to specify what their denominational publisher’s role should be, they

56. Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1991), p. 5.

57. Margaret R. Somers, “The Narrative Constitution of Identity: A Relational and Network Approach,” *Theory and Society* 23 (1994): 605-49, here 606.

58. Nancy Ammerman, *Pillars of Faith: American Congregations and Their Partners* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2005).

most frequently said producing resources that reflect their denomination's identity!⁵⁹

Critical in both the Ammerman and PCPA findings is the recognition that identity or narrative never exists in the abstract. Rather, it takes life as it is embodied in some resource and used in some practice. In fact, the importance and nature of *carriers* of a denomination's culture is the focal concern of Carroll and Roof's *Beyond Establishment*. Limited to oldline Protestantism, the book examines closely such carriers as fellowship ties, church school, ritual, hymns, retreat centers, church-related colleges, campus ministry, theological education, and ordination processes. Unfortunately for the oldline, the various chapters in the volume present a relatively consistent and negative picture. The picture is of the erosion of each carrier's vitality and its viability as a vehicle of denominational culture.

Carroll and Roof's conclusion presents a strong, even passionate argument for the importance of strengthening and sustaining oldline Protestant identities. It also includes a short list of possible ideas for strengthening denominational identity. But in the absence of any evidence that it was realistic to expect a denomination to turn the ideas into workable strategies, the book is anything but optimistic. Indeed, when one connects the seriousness of the situation for oldline Protestantism as described in *Beyond Establishment* with the broad historical perspective of Richey's documentation of an alternation between an internal and external orientation in the evolution of oldline Protestant denominational purposefulness, one loses some of the hopefulness that cyclical perspectives such as Richey's hold out.⁶⁰ The severe erosion of oldline Protestant denominational identities and their respective carriers of identity presents a strong argument for why the oldline's future today might not include a turn or return to missional vitality as it did the last time the denominations turned introspective (during the post-Civil War period).

In contrast to the abstractness and skepticism of the immediately preceding reflections, one of the major findings in Ammerman's congregationally focused ORW complement to this book's focus on national denominational structures presents at least a hint of strategic hopefulness. As suggested above, her analysis leads her to boldly conclude that

Among both conservatives and mainliners, denominational citizenship is strengthened by intentional congregational practices that link local life to the denomination's narratives. Telling stories about denominational mis-

59. Bibby, "PCPA Congregational Resource Study," p. 78.

60. Richey, "Denominations and Denominationalism."

sion, missional accomplishments, singing the songs of the faith and otherwise emphasizing its distinctive worship practices, teaching children and adults from denominationally-produced materials — these narrative practices are by no means universal, but where they are present, congregations are more likely to describe themselves as strongly aligned with their denomination.⁶¹

But more importantly she further finds: “The likelihood of engaging in these pro-denominational practices is highest among those that have been drawn into regional denominational participation.”⁶² At least one remaining, viable carrier of denominational identity is the participation of congregations in regional organization, which in turn strengthens the participating congregations’ intentionality about narrative engagement. The “regional” core of this relationship is underscored by the further, and somewhat surprising, finding in Ammerman’s study that congregational participation at the national level produced no such boost in sense of connection to a congregation’s larger tradition. It also is consistent with our earlier note about the ascendancy of relational tasks in those denominations best adapting to the pressures of postmodernity.

Judicatory leaders and staff are the face of their denomination at the regional level. In anticipation that they and their regional level of organization were integral to denominational systems, the larger ORW project also included a study of judicatories in the project’s eight focal denominations. It was directed by Adair Lummis.⁶³ Her findings show that judicatories are very aware of, and indeed very much experience, the stress on denominational identities highlighted in this book’s study of national structures. They are also by and large aware of their critical role in mediating denominational identity. And many appear to be doing it relatively well. But not all are doing it well. Judicatories are challenged by the same corrosive effects of the postmodern world as

61. Ammerman, *Pillars of Faith*, chap. 7.

62. Ammerman, “Voluntary Citizenship: Denominational Institutions and Religious Identity,” March 2001, p. 32.

63. See Adair T. Lummis, “Brand Name Identity in a Post-Denominational Age: Regional Leaders’ Perspectives on Its Importance for Churches” (paper delivered at the annual meetings of the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion, Columbus, Ohio, October 2001); “The Art and Science of Subtle Proactivity: Regional Leaders and Their Congregations” (paper presented at the Religious Research Association Annual Meetings, Columbus, Ohio, October 2001); “The Role of Judicatories in Interpreting Denominational Identity” (paper presented at the annual meeting of the Religious Research Association, Boston, 1999); and “Judicatory Niches and Negotiations” (paper presented at the annual meeting of the Association for the Sociology of Religion, San Francisco, 1998) (Adair T. Lummis on-line articles and books: http://hrr.hartsem.edu/about/lummis_articles.htm).

are national structures, and many observers believe that the range of vital experiments notwithstanding, they are just as weak a link in the overall system as are national structures. To further complicate the matter, at least from the perspective of strategic options for national structures, as demonstrated in the UCC case study in this book, a strong link between national structure and the judicatory does not necessarily result in a strong link between congregation and national structure.

Lummis does nevertheless point to a clear consensus among the judicatory leaders she studied about another potentially concrete ray of strategic hopefulness concerning the strengthening of denominational identities. It is the judicatory officials' consensus that the most important thing they did related to promoting denominational identity and covenant relations among and with their congregations was helping congregations find good pastors.

6. Are Parish Clergy the Major Linchpin in Sustaining Denominational Identity?

Robert Wuthnow, certainly the most prolific academic analyst of the current restructuring of American religion and arguably the most insightful, makes the following blunt assertion about oldline Protestantism: "[T]he guardians of denominationalism will increasingly be the clergy. Perhaps it has always been so, but now the clergy must take on the additional responsibility of caring for the bureaucratic structures built up over the past century."⁶⁴ His suggestion that it may always have been so is undoubtedly a recognition of two facts, one historical and one organizational. As church historians remind us, denominational structures in colonial America originally emerged as associations of congregations, represented primarily by their clergy leadership. They emerged for purposes of fellowship. But additionally, because of the distance that separated these American congregations and clergy from their home country judicatories, the associations were necessary "to resolve problems, adjudicate moral and theological disputes, and identify, train and authenticate leadership."⁶⁵ Organizationally, clergy are typically heavily dependent upon denominational systems for, for example, career opportunities, insurance and pension plans, and the denominational policies that govern their clergy standing.

But the key point behind Wuthnow's insight is that clergy will *increasingly*

64. Robert Wuthnow, *Christianity in the Twenty-First Century: Reflections on the Challenges Ahead* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 51.

65. Richey, "Denominations and Denominationalism," p. 79.

become the guardians of denominationalism because the religious identity of laity is increasingly local and personal. Accordingly, national denominational identities and related structural issues become less important to increasing numbers of laity. If such national matters are to receive attention at all, therefore, it will be, by default, from clergy. Wuthnow does not miss the irony in the juxtaposition of this clergy reality and the years of effort by most oldline Protestant denominations to increase the inclusion of laity in their connectional system. Indeed, he fears that two likely outcomes are an increasing separation between clergy and laity, and an increase in levels of anticlericalism.⁶⁶

Unfortunately, Wuthnow does not comment on whether such an increasing clergy investment in national denominational structures is likely to strengthen the identities of those oldline Protestant denominations currently unsettled by weakened cultures. Other analysts of the clergy situation in oldline Protestantism give us reason to be doubtful. The Gilpin and Holper contributions to Carroll and Roof's collection of essays on carriers of denominational identity are particularly stark in this regard. Gilpin begins his essay by noting that "A century ago, in the 1880's, the theological school played a central role in forming denominational identity."⁶⁷ He then proceeds to document the "marked contrast" found in the present situation: "In sum, at a time when the mainstream churches are actively seeking new avenues for reestablishing the vigor of denominational identities, they find the seminaries generally sympathetic but not much help. The reason, it seems, is that seminary faculties have given little systematic consideration to the formative tasks involved in the transmission of denominational cultures within their own sphere of work."⁶⁸ More critically, he concludes, "The possibility and appropriateness of denominational identity has itself become a question. In other words, the seminaries may be said to have entered the contemporary context lacking a critical 'ecclesiology of denominations,' an understanding of church that would make the case for the formation of denominational identity as an appropriate and integral feature of theological study."⁶⁹

Holper's contribution presents us a double gift. One is its analysis of how changes in ordination policies affected the strength of denomination identity in the specific instance of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). Equally important is the frame used in the analysis, specifically Holper's wonderfully rich, textured articulation of the tension between "discipline" and "democratization." Ori-

66. Wuthnow, *Christianity*, p. 51.

67. W. Clark Gilpin, "The Theological Schools: Transmission, Transformation, and Transcendence of Denominational Culture," in *Beyond Establishment*, p. 188.

68. Gilpin, "The Theological Schools," p. 189.

69. Gilpin, "The Theological Schools," p. 201.

ginally elaborated in Harrison's now classic *Authority and Power in the Free Church Tradition* in a case study of the American Baptist Convention in the mid-1950s, and more recently revisited and refined in Farnsley's case study of the early 1990s' restructuring of the Southern Baptist Convention, maintaining a faithful and vital balance between tradition and democracy is one of the continuing and pervasive challenges to American denominationalism. It is also one of the challenges most affected by the dynamics of postmodernity.⁷⁰ Using more specifically Presbyterian language, Holper articulates the challenge as maintaining the tension "between the tradition's Reformation-era commitment to the church as a disciplined, bounded community whose identity (gift), mission (task), and order (means) are God-given . . . and a more sociologically defined model of the church as a democratic, voluntary society whose identity, mission and order are determined by the free choice of those who associate themselves with Presbyterian congregations."⁷¹ Using the window of changes in ordination policies, he concludes that at least within the Presbyterian Church any balance in the tension has given way to a dominance of democratization, and that the "democratizing trends — entrepreneurial leadership, professional identity, specialization of tasks, constituency-based understandings of representation, and the strategic embrace of government entitlement programs as the primary means for providing social services — has resulted in an increasingly less bounded and disciplined community of faith and witness."⁷²

Several contrasts among denominations in the eight case studies in this book provide support for the above contentions about the critical role of clergy in mediating denominational identities, and the critical role of the certification and training of clergy that strengthens this role. For one thing, theological education is mentioned, even if merely in passing, only in the case studies of denominations with stronger identities. This clearly fits with my broader experience that suggests that overall, the national structures of strong identity denominations have a closer relationship with, and indeed more control over, the denomination's mechanisms of clergy selection and training than is the case in weaker identity denominations. Indeed, from this perspective, one of the regrettable consequences of the fiscal strain experienced by most oldline Protestant denominations over the past quarter-century is that it has prompted national structures to reduce their support of theological education. In a similar vein, the democratiza-

70. Paul M. Harrison, *Authority and Power in the Free Church Tradition: A Social Case Study of the American Baptist Convention* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1959); Farnsley, *Southern Baptist Politics*.

71. J. Frederick Holper, "Presbyterian Ordination Practice as a Case Study in the Transmission of Denominational Identity," in *Beyond Establishment*, p. 207.

72. Holper, "Presbyterian Ordination Practice," p. 217.

tion pressures that have increasingly reduced national control of ordination policies and processes are much more evident in weak identity denominations, most likely contributing to a downward spiral of cause and effect.

One also sees a link between the denominations in our case studies that best represent Miller's paradigm movements and the above argument for the critical role of clergy in sustaining denominational identity. Specifically, one sees that both the Vineyard and AG have mixed presbyterian and congregational polities. They are presbyterian with regard to clergy and congregational with regard to congregations. Among other things, this means that while congregations are formally independent of national and region control, clergy hold their denominational standing at the regional or national level. In such structures it is unavoidably clear that the clergyperson is the primary mediator of a denominational connection. Indeed, it is not uncommon for a congregation in such traditions to change its denominational affiliation if it happens to call a pastor from another denomination. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that the national structures of these denominations give the high priority they do to their connection to local clergy. One also sees a similar polity and similar priority to clergy in the case of our strong identity, but hardly new paradigm, LC-MS case.

Conclusion

Expressive individualism, congregational localism, increasingly diverse and divisive constituencies, and the fragmentation of grand narratives are among the more pervasive and significant challenges that the postmodern leanings of today's society present to America's denominations. Some denominations appear to be up to the challenge, some are struggling to cope. All are affected.

More specifically, the analytical conversation contained in this summary chapter between the case studies and essays contained in this volume on the one hand and the broader denominational and organizational literature on the other hand pointedly shows that those denominations that are most effectively negotiating the postmodern challenge are those denominations

- with strong identities;
- with strong, personal, relationally dense, crosscutting, connectional networks; and
- with strong noncognitive sources of religious authority.

Additionally, the analytical conversation suggests that these three primary factors are in turn enhanced by priority attention to:

- a denomination's narrative practices, especially the identification and telling of stories that connect the larger denominational identity to the primacy of local identities while at the same time diminishing "the particularism of its various local, regional and national histories";⁷³
- the identification, education and training, and ongoing nurture and support of the denomination's ordained, congregational leadership;
- engaging and adaptive forms of worship;⁷⁴
- acute political sensitivities; and
- a dynamic balance being maintained between the disciplined anchoring of the tradition and the potentially renewing and inevitably segmental, incremental, and local impulses of the Spirit.

If there is a single, primary, and integrative banner among all these key factors, my coeditor and I clearly agree that it is *identity*. Accordingly, if there is only one thing that practitioners responsible for national denominational structures take from this book, it is my hope that they ask of every decision they face about denominational policy, program, and practice, *What are the implications of this (policy, program, practice) for maintaining and enhancing the denomination's identity?*⁷⁵

This being the case, let me conclude with just one example of how this question might radically change the character of a conversation. As I write this conclusion many, particularly oldline Protestant denominational executives, staff, and boards, face the painful reality of budget deficits. The two immediate paths of response are begrudging, structural downsizing and the call for evangelism campaigns. In contrast, a focus on identity changes the question from larger size and smaller size, to the question of *right size*. What is the right size of our national structure in this time and place to maintain and enhance the theological identity we carry? Perhaps providentially, the notion of "right size" fits the niche and segmentally diverse reality of a postmodern world.

73. Wuthnow, *Christianity*, p. 49.

74. See, for example, Miller, *Reinventing American Protestantism*, and C. Kirk Hadaway and David A. Roozen, *Rerouting the Protestant Mainline: Sources of Growth and Opportunities for Change* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995).

75. This is the same primary hope that I have for scholarly study of denominations. My primary hope for organizational scholars is twofold. First, that they attend to the importance of ideas and identity. Second, that the complex interplay of internal and external dynamics in the postmodern world requires an equally complex interplay of organizational perspectives (e.g., the new institutionalism, old institutionalism and resource dependency) in their analysis (see, for example, Powell and Friedkin, "Organizational Change in Nonprofit Organizations").