

**Connectionalism Beyond the Denomination:
Local Religious Ecologies & Beyond**

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It is common knowledge that congregations provide a host of services to their local communities, the nation and the world. This knowledge is to the recent detriment of the budgets of our social welfare agencies — and for that matter, to the many recipients of such assistance, but that is another talk...

Congregations provide public space. They offer a wide array of social assistance; and they are a channel for a large amount of volunteer activity. They may do this independent of other groups, but more often these ministry endeavors are done directly or indirectly in partnership with other organizations, or at least with the use of their educational and financial resources.

In the "golden past" congregations in many religious traditions relied on their denominational ties to facilitate these efforts. However, in our "post-modern milieu" there is considerable doubt about the effectiveness of these denominational linkages, resources and identities. Parachurch groups, networks of megachurches, hordes of church consultants, and websites filled with ideological resources offer new paths and partnerships for the local congregation. What this "new reality" actually looks like from the congregational level, however, has not been the subject of much research.

One aspect of the ORW project attempts to address that void by examining the connections a congregation makes both within a denominational structure and external to it, in order to accomplish its ministry of nurturing its own and serving its community.

This presentation describes our preliminary findings regarding those connections external to a congregation's denominational ties. Therefore, in the next few minutes I want to give you a sketch of the various organizations, coalitions, churches, and individuals who work with, or form partnerships with, our sampled congregations to do their missions tasks and from whom they get their resources. Again, I will be talking about those partnerships other than a congregation's self-sponsored programs and its denominationally sponsored projects

How we went about getting the information:

Of the approximately 550 congregational key informants being interviewed we have data so far on 479 religious communities as diverse as a truckers ministry in Albuquerque run by a reformed hooker to a gnostic group in Nashville, from a Native American Catholic mission in the heart of Chicago and two Buddhist groups in Seattle to a Muslim masjid and a Beechy Amish community in rural Alabama and I'm even still waiting on a report about a Missouri wicca gathering.

The research team has marveled at the diversity and vitality of religious life we have found, BUT we have been even more amazed at the extent of extra-denominational connectionalism that exists.

Before we get to what we are finding let me briefly sketch how we undertook this part of the research:

In each of the congregational interviews our field researchers were asked to query the interviewee about what the congregation does, its activities, ministries, etc. and who it does this with. For each of those partnerships named the researchers were to explore the nature of the connection/partnership with that group using a series of questions including: the nature of the relationship, when the affiliation began, how the connection was first established, how central it was to the congregation's sense of mission and the like. The researchers were then asked to question, in much the same manner, how and from whom the congregation got its resources for its internal mission of nurturing its membership (its hymnals, liturgical accouterments, educational literature, etc).

An aside - a later research task underway presently is in-depth interview efforts with a stratified random sampling of about 250 these partner organizations. These interviews are designed to explore the nature of the linked organization and how it goes about partnering with religious groups.

Following the key informant interviews, the researchers condensed these partnership findings and recorded them on a survey form which I have just begun to enter into a SPSS data file. At present, for each of the individual partnerships (of which there are 5169), I have data on the type of organization, the geographic scope of the org. (Whether it is a local, regional, national, or international group) and the temporal relational connection (whether the partnership is ad hoc, cyclical, or on-going)

Much of this data is still "unclean" — at times judgments about these groups and the relationship were based on our guesses from the survey form. Within a few months I begin the arduous task of determining exactly what a group is and does from listening to the interviews, studying their literature if we have it, or by finding them on the Web, and then inputting the rest of the information we have on these groups. PRELIMINARY RESULTS --- AND I DO MEAN PRELIMINARY!

So given the admittedly tentative nature of this data... I now turn to a sketch of what are findings are to date:

We have interview data on a total of 479 congregations and their 5169 partnerships. This averages to 10.8 extra-denominational connections per congregation.

Several congregations in our sample have over 40 partnerships, with one congregation having 46 external connections.

At the other end of the scale there are 17 religious groups surveyed with no claimed or recorded partners.

Even at this very early date we have begun to see certain patterns within the data. One of the most obvious ones is the distribution across research sites

Differences by Research Site:

As you can see in table 1 of the handout there are some sizable differences in the average number of congregational connections across our 7 research sites. It seems apparent there are variables influencing the number of connections in each area. One of the most obvious of these variables is the population of the research site. There is a strong relationship between the population of an area and the number of partnerships per congregation - the larger the population, the more ties. We are still too early in the data collection and analysis process to test conclusively for the influence of this or other variables. We expect, however, to find that population density, the number of secular and government social service agencies in an area, the strength of familial structures, population mobility, and the character of communities might have a significant influence on the number of partnership a congregation has.

Differences by Denomination and by Religious Grouping:

We have also discovered several interesting patterns when the number of partner organizations per congregation are analyzed by denominational affiliation and by our grouping of like religious traditions. Table 2 in the handout lists all the distinct religious groups presently represented in our study, the number of interviewed congregations, and the average connections per group in that denomination. I give you this primarily because we are quite proud of the range of diverse religious traditions, we have been able to interview. This has not come without considerable perseverance on the part of our researchers.

From this list you can begin to see subtle distribution patterns. These patterns become more evident, however, when the 80 plus denominations are grouped into religious families. The upper part of Table 3 presents this information.

One apparent pattern is that — for the Jewish, mainline Protestant, and Catholic congregations in our study — partnering with extra-congregational and extra-denominational ministries and resources is a common and frequent mode of operation. These groups seem quite likely and willing to cooperate with external groups to accomplish their mission.

For the independent congregations in our sample there is also a high number of partnerships. This is to be expected, however, since these connections represent, for the independent churches, the whole of their ties, unlike the other congregations with have both denominational and extra-denominational connections. In reality, this figure probably represents a smaller number of total partners since they don't have any uncounted denominational ties.

For the African American congregations, the lower score, far lower than expected, might indicate

several things:

1. That they didn't tell our researchers everything,
2. That we didn't ask the right questions or ask them about the right group ties, or
3. That ministry takes place from within the congregation - through internal ministries and programs and less often through extra-congregational non-profits.

The findings for the Pentecostal, Evangelical, other Christian groups, and even the non Christian - Buddhist, Hindu, Gnostic, Muslim congregations do not come as a surprise. One would expect the more sectarian congregations to be less likely to connect to groups (especially local and national secular ones) external to the congregation. But it also might be the case, similar to traditionally historic Black denominational churches, that ministry is primarily done from within these congregations, not by cooperating with outside groups.

Given these early results I can't wait till we get the rest of the data in the computer and am able to discriminate by subgroups of partnership types based on their function and services to see how this relates to denominational affiliation.

I want to briefly comment on the lower portion of Table 3. This portion of the table shows the data on several of the most relevant questions in the congregational survey completed by the key informant (usually the pastor) of these congregations. As you can see there are a few obvious correlations between several of the perceived mission priorities for certain denominations and the partner organizational pattern, but there are also many inconsistencies. For instance, the low mission priority scores for the "Other" and "Non" Christian groups fits their low partnership averages. On the other hand, the high mission priority scores of the African American congregations is counter to their low partnership averages.

Perhaps partnering with outside groups is less a matter of what a congregation says its missional priorities are, than a church's cultural norms, traditional ministry delivery structures, and established patterns of relating to the world that shapes the ties a congregation makes outside of its four walls, or its denominational walls. Later analysis will allow us to test for the influence of variables (such as a congregation's size, internal resources, and perhaps the strength of its relationship to its denomination) that we hypothesize might be significant variables in explaining the level of congregational partnering, and patterns of partnering with certain types of groups.

The Organizational Types:

We attempted to assign these 5169 partnerships to one of 16 organizational types based on its form and function as best we can tell at this time. It needs to be said, however, that this typing, like everything else in this preliminary report, is subject to revision. Table 4 lists these 16 partnership categories. To give you an idea of the number and kinds of connections within these types, I have given examples of groups within each of the types and noted the number of partnership established with each category.

Although it is not evident in this data, I have noticed several preliminary patterns in the partnership ties across the seven research sites:

Hartford congregations as a whole have a high percentage of participation with secular non-profits and chapters of secular national organizations than do most of the other areas. Likewise, Hartford's congregations on average participate at a higher rate in chapters of national religious organizations than do the other areas, except Albuquerque and Seattle.

Nashville congregations have considerably lower percentage of connections to secular non-profit groups than the other areas.

Rural Alabama congregations, when compared to the other areas, has a higher percentage of informal coalitions, but a very low percentage of named alliances. In addition, rural Alabama congregations in our survey had a higher percentage of partnerships with local or regional religious non-profits.

Rural Missouri congregations showed a comparably higher percentage of named alliances. At the same time, they had a very low percentage of partnerships with local religious non-profits, and with chapters of national religious non-profits and national secular non-profits. These congregations, however, did partner in greater numbers with local secular non-profits and with government sponsored groups such as the County extension agency and the Department of Human Resources than did the churches in our other research areas.

What all this means about the extra-denominational partnerships a congregation makes is still a mystery. Given the early stages of our research and analysis, we have few conclusive findings to offer. What we can say, however, is that the congregations in our study are involved in more of these partnerships than we would have guessed. In addition, within these partnerships there are several distinctive patterns which we are anxious to examine further. Although we are far from finished, this preliminary analysis has piqued our interest to continue the task at hand. One final thing has become very clear from this early work — the picture being painted by the data from this extra-denominational layer of congregational life offers new hues and tones to the well-known colors of the religious organizational life of the United States. Perhaps when this research is finished it will have had a hand in contributing to a richer, deeper, and more interesting nuance to our accepted portrait of "denominational" religion in America.