

## JUDICATORY NICHES AND NEGOTIATIONS

Adair T. Lummis  
Hartford Institute for Religion Research

*A paper presented at the annual meeting of the Association for the Sociology of Religion San Francisco, 1998*

---

### **Introduction:**

Regional judicatories - whatever their denomination, resources, or location - are likely to feel internally and externally pressured to increase the number of their congregations growing in membership, financial health, program vitality, and dedication to supporting denominational core values and ministries. Pressures on regional offices to fulfill these objectives bring them into some competition with judicatories of other denominations who are also trying to maintain their members and attract the unchurched through various tactics. However, unless there are blatant sheep-stealing efforts directed at members of other denominations, this competition can bring collaboration and better communication among judicatories in the area as their staffs seek to find more effective ways of organizing and care; In even the best conditions of inter-judicatory communication and collaboration in a region, national church offices will be putting pressure on judicatory offices to expand their regional niche in recruiting members. Farnsley (1994) and Toulouse (1994) highlight the often unpalatable reality for regional executives of having to "compete" with other denominations for members. This message is hard to miss; it is widely expounded by church growth experts to their national, regional and local denominational clients that they must take care to properly "market" their denomination and congregations to better attract potential members that might otherwise go to other churches and faiths.

Individual judicatory leaders have certain ideas typically about the kind of members they would most like to attract, as well as some perception of the kind of persons that are most drawn to their typical congregations. Both perceptions of the ideal and actual members may vary among regional executives within one denomination, but there is generally some consensus about the constituency of their regional niche. Realization on the part of judicatory executives that their regional niche or 'customer base' as Miller (1997:182-183) puts it, is different than that of another denomination, may not stifle competitive feelings if the other denomination's base population is likely to spur greater church growth than theirs. This probability is adumbrated in Miller's description of the challenge of the 'new paradigm churches', such as the Vineyard, which attract the baby boomers, compared to older social justice-oriented pluralistic liberals who are more drawn to the Episcopal and other mainline churches in Southern California (Miller 1997:187).

A major dilemma for judicatory executives is how much of their limited resources they should give to expanding and strengthening congregations which attract and hold the majority of their typical members, and how much should they expend on starting or maintaining congregations which are differently geared to better suit the tastes of a minority. Ammerman (1997:384) defines niche

congregations as churches which effectively draw members, many of whom travel some distance to attend, because these congregations are distinctive in providing desired worship experiences and services not offered anywhere else nearer. Here, this definition will be retained with one important distinction: the criteria of being successful in securing members who can sustain the church without judicatory or national financial support, will be dropped. The implicit part of Ammerman's definition that niche congregations are atypical of other congregations in the judicatory will be made explicit. In other words, simply because a congregation of a denomination is rarely present in a particular region, will not define it as a niche congregation if it is similar in membership and operation to other congregations of this judicatory. Using this newly constructed definition of 'niche congregations' more easily permits the examination of why judicatories establish or maintain congregations which appeal to a constituency which is not normative for the judicatory, but also is not targeted heavily by judicatories of other denominations in the area.

## B. Types of Niche Congregations

1. Racial/ethnic niche congregations are the most likely to be mandated by the national church for the judicatory to start and maintain. Unlike some niche congregations that draw from a wide area, these are typically carefully located to maximize the probability such congregations will attract sufficient numbers of members in the surrounding community. Although denominations are often eager to have the judicatory start niche congregations for racial/ethnic minorities whose first language is not English, these niche congregations are likely most problematic for judicatories to effectively operate. Why this might be the case is illustrated in the observations of one executive, who explains:

"We have nine congregations in which Spanish is the dominant language, but they are very different culturally. One is Puerto Rican, one Mexican, and one Cuban, and so forth. You can't lump them together and call them 'Hispanic' because the cultural realization of each of these communities means you cannot send a Mexican to oversee a Cuban congregation."

Apart from the difficulty of finding clergy for these ethnic language congregations, there is the problem of integrating their clergy into the life of the judicatory. These ethnic minority clergy may neither speak English fluently nor share the other cultural characteristics with the majority of clergy. Executives interviewed in two other denominations are wrestling with the consequences of the possibility or actuality of establishing niche judicatories - or judicatories that do not serve specific geographical regions, but rather care for all the congregations of the larger language groups within the denominations - such as Hispanic, Korean, Chinese, and so forth. These executives worried whether establishing such niche judicatories would lead to a greater growth in size and diversity within the denomination or more to, as one put it, "the reghettoization of American religion."

Regardless of whether racial/ethnic and especially 'language' types of niche congregations are successful in becoming independent from judicatory financial support, they are likely to be given continued monetary aide and other resources, only partly for "market" reasons. Value or theological priorities of ministry can be ascendant in resource allocation to such niche congregations.

2. Racial or national origin niche congregations, which do have an English-speaking membership may also be established and maintained financially by the judicatory. However, interviews with regional church executives suggest that their judicatory will not continue to support these congregations for more than several years, unless these missions show real promise of growth. Denominations and their judicatories value having mixed, or racially integrated and culturally-diverse congregations. With limited resources, therefore, judicatories are unlikely to underwrite de facto racially-segregated congregations, especially those located in racially-mixed communities.

3. Token denominational presence niche congregations. An exception to the foregoing generalization may be made by judicatories where such churches are the only one of their denomination remaining in the vicinity, especially if this is the only congregation remaining of a whole denominational cluster in the area. In illustration, an executive in one area explained his continued financial support of one long-struggling congregation because it "is the only Protestant presence left in this whole section of the city." An executive of another denomination in another region commented that they kept one fairly small congregation going in an area because for liberal mainline Protestant denominations "this whole region is a mission field, almost all congregations here now are Pentecostal." Where there are good interdenominational ties among judicatories, two to four judicatories of different denominations may jointly establish and maintain what they hope will be a flourishing niche congregation of "their" general type, especially in an effort to attract immigrants and first generation national minorities to their kind of worship and Christian education.

4. Liturgical/theological niche congregations. A fairly prevalent category of niche congregations are those which offer a different kind of worship service than normally found in churches of the denomination, or are much more theologically conservative or theologically liberal than is denominationally typical. An illustration of this variety would be evangelical, charismatic and rather fundamentalist churches of mainline liberal Protestant denominations. Charismatic niche churches, sometimes to the dismay of their judicatory executives, can be the fastest growing and wealthiest congregations in the judicatory. Similarly, congregations that offer radical kinds of music and drama in their services may become successful niche congregations as younger singles and families pass the other the more traditional churches of the judicatory on their way to worship there.

Interviews suggest that such atypical liturgical/theological congregations, however, are very unlikely to be appreciated at all or long supported or tolerated by the leadership of their judicatory unless these congregations are successful.

5. Congregations which are 'Open and Affirming' of Gay and Lesbian lifestyles are among the most successful niche congregations in those denominations and specific judicatories which will have them. A major reason for their success is that these churches draw a cosmopolitan group who are not widely sought by competing judicatories, and whose members often possess another characteristic cited by Ammerman (1997:167) as important to congregations flourishing as niches: a wide network of acquaintances and friends they can recruit. This network does not necessarily have to be personal or face to face. The Unitarians have successfully grown such niche

congregations, not as much by their direct personal contacts, as through advertising in gay and lesbian periodicals which probably have a wider geographical circulation than, say, periodicals of one ethnic national group in the region. Some denominational judicatories more for value than market reasons, will give some assistance to maintaining such niche congregations even if these are have been struggling for survival for years; and some judicatories even within the same denomination will refuse to grant continued denominational status to such congregations even if they are thriving.

6. Sovereign niche congregations are those churches whatever their niche membership or value to the denomination, have been so successful, that as Ammerman (1997:p. 159 et. passim) describes, they can continue much as they please, even though they may not be favored by their judicatory leaders. Unless successful niche congregations violate core values of the judicatory or national church powers, they will be at least tolerated. Their success protects them from having to give in to typical exhortations from judicatory executives that they draw more members from their surrounding communities or act as 'mother' and 'mentor' churches for less financially advantaged congregations in the judicatory. Their presence allows the judicatory to recruit members from a larger proportion of the population than would otherwise be the case. However, any apparent arrogant or egregious lack of cooperation with judicatory priorities and programs, is also a dangerous path for these niche congregations to take, should they become less autonomous. If, interviews suggest, presently successful, autonomous niche congregations whose special focus is neither appreciated by their judicatory executive nor fulfilling a denominational mission priority, suffer reverses and need judicatory assistance, the likelihood is dim of their continuing as the same kind of niche congregation tolerated by their judicatory.

## **POSTSCRIPT**

Interviews with executives and staff indicate that they do talk to their counterparts in other denominations. They seek to find out what other judicatory staff are doing in expanding and strengthening their churches, and try to assess whether these approaches would be feasible in their polity, theology and situation. They are looking for help because they need it. Their national church bodies are providing pressure on the judicatories to expand in members and resources, but not giving judicatories sufficient assistance to reach these growth objectives.

One solution to the unpleasant prospect judicatory staff face of competing for members with regional staff of other denominations with whom they are sharing ideas and programs, is to start or support the existence of various kinds of niche congregations. These niches extend their market base, but are usually different enough that these do not draw members away from churches of their ecumenical partners. Niche congregations can, however, also be problematic for judicatories. By definition niche churches are very different from the majority of congregations in the judicatory. These either cost money to maintain, or if autonomous but uncooperative, may be costly to consensus building, collaborative programs, and overall morale in the judicatory. At the same time, it does seem that niche congregations of varying types will become increasingly important tokens used in judicatory internal and external negotiations.

## REFERENCES

- Ammerman, Nancy T. 1994. "SBC moderates and the making of a post-modern denomination." *Christian Century* 110(26):896-899,
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1994. "Denominations: Who and what are we studying?" R. Bruce Mullin and Russell E. Richey (eds.) *Re-Imagining Denominationalism*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- \_\_\_\_\_with Arthur Farnsley II. 1997. *Congregation and Community*. New Brunswick, N.J., Rutgers University Press.
- Baker, Wayne E., Robert R. Faulkner, and Gene A. Fisher. 1998. "Hazards of the market: The continuity and dissolution of interorganizational market relationships." *American Sociological Review* 6:147-176,
- Chaves, Mark. 1993. "Denominations as Dual Structures: An Organizational Analysis." *Sociology of Religion* 54:147-169.
- 1997. *Ordaining Women: Culture and Conflict in Religious Organizations*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Farnsley II, Arthur Emery. 1994. *Southern Baptist Politics: Authority and Power in the Restructuring of an American Denomination*. University Park: PA:The Pennsylvania State University Press.
- Frank, Thomas Edward. 1997. *Polity, Practice and the Mission of the United Methodist Church*. Nashville: Abington Press.
- Klass, Alan C. 1996, *A Fork in the road: Emerging Trends in Judicatory Operations*. Pamphlet. Privately printed. (?)
- Luidens, Donald A. 1994. "Between myth and hard data: a denomination struggles with identity," pp. 248-269 in Jackson W. Carroll and Wade Clark Roof (eds.), *Beyond Establishment: Protestant Identity in a Post-Protestant Age*. Louisville: Westminster/John Knox..
- Greer, Bruce A. 1993."Strategies for evangelism and growth in three denominations," pp. 87-111 in David A. Roozen and C. Kirk Hadaway (eds.), *Church and Denominational Growth*, Nashville: Abington Press.
- Mead, Loren M. 1991 *The Once and Future Church*. Washington. DC: Alban Institute.

Miller, Donald E. 1997. *Reinventing American Protestantism*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Podolny, Joel M., Toby E. Stuart, Michael T Hannan. 1996. "Networks, knowledge, and niches: Competition in the worldwide semiconductor industry, 1984-1991." *American Journal of Sociology* 102:659-689.

Richey, Russell E. 1994. "Denominations and denominationalism: An American morphology," pp. 74-97 in Robert Bruce Mullin and Russell E. Richey, *Reimagining Denominationalism: Interpretive Essays*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Takayama, K. Peter. 1974. "Administrative Structures and Political Processes in Protestant Denominations." *Publius* 4:5-37.

Toulouse, Mark G. 1994. "What is the role of a denomination in a post-denominational age?". *Lexington Theological Quarterly*, vol. 29:207-248.