

The Art and Science of Subtle Proactivity: Regional Leaders and Their Congregations

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*A paper presented at the Religious Research Association Annual Meetings, Columbus, Ohio
October 2001.*

Exercising authority generally and particularly in the church today, as Jackson Carroll stated (1991:14), "involves influencing, directing, coordinating, or otherwise guiding the thought and behavior of persons and groups in ways they consider legitimate." Carroll goes on (1991:19-36 et. passim) to describe some of the problems clergy have in getting their leadership seen as legitimate in light of the diversity of beliefs, the marginality of the church in society, the value placed on egalitarian decision-making, and the fact that being a member of a church is voluntary.

Clergy have to find sources for gaining legitimacy as leaders within their congregations based on varying combinations of official status, credentials, as well as their own personal credibility and competence in the opinions of members (Carroll, 1991:35-60). Even with these bases covered, Carroll (1991:24) indicates that "At best, church leaders can attempt to influence decisions and actions more indirectly by morally persuasive analysis and interpretation and then doing so in partnership (1991:122) with lay leaders in the congregation.

It is the contention of this paper that the statements Carroll makes about the authority of pastors are also applicable to the extent to which regional judicatory leaders can be effective *in directing, coordinating, or otherwise guiding the behavior* of clergy and congregations.

DATA AND METHODS

The data for this paper was collected as part of a Lilly Endowment funded study of congregations, judicatories, and national church offices. Building on site interviews with regional leaders of seven denominations in seven geographically dispersed sites, I developed an eight-page survey with core questions that went to a national sample of regional judicatory leaders across these denominations that was mailed in the spring of 1999. There are 1,077 surveys in the data base, approximately a 50% return overall, which ranged from a low 33% to 60% in each of seven denominations.¹

At the end of the survey, respondents were asked if they would be willing to be interviewed over the telephone and if so to write their names, telephone numbers, and best times to call. At least three-fifths of respondents in each of the denominations did so. Between the spring of 2000 and the spring of 2001, open-ended telephone interviews of approximately half an hour were conducted with about eighty of these regional leaders, roughly proportionate to the number of respondents in each of the seven denominations.

FINDINGS

A. Congregational Autonomy and the Exercise of Authority

Regional leaders are expected to strengthen their congregations and keep them within the denominational fold. This is no easy task for judicatory executives, who confirming the observations and reports of others (e.g. Ammerman et. al., 1998; Carroll, 1991; Hadaway and Roozen 1995; Hoge et.al., 1994), portray their jobs as serving congregations that are not only diverse in size, financial health, and demographic characteristics of their members (a long-standing situation), but which have also become more divergent in worship style preferences and the stances taken on lifestyle and social issues. About a third of the judicatory executives interviewed volunteered that such congregational differences were exacerbated by the growing differences among their pastors, occasioned some felt by clergy's increasingly different life experiences and backgrounds now.² If clergy do not want to cooperate or associate with other clergy, staff, or leaders of the judicatory, the overall mission and ministry of the judicatory will definitely suffer, with negative repercussions for the larger denomination.

The amount of control regional executives and elected leaders can exercise over congregations looks more different in written rules than in actual practice, interviews indicated. There are denominational differences in the degree to which congregations can exercise autonomy in directing their own affairs, including getting outside resources in programs and consulting, and in choosing their own pastors. At the same time across denominations, large wealthy churches have a great deal of autonomy from their regional judicatory, and small congregations particularly those partly supported by the judicatory have very little organizational autonomy. The situation still holds that membership is voluntary in big and little churches. Further, despite denominational rules and canons governing congregations, in this secular society with relative impunity congregations can refuse to pay any or all of their yearly expected assessments, reduce their giving to denominational mission, and possibly leave the denomination, even if it involves law suits in state courts over the ownership of the church buildings and land.

Perhaps another way of saying it is that the voluntary character of religious involvement, strengthened by cultural norms of egalitarianism, is weakened by the growing marginality of denominational jurisdiction even over its own congregations. Both of these trends have contributed to congregations viewing their associations with their regional judicatory as more a voluntary than a mandated response on their part as well.

Regional leaders are in unenviable position: they have as their major responsibility the care of congregations in their jurisdiction, often without sufficient real authority to insist congregations make needed changes, if these changes are contrary to what the congregation wants. How can they best carry out their work to keep their congregations vital and associated in common mission?

B. Regional Leaders General Policy in Working With Congregations: Survey Responses

Regional leaders surveyed in 1999 were asked: "What is your policy in regard to providing resources, consulting to local churches that you believe need help?" Possible responses were on a continuum

from (1) "wait for the church to ask"... to... (5) "assist church to know what help it needs." The responses of regional leaders surveyed in the total sample and within the seven denominations indicated that were fairly divided in the style they used. In the full sample, about a third said, they:

a) were more reactive (35%) usually waited for the church to ask for help (scores 1,2)

b) were both reactive and proactive (28%), depending on the circumstances (score 3)

c) were more proactive (37%) usually assisting churches to know what help they needed, and then getting this help to the churches (scores 4,5).

The amount of time the regional leaders had to give to assisting churches made some difference in how reactive or proactive they tended to be with congregations. Elected leaders of subdivisions of churches within a judicatory are reimbursed for some expenses in their work, but typically their income is derived from being full-time senior pastor of a church.³ Elected sub-judicatory leaders are significantly⁴ less likely to be proactive, and more reactive, than regional executives and senior staff in working with congregations. This same relationship between persons being paid as regional leaders and the extent to which they actively helped churches know what they needed rather than waiting for churches to ask for help within three denominations where a sample of both paid and unpaid regional leaders were surveyed. In AOG, LCMS and RCA elected volunteer sub-judicatory leaders, typically full-time pastors, were nearly twice as likely to be reactive in dealing with congregations than paid staff in these denominations.⁵

Regional judicatories may also have too few paid staff to cover the total number of congregations or to adequately cover the geographically dispersed congregations in its territory. Even within the same denomination regional judicatories studied differ considerably in the resources available to them to hire paid professional staff. Some regional judicatories have a high proportion of wealthy, contributing congregations than others, and some have varying amounts of extra income from their own endowment funds. Those regional judicatories that have fewer staff than needed to serve their congregations, are almost forced into a reactive policy, as explained by one:

- We have 175 churches in our region - and we just do not have the time to sit down with each church and say, "What do you need?" So, to some extent it is a squeaky wheel thing.

Whether regional leaders are salaried for working with congregations or whether there are simply insufficient number of paid judicatory staff to cover the congregations in its territory, are not the only determinants of their policy. In examining the survey responses of *paid* regional leaders only, there are still some denominational differences. Bishops and senior staff in the Episcopal Church are most likely as a denominational group to over two-thirds majority endorsing a proactive policy with their congregations (71%), while LCMS and UMC tie for second place in having a smaller majority saying they are proactive (58%). In contrast, approximately a two-fifths minority of the other three denominations, AOG, RCA AND UCC with paid staff⁶ are proactive (40%-36%), waiting for churches to ask for assistance. These differences reflect the greater formal authority regional executives in the first three denominations have over their self-supporting congregations as compared to that held by regional executives in the latter three. Regional leaders interviewed in the AOG, RCA, UCC and the Vineyard are more apt to indicate they do not have the formal authority to

come in uninvited to a self-supporting church, and have to take particular care not to be seen as "barging in."

C. Regional Leaders' Reflections on Their Bases of Authority in Effecting Change in Congregations

1. Being Seen as Helpful

In telephone interviews conducted in 2000-2001, I asked approximately eighty regional leaders whether they adopted a more reactive, mixed or proactive style in working with churches, why, and what this involved in various situations. The majority of these regional leaders would concur that it is certainly preferable to wait until a congregation asked for help both in preserving their own time and in better assuring congregational acceptance of their assistance. The problem is, in many instances, getting congregations to ask them for assistance, so they can try to be helpful. Being seen as helpful is certainly a major way that regional leaders gain legitimacy with congregations to exercise authority, as one explained:

- When we are able to meet a church's need, and meet it in a timely and effective manner, that creates a reputation out there that we can really help churches.

There are several reasons, regional leaders variously suggested, why congregations which could benefit from consulting and program resources do not request this of their judicatory. A distressing number of congregations seem to have no idea what kinds of resources their judicatory offers and they can have for the asking. This holds often despite such information provided regularly to congregations through judicatory newsletter notices, mailings to their pastors, and announcements at clergy gatherings and annual meetings of the judicatory.) There are some congregations also which are so determinedly autonomous and sufficiently wealthy, that without asking regional leaders for advice, they hire their own consultants and purchase educational and worship material from external sources. Self-supporting congregations are sometimes quite content and do see a need to seek out new resources or participate in judicatory sponsored programs, which might further enhance their life. Or congregations may fully realize they are stagnant or in some decline, but misunderstand why, and therefore do not ask for judicatory help, which might turn them around. Congregations in trouble may be reluctant to ask for help, fearing that the judicatory executive would close the church or place it under its direct governance (fears which regional leaders wryly observed become a self-fulfilling prophecy if the churches do nothing). As one put the situation:

- There are congregations that never ask for anything until it is too late. I put this down to the new parochialism. My somewhat cynical view is that those that see themselves in trouble ask a lot. And those which think they are O.K. – don't. To be a little more generous about this, the congregations that haven't bothered either to listen or to be aware of the services that are available to them don't ask. It amazes me that they do not know what is here for them.

Many of the regional leaders interviewed volunteered that whether their polity demands no

entry into congregations without being invited, they still need to be proactive in trying to get information about what congregational needs are, in discovering emerging problems before these are crises, if they are to effectively serve these congregations.

Regional leaders also need to actively work to gain the trust of clergy and lay leaders. The more trust regional leaders can engender with influential persons in congregations, and the more such connections they make, the more likely they will have personal contacts with influential individuals to:

- a) be their informants about real needs of or crises in the church.
- b) be better able to ask the regional leader or judicatory for resources.
- c) be opinion leaders in getting their congregation to accept judicatory assistance.

2. Discovering Needs of Churches and Gaining Their Leaders' Trust

Developing sufficient trust and rapport with the pastor, lay board members, and committee chairs, may well require judicatory staff making extended and frequent visits to the congregation. Almost an aphorism now in denominational circles is the admonition that judicatory leaders should listen to what congregations want, not impose their own views. As Klass (1996:13) for one put it:

“...judicatory personnel must build good, solid rapport with congregations and their leaders. Lots of listening time is required...more like counseling, and less like diagnosis and prescription.” This type of listening requires frequent contact.

Indeed, judicatory personnel I interviewed across denominations would agree with this statement in principle. However, regional leaders also indicated that having frequent on-going contact over a long time period with one congregation is apt to be difficult, given the demands made by their other duties and other congregations on their time. Further, before judicatory personnel can listen and build rapport with congregations and their leaders, they first have to gain entry into congregation in a non-threatening way. The following are some of the ways regional leaders are managing such entry.

a. Making the most of Regular Congregational Visitations

Most congregations expect a visit from their judicatory executive or associate executives on a fairly regular basis, at least every two or three years and preferably once a year, to preach, teach, or otherwise acknowledge by their presence the contributions of the congregation to the judicatory. Senior staff may have regularly scheduled meetings at congregations with their clergy and lay officials to discuss governance, finances, property, programs and the like. Several regional leaders suggested the wisdom of taking these opportunities to establish contacts, gather information about the congregation, as well as inform church leaders about the kinds of resources the judicatory offers, encouraging them to request any of these, if they wish. In illustration, the following regional leaders in different denominations describe a version of this strategy:

- We want churches to request our help, but we do try to be proactive through visits of our staff in the various regions and finding out from them (clergy, lay leaders) the kinds of issues

that are in the churches they may not have contacted us directly about. But when we are there, they share.

- We first begin to build trust -- which is going to be done by regular visits to local congregational leadership, building stronger relationships with pastors. ...We hope to develop the trust so that they will participate, feel free to ask, and will not be offended if suggestions are being made.
- Since we are a connectional church, I am in each church at least once and sometimes twice a year, it becomes a way of monitoring what is happening. I also try to visit with the pastors on a more informal level at this time. I take this opportunity to let them know what the conference has to offer them as tools or resources.
- The way I intervene is by being present, worshipping with them, preaching occasionally, sharing my gifts, and letting them know what resources we have available. As they develop levels of trust, they are much more inclined to invite resources.

Establishing personal connections with the pastors and lay leaders of several congregations permit regional leaders to learn about serious problems surrounding pastors, even if the pastors themselves do not ask for help. In illustration, two regional leaders describe how establishing relationships with lay leaders or other clergy enabled them to get essential information to redress a situation, when the pastor involved was not forthcoming about the problem and reluctant to ask for help:

- We just had one of the board members realize they needed to have help. Most often what happens is that people in the congregation - not so much the leaders, but the people in the congregations themselves call and say, "We really have a problem" because sometimes those clergy leaders don't want anyone from the outside coming in, they are "handling it themselves", you know.
- On paper each congregation has to ask for help... Now that is on paper. The truth is we try in our section to build relationships with the ministers in the churches. Often if a guy is struggling, he is not going to tell the District - "Hey! I've got a problem.". But he is going to tell his buddy. And then... his buddy, one of my committee members can say, "Peter over here is having a problem" ...and we can get him help. This is why relationships are so important. Because we all need encouragement at some point or other, and we all need a shoulder to cry on, we all need another pastor that will just let us say nasty things about our churches...because we all feel that way sometime or other...but primarily we need someone to say, "I know of a resource there." That is what we do best, and most often it is done on an informal basis.

There are limits to the amount of time that most regional leaders have to visit and talk with lay and clergy leaders in any one congregation. Those who have had longer tenure in their position have had more opportunity to make the "personal connections," even if these are reinforced only once or twice a year, an advantage several mentioned. There are attempts to find ways to listen to congregations while taking some of the burden off individual judicatory personnel and getting more regional leaders involved. Several judicatories are experimenting with sending in two or more

judicatory leaders to all its congregations to listen to needs and advertise the judicatory, as illustrated in the descriptions from two judicatory leaders in two denominations:

- Technically we cannot go into a church unless we are invited. The only way, well one way, is that the board of directors agreed that we would embark on a three-year visitation of our churches. In this visitation we are just to visit - not to come and say, *We want your money!* - but to be a presence. One of the conference ministers and a member of the board of directors go, and we spend an hour to two hours just asking questions: "What good things have been happening?" "What has been challenging?" "What is God calling you to do in this place?" Sometimes as a result of those conversations, we can offer conference resources and our experience at other churches.
- We have a visitation program in which a member of our diocesan council and a member of our commission on congregational life visit every congregation once a year. They have the express purpose of assessing what the needs are there, and also sharing what is going on the regional and diocesan levels and offering help. We have found this proactive approach very helpful.

b. Offering Group Learning Events to Congregational Leaders

Another way of maximizing the effectiveness of judicatory staff time spent in gathering information about congregational needs, forming personal connections, imparting information and sharing resources - is through the judicatory holding group events to which congregational leaders from all or a selection of congregations are invited. A number of regional executives across denominations described some version of this approach, which usually involved inviting clergy and/or lay leaders to attend voluntarily and with at no cost to them, a seminar or conference, often with outside speakers or consultants and free meals. Sometimes the major and stated purpose of such events is for gathering information about what kinds of issues congregations are addressing, and what kinds of support or help their leaders need in order to meet challenges. In illustration:

- We are just finishing up a project called Listening to Congregations, where we go out to regional areas, and say: "Come tell us what you need! Instead of us sitting around a table in the back of a church office, you come and tell us!" We were wondering if anybody would come to these events. A whole lot of people did! So, we are just in the process of gathering that information.

More typically, the judicatory staff, having already gathered information on what some of their congregational leaders' common needs and interests are, design workshops focused on training in one or more of these identified areas. Conflict management, church revitalization, stewardship, and youth ministry are the kind of topics, for example, that have been the focus of workshops in judicatories of several denominations. Usually, all clergy and sometimes lay officers of the church are sent letters of invitation to participate. Conferences or workshops are also offered fairly frequently for persons specializing in certain areas (e.g. church treasurers, directors of music or of Christian education, etc.) and for leaders of particular types of congregations in the judicatory (e.g. churches over 500, churches under 150, new churches, stagnant churches, growing churches).

Depending on the focus of the conference or workshop series, judicatory staff may also telephone particular clergy or lay leaders, and as one put it "encourage them to be part of this."

These judicatory sponsored events have several anticipated outcomes. The first is getting training and counseling to people who need it, without their having to understand or admit how much they need it, or even ask for it individually. The group setting allows more interaction among the participants, as well as giving judicatory leaders opportunity to get to know clergy and lay leaders better, hear what participants believe are pressing issues in their congregations, and allow judicatory staff to describe other kinds of resources the judicatory can provide. Another advantage of the group conference or consultation is that it is more obvious that the judicatory is the provider, not just one regional leader who has met with clergy or visited their congregations recently. In illustration, the following regional leaders describe such events and what purposes these serve for the congregations and the judicatory:

- In an effort to be proactive, we do try to set up workshops or training sessions that deal with issues these clergy are going to face, even though they haven't asked for our help yet.
- Our polity is pretty clear; we cannot intervene unless we are invited. But one of the ways we have discovered to help is to hold consultations on specific issues and invite the churches to come. Once they get there, and the issues are clearly laid out, what happens often times is they self-identify the problems and the challenges. Then they proceed to engage in some sort of redressing of the particular issues.
- We are just about to have our first three-day workshop for stagnant congregations under our larger Covenant for Renewal Program. We have brought in some outside resources, and they will lead us through the process of taking the learning from family systems theory and applying it to congregations that are stale or dead in the water. We then will undertake to train the pastors in how to move their congregations out of their stalemates and into more active ministry. We sent a letter to every pastor saying that we would pay any expenses they could not afford. After the letter we made telephone calls to every pastor encouraging them to attend. We have twenty-five people coming. It is my intention that after this first workshop we will continue to have quarterly meetings to share case studies, reflect together, and to really provide a kind of mutual support for pastors as they work on: *How do you get your church unstuck?*

3. Judicatory Time and Profit

Many judicatory executives and senior staff would recommend taking these rather proactive, but also non-threatening and relatively unobtrusive ways to gather information from congregations and establish connections with their leaders, over just "waiting" for a congregation to make the first overture. These approaches and methods of gaining access, information and trust, however, typically involve much staff planning and time in congregations. Staff time spent with one congregation can be too costly, if not always in actual dollars, in time staff is not spending spent with other congregations. Therefore, a number of regional leaders interviewed recommend taking substantial time to listen, talk, and try to help a congregation only **IF** the congregation is one that has the potential for growth or otherwise contributes to the life of the judicatory, rather than drains it. This caveat is discussed next.

D. Regional Leaders Styles of Responding to Congregational and Clergy Needs: Reactive, Proactive and Subtly Proactive

1. The Extremes of Style: Working with Marginal or "Iffy" Congregations

Regional leaders (even within the same denomination) described the extremes of a reactive and proactive policy when they talked about helping their small, stagnant congregations. At least one or two regional executives in five of the seven denominations frankly said they followed the policy of "leave well enough alone" in regard to small congregations which are never going to grow but also are self-supporting *and* demand little or nothing of the judicatory.

Regional leaders face more of dilemma in deciding whether to adopt a more reactive or more proactive policy when these small churches *do* request many services. Regional leaders can be overwhelmed by demands from lay leaders and clergy that they resolve conflict in perpetually conflicted pastor-eating parishes, and "to do something" about helping "my church grow" in congregations which do not want to change in any other way:

- The worse problem in our region is (church) survival; and the worse part of that is that churches develop a survival mentality. This makes them much less willing to risk and strike out in new directions, when that might be the answer to their question about survival.

Most regional leaders would prefer to ignore requests from small, stagnant churches and follow Loren Mead's (1991) warning not to expend a lot of judicatory staff resources in trying to save them from extinction. Several judicatory executives interviewed declared they would take no action in these cases because, as one put it:

- Sometimes we are just waiting for dying churches to understand they are dead. And it is just a waiting game at that point because I don't want to close anybody against their will. They sort of have to come to their own conclusion that they don't have an active ministry.

In contrast, faced with similar kinds of problems in how to deal with stagnant or dying congregations, some judicatory executives adopt a very proactive approach. These regional leaders are likely to be in the more hierarchical denominations. They have more authority to intervene if there are problems, and there is usually an expectation that all congregations will provide the judicatory office with a full accounting every year of their finances, members, programs and plans. From these sources, regional leaders have ready access to church reports that help them pinpoint which congregations are possibly in trouble. Judicatory leaders in the Episcopal Church and the United Methodist Church, in particular, indicated that once or twice a year they and other regional officials meet as group to check congregational reports, share information about congregations with problems, and then deciding what actions to take. The explanation of one such official is instructive:

- We have a series of statistical checklists that we go through every year. When we see certain kinds of information, it allows us to contact the church, ask what is going on. So we tend to meddle in their lives very heavily because we think that is what we should be doing.

Since regional leaders in the more hierarchical, church-centered denominations can⁷ legitimately adopt a more proactive approach than those in the more congregational-centered denominations can, they can exert authority in a proactive manner, even if the churches object. Similar to regional leaders in any denomination, however, they try to avoid antagonizing their healthy or wealthy congregations. Congregations that are in crisis are quite another matter.

Examples proffered by judicatory executives and senior staff of proactive policies and programs they instigated to force marginal congregations to move in certain directions were made primarily (but not exclusively) by those in the Episcopal Church and the United Methodist Church. In a Methodist conference, small churches that had been stagnant for some time were told they had to participate in a judicatory sponsored program for congregational revitalization before they would be assigned another pastor. In several Episcopal dioceses bishops are experimenting with the '*Shut Down-Start Over*' "method of church renewal whereby a dying or crisis-ridden congregation is pressured to disband legally as that parish and reconstitute itself (using the same facilities) as a new congregation under temporary oversight of a diocesan congregational development team. One diocese is further reviving a seldom-used church law to mandate change in crisis-ridden congregations:

- For those congregations which need help and are in real difficulty, but refuse to ask for help, one of the blessings of being the Episcopal Church is that we do have rules, one which is called the Imperiled Parish Canon, which flies in the face of Episcopal polity generally, but which we are now using. What that canon means is that if your parish meets certain criteria, you have no choice; the bishop will be sending a team in....One church that fired their rector, which they can't do, was declared "imperiled" and closed. They did not like it at all; saying they had been "hammered" by the diocese. Another imperiled parish is responding well and is working with a congregational development team to try to regroup and see what can be done.

Similar judicatory takeover of marginal congregations also occurs in the more congregationally-centered Assemblies of God. A formerly sovereign church that has been torn up by conflict or seen its membership dwindle, may revert to the status of district-affiliated church. At this point the district will appoint staff or other clergy to oversee the church in all its decision-making, assign it a pastor, and keep a close watch on its finances

2. Pleasant Proactivity: Helping with a Pastoral Search

Judicatory executives and staff appear more likely to initiate intervention in congregations in times of pastoral search, or in times of new church development which will be sponsored by one or a cluster of congregations. These are generally exciting, positive times for congregations, and where they expect and welcome some direct involvement of their regional leaders. These are also important intervention points for regional leaders to exercise their expertise and strengthen their influence. The kind of pastor called or appointed will not only impact the life of the congregation, but also will have ramifications for the future relationship between the congregation and the judicatory. Therefore, even regional leaders who generally wait for churches to ask for assistance or invite them in, are likely to take a more proactive role in assisting with pastoral searches. In illustration, one comments

- We function a bit in both ways. We do not have much power to intervene. We are very proactive during times of ministerial change. I try to meet with every church to try and help them with the whole process, and offer services for thinking about the future

Sometimes the pastor has been "involuntarily terminated" or left willingly with crises and conflicts in his or her wake. Although neither the regional leader nor the congregational leaders find having to deal with the resultant issues pleasant, this is still an opportunity for the judicatory to be seen as particularly helpful in exercising authority, and so gain the members trust and respect. The congregation may be more open than ever before to taking judicatory leaders' advice and moving in new directions.

3. Subtle Proactivity for Strengthening Congregations

Most judicatory executives would concur that waiting for churches to ask for help, without trying to find out what they need, may result in churches asking too late for the judicatory to be helpful. Many might agree with the following bishop that this wastes salaried staff time, e.g.

- I tell the superintendents they need to be much more proactive; they need to be showing up in churches, rather than sitting in the office and waiting for someone to come in. They need to be out there.

Yet regional leaders are aware that all too easily lines between their being seen as attentive listeners and being viewed as interfering interlopers can get blurred in church situations, to quote another leader:

- We try to be alert and aware as to what the needs are, and to walk that fine line between hovering and being too involved too soon, but yet being available and ready so that you don't wait until disaster strikes.

Even when regional leaders take great care to gather information and build trust, there are still going to be clergy and congregations in crisis that will not ask the judicatory for assistance. In these cases, a number of regional leaders interviewed gave descriptions of their actions, which are proactive, but carried out subtly more than overtly. Generally, regional executives and senior staff do not demand that clergy or elected members of the congregational governing board accept the kind of assistance the judicatory can provide. Rather, as adumbrated earlier, they "suggest" options and "invite" clergy and lay leaders to take advantage of workshops, and "offer" staff consultants and program resources to the congregation. In illustration, other leaders from different denominations commented:

- I often find myself suggesting things to congregations, and perhaps raising questions. But I have never been in a situation where I have told a congregation it needs to do x, y, and z.
- We are in the process now of doing some work in church revitalization and it is really unclear how we will make entry - whether we will say them, You could really use this because you need it! or Who would like to come to this? We tend to say the latter.
- If I see there is a need and the church does not know how to ask for assistance, I don't hesitate to call up and offer help.

- Polity-wise we cannot tell a congregation what to do. But in reality if we see a church in trouble or a pastor in trouble, we will consult with them and encourage them to take action.
- Congregations have to ask for intervention... We do not have the ability to walk in and say: "You are doing this wrong!" That is not within our authority...If a lay group or pastor was running the church into the ground, we can try to make contact with someone who is in the inside leadership, or somebody on the outside who can influence someone inside.

If these invitations, suggestions, and circumvention do not work, even the generally reactive regional leader may take a subtly proactive approach in averting a crisis:

- Initially I did not interfere in a congregation unless I was called in. But just today I called a person that I am going to have lunch with - because I learned there was a problem going on in the congregation and neither she nor the official board of the church has told me. That is not unusual because they don't want to be embarrassed by airing dirty linen. I simply called and said, "I understand there are some problems; I would like to have lunch and let's talk this over and see where we are coming from, and what is going on, and how I can be helpful."

E. Constructive and Destructive Consequences of Being Subtle

In order to effectively use the authority of position to move a congregation toward greater vitality, it is almost necessary in congregational polities and very helpful in more hierarchical polities, for judicatory leaders to be *subtly* active in listening, questioning, gathering information, and making personal contacts in local churches. Judicatory leaders similarly are more likely to be successful in getting people or churches to accept assistance, if they work behind the scenes to devise probable solutions, and present these as options rather than commands.

Although such subtle proactivity is often an effective strategy for helping congregations, it has drawbacks for the recognition of regional leaders' authority based on expertise. Subtle actions are by definition not widely observable. Effective judicatory senior staff may be well known and highly appreciated by those who have had direct contact with them recently, but most members of congregations have no idea who their judicatory staff are and what they do. Even the top regional executive in judicatories of a hundred congregations or more, while having name recognition, is not going to be seen more than two or three times a year by most clergy and lay leaders and then in group situations, clergy gatherings or congregational visitations. Milofsky's (1999) suggests that lay persons in the Episcopal Church underestimate the influence and importance of their bishop's leadership on their and other congregations of the diocese, in large part because they:.... "don't see the organization at work... Effective leadership increases integration and does so in a way that places most of the credit with the local organizers, not with regional leaders."

Regional leaders voiced this same observation and plaint across denominations interviewed for this present study. In illustration:

- We are fairly autonomous, very congregational, anyway... Basically I have several district level positions to assist our churches, we put on programs, and we do a kids camp sponsored by our district - but basically our people do not know the district exists. We tell them, we bring the leaders through, we will go to the kids camps and the youth retreats - but

its "Oh that's nice!" You know, they don't make the connection...the people in leadership understand the district relationship, but the average person in the pew - whether it is Promise Keepers putting on the men's deal or our district doing it - is irrelevant for them. (Just as long as they get good programs from somewhere?) Exactly.

- The tendency of lay people is to turn to us if there is a problem, but other than that, they do not know we exist.
- The pastors, the people who come to annual meetings as delegates, and then less frequently the moderators, see the conference as very helpful, but 99% of the people in the pews hardly know anything about it.
- The national church has this report out where some congregations, one in this diocese too, say "Why do we need a diocese? We don't know!" What they did not ask was: "So - who found the new rector that made this all happen for you?" and "What was the structure and support system in deployment and negotiation behind the scenes that you never knew about?" And all that kind of stuff.

The senior staff member just quoted went on to say that although of course it is more important to do an effective job in strengthening congregations than to be recognized for doing so, still this hurts! Regional leaders do in main try to be helpful to the congregations in their jurisdictions. Often, as described, they can best do this through using a subtly proactive approach in working with congregations. Yet, if the work of judicatory leaders is unrecognized and denigrated as of little worth by many members, how badly will this impair these leaders' continued motivation to devote as much effort to assisting congregations? Pastors are not the only church leaders who "burn out." If many congregations believe that the judicatory is not needed, how will this impact their funding of the judicatory and its future ability to attract high caliber executives and senior staff?

This aspect of the exercise of authority is a dilemma confronting regional leaders in many judicatories across denominations. We welcome others' reflections on this issue.

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ENDNOTES

1. [\(return to text\)](#)

Respondents:	Numbers
Assemblies of God	252 (41 Dist. sups., 211 Section pres)
Association of Vineyard Churches	27 (Area Pastoral Coordinators)
Episcopal Church	78 (58 Bps; 10 staff, 10 prov. pres)
Lutheran Church Missouri Synod	353 (31 Dist. pres. 322 Circuit coun)
Reformed Church in America	45 (7 Synod execs., 38 Classis clerks)
United Church of Christ	57 (Conf. and Ass Conf. Ministers)
United Methodist Church	265 (19 Bps, 33 CC dir; 211 D.S., 2 ?)
	Total Sample 1,077

2. The persons graduating from seminary, unlike those from a couple of decades ago, are typically older second career persons, resulting in their having a greater diversity of life experiences on coming to seminary. Further, since most seminarians now commute and do not live on campus during seminary, there is not the same "homogenizing" seminary culture being formed. A couple of regional leaders interviewed posited this last factor as one reason for more diversity in orientations among their clergy.

3. In the full sample, 457 were executives or senior staff paid for their time; 579 were unpaid (usually elected) leaders, who also served as paid pastors of large churches.

4. The correlation between being not paid for work as a regional leader and being proactive is $-.38$, sig. $.0001$.

5. Proportion who are reactive in waiting for churches to ask for help: AOG - 25% of paid staff to 40% of elected volunteers; LCMS - 13% of paid staff to 58% of elected volunteers; RCA - 27% of paid staff to 52% of elected volunteers.

6. Area Pastoral Coordinators in the Vineyard were the only regional leaders in place at the time of this survey. These men are not paid for their work with other congregations, but rather earn their salaries by being senior pastors of Vineyard congregations.

7. See Zikmund et. al. (1998) for a historical and current description of these polity types, and a taxonomy of how present denominations can be classified.