

Brand Name Identity in a Post-Denominational Age: Regional Leaders' Perspectives On Its Importance for Churches

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In national offices of several denominations, efforts are underway to reclaim and extend the reputation of their faith body as one with a uniquely valuable set of beliefs, polity, and worship. The reality of the “post-denominational age”, where people stay or change congregations for reasons other than denominational affiliation, is fueling national church efforts to strive more extensive education about the history, polity, beliefs and practices of the denomination among its members, develop some standards and consistency in worship, and achieve better public press generally including the use of paid t.v. spots. New media are reporting on the efforts.

One such story: “Protestants Look to Their Roots: After Decades of Ecumenism, Denominations Emphasize Sectarian Brand Identity” is the title of an article by Barbara Carton published in the *Wall Street Journal* (October 19, 2000: B1,B4). This article describes some actions mainline Protestant denominations are presently taking to better publicize to the general public what is unique about their tradition, as well as be considerably more intentional about teaching their distinctive history, polity, and other facets of their faith and practice not only to new members, but to long-time members, and those seeking ordination in their denomination. By establishing a stronger “brand” identity, Protestant denominations hope to: 1) re-involve the marginal members in congregations; 2) induce their congregation and members to demonstrate commitment to the wider denomination in practices and in financial contributions; 3) attract new members who are not presently identifiers with the denominational label.

Although un-churched “identifiers” with a denomination may be the best source of new member recruits for congregation of this denomination (or another in the same denominational “family”), unless they do so become involved in the “community” life of the congregation, their identification per se does almost nothing to strengthen the denomination. These points have been made primarily for Protestants in studies by Bibby (1999); Hoge et. al. (1994), Marler and Hadaway (1993) among others. A recent study by D’Antonio et.al. (2001) of American Catholics notes similar trends in decline of congregational involvement, as well as commitment and conformity to the denominational teachings. These authors make a similar recommendation that,

“Catholics must have a sense that being Catholic is special. They must know that being Catholic is different from belonging to any other religious group. They must have a pride in their heritage.” (pp. 134-135)

Societal factors reducing denominational commitment are noted by many scholars and denominational leaders, as I summarized in a 1999 paper. Among these are the greater mobility of people and exposure to various values and situation in their new locations, which combined with the societal values on making personal decisions choices autonomous of outside influences, is seen to contribute to the “isms” destructive to maintaining denominational identity and commitment, i.e. “consumerism” and, “individualism” , and “congregationalism”.

It is the contention of this paper that these “isms” also may impede denominations successfully employing national publicity and increased efforts at denominational training of members and of clergy to turn this situation around. . As congregations strive to offer a variety of kinds of services and programs that will be involving to different groups of people, they may come to see the health of the congregation as considerably more important than that of the denomination, or exhibit increased “congregationalism.” in making decisions and connections without and outside of denominational recommendation or even approval. Congregations which have are not financially dependent on the denomination, take the initiative in looking at sources that can help them grow stronger and larger, and these sources can easily be outside the denomination. Congregations can become as or more involved in joint projects with congregations or agencies outside of their denomination than with their own (Ammerman forthcoming 2001).

Just as the values of Individualism and consumerism support “church shopping” of even lay persons born in the denomination and eventually of congregations to “shop” for the best resources, as well as legitimate individuals and congregations’ r donations of time and money to ecumenical bodies and secular causes, these values will also block efforts of their denomination to insist that individuals or congregation behave in certain ways. Whatever the denominational polity, just like individuals, congregations can leave the denomination, either through church constitutions and charters of their regional judicatory with relative ease, or with more difficulty through legal conflicts in state courts when ownership of property is involved. Whatever the denomination, the larger and wealthier the congregation the more autonomy it has and will exercise in deciding whether to go along with national or regional priorities and demands.

National denominational bodies, faced with growing “congregationalism” on the part of their local churches, and the resulting variety of worship practices and beliefs within the denomination, can have a more difficult time successfully promulgating a distinctive identity that is acceptable to a clear majority of their congregations and members. National denominational bodies may also find their authority over individual congregations is greatly attenuated by these “isms.” This results in national leaders’ experiencing reduced authority to insist that congregations provide extensive training in denominational history, polity and core beliefs - if congregational leaders do not feel that doing so is a priority in light of other objectives.

It is the thesis of this paper that brand name identity is a lot more important to national denominational offices than it is either local congregations and to regional judicatory leaders. In theory, it does sound plausible that the more a denomination is seen as a faith tradition distinct from others, the more likely individuals will stay within congregations of the denomination rather

switching to those of other denominations, and the more likely those not yet members of the denomination will seek out one of its congregation because greater brand identity, and to learn more about it and then join. Perhaps a denomination can increase its brand identity by putting more effort into teaching what is distinctive about its tradition to marginal and nominal members, thereby making these members more active individually as well as more likely to marry and raise children in the faith tradition. If this happens, then the number of committed members of the denominations will rise. Our study of regional judicatory leaders and their work with congregations suggests that where this brand identity approach misses is in attracting the always unchurched adults.

Regional Judicatories and Brand Name

Regional denominational offices are located to better permit the denomination to exercise both religious authority and provide expert services to congregations. Regional judicatory executives and staff are expected by their national church bodies to be proactive in promoting denominational loyalty among the congregations in their charge. However, it might be safe to say that regional leaders are exhorted even more strongly by their national bodies to increase membership in their congregations, a result that presumably will be expedited through meeting these other objectives. A 1999 mailed survey of regional leaders in seven denominations¹ and subsequent telephone depth interviews with approximately eighty of these leaders allows some assessment of the fit among these objectives.

A. Results from the Survey Data

Analyses of the survey data, in my 1999 paper, “The Role of Judicatories in Interpreting Denominational Identity” had several findings:

1) First, growth in denominational identity among congregations is seen as a likely major resource contributing to the overall vitality of the denomination. Regional leaders who believed their denomination had become more effective in maintaining a denominational identity among their congregations over the last five years were significantly more likely than those who believe it had remained the same or decreased, to also believe that: there was similar denominational growth in unity of purpose, more denominational success in attracting and keeping members in their local churches, and both better health of the congregations generally and more financial stability at their national church headquarters.

2) Given the value of denominational identity among congregations as a value in itself and partly as a resource for achieving other goals, it seems that denominations do have less of this resource now than even several years ago, and some denominations would seem in more precarious straits in retaining vitality than others. In maintaining denominational identity in their congregations, nearly twice as many regional leaders believed their denomination had declined (37%) than believed their denomination had increased (20%) in effectiveness over the last five years. Least decline in maintaining congregational identity with their denomination was reported by regional leaders in evangelical, entrepreneurial denomination of the Assemblies of God and the Association of Vineyard Churches. The Episcopal Church and the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod with distinctive liturgies and hierarchical polities were third and fourth in ability to stave off erosion of denominational identity. The United Methodist Church, which has strong regional control over

congregations, but no central national authority, was fifth. Sixth and seventh were two denominations with much internal diversity, little formal authority over congregations on either the regional or national levels - the United Church of Christ and the Reformed Church in America, which reported the greatest loss of denominational identity in their local churches.

3) Within denominations, those regional leaders reporting most loss in denominational identity among their congregations were those who also: a) reported that many of their lay leaders objected to the national church's policies and programs; b) they personally did not use national church resources, and c) there were substantial theological differences held by their membership. This last factor of theological differences was most important for those leaders in denominations where theological unity was part of the denominational brand identity; such as LCMS. In UCC, in contrast, where theological diversity is the part of its brand identity, such diversity is expected and had no impact on whether conference ministers reported more stability of loss of congregational identity with the denomination..

B. Insights from Interviews conducted in 2000-2001

Working on the assumption that growth in congregational identity with the denomination is a valuable resource and its decline in such congregational identity will endanger the attainment of denominational objectives and is a cause for concern, open ended telephone interview questions were directed toward what these leaders thought were particularly important elements of their denominational identity, and what would enhance or detract from their congregation's identify with the denomination. Fortunately, fairly early in the interviewing, one judicatory executive responded, "Ask me if I think it is important that our congregations identify with our denomination in a post-denominational age." So I did, and added this question to the set. It was interesting to note that majority of these regional leaders interviewed were well acquainted with the term "post-denominationalism" and the "brand" identification of their denomination which they found salient or not.. Their responses illuminate why national offices in Protestant denominations are unlikely to experience much success in this new emphasis on promoting and teaching what is special about their particular denomination.

1. *Attracting and keeping the never-churched adults*, those who have little or no contact with congregational worship or religious instruction in any form, is a larger part of most regional leaders jobs across denomination than more national church leaders may realize. This factor alone had major consequences for efforts at increasing brand name identity.

Almost a fifth of the regional leaders interviewed raised the example of the church name of a congregation, whether it included the denominational affiliation in its title. Several leaders brought up that the fact that if the denomination were not part of a certain congregation's name, no one walking it to the church would know - the congregation has so carefully tried to emulate congregations of other denominations in worship style and other factors, no one walking in would know its affiliation, e.g. "If I didn't see Lutheran on the door, I wouldn't know it was."

Congregations with polities stressing more autonomy of local churches, are likely more apt to leave the denominational affiliation out of their church name. Many American Baptist congregations, as reported by Lowell Fewster (2000) do not mention their affiliation on their sign. Regional leaders I interviewed in AOG, RCA, UCC all made of this absence in denominational identification on the

church name, making it difficult for newcomers to identify it by denomination, as well as sometimes as members: e.g.” One church did not even have AOG in their name at all, and probably half the congregation did not know they were AOG.”

Regional leaders mentioned the example of a church name without a denominational affiliation not as much to illustrate inattention to denominational identity on the part of some of their congregations, but rather whether the denominational *brand* name hurt or helped membership growth itself. In illustration:

- UMC leader: People thought it was a Lutheran church just by looking at it. Those looking for a UMC church could not find it because it was not in the name. So we eventually changed the name to include United Methodist in the name and the consensus was that it helped us to get members; it did not hurt us. People did not stay away because it was UMC. Now I still think that was not the main reason people came. For some people it was loyalty to the *brand*. For most people it was their satisfaction with what was going on in the congregation.
- RCA leader: Hardly any church has the name “reformed” in it here, and we don’t start churches with the name “reformed” in it any more. We know we will be much more effective if we don’t try to attract them with the “reformed” brand.

2. *Polity is a major component of denomination identity* for regional leaders in the more hierarchal and connectional denominations, Episcopal and Methodist, who are finding that many in their congregations do not understand the polity rules, and that there are higher authorities have the right to make rules and choose or stop their hiring or firing their pastor. Polity is also an important in the free-church tradition, as way of contrasting themselves in a positive way to the more hierarchal denominations.

- UCC leader. I think it is important for people to understand polity because it is very much part of our identity... Somebody that came in from another denomination can say, “Well how can the UCC say this?” and I say, “Well, they can say whatever they want but that does not affect you as a local church? That is our covenant.

3. *Negative Comparisons and Incendiary Issues were mentioned* by regional leaders as much as positive to denominational identity among congregations,. The homosexuality issue has, according to a number of regional leaders particularly in the Episcopal Church, UCC and UMC, made some of their congregations more denominationally loyal and some less. Here the national church passing resolutions and making rules that are supposed apply to congregational options in the judicatory is the factor in itself reducing the denominational affiliation of some local churches , as much as the content of the resolution or rule.

4. The consensus among regional leaders across denominations is that *pastors’ beliefs and actions* are the main factor in whether the congregation identifies with the denomination Regional leaders complain less about the lack of knowledge of the denomination among new clergy, and more about what might be termed what aspects of the denomination new clergy need to know in order to minister effectively in congregations of the twenty-first century: As one put it:

- We may be in a post denominational age, but every denomination, not just UMC are trying to figure out how to mold their pastors so they reflect the tradition in which they are going to minister.

Many regional leaders are more concerned with what might be termed the “consumerism” or “individualism” on the part of the newly ordained. The plaint goes that unlike clergy of their generation, now newly ordained graduates will take the best paying job with the best prospects, sometimes even if it is in another denomination. This has always been true in the free-church traditions, but is more possible now in the other more hierarchical denominations which “share full communion”. “Whatever opens up - they go!” and as another commented: “The boomers and X-generations want the fellowship, want the relationship, but feel less need of structure, and are not interested in the company line.”

5. Because pastors are important in keeping congregations within the denomination, regional leaders care a great deal more about making sure their **clergy** *have some grasp of the distinctive aspects of their denomination, and value these*. A minority of regional leaders seem to care “in this post-denominational age” whether indeed their congregational *members* are denominational committed, given their far more pressing priorities of recruiting new members and keeping their congregations happy with judicatory — even if these congregations are angry with the denomination.

Regional leaders interviewed in majority did not think the denominational name was drew new members in to their congregation.

The new people who come to us, come because of whatever attracts them - whether the beauty of the liturgy or outreach and justice, or youth ministries - whatever happens to be the appeal to them. I think those people who do not have the history with the Episcopal Church there is not that identity and if they move on to another place they would probably shop around for a church that would meet their needs in similar ways.

I would say that younger people do not feel quite the affiliation. They are look for a certain type of church and they will go to any church that gives them what they are looking for, the kind of spirituality that they seek. They will come to a prayer service here and not go to church for the rest of the month. They are going to buy what they want.

The reality is that we are an aging denomination and so people who are still in our churches care deeply. For the newer, younger members, I don’t think the denominational name is important.

Given the importance on attracting people to congregations, especially the younger people, the following comments about the relative unimportance of denominational identity among lay members of congregations. Regional leaders in main do not see that either stressing the denominational name or insisting new members take extensive membership courses is going to accomplish getting new members into and committed to their congregations, and in fact it may turn them away. · RCA: Denominationalism for professionals is really different than that t for congregations. Between the call system and the Board of Pensions, those are pretty big issues. - But for most people in the pew they neither know nor care. etc.

- RCA: Even if they go through membership classes - they still see the local church as being the key ingredient in their spiritual life and not the denominational relationship, especially if they are new church plants.
- UCC: I don't think denomination identity it is really important...our churches are growing. These are very liberal and openly gay churches. Most of our growth is from unchurched people coming out of a secular background.
- EPIS I don't know that it is our job to necessarily mold people into a denominational identity. I want to help them grow in the faith as Christian women and men, and hopefully they will find the Episcopal church will meet their need where ever they go. But the truth is, it does not always. And I think you have to be realistic about that.
- EPIS. Well we are experiencing some of that post-denominational age. We think that the baby boomers and particularly the Gen X'ers are not as interested in whether it is an Episcopal church or Lutheran church, that is not a major concern to them. What is a concern to them is that the church speaks to their spiritual lives and has programs that minister to their lives. For that reason, we are finding that larger churches are growing faster than smaller churches because the larger churches have more programs that these people identify with. They have a very much a consumer kind of attitude: "What can you do from my children?" "What kind of choir program do you have?"

And finally, how important is a specific denominational identity for the Christian faith? Perhaps of less importance than for the fate of one denomination:

- One of the things that we are called to do is to sort of die to some of these old identities and grow into new ones and that is a constant process... We have a new ingredient and it is the juice and that is what gives us this new sense of identity. Especially when you get into the Xers and the millenniums we are talking about people to whom the name of their denomination is okay but is not as important as it was to their parents and grandparents. I don't get all excited when somebody says" this denomination may die" or become something else - because we are supposed to be dying and becoming something else. That is the name of the game.

1. [\(return to text\)](#) Survey results as part of the Organization of Religious Work study supported by the Lilly Endowment by a grant to Hartford Seminary, included:

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	