

# JUDICATORIES WAYS OF ENCOURAGING THEIR CONGREGATIONS TO SHARE OR COVENANT WITH ONE ANOTHER IN MINISTRY AND MISSION

Second Research Report: PART A

By

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**Foreword:** The First Research Report described the importance regional leaders interviewed gave to getting congregations in their jurisdictions to be in connection or covenant with one another, as well as some difficulties they encountered in doing this. In this, the Second Research Report, the major focus will be on ways that regional leaders are trying out now to get their congregations to work together. This report will be in two parts: A. Promoting Sharing Among Congregations Generally; and B. Encouraging Large, Wealthy Congregations to Share Resources with Small, Poor Congregations.

**Request:** Many of you, whose interviews have contributed to this report, I talked with over six months ago. You may have started a program since we spoke, or the program or policy you described may have been developed further with both snags and successes. Please update us now through the web discussion board or by direct e-mail, if you prefer.

## **A. Promoting Sharing Among Congregations in the Judiciary Generally**

**1. Promoting congregational sharing is a judicatory priority, particularly in some denominations.** Most regional leaders, interviews suggest, would like congregations in their jurisdictions to do a lot more sharing of programs, resources and activities than is presently the case. This was confirmed by the survey responses: almost all (94%) of the regional leaders in full sample and a strong majority in each denomination believe that in their judiciaries *at least some effort* should be placed on Asharing of resources and programs among our local churches.” Sharing programs and resources among congregations of a judicatory is often hoped by regional leaders to accomplish two things: 1) using scarce resources of personnel and materials as efficiently as possible; and often especially 2) building up a sense of community among the congregations and people in the regional judicatory. Nearly three-fifths (58%) of the total sample and over half of the regional leaders in each denomination feel that getting their churches to share more is an area in which *much or great* effort should be made.

There are denominational differences among regional leaders in the amount of attention they feel should be given to getting churches in their jurisdictions to share more than they do presently. Regional leaders in the United Church of Christ and the Episcopal Church are most concerned

with improving this area; the Vineyard leaders least. These differences may be due to different value priorities as well as somewhat greater need in some regions.

**2. Review of explanations given by regional leaders in telephone interviews to why getting their congregations to share can be problematic. These fall in the following major categories:**

(a) Getting lay persons to go to anything at a church other than their own is difficult because their time is so stretched. This is a point mentioned by leaders in all denominations, but to quote one executive:

! Part of it I think is simply the time crunch. People do not have much time; they do whatever is easiest. There is a church board meeting at 8:00 p.m. tomorrow night and some of the people will not have been home from work yet. They work more than hour on the train from the city...and some of them will leave home at 5:30 in the morning to beat the traffic. When they get here at 8:00 they will not have been home for dinner yet. So that is real commitment - and time is precious. That means if it is going to take 42 meetings to get this thing off the ground - or can we just do it ourselves and have one meeting?! There is no contest.

(b) Ecumenical relations with congregations are often more geographically accessible and sometimes preferable to working closely with another church of their denomination. Several executives in different denominations explained that when two churches of the same denomination are geographically close, there might be a number of obstacles to their sharing programs or resources with one another. Sometimes there are historical differences that are still operative, e.g. At the mine bosses went to one church, the mine workers to the other.≡ One church may have broken off from the other church because of some conflict. The pastors and lay leaders of the congregations of the same denomination in the vicinity can be competitive with one another fearing As sheep stealing.≡ For small churches in proximity, sometimes they also fear that they will be Amerged≡ by the judicatory, if they appear to be Atoo≡ happily cooperating. To quote a leader in another denomination:

! We struggle with getting churches to share all the time. But churches in proximity are so afraid that they are going to lose something...If they start working together in program, there arise all these concerns about AOh my goodness! If we are working with this neighboring church (of our denomination) on this project, is that going to be the start of us working together on other things? Sooner or later are we going to end up merging? What if we lose our church?≡ ... It takes real work to get a church convinced they can benefit from working together with another church and not lose.

(c) Great distances between congregations of the judicatory can certainly be a block to lay persons going to a program or meeting at another church. Sometimes geographic distance is compounded by the fact that traveling entails an urban- rural distance “ between the congregations; and the cultural separation may be the greater obstacle. However, rural churches may have fewer resources available in their locale, and may be particular eager to share with members of other rural churches in the denomination in some central place. In illustration, one regional executive who has a mainly rural judicatory found that he had a much easier time getting rural lay persons as well as clergy to come to conferences and programs, than he did those who belonged to city churches. He attributed this to the fact that city church members had more **ecumenical** opportunities to do things, whereas the rural leaders did not.

(d) The pastors of the congregations are not interested in sharing. This is by far the most important factor noted by regional leaders across denominations in whether their churches shared activities and resources. If the pastor had little interest in developing joint programs with another church, it is unlikely that there will be much cooperative activity. It is here that sometimes special attention by the regional leader to talking more with these isolationist pastors can help bring them more into the cooperative life of the judicatory, in the experience of one executive who has long dealt with such clergy.

**3. The most prevalent kinds of inter-congregational sharing are in areas where there is perceived need to augment the resources one local church can offer and which do keep members in regular worship attendance at their home church.**

Regional leaders across denominations noted that in their jurisdictions that congregations did not generally like to share worship services with another congregation, except sometimes on major religious holidays, such as an Easter sunrise service, or in the case of need, such as when their sanctuary is being renovated.

Perceived need for serving their own members is a major contributor to congregations’ willingness to engage in joint educational programs, according to many interviewed. This need is most likely to arise in having enough people or material resources to put on confirmation programs or an educational/recreational program, especially for teenagers during the school year or for children’s summer programs. Perceived needs of others for assistance are also a strong motivator for some of the smaller and medium sized congregations to cooperate in mission activities. Mission outreach is major focus of regional leaders’ efforts to engage their churches with one another.

**4. Informal consulting and advising by regional leaders and staff is their typical channel to**

**get their congregations to share in putting in programs for church members.**

As they work with congregations, regional leaders do try to get churches to share programs with others in some proximity, where both congregations would clearly benefit. Such suggestions from regional leaders to congregational leaders, however, must be made with the great diplomacy and Asoft sell≡ tactics, so as not to evoke the fears described.

**5. Judicatory newsletters and web sites are probably the second most widely used way to encourage sharing among congregations.** These media are used to promulgate things are being done by their churches in areas of need, and opportunities not only to help one another, but also to share in mission outreach to their communities and to the world.

**6. Judicatory recognition of its local churches that are doing good work, particularly as informal or formal associations of congregations, can stimulate further sharing.** The judicatory newsletters and web sites are used purposively to affirm and reward the efforts of congregations to engage in joint programs. Additionally, one interviewed described a degree of success in stimulating inter-church arrangements for developing joint programs by asking the clergy or lay leaders of these churches to explain their programs at a judicatory-wide conference, so all could attending could benefit from their presentations.

**7. Joint mission projects as ways of enhancing covenant relationships among congregations within a judicatory** was mentioned by several in each denomination as not only meeting objectives for mission outreach, but also as a method for getting congregations to work better together in all areas. Some congregations are proactive in seeking partnerships in mission with other congregations on their own. Congregations banding together to engage in soup kitchens or working with Habitat for Humanity, or to support a missionary or medical mission team overseas, are major examples of voluntary inter-church partnerships within a judicatory. Often regional leaders, however, take major role in linking congregations in mission outreach endeavors, directly or indirectly. In illustration the following regional executives and senior staff from different denominations describe their role here:

! At our annual retreats of several days for pastors there are a number of opportunities for joint mission projects presented. In one association, forty-two churches raised nearly seventy thousand dollars, got lots of volunteer hours, to put in new affordable housing units. This was done intentionally to help churches come together around a common mission. So we look at the focal points of ministry, and say, AHow can you do this in covenant with your sisters and brothers down the road?≡

! I work with the leadership of congregations and find people who have a special interest particularly in mission. For example, if some leader has a special interest in hunger, I will ask, AWill you sponsor some joint congregational activities in addressing hunger?≡

- ! In getting congregations together, I have probably been considered a guru for that. We have gathered emergency kits from our churches and sent a million dollars of books to African universities and libraries.

Several judicatories across at least three denominations have created a staff position (e.g. Achurch and community worker) trying to initiate interest and coordinate congregations around various mission programs.

Exciting experiments are being tried by some judicatories to gather their congregations together in achieving three, five, or ten year mission goals in line with a vision of the judicatory as, for example, a system of Apower-filled churches - multicultural missions and new faith communities.≡.

**8. Judicatory financial grants or allocations to encourage churches partnering with one another** in mission is an experiment being tried in a number of judicatories in different denominations. This is typically done by judicatories in two ways: 1) giving funds collected annually back to formal regional subdivisions of their congregations (i.e. sections, associations, circuits, deaneries, districts, etc.) to use only in joint mission activities; and 2) giving grants to two or more congregations which present a proposal to the judicatory to work together in some mission project. One regional leader described this as Acarrot money≡ to get congregations to do programs together they probably would otherwise not do. Another depicted their experiment along these lines, as follows:

- ! I think I have found at least a temporary way to get congregations to work together. About a year ago I gave each (subdivision of congregations) \$10,000 with the goal they were to make a difference in the world, however they defined the world. BUT they could not do something that somebody had already done; they were not a funding agency nor were they just tagging on to something else. They were expected to be creative and forward looking in wherever they were. When you put money into something, you often have people coming together. Most congregational leaders in each (subdivision) did not know each other, so I thought this would be an incentive for them to have a conversation. I find that when people are together you almost always have at least one person who is rather forward looking and visionary. That person can serve as a catalyst for some of the others who have those leanings, but perhaps are reticent to share some outlandish thoughts. I wanted them to really think outside the box, do a lot of brain storming and just be out there. This has been very successful for us. Out of six (subdivisions), four actually have come together on a regular basis - not that they have 100% of the people coming together, but at least they have representatives of the different churches. So they are talking across church boundaries.

**9. Judicatory providing free or low cost courses or consultations is a way of both serving individual congregations and linking them with one another in common causes.**

Many judicatories across denominations, if not the vast majority, offer some mini-courses or

topical conferences and events for clergy and lay leaders. These offerings are envisioned as good ways of providing leadership as well as perhaps another carrot to get leaders from different churches together. Regional leaders interviewed who have tried this approach would affirm that for these offerings to work as hoped, the church leaders (and those attending) have to see the need for the course or conference, the relevance for them and their congregation. People, who have to travel to another church to attend courses or conferences, may have to be urged by leaders in the church to take this time, as well as find these experiences interesting. Indications from regional leaders interviewed suggest that such mini-courses and conference consultations are best attended and most valuable to participants when persons are specifically invited who have similar positions in their congregations, e.g. for treasurers, for wardens, for church school directors, for choir directors, and the like.

Training programs of one to several years which will provide at least a certificate affirming the graduate's readiness to undertake established positions within congregations, say as a lay preacher, can also be successful. These programs are typically used for attracting and training leaders for small congregations as well building up a fairly stable network of persons across churches that may develop inter-church programs. (Such networks are often bolstered by the judicatory through holding annual conferences for graduates of these.) Judicatories in different denominations are also providing funds for training a cadre of clergy and lay persons, who in turn have agreed to work as conflict mediators, vacancy consultants or as supply preachers for churches in need. Their helpful presence in congregations other than own on a temporary basis is often hoped by regional leaders to have the secondary benefit of creating a feeling of common cause and caring among churches within the judicatory.

Clergy conferences for the judicatory are in place across denominations, partly to encourage clergy sharing and subsequently better inter-congregational sharing. However, as a majority of those interviewed would attest, getting clergy to come to these formal gatherings willingly, is not easy, in part because they do not see the relevance of these events for their own pressing church work. Far more effective, a number of regional leaders interviewed attest, is to hold special conferences for clergy and sometimes their lay leaders who are from churches with similar characteristics.

Church size is a major category for designing conferences. Pastors of large churches have different issues to deal with than those of small churches and, as will be given further discussion, leaders of large churches like or need special attention by their judicatory to feel valued. Conferences are not the only way of linking churches by size; some judicatories have established staff positions with the portfolio to also link congregations of different sizes together, as illustrated below:

- ! There are several district consultants here have been assigned to congregations based on worship size. For example, the district person who serves my congregation -- we are in a

category from 400-800 in worship attendance -- will specifically design workshops or try to network that group of congregations together. He will come in as a consultant, or hold a workshop for me. He will say: AThis is what those folks are doing over at this place.≡ Or AIf you are looking for this ministry idea, here are a couple of congregations are doing that.≡

A number of judicatory leaders are especially eager to get congregations in need of assistance that assistance most efficiently and effectively through having their representatives come to the same conference as well as have closer judicatory staff supervision. In illustration, one judicatory Ahas on the drawing board≡ a series of seminars for about twenty-five of its Achurches which have plateaued to help them find new resources and energy for the future.≡

**10: Judicatory leaders clustering congregations under the leadership of one pastor or a pastoral team,** is of course one structural way of getting congregations to share. Although small churches with long histories may have to be Akicked into” cluster or yoked arrangement, as one regional leader put it, it can work out well. Judicatory executives in some areas across denominations are now faced with a growing number of declining membership churches, which though they cannot afford even a half-time pastor, are also struggling to hold on to their autonomy. Many of these regional leaders are experimenting with various solutions to keeping their more recently clustered churches content with the arrangement.

Several regional leaders in different denominations believe that their present successes in clustering or congregations under one or more clergy, is that they also have structured in a lay board that represents all congregations in the cluster. Doing this better ensures that the ties among the clustered churches are not just because they share the same pastor or pastoral team. One explains as follows:

! I think one of the reasons this clustering has worked here is that the cluster has its own governing board with representatives from each congregation. Each congregation has its own Vestry. On the cluster governing board, some of the Vestry members are on this too, but they will choose other people as well. The board governs the joint activities of the congregations in the cluster, and actually receives money from the congregations to pay the clergy. So it is kind of a hybrid - the congregations are joined, but they still have areas of autonomy. Churches do not like thinking they have no autonomy.

A more palatable way of linking congregations, several executives noted, is for independent, established churches alone, or better in partnership with other churches X to provide funds, resources, and personnel to start a new congregation, particularly a multicultural mission church in the inner city. This and other kinds of ways regional leaders hope will encourage larger churches to help smaller churches in a judicatory will be discussed in the next section of this

Second Research Report.

**Postscript:** This is a quick overview of some of the kinds of programs and procedures being tries to better link congregations with one another and with the judicatory. We would welcome more description of what you are presently doing in this area. It will be posted as soon as we get it, so that others may benefit from your experiences.