CONGREGATIONS IN CONFLICT

Cultural Models of Local Religious Life

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1

"WHO WE ARE" AND "HOW WE DO THINGS HERE": LOCAL UNDERSTANDINGS OF MISSION AND IDENTITY

Martha immediately took me back to her kitchen and fixed me a cup of coffee. It was late August 1991, and I had spent the spring and summer doing research on Oak Park and its two neighboring villages, River Forest and Forest Park. I had been reading both local papers, spending time at the libraries and the historical society office, and I had a list of local restaurants where the managers did not mind if I spent hours when they were not busy, drinking coffee and taking up table space with my notes. The ice cream shop on Chicago Avenue had become a favorite. I had interviewed community leaders and informants, including one reporter on the local paper who grew up in Oak Park and spent most of one summer afternoon in the bagel shop at the center of town, chain-smoking and telling me about the community's history and politics.

I had just begun interviewing members of Martha's church, Hope Episcopal, the first congregation out of twenty-three in which I would conduct interviews. I would find out that many of the people I interviewed preferred talking in the kitchen, and this was particularly true of women like Martha.[1] In her sixties, Martha is a retired widow who has lived in Oak Park for over thirty years. She has been both a homemaker and a professional woman, and for many years an active member and leader in Hope Episcopal Church. She is thin and tall, and her straight dark hair, bobbed short, has a little gray. She is energetic and friendly. Once I was settled with a cup of coffee, she took a seat next to me at the kitchen table and asked me all about my research and my plans for the future. She seemed to be both practical and fun, and I found myself liking her more and more as we talked, relaxing in the big, sunny kitchen.

Her church had been going through a difficult time, and as the interview unfolded, she told me about it, growing more serious as she went along. Eventually, I would get eight different versions of this conflict from the people I interviewed in this church, although most agreed on a few basics. The conflict began after the new pastor came a couple of years ago. Several incidents would be mentioned in different combinations: conflicts over a moveable altar, over how a

funeral was conducted, over ministry to AIDS-stricken members, over finances, over administrative procedures.

Martha told me easily, clearly, about the course of events. She could talk in some detail about who was on which side, but she was unable to say why there had been no resolution, why the conflict kept cropping up again. She said, "We don't have the tools, we don't have the skills, to deal with conflict constructively." But this struck me as odd; if any group would have the skills to handle conflict, it should be this congregation full of highly educated people in business, management, the professions, people with what sociologists call "human capital," who might well have had specific training in management, even in mediation, that ought to help resolve things here.[2]

When I asked Martha if she could tell me what the cause of the conflict was, she paused. Then she told me about a meeting she had gone to several weeks ago, the annual evaluation meeting for the rector.[3] She has gone to the church for many years and thought she knew the place very well. But as several people got up to talk about the church and the problems it had been having, she had a sudden and upsetting realization, thinking to herself, "I wasn't going to the same church they were."

At the time, I was not sure quite what she meant. But as I talked to more people in this church, I would come to understand that, while the trouble began when the new pastor came, it was essentially a fight between two groups of lay leaders and core members. One group seemed to take for granted that their church is primarily about having a place to worship, about long-term friendships and family-like attachments, about people who know you and your family and could be counted on for help in times of crisis. Most of these people valued a traditional approach to doctrine and ritual practice. Many of them would tell me that the new pastor was himself the problem, saying with disapproval that his style did not fit with the congregation, that he would sometimes be uncaring and flippant, telling jokes during the sermon, and saying radical things just to provoke a reaction. These members were particularly upset about the moveable altar and the last-minute changes to the format of the funeral service. Many were long-term members, but there were quite a few newcomers in this group, as well.

For others, including Martha, the church is primarily about providing leadership in the community, about interpreting doctrine and ritual tradition in light of contemporary social reality and current members' needs, about taking a stand on issues like AIDS and gay and lesbian rights. For this group, the church is about service and witnessing to the community about the virtue of tolerance and the importance of diversity. This group was intrigued when the pastor experimented with the moveable altar, and they enjoyed the challenging and thought-provoking things that he said. They liked his jokes. Some of these people were long-term members, but many were newcomers, having joined in the last two to three years.

These two groups were not cleanly divided by length of membership, although more of the newcomers liked the pastor than did not. Ideology was not the divide between them; in interviews, they all self-identified as liberal or moderate and had similar views about ideologically salient issues like abortion and the role of homosexuals in the church. The new pastor has been more sympathetic with the views of the second group, and his arrival triggered a series of conflicts, opportunities for people to articulate, and thus to define and sharpen, their different underlying assumptions about "who we are" and "how we do things here."

Martha told me that she thought that part of the problem was a kind of Episcopalian rigidity that made compromise difficult. But fieldwork in twenty-two other congregations belonging to fifteen different denominations (Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish), as well as general experience in community organizations, convinced me that what was going on in Martha's church is not unique to Episcopalians. Faced with conflict that seemed to grow more acrimonious with no end in sight, many members, including those not so strongly committed to either group, would decide to leave, some attending other Episcopalian churches in the area.[4] Eventually, this conflict would reduce the Sunday attendance at Hope Episcopal from about 250 to under 100, and in 1995, when I followed up, the church, with a new pastor, was only just beginning to recover its attendance, along with some sense of optimism about the future.

From Conflict to Local Culture

In the process of understanding the patterns of conflict in the congregations in and around Oak Park, my interview with Martha was something to which I kept returning. There are various ways to interpret conflict, and as I learned more about Hope Episcopal, I kept trying to fit Martha's story, and the stories the other members told, into these preexisting interpretive frameworks, to see which one was the best fit. Was this really a conflict over ideas and symbols – the moveable altar, the proper way to conduct a service? Or was it really about power, perhaps a struggle between the pastor and the lay members over authority and control? Or was it at heart a fight between old-timers and newcomers and the accompanying generational transition in congregational leadership? All of these frameworks captured some partial truth about the conflict at Hope Episcopal, but each one left important things out, too.

The situation became even more complicated when I went beyond Hope Episcopal to consider conflicts in the twenty-three different congregations I had studied. Two Catholic parishes, two synagogues, and nineteen Protestant congregations from a wide range of denominations, these congrega-

tions were chosen to achieve some scope for comparison along dimensions identified in previous studies as relevant for conflict – size, polity type, and a liberal or conservative religious orientation. "Small" congregations are roughly 150 members or less, with an administrative structure revolving around the pastor and a small group of lay leaders, while large congregations have more than 150 members and a more formal administrative structure with more boards and committees (Rothauge 1990). I divide polity into "congregational" and "hierarchical," with the latter containing both presbyterian and episcopal polities as described by Moberg (1962). Congregations were labeled "liberal" or "conservative" depending on how the pastor and the majority of the lay people I spoke to (roughly ten per congregation) characterized the congregation's religious orientation (see Table 4 in Chapter 2). Over eighteen months, from late 1991 to early 1993, I conducted over 230 interviews plus participant-observation of services and the review of congregational documents like sermons, annual reports, newsletters, minutes of meetings, bulletins, and histories. Chapter 2 and Appendix A contain a much longer discussion of why size, polity, and religious orientation were the relevant dimensions and how the congregations were chosen and the fieldwork conducted.

How to make sense of conflicts in such a diverse group of congregations? In going through interviews and fieldnotes, I found that I kept returning to Martha's description of the rector's evaluation meeting, running up against someone for whom Hope Episcopal was "a different church." As May (1980) points out in her excellent study of divorce in the United States at the turn of the century, conflict can be the result of a violation of shared expectations, or conflict can result from the clash of two fundamentally different sets of expectations for behavior. The former is *within-frame* conflict and can be resolved by routine kinds of processes that enforce compliance with agreed-upon expectations. The latter is *between-frame* conflict, which is more difficult to resolve because the divergent expectations include different ideas about appropriate decision-making processes.[5] Between-frame conflicts in small groups are often fundamentally about identity, an attempt to forge an answer to the questions, "Who are we?" and "How do we do things here?"[6]

When I realized this, I began to think of conflicts like the one at Hope Episcopal, and several of the other congregations, as identity conflicts. Doing so enabled me to integrate the insights from various perspectives on conflict. Identity conflicts involve both power and symbols; they can be understood as conflicts over the power to symbolize different under-

standings of the congregation's identity and to institutionalize these understandings in very concrete ways, including the liturgy, the programs, the ways of making decisions, and the norms of interaction that, taken together, form the overall tenor of congregational life. This is why they are initiated by those with the most commitment to the congregation – the pastor and the most involved lay leaders. There was no need to choose between an explanation of conflict based on symbols and one based on power or a struggle for control, because both were caught up in actual conflict events as they unfolded in these congregations.

But not all of the conflicts I encountered were as severe as the one at Hope Episcopal. In most congregations, the conflicts were less intractable; they involved smaller groups of people, they did not cause the same kind of widespread emotional upheaval, and they were more routinely resolved. How could those smaller conflicts be related to identity? Martha's story, I realized, is about two groups of people whose different visions of mission and identity for the church include very different ideas about religious authority and member commitment. Most other explanations for conflict look at factors like the size of the group and its formal structure to explain variations in authority and commitment, which are in turn linked to variations in group processes like conflict and decision making.[7] Martha's story, along with similar ones that kept emerging from interviews with other members, led me to realize that, instead of using underlying variables like size and organizational structure as a proxy for authority and commitment, as previous studies have tended to do, I could study local culture as an expression of the locally negotiated understandings about appropriate styles of authority and commitment (cf. Coser 1956). If different local understandings of mission and identity explain why severe conflicts take the form that they do, then perhaps, I began to think, those local understandings also hold the key to interpreting the regularities and patterns in more normal or within-frame conflicts.[8]

Throughout the course of the fieldwork, then, the interpretive focus changed, and this became a comparative study of local religious cultures and how they are constitutive of but also constituted by organizational structures, like size and polity, and practices, like conflict and decision making. This change is a move away from thinking about a set of underlying variables that have a uniform effect on the organizations within a social space and toward specifying a limited set of organizational types, shaped by historical and institutional factors, within which the relationships between things like size, polity, authority, and decision making may

be differently structured.[9] It is also a shift away from a methodology of "freezing" social process and making the analytical choice to designate conflict as an outcome toward looking at both the processes by which conflicts are made and the effects that conflicts in turn have on local identity and local practices. This shift was greatly influenced by my reading of Giddens (1984) on the importance of studying the processes by which actors in specific contexts reproduce or change social structure through their interactions.

This change in focus allowed me to better carry out some of my initial goals, including the goal of generating a better understanding of conflict in local religious organizations, especially the kind of serious conflict that Martha described in her church. A better understanding, I thought, should improve on existing studies in very specific ways. It should go beyond a laundry list of the possible causes of conflict. It should emphasize organizations and organizational processes over latent or potential conflicts in individual attitudes. It ought to analyze a congregation's whole pattern of conflict, including what issues people fight over, how they frame those issues, typical processes by which conflict plays out and is resolved, how serious or divisive conflicts are, and what effect they have on the congregation in the long run.[10]

Chapter 2 describes in more detail why the three factors identified in previous studies – size, polity, and cultural orientation – did not allow me to develop that better explanation of conflict that I had been seeking. While having some effect on the kinds of issues that caused conflict and the frequency of conflict, they did not allow me to explain why some issues are understood differently in different congregations, or why and where different kinds of moral arguments are used. They did not allow me to understand differences in conflict processes, including the role of the pastor, typical kinds of decision-routines, or favored kinds of solutions. They did not help me to understand why four of the twenty-three congregations exhibited a particularly severe set of conflicts that resulted, in three cases, in the exit of a large group of members.

In addition to changing the way in which I approached the original goals of the study, this change in focus also raised some entirely new issues, as I became interested in understanding more about these local religious cultures than just their relationship to conflict. I became interested in the content of the religious cultures themselves. There are over 300,000 congregations in the United States that provide members with a place of worship and fellowship.[11] Which ones foster the habits of caring and civic

tolerance that Putnam and others find to be necessary for vital democratic communities?[12] Which ones foster a more publicly engaged form of religion, and which ones are more privatized? Conflict, initially the sole focus, became a window into these larger questions of the shared and divergent expectations about legitimate goals and ways of doing things, or what might be called the moral order of local religious life.[13]

This is a particularly important set of questions in the sociology of religion right now, because one influential branch of recent scholarship has developed a dominant narrative of religious change in the United States over the last forty to fifty years. While various terms have been used – privatization, voluntarism, increasing individualism – several scholars have concluded that the civic capacity of American religion has declined in the last half of this century. They point variously to more individualism in religious discourse, to more switching among congregations over the individual member's life-course, to the declining legitimacy of pastoral authority, and to declining denominational loyalty. They interpret these trends as an indication that American religion has become less publicly engaged and that the very basis for any commitment to organized religion is being eroded. There has been very little comparative study of congregations, however, to assess whether trends in individual religiosity as reported in surveys or perceived changes in religious authority by denominational leaders have actually resulted in congregations that are less engaged in their local communities or in local religious cultures that are more privatized and inwardly focused.

This book is structured around a central argument: that congregations develop distinct cultures that comprise local understandings of identity and mission and that can be understood analytically as bundles of core tasks and legitimate ways of doing things. The primary thesis is that these local religious cultures are not completely idiosyncratic, but that they come in patterns shaped by the larger institutional environment that limits their range of variation. I call these patterns *congregational models*. In twenty-three congregations, I did not find twenty-three different congregational models; rather, I found four basic types: *house of worship*, *family*, *community*, and *leader* models. A few congregations, like Martha's, had two well-defined groups of people who operated from the assumptions of different models; in most congregations, however, a single dominant model structured the public culture.

The secondary thesis is that the narrative of religious decline and increasing individualism has missed something important by failing to

look seriously at local religious cultures. The four congregational models I found in this community do, in various ways, stress tolerance and foster caring relationships. They promote engagement with local civic life, ranging from compassionate outreach to the poor to activism on social and political issues. This suggests that an analysis of changes in religious discourse and individual religiosity needs to be supplemented by an analysis of the organizations and the institutional forms that shape religious participation, if we want to develop a better understanding of how social changes affect the relationship between religion and public life in the United States at the level of the local community.

In addition, I want to suggest that an institutional approach is useful in studying local culture, or the culture of individual groups and organizations. Congregational models are a specific example, within the institutional field of American religion, of a more general phenomenon, what Paul DiMaggio (1991) has called the *institutional model* of the group or organization. Rooted in an understanding of local culture as a negotiated order built up over time and through interaction, this analysis nevertheless brings a different lens – an institutional lens – to bear on the study of local culture, something that has previously been examined through a lens that foregrounds particular, idiosyncratic detail.[14]

Local Culture Through an Institutional Lens

In any field there are usually one or two paradigmatic studies that set the terms for the development of future work. A paradigmatic study of local culture that has influenced anthropology, history, sociology, and cultural studies is Clifford Geertz's (1973) description of the Balinese cockfight. Geertz describes the cockfight as a complicated social drama, a ritualized performance where every man knows and re-creates his place in the taken-for-granted order of Balinese society. And he evokes it beautifully. When you read Geertz's description, you can almost picture yourself there, straining with the others to get a view of the fifty-foot ring, seeing the fighting roosters tear each other apart – and running away when the authorities break it up.

In American sociology, the book *With the Boys*, Gary Alan Fine's (1987) study of how Little League teams build a unique social identity through the members' interactions, kept local culture on the intellectual agenda of cultural and organizational analysis for a new generation of scholars. In contrast to the cockfight, Little League may seem tame; no blood and

feathers here. But the reader of Fine's study gets the same sense of watching as the members come to define themselves and be understood by others as a certain kind of team. They do this not only through the sport itself, but through all of the behind-the-scenes interactions that build up common understandings of "who we are" and "how we do things here" – local culture.

Local culture has often been studied this way.[15] In effect, anthropologists and sociologists have answered the question, "why study local culture?" by examining it as the *locus of social processes through which common understandings of group or organizational identity are built up and maintained over time.* These accounts are by definition descriptive, and the plausibility of the account is often judged by aesthetic criteria. Is the description "thick," or rich or elegant or compelling?[16] Is there internal consistency? Fine captures the emphasis on the particular and the idiosyncratic that are the hallmarks of this approach when he coins the term "idioculture," defining it as

> a system of knowledge, beliefs, behaviors, and customs shared by members of an interacting group to which members can refer, and that serve as the basis for further interaction. . . . This approach stresses the localized nature of culture, implying that it . . . can be a particularistic development of any group (1987:125).

There have been more studies that document the extent of such uniqueness than ones that specify its limits.

Surely the members of the Little League teams that Fine studied were free to come up with their own local culture that was negotiated, idiosyncratic, and particular. But how far could they go in defining their own identity? Their understanding of their own team might incorporate a range of attitudes toward winning and losing. But if they decided that baseball itself were not worth playing, how long would they remain a Little League team? Can one imagine a Little League team in which members understand their *primary objective* to be making money, housing the homeless, kayaking, or robbing liquor stores, instead of playing baseball?

The twenty-three congregations I studied all have strong idiocultures. These are comprised in part of narratives about formative events, leaders, and founding families. But they also have more unexpected elements. For example, when I asked the pastor of one UCC[17] church about what brings his congregation together, he laughed, and then he told me about their

"donut program." They make and sell donuts at the weekly farmers' market. Everyone I talked to in this congregation spoke about "our donuts." Sometimes they smiled or even laughed, but they mentioned this spontaneously and spoke of it as something special. No other congregation does anything like this, they repeatedly told me. Besides, getting up in the middle of the night to make donuts and then stand in the cold morning air to sell them breeds a certain camaraderie.

Donuts are a part of this church's idioculture. In other congregations, the idioculture includes stained glass windows designed by an important artist or stories of the heyday in the 1950s when the Sunday School had over 1,000 people. Two congregations had stories of near-death, when the congregation almost shut its doors due to lack of members, and resurrection, to a present with several hundred members and an impressive annual budget. In short, each of these twenty-three congregations exhibits the richness and variety that one would expect in the culture of living communities, and the idea of idioculture is a useful one to employ in understanding some things about them.

It is no wonder, then, that the emerging field of congregational studies has concentrated on this idiosyncratic approach to local religious culture. Local congregations are places where individuals come together to form, interpret, and enact their religious commitments. The congregations where people find what they need to meet a variety of needs, and that people join for a variety of reasons, are not simple aggregations of individual preferences; nor are they straightforward reproductions of larger religious traditions. In congregations individual commitments and larger traditions are combined in ongoing, creative ways. A large and growing body of work develops this view, showing congregations to be crucibles where individual ideas, beliefs, and commitments interact with religious traditions, changing both and forming robust local cultures.[18] Fine (1984) gives this view of organizational culture the label "negotiated order," a term that evokes both the regularities of group life and the processes that reproduce it.

But if the idea of idioculture is helpful in understanding some things about congregations or other organizations, I argue that it is only partial. There are other things we might want to know about the culture of a group or organization that are not captured well by the emphasis on rich idiosyncrasy that has developed in the typical approach to local cultures. The emphasis on the particular and the idiosyncratic provides only one analytical lens through which to view local culture. Like any lens, it captures

some things clearly in the foreground and makes other features appear more remote or indistinct. In short, while it is possible to identify the particular within the culture of a group or organization, it is also possible to identify patterns that are common across similar groups and organizations, bundles of cultural elements – ideas, symbols, programs, habits, ritual practices – grouped together in recurring ways.

I argue that the bundles of understandings about mission and identity in local cultures make a difference in what sociologists call organizational process and outcomes, or, in more common language, how decisions are made, how conflicts arise and are resolved, how goals are set and programs developed. In doing so, I am making use of a set of ideas from an approach to organizational theory known as the *new institutionalism*. Institutional analysis can provide another, different kind of analytical lens through which to view local culture.[19] This lens allows us to identify features that the local cultures of similar groups and organizations have in common – art museums, congregations, families, or Little League teams. Taking some insights from institutional analysis can help us understand things about local culture that an idiographic approach cannot.

In sociology, the new institutionalists have developed a comparative approach to studying culture in organizations that has the potential to span levels of analysis from individual behavior to society. Institutional analysis also has the potential to shed light on two issues at the heart of this study – what the local cultures of organizations within the same institutional field have in common, and how culture influences organizational process, including conflict. To date, there have been few studies that develop this potential. For example, how institutions shape conflict within organizations has remained virtually unexplored, despite other work that suggests that conflict is governed by just such taken-for-granted notions of "who we are" and "how we do things here" that institutional analysis is ideally suited to examine.[20] There are several reasons for this. Much of the "new" institutionalism gives primacy to a supraorganizational approach. When analysis is done at the organizational level, a major focus has been on the legitimating or ceremonial role of institutional culture vis-à-vis powerful outsiders, not on how institutions shape internal processes.[21]

Nevertheless, there has been some work that addresses how institutions shape an entire bundle of ideas about organizational goals and legitimate means of achieving them and so lead to different patterns of behavior in organizations. DiMaggio (1991) identifies two different institutional

models of the art museum, one more elite and the other more democratic. Galaskiewicz (1985, 1991) analyzes two different corporate roles in an urban grants economy. Fligstein's (1990) work on "conceptions of control" identifies different bundles of ideas about the nature and purpose of the organization arising in the sales and marketing operations of large corporate firms.

All three authors take an explicitly institutional approach to the culture of the organization, and all three find common patterns among the organizations within a given institutional field that shape and delimit the ways in which people think about the organization's goals and legitimate means of achieving them. An art museum may have an idioculture, but its director is not free to institutionalize a completely idiosyncratic view of the museum's purpose and how to carry it out. If she attempted this, the museum would lose legitimacy. More importantly, it would lose public attendance and outside funding (see Alexander 1996).

The congregational models that I analyze are like DiMaggio's models of the art museum. They are not completely idiosyncratic; they are shaped by common expectations in their institutional environment about what a congregation might and should be like. However, they are not some simple or straightforward imprinting of a larger denominational culture or religious tradition. Congregational models are, in effect, the constitutive rules for the formation of local religious cultures; they are legitimate bundles of core goals or tasks and the means of achieving them (cf. Sewell 1992). In *With the Boys*, Fine points out that local cultures are built up over time out of elements – jokes, stories, rituals, donuts – that are available, triggered, functional, and appropriate.[22] In his later work, Fine (1996a, 1996b) moves toward an analysis that links the formations of idiocultures to features of the larger institutional environment, including occupational rhetorics and discourses about the nature and purposes of work. I will argue that congregational models in particular, and institutional models in general, are the sets of rules within a given institutional field that determine which bundles of elements go together and, therefore, which ones are available, functional, and appropriate, yielding a stable number of organizational types.

House of Worship, Family, Community, Leader

When I studied these twenty-three congregations, I only found one place known for its donuts. But I did not find twenty-three different approaches

to mission, nor did I find twenty-three different sets of ideas about what local congregations in general ought to be like. Rather, I found four different bundles of ideas, ways of doing things, discourses, and taken-for-granted assumptions about "who we are" and "how we do things here." I found four different patterns of local culture, or congregational models. Nineteen of the twenty-three congregations had institutionalized one of these four models as a dominant model; congregations with the same model showed similar patterns of within-frame conflict. Four of the twenty-three congregations were in a period of transition from one model to another; each of these showed the same kind of serious, between-frame conflict that Hope Episcopal experienced.

It is possible to think of the congregation primarily as a provider of religious goods and services to individuals – worship, religious education, and rituals like weddings and funerals that mark important life events. I call this a *house of worship* model. Congregations that have adopted this understanding concentrate on the core tasks of worship and religious education. The primary goals are to provide an intimate and uplifting worship experience and to train members, especially children, in the denomination's heritage, doctrine, and rituals. These congregations make limited demands on member loyalty and time and assume a segmented form of attachment, where religious involvement remains relatively separate from other areas of members' lives. Decisions are made by clergy, paid staff, or committees. A good contemporary metaphor might be of a specialty religious store where you go for specific goods – a religious Crate and Barrel, say. A more historically sensitive metaphor would be that of a temple – a ritual center that may not be connected with nonreligious elements and activities in people's lives.

In some congregations, the dominant model is that of a *family*, a place where worship, religious education, and providing close-knit and supportive relationships for members are the core tasks. These are the three things that are done well, that people are proud of, and that are valued above all of the other activities of the congregation. Members of these congregations know and care about each others' lives. They are patriarchal, in the sense used by Riesebrodt (1993): Informal, personal connections and length of membership are more important bases of authority than are formal structures or positions, with the congregation being run by a small group of long-time lay leaders who are all good friends and belong to extended family networks.

One can also understand the congregation as a *community* of intimate

ties and shared values. Such an understanding does place value on worship and religious education and on providing members with a feeling of belonging and family-like attachment. But it also deems it important that the policies and programs of the congregation express the values and commitments of the members regarding social issues. Figuring out how to interpret and apply shared values is the most important communal enterprise. Their chief form of witness is in living their values, institutionalizing them in local congregational life. If a house of worship is like a religious store and family congregations are like patriarchies, community congregations are like democracies, with more emphasis on formal and open decision-making routines that include all members.

It is also possible to think of the congregation primarily as a *leader*. Worship and education are important here, too. And so is expressing members' values. But leader congregations are different than community congregations in three respects. First, the values that they express spring more directly from the official tenets of their denomination or tradition and less from members' own interpretations and life experiences. Second, their view of witness is more activist, having less to do with living their values and more to do with changing the world beyond the congregation, engaging in political and social action beyond their own four walls. Third, intimacy is less valued here as a public good. Providing members with intimate connections or a feeling of belonging are low priorities in this understanding, although here too some individuals can find close friends by seeking them out. These congregations are participative, but they are more like branches of a social movement organization, with a strong mission, than like democracies, which have a more diffuse mission.

Congregational models are historically bounded "models of" and "models for" a congregation, in the form of a set of core tasks. But the core tasks of the different models are not local or idiosyncratic ideas. They are religious imperatives broadly institutionalized in the field of American congregational religion – *religious reproduction* through worship and education, *building religious community* within the congregation, and *witness* to outsiders. These imperatives have appeared in different combinations in different historical periods, according to Holifield's (1994) discussion of the history of congregational forms. The four congregational models found in this community define ways in which these twenty-three congregations approach these core religious-institutional tasks today, in this community (see Table 1).

Table 1. *The core tasks of the four congregational models*

Core Task	Congregational Model			
	House of Worship	Family	Community	Leader
Religious reproduction	Worship Religious education	Worship Religious education	Worship Religious education	Worship Religious education
Religious community	Intimacy is possible/ individual choice	Provide close, family-like attachments for most/all members	Provide close, family-like attachments for most/all members Community of values	Intimacy is possible/ individual choice Community of values
Religious witness	Presence in community is witness	Presence in community is witness (live our values)	Express members' values in policies and programs programs (live our values) Be a leader in community, denomination, or beyond (change the world)	Adopt pastor's or denomination's policies and

Not surprisingly, all four models emphasize religious reproduction. They all place importance on education, which reproduces the religious tradition, and worship, which is the local, communal enactment of the relationship of the believer to the sacred.[23] Waugh (1994) calls the congregation an institution of education and worship at the center of a reli-

gious community's life, and worship and education are central to each of the four congregational models.[24]

Congregations are by definition local communities of believers, and it is common for case studies of congregational life to emphasize that they are places where members find intimate personal connections and participate as "whole persons." Warner (1994) calls fellowship the "master function" of congregational life and uses a family metaphor to describe the intimacy of attachment within congregations. But my study shows what others have suggested – that such an emphasis on fellowship and intimate connection, while common in congregational life, is not distributed uniformly; instead, it receives more emphasis in some traditions, and in some congregations, than in others.[25]

The models also orient the congregations to the religious imperative of witnessing to their faith and tradition. The range of responses to that imperative can be characterized as "worshipping together is our witness" (family and house of worship models), "living our values is our witness" (community and leader models), and "being a leader in the community is our witness" (leader model). These are local enactments of mission orientations that are broadly institutionalized in American religious organizations and are particularly close to the "sanctuary," "civic," and "activist" mission orientations used by Mock (1992).[26]

The term "model" implies that ideas about a congregation come in bundles and are institutionalized in ways that broadly affect congregational life. It also implies the idea of moral order. Because congregational models are ideas about core tasks of the congregation and legitimate means of achieving them, they are an "is" that implies an "ought." This is similar to Jepperson's (1991) idea of institutions as "packaged social technologies" with accompanying sets of rules for their enactment. Douglas (1986) probably has the best discussion of how institutions imply a set of moral obligations, patterned relationships, and legitimate behaviors that come to be valued for their own sake. In general, institutions link specific programs, goals, and ways of doing things to larger conceptions of the good.[27]

The idea of a model also implies that congregational models are to culture what formal polity is to structure. Like Sewell's (1992) idea of a schema as something that organizes both ideal and material resources, these models constrain and shape programming, the distribution of resources, and the development of idiocultures.[28]

To call the models "institutional" indicates that they are taken for granted and unarticulated unless challenged. This is a sense of the word that the new institutionalists sometimes deemphasize, because they fear that older institutional analysis, in its emphasis on the taken-for-granted, sometimes implied that organizational culture is functional, unitary, and consensual.[29] However, it is possible to identify a pattern that is dominant in the public culture of the congregation – in discourse, symbols, and patterns of member interaction – without implying that there is perfect consensus or a completely unitary culture. It is possible that there would be emergent or residual models preferred by a small number of congregants. Dominant institutional patterns may persist and have effect despite disagreement or even opposition.[30] And in this case, it was possible to distinguish between nineteen congregations where there was indeed one dominant model and four where the dominant consensus was being actively challenged, showing that the same approach can help us to understand both how culture works as a taken-for-granted ground of activity and how it works as a resource for conscious, strategic, and referential action.

Finally, congregational models are institutional in another sense, that of being "institutionalized." They are not just common understandings, but they are manifest in policies and programs, in taken-for-granted ways of doing things, in sermon topics, in the interaction of members with each other and with visitors, and in the forms of liturgy and ritual, all of which fit together to provide an overall sense of identity and tenor of congregational life. When I interviewed members, they did not tell me, "Well, I believe we're really a house of worship," and then list all of the characteristics described in Table 1. Instead, they would tell me what their congregation is good at and what they are not good at, what programs are valued and cherished and what ones are not. They would say that their witness is their believing presence in the community, or that their witness involves eradicating racism and sexism from the community. These things repeatedly fell into the same limited set of bundles that I, for analytical reasons, call "models" of congregational life.

The Significance of Congregational Models

In Chapter 2, I describe the process of discovering patterns in the local cultures of these twenty-three congregations – patterns in their discourse

and practice that I argue constitute four distinct congregational models. This discovery fundamentally changed the way in which I thought about what it means to conduct a comparative analysis of organizations and organizational processes. Initially interested in how underlying or structural variables like size and polity might influence processes and outcomes, I came to discover that the standard variables that sociologists use to capture variations in commitment and loyalty, in authority, and in mission and identity are not always good proxies for these.

Part of the significance of congregational models is in their discovery and in the argument that they serve as an important mediating level of analysis in two ways. They mediate between "underlying variables" like size and polity (formal structure) and group processes, by institutionalizing patterns of authority and commitment that are related to, but not determined by, these structural features of the organization. They also mediate between larger cultural formations – traditions, ideologies, discourses – and social action at the local level. I agree with Nee and Ingram (1998) about the importance of developing analyses that can examine the link between institutional culture and agency at the local level as the next step in developing a multilevel understanding of the relationship between social forms and social action. For these reasons, an expanded analysis of institutional models may prove to be useful in general and in other institutional fields.

In the nineteen congregations that had institutionalized one dominant cultural model, there was conflict mainly over the content of the model or conflict about the implications of the model for any given decision. In each kind of congregation – house of worship, family, community, leader – conflict exhibited a different pattern, but in no case was it either unresolvable or threatening to the health of the congregation as an organization or a community. This within-frame conflict was often painful, but it was usually amenable to being resolved by some previously existing organizational routine. Chapters 3–6 examine patterns of conflict in each of the four types of congregations. Rather than using congregational models as underlying variables, I develop an analysis in Chapters 3–6 that shows that within-frame conflict is a process that is constituted by congregational models and through which the models themselves can be reconstituted.

Chapter 7 discusses the transitional congregations. In these congregations, the serious, between-frame conflict is a process by which opposing models are articulated and through which the current dominant model is challenged. These congregations had conflicts that were more emotional,

involved larger percentages of the members, and were harder to contain. Provisional decisions or solutions would hold only for a time, until a new event triggered the old conflict all over again. These between-frame conflicts were not over how to interpret and apply some shared understanding of mission and identity to particular situations; rather, they were more fundamental conflicts over the very nature of the congregation's identity and core tasks – over which congregational model to have in place.

Chapter 8 examines the utility of developing an institutional lens for the comparative study of group and organizational cultures in other fields. This chapter develops the argument that understanding how culture is firmly rooted in things like norms, core tasks and goals, and decision-making routines as well as in the symbolic and ritual life of the organization is a key step in analyzing the link between local group processes and larger institutional formations. This chapter also explores why there is a stable variation in institutional models in the American religious field and suggests other institutional fields in which the analysis of the variation in institutional models at different organizational levels might be a useful approach to analyzing the link between culture and group process.

Chapter 9 focuses on what was learned about these congregations as *religious* organizations. Scholars who have studied postwar American religion have constructed a lament for the decline of religious authority and commitment. Wuthnow (1988) uses the term "restructuring", while Roof and McKinney (1987) talk about voluntarism and Bellah et al. (1985) talk about increasing individualism. Despite some real differences in individual accounts, these and other studies comprise a body of influential work that, taken together, constructs a metanarrative about the declining significance of denominational attachment, increasing rates of member switching, the growth of an individual-expressive or personalistic style of commitment, and growing divisions between liberals and conservatives. This metanarrative rhetorically links this institutional restructuring to various forms of decline – in community, in public religion, in social capital.

These authors tend to rely on case studies and analyses of religious discourse rather than on comparative studies of authority and commitment in historically located religious organizations. This leads to a linear narrative about disembodied trends – increasing privatization, voluntarism, and individualism, all driven by ongoing modernization. These authors assume that liberal or mainstream religious groups are more affected by modernization than are conservative groups, but that no group is immune from

its corrosive effects. They share a pessimistic view about the viability of religious tradition and traditional religious authority in the contemporary United States. Bellah, in particular, questions whether the entire rationale for participation in religious organizations and perpetuating traditional faiths is not eroding in our society. And while they note that religious participation is robust, these scholars question the depth or character of contemporary spirituality and commitment or the ability of private devotion to motivate public religion.

This comparative study of local congregations makes it clear that increasing voluntarism and individualism do *not* lead to one single pattern of local participation, to one reaction to religious authority and tradition, or to one style of member commitment. In Chapter 9, I discuss how voluntarism means, at the local level, the freedom to negotiate and implement a *limited range of local religious cultures* that have different implications for understanding the effects of an individual-expressive style of commitment on the organization of local religious life. Chapter 9 explores those implications in more detail, suggesting ways in which we might want to rethink our analysis of American religion as a public space and the forms of community and civic involvement that it fosters. Here, I join others whose work has begun to challenge the linear narrative of change that has structured earlier work and argue that the case for decline – in community, in commitment, in public engagement – needs closer scrutiny.

Notes

1. "Martha" is a pseudonym, as are all names of individuals and congregations. The names of the communities are real. This choice was made to protect the confidentiality of those who, in many cases, discussed with me sensitive aspects of their own histories and their congregations' conflicts. Identifying the communities was done to address the concerns of a growing number of sociological researchers who feel that not doing so presents two serious problems. First, it prevents other scholars from making comparative or follow-up studies. It also collapses what might be important distinctive features of a community's history and politics into "underlying variables" like size and demographics. See Warner (1988) Demerath and Williams (1992), Ammerman (1997a), and Eiesland (1998) for examples and discussion. See also Burawoy et al. (1991) for a more general discussion of the extended case study method and its engagement with real communities.

2. This is not meant to be an elitist statement, but rather an institutional one. Management and the professions are institutional locations for storing and

spreading specific techniques of conflict resolution, as witnessed in the prevalence of articles like "Conflict Resolution Skills for Supervisors," "How to Cope with Conflict Between the People who Work for You," and "Effective Team Management" (conflict management is listed as the single most important team management skill), just a few of the many articles revealed by a quick search of *ABI Inform*, which indexes business and professional journals. Managers and professionals think and talk about how to manage conflict and develop institutional repertoires for managing conflict that are widespread in training programs. For Martha to say that the people in her church do not have the skills or tools to manage conflict, then, is an indication of just how intractable she perceived this situation to have become.

3. "Rector" is the term for the head pastor of an Episcopalian parish.

4. One of these other churches is also included in this study. The pastor there told me that an important part of his parish's ministry over the last year or so was to provide what he called a "healing place" and a "refuge" for people fleeing the conflict at Hope Episcopal, especially those who were looking for warmth and intimacy in congregational life and a traditional worship service, all of which his small congregation provided. This congregation is discussed at length in Chapter 4.

5. One of the few empirical studies of this that is also a comparative study of organizations is the work of Hannan, Baron, and colleagues at Stanford University on conflict in high-tech firms in the Bay Area. For a longer discussion of the conflict that ensued when managers tried to alter the basic model of the employment relationship in these firms, see Hannan et al. (1996).

6. Cf. Goffman (1974:428ff.).

7. Hirschman's (1970) work, for example, indicates that conflict is influenced by who is willing and able to voice dissent and who is likely to exit when dissatisfied. Both of these behaviors (voice and exit) are influenced by the distribution of authority in the group and by the loyalty or commitment of the members.

8. Along with Victor Turner's (1974) work, Lighthall's (1989) study of conflict and decision making in a secondary school, *Local Realities, Local Adaptations*, was a prompt in thinking about conflict in this way. So was Simmel (1955, 1971), who emphasizes that conflict flows out of patterns in group attachment and that between-frame conflict can be the most intractable.

9. Abbott (1992, 1997) argues that we need to move toward an understanding of the limited set of social types or forms that structure action and resources – both spatially and temporally – within a given field of activity. See also Mohr and Guerra-Pearson, who call for studies of how "organizational forms are both embedded within and constitutive of institutional space" (forthcoming) to understand the arrangement of both resources and practices within a given field.

10. For other reviews of the literature on conflict in religious organizations, see Becker et al. (1993), Starke and Dyck (1996), and Kniss (1997). For a recent review of the literature on organizational conflict, see Jehn (1997).

11. How many people belong to those 300,000 congregations? Measures of religious "belonging" fall roughly into three types: attendance figures, self-identification as a member, and official membership counts. There is a debate about weekly church attendance, with the lowest estimates between 30% and 40% of the American population (see Wuthnow 1988; Hadaway et al. 1993); Kosmin and Lachman claim that "80 million Americans attend worship services on any given weekend" (1993:1), which would be roughly 32% of the U.S. population. There is less debate about the number of people who identify themselves as belonging to a religious group; Kosmin and Lachman (1993) give that figure as somewhere around 90% of the American population, which is consistent with other sources. Official membership figures from denominational sources consistently come in somewhere between the two extremes and are close to Gallup poll estimates of membership at around 62% of the American population (cf. Watt 1991). By any measure, religious organizations encompass more Americans than any other single form of voluntary organization in the United States (Watt 1991).

12. Putnam is famous, of course, for his "bowling alone" thesis, which argues that the amount and the nature of civic participation is changing in the United States, indicating a long-term decline in social capital or the skills and habits necessary for effective interaction in the public sphere (*Current*, June 1995). A very intelligent debate of this thesis has taken place in the pages of *The American Prospect*, in an article by Putnam, "The Strange Disappearance of Civic America" (no. 24, Winter 1996) and in a series of rejoinders by Michael Schudson, Theda Skocpol, and Richard Valelly in the next issue (no. 25, March/April 1996), which includes a reply by Putnam. The criticisms of Putnam span his data, methods, and interpretation; my own view is that Putnam has data to show a restructuring or reconfiguration of civic participation, but the jury is still out on whether that leads to some overall decline in any meaningful sense. It may, however, lead to a worsening social division between cosmopolitans and parochials. See Hammond (1992) for an excellent discussion of the differences between a parochial and a cosmopolitan orientation to civic life and community involvement. Nicholas Lemann makes a similar point in a critique of Putnam published in the April 1996 *Atlantic Monthly*.

13. If Lighthall was an exemplar of looking at conflict as tied to local culture, Elaine Tyler May (1980) was an exemplar of thinking about conflict as a window into "moral order." Her study of divorce in the United States in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries uses data on the rhetoric of divorcing couples to analyze what she calls the shared and divergent expectations of what

the obligations of marriage entailed for both parties. This is similar to Wuthnow's (1987) understanding of the moral order as encompassing both a set of conceptual categories that organize relationships among groups and the social relations themselves that are shaped by obligations defined by the conceptual categories (*Meaning and Moral Order*, esp. Chapters 2, 3, 5).

14. I follow Fine's (1984) development of the idea of "negotiated order" in describing the culture of individual groups or organizations. The idea of applying different "lenses" to the analysis of organizations is taken from Martin (1992).

15. See, for just a few excellent examples, Geertz (1973), Kanter (1977), Sahlins (1985), Abu-Lughod (1986), Laitin (1986), Hopewell (1987), Jackall (1988), Lighthall (1989), Anderson (1991), Apter (1992), Kunda (1992), and Bell (1994).

16. "Thick" refers to Geertz's criterion for "thick description," the ethnographic method described in *The Interpretation of Cultures* (1973).

17. United Church of Christ.

18. This body of work consists of a wealth of case studies and a few more general, synthesizing or theoretical accounts. See, for example, Blau (1976), Swatos (1981), Caplow et al. (1983), Greenhouse (1986), Ammerman (1987), Furman (1987), Gremillion and Castelli (1987), Hopewell (1987), Neitz (1987), Wertheimer (1987), Warner (1988, 1994), Hammond (1988), Olson (1989), Prell (1989), Seidler and Meyer (1989), and Wind and Lewis (1994). These studies mostly emphasize the local, the particular, and the idiosyncratic. For example, Gremillion and Castelli (1987) note that the parish one belongs to is a better predictor of stands on theological and social issues than standard sociological variables like gender and age. The Notre Dame Study of Catholic Parish Life concluded that

> It may be more important that I am a member of Saint Francis parish than that I am a sixty-four-year-old woman. And I may think more like a forty-year-old man from Saint Francis parish than a sixty-four-year-old woman from Sacred Heart (Gremillion and Castelli 1987:46).

Bass finds that, in "every congregation, deliberate efforts to transmit tradition are evident" (1994:178). However, she also notes that congregations

> do not simply inherit tradition; they contribute to it. A living congregation does not leave a living tradition unaffected. . . . *Congregations enable great traditions to find expression in ever new historical forms, and thereby to be both perpetuated and changed* (Bass 1994:185, emphasis in original; cf. Flynt 1994).

Carroll and Roof (1993) find that local congregations are locations for eclecticism and creativity in matters ranging from governance to ritual practice.

19. For general introductions to institutionalist arguments and approaches, see Zucker (1988), Powell and DiMaggio (1991), Friedland and Alford (1991), and Brinton and Nee (1998).

20. Exceptions to this general neglect include Barley (1986), Douglas (1986), Brint and Karabel (1991), Orru et al. (1991), and Searing (1991); cf. Lighthall (1989). The review by Strang (1994) makes a similar point.

21. For example, see Meyer et al. (1983), Tolbert and Zucker (1983), Meyer et al. (1987), Meyer and Rowan (1991), Scott and Meyer (1991), and Searing (1991).

22. See Fine (1987:130ff.). Friedland and Alford (1991) urge the discovery of the institutional content of these aggregative rules for organizations in particular institutional fields.

23. Although all congregations consider worship and religious education to be core tasks, congregations with different models go about worship and education somewhat differently. How they do this will be examined in Chapters 3–6.

24. In the U.S. context, scholars agree that these are the primary institutional tasks of congregations. Bass notes that

> Whether religious traditions generally and necessarily require congregations for their sustenance may be open to debate, but within the North American context of religious voluntarism it is evident that congregations have provided ancient transnational traditions with indispensable means of extension into new historical settings (1994:187).

Cf. Blau (1976), Gremillion and Castelli (1987), Wertheimer (1987), Davidman (1991), Bass (1994), Holifield (1994), Warner (1994), and Waugh (1994).

25. See Bass (1994), Flynt (1994), and Nelson (1997) for studies that demonstrate that an emphasis on intimate interpersonal ties is not a feature of every congregation; cf. Hall (1988).

26. For discussions of different ways of classifying mission orientation, see Dudley (1983, 1988), Roozen et al. (1984), Carroll and Roof (1993), Dudley and Johnson (1993), and Gilkey (1994). All of these authors preserve a basic distinction between inwardly and outwardly oriented groups. It is common to acknowledge the difference between a "civic" orientation, which is concerned with the local community, and an "activist" orientation, which actively seeks to change the world. Some authors also make the distinction between those that see their primary mission as saving individual souls (an evangelistic orientation) and those that see the changing of societal institutions as their goal (see Dudley and Johnson 1983; Roozen et al. 1984).

27. Cf. Selznick (1949), Tipton (1982), and Wuthnow (1987).

28. Cf. Swidler (1986), Greenwood and Hinings (1988), DiMaggio (1991), and Sewell (1992). The core idea that all share is that culture and action are mutually constitutive in reality even if analytically separable. See Emirbayer and Mische (1998; cf. Archer 1988) for a much longer and more thorough discussion of the different ways of theorizing the link between culture, structure, and agency and for an excellent literature review. For a good example of cultural approaches to the study of religion, see the entire volume of *Sociology of Religion* for 1996, edited by Rhys Williams.
29. See DiMaggio (1991) and DiMaggio and Powell (1991) for a discussion of the differences between older and newer institutional approaches in sociology and organizational studies; cf. Selznick (1949). For similar discussions of institutionalist analysis in anthropology and political science, see Douglas (1986) and Searing (1991).
30. See, for example, Jepperson (1991), Powell (1991:190–191), Fligstein (1990), Martin (1992), and Eliasoph (1996).