

## THE 1989 H. PAUL DOUGLASS LECTURE

### FROM TYPICAL CHURCH TO SOCIAL MINISTRY: A STUDY OF THE ELEMENTS WHICH MOBILIZE CONGREGATIONS

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#### INTRODUCTION

To judge only by my own experience as a student, pastor and teacher, the relationship between social research and the institutional church is a story of promise and frustration.<sup>1</sup>

A time of immense possibility was initiated in the work of H. Paul Douglass. I was first influenced by Douglass as a field education student with the Protestant Council of New York in the mid-1950s when we used his approach to help congregations adapt their programs and denominations alter their strategies to meet the challenge of changing social conditions.

When Douglass entered professional life at the turn of the century, he employed the sociology he learned from the University of Iowa, Columbia University and the University of Chicago to address the problems confronting churches (Brunner, 1959). Along with his field notes and interviews, Douglass was the first to make extensive use of survey methods and demographic data in both church and community analysis. Douglass made studies with churches, not of them. Working with church leaders he collected information which he hoped would be useful for making decisions for church strategies and particular programs. By a focus on the changing social conditions which were common to rural, city and suburban churches, he hoped to transcend denominational differences and generate a united Christian witness through shared social ministries. His pioneering work has been studied and reprinted by university sociologists, but, unfortunately, he felt unable to break into the tight circles of denominational decision-making or the glacial traditions of theological education.

In 1959 when I was ordained, most denominations employed sociologists in the limited but essential task of selecting sites for new church development. When I returned from the parish to the seminary in the mid-1970s, the denominational staff sociologists were gone, replaced by executives with training in organizational development. In the seminary I discovered a shocking absence of interest in congregational studies. Many seminary faculty believed in the "church" as a concept, and frequently devoted time to policy commissions and leadership education. But scholarly interest in congregational life was (and is) generally limited to the search for nonnative standards from scripture and historical experience. Even in the social sciences, only a few congregations have been selected for serious study, and these have been drawn primarily from marginal groups or dramatic deviants which "tell a good story" but are significantly different from the local congregations which most church members attend.

In a strange twist, recently some biblical scholars have discovered research uses of the social sciences, and more church leaders have published studies of typical churches.<sup>2</sup> As part of that movement, in the fall of 1979 a group of seminary and church leaders who shared an interest in congregational studies first gathered to respond to the provocative genius of the late James F. Hopewell, who was working on his study later published as *Congregation: Stories and Structures* (Fortress, 1987). This informal group continues to use the disciplines of social science for congregational studies in occasional conferences, institutes and workshops, and in books, articles and even videotapes. Our common concerns and varied perspectives are reflected in the publication of *The Handbook for Congregational Studies* (Abingdon, 1986)--suggesting a mixture, a kind of triangulation, of interdependent approaches focused on the congregation.

Finally, as a faculty member of a theological seminary in Chicago, I witness the current renaissance of practical theology. This movement is a kind of palace revolt of well known theologians who are trying, among other ambitions, to find the connections, what they have called "correlations," between the social sciences, Christian convictions and human experience (Browning, 1983; Mudge and Poling, 1987).

From my early experiences with the work of H. Paul Douglass to the present, I have seen the rise and fall and rise again of working relationships between religious concerns and the social sciences. My comments are part of that unfolding story.

## **PROJECT RATIONALE**

The project on which I am reporting is based in the Center for Church and Community Ministries, an agency organized in the early 1980s for congregational studies, teaching and consulting in association with McCormick Theological Seminary in Chicago, Illinois.

At present we are engaged in a major program which seeks to strengthen congregations through the development of social ministries in response to community needs. The project is set in the context of the Reagan administration which encouraged a reduction of national funding for social services, and an increase in voluntary support and private sector participation in the social concerns of community development (Palmer and Sawhill, 1982).

The project rationale, written in 1986, suggested that since churches had historically been centers of community identity and concern, the time was ripe for congregations to reclaim this primary community function in the face of disintegrating commitments to community, loss of national government resources, and growing awareness of local social needs (Bellah, et al., 1985; Berger and Neuhaus, 1977; Palmer, 1981). In the initial discussions, the Center proposed to the Lilly Endowment a plan to develop congregational models to show how typical churches would respond to encouragement and resources for developing community social ministries.

This situation offered distinct advantages for research. Since the Center proposed both to manage and to study the process of mobilizing these congregations for ministry, the research design could be woven into project administration. As project managers, the Center would share common goals with the congregations, and as managers have access to the kinds of information which others might study as outsiders. Together with the churches, for example, we share an interest in program success, personal faith and leadership development. Further, by working with congregations to initiate these programs of social ministry, we could observe the

social dynamics of program development through a period of several years.

From the perspective of some scholars in both the social sciences and theology, this combination of "research-in-action" is an oxymoron, impossibly confusing the objectivity of research with the interests of project administration. This issue is pivotal for congregational studies, and I will return to it at the conclusion. For now let me recognize that our managerial role does have intended and unintended consequences. In this post-empirical era, we have tried to make public our commitments rather than make false claims to be objective or value free (Bernstein, 1983). At the same time, we will argue that "disciplined immersion" (Geertz, 1973; Heilman, 1973) in congregational life, although always messy, is the most revealing perspective for both sociologists and theologians to study the relationship between faith and action. Some games cannot be learned from the sidelines: and the researchers' own commitments and participation are essential elements in our congregational studies.

To this proposal, to study congregational transformation toward social ministry, the Endowment responded generously. Beyond the costs for a year of planning with the churches, and beyond our own administrative costs, beginning in mid-1988 and ending in mid-1991 the Center is able to provide seed money of \$20,000 annually for three years (total \$60,000) for each of 40 Church and Community projects in the two mid-western states of Illinois and Indiana. At this point we have fully funded 36 ministries, and provided lesser amounts to several others. Since each project was expected to include both church and community partners in their ministries, we now have participation from more than 100 churches and more than 150 boards, agencies and organizations from both the public and private sectors. Management of this project is time consuming, but we have made it pay off in quality and diversity of comparative congregational studies.

With a project of this size, we were able to seek and select "typical" congregations which roughly approximate the demographic characteristics of mainline and evangelical churches in the two state area.<sup>3</sup> We include churches from 18 denominations, from conservative to liberal, from a handful to several thousand members, divided roughly one third in rural communities, one third in small cities and suburbs, and one third in metropolitan areas. Like the mid-west, we are dominated by Anglo churches, but include some black, Hispanic and Asian representation. With a modest administrative organization, we have used workshops, newsletters and staff visits to generate among the participants a sense of belonging to a common cause. Therefore our interventions are generally viewed as a necessary nuisance, and an opportunity for them to tell others what they are doing. Significantly, church leaders not only cooperate in data gathering, but share in its interpretation.

With this background, I will describe two approaches to research which we are using, one based on administration and the other more related to theory. Finally I will suggest three challenges which the project offers to the study of religious values and behavior.

## **I. ADMINISTRATIVE RESEARCH**

Administrative research is the focused attention on what we can learn by managerial decisions about congregations, and about our own assumptions in the project. When we make an administrative decision, we observe the response as initial data for further research. In our case, administrative research is mandated by our theological assertions that congregations are "called" to be involved in social ministry, and that mainline and evangelical congregations grow stronger in the process.

First, we needed to build an organization. We divided the area into four geographic regions: Chicago, Central Illinois, Northern Indiana and Indianapolis, where each would have 10 projects. In each region we found a coordinator and gathered a team of several denominational leaders who negotiated the selection of "typical" churches which were not heavily engaged in social ministry, and who then agreed to help these churches to develop their programs. Our first discovery were the "denominational leaders," a significant, overlooked and frustrated network of church professionals who are expected to connect local congregations with denominational values, programs and commitments. Mainline Protestantism has bet their future on this bureaucracy, yet we know very little of their work, their beliefs and values, and their effectiveness--an invitation to religious research (Hargrove, 1986).

Second, we needed willing congregations. We offered one year of planning and three years of seed money, if they would agree to continue the ministry at least an additional two years on their own resources. About a third of the prospective congregations declined--suggesting self-selection factors in which we took an interest. Many reasons contributed to non-participation, but two dominated. Frequently pastors reported that their lay leaders were not interested, a perception we will discuss later. Most often, congregational leaders (lay and clergy) could not imagine what the program might look like at the conclusion of a year of planning and several years of development. The money was intimidating because of the program it implied. "Imagination" (Keane, 1984) and "risk" (Wehrung, 1986) are primary characteristics of participating churches, and significant elements in the decision making process to which we will return.

Third, each congregation needed a plan for their ministry. During 1987-88 the contract churches participated in a planning process directed by the staff of the Center for Church and Community Ministries with regional workshops and progress reports expected each quarter. We structured this year around the framework from the *Handbook for Congregational Studies*, which is divided into four parts: context, identity, program and process. In the fall the congregations studied their social context, in the winter their identity, in the spring they concentrated on a combination of program and process which we called "organization," and then they combined the draft reports to make their project proposals for ministry beginning in the summer of 1988. These three concepts from the *Handbook* -- context, identity and organization -- have provided the structure for us to combine both the framework for managerial decisions and the index for organizing research data.

Fourth, since we wanted these ministries to have a maximum impact, we limited the choices of potential projects to what we called six "survival issues," specifically listing a choice of hunger, health, housing, education, employment and world peace. We discovered that most congregations had trouble focusing on "issues," but they translated our language about issues into the needs of real people of their communities. They cared about youth and their need for education and employment, and about the elderly and their health and housing needs, or about families and their many basic needs. Like most academic professionals, our staff were looking at more abstract issues, while the congregations were more likely to think first about people--who may need help with their problems (Hopewell, 1987:56). This distinction reflects a major barrier that inhibits congregations in moving from individual needs to systemic changes, from service to justice in ministries they organize.

Finally, since we wanted to generate ownership within the local church, we made a highly theoretical, theological and controversial decision (Dudley and Hilgert, 1987:65-75). We

required each local project to have a layperson--a church member--as organizational leader (chair). The pastor was asked to serve as resource, interpreter and encourager, but not project chairperson. We did not realize how liberal, white, middle class and Protestant this decision would appear. One black pastor protested that I was "messin' with (his) 'ierarchy." Administratively the decision has proven valid many times, but in the process we discovered how much we have to learn about widely different but culturally effective variations in patterns of congregational leadership.

In summary, administrative research is both delightful and disconcerting. These discoveries are delightful when they confirm the "common sense" approach to congregational problems, the stuff from which so many self-help books have been written. At the same time it is very disconcerting to recognize the piecemeal character of this information since it is uninformed by a coherent theoretical construct of either theology or the social sciences. The problem with administrative research is not that it is wrong, but it is of such specific and limited value. This gap between problem solving and theory grounded research is the reason why the academics, church leaders and researchers need each other.

## II. THEORY-RELATED RESEARCH

To provide a more systematic, comprehensive approach, we recruited a group of academics to join with the administrators to organize our research theory and methodology. Some of the names are well known to you. We invited two sociologists in the mid-west who shared our concerns, Professors James Davidson of Purdue University and James Wood of Indiana University. Initially we matched them with two representatives of theological education, one from McCormick Theological Seminary in Chicago and the other from Christian Theological Seminary in Indianapolis. As staff we hired two professional researchers--Mary Mattis, who was then director of research for the United Presbyterian Church, and Alan Mock, a graduate instructor in the sociology of religion at Purdue. Since then the research group has included numerous part-time advisors from theology, history and other social sciences.

We began by drafting eight basic questions which we all agreed were of central significance:

1. What are the differences between churches which develop social ministry and churches which do not?
2. How do churches become involved in social ministry?
3. How can leadership facilitate social ministry?
4. What are the effects of social ministry on the congregation as a whole?
5. What are the effects of the social ministries on the populations the ministries are designed to reach?
6. What are the effects of the social ministries on the partners in the project, and on relationships with the denomination, seminaries, and other groups such as social agencies, business and government?
7. What is the relationship between service and advocacy or justice ministries, and when will a congregation engage in one or the other?
8. Which congregations will institutionalize social ministries, and what are the distinguishing characteristics of the process?

These questions provide the focus for a variety of theories and theological issues: From the social sciences we wanted to address theories of socialization and conflict, deprivation and social exchange, values and interests, and functional authority of Weber's models of leadership.

From the seminary we heard questions of individual and community vocation, of biblical authority and social behavior, of spirituality and public ministry, and of the gap between Christian service and social justice, and how these related to various concepts of God.

The languages were different, but the issues were remarkably similar. In both theology and the social sciences we were interested in continuity and change, in vertical and horizontal faith, in community and individuality, in death (or termination) and renewal, in values and norms variously defined. Our discussions took on a lively character when we discovered the differences among us, for example, that our two major sociologists have both published on the motivation of volunteers, dramatically stated, one from a more Marxian interest-driven perspective and the other from a Weberian value-driven approach (Davidson, 1985; Wood, 1981).

As you would expect, we have operationalized these theories and developed a schedule for data collection including instruments and staff procedures. In one sense, our whole project is a single, substantial intervention of incentive and support for congregational development of community social ministries. Since much of our data can be generated by reports and procedures relating to program development, we needed relatively infrequent and unobtrusive research interventions in the lives of church members. We have used three approaches to theory-related data gathering: (1) observations and interviews by Project-related staff, (2) membership questionnaires, and (3) materials written by congregational leaders (Selltz et al., 1964; Young, 1966). Since we are only at the mid-point of implementation, I believe that any extensive review of findings would be premature and inappropriate. Rather I have organized this section around these three different approaches to theory-related research.

### *1. Observation and Interview*

Field observations and interviews are equally familiar to both church leaders and social scientists, but used for different purposes. In our reports we have made an effort to distinguish between administrative recommendations which call for judgments and action, and the more descriptive research material on the process and progress in local project development.

We have used numerous sources to gain this information, including interview tapes and written observations from our field consultants; periodic reports from regional coordinators and denominational leaders; staff notes from workshops, phone calls and site visits; information provided from a member of the local project who has been asked to keep records of process dynamics and difficult decisions; and other regular information, such as the financial reports which reflect one measure of project activity. The most energy and insight has come from our collection of quotes, comments and observations of project leaders--the juicy human stories which we tried to call "pericopes," but the spelling program in our computer insists on calling "porkpies."

Management of narrative materials is a major challenge. How do you build categories of comparison between such different projects: a small Methodist church with a big housing project in Indianapolis, a housing rehab program of a Disciples church in a small town in central Illinois, a fired-up youth program in the Sweet Holy Spirit Baptist church in a black neighborhood in Chicago, a family help program in a mid-sized town in Indiana, several health care programs for the elderly, a regional advocacy program for the hearing impaired, and a peace project of reconciliation initiated by the Church of the Brethren in a college town where they have felt marginalized since the polarization of the Vietnam war?

We developed six fields of keywords reflecting both practical needs and theoretical considerations. Four of these fields are from the *Handbook*. *Context* includes neighborhood description, indicators of support or resistance, sections on community partnering, and measures of community impact. Under *identity* we index its origins, demographics, bases, expressions, and examples. The *program* field looks at target populations, specific programs, structure, and resources. *Process* covers keywords in leadership, decision-making, harmony or conflict, ownership or resistance, and congregational change. The fifth field focuses on the *project* itself, including its focus, organization, implementation, and target populations. Finally, we include a field on *interventions*, which traces research and reactions, staff interveners, and intervention resources.

All significant narrative materials, from both church and staff sources, are coded according to these keywords and indexed by computer. From this database we can see the progress of any particular project, and compare any issue of interest throughout the projects. This comparative analysis has proven helpful for both administrative and research purposes.

In using this information, we can see the particular congregations develop ministries in ways which are appropriate to the heritage of that church in the community they serve. In this sample of churches, for example, we can see that black churches mobilize differently from white churches in similar conditions, how rural churches respond differently from comparable urban churches, how small churches behave differently from larger churches in the same denomination, but similar to other small churches across denominational lines.

In the influence of church size, we expected (Dudley, 1978) to find that larger churches (membership of 800 plus) would organize their ministry in a more formal way, with board members chosen for the specific skills they offer to match the needs of the ministry. Smaller congregations would take a more "familial" approach, with boards composed of people who had known each other for many years, operating on a more informal basis. We also discovered the inverse of each, where some formal boards operate with highly collegial, almost informal, relationships, and some small church boards needed board structure and formality to transcend too much familiarity.

We have seen how some church leaders tend to delegate to staff the responsibility to design, plan and implement the ministry. Other core committees tend to take a much stronger hand in designing and implementing their ministries, making the staff an extension of plans developed by the board. We also found many projects in which the responsibilities are more cooperatively generated and distributed between board and staff. Since the leaders of many of our larger Protestant churches could not define their programs until they had hired the staff, they appeared to move more slowly.<sup>4</sup>

In developing partners in ministry, we discovered that few congregations had any prior experience in sharing decision-making with other groups, so gathering partners has been a new and often threatening experience. Most congregations began by negotiating with neighbor churches to develop a more ecumenical community program. As they defined their areas of ministry, congregations have discovered about twice as many non-church partners who share their particular concerns.

These partners include social agencies of similar concerns, such as pre-school and elderly programs; resource groups like hospitals, libraries, colleges and school systems; public groups

like a village board, state agency, or congressional office; service clubs, like Lions, 4-H Club, and YWCA; private sector, like a real estate agency, convenience store, and a local savings and loan. Partners have broadened the socioeconomic base of ministry, strengthened the program and brought community recognition and influence. Gaining partners has often made the congregation give up an intimate ownership of the project, but in most cases the loss is compensated by community affirmation, especially by secular partners who have a gentle put-down for churches, saying, "We never knew the church cared the way we do." With this new experience, we believe our studies of congregations have been too limited and parochial.

From our review of church-related literature, the approach of using observations, interviews and personal perspectives provides most of the data for congregational studies. But in our project, such qualitative reporting is insufficient. Therefore, we included a second approach to data-gathering, by asking more structured questions to a larger sample of participants.

## *2. Survey Data*

The second source of information comes from more standard social science questionnaires and survey instruments. Although these are familiar to social scientists, they are foreign and disruptive in most local congregations. With church members as a whole, we have designed only three survey interventions--one written questionnaire at the beginning in 1987 and another at the conclusion of funding in 1991, and a telephone survey in the spring of 1989. With the denominational leaders and pastors we have used a few more instruments, such as background questions on their own faith journeys, and explorations in congregational structure and story based on the work of James F. Hopewell (1987).

In the time available here, we will concentrate on our use of a written membership survey questionnaire which we called Church and Community Planning Inventory (CCPI). This instrument is primarily based on questions drawn from the Parish Profile Inventory of Hartford Seminary and from other questions used in previous research.<sup>5</sup> For each question we have developed a bibliography of prior usage which has been a great help in both academic writing and congregational interpretation. We also developed a Spanish language edition of the CCPI, but our Asian participants used the English version in a congregational setting with translation and discussion--for them it was a social event!

To gain acceptance, the questionnaire was widely circulated and discussed with congregational leaders prior to its distribution. In congregations larger than 250 members, we used sampling procedures. Since the church leaders were actively seeking responses with us, our returns were unusually high, averaging over 55 %. In one strong Catholic congregation we received a 95% return because they brought their completed forms together after receiving them in the mail, and discussed their responses as part of their continuing parish education program--and the pastor told us, "Besides I have something on everyone which I threatened to use if they didn't show up."

In all we have a data bank exceeding 5000 individual responses to the CCPI. One round of regional workshops was devoted to consulting with the church leaders to share with them the task of interpreting the results. They were generally surprised to find that church members' support for social ministry was far greater than the leaders had dared to anticipate. In discussing the data, leaders felt affirmed in their "hunches" about the members' responses, feeling that they knew the church well in some areas and had much more to learn in other areas. Some church leaders needed to destroy the halo that seems to sanctify statistical reports, and were liberated when they found some distributions which they felt were simply

"wrong," and could say so. Then the rest made good sense.

For the project as a whole, the survey provides a base line for congregations at the time of entry. In our discussions with church leaders we helped them compare their scores with other churches they knew within the project, and with the norms in other national and regional samples using the same and similar questions. For many church leaders these discussions of their survey data were the high point of the planning year; as one pastor said, "It made the whole effort worthwhile."

For our research purposes, the survey results have been helpful in many ways. For example, in probing questions of pastoral leadership, we have scores from pastors and the scores which pastors predicted for their congregations. In general, pastors were theologically and socially more liberal than their congregations, which we expected. We did not anticipate that pastors would significantly underestimate the stated interest and willingness of the congregation to support social ministry. This difference in perception between the congregation and its leaders, especially its pastor, has been the theme of a working document among us, and continues as a major research interest (Hadden, 1986; Harris, 1977).

Second, based on the membership survey we can examine the relationship between personal beliefs and social perspectives. For example, as in other studies, what has been called "horizontal faith" has a positive relationship with social ministries, and "vertical faith" has a neutral or negative relationship (Davidson, 1972). Our study confirms the earlier finding, but further, we have enough data from each congregation to explore the ways these faith patterns interact in the life and decision-making of particular churches.

Thirdly, the most significant application of the membership survey has been in the development of a nine-cell comparison between religious orientation and congregational social posture on social ministries. In religious orientation we identified congregations by their emphasis along a scale which combines beliefs on biblical authority with their emphasis on personal conversion (evangelical) to gradual growth in faith (liberal), or in-between (moderate). In social posture we identified congregations which felt the church primarily serves their own members (sanctuary), serves the community as needed (civic) or takes corporate stands on social and justice issues (activist).<sup>6</sup> In our sample a plurality of contract and partner congregations fall in the civic category with moderate or liberal religious orientation (46% in the "center"), which might be expected. We were delighted that the majority of congregations are distributed throughout the other cells, which suggests that some of our churches combine liberal faith with sanctuary social views, and some combine evangelical faith with activist social posture.

Specifically, these data cast serious doubt on the simple assumption that liberal churches will obviously take the activist stance, or evangelical churches are confined to a sanctuary posture. However, the data do suggest a more significant geographic trend, that rural congregations tend to assume a civic or centrist position, taking seriously all the concerns of their communities. Conversely, urban congregations tend to be more activist, that is, more likely to isolate particular issues and seek to make systemic changes.

Since we expect to use another written membership survey in 1991, we hope to compare the results of both the phone poll and the second membership survey with the data from 1987 to explore some implications of involvement in social ministry over time.

### **3. Congregational Reports**

The third source of data, the congregational program reports, are really a hybrid of both administrative and theory-related research. These reports are written by congregational leaders for project management without the appearance of research intervention. Using this material represents a source of data which is generally overlooked or underrated.

Since we used the categories of context, identity and organization in the planning process (Carroll, et al. 1986) we have maintained that framework as a skeleton for the narrative reports which are due for administrative purposes in September, January and late April of each year. From the congregational perspective, these three study areas provide a solid foundation for their own internal management, and a resource for preparing proposals to other funding sources. For both administration and research, these reports provide the best insights into the strengths and weaknesses of each project, through the eyes and the language of those who work with it on a daily basis.<sup>7</sup>

From these reports we have some of our most interesting insights into the dynamics of decision-making in each local project. Some theories have suggested that significant institutional change can occur only with the intervention of strong pastoral leaders (Hessel, 1982; Schaller, 1972). In general, the reports from these churches seem to support a different hypothesis, that "typical" congregations can develop and institutionalize effective social ministries, with a wide variety of leadership styles, when they integrate studies of congregational context and identity with an organization capable of deciding and acting. Conversely, the denial of any of these three elements--context, identity or organization--has seriously inhibited the development of their social ministry.

Taking each in sequence, focused study of *social context* served to counter the "familiarity blindness" and the "selective perception" which congregations develop in their inability to believe that they can make any difference in the world. From contextual studies church leaders can re-focus on the individual and systemic community needs. Perhaps more important, congregations discover new resources and potential allies in confronting these needs. They are not alone.

The study of *congregational identity* required leaders to review the assumptions of faith and action which are carried in the formal and informal life of the church. These studies included at least two elements: a narrative review of congregational history and their larger Christian heritage, and a statistical review (in the CCPI) of member attitudes and values in areas of social ministry. Looking back on their history and heritage, congregations were reminded that social ministries were embedded in their Christian faith and in their own past, not something which the church committee (or CCP staff) recently invented. We tried not to introduce something new, but to affirm core values in their Christian tradition and their congregational memory. From a theory of culture, we hypothesized that mobilizing churches for change would be grounded in a perceived continuity or recovery of values (Pelikan, 1984; Shils, 1981), and most preliminary reports support this thesis.

*Organizational structure* gave the leaders the confidence that they could act on what they were discovering in their studies of context and identity. Or perhaps it worked the other way, for it seems that a congregation cannot see the evils or needs of its community if it does not imagine, or believe, that it has the power to act (Dykstra, 1981: 75-88; Mudge, 1987). In our planning process the seed money functioned as a catalyst for the imagination of church

leaders: they could see what needed changing when they believed they could make a difference. Ministries were mobilized when they combined context, identity and organization. One leader from a depressed rural community unconsciously combined the elements when he said, "Now that we are organized, we see the world differently. We have begun to believe in ourselves again."

Further, we believe that the corporate self-image of the congregation has motivational power to build confidence in its membership, and to move it to act in a way which feels right to the members. Thus we have clustered congregations around several self-images which reflect their memory of their congregational history in their social context (Dudley and Johnson, 1991). These images suggest how congregations accomplish common goals through very different behavioral patterns.

Two of these images carry a sense of imminent danger or crisis. One common self-image is a survivor church, which is hanging on by its fingernails, like Indiana Jones, ever confronted by impossible situations. Surprisingly, we found that this self-image seemed both effective in its setting, and suited to the leaders it attracts. They use crises to mobilize resources, never winning but never quitting. By contrast, we found crusader churches which turn every incident into a campaign, every crisis into a larger cause. For many people these are the epitome of social action churches, but we found this image suited only a minority of the typical congregations which were willing to engage in social ministries.

More often we found that churches saw themselves motivated in ministry not by crises or causes, but by a sense of belonging to a place or caring for a people, over time. Some churches are dedicated to serving their communities, what we called the **pillar churches**, which told their stories as pillars of community values and engaged in ministries of mercy as acts of civic and Christian responsibility. We found a distinct difference in the **pilgrim churches**, which moved through life with a focus not on the place but on the people they served through a network which mixed language and culture with their understanding of the Christian faith. Finally, we found numerous congregations which took pride not in the community as a whole, not in a particular cultural group, but in their tradition of caring for individuals, for particular persons who needed help. We have called them **servant churches**. These five images come from the reports of congregational leaders, showing how they organize and develop ministries quite differently.

Each of these studies deserves a paper or a book of its own. I have tried only to suggest the possible use of these data, and we at the Center invite your participation in its further analyses.

### III. THREE CHALLENGES

When we look on this project as a whole, we can see at least three challenges which are significantly larger than the material we are studying. In reviewing the literature of congregational studies, we have been amazed to discover several independent streams of information. Most church consultants base their recommendations on administrative research, a stimulus and response approach which describes what they did and how particular congregations responded to that intervention. Most seminary faculty write from the author's observations supported by interviews and anecdotes. Most sociological literature, especially professional journals, is dominated by the numerical results of survey data. Documents written by churches, if they are used at all, appear in historical materials produced for the congregation's own celebrations.

The first challenge is the integration of these streams into a more comprehensive approach sometimes called the TRIANGULATION of research. By triangulation we mean the focus of multiple data, perspectives, methods and theories on specific issues or phenomena, which reflects the diversity we invited into our Research Operations Advisory Committee. We have been delighted to find, as reported by others, "triangulation is not simply an aggregate accumulation of the results of other methods. It involves their interaction, and it is thus a phenomenon that is more than the sum of its parts" (Hillery, 1981:23; cf. Denzin, 1970, 1989).

In the Church and Community Project we have been able to facilitate triangulation by utilizing similar analytical categories for all sources. The resulting insights are significantly different from research which is limited to a single approach, a challenge to theory and method alike. For example, in developing our nine-cell typology of faith orientation and social posture, we began by organizing our material around simpler frameworks like the four-cell approaches used by several authors in recent publications (Roozen, et al., 1984; Warner 1988). Using SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) we could make the cluster analysis of the data conform to the distributions reported by others as long as we used only membership survey material. But as soon as we used two or more research approaches, the simpler analytical frameworks were inadequate.

In fact, we found that the technical procedures of the SPSS Quick Cluster program were so strongly influenced by large differences in characteristics which were marginal to us, that churches were placed in categories which were incongruous with the field notes of staff visitors, or in some cases, with the observations and experiences of congregational leaders. In the process, we were forced to revise procedures until we found a statistical process which also conformed to the way the churches saw themselves and others saw them. Triangulation forced a revision of both the concepts and the methodology.

Triangulation is more complex and more risky than using any single approach. Now I can better understand why so many journals are focused on more limited data, perspectives, theory and methods. But religious phenomena, especially congregational studies, lend themselves to the challenge of incorporating multiple elements, and the very diversity offers its own self-corrective powers. Further, once we have begun to see the larger picture, then each separate stream seems still, silent and un-real by comparison.

The second challenge to comprehensive research is the need for dialogue between social scientists and religious professionals. Theologians have taken the initiative in seeking to bridge the differences of discourse in an effort which they call CORRELATION, a word which carries more technical meaning to statisticians. By "correlation" theologians seek to establish a mutually beneficial relationship between theology and the social sciences (Tracy, 1983). Theologians have initiated the dialogue by affirming the disciplines of socio-historical research, and recognizing their biases as assumptions of self-interest that influence all perception (Poling and Miller, 1985).

This dialogue depends upon the willingness of some religious researchers becoming multi-lingual, that is, able to speak the languages of both the social sciences and the seminary, and in the dialogue admit that we may begin at very different places on such issues as belief and behavior--which are the dependent and which the independent variables? There are no short cuts, no Rosetta Stone to make it easy, but many hours of interesting and difficult exchange among the "cultures" involved. The purpose is not conversion or loss of identity, but mutual

enrichment.

For example, when we developed the five congregational images, we modified and shaped the reports from congregational leaders by making comparisons with other data sources--that's triangulation. Then we took the concepts which were rooted in project experience and looked for images which carried comparable weight in the Christian tradition--that's the basis of correlation. Each image--survivor, crusader, pillar, pilgrim and servant--needed to be legitimate in both secular analysis and sacred memory.

Correlation is not simply the translation of concepts from the cultural language of the social sciences to the symbol system of the church, but rather a negotiation between concepts of different cultures so that each can be informed by the other. In such discussion we are far more likely to identify the complex components of faith and action, to uncover the many layers and dimensions of congregational life, and to build the body of knowledge by which general theories and particular behavior may be understood.

We have been overwhelmed by the richness of information which triangulation and correlation yield. Gone are our simple stereotypes of liberal and conservative, of leaders and followers, of faith commitments which "ought" to make a difference in practice. In their place is the rich texture of congregational dynamics with a momentum of long-term commitments, unspoken relationships and a limited but functional array of options.

After triangulation and correlation, the third challenge is RESEARCH-IN-ACTION: Has our research desire-to-know impaired our managerial will-to-act? or vice versa? We agree that sometimes applied sociology has become the servant of political and commercial interests. Nevertheless we are drawn by Bellah's vision of a "practical sociology" (Bellah, 1983) which is not the tool of managerial decisions, but a source of social critique which should place every project in a larger moral and ethical context.

Ethically, the client relationship must not be violated for research purposes. Our project management and seed money does not buy the right for us to use whatever data we accumulate. We still must request permission to gather information, and protect the vulnerable participants from jeopardy. For example, data on pastoral perceptions of their congregations could be damaging to the pastor's relationship with the congregation, and could leave an unfavorable impression of the pastor in the denominational placement procedure. We use that data in aggregate, while individual scores are protected primarily for the pastor's personal use.

However, we have made an unusual choice: Most of these data are protected not by keeping them from the congregational leaders, but by inviting church members to share in analysis so that they become co-investigators in the research process. Working individually and in regional teams, church leaders have joined with us to translate the data from budget items, quarterly reports and statistical forms into community stories and personal experiences--greatly enriching the well from which we draw some tentative conclusions together, and reducing the threat that small fragments of data might create major misunderstandings.

It is the policy of our Center that members of our churches are not objects for study, but they are the subjects, the actors with speaking parts to help us understand their drama. For this reason our Center has resources for an in-residence program for researchers who want to work with existing data, and we are developing a variety of field conferences and teaching churches which will provide direct contact with congregational leaders to examine the program in action and to share in the interpretation of data.

In the same way, we believe that there are numerous church agencies and congregations which would make natural partners for religious research of significant issues--and they have access to people who care and funding to make it happen. Such research challenges the professional to the **triangulation** of several sources, and the **correlation** of dialogue between different worlds of thought. We believe that such **research-in-action**, when carefully designed and openly engaged, would enhance the level of social science research and make a positive contribution to both religions and scientific communities.

Finally, there is a larger ethical issue at stake: In the tradition of H. Paul Douglass, we are committed to the challenge of changing communities, to help congregational leaders to meet and sometimes shape these changes. Working with church leaders, we are trying to create programs and awaken consciousness which did not exist, and to better understand how it happens. In the process we study changing leadership patterns and perceptions, changing attitudes and beliefs, changing coalitions and community groups. Although we recognize some philosophical problems in our approach, yet we believe that the best way to understand and promote congregational change is through disciplined immersion, tracking with them in their process toward a common goal.

For some research the strict separation of approaches seems to work well. For congregational studies the triangulation of multiple sources and correlation between the social sciences and theology seem more appropriate. Further, the study of congregations-in-transition is best achieved by research-in-action which allows expression of both our personal religious convictions and our disciplined professional vocation. Even as a conservative, Edward Shils has suggested only two reasons which legitimate social research: to increase knowledge and to heal pain (Shils, 1980). Both are essential to our vocation as religious researchers, and both are basic to congregational studies. That is our challenge and, ultimately, our satisfaction.

## NOTES

1. My thanks to the Research Operations Advisory Committee and Congregational Studies Project Team for critique and suggestions, especially James D. Davison, Sally A. Johnson, William McKinney, Donald B. Ottenhoff, Thomas Van Eck and Barbara G. Wheeler. For further information, contact Center for Church and Community Ministries, McCormick Theological Seminary, 5600 S. Woodlawn Avenue, Chicago, IL 60637.
2. For basic socio-biblical scholarship, see Gottwald (1979), Meeks (1983) and Theissen (1978). For a biblical approach similar to this paper, see Dudley and Hilgert (1987). For an extended Bibliography on Congregational Studies, see Dudley and Hopewell in Dudley (1983).
3. Representing 18 denominations, including 15 United Methodist, 13 Roman Catholic, 11 Presbyterian, 8 Lutheran, 7 Christian (DOC), 5 United Church of Christ, 3 Baptist, 3 Evangelical Covenant, 3 Mennonite, 2 Church of the Brethren, and African Methodist Episcopal Zion, Christian Methodist Episcopal, Congregational Christian, and Episcopal congregations.
4. However, other attributes of these larger, more affluent congregations also may have significantly inhibited the development of social ministries: e.g., the gulf between the congregational membership and the community need may be greater, the impact of the seed money may be less, and the conflict in values and life-style may be felt more keenly in these congregations. Catholic churches of comparable size and location seem to have more diversified membership, more available leaders (parish workers and nuns) and more recent

history in developing community social ministries.

5. The Parish Profile Inventory is reprinted in *Handbook for Congregational Studies*, pp. 182-190. Other questions were provided primarily by Professors James Davidson, Alan Mock and James Wood.

6. Social Posture/Religious Orientation typology: '

| N = 62      | Sanctuary | Civic | Activist |
|-------------|-----------|-------|----------|
| Evangelical | 1         | 7     | 4        |
| Moderate    | 6         | 16    | 6        |
| Liberal     | 5         | 13    | 4        |

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7. Materials written by congregational leaders seem to be the least common approach to congregational studies. These data and their interpretation are most similar to what Selltitz et al. classify as "personal documents" in research, defined as meeting the following three criteria:

They are (1) written documents; (2) documents that have been produced on the writer's own initiative or, if not, in such a way that their introspective content has been determined entirely by the author; and (3) documents that focus on their author's personal experiences.....This more limited definition of personal documents has the advantage of bringing to the fore their most distinctive characteristic: they permit us to see other people as they see themselves. (pp. 323-324)

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