

Studying Congregations

A N E W H A N D B O O K

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STUDYING CONGREGATIONS

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Chapter 3

Culture and Identity in the Congregation

NANCY T. AMMERMAN

No two congregations are alike. Each gathering of people creates its own ways of doing things, its own ways of describing the world, its own tools and artifacts that produce its distinctive appearance. Congregations, in other words, are subcultures within a larger culture. They have distinct identities that can be seen in what they make and do together. One of the perspectives one can bring to the study of a congregation, then, is that of the student of culture who looks for the everyday patterns of life that make each congregation itself, that give it its identity. James Hopewell begins his book *Congregation* with the observation that “a group of people cannot regularly gather for what they feel to be religious purposes without developing a complex network of signals and symbols and conventions—in short, a subculture—that gains its own logic and then functions in a way peculiar to that group.”¹

Defining Culture

Culture is who we are and the world we have created to live in. It is the predictable patterns of who does what and habitual strategies for telling the world about the things held most dear. The *Handbook for Congregational Studies* talked about a congregation’s identity, and cul-

ture is not unlike what the *Handbook* meant by that concept. But thinking about a congregation’s culture reminds us that it is something this group of people has created, not a fixed or normative category. Unlike our usual notions about identity, a culture is neither who we always will be nor who we ought to be. It is who we are and all the ways in which we reinforce and recreate who we are. A culture includes the congregation’s history and stories of its heroes. It includes its symbols, rituals, and worldview. It is shaped by the cultures in which its members live (represented by their demographic characteristics), but it takes on its own unique identity and character when those members come together.² Just as our larger culture tells us how to greet people and how to eat properly and what sorts of clothes to wear, so a congregational culture gives those rules its own special twist. Understanding a congregation requires understanding that it is a unique gathering of people with a cultural identity all its own.

Congregations, of course, do not create their cultures from scratch. They have a rather large store of ingredients from which to borrow. In some cases, they may get both the ingredients and an elaborate recipe from their specific religious tradition. When one walks into a Catholic or Presbyterian or Lutheran place of worship, or enters a Jewish or Muslim or Hindu sacred

space, it is clear that the place or space belongs to a tradition, that it is identified with the ideas and practices and symbols of that larger religious whole. It may seem, in fact, that congregations have little room for creating anything on their own, given some traditions' prescriptions for how rituals are done, what sort of governance structure is allowed, what lessons are studied by the children, and even what the building looks like. Congregations, after all, act as carriers of some larger tradition. Even the most independent church, which claims to be free of denominational interference, nevertheless sees itself as a carrier of the Christian message and participates in networks of affiliation that shape its life. What each congregation cooks up, then, is always a mix of local creativity and larger tradition. What we see in a given locale is that group's selective retrieval of their own theological heritage, along with the local inventions that have been necessary to make sense of life in that place.

In addition to being shaped by a theological tradition, congregations are also, of course, shaped by the larger secular culture in which they are located. Most obviously, they usually borrow the larger culture's language. Anyone who has visited congregations at a distance from his or her home immediately recognizes that congregations borrow more than language. The rhythm of the music may be different, even if the hymns are the same. The order and timing of the service may vary, even if all the usual elements are there. The arrangement of the space, the dress of the worshipers, and who is honored and how—all signal the distinctiveness that comes from a particular local culture. What we see in those distant locations is both the particular inventions of those local worshipers and the ways they borrow from the habits and tools of their larger culture.

In the United States, congregations build their culture out of well-defined expectations for what local religious bodies are supposed to be like. We expect, for instance, that congregations are voluntary gatherings, that people can choose where they belong. Religious groups that attempt to assign people to a given parish must contend with this larger cultural norm.

We also expect religious buildings to be distinctive and worship services to be at a predictable time. We expect that there will be a "pastor" of some sort and a certain predictable range of activities—worship chief among them, but educational, fellowship, and service activities, as well. When a congregation engages in activities outside the expected range—political activities or economic enterprises, for instance—it has to explain itself. Likewise, when a congregation fails to engage in the expected activities, it is suspect. Certainly lots of groups manage to be different, but the point is that they (and we) recognize that they are *different*.

We can remind ourselves that how we do things is shaped by our culture by noting that "it has not always been so." Sunday school is a relatively recent invention, for instance, and only in the last century or so have churches had picnics and outings, not to mention gyms and bowling alleys.³ We can also remind ourselves of the strength of these cultural patterns by looking at the non-Christian immigrant groups who are increasingly present in the United States. Despite the traditions for gathering (or not gathering) that may have been present for Muslims or Buddhists in their home countries, in the American situation these groups are organizing congregations that look very much like the voluntary gatherings that are characteristic of American religious groups.⁴ They, like everyone else, construct their congregational culture out of the materials available, and those materials come from the particular cultural stockpile where they are located.

Not only are congregations in the United States shaped by this institutional blueprint, they also borrow from their own social and cultural locations. Folks in rural areas may arrive in overalls that would be shocking in a suburban congregation. The pastor of a university church may include contemporary poetry in her sermon that would be bewildering to another congregation. The participants in a Hindu temple will bring food for a temple gathering that would taste odd to members elsewhere. And when all the members of the committee pull out their computerized pocket calendars or exchange E-mail addresses, they are bringing the habits of

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their particular social worlds into the mix of the congregation's activities.

Sometimes the outside culture people bring to the congregation is based on region, ethnicity, and social class. Congregations in the South are different from those in the West, while gatherings of *Latinos y Latinas* are distinct from those of African Americans or those of European heritage. But even within, say, an African American and southern subculture, there are also divisions based on education and occupation and social class and generation. Having been to college gives a person different experiences from those who have not been. People who do similar types of work may discover that they have much in common. Similarly, people who have been brought up in a particular time (such as the Great Depression or the period following World War II) share some common experiences. From all the different social settings in which we have learned to be who we are, we bring skills and assumptions into the culture of the congregation.

It is not unusual, in fact, for the people who gather into a congregation to share a common social and cultural heritage. They are likely to speak the same language, probably with the same accent. They are likely to be quite similar in educational, occupational, and status backgrounds. And they are quite likely to share a common ethnicity. Because the United States allows for the voluntary gathering of religious communities (rather than having an official state church with prescribed parish boundaries), members sort themselves into groupings in which they feel at home, where the people in the pews are like themselves. As a result, all the cultural elements that create that feeling of at-homeness also shape the congregation's particular ways of doing things. Their ethnic and status culture will affect the kinds of music they like, the kinds of literature the pastor can cite in a sermon, the way they expect to be involved in decision making, and the sort of decor they see as appropriate—among other things.

One of the most basic cultural differences that finds its way into congregational life is the difference between traditional rural ways of life and the fast-paced life of the modern city.

Rural communities expect everyone to know everyone else and are not surprised when family, politics, and business spill over into each other. They expect to get things done informally and in their own good time. Urban communities, by contrast, are places where people tend to live by the clock and by the book. People do not expect others to know their business, but they do expect to have clear job descriptions and definite lines of authority. These expectations naturally find their way into congregational life.⁵

One of your first tasks in understanding the culture of your congregation is to take an inventory of the important pieces of the outside culture your members share. You may get some of this information from a parish survey that includes questions about education, occupation, ethnicity, and residence, for instance. What social and cultural characteristics do they share? In what ways is it easy for people to talk to each other because they already have so much in common? Understanding the culture in which they live most of their lives, in neighborhood and family and workplace, will help you to understand the cultural expectations and patterns they bring into the congregation. A survey will give you important outlines of the differences, but a closer understanding of different cultural ways of life will probably require more in-depth interviews and observation.

One of the things you may discover rather quickly, both from surveys and from interviews, is that no congregation is ever really just one unified culture. There are subcultures within that may be more or less distinct, groups that spend a good deal of time with each other and perhaps relatively little with others in the congregation. A subculture may be organized around commonalities of age or longevity, with older widowed women participating in a world of congregational activities that is quite different, for instance, from the world inhabited by a young adult, activist group of professionals. Subcultures in the congregation may also be defined by where people live or what they do for a living. You will need to discover the lines along which such subcultural differences are drawn. Is there one small minority or several?

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Are there two or three large blocks of people with some significant differences: Italians and Irish, managers and line workers, new residents of subdivisions and older town residents, and so forth? Each subculture may see different parts of the building as sacred, may enjoy different parts of the worship service, and may engage in very different mission activities. As you try to understand the culture of a congregation, remember that there are probably significant variations on the themes you discover.

As you are looking for the ways in which outside statuses define lines of difference inside the congregation, it is important to keep in mind that congregations vary enormously in how they relate to the world outside their doors. Some congregations pride themselves on being set apart from the world.⁶ They are very aware of their boundaries and talk often of what makes them different from other groups of believers and from the outside world. They offer their members as many alternatives to the outside culture as possible, and they absorb large amounts of their members' available time, often minimizing differences in the backgrounds people bring into the congregation. Most of their members' significant relationships are likely to be congregation-related as well. Whether set apart by distinctive food and dress or by distinctive morals and language, these congregations have cultures that are sustained by the high investment of their members in the congregation's common life.⁷ Their stories, views of the world, habits, and rituals are likely to be relatively unusual, in contrast to congregations that have more permeable boundaries with the larger culture.

In contrast, where the congregation emphasizes being part of the culture rather than set apart, movement in and out of the congregation is relatively easy, and the congregation can speak to and with the community in terms seemingly understood by everyone. What people do because they are members and what they do just because they are good citizens are hard to distinguish. These congregations have little apparent sense of boundary, of what sets them apart—except perhaps their shunning of the strictness and intolerance they see in other

groups. These congregations have fewer requirements for membership and absorb less of their members' time and energy. As a result, their cultures may seem less distinctive, more ordinary. When we observe such a congregation, it is important to remember that even what seems unremarkable is still a distinctive culture. There are still boundaries that define who is an acceptable member and who is not. Even the most apparently boundaryless congregation probably has a well-tuned but unspoken sense of what belief and behavior would be out of place among them.

The shape of a congregational culture is also affected by its size. The larger the congregation, the more diverse the cultures within it and the more subcultures there are likely to be. While there may be many elements everyone shares, large congregations are likely to have subgroups that are defined by the unique activities that they do not share with other groups in the congregation. For instance, an older adult Sunday school class may carry on a way of being church that was pervasive fifty years ago, but not (in the rest of the congregation) today. In other congregations, a singles group may have a life of its own, or the people who attend the 11:00 service may barely know those who attend at 8:30. In small congregations, there is little opportunity for such special interest groups to become isolated, but in large congregations, there are often many subcultures relatively independent of one another.

Finally, a congregation's culture is shaped by its own history. We will return to this in more detail below, but it is important to remember that the culture we see today is but a chapter in a much longer story that has both a past and a future dimension.

Each congregation is, then, a unique culture, but it is a culture constructed out of many different kinds of materials. And it is never static. Each time a new person joins, each time a new pastor or priest or rabbi arrives, each time something changes in the neighborhood, and each time the members themselves change (have children, grow older, lose their jobs, and the like), the life experiences out of which the congregation's culture is made have been

altered. A congregation exists in the tension between long entrenched patterns and new contingencies. In fact, there is often active negotiation going on over what sort of place a congregation will be. In some places the weight of history and continuity is much stronger than in others. Where people's lives seemingly change less and there is little movement in and out of the congregation, the culture seems to remain unchanged. But in no place does the existing culture survive unchanged forever (we promise!). A congregational culture is constructed out of all the materials we have been discussing—theological and denominational traditions, expectations from the larger culture, patterns of social class and ethnicity, and the like. All those things are carried into the congregation by its members and leaders. Whenever any of those elements changes, the congregation will inevitably change as well.

As we suggested in the beginning, however, congregational culture is more than the sum of what people bring with them and more than a mirror image of the theological tradition they represent. It is a unique creation, constructed out of their interaction together over time. Your job in understanding this culture, then, is to observe that interaction and talk with people who can explain to you "how we do things here."

Reasons for Studying Culture

Some people may want to study a congregation's culture just because they are fascinated and want to understand these unique human institutions. But others may have much more specific and practical goals in mind. One of the most common times when a congregation's culture needs to be understood is when any new person arrives. Especially when clergy begin their work in a new place, they need to know much more than mere annual reports and orders of worship can tell them. They need to know the congregation's stories and its idiom, its ways of feasting and its ways of bestowing honor. The new pastor needs to learn the often unspoken expectations of the insiders and elites, as well as the expectations of those who attend more sporadi-

cally. Immediately after a pastor or priest or rabbi comes to a congregation, a careful study of its culture can be invaluable.

Similarly, any new person who joins the congregation will have to learn his or her place in it. A careful study of the congregation's culture can help those who work with new members to know how to help them through the process.

Understanding culture is also critical to making any sort of change. Before new programs can be implemented or administrations reorganized or new ministries begun, clergy and other leaders need to understand the well-established ways of life that will be disrupted by these changes. Understanding what will be lost can often help leaders find rewarding substitutes in the new system. Seeing clearly how people's lives will be changed can help leaders know how to communicate about what will happen and avoid unpleasant surprises for everyone involved. Studying the culture may also uncover stories and symbols from the congregation's past that may help to bridge the way into the future. There are both hidden riches and lurking land mines in any culture, and it pays to know where they are.

Methods for Studying Culture

When an anthropologist enters a new culture, the most important thing he or she does is to observe—to watch and listen long enough to know something of what people intend by their actions and what they mean by their words. You, unlike some anthropologists, are not going off to a tropical isle, however, and that is both an advantage and a disadvantage. The advantage in time and energy is obvious. The disadvantage is that congregations seem so familiar to most of us that it is hard to have the patience and discipline to get past our assumptions. We are the proverbial fish that does not notice the water. For that reason, a visit to another congregation may be a helpful exercise at the beginning of your study process. Refer to the section on observing worship in chapter 7 of this book for guidelines for this task. By

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watching how a group quite different from your own gathers for worship, for instance, you may begin to see some of the distinctiveness of the congregation to which you are giving your primary attention.

Many times those who study a congregation's culture and identity will be members and leaders of that congregation. If that is the case, you should pay special attention to the advice for insiders given in the chapter on methods. You will be uncovering and giving voice to many of the unwritten assumptions of your congregation's life. You will want to proceed with great care and respect while also working hard to see the things you need to see.

Other times, a congregation calls on an outside consultant for advice on seeing themselves more clearly. Just as it may help members to visit another congregation as a way of gaining perspective, so an outsider can often see and say things an insider cannot. A consultant will need to know, however, that the congregation itself is fully involved in setting the agenda and helping to provide the information necessary to understand something an outsider can only begin to comprehend in the short time usually available for such studies.

If you are studying your own congregation, your first task as an observer of culture will be to identify the focus of your activity and to organize your work. It is easy to get overwhelmed by the complexity of a culture, and your task will be made easier *if you develop a focus* that will help you narrow your work. You did not start out to learn about this congregation so that you could write a book! You started out with a specific concern, a puzzle you wanted to solve. You might be interested in understanding what the congregation is passing along to its children or what newcomers are perceiving when they arrive or why the youth group is thriving or why money is a taboo topic or why certain community service projects generate no enthusiasm. Depending on your focus, you can be selective about the events you observe, the people you interview, and the artifacts you collect. You can also be selective in the themes you choose to highlight in the material you have gathered.

As you decide on what you want to know, you will also need to think about how you will find out. You will almost surely want to do some *systematic observation* of events in the congregation. You want to know what people are actually doing when they gather in this place. Likewise, you will discover that the events do not always explain themselves. *Interviews* will be important aids to filling in the cultural picture. Some of those may be in the form of *focus groups*, or you may choose to focus on the congregation's history through the use of a *time-line exercise*. You may even decide that some of what you need to know can be gathered through the use of a paper-and-pencil *questionnaire*. Alongside your observations and conversations, do not forget to gather the *artifacts*—from old pictures to worship books—that may give you an additional window on this congregation's identity. For specific guidelines on each of these ways of gathering data, refer to chapter 7 on methods. But before you undertake any specific method of gathering information, make sure you know what you want to know and how a given activity will help you find it out.

Also, this should not be a solo operation. At the very least, a group of advisers from the congregation should help to develop the focus, design the methods to be used, and serve as interpreters along the way. Indeed, a team of people from the congregation can divide up the tasks of data gathering as well. Some can observe one event while others concentrate on other events. Each person might conduct only three or four interviews. And everyone can be on the lookout for important documents and other materials. If you do proceed as a team, it is important to meet regularly together so that you are clear about your assignments and your focus. It is also important that everyone agree to keep good notes. Although several people can gather data, it is still essential that one person be responsible for compiling it. As that person reads notes and interview transcripts, however, the team of other information gatherers can be valuable consultants in understanding the themes and patterns that emerge.

Before you design your study, you will need

to take into account all the various dimensions of the congregation's culture and identity. One way of thinking about those dimensions is to look at *activities*, *artifacts*, and *accounts*. Our sense of who we are is shaped by what we do, what we make, and how we talk about ourselves. Let us look more closely at each of those aspects of congregational culture.⁸

Activities: What the Congregation Does Together

Congregations create their culture, in large part, through the things they do together. Whenever they gather, inside the congregation's building or scattered throughout the community, they act within (and sometimes stretch) the boundaries of what their culture has established as normal. It even happens when just one person is representing the congregation. Sometimes, in fact, the congregation acts even when no one is present, for example, through its gifts and other forms of presence in the community. The most visible—and the most invisible—of those activities are the congregation's rituals.

Rituals

All cultures have rituals that give shape to people's common life together, and congregations are certainly no exception. The single most common congregational activity is, in fact, the ritual of a weekly worship event. It is in this event that congregations engage in their most dramatic rituals, their most intentional presentation of who they are. In a powerful sense, worship is an event that is meant to express the unifying vision of the congregation. It is this expressive character that makes something a ritual. It is predictable activity that is intended to express something beyond itself. Ordinary activities like turning on the lights or taking out the garbage may take on some special meaning, but they usually remain relatively meaningless, mundane tasks. But other ordinary activities can take on special meaning by being enacted in the context of a congregation's life together. Note what Dodson and Gilkes have to

say about the routine act of eating (see sidebar 3.1). Rituals are more than utilitarian, then; they communicate meanings and relationships that are central to the very identity of the congregation. Rituals point beyond themselves. All rituals, in fact, help to create the community that enacts them. They both *express* who we are and *make* us who we are.⁹ From how someone is greeted at the door, to the congregation's most holy events, rituals say more than what can be communicated in words.

Sidebar 3.1

RITUALS OF FOOD IN AFRICAN AMERICAN CHURCHES

Since the meat most often served in United States African American churches is chicken, it is referred to by many as "gospel bird." The sale of chicken dinners was a principal means whereby churches raised money to build their sanctuaries and schools and generated income for a variety of activities. The image of chicken dinners, dinners featuring "gospel bird," is so fixed in the United States African American imagination that some see it only as a negative stereotype. Many people will not eat chicken precisely because of the negative dimensions. Yet, the popularity of church dinners featuring chicken as a source of fund-raising and sociability remains strong. Regardless of attempts to diversify the fare, chicken dinners are most in demand, and the chicken usually runs out first. The preference is still for gospel bird. (p. 523)

The importance of feeding the preacher is expressed in a variety of ways. In one congregation we observed that a special potluck was being organized to celebrate the installation of an assistant pastor. Every member was asked to bring a dish. The kitchen team was voted in at a special church meeting. A deaconess of the church, who was also a member of the kitchen team for that dinner, announced for several Sundays during the worship service that all contributed food was to be brought to the kitchen and there would be no acceptance of special dishes designated "only for the pastor's table." On the Sunday of the dinner, members complied with the kitchen team's request and did not attempt to designate their dishes for the pastor's table. However, many brought dishes separately prepared for the assistant pastor, each wrapped for carry out and in shopping bags. (p. 531)

From Jualynne E. Dodson and Cheryl Townsend Gilkes, "There's Nothing Like Church Food," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 63 (Fall 1995): 519-38.

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Even “low church” congregations, who pride themselves on less formal rituals, nevertheless have their own version of the worship drama. Whether a congregation is “high” or “low,” there is a routine order of songs and prayers and sermons. People wear special costumes (even if it is only their best Sunday suit), they know their places (fourth pew on the right), and they know what props are needed (Bibles, hymnals, prayer books, head coverings, and the like). In fact, one way to observe a worship service is to imagine it as a theatrical event, looking for the settings, props, costumes, actors, and scripts.

One of the most important things to notice about any ritual is that it involves all the senses. It involves things we see, touch, smell, and taste, as well as what we hear.¹⁰ Look for the banners and flags, furniture, linens, clothing, and other implements that draw your attention to the specialness of the ritual. Open your ears to the array of sounds that accompany worship—the sounds of children wiggling in their seats, of a mass of bodies bowing to the floor, of bells and calls to prayer. Then close your eyes and note the smells that surround you. You do not need incense to have special smells that remind you of where you are and what you are doing. It may just be someone’s characteristic perfume or the mustiness of old hymnals. The things you smell and touch, along with the bodily movements that are required of worshipers, are often part of a deeply held memory. Kneeling, washing one’s hands, walking forward to receive Communion or give one’s offering, the touch of the *tallit* on the edge of the Torah, being immersed in a baptismal pool, even the rhythm of standing and sitting—all form part of the texture of a congregation’s cultural memory.

Likewise, ritual music is a deeply sensual experience that often touches people in ways words cannot.¹¹ In his book on current Catholic musical practices, Thomas Day notes that “congregational singing always begins as a sensuous experience, not an intellectual one; it flourishes wherever the congregation can feel the sensuous pleasure of musical vibrations.”¹² Singing and chanting call worshipers to enact and relive—together—the faith they are recounting in song.¹³

In addition to paying attention to the sights and sounds of the congregation’s rituals, the observer should also pay attention to the actors. Not everyone is an equal participant in all the ritual events of the congregation. Within every group there are differences in status and in levels of participation. Some differences in status are marked by ordination or some other setting apart, and they give some members specialized worship roles. These leaders may be permitted access to sacred spaces and expected to utter sacred words or read sacred texts that are forbidden to ordinary members.¹⁴ In addition, there are more ordinary roles and positions of honor that reflect the congregation’s identity and culture.¹⁵ Singers, readers, ushers, offering takers, and announcement makers are likely to be otherwise influential members of the congregation, for instance. The presence or absence of certain members or guests may be especially marked, acknowledging their importance and honor in the community. Even the way people greet one another reveals much about who defers to whom—whether by gender, social class, seniority, or spiritual categories defined by the congregation itself. Both in these routine activities and on special occasions, some people are singled out for special recognition. That recognition, in turn, says a lot about the sorts of behavior the congregation values and wishes to encourage. All the things people do as they gather for worship signal both the ways they are bound together into one community and the ways that community itself is divided.

Of particular note are the ways worship and other rituals are likely to reveal the differing roles of men and women, gendered differences developed by either habit or fiat. There may be spaces inhabited by one gender and not the other—separate seating or places off limits to women (or men). Women and men may have distinct roles, some things permitted to one and not the other. Just as people bring their outside status and cultural identities into the congregation, they also bring with them all the experiences and expectations that go with being male and female. Even congregations that pride themselves on equality may be experienced differently by women than by men. A careful observer will both watch for what

men and women do and listen for how they describe their experiences.

The scheduling of worship can also tell you about the congregation's culture. Even if the service is at a rather predictable time, you should notice, for instance, whether there are early services, what the rhythm of children's and adult activities is, and what people seem to expect to do with the rest of their day. A congregation sends (usually unconscious) signals about itself in the very schedule of services it posts (if it does) on its outdoor bulletin board.

Beyond the mere worship schedule, worship is important because it is a ritual, and rituals say something about who we are. They point beyond themselves to deeper meanings. In the case of religious gatherings, those meanings are, at heart, about the deity being worshiped and proclaimed. The congregation's rituals are one way that it tells the story of God's activity. What and how members pray says a good deal about their understanding of their god. Listen for how God is addressed, what God is asked to do, what God is thanked for, and what is simply assumed about God's nature. Beyond these direct verbal cues, allow yourself to experience the sensual and emotional weight of the gathering you are observing. Does it feel joyful or solemn, awe-inspiring or comforting, or some combination thereof? In addition, talk to your informants about what they experience and how they understand what they do when they worship.

The experience of worship is also sometimes expected to change things; but the degree to which that is the case varies enormously—from person to person, event to event, and congregation to congregation. At the least, times of worship offer moments of quiet reflection about life. But they may also offer extended periods of ecstatic religious experience, deep insight into one's own soul, or renewed passion for trying to change the world. Not every person who attends expects to have a mystical or ecstatic experience at every service, but most people who choose to attend religious services expect that at least occasionally they will feel close to God. At the very least, they expect congregations to invoke

God's presence, and part of a congregation's culture is its mode of doing so. Does God's presence depend on the individual worshiper or on the leader? Is it simply there in the building and the ritual, or must it be experienced by each person? Does it require special actions or objects, or it is readily available in ordinary time and space?¹⁶ Is it something that happens constantly, or something that is a surprising rarity? A congregation's sense of transcendence is an important aspect of its culture and something often observable in its rituals.

Rituals define the congregation and the people who participate in them. Some rituals focus on the group. They have been called *rites of intensification*. They intensify the group's commitment to its shared beliefs and meanings. They include a variety of occasions in which core values of the group are celebrated. For the nation, those might include the Fourth of July, Thanksgiving, or Mother's Day; for Christian churches, the celebrations of Christmas and Easter; and for Muslims, the fasting of Ramadan. In addition, local congregations may have their own special days—homecomings and anniversaries and fairs and barbecues and other local rituals. At an annual meeting, the events of the year may be recounted. At an anniversary, the congregation's history may be told. At the Jewish Passover, the history of Israel's most formative events are enacted. Such events provide opportunities for members to learn about the group they belong to, for children to be brought into the faith, and for everyone to experience a sense of unity and accomplishment.

Other rituals focus on the individual's life, especially as defined by her or his participation in the group. These have been called *rites of passage*. They are transition events that mark changes in the individual's life or changes in the life of the congregation. They are moments that mark our passage from one status to another. The child passes into adulthood, the congregation passes from one pastor or rabbi to another, the member passes from this life to the next, the person being ordained passes from laity to clergy, and the visitor passes into full membership. Confirmations, bat and bar

mitzvahs, installations and ordinations, funerals, and many other rituals define the contours of our individual lives in ways that also define us as members of a congregation. A funeral not only marks the death of an individual but also signals the continuing life of the group gathered to mourn. How families are comforted and cared for and what is extolled in the eulogy, even how the body is treated, communicate volumes about those left behind.¹⁷ Such times let us ask ourselves all over again who we are and who we want to become.

Anthropologist Victor Turner noted that rites of passage often include a time "between" (called *liminal*, meaning "on the threshold"), when we are no longer who we were but not yet who we will become. These times often allow for experimentation and breaking the rules.¹⁸ Newness can break into the congregation's routine, requiring people to be more intentional than usual about what they do and why. The congregation itself may take the transitional time between pastors as a liminal time, for instance. It can be a time of self-study and reflection, not just on what pastoral skills are needed, but on what sort of congregation this is. In observing important rites of passage, then, we should pay attention to the time leading up to the big event, as well as the event itself. We can learn a good deal about how the congregation defines a virtuous life, as well as about its own sense of identity and purpose.

Other Activities

Worship, while the most central event for most congregations, is certainly not the only important activity to observe. In most congregations, there are at least some additional activities that bring together all or part of the group. Most congregations have some sort of *religious education activities*. For most Christian and many Jewish groups it is a Sunday school (Sabbath school for Seventh-Day groups). There children learn basic scriptural knowledge and are taught the principles of their faith. In congregations that also have adult classes, those groups often

function as support groups, as well as forums for study and discussion. Indeed, Robert Wuthnow reports that adult Sunday school classes are the single most common form of small group in American society, with perhaps 25 million adults participating.¹⁹

In some churches the educational opportunities are much more extensive—lecture series; missions education groups; special men's, women's, and children's groups; and weeknight Bible study groups. For Jewish children, education includes learning Hebrew and preparing for a bar or bat mitzvah. For Muslims, it includes Arabic and study of the Qu'ran. Observing educational activities reveals both *what* is being taught about living a virtuous life and about the history of the faith, but also *how* members expect to participate—whether they expect to learn by memorization or interaction, or whether the emphasis is on personal experience or learning the facts, for instance.

Many congregations also engage in *fellowship* activities. They want their members to know each other and care for each other, so they plan church suppers and holiday parties, lunch after sabbath services or grand feasts for the end of Ramadan, outings, sports events, bingo nights, and coffee hours. Just which holidays are celebrated, which sports organized, and what foods brought to potluck dinners are—no less than worship rituals—elements in the congregation's culture. Whether the coffee is instant or brewed, served in china or foam or paper cups, and paid for by the congregation's budget or by individual contributions may say a good deal about the resources and political sentiments of the members.

While some of what a congregation does is explicitly planned with fellowship in mind, a great deal of what it does has fellowship as a by-product. Whether participating in a weekly Bible study or serving together on a soup line, representing the group's interests before a town board or painting the nursery, when members gather, they inevitably share bits and pieces of their lives with each other. That shared activity, in turn, creates an additional base on which the culture of the congregation can be built.

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What and how much is shared, however, will vary with the culture of the congregation. In some places members are accustomed to a great deal of privacy. In others, members expect to talk extensively about their work and family life. When a member is in need, others are likely to respond with tangible forms of assistance, as well as with emotional support—with casseroles and hugs.²⁰ They share face-to-face discussions of life's issues and become intimate companions, forming a familylike bond of obligation. Other congregations, however, simply do not expect such social bonds to be important. They see themselves primarily as worship centers, and they do not seek to foster ongoing relationships among those who participate.

Beyond the intimacy, fun, and sharing of fellowship times are the day-to-day *task-oriented activities* that keep the congregation going. Committees and task forces meet to plan the congregation's programs. Deacons or elders or a council are charged with overseeing the spiritual and programmatic affairs of the congregation. Each working group has its own culture, its own habits and routines—when they meet, who takes minutes, whether there is coffee or tea, who talks the most, how they report to the rest of the congregation. These routines for *how* work is done are intimately related to assumptions about who can make decisions and why (all subjects taken up in much more detail in chapter 4 on process). These small cultural elements are as much a part of the congregation's authority structure as are the official patterns contained in the group's bylaws.

In addition to decision-making bodies, there are also often *ministry activities* aimed at serving people outside the congregation. Members come together to staff food pantries, organize support for the nation of Israel, visit people they want to recruit, build a Habitat for Humanity house, or go on an overseas mission trip. The shape of these ministries is also a reflection of the congregation's sense of identity and its sense of its place in the world. What problems are noticed reflects the particular cultural blind-

ers (and telescopes) of the congregation. What members choose to do in response reflects the congregation's sense of mission along with its perceived cultural resources.

Finally, there is what we might call the *kitchen work* of the congregation. Often it is literally in the kitchen, but it might also be in the office or in the yard. It is the behind-the-scenes support work that makes congregational life possible. It is the dish washing and envelope stuffing and hedge trimming that are no less a part of the congregational culture than the highest holy moment. It is the work of the altar guild and the usher board, for instance, in setting the stage for worship and making sure the service goes smoothly. How all this is done and by whom will be shaped by often unwritten expectations in each congregational culture. Often these tasks are done by women, women who may have few public roles in the congregation but expend themselves for the good of the community in these seemingly small tasks. Joanna Gillespie's interview with such a woman (see sidebar 3.2) gives us a glimpse of how mundane work is given meaning by its place in the very special culture that is the congregation.

Sidebar 3.2 THE EVERYDAY WORK OF THE CONGREGATION

One older woman, farm-born and -raised, spoke fervently about the rewards of her thirty years "on the altar." She had always found great satisfaction in making things "pretty" and "shiny." "Sometimes, when I'm alone in the church, and just polishing the brass till it glows, and I'm praying . . ." Her voice broke and her eyes filled with tears. She added, almost in surprise, "That's when I know He's there." After a silence, I said, "It's lovely to hear you say that." She spoke thoughtfully, "Never said it before. No one ever asked me before." When asked what it is about "altar work" that transforms it into a kind of worship for her, she responded, with deep emotion: "I was doing it for Him, and for our priest, and for our people . . . I just always felt that it was *one* thing I could do for my religion, that I loved."

From Joanna Gillespie, "Gender and Generation," in *Episcopal Women* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 202-3.

CULTURE AND IDENTITY IN THE CONGREGATION

When observing all of these routine activities of the congregation, you can use the same sorts of questions you used when watching more formal rituals. You can look for who is participating and how they use their space, what props they need, how they are dressed, and the like. You can note the congregation's use of time—when things are scheduled and what the rhythm of events is. And you can note the way tasks are divided and the way different types of people (by gender or age or longevity, for instance) participate. After observing for a while, you may also be able to discern the unspoken assumptions and see the activity that goes on behind the scenes to make any given event possible.

It is through all these patterns of activity that the congregation communicates to itself and others what it is about. Symbols of identity and transcendence are most visible in a congregation's most ritualized events, but all sorts of things can be rituals, and all sorts of objects and gestures can carry meaning beyond themselves.²¹ Every time members greet each other or call a meeting to order, they signal their participation in the culture that makes those words and deeds sensible. Whenever they arrive with Bible in hand or sneak out for a cigarette between Sunday school and worship, they signal that they know and accept the norms that govern this community's life together. And whenever they genuflect and cross themselves, join hands in a prayer circle, or bow to the ground in prayer, they indicate that they are connected both to this particular group and its traditions and to a sacred reality beyond them all. Observing what people do together is also a way of understanding who they are and what they think is important.

Introducing Newcomers to the Culture

The culture of a congregation emerges in what it does together, but the people who constitute any congregation are constantly changing. Congregational cultures are constantly being remade and passed along to newcomers, whether intentionally or unintentionally. No

congregation can count on its current members to last forever, nor can it count on a guaranteed pool of potential members from its community or even from its own progeny. Congregational membership in the voluntary system of the United States is neither prescribed by law nor inherited in unbroken line from ancestors. The last several decades have, in fact, seen a vast increase in the degree to which religious affiliation (including the decision not to affiliate) has become a matter of individual choice, a matter indeed of several choices across a lifetime, as people move about and switch from one religious group to another.²² All congregations, then, are faced with the ongoing task of integrating newcomers into the existing culture of the place.

Sometimes those newcomers are newborns, and the congregation's efforts at teaching their young are good indicators of how they think about themselves. Children's Sunday school classes often help us see what members are willing to say about the nature of God, about what is expected of members, and about what constitutes a virtuous life. Even more explicitly, confirmation and bat and bar mitzvah classes teach the essential practices and doctrines of the congregation and of the faith. Beyond these obvious opportunities for observing explicit cultural transmissions, you can watch for where children are included and excluded, when they are reprimanded or rewarded. What adults tell their children is often a reminder to themselves about what is supposed to be important.

Given current levels of geographical and religious mobility, few children born into a congregation today can be expected to grow up, marry, and raise their own children there in the years ahead. But raising children is still a key ingredient in the culture of most congregations. Many people join a church or synagogue "for the children." Congregations that orient themselves to this impulse are often identified by their emphasis on children's activities and on their description of themselves as "family" places. The degree to which this is the case (and the degree to which that fits the demographic realities of the community) will be an

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important piece of understanding a congregation's culture.

Not all newcomers are newborns, of course. But recruiting members from beyond the households of existing members is not something many congregations do with any real intentionality. Observing this aspect of a congregation's culture may require looking for assumptions, rather than for established programs. Most congregations rely on their recognized position in the community to bring them a steady supply of new members. Understanding the culture of a congregation will require assessing the way people beyond its membership routinely come in contact with it. That is, do people in the community have a clear perception of what sort of congregation this is and who is most likely to belong here? Where is the congregation located—both physically and socially—in the community? Who routinely encounters the congregation and its members in their usual round of activities and relationships? It is those relationships, activities, networks, and presence that create the social pool out of which the congregation will naturally draw its new members.

More than most other religious groups, evangelical Christians are likely to make recruitment of new members and converts central to the congregation's culture. Members talk to their neighbors, coworkers, and friends about making a religious commitment and joining the church. The degree to which such explicit recruitment activities are encouraged is another important aspect of the congregation's culture. A more reserved congregation might find any sort of advertisement offensive, while still others might encourage door-to-door witnessing. It is important to pay attention both to what people say about proper methods and targets of recruitment and to *what they do* to bring people in.

In addition to both passive and personal contacts, congregations can also engage in various media efforts at communicating with the community. Many congregations put advertisements on a local newspaper's church page or in the telephone yellow pages. They may try to convey in a few words or images the theologi-

cal and programmatic emphases that make them distinctive. They explicitly try to describe themselves in ways that can provide clues to their culture. These are among the artifacts you should collect.

Congregations also communicate with the community through their various efforts at ministry or service. Some congregations may offer food and shelter, while others offer space for public recitals. Some may be the place the town or neighborhood comes together in times of crisis, while others offer individualized psychological counseling or family crisis assistance. Understanding the congregation's culture involves looking at who is served, by whom, and with what intended effect.

Whenever and wherever a congregation communicates about itself with those beyond its domain, the congregational culture is being heralded—and remade. When those outsiders choose to become insiders, they have to be turned into practicing members of the culture, and observing the socialization process is another excellent window on a congregation's life. Congregations with especially distinctive cultures may have to work hard at training their new recruits, while more ordinary congregations may absorb members with ease. Catholic parishes routinely require an extended period of study and reflection in "Rite of Christian Initiation for Adults" (RCIA) classes. Evangelical churches may require a period of new member classes but also expect that new converts will be shepherded by experienced members in their first months and years of participation. Orthodox Jewish congregations have to teach their recruits Hebrew, in addition to the intricacies of dietary and other distinctive practices.²³ Along the way, congregations also pass along their subtle expectations about decorum, how much enthusiasm is permitted, what the most important obligations of membership are, and the like.²⁴

Not to be missed, finally, are the ways new members change the culture of the congregation. They bring in new expectations, new experiences, and new connections to other parts of the community. A picture of recent recruits and their connections in the congrega-

Sidebar 3.3
SPACE, PROPS, AND IDENTITY

Spring Hill Church rapidly developed a reputation in its early years as the performing arts center of its growing suburban community. They hosted concerts and recitals and the annual community arts festival. As they planned for new buildings, they decided to build a performing arts center first, followed by a sanctuary. Once it was built, the old sanctuary was torn down, and worship services moved into the new center. To accommodate the multiple uses of the building, the pulpit, lectern, and altar table were constructed on rollers, and they moved about very easily (sometimes too easily!).

In the years that followed, however, the community continued to grow, and the musical groups found other spaces for rehearsal and performance. At the same time, the church suffered a financial scandal over money missing from the organ fund. And finally, a succession of sexual scandals destroyed the last shreds of trust members had in their leaders. In a few short years they had lost their sense of identity. They were no longer the respected center of the community's arts activities, and they did not have leaders they and others could trust.

Unsure of what story to tell about themselves, their worship also took on a flat, detached quality. Interviewed about worship at Spring Hill, members seemed uninvolved, almost unable to remember what had happened last Sunday. They did not notice changes and could not think of what they especially liked or disliked. The seminarian who interviewed them wondered what this apparent lack of passion could mean. She finally concluded, "They are no longer sure how they fit in the world as a congregation, therefore they are detached from their ritual. All the meanings previously attached to their ritual have been called into question by the loss of their civic identity, the problems that undercut or destroyed trust in their leaders, and the discontinuity of four pastors in five years."

Like the pulpit and altar table that are dislodged at the slightest sudden gesture, worship at Spring Hill seems transient and untrustworthy. Things will not be nailed down again until the painful stories are told, the old identity mourned, and a new one consciously constructed. Only then will new stories *and* new rituals be possible. At that point, the rollers may finally come off the furniture.

This case is drawn from the work of a student at Candler School of Theology who asked to remain anonymous. The name of the church has been changed, as well.

tion is often a very good indicator of the future direction of the congregation's culture.

Artifacts: The Things Congregations Make

Congregations are both producers and consumers of vast arrays of material objects. The congregation's culture is not just the activities in which it engages, but also the props for and residues of those activities. Just as rituals and activities structure the congregation's time together, so its buildings and furnishings, altars and holy books, even cribs and dishes, structure its space. Archaeologists can often reconstruct amazing details of everyday life from the shards of pottery and bone they dig up. When we look at a living congregation, we do not have to use our imaginations quite so much, but the physical environment can still

tell us a great deal about those who created it.

The building itself is perhaps the most obvious of the congregation's artifacts, speaking silently about the congregation's patterns of activity and its values. Its surrounding landscaping and parking, along with the visible religious symbols it displays, establish the place of the congregation in the community and reflect its assumptions about God, nature, humanity, itself, and others. Buildings, furniture, and grounds are the visible, sensual reminders that offer clues to observers about the group that uses them.²⁵ Is there a high fence or a wide driveway around this property? Is the children's wing deserted and musty, or is there a high-tech nursery? Taking a walk around the neighborhood, perhaps with someone who lives or works there but is not a member, can often help you to see the congregation's property with new eyes.

The layout and furnishings of the building help to shape the patterns of interaction con-

tained in it. The size and condition of gathering spaces and their accessibility to people with various handicapping conditions determine what sorts of social interaction is possible, among what sorts of people. A trip through the building in a wheelchair can be a very revealing experience. You might also want to do an inventory of gathering spaces, including their size, location, condition, and use. A look at the worship space is also helpful. A visually rich environment may encourage silent individual meditation, while a visually neutral one may encourage human interaction. Thinking about how the space encourages different sorts of interactions with God and others will be a step toward understanding the culture that occupies that space.

Buildings convey meanings, but like all meanings, these are dependent on the audience receiving them. For that reason, a walking tour with a small group of informants can be a very useful activity. Ask them to tell you stories about events they associate with various areas of the group's building and grounds. Ask them to stop occasionally to talk about what makes a given spot special, even how it feels to be in that place and who it reminds them of. Going to the places they find most holy or the places associated with their fondest memories can be extremely revealing. The members of Spring Hill Church (see sidebar 3.3) might have had interesting stories to tell about why their building was built as it was and why the altar table is on wheels. Their situation reminds us that buildings are sometimes more appropriate to a congregation that once occupied them than to the needs of the current group that gathers there. As you tour buildings, watch for the spaces that are unused, as well as those that are busy.

Some of the congregation's space, of course, is marked off as sacred.²⁶ There are the obvious symbols contained in altars and banners, prayer rugs and ark, crosses and stained-glass windows, pulpits and organs. Those items tell stories about the faith tradition of the congregation. They honor the heroes and saints, and they mark off the spaces that are especially holy. The symbols that highlight these spaces usually have official theological meanings, but

they also have meanings embellished by the given local congregation that has constructed them. We already noted that worship services are especially good times for observing the congregation's use of its space and its deployment of sacred artifacts. But the congregation's culture usually involves more than what is brought out on such special occasions. All the congregation's activities require physical space and props, all of which tell a story. Try taking one room in your congregation's building—the nursery or kitchen, for example—and do an "excavation." See what the objects in that room can tell you.

You also may want to draw a map of important spaces, especially after you have a good sense of how they are used and by whom. When Melvin Williams was studying the culture of the church he calls Zion, he discovered that space and status were very closely related to each other. The map he drew of the sanctuary (see figure 3.1) was also a map of the relationships of the members to the congregation and to each other. One way you might find out about the congregation's space and important objects is to ask one of your informants or a focus group to take you on a walking tour of the property, pointing out the important memorials, the sacred spaces and decorations, the significance of the arrangement of the pews or the placement of the lectern, and the like.

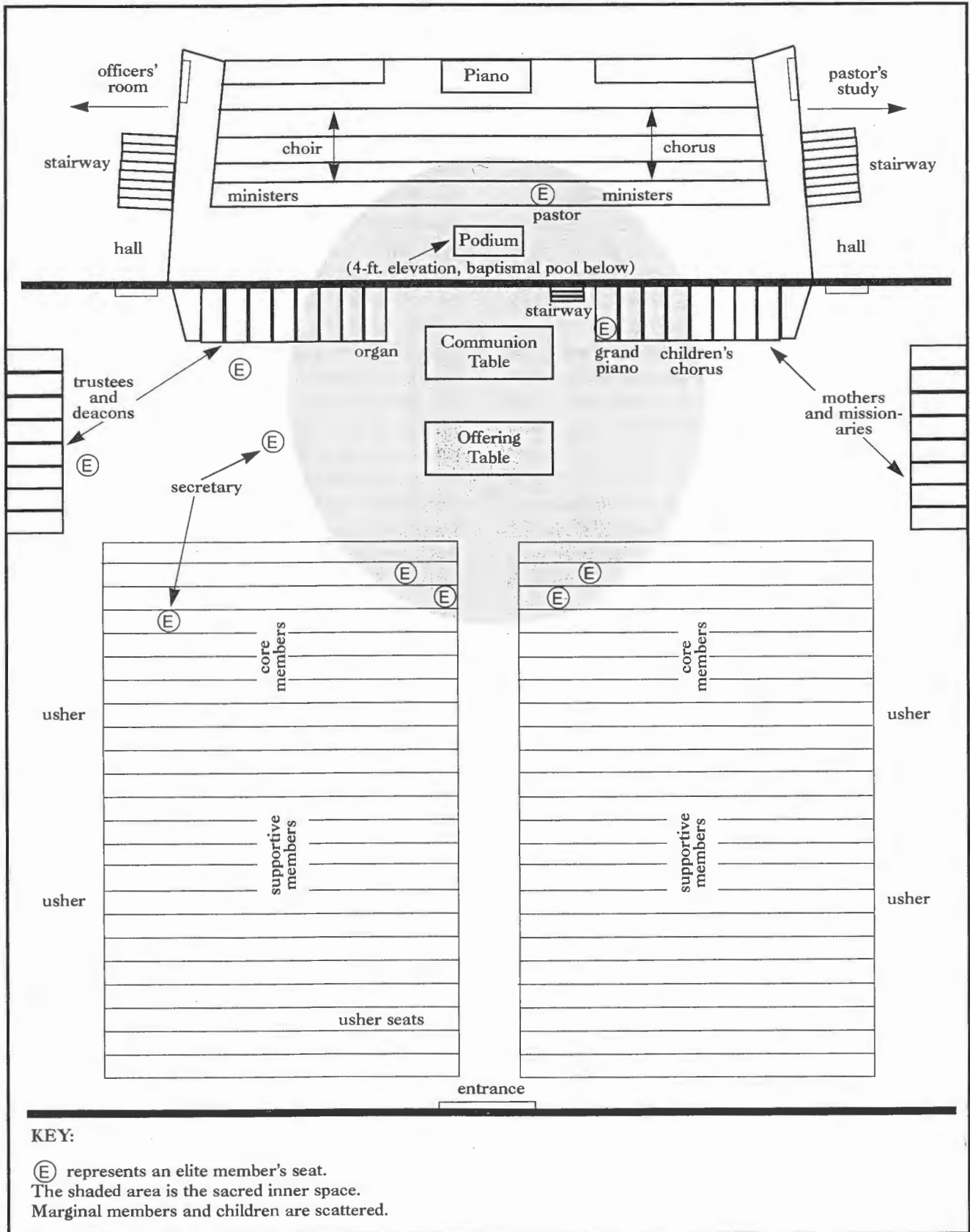
Like all cultures, congregations invent material objects that aid them in performing their routine tasks and express the values they hold dearest. Whether it is the set of accounting books and office equipment, the dozens of baby cribs in the nursery, or the extensive athletic equipment in the gym, physical objects tell us a good deal about the culture that uses them. The arrangement of buildings, furniture, landscaping, and ritual objects is critical to understanding the group's identity and its relationship to its community.

Accounts: The Stories Congregations Tell

Cultures are patterns of both activity and objects, but they are also patterns of language

Figure 3.1 SEATING CHART OF ZION'S AUDITORIUM

Reprinted by permission of Waveland Press, Inc. from Melvin Williams, *Community in a Black Pentecostal Church*. (Prospect Heights, IL; Waveland Press, Inc., 1974 [reissued 1984]) All rights reserved.



and story. Language is a basic social process, a way we relate to each other and a way to agree on what our world is and means. Whenever we share experiences, we talk about them, and in the talking we come to understand more about what the experience meant in the first place. Congregations, too, are full of talk—sometimes mundane and sometimes holy. Listening for how people talk to each other is critical to understanding their culture.²⁷

Language

Congregations develop distinctive words and phrases for their surroundings and their activities. They naturally develop shorthand ways of alluding to the ideas, people, and events they care about. One learns that it is the “narthex” and not the “vestibule”; a “carry-in,” not a “potluck.” A new member may even learn to speak (and think) of himself or herself differently—as a communicant, a *ba’alat teshuvah*, or a believer, for instance.

When learning about your congregation’s culture, you might start by creating a lexicon of the names for their sacred objects, actions, times, and spaces. Are there words for different parts of the building and words for various aspects of the worship service? Are there names for the officials of the congregation, both clergy and lay? And are there designations for the seasons of the year, the clothing worship leaders wear, the people who assist in worship, and the ceremonies used when people are inducted into full membership? Some churches, for instance, have Communion, while others celebrate the Eucharist, and still others commemorate the Lord’s Supper. Some have homilies, and others have sermons. Some know exactly what a lectionary is, and others would be bewildered. Each religious tradition’s language gives voice to the particular ways that tradition seeks to connect people with God. Once you have constructed your lexicon, note the degree to which this lexicon sets the congregation apart from the larger culture in which it is situated and the degree to which everyone in the congregation shares in its use. Do only the specialists know

the correct terms to use, or does everyone share a common jargon?

History

In addition to the words that name and order the congregation’s time and space, there are also stories that transmit the lore of the group.²⁸ These tales may be about their founding, but they are also likely to be about times of great success or of crises that have been overcome. They are stories passed on from old members to new as a way of telling what this congregation is all about. Denham Grierson has written, “The act of remembering is essential for the creation of identity and corporate integrity in any community. A community is by definition a sharing together of significant happenings.”²⁹

Not everything, of course, is of equal significance. Thousands of events happen to us each week; relatively few are worth remembering for their capacity to disclose who we are. A congregation’s history is actually quite pliable. There are always stories to be told. Which stories get told at which time depends in large part on both the needs of the hour and the memories of those present. Knowing those stories can often be helpful when planning for the future. When people can make connections between proposed changes and some episode in their past, the new activities are often more comprehensible. Similarly, telling the congregation’s stories may allow themes, images, and symbols to emerge that can be energizing for the future.³⁰

Many attempts to articulate a congregation’s history, unfortunately, get trapped in the details and miss the grand stories of its heroes, heroines, turning points, and significant symbols. Annual reports may contain the nuts and bolts of a congregation’s life but little of what makes it distinct from any other group with 343 members and \$600,000 worth of property. Parish profiles prepared to guide the selection of a new pastor may not get past the congregation’s average income and predominant view of the Bible to tell how this group came to think that way. Locally written histories often contain valuable information about leadership, proper-

ty, and program but little about the stories that give those objects their meaning.³¹

One way to discover those stories is to do *oral history interviews*. Long-term members of the congregation can be given an opportunity to reminisce about the history of the group. The person who conducts the interview may begin with some general orienting questions and then focus on specific themes or tales. The general questions may be quite simple.

- *Tell me what this congregation was like back when you first started to attend here.*
- *How have things changed around here since then?*
- *What do you think a new member ought to know about the history of this congregation?*

The specific themes you explore might include descriptions of worship services or what the religious education program was like or what sorts of buildings they had and how money was raised. In addition to listening for the general contours of the congregation's history, keep the interview focused in ways that serve your attempts to understand this particular culture. Along the way, keep the people oriented by asking them to relate their stories to other events you know about.

- *Was that before or after the big fire?*
- *Was that while Father Kowalski was here?*

Encourage them to tell stories, not just to relate facts. You are interested in the facts, but it is the stories that will tell you about this congregation's sense of identity.

Another useful exercise when uncovering a congregation's history is to *construct a time line*. Here the story telling is collective, rather than individual. The specifics of this exercise are described in more detail in the chapter on methods, but recall that you will be visually marking off significant events in the congregation's history and in the surrounding community and world. While a time line used to understand a changing context might focus especially on events outside the congregation, a time line exploring history

will understandably focus inward. You might start by placing key information about clergy and buildings along the top. Then prompt the participants with questions about the people who were part of the congregation, the activities and programs that they remember and the crises that affected them. As events are recalled, encourage the participants to elaborate, tell stories, and make connections. The visual image you construct, as well as the stories told along the way, may help the congregation see its history in a new way. Leave the paper up as long as feasible, and encourage further additions, even after the initial session. Make your own notes, transcribing the time line and recording the stories. At some point, you may want to distribute a version of the time line to the whole congregation.

Myths

In the telling of congregational stories, certain tales rise above the others to take on the special quality of myths. Myths are stories that ground our history in something bigger. They speak of divine actions in ways that define who we are. When members tell about the congregation's founding or its survival of a crisis in terms of God's unfolding will, they are giving the story mythic quality. It is not less true for being a myth, but more so.

The stories told as myths may come from a denomination, from the larger faith tradition, or from the Scriptures. Rabbis are never without a story to illustrate one of life's truths. Methodists hear stories about the Wesleys, Baptists about Luther Rice and Lottie Moon, and members of AME churches about Richard Allen and Jarena Lee. Christians in all sorts of traditions share stories about the saints and mystics and teachers of the early church, as well as the foundational stories of Jesus' life. And Jews, Christians, and Muslims alike hear the great sagas of kings and prophets from ancient times. Pay special attention to which stories from sacred texts are particular favorites, retold in sermons or children's plays or sung in hymns. Those stories are likely to tell you something about whom people identify

with and how they understand their own lives. Each group is likely to find in the stories elements that make sense of their own situation, and as situations change, new meanings are likely to arise. As congregations change, there will be new stories to tell and new people who need to hear old tales. But people are also likely to find themselves listening to old stories with new ears.³² Stories have a great deal to do with who we think we are and who we can imagine becoming. Stories often have multiple plots, with multiple trajectories, and they can either constrain or enliven a group's future. Watch for how new people suggest different ways of hearing old stories.

Worldviews

The mythic story line adopted by a congregation has within it a basic view of the world that may be—according to James Hopewell's appropriation of Northrop Frye's literary theory—comic, romantic, tragic, or ironic (see sidebar 3.4). Individuals and congregations have characteristic ways of looking at the world and characteristic explanations for why things happen as they do. Hopewell's idea was that all of us have in our minds ways of answering some of life's most important questions. While not everyone will be easily categorized, there are often dominant worldviews in a congregation that follow one of these themes more than another.

These worldviews may be discovered in interviews by asking people how they make sense of a death or illness, what they think God is up to in the world, or how they see their own faith changing over the years. Looking for themes in the interviews may give the observer clues about the typical ways people in this congregation understand the grand unfolding of life's story. One might also use a survey that includes the questions designed by Hopewell.³³ In either case, a visual accounting of your findings (see figure 3.2) may help you to see how the people in this congregational culture shape their view of the world. By literally mapping where a representative selection of members falls on these worldview dimensions, you may learn a great deal

about the assumptions and storylines that shape your congregation's culture.

Sidebar 3.4 CONGREGATIONAL WORLDVIEWS

1. Those with a *comic* worldview are sure that everything will work out in the end, that the great forces in this world will be harmonized. Comics learn things by a kind of *gnostic* intuition and are convinced that our current difficulties are illusory, that underneath lies a fundamental harmony we cannot yet see. Life is the story of the discovery of that harmony. You can hear these essential assumptions in phrases like "go with the flow" or "it all adds up." A religious leader like Robert Schuller might fit here.

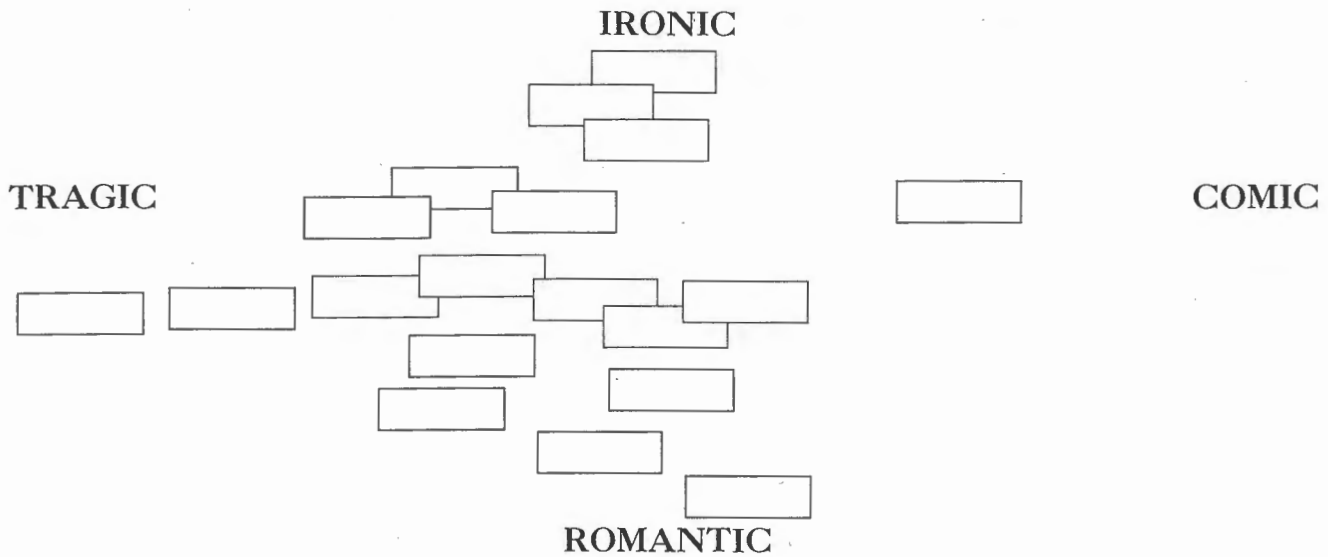
2. *Romantics* see life as a quest guided by knowledge that comes from a *charismatic* (inspired) spirit. Life's complications are the result of the adventure and risk of pitting protagonist—often a heroic figure—against antagonist. The result is a priceless reward: a great love, a holy object, a boon for the world. The story moves from tranquility to crisis to fulfillment. You can hear this worldview in phrases like "expect a miracle" or in accounts of transforming encounters with God's Spirit. Someone like Oral Roberts might fit here.

3. *Tragedy*, like romance, involves a hero or heroine but one whose vicissitudes force his or her decline. The opposite of romance, the story begins with apparent—but mistaken—fulfillment and moves through crisis to decline. Here there is a great power to which one can only submit, a transcendent will against which struggle is futile. The sacred *canonic* texts that reveal this divine will are the only sure source of knowledge. You can hear this worldview in calls for "dying to self" and "submitting to God's will." Jerry Falwell might fit here.

4. An *ironic* view of the world simply takes life on its own terms—no heroes or intuition or transcendent wills here, just the *empirical* facts, please. What seems to be an uncommon blessing or strange uncertainty proves to be naturally explainable. The reward in an ironic story is not the resolution of some grand dilemma but the camaraderie of the all-too-human actors who face it. You can hear this worldview in emphases on "relevance" and "fellowship." Walter Cronkite's famous closing line, "And that's the way it is," exemplifies the ironic worldview.

A summary from James Hopewell, *Congregation: Stories and Structures* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987).

Figure 3.2 DISTRIBUTION OF A CONGREGATION'S WORLDVIEWS



Symbols, Images, and Metaphors

Sometimes the congregation's identity is captured not so much in a story as in an image or metaphor. When members say, "We are an ark," they may be signaling the degree to which they feel isolated in a hostile environment, and that image will affect their planning and behavior. If they say, "We are the center of this community," it may signal something very different, as will an image of rescuing people with a life raft. Those images can be multivalent, interpreted differently by different people at different times in a congregation's history. But images and metaphors are to be taken seriously as shapers of a congregation's culture. Note the recurrent images Dudley and Johnson discerned in their study of congregations seeking to minister to their communities (see sidebar 3.5). Do any of these sound familiar?

While images and metaphors are often implicit, other gestures and objects are more explicitly used by the congregation to signal something beyond themselves, something that the congregation considers important. Anything carrying that sort of meaning is a significant symbol. Every word or gesture, of course, represents something more than mere sounds and movements and is therefore a symbol

defined by the culture in which it is located. Everything from the words we use to the building directory to gestures of greeting are signs that stand for social realities beyond themselves. We are interested here, however, in more than the everyday symbols of the culture. Most helpful to the interpreter of a congregational culture are the more potent reminders of the values this group holds dearest, the symbols that evoke a more visceral response which is less easily pinned down. The symbols we are looking for are the ones with high levels of emotion and low levels of specificity about their explicit meaning. Symbols, in Victor Turner's terms, are multivocal: they evoke a mysterious complexity of meaning and do so in such a way that one's identity is itself caught up in them.³⁴

Often these symbols are directly related to the congregation's theological tradition: the cross, the open Bible, a baptismal font, the Torah scroll, the menorah, and the like. Asking people to draw a mental (or actual) sketch of the congregation's worship space may elicit mention of items they see as significant. Talking to various members about what key symbolic items mean to them can help to outline the contours of the operative theological traditions in the congregation. What does the Communion table remind them of? What do they feel and think when they

Sidebar 3.5
CONGREGATIONAL
SELF-IMAGES

The *Pillar church* is anchored in its geographic community, for which it feels uniquely responsible. The architecture often reflects this self-image: the strong pillars that lift the roof physically reflect a membership that lifts the community spiritually. Like the building, the members are pillars of the community, good citizens individually and corporately.

The *Pilgrim church* dwells with its own people wherever they are, sustaining them as a community in their pilgrimage. Their culture and their Christian faith are woven into a single fabric of church life. Some Pilgrim congregations have moved with their people from one dwelling place to another. With a strong pilgrim theology some churches embrace waves of immigration or racial change.

The *Survivor church* loves to tell stories of the storms it has weathered. Often the congregation attracts and sustains people who take pride in their survival time and again. Survivor churches live on the edge, always on the verge of being overwhelmed by emergencies. They do not expect to conquer their problems, but they will not give in.

The *Prophet church* attracts members who feel called to challenge the evils of the world from communities to corporations, from individuals to national governments. Independent, often entrepreneurial in style, Prophet churches or prophetic segments in a larger church draw strong support from members who share their commitments. Prophet churches share with Survivors a sense of crisis that demands high levels of commitment.

The *Servant Church* attracts people who like to help others in modest ways of quiet faithfulness. They visit the sick, take meals to the bereaved, and send cards to the shut-ins. Beginning with their own members, they naturally extend their service to provide food, clothing, and other basic needs to their neighbors.

In summary, then, the images reflect the ways congregations respond to human need: The *Pillar church* has a sense of civic responsibility that embraces the community. The *Pilgrim church* cares for the cultural group as extended family. The *Survivor church* reacts to crises in an overwhelming world. The *Prophet church* is proactive to translate crises into causes. The *Servant church* reaches out to support individuals who need help.

From Carl S. Dudley and Sally A. Johnson, *Energizing the Congregation: Images that Shape Your Church's Ministry* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1993), 4-7.

see the opening of the Torah scroll? How do they feel when someone is baptized?

Other symbols may have no explicit *theological* connections. Yet a particular arrangement of furniture, the way the annual report is printed and bound, projecting the words of praise choruses with an overhead projector, who moves through a reception line first, or even what color the restrooms are painted—all may have meanings that tell us a great deal about the culture we are observing. The importance of these more mundane symbols is often discovered when inadvertent changes are made. A new printer is selected, new paint is applied, or furniture rearranged. Suddenly people realize something is awry. The old arrangements were not just functional but symbolic of the congregation's sense of identity. Observing such disjunctures and asking people to reflect on them can often be a helpful window on the congregation's culture.

Theologies

As we already noted in the chapter on theology, congregations have both official and unofficial ideas about what God is like, how human beings are related to God, what constitutes sin and salvation, and other questions about the nature of the world and where it is headed. Understanding the congregation's culture requires attention to this dimension, as well. The official ideas are usually fairly easy to find. A congregation may recite a creed or a set of prayers. Preachers may expound on proper doctrine. Teachers may explain the ways of the faith to children, especially in confirmation or bar and bat mitzvah classes. There may be pamphlets or banners with key covenants on them, and new members may be given guidebooks to the faith. Books of procedure may also take their place alongside sacred scripture as guides for congregational life. In all sorts of ways, congregations spend

Sidebar 3.6
MISSION ORIENTATION
QUESTIONS

For each of the following statements, indicate whether it is Basic, Quite Important, Somewhat Important, Not Really Important, or Contrary to your congregation's sense of mission.

1. Providing adult education that brings laity face to face with urban problems, racial discrimination, world poverty and hunger, and other social issues.
2. Providing for members an earthly refuge from the trials and tribulations of daily life.
3. Cooperating with other denominations and faith groups to achieve community improvements.
4. Helping people accept that their condition and status in life is determined and controlled by God, and that therefore one has only to accept it and live the best life possible.
5. Promoting social change through *the use of organized, collective* influence or force.
6. Helping people resist the temptation to experiment with the new "pleasures" and "life-styles" so prominent in our secular society and media.
7. Providing aid and services to those in need within the local community.
8. Maintaining an active, organized evangelism program; inviting the unchurched to participate in the life of the congregation.
9. Actively reaching out to members of other religious groups with an invitation to participate in the life of the congregation.
10. Encouraging the pastor to speak out in public and from the pulpit on controversial social, political, and economic matters.
11. Preparing church members for a world to come in which the cares of this world are absent.
12. Encouraging members to make specific declarations of their personal faith to friends, neighbors, and strangers.
13. Providing financial support to political or social action groups and organizations.
14. Maintaining a proper distance between the congregation and governmental affairs.
15. Helping people to understand that they are "agents" of God's hope, responsible for actualizing the good and humane as they share in the development of history and society.
16. Fostering a sense of patriotism among the congregation's members.
17. Encouraging members to reach their own decisions on issues of faith and morals.
18. Involving the congregation corporately in social and political activities.
19. Organizing social action groups within the congregation to directly accomplish some social or political end.
20. Protecting members from the false teachings of other churches and religious groups.
21. Listening to what the "world" is saying in order to understand what the congregation's ministry should be about.
22. Encouraging and inspiring members, as individuals, to become involved in social and political issues.
23. Encouraging members to adhere faithfully to civil laws as they are mandated by governmental authorities.

From David A. Roozen, William McKinney, and Jackson W. Carroll, *Varieties of Religious Presence* (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1984), 84-86.

time highlighting their ideas about God. The observer interested in the explicit theological teachings of a congregation will likely have little trouble finding occasions for study. If you do, that may tell you a great deal about the culture of the congregation. The degree to which theology is an explicit topic of conversation does vary, and that is part of how a group identifies itself.

Theology is not only contained in creed and

scripture, however. It is also heard, as we have already noted, in stories. Both the stories of the individual congregation and the stories members tell and retell from their larger tradition say a great deal about which aspects of God's character they find most compelling, how they think humanity should be related to God, and what they care most deeply about. Are they fond of the stories of conquest or the stories of sin and forgiveness? Do they focus on the mar-

tyrs or on the wisdom characters? Do they tell the miracle stories over and over? Listening for favorite characters and stories can help the observer discover what people really believe.

In addition, concentrate your observation on looking for the ways people's routine actions reveal what they believe about the nature of human life, who God is, and what God expects of them. How do they treat each other? How do they treat outsiders? What objects and events get special care? When do they punish their children, and when do they reward them?

Closely related to its theology is the congregation's "mission orientation," its sense of how God works in the world and what God wants people to do. When Roozen, McKinney, and Carroll studied congregations in Hartford, Connecticut, they discovered there were four typical ways of relating the congregation to its context, ways in which the congregation was present in the community.³⁵ Some congregations see their presence largely in terms of providing sacred space that is a safe haven from this world (the *sanctuary* orientation). Others see themselves as actively involved in seeking individuals who need salvation and thereby changing the world one person at a time (the *evangelistic* orientation). Still others see themselves as the promoters and preservers of what is good in this world (the *civic* orientation), while the last group seeks to change the structures of the world that cause suffering and injustice (the *activist* orientation). These orientations flow from a congregation's understanding of God's actions and their own, of where that action is located (in this world or another), and of whether or not congregations are primary actors in the drama. Sidebar 3.6 contains a set of survey questions that can be used in identifying a congregation's dominant understanding of its mission.

It is important to remember that theological exposition does not happen only in the official venues and is not done only by official clergy. When teachers explain the ways of God to four-year-olds and when adults reprimand teens for their lack of seriousness, theological exposition is taking place. Similarly, when one member attempts to comfort another or explain a ritual to a newcomer, or when an

adult discussion group tackles a difficult scripture, more theological work is being done.

In addition, much of the congregation's theology is implicit in what it values and how it does its work. Who is welcome and what behavior is condemned says much about how God's family is defined and what constitutes a virtuous life. The stories and metaphors you have been gathering also contain themes of God's presence and action in the world. Even the minutes of a board meeting may contain hints of this congregation's ideas about what a church or synagogue is really supposed to be about. Most assuredly, their budget fights reflect underlying theological assumptions. Listening for the theological dimension of the congregation's culture means listening for what is valued most highly, what people really care about. The chapter on theology offers additional guidelines for how observers can discern the operative theologies in a congregation.

Finally, a word about surveys. *Many* questionnaire items have been developed for discovering various aspects of people's beliefs about God. Some representative questions are contained in the chapter on methods and in appendix A. Seeing how your congregation responds to such a set of questions can often be very revealing. One should always, however, take actual observations more seriously than, or at least alongside, responses to a survey. How people actually use and talk about the Bible is far more important than which preset response they choose on a questionnaire. In addition, the questions asked on the survey may not really reflect either the particular questions most pertinent to this congregation's operative theology or the way they would put things. The range of responses may not be their range at all. Finding out that 60 percent of respondents chose a given answer to a question about faith may only tell you that that answer was the least unpalatable of the alternatives. If you use a survey to find out about your congregation's theologies, choose the questions with care. Avoid items that contain language or presuppositions that seem foreign to you. Keep the language as close to what is familiar as possible. And then use the results

more as a conversation starter than as a final verdict on what the congregation believes.

Understanding the culture of a congregation means taking seriously the language it uses, the history it has available, the myths and stories and worldviews that ground it, and the theologies that occupy both center and backstage. All the things they say about themselves stand alongside what they do and what they make as clues to the patterns of relationship and meaning that characterize this particular people in this particular place.

Interpreting the Congregational Culture

Having observed and interviewed the congregation to gather information about what the congregation does, what it makes, and how it speaks of itself, the time will eventually come when interpretation is in order, when you will want to be able to say something about what it all means. If you have been taking good notes and reviewing those notes along the way, you probably have a good idea already about what the dominant themes are. If you have been working with a group of advisers and cogatherers of data, the process of interpretation should include them, as well.

One way to begin the task of summarizing the information you have gathered is to make a list of statements for yourselves that begins with, "People in this congregation tend to" You might organize those statements around the various types of things you have observed: "Worship services tend to ..." "The building tends to ..." "Newcomers tend to ..." "Beliefs about God tend to ..."

Another way to approach this task is to think about what one might write in a handbook for newcomers to a congregation. What cultural knowledge does one need to survive here, assuming the newcomer knows *nothing* before coming here? These statements are not where you want to end your interpretation, but they can be a good beginning place, a way to begin to summarize the mounds of information you have collected.

As you begin this process, remember your focus. Using that focus, you might organize

the information you have gathered around the various elements of culture we have identified.

- Which rituals are most predictable and central to the congregation's culture?
- Which other activities are most instrumental in shaping the people who participate and in influencing what this group thinks of itself?
- What symbols best describe who they are? What objects, people, and events carry meanings linking them to the ideals of this group?
- Which routine practices and styles of relationship best capture what this congregation values most?
- What stories are the essential myths of this people?
- What beliefs and ideas best describe what they think a practicing member ought to be like?

How you ask these questions will be shaped by the curiosity or dilemma that sent you on this search in the first place. What does the ritual life of this congregation tell us about that issue? What do its key symbols say? And so forth. But be open to surprises. With all the information you have gathered, you may learn valuable things about this congregation that are quite peripheral to the actual focus of your study!

As you try to make sense of what you know, be aware that studying a congregation's culture nearly always generates more information than you really need. While some of that information may turn out to yield surprising insights, you need to remind yourself again of the questions with which you began, reformulating those questions in light of what you now know. Having gathered fascinating vignettes of congregational life, it is often hard to set them aside, but for the sake of coherence (and time) some triage is always necessary. Do not throw extraneous material away! Simply file it for later review and move on with the task at hand.

In addition, you will have learned along the way that not every activity or every behavior

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you observed is meaningful. Sometimes what you saw was a meaningful wink, but sometimes it was just an idiosyncratic twitch. While you may have uncovered many interesting details about the congregation's story and its patterns of life, not all of them tell you about the particular patterns of culture that stand at the center of the congregation's life or that bear on the issue in which you are interested. An important interpretive task is that of winnowing down all the things you now know to the key information that needs to be communicated to others.

Go back through all the information you have collected, then, looking for what is most significant, which ideas and activities and artifacts seem to be essential to this congregation's identity and to answering your specific questions. One way important discoveries are often made is by asking yourself about the surprises and unexpected happenings you have encountered. Where did you find things that were not as you thought they would be? What has happened that surprised everyone and made the whole congregation see itself more clearly?

You will also have discovered that there are many stories and many meanings within any given group of people. You may despair of ever finding the threads that weave through the tapestry of the whole. Those threads, in fact, may be very thin. A description of any congregation's culture will include the ways in which that culture is subdivided, the ways varying groups within the congregation tell different stories and practice the ways of the faith differently.

But in the midst of all the detail and diversity, you should have found some recurring patterns and themes. Perhaps it is an insistence on decorum and proper observance of the commands of the faith. Perhaps it is support for families. Per-

haps it is the presence of the Spirit. Perhaps it is a sense of survival in an alien land. Perhaps it is a story of congregational rebirth. Or perhaps it is an ever-present struggle to be inclusive of diversity. You may also discover that the patterns in your congregation, its typical ways of doing things, are similar to the patterns described by Hopewell's worldview types, the "mission orientation" types, Dudley's and Johnson's "congregational self-images," or some other set of congregational descriptions you have discovered. Although each congregation is certainly unique, discernible similarities across congregations often help observers make sense of their own situation. A careful look at what others have written about congregations can often help you see your own congregation's culture more clearly.

Once you have decided what the key lines of your findings will be, you will need to communicate what you know back to the congregation. A report from observers to congregations can take a number of forms. If it is written, it may take the form of a story (or collection of stories). It might also be an outline of answers to questions or simply a descriptive essay. Or it might take oral, visual, or even dramatic form, depending on the talents of those doing the reporting. But it is important to bring the congregation itself into this process. As you offer back what you have observed about what the congregation most values and how it identifies itself, the members need opportunities to respond. Your systematic observation of the congregation's culture should exist in dialogue with the ongoing life of this particular gathering of people. They can offer further nuances and corrections, but they can also receive a new understanding of their own assumptions and uniqueness, having seen themselves through the eyes of a cultural observer.

CULTURE AND IDENTITY IN THE CONGREGATION

NOTES

1. James F. Hopewell, *Congregation: Stories and Structures* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), 5. Another helpful treatment of the congregation as a culture is Denham Grierson's *Transforming a People of God* (Melbourne: The Joint Board of Christian Education of Australia and New Zealand, 1984). He suggests that pastors pay attention to, among other things, the congregation's remembered history, hero stories, artifacts of significance, symbols, rituals and gestures, myths of destiny, and images of hope.

2. The *Handbook for Congregational Studies* spoke of history, heritage, worldview, symbols, ritual, demography, and character as the elements of a congregation's identity (p. 23).

3. E. Brooks Holifield, "Toward a History of American Congregations," in *American Congregations: New Perspectives in the Study of Congregations*, ed. James P. Wind and James W. Lewis (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 23-53.

4. R. Stephen Warner, "The Place of the Congregation in the Contemporary American Religious Configuration," *American Congregations*, 54-99.

5. A vivid example of the way images from rural life can pervade even an urban congregation is found in Melvin Williams *Community in a Black Pentecostal Church* (Prospect Heights, Ill.: Waveland Press, 1984).

6. This is the distinction sociologists of religion label "sectarian." See Rodney Stark and William Sims Bainbridge, *The Future of Religion* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), chapter 2, for a summary of the social characteristics that define "sects."

7. Daniel V. A. Olsen, "Fellowship Ties and the Transmission of Religious Identity," in *Beyond Establishment: Protestant Identity in a Post-Protestant Age*, ed. Jackson W. Carroll and Wade Clark Roof (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1993), 32-53.

8. This framework for analyzing congregational culture was developed for the study of the congregations described in Nancy Tatom Ammerman, *Congregation and Community* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1997). The section below draws heavily on ideas elaborated in chapter 1 of that book.

9. Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973).

10. Keith Roberts has written about the different ways in which congregations acknowledge and highlight the sensual aspects of their rituals in "Ritual and the Transmission of a Cultural Tradition: An Ethnographic Perspective," in *Beyond Establishment*, 74-98.

11. The importance of bodily ritual and singing in creating communities across cultural boundaries is discussed in R. Stephen Warner, "Religion, Boundaries, and Bridges," *Sociology of Religion* 58, no. 3 (Fall, 1997): 217-238.

12. Thomas Day, *Why Catholics Can't Sing: The Culture of Catholicism and the Triumph of Bad Taste* (New York: Crossroad, 1991), 163.

13. Linda J. Clark, "Hymn-Singing: The Congregation Making Faith," in *Carriers of Faith*, ed. Carl S. Dudley, Jackson W. Carroll, and James P. Wind (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1991).

14. Pierre Bourdieu notes the way in which legitimate religious authority is constituted in the ability to say the right words, use the right gestures, occupy the right space, and in so doing represent the whole institution, rather than merely oneself. See *Language and Symbolic Power*, trans. John B. Thompson (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1982), chapters 3-4.

15. Samuel Heilman describes in vivid detail the "cast of characters" and their predictable roles in the synagogue he studied. See *Synagogue Life* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973).

16. R. Stephen Warner has made the distinction between what he calls "monistic" and "dualistic" modes of religious experience. The latter has highly formalized routines at times set aside for invoking God's presence. The former sees divine pres-

ence permeating everyday time and ordinary objects. No special ritual formulae are necessary; ordinary speech and everyday dress will do. See "Dualistic and Monistic Religiosity," in *Religious Movements: Genesis, Exodus, and Numbers*, ed. Rodney Stark (New York: Paragon, 1985), 199-220.

17. Clifford Geertz recounts the story of a death and funeral in Java as a way of illustrating the intricate ways in which ritual, death, and social life are intertwined. See "Ritual and Social Change: A Javanese Example," in *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973).

18. Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1977).

19. See Robert Wuthnow, *Sharing the Journey* (New York: Free Press, 1994), 66-68.

20. Wuthnow's *Sharing the Journey* examines both the emotional support and the spiritual formation that happens in small groups. For a discussion of the ways in which these bonds of mutual aid constitute a system of "pastoral care" in the congregation, see Don S. Browning, "Pastoral Care and the Study of the Congregation," in *Beyond Clericalism: The Congregation as a Focus for Theological Education*, ed. Joseph C. Hough, Jr., and Barbara G. Wheeler (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988), 103-18.

21. In *Meaning and Moral Order* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), Robert Wuthnow argues that there need be neither gathering of people nor setting off of special objects to have a ritual. Wherever people engage in behavior that communicates (often dramatically) about their social relations, ritual has occurred (pp. 98-109).

22. For a recent report on patterns of denominational switching, see C. Kirk Hadaway and Penny Long Marler, "All in the Family: Religious Mobility in America," *Review of Religious Research* 35, no. 2 (December 1993): 97-116.

23. Lynn Davidman, *Tradition in a Rootless World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), describes the process of becoming Orthodox as it was experienced by two groups of young Jewish women.

24. Some religious educators recognize the power of congregational and familial cultures in forming religious people in unintentional, as well as intentional, ways. Children learn by participating in events and activities—official and unofficial—that give the tradition its identity and substance. See, for example, John H. Westerhoff and Gwen Kennedy Neville, *Generation to Generation: Conversations in Religious Education and Culture* (Philadelphia: Pilgrim Press, 1974).

25. For a discussion of the importance of artifacts in understanding organizational cultures, see Pasquale Gagliardi, "Artifacts as Pathways and Remains of Organizational Life," in *Symbols and Artifacts* (New York: Aldine de Gruyter, 1990), 3-38.

26. See Michael Ducey, *Sunday Morning: Aspects of Urban Ritual* (New York: Free Press, 1977), 94-97, for a discussion of the uses of sacred space in the churches he studied. Heilman also offers a very instructive look at the physical setting of the synagogue in *Synagogue Life* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973).

27. See Peter L. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy* (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Doubleday, 1969), chapter 1, and Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality* (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Doubleday, 1967). Hopewell (*Congregation*) discusses the importance of the congregation's "idiom" (pp. 5-9). See also Ducey's description of the use of language, music, and styles of speaking in *Sunday Morning*, 116-22. In *Bible Believers: Fundamentalists in the Modern World* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1987), 86-88, I note the way language helps to maintain the boundaries of a conservative congregation.

28. Heilman (*Synagogue Life*) notes that the story of Kehillah Kodesh's beginnings is known by every member, and "the very knowledge of these facts seems often to be the best evidence of one's membership in the group" (p. 9). He goes on to include gossip and joking as modes of storytelling that shape that community's life, alongside the prayer and study that are at the heart of a synagogue's identity.

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29. Denham Grierson, *Transforming a People of God*, 55.
30. The uses of story and image in moving a congregation toward change are noted in Carl S. Dudley and Sally A. Johnson, *Energizing the Congregation: Images that Shape Your Church's Ministry* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1993), especially chapter 7.
31. James P. Wind, *Places of Worship* (Nashville: American Association for State and Local History, 1990) is a useful guide to writing congregational histories.
32. Carl Dudley tells a story about a Norwegian church that sold its building to a Black congregation. The Norwegian congregation, as was traditional, had a boat over the altar, and planned to take the boat with them to their new building. The

Black church, however, had immediately adopted the boat as part of *their* heritage and refused to let it go. The boat was the same boat, but meant something very different and no less important to this new constituency.

33. See Hopewell, *Congregation*, pp. 203-11.

34. Victor Turner, *Drama, Fields and Metaphors* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1974), 29. For a more extended discussion, see Victor Turner, *The Forest of Symbols* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1967), 19-41.

35. David A. Roozen, William McKinney, and Jackson W. Carroll, *Varieties of Religious Presence* (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1984).