

CHAPTER 2

Identity

To speak of the identity of a congregation is a way of talking about the “we” that persists through shifting styles and circumstances. No matter how drastically changes affect a congregation, it remains “us,” recognizable in many ways both to members and to other observers. Another way of putting it, as we did in chapter 1, is that the identity of a congregation is the persistent set of beliefs, values, patterns, symbols, stories, and style that makes a congregation distinctive. A congregation’s identity is a result of the elaborate communication among its members through which they share perceptions of themselves, their church, and the world—communication in which they develop and follow common values and by which they engage in corporate recollection, action, and anticipation. Identity itself changes over time, but it mirrors a congregation’s enduring culture.

Context, the subject of the next chapter, focuses on how environment conditions the life of a local church; however, identity explores the individuality of a congregation that distinguishes it from its conditioning environment. The larger context gives a church, say, its suburban, white, middle-class, Lutheran, Texan, late twentieth century attributes; but the manner in which the congregation incorporates these factors within its own culture differentiates its identity from all the forms the same enviroing factors elsewhere take. Likewise, a congregation’s program and process, the subject of chapters 4 and 5, can be studied in their own right as the structures and activities (program) and the underlying dynamics (process) through which the congregation gives expression to its ministry and mission. And, while a congregation’s programs and processes—for example, its church school or its style of planning—will share much in common with those of other congregations, they will also manifest distinctive characteristics, peculiar to that congregation, as they are shaped by the congregation’s singular identity.

Christian congregations proclaim their identity to be summed up and ascribed in Jesus Christ. The methods of empirical analysis employed in the description of a

congregation’s identity, a number of which we will describe, do not qualify or deny the theological understandings of a local church as the body of Christ or the household of God, but rather they help one understand something of the manner in which a congregation perceives its unique historical life and expression within the gospel promise. As individuals may simultaneously identify themselves to be Christians and yet to have unique personalities, so a congregation can, without compromising its Christian attributes, claim a singular corporate character.

2.1 Situations

Although as susceptible of analysis as the context, program, or process of a congregation, identity is often its less examined aspect. Consider how the issue of identity lurks below the surface of the church situations described in chapter 1.

Case 1: The graying Methodist church that hesitates to house the elderly. Ostensibly the issue presents a conflict between the pastor and her board, and requires program and process skills for its resolution, as well as an understanding of the dynamics of the context. But note how both the pastor’s initiative and the board’s resistance draw their definition from aspects of identity. Contributing to the tension are *symbols* of what the church represents to its members (“the classic beauty of its sanctuary”) and understandings of Heritage’s *heritage* (its traditions of social service; its long life of Christian action and challenge). We learn that Heritage’s problem also springs from its *demographic profile*: an aging membership with a “dying” image in a lively neighborhood. In its attempt to establish priorities, the Heritage board searches to express its authentic *character*. Symbols, heritage, demographic profile, and character are all elements of a church’s identity that will be examined later in this chapter.

Case 2: The breakaway congregation threatened by wine at a wedding party. Here is a church that has recently paid unusual attention to its identity, finding its beliefs and values sufficiently at odds with those of its founding denomination to sever its connection. Its own *world view* has been projected by a popular pastor and media ministry. Its contemporary *ritual* gives it further distinction. In the wedding wine incident, moreover, it faces a test of *character*. What, members now ask, constitutes the faithful nature of the congregation? Like the element of character, those of congregational world view and ritual form other features of identity that this chapter examines.

Case 3: The pretty white church that blames its pastors. The conference minister presses the congregation to explore its identity more fully. He wants members to move beyond the mere facts of their policies and program in order to explore their painful *history*. Pulpit ghosts, fights and funny situations, saints and grief—all crowd the collective past of the congregation, seemingly too hurtful for them to examine formally. This chapter therefore describes ways to examine the local church's history as an element essential to its identity.

Case 4: The black Episcopal church seeking an authentic heritage. The struggle of St. Augustine's Church to sing its Lord's song so illustrates the many dimensions of identity that the story forms the backdrop of the next section.

2.2 Elements of Identity

In psychological terms, identity is the singular sense of who one is. The concept of identity becomes more complex when it describes a quality possessed by a group such as St. Augustine's Church. Here identity again refers to a reflexive awareness, but now meanings are communicated not merely within a single person but within a group, now by what Clifford Geertz, following Max Weber, calls "webs of significance."¹ The web of meanings—the network of natural awarenesses, beliefs, values, goals—is a way of speaking about the culture of a local church. *The identity of a congregation is the perception of its culture by either an observer or the congregation itself.* The function of observers is important because they often contribute to the meaning that a group comes over time to attach to itself.

The struggle for an authentic heritage in St. Augustine's provides an instructive example of collective identity. In spite of deliberate and prolonged attempts

in slaveholding days to destroy an Afro-American understanding of roots, solidarity, and religion, and in spite of present-day oppressions that erode a sense of cultural worth and purpose, members of St. Augustine's are struggling, not without conflict, to meld and enrich an identity that honors their Anglican heritage and their black religious experience. The tension over the music marks part of their quest for their unique identity.

St. Augustine's experience offers a lesson to church analysts in what to expect in congregational identity:

1. Identity often opposes despair. Without the meaning and self-awareness that a positively valued identity gives, this and any congregation is likely to drift without direction. Both aspects of St. Augustine's identity—Anglican and black—were positively valued, and the conflict that ensued over them, though frustrating to Father Cummings, signals an essentially healthy situation. Both aspects of this congregation's identity enabled it to discover and affirm its particularity, and prevented it from drifting without definition, taking cues from whatever might come along. Without a positively valued, collective identity—even a divided one seeking reconciliation—the congregation could be without hope, having little sense of present character and thus small expectation for themselves in the future. A despondent group is often dissociated from the web of meanings that forms its identity and gives coherence to its experience; its identity is out of touch with its present circumstances.

Congregations that give all of their attention to programs, process, and context and no attention to the relationship of these dimensions to identity are in danger of despair. Any local church can become so occupied with the dynamics of its programs, the resolutions of its process, and its transactions with its environment that its sense of intrinsic identity becomes diffuse and disregarded. The church may so focus its activities and adaptations that it forgets to comprehend who it is and why it invests in such behavior.

2. St. Augustine's identity has a number of dimensions open to analysis:

- a. Cognizance of the struggle of the group through its *history*. Not only does a church acknowledge a heritage that in part transcends its own experience; it also recalls its own particular story that traces its life to the present and into the future.

- b. An appreciation of the traditions that constitute the congregation's *heritage*. Heritage gives a continuity and legitimation to a group's outlook and ideals.

- c. Perceptions of the way things are: a *world view*

that gives a particular significance to human lives and larger happenings.

d. The use of *symbols*. Certain signs that convey powerful meaning also express and reinforce the identity of a church.

e. A practice of group *ritual*. Repetitive actions that have more than utilitarian significance, such as ways of greeting, celebration, negotiation, intimacy, and grief, are another dimension of collective identity.

f. An understanding of the group's *demographic picture*. Groups have an image of their more measurable characteristics and possessions such as age, sex, race, class location, education, property, and power.

g. A grasp of group *character*. Churches exhibit and recognize in themselves a particular configuration of values and dispositions that frame that group's ethos.

3. An analysis of St. Augustine's identity must bear in mind both identity's integrative function of *being* in the present and its transformative function of *becoming* as it moves into the future. Some students of identity restrict their definition of identity to the former function, but our observation of St. Augustine's suggests that a group's perception of itself involves both what it finds itself to be and what it determines to become. Gaining appreciation of heritage is not merely to enhance the sense of its present state of being; it is also, as Erik Erikson says of identity in general, an "accrued confidence,"² a dimension that enables members to transform even their own nature in future liberation. St. Augustine's has not only a unique heritage of an Anglican tradition but is also adjusting to a different future. A similar sense of both being and becoming accompanies any congregation's apprehension of its identity. In fact, so consciously occupied are some present-day American congregations with what they might become, spiritually and socially, that they may overlook their being—who they now are.

To emphasize only *being* reduces the elements of identity to traits that freeze corporate life in a museum-like preservation. To emphasize only the phenomena of *becoming*, on the other hand, diminishes church identity to wraithlike transience. Strategies that seek a homogeneous congregation with members of similar outlooks and backgrounds tend to get trapped in the first mistake: seeing identity solely in terms of being. When we feel the attraction of "our kind of folks" we are responding to a given set of identity traits, a sameness that assures us that our character would not

be lost in adaptation. Strategies, however, that seek new liberationist structures for congregations tend to fall into the second snare that sees identity only in terms of becoming. In our quest for social change we may think our church can leave behind its present culture and enter another context without loss of identity. Neither strategy usually works; neither provides the "accrued confidence" that finds in congregational identity both its reliance upon being and its capacity to become.

A full exposition of congregational identity juxtaposes functions of being and of becoming. Specifically that means that in the analysis of the various aspects of a congregation's identity, one should look for both of these functions, to wit:

History:	both its representation of the past and its expectation of the future;
Heritage:	both the integrative and transformative forces of tradition;
World View:	perceptions of both order and of crises that counter it;
Symbols:	both their cohesive focus and also their "multivocality" that changes life;
Ritual:	both repetitive action and its access to "liminality" in which the group discards normal corporate structure;
Demography:	both the naturally given attributes of members and their desire to change their demography by assimilating different member types;
Character:	both its characteristic traits and also the sense of "having character" that chooses the way of difficult adaptation.

The parables of Jesus were an early portrayal of the identity of people. On the one hand the stories deal with familiar, integrative aspects of being, such as shepherding, lost coins, and worship in terms of which hearers could identify and locate themselves. On the other hand, they conclude with stranger, transformative events of becoming such as the justified sinner and the welcomed uninvited. A similarly parabolic outlook is needed to understand the full identity of a present-day religious community. Identity reflects both being and becoming. Expressing neither just fashion nor just unconvention, identity binds both these modalities in representing congregations that Paul calls households of God—a designation that, like identity, juxtaposes the familiar and the strange.

In the following sections we consider each of the aspects of identity with suggestions for gathering and analyzing information about a congregation's identity. There is a certain eclecticism about the elements we

consider; they are like multiple facets of a precious stone, each of which reveals something distinctive about the stone. There are, however, obvious overlaps between the aspects that should not be ignored. No one congregational study team will likely find it necessary to explore all of the elements we treat, but we recommend analysis of several elements as essential for discovering the richness of the congregation's identity.

2.3 History

2.3.1 History and Identity

When somebody is genuinely interested in who we are, we soon start recounting to them incidents in our past that reveal additional aspects of our nature. As 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, the substance of which comes largely from remembering."³ But as Grierson implies, not everything that has happened to us is of equal significance. We could easily bore our friend with accounts of how we tied our shoes or bought groceries. Thousands of events happen to us each week; relatively few are worth remembering for their disclosure of who we are, either to ourselves or to someone else. To distinguish the one type of happening from the other, Norman Perrin speaks of both "history" and the "historic."⁴ History could conceivably acknowledge any sort of incident; a focus on the historic restricts apprehension to those occurrences that distinguish their subject's identity. Were we to be musing about a present-day congregation a half century from now, the historic elements in that church's history would be the stories, large and small, that would most helpfully characterize the present group for us.

Many attempts to articulate parish history get trapped in describing the less telling regularities of the past and have little to say about a congregation's more historic activity, such as its founding, significant experiences in its past, critical turning points, important people or "heroes" past and present. Annual reports, for example, may concentrate only upon statistics and programs. Parish profiles prepared to guide the selection of a new pastor or adoption of a new strategy tend to get locked in cross sections of opinion without exploring their historic antecedents. Amateur histories of local churches are sometimes little more than genealogies, or chronicles of predictable changes in leadership, property or program.

Suggested below are two ways of gaining a deeper

appreciation of the historic "plot" in which congregational identity develops.⁵

2.3.2 Gathering Oral History

Pastors may already encourage the older members of the congregation to reminisce merely for therapeutic reasons, but the activity also provides an opportunity that could strengthen the congregation's understanding of its story. Long-term members are a primary source for oral history. Other members besides the pastor, of course, can be the investigators, and the project can be carried forth to several different conclusions that would enrich the identity of the congregation.

Critical to the process are guided interviews. Questions like the following would be asked members who have been intimately associated with the church for shorter and longer times:

What's the news around the church now?

Tell me about your association with the church.

What changes have you noticed about the church during the time you have been associated with it?

What has happened that you would like not to have occurred?

What has happened that you would like to have been followed up in a different way?

More specific questions would follow such general inquiries. Informants might also contribute documents and other artifacts to a project, but the purpose would not be primarily the accumulation of archives. More important to a congregation's "becoming" would be its development of a recognized plot played out in its actions, sermons, administrative deliberations, entertainment, and education.

2.3.3 Time Line

Another way of gaining a firmer understanding of the historic is to gather a group of parishioners for an evening of disciplined recollection. Tape up on a wall a long sheet of wide, light paper, and mark a longitudinal line from one end to the other, a third of the way from the paper's top. Put the founding date of the congregation at the left end of the line, the present date at its right end. Mark off in suitable time intervals the intervening period: decades, single years, and so forth.

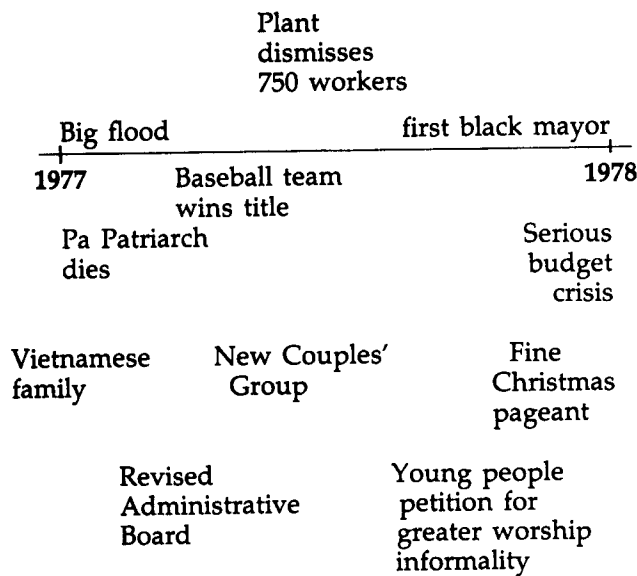
1. Encourage members to recall important events in the church's past. Title these and note them on the paper near their date, but below the line.
2. In the section above the line describe at their appropriate date significant events of the neighborhood, region, nation, and world.

3. Encourage participants in their attempts to connect and elaborate the events noted.
4. Leave the paper up so that participants may later supplement their findings.
5. Record and transcribe the session for multiple uses, including more comprehensive inquiries into the history of the congregation. The time line may be an item for general distribution to the membership.

Figure 2-A provides an example of a brief segment of a congregation's time line.

Figure 2-A

A "Slice" of a Time Line



character of the parish. The Greeks called this function *anamnesis*.

2. Plots *thicken*. They complicate a single story line by also involving other unintegrated factors in parish life. Thickening is an action of acknowledging disparate elements in congregational life.

3. Plots *unfold*. They show cause and effect. Certain events are historic primarily because they seem to be the instruments of subsequent happenings, not because they identify the congregation or thicken its plot. In unfolding, plot gives reason for the course of events.

4. Plots *twist*. They are not predictable; a parish history is not, therefore, a rigid formula by which the future is projected. Plots rather manifest the uncertain. They do not just unfold; they move in surprising directions that especially reflect the "becoming" aspect of parish identity.

An analysis of parish history might include the following exercise:

1. Develop a comprehensive account of the congregation's last decade. Note what seem to be the somewhat distinct events within the history.

2. Ask which of the four functions seems most active in each event: linking, thickening, unfolding, twisting. All functions accompany each event, but one will probably seem to dominate the manner in which it has been related.

3. Ask which of the four functions seems most suppressed in any single event. There is evidence that in undertaking a certain action a congregation diminishes its attention to other functions.

4. Ponder the sequence of functional emphases and suppressions. Does the pattern itself suggest anything about the character of the congregation?

2.3.4 Analysis

Perhaps nowhere in the study of a congregation's identity are its dual aspects of "being" and "becoming" more patent than in writing a parish history. In its history, that which a congregation *be* is glimpsed in the changes that compose what it *becomes*. One way to reflect upon the nature of transformation in congregational history is to characterize the dominant functions of successive historical events in a congregation and to note how one function seems achieved at the expense of another.

Were we to treat history as a story, we could delineate four different functions that events may assume in its plot. We use the slang of narrative analysis to identify the functions.

1. Plots *link*. Within the cascade of events that constitute the total past of a congregation, a plot (or history) *connects* relatively few incidents and aligns them as a sequence significant to understanding the

2.4 Heritage

2.4.1 Heritage and Identity

The heritage of a congregation is that which comes to it out of its past by inheritance. At first glance, heritage and history might seem to refer to the same matter; however, we do not use them synonymously here. Heritage represents what a congregation considers to be its sacred deposit from its total past, while history tells the congregation's own particular story. By heritage, then, we will mean *a congregation's acknowledgement of the inheritance of beliefs and practices about the Christian faith and life and the purpose of the church that it has by virtue of being a Christian church and standing in that particular historical stream*. These beliefs and practices—the Christian heritage—are contained not only in the Scriptures, but in the creeds and confessions, the councils of the church, the writings, liturgies, hymns,

and stories of the church through the ages in its variety of denominational expressions. They are mediated to an individual congregation, not only through the denominational stream of which it is a part, but also through the peculiar experiences of the congregation itself, both in its past and present.

We shall come back to this dual character of a congregation's heritage. First, however, what is the relation of heritage to identity? The heritage, as we have restricted its use here, contributes a singularly important element to the web of meanings that constitutes a congregation's identity: its identity as a *Christian* community rather than a Jewish synagogue or Buddhist temple, a service club, a corporation or a university. To be sure, a congregation's web of meanings may include elements that are similar to these other collectivities—sometimes, some would say, to the point of obscuring its identity as a Christian congregation; however, it is its *Christian* heritage that contributes a distinctive element to a congregation's identity and sets it off from other communities. Thus heritage is especially important in defining the boundaries of a congregation's identity.

The two-sided character of the heritage of a congregation that we noted previously—its inheritance as a part of the Church Universal (mediated through its denomination) and that which comes to it through its particular local history as a congregation—is an important distinction for consideration of the relation between heritage and congregational identity. As they have studied religious life in various societies, anthropologists and others have sometimes used a distinction between two types of traditions that exist simultaneously within the same religion. Although the distinction has been given various names, we will refer to it, following Robert Redfield, as the "great tradition" and the "little tradition."⁶ By the great tradition, we refer to the classic expression of a particular religion. It is the official or orthodox tradition (although we know that within Christianity there have been numerous "orthodoxies" reflecting the various denominational streams). Some Protestant groups have wanted to restrict the great tradition to the Bible—*sola scriptura*; however, they have frequently developed creedal or confessional statements in addition to the Bible, and they also have stories about and writings of various Christian luminaries and denominational founders—St. Augustine, St. Francis, St. Teresa, Luther, Calvin, or Wesley, for example. These also come to have a place in the great tradition. Scholars in theological seminaries and ecclesiastical councils as well as the official leaders of a congregation often feel a special responsibility for exemplifying and perpetuating the great tradition.

At the same time, however, there is the little, or local, tradition of a congregation. It is that particular

distillation of beliefs and practices from out of the great tradition, mixed with elements of the peculiar history and experiences of the congregation. Of course, we should not forget that the great tradition also reflects the experiences and peculiar histories of individuals and congregations in the past that have now been incorporated into the stream of the great tradition.⁷ Nevertheless, each congregation has its own little tradition, its peculiar interpretation of Christian faith and practice, which may be commensurate with the great tradition or at odds with it at one or several points. The conflicts that have developed in many white congregations over the inclusion of blacks in the membership point to the tension that exists between the universalism of the great tradition and the particularism of some little traditions. Within the great tradition, an inclusive church is the norm; within the little tradition of First Church, Centerville, the congregation's wisdom about how to handle such things as racial, ethnic, or social class differences has taken on sacred status which the congregation aims to maintain. The little tradition of a congregation is perpetuated informally by a larger number of church members than those charged with maintaining the great tradition.

The tension that often exists in congregations between its great and little traditions is an important dynamic to be considered in congregational analysis, and a potentially important ingredient in the kind of reflection in a congregation that can lead to renewal. A congregation's heritage (drawn from the great and little traditions) forms part of its present identity—its *being*. And there are expressions of that heritage, currently neglected, that can shape its potential identity—its *becoming*. In one of the analyses of the congregation which formed the focus of the book, *Building Effective Ministry*, the current theological identity (called there the "operational theology") of the congregation—an upper middle class congregation in an affluent suburb—was described as follows:

The "operational" beliefs of the congregation . . . are centered in belief in a God who loves individuals, calls them to fulfill their potential as individuals, forgives and supports them when they fall short and are hurt, and blesses them with the good life. There is an especially strong belief that individuals are called to fulfill their potential and must refuse to give up or to sell themselves short.

This operational belief system also seems to carry over into the belief that the congregation itself must refuse to sell itself short or to be less than "the best show in town." . . . Additionally, the theme, repeated several times by leaders, that the congregation must be a "hospital" to bind up those hurt by the stresses and strains of life seems also to be a part of the operational belief structure and parallels the individual's belief in a loving, forgiving, supporting God.⁸

These beliefs reflect the peculiar refraction of parts of the great tradition through the congregation's little

tradition. While the beliefs are in tension with important themes of the great tradition, the congregation nevertheless stands in that tradition. The Christian heritage is a part of its identity, and the broader elements of that heritage are available to members as a resource for critiquing and challenging elements of their current identity. As a theologian analyzing the same congregation pointed out,

It is true that this congregation falls far short of the biblical promises of what the congregation can be, but for all of that, we must remember that it is a community of the people of God. That is the audacious claim they can make and that claim is an expression of hope in God. . . . [T]his church is the body of Christ. That statement is one of belief in God's promise to be with Wiltshire Church and to be for Wiltshire Church. It is an expression of my expectation that community is, has been, and will be justified by God in her gracious and steadfast love.⁹

2.4.2 Exploring a Congregation's Heritage

There are a number of ways—more than can be described here—for exploring a congregation's heritage as it contributes to its identity. We will note several that we believe are especially helpful for a congregation that would explore both its great and little traditions and the relationship that exists between them. First, however, let us describe essentially what is at stake in any such exploration.

On the one hand, there is the need to understand the current being of the congregation with respect to its heritage—its present theological identity. This involves study of what Joseph Hough¹⁰ calls the "documents" of a congregation, living and written." These documents, Hough continues, "must be examined in order to determine the present, concrete working understanding that the congregation has of itself. This analysis should make transparent the purpose of the congregation as it is articulated and understood by the members." Among such "documents" available for analysis are:

- the beliefs held by congregational members
- themes and dominant theological images communicated in sermons, liturgies (to be explored further in the section on ritual), symbols (to be explored further in the section on symbols), teaching, and written statements of the congregation's purpose
- and behavioral expressions of the congregation's theological identity in its organizational life, both internal and external

On the other hand, there is a need to examine the congregation's present theological identity in light of elements of the great tradition. To quote Hough further:

Utilizing an explicit understanding of the nature of the congregation based on interaction with the biblical and theological sources, the analyst [of the relation of identity and heritage] becomes an external critic, raising questions about the adequacy of the congregation's self-understanding in light of the universal theological dialogue in the church about the mission and ministry of the church as the body of Christ in the world. Theological analysis has this normative function. It calls the church into account to be faithful to its covenant with God and to respond creatively to the promises of God for the church and the world.¹¹

How does one put together these two foci of the analysis of a congregation's theological identity? Analysis of the theological themes present in the "documents" of the congregation may follow several different strategies.

One may proceed in an inductive fashion, listening attentively for themes, images and metaphors that are present in the various kinds of documents referred to above. Participant observation, unstructured interviews, and content analysis of written materials (such as sermons, church school literature, annual reports and meeting minutes) are useful techniques for inductive exploration. (See chapter 6 for a discussion of many of these techniques.) As one observes the congregation in action, questions its members and leaders, explores the content of sermons and other written materials, certain theological themes and metaphors will begin to emerge with considerable frequency and usually they will begin to take on some degree of coherence as expressive of core elements of the congregation's identity. This is essentially the strategy used to discern what were called the "operational beliefs" of the congregation described previously. Denham Grierson notes how these themes or metaphors function to "select, emphasize, suppress, focus, and organize features of the common life of the people. 'We are the soldiers of Christ.' 'The church is God's missional arm.'" The total configuration of such themes, he argues, embodies a congregation's fundamental vision.¹²

One may also proceed in a more structured fashion by using various predefined theological categories to describe a congregation's identity. It is particularly useful when one wishes to compare two or more congregations and therefore needs common categories by which to compare them. But predefined categories can also be helpful in analyzing a single congregation when one wishes to describe the degree of theological diversity or homogeneity that exists in the congregation and needs some common categories for comparison of individual member's beliefs. Obviously there are a variety of categories and techniques which one can use. We cite two examples of measures of theological orientation. Additionally, the Parish Profile Inventory

(see General Appendix) provides additional examples of measures of religious beliefs.¹³

Before proceeding to these examples, we simply note here the difficulty of writing belief statements that represent the options appropriate to a particular congregation or group of potential respondents. If the study team is not satisfied with those given in the examples, it is encouraged to write more satisfactory statements. In undertaking this, the team will find it helpful to consult one of the many guides to questionnaire construction¹⁴ as well as to the references cited in the preceding note.

In the two examples which follow, each provides a way of studying important but different aspects of a congregation's theological identity.

The first includes several questions having to do with basic Christian beliefs. Carefully developed by a group of social scientists and theologians, with the support of the Lutheran Church in America, the questions were designed originally to provide a profile of the religious beliefs and religious experiences of Lutheran laity and clergy.¹⁵ The questions are, however, quite appropriate for use in other denominational traditions and for developing a profile of the religious beliefs of members of a particular congregation. Each provides a question stem with several response categories representing different possibilities for holding the belief in question. We have included, with minor alterations, only a few of the many questions that were developed for the larger study. A congregational study team may wish to consult that study for additional questions or use the examples here as guides to constructing additional belief questions for use in its analysis of its congregation's heritage. Representative questions include:

1. "Faith" has meant many different things to people. Which one of the following statements *comes closest* to describing your own view of faith? (Circle one response only.)
 - a. a life of commitment to God that I demonstrate by trying to do what is right.
 - b. My decision to accept Christ instead of going on in my own sinful ways.
 - c. My trust in God's grace.
 - d. My belief in all that the Bible says.
 - e. In my view, as long as people are truly sincere in their beliefs, they show faith.
 - f. I am not sure what "faith" means, although I am convinced that it is important.
 - g. To be honest about it, the idea of faith doesn't seem very meaningful to me.
 - h. None of these; what faith means to me is _____.
2. Which one of the following comes closest to your view of the way in which God influences the things that happen in the world? (Circle only one response.)
 - a. God sets history in motion but really doesn't interfere with it anymore.
 - b. God influences individuals, who then shape events.
 - c. God influences individuals, but also shapes events directly through nations and social affairs.
 - d. I don't think of God as "influencing" the things that happen.
 - e. Not sure because I haven't thought about it much before.
 - f. None of these; my view is _____.

3. People often wonder how a merciful God can allow terrible things to happen, such as the killing of six million Jews during World War II. Which statement *comes closest* to your view of why God lets these things happen? (Circle only one response.)
 - a. God allows terrible things to happen in order to punish people for their sins.
 - b. We don't know why these things happen, but we know that God is able to use them for good.
 - c. God doesn't have anything to do with these things; the devil causes them.
 - d. People cause these things to happen, not God.
 - e. Frankly, I don't know how God can allow these things to happen; it doesn't seem right to me.
 - f. I don't have a view on this topic.
 - g. None of the above; my view is _____.

4. Which one of the following statements comes closest to expressing your view of life after death? (Circle only one.)
 - a. I don't believe that there is life after death.
 - b. I am unsure whether or not there is life after death.
 - c. I believe that there must be something beyond death, but I have no idea what it may be like.
 - d. There is life after death, but no punishment.
 - e. There is life after death, with rewards for some people and punishment for others.
 - f. The notion of reincarnation expresses my view of what happens to people when they die.
 - g. None of these expresses my view. What I think about life after death is _____.
5. Which of these statements comes closest to describing your feelings about the Bible? (Circle only one.)
 - a. The Bible is the actual word of God and is to be taken literally, word for word.
 - b. The Bible is the inspired word of God but not everything in it should be taken literally, word for word.
 - c. The Bible is an ancient book of fables, legends, history, and moral precepts recorded by men.
 - d. None of these; my view is _____.
 - e. Can't say.

6. Which of the following comes closest to your attitude toward people in other countries who have never heard about Christ? (Circle only one.)
- A desire to share the love of Christ with them.
 - A feeling that if we do not preach Christ to them, they will be damned forever.
 - A feeling that we shouldn't worry about them because there are so many people in this country who haven't heard about Christ.
 - A feeling that we should respect their religions and stop trying to impose Christianity on them.
 - Frankly, I haven't thought about it.
 - Can't choose.
7. Christians sometimes describe God as a "God of justice" or a God who commands us to bring about justice. Which *one* of these statements comes closest to your own ideas about what this means?
- It means that the church should work for justice and support groups that are working to end inequality and oppression.
 - I think of it at a more personal level. It means I should try to be just and fair in all my dealings.
 - I think this is actually a spiritual term that refers to God punishing evil, rather than activities of the church or individuals.
 - Frankly, the concept of God's justice doesn't have any particular meaning to me.
 - I'm not really sure what it refers to.
 - None of these; its meaning to me is _____.

The use of these questions, or ones like them, can be important not only for comparing the profile of one congregation's beliefs to another, but for understanding the distribution of beliefs within one's own congregation. Furthermore, it is possible, especially if one has access to a computer to aid in the analysis, to compare the responses of significant groups within the congregation—for example, leaders versus nonleaders; actives versus inactives; new members versus old-timers; various age groups within the congregation; and so forth.

The profile (or subgroup profiles) that emerges gives insights into a congregation's identity in several ways. First, the profile enables the study team to get a sense of the typical or modal pattern of belief within a congregation, ranging from highly orthodox to unorthodox or agnostic. Where there is considerable agreement on beliefs, one may infer a rather clear theological identity; where there is considerable spread in the response pattern, the theological identity is much less clear, which, in itself is an important datum about the congregation's identity. In either case, the analysis provides some clues into the interaction between the

little and great traditions within that congregation. Second, assuming that what a person or group believes has some consequences for behavior—a point we will discuss further under the heading of character—the belief profile that emerges can stimulate fruitful discussion about the degree to which a congregation's behavior, reflected in its programs, processes, and relationship to the world about it—is consistent with its fundamental beliefs about God and God's purposes in the world. Additionally, leaders of the congregation, who are typically concerned with bringing the congregation's little tradition more into harmony with the great tradition, may find helpful insights into areas of needed emphasis in the programs of the church. Finally, the responses to several of the belief items listed above can be useful in the analysis of a congregation's world view, which will be considered in the subsequent section.

A second structured way of characterizing the current identity of a congregation with respect to its heritage is in terms of the congregation's orientation to mission—how its members understand and act in relation to issues in society. As is well known, many conflicts have occurred in congregations over such issues. In a study of congregational orientations to mission, Roozen, McKinney, and Carroll¹⁶ developed a set of questions that enables a congregation to characterize itself in terms of four different orientations to mission. Most congregations are a mixture of the four, but typically one of them is dominant. The first two orientations are "this-worldly" in focus; the latter two are more "otherworldly." The orientations are as follows:

Activist

This world is the arena of God's redemptive activity and also, therefore, the arena in which God calls the *congregation* to speak out on issues and engage in corporate action, working for social change and transformation towards a more just and loving society. The activist orientation includes a critical stance towards existing social and economic structures and does not shy away from controversy in the interest of maintaining harmony.

Civic

This world, as for the Activist, is the arena in which God calls Christians to act and to take responsibility for public life; however, the civic orientation is more comfortable with the existing social and economic institutions. It is more concerned with making them work well than with challenging them. Furthermore, the congregation itself

resists acting as a corporate body in public; rather it provides a forum in which social issues can be discussed and debated in a way that enables *individual* members to act responsibly as Christians, though not as representatives of the congregation.

Evangelistic This world is devalued in favor of the world to come. To call persons to salvation and the promise of eternal life in the world to come, members are encouraged to witness to their faith, sharing the message of salvation with those outside the fellowship and leading them to membership in the church. The spirit of the Great Commission is at the center of congregational life, and the power of the redeemed life is sufficient to overcome members' hesitancy to proselytize among members of other religious traditions as well as among the unchurched.

Sanctuary Also otherworldly in emphasis, this orientation encourages the view that church exists mainly to provide persons with opportunities to withdraw, in varying degrees, from the trials and vicissitudes of daily life into the company of committed fellow believers. A sharp distinction is made between the sacred and secular, between the spiritual and temporal realms. The temporal realm is sinful, but nevertheless God-given and necessary to human existence. Thus Christians are expected to live in the world, accepting it as it is, and to uphold its laws; but they are to be "not of this world" in their deepest loyalty which belongs only to God.

We repeat: each of these orientations may be found in a single congregation. Some members may understand the church more in terms of one than another of the orientations; however, there is typically a modal or dominant orientation. It can be discerned, not only in verbal statements such as descriptions of the church's purpose or in sermons, but also in church programs—in those things that a congregation emphasizes or does not emphasize in its programs. As the dominant orientation, it is very much an element in the congregation's identity.

The four statements above can be used as is, for example, as guides to participant observation in the

congregation. In the book from which they are drawn, there are case studies of ten congregations based on participant observation. Observers participated in worship services and educational programs, talked with members, attended board and committee meetings, examined annual reports, budgets and minutes. They listened and watched for significant themes, images, and metaphors which would help them understand the congregation's orientation to mission. From this, it was usually possible to identify one theme that was dominant in the way the congregation understood its mission.¹⁷

As an alternative, one might give the statements to members or leaders as a paper and pencil exercise, asking them to rank the orientations in terms of how each is (or should be) reflected in the mission of the congregation. Such an exercise is a helpful way to initiate a discussion on the congregation's identity.

Yet another alternative is to use a questionnaire with the following statements which have been found to measure the four orientations.¹⁸ The statements can be preceded by a question such as: "Listed below are several descriptive statements regarding activities in which a congregation might engage. How likely would your congregation be to engage in each one?" Four response categories can be given for each: (1) Very Likely, (2) Somewhat Likely, (3) Somewhat Unlikely, (4) Very Unlikely. We have grouped the statements under the four orientations; however, in a questionnaire, the theme names should not be used, and the statements should appear in random order.

Activist

1. Sponsor organized social action groups within the congregation.
2. Promote social change through organized, collective influence.
3. Encourage the pastor to speak out on social and political issues.
4. Provide financial support for social action activities.
5. Support corporate congregational participation in social and political issues.

Civic

1. Cooperate with other religious groups for community improvements.
2. Provide aid and services to people in need.
3. Help persons understand themselves as agents of God's love and hope.
4. Encourage members, as individuals, to be involved in social issues.
5. Encourage members to reach their own decisions on matters of faith and morals.

Evangelistic

1. Maintain an active evangelism program, inviting the unchurched to participate.
2. Encourage members to make explicit faith declarations to friends and neighbors.
3. Reach out to members of other religious groups with the message of true salvation.
4. Protect members from the false teachings of other religious groups.
- *5. Prepare members for a world to come in which the cares of this world are absent.

Sanctuary

1. Resist the temptation of contemporary "pleasures" and lifestyles.
- *2. Prepare members for a world to come in which the cares of this world are absent.
3. Accept one's condition and status as controlled and determined by God.
4. Encourage obedience to civil laws as a religious duty.
5. Foster a sense of patriotism as a religious duty.

*NOTE: This item is included in both the Evangelistic and Sanctuary orientations because of its importance for each.

The pattern of response for each of the statements can be summarized for the congregation as a whole, using either percentages or an average score. (For computing the average scores, a "Very Likely" response should be scored as 1; a "Somewhat Likely" as 2, and so forth.) Additionally, a score for each orientation can be computed for each person responding to the questionnaire by summing the responses to each question reflecting the orientation. From this, an aggregate score for the congregation can be computed for each orientation by summing the orientation score for each individual and dividing by the total number responding. For example, this method of scoring might reveal that a congregation has aggregate scores of 1.2 for Activist, 4.3 for Civic, 5.2 for Evangelistic, and 3.2 for Sanctuary. In this case, its orientation to mission would reflect a somewhat otherworldly focus, with considerable emphasis on evangelistic outreach but little on work for social change. The responses of types of members within a congregation—leaders and non-leaders, actives and inactives, and so forth—can also be compared to examine areas of agreement/disagreement. Any one of these methods for scoring or summarizing the responses can become the basis for a lively discussion of a congregation's identity as expressed in its orientation to mission.

The various techniques we have described thus far are ways primarily of describing the current theological identity of a congregation—its *being*. But we said that the current identity, which generally reflects a congregation's little tradition, needs to be examined in light of the great tradition. Such an examination is necessary both as a critique of the congregation's current identity and as a way of helping it to explore its identity as *becoming*. In general, such reflection as this follows the pattern suggested by Joseph Hough in the passages cited previously. It is a task of biblical and theological reflection. There are many differing methods for doing such reflection; however, let us simply cite two that we believe are especially helpful. Because they are described in considerable detail elsewhere, including helpful illustrations and guides to their use, we will be quite brief.

For the study of biblical passages and themes in their relation to a congregation's being, the method developed by Walter Wink and described in his book, *Transforming Bible Study*,¹⁹ is useful. The method not only takes the text in its literary and historical context seriously, but also through a method of questioning, it enables participants in the study to "live into" the text so that it becomes vivid for them. Most importantly, it leads them to apply it to themselves and their situation in a way that can be deeply transformative. In studying a congregation's identity, biblical passages on the church and its mission are especially appropriate.

Somewhat similar to Wink's method, but drawing on other elements of the great tradition as well, is a method of theological reflection developed by James D. Whitehead and Evelyn Eaton Whitehead and described, with examples and exercises, in their book, *Method in Ministry*.²⁰ The method involves bringing to bear three sources of information in reflecting on issues in the ministry of the church: the Christian tradition (what we have called the great tradition); personal experience (including the experience of a congregation—its little tradition); and cultural information. Through reflection on this mix of information, a congregation can find resources to critique its being and be opened to new possibilities for its becoming.

In addition to these two methods for bringing images and themes from the great tradition to bear transformatively on a congregation's current identity, a number of other methods of exploration exist, including study and discussion of such books as *Christ and Culture*, by H. Richard Niebuhr, or Avery Dulles' *Models of the Church*,²¹ both of which lay out clear models, drawn from the great tradition, for thinking about a congregation's identity.

2.5 World View

2.5.1 What Is a World View?

Closely akin to heritage is world view, and though they are related, they are also helpfully distinguished. Our world view is the perspective we use to make sense of our total life. That life touches not only our personal selves but also the various societies in which we participate, as well as nature and what we find sacred. World view gives powerful shape to what we experience; it combines into images the raw data we receive through our five senses, gives the images universal significance, and evokes in us deep emotions about their reality. Our world view is the scene we see in which our lives gain ordered significance.

World views differ. What one person or group finds to be valid, real, feared, or suspected about life is often distinguishable from that which another person or group sees. When speaking about variation in world views we generally differentiate the variety according to a liberal-conservative spectrum of beliefs. That distinction, based upon two categories of world view, is too simple to guide an inquiry that attempts to understand the complex but fragile shaping a person or congregation gives to their experience. In the analyses that follow we shall therefore suggest a somewhat larger set of categories by which we might tune in more finely to a congregation's particular expression of world view.

While world views differ, they do not occur indiscriminately in human groups. One of the major forces that binds a congregation, and thus effects its identity, is the roughly common pattern of members' world views. Individuals may both select a local church that possesses a world view congenial to their own, and also, once a part of that fellowship, align their own perspective more closely to the dominant interpretation of life shared by other members. World views are negotiations; members work to align various options in explaining the events of their lives. A congregation's struggle to make coherent sense of an uncertain world is a wondrous transaction that we are privileged to uncover, if only slightly, in this exercise.

2.5.2 Setting the Scene

Consider a church building made largely of windows that permit the building's occupants to look out four sides to a continuous horizon. Now picture that horizon to be a gigantic circle of western literature, with its many books arranged according to a pattern in which books placed closest to each other have the greatest similarity of motif, and those whose outlooks differ the most from each other are separated by half the horizon.

The literary critic Northrop Frye has laid out literature in such a cosmic circle, and has delineated it much as one might box a compass.²² As a compass in its 360-degree swing passes four cardinal points, so Frye's depiction of literature acknowledges four basic narrative categories, each joined to the next in a total turn. The cardinal categories, which we, following Frye, have used in a technical way, are comedy, romance, tragedy, and irony.

One reason that Frye gives writing such a spatial orientation is to enrich its meaning. It is toward the promising eastern dawn that he orients comic literature. Towards an adventurous southern noonday he marshals romantic works. He places tragic literature in the declining western sunset, and consigns ironic writing to the northern night. Viewed as a whole (which a human can never do) the entire collection forms one gigantic repetitive story that moves from cosmic security through romantic quest to tragic defeat and then to ironic death, but then beyond through resurrection again to comedy, there to begin the round again. Any single writing is a manageable bit of this gigantic myth.

Were members of a congregation to stand in our transparent building in such a way that they could react to the messages of the literary horizon, they would probably cluster themselves closer to one side than another. They might prefer a tragic interpretation rather than a comic one. Other congregations would seek different orientations, reinforcing their own ideas in relation to a particular sector of literary understanding.

Like the directions marked on a compass, one could be pointed to many gradations between literature (and we between congregational world views) that are, for example, comic ironies and those that are ironic comedies, depending upon which primary category they most resemble. What is at least uncommon and logically difficult is for a book or congregational world view to be simultaneously pointed towards the opposite points of the circle: comic and tragic, or ironic and romantic.

We will first give a brief, more literary definition of the four categories and then look at ways in which each is expressed in congregational world view.

1. *Comedy* is basically concerned with the development of harmony. It is not necessarily humorous. The complications of life are found to be illusory when actors find the true nature of reality and join in its accord. The opposite of tragedy, comic development moves from a supposed subordination beneath power to union with it.

2. *Romance* involves a quest. The complications of life are the real consequences of embarking upon an

adventure that pits protagonist against antagonist. Such struggle results in a priceless reward: a great love, a holy object, a boon for the world. The opposite of irony, romance requires a hero or heroine to move from a domestic uniformity into outlying uncertainties and uncommon blessings.

3. *Tragedy*, like romance, involves a hero or heroine but one whose vicissitudes force his or her decline. The opposite of comedy, tragic development moves from a mistaken union of the hero and power to his or her subordination, and often death, beneath power. One's tragedy is resolved not by gaining better status but by accepting the pattern which restricts and diminishes one's autonomy.

4. *Irony* has no heroes and heroines; supposedly heroic situations and their actors are found to be all too human. In this motif, the opposite of romance, life moves from strange uncertainties and uncommon blessings toward uniform, natural explanation. Irony is resolved in empirical understanding and in the camaraderie of persons who recognize their equally human, nonsupernatural equality.

2.5.3 Congregational Language

World views that reflect images like the above do not seep imperceptibly among members of a group; views are conveyed by recognizable signs and codes by which people communicate with each other. That common language is primarily verbal and written, but it also includes, especially in groups like congregations, a large number of gestures, marks, physical signs, and symbolic activities that themselves transmit the nuances of a world view. By this varied but common language members exchange information about their world. We can overhear much of what they say.

In congregational communication that conveys a *comic* interpretation of the world, we can recognize varied degrees of a gnostic drama that intuits a hidden unfolding of meaning in the world. Through their deepening consciousness, seekers unite with that meaning and thus gain an ultimate peace and perpetuation.

Phrases and signs that tend to convey a comic sense of the world include:

- "It all adds up"; "It will all work out"
- "Let go and let God"
- "Possibility thinking"
- "Go with the flow"
- Acknowledgments of a cosmic force
- Acts of meditation
- Consciously symbolic gestures and artifacts that beckon deeper contemplation
- Holistic healing practices

Communication within a congregation that pursues a *romantic* world view is more heroic than that pursuing the comic interpretation. But romance occupies a position adjacent to comedy on the horizon, and congregations can partake of varying degrees of both orientations. A critical difference in the romantic view is its charismatic understanding of a supernatural spirit that encounters and transforms seekers but does not merge with them into one being. The indomitable love and power of a transcendent God rather meets those who undertake the adventure away from routine existence.

Phrases and signs that tend to convey a romantic sense of the world include:

- "Expect a miracle"
- "I want Jesus to be my Lord and not just my Savior:
- "God told me . . ."; "God wanted me to . . ."
- "We met Christ"
- Experiences of God's felt presence
- Manifestations of a Spirit baptism, including glossolalia
- Healing requiring touch and prayer
- Visions

In *tragic* communication a congregation speaks more in terms of obedience than adventure. Although a heroic situation characterizes both the realms of romance and tragedy, the romantic hero meets God in personal encounter, while the tragic hero confronts God's word and will. A congregation may orient its perceptions somewhere between these adjacent positions, relying in part upon a direct experience with God and in part upon a mediating canon such as Scripture or an authoritative church. But members seldom reflect the opposing views of comedy and tragedy. The tragic perspective opposes gnostic aspects of comedy that find life's contradictions solved by a consciousness of cosmic harmony. Instead, the tragic orientation of a congregation is canonic; it decrees that life submit to, but not merge into, a transcendent canon given by God. Fundamentalists offer a highly tragic interpretation of the world when they speak of an infallible biblical pattern that orders human knowledge and world history.

Phrases and signs that convey a tragic sense of the world include:

- "The way of the cross"
- "Bible-centered, Bible-believing churches"
- "Get right with God"
- "Dying to self"
- References to moral decay and damnation
- Acts of allegiance and submission to God

- Acceptance of illness and catastrophe as part of God's plan
- Traditional missionary activities

Other congregations convey more of an *ironic* world view. Relying upon an empiric understanding of phenomena that questions the validity of gnostic intuitions, charismatic blessings or canonic patterns in life, an ironic congregation instead expresses belief in the integrity of simple human experience. Such an orientation is not irreligious; it also gives faith to a world view, but one in which supernatural explanations are suspect. Especially troublesome to an ironically oriented congregation are the charismatic claims of a romantic church. Both focus upon love, but for the ironists that love is a horizontal power among fellow humans, not a vertical power that singularly blesses certain events and persons. Ironists regularize but celebrate humanity. Congregations may combine this perception with either of the adjacent views, giving a tragic or comic edge to their perspective.

Phrases and signs that convey an ironic sense of the world include:

- "Not holier than thou"
- "Being honest and realistic"
- "Relevance to everyday life"
- "Fulfilling human potential"
- Attention to issues of justice
- Acceptance of illness or catastrophe as a fact of life
- Emphasis upon fellowship
- Symbols used for their ethical implications

2.5.4 Hearing the Language

World view is communicated within a congregation by its language of phrases, signs, and stories like those described in the previous section. The components can function as *indicative* aspects of that language; they thus describe life as the congregation experiences it, giving it specific shape and meaning. As a congregation's language also performs *subjunctive* functions that evaluate life and *imperative* actions that actuate it, we have to use an analytical method that helps to distinguish its indicative aspect.

Several methods such as participant observation and documentary analysis are useful, but here we suggest uses of a guided interview technique as particularly well-suited to the task. Not only can a guided interview of this sort help disclose the indicative nature of a congregation's expression of "being"; it can also work to nuance the indicative dimension of the group's "becoming." The suggested interview questions concern crises. Crises challenge the very world view

advanced in their answer. In participating in conversations built on crises, we are privileged not only to learn something about the informants' constructions of reality, but their responses to threats to their world views. While there may be some initial anxiety or uneasiness on the part of respondents before the interview, most, however, soon sense the open spirit of the conversation—that they are not being tested and that their answers are in fact useful and interesting—and many become enthusiastic about the process. Pastors who have used this method report that some interviews are among the more satisfying of their pastoral calls, opening unprecedented communication between pastor and parishioner.

In the interview, the interviewer asks a person to recall his or her thoughts about different sorts of limit situations. When informants in a friendly atmosphere can nonetheless address threatening topics, they often explore aloud the "being" and "becoming" of their own stories. At some point in the interview three questions are asked that portray crises related to one's person and group:

- Think of the death of a friend or relative. What do you suppose was going on?
- Tell me about the way your faith has changed throughout the years.
- What is happening with someone who is senile?

Although these questions may be asked at any appropriate moment in the interview, it has proved generally helpful to begin with the instance of death. The question often releases an extraordinary number of ideas and suspicions that the informant has seldom shared, and the exchange sets the tone for the rest of the conversation.

To understand other aspects of the world that the informant expresses, further questions are asked about crises in larger contexts:

- Remember a time where life in your family seemed out of control. What was really happening?
- What is God doing with our nation?
- What would a new pastor do to the life of your church?

And some questions that deal with the supernatural:

- Has God ever spoken to you? Given you a sign?
- Have you felt God's presence?
- How do you get in touch with God?

Write down as much as possible of the informant's answer as it is spoken, and later fill in the gaps. The

interview may be tape-recorded, but note-taking is recommended. Use five-by-eight-inch cards; they permit the easier comparison and rearrangement of notes. Mark the source and sequence of each card.

About half of the persons interviewed should be those who give formal and informal leadership to the congregation. The other half should be a sample of membership varied according to sex, age, education, and intensity or participation. Interview people individually, not as couples or groups.

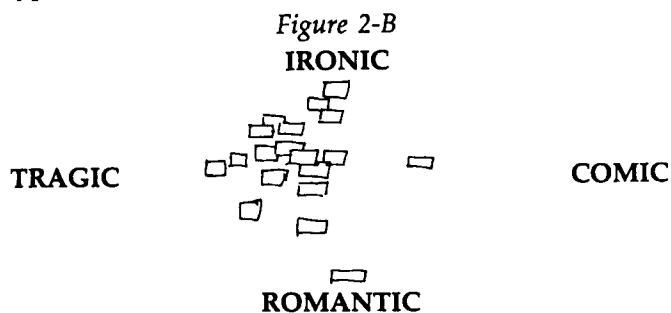
2.5.5 Analysis

1. Read your notes as if they were spoken by inhabitants of a recently discovered village. Your task is to find out, with as little preconception as possible, how your informants describe what is going on in life, where it seems headed and why. Explore how they perceive themselves as persons, how they typify their church, their world, and their God.

2. Underline phrases that characterize the nature of things and events.

3. Note recurrent themes: images that organize the ideas of several informants, similar phrases, common solutions, reiterated stories, repeated symbols. Put each theme on a separate card.

4. Arrange the cards in a spatial pattern that suggests the affinity of each of the four world view categories, the closer the card to the cardinal point the greater the consonance between its language and the world view type, as illustrated in figure 2-B.



5. Against that background write down a composite depiction of life viewed from the perspective of the local church.

From this base further inquiries could:

- thicken* the description by a second round of interviews (some with the same informants) and by participant observation and analysis of documents written by members of the congregation
- test* the picture by a survey instrument that asked similar questions, and/or by the objective assessments of members of the congregation

- determine* whether the picture is more characteristic of nuclear than marginal members
- compare* the view with that of another congregation. In that much of a congregation's expression is already familiar to its church-going observer, the contrast between the pattern of two churches would bring a deeper appreciation of the variables in world view that each employs

A clearer understanding of a congregation's world view enables one to perceive with greater accuracy what is communicated in preaching, prayer, and counseling. Differences in world view often play a part in conflicts among members, and may distinguish various adult groups and church school classes. Caring for a person requires that a minister comprehend that person's world view.

2.6 Symbols

A symbol stands for something else. Virtually everything said and done in a parish is, therefore, symbolic, representing matters different from the actual sounds, sights, and movements that convey their meaning. We participate in congregational life not merely to experience the direct effect of its words and actions but also to represent symbolically our association with a reality beyond the specific event we ourselves make. Bowing one's head is symbolic insofar as it suggests a disposition other than physically inclining one's neck. Not only, however, are singular parish gestures like bowing symbolic; all words uttered are themselves symbols, for they stand for things other than their actual sounds. Built largely on words, gestures, and their combinations, a congregation is in one sense constituted by a highly complex system of symbols.

To distinguish, however, those relatively few symbols within its whole system that appear critical to a congregation's identity, we shall make a somewhat arbitrary distinction between signs and symbols. Both signs and symbols stand for something else, but signs can be said to make their points with low emotional stimulus but with high specificity about their referents.

Most signals in a congregation's communication system are by this definition signs. Everything from the "office" marking on a door to the report of the building and grounds committee are signs insofar as they convey information dispassionately and clearly. If we designate most of a congregation's language to be signs, we may permit ourselves a more restricted definition of symbol. A symbol thus stands for something else, but

with high emotional stimulus and low specificity about what that something is.

Frequently a congregation uses the cross as its primary symbol. While members express a relatively high degree of emotion in their associations with the cross, they have difficulty pinning down precisely what the cross signifies, in comparison to the precision by which they could state what "office" means. Symbols, in Victor Turner's term, are multivocal; they evoke a mysterious complexity of meaning and do so in a way that one's identity is itself caught up in their enactment.²³

The symbols of a congregation often have no patently Christian association. The building and grounds of the group symbolize many qualities implied in "turf." A graceful chandelier in the sanctuary may convey senses of illumination, beauty, and property important to a congregation's identity but may imply no distinctly Christian quality. Symbols, moreover, are often unconsciously presented. While some objects such as a banner may be deliberately displayed as a symbol, many others, such as furniture arrangements and financial disclosures, function less obviously in the symbolic realm but nevertheless represent aspects critical to a congregation's identity.

2.6.1 Methods of Exploration

A helpful way of examining the symbology of a congregation is to look at the parish as if it occurred in the distant past and to ask of its artifacts that do not have an obviously instrumental explanation, "What did this mean to its members?" The point is to take no part of parish life for granted, to ponder not only what things and behaviors do but also what they signify to their participants. As one finds certain items, such as a particular joke, or a type of literature in the church foyer, that seem especially linked to identity, one asks members about them:

- How come the pictures in the hall show no women?
- Tell me the story about the unused parlor.
- What does this altar rail mean to you?

A church frequently holds, moreover, one or more areas that members sense to be "warm" or perhaps "holy," indicating space that is highly charged with symbolic meaning. Warmth may manifest itself in different places in different churches: at thresholds, Bible classes, altar, around the coffee urn, in the pastor's study. Holiness frequently accompanies the area in which unambiguously Christian symbols, like sermon and sacrament, are presented. In analyzing the

meaning of such areas, one would both observe the styles of behavior (see also the following section on ritual) that occur there and also encourage participants to express their understanding of what the place and their actions signify.

People as well as objects and actions function as symbols in a congregation. The person in the congregation most often perceived to represent something beyond himself or herself is the ordained person, especially the congregation's chief pastor. As Urban Holmes would point out, the pastor acts as a bridge by which a community links its formal and empirical comprehension with its intuited sense of myth and metaphor.²⁴ Characters other than the pastor in the congregational drama serve a similarly symbolic function, and the analyst of parish identity would seek their significance as well.

2.6.2 Analysis

Their diffuse meanings notwithstanding, congregational symbols seem specific enough to be differentiated according to several categories. We use these categories to explore more precisely the symbols of congregational identity.

1. Certain symbols seem employed primarily to indicate the link between the congregation and *transcendence*. They are often found in the precincts of the sanctuary, and they employ the more recognizably Christian representations of God's salvation: Bible, cross, sacrament, biblical figures in stained glass, and so forth. Such symbols communicate the congregation's participation in the great tradition and intimate the ultimate worth of the identity provided a congregation.

2. Other symbols indicate the intertwining of a congregation's identity and *love*. Food is a primary symbol employed by the parish in this category. Except in the case of meals for the destitute, where plain nutrition is more the object, food in the congregation usually is a way of signifying love; it is a sign of fellowship. When we want to indicate the solidarity with others our corporate identity provides, we may show it in symbols like coffee, doughnuts and parish suppers.

3. Other symbols express the association of a congregation's identity with *power*. Here neither ultimacy nor intimacy are so much at stake as an assurance of consequence in what the group does. Some symbols such as money are used by the parish to signal its capacity to achieve or miss its goals. Money—its pledging, offering, display, and accounting—is a primary symbol by which a congregation shows to itself its authority. A seemingly drab financial report of the

parish may in fact signify the identity of the church with accomplishment or failure.

4. Still other symbols may represent a congregation's sense of *justice*. While the signals in a parish may not be as radical as symbols used by a social action group, they nevertheless exhibit the congregation's identification with ideals of fairness and human rights. Posters, donations, and social programs may not only have an instrumental effect but also express a symbolic commitment of the church to principles of justice.

The variety of roles expected of the congregation's pastor reflect such different symbolic referents. For example, in classical distinctions among the "offices" of ministry, we can examine the representations of transcendence that are primarily associated with a priestly role, or the symbols of love generally associated with a pastoral role. The images of power and justice are largely allied, respectively, with the kingly and prophetic offices. As pastors move through their day's diverse activities, they not only do things, they also represent qualities of the Christian life such as the four suggested here. To analyze the particular symbolic pattern of an individual pastor, one might begin by asking how the pastor's person and actions portray ultimacy, love, authority and justice.

Other people in the congregation, of course, also stand for these qualities. The equivalent of "Mr. Methodist" in the parish, or the family that always sits up front, seems often to symbolize a congregation's sense of transcendence, while "Ma Smith" in the kitchen represents love. "Old Man Bigbucks" typifies its power, and teenagers may embody the church's hopes for justice. Members should be examined both for what they do for a congregation and for what they mean to it.

2.6.3 *Becoming*

Symbols are seen primarily as assurances of being, but they are also instrumental in representing changes in congregational identity. Frequently this change seems to occur in a deliberate shift in a symbol's referent. When an image such as the cross is conscientiously related to negotiations usually symbolized by references to money, or when Old Man Bigbucks identifies himself with an issue of social justice, we witness what could become a paradigm shift, a basic transformation in the way a congregation views and values itself.

2.7 Ritual

2.7.1 *Ritual and Identity*

Ritual, as we defined it earlier, is repetitive action that has more than utilitarian significance. It is a form of nondiscursive, gestural language through which a

group acts out meanings and relationships that are of enduring significance to its life. All ongoing groups develop rituals through which they communicate that which is central to their existence; here, however, we are especially concerned with rituals in congregations and their relationship to identity.

Rituals function analogously to various creedal statements and symbols. They communicate meanings and relationships that express a congregation's identity—either what its identity actually is (or once was), or what its identity is becoming. Thus a congregation says something about itself as a community by the sincerity of the ritual greeting one receives at the door of the church. And it says something also about its identity as the Body of Christ as members share the cup and bread of the Lord's Supper. The congregation is not simply saying something in these rituals that could as equally well be said verbally. Anna Pavlova is said to have responded when a questioner asked "What do you say when you dance?": "If I could tell you, I wouldn't dance." Orrin Klapp refers to this quality of communication through ritual action as "mystique." It is "the whole meaning that a person gets, usually without being able to fully describe it."²⁵ This is why a congregation cannot rely solely on verbal statements to communicate its identity. Ritual and symbols are needed as well; although, to be sure, ritual events are important for reasons other than communicating a congregation's identity. In exploring ways rituals function as communication about a congregation's identity, two distinctions are helpful.

First there is the distinction made earlier between the great and little traditions. There are rituals that communicate about identity related to each of the two traditions. The former express meanings about the congregation's identity as standing within the broad sweep of the universal church; the latter communicate the identity of a particular congregation, its appropriation of the great tradition as that tradition is refracted through the congregation's peculiar historical experience.

The second distinction reflects the difference between rituals that are "rites of passage" and those that are "rites of intensification." The former were first so designated by Arnold van Gennep and refer to rituals that have developed in every known society around particular times of transition in individual life: birth, puberty, marriage, and death.²⁶ The recent emphasis on various life stages has made us aware of the importance of a variety of other life cycle transitions as well. Transition periods are not only potentially

disruptive to the individual involved, but also to the society or group of which he or she is a member. Rites of passage, van Gennep pointed out, involve a period of separation from a previous status, a transitional or liminal (threshold) stage; and a stage of incorporation into a new status. The rites enable both the individual and group to deal with and accept the transition. In the process, especially during the liminal or threshold period, the individual moves from one state of being (a previous identity), through a period of becoming, to a new being (a new identity). He or she is now an adult rather than a child, or a spouse rather than a single person, or a member of the congregation rather than a non-member, or a loved one who is now with God in eternal life rather than present with her or his human family or community. In the process, too, the rituals enable the group to rehearse and reaffirm its identity in relation to the changed individual—the “new being” that is in their midst, or now physically absent in the case of a death.

Other anthropologists have called attention to a second type of ritual: those rites aimed at intensifying a group's commitment to its shared beliefs and meanings.²⁷ Rites of intensification include a variety of occasions—for example, Thanksgiving, Christmas, Easter, Memorial Day, Fourth of July—in which core meanings of a group, be it church or nation, are lifted up and celebrated. They too can involve a kind of liminal or threshold experience through which one passes from “everyday life” to a rehearsal of core aspects of the community's life and back to “everyday life” as a renewed individual or community.

Without trying to be exhaustive, let us consider several rites of passage and rites of intensification that reflect either or both the great and little traditions:

1. *Rites of passage.* Such rituals as baptism, confirmation, receiving new members, funerals, ordaining/installing a new pastor, and even greeting newcomers at the church door reflect transition events not only for the individuals involved, but also for the congregation. They are occasions for rehearsing aspects of a congregation's identity in relation both to the great tradition (the church universal) and the little tradition (the congregation's unique heritage). In greeting newcomers, or baptism, or confirmation, or receiving new members, what is the congregation communicating to itself and others about its identity? A warm and open family as part of the “family of God” or one that newcomers will have difficulty joining? A body of Christians who take their commitments seriously, or one that demands little by way of belief or participation? (One congregation of our acquaintance asks new members only, “Do you believe in Jesus Christ, whatever that means to you?”)

Increasingly, too, the entire period surrounding the change of pastors is seen as a transitional stage of great significance for examining a congregation's present identity (its being) and asking what it would like to become. In this, both the great and little traditions come into play, especially as the time is used for self-study and determining the type of pastoral leadership that is needed. For Hope United Church of Christ, the congregation introduced in chapter 1, participation in the rite of passage around pastoral change was painful because, in part at least, members resisted confronting honestly aspects of their identity which the transition period requires in the process of moving from “being” to “becoming.”

How congregation members act at the time of a death of one of its members provides additional significant opportunities for observing a major rite of passage and discerning aspects of congregational identity. While every death is a disruptive experience, this is especially true for a congregation when it is the death of a core member or when the death has occurred unexpectedly, prematurely, or as the result of an accident. Of importance is not only the actual funeral rite itself—the place it is held, the words, symbols, gestures, liturgical pattern, presence of the body during the service, whether the casket is open or not, the behavior of those present, and so forth—but also the patterns of the members in coming to the support of families before and after the funeral—bringing food, attending wakes, ways of expressing condolences. These behaviors are not random; rather every congregation (and community) develops patterned ways—rituals—for dealing with them. And these various behaviors and symbols are clearly significant clues to a congregation's attitudes towards death, their relation to the great tradition and especially, their little tradition. They also are important clues to their world view. When a young member is killed in an automobile accident, the patterns of behavior of a congregation with a *comic* interpretation of the world will respond quite differently from one with a *tragic* perspective.

2. *Rites of intensification.* Some rites of intensification in congregations are especially significant in renewing and intensifying commitment to the great tradition: the various seasons and special days of the Christian year as a whole; the celebration of the Lord's Supper; and, in general, the “shape” or order of the regular Sunday worship, with its movement from adoration to confession, to assurance of forgiveness, to thanksgiving, to reflection of the meaning of God's Word, to offering and rededication. This order in effect rehearses the story of the congregation's life. In addition, some rites of intensification are especially important for communicating those aspects of congregational identity

tity related to the little tradition: homecoming celebrations; an annual strawberry festival or church fair; coffee hours and potluck suppers; and annual meetings of the congregation which not only conduct church business but rehearse the events of the past year. What happens in such rites, both those reflecting the great and little traditions? Not only do they provide occasions for remembering the congregation's history—one in which they share by being members of the congregation—but also their history as a part of the Church Universal. They also help disparate groups within the congregation experience their oneness as a particular people and as members of the Body of Christ. Then, too, they provide occasions for young and old alike to learn about the heritage of the congregation—its particular heritage and its heritage as a Christian community. Without such ways for transmitting its heritage, the congregation's identity would not likely be maintained.²⁸

Rites of passage and intensification do not exhaust the ritual expressions of a congregation. Without trying to be exhaustive, we will mention several other rituals important to identity.

1. *Spatial arrangements and seating patterns.* Ritual and symbol come together in expressing clues to congregational identity in the arrangement of sacred space in the sanctuary or meeting room and in the patterned ways that individual members or types of members are seated. As is well known, some members have great difficulty emotionally if "their" seat in the sanctuary is preempted by a visitor or other member. Rather than ignoring or dismissing such behavior as irrational, one might begin to explore what the pattern is in a particular congregation and what it means, both to the individuals involved and also as expressive of the identity of the congregation itself. What is it about their particular spaces that have become sacred to the members?²⁹ What do the observed patterns say of the congregation as a whole? Is having a special seat or pew more typical of older members than younger? Long-time members than newer ones? "Pillars" of the congregation than "rank and file" members? Higher status than lower status members? Is it possible to get any clues to the "power structure" of a congregation by these seating patterns? Here is how anthropologist Melvin Williams describes the situation in a black Pentecostal congregation that he studied:

Physical setting in the sanctuary of Zion Holiness Church provides a critical index to the power and importance of particular persons. Although all of the sanctuary is sacred, some places have accumulated more status than others. Not only do the chorus and choir have their designated places, but the missionaries, church officers, and pastor's wife, as well as the pastor, have their places within the inner sacred space of

the liturgical event every Sunday. Within this inner sacred space, the offering is received, preaching is lifted up, Communion passed out. The closer to the inner space, the more powerful a person is perceived to be. One's seat in Zion is more than a place to sit; it is an expression of one's status.³⁰

This pattern is considerably different from that in congregations with different identities—for example, one made up of highly mobile, upper middle class individuals for whom the church is but one of the many associations to which they belong. Thus seating arrangements (as well as church membership itself) are less likely to be an important means for expressing status or power as for those for whom the congregation is a central focus of their lives. These differences are clear in the contrast which Williams draws between Zion Church and Wiltshire Church, a white, upper middle class, United Methodist congregation.

2. *Typical patterns of dealing with crises and conflicts.* More will be said about how congregations deal with differences in the chapter on process (chapter 4). Here, let us simply note that congregational identity is often expressed in the typical patterns for responding to crises and conflicts in the congregation that have developed over the years. The style of dealing with conflicts in the past will likely carry over into the present. It is not incorrect, we believe, to refer to these typical patterns as a form of congregational ritual through which it enacts an aspect of its identity. Its ritualized ways of facing crises and conflicts may include patterns of avoidance, denial, confrontation, working for amicable resolution, or a variety of other patterns. There is likely also to be a relation between these patterns and the theological assumptions and world view operative with the congregation.

3. *The underlife of the congregation.* Erving Goffman³¹ has used the concept of the "underlife" of an institution to describe the way that individuals make adjustments to the demands that an institution places on them. There are in congregations explicit or implicit expectations ("demands" is probably too strong a word) for proper behavior of members. Such expectations, which are explored in more detail in the discussion of norms in chapter 4, grow out of the congregation's sense of identity. They can range from appropriate attitudes to be expressed in worship to appropriate dress for different occasions or for persons engaged in specific roles, or to appropriate behavior for members in their daily lives (e.g., members of this congregation don't drink alcoholic beverages, or members of this congregation are committed to social justice). The conflict over wine for the wedding at High Ridge Presbyterian Church reflects such an expectation for proper behavior by its members. Dean Kelley has noted that conservative churches typically have more explicit and stringent

expectations for their members than their more liberal counterparts.³² Such expectations grow out of a congregation's identity, its sense of who it is. But, as Goffman noted, participants sometimes develop ways of seeming to honor these expectations while, at the same time, pursuing goals important to them that may run counter to the formal expectations. He calls these "secondary adjustments" and refers to them as making up the "underlife" of the institution. In such ways individuals acknowledge the congregation's identity but find ways of expressing their own goals where these come into some conflict. Some examples include:

- the teenaged couple who attend worship as they are expected to do but sit on the back row of the congregation so that they can carry on their courtship during the service
- the deacon who takes the morning offering to the bank for deposit allowing him to miss the remainder of the service while having nevertheless made an appearance
- the men who, in some rural churches, stay outside during the first hymn (the "cigarette hymn") to smoke and talk, which may be both a way to socialize but also to express, implicitly, the attitude that participation in the service is more important for women and children than for men
- members who like the pastor and rationalize her sermons on controversial subjects with which they disagree as being ones "the denomination required her to preach."

Sociologist Larry Ingram³³ has described a number of these "underlife" patterns in a Southern Baptist congregation. They too can be thought of as rituals or patterned behavior. Attention to them can give important clues to the norms of a congregation that express its identity as individual members honor them "in the breach."

2.7.2 Methods of Exploration and Interpretation

As with other aspects of identity, the method of participant observation is likely to be the most helpful for the study team in studying the rituals present within a congregation's life. Let us, nevertheless, suggest some explicit guidelines for observing ritual.

1. Make a list of all the ritual events that take place within the life of the congregation, from the seemingly peripheral ones (for example, the greetings at the door) to the central ones (for example, the Lord's Supper). Do not ignore the patterned behaviors that are not typically considered to be rituals, such as seating arrangements, responses to crises or aspects of the congregation's

"underlife." Enlist the aid of members in doing so.

2. Note the times of observance for each of the rituals listed. When are they carried out? Are they recurring throughout the year? Seasonal? Annual? Irregular, reflecting particular occurrences such as a birth or death or a specific congregational crisis?

3. Where do the rituals occur? In what space? As with the analysis of symbols, are some places where particular rituals occur more "warm" or "holy" than others?

4. Who is involved in the rituals? What are the roles of the various actors? Are the roles of some persons more important than others in the rituals? What are the characteristics of these people (e.g., their age, sex, position in the congregation, socioeconomic status)?

5. What are the attitudes and emotions displayed by the actors as they engage in the ritual? Awe? Respect? Seriousness? Sorrow? Happiness? Humor? Closeness with others? Distance from others?

6. What are the symbols used in the rituals? Would members object if they were changed?

7. What is the sequence of events in the rituals? Is the sequence generally invariant, or does it not seem to matter?

8. How do the congregation's members interpret the purpose of the ritual?

9. In analyzing the seating patterns of a congregation, it may be helpful to draw sociograms: diagrams drawn over several Sundays (if the morning worship service is what is being studied) or following several meetings of the official board, which note where people sit. Sociograms facilitate reflection on whether there is a pattern to the seating arrangements and whether this pattern reveals anything about a congregation's identity.

When questions like those above have been asked of the ritual, it will likely be the case that one will already have begun to discern clues to the congregation's identity. However, several further steps of analysis may also prove helpful.

1. Try to classify the various rituals in terms of the distinctions between rites of passage and rites of intensification or other forms of ritual. This will give clues as to the functions of the rituals. From observing the various rituals and from answers given to the questions above, one should begin to be able to say what it is that is being communicated to or about the congregation at particular transition points that have the potential of being disruptive to its life, or what meanings are being rehearsed in the various recurring sites of intensification. Or what is being said about the power structure of the congregation or tensions between congregational norms and those of individual members?

2. The distinction between the great and little traditions should also be useful in making sense out of the meanings being communicated. What aspects of the catholic tradition are being communicated about this congregation's identity? What aspects of its own peculiar heritage are being communicated? How does the latter affect the former and vice versa? Are there tensions between them that are potentially transformative and that may signal the congregation's "becoming?"

3. The discussion of the relation of symbols to transcendence, love, power, and justice in section 2.6.2 is equally appropriate to the analysis of a congregation's ritual, and it can be applied to the responses given to the questions in 1 and 2 above.

4. Are there common themes that begin to emerge out of the analysis of the various rituals? Are they recurring themes? Do they make sense when we think of them in relation to other aspects of the congregation's identity that we are studying? Do they make sense when we consider the congregation's program and the social and cultural context in which it is set? If the answer to these questions is generally affirmative, then we can be reasonably certain that we have heard what it is that the congregation is communicating through its rituals, whether explicitly or tacitly, about its identity.

2.8 Demographic Picture

2.8.1 Demography and Identity

Demography involves the careful description of groups of people, typically using statistics. In the following chapter on the congregation's context, demographic analysis is used as a way of understanding the context. Here it is employed to understand the congregation's identity, both its perceptions of itself and the identity it presents to outsiders. When we describe the age, gender, marital status, race, ethnicity, or socioeconomic characteristics of a congregation, we are presenting the congregation's demographic picture. How is this related to identity? In the case of an individual, personal characteristics (age, sex, marital status, race, ethnicity, and so forth) contribute to her "singular sense of who she is," as we defined identity earlier in psychological terms. And this sense of who she is is not only an identity of her own making, but is partly derived from the culturally defined meanings which others attribute to her in light of her demographic characteristics. Consider, for example, a thirty-year-old single woman, the daughter of Italian immigrants, with a college education and a middle management job in an insurance company. These characteristics by no means exhaust her identity, but they

constitute important ingredients of the meanings that both she and others attach to her and from which she derives a sense of who she is. To ignore them would be a mistake if our interest is to discover who she is or help her in self-discovery.

If this is true for individuals, it is also true for groups and, in particular, for congregations. Here our concern is not with the individual identities of the congregation's members, but of the demographic picture that the members constitute in the aggregate. And they involve the same kinds of characteristics we took note of for the individual. What we are interested in are both the distribution of the various demographic characteristics across the congregation—how homogeneous or heterogeneous the congregation is—and a picture of the typical or average member, if there is such. Both are important ingredients of a congregation's identity, especially what we earlier called its "being" or given character; but both also can be ingredients in its "becoming." Consider the following example, which illustrates the importance of these aspects of the demographic picture and their interaction with both context and program, which are discussed in subsequent chapters.

A congregation has for years prided itself on being a "family church." In the 1950s and 1960s, in particular, this image of its identity was accurate, based on its demographic picture, and it was reflected in its program. The congregation was quite homogeneous—white, upper middle class, mostly married with children of school age. These were its typical members. This "family church" identity persisted into the 1970s; however, the number of members began to decline sharply, and the families in the church increasingly were represented only by the mother and father. Few children and teenagers were present or active. The demographic picture of the typical congregation had changed; both the distribution of member characteristics and the typical member were no longer the same as before. Furthermore, the congregation was having difficulty reaching out to newcomers in the high rise apartments that were being built in the surrounding neighborhood. These persons were much more likely to be young singles, divorced persons, widows and widowers, or couples with no children. In short, although "family church" identity, reflecting an earlier demographic picture, was still dominant in the culture and program of the church, it had become dysfunctional both for its current members and for outreach to new residents in the neighborhood. Its identity and program were incompatible with its context. Analysis of their current demographic picture led congregational members to an awareness of who they presently were and how they had changed; and it led them to reflect on

who they would like to become and what was necessary to bring about the change.

Another important way that analysis of the congregation's demographic picture gives insight into its identity is in the area of social class. This concept is difficult to define, and there is considerable debate among social theorists about its precise meaning, though not about its importance.³⁴ Generally (and begging the question of the distinction often made between class and status), we understand class to refer to those who share similar positions in society related to their education, income and occupation. As a consequence of being in a similar position on these attributes, they also tend to have similar social and political attitudes, economic interests, life-style, and life chances (access to such necessities as food, clothing, shelter, and health care). Although, in American society there are not the kinds of self-conscious classes that Karl Marx believed would always arise as a result of varying relationships to the means of production, it is not difficult to see the effects of class position in these various ways. Especially important are the class-related inequalities that exist. Various aspects of religious life itself are also affected by class. Thus, an important component of the identity of congregations—especially because people have considerable choice among the congregations they join—is the typical or dominant social class of its members. Preferred styles of worship (for example, informal and spontaneous vs. formal and structured) are related to class preferences, as are also differences in theological orientation, world views and beliefs about the mission of the church and of individual Christians in society.³⁵ The sharp debates between the "new Christian right" and socially liberal Christians over various social issues are in part reflections of different class interests as they interact with and influence theological and ethical orientations.³⁶ Thus, class analysis provides important clues to congregational identity and to a variety of aspects of congregational life and mission.

Other examples of the importance of understanding a congregation's demographic picture include the predominantly white congregation that wishes to reach out to blacks who are moving into the community, or the judicatory official who encounters resistance in trying to bring about the merger or clustering of congregations with differing demographic pictures.

2.8.2 Methods of Exploration

Of all the elements of identity that we discuss, the demographic picture is perhaps the easiest for which to gather the necessary data. There are two ways of going about it.

One way is to gather together a small number of people who are considerably knowledgeable about the membership. They pool their knowledge to come up with estimates of the percentage of members in different age, sex, racial/ethnic, marital status, educational, or occupational groups in the congregation. In a congregation with no more than three to four hundred members, this method generally works quite well. The percentages need only to be reasonably accurate to be helpful in describing the congregation.

The other method, especially necessary in larger congregations, is the use of a questionnaire, or inventory, filled out by the members themselves. The Parish Profile Inventory (General Appendix) includes a section of questions that can be used by a study team to develop a demographic profile. Such records can be updated periodically to provide insight into the changing demographic picture.

Using either method, the goal is to be able to describe the demographic picture quantitatively so that one can consider both the distribution of the various member attributes and give a profile of the typical member. Furthermore, because it is often important to be able to compare the demographic picture of the congregation's members with the profile of residents in the church's context, the study team should use categories comparable to those of the U.S. Census of Population (available in public libraries). These categories can be found in demographic questions used in the Parish Profile Inventory and in the discussion of the use of the Census in chapter 3.

2.8.3 Analysis

In summarizing the distribution of the various demographic characteristics, it is usually most helpful to convert them into percentages which will not only indicate the proportions in each category (thus showing the homogeneity/heterogeneity of the congregation), but will also reveal the typical or modal member (the category with the largest number). Using the median or mean as measures of the average will also provide a picture of the typical member; and the standard deviation (for those statistically inclined) can be computed to indicate the diversity that exists. Constructing an age-sex pyramid³⁷ is a graphic and often helpful way to represent the age-sex identity of a congregation; while other types of graphs (e.g., bar or line graphs or pie charts) also provide ways of picturing the congregation demographically.

A social class analysis of the congregation can draw on the various data gathering techniques described above to get a profile of the educational, occupational and income distribution of the congregation. But it also

requires some imaginative reflection by leaders and members on the ways that their congregation's beliefs, practices, orientations to mission (or those of particular groups of members) are reflective of (not necessarily determined by) their social class position. One way to help this along is to do a comparative analysis of other congregations in the community and probe differences that may be related to the typical social class of members. Another way is to do interviews with nonmembers in the community, especially those from different economic, racial, or ethnic backgrounds, to probe how they view one's congregation. When leaders of one New England congregation asked a group of blacks in the town to tell them how blacks perceived the church, the church was described as "the big white church on the green." The double meaning of "big white church" was clear.

We have already suggested some uses of the demographic picture but let us reiterate them and add several others:

- To provide a profile of the congregation's typical member
- To indicate the degree of diversity that exists in a given congregation
- To compare the congregation's presumed demographic picture with its actual one
- To compare the congregation's demographic picture with that of residents in the community served by the congregation
- To provide important clues for program development for both present and potential members
- To assist a congregation to reflect on its given demographic identity in comparison with that which it would like to become
- To assist judicatory officials in understanding the congregations with whom they work—for example, when there is a pastoral change, when consultation or support is needed, or when clustering or mergers are contemplated.

2.9 Character

When leaders refer to the "personality" of their congregation, they generally have in mind all its traits and dispositions that distinguish it from other churches they have known. Their concept of personality is thus a summary way of talking about a parish's identity. We suggest that the concept of *character* is a more ample way of getting at the same issues. Less tied to connotations of the person than personality, character can better embrace corporate dimensions of outlook (heritage and world view), activity (history and ritual), constitution (demographic picture) and expression

(symbol). Thus, in this sense, character is virtually synonymous with identity.

But character also more clearly identifies another aspect of identity not yet fully analyzed. This is the moral dimension of congregational life, its values, its preferred behavioral tone, its ethos, its corporate integrity. Like the other elements of identity, character thus refers both to the congregation's being and to its becoming. On the one hand character brings together the means by which a congregation merely exists in the world: what Clifford Geertz calls its "tendencies, capacities, propensities, skills, habits, liabilities, pronenesses."³⁸ On the other hand, character refers to the capacity of the congregation to engage also in moral deliberation. A church has the freedom to "have character" as well as to just "be" a collection of characteristic traits. Character, in the understanding of Stanley Hauerwas, "denotes not only what is distinctive but also what is in some measure deliberate, what a man can decide to be opposed to what he is naturally."³⁹

It is helpful to contrast what is central in the valuing element of character with world view. While the latter refers to what a congregation perceives, character represents what the group prefers or values. World view treats what people suspect is going on, character what they wish would go on.

2.9.1 Studying Character

Participant Observation and Interviews

To understand some of the constituents of the character of a congregation, one may use the basic methods of ethnographic inquiry already described. Here we look for the themes by which the congregation prefers its life.

1. *Participant observation* is essential to the search. The study team analyzes the characteristics of nuclear members and principal leaders and contrasts these with the attributes of marginal members. Observers record actions and ponder the nature of events, and especially, because values are at stake, those events that show stress. Special attention must also be paid to a congregation's "street wisdom" about how things really get done and what really to avoid. Additionally, the observers note wishes, desires and instances of their fulfillment. Etiquette, style, and stereotypic behavior are watched and described. Throughout the study, the team keeps in mind the underlying questions: What do members show to be the preferable and reliable practice of their congregational household?

2. *Guided interviews* are also important in the study of character. They permit the actors themselves to ponder

their behavior and develop their own ideas about what congregational actions intend. Some of the better interviews may be with marginal members who often bring a more critical interpretation to church behavior. The type of questions to ask of all informants includes:

- Tell me about your own association with this church.
- How is this church most likely to fall apart?
- What sort of talk dampens the spirit of this church?
- What distinguishes this church from (a nearby competitor)?
- What sort of church program or project is frustrating and unproductive here?
- Think of a respected member. Without naming him/her, describe his/her characteristics.
- Think of an embarrassing member. Without naming him/her describe his/her characteristics.
- At what points in church life do you feel closest to God?
- At what points in church life do you feel in danger of losing touch with God?

As in other types of inquiry already described, data from informants contain themes and images that are not idiosyncratic to the individual but rather reflect a corporate pattern of culture. The study team's task in delineating congregational character is to pick out and describe those strands in the pattern that reflect values and disposition.

Corporate Moral Inquiry

Another way of exploring parish character is to assemble ten or twelve representative members of the parish to ponder some knotty moral issue such as abortion or a dimension of business ethics. The point is not so much to help people in their ongoing lives as to learn more clearly what constitutes the premises and range of variance in current parish attitudes. Both initial perceptions of participants and the ways by which they struggle for consensus should be recorded. Writing main points on newsprint would help the group themselves see the shape of their deliberations, but a more detailed record for later perusal should also be written or taped.

When approached as an exercise to discover parish character, the session might encourage deeper moral reflection than a session set up to promote a particular "right" response. Parish discussions of moral issues frequently begin with a formidable challenge such as "What is the Christian answer to _____?" A discussion conducted in the light of such an introduction has several handicaps, including an implication

that some people, like the pastor, harbor more profound answers than others. It also gives an opportunity for persons to assume a party line on the issue that does not really expose their personal handling of it.

Rather, the study team should try a discussion that begins in a more adventuresome way: "We all have deep opinions about this issue, and we want to see how they differ but relate to each other." Later on, the discussion leader may sketch some obviously extreme positions that seem to fall outside the opinions expressed. Ponder with the group how their distinctive insights may be related to each other and to interpretations of the Gospel.

2.9.2 Analysis

One way of looking at the rich material gathered from participant observation, guided interviews, and group discussions is to ask of it four questions:

- What virtues does the parish characteristically find in *crisis*?
- What qualities are expressed in the dominant *mood* of the congregation?
- What styles reflect its dominant *manner* of behavior?
- What does the congregation *wish to become*?

Congregations develop particular valuations of *crisis* and frequently use the assessment of an especially serious crisis to characterize their present corporate life. Listen for recurrent references to a certain death, perhaps of a prominent member or one that was especially unjustified, and see how its experience and parish responses portray certain deep traits of parish character. The death may also be a real or threatened corporate disintegration, such as a schism, a parish fight, or a difficult change in leadership.

Congregations also exhibit a pervasive *mood*, a distinctive temperament that qualifies and also assesses the way the parish expresses its corporate life. Moods are atmospheres; they may waft an air of innocence or complicity through the church, or perhaps one of fertility or decay.

The *manner* by which congregations feel they get things done is another variable in the configuration of character. Congregations develop particular sets of sharpened skills whose employment form the dominant style of parish life, its dependable behavior.

And parishes also *wish to become* some embodiment of qualities that they now are not. Congregational character includes both a recognition of present traits and the anticipation of their transformation.

How might such a diverse collection of crises, moods,

manners, and desires be summarized so that the "spirit" of a local church may be seen in some holistic, more communicable pattern? Actually, this is a question that extends beyond summing up the character of a congregation, as we are using the term here to express the valuing dimension of identity. It is also an appropriate question with reference to the whole of our concern with a congregation's identity; thus, the following section provides a guide for interpreting the insights from the more focused analysis of a congregation's character, but also as a way of bringing together the varied insights garnered from exercises suggested in the previous sections of this chapter.

2.10 Summing It Up in Story

Early in this chapter, we suggested that a study team probably would not find it useful to explore all of the various methods suggested for understanding a congregation's identity; however, it is strongly recommended that at least several be explored. And while we have suggested methods of analysis and interpretation of the specific "windows" into a congregation's identity, it is also important to attempt to bring together these various findings into a more holistic perspective. What we suggest is a form of "triangulation" where the various angles on identity are combined to provide a more comprehensive view. We would suggest that this may be appropriately done through a conscious effort at storytelling in which the study team attempts to express what it has learned of the congregation's identity in a story.

Throughout many of the guides to analysis of identity there has run a persistent reference to story. Story is the way a community usually views, values, and talks about itself in relation to its world and heritage. Most communications in a congregation are narrative in their nature. The pervasiveness of narrative in congregational life is acknowledged in this handbook's predecessor, which examined a single congregation through the perspectives of many disciplines:

Story is not then just the play of children by which a group interprets its common life. . . . Any ongoing ministry in a church relies upon story in its attempt to interpret its life. It is not just sermons that need illustration; all of corporate life needs imaging for its communication.

Once one begins to sense the power of narrative in congregational life one finds it everywhere. It constitutes the news that members share about their common life. A large part of that news is gossip. In one of the best ethnographies of a congregation Samuel Heilman shows how gossip—that is, stories about other members—is essential for corporate existence. Heilman even demonstrates the presence of four layers of gossip, increasingly private and potent, that enrich

activities and relationships in a congregation. Stories of origin and narrative explanations of behavior also define life together, as do schemes for the future and reports of the past. Introductions, confessions, testimonies, and other accounts further tie individual lives to the group story. Even jokes serve the common narrative pattern, their telling deemed tasteful if they somehow advance the common story. Longer sequences of group behavior such as fights and social events have a dramatic framework that holds actors, plot, props, and setting. Added to all of the above is the more consciously storied nature of divine worship: its liturgical drama, its Scripture, hymns, sermons, and symbols. From its conception to its death the local church exists by the persistent imaginative construction of its members.⁴⁰

In spite of the prevalence of storied communication in the life of a congregation, its leaders and members seldom consider their corporate identity in narrative form. Instead, they talk about their parish in terms of numbers, programs, and environmental circumstances. They thereby avoid the fact of their character, the challenge of who they are, and who in Christ they can become. Necessarily they tell stories about their smaller actions and ideas, but they usually conceal the larger story of who they are and can become.

A study team's investigations into identity, and especially into character, have important implications, therefore, for what James Hillman called "restorying."⁴¹ The use of analytical devices that possess narrative dimensions encourages both study teams and their congregations to find the pregnant stories that bear the church's identity. In telling its own story, in discovering its richness of character and in playing with its plot and weighing its setting, a local church gains a new sense of what has become a largely lost art, that of recounting the big story about its congregation and its world.

Attention to the narrative quality of corporate life seems to promote three closely related features of identity formation. Story first relates an *evocation* "that we are." Instead of considering our congregation as an accidental collection of miscellaneous motivated people, through narrative we build metaphors that show our corporate nature, our body that congregates our group. Second, story reports a *characterization*, our sense of "who we are." We are not a copy of another congregation; we discover our peculiar identity largely through the narrative told of ourselves. In understanding the particular story of a congregation, we more or less consciously contrast it with other stories and thus come to appreciate our unique participation in a world of storied communication.

Third, story tells our *confession*, our account of "what we are" in terms of our ultimate goal. In that it relates past, present, and future, our account of even our past reflects our hopes about our future. The story we live,

uniquely our own, is confessed even to ourselves in the larger context of the world's becoming, the story of God's redemption.

Insofar as a story emerges from the deliberations among its members, and insofar as it continues to be told and shaped by members, it constitutes a way by which the congregation may evoke, characterize, and confess its identity. What therefore develops is a storytelling pattern similar to that of a family. Not having lost the art of storytelling as thoroughly as have most congregations, healthy families use and play with the stories to understand their character. Members of the family help each other tell them. "No," says one, "you got it all wrong," and relates her own version of a family event that mirrors its identity. "What if," begins another, and the family recollects its past, represents its embodied present, and projects its future in a sequence of related stories.

When used without regard to the other, either hard data about a congregation or a telling of its story may distort its identity. Data, such as findings distilled from the various exercises of this and other chapters of this

handbook, may without their narrative accounting suggest that a congregation is merely a collection of behavioral predictabilities and not a twisting, unfolding human drama. Story, however, unaccompanied by the types of empirical inquiry suggested in these chapters, tends towards self-deceiving fancy that avoids unpleasant features of corporate character. A congregation's identity must reflect both critical inquiry and its story.

Each congregation, each the household of God, has its own identity. By analyses like those suggested in this chapter, the identity of the household may be better understood. As a result, the congregation may evaluate its identity positively, or it may discover elements it wishes to change. In either case, such understanding is an essential foundation if the household is to be able to express with integrity who it is through its programs and processes and serve faithfully within its setting. By learning to tell the story of who it is and who, by God's grace, it aims to become, the local church is in its storied identity a token of the greatest story of all, the account of the world's salvation.

NOTES

1. Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), p. 5.
2. Erik H. Erikson, *Childhood and Society* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1950), p. 261.
3. Denham Grierson, *Transforming a People of God* (Melbourne, Australia: The Joint Board of Christian Education of Australia and New Zealand, 1984), p. 55.
4. Norman Perrin, *The New Testament: An Introduction* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1974), pp. 27-29.
5. For other suggestions about studying a congregation's history, see Grierson, *Transforming a People of God*, pp. 53-55, 97-104.
6. Robert Redfield, *Peasant Society and Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1956), pp. 40-59.
7. Recent scholarship reveals a variety of little traditions in the New Testament itself, each reflecting the peculiar experience of an early Christian congregation. See, for example, Wayne A. Meeks, *The First Urban Christians* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983).
8. Jackson W. Carroll, William McKinney, and Wade Clark Roof, "From the Outside In and the Inside Out," in Carl S. Dudley, ed., *Building Effective Ministry*, (New York: Harper & Row, 1983), pp. 102-3.
9. Joseph C. Hough, Jr., "Theologian at Work," in Dudley, ed., *Building Effective Ministry*, p. 119.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 112.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 113.
12. Grierson, *Transforming a People of God*, p. 109.
13. See also Richard A. Hunt, "Mythological-Symbolic Religious Commitment: The LAM Scales," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 11, 1 (March 1972), pp. 42-52.
14. For example, Earl R. Babbie, *The Practice of Social Research* (Belmont, Cal: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1973); or A. N. Oppenheim, *Questionnaire Design and Attitude Measurement* (New York: Basic Books, 1966).
15. The complete questionnaire and chapters discussing the findings are in Roger A. Johnson, ed., *Views from the Pew, Christian Beliefs and Attitudes* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983), esp. pp. 182-200.
16. *Varieties of Religious Presence, Mission in Public Life* (New York: The Pilgrim Press, 1984).
17. *Ibid.*, chapter 6.
18. *Ibid.*, pp. 83-86.
19. Walter Wink, *Transforming Bible Study* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1980).
20. James D. Whitehead and Evelyn Eaton Whitehead, *Method in Ministry*. (New York: The Seabury Press, 1981).
21. H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper & Bros., 1951); Avery Dulles, *Models of the Church* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1974).
22. Northrop Frye, *The Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1937). See especially the essay, "Theory of Myths," pp. 131-239.
23. Victor Turner, *Drama, Fields and Metaphors* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1974), p. 29. For an extended discussion, see Victor Turner, *The Forest of Symbols* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1967), pp. 19-41.
24. See Urban T. Holmes, III, *The Priest in Community* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1978), p. 56.
25. Orrin Klapp, *Collective Search for Identity* (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1969), pp. 119-20.
26. Arnold van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960 [first published in 1909]).
27. See Eliot D. Chapple and Carleton Coon, *Principles of Anthropology* (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1942).
28. For further discussion of the importance of rites of passage and intensification for congregations, see Carl S. Dudley, *Making the Small Church Effective* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1978), pp. 104-20.
29. See Dudley, *Making the Small Church Effective*, pp. 95 ff. for one example.
30. Melvin D. Williams, "Corporate Church and Spiritual Community," *Building Effective Ministry*, Carl S. Dudley, ed., (New York: Harper & Row, 1983), p. 65. See also Williams, *Community in a Black Pentecostal Church* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1974).
31. *Asylums* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, Anchor Books, 1961).

32. *Why Conservative Churches Are Growing* (New York: Harper & Row, 1977).
33. Larry Ingram, "Underlife in a Baptist Church," *Review of Religious Research*, 24 (December 1982), pp. 138-52.
34. See Robert A. Nisbet, *The Sociological Tradition* (New York: Basic Books, 1966), pp. 174-220, for a discussion of various uses by social theorists of the term *class* and the closely related term *status*.
35. For a discussion of the relation of class and Protestant religious life in America, see N. J. Demerath, III, *Social Class in American Protestantism* (Chicago: Rand McNally & Co., 1965).
36. See Peter L. Berger, "The Class Struggle in American Religion," *The Christian Century*, February 25, 1981, pp. 194-99.
37. For instructions for constructing an age-sex pyramid, see Murray H. Leiffer, *The Effective City Church* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1961), pp. 150 ff.
38. *Interpretation of Cultures*, p. 95.
39. Stanley Hauerwas, *Vision and Virtue* (South Bend: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), p. 52.
40. James F. Hopewell, "The Jovial Church: Narrative in Local Church Life," in *Building Effective Ministry*, Carl S. Dudley, ed., (New York: Harper & Row, 1983), pp. 81-82.
41. James Hillman, "Archetypal Theory," in *Loose Ends* (New York and Zurich: Spring Publications, 1975), p. 4.

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