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# 4. The Conflict of Corporate Church and Spiritual Community

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## *An Ethnographic Analysis*

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### **The Approach**

An ethnographic analysis of a congregation is an application of anthropology as a method of understanding the culture of the congregation. Stated briefly, the anthropological approach assumes that every congregation has its own distinctive pattern of meaning that can be discovered by the two basic methods of ethnography: participant observation and the ethnographic interview.<sup>1</sup> The ethnographer endeavors to understand the behaviors, customs, interactions, social networks, feelings, and artifacts of the congregation and to determine what these signify to its members.

The selection of informants from the congregation is crucial for the quality of the final report. Rooted in the culture of the congregation, informants are the experts on the language and symbols of the community being studied. Unfortunately, some members are spontaneous conflict generators, who use any conversation or interview to create disturbances. But there are members in most congregations who enjoy their knowledge of their church and its members and are anxious to explain the workings to someone who cares and can be trusted. The task of the analyst is to discover them and to make the researcher's ambiguous social role more clear, so that the informants' rights, interests, and sensitivities are protected. Even informants who may appear so sophisticated as

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<sup>1</sup> See J. P. Spradley, *The Ethnographic Interview* (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1979), and *Participant Observation* (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1980).

not to require such protection need a clear understanding of the analyst's role.

Once the ethnographer finds the informants, they must be interviewed as well as observed. The interview should simply be a friendly, comfortable conversation. Within these social boundaries, whatever the interviewer is able to remember (through tape recordings, written notes, informal questions, etc.) will determine the quality of the analysis. The congregation analyst will discover that careful observation of details and extensive participation in membership activities will help to formulate questions for the interviews and conclusions for the final report. The analyst should expect false starts and blind alleys. But in most cases an ethnographer who is also an accepted member of the church fellowship will have the distinct advantage of being involved in the field setting, and of sharing its faith and knowing most of the religious rules, symbols, and rituals of the congregation. Participation, however, does have its dangers: overcommitment to the setting, loss of objectivity, and multiple role expectations. However, the analyst can become a fully participating member in the congregation notwithstanding the possible hindrances of such immersion. Such membership allows for early identification of key events, important factions, leadership hostilities, powerful and influential members, and irreconcilable differences. Jules-Rosette has called such a member observer an "observing participant." Using his or her knowledge, the analyst selects key informants who will be both knowledgeable and communicative.

The ethnographer must constantly guard the data, as Jules-Rosette explains:

In his study of the Kachin of Highland Burma, Edmund Leach noted that many informants' categories are often ambiguous and highly variable. This ambiguity permits a wide range of social and linguistic distinctions which the researcher may find expedient to prune or eliminate from his study. In spite of the researcher's goal of critical detachment, he actually selects and remolds the informants' commentaries into a consistent account of cultural facts.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Bennetta Jules-Rosette, "Rethinking Field Research: The Role of the Observing Participant," presented at the 79th annual meeting (1980) of the American Anthropological Association.

Accuracy requires the analyst to keep a detailed diary of experiences during the analysis. Such a diary allows the analyst and other readers to check the researcher's decisions and conclusions in interpreting the congregation. The researcher may reject the explanations of the informants about the problems and crises in the church because of the scope and goals of the chosen interpretation. But ethnography is always a study from one perspective or another. No one must forget that the interpretive process permeates the entire study.

Translation competence is what Spradley<sup>3</sup> calls the tendency of the informant to translate his own language into that of the researcher. To the extent that the researcher exhibits a lack of cognition about the subculture or world of the informant, the informant will attempt to translate it. The analyst must work to avoid such translations in order to obtain unscreened information. A full member in the congregation should require no translation from the informant. Furthermore, every ethnographer's description is a translation itself. So the analyst must strive to use as much of the native or church language as possible in notes and the final report.

Just as a new pastor seeks to understand and interpret the traditions, social networks, precious objects, daily routines, and common commitments of a congregation, so the ethnographer seeks to lift up the belief system of the community as explained in the language and in the behavior of its members. What the new pastor must learn (and the older pastor assumes), the ethnographer tries to make explicit. Ethnography provides an interpretation that may be useful to others for motivation and leadership in the church.

### **Basic Assumptions**

The analyst will comb through the data to discover patterns of social behavior, looking for meanings that reside in that behavior for the members of the congregation. Soon he or she will discover that social behavior is replete with a complexity of meanings. Thus the analyst may decide upon an ethnographic focus. In my Pittsburgh study, I decided to focus upon the meanings in the

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<sup>3</sup> Spradley, *The Ethnographic Interview*, p. 21.

congregation that contributed to community in that church.<sup>4</sup> In a Lafayette study, I focused upon the meanings in the congregation that contributed to social involvement in the community at large.

Of course, the analyst may decide not to have a particular ethnographic focus but to do a "surface investigation" of several areas of congregational interaction. Once these decisions are made, the researcher is prepared to return to the congregation for focused observations—those observations that will help discover particular patterns of behavior that relate to the area of concentration. Over and over, the analyst will ask those questions that will provide the essential information.

The analyst searches for patterns in the interviews and observations that will yield a list of themes that dominate the congregation's behavioral activities. These themes will provide an interpretation of what is distinctive in the subculture of that congregation.

An adequate ethnography also introduces the pastor or the consultant to various members of the congregation and prepares the pastor for the known relationships that exist among them. This congregational analysis is designed to facilitate the pastor in serving the people of the church. It is what Spradley calls "strategic research."<sup>5</sup>

Such an endeavor is designed to be useful to members in resolving their own congregational predicaments. Because of this I do not want the material I present to offend its intended audience. The presentation must be understandable in their idiom. This chapter is designed to assist pastors and congregational consultants as well as researchers. Thus it is different from the research I have written in the past.<sup>6</sup> Here, the exposition of deep bonding is secondary to my efforts to assist those who would understand and minister to their congregations.

### **Wiltshire Church**

The case study of Wiltshire Church was largely based upon ethnographic data collected by a husband-and-wife team of par-

<sup>4</sup> M. D. Williams, *Community in a Black Pentecostal Church: An Anthropological Study* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1974).

<sup>5</sup> Spradley, *The Ethnographic Interview*.

<sup>6</sup> See Williams, *Community in a Black Pentecostal Church*, and *On the Street Where I Lived* (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1981).

ticipant observers. Neither had prior training in ethnography, but as participants in the congregation, they were accepted as part of the people they studied. Participant observation is the distinctive methodology for ethnography.

We will discover that there are certain themes that are the basis for a significant cleavage in the Wiltshire Church. Those themes and that cleavage help us to explain the actions, customs, social networks, feelings, and issues of the congregation.

The framework for this analysis is borrowed from the work of Victor Turner, who described the distinction between "structure" and "communitas."<sup>7</sup> Structural groups are pragmatic, goal oriented, and intentionally organizational. Communitas, by contrast, signifies spontaneous relationships of intimate bonds without regard to status, wealth, or property. A similar and more familiar distinction was developed by Ernst Troeltsch in the concepts of "church" and "sect."<sup>8</sup> Troeltsch notes that churches tend to be large and mutually dependent upon the culture, while sects are comparatively smaller and seek their identity apart from or against the culture.

From the reports of the tensions in the Wiltshire Church, the basic cleavage in the congregation appears between the majority who are satisfied with the structural "corporate" church and a minority who seek a more demanding "spiritual" communitas. These differences can be seen (1) in their attitudes toward the larger society, (2) in their orientation toward congregational organization, and (3) in their expectations of pastoral leadership.

First, the structural approach of managers and executives dominates and supports both the town and the church. Throughout its history the Wiltshire Church has been a reflection of the wealthy members, especially the officers of the Adams Company. It is located in the center of town, symbolic of its position in the culture. Although not all members have been wealthy, the church has projected the style and image of an establishment agency for affluent upper-management people, the corporation mentality. For most members, it is the anchor and extension of the most signifi-

<sup>7</sup> V. W. Turner, *The Ritual Process, Structure and Anti-Structure* (Chicago: Aldine, 1969; Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell Paperbacks, 1977).

<sup>8</sup> E. Troeltsch, *The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches*, trans. Olive Wyon (New York: Macmillan, 1931).

cant values that hold the town together. The church fits the neighborhood.

By contrast, some members want to participate in spiritual communities that are less structured and more intimate. They reject the dominant image of affluence. They want more involvement with people in the larger community who are economically deprived, whose poverty demands concerted Christian social action. Their professed identity is not in upward mobility, but in the recognition of human need, spiritual need for themselves and economic need for others. They seek not a larger congregation but a smaller group of other Christians who share their spiritual commitments.

Secondly, the organization of the case material, and apparently the church, reflects the values placed on proper organization and due process. The members recognize the need to constantly recruit new members, to keep present members, to maintain their financial base, and to retain their prestigious reputation. They would not settle for less than the "best show in town." Success has reinforced the growth and stability of the church. Most members are concerned about "what works." Although the church frequently celebrates the Eucharist, the theology of the members remains undeveloped. The present pastor accepts his "agnostic" members where he finds them and leads them in areas of proven effectiveness: personal counseling and expanding programs for children and youth. It is the "in" church in Wiltshire.

By contrast, those who seek mutual fellowship through more demanding commitments seem to feel that the pastor is lacking in spirituality. Some have separated the organizational activities of the pastor from the more "spiritual" groups of the music program, the church school, and study groups. Others have challenged the organization to clarify its goals in reflection and planning. They feel that the corporate commitments of the church have impeded the spiritual growth of the congregation.

Thirdly, the pastor experiences the tension between the advocates of the corporate church and the seekers for spiritual commitment. He has developed into a good team player in the "corporate realm." He is aware of the corporate pressures on the lives of his members, and does not make time demands that conflict with their

busy schedules. In recognizing the Shangri-la image of the town, he avoids continual invasion of their belief systems. He admires their way of life, and has become a corporate manager in his leadership style.

Significantly, the pastor's sermons provide a kind of mass counseling program designed to assist corporate managers to endure and to feel understood. Things are kept peaceful, and the world is held together, by the pastor's counseling from the pulpit and with individuals.

But still, some members hunger for a more spiritual relationship with the pastor. One member confronts him almost every week about his sermons. She is trying to feed her spiritual needs by her own individual efforts. The pastor enjoys the challenge of an individual encounter. He is able to grapple with spirituality on an individual basis and to minister to each member in her or his time of crisis. But he is not able to bridge the "corporate-spiritual" chasm in the aggregate. Taken as a whole, the congregation asks too much of him. They want him to provide a successful establishment church and an intimate spiritual *communitas* at the same time.

### **The Pastoral Dilemma**

Some members would like to push the pastor and test his elasticity. I think he cannot endure these tests much longer. He has tried to communicate his limitations. He told his congregation that he was under psychiatric care, that he failed his doctoral examinations. He told other members that he is considering leaving the ministry to be a consultant in corporate counseling. Many refuse to hear.

The pastor has much experience with this kind of population. He does his corporate job well. But the church is not a corporation. He is denied the perks and rewards of a job well done in the corporation. He is over 50 and is showing signs of job burnout. He is tired of preaching "thou shall not be a failure" (materially), when he suspects that he may be one himself. He is tired of ministering to the crisis needs of people whose net worth far exceeds his own and who would deny him any substantial increases. He is tired of being concerned about the well-being of people who

would deny him a four-bedroom house. He wearies of counseling people who "don't care about me." He despairs at the disloyalty of those who joined.

The members sense the pastor's "spiritual" weakness, and some of them are attempting to exploit it. They object to the pastor's building expansion program because he appears to be trying to reassert control and influence over the church school. Historically, this is the style the pastor has used to assert himself, building structures and changing personnel.

In this analysis of this congregation, my focus has been upon the congregation as an interactional group. From this distance much individual variation has necessarily been neglected. Suffice it to state that omission. When I state that the church represents corporation-like commitments, I am aware that many individual members hold deeply spiritual commitments. Although Wiltshire Church is not the kind of community I have observed in Zion,<sup>9</sup> but rather an expressive aggregation, there are some members who perceive and respond to it as their spiritual community of primary involvement.

### A Comparison

The previous analysis might be helpful to lay leaders, pastors, executives, and others working with the Wiltshire Church or with another, perhaps their own, congregation. But there are many ways to assemble ethnographic data once it has been collected. The following categories are suggested as areas that might interest pastors, consultants, and denominational committees as they seek to better understand and motivate local congregations. These categories are adapted from my book *Community in a Black Pentecostal Church*: (1) history, (2) formal and informal organization, (3) behavioral dynamics, (4) church activities, (5) symbolic expressions, (6) physical setting, and (7) quality of community. These categories suggest how ethnographic data from two churches (Wiltshire and Zion) demonstrate the distinctive character of each congregation.

The Zion Holiness Church (Pittsburgh, Penn.) has a *history* of

<sup>9</sup>Williams, *Community in a Black Pentecostal Church*.



migrants from the rural South to the urban North, where they feel ostracized and excluded. This exclusion occurred, in part, because of local perceptions that: (1) they were creating ghettos and slums; (2) they were causing a race problem where none had previously existed; and (3) they had habits of speech, dress, and behavior that were inferior.

Wiltshire Church has a history as a company church in a company town for company people. The company was paternalistic. It built houses, a town, and a church for its people, and it provided the resources to sustain that church. Though the company is no longer dominant, the attitude remains.

Both histories have a continuing effect upon the life and style of their respective churches. In Zion, the members depend completely upon one another. In Wiltshire they are struggling with new forms of paternalism.

Zion and Wiltshire have a formal *organization* that is determined by their respective denominational affiliations. Yet both have informal organizations determined by their respective histories and circumstances. In Zion, those who collect the most money from nonmembers and give it to the church become very powerful. In Wiltshire, a few who have the pastor's ear and "blessing" are very influential.

Power is fluid in Zion, depending upon how many of the members one can influence. Such influence depends upon exposure in the congregation, fellowship with members, and collection of donations to support the church. Power in Wiltshire is circumscribed by the will and influence of the pastor, who makes the agenda, controls the communication, and sustains the necessary votes to provide leadership.

*Behavioral dynamics* in Zion are dominated by mobility within the church and by the church-community character of the congregation. One finds intensive interaction in a church that dominates the lives and interests of its members. Dress, especially women's hats, provides conversational interest, invidious comparison, and exposure. Seating arrangements reflect the social rank of individual members. Membership relationships, and rumors of relationship, encourage gossip and controversy. Fund raising accrues power and its abuse. Love and fellowship provide influence and a

sense of security within the community. All of these create vitality and meaning for Zion Holiness congregation.

In the Wiltshire Church, most of the reported behavioral dynamics of the congregation are confined to the administrative tasks of managing the church, especially the administrative board meetings and retreats. Other dynamics are reported in relation to the crises generated by these meetings. The choir, youth programs, church school, study groups, and regular worship include innumerable unrecorded important relationships. The emphasis on structure is typical of the orientation of this congregation.

*Activities* of Zion's members are all centered in and determined by the church, except for the time spent in outside employment. The members of Zion interact together at church dinners and food sales, church plays and rehearsals, music rehearsals, church trips, picnics, membership household movings, membership legal actions, funerals, and worship. The church is the center of their socioreligious activity.

The members of Wiltshire exert most of their efforts in the children's school and the music program. Involved members are eager to participate in these few activities. Other members attempt to be a part of decision-making processes by belonging to strategic committees, keeping the "ear" of the pastor, or campaigning against the "pet" projects of the pastor. Most members are satisfied to participate peripherally by attending worship services and routine activities.

*Symbolic expressions* in Zion are from the rural South and its hills and valleys. The members' language is full of references to farm animals, food, and water ("cool well water," not refrigerated). The members emphasize the enthusiasm of their fellowship in order to attract new members. They are a community of people who attempt to "love everybody," especially their fellow members.

In Wiltshire we discover a competitive church, not just with the outside world but within the congregation. Two themes are in tension. The structural approach is dominant, with its emphasis on good management and success through concentration on children, youth, music, and counseling (including preaching). The subordinate theme is a hunger for commitment to spiritual relationships and to people in physical need. Tension exists between

those who see the church as an extension of upper-middle-class values, and those who see Christianity as a spiritual commitment to people in need.

*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 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.

Members of the Wiltshire Church are uncomfortable with the concept of sacred space. Since their Communion table is surrounded by a low railing, in the act of Communion they come forward in small groups to share the sacrament. No place in the sanctuary is set completely apart. But conflict revolves around the allocation of space resources. In Wiltshire, importance is attached not to where the space is located, but to how much is allocated. The pastor, the church school, and others are constantly vying for more space.

The *quality of community* in Zion is intense, abiding, and continual—in gossip and on the phones—the very stuff of its members' lives. News about the church or its members can be a source of great anxiety until it is shared with someone who is similarly concerned. Informal subgroups have developed in the congregation, so that the same people often come and leave together; they often testify on the same nights and "feel the spirit" at the same time. They respond to and support each other in loving and courageous ways.

The lack of community in the Wiltshire Church appears to short-circuit the development of similar social networks and feelings of intimacy. The church seems to have little impact upon values and actions of most members. On the contrary, their wider neighborhood, family relations, and employment obligations seem to dominate their lives. Only to the extent that the church is an

extension of these concerns does it impinge upon most congregants' major interests. The sociological approach in this volume (Chapter 6) will expand on the impact of social context.

As I have stressed before, the pastor has utilized this focus to create a successful church. The issues that abound within this congregation involve the separation between "corporate church" and "spiritual community" and the personality conflicts that are based upon that cleavage. The pastor is a strong-willed, management-oriented person. He tends to control his domain. Those persons who would influence the direction of the church must engage that personality. They often fail. Most members have been largely content to allow the pastor to control a successful church. But with the pastor showing signs of burnout, some officers and those who espouse various spiritual communities are becoming increasingly aggressive in the affairs of the church. The future of this congregation cannot be determined in isolation but must be assessed in the context of the community where it is located. The question here is whether a different kind of pastor and a different kind of church would be as successful as this one has been. Is the nature of the neighborhood changing? Do they need a different kind of church to meet changing conditions? Or are we seeing some superficial rumblings that always occur when an aggregate of human beings interacts, desiring, but unable to become, a spiritual community?

#### SUGGESTIONS FOR RELATED READING

Heilman, S. C. *Synagogue Life: A Study in Symbolic Interaction*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976.

An excellent example of ethnography applied in a Jewish congregation by a sociologist.

Jules-Rosette, Bennetta. *African Apostles: Ritual and Conversion in the Church of John Maranke*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1975.

A recent study that is particularly helpful in identifying the problems of intimacy in collection of data.

Spradley, J. P. *The Ethnographic Interview*. New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1979.

A useful introduction to ethnography and to interviewing in the field situation. It is written in a style and format for beginners in the discipline.

———. *Participant Observation*. New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston. This is a companion volume to his *Ethnographic Interview*. Together they are a useful introduction to the entire area of ethnography.

Troeltsch, E. *The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches*. Translated by Olive Wyon. New York: Macmillan, 1931.

Specific discussion of “church” and “sect” may be found in volume 1, p. 331 f., but concepts used frequently throughout.

Turner, V. W. *The Ritual Process, Structure and Anti-Structure*. Chicago: Aldine, 1969. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell Paperbacks, 1977.

The study of community ritual and its oscillation between structure and spontaneity.

Williams, M. D. *Community in a Black Pentecostal Church: An Anthropological Study*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1974.

One of the first ethnographies written about an American congregation by an anthropologist.

———. *On the Street Where I Lived*. New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1981.

An example of the ethnographic approach applied to understanding a neighborhood.