6. From the Outside In and the Inside Out

A Sociological Approach

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Introduction

Local churches are community institutions. Historically in America most churches have defined their community geographically, although other definitions (ethnic, racial, ideological) are possible. As community churches have complex and changing relationships to their environment, they depend on the community for resources that are essential for their continued existence, such as members, finances, and services. They also contribute to their community in both direct and indirect ways. Among the obvious contributions are services offered by a church to its neighbors, ranging from education for the young to food for the poor. They contribute in indirect, subtle ways as well by fostering a sense of well-being among their members, advocating and enforcing standards of individual and social behavior, and providing visions of community life that transcend short-term self-interest.

A congregation's relationship to its community is a product of several factors, among them the history and character of the community itself, the church's denominational heritage and local history, the religious environment of the community, and choices made by the congregation and its leaders. The case of Wiltshire Church illustrates the complexity of the church-community relationship and the impact of choices made by the church within its immediate environment.

As sociologists, we share the conviction that in recent years congregational analysis has overemphasized the internal dynamics

of congregational life and has failed to take sufficient account of the influence of the social and ecological context on the church's inner life. We argue, in other words, that congregational analysis should work from the "outside in." While we do not subscribe to a deterministic view, we believe that the environment both sets limits on, and provides opportunities for, a congregation. Therefore we begin with an examination of the Wiltshire Church's community and regional context, looking at population characteristics, physical setting, community institutions, and relationships between the town and the region. Secondly, we turn to the "social worlds" of Wiltshire residents, the perceptions of reality that guide their daily lives, lifestyles, values, interests, and needs. Finally, we view the church from "inside out" to see how the internal life of the church relates to its community setting.

Throughout this chapter we use an analytical framework suggested by Rachelle and Donald Warren.[1] That framework organizes various data under three broad rubrics, or "orienting questions": (1) *Identity:* What is this community's (congregation's) understanding of itself? How do members define its boundaries, both geographically and socially? What are the chief characteristics or qualities of the community (congregation) and the dominant myths and symbols that shape community life and give it meaning and flesh? (2) *Interaction:* In what ways and places do people interact with one another? Who talks with whom and about what? What are the boundaries between formal and informal communication and behavior? How do groups define their special space? What institutions and practices symbolize change over time? (3) *Linkages:* How do persons and groups relate to the world around them? In what ways are external forces transmitted and resisted by residents (members)? Where do points of tension between individual and outside interests find expression?

FROM THE OUTSIDE IN

Demographic Setting

Although the town of Wiltshire traces its history to its founding by Yankee settlers some three hundred years ago, it is in many

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[1] In *The Neighborhood Organizer's Manual* (South Bend, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1977).

respects a new community. In this section we look at some of the characteristics of the "new" and the "old" Wiltshire that provide the social and ecological context for Wiltshire Church. Our focus is on demographic and other statistical data that illuminate the community's identity and patterns of interaction and the linkages between Wiltshire and other communities in the region.

Identity.   Interspersed throughout the data collected for this project are suggestions of Wiltshire's self-understanding. From interviews with community residents and from data from the U.S. Census and local sources, we see three components of Wiltshire's identity: its rapid population growth, youthfulness, and affluence.

Perhaps the central dynamic in Wiltshire community life is its rapid growth since 1940. Once a sleepy New England town, the community has now become one of the larger suburbs in its metropolitan area. With a 1980 population of over 21,000, the town has grown more than fourfold in forty years. Having undergone one transition from an agricultural village to a "company town" in the nineteenth century, Wiltshire has undergone another transition in the twentieth to become a suburb.

Wiltshire's growth pattern, as shown in Table 6.1, is that of a "second-ring" suburb. During the forties the community grew, but only slightly; its rate of growth was considerably lower than that of other suburban communities in its Standard Metropolitan Statistical Area. Its population more than doubled in the fifties as the metropolitan area expanded to the west; the town experienced a gain of over five thousand people in this decade. Growth continued in the sixties as the population increased by over 70 percent and more than seven thousand people. Wiltshire's growth slowed in the seventies to 21 percent with a gain of over three thousand residents.

Table 6.1   Population Growth of Wiltshire and Its Region

| | Percent Population Change | | | |
	1940–1950	1950–1960	1960–1970	1970–1980
Entire Metropolitan Area	14	35	21	1
Central City	7	−9	−3	−14
All Suburbs	97	169	31	5
Wiltshire	22	210	72	21

The table also shows the growth rate of the region as a whole and its central city and suburban components. The city areas have been losing population since 1950 and declined fully 14 percent in the past decade. The suburban communities of the region, however, have grown quite rapidly. Wiltshire's growth in the 1940s lagged behind other suburbs, but since 1950 it has grown more rapidly than other towns. Its rate of growth in the past decade is more than four times that of other suburbs in the region.

Although 1980 census data on housing construction are not yet available, the 1970 census showed that only 19 percent of the owner-occupied housing predated 1950. Thirty-two percent of these units were built in the 1950s, 20 percent between 1960 and 1964, and 29 percent in the late sixties. Other data from 1970 also suggest the high mobility of Wiltshire. During the single year 1969–70, 5.5 percent of the owner-occupied housing (excluding new units) changed hands (compared to 4 percent in the rest of the region). Less than half (47.4 percent) of the 1970 residents over age 5 resided in the same household in 1965; this compared with 56.4 percent in the total region.

A real estate agency's brochure gives a sense of the community's self-understanding and its appeal. "Recreation opportunities are so extensive," the brochure states, "that it would be impossible to describe them on this page. The 'showplace' of Wiltshire is the town-owned Wiltshire Farms Recreation Center, which opened in 1972. It houses a championship 18-hole golf course, four swimming pools, tennis courts, paddle tennis courts, skating rink, cross country ski trails and unusual play areas for children." Residents, the brochure continues, "are education-oriented and, as a result, the school and other facilities for children are excellent. Seventy-six percent of the graduating seniors from Wiltshire High School continue their education. . . . Within the Town of Wiltshire there are five private schools with outstanding educational programs and facilities."

A second important feature of Wiltshire is its youthfulness. The 1970 census showed that 42 percent of the community's residents were under age 18 and 28 percent were in the prime childbearing ages of 25 to 44. Its median age was only 26.1 years. In the region as a whole, 34 percent were under 18, and 25 percent were 25 to 34; the median age was 28.6 years, or fully 2.7 years older.

Wiltshire's youthfulness is reflected in the community's public school enrollments. Between 1963 and 1970 the enrollment increased 61 percent. Enrollment grew another 3 percent from 1970 to 1975 but began to decline in the late seventies; there are 14 percent fewer students in 1981 than there were in 1975. Though enrollments are down in Wiltshire, the declines are far less severe than in neighboring communities closer to the region's central city.

Local YMCA officials estimate a decline in Wiltshire's youth population of about 8 percent in the past ten years and an increase from 25 to 33 percent in the over-45 population. Increasing property values, a recent slowdown in housing construction, and community resistance to low-income housing make it likely that the median age of Wiltshire residents will continue to rise. At the same time the town remains young relative to the rest of the region.

A third major feature of Wiltshire life is the community's affluence. Wiltshire is one of the wealthiest communities in the region. Commercial demographic analysts estimate that 20 percent of the community's families have incomes of $50,000 a year or more; another 29 percent have incomes of $35,000 to $49,000; and 30 percent earn between $25,000 and $34,999. In 1981 the town is home for four families with incomes over $50,000 for every family earning less than $10,000.

Wiltshire's median family income of $34,445 is 30 percent higher than the regional median of $26,597. The increase in the relative affluence of Wiltshire families is suggested in the fact that in 1950 the community's median income was only 13 percent higher than that of the region.

In 1970, the latest year for which complete census data are available, 45 percent of Wiltshire's employed residents were in professional or managerial positions. Adding clerical and sales workers to this total puts fully 76 percent in white-collar jobs. In the region, 28 percent of the workers are professionals and managers and 58 percent are white-collar employees. Adults (over 25) in Wiltshire averaged 13.7 years of formal education in 1970, with 54 percent having completed at least some college. The regional median education was 12.3 years with only 26 percent reporting any college training. Eighty-eight percent of all families
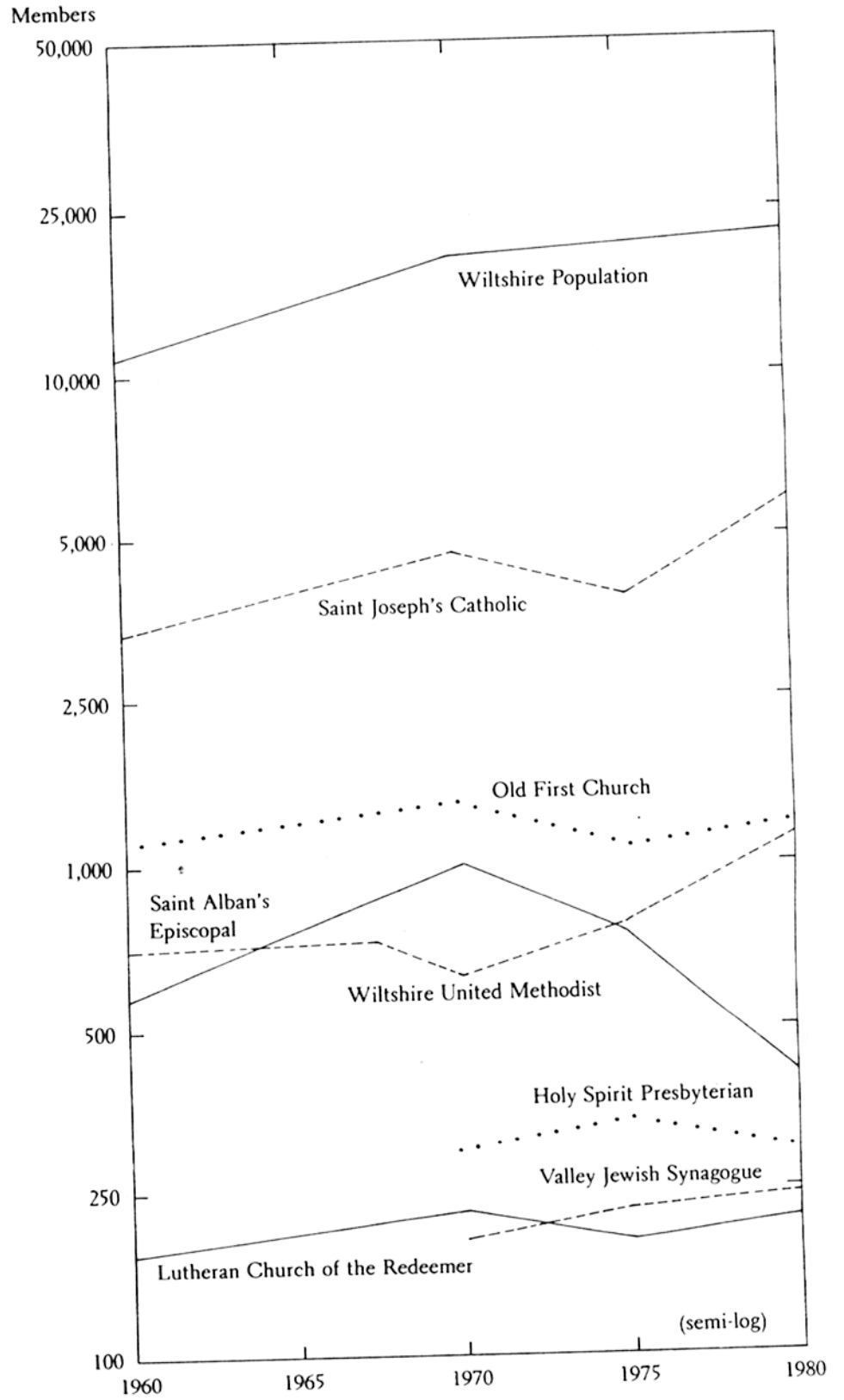
in Wiltshire were living in single-family homes; the comparable figure for the region was 58 percent. Seventy percent of Wiltshire households owned two or more automobiles compared to 43 percent in the region as a whole.

Interactions. Wiltshire's recent transition from a small agriculturally based town with a single major manufacturing employer to a growing suburban community that is dependent on the rest of the region for its economic vitality has left its mark on patterns of interaction within the community. Religious life in Wiltshire provides a "window" on the old-timer/newcomer relationships of the past three decades. In Figure 6.1 we have plotted the membership trends of seven of Wiltshire's major congregations. The data were supplied by the congregations themselves, and as usual among denominational statistics, there are varying definitions of membership. They nonetheless suggest changes in Wiltshire's religious population.

The oldest church in town is Old First Church, which traces its history to the founding of the town itself. For some two hundred years it was recognized as "the church in town," the religious home of the community's leading citizens. Even today it contributes a disproportionate share of Wiltshire's civic and political leadership. Old First Church grew very rapidly in the early stages of Wiltshire's suburbanization; its membership grew from under 800 in 1950 to nearly 1,400 in 1970 as its strong Sunday school program attracted large numbers of young families. During the 1970s, Old First Church began to show slight signs of decline. Membership decreased by some 300 people despite the community's continued growth. A study of the congregation showed the membership to be considerably older than the community at large. Average Sunday church attendance declined from 376 in 1970 to 290 in 1980, and the church school enrollment fell from 850 to 180 students. Old First Church is viewed by many in the community (and many of its members) as the church of the "old guard," of those who have controlled Wiltshire in the past.

The Methodist church was founded in the 1800s with leadership from one of the founders of the local textile plant. The church building resembles the plant in construction materials and is based on plans chosen by the wife of the plant's owner.

Figure 6.1   Membership of Major Wiltshire Congregations

Members

- 50,000
- 25,000
- Wiltshire Population
- 10,000
- 5,000
- Saint Joseph's Catholic
- 2,500
- Old First Church
- Saint Alban's Episcopal
- 1,000
- Wiltshire United Methodist
- 500
- Holy Spirit Presbyterian
- Valley Jewish Synagogue
- 250
- Lutheran Church of the Redeemer
- (semi-log)
- 100

1960   1965   1970   1975   1980

Through most of its life the church was known in the community as a "company church." Many of its members and most of its leaders were factory employees; the annual deficit was covered each year by the company's chief executive. During the early years of Wiltshire's recent growth, the Methodist church was largely unaffected, its membership remaining fairly stable through the fifties and sixties. In the early seventies, new leadership effected a psychological and economic break with the church's historical identity as a "company church," a break that was facilitated by changes in ownership of the plant. The church has grown and changed considerably since 1970. Its membership has risen from 689 to 1,101 in the decade; church school enrollment has increased from 309 to 503; average Sunday worship attendance is up from 163 to 305. It has earned the reputation as "the best show in town."

Saint Alban's Episcopal Church, the third of the older Protestant churches in Wiltshire, also benefited from the community's growth in the postwar period. Between 1960 and 1970, Saint Alban's membership increased from 773 to 1,020. By contrast with Old First's growth in this period, however, Saint Alban's new members were older. Church school enrollment remained stable through the 1960s and average church attendance actually declined. Around 1970 the church began to suffer rather dramatic membership declines as inactive persons were removed from the rolls.

The most dramatic change in Wiltshire's religious life is the growth of the Catholic population. Saint Joseph's Catholic Church, which serves the township, has shown enormous membership gains. Enrollment in the parish rose from 3,230 to 4,644 in the sixties, prompting the diocese to split the parish and form a second congregation in the western part of town. Despite the loss of a thousand members to the new parish, Saint Joseph's still reported a net increase of more than a thousand members in the seventies. The new parish has itself grown to over three thousand members.

In addition to the second Catholic parish, other congregations have been formed in the past two decades in response to population growth and changes. Among these new congregations are a

Lutheran parish, at least two conservative evangelical churches, and a synagogue that serves the area's growing Jewish population.

To get a sense of the change in Wiltshire's religious population we totaled the membership of the larger congregations in the community and compared the result with the Wiltshire population. In 1960, 71 percent of the population were on the rolls of these congregations; 32 percent were members of Saint Joseph's Church and 39 percent were members of the five largest Protestant congregations. In 1980, 61 percent of the town population were on the rolls of the major religious groups in the community; 42 percent were members of the two Catholic parishes and 19 percent were members of the five Protestant churches.

Although church membership statistics are notoriously imprecise and we lack data on some of the smaller congregations in the community, it appears that in the past two decades there have been two important developments in religious group interaction. The first is a decline (from 71 to 61 percent) in the percentage who are are members of any major religious body. The second is a decline in the proportion of the population who are members of Wiltshire's historically dominant Protestant congregations; the decline is from 39 percent in 1960 to 19 percent in 1980.

The head of Wiltshire's clergy association, a pastor who has been in the community for two decades, reflects on the changing role of religious organizations in Wiltshire: "You know, years ago the church was really the center of the community and people pretty much rallied around the church that was there as a way of finding expression for their social needs as well as spiritual needs. There was great respect for the influence of the church in the community which I think has been lost now. . . .When you see churches pretty much struggling for survival and competing with so many outside interests, they have lost a great deal of their effectiveness and especially their influence."

The shift from a sleepy community dominated culturally and religiously by a tight-knit elite of old families and executives of the Adams Company has created an increasingly heterogeneous town whose political and social life are far more fluid than in the past.

Linkages. Excerpts from a session with black students living

in Wiltshire as part of an educational enhancement program provide a unique perspective on the community's relationship to the outside world. "It reminds me of *The Brady Bunch* on TV," said one student. "It's the typical American town that people in other countries hear about. You don't see the real America. It's an ideal."

Another spoke of his high school classmates: "Kids here don't have a very realistic understanding of what it's like to live in a city. All they ever see is the theaters and hotels. It's a stereotyped view of how a city is. They just know what they see on television." Another feels the same is true of his teachers. "I remember seeing a film at school on bullfighting, with lots of blood and everything. The teacher was surprised that I was shocked by it. She said, 'Well, you come from the city. You must be used to seeing things like that all the time.'" In the words of still another student, "Their parents work in the city. They only see the downtown area. They have a view of the city as a place where minorities live, as run down, as ghettos and slums. They grow up in this type of area. They're born here, they go to school here, then they go to work in this type of area. . . . It's two different worlds, really."

In actuality, the community of Wiltshire has an integral relationship with the city and the region. Although the Adams Company and the town of Wiltshire employ a sizable proportion of the town's residents, more than one-quarter of the residents commute to the city to work; even higher proportions of the newer residents depend on city employment for their livelihood. Wiltshire participates in the regional council of governments and relies on social service agencies located in the city. Residents depend on regional newspapers and radio and television stations for information about community activities and developments throughout the nation. Many serve on regional boards of voluntary agencies such as the United Way.

Wiltshire's central function on behalf of the whole region is to provide residential housing for upper-middle-class people. Its residents' occupations and income and education levels, as we have noted, place Wiltshire as one of the most affluent towns in the region. This affluence makes relationships to the rest of the region somewhat ambiguous, as is illustrated in two recent controversies.

The first involved an attempt by the Adams Company to develop a parcel of property for multifamily dwellings. Community opposition (based largely on conservationist grounds) was fierce, and the proposal seeking a zoning variance was denied. Within a matter of months, on the other hand, an area corporation was given permission to build a major computer facility in Wiltshire that promised new jobs and the prospect of lower property taxes for residents. The proposal found virtually unanimous public support.

The New England tradition of local autonomy is valued by old and new residents alike and provides an important lens through which its regional relationships must be viewed. The tradition places major emphasis on local community loyalty and responsibility but contributes to the problematic relationship between Wiltshire and its surrounding region. As pressures rise from demographic changes and increasing economic disparities between the central cities and communities like Wiltshire, one can expect further strain on historic forms of government.

The Social Worlds of Wiltshire

Turning from social and demographic characteristics, next we look at the social worlds in which Wilshire's residents live. By "social worlds" we mean the perceptions of the world that inform their daily lives, values, lifestyles, interests, and needs. Wiltshire is more than just a place to live, a commuter suburb of nearby Springfield. It is a community experience providing residents a sense of meaning and belonging. Indeed, the community lends itself especially to psychological "world building," for a variety of reasons. Its three-hundred-year-old heritage of New England individualism and independence, its geography ("in between the ridges"), and its comfortable, suburban affluence all help to create a distinctive self-awareness as well as a sense of isolation and of values to be protected. Thus, to understand the dynamics of congregational life in Wiltshire, it is essential to understand Wiltshire as a social reality and to recognize the values and outlook people in the community bring to church experience.

In analyzing the social worlds of Wiltshire, again we draw upon the three categories of identity, interaction, and linkages.

Identity.   Of all the clues to understanding Wiltshire, none is more potent or revealing than the "Shangri-la" image used by a leading town official. People move to the town, according to the official, to have their own piece of suburbia in a retreatlike setting: "to get between the birches and the elms," "get between the ridges every night," in search of their "own little island."

The retreatist atmosphere of Wiltshire is sustained, in no small part, by its high degree of homogeneity. Few residents are poor. Virtually all are white. Many are upwardly mobile, professionals and corporate executives who have "made it" in the system. Most have moved to the community and do not have deep roots within it. The traditional nuclear family with the husband employed full-time and the wife devoting her energies to raising a family (at least while the children are young) remains the norm. Residents share an awareness of job-related stress, knowing that corporate transfers are frequent and that daily commuting to the city takes a toll. Divorce and family tension are real.

In Shangri-la, however, there is escape. For people in Wiltshire there are two worlds—the public and the private. Wiltshire offers an environment in which everyone has ample opportunity to retreat from day-to-day stresses from the job and the city—alone or with one's family—through recreational activities and community-based interest groups. Here there is opportunity to explore and to develop the private life, a chance to expand a realm quite different from the public, job-related realm. Unlike the corporate workplace, which is cool, rational, and ordered, the private world of Wiltshire is warm, expressive, and unstructured. Activity in the workplace is regularized and calculative; activity in Wiltshire is more voluntary, open to personal preferences and choices.

Wiltshire's residents recognize these two worlds are different and to some extent experience a tension between the public and the private. But the two realms are not in opposition to one another; instead, they should be regarded as complementary, the fusion of instrumental and expressive aspects of everyday life. The pressures of corporate life, long hours, and heavy travel schedules take on meaning to the extent they make life in Wiltshire possible. Commuters return to Wiltshire to shift gears, to return to time for oneself, one's spouse and family, for tennis, friends, and church.

Because of its upper-middle-class character, the town is dominated by values of individualism, hard work, ambition, success, and achievement. Having made it to Wiltshire, residents attach great significance to their own social standings, achieved by the investment of effort and sacrifice. To live in Wiltshire is to recognize this achievement, to celebrate a way of life called the American Dream. Furthermore, it promises to offer their children what they need in order to follow them in the company of the affluent— the best education possible, a safe neighborhood in which to grow up, and an environment supportive of individual growth and well-roundedness. Not surprisingly, Wiltshire residents often joke about "buying a school, not a house." Investment in the children represents an extension of their own lives, as well as affirmation of a lifestyle they claim as their own.

Wiltshire symbolizes the success that residents feel they deserve, yet it also presents some tensions for them. They know that life at the other end of the thruway is different, that not all share in the prosperity to which they have become accustomed. The community's homogeneity both reinforces the tension and provides a form of legitimation for the residents' good fortune. Proximity to others who have "made it" (or who are making it) is its own form of reminder that one can fall behind, that one can fail. Residents see that some of their neighbors fail in their attempts to climb the corporate ladder, that others face marital and family problems, and are reminded that life is not always easy, that life *is* a challenge. To be able to feel that one is meeting life's challenges helps to legitimate the rewards that have been obtained. By meeting the challenges one earns the right to the rewards.

Interaction. To grasp the social worlds of Wiltshire, we must also look at the social networks, or patterns of interaction, within the community. People's values, interests, lifestyles, and outlook are typically anchored in some social base, wherein they are affirmed and mutually reinforced. In a small-town, suburban setting like Wiltshire particularly, the social networks and cleavages between them are readily identifiable; despite the apparent homogenity of the community, social group differences are real. Moreover, the social networks and divisions become part of the fabric of

congregational life—both shaping, and being shaped by, what takes place within the religious institution.

Wiltshire's transition to a growing suburban community has led to tensions between those who built and led the community through the Second World War and those who have made it their home in the past three decades. Not that they don't have some things in common. To an extent there is an affinity between the newcomers' values and the old town spirit of individualism and independence; both also place high value on traditional family life and morality. Yet there are differences. Newcomers over the years, and in the high suburban growth period of the fifties and sixties especially, accentuated the upper-middle-class character of the town and made more visible its affluent, consumption-oriented styles. The character of the town changed, becoming more transient, more a commuter community. In more recent years, the distinction between old-timers and newcomers appears to have become less important. Increasingly, one senses that Wiltshire has different meanings for the various cohorts of in-migrants, ranging from those who came in the fifties and sixties to those who arrived quite recently.

Wiltshire is a community turned inward upon itself. Boundaries are drawn, particularly by those who have moved in over the past couple of decades, on the basis of having earned the right to belong. The mayor, speaking of the "drawbridge mentality" of the town, puts it this way: "There is an attitude in some quarters that we worked to get here and anyone else who wants to be here can also work to get here. On the other side of the issue are the descendants of the original residents of three hundred years ago, who are saying to the new people, 'We made room for you and we think you should take an example from us and make room for others.' "

Boundaries have also been drawn between those who have earned the right to belong. These boundaries find symbolic expression in local housing patterns. In many neighborhoods, one sees only the driveways; the houses themselves are invisible, nestled among the birches. Consequently, when interaction occurs within Wiltshire, it is mainly among upper-middle-class persons

who share common private—individual or family—interests and needs. Social activities are frequently organized along lines of hobbies or sports (e.g., tennis), and children and youth (e.g., PTA), religious activities, and personal needs (e.g., AA, singles' clubs). Bonding takes shape to a considerable extent around personal concerns and interests, as opposed to a shared community, ethnic, or religious heritage. This makes for a situation in which social ties are often tenuous and short-lived. In many ways it seems to be a community in search of greater sharing and belonging. This search is an issue both in the Wiltshire Church, as we shall see, and in other religious groups in the town.

Linkages.   As already noted, life in Wiltshire must be understood in terms of the bifurcation between the public and private, between life in the workplace and life at home in suburbia. Aside from a somewhat divided existence, this also makes for carefully defined boundaries between the two worlds. The private life is valued and protected, not to be confused with the public realm. By keeping the two separate, Wiltshire maintains its meaning and identity.

Despite its introverted, localistic character, Wiltshire is not an isolated place. The residents are sophisticated, cosmopolitan people. They are aware of what goes on in the larger world; their lifestyles and values reflect the positions they hold in the nation's corporate economy. Indeed, as a result of their position in the larger system, they bring to Wiltshire all sorts of external realities—the corporate culture, stresses and anxieties, dreams and failures. By their very presence, the external realities create the need for a place of retreat and re-creation, for a meaningful private life, for Wiltshire itself.

Because of the carefully circumscribed character of the private world, not surprisingly in Wiltshire there is no great outpouring of concern for broad social problems. It's not the place for contending with poverty and social injustice or for working out solutions to difficult social issues. The latter are part of public, not private, life. Local community life is geared to protecting residents from the intrusion of the outside world on the inside world of home and family. Cognitive boundaries are reinforced by the town's strong sense of political autonomy and self-control. If there

are problems, they are local and personal: drugs in the schools, tension and divorce in families, alcoholism for particular persons. Over these, Wiltshire expresses concern. But beyond these locally defined problems, there is little attempt to deal constructively with vexing social issues.

Wiltshire is a place of professionals where competence is known and appreciated. If there are problems, residents here seek help from professional experts. The stance is one of hiring others to check the problems out, to get someone to take care of these needs for them. Their affluence, combined with a privatized outlook, fosters a reserved, somewhat hands-off approach to social and personal needs.

FROM THE INSIDE OUT

We began this analysis by considering the "outside" of the congregation—aspects of local and regional context and the social worlds of its members. Now we turn to the "inside" of the congregation to examine both internal characteristics and their functional relationships to the congregation's "outside." The analysis continues to be organized around identity, interaction, and linkages.

Identity

A number of dimensions of the congregation's identity may be noted. We have organized them under the headings of heritage, member characteristics, beliefs, and norms of membership.

Heritage.   It is obvious, but nonetheless important, to note that Wiltshire Church stands within the Christian tradition, and this fact is not insignificant for understanding its current identity, interaction patterns, and linkages. From the Christian heritage leaders and members selectively appropriate core beliefs, symbols, and rituals. Even when only parts of that heritage receive emphasis by the congregation, that which is emphasized gives character to the identity or ethos of the church, and that which is neglected is nevertheless "available" and may be a resource for critiquing or challenging the congregation's current focus. For example, the groups within the church currently calling for more emphasis on spiritual growth and greater concern for social justice do so by drawing on neglected aspects of the church's heritage.

That the church stands within the Methodist tradition also contributes to its identity, although its Methodist heritage seems to be of importance in relatively limited ways. Indeed, its building and its current style make it different from the typical Methodist churches of the region, as the district superintendent acknowledged. Its building, he noted, gives it the appearance of an Episcopal church, rather than a more typical white-frame Methodist church on the edge of town. Differences from traditional New England Methodism are also reflected in pastoral style and tenure, membership growth, age of membership, and relative affluence.

The local history of the congregation is a further contributor to its current identity. That it was once a "company church in a company town" is not of great, continuing significance save as a point of comparison to what it was before the coming of the present pastor in 1970. Even from this comparative perspective, the post-1970 transformation and growth has been rather remarkable, as was noted earlier. It is, therefore, not surprising (and probably accurate) that the pastor's telling of the history of the church to new members emphasizes that most that is of importance has happened since (and largely because of) his arrival.

Member Characteristics. The kinds of people joining the church since Sid arrived (as well as the few remaining who preceded him—approximately 15 percent) contribute importantly to shaping the congregation's identity. The distribution of particular attributes or characteristics of members—for example, age, social class, values, or beliefs—gives a congregation a particular identity or ethos. These attributes or characteristics may be homogeneous or heterogeneous. The more homogeneous they are, the more clear or distinctive the congregation's identity will be.

Concerning the age structure of the church membership, from what information we have available, Wiltshire Church can be described as middle-aged, with the majority of adult members falling between 30 and 50. This is a relatively homogeneous age structure. Since this age range is also the primary period for families with children present in the home, the experience of child rearing is also an important shared characteristic of a majority of the members and a concern that they bring with them to the church.

A common socio-economic status contributes to congregational identity. Although specific occupations of members differ, a majority of breadwinners are in middle- and upper-management positions, earning substantial salaries, many in excess of $50,000 per year. In addition to providing homogeneity of outlook, the fact that so many members share a corporate management background leads to what one member called a "middle-management style of leadership." Such a style places heavy emphasis on professionalism. Said one leader, "We don't know what we want and expect from the church and staff, so we hire talent to give it." If there is a problem, hire a consultant; if good music attracts people to the church, then hire professional musicians. This style seems to be a part of the congregation's identity.

Racially, the church is predominantly white, although several black families are members. The latter are mostly longtime United Methodists who have moved to Wiltshire and affiliated with the congregation. They are essentially similar to white members in age and socio-economic status.

Members also share another trait. Approximately 50 percent are relative newcomers to the congregation, having joined within the past five years. Less than 10 percent of the current members have been associated with the church since childhood. This led one leader to observe that it was necessary to regroup and reorganize every five years.

Considerable homogeneity in such characteristics as age, child rearing, socio-economic status, race, and even mobility creates commonality of outlook, style, needs, and expectations for the church. In response, congregational leaders have developed a church program—especially attractive worship services and a strong church school program—that "speaks to" the members' needs and expectations. In all of this there seems to be little contradiction between the status of being a Wiltshire resident and the status of being a member of Wiltshire Church. A young family, newly arrived in town, would find a congregation of peers whose hopes and fears are similar to their own, and whose members are not too far above or below on the corporate ladder.

There is a remarkable fit between the current pastor and the constituency the church is attracting. The pastor makes no secret of the fact he is ambitious, has been open about his concern for the

economic security of his family, and is comfortable with traditional middle-class social and political values. He identifies with and has affection for his members. His appeal, however, seems to go beyond a willingness to be "one of the boys." He is willing to act out what remain fantasies for many of the members: expressing public disdain for ecclesiastical superiors, confessing personal failures and self-doubts, and discussing topics seldom allowed "out of the closet" in community life. He is willing to stretch the congregation's intellect and emotions, but only within a framework of basic acceptance of the rules that govern Wiltshire public and private life.

Beliefs.   Beliefs and values are another important attribute constituting a congregation's identity. In Wiltshire Church, diversity is the rule in religious convictions and beliefs. There is no formal statement of faith to which assent is required or encouraged. To be sure, the use of creedal affirmations, hymns, prayers, and other elements of worship, including the sacraments, function to articulate the basic identity of the church as standing within the Christian heritage. However, it appears that these more formal beliefs are not especially salient for a majority of the members in the sense of informing attitudes and behaviors. The minister perhaps overstates the case when he refers to members as "secular agnostics," but others confirm that commitment to core Christian beliefs is "limited" and "nominal."

Although we never have complete data, we can hazard an inference, based on interviews, questionnaires, and sermons, about the "operational" beliefs of the congregation. These 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." It is highly important that things be done well. Indeed, the dissatisfaction with the current church school facilities seems to reflect the belief that such inadequate facilities are a "selling short" of the congregation. Addition-

ally, 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. These operational beliefs support a generally privatistic orientation and lifestyle.

Some members who are concerned about spiritual shallowness and superficiality complain about the belief structures described above. These essentially privatistic and nonthreatening beliefs also frustrate members who want the church to become more involved in issues of mission and social justice. Likewise, the belief structure reinforces and legitimates the isolation of the town from significant issues in the region. Beliefs are also dysfunctional, as we shall note below, in their failure to foster among members a strong bond of religious commitment, personal as well as institutional. There is a lack of any compelling and unifying set of doctrinal affirmations.

Norms of Membership. One further aspect of congregation identity may be seen in the norms of church membership. New members are desired; congregational growth is viewed positively; and the minister and others work hard to seek out and bring in new members. At the same time, joining the church is easy. There are few, if any, expectations for new members, with the possible exception of giving to the church and participating. Discussing criteria for membership, leaders used the following expressions: "We're not an evangelical church"; "we don't actively go out to work on 'true belief'"; "we don't open ourselves up to nonbelievers"; "we don't exclude anyone." These norms regarding membership open the congregation to the community and make it easy for new residents to join. At the same time, the absence of clearcut expectations makes the congregation vulnerable to whatever values or interests new members may bring with them, adding to the heterogeneity of congregational beliefs and increasing the likelihood of conflict.

Further, norms regarding membership limit the church's claim on members. It becomes an organization of limited liability. Thus, when members perceive that their needs and expectations are not being satisfactorily met, they may be little inclined to honor their

membership covenant. Church records provide indications of the casualness of church life. While membership in the church increased 66 percent between 1972 and 1980, average attendance at Sunday worship increased only 50 percent. The ratio of those in attendance to total members declined from 34.8 to 31.6 in this period. Sunday school enrollment increased from 309 in 1970 to 543 in 1980, but average Sunday school attendance actually declined from 247 to 215. The church's 1981 budget of $155,500 represents an average member contribution of $141.24; assuming the congregation's per capita income to be approximately equal to Wiltshire's estimated per capita income for 1981, the average contribution is only 1.2 percent of income.

Interaction

We turn now to patterns of interaction in the church, focusing on both formal and informal patterns. Under formal patterns, we consider both governance and programs. Under informal patterns, we consider the bonding (or lack thereof) between congregation members.

In its governance, the congregation loosely follows Methodist polity. The administrative board plays the key role along with the pastor-parish relations committee. Other committees are primarily organized around program functions. When Sid arrived, he deliberately reduced the size of the church's leadership. Now there seems to be a small group of laity, probably fewer than the administrative board or PPRC, who, with the pastor, make most of the major decisions. The pastor, in particular, has considerable authority and has an unusually broad role in shaping policy and determining the direction of the church. Although Methodist polity is partly responsible for the way his role is defined, Sid's power seems especially to derive from four sources. One is what he describes as his "mandate" from the bishop at the time of his appointment "to straighten out the mess." Second is his demonstrated competence, which contributes to his authority. Third, there is what we have called the "managerial style" of the church, the willingness of the members to "leave it to the professional." Finally, there is his relatively long tenure as pastor.

It is not particularly surprising that power should be concentrated in the pastor and a relatively small number of laity in

Wiltshire Church. For reasons just mentioned with reference to Sid, coupled with the relatively large size of the church, the voluntary nature of membership in which members are not materially rewarded for involvement, and a high rate of member turnover, we might expect a concentration of power. It follows what Roberto Michels called the "iron law of oligarchy."[2] Although such a concentration of power might be suspected of leading to member apathy and indifference, this need not be so. As long as member expectations of the church are being met, the church is functioning effectively, and there is no serious conflict, most members are likely to be willing to allow the pastor and a small group to make major decisions. But when groups find expectations or needs unfulfilled (e.g., those in Wiltshire Church asking for spiritual renewal and the others concerned with social justice), or when a conflict develops (e.g., over the pastor's housing), there is likely to be a challenge to oligarchical rule. Furthermore, the slowing of mobility in Wiltshire and among church members seems to be increasing the interest of a broader spectrum of church members in having a "say" in the direction of the church.

In addition to governance, another aspect of the more formal interaction patterns in the church centers in its programs of ministry and mission. The programs that exist in the church are generally well done, as might be expected in a congregation that emphasizes professionalism. This is especially true of those program aspects directed toward current members, which constitute the large majority of what is undertaken. The church's worship services, particularly the preaching and music, are exceptionally well presented. Likewise, particularly the church school and youth program receive considerable attention and positive evaluation, affirming the child- and youth-centered values of the town. Although adult education has received attention in past years, the current disposition of the staff has left a void in this area. Another positively appreciated ministry of the church is pastoral care, in which the minister, through his counseling and preaching, is viewed as effective in relating to the myriad of issues facing members—painful interpersonal experiences, hard decisions, illness and suffering, divorce, and family difficulties.

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[2] In *Political Parties* (Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press, 1949).

What seems generally underemphasized in the program is outreach beyond the congregation. Only 18 percent of the total budget of $155,500 is directed toward programs beyond the congregation, and two-thirds of that amount goes to Methodist apportionments, much of which is used for maintaining the denomination. The lack of budgetary outreach is matched programmatically by the apparently limited programs that serve or engage people and issues beyond the congregation. There are a few such programs, directed at the problems of the aging, participation in clothing drives, participation in a local ecumenical refugee resettlement program, and beginning exploration of a relationship with a coalition of urban churches in the nearby city. These latter programs, however, seem to involve only a limited number of members. The pastor does become involved in some social ministries and community concerns, but sees his ministry as primarily within the congregation and to its members.

In general, this review of programs within the church suggests that ministry is seen in individualistic terms, focusing on congregational members in their private rather than public lives. Generally, the members see themselves as ministered to, rather than as ministers, as receiving ministry rather than giving it; hence, they are concerned that "employed leadership should serve our needs."

Given the focus on individual needs and on ministry *within* the congregation, considerable effort goes to building up the community from within, creating fellowship among members. It is surprising, therefore, at first glance, to hear members complain of lack of fellowship (over half the congregation surveyed would like the next pastor to be gifted especially in "deepening our fellowship with each other"), of superficial relationships with other members, of a failure to experience much community within the church. Both the efforts directed at building fellowship and the considerable homogeneity of members on a variety of personal and social attributes would suggest the contrary to be true.

On further reflection, however, the lack of deep bonding among church members could be anticipated. One reason is the absence of any deeply shared theological commitment or strong commitment to a denominational heritage, which makes it difficult to build community within the congregation (and even more difficult

to reach out to the broader world in the name of the church).
Second, the church's membership size makes it difficult to develop
strong primary group ties, especially when the programs of the
church involving adult members seem primarily geared to atomis-
tic individuals participating as spectators. A principal exception to
this lack of bonding among members appears in the choir, where
primary, nonsuperficial relationships have developed. We can un-
derstand, therefore, why the choir is a locus for some of the pre-
sent conflict in the congregation. It is one of the few places in the
church where individuals have developed sufficient social solidari-
ty to respond to a threat to one of their own or to care deeply
about the direction of the organization.

In general, then, the privatization that exists within the lifestyle
of the community residents as a whole is reflected in the church,
and efforts at community building have not succeeded in overcom-
ing it.

Linkages

Given the previous discussion of the inward and individualistic
focus of the congregation, it follows that linkages of the congrega-
tion with much outside of itself are few. Yet there are linkages to
be noted.

Wiltshire Church identifies with its local community. It is
proud of its history in the community but makes little effort to
dwell on history. Its focus is on its youthfulness and the freshness
and relevance of its program for the Wiltshire of today.

We previously noted that the Methodist heritage contributes
little to the congregation's current identity. Members are aware of
their Methodist connections, but function as Congregationalists.
Yet, there are continuing linkages with the Methodist heritage.
First, the church is dependent on the Methodist system for its
ministerial leadership. Sid Carlson serves under the appointment
of the bishop, and should he or the congregation seek to sever that
relationship, the bishop must give approval. Second, the denomi-
nation's polity provides a formal organizational structure for the
congregation, and although this does not seem to be followed rig-
idly, it gives the pastor and administrative board considerably
more authority than would be the case if the church actually was

Congregationalist. Third, its Methodist identity accounts for at least some of the church's membership growth in recent years, as Methodists have moved to the area and looked for a compatible Methodist congregation. (This does not, however, seem to have been a major factor in the church's appeal to many new members.) Fourth, the church, as noted, contributes to the denomination financially, and Sid Carlson participates in some conference activities. Finally, the Methodist connection provides a context in which some leaders evaluate the congregation. Considerable pleasure is taken in being the largest, most active, most vital church in the district, and near the top in the annual conference.

The church recognizes it is in a competitive relationship with other churches in town, and though relations are cordial, there are few efforts to deepen interfaith ties or engage in cooperative efforts in Wiltshire or beyond. Linkages with other congregations are perfunctory, formal relationships, as expected in a suburban community; however, Sid Carlson and the congregation's commitment to these linkages is relatively minimal. The church's major efforts go into maintaining a program that responds to the needs of its own members. The pastor avoids pressing members to involve the church in activities that bring contact with issues and concerns that cloud the boundary between private and public life. The church does not actively discourage those who seek close ties with the denomination or who would involve members in regional issues but makes it clear that these are not its major priorities.

Wiltshire Church, for most of its life a "company church" in a small town, has emerged as a community church in suburbia. It is aware of the boundaries between local and regional life but shows little motivation to transcend them.

The congregation is broadly accepting of the way things are in community and national life. Members recognize problems in the world but see traditional means of resolving these problems as adequate.

Contemporary social problems do not receive a great deal of attention from the pulpit or, as we have noted, in church programming. Where attention is given, it tends to be in terms of the impact of social problems on the lives of members and is aimed at helping individuals to cope with this impact. There is little recognition that the church's members are well off relative to others in

the region, that church members have disproportionate financial resources and power, or that Christian stewardship implies any special responsibility for community, regional, or national life.

We conclude with two propositions basic to our sociological approach. First, a congregation—its theology and ethics; its worship, program, and style of operation; what it does or does not do in ministry and mission—is profoundly shaped by its social context, especially the local community and the social class of its members. Second, a congregation, by virtue of its relationship to a religious or faith tradition, has the capacity, in a limited but crucial way, to transcend the determinative power of the social context, so that it influences the values and interests of its members as well as being influenced by them. A congregation that participates in a faith tradition contains within it the ideas and inspiration, beliefs and experience, on the basis of which the status quo may be challenged and at least partially transcended. The more church leaders and members are helped to see and understand the impact of their context upon their congregation's life, the more likely they will be to discover ways of influencing this context rather than simply being influenced by it. This is characteristic of what sociologists call "open systems." They have the capacity for self-renewal based on feedback and insight.

The Wiltshire Church can never escape the influence of social context. Recognition of this fact offers a limited but crucial freedom *from* its power and freedom *for* becoming an influential and shaping force within it. Sociological analysis will not prescribe to the church what it should be or do. But it can provide the congregation with comprehensive information and fresh insight about itself and its setting that create new possibilities for a people with the resources of faith.

SUGGESTIONS FOR RELATED READING

Berger, Peter L. *The Sacred Canopy*. Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1969.

    A theoretical approach to the sociology of religion that has informed this chapter's discussion of social worlds.

Carroll, Jackson W.; McKinney, William; and Rozen, David A. *The

Varieties of Religious Presence. New York: Pilgrim Press, forthcoming 1983.

This book grows out of an extensive sociological study of diverse ways local churches and synagogues interact with their communities in a single metropolitan area.

Douglass, H. Paul, and Brunner, Edmund deS. *The Protestant Church as a Social Institution*. New York: Russell & Russell, 1935.

The summary of hundreds of studies of churches and communities conducted in the 1920s and 1930s by two pioneer religious researchers.

Earle, John R.; Knudsen, Dean D.; and Shriver, Donald W., Jr. *Spindles and Spines*. Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1976.

A study of Gastonia, North Carolina, that re-examines this community two generations after Liston Pope's classic community study, *Millhands and Preachers*.

Gustafson, James M. *Treasure in Earthen Vessels: The Church as a Human Community*. New York: Harper & Row, 1961.

One of America's leading Christian ethicists takes a multidimensional look at local churches.

Hoge, Dean R., and Roozen, David A. *Understanding Church Growth and Decline, 1950–1978*. New York: Pilgrim Press, 1979.

A number of social scientists and other scholars look for the reasons for the membership declines in "mainline Protestantism" since the mid-1960s.

McKinney, William; Roozen, David A.; and Carroll, Jackson W. *Religion's Public Presence*. Washington, D.C.: Alban Institute, 1982.

An examination of community leaders' expectations and evaluation of the religious community's role in public life in a metropolitan area (Hartford, Connecticut).

Roof, Wade Clark. *Community and Commitment: Religious Plausibility in a Liberal Protestant Church*. New York: Elsevier, 1978.

A sociologist looks at church participation patterns among North Carolina Episcopalians and stresses the importance of social worlds on member views and behavior.

Vidich, Arthur J., and Bensman, Joseph. *Small Town in Mass Society*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1968.

One of the most important community studies published in recent decades that gives considerable attention to the community role of religion.

Warren, Donald, and Warren, Rachelle. *The Neighborhood Organizer's Manual*. South Bend, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1977.

An extremely useful volume for those persons seeking to understand the dynamics of community life.

Wood, James R. *Leadership in Voluntary Organizations: The Controversy over Social Action in Protestant Churches.* New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1981.

A short, lucid analysis of factors affecting organized religious responses to community issues.