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The Role of Judicatories in Interpreting Denominational Identity

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A regional judicatory executive interviewed for our study of the Organizing of Religious Work, expressed themes concerning denominational identity which have been echoed in various ways by regional leaders in other denominations:

The ties that bind us together nationally are weaker than I would like them to be. Also the ties that bind us together as a diocese are weaker than I would like them to be. Even though I think there is a strong sense of diocesan identity here, there is still a sense of growing congregationalism -- more centered in the congregation's life than in the diocese's. I see that as part of the decentralization trend in the culture and I see that as a challenge. My way of working on it will be through relationships, partnerships. I think that is also true of the National Church. We need to understand that the National Church is not in New York; **we** are the National Church. We are different from each other, but we need that variety to be the Church God calls us to.

Introduction: National and Regional Responsibility for Denominational Identity

Regional judicatories are expected by their national church bodies to be proactive in promoting denominational loyalty among the congregations in their charge. This national church expectation may be stronger in those denominations where judicatories came into being primarily as "creatures of the national" ¹, to quote one regional executive. This expectation, however, is still very present even in denominations where it was more the case that regional clusters of congregations created national structures to coordinate their education and mission efforts. By whatever paths national church executive offices and boards become established, in most denominations these national bodies have been instrumental in creating new regional judicatories.

When national church bodies reconfigure regional jurisdictional lines, they do so in an attempt to bring the denomination closer to the local churches and members; to explicitly increase, not diminish, denominational identification in local churches. Locating denominational offices regionally, or sometimes in non-geographic ethnic-language groupings of churches, is a policy intended to better permit the denomination to exercise both religious authority and provide expert services to congregations and clergy. ² Effective discharge of these judicatory responsibilities is expected to

enhance denominational loyalty among congregations.

Necessary evidence of denominational loyalty of congregations acceptable to national and regional offices certainly includes congregational self-identification as part of the denomination. However, it would not be sufficient proof of real commitment unless congregations also demonstrate the requisite adherence to core theological precepts and denominational policies, as well as give support to national and regional missions priorities. Nancy Ammerman has explained in this session and elsewhere³, that although denominational identification of congregations and individuals is still much alive, there are clear differences among denominations and individual congregations in the proportion of members who are committed to supporting by their worship attendance, time and material resources the denomination with which they claim affiliation. The extent to which can these congregational differences in denominational commitment can be influenced by the regional judicatory or the national church actions - is a question of great current concern to these bodies. It is also a core question for this paper. Can national and regional bodies do anything effectively to stem what some fear is a loss of congregational commitments, or are these losses more due to external forces over which they have little control? Some scholars believe that national and regional judicatory efforts to inspire greater denominational loyalty are apt to be undermined by forces attendant on the culture of consumerism and this era of high mobility, both of which trends are so disruptive to interpersonal and institutional supports for denominational affiliation. ⁴

Both consumerism and high mobility strengthen the general societal emphasis on personal and organizational autonomy. For religious institutions, this translates into greater "individualism" of clergy and church members and more "congregationalism" of local churches. These conditions in turn portend for regional judicatories more problems in exercising religious authority, as well as more demands from congregations for services and resources. The expansion of "Individualism" and "congregationalism" within a denomination or individual judicatory can also entail less congregational monies coming to the judicatory and national coffers with which to provide staff services and resources, as congregations decide they would like to spend their mission budgets on causes other than those endorsed by their denomination. Further, trends toward increased "Individualism" and "congregationalism" can also lead local churches to insist on going their own way in matters of worship practices, church policies, and outreach mission efforts. This resulting variety of purposes and practices can have deleterious consequences for national church bodies' ability to promulgate a coherent denominational identity and to establish national policies which are followed by their constituent national, regional and local organizations. This is especially likely to occur in those denominations which celebrate the value of diversity. ⁵ Apart from denominational affiliation, does a such variety within

individual judicatories have similar consequences,? This is also been a question guiding this research.

Research on Regional Judicatories

The perceptions of regional judicatory leaders about the importance of denominational identity among the congregations and clergy in their charge, and their experiences in promoting loyalty to the national and regional mission priorities, were gathered as part of the “Organizing Religious Work” project funded by the Lilly Endowment. During 1997 and 1998 approximate 35 hour-long interviews were conducted with judicatory executives and senior staff in seven geographically dispersed areas in the United States, primarily those in seven denominations: the Assemblies of God, the Association of Vineyard Churches, the Episcopal Church, the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod, the Reformed Church in America, the United Church of Christ, and the United Methodist Church. These interviews were transcribed and coded. Building on these interviews, an eight page survey was developed with core questions for a national sample of regional judicatory leaders across these denominations. There are 1075 surveys in the data base to date, approximately a 50% return overall.⁶

Is Denominational Identity a Problem?

It can be concluded from regional leaders survey responses that at least a third perceive this area to be a problem by their responses to the question: “Over the last five years, in your opinion, has your denomination as a whole become more or less effective in maintaining a denominational identity in local churches?” While approximately a fifth (21%) saw some increase here, nearly two-fifths felt their denomination had decreased somewhat in effectiveness in maintaining congregational loyalty. Indication that maintaining a denominational identity in their congregations is important in the view of regional leaders is further attested to by the fact that their answers to this question are significantly correlated with other concerns about their denomination as a whole. In particular, there is a very strong correlation (.49) between regional leaders’ perceptions of denominational effectiveness in maintaining congregational commitment, and their perceptions of denominational effectiveness in “keeping unity of purpose within the denomination”, an item which received a similar distribution of responses.¹ “Unity of purpose” may be viewed by many regional leaders as not only a potential outcome of denominational identity but almost part of its definition. At any rate, those judicatory leaders who see their denomination as having more difficulty over the last five years in keeping a unity of purpose in the denomination and/or maintaining a denominational identity in local churches, are also significantly more likely to believe their

¹ For the actual percentage distribution on responses to denominational effectiveness in maintaining “unity of purpose”, other items and statistical results mentioned in this paper, see Table Appendix. This particular distribution of responses to “unity” is found in Table I.A.

denomination to exhibit decreased effectiveness over the last five years in: (in decreasing order of strength of correlations with denominational identity)

- maintaining the health of local churches
- attracting and keeping members in denominational churches
- creating a financially stable national church
- developing an identity as a global church presence
- attracting ethnic minority clergy
- attracting ethnic minority members
- providing resources for spiritual revitalization
- expanding overseas mission efforts and ministries
- maintaining a high quality of clergy in local churches

Fairly substantial differences exist among the seven denominations, however, in the proportion of regional leaders who concur that their denomination has been successful in maintaining a denominational identity in local churches. In illustration, denominations range from 2% to 48% of their regional leaders reporting an increase over the last five years in strength of denominational identity among member congregations, and similarly range from 15% to 68% of their regional leaders noting a decline in congregational identity in their denomination. Denominations were grouped according to the strength of their denominational identity in local churches, as indicated by the proportions of their regional leaders who believe congregational loyalty to the denomination has grown, or at least not declined over the past five years. The denominations are clustered as follows:

Clusters by Vitality of Denominational Identity in Local Churches

(Denominations are listed *alphabetically* within each cluster).

Strong Identity Vitality

(32%-48% of judicatory leaders reporting increase, 15%-19% of leaders reporting decrease over last 5 years in denominational identity in local churches.)

Assemblies of God

Association of Vineyard Churches

Mixed/Moderate Identity Vitality

(20%-25% report increase, 21%-37% report decrease)

Episcopal Church

Lutheran Church Missouri Synod

Weak Identity Vitality

(2%-16% report increase, 53%-68% report decrease)

Reformed Church in America

United Church of Christ

United Methodist Church

In looking at these clusters, some may note that denominations with a stronger or more clearly identifiable national offices and leadership have maintained denominational loyalty in their congregations better than those denominations with weaker national structures or lack of any one central national body.

This distribution accords with several scholars observations on the value of centralized authority for denominational identity.⁷ There may be other explanations for this clustering as well.²

Denominational theology, polity and culture do have some effect on the extent of congregational loyalty. However, these data also indicate differences among judicatories within denominational clusters (as well as within particular denominations on all variables). If even adjacent judicatories of one denomination have very different mode of operating due to historical situations, a change of top executives or a large influx of ethnic members creating different expectations of the exercise of religious authority and the provision of services,⁸ then judicatories of one denomination in different parts of the country are likely to vary as well.

Nancy Ammerman (1999) describes the culture of the west, which is highly individualistic and secularized especially in the Northwest. She suggest this culture may depress strong local expression of identity with particular denominations. In our interviews with regional judicatory leaders, the Northwest was the only region which really stood out from our other six areas. Almost all of the ten regional leaders (executives and senior staff representing seven denominations) interviewed in the Northwest region by three different interviewers, made a point of stating that their national church offices in other parts of the country have no understanding of the difficulty they face in trying to build strong ties between their congregations and their denomination. Most of these judicatory officials remarked to the effect that their clergy and congregations were very independently minded and were

² My colleagues presenting in this session want me to admit the foregoing explanation is rather post-factum. This clustering was more due to serendipity than theory. In running cross-tabulations on a number of both ordinal and nominal variables where a correlation statistic was automatically requested, I could not help but notice that the alphabetical listing of denominations was producing a good number of significant correlations with other variables! My colleagues have jokingly suggested that no more analysis on denominational identity is now called for: since the name of the denomination is obviously the central factor in keeping their congregations loyal. Therefore, denominations and movements should take care that the name they choose starts with a letter at the beginning of the alphabet (indicating they are of superior "grade") or at least take care they do not choose a name that is qualified by an adjective, such as "reformed" or "united"!

not inclined to collaborate with one another. Particular difficult for enhancing denominational identity, these regional leaders noted, is that fact that their congregations were filled with persons who were new not only to this denomination, but also many who were new to church-going altogether. Further, executives noted that such recently church members, in accord with Northwest cultural norms, are more interested in what they can immediately get from attending church. Even if good educational programs were available, such persons would change churches or dropout if they are pressured to undergo any but the most limited religious preparation for understanding the denominational tradition to which their congregation belongs.

The answer to whether maintaining denominational identity in congregations has become more difficult, is in short likely affected by attributes of the denomination - its theology, ethos and polity, characteristics of the judicatory history, present organization and leadership style, as well as the culture and geography of the region. There are several other aspects of denominational identity, however, which can be pivotal in predicting congregational loyalty to the denomination.

Pride in the Denomination's Tradition and Pride in the National Church's Policies, Actions

Denominations have a history, or organizational saga⁹ of how and why they came into existence and the effect of early leaders on the development of the denomination. In some denominations this saga is of longer duration and perhaps has more impact on current practices, but all denominations and "movements" have some such saga. In addition, denominations are variously distinctive for the kinds of worship, hymns, as well as rituals or ceremonies which have been normative in its congregations. All of these factors contribute to a denominational *tradition*.

Denominations have some central church structure, typically with staffed divisions or agencies which handle national and international missions, education and deployment of clergy, lay leader training programs and educational materials, church development and support, and the like. National executive offices and governing bodies also make regulations and policies governing what congregations, but especially pastors, are expected to do if they wish to remain denominationally affiliated, and issue policy statements that receive both church and public media attention. These are the kinds of actions that contribute to the current impression of the **National Church** held by lay and clergy members.

Nancy Ammerman mentioned that congregations can be classified as to whether they have a strong identification with the tradition (primarily the distinctiveness of the worship) and whether they have a strong identification with the organizational structure of the denomination. The survey data from judicatory leaders affirms that these two types of "identity" are distinct, but often related. Two survey

questions for regional leaders asked the extent to which it was “mostly true” to “mostly false” that in their judicatory **lay leaders** “take pride” in “*our denomination’s tradition*” and in “*our National Church’s policies and actions*.” A majority thought both conditions are more true than false as characteristic of their judicatories. However, proportionally twice as many considered the second statement false.; 44% saying it was at least somewhat false that their lay leaders took pride in the National Church actions compared to 22% who believed it false that their lay leaders take pride in the denomination’s tradition. Overall these two measures of denominational identity are quite highly correlated (.57). The Episcopal Church particular, and the United Methodist Church stand out from the other denominations, according to their regional leaders, in having judicatories where there is a high degree of loyalty to the denominational tradition. The Assemblies of God is unique in having the highest proportion of regional leaders reporting a admiration of what their National Church is doing. The greatest discrepancy in proportion of regional leaders reporting pride in the denominational tradition and pride in the actions of their National Church was found in the Episcopal Church. The most congruence between these two kinds of identity with the denomination were found in the Assemblies of God. However, the correlation between the two kinds of identity holds in each denomination significantly.

Given that whatever stances taken by national church bodies, are apt to be irritating to some pockets of congregational leaders, it would seem advantageous to ensuring that their congregations maintain denominational identification by their leading members having strong loyalties to the denominational tradition.¹⁰ On the other hand, given the rising proportions Nancy Ammerman had just mentioned of non-cradle members in congregations belonging particularly but hardly exclusively to the liberal Protestant denominations, members who have little knowledge of or pride in the particular denominational tradition of the church, it would seem similarly helpful to denominational identity if these “converts” are at least enthusiastic supporters of national church policies and mission priorities.

This raises the question of whether identity with the denominational tradition can offset lack of pride in the national church’s policies and actions in maintaining denominational identity in congregations. In correlations in the total sample and in each of the three Denominational clusters, the existence of both of these kinds of identity in a judicatory are significantly associated with regional leaders’ assessment of overall effectiveness in maintaining a denominational identity in local churches. Denominational Clusters. . However, “pride in the national church” is more strongly related to this assessment than is pride in the denominational tradition in the full sample (.32 to .24 respectively). A fuller answer to this question may depend on some other supports to denominational identity in congregations.

Degree of Theological Diversity Among Church Members

One major support to denominational identity in local churches appears to be the degree to which regional leaders perceive “theological diversity in beliefs among church members” in their judicatories. The more regional leaders disagree that there is theological diversity in their judicatories, the more likely they are to believe their denomination has become increasingly effective in maintaining denominational identity within its congregations (-.24). Regional leaders of judicatories in which congregations accept the same set of core beliefs would likely see this happy state of affairs as characteristic of their denomination. However, the more theologically conservative denominations are more likely to have stated beliefs to which their congregations and clergy are expected to adhere. In examining this possibility by the Denominational Clusters, indeed the High Identity Vitality denominations (AOG,AVC) are far more likely to have regional leaders who disagree that theological diversity exists among congregations in their judicatories compared to the other two clusters (-.40), whereas the Low Identity Vitality denominations (RCA, UCC, UMC) stand out from the other two clusters in agreeing that there is widespread theological diversity among church members in their judicatories (.37). The Mixed Identity Vitality denominations (Episcopal, LCMS) have regional leaders who perceive different situations in regard to theological unity of members in their judicatories.

Probably because the Low Identity Vitality denominational cluster is characterized by a high degree of theological diversity among its church members, theological diversity is more an accepted norm for congregations. Therefore, the degree to which regional leaders in this cluster report theological diversity is unrelated to whether they perceive that lay leaders take pride in their denomination's tradition or in the actions and policies of their national church, or whether denominational identity among congregations is growing or declining. This is definitely not the case in either the High or Mixed Identity Vitality Clusters. In both these clusters, some uniformity of theological beliefs appears important for denominational identity in local churches generally, and for the degree to which lay leaders take pride in both in the denominational tradition and in the national church.

Judicatory Actions to Strengthen Denominational Identity

Seeing that churches in judicatory comply with their denomination's basic theology and rules might be a way that regional leaders could employ to increase denominational identification among their congregations. However, this is a means to strengthening denominational identity mainly considered by the regional leaders in the High Identity Vitality denominational cluster, the only cluster which has both comparatively strong degrees of theological uniformity and judicatory control over whether clergy and congregations may retain denominational affiliation. Regional leaders in the other two denominational clusters are more divided on whether they should (or realistically could) put priority

on obtaining a greater degree of theological homogeneity among their congregations; to attempt this might result in severe losses of membership, especially in the Low Identity Vitality cluster.¹¹ Regional leaders in the High and Mixed Identity denominational clusters who intend to give priority to ensuring congregational compliance with denominational theology, may feel more supported to take such action when they also perceive that a majority of congregational leaders highly approve of their national churches' policies.

Using National Denominational Resources, Nancy Ammerman found, predicts strength of denominational identity in congregations. Do regional leaders who use or advise others to use national denominational resources in working with congregations perceive higher congregational identification with the denomination as a whole, its tradition, and its national church pronouncements and priorities? **Yes.** The greater use regional leaders make of national denominational resources for helping congregations in their judicatories, the significantly more growth they notice in congregations' maintaining a denominational identity (.22), they are more likely to report that in their judicatories lay leaders take pride in their denominational tradition (.14), and especially pride in their national church activities (.28). Whether regional leaders use consultants or programs from non-denominational agencies at all or in combination with denominational material and persons, has no significant effect on denominational identity of congregations. A reason for this lack of impact from using non-denominational agencies and resources is, analysis of write-in names of consultants and agencies indicates, is attributable to the fact that regional leaders in theologically conservative denominations tend to use a different cluster of non-denominational consultants and agencies than those in the theologically liberal denominations, although there is some cross-over in use of consultants and agencies.

Regional leaders in the High Identity Vitality denominational clusters are significantly more likely than those in the other two clusters to use or recommend national church resources and programs (.24) for their own local churches, while those in the Mixed Identity Vitality clusters are least likely to do so (-.20). Leaders in the Low Identity Vitality cluster are neither more or less likely as a group to use national denominational materials. This distribution underlines an impression of regional leaders in the High Vitality cluster being favorable toward what their national church offers and trying out national denominational resources; those in the Mixed Vitality cluster resistant to national church programs and publications, and being somewhat skeptical of whether these would be applicable to congregations in their judicatories; while those in the Low Vitality cluster are more indifferent, will take or leave national resources depending on how useful they anticipate they will be in their judicatories. The data, however, suggest that regional leaders in all denominational identity clusters would be well advised to

use their national denominational programs and publications. Although causal direction can be ascertained from this survey data, still the greater use regional leaders in all three Identity Vitality clusters make of their national denominational resources in working with congregations, the better they assess the growth and maintenance of denominational identity in local churches.

Site interviews with judicatory executives gives some insight into how these leaders make use of national denominational resources. A number of regional executives advertise national resources through including a page or more about denominational programs available in their own judicatory monthly newsletter, sometimes suggesting that clergy and church leaders check out the national church web-site. Regional executives also advertise clergy retreats and lay training programs to take place in the judicatory which will be led by some one from the national church. To be sure, some of these national programs are not voluntary for regional judicatories to sponsor: especially those one sexual abuse in churches. These site interviews indicated too that a number of regional executives and senior staff use a national resource of program, but tailor it themselves specifically for the congregations in their region, so in a way it is also “their” program as well as that of the national church.

Taking Actions to Bridge Gaps Between the Local Church in the Judicatory and the National Church and/or Aligning the Judicatory’s Identity More with the National Church would be direct responses to what about two-fifths of the regional leaders perceive to be somewhat problematic in their judicatories. Over two-fifths believe that “bridging gaps between our churches and the National Church” should receive at least “much” effort on the part of their judicatory in the next five years; however, only a fifth felt that comparable effort should be expended on “aligning our judicatory’s identity more with the National Church, presumably because relations in this area are satisfactory. Yet, it is mainly the amount of effort regional leaders feel should be given the latter, i.e. getting their judicatory and national church more closely meshed, that has several significant correlations with their positive perceptions of growth in congregational and lay leader identification with the denomination.

These results also suggest that it is those regional leaders who have fairly positive impressions of their national church who are most likely to put priority on furthering relations between their congregations, judicatory with their national church. Site interviews with judicatory executives also gave this impression. Those regional leaders interviewed who described either objections their congregations were having to national church ‘s policies or pronouncements, or problems they personally were having in trying to relate national church programs and educational resources to congregations in their jurisdictions, never considered they or others in their judicatory alone were to blame for this lack of communication and program coordination. Rather their solutions entailed getting national church

executives and program staff to better understand their challenges in working with churches of their particular judicatories, which might be far from the national church offices. Believing that lay leaders generally take pride in the national church's actions is significantly associated with regional leaders' placing greater priority on aligning their judicatory's identity more with the national church in all three Identity Vitality denominational clusters. Or conversely, this shows that if regional leaders do not believe that lay leaders respect the recent policies of the national church, they are unlikely to be willing to expend effort to better judicatory relations with the national church.

Relative Strength of Supports for Denominational Identity in Congregations

In looking at the relative strength of the various conditions and potential actions for enhancing denominational identity in local churches (see Table V, page 6 of the Table Appendix), the three variables with the most consistent predictive power are:

- the extent to which judicatory leaders perceive that prominent laity in their churches "take pride in our National Church's policies and actions";
- the degree to which there is theological uniformity among church members in the judicatory; and
- the frequency with which the judicatory leaders use national denominational resources in their work with congregations.

These three variables, however, do predict the extent of congregational identity with the denomination somewhat differently within each of the Identity Vitality denominational clusters. The more pride judicatory leaders believe their laity take in the activities of their national church, the significantly more apt they are to believe denominational identity in local churches has grown, or at least remained stable declined over the last five years in all three denominational clusters, but particularly the Mixed Identity Vitality cluster (Epis. & LCMS). Only in the Mixed Vitality cluster too does theological diversity have a significant negative effect on congregational identity with the denomination. This is the cluster where there is most likely to be conflicting beliefs and expectations, both within the regional judicatory and between some judicatories and their national church offices. It is only in the Low Identity Vitality cluster (RCA, UCC, UMC) with other influences controlled by regression, that the greater the frequency with which judicatory leaders use national denominational resources in their own work with congregations, the significantly more likely they are to believe that denominational identity has grown in local churches. Since this is the cluster with the lowest denominational identity, it is particularly important to note that national denominational materials can have a positive impact on denominational identity in local churches (if the judicatory leadership is willing to give these programs and publications a trial).

A point not shown in the regressions presented, but an important one to make, is that even in controlling for Identity Vitality clusters of denominations, regional leaders' perceptions of the extent of lay loyalty to the denominational tradition will not contribute as much to regional leaders' overall assessment of denominational identity in local churches as the extent of lay admiration of their national church's policies and actions. It also needs mention that the effects of denominational affiliation on denominational identity in local churches are not washed out by controlling the three variables listed above by regression. Adding dummy variables for the highest and lowest Identity Vitality clusters to the three variables listed above using the full sample, indicates (in Table V.C) that additional characteristics of the denominations contribute to congregational loyalty.

Consequences for Regional Judicatories of the Extent of Denominational Loyalty in Churches

Earlier mention was made of the apparently positive outcomes for the denomination, as assessed from judicatory leaders' responses, if the degree of denominational loyalty in local churches had increased or at least not decreased . There also appear definite advantages for the regional judicatories in whether congregations identify clearly with the denomination, and particularly in whether lay leaders in the judicatory identify with the denominational tradition and/or appreciate the ministries and policies of their national church. The more growth that regional leaders see in overall denominational identity in congregations, and especially the more they believe prominent laity in their judicatories take pride in the denominational tradition and/or the actions of their national church, the significantly more likely they are to also say:

- that congregations in their judicatories “willingly contribute their share to our larger mission”; and
- the effectiveness of regional judicatories in promoting the mission of the denomination has increased over the last five years.

It is fairly well established that financial giving of congregational members to causes beyond their local church, such as voluntary monies sent to their judicatory and to national church missions, is affected by the strength of congregational loyalty to the denomination.¹² Given this, why would judicatory leaders not do everything they could to increase congregational members' endorsement of the national church mission giving priorities? Site interviews with regional leaders in denominations across the Identity Vitality clusters suggest several reasons: Some regional judicatories have experienced competition for mission funding occasioned by the national church soliciting their congregations directly without contacting or notifying the judicatory staff, a situation that does not breed trust. More commonly, it seems that regional leaders' reluctance to advance the causes of the national church is occasioned by division among congregations within the judicatory over some national policy statement or new national directives affecting congregations. In this situational scenario, if the judicatory executive pushes the

funding causes of the national church, such action is almost certain to increase dissension within the judicatory. If severe or long lasting, such dissension can potentially lead to the regional executive being criticized by some internal faction, reducing not only the executive's ability to mediate conflict within the judicatory, but also potentially reducing congregational funding of the judicatory.

Regional leaders who believe that there has been an improvement in keeping congregations denominationally loyal over the last five years, are also apt to believe the overall effectiveness of judicatories in promoting the mission of the denomination has increased in this time period (42% overall though judicatory effectiveness had increased, possibly extrapolating from their own experiences.) Regional leaders' perceptions of growth in denominational identity among local churches, is less related to whether they thought the importance of judicatories in relation to the national church had increased in their denomination (52% thought it had). There are some interesting differences by denominational cluster, however. The more regional leaders in the High Identity Vitality denominational cluster (AOG,AVC) believe that denominational identity has grown in their congregations over the last five years, the significantly more likely they are to say that their judicatories have also grown in importance relative to the national church during this time period. The opposite is the case for regional leaders in the Mixed Identity Vitality (Epis & LCMS) and Low Identity Vitality (RCA,UCC,UMC) denominational clusters. The more leaders in these last two clusters believe that denominational identity has increased in their local churches, the significantly less apt they are to say that their judicatories have increased in importance relative to the national church. These interactions may be attributable to some positive effects of decentralization in the High Vitality denominations which by definition stand out as particularly growing in denominational identity within their local churches, or rather to the lessening importance of the national church compared to the regional judicatories in the Mixed and Low Vitality denominations whose leaders are more likely to acknowledge a decrease in congregational identity with their denominations, or a combination of these and other factors.

From these last findings, one might surmise that there are at least mixed feelings within the leadership of many regional judicatories about whether growth in denominational loyalty among their congregations is unequivocally going to be "a blessing" for them.

IN POSTSCRIPT SUMMARY

Denominational identity in local churches, as perceived by regional judicatory leaders, is associated with many other positive trends in denominational conditions - particularly greater unity of purpose within the denomination, growth in membership, in overseas mission efforts, clergy recruitment, national church funding, and congregational health. In general the major variables predicting growth in

congregational identity with their denominations are regional leaders perceptions of the degree that: 1) lay leaders in their judicatories take pride in their national church's policies and actions, 2) there is theological unity among judicatory members; 3) the judicatory leaders use national church resources in working with their congregations. However, clusters of denominations grouped according to amount of growth or decline in denominational identity among local churches, continue to predict strength of congregational loyalty to their denomination even with the three major contributors to denominational identity controlled by regression. Further on some measures there is different relationship (considerably weaker, stronger, or in the completely opposite direction) among predictors of denominational identity in each of these clusters. It appears that denominational culture still matters in predicting denominational loyalty.

ENDNOTES

1. This comment was made by an AOG district executive interviewed as part of the ORW study. His statement is also true for the LCMS (Becker, 1998). Lutheran Missouri districts were established by their national office to have a more immediate denominational presence in a geographical area for oversight of and services to congregations, not be semi-autonomous or loosely affiliated bodies of the larger denomination. In other denominations, clusters of congregations originally established one or several national church bodies to coordinate regional efforts (UCC? UMC?), but in these denominations and others, e.g. the Episcopal Church and RCA, the national governance body and offices so established in turn create additional regional judicatories.

2. Denominations on the national level have structures which still exercise, as Chaves (1993) describes, both "religious authority" over belief and belonging rules and policies, and "agency authority" or expertise in congregational and leadership development, fund-raising, education, and the like. As I have argued elsewhere (Lummis, 1998), although in past decades regional offices may have exercised primarily "religious authority", now their staffs are charged with maintaining religious standards but additionally are asked to provide expert consultants and resources to better serve the needs of the congregations in their jurisdictions.

3. Nancy Ammerman, 1999 "Challenges to Denominational Identity in Local Congregations", Paper presented at the Religious Research Association Annual Meetings, Boston (November, 1999); and Ammerman (1994).

4. Researchers have made these points in general and for particular denominations and as empirical generalizations for all denominations, see for example, Ammerman (1993, 1994, 1997, 1999, Becker (1998), Chaves (1997), Frank (1997; Hadaway and Roozen (1995); Luidens (1994); Nesbitt (1997); Poloma (1998,1999).

5. This point seems to be especially true in denominations which have tried to include many different perspectives, as described by Barman and Chaves (1999) for the United Church of Christ, Richey (1996) for the United Methodist Church, and Swatos (1999) for Episcopal Church.

6. This survey was sent out to the population of regional executives in these seven denominations, as well as sub-judicatory leaders in the Assemblies of God, the Lutheran Missouri Synod, and the United Methodist Church. Packets were sent out from Hartford Seminary with labels supplied by the national offices, included the survey with our promise of confidentiality, a cover letter signed by a national denominational leader, and a postage-paid return

envelope addressed to us. The 1075 surveys represent an approximate 50% return across denominations, with rates between 35% and 70% in the seven denominations.

7. Liebman, Sutton and Wuthnow (1988) predicate a generally positive influence of a centralized authority structure on holding denominations together, unless lines of cleavage coincide causing mass defections. Richey (1994:89) argues that where regional bodies, agencies and task forces compete effectively for resources and influence with the national bodies, the former top-down “denominational grammar begins to erode”. This causes disruption of common identity and value priorities in denominations where this has occurred, as has happened in the United Methodist Church. Barman and Chaves (1999) case study of the UCC depicts this denomination as fractured organizationally on the national level for some time, a situation which has been aggravated (at least temporarily) by its current restructuring. Luidens (1994) describes the pressing need felt by the RCA General Synod to find a common mission that would serve to develop unity and common identity in this denomination.

8. In illustration, see the case studies of the striking differences in organization and issues in adjacent regional judicatories belonging to the the Seventh Day Adventists (Lawson, 1998,1999) and to the Roman Catholic Church (Harper and Schulte-Murray, 1998).

9. I owe the concept of “organizational saga” to Burton Clark’s description (Clark, 1972) of how this process works in institutions of higher education to shape present structures and beliefs.

10. This question is explicitly raised by Wood and Bloch (1995) in discussing the impact of the UMC national church rulings on clergy homosexuality on lay members: “..those who do not agree with the national church --will they leave the UMC, diminishing its diversity, or will the common UMC heritage be strong enough to hold them despite their dissatisfaction on the issue?”

11. Hoge, Johnson, and Luidens (1994:206-207) predict that if a mainline denomination tries to define itself theologically so narrowly that it places new mandates on what members must believe, mass withdrawals and splits in the denomination are likely to occur.

12. Hoge, Johnson, and Luidens (1994:211-212) report from their study that “while mainline Protestants continue to support their congregations financially, they are sending less money to denominational offices.”

TABLES ON JUDICATORY LEADERS PERCEPTIONS OF DENOMINATIONAL IDENTITY IN LOCAL CHURCHES

Respondents:	<u>Numbers</u>
Assemblies of God	252 (41 Dist. sups., 211 Section pres)
Association of Vineyard Churches	27 (Area Pastoral Coordinators)
Episcopal Church	78 (58 Bps; 10 staff, 10 prov. pres)
Lutheran Church Missouri Synod	353 (31 Dist. pres. 322 Circuit coun)
Reformed Church in America	45 (7 Synod execs., 38 Classis clerks)
United Church of Christ	57 (Conf. and Ass Conf. Ministers)
United Methodist Church	263 (19 Bps, 33 CC dir; 211 D.S.)

TABLE I. Overall Responses to Survey Questions on Denominational Identity

A. Change Perceived in Denomination: “Over the last five years, in your opinion, has (your denomination) as a whole become more or less effective in:
 1) maintaining a denominational identity in the local churches?
 2) keeping unity of purpose within the denomination

<u>Denominational Effectiveness has:</u>	<i>1) Den. Identity in Local Churches</i>	<i>2) Unity of Purpose in Denomination</i>
Increased greatly	3%	7%
Increased somewhat	18%	22%
Stayed the same	42%	30%
Decreased somewhat	32%	30%
Decreased greatly	<u>5%</u>	<u>11%</u>
	100% (n=1069)	100% (n=1064)

B. Situation in Regional Judicatory “ In this (regional judicatory) , how true are the following statements in your best judgment?

	<i>Mostly True</i>	<i><u>Smwht True</u></i>	<i><u>Smwht False</u></i>	<i>Mostly False</i>	
3) Lay leaders take pride in our <i>denomination’s tradition</i>	17%	61%	19%	3%	(1052)
4) Lay leaders take pride in our <i>National Church’s policies, actions</i>	8%	48%	33%	11%	(1051)
5) There is theological diversity in beliefs among church members.	34%	43%	17%	6%	(1056)
.....					
11) Congregations willingly contribute their share to our larger mission.	18%	61%	19%	2%	(1052)

C. Use of Resources in Regional Judiciary: “How often do you use or suggest each of the following sources for materials, consultants, or programs for local churches in your (judicatory)?

	<i>Almost Always</i>	<i>Quite Often</i>	<i>Some- times</i>	<i>Rarely or Never</i>	
(6) National Church resources, programs	10%	43%	42%	6%	(1043)
(7) Consultants, material programs from non-denominational agencies	1%	14%	51%	34%	(1041)

D. Judiciary Priorities in Next Five Years: “In the next five years, how important are each of the following for this (judicatory) to put major effort in developing or achieving?”

	<i>Amount of Effort</i>			<i>Fine, No Need</i>	<i>Not Important.</i>	
	<i>Great</i>	<i>Much</i>	<i>Some</i>			
(8) Seeing that churches comply with our basic theology and rules	8%	16%	40%	30%	6%	(1054)
(9) Bridging gaps between our churches and the National Church	15%	30%	39%	12%	3%	(1050)
(10) Aligning our (judicatory’s) identity more with the National Church	5%	15%	36%	35%	9%	(1052)

E. Judiciary Effectiveness & Importance

<i>In promoting the mission of the denomination over the last 5 years, would you say:</i>	<i>Increased</i>	<i>Remained Same</i>	<i>Decreased</i>	
(12) The effectiveness of judicatories has:	42%	45%	13%	(1064)
(13) The importance of judicatories compared to the National Church has:	52%	37%	11%	(1070)

TABLE II. Denominational Difference: Key Clusters

Effectiveness of: Maintaining a Denominational Identity in Churches in last 5 years

Denominations in Alphabetical Order within the three categories

Stronger Denominational Identity in Local Churches (32%-48% of judicatory leaders reporting increase, 15%-19% of leaders reporting decrease)

Assemblies of God

Association of Vineyard Churches

Mixed/Moderate Denominational Identity (20%-25% report increase, 21%-37% report decrease)

Episcopal Church

Lutheran Church Missouri Synod

Weaker Denominational Identity in Local Churches (2%-16% report increase, 53%-68% report decrease)

Reformed Church in America

United Church of Christ

United Methodist Church

TABLE III Two Variable Correlations on Denominational Identity
Correlations given are significant at .01 level or better

	<i>Growth in chch Den. Identity</i>	<i>Lay Leader Pride in Den. Tradition</i>	<i>Lay Leader Pride in Nat Ch Actions</i>
A. Correlations with Denomination			
<i>(1=specific denomination, 2=all others)</i>			
Assemblies of God	.24	n.s.	.10
Assoc. of Vineyard Church	.10	n.s.	n.s.
Episcopal	n.s.	.12	n.s.
Lutheran Church Mis. Synod	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.
Reformed Church in America	-.14	-.08	-.14
United Church of Christ	-.10	n.s.	n.s.
United Methodist Church	-.19	.09	n.s.
B. Correlations with Den. Identity Items and Potential Contributors			
1) Den. Identity in churches	---	.24	.32
2) Den Unity (growth-decline)	.49	.20	.35
3) Pride in Den Tradition	.24	---	.57
4) Pride in Nat Church	.32	.57	---
5) Theo Diversity in churches (true-false)	-.24	-.08	-.16
6) Use Nat.Ch. Resources	.22	.14	.28
7) Use NonDen. Resources (always-rarely)	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.
8) Priority: Theo. Compliance	.19	n.s.	.20
9) Priority:Gaps LocCh--NatCh	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.
10) Priority: Jud--NatCh identity (great-none)	.18	n.s.	.22
C. Correl. with Potential Outcomes			
11) LocChs give willingly to mission (true-false)	.13	.28	.22
12) Effectiveness of Judicatories (increased-decreased)	.16	.19	.16
13) Importance of Jud.s vs NatCh (increased-decreased)	-.09	n.s.	n.s.

D. Correlations with

Denominational Clusters

Correlations given are significant at .01 level or better

	<i>Hi, Growing Vitality</i> <u>AOG, AVC</u>	<i>Mixed Vitality</i> <u>EPIS, LCMS</u>	<i>Low, Declining Vitality</i> <u>RCA, UCC, UMC</u>
1) Den. Identity in churches	.27	n.s.	-.27
2) Den Unity (growth-decline)	.44	-.15	-.25
3) Pride in Den Trad	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.
4) Pride in Nat Church (true-false)	.11	n.s.	-.11
5) Theo Diversity in churches (true-false)	-.40	n.s.	.37
6) Use Nat.Ch. Resources	.24	-.20	n.s.
7) Use Nonden. Resources (always-rarely)	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.
8) Priority: Theo. Compliance	.17	n.s.	n.s.
9) Priority:Gaps LocCh--NatCh	n.s.	-.16	.14
10) Priority: Jud--NatCh identity (great-none)	n.s.	-.17	.12
11) LocChs give willingly to mission (true-false)	.10	n.s.	n.s.
12) Judicatories' Effectiveness	.10	n.s.	n.s.
13) Judicatories Imp.vs NatCh (increased-decreased)	-.13	n.s.	n.s.

TABLE IV Three Variable Correlations on Denominational Identity

CONDITIONS

A. Den. Identity in Local Churches

(growth-decline) **and:**

3) Pride in Den Trad (true-false)	.31	.28	.21
4) Pride in Nat Church (true-false)	.31	.38	.18

B. Pride in Denominational Tradition

and

4) Pride in Nat Church (true-false)	.71	.57	.50
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C. Theological. Diversity in Local Churches

(true-false) **and:**

1) Den. Identity in churches (growth-decline)	-.17	-.17	n.s.
3) Pride in Den Trad (true-false)	-.22	-.16	n.s.
4) Pride in Nat Church (true-false)	-.19	-.22	n.s.

	<u>Denominational Clusters</u>		
	<i>Hi, Growing Vitality</i> <u>AOG, AVC</u>	<i>Mixed Vitality</i> <u>EPIS, LCMS</u>	<i>Low, Declining Vitality</i> <u>RCA, UCC, UMC</u>
<i>ACTIONS</i>			
D. Use Nat. Church Resources (always-rarely) and:			
1) Den. Identity in churches (growth-decline)	.20	.15	.21
3) Pride in Den Trad (true-false)	.22	.16	n.s.
4) Pride in Nat Church (true-false)	.34	.25	.23
E. Seeing that Churches Comply with our basic theology and rules (great effort-no effort) and:			
1) Den. Identity in churches (growth-decline)	.19	.18	n.s.
3) Pride in Den Trad (true-false)	n.s.	n.s.	.14
4) Pride in Nat Church (true-false)	.19	.24	n.s.
F. Bridging Gaps Between Our Churches and the National Church (great effort-no effort) and:			
1) Den. Identity in churches (growth-decline)	.20	n.s.	n.s.
3) Pride in Den Trad (true-false)	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.
4) Pride in Nat Church (true-false)	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.
G. Aligning Our Judicatory's Identity More with the National Church (great effort-no effort) and:			
1) Den. Identity in churches (growth-decline)	.33	.23	n.s.
3) Pride in Den Trad (true-false)	n.s.	.14	n.s.
4) Pride in Nat Church (true-false)	.18	.28	.20
<i>OUTCOMES</i>			
E. Local Churches Give Willingly and:			
1) Den. Identity in churches (growth-decline)	.17	n.s.	n.s.
3) Pride in Den Trad	.27	.28	.32
4) Pride in Nat Church	.29	.12	.24
F. Effectiveness of Judicatories (increased-decreased) and:			
1) Den. Identity in churches	.33	n.s.	.13
3) Pride in Den Trad	.22	.20	.17
4) Pride in Nat Church	.25	n.s.	.18
G Importance of Jud. vs Nat Church (increased-decreased) and:			
1) Den. Identity in churches	.22	-.15	-.12
3) Pride in Den Trad	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.
4) Pride in Nat Church	n.s.	-.17	n.s.

TABLE V. Multiple Regressions on Denominational Identity

*= sig <.05 **=sig .01 ***= sig. .001

A. Major Predictors of Growth of Denominational Identity in Congregations by Characteristics of Regional Judicatories, Regardless of Denominational Affiliation

	B	(std. error)	Beta
Constant	2.509	(.131)	
Pride in National. Church	.294	(.034)	.264**
Theological Diversity in Churches	-.186	(.030)	-.181**
Use National Church Resources	.135	(.036)	.114**
<i>N=1025</i>			
<i>Adjusted R squared</i>			.152***

B Predictors of Growth of Denominational Identity in Congregations By:

	<u>Denominational Clusters</u>		
	<u>Hi, Growing Vitality</u> <u>AOG, AVC</u>	<u>Mixed Vitality</u> <u>EPIS, LCMS</u>	<u>Low, Declining Vitality</u> <u>RCA, UCC, UMC</u>
	Beta	Beta	Beta
Pride in National Church	.26***	.35***	.14**
Theological Diversity in Churches	-.11	-.09*	-.00
Use National Church Resources	.09	.05	.18***
<i>N=</i>	<i>(261)</i>	<i>(416)</i>	<i>(346)</i>
<i>Adjusted R squared</i>	.107***	.152***	.055***

C. Predictors of Growth of Denominational Identity in Congregations with Denominational Clusters included as Dummy Variables

	B	(std. error)	Beta
Constant	2.319	(.137)	
Pride in National Church	.281	(.033)	.252***
Theological Diversity in Churches	-.082	(.033)	-.081**
Use National Church Resources	.125	(.036)	.105***
LowDenVitality (RCA,UCC,UMC) 0,1	.304	(.060)	.163***
HiDenVitality (AOG,AVC) 0,1	-.219	(.067)	-.108***
<i>N= 1025</i>			
<i>Adjusted R squared</i>			.192***

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