

***Organizing Religious
Work for the 21st
Century:
Exploring
"Denominationalism"
1997-2002***

Project Overview

Technological and cultural changes are transforming the way work is done. These are changes that affect all segments of American life, including religion. For much of this century, for instance, many people did religious work through centralized denominational systems that linked congregations to regional and national offices. Most of these structures are still in place, but it is clear that they are feeling the pressures of these unsettled times. Meanwhile, hundreds of new religious organizations are being formed to serve congregations. This project is an attempt to assess the changes afoot in existing denominational systems, while also mapping the emerging forms of cooperation through which congregations are channeling their ministries.

The Organizing Religious Work Project began in 1997 as a project of the Hartford Institute for Religious Research. The full project entailed over 70 researchers and associates throughout the country looking at religious organization at the three levels of congregations, judicatory officials and denominational structures and their executives.

This project specifically looked for the organizational connections through which communities of faith:

1. provide their participants with opportunities for worship, education, spiritual support, and nurture
2. provide service and care to their communities
3. speak out for the values they believe in
4. come to understand and work with people different from themselves
5. remember and pass on their own faith tradition
6. obtain the resources and professional leaders they need to do their own local work
7. hold each other accountable

Sponsorship

This research is being done under the auspices of the Hartford Institute for Religion Research at Hartford Seminary, in Hartford, Connecticut. This study is funded by a generous grant from the Lilly Endowment, Inc., an Indiana-based foundation with a special concern for the institutions that provide the religious resources upon which a flourishing and humane society depends.

The "Organizing Religious Work" project is co-directed by Dr. Nancy T. Ammerman, author of *Congregation and Community*, Dr. Adair T. Lummis, co-author of *An Uphill Calling: Ordained Women and Men in the Protestant Ministry*, and Dr. David A. Roozen, director of the Research Institute and co-author of *Rerouting the Protestant Mainstream: Sources of Growth & Opportunities for Change*. Dr. Scott L. Thumma was our Research Associate.

National Organizations Research

The project included a focused attention on eight existing national "denominations," chosen because of their differences in history, polity, theology and ethnic heritage they represented.

Eight Focus Denominations

Assemblies of God

Episcopal Church

Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod

National Baptist Convention, USA, Inc.

Reformed Church in America

United Church of Christ

United Methodist Church

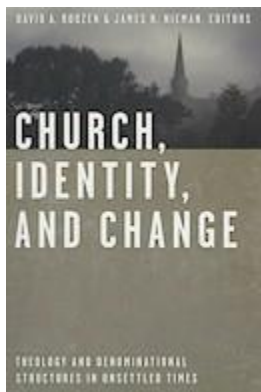
Vineyard Fellowship

For each denomination, a four-person team—a sociologist, a theologian, a historian and a denomination executive sought to discover and articulate how the national organization defines its tasks, and how it structures itself to accomplish them through interview, survey, and historical analysis. In addition, these teams are engaging each denomination's leaders on the theological assumptions that are embodied in their ways of working.

Survey Instruments used at the national denominational level include:

- Key informant interviews in each of the denominations
- Questionnaire of Assemblies of God Pastors
- Association of Vineyard Churches Pastors Survey
- Historical summaries of denominations

A following book is a summary of the ORW findings:



Church, Identity, and Change: Theology and Denominational Structures in Unsettled Times

David A. Roozen and James R. Nieman (editors)

Book description:

Are denominations passé? In the face of theological crises and plunging membership numbers, the days of some denominations appear to be numbered. Other denominations, though holding their own, are also feeling the stresses of large-scale social change.

Church, Identity, and Change offers an unprecedented, in-depth, inside look at the church today through the lens of eight diverse Protestant denominations. For each of the denominations examined—Assemblies of God, Association of Vineyard Churches, Episcopal Church, Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod, National Baptist Convention, Reformed Church in America, United Church of Christ, and United Methodist Church—an interdisciplinary team of

scholars presents a historical overview, a sociological case study, and a theological essay. These denominations represent a wide scope of American churches—liberal and conservative, old and new, declining and growing, liturgical and nonliturgical. The case studies particularly bring to life each church's distinctive challenges, including financial scandal, the death of a founder, and more.

The book offers a timely assessment of the relationship between Christian faith and denominational structures. At a time when many analysts are heralding a major paradigm shift from modern to postmodern forms of organization, *Church, Identity, and Change* tracks how these several denominations are restructuring their organizational identities and practices to embody their theological commitments in a postmodern world. This book is an essential resource for those concerned about the fate of the church in the twenty-first century.

Regional Bodies Research

Recognizing that no religious body can be understood solely by looking at either its national or local organizations, we also gave attention to the often-overlooked regional units on which both local congregations and national structures depend. Taking our seven regional research sites as the focus, we examined the role of state and regional units in each of the eight denominational systems. We interviewed judicatory officials, read newsletters and reports, attended annual conventions, and sought to understand the unique challenges of working at this middle level in larger religious bodies.

Survey Instruments used at the regional/Judicatory level include:

- Questionnaire given to Judicatory executives
- Regional leader interviews

Reports of the judicatory findings by Adair Lummis:

[The Art and Science of Subtle Proactivity: Regional Leaders and Their Congregations](#) A paper presented at the Religious Research Association Annual Meetings, Columbus, Ohio, October 2001.

[The Role of Judicatories in Interpreting Denominational Identity](#) A paper presented at the annual meeting of the Religious Research Association, Boston, 1999.

[Judicatory Niches and Negotiations](#) A paper presented at the annual meeting of the Association for the Sociology of Religion, San Francisco, 1998.

Research report summaries by Adair Lummis

[Research Report Conference I: The Middle Judicatory as a System of Congregations Connected to the Regional Office](#)

[Research Report Conference IIa: Judicatories' Ways of Encouraging Congregations to Share or Covenant with one another in Ministry and Mission](#)

[Encouraging Large, Wealthy Congregations to Share Resources with Small, Poor Congregations, Second Research Report, Part B](#)

[Research Report Conference III: Regional Leaders Ways of Working with Congregations Research](#)

[Report Series IV: Getting Pastors for Churches & Clergy for the Judiciary](#)

[Research Report Series 4.2: Finding Leaders at All for Part-Time and Rural Parishes](#)

[Research Report Series 4.3 - 4.4: Nonstipendiary and/or Non-M.Div. Pastors for Small Congregations: Education, Oversight and Impact on Community and Covenant Within the Judiciary](#)

[Research Report V: Connections and Unity Among and Between Congregations, Middle \(Regional\) Judiciaries and Their National Church](#)

Local Congregations Research

Our search for emerging patterns took place in seven local communities. Teams of researchers from universities located in each site worked with us. They visited a representative sample of congregations—congregations of all sizes, all religious traditions, and all ethnic groups. They discovered through interviews and surveys what work each group considers most important and what resources and partnerships make that work possible. By combining insights from 549 local congregations, we are able to describe the range of partnerships and resources available to congregations today. Through subsequent interviews with representatives of local religious and secular agencies and nonprofits and through in-depth case studies of a smaller group of representative congregations, we were able to round out the picture of how religious people are thinking about who they are, what they should be doing, and how they do it.

The seven local sites were:

Nashville, Tennessee

Hartford, Connecticut

Albuquerque, New Mexico

Rural central Missouri

Seattle, Washington

Rural northern Alabama

Chicago, Illinois

Read [The Summary Report of findings from the local congregational level](#) of the study by Nancy Ammerman. You may also wish to review her book based on the local findings titled [Pillars of Faith](#).

Area Reports

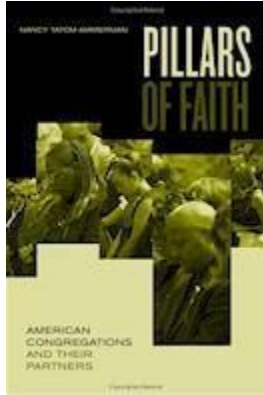
Individual reports were created for each area studied in the project. You can view these reports by clicking on the name of the area.

[Alabama](#)

[Albuquerque](#)

[Chicago](#)

[Hartford](#)
[Missouri](#)
[Nashville](#)
[Seattle](#)



[Pillars of Faith: American Congregations and Their Partners](#)

by Nancy Ammerman

A description of the book:

At the close of the twentieth century the United States was, by all accounts, among the most religious of modern Western nations. *Pillars of Faith* describes the diversity of tradition and the commonality of organizational strategy that characterize the more than 300,000 congregations in the United States, arguing that they provide the social bonds, spiritual traditions, and community connections that are vital to an increasingly diverse society.

Nancy Tatom Ammerman follows several traditions—Mainline Protestant, Conservative Protestant, African American Protestant, Catholic and Orthodox, Jewish, Sectarian, and other religions—as they establish discernible patterns of congregational life that fit their own history, tradition, and relationship to American society. Her methodologically sophisticated study balances survey research with interviews conducted with people from ninety-one different religious traditions and ethnographic observations that yield new information on many dimensions of American congregational life. Her book is the first to depict the complex resource base supporting American congregations, the enormous web of partners with whom congregations work, and the range of institutional patterns they exhibit.

Contrary to many gloomy forecasts, *Pillars of Faith* argues that organized religion in the United States is robust and vigorous—and that it can handle the increasing demands of escalating diversity and mobility the future is sure to bring.

Project Reports

Online reports from the study:

[The Summary Report of findings from the local congregational level](#) of the study by Nancy Ammerman.

[New Life for Denominationalism](#), Nancy Ammerman's article on denominational identity reprinted with permission from Christian Century.

[The Art and Science of Subtle Proactivity: Regional Leaders and Their Congregations](#) A paper presented by Adair Lummis at the Religious Research Association Annual Meetings, Columbus, Ohio, October 2001.

The Role of Judicatories in Interpreting Denominational Identity A paper presented at the annual meeting of the Religious Research Association, Boston, 1999 by Adair Lummis. [[Download the free Adobe Acrobat Reader to read this article](#)]

Adair Lummis' paper entitled **Judicatory Niches and Negotiations**.

Connectionalism Beyond the Denomination: Local Religious Ecologies and Beyond A paper presented by Scott Thumma.

What God Makes Free is Free Indeed: Nondenominational Church Identity and its Networks of Support by Scott Thumma.

Nondenominational Congregations Today Report with a Comparison of Nondenominational Congregations from the ORW and FACT Studies by Scott Thumma.

Can Anything Good Come out of Rural Alabama? A paper written by Daryl Healea reviewing the research he collected in Alabama.

Finding Rural Churches: Methodological and Practical Consequences of Invisibility A paper written by Zoey Heyer-Gray and Mary Jo Neitz and presented at the meetings of the Association for the Sociology of Religion.

Books based on the findings from this study:

Church, Identity, and Change: Theology and Denominational Structures in Unsettled Times

David A. Roozen and James R. Nieman (editors)

Pillars of Faith: American Congregations and Their Partners by Nancy Ammerman