Learning and Transformation

RESOURCES FOR CONVERSATIONS

FROM THE TEXAS METHODIST FOUNDATION

THE TOWER OF BABEL - IN ONE LANGUAGE: WHAT IS THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE DENOMINATION AND THE LOCAL CHURCH?

BY GIL RENDLE, SENIOR CONSULTANT, TEXAS METHODIST FOUNDATION

At one time, the whole Earth spoke the same language…. God took one look and said, "One people, one language; why, this is only the first step. No telling what they'll come up with next – they'll stop at nothing! Come, we'll go down and garble their speech so they won't understand each other. *- Genesis 11, The Message*

We need new insight into the multiple ways in which congregations will relate to their denominations in the future and the multiple confusing languages that will be involved.

The request by the church leaders was to help them understand why their congregation was growing at an annual rate of 4% when their surrounding community was growing by 7%. From a consultant's perspective this was a leadership group that had clearly done its homework and was asking an informed question. They had already taken their measurements and were asking about the difference. It came as a surprise to the consultant that, as the leaders continued to talk, their language clearly indicated that they believed their church was not growing. Noting the shift in the conversation, the consultant stopped the group to point out the difference between the "no growth" language the leaders were using and the graph which indicated a steady annual 4% growth. "Yes. Yes, you're right," responded the chairperson of the leadership group. "We are growing. But they are not good members."

Whenever I tell the story of this consultation I point out that as soon as I heard , "not good members," I knew I had this group right where I wanted them. I immediately broke the leaders into small groups with instructions to "describe a good member." Few people are surprised when I tell them that the subgroups all described a good member by describing themselves – regular in worship attendance, supportive of the budget, and active in programs and on committees. This leadership group described the people who live most closely to the center of a congregation, the loyal and involved. Interestingly this particular congregation was attracting a large number of adults, young adults, and young families who were among the new arrivals making up the community's 7% expansion. But these new people coming into the congregation had a different lifestyle with a much smaller amount of discretionary time left over after already established commitments of work, family, children's activities, and volunteer work. They were simply less able to be consistently active in the congregation. As one astute Episcopal priest noted, these were not the old "pew renters" who would sit each week in the pew that belonged to them. These were "time- share people" who could only be there much less regularly but who nonetheless were deeply concerned about their Christian formation as individuals and families. Being at church was important, but for them connecting with the congregation was a more complex task. The expectation of church leaders and the reality of participant's lives often exist in tension.

It is not uncommon for congregations to want more of a relationship with individuals than the individuals want with a congregation.

In part, wanting more of a relationship comes from leaders only having one model of a relationship – the "membership / belonging" model. Earlier cultural norms of a person's identity being framed by the groups to which he or she belonged made membership a critical matter. Membership demanded full participation and loyalty. For example in the business community, the nation's three largest service organizations - Lions Clubs International, Rotary International, and Kiwanis International – originally had weekly requirements for meeting attendance. To be a member meant to be present and not to be present jeopardized membership. Adults still tell stories of being on vacation as children with their family only to have their father need to find a local meeting of the Rotary club near their vacation spot so that a meeting would not be missed and membership would not be challenged. Beginning in the 1990s these organizations experienced regular membership decline by as much as 5% annually. At some point the old cultural norm of active membership in such a group as being important to a person's identity gave way to a newer standard allowing a person to shape his or her own identity through selfdetermined and self- limited participation in chosen activities. More recently these same service organizations are moving away from the singular membership model and experimenting with participant models, shifting requirements for attendance to as little as once a month and adding cyberclubs that meet on the Internet, family clubs that involve parents and children, and early morning gatherings at Starbucks.[i] The earlier membership model that identified individuals as "not good members" for missing meetings shifted to a participant model that recognized and facilitated the multiple ways in which people could participate. Many congregations have not made this shift. In many congregations to be less than a fully participating, contributing, volunteering member still risks censure and identification as a "not good member". The once singular model of membership which built cohesion and community now marginalizes people and limits the congregation's responsiveness to peoples' life situations and personal needs. Congregations in the present diverse culture need multiple models of relationships with people that welcome a wider range of individuals into Christian formation beyond the singular model that invites only membership.

Similarly denominations commonly want more of a relationship with the local congregation than the local congregation might want with the denomination.

Historically in the United States most congregations claimed and enjoyed a denominational link. From the beginning there have been well defined and powerful centers to each denomination that provided substantial gravitational pull on congregations resulting in a clear and dependable relationship. At the center in that earlier time were history, ethnicity, theology, polity as well as particular worship, community and individual practices. These were points of similarity and solidarity where people and congregations of a denomination easily recognized themselves as smaller parts of the larger whole. At the present time, many decades and a number of generations later, these clear centers have been substantially weakened by forces such as the mobility of the American people, by a more ecumenical sensitivity which has reduced the impact of denominational differences, and by theological / political differences that are played out in ways more regional than denominational. Denominations have moved from having clear gravitational centers to having simple operational associations centered around practices of clergy deployment, pension and insurance programs, regulatory polity, and shared mission programs. As evidence of the weakened center, congregations at one point on the learning curve of church growth were encouraged to diminish or hide their denominational identity as part of a strategy for attracting new people.

Weak or strong in relationship, congregations still clearly value and depend upon a denominational connection. In her research on the partners of American congregations, Nancy Ammerman points out that "virtually nothing [congregations] do is possible without the support of outside organizations."[ii] While the choice of outside helping organizations is vast and growing, she goes on to point out that congregations most commonly select denominations as primary partners.

While the need or attractiveness of a denominational relationship remains high for most congregations, the terms of the relationship can no longer be defined using a singular model. Like the congregational leaders who want more of a relationship than people sometimes choose to give, denominations may also be assuming an older single-standard of relationships that some congregations will welcome, others will tolerate, and others will resist. The singular model, which may now be inadequate, is often described as a covenantal or connectional relationship.

In the local congregation the singular membership model no longer serves well because people are now living in a complex culture of the individual where primacy is given to the unique over the general. Individuals can no longer be viewed as simply a part of a larger group. People no longer seek to be the same as others. Similarly, congregations are no longer considered to be all alike but vary in important and substantive ways. A denomination can no longer be considered the "whole" made of the sum of its individual smaller and identical congregational parts. It may be more helpful to think of a denomination, at both its regional and national levels, as a constituency of constituencies, which is Robert Quinn's description of a long established complex organization.[iii] In a constituency of constituencies there are multiple voices, multiple subgroups, and competing interests.

No Longer Generic

Congregations no longer look alike through such a filter, and the word "congregation" or "church" can no longer serve well as a generic reference to all the churches and charges that make up a denomination. Consider three distinct but related variables as ways to describe the complexity of the current field of congregations: size, purposefulness, and connection to the changing culture. Size (as measured by aggregate average attendance at weekly worship) has long been understood as one of the most defining characteristics of a congregation. Size brings shape to the form of a congregation's organizational structure, its way of making decisions, the form of its identity, and the way in which it practices and forms people in faith. Briefly stated, small congregations (<100 average attendance) make up the vast majority of all congregations in North America, are highly relational, are commonly singular in their gift of ministry, and are traditional and well established in their practice of worship. By greatest contrast large congregations (>500 average attendance) are fewer in number but engage a much greater percentage of people who are involved in congregations, organizationally connect and align smaller relational subgroups within the whole in a sense of shared community that does not depend upon agreement, are multiple and additive in establishing their various gifts of ministry, and offer choices among different practices of worship along a rather broad continuum. In between are the midsize congregations stressed by the pressure to offer the choices and variety of practices of the large congregations though they have far fewer resources available to do so.

Even such an oversimplified basic description of differences by size offers a way to imagine how congregations of different sizes need different relationships and resources from their denominational connection and can offer different and varied contributions in return. Some smaller congregations look to the denomination as the primary relationship that gives them a distinctive identity to separate them from other surrounding congregations in their neighborhood, while some of the larger congregations have fully formed individual identities not dependent upon and perhaps not even referencing their denominational connection. Some smaller congregations look to their denomination as the primary, even exclusive, channel through which the congregation participates in the extension of ministry beyond their own doors, while some larger congregations have fully formed programs, commitments, and relationships of missional outreach that may or may not include denominational connections. Some smaller congregations are fully dependent upon their denomination to provide leadership training, while some larger congregations outsource their leadership training to nondenominational providers or develop their own training.

Two caveats need to be offered to such generalized statements about congregations differentiated by size. The first is that the above descriptions are not snapshots of oppositional needs and relations between the denomination and congregations but rather brief evidence of the poles of several continuums on which individual congregations find their own, of many, positions. The second is that the transfer of products, services, and resources between the denomination and the congregation is not the sole basis of relationship as if devoid of the influence of theology, history, and polity. Nonetheless, even such a rudimentary sketch of congregations by size challenges any single the denomination-congregation relationship as inadequate and uninformed of the needs, mission, and vision of a rather wide variety of congregations housed within any one denominational tent.

Turning to the second variable of purposefulness, another range of differences can be observed. In a cogent summary of the challenges facing denominations, David Roozen recalls the earlier observation of sociologist Peter Takayama that, while denominations and local congregations are both purposeful and relational (task and relationship being the two pillars on which all viable organizations are built), denominations will give priority attention to purposefulness and congregations will give priority attention to relationships.[iv] Fundamentally denominations, at both the regional and national levels, are "built" purposefully while congregations tend to be constructed much more

following relational norms and practices. This difference in priority of attention offers explanation of how a local congregation can claim honest understanding and give verbal support to the denominational mission (such as the United Church of Christ's emphasis to "spread the message of God's extravagant welcome, reaching out to those who have felt there is no room for them within Christianity and the church – the excluded and alienated, the spiritually homeless, the questioning."[v]) but balk and become nonresponsive to the mission when including such people in its own location threatens to introduce new people into the congregation in ways disruptive to the relationships for people and norms already operative. This difference between purposefulness and relationship offers further support to the argument that the denomination cannot assume a singular connection to the denominationally framed mission. All congregations are not naturally enlisted in the missional purpose of the denomination, and the expectation that the relationship between denomination and congregation is shaped by shared engagement in a stated mission is inadequate.

To complicate this picture further, larger congregations, like denominations themselves, tend to give priority attention to purposefulness over relationship because, like the denomination, they are too large and complex to manage the development of community through relationships and depend instead on the network of smaller relational subgroups to coalesce around a shared stated purpose. Indeed, congregations with average weekly worship attendance over 500 need to learn how to be purposeful and align their various subgroups and coalitions through connection to that purpose, or they cannot maintain or grow past the 500 size (which appears to be an upper tipping point of vitality and viability for congregations in the current American culture). However, while congregations of a certain size must learn how to be purposeful in order to function effectively at their size, it cannot be assumed that their missional purpose is the same as that framed by the larger denomination. Universal and unilateral appeals by denominations for all congregations to share and support the denominational mission through budgeted financial support, collaborative participation, or aligned effort at the local level, is inadequate; once again, undershooting the target of keeping congregations of varied types connected in the denominational fold.

Congregations also fall at different places on the continuum of being in connection with the fast changing culture, the third of our short list of variables being used to differentiate congregations. From a systems perspective one of the requirements for sustainability of life for an organism, or organization, is to be "open" – to have porous boundaries that allow for an on-going connection with the surrounding environment. To be disconnected from the environment, to be a closed system, is death. The living system of a flower once disconnected from its environment of sun, soil, and water quickly dies. Similarly, a congregation, once disconnected from its environment which is a fast changing culture also withers and dies. Here again congregations fall along a continuum of levels of openness and adaptability in their connection to their environment. Generally large congregations, and some midsize congregations, have adapted well to an environment driven by individual values and have learned how to offer choices of worship expressions, a variety of formats for faith formation, engagement in small groups, and levels of participation which are inviting and engaging to people. With equal effectiveness a number of small to midsize congregations have learned to identify their one or few real gifts for ministry such as hospitality, caring, or service and have learned, in singular fashion, to pursue their God-given gift in a way that invites and engages those people who are similarly gifted. However, other congregations of all sizes have fundamentally disconnected from their surrounding environment, refusing to modify their long held practices of worship, formation, organization, decision making, or programming to encourage, or even allow, new people to find their place in the congregation. Longevity of human life now presents us culturally with five generations living side by side where only decades ago the norm was three generations. Some congregations have so embedded themselves in past practices that there are only two older generations now present within the congregation and the gap to the younger generations is too great to make the leap – a point of great vulnerability. The inability of managing the generational transfer will be the demise of a substantive number of these congregations.

Again, as the denomination itself seeks to adapt to live in a changing culture, it cannot assume a singular relationship with congregations which are spread widely along their own continuum of appropriate or inappropriate responses to a changed environment. The earlier formulations of relationship as covenant or as connection can no longer assume that "we are all in this together" as if the congregational "we's" are all alike.

Model or Matrix?

The argument offered here is that people can no longer be addressed by the congregation as being uniform and, similarly, congregations can no longer be approached generically by the denomination. One of the dominant conclusions from attention to the discipline of congregational studies beginning in the 1970s is that there are seemingly endless ways to differentiate and diagnose congregations depending on the organizational, sociological, or theological frame used for observation.[vi] Indeed, in his formative work on organizational culture, Edgar Schein notes that the uniqueness of an organization is so pervasive that the work to describe and understand an organization's individual culture is limitless unless framed by a particular question that will set limits to the task.[vii]

Since people and congregations can no longer be approached as if they are all alike, the implication is that both congregations and denominations will need to learn to manage a variety of relationships with their constituencies. The appropriate response to the inadequacy of the current model of relationship may not be the search for the new model but the development of an organizational agility to manage a matrix of relationships.

In an insightful application of communication theory to congregations, Rex Miller offers a helpful matrix that can sharpen the task now set before both congregations and denominations in shaping appropriate and multiple relationships.[viii] Miller identifies four paradigms of communication that humans have used to pass on information and wisdom: oral, print, broadcast, and digital. A paradigm is a set of assumptions and practices that are sufficiently integrated and integrating that they shape a person's experience and understanding of his/her world. In this case Miller's argument is that the ways in which information and wisdom are passed from person to person are a product of the technology available for the task and actually bring shape to the way people order their lives and relationships. Miller's work is a broad overview of the impact of the changes in the shifting paradigms of communication on both the culture and the congregation, a summary of which, for our purpose, can be found in the following chart:

Paradigm	Mediating Medium	Mode
Oral BC – 1500 AD	Ear	Dominated by relationship
Print 1500-1950	Eye	Dominated by logic
Broadcast 1950-2010	Experience (spectator)	Breakdown of logic Chaos
Digital 2010-	Experience (interactive)	Future perfect tense

Historically, the longest lasting paradigm of sharing information and wisdom began with the very first communication by humans in which one person gave information to another by telling. The oral paradigm depended upon one person' passing information to another – a process mediated by the ear and dominated by relationship. In order to learn something new a person had to be in personal relationship with the person who held the information and would learn by listening. Information and wisdom were managed by the roles and responsibilities given to individuals. Teachers were the actual containers of wisdom, and to learn was to have a relationship with the teacher. Storytellers were people who memorized "text" for faithful transmission and held the responsibility of passing on the stories unchanged as an early form of historical record. They also provided interpretation which helped to shape learning. "When weary Anglo-Saxon warriors gathered in the mead hall to drink and heal their wounds, they often listened to the wandering poets known as scops. Accompanied by the harp, the scop recited stories of adventurers who dared to journey into unchartered territories…. Bearing tales of the larger world, the scop traveled from village to village as well as to the houses of the mighty, connecting people separated by distance and social status – connecting them as well to their literary and religious heritage."[ix]

The dominance of the oral paradigm was broken by the subsequent stage dominated by print. The paradigm shifted at the point of the invention of the printing press by Johann Gutenberg in 1440. As early as 5000 BC the Sumerians invented writing as a means to stay in touch over distance with their trading partners. Although writing itself had been practiced for centuries, the development of written

communication included the search for technologies that would increase the volume and accuracy of communications while reducing the time needed to send and receive communication. This ongoing development of communication and communication technology has, in large part, been in the service of trade.[x] It was at the point of the invention of the printing press that information and wisdom could, for the first time, be housed in documents to be shared broadly instead of carried by specific individuals. The medium of communication shifted from ear to eye – from depending upon relationship to depending upon the logic encountered in the document. The shift moved communication from the teacher to the text. Indeed, the role of teacher shifted from being the container of wisdom to being the guide who would help direct the path of the learner through the documents and books where information and wisdom was now housed. Following the initial oral paradigm, the print paradigm has now been dominant over recent centuries which have been witness to the most rapid development of human civilization. It is important to note that the print paradigm has also been the dominant mode of training of the older clergy and denominational leaders of our present time. These leaders were shaped by formal and comprehensive logic-driven systematic theologies and were trained in practices of preaching centered on explanation and persuasion that were logical expressions of the conviction that faith was an issue of right understanding and correct belief. Much of the leadership training as well as the structure and practice of current denominationalism has been deeply fashioned by the print paradigm.

In the 1950s, the beginning of the broadcast paradigm, Miller points out that once again the invention and development of new technology in television and modern communication shifted our orientation. The shift this time was from eye to experience. No longer was information and wisdom housed primarily in logically regulated texts requiring the discipline of inquisitiveness but could now be mediated by the individual's personal experience. In fact, the flow of information quickly became so abundant and unregulated that the individual was put into the position of spectator and needed to learn how to attend to information selectively. The mode of communication at this point shifted from the initial paradigm of relationship - through logic - to chaos, which was the breakdown of logic where individuals need to find their own way through an overabundance of information in search of personal wisdom. Miller identifies this paradigm as "broadcast" which implies a curious polarity in which one experiences communication as part of a vast group but does so individually. For example, a television viewer is part of a vast crowd of millions of viewers watching a program, but he does so individually in his own home. Similarly in this paradigm people attend a rock concert in a huge crowd of 10,000 participants but experience it individually in a chaotic huddle of individuals listening to sound too loud to permit connection to others even in the most immediate vicinity. Miller notes that it is congruent that this time of the broadcast paradigm was the same period of the phenomenal growth in the number of large churches where people could attend church as a part of a group of 1,000 to 10,000 people in a theater setting and yet experience the communication as an individual spectator. In their research on mega churches (congregations with average worship attendance of 2,000 or greater), Scott Thuma and Dave Travis note that by 1960 there were only 16 in the United States. Beginning in the 1970s, when the broadcast paradigm was at strength, that number grew exponentially until by the time of their data gathering in 2005 there were 1215 mega church congregations.[xi] It is important to note that communication in this broadcast paradigm, whether through television, rock concerts, or mega churches, is mediated by experience, but by **passive** experience.

Miller points to the personal computer and subsequent digital communication through networks and Internet as introducing a new and not yet fully shaped paradigm of communication which is again experience based but is now interactive rather than passive. The individual is not limited to being engaged with the tool of the communication- the computer, the email, the chat room, the video game- but with the smaller self selecting community (micro-community) that is also simultaneously engaged through shared use of the tool of communication. For the people of the broadcast paradigm, playing a video game is an individual experience between the person and the game. For the people of a digital paradigm, playing a video game is a connection to a small community of people also engaged – perhaps even simultaneously on the Internet – with the same game. In one paradigm the game isolates the person; in another it is a tool of connection to a small community. In the digital paradigm the experience is interactive and immediate – what Miller calls "the future perfect tense". Clearly this is a paradigm still in formation, as indicated by Miller's offering the date of 2010 as a marker for this paradigm's dominance. But this newly evolving paradigm does suggest the development of smaller gatherings than the mega church offers, settings more interactive than passive, teaching done by interactive sharing rather than by trained leaders, and micro-community relationships shaped by shared and immediate experience.

The Implication for Denominations and Congregations

Miller argues that just as the changing paradigms of communication have shifted the way in which people engage with information and wisdom, so has there been a concomitant shift in relationships between parties, both individually and organizationally. The earlier summary chart of the paradigms can be extended to note the shift in relationships.

Paradigm	Mediating Medium	Mode	Relationship
Oral BC – 1500 AD	Ear	Dominated by relationship	**Covenant:** relational Blessing & Curses
Print 1500-1950	Eye	Dominated by logic	**Vows:** contractual Benefits & Costs (litigation)
Broadcast 1950-2010	Experience (spectator)	Breakdown of logic Chaos	**Promises:** no fault agreements Mutual Benefits
Digital 2010-	Experience (interactive)	Future perfect tense	**Agreement:** social cohesion through webbed networks Micro-Community

In the earliest oral paradigm the relationship was understood covenantally – a deep pledge of being connected much as the idea of covenant in the Old Testament frames the relationship between God and Israel. It is a deep commitment in which the people pledge to be faithful to Yahweh as their only God and God pledges that Israel will be God's people. The relationship is managed by blessings and curses. When Israel honors the relationship, they are blessed, when the relationship is broken, they experience being cursed.

The language most used currently by established denominations to describe their intended relationship with congregations is covenantal (or "connectional" in its more organizational form.) Such covenantal constructs assume a belonging: Israel belongs to God and God to Israel, the congregation belongs to the denomination and the denomination to the congregation, the member to the congregation and the congregation to the member. Faithfulness in the relationship is measured. God blesses and curses people depending upon their actions and attitudes and, at their bravest, the prophets blessed and cursed God in return. Continuing the covenantal paradigm, blessings and curses are modified as sanctions by denominations as they evaluate congregations as either "good" or "not good" depending upon their levels of support, participation, and compliance with denominational positions – and we are now back to the church leadership group fretting over good or not good members as measured by their involvement, financial support, and loyalty.

As the paradigm shifted from oral to print, the foundation of relationships shifted from personal contact to contracts. Contracts are logically defined agreements based on benefits and costs. When trade was begining to develop, the merchants in Portugal who financed the trading ships that traveled to the East Indies for spices could not hope to manage the agreement with the ship's captain face to face so they gave clear expectations in writing which laid out who was to bear what costs and who would reap what portion of the benefits. The medium of print quickly introduced such logical frameworks to all relationships. Indeed, one central purpose of the legal profession is the management of property rights: who owns, who benefits, who pays costs, and what consequences are levied if agreements are not met. These are logically and methodically managed relationships.

If Christian community was originally framed covenantally because it was embedded in the oral paradigm, the creation, development, and maturation of both congregations and denominations over the past several centuries happened while embedded in the print paradigm. It is not surprising, then, that relationships between denominations and congregations are still described covenantally but are overlaid with contractual agreements and limits as found in books of polity. Especially in the last century, as the print paradigm reached its zenith, books of polity which began as founding documents and descriptions of basic governance blossomed into large volumes of legislated agreements and procedures.

Miller dates the end of the dominance of the print paradigm in the 1950s when relationships shifted again. The new lack of clarity and dependibility seems to have spawned an even greater flow of legislation, rules and regulations. In their 1992 essay on American denominationalism, Craig Dykstra and James Hudnut-Beumler identified the early stages of American denominational development as moving from a constitutional confederacy to a corporation.[xii] The corporate model is the perfect expression of logic-based contractual relationships. Importantly, Dykstra and Hudnut-Beumler identify the most recent stage of denominational development as shifting from corporate organization to regulatory agency beginning in the 1960s. They describe this most recent developmental stage of denominations as a response of economy - as relationships between the denomination and the congregation became less uniform, less clear and less predictable, the economic response was not to invest in negotiating the needs of individual congregations and individuals (which would be costly in time and resources) but to bring clarity by enforcing agreements of relationship. Polity grew with legislation and requirements. Denominations were not alone in this shift. During the same period both civil and criminal law (not to mention the IRS code and the health insurance industry) became much more comprehensive and restrictive; and the culture, particularly in the United States, became more litigious.

In the final two paradigms, broadcast and digital, Miller points to relationships less clearly formed, less dependable, and less predictable. In the broadcast paradigm the deep pledges of covenant have morphed into more malleable promises to stay in relationship as long as both parties continue to find mutual benefit. Walking through a parallel interpretation of the marriage relationship using these paradigms one can see the earliest stage of marriage as a covenant (recognized sacramentally in some traditions) modulated to a more contractual agreement with costs levied if the contract is broken in divorce, to a promise which endures as long as the partners find mutual benefit but can be broken / ended without claim – no fault.

Miller projects that relationships in the digital paradigm will be directed by temporal agreements among smaller groups of people attracted to one another by affinity or shared practice – social cohesion through webbed networks in small micro-communities. Relationships may be intense but will be more diffuse and will be formed and managed by the individual, or the individual congregation.

It is critical to note that in the long line of human history there have only been four communication paradigms, two of which have dominated all of human history until the most recent generations. However, within only the past 50 years the culture has shifted from using two paradigms to four paradigms. Christian denominations and congregations are organizational constructions of a biblical people, so it is fitting and important that covenantal pledges of faithfulness are used to inform the relationship of community. Nonetheless, the argument of this essay is not that this covenantal / connectional model is inappropriate, but when employed as the only model may not serve denominations or congregations to manage the variety of relational assumptions now operative in the present culture effectively. While framing faith-based relationships as covenantal may be foundational for church based systems, Miller's overview of paradigms suggests that a single model may produce ongoing and growing disappointment. Before 1950 there were only two paradigms operative, the oral and print. While the print paradigm was dominant, the people of congregations and denominations easily understood the covenant relationship because of its biblical origin and its similarity to contractual costs and benefits. With the speed of technological development we now live in a new swirl of assumptions about relational connections that introduces a messiness and unpredictability undermining the singular assumption of covenant.

The New Question of Relationship

Moving from a focus on a singular model of relationship to understand and respond to a matrix of relationships requires an appreciation for messiness and is much more challenging. The question that now faces denominations is not what is the next model of the relationship but what is it that now lives at the center that keeps us connected in all our differences. Perhaps what now rests most powerfully at the center is not history, ethnicity, or polity but the story – the story of who we now are, why we now are, and where we now are. What can now hold us together is a bold, vibrant story.

The power of story may be more easily seen by turning to examine a very large congregation with many different constituencies, voices, and subgroups. All who participate in a very large congregation are not alike. Indeed, for many people a part of the draw of a large congregation is the high level of diversity that they experience as a part of such a community. Despite differences people need to be able

to see themselves connected to the shared story that belongs to the congregation. In a consultation with a very large congregation, I began by interviewing the senior pastor, clergy and program staff, and key lay leaders. The purpose of the consultation was to help this congregation prepare for the retirement of its long tenured, high-profile, beloved senior pastor and prepare to receive the successor. At the end of the interview with the senior pastor, I asked a final question: "What do I need to know most about this congregation?" The answer was, "Gil, you need to know that this is a centrist church with a thick culture." I asked for an explanation and the senior pastor explained that they were "centrist" – they lived at the center of their Presbyterian theology and practice. He explained that there was a full range of theologies and moral perspectives among the members and participants of the congregation. All were welcome, but in this church, mission was to be shaped, programs were to be developed, worship (in its various forms) was to be connected, and decisions were to be made from their traditional Presbyterian center. Secondly they had a "thick culture," they moved intentionally and strategically into change and did not necessarily seek to be innovative or agile but moved "thickly" with purpose. The senior pastor was telling me the story of this historic congregation that was quite a bit more than the sum of its programs, services, missions, and aspirations. He was describing their identity.

What is more important is that as I continued the interviews I concluded each one with the same question: "What do I need to know most about this congregation?" Almost every one of the people interviewed, staff and lay leaders, offered the same answer, that they were a centrist church with a think culture. When asked to explain, each person offered the same definitions as the senior pastor. This church's story lived and operated effectively because it was known, and shared, living visibly in the actions of leaders. Indeed, it was the story that held all of the differences within the congregation in balance. This balance that held disparate voices together in this congregation was most visible as it began to weaken when the senior pastor finally announced both his retirement and the need for a search committee for the successor. Suddenly the once balanced voices held in place by the church's story began to surface in new and oppositional ways as people sensed an opportunity to seek more importance for their own preferences. For example, a few people became much more active seeking attention and resources for programs with gays, lesbians, and transgendered people, while some other people suddenly pushed the church to take a stand against the ordination of gays. Some wanted more budget for social justice ministries, while others wanted new budget attention for mission programs. With story and story teller in place such diverse congregations as this large historic church live from their center and the relationship with members and participants remains balanced. Everyone in the congregation does not need to live at the center. But the story of the congregation which does live at its center is known, and people, from whatever their particular perspective or interests, can see themselves in the story and stay in connection. Multiple and different relationships are managed by allowing individuals their differences but inviting them to connect to the same core story.

Older and more naive ideas of harmony and agreement that live in many congregations and denominations force us toward seeking a false sameness as if we all are, or should be, alike. The reality in a highly complex culture where people encounter differences with great regularity is that community is built through acknowledging and negotiating the differences. It is not the differences that keep us apart; rather, they enrich us. False harmony and enforced intimacy are not needed. Individuals understand that they are not alike and do not choose to be like everyone else. Tom Long describes a congregation as the place a person goes in order to be with people he or she may not want to be with under other circumstances. He then goes on to explain that what we need to always remember as participants in a congregation is that those other people feel exactly the same about us.[xiii] Differences do not dissuade us in a congregation or in a denomination and do not block a diverse people from being in community while connected to a shared central faith.

In order to manage the variety of relationships present in this complex culture the denomination needs a strong, clear story at the center and then porous boundaries at the edge where both congregations and individuals can connect as they are able and as they must. The story needs to be able to answer three questions: Who are we? What has God called us to do? And, who is our neighbor? These are the questions of identity, purpose, and context.[xiv]

It may be that these questions of a denomination are best asked with the word "now." Who are we **now**? What has God called us to do **now**? Who is our neighbor **now**? Asking these questions with the clarifying "now" is important because of the way in which we manage self-understanding. For most of us identity and self-understanding are frequently framed in the past. When teaching about congregational identity I commonly ask leaders if they think of themselves as younger than they really are. Invariably the answer is yes as smiles break

out in the room. I then point out that thinking of ourselves as younger suggests that we know more about **who we were** than about **who we currently are**. The way we understand ourselves is based on who we were prior to our most recent personal changes. Congregations and denominations similarly know more about who they once were than about who they now are. In a congregation it is the last fifty or so new members or participants who actually know more about who, what, and where their congregation is in the present moment than do the elected leaders who sit on boards and committees or the most loyal members who have been faithfully attending for years. Self-understanding caught in some earlier moment is a common condition of congregations and presents a similar trap for denominations. To live and to act out of an earlier self makes us break with the current and new people we hope to invite into shared ministry.

Living out of our past tends to produce a weak story even if the past was heroic. The story of who we once were does not encourage or inspire people to be more than they are in the current moment. What is needed is a story – a narrative for people to live in the present moment. It must be informed by history but not clouded with the details and complexity produced by historical research or else it becomes a story too complex to live. It must resonate with and represent the theology of the denomination but not reduce it to a dogma or relational morality that deadens a person's own experience.

In November of 2007 the United Methodist denomination hosted a historic gathering to which the bishops, district superintendents, and key conference executive staff were invited. Meeting at Lake Junaluska in North Carolina, this gathering of 850 denominational leaders from around the globe had not been repeated for forty years. The purpose of the gathering was to recall and to rehearse the story that now lives at the center of the denomination. It was a story meant to be strong enough to hold this group of people together in all of their substantial diversity – global, theological, political, regional, and generational. Gathered at Lake Junaluska were the key people who were to lead the denomination, and they were being reminded of the bold story at the center of all that they did and all that they dealt with. They were being reminded of:

- **The Mission:**

  The mission of the United Methodist Church is to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world." **(purpose)**

- **Their shared faith:**

  Distinct among Christians, United Methodists follow John Wesley's three general rules: "Do no harm. Do all the good you can. Stay in love with God." **(identity)**

- **The named priorities:**

  Participants were asked to give particular attention in their work to the areas identified as having the greatest need for the present and near future: the "seven pathways" and "four initiatives". **(context)**

Like the large Presbyterian church that was centrist with a thick culture, the denomination made an effort to describe and remind its leaders of a functional center sufficiently bold with identity, purpose, and context so that they could align their own work with what was most important. It was also an effort to identify and rehearse with these leaders a center to which thousands of congregations and millions of people could connect, although in their different ways because of their different circumstances. The story could have been told with more complex detail in history and theology but it would have lost its clarity and power. They story could have been told more inclusively so that all of the interests and agendas of denominational constituencies and subgroups might be represented in a much broader list of priorities, but all urgency and agency would have been lost. Getting to the story – the story that will carry the future and invite connection – is exceptionally difficult work for leaders because it requires that choices be made. The normal fear of a diverse organization is that when choices are made some will feel left out and the organization will be weakened. The reality is that making choices that bring clarity invites all of the people of differences to find their own place and make their own connection to what they see as a vibrant and faithful center.

The story that lives at the center of a denomination is more than a covenant which assumes connection and loyalty because of who we once were and the historic way in which we understand our relationship with God and with one another. The story at the center is also more than a case statement that is the product of the print paradigm bringing a contractual form to the relationship by inviting support and participation based on reciprocal benefits. Covenant and case statements may come out of the story. It is important for the

denomination to use covenantal and case statements because there are still those within the denomination who live with a strong frame of reference to those paradigms. The story, however, is deeper and connects people in whatever different way they may have the gifts and passions through which to live the story.

The Challenges

In a time when there were, at best, three generations and two paradigms shaping peoples' values and behavior the task of leadership was simpler and more direct. In the present moment when five generations and four paradigms live in shared space and time, the challenge of leadership is much more complex. The way ahead requires more than the search for the next metaphor for a denomination and more than the next model for the relationship between the denomination and congregation. The leadership task has become increasingly complex in at least five ways.

The first issue of complexity is learning to be "multi-lingual" in the various paradigms, metaphors, and images that speak to a diverse people. Congregations and denominations will continue to hold together people whose understanding about their lives has been shaped separately by different generational values and different cultural times. The fact remains that people in a congregation or a denomination will use different assumptions and different language both to express and understand themselves. At any moment a denominational leader will need to know how to talk to covenantal and contractual people and still be able to speak meaningfully to others who search for mutual benefits in relationship or who are satisfied by making links to smaller micro-communities that may or may not be a direct offshoot of the denomination. This is an issue of skill development knowing "how to talk to whom, when." In the mid 1980s the Mercedes Benz auto company defined two basic and critical but different markets for their automobiles. The one audience was those people who were most concerned about technology, performance, and quality. The other people were captured by design, style, and the appointments established by using exceptional materials and workmanship. With dual groups in mind the marketing team created commercials that spoke to both audiences developing, for example, 60 second commercials in which the focus began clearly on technology and performance but after 30 seconds abruptly but seamlessly shifted to focus on appearance and style for the second half of the commercial. The example, of course, is overly simplistic but points to the need to learn how to speak with others in multiple ways so that they can hear the message. To work from only one communication paradigm or to live from only the values of one generation is to be offended by, and offensive to, the other paradigms and generations. Leaders need deep cultural grounding that allows them to hear the differences descriptively and not be personally or institutionally offended by those who think and talk differently.

The second issue of complexity is related to the reduced control or influence that the denomination has over the relationship with its congregations. To move away from a singular model of relationship and an assumed language to describe the relationship is to open the relationship to the interpretation and needs of others. The shift can be described as follows:

Model	➜	**Matrix**
Control	➜	Hospitality
Monological	➜	Dialogical
Neat	➜	Messy

The relinquishing of control raises the deep issue of hospitality which at its center is more than being invitational. Hospitality means making sacred space available in the denomination for what the individual congregation needs to be or to do. Certainly a congregation cannot stand in opposition to the denomination at its core identity, purpose and context and still be part of the denomination. To be in full opposition is to step outside the boundary of the relationship. However, within the bounds of the denominational community, room must be allowed for a relatively broad range of expressions in which congregations can live out their uniqueness yet still feel the hospitality of being welcomed.

Moving from monological communication to dialogical communication is another attendant change in the relationship in which the denomination has to practice the leadership of listening as well as the leadership of talking. The denomination at both the regional and the national level is no longer in the systemic position of directing congregations. Denominational leaders can no longer "tell" churches and clergy what to do. However uncomfortable this change is from the perspective of the exercise of denominational authority, the shift to a dialogical relationship in which there is both talking and listening offers the promise of new learning. The new can only be discovered in reflective dialogue. This tenet is a central discovery of Nobel winning physicist and world acclaimed thinker David Bohm. The new always comes from the talking and the listening that is involved in dialogue.[xv] Bohm points out that when I say something to which you listen and then you respond I commonly realize that your response means that you heard something other or more than I thought I had said. You learned from what I said, and in turn, I learned from the new thing that I heard in your response. Given time, such sustained dialogues that depend as much on listening as on speaking lead to new insights and actions that neither person could have discovered or dreamed on his/her own. Similarly, allowing congregations full voice in a dialogue about their relationship to the mission of the denomination will provide the learning necessary to shape a viable denominational future.

Some congregations will live closer to the center of the denomination than will others. The resultant range of the ways in which congregations will frame their relationship with the denomination will prompt a messiness uncomfortable with the earlier assumptions of a denomination as corporation or regulatory agency. However, hope lies in the realization that the Spirit of God moves more easily in spaces created by un-uniform messiness than in the rigidity of tightly controlled organizations.

The third challenge of the task of leadership is the recognition that in a large, diffuse organization differences are not negotiated by the participants but by the leaders. Again, it may be more instructive to look at a large congregation to understand this dynamic. In a large congregation individuals are drawn to the diversity that can be housed there. Members and participants attending worship are aware of the diversity in the sanctuary. Some differences are gross and easily recognized – age, race, gender. Other differences are subtle and may be experienced more intuitively – political, socio-economic, generational orientations. Nonetheless, the diversity is appreciated and often experienced as supportive to the individual's spirit and faith formation. However, at the end of the worship service in a large congregation, the individuals quickly revert to their own individual subgroups (both within the congregation as they choose to participate in programs based on the similarity that they hold with the people of a program subgroup, and back at home and at work). For the individual the move is from the great diversity of worship where she/he experiences difference to the smaller groups in her/his lives where she/he holds commonness with others. The diversity in the large congregation is appreciated by the participants, but it is not negotiated by them. The differences are negotiated by the senior clergy, staff, and board. For example, in a consultation with a large congregation with a wide array of programs I arranged to interview a broad range of program leaders. On one morning during the interviews I talked with a women's group leader whose group was affiliated with a denominationally based interest group focused on women's rights and self-empowerment. Next I spoke with a young man who provided leadership to a group of young professional husbands who participated in bible study and personal sharing focused on being the head of a family in which the role of the wife was understood to be submissive. Both of these leaders were aware of the other group, both stated that the wider congregation did not necessarily share the perspective of their program group, and both stated that their senior pastor had made space for them to be a part of the life of the church as long as they connected their mission to the whole of the mission (story) of the congregation. Consider, however, the complexity of the work of the senior pastor, staff, and board when resources of time, attention, money, or space are wanted by any such different subgroups and when choices need to be made. The choices made must be guided by the mission or story of the whole congregation and continual interpretation and dialogue need to be offered by the leaders to help divergent people and groups stay connected.

The fourth challenge for the denomination and its leaders is to use the story appropriately in contrast to uniformly. A national marketing campaign is an example of a denomination using its story uniformly and monologically. Commonly a campaign shares the same or similar message with everyone, assuming that all will hear what is needed. Marketing campaigns are important tools to talk to a culture that does so much of its learning in this way. However, when considering relationships rather than speaking uniformly, leaders need to be appropriate. In fact, it is a truism in complex settings that it is more important for leaders to be appropriate than it is for leaders to be right. Being appropriate means saying what can and should be heard. To say less would not be helpful, to say more would not matter. The message is determined as much by the hearer as by the speaker.

Some congregations live effectively and stay connected with the denomination in identity and mission and need to be affirmed. Some congregations are wrestling with their denominational connection, and they need to be encouraged. Of course there are also those congregations who choose not, or are too fearful, to change their practices in ways that will connect them to either the denomination or their own neighborhoods, and they wrestle with issues of viability and vitality. These congregations need a message of challenge. It is an act of courage for denominational leaders to learn to say to timid or recalcitrant congregations, in gracious and descriptive ways that do not break relationship, "You're better than that!" Building a new story with people often means confronting and demythologizing the old story as inadequate and limiting.[xvi] Helping congregational leaders experience the breakdown of their present self-limiting self understanding allows for the possibility that the leaders might understand themselves and the purpose of their congregation in a new way.

The final and perhaps one of the most challenging tasks of this new denominational leadership with congregations is to escape the trap of "the tyranny of the all." Long established denominations operate on deeply embedded norms that have guided past generations of leaders, congregations, and practices. Many of the norms that provide guidance are the product of interests held by some part of the denominational system. In his discussion of complex organizations as a constituency of constituencies, Robert Quinn notes that organizations take on both a public mission (what is said publically about the mission and purpose of the organization) and a private mission (a more functional mission of satisfying the strongest of the constituent voices in the organization.)[xvii] An example is a school system that operates under a public mission statement that describes the central organizing principle and purpose as the education of children. However, Quinn points out, over a period of time established and complex organizations take on a private mission, not publicly acknowledged, which is to satisfy the needs of the strongest of the constituent voices in the system which in an educational system is the administration and the faculty.

In long established denominational systems the strongest constituent voices are clergy, congregations and denominational staff. Whatever the public mission of the denomination (for example the public mission of the United Methodist Church "to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world") the private mission assumed by the system is to meet the needs of the clergy, congregations, and staff already in the system. The private mission establishes deep and powerful norms that must be broken for change to happen. One of the dominant norms that undergird the private mission in many established denominations is *the assumption of egalitarianism* in which we assume that "all"—all congregations, all clergy, all lay leaders, all members, all agencies, all committees, all social justice issues, all subgroups—must be given a fair and equal share of attention and resources. Coupled with an assumption of the scarcity of resources, this egalitarianism creates a competitive arena in which importance and effectiveness in the system are measured by the amount of resources garnered, not by what is accomplished.

More difficult than managing the competition over resources, however, is the tyranny of the all that is also based on the norm of egalitarianism. The tyranny of the all puts constraints on the denomination by insisting that the denomination (either nationally or regionally) cannot move ahead on mission until all congregations and all clergy are ready to move ahead together in agreement and have had their needs met. The norm of egalitarianism was established in an earlier era of denominations in which uniformity among congregations was assumed and in a corporate, bureaucratic manner (appropriate for the time) all clergy and all congregations advanced in sync. There was a career ladder available to clergy so that by tenure clergy could commonly assume that over time they would move to larger churches with higher salaries. There were sufficient resources available so that congregations in less hospitable environments and with lesser gifts for ministry would be cared for by the denomination through subsidies if they could not care for themselves. Denominations lived with the assumptions of "no clergy left behind"; "no congregations left behind." In the current complex environment in which there are multiple forms of relationships between the denomination and its clergy and congregations such normative assumptions are not functional. The tyranny of the all gives the power of "no" to clergy unwilling or unable to retool for a changed culture and to congregations recalcitrant or unable to address issues of transformation or who are living beneath the threshold of change. The relationship with less effective clergy and with recalcitrant congregations does not necessarily need to be severed. However, the norm of egalitarianism must be broken so that the former needs of constituent voices no longer has the power to hold back the new learning and practice of effective ministry.

We now live in a fast changing culture of multiple generations, multiple paradigms, and unending change fueled by swift technological advance, deepening globalization, and the subsequent growing division of people between the haves and have-not, between the participants and nonparticipants in the wealth and benefits of the world. It is, indeed, a complex world. Such complexity needs to be reflected within the relationships between denominations and congregations.

[i] "Not Your Granddad's Service Club", USA TODAY, November 15, 2007, 3A.

[ii] Nancy Ammerman, *Pillars of faith: American Congregations and their Partners*, (Berkley: University of California Press, 2005), 206.

[iii] Robert Quinn, *Deep Change: Discovering the Leader Within* (San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 1996), 91.

[iv] David Roozen and James Nieman (eds.) *Church, Identity and Change: Theological and Denominational Structures in Unsettled Times* (New York: Erdmans, 2005), 596.

[v] www.ucc.org/god-is-still-speaking

[vi] For example, see: Nancy Ammerman, Jackson Carroll, Carl Dudley, William McKinney (eds.) *Studying Congregations: A New Handbook*, (Nashville, Abingdon Press, 1998).

[vii] Edgar Schein, *The Corporate Culture Survival Guide*, (San Francisco, Jossey Bass, 1999) 26.

[viii] Rex Miller, *The Millennium Matrix: Reclaiming the Past, Reforming the Future of the Church*, (San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 2004), 95-118.

[ix] Kevin Armstrong, "In Search of a New Creation: Guided by the Christian Scop" (unpublished manuscript, 2002).

[x] Nayan Chanda Bound Together: How Traders, Preachers, Adventurers and Warriors Shaped Globalization (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 61-66.

[xi] Scott Thuma and Dave Travis, Beyond Megachurch Myths (San Francisco: John Wiley & Sons, 2007), 1-20.

[xii] Craig Dykstra and James Hudnut-Beumler, "The National Organizational Structures of Protestant Denominations: An Invitation to a Conversation" in *The Organizational Revolution: Presbyterians and American Denominationalism*, Coalter, Mulder, and Weeks, eds. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1992), 307-331.

[xiii] Tomas Long, Testimony: Talking Ourselves into Being Christian, (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004), 44.

[xiv] Gil Rendle and Alice Mann, *Holy Conversations: Strategic Planning as a Spiritual Practice for Congregations* (Herndon: Alban Institute, 2003), 3-6.

[xv] David Bohm, *On Dialogue* (London: Routledge, 1996) 2.

[xvi] William Isaacs, *Dialogue and the Art of Thinking Together* (New York: Doubleday, 1999) 252-290.

[xvii] Quinn, 9 1.

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