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# The Ecumenical Outreach Coalition: A Case Study of Converging Interests and Network Formation for Church and Community Cooperation

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*This study examines the formation of a particular ecumenical coalition of churches that emerged in response to decaying neighborhood conditions. An "Open Systems Role-Set Theory" is applied to a qualitative case study of interchurch cooperation. This model examines the process through which this new organization resulted in changes in leaders' social networks, which led to changes in strategies for community outreach. Although this study focused specifically on an ecumenical alliance of religious congregations, leadership networks and coalitions generate cooperation and/or competition between agencies throughout the independent sector. One basic theme that emerges from this study suggests that the makeup of, and political dynamics within, leaders' role sets drive the process through which organizational decisions are made and resources are allocated.*

## STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Legal scholars have questioned the assumption that religious congregations merit the tax benefits given to nonprofit organizations. Hansmann (1980, 1981, 1989) and Hone (1979, 1989) have argued that churches are more like member-serving country clubs than agents of public well-being. Even so, scholars cannot ignore the historical significance of religious involvement in social change. The Black Church brought the quest for civil rights to the public agenda (Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990). The Church of the Savior in Washington, DC, and East Harlem Protestant Parish are examples of churches continuing

the struggle for racial justice in their particular communities (O'Connor, 1963; Webber, 1960, 1964). Sociologists of religion have studied variation in the degree to which churches emphasize social outreach. Numerous case studies and surveys suggest that almost all churches do some form of outreach or advocacy work (Dudley & Johnson, 1993; Mock, 1992; Smith, 1981). In addition, the political and organizational mechanisms that produce this variation have been examined (Carroll & Roozen, 1990; Davidson & Koch, in press; Koch 1994a, 1994b; Mock, 1992). Finally, an alternative organizational form—the local ecumenical coalition—has been studied to determine the extent to which congregations serve the public by sharing resources (Davidson, 1985; Johnson & Dubberly, 1992).

This study examines the specific process through which one particular coalition of congregations came to align themselves for purposes of community solidarity and social renewal. The theoretical model illustrated by this case study poses two basic questions. First, what motivates religious leaders to involve their organizations in social change? Second, by what process do these initiatives achieve success? What we call open-systems role-set theory combines insights from organizational theory and social psychology, arguing that significant and successful outreach ministry is a social and political, as well as an ideological, process. When making decisions, church leaders are motivated by a combination of personal and organizational values and interests. The manner in which leaders confront or ignore changes in the social and political climate where they serve illustrates the degree to which their congregations become, or continue to be, agents of positive social change.

## OPEN-SYSTEMS ROLE-SET THEORY

### AN OPEN-SYSTEMS APPROACH

The basic premise for this study asserts that congregations are part of a complex social context referred to here as an open system. The local community provides an ideal setting for observing the complex relationships between all of the various elements comprising such a system. An open-systems organizational approach argues that churches

- are private, yet exist in a competitive relationship with other organizations in their environments;
- depend on voluntary compliance and contributions of their constituents;
- persuade their members to comply with organizational goals by appealing to individuals' values and interests; and
- are in a position to both transform and be transformed by social forces in the environment. (See Davidson, 1985; Scherer, 1980; Smith, 1993.)

|  | Motivation | |
|  | Values | Interests |
|---|---|---|
| Relationship to open system | | |
| Engage | Ideological | Pragmatic |
| Retreat | Sectarian | Protective |

Figure 1. Organizational Type

Social processes in a congregation's environment, such as increases in crime, decreases in property values, and growing urban decay, create a social context within which church leaders make choices. Even failing to make a decision is a choice by default; it is a choice to continue established patterns without any specific focus on new external problems. The open-systems component of this theoretical model conceptualizes these options as two distinct questions that, for the sake of simplicity, may be seen as dichotomous choices. First, will church leaders *engage in* or *retreat from* the challenges of a changing context? Second, is that decision motivated primarily by individual and/or organizational *values* or *interests*? Even at the level of the local congregation, these questions oversimplify the choices and the decision-making process considerably. Some segments of the congregation may lean toward one side of the issue, whereas others lean in the opposite direction. For those who agree on the general direction in which to move, and the rationale for this direction, there may be high or low levels of agreement with the specific steps to take, with alternative patterns of engagement or retreat proposed and argued on the basis of different and conflicting justifications. Even so, assuming that the leaders of a congregation make the decision to try to implement some form of change, the critical question that this model addresses is whether the leaders take their congregations toward or away from the external social conditions in their open system and, regardless of the direction, whether they do so on the basis of what they believe in or by virtue of what they stand to gain or lose by their decision. A 2 × 2 model of these simplified choices is presented in Figure 1. Note also that these categories are not necessarily rigidly bounded but reflect the possibility for movement within any particular congregation as well as provide dominant characteristics for congregational archetypes.

Examples of value-based (ideological) organizations that engage the social context are the churches described elsewhere as "activist" (Carroll & Roozen, 1990) and "prophetic" (Davidson & Koch, in press; Koch, 1994a). Wilson and Janoski (1995) link theology and voluntary action. Case studies by Hadden and Longino (1974) and Long (1990) also illustrate this type. Examples of value-based (sectarian) organizations that retreat from the social context are

those of the sort described by Ammerman (1987) and Roberts (1990). Although each archetype is distinct with regard to motivation to outreach, value-based organizations of both types certainly take their religion seriously (Finke & Stark, 1992; Kelley, 1972). However, activist types necessarily run the risk of having their ideology eroded as they form alliances and engage in contacts with others in their environment who do not share the same ideology (Hoge, Perry, & Klever, 1978; Kanagy, 1992). Interest-based retreat organizations (protective) fit the stereotype of churches that serve members only (Hansmann, 1980, 1981, 1989; Hone, 1979, 1989). These churches have also been described as "priestly" (Davidson & Koch, in press) and "fundamentally different in values and life styles from those who live immediately around the church (sojourner)" (Carroll & Roozen, 1990, p. 357). Older case studies by Fichter (1951) and Pope (1942) also illustrate this type. Interest-based (pragmatic) organizations that engage the social context include the kind of coalition described in this study. These congregations link together to maximize the utility of the resources they possess and to share the costs of maintaining a significant presence amid changing contextual circumstances (Davidson, 1985; Johnson & Dubberly, 1992). Bolman and Deal (1991) conceptualize this approach as follows:

- Church leaders represent coalitions of other individuals and interest groups both inside and outside the congregation.
- There are likely to be enduring differences between leaders' values and interests.
- Some leaders will have more power than others to control the outcome of the allocation process based on their ability to elicit consensus.
- Decisions emerge from bargaining, negotiation, sanctioning, and jockeying for a position with the most powerful church leaders.

Although this model distinguishes among four distinct types of organizations, the distinctions should be regarded as reflecting an organization's dominant priorities and emphases. In fact, the boundaries between the various types are not absolute boundaries, and organizations may well need to reflect all four patterns to some extent merely to survive. However, organizations may vary over time in terms of the relative emphasis given to each of these patterns, and different segments of an organization may vary in terms of their own priorities for the organization (Carroll & Roozen, 1990; Kanagy, 1992; Wineburg, 1992). The coalition described in this case study is one in which all of the congregations in a particular geographic area, regardless of their ideology and past patterns of community relations, came together on the basis of pragmatic interests to indicate their willingness to be involved in community action. In other words, it can be considered a pragmatic coalition. What follows is a discussion of the specific mechanism through which interests are defined and outcomes are negotiated as leaders strategize for this type of ecumenical outreach.

ROLE THEORY

By what process is power negotiated in religious organizations? Role theory asserts that the makeup of, and the political maneuvering within, the network of key leaders determines the manner in which consensus is reached (Koch, 1994a). This process of maneuvering and negotiating within the role set reflects the partially divergent and partially overlapping interests and values of all participants. Persons acting on behalf of local congregations, whether clergy or laypersons, may draw on their religious beliefs and their specific congregational tradition in the community in an effort to legitimate their particular program proposals. Whether these justifying arguments reflect pragmatic interests is, of course, a matter of interpretation. Even when such interests can be identified, this should not automatically be taken to mean lack of sincerity in the claims made regarding the religious or ideological foundations for such proposals in the motivations of church-based activists. After all, there are times when both values and interests point in the same direction (Wilson & Janoski, 1995; Wineburg, 1992). Moreover, when church-based volunteers are involved with persons from the community outside their congregation, their success in forming an alliance may need to be based explicitly on pragmatic interests they share in dealing with community-wide issues. The obvious reason is that these external allies do not necessarily share the same ideology. A social role is "a set of expectations attached to a particular combination of actor-other identities. . . . All the roles associated with one of actor's identities is that identity's role-set" (Heiss, 1981, p. 95; Merton, 1957). Parish clergy, volunteers, lay professionals, and church members each occupy roles and direct expectations toward one another. People acting in these various church-based roles may differ from one another in terms of their priorities for church programs and also in their views regarding how their congregation should relate to the wider community. Moreover, within the internal life of the church, such differences are likely to be based on competing ideological interpretations of what their religious faith means or implies for dealing with various issues (Ammerman, 1990). In religious congregations, the pastor is the focal person in most role sets. Typically an ordained clergyperson, the pastor acts as a public representative and CEO, as well as the most visible and dominant person involved in the leadership of the congregation in its weekly worship rituals (Koch, 1994b). Thus, the pastor has a unique position as the person whose voice is likely to be dominant in interpreting the meaning of the religious ideology for various issues the congregation faces (Collins, 1975).

At the same time, because of his or her strongly ideological (and idealistic) role, the pastor who is committed to dealing with external issues in the community is likely to pursue a policy of enlisting the help of laypersons who themselves have a stake in the community. These alliances and working relationships with key people in the community articulate pragmatic concerns that are shared by both the church and other community groups and residents. Pastors' role sets include congregational insiders such as major contributors,

| Examples of Outsiders (not members of congregation) | | Examples of Insiders (members of congregation) |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Denominational leaders | | Committee members |
| Community leaders | | Pastor's family |
| Other clergy | Pastor | Church board |
| Teachers/mentors | | Other staff |
| Social service professionals | | Most generous contributors |

**Figure 2.   One Parish Pastor's Role Set**

board members, and other staff, as well as outsiders such as political leaders, human service agency representatives, denominational authorities, and other clergy (Koch, 1994b). Figure 2 is an example of a typical pastor's role set.

This diagram oversimplifies considerably, of course. For one thing, it does not distinguish between different categories in the pastor's role set in terms of such crucial variables as salience, frequency, and intensity of interaction. Typically, for example, a pastor's relationships with insiders will be higher in terms of these variables than those with outsiders (Davidson, 1985; Dudley & Johnson, 1993; Mock, 1992). Moreover, the diagram does not identify indirect relationships, even though these might well be crucial in a congregation's community activism. Such a relationship could well involve a pastor having direct influence on a church volunteer or committee member who, in turn, would interact with a community leader or a social service professional. (In some instances, of course, community leaders and social service professionals are congregational members themselves, in which case a pastor's direct influence may well be stronger.)

The decision to engage in, or to retreat from, contextual change or programmatic involvement in the community will emerge from a pastor's role sets and will reflect all the direct and indirect influences that all role-set participants may exhibit. In this process, the relative influence of a particular congregation's values and interests, and the values and interests of various other participants, may be difficult to discern. Even so, the question of who the people are in the pastor's role set and, more important, who they represent, will influence whether or not the organization will become involved in a community-based outreach ministry. This case study demonstrates how interaction within, and expansion of, pastors' role sets produced the ecumenical coalition. Two propositions emerge:

> *Proposition 1:* The more congregational and community interests converge, the more likely it becomes that members of pastors' role sets will engage their congregation in confronting changing contextual circumstances.

*Proposition 2:* When the interests of the congregation are served by engaging changing contextual conditions, pastors' role sets will expand to include members of the community, or other organizations, whose presence or expertise furthers those interests.

The following discussion of method and findings details the process through which several downtown churches decided to form an ecumenical coalition. This alliance essentially occurred in response to continued neighborhood deterioration, a widely studied catalyst to grassroots mobilization (Bettencourt, 1996; Kasinitz, 1992; Pratkanis & Turner, 1996). In this case, churches in the study area could choose either to leave the area and reestablish in a more affluent neighborhood or to engage in a ministry to the area, thereby making it feasible to protect their physical assets.

## METHOD AND SETTING

This is an exploratory case study of a local ecumenical organization, the Committee of Churches, that was established in a moderately sized southwestern city to prevent neighborhood deterioration and to promote downtown development. One major reason for the selection of this particular organization for study was that it was a new coalition and thus allowed for an investigation of the contextual conditions and initial participants' motivations for its formation as well as the social dynamics of its early stages. Specifically, the establishment of the Committee of Churches reflected the leadership of a university-oriented Methodist church that was committed to remaining in the neighborhood and that decided to try to convince other churches in the area to work together to protect their local interests. This research reflects only the initial phase of the coalition's existence. Research is continuing to determine whether the organization will continue to be successful in mobilizing a widely divergent group of congregations.

The organization initially included all 16 of the churches in the target area. This afforded the opportunity to observe how congregations as varied as mainline Protestant, Catholic, and quasi-independent sectarian churches made the explicit decision to transcend their historic religious differences and to try to work together in matters affecting their shared interests in the community. The local community itself had specific, well-defined boundaries. Moreover, given the strength of religion in the culture of the larger urban and regional setting, we might anticipate that such an interchurch coalition committed to dealing with specific social problems in a well-defined area would have the potential for significant influence in the community.

The basic strategies for obtaining the data for this exploratory project were quite simple. Interviews were conducted with key people, both clergy and

laypersons, who were involved in the preliminary discussion and initial establishment of the Committee of Churches. These included the minister of the Methodist Church, the then-current president of the Committee of Churches, a lay leader of the Methodist Church and active participant in the organization from the beginning, a downtown businessperson whose job involved promoting downtown development, and the former (and first) president of the organization who was later elected mayor. We did not focus on the internal structure of any of the churches, nor did we interview the huge number of volunteers who were recruited to help with the large community project that was undertaken as the organization's first important activity.

All of the churches that belong to the Committee of Churches are located either in the downtown area or in a one-square mile area adjacent to down-town—actually between the downtown area and the campus of a large state university (nearly 25,000 enrollment). A major state highway divides the downtown business area from the adjacent one-square mile area (which we will call Oldtown), and a six-lane city street divides Oldtown from the university campus. All of the respondents for this study described deterioration of this area in some detail, as we shall see.

## FINDINGS

There were many specific factors leading to the formation of the Committee of Churches. But the overriding concern was the decreasing deterioration of the Oldtown neighborhood and the associated increase in crime rates in the area. Here is how a respondent who was one of the first to be involved in the establishment of the committee described it:

> Let me tell you what really happened on this. I served as chairman of the Long Range Planning Committee of the _____ Methodist Church. We were looking at what type of congregation we would be as we entered the 21st century. And, the more we looked, the more we came to the conclusion that we would be significantly impacted by the neighborhood in which we were located. We had made the decision that we wanted to continue to be a university-affiliated church. [The church] was put across the street from the campus. We did not want to move. We wanted to continue to be a part of the neighborhood, but our neighborhood had been deteriorating. There [was] urban blight. You had some nice homes in that area, but then there would be a home that was not kept up well. [Also,] we were beginning to have instances [of crime] on our parking lots and within the church. The church would be broken into, and cars were broken into on the parking lot. We said, look, all of the downtown churches have a vested interest in what happens downtown. Why don't we look into what needs to be done . . . to act as a catalyst to get something done about downtown revitalization.

Several churches had been victimized by crime, even the downtown churches that were not located in the blighted Oldtown neighborhood. The same respondent explained,

> If you take a look at First Presbyterian, First Methodist, Broadway Church of Christ, First Christian, First Baptist, St. Elizabeth's, St. Paul's, St. John's . . . each one of them had been experiencing a lot of stress . . . I mean, I can't tell you how many times we have had break-ins at _____, and that has been the pattern for every one of the churches. And assaults on their parking lots, and that kind of thing.

The challenge was to change the neighborhood—initially to prevent further deterioration. This led eventually to an explicit and intentional process of reaching out to community leaders. One member of the long-range planning committee, an attorney who eventually was elected as the first chair of the Committee of Churches, also described this process:

> We talked to the city people. We talked to the county people. We talked to [city's] Heritage Foundation. We talked to the neighborhood associations. We talked to the women's clubs. Anybody and everybody that was located downtown, we basically conducted interviews with them. We finally came to the conclusion that the churches were the ones that had the largest interest really.

In this way the definition of the issue was expanded to include churches' economic interests in the entire area as well as their concern for the social problems in Oldtown. The churches had a large investment in terms of their physical plant; doing something to revitalize or improve the area was important for their own survival in their current location and for the well-being of the citizens of Oldtown. It is interesting and relevant to note that the particular Methodist Church that initiated the process was strategically located on the busy six-lane city street right between the Oldtown area and the university. It was the closest of all the churches to the university and for many years had expressed its commitment to the university by periodically having programs designed to appeal to the university community (special speakers, musical programs, and so on that featured well-known "names" from outside the area).

Although other churches also had student-oriented ministries, this church's conscious intentions included the university as a whole. It is also of interest that the church included university people as well as some major local political leaders. Thus, more than the other churches in the area, this church clearly had a "double stake" in terms of both the residential neighborhood and the university community. To begin what became the first major project, this Methodist church's five-member planning committee met with the church's administrative council (the chief governing body) to discuss their diagnosis

and explore strategies for initiating cooperative efforts with other churches in the area. The decision was made to form a committee that would include all of the churches in the area, downtown as well as those in Oldtown. Members of the planning committee then got in touch with these churches and asked them to send delegates to a dinner meeting to discuss the feasibility of organizing a Committee of Churches.

After a year of building relationships with one another, the committee elected officers and formalized its structure. A mission statement and bylaws were adopted, and the decision was made for each participating church to have three representatives on the committee. It was also decided that the focus of the committee's activities would be limited primarily to dealing with the social problems they faced in their community rather than issues involving their different theological traditions or styles of worship. This decision, in essence, meant that the committee would fit the pragmatic category of organization in our theoretical model, not the other types, regardless of whatever differences might have existed (and undoubtedly did exist) within the various congregations in terms of their own distinctive priorities.

But what kind of actions were needed to deal with such problems as deteriorating housing, rising crime rates, a stagnant business environment, and related problems? What could a committee of churches do that local business and political leaders were unable to do? Answers to these questions were by no means obvious, but the committee continued its efforts. One member, a delegate from the Catholic Church in Oldtown, remembered having some general ideas about a festival of some type that would showcase the different ethnic groups in the area and also bring people downtown. As she explained,

> I thought, let's have a street festival. That would be fun and would attract people to the area . . . People could see it is not such a scary area, and that there are some really beautiful things, and that way they would associate something positive with the area.

The attorney who had been elected chair described the process that occurred while the idea was still in its formative stages:

> We formed a task force of three people that went to the city, talked about what we had in mind, and then the city picked up on it and we worked together with various different interest groups. We got all the downtown banks to sponsor a dinner at the Women's Club [downtown] . . . and got all the interest groups together and shared with them the idea of the downtown festival, and from there it just grew.

The meeting was structured to allow small-group brainstorming, and out of this process the general idea of a street festival was transformed into a July

4 celebration, to be called "Fourth on Broadway." It was also noted that the odds for success should be enhanced because the patriotic celebration would be an occasion to honor the returning Desert Storm military troops. Planning for Fourth on Broadway involved a major mobilization of numerous individuals and groups in the community. More volunteers from the participating churches had to be recruited, and arrangements had to be made with city officials, the police department, local business groups, service organizations, and many others. It was a definite change from the early phase of talking about the social problems of the area, but it shifted the group's attention from the deteriorating Oldtown residential neighborhoods to the stagnant downtown business district and the goal of bringing people downtown for a civic and patriotic celebration.

The Fourth on Broadway was highly successful. Thousands of people came from throughout the city and the surrounding rural and small-town area. Parking spilled over into Oldtown residential neighborhoods, and many Oldtown residents walked over to take part in the activities on Broadway. Broadway itself had been closed to auto traffic, of course, and the street, sidewalks, and parking lots were filled throughout the day with people enjoying the festivities. The crowd was even larger and more concentrated when they came together that evening for the concert and fireworks. The local news media hailed the event as an example of the great things that could be accomplished with community-wide cooperation.

The lead role of the Committee of Churches in organizing the event was not emphasized very heavily in the publicity promoting or celebrating the event, but all members of the committee were gratified by what they had accomplished together. The event definitely strengthened (or helped institutionalize) the Committee of Churches in the community. To what degree has this initiative produced a ripple effect of community-oriented service programs in member churches? One of the large conservative churches in the target area (on Broadway between downtown and the university) established a latchkey program for children who live in the area or whose parents work downtown. A downtown church started a soup kitchen. A couple of respondents felt that part of the impact of the Committee of Churches would be to serve as a catalyst to stimulate other churches to start social service programs on their own. The latchkey program and the soup kitchen are examples of this process. In addition, the committee itself initiated contacts with the local YWCA to start a gang intervention project by setting up some type of youth center.

As these projects were discussed, committee members began to face the fact that most of them would probably be centered in the individual congregations that chose to initiate them. The committee itself had no physical plant or other infrastructure that could be used to actually provide programs or services. In recognition of this, they felt that their role probably would be to serve as a catalyst and a source of "moral support." Because the committee was not the primary source of energy or other resources to implement such projects, it

inadvertently became somewhat marginalized with regard precisely to those social ministry activities that its members were initially interested in undertaking. In the meantime, however, the clergy of the participating churches began to work within the committee structure to organize annual ecumenical Thanksgiving services.

Nevertheless, the process through which the July 4 street festival emerged has created a fledgling network of church-based individuals who at least initially expressed a willingness to confront deteriorating contextual conditions and to explore the possibilities for acting in concert with one another to further mutual pragmatic interests in the Oldtown neighborhood. In the face of the continuing problems threatening coalition congregations, leaders began the process of trying to put aside their ideological differences and work cooperatively to provide a foundation for positive social change. But the highly successful Fourth on Broadway was only a beginning and, despite the enthusiasm it generated, its relevance for dealing with continuing social problems in the area was limited.

In the months following the success of the Fourth on Broadway celebration, clergy and laypersons alike had to face the fact that a successful July 4 street festival does not in itself solve the seemingly intractable problems of crime, poverty, and neighborhood deterioration. Subsequent to its initial success and the favorable publicity, the Fourth on Broadway festival has continued in succeeding years to be a successful and eagerly awaited community tradition, but the annual event has become the responsibility of a separate organization. Participants in the Committee of Churches realized that sponsoring an annual July 4 celebration would not fulfill their original goals of reversing long-term neighborhood deterioration or meeting the social service needs of community residents. Thus committee leaders launched another organization, Broadway Festivals, Inc., that would take on the July 4 project on an annual basis, in the hope that this would allow them to refocus their attention on the neighborhood social problems with which they were originally concerned. The relationship between the two organizations was formalized by having Committee of Churches representation on the board of Broadway Festivals. In this way the committee would be able to satisfy its concern to ensure that beer sales not be allowed in exchange for financial sponsorship by beer companies. (Beer is available at Fourth on Broadway in local restaurants and bars for consumption within these establishments only but not from sidewalk vendors.)

In the meantime, the social problems in Oldtown persist, and there is evidence of diminished enthusiasm among the committee's leaders and members. Despite this, the new networks that were established and the initiation of discussions regarding pragmatic responses to continuing community problems probably does provide at least the potential for positive change in the community. Whether this potential will be realized could not be determined at the time this phase of the project was completed, but the Committee of Churches merits continuing research.

## CONCLUSIONS

The primary purpose of this study was to outline a theoretical model of religious involvement in social change. We illustrate that model through a preliminary and exploratory case study of an ecumenical outreach coalition composed of diverse congregations in a blighted community. The open-systems role-set theory argues that church leaders make decisions on the basis of their assessment of the context within which their organization does its work and on the basis of personal and organizational values and interests that are debated and negotiated within leadership networks. This occurs within leaders' congregations and with persons in their external social networks as well. The Committee of Churches is an example of an interest-based outreach organization that was formed in an effort to mitigate the negative effects of inner-city decay on downtown church ministries and property (both institutional and individual). As such it fits the category of a pragmatic type of organization described in the discussion of Figure 1.

This does not mean that all of the congregations that made up the committee could be considered pragmatic organizations. Instead, the wide diversity of denominations represented among the participating congregations would suggest that individual congregations could be identified that fit all four organizational types. Unfortunately, this research did not address the congregational level but was limited to the Committee of Churches. However, the participation of all the congregations in the community in this ecumenical coalition suggests that, regardless of their own internal priorities, congregations (like other organizations) that are faced with serious problems and threats in their immediate environment can, at least for a time and to a limited degree, put aside their own priorities and join together in a collective pragmatic project that they hope will lead to improvements in their community. Whether this pragmatic cooperation will continue and expand is impossible to determine at this stage in the coalition's history.

The social process that led to the formation of the Committee of Churches does appear to demonstrate, however, the theoretical proposition that engaging the social context depends on the degree to which congregation and community interests converge. There was certainly a perception of such convergence by the leaders of the Methodist Church that initiated the process and the committee's founders and initial leaders.

Of greater theoretical significance, however, is the manner in which the effort to improve the downtown neighborhood resulted in the initial stage of developing interorganizational networks in each participating congregation. Pastors, key layleaders, and officials from city government and local businesses became members of each other's role sets. The Fourth on Broadway project was one initial demonstration of what becomes possible as congregational leaders try to expand their scope of interest and influence.

Nonetheless, at the same time, the difficulties experienced by the Committee of Churches in developing an appropriate set of strategies for engaging the social problems that led to its formation may well demonstrate the limits of churches—even local interchurch coalitions—as pragmatic organizations able to sustain direct influence in the community. These limits are probably inevitable, given the nature of churches as religious rather than political organizations. It is also inevitable given the fact that the primary focus of most church congregations is internal rather than external (Carroll & Roozen, 1990; Davidson & Koch, in press). Moreover, the fact that the various congregations that made up this particular coalition undoubtedly differed among themselves in terms of the primary theoretical dimensions of our model—engagement with community versus withdrawal and ideological versus pragmatic motivational orientations—makes the challenge of working together even greater.

Future research dealing with this particular ecumenical organization will need to be sensitive to these internal variations. It seems plausible that congregations' priorities differ in at least two crucial ways. First, in terms of whether or not they continue to be active participants in this particular ecumenical coalition, and second, with regard to how much energy and resources they devote to whatever projects that may develop in the future. Regardless of which process predominates, it seems clear that there is a definite ideological dimension to the public expression of religion in that individuals' religious values and church involvement inspire concern with a community's social problems. However, especially in an environment that is threatened with deterioration, and in which churches clearly have a major pragmatic stake in terms of their physical plant, there is a very strong probability that community involvement by congregations may be motivated by material interests (both individual and organizational) as much as by religious values. Indeed, it is often difficult to disentangle the two types of motives. Even so, the willingness of members of local congregations to be involved in dealing with pressing social problems in the community is a potentially valuable resource if it can be mobilized appropriately and effectively, and on a continuing basis.

Whether interest-based community engagement by itself fully justifies the tax benefits extended to the participating churches is, of course, a policy question that is beyond the scope of this study. However, the Committee of Churches illustrates the beginnings of a foundation for outreach ministry, the positive effects of which could go well beyond participants' initial expectations and the short-term success they had with their first groundbreaking project. For reasons that may well have been both idealistic and pragmatic, church leaders in this study assessed and attempted to respond to conditions that were making their neighborhood more dangerous and their neighbors more fearful. As they initiated conversations with each other, they began to generate ideas and strengthen their motivation to do something. Whether motivated by ideology, political savvy, or simple pragmatic considerations, the leaders who established the Committee of Churches created new possibilities for positive social change in their community.

Research on this new ecumenical coalition is continuing. Further studies are needed to assess what types of positive social change might emerge from what the Committee of Churches represents in the stories of each constituent congregation.

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