People Make the Place: Religious Leadership and the Identity of the Local Congregation

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Abstract The identity of a congregation is more dependent on the people who gather together than on any particular constellation of structures and strategies, programs, and policies. While social processes of attraction, selection and attrition are fundamental to identity development, a paradoxical consequence is that a strong identity is unavoidably linked to a degeneration of the congregation's vitality and to a reduction of its capacity for survival in a changing environment. The arrival of a new religious leader may help to halt the growing degeneration and incapacity by the minister becoming the center of a new cycle of attraction, selection, and attrition. However such a renewal in identity is always rife with conflict and therefore contrary to the idea of a religious congregation as a harmonious and peaceful assembly of believers.

Keywords Identity · Conflict · Congregation · Leadership

Introduction

In recent years the religious identity of local congregations has become problematic. This uncertainty of identity may be both cause and effect of the general decline in church participation and involvement. In many mainline churches people belonging to the same congregation differ widely in their vision of what their church should stand for and what should be the mission of their congregation (Carroll and Roozen 1990; Finke and Stark 1992; Gremillion and Castelli 1987; Groot et al. 2005; Hartmann 1996; Hauerwas and Willimon 1989; Hoge and Roozen 1979; Kelley 1972; Peyrot and Sweeney 2000; Stollberg 1998). The religious relevance of the social life of the religious community has become quite uncertain. Where the membership of many congregations is characterized by just a rather loosely bound togetherness, the question arises as to what is still distinctive and

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specific about a local church? The answers to such questions are relevant when one wants to determine which strategy to follow and which structure to develop so that the church may grow, provide a significant contribution to the society in which it exists, and satisfy the religious and social needs of its members. However, the answers are now less easy to formulate than once used to be the case. The consequence is that when mission and identity remain unclear, it becomes ever more difficult to appeal to members and attract outsiders. If there is uncertainty about the exact nature of the church's primary task, about what one should be doing, and why, the congregation looses members and the gospel's good message gets lost.

In reaction to such a loss, those who remain often show a paradoxical reaction by intensifying their effort in performing the activities that obviously failed to keep the congregation together. They proclaim with even more anxious conviction an ideology that was apparently disappointing for many who left. In spite of all the energy expended, however, all this will not produce a lasting change for the good. They repress the frightening question of whether such an ecclesiastical organization of what is predominantly the social life of the congregation really constitutes the essence of what it means to be a church.

In the hope of a salvific solution that arrests the decline in involvement and enthusiasm in their congregation, help is sought from clerical consultants who are experts on church revitalization. In many cases part of their advice will be a suggestion to analyze what it is that determines the identity of their church and to develop a vision of what should be its mission. In such a situation a managerial conception of identity as developed by Carroll and Roozen (1990) is frequently used to structure the analysis, as it takes account of the variety within and between congregations. They describe identity as "the persistent set of beliefs, values, patterns, symbols, stories and style that makes a congregation distinctive" (Carroll and Roozen 1990, p.352, cf. Carroll et al. 1986, p.21), or, in more operational terms, as "the shared perceptions of members about themselves, their congregation, and their mission" (Carroll and Roozen 1990, p.352). It is an identity that results from the interaction between the internal characteristics of a congregation—its history, symbols, stories, rituals, norms, manners, and behavioural patterns— and the various aspects of the environment in which the congregation is situated, including its members' social world (Carroll and Roozen 1990). With respect to the leadership role of the clergy Carroll and Roozen remark that "clergy beginning a new pastorate find, wittingly or unwittingly, that each congregation they enter is different in certain important ways and that they must learn to understand those differences if they are to exercise effective leadership in the congregation" (p. 351). What is defined as a difficulty by Carroll and Roozen—the fact that a pastor has to adapt to ever different congregations with each new career move, may however constitute the solution to the problems of uncertainty and pluriformity in relation to what a congregation should be.

Contrary to the perspective developed by Carroll and Roozen, in this essay it will be argued that the identity of the congregation is not primarily a question of activities and structures, of strategies and policy, of its history, symbols, rituals, norms and manners, but a matter of persons and personality (Schneider 1987). The identity of a congregation is determined by the attraction between people. It is the people who gather together who determine the identity of congregational life, people who have certain preferences and who share them with others. The congregation is in fact the religious assembly of "our kind of people." When its context changes, a congregation with an identity based on affinity may be unable to function effectively in those changed environmental conditions. Necessary for accommodation is a radical change of culture, a change in personality brought forward by the leadership provided by the minister as outsider.

People make the place: social attraction and personal affinity

In characterizing an organization's culture Benjamin Schneider (1975, 1987; cf. Nauta 1982) defended an interactionist position against the situationist perspective of social behaviorists like Mischel (1968) and others. Mischel argued, based on the results of laboratory experiments, that situations dominate traits, "it becomes essential to study the difference in the behaviors of a given person as a function of the conditions in which they occur, since the assumption of massive behavioral similarity across diverse situations is no longer is tenable" (Mischel 1968, p.295). Bowers (1973) and Schneider (1975) argued that humans select themselves into and out of settings, they are not randomly assigned to real organizations. People and human settings are inseparable: people are the setting because it is they who make the setting. To understand the impact of this perspective, one must take the organization and not the individuals as focus, as level of analysis. To understand an organization's character and culture, or its identity, the question is to understand the differences between organizations through a focus on the attributes of people. To understand the identity of an organization, individual differences within an organization are of lesser concern. Schneider (1987) proposes that attraction to an organization, selection by it, and attrition from it yield particular kinds of persons in an organization. These people determine organizational behavior. The effect of these processes is a restriction of range in the kinds of people in an organization. This restriction of range yields similar kinds of behavior from the people there, making it appear as if the organization were a determinant of their behavior (Schneider 1987).

Schneider suggests that it is goals to which people are attracted, it is goals with which they interact (Vroom 1964). These goals are not actively chosen or consciously dictated. Rather they emerge initially from the kind of persons who establish (found) the organization (Schein 1985). As an organization confronts both its larger environment and its internal environment, the processes and structures that emerge, for example, in a bank will differ from the YMCA; the environments they confront will be different because the people who formed them are different. Although in any organization structures and processes emerge out of day-to-day necessity, the form and content of those structures and processes are ultimately traceable to the founder. The founder who started Stanley Morgan is different from the one who founded the YMCA, the Methodist Church or the Chicago Bulls. As a consequence the environments in which they operate will differ. The contribution of difference in people and difference in environments produces differences in structures (Schneider 1987). Miller and Droge (1986) have shown that, other things being equal, it is the founder's personality that determines organizational structure and identity. This can be quite explicitly illustrated by the particular identities of different monastic orders in the Roman Catholic Church. The Augustine, Franciscan, Jesuit, Benedictine and Dominican orders all have their own identity and profile due to differences in personality and orientation between their respective founders.

When organizations exist in particular environments and have particular technologies, they need people with particular kinds of competencies. Different kinds of people have different competencies. Organizations further restrict the range of types of persons in them through the recruitment and hiring of people with the kinds of competencies needed for effectiveness. But people are conceptualized as profiles of personal attributes, people are not defined by a single characteristic, they are multidimensional (Schneider 1987). Through selection and recruitment procedures organizations can be typed by people sharing many common attributes and differing only with respect to specific competencies. Thus as an outcome of the attraction—selection—attrition cycle organizations will have severely

restricted the range of types of people in them (Schneider 1987). Over time, persons attracted to, staying with, and behaving in organizations cause these organizations to be what they are. But also in time an organization can become so ingrown that it begins to occupy an increasingly narrow ecological niche. When this happens, the organization can fail. When the environment changes, the kinds of people, processes, and structures are no longer viable. Organizations may then die.

The longer an organization lives, the stronger its identity becomes. But this also makes degeneration inevitable, particularly in the case of nonprofit, voluntary organizations. When, with time, people, structures, and processes develop an ever better fit within a more and more circumscribed context, even the smallest change in such an environment will cause a catastrophe because it disrupts the balance of the system. Moreover, the distribution of competencies and attributes will be such that adjustment turns out to be impossible. The paradox of such a community is that, owing to adaptation, accommodation becomes impossible. As people feel at home in an ever smaller world, they become homeless when that world is slightly dislocated. If we assume that people make up an organization's identity, we must acknowledge that it is also the people whose selection and recruitment lead to an organization's downfall.

Factions and conflict

A decreased participation in church activities and a loss in church membership appear to be typical of modern secular society. This loss in religious involvement cannot be explained solely by increased options of choice within, between, and against religious organizations. Perhaps an important cause may be found in the loss of mission when the congregation's social life becomes a goal in itself (Hartmann 1996; Stollberg 1998). In that case all endeavours trying to regenerate the community by changing structures and procedures, forms, and thoughts will fail because the people who are still active will feel happy together although no one else does. Renewal can only take place when new members will participate in the congregation's activities. Structures and procedures will change if people change or when new members are different from those already present. But new people will not be attracted to the existing community of the select, because they feel they are too different in outlook and makeup. Apostasy in modern times is particularly an effect of disaffinity, not of disbelief or a loss of faith. People leave the church because they feel no longer at home in the community of the happy few.

The religious leader as identity anchor

The one who is the most important agent of change in all this is possibly the minister who leads the congregation. It is the minister who, if only by his or her presence as religious leader, has the biggest influence on anything happening in the parish. As both a social outsider and a central figure in the work of the church, it is the pastor who possesses the potential for change and adaptation. Trusting there to be a certain affinity with the parishioners, the parish appoints a pastor who fits in. At the same time, this pastor is also different from the mental image the parishioners had of the good shepherd. It is precisely this gap between similarity and difference, an appropriate gap, that allows the minister to lead others on the road towards change. If "central outsiders" join the congregation's community, liberation from all that was common and seemed to be right and good may be

realized by not being and behaving as was expected (cf. Weick 1979). If this occurs, a different congregation is created. This is a development many a minister will recognize from their past appointments with various congregations. A recent example was shown in a television documentary on the missionary action of the congregation of the *Nassaukerk* in Amsterdam. Under the supervision of a new female minister, the task of helping homeless people and drug addicts was taken over from the local authorities. Those who no longer felt at home in such a church for the poor, opted for, and were referred to, other Amsterdam churches which better suited the personal needs of the malcontents, and such alternatives exist still in abundance.

In the same way in which the identity of the Christian church is to be regarded as determined by the figure of Christ, as interpreted by Peter and Paul, so the culture and identity of different Protestant churches, too, resemble the personality and spirituality of their sources of inspiration: Arminius, Calvin, Luther, Zwingli, Wesley, Kuyper. Conflicts of orthodoxy and emancipation, in the Reformed churches in the Netherlands and abroad, were always in large part conflicts between personalities. The resulting church congregations bear the stamp of those personalities. Lutherans differ from Calvinists; Dissenters differ from Secessionists. True to their nature, they always found a theological issue that could be used to mask and legitimate going their separate ways and justify the loss of the original unity. Whatever happens at the level of the church as a whole repeats itself at the level of the congregation (cf. Miller 1997). It is the congregation's minister who determines the distinctiveness of the congregation. And to the extent that the minister differs, all these congregations differ too. The pastor determines the identity of the church. This goes as much for the Protestant minister (cf. Hoge and Roozen 1979) as for the Catholic priest. In the Catholic world, too, the local priest is of crucial significance for the creation of what is distinctive in a parish. It is the priests who constitute the greatest influence on the commitment of the parishioners to church life (Peyrot and Sweeney 2000; Gremillion and Castelli 1987).

After the minister of the Amsterdam *Nassaukerk* had introduced the mission for the poor, he answered the call to serve another congregation. A minister with a different pastoral preference succeeded him,, and, after some time, a different congregation gathered together at the Sunday morning service. This time reflecting its minister's orientation and personality, more orthodox and dogmatically interested.

The inevitability of conflict

In spite of, or perhaps on account of, this tendency towards homogeneity in the congregation, conflict is inevitable. Conflict powered by ambivalence may be the primary risk of any congregation (cf. Capps 1990, Hirschorn 1999, Watzlawick 1983). Nearly always, the pastor is involved in that conflict in one way or another. This conflict-proneness of congregations may be understood as a system characteristic rather than as a personal failure. Change is threatening to all those involved. Uncertainty and ambivalence are the result of any succession in the leadership role of a congregation. All group members try to defend themselves against this putative threat. This leads to patterns that are strongly coloured by a paranoid structure and induces a certain schizoid reaction in all group members. As a phenomenon, these patterns are a feature of the 'group-as-a-whole' (Bion 1961; Hinshelwood 1994). The mentality and the climate of the group depend on the specific way in which temptations and threats are dealt with (Main 1973). A sudden and

unexpected threat, not cushioned or prevented as a result of a lack of any empathic understanding, leads to fierce emotional reactions. At least two characteristics can be discerned in the reactions: splitting and projective identification.

What is striking in the manner of response is the strong tendency to overdo the separation of positive and negative aspects in oneself and in others, with good opposed to evil, liberal to orthodox, right to left, individual to community, friend to enemy (Lyon 1999). What in therapeutic practice is referred to as splitting presents itself in the everyday life of the congregation in the actions of at least two dissident groups. In nearly all congregations, there is one group glorifying the past, painting a rosy picture of things gone by ('when our former vicar was still here...', 'when we still had afternoon services ...'). Nearly always, there is also a group that turns against the minister (Lyon 1999). Such a splitting, such a separation of feelings, protects against the threat posed by the ambiguity of everyday existence. In life, there is never anything entirely good or entirely evil. Living with that is not easy and often creates insecurity. As a protection against this insecurity, it is easier to create a world for oneself in which good and evil *are* separated. Such a separation of positive and negative feelings protects the self against the threat posed by one's own ambivalence. This defence turns into disappointment when those who were invested with the person's unbearable qualities do not behave in accordance with these projections. It is quite unacceptable and intolerable when somebody who has been made the personification of evil does anything right. Gossip and backbiting, lies and deception, and other kinds of emotional impudence poison the atmosphere and make a rational solution impossible—a rational solution that is not even sought, given the nature of the conflict. Such affective turbulence shows how the congregation—as-a-whole is unable to simultaneously put together the positive and negative feelings (love and hate) experienced with respect to the minister, instead deciding to split them up and assign them to separate segments in the whole. The separation of the 'good shepherd' and the 'evil pastor,' however, erodes the ability to reflect and only exacerbates polarization.

The separation of good and evil is an example of the more general process of projective identification. As a theological theme, it is not without psychological significance either, as is evident from the daily trouble in the average congregation. Unpleasant feelings, the attendant ideas, and tendencies to take action, are projected onto somebody else, who then subconsciously identifies with this projection. Thus, the other qualifies himself as different from myself, while nonetheless a relationship is maintained in which what is projected is experienced vicariously. It is a process that results in the conflicting parties behaving, against all reason, in such a way that the projections with which they are burdened are validated by their behaviour. Critics of some ecclesiastical policy are becoming ever more radical, feeling forced to take ever more extreme views. Conservatives feel they have to defend old values ever more forcefully so that at least something of what they hold dear is retained. Those who are accused of being insensitive to the concerns of others become ever chillier. Those who were suspected of erring and inconstancy become more insecure and tend to persist in their error. In groups, there are always people who, on account of their emotional history, attract certain projections and are willing to avail themselves of that opportunity. Thus, the habitual behaviors and standard preferences in relations with others are taken advantage of and exploited for the benefit of the emotional management of the group as a whole.

It is precisely the entry of a new minister which brings about such polarizing effects: the situation created by the minister's performance is full of uncertainties and ambivalence. In order to counteract that ambivalence (it is, after all, also an expression of one's own uncertainties and doubts), new factions and coalitions arise, creating, among the group of like-minded people who had been stunned into speechlessness, a potential for change, a

change believed to be a revolution in thought and feeling. Every minister has an individual identity, an identity that is communicated to the congregation which has called this pastor to serve their community in good faith. Since supporters will gather around the newly called pastor, and those who disagree or feel disagreeable towards the new minister will leave, eventually, the congregation will become different after every succession in its leadership because a new dominant faction arises with the coming of each new incumbent of the pastor's position. Those members of the congregation who do not feel at home, will resign to the background and will wait for a new opportunity, the coming of a new minister, to claim their rights.

In the Amsterdam *Westerkerk*, the congregational conflicts when the pastoral and rhetorically gifted Rev. Nico ter Linde was succeeded by a female feminist minister, are to be understood, and not just condemned, especially from this perspective of 'the people make the place'.

Practical conclusions

The identity of the local church is found in the idiosyncrasy of minister and congregation, of priest and parish. It is the identity of a club formed by 'our kind of people'. In this respect, it does not differ from other associations in the social or political fields, or indeed business and industry, where affinity also forms the basis for commitment. This insight should be enough to jettison the idea of one congregation for all. On the contrary, congregational life should be arranged in such a way that what initially looked like a weakness, its divisiveness and diversity, changes into a strength. Religious commitment is less and less a matter of continuity. Affinities change depending on changes in taste and preference. Commitment can thus differ in various stages of life and can be determined by experiences in work and leisure and family (Wuthnow 1998). There is, therefore, some missionary zeal precisely in the renouncement of harmony as exemplary for the congregation. Such an ideology of help and harmony is considered by many pastors to be the sure sign of vitality and the certain promise of a long and fruitful future (Nauta 2002). If the gospel of liberation *is* understood, one will attempt to rid oneself of the oppression felt in such a dated, parasocial, repressive congregational life, which in the society at large is recognized as antiquated and old-fashioned, but nevertheless presented by the church as a divine good.

Wherever the contextuality of commitment is seriously taken into account, and the idiosyncrasies of each pastor's ministry are respected, room is created for a manifold of congregations and a pluriformity of congregational life, providing for a variety of devotees of religion. Wherever affinity is expressly understood as the basis of the congregation's own identity, it is easier to openly reflect on what faith means to those who consider themselves part of that congregation. It might also be easier to accept, when affinity forms the basis for the congregation, that some will drop out and stay away, seeking salvation elsewhere, although rarely leaving their own tradition (Bibby 1999). In such a congregation where people come together for pleasure, the mutual commitment is stronger, but at the same time it is easier to accept that this commitment is only temporary. Precisely because it should be understood that a commonality in taste, interest, cognition, desire, and personality determines the congregation's identity, conflicts, open or covert, will be less virulent. There is no accounting for tastes. Such a community in which the people have opted for one another will do justice to everyone. And if, for some reason or other, being

together is no longer to one's liking, it is no longer quite so awkward to say, "NOT just now, thank you".

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