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Congregations and Public Life

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Congregations are called to public life. The lives of congregations are inherently public. When congregations live the life to which they are called they both invite people to faith in Jesus Christ as members of his public community and form and shape the faith of their members for public witness and service in the world. In the era of mission after christendom, the public life within congregations is connected in important ways with the public life of congregations in the larger society. This article explores these connections and their significance for congregational life and mission.

THE CHURCH'S OWN PUBLIC LIFE

The connection between the internal public life of the church and its external public life is an important one, as Parker Palmer and Patrick Keifert have shown. Seeing that connection involves, first of all, using our Christian imaginations and the biblical metaphor of hospitality to the stranger in order to understand the internal life of the church with God—especially that of congregations—as *essentially public* in character. Palmer sees the church as a school of the Spirit that practices both the Spirit's hospitality to the stranger and the congregation's living in community with the stranger. "The church will practice the public life by practicing the living presence of God," Palmer maintains, "a presence in which gaps are bridged, wounds healed, obstacles surmounted, the many made one."[1]

[1]Parker J. Palmer, *The Company of Strangers: Christians and the Renewal of America's Public Life* (New York: Crossroad, 1981) 132.

Congregations are called to public life rather than to familial coziness. By serving the public arena the congregation participates in God's ongoing creating activity in the world and anticipates the coming kingdom of God in all its justice and fullness.

Worship has a public character and is open to anyone in society. Not only is it in principle open to strangers, but it both presumes and creates a public, Keifert observes, by "the interaction of strangers through a common set of actions" in an order of worship.[2] Worship and other public functions of a congregation are modeled after God's hospitality to the stranger and the public character of early Christian worship. That ancient Christian worship was marked by lively mutual discussion and interpretation of Scripture. Keifert puts forth a public image of the church as "a company of strangers engaged in an evangelical conversation and life on behalf of the world."[3] Such a public church cannot be conceived primarily by a model of an intimate society of individuals, nor can its pastors function primarily as private leaders of an intimate community. Instead, pastors and lay leaders must be evangelical public leaders.[4]

Christians are formed by and for the public church; they do not spontaneously take shape. Invitations also are characteristically made to "everyone" to participate in Christian education and a variety of other events and groups a congregation may have, which both nurture Christian imagination and provide opportunities for learning Christian practice outside of worship. Cynthia D. Moe-Lobeda calls attention, for example, to the promises Lutherans make in their liturgy for the "Affirmation of Baptism" "to live among God's faithful people, to hear his word and share in his supper, to proclaim the good news of God in Christ through word and deed, to serve all people, following the example of our Lord Jesus, and to strive for justice and peace in all the earth."[5] These promises describe the comprehensive practice of Christian living for the believer. Engaging in all these practices together is a regular part of the Christian's life of faith, a case Moe-Lobeda makes effectively. Each of these practices is fundamentally public as well as personal.

This implies the importance not only of participation in worship and use of the means of grace but also of formal religious instruction and informal learning that comes from participation in other aspects of the church's ministry of service and justice. Both Robert Benne and Ronald Thiemann have a sense of religious traditions and congregations as "'schools of virtue' through which masses of citizens form and maintain the 'elementary republics' and 'the small platoons' of our common life."[6] Congregations help to form the character and conscience of individuals

[2]Patrick R. Keifert, *Welcoming the Stranger: A Public Theology of Worship and Evangelism* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992) 88.

[3]Ibid., 90–91.

[4]Nathan C. P. Frambach, "Models of Leadership for the Congregation," *Word & World* 20/4 (2000) 379–389.

[5]Liturgy for the "Affirmation of Baptism," in the *Lutheran Book of Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1978) 201. Cynthia D. Moe-Lobeda discusses the import of these promises for the lives of Christians and congregations in *The Public Church: For the Life of the World* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2004) 14–39.

[6]Robert Benne writes of "schools of virtue" in connection with religious traditions generally, but also discusses the role of congregations specifically in forming the character of Christians. See his *The Paradoxical Vision: A Public Theology for the Twenty-first Century* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995) 187; and his "Lutherans in Public: Four Lively Options" (paper presented to the 2006 Annual Gathering of Lutheran Ethicists, 5 January 2006, Scottsdale) 4 (publication forthcoming).

who become Christian actors in the public sphere through teaching them the faith, worship, preaching, spiritual practices, and solemn commitments made in the affirmation of their baptisms. Such religious formation helps shape "habits of the heart"[7] in individuals. These are patterns of commitment, thought, and behavior, and skills for public life that meld self-interest, compassion, virtue, private gain and public good,[8] justice, and peace in persons' religious and moral reflection about the public sphere and their action in it. This involves both effective and intensive religious education for adults.

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In the time after christendom, when our secular culture does not operate with Christian assumptions and when the culture either forgets or no longer chooses to tell of the contributions of religion to secular life in the past, the churches may need to tell these stories—in part, for the sake of the future life of the public church concerned for the well-being of the common good and for justice.[9] For Benne, educating in the faith for Christian vocation in the world also means attention to nurture and reflection about members' secular callings as well as becoming "a locus for moral deliberation" that "can stimulate and help the laity make connections between their religious and moral convictions and their life in society."[10]

COMMUNITIES OF FAITH IN THE SECULAR PUBLIC SQUARE

Christian concern for secular public life in the United States was expressed by theologians throughout the twentieth century, often with implications for the lives of congregations and individuals as well as national church bodies.[11] Perhaps the most prominent public expression of this concern was in the American civil rights movement, led by Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, which garnered support and participation from a minority of white Protestant clergy and laypeople. Another influential movement among Protestant Evangelicals and Roman Catholics galvanized around the movement to

[7]Robert N. Bellah et al., *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*, updated ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996).

[8]Ronald F. Thiemann, *Constructing a Public Theology: The Church in a Pluralistic Culture* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1991) 43.

[9]Robert Wuthnow, *Christianity in the Twenty-first Century: Reflections on the Challenges Ahead* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993) 190.

[10]Benne, *The Paradoxical Vision*, 193.

[11]Among the notable theologians arguing either for the church's direct involvement in public life or for the relevance of Christian theology and ethics for social and political life were Walter Rauschenbusch, Reinhold Niebuhr, John Courtney Murray, Richard C. Bennett, and Paul Ramsey. Also influential in the USA were such widely read European Protestant theologians as Paul Tillich (*Love, Power, and Justice: Ontological Analyses and Ethical Applications* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1954]) and Jürgen Moltmann (*Theology of Hope*: *On the Ground and the Implications of Eschatology*, trans. James W. Leitch [New York: Harper & Row, 1975]) in those books that dealt with ethical, social, and historical themes in theology.

abolish the constitutionality of abortion. Both demonstrated that the churches do not necessarily speak with one voice on most public issues.

But despite these theological arguments and social movements, both the *legitimacy* and the *manner* of the church's involvement in public and social life continue to be disputed.[12] Reservations have been based on various grounds. Some use an argument for religious freedom coupled with a fear that one faith with a political upper hand might impose itself or its preferred way of life on persons or communities of different faiths or religious traditions. Such arguments are often based also on a view that religion is inherently a private matter for individuals rather than a matter with legitimate direct public import. Such views are often held by both clergy and laity, even when their churches have established traditions of comment upon or involvement in public affairs. Complicating this picture is the recognition—sometimes with regret or fear—that in the United States and the rest of the West, Christian churches now find themselves engaged in mission "after christendom," when Christian assumptions and ways of thinking about God and humanity, history and creation, and sin and redemption no longer inform secular culture to the degree they once did.

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Under such conditions, seeing the connection between the public character of the church's internal life and the external public involvement of the churches is also an act of Christian imagination that extends God's hospitality to the stranger outside the church and connects that metaphor to God's passion for justice for all people. The church's public life in society often needs to be asserted and advocated to secular society and the members of the churches alike rather than to be assumed.

Why is such an external public ministry necessary to the church's identity and mission? Keifert connects the public character of the church's internal life to its public life in society. The church evangelizes in the world to liberate people from "self-justifying systems [of thinking about human beings, their relationships, and of ways of organizing those relationships] that depend upon and grow out of their egocentric, self-justifying selves" through faith in Jesus Christ, God's own Son, sacrificed by God "for the liberation of humanity." Keifert notes,

> While this need does not release the church from its responsibilities as a public citizen to ameliorate and seek to prevent the great injustices of racism, sexism, and classism through means available to all persons, it remains the unique ministry and responsibility of the church to bring the eschatological liberation of hu-

[12]See, for example, the works of Benne cited above, which dispute the advisability of the ELCA's *direct* involvement in the political process through public policy advocacy and its corporate investments in most, but not all, cases. For an analysis of "the case against public religion" generally, see Martin E. Marty with Jonathan Moore, *Politics, Religion, and the Common Good: Advancing a Distinctly American Conversation about Religion's Role in Our Shared Life* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000) 23–41.

manity, person by person, from the root of these systems of injustice.[13]

Such conversion and liberation of persons through the forgiveness of sins, the promise of resurrection, and the fulfillment of the kingdom of God frees them also for their proper role as stewards of creation and participants of God's primal work of creating. "Our redemption is critical," Keifert writes, "precisely because it frees us to be a part of God's creative and sanctifying activity in the world, both in its private and public dimensions," precisely through "our creaturely selves." "This stewardship of creation is as much a public as a private activity."[14] And yet such stewardship is caught up not only in God's ongoing creating activity but in God's redemptive activity toward the creation as well. "The actions of God the Creator and Redeemer cannot finally be separate," Benne observes.[15] God's promise to redeem all things and bring them to fulfillment at the end of time engenders in Christians, Jürgen Moltmann argues, "creative discipleship" with "'creative expectation,' hope which sets about criticizing and transforming the present because it is open toward the universal future of the kingdom [of God]."[16]

So, what is the public church in the sense of its life in society? The public church is marked by a concern for the public order of society and for the common life among people, organizations, and groups apart from the political and economic spheres of social life. Marty regards the public church to be "a family of apostolic churches with Jesus Christ at the center, churches which are especially sensitive to the *res publica*, the public order that surrounds and includes people of faith."[17] It is a loosely organized set of expressions—congregations, denominations, ecumenical organizations, religious interest groups, and para-church organizations[18]—that engage the public order both out of their own particular religious traditions and out of what they share in a common Christian calling. The public church is also concerned with the common life in the wider circle of civil society outside the spheres of politics and economics. Focusing on the congregational expression of the public church conceived as public prophetic moral companions in civil society, Gary Simpson argues that such congregations are compassionately, critically, and self-critically committed to other social institutions and their moral predicaments.[19] Others extend the sphere of the public church's concern to the whole of God's creation.[20]

[13]Keifert, *Welcoming the Stranger*, 87.

[14]Ibid., 81.

[15]Benne, *The Paradoxical Vision*, 88.

[16]Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, 334–335.

[17]Martin E. Marty, *The Public Church: Mainline, Evangelical, Catholic* (New York: Crossroad, 1981) 3.

[18]For a critical assessment of these various expressions of the public church, see Marty and Moore, *Politics, Religion, and the Common Good*, 73–155.

[19]Gary M. Simpson, "Toward a Lutheran 'Delight in the Law of the Lord': Church and State in the Context of Civil Society," in *Church & State: Lutheran Perspectives*, ed. John R. Stumme and Robert W. Tuttle (Minneapolis: Fortress: 2003) 49. See also, Simpson, "Civil Society and Congregations as Public Moral Companions," *Word & World* 15/4 (1995) 420–427.

[20]See Moe-Lobeda, *The Public Church*, 9 and 12, and the website of the Web of Creation at www.webofcreation.org (accessed 29 March 2006).

Engaging both its internal life and its external life in society is an exercise of practical theology for the public church.[21] Public theologies[22] are important both to the understanding of Christians who think and act in the public sphere and to the larger public that is considering matters of policy. In a world after christendom, it is both possible and necessary for Christians to make publicly intelligible theological claims as warrants on issues of public importance for the common good.[23] Because such claims about "supreme reality" work in ways similar to claims by nonreligious persons about that reality, religious and theological claims are constructive, legitimate contributions to public debate, and are consistent with a Madisonian view of the free exercise of religion in a democracy.[24] Putting such theological claims in the public sphere makes them subject to public criticism in the same way that any public argument is. For Thiemann, this is an act of Christian confidence: "By opening Christian tradition to conversation with those in the public square, public theology opens Christian belief and practices to the critique that inevitably emerges from those conversation partners."[25] At the same time, such an engagement requires a self-critical engagement by Christians with their own religious and theological tradition.

Companions in the Public Square: Tactics in Workable Strategies of Action

Congregations taking up this mission engage the public realms out of their own religious and theological traditions on the one hand and common secular culture on the other. Congregations will make self-critical use of secular traditions of reason and argument and the heritage of thought about common life in their own Christian imagination, which may result in action. Nancy Tatom Ammerman and her colleagues showed how this happened in a study of congregational responses to community change. Congregations drew on the theological stories, symbols, rituals, and ideas of their own congregational and religious heritages as well as a variety of ideas and practices from secular culture to create what she calls "workable strategies of action."[26] The remainder of this article will look at five ways for congrega-

[21]See Patrick R. Keifert, "The Return of the Congregation: Theological Method," in *Testing the Spirits*, ed. Patrick R. Keifert (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, forthcoming), for an illuminating discussion of the relation of the church's mission, theology, and Christian practical reason in the contemporary context.

[22]For analyses of the state of the recent discussion of this theme, see Kathryn Tanner, "Public Theology and the Character of Public Debate," *Annual of the Society of Christian Ethics* 16/1 (1996) 79–101, and E. Harold Breitenberg Jr., "To Tell the Truth: Will the Real Public Theology Please Stand Up?" *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 23/2 (2003) 55–96.

[23]Thiemann, *Constructing a Public Theology*, 19–23 and 40. See his *Revelation and Theology: The Gospel as Narrated Promise* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1985) for a discussion of what making public theological claims means in our postmodern world.

[24]Ronald F. Thiemann, *Religion in Public Life: A Dilemma for Democracy* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 1996) 150.

[25]Thiemann, *Constructing a Public Theology*, 23. See also *Religion in Public Life*, 155–157.

[26]Nancy Tatom Ammerman et al., *Congregation & Community* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1997) 243 and 358.

tions to engage the public realm: moral deliberation, social ministry, community development, community organizing, and public policy advocacy. These approaches can be combined in response to congregational aims and local conditions to create workable strategies of action.

> ***"the more Christians participate in public life, the more they develop attitudes and behavior that contribute to their public moral agency as both Christians and as actors in civil society"***

In the process of carrying out these strategies of action, not only do congregations become public actors but their members become public actors as well, as they participate in the congregation's public ministry through one or more of the following tactics. These individuals thus live out their callings as members of Christian communities in "the public square" of civil society. The manner and extent to which this happens for persons will vary with the situation and with the particular tactics the congregation uses in its strategy. The more Christians participate in the public life of their congregations and in the public life of the larger society, whether as part of their congregation's ministry or not, the more they develop attitudes, values, knowledge, skills, and behavior that contribute to their public moral agency as both Christians and as actors in civil society. This needs to be kept in mind as we discuss each of the following tactics for congregational engagement in public life.

1. Moral deliberation

Moral deliberation denotes a structured process for talking, deciding, and acting as Christian community.[27] Although the details differ among the particular processes used, Christian moral deliberation generally involves conversation that intentionally relates Scripture and Christian or ecclesiastical traditions to cultural and social analyses of the reasons for the immediate situation and the experience of people. The purpose is to reach some conclusions about what the situation is, how the congregation sees God active in it, and what they ought to do. If desired, the congregation can then reach decisions, plan strategies, and act; the results can then be evaluated. When seen in this way, moral deliberation can also be understood as a practice of corporate spiritual discernment about matters of ministry facing the congregation[28]—here, about its engagement in the public realm.

Some kind of deliberation or discernment process—however structured or

[27]The conception of moral deliberation as "talking, deciding, and acting as Christian community" was explicitly used in a video workshop by Patrick R. Keifert, Patricia Taylor Ellison, and Ronald W. Duty, *Growing Healthier Congregations* (Saint Paul, MN: Church Innovations, 1997).

[28]On moral deliberation as corporate spiritual discernment, see Per Anderson, "In Defense of Unruly Discernment: Moral Deliberation in the ELCA," *Currents in Theology and Mission* 23 (April 1996) 104–118; and Ronald W. Duty, "Moral Deliberation in a Public Lutheran Church" (paper presented at the 2006 Annual Gathering of Lutheran Ethicists, 5 January 2006, Scottsdale, Arizona, publication forthcoming).

unstructured—is often involved when congregations decide to engage the public realm in their communities. More structured processes facilitate very deliberate (in a double sense) ways for congregations to discern how to pursue their missions. Because moral deliberation processes are not only for talking but also afford the possibility of deciding and acting, they are natural complements to a variety of approaches to ministry in the public realm, including social ministry, community organizing, and public policy advocacy.

Moral deliberation processes provide ways for congregations to venture into deeper waters with more serious topics than they might be used to. Pastors and laypeople are sometimes reluctant to engage some topics for conversation or to consider certain kinds of mission activities, because they fear these might divide congregations and create conflict. But because of the ways moral deliberation processes structure conversation, congregations can often deal with subjects and possible mission activities that involve even moderately intense levels of conflict. When congregations with even such levels of conflict deliberate, what leaders fear—that the congregation will fall apart—seldom happens. For a number of these congregations, such conflict is creative for mission rather than destructive of congregational life. The outcome is enabled not only by the deliberation process itself, but also by conversation leaders who have important attitudes and values, basic knowledge and skills, and who exhibit certain behaviors that assist congregations to talk together.[29] People with these gifts and assets are often found in congregations.

2. Social ministry

One tactic for congregations to address human need is to engage in social ministry to provide direct assistance and a variety of services to people in their communities. Individual congregations minister to human needs in their communities in a variety of informal as well as formal ways. But more significant are frequent efforts to share money, volunteers, space, and other kinds of support with other groups. "Congregations do much of this work in the public arena," Ammerman observes, "not by organizing their own programs, but by contributing their energy and resources to the efforts of others."[30] While this cooperation may be with their own denominational social service agencies, often it is expressed ecumenically, in cooperation with nondenominational or secular nonprofit organizations, or with public agencies. Also important are the joint efforts of pastors in both in-

[29]For a study of such leaders, see Patricia Taylor Ellison, "Doing Faith-Based Conversation: Metaphors for Congregations and Their Leaders," in *Testing the Spirits*, ed. Patrick R. Keifert (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, forthcoming).

[30]Nancy T. Ammerman, "Connecting Mainline Protestant Churches with Public Life," in *The Quiet Hand of God: Faith-Based Activism and the Public Role of Mainline Protestantism*, ed. Robert Wuthnow and John H. Evans (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002) 129. Her conclusions are generally supported for the ELCA in "Local Congregational Social Ministry Activity in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America" (report for the ELCA Department for Research and Evaluation, 11 January 2001); and Kathryn Sime, "Congregational Social Ministry Focus Groups: Summary of Findings" (report for the ELCA Department for Research and Evaluation, 5 September 2000). Ammerman's article is based on data from a larger study of a variety of Christian churches in the United States, including, but going well beyond, mainline Protestants, analyzed in Nancy Tatom Ammerman, *Pillars of Faith: American Congregations and Their Partners* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005) esp. 115–205.

formal as well as formally organized ecumenical associations of clergy, although these efforts are generally unrecognized by their parishioners. All these efforts involve the commitment of significant resources by congregations that produce impressive efforts and large human benefit.

"social ministry is one significant way congregations live out callings to be public moral companions"

Through involvement in social ministry, congregations have other effects as well. Social ministries both draw upon and enhance individual and congregational gifts, capacities, and skills for participation in public life. Social ministry is one significant way congregations live out callings to be what Simpson calls public moral companions. "In the encounter with diverse groups of coproviders," notes Ammerman, "mainline congregations and their members are drawn into the practical, everyday dilemmas of public life, who should be served, what services are needed, how can we pay for them, and how can we work together?"[31] Finally, in such efforts congregations "also expand and redefine the very nature of their own membership and citizenship," Ammerman observes, crossing boundaries that "allow religious values and religious caring to pass freely between mainline churches and public life."[32]

A congregation's deliberations about becoming involved in a social ministry, whether on its own or in partnership with others, will involve several considerations. These will include biblical and theological arguments for serving others, the self-images of the congregations, and the human and other gifts available to address the conditions of people and communities. A careful study of biblical images can help change the consciousness of congregations toward more openness to holistic, community-minded, empowering, justice-oriented, liberating approaches that focus on the intrinsic worth of those the ministry seeks to serve.[33] In addition, a congregation's self-image can also become an asset in moving congregations to engage in social ministry. Having a particular kind of self-image is less important than the ability to use that self-image to move a congregation to involvement in social ministry.[34] The particular kind of involvement will often be influenced by the

[31]Ammerman, "Connecting Mainline Churches and Public Life," 154.

[32]Ibid.

[33]Robert Kysar, *Called to Care: Biblical Images for Social Ministry* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991) 99–119. Robert Wuthnow has a perceptive discussion of the strengths and weaknesses of various approaches to arguing on behalf of serving the poor in his *The Crisis in the Churches: Spiritual Malaise, Fiscal Woe* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997) 185–206.

[34]Karl S. Dudley and Sally A. Johnson, "Congregational Self-Images for Social Ministry," in *Carriers of Faith: Lessons from Congregational Studies*, ed. Karl S. Dudley, Jackson W. Carroll, and James P. Wind (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1991) 104–121. Practical information for congregational social ministry is found in Miguel de Jesús, *Beyond Our Comfort Zone: Developing Social Ministry Programs in Multiethnic Settings* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2002); *Serving as Jesus Served: A Planning Guide for Social Ministry in Congregations* (Chicago: ELCA Division for Congregational Ministries, 2004); and Andrew White, "Social Ministry in the Local Congregation," in the video series *Theology and Social Ministry*, produced and directed by Norman Wegemeyer (Columbus, OH: SELECT, 1984).

size of the congregation and the size of its budget.[35] Wuthnow believes that budgets may be constrained at less than optimal levels for ministry, in part, because particularly middle-class parishioners fail to see the connections between their religious life and their everyday pressures of work, income, and lifestyles. He argues that churches need to do a better job connecting these things in order to offer their members a spiritual challenge to engage in ministry, including social ministry.[36]

3. Community development

The next three congregational tactics of action—community development, community organizing, and public policy advocacy—differ from social ministry generally in their aim to change social, economic, and political conditions that affect people's lives through direct action rather than to meet people's needs or ameliorate their suffering without changing those conditions. The conditions these tactics attempt to change are often complex and difficult to understand. Addressing them may involve congregations in addressing systemic issues of justice. This combination of social complexity, relative lack of clarity, and possible systemic injustice may easily give rise to disagreement and the risk of conflict in a congregation. This accounts for the greater reluctance of some congregational leaders to address such issues or to pursue such strategies of action in comparison to social ministry.[37] It also highlights the importance of doing one's homework on the issue in order to help a congregation gain as much clarity as possible about its social and ethical complexity and its systemic implications.[38] It also calls for the thorough exercise of moral deliberation, not merely to give parishioners an opportunity to struggle with an issue together but also to consider how to decide and act,[39] risking commitment to do something together in conditions where some uncertainty always remains. And the conversation should include a discussion of what means may be most appropriate for the ends the congregation or its community seeks.

In community development work, congregations both accompany and provide resources to communities in order to address goals such as the improvement of housing, commercial development, job creation, the provision of education and training, or creation of community and cultural centers, which may be seen to both enhance the quality of life and empower the capacities of persons and the commu-

[35]Ammerman, *Pillars of Faith*, 135, 157.

[36]Wuthnow, *The Crisis in the Churches*, 203–206. For a discussion of the relation of the work lives and spiritual crises of middle-class parishioners, see pp. 87–118.

[37]Sime, "Congregational Social Ministry Focus Groups," 3 and 8.

[38]Benne remarks that "the church must do serious preparation when it takes up a public issue" in connection with the preparation of denominational social statements (*The Paradoxical Vision*, 208). This is sound advice for all occasions when any expression of the church addresses public issues.

[39]A focus group of Lutheran congregational leaders expressed confusion over whether the focus of moral deliberation was simply on the process of conversation itself or on a possible resolution of the issue (Sime, "Congregational Social Ministry Focus Groups," 5). Clearly from this focus group, confusion ensues when there is no attempt to resolve the issue. If moral deliberation is to be a workable strategy of action of corporate spiritual discernment, congregations must have at least the option of deciding and acting on a course of action.

nity to better determine their own future in desirable ways.[40] The means to address these goals are often a coordinated set of projects to create physical or social capital that may be conceived, implemented, or controlled through the direct involvement of the community. Community development work can involve congregations in partnerships with groups of community members, public agencies at various levels of government, nonprofit organizations, and private lenders and commercial groups. A distinctive mark of community development is its focus on changing the social, economic, or physical conditions that affect the lives of people in local communities.

> ***"community organizing involves what popular historian Studs Terkel calls 'clout'"***

4. Community organizing

Community organizing also attempts to change the social, economic, political, or physical conditions affecting people in local communities. With community organizing, the emphasis is less on using the assets of the community to develop its own projects and more on holding public or private officials or organizations accountable to do (or refrain from doing) things that affect the lives of people in a community. In metropolitan Chicago, for example, United Power for Action and Justice[41] has helped to get a gradual expansion of health insurance coverage for the uninsured in Illinois, both through working with local state legislators on a state insurance program for basic health care coverage and working with a major health care insurer on a private pilot program for a segment of the uninsured suburban population in Cook County. Community organizing involves a coordinated effort among participating congregations and organizations to listen to their members' concerns, build personal relationships, and marshal individual and organizational support into what popular historian Studs Terkel calls "clout"—sustainable, public, nonpartisan demonstrations of community power having political overtones—to accomplish their goals.[42] This strategy may include an effort to hold public officials accountable at the polls if they are unresponsive to the community organization's demands.

5. Public policy advocacy

Public policy advocacy involves the effort by national religiously connected

[40]To get a sense of the possibilities of involvement in community development, see the website of Bethel New Life, a faith-based nonprofit with roots in a congregation in the West Garfield Park neighborhood in Chicago, at www.bethelnewlife.org (accessed 24 March 2006).

[41]United Power for Action and Justice is a project of the Industrial Areas Foundation and has a dues-paying membership of local churches, synagogues, mosques, labor unions, and local health care providers.

[42]See Dennis A. Jacobsen, *Doing Justice: Congregations and Community Organizing* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001), for a description and advocacy of community organizing for Christian congregations. For an illuminating study of effects of involvement in community organizing on the congregations themselves, see Interfaith Funders and the University of New Mexico, *Renewing Congregations: The Contribution of Faith-Based Community Organizing* (Syosset, NY: Interfaith Funders, 2003).

organizations such as Bread for the World, national denominations, or their regional judicatories to appeal to members of congregations who are interested in certain policy issues to ask their elected representatives to either support or oppose particular legislation that is up for action in the U. S. Congress or a state legislature. Congregations usually get involved through an educational effort to acquaint members with social issues, using information from these advocacy organizations or their denomination's social policy statements. They are also provided with information about how to become involved in direct advocacy through those organizations.[43] These advocacy organizations typically provide policy alerts about pending legislation to interested persons and may also provide a mechanism through the internet for easily transmitting these persons' stated concerns and wishes to their elected representatives' offices. Advocacy organizations are typically nonpartisan and also attempt through their own staffs to persuade legislators to support their positions. While they may provide members of their networks information about the voting records of their representatives, they do not attempt to tell their members how to vote in elections. Involvement in advocacy is one way congregations can encourage their members constructively to exercise their role as democratic citizens.

The internal lives of congregations are inherently public. They are called to mission in the public square as a way of participating in God's ongoing creating activity in the world and as a way of anticipating the coming kingdom of God in all its justice and fullness. By using their own theological stories, symbols, rituals, ideas, and other aspects of their heritage, congregations can fashion workable strategies of action in the public square from a variety of tactics and practices such as moral deliberation, social ministry, community development, community organizing, and public policy advocacy. Pursuing their strategies of action puts them in partnership with others to care for the wounded and the marginalized and to work for justice in their communities. In so doing, congregations act as public prophetic moral companions to those persons, groups, and organizations in their communities that not only face their own dilemmas, but the dilemmas of their communities and the larger society as well. ⊕

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[43]See "Involving Congregations in Advocacy Now (ICAN): An ELCA Guide to Developing an Advocacy Ministry within Your Congregation," online at http://www.elca.org/advocacy/congregations/ministry (accessed 12 March 2006).