A growing body of research examines conflicts over homosexuality in national religious organizations, but little research explores variation in how local congregations are responding to the issue. We focus on twenty-one congregations in the northeastern and southwestern United States that belong to one mainline Protestant denomination, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA). We ask how local factors and national denominational actions influence how these congregations are addressing homosexuality. Before a recent national denominational study, local situations and factors led congregations to respond to homosexuality in a broad range of ways. Since the national study, there is much less variation in congregations’ responses, illustrating how a denomination can use a national study to frame and shape local considerations of a controversial issue. This article bridges the gap between studies of homosexuality focused on denominations and those focused on congregations to show how denominational actions can shape local considerations. More broadly, this article illustrates the range of ways congregations may respond to controversial issues in their national denominations and one strategy, a national study, which a denomination may adopt to frame and shape such conflicts.

National headlines—“Nation’s churches in turmoil over gays,” “Conservative group amplifies voice of Protestant orthodoxy,” “Church Is Rebuked on Same-Sex Unions”—point to continued debates about homosexuality being waged in mainline Protestant denominations across the country (Dooley 2004; Goodstein and Kirkpatrick 2004; Goodstein 2004). While some headlines describe conflicts about the general policies of different Protestant denominations, others point to specific controversies like the recent ordination of Gene Robinson as the first openly gay Episcopal bishop, the United Methodist church trial of Elizabeth Stroud, an openly lesbian minister, and the church trials of several clergy who presided at marriages or commitment ceremonies for same-sex couples in recent years in defiance of their national denomination’s policies.
Religious debates about homosexuality have ramifications for national Protestant denominational bodies as well as for local congregations. The United Methodist Church court trials of Elizabeth Stroud, for example, clarified the policies of the United Methodist denomination and also influenced Stroud's local congregation, where she continues to serve as a lay minister but no longer celebrates communion, weddings, or baptisms for church members (Remsen 2004). Some mainline Protestant congregations, particularly Episcopal congregations, are leaving their denominations in response to national denominational debates about homosexuality (Grossman 2005). Other congregations are in public or private conflict about homosexuality, and still others have joined networks of congregations that publicly welcome gay men and lesbians into the lives of their congregations (Hartman 1996, Cadge 2005). Leaders of more than half of the mainline Protestant congregations Nancy Ammerman describes in her new book report that their congregations are particularly concerned about conflicts over homosexuality, including two-thirds of the Episcopal congregations studied and three-quarters of the Presbyterian congregations (Ammerman 2005).

A growing body of research analyzes national debates about homosexuality in mainline Protestant denominations (Beuttler 1999; Burgess 1999; Cadge 2002; Koch and Curry 2000; Stephens 1997; Udis-Kessler 2002; Wood and Bloch 1995; Wood 2000). Much less research focuses on how these debates, and the issue of homosexuality more generally, are being received and responded to by individual congregations. A growing number of ethnographic studies describe how mainline Protestants with different opinions about homosexuality understand the issue, but do not fully explore how the wider range of congregations in the U.S. are addressing it (Ammerman 1999; Moon 2004; Stein 2001). Few researchers have asked why congregations respond to homosexuality differently and how local and national denominational factors may interact to shape such responses.

Considering the ways in which national denominational and local factors shape congregations' response to homosexuality is important both empirically and theoretically. Empirically, current attention from scholars and the media on national denominational conflicts and debates about homosexuality in mainline Protestant denominations may be overshadowing or distorting what is taking place in some individual congregations. While some local congregations are certainly in conflict about homosexuality, others are not, as they respond to the issue quietly in ways not often covered by the media or noticed by scholars. Scholarly attention to national denominational debates follows from secular media coverage of those debates but overlooks the possibility that there are different things happening around homosexuality at national (denominational) and local (congregational) levels of analysis. Theoretically, scholars concerned with conflicts over homosexuality or other issues in mainline Protestant denominations have tended to focus either on denominations or on congregations, rarely bridging the two levels of analysis. As Becker and colleagues argue, congregations and denominations are linked by shared resources, constituency, theology and history (Becker et al. 1993). As such, particularly on issues that are the subject of controversy and may threaten denominational unity, the actions of denominations may influence what happens in congregations and vice versa. To try to shape or minimize conflicts, denominations may develop strategies or utilize resources in ways that will influence how controversial issues are addressed in local congregations. The strategies denominations are using to respond to homosexuality and other controversial issues, and the outcomes of these strategies, are relevant theoretically beyond the case of homosexuality.
This article explores how local factors and denominational actions influence how congregations respond to homosexuality. We explore this question in the five million member Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA). In response to ongoing denominational conflict about homosexuality, the ELCA initiated a five-year national sexuality study in 2001 that included extensive educational materials for congregations. Through these educational materials, including curriculum for two six-week studies of sexuality and homosexuality respectively, the denomination framed the ways local congregations would study and consider the issue. We examine how twenty-one congregations in the northwestern and southwestern United States responded to homosexuality before and after they completed the national study. Through interviews conducted with clergy at each of these congregations, we explore how local congregational and community factors in combination with denominational efforts framed and shaped congregations' responses.

Before the ELCA conducted its national sexuality study, the ELCA congregations examined were responding to homosexuality in a wide range of ways. A few had gone through a study process to become a Reconciling in Christ (RIC) congregation that publicly welcomes gay and lesbian members. At the majority of congregations, however, homosexuality had been addressed on a more informal or ad hoc basis, either publicly as a congregation or privately with particular members in response to local events. Despite denominational conflicts about homosexuality, only two of the twenty-one congregations studied reported internal conflicts about homosexuality before the national study. After the study, which all twenty-one congregations completed, responses to homosexuality were more uniform across congregations. Rather than ad hoc local situations shaping whether and how church members had addressed homosexuality, the study materials—and particularly the six-week study focused on homosexuality—shaped congregations' responses to the issue. While no congregations took (or changed) official positions about homosexuality as a result of the study, the majority of congregations went through the materials in similar ways, raised and discussed similar issues, and had similar outcomes, namely a greater understanding of and appreciation for different positions about homosexuality. The national study materials framed congregational responses to homosexuality in ways that minimized conflict, especially by helping members at three-quarters of the congregations examined here realize that opinion about homosexuality is mixed not only in the denomination but in their own individual congregations.

BACKGROUND

Religious Debates About Homosexuality

Conflicts about homosexuality have been taking place for more than thirty years in a wide range of religious traditions across the United States (Clark, Brown, and Hochstein 1989; Comstock and Henking 1997; Dillon 1999; Shokeid 1995; Zuckerman 1999). Liberal religious organizations like the Society of Friends (Quakers), Unitarian Universalists, and Reform Jews welcome gay men and lesbians into all areas of religious life while many of the most conservative groups do not, successfully avoiding conflicts over the issue generally by not discussing it (Ellison 1991; Frost n.d.; Oppenheimer 1996). The six largest mainline Protestant denominations, representing an estimated 21.7 million people, are among the American religious organizations most divided over homosexuality (Wuthnow and Evans 2002). Reli-
igious restructuring in the twentieth century led to divisions within these denominations in which significant numbers of members are on either side of a broad theological divide, particularly evident around questions of gender, sexuality and the family (Glock 1993; Roof and McKinney 1987; Wuthnow 1988, 1989).

Homosexuality has been controversial in the mainline Protestant denominations since the early 1970s. With the exception of the United Church of Christ and the Episcopal Church, each denomination currently has a national policy which calls homosexuality incompatible with Christian teaching, prohibits the ordination of gay men and lesbians, and simultaneously calls on the church to support the civil rights of gay and lesbian people. Each denomination also has support networks for gay and lesbian members started in the 1970s and networks of congregations that since the early 1980s publicly welcome gay men and lesbians into the lives of their churches. Special interest groups exist on all sides of the debate in each denomination, and the issue is regularly debated at national denominational meetings where denominational conflicts over homosexuality are reported on by the national secular news media (Cadge 2002).

Scholars interested in homosexuality in mainline Protestant denominations and other religious organizations have focused almost exclusively on debate within national religious bodies rather than on how the issue has been addressed in the local congregations that are the building blocks of religious life in the U.S. (Warner 1994). Researchers have traced the history of national debate and focused on the development of special interest groups around the topic (Beuttler 1999; Burgess 1999; Buzzell 2001; Cadge 2002; Ellison 1991; Haeberle 1991; Koch and Curry 2000; McLain 1995; Oliveto 2002; Rogers 1999; Udis-Kessler 2002; Wellman 1999; Wood and Bloch 1995). The few researchers who have focused on congregations have tended to examine congregations in conflict about homosexuality or those on different sides of the issue, rather than considering how a range of congregations have responded in the context of broader national debates (Ammerman 1999; Cadge 2005; Hartman 1996; Moon 2004). With the exception of an important article by Ellingson and colleagues, which points to the intersections between doctrine, geography, and local culture in how local religious groups in Chicago are responding to homosexuality, almost no research focuses on how populations of congregations in the same region or religious tradition respond to the topic (Ellingson, Tebbe, Van Haitsma, and Laumann 2001).

Considering how national denominations and local congregations respond to homosexuality separately and in relation to one another is important not just empirically, but also for what the case may contribute to broader thinking about how controversial issues are addressed in denominations and congregations individually and in relation to one another. A well established body of literature explores the causes and processes of conflict in denominations and congregations on issues such as civil rights, women’s ordination, gender and family issues, worship styles, and other topics (e.g. Becker et al. 1993; Becker 1999; Chaves 1997; Wood 1970, 1972). Relatively little attention, however, focuses on how the actions and strategies denominations adopt in the midst of such conflicts influence how local congregations respond to controversial issues. In their struggles with a range of controversial issues, mainline Protestant denominations have discussed issues, studied them, made policies about them, tried not to make policies about them, outlined periods of time in which they would and would not discuss them, etc. Local congregations have responded in numerous ways, but how their actions are related to the actions of their denominations is not clear. We focus here on the influence of a national denominational study, a relatively common way denominations respond
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to controversial issues in their midst. Future analyses that examine other ways denominations attempt to frame and influence local considerations of controversial issues will further these theoretical concerns.¹

Evangelical Lutheran Church in America Debates Over Homosexuality

Like all of the mainline Protestant denominations, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America’s struggles over homosexuality extend back over thirty years. The ELCA began its discussions of sexuality shortly after the denomination was formed in 1988 through a merger of the Lutheran Church in America (LCA), the American Lutheran Church (ALC), and the Association of Evangelical Lutheran Churches. Before the merger, both the LCA and ALC had policies in the 1970s stating that homosexuality is viewed “biblically as a departure from the heterosexual structure of God’s creation,” but that homosexuals deserve civil rights (LCA, 1970, 5th Biennial Convention Social Statement). Gay and lesbian people were fully welcome to participate in the lives of local congregations, and shortly after the merger a national task force was appointed to facilitate a church wide study of homosexuality. As a result of this first study, the ELCA released the first draft of a social statement, “The Church and Human Sexuality: A Lutheran Perspective,” in 1993 and received over 20,000 responses, most of them critical. Deliberation about the statement continued in the following years. In 1996 the denomination adopted a Social Message on Sexuality that called for all individuals to be respected, regardless of their sexual orientation, but said nothing directly about homosexuality.²

Divisions and strong opinions about homosexuality continued to be evident in the ELCA following the 1996 statement. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, the denomination began to develop materials to help members understand and respect their differences of opinion. These publications had titles like, “Talking Together as Christians about Homosexuality: A Guide for Congregations,” and “Conversations among Sisters and Brothers in Christ on Homosexuality and the Church.” As a result of continued controversy around homosexuality, the national denomination voted by a large margin in 2001 to “initiate a process within the ELCA to develop a social statement on homosexuality,” and devoted 1.15 million dollars to support the effort.³ A national sexuality study committee was assembled and the study, titled Journey Together Faithfully, was launched with a web site, local meetings, study materials, etc. To involve local congregations, this national sexuality study committee developed two sets of materials, one about sexuality generally (released in 2002) and a second about homosexuality specifically (released in 2003), and asked congregations to use them for studies of the topic. Congregations were invited to send their substantive feedback to the denomination following their studies. In response to this feedback and their own deliberations, the national sexuality committee made its recommendations to the national church in January 2005. At the Churchwide Assembly in 2005, delegates voted not to change current denomination policy which does not allow gay and lesbian people to be ordained unless they remain celibate, and not to adopt a policy about the blessing of same-sex relationships. A social statement is expected to be brought to the Churchwide Assembly in 2009.⁴

While no mainline Protestant denomination is representative of the others, the ELCA’s polity is most like the polity of the United Methodist Church and the Presbyterian Church USA in that these denominations have national policies that are binding for local congregations. The policies around homosexuality have, therefore, been the subjects of intense controversy.⁵ The process by which the ELCA has addressed homosexuality over the years is
most like the approaches of the United Methodist Church, Presbyterian Church USA, and Episcopal Church in their reliance on national studies. The ELCA, however, devoted considerably more resources to their recent national study, developed teaching materials for congregations that were much more extensive that those developed by other denominations, and asked all congregations to study the issue, which other denominations have not done. The ELCA, in the context of this study, can be thought of as representative of other mainline denominations in a very broad sense, but the particularities of each denomination's polity, history of studying homosexuality, and history around homosexuality more generally make simple comparisons impossible. This case is best read as an example of how a national denominational study may influence local considerations of homosexuality when a denomination devotes substantial time and resources to the study process.

METHODS

To understand how congregations in the ELCA are responding to homosexuality, we focused on twenty-one congregations in the northeastern and southwestern United States. Eleven congregations belong to one synod (regional body) in the northeast and ten congregations belong to one synod in the southwest. Both synods include urban and suburban congregations in the vicinity of a similarly sized city. While both of these cities have lesbian and gay populations, neither has been a center of gay and lesbian activism in the past thirty years. All of the congregations examined are at a distance from the demographic center of the ELCA and its national headquarters in the Midwest.

To learn about how a wide range of congregations in these regions responded to homosexuality, we located congregations with the guidance of regional denominational representatives. In the northeast, a denominational representative suggested a broad range of congregations she had recently invited to a regional event about homosexuality, while in the southwest, a regional denominational representative posted a short description of our project and a request for participation to their local clergy listserve. We located additional congregations through these initial contacts, ending up with a snowball sample designed to include congregations that had responded to homosexuality in a wide range of ways. By design, all of the congregations in our sample had addressed homosexuality in some way in recent years. This enables us to consider variation in how individual congregations responded to the issue. It does not, however, enable us to assess what factors lead some congregations rather than others to address the issue at all. A congregational survey including many more congregations is needed for that. While it is impossible to assess the extent to which these congregations are representative of those in their synods and these synods representative of those across the country, the range of responses to homosexuality we document indicate that we contacted a diverse set of congregations. The information presented here can inform future investigations of a larger number of congregations.

At each of the congregations selected for study, we contacted the senior minister by mail or telephone and, in the summer of 2004, conducted a semi-structured interview with her/him by telephone. We also gathered materials from the pastor such as sermons, study guides, and the response booklets some congregations compiled after completing the sexuality studies. To better understand the regional contexts, we also interviewed regional denominational representatives and representatives of local denominational gay rights groups in the area. Interviews lasted about one hour and were transcribed and coded along relevant themes (Strauss and Corbin 1990).
This analytic approach allowed us to hear how congregations have responded to homosexuality through the voices of their pastors, and to assess more variation in how these congregations responded than would be possible through detailed ethnographic research of fewer congregations. Given that little previous data has been gathered about congregations' responses to homosexuality, this approach further enabled us to ask open-ended questions and gather more detailed information than would have been possible through a larger survey administered to more congregations with closed questions.

**FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

**Before the National Study: Three Types of Congregational Responses**

Before the ELCA's national sexuality study, about two-thirds of the twenty-one congregations we examine in this paper had addressed homosexuality. Local factors and situations generally influenced how and why they had done so, and relatively few congregations were or had been in conflict about the issue. The congregations that had addressed homosexuality before the national study had generally done so in one of three ways. First, a small number of congregations (four of twenty-one) had consciously decided to address homosexuality and to become Reconciling in Christ (RIC) congregations, publicly welcoming gay and lesbian people into their church community. These congregations saw in the RIC program the opportunity to extend social justice commitments that had been important throughout the history of their congregations. One such congregation had become a RIC congregation in the early 1980s. The current pastor explained that “the congregation always has been on the edge of social justice and felt strongly that this is what needed to be done.” Each of these congregations went through a structured process of study and reflection before voting as a congregation to become a RIC congregation. Not all congregations that considered joining the RIC process did join. One additional congregation considered becoming a RIC congregation but decided against it. As the minister explained, “people said, we welcome everyone so we don’t need something specific.” He and the congregation felt that gay men and lesbians were already welcome in the congregation and they did not need a specific RIC label or membership to signify that welcome.

A second group of congregations, the majority, had addressed homosexuality publicly in the congregation in relatively unstructured or ad hoc ways in response to events in the congregation, denomination, or community. None of these congregations had made official statements or took public positions about the issue. Rather, they addressed it in response to relevant events and devoted little other attention to the topic. At one congregation, for example, a former pastor returned to the church as a guest and preached about homosexuality in a sermon. The current minister was not expecting this and had several informal conversations about the issue with church members after the service. At several other congregations, homosexuality was addressed in response to their social service work with AIDS service organizations or just generally in adult Sunday school classes or forums. The minister at a congregation in the northeast, for example, said church members have talked about homosexuality “in various small groups...we have talked about it certainly and dealt with it but in a more informal way.” Only a few congregations addressed homosexuality in response to denominational actions before the national sexuality study. Outside of the RIC congregations, the congregation that had devoted the most sustained attention to homosexuality had taken the initia-
tive and hosted a human sexuality retreat for church members as a way to better understand an issue which was causing substantial conflict in their denomination.

The third small group of congregations had addressed homosexuality privately or pastorally rather than publicly as a congregation. At one congregation the male organist’s partner (also a man) died suddenly and it was when his funeral was held in the church that the minister said homosexuality was first addressed, indirectly in the pastoral care and support she and church members provided. Other clergy spoke about particular families that included gay and lesbian members and described addressing the issue with them privately.

In light of ongoing denominational conflict about homosexuality in the ELCA over past years, it is interesting to note that only two of the twenty-one congregations studied described themselves as having been in conflict about homosexuality before the national study. Both of these congregations were in the southwest and the pastors of each reported losing some church members as a result of the conflict. At one congregation, a large suburban church, a group of members wanted the congregation to take a public position against ordaining gay and lesbian people and blessing same-sex unions. When church leaders refused, about twenty-five families left the congregation to join more conservative non-ELCA congregations in the area. At the other congregation, an urban church, a group of people the pastor said had “very, very strong opinions about homosexuality” began to have meetings with one another about the topic. Some became involved with Word Alone, an evangelical renewal group within the ELCA. One of the people involved with Word Alone subsequently ran to be the president of the congregation and, when the minister would not support him, he and the others who had strong opinions about homosexuality left the congregation. These two cases are revealing in the extent to which they show congregational conflicts started or stemming from people with more conservative rather than liberal opinions about homosexuality and in their resolutions. In both cases the people with more conservative opinions left the congregations. The congregations themselves did not do anything differently around homosexuality after these individuals left.

Local Experiences of the National Sexuality Study

As part of the ELCA’s national sexuality study, as outlined above, all 10,600 ELCA congregations in the United States were asked to study sexuality and homosexuality, using the educational materials the denomination had prepared for that purpose. All of the twenty-one congregations examined here completed at least one portion of these study materials as a congregation, generally the materials about homosexuality rather than sexuality more generally. Congregations typically completed the study materials in fairly uniform ways and fell into one of two broad groups in their experiences: congregations in which there were, and were not, differences of opinion.

Before describing how different congregations experienced this study process, it is important to note that when approached about it, not all congregations were equally willing to complete the study initially. Several of the congregations in the southwest (4 of the 10) were skeptical. The pastors of these congregations said that some church members felt that the national study was being forced on them and/or that decisions about homosexuality had already been made at the national level. As one minister explained, “There are some people in the congregation who believe that the new leadership of the ELCA is trying to soften us up and lead us in this direction that we will some day bless same sex unions. And they see this as just propaganda…” Continuing in the same line of thought, another minister said
members of his congregation felt that the decision was already made; people think “that we [a]re going to be ordaining practicing gays and lesbians and that we [a]re going to be blessing same-sex unions...the studies were simply designed to convince us that this was the right thing to do.” Despite members’ concerns, the pastors of these congregations encouraged church members to complete the studies. One minister described himself as a “coach” trying to connect his church members to the national denomination and “explain how the system works.”

Congregations went through the studies themselves in relatively uniform ways as indicated by the national denominational materials. The studies were designed to take place over six to eight sessions that typically met in adult Sunday school classes, special sessions on Sunday afternoons, or in weekday evening sessions led by the pastor or lay members. The educational materials most often used, those about homosexuality, began with a session focused on Christian / Lutheran identity before moving into sessions focused on biblical passages about homosexuality, considerations of same-sex marriage, the ordination of gay and lesbian people, and possible denominational positions on same-sex marriages and ordination. At the congregations we examined, the number of church members who participated in these studies ranged from three or four to seventy percent and averaged about fifteen percent of regular members. At a few of the smaller congregations, the studies were multi-generational including teenagers as well as younger and older adults, though at most congregations the studies included only adults.

Congregations’ experiences of the studies differed based on whether there was disagreement about the issues in the congregation itself. One group of congregations, generally those that had previously gone through the process of becoming a RIC congregation, found that opinion about homosexuality was relatively homogenous because they had long histories of addressing sexuality and actively including gay and lesbian people in their congregations. In the second group of congregations, the majority, there were many differences of opinion about the issues discussed. This group included all of the congregations that had not previously addressed homosexuality as a congregation. Regional location, urban/suburban location, size, demographic composition, and other structural factors had little influence on the broad group into which each congregation fell. Rather, congregational histories around social justice generally, and homosexuality more specifically, influenced the degree of disagreement and thus the congregations’ experiences with the studies.

In the three-quarters of congregations in which opinion about homosexuality was mixed, these differences of opinion did not lead to direct conflict or controversy among members. Rather, clergy and the denominational study materials framed the discussions in ways that helped participants recognize and discuss their similarities and differences without controversy. From the title of the national study (Journey Together Faithfully) which implies that the denomination will continue to journey together despite conflict, to the emphasis on common histories and identities in the materials themselves, the national sexuality study committee and local clergy continually tried to frame and temper disagreements about homosexuality among church members.

Many ministers continued the effort to emphasize commonalities over differences in how they approached the sexuality studies from the start. The pastor of a suburban congregation in the northeast, for example, first addressed homosexuality in his congregation in a Sunday morning, discussion-oriented church service after reviewing the denomination’s study materials. From the start, he said, he decided to focus on the “common ground” in an effort to get
a wide range of people involved in the study. He explained, “I decided just to direct that focus more on our commonalities or common ground, some of the things that we would not disagree on in terms of we were all looking for a loving committed relationship and that we are called by God to respect one another and to be partners for others....” A smaller group of church members continued this discussion in evening sessions using the denominational materials after agreeing to ground rules which included, in the words of the minister, “not always agreeing with folks” but “respect[ing] one another in the midst of our differences.” At another congregation the minister started the study not by talking about sexuality at all but with a “sin survey” that listed issues such as suicide, gambling, euthanasia, adultery, promiscuity, prostitution, etc. Church members were asked to check off the issues they thought were sinful, an exercise the minister explained was designed to show that there was “not one thing” about which they all agreed. She explained further, “Even the [issues] where the [denomination] says this church opposes adultery, promiscuity, pornography, you know? Even those, [church members] weren’t in agreement on. So that sort of became our trump card in that we said see—we worship together, have fellowship together, we love one another, and we don’t agree on anything.”

Within the respectful boundaries or ground rules set by the denominational study materials and clergy in congregations, the ministers leading these studies encouraged church members to voice their opinions and to disagree with one another, expecting them to be able to handle these disagreements. In deciding to participate in the sexuality studies, a pastor in the southwest said that he thought the congregation could agree to disagree. In his words, “we have people in our congregation that you would call left wing liberals and right wing conservatives and all in between ...they’re very divided on certain issues ...but they can still worship together...they can agree to disagree but still remain together and worship togeth-er and be brothers and sisters in Christ.” Other ministers spoke about actively playing the position of devil’s advocate in the midst of the studies as a way to ensure that all positions, even those they disagreed with, were put on the table for discussion.

Some of the most dynamic studies of sexuality took place in congregations where not just church members, but the pastors themselves disagreed about homosexuality. In one congregation the senior and junior pastors held different opinions about homosexuality. When asked if that caused friction in the congregation or in the sexuality study the junior pastor said no, “I think there are a lot of issues in parish life where we don’t always see eye to eye ...We’re served by diversity, not by uniformity of thought and purpose.” Many viewpoints were presented in this congregational study, leading the junior pastor to explain, “for me, its about being a baptized child of God that makes it possible for us to have a conversation about anything that is going on in society. And if I don’t agree with where you’re at, that doesn’t mean we can’t be together in the body of Christ.”

Rather than seeing their congregations as places where consensus about homosexuality should emerge, clergy used the denominational study materials to frame respectful conversations and then facilitated and encouraged dialogue among people with different positions about homosexuality. So long as participants agreed to a broad frame of ground rules and procedures about respecting each other and recognizing, implicitly if not explicitly, their commonalities as members of the ELCA, clergy felt free to encourage people with different opinions about homosexuality to speak their minds and to recognize the range of opinions present in their congregations. Several pastors spoke of striking differences of opinion among congregants and a “genuine” kind of give and take that took place in the studies. One pas-
tor described the experience saying, “We were very pleased with the number of people that came to the studies. They were all very open. I heard both sides.” Another stressed that “church is a place where we do have diverse opinion, our unity is not our uniformity.” He referred to Galatians 3 saying we are “no longer male or female...but one in Christ Jesus...we still have the diversity but our unity is in Christ.”

Local Results of the National Study

Rather than coming to consensus or clear positions about homosexuality at the conclusion of their congregational studies, the majority of congregations in which there were differences of opinion reported greater understanding of and respect for different positions about homosexuality after completing the studies. None of the congregations examined took positions about homosexuality or adopted resolutions following the studies, and opinion about specific issues was often mixed. As the pastor of a suburban congregation explained, “Is to engage in homosexual acts sinful? I would say half [who completed the study] would have answered yes and half would have answered no.” When the minister of another congregation asked study participants to rank their opinions about homosexuality on a scale of one to six, they were split exactly down the middle.

While consensus about homosexuality in individual congregations was not a result of these studies, a wide range of clergy reported that there was less anxiety about the issue and more understanding and openness to dialogue. One minister said that she saw individuals’ opinions change in the midst of the study not so much about homosexuality but about the fact that the issue “wasn’t really that big of a deal....in that sense we sort of got all of that anxiety and all of that out of out systems.” Other ministers spoke at length about the ways the studies helped people understand one another better. One minister explained, “I think that the [sexuality study] did a good job in helping people respect one another’s position and not have to feel so insistent on getting their own way.” Another explained, “Some of the people, particularly in the group I was leading are less clear [after the study than before] because they had very clear understandings about [homosexuality] but now they’ve read this and they’re still struggling with it.” Increased understanding among people with different positions about homosexuality was also evident nationally in the summary information the national sexuality task force published from the responses to the study received from more than 28,000 individuals. “Nearly three-quarters of respondents,” the committee reported, said that “the study helped them to better understand the views of other people—they learned something” (Report and Recommendations from the Task Force, January 2005).

CONCLUSIONS

Taken as a group, the twenty-one congregations analyzed here point to the significance of both local and national factors in understanding how congregations respond to homosexuality. Prior to the recent denominational national sexuality study, local factors significantly influenced how these ELCA congregations addressed the issue. Once the national study started and congregations were provided with the same guidelines and materials for studying sexuality, there was much more overall uniformity in their responses, uniformity best characterized as respectfully framed and stated differences of opinion among church members. In about one-quarter of congregations, opinion about homosexuality was relatively homogenous. In the majority of congregations opinion was mixed, and differences of opinion around homosexuality the norm. While local factors clearly influenced how congrega-
tions responded to homosexuality before the national study, the denominational study materials and clergy's use of them shaped how different opinions were presented and framed in and following the studies.

While it is impossible to generalize about the specific factors that influence how all ELCA, or all mainline Protestant, congregations respond to homosexuality based on the small number of congregations in our sample, these findings do point to a number of general factors that likely have an influence. The congregation's previous history with the issue is of obvious importance, as is its involvement with previous more general social justice issues. The presence of gay and lesbian people, or the family members of gay and lesbian church members, may also influence response and should be explored in more detail in future studies. The initiative of the national denomination in creating formal materials, providing clergy and congregations with guidance in how to use the materials, and suggesting specific ways they should do so is also clearly a factor. Simple structural characteristics of congregations such as size, geographic location, and congregational demographics were not, in this study, predictive of how congregations addressed homosexuality. It is more likely that these factors influence which congregations address homosexuality at all rather than how they do so. Data from a national congregational survey that inquires about such issues are necessary to investigate this distinction.

The findings from this study have implications both for understanding religious conflicts over homosexuality and for understanding the relationship between denominations and congregations around controversial issues. Empirically, this study suggests that opinion about homosexuality is divided, not just in national denominational contexts, but all the way down to the most local level—in congregations. While the battles waged between special interest groups at national denominational meetings are clearly central to understanding mainline Protestant positions on homosexuality, this study also suggests that few congregations have been in conflict about homosexuality. To the extent that this result could be replicated in larger, more systematic studies of mainline Protestant congregations, it suggests that conflicts over homosexuality may be more national (denominational) than local (congregational), even though differences of opinion are evident in the majority of the congregations studied. These results also suggest that many members of the "loyal middle" in mainline Protestant churches are struggling with homosexuality as they talk, read and debate in an attempt to better understand (Weston 1999). Rather than articulating clear positions, many mainline Protestants have messier responses to the issue than simple position statements suggest. The opportunity to struggle with such messiness as a congregation may be one of the mainline Protestant denominations' most lasting contributions to broader societal debates on the subject.

Theoretically, these congregations show that the ways national denominational bodies respond to controversial issues have clear implications for how those issues are addressed and considered in local congregations. Before the national study, the actions of the denomination had led a few congregations to become RIC congregations in protest to denominational policies. Through the study materials created by the national sexuality study committee, the national ELCA denomination influenced the format through which congregations considered homosexuality (six-week local studies in individual congregations) and the frames through which it was addressed, primarily by contributing to an environment in which differences of opinion could (and should) be respectfully expressed. While this article focused on how a well-designed denominational study could influence local congregations' respons-
es, future analyses that either compare the influence of denominational studies across topic areas or denominations, or that compare different types of denominational actions, will further develop this area of inquiry.

Most broadly, this paper points to the importance of considering multiple levels of analysis when trying to understand the shape of mainline Protestant responses to homosexuality and other controversial issues. While attention to national events alone might suggest that the ELCA is divided, attention to local events alone might suggest that national denominational conflicts are overstated and not truly representative of what is taking place in the day to day lives of individual church members. Both are important components of how the ELCA is responding to homosexuality. While the national denominational study did not “solve” the problem of homosexuality or make clear how the denomination should proceed nationally, it did show that most congregations are learning how to live with their differences around the issue.

This article is a first step in better understanding and conceptualizing the relationship between local congregations and national denominational debates in the ELCA, and by extension other religious bodies, around homosexuality and around other controversial issues. While we have focused on the ways local congregations are responding to national denominational debates, further research needs to investigate the reverse by asking how local debates shape national debate in different religious organizations. Future research also needs to move outside of the ELCA to focus on other mainline Protestant denominations and religious bodies more generally, and to assess the responses of many more congregations in systematic, large-scale quantitative analyses based on broad congregational surveys. Future research need not be focused on particular geographic areas but might compare particular sets of congregations, like those that have joined gay and lesbian welcoming congregation programs, to continue to tease out patterns among that will further understandings about the relationship between national and local debates about homosexuality within mainline Protestant and broader religious organizations.

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NOTES

1Additional studies that reverse the direction of causality to ask how the actions of congregations influence denominational decisions to begin national studies will also further these theoretical concerns.

2This history is a topic of study itself and is presented here, in simplified form, for ease of reading. Additional information and detailed timelines are available from the authors. A general chronology is also available at http://www.elca.org/faithfuljourney/policy.html

3For more information see http://www.elca.org/faithfuljourney/

4For more information see http://www.elca.org/faithfuljourney/faqs/

5Debates over homosexuality in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, United Methodist Church and Presbyterian Church can be interestingly compared to debates in the United Church of Christ and the American Baptist Churches, two denominations where homosexuality has not received as much attention in part because they do not have national denominational policies on the issue that are binding to local congregations.

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This is not an ideal way to locate congregations, but other ways of locating them were not possible because of practical and resource limitations. Practically, there is no list or sampling frame of congregations in these regions that have addressed homosexuality so sampling from such a frame was not feasible. Congregations that have joined special interest groups around homosexuality could comprise such a frame but we decided not to contact congregations through these organizations because such a narrow range of congregations belong to them which do not represent the range of congregations that have addressed the issue. Ideally we would have contacted a random sample of congregations in each region to locate those that had addressed homosexuality and then conducted longer interviews with them. Resource limitations made this approach simply not feasible. It is possible that our arguments, specifically about institutional coupling and de-coupling are related to the ways we located congregations. We take this possibility into consideration in the conclusion of the paper.

Eleven of the thirteen congregations we contacted in the northeast are included for an 85% response rate. All of the congregations in the southwest that contacted us indicating their interest are included in the study.

REFERENCES


Bridging the Denomination-Congregation Divide


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