

How Denominational Resources Influence Debate about Homosexuality in Mainline Protestant Congregations*

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A growing body of research examines national conflicts over homosexuality in mainline Protestant denominations, but few studies have explored the concrete ways individual congregations are responding. We focus on thirty mainline Protestant congregations (in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the Presbyterian Church [U.S.A.], and the United Methodist Church) in the northeastern United States that have formally considered the issue of homosexuality recently. Based on in-depth, semi-structured interviews with these congregations' clergy, we assess how homosexuality became a public issue in each church and how each denomination influenced the process by which congregations responded. Building on previous research on the relationship between congregations and denominations, we find that denominational resources about homosexuality, primarily in the form of structured educational materials, narrow the range of social processes congregations adopt in response. The more educational resources and structured guidance denominations provided, the narrower the range of processes congregations took in response.

Leaders and members of mainline Protestant denominations have been arguing about homosexuality for the past thirty years. While each mainline denomination has tried to settle conflicts and reach tenable compromises regarding

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homosexuality, the issue remains a centrally contentious, and some might say intractable, locus of conflict within and among mainline denominations, congregations, clergy, and laity.

In recent years, for example, some Episcopal congregations have decided to cut formal ties with the Episcopal Church in the United States after openly gay Rev. Canon V. Gene Robinson was installed as Bishop of New Hampshire, aligning instead with the more conservative Episcopal Church of Uganda (Banerjee 2004). Homosexuality has also been discussed in church outside of high-profile controversies. A 1999 survey of Presbyterians showed that 20 percent had heard a sermon about gay and lesbian issues in the past twelve months, and a separate national survey conducted in 2000 found that 15 percent of all Protestants who attended church at least a few times a year recalled hearing a sermon about homosexuality in the past year (Presbyterian Panel 1999; Wuthnow 2000). Moreover, some mainline congregations have taken the step of identifying themselves as officially welcoming to gay and lesbian people, often after conducting a formal congregational study on the topic.

Existing social scientific research describes the national debates about homosexuality in congregations (Clark, et al. 1989; Dillon 1999; Swindler 1991), but says little about how the issue has been addressed locally by individual congregations or how national denominations have shaped that process. This general neglect of the relationship between denominations and congregations in current research about religion and homosexuality is particularly glaring since congregations are the fundamental units of mainline Protestant denominations. National congregational surveys have scarcely addressed the topic,¹ and the few small studies that have been conducted focus on individual congregations that have taken specific positions on homosexuality or were in conflict when the research was conducted (Ammerman 1999; Hartman 1996; Moon 2004; but see Ellingson, et al. 2001 for an important exception). Likewise, there have been few studies of mainline Protestant clergy's positions on homosexuality (but see Djupe, et al. 2006; Olson and Cadge 2002). Despite social scientists' lack of attention to the issue, there is plenty of anecdotal evidence to suggest that homosexuality is a source of tremendous contention in many mainline congregations.

We began this project to fill an empirical void in the literature on congregations and homosexuality in mainline Protestant denominations. At the descriptive level, we aimed to learn *how* mainline congregations that decide to engage in dialogue about homosexuality do so, what the *process* is like, and what *results* it has. At the theoretical level, we build on research about the relationship

¹The National Congregations Study (see Chaves 2004), for example, asks only one question about homosexuality: "Does your congregation have any special rules or norms concerning homosexual behavior?" The responses are: yes (56.8%), no (41.3%), refused (0.4%), and don't know (0.6%).

between congregations and denominations by Becker (1999), Chaves (2004), and Ammerman (2005) to specifically investigate how, if at all, denominational membership shapes the ways individual congregations respond to homosexuality.

We focus on thirty churches in three mainline Protestant denominations in and around one large city in the northeastern United States. We chose these congregations specifically because they had responded to the issue of homosexuality in some concrete way in recent years. Choosing to study such congregations in detail allows us to understand the range of processes congregations take in responding to homosexuality and how denominational resources regarding homosexuality may influence those responses. We focus on congregations in three mainline Protestant denominations: the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) (PCUSA), and the United Methodist Church.

Although these three denominations share much in common organizationally and theologically, they diverge in the extent to which each has provided concrete educational resources to their congregations about how to enter a dialogue about homosexuality. The ELCA has provided the most structured resource materials. At the time when we conducted our research, the ELCA was completing a national sexuality study that involved distributing educational materials, holding training sessions in some regions, and offering other denominationally prepared and distributed resources about sexuality and homosexuality for congregations wishing to study the topic. The United Methodist Church has provided its congregations with more minimal guidance; it created some educational materials to facilitate discussion about homosexuality in congregations several years ago, but has not systematically asked congregations to engage with them as part of a broader study process. The PCUSA has provided the least guidance; it made very few denominational resources available to congregations that wished to have formal discussions of homosexuality. A comparison of congregations in each of these three denominations specifically shows how denominations' educational resources narrowed the range of social processes that member congregations took in responding to homosexuality.

THE THEORETICAL RELEVANCE OF DENOMINATIONAL RESOURCES

Social scientists, particularly those concerned with organizational issues and American religious ecology, have long been interested in the relationship between congregations and denominations (Chang 2003; Chaves 1997; DiMaggio 1998). Some scholars have viewed denominations and congregations as tightly bound and others as more loosely bound. Particularly within mainline Protestantism, some scholars point to evidence of tighter relationships where denominational ties are highly relevant for both clergy (Chaves 2002; Djupe and

Gilbert 2003) and congregations (Ammerman 2005; Carroll and Roof 2002; Warner 1994, 2005). Ammerman (2005) speaks of a notion she calls “denominational citizenship,” which derives from the shared rules, structural ties, narratives, and relationships provided by denominations. She concludes that denominational citizenship is alive and well, but that there has been loosening in hierarchical mainline Protestant denominations.

Other scholars point to looser relationships between congregations and denominations, specifically in light of loosening relationships between individuals and their denominations. In recent years, the scholarly literature on denominations has emphasized the demise of the old “Protestant-Catholic-Jew” rubric of American religion (Herberg 1955) in favor of notable diversity within most religious families (Wuthnow 1988, 1996; see also Bibby 1991; Hoge, et al. 1994). Studies have shown that Americans increasingly have detached from the religious traditions of their birth and are now quite likely to switch across denominations, and even entire religions, over their life course (Chaves 1998; Roof 1993; Warner 1994, 2005; Wuthnow 1988, 1996). While Wuthnow’s arguments about the declining significance of denominationalism apply primarily to the relationships between individuals and their denominations, these arguments may also apply to the relationship between denominations and congregations, and particularly to the importance of local factors in congregations’ day-to-day actions.

Local congregational factors such as history, geographic location, demographics, leadership, and financial situation may influence congregations’ day-to-day operations much more than denominational ties. Becker argues that congregations have distinct cultures; they are “crucibles where individual ideas, beliefs, and commitments interact with religious traditions, changing both and forming robust local cultures” (1999:10). A wide-ranging body of literature supports this contention (Ammerman 1987, 1999, 2005; Bass 1991; Carroll and Roof 1993, 2002; Chaves 2004; Djupe and Gilbert 2003, 2006; Warner 1988, 1994, 2005). R. Stephen Warner (1994) notes that most people of faith have extensive contact with their congregations but not with their denominations. And Becker (1999) demonstrates systematically that even within the same religious traditions some congregations are far more invested than others in debate and discussion of social and political issues.

As evidenced by this brief review, scholars think about the relationships between congregations and denominations in multiple ways, and there is a wide range of (sometimes conflicting) empirical evidence. When denominations confront controversial issues, there is also reason to expect the nature of these relationships to change. Congregations might look to denominations for guidance or leadership around such issues. It is the denomination that typically intervenes in the midst of congregational strife by, for example, replacing clergy, addressing financial struggles, and resolving internecine battles among congregational factions. Congregations might also distance themselves from conflict taking place in

the denomination (or vice versa) as clergy and parishioners alike steer clear of controversial issues for fear of alienating current and potential members (Hadden 1969). The ways that denominations respond to controversial issues, whether by providing educational materials on the issue or by saying nothing whatsoever, may also influence the relationship between the congregations and the denomination and the ways individual congregations respond.

MAINLINE PROTESTANT DEBATES OVER HOMOSEXUALITY

Since the beginning of mainline Protestant denominational debate about homosexuality, and particularly in recent years, social scientists have worked to understand the dynamics of homosexuality-related conflicts in religious contexts. Some studies examine the social and theological aspects of different denomination's debates (Beuttler 1999; Burgess 1999; Buzzell 2001; Cadge 2002; Ellison 1991; Koch and Curry 2000; McLain 1995; Melton 1991; Rogers 1999; Seow 1996; Siker 1994; Stephens 1997; Udis-Kessler 2002; Wellman 1999; Wood 2000; Wood and Bloch 1995). Others focus on the special interest groups that have developed around the issue (Haeberle 1991; Oliveto 2002). Still others consider the place of gay and lesbian—and increasingly, bisexual and transgender—people in mainline churches and beyond (Comstock 1996; Shallenberger 1996). Most of these studies focus exclusively on denominations and denominational debate, however, rather than on how individual congregations address (or do not address) homosexuality (for exceptions, see Ammerman 1999; Olson and Cadge 2002). Research on homosexuality and mainline congregations describes gay and lesbian welcoming congregation programs (Cadge 2002) and analyzes how people in congregations that have taken public positions regarding homosexuality understand the issue (Moon 2004; Haythorn 1998). Additional research examines congregations in the midst of conflict, but neglects the question of whether congregations have or can respond to homosexuality without turmoil (Hartman 1996).

The only study that examines the complex ways that religion and sexuality are negotiated at different institutional levels emphasized how local norms, congregations' identities, official religious teachings, and national denominational policies (but not resource provision) influenced local congregations' responses to sexuality. Stephen Ellingson and colleagues (2001) found that in Chicago neighborhood churches, local norms and congregations' identities were more salient than national factors in influencing the ways clergy negotiate their responses to sexuality. In light of this study's findings, we would expect local and congregational factors to play important roles in shaping the ways in which the congregations we studied responded to homosexuality. At the same time, denominations vary in the extent to which they provide congregations with relevant resources for the discussion of sexuality. Therefore, we would expect congregations that

wish to engage the topic of sexuality to benefit from the provision of concrete resources by their denomination regardless of local and congregational constraints

In the six largest mainline Protestant denominations, homosexuality has been a subject of formal debate since the 1970s, but the specific nature of these debates has varied across denominations. At present, these six denominations formally support civil rights for gays and lesbians, but four condemn homosexuality itself. In most denominations, various studies and debates about sexuality (generally) and the ordination and commitment ceremonies or marriages of gays and lesbians (specifically) are ongoing and have been addressed at national denominational meetings regularly since the 1980s (Cadge 2002). Welcoming congregation programs exist in each mainline denomination for congregations wishing to designate themselves as places that are explicitly open to gay men and lesbians. For comparative purposes and to investigate the influence of varying denominational contexts, we concentrate here on congregations in three mainline Protestant denominations: the ELCA, the PCUSA, and the United Methodist Church.

This comparison is illustrative for several reasons. First, these three denominations are in similar places historically with regard to homosexuality. Each made a statement about homosexuality in the 1970s that called homosexuality incompatible with Christian teaching but simultaneously supported the civil rights of gay and lesbian people. Since that time, each denomination has studied homosexuality, debated a wide range of issues related to the topic, and attempted to tolerate dissension around the issue without significantly changing their initial policies. Second, the three denominations are organizationally similar. The decisions and policies of each national denominational body are generally considered binding for local congregations. Third, none of these denominations was in the midst of a national crisis around homosexuality (like the one in the Episcopal Church) when this research was conducted.

Despite their similarities, these three denominations also vary on our factor of interest, the degree to which they provided educational materials and other structured guidance regarding homosexuality to local congregations. The ELCA created detailed materials for congregations around sexuality and homosexuality and asked their congregations to study the issue; the United Methodist Church has developed more limited materials for congregations; and the PCUSA has offered relatively few congregational resources about homosexuality.

In the region studied, there is one additional similarity among the three denominations under consideration: all three *regional* bodies had addressed homosexuality (albeit in slightly different ways) in recent years. The regional presbytery of the PCUSA had addressed the issue fairly consistently, and votes were quite evenly divided on topics related to homosexuality, as has been the case in the national church. The presbytery had not responded in any organized way to congregations that had taken public positions on the issue, nor had they host-

ed or facilitated any educational programs on the topic. The regional United Methodist body had also debated many resolutions about sexuality on the floor of their annual conferences in the 1990s and ultimately decided to impose a moratorium on the issue because of the conflict it was creating. A few educational programs were undertaken, and the issue has returned to the agenda, although in a limited way because opinion within the conference, as in the national church, was mixed. The local ELCA synod had done more educational work than either the Presbyterians or United Methodists, sponsoring several workshops in conjunction with the denomination's national sexuality study to help clergy understand how to address homosexuality in their congregations. Unlike in the national denomination, where opinion about homosexuality is clearly mixed, the majority of ELCA clergy and denominational leaders in this region seem to support gay and lesbian people in the church and in society, as evidenced by the fact that regional denominational leaders voted in recent years to begin a Gay and Lesbian Task Force within the synod.

DATA AND METHODS

To understand how denominations' educational materials influence the ways congregations respond to homosexuality, we focus on small samples of congregations in the ELCA (N=11), the PCUSA (N=10), and the United Methodist Church (N=9) that have addressed homosexuality in recent years. All of these congregations are located in and around a large northeastern city. This focus on one geographic region enables us to control for some non-denominational local factors such as geography, regional voting patterns, and the residential patterns of gays and lesbians, which may influence how homosexuality is addressed in congregations across the country.

We identified and contacted specific congregations in this region with the assistance of regional denominational representatives. We would have contacted a random sample of congregations in each denomination if we were interested in *which* congregations addressed homosexuality. We would have contacted congregations that belong to homosexuality-related special interest groups if we were interested in which congregations take *particular positions*. However, our approach was the only way to locate a wide range of congregations that have grappled with homosexuality *regardless* of whether or not they have taken public positions on the topic.

A regional ELCA representative gave us the names of 13 congregations that recently had sent a representative to a regional denominational program about how to study homosexuality in congregations in collaboration with the national ELCA sexuality study. We contacted all 13 of these congregations and interviewed the pastors of 11 of them. The ministers of the other two congregations informed us that they had not addressed homosexuality.

For the PCUSA, a denominational representative gave us the names of 18 congregations that recently had borrowed materials related to homosexuality from the regional resource center. We contacted all of these congregations, received responses from 14, and conducted interviews with the pastors of 10. The four congregations that responded but were not included had not addressed homosexuality.

The regional United Methodist Church representative did not have a similar list of congregations that might have recently addressed homosexuality. Instead he gave us the names of three pastors who had served in the region for many years whom he felt might know of such congregations. We contacted these ministers and based on their suggestions developed a list of 15 United Methodist congregations in the region that had likely addressed homosexuality. We contacted these congregations and received responses from 12. Of these 12, nine had addressed homosexuality and were willing to participate in our study.

In the end, we conducted semi-structured telephone interviews with the pastors of a total of 30 congregations in the summer of 2004.² Each interview lasted about one hour and was transcribed and coded. Interview questions covered descriptive information about the congregation as well as questions about when homosexuality first came up in the congregation, how it has been addressed, who in the congregation addressed it, what endpoints there were (if any), what the overall tone was, and what challenges arose in the process. We also gathered related materials, such as sermons and study guides, from each congregation whenever possible and interviewed representatives of regional denominational bodies to better understand responses to homosexuality in the region.

The ELCA and PCUSA congregations studied here each represent six to seven percent of the congregations in this region; the United Methodist congregations included represent closer to two percent regionally. While it is not possible empirically to assess whether the congregations studied are representative of those in this region or their denominations nationally, the process of locating these congregations and the fraction of total congregations they represent are suggestive along several lines. First, the congregations included may represent the complete set of congregations in these denominations in this region that have addressed homosexuality in recent years, which suggests that large majorities of congregations are likely not addressing the issue. A much more systematic survey that includes congregations that have and have not addressed homosexuality is needed before any reliable conclusions may be drawn about the factors that lead congregations to address (or fail to address) the issue. Second, the ease with which the ELCA and PCUSA regional representatives were able to suggest congregations in the area to contact suggests that, in this region, these two denomi-

²ELCA pastors we interviewed are identified in this analysis as L#, United Methodist pastors as M#, and PCUSA pastors as P#.

nations may have more informal resources available for addressing homosexuality than do the United Methodists. The larger fraction of ELCA and PCUSA congregations in this region that had addressed homosexuality may also suggest the same. However, whether there are differences in how United Methodists are responding to homosexuality when compared to Presbyterians and Lutherans (either regionally or nationally) cannot be determined without further data collection.

DENOMINATIONAL CONTEXT AND CONGREGATIONAL DEBATE ABOUT HOMOSEXUALITY

We selected for study only congregations in which homosexuality was addressed. In nearly all of the congregations, clergy spoke privately or pastorally with at least a few church members about homosexuality. In more than 80 percent of the congregations, clergy also responded to the issue of homosexuality

TABLE 1

Congregational Studies of Homosexuality: Processes, Influences, and Outcomes

Denomination	Processes	Principal Influence	Outcomes
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA)	Congregational Study	Structured denominational educational materials Relevant congregational events	Better understanding of homosexuality-related issues amongst congregants
United Methodist Church	Wide range of forums (congregational study, informal meetings, Sunday School classes, etc.)	Limited, less structured denominational educational materials Contentious national denominational debate	Mixed results (conflict, little change, better understanding of homosexuality amongst congregants)
Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) (PCUSA)	Wide range of forums (Sunday school classes, other educational programs, youth groups, etc.)	Contentious national denominational debate	Mixed results (losing a few church members, little change, better understanding of how to disagree)

publicly through Sunday school classes, sermons, congregational studies, and other forums (see Table 1).

The congregations under study here do cluster together along denominational lines, rather than by size or other local factors, in the social processes through which they addressed homosexuality. This clustering pattern is due in large part to the educational materials provided by each denomination regarding how congregations might grapple with homosexuality. The ELCA provided clearly structured educational materials to congregations wishing to confront the issue in this region; these materials specifically suggested conducting a congregational study. The United Methodist Church was more uneven, making some educational materials available that suggested less structured responses. The PCUSA provided the least formal guidance, at least in the form of educational resources. Because educational resources played such an important role in structuring how congregations responded to homosexuality, we discuss congregations within each denomination in turn.

Providing Ample Guidance: The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America was in the midst of a national study of sexuality when this research was conducted. A major component of this national study involved providing structured educational materials to individual congregations that wished to discuss homosexuality. The Lutheran congregations we studied were exploring homosexuality either at the request of their denomination or in response to relevant congregational events. Lutheran clergy tended to organize congregational studies about homosexuality using the materials prepared by the denomination. They reported that their church members emerged from these studies with a better understanding of homosexuality-related issues.

The few of the Lutheran congregations in this region that had addressed homosexuality publicly before the recent national denominational sexuality study did so in response to events in their local congregations, consistent with the findings of Ellingson and colleagues (2001). In one Lutheran congregation, a broad conversation about homosexuality was generated after a new chapter of Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG) was advertised in the church bulletin and some congregants became confused about why the church was advertising PFLAG. At another 200-member suburban congregation, homosexuality came to the fore after the male organist's male partner died. At that time, a few gay couples joined the congregation, a few straight couples left, and a lesbian couple not affiliated with the congregation asked if they could hold their commitment ceremony on the premises.

In the majority of the other Lutheran congregations we studied, homosexuality was addressed primarily because the ELCA specifically asked them to study it as part of its national sexuality study and provided educational materials with which to do so. For almost all of these congregations, the study of homosexuali-

ty had occurred only in the past year. One Lutheran pastor told us that the subject first came up in a formal way in his congregation when the ELCA published materials on the topic. He said he “read through the materials and liked them a lot” and ended up using them to lead a study that included twice as many members as are usually involved in adult education (L9). Another Lutheran pastor at a congregation called a “missionary development site” (because of its commitment to try to revitalize itself) explained:

My first year as pastor here, we were so devoted to the issues around redevelopment that we kind of had blinders on to whatever was going on elsewhere in the world. The second year we started asking some questions. Is it time? Are we healthy enough to talk about this? Now in the third year, we just thought it was a necessity that we take the task of struggling through the information given by the ELCA, the “Journeying Together Faithfully” [national sexuality study] document (L4).

All eleven of the ELCA congregations conducted a congregational study of homosexuality in response to the denomination’s request. These studies took place in congregations both with and without formal positions on homosexuality. In some congregations, the studies included almost all of the regular church members, while in others the studies included very few. At some churches, clergy led the studies, while in others lay people led them with clergy on hand. One pastor referred to himself as a “local theologian” because he was on hand but not leading the program (L4). The study programs generally lasted six weeks. Sometimes people dropped out of the study groups, but more often, they stayed through to the end of the program. When asked how people responded to the study process, one minister told us that people were “very eager and very engaged in the discussion and attendance was very consistent, which is usually a good indicator” (L8). A number of pastors described carefully choreographed dances they did while leading these studies as they tried to keep people on different sides of the issue from saying things that would be offensive to one another. This was especially the case when closeted gay congregants participated in a study with more conservative members of the congregation. “I tried to keep the discussion something that everyone could participate with,” one pastor told us, “[but] I tried to keep it honest at the same time” (L4).

When asked about the results of their congregations’ homosexuality study programs, the majority of Lutheran clergy reported that people’s opinions about homosexuality softened or were moderated, and that they learned to better understand views with which they disagree. Several ministers also spoke about how this experience shifted congregation members’ frames from thinking about homosexuality as an idea to thinking instead about gay and lesbian people. As one pastor explained,

I really am very pleasantly surprised with ... the sense of compassion ... people saying “gee, I didn’t know it [the Bible] said that, I have to rethink this.” It’s been nice to hear

people say things like ... “we’re not studying an issue, these are people.” So that [represents] movement from an issue which doesn’t have a face to people sharing stories of gay people they know or work for. (L8)

This pastor also shared the story of someone who was involved with the study at his church who subsequently challenged disparaging remarks his co-workers were making about a lesbian couple (L8). This sentiment was further echoed by another Lutheran pastor, who explained that as a result of their study, “Some people changed their minds. And some people became OK with the notion of [gay] ordination and same-sex blessing. Some people didn’t change their mind, but they experienced an atmosphere that proves that we can disagree on an issue and still kneel next to each other at the communion rail” (L6).

Providing Minimal Guidance: The United Methodist Church

Although the United Methodist Church has conducted national studies about homosexuality in the past and created some materials for congregational studies, there was much less evidence of structured educational guidance for individual congregations than was the case in the ELCA. The United Methodist congregations we studied tended to have addressed homosexuality first as a byproduct of national denominational debate, rather than at the specific request of the denomination or in response to local issues. One-third of the United Methodist congregations had conducted congregational studies, while the majority had addressed the issue in a wider range of forums. After addressing homosexuality, United Methodist ministers described mixed results. One congregation had a large conflict, another had a smaller conflict, and several others reported no change in congregational attitudes or behaviors with regard to homosexuality.

Responses to homosexuality took a qualitatively different form in United Methodist congregations, in part because of the relative lack of structure provided by the national church through educational materials for congregations. The pastor of one United Methodist congregation did explain his decision to conduct a congregational study by saying, “The denomination had a study book they put out and it was asked that a lot of ... the congregations, you know, look at the study book, use the study book, and so on” (M2). This pastor, however, was the exception to the rule among United Methodist congregations, as we discovered.

Rather than responding to local events in the congregation or national requests from the denomination to study homosexuality, many more United Methodist congregations addressed homosexuality in response to national events taking place in the denomination. One United Methodist pastor, for instance, began addressing the issue in his congregation several years ago after returning from a national denominational meeting. “I went to that General Conference,” he explained, “and when I came back, you know, I usually say something about it. ... So from the pulpit I said what I’ll do next Sunday is if any of you would be

interested, I'll meet with you after church in the chapel [to talk about the discussion of homosexuality at the national meeting]" (M3). The following week he held this informal meeting and quickly learned that his congregants were very upset by what had happened at the national meeting regarding homosexuality and decided to begin the process of becoming a gay and lesbian welcoming congregation. At another congregation, the church and society leadership team (a group of members responsible for leading the congregation through discussions of issues that affect society) decided to focus on homosexuality in preparation for a national denominational meeting. "They usually take an issue a year," the pastor told us,

and so the year that I came [to serve this congregation] they were going to be working on the issue of homosexuality. ... It was the year of the General Conference. General Conference is every four years, which means that the issue [of homosexuality] gets lifted up every four years as the denomination starts to make its statements or vote on the issues, and so [the church and society work team] were going to discuss it that year. (M4)

Individual United Methodist congregations addressed homosexuality in a wide range of forums. In addition to those that conducted their own congregational studies, others hosted Sunday school classes and speakers on the topic for both children and adults. One congregation, for example, devoted several sessions of an adult Sunday school class on social justice issues to homosexuality. The minister reported that several broader and more informal conversations among church members developed as a result.

United Methodist ministers reported a broad range of responses to their congregations' consideration of homosexuality, and the nature of these responses does not seem to flow from the organizational form of that consideration (a congregational study, series of Sunday school classes, etc.). One congregation—the only one of the thirty we studied—ended up facing a substantial conflict over homosexuality that led a number of people to leave the congregation. In this congregation, the minister decided to conduct a study of homosexuality using the materials the United Methodist Church put together in 1994 for that purpose. He understood the denomination to be asking him to undertake this study, and national and regional bodies provided little support aside from providing the study materials. Unlike in the ELCA, the United Methodist Church did not overtly recommend that congregations undertake their own discussions and studies of sexuality. This pastor had a strong personal opinion about homosexuality, because of his own background and experiences, from the start. When he was putting materials together to publicize the study, he remembers, "one of the key [congregational] leaders who was speaking, I guess for himself and others, said to me he didn't think I should do the study. Basically what he was saying was, we don't want you to do this study" (M1). The minister felt he was already "so far down the road" that he could not turn back, so he proceeded to lead the study

(although in retrospect he says he should not have done so). About fifteen church members participated. Church members quickly got into serious disagreements about the material, and in the end, twenty to thirty people left the congregation for more conservative churches in the region. Several factors, including the pastor's high level of personal investment, a lack of support from key lay people, the absence of denominational support both regionally and nationally, and the fact that the pastor led the congregational study himself all contributed to this outcome. A second Methodist congregation also reported losing a few members after considering homosexuality, although this conflict was far less severe than that of the previously mentioned congregation.

The remaining seven Methodist ministers reported either that their church members reached greater understandings as a result of their considerations of homosexuality or that little change had occurred in their congregations. One pastor, for example, described the tone in his church as more intellectual than emotional, saying, "I haven't had any angry people ... except for one phone call. ... Most people are really looking at it as an issue and trying to figure out what Christianity says about it: is what the church traditionally says about this right or wrong?" (M4).

Providing No Guidance: The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)

The Presbyterian congregations we studied reflected the least educational guidance from the denomination in their responses to homosexuality. Like the United Methodist congregations, Presbyterian churches generally addressed homosexuality because of the debate it was causing nationally within their denomination. Some churches felt they had to respond and take a position, even when some ministers said they would rather not do so. Individual Presbyterian congregations responded by addressing homosexuality in a wide range of forums in large part because the denomination was providing few formal educational materials to congregations that wished to grapple with the issue. Presbyterian clergy reported a range of outcomes, from losing a few church members to the congregation coming to a better understanding of how to disagree.

The common theme we heard among Presbyterian clergy was that the visibility of the denomination's national debate about homosexuality forced them to contend with the issue in their congregations. As one Presbyterian minister explained, "Pretty much the national church debate kind of brings it to the forefront here. ... In other words, because of what the national church does and what ends up in the media, [it] is usually what forces us to publicly respond to it" (P10). Later in the interview, when asked to identify the biggest challenges for his congregation regarding homosexuality, this minister returned to the same theme, saying, "I think the national denominational debate prevents us from doing this purely on our terms in terms of how we would approach it [homosexuality] pastorally here, because if the denomination comes out or at least the press makes it look like the denomination is coming out in a position that we find untenable,

then it really makes us have to make a more public statement than we would chose to" (P10).

Homosexuality was addressed in the Presbyterian congregations either by the pastor and lay leaders (in two of the congregations) or by the whole congregation in a broader range of forums (in the other eight congregations). One pastor told us that the topic came up when it was being hotly debated nationally, but she was not aware of a time when the congregation had any educational programs about homosexuality. This fact is particularly interesting because the congregation belongs to the Covenant Network, an organization that formally tries to facilitate conversation about homosexuality with the goal of achieving a moderate overall position. It was only when the clergy and lay leaders voted to become a member of the Covenant Network that the pastor thinks the issue was discussed at all (P3).

In eight Presbyterian congregations, homosexuality was addressed formally in Sunday school classes, speaker series, youth groups, leadership councils, and other similar forums. In one Presbyterian congregation, the issue came to the attention of the congregation in the midst of denominational debate and was then addressed in a Sunday school class by a representative of One by One Ministries, a group that supports "ex-gays," or people who previously understood themselves to be homosexual. The topic was also covered in leadership and youth group meetings (P1). In another Presbyterian congregation, the minister first mentioned homosexuality when she was interviewed for her job with the congregation. Subsequently, the issue had been addressed by the elders, in sermons, with the youth group, and with all of the scout troops who meet at the church. Church leaders met with the leaders of the scout troops to say, "We are an open and welcoming church to all people. If you can't include, not just include but positively support homosexual persons in your organization then we're going to have to ask you to find another place to go" (P9). The scout leaders agreed with this sentiment and worked with church members to craft an inclusive vision statement.

At another Presbyterian church, the congregation had conducted a study several years earlier after a visit from a prominent Presbyterian speaker on gay and lesbian issues. After her visit, the local church leaders passed a resolution declaring itself an "open and affirming congregation," but did not join formally with any denominational organization for welcoming congregations. A few years later, the congregation considering joining the Covenant Network, and the pastor and lay leaders at the time decided to include the whole congregation in the process. The current pastor, who was not at the church at the time of this decision, explained that a few educational sessions and meetings were held, and then the congregation, "ultimately had a meeting of the congregation where, you know, the floor was open to anybody really in the church to talk through their sense of what it meant to join the Covenant Network. The lay leaders had said that going into it that if there was not two-thirds of the congregation on board

with this, they were not gonna go forward with it, and after their discussions within this meeting they took a vote, and a solid two-thirds and then some voted in favor of joining the Covenant Network and so session [lay leaders] went ahead and did that" (P5).

Responses to congregations' considerations of homosexuality were mixed among Presbyterians. Three congregations reported losing one or two families as a result of the issue, including both very conservative and very liberal people. A few of the more conservative Presbyterian churches also reported subsequent difficulty in getting some people to join their congregation because of the issue. "It hurts us in terms of more conservative people," one pastor explained. "We've had some conservative people who would not join the church because they couldn't, in good conscience, be a part of a denomination that even kind of talked about this as an option" (P10). Other ministers said that the issue helped people to learn how to disagree; in the words of one minister, the discussion process created a "healthy tension. This is an open debating community. People understand that we may have differences on key issues like that, but it's not something we hold against each other. ... I think we try to hold each other in healthy tension over that issue, and maybe some others, but that one seems to be a real lightning rod" (P4). A few Presbyterian congregations also reported little change in their congregations as a result of their discussions of homosexuality. In the words of one pastor, "It's not a contentious issue here. And that doesn't mean that our head is in the sand or something. I mean we've done some study about it. I've spoken about it. But no one is wanting to make an issue out of it" (P6). Several congregations pointed out that other issues, particularly those related to race and ethnicity, were much more controversial in their congregations than homosexuality.

CONCLUSION

The educational resources and guidance provided by mainline Protestant denominations served to narrow the range of social processes undertaken by congregations in the vicinity of one northeastern city in response to homosexuality. Denominations (like the ELCA) that provide structured educational resources allowed congregations to experience a relatively uniform process regarding the formal discussion of homosexuality in comparison with congregations from denominations that provide fewer educational resources. The high degree of denominational guidance allowed ELCA congregations to address homosexuality in clearly organized ways, generally following the six-week study outlined in the supplied educational materials. These study materials led to the lengthiest and seemingly most thorough studies of homosexuality among the congregations analyzed here.

Although the United Methodist Church produced educational study materials in the 1990s to help congregations respond to homosexuality, formal education based on those materials was more limited; we found that few of the congregations studied in this region used them. Rather, the processes by which United Methodist congregations addressed homosexuality were more varied in response to national denominational events.

The PCUSA provided the least educational resources for congregations wishing to respond to homosexuality. Perhaps not surprisingly, the Presbyterian congregations we studied therefore adopted an especially wide range of processes in their formal discussions of homosexuality, from speakers and educational programs to sessions in Sunday school classes.

These findings suggest that denominational membership, or a weak version of what Nancy Ammerman calls “denominational citizenship,” *does* influence how local congregations respond to homosexuality. In the face of challenges like those emerging around homosexuality, our analysis suggests that denominations’ educational materials do influence the process by which member congregations respond, as well as the extent to which congregations undergo similar or varying processes regarding contentious matters. While local congregational cultures such as those described by Becker (1999) and Ellingson and colleagues (2001) also likely influence the ways congregational debate and discussion about homosexuality proceed, additional ethnographic study is needed to analyze the nexus between local and congregational context and denomination-wide resources.

Apart from what they suggest about how denominational resources structure congregational processes, our findings also lead to several broader conclusions about homosexuality in mainline Protestant congregations. First, our research suggests that only a small fraction of congregations (perhaps less than 5 percent) are responding to homosexuality in an organized or formal way, although survey data would be needed to confirm this conclusion. Among these congregations, many are responding to homosexuality on their clergy’s initiative. A significant fraction of congregations are also addressing the issue publicly, although scholars and journalists have rarely noted these efforts except when they result in conflict. Second, some congregations belong to homosexuality-related special interest groups, but most do not, suggesting that the study of homosexuality is not confined to congregations that eventually do take a formal position on the issue.

Third, our study suggests that in many mainline denominations, national denominational debate is sparking conversation and study about homosexuality in congregations rather than vice versa. Especially in the PCUSA, the national debate (and media coverage of it) is bringing the issue into congregations in ways that almost demands that they respond but, as one pastor explained, does not allow them to deal with the issue in ways that might be most productive. The PCUSA has made few materials available for congregational study, allowing the contentious national debate to overshadow individuals’ study and learning about

homosexuality in their congregations. Even churches that had taken a clear position on the issue had not always studied homosexuality in a formal way before arriving at their positions.

Fourth, we find that despite attention to conflict and debate around homosexuality in the national and local press, the majority of local congregations that address homosexuality are *not* in conflict about it. While there is no denying the national denominational conflicts, the congregations profiled here illustrate that there is not nearly as much conflict in local churches as one might conclude from national debates and media portrayals. In only one of the thirty congregations we studied was there enough conflict to lead more than a few members to leave the congregation. In most congregations, people disagreed about homosexuality but through their formal studies and discussions, people on both sides of the issue learned more about homosexuality itself and about different ways of understanding and talking about it.

Finally, the congregations described here emerge not as places where resources are being mobilized to fight national battles about homosexuality, either within the denominations or in the broader society. Rather, to varying degrees, congregations are primarily educational centers (shaped by their denominational memberships) where varying amounts and types of information about homosexuality are being taught, learned, and shared. The question for leaders and those concerned about conflicts over homosexuality in mainline denominations, therefore, is more a question about whether different congregations can coexist within the same denomination (as illustrated most visibly by the current situation in the Episcopal Church) than whether different people can coexist within the same congregations. Individuals, with the leadership of their pastors and commitments to their congregations, generally seem to be figuring out how to disagree and live together. The question is whether the mainline denominations nationally will figure out how to do the same.

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