

# Why Can't We Get Along? Conflict within CRC and RCA Congregations

James M. Penning  
Dept. of Political Science  
Calvin College  
[penn@calvin.edu](mailto:penn@calvin.edu)  
(616) 526-6232

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## INTRODUCTION

In his book, *Great Church Fights*, Leslie Flynn quotes the following news story about a feud in a Welsh church looking for a new pastor: “Yesterday the two opposition groups both sent ministers to the pulpit. Both spoke simultaneously, each trying to shout above the other. Both called for hymns, and the congregation sang two --- each side trying to drown out the other. Bibles were raised in anger. The Sunday morning service turned into bedlam. Through it all, the two preachers continued to out shout each other with their sermons. Eventually, a deacon called a policeman. Two came in and began shouting for the congregation to be quiet. They advised the 40 persons in the church to return home. The rivals filed out, still arguing. Last night one of the group called a ‘let’s be friends’ meeting. It broke up in argument” (Flynn 1976: 53).

Fortunately, not all church fights are as serious as this one. But some are, leading to extreme ill will among believers and, in some cases, congregational dissolution (Stockton 2000). Moreover, even relatively “minor” conflicts have the potential to disrupt church life and divert congregant attention and resources away from scripture’s call to spread the gospel and nurture each other in the faith.

The purpose of this paper is to examine conflict within two Reformed denominations, the Christian Reformed Church (CRC) and the Reformed Church in America (RCA). Specifically, the paper seeks to identify some of the major potential sources of conflict within CRC and RCA congregations, with the hope that, in so doing, we may not only develop a better generic understanding of church conflict but also be better prepared to avoid some of the more important sources of conflict within Reformed communities. The paper begins with a general discussion of the nature of organizational conflict. That it, attempts to define the term “conflict” and specify its use in this paper. Second, the paper focuses more specifically on the nature of church

conflict, giving particular attention to conflict within the CRC and RCA. This section of the paper includes a review of the literature on church conflict in order to develop some testable hypotheses concerning the sources of church conflict. Third, using data from the “FACT” congregation studies, described below, the paper seeks to examine some of correlates of conflict within the two Reformed denominations, giving particular attention to conflict over the “conduct of worship.” And finally, in an effort to explain overall levels of conflict, the paper presents multivariate models of conflict within both the CRC and RCA.

## NATURE AND IMPORTANCE OF CONFLICT

### Nature of Conflict

The sociological literature on conflict provides us with a wide variety of definitions of the term. Consider the following, representative, examples:

- “Conflict describes those experiences of individuals and groups trying to achieve goals which are either incompatible or appear to be so.” (McSwain and Treadwell 1981: 25)
- “Conflict exists whenever there are important differences between people, groups or nations which should they persist and remain unresolved, serve to keep the parties involved apart in some way” (Jay Hall quoted in Eidson 1994: 20),
- “Conflict [is] a struggle over values and claims to scarce status, power, and resources in which the aims of the opponents are to neutralize, injure, or eliminate their rivals” (Gangel and Canine 1992: 131)

From these, and related, definitions we can draw several conclusions about conflict. First, conflict is potentially very important, possibly involving inter-personal struggle over basic goals and values. Second, conflict may well be deeply rooted in human nature. Indeed, humans are political creatures in that we frequently differ over goals and/or visions of “the good.” Consequently, one might well perceive conflict as springing from human nature and, perhaps, as an inevitable consequence of human social interaction. To be human is to struggle with other

humans. In the third place, one can conclude that conflict is not limited to clashes between isolated individuals; it also can involve clashes within and between groups of all sorts ... ranging from the very large (e.g. nation-states) to the relatively small (e.g. the local congregation). Since organizations, like individuals, may possess their own, particular objectives, it is not surprising that, like individuals, they also frequently conflict with each other (Long 1992, Cyert and March 1996). Finally, conflicts vary tremendously in terms of their degree of importance or significance to the broader society (McCullough 1991: 75). While certain clashes between individuals may be insignificant or trivial (except, perhaps, to the parties involved), other clashes (e.g. those between nation-states) may have life-or-death implications for large numbers of people.

Conflict may be usefully conceived as a component or aspect of decision-making. As individuals or groups make decisions, differences in their objectives, values, and interests are clarified and the potential for disagreement and conflict increases. Thus, it is sometimes useful to think of conflict as a process rather than as a discrete event (McSwain and Treadwell 1981: 26). This means that the nature and meaning of a given conflict can change and evolve over time.

Perhaps the greatest misconception surrounding the idea of conflict is the assumption that conflict is necessarily a negative process, to be avoided at all costs. Actually, conflict can be both destructive and constructive (Fray 1969: 35, Lee et al. 1969: 25, Gangel and Canine 1992: 130). While conflict can certainly impair human relationships and harm organizations and groups, it can also serve to sharpen thinking, spur activity, promote compromise, and enhance creativity. Thus, while conflict can pose tremendous difficulty for both individuals and organizations, it can also constitute a source of great opportunity. Much depends on such factors as the source of the conflict, the significance of the conflict, and the willingness of participants to communicate and compromise.

### Conflict Within the Church

Although one might hope for and even expect social and political harmony to prevail among God's people, both the Old and New Testaments of the Bible are replete with examples of internal conflict. In the Old Testament, for example, we witness frequent conflict between the various tribes of Israel, conflict so serious that it led to a division of the land into two kingdoms. Moreover theological conflicts over such matters as idol worship were also common. Even as great a leader as David could not escape a life of conflict, facing opposition not only from external foes such as the Philistines, but also from fellow Israelites, ranging from King Saul to his own son, Absalom.

Similarly, while we might prefer to envision the New Testament church as a peaceful family, sharing goods without complaint and working cooperatively to spread the gospel, the record suggests that this wasn't always the case. Indeed, the apostle, Paul, had to devote considerable time to peace-making in the church (Flynn 1971: 13-14). For example, Paul openly rebuked Peter for his attitude toward gentile believers (Acts 6: 1-6). In addition, Paul had a difficult time dealing with factionalism within the Corinthian church (I Cor. 1:11-12) and with a disagreement between two women in the Philippian church (Phil. 4: 2-3). Paul even faced disagreement from his close associate Barnabas over whether to take Mark along on their second missionary journey, leading to their divided ministries (Acts 15: 36-40).

Over the past two thousand years, of course, the church has faced internal conflicts which make these early disputes seem relatively trivial. The Protestant Reformation produced bloody conflicts within the church, conflicts which in certain respects continue to this day. Today's church is divided into hundreds of (sometimes warring) denominations, congregations, and factions, suggesting that believers sometimes have forgotten James' concerns over "wars and factions" within the church (James 4: 1).

Conflict within the church often occurs at the congregational level since it is there that congregants meet face-to-face and have frequent opportunities to share, and disagree about, their deepest concerns and values. Yet it is clear that not all congregations exhibit the same degree of internal conflict. According to Becker (1999) this variation can be partially explained by the concept of “congregational culture.” According to Becker, congregations develop distinct cultures which involve understandings of their “core tasks” and affect the behavior of both clergy and laity. Thus, these congregational cultures and may either exacerbate or inhibit internal conflict. Specifically, Becker (1999: 15) identifies four distinct types of congregational culture which she labels respectively “house of worship,” “family,” “community,” and “leader.” In her research, these categories or models proved to be considerably more useful in understanding congregational conflict than did structural variables such as congregational size (Becker 1999: 48-49).<sup>1</sup>

As Eidson (1994: 21) notes scholars studying church conflict have developed two primary views of such conflict. The first equates conflict with sin and emphasizes the avoidance of conflict. The second views conflict more positively as inevitable and a necessary concomitant of church growth. Nevertheless, given the potential seriousness of internal church conflict, it is hardly surprising that most scholars studying church conflict have tended to emphasize the destructive rather than the constructive aspects of conflict (e.g. Prinzing 1986, Durham 1990, Halverstadt 1991, Craig 1999).

While this literature on conflict management in the church is useful, it suffers from two major flaws. First, it tends to lack a central conceptual and theoretical core which might guide both scholarship and practice (Anson Shupe in Stockton 2000: x). Instead, most of the literature consists either of case studies of conflicts in particular congregations (Lee et al. 1969, Stockton 2000) or of collections of time-worn axioms developed by practitioners working in the field (McSwain and Treadwell 1981, Halverstadt 1991, McCollough 1991, Berkley 1994). While these

efforts are useful, they tend, as a group, to be somewhat disjointed and lacking in overall applicability. A second flaw in the literature is that very little of it is comparative and empirical in nature, utilizing data from multiple congregations and/or denominations. This limits our ability to develop broader generalizations with sufficient external validity to help us understand and deal with church conflict in a variety of settings.

This is exceedingly unfortunate since now, as always, churches are suffering from internal conflicts and desperately require healing. Christians, suggests Flynn (1971: 9), all too frequently act like porcupines in a cold, northern forest. They need to huddle together for warmth and support but, when they try to do so, they keep “needling” each other.

#### Conflict Within the CRC and RCA

Conflict is nothing new to either the CRC or the RCA, as the following story illustrates. According to Flynn (1971: 13), “A motorist asked a boy where the Reformed Church was located: ‘Go one block south and you’ll see a church on the corner. That’s the United Church. Go one block more, and you’ll come on a church that’s not united. That’s it!’”

Whether apocryphal or not, this story suggests an important point about the frequency of conflict within Reformed denominations. Indeed, inter and intra-denominational conflict has been so common in the CRC and RCA that a full accounting of such conflict would far exceed the scope of this paper. However, a brief overview is presented below for illustrative purposes.

The RCA, being the oldest Protestant denomination in the United States, has the longer record of conflict. During the nineteenth century, for example, the RCA faced serious conflicts over issues of “Americanization,” as it struggled to reconcile its Dutch heritage with life in North America. By mid-century, however, many of these issues had been resolved as symbolized by the church’s decision in 1869 to change its name from the Dutch Reformed Church to the Reformed Church in America (Guth et al. 1997: 33). More recently, the RCA has struggled with such thorny issues as the ordination of women to the ministry and whether Christ is the only way

to salvation (Nemeth and Luidens 1994; Honey 1998, Japinga 2001), Issues such as these not only have divided individual congregations within the RCA, they have also divided the church by region. At the risk of over-generalization, one might well argue that the RCA faces continuing conflict between its more theologically liberal or progressive eastern wing and its more conservative or traditional Midwestern wing (Nemeth and Luidens 2001; Van Engen 2002). Of course, not all conflict within the RCA (or, for that matter, the CRC) has revolved around fundamental issues; the denomination, like all denominations, has also faced numerous congregational fights over worship style, personalities, and leadership.

While the RCA has a longer history of internal divisions and conflicts, the CRC has also had its share of serious internal conflicts. Indeed, the CRC traces its origins to conflicts within the church. Many of the early members of the CRC could trace their religious heritage to the *Afscheiding*, a movement of certain Dutch Reformed believers in the Netherlands to leave the Dutch Reformed Church over perceptions of theological drift within the church. The spirit of schism persisted when these dissenters emigrated to North America, as many of them found the RCA to be insufficiently orthodox for their tastes. As a result, many of them left the RCA and formed a new denomination, the CRC, in 1857. This initiated a half century period of nearly constant bickering between the two denominations (VanderZicht 1982: 9) Throughout the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century, the CRC tended to attract a majority of Dutch Reformed people who left the Netherlands for Canada and the United States (Kuyvenhoven 1983: 7)..

Over the past century, the CRC has faced numerous conflicts which have split congregations, shaken Calvin Theological Seminary, and threatened to seriously weaken the church (Bratt 1984). Like the RCA, the CRC faced considerable difficulty adapting to American culture and some of its internal conflict revolved around such “peripheral” cultural issues as the use of English in worship services and sabbatarian practices. However, perhaps because of the

CRC's adherence to strict confessional tests of religious orthodoxy, many of these conflicts have focused on basic theological issues such as the nature of God's love and the permissibility of working cooperatively with "unbelievers." In recent years, the CRC has found it exceedingly difficult to resolve controversies over such matters as evolution, gay rights, and the ordination of women to the ministry (Zylstra 1990). These conflicts have split congregations and even caused some CRC members to leave the denomination and form a new, secessionist, denomination ironically labeled, the United Reformed Church.

### POSSIBLE SOURCES OF CHURCH CONFLICT

The possible sources of church conflict are as numerous as the range of human thoughts and emotions. Nonetheless, the literature on such conflict permits one to identify a variety of different sets of variables which can help us develop testable hypotheses pertaining to intra-congregational conflict. These sets of variables, organized in the form of eleven hypotheses, are listed below:

1. **Spiritual Vitality:** Spiritual vitality will be negatively related to intra-congregational conflict. That is, those congregations which are spiritually alive and which deepen congregants' relationships with God will exhibit such "fruits of the spirit" as love and compassion, values which are inimical to conflict and strife (: Ch. 5).
2. **Social Vitality:** Social vitality will be negatively related to intra-congregational conflict. In other words, those congregations which strengthen personal relationships and are open to new members will be more harmonious than other congregations, if only because they foster a type of social connectedness which might militate against conflict (Lee et al. 1969).
3. **Financial Vitality:** Financial vitality will be negatively related to intra-congregational conflict. Financial stress can fragment even the most stable congregation since it generates conflicts over giving and church priorities (Fray 1969: 54, Prinzing 1986: Ch. 4).

4. **Social Justice Agenda:** Emphasis on a social justice agenda will be positively related to intra-congregational conflict. This is because, for some Christians, there is a built-in tension between evangelism and the “social gospel” (Prinzing 1986: Ch. 7).
5. **Personal Piety/Moral Boundaries:** Emphasis on personal piety and strict moral boundaries will be negatively related to intra-congregational conflict. Such activity not only creates clear sets of goals and expectations for members, but also helps to define differences between “insiders” and “outsiders.” One might expect “insiders” to develop relatively strong sets of internal norms, role expectations, and behavioral patterns (Smith 1998).
6. **External Focus/Ecumenism:** An emphasis on ecumenism or working collectively with other congregations, denominations, or organizations will be negatively related to church conflict. In order to work cooperatively with others, one must be prepared to sublimate one’s particularistic beliefs in favor of efforts to pursue a larger good. Such an emphasis on cooperative and unity is inimical to intra-congregational conflict (Craig 1999: Ch. 4)
7. **Organizational Vitality:** Organizational vitality will be negatively related to intra-congregational conflict. That is, those congregations which have a clear sense of their heritage and are able to establish clear goals, develop effective programs, and deal openly with disagreements will be less prone to internal conflict than will those which lack such vitality (McSwain and Treadwell 1981: 67, Berkley 1994: Ch. 13, Shupe 1995, Stockton 2000).
8. **Leadership:** Good leadership will be negatively related to intra-congregational conflict. On the one hand, bad or weak leadership can be a source of conflict as congregants lack guidance and may seek to replace such leadership. On the other hand, strong leadership may help promote organizational unity, as congregants are given a clear set of objectives and means to achieve them (: 23, Berkley 1994: Ch. 16).
9. **Location and Physical Context:** Contextual stress will be positively related to intra-congregational conflict. Specifically, congregations located in large urban areas with multiple

problems or those dealing with such structural issues as space constraints or aging facilities will be more likely than other congregations to develop internal conflicts as congregants struggle over how best to deal with these issues (Halverstadt 1991: Ch. 5).

10. **Theology, Liturgy and Music:** Changes in worship content and style will be positively related to intra-congregational conflict. Few things generate more friction in a congregation than changes in worship style and content (Prinzing 1986, Berkley 1994: Ch. 16).

11. **Environmental Stress/Change:** Environmental stress or change will be positively related to intra-congregational conflict. Rapid change in such important areas as congregational size, worship style, or leadership will tend to generate increased conflict within congregations (Fray 1969, Prinzing 1986).

Several words of caution should be noted concerning these hypotheses. First, although they represent an important group of possible sources of conflict, the list is not exhaustive. For example, because of limitations in the dataset used to examine these hypotheses (described below), the number of hypotheses pertaining to theology is limited. Second, while the hypotheses generally have a considerable amount of face validity and are rooted in the literature on church conflict, one can readily envision counter or alternative hypotheses. For example, it is possible to imagine that an emphasis on spiritual piety and moral boundaries might actually increase internal conflict as congregants battle over the nature of those boundaries and over possible violations of those norms. And, finally, one must recognize the interactive nature of the conflict process. While many of the factors listed above may well generate conflict, it is likely that conflict also shapes those same variables; the direction of the “arrow,” if you will, goes both way. To illustrate, while good leadership may help to minimize conflict, a lack of conflict may also help a congregation attract good leaders.

## DATA AND METHODS

Data for this study are drawn primarily from the 1999 Faith Communities Today (FACT) survey of American congregations. The FACT data were generated in association with the Cooperative Congregation Studies Project and consist of data pertaining to congregations in twenty six American denominations, including Protestant denominations, Roman Catholics, Jews, and others. Data were collected by mailing questionnaires to “key informants” (pastors or other knowledgeable people) in congregations from each of the denominations. It is important to note that the unit of analysis for the FACT study (and, therefore, this paper) is the congregation, not the individual or the denomination. However, by aggregating the congregational responses by denomination, it is possible to make inter-denominational comparisons.

Response rates for Reformed congregations to the FACT survey in 1999 were very good, particularly for the CRC. Out of a total of 723 CRC congregations in the United States surveyed for the FACT study, 515 responded for an overall response rate of 71 percent. And, out of a total of 949 RCA congregations in the United States, a total of 399 responded for an overall response rate of 42 percent.

## FINDINGS

### Conflict in the CRC, RCA, and Other Protestant Congregations

How much conflict is there within CRC and RCA congregations? Table 1 helps us answer this question by reporting the percentages of congregations experiencing “moderate” or “serious” conflict over a variety of matters. Data are provided not only for CRC and RCA congregations but also for an aggregate group consisting of the other sixteen “white” Protestant denominations included in the FACT survey.<sup>2</sup>

(Table 1 About Here)

Table 1 reveals, in the first place, that there is indeed a considerable amount of reported conflict within all three groups of Protestant congregations. Indeed, with respect to some matters

such as “leadership style,” over a fifth of congregations in the CRC, RCA, and “other Protestant” categories report having “moderate” or “serious” conflict. Moreover, given the likely tendency of congregational informants to under-report conflict, these numbers, if anything, may understate the true incidence of conflict within American Protestant congregations.

A variety of matters, ranging from “worship conduct” to “money,” tended to generate conflict in the three groups of congregations examined here. In general, there was relatively little variation in the mean percentages for various sources of conflict, although the amount of conflict over “worship conduct,” “members’ behavior,” and “leadership style,” did tend to exceed conflict over “program/mission,” “theology,” and “money” for all three groups.

Some very small inter-denominational differences do appear between the three groups of congregations with respect to sources of conflict. Among CRC congregations, the highest mean conflict score (2.0) pertained to “worship conduct.” Among the RCA congregations, “worship conduct” and “leadership style” tied for first place, with mean scores of 1.8. And among the remaining sixteen Protestant denominations, first place was shared among four conflict sources, with means of 1.8, respectively: “members’ behavior,” “leadership style,” “decision-making,” and “money.” Overall, however, the patterns of conflict sources appear to be very similar between the three groups of congregations.

As an initial way of examining conflict within CRC and RCA congregations, an additive “conflict index” (CONINDEX), consisting of the nine potential sources of conflict listed in Table 1, was created for the CRC, RCA, and the group of sixteen other Protestant denominations. Since each source of conflict has a range of 1 (“no conflict”) to 4 (“very serious conflict”), the total range of the index is from 9 to 36.<sup>3</sup> A comparison of the mean index scores for congregations from the two denominations and the “other Protestant” denominations (14 for the CRC and 15 for both the RCA and “other Protestant” denominations) reveals very similar overall levels of conflict.

In a preliminary effort to determine which variables tend to be associated with overall levels of conflict within the CRC and RCA, correlations were calculated between eleven sets of variables (associated with the eleven hypotheses discussed above) and the conflict index, with results reported in Table 2.<sup>4</sup> One must note at the outset that the presence of correlations in no way demonstrates causal relationships between variables. But calculating correlations and associated levels of significance can be heuristically useful, helping us in an initial effort to sort through masses of data and suggest possible future directions for analysis.

(Table 2 About Here)

Earlier it was hypothesized that there would be a negative relationship between **spiritual vitality** and congregational conflict. Table 2 lends credence to this hypothesis; strong, negative, statistically significant relationships appear between three different measures of spiritual vitality and the conflict index for all three groups of congregations. Specifically, congregations which are “spiritually vital and alive,” which help congregants “deepen relationships with God,” and which are characterized by “spiritually uplifting/inspirational” worship tend to be associated with lower levels of congregational conflict.

The evidence is equally strong for **social vitality**. As hypothesized, strong, negative, significant relationships are found between various measures of social vitality and the conflict index for all three groups of congregations. Those congregations which feel “like a close knit family,” which have programs that “strengthen personal relationships,” and which “easily assimilate new people” tend to have much less conflict than those lacking in these characteristics. These data, then, suggest the value of examining churches as social networks and of viewing social relationships as being closely associated with conflict or harmony.

When one examines the relationship between **financial vitality** and congregational conflict the results are mixed. As hypothesized, there is a strong, negative, and statistically significant relationship between the current financial health of a congregation, regardless of

denomination, and the level of conflict. That is, congregations which are financially healthy also tend to have relatively lower overall levels of conflict than do those congregations which are financially stressed. However, it is likely that there is an interactive relationship between the two variables; a lack of funds may be both a cause and a consequence of congregational conflict.

Financial health “five years ago” proved to be significantly related to the conflict index for both the RCA and “other Protestant” groups but not for CRC congregations. However, even for CRC congregations the correlation was in the expected (negative) direction. On the other hand, little if any relationship appeared between either “total congregational income last year” or the “financial effort” of adult members.

Table 2 provides only limited evidence to support the hypothesis that emphasizing a **social justice agenda** is related to congregational conflict. Indeed, for most of the variables in this category, including “frequency of worship focusing on social justice,” the “social action index” (an additive index of 16 variables measuring congregational involvement in social justice activities), and “social efficiency” (number of persons served in social ministries divided by the number of regularly participating adults), the relationships were weak and/or not statistically significant. The one exception to this pattern pertains to the item measuring whether or not a congregation “is working for social justice.” Contrary to expectations, for all three congregational groups, there was a significant negative relationship between working for social justice and conflict; those congregations working for social justice actually tended to have *less* conflict than did other congregations.

Why might this be the case? One possible explanation is that congregations pursuing a social justice agenda have gone beyond twentieth century debates over evangelism v. social justice and are now relatively unified in the pursuit of social justice. Another, related, possibility is that pursuit of social justice gives congregations goals and objectives which direct their

attention away from (sometimes petty) internal congregational strife and toward pressing external needs.

In general, the data tend to support the hypothesis that there is a negative relationship between congregational emphasis on **personal piety/moral boundaries** and conflict. That is, those congregations which establish clear behavioral norms and emphasize distinctive, Christian lifestyles tend to have less conflict. This is particularly true of the “other Protestant” denominations, where six of the nine correlations were both negative and significant at the .001 level or better. For the Reformed denominations, and especially the CRC, the relationships were somewhat weaker and less significant, although still generally in the hypothesized direction. In general, certain variables, including “fasting” and “displaying religious symbols” appeared to be only modestly related, if at all, to conflict. On the other hand, emphasis on such moral boundary issues as “abstaining from premarital sex” proved to be significantly related to conflict, regardless of the group examined.

Do congregations with an **external focus or ecumenical emphasis** tend to have lower conflict than do other congregations? For each of the three variables in the category, the correlations proved, as hypothesized, to be negative. The most notable relationships found were between the “publicity index,” an additive index measuring congregational use of ten different types of media in efforts to spread the gospel (see Appendix), and conflict. For all three groups examined, those congregations which used a greater variety of media tended to have lower levels of congregational conflict. The relationships with conflict were also largely negative with respect to two other variables -- the “ecumenism index,” an additive measure of congregational sponsorship of four different types of “ecumenical or interfaith” activities (see Appendix), and a variable measuring congregational efforts to increase racial or ethnic diversity. However, for these two variables, the relationships were only statistically significant for “other Protestant” denominations. Moreover, one might note that, with respect to the “other Protestant”

denominations, the direction of the relationship for the “diversity” variable was actually positive, indicating that an emphasis on diversity is associated with *higher* levels of conflict.

Among the most notable relationships found in Table 2 are those pertaining to **organizational vitality**, with the data strongly supporting the hypothesis that organizational vitality is negatively related to congregational conflict. With only one exception, virtually all of the relationships between measures of organizational vitality and congregational conflict are negative and significant for all three groups of congregations. Those congregations which “clearly express their denominational heritage,” which possess a “clear sense of mission and purpose,” which have “well-organized” programs and activities, which “deal openly with disagreements and conflicts,” and which welcome “innovation and change” tend to have less internal conflict than do those congregations which lack these characteristics.

Table 2 also appears to support the idea that **leadership** qualities may be related to levels of congregational conflict, although the relationships seem to be more complex than one might expect. For example, the correlation coefficients indicate that there is a negative relationship between senior clergy age and congregational conflict, particularly for the CRC and “other Protestant” congregations. That is, those congregations with older ministers also tend to have relatively higher levels of conflict. However, one should be cautious in interpreting these findings since, when one controls for congregational size, these relationships largely disappear (data not shown).<sup>5</sup> The nature of the relationship between the level of clergy education and conflict varies, depending on the congregational group analyzed. While no significant relationship between clergy education and conflict appeared among RCA congregations, among CRC congregations, the relationship was significant and negative; higher levels of clergy education tend to be associated with lower levels of conflict. On the other hand, the opposite proved to be true for “other Protestant” clergy. In part, this may reflect the greater variance in clergy education among “other Protestant” denominations; unlike their peers in some other

Protestant denominations, relatively few CRC or RCA clergy have less than a seminary education. Finally, one might note that no relationship was found between the tenure of previous senior clergy and congregational conflict, regardless of the group examined.

When one examines congregational **location and physical context**, one sees that, as hypothesized, the physical condition of a congregation's buildings is strongly and negatively related to internal conflict for all three groups of congregations. Those congregations whose buildings are in excellent condition tend to have lower levels of conflict than do those with deteriorating buildings. Of course, once again, the direction of causation is unclear. It is quite possible that there is an interactive relationship between the two variables. Among Reformed congregations, no relationship appeared between "church age," "the population of church location," or the "space index" (an additive index of congregational space needs, described in the Appendix) and conflict. On the other hand, among "other Protestant" congregations, a significant, negative relationship was found between conflict and "church age" while a significant positive relationship was found between conflict and "population of church location." In "other Protestant" congregations, younger congregations and those in larger cities tended to have the highest levels of conflict.

As noted above, the FACT dataset contains relatively few items pertaining to theology. Thus, our examination of relationships between congregational conflict and **theology, liturgy, and music** must be largely confined to the latter two categories. Table 2 provides us with correlations pertaining to a wide variety of liturgical and musical practices. For the most part, these variables proved to be unrelated to congregational conflict. There are, however, a few exceptions. Among "other Protestant" congregations, for example, "charismatic" congregations tended to be less fractious than other congregations. In addition, among all three groups of congregations, the presence of "a time during the worship service to greet" proved negatively related to conflict. This finding seems to comport well with our previous findings concerning

social vitality. Finally, at least among CRC and “other Protestant” congregations, the use of incense or candles proved positively related to conflict, perhaps indicating that “liturgical” services may be under attack in certain churches. However, since relatively few CRC or RCA congregations employ incense or candles, one must interpret these findings with caution.

The final hypothesis examined here suggests that **environmental stress/change** will be related to congregational conflict. Table 2 reveals that this is indeed the case. In the first place, the table reveals that there is a strong, negative relationship between congregational growth over the past five years and conflict. For all three groups of congregations, those which have grown the most tend to have the least conflict. Of course the interpretation of these data is problematical. It is quite possible, for example, that conflict inhibits growth. Or it may be that growth enhances congregational harmony. Table 2 also reports a significant, positive relationship between “change in worship style over the past five years” and conflict among CRC and “other Protestant” congregations. The direction of the relationship is the same for RCA congregations, although the relationship is not statistically significant. This suggests that those congregations which have recently changed their worship styles have also experienced the greatest amount of conflict. However, once again, a degree of interpretive caution is in order. It is quite possible that this increased conflict may be a consequence rather than a cause of changes in worship style. Finally, for all three groups examined here, there is a significant positive relationship between clergy turnover over the past ten years and conflict. Those congregations with the highest turnover also tended to have the greatest amount of conflict. One suspects that, once again, the relationship between the variables may be interactive.

#### Conflict Over Worship Content in the CRC and RCA

Since it is impossible, in a single paper such as this, to examine in detail each of the types of conflict which may appear in congregations, a degree of selectivity is necessary. Therefore, in order to provide a more in-depth analysis of intra-congregational conflict, this section focuses

specifically on conflict over “worship conduct.” This type of conflict was selected because it is the among the most commonly mentioned sources of conflict in Reformed churches in North America, ranking first among CRC congregations and second among RCA congregations. Since our primary concern is with Reformed congregations, congregations in the “other Protestant” category are excluded from the following analysis.

In examining possible sources of worship service conflict, three sets of variables are utilized: (1) worship service content (2) leadership characteristics and (3) environmental stress/change. These sets of variables were selected both because Table 2 suggests their importance and because of their intuitive link to the “conduct of worship” in Reformed congregations.<sup>6</sup>

Table 3 permits us to examine possible relationships between “worship service content” and conflict over the conduct of worship in the CRC and RCA. The data reveal that, for both denominations, important relationships appear. In the first place, Table 3 demonstrates that those CRC and RCA congregations which have worship services that are “spiritually uplifting and inspirational” tend to have lower levels of conflict than do congregations whose worship services are not as uplifting. For example, while 43 percent of CRC congregations with very uplifting services reported having no conflict, only 21 percent of those congregations lacking uplifting services reported having no conflict. Similar, though less pronounced, patterns appear for the RCA.

(Table 3 About Here)

Having “worship content focusing on social justice” is not as closely related to conflict over the conduct of worship as is having a spiritually uplifting service. Nevertheless, for the RCA, a significant negative relationship was found between the two variables. Those RCA congregations characterized by worship focusing on social justice tend to have less conflict than

do other RCA congregations. The relationship for CRC congregations is also negative, but not statistically significant.

The opposite is true when one examines relationships between congregational emphasis in worship and education on “prayer and other spiritual practices.” Here we find negative, statistically significant relationships for CRC congregations but not for RCA congregations. Indeed, for the RCA, the relationship is slightly positive. These differences are difficult to explain, though they comport well with known differences between the two Reformed denominations. The RCA has long been known as a “mainline” Protestant denomination and, as such, may place a greater emphasis on social justice issues than does the CRC. In contrast, the CRC has long been closer than the RCA to evangelical Protestantism, with its relatively greater emphasis on spirituality and personal piety.

A second set of “explanatory” variables considered here involves clergy “leadership characteristics.” Specifically, we are interested in ascertaining whether having a senior pastor with certain leadership characteristics is related in any fashion to the degree of conflict in CRC and RCA congregations. From Table 4, we see that, for the most part, leadership characteristics do not seem to be related in meaningful ways to conflict. This is certainly true of clergy age; in neither Reformed denomination was a significant relationship found between the “age of the current senior clergy person in charge of the congregation” and conflict.

(Table 4 About Here)

The education level of the senior clergy did prove to be significantly related (.05 level) to conflict among RCA but not CRC congregations. Among RCA congregations, congregations served by less well-educated senior pastors tended to have somewhat less conflict than those served by better educated pastors. However, one must recognize that, in both the CRC and RCA, the number of ministers with a “B.A. or less” is relatively small, making it difficult to draw firm conclusions. When one examines the relationship between the tenure of the previous senior

clergy person and conflict, we see that there is no significant relationship for RCA congregations but a significant, positive one for CRC congregations. Among CRC congregations, those whose previous ministers had longer tenure also tended to have slightly higher levels of conflict.

The final set of variables utilized here pertains to environmental stress or change, with the data reported in Table 5. From the table we see, in the first place, that there is little or no relationship in either the CRC or the RCA between the “number of senior clergy” who served a congregation during the past ten years and the degree of conflict. More important relationships appear, however, when one examines changes in the “number of regularly participating adults” in congregations since 1995. For both the CRC and RCA, negative relationships between such changes and conflict are evident, although the relationship is far stronger for the CRC. For the CRC, those congregations with increasing membership tend to have lower levels of conflict. Once again, however, a word of interpretive caution is in order since it is possible that congregational harmony may actually help to increase the number of participating adults in a congregation. The arrow of causality probably goes both directions as these variables interact with each other.

(Table 5 About Here)

One of the variables which proved to be most closely linked to conflict over the conduct of worship in both the CRC and the RCA is change in the style of a congregation’s primary worship service over the past five years. For both denominations, strong, positive, statistically significant relationships appear. That is, for both denominations, congregations which have experienced great change in worship style in recent years also tend to have relatively high levels of conflict over the conduct of worship.

#### Explaining Overall Levels of Conflict Within the CRC and RCA

The final section of this paper involves an effort to “explain” overall levels of conflict with the CRC and RCA, using a multiple regression analysis. The dependent variable in the

analysis is the overall conflict index, discussed above (CONINDEX) while the independent variables consist of all those variables reported in Table 2 which proved to be statistically significant at the .05 level or better for both the CRC and RCA. The results are reported in Table 6. In interpreting the table, one should note that since the coefficients reported are standardized regression coefficients, the results for the CRC and RCA are not strictly comparable. Nonetheless, they do permit us to get a sense of the importance of those variables which seem to contribute to conflict within the two denominations.

(Table 6 About Here)

From Table 6 we see that the model for the CRC explains approximately 21 percent of the variance in overall levels of conflict within CRC congregations ( $R^2 = .21$ ). Four variables in the analysis proved to be significantly related to overall levels of congregational conflict: “feeling like a close-knit family,” “dealing openly with disagreements and conflicts,” “providing a time during worship for persons to greet,” and “membership change over the past five years.” As one might expect, those congregations which feel like a close-knit family, deal openly with disagreements, are attracting new members, and provide opportunities within the worship service for congregants to greet each other tend to have lower levels of conflict than do other congregations.

Table 6 reveals that the model for the RCA is even more powerful than that for the CRC, explaining 26 percent of the overall variance in congregational conflict ( $R^2 = .26$ ). Like the CRC, conflict within RCA congregations is partially explained by such variables as “feeling like a close-knit family,” “dealing openly with conflicts,” and “providing greeting time in worship services.” However, in addition, RCA conflict can be explained in terms of “having a clear sense of mission and purpose,” “welcoming innovation and change,” “the state of church facilities,” and “clergy turnover.” And, unlike the CRC, RCA conflict proved unrelated to “membership growth” but positively related to “the number of clergy over the past ten years.”

In general, then, overall levels of conflict within the two denominations are best explained in terms of social vitality (feeling like a close-knit family), organizational vitality (especially dealing openly with conflicts and disagreements), and environmental stress and change (membership growth and clergy turnover). Other factors such as spiritual vitality, having a social justice agenda, an emphasis on personal piety/moral boundaries, and having an external focus proved to have less predictive value.

## CONCLUSIONS

The literature on church conflict is extensive but is excessively anecdotal and impressionistic. This paper seeks to partially rectify this situation by utilizing the FACT study of congregational life in the United States to examine conflict within congregations of two American Reformed denominations ... the CRC and RCA. In addition, for comparative purposes, the study provides data concerning conflict in sixteen other "white" Protestant denominations.

Both the CRC and RCA have long histories of conflict within congregations and with each other. The FACT data indicate that today's CRC and RCA congregations tend to have overall patterns of conflict which are similar to each other and to those exhibited by other white Protestant denominations in the United States. Among the most common causes of internal strife in these denominations are "worship conduct," "members' behavior," and "leadership style."

This paper examines a variety of possible sources of intra-congregational conflict, by focusing on relationships between a "conflict index" and eleven categories of variables which are hypothesized to be related to congregational conflict. Among the most important correlates of conflict are those pertaining to spiritual vitality, social vitality, organizational vitality and environmental stress/change. These patterns tended to hold, regardless of the denominational category examined.

An in-depth analysis of conflict over the “conduct of worship” in the CRC and RCA, presented above, focuses on three categories of variables ... worship service content, leadership characteristics, and environmental change. In the “worship service content” category, having worship services which are “spiritually uplifting and inspirational” proved to be particularly important. CRC and RCA congregations did tend to differ in one notable respect. While, in the RCA, having services focusing on social justice was associated with decreased conflict over the conduct of worship, in the CRC having an emphasis on personal prayer and spirituality was associated with decreased conflict.

For the most part, leadership characteristics proved to be unrelated to conflict over the conduct of worship, although clergy education was slightly associated with conflict in the RCA and the tenure of the previous pastor was associated with conflict in the CRC. On the other hand, as one might expect, having recent changes in worship style proved to be strongly related to conflict over the conduct of worship in both Reformed denominations.

Finally, a multivariate analysis of conflict within the CRC and RCA suggests that variables related to social vitality, organizational vitality, and environmental stress/change are particularly important. On the other hand variables related to spiritual vitality, financial vitality, social justice agendas, personal piety/moral boundaries, and external focus/ecumenism have less predictive power.

These findings provide exceedingly useful clues for scholars interested in understanding congregational conflict in the CRC, RCA, and other Protestant denominations. Clearly, they suggest the importance of maintaining strong social bonds and organizational vitality in congregations as well as the possible usefulness of attempts to manage change. The benefits to congregations and Reformed denominations could indeed be significant.

TABLE 1  
 AMOUNT AND SOURCES OF CONFLICT  
 IN CONGREGATIONS FROM SELECTED DENOMINATIONS

Source of Conflict	CRC		RCA		Other (16) "White" Protestant Denominations	
	Percent Reporting "Moderate" or "Serious" Conflict	Mean*	Percent Reporting "Moderate" or "Serious" Conflict	Mean*	Percent Reporting "Moderate" or "Serious" Conflict	Mean*
Worship conduct	28	2.0	21	1.8	18	1.7
Members' behavior	24	1.8	18	1.6	23	1.8
Leadership style	21	1.7	24	1.8	26	1.8
Decision making	15	1.5	18	1.6	22	1.8
Progam/mission	14	1.5	12	1.5	12	1.5
Theology	14	1.5	7	1.3	12	1.4
Pastor's personal behavior	11	1.4	13	1.4	14	1.5
Money	11	1.5	19	1.7	23	1.8
Other	9	1.2	7	1.9	17	1.5
Minimum "N"	508		399		7,156	

Source: 1999 FACT Surveys.

\* Four point scale, ranging from 1 "no conflict" to 4 "very serious conflict"

TABLE 2  
CORRELATIONS BETWEEN SELECTED VARIABLES  
AND “CONFLICT INDEX” FOR SELECTED DENOMINATIONS<sup>a</sup>

Variables	CRC	RCA	Other (16) “White” Protestant Denom- inations
<b>Spiritual Vitality</b>			
Congregation is spiritually vital and alive	-.27***	-.21***	-.26***
Cong. helps deepen relationships with God	-.18***	-.14**	-.22***
Worship is spiritually uplifting/inspirational	-.25***	-.13**	-.20***
<b>Social Vitality</b>			
Congregation feels like a close knit family	-.27***	-.14**	-.21***
Programs strengthen personal relationships	-.24***	NA	-.23***
New people easily assimilated into congregation	-.24***	-.19***	-.25***
<b>Financial Vitality</b>			
Current financial health of congregation	-.12**	-.16**	-.26***
Financial health “five years ago”	-.04	-.14**	-.23***
Total congregational income last year	-.00	-.00	-.02
Financial effort per adult member	.05	.13*	-.01
<b>Social Justice Agenda</b>			
Congregation is working for social justice	-.10*	-.10*	-.11***
Frequency of worship focusing on soc. justice	-.03	-.04	.02
Social Action Index	.01	.04	.04*
Social Efficiency	-.01	.08.	.03
<b>Personal Piety/Moral Boundaries</b>			
Emphasis on prayer, scripture, spiritual practices	-.08	-.11**	-.12***
Family devotions	-.08	-.13**	-.14***
Fasting	.01	-.06	-.03
Observing dietary restrictions	.10*	-.06	-.02
Abstinence from alcohol	-.05	-.08	-.11***
Sabbatarian practices	.01	-.12*	-.07***
Displaying religious objects/symbols/statues	.02	NA	.02
Abstaining from premarital sex	-.12*	-.11*	-.12***
Strict congregational expectations for members	-.10*	-.03	-.16***
<b>External Focus/Ecumenism</b>			
Publicity Index	-.11*	-.11*	-.07***
Ecumenism Index	-.03	-.02	-.09***
Attempting to increase racial/ethnic diversity	-.07	-.05	.07***

TABLE 2 (continued)

Variables	CRC	RCA	Other (16) “White” Protestant Denom- inations
<b>Organizational Vitality</b>			
Clearly expresses its denominational heritage	-.04	-.13**	-.10***
Clear sense of mission and purpose	-.24***	-.29***	-.26***
Programs and activities are well organized	-.15***	-.12*	-.18***
Deals openly with disagreements and conflicts	-.27***	-.28***	-.23***
Welcomes innovation and change	-.12**	-.13**	-.18***
<b>Leadership</b>			
Age of current senior clergy	-.18***	-.08	-.09***
Level of clergy education	-.13**	-.05	.09***
Tenure of previous senior clergy	-.01	-.07	-.00
<b>Location and Physical Context</b>			
Age of church	.02	-.05	-.04*
Population of church location	-.04	.03	.10***
Space Index	-.04	-.06	-.02
Physical condition of congregation’s buildings	-.14***	-.18***	-.16***
<b>Theology, Liturgy, and Music</b>			
Encourages public “speaking in tongues”	.01	NA	-.14***
Frequency of reading of creeds/faith statements	-.00	.04	.02
A time for lay persons to testify re their faith	.07	-.12*	-.04*
A time during worship for persons to greet	-.09*	-.11*	-.05**
The use of visual projection equipment	-.02	-.03	-.04
Frequency of use of incense or candles	.12**	.05	.06**
Dance or drama	-.00	.06	.03
Kneeling [or prostration] by the congregation	.09*	-.04	.04
Frequency of use of organ or piano	.09*	.06	.05*
Frequency of use of electronic keyboard	-.00	.02	-.02
Frequency of use of electric guitar/bass	-.00	.04	-.02
Frequency of use of non-elec. string or wind	-.04	.04	-.01
Frequency of use of drums or other percussion	-.04	-.02	-.03
Frequency of use of recorded music	-.05	.06	-.02
<b>Environmental Stress/Change</b>			
Membership change over past five years	-.38***	-.19***	-.23***
Change in worship style over past five years	.12*	.10	.12***
Number of clergy over past 10 years	.09*	.29***	.21***

Source: FACT Surveys, 1999

\*p = .05 \*\*p = .01 \*\*\*p = .001

<sup>a</sup> Pearson’s “r” correlations. For variable coding and index construction, see Appendix.

TABLE 3  
RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN WORSHIP SERVICE CONTENT AND  
CONFLICT OVER THE CONDUCT OF WORSHIP IN THE CRC AND RCA (percentages)

How well does the statement, “Our worship services are spiritually uplifting and inspirational” describe your congregation?	CRC			RCA		
	Not Well	Well	Very Well	Not Well	Well	Very Well
No Conflict	21	31	43	40	42	50
Not Very Serious Conflict	29	41	38	25	39	33
High Conflict	50	28	20	35	19	17
“N”	68	272	173	60	204	129

$r = -.18^{***}$

$r = -.10^*$

How often does the sermon in your worship service focus on social justice?	CRC			RCA		
	Seldom/ Never	Some- Times	Always/ Often	Seldom/ Never	Some- times	Always/ Often
No Conflict	36	31	42	41	42	57
Not Very Serious Conflict	34	41	35	32	39	26
High Conflict	30	29	24	28	19	21
“N”	138	288	81	108	225	62

$r = -.04$

$r = -.09^*$

How much does your congregation, in its worship and education, emphasize personal prayer ... and other spiritual practices?”	CRC			RCA		
	Very Little	Some	Very Much	Very Little	Some	Very Much
No Conflict	21	31	43	37	49	44
Not Very Serious Conflict	29	41	38	44	34	32
High Conflict	50	28	20	19	18	25
“N”	68	272	173	62	152	177

$r = -.08^*$

$r = .02$

\* $p = .05$  \*\* $p = .01$  \*\*\* $p = .001$



TABLE 5  
RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ENVIRONMENTAL CHANGE AND  
CONFLICT OVER THE CONDUCT OF WORSHIP IN THE CRC AND RCA (percentages)

How many senior/sole clergy persons have served your congregation during the past ten years?	CRC			RCA		
	One	Two	More Than 2	One	Two	More Than 2
No Conflict	38	33	31	47	44	38
Not Very Serious Conflict	36	40	39	33	37	36
High Conflict	26	28	31	21	20	27
“N”	150	245	101	154	174	64

r = .05

r = .05

Since 1995 has the number of regularly participating adults (in your congregation):	CRC			RCA		
	De-creased	Stayed Same	In-creased	De-creased	Stayed Same	In-creased
No Conflict	30	28	36	39	43	46
Not Very Serious Conflict	28	40	45	27	40	35
High Conflict	42	32	19	34	17	19
“N”	107	176	193	82	60	241

r = -.14\*\*\*

r = -.08

In comparison to the style of your congregation's primary worship service 5 yrs. ago, is the style of your current service:	CRC			RCA		
	Same	Some Change	Great Change	Same	Some Change	Great Change
No Conflict	41	27	13	54	32	17
Not Very Serious Conflict	37	43	37	32	40	34
High Conflict	21	30	49	14	28	50
“N”	220	191	67	252	93	47

r = .22\*\*\*

r = .29\*\*\*

\*p = .05 \*\*\*p = .001

TABLE 6  
DETERMINANTS OF CONGREGATIONAL CONFLICT  
(MULTIPLE REGRESSION)

	CRC	RCA
<b>Spiritual Vitality</b>		
Congregation spiritually vital and alive	-.02	-.06
Congregation helps deepen relationships with God	.03	.12
Worship is spiritually uplifting/inspirational	-.04	.04
<b>Social Vitality</b>		
Congregation feels like a close knit family	-.16**	-.13*
New people are easily assimilated into congregation	-.03	.05
<b>Financial Vitality</b>		
Current financial health of the congregation	-.03	-.03
<b>Social Justice Agenda</b>		
Congregation is working for social justice	-.02	.06
<b>Personal Piety/Moral Boundaries</b>		
Abstaining from premarital sex	-.07	-.00
<b>External Focus/Ecumenism</b>		
Publicity index	-.06	.05
<b>Organizational Vitality</b>		
Clear sense of mission and purpose	-.07	-.24***
Programs and activities are well organized	-.00	-.01
Deals openly with disagreements and conflicts	-.14**	-.29***
Congregation welcomes innovation and change	-.02	-.08***
<b>Location and Physical Context</b>		
Physical condition of congregation's buildings	-.06	-.21***
<b>Theology, Liturgy, and Music</b>		
A time during worship for person's to greet	-.14**	-.12*
<b>Environmental Stress/Change</b>		
Membership change over the past five years	-.23***	-.07
Number of clergy over the past ten years	-.00	.17**
Multiple R	.46	.51
R squared	.21	.26

- \* Statistically significant at the .05 level
- \*\* Statistically significant at the .01 level
- \*\*\* Statistically significant at the .001 level

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APPENDIX  
SPSS Variable Names, Coding, and Index Construction (from Table 2)

**Spiritual Vitality**

How well does each of the following statements describe your congregation? (scale, ranging from 1 “hardly at all” to 5 “very well.”)

- VITAL: Our congregation is vital and alive.  
DEEPGOD: Our congregation helps members deepen their relationships with God.  
UPLIFT: Our congregation’s worship services are spiritually uplifting and inspirational.

**Social Vitality**

How well does each of the following statements describe your congregation? (scale ranging from 1 “hardly at all” to 5 “very well.”)

- FAMILY: Our congregation feels like a large, close-knit family.  
GOODBOND: Our congregation’s programs and activities strengthen personal relationships among our members.  
ADDFOLKS: New people are easily [assimilated/incorporated] into the life of our congregation.

**Financial Vitality**

- FINAN00: How would you describe your congregation’s financial health currently? (scale ranging from 1 “serious deficiency” to 5 “excellent”)  
FINAN95: How would you describe your congregation’s financial health five years ago? (scale, ranging from 1 “serious deficiency” to 5 “excellent”)  
TOTINCOM: Approximately how much income did your congregation receive last year from all sources?  
FEFFORT: TOTINCOME/REGADULT (total income from all sources divided by the number of regularly participating adults)

**“Social Justice” Agenda**

- JUSTICE: Our congregation is working for social justice (scale, ranging from 1 “hardly at all” to 5 “very well.”)  
SOCJUST: How often does the [sermon/homily/lesson] focus on social justice or social action? (scale, ranging from 1 “always” to 5 “never.”)  
SOCINDEX: Additive index of sixteen variables measuring whether “during the past 12 months” a congregation provided particular social services, ranging from food pantry or soup kitchens to prison or jail ministries. The specific variables were coded 1 “no” and 2 “not no,” for a possible range of 16 to 32. The specific variables are: SOUP, CASH, THRIFT, SHELTER, HOT, ABUSE, DAYC, TUTOR, VOTE, ADVOC, WORK, HEAL, HOSP, ELDER, IMMIG AND JAIL. The values of alpha were as follows: CRC (.76), RCA (.72) and Other (.81).

SOEFFIC: NOSERVED/REGADULT (number of persons served divided by the number of regularly participating adults)

### **Personal Piety/Moral Boundaries**

How much does your congregation, in its worship services, emphasize the following home and personal practices? (scale ranging from 1 “not at all” to 5 “a great deal.”)

GOODPRAY: Personal [prayer, scripture study, devotions and other spiritual practices]?

DEVOTION: Family devotions?

GOODFAST: Fasting?

GOODVEG: Observing dietary restrictions?

NODRINK: Abstinence from alcohol?

GOODHOLY: Keeping the Sabbath [or observing restrictions on your holy day]?

GOODICON: Displaying religious objects, symbols, statuary, icons or pictures in the home?

NOSHACK: Abstaining from premarital sex?

Which of the following three statements best describes your congregation?

STRICT: 1 “Our congregation has only [implicit/vague] expectations of members that are seldom, if ever, enforced.” 2 “Our congregation has fairly clear expectations for members, but the enforcement of these expectations is not very strict.” 3 “Our congregation has [explicit/definite] expectations for members that are strictly enforced.”

### **External Focus/Ecumenism**

PUBINDEX Additive index of ten variables focusing on community outreach, including such activities as placing newspaper ads, sponsoring special programs, and direct mail promotions. Variables were coded 1 “would not be supported” or 2 “supported,” for a possible range of 10-20. The specific variables were: NEWSADS, RADIOADS, MAILADS, EVANCAMP, NEWCOMER, WITNESS, REVIVALS, BIGEVENT, MINCALLS, AND LAYCALLS. The values of alpha were as follows: CRC (.68), RCA (.71), and Other (.75).

ECUINDEX Additive index of four variables measuring whether a congregation has sponsored various types of “ecumenical or interfaith activities” in the past 12 months. Variables were coded 1 “no not circled” or 2 “no,” for a possible range of 4 to 8. The specific variables were JOINT (joint worship services), CELEB (joint celebrations or programs other than worship), DGOOD (joint social outreach or service programs) and COUNC (councils of churches or ministerial associations). The values of alpha were as follows: CRC (.49), RCA (.59) and Other (.75).

DIVERSE: How well does the following statement describe your congregation? Our congregation is trying to increase its racial/ethnic diversity. (scale ranging from 1 “hardly at all” to 5 “very well.”)

## Organizational Vitality

How well does the following statement describe your congregation? (scale ranging from 1 “hardly at all” to 5 “very well.”)

- OKDENOM: Our congregation clearly expresses its [denominational] heritage.  
PURPOSE: Our congregation has a clear sense of mission and purpose.  
WELLORG: Our congregation’s programs and activities are well organized.  
OPENDEAL: Our congregation deals openly with disagreements and conflicts.  
CHANGE: Our congregation welcomes innovation and change.

## Leadership

- AGECLERG: Age of current [senior/sole] clergy person in charge of the congregation.  
EDUC: Highest level of education of current [senior/sole] clergy person: 1 “hs diploma or less” 2 “some college or technical” 3 “college bachelor’s degree” 4 “Masters Degree” 5 “Doctoral Degree.”  
TENURE: How long was the previous [senior/sole] clergy person employed by your congregation?

## Context

- YEARORG: In approximately what year was this congregation founded?  
SIZPLACE: How would you describe the place where your congregation’s primary worship building is located? 1 “rural or open country” 2 “town or village of less than 10,000” 3 “in or around a city of 10,000-49,999” 4 “in or around a city of 50,000-249,999” 5 “in or around a city of 250,000+”  
SPAINDEX: Additive index of four variables assessing space needs, with variables coded from 1 “much more than we need” to 5 “much less than we need,” for a possible range of 4-20. The specific variables were: WORSHSIZ (your worship space), EDUCSIZ (educational space), FELLOWSIZ (fellowship space), and PARKSIZ (space for parking). The values of alpha were as follows: CRC (.80), RCA (.75) and Other (.78).  
NEEDFIX: How would you describe the overall physical condition of your congregation’s building(s)? (scale ranging from 1 “in serious need of improvements and repairs” to 5 “excellent.”)

## Theology, Liturgy, and Music

- TONGUES: Our congregation encourages the public expression of speaking in tongues. (scale, ranging from 1 “hardly at all” to 5 “very well.”)

During your congregation’s [regular or best attended WEEKLY] worship service, how often are the following included as part of the service? (scale ranging from 1 “never” to 5 “always”)

- CREEDS: Reading/recitation of creeds or statements of faith  
TESTIFY: A time for lay persons to testify about their faith  
PASSPEAC: A time during worship for people to greet each other [or pass the peace]  
SLIDES: The use of visual projection equipment  
CANDLES: Incense or candles

DANCE: Dance or drama  
KNEEL: Kneeling or prostration by the congregation

[If service includes music] How often are the following used in your congregation's [best attended WEEKLY] worship services? (scale ranging from 1 "never" to 5 "always")

PIANO: Organ or piano  
KEYBOARD: Electronic keyboard or synthesizer  
ELECTRIC: Electric guitars or bass  
VIOLINS: Non-electric string or wind instruments  
DRUMS: Drums or other percussion instruments  
CDMUSIC: Recorded music (tapes, cd's, etc.)

### **Change**

GROWPLAT: Since 1995 has the number of regularly participating adults 1 "decreased 10% or more" 2 "decreased 5% to 9%" 3 "stayed about the same + or - 4%" 4 "increased from 5% to 9%" 5 "increased 10% or more."

STYLEDIF: In comparison to the style of your congregation's primary worship service 5 years ago, would you say the style of your current primary worship service 1 "is basically the same" 2 "changed a little" 3 "changed somewhat" 4 "changed a great deal."

PASTPAST: How many [senior/sole clergy persons], including your current one, have served your congregation during the past 10 years?

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> While the dataset used in this paper does not permit a direct test of Becker's approach, some of the categories of variables used below, including "social vitality," "social justice agenda," "moral boundaries," and "external focus" do, at least indirectly, relate to the concept of congregational culture and may afford some clues as to the validity of Becker's approach.

<sup>2</sup> American Protestant denominations are, to a large degree, segregated by race and notable theological and cultural differences may exist between predominantly "black" and "white" denominations. The comparison here is limited to "white" denominations since both the CRC and RCA in the United States are largely "white" denominations. The denominations included in the "other white Protestant" category are: American Baptist, Assemblies of God, Independent Christian, Non-denominational Protestant, Churches of Christ, Church of the Nazarene, Disciples of Christ, Episcopal Church, ELCA, Mega Churches, Mennonite Church, Presbyterian USA, Seventh Day Adventist, SBC, United Church of Christ, and United Methodist Church.

<sup>3</sup> This index proved to be highly reliable, with alpha values of .77 for the CRC, .76 for the RCA, and .81 for the other Protestant denominations.

<sup>4</sup> The SPSS variable names and coding schemes are reported in the Appendix.

<sup>5</sup> Perhaps surprisingly, no relationship appeared between congregational size and the conflict index. The respective correlations were CRC (-.00), RCA (-.09), other Protestant (-.02). None of these relationships was significant at the .05 level or better.

<sup>6</sup> For analytical purposes, the variables used in Tables 3-5 are each grouped into three categories, with an effort to ensure rough equivalence in "N's" per category. Thus, for example, congregational conflict is grouped into three categories: "no conflict," "not very serious conflict," and "high conflict. The first two categories are not recoded; the final category ("high conflict") combines the "moderately serious" and "very serious" categories. Other variables included in the three tables are recoded as follows: UPLIFT 1-3=1, 4=2, 5=3; SOCJUST 1-2=1, 3=2, 4-5=3; GOODPRAY 1-3=1, 4=2, 5=3; PASTPAST 1=1, 2=2, 3-5=3; GROWPLAT 1-2=1, 3=2, 4-5=3; STYLEDIF 1-2=1, 3=2, 4=3.