

Finding the Way in: Career Paths in the Congregation

John W. Hawthorne

Because religious behavior is, in essence, a group phenomenon, the congregation is the key component in the understanding of the religious individual. It is in the church that the individual religious behaviors gain their meaning. It is the joining of the religious group that must first precede formal membership (see Bainbridge and Stark, 1981; Stark and Bainbridge, 1980). Membership in the religious group, while being analytically distinct from formal church membership (Finney, 1978), forms a reference group for the individual in the congregation (Garrett, 1979). Even a national religious affiliation does not include the normative components of religious behavior that are present in the local congregation (Blaikie, 1976). A clear understanding of the religious individual must be based in the context of the congregation where she/he attends.

Identification with the local congregation is an important part of individual's religious behavior (Lazerwitz, 1977). For example, group influences are important even in such seemingly "individual" changes in behavior as conversion (Strauss, 1977). Because of this, the religiosity of individuals can differ from congregation to congregation - even within the same denomination (Roof *et. al.* (1979) tested Kelley's thesis (1972) about the growth of conservative churches by examining differences between congregations within the United Presbyterian Church). The differences that do exist between congregations may be controlled through the use of sanctions and takes place in the context of the interactions of the participants (White, 1968). As Garrett (1979) puts it, the "local church or fellowship constitutes a strategic primary group whose influence is normally the first felt by newcomers" to the church.

The purpose of this paper is to analyze some of the ways in which a newcomer to a congregation is introduced to this primary group and how the individual begins to "move in" to become a member (in the phenomenological sense, not necessarily in the formal sense) of the congregation. Particular attention will be paid to the concept of "career" as it is used in sociology. This concept lends itself very nicely to a study of the assimilation of the newcomer to a congregation. Concluding the paper will be a set of recommendations, drawn from the career analogy, for improving congregational assimilation.

Moving into the Congregation

Steve and Kathy Thompson moved from their home in Indianapolis to a new home in Centerburg. Kathy had just become the head of Surgical Nursing at Centerburg Municipal Hospital. Steve teaches Senior-High English. Two blocks from their new home was the First Church of the Nazarene. While not having much exposure to the Church of the Nazarene in the past, they decided to attend the local church. Upon arriving on Sunday morning, they noticed that while the people attending the church were much like them, they still felt somewhat like "outsiders". They decided after church that they would give it couple of more weeks. If they didn't feel more a part of the church after that, they would look for a "warmer" congregation.

The key to the process of assimilation is to assist people like the Thompsons in "learning the ropes" of the congregation. The newcomer must learn where sh/he fits in. The influence of the local church is felt by the newcomer in the form of expectations of appropriate behavior for the religious group. Unfortunately, this set of norms and their accompanying expectations are not obvious to the newcomer. Over time, however, the newcomer will learn to recognize a wide variety of roles and statuses present in the congregation.

These roles, rather than being static (as in Linton (1964)), are in a constant state of flux. This changes the focus of study from specific positions (members, board officials, ministers) to the interaction and modification of roles (see Lauer and Handel, 1977). As Goode (1961) has pointed out, in his article on role strain, it is not always possible to meet the expectations of others. The result is that the individual, rather than simply acquiring a role he is expected to acquire, often has to negotiate the role. This is as true in the religious group as anywhere else. In fact, the church may be the best example of the myriad of roles and expectations present in social groups. Jarvis (1976) has observed that "the local church is an arena in which different religious subcultures negotiate". A given congregation may be filled with several perspectives on how religious people ought to behave. The minister may have one version of religiosity while the people in the pew have another version. These subcultures are often in conflict over which version is "true". These subcultures, then, are always in some form of tension. As Turner (1962) states:

. . .role behavior in formal organizations becomes a working compromise between the formalized role prescriptions and the more flexible operation of the role-taking process. Role conflict is the attempt to devise an orientation from which the actor can cope effectively with the multiple other-roles which cannot be dealt with in a "consistent" fashion. (p.38)

If congregations develop a sense of "career", it is useful to begin with this latter, more "dynamic", version of role.

Applying this processual analysis to the religious setting, Bibby and Brinkerhoff (1974) have suggested three stages involved in the movement of a new attender into the congregation. The first is contact. The group must have some interaction with the "potential member" (see also Stark and Bainbridge (1980), Bainbridge and Stark, (1981)). People rarely walk in off the street to a congregation full of strangers. In fact, the notion of "warmness" is one of the most common reasons why people attend a given church. Sunday School campaigns exhorting "everyone bring one" may not be tremendously effective, but they certainly have a handle on reality. Secondly, there is what Bibby and Brinkerhoff call "bridging". At this stage, the individual begins attending the church and becomes socially attached to it. For the time that the individual is in this stage, she/he is participating on the peripheries of the congregation. She may know several individuals, but is not a part of the "inner circles". The third stage Bibby and Brinkerhoff describe is assimilation. In this stage, the prospect is brought through a religious experience and finally into membership in the church. The success of the assimilation process is dependent on the individual properly understanding this process and making adequate progress through the stages.

Through a process such as this, the congregation is able to label someone as being in a specific status along the pathway to membership. This labelling, according to Brinkerhoff and

Burke (1980), "involves more than merely naming, but involves placing the person in a category with accompanying expectation." Garrett (1979) points out that this process allows the congregation to provide the neophyte with the feedback regarding the correspondence between the group's expectations and the individual's performance. The process of assimilation, then, involves adjustments by both the congregation and the incoming individual. The congregation makes clear the group expectations and the individual must either make progress toward these expectations or find another congregation.

Careers

If the group has a developed set of expectations, the expectations will tend to stabilize over time. The stabilized expectations begin to take on the coercive power Durkheim attributes to all other social facts. In this way, crystallized expectations can be thought of as forming a sense of "career". The notion of career is quite useful to the analysis of the assimilation process because it combines both individual and collective usages of the concept. As Goffman (1961) points out:

One value of the concept of career is its two-sidedness. One side is linked to internal matters held dearly and closely, such as image of self and felt identity; the other side concerns official position, jural relations, and style of life, and is part of a publicly accessible institutional complex. (p. 127)

It is the interaction of the individual and institutional careers that makes the case of the neophyte interesting. In a developmental sense, the individual would be making decisions regarding future levels of involvement in the congregation. At the same time, the organization will have a sense of career which will be used to plot the individual's progress in the organization. If the individual is to assimilate into the congregation, she/he must be able to bring these two careers together. The individual's religious history and the career of the congregation need to meld. Roth (1963) offers an excellent description of how specific an organization's career may be;

...norms develop for entire groups about when certain events may be expected to occur. When many people go through the same series of events, we speak of this as a career and of the sequence and timing of events as a career timetable. (p. 93)

This process of moving the individual from visitor to member to "inner circle" describes one of the principle characteristics of a "career". To the extent that a congregation has a clearly formulated sense of how an individual should progress through the life of the church, it can be thought to have a normative "career". Each stage in this career can be specified and may also have some form of a loose "timetable" (Roth, 1963) associated with it. As this timetable is used, the extent of involvement of the individual becomes clearer. The timetable becomes a gauge to analyze the progress or lack of progress shown by the individual.

Steve and Kathy Thompson have now attended First church for about four weeks. They have been to the Sunday School for the last two weeks. Whether they realize it or not, they probably have moved out of the visitor status. They now may be considered "regulars" by Gladys Jones, the head of the membership committee. The next few weeks will be very

important to the status of the Thompsons. Ms. Jones has told Pastor Kelly that if the Thompsons continue attending regularly for another three or four weeks, he should talk to them about joining the church. If they make the decision to join, Martha Wilson is already planning on asking Kathy if she will be on the ladies ministry council.

What will determine the speed of the individual's movement through the religious career? Glaser and Strauss, in their book *Status Passages* (1971), observe that the progress of an individual through the organization career will be dependent on a number of variables. They have defined fourteen characteristics on which organizational statuses may vary (pp. 4-5). Several of these are relevant to an examination of the religious career. These are:

The desirability of a status passage:

If an individual sees a new status as more positive than the former status, the progress through the career should be easier. If the move to the new status is not seen as positive (there is either no gain or a loss), she/he will have very little motivation to move through the career.

The inevitability of the passage:

If the passage is inevitable, the individual's motivation to move through the career path is irrelevant. The career will be developed anyway.

The reversibility of the passage:

If the individual in transition can reverse the career progress, she/he may have to work harder to make progress. This is true because to not "move forward" may easily lead to a type of "backsliding".

The degree to which the passage is repeatable:

If the individual can repeat the status passage, it may not be as important that she/he get it right the first time. While in the religious career, there may be some people who repeat a particular status passage (Reuben Welch writes that he can "remember the times and tell you the places" of his salvation), this is usually seen as deviant. Most of the progress in a religious career should be seen as a one time passage.

The number of persons involved in the status passage:

The more people there are moving through a religious career at one time, the less any given individual will feel a great deal of pressure to make progress. The presence of many people in status transition not only adds to feelings of anonymity, but will lessen the effectiveness of the congregation's sanctions. If deviance is observed, the individual will not be very motivated to move into further in the career.

The extent to which a status passage is made voluntarily:

If the individual has made progress through the career by choice, the commitment to continue that progress should be great. If, on the other hand, the individual feels forced through the career, a type of reactance is likely.

The degree of control the various parties have over the transition

If the congregation can control the individual's progress, the career development of the individual will quicken. If the individual can maintain total control over her/his career, the speed of career progress is totally defined by the individual. The congregation has little power over the individual in this case. Relating this to point 6, the congregation, if it is to control the career development, must be careful not to push too hard.

The legitimation of the status passage:

This is particularly relevant to the religious career. The progress of the individual, especially the transition from nonmember to member, is granted legitimacy by the congregation. This is done through official procedures and rituals that serve as mechanisms to tie the individual to the group.

The clarity of the signs of passage:

This is related to the traditional sociological concept of "rites of passage". At various points in the career, there are clear signs that a person is making progress. These points become milestones that mark how the individual is doing. To the extent that the congregation can provide with clear markers, the better the individual is able to check her/his progress against the "timetables" discussed earlier.

The length of time required to make the passage:

The time factor is important in maintaining the individual's interest in the career as well as maintaining the congregation's interest in the individual. If the individual has made little progress, and the career advancement seems still far off, the individual's motivation will lessen. In addition, the congregation may simply "lose patience" with the individual.

Congregation will differ as the particular form of the religious career. Some will have careers in which progress is easily measured. Others will have careers that do not seem to have any "timetables". However, what seems to be sure is that every congregation has some form of religious career. Each congregation will be able to specify the ways in which a person "is religious". Around those role expectations will develop entire sets of social structures. These structures then provide the basis for all future interaction in the religious group.

Finding the Way In

As Steve and Kathy Thompson ate Sunday dinner, they were shocked to realize that this Sunday marked one year since they first attended First Church. It seemed hard to believe. At the beginning they had been so unsure as to whether they would fit in or not. Now Steve is on

the church board and kathy is president of the ladies' ministry group. Both of them have been very active in their Sunday School class, serving as directors of their fellowship circle. Now, even if they were to move to another part of town, it is unlikely that they would go anywhere else, even if it was closer. First Church, in a relatively short time, had become their home.

If we consider the congregation as the locus of a unique religious career path, the essence of assimilation becomes finding ways of 1) helping the incoming individual to learn what the expectations of the career actually are, and 2) making the individual's "career advancement" as easy as possible. Drawing upon the career analogy, it is possible to suggest several concrete things a congregation can do to help people "find the way in".

First, it is in the congregation's interest to make the milestones of the career as clear as possible. Separation of the congregation into various groups can make clear the "insiders" from the "outsiders". However, this must be done with extreme care. The goal is to simply make the divisions clear, but not to make them such that the incoming individuals see career progress as impossible.

Second, the congregation must be able to make sure that there are elements of life in the "inner circles" that are more attractive than life at the edges. This means that they must not only make clear the benefits of career advancement, but they must be able to insure that those in the "inner circles" do not detract from its attractiveness, either through hypocrisy or cliquishness.

Third, congregations must resist the impulse to "hurry" the individual. If career advancement is most likely under voluntary situations, pressure, however well meaning, may work against the congregation's interests. Argumentativeness can keep the next phase of the career from being attractive. On the other hand, the congregation should be sure to continue to support the individual throughout their voluntary progress. To simply wait "until they make a decision" runs the risk of making the individual feel shunned.

Fourth, the congregation must attempt to see that there not be too many people in transition at any one point. While the congregation does not want to "hurry", to leave too many individuals in the midst of a decision may lessen the degree to which they feel like progress should be made. As individuals sense that most of the others in the congregation had "moved on", they will feel an increased motivation to belong (officially or otherwise).

While religious organizations are different from occupations (except for those of us at this meeting), do contain many of the same components that jobs contain. There are (more or less) clear expectations and job descriptions. They also have imagery that suggests that if you are not making progress, you are losing ground. If an advertising executive has been a middle-level manager for 20 years, he is not going any higher. In fact, he is in danger of losing status. Similarly, in a congregation, a person who has been a regular attender for 10 years, but never moves into the center of congregational life is deviant. Even more than that, is unlikely that an individual will remain in the congregational career for long if he is not making progress.

If we, in the church, are to remain true to our mission, we must find ways of making career paths clearer. Too often, people start the religious career but get "lost in the shuffle". Perhaps if we can get a clearer image of the pathways into the social psychological center of the church, we can help many "find the way in".

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