

# Seeing Churches as Voluntary Associations: Category Error or Insight for Practice?

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*A Keynote Address to  
The Third Conference on Church Leadership  
and Organizational Change, Järvenpää,  
Finland, September 2011*

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# Seeing Churches as Voluntary Associations: Category Error or Insight for Practice?

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## **Abstract**

*The paper begins by considering the criticism that conceptualising churches as organizations constitutes a 'category error' and proposes an alternative criterion for the evaluation of research findings on churches: practical applicability and usability. Presenting the example of a study of churches and synagogues conducted in England, the paper shows how research was able to throw light on the organizational challenges faced by clergy, lay staff and lay members of congregations. It further shows that, by conceptualising religious congregations as 'voluntary membership associations', it is possible to suggest explanations for many of the organizational challenges they face.*

Key words: churches; organization of churches; voluntary associations; churches as nonprofits

## **The Spectre of a Category Error**

In 1998, my book on churches and synagogues was published<sup>1</sup>. It reported the findings of a study in which I looked at how local Christian and Jewish congregations in England are organized and managed on a daily basis. Since my specialist academic area is the organization and management of non-profit or third sector organizations (also called 'NGOs', 'nongovernmental organizations', 'civil society organizations' or 'voluntary organizations'), I used that broad area of expertise to frame my study; to look at what I saw as one small corner, or sub-sector, of the field of 'non-profit studies'.

I posed organizational questions such as: how do clergy relate to other paid staff and to lay leaders; how is work allocated; how are volunteers recruited and managed; how are non-worship activities run; how is money accounted for; how is planning and goal-setting done; what are the governance and leadership challenges for local congregations; what is the impact of religious values on day-to-day working; how is organizational change achieved; and how are congregations linked with wider denominational structures?

Soon after the book was published I was contacted by a student of philosophy and theology who said he needed to see me urgently. When we met, he explained to me

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<sup>1</sup> Harris, 1998a

that my book was fatally flawed – because, he said, I had made a ‘category error’<sup>2</sup> . My findings were, therefore, invalid.

Although not myself a philosopher, my understanding is that a ‘category error’ can be said to occur when we put a phenomenon into a class to which it does not correctly belong; for example, when we place whales in the category ‘fish’ or when we think a university – an abstract concept – can be seen in a physical building . Indeed, the way in which this kind of mis-classification can lead to wrong conclusions about the phenomenon under study was famously illustrated for my own field of non-profit studies by US nonprofit scholar Roger Lohmann in 1989. He talked amusingly but critically about the way in which nonprofits are so often conceptualised as ‘economic actors’ – albeit strange ones which fail to make profits. The very name used to refer to them reflects the economic categorisation. Yet, seeing nonprofits as economic actors, is analogous, Lohmann argued, to seeing lettuce as a mammal; putting it in the category of mammals and consequently producing misleading, and startling conclusions: *“Lettuce is a non-fur-bearing, non-milk producing, non-child-bearing, and non-warm-blooded non-animal. Further, as a mammal, lettuce is highly ineffective, being sedentary and not warm-blooded. All other mammals are much faster! Lettuce is also remarkably non-agile and fails to protect its young. On the whole, lettuce is a miserable excuse for a mammal!”*<sup>3</sup>

In short, scholars who make ‘category errors’ produce misleading research outcomes because their studies are grounded in false assumptions about the nature of the phenomenon they are looking at. They may also fail to appreciate the full worth of the phenomenon. So with respect to my own study, the argument of my visitor was that I had incorrectly treated local churches as though they belonged to the category ‘organizations’ whereas, he claimed, they correctly belonged in the category ‘God-inspired phenomena’. It followed, he said, that it was inappropriate for me, as a social scientist, to study them. That should be left to theologians.

In the following months, as I made presentations about my work at conferences and seminars, this kind of criticism about my wrong categorisation resurfaced in different ways. Some questioned why I treated local congregations as a sub-category of the third sector. Others were concerned about the way in which I had studied local churches and local synagogues *together*, comparing and contrasting their organisational challenges. Since they are underpinned by different religious values and principles, how could they be studied as a single phenomenon?

The accusation of category error went further. Within churches of the Christian tradition there are of course wide variations in theology and practice and I was often criticised for grouping together for my study a Catholic congregation, an Anglican

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<sup>2</sup> Ryle, 1949

<sup>3</sup> Lohmann, 1989: 369

congregation and a Black-led Pentecostal church. Did I not understand that these were totally different phenomena? And why had I left out all the many *other* kinds of Christian churches, not least the large US-style evangelical churches?

There are a number of possible responses to the accusation that I made a ‘category error’ in conceptualising churches and synagogues as organizations generally, or as a sub-set of nonprofits in particular<sup>4</sup>. There are also a number of possible responses to the accusation that churches and synagogues should not be studied together or that the categories ‘church’ and ‘synagogue’ are themselves too wide-ranging to be valid for analytical purposes. But I myself judge the worth of my own scholarship according to very different criteria from my visitor who was so concerned about the ontological basis for my study of churches and synagogues. As a long-time scholar of organizations in the business, governmental and third sectors, I judge my work according to the *usefulness* of my study outcomes for *practical people*. I want my studies to provide *explanations of problems and insights into the complex challenges of running and changing organizations*. Although trained originally within the academic discipline of sociology, I have always aligned myself with interdisciplinary fields such as social policy and management studies in which a range of concepts and methodologies are used to generate knowledge applicable to practical problems<sup>5</sup>. I am in the business of problem-solving, explanation and achieving change. I therefore want my research to lead to usable findings.

In the next part of the paper, I look more closely at the study I conducted of churches and synagogues so that you can judge for yourself whether – despite the disapproval of my visitor – I was able in some way to meet my own quality standards. Was I able to generate practically-useful knowledge by conceptualising my objects of study as organizations; specifically, organizations occupying a small part of the bigger category of nonprofits?

### **The Study of English Churches and Synagogues**

I began my study not by trying to categorise churches at all, but with an exercise in ‘sociological imagination’; an attempt, using my own personal and academic experiences, to see churches in their broad social context<sup>6</sup>. I reflected on the possibility that churches of different denominations, and even congregations of different religions, *might share organizational features and problems*; and that a study framed from this perspective might

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<sup>4</sup> For example, as Muukkonen (2009) has helpfully shown in relation to the study of nonprofits, Wittgenstein’s ideas about ‘family resemblances’ can provide a useful frame for studies of organizations; an alternative to the frame which seeks to place phenomena into strictly differentiated types.

<sup>5</sup> Holmwood, 2010

<sup>6</sup> Mills, 1970

yield findings and insights which could have practical applicability across congregations of different denominations and religions.

There are a number of reasons why congregations of different denominations and religions might be expected to have common organizational features and to experience similar problems. First, they have broadly similar purposes; what Peter Berger<sup>7</sup> referred to as the "human enterprise" of establishing "a sacred cosmos". Typically, their work is about providing a framework for corporate acts of worship. Following the theoretical approach of the 'New Institutional' school of organizational analysis<sup>8</sup>, congregations might therefore be expected to adopt broadly similar organizational mechanisms for implementing their similar organizational purposes.

Second, local congregations share a common, often uncertain, organizational environment<sup>9</sup>. Again following a 'New Institutional' approach which emphasizes the way in which organizational environments shape structures and processes, we might expect churches and synagogues to be subject to isomorphic pressures from their environment, that is pressures to become more alike<sup>10</sup>.

There was also some empirical support for my starting hypothesis that churches and synagogues share organizational features. Biddell, for example, noted that: "... when it comes to matters of staffing, raising and handling money, or the day-to-day operations of the church, most congregations of similar size look surprisingly alike, regardless of denomination"<sup>11</sup>. Luckman extended the point, for the US at least, across religions: "There can be little doubt ... that Catholicism, Protestantism and Judaism are jointly characterized by similar structural transformations - a bureaucratization along rational businesslike lines - and accommodation to the 'secular' way of life".<sup>12</sup>

With this confirmation that my initial hypothesis was not totally unfounded, I embarked on my quest to understand the organizational nature of churches and synagogues – not simply how they work but also the practical challenges they face. I used two main methods: a literature review of English language literature which refers in some way to organizational aspects of churches and synagogues, and case studies of four English congregations - a large, inner-city Roman Catholic parish church; a small, Black-led Pentecostal church in an industrial town; an Anglican church participating in a parish team ministry in a market town; and a suburban Reform synagogue.

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<sup>7</sup> Berger, 1967:26

<sup>8</sup> Scott, 1987; di Maggio and Powell, 1991

<sup>9</sup> Benson and Dorsett, 1971; Scherer, 1980

<sup>10</sup> di Maggio and Powell, 1983; Nelson, 1993

<sup>11</sup> Biddell, 1992: 95

<sup>12</sup> Luckman, 1969:147

The data suggested that English congregations *do* have a number of organizational features in common - irrespective of their marked differences with respect to factors such as religion, denomination, strictness of guiding theology, history, funding, membership, staffing, size and geographical location. Common organizational features identified included similar broad purposes; a key role for clergy in activities; members attracted by opportunities for social integration and self-expression; and a responsive approach to local, cultural and organizational environments.

With respect to the organizational challenges faced by congregations, the similarities between the case congregations were very striking. All four of the congregations, for example, found setting and implementing congregational goals problematic in the face of members' demands to have their own individual needs met. All were also obliged to make pragmatic adaptations of their goals in response to pressures from their local communities and the secular environment; all had to give higher priority to organizational maintenance than longer term visions; and all were struggling with a sense of failure engendered by official, but inherently unachievable, religiously-based purposes.

All four of the congregations also struggled with issues of organizational change. Change of any kind was unwelcome for many internal groups and individuals. Ministers and senior lay people had to build consensus behind change and create an environment in which change was seen as an opportunity rather than a threat. With respect to links with other organizations within their own denomination, the four congregations were all concerned to find ways of ensuring an equitable balance of resource exchange. The four congregations also experienced similar difficulties in relation to their formal welfare projects. These projects competed for human and financial resources with other congregational activities and their continuity was often dependent on the enthusiasm and personal circumstances of just one or two committed lay people.

In addition to these many challenges which were faced by all four of the case congregations, there were a number of other issues which were raised by interviewees in three of the four congregations; with the Pentecostal church, apparently able largely to avoid problems faced in the other three congregations. Those three congregations had internal interest groups which competed for available resources and caused ill-feeling if their wishes were not complied with. These groups were often only 'loosely coupled' to the committees which officially controlled them.

The three congregations (that is, the synagogue, the Anglican church and the large Roman Catholic church) also reported similar problems surrounding the roles of clergy and lay people and the relationship between them. Clergy found it difficult to balance the numerous demands placed on them by their congregants on the one hand, and by their own professional and religious ideals on the other hand. Difficulties in the relationship between lay people and ministers were widespread, with evidence of power struggles and questions raised about relative authority. Senior volunteers in the three congregations

were hard to recruit and retain and once in post they were often overloaded. That the small Black-led Pentecostal Church was able to avoid some of the challenges experienced in the other three congregations seemed to be explained to some extent by its strict religious norms and members' commitment to obedience to the wishes of the pastor and senior lay leaders.

That religion-related factors can contribute directly to the organizational challenges faced, or not faced, by congregations was confirmed to some extent by differences between the synagogue and the three Christian congregations. For example, the three Christian congregations had strong norms against open conflict and debate which were not in evidence in the Jewish congregation where interviewees talked openly about 'rows'. And religion was a possible explanation for additional challenges faced in the congregations. For example, there were often feelings of disappointment about goals not achieved which were traceable to strongly-held religious values about helping the needy, educating young people, or bringing in new people into a congregation's traditions.

Thus, religion was clearly an important element in the organizational issues faced by the case congregations. To that extent, my visitor was making an important point: much of what happens in congregations can be seen as related in some way to their 'God-related' nature. But I also noted the extent to which religion did *not* emerge as a contributory variable, or at least not the main one, in so many of the organizational issues experienced by congregations.

So if the 'religion factor' on its own was not sufficient to account for the practical problems faced by those who work in congregations, I needed to look for other ways to explain my findings. Here I again used my 'sociological imagination'<sup>13</sup> and started to consider how my knowledge of nonprofits, particularly 'voluntary associations', might help me to provide explanations for the organisational challenges faced by congregations.

### **Voluntary Associations**

Voluntary associations are groupings which offer "the chance to come together with others to create or participate for collective benefit"<sup>14</sup>. They are characterized "by their common purpose of defending and promoting functionally defined interests"<sup>15</sup> or "in terms of participation, shared objects and resources, mutuality, and fairness"<sup>16</sup>. They generally have a name, a governing body of some kind, articulated goals or purposes, and people who are 'members'<sup>17</sup>. Associations do not depend on paid-staff and are basically run by

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<sup>13</sup> Mills, 1970

<sup>14</sup> Bishop and Hoggett, 1986:3

<sup>15</sup> Streek and Schmitter, 1991: 231

<sup>16</sup> Lohmann, 1992:vii)

<sup>17</sup> Billis, 1993

volunteers<sup>18</sup>. This concept of a voluntary association can be applied – for example - to self-help groups, professional associations, trade associations, trade unions, neighbourhood associations, leisure groupings and community action groups.

Research-based literature on organizational aspects of associations indicates that they typically have a number of features. First, if their members do not receive the material, social or psychological benefits they expect, they will leave<sup>19</sup>. This essentially *voluntary* nature of participation in associations means that high priority must be given to responding to individuals' demands to ensure that they remain members<sup>20</sup>. It also means that leaders of associations "have at their disposal only weak instruments for convincing other members to follow their suggestions or orders"<sup>21</sup>. If work allocated to an association member is not carried out, or is not carried out as expected, there are a limited range of sanctions available. Volunteer members resist coercion and can be controlled only through what Etzioni<sup>22</sup> refers to as 'normative' power .

A second noted feature of associations is that members seek from them 'expressive' social and personal benefits such as friendship, mutual support and exchange of news. Thus, they tend not to be interested in formal procedures and they are not especially task-oriented in their approach to associational activities. In meetings they may expect the *process* of discussion and decision-making to carry intrinsic rewards<sup>23</sup>; an expectation that can be at odds with 'business-like' procedures and speedy decision-making. Since associations also have a tendency to factionalism because of competing internal interests and values<sup>24</sup>, the difficulties in decision-making can be compounded as time and energy is channelled into consensus-building.

A third notable feature of associations is that the role and status of paid members of staff, if there are any, can be ambiguous. Is their role to assist and support the members who retain prime responsibility for carrying out the association's work or is it to do mainstream operational work which would otherwise be done by volunteer members<sup>25</sup>? Trends to professionalization and formalization may alienate those members who value informality, friendliness and member-focused activities<sup>26</sup>. As associations grow, it can become increasingly difficult for members to carry out all the work that seemingly needs to be done, yet the employment of staff can raise more problems than it solves. In short, a key organizational feature of associations is their essentially *voluntary* nature. Members come

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<sup>18</sup> Smith, 1997

<sup>19</sup> Oropesa, 1995

<sup>20</sup> Knoke and Prensky, 1984

<sup>21</sup> Milofsky, 1988:191

<sup>22</sup> Etzioni, 1961

<sup>23</sup> Mason, 1995

<sup>24</sup> Smith, 2000

<sup>25</sup> Billis, 1993

<sup>26</sup> Chapin and Tsouderos, 1956



and go as they wish, they value social interaction, and whatever work is done is mostly done without pay.

When I put the literature about voluntary associations alongside my own study data and compared them systematically, numerous similar themes emerged. For example, it seems that, in practice, many lay members of congregations generally behave as they would in any other kind of voluntary association - irrespective of the formal statements of theologians, denominational headquarters and ministers of religion. They do not feel obliged to join in the first place, they feel free to participate or not as it suits them, and they assume that they should be able to contribute in whatever way, to whatever extent, and for whatever time period, they wish<sup>27</sup>.

Lay members of churches do not generally expect to be told what to do and how to do it in 'their' organization and they expect their relationships with other members of the association to be informal and fulfilling. Their attitudes to any paid staff, including clergy, may be ambivalent and they may be uncertain about the role of such staff in the congregational context. Their focus is the congregation itself and they are not much interested in links with outside organizations, other than those which can provide needed resources. As Gareth Morgan<sup>28</sup> taught us, people carry with them "images of organization" and it seems that the 'image' (or theory) that many people bring with them to their congregational participation is that of a voluntary membership association.

### **Insights for Congregational Practice**

These insights about how lay people view their participation in congregations provide a broad explanation for many of the issues and problems found in the congregations I studied and in earlier literature.

For example, the association model offers an explanation for reported tensions between lay people and both clergy and paid lay staff. The religious principles which clergy learn in their training make universal claims to authority and allegiance and generally assume that the activities which take place in and around congregations are the centre of people's lives. Their training also encourages clergy to see themselves as prime interpreters of a congregation's mission. In the case of lay paid staff, many of them draw their organizational models from the professional and bureaucratic worlds in which people have set hours and conditions of work, are managed and monitored, and have clear role boundaries. Such images of organization are very different from that of a voluntary association held by many congregational members. If clergy, paid staff and lay people are holding different and incompatible organizational assumptions about their congregations,

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<sup>27</sup> See also, Hoffman, 2006; Warner, 1994

<sup>28</sup> Morgan, 1986

clashes over roles, role relationships and relative authorities are highly likely to occur and to be difficult to resolve.

The association model (or 'image' or 'theory') also helps to explain why some leaders in the congregations I studied were impatient with slow decision-making, gossip exchange during committee meetings, and 'unreliable' volunteers. If they were drawing their own organizational images of congregations from the world of business or professional employment, then they would indeed see much congregational activity as 'chaotic', 'unprofessional', 'amateur' or 'inefficient'. On the other hand, for the majority of their fellow congregants who placed a high value on associational features such as volunteerism<sup>29</sup> informality, friendship, social interaction, open discussion of problems, and opportunities for self-development, such criticisms would be seen as totally inappropriate.

The idea that the associational 'world' has different organizational features from the more formal world of 'bureaucracies' in which paid staff do the main operational work<sup>30</sup>, helps to explain not only differing viewpoints about appropriate behaviour within congregations but also resistance to organizational growth and change. In the case congregations, many of the objections to changes in personnel, membership and physical fabric were underpinned by fears that such changes were moves towards formality and adherence to prescribed procedures. There were also fears that the interests of individuals and internal groups were threatened. Whereas opposition to change was seen as short-sighted and selfish by those in congregations who had longer-term visions of drawing in more people and responding to more and wider needs, it is quite consistent with an *associational idea* of the congregation as a place where individual members all know each other, where personal needs can be met, where 'business' is conducted in a relaxed and informal manner and where helping efforts are directed mainly towards other members.

The focus on 'mutual benefit' rather than 'commonweal' forms of helping behaviour which is characteristic of associations, explains as well why the case congregations generally found it difficult to sustain formal welfare projects but sustained with relative ease more informal and 'unorganized' forms of care. In the context of a voluntary membership association, informal and even 'semi-organized' forms of caring can be taken-for-granted. On the other hand, the idea of an on-going regular commitment or the giving of care to 'strangers' beyond the circle of members is outside of the associational model and closer to a bureaucratic model of a welfare agency or service-providing non-profit in which services are provided by staff to third parties<sup>31</sup>. When congregations are seen as voluntary associations, the organizational fragility of their welfare projects is explained.

It is also understandable that members of congregations who see themselves as participating in a voluntary association and who are aware of the heavy dependence of

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<sup>29</sup> see , Yeung, 2004

<sup>30</sup> Billis, 1993

<sup>31</sup> Harris, 1995

their congregation on voluntary donations of time and money, should feel uneasy about attempts to limit the freedom of their congregation to set its own goals. Thus they may be resentful of denominational structures which prescribe and monitor adherence to goals – anything from broad religious purposes to adult education aims.

In sum, I would suggest that the model of associations is useful in helping to explain organizational features and issues raised in both the earlier literature and in the congregations I studied. Once we see congregations as voluntary associations, we can also see why people behave the way they do in the congregational context; why they have the expectations they have; and why they make the assumptions they make. Tensions between individuals and between members of internal groups is also understandable. There are often different organizational images or models which can be held within the same congregation, without any of the different assumptions ever being made explicit. Once we have a workable explanation for what is going on we can perhaps move towards resolutions of some of the practical problems faced in churches.

## **In Conclusion**

Earlier in this paper I referred to my personal standard for evaluating research: providing insights which are useable by practical people. Happily, I have learned over recent years that the ‘voluntary association’ organizational image can indeed be a powerful tool in helping to understand the tensions and challenges that arise in the organisation and management of churches<sup>32</sup>. I have had the privilege of working with several congregations who have found the voluntary association idea very useful.

Yet it has not been my intention here to suggest that the voluntary association theory can provide a total explanation of all the organizational problems faced by those who run churches and synagogues. Certainly, it does not preclude other theories which emphasise other perspectives on what happens in congregations; not least those theories which emphasise the culturally-determined or the sacred nature of the congregational task<sup>33</sup>. Rather, I hope that this paper has explained why my study findings retain their value to the world of practice. I may indeed have made a ‘category error’ but, all the same, I believe that I have been able to offer insights into the realities and challenges of managing local churches.

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<sup>32</sup> Cameron, 2004

<sup>33</sup> See, for example Becker, 1999; Chaves, 2004; Harris, 1998b

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