

The Resurrection of Middle Judicatories

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In the first article, “The Death of Middle Judicatories”, I laid out some of the challenges that are killing middle judicatories today, beyond the reduced financial support they are receiving. The same cultural forces that are killing denominations and congregations, that have rendered the “hub and spoke” model ineffective, are at work in middle judicatories as well: the breakdown of connection between congregations and colleagues (both lay and clergy); the loss of denominational loyalty; the multiplicity of perspectives in the culture and in church life and the failure to adopt more relevant models of governance; the increase in destructive conflicts in congregations....the list goes on.

The old “hub and spoke” model is not only failing, it is also killing the middle judicatory executives who are trying to make the middle judicatory work. Heroes seem to make the old model work for a while, but ultimately they fail, leaving an impossible “act” to follow for their successors. Slaves dutifully try to meet the multitudinous demands of the “hub and spoke” middle judicatory, but end up spent and burned out. Only change agents, dedicated to changing from the “hub and spoke” model to something more relevant, can truly succeed as middle judicatory executives these days, and being a change agent is no easy undertaking.

So what is the alternative to the “hub and spoke” model? In a word, “network”, or, if you prefer, a “matrix of relationship”.

Though most denominations refer to their middle judicatories by names that suggest a matrix of relationship: “conference” implies there is conferring going on between congregations and leaders; “diocese” comes from Greek words that mean “keep house”; “region”, “area”, and “district” imply a relationship between all the congregations and members of a give geographical area; “convention” implies the convening of people; “classis” comes from a Latin word that means grouping people together; “synod” comes from the Greek for “together way”. But most middle judicatories have become one dimensional as about the only relationship that can be seen is that between individual congregations and the judicatory executive or staff. There is practically no relationship ongoing between congregations and precious little between leaders. Recovering the “community” that the middle judicatory needs to be is especially crucial in a time when radical individualism and parochialism are rampant and people are losing their sense of belonging to a larger family or body.

How does a middle judicatory make the shift from “hub and spoke” to “matrix of relationships”? As I have consulted with judicatories, I have seen and helped develop a number of methods and tools.

Judicatory spiritual leaders: These go by various names such as “regional elder” or “conference deacon” or “synod visitors”. They are trustworthy clergy and lay leaders who demonstrate spiritual and emotional maturity, and commitment to the whole church. These groups are created by the judicatory to engage in regular visitation of congregations and clergy. They may visit on Sunday mornings on special occasions in the lives of congregations (such as a dedication of leaders, a mortgage burning, an anniversary). They may occasionally visit a congregation’s board meeting (not to “check up” on the congregation or to spy, but to represent the wider church and its interest in the congregation’s effectiveness and health). Since Sundays are often involved, the clergy who are selected to participate in this role are most often drawn from the ranks of the retired. Though they may carry messages from the larger body, the primary point is to be experienced as caring partners and connectors on behalf of the whole body, not as persons coming to ask for things.

Resource Teams: Every middle judicatory has some individuals who are gifted and/or experienced in certain areas (youth ministry, spiritual disciplines; stewardship campaigns, teaching,

etc.). These folks can be recruited and trained to serve as consultants to congregations on behalf of the judicatory. Of course, their local responsibilities must be honored in determining how much time they have for such work, but most folks who are good at particular things are more than happy to share their knowledge and experience with other leaders and congregations. Who knows better how to develop an effective youth program than someone who has done it in his/her own congregation? So why send a judicatory staff person (if you have one) when a locally grown consultant is better? Being called upon to share with others helps individual consultants to consolidate what they know as they prepare to share it, as well as helping the recipient congregation. Being a part of a Resource Team in a given area provides a way of learning from others with similar interests and skills and provides a means of holding one another accountable.

Some of the services provided by Resource Teams might include:

- orientation of congregational search committees to the search and call process;
- guiding to resources and encouragement toward evangelism;
- developing congregational youth ministry;
- providing resources related to stewardship education;
- assisting acquisition of and education related to technology and communications;
- educating members about local mission and justice ministry issues;
- leading cultural or generational sensitivity training;
- guiding to help toward conflict management and mediation; and
- stimulating worship enrichment and spiritual life development.

Communities of Learning (or “affinity groups”): If there is one individual or congregation of the judicatory that is interested in a particular subject, there are most like several others. As judicatory leaders here of such interests, they can help to draw together “learning communities” of similarly interested people. These learning communities may last for several months or several years, dependent upon the subject and the ongoing interest of participants. Because ownership is important, these groups are most effective when they develop their own leadership, rather than depending upon judicatory staff to lead them. Communities of learning will sometimes lead to the development of new resource teams.

The possible subjects are limitless, including:

- personal practice of the spiritual disciplines,
- regular study of the lectionary for sermon and lesson preparation,
- the arts and worship,
- particular mission and/or social action interests (local or global),
- technological skills for use in the church,
- mutual support of leaders,
- theological study and discussion,
- Bread for The World, or
- congregational revitalization.

Two areas of work that have long worked super-effectively as such Communities of Learning or affinity groups are outdoor ministries (camp and conference) and women’s ministries.

Annual Planning Event: an annual planning event can be opened to the entire judicatory body, so that anyone who is interested is welcome to come and help plan the body’s program for the next few years. Those who come are invited to self-select their interest area. The entire process can be completed in one Saturday. It encourages new people to become involved and helps to reduce reliance on committees that ordinarily meet several times a year.

Communications Network: This, of course, is essential if the judicatory is to become a community. While primarily a digital network, it must be flexible enough to communicate in several different ways in order to accommodate those individuals and congregations who are not computer equipped (or do not have adequate digital service). The judicatory website should provide information but also places (pages, blogs, etc.) for Resource Teams, Learning Communities, and others to communicate regularly.

One of the important tasks of the group that is responsible for creating, maintaining and growing this network will be to provide training in using applicable computer programs and help in obtaining adequate equipment for those congregations that do not have it.

So what is the work of the judicatory staff if so much work is going to be done by judicatory spiritual leaders, resource teams; learning communities and affinity groups, and so forth? There is still plenty to do!

The staff (especially the ordained staff) continues to have a sacramental role, being present at sacred moments in the lives of congregations and individuals (though not necessarily to the exclusion of volunteer judicatory representatives). The staff still plays a connectional role, keeping an eye open for people's interests and needs and thus linking them up to resource teams, affinity groups and so forth. No else has the "bird's eye view" that staff develop. The staff must still serve in those roles that require one individual to do ministry on behalf of the whole, such as dealing with misconduct cases and other extremely confidential situations. The staff, particularly the senior executive, are still among the only ones who have the authority (formal and informal) to deal with the most vexing and sensitive situations (sometimes it takes the senior executive to be able to tell a group of trouble making members or a minister, "You, out of the pool!")

But there is much more of the work that has been traditionally done by staff that can effectively be done by people carefully recruited to work for free, for expenses, or a small stipend. But the typical judicatory system has not been used to thinking this way and judicatory staff has been trained to make themselves indispensable just as have been congregational ministers who work in pastor-centered styles.

Some judicatories will want to try to develop the new model on their own, while others will desire to use a coach-consultant. However the journey is undertaken, it must begin soon as most of our middle judicatories and their staffs are under incredible time and financial pressures that leads to the burn out of leaders and the premature death of the judicatory and the congregations it is supposed to serve.