

Interdenominational Dialogue: Seeking a Common Language for Affiliation Research and Practice

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The literature on church membership has grown dramatically in the last twenty years. Scholars have undertaken serious examination of various facets of this issue: changes in the populations of the major religions in the United States, growth and decline in the membership of particular denominations, and individual attitudes and behaviors associated with involvement in religious institutions. They have examined in detail the contextual and institutional factors influencing growth and decline: demographic shifts, changes in the cultural milieu, congregational characteristics, the role of religious leadership, and even the economic benefits of belonging to churches.

This vast literature exhibits little commonality in the language and definitions used in discussing church affiliation. *Churched* and *unchurched*, *affiliation*, *nonaffiliation* and *disaffiliation*, *membership* and *non-membership*, *growth* and *decline*, *outreach* and a variety of other terms are used to discuss the phenomena related to church and synagogue participation, but their connotations and denotations shift from one faith tradition to another, from scholar to clergy, and from one academic discipline to another.

This chapter explores the definitional issues surrounding the study and discussion of congregational affiliation and growth. The first sections examine the range of definitions used by clergy and scholars. The final section suggests using the concepts of ideology, participation, and identity as a basis for sorting out the confusion and complexity in affiliation-related terminology.

RESEARCH DEFINITIONS OF THE CHURCHED AND THE UNCHURCHED

The attempt to define who is inside the church or synagogue and who is outside takes many forms. Gordon Turner (1984), for example, proposes

nine concentric rings starting at the "hard core" members who are most involved in the life of the church, moving outward to "soft-core church dropouts," and ending with "hostile reactors." Location within these concentric circles—being a member, an affiliate, or a nonmember—is seen as a fluid experience rather than a permanent state of being.

Others seek more categorical, objective definitions based on Gallup's guidelines (Gallup Poll Organization, 1978) although the specific terms employed vary from study to study. Dean R. Hoge, Benton Johnson and Donald A. Luidens (Chapter 4), for example, use the terms *churched* and *unchurched*; Penny Long Marler and C. Kirk Hadaway (Chapter 5) choose to refer to these persons as *active* or *inactive*. Both studies use frequency of church attendance as a measure to sort people into these two groups; Hoge, Johnson, and Luidens further require church membership for an individual to be considered "churched." *Church member* in their study means that the person has self-consciously joined a local congregation and now has his or her name on the rolls.

It is recognized that the term *unchurched* encompasses a broad array of individual relationships to the church and ought to be subdivided into more meaningful and conceptually useful categories. Hoge, Johnson, and Luidens (Chapter 4) divide the unchurched into four types based on membership and attendance: (1) people who are attenders but not members; (2) people who are members but not attenders; (3) people who are neither but see themselves as religious; and (4) people who are inactive and also see themselves as non-religious. Marler and Hadaway (Chapter 5) add religious identity as a basis for classification. In their schema, the inactive population includes: (1) "nones," those with no religious identity or preference; (2) "mental affiliates," persons who claim a religious preference, say they attend religious services several times a year or less, and do not claim to be members of a church or synagogue; and (3) "marginal members," persons who claim a religious preference, say they attend religious services several times a year or less, and claim to be church or synagogue members. C. Kirk Hadaway and Wade Clark Roof (1988) further distinguish those who have never had a religious identity ("none stayers") from those who have newly rejected one ("apostates"). They include, as well, the "invisible affiliates"—those who identify with some religion, but who rarely if ever attend religious services.

Disaffiliation is an active term describing a process by which a person moves from being inside to being outside the religious institution. Other terms employed for this concept are *disengagement*, *defection*, or simply *dropping out*. David Roozen (1980), for example, defines *disengagement* as not attending religious services for a period of two years or more. In distinguishing among these terms, Howard Bahr and Stan Albrecht (1989) suggest that, unlike other processes of withdrawal, disaffiliation entails a change in personal identity. They also offer a typology of disaffiliation

based on justifications for the change in religious engagement (e.g., maturation, unmet personal or spiritual needs, or conflict with the church).

DEFINITIONS IN USE

We recently asked a group of fifty clergy and scholars representing diverse professional and religious perspectives for their definitions of (1) congregational membership, (2) denominational affiliation, (3) the unaffiliated, (4) outreach, and (5) congregational growth. A summary of the range of definitions in use for each of these concepts is presented in the following pages. The denomination of respondents is noted in parentheses for the reader's information. It is not intended to suggest that any individual's comments represent all views in this denomination or its affiliate churches or synagogues. Indeed, in a number of instances there was significant variation in responses from members of the same denomination.

Congregational Membership

The definitions given for congregational membership were both theoretical and functional.

Theoretical Definitions. Theoretical definitions view membership as based on the ideology and social identity of those who choose to be part of a religious group. These definitions are often ritually based, and in this way they are concerned with membership as a familial identification. In some groups (Lutheran, Presbyterian, Mennonite, Mormon, and others), for example, baptism is a prerequisite for being considered a member of the group.

In addition to ritual initiation, some churches include in their definition of membership a profession of faith. Membership, in these cases, requires a certain ideology or set of religious beliefs apart from the more measurable behavior of baptism or attendance at worship services.

Members are those who have publicly (before the Elders and the congregation) affirmed Christian faith and made a commitment to be responsible for the ongoing life and ministry of the congregation. Members also include the baptized children of such persons. (Presbyterian)

Membership is defined initially as profession of faith, then attendance and/or donations at least once a year. (United Methodist)

Functional Definitions. Functional definitions are concerned with membership as a personal matter. They are based on individual behaviors: how often a person attends worship services, whether he or she pays dues to a congregation, whether he or she volunteers for the congregation, and so on.

A number of respondents (Catholic, Episcopalian, Presbyterian, Jewish, and others) noted that membership entails, at the very minimum, undergoing a formal registration or application which assures that the family's name is placed on the rolls of the congregation. A Reform rabbi said that membership means "a family unit has declared the desire to affiliate, filed an application, come to meet with a membership person, and an annual dues or contribution has been determined." Generally some level of participation is added to this definition of membership.

In most Episcopal churches, membership implies (1) name on the rolls, (2) communion at least twice a year, and (3) at least six months duration since joining. There are different classes of members, though: confirmed, communicant, baptized, and—to beg the whole question—"active" and "inactive" members. (Episcopalian)

Congregational membership is a term that refers to an individual, couple, or family unit who has formally associated themselves to the house of worship and who fulfill all of the financial as well as religious requirements of that given institution. (Conservative Jewish)

In addition to a financial commitment, the most commonly noted form of participation requisite for "membership" is attendance at religious services.

Membership means an active participation in at least the liturgical life of the community. (Roman Catholic)

Congregational membership is with the worshipping community—in its ritual, ceremonial, sacramental, witnessing service and advocacy life together. (Lutheran)

In a few instances, functional definitions are rooted in geography. Catholic respondents, for example, mentioned the demarcation of the local parish, and a Mormon respondent explained how one's home address determines congregational affiliation in the Church of Latter Day Saints.

Complexity in Defining Membership. Defining membership is a complex undertaking because of the subtleties within the concept of membership (especially the distinction between active and inactive members), the multitude of factors that comprise a single definition, and the relativity of the term.

First, respondents are clear on the attributes and behaviors which distinguish active members, or members in good standing, from other congregants. Attendance at worship services is generally indicative of an active member, although definitions vary from the general "regular attendance," or "regular as defined by local custom," to more highly specified frequency at services: "weekly attendance," "one or more times a month," "at least half of the Sundays," "when in town," or "twice in the past year." Financial support is the other mark of an active member. This too varies across

respondents: "financial support as they are able," "a contribution of several hundred dollars or more," or "fulfillment of one's dues obligation." One respondent noted that the best informal definition of an active member or a member in good standing was "anyone whom two or three other persons in the congregation (not otherwise related to him/her) know by name."

Some respondents added other conditions for active membership. These included, among others, willingness to accept assignments and participate in the life and work of the congregation (Mormon), participation in some level of study (Reform Jewish), an attempt to live a life in accordance with the tenets of the congregation (Roman Catholic), and personal involvement and commitment to the goals of the congregation (Roman Catholic).

Moreover, as seen in the preceding definitions, despite our attempt to analyze the various definitions of membership, most are comprised of several conditions—both functional and theoretical—all of which are considered necessary for membership.

Finally, several respondents said that membership is not a fixed concept amenable to such specification. Rather, the criteria for determining the boundary between member and nonmember are relative standards which rest with the individual congregation. "In my research with diverse congregations," wrote one participant, "I accept each congregation's own criteria for membership" (Jewish). Another wrote that a person is a member "when a congregation considers him or her to be a member" (Lutheran). Even active membership was described by several respondents as "whatever the bylaws, customs, and behavior of a congregation prescribe" (Unitarian-Universalist, Jewish, Lutheran, and others).

Denominational Affiliation

Some respondents see denominational affiliation rooted in the individual's self-identity and/or expression of faith. Others regard it as essentially an institutional identity derived from a congregational connection.

Self-Proclaimed Identity. Jewish respondents were most likely to define denominational affiliation as a self-proclaimed identity. "Denomination is operationally defined by the individual's self-reported denomination," wrote one. A person is affiliated with a denomination, explained another, when she or he "is a member of a congregation of that denomination, and/or attends services or functions there, and identifies as a member of that denomination."

For the Church of Latter Day Saints (LDS), denominational affiliation is the same as membership in the Church. A child born to LDS parents becomes a member of record. A child of record or convert (age 8 and over) becomes a baptized member when he or she is baptized into the LDS Church. Catholics, too, defined denominational affiliation as "baptism and acceptance of the basic tenets of the denomination."

Institutional Connection. For others, individuals become affiliated with a denomination when they become members of a church or synagogue which is institutionally affiliated with the national denomination (see Chapter 1). These respondents maintain that the individual's denomination is defined exclusively by his or her connection to the congregation.

For the individual, denomination affiliation goes with congregational membership. For the congregation, this entails compliance with the provisions of the United Methodist Discipline. (United Methodist)

Individuals are affiliated with the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod (LCMS) through member congregations. Only congregations and ordained/commissioned ministers of the Word (clergy or teachers) are technical "members" of the LCMS. (Lutheran)

The Unaffiliated

Definitions of the unaffiliated are almost as diverse as definitions of members. The term *unaffiliated* is often used as the converse of member. It refers to those who do not formally belong to a congregation or do not participate in the ways described above (are not baptized, do not pay dues, fail to attend worship services, and so on). They are the people who either have no regular contact with a particular church or synagogue, or hold no membership in one. As one rabbi wrote: "Unaffiliated means to me not belonging to a *religious* institution (a church or synagogue). No other Jewish or Christian institution serves the purpose of affiliation (for example a Jewish community center or a Y)." Being unaffiliated is also linked with identity. The unaffiliated, said one respondent, are those "who do not report themselves as 'belonging' to the group or groups in question" (Episcopalian).

Different types may be considered unaffiliated: "those who have never formally become a member of a congregation or those who are 'tasting the wares' with the idea of deciding whether or not they wish to formally become members" (Conservative Jewish); or "those who have either resigned from the congregation membership or have never on their own chosen to become members of the synagogue" (Reform Jewish). Included in this category are persons "who may indicate on a survey a religious preference, but who are not actively involved, and those who have made a faith commitment to a religious story, but who find no sense of place or belonging in any formal congregation" (Presbyterian) (see Chapter 5).

Ceasing to be a Member. Clergy and researchers were also asked about "disaffiliation," that is, how an individual ceases to be a member. Formal declaration of disassociation, the individual or family explicitly requesting

to be removed from the rolls, was most often mentioned as the way one ceases to be a member.

The person may either request that his or her name be taken off the list, or by doing nothing his or her name will come off sooner or later. Periodically all churches 'clean' their rolls. In the Presbyterian denomination, the procedure is to contact the person under question to see whether or not he or she wants to remain on the roll, and if so, whether the person expects to attend or contribute. Then a decision is made. (Presbyterian)

Others responded that lack of financial support for some period of time results in removal from the membership list; six months, a year, three years—the amount of time varies before nonpayment cancels membership.

One may simply cease responding to annual statements regarding contributions. In the case of nonresponse to annual dues commitments, our congregation makes written, then telephone contact, and no one is removed from the rolls for at least two years following his/her last contribution. (Reform rabbi)

Still others emphasized that membership ceases through inactivity. At some point, the church "writes you off": the decision is made that someone is not worth pursuing any longer or that the congregation simply does not have the resources to follow up lapsed members. In some cases, names are removed from the rolls because the church or synagogue is unable to contact the member, the person has died or has transferred to another congregation. Finally, in some congregations or denominations egregious acts warrant removal from membership by excommunication.

A person ceases to be a member by session removal after two years of inactivity, after diligent effort has been made by the session to restore such a person to active membership. (Presbyterian)

Members may be removed from the rolls for cause (excommunicated) or because they have not attended worship for extended periods and/or cannot be contacted. (Lutheran)

Outreach

Although they differ in intent and focus, the definitions given for *outreach* agree that the term refers to an effort to extend the church or synagogue to those outside the door. As one respondent explained: "Outreach, by definition, is set in contrast to all activities which revolve around what one might call inreach. Inreach activities have as their focus the lives of those who are currently active participants in the life of the congregation. Therefore, to reach out means to extend the sphere of activity beyond the current active

congregation's needs." Basically, outreach is used to refer to one of two endeavors: evangelism, and social/community service (see Chapter 2).

Evangelism. Evangelism, a calling to witness faith, is a "spiritual outreach" intended to win outsiders to faith.

Outreach can be a synonym for evangelism, i.e., witnessing to the Gospel of Jesus Christ among neighbors and friends, seeking their acceptance of Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord and their church membership. (Presbyterian)

Outreach means extending an understanding of faith to those who are unchurched or on the margins. (Roman Catholic)

The term is also used to refer to efforts to bring new members into the congregation—not necessarily to bring them into the denomination or faith, or even into worship, but merely, as a first step, to bring them in as identified members of the congregation. "Outreach is any activity designed to communicate to, serve, or attract those in the community not already affiliated with or active in a Christian congregation," wrote one respondent from the Lutheran Church. Several rabbis referred to outreach as "programs for bringing the unaffiliated into congregational affiliation and membership," "formal and informal methods of bringing previously unaffiliated or inactive members to become involved with congregational activities," "a process to tap the environment for new members," "recruitment," and "enlistment."

Jewish outreach, it should be noted, is directed either toward inactive Jews (those who are born of a Jewish mother but are either unaffiliated or nonobservant) or toward interfaith couples (in which one of the partners is born Jewish). This latter form of outreach is a recent invention, most closely associated with the Reform movement (see Chapter 7) but increasingly engaged in by Conservative synagogues as well. In either case, Jewish outreach, with its focus on Jews and interfaith couples, connotes a very different activity from the Christian concept of outreach as missionary activity.

Even within a single church, "outreach" may have multiple referents. A respondent from the Mormon Church, for example, defined outreach as active proselytizing to those outside the faith and ongoing work with those inside the church.

Outreach consists of two distinct activities. The first is outreach to people who are not members of the church. This proselytizing or missionary activity is carried out primarily by 19–20 year old volunteers who spend two years working full-time as missionaries in various areas of the world. The second outreach activity is directed at members of the church. This consists of a monthly visit to all families in a congregation by members assigned to be "home teachers." The purpose of the visit

is to teach doctrinal principles, encourage Christian living, and provide support and assistance as needed. (Mormon)

A Mennonite respondent explained that outreach can refer both to individuals and to congregations:

Congregational outreach is defined in two ways: (1) invitation of nonmembers to become members of the congregation; and (2) the establishment of an "outpost," a new congregation sponsored and perhaps initially staffed by persons from the home congregation. (Mennonite)

Social/Community Service. Social/community service efforts are acts of self-giving on behalf of others as a demonstration of faith at work in congregants' lives.

Outreach can be a synonym for Christian service, i.e., meeting human needs in acts of compassion done in Christ's name. (Presbyterian)

Activities of service and ministry to those outside the church. (Episcopalian)

Outreach means a congregation extends its influence into its neighborhood and/or the wider area for which it assumes responsibility. (American Baptist)

Some express their definitions of outreach in the language of social action:

Outreach is pro-active solidarity with the poor and disadvantaged. (Roman Catholic)

Serving *directly* to meet the needs of the suffering and oppressed (feeding the hungry, healing the sick, sheltering the homeless, etc.) and advocating for justice (working for appropriate legislation, etc.). (Lutheran)

Growth

Definitions of congregational growth generally focus on what Mead (Chapter 2) refers to as numerical and maturational growth.

Numerical Growth. Increase in membership numbers is the most common definition offered for congregational growth. Some definitions are concerned primarily with absolute numbers, others with the rate at which individuals are joining. Thus a number of respondents simply defined growth as "net increase in numbers and/or human resources of a congregation" (Episcopalian), "the percentage net gain/loss in members over the preceding year" (Jewish), "growth in the membership list" (Presbyterian), or "the net growth of persons and baptized children who have affiliated with the congregation plus children born within the congregation" (Protestant). Other definitions include, as well, the attendant increase in financial

resources for the religious institution and the increase in participation in church or synagogue functions (including worship).

Maturational Growth. Many of the definitions offered combine numerical growth with spiritual growth—the capacity of congregants to deepen their faith and their spiritual roots. As one Presbyterian scholar explained: “We discuss congregational growth along two tracks: numerical growth and spiritual growth. Numerical growth means simply the increase in the total number of persons who participate in the life of a local congregation. Spiritual growth means the faith maturation of individual members of the congregation.”

RESOLVING DEFINITIONAL COMPLEXITY

We clearly face substantial complexity in our attempts to define affiliation-related terms. Most researchers and clergy use membership and/or some level of church attendance as their criteria for affiliation. These, however, fail to eliminate confusion since they are variously understood in different congregations and variously defined in different studies. Is someone church or unchurch if he or she volunteers for church or synagogue outreach efforts but never attends worship services? What if someone attends worship services regularly but never makes a financial contribution to the congregation? What if someone uses a church social service on a regular basis but does not attend worship services? Is a couple church if they choose to have their wedding in a synagogue or if they hold a funeral service for a relative in a church?

Moreover, the labels “church,” “unchurch,” “affiliated,” “unaffiliated,” “member,” and “nonmember” are not based on religiosity or spirituality. We might encounter individuals, officially unchurch but with strong religious sentiments, who are living deeply religious lives (Chapter 6; Taylor, 1988). Disengagement from organized congregational life is hardly tantamount to nonreligiosity. These issues blur distinctions between member and nonmember, church and unchurch, and leave us with an obvious need to define our terms and clarify the concepts of being within or without the church or synagogue.

Some order comes to the confusion if we consider that definitions are essentially attempts to describe the extensiveness and intensity of three aspects of association with churches and synagogues: ideology, identification, and participation.

Ideology

Ideology signifies adherence to a set of values and beliefs. One may arrive at an ideology through formal or informal learning, personal exploration, or life experiences. Or the ideology may simply be inherited if

membership in the group is mandated or conferred upon the individual regardless of his or her personal choice. For example, according to Jewish theology, a child born of a Jewish mother is considered Jewish regardless of place of birth, the father's religion, or other factors. A child is additionally required to undergo rituals such as circumcision in order to enter the Covenant, but these rituals derive from the ideology inherited at birth.

Identification

Identification refers to a psychological association with a group that shares the values and beliefs of the religion. The identification may be personal (the individual chooses to associate) or it may be familial (one's parents or grandparents identified with or belonged to a particular religious community). People may identify at varying levels within the religion. The more specific their identification, the more likely they are to participate at the congregational level. One may identify with a particular religion (e.g., Jewish, Protestant, Catholic), with a denomination, either local or national (e.g., Conservative Jew, Presbyterian, Jesuit), with a specific subgroup of a denomination (e.g., Southern Baptist or Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod), and/or with a given congregation.

Some may label themselves Southern Baptist or Conservative Jew, not because they have an allegiance to or an identification with the national denomination, but merely because they are members of a congregation which is affiliated with the denomination. Conversely, people may have a denominational identification (e.g., call themselves Episcopalians or Catholics) and have no formal congregational affiliation. Such individuals describe themselves as part of a religion because of birth, family factors, or personal beliefs, but they do not actively participate in church or synagogue life. Finally, individuals may have a denominational identity at variance with their congregational membership. A demographic study in San Francisco, for example, found that almost 20% of synagogue members who identify themselves as Conservative Jews in fact belong to Reform temples (Tobin, Milder, Sternberg, & Seltzer, 1989).

Sources of Congregational Identification. Congregations have histories and cultures which form institutional and communal identities. Individuals who identify at the congregational level may root their identification in the reputation of the congregation or in the activities and programs for which it is noted. They may choose to associate with a congregation because its philosophy or way of conducting its business is attractive to them and fits their own personal beliefs and values.

Identification with a particular congregation may stem from family or personal history. Some "grow up" in a congregation; go through life transitions in that setting; and then, as adults, remain in the congregation which

has become a place where they feel at home and where they have a strong sense of belonging.

Identification may also develop through association with clergy or laity. Individuals or families may develop loyalty to a congregation because of a connection they feel to a specific minister, priest, or rabbi. For these people, it is only the charisma or leadership of the cleric that brings them into the church or synagogue. Such people may easily switch congregations since their allegiance is to a particular person rather than to the institution as a whole. If the religious leader leaves the congregation, moves or retires, then the individuals whose religious identity comes through this cleric may also sever their ties to the institution.

Religious identity may come through peer groups. Individuals often join a particular congregation when recruited by friends who have already affiliated. Over time, members may develop a support group within the congregation or meaningful ties to other congregants. For such individuals, identity is less with the clergy, the institution, or even the ideology, but with a group of individuals who are associated with that church or synagogue. Indeed, these social ties can be very strong. Church workers often note, for instance, that peer groups which form early in the life of a congregation can feel like "insider" groups, close and tied to the institution. Others may be prohibited from feeling welcome in a congregation in which peer groups already seem to be formed and exclusive.

Some of the social impetus to identify with a particular congregation converges with geographic area. Newcomers to an area may join a church or congregation seeking to find people with whom they can feel compatible. Parish or other boundaries often define the church that residents in a given district ought to join. Ideology or religious practices may also direct individuals to affiliate with a congregation in a particular locale. For example, an Orthodox Jew who will not ride on the Sabbath generally chooses a synagogue within walking distance of his or her home.

Participation

Most often as we examine questions of affiliation, we focus on congregational or denominational participation rather than on ideology or identification. In part we focus here because levels of participation are more easily examined, measured over time, and compared among groups than are ideology and identification, the somewhat more abstract aspects of membership.

As noted above, participation is most commonly defined as financial contribution and attendance at worship services. Financial participation is considered by many to be the *sine qua non* of membership: if a person does not pay, he or she is not a member. Frequency of attendance at services is an indicator of involvement in the spiritual life of the congregation and in

its worship and ritual practices. Congregants may also participate through study—learning about the history, teachings, traditions, and practices of the religion. They may participate by volunteering or engaging in outreach in the institution or in the wider community. These various forms of participation correspond with Mead's (Chapter 2) varieties of congregational growth. Congregations can strive for numerical growth (increase in the number of dues-paying members), maturational growth (enhanced faith and spirituality, greater participation in worship services, in ritual practices, and in learning about the religion), organic growth (volunteering within the congregation), and incarnational growth (volunteering for the community, engaging in outreach).

If affiliation is understood as a complex of ideology, identification, and participation, then the diverse definitions used by congregations and researchers can be gauged along these three dimensions. Analyzing affiliation-related terms in this way can reveal the correspondence among definitions and the points where further specification is needed.

CONCLUSION

Religious scholars and clergy offer a multitude of definitions for similar terms. In some instances, there is agreement about general meanings (e.g., an "active member" is one who participates in worship services and other activities of the church or synagogue) although there is little common understanding of the specifics (e.g., whether active members attend services on a weekly basis or simply a few times a year). In other instances, the same term is used to express vastly different meanings across denominations or religions (e.g., outreach often means activities for interfaith families in the Jewish tradition but more often refers to social missionary activities in various Protestant denominations). Finally, there are terms which are ascribed purely idiosyncratic meanings (e.g., a member is whoever the congregation decides is a member; participation is whatever the local culture defines as the norm).

On the one hand, this multitude of definitions demonstrates the rich pluralism of perspectives necessitated by the diversity among individual churches and synagogues. Some definitions emerge from the particular structure of a church (the division of the Catholic Church into parishes, the maintenance of membership records by the Mormon Church of Latter Day Saints, the use of letters of transfer in the Lutheran Church, the reliance of the Jewish synagogue on annual membership dues, and so on). Others emerge from the ideology or religious practices of particular religions (e.g., baptism as a prerequisite for membership, or public affirmation of Christian faith). Still others come from the historical experience of the religious group (e.g., the Jewish concept of outreach is tightly linked to concerns of Jewish identity and absolute survival of the Jewish people).

On the other hand, the multitude of definitions presents a challenge to research and practice. If concepts are defined and measured in different ways in various research efforts, results cannot be compared across studies, and perhaps not even over time. There is, as well, little common language within and among denominations for addressing policy and planning issues related to increasing congregational affiliation.

Exchange among all the actors—clergy, researchers, national organizations, congregations, denominations, and institutions, including seminaries and universities—is essential. Ultimately, there is agreement that increased participation in religious community is beneficial. Research on factors associated with membership, local recruitment efforts and programs to increase involvement, and national efforts to address major contextual influences on religious life all play key roles in our understanding of participation, growth, and decline. The study of affiliation, membership, and participation must be integrated into the everyday lives of denominations and congregations. Otherwise, isolated individuals, institutions, and movements talking only among themselves (and sometimes not even among themselves) limit the ability of religious groups to increase church and synagogue participation. The first step for a full and productive exchange is to develop a glossary of commonly accepted definitions or, at the very least, to clarify the plurality of meanings underlying the terms being used in our dialogues on congregational affiliation.

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