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Will Churches Respond to the Call? Religion, Civic Responsibility, and Social Service*

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Despite national calls for churches to become more involved in social service, many churches may not be willing or able to respond. Drawing on sociological theory, previous research, and interviews with pastors and parish social ministers from Catholic congregations in a large, urban city in Texas, we examine key factors linked to church-based social service efforts. Particular attention is given to church leadership, race/ethnicity, organizational characteristics, social and political networks, and the intersection of these factors in affecting service provision and advocacy. We then discuss the likely impacts of policies calling for religious organizations to increase their social service activities.

The challenge we face today, especially those that face our children, require something of all of us—parents, religious and community groups, business, labor organizations, schools, teachers, our great national civic and service organizations, every citizen.

— President William J. Clinton, January 24, 1997

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During the past decade, several remarkable shifts in U.S. national policy emerged, including welfare reform and prominent calls for civic responsibility and faith-based social service. In 1996, for example, the U.S. Congress passed comprehensive welfare reform legislation, the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) (Cnaan, 1999). One year later, President Clinton held the so-called Philadelphia National Service Summit (Clinton, 1997). And recently, under President Bush's administration, there have been calls to expand the participation of faith-based organizations in accessing federal funds targeted for social service programming (Bush, 2001). The underlying idea in each instance is that local and state autonomy, community-based efforts, and self-sufficiency are philosophically and pragmatically the most effective means by which to address social problems in America.

These different initiatives are striking because of the pronounced social service role anticipated for religious organizations and the attendant potential for blurring the boundaries between church and state (Rosen, 2000). The "charitable choice" provision of PRWORA mandates, for example, that religious organizations be included as eligible providers by states that contract with non-profit organizations for social services (Chaves, 1999). Similarly, and as reflected in President Clinton's remarks at the Philadelphia Summit and President Bush's inaugural speech, religious organizations increasingly are being asked to assume greater responsibilities for providing or promoting social services. A central question, though, is to what extent, how, and why religious organizations can or will respond to these calls.

Considerable research has focused on secularization processes (Chaves, 1994; Regnerus and Smith, 1998). Similarly, a large body of research has evolved around the issue of church involvement in social services (Cnaan, 1999; Demerath et al., 1998; Harris, 1999; McRoberts, 1999; Williams, 1999). Yet relatively little research has focused on factors affecting the capacity or willingness of religious organizations to respond to recent initiatives. Such research is needed because it can address simplified or incorrect assumptions about how churches will respond.

Taking these observations as a point of departure, this paper draws on previous theoretical and related empirical research to

identify the potential salience of several key factors on church responsiveness to calls for greater social service. Because of their theoretical importance and the emphasis given to them in previous research, we focus particular attention on the role of leadership, race/ethnicity, organizational characteristics, and social and political networks as they relate both to social service and advocacy. We also focus on the intersection of these factors to highlight that their influence frequently is contingent on one another. More generally, we emphasize the notion that church responsiveness, and how that responsiveness is manifest, is apt to vary considerably within and across different denominations.

To explore the relevance of these factors, we provide a case study analysis of social service activities of one denomination. In particular, we focus on a large, urban city in Texas and churches within a denomination, Catholicism, noted for its longstanding history of social service activity. Analyses center around in-person and in-depth interviews conducted with pastors and parish social ministers from these churches. The interviews occurred immediately after a concerted effort by the local diocese to promote greater church involvement in social service initiatives. In the remainder of the paper, we outline several broad theoretical issues, review the data used for this study, and then discuss the findings and their research and policy implications.

Theoretical Background

In this section, we outline a series of theoretical issues that will be explored in greater depth in the subsequent analyses. Our central thesis is that these issues affect church responsivity in complex ways, and that attempts to promote greater church involvement in social service initiatives thus requires greater attention to them.

Leadership

The leadership in any organization is central to the kind of activities the organization undertakes (Kalleberg et al., 1996). In organizations that are hierarchically structured and where decisionmaking authority is vested primarily in one person, leadership assumes a particularly salient role in affecting the kinds of

activities pursued. Of particular relevance for the present discussion is that in many denominations, even those such as the Catholic church, which is centralized and hierarchically structured, substantial decisionmaking authority rests with local church leadership (Cohn, 1993; Stark, 1998). This authority can be constrained or enhanced by the theological and political orientations of congregations (Ammerman, 1997; Wood, 1994). But the potential for church leadership to promote or inhibit certain activities is nonetheless considerable. We can anticipate, for example, that some church leaders are more aggressively committed than others to promoting social service, and some may be opposed to such efforts.

Race/ethnicity

Considerable research attests to the links between race/ethnicity, religious affiliation, and involvement in social service and justice-oriented activities (e.g., Lincoln and Mamiya, 1990; Pattillo-McCoy, 1998; Cavendish, 2000). Some studies specifically attest to the role of race/ethnicity in whether a church pursues public funding for social service initiatives. Chaves (1999), for example, found that African-American congregations were much more likely than white congregations to apply for public funds, and argued that among African-Americans there are fewer cultural or institutional barriers between church and state and that clergy in African-American churches have more power and authority to pursue programming of their choice.

Building on such research requires, in part, exploring whether and how similar observations extend to other groups. For example, within the Catholic church, there have been prominent social service efforts within predominantly Latino parishes, efforts that differ markedly from those of non-Latino parishes (Pulido, 1991). This issue is especially relevant in the present context given the large number of Latino parishes in the study site. Latino Catholic parish identity may be associated with an expectation of active collaboration and involvement with government-sponsored initiatives. Consequently, there may be more responsiveness among Latino Catholic congregations to calls for such efforts. Furthermore, as a result of historical and cultural factors in the development of Latino Catholicism in the United States, Latino parish

identity also may be associated with an expectation that the church should—from a moral standpoint—be actively involved in advocating for the poor and oppressed (Skerry, 1993).

Organizational Characteristics

Two primary constraints on any organization achieving its goals are its membership size and resources (Ammerman, 1997, pp. 48–49). For example, for certain types of activities to be undertaken or sustained over time, a critical mass of members or a sufficient threshold of resources may be needed to go beyond simply maintaining an organization as an ongoing entity (Scott, 1998). Both of these dimensions are potentially relevant to but do not necessarily determine church action (Demerath et al., 1998). Proceeding from Ammerman's (1997, p. 51) observation that "congregations vary greatly in the degree to which they are able to make decisions about how they will use the resources they have," we explore whether and how dynamic leadership or congregants can result in social service initiatives even among churches of relatively smaller size or with limited resources. We contend that organizational characteristics indeed are relevant, but that these operate in conjunction with church leadership, congregational composition, and community context (McRoberts, 1999).

Social and Political Networks

Ties to social and political networks have long been established as factors critical to mobilizing community-based initiatives (Kling and Posner, 1990), no less for religious-based efforts (Williams, 1999; Wood, 1994). Indeed, many congregations are embedded within networks of diverse memberships and local and national organizations (Ammerman, 1997). These networks can serve to stimulate, enable, or enhance church-based social service and advocacy efforts, and, in turn, churches can serve as a vehicle through which other organizations pursue their specific agendas (Williams and Demerath, 1991). Here, we posit simply that the willingness and ability of specific Catholic congregations to respond to calls for social service will depend greatly on their involvement with other service and advocacy organizations.

Intersections of Leadership, Race/ethnicity, Organizational Characteristics, and Networks

There is reason to believe that the above-mentioned factors do not operate in isolation and, moreover, that frequently their influence is of a contingent nature (Ammerman, 1997; Demerath et al., 1998). Indeed, focusing on these factors independently may create a misleading image of whether, how, and why churches in particular social and historical contexts engage in social service efforts (Abbott, 1997). Several examples, relevant to the subsequent analyses, merit brief mention. Research suggests a coalescence between the activist ideologies espoused by Latino Catholic churches and the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF). Both focus on grassroots, sometimes oppositional, community-based mobilization, service, and advocacy efforts (Marquez, 1990; Skerry, 1993). This merging of interests may lead Latino churches affiliated with IAF-like organizations to become more engaged in such efforts than they otherwise would or could. Similarly, Latino churches with leadership supportive of social service activities may be more likely to seek out or be targeted by activist organizations, in turn contributing to increased service or advocacy. Finally, Latino or non-Latino congregations with significant material resources may have little collective will to pursue social service and advocacy efforts without considerable mobilization by the congregational leadership (Demerath et al., 1998).

Data

To identify and explore the potential salience of the factors identified above—whether, how, and why they may be relevant—we first establish the level of social service activity among Catholic churches in a large, urban city in Texas and then examine in-depth interviews with pastors and parish social ministers from these churches. This approach is consonant with calls for closer, more nuanced analysis of church responsiveness to national calls for social service. Following previous research on the relationship between religion and social service (e.g., Harris, 1999; McRoberts, 1999), we employ a qualitative methodology to illustrate how church responsiveness may be linked to the specific factors outlined above.

The selection of Catholic churches was based on several considerations. First, the Church has a history of emphasizing social service activity (Burns, 1996; Dillon, 1999). Second, the centralized and hierarchical nature of the Church contrasts markedly with the potential for local churches to be differentially involved in social services (Cavendish et al., 1998). Third, the range of smaller and larger as well as racially/ethnically diverse churches in the selected city provided an opportunity to explore the salience of organizational size as well as race/ethnicity. Fourth, and from a pragmatic standpoint, the study site provided access to a relatively large number of Catholic churches. Finally, in the diocese in which the study site is located, the local Bishop had issued a letter in 1995 to church leaders requesting them to hire a parish social minister to coordinate social service and advocacy efforts and to collaborate with the IAF. Catholic churches in this diocese thus were confronted with national and local calls to begin or expand their service initiatives. This situation in turn created a unique opportunity to employ a case study to examine factors affecting church responsiveness.

Before analyzing the interview data, we compiled church materials, along with church profiles (number of families, weekly church income, church activities) from a 1996 inventory conducted by the area's Catholic diocese. The inventories were based on self-administered surveys completed by priest and parish leaders. A simple count of the social service activities of each church was used to provide a crude quantitative estimate, supplemented with qualitative assessments by priests and parish leaders during interviews, of relative church responsiveness.

Specific activities in the diocesan inventory centered around four distinct categories and one advocacy category. The service categories include: basic needs (food, rent, clothes); special needs (assisting the deaf, blind, handicapped); helping ministries (assisting persons with terminal illnesses, AIDS, or the bereaved or homebound); support groups and outreach (assisting the elderly and drug abusers, providing marital and job counseling); housing and the homeless (working with Habitat for Humanity and local shelters); transitional support (assistance to immigrants/refugees); health ministries (running or supporting blood drives and nutrition classes); family issues (assisting with child

Table 1

Characteristics of Each Church in Study

<i>Church</i>	<i>Total Service Activities (0-108)</i>	<i>Total Advocacy Activities (0-9)</i>	<i>Top Three Primary Social Service/Advocacy Activities</i>	<i>Leadership Orientation</i>
1	55	2	Groups/outreach (9) Basic needs (7) Ecumenical efforts (5) Helping ministries (5) Housing/homeless (5)	Serv./Adv.
2	47	4	Groups/outreach (10) Basic needs (9) Family issues (6)	Admin.
3	46	5	Basic needs (9) Groups/outreach (9) Advocacy (5) Helping ministries (5)	Admin.
4	42	5	Basic needs (8) Groups/outreach (6) Advocacy (5)	Serv./Adv.
5	40	3	Groups/outreach (10) Basic needs (5) Family issues (5) Housing/homeless (5)	Serv./Adv.
6	37	7	Groups/outreach (8) Advocacy (7) Basic needs (7)	Serv./Adv.
7	27	1	Basic needs (7) Groups/outreach (7) Family issues (4)	Admin.
8	23	4	Advocacy (4) Groups/outreach (4) Housing/homeless (4)	Admin.

continued

Table 1

Continued

<i>Church</i>	<i>Total Service Activities (0–108)</i>	<i>Total Advocacy Activities (0–9)</i>	<i>Top Three Primary Social Service/Advocacy Activities</i>	<i>Leadership Orientation</i>
9	20	2	Basic needs (5) Groups/outreach (5) Seasonal assistance (4)	Admin.
10	19	2	Basic needs (4) Groups/outreach (4) Helping ministries (3)	Admin.
11	15	2	Basic needs (5) Advocacy (2) Criminal justice (2) Seasonal assistance (2)	Serv./Adv.
12	15	2	Basic needs (7) Groups/outreach (4) Advocacy (2) Helping ministries (2)	Serv./Adv.
13	14	3	Advocacy (3) Basic needs (3) Family issues (2) Groups/outreach (2) Housing/homeless (2) Seasonal assistance (2) Transition support (2)	Serv./Adv.

care, supporting youth-at-risk interventions); professional support (providing legal advice, mediation services, consumer credit counseling); respect-for-life activities (legislative lobbying for specific initiatives); criminal justice (supporting prison ministries and youth mentoring); ecumenical efforts (providing space for community activities and engaging in interfaith efforts); seasonal assistance (providing services needed during specific holidays);

and education about the church's social mission. Advocacy activities included initiatives that address hunger, poverty, prisoner's rights, etc.

For the different categories, there were between three and twenty possible activities from which to select. The number of possible activities across the fourteen service categories was 108; the number of possible advocacy activities was 9. Table 1 presents the count of total service activities (0 to 108) and advocacy activities (0 to 9) for each church, along with other church characteristics. Among all the congregations, the lowest and highest number of service activities was 14 and 55, respectively; the lowest and highest number of advocacy activities was 1 and 7, respectively. The priority given to specific activities varied across churches, with basic needs by far being the most commonly prioritized effort.

In-depth, in-person, semi-structured interviews were conducted with priests and parish leaders from Catholic churches in the selected city in 1997. Each interview lasted from one-half hour to two hours, and all were transcribed and coded for themes (Swift, 1996). The interviews themselves focused on the following topics: parish mission and factors affecting this mission (e.g., Diocesan or other dictates, racial/ethnic composition and identity of church, leadership philosophy); leadership views about the importance of social service, as well as topics covered in weekly sermons; and perceived barriers toward and facilitators of implementing social service activities (e.g., neighborhood context, church size and income level, affiliation and experiences with local advocacy organizations such as the local branch of the IAF).

Of the nineteen Catholic churches, thirteen elected to be interviewed and had completed the diocesan inventory. Despite repeated attempts to obtain interviews, pastors and parish leaders from six of the nineteen churches, one of which was African-American and the remainder of which were predominantly Anglo/non-Latino and relatively wealthy compared to the others, were unavailable, did not respond to calls, or declined to participate. In examining Latino versus non-Latino parishes, the racial/ethnic identity of the congregation was determined by whether a parish offered church services in Spanish and by whether the parish priests or leaders identified their church as

“being” “Latino.” The latter designation usually corresponded to a predominance of Latino congregants, but this was not always the case. Finally, pastor leadership orientation was coded as “administrative” if the overriding concern expressed by the pastor was with internal church affairs and “service/advocacy” if it was with social service and advocacy.

In this study, there were six Latino, five Anglo, and two mixed congregations. The number of families at each church ranged from several hundred to several thousand, and weekly income ranged from between \$3,000 and \$25,000. (This information, analyzed below, is not presented more precisely or in the table to preserve the anonymity of the churches and the respondents.)

There are limitations to any case study, especially with respect to generalization of empirical patterns, and these apply equally to the present study (e.g., a focus on one denomination, one city, in one state, at one point in time, etc.). Recent research suggests, however, that there is a considerable need for greater understanding not only of whether but how and why the factors focused on in this study affect church social service activity, efforts for which qualitative methodologies are uniquely suited (Sjoberg et al., 1991). Such research can, for instance, generate greater theoretical insight into intra-denominational variation in social service activity.

Findings and Discussion

Our first step was to examine possible associations between church activities and leadership, race/ethnicity, organizational size, and IAF affiliation. Statistically, and here recognizing that the sample is small, we found little evidence that these factors directly affected service and advocacy activities (i.e., mean activity levels did not differ statistically). The two exceptions were for number of families and church income, each of which was modestly correlated with social service activities (.549, $p = .052$, and .424, $p = .170$, respectively). That is, churches with larger memberships and higher incomes were more likely to engage in service activities than were those with smaller memberships or lesser incomes. We also found evidence that service and advocacy activities were somewhat correlated with one another (.427, $p = .145$). With these analyses in mind, we draw on the interview data

to show that these factors can affect service and advocacy, and that they interact with one another in specific and identifiable ways.

Leadership

As church leaders, priests differ in their willingness to pursue or support social service or advocacy agendas, which in turn affects whether related activities are undertaken. For example, one priest at a large, predominantly Latino congregation, stated: "I'm very non-political when it comes to preaching." (3:1413) By contrast, a priest from a smaller, also Latino congregation saw his role as one of actively mobilizing church-based community services and advocacy:

My vision is for us to feel like this is our neighborhood, our barrio. The things that go on here that are detrimental to our children, families, elderly people, to human beings—we have to get rid of these. It's our responsibility to become active in achieving that goal.

Another priest, from another small and Latino, but less wealthy congregation, provided a somewhat similar view. However, he emphasized that provision of social services was itself inconsequential in the absence of initiatives aimed at social structural change and empowerment of disadvantaged populations: "I share some of [Saul Alinsky's disdain for social workers]. There's a need for social services and all that stuff, but that approach by itself is zero."

That Catholic priests seek to promote social service or advocacy activities should not be surprising, given the emphasis in Catholic theology and teachings on such activities (Stark, 2000). Yet it is evident that not all Catholic priests assume comparable leadership roles in pursuing or promoting these types of activities. Further comparison of the comments from two of the priests above illustrates the point. Despite coming from a large and relatively wealthier congregation, the non-political priest repeatedly emphasized the extent to which he was overwhelmed both by the daily administration of the church and by attempts to provide basic services. With little prompting, this priest energetically noted:

I have three priests now, but that's probably temporary; it's usually two. You barely keep up with performing the weddings and the

funerals and doing the Masses on the weekend, which may tie into your questions on “Why [is the church] not more interested in peace and justice and social activities.”

Later, when the interview turned directly to the issue of social service activities and advocacy, the priest commented as energetically:

[Talk of] empowerment and all those kinds of political terms tends to turn me off. I’m a parish priest trying to take care of [thousands of] people. I don’t have the funds to do it. Don’t talk to me about peace and justice.

By contrast, the priest from the smaller and less wealthy congregation emphasized his attempts to “make every connection between liturgy and scripture and justice,” an effort reflected in his approach to church activities: “The church is not sent to the church; the church is sent to the world, and we do try to do that.”

The juxtaposition is striking: whereas the first priest focused on administrative concerns and demands, the latter focused on efforts to tie all church Masses and church-based activities to social service, justice, and advocacy initiatives. From these and similar comments made by the two priests, it appears that their respective orientations differentially impact church programming efforts. Indeed, this possibility was suggested later in the respective interviews by the hostile attitude of the first priest toward the local IAF, an organization widely known for its service and advocacy efforts, and by the highly receptive attitude of the second priest toward it.

It should be emphasized that leadership effects are not necessarily obvious or direct. For example, church 3, with the more administratively-focused pastor, was engaged in almost three times as many social service and advocacy activities as either church 12 or 13, which were similar in most respects to church 3 save that they were staffed by more service/advocacy-oriented pastors. Such patterns should not obscure, however, that the pastors’ leadership orientations can and influence a church’s level of activities. For example, in church 3 the level of activity arguably should have been considerably higher given that the congregation was wealthy, Latino, and affiliated with the local IAF, all of which

are factors that one would expect to enhance service and advocacy activities. As was clear from the comments of this church's priest, as well as other statements made throughout the interview, many of the activities at the church occurred despite his opposition to engaging in "extra" church activities, while other activities were effectively blocked by his lack of support. By contrast, church 4 was one of the most active congregations even though it was almost identical to the two least active churches (12 and 13). The reason, in large part, appears to be that this church had an activist priest and was able to support a parish social minister, who could help implement various activities.

The effect of church leadership also appears to be constrained and/or enhanced by receptivity to the inclinations of congregations as well as the willingness of congregations to push their leaders into action. As but one example, the parish social minister from one of the smaller, Latino Catholic congregations emphasized the critical role of the church priest in stimulating social service and advocacy among parishioners, yet stressed that the priest's actions reflected a willingness to act on the behalf of the wishes and needs of the congregation:

[The priest] realized, or we made him realize, that there was a flooding [problem in the area]. So he started to talk to the City Council. Then, a lot of our parishioners were employed at [Company X]. They were having problems—they weren't getting paid well and their working conditions were not good. So, [the priest] got out there, rounded [the parishioners] up; [then] they went to [the company] and fought—and things got better.

The priest himself echoed the social minister's comments about the parishioners pushing him, stating: "Whatever issues or areas of advocacy come up, it's really the people themselves that really take the issue there." Nonetheless, it is evident that with a less receptive priest, the congregation's efforts likely would not have had nearly the same impact, if any.

The idea that the influence of church pastors is influenced by their congregations is captured in part by Becker's (1998) distinction between community and leader congregations, similar to our distinction above between administrative versus service/advocacy-oriented leadership approaches. In Becker's (1998, p. 242) terms, "the role of the pastor in a community congregation

is largely that of a professional hired to perform certain ritual and administrative tasks, and to facilitate the process of congregational consensus seeking." Such leaders are apt to be more administratively-oriented and to support only those activities initiated by the congregation. By contrast, pastors of leader congregations "do not simply want to live their own values; they want to change the world" (p. 242). For this reason, they frequently are proactive about promoting specific issues that affect both the congregation and the community in which it resides. This characterization applies well to the two pastors discussed above, and the culture of the respective congregations as well. Leadership thus can be a critical aspect of service and advocacy but the types and success of efforts undertaken by church leaders, including those aimed at blocking certain activities, can depend significantly upon the views and actions of the congregation (Ammerman, 1997; Wood, 1994).

Race/ethnicity

In contrast to the Anglo and racially/ethnically mixed congregations, Latino congregations more consistently voiced concern about social service and advocacy as constituting central aspects of parish efforts and as being reflective of the quality of parish life generally. However, this concern is not directly reflected in actual levels or types of service and advocacy activities. One reason is that the two least active Latino congregations could not support even a part-time parish social minister. Yet, as church 4, similar in most respects to these two churches, attests, the presence of a parish social minister can dramatically elevate service and advocacy activities, even with few congregants and relatively little income. Thus, if churches 12 and 13 had been able to afford a full or part-time parish social minister and if their level of activity then rose to that of church 4, an apparent "Latino" effect would have become readily apparent; in fact, six of the most active churches then would have been comprised of predominantly Latino congregants.

In short, it is likely that Latino congregations are more responsive to calls for increased social service as well as advocacy, even when this responsiveness is not readily apparent. Because of such barriers as the ability to hire part-time staff, this greater responsiveness may in many instances not be actualized.

Yet the question arises as to why such a difference would be present at all. That is, why would Catholic Latino congregations be more focused than non-Latino ones on service and advocacy? The comments of a priest from the most active Latino congregation—indeed, the most active church in this study—are illustrative:

We've been fighting the erosion of our land [and] our people, the knocking down of our homes, the [proposed] mall, [a representative] on the City Council, for his greed and indifference to people's feelings and the value of history. . . . We have advocated for a change in the minimum wage law, for the ten-dollar an hour starting wage for workers, against the tax abatement to companies who are making millions. . . . [And] we've been told to shut up by the mayor, to whom I said, "Go to hell."

Such forceful, and generally quite specific, comments suggest a clear sense of oppression and discrimination, as well as a mandate to fight back.

By contrast, many of the non-Latino parish priests expressed much less of a sense of injustice or a need to promote greater provision of services by local or state government. The cautious statements of a priest from an Anglo church are illustrative:

I think there definitely should be a role [for the church in community development]. We certainly shouldn't just kind of step aside and say, "Well, go your own way." But there's a delicacy in terms of how far. . . . Instead of saying, "The state government should be doing this [i.e., some type of activity]," I'd rather talk about influences in our society, then leave it up to people to decide.

This priest's comments are telling in that they intimate that advocacy would be lower among Anglo congregations. And, indeed, advocacy was a primary activity for almost all (6 of 8) of the Latino and mixed congregations but only 1 of the 5 Anglo congregations.

In short, Latino and mixed congregations actively supported and pursued social service and advocacy activities, whereas Anglo congregations supported a range of service activities but were much more reserved about advocacy. This reservation, coupled with the fact that most of the Anglo churches (4 of the 5) were led by an administratively-oriented pastor, suggests that such congregations are less likely to be responsive to calls for increased

service, much less advocacy. Insofar as Anglo congregations are responsive, the motivation and energy are likely to come from specific congregants rather than the leadership or a concerted effort of the entire congregation.

Drawing on theories about symbolic resources and racial/ethnic identity helps to understand these racial/ethnic differences. Symbolic resources include discourses and the use of sacred symbols (Bruce, 1994), and provide a powerful means by which to promote social action and create solidarity (Williams and Alexander, 1994). Similarly, racial/ethnic identities can provide a strong basis for social action (Olzak and Nagel, 1986). Symbolic resources and racial/ethnic identity assume particular importance in the context of Latino populations and religiously-based activities, since the majority of American Latinos identify as Catholics. That is, a coalescence exists in which symbolic resources, racial/ethnic identity, and Catholic theology combine to infuse Latino Catholic congregations with the view that service and advocacy are central to being a congregant (Hwang and Murdock, 1991; Roof and Manning, 1994).

Apart from observing differences between Latino and Anglo congregations, it is notable that among Latino congregations there also was considerable variation with respect to each church's specific racial/ethnic composition. For example, most members of predominantly Latino congregations were of Mexican heritage, but many were of Central American descent. There also were significant numbers of recent Spanish-speaking immigrants with no fluency in English.

Such variations suggest the need for exploring the relationship between race/ethnicity and the willingness or ability of a congregation to undertake service initiatives. It may be that focusing on racial/ethnic composition itself glosses over substantial differences in how specific sub-populations of a racial/ethnic group affect social service efforts. Consider the remarks of a priest at one of the predominantly Latino Catholic churches:

I heard a priest talk about the [five] levels of Spanish people. [First], those who have recently arrived from some other country and who speak no English and have no cultural ties to the United States. [Second], those whose children begin to speak English because

they're in schools, but the parents don't—they still speak only Spanish and have strong cultural ties to their home country of origin. [Third], those where both the parents and children are becoming bilingual, are beginning to have greater cultural ties to the United States, but they still know they're really Latins. [Fourth, those] where the parents and children are bilingual but are losing their cultural connection to their country of origin. [And fifth], those who have Spanish last names and know neither the language nor the culture of the country in which [their parents] grew up. We have all of those people, but we are heavier at the first three levels than the other two. And so, in ministry, we have to keep in mind all of those things.

Regardless of whether this priest's views are accurate, they raise a concern expressed by many church leaders during the interviews—namely, the importance of addressing the diverse needs of their congregants and of not viewing race/ethnicity as an all-encompassing category (Flores-Gonzalez, 1999). The issue is important because diversity of membership increasingly is a challenge confronting many congregations (Cnaan, 1999). It is important, too, because it suggests that attempts to categorize congregations as “African-American,” “Hispanic,” or “Anglo” may obscure more than they clarify (Olzak and Nagel, 1986).

Organizational Characteristics

Many priests interviewed in this study expressed the view, echoed by research (e.g., Ammerman, 1997), that church size and financial assets constrained the ability of the congregation to engage actively in various social service or advocacy efforts. As indicated above, in this study the association between these two factors and church service and advocacy levels is relatively strong. However, reliance on size and income to predict activity levels can be misleading. For example, two of the most active churches (2 and 4) had similar levels of service and advocacy activities, yet were quite different in composition and resources (church 2 was much larger and wealthier than church 4). Moreover, both were significantly less wealthy than the wealthiest church in this study but engaged in considerably more activities. Congregation size and income thus constrain “on average” the social service and advocacy activities of Catholic churches in this study, yet

some smaller, less wealthy congregations engage in high levels of activity and some larger, more wealthy congregations engage in relatively few activities.

Organizational and financial constraints—including the extent to which they are perceived as constraints—appear to be salient primarily when leaders adopt a bifurcated vision of church activities as involving administrative versus “extra,” non-administrative tasks. In this way, leadership and organizational constraints appear to interact. Indeed, in churches where the priests strongly emphasized their administrative rather than social service responsibilities, organizational constraints were more consistently mentioned as barriers to service and advocacy. Conversely, in churches where such activities were viewed as intrinsically tied to church life, organizational constraints were less likely to be viewed as barriers. Why? In these churches, organizational factors appear to be less constraining because they are not viewed as necessary for action. The distinction that again emerges, then, is one between community/administrative versus leader/activist congregations (Becker, 1998), with the latter more likely to construe service and advocacy as a moral mandate to be lived. Even so, as discussed earlier, there is a minimal threshold below which involvement in these activities becomes difficult.

Social and Political Networks

We focus here on the potential relevance of social and political linkages, especially affiliation with the local branch of the IAF, for church social service initiatives. Although there is no evidence of a statistical association between IAF affiliation and service or advocacy activities, many priests, even those who disliked the local IAF, stated that IAF affiliation was critical to having a societal impact. One priest commented, for example, that even though the local IAF was not a consistent presence in his church’s activities, there was a “need to be involved in some sort of coalition . . . because that’s the only way churches can make an impact on society.”

Any influence of IAF affiliation is, however, likely to be contextual and to depend on the needs and abilities of specific congregations. That is, for particular churches, IAF affiliation may be especially helpful in promoting specific service and advocacy

activities (Warren, 1995). For example, affiliation with the IAF appears to assist the poorest congregations in developing an ability to engage in more service activities than they otherwise could, and particularly advocacy initiatives that they otherwise might not consider pursuing. As the priest at one church noted: "There's been a real spill-over effect [of the association with the IAF]—it's helped to develop some leaders [within the parish] and given them confidence." (2:1019) Another priest, also from a relatively small and poor congregation stated: "The IAF came to me. They were very insistent. I totally agree with what they're doing, [and] now I'm getting to be part of the political system."

Clearly, however, affiliation with activist organizations like the IAF need not always involve a change in church activities, especially if the affiliation is primarily symbolic, as it was in several of congregations in this study. One priest wryly commented: "Yeah, we pay dues [for membership in the local IAF] because the Bishop says we should—to keep him off my back."

Several church leaders viewed affiliation with the IAF as mutually beneficial for their church and the IAF, but only if a particular issue was of equal interest to both. Otherwise, collaborations were viewed as unlikely or, if undertaken, unlikely to have an impact. One priest commented:

Have the [local IAF's] programs inspired ours? I don't think so. In Latin America, the word used for agitation is "toma de conciencia," as opposed to "concientizar." [The first means] to become aware of what's going on in your world, [the second] is to just tell people about something and get them to agree with you.

Here, the priest was noting that the IAF, while occasionally helpful to the church, was not essential for engaging in service or advocacy activities. Why? As revealed in his response, the priest believed that there is a cultural difference between his Latino congregation and the primarily African-American local IAF organization regarding what are viewed as accepted or legitimate approaches to addressing social problems or to undertaking social service initiatives. Thus, the affiliation was primarily symbolic rather than instrumental to this church's activities.

Conclusion

Given national calls for religious organizations to assume more civic responsibility for addressing social problems, there is a pressing need to understand whether, to what extent, and under what conditions they will be responsive. Furthermore, as the line between church and state becomes increasingly blurred—whether through statutory policies, legal decisions, or general social and political trends—the responsiveness of religious denominations to this call has emerged as an especially important phenomenon to understand. Although recent research has proven suggestive, there is much theoretical and empirical research that remains to be done. And there is, as this same research indicates, an especially pressing need for research that provides a more nuanced examination of potential intra-denominational variation in the willingness and ability of specific denominations to undertake social service and advocacy efforts.

The present study addressed this need through a case study of variation in Catholic church service and advocacy activity in a large urban city in Texas. The results indicate considerable variation in the types and levels of service and advocacy activities undertaken by different Catholic churches. This variation in part was attributable to differences in leadership among the churches, the racial/ethnic composition of the congregations, affiliation with the local IAF, and to the unique intersection of these factors in specific congregations.

These findings suggest that greater attention should be paid to assessing the impacts of existing and proposed legislation aimed at promoting greater faith-based involvement in social service. We should not assume, for example, that all denominations will respond or that within a given denomination all churches will respond equally (Harper and Schulte-Murray, 1998; Stark, 2000; Wineburg, 1992). Moreover, responsivity in one domain (e.g., homeless shelters) does not necessarily entail responsivity in others (e.g., job training or legal support, or advocacy).

Although the generalizability of these findings needs to be demonstrated, they suggest the need for greater attention to understanding Catholic church involvement in social service and

advocacy as well as that of other religious denominations. Research should focus not only on between-denomination variation, but also on intra-denomination variation. And particular attention should be given to the direct and interactive ways in which leadership, race/ethnicity, organizational factors, and social and political affiliations can influence church-based social service and advocacy. There also is a need for more systematic attention to the types of activities that constitute "responsiveness." For some studies, this may mean the willingness to apply for federal grants (Chaves, 1999), but clearly a much wider range of possibilities exists.

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