

The Death of Middle Judicatories

A Travel Free Learning Article

By

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We probably should have seen it coming. I have been aware of it and ringing the alarm in my own denomination for fifteen years or so, but that is no claim to genius. It has been coming for forty years in many denominations. What is it? It is the death of middle judicatories. The same cultural forces that have been killing so many denominations and congregations are decimating middle judicatories too. [Note: These observations are also applicable to other categories of regional denominational organizations such as districts, conferences, state conventions, annual conferences, etc.]

This is bad news for congregations, because while many pastors have written middle judicatories off as irrelevant or worse, the fact is that they are extremely important to healthy congregational life. At their best, they help grow and maintain a strong and healthy clergy, they head off destructive conflict and help congregations engage in healthy conflict, they hold individuals and congregations accountable to the whole Gospel, they confront parochialism and interpret the work and life of the wider church, and they model health. In doing all of this they build life-giving relationships between individuals and congregations. As a former middle judicatory executive myself, I have some times seen these things happen and rejoice in them.

Middle judicatories provide the connective tissue between congregations and their wider church family or denomination. Or, to use another biological image, middle judicatories are like the arteries and veins of denominations. When the flow in one of these vessels is partially blocked or cut-off, bad things happen both to the local and to the whole.

Here is the crux of the matter: many middle judicatories are still doing their work as though it were 1960. That is, many operate in a *hub and spoke* model, with the executive and/or staff being the hub.

The *hub and spoke* model worked in the 1960's, the 1950's, and before, but has functioned less and less effectively in the 1970's and beyond. An obvious problem with the old model is that there are fewer resources coming from national denominations for middle judicatories these days—as there are for many every expression of the church beyond the congregation. Many mainline Protestant middle judicatories are trying to function with about one-third as many staff as they had in 1960.

We should not be fooled by this obvious difference between 1960 and now. The more significant problems with the *hub and spoke* model have to do with other more subtle and more sweeping changes in culture since 1960. To think the problem is simply one of not enough money or not enough staff is to miss the main point.

For example, in 1960, congregations of the same denominational family still had vital relationships with each other. There were fifth Sunday night gatherings in many places, county fellowships, regular small district gatherings of congregations within an hour or so of each other, regular youth gatherings, and annual meetings of middle judicatories that drew a thousand or more participants. People related strongly to their church brand (denomination) and spent much of their relational time and energy beyond the congregation with others of the same brand. Many ministers were educated in denominational colleges and seminaries, so that they had a strong sense of connectedness to a significant number of colleagues who went to the same schools. Today clergy are often educated in the school that is closest to them (especially true if they have a spouse that is the primary breadwinner, as so many seminarians do these days) or in the school that specializes in their primary areas of professional interest.

Today, it is difficult to find lay people who attend middle judicatories or denominational meetings out of anything other than an increasingly rare sense of brand loyalty or a desire to visit with a few friends they made many years ago in camp or a mission project or a judicatory board. Small attendance at middle judicatory events is not just because clergy and lay people have more things to do these days (though they do), but because the events themselves are seen as largely irrelevant to their personal faith and to the health of their congregations.

Another example of the difference between 1960 and today is in the fact that the nation has moved from a single dominant cultural perspective (white male) to a time when there is no single dominant cultural perspective. Women and people of color and people of minority subcultures are now heard in their own voices and no longer have to learn how to speak “white male-ese” in order to be heard. From most every angle, including those of justice and creativity, this has been liberating and better. It has not been easier. Indeed, multiple cultural perspectives make institutional life much more complicated and difficult: there is more conflict in congregations today than many of us in leadership can remember.

This can be a dynamic source of deepening and growth, if well managed. Few clergy are good at managing such conflict (in fact, many of us are conflict avoidant) and there are just not enough middle judicatory staff available to handle every conflict (assuming the middle judicatory staff are any better at managing conflict, which is a large assumption). Increasingly, middle judicatory staff has to spend what little time they have with devastating unhealthy conflicts rather than with potentially creative healthy conflicts. There is practically no time for teaching conflict management skills.

Perhaps most painful of all is to see what happens to the often creative and energetic people who are called into middle judicatory executive positions. They fall into three categories as I have observed them: heroes, slaves, and change agents.

The heroes are those who simply put their heads down and hit it hard every day, averaging 70 or 80 hours of work a week, trying to do as much good as they can in the limited time and with the limited funds they have available. They can sustain this for a while, some for a remarkably long while, but this is a prescription for eventual burn-out and the failure of personal health (both emotional and physical). Even if they succeed in covering the waterfront for several years, when they leave, the next person is likely to find that the red cape doesn't fit, and that they can't fly no matter how hard they try.

The inevitable decline may have been stemmed for a few years by heroic effort, but inevitably the cultural tide will wipe out the hard won but anachronistic victories. Heroes are worshipped, but they are seldom effective in the long haul because they draw attention to themselves and away from the underlying issues.

The slaves are the ones who, once harnessed, are simply committed to doing whatever whenever the system demands. Systems are well known for their resistance to change, so they will never ask for truly creative change, rather they always ask for continued service to what has always been done for service to the world of 1958. This is another prescription for burn-out, poor personal health, and the eventual death of the middle judicatory and of many congregations that do not get what they really need.

The change agents are the ones who recognize that 1960 is gone and never coming back and who, in the midst of doing the necessary each day (though not everything that presents itself as urgent), are also working at bringing transformational change to the middle judicatory so that it can become an effective servant of the church once again. This is hard work, it takes time, and it demands some of the best leaders (just as the transformation of congregations demands some of the best leaders). As the old saying goes, when you are up to your hips in alligators, it is hard to remember that the original objective was to drain the swamp! To do so requires spiritual as well as emotional and professional discipline, it requires frequently getting up on the balcony to see the bigger picture.

I see more heroes and slaves in middle judicatory ministry than I see change agents. I think many of the former have the capacity to become the latter, but it is unlikely that they can do this without outside

assistance, which is someone outside their system who can remind them of the original objective and change the model.

In the absence transformation, I see the ever-quicken death of middle judicatories continuing unabated. I also see more and more otherwise excellent leaders burning out and dying spiritually as well as physically under the weight of the current systems' demands for heroes and slaves. Accompanying this will be the death of an increasing number of congregations that might have been changed and saved (in the fullest sense of the word) from their own cultural enslavement to the religious world of 1960.

Yes, there is much at stake.

(Next article: an alternative to hub and spoke middle judicatories)

Important Things to Know

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