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Book Talk:
*No Congregation Is an Island:
How Faith Communities Navigate Opportunities
and Challenges Together*
by Jennifer M. McClure Haraway
(2023, Roman & Littlefield)

Response by Kevin D. Dougherty*
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Tens of millions of Americans gather to worship each week. They gather in cavernous structures with stained glass windows, conventional meeting houses, and converted spaces in strip malls or school gymnasiums. Relational bonds turn visitors into committed members in religious congregations. In her book *No Congregation is an Island*, sociologist Jennifer McClure Haraway shifts attention from individual relationships within congregations to organizational relationships across congregations. She argues that these inter-organizational relationships "help congregations to navigate opportunities and challenges" (p. 1).

The short book of 151 pages begins with an introductory chapter titled "Why Relationships Between Congregations Matter." The next five chapters document five types of congregational relationships: 1) interdenominational relationships, 2) exclusive interdenominational relationships within non-instrumental Churches of Christ and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 3) interdenominational relationships, 4) intraracial relationships, and 5) interracial relationships. Key findings include the propensity for congregations to interact with other faith communities of the same theological heritage and same racial composition. When bridging across denominations does occur, it typically happens within broad religious traditions. Evangelical churches collaborate for evangelism. Theologically liberal Christian churches and non-Christian congregations collaborate for social justice. McClure Haraway recounts the advantages and disadvantages of each type of relationship. The book ends with a concluding chapter titled "Practical Next Steps" and a methodological appendix.

The book is sociological in approach but practical and conversational in tone. McClure Haraway has a PhD in sociology from Pennsylvania State University. She is an Associate Professor of Religion and Sociology at Samford University. She is also a Congregational Research Strategist at Samford's Center for Congregational Resources. Congregations and religious social networks are her research expertise. Data for this project come from a survey of 438 congregations in eight central Alabama counties administered in 2017-2018 and interviews with 50 faith leaders from these congregations in 2021. McClure Haraway employed network analysis to discover and depict the five relationship types. Social network diagrams with clusters of dots connected by lines of different widths appear in every chapter. Although her sample is limited to congregations in central Alabama, she argues that her findings are broadly applicable because she studies social processes that are common in congregations. These processes are social support and a preference for similarity (p. 14).

Readers seeking an academic treatise on congregational networks are not the intended audience of the book. McClure Haraway introduces the book as a "resource" offering "practical guidance" to religious leaders: "If you are a minister or leader who is feeling stressed, overwhelmed, and perhaps bewildered... this book is for you" (p. 1). Short chapters feature bullet points and numbered lists. Each

chapter ends with "Tips for Your Congregation" and "Questions to Consider." As noted, "Practical Next Steps" is the final chapter.

The book's practical emphasis is further exemplified by its conversational tone. McClure Haraway speaks directly to religious leaders, using "you" and "your." Other examples of colloquial language are: "If some of you are wondering" (p. 14), "Sound familiar?" (p. 17), "What's next" (pp. 32, 65, 93), "I'd like to remind you" (p. 95), "Can you imagine?" (p. 102), and "Thanks for reading this book!" (p. 105).

Before posing questions to the author, I want to highlight another caveat about the research design. McClure Haraway administered her survey to a key informant in each congregation, usually a minister. Key informant surveys are common in congregational research, but they have limitations (Schwadel & Dougherty, 2010). The findings reported in *No Congregation is an Island* are perceptions of religious leaders. This is particularly important to remember when reading about the advantages and disadvantages of different relationship types. There are no direct measures of the consequences of congregational collaboration on congregants. McClure Haraway defends her data collection strategy in chapter 7 while acknowledging that her findings are "not capturing all possible relationships between congregations" (p. 102).

In keeping with the tradition of Book Talk in the *Interdisciplinary Journal of Research on Religion*, I have several questions for McClure Haraway about her book. Rather than asking her to justify her methodology or conclusions, my questions invite her to speculate on issues of congregational collaboration beyond her data. I hope that our exchange will provide fodder for future research.

First, how does context impact congregational collaboration? Central Alabama has many congregations. McClure Haraway reports in the appendix that there are over 2,000 congregations in the eight counties she analyzed. There are more congregations than in 12 other states (Grammich et al., 2023). Perhaps the reason that 57% of congregational relationships are intradenominational in central Alabama is the presence of comparable congregations within the region. Congregations in central Alabama presumably have more significant opportunities for collaboration than congregations in states such as Wyoming, Vermont, or Rhode Island, each with fewer than 1,000 places of worship. Are congregational collaborations across faith traditions more prevalent in states with fewer congregations?

Additionally, I wonder about the impact of gender on congregational collaborations. Only 8% of the religious leaders in McClure Haraway's sample were women. Who are their collaborators? Does gender operate as a basis of collaboration similar to race?

Second, are some congregational collaborations more important, even if uncommon? Only 30% of the congregational partnerships identified by McClure

Haraway crossed racial lines. However, these interracial collaborations have profound implications for congregations and their communities. The U.S. Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s provides examples. In contrast to the resistance of many whites, some white religious leaders and white congregations were allies in the movement. The alliance of Black churches and white, progressive congregations helped yield the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Racial justice remains a distant ideal in the United States. Hence, the interracial collaborations of congregations remain critically important. I worry that the practical advice in the concluding chapter risks perpetuating social divisions. McClure Haraway recommends four ways to build congregational relationships: friendships between ministers, joint events, ministerial groups, and pulpit exchanges. Her findings in prior chapters reveal that these pathways typically lead to partnerships of similarity. How can congregations build better bridges?

Third, what are collaborations beyond congregation-to-congregation? Congregations are not the only organizational form within a geographic area. In a longitudinal study of congregations in a demographically changing urban area, Mark Mulder and I found that congregations were linked to other types of organizations. Christian Reformed congregations in southeast Grand Rapids, Michigan, suffered when a Dutch-owned grocery store closed and Christian schools, including the denominational college, relocated to the city's outer suburbs (Dougherty & Mulder, 2009). These changes were not just symptomatic of demographic shifts; they illustrated institutional interrelationships. Dutch-owned businesses, schools, and congregations depended on one another. How are other organizations relevant to the fate of congregations in central Alabama and elsewhere?

No congregation is an island, but many seem to be peninsulas. Congregations partner with other congregations adjacent to them theologically and racially. The more distinctive the identity of a denomination (e.g., non-instrumental Churches of Christ and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints), the less connected their congregations are with other faith communities. McClure Haraway draws a useful map of these congregational connections. Although intended for religious leaders, *No Congregation is an Island* will hopefully inspire scholars to look more closely at collaborations involving congregations and their consequences on clergy, congregants, and communities.

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Author's Reply by Jennifer McClure Haraway

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To start, I am thankful to *IJRR* for the opportunity to discuss *No Congregation Is an Island* in a scholarly setting. Although the book is intended more for religious leaders than for the scholarly community, I hope that this Book Talk spreads awareness of it among scholars, particularly those who study the sociology of religion, congregations, and social networks, because it focuses on applications relevant to these fields. I am also grateful for Kevin Dougherty's charitable summary and book review.

Before turning to the questions that Dougherty posed in his review, I would like to highlight some important and intentional features of the book that make it accessible to religious leaders, as Dougherty noted in his review. First, it is short. Many ministers have too much to do and insufficient time; many work over 40 hours per week (Carroll, 2006, p. 100). I do not want this book to be onerous or just one more thing they have to do, so I wrote it succinctly as possible with the hope that its shortness enables more clergy to engage with the book.

The book is sociological and accessible through its practical applications and conversational tone. I have published four sociological articles from the survey data collection of central Alabama congregations (N=438) that inform the book (McClure 2020, 2021a, 2021b, 2022). Although these articles have implications for religious leaders and congregations, they are too technical to make a meaningful impact because they use specific jargon from social network analysis that can be unfamiliar to non-network scholars, much less religious leaders. The analyses in *No Congregation Is an Island* are based on 50 interviews with religious leaders, and this book is the only publication from this project that presents analyses from the interviews. I drew on these interviews to share stories, insights, and examples that reflect the findings from the earlier articles in a way that is more accessible to religious leaders and others outside of scholarly communities. In addition, I desired to make the book's applicability clear to readers, so I included practical tips in each chapter as well as questions for congregational leaders to discuss together as they consider applications at their congregation. I also intentionally used contractions and second-person pronouns to make the book more conversational, engaging, and accessible.

Dougherty's point about the study's key informant strategy is well-taken. It was unfeasible to conduct surveys and multiple interviews within each congregation. However, I agree with Dougherty that the findings in the book are based on the perceptions of the congregational leaders. Attendees likely have varying levels of awareness about their congregation's partnerships, especially when those partnerships primarily involve a friendship between ministers or participation in a ministerial group.

Dougherty's first question involves how the context impacts congregational collaborations. The book's eight-county central Alabama study area includes more congregations than some U.S. states. A previous article from the project indicates that congregations are more likely to build relationships with congregations that are geographically closer (McClure, 2021a, p. 567); because of the density of congregations in central Alabama, there may be sufficient nearby congregations with which to build partnerships. It is plausible that congregations in states or regions with fewer congregations may need to invest more intentionality or effort when building connections with other congregations. Concerning the low percentage of female main ministers in the survey, it is pretty interesting that there was no homophily among congregations by the main minister's sex (McClure, 2021a, pp. 566-567). In other words, female-led congregations were not more or less likely to build connections with other female-headed congregations. Additional analyses indicate that female- and male-led congregations did not differ regarding other network characteristics, like their preference for similarity within their religious group or racial group or their connectedness in the network. Perhaps this would differ in a context with more female-led congregations.

The second question concerns the importance of various types of relationships. In the book, I focused on four relationship types—within and between religious groups as well as within and between racial groups—and I intentionally did not prioritize one type of relationship over another. This is primarily because many congregational ministers and leaders feel overwhelmed with the tasks that they juggle, and I want them to find help and support wherever they can. Relationships with similar congregations tend to be easier to build, and they can provide significant and rich support; however, relationships with diverse congregations tend to provide a broader range of ideas and resources that can be beneficial (Atouba & Shumate, 2015, p. 603). Having said this, I do think that interracial collaborations are crucial because of the continued racial divisions and inequality in the study area and the United States. Chapter 6, which addresses interracial relationships between congregations, gives the most detailed and nuanced practical advice about how to build this type of relationship compared to the other chapters in the book. Congregations can build interracial in various ways, including through friendships between ministers, joint events, ministerial groups, and pulpit exchanges; however, these ties are much more common among

congregations that are similar in race. Congregations that seek to build bridges across race likely need to do so in multiple ways: outside of their religious group because of racial homogeneity within many religious groups, outside of their local neighborhood because of racial residential segregation, or across cultural and political differences. Perhaps another reason why the book does not prioritize interracial relationships is that not every congregation is equipped to build them with the necessary sensitivity and care.

Dougherty's final question focuses on congregational collaborations with other types of organizations. The 2017-2018 survey asked about such connections, with a question where key informants could list up to 10 religious and community organizations with which their congregation partnered, excluding denominations and other congregations. Congregations had many partners, including community nonprofits, advocacy organizations, missions organizations, parachurch organizations, local businesses, schools, and others. I considered incorporating these relationships into the network, but the data were too messy. The survey data indicated that congregations that reported more relationships with other congregations also reported more relationships with other religious and community organizations ($r=0.31$; $p<0.001$). So, congregations that were isolated from other congregations tended to be isolated from other community and religious organizations. In this research project, I focused on relationships between congregations to maintain a precise orientation. However, the broader ecologies of organizations around congregations matter as congregations navigate various opportunities and challenges. Survey data from this project indicate that congregations that reported a greater number of relationships with community and religious organizations were more involved in the community ($r=0.26$; $p<0.001$; see McClure 2022, pp. 458-459, for the measure of community vitality) and had more sustainable staff and volunteers (see McClure 2022, p. 459, for the measure of staff/volunteer sustainability). Further research on these relationships can describe the additional ways in which these relationships matter.

In closing, I would like to note that one of my goals for this research project was to add to the small literature on social networks and congregational life. I hope this project will encourage additional research on social networks in congregational life and that others can further build on this research.

Many thanks to *IJRR* for the opportunity to be part of this book talk and to Kevin Dougherty for his review.

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