

Denominational Identity in The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

A Comparison with the ECUSA, UCC, Southern Baptists, Nazarenes and the UUA
A Paper Based on Findings From *Faith Communities Today* with Discussion Questions

Kenneth W. Inskoop and Jeffrey L. Drake
Department for Research and Evaluation
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
October 25, 2001

INTRODUCTION

Denominations are the products of specific historical, cultural and sociological forces. These forces shape how groups view the central event of the Christian faith—the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. While based on the same foundational writings, denominational differences are typically understood along a liberal-conservative continuum related to views of the traditional creeds, the Bible, and other political and social sensitivities. Other denominational differences are related to a host of factors including ethnicity, race, social class, the influence of religious freedom (religious competition and congregationalism), and the charismatic movement.

In this report we focus on the religious attributes of congregations in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) by comparing them to those of several other denominations. We use key informants—most often the pastors of congregations. We hope that this report will encourage discussion throughout the ELCA about our identity. We show evidence that denominational differences remain in the United States and that the liberal to conservative continuum, so often used by the press and other analysts of American religion, does not work very well. ELCA Lutherans, for example, are neither fundamentalists nor liberal. For purposes of discussion, we focus on views of authority and emphases in worship, education and religious practice.

The data used for the report was gathered as part of the Cooperative Congregational Studies Project, now called FACT or *Faith Communities Today*.¹ Over the past several years, researchers from over 45 different faith communities have been working together on a major research and education project on religion in the United States. In the winter of 2000, using a common survey instrument, they collected data from randomly selected congregations in each of the various faith traditions. Now, as the beneficiaries of an extensive and comprehensive data set, the research team will examine the many facets of religious life in the United States. The work was funded by the Lilly Endowment and the project principals are Carl S. Dudley and David Roozen of the Hartford Seminary, Hartford, Connecticut.

We look at the ELCA (5,178,225) and five other denominations including The Episcopal Church (ECUSA-2,364,559); the Church of the Nazarene (627,054); the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC-

¹ For more information on FACT see <http://fact.hartsem.edu/>

15,729,356); the Unitarian/Universalist Association (UUA-216,931); and the United Church of Christ (UCC-1,421,088).² Two of these denominations are “full communion” partners of the ELCA–The Episcopal Church, and the United Church of Christ. Respectively they represent liturgical/sacramental and reformed Christianity in the United States. The Church of the Nazarene exemplifies the evangelical/Holiness movement in American Christianity, while the Southern Baptist Convention represents conservative evangelicalism. The Unitarian/Universalist Association characterizes itself as “a liberal religion born of the Jewish and Christian traditions.”³ These groups fairly represent the breath of Protestant denominational expression in the United States today with the exception of the traditionally Black churches. The initial report of *Faith Communities in the United States Today* separates denominations into families largely based on the liberal-conservative continuum–“liberal Protestants” (e.g., Episcopalians, Presbyterians, United Church of Christ); “moderate Protestants” (e.g., American Baptists, ELCA, Mennonites, United Methodists); and “evangelical Protestants” (e.g., Assemblies of God, Nazarene, Southern Baptists.)⁴

As noted, the FACT survey was designed to be completed by a key informant in the congregation, usually a pastor. The questionnaire focused on congregational identity and worship, history, the location, the congregation’s leadership and, its programs, participants and finances. Response rates were strong enough in each of the denominations to generalize.

HERITAGE

When asked how well their congregation expresses its particular denominational heritage, differences between these groups are readily apparent. The key informants in ECUSA and SBC churches responded most positively.⁵ Thirty-six percent of Episcopalian key informants reported that their congregation expressed its denominational heritage “very well” compared to 26 percent of Southern Baptists and ELCA informants. When the categories of “very well” and “quite well” were combined, then congregations in the ELCA, more than the other denomination, believe they clearly express their denominational heritage, followed closely by the Episcopalians. (See Figure 1.) The informants from the UCC were least likely to report that their congregations express their denominational heritage.

² Inclusive membership. *Yearbook of American and Canadian Churches 2000, Religious Pluralism in the New Millennium*. ed., Eileen W. Lindner. Nashville: Abingdon Press. 2000. Membership for the UUA is from the *Unitarian Universalist Association Statistical Summary* at <http://www.uua.org/statistics.html>.

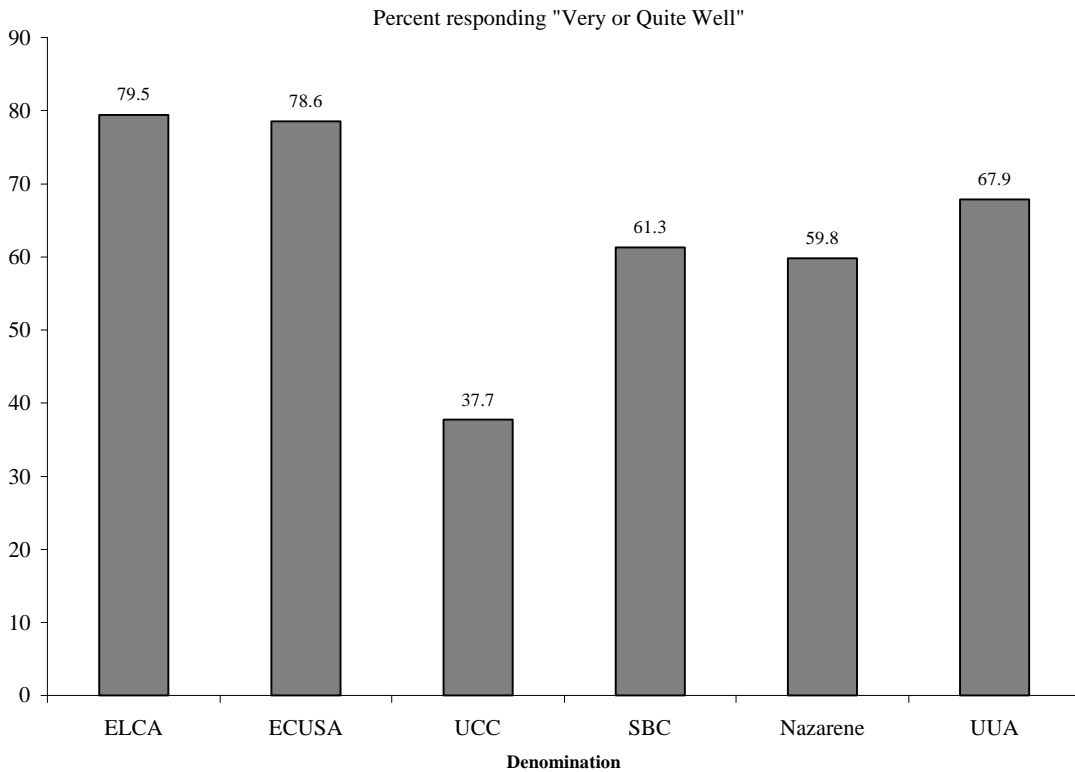
³ Each of the denominations post considerable information about their basic beliefs on their web sites. The sites are as follows: ECUSA, <http://www.ecusa.anglican.org>; ELCA, <http://www.elca.org>; UCC, <http://www.ucc.org>; SBC; <http://www.sbc.net>; Nazarenes, <http://www.nazarenes.org>; UUA, <http://www.uua.org>.

⁴ Carl Dudley and David A. Roozen, 2001, Introduction page 3. available at <http://fact.hartsem.edu>

⁵ The question reads: “Our congregation clearly expresses its [denomination’s] heritage.” The response categories were “very well,” “quite well,” “somewhat,” “slightly,” and “hardly at all.”

1. How important is a Lutheran heritage in your congregation?
2. How would you describe the denomination's heritage? Do you see it as a strength or weakness?
3. How important is it to have a denominational heritage?

Figure 1: How well the congregation expresses its denominational heritage.



AUTHORITY

The key FACT informants were asked about five different possible sources of religious authority including sacred Scripture; the historic creeds, doctrines and traditions; the Holy Spirit; human reason and understanding; and personal experience.⁶ (See Table 1.)

⁶ The question reads: "How important are the following sources of authority in the worship and teaching for your congregation?" The response categories were "absolutely foundational," "very important," "somewhat important," and of "little or no importance."

Table 1: “Absolutely Foundational” Sources of Authority in Congregational Worship and Teaching

Authorities	ELCA	ECUSA	UCC	SBC	Nazarene	UUA
Scripture	86%	54	52	98	95	1
Holy Spirit	61%	26	16	79	87	2
Historic Creeds	37%	37	6	5	9	2
Reason	9%	19	9	3	6	45
Experience	8%	9	6	7	17	41

The SBC (98%) and the Nazarenes (95%) were most likely to say that Scripture was “absolutely foundational” followed by the ELCA (86%), the ECUSA (54%), the UCC (52%), and the UUA (1%). The informants for the ELCA (86%) were less likely than the SBC or the Nazarenes to say that Scripture was absolutely foundation, but more likely to do so than were informants from the ECUSA or the UCC.

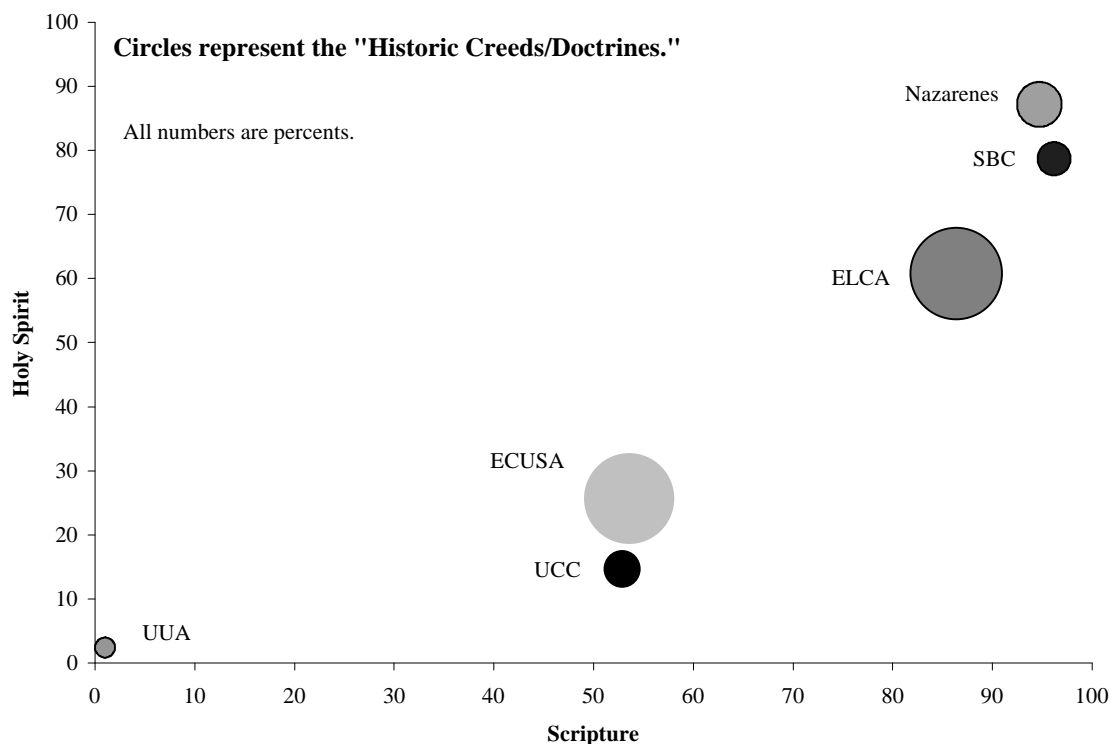
With regard to the Holy Spirit, the informants from the ELCA (61%) were less likely that than in those from the Nazarenes (87%) or the SBC (79%) to identify the Holy Spirit as “absolutely foundational” but more likely to do so than were the informants from the ECUSA (27%), the UCC (16%) or the UUA (2%).

With regard to historic creeds and doctrines, the informants for the ELCA (39%) were more likely to see this tradition as “absolutely foundational” compared to the Nazarenes (9%), the UCC (6%), the SBC (5%) or the UUA (2%). With regard to the foundational place of the historic creeds and doctrines, the ELCA is most like the ECUSA (37%).

Reason as “absolutely foundation” was cited most often by the informants from the UUA (45%) and the ECUSA (19%). Experience was cited most often by the UUA (41%) and the Nazarenes (17%).

In short, the ELCA is closer to the SBC and the Nazarenes when it comes to accepting the “absolute foundational” role of Scripture and the Holy Spirit but closest to the ECUSA in accepting the historic creeds. This set of relationships can be shown spatially instead of thinking in terms of the continuum. Figure 2 shows each of the denominational groups based on the percent of informants responding that the Holy Spirit, Scripture, and the historic creeds/doctrines were “absolutely foundational.” While Figure 2 appears complicated, it is simply a “picture” of some of the material presented in Table 1. Views on the Holy Spirit are plotted along the left (Y) axis, so that, for example, 2 percent of the UUA informants indicated that the Holy Spirit was “absolutely foundational” compared to 87 percent of the Nazarenes. Views of Scripture are plotted on the bottom (X) axis. Again, one percent of the UUA informants noted that Scripture was “absolutely foundational” compared to 98 percent of the SBC informants. Finally, the size of the circles representing each group reflect the percent of informants who indicated that the historic creeds/doctrines were “absolutely foundational.” In the case of the historic creeds/doctrines, the informants from the ELCA and the ECUSA were most likely to say they were “absolutely foundational” so that the circles for these two groups are the largest.

Figure 2: "Absolutely Foundational" Sources of Authority



The informants were asked choose “the **one** source of authority that is most important in their congregation’s worship and teaching.”⁷ (See Table 2.) Faced with this difficult decision, Scripture takes a predominate place as the most important source of authority for all these denominational groups with the exception of the UUA. Eighty-two percent of the key informants for the ELCA chose Scripture as the most influential authority compared to 94 percent of the Southern Baptists informants. Among the ecumenical partners of the ELCA, the percent of informants choosing Scripture is 77 percent for the UCC and 61 percent for the ECUSA.

Table 2: The One Source of Authority Most Important in Congregational Worship and Teaching

Authorities	ELCA	ECUSA	UCC	SBC	Nazarene	UUA
Scripture	82%	61	78	94	70	2
Historic Creeds	6%	23	5	0	1	1
Holy Spirit	11%	6	6	5	27	1
Reason	1%	7	9	0	0	37
Experience	1%	2	3	0	1	33

⁷ For the UUA the totals do not equal 100 because two categories—Unitarian Universalist principles and world religious traditions—were added to the options for Unitarian Universalist respondents but they are not included here.

On the other hand, The Church of the Nazarene had the highest percentage of key informants choosing the Holy Spirit as the most important source of authority at 27 percent while the ELCA had the second highest percentage with 11. Twenty-three percent of the ECUSA key informants chose tradition compared to six percent in the ELCA.

1. Is there a Lutheran view of Scripture? What is it?
2. When you think about what is “absolutely foundational” as a source of authority in your life, what would you cite?
3. How do you understand the role of the Holy Spirit in your life?

EMPHASES IN WORSHIP AND EDUCATION

The Sermon

A sermon reveals the sensitivities of the preacher and these sensitivities have a denominational flavor. The informants were asked about the focus of sermons. “How often does the sermon in your worship focus on God’s love and care, practical advice for daily living, personal spiritual growth, or social justice/social action?” (See Table 3.)

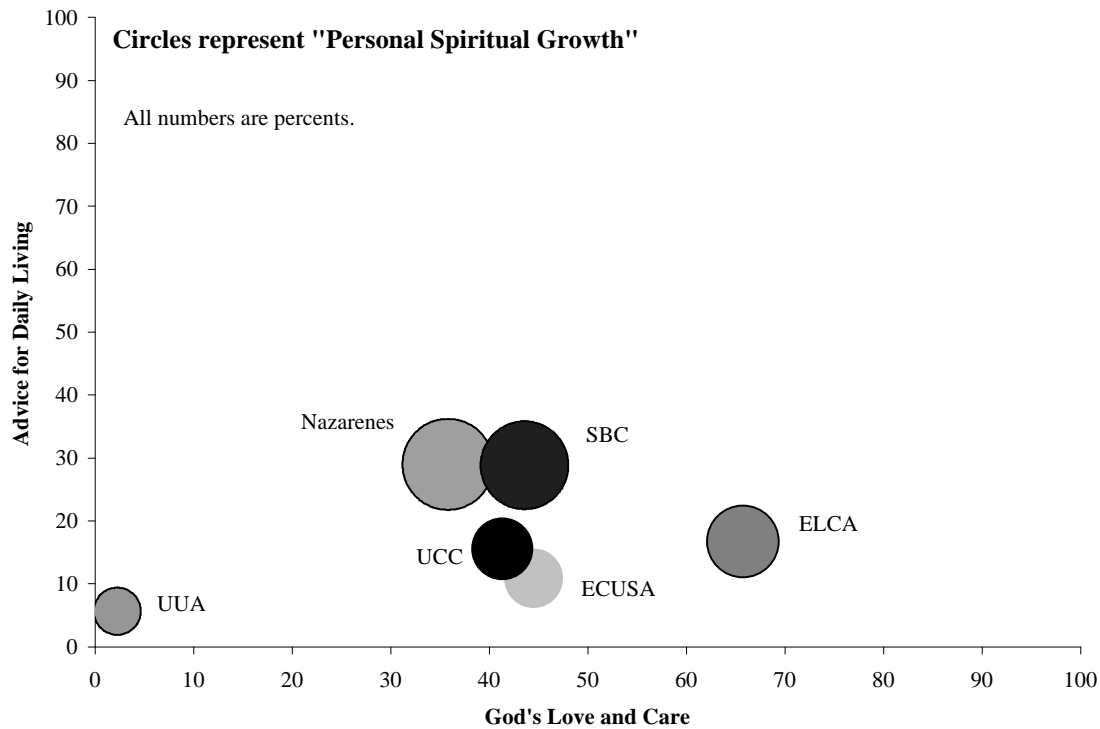
Of these four areas of focus, an emphasis on God’s love and care is most likely to “always” be a part of a sermon in each of these denominations with the exception of the UUA. Among them, an emphasis on God’s love and care is most likely to be part of a sermon in the ELCA (66%). On the other hand, practical advice for daily living and personal spiritual growth are more likely to “always” be parts of sermons in SBC (67%) and Nazarene (69%) congregations compared to the ELCA (43%), ECUSA (28%) or UCC (34%) congregations. Social justice or social action concerns are much less likely to “always” be included as a focus of a sermon.

**Table 3: The Focus of Sermons
“Always” Included**

Topic	ELCA	ECUSA	UCC	SBC	Nazarene	UUA
God’s Love and Care	66%	5	41	44	36	2
Practical Advice for Daily Living	17%	11	16	29	29	6
Personal Spiritual Growth	26%	17	18	38	41	11
Social Justice/Social Action	4%	2	6	2	1	4

Again, we can show some of these differences spatially. Figure 3 is of the same design as Figure 2, but this time, a focus on advise for daily living is the left (Y) axis, a focus on God’s love and care is the bottom (X) axis, and the size of the circles represents a focus on personal spiritual growth.

Figure 3: Focus of the Sermon in Worship



In terms of the focus of sermons, the focus on God's love and care in the ELCA separates it from the cluster of denominations that includes not only the Nazarenes and the SBC, but the UCC and the ECUSA as well.

1. The Lutheran informants were most likely to say there was always an emphasis on God's love and care in sermons. Why do you believe this is so?
2. How would you explain the mainline groups putting less emphasis on advice for daily living?

Creeds and Testifying

Informants from denominations with a history of liturgical worship like the ECUSA and the ELCA were much more likely to report the recitation of creeds or statements of faith during a worship service than those from the SBC or the Nazarenes. (See Table 4.)

Table 4: Included in Worship

“Always” or “Often”	ELCA	ECUSA	UCC	SBC	Nazarene	UUA
Recite/Read Creeds or Statements of Faith	97%	98	38	7	15	62
A Time for Lay Persons to Testify about Their Faith	3%	5	7	28	59	28

The informants for the SBC (28%) and the Nazarenes (59%) report that they are more likely to “always” or “often” include a time for lay persons to testify about their faith.

1. Have you ever heard a Lutheran testimony? If so, what was it like? If not, why not?
2. What are the two creeds Lutherans most often recite? Do you prefer one over the other? What else do we know about them?

EMPHASES ON RELIGIOUS PRACTICES

Expectations and Enforcement

Some people consider “strictness” as significant trait of a “strong” religious group. The questionnaire asked the informants: “Which one of the following three statements best describes your congregation? a.) Our congregation has definite expectations for members that are strictly enforced; b.) Our congregation has fairly clear expectations for members, but the enforcement of these expectations is not very strict; c.) Our congregation has only implicit/vague expectations for members that are seldom, if ever, enforced.” (See Table 5.)

Fifteen percent of the informants for the Nazarene and 14 percent of in the UUA reported that their congregations had definite expectations that were strictly enforced. This compares to nine percent for the SBC. Fewer than three percent of the informants from either the ELCA or the UCC and less than two percent from the ECUSA responded that they had definite expectations that were strictly enforced.

Table 5: Expectations and Enforcement

	ELCA	ECUSA	UCC	SBC	Nazarene	UUA
Definite Expectations/ Strictly Enforced	3%	2	3	9	15	14
Fairly Clear Expectations/ Enforcement Not Very Strict	51%	48	42	71	79	47
Implicit-Vague Expectations/ Seldom if Ever Enforced	46%	51	56	20	11	39

According to the informants, the predominate pattern for the SBC (71%) and the Nazarenes (79%) are clear expectations that are not strictly enforced. In the ELCA, 51 percent of the informants held that there were fairly clear expectations but they were not strictly enforced compared to 48 percent in the ECUSA and 42 percent for the UCC.

1. Is strictness a sign of a strong religious group? What do you think?
2. Are there any “definite expectations” for Lutherans? If so, what are they? If not, why not?

Emphases on Personal Religious Practices

We asked the informants the extent to which personal prayer/scripture study/devotions; family devotions; fasting; dietary restrictions; abstinence from alcohol; activity restrictions on Sundays; and abstaining from premarital sex were emphasized by their congregation in its worship and education. (See Table 6.) Ninety-three percent of the informants from the Nazarenes and 91 percent of the informants from the SBC reported that personal prayer, Scripture study, and personal devotions were emphasized a “great deal” or “quite a bit” in their congregation’s worship and education. This compares to 76 percent for the ELCA, 70 percent for the ECUSA, 64 percent for the UCC and 14 percent for the UUA.

Table 6: Emphases in Congregational Worship and Education

“A Great Deal/Quite a Bit”	ELCA	ECUSA	UCC	SBC	Nazarene	UUA
Personal prayer, Scripture study, devotions	76%	70	64	91	93	15
Family devotions	44%	32	42	32	57	2
Fasting	1%	6	1	5	18	0
Dietary restrictions	0%	1	1	2	4	0
Abstinence from alcohol	3%	3	3	53	61	0
Sunday activity restrictions	1%	27	26	69	55	3
Abstaining from premarital sex	29%	18	15	76	75	2

Figure 4 shows the spatial relationship of these denominations on the worship emphasis on family devotions (X) and Sunday activity restrictions (Y) with the size of the circles representing personal prayer. The ELCA, according to these informants, puts considerable emphasis on family devotions and personal prayer but so do most of the other religious groups. What separates these denominations is the matter of Sunday activity restrictions which are emphasized by nearly 70 percent of SBC congregations compared to less than one percent of ELCA congregations. When it comes to Sunday activity restrictions, the ELCA is most like the UUA.

Figure 4: Congregational Emphasis in Worship and Education

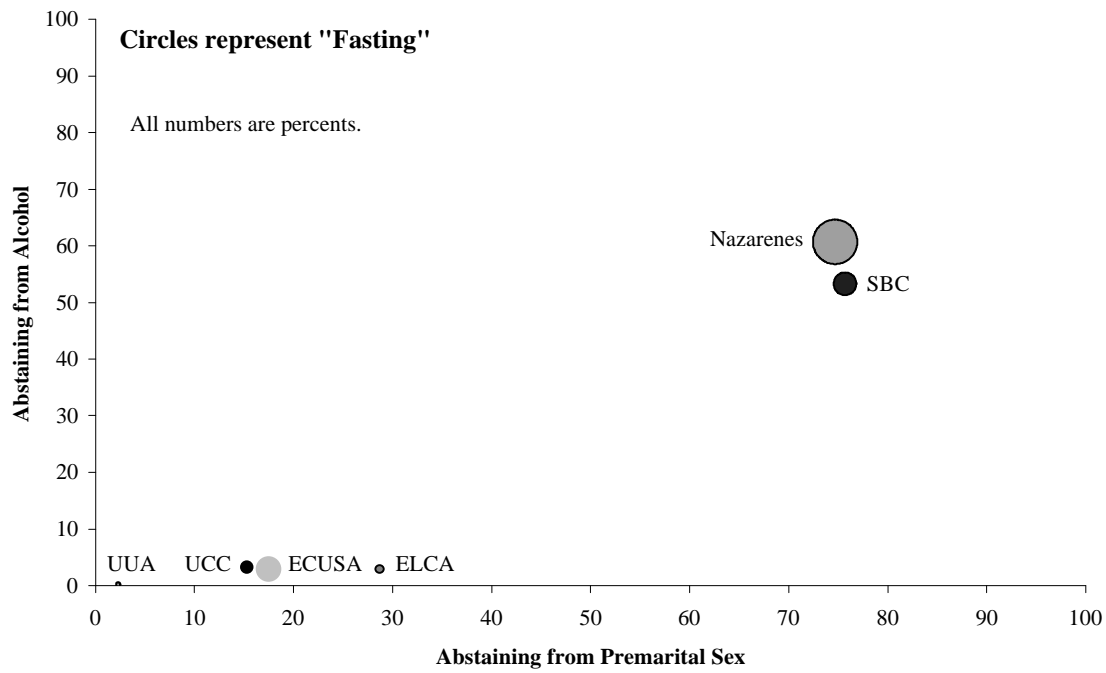
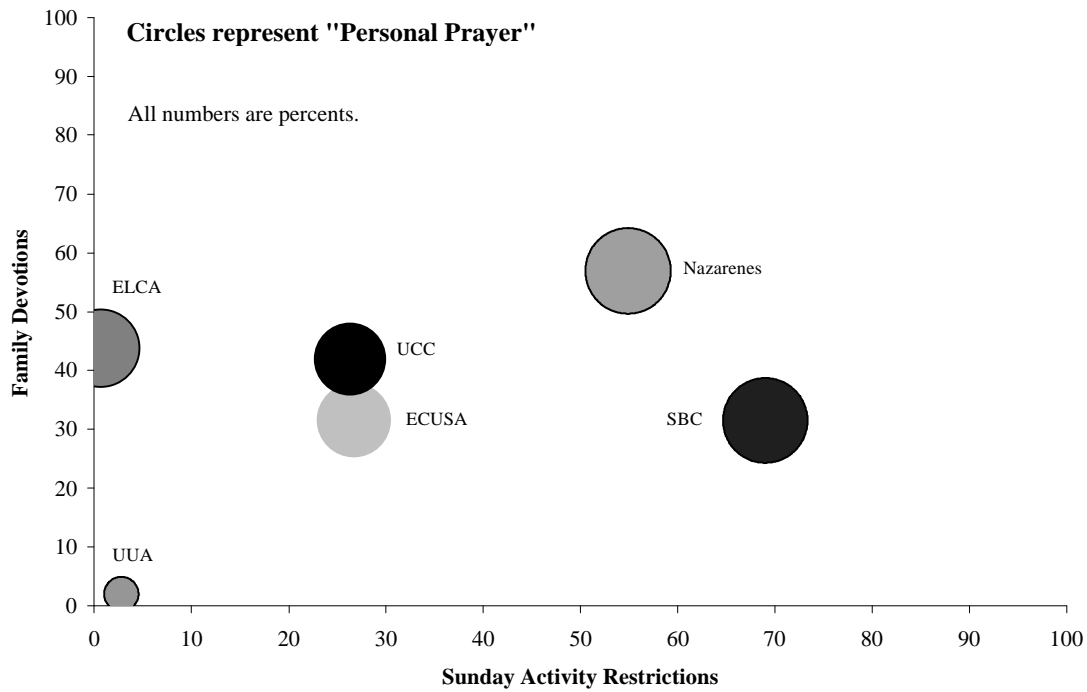


Figure 5: Congregational Emphasis in Worship and Education



1. According to the informants, the ELCA puts more emphasis on abstaining from premarital sex as a part of its worship and education than either the UCC or the ECUSA but considerably less than the Nazarenes or the SBC. What do you make of this?
2. Some people have suggested that the mainline denominations including the ELCA are too much like the wider culture; too accepting of the ways of the wider culture particularly with regard to sexual behavior, alcohol and even with regard to Sunday activity restrictions. Do you think this is a problem for ELCA Lutherans?

Figure 5 shows the spatial relationships of these denominations on the worship and education emphasis on abstaining from alcohol (Y), abstinence from pre-marital sex (X) and the size of the circles representing fasting. In terms of emphasizing abstention from alcohol and premarital sex, the SBC and the Nazarenes are closest. The ELCA is more likely than the other mainline groups to emphasize abstaining from premarital sex, while the ECUSA and the SBC place almost the same amount of emphasis on fasting. The Nazarenes place the greatest amount of emphasis on fasting.

CONCLUSIONS

There is remarkable variation between these denominational groups in terms of heritage, understanding of authority, and emphases in worship, education and religious practices. Certainly when it comes to alcohol and Sunday activity restrictions and even the lack of definite expectations, the mainline religious groups cluster together at one end of the continuum with the SBC and the Nazarenes at the other. But, taken point by point, different combinations are also quite evident. In terms of the authority of Scripture and the Holy Spirit, the ELCA is closest to the SBC and the Nazarenes while the ELCA is closest to the ECUSA when it comes to the historic creeds and doctrines. In terms of an emphasis on God's love and care as a focus of the sermon in worship, the ELCA is out by itself, while the Nazarenes, the SBC, the UCC and ECUSA all group together. In terms of a congregational emphasis on abstaining from alcohol, the ELCA is grouped with the UCC and the ECUSA—a long way from the Nazarenes and the SBC. In short, these denominations group with each other