### Organized Religion

#### Denominationalism and Congregationalism

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Here are some questions to ponder as you read this chapter:

- What factors—social and theological—have caused the fission (schisms) and fusion (mergers) of denominations?
- Why have denominationalism and congregationalism become the central features of organized religion in the United States?
- What are the ways in which denominations organize themselves?
- How are religious special purpose groups and paradenominational groups supplanting denominations?
- How do congregations work, and how do megachurches differ from the typical local congregation?
- Is marketing religion—selling it like any other product—a perversion of the faith, or is it a normal and healthy process?
- What are “new paradigm” churches, and how are they using marketing ideas to grow at phenomenal rates?
In the previous chapter, we looked at some important aspects of organized religion, such as the processes by which religions institutionalize and the various ways that sociologists have tried to categorize different types of religious organizations (church, sect, denomination, and new religious movement [NRM]). In this chapter, we continue to think about the way religion is organized, taking a distinctly American focus as we consider denominationalism and congregationalism as central organizing principles of religion.

Recall that church–sect theory was initially developed by Max Weber and Ernst Troeltsch, both Germans and well aware of the tradition of state established religions, which was a central part of German (and European) history in the early modern period. In Chapter 7, we suggested that the concept of “church” as Weber and Troetsch imagined it was not possible in a democratic and pluralistic society like the United States. Not surprisingly, it was an American, H. Richard Niebuhr, who introduced the concept of “denomination” into the church–sect equation, and another American, Milton Yinger, who elaborated the concepts of sect and denomination even further (identifying various types of sects and denominations). This expansion of the original model has led some to conclude that church–sect theories have become such a hopeless hodgepodge of definitions and variables they have no real meaning or utility (Goode, 1967; Greeley, 1972; Murvar, 1975).

At least in the modern American context, it may be wiser to begin understanding the organization of religion from different starting points. The unique history of religious development in the United States has led one observer to describe America as a “denominational society” and to specifically “reject the notion that denomination is a compromise or halfway house between sect and church” (Greeley, 1972, p. 71). Another focuses his organizational lens even closer to the ground by looking at congregations (local churches, synagogues, mosques, and temples) and arguing that the central organizing principle of American religion is “de facto congregationalism” (Warner, 1993, 2005). To understand organized religion, from this point of view, we have to understand denominations/denominationalism, congregations/congregationalism, and the relationship between the two.

Although religious establishments existed in the American colonies, the United States as a nation is constitutionally diverse in two senses: (1) multiple religious groups have been woven into the fabric of American life from its founding and (2) this pluralism became embodied in the disestablishment of religion in the U.S. Constitution. Disestablishment allowed for free exercise of religion—religious voluntarism—which has taken organizational form in the proliferation of religious groups in America. In the terms of the “religious economies” perspective (Stark & Finke, 2000), American religion is a free market in which religious organizations from corporate giants like the Roman Catholic Church to entrepreneurial start-ups in storefront churches compete for the attention of religious consumers. As we will see, there are winners and losers in this marketplace. This religious pluralism in a free religious marketplace raises the issue of religious marketing, which we discuss in this chapter.

As Nancy Ammerman (2006, p. 355) has argued, both denominations and congregations are part of larger “organizational fields,” and as we would expect from the open systems perspective, they are susceptible to influence from this larger field. Hence, both denominations and congregations from all religious traditions have a tendency to become like each other. Organizational theorists call this propensity to morph into similar forms institutional isomorphism (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983).

One major development in the organizational field of religion that has the potential to influence both denominations and congregations through this process of isomorphism is the rise of very large congregations known as megachurches. In addition to understanding the rise, structure, and spread of megachurches, we will also consider their implications for the marketing of religion, especially to the unchurched and religious “seekers.”
The Denominational Society

Denominationalism is a unique and recent way of organizing religion in the long history of human society (Ammerman, 2006, pp. 361–362). In his famous work on the evolution of religion, Robert Bellah (1970c) maintained that the early stages of religious development are characterized by an undifferentiated religious worldview, so that individuals experienced the world as a single cosmos in which religion was diffused through all of life. Under these conditions, religious community and society are one and the same.

In the course of societal development, religion becomes symbolically differentiated from other social institutions; in particular, the political and distinct religious organizations arise. Initially, a single religious organization dominates a particular geographic area. This is evident in the domination of Europe by the Roman Catholic Church. Over time, the religious sphere itself comes to be internally differentiated. In the Western world, the Reformation era (1517–1648) brought about the emergence of different “confessions” which were doctrinally and organizationally distinct: Catholicism, Lutheranism, and Calvinism (Gorski, 2000).¹

Although this gave rise to some religious pluralism between societies, each confession attempted to align itself with the political powers to become the officially sanctioned church in its territory. Thus, Lutheranism became the official religion in Scandanavia and parts of Germany (e.g., Saxony); Calvinism predominated in Switzerland, the Netherlands, and southern Germany; and Roman Catholicism continued to have official status in France, Spain, and Italy. In each case, political citizenship and confessional identity were linked. Consequently, conflict rather than peaceful coexistence dominated the scene, and religious persecution was prevalent. As Gorski (2000) observed, “The sixteenth and seventeenth centuries witnessed mass movements of religious refugees, a sort of confessionally driven Völkerwanderung in which Protestants drove out Catholics, Catholics drove out Protestants, and everybody drove out the Baptists and other sectarians” (pp. 157–158).

Some of those driven out of Europe for religious reasons were followers of the Calvinist Puritan movement who were seeking to reform the Church of England. They ended up founding the New England colonies and creating Congregationalist religious establishments of their own in Connecticut, Massachusetts, and New Hampshire. In six other colonies, the Church of England was established (Georgia, Maryland, New York, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Virginia). Rhode Island, Delaware, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania had no religious establishment, the latter three being among the most religiously diverse colonies. As noted, the result of this situation was that no single confession dominated the American religious scene.

Religious disestablishment and religious freedom are key social structural preconditions for denominationalism to flourish. When Greeley referred to America as “the denominational society,” he means a society that is characterized neither by an established church nor dissenting sects but religious bodies or associations of congregations that are united under a common historical and theological umbrella, that are presumed equal under the law, and that generally treat other bodies with an attitude of mutual respect. As a consequence of this “social organizational adjustment to the fact of religious pluralism” (Greeley, 1972, p. 1), there are hundreds of denominations in America (Mead, Hill, & Atwood, 2005). Indeed, the Handbook of Denominations in the United States (Mead et al., 2005) lists 31 Baptist denominations and

¹These are called “confessions” because they have distinct “confessions of faith.” A confession of faith is a particular religious group’s doctrinal statement. Among the most significant of these historically are The Augsburg Confession (1530), written by Martin Luther and severing ties with the Roman Catholic Church, and the Geneva Confession (1536), originally credited to John Calvin (Pelikan, 2003).
17 denominations in the Calvinist/Reformed tradition alone. This denominationalism has also become a global phenomenon; the *World Christian Encyclopedia* reports 33,830 denominations within Christianity worldwide (Barrett, Kurian, & Johnson, 2001).

William Swatos (1998) observed the following:

> Although, strictly speaking, denominationalism is a Protestant dynamic, it has become fully accepted in principle by all major religious groups in the United States; in fact, one could say that the denominationalizing process represents the Americanizing of a religious tradition. (p. 135)

In this understanding, other Christian religious traditions like Roman Catholicism, Mormonism, and Seventh-day Adventism are also considered denominations. Beyond Christianity, some have even written about Jewish “denominationalism” in reference to the four branches of Judaism—Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, and Reconstructionist (Lazerwitz, Winter, Dashefsky, & Tabory, 1998). The Nation of Islam and American Society of Muslims are distinctively American Islamic denominations (though the former is often viewed negatively by traditional Muslims). In fact, the American Society of Muslims evolved from the Nation of Islam under the leadership of Warith Deen Muhammad and once established saw a splinter group calling itself the Nation of Islam break from it with Louis Farrakhan as head (see Chapter 12 for more details). If Swatos’s observation is correct, we could in time expect to see Sunni and Shia Islamic organizations develop as distinctive Islamic denominations, perhaps with a national twist: Nigerian Sunni Muslims of America, American Federation of Pakistani Shia Mosques, the Association of Indonesian Sunni Mosques in America, and so on. Buddhism and Hinduism also have different branches or schools, though like Islam they were brought to America in large numbers only recently so time will tell whether there will be an evolution of those branches into recognizable denominations.

### Theology and Social Processes in the Proliferation of Denominations

The development of this diversity of American denominations has been the result of theological differences and disputes, as well as theological innovations by religious entrepreneurs but also of fundamental social processes such as immigration and racial conflict. (An excellent, free online resource for information on American denominations, including profiles, membership statistics, and family trees, is the Association of Religion Data Archives: http://www.thearda.com/Denoms/Families.)

### Race

Methodism, for example, has been heavily influenced by theological differences and race. The denomination itself began as a revitalization movement in the Church of England under the direction of John Wesley (an ordained minister of the Church of England) whose preaching emphasized personal holiness. As the movement spread, it eventually broke from the Church of England when the Methodist Episcopal Church in the United States was organized in 1784. By 1816, the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church was founded by African American congregations seeking independence from white Methodists, and not long after, the AME Zion Church ordained its first bishop, symbolizing its split from the larger (white) body of the Methodist church. In 1844, the Methodist Episcopal Church, South split from the Methodist Episcopal Church over the issue of slavery2 and later amicably split with the Colored Methodist Episcopal (CME) Church.

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2It is well known that John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, was vehemently opposed to American slavery, and early in its history, the Methodist Episcopal Church opposed the practice. See Wesley’s “Thoughts Upon Slavery,” published in 1784 (available online at http://docsouth.unc.edu/church/wesley/menu.html).
in 1870. In 1939, the two historically white Methodist Episcopal denominations, along with the Methodist Protestant Church, reunited to form the Methodist Church, which was joined in 1968 by the Evangelical United Brethren Church to become the United Methodist Church—the second largest Protestant denomination in America. All these splits and mergers were related to issues of race, not theological differences.

Other denominations were also affected by racial differences and differences over racial issues. Presbyterians were split over the issue of slavery, dividing in the mid-19th century between the United Presbyterian Church in the USA and the Presbyterian Church in the United States (“Southern”). The Southern Baptist Convention was formed in 1845 when Baptists in the South—who held to a biblical defense of slavery—split to form their own denomination.3 Free slaves after the Civil War founded the National Baptist Convention in 1895, creating yet another race-related schism.

**Immigration**

Lutheranism has been a predominantly white denomination in the United States, owing to its historic establishment in parts of Germany and Scandinavia. Its history, therefore, has been shaped not by race but by immigration and theological disputes. When Lutherans immigrated, they brought their national churches with them, as well as their particular languages and cultural practices, which prevented unity among groups that shared many religious views in common. Lutheran denominations (typically called “synods” or “churches”), therefore, proliferated in the late 19th and early 20th centuries as Lutheran immigrants flowed into the country. For example, Swedes founded the Augustana Evangelical Lutheran Church in 1860, Danes the American Evangelical Lutheran Church in 1872, Finns the Finnish Evangelical Lutheran Church of America in 1890, and Norwegians the Lutheran Free Church in 1897.

Over time, as these immigrants assimilated into American society, theological differences became more prominent than differences of nationality. This is reflected in the current state of Lutheran denomination in the United States. Currently, there are 10 Lutheran denominations organized in the United States.4 The three largest of these are the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod (LCMS) (est. 1847 by Germans), and Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod (WELS) (est. 1850 by Germans). (The word “Synod” in Lutheran usage can refer either to an entire religious body like the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod or a local administrative region like the Texas Synod, Iowa Synod, etc.).

Important theological differences and religious practices exist among these three groups (e.g., over the interpretation of scripture, ordination of women and gays, and the role of women in lay authority positions), with the ELCA being the liberal or mainline Lutheran church, the LCMS more conservative, and WELS the most conservative.

The history of denominations is not only one of division and schism but also of mergers and consolidation (Chaves & Sutton, 2004). As Figure 8.1 shows, the largest Lutheran church in America, the ELCA, was formed out of a complex series of mergers beginning in the early 20th century. It was formed in 1987 with the merger of three Lutheran denominations, each of which were formed from the merger of several other Lutheran denominations, which were themselves formed from mergers of various Lutheran denominations and synods.

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3In 1995, the Southern Baptist Convention for the first time acknowledged its racist origins and apologized for its defense of slavery. See *This Side of Heaven: Race, Ethnicity, and Christian Faith* (Priest & Nieves, 2007).

4American Association of Lutheran Churches, Apostolic Lutheran Church of America, Association of Free Lutheran Congregations, Church of the Lutheran Brethren of America, Church of the Lutheran Confession, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), Evangelical Lutheran Synod, Latvian Evangelical Lutheran Church, Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod (LCMS), and Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod (WELS) (Mead et al., 2005).
Figure 8.1 Mergers Resulting in the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America
There are 10 Lutheran denominations in the United States as of 2010, and most of the splits have been based on immigration and ethnicity patterns rather than race or doctrinal differences. This ELCA congregation is affiliated with the largest of the Lutheran groups—being the largest because of a series of consolidations. So denominationalism is characterized by fission (splits) and fusion (mergers).

These developments are not just remnants of a historical past. In the dynamism of the American “religious economy,” denominations are continually developing and dying, splitting and merging. As of this writing, there may possibly be yet another split in the Lutheran church over a theological issue. As we discuss at more length in Chapter 11, the ELCA voted in 2009 to ordain noncelibate gay clergy, and in 2010, the first gay Lutheran ministers were welcomed onto the church’s clergy roster. As a consequence, 185 ELCA congregations have voted to leave the denomination, and a new Lutheran denomination is in the works: the North American Lutheran Church.

Innovation

A final significant source of new denominations in America is the theological innovations of religious entrepreneurs. Joseph Smith founded the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (the Mormons) in the 1820s, Charles T. Russell the Jehovah’s Witnesses in 1870, and Mary Baker Eddy the Church of Christ, Scientist, aka “Christian Science” in 1879. All of these groups are innovative updatings of the Christian tradition, and although they were attacked early on as “cults” (in the negative sense sociologists reject), they have since grown to relatively large and respected denominations (Jenkins, 2000). As we saw in Chapter 6, amazing growth has particularly been among Mormons and Jehovah’s Witnesses.

Beyond Denominations?

Although the United States is still a “denominational” society, there are some significant developments in American religious life that suggest the importance of looking beyond denominations. These include transdenominational evangelicalism, nondenominationalism, and paradenominational groups and organizations.

Transdenominational Evangelicalism

By all accounts, one of the most dynamic sectors of the American religious economy—and, indeed, the global religious economy—is evangelical Christianity. Although still in the minority, evangelical Protestantism has made significant inroads in Africa, Latin America, and Asia (Freston, 2007). In the United States, individuals belonging to evangelical traditions now constitute over half of all Protestants (Pew Research Center Forum on Religion & Public Life, 2008b).

Although for ease of identification in survey-based studies some scholars define individuals as evangelicals according to their denominational affiliation (commonly named evangelical denominations are the Southern Baptist Convention and Churches of God), most recognize that evangelicalism is a movement, not a denomination or even a collection of denominations. It is, in fact, a transdenominational
movement that had its origins at a specific place and specific point in time: with the founding of the National Association of Evangelicals in April 1942 at the Hotel Coronado in St. Louis, Missouri (Marsden, 1991). According to sociologist Christian Smith (1998), “Evangelicalism is not primarily denominationally based but . . . ‘a transdenominational movement in which many people, in various ways, feel at home.’ . . . Institutionally, this transdenominational evangelicalism is built around networks of parachurch agencies” (p. 135). These agencies include seminaries like the Moody Bible Institute, publications like Christianity Today, colleges like Wheaton, and publishing houses like Zondervan. Some churches and denominations do contribute to the movement—Vineyard Christian Fellowship and Calvary Chapel are examples. Some observers have also noted the influence of the evangelical movement within otherwise mainline denominations (Kosmin & Keysar, 2009). Nonetheless, Smith and others are right to say that evangelicalism in the United States is not fundamentally denominational.

Evangelical Protestantism’s transdenominational organization may be one of the sources of its strength today. The theoretical issue of interest with respect to evangelical strength has to do with the plausibility of traditional religious worldviews in the modern pluralistic world. One widely respected sociologist of religion, Peter Berger, has devoted much of his writing to the exploration of plausibility structures (Berger, 1967; Berger & Luckmann, 1966). These are social interactions and processes within a group that serve to protect and sacralize the shared meanings and outlooks of the group. Much of Chapter 4 was concerned with this issue, and the emphasis in Chapter 5 on the importance of affective commitment in maintaining moral commitment (adherence to ideology) points to the same phenomenon.

Berger’s view is that belief systems, if they are to survive, must be rooted in a plausibility structure. An understanding of the religious group as a reference group is particularly critical to any analysis of plausibility. Individuals are capable of accepting all sorts of strange beliefs if enough other people seem convinced. It is a basic maxim of social constructionism that individuals look to others for a definition of the situation if they are uncertain themselves. When dealing with issues of the meaning of life, with the supernatural, and with the ultimate cause of perplexing events, ambiguity is a given. Plausibility structures—which typically include rituals, symbols, music, architecture, reference groups, self-validating beliefs—are especially critical in making beliefs credible if they run contrary to those of the larger society, as we see in the “Illustrating Sociological Concepts” feature. Moreover, plausibility is especially problematic in a pluralistic society where people are constantly exposed to meaning systems and believers who seem to contradict their own ideas. Thus, for Berger (1967, p. 152), pluralism itself undermines the plausibility structures that support religious belief.

Some of the world’s great cathedrals elicit a sense of awe and humility in the individual just through the effective use of space and the breathtaking beauty of the chancel area. Anyone entering the Notre Dame Cathedral in Montreal is likely to feel such awe. The architecture, by creating a mood, enhances the plausibility of belief in the transcendent power of God.
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ILLUSTRATING SOCIOLOGICAL CONCEPTS

Plausibility Structures Support Beliefs

The plausibility or believability of the worldview is essential if a religious group is to survive. If everyday events or if scientific explanations seem to disprove the religious worldview, the survival of the group may be threatened. Belief systems, if they are to survive, must be rooted in a social base and reinforced through a sense of sacredness or absoluteness about the beliefs. Plausibility can be enhanced through a variety of mechanisms: reference groups committed to the belief system, dualistic belief systems, norms requiring that members engage in evangelism, a sense of profound respect or awe for the leadership, rituals that elicit a sense of awe, music that evokes strong emotions, emotionally laden symbols, and even especially beautiful and expansive architecture.

Individuals are capable of accepting all sorts of strange beliefs if the plausibility structures are strong enough. If a religious leader stakes his or her reputation on a specific time, date, and year when the end of the world will come, the movement may be in serious trouble the day after the predicted apocalypse. What happens to the belief system when time drags on and the end does not arrive? If they are going to survive, world-transforming movements must develop belief systems that are self-validating (Festinger, Riecken, & Schachter, 1956).

An important characteristic of the ideology of many world-transforming religious groups is dualism, the belief that reality is ultimately a battle between the forces of good and evil—perhaps personalized in the form of God versus Satan. Dualism is very functional in sustaining plausibility of an otherwise implausible worldview. In other words, groups that have a worldview that contradicts the scientific and “commonsense” explanations are more likely to survive if they have a worldview that is dualistic. Any outcome or event can be explained as a cosmic battle—dualistic perspective appears to be self-validating. As Lofland (1977) put it, “the believer cannot lose. He derives confirmation from any outcome” (p. 197). Lofland explained that the Moonies he studied often used the conventional mass media to confirm their worldview. When national and international events reflected unrest, deterioration, and disorganization, the devotees were jubilant. Surely this was evidence to everyone that the end was near! Surely this victory by Satan would convince people to repent and join the unification cause. If a month went by when no tragedies occurred, this was because God was restraining Satan for some special reason.

On the other hand, some doomsday prophets have set a specific date on which the final judgment will commence. What happens to such groups when the predicted date passes? In many cases, passage of the doomsday date results in the movement’s collapse. However, the Unification Church passed several critical dates established by the founder, Reverend Moon. In these cases, the ideology was modified by simply proclaiming that the end of the world will come in several phases. The cataclysm that was expected was simply declared to have occurred—but in the unseen spiritual realm. Some Christian groups that predicted the end of the world have similarly modified their stance. In some cases, they simply set a new date. A more effective strategy is to proclaim that the new era is now in progress but that only the “saved” or the “elect” are able to see or experience the transformation. This has been the strategy of the Jehovah’s Witnesses for whom the “new age” began in 1914 (Kephart & Zellner, 1998). In any case, basic dualism can continue to provide a simple and self-validating system of meaning.

(Continued)
Another apparently self-validating belief system is taking a body of scripture—whether it's the Quran, the Bible, or the Book of Mormon—as literally and absolutely true. Passages testifying to the veracity of the contents may serve to reinforce the believer's conviction. All other forms of evidence (scientific or otherwise) can be readily dismissed if they contradict those scriptures. The sacred scrolls become the final authority on all things, and the sense of sacredness that surrounds that scripture makes anything in it seem plausible. In this case, the utter respect for the scripture serves as a self-validating plausibility structure.

Close-knit reference groups and awe-inspiring rituals and symbols serve as important plausibility structures as well. However, for groups that reject the outlook of the dominant culture, dualism provides a worldview that not only offers to explain the meaning of events but also provides a neat tautology (circular reasoning) that allows for self-validation of the worldview. It is not surprising then that many religious movements, especially the world-transforming ones that have managed to survive, are dualistic, evangelistic, and otherworldly.

In his analysis of American evangelicals, Smith took issue with Berger’s argument. He maintained that “American evangelicalism as a religious movement is thriving...very much because of and not in spite of its confrontation with modern pluralism” (Smith, 1998, p. 1). Smith suggested a subcultural identity theory of religious strength in modern society that accords well with the understanding of religion we suggest in this textbook: “Religion survives and can thrive in pluralistic, modern society by embedding itself in subcultures that offer satisfying morally orienting collective identities which provide adherents meaning and belonging” (Smith, 1998, p. 118).

Part of evangelicals’ collective identity has to do with their distinguishing themselves from non-evangelicals as a negative reference group (“out-group”) and thereby creating some boundaries but at the same time keeping the boundaries somewhat permeable so as to not cut themselves off entirely from the wider society (as fundamentalists do). By doing so, they create the social basis (plausibility structure) necessary to support their religious beliefs. About this Smith (1998) concluded the following:

In the pluralistic modern world, people don’t need macro-encompassing sacred cosmoses to maintain their religious beliefs. They only need “sacred umbrellas,” small, portable, accessible relational worlds—religious reference groups—“under” which their beliefs can make complete sense. (p. 106)³

Evangelicalism as a transdenominational movement helps provide the plausibility structures that support individuals’ beliefs and that help make evangelical Protestantism one of the strongest traditions in American religion.

Nondenominationalism

A second religious development that takes us beyond denominations proper is the rise of

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³Smith (1998) elaborated the metaphor: “We would like to suggest, however, that in the modern world, religion does survive and can thrive, not in the form of ‘sacred canopies,’ but rather in the form of ‘sacred umbrellas.’ Canopies are expansive, immobile, and held up by props beyond the reach of those covered. Umbrellas, on the other hand, are small, handheld, and portable—like the faith-sustaining religious worlds that modern people construct for themselves. We suggest that, as the old, overarching sacred canopies split apart and their ripped pieces of fabric fell toward the ground, many innovative religious actors caught those falling pieces of cloth in the air and, with more than a little ingenuity, remanufactured them into umbrellas” (p. 106).
nondenominationalism, both in the form of nondenominational congregations and individual religious identities. We have already seen in Chapters 5 and 6 the increasing number of Americans who choose not to identify their religion according to a denominational label (including those who specifically say “nondenominational” but also those who are “just Christians” and the “religious but unaffiliated”). Organizationally, nondenominational congregations are the single largest category of faith community in terms of affiliation. Roughly 18% of congregations in the United States are nondenominational. Mark Chaves (2004) has observed the following: “If the unaffiliated congregations were all in one denomination, they would constitute the third-largest U.S. denomination in number of participants” (p. 25).

Nondenominationalism is actually related in part to evangelicalism, and vice versa. In one survey, 20% of evangelicals reported attending nondenominational churches (Smith, 1998). Another study—the American Religious Identification Survey (ARIS)—found that from 1990 to 2008, most of the growth in the Christian population occurred among those who would identify only as “Christian,” “evangelical/born again,” or “nondenominational Christian.” Taken altogether, these three groups grew from 5% of the population in 1990 to 11.8% in 2008. Looking to the future, Kosmin and Keysar (2009, p. 12) observed that among all Christians, these Generic Christians have the youngest age composition.

In the press release announcing the release of ARIS 2008, Mark Silk (director of the program that sponsors ARIS) suggested that a “generic form of evangelicalism is emerging as the normative form of non-Catholic Christianity in the United States.” If this is true, it may soon be possible to view nondenominational and transdenominational evangelicalism as a sort of “denominational label” (Ammerman, 2006, p. 364)—a category people can use to identify themselves as holding certain beliefs and engaging in certain practices in common with others across the United States and, perhaps, around the world.

Paradenominational Groups and Organizations

Robert Wuthnow (1987) argued in The Restructuring of American Religion that religion in the United States is experiencing a dramatic shift rooted in special purpose groups. Since early in the 19th century, special purpose groups have operated alongside of denominations, crossing boundaries and providing for joint efforts between various groups. The American Bible Society (founded in 1816) was followed in that century by such groups as the American Sunday School Union, the Women’s Christian Temperance Movement, the Anti-Saloon League, the American Anti-Slavery Society, and the YMCA. People of diverse religious affiliations banded together to address some problem or provide some service.

The 20th century has seen a continuation of the spawning of special purpose groups, with religiously motivated people mobilizing associations across denominational lines to address public issues: war and peace, abortion legislation, world hunger, civil rights, changes in gender roles, business ethics, and the recruitment activities of cults. The Full Gospel Business Men’s Fellowship, the Christian Legal Society, the Fellowship of Christian Athletes, and Clergy and Laity Concerned about War are only a few examples of special purpose groups for which religion is intrinsically tied to social and political issues.

Until the 1970s, said Wuthnow, the members of these organizations still felt primary loyalty to their denominations and it was the faith communities, as such, which defined their core values and their sense of morality. The special purpose groups were secondary in their sense of belonging and identity. However, in the last three decades intense conflicts have arisen over many issues relating to moral conduct and how to redefine reality. Wuthnow believed that the nation has polarized into conservative and liberal camps, each with their own sets of special purpose groups. Members of each camp may belong to the same congregation/denomination, so that community is split and is no longer able to claim the moral authority or to elicit the deep loyalty
necessary to define meaning and to sacralize values. The deeper loyalty, he says, is going to the paradenominational groups, and these paradenominational groups are growing remarkably in both numbers of groups and in memberships.

This could fundamentally alter the structure of religion in the United States, so that religious conservatives from various denominations who are adherents of, say, The Christian Voice, may find that the paradenominational group elicits more loyalty and does more to provide a sense of identity and belonging than do the individual denominations to which the members each belong. Wuthnow believes the face of religion in the United States is being fundamentally restructured by these paradenominational groups. Denominations, he believes, are no longer the central structural element of American religion.

Robert Wuthnow’s assessment is based on some sweeping interpretations of history, and it remains a controversial thesis. It, along with the idea of transdenominationalism and nondenominationalism, does provide a new way of thinking about the historic shifts that appear to be occurring in American religion.

**Critical Thinking:** From your own experience and observations, does it seem feasible that special purpose groups (cross-denominational groups concerned with issues of abortion or peace and justice or prayer in schools) are replacing denominations in providing belonging and in defining religious meaning and values? Why do you think as you do? What kind of evidence is persuasive?

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6Of course, not every religious group conforms to this pattern. Exceptions include Native American religions and religious groups practicing Wicca (witchcraft). We are unable to treat another interesting way of looking at denominational organization—Mark Chaves’ (1993) analysis of denominations as “dual structures.”

7Interesting research that uses polity structure as an independent variable in understanding denominations includes Takayama’s work (Takayama, 1975; Takayama & Cannon, 1979; or more recently, Cantrell, Krile, & Donohue, 1983; Mullen, 1994).
denominations (like the Southern Baptist Convention or American Baptist Churches), they are nonetheless formally independent. They choose their own pastors, control their own finances, own their own property, and so on. This is not to say that some denominations that are formally organized as congregational polities do not exercise influence on their member congregations. As Ammerman (1990, 2009) observed, at the height of its power, the Southern Baptist Convention “provided such comprehensive programmatic support that local congregations from Atlanta to Dallas bore strong resemblance to each other” (p. 574).

The Roman Catholic Church provides a good example of the episcopal polity. Also called “hierarchical,” this type of church polity places ultimate authority over local churches in the centralized hands of bishops (the Greek word is *episcopos*). Each of the Roman Catholic Church’s nearly 20,000 congregations in the United States (called “parishes”) are geographically defined and clustered into a “diocese,” which is under the authority of the local bishop, and ultimately, under the authority of the Bishop of Rome, that is, the Pope. This does not mean, however, that de facto congregationalism does not exist in Catholic churches. In fact, there is a great deal of diversity and difference between parishes due to their local autonomy. In his survey of Roman Catholicism in America, theologian Chester Gillis (1999) observed that differences in composition of the parish community, leadership, interests, preaching, programs, worship, and organization can make one parish, even in the same diocese or city, very different from one another. . . . To this extent, all Catholicism is local. (p. 32)

De facto congregationalism is evident in how local dioceses and parishes implement—or choose not to implement—universal rites promulgated by the church hierarchy (Yamane & MacMillen, 2006). It is also seen on Sunday mornings when Catholics across America “church shop,” floating from their geographically defined parish to their parish-of-choice, often passing several other Catholic churches on the way (Warner, 2005). Catholics choose their parishes because Catholic parishes have their own local cultures and identities through which official church policies are interpreted (McCallion, Maines, & Wolfel, 1996). Indeed, one of the major conclusions of the Notre Dame Study of Catholic Parish Life in the 1980s was that “relative to the life of the rest of the church, parishes seem to have a life of their own” (Gremillion & Castelli, 1987, p. 47).

Other denominations that have some form of episcopal polity, with a bishop having some authority over the churches, include Eastern Orthodox, Anglican, Episcopalian, Methodist, AME, AME Zion, and some (but not all) Lutherans. Many of these denominations are also affected by congregationalism and local authority. For example, the United Methodist “General Conference,” where policy is decided, has an equal number of ordained clergy and laypeople who vote representing their congregations. Likewise, the local United Methodist church building is actually owned by the larger denomination but maintained by the local congregation. So power and responsibility is shared.

*Presbyterian* is a kind of intermediate polity, between the congregational and episcopal, which is derived theologically from the Swiss reformation. Like episcopal polities, it is hierarchical; like congregational polities, it gives some authority to the local church. Some say it was a model for the U.S. Constitution’s federal system of government. Like the U.S. government, there are typically levels of governance: Local churches are grouped into larger assemblies sometimes called presbyteries, which are grouped into synods, which are brought together in general assemblies. General assemblies have authority to set policy for the denomination, but decisions at that level must be filtered down through the lower levels of governance for final approval. Local congregations have authority insofar as they elect members to represent them at the higher levels of the denomination’s governance structure. Not surprisingly, denominations like
the Presbyterian Church USA (PCUSA) and Presbyterian Church in America (PCA) are organized in this fashion. Yet, as Warner (2005) wrote, many Presbyterian congregations use hymnals other than the ones authorized by the denomination and choose ministers trained at seminaries other than denominationally sponsored ones. This de facto congregationalism means that the “label Presbyterian on the door no longer conveys a great deal of information to the first-time visitor to a local church” (Warner, 2005, p. 163).

Although the idea of a congregation comes from Christianity, de facto congregationalism means that this organizational form is not limited to the Christian tradition. Scholars studying the Muslim community in America have found convergence toward the congregational model, even though most of the nearly 2,000 mosques (masjids in Arabic) in the United States are relatively new, with 87% having been founded since 1970 and 62% since 1980 (Bagby, 2003). According to Islamic scholar Ihsan Bagby (2003), “Most of the world’s mosques are simply a place to pray. . . . A Muslim cannot be a member of a particular mosque” (p. 115) because mosques belong to God, not to the people. The role of the imam—the minister—is simply to lead prayers five times a day and to run the services on the Sabbath, including delivery of a sermon. The imam does not operate an organization and does not need formal training at a seminary, unlike most Christian and Jewish clergy. Mosques were historically government supported in other countries, so they had to make major changes in how they operate in North America. Because they could not depend on government funding, Islamic mosques needed to adapt to the congregational model: Members who were loyal to a particular mosque would support it. They also began to put more emphasis on religious education (which had been done largely by extended families in the “old country”), religious holidays at the mosque rather than with families, socializing (potlucks and coffee hours), and life cycle celebrations (birth and marriages solemnized, conducting funerals) (Waugh, 1994). This is a major change in the role of the mosque and the imam for many Muslims.

This same pattern of transformation from the religious structure of the homeland to a congregational structure in America has been seen in other religious communities founded by non-Christian Asian immigrant groups in recent years, including Indian Hindus (Kurien, 1998) and Japanese, Korean, and Laotian Buddhists (Warner, 2005). For example, Carl Bankston and Min Zhou (2000) reported on a fieldwork study of a Laotian Community in New Iberia, Louisiana, in the mid-1990s. The Theravada Buddhist temple constructed there reproduces the festivals and rites of the home country, but its organizational functioning has also been transformed by the American context. In the home country, the sangha is defined as the community of monks who have authority over the temple, and all men at some point in time are expected to become monks at least for a period of time. In America, the sangha is dissolved into the local congregation and being a monk becomes a specialized, professional status. Authority becomes vested in the lay members of the temple who “call” the monk to service in their community (a very “Baptist” or “Congregational” idea). The Korean Buddhist Kwan Um Sa temple in Los Angeles grew in membership when it began offering the types of social services often found in American congregations: “marriage and youth counseling, hospital arrangement, hospital visits, arrangement for Social Security benefits, . . . transportation for elderly members” (Yu, 1988, p. 90). The Japanese American Jodo Shinshu Buddhists call their place of worship a “church” and sit in church pews rather than traditional Japanese mats (Warner, 2005, p. 167).

De facto congregationalism is a structural reality of American religious life. It reflects principles of the open systems model: Organizations are influenced by inputs from the larger social environment. In this case, the key aspect of the environment is the pattern of organization constituted by other religious congregations. That environment exerts influence particularly under conditions of uncertainty for new organizations,
like those founded by immigrant religious communities. As Warner (2005) argued that “organizations that copy other organizations” (p. 168) have a “competitive advantage” and “reliance on established legitimated procedures enhances organizational legitimacy and survival characteristics” (p. 155; see also DiMaggio and Powell 1983).

Congregational Demography

No one knows how many congregations exist in America today, but most educated observers estimate that there are over 300,000 (Ammerman, 2009). Because there is no single list or directory of all congregations, it has been very difficult to study a representative sample of them so as to draw generalizable conclusions. Most “congregational studies” have been qualitative case studies (Ammerman, Carroll, Dudley, & McKinney, 1998). Indeed, sociology of religion students are often asked to do case studies of congregations—visiting a congregation and writing or presenting about what they observed—as one of their class assignments. The “Doing Research on Religion” feature in Chapter 2 offers students some suggestions from a veteran sociologist on how to observe congregations sociologically.

The most important recent contribution to the study of congregations in America is the National Congregations Study (NCS). The NCS uses a technique pioneered in the study of other organizational fields to draw a representative sample of congregations in America: it asks individuals participating in a nationally representative study of Americans to name their congregation (Chaves, Konieczny, Beyerlein, & Barman, 1999). To date, there have been two waves of data collection, the first in 1998 had a sample of 1,236 congregations, and the second in 2006 and 2007 had a sample of 1,506 congregations. The longitudinal design of this ongoing study allows scholars to track continuity and change in congregational life (Chaves & Anderson, 2008). Analyzing a representative sample of congregations at two points in time has yielded many insights. Unless otherwise noted, the findings we discuss are from the 1998 NCS data, since published research from the second wave of the NCS is limited at this time.

The first insight from the NCS has to do with the demography of congregations, and the curious relationship between looking at congregations from the perspective of the organization as compared to congregational experiences of individuals. As Chaves (2004) wrote, “although most congregations are small, most people are associated with large congregations” (p. 18), in both 1998 and 2006 and 2007, the median congregation had 75 regular participants (including children), but the median person was in a congregation with four hundred regular participants.

One way to understand this “double aspect” of congregations is to think about lining all congregations up from largest to smallest. The

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8Of the congregations surveyed in 2006 to 2007, 262 were also surveyed in 1998. This is known as a “panel” design, and adds even more precision to the study of congregational stability and change because comparisons can be made not between one sample of congregations in 1998 to another sample of congregations in 2006 and 2007 but between the same congregations at two points in time. This allows researchers to make stronger causal claims in explaining change (Halaby, 2004; Hannan & Tuma, 1979).

9In statistics, median is one way of understanding the average value in a collection of values. It refers to the value that is in the middle of a distribution, where half of the values are above it and half of the values are below it. Like the more commonly used mean (or arithmetic mean or simple mean), it is a measure of central tendency, but has the benefit over the mean of eliminating the influence of outliers (very large or very small cases). For example, median income is often reported because the income of the superrich like Bill Gates would skew the mean. Similarly, Chaves looks at the median size of congregations to eliminate the excessive influence of the few extremely large congregations that exist. We consider these megachurches more fully later in this chapter.
median congregation is the one in the very middle (see Figure 8.2). If you walked from the smallest congregation toward the largest and stopped in the middle, you would be at a church or temple with 75 regular participants. The proportion of the total population who attend the congregations you passed would only be 11% (Chaves, 2004, p. 18). Eighty-nine percent of regular attendees are in the 50% of congregations that are above the median.

Looking at it from the individual perspective, if you walked from the largest religious communities toward the smallest, once you walked past half of all the people who attend religious services regularly, you would be at a congregation with 400 members. The proportion of all of the congregations you have passed, however, is just 10%.

There are significant denominational differences in congregation size also between the organizational and the individual perspectives. Chaves (2004, p. 24) reported that only 6.2% of all congregations in America are Roman Catholic, but 28.6% of people attend Catholic churches. By contrast, over twice as many congregations are Southern Baptist (16.9%) than Catholic, but half as many people attend Southern Baptist churches (11.2%) compared to Catholic churches.

One consequence of this is that when you ask people to estimate the average size of a

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**Figure 8.2** Double Aspect of Congregations’ Size of Distribution
congregation, they almost always estimate well over 75. As we can see, this overestimate is based in their individual experiences with congregations. From the individual perspective, the average size of a congregation is larger than it is from the organizational perspective. Also, if you ask a Catholic to estimate average congregation size, she is likely to give a higher estimate than a Baptist (or most any other Protestant for that matter).

**WHAT DO CONGREGATIONS DO?**

As one of the most prevalent voluntary organizations in American society, congregations do many things. As we have already seen (Chapter 5), they are central to the socialization—especially the religious socialization—of children. They are the organizational center for the belonging function that we have identified as central to religion. As such, they play a key role in community formation (Ammerman, 2009).

Because communities can be exclusive, there is a dark side to this, as we will see in Part V when we consider religion and social inequality. The segregation by people according to economic class (Chapter 9) and race (Chapter 10) are two organizational realities of religious life.

The flip side of this same segregation coin is that congregations can also be the main community-based organization involved in the preservation of ethnic or racial minority cultures and therefore important organizational bases for survival and empowerment. This is why religious communities have historically been so important to immigrant populations (as discussed in this chapter and in Chapter 15 on globalization). We discuss at length the reality of churches as the core institution of African American communities in Chapter 12.

This segregation notwithstanding, when the “imagined community” is drawn more widely, congregations perform many valuable social services that benefit individuals well beyond their memberships (Chaves & Tsitos, 2001; Trinitapoli, 2005). They feed the hungry, clothe the naked, welcome the stranger, care for the sick, visit those in prison, give comfort to the abused and elderly, tutor the young, and so on. For all of their difficulties in terms of recent membership declines, mainline Protestant churches are the most active congregations in providing social services to their local communities (Ammerman, 1997, 2005).

Finally, congregations are very active in political life. Using the 1998 NCS data to look at seven different types of political involvement—from distribution of voter guides to demonstrations and marches to voter registration drives—Kraig Beyerlein and Mark Chaves (2003) found that 41% of congregations had engaged in at least one political activity in the previous 12 months. Congregations from different religious traditions tend to be drawn to different types of activity, though. More than others, Catholic congregations are involved in demonstrations, marches, and lobbying. Mainline Protestant congregations more often organize discussion groups. Black Protestant congregations register voters. Mainline and Black Protestant congregations host political candidates, while evangelical and Black Protestant congregations distribute voter guides more than other congregations (Beyerlein & Chaves, 2003).

These various and important activities of congregations notwithstanding, at the heart of congregational life is worship (Ammerman, 2005). As Chaves (2004) put it, “Congregations’ central purpose is of course the expression and transmission of religious meaning, and corporate worship is the primary way in which that purpose is pursued” (p. 127). There have been many fascinating case studies of congregational worship, especially changes in worship style to more contemporary forms (see Wolfe, 2003, chap. 1). As we will see later in this chapter, much recent attention has been paid to the nontraditional worship services held at megachurches, especially those that are seeker-oriented.

A particularly insightful recent study is Timothy Nelson’s (2005) analysis of Eastside Chapel, an African Methodist Episcopal (AME) church of some 300 members in Charleston, South Carolina. More than some other AME
churches, Eastside Chapel is Pentecostal in orientation, emphasizing the “gifts of the spirit.” Eastside Chapel members believe they can and should have relationships with God, Satan, and other spiritual beings; they are an objective reality for them, as consequential as human beings (Nelson, 2005, p. 49). Nelson showed how the Pentecostal beliefs and the ritual structure in Eastside Chapel’s service work together to organize and direct what otherwise seem to be spontaneous, enthusiastic outbursts from the members in worship. Jumping up and down, raising hands, shouting out, and even moving out into the aisles to dance are all governed by social norms prescribing what can be done, by whom, and when.

Table 8.1 Frequency of Worship Elements, From Perspective of Congregations and of Individuals, 1998 and 2006 to 2007

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Singing by congregation</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>97</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sermon/speech</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>97</td>
<td>98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Silent prayer/meditation</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Written program</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People speak/read/recite together</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People call out “amen”</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Applause</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Singing by choir</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People other than leader raise hands in praise</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People speak in tongues</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Electric guitar</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drums</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adults jump/shout/dance spontaneously</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visual project equipment</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


NOTE: All elements are found in most recent main service, except for speaking in tongues, which was any time in the past year.
As with any case study, Nelson’s offers great insight into the substance and process of worship. However, the question of representativeness also arises: How typical is Eastside Chapel? However, because it is a national sample of congregations, the NCS provides a national sample of worship. This first wave of the NCS explored worship according to a “repertoire” of worship elements (29 in total) that can be assembled by congregations in different ways (Chaves, 2004). The second wave asked about many, but not all, of those same elements. Table 8.1 shows the frequency of 14 different worship elements in 1998 and 2006 to 2007, both from the perspective of congregations and attenders.

As Table 8.1 indicates, there are two nearly universal elements in congregational worship: singing and preaching. In 1998, 96% of congregations (housing 98% of attenders) included singing in their weekly worship services, and 95% (with 97% of attenders) had a weekly sermon or speech. The average worship service was 70 minutes long, of which 20 minutes were devoted to a sermon and 20 minutes to music (Chaves, 2004, p. 133). These figures were essentially unchanged in the second wave of the NCS.

Beyond singing and preaching, other elements of worship were less ubiquitous and also evidenced more change from 1998 and 2006 to 2007. We will return to these changes in a moment. First, we observe with Chaves that there are systematic patterns in the elements congregations use and how they put them together. Congregations tend toward social homogeneity—that is, members of congregations tend to be like one another economically, racially, and ethnically—and Chaves (2004, p.135) found that worship elements vary systematically according to social class.

As Table 8.2 makes clear, poorer, less educated congregations are more spontaneous and demonstrative in their worship styles. In these congregations, one is more likely to see people jumping, shouting, dancing, raising their hands in prayer, speaking in tongues, and calling out “amen.” To return to the question previously posed, it is quite clear that Timothy Nelson’s case study of Eastside Chapel is generalizable. The worship style at Eastside is what Chaves (2004) would call “enthusiastic,” and as we would predict based on the NCS, Eastside is located in one of Charleston’s most impoverished neighborhoods.

In contrast, more affluent, well-educated congregations are more formal in style. In these congregations, one is more likely to see elements like singing by choirs, silent prayer or meditation, written programs, and incense. We discuss the reasons for this social class homogeneity in congregations at greater length in the next chapter (see also Chaves, 2004, pp. 139–143).

Although informal styles of worship are associated with lower socioeconomic status congregations, one of the most significant changes between the first and second waves of the NCS is the increasing informality of worship (Chaves & Anderson, 2008, p. 422). As Table 8.1 showed, in just 8 years, the percentage of congregations that report using visual projection equipment has increased by 15%.

Use of visual projection equipment rather than hymnals, praise bands, and praying with hands upraised in praise are on the increase in many congregations. While this type of emotionally intense worship was once associated with a particular social class, it is spreading through the culture, in part due to megachurches and televangelism.
Table 8.2 Congregational Social Class Differences in Use of Various Worship Elements

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Elements</th>
<th>Mean % of people with bachelor’s degrees</th>
<th>Mean % of people in poor households (&lt;$25,000 annual income)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Spontaneous and Demonstrative</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adults jump/shout/dance spontaneously</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People speak in tongues</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People other than leader raise hands in praise</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drums</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People call out “amen”</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Applause</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Electric guitar</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visual project equipment</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Common Features</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Singing by congregation</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sermon/speech</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Formal</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Singing by choir</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Silent prayer/meditation</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Written program</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People speak/read/recite together</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communion</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Incense</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**SOURCE:** National Congregations Study Wave 1 (Chaves, 2004, Table 5.2, p. 135).

**NOTE:** All elements are found in most recent main service, except for speaking in tongues, which was any time in the past year.

Drum use is up by 14%. Electric guitars and people raising their hands in praise increased by 12%. Indeed, all eight spontaneous and demonstrative elements listed in Table 8.2 became more common by 2006 and 2007. In contrast, the elements that become less common (written programs, people speaking/reading/reciting together, singing by choirs) are all formal worship elements.

What explains the increasing informality of worship? Analyzing the first wave of the NCS study, Chaves (2004) highlighted “a long-term
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trend toward informality in several cultural domains, including clothing, manners, and naming” (p. 158, citing Lieberson, 2000). The open systems perspective suggests that these broader cultural shifts cannot help but influence religious organizations.

Another explanation for the spread of informality in worship is the growing number and influence of megachurches, especially those “new paradigm” and “seeker” churches that use contemporary marketing strategies to reach bigger and bigger audiences. We turn our attention to these very large and influential religious communities next.

MEGACHURCHES

Stories about megachurches in the popular news media abound. For example, a 2005 New York Times Magazine cover story on “The Soul of the New Exurb” reported on Surprise, Arizona’s, Radiant Church (Mahler, 2005). Although it was only founded in 1997, the church had since grown to 5,000 weekly attendees in a new 55,000 square foot church with five 50-inch plasma screen TVs, a bookstore, café (including drive-through), Xboxes for the kids, and Krispy Kreme doughnuts at every service (the doughnut budget is $16,000 per year). The story quotes the church’s pastor, Lee McFarland, as saying, “We want the church to look like a mall. We want you to come in here and say, ‘Dude, where’s the cinema?’”

More recently, the website of Forbes magazine reported on megachurches using Second Baptist Church of Houston (est. 1978) as an example. Second Baptist is the sixth largest megachurch in America, claiming 53,000 members, over 22,000 weekly attendees, and an annual budget of $53 million dollars. It doesn’t just have a building with a sanctuary; it has five campuses that house fitness centers, bookstores, coffee shops, and an auto repair clinic. Of course, it does have a building for worship, which it is currently refurbishing to the tune of $8 million. It will seat 6,500 under a six-story high dome (Bogan, 2009).

Other well-known megachurches include the Willow Creek Community Church in South Barrington, Illinois (average attendance 23,400), and LifeChurch of Edmond, Oklahoma (26,776), not to mention the megachurches associated with famous pastors like Joel Osteen’s Lakewood Church in Houston (43,500), Rick Warren’s Saddleback Valley Community Church in Lake Forest, California (22,418), T. D. Jakes’s The Potter’s House in Dallas (17,000), and Creflo Dollar’s World Changers Ministries in College Park, Georgia (15,000).

Critical Thinking: The majority of megachurches (over 60%) are located in the southern Sunbelt of the United States—with California, Texas, Georgia, and Florida having the highest concentrations. Most are also located in suburban areas of rapidly growing sprawl cities such as Los Angeles, Dallas, Atlanta, Houston, Orlando, Phoenix, and Seattle. Although megachurches are geographically concentrated, there are megachurches in almost every state. The Hartford Institute for Religion Research maintains an interactive database of megachurches in the U.S. on its website: http://hirr.hartsem.edu/megachurch/database.html. You can sort their list by congregation, denomination, or size. You can also look at megachurches by state. What megachurches in the database are near where you live? Have you ever attended one of these megachurches? If so, how did your experience compare to what is described in this chapter?

By any measure, megachurches are a significant social phenomenon. According to Scott Thumma and Warren Bird (2008), megachurches
are “Protestant congregations that draw 2,000 or more adults and children in a typical weekend (attendance not membership)” (p. 1). (Due to their geographic—parish—organization and consequently larger average size, Catholic parishes are excluded from this definition.) Thus defined, the best estimate is that the total number of megachurches in the United States has increased from 50 in 1970 to over 600 in 2000 to more than 1,200 by 2010. Even though this is a small segment of the 300,000+ congregations in America, the average megachurch has weekly attendance of 4,142 persons, compared to 75 in the average of congregation. This means that over five million people attend services weekly in megachurches, giving them a disproportionately large influence.

In line with our earlier discussion of denominationalism, which connected the movements toward nondenominationalism and transdenominational evangelical Protestantism, 37% of all megachurches are nondenominational (up from 29% in 2000) and 65% self-identify as theologically evangelical (up from 48% in 2000) (Thumma & Bird, 2008). Of denominationally affiliated megachurches, 16% are Southern Baptist, 10% are other Baptist, and 6% are Assemblies of God. Regardless of their denominational affiliation, virtually all megachurches have a conservative theology, even those within mainline denominations (Thumma, Travis, & Bird, 2005).

The ever-present singing and preaching we find in congregations generally are translated in the megachurch ritual vernacular into electric guitars (often or always used in 96% of megachurches), drums or other percussion instruments (97%), and visual projection equipment (97%). Megachurches are also leading the way in terms of informal, spontaneous, and demonstrative contemporary worship styles. As a flier commissioned by the Radiant Church’s Pastor Lee McFarland and sent to the residents of Surprise, Arizona, put it: “You think church is boring and judgmental, and that all they want is your money? At Radiant you’ll hear a rockin’ band and a positive, relevant message. Come as you are. We won’t beg for your money. Your kids will love it!” Some sociologists have argued, and many megachurch pastors would readily admit, that everything done in megachurches is done intentionally for the purpose of attracting members and attenders. In this view, most megachurches can be considered “new paradigm” or “seeker churches.”

The state of Alaska may be the largest state in the United States (more than double the size of Texas), but the population is only a bit more than half a million. Still, even Anchorage, Alaska, has its megachurch—ChangePoint—with coffee bars, the largest gymnasium/recreation space in the state, Sunday school classrooms that look like the kids are in Noah’s Ark, and many other features to market the faith and draw people to the church.

“NEW PARADIGM” AND “SEEKER” CHURCHES: CONGREGATIONS WITH A MARKETING STRATEGY

Some newly founded and very rapidly growing religious communities have been extremely deliberate about marketing strategies. They have identified a “market segment” that they believe to be undersupplied or for which they believe a demand can be created. They assess the demographic characteristics of the population and seek to provide a service (pun intended) that will “sell.” Not all of these congregations are huge, but they do tend to
grow quickly. Donald Miller (1997) called these churches geared to marketing the “new paradigm churches.” Indeed, Miller believed these religious organizations are so significant that they represent the first wave of a new reformation that will shake the foundations of religion as we know it. He believed this new movement will be as profound as the reformation led by Calvin, Luther, Zwingli, Knox, and the Anabaptists of the 16th century.

Miller called these “new paradigm churches” because they seem to break many of the rules for reform movements. These religious organizations are unlike previous renewal or reform movements within Christianity. Some of the unique aspects can be summarized as follows:

- Unlike most reform movements, these churches are less interested in revising the message of the dominant religious establishment (that is, a rethinking of the meaning system) and more focused on a radical transformation in medium of delivery (for example, breaking away from stodgy 16th-century hymns accompanied by a pipe organ and presenting the faith through the music and technology of the youth culture).
- Whereas previous renewal groups have rejected the dominant culture and presented an image of world rejection, the new paradigm churches have assimilated greatly to the larger culture, adopting most of its technology and some of its values. This defies the typical sect-to-church-to-sect renewal pattern.
- As these organizations have developed, they have been remarkably “postmodern” organizations, with more emphasis on energetic activity than on hierarchy—more characterized by networking than by formal structures that control people’s behaviors within the organization.

The new paradigm churches have 12 common features, according to Miller (1997):

4. Worship is contemporary.
5. Lay leadership is highly valued.
6. They have extensive small group ministries.
7. Clergy and congregants usually dress informally.
8. Tolerance of different personal styles is prized.
9. Pastors tend to be understated, humble, and self-revealing.
10. Bodily, rather than merely cognitive, participation in worship is the norm.
11. The “gifts of the spirit” (a phrase that normally embraces “speaking in tongues”) are affirmed.
12. Bible-centered preaching predominates over topical sermonizing. (p. 20)

Kimon Howland Sargeant (2000) did a study of a similar (but not identical) phenomenon, a group of loosely connected Christian churches designed very specifically to market the faith to the unchurched. Sargeant looked at very rapidly growing churches, many of which either are or are becoming megachurches. These religious movements are referred to as “seeker churches” because they are designed to appeal to religiously alienated “seekers.” The population they address, the adoption of modern media, the insistence on upbeat messages, the ideas of marketing the faith through paying attention to method of delivery, the willingness to modify aspects of the faith to meet consumer demand, and the leadership by innovative (and often theologically untrained) religious entrepreneurs makes these organizations relevant to our focus on marketing of religion. For example, Sargeant (2000) said that “seeker church experts often proclaim the shopping mall, Disney, and other customer-sensitive companies as models for the twenty-first-century church” (p. 8). We will draw from the literature on both new paradigm and seeker groups in the remainder of this chapter. With Miller, we will consider “seeker-sensitive churches” as one type of new paradigm church.
The Audience: Targeting Markets

Like any good business that pays attention to marketing, seeker and new paradigm churches have focused on specific target markets. They analyze the characteristics of their target group and make adjustments to attract that population. Indeed, they sometimes hire consultants to conduct surveys of interest and needs of the local population and to develop market strategy action plans (Sargeant, 2000). It is important to realize what a profound shift this represents in evangelism. It would never have occurred to Great Awakening preachers like Jonathan Edwards to target the market. He simply preached what he believed to be the truth and trusted it would fall on receptive ears. While later evangelists such as Charles Finney, Dwight Moody, and Billy Sunday introduced a marketing perspective (Billy Sunday calculated the “efficiency” of revivals by determining the cost per convert and advocated “scientific management in the pulpit”), they did not focus explicitly on target markets or market shares.

While there are variations on the theme, new paradigm churches have largely targeted middle- to upper-middle-class families, especially those who were part of the baby boom generation and are college educated. Often the targeted group is “the unchurched,” but since white baby boomers, young adults, and the college educated are the least likely folks to be active in a church, and since baby boomers are a very large segment of the population, the target quickly becomes this same cohort. People who fit that profile generally have certain characteristics in common, and the new paradigm clergy are highly sensitive to those traits.

Thus, a key element of new paradigm churches is the desire to be culturally relevant. Miller (1997) wrote, “Simply put, if the message is going to communicate with an intended audience, it must be culturally appropriate” (p. 28). He further quoted a new paradigm minister as saying, “If [nonbelievers] are going to reject the message I preach, let them reject it, but let them reject the message and not all the peripheral things that are secondary” (Miller, 1997, p. 66).

Market-sensitive churches therefore try to appeal to people through themes that have cultural currency with middle-aged, well-educated Americans:

- They use the language of the therapeutic community (though they may reject the narcissistic elements of that subculture).
- They stress individualism.
- They are intensely antiestablishment (opposed to bureaucracy, but not necessarily antagonistic to the dominant culture, per se).
- They employ the metaphors of consumerist America, with the mall as a model of the good life.
- They appeal to the cultural styles that are current with the targeted cohort, such as music styles.

What this means is that direct requests for money are carefully avoided and offerings are unobtrusive (sometimes as minimalist as a box at the exit for contributions). Because “product loyalty” is very weak (including loyalty to a denomination), any affiliation to a denomination—if it does exist—is downplayed. Most new paradigm churches are independent, and those that are affiliated with a mainline denomination do not indicate that affiliation on their signs or their literature. This seems to be in keeping with the anti-bureaucracy attitudes of the baby boomers. Music is decidedly contemporary and upbeat, with a very strong preference for vocal and band music over the ponderous melodies of Bach played on an organ. Indeed, as was noted, guitars are everywhere, and meeting houses in the early years of a church’s growth are likely to be rented space in a mall, a renovated warehouse, or a rented auditorium with no stained glass or other of the accoutrements of traditional religious settings. Baby boomers by and large have a negative image of “organized religion” so the setting and the attire are not conventional “high church.” People dress very casually—including the ministers in many such congregations. Pastor Lee McFarland was pictured in the New York Times Magazine preaching in a Hawaiian shirt. This target group wants direct access to spirituality, not a mediated experience.
through ordained clergy. They are often free with bodily expression in worship, reaching levels of euphoria that would be embarrassing in mainline churches.

The historical Protestant idea of the “priesthood of all believers” resonates well with the members of new paradigm churches. Lay leadership is encouraged, pastors are understated in their leadership styles (even though they may be very much in charge behind the scenes), and members are invited to make their own interpretations of the meaning of scripture to their lives.

Modern technology has also facilitated the antiestablishment and local autonomy trends. The availability of computers, desktop publishing, and communications networks has meant that sizable local churches have sufficient resources and talent to write their own curricula for religious education and can produce other materials that congregations have normally obtained from the larger denomination (Miller, 1997). Each congregation or each program within a congregation is more capable of producing their own tailor-made materials with desktop publishing. The benefits of being affiliated with a denomination are therefore a bit muted.

The middle-aged professionals—who are the target population—value self-actualization highly. Moreover, as predominantly suburbanites, they are used to the many conveniences of suburban life, including having lots of choices. The expectation is carried over into their religious lives. Sargeant (2000) wrote, “One might describe the dominant characteristic of this cultural ethos as consumerism. People today, especially middle-class baby boomers, expect, even demand, choice in their workplace, home, shopping options, and their religious commitments” (p. 42). If religious individuals are the consumers in this equation, then religious communities are the producers of religious products that must be appealing in a competitive marketplace.

Creating an Appealing “Product”

Many unchurched people who are white-collar professionals are more comfortable in a business or consumer environment than in a traditional religious one. Thus, the huge Willow Creek Community Church near Chicago has developed a campus of new buildings that look more like a modern community college or a corporate training center than a faith community. Indeed, a mall is often explicitly used as a model of what these churches should be like, once they become large enough to build their own facilities. Sargeant (2000) wrote,

> Every aspect of the church’s facilities emulates the best of corporate America in quality, design, and style. Willow Creek’s aim is to reduce or minimize any cognitive dissonance between the religious realm and the working and shopping world of suburban middle-class Americans. (p. 19)

Many seeker-sensitive churches are even afraid of making people uncomfortable with too much religious symbolism, so a surprisingly high number of these evangelical churches do not even have a cross in the worship auditorium or in any prominent place (Sargeant, 2000, p. 61). Tradition is often avoided as well. Sargeant (2000) reported that seeker churches have taken a very low view of tradition in all of its various meanings. Tradition, according to many pastors, poses an unnecessary barrier for seekers. . . . Tradition, in short, represents the old paradigm, an outdated way of doing things that is largely ineffective in the current religious environment. (p. 63)

So eager are such churches to be user-friendly to the unchurched that American holidays are often highlighted over Christian holy days. In roughly a fourth of the seeker-sensitive congregations, there is not even any communion as part of worship, despite the fact that these are led by emphatically evangelical Christians (Sargeant, 2000, pp. 70–72). In the interests of recruitment, these churches have jettisoned aspects of organized religion that alienate young adults and baby boomers (Miller, 1997).

Services are designed to appeal to the cultural preferences of the target group; the pre-worship
music is often light rock or soft jazz “because rock music has played such an important role in the lives of baby boomers” (Sargeant, 2000, p. 65). The music style helps to define what kind of people a faith community wants to attract. Praise music is often written locally and is very rhythmic and upbeat. An important point is that these sounds are love songs to God rather than lyrics about God. Miller (1997) even describes the musical portion of the services as “a form of sacred lovemaking” (p. 87) to God. They are easy to sing and are emotionally evocative.

Of course this is also a population that seeks the novel and the innovative, so spontaneity prevails over ritual and contemplation; the services are often designed to surprise and intrigue attendees. Baby boomers generally do not cope with boredom patiently. Innovation is the name of the game. Drama is often employed as a major element of the morning service, as are multimedia entertaining “shorts.” Everything is very carefully choreographed and rehearsed, with timing as important as in a Broadway theatrical production. The pastor, while giving the image of a downhome sort of person, is actually performing as a CEO in a major corporation (Sargeant, 2000).

Seeker-sensitive churches try to present the gospel in a way that is relevant to the lives of attendees. Unlike many new paradigm churches that have sermons based on verse by verse explication of the Bible, the explicitly “seeker-sensitive churches” present messages that are topical and pragmatic. Message titles include “Fanning the Flames of Marriage,” “Authenticity,” “The Art of Decision Making,” and “Energy Management” (Sargeant, 2000, p. 18). Kimon Howland Sargeant (2000) pointed out that one danger of emphasis on “relevance” is that “the audience and not the messenger, determines, at the very least, the topics and tone of the message” (p. 81).

There is a danger in marketing religion, however, which brings us back to the issue of mixed motivations in a complex organization. In her study of televangelism empires, Frankl (1987) found that like any other institution, a religious corporation can face dilemmas that can compromise the original mission of the organization. The survival of a huge organization requires generation of large amounts of money to keep the organization going. Organizational maintenance of the huge financial enterprise may lead to goal displacement so that even the core beliefs of the group may be modified. According to Frankl, the content of religious programming in a market-driven religious enterprise often becomes transformed; it is no longer based on the message of the founder but on rationally calculated economic needs of the “business” to prosper. In today’s media world, content must be simple, fast-paced, and entertaining—not complex and thought-provoking—so the message itself may have to be truncated to meet the market needs. The message of Christianity may undergo scrutiny for its marketability and be modified accordingly. If a message is popular with the public, it “sells” well: The money pours in. So there is a temptation to preach only on those things that are profitable and to avoid preaching on those things that do not yield a financial reward. So the marriage of Christian message with marketing can sometimes change the message itself. The marketing process—changing the message to adapt to the market—may distort the message which the founder intended. This is a worst case scenario that you may consider as you learn about marketing a faith and efforts to avoid compromising it.

There is little that is challenging or complex in these churches regarding the ethics or the environmental impact of a consumerist lifestyle. Indeed, a message focusing on personal and private issues is so pervasive that there is little attention to social justice issues or to public or global causes. The church becomes a place for therapeutic comfort or for maximizing one’s full potential. God is immanent (a nearby source of comfort) but not a transcendent being who sets standards for a life lived in covenant with the divine. As Sargeant (2000) put it, “Seeker church pastors de-emphasize God’s inscrutability, God’s mystery, and God’s ultimate judgment” (p. 85). These things just do not “sell” well with this population.
Sin is recast as preventing realization of one’s potential as a human being. The measure of profound spirituality remains: “Is your soul being satisfied?” By contrast, First and Second Great Awakening evangelists believed that God had chosen the elect and God’s satisfaction was all that mattered; using human subjectivity as a standard of authentic Godliness would have been offensive and profoundly un-Christian to them. However, we live in a different time. Sargeant (2000) summarized it this way: “For today’s religious consumers, the search for meaning and fulfillment is as important—and initially even more important—than the search for God. . . . God becomes the means toward our fulfillment, rather than the end toward whom we owe our allegiance” (pp. 98, 121).

In addition to the worship hour being adapted, two other types of programs cater to the needs of the congregation. These seeker-sensitive churches are not necessarily different from other congregations, but they are clearly more intentional and more focused. First, they provide a wide range of entertainment and social opportunities: movie nights, marriage renewal weekends, family camping retreats, basketball and softball leagues, handball tournaments, and so forth. These are sometimes called the “side doors” of recruitment by church-growth consultants, since they are ways of attracting people to the church other than the historically preferred “front door”: the Sunday morning church service (Mahler, 2005).

Second, small groups are at the core of the ministry. Opportunities for deep intimacy are rare in a competitive capitalist society, and feelings of alienation from the structures and from other people are common. People in a dog-eat-dog, rapid-paced modern society need to feel human connection. New paradigm churches provide this. Indeed, they consider small groups to be the “real church experience,” not the Sunday morning worship hour. Virtually every member is urged to join at least one small group, for “this is a movement built on relationships” (Miller, 1997, p. 36). Sargeant (2000) cited the adage among leaders of these churches that “the church only grows bigger by growing smaller” (p. 118). These small groups can be Bible study groups, prayer groups, exclusively men’s or women’s gatherings, healing or therapeutic clusters, or other topical groups. However, they remain small, they challenge people to apply faith principles to their lives, they share intimately with one another about their lives, and they become potent reference groups. Many studies have shown that in churches of all sizes and denominations, small intimate groups are at the core of local church vitality, for we live in a society that atomizes and isolates us (e.g., see Wuthnow, 1994a).

Critical Thinking: New paradigm and seeker-sensitive churches are being very self-conscious about their marketing strategies to draw members. Yet Max Weber insists that people have always been more likely to join churches where there is “elective affinity” to their social, cultural, or economic circumstances. Is this any different? Does it make a difference whether the leaders unintentionally draw people with similar cultural values or interests or intentionally target an audience and modify the message to have greater appeal? Why?

Pragmatism About Methods and an Uncompromising Message

New paradigm clergy believe that they have changed the medium or the methods of delivery, but not the message. Scholars who study these groups are less sanguine that they have been successful in not compromising the message itself. Sargeant (2000) concluded that “changing the method can not only change your results; it can also change your message” (p. 131). A basic principle of marketing, of course, is that the product ought to change in order to meet the demand.
We have seen that marketed Christianity tends to become infused with local or national values—embracing consumerism, shying away from asking the larger ethical questions about the consequences of one’s behavior on others or on the natural environment, and even blessing a certain amount of self-absorption. Yet leaders of these new paradigm churches have tried to be self-conscious about what they believe to be the core of the faith—what is not open to compromise. It may be that their decisions about what is the kernel and what is chaff may differ from yours or mine or the mainline minister down the street, but there are some things on which they will not budge. The centrality of Jesus Christ is affirmed, as is the importance of a personal relationship with Jesus. The notion that human depravity is part of the human condition is affirmed, even if it is given a soft sell and is sold as a matter of self-actualization. Interestingly, a central theme in the baby boom generation is tolerance for others who are different—an openness to acknowledging that what is right for me is not necessarily right for you. This is perhaps the first generation of Americans in which the majority affirms that there are multiple paths to God, each with equal legitimacy. Indeed, a timely Gallup poll reports that of Americans who identify with a religious group, 82% said other paths to God are equally good as their own path (Gallup Organization, 2000). However, new paradigm churches are quite uniform in rejecting this notion. They proclaim that Jesus offers the exclusive access to God. This is an issue that for them is a core belief and is not to be compromised.

While the authority of scripture is affirmed, the intolerance that middle-class baby boomers find offensive is avoided. This rather “soft” approach to interpretation is consistent with new paradigm principles of priesthood of all believers in interpreting the meaning of the faith. In this case, compatibility with target-group values is achieved without compromise of basic principles.

The new paradigm ministers try to keep clarity about the message, the model, and the market: how these interact, which are most important, and which cannot be compromised. They do not all agree on where the lines should be drawn. Indeed, while some leaders in new paradigm churches actively utilize the language of the business world, not all are comfortable with this. Sargeant (2000) quoted a minister of music in one Baptist church: “People may think because we are a church, maybe we shouldn’t market. But any organization, secular or otherwise, if [it’s] going to grow, [it’s] got to get people to buy into the product” (p. 5). On the other hand, Miller found that most new paradigm pastors do not use the rational choice language about “selling a product.” They generally avoid the crass utilitarian terminology of the marketplace. Still, the leaders of these new paradigm churches are “entrepreneurs” in the sense that they innovate freely and seek to meet demand in the marketplace, but their purpose is spiritual. Ultimately a faith community is not a business seeking economic profits. For pastors and members, the purpose is spiritual and that makes a huge difference in standards of conduct. It is mostly social scientists using marketing perspectives who are likely to refer to individual congregations as local “franchises.”
**Critical Thinking:** Is “marketing” of religion intrinsically a problem that causes distortions of religion, or does competition in the marketplace of ideas add vitality and intensified commitment to religion? Why do you think as you do?

**Summary**

Denominationalism was born as a fundamentally American phenomenon, rooted in the pluralism of the new continent and the new country. Separation of church and state became central principles of the founders as they realized that religious tolerance and public policy need to be based on rational deliberation. This is the way the best interests of the country can be served in a culturally and religiously diverse society. In this environment, each religious group had to organize without state tax support. As congregations with similar outlooks or similar issues and cultures looked for ways to provide mutual support, denominations became the vehicle to do so. When religious groups that did not organize themselves into larger umbrella groups immigrated to the United States (Muslims, for example), they have tended to follow the pattern of “institutional isomorphism”—becoming like other religious communities in the environment. Moreover, this pattern of denominationalism has now spread around the globe to other places that are religiously and culturally diverse. Still, as we enter the third millennium, denominationalism seems less compelling as people organize around religious special purpose groups. Nondenominational Christian churches are now the largest “brand” of religious congregation in the United States.

Congregationalism—in which local congregations have a good deal of power and authority and no bishop controls policy—is also preeminently American. Even the more hierarchically organized churches—those with episcopal or presbyterian polity—have elements of congregationalism when they are in the United States. Congregations do vary in many ways: when we compare congregations, the median size of a congregation is 75, but because some congregations are huge, the typical American attends a congregation of about 400. Regardless of size or style of worship (which varies by social class), congregations provide a range of resources and support to their members. The most notable phenomenon in the past three decades has been the rise of megachurches: congregations of more than 2,000 and often becoming small cities with tens of thousands of members and a vast array of services. Often associated with these megachurches is a relatively new phenomenon—the explicit and intentional marketing of the faith so it will “sell” and so the organization can grow and thrive. This marketing involves finding target “markets” where there is a need and producing a “product”—a religious product—that will sell to that market. Critics claim that this includes a truncating and distortion of the message, but adaption of a faith to a new environment is hardly new or innovative. It has existed for a very long time.

One of the ways that religion is modified is that it must meet the needs for meaning of people in different socioeconomic circumstances. Thus we turn next to the issue of religion and inequality—how religion affects economic development and how it is affected by economic factors in the environment.