



# Congregations in the New Century

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**I**N 1964 SOCIOLOGIST PETER BERGER WROTE A LETTER TO AN INQUIRER ABOUT the parish ministry in which he suggested that the local congregation was likely to be the primary setting in which the Christian story would continue to be told for the foreseeable future.<sup>1</sup> Thirty-six years later, Berger's observation is arguably more accurate than when he first made it, but it is doubtful that he or anyone else could have foreseen the extent to which congregational life has become such an important subject of discussion in the church.

Congregations are indeed the primary form for the embodiment of the Christian story in American society today, but what that means for their life and practice has become a matter of intense debate, largely because of changes taking place in both church and society. Accordingly, the Christian church, its denominations and local expressions, is faced with challenges that will affect its prospects and possibilities well into this new century.

Throughout its nearly two-thousand-year history the church has been anything but a static reality. The need to adjust and respond to changes in the social and political context is nothing new. The fact that the church faces such a need to-

<sup>1</sup>Peter Berger, "Letter on the Parish Ministry," *The Christian Century*, 29 April 1964, 547-550.

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*Ministry in this new post-traditional century will require congregations that have a clear sense of mission, an identity formed by the gospel of Jesus Christ, and creative leadership anchored in that gospel but willing to take risks in order to make it known.*

day can be seen, therefore, as an opportunity rather than as a problem. The purpose of this essay is to attend to that sense of opportunity.

### I. THE NEW SITUATION

One indication of the changed situation in which the church finds itself can be seen by looking at membership figures of representative mainline denominations. The year in which Berger wrote his letter is about the high-water mark for church membership. By 1970 membership had begun to decline in terms of percentage of the population, and by 1980 actual membership was in decline. That trend has continued up to the present day.

Loren Mead of the Alban Institute has gathered some representative numbers.<sup>2</sup>

	<i>1970</i>	<i>1980</i>	<i>1990</i>
<i>Population of the United States</i>	203,302,031	226,542,203	248,709,873
Membership—EPISCOPALIAN	3,285,826	2,786,004	2,446,050
% of population	1.62%	1.23%	0.98%
Membership—PRESBYTERIAN	4,045,408	3,362,086	2,847,437
% of population	1.99%	1.48%	1.14%
Membership—UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST	1,190,608	1,736,244	1,599,212
% of population	0.96%	0.77%	0.64%
Membership—UNITED METHODIST CHURCH	10,509,198	9,519,407	8,904,824
% of population	5.17%	4.20%	3.58%
Membership—ELCA (Lutheran)	5,560,137	5,384,271	5,240,739
% of population	2.78%	2.38%	2.11%

Such figures set the stage for this essay's attempt to assess how congregations from mainline denominations might think about their future given a changing social and ecclesiastical context. In attending to such numbers Mead himself suggests that they represent the end of a particular way of understanding and thinking about the church. They mark the end of the domination of the Christendom paradigm, which has been the primary way in which the church has understood its life and mission since Constantine's conversion to Christianity in 313 A.D. led to the establishment of Christianity as the official religion of the empire. What will suc-

<sup>2</sup>Loren B. Mead, *Transforming Congregations for the Future* (Washington, DC: Alban Institute, 1994) 128.

ceed the Christendom paradigm is not yet clear, and that unclarity, even confusion, is what is characteristic of the current time of transition.

Douglas John Hall has come to a comparable conclusion. Christianity's sojourn "as the official religion of the officially optimistic society" has come to an end.<sup>3</sup> Christianity's loss of its privileged position reflects its failure to take account of the negative dimensions of human experience at a time when human experience is increasingly characterized by negation and disintegration. Thus, Christianity has lost its credibility in its identification with a shallow cultural optimism.

Both a change in self-understanding and a change in how Christianity is perceived by society are taking place with significant implications for congregational life. Before moving to the congregational level, however, it will be helpful to describe in fuller detail what seems to be happening using Mead, Hall, and Jackson W. Carroll as our guides.

### *1. A loss of dominance*

Mead describes what is taking place as a change in the dominant paradigm which has governed the way the church has understood itself and its mission for most of its history. Under the Christendom paradigm distinctions between social, political, and religious realities were diminished. There was an assumed unity of the sacred and the secular, with the actions of religious and political leaders being mutually reinforcing.

Mission was an activity directed at those outside of the political-religious unity of the western world. In fact mission was often associated with political diplomacy and at least on occasion accomplished through cultural or even military imperialism. Internal cohesiveness for both church and state was often a product of external enemies. Life outside of the church was life outside of both the law and the faith, and membership in the church was effectively a matter of birth more than a consequence of baptism. To be a Christian, therefore, was, "to be a good, law-abiding citizen; to pay the taxes that supported religious and secular institutions alike; to support the efforts to enlarge the Empire and bring in the pagan world; to be obedient to one's superiors (disobedience was both seditious and heretical); and to support the whole system with one's prayers and, if necessary, with one's life."<sup>4</sup>

As an attempt to provide a way to understand the Christian life and a framework in which it could be lived out, the Christendom paradigm was attractive and appealing. It is, however, no longer adequate for the situation in which the church finds itself.

The break with that paradigm, as Mead understands it, became irrevocable with the conviction that laity have a ministry. "If there is a ministry of the laity, then the church is no longer the same as the Empire."<sup>5</sup> Taking seriously the fact that the church and "empire" are not the same sets before the church a new agenda, an uncertain future, and the need for a new paradigm.

<sup>3</sup>Douglas John Hall, *Lighten Our Darkness* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1976) 74.

<sup>4</sup>Loren B. Mead, *The Once and Future Church* (Washington, DC: Alban Institute, 1991) 17.

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.*, 25.

## 2. *A loss of establishment*

If Mead concentrates on the self-understanding of the church, Hall focuses on the stance that the church has taken vis-à-vis the larger society. The church is gradually being disestablished by a culture that no longer finds in the Christianity of the mainline churches convincing truth claims or plausible interpretations of experience. Church involvement has become strictly a matter of individual choice. The church can passively accept the process of disestablishment and watch both its authenticity and effectiveness continuously diminish or it can reclaim its integrity and seek to disestablish itself from the culture in order once again to be able to engage the world properly and authentically.

In other words, the situation that the churches face has to do with becoming once again an authentic expression or embodiment of the Christian story, a role which the churches had forfeited through their social and political establishment.

## 3. *A loss of tradition*

Jackson W. Carroll has appropriated the word “detraditionalization” to describe what he thinks is at the heart of the situation of the Christian church at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Typically, traditions—especially religious traditions—are important because they help individuals locate themselves in a larger story than their personal one. Traditions also provide a way or ways to view the world, including identifying expectations with respect to behavior and relationships. When traditions function well they play a formative role in how the future gets shaped.

What is becoming increasingly obvious, however, is that “many traditions no longer carry the authoritative weight that they once did.”<sup>6</sup> Since the eighteenth-century enlightenment’s emphasis on reason and the autonomous individual the process of detradditionalization has gathered momentum until it is possible today to talk with some justification about our society as a post-traditional society. In such a society truth and authority reside not in something external and outside of oneself but rather as internal realities: in the heart, mind, will, knowledge, or experience of the individual.

In a post-traditional society, individuals are encouraged and, to some extent, forced to construct their own identities and to choose how they want to live—in marked contrast with traditional societies in which identities are preassigned or ascribed and expected and acceptable behavior clearly defined. The reality is that the

social relations that have supported the passing on of traditions have...become *disembedded*,...many of our day-to-day social relationships have been lifted out of the time- and place-bound local contexts and communities in which traditions and tradition-bearing institutions have had their powerful identity-shaping effects. Destabilizing these social relations likewise destabilizes the traditions that they embody and the practices that sustain the traditions.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>6</sup>Jackson W. Carroll, *Mainline to the Future* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2000) 15.

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*, 18.

The language of disembedded social relations or destabilized traditions points to the increased weight given to choice as a feature of contemporary life. No longer tied to geography to the extent that the generations before us were, we are faced with decisions about where we live, what we do, and with whom we associate. Life is increasingly experienced in fragments, no longer embedded in coherent narratives or perspectives or stable institutions.

Carroll sums up some of the factors leading to the disembeddedness of traditions as follows: “the changing nature of families and communities, travel, instantaneous communications, and encounters with diversity—these experiences make it increasingly difficult, especially for the young, to find their place in stable narratives or traditions both as sources of meaning for the present and as orientation for organizing one’s future.”<sup>8</sup>

It must also be said, however, that not all individuals or groups experience the erosion of traditions to the same extent. Some persons and groups have remained largely untouched by the process of detraditionalization: some because of intentional action that they have taken to avoid it or protect themselves from it, others because their social location and personal choices have shielded them from most of its effects.

Neither should it be assumed that post-traditional society means the disappearance of tradition or that traditions will no longer exercise any influence. Rather, it means “a world in which traditions can be claimed, rejected, reinterpreted, or even invented, but not simply taken for granted and uncritically followed.”<sup>9</sup>

This review of the work of Loren Mead, Douglas John Hall, and Jackson W. Carroll has identified several ways to think about the current situation of mainline denominations in the United States at the beginning of a new millennium. In spite of their different emphases, however, the general conclusions of these authors are the same. The churches find themselves in a new situation relative to their social and cultural context. Their privileged and taken-for-granted position in society no longer seems to hold true. It is not that religion is no longer important in our society; in fact, there are any number of indications that would suggest an increasing interest in religion throughout society. Neither is it the case that post-traditionalists are hostile or opposed to mainline denominations. Denominational Christianity is being ignored rather than attacked. It is perceived as being uninteresting and irrelevant.

## II. FACING THE NEW SITUATION

In such an environment the churches cannot continue business as usual if they want to be faithful and effective in their mandate to go and make disciples. Whether the precipitating factor is described as the collapse of the Christendom

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., 22.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., 25.

paradigm (Mead), cultural establishment with its attendant loss of authenticity and integrity (Hall), or the loss of embedded traditions in a postmodern world (Carroll), the result is the same: a need for churches to rethink what they are and how they are to give shape and substance to their presence in the world.

That need, in my judgment, can most adequately be addressed and settled at the congregational level. First of all, because Peter Berger is right—congregations continue to be the primary locations in which the Christian story is kept alive. Congregations are the most viable form of church that we know—flaws and distortions notwithstanding.

But there is another reason why it is necessary to address this need at the congregational level. Post-traditional society has a rather deep-seated distrust of institutions, especially the further removed they are from the grass-roots level. Studies rather routinely remind us that denominational loyalty is a limited value for contemporary Christians, even those for whom membership in some community of faith is thought to be important. Thus, affiliation with a community of faith is primarily dependent on choices that are made in response to the type of worship, programs, ethos, and leadership present in particular congregations or worshiping groups. In other words, such decisions are made locally; therefore, it is at the local congregational level that the challenges posed by a changing society will be played out. The question, then, is what the local congregation is to be and do in order to be faithful to its calling and appropriately responsive to its societal context.

### *1. A new mission*

For an initial response to that question, I want again to turn to Mead, Hall, and Carroll but this time for their proposals in response to that question. For Mead, the church needs to foster the growth of congregations that understand their task as that of serving the transformation of ordinary people. Mission needs to be understood as an opportunity and, more importantly, the responsibility of each congregation. Mission is at the front door of every congregation; it is no longer a task for professionals at the edge of the frontier, however true that may have been at one time.

The transformation of ordinary people involves a movement from discipleship to apostleship, that is, a movement from *knowing* what is necessary to follow Jesus to *doing* what is necessary to follow Jesus. If congregations are to be faithful and effective in carrying out that mission they will need to attend to the traditional functions of congregational life, but with greater intentionality and passion than is currently the case for most.

Thus, from Mead's perspective, transforming congregations will be those that seek to become a genuine community (*koinonia*), able to reach out and also to nurture those within. They will be communities in which the word of God is proclaimed (*kerygma*), offering forgiveness and hope because of what God has done in and through Jesus the Christ. They will be communities marked by teaching and learning (*didache*), not only telling and retelling the biblical stories but witnessing

to the ongoing activity of God in the world. And they will be communities of service (*diakonia*), attending to the brokenness of the world in ways that bind and heal.

Such congregations will be in effect “demonstration” communities, embodying a way of being in the world that is faithful to God and also responsive to the needs not only of its members but of those outside the sanctuary. Rather than functioning within the Christendom paradigm, Mead suggests two other images from the Old Testament era of Ezra and Nehemiah at the end of the exile. The task for the Israelites returning to their land was twofold: to rebuild the city wall and to restore the temple. These images point to what is necessary for contemporary congregations. They need, in effect, to rebuild the city wall, that is to define themselves, and to restore the temple, that is, to create a strong internal life. What congregations are is more important than what they do.

Congregations, thus, need to be places where transformation can occur, nourishing participants in the process of transformation, empowering them to be engaged in mission, providing hospitality for those who enter, and attracting others to their fellowship by virtue of what they are.

## 2. *A new vision*

Hall argues for a new theological vision. As the officially established religion of the western world, Christianity has opted for a theology of glory. If the church is going to disestablish itself, that is, to regain some sense of agency in the world rather than merely allowing itself to be disestablished by the culture, then it will need to replace a theology of glory with a theology of the cross. A theology of glory is unable to deal with the experiences of negation and suffering that increasingly characterize the human condition.

Congregations shaped by an indigenous theology of the cross, that is, ones that take seriously their actual context, will be able to live into the darkness and injustice of the current age by providing a place to ask questions before giving answers. A theology of the cross would call into being a community marked not by privilege or mastery but by humility and service.

Congregations that live under a theology of the cross live not for themselves but for the world. They will be willing to join with all persons in a quest for moral authenticity, for authentic community, for transcendence and mystery, and for meaning, quests common to the human spirit.<sup>10</sup>

As people of the cross, congregational members are to be as salt, yeast, and light within society. Such biblical images are not great or glorious; rather, they announce an intention of being something on behalf of the larger society and recognize that they are worthless when they refuse or fail to be what they are intended to be.

Congregations choosing to be salt, yeast, and light have a story—grounded in the cross of Jesus the Christ—to embody and a mission to be engaged, that of par-

<sup>10</sup>Douglas John Hall, *The End of Christendom and the Future of Christianity* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1997) 57-65.

ticipating in God's reconciling action designed to make the world whole, to fulfill its promise, to mend its torn and tattered life.

A theology of the cross that takes seriously both the suffering of God and the suffering of the world is the foundation of the congregation's life. Congregations are to nurture the kind of earnest and informed commitment to Jesus the Christ that will make them as prepared as Jesus was to *be* agents of God's reconciliation in the world through self-sacrifice, voluntary suffering, and informed disciplined service.

### 3. *A new approach*

At a time when the authority of traditions has declined, Carroll looks to the "various newer local ecclesiologies" for examples of how congregations are to approach the future. Identified by such names as seeker churches, cell churches, megachurches, seven-day-a-week churches, mall churches, or next churches, these typically larger non-traditional congregations have emerged as creative attempts to respond to the reality of an unsettled post-traditional world.<sup>11</sup>

Such congregations emphasize the authority of the Bible while de-emphasizing tradition. They favor present-oriented, Spirit-directed worship in a contemporary musical idiom. Strong leadership, not necessarily seminary educated, is combined with an emphasis on the gifts of the people. Small groups provide a place for study and sharing but also serve as a staging ground for outreach and service. Usually theologically conservative without embracing fundamentalism, such congregations reach out with a casual, informal style yet high expectations and many opportunities for commitment.

Such congregations represent an emphasis on one side of what has been an ongoing debate, tension, or even conflict throughout church history—an emphasis on the church as a movement more than on the church as an institution, on freedom and the blowing of the Spirit more than on tradition and an accompanying reliance on structure and defined patterns of organization. The need is for both tradition and freedom, but Carroll is convinced that what is needed today is more emphasis on freedom. "My central point is that the circumstances of posttraditional society call for us to come down on the side of freedom and boldness in adapting existing ecclesial practices to meet new realities and, at times, in constructing new practices."<sup>12</sup>

Not all congregations can or even should become post-traditional congregations, however. Neither are the Willow Creeks of the ecclesiastical world beyond criticism. There are, however, some lessons to be learned from the post-traditional congregations, beginning with boldness in exercising freedom in shaping the congregation's practices and structure. Leadership must also be bold, creative, and entrepreneurial, able to discern needs, imagine new ways of responding to such

<sup>11</sup>Carroll, *Mainline*, x.

<sup>12</sup>*Ibid.*, 67.



needs, and enlist the resources and gifts of laity in service of that discernment. Unashamedly proactive use of market research has proven to be helpful in discovering needs and then in shaping strategies and practices effective in welcoming and receiving new members: simple but engaging worship using contemporary idioms without relying on particular symbols or architectural styles, affirmation and employment of personal gifts, and a commitment to the use of small groups. Above all such congregations have identified the importance of creating a climate characterized by seriousness with respect to what is understood to be central to the faith and relative freedom with respect to matters deemed not of its essence.

Overall, “by offering clear doctrinal and moral teachings expressed in a contemporary idiom that takes participants’ culture seriously, by emphasizing excellence in all aspects of their ministries, and by providing occasions for deep religious experiences, post-traditional congregations offer an appealing religious option among the variety of alternatives available in a detraditionalized ‘religious marketplace.’”<sup>13</sup>

### III. MISSION, IDENTITY, LEADERSHIP

Congregations deciding to deal positively with the opportunity that the contemporary situation presents them can learn from each of the perspectives already presented. Mead’s conviction is that congregations need to take the importance of mission seriously both because engaging in mission is of the essence of what it means to be a congregation and because it is precisely what the context demands. In order to be effective in mission, each congregation will need to attend to the traditional functions of congregational life—*kerygma*, *koinonia*, *didache*, and *diakonia*—which will serve both to define the congregation (clarify its identity) and to create a strong internal life which is the prerequisite for mission.

Hall’s conviction is that congregations need to pay explicit attention to their identity. This entails the appropriation of a theological vision that can ground a posture of servanthood in the world. A theology of glory cannot provide such a vision; a theology of the cross can. To be salt, yeast, and light is not to strive for greatness or even respectability. It is instead to recognize the extent to which the Christian story stands in contrast, even opposition, to the prevailing values, assumptions, and goals of society. Congregations may thus discover that they have become aliens in their own land, but “only as a community that does not find its source of identity and vocation *within* its cultural milieu can the church acquire any intimations of ‘gospel’ *for* its cultural milieu.”<sup>14</sup>

Carroll’s contention is that what congregations particularly need today is the freedom to explore and create new ways of being the church. Such freedom need not entail a rejection of either the past or all things traditional. But it does require

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., 97.

<sup>14</sup>Hall, *End of Christendom*, 55-56.

leadership that is willing to take risks, holding firm to what is central to the Christian faith, while encouraging exploration and creativity in all other matters.

I want to conclude these reflections by suggesting that those congregations which will be able to respond to the current situation with some measure of confidence and effectiveness will be those that pay attention to the three themes that have been woven together in this discussion: mission, identity, and leadership.

The descriptions provided by Mead, Hall, and Carroll have defined the general challenge that faces mainline congregations in the United States today. The more specific nature of the challenge will depend on the unique circumstances of the particular societal context in which each congregation exists.

Each congregation will, therefore, have to determine for itself what it is to be and do in order to be faithful to its calling and responsive to its social context. But that determination is likely to be more adequate and its embodiment more effective if it takes seriously the importance of mission, identity, and leadership in its work. If the Christian story is to continue to be told, it will be in congregations—communities gathered around worship and the word—and through their practices that the telling will happen. And if that story is to be told well and persuasively in the current social context, it will be by congregations that have a clear sense of mission emerging from an identity forged in an encounter with the gospel of Jesus Christ, and creative leadership—both lay and ordained—anchored in that gospel but willing to take risks in order that the good news might be heard in a post-traditional world.<sup>15</sup> ⊕

<sup>15</sup>The importance of attending to matters of identity, mission, and leadership in creating and nurturing healthy congregational life first became clear to me as one result of spending significant time with sixteen congregations during my sabbatical year in 1997-1998.