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Congregational Niche Building and Community-Based Sociopolitical Activism

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> Churches are in kind of a survival mode, with dwindling memberships, and clergy are focused on the immediate needs in their churches and communities.
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> —Curtis Ramsey-Lucas, Director of Legislative Advocacy, American Baptist Churches (U.S.A.), 1999

The twentieth century transformed American religious denominations in profound and permanent ways. What were once stalwart, thriving denominational structures now face serious fissures because of profound internal differences of opinion on matters ranging from doctrine to politics. Some of the leading Protestant congregations of earlier centuries have given way to newer manifestations of American religion's ever-growing diversity, including nondenominational evangelical megachurches and a full complement of non-Christian faith communities. Is there still a place for mainline Protestant congregations and denominations in this fast-changing American religious landscape?

Even in the face of dramatic transformation, denominations and congregations remain key organizational entities within American religious life. Despite

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In the competitive American religious marketplace, congregations must find ways of distinguishing themselves in order to attract and retain members. For some congregations, sociopolitical activism can be an effective means of building a unique community niche.

their increasing diversity, denominations retain meaning and vitality. In addition, the congregation is still the most significant organizational means of gathering the faithful in cities and towns across the United States. Both denominations and congregations, however, must grapple with the simple fact that times have changed by adapting themselves to the demands of American religious life in the twenty-first century.

Two key realities face every American congregation as this new century unfolds. First, even though most congregations retain ties to one denomination or another, intradenominational diversity is now part and parcel of American religion. Conservative congregations coexist side-by-side (but not always peacefully) with liberal congregations within the same denomination. It is this diversity that generates much of the infighting that we observe across Protestantism over doctrinal, moral, and political issues. Second, American religion is characterized by stiff competition. Congregations that hope to survive can no longer rely on their denominational label as the primary means of attracting and retaining members. Instead, congregations that create unique community niches for themselves are those that seem to succeed. Congregations that do not carve out distinct niches are more likely to fail over the long run.

Crass though it may sound, in the highly competitive free marketplace that is American Protestantism it is crucial for congregations to develop and implement successful local "marketing strategies." Two societal trends—denominational decline and the current liberal-conservative bifurcation of religion in the United States—exacerbate the need for what I shall call congregational "niche building." This article is designed to (1) explain why such niche building is relevant and necessary and (2) explore how and why community-based sociopolitical activism can be a viable niche-building strategy for some congregations.

The Challenges of Denominational Diversity

In 1955, Will Herberg published his well-known book *Protestant-Catholic-Jew*, reflecting the primary divisions in American religion during the era in which he wrote.[1] Indeed, American religion's major dividing points at midcentury were ecclesiastical; religious traditions and denominations were the primary means of religious differentiation. Today, however, denominational ties are no longer as meaningful as they once were. It is not a stretch to say that a conservative church is conservative first, and Baptist, Lutheran, or Methodist second.

Robert Wuthnow argues that the significance of denominationalism has declined precipitously since World War II for several reasons.[2] The Protestant-Catholic dichotomy in the United States has become less sharp as Catholics have

[1]Will Herberg, *Protestant-Catholic-Jew* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1955); see also Gerhard Lenski, *The Religious Factor: A Sociological Study of Religion's Impact on Politics, Economics, and Family Life* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1961).

[2]Robert Wuthnow, *The Restructuring of American Religion: Society and Faith since World War II* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988).

assimilated and anti-Catholic stigmatization has declined. Social status is now less strongly enmeshed in one's religious tradition than was previously the case. People marry across religious traditions without compunction. Americans are now much more willing to engage in denominational switching than they were in previous centuries. Many in fact prefer nondenominational churches such as Willow Creek Community Church in Wheaton, Illinois, or the Potter's House in Dallas. Generally speaking, Americans today seem less likely than their forebears to include denominational membership among the key components of their self-identity.[3]

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As denominationalism has declined, a liberal-conservative dimension has emerged as one of the more important points of division within American religion. This dimension traces its roots to the fundamentalist-modernist split of the early twentieth century in which Protestants sorted themselves into two camps based on their views about the appropriateness of accommodating religious life to modern scientific and technological advances. The major denominations of mainline Protestantism moved in a more accommodationist, secular direction, whereas Protestant conservatives (then referred to by the blanket term "fundamentalists") largely retreated from the affairs of this world. The liberal-conservative dichotomy reasserted itself in the 1950s and continued into the 1970s, when theologically and politically liberal voices within Protestantism became involved in a range of public protests from the civil rights movement to the anti-Vietnam War movement. By the late 1970s, theologically conservative Protestants had become profoundly concerned with shifting moral standards in the United States and mobilized themselves (first under the banner of Jerry Falwell's Moral Majority) to bring a religiously conservative sociopolitical agenda to bear on the United States. This dissension among and within religious circles reflects a lack of consensus over moral issues that pervades American culture today.[4]

The liberal-conservative split is evidenced today in intradenominational battles over matters such as ecumenism, the use of gender-neutral language, homosexuality, and the ordination of women. We constantly hear reports that one denomination or another is about to split apart as a result of disagreements over one of these issues. Organizationally speaking, however, denominational splits are relatively unlikely. Inertia and tradition will hold most current denominations together (at least for the most part). Far more likely is that denominations will con-

[3]On this point, consider Robert Bellah's classic statement of "Sheilaism." See Robert N. Bellah et al., *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985).

[4]Wuthnow, *Restructuring of American Religion*; James Davison Hunter, *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America* (New York: Basic Books, 1991).

tinue to persist in the face of growing diversity. As a result, it will be more difficult for congregations to distinguish themselves from their "competition" based on denominational labels alone, because the meaning of denominational labels themselves is now relatively unclear. Does "United Methodist" mean the liberal congregation that affirms homosexuality and marches against injustices of every variety, or does "United Methodist" mean the conservative "Confessing Movement" congregation that assists with a crisis pregnancy center and calls for greater theological rigor?

THE FREE MARKET AND AMERICAN RELIGION

One of the most influential developments in the social-scientific study of religion in recent years has been the theory that the American religious landscape shares several characteristics with the capitalist notion of the free market. As the argument goes, "where religious affiliation is a matter of choice, religious organizations must compete for members and...the 'invisible hand' of the marketplace is as unforgiving of ineffective religious firms as it is of their commercial counterparts."[5] Denominations and congregations rise and fall on the basis of how well they are able to compete against other alternatives. Because of the First Amendment's guarantees of religious freedom, the United States is a nearly unfettered free marketplace for organized religion. According to Roger Finke and Rodney Stark, denominations and congregations alike either succeed or fail in the long run depending on the quality and distinctiveness of their organizational structures, "sales representatives" (namely clergy), "product," and marketing techniques.[6]

The need to develop niche-building strategies is especially crucial for mainline Protestant congregations. There was, of course, a time when mainline Protestant denominations and congregations enjoyed a good measure of social hegemony. Congregationalists, Episcopalians, and Presbyterians in particular exercised substantial social influence and used it to their advantage. They had few worries about filling either pews or coffers. However, those days are now gone. Studies show that churches enforcing strict moral standards and teachings have fared best in America's religious marketplace.[7] Much of the appeal of strict churches is that they offer both a visible alternative to the rampant secularism of everyday life and clear moral answers to life's most vexing questions.[8] In the past century, mainline Protestantism has not often positioned itself as either stridently anti-secular or morally absolutist. This positioning has contributed to the relative decline of mainline

[5]Roger Finke and Rodney Stark, *The Churching of America, 1776–1990: Winners and Losers in Our Religious Economy* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1992) 17.

[6]Ibid.

[7]Finke and Stark, *Churching of America*; Laurence R. Iannacone, "Why Strict Churches Are Strong," *American Journal of Sociology* 99 (1994) 1180–1211; Dean M. Kelley, *Why Conservative Churches Are Growing: A Study in Sociology of Religion* (New York: Harper, 1972).

[8]For more on this argument, see Robert Booth Fowler, *Unconventional Partners: Religion and Liberal Culture in the United States* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989).

Protestantism, both denominationally and congregationally. Yet mainline Protestantism would cease to lose all relevance if it were to alter its theology in an attempt to imitate evangelical Protestantism. Mainline congregations need to find alternative ways of competing in the religious marketplace.

How can mainline congregations go about the difficult business of attracting and retaining members? Some churches engage in drastic transformations. Robert Chesnut, a pastor of a Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) congregation in Pittsburgh, has written about the many difficult efforts he and his congregants undertook to reinvigorate their congregation and make its work relevant to their members and the surrounding community. Some of their innovations included the inclusion of contemporary "seeker" services, the construction of a Taizé prayer maze, and the institution of a variety of activities designed to incorporate the church's African American neighbors.[9] Milwaukee's Greg Van Dunk, a pastor of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, explains how he helped to rebuild a previously German American urban congregation that had declined and disbanded. The new congregation, which is primarily African American, was built up through creative neighborhood outreach projects.[10] Similarly, sociologist James Wellman presents an insightful and thorough analysis of Chicago's Fourth Presbyterian Church, which has adapted in myriad ways over the years to the changing needs of its congregants and surrounding neighborhood.[11]

In order for mainline Protestant congregations to continue to thrive, they must rethink the "market preferences" of the people whom they might serve most expediently.[12] Sometimes that means embracing contemporary worship styles. Sometimes it means deleting the denominational name from the church sign (Chesnut's Pittsburgh congregation is called the Cathedral of Hope; Van Dunk's Milwaukee congregation is called All Peoples Church). And sometimes it can mean engaging in community-based sociopolitical activism.

Religion and Politics

One of the first policy actions that President George W. Bush accomplished following his 2001 inauguration was to establish the White House Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives. The core reason for the establishment of this office was the recognition by elected officials of both parties that many congregations participate in local-level service delivery work. In particular, congregations often serve community members who live in poverty or struggle with drug and alcohol

[9]Robert A. Chesnut, *Transforming the Mainline Church: Lessons in Change from Pittsburgh's Cathedral of Hope* (Louisville: Geneva, 2000).

[10]Greg Van Dunk, *Let the Glory of the Lord Rise among Us: Growing a Church in the Heart of the City* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2002).

[11]James K. Wellman, *The Gold Coast and the Ghetto: Christ and Culture in Mainline Protestantism* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1999).

[12]See Nancy T. Ammerman, *Congregation and Community* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1997).

addictions. Why not allow faith-based organizations to compete with secular organizations for federal funds to help them undertake this work?[13]

This policy development has provided congregations with enhanced opportunities and incentives to engage in sociopolitical action at the local level. Examples of such action include feeding the hungry; sheltering the homeless; collecting clothing for the less fortunate; offering programs for children, the elderly, and the disabled; counseling those addicted to drugs and alcohol; and even providing healthcare services. The most politically engaged congregations go even further by lobbying local government and business elites about issues that concern them, either unilaterally or in coalition with other congregations. Such activism is sometimes organized by national and regional networks, including the Industrial Areas Foundation and the Pacific Institute for Community Organization.[14]

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Congregational involvement in sociopolitical outreach can be a highly beneficial niche-building strategy—with or without federal funding. Such activity helps prospective members to understand what values a church stands for. Particular forms of outreach can readily identify a congregation as either conservative or liberal. In addition, some individuals are specifically attracted to certain congregations because of their politics. A Lutheran pastor once told me (quite proudly) that people were drawn to his church because "they know that we take very strong justice stands on social issues." Sociologist Penny Edgell Becker argues that it is commonplace for congregations to define themselves primarily through shared social and political values.[15] Some people will be attracted to the clear articulation of values that comes from community-based activism. Such articulation of values also helps to build bonds of friendship and commitment among congregants, which might make them less likely to leave for another church. As Ram Cnaan has argued, "social ministry can act as the glue that holds the congregation together, beyond the spiritual aspect of worshipping together."[16]

Of course there are inevitable challenges facing congregations that include sociopolitical activism among their marketing strategies. The first such challenge

[13]On President Bush's faith-based initiatives, see Amy E. Black, Douglas L. Koopman, and David K. Ryden, *Of Little Faith: The Politics of George W. Bush's Faith-Based Initiatives* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2004); E. J. Dionne and Ming Hsu Chen, eds., *Sacred Places, Civic Purposes: Should Government Help Faith-Based Charity?* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2001).

[14]On this sort of organizing, see Stephen Hart, *Cultural Dilemmas of Progressive Politics: Styles of Engagement among Grassroots Activists* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001); Richard L. Wood, *Faith in Action: Religion, Race, and Democratic Organizing in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002).

[15]Penny Edgell Becker, *Congregations in Conflict: Cultural Models of Local Religious Life* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

[16]Ram A. Cnaan, *The Invisible Caring Hand: American Congregations and the Provision of Welfare* (New York: New York University Press, 2002) 246; see also Ammerman, *Congregation and Community*.

concerns the normative propriety of church-state interaction. It is inevitable that some congregants will chafe against activity that even borders on the political, on the grounds that the church has no business in the affairs of the state (and vice versa). As such, only congregations in which most members share similar political viewpoints should pursue sociopolitical activism as a marketing strategy. Nevertheless, a sizable majority of the hundreds of mainline Protestant clergy whom I have interviewed over the years for my research say that it is appropriate and important for their congregations to be involved in community activism, particularly to ameliorate poverty. Mainline clergy are equipped theologically to justify congregational initiatives that can be quite political.

Another challenge stems from the need for congregations to be intentional and open about their sociopolitical work. It is impossible to run a service-delivery program if full information about that program is not available to congregation members. Not only does full disclosure promote needed volunteerism, but it also encourages the congregation to incorporate such work into their formal mission statements. As a United Methodist pastor once told me, "One of the problems I think the churches have is that they don't have a clearly enough defined mission statement…. [My church] has a very clear mission statement that we're committed to." This pastor and many others like him have found that the best way to make a difference in people's lives is through intentionally and openly pursuing local-level advocacy.

A related challenge lies in the argument that the political work of a religious body should be undertaken only by its top elites. Yet, the national-level political witness of mainline Protestantism has dwindled over the past few decades. Each mainline Protestant denomination maintains an office in Washington, D.C., that coordinates government relations and lobbying, but most congregants and even many clergy are unaware of the work that these offices undertake.[17] Moreover, in recent years mainline clergy have been less visible on the national political stage than they were a generation ago when they marched for civil rights and against the Vietnam War. This change has occurred in part because of the increased conservative tenor of American politics since the 1980s. Another reason is that clergy seem to feel the need for local-level work more acutely than they feel any need for a more national-level witness.[18] As a Lutheran pastor once told me:

> We have to deal with so many immediate issues....Since there's so many pressing problems in the immediate community we live in, [with] people coming in looking for food, looking for a place to live, looking for money to get back on their feet...we're much more familiar...with local political issues....How am I really going to change that big issue at the national level?

[17]Laura R. Olson, "Mainline Protestant Washington Offices and the Political Lives of Clergy," in *The Quiet Hand of God: Faith-Based Activism and the Public Role of Mainline Protestantism*, ed. Robert Wuthnow and John H. Evans (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002).

[18]Ram A. Cnaan, *The Newer Deal: Social Work and Religion in Partnership* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999); Cnaan, *The Invisible Caring Hand*.

The final and most profound challenge lies in the fact that many congregations are not organizationally well positioned to engage in community-based activism or social service delivery. Congregations often suffer from a lack of expertise, financial resources, and incentives for volunteer participation that can render them ill suited for such activity.[19] It can be very difficult for a church to raise the needed funds to undertake a major sociopolitical initiative. It is equally challenging to find enough volunteers to staff and organize such initiatives. If a congregation seeks to participate in actual service delivery, it needs to be sure that it has the skills, funding, and volunteers in place to do that work well. In the absence of resources, political action of any sort cannot proceed under any circumstances.

Critics might charge that such market-based talk cheapens the sacred and eternal mission of organized religion. Indeed this could be a valid criticism from a semantic point of view. However, at the end of the day, a congregation needs members. Without members, there is no one inside the church to whom clergy may minister. Neither is there anyone to participate in crafting a congregational vision, to help staff events, nor above all to offer financial contributions to keep the church running. A church needs money in the offering plate to keep fulfilling the real mission of any congregation: the glorification of God and the spiritual strengthening of its members.

It is eminently rational for congregations to make themselves as helpful and beneficent as possible to people in the neighborhoods that immediately surround the church. Local problems, especially poverty, create real human needs that require attention. Churches are often among the few institutions that might have sufficient skills, funding, and willingness to address these needs. For congregations with the wherewithal and resources to undertake sociopolitical activism, such activity can benefit not only congregants themselves—which will allow the congregation to persist and thrive in the competitive American religious marketplace—but also people outside of the church who have real human needs that are not otherwise being met. Such work is highly consistent with the longstanding mainline Protestant teaching that religious people should be actively involved in secular society by addressing the problems of the less fortunate in a Christ-like manner. ⊕

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[19]Michelle L. Chin, Adam L. Warber, and Phillip Hardy, "How Firm a Foundation? Church Organizational Structure and the Political Mobilization of Congregants," *National Political Science Review* 10 (forthcoming).