Word & World
Volume 27, Number 3
Summer 2007

What Do Congregations Do? The Significance of Christian Congregations to American Civic Life

MARK CHAVES

The role of religion and churches in modern societies is a subject of longstanding concern not only to religious leaders, but also increasingly to social scientists and policy makers, since religious organizations make up a sizeable portion of American civil society.[1]

In this essay I will explore the theme of congregations' significance to American civic life in two ways. First, I will talk about what churches do, and I will start by focusing on their social service activities. This is an appropriate place to begin because of the movement to direct more public resources to religious organizations in support of their social service activities. That movement's most visible face is the Bush administration's "faith-based initiative," which is best understood as a set of loosely coordinated legislative, administrative, and cultural initiatives at all

[1]The material in this essay has been presented orally at a conference in Germany and will appear in a somewhat different form in the forthcoming volume *Civil Society, Civic Engagement, and Catholicism in the United States*, ed. Antonius Liedhegener and Werner Kremp (Trier, 2007). It is used here with permission.

Part of the answer to the question of this issue ("What Is a Christian?") is supplied by a study of what Christian congregations actually do, especially their role in American civic life. As it turns out, American congregations are more important for their contribution to the arts than to social services and politics.

levels of government, held together by the common goal of directing more public money to certain kinds of religious organizations in support of their social service work.

These efforts raise many issues and questions, some of which are not at all new. Churches have been engaged in human service work for a very long time, and they have long received government support for this work. At least since the Social Gospel movement of the early twentieth century, there have been those who have called on churches to do more to meet human needs. Recent efforts and the debate associated with faith-based initiatives, however, have increased public interest in churches' social service work, and this increased interest provides an opportunity to examine this work more closely. There is much misunderstanding afoot about congregations' social service work and, more generally, about what churches do, how they do and don't contribute to American society, and how to think about their significance to American public life. So focusing on churches' social service activities provides a useful launching point for a more general discussion of what churches do and their place in American civic life.

Much of the first part of the essay will be based on simple percentages and averages calculated from the National Congregations Study, a 1998 survey of a nationally representative sample of 1,236 congregations from across the religious spectrum.[2] These informative data make it relatively easy to describe what the average or typical congregation actually does. It is much more difficult, however, to assess the *significance* to American civic life of what churches do. This is the issue I will address in the second part of this essay. There I will assess congregations' significance to civic life by examining their share of activity in various secular arenas, and then I will describe what I believe to be a significant and ongoing shift in American religion that has important implications for churches' future significance to civic life, among other things.

Congregations' Social Service Activities

Two common assumptions about churches and social services turn out to be myths—that is, they are not borne out by the evidence. The first, and probably most important, myth is that the typical congregation is intensively involved in social service activities. The reality is that virtually all congregations do some things that might be called social service, but much of this activity is very small-scale and informal, and focused on short-term, emergency needs for food, clothing, and shelter. Fifty-seven percent of congregations reported some sort of social service activity in the National Congregations Study; three quarters of churchgoers are in these congregations. This probably understates the extent to which congregations do very informal kinds of things—virtually all congregations do something that

[2]Mark Chaves, *Congregations in America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004). Selected summary statistics and an explanation of the methodology employed are found on pp. 213–235. The statistics are referenced throughout this essay.

might be called social services—but I think it gives an accurate picture of the proportion of congregations doing more or less formal kinds of social service activities.

What kinds of programs are congregations typically involved in? Food programs, reported by one third of congregations, are most common, followed by shelter programs, clothing programs, and, related to activities focused on housing and shelter, services to the homeless.

> ***"The typical kind of church-based social service activity is focused on short-term, emergency needs. More intensive, personalistic, transforming kinds of social service are engaged in by only the rare congregation."***

Importantly, the percentages of involved congregations get very small when looking at more serious, intensive programs that serve long-term needs: 5 percent are involved in health programs, 2 percent in substance abuse prevention programs, 1 percent in employment-related programs. The basic picture is that the typical kind of church-based social service activity is focused on short-term, emergency needs. More intensive, personalistic, transforming kinds of social service are engaged in by only the rare congregation.

There could, of course, be much variation in intensity behind these numbers. A food program could include anything from collecting canned goods at Thanksgiving to running a soup kitchen; housing could be anything from a Habitat for Humanity project, in which a small group of volunteers works on a house for several months, to building low-income housing.

Here are several more direct measures of the intensity of congregational involvement in social services: 6 percent of congregations have a staff person working at least quarter-time on social services. The median congregation doing social services mentions just two programs. The median amount of money those congregations spend on social services is $1,200, which is 2 to 3 percent of the median budget. And the median congregation doing social services reports only ten volunteers involved in these activities.

There are, of course, some congregations that are deeply engaged in social services, and they are important. I don't mean to trivialize the absolute amount of social service activity that occurs in congregations. Even if only 1 percent of congregations are deeply involved in social services, 1 percent of three hundred thousand congregations in the United States is still three thousand congregations doing significant work of this sort. But the key point here is that those congregations are the exception, not the rule. The vast majority of congregations are involved in social services in only a peripheral and superficial way.

A second myth is that congregation-based social services represent an alternative to the world of secular and government-funded social services. The assumption here is that there are large amounts of congregation-based social services that

are entirely bottom-up and voluntary in the sense of being initiated and fully supported by the voluntary action and donations of people in the congregation, and that this world of church-based services offers an alternative—some think a superior alternative—to the world of secular and government-funded social services.

> ***"the notion that all this laudable activity is occurring in a pristine religious voluntary sector unsullied by government or secular organizations is wrong"***

The truth is that, when congregations are doing more than superficial social services, their activity is almost always done in collaboration with secular nonprofits and with government, and it often—maybe even almost always—is *dependent* on those collaborations and the support that comes from government and secular social service agencies. Consider, for example, programs that feed the hungry. The soup kitchen is one of the most common forms of congregational involvement in social services and, on the surface, it appears to be the quintessential case of a social service provided largely by religious organizations operating on their own, supported only by their own material and volunteer resources. But this surface appearance is misleading. A study of congregation-based feeding programs in Tucson, Arizona, for example, revealed that virtually all of these programs used food that came from the local food bank, a secular nonprofit organization, and virtually all relied on grants from the city to pay someone to cook the food and someone else to deliver it to the congregations each evening, where volunteers then distributed it to hungry people.[3] The congregations are an important part of this system—they provide volunteers to serve the food and space in which people can eat it—but they would not be able to do this work absent a three-way collaboration among the congregations, a secular nonprofit organization, and the city. The notion that all this laudable activity is occurring in a pristine religious voluntary sector unsullied by government or secular organizations is wrong.

So, congregations are not, in general, intensively involved in social services, and when they do conduct serious social services they do so in a way that often is dependent on substantial external support and collaborations.

But let me add a positive note. There is, in fact, a distinctive congregational approach to social services; it is just not the approach assumed in much conventional wisdom about congregations. When churches do more than collect canned goods at Thanksgiving, the characteristic congregational approach to social service—and something they are very good at—is to mobilize small groups of volunteers to do well-defined, bounded tasks on a periodic basis: five people cook dinner once a week at the homeless shelter, ten people spend six Saturdays fixing or build-

[3]Rebecca Sager, Laura S. Stephens, and Mary Nell Trautner, "Serving Up God? The Manifestations of Religion in Faith-Based Social Service Organizations" (paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Sociological Association, August 2001, Anaheim, California).

ing a house or apartment, the youth group spends two summer weeks painting a school, and so on. If we were serious about involving congregations more deeply and intensively in social service work, we would look for ways to use this particular resource. This is the genius of Habitat for Humanity, and it is why there is so much church presence among homeless shelters and feeding programs for the hungry. These programs know how to use this particular kind of resource that churches are very good, perhaps uniquely good, at providing.

What Do Congregations Do?

So if congregations don't do much social service activity, what *do* they do? First, congregations gather people for worship and religious education. This is painfully obvious, yet one of the odd features of our current cultural moment is that it seems necessary to point out that, although most churches do some social services, and although a very small percentage of churches do a lot of social services, churches are not, fundamentally and essentially, social service providers.

But there is more to say that is not quite so obvious. Worship and religious education are congregations' core activities, but the pursuit of these core activities also generates by-products, so to speak, and it is reasonable to ask what the most significant by-product is. In these days of faith-based initiatives we focus on social services as a significant by-product of churches' core activities. Since the rise of the religious right in the 1980s we also have focused on politics as a by-product of congregational activity. But the truth is that neither politics nor social services are significant activities for the vast majority of congregations. Something else is, though, and that is art.

No one doubts the historical connection between religion and art but, today, we mainly think of art and religion as two largely distinct, perhaps even opposed, arenas. This opposition seems plausible if we limit our attention to *high* art. But if we define artistic practice more broadly as the making, seeing, or listening to music, dance, drama, and objects for display, whatever the venue, the quality of the product, or whether it is pursued as an end in itself, then the intimate connection between art and religion—especially religion as it is practiced in congregations—becomes clear, mainly of course because worship services are constructed in part out of artistic elements like music, drama, poetry, and dance. The case is clearest with music, but the point is not limited to music.

Fifty-seven percent of congregations did social services in the last year, and 42 percent did some sort of political activity, but virtually all expose people to live music every single week. The worship service experienced by the average attender in the United States has twenty minutes of music and lasts for seventy minutes, which means more than one quarter of worship is music. And almost 80 percent of congregations had some sort of nonmusical arts activity in the last year, meaning mainly drama or dance. A lot of this arts-related activity happens in worship, but a substantial amount happens outside of worship as well: 38 percent of congrega-

tions had a group put on a musical or theatrical performance; 43 percent had a group that attended a live performance elsewhere.

So, more congregations engage in the arts than in social services or politics, and these artistic activities involve more people than the social service or political activities. Seventy people attend the average worship service; in congregations with choirs twenty people are in the average choir. Compare that to the number involved in other ancillary activities. In congregations with social service programs, the median number of people involved with these programs as volunteers is ten. On average, only fifteen people in a congregation regularly meet in small groups for any purpose other than worship, religious education, or internal administration.

"more congregations engage in the arts than in social services or politics, and these artistic activities involve more people than the social service or political activities"

Artistic activity also takes up more staff time than either social services or politics. Full-time clergy spend fifteen hours per week in worship or preparing for worship; they spend only one to two hours weekly working with community or civic groups.[4] As noted above, only 6 percent of congregations have a staff person devoting at least quarter-time to social service work; we did not ask how many congregations employ organists or music directors, but it is certainly much more than 6 percent.

So what do congregations do? No one will be surprised at the centrality of worship and religious education to congregational life. The prevalence of artistic activities, relative to politics or social services, is more surprising. Although the social gospelers among us might wish it were otherwise, if we ask what congregations do beyond their core activities of worship and religious education, the answer is that they facilitate art, and perhaps, on occasion, even beauty, more commonly and more intensively than they dispense charity or pursue justice.

Are Catholic Congregations Distinctive?

Let me briefly mention some denominational differences regarding congregations' civic activity and presence. In general, if we compare the civic activity of mainline or liberal Protestant congregations, conservative or evangelical Protestant denominations, and Roman Catholic congregations, we find that liberal Protestant congregations are most active, evangelical white Protestants are least active, and Catholic congregations are in between, often falling closer to the more active liberal Protestants than to the less active conservative Protestants.

There are three specific activities, however, in which Catholic congregations

[4]Jackson W. Carroll, *God's Potters: Pastoral Leadership and the Shaping of Congregations* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006) chap. 4.

stand out for being more active than Protestants, either liberal or conservative. The first is well known, and I mention it only for the sake of completeness: Catholic congregations are much more likely to operate their own elementary schools than are Protestant congregations. Fifty-five percent of Catholics are in parishes with schools, compared to 14 percent of conservative Protestants and 3 percent of liberal Protestants.

The other two civic activities on which Catholics stand out are more surprising, and they involve political action. Catholic congregations are much more likely to be involved in direct-action politics than are other kinds of congregations. That is, they are more likely to organize or participate in efforts to lobby elected officials (23 percent of Catholics are in parishes that do this, compared to 10 percent of mainline Protestants and 6 percent of conservative Protestants). And they are more likely to organize or participate in a demonstration or march concerning public policy (42 percent of Catholics are in parishes that report this activity, compared to 12 percent of mainline Protestants and 14 percent of conservative Protestants).

I speculate that these higher levels of Catholic involvement in these particular kinds of political activities may be connected to Catholic mobilization around abortion. Catholic churches also may be more open than other congregations to mobilizing efforts by community organizers in the Saul Alinsky tradition. But whatever the purpose of this activity, Catholics are more likely than white Protestants to be in politically active congregations, and Catholic congregations seem to engage in politics in distinctive ways. More generally, denominational differences in congregation-based political activity seem to be differences in political style more than quantitative differences in the level of political engagement, with congregations from different religious traditions engaging in politics in identifiably particular ways.[5]

Congregations' Share of Secular Civic Arenas

Because of the National Congregations Study and other recent studies of congregations we now know quite a lot about what congregations do and the relative significance of various kinds of activities *for them*. But what of the flip side? We need to assess not just the relative importance of art, social service, and politics to congregations; we also need to assess the relative importance of congregations to the worlds of art, social service, and politics. In each of these arenas we would like to assess the extent to which churches are significant actors or venues or facilitators of action.

This is very difficult to assess, and the data are limited. Surveys of congregations alone will not suffice. But I draw on a variety of data sources to cobble to-

[5]Additional details about denominational differences in congregation-based civic activity are presented in Chaves, *Congregations in America*, chap. 4, and Mark Chaves, Helen M. Giesel, and William Tsitsos, "Religious Variations in Public Presence: Evidence from the National Congregations Study," 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) 108–128.

gether what I think is a reasonably strong circumstantial case that, not only is artistic activity more important to congregations than social services or politics, but congregations are more important to the artistic arena than they are to either the political or the social services arena.[6]

"not only is artistic activity more important to congregations than social services or politics, but congregations are more important to the artistic arena than they are to either the political or the social services arena"

The basic point I want to make here is that a substantial proportion of all live arts activity occurs in congregations. We can get a handle on this by drawing on surveys of arts participation in order to compare the percentage of people who experience live music, dance, and drama in congregations with the percentage who experience it anywhere. The case is strongest with music. In 1998, two thirds of American adults claimed to have attended a religious service within the past twelve months. More than 95 percent of those attendees participated in a service with singing by the congregation, more than 90 percent heard a musical instrument being played, and more than 70 percent heard singing by a choir. Half of religious service attendees heard a soloist. This means that more than 60 percent of Americans participated in, or at least heard, group singing in a congregation in the past year, 60 percent heard an instrument being played in a congregation, and one third heard a soloist in a congregation.

In that same year, by contrast, 17 percent of American adults claimed to have attended a classical music concert and 39 percent claimed to have attended a pop music concert within the past twelve months. Twenty-five percent saw a musical play, 12 percent saw a jazz performance, and 5 percent saw live opera. Especially if we factor in the frequency with which people attend religious services compared with these other events at which live music is heard, it becomes clear that worship services constitute the vast majority of the live musical events experienced by people in American society. Congregations' worship services, where 60 percent of the population hear live music in a given year, are the single most common type of event at which live music is heard in American society. Even for other art forms like live dance and drama, a nontrivial amount is experienced in congregations.

So, a substantial proportion of all live art experienced in American society is experienced in congregations. But how does this compare with the proportion of all social services and politics occurring in churches? According to the data, con-

[6]Readers interested in more details can find them in Chaves, *Congregations in America*, chap. 7. Unless otherwise noted, all numbers concerning Americans' participation in arts events are from either Peter V. Marsden, "Religion, Cultural Participation, and Cultural Attitudes: Survey Data on the United States, 1998" (report to the Henry Luce Foundation, Department of Sociology, Harvard University, 1999), or National Endowment for the Arts, *1997 Survey of Public Participation in the Arts*, Research Division Report 39 (Washington, DC: National Endowment for the Arts, 1998).

gregations apparently account for a bigger share of all political activity in American society than they do of all social service activity, but they account for a bigger share of all activity in the cultural arena than in the social services or politics arenas. In this sense, congregations are a more significant organizational base for live arts than they are for social services or politics.

It is not just that people passively consume art in congregations. People do not just listen to music in congregations; they sing and play music as well, and examining the frequency of this sort of behavior in congregations relative to its frequency in other settings leads to the conclusion that a bigger share of all artistic skill-building than of all civic skill-building (for example, writing a letter, leading a meeting) occurs in congregations.[7]

Data limitations preclude establishing firmly congregations' shares of all activity in these arenas, but the available evidence, with all its limits, suggests that congregations' share of all live arts activity in American society is indeed more than their share of all political or social service activity. If we look for the secular public arena of American social life in which congregations are most a part we find it in the arts, not in social services or politics. This provides an important corrective to conventional wisdom about the nature of congregations' significance to civic life.

A Significant Change

Is anything important changing regarding congregations' place in American civic life? Mainly, I am more impressed with continuity over the last five or six decades than with change when it comes to congregational activities and their place in civic life. But there is one kind of change that may very well have significant implications for the future of churches' place in public life: the increasing concentration of people in the very largest congregations.

People and resources always have been concentrated in larger churches, but we may not fully appreciate the extent of that concentration. American religious life operates with something like a 20/70 rule: the biggest fifth of congregations have about 70 percent of all the people, money, staff, and volunteers. People and resources are heavily concentrated in the biggest churches. Moreover, the church size distribution in American society is highly skewed. Most churches are small, but most people are in large churches.

What I want to emphasize here is that this concentration is intensifying.[8] The American religious population is becoming more and more concentrated in the very largest congregations. This increasing concentration is not because unchurched people are being drawn to large churches. Rather, people are shifting from smaller churches to bigger churches, and therefore higher and higher per-

[7]For supporting evidence, see Chaves, *Congregations in America*.

[8]For more details on this concentration and a preliminary effort to explain it, see Mark Chaves, "All Creatures Great and Small: Megachurches in Context" (H. Paul Douglass Lecture, printed in *Review of Religious Research* 20 [forthcoming]).

centages of people are concentrated in the very largest churches. This trend seems to have begun in the 1970s, and it continues today with no sign of abating. We all know about megachurches, but I don't think we have fully appreciated the extent to which people are becoming concentrated in such churches, or the extent to which this concentration is occurring across the religious spectrum. People are becoming increasingly concentrated in the largest churches all across the Protestant spectrum. This is true for large and small denominations, liberal and conservative denominations, and growing and declining denominations. This concentration trend is a phenomenon that is much broader and deeper than the spectacle of Protestant megachurches with tens of thousands of members. True megachurches are only the tip of an iceberg that may well be an important development in American religion, and one whose causes and consequences for religion's civic significance, among other things, we do not yet fully grasp. ⊕

MARK CHAVES is professor of sociology, religion, and divinity at Duke University, Durham, North Carolina.