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Effects of Auto-Mobility on Church Life and Culture

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The automobile is one of the most important technological developments shaping our collective lives in the United States. Its influence is pervasive. Especially important is the key connection between changing modes of transportation and further developments in what might be called our "social geography." Social geography concerns how the use of land interacts with changing technologies (for example, modes of transportation) to shape institutions and also to form our patterns of behavior. Clearly, the influence of the automobile in shaping and reshaping patterns of life in the twentieth century has been nothing short of remarkable.

The shaping and reshaping of our social geography by the automobile also includes its impact on churches and their congregations. This is seen most directly in the various types of congregations that continue to be developed, most of which reflect changing patterns of transportation in general and automobile usage in particular. There are at least five discernible phases of transportation development from the time the automobile first appeared on the scene at the end of the nineteenth century until the present day. This essay summarizes each of these phases in terms of the production and usage of automobiles and the subsequent influence they had on the development of churches and their congregations.

The development of the automobile has brought fundamental changes to U.S. social geography, and with them fundamental changes in patterns of congregational life among U.S. churches. These changes continue, along with their many challenges and opportunities.

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PHASE I: EXPERIMENTATION AND RECREATION: 1890S–1910S

Automobile Developments

A number of efforts were made in Europe during the last several decades of the nineteenth century to develop a feasible automobile, but in the United States it was not until 1893 that the first gas-powered automobile was successfully developed by Charles and Frank Duryea.[1] These brothers were soon joined by Henry Ford and Ransom Eli Olds, whose first automobiles were built in 1896. Numerous entrepreneurs were at work by 1900 creating automobiles for public purchase.[2] An essential early decision concerned what would power this new mode of transportation. Three sources competed—steam, electricity, and gasoline—with the gas-powered engine eventually winning the day as being the most readily available and technologically viable.[3]

"this new form of transportation became tied to the value of speed from the very beginning of its life"

There was little impact from the automobile on reshaping America's social geography, however, during this first phase of its development. It would require the construction of extensive roadways dedicated to automobile transportation before that would begin to emerge. The primary influence of the automobile in this first phase was its image as a recreational toy of the affluent. One early use of the automobile became the practice of racing them competitively, as epitomized by William K. Vanderbilt, Jr.[4] This new form of transportation became tied to the value of speed from the very beginning of its life. Another value that became embedded in the early use of the automobile was fun, with cars being used for recreation, touring the countryside, and even traveling great distances to view scenic wonders.[5]

Influence on Churches and Their Congregations

There also appears to have been little impact from these early automobiles in reshaping the patterns of congregational life. In rural areas, it is likely that some pastors serving multiple parishes began to find the automobile to be a helpful transportation mode in navigating the distances between these. In the cities, however, the electric streetcar systems were still emerging as the dominant transportation mode, and this mode of transportation continued to influence the formation

[1] Richard P. Scharchburg, *Carriages without Horses: J. Frank Duryea and the Birth of the American Automobile Industry* (Warrendale, PA: Society of Automotive Engineers, Inc., 1993).

[2] Eugene Rachlis, *Early Automobiles: The Story of Horseless Carriages from the Clock-Spring Car of 1646 to Henry Ford's Model T* (New York: Golden Press, 1961).

[3] Tom McCarthy, *Auto Mania: Cars, Consumers, and the Environment* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007) 16–17.

[4] Ibid., 3.

[5] Ibid., 5–6.

of thousands of city-neighborhood congregations for several more decades. This type of congregation usually served a well-defined, three-generational neighborhood and was usually located near a streetcar line. Such congregations required the development of little or no parking space, an unintended consequence that would later come back to haunt them.

PHASE II: THE AFFORDABLE, MASS-PRODUCED AUTOMOBILE: 1910S–1930

Automobile Developments

Henry Ford's vision for the affordable, mass-produced automobile began to become a reality in 1908 with the introduction of the Model T. That car continued to be manufactured up to 1927, by which time over 15 million had been sold.[6] Ford's goal was to produce a car that even the laborers working in his factory could afford. Ford's approach was to mechanize the assembly process, which led to the standardization of manufactured parts and the creation, by 1913, of the assembly line.[7] Ford's Model T soon began to democratize the roadway, as he made this new form of transportation available to the vast majority of people in the United States.

Ford worked diligently to control and even reduce his costs in the manufacturing process. This led him into what is known as "backward integration," where he bought up the companies and land related to the extraction industries that fed the emerging automobile industry—iron ore, rubber, wood, and coal.[8] Unfortunately, little attention was paid at this time to environmental concerns on any level, including how raw materials were extracted, the pollution generated by the manufacturing process, or the pollution created by the automobile's inevitable emissions, as well as the eventual disposal of worn-out cars.[9]

Those involved in shaping public-transportation policy began to move by the late 1910s to develop the necessary city, county, and state roadways required to handle the vast increase in the number of automobiles coming into service. State highway departments were organized across the country, and road construction, especially paved-road construction, became a boom industry. The first networks of both state highways and U.S. highways were well in place by the early to mid-1920s.[10]

The affordable automobile expanded access for the masses to the earlier values of speed and fun. However, these were soon offset among the majority of the population by the additional values of personal mobility and individual freedom, which led to the automobile beginning to reshape the social geography of the United States. In cities, streetcars continued to serve as the primary transportation

[6]Rudi Volti, "A Century of Automobility," in *Technology and Culture* 37/4 (October 1996) 663–685.

[7]Lindsay Brooke, *Ford Model T: The Car That Put the World on Wheels* (St. Paul: MBI, 2008) 48–73.

[8]McCarthy, *Auto Mania*, 55.

[9]Ibid., 57–68.

[10]Michael R. Fein, *Paving the Way: New York Road Building and the American State, 1880–1956* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2008) 77–129.

mode well into the 1930s, with the logic of urban life being focused primarily in a concentration developed in relation to the central business district (CBD). But General Motors' use of a subsidiary in the 1930s to buy up and tear out over one hundred electric streetcar systems, and then turn around and sell buses to these same cities, would dramatically alter the urban landscape during the next phase.[11] Soon the logic of urban space would shift from streetcar concentration to automobile decentralization.

One city in particular anticipated this shift to the dominance of the automobile in shaping urban transportation and subsequently reshaping the social geography. This was Los Angeles, California, where the city fathers and business community laid the foundations in the 1920s for what we now call the "automobile city."[12] They opted, through a series of political maneuverings, to invest primarily not in expanding the electric streetcar system but instead in building the first urban system of what we now know as "freeways."[13] Their decision anticipated what would come to reshape all of life in the United States, in cities and rural areas alike. There was embedded, however, in their decision another important unintended consequence that came from relying on automobiles as the primary transportation mode—the generation of smog.[14]

"congregations began to set aside increased space for parking and newly forming congregations secured locations not tied as directly to fixed-rail systems of transportation"

Influence on Churches and Their Congregations

The building of social institutions usually tends to lag a bit behind the introduction of new or modified forms of transportation, so during much of this phase we still find city-neighborhood congregations being developed based on the logic of the fixed-rail, streetcar systems. But on the growing fringes of these urban areas, one can begin to discern by the mid- to late 1920s the increased influence of the automobile, as congregations began to set aside increased space for parking and as newly forming congregations secured locations not tied as directly to fixed-rail systems of transportation.[15] It is important to note, however, that the increased mobility did not yet fundamentally reshape the logic of the city-neighborhood congregation. That would come in the next phase.

Congregations in small towns and rural areas were more directly influenced

[11]McCarthy, *Auto Mania*, 150.

[12]Scott L. Bottles, *Los Angeles and the Automobile: The Making of the Modern City* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1987).

[13]Mark S. Foster, "The Model-T, the Hard Sell, and Los Angeles's Urban Growth: The Decentralization of Los Angeles during the 1920s," *The Pacific Historical Review* 44/4 (November 1975) 459–484.

[14]McCarthy, *Auto Mania*, 119–121.

[15]James J. Coale, "Influence of the Automobile on the City Church," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 116 (November 1924) 80–82.

by the mass-produced, affordable automobile in this phase. Pastors found them to be a great convenience in accessing parishioners and in serving multipoint parishes, especially as roadway systems were improved. Increasing numbers of rural members now had more ready access to congregations in town, and the beginning of the decline of many rural congregations was set in motion, a trend that was played out increasingly over the next few decades.[16]

PHASE III: DEVELOPING A SUBURBAN AUTOMOBILE CULTURE: 1930–1965

Automobile Developments

The transition into this third phase of the influence of the automobile on the social geography of the United States began in the mid- to late 1920s and was clearly in place by 1930. The full effects of these changes were delayed, however, by the Great Depression of the early 1930s, and World War II. The changes that came to characterize this phase reflected two additional core values that emerged around the automobile, complementing the values of speed, fun, personal freedom, and individual mobility of the previous phases: choice and identity.

Ford's dominance of the automobile market waned in the mid- to late '20s as competitors began to offer yearly style changes along with multiple accessory choices. The possibility of choice, which Ford had worked to restrict in order to keep production costs low, helped nurture the formation of a different type of automobile consumer in the midst of the increased affluence of the 1920s. General Motors products in general, and the Chevrolet in particular, cultivated this change in consumer behavior.[17] Increasing attention came to be paid to the coming year's new style, with the car companies increasingly using style changes to make previous years' models appear out of date. Eventually Ford, as well as the newly formed Chrysler Corporation in 1926, joined in marketing to this changing pattern of consumption.

Tied to this changing pattern of choice in consumer behavior was the development as well of a new connection between personal identity and the automobile that one owned. A whole industry of market research evolved to help consumers make this connection.[18] The mass-produced automobile became increasingly personalized through the introduction of numerous models and an endless array of accessories that could be added to one's purchase. Vance Packard captured these changes in the personalized automobile culture quite aptly in his 1957 book, *The Hidden Persuaders.*[19]

The values of choice and identity became especially available to the public with the mass production of automobiles by the Big Three Detroit automakers fol-

[16]Warren H. Wilson, "What the Automobile Has Done to and for the Country Church," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 116 (November 1924) 83–86.

[17]McCarthy, *Auto Mania*, 83–84.

[18]Ibid., 89.

[19]Vance Oakley Packard, *The Hidden Persuaders* (New York: D. McCay, 1957).

lowing the World War II (Chrysler, Ford, General Motors). The expanded purchase and use of autos at that time contributed to changing the logic of the city to a pattern of decentralization as the boundaries of the old streetcar cities expanded in all directions along new streets and thoroughfares constructed primarily for automobiles. The booming economy of the postwar years was accompanied by the birthing of the baby-boom generation that utilized the automobile to introduce what we have come to know as the "automobile suburb." This new type of bedroom community separated people's homes from their places of work, and a whole set of new institutional forms was generated to serve these suburban communities, including shopping centers, suburban (one-story) schools, and suburban congregations (which will be discussed in more detail below).[20]

"marketers quickly idealized suburban life into what came to be thought of as the 'American dream'"

The creation of the suburbs was fed by a number of forces in society, including $3-a-barrel oil, improved streets and thoroughfares, thirty-year fixed-rate FHA and VA home mortgages, and the out-migration of white persons from central cities, meeting and mixing with the in-migration of rural Americans, displaced there by the continued mechanization of farming. The prototype of Levittown on Long Island, New York, became the idealized norm of suburban life—an affordable single-family, detached home in close proximity to the institutions of shopping, schools, and churches. Marketers quickly idealized this suburban life into what came to be thought of as the "American dream."[21] The choice and identity offered by the automobile deeply worked to reinforce this dream and continued to expand on it as families increasingly moved to owning two cars or more to accommodate their diverse transportation needs.

Seeds of change, however, were also sown in this period, which eventually led to the next phase. These seeds included at least four things: First, there was the excess of the automobile industry in focusing on the external styling of cars, which eventually led to consumer reaction (epitomized in their rejection of the Edsel in the late 1960s) and a turn to compacts and simplified cars such as the VW Beetle by the late 1950s and early 1960s. Second, there was an increased awareness of the environmental impact of the automobile due to its widespread use. California led the way in seeking federal legislation to address environmental concerns and was quickly joined by other states. Third, increasing attention was brought to matters of safety, as exemplified by Ralph Nader's 1965 book, *Unsafe at Any Speed*.[22]

[20]Rosalyn Baxandall and Elizabeth Ewen, *Picture Windows: How the Suburbs Happened* (New York: Basic Books, 2000).

[21]David Halberstam and Tracy Dahlby, *The Fifties* (New York: Ballantine, 1994) 132–142.

[22]Ralph Nader, *Unsafe at Any Speed: The Designed-In Dangers of the American Automobile* (New York: Grossman, 1965).

Fourth, the federal decision in 1955 to create a national network of interstate, limited-access freeways led to a further reshaping of the social geography of the United States as this system began to reach completion in the mid- to late 1960s (more on this in the next phase).[23]

Influence on Churches and Their Congregations

The key development for churches and their congregations in this phase of the automobile came during the postwar years with the rise of suburban culture. The massive migration of population from both the central cities and the rural areas into this new type of housing community generated a lifestyle and set of values that dramatically reshaped both congregational identity and the primary practices for carrying out congregational life and ministry. The suburban success of the churches was quite remarkable, with thousands of new congregations developed to serve the expanding systems of suburban communities.

These congregations were primarily two-generational, with the vast majority of young persons moving out of these suburbs as they reached their young adult years. Studies place this exodus at between 80 and 90 percent of the children raised in these congregations.[24] This meant that the overwhelming majority of these two-generation, suburban congregations actually peaked in membership within twenty years of their coming into existence. The majority of these congregations are still in need of adjusting to this reality—the golden years are all too often still viewed as those associated with the presence of the baby-boom generation in the 1950s and 1960s.[25]

The membership in these congregations was also highly mobile during these years, with an average of seven out of every ten new members cycling out of the congregation within ten years.[26] This transience required the development of a new logic for fostering congregational identity—a logic that became known as the "program church," where a shared set of programs and activities under the administrative oversight of a "professional minister" (what Niebuhr called for as the "pastoral director") became the norm.[27] The suburban success, however, had a darker side, one which Gibson Winter aptly labeled in his 1962 book, *The Suburban Captivity of the Churches*.[28] Paralleling the commodification of personal identity around the automobile, the suburb and the suburban church epitomized the commodification of the American dream, but, increasingly, it was found to have more style than substance.

[23]McCarthy, *Auto Mania*, 148–175.

[24]These findings come from the author's research in numerous suburban congregations in various cities among different denominations.

[25]Ibid.

[26]Ibid.

[27]H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Purpose of the Church and Its Ministry: Reflections on the Aims of Theological Education* (New York: Harper & Row, 1956).

[28]Gibson Winter, *The Suburban Captivity of the Churches: An Analysis of Protestant Responsibility in the Expanding Metropolis* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1961).

PHASE IV: FOCUSING ON EFFICIENCY, SAFETY, AND THE ENVIRONMENT: 1965–1995

Automobile Developments

Dramatic changes during the late 1960s began to reshape the place and role of the automobile in American life, and a new set of what might be called "counter-values" emerged—efficiency, safety, and the environment. Vast numbers of consumers shifted their attention to concerns about gas economy, auto safety, and pollution control. These concerns were driven to a large extent by the themes of the youth counterculture, which challenged the validity of the American dream, the values of consumerism, the dominating role of big business and institutions, and emphasized the need to care for the environment.[29] Perhaps no event symbolized these themes more than the first Earth Day on April 22, 1970, with over twenty million persons participating.[30]

The passing of environmental protection legislation for both clean air and clean water soon followed in the early 1970s.[31] Led again by environmental interests in California, these legislative initiatives set the stage for the rethinking and reshaping of automobile policy for the next several decades. Federal mandates for change in regard to both safety requirements and fuel efficiency, along with the development of anti-smog devices, became the norm, one which American automakers continued to fight aggressively as the years rolled by.[32] This resistance by U.S. automakers actually worked in the favor of the expanding import market that was being filled by Japanese automakers, who focused on providing a quality product that was both safe and fuel efficient, and therefore also more environmentally friendly.

The capturing of market share by foreign imports continued unabated through the 1970s and into the 1980s, especially in light of the oil embargo in the early 1970s and the gas rationing that this necessitated. The Big Three in Detroit were slow to respond and even slower to learn critical lessons in terms of knowing how to adjust to the changing values of the American consumer during this time.[33] Their reinvention as automobile manufacturers is, in many ways, still in process, although the resurgence of the SUV market in the mid-1980s to the early 2000s gave them some respite from the challenges they continue to face.[34] Whether they have sufficiently learned from the shifts during this period is not yet clear (more on this in the final phase below).

[29]A helpful summary of this period of time is provided by Milton Viorst in *Fire in the Streets: America in the 1960s* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1979).

[30]See comments by the founder of Earth Day, Senator Gaylord Nelson, in 1993 at http://earthday.envirolink.org/history.html (accessed March 22, 2008).

[31]McCarthy, *Auto Mania*, 173–174. The Clean Air Act was passed in 1970, and the Clean Water Act in 1972, the latter through a congressional override of a veto by President Nixon.

[32]Ibid., 193–206.

[33]This story is told in helpful detail by David Halberstam in *The Reckoning* (New York: Morrow, 1986).

[34]McCarthy, *Auto Mania*, 231–252.

The federally funded, limited access, interstate highway system was reaching completion by the late 1960s. Most of the final stages to be built involved the complex construction of freeways through existing neighborhoods in urban areas. Massive dislocation of residents occurred, along with numerous organic neighborhoods being arbitrarily bifurcated.[35]

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The completed freeway systems through, around, and between cities created unprecedented patterns of mobility that continued to reshape the social geography of the U.S., as well as the location of key institutions designed to serve the public. Urban fragmentation became the predominant pattern, especially as incorporated suburbs began to compete for population growth around issues of quality of schools and reduced property taxes. "Skip development" also became common in many metropolitan areas as developers built planned communities in isolated areas that were connected by freeways, but which were often separated by open land.

These patterns made it increasingly difficult for institutions to know where to locate, whether it be shopping centers, schools, or churches. The overall tendency was toward a regionalization in the placement of institutions that served multiple neighborhoods and suburbs in order to accommodate larger economies of scale. These new forms included regional malls for shopping, multiscreen cinema-plexes for moviegoers, massive campuses for junior and senior high schools, and megachurch campuses for churchgoers.

Influence on Churches and Their Congregations

During this phase of automobile development three major changes impacted both the location of new congregations and the continued ministries of existing congregations. First, there was the rise, as noted above, of the very large congregations that we have come to know as "megachurches." These are congregations that see at least 2,000 in worship on a weekly basis, usually with multiple services. The number of such congregations has grown from fewer than ten in 1970 to over 1,200 in 2006.[36] They are usually located on large-acreage tracts in close proximity to major freeways, and they usually serve a large regional constituency. Most of these congregations provide "seven-day-a-week" ministries, with scores of programmatic opportunities for participation.[37] Most are also independent or only

[35]Tom Lewis, *Divided Highways: Building the Interstate Highways, Transforming American Life* (New York: Viking, 1997).

[36]John N. Vaughan, "The 100 Largest U.S. Churches," *Outreach Magazine*, Special Issue, 2006.

[37]Lyle E. Schaller, *The Seven-Day-a-Week Church* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1992).

loosely associated with their denomination, if affiliated. And most have attracted large numbers of members from other congregations, usually the older city-neighborhood and suburban congregations.

Second, those seeking to plant new congregations, apart from the effort to build a megachurch, experienced difficulty in knowing how to develop a ministry and locate its life. Target-focused ministry around affinity networks became increasingly the pattern for starting new congregations, and most of these were started by renting space for their first years, often in schools.[38] Building a first unit often presented major challenges to the ability to purchase sufficient acreage for growth (usually more than fifteen acres) and to decide where to locate this first unit. Constructing a congregational identity around an affinity-based constituency that is regionally dispersed has also placed new demands on pastoral leadership, emphasizing certain leadership personality traits and focusing increasingly on pastoral persona.[39]

Third, both the congregations in older automobile suburbs and the congregations in the older city neighborhoods have struggled in trying to respond to our regionalized, automobile culture. The suburban congregations lost the baby-boom generation through natural migration in the 1970s, and many of them have found it quite challenging to attract the younger replacement families who moved into their neighborhoods during the past several decades, especially since they were not able to offer the full range of programs available in the megachurches. The older, city-neighborhood congregations fell on even harder times as a result of significant racial and ethnic changes in their communities over more than forty years. Those that continue to survive with some dimension of their original identity, whether based in ethnicity or social class or both, usually have memberships with an average age of over sixty. In addition, almost all of these congregations face the steep challenge of being able to provide anything near the parking required for their drive-in membership.

PHASE V: REDISCOVERING COMMUNITY AND GOING GREEN: 1995 TO PRESENT

Automobile Developments

The influence of the automobile is continuing to reshape U.S. society as it interacts with changing values in the population. There are at least two trends and additional countervalues that are presently at work in contemporary life. The first trend and countervalue is that of sustainability, with fundamental questions about whether a lifestyle shaped around an automobile culture that depends on oil as its primary energy source can be sustained. This issue has emerged as a critical matter of public policy within the past two decades and shows no signs of diminishing.

[38]Rick Warren, *The Purpose-Driven Church: Growth without Compromising Your Message and Mission* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1995).

[39]H. Stanley Wood, ed., *Extraordinary Leaders in Extraordinary Times: Unadorned Clay Pot Messengers* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006) 30–97.

The expansion of the global economy, especially the rapid industrialization occurring in China, is clearly demonstrating the limits of relying on oil as our primary energy source. The dramatic increase in the price of gas over the past several years makes this daily apparent. The debate is focusing attention back on fuel efficiency, and therefore is helping us move past the recent SUV culture that tended to promote safety over efficiency.

The second trend and countervalue is the turn to "green." This issue is now finding a place in the debate and is contributing to the development of alternative approaches to automobile design. The green technology was pioneered for automobile manufacturing by the Japanese, but is now finding its way into American-made autos as well. The focus on going green in relation to automobile design, manufacture, and purchase is clearly linked to the increasing attention given to global warming. But interestingly, the U.S. government, in supporting U.S. business, has tended to drag its feet in supporting worldwide commitments to reduce the effects of pollution, symbolized by the failure of the United States to sign the Kyoto agreements in 2001.[40]

"there appears to be some initial reshaping of the social geography through both a rediscovery of local community and the use of information technology to navigate space"

One implication of these developments for U.S. social geography is the growing awareness of the limits of freeway systems in metropolitan areas. City after city is now in the process of discovering that it is simply not possible to continue to build sufficient roadways to handle the increased volume of automobiles and trucks seeking to use them. Los Angeles has once more led the way in demonstrating this trend, with its freeways now being full throughout the day and with driving times continuing to increase. The challenge of using public transit has yet to gain adequate public support, whether it be ridership for buses or funding for light rail initiatives. The high cost of gas, however, may soon heighten the stakes in that discussion.

Complementing the awareness of the limits of freeway systems, there appears to be some initial reshaping of the social geography through both a rediscovery of local community and the use of information technology to navigate space. This is especially true for many in the emerging X and millennial generations. They tend to seek out the local and the particular, with a focus on the coherence of community life and the development of organic relationships, both enhanced by their use of information technology. These are patterns that are continuing to take shape among the emerging postmodern generations and that are working to reshape the U.S. social geography. Some of this is driven by the development of a dual

[40]McCarthy, *Auto Mania*, 241.

economy in which vast numbers of persons are now priced out of ever securing the American dream (as symbolized most directly by owning a single-family, detached home) while others live in increasing affluence. But some of this is also being driven by persons who are less enamored with the perceived endless consumption of their parents and grandparents.

Influence on Churches and Their Congregations

The trends and values noted for this phase are still very much in process, especially in their potential to reshape the practices of churches and their congregations, but a few patterns are beginning to emerge. One pattern is the increased evidence that we are moving into a postcampus environment regarding the development of megachurches. It appears that the large campus church may well have been a late, baby-boomer phenomenon that does not appeal to the emerging postmodern generation. While these megachurches will continue to be around for some time to come, they have likely peaked in terms of driving the development of church practices in the United States.

"while megachurches will continue to be around for some time to come, they have likely peaked in terms of driving the development of church practices in the United States"

Another pattern is the development of what is referred to as the "emerging church."[41] These congregations are highly organic in character, relational in lifestyle, and oriented toward incorporating more mystery and art into their worship life. In addition, much of their communication and networking is carried on through the use of new forms of information technology. They often meet in rented space or use facilities that are patterned quite differently from traditional church architecture. But, they also tend to be mostly generationally based and affinity-group oriented, which may in the long run make them yet one more time-based congregational form. These congregations, however, are a further indication that the day of the megachurch is probably passing as the dominant influence in shaping church life. This decline in the influence of the regional church has yet to be played out in relation to changing patterns in automobile culture.

A final pattern involves the continued rediscovery of what it means to be church in contemporary society. This discussion about the meaning of church calls for a reengaging of ecclesiology from a missiological perspective. This is helping many more traditional congregations, whether located in city neighborhoods or first, second, or third ring suburbs, rethink their core identity in relation to recontextualizing their ministries. This missional church conversation is showing some promise of helping churches and their congregations break the cycle of simply cre-

[41]Eddie Gibbs and Ryan K. Bolger, *Emerging Churches: Creating Christian Community in Postmodern Cultures* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2005).

ating new types of time-based congregations in response to changing circumstances. It is doing so by cultivating an identity rooted in Trinitarian understandings that works itself out within the inherent relational and missional nature of the church.[42]

The rise of automobile culture has dramatically shaped and continues to reshape the social geography of the United States. The earlier values associated with automobile ownership—such as speed, fun, personal mobility, individual freedom, choice, and identity—all worked to change the logic of our landscape from concentration to decentralization, to fragmentation, and finally to regionalization. The countervalues of efficiency, safety, and the environment, which were more recently expressed, have challenged many of the earlier values. The most recent emergence of the countervalues of sustainability and green are clearly influencing a renewed focus on local community and an expanded use of information technology as we increasingly recognize the limits of our freeway systems. The morphing will continue over time, but what appears to be increasingly evident is the fundamental lack of viability of a social geography that is overly reliant on the automobile. ⊕

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[42]Literature on this subject includes books such as: Darrell L. Guder et al., *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998); Craig Van Gelder, *The Essence of the Church: A Community Created by the Spirit* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2000); Richard H. Bliese, Craig Van Gelder, and Kelly A. Fryer, *The Evangelizing Church: A Lutheran Contribution* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2005); Craig Van Gelder, *The Ministry of the Missional Church: A Community Led by the Spirit* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2007); and Rick Rouse and Craig Van Gelder, *A Field Guide for the Missional Congregation: Embarking on a Journey of Transformation* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2008).