

DAVID A. ROOZEN & JAMES R. NIEMAN, EDITORS

CHURCH, IDENTITY, AND CHANGE

THEOLOGY AND DENOMINATIONAL
STRUCTURES IN UNSETTLED TIMES

Introduction

David A. Roozen and James R. Nieman

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CHURCH, IDENTITY, and CHANGE

*Theology and Denominational Structures
in Unsettled Times*

Edited by

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Introduction

David A. Roozen and James R. Nieman

Eighty years after Nietzsche's madman shouted "God is dead,"¹ that same cry was used to label the supposed religious climate of the late 1960s. The report, however, was exaggerated. In fact, that decade was an extremely energetic period of theological exploration, finding conflict mixed with creativity, bewilderment with innovation, and anxiety with renewal in a way that is typical during major, unsettling transitions. A closer examination of the period reveals that God's viability was less the issue than how we think about God and structure that into practice. Today, another rumor of death is often heard: the demise of denominationalism. Could it again be that life and death are less the issue than how denominations think about God and structure such reflection into organizational identity and practice? We believe that the historical introductions, sociological case studies, and theological essays in this collection support such a conclusion.

This conclusion should not be misunderstood. We neither deny nor minimize the fact that all denominations today are feeling unique sources of stress. For many, this strain has edged into crisis and seeking strategies to cope. The search for strategies has been especially marked by contentiousness, disorientation, apprehension, fear of loss, and sense of hurt. Even so, several transitions suggest a story more complex and compelling than any simple prediction of doom.

- Many people are investing considerable energy in the future of their denominations. It is probably true that there is a growing layer of privatistic

1. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science: With a Prelude in Rhymes and an Appendix in Songs*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), sec. 125, 343.

and localistic indifference to denominations across our society. This is not the dominant story, however. Instead, by actually looking closely at denominations, as did the contributors to this collection, what emerges is a commitment to affirm and engage these groups, even to the point of sometimes fighting with friends and colleagues.

- Many denominations, particularly within oldline Protestantism, face serious problems and may never regain the numerical, missiological, or cultural prominence they once enjoyed. Yet in this study, neither social analysts nor denominational leaders actually believed that even the most challenged denominations were in imminent danger of collapse. Even groups facing great struggle show indications of adaptive resources and pockets of vitality. In denominations beyond the oldline, images of steadfast purpose and high energy predominate.
- While the major sources of stress and strain, transition and change that challenge denominations are clear and well known, so are the organizational and theological resources for coping with these challenges. Equally in abundance are the strategies that can be applied to or enhance these resources.
- Historians have noted that during the roughly 350 years of Protestantism in North America, there have been several distinct transitions in the nature of denominations. Just as important, the organizational embodiments of all the major colonial religious bodies from America's founding period, as well as the major indigenous movements that joined them along the way (such as Methodism, Assemblies of God, and the historic black denominations), have survived these transitions in recognizable form. As Russell Richey succinctly remarked in his sketch of the five historical stages of American denominationalism, "Radical change is not a new experience."²
- Scholars have reminded us that denominations, in addition to being organizations, are also traditions and cultures. As such, they typically have a more foundational and adaptable permanence than their organizational carriers, enabling a greater durability than appearances might first suggest.³
- As will be noted later in this introduction, transition is the pervasive real-

2. Russell E. Richey, "Denominations and Denominationalism: An American Morphology," in *Reimagining Denominationalism: Interpretive Essays*, ed. Robert Bruce Mullin and Russell E. Richey (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), p. 74.

3. Nancy T. Ammerman, "Denominations: Who and What Are We Studying?" in *Reimagining Denominationalism*, pp. 111-33; Jackson Carroll and Wade Clark Roof, eds., *Beyond Establishment: Protestant Identity in a Post-Protestant Age* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1993).

ity affecting the way secular America in general and corporate America in particular organize their work. This reality is no less true for religious groups in America, obviously including the denominations in and beyond this study.

Others may wish to speculate on what motivates the rumor that denominationalism is dying. Our interest is the reality of denominations, not the rumors. *The issue facing American denominations as they enter the new millennium is not death but instead how they can and do bear their particular legacies faithfully and effectively into a changing future.*

Since colonial days, religious work in America has happened through denominations. At least since the start of the twentieth century, these religious bodies consisted of a fairly tight, intradenominationally connected system of congregations, regional judicatories, and national offices. This system was the product of more than two centuries of consolidation among America's historic immigrant and indigenous churches.⁴ The vast majority of these structures are still in place, retain some semblance of internal coherence, have considerable social and religious significance, and will be with us for the foreseeable future. Nevertheless, the stresses upon them today clearly indicate that they are entering an unsettled period of transition.⁵ A constellation of technological, economic, demographic, and cultural changes is transforming all of American society, as well as the world. Many organizational analysts argue that these changes are so fundamental as to signal a major paradigm shift from modern to postmodern forms of organization, a shift affecting all institutional segments of American life, including the religious.⁶ *The purpose of this collection is to examine part of that shift, using the national structures of eight diverse Protestant denominations as a window into the nature of this transition.*

4. On the history of denominationalism, see Richey, "Denominations and Denominationalism"; Craig Dykstra and James Hudnut-Beumler, "The National Organizational Structures of Protestant Denominations: An Invitation to a Conversation," in *The Organizational Revolution: Presbyterians and American Denominationalism*, ed. Milton J. Coalter, John M. Mulder, and Louis B. Weeks (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1992), pp. 307-31; and Ben Primer, *Protestants and American Business Methods* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: UMI Research Press, 1978).

5. For a provocative perspective on organizational change in such an unsettled period, see Ann Swidler, "Culture in Action: Symbols and Strategies," *American Sociological Review* 51 (1986): 273-86.

6. Stewart Clegg, *Modern Organizations: Organizational Studies in the Postmodern World* (Newbury Park, Calif.: Sage, 1990); Nancy T. Ammerman, "SBC Moderates and the Making of a Postmodern Denomination: Locating a Niche," *Christian Century* 110, no. 26 (September 22, 1993): 896-99.

Because denominations are both religious and institutional in nature, the broad frame of our inquiry is the relationship between the *theological and the organizational nature* of national denominational structures as they *adapt to the changing situation* of the twenty-first century. The method of our inquiry is to draw the reader into the actual situation of the national structures of eight denominations, using a distinctive collection of articles:

Historical introductions to each denomination, giving background to its national structure and the theological legacy that undergirds this;
Sociological case studies of how each denomination defines and attempts to redefine the purposes and organization of its national structure;
Theological essays that treat the work, organization, and rethinking of each denomination as instances of embodied, practical theology; and
Concluding reflections, one focused from an organizational perspective and the other highlighting the theological dimension.

In a demanding time for organizations attempting to do God's work, we seek to help those who are committed to their denominations turn the challenges they face into opportunities. We also seek to help students of American religion and postmodern organizations who are attempting to deepen their understanding of the adaptive capacities inherent in the broader social and cultural transitions within which denominations are embedded.

Features of the Study

The two most recent examinations of denominationalism in the United States share a common orientation.⁷ On the one hand, they acknowledge that denominations are a distinctive mark if not the historically fundamental organizational unit of American religious experience. On the other hand, they express the pervasive sense that, "Born in an earlier era to give expression to free and voluntary religion in a country without an established church, the denomination often appears out of kilter, if not hopelessly obsolete, in an America where religion has become more pluralistic and privatized."⁸ Particularly among commentators on and practitioners within oldline Protestantism, assessments of denominationalism are often cast in the gloomy tones of demise.

7. Carroll and Roof, *Beyond Establishment*; Mullin and Richey, *Reimagining Denominationalism*.

8. Carroll and Roof, *Beyond Establishment*, p. 11.

Even for oldline Protestantism with its downsizing, such assessments seem overdramatic. Beyond the oldline, however, the claims are flatly erroneous, especially when considering that many such groups are bursting with growth and optimism. The Holiness/Pentecostal segment and the independent megachurch movement are perhaps the most noticeable examples of this, and they share three characteristics worth noting.⁹ First, their national connectional systems are less hierarchical and bureaucratic when compared to oldline Protestantism. Second, prompted by the combination of organizational growth and bureaucratic skepticism, they are searching for nonhierarchical ways to strengthen their national connectional systems for the sake of mission. Third, there are noticeable tensions in these national connectional systems between fellowship-resource functions and regulatory-accountability functions. Two of the denominations in this collection derive from this stream of American religious expression, and their inclusion alone sets this study apart from others, causing a reconsideration of earlier assessments about the fate of denominations. Indeed, the very breadth and diversity represented by all eight denominations in this study is also a distinctive feature. The vast majority of recent literature on American denominations, including the rumored demise of denominationalism, has focused on oldline Protestantism. Four of the denominations contained herein clearly belong to this family. We have intentionally balanced these, however, with four other groups from beyond that family. Among other things, this means that we were able to compare the experience of several denominations that confront the current period of unsettled transition in a weakened state with several more that engage these changes from a position of vitality and growth.

Another unique aspect of this study is its attention to how the national level relates to the overall structures of a denomination. Simply put, *a denomination is a group of congregations united under a common and distinct faith, name, and organization*. Even such a basic definition immediately indicates that a denomination is a layered organizational system. In the United States these layers typically have a geographical quality, connecting local congregations with national offices and agencies through one or two layers of regional divisions generically called “judicatories” (classes, associations, or districts for relatively circumscribed clusters of congregations, and dioceses, conferences, or

9. Kimon Howland Sargeant, “The Post-Modern Denomination: An Organizational Analysis of the Willow Creek Association” (paper presented at the Religious Research Association Annual Meeting, Nashville, 1996); Scott L. Thumma, “Megachurches Today: A Summary of Data from the ‘Faith Communities Today’ Project,” found at http://hrr.hartsem.edu/org/faith_megachurches_FACTsummary.html; Scott L. Thumma, “Exploring the Megachurch Phenomena: Their Characteristics and Cultural Context,” found at http://hrr.hartsem.edu/bookshelf/thumma_article2.html.

synods for larger regional groupings). The important point is that a denomination is more than its national structure. While the intentional focus of this study is on national structures, the sociological cases and the theological essays will to a great extent use those structures as a vehicle for examining aspects of the entire denominational system, especially the relationship between a denomination's internal diversity and its identity.

The traditional geographic layering of organizational connections within denominations is also germane to how this study was uniquely related to two parallel projects, one on congregations and the other on judicatories. All three projects were part of a comprehensive study entitled "Organizing Religious Work for the Twenty-First Century: Exploring Denominationalism." Located within and staffed by faculty of Hartford Seminary's Institute for Religion Research, the entire project received major funding from the Lilly Endowment, Inc., beginning in the fall of 1997. In the language of the original funding proposal, the study would consist of "three distinct, but closely coordinated, sub-projects. One sub-project will take the national 'denomination' as its focus; a second will focus on regional judicatories; and a third will take the local congregation as the starting point, moving outward to ask how congregations form the functional networks through which they accomplish their work in the world and by which they themselves are shaped." The congregation subproject was directed by Nancy T. Ammerman, assisted by Scott Thumma. It included surveys, interviews, and ethnographic examination of congregations and the local organizations with which they were connected in seven representative areas of the United States. The sampling of congregations in the seven locales included all faith traditions, but oversampled congregations from the eight denominations of the national subproject.¹⁰ The judicatory subproject was directed by Adair Lummis. It included in-depth interviews with judicatory staff from the eight denominations of the national subproject and in the seven locales used by the congregation subproject. In addition, mailed surveys and telephone interviews were used with a broader sample of judicatory leaders in the eight denominations.¹¹

10. Nancy Tatom Ammerman, *Pillars of Faith: American Congregations and Their Partners* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005); Nancy T. Ammerman, "Doing Good in American Communities: Congregations and Service Organizations Working Together," found at http://hrr.hartsem.edu/about/about_orw_cong-report.html.

11. Adair T. Lummis, "Brand Name Identity in a Post-Denominational Age: Regional Leaders' Perspectives on Its Importance for Churches" (paper presented at the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion Annual Meeting, Columbus, Ohio, 2001); Adair T. Lummis, "The Art and Science of Subtle Proactivity: Regional Leaders and Their Congregations" (paper presented at the Religious Research Association Annual Meeting, Columbus, Ohio, 2001); Adair T.

Although each subproject of the Organizing Religious Work (ORW) project had its own integrity, the subprojects were also designed and implemented in close coordination. Emerging insights were a continuing point of conversation among the project coprincipals. In addition, several consultations involving an interdisciplinary mix of scholars and an ecumenical mix of church leaders were convened to discuss the implications of and relations between the joint findings of the three subprojects. Therefore, the national level perspective of this collection was uniquely expanded by an ongoing dialogue with careful studies conducted at congregation and judicatory levels. Together they treated the denomination as an inclusive connectional system.

By attending to the layered organizational system of denominations, another unusual (though not utterly unique) aspect of this study comes to the fore: the seriousness it gives to organizational perspectives, including secular literature on organizations. It may seem strange, if not dangerous and misguided, for a study of religious organizations to take cues from the study of secular organizations. While we examined the embodiment of denominational theology and tradition in organizational structures, the vast majority of organizational theory, including extensions to emerging forms of postmodern organization, is secular in derivation and tone.¹² There are good reasons why such insights are important, however. For example, there is clear evidence that the twentieth-century development and refinement of Protestant national structures was heavily affected by the importing of cutting edge organizational structures and processes from corporate America.¹³ There are also striking parallels between the calls for reorganization in denominations and those heard in secular organizations, such as the need for decentralization, greater local autonomy, network connections instead of hierarchy, and resourcing functions rather than regulation. Indeed,

Lummis, "The Role of Judicatories in Interpreting Denominational Identity" (paper presented at the Religious Research Association Annual Meeting, Boston, 1999); Adair T. Lummis, "Judicatory Niches and Negotiations" (paper presented at the Association for the Sociology of Religion Annual Meeting, San Francisco, 1998). These papers can be found at http://hrr.hartsem.edu/about/lummis_articles.htm.

12. An interest in the organizational embodiment of traditions is particularly salient in two streams of sociological theory: (1) the merging of cultural and structural perspectives in neo-institutionalism, and (2) the merging of cultural and resource mobilization perspectives in constructivist approaches to social movement theory. Walter W. Powell and Paul DiMaggio, *The New Institutionalism in Organizational Analysis* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), is perhaps the most comprehensive summary of the former. Ulf Hjelm, "Constructivist Analysis and Movement Organizations: Conceptual Clarifications," *Acta Sociologica* 39, no. 2 (1996): 169-86, is the most recent systemization of the latter.

13. Richard W. Reifsnyder, "Managing the Mission: Church Restructuring in the Twentieth Century," in *The Organizational Revolution*, pp. 55-95.

Ammerman's characterization of the postmodern denomination draws its framework directly from sociologist Stewart Clegg's recent work.¹⁴

The basic definition mentioned earlier indicated that denominations have an explicitly religious dimension, organizing around a common faith. As Richey put it, a denomination "is *ecclesial*, a movement or body understanding itself to be legitimate and self-sufficient, a proper 'church' (or religious movement)."¹⁵ Ammerman was still more direct:

Set out to write about denominations, and one can hardly avoid writing about beliefs and practices. That, after all, is what denominations are supposed to be. The great reformers of the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries argued over how best to honor God and reach heaven. They argued that what one believed, how one worshipped, the religious devotions of one's life mattered. . . . As Christians began to transform the Church Universal into the Church Denominational, they did so with differences over beliefs and practices at the forefront of their fights. . . . The person on the street, like the theologian in the seminary, knows that denominations are supposed to be identifiable by their beliefs and practices. Defining denominations by the ideas and rituals that distinguish them from others is the commonsense thing to do.¹⁶

The national structures of denominations are not simply organizations, but religious ones as well. Any adequate understanding of denominations therefore must include the question of the relationship between (in our case) their *Christian* nature and their *organizational* nature. Highlighting this very relationship, especially the religious aspect of how these organizations face massive transition, is one of the unique aspects of this study. By contrast, much recent literature on denominations has been segregated into academic disciplines. There are books and articles written by historians for historians, by sociologists for sociologists, by theologians for theologians, and by practitioners for practitioners. Our alternative was to create an explicit dialogue among a church historian, a sociologist, a theologian, and a national level executive within each denomination. The resulting sets of histories, case studies, and essays emerged from each denominational team's own internal dialogue. Our goal was to generate critical but appreciative reflection that provides grounded, comparative, and multidisciplinary insights for both scholars and practitioners who care about how denominations seek to embody God's work.

14. Ammerman, "SBC Moderates"; Clegg, *Modern Organizations*.

15. Richey, "Denominations and Denominationalism," pp. 75-76.

16. Ammerman, "Denominations," p. 113.

Traditional ecclesiological treatments of polity provide one perspective on the relationship between organization and theology,¹⁷ as do the limited number of more ideal-type taxonomies¹⁸ and the few (mostly polemical) accounts of specific denominational structures.¹⁹ In most respects, however, it was a new challenge to develop what we envisioned, an empathetic examination of denominational structures as embodied theology, one that does justice to both the organizational and the religious nature of those structures.²⁰ Our theological point of departure in accepting this challenge was, to borrow appreciatively from Thomas Jeavons's recent study of Christian service organizations: "What makes this organization, what it does, and the way it does it, Christian?"²¹

Another aspect of denominations mentioned earlier in our basic definition seems so obvious that its broader significance may easily be overlooked: a denomination has a name. Each is "denominated." Among other things, this means that it exists alongside other groups similarly named, that is, other denominations. As Richey noted, "The denomination exists in a situation of religious pluralism, typically a pluralism of denominations." Such denominationalism "is voluntary and therefore presupposes a condition of legal or *de facto* toleration and religious freedom — an environment within which it is possible, in fact, willingly to join or not join."²² Ever the historian, Richey was also quick to add that such voluntaristic denominationalism is a relatively recent phenomenon. Many American denominations, including all colonial imports (Lutheran, Presbyterian, Mennonite, Anglican, Baptist, and Congrega-

17. Robert S. Paul, *The Church in Search of Its Self* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972).

18. For the most comprehensive sociological treatment, see Gary P. Burkart, "Patterns of Protestant Organization," in *American Denominational Organization: A Sociological View*, ed. Ross P. Scherer (Pasadena, Calif.: William Carey Library, 1980), pp. 36-83. For a more theologically informed approach, see Avery Robert Dulles, *Models of the Church*, expanded ed. (Garden City, N.Y.: Image Books, 1987).

19. Andy Langford and William H. Willimon, *A New Connection: Reforming the United Methodist Church* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995), provides a recent example of the polemical literature; Reifsnnyder, "Managing the Mission," is a recent example of a more descriptively neutral treatment.

20. The most direct methodological models for what we envision come from the merging of congregational studies and practical and local theology in the recent work of Don S. Browning, *A Fundamental Practical Theology: Descriptive and Strategic Proposals* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), and Robert J. Schreiter, "Theology in the Congregation: Discovering and Doing," in *Studying Congregations: A New Handbook*, ed. Nancy T. Ammerman, Jackson W. Carroll, Carl S. Dudley, and William McKinney (Nashville: Abingdon, 1998), pp. 23-39.

21. Thomas Jeavons, *When the Bottom Line Is Faithfulness: Management of Christian Service Organizations* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), p. 139.

22. Richey, "Denominations and Denominationalism," p. 75.

tional), had a predenominational ecclesial existence, such that even a radical change today should not necessarily be interpreted as a signal of demise. It may instead be simply another metamorphosis.²³

Being denominated also connotes that something is distinct, having recognizable boundaries. Most denominational analysts have long recognized that the distinctness of a denomination is not solely or in some cases even primarily carried by its beliefs. As will become apparent in what follows, distinctness can also arise from social class, race or ethnicity, polity or governance, and worship or other practices. How all these elements and others besides merge to form a recognizably distinct entity is what Ammerman referred to as a denomination's "cultural identity."²⁴ In a related way, we invite the reader to pay special attention to the notion of *denominational identity*. To be clear, denominational identity is a characteristic of the entire denominational system, not solely or even primarily the privileged domain of the national level. Nevertheless, as a central part of the overall system, a denomination's national structures are intimately linked to overall identity issues, sometimes as cause, sometimes as beneficiary (or victim). The material in this collection is distinctive in showing that, to the extent that the current state of transition and adaptation in national structures is problematic, *it is most immediately a problem of identity*. The place of national structures in this broader identity work, particularly what they are presently doing or might yet do to strengthen denominational identity, therefore becomes a central topic in the concluding reflections of this volume, as well as something worth noticing in the descriptive material throughout the collection.

The eight denominations in this study, like the vast majority of American denominations, have a set of interrelated national structures, including both a national assembly that meets periodically and various ongoing administrative or program offices and agencies. To the extent that a denomination has a primary national governance structure, it typically takes the shape of a national assembly operating with some form of representative, participatory democratic process. Theoretically, the role of denominational assemblies is analogous to

23. Richey, "Denominations and Denominationalism," p. 76.

24. Ammerman, "Denominations," pp. 119-22. For a similar perspective as applied to congregations, see Jackson W. Carroll and James F. Hopewell, "Identity," in *Handbook for Congregational Studies*, ed. Jackson W. Carroll, Carl S. Dudley, and William McKinley (Nashville: Abingdon, 1986), pp. 21-47. For a perspective applied to organizations more generically, see Joanne Martin, *Cultures in Organizations: Three Perspectives* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992); Edgar H. Schein, *Organizational Culture and Leadership*, 2nd ed. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1997); Terrence E. Deal and Allan A. Kennedy, *Corporate Cultures: The Rites and Rituals of Corporate Life* (Cambridge, Mass.: Perseus Books, 2000); Mats Alvesson, *Understanding Organizational Culture* (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage, 2002).

that of federal and state legislatures. Of course, such governmental legislatures are nearly full-time operations. By contrast, a denominational assembly typically meets only one or two weeks annually, biennially, or even, as with the United Methodist Church, quadrennially. It is therefore not hard to imagine that a denomination's ongoing national offices and agencies have considerably more power and importance than its periodic national assembly, especially when compared to similar structures in federal and state governments.

A denomination's ongoing national offices and agencies typically include some that are largely independent from the national assembly (such as pension boards and publishing houses) and some that are directly mandated by and accountable to that assembly. A key and enduring structural issue in all denominations, and a distinctive concern in this collection, is the relationship of national offices and agencies to the national assembly and to each other. A related and persistent structural issue is the degree to which a denomination's national structures are representative of or responsive to congregations and persons in the pew. There are at least two dimensions to notice. One is that the accountability of the staff of ongoing national offices and agencies to the grass roots typically runs through the national assembly. Given the relative power of national staff in comparison to the national assembly, the ability of the grass roots to hold national staff accountable is episodic and arduous at best. The other dimension to notice is the extent to which delegates to the national assembly, typically unpaid volunteers elected at the congregation or regional level, represent the grass roots. When such questions about the accountability and representativeness of the national level are combined with concerns about the fundamental identity, direction, beliefs, and practices of a denomination, it is little wonder that denominational politics occasionally make the front pages of the secular press. If this much is publicly on the surface, there can be little doubt that more resides beneath.

The fundamental, rational-legal process of representative democracies, a process that most denominations have used since the days of their American founding, is clearly political. The political nature of national level decision making in denominations has therefore been a reality for our country's dominant national religious structures during more than 250 years of good times and bad. Nevertheless, this political quality appears to become more visible, complex, and heated during the unsettledness of change and transition. Such periods also make the interaction between theology and cultural context more challenging. Indeed, the negotiation among diverse constituencies and theological perspectives is a prominent theme throughout this book, as is the tension between more singular and more multistranded theological perspectives.

Our examination of the national level of denominational organization

focuses primarily on the national assembly and particularly its derivative agencies, the latter typically directed by the denominational office of the president or the CEO equivalent, such as a presiding bishop or executive secretary. Especially in the organizationally descriptive portions of this collection, attention is paid to the potentially changing nature of the national level's work, both what that work is and how it is being done. Since the national level includes not only the roles, rules, and relationships that arrange how the organization does its work but also the goals and purposes to which that work is oriented, we are consequently interested in both form and function. Many might argue that form should follow function. When both form and function carry theological value as well as the weight of tradition, however, the commonsense or utilitarian sequence of the two (form follows function) becomes questionable. To complicate matters further, the negotiated balance between form, function, and theological warrant is not always consistently systematic. William Warren Sweet remarked in the 1930s that Presbyterians had developed "a more democratic government but a 'monarchial gospel,' while Methodists developed a 'monarchial' government but preached a more 'democratic gospel.'"²⁵ The attempt to document the relationship between form, function, and theological warrant, let alone how this connects with a changing social and cultural context, is a unique feature of this book.

The governmental structure of Protestant denominations, frequently referred to as polity, is typically described as episcopal (Episcopalian, United Methodist), presbyterian (Presbyterian Church [U.S.A.], Reformed Church in America), congregational (various Baptist denominations, United Church of Christ), or some combination of these (how the Assemblies of God mixes presbyterian and congregational). All three use national structures, but in congregational polities the local congregation has final authority over all aspects of its life, so that compliance with national and regional directives is, with few exceptions, voluntary (or to use the religiously preferred term, covenantal). The congregation owns its property and hires or fires its clergy. Theologically, each congregation is fully the church. In both episcopal and presbyterian polities, the national assembly sets general policy and standards to which congregations must conform, but the regional structures mediate and elaborate this to and for congregations. Regional structures are where congregations and clergy hold standing in the denomination, have a voice in clergy placement, and typically hold claim to local church property. This connectional arrangement is theologically the dominant ecclesial structure. In episcopal polities the primary regional structures are

25. William Warren Sweet, *The Story of Religion in America* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1939), p. 319.

headed by bishops, while in presbyterian systems they are representative democracies. To use nonreligious descriptors of organizational structure, both episcopal and presbyterian systems are fundamentally federative, with congregations having some of the characteristics of franchises. By contrast, the national structures in congregational systems are best understood as associative or coalitional in light of the autonomy of their congregations.

In practice, the role and prominence of national structures within their overall denominational systems varies more than these three traditional and generalized types of polity would suggest. There is also a considerably greater range in how a denomination's national assembly actually relates to its agencies and offices, and vice versa. In perhaps surprising contrast, the general kind of work done by national structures differs less than one might expect, although the priority and resources given to various tasks can diverge greatly. In any case, this collection gives ample opportunity to consider the disparities between theory (formal polity) and practice in several different national level models.

We have noted that the national structures of denominations have certain parallels with state and federal governments. Accordingly, one can find legislative, executive, and judicial functions within all national denominational structures. Legislatively, each denomination's national assembly establishes the rules of governance for all levels of the system. In episcopal and presbyterian systems, the national assembly also establishes general policy on matters of faith, ordination, and religious practice. National assemblies within congregational polities also regularly deal with such matters, but their resolutions are more guidelines than binding rules for other levels of the denomination. Additionally, the legislative function of national assemblies in virtually every established denomination sets broad policy directives for a range of programs, implementation of which is usually delegated to the various programmatic offices and agencies within a denomination's "executive branch."

National program initiatives are of four general kinds. At the most abstract level, national directives can set the theological principles and goals that should undergird program initiatives and their implementation by judicatories and congregations. This is a regulatory function. At a more concrete level, all national structures help to provide program resource materials, especially educational curricula and worship materials for congregations. Third, all national structures run at least some domestic and international mission programs. Finally, all national structures provide a measure of training and information, opportunities for celebration and fellowship, systems of denomination-wide communication, and support for the denomination's judicial system (if not actually convening it). Even if through fully or quasi-independent agencies, most national structures provide pension funds and insurance programs, and many

have publishing houses. Some national structures are also directly responsible for a system of seminaries, colleges, and/or parochial schools, as well as providing placement assistance for clergy.

While much of a national structure's work is internal to the larger denominational system, in all instances there is also an external dimension. This moves in two different directions. The first is providing a public voice for a denomination's religious values and commitments. The second is providing mechanisms for relating to other denominations and faith groups, both nationally and internationally.

With such a diverse complex of functions, it is not surprising that national structures can evolve into sizable bureaucracies, complete with specialized professional staff. Related to this, the historical record of accomplishment of these corporate earthen vessels of the Christian gospel is immense. Among other things, they helped to create and sustain the highest level of individual religious participation in the Western world, the largest sector both of nonprofit organizations (namely, congregations) and of charitable giving in the United States, and a wide array of domestic and international networks of humanitarian aid, social welfare agencies, colleges, hospitals, and specialized housing. When considering the corporate power and productivity of the United States, few people immediately connect such organizational virtuosity and innovation with the religious system. Our focus on denominations through their national structures makes a distinctive and compelling case for this claim, fascinating if for no other reason than their special blend of collective, corporate, and governmental functions. At the same time, few people view corporate America as an unmixed blessing or believe that state and federal governments operate at peak efficiency. The same concerns might well be voiced about the national structures of denominations, especially during a period of broad social and cultural change. For this reason, we will also find denominational structures rife with tensions between inertia and change, theology and efficiency, tradition and adaptation, and local interests and national priorities, all amidst increasingly diverse constituencies.

Description of the Collection

Selected Denominations

Our selection of denominations assumed that the organization of religious work in the United States is in a transitional period, with no broadly shared consensus about how God's work should be done. In order to see how different

groups are trying to adapt, it was therefore essential to involve as broad a spectrum of denominations as possible. Within a Protestant frame, we tried to maximize the diversity of these denominations in light of five considerations:

Theology: Whether sacramental, confessional, progressive, reformed, pietistic, or Pentecostal, traditions differ in what they think the church should say and do in the world.

Polity: Episcopal, presbyterian, congregational, and mixed polities vary by how authority and responsibility are allocated and exercised at different levels of organization.

Scale: Larger groups obviously have more resources than smaller ones, but at the same time face greater contingencies.

Ethnicity: Immigrant and African American groups, for example, bear quite distinct traditions of organizing in the larger social milieu today.

History: Older groups have had longer to compromise with society and constituencies, as well as formally institutionalize. A denomination's original structure also reflects the currents of that period and is carried onward as a resource or liability of that tradition.

Trying to maximize diversity on the basis of these factors led to the selection of the eight denominations that are the immediate focus of this collection. They are listed in alphabetical order below, which is the same order in which they appear in the book. Following the name of each is its common abbreviation and a brief sketch of its theology, polity, size (approximate number of congregations), historical ethnicity (if still significant), and period of founding. Later in this introduction we will describe the content of the chapters related to each denomination and suggest several paths through the entire collection.

Assemblies of God (AG): Pentecostal theology, presbyterian-congregational polity, 12,000 congregations, founded 1914.

Association of Vineyard Churches (Vineyard): Postmodern Pentecostal theology, presbyterian-congregational polity, 500 congregations, founded 1982.

Episcopal Church (Episcopal): Sacramental theology, episcopal polity, 7,500 congregations, the dominant church of the southern British colonies.

Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod (LC-MS): Conservative theology, episcopal-congregational polity, 6,000 congregations, historically German, founded 1840s.

National Baptist Convention, USA (NBC): Restorationist theology, con-

gregational polity, 20,000 congregations, historically African American, founded 1895.

Reformed Church in America (RCA): Reformed theology, presbyterian polity, 900 congregations, historically Dutch, founded 1628 in New Amsterdam (New York City).

United Church of Christ (UCC): Liberal Reformed theology, congregational polity, 5,800 congregations, product of several mergers including descendants of the *Mayflower* Puritans.

United Methodist Church (UMC): Wesleyan theology, episcopal polity, 35,000 congregations, founded 1784.

Research Teams

The examination of the adaptive tactics and resources at the national level of these eight denominations was conducted by a four-person research team for each denomination. As noted earlier, each team consisted of a church historian, a sociologist, a theologian, and a national level executive. In collaboration with others on the team, the historian wrote an introduction that provided historical context for the denomination and the other writers, the sociologist wrote a sociological case study, and the theologian wrote a theological essay. The national level executive was both a consultant to the writers and an entrée to the national structures. Teams met both separately and collectively, starting with an orientation meeting for the entire project in the spring of 1998. The sociological case studies were researched and drafted between the fall of 1998 and the fall of 2000. Some writing on the historical introductions and the theological essays happened during this same period, with first drafts of most chapters completed a year later and the final versions finished by the spring of 2002.

The specific assignment for each sociologist was to select at least one theme or issue that was central to understanding the then current (1998-2000) adaptive challenges faced by the national structure of her or his denomination, especially as it sought to determine, articulate, and act on its identity and mission. These were then to serve as a window into:

- How the national structure defined its work (mission, functions, tasks), and what historical continuities and discontinuities this definition represented;
- How the national structure organized its resources to accomplish this work, and what historical continuities or discontinuities this organization revealed; and

- Why the national structure had arrived at defining and organizing its work in the aforementioned ways.

The core of the case study was to be descriptive. Nevertheless, the writers were also invited to conclude with an empathetic evaluation, reflecting on the case's implications for denominational leaders, the emerging nature of organized religion, and organizational adaptiveness.

The sociologists used a variety of methods for obtaining the information upon which their studies were based. In all instances this included interviews with national leaders and staff, as well as a review of published and unpublished documents, memos, and reports. One of the responsibilities of the national level executive on each team was to help in gaining access to these people and documents. All sociologists also had access to reports from the interviews conducted by the ORW judicatory subproject and congregational surveys conducted by the ORW congregation subproject. In a few instances this information was supplemented with clergy surveys conducted by the sociologists themselves and/or participant observation at national meetings. Every team member for a denomination had access to all this information, and on several teams many or all team members participated in the interview and observation processes. With only a few exceptions, team members had some history of personal involvement with the denominations they studied.

The case studies were developed in close cooperation with the theological essays, in some cases providing essential background to them. The task of integrating organizational perspectives with theological reflection is formidable, with scant literature concerning the national structures of denominations upon which to draw. Recent attention to practical, contextual, and local theology has emphasized that the development of action strategies within religious organizations can be a fundamentally theological activity, but literature in this is focused almost exclusively on congregations. Don Browning, for example, has argued that congregations can be communities of memory, tradition, and practical theological reason,²⁶ while Robert Schreiter has illumined the rich theological practices that relate particular religious gatherings to their broader traditions.²⁷ Without any models for applying such insights to denominations, however, we were essentially asking the theologians on each team to pioneer a new kind of research. By embracing this challenge, they not only expanded the present scope of practical theology but also reaffirmed that the work of denominations is deeply theological.

26. Browning, *A Fundamental Practical Theology*.

27. Robert J. Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1985).

The specific assignment for each theologian was to offer a theological portrayal of the denomination based on information assembled by the team, including but not limited to the case study. Each essay was to convey the actual, operative theologies used at the national level and, if possible, how these intersected with theological expressions throughout the denomination. In other words, this required venturing beyond official theological statements into the wider claims and commitments embodied in daily practices and organizational arrangements. Although there was no set pattern for the research or reflection that resulted in these essays, the theologians were advised to bring careful observation and description of a presenting situation and its implicit faith commitments into conversation with the larger historical and systematic theological memory of the denomination. A more detailed discussion of this task and a summary of the results can be found in the concluding reflection on theology at the end of this volume.

From the outset two premises served as points of departure for this entire study. First, the national structures of denominations are organizationally embodied traditions whose religious character includes an intrinsic commitment to being a community of memory. Second, these same structures are presently facing a period of transition in the United States. Taken together, these premises obviously foreground questions of continuity and change. To highlight the importance of such questions and to provide resources for their consideration, we therefore included a historian on each denominational team. The perspective these historians brought to their respective denominations and fellow team members is reflected in the introductions that begin each denominational set within this collection. These introductions, besides giving the historical background for the case studies and essays that follow in each set, will be especially valuable for those without a working knowledge of a particular denomination.

A biographical note about the writers whose work is presented here can be found in the List of Contributors (pp. 654-56). We also wish to recognize the national level executives who contributed their time, insight, and patience as members of the denominational teams:

LeRoy Bartel, Secretary for Education — AG
Kenneth R. Bradsell, Director of Policy, Planning, and Administrative
Services — RCA
Lorin Cope, Assistant to the President — UCC
Todd Hunter, National Director — Vineyard
C. David Lundquist, General Secretary, General Council on Ministries —
UMC
Kenneth Schurb, Assistant to the President — LC-MS
Bruce Woodcock, Church Pension Board — Episcopal

(The NBC used several national and state leaders as key informants rather than a single national executive.) In addition, we wish to acknowledge several team members who began the journey with us but needed to withdraw for various reasons along the way: Marilyn Dubasak, Samuel Solivan, Richard Valantasis, and George O. Wood. Finally, we wish especially to remember the lives and contributions of Peter Becker (sociologist, LC-MS) and John Wimber (national level executive, Vineyard), both of whom died during this project.

Chapter Précis

Given the focus of this study, each writer had a broad mandate: to provide a strategic and practical glimpse into the purposes, organizational arrangements, and adaptability of a denomination's national structures, as well as into its theological and historical resources. Each chapter, therefore, contains a virtual feast of topics, situations, questions, and conclusions, so that any one of them could profitably be read alone. Nevertheless, since each religious tradition represents an organizationally and theologically integrated reality, we recommend at the very least that the chapters be read as they were produced, in denominational sets. Such a strategy naturally means moving beyond one's typical disciplinary expertise. Since denominations are messy wholes and not neat abstractions, an appreciative understanding therefore requires an interdisciplinary approach. While we have no illusions about completeness or accuracy in portraying denominational complexity and wholeness (for example, perhaps one coauthored, integrated article on each denomination would have been stronger), we still believe the assembled sets for each denomination offer a step in the right direction.

Because of the richness of topics that dance in varying ways across the chapters of this collection, there was simply no one best way to order them. For the sake of simplicity in locating material, we therefore settled on a conventional alphabetic arrangement by denominational name. Before suggesting several ways to read through the entire collection, we first offer a brief précis of each of the twenty-four chapters.

ASSEMBLIES OF GOD

Historical Introduction (Gary B. McGee)

Through a hundred years of robust growth, the AG has managed to maintain a healthy balance in regard to two enduring tensions. The one tension is between its restoration Pentecostal heritage and evangelical respectability. The other is

between charisma and institutional structure. Both tensions have faced an increasing amount of pressure in the transition to the twenty-first century.

Sociological Case Study (Margaret M. Poloma)

Thomas O'Dea's five dilemmas of institutionalization are a well-known statement of the trade-offs between the positive and negative aspects of religious organization. These are used for a close analysis of the tensions evident in the AG today, especially the pressure from both new Pentecostal and new evangelical developments. The ambiguity produced by such pressures appears to function as a safety valve protecting the AG's historical balance between charisma and institution building.

Theological Essay (William W. Menzies)

The growing role of the national level of the AG reflects a growing complexity of challenges that has required much intervention and leadership. Eight specific theological challenges are studied to show how these were addressed with a deepened attention to doctrine, prayer, and Scripture. Ongoing tensions and relationships with evangelicals and other Pentecostals raise new questions about how the AG will retain its distinctive place.

ASSOCIATION OF VINEYARD CHURCHES

Historical Introduction (Bill Jackson)

The primary way of expressing the Vineyard's history is through the biography of its founder, John Wimber. Wimber embarked upon a quest for a radical middle between a doctrinal evangelicalism and Pentecostal power that covered at least seven distinct periods until his death in 1997. Todd Hunter became national director in the spring of 1998 and challenged the Vineyard to honor Wimber by looking forward and defining itself not in ecclesiastical but in biblical terms.

Sociological Case Study (Donald E. Miller)

John Wimber's successor, Todd Hunter, inherited a remarkably successful, innovative, and yet tumultuous organization that was only twenty years old. Rather than routinizing and consolidating the movement, he tried to remove its layers of emerging bureaucracy by radically decentering its authority, hoping to create a "charismatic moment" within the movement and ignite a new level of spiritual entrepreneurship. The reasons for Hunter's hopes and the implications of his resignation in May of 2000 are explored.

Theological Essay (Don Williams)

The biography and commitments of founder John Wimber reveal many parallels between his theology and that of the Vineyard itself. In addition, the Vineyard *Statement of Faith* is examined to show how it draws from doctrinal insights of earlier periods of church history. The highly flexible and relationship-oriented polity of the Vineyard, woven from these several theological strands, positions it for effective witness in the postmodern period.

EPISCOPAL CHURCH**Historical Introduction (Ian T. Douglas)**

The denomination's political, economic, and social ascendancy led Episcopalians to believe they were the established church in the United States. Over the last three decades a dramatically pluralistic America and the global Anglican Communion have challenged the presumed cohesion of the national church ideal. In partial response, Episcopal bishops recently dedicated themselves to becoming agents of reconciliation in a church divided over issues of human sexuality and in a world torn apart by violence, poverty, and disease.

Sociological Case Study (William H. Swatos, Jr.)

The changing role of the presiding bishop and a 1995 embezzlement scandal in the national offices are used as ways for exploring what Episcopalians consider the national church to be. The former shows a movement from an authority-orientated hierarchical church to an autonomy-oriented network of discernment rather than decision making. The latter shows that diffuse organizational structures and competing strategic visions in the denomination allowed for creative, healthy resolution of the scandal's breach of trust.

Theological Essay (Jennifer M. Phillips)

The 1995 embezzlement scandal in the national offices raised basic questions about the way church structures reflect the theological leadership and commitments of the presiding bishop. Even more strikingly, the aftermath of that scandal continues to pose a theological challenge to this highly liturgical denomination on matters of forgiveness and reconciliation, and whether its ritual practices in these areas have suffered a lack of imagination and courage.

LUTHERAN CHURCH—MISSOURI SYNOD

Historical Introduction (Paul Marschke)

For nearly a century, the primary adaptive challenge of the LC-MS was distinguishing German from Lutheran identity in its witness and work. These tensions were at least partly responsible for the duality of structure that emerged, with centralization in matters of doctrine and decentralization elsewhere. More recently, the tension between doctrinal purity and effective mission outreach has become the new LC-MS identity issue, reinvigorating historic tensions around centralization and decentralization.

Sociological Case Study (David L. Carlson)

A crisis over communion threatens a second major schism in the LC-MS in a little over a quarter-century. This crisis is driven by differing views of what constitutes fellowship (who ought to be invited to share the sacrament) and complicated by the postmodern drift from hierarchical to persuasive authority. While the congregational dimension of LC-MS governance gives space for inventive governance, a lack of trust in this political model has pushed the denomination into an earlier European exercise of hierarchy amidst crisis.

Theological Essay (Eugene W. Bunkowske)

Communion, particularly as seen through the Lord's Supper, is the theological focus for this essay. Recent national level discussions about the Supper are examined on the basis of evidence from formal resolutions and informal conversations. Especially important are the perceived qualities, possibilities, and limits for communion, as well as how this theological conversation within the denomination reveals broader religious challenges facing society at large.

NATIONAL BAPTIST CONVENTION

Historical Introduction (Quinton Hosford Dixie)

Despite all the NBC's growth and significance, it has since its origins possessed contradictory impulses that keep the organization at odds with itself. These impulses include the denomination's birth during the period of "separate but equal," the tension between efficiency and harmony in Baptist polity, the pulls of congregational autonomy versus centralized authority, and the role of women within the denomination. These typically become increasingly troublesome in unsettled times.

Sociological Case Study (Aldon D. Morris and Shayne Lee)

The office of the NBC president and a scandal related to it reveal both resilience and rigidity in the practices and culture of the denomination as it struggles to remain relevant and vital. What unfolds is an illuminating account of how loose formal structures can have strong cohesiveness, how loose coalitions can have multiple points for adaptation, and how the lack of explicit policies can contribute to the maintenance of marginalizing informal practices.

Theological Essay (David Emmanuel Goatley)

Tracing the many historic sources and struggles of the NBC, this essay explores the denomination's relation to other parts of the black church tradition and to the dominant white American culture. These subtle theological contours help explain why the NBC responded as it did to the fiscal misappropriation crisis that engulfed its presidency in 1998. Honesty about sin and deep commitment to forgiveness are seen as foundational theological resources for the members.

REFORMED CHURCH IN AMERICA**Historical Introduction (John Coakley)**

Its presbyterian polity notwithstanding, the RCA's historic definition of the church as the locus of preaching and sacraments construes the church as something essentially local. At the same time, there is the conviction that the church must be "purposive," activist about its mission. However, it appears that mission in the purposive sense is increasingly being considered as the very essence of the church. In addition, there is a growing challenge to the assumption that the national level most properly has the job of mission.

Sociological Case Study (Donald A. Luidens)

The implications of the 1997 Mission Statement for rethinking the purpose and organization of the RCA's national structure are analyzed. In an unprecedented fashion, congregations are coming to see themselves as autonomous actors within the historically connectional RCA. The corporate model of the denomination has not died, however. Instead, it seems to be in transition from an agency acting on *behalf of* congregations to one acting *on* congregations, a national structure fully engaged with local matters.

Theological Essay (Steve Mathonnet-VanderWell)

The 1997 Mission Statement is used as a window into the RCA's theology. Both the process of its adoption and its overall content reflect key changes in the

functional theological commitments of the denomination. At issue is whether the statement's strong emphasis upon the congregation shifts the theological basis for classic Reformed ecclesiology, obscures the value of denominational heritage, and risks impairing the very mission it seeks to promote.

UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST

Historical Introduction (Barbara Brown Zikmund)

The growing nineteenth-century concern about Christian unity generated an ecumenical movement that encouraged mergers and reunions early in the twentieth century. The UCC is rooted in this history, in which unity through shared life and work took precedence over issues of faith and order. The 1999 UCC restructuring seems to suggest a different vision of Christian unity rooted in who makes up the church rather than what it confesses or what it does.

Sociological Case Study (Emily Barman and Mark Chaves)

The nature, rationale, and implications of the 1999 UCC restructuring at its national level are the focus of this case study. The restructure had the goals of creating new relationships among the various units of the denomination and pushing the UCC to emphasize and value diversity of various sorts. Emerging issues concern the reasons congregations become alienated from national structures, the national wariness about covenant, and a possible shift from an ecumenical to a multicultural view of the meaning of diversity.

Theological Essay (Roger L. Shinn)

Formed over forty years ago as an intentionally ecumenical denomination, the UCC today faces a reorganization that reveals theological concerns unresolved since the time of its origins. Most noticeable is the growing theological distance between national boards and local congregations, particularly in areas of cultural diversity. Pressured by declining membership and finances, the denomination seeks to be true to its heritage while creatively engaging new social challenges.

UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

Historical Introduction (Russell E. Richey)

From its outset, American Methodism has agonized over its highly stylized, disciplined, and centralized apparatus for decision making and resourcing. This

agony and the calls for reform have grown in intensity as the inadequacies of established bureaucratic patterns grow increasingly stark. Although restructure remains elusive, there has also been an emerging awareness that such habitual Methodist practices as itinerancy, superintending, and conferencing actually enact important theological principles.

Sociological Case Study (James Rutland Wood)

The UMC faces vast changes driven both by broader social forces and internal struggles precipitated by those forces. In response, eleven transformational directions were reported by a Connectional Process Team to the UMC General Conference in 2000. Potential changes are analyzed in three areas: greater structural flexibility that allows local mission response to the call of the Spirit, the meaning and priority of biblical authority, and the reduced structural centrality of the UMC in global Methodism.

Theological Essay (Pamela D. Couture)

Practical theology in the Wesleyan tradition is deeply committed to mutual bonds of relationship (restructuring), public implications of the spiritual life (reshaping), and connections between the theological heritage and contemporary concerns (reclaiming). These commitments are explored in relation to three recent national level projects of the UMC and how these exemplify a distinctively Wesleyan manner of doing theology in practice.

Reading Strategies

Armed with some sense of the range of insights in each chapter and denominational set, you may consider planning a route through this material a daunting task. We have already recommended that an entire set be read as a unity, rather than selectively reading, say, only the sociological case studies or the theological essays. While such a selective reading at first sounds beneficial for those with more limited disciplinary interests, the complexity of the denomination could easily be lost by dropping out the other disciplinary perspectives. Beyond these initial cautions, however, we want to suggest several reading strategies that seek to connect particular reader interests with the specific features of each denominational set.

As a starting point, it is fruitful to recall the list from earlier in this introduction about the considerations that led to the selection of the eight denominations in the first place: theology, polity, scale, ethnicity, and history. We then briefly sketched each selected denomination in light of these five consider-

ations. Therefore, one simple strategy would be to select whichever consideration holds greatest interest and read through the collection by emerging clusters or natural sequences. For example, a *cluster* strategy would look for common qualitative or quantitative features, such as representatives of the same theological family (Pentecostal or Reformed) or similar forms of polity (congregational or episcopal). By contrast, a *sequential* strategy would identify a typical scale of comparison and move through that scale in some predetermined order, such as smaller to larger in scale or older to younger based on the period of founding.

A *blending* of cluster and sequential strategies is another possibility especially germane to those interested in history and the continuing influence of the period of founding. Looking at all eight denominations in the order of their founding also reveals three broad clusters in that sequence. First are the colonial establishment denominations of the UCC, Episcopal, and RCA, although all three also include later waves of immigration. Next, the UMC is largely an indigenous movement emerging in the late eighteenth century and affected by frontier expansion well into the nineteenth century. By contrast, the LC-MS represents a mid-nineteenth-century European immigration, while the NBC develops out of the freedom of slaves following the Civil War. Finally, the twentieth century is bracketed at its start by the formation of the AG (reflecting the dislocations due to American industrialization and urbanization) and near its end by the establishment of the Vineyard (with roots in the California Jesus movements of the late 1960s). A more abbreviated approach might begin with the establishment-oriented, colonially grounded Episcopal, move to the LC-MS as it continues to struggle with its nineteenth-century and ethnic immigrant roots, proceed to the AG at the turn of century, and then close with the quite contemporary Vineyard. Of course, this in no way implies that the four denominations not mentioned have uninteresting or unimportant histories. It is worth noting, however, that those histories are somewhat more complex, so that the impact of each group's respective period of founding on its contemporary efforts and commitments is not as easy to isolate.

Beyond clusters, sequences, or blends of the two, one other reading strategy would be to identify *themes* mentioned in the chapter précis. For example, a reader with special interest in the relation of *structure and purpose* might focus on the four denominations whose sets particularly emphasize that theme: the RCA, AG, Vineyard, and UCC. The RCA set uses a new mission statement as a way of exploring the denomination, especially how that statement departs from both the denomination's polity and the role of its national structure. The AG set examines the classic tension between a movement's foundational religious experience and the need to institutionalize that experience so it can be ex-

tended to future generations. The Vineyard set looks at a denomination on a journey from being a loose coalition to a more formalized organization and facing the daunting transition brought by the death of its founder and leader. Finally, the UCC set draws our attention back to the ongoing struggle for renewal and adaptability by America's colonial denominations. The theme in all four sets is how foundational theological values are evolving in new circumstances, both redefining the priorities of the national structure and provoking significant changes within denominational polity.

A different thematic strategy might look at *dominant tensions*, especially those between unity and diversity or fragmentation and reconciliation. Four sets attend to this particular theme. The LC-MS set focuses on the dynamics and struggles of a denomination trying to reassert traditional, exclusivist boundaries. The UMC set presents a denomination almost paralyzed by conflict generated by diverse constituencies, with one of the most contested issues being the very breadth of diversity that can be tolerated. Both the NBC and Episcopal sets look at how the crisis of scandal can accentuate existing organizational tensions and fissures while at the same time bring out a denomination's resources for solidarity and reconciliation.

One last example of a thematic strategy for reading through this collection would be to look at the *adaptive strategies* different denominations use. All eight denominations face some measure of division or discord, but their means for responding to such threats are quite distinct. The LC-MS attempts to increase national command and control in order to preserve the purity of the tradition. The AG has a strong core identity that allows for some tolerance of and patience with threats from margins. In the tension between spirit and structure, the Vineyard has resolved to err on the side of spirit. The NBC has learned to close ranks around ethnic solidarity. The Episcopal set notes an intentional connection between the pastoral style of the presiding bishop and the denomination's historic theological resources for reconciliation. The UCC attempts to respond by readjusting national purpose and structure, while the RCA tries to respond by redefining these. Finally, the UMC is working to articulate a renewed theological core by which it can restore a sense of direction amidst transition.

Literature on Denominations and Organizations

Eleven months a *New York Times* best-seller, *Thriving on Chaos* resonated with the experience of the reading public in the late 1980s. It called for a revolution that "challenges everything we thought we knew about managing, and often

challenges over a hundred years of American tradition. Most fundamentally, the times demand that flexibility and love of change replace our longstanding penchant for mass production and mass markets, based as it is upon a relatively predictable environment now vanished.”²⁸ It proposed turning uncertainty into opportunity through becoming obsessed with listening, flattened networked structures, and fostering “fast failures” (that is, creating an ethos that encourages both the risk of innovation and the accountability to discontinue those experiments that fail). Many similar books quickly followed during the 1990s, including *The Boundaryless Organization* and *The New Management*.²⁹ The former claimed to provide the practical strategies necessary to sweep away the artificial obstacles of hierarchy and turf that stand in the way of creating the organizational forms required in the new millennium: virtual organizations, horizontal organizations, team-based structures, and so forth. The mantra of the latter book was to lead from the bottom up and the outside in. Among other things, it called for creating competition within an organization and then balancing the tension so generated by establishing communal, democratic decision-making processes. Finally, the turn of the century was marked by a readable explication of the new electronic global economy, *The Lexus and the Olive Tree*. It warned of the inevitable tension between retribalization and consumerism as globalization replaces the Cold War economic system with an integration of capital, technology, and information across national borders.³⁰ All four of these books exemplify how technological, economic, demographic, and cultural changes during the past quarter- to half-century have prompted a paradigm shift from modern to postmodern forms of corporate organization.

There are striking parallels to these insights in the organization of American religion. A good place to begin tracing these changes in the religious sector is with a little-noticed but symbolically profound fact from 1966. In that year the Southern Baptist Convention surpassed the United Methodist Church in membership to become the largest Protestant denomination in the United States. Something was happening within American religion, but typical for most major transitions, it was not immediately clear what. The emergence of a new market leader among Protestant denominations that year was caused by a

28. Tom Peters, *Thriving on Chaos: Handbook for a Management Revolution* (New York: Knopf, 1987), p. xiii.

29. Ron Ashkenas, *The Boundaryless Organization: Breaking the Chains of Organizational Structure* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1995); William E. Halal, *The New Management: Democracy and Enterprise Are Transforming Organizations* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 1998).

30. Thomas L. Friedman, *The Lexus and the Olive Tree: Understanding Globalization* (New York: Harper Collins, 1999).

nearly equal mix of Methodist decline and Southern Baptist ascent. Most initial reflection, however, focused on the decline, locating Methodism within the broader, ebbing mainline. Writing about the 1960s, Sydney Ahlstrom was one of the first to locate the changed fortunes of the mainline in a wider perspective. “[I]t may even have ended a distinct quadricentennium — a unified four-hundred-year period — in the Anglo-American experience. A Great Puritan Epoch can be seen as beginning in 1558 with the death of Mary Tudor . . . and the terms ‘post-Puritan’ and ‘post-Protestant’ are first popularly applied to America in the 1960s.”³¹ Ahlstrom was speaking in particular of the demise of the white Anglo-Saxon Protestant establishment. The 1960s may well have marked the end of WASP cultural hegemony, but to expand this into a “post-Protestant” assessment fails to account for several details. Perhaps most important, it ignores the ascendancy of Southern Baptists as well as the growth of many other noncolonial groups, including the Assemblies of God and several of the historic black denominations. Indeed, even Methodism was not part of the colonial, religious establishment, and Sweet noted as early as 1948 that this establishment had already lost numerical dominance in the early years of the nineteenth century. Unsurprisingly, this dominance was lost to Baptists, Methodists, and other left-wing sectarian bodies, denominations better adapted to the conditions of the movement westward.³² Their dominance was further eroded by the immigration of large numbers of non-Protestant groups beginning just before the start of the twentieth century.³³

Why Conservative Churches Are Growing was the first book to bring a more integrated perspective on the changes symbolized by the denominational shifts of 1966.³⁴ In simple outline, it argued that the stricter a denomination was in enforcing doctrinal and behavioral norms, the more serious and committed its members were. Conservative groups were strict, and therefore their beliefs and practices remained plausible, even against the onslaught of an increasingly secular popular culture. The mainline (rapidly becoming “oldline”) denominations had become less strict, and therefore their brand of religion

31. Sydney E. Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972), p. 1079.

32. The link between vitality and the adaptive innovation of newly emergent religious movements has recently been popularized in economic, entrepreneurial terms as the major thesis of Roger Finke and Rodney Stark, *The Churching of America, 1776-1990: Winners and Losers in Our Religious Economy* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1992).

33. William W. Sweet, “The Protestant Churches,” *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 256 (1948): 43-52.

34. Dean M. Kelley, *Why Conservative Churches Are Growing: A Study in Sociology of Religion* (New York: Harper and Row, 1972).

provided little if any plausible difference from secular culture, especially for newer generations of young adults.

The 1979 *Understanding Church Growth and Decline* added three nuances to Dean Kelley's theory.³⁵ First, it empirically confirmed that the most significant portion of the oldline decline involved young adult dropouts. Second, it confirmed that the baby boomers raised in oldline churches but now leaving them as young adults were not, for the most part, entering more conservative churches. Instead, they were moving into the ranks of the unchurched because they found that even oldline churches, especially at the congregational level, were out of step with the progressive values of 1960s countercultural revolution. Third, as historian James Smiley persuasively argued, oldline Protestantism's historical roots in evangelical strictness, its dominant ethos of comforting and culture-affirming devotionism, and its prophetic predisposition toward the strange countercultural mix of emergent personal and social liberation were producing a major identity crisis.³⁶ Equally important, this weakening of identity was both cause and consequence of what Hoge argued were the increasing divisions in the oldline Protestant house.³⁷

A decade later, *The Restructuring of American Religion* provided the most comprehensive and integrated treatment to date of the dramatic changes occurring since the Second World War.³⁸ A primary theme and conclusion was the declining significance of denominationalism. Robert Wuthnow meant by this both the weakening of denominational attachments among members and potential members and the erosion of the symbolic barriers that distinguished one denomination from another. Among the major factors contributing to this were increased intradenominational diversity (which contests and blurs a denomination's distinctive identity), growing consumerist individualism (which emphasizes subjective interpretation that erodes the tacit acceptance of official denominational creeds and changes the nature of theology), and hundreds of new, small, special-purpose religious groups (which deliver more attention to the varied self-interests of niche constituencies than can inclusive denominations). The combination of indistinct denominational identity and increased

35. Dean R. Hoge and David A. Roozen, eds., *Understanding Church Growth and Decline, 1950-1978* (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1979).

36. James H. Smiley, "Church Growth and Decline in Historical Perspective: Protestant Quest for Identity, Leadership, and Meaning," in *Understanding Church Growth and Decline, 1950-1978*, pp. 69-93.

37. Dean R. Hoge, *Division in the Protestant House: The Basic Reasons behind Intra-Church Conflicts* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1976).

38. Robert Wuthnow, *The Restructuring of American Religion: Society and Faith Since World War II* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988).

expressive individualism echoes the “new voluntarism” mentioned in *American Mainline Religion*.³⁹ The two have also come to be major themes in subsequent literature on the changing fortunes of American denominations, along with subjective individualism’s organizational equivalent, congregational localism. By the mid-1990s, each theme was being consistently presented as a manifestation of the transition from modernity to postmodernity.

The Greening of America was the first best-selling articulation of the countercultural values that captured so much of the baby boom generation during the 1960s. A decade later, *New Rules: Searching for Self-Fulfillment in a World Turned Upside Down* provided a succinct, popularly written account of the inward turn this generation made during the early 1970s.⁴⁰ It was, however, the “Sheilaism” presented in *Habits of the Heart* that most forcefully captured the nature and potential implications of the expressive individualism of baby boomers for the religious community.⁴¹ As noted above, the religious impact of this emerging new form of American individualism was further popularized by William McKinney and Wade Clark Roof as “new voluntarism.” This was considerably nuanced in an article by Penny Marler and David Roozen as a fundamental social-psychological shift in American culture from an objective to a subjective locus of authority that gave rise to the “the dual edges of church as choice.”⁴² Prior treatments of privatized “church as choice” focused exclusively on the baby boomers’ decision to drop out of religion. The authors pointed out that a choice could also be made for religious participation, and their national survey analysis provided evidence of both choices being made. Their article is important because it provided the basis for merging the expressive individualism, spirituality, and seeker orientation of baby boomers in *A Generation of Seekers*.⁴³ This widely influential book argued that many baby boomers were not opting out of religion altogether, but showed a predisposition toward more subjective and spiritual forms of religious expression instead of doctrinal and institutional forms. *The Post-War Generation and Establishment Religion* was

39. Wade Clark Roof and William McKinney, *American Mainline Religion: Its Changing Shape and Future* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1987).

40. Charles A. Reich, *The Greening of America: How the Youth Revolution Is Trying to Make America Livable* (New York: Random House, 1970); Daniel Yankelovich, *New Rules: Searching for Self-Fulfillment in a World Turned Upside Down* (New York: Random House, 1981).

41. Robert N. Bellah and others, *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985).

42. Penny Long Marler and David A. Roozen, “From Church Tradition to Consumer Choice: Two Gallup Surveys of Unchurched Americans,” in *Church and Denominational Growth*, ed. David A. Roozen and C. Kirk Hadaway (Nashville: Abingdon, 1993), pp. 253-77.

43. Wade Clark Roof, *A Generation of Seekers: The Spiritual Journeys of the Baby Boom Generation* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1993).

among the first religious treatments that tied this emergent, expressive individualistic spirituality to postmodernism.⁴⁴ More importantly, several contributions from Europe drove home the point that the spiritual preference of the postwar generation was not, in the majority of cases, a solitary experience.⁴⁵ Rather it tended to be embedded in small group experiences that gave priority to the expressive and communal.

There is a significant body of literature arguing that one of the divides between a denomination's national staff and its local congregations is that the former gives priority to mission and the latter gives priority to the communal. In light of the communal and anti-institutional views of baby boomers, let alone the increased fragmentation within denominations that further erodes the national-level sense of common identity and purpose, the relatively recent rediscovery of local congregations is unsurprising. Perhaps the only unusual aspect about this rediscovery was its almost simultaneous mention by both a sociologist writing in a prestigious, academic journal and a folksy church consultant writing for church practitioners, each referring to "a new paradigm." A difference between the two versions of this paradigm, however, was that the former emphasized the communal nature of congregations while the latter emphasized mission. Stephen Warner went to the theoretical crux of the matter when he asserted, "We shall see below that religion in the United States has typically expressed not the culture of the society as a whole but the subcultures of its many constituents; therefore it should not be thought of as either the Parsonian conscience of the whole or the Bergian refuge of the periphery, but as the vital expression of groups."⁴⁶ As evidence of this, he cited a variety of recent studies showing the development of "assertive particularism, resurgent traditionalism, creative innovation, and all-round vitality in American religion."⁴⁷ Among the organizational implications of this new innovative group vitality were the fading of national denominational structures and the rise of "de facto congregationalism," the latter grounded in the growing prominence of

44. Wade Clark Roof, Jackson W. Carroll, and David A. Roozen, eds., *The Post-War Generation and Establishment Religion: Cross-Cultural Perspectives* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1995).

45. See, for example, Danièle Hervieu-Léger, "The Case of French Catholicism," and Liliane Voyé, "From Institutional Catholicism to 'Christian Inspiration': Another Look at Belgium," in *The Post-War Generation and Establishment Religion*, pp. 151-70 and 191-206 respectively.

46. R. Stephen Warner, "Work in Progress toward a New Paradigm for the Sociological Study of Religion in the United States," *American Journal of Sociology* 98, no. 5 (March 1993): 1047.

47. Warner, "Work in Progress," p. 1048.

“affectively significant associations under local and lay control.”⁴⁸ This same paradigm shift from national denominational prominence to local congregation was also at the heart of Loren Mead’s *The Once and Future Church*.⁴⁹ His normative agenda for the congregation was clearer in the book’s subtitle, however: *Reinventing the Congregation for a New Mission Frontier*.

It is too early to tell whether these differing communal and missional interpretations show that church professionals, especially in oldline Protestantism, still do not understand the changing nature of baby boomer religious expression. It is worth noting, however, that the priority of the congregation was also soon adopted as a core tenet of faith within several emergent theological streams, most with an emphasis on mission.⁵⁰ The major exception to this missional thrust in recent theological writing giving priority to the congregation is found in works that emphasize the Holy Spirit and the experience of the Spirit in worship.⁵¹ *Reinventing American Protestantism* is one of the first sociological studies that appreciatively examines the new wave of Pentecostal denominations and their megachurch, seeker orientation, asking what their innovative and apparently successful style suggests for oldline Protestant groups.⁵² This book is also one of the first to connect the experiential priority on the local with postmodernism.

Finally, back on the denominational level, the twin and interrelated threats of increased diversity and eroded denominational identity have received major attention within oldline Protestantism. Indeed, the subtitle of *Beyond Establishment* (mentioned much earlier in this introduction) is *Protestant Identity in a Post-Protestant Age*. This book is a collection of essays addressing recent changes across a broad spectrum of programs and institutions that used traditional carriers of denomination identity: Sunday schools, women’s organizations, church-related colleges, campus ministries, seminaries, hymnals, and so forth. The editors concluded:

Protestantism has moved ‘beyond establishment’ in the sense of an unofficial hegemony that mainline Protestants exercised culturally and socially in

48. Warner, “Work in Progress,” p. 1066.

49. Loren B. Mead, *The Once and Future Church: Reinventing the Congregation for a New Mission Frontier* (Washington, D.C.: Alban Institute, 1991).

50. Darrell L. Guder, ed., *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998).

51. For a mainline Protestant example, see Peter Crafts Hodgson, *Winds of the Spirit: A Constructive Christian Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1994). Examples from a Pentecostal perspective can be found in the theological essays by Don Williams and William W. Menzies within this collection.

52. Donald E. Miller, *Reinventing American Protestantism: Christianity in the New Millennium* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

nineteenth and early twentieth century America. The combined impact of pluralism and privatization in matters of religion and culture has eroded much of this hegemony. This erosion, together with the serious hemorrhaging at the level of membership, has left mainline Protestants with a severe crisis of identity and purpose.⁵³

Writing a year later and again focusing on oldline Protestantism, Richey outlined five stages through which he perceives denominations moved during more than three hundred years of American history.⁵⁴ Each stage represents a distinctive style of being a denomination based on adhesive and dynamic principles. These include the commitments, ideals, and purposes that hold a denomination together and direct its energy. In historical order, these five stages are: ethnic voluntarism, purposive missionary association, churchly denominationalism, corporate organization, and postdenominational confessionality. The last stage represents the current state of oldline denominations, and Richey chose the name to suggest “that denominations have lost or are losing long-familiar adhesive and dynamic principles and are groping, often desperately, for tactics that work and unite.”⁵⁵ After a familiar litany of challenges faced today, including the frequent contentiousness among a denomination’s diverse constituencies, Richey asked, “Might the problem, the cause, lie in the collapse of denominational purpose and in the loss of a real reason for hanging together?”⁵⁶

Expressive individualism, congregational localism, and pluralism’s potential for fragmentation are among the pervasive and significant challenges that the postmodern situation of American society places before denominations. While some denominations seem up to the challenge, others are struggling to cope — but none are left unaffected. It is to the stories of eight of these diverse and resourceful religious groups that we now turn.

53. Roof and Carroll, *Beyond Establishment*, pp. 343-44.

54. Richey, “Denominations and Denominationalism.”

55. Richey, “Denominations and Denominationalism,” p. 87.

56. Richey, “Denominations and Denominationalism,” p. 88.