



## Still Gathering After All These Years: Congregations in U.S. Cities

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It is hard to look at a city and not notice that religion has played some role in its life. Buildings built by congregations dot the urban landscape—sometimes dominating the terrain with towering steeples or sprawling mega-complexes, sometimes hiding in theatres or funeral homes or church basements, only appearing as the time for worship approaches. There are at least 300,000 congregations within the United States—no one knows for sure how many. No complete list exists because the array of congregations includes everything from the most tightly-organized Methodists to the most entrepreneurial storefronts. Congregations are more pervasive than schools and libraries, more numerous than voting precincts, and claim more members than any other single voluntary organization. If for no other reason, sheer numbers should make urban congregations worthy of our attention.

### *Congregations in a Shifting Urban Landscape*

But are those congregations still thriving? Are the steeples and graveyards simply a reminder of a bygone day? Some of the most striking buildings may, in fact, be overgrown and nearly empty of worshipers. Still others may be housing boutiques, theatres, and social service agencies. In older cities, there are, by definition, many older churches and synagogues, not all of which have survived the vicissitudes of changing urban communities. Lutheran churches built a century ago for Swedish and Norwegian immigrants may have merged and moved to the suburbs. Even Catholic parishes and schools have closed their doors. What was once a “church-friendly” neighborhood may today be re-zoned as industrial and commercial space, with busy thoroughfares re-routed away from a congregation’s old doorstep. Cities constantly re-use and re-arrange their space, shuffling populations and buildings from one place to another over the years and challenging even the most adept congregation to maintain itself.

In our 1992 survey of nine urban communities that were especially stressed by changes both good and bad, we discovered several common patterns of congregational response (Ammerman 1997). Many congregations simply attempt to hold their own, doing what they have always done, with a slowly dwindling membership. Some of these will eventually close their doors or merge with another congregation. A few will stare death in the face and resurrect them-

selves, often under the leadership of a pastor who helps them start all over again in developing new ministries and new styles of worship. Some will move. They will assess the possibilities for ministry in their current location and opt for friendlier territory. A brave and tenacious few will face the challenges, fight through the thicket of transition, and develop ways to welcome new populations into their midst.

But more common than any of these responses is simply the founding of new congregations suited to the needs of newcomers. In our early nineties study, we discovered that 21 percent of the congregations in those rapidly changing neighborhoods had been founded since 1980 (Ammerman 1997). A larger survey five years later, covering five large urban regions, found 14 percent of the congregations having been founded since 1985 (Ammerman 2000). In both instances, these new congregations are far more likely to be in conservative or pentecostal traditions than in more liberal Protestant ones. The bottom line is that there may be as many as 50,000 new congregations being founded every decade, and it is conservative entrepreneurs who are most actively involved in that process. Not all of these efforts survive, but there are probably ample new groups being formed to replace those that decline and die.

Far from being fixtures in the urban landscape, the population of congregations is a constantly shifting array—some coming, some going, others moving, and still others reinventing themselves.

One of the major shifts that rearranged the urban religious landscape was the mid-twentieth-century movement of middle-class whites out of city neighborhoods to the suburbs. In the years after the Civil War, “in town” neighborhoods had housed the workers and managers of a growing urban economy and were connected to the city’s economic and political landmarks by trolley and subway lines. Within these neighborhoods, venerable mid-sized Protestant and Jewish places of worship multiplied in the years between the Civil War and World War II, with a major building boom in the 1920s. These distinctive religious buildings, each reflecting its own tradition, housed lively religious education programs for children, along with men’s and women’s organizations, serving the religious needs of the families who occupied the modest bungalows and apartments that surrounded them.

When those families began to move to the suburbs in the 1950s, many of them looked for new congregations there (and fueled another religious building boom, further from the city’s center). While some members returned each week to congregations that perhaps held long family memories, even that connection was put in jeopardy by the changing racial housing patterns of the 1960s and 70s. The result was that many sold their old buildings to new congregations, while others reestablished themselves in a variety of ways.

One way some congregations reinvented themselves, especially in these downtown and inner fringe areas was to become an “activist” congregation that engages in a variety of social, economic, and political efforts toward alleviating

suffering and injustice. The “Church and Community” project, for instance, identified more activist congregations in “inner fringe” neighborhoods than in any other part of the city (Mock 1992). Similarly, Guest and Lee (1987) found that proximity to central business districts was positively related to a community service orientation. They also found that congregations with a service orientation toward the surrounding neighborhood are those that have been in the community longer, but who do not necessarily have a localized membership. This echoes recent findings by Chaves from the National Congregations Study (Chaves 1999). The most likely congregations to have active social service programs are those located in poor neighborhoods, but whose members are more affluent and commute to participate in those congregations. Kanagy, working with a much smaller sample of congregations, reached similar conclusions. Social activism is related to poverty and ethnic diversity in the congregation’s neighborhood (Kanagy 1992).

But not all congregations located in poor inner fringe neighborhoods adopt an activist stance. The strongest predictor of which ones do, in virtually every study, is the theological tradition of the congregation. Activist congregations most likely belong to liberal denominations (Davidson, Mock, and Johnson 1997; Guest and Lee 1987). They have pastors and lay leaders who have liberal beliefs and try to link faith to social action (Davidson, Mock, and Johnson 1997). In other words, these are congregations that have deliberately developed an identity as places to work for change in this world. For some, that identity emerged out of the crucible of the civil rights struggle, as old-line white congregations faced the moral imperatives of justice and integration. Many of their old members may have left, but those who remained—and those who have been attracted since—define themselves by a faith that seeks active engagement with the difficulties of this world. The result is often a congregation whose visibility in the city far outstrips its modest size.

Another set of venerable players on the urban religious scene are African-American churches. Included among them are historic congregations in traditionally-black neighborhoods, as well as churches that took over the buildings of fleeing white congregations in newly black middle class neighborhoods (Pattillo-McCoy 1999), and new congregations (including some prominent megachurches) built in affluent black suburbs (Gilkes 1998). These congregations have historically played key roles for their members, providing opportunities for participation, leadership, and cultural expression in a society where few other such opportunities were available. While many things have changed over the last half century, black churches and black preachers remain central in the social, economic, and political life of African-American communities and the city as a whole (a subject Fred Harris explores in more detail in his essay). Black churches are more likely than white churches to be politically active and to take on economic development issues, and many cities have prominent black clergy who act as a moral voice for the city as a whole.

Because these churches are so politically visible, it is easy to forget that they are still, first of all, spiritual institutions. A generation ago, scholars argued that the otherworldly bent of much African-American worship was a hindrance to this-worldly activism. Since that time, however, many other scholars have tried to understand the link between the ecstatic, spirit-filled experiences of Sunday morning and the way these worshipers encounter the world on Monday. Calhoun-Brown, for instance, demonstrates that organizational involvement in religious activities is strongly related to political mobilization. People who are active in church are there to get the information and encouragement they need to participate. She also shows that those who want churches to emphasize personal salvation are not therefore less inclined toward this-worldly activism (Calhoun-Brown 1998). They are, in fact, more inclined toward a kind of separatist version of black empowerment. McRoberts argues that the religious experiences of the poor Boston churches he studied provided, in many instances, a sense of personal empowerment that enabled participants to pursue justice and success in their lives (McRoberts 2000). At the very least, observers should not discount the religious activities of black congregations as irrelevant to their role in the larger urban community.

Every city contains, then, a large store of congregations in the central and immediately-surrounding areas, often occupying buildings built between about 1875 and 1945, that have many stories to tell. Those that have continuously occupied their buildings over the decades undoubtedly have undergone dramatic changes. But other buildings can tell tales of diverse occupants, one group replacing another over time. Take a peek inside that striking old building, and you may glimpse a thriving new congregation, the latest in a succession of occupants, whose Spanish songs of praise perhaps echo off walls that have heard a dozen languages and as many different ways of worshiping God. Synagogues have become Black Pentecostal churches. Presbyterian churches now house Buddhists or Muslims. And congregations of all stripes have created and housed programs to meet the needs of each population wave that has passed through the neighborhood—from the hygiene, domestic science, and language classes taught to earlier immigrants to the gang intervention, welfare-to-work, and refugee resettlement services offered today.

While these inner fringe urban neighborhoods often contain the most active, historic, and colorful congregations, in the years after World War II, the religious center of gravity, like everything else in American cities, shifted outward. As new suburbs were built, new congregations were built along with them. Fueled by the Baby Boom, church attendance reached new highs, and family-centered congregations grew alongside the family-centered schools and parks and neighborhoods of the new suburbs (Hudnut-Beumler 1994). Our 1997 survey of congregations in five urban regions found that nearly one third of today's congregations were founded in the 25 years following World War II (Ammerman 2000). Like the suburbs themselves, these churches are disproport-

tionately white and middle class. And they remain today the most organizationally healthy congregations, with higher average attendance and fatter yearly budgets than congregations founded either earlier or later.

The cultural ties linking suburban home owning with child rearing and religious attendance remain strong. While overall membership in “mainline” Protestant groups has declined, their “market share” of the “families with young children” population has remained constant (Marler 1995). Unfortunately, that population segment has declined from about half of U.S. households in the 1950s to less than a quarter today. While families are still looking for places to take their children, there are not enough such families to support all the congregations that once thrived in this population niche. At least some of those suburban congregations will be looking for new programs and new members in the years ahead.

### *Religious Frontiers in Today's Cities*

Americans did not quit forming congregations when the Baby Boom ended, however. Look more closely at that seemingly abandoned religious building—or around the corner or down the block—and you may discover that in its shadow stand perhaps a dozen new sacred spaces, home to new gatherings of worshippers. Look in the most distressed downtown neighborhoods and in the most affluent exurban byways, and you will find new religious communities gathering for worship and for mutual support. The recent story of religion in American cities is a story of significant innovation.

In part that innovation emerges from the continuing sprawl of urban areas. In the 1980s and 90s, developers turned their sights ever further outward, placing businesses along urban perimeter highways and housing in what used to be rural pastures. People in remote small towns suddenly found themselves part of an urban region—“exurbs.” Neither they nor their suburban neighbors necessarily thought they ever had to go into the city’s center. With office parks and shopping malls on the edge of the city, the urban region had been decentralized, transformed from a hub-and-spokes to a pepperoni pizza.

These new exurbs brought a transformation of the religious ecology, as well. Nancy Eiesland documents the way new populations in a southern small town prompted new kinds of congregations to be formed, new lines of competition and cooperation to emerge, as well as transformations within existing congregations (Eiesland 2000). No congregation was left untouched. A country Methodist church struggled through years of conflict as newcomers arrived. Old southern assumptions about where pentecostals belong in the status hierarchy of the community (on the other side of the tracks) were challenged by middle-class charismatics appearing, both in a new congregation and within existing ones. And everyone had to devise responses to the megachurch down the road. While that 3000-member church was a story in itself, the ripples it sent through the rest of the religious community were no less significant.

Undoubtedly “megachurches” are the most visible recent trend in

American cities. While Catholic parishes have long claimed thousands of communicants, Protestants have only recently created this distinctive new church form, of which there are at least 350 in the U.S. (Thumma 2000). Indeed, megachurches now exist throughout the world, often linked in loose networks to U.S. congregations. Generally defined as a congregation that has at least 2000 weekly worshipers, megachurches are home to huge staffs and long lists of programs. Sometimes they look like churches, and sometimes they don't. Sometimes they are "seeker" oriented (like Willow Creek), but not always. They usually have a strong and popular pastor, but the attraction is also the experience of being part of something so big. But even in the midst of the crowds, most megachurches also provide ample opportunities for members to be involved with small fellowship groups, mission activities of all sorts, as well as volunteering for the hundreds of tasks that are necessary to keep such places going.

Megachurches are most often found in the Sunbelt of the south and the southwest and are almost always in suburban locations. Thumma notes, "These suburban areas offer expansive, less expensive plots of land suitable for acres of parking lots and the multiple buildings that are needed to support a congregation of several thousand. Zoning regulations are often less restrictive than in established urban communities. Most importantly, the suburbs provide a continuous influx of exactly the type of person attracted to megachurches—consumer oriented, highly mobile, well-educated, middle class families." Both Thumma and Vaughan (Vaughan 1993) report that sprawl cities, such as Houston, Orlando, Dallas/Ft. Worth, Los Angeles, Atlanta, Phoenix, and Oklahoma City, have the highest number of megachurches.

Megachurches are, by definition, regional churches. They draw their members from every corner of the city. But they are not the only congregations that draw members from a wide area. In an earlier day, congregations were often closely tied to a particular geographic place. They were parish churches or orthodox synagogues, literally identified with a neighborhood. Or they were town churches, representing their religious tradition—Presbyterian, Baptist, Episcopal, Lutheran—for the citizens of that locale. Later a similar principle operated in many new suburbs. As developers created communities out of cornfields, church hierarchies rushed to make sure that there would be a way for their adherents to worship close to home. When a person joined Pleasantville Methodist, she identified herself both with a place and with a religious tradition.

Increasingly, however, those "parish" identities have eroded. While we may live in Pleasantville, we shop at the regional mall, belong to the downtown Rotary, work at an exurban industrial park or office complex, and enroll our children in a charter school for the arts (Eiesland 2000). The fact that we choose the Episcopal church across town has less to do with where we live than with the particular programs, ministries, and people we find when we go there. Congregations increasingly occupy a "niche" that is identified by programming

and membership more than denomination or location. People still want to belong, but our sense of belonging is more complicated than the towns and families that used to anchor us. As a result, fewer and fewer congregations are primarily related only to an immediate geographic community (Ammerman 1997).

Many may be located in what McRoberts calls “religious districts.” Looking at the history of Boston’s African-American congregations, he documents the way racial barriers, economic shifts, and zoning combine to crowd multiple congregations into small geographic spaces (McRoberts 2000). Depressed commercial zones, with cheap rents, attract more than their fair share of congregational tenants. Each draws members mostly from outside the neighborhood in which it is located, catering to many different segments of the African-American ethnic and religious community. Like stores selling distinctive styles of pants, he argues, the presence of diverse congregations in close proximity encourages “customers” to “shop” in the neighborhood. Similarly, one can find busy intersections or highway interchanges with large congregations on every corner. Far from competing for neighborhood residents, each is drawing a distinct membership from as large a region as they can afford parking space.

The innovation reshaping urban religion is not simply geographic, however. It is also shaped by the presence of significant new participants. Mosques, temples, and other shrines now mark U.S. cities as home to the full range of the world’s religions (Eck 1997). With the reform of U.S. immigration law in the mid-1960s, the flow of newcomers has included a far bigger and more diverse mix. The Protestants, Catholics, and Jews who had come here from Europe a century ago are joined now by Hindus and Sikhs, Buddhists and spiritual practitioners from all over the world. Muslims may soon overtake Jews as the second most numerous religious tradition in the U.S.

And as they do, the U.S. is providing the setting in which new understandings of old religions get worked out. Dislodged from traditional cultures, and thrown together with co-religionists from around the world, each tradition must sort out what is religiously essential and what is not. It is not just that they are being confronted with external challenges from modern ideas. They are also being confronted with internal challenges as the religions themselves are remade in this new setting.

As these newcomers make their way into the American religious mix, they are also beginning to absorb some of the religious habits of this country (Warner and Wittner 1998). Even new immigrants from traditions that do not form “congregations” in other parts of the world find themselves establishing congregation-like groups in this country. Never really *identical* to the Christian and Jewish patterns, they nevertheless legally incorporate, build buildings, designate someone as their “clergy,” establish membership rolls and organize boards, hold services during the weekend, and create programs of education and

community service. Immigrant groups have not yet, we found, fully moved into the networks of religious and community organizations in their local communities (Ammerman 2001). But there is every reason to believe that they will.

Most immigrants, of course, do not initially have the resources to build ornate shrines or to spin off multiple specialized gatherings. In their early years, houses and storefronts are more common homes for immigrant groups. They may be in well-defined ethnic enclaves, but they are just as likely to draw their members from throughout a metropolitan region. In their survey of immigrant congregations in the Houston metropolitan area, Ebaugh and her associates found both Hispanic Catholic parishes where members commute on average less than 3 miles and a Hindu Temple where a 20-mile commute is the average (Ebaugh, O'Brien, and Chafetz 2000). Both ethnic housing patterns and religious expectations combine to keep Hispanic Catholics tied to nearby churches. Neither of those factors is at work among Houston's prosperous Indian community. Although there are other Temples in Houston, one is clearly the most highly regarded. Its members are scattered throughout the region, but are recruited into Temple membership through strong ethnic networks. The dozens of other immigrant congregations they studied fall somewhere between these extremes, relating to members and neighborhoods based on factors ranging from the available religious competition to the nature of particular immigrant needs and networks.

Not all the new immigrants, of course, are bringing in new religious traditions. Those who leave India or Korea, for instance, are disproportionately more likely to be Christian than are those who stay behind (Warner and Wittner 1998). Down an urban sidestreet, one is likely to find a group of Indian or Chinese Christians, for instance. Many Latin American immigrants are forming evangelical and pentecostal churches, in addition to swelling the rolls of local Catholic parishes. Minus Koreans, both Presbyterians and Methodists would be experiencing more net loss in membership than they are. But the numbers are a mixed blessing. Whether it is Filipino Catholics or Korean Presbyterians, these newcomers are often much more conservative than their native-born hosts. They are less likely to welcome the leadership of women, for instance, and more likely to insist on older ways of worshiping. Immigration is bringing tension and change even within America's old established religious bodies.

### *The Opportunities and Challenges of Diversity*

What can account for this continuing profusion of religious gathering? In part we can chalk it up to the tradition of religious liberty that took root in American soil with the first European immigrants. By leaving the field open to the ebb and flow of religious needs and energies, by refusing to create a state-regulated religious system, our forebears left us this legacy of spiritual variety and constant change. Every group is on its own to gather itself, to establish its own way of worshiping, to offer its adherents a way to live. So long as its mem-



bers support it, any religious group can succeed. No group can grow lazy on a government subsidy, losing connection with the needs and energies of its members. As new populations have arrived and old ones have moved or changed, the religious scene has been free to change in response.

As people in U.S. cities seek out places to worship, then, they have a dizzying variety to choose from. The congregations that fill those cities are as varied as the cultures and lifestyles of the population. While there may be several dozen Methodist churches, for instances, no two will be exactly alike, each giving expression to different ways that people identify themselves, their values, and their cultures. Each congregation creates and preserves distinctive styles of worship—from multi-media spectacles to Taize—and offers specialized ministry for particular populations—from deaf people to working moms to immigrants who have not yet learned English. Congregations are places to call home, places to be with those who value the same customs and stories, indeed places in which those stories and customs are developed and sustained.

Whether the customs in question come from a distant culture or from a regional or occupational subculture within the U.S., congregations are spaces in which groups engage in “cultural reproduction”—passing valued traditions on to the next generation. Even old-line Protestants are discovering what immigrants, Jews, and African-Americans have long known: the larger culture cannot be expected to teach (or even value) the particularities of distinct religious communities. As Warner has observed, we are all sojourners and need gathering spaces in which to tell our founding myths and practice our distinctive ways (Warner 1999). These religious differences, he argues, need not require antagonism. Civility “can advance along with religious particularism.” (p. 236). Rather than exacerbating differences, congregations may mediate them. Congregations need the space to tell their own stories, but the distance between groups can be lessened when the larger public overhears those stories on occasion.

Congregations, in all their dizzying variety, then, continue to thrive in U.S. cities. While we often see individual groups who shut their doors in defeat—either after a long and fruitful life or after a brief and futile effort at success—we are just as likely to see new groups opening their doors. In an increasingly mobile, fragmented, and presumably secular society, this venerable form of community retains its vitality. Indeed *because* we are so mobile and fragmented, it may be all the more essential that we find places to belong, places that provide identity and caring, but places which still allow us to move in and out with relative ease. Commentators such as Robert Putnam have made clear the need for places in which “social capital” is generated (Putnam 2000). In order for a society to survive, its members need arenas in which they learn to trust each other, to communicate with each other and work together on common projects. Congregations are clearly among the most important of the institutions that fill this role. When urban nomads look for places to put down

at least temporary roots, when people look for familiar faces and a recognizable language in a new land, congregations and their affiliated gatherings are often the home people adopt.

### *What Congregations Do*

Congregations are about more than culture and belonging, of course. While congregational leaders (and their members) tell us that “fellowship” is among the congregation’s most important functions, the single highest priority for congregations is religious rather than social. The vast majority of congregations are very clear that their primary task is a spiritual one—to provide opportunities for their members to worship, to help those members deepen their individual spiritual lives, and to provide religious education for their children (Ammerman 2000). That is, we fail to understand the fundamental nature of these organizations if we do not take seriously the religious character of their work. Understanding urban congregations means paying attention to what congregations believe, how they worship, even the religious architecture and adornment with which they surround themselves.

The internal and religious work of congregations is often taken to have no public interest or value. However, we have recently realized that even the most private and “otherworldly” activities can have effects beyond the congregation’s four walls. David Martin, for instance, studied Latin American pentecostals and argued that the very notion that every believer can speak in heavenly tongues is central to the many ways in which these churches are instilling democratic and entrepreneurial skills, opportunities, and aspirations in their members (Martin 1990). More recently, McRoberts reports on his close reading of worship in the many pentecostal storefront churches that populate the Four Corners neighborhood in Boston (McRoberts 2000). He calls their worship “socializing” because the experience itself convinces participants that they have the ability to engage the problems of their worlds. As Peter Berger pointed out more than three decades ago, the root of the word “ecstasy” is “ex-stasis” or literally “standing out of place” (Berger 1969). The liminal space provided by ecstatic worship can often provide both critical perspective and a sense of possibility that have real effects in how people then engage the world outside.

There are other indirect effects, as well. In joining a congregation, people learn how to be good citizens and contribute their collective resources to the well being of the community. By providing places in which people can debate and organize, moderate and lead, learning to express themselves and to disagree, congregations provide one of the essential building blocks of democracy. Certainly they are not the only places where people practice such “civic skills,” but not everyone has access to the civic and social clubs or the high status schools and jobs where many citizens learn to be leaders (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995). Congregational participants of all social statuses, however, get opportunities to lead. Every congregation that needs to organize a picnic or debates its next building project or organizes a parish council provides its mem-

bers an essential lesson in governing. The story of urban congregations is often a story of underground schools in democracy and participation.

Congregations are most often noticed when they organize large programs of service to the community or mobilize their members for political action. But much of what congregations do for their communities is much less visible. It encompasses the social and civic capital they generate, but it also includes the informal care they provide for their own distressed members, as well as the ad hoc food and shelter they arrange for those who come to their doors. Even the poorest congregations step into the breach when no other services are available. Congregations are places where people take care of each other. They are a “first response” social service agency for their own members and for dozens of urban wanderers. They supply food and child care and job assistance and in-home visits to the elderly. We should not ignore the degree to which these “extended family” or “village” style services sustain people in ways that might otherwise require external agency assistance.

Some congregations, of course, do more than this informal aid. They organize vast programs of housing rehabilitation, job training, shelter for abused women and children, education and health care, and on and on. The largest of these enterprises may get spun off into major non-profit organizations. In fact, many urban service agencies got their start through the energy and compassion of the religious community. Congregations remind people of what needs to be done and sometimes inspire innovative efforts to address the city’s problems. The networks of communication that come together in a congregation can often begin to bring together the human and financial resources to make new ventures possible (Milofsky and Hunter 1995; Wuthnow 1991). Congregations know that they cannot care for their communities alone, but they often provide a necessary organizing base, a channel for a variety of concerns and volunteer energies.

What has also become clear, however, is that a great deal of what congregations do in the community is not done through the mechanism of beginning their own congregationally-run programs. Far more common are patterns of service provision that involve a complex network of organizational partnerships. Congregations have learned to widen their usual resource base to draw on partnerships with other groups that share their goals. Sometimes those groups are other agencies within their own religious tradition, but just as often, they are neighboring congregations, groups of community volunteers, local social service agencies, even business and government.

Across the 549 congregations we surveyed in 1997 and 1998, there are, on average, seven inter-organizational connections through which outreach work is done. This is over and above whatever connections a congregation may have through its own denomination. All kinds of Christian congregations are involved in these extra-denominational partnerships, as are Jews, but mainline Protestants are far more involved than anyone else. It is virtually a universal for

mainline congregations to have at least one organization with which they do outreach work, and the average is more than ten. That norm of at least some community involvement through outside organizations is nearly as strong in the other Christian and Jewish traditions, as well, even if overall levels of activity are lower. Only among the most sectarian groups (Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses, for instance) and the groups newest to American soil (Hindus and Muslims, for example) is it common to find congregations that have no connections outside their own religious world. Partnerships between congregations and other community organizations have simply been institutionalized as an expected pattern in most of American religion.

Just what kinds of commitment do such outreach partnerships entail? Rarely does a partnership involve a whole congregation on an on-going and intense basis. But rarely is it something about which they know or care little. We attempted to find out as much as we could about these connections, and discovered that nearly two thirds of all congregations have at least one outside organization that uses space in their buildings (either donated outright or made available at minimal cost). If nothing else, congregations are valuable to their communities because they provide meeting space and other facilities to support the work of organizations beyond their own membership.

But it's not just empty space; it is also personpower. Each congregation contributes, on average, volunteers to three organizations, and 80 percent report that they send volunteers to help in at least one group. For the groups to which they send volunteers, the median number of members who are involved is five, with a few reporting literally dozens of routine volunteers. That, of course, does not begin to count the number of groups in which individual members work, not as official representatives of their congregations, but at least in part because their congregation encourages such activity. Sixty percent of the individual members we surveyed claim that they participate in community service organizations at least a few times a year, and 75 percent claim that they at least occasionally provide informal service to people in need.

We're also not just talking about mobilizing volunteers. On average three organizations receive monetary contributions from each congregation, for an average of nearly \$2000 per organization per year. And most congregations supplement their monetary contributions to at least one organization with other material goods—food, clothing, furniture, Christmas gifts, and the like—collected by the members.

While this pattern of multi-faceted participation with outside organizations is present in other traditions, the level of activity in mainline Protestant congregations is roughly double that in conservative, African-American, and Catholic churches. Mainline churches send volunteers to, provide space for, and give money and goods to roughly twice as many organizations (Wuthnow 1999). While mainline groups are distinct for their level of activity, the basic pattern is not unique to them. Providing space and sending volunteers are pat-

terns that are nearly as prevalent — if not as numerous — across Christian traditions, and the total funds contributed in Catholic and conservative Protestant churches is about the same as in mainline ones.

What sorts of things do these connections and partnerships allow congregations to do for their communities? Almost three quarters of the congregations we surveyed have at least one connection to a community organization that provides immediate relief to people in need (Hodgkinson and Weitzman 1993). Indeed the average congregation has two such connections. Through the work of these coalitions and partner organizations, runaway teens are housed; battered women and children find a safe place; people who are homeless find temporary shelter; and thousands and thousands of hot meals are served to people who are hungry. While many of these organizations also do advocacy and work on long-term solutions, their primary task is simply to relieve immediate suffering.

Some congregations do seek out partners to work on various kinds of longer-term economic development projects. The idea of church-based “community development corporations” is getting a good deal of attention these days, but it is the rare church (about 3 percent overall, but 22 percent of African-American churches) that has taken on this sort of economic partnership (Day 1995). The single most common effort to provide long-term intervention is Habitat for Humanity. Forty-one percent of all the mainline Protestant churches in which we interviewed have some connection to Habitat, with Catholic parishes not far behind (at 33 percent), and conservative and African-American churches involved, as well, but at much lower levels (11 and 8 percent, respectively).

What about politics? We found that congregations almost never have partnerships with voter education and registration groups, although they may engage in these activities on their own. Even when we prompted for connections to groups like Christian Coalition, we simply did not find any congregations admitting to using their voter guides, for instance. The only congregations that talked about such explicit political activity were African-American ones, not conservative white Protestants (Pattillo-McCoy 1998; Wood 1999). Connections with issue-based advocacy groups (from the NAACP to Gay Pride parades to Amnesty International) are present, but not extremely common (only about 1 in 6 has any such connection).

The typical congregation also provides support for two organizations whose job it is to enhance the educational, cultural, and personal well-being of community participants. These are the scout troops and nursery schools, senior centers and sports leagues—all existing independently of any single congregation, but often housed and supported by congregations, along with others in the community. In addition, there are arts organizations that use religious buildings for rehearsals, performances and lessons. Congregations support formal and informal programs of tutoring, after-school care, and literacy

classes. They contribute to programs of education and service provision that surround issues as diverse as AIDS, unwanted pregnancies, handicapped persons, adoption, and the like. They support and refer parishioners to counseling centers of all sorts. And they cooperate with others in delivering spiritual care to people in hospitals, nursing homes, on college campuses, and even in police and fire departments.

A closely related set of activities are those that fall into the “self-help” category. Here persons with a given concern gather to help themselves and each other to deal with the problem. By far the best known and most widespread, of course, are the Alcoholics Anonymous and other 12-step groups for narcotics addicts, overeaters, and even “sex and love addicts.” Congregations across the religious spectrum provide support for these groups, but mainline Protestant churches are especially likely to be involved.

The picture, then, is a busy one. Congregations provide critical resources of money, space, personpower, and other support to a wide array of organizations engaged in providing for the well-being of communities. They are also often the locations where needs, ideas, and resources come together to precipitate the birth of new service organizations. The work being supported is most often first-line assistance to people with critical physical and economic needs. But nearly as often, the work being supported is aimed at the enrichment of the community’s educational, recreational, and cultural life. Politics, economic development, and issue advocacy are certainly present in the range of things congregations support, but they are not the primary ways in which most congregations seek to contribute to the well-being of their communities.

The strongest congregations, however, never forget that they are more than a social service agency and a gathering place. As much as cities may need congregations to be sources of belonging and compassion, they also need the spiritual and moral resources they provide. Congregations are among the few places in our society that dare to teach virtues and morality, to remind us of our imperfections and call us to better lives. They are where people gather to encounter a presence beyond themselves—a Torah that calls them into observant living, a rhythm of daily prayer and zakat that establishes obligations to Allah and to the community, the presence of ancestors and the stories of gods whose examples remind them of who they are, the ecstasy of rituals, the singing of hymns, the reading of sacred texts. All these religious practices invite a spiritual strength that can permeate and transform lives. They also introduce a potential source of critical perspective, a way of looking at the world that is not subject to the “spin” of political and market analysts. People who have tapped into this spiritual strength see their own lives differently, and they can see the world differently, as well. In the midst of looking for the political and economic impact of congregations, observers of cities would do well to pay attention to these more elusive spiritual effects, as well.

### *Issues to Keep an Eye on*

**Shifting Religious Ecologies.** As populations shift across different sections of the city, congregations are likely to undergo shifts, as well. In the most distant areas, small town churches may be transformed by new suburbanites, while in more proximal suburbs aging congregations may be struggling to survive. Meanwhile, new congregations are probably being built alongside the old.

**Immigrant Congregations.** Both immigrant gatherings from non-traditional religions and immigrant Christians are becoming too numerous to ignore. They are likely to be creating space for the preservation of old cultures, while also negotiating with the new. This new cohort of immigrants is maintaining close “transnational” ties to their countries of origin, from which they may receive help in building their religious shrines. These congregations are often economic and social hubs, as well as religious ones, and there are indications that the second generation may be retaining ethnic-religious ties, even after they have the language and other skills to navigate U.S. culture.

**Megachurches.** While these giant congregations are not likely to eliminate other religious forms, they are likely to continue to multiply. They are especially well-suited to a mobile, consumer-oriented culture, and their non-traditional styles appeal to the Boomer and X-er generations. Many megachurches, however, face leadership crises in the coming years as the generation of founding pastors nears retirement. Despite their apparent success, most of these congregations have enormous debt and could face financial crises, as well.

**Street-level Ecumenism.** Not many people are interested in traditional forms of ecumenism (doctrinal statements, official councils, and the like), but when there are problems to be solved, surprising coalitions often form. We found that much of the cooperative work being done among congregations is done through informal partnerships. Since these often cross religious and ethnic boundaries, they may accomplish more than simply getting the job done.

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