

# **Congregational Studies Worldwide**

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# Foreword

Dr. Thorsten Latzel, Frankfurt / Prof. Gerhard Wegner, Hanover

Local communities (congregations, parishes) are of fundamental importance in the Christian churches, and in Protestantism in particular. From a global perspective they are very much an “in” phenomenon: one which is showing significant growth in (for instance) China or Latin America. In central and northern Europe, on the other hand, the statistics show an overall decline in the vitality of such communities – as a factor in a complex process of interaction with religious developments in society as a whole.

This development in local church communities that I have outlined is linked to a multiplicity of issues in the fields of Practical Theology, the Sociology of Religion and church leadership:

How important will local congregations and parishes prove to be in the overall future development of the church? Are they to be understood, in the tradition deriving from Émile Durkheim, as the “source of the social vitality” permeating the entire phenomenon of religiosity, and so as the germ cells of all future ecclesiastical developments? Or do they – at least in some regards – represent an outmoded social form in the religious field, based on a theologically overexalted concept of community, so that just like other social forms (e.g. the family) they are exposed to a fundamental process of transformation? Will we see the emergence of a stronger degree of diversification and of individual profiling as between the various congregations?

How can the (organizational) reality of church communities be reconstructed theoretically, and what developmental trends are apparent on this level? Are the major developmental trends affecting religious organization and communication in Germany (secularization, individualization, deinstitutionalization) reflected on this level as well, or are there stubbornly self-willed deviations to be found in this field, deviations which at least indicate the possibility of development in other directions, or even facilitate them? Is there here perhaps even “another world” of religious interaction, tied to face-to-face communication, which does not appear to be represented as such in the broad perception of religion?

How strongly is the specific development of actual individual parishes or congregations influenced by, or susceptible to the influence of, a variety of factors: general religious developments; structural measures implemented by the church leadership in pursuit of a particular policy; the spiritual life or the “social capital” of the community; the clergy, other paid staff, particular groups or (charismatic) individuals; the socio-economic development of the specific urban or rural area? What are the needs that arise in the community as a result, and how are these met in terms of Practical Theology or of actions taken by the church leadership?

What is the relationship between the processes of religious communication in the narrower sense and the broader fields of all kinds of social assistance, educational activities and the diverse forms of pure conviviality – all of these things being factors that accrete to the social structure and together make up the empirical entity that we call a church community, a congregation or a parish?

What part is played by such alternative, extra-parochial forms of church community as internet congregations, congregations formed for a limited period of time, institutional congregations and the like, and how do these relate to each other?

The debate is up and running, and open for contributions. And the idea that anyone might assume that such a social structure with its multiplicity of interconnections would remain untouched by the manifold tectonic shifts in the architecture of society in our time, or could defy them and remain more or less unaffected by them, seems most extraordinary.

In the ecclesiastical debates of recent decades, such issues have often been argued on a very emotional level, with different actors doing all they could to defend their own strongly held positions – especially when it has been a question of implementing changes in church structures. And in view of the continuing pressure on budgets, these arguments will continue to play a major role in the future.

It is all the more important that sociological studies of these topics should be undertaken. They will not be able to come up with simple answers to the issues raised, but may be able to offer some points of orientation or critical terms of reference. In addition, they can help to take us beyond the entrenched positions that are blocking progress with regard to a number of aspects of the discussion. As examples of this we may take two studies relating to Germany that have deliberately sought to follow up new approaches to achieving an awareness of how local parishes are developing. One of these is the “Parish Barometer” of the Social Science Institute of the EKD. This sets off in innovative directions by first establishing a matrix of viewpoints from multiple perspectives and investigating a largish number of specific parishes not only as organizations but also as markets and communities<sup>1</sup>, and that over a longish period of time. The other example is the EKD’s 5th Church Membership Survey, whose investigation and analysis of networking covering an entire local parish may be seen as a major milestone in the field of the Sociology of the Church.<sup>2</sup> This network analysis approach continues to have great potential for

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1 This matrix forms the basis of the “Parish Barometer” constructed by the Social Science Institute of the EKD: Hilke Rebenstorf, Petra-Angela Ahrens, Gerhard Wegner, *Potenziale vor Ort. Erstes Kirchengemeindebarometer*. Leipzig 2015.

2 Cf. Heinrich Bedford-Strohm und Volker Jung (eds.): *Vernetzte Vielfalt. Kirche angesichts von Individualisierung und Säkularisierung*, Gütersloh 2015.

a wide range of interpretations – particularly when it is linked to issues of religious communication and social capital, as is the case in the 5th Church Membership Survey.

Despite these two examples and other individual investigations, Protestant parishes – of which there are 15,000 in Germany alone<sup>3</sup> – do not receive the degree of attention from sociologists of religion or of the church to the specific ways in which they function that they really deserve in view of the developments that are occurring and the current state of the ecclesiastical discourse. The discipline of the Sociology of Religion has directed its interest primarily towards the presence of religion in society in general or in the biography of the individual person. This leads to the paradoxical situation that church parishes are confronted with high expectations and are the subject of heated debate, but that scarcely any attention is paid to their actual, real-life situation.

The present volume takes up this desideratum and at the same time offers a specific approach designed to stimulate discussion: it broadens the field of attention to take in international comparative sociological studies of congregations in other countries and on other continents. In doing so, it offers important contrasting scenarios that make it possible to grasp which factors are peculiar to the development of congregations in their respective individual national contexts and which are common to them all.

A variety of studies in the fields of the Sociology of Religion or of the Church have focused on the social reality and the manner of operation of church congregations in different countries. This conference, “Zukunft Kirchengemeinde. Congregational Studies Worldwide”, held by the Social Science Institute of the EKD and the Protestant Academy Frankfurt at the Martin Niemöller House in Schmitten, Arnoldshain, from 21 to 23 March 2016, brought together leading academics from Europe, the U.S. and China who have been involved in such sociological investigations of congregations. The aim was to compare the different studies from the conceptional, methodological and content points of view, to expand national discourses and to open up new transnational perspectives for research.

Looking back, the idea of holding such a conference has turned out to be an extremely fruitful one.

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3 Figure taken from the 2013 church statistics. There are about 12,000 Roman Catholic congregations.

In the first place, looking beyond the garden fence of one's own ecclesiastical territorial unit sharpens the perception of common challenges and of peculiarities in respect of the development of congregations in each specific national, denominational or historical context. Nancy Ammerman's approach offers a helpful matrix of different functions that can be used to compare church congregations in such very different contexts. She distinguishes the following four fields of activity:

- worship (divine services, devotional meetings, Bible study etc.)
- religious instruction and education
- community formation (the furthering of religious, social and cultural cohesion)
- mission (in the sense of influencing what happens in the environment surrounding the congregation, e.g. as a result of social welfare activities or outreach).<sup>4</sup>

Comparing how these different functional levels stand in relation to each other makes it possible to gain an awareness of how specific congregations are developing, and to see their development in relation to that of congregations in other socioreligious contexts.

Secondly, international comparisons reveal the extent to which churches or the church leadership are in a position to exert influence – and the limits to their ability to do so. This can be seen in exemplary fashion in the different action strategies adopted by the churches in the various cantons of Switzerland – as can be seen from the studies in this field produced by Jörg Stolz. In his contribution to this conference, however, he was above all concerned with the specific factors characterizing established and newly founded congregations respectively: each demonstrates peculiarities which at the same time make clear the path dependency of particular models of congregation.

And thirdly, open questions facing church leadership and desiderata addressed to sociologists of the church emerged clearly. It proved to be a particularly fruitful circumstance that the conference was attended not only by international representatives of Practical Theology and the Sociology of Religion, but also by experts who view matters from a different angle: religious practitioners, individuals occupying positions on various hierarchical levels in church leadership, representatives of organizations concerned with missionary and educational activities and, last but not least, ordinary church members who were simply interested in the topic. I would like to thank all these people most sincerely for their open, critical and yet appreciative participation in the discussions.

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4 Thus described in Nancy T. Ammerman: *Congregations: Local, Social and Religious*. In: Peter B. Clarke (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of the Sociology of Religion*. Oxford 2011, 562–580, here 565 ff.

In this volume, the lectures are printed in the order in which they were delivered at the conference. Some of the contributions have been revised and modified by the respective authors, as against the versions presented orally at the event. As editors of the volume we have deliberately avoided trying to impose on readers any kind of “reading instructions” telling them how the individual contributions are to be read and how they are related to each other. All the contributions are formulated in an easily understandable manner, and speak for themselves. For readers in a hurry, the evaluation of the conference by Professor Eberhard Hauschildt, which is to be found at the end of the volume, is to be recommended. We hope that all others will experience many hours of stimulating reading – and that their involvement with this process of transnational dialogue will be just as profitable for them as it was for those attending the conference.

To conclude, it remains for us to express our thanks to all those people without whom this volume would never have appeared: the speakers, who despite their manifold other commitments continued to pursue the exchange of ideas even after the conference and have kindly made their contributions available to us; Anthony Mellor-Stapelberg for his sensitive and precise translations of the German-language lectures into English, Janet Smith for her extremely patient editing of the texts to ensure their uniformity, Dr. Annette Weidhas and Christina Wollesky for their competent support of the project on behalf of the publishing house, and the Evangelische Bank, represented by Kristof Hochkirchen-Baten, for approving a grant towards the printing costs.

May the combined efforts of so many people prove beneficial to the development of Christian congregations.



# “Congregational Studies”

## An Introduction

Gerhard Wegner

This publication is not the first to document the fact that, as in other countries, so also in Germany, there is a new and growing level of interest in the nature of Christian “gatherings” – church parishes and congregations. Its appearance has been preceded by that of the Concluding Report on the EKD’s 5th Church Membership Survey (Bedford-Strohm/Jung 2015), which testifies to the same phenomenon. From a global perspective, there is already a tradition of “congregational studies” going back many decades – a field of research that is concerned in particular with the structures, development and future perspectives of such Christian communities throughout the world (see first and foremost: Ammerman 2005). Anyone who takes a look at studies in this field cannot fail to be struck at once by how differently Christian communities are structured in different countries, as a result of cultural differences on the one hand, but also of widely differing political and social structures on the other. As examples of ideal types, the central or northern European, predominantly German, parochially structured church community, as a legacy of the former established state churches, and the American “congregation” based on voluntary membership stand in sharp contrast to each other. The two function in completely different ways, even if there are a number of things that they have in common and areas in which their structures overlap.

The remarks that follow are intended to offer an introduction to this research field of “congregational studies” and to draw attention to some fundamental features shared by Christian communities in all their diversity, and also to indicate what some of the important issues are that such research is concerned with.

### 1. Preliminary remarks: Church parishes in Germany

As a preliminary, it is worthwhile making a few fundamental remarks on the parochial structures of the “mainstream” churches in Germany as a starting point for congregational studies in the German context. Up-to-date information on German church parishes and congregations is to be found in the EKD’s 5th Church Membership Survey (Bedford-Strohm/Jung 2015), but latterly also and in particular in the “Barometer of Parish Performance” devised by the Sozialwissenschaftliches Institut (Social

Science Institute) of the EKD (Rebenstorf et al. 2015). In the first place, it is very revealing that the local parish continues to be the most important (and indeed practically the only really relevant) factor that links German Protestants to their church: 45% of Protestant church members state that they have either very close or fairly close connections to their local church parishes, and a further 24% that they are connected to some extent. The decisive factor is that these figures represent the degree to which church members are connected to the “official” Evangelical, i.e. Protestant,<sup>1</sup> Church in its entirety; by contrast, Protestants do not feel anything like as closely linked to their own “state”, i.e. provincial, churches. Anyone who feels bound up with the Protestant Church also feels bound up with his or her own local parish, and vice versa. Thus despite the substantial legacy of the former established churches, the fundamental structure of Protestant Christianity in Germany is not so very different from that in other parts of the world: it is the “local” (more or less interactive) context that is of decisive importance to the way Protestant Christianity in Germany hangs together. This is further emphasized by the fact that the percentage of those who state that they feel closely linked to the life of the church is higher in relation to the local parish than it is in relation to the Evangelical (Protestant) Church as a whole.

An analysis of further differentiating factors in the degree of connectedness to the local parish shows that age plays a major role, as is also the case with regard to religion in general. Very high levels of connectedness are found among older church members, while those among younger people are noticeably lower. But even among the youngest group investigated, those aged up to 29, 30% still see themselves as having a “very” or “fairly” close connection to their local parishes, and 26% as being connected “to some extent”. Among the over 70s, on the other hand, 67% feel themselves to be “very” or “fairly” closely connected, and a further 17% to be connected “to some extent”.

Furthermore, the local parish in its German manifestation is the centrepiece of religious communication in society. This can be seen when church members are asked about their connectedness with their local parishes as an aspect of how they view themselves in religious terms. It then becomes clear that it is in particular those members who see themselves as being more religious who also feel themselves bound up with their local parishes – and the corollary to this is that a greater distance from the local parish goes hand in hand with a greater distance from religion in general. There are also a whole number of other indicators showing that the members who identify with their local parishes or are even actively involved in

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1 *Translator’s note:* “EKD” = “Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland”. The EKD itself translates its name into English, for example on the English pages of its website, as “Evangelical Church in Germany”; but in fact “evangelisch” means “protestant” rather than “evangelical”. The EKD is not “evangelical” as that term is normally understood in English. In the following text I have therefore generally used “Protestant” rather than “Evangelical” to refer to the EKD.

them are those who ensure that religious communication continues to take place in Germany at at least a “basic frequency”: and that applies to religious communication both in its private and in its public form. And those people who say that for them religious communication takes place principally in private, family or other similar contexts are as a rule among those who also feel themselves to be bound up with their local parishes. This picture is then further confirmed when the question of possibly leaving the church is linked to that of identification with the local parish: those who feel themselves closely bound up with their local parishes are not considering terminating their church membership. To say it in the words of Nancy Ammerman’s book title: in Germany too it is local parish congregations that are the “pillars of faith”.

This example from the specifically German parochial tradition also demonstrates certain features that are typical of church communities everywhere, whether of the “parochial” or of the “congregational” type. Here too, people who feel themselves particularly closely bound to Christianity gather together in – or at least in the vicinity of – the parish congregation. Even if, as will be shown, local church parishes may well demonstrate specific forms of narrowness in respect of the social milieus and cultural backgrounds they represent – or in respect of which social class is the loadbearing element in them – it is nevertheless impossible not to recognize that they are the most important focus for ecclesiastical orientation and Christian faith in society. In Germany as elsewhere, it is the local parish communities that render Protestant Christianity visible; and this is even more so if one takes the global dimension into account, since in other countries the institutions that are typical of Germany as the legacy of the former established churches, such as the “state” or provincial churches, each governed by its own bureaucratic structures, do not exist, and Protestantism is primarily, and to some extent exclusively, expressed through groups that come together in the form of “congregations”.

## 2. “Congregational studies”

I will now give an overview of some aspects of the research into church communities that has already been undertaken or is currently planned and which falls under the umbrella of “congregational studies”. This section of the text is subdivided into five parts:

- The social vision of the church community
- The parochial tradition
- The congregational tradition
- The structure of the church community
- How the church community sees itself

## 2.1 The social vision of the church community

It is a commonplace that the idea and the reality of there being a Christian community or congregation at all go back to the earliest texts in the New Testament. At the very beginning, there is the group of disciples who gather in Jerusalem after the events of the Resurrection; at Pentecost, something very out of the ordinary happens to them, and they thereupon set up the first and original Christian community, described in gripping detail by Luke in the Acts of the Apostles. The form adopted by this original Christian community has again and again been understood to be the ideal form for any Christian, or indeed also non-Christian, community: a whole series of social visions, not only in Christian but also in socialist and communist thought, have taken it as a model of how people should best live together in community.

This faith community, which then subsequently spreads to Asia Minor and Europe as a result of Paul's missionary journeys, sees itself as the body of believers "called" or "chosen" to live out the Gospel. It comes into being on the basis of this experience of being called, i.e. of a moment of being gripped by belief in Christ and the truth of the Christian faith, a moment which stands out in the New Testament writings as the moment of conversion. This impetus is of decisive importance to all ecclesiastical social activities and institutions: it is not a matter of a free decision to come together in order to achieve some aim or another, and with this in view to set up an organization as what we would nowadays call an institution of civil society, but of the founding of a specific societal entity, whether or not in the form of an organized association, as the deliberate, almost inevitable consequence of the experience of being called; of the establishment of the Church by a force acting from outside society, the establishment of the Church by God. This, at any rate, is how it is presented again and again in the relevant texts and in their depictions of the experiences of the Church's founders. Accordingly, the emphasis is not first and foremost on achieving social objectives or fulfilling social purposes, but on witnessing to an event external to the persons concerned, who seek to express this in their communal gatherings and in their relationships with each other.

In this respect, the Christian community is at its heart nothing else but the social manifestation of this experience of something that causes those involved to cross the boundaries and go beyond the limits of their everyday concerns. As is the case in the New Testament in general, and in particular in the actions of Jesus, this means that certain assumptions of belonging that had appeared to be a matter of course are broken down: it is now no longer the fact of belonging to a particular nation, family, place or anything of that sort that is the prerequisite for membership of the community, but only that of belonging to something or someone Other, namely Jesus Christ. All in all, this places the Christian community at a considerable distance from other principles or entities coexisting with it or forming part of its environment, so that it sets itself off from them, adopting a self-referential *raison d'être* of its own, that of being

called to witness to faith in the resurrected Christ. Missionary activity thus serves to call people to enter into this new world, where they can experience a new and better life. Forms of common property and shared possessions – communism – do play a part in this, but come to be more and more relativized and subjected to provisos again at a very early date.

The unity between nationality and religion, which was a constitutive factor in the Roman Empire, is broken down. The unity between the Messianic religion of Christ and Jewish religion is also broken. It is no longer circumcision that is the prerequisite for belonging to the community, but only faith in the resurrected Lord and then baptism, not rank or station. There is no longer Greek or Jew, no longer male or female, and so it can suddenly be said that the established inherited bonds have been overcome and that there is now a new description of one’s own identity which points far beyond all worldly differences and distinctions. The citizenship of the first Christians is citizenship of the Kingdom of Heaven. The new symbolism is the concept of being part of the Body of Christ, or the community’s definition of itself as the people of God on a pilgrimage through time.

If we seek to describe this structure in modern sociological language, we might in one respect speak of this religious entity setting itself off from society, or of a kind of “disembedding”. The Christians may remain citizens of their own worlds, but only to a subordinate extent. Their essential life, their identity is witnessed to in the new world of the community of faith. It becomes clear how very much a social vision of the Christian community is implicit in this, which – to the extent that its members take their foundation myth, and thus themselves, seriously – may indeed have a revolutionary impact because it overcomes and breaks down existing divisions and boundaries in society that can be understood as manifestations of sin. The Spirit of God which they believe to be present in their community again and again forces them to break through their boundaries (though these are of course nevertheless again and again re-established), and ultimately to develop a practice of “missionary” activity that has the whole world as its target. The fact that this practice has repeatedly been corrupted by the circumstance that it has not really been concerned to transcend existing cultural and political bonds, but rather to extend the area of dominance of the cultural patterns (and boundaries) that existed in the European context, is a part of its history that has been subjected to frequent consideration and criticism. But despite this, the luminosity that the community nevertheless possesses is drawn from a vision of the Body of Christ spanning all cultures and political orders. Though claiming universality in this understanding of itself, it is at the same time also always incarnate in the particularism of existing cultural and also ethnic contexts, and it is from this tension between particularity and universality that it draws its own specific dynamism which can drive it to far surpass its own limitations in its love for humanity and its obedience to God.

This social vision of the Christian community (with all the stresses and strains accompanying it) has again and again undergone productive renewal in the course of Christian history. Again and again, ecclesiastical umbrella organizations and their bureaucracies have sought to repress the idea of autonomous congregations organizing themselves – yet the idea has prevailed again and again in many diverse forms, whether in early monasticism and in the religious orders, or later in the foundation of the churches of the Reformation, or even before the Reformation among the Hussites or the Waldensians. Even if it was in fact often particular interests that were the focus of these developments, they were nevertheless articulated as a universal movement that invoked the ideal of the primitive Christian faith in order to stand up against repression by overweening churches. Of particular importance is the rediscovery of the idea of the autonomous self-organizing community by the young Luther, who took up its revolutionary potential and used it to stoke the fires of his early Reformational efforts. The peasants in particular adopted the idea and tried to instrumentalize it to further their own interests; whereupon the rulers put an end to the process by nationalizing the church.

What this demonstrates in exemplary fashion is the problem lying at the heart of the question of the form that the Christian community is to take in society: the dichotomy between, on the one hand, the immediacy of the experience of the Spirit and of faith in the individual form that this experience takes in each person, within the framework of the common experience of the community (which, however, is then always invoked to determine the acceptable limits of that individuality); and on the other hand the opposite experience, namely that of the organizational heteronomy of the superordinated ecclesiastical organization, which is no longer able to bear the immediacy of the experience of God and so progressively deprives the parish communities of the true source of their ability to produce religious fruit. And this ultimately develops into a tendency to no longer allow the local religious gatherings, the embodiments of the communal tradition, to have their say and exert any influence of their own, but instead to organize the ecclesiastical presence in a statist or parastatist manner by the “top-down” installation of priests with defined geographical areas of jurisdiction.

For a long time this form of church organization, the bureaucratic form exercising de facto state control over religion, was the dominant form both in Protestantism and also, of course, in Catholicism; until, as a consequence of the nineteenth century bourgeois revolution but heralded long before that by developments arising out of the Reformation, the tradition of the church community as a vital centre of religious life and experience, administering and organizing itself, was rediscovered, and has continued down to today – nowadays in particular in the form of charismatic Protestantism – to bear within itself a substantial quantity of social dynamite.

Starting at the latest with the foundation of the new churches of the Reformation, and in particular of the many heretical traditions which were forcibly expelled from Europe and organized themselves

anew above all in what was to become the United States of America, the forms adopted by the Christian community in society can be divided into two major lines of tradition, which continue to be of enormous importance right down to today:

- On the one hand the parochial tradition, which still perpetuates to some extent the legacy of the state-constituted established churches;
- On the other hand the congregationalist structure based on the voluntary association of Christians in the manner of civil society organizations.

In Protestantism, parochial structures are essentially still strong and vigorous in parts of central and northern Europe, while congregationalist structures are to be found throughout the rest of the world. The Anglican tradition oscillates between the two, continuing to show a great diversity of very specific parochial and congregationalist structures. The Catholic Church too displays great diversity in this respect.

## 2.2 The parochial tradition

The parochial tradition in Christian communities is based on the heteronomy and heterocephaly of a defined geographical area. It arises out of the established church tradition of placing an area under the supervision of a centrally-appointed full-time priest or clergyman with conditions of tenure resembling those of a civil servant, and in this respect does not necessarily initially have anything to do with specific structures within the individual parish or community. All those who live within a defined geographical area and who consider themselves to be Christians belong to the parish. In central and northern Europe these two criteria were long identical, unless somebody deliberately took the decision to leave the church. At any rate, this is how things were defined in canon law right down to the 70s and 80s of the past century: everybody was a member, except for those who took the deliberate action of renouncing their membership. Today, in view of the substantial number of people who are not church members (in Germany, these represent one-third of the population), the parish can no longer be defined in this way. The parochial community thus now simply consists of all the people in a specific residential area who are members of the Protestant Church. In this respect, it may be said of Germany that a Protestant Christian can always automatically know which parish community he or she belongs to. People are assigned to a parish automatically as soon as they move to a particular place. In this way, the structure of the church parishes corresponds to that of the local authorities, where it is completely a matter of course for people to fall under the authority of, say, the district council in whose area they live. This is clearly a legacy of the status of the mainstream Protestant churches as established churches, which was their constitutional position until 1919.

Thus church communities in Germany are not voluntary associations, but basically represent an imposed collectivization of all members of a particular denomination living in a particular geographical area. Gunter Kehrler formulated this very appositely in 1970 as follows: “The parish community, as far as its visible form is concerned, must be regarded as the administrative unit of the church which a member of the church community is automatically regarded as belonging to, whereby membership is the rule and non-membership requires an explicit declaration.”<sup>2</sup> The practical consequence of this structure is that the mass of members of a parish ultimately perceive their parish church as a centre providing religious services. And this even though parochial church communities offer precisely the same opportunities for participation (e.g. electing the parochial church council, though in general there is only a small turnout of church members at such elections) as is the case with local authorities. It is this derivation of the structure from the former established state church that gives rise to a situation whereby only a minority of church members experience this form of parish as a community they can participate in as stakeholders, and in which, accordingly, the spirit of a living community is to be found.

Thus in practice, the parish is the lowest level of church administration, even if the church statutes provide for something different. In Germany, however, these statutes vary very widely from one church province to another, allowing completely different forms of parochial organization. What is common to all parishes today, however, is that they are supposed to organize themselves, and to do so through structures such as a parochial church council, a council of elders or the like. The emergence of these forms of self-organization was a result of the nineteenth-century bourgeois emancipation movement, which at least in Germany and in Scandinavia as well led to the establishment of such bodies and to the right of the grass-roots church members to elect them. These bodies were introduced in the days when there were still established state churches, so that in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries at the latest more and more forms of self-organization arose even within the hierarchical structures of those established churches, and above all more and more different kinds of groups came to be formed within them.

Thus the structure of the parochial type of church community today is a hybrid one in this respect, and also an ambivalent one. In many church statutes this can be seen above all in the fact that it is always possible for the church leadership to intervene in the parish; but on the other hand there are also a wide variety of reservations attached to these powers in order to protect the right of the parishes to regulate themselves. This goes so far that in a number of “state” (i.e. provincial) churches it is even the parishes

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2 „Die Gemeinde muss, was ihre sichtbare Gestalt betrifft, als für das Gemeindemitglied selbstverständlich vorgegebene kirchliche Administrationseinheit gesehen werden, wobei die Mitgliedschaft die Regel und die Nichtzugehörigkeit definitiv zu erklären ist“ (Kehrler 1970: 189).

themselves that collect church tax, only afterwards passing it on to the church authorities, whereas in others the opposite is true; obviously, this is associated with differences in the way rights are assigned between the hierarchical levels, and so with differing power structures. Everywhere in Germany each church parish is in itself a corporate body under public law, as are also the churches as a whole.

As many studies show, church parishes organized in this way differ utterly in their degrees of vitality and in the multifarious forms of activity that exist within them. Some develop a multiplicity of activities in the field of religious socialization, operate kindergartens, or are involved in providing church-based social services etc. Many demonstrate a lively cultural life, having choirs and orchestras and the like. The church communities are also the places where religious education takes place in the form of confirmation classes, and through the religious services provided by the clergy they are the places where rites of passage, i.e. baptism, marriage and burial, take place. In practice, as Herbert Lindner says, having spent his whole life researching into church communities, the parishes are rather weak bureaucratic organizations, managed in the way a family business might be (Lindner 1994: 155, *passim*). Lindner’s description relates to the way parishes actually function, bodies which it is difficult to describe as modern organizations, but which can also only be described up to a point as classic institutions. Their major focus is on specific structures of community, which are cultivated, but are nevertheless only able to attract some 13 to 15% of parish members to get involved with them. As has already been mentioned, some 45% of church members in Germany claim to be closely or fairly close to the church; yet the turnout at parochial church council elections ranges only from 15% to 20%. Those who take part in elections are above all those who are closer to the inner fellowship of the community.

Fundamentally, the established church legacy leads to the diagnosis arrived at by Grace Davie: “Europeans do not, on the whole, view their churches as centers of activity that will collapse without their support, they are much more inclined to regard them as a necessary public provision” (Davie 2001: 276). In view of this mentality it is no surprise to find a broad spectrum of attitudes and behaviours among church members in Germany, from the up to 15% who are highly involved to the similar number who are indifferent. Thus well over two-thirds of church members, although belonging to a parish, take practically no part in its life or activities.

### 2.3 The congregationalist tradition

The church community as a congregation, as it is found in Protestantism especially in the U.S. and in almost all the rest of the world except Europe, offers a completely different picture from that provided by the parochial model. The focus here is on the activity of individuals of equal status who come together in a way resembling that of an association in civil society and pursue a multiplicity of activities together.

Nancy Ammerman has researched this form of church community in the U.S. exhaustively. For her, the decisive factor is “the willingness to invest voluntary resources in preserving and extending a religious tradition” (Ammerman 2005: 256). Note that it is willingness that is the crucial factor. One does not belong to a church community as a matter of course, with the only obligation being to declare it if one wishes to withdraw; rather, the prerequisite is a positive personal interest, which is the sole element that keeps such communities alive. For there are no traditions of established state churches standing in the background, but a broad spectrum of religious diversity and cultural pluralism – factors that have shaped the American situation right from the beginning. Within this context, each person chooses a specific space of plausibility for himself or herself, and seeks to expand and shape it through his or her own personal involvement. Attachment to a denominational tradition is the outcome, at least to a certain degree, of a deliberate personal decision – though at the same time it is true that in most cases this decision will correspond to family tradition.

Essential factors in the formation of such communities and above all in their regeneration are shared narratives, or “accounts”, as Nancy Ammerman calls them, which are formed, so to speak, at the point where the tradition of the religious denomination and the involvement of the individual concerned interact. These narratives include a multiplicity of stories about one’s own congregation and its development, about people who have put their stamp on it, charismatic founder personalities and significant activities. They contribute towards the formation of “social ties” which continue to be created in group traditions and in actual groups. Without a living feeling of responsibility towards such social ties, church communities cannot exist. And so life in the group and a more or less intensive degree of social control, which goes hand-in-hand with social support, play an incomparably greater role than is the case in the European parochial tradition, in which the parish will still continue to exist even if, in the extreme case, there are no social ties, no social control and no social assistance at all.

Nancy Ammerman summarizes: “Congregations are where people hear the stories of divine action in the world, experience a sacred presence as part of their own unfolding life narrative, and build the relationships that allow new shared faith stories to be added to the collective lore” (Ammerman 2005: 270). This quotation describes very nicely how shared “accounts” and social ties are formed in the congregations. The congregational community develops on the basis of its own narratives which together build up a collective memory or body of “lore”, and are handed on to the future membership. If this constant further development breaks down for any reason, the congregation itself will dissolve; in the American context this is a not uncommon event, being followed by the formation of new Christian groupings to carry on in the spirit of the earlier congregation.

Thus the congregation is very much more unstable than the parish of the established or formerly established church; but at the same time it tends to display a much greater degree of religious vitality and is indeed dependent on developing such vitality of its own in order to be able to sustain the constant

further spinning of the web of its own narratives which reflect the specific epiphanies of its members. Congregations are of necessity generally aligned towards missionary activity, since it is essential for them to take in new members if they are not ultimately to die. In this context, there is no other guarantee that Christianity or the church will survive than that furnished by the commitment of its members.

## 2.4 The structure of the community

The structures of church communities are very different in different cultures and socio-cultures; these differences can be observed along the fault-line that runs between parishes and congregations, but also go far beyond those distinctions. Nevertheless, there are certain common principles that can be identified as the forces shaping the Protestant tradition of church communities. Among these, there is a fundamental fourfold pattern of functions (cf. Ammerman 2011: 565ff.):

- Worship
- Religious Education
- Community Formation
- Mission

These four functions are clearly distinguishable in the activities of Christian communities. Worship includes not only the main Sunday services, but also other forms of devotional meeting and similar occasions of religious communication. Religious education for children and young people is provided everywhere in the world, and the processes of forming groups within the community and of furthering the coalescence of the community as a whole are of major importance as well. The mission aspect takes on a variety of different forms, but in general terms refers above all in the English-speaking world to the community’s view of itself as being entrusted with a specific task. This may manifest itself in explicitly religious missionary work, but also in involvement in the field of social responsibility.

A further fundamental principle is a certain form of self-organization of the community. This has always formed part of the congregationalist tradition, but can also be traced in parochial traditions, at least since the bourgeois emancipation movements of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. There are of course numerous different ways in which church communities’ structures can be influenced from outside: but they almost always retain a certain degree of leeway for self-organization. Even in the parochial tradition, parochial church councils and boards of elders are vigilant in their defence of these areas of leeway and assume responsibility for making use of them in one way or another. But even where these bodies exercise little responsibility themselves, groups of one kind or another are frequently formed within the communities which are very much capable of organizing themselves to take initiatives.

Moreover, a factor that exerts a particularly strong influence on the relationship between organization and interaction is what might be called the “principle of assembly”. Church communities can only become visible – whether externally in the public arena, or even, so to speak, to themselves – if people assemble together in one way or another and thereby assure themselves of their presence, their materiality, their reality and thus also their physical identity. Among the various forms of such voluntarily organized assembly, religious ones are an utterly fundamental example; this applies in particular to the regular divine services, but there are always other forms as well.

Closer consideration of the forms and functionalities of religious communication will reveal at least three dimensions that can be distinguished:

- Rituals. Church communities develop and foster rituals, which in the parochial tradition are always more or less strongly influenced by the superordinated ecclesiastical organization or even imposed by it. Among these rituals are the forms of worship, but also the manifold forms of religious initiation rituals.
- Charisma. In church communities there are also always charismatic forms of religious communication of one kind or another. They appear in particular when new communities are formed, and so also in cases where church communities split or new initiatives are launched. Such charismatic renewals may also be determined by specific external events, e.g. by social changes with a major impact that require a Christian community to develop social activities for the sake of the poor. But they can also result from acute experiences of secularization, which may also provoke a revival in religious communication.
- Discourse. Finally, Christian communities are shaped in one way or another by specific discourses, i.e. by forms of narrative or argumentative interaction, and the experiences they give rise to both with other people and also and in particular with the Bible and the word of God. Thus all over the world there are Bible study groups where people come together and try to experience the word of God for themselves, not only in a ritualized but also in a discursive form. In many cases too, a church’s leadership will only take major decisions after an extensive process of discourse that explores the meaningfulness of the community’s own religious traditions. Educational events in the form of discourse may also play a part.

Church communities are not static constructions, but are constantly mutating, particularly because of the fact that they may lose some of their specific functions while at the same time having to take on new ones. It is indeed a feature of the parochial tradition of central and northern Europe that a number of functions have been lost over the last 40 to 50 years or so. In Germany, for example, nursing care in the

home was attached to the church parishes through the person of the parish district nurse right down until the 1970s and 80s. As a result of the professionalization of nursing this function was largely lost, or else remained only indirectly linked to the church through the parishes’ organizational membership in the “social stations”. Recently, however, on the basis of the activities of foundations and through personal donations, there has been a movement in the direction of again integrating new forms of domestic nursing into the church parishes, and thus reinventing the parishes as caring communities.

One interesting field in which church communities often find themselves pulled in opposite directions is the relationship between drawing upon services provided and providing services oneself, i.e. the role of the community of members. As a rule, these draw upon the services of the religious experts employed by or assigned to the church community. This always raises the question as to what the relationship should be between the activities of the voluntary leadership, and also those of groups and communities within the parish, and those of the professional or paid operatives. Whereas in the American tradition the working hours of the clergy and the tasks to be performed by them are often clearly defined in contracts of employment, things are quite different in the European tradition, where the clergy are regarded as being on duty all the time. There is an assumption that the clergy are more or less universally altruistically motivated, so that they can be called upon at any time for whatever purpose.

The question of the extent to which church communities display structures that are orientated towards missionary activity can be answered in very different ways on the basis of these results. Fundamentally, it is a safe assumption that the congregationalist structure always remains dependent upon winning new members, and to this extent has to demonstrate a certain missionizing character. The question as to how far this is actually translated into missionary activity remains open, however. In principle, the parochial structure is not dependent upon such activity; and indeed, the rising numbers of people leaving the churches in Germany or indeed in northern Europe as a whole over the last few decades show that individual church members or individual parishes tend not to engage in missionary activities of this kind. In practice, however, the decline in the number of church members and the lack of activities directed towards renewing the membership does mean that the church parish as an institution is coming to pack less punch in the public arena, or that the parishes are shrinking. The decisive fact, however, is that in parochial structures there are no real incentives for getting a more determined grip on the problem of ensuring future survival which the parishes are constantly faced with.

## 2.5 How the church community sees itself

Although it is clearly apparent from an empirical point of view that the church parishes or communities undoubtedly represent the foundation of Protestant Christianity and “churchianity”, there is a distinct lack, at least in German theology, of theological consideration of the nature and role of such commu-

nities. Thus it remains – surprisingly, in this liberal theological tradition – a thoroughly open question whether the parish is merely a virtual principle of Protestant church organization, or is a real and empirically existent reality. These may appear to be rather strange alternatives, but it is indeed the fact that a clear debate on the significance of the church communities is far from ubiquitous in the German ecclesiological tradition. There are entire ecclesiologies that manage not to refer to them at all, or which treat them in such a relativizing manner that they completely fail to do justice to their actual constitutive significance. Yet in fact, the parochial principle is upheld everywhere.

Thus in 1994 Dietrich Rössler was able to come up with this pointed formulation: “The church parish is the first and last authority, even for an assessment of the problem of why it exists at all. Accordingly, for Protestant Christians there is no higher form of religious life than belonging to a particular parish community.”<sup>3</sup> In making this statement, however, Rössler by no means necessarily means the actual local parish to which the individual Christian belongs, but is rather referring to the church as a whole as a community in a more virtual than concrete manner. And in 1960 Trutz Rendtorff expressed much the same view: “At the same time it can be seen very clearly that the term ‘parish community’ does not really describe a sociological fact, but embodies an appeal, directed both to those who are its members and to the world outside, which may by all means coexist with an awareness of the extent to which its aspiration is inadequately realized.”<sup>4</sup> Here too it is very clear that the term “church community” refers to a fundamental stock of shared social values that determine the way Protestant Christians in their totality live and work together and lays down, as it were, a yardstick for that, without referring to any real communal life in the parishes. Trutz Rendtorff was one of those who repeatedly drew attention to the specific forms of narrowness to be found in actual parish communities and who warned against certain ideals of community specific to church parishes, which are in any case unrealizable, being held up against all reality as being particularly Christian. This, he maintained, was nothing other than a form of conservative reactionary thinking that should have no place in the modern world.

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3 “Die Kirchengemeinde ist erste und letzte Instanz, selbst für die Beurteilung des Problems ihrer eigenen Begründung. Dementsprechend gibt es für den evangelischen Christen keine höhere religiöse Lebensform als die Zugehörigkeit zu einer bestimmten Gemeinde” (Rössler 1994: 586).

4 “Zugleich zeigt sich sehr deutlich, dass ‘Gemeinde’ nicht eigentlich einen soziologischen Tatbestand umschreibt, sondern einen nach außen und nach innen gerichteten Appell verkörpert, der mit dem Bewusstsein der mangelnden Realisierung seines Anspruchs durchaus zusammenzugehen vermag“ (Rendtorff 1960: 161).

Finally, it remains at this point to pose the question as to whether the church community can best be described as a network of Christian communication or rather as an instrument for the propagation of the Gospel. Viewed empirically, it certainly does represent a network of Christian communication of a density such as is not to be found anywhere else in society. But theologically, it can also be conceived as an instrument for propagating the Gospel, i.e. as something with an effect that reaches out beyond itself – like leaven, if you like – to impact the whole of society, and which embodies the Kingdom of God in the structures of the world.

### 3. Summing up

Attempting to sum up the foregoing considerations, it may be said that there are certain aspects which can be determined as being valid everywhere in the world:

- Church communities indisputably represent the grass roots of the Protestant churches. Protestantism becomes visible through what takes place in the parishes and congregations; they embody, so to speak, the very principle of Protestantism.
- The Protestant mentality is shaped by this “church community principle”. Protestants have fundamental problems with church hierarchies that go beyond the local community, and this applies even to those Protestant churches that are based on the parochial system. For even here, there is “a great gulf set” between the parochial church councils, the church members and in particular the clergy employed in the parishes on the one hand, and the superordinated church leadership on the other. Interaction within the community, the principle of assembly or voluntary self-organization, is decisive; or at least, that should ideally be the case.
- Consequently, there exists an ideal image of a congregation that voluntarily organizes itself: an image which is again and again brought into play, both in contrast to and within the parochial church communities.
- Innovative tendencies in Protestantism again and again constitute themselves in the form of such voluntarily self-organizing congregations; this applies in particular to the charismatic movements in Protestantism, which are the most innovative tendencies at the present time. Innovation in Protestantism cannot be conceived in any other way than as being based on interaction. This has something to do with authentic charismatic communication and cannot be propagated only through the media, though of course they can provide support.

However: there is a lack of theological and sociological investigation of this world of the church communities. This applies in particular to the parochial tradition, which, at least in Germany, has not been the focus of adequate research for the last fifty years or so.

The questions to be investigated would include:

- How do church communities develop?
- What are the factors determining their vitality?
- Are the models tending to converge?
- What is their relationship to the society that surrounds them?
- What size categories exist among the church communities, and what is their significance?

It follows that the field of “Congregational Studies” still has a lot of work to do. The reality of church communities is much more fascinating and much broader than has been thought up until now. At the same time, their function in respect of the propagation of Christian beliefs and attitudes has an importance that it is impossible to overestimate.

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## Open Questions / Desiderata

### with regard to the understanding and description of church parishes and congregations in Pastoral Theology

Eberhard Hauschildt

The discipline of Practical Theology has as its object the *landscapes of ecclesiastical practice* in society, which also includes observing the context in which religious practice takes place in society at all. At the same time, as a branch of *theology* it reveals how this object is always perceived and studied from a particular perspective: namely, that of enquiring into the question as to how the *Gospel* is communicated in that particular context. In doing so, it attempts to establish through *critical* analysis which of the forms of activity and reflection that are to be found within a church can be seen to be theologically inappropriate and/or predictably doomed to failure since they are not fit for the intended purpose. And it attempts to make a *constructive* contribution to expanding the range of possible activities.

It more or less goes without saying that a major focus of such investigations, though not the only one, will be on *activities within church communities*. This heading covers *many subcategories* that are already *well researched*. For example, much excellent work has been done on areas directly linked to the *activities of clergy*: such areas include the themes of their sermons and services and the way they handle occasional ceremonies such as baptisms and weddings, and also confirmation classes, pastoral care, the role of the clergy and their own understanding of that role. In addition it may be observed – in this respect I am referring specifically to Practical Theology work written in German – that an additional field has come under consideration, especially in connection with the rise of empirical research from the 1970s onwards: namely the *view that members of the congregation* take of each of the topics mentioned, of their own church as a whole and indeed of religion in general. Then there has also been an extensive debate, even if it has been conducted in a number of intermittent phases, on the *phenomenon of the persistence of parochial structures and mentalities in the “Landeskirchen”*, the “provincial” churches that are the legacy institutions of the established churches of former centuries: this is a debate that has peaked several times – at the turn of the twentieth century, after 1918, and consistently from the 1950s right down to the present day.

Thus there is in any case much debate on the “future of the congregation” or “congregation of the future” – both of which are possible interpretations of the German title of this conference, “Zukunft Kirchengemeinde”. This debate shows precisely where the crunch comes with regard to the conflicting ecclesiologies and ideals of what the church should be as between the various ecclesiastical factions

and schools of churchmanship: the liberal proponents of a broad, “popular”, all-embracing church – a “church for everybody”, the conservatives with their neodialectical theological orientation, the socially critical alternative left and the missional evangelicals. The underlying buzzwords and key concepts are, for example, missionary activity to build up the community, regionalization, extra-parochial activities and congregations to supplement or replace the legacy parochial structures, or support for the parochial system as the only really coherent form of Christian community. Vigorous debates on these topics are taking place in any case. It would therefore be no great gain for this conference if the call to pursue Congregational Studies were to turn out to be a rallying call for just one particular camp in this debate. If that were to be the case, it would guarantee that progress was scarcely possible.

And yet, or least so it seems to me, a glance at the fields of *research* into church communities conducted in German by practical theologians will show that there are some *enormous blank spaces on the map*. And the appellation “Congregational Studies” stands precisely for these “undiscovered countries”. I for my part discovered the existence of these blank spaces when I had to prepare two lectures that were to provide overviews of the current situation in different fields of Practical Theology: the one was to be concerned with the Sociology of Religion and the Church, and the second with the nature of the church itself.

Anyone seeking to give an overall portrayal of the field of the Sociology of Religion and the Church will find plenty of literature concerned with religion and the church in society, i.e. taking a *macro-sociological* approach. There is plenty to draw on here, starting from the classic work on the Sociology of Religion by Émile Durkheim and Max Weber, and going all the way to Niklas Luhmann and Peter L. Berger. Much attention has also been paid to the nature of the church as an institution. And there is plenty of literature devoted to the *microsociological* field, to the religiosity of individuals and how they participate in church life, whereby the boundary between this field and that of the psychology of religion is a fluid one. But the problematic area is that of the *meso level* of the Sociology of Religion. Here, research work is considerably more thinly spread. The only area to have been subjected to further scrutiny recently has been that of the nature of religious organizations, whether this has been approached from the direction of systems theory or from that of management techniques and efficiency.

This imbalance reflects that prevailing in sociological research as a whole: because the whole field of *group sociology* has been studied to an amazingly inadequate extent. The greatest amount of work, it seems to me, has been done on the *sociology of the family*; then there was a time when there was a boom in the field of group dynamics; and now, starting relatively recently, research is being done into networks. But it is very telling that for decades there has basically existed only one work in German giving an overall view of group sociology, namely that produced by Bernhard Schäfers in 1980, with a third, revised, edition in 1999, which however is now out of print (Schäfers 1999). No research at all has

been done into such large and significant groups as church service attendees or church congregations as a whole, if we leave aside for the moment the new network study relating to a single congregation which is presented as an example in the EKD's 5th Church Membership Survey (Bedford-Strohm/Jung 2015). Thus within this area of the human sciences, the one that serves as the closest field of reference for Practical Theology, there is a sub-area that has been researched only very patchily, both in general sociological terms and even more so in terms of the Sociology of Religion: namely the topic of (religious) groups.

With regard to the presentation of *theories on the nature of the church* from the perspective of Practical Theology the picture is very similar. To some extent, even the most basic preliminary academic work is lacking. When Uta Pohl-Patalong and I wrote our textbook on the theory of the nature of the church (Hauschildt/Pohl-Patalong 2013: 145–148), we first had to cobble together on our own a typology of groups within parishes and congregations, since no such thing existed at that time. The works of academic research into individual groups can be counted on the fingers of one hand. Since that time, at least, one study on gospel choirs (Ahrens 2009) and one on brass bands (Koll 2016; Koll et al. 2013) have appeared. There is also a work that presents a typology of Third World groups: this dates from 1998 (Nuscheler et al. 1998). There is nothing at all on the dynamics of the work of parochial church councils or councils of elders. There is a complete lack of case studies relating to groups within the church – how they come into being, how they develop over time, and how they eventually disappear again.

*And so my first desideratum would be: there is a lack of research into the processes that take place within church community groups of all kinds; but such research is essential before work can be started on anything like a fully-fledged theory of church parish or congregational groups.*

In the same way, there is a lack of work on individual parishes or congregations. There is a work on growing congregations published in 2008 under the overall direction of the systematic theologian Wilfried Härle (Härle et al. 2008). But methodologically this work is a sad case, lacking as it does any definition of growth and any adjustment of the data to eliminate spurious effects, and its findings were accordingly practically useless (cf. Hauschildt 2008). One may reproach those responsible for this project for these shortcomings: but what was there in the literature of Practical Theology that they could have drawn on for assistance? Practically nothing.

In this field too we are still waiting for the first basic step: a typology, developed on the basis of empirical research, of the parish congregations of the Protestant “provincial” churches. We need to find out, for example, how wide the differences really are between a liberal and an evangelical congregation, or between a parish aligned towards social concerns and one of a high-church tendency. In addition, there is once again a lack of methodically conducted case studies. There are, for example, no insights into how attendance at the services in a specific parish or congregation develops over the course of a year, or into the

extent to which this depends on the preachers or the nature of the service, or on the composition of the congregation. There is a lack of case studies on the effects of the departure and replacement of a pastor, or as to whether this may not have too great an effect after all. There is a lack of case studies on how non-parochial congregations, such as for example the Protestant student congregation of a university, function in comparison with normal parishes. *So this would be my second desideratum: there is a lack of research into the processes that take place within church communities of all kinds; but such research is essential before work can be started on anything like a fully-fledged and empirically based comparative theory of the parishes of the provincial churches.*

*And a third desideratum, once the two set out above have been dealt with: there is a lack of detailed studies of the interactions between groups within the parish or congregation and the parish or congregation as a whole; but such studies are essential before any overall theory of the church community, even one that is only moderately empirical, can be developed.*

It would be easy to extend this list; but I only want to add two related assumptions. The first is that it would above all be *studies of conflict situations and of clear cases of failure* that would be likely to be of the most interest and most use, on the principle of learning from mistakes. The second assumption is that such studies of parishes or congregations and of groups within them would have to include consideration of what the relationships are like between the groups and the parishes and their *environments* – the local government structures and the civil society organizations existing in the same area. They would also need to cover the question of *links and networks* going beyond the local level that have been formed, whether on the basis of theology and ideology or of pragmatic personal relationships – or have not been formed, as the case may be.

The two congregational/parochial studies that do exist in relation to German-speaking countries, the Swiss National Congregation Study (Stolz et al. 2011; Monnot 2013) and the “Parish Barometer” of the Social Science Institute of the EKD (Rebenstorf et al. 2015), represent the first marked paths leading into these unknown territories. In the course of this conference we will be able to discover both what they show us and what they do not.

The conference is to deal with *Congregational Studies worldwide*. And that is a good thing, because *we can learn something* from the methodologies developed elsewhere and from the findings they have produced. We must however approach this task with circumspection, because at the same time, such findings cannot simply be transferred one-to-one to the European, and again in particular to the German, situation. This is demonstrated *by the very fact that* Congregational Studies have already developed much further in other places than they have in German-language Practical Theology: because in those other places the pressure to research into such matters is much higher. This has not been the case in Germany up to now. And there is a good explanation for this: when under the secure and cosy German circumstances failures occur in parishes and parish work, what happens in our institutionalized “provincial” churches? Nothing. The church tower does not fall down, the parish remains in existence, a new pastor will come at the latest

when the current incumbent retires. But in many other countries, failure means that the whole congregation, church tower included, will be in jeopardy and may disappear completely, so that the denomination concerned has one congregation less, and accordingly a certain number of members less. And as long as the parish cannot exactly be said to have failed, but carries on with its work in a plodding manner one might call “so-so”, and the same can be said of the commitment of the parish members as well, then in the parishes of Germany’s “provincial” churches it really is the case that nothing at all happens.

In such circumstances, the weaknesses of the type of institutionalized church that we have in Germany – leaving aside for the moment the strengths that it indubitably also possesses – become glaringly obvious. At least at first glance, this fits in precisely with the picture of “lazy monopolies” presented in the market theory of religion: churches in which both the church leadership and the members are lazy, since the church practically still occupies the position of a monopolist on the market.

The distinctions between *different types of congregation* are also much easier to study in other countries where an initial typology can be derived quite simply from the denominational landscape, or where one can compare evangelical and non-evangelical congregations. We will hear quite a lot about this at this conference, and what we hear is likely to prove very interesting. And the methodologies used and the questions investigated may well provide us with good examples to follow.

It remains the case, however, that recipes based on the conditions existing in other national religious cultures or other ecclesiastical models cannot simply be transferred to churches elsewhere. The failed attempt to take over a stewardship model here in the 1950s and the failure of the church growth euphoria of the 1980s and 1990s (failure, that is, if one discounts those cases in which attendance at services or parish group meetings in one parish of a “provincial” church grew strongly because they attracted like-minded people from other neighbouring parishes) should be warnings to us. I also dare to make the prediction that it will not prove possible to simply copy the “fresh expressions” movement under German conditions.

My thesis is precisely that we cannot progress *without first taking the trouble to produce studies of our own parishes in our own provincial churches*. Looking at Congregational Studies worldwide will not be of any great use if it leads us to draw premature conclusions with regard to what German parishes and congregations ought to be doing better. It will be of much greater use if it helps my own discipline of Practical Theology to further clarify what it is we ought to be researching into in relation to our parishes.

So: I have focused first and foremost on my desiderata, and in addition I have warned against too much impatient euphoria with regard to international Congregational Studies. And we, as representatives of Practical Theology in Germany, should also confess that with regard to the neglect of Congregational Studies we are not only the victims of circumstances, but also equally part of the problem. And we will remain part of the problem if we allow involvement with Congregational Studies either to become

the battle-cry of a free-church-orientated camp within Practical Theology, or else to be restricted to a grand coalition embracing the fans of “fresh expressions” and the defenders of the local parish against extra-parochial or supra-parochial church work. And however much the works of Bernhard Petry (2001) and above all of Herbert Lindner (1994; Linder/Herpich 2010) on the organizational structure and organizational behaviour of local parishes may have depicted a new innovative ideal, they nevertheless seem to be too much in the thrall of a further ecclesiological camp, namely one whose ideal is the church as a programmatic organization resembling a not-for-profit enterprise.

To conclude I must add *something constructive*. The following remarks of mine are no more than pointers to individual observations in relation to German Congregational Studies. In making them, I am simply drawing on a small number – and thus of course on a very limited range – of perceptions that seem to me to be interesting and which represent the outcome of a little study I was myself responsible for, and which one might regard as belonging to the field of Congregational Studies. It was concerned with investigating changes in the nature of the church in rural areas, or, more precisely, in peripheral rural areas (Hauschildt/Heinemann 2016). The research design that I chose in this case was deductively orientated: the starting points were the theory of the church as a hybrid organization and the ideas appearing in contemporary literature about new models for the church in rural areas. For each of the dozen types of parish whose structures we defined, only one individual parish was visited as an example, and just one interview each, following a predetermined line, was conducted firstly with a group of members of the parochial church council and secondly with the responsible parish leader, in most cases, though not always, the pastor.

The clearest conclusion that we came to was the finding that *rural parishes have things to teach us that it is worth our while to take note of*. For they are not, as is often supposed, places where an outdated idyllic past has been preserved and upheld, but are, along with the inner-city parishes, places where particularly radical changes (in response to reductions in the numbers of paid staff) are taking place, changes which demonstrate something of what the challenges of the future will be, and of the attempts that are being made to get to grips with them.

I will just briefly mention four further aspects, and condense them to provisional theses.

The first two are encouraging in their nature:

- The *roles of and the interplay between paid and volunteer staff* are changing, and such changes are perfectly possible.
- It is *not so much the quantity as the quality of meetings and assemblies* within the parish that is important.

Thinning out the frequency of assemblies is not without risk, but could be less damaging than is generally assumed.

The other two theses are of a critical nature:

- There was one example showing how anti-parochial theology (in this case evangelical in nature) can damage the local community as it actually exists and become a self-fulfilling prophecy.
- In more than one case in which structural changes had been introduced it was apparent that *ill-considered actions on the part of the church authorities* giving clergy a combination of tasks to perform (e.g. a half-time job in a village parish combined with a half-time position as a teacher at a church school) had left pastors feeling completely out on their own and falling between all the stools to such an extent that it was simply impossible for the measures to function as intended.

My impression is that we in Germany are still more or less at the beginning of things with regard to many aspects of Congregational Studies. There are a number of items of German-language research that were published in obscure places in the past and have been forgotten, and which need to be brought to light and reviewed. But above all, it is both necessary and stimulating to take a look over the garden fence, to look beyond the German-speaking countries. I am looking forward very much to the two days we have before us.

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# Understanding the Dynamics of Congregational Life

Henk de Roest

In *Religion in der Moderne: Ein internationaler Vergleich*, published last year, sociologists of religion, Detlef Pollack and Gergely Rosta, select three dimensions in order to cover the territory of individual religiosity, namely the “dimension of identification/belonging”, the “dimension of practices” and the “dimension of beliefs and experiences”. They then distinguish different variables or indicators by which they can capture these dimensions through empirical methods, indicators like membership, entrance and exit rates, trust in churches, etc. for the dimension of belonging; indicators like churchgoing, participation in congregational life, prayer practice, baptisms, weddings and funerals for the dimension of ritual practices; indicators like belief in God, afterlife, heaven, reincarnation and experiences of Gods proximity and the relevance of religion for one’s everyday life, for the dimension of religious beliefs and experiences. Surveys, usually with 1000–1500 respondents, are considered the primary sources of data. Now the ambition of the authors is to grasp religiosity, and in particular they want to *understand* and, what is more, *explain* the weakening of religious and ecclesial ties in modern societies and the transformation, if there is such a transformation, of the religious landscape, that is the presumed growing interest in new forms of spirituality. My question is: what can we learn from studies like these about the dynamics of congregational life? My preliminary answer is, in the past decades, by using a wide and increasingly wider array of methods, quantitative and qualitative, we actually have learned quite a lot. Yet, survey studies alone are not enough to do justice to the dynamics of congregational life, that is to the decline of congregations, their growth, development and a wide range of congregational phenomena. Today, in four points, I will make my case.

*First*, surveys, using questionnaires, sampling techniques, scale constructions and statistics are important for the research of congregations. In the exploration of congregational life, a quantitative lens is essential. This lens can investigate the influence of developments in society and culture on the congregation, as well as what is happening within a congregation. Within a quantitative framework, questions such as *How much?* or *How strong?* are relevant and surveys and statistical analysis based upon them also allow for correlational explanations, by enabling one to affirm or reject assumptions, that are formulated as hypotheses.

For example, in order to understand processes of church closures in the Netherlands, the intended outcome being a manual for guiding congregations in the process of closing down a church, I found that changes in the demographic makeup of a residential area, the ecology of a congregation as Nancy

Ammerman would put it, influence both the material and human resources of a congregation and diminishing resources are a major reason for closing a church. It is not that church closures are caused by demographic changes alone, but they do constitute an important factor. Statistics clarify what is taking place in the life of congregants, in the background, so to speak. The dynamic of spatial planning may lead to a changing urban ecology. Some ecologies are full of potential for churches, such as those with many new housing estates, young parents and children, an influx of migrants, but it is not difficult to conceive of ecologies that offer hardly any opportunities for churches to develop and grow (Bisseling et al. 2011; Brouwer 2009). The context influences congregational life.

An example of using quantitative methods to study what is happening in or related to congregations, is an explorative questionnaire study that we did among participants of a congregational event, the Long Night of the Churches (German: “Lange Nacht der Kirchen”, Dutch: “Kerkennacht”). We wanted to know what the participants, churchgoers and non-churchgoers experienced. We found that a very large majority of the respondents indicated that they experienced the Long Night of the Churches to be a qualitatively different phenomenon from other festivals (e.g., a museum night or music festival) and that for both churchgoers and non-churchgoers *shared bonding* experiences (e.g., a special feeling of connectedness, contact with a higher spirit, together with unknown people) are what makes activities at the Night of the Churches unique (De Boer/De Roest 2016).

A third example of a relevant survey is a research project on divorce and its effects upon participation in organized religion. It was demonstrated, first, that young adults whose parents have divorced are less likely than their peers to become involved in organized religion and, second, that two-thirds of people who were involved in a church at the time of their parents’ divorce report that no one from their faith community reached out to them (Marquardt 2015; Osmer 2012: 237). Osmer argues that there are compelling grounds, both theological and empirical, for American mainline congregations to view both intact and divorced families as a central part of their mission (Osmer 2012: 238) with programs targeting the needs of families through different stages of life and with counselling centres offering healing and support to members of divorced families.

In general, nation-wide surveys and congregational questionnaires can provide a comprehensive description of the functioning of a congregation. An analysis of the membership may for example indicate that many congregations are continuously declining and aging. It may also reveal that membership expectations of a church hardly change over time. They are extraordinarily stable when it comes to pastoral care and taking care of people in need (Hermelink 2006: 426). Surprisingly, analysis may also demonstrate that children are important in order to strengthen ecclesial ties. According to Pollack and Rosta, it is simply wrong to state that subjective religiosity flourishes when the distance to the institutional church is large (Pollack/Rosta 2015: 235). Faith, they assert, is most vivid in a community with others, in common ritual

practices, in contact with like-minded people and, they add, the family is the most important mediating instance or interface between an individual and the church. Children that attend for example *Krabbelgottesdienste*, *Mutter-Kind-Kreise* and *Kinderstunden* bring parents into the church (idem 237).

Quantitative research can also be used to assess the vitality of a congregation. Starting in 1991 in Australia with almost 7000 congregations, the *National Church Life Survey* (NCLS), an international survey among denominations and congregations, has given voice to congregational members.<sup>1</sup> Such a survey provides information about the understanding of congregational life, in particular its strengths and weaknesses, from an attender's perspective. The format of this survey has also been applied in the USA (Woolever/Bruce 2010). Data of other churches on their strengths are used as a point of comparison and reference. It may turn out, for example, that the empowerment of leadership in a congregation needs improvement or that the *Gottesdienst* offers some opportunities for enriching one's faith, but that small groups are more important for congregants in that respect.

*Second*, the value of quantitative studies for congregational research is important but severely limited, particularly if these studies distance themselves from qualitative studies. An example is the book by Pollack and Rosta. Although they wish to reconstruct the world- and self-understanding of those who are acting in the field, not as an end in itself but as a starting point for sociological analysis, and since, therefore, they want to allow qualitative research to play an important role, to my astonishment, qualitative approaches are described in pejorative language ("often not reliable", "not representative", "not value free", "cannot be checked by peers"). Consequently, a desire to understand the internal dynamics, not only of congregations but also of religious practices and lived religion in a broad sense, is virtually absent. This is confirmed by absent references. We do not find any references to American sociologists like Nancy Ammerman, for example, with her book about spiritual tribes. Also all practical theologians, engaged in empirical research, are absent. There are no references to the work of Johannes van der Ven and Leslie Francis; scholars like Hans-Günter Heimbrock, Jan Hermelink, Wilhelm Gräß, Uta Pohl-Patalong, Friedrich Schweitzer, Ralph Kunz, Thomas Schlag, Birgit Weyel and Eberhard Hauschildt are missing. Zooming out, I see hardly any influential psychologists of religion, like Tatjana Schnell, Ralph Hood or Kenneth Pargament. New and promising approaches in the research of religion in modernity, like the material approach of Birgit Meyer and others, are also neglected. In my view, all these researchers contribute to a better understanding of religious practices, both within and outside ecclesial contexts. Methods that are drawn from, for example, participatory action research, appreciative inquiry and ethnography, including visual ethnography, are essential for understanding congregational practices, be it

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1 Kaldor/Powell et al. 1995; see also: [www.ncls.org.au](http://www.ncls.org.au).

ritual practices or practices of policy making, strategic leadership, practices of care, practices of Christian education and practices in which the making and reception of meaning is taking place. So, a drive to produce overarching theories may distance sociological research from the reality of the situation “on the ground”, especially if it favours insights from the quantitative family.

*Third*, in the past decades, practical theologians in Western Europe and the USA, but also some sociologists of religion and cultural anthropologists have searched for and applied research methods that do justice to the internal movements and patterns of behaviours and relationships “from the inside”. We are impressed by the enthusiasm with which new creative methods are developed and embraced. In 1998 Nancy Ammerman perceived local faith communities as the comprehensive configuration of four perspectives: *context/ecology*, human and material *resources*, *process* (including decision making), and *culture* (the distinct ways of being together and seeing the world) (Ammerman et al. 1998). The nature and essence of congregations can be grasped by empirical research through the use of these perspectives as analytical tools and they have been applied in different research projects and also connected to the life-cycle of a congregation (Brouwer et al. 2007). Today, congregations are examined holistically using multiple research methods. The methodology leans upon tested ways of conducting social research and they all fall into descriptive and interpretive categories (Nieman 2012). We want to know what is going on in congregations and why this is going on. Statistical information and surveys are still being used, but most descriptive tools are at the qualitative end of the spectrum. Practices are looked at in a detailed, fine-grained way. Also the role of ordinary theology or ordinary ecclesiology and how faith informs practices, is being acknowledged. Researchers can be interpreters of a community’s faith in action. Nevertheless, I want to add that the nature of a problem in a congregation should dictate the choice of method (cf. Wellington/Sczerbinski 2007). We should choose the methods that our questions require, and in most cases a mixed or multi-moment method is to be preferred. Clarity about the purpose of a project will inform the decision about research strategy and plan (Oster 2008: 48). Therefore, there are methods and rules of investigation for understanding the life of congregations that are more appropriate to this field of inquiry than others. In the field of congregational studies – the name originates from a working group of American scholars in 1979 that is still active – apart from surveys and interviews (Ammerman 1997), these methods have increasingly included detailed ethnographic studies, involving long term participant observation. In 1987 in the USA a “symbolic” or “cultural” approach was advocated by James Hopewell, which arose from his observation about how “astonishingly thick and meaning laden is the actual life of a single local church” (Hopewell 1987: 3). He advocated digging down beneath the surface of congregational life to uncover the symbolic meanings of group practices. In the last fifteen years a deeper awareness has grown of how adherents are involved in congregations, making it hard to say what its boundaries are (Nieman 2012: 135). Although congregations remain intentional, potent channels for faithful practices,

these practices can also take place outside structured gatherings. Ammerman and Roman Williams have explored the ways in which ordinary people practice and experience religion (or not) across the domains of everyday life (Ammerman/Williams 2012). In Ammerman and Williams' research we see how visual methods provide a unique contribution and potential for understanding people's perspectives. In his most recent project Williams asks research participants to use personal mobile devices or digital cameras to photograph congregational contexts and community concerns. These images are then used in in-depth interviews, in which they function as trigger or conversation starter, in small group discussions, and they are displayed publicly "to engage communities of faith in the process of self-evaluation, dialogue, and change" (Williams 2016). In my own research on church closure I asked active churchgoers to select pictures from a pile of pictures of the life of the congregation and provide comments to them, the question being what they would miss most when the church closed down (De Roest 2013). According to Helen Cameron and Clare Watkins, in their study *Talking about God in Practice*, congregational studies require a conversational approach right from the start (Cameron/Watkins 2010). In my evaluation, their plea for methods, which belong to a view of a congregation as "emergent" in relational processes, resonates with what has been labelled the *relational constructionist* approach in organizational psychology as advocated by Diane Marie Hosking and others. In this approach, actors are considered part of – rather than apart from – reality constructions and language is seen to construct social realities (Hosking 2001). Williams' approach, Cameron's, and also my own approach, are interested in the interactions, shared value systems, operant and espoused theologies and dynamics of religious socialization and participation that constitute the "micro" level of everyday congregational life in local urban or rural contexts.

*Fourth*, I zoom in, for somewhat longer, on a specific research project. At our university we did research on the consequences of sexual abuse in pastoral relationships for the relationship of the primary victims (all female) to the religious congregations of which they were members (for the following cf. van Den Berg-Seifert 2015). Although churches have dealt better with abuse (protocols; discourse about power) in the last decade, this does not mean that people who have experienced sexual boundary transgression in a pastoral relationship are now able to stay in a congregation. In order to better understand the processes in the religious congregations and also to develop strategies for action, we asked primary victims of clergy sexual misconduct about how they experienced their relationship to their religious congregation through time. The aim of the study was to describe the relational dynamics from the victims' perspective and to evaluate the implications they have for congregational life. The methodology that we applied in the study can be labelled a narrative-dialogical approach, resembling a form of action research. The study was "narrative" because of its focus on the narrative character of the empirical material and the way the analysis and presentation was done. It was dialogical in particular because of the important role conversations played in it. We enabled participants who so desired to actively take part in carrying

out the study. Offering the opportunity to actively participate proved adequate for two reasons. This way, people who had experienced a harmful objectification in the past could now, to a certain degree, determine themselves what role they wanted to play and, furthermore, the participants' reflections were important not only as information, they also contributed to the analysis in a significant manner. I wish to highlight three results. First, we found that the relational dynamics can be fully understood only when the preceding story has been told, the story of the boundary transgression itself. Second, a sub-question about relational ties in the participants' constructions could be narrowed down to the responsibilities which primary victims experience. A contextual approach, based on family therapist Boszormenyi-Nagy, allowed us to take into account the role of loyalties and responsibilities in the congregation dynamics. Looking at the terminology, we now speak of "people who experienced boundary transgression in a pastoral relationship," to indicate that the boundary transgression – no matter how overwhelming it may be at times – is only one aspect of people's lives. Third, we drew a spatial sketch of the congregation dynamics, comparing the congregation with a complicated network. We observed that participants often seem to reduce the complex relational dynamics of this network to a one-dimensional movement toward the centre or toward the margin of the congregation. Therefore, we looked at the varying positioning (also over time!) that we encountered in the interview material. We observed that survivors do not want the boundary transgression to be seen exclusively at an individual level, as if it were not a problem of the congregation as a whole. We also observed how they sought to regain control over their own lives by actively positioning themselves. In the end, however, all the participants in the study have left the congregation in which the boundary transgression took place. In their narratives, there is a clearly negative correlation between the positions of the transgressing pastor and the affected congregation member. Where the one is, the other can't be any longer.

*Finally*, what can we learn about the dynamics of congregational life? Well, it is the practitioners, i.e. ministers and lay-persons, chaplains and congregants, and future pastors like theology students, but not necessarily restricted to them, who should be able to benefit from the insights gained by congregational studies. Here we emphasize the notion of valorisation. After the "ethnographic turn", the question of how sources (of knowledge) for ecclesial reflection should be prioritized gathers traction because of the engagement with formal theological disciplines, e.g., systematic ecclesiology, but also because of the necessity to be relevant for practitioners, professionals and lay-persons, acting in the "ecclesial domain". Nowadays research assessment panels put a strong emphasis on *knowledge valorisation*, the transfer of knowledge resulting from basic and applied research to other parties. A reappraisal of research that contributes to wider society is evident. It is popular in university policy and rightly so. Valorisation can be seen as a complex and, with emphasis, *interactive* process in which knowledge is made available, and in which interaction between research institutes and practitioners is crucial. In today's society, the flourish-

ing of individuals, companies and regions derives more than ever from the ability to develop and exploit knowledge and, in relation to congregational studies, the same may be said of congregations and new and emerging ecclesial communities. This change of direction is good news for congregational studies, especially if research questions stem from the concerns and experiences of practitioners, both pastors and the faithful. Studies can be “occasioned” by the issues of a congregation or wider parish, enabling congregants, in different degrees of commitment to a congregation, not only to become research participants, instead of (articles and reports-reading) research recipients, but also to become implementers precisely through participating.

From the aforementioned research project we have learned that safety turns out to be a central factor when it comes to the question of whether abused people can remain in their congregation. The clearer the sexual or sexualized contact is understood as abuse, the more favourable the congregation dynamic is for the primary victims. We also observed that what has an excluding effect need not have been meant to be excluding. The congregation members’ wish to move forward and leave the unpleasant abuse story behind has an excluding effect. But also what is meant as help can be excluding. Some of the participants in the study have experienced that help from outside the congregation which was not complemented by help from the congregation itself contributed to their isolation, because people from the congregation no longer felt responsible for the victims. People who experienced misconduct need people from within the congregation who support them and stand up for them. It turned out that our research, precisely for this reason, in a performative way, had this beneficial effect (van Den Berg-Seifert 2015).

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## American Congregations: How Different Are We?

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Congregations have long been identified as a ubiquitous part of the American social and political landscape, and also as distinctively American. The diverse and voluntary character of American religious life has resulted in a profusion of local faith communities that seem to defy predictions about religious decline. This typical American form of religious organizing is what Stephen Warner dubbed “de facto congregationalism” (Warner 1994), and it was one of the reasons he doubted the ability of a European paradigm to explain our religious life. People from all sorts of religious traditions (without a sacred canopy) voluntarily organize religious groups and expect to have a say in how things run. The congregations they form, in turn, provide protected spaces in which traditions are preserved and marginalized voices are heard. If he is right that the European paradigm does not fit the U.S., should we be just as wary of using a U.S. paradigm to study the rest of the world?

It is perhaps no accident that a lively sociological interest in congregations emerged in the U.S. first, followed soon thereafter by work in the UK. That interest was noteworthy nonetheless, because neither theologians nor social scientists in the middle of the twentieth century saw religious organizations – especially the local congregation – as worthy of attention. Theologians were likely to see local churches as a problem standing in the way of theological and social progress. Social scientists were likely to assume that nothing of significance was happening under the banner of religion. In sociology, the emergence of attention to congregations came as predictions of secularization waned and studying religion became more plausible. In addition, a renewal of the study of organizations created a new disciplinary locus for much of the work that would follow.

Turning to this new object of study, we immediately recognized the enormous variety of beliefs, practice, size and organizational complexity. Could we really use one category to study a storefront Pentecostal church, a suburban mosque, a downtown cathedral and a Reconstructionist Jewish minyan? It may well have been a result of the Protestant heritage of the early scholars in this field, but the term that has come to encompass those disparate religious forms is “congregation.” In spite of the different ways that category is used in different religious traditions, it has become the term of choice for local religious gatherings.

Organizationally and analytically, there are good reasons for this development. Each of these “congregations” is a local multi-purpose religious gathering. And each responds to U.S. cultural expectations that shape what they do and how we see them – regular weekend gatherings for worship, programs for

children, a recognized religious leader in charge. In addition, the law treats them in similar ways – tax exempt property, recognition of the power of the leaders to conduct weddings or to serve as chaplains, and the like.

The study of “congregations,” that is, has come to embrace a category of religious organizations, even where these might not use the term for themselves. We have used that common term in spite of its various theological pedigrees because these organizations are seen as sharing common functions and forms. They are, in other words, shaped by “institutional isomorphism,” a process that treats organizations with similar functions and similar external cultural and regulatory pressures as occupying a “field” (DiMaggio and Powell 1983). Researchers in Europe are also routinely using a functional equivalent of “congregation” (Krech 2009), and one of the tasks of this conference and of my talk is to ask whether and how that fits. What I want to do in this presentation is to think with you about how the religious organizational field is shaped differently by the cultural and regulatory pressures that distinguish the U.S. from other places in the world; while at the same time, I will suggest that the analytical questions that have been developed by students of American congregations may still be useful for understanding congregational life in widely different cultural contexts.

## 1. The Cultural and Regulatory Contexts

Two critical research questions are raised when we place the U.S. in comparison with Europe, questions that can inform research as it moves into other parts of the world as well. The first has to do with the regulatory context (which also shapes the resource environment), and the second has to do with the cultural context. That is, what forms of religious organizing are permitted and supported? And what sorts of religious organizing are expected by and are integral to the culture?

In spite of the fact that American researchers tend to lump all of Europe together as characterized by “monopoly” in comparison to the U.S. “free market” of religion, there is, of course, enormous variation, variation that I will not be able to cover in full.<sup>1</sup> Rather, let me suggest some of the key complexities that need to be taken into account. I will take as a perhaps controversial starting place the notion that at one point in history, European territories were marked by *Cuius regio, eius religio*. While that never meant that

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1 On the European religious situation, see Davie, Grace. 2000. *Religion in Modern Europe: A Memory Mutates*. Oxford.

every citizen shared the approved doctrine and practice of the realm, it has nevertheless left an imprint on the landscape and culture that is distinct from the American experience. Our closest equivalent may be the Congregational meeting houses that sit at the centre of nearly every New England town green.

In the U.S. experience, that Congregationalist legal establishment ended in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, with significant diversity already present and the national constitution setting “free exercise” as part of the country’s essential heritage. No state agency approves the establishment of a new congregation, and no state agency provides it with any direct support. It is not utterly unregulated. It will have to comply with zoning and other local laws, and more esoteric practices (smoking peyote or animal sacrifice, for instance) may be outlawed. But congregations in the U.S. are remarkably free to establish themselves, to seek members, to regulate their own activities (within the limits of whatever *religious* authority they themselves recognize), and to participate in public life to whatever extent they choose. In understanding congregational life, internal explanations based on the congregation’s own culture and structure outweigh external ones based on what others permit.

In the European context, there are much more serious regulatory questions to be asked, even in the absence of the fully-fledged established churches of old. For instance:

- How long ago were the legal ties between a particular church and the state broken? How was that battle defined, and what were the competing communal identities and structures? Was the church vehemently rejected, outlawed, or just slowly deprived of full tax support?
- What was put in its place? A disestablishment of all forms of religion or a limited establishment of some? A plural establishment leaves in place expectations about legitimacy and support from the state, while introducing a measure of individual choice. A full disestablishment makes both legitimacy and support a matter of open and voluntary choices.
- What forms of support are in place – for none, some, or all congregations? Who pays for buildings, schools, clergy and the like? With devolution, even well-supported state churches may no longer be able to depend on support from the taxpayers (Davie 2000).
- What are the opportunities and barriers for religious groups that fall outside the bounds of customary law and tradition? Even if there are legal openings, the cultural and structural definitions may still make organizing difficult. Because Italy requires that legal agreements must be made with a central religious authority, internally diverse traditions such as Islam have trouble negotiating whatever local disputes may arise (Mantovan 2010).

Taking such questions into account, Monnot and Stolz's (2014) survey of congregations in Switzerland is especially useful for illustrating what difference this history makes. They find that about half of Swiss congregations are associated with the Catholic and Reformed "recognized" churches in Switzerland. Another quarter – many more than their proportion of the population might predict – are non-establishment Christian congregations, often evangelicals of various sorts. About 20% are non-Christian, but nevertheless organizing in recognizable congregational form. And the small remaining proportion are non-Christian and gather in more informal networks. Not surprisingly, the recognized churches are much more likely to own their own, often historic, building, have a much larger budget and a paid full-time spiritual leader, and have a membership roll many times the size of the membership in other congregations. Average weekly attendance, however, is roughly equivalent across the three congregational forms. The community that gathers to worship is perhaps less determined by structural questions of budget, building and personnel; but their resulting presence in the larger community may be very different. Even with fewer regular participants, the established churches can still have a large local impact through their trained professional clergy, their large central meeting spaces and their historic legitimacy. They may also be able to depend on the culture and the schools to do much of their religious education for them.

Throughout Europe, then, there are both implicit and explicit supports for some religious groups that do not exist for others. How those groups organize, what activities they undertake, and how members support those activities are shaped by each country's variation on this set of regulatory questions.

In the U.S., there are implicit and explicit supports, as well, although they tend to be spread fairly evenly across a very diverse set of religious traditions. As newcomers have arrived, they have adapted to the basics of the congregational form and largely been adopted into the system of legal protections and expectations. Ours is not a completely unregulated religious market, but the boundaries are very broad. The differences we find in budget or building ownership or expenditure on religious education bear only a faint relationship to whatever established status a congregation may once have had.

But what about the rest of the world? Does either the U.S. or the European model help us think about the role of congregations in places where religions may have very different forms and histories? As many religious studies' scholars have noted in recent years, the very notion of having a distinct "religious" institutional sector is not common in much of the world. When religious belief and practice is simply interwoven in the fabric of everyday life, it makes little sense to speak of a "congregation." In dominantly-Muslim contexts, worship, learning and community caring happen across multiple religious sites, sites that are rarely thought of as voluntary multi-purpose membership organizations. And in many Asian contexts, attachment to a shrine or pilgrimage site never takes on the character of a face-to-face community. Clearly a great deal of the world's religion happens without benefit of congregations.

Yet no corner of the earth is utterly devoid of congregational gatherings, at least in part because Christians have travelled across the globe and brought this way of organizing with them. Witness the way congregationally-organized Pentecostal gatherings have ensconced themselves in the indigenous religious life of cultures across the globe (Droogers 2001). Throughout Africa, for example, Pentecostal and African Indigenous churches are robust and enduring forms of association that often outlive the attempts of NGOs to “organize” a community (Freeman 2012).

The spread of congregational forms may also be attributed in part to the fact that migrants of all sorts find congregations to be the most obviously practical way of gathering in a new land (Baumann 2009; Ketola et al. 2014; Warner 1998). Whether Christian or something else, the regulatory context of these congregational gatherings varies enormously, but always matters. They may be completely underground or proliferating on every block as each new preacher or prophet gathers a flock. The “red, black, and gray markets” for religion that Yang (2006) describes in China alert us to the reality that congregations of all sorts, in every part of the world, must deal with legal and customary rules for what they are and are not permitted to do. What seems likely, however, is that the grassroots flexibility of the congregational form may make its way into law and culture in many places where it has not been the norm.

All congregations, immigrant and not, must deal with the way their host culture does or does not support what they do. The resources of a congregation are not just dependent on state subsidies; they are also dependent on the legitimacy they can command and the volunteer energy they can garner. Even legally-permitted religious groups may not be widely seen as worth joining, and voluntary religious systems can open the door to non-participation just as easily as to participation. That is, every congregation must be understood in terms of the opportunities and constraints present in both the legal system and the culture. In France or Sweden, the non-religious culture may be a far larger barrier to congregational thriving than is any legal or financial disincentive.

## 2. Inside the Congregations

Having taken those macro-contextual factors into account, it is clear that congregations will vary in their structure and their role in society, whether the comparison is between the U.S. and Europe or across any other set of cultural contexts. That very large caveat, however, does not mean that the internal social processes in those congregations must be analysed using utterly different tools. What I want to suggest in the remainder of this talk is how we might use common analytical tools to understand the congregations we find, even in very different contexts. In fact, I want to argue that we have not really understood the

role congregations might play in a society if we only know the facts of their budgets and buildings. Each particular group will take those basic structural ingredients and use them in distinct ways.

## 2.1 Congregational Cultures

Much of my own work in congregational studies has emphasized the social processes of culture production (see also Wuthnow 1994). In *Studying Congregations*, I wrote, “Each gathering of people creates its own ways of doing things, its own ways of describing the world, its own tools and artefacts that produce its distinctive appearance.... Culture is who we are and the world we have created to live in. It is the predictable patterns of who does what and habitual strategies for telling the world about the things held most dear” (Ammerman 1998:78). However much a larger religious tradition may prescribe patterns of worship and decision-making, and a particular legal milieu may shape the way they gather, each local group will put its own stamp on prescribed patterns. Some larger tradition may provide a rich store of symbols and rituals, but each congregation uses those symbols in its own way and adds its own array of material, social and theological “products” to the mix.

I have suggested that it may be useful in analyzing a congregation’s internal culture to pay attention to its activities, its artefacts, and its accounts. That is, what do they do together? What material things and spaces do they make? And how do they give accounts of who they are, why they do what they do, and the role of divine or spiritual actors in the drama? No matter how modest or how grand the congregation, their collective gatherings will produce these cultural markers.

### 2.1.1 Activities

Each group will gather to do things together. They will almost certainly have some sort of worship service, and they will put their own stamp on the mix of music, preaching, praying and participation. Paying attention to that mix is a vital part of understanding the religious culture that is shaping and shaped by these worshippers. They will also almost certainly pay some attention to passing along that culture to children and newcomers. What they do and how intentionally they do it is another critical component in understanding the organizational vitality of a congregation. It is also a measure of the degree to which they assume themselves to be in harmony with the larger culture and its own educational systems.

The activities we often call “fellowship” are also likely to vary significantly depending on how much a part of the dominant culture a group understands itself to be. If there is little to distinguish the bonds inside a religious community from those present in the larger community, there is little reason for that congregation to spend organizational energy on socializing. When it does, the gatherings are as likely to be civic festivals as congregational picnics. Whether in Europe or in the U.S., however, when a group perceives itself to be on the margins, “bonding” in congregation-based social activities is very likely.

The presence of congregation-based charitable and proselytizing activities is also dependent on both the cultural context and the theological tradition. In some places there is a large place for religious organizations as part of the welfare safety net, and congregations are actively involved in mobilizing their human and material resources for the cause. In some traditions, no matter the context, evangelizing or serving the poor are religious mandates. We should always ask questions about congregational outreach activities, but recognize the degree to which the answer may depend on both contextual and theological factors.

### *2.1.2 Artefacts*

Congregational culture is, then, patterns of collective activity. But it is also characterized by material and spatial constructions. Congregations define and inhabit their space in ways that speak to what is important to them. Historic buildings and art are obvious cultural artefacts, but even the most impoverished congregation will use the resources it has to arrange and decorate the space it can afford. Congregations also find and use the necessary tools for doing their collective work, whether they are sacred vessels for sacraments or computers for multimedia presentations. The leaders and participants also establish norms for how each should dress for the occasion, with clothing forming another dimension of the material culture they inhabit. When we seek to understand a congregation, the tools of material cultural analysis are critical to our task – no matter where the congregation is located.

### *2.1.3 Accounts*

Congregations also create “accounts” – not just their financial bookkeeping, but their ways of narrating who they are. They create accounts that explain why they do what they do. They tell the stories of their tradition and of their own history. Sometimes these are grand cosmic myths; sometimes they are anecdotes about the flowers in the dooryard. Sometimes they are preserved in officially produced histories; more often they can be collected from the memories of the participants. Sometimes they may reflect a clear and coherent theological system; but just as often they may reflect the particular collection of values that have come to characterize this particular religious community. The difference between clear theologies and ad hoc ones may be as much a matter of a recent disruption in the congregation’s life as of the adequacy of the pastor’s theological teaching. As Ann Swidler (1986) pointed out, ideas often become most salient in a culture when habitual patterns of interaction have been disturbed and new ones have to be deployed – when we have to give an account of why we do what we do.

Along with activities and artefacts, accounts form the categories we can use when we approach a congregation and wish to analyse the organizational culture it has created. The particular combination of cultural elements will vary from one place to the next, but understanding congregational life will always mean paying attention to the fact that congregations create cultures.

When they do all of this, of course, we cannot ignore the fact that they reflect more than just their religious tradition's prescribed ways or even their own local inventions. Every group also brings with them the particular ethnic traditions and social class preferences that define them beyond the congregation. The language they speak, the food they share and the musical styles they prefer are situated in a larger cultural order of which each congregation is a part.

This is one of the places where the American system of voluntary organizing may exaggerate divisions that are less pronounced when congregations are not left to their own homophilic devices. Even in the U.S., Catholic parishes, organized by geography, are somewhat less identifiable by social class, for instance, than are Protestant gatherings that may be specialized niches that draw like-minded people from across a wide region. Even Catholic parishes, however, are very likely to have distinct ethnic, racial and language communities within them. No matter what the religious tradition or location, people who gather will bring elements of their larger community culture with them into the congregations they form.

## 2.2 Congregational Ecologies

We have already noted the impact of macro-contexts on congregational life, but it is also important to pay attention to the micro-context. Faith communities gather in particular places and are always in relationship to those places. Truly neighbourhood or town congregations are likely to have routine relationships with schools and businesses and local government, for instance. They may be the site for community gatherings in times of distress or celebration. There may, in other words, be a very permeable boundary between the congregation and the community of which it is a part. Congregations in the established churches are also likely to have a strong neighbourhood population, while the less established religious groups may look more like American congregations in their geographic dispersion.

In fact, the picture of a single congregation related to a single place is increasingly anachronistic even in places that seem to have established religions. Their parish churches may not be the only faith community in a given place. That means that understanding the micro-context involves mapping the community, including the other congregations, service organizations and public agencies in the territory. It means mapping the residential patterns of the participants. It means asking about the religious offerings competing for attention and the geographic, communications and transportation systems that make them accessible and visible. The American habit of thinking "ecologically" about a congregation is not utterly out of place in other parts of the world.

The study of micro-context, then, can be thought of as combining geographic, organizational and demographic questions about the place of a given congregation. We might ask, for instance:

- What mental maps define congregational boundaries for those who currently attend, and what are the demographic, historical and cultural characteristics that define those maps? How do they compare with the official community and religious maps?
- What is the functioning “catchment area” from which the congregation draws participants? And to which is it related as a service provider?
- What other religious organizations (congregations and others) exist in that catchment area?
- What defines this congregation’s “niche” in the catchment area? That is, what is religiously and culturally distinctive, drawing people to it? And what resources does it uniquely contribute to the wellbeing of the area?

An ecological approach to congregational life also calls for attention to the larger cultural and organizational context. The presence of immigrants in a neighbourhood happens because there are larger economic and political forces at work, and understanding congregational life means paying attention to those forces. The existence of congregations that are informally identified with particular populations (gay Catholics, “social justice” Lutherans and the like) happens in the context of larger cultural and institutional forces that identify such populations and sustain niches in which they thrive.

Taking an ecological approach also draws attention to resources of all kinds. Congregations need “fuel” to get things done. They need people to do the work and participate, money to pay the bills, and the means to be visible and communicate their message. As we have noted, those resources can come from outside sources, such as tax revenue, and disparities in available resources will be present across a religious ecology. Just as plants and animals thrive or perish based on their ability to find resources and adapt to what they find, so congregations thrive or perish based in part on the available resources of people, money, infrastructure and legitimacy. When any of these is in short supply, competition may ensue. When the nature of any of them changes, it is the adaptive group that may thrive.

### 2.3 Power, Leadership and Authority

Converting a resource into action, however, requires power, and the many ways in which power is generated and used in congregations have been another focus of congregational study in the U.S. Carl Dudley, one of the pioneers in the revival of congregational studies, talked about the importance of understanding “process” (Carroll, Dudley and McKinney 1986). Included in that, for him, was a wide range of cultural and organizational factors, all affecting how a congregation “does things.” My own sociological

framework draws on the work of Rosabeth Kanter in the study of organizational leadership (Kanter et al. 1992). She defines power as the ability to get things done, and points out that leadership is a matter of mobilizing the people, resources and motivation to pursue an organization's goals. Leaders must communicate, persuade, connect and empower so that work otherwise impossible gets done.

Understanding congregations in Europe and elsewhere, no less than in the U.S., means understanding how leadership is being exercised. What forms of communication and persuasion are being exercised? How are connections and coalitions being built? How are participants being empowered and their skills being mobilized? It also means understanding the organizational culture that shapes these processes. There will be cultural expectations about how meetings run, ideas about the meaning of money and responsibility for it, patterns for how innovations originate and come to fruition, and norms for how disagreement is handled.

Understanding congregational leadership also means taking fully into account the way the religious tradition's authority is understood and exercised in each place. The foundation of authority is the legitimacy granted to that authority by those who live in relationship to it. When religious authorities can claim that legitimacy, they are also able to exercise a moral leadership based on shared commitments to a power beyond themselves. When the traditions and symbols of a religious tradition are in the hands of such trusted authorities, they can be significant sources of power for accomplishing all the kinds of work in which a congregation is engaged.

### 3. How Different are We?

Wherever we find them, local multi-purpose religious gatherings will exist in a context that is shaped by their particular cultural and legal heritage. Much of what we have assumed in the study of congregational life has originated in a cultural and legal context where voluntary religious organizing, free individual choice and vibrant religious cultural presence are the norm. We are indeed different.

Those differences, however, provide a fruitful platform from which to identify the kinds of questions that should inform the study of congregations in whatever context it happens. We should attend carefully to the history of religious diversity and religious regulation that shapes what is possible and expected. We should attend carefully, as well, to the direct and indirect support any given group can expect from the state or other resources beyond its own members.

Beyond that macro context, we can also attend carefully to the organizational culture that makes each group distinctive, looking for the mix of prescribed theological elements, ethnic and social class

traditions and local history that shape that culture. We can catalogue their collective activities and their material culture, as well as listening to their own accounts of who they are.

In that same micro environment, we can ask questions about the local organizational ecology. We can note the likely supply of potential members and their resources, the likely competition, religious and otherwise. We can map the connections and points of access that are critical to organizational survival and thriving.

We can also ask how that congregation's organizational culture defines and mobilizes the resources it has. We can attend to the mix of theological authority and pragmatic empowerment that allows a congregation to do its work and make hard decisions about its future.

All of these questions will arise from multiple sources – from religious communities themselves who want to achieve some new goal, perhaps; from public agencies that want to understand the potential of religious congregations for both progress and resistance to change. They may also arise from theologians and scholars who are eager to discern the religious shape of things to come. Local religious gatherings are immensely varied, but understanding what they are doing and what they mean to those who participate will surely provide essential clues to the other questions we may wish to ask about religion in the rapidly changing societies around us.

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# Religious Congregations in 21st Century America

## A Report from the National Congregations Study

Mark Chaves / Alison J. Eagle

What is religion in the United States like today? This is a difficult question to address in part because views on religion depend on your perspective. What one person sees as a big change another might view as a small one. What one sees as a desirable change, another might see as unwanted. In addition, the United States is a religiously pluralistic society. It embraces hundreds of Christian denominations, several strands of Judaism and Islam, and dozens more varieties of non-western religions, some of whose adherents have sustained their faiths here for generations, while still others have built new institutions and houses of worship.

How do we make sense of it all? The National Congregations Study can help.

### 1. What Is the National Congregations Study?

The National Congregations Study (NCS) is a source of reliable information about congregations. Based on three nationally representative surveys of congregations from across the religious spectrum – the first in 1998, the second in 2006–07, and a third in 2012 – NCS findings can inform those with deep interests in the state of American congregations as well as those with only a passing interest in religion. Because the same questions have been asked in multiple waves of the NCS, we can also track how congregations have changed over time. These data will keep sociologists and professional religious observers busy for years, and they will inform all manner of religious leaders, from small-town clergy and megachurch pastors to seminary presidents and denomination heads.<sup>1</sup>

There are many other surveys that explore America's religious landscape. But most other surveys ask people only about their own individual religious beliefs and practices. The NCS, by contrast, examines

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1 The NCS in Brief: Wave I: 1998, Wave II: 2006–07, Wave III: 2012; nationally representative survey, congregations from across the religious spectrum; 3,815 congregations total.

what people do together in congregations. What communities of faith do together tells us something important about the state of American religion, whatever the specific beliefs and practices of individuals in those communities.

Before 1998, a national snapshot of American congregations did not exist because there was no good way to construct a representative national sample of congregations. The problem was that no definitive list of all congregations exists. Phonebooks do not work since many small congregations are unlisted or do not have phones. Some denominations keep very good lists of their congregations, but not all do, and many congregations are non-denominational. In 1998, 2006, and again in 2012, the General Social Survey – a well-known national survey conducted by NORC at the University of Chicago – asked respondents who said they attend religious services where they worship. The congregations named by these people are a representative cross-section of American congregations. The NCS then contacted those congregations and interviewed someone, usually a clergy person or other leader, about the congregation's people, programs, and characteristics. Between 73 % and 80 % of named congregations cooperated with us in each of the three NCS waves. Between the three waves of the NCS we now know about the demographics, leadership situation, worship life, programming, surrounding neighborhood, and much more, of 3,815 congregations.

Overall, the NCS gives us a broad and varied cross-section of American religious life, and it allows us to offer some grounded observations about the state of congregational life in this country. NCS findings help us distinguish truth from myth about American congregations, and they help us assess the extent to which this or that feature of congregational life permeates the religious landscape. These findings also will help readers place their own experiences in a larger perspective.

While this report highlights some of the most important findings from the NCS, it only scratches the surface. Please see the NCS website for more information.<sup>2</sup>

### What Are Our Most Important Observations?

- The number of congregations claiming no denominational affiliation increased from 18 % in 1998 to 24 % in 2012.
- White mainline congregations, and the people in those congregations, are older than the congregations and people of other religious traditions.
- Most congregations are small but most people are in large congregations.

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2 <http://www.soc.duke.edu/natcong>.

- People are increasingly concentrated in very large congregations. The average congregation is getting smaller, but the average churchgoer attends a larger congregation.
- People in smaller congregations give more money to their churches than do people in larger congregations.
- Worship services have become more informal and expressive.
- 10 % of churchgoers worship in multi-site congregations.
- American solo or senior pastoral leaders are more ethnically diverse and older, but not more female, than they were in 1998.
- Thirteen percent (13 %) of congregations are led by volunteer senior or solo pastoral leaders.
- Assistant and associate ministers and specialized congregational professional staff constitute 42 % of the full-time ministerial work force and three-quarters (74 %) of the part-time ministerial work force.
- Compared to solo and senior pastoral leaders, secondary ministerial staff are more female, younger, less likely to be seminary educated, and more likely to have been hired from within the congregation.
- There is increasing diversity over time both *among* and *within* American congregations.
- Food assistance is by far the most common kind of social service activity pursued by congregations, with more than half (52 %) of all congregations listing food assistance among their four most important social service programs.
- When congregations lobby elected officials or participate in demonstrations or marches, the issues they most commonly engage are poverty, abortion, and same-sex marriage.
- Acceptance of female lay leadership is very widespread, with 79 % allowing women to hold any volunteer position a man can hold, and 86 % allowing women to serve on the governing board.
- Congregational acceptance of gays and lesbians as members and lay leaders increased substantially between 2006 and 2012, but acceptance levels vary widely across religious traditions.

## 2. Religious Traditions and Denominations

The American religious landscape is always changing. In recent years, surveys of individuals have documented declining membership in mainline Protestant denominations, increasing presence of Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, and other religious groups beyond Christianity and Judaism, and dramatic increase in the “nones” – people with no religious affiliation. The first two of these trends have obvious counterparts among congregations: fewer mainline Protestant congregations and more non-Christian congregations.

The NCS shows that congregations also are seeing an increase in their own type of “none”: congregations that claim no denominational affiliation. Unaffiliated congregations increased from 18 % in 1998 to 24 % in 2012, and the share of churchgoers in those independent congregations increased from 10 % in 1998 to 15 % in 2012. (Throughout this report, all of the numerical differences that we emphasize are statistically significant at least at the .05 level.)

Non-denominationalism occurs mainly among white evangelical and black Protestant traditions, with 30 % of white evangelical Protestant and 25 % of black Protestant congregations claiming no official denominational connection in 2012. Independent congregations also tend to be newer than others, with the median congregation founded only 25 years ago versus 82 years ago for affiliated congregations.

If we place congregations and their people within nine major religious categories, the largest is white evangelical Protestants, comprising 46 % of all congregations and 38 % of all those who attend religious services in 2012. Roman Catholics have the biggest difference between their share of congregations and their share of people, with 28 % of the churchgoing population in Catholic churches that constitute only 6 % of all congregations. That’s of course because Catholic parishes are, on average, much bigger than congregations within any other tradition. Twenty-one percent (21 %) of congregations are black Protestant, 20 % are white mainline Protestant, 1.6 % are Jewish, 1.1 % are Muslim, 1.1 % are Buddhist, 0.7 % are Hindu, and 2.2 % identify with some other non-Christian religious tradition (Fig. 1). Throughout this report, we include non-Christian congregations in the aggregate statistics, but we usually do not separate them out for focused analysis because there are not enough non-Christian congregations in the NCS sample to justify doing so.

The largest single denomination in the evangelical Protestant category is the Southern Baptist Convention, with 10 % of all congregations and 8 % of all attendees. The largest denomination within the mainline Protestant category is the United Methodist Church, with 9 % of congregations and 6 % of attendees. No other denomination has more than 4 % of all the congregations in the country, but other sizable groups within the evangelical category include Assemblies of God, Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, and Seventh-day Adventist. Predominantly-white nondenominational Protestant congregations also are placed here. Other sizable groups in the mainline category include Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), Episcopal Church, United Church of Christ, and American Baptist Churches in the U.S.A.

The distribution of congregations across major religious groups has not changed dramatically since 1998, but one trend stands out: fewer mainline Protestant congregations (26 % in 1998 and 20 % in 2012) and attendees (24 % to 17 %) (Fig. 1). The proportion of non-Christian congregations also grew, but that increase does not reach statistical significance in these data.

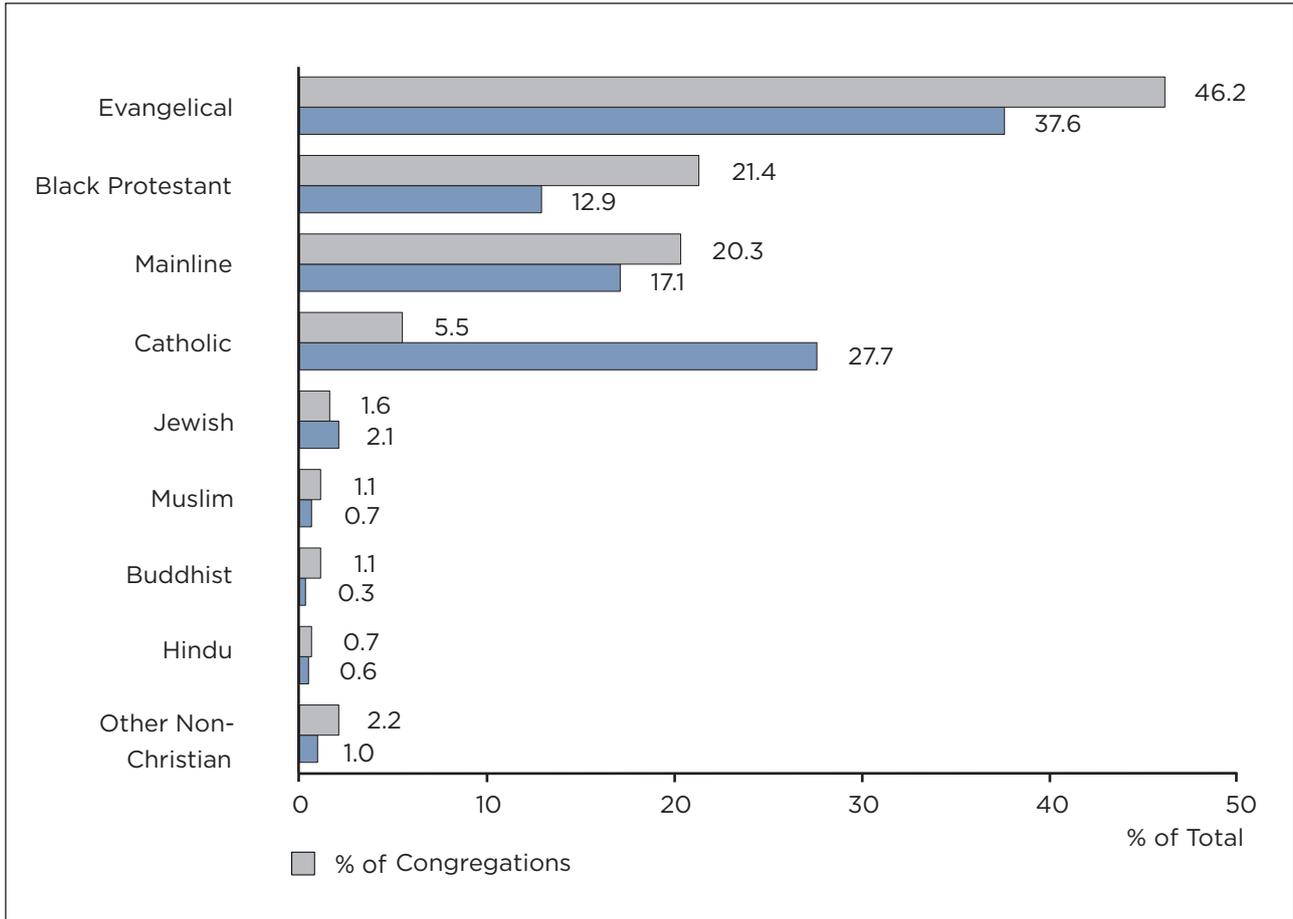


Figure 1 Distribution of U.S. congregations and attendees among different religious traditions, 2012

Beyond these shifting percentages, age differences across different types of congregations provide another indication of the shifting congregational landscape. White mainline Protestant congregations are the oldest congregations in the country in two different senses. Their *congregations* are older, and their *people* are older. In 2012, the median congregation of any sort was founded 58 years ago, but the median mainline congregation was 122 years old. The average Catholic parish was somewhat younger than that (96 years old), while congregations within other religious families were much younger: 68 years old for black Protestants, and only 30 years old for white evangelicals. Indeed, over all three NCS waves, the number of congregations established in the past 10 years has been consistently higher for white evangelicals (16%) and black Protestants (15%) than for Catholics (3%) or white mainline denominations (2%).

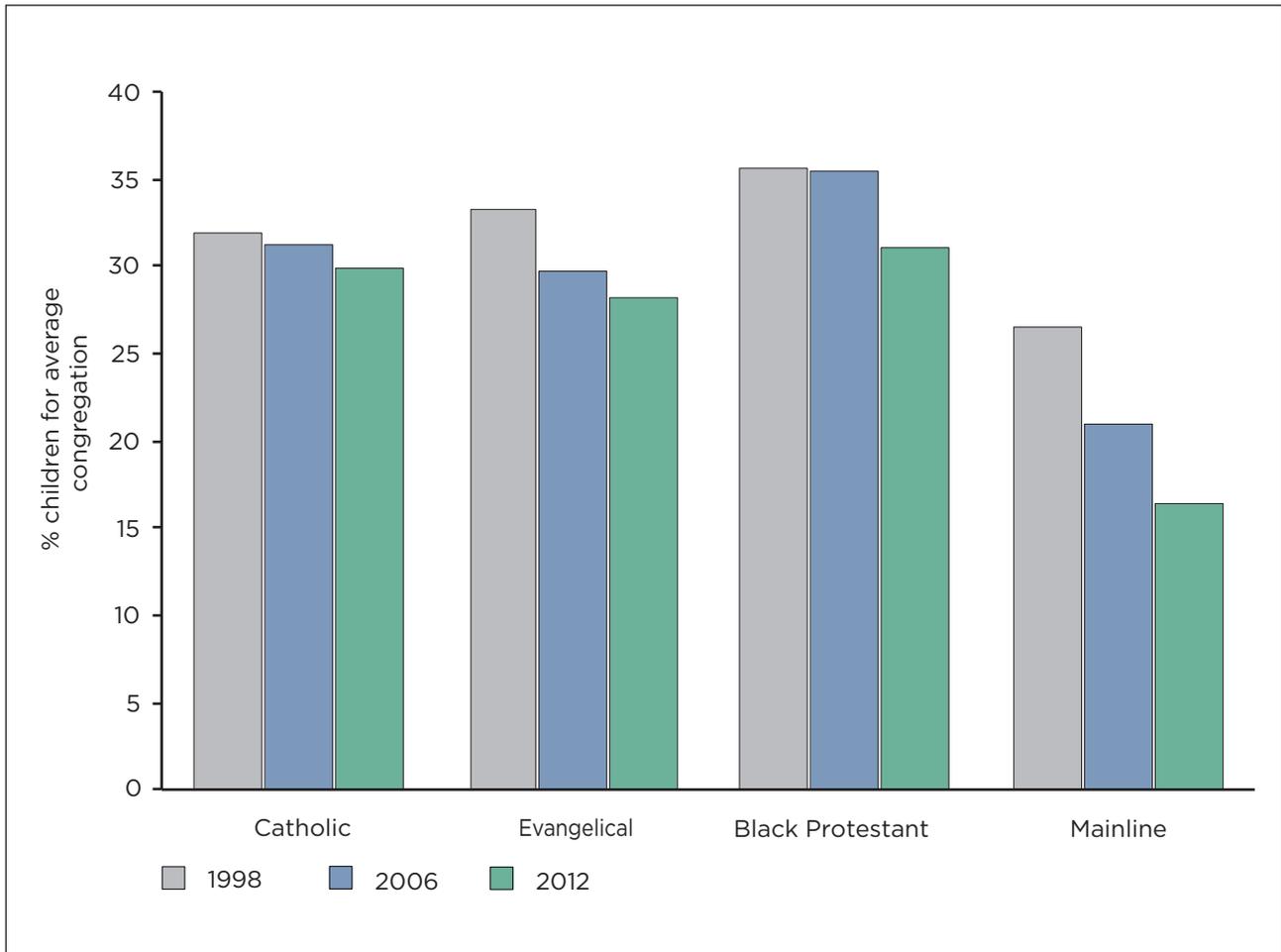
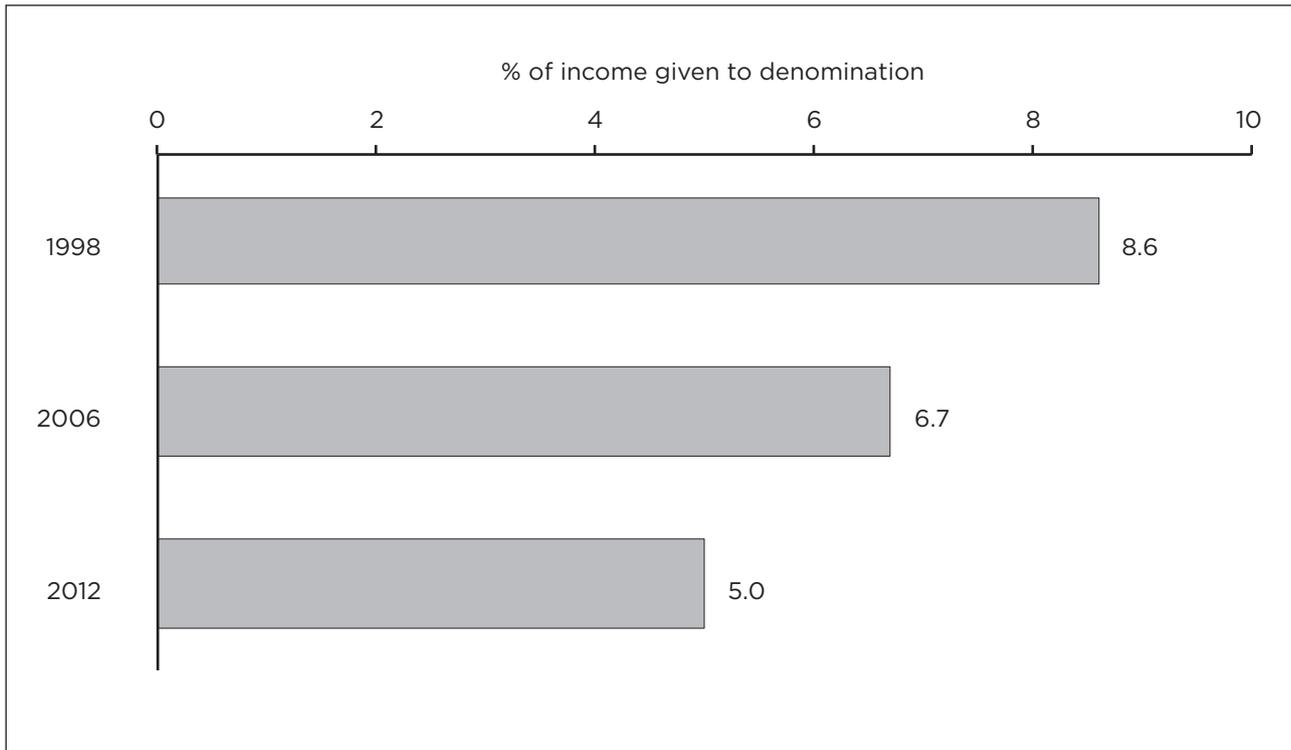


Figure 2 Children as a percentage of the regular attenders in congregations over time, by religious tradition

This surely reflects a culture of church planting and religious entrepreneurship among white evangelical and black Protestants that is not as strong within other groups. The consequence is more churning within these traditions: more new congregations appearing each year, but also a more rapidly changing set of congregations within those traditions since not all new congregations last for many years.

This culture of church planting also creates an interesting difference in congregational leadership patterns across religious groups. Averaging across all three NCS surveys, 21% of white evangelical and 27% of black Protestant churches are led by their founding pastors, compared to only 3% among Catholics and 1% among white mainline churches.



**Figure 3** Giving to denominations as a percentage of total income, for all affiliated congregations

White mainline congregations also are filled with older people relative to other groups. Fifty-six percent (56 %) of adults in a typical white mainline congregation are over 60 years of age, compared with 42 %, 32 %, and 31 % in Roman Catholic, white evangelical, and black Protestant congregations, respectively. Looking at the other end of the age spectrum, in 2012 children comprised 16 % of regular attendees for a typical mainline congregation compared to an average of 29 % in other Christian traditions (Fig. 2). While the proportion of children in churches has declined the fastest since 1998 in white mainline congregations, no Christian group has escaped this trend. It appears that all congregations are aging, but white mainline congregations are older than others and aging at a faster rate.

We have seen that an increasing minority of congregations are unaffiliated with any larger denomination, but it is worth emphasizing that most congregations remain attached to a denomination, convention, association, or a similar kind of larger religious group. Moreover, many congregations remain strongly connected to their denominations. In 2012, 66 % of denominationally affiliated congregations were visited by a denominational representative who spoke to the congregation, a number that has not

declined since 1998. And denominational representatives were much more common visiting speakers at affiliated congregations than representatives of social service organizations (36%), government officials (6%), or candidates for public office (6%). Moreover, the 2006 NCS showed that, when congregations turned to outside consultants for help with finances, personnel, member education, strategic planning, or other issues, three-quarters of the time they received that help from their denominations.

Financial ties between congregations and denominations also remain significant, though there are signs of fraying. Over 80% of affiliated congregations financially support their denominations, but this contribution as a proportion of congregational income has declined between 1998 and 2012 (Fig. 3). The ever increasing cost of running a local congregation leads congregations to retain more money for internal operations. The stress felt by congregations during the 2007–2009 Great Recession is another part of this story, as median income for denominationally-affiliated congregations, expressed in constant 2012 dollars, decreased from \$114,000 in 2006 to \$108,000 in 2012. The typical congregation contributed \$4,000 to their denomination in 2012, with larger churches and mainline congregations more likely to contribute – and more likely to give a larger amount.

Overall, churches and churchgoers are aging, and congregations in America have become less connected to denominations over time. The decrease in denomination affiliation is primarily seen among the more entrepreneurially-minded evangelical and African American Protestants, for whom younger congregations are more often led by their founding pastor than those in the Catholic or mainline Protestant traditions. However, while the aging of churchgoers is more pronounced in mainline congregations, no group is immune to the general trend of fewer children since 1998. This trend reflects underlying demographic changes in American society: smaller families as a result of delaying marriage until later in life, and more people who do not have children. That is a trend likely to continue to influence American congregations, and is one to watch in the long term.

### 3. Size and Concentration

Size is one of the most important characteristics of any organization, including congregations. It affects everything else. More people mean more resources, more staff, and more programming. Bigness also brings more complexity: different kinds of staff, more administration and coordination, bureaucracy, formality, and possibly a loss of the personal touch.

There is a lot to say about congregational size, but one fact is fundamental: Most congregations in the United States are small, but most people are in large congregations. In 2012, the average *congregation*

had only 70 regular participants, counting both adults and children, and an annual budget of \$85,000. At the same time, the average *attende*e worshipped in a congregation with about 400 regular participants and a budget of \$450,000.

How can both of these facts be true? The key to understanding this apparent paradox is that there are relatively few large congregations with many members, numerous staff, and sizeable budgets, but these very large congregations are big enough that they actually contain most of the churchgoers.

To get a feel for just how concentrated people are in the largest congregations, imagine that we have lined up all congregations in the United States, from the smallest to the largest. Imagine that you are walking along this line, starting on the end with the smallest congregations. When you get to a congregation with 400 people, you would have walked past about half of all churchgoers, but more than 90 % (93 %, to be exact) of all congregations! Or imagine walking along this line of congregations from the other direction, starting with the very largest. When you get to that same 400-person congregation, you would have walked past only about 7 % of all congregations, but half of all churchgoers.

In a nutshell, the largest 7 % of congregations contain about half of all churchgoers. Most denominations, even the largest ones, could comfortably gather the pastors of congregations representing more than half of their people in a medium-to-large hotel ballroom. And it is not just people who are concentrated in this way. Money and staff also are concentrated in the largest congregations.

This basic fact has tremendous implications for American religion. It means that most seminarians come from large churches (since that's where most people are), but most clergy jobs are in small churches. About 70 % of full-time ministerial staff and about 80 % of part-time ministerial staff are employed by congregations with fewer than 400 people. Viewed another way, about three quarters of clergy serve in the set of congregations containing about half of all the people.

This concentration also means that pastors of the largest churches wield political power inside denominations that may be proportional to the size of their congregations but disproportional from a one-congregation, one-vote point of view. And it means that denominational officials can serve the most people by concentrating their attention on the largest churches. But that strategy can leave most congregations out of the picture. When confronted with a policy decision, should you ask what the impact might be on most churches, or what the impact might be on most churchgoers? That is a tough question.

This concentration of people in larger congregations also means that national statistics about congregations can be presented from one of two perspectives. Do we want to know what happens in the average *congregation*, or are we more interested in the experiences of the average *attende*e? This is an important distinction to keep in mind while reading this report, which presents information from both perspectives.

### 3.1 What Has Changed over Time?

It's not just that most people are in large congregations. That's always been true to some extent. But the concentration of people in the largest congregations has become more extreme in recent years, with the average congregation getting smaller while the average person attends a larger congregation. Between 1998 and 2012, the number of regular participants, both adults and children, in the median *congregation* decreased from 80 to 70 people. And median weekend attendance at all worship services declined from 100 people in 2006 to 76 people in 2012.

At the same time, the average *attendee* goes to a larger congregation in 2012 than he or she attended in 1998. The number of regularly participating people (adults and children) in the congregation attended by the average churchgoer remained constant at 400 during this period, but the median number of regularly participating adults increased from 275 in 1998 to 310 in 2012. And weekend worship service attendance at the average person's congregation increased from 350 to 400 people between 2006 and 2012.

The National Congregations Study (NCS) began only in 1998, but we know from other research that this trend towards more and more people in the largest churches began in the 1970s.<sup>3</sup> We all know about megachurches, but they represent only the tip of the iceberg. The movement of people from smaller to larger churches is much broader and deeper than the proliferation of stereotypical megachurches. This trend has to plateau at some point – otherwise all churchgoers will wind up in one gigantic congregation! But there is no sign yet that we have reached that plateau.

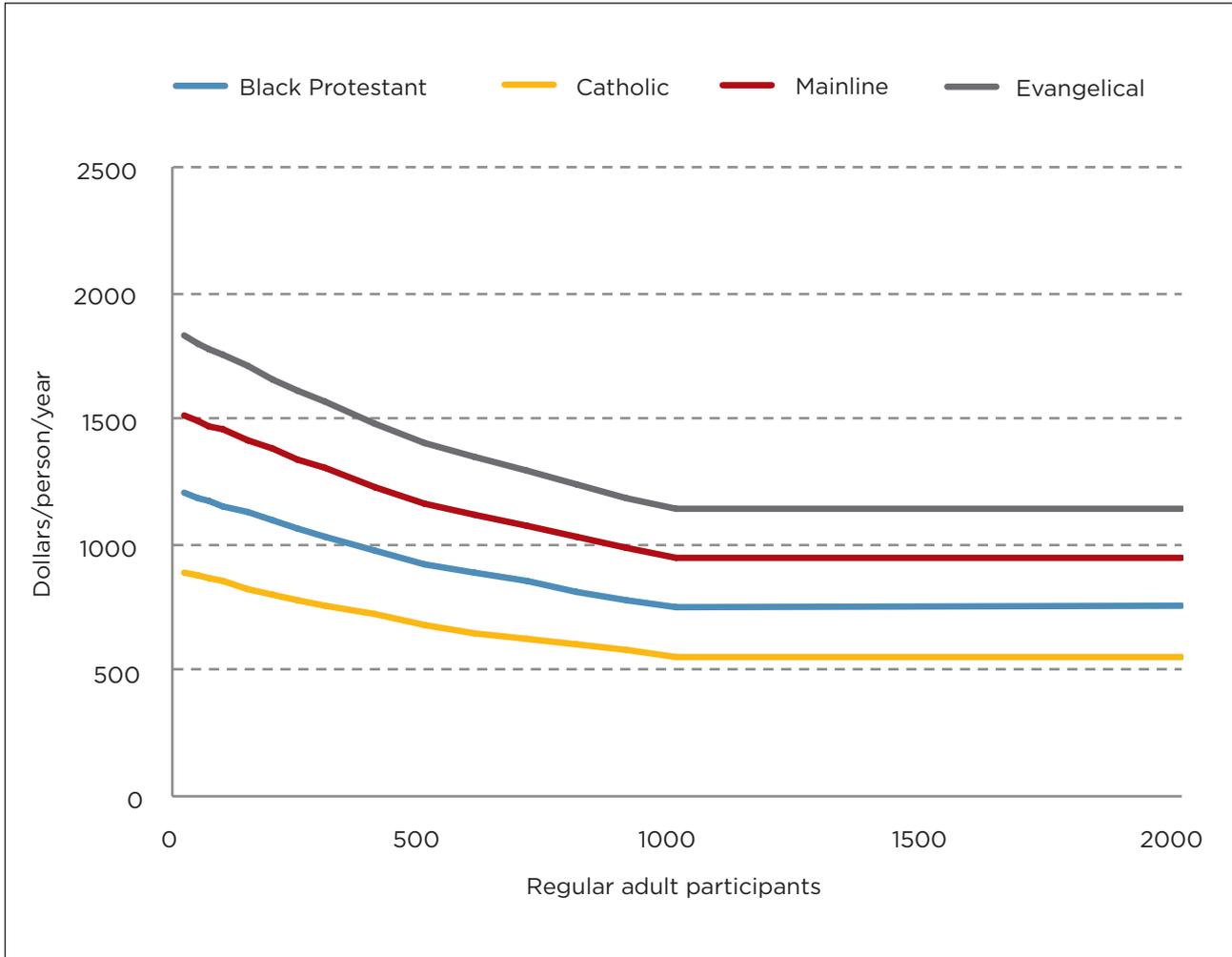
### 3.2 Does Size Matter?

Size affects congregations in some obvious ways, but also in some less obvious ways. One important question is whether people in large congregations feel the same sense of commitment to their congregations that people in smaller congregations feel. Smaller congregations, for example, have to rely on many people pulling some weight. Larger congregations, by contrast, have a larger pool of people from which they can draw volunteers and contributors, so they can thrive with more people whose participation is limited to attending worship services. Does this reality produce different patterns of participation and financial support in large and small congregations?

Yes, it does. As figure 4 shows, the median annual per capita donation decreases as congregational size increases. As is well known, Protestants give more to their churches than do Roman Catholics, and, among Protestants, evangelicals give more than mainline Protestants and whites give more than

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3 Mark Chaves, "All Creatures Great and Small: Megachurches in Context." *Review of Religious Research* 47 (2006): 329–46.



**Figure 4** Donations per regular adult in U.S. congregations, by religious tradition. This figure is based on analysis of all three NCS waves. The graph shows the situation in 2012, but patterns in 1998 and 2006 are qualitatively the same

blacks. However, within each of these groups, people in smaller churches give more than people in larger churches. (The lines in this graph are based on analyses that control for the socio-economic status of a congregation’s people as well as their age demographics.)

For example, an evangelical congregation of 100 adults receives an average per capita contribution of \$1,750 while a congregation of 400 receives \$1,480 and a congregation of 1,000 receives \$1,140.

The analogous numbers for Catholic parishes are \$850, \$720, and \$550. Overall, a congregation of 100 adults receives about 18% more per capita than a congregation with 400 adults. The lines level off at about 1,000 regular adult participants. The graph only displays the relationship until a congregation size of 2,000 adults because there are few congregations larger than that in the NCS sample, so we are less confident about the shape of the lines beyond that point.

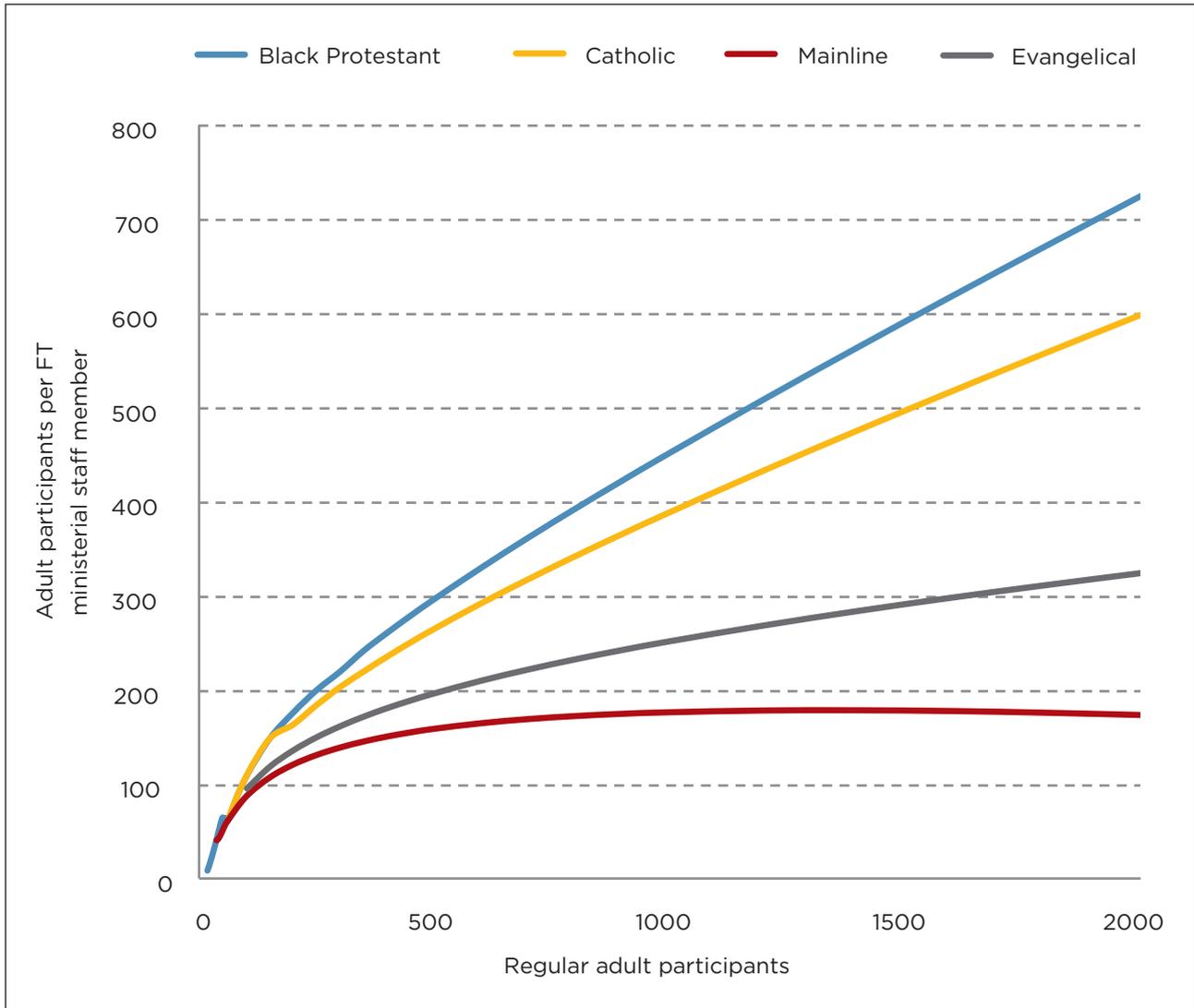
We do not know if there is something about larger congregations that causes people to give less than they would give if they were in a smaller congregation, or if people inclined to give less are drawn to larger congregations. Perhaps members of smaller congregations perceive (rightly or wrongly) that their congregations have more financial need than people in larger congregations perceive. Or perhaps larger congregations require less financial commitment from their members because they are more efficient. Perhaps members of larger congregations are somehow less personally invested in their congregations, or perhaps they are just as invested, but a particular level of commitment translates into more financial support for a smaller congregation than it does for a larger congregation. Whatever the dynamics behind this relationship, it is clear that people in smaller congregations give more to their churches than do people in larger congregations. Not incidentally, other research shows that people in smaller congregations also participate more in the life of their congregation than do people in larger congregations.<sup>4</sup>

Another interesting issue is how congregational size affects staffing. Do larger congregations get by with fewer staff per capita, or does staff size simply increase proportionally with congregation size? Figure 5 addresses this issue by showing how the number of regular adult participants per full-time ministerial staff member (i.e., clergy) changes with congregational size. This graph only includes the 62% of congregations who have at least one full-time clergy person, and the lines are based on analyses that control for socio-economic status and age structure of the congregation's people.

There are interesting differences across religious traditions, but there is also a basic similarity: Larger congregations have more people per full-time clergy person. The participant-to-staff ratio increases sharply for all groups up to congregations having about 200 regularly participating adults. This is because, up to about 200 adults, the vast majority of congregations with any full-time staff have just one full-time clergy person. The participant-to-staff ratio continues to increase beyond 200 adults, but less sharply, and at different rates for different groups. For evangelical Protestants it levels out by about 600 adults, meaning that, above that size, evangelical churches add full-time staff to keep their participant-to-staff ratio constant, while other groups add fewer staff as size increases, resulting in higher ratios at larger sizes.

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4 David Eagle, "Supersized Christianity: The Origins and Consequences of Protestant Megachurches" (PhD diss., Duke University, 2015).



**Figure 5** Number of regularly participating adults for each full-time ministerial staff member in U.S. Christian congregations, by size and religious tradition. Combined 2006 and 2012 data

In general, larger white Protestant churches have more full-time ministerial staff than Catholic churches or black Protestant churches. A white Protestant church with 200 regularly participating adults, for example, has an average of 1.6 full-time ministers, or one minister for every 126 adults. A Catholic church of that size has an average of only 1.2 full-time ministerial staff – one for every 164 adults. And

a black Protestant church of that size has only 1.1 full-time ministers, or one for every 176 adults. This difference is even more pronounced in larger churches. A white Protestant church with 500 adults has an average of 3.1 full-time ministers, or one minister for every 159 people, while a Catholic church of that size has an average of only 1.9 full-time ministerial staff – one for every 263 people. (There are too few black churches of this size in the NCS sample to calculate a meaningful ratio for very large black churches.)

Part-time clergy also fill important roles in congregations. There are no noticeable differences between religious traditions in the rate at which part-time staff increases with size, but this might be because we have information about part-time staff only from the 2012 survey, so we are less able to discern differences between subgroups. In any event, looking just at the 43 % of congregations that employ at least one part-time ministerial staff member, a congregation with 100 adults has, on average, 1.4 part-time clergy, for a ratio of 73 adults per part-time ministerial staff member. A congregation with 200 adults has 1.7 part-time clergy (one per every 118 adults), and a congregation with 500 adults has 2.0 part-time clergy (one per every 250 adults). As with full-time staff, churches add part-time staff as they get larger, but at a decreasing rate.

The upshot here is that larger congregations get by with fewer staff per capita. Does this mean that they enjoy economies of scale that make them more efficient? It is difficult to say. To be more efficient means that we do more (or the same) with less; doing less with less is not increasing efficiency. If having more participants per staff member means that people are served less well in larger than in smaller congregations, then a higher participant-to-staff ratio represents no gain in efficiency. Another complicating factor is that people probably expect (or are taught to expect) different things from clergy in large congregations than they expect from clergy in smaller congregations. If people in a large congregation do not expect the same level of personal attention from the pastor that people in a small congregation expect, for example, then receiving less attention in a large congregation does not necessarily mean they are served less well. Overall, the pattern in Figure 5 probably reflects differences between small and large congregations in how staffs are organized and how they use their time more than it reflects differences in efficiency. Moreover, since clergy are better paid in larger congregations, it is not clear that larger congregations spend proportionally less on staff even though they have fewer staff per capita. They may even spend proportionally more. We do not have the data to assess that.

Overall, size matters for congregational life. Especially in an era of increasing concentration of people in larger churches, it is worth trying to understand the many ways in which it matters.

## 4. Worship

Congregations' central activity is corporate worship. This has not changed, but the nature of worship in American congregations has changed noticeably in recent years. One of the most fascinating and important changes is that worship services have become more informal in recent years, with more churches using contemporary music and musical styles, more spontaneous speaking from people in the pews, more unscripted bodily movement, and other developments that make worship more expressive and apparently focused on producing a certain kind of religious experience for participants.

The NCS asked questions in at least two of its surveys about 21 different things that may or may not happen in a congregation's main worship service. Without exception, if there is change over time in the prevalence of a particular worship practice, it is in the direction of more informality (Fig. 6). For example, looking at change from 1998 to 2012:

- Fewer congregations incorporate choir singing into worship, falling from 54 % to 45 %.
- The number of congregations that use a printed bulletin dropped from 72 % to 62 %.
- Far more use visual projection equipment in worship, increasing dramatically from only 12 % to 35 %.
- The number of congregations in which someone other than the leader speaks at worship about their own religious experience increased from 78 % to 85 %.
- The number of congregations where people spontaneously saying “amen” grew from 61 % to 67 %.
- More have people jumping, shouting, or dancing spontaneously, up from 19 % to 27 %.
- The number of congregations in which people raise their hands in praise jumped from 45 % to 59 %.
- More congregations have applause breaking out, rising from 55 % to 65 %.
- The number of congregations that use drums increased from 20 % to 34 %.
- Fewer congregations use organs, falling from 53 % to 42 %.

This trend towards informality has not occurred at the same pace and in the same way within every religious group. Most of the increase in informality has occurred among traditionally white Protestant groups. The use of organs, for example, decreased significantly only among evangelical congregations, while fewer choirs and more raising of hands happened only in evangelical and mainline Protestant congregations. Catholic congregations, by contrast, saw increases only in using more visual projection equipment and drums. They also were more likely in 2012 than in 1998 to have a time for people to greet one another, although greeting one another during the worship service did not increase in other traditions. And black Protestant congregations showed little change in any of these worship service features, with at least

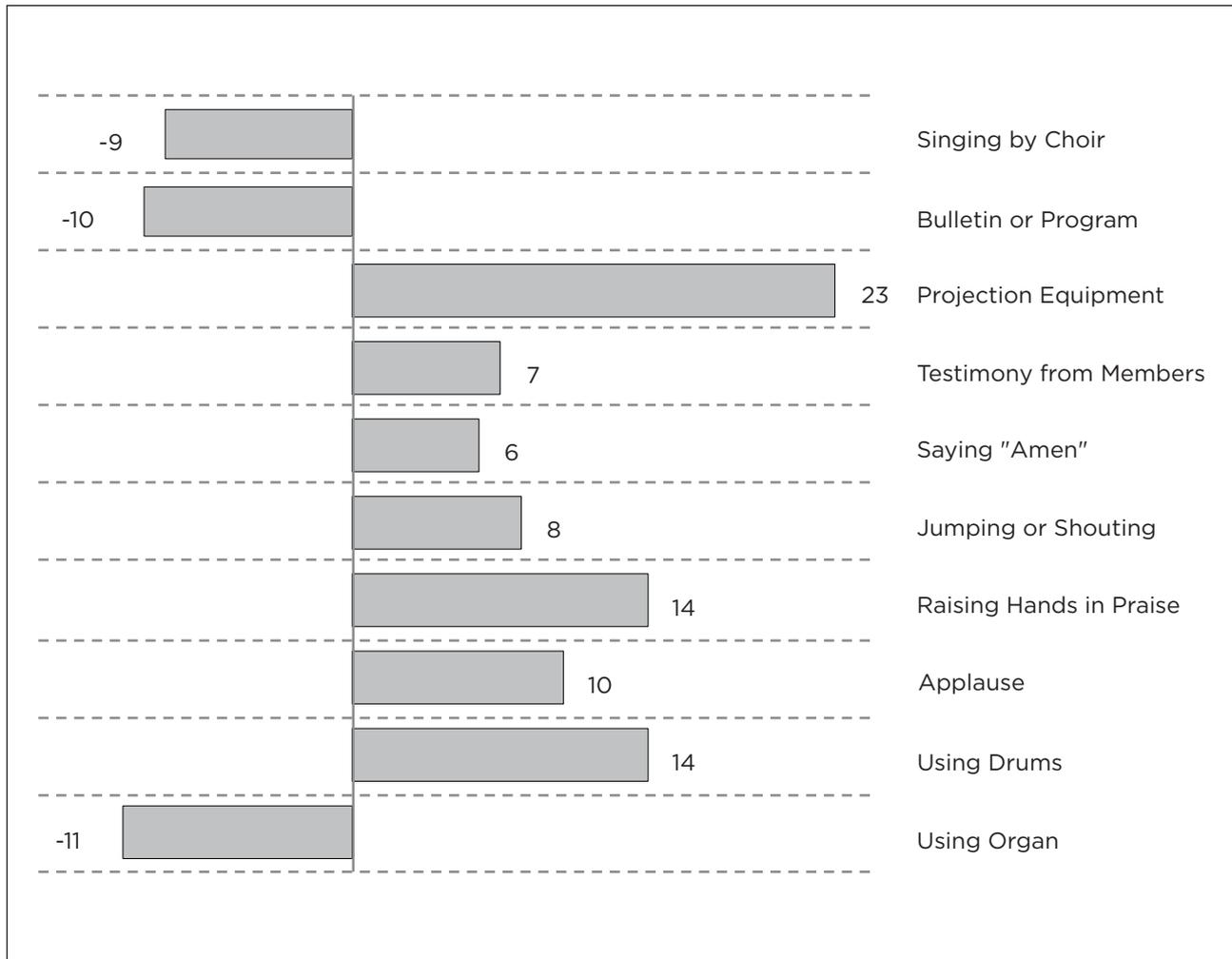


Figure 6 Percentage point change in selected features of worship services, 1998 to 2012

80 % of worship services across all years including a time for greeting one another, applause, jumping or dancing, spontaneously saying “amen,” raising hands, and testifying.

Why is this happening? It may be that Pentecostal-style worship has widened its influence. Speaking in tongues, the hallmark of Pentecostal worship, has indeed trended upward (occurring in 24 % of congregations in 1998 and 30 % in 2012), but the worship changes seem broader than just more Pentecostalism. More likely, congregations share in a wider cultural trend towards informality. People dress more informally at work and social events as well as at churches and synagogues. When talking with each other,

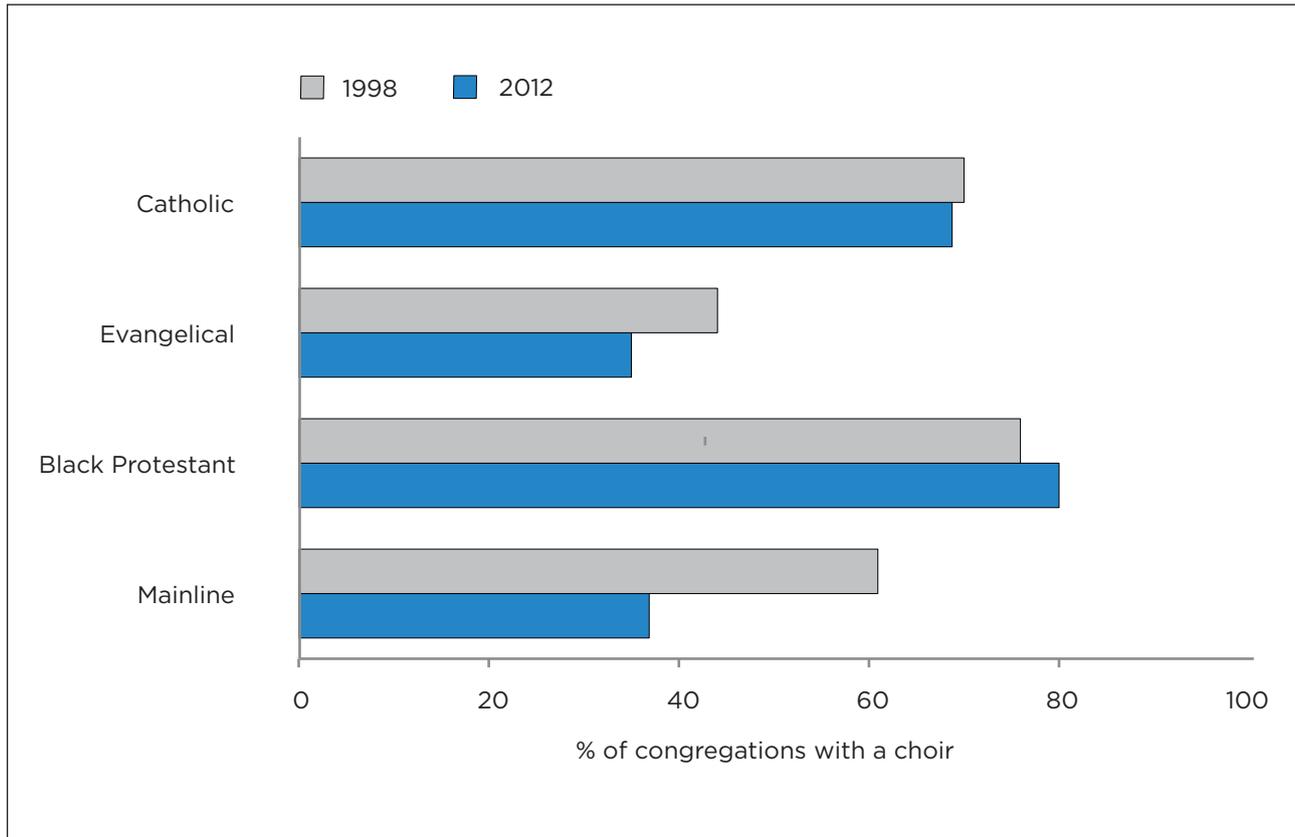
we are less likely to use titles like Mr. or Mrs., Doctor, or Professor, and more likely to use a first name, or even a nickname. Another possibility, one consistent with the observation that these changes mainly happened within white Protestantism, is that they reflect the spread of an evangelical worship style that, helped along by its association with megachurches and contemporary worship music, is itself part of a decades-long trend in American religion away from an emphasis on belief and doctrine and towards an emphasis on experience, emotion, and the search for a least-common-denominator kind of worship in a time of ever less salient denominationally specific liturgical and theological content. Yet another possible dynamic is that, between the consolidation of Catholic parishes in some dioceses and the shrinking of the Protestant mainline, there are simply fewer congregations with more formal worship styles. We are not in a position to sort all this out. Whatever the causes, informal worship has increased in American congregations, and its rise does not seem to have peaked yet.

#### 4.1 Focus on Choirs

Digging a little deeper into one of these specific changes – the declining presence of choirs in worship services – illustrates some of the complexity behind the numbers above. The decline of choirs is worth examining in its own right because singing in the choir is one of the most common ways, along with Bible studies, for people to become more deeply involved in a congregation, and it's the single most common way for lay people to participate actively in gathered worship. Choirs often become their own communities within congregations, with participation in them as meaningful to choir members as their participation in the congregation as a whole. And choirs enhance worship services in ways that are not replaceable by other kinds of music. So choirs can be socially and liturgically important to congregations, and losing them represents a significant change.

A key observation here is that the decline of choirs has occurred only within traditionally white Protestant congregations – not in Catholic or black Protestant churches. In 2012, people in only about one third of white Protestant churches heard a choir sing at its most recent main worship service, compared to 80% of black Protestant churches and 69% of Catholic churches (Fig. 7). White Protestant churches are much more different than they once were from black Protestant and Catholic churches when it comes to the presence of choirs.

This decline in choirs among white Protestant churches is not because of the declining average size of congregations. It's true that average congregation size is declining, and it's also true that, across all these religious traditions, larger congregations, especially those with paid music staff, are more likely than smaller congregations to have a choir. But the decline of choirs is especially evident among larger churches – those with 100 or more regularly participating adults. And the decline is particularly dramatic among larger white evangelical churches. A stable one-third of evangelical churches with fewer than 100



**Figure 7** Change over time in the prevalence of choirs in U.S. Christian congregations, 1998 to 2012, by broad religious tradition

regularly participating adults have choirs (36 % in 1998 and 35 % in 2012). In larger evangelical churches, by contrast, 69 % had a choir in 1998 but only 36 % had one in 2012.

Interestingly, it appears that congregations without choirs are not simply substituting other kinds of music for choir singing. Instead, taking into account differences in size and religious tradition, worship services without a choir have, on average, about 4 fewer total minutes of music. The decline of choirs is not dramatic enough to produce an observable decline in the amount of music across all worship services – the average worship service contained about 20 minutes of music in all three NCS surveys. But there are hints that fewer choirs, at least in some contexts, means less music in worship services, not just different kinds of music.

## 4.2 Other Things about Worship Services

The NCS tells us much about worship patterns beyond the informality trend and the declining use of choirs. Here are a few additional tidbits:

- *Length of Time Spent in Worship.* The median worship service is 75 minutes long, but there is a lot of variation around this average. About one in four worship services are two hours or longer, while slightly more than one third (35 %) keep regular worship times to an hour or less. Black Protestant and white evangelical services average about 90 minutes, compared to the 60-minute average service in Catholic and white mainline churches. Much of this 30-minute difference is taken up by longer sermons, which average 35 minutes in white evangelical and black Protestant churches and only 15 minutes in Catholic and white mainline Protestant churches. Congregation size doesn't seem to be related to service length, and there is no noticeable trend over time.
- *Multiple Worship Services.* Sixty-two percent (62 %) of congregations have more than one worship service in a typical week. Over time, however, multiple services have become less common, driven by changes among smaller congregations. In 1998, 70 % of congregations with fewer than 150 regular adult participants had multiple services on a weekend, dropping to 57 % in 2012. In contrast, the vast majority (nearly 90 %) of congregations with more than 150 adults reported having multiple services in all three NCS surveys. In congregations that do have more than one weekly service, it seems that those services are more likely now to be similar in nature than they were in the past. In 2006, 48 % of congregations with more than one service reported important differences between these services, but only 30 % reported such differences in 2012. Perhaps the “worship wars” are less of an issue for congregations than they once were, though, when multiple services do differ from each other, it is mainly because of differences in formality and music. Twenty-two percent (22 %) of congregations with more than one service in 2012 said that the level of informality was an important difference between the services and 15 % said that the music was different. Language differences were much less common, reported by only 3 % of congregations with more than one service.
- *Multisite Congregations.* The development and proliferation of multisite congregations is an interesting recent development in American religion. Overall, 3.4 % of congregations in 2012 were multisite; 10 % of churchgoers were in those congregations. About half of these churchgoers hear the same sermon heard by people in the other locations, and one-third listen to or sing at least some of the same music. Not surprisingly, this phenomenon is driven by large congregations: 16.5 % of congregations with at least 500 adult participants had multiple locations in 2012.

All in all, there is much variety – both across religious groups and over time – in the ways that Americans worship together. We have tried to document some of this variety here, emphasizing the spread of a more informal and expressive worship style. One would think that the rise of this particular worship style has to peak eventually as it reaches a saturation point, but it has not reached that point yet. Especially given the centrality of worship to congregational life, this is a trend worth watching in the years to come.

## 5. Leadership

The solo pastor may be the image that comes to mind when we think about the typical religious congregation and its leadership, and, indeed, most congregations (56 %) are led by a full- or part-time solo leader with no additional paid ministerial staff. But congregations with full-time, paid leaders are about equally split between those with just a solo leader (46 %) and those with at least one additional paid ministerial staff person beyond the primary leader (54 %). Twenty-four percent (24 %) of congregations with paid leaders (20 % of all congregations) employ two ministerial staff (including the primary religious leader), and another 22 % (19 %) employ 3 or more. Overall, secondary leaders hold 56 % of all ministerial positions: 42 % of full-time positions and 74 % of all part-time positions. Assistant, associate, and specialized ministers are important to many congregations, and they constitute a majority of the ministerial work force.

This section of the report provides an overview of congregational staff configurations, assesses the extent to which pastoral leaders faced pay cuts in response to the Great Recession of 2007–09, and examines stability and change in pastoral leaders' ethnicity, gender, age, and educational attainment.

Two terminological clarifications are necessary here. First, when talking about a congregation's primary leader, we encompass both situations in which the congregation has only one leader (56 % of congregations) and situations in which there are several ministerial staff, with one person designated as the senior leader. While the vast majority of congregations have a clergyperson as their primary leader, some are led by lay people, especially in congregations with part-time rather than full-time leaders. This is how it can be, for example, that there are a few Catholic parishes in the NCS which are led by women, or how it can be that there are some congregational leaders without graduate degrees even in traditions in which all ordained clergy have such degrees. We will sometimes use the terms "senior clergy," "head clergy," or "pastoral leader," as shorthand to refer to the primary pastoral leader. This is regardless of whether or not that person is the sole leader or head of a multi-person staff, whether or not that person is paid, and whether or not that leader is an ordained clergyperson.

Second, “ministerial staff” encompasses paid head clergy as well as other paid staff who are primarily engaged in the congregation’s religious mission, whether or not they are ordained clergy. Specifically, we asked NCS congregations to tell us about “ministerial or other religious staff, such as youth ministers, other pastors, pastoral counselors, directors of religious education, music ministers, and so on.” We asked them not to count “secretaries, janitors, school teachers, or other full-time employees not primarily engaged in religious work.” Inspection of the job titles held by those listed as ministerial staff by congregational informants confirms that this definition was closely followed. We sometimes will use “clergy” as shorthand for these ministerial staff members, even though they may not be ordained clergy.

## 5.1 Staff Configurations

There is a lot of variety among congregations in how they are staffed, and in how that staff is organized. While the majority of congregations (61 %) employ a full-time leader, 13 % are led by unpaid volunteers, and 21 % are led by a paid part-time leader. Having a part-time or volunteer leader sometimes is a theological choice, as for Mormons, but more often it is because a congregation cannot afford a full-time leader, as for many Protestant churches, or because there are not enough qualified leaders to serve all churches, as in the Roman Catholic Church. In any event, smaller congregations, of course, are much less likely to have a full-time leader. Only 53 % of congregations with up to 100 regularly participating adults have a full-time paid leader, compared with 61 % of congregations with 100–200 participants and 92 % of congregations with at least 200 participants.

We observed earlier that most clergy are in congregations with fewer than 400 people. The largest 7 % of congregations, for example, contain half of all churchgoers, 33 % of all full-time ministerial staff, and 20 % of all part-time ministerial staff (including primary clergy). However, these largest congregations contain a much larger portion of all *secondary* full-time ministerial positions (63 %). Indeed, they contain a majority of such positions: 63 %. They contain a larger portion of all secondary part-time ministerial positions (27 %), but this difference is not as dramatic since smaller congregations also employ many people in part-time secondary positions.

Religious groups vary in the extent to which their congregations are led by full-time leaders. Almost three-quarters (74 %) of head clergy in Catholic parishes and white evangelical churches (72 %) work full time in that congregation, but fewer than half (47 %) of head clergy in African American Protestant churches are full time. White mainline Protestants fall in between, with 62 % of head clergy in a full-time position. Volunteer or unpaid head clergy tend to have less formal education and are most common in smaller and less well-off congregations. We see the most volunteer senior or solo clergy in black Protestant churches (22 %) and the fewest in mainline (8 %) and Catholic (9 %) churches, with evangelical (14 %) congregations falling in between. Volunteer leaders also are more likely to be female.

## 5.2 Making Ends Meet

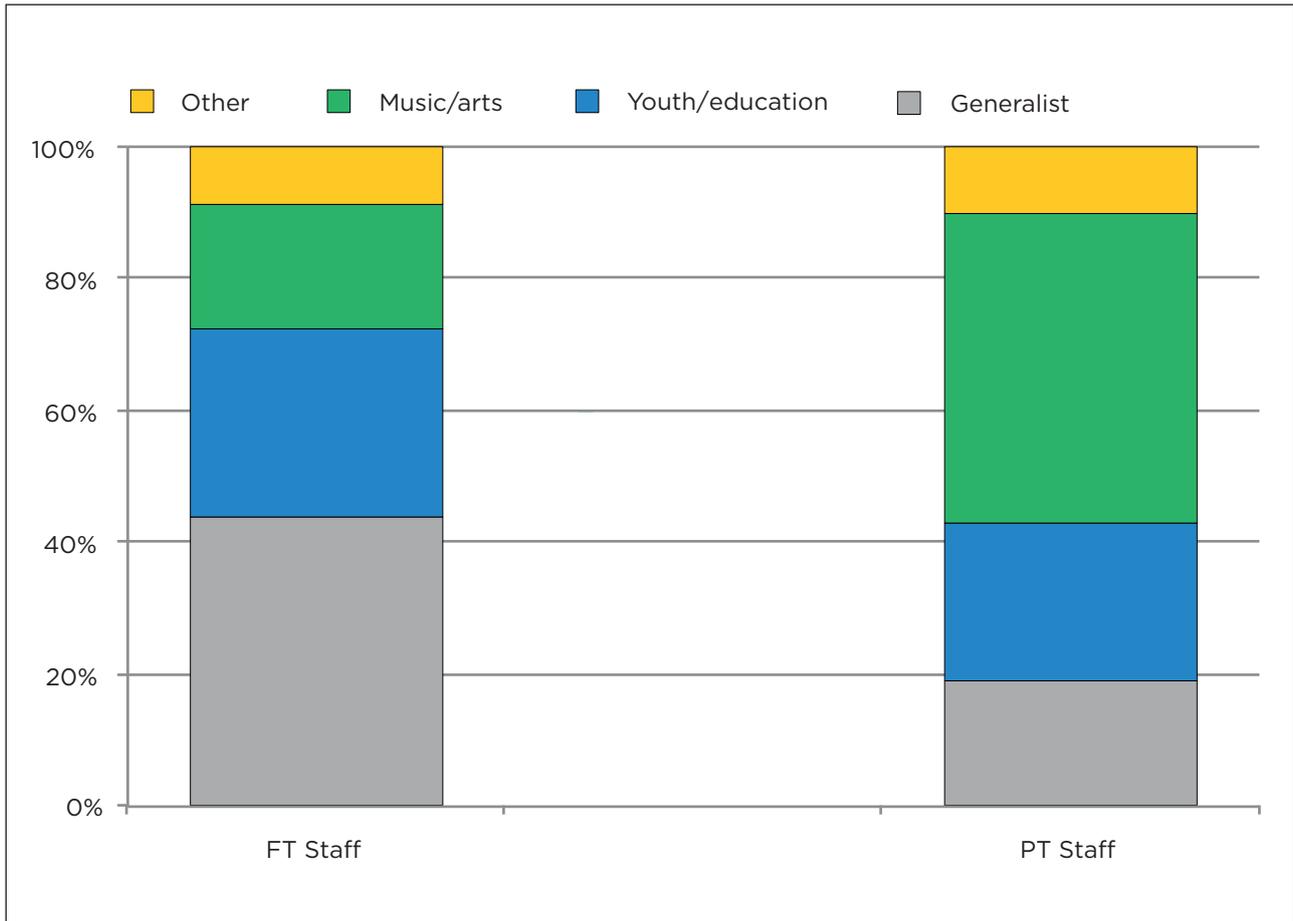
Pastoral leaders who do not serve a single congregation full-time generally make ends meet either by serving several congregations or holding another job altogether. Thirty percent (30 %) of part-time senior or solo clergy serve multiple congregations while 58 % hold a job aside from congregational ministry. Remarkably, a sizable number even of full-time paid pastoral leaders either serve other congregations (11 %) or hold another job beyond their pastoral position (25 %). Overall, 16 % of solo or senior pastoral leaders served multiple congregations, and 34 % were bi-vocational. There were no time trends between 2006 and 2012 in the prevalence of congregations served by either bi-vocational or multi-congregation head clergy.

Serving more than one congregation is much more common for Roman Catholics (42 % of all head clergy, whether full- or part-time) than for evangelical Protestants (6 %). Mainline Protestants (25 %) and African American Protestants (18 %) fall in between. Jobs outside the ministry, by contrast, are much more common among African American Protestants (57 % of all solo or head pastoral leaders, whether full- or part-time) and white evangelicals (39 %), and more rare for mainline Protestant (15 %) and Roman Catholic (13 %) ministers and priests. All of these numbers are much higher, of course, for part-time pastoral leaders. Eighty-two percent (82 %) of part-time leaders of Catholic parishes serve other congregations. The comparable numbers for mainline, black Protestant, and evangelical churches are 36 %, 23 %, and 21 %, respectively. And 91 % of part-time leaders of black Protestant churches have another job, compared with 75 % for evangelical part-timers but only 15 % and 9 % for mainline and Catholic part-timers, respectively.

## 5.3 Generalists and Specialists

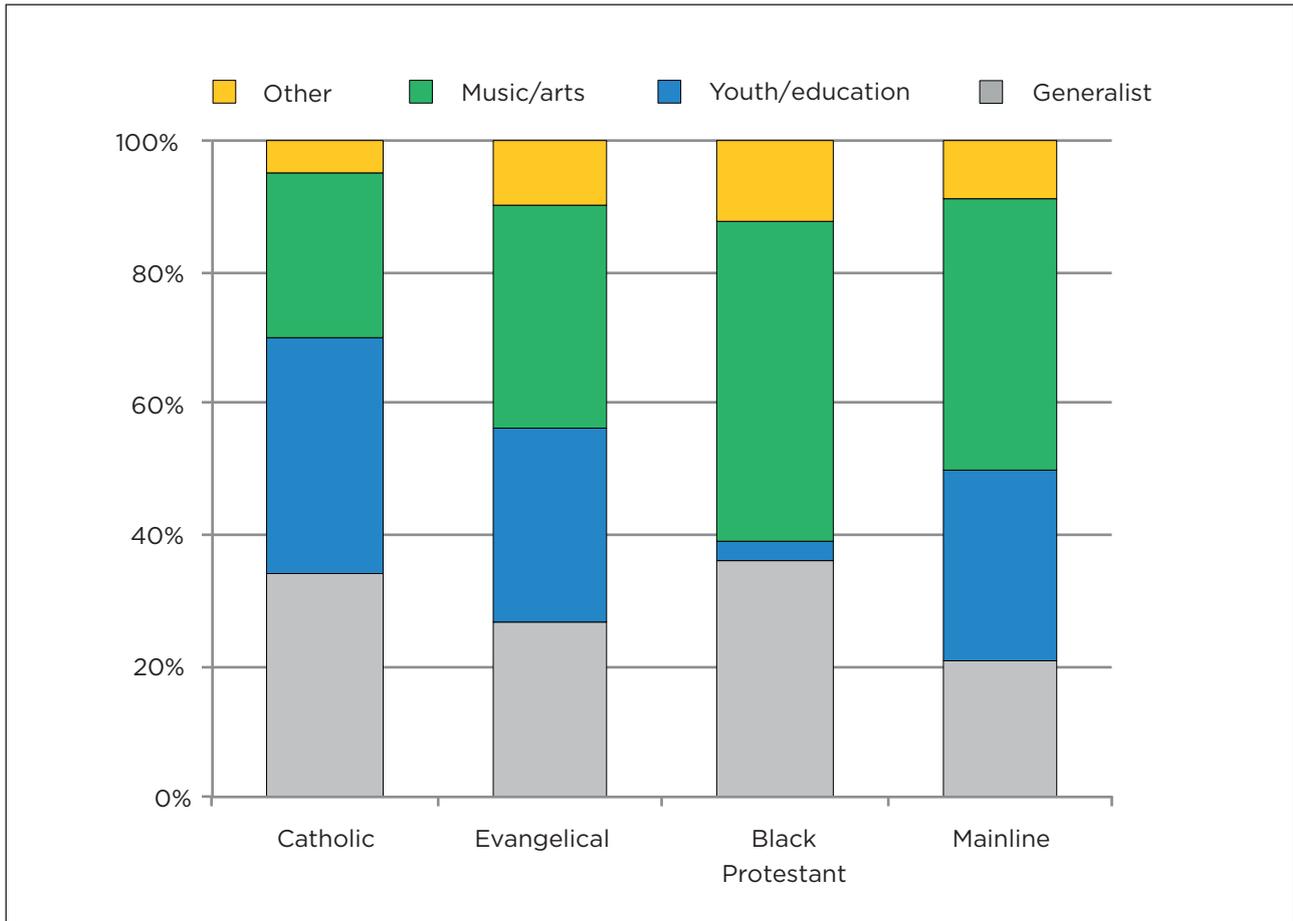
For congregations with up to three ministerial staff members (which includes more than 90 % of all congregations), generalist assistant or associate ministers are by far the most common kind of full-time secondary position, making up 45 % of all full-time secondary positions in these congregations. Positions focused on youth or religious education (29 % of full-time secondary positions) and music or other arts (17 %) are the most common kinds of specialist positions. No other type of specialist position makes up more than 3 % of full-time secondary positions, but it may be that specialized positions such as those focusing on pastoral care, discipleship and small groups, outreach, or administration are more common in the minority of congregations with more than three ministerial staff members for which we don't have detailed staff information.

The generalist-specialist distribution is different for part-time and full-time secondary leaders. Part-time secondary ministerial leaders are most often musicians (47 %), followed by staff focused on youth or religious education (24 %) and generalist ministers (19 %) (Fig. 8). In short, most full-time secondary ministerial staff are generalists while most part-time secondary staff are specialists.



**Figure 8** Type of full-time and part-time secondary ministerial staff in U.S. religious congregations that have up to three ministerial staff members, 2012

Religious traditions vary in their tendency to employ generalist ministers, musicians, or people focused on youth or religious education as secondary congregational staff members. When looking at all secondary ministerial staff (full-time and part-time combined) (Fig. 9), Protestant churches, especially black Protestant churches, employ relatively more musicians than Catholic parishes do, and staff focused on youth or education are least common in black Protestant churches. Distinguishing between staff focused on youth and staff focused on religious education reveals another interesting religious difference: white Protestant churches are more likely to have youth ministers rather than religious education specialists while the opposite is true for Catholic churches.



**Figure 9** Type of secondary ministerial staff (full-time and part-time combined) in U.S. congregations that have up to three ministerial staff members, by religious tradition, 2012

In sum, congregational staffing is more complex and variable than it might appear at first glance, with almost half of all congregations employing more than one leader in a mix of full-time and part-time generalists and specialists who together do much of the work of running congregations.

### 5.4 Pay Cuts Rather than Layoffs in Response to the Great Recession?

We cannot directly assess how congregations responded to the Great Recession of 2007–09, but there are hints in the NCS data that congregations, unlike many other employers, responded to the extra financial stress of those years with pay cuts rather than layoffs. We do not see any decline in the average number

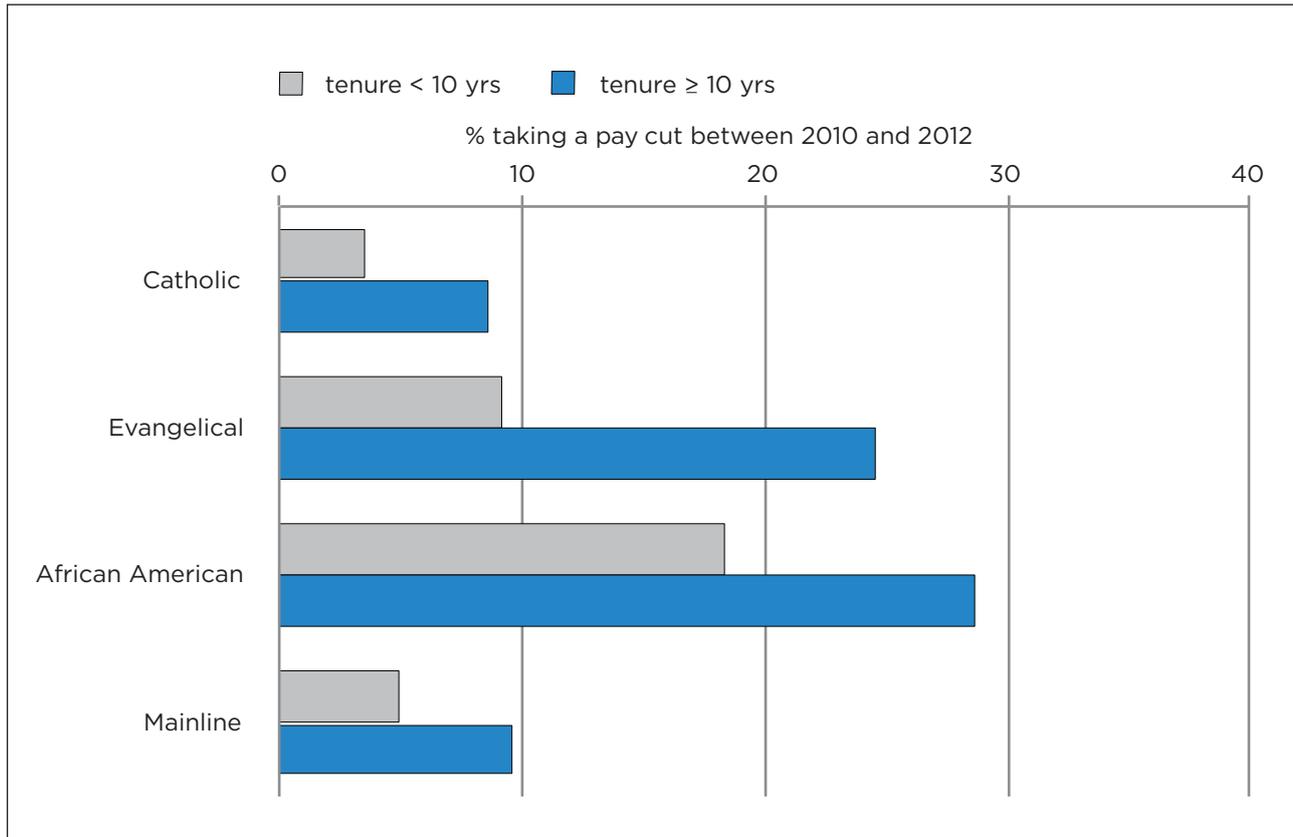
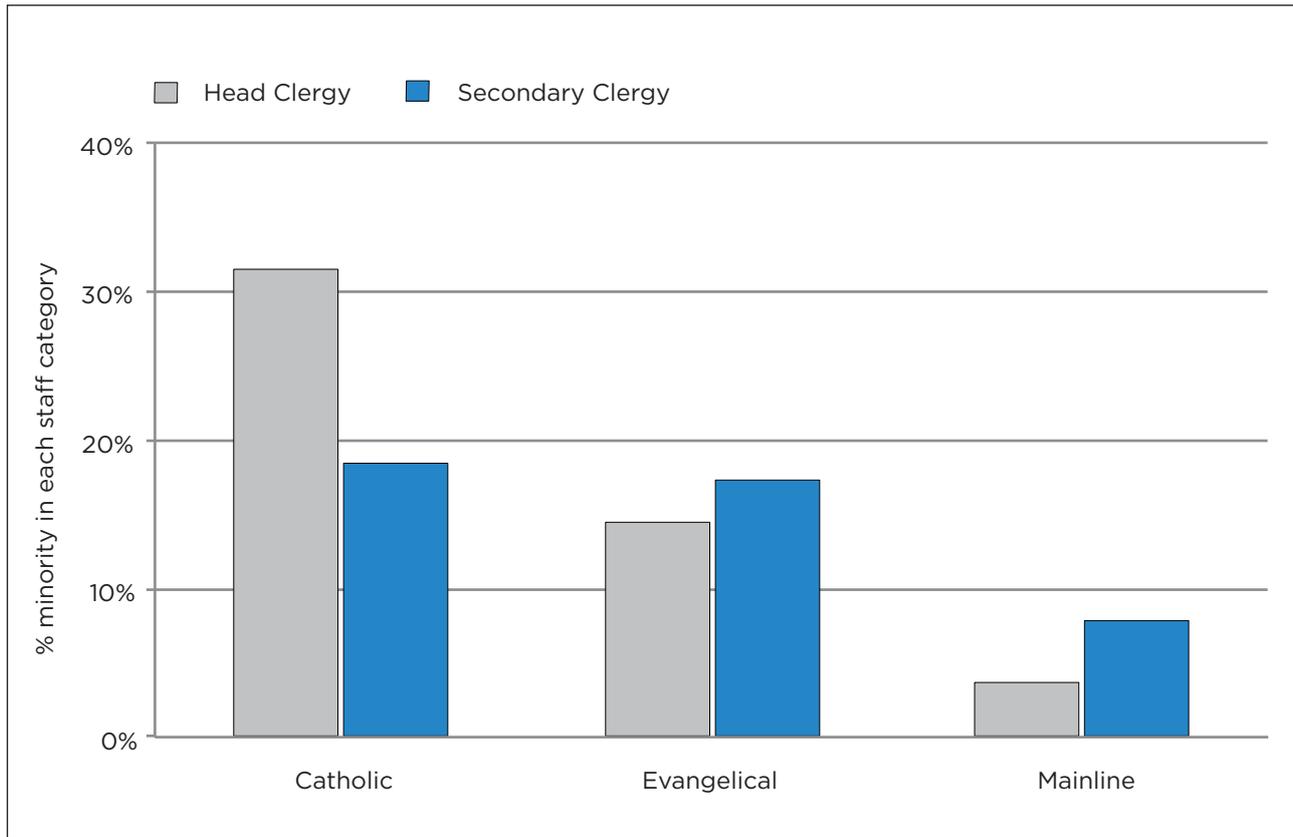


Figure 10 Prevalence of pay cuts in the past two years for solo or senior pastoral leaders, 2012

of either full-time or part-time staff between 2006 and 2012. At the same time, a noticeable minority of congregations reduced the pay of their primary leader: 14% of solo or senior pastoral leaders experienced a pay cut between 2010 and 2012. Pay cuts were more common among evangelical (16%) and black Protestant (23%) congregations than among Roman Catholic (5%) or mainline (6%) congregations. Interestingly, solo or senior pastoral leaders who had been at their congregations for a longer time were more likely to take a pay cut. For example, 25% of evangelical pastors with 10 or more years of tenure experienced a reduction in pay, compared to 15% of those who had been lead pastor for fewer than 10 years (Fig. 10). Perhaps the deeper connection between long-time leaders and their congregations made them more likely to take a pay cut themselves rather than lay off or reduce the salaries of lower-paid staff. Clergy in smaller congregations also were more likely to take a pay cut during this time period, probably because smaller congregations have less of a financial cushion to draw on during economic hard times.



**Figure 11** Racial or ethnic minority clergy in U.S. congregations within traditionally white religious traditions

The NCS did not ask about clergy pay cuts before 2012, so we do not know if these pay-cut rates are in fact a response to the 2007–09 recession. It might instead be that about 14 % of solo or senior pastoral leaders experience a pay reduction within any given two-year period. Future NCS surveys may be able to distinguish between these two possibilities.

### 5.5 Ethnic Diversity among Pastoral Leaders

Among historically white Christian religious traditions, Roman Catholic pastoral leaders – whether senior or secondary – are more ethnically diverse than Protestant leaders. This is mainly because Catholic churches themselves are more diverse than Protestant churches, on average. Catholics also stand out because their solo or senior leaders are more ethnically diverse than their secondary ministerial staff, while the opposite is true for Protestants (Fig. 11). Overall, 13 % of solo or senior pastoral leaders and 15 % of

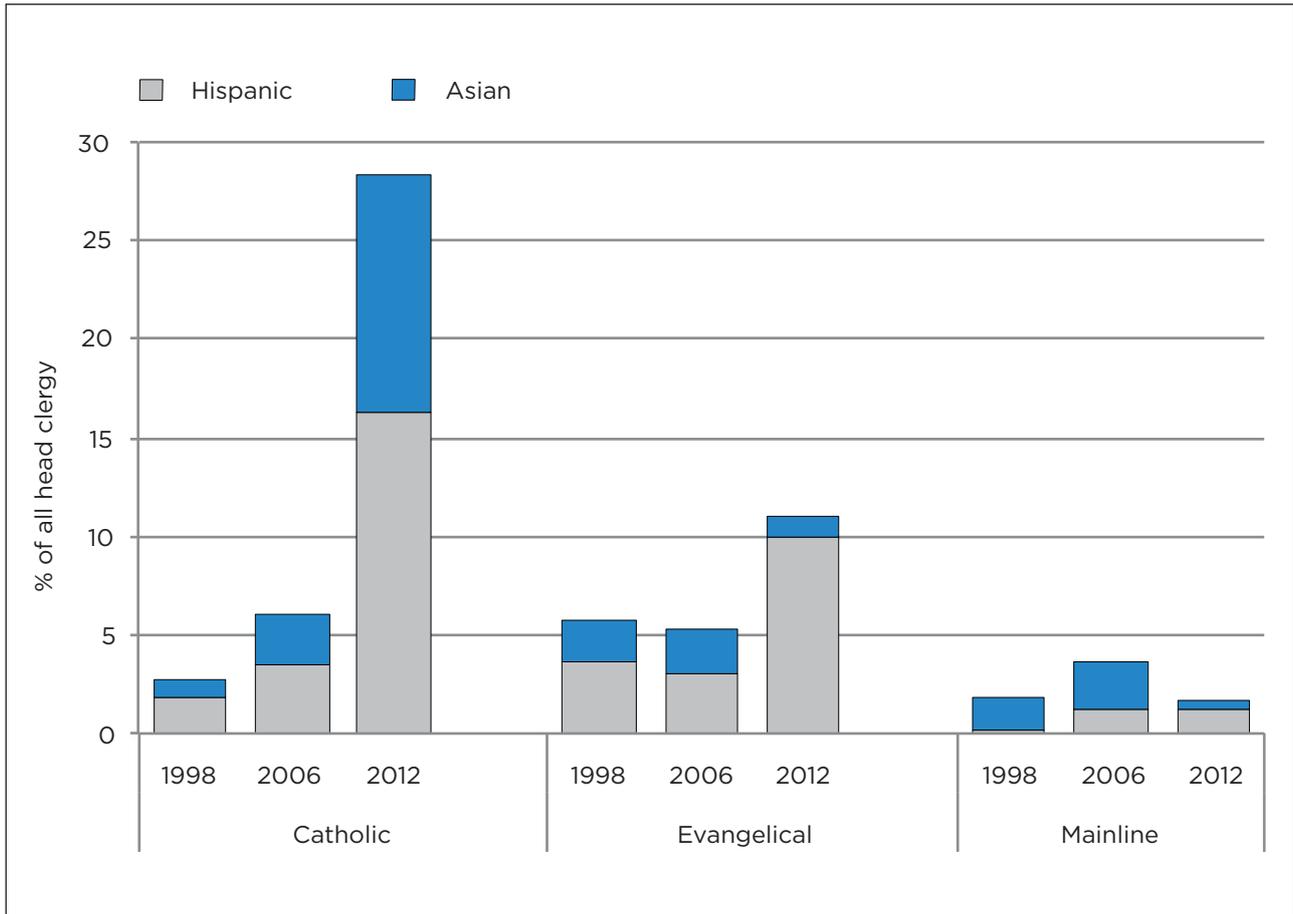


Figure 12 Increasing share of Asian and Hispanic head clergy in traditionally white religious traditions, 1998-2012

secondary ministerial staff (whether full- or part-time) within predominantly white religious traditions are African American, Hispanic, or Asian. Black Protestant congregations have the least ethnically diverse clergy, as virtually all (99%) solo or senior leaders as well as secondary clergy are African American. In a similar manner, mainline Protestant head clergy are almost entirely white and non-Hispanic (96%), although there is more diversity in their secondary clergy.

Overall, the percent of congregations with a white, non-Hispanic, senior leader dipped from 77% in 1998 to 67% in 2012. This decline was driven almost entirely by changes within Catholic parishes, in which the percent of congregations with a white, non-Hispanic pastor decreased from 97% in 1998 to

69 % in 2012. As Figure 12 shows, many more Catholic parishes are now led by Hispanic and Asian clergy. Hispanics led only 2 % of Catholic parishes in 1998, increasing to 17 % in 2012. Asian-led Catholic parishes increased from a barely noticeable 1 % in 1998 to 12 % in 2012. Since these Hispanic and Asian leaders are often immigrants, Roman Catholic head clergy also are much more likely to be born outside the United States (34 %) than those in evangelical (10 %), mainline (3 %), and African American (2 %) congregations. Evangelical congregations did see some change in clergy ethnic composition, most notably an increase in Hispanic leaders from 4 % in 1998 to 10 % in 2012.

## 5.6 Gender of Pastoral Leaders

Despite large percentages of female seminarians and increased numbers of female clergy in some denominations, women lead only a small minority of American congregations. Moreover, we do not detect any increase since 1998 in the overall percentage of congregations led by women. In 2012, women led only 11 % of congregations, with these congregations containing just 6 % of the people who attend religious services.

Of course, the presence of female leaders varies substantially across religious groups. Congregations within mainline Protestant and African American Protestant traditions are much more likely than evangelical Protestant congregations to be led by women. Combining data from all three NCS surveys, about 1 in 5 mainline and African American Protestant churches were led by women, compared to only 3 % of congregations within evangelical traditions. And female leadership in Roman Catholic congregations remains near zero. (It is not literally zero because some priestless parishes are led by women, who usually are members of religious orders.) About 10 % of Jewish Reform and Conservative synagogues are led by women (Fig. 13).

The gender picture is much different when we look at secondary rather than primary ministerial staff. Forty-one percent (41 %) of full-time and 53 % of part-time secondary ministerial staff are female – significantly higher than the 11 % of solo or senior pastoral leaders who are female. Although women are more commonly secondary rather than primary ministerial staff within all major religious traditions, white evangelical churches stand out for having fewer female secondary ministerial staff than congregations in other traditions. Women comprise only 27 % of full-time secondary ministerial staff within white evangelical congregations, compared with 46 % to 56 % for other traditions. Looking at part-time positions, a minority are held by women in evangelical and black Protestant congregations (47 % and 39 %, respectively) while two-thirds of such positions are held by women in Roman Catholic (66 %) and mainline Protestant (65 %) congregations (Fig. 14).

Even within religious traditions with sizable numbers of female clergy, female leaders are more common in smaller congregations. Just looking at mainline Protestant and African American Protestant

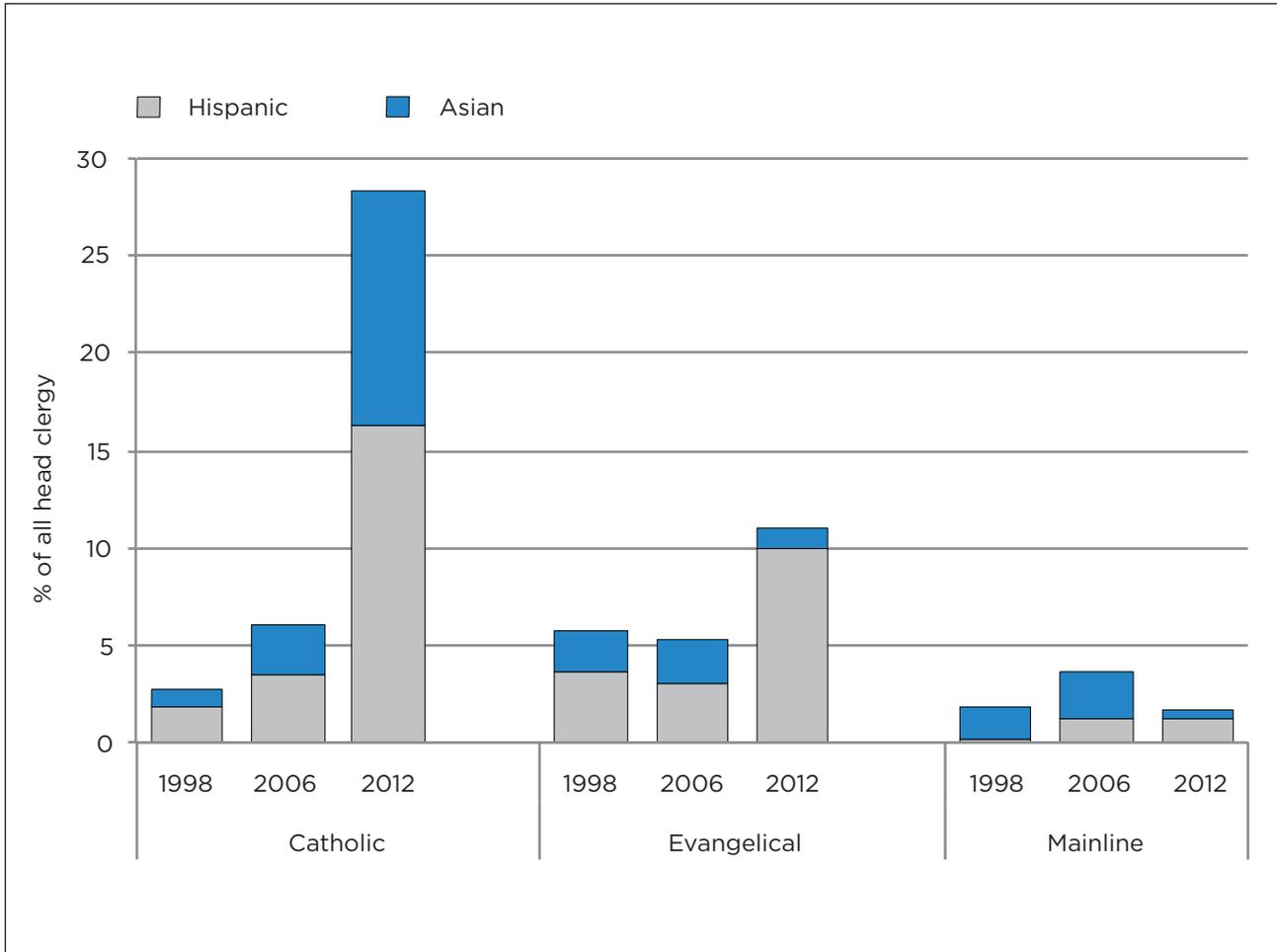


Figure 13 Gender of solo or senior pastoral leaders in U.S. congregations, by religious tradition, 1998–2012

congregations, where the vast majority of female pastoral leaders serve, only 12.4% of churches larger than 200 adults were led by a woman in 2012 (up from 6.1% in 1998). In comparison, 24.6% of congregations with fewer than 100 regular adult participants were led by women in 2012, almost exactly the same percentage of female-led small congregations in 1998 (24.3%). So it looks like women have made some inroads as pastoral leaders in large congregations, as illustrated by several well publicized examples of women called to serve prominent congregations. And other research has shown that women earn salaries comparable to men if they have similar education and experience and if they lead congregations of

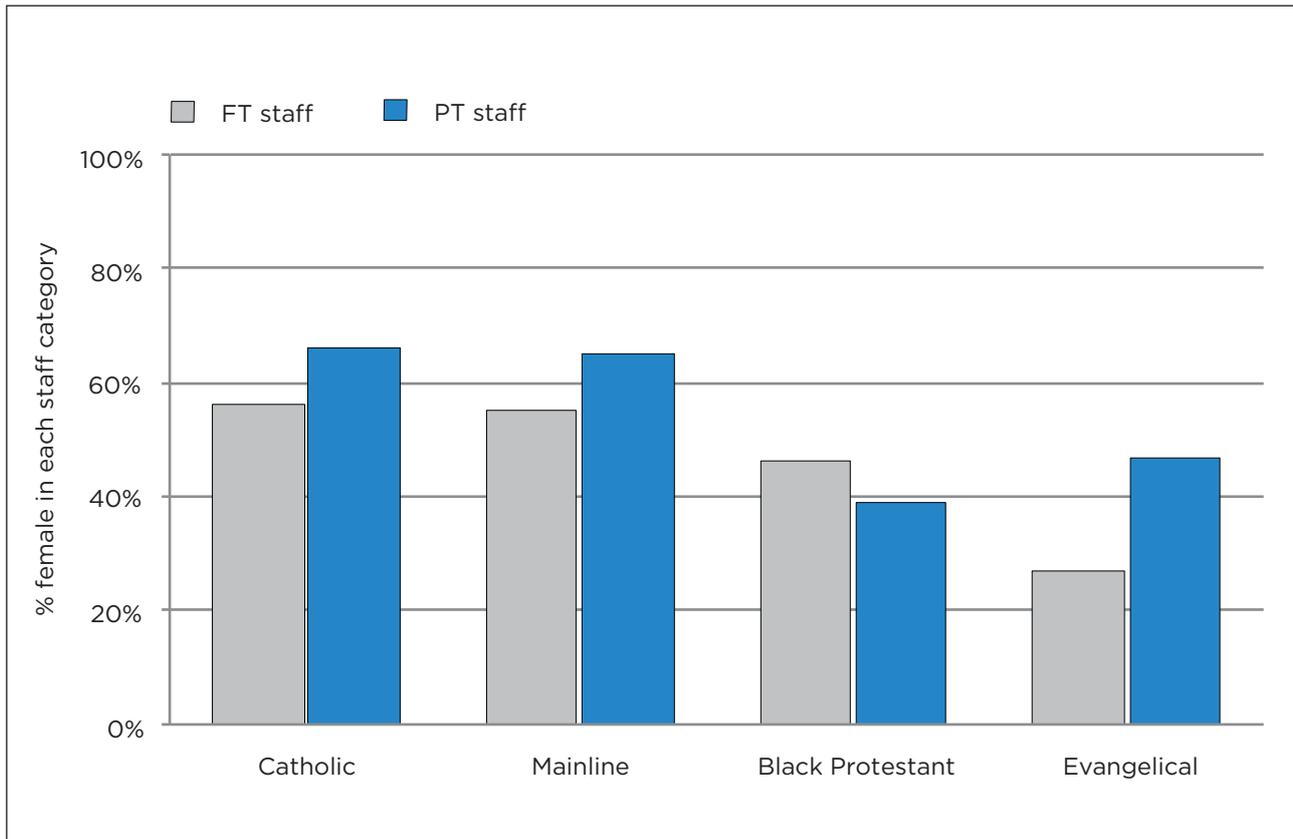


Figure 14 Women in secondary ministerial staff positions, by religious tradition, full-time and part-time, 2012

similar size and member income level.<sup>5</sup> But the overall percentage of congregations led by women is not higher today than it was in 1998, and the stained glass ceiling still makes it less likely that women pastor the largest and best-paying congregations.

Overall, it is hard to miss the general pattern that lower status and lower paid ministerial positions are more heavily female. Women are more likely to lead smaller congregations. Secondary ministerial positions are much more likely than solo or senior pastoral positions to be held by women. And, among secondary positions, part-time positions are more likely than full-time positions to be held by women (except in black churches).

5 Jackson Carroll, *God's Potters: Pastoral Leadership and the Shaping of Congregations*. Wm B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2006, p. 70.

Why are so few congregations led by female clergy? Several factors are important. First, even though the percentage of women enrolling in Master of Divinity programs is much higher than it was 40 years ago, that percentage peaked in 2002 at 31.5% and even fell slightly to 29.7% in 2012, according to the Association of Theological Schools. Second, women with Masters of Divinity degrees are less likely to pursue pastoral ministry than men, although other research has shown that, when women do work as pastors, they report higher levels of job satisfaction than their male colleagues.<sup>6</sup> Third, and perhaps most important, several major religious groups do not permit women to lead congregations, and, even within denominations that have ordained women for decades, many congregations remain reluctant to hire women as their primary leader. Overall, it seems likely that the percentage of congregations led by women will slowly increase in the coming years as clergy from younger, more female cohorts replace clergy from older, almost completely male ones. But the presence of women in congregational leadership will continue to be widely variable across denominations and religious groups, and the overall percentage of congregations led by women likely will remain well below 30% for the foreseeable future. Consistent with developments in other occupations, the trend toward gender equality in American religion is uneven and stalled.

### 5.7 The Aging Clergy

An increasing number of second-career clergy and a decreasing number of young people going to seminary straight from college help to produce a clergy population that is aging faster than the American public as a whole. Delayed retirements in response to the Great Recession also may have contributed to this clergy aging in recent years. The solo or senior leader in the average congregation was 49 years old in 1998, 53 years old in 2006, and 55 years old in 2012. In comparison, the average age of the over-25 American public increased by just three years between 2000 and 2012, from 46 to 49 years. The percent of people in congregations led by someone age 50 or younger declined from 48% in 1998 to 35% in 2012 – a remarkable change in only fourteen years.

Solo and senior pastoral leaders are aging at different paces in different religious groups (Fig. 15). Evangelical head clergy aged the least between 1998 and 2012, while those within mainline and African American Protestant congregations aged the most – seven to nine years – between 1998 and 2012. Catholic priests are as old as mainline and African American ministers in 2012, but they were older than other clergy to start with in 1998, so the change in average age during these years is not as large. Since Hispanic head clergy are significantly younger than those of other ethnicities (with an average age of 44 in 2012 across traditions), it seems likely that the Hispanic proportion of head clergy will continue to grow.

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6 Elaine McDuff, “The Gender Paradox in Work Satisfaction and the Protestant Clergy,” *Sociology of Religion*, v. 62 (2001), pp. 1–21.

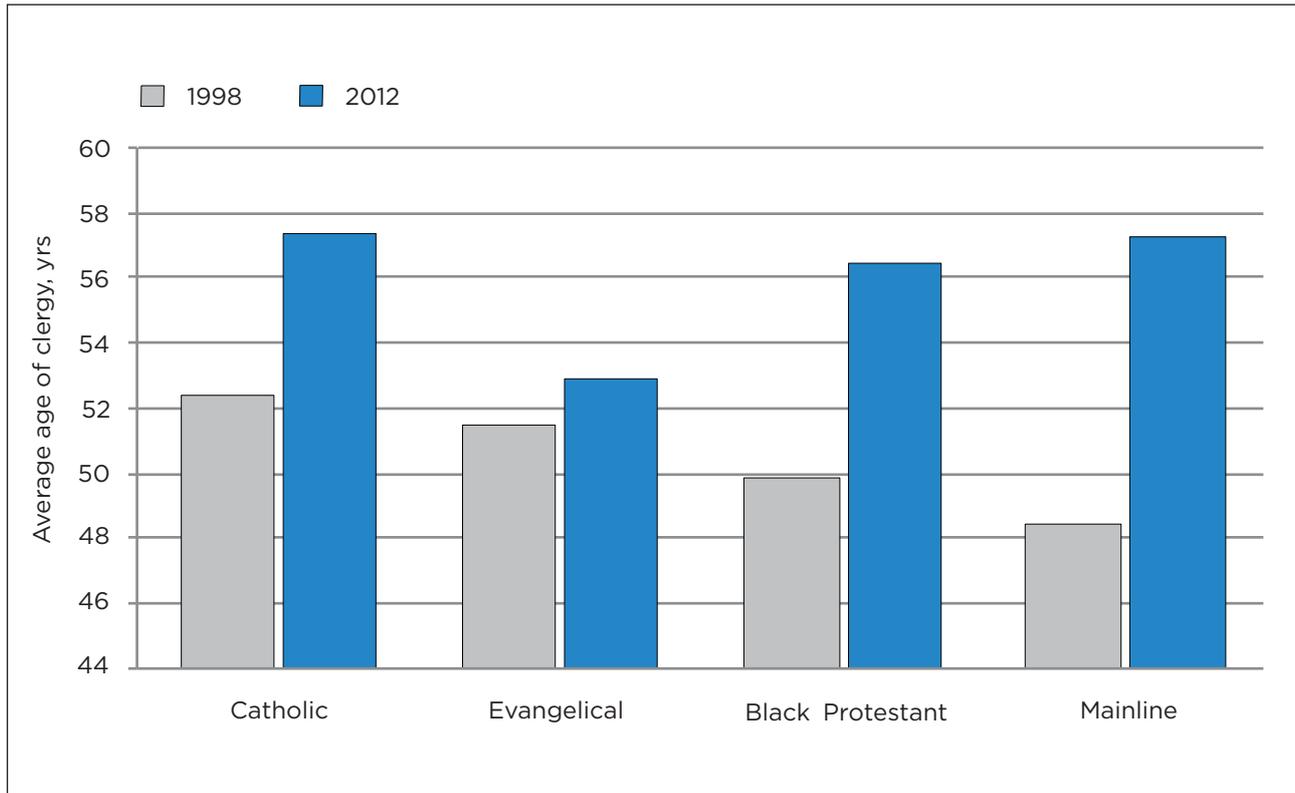
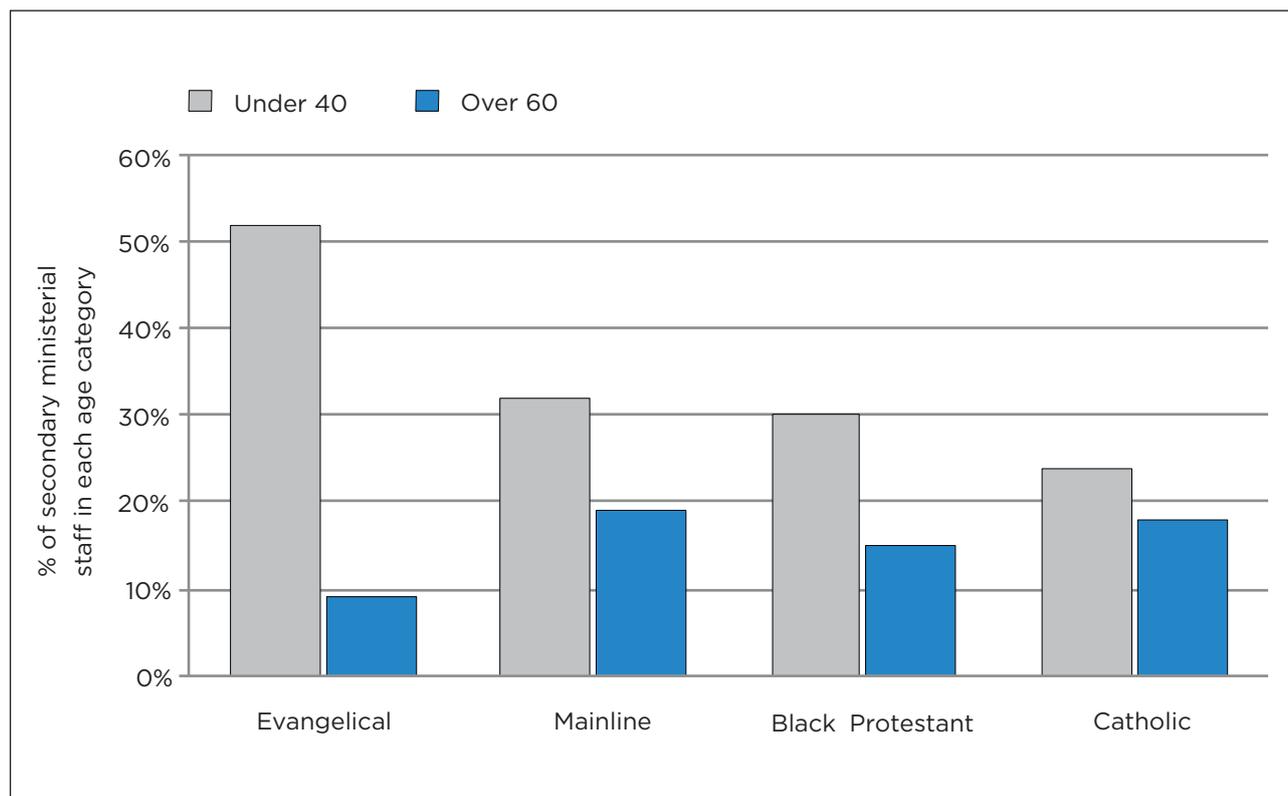


Figure 15 Aging of solo and senior pastoral leaders in U.S. congregations, by religious tradition

Secondary ministerial staff are younger on average than solo or senior pastoral leaders. While only 9% of solo or senior pastoral leaders were under 40 in 2012, two out of five (39%) secondary ministerial staff members are that young. At the other end of the age spectrum, 32% of solo or senior pastoral leaders were over 60 years old in 2012, compared to only 13% of secondary ministerial staff. With more than half of all secondary ministerial staff under 40 and fewer than one in ten over 60, evangelical congregations have the most youthful secondary ministerial staff. Catholics have the oldest secondary staff, with mainline and black Protestants in between (Fig. 16).

### 5.8 Education among Pastoral Leaders

In general, clergy are a highly educated segment of American society, with about half (49% in 2012) of solo or senior pastoral leaders holding graduate degrees. While there is no change in this proportion between 1998 and 2012, the education level of clergy is highly variable across denominations and religious



**Figure 16** Age distribution of secondary ministerial staff in U.S. congregations, full-time and part-time clergy combined, by religious tradition, 2012

traditions. Roman Catholic congregations have the most highly educated congregational leaders (85% with graduate degrees in 2012), closely followed by mainline Protestant congregations (77%). On the other hand, solo or senior pastoral leaders of African American congregations are least likely to have graduate degrees (29% in 2012). Between those extremes, 41% of white evangelical congregational leaders hold a graduate degree. In evangelical and African American Protestant congregations about three out of ten head clergy have no formal education past a high school degree. Across all traditions, the more highly educated clergy tend to lead larger congregations; 71% of leaders in congregations with more than 100 regular adult attendees have graduate degrees, compared with 42% of solo or senior pastor leaders in smaller congregations.

Within every tradition, secondary ministerial staff are less well-educated, on average, than solo or senior pastoral leaders. In 2012, 42% of full-time secondary ministerial staff and 18% of part-time

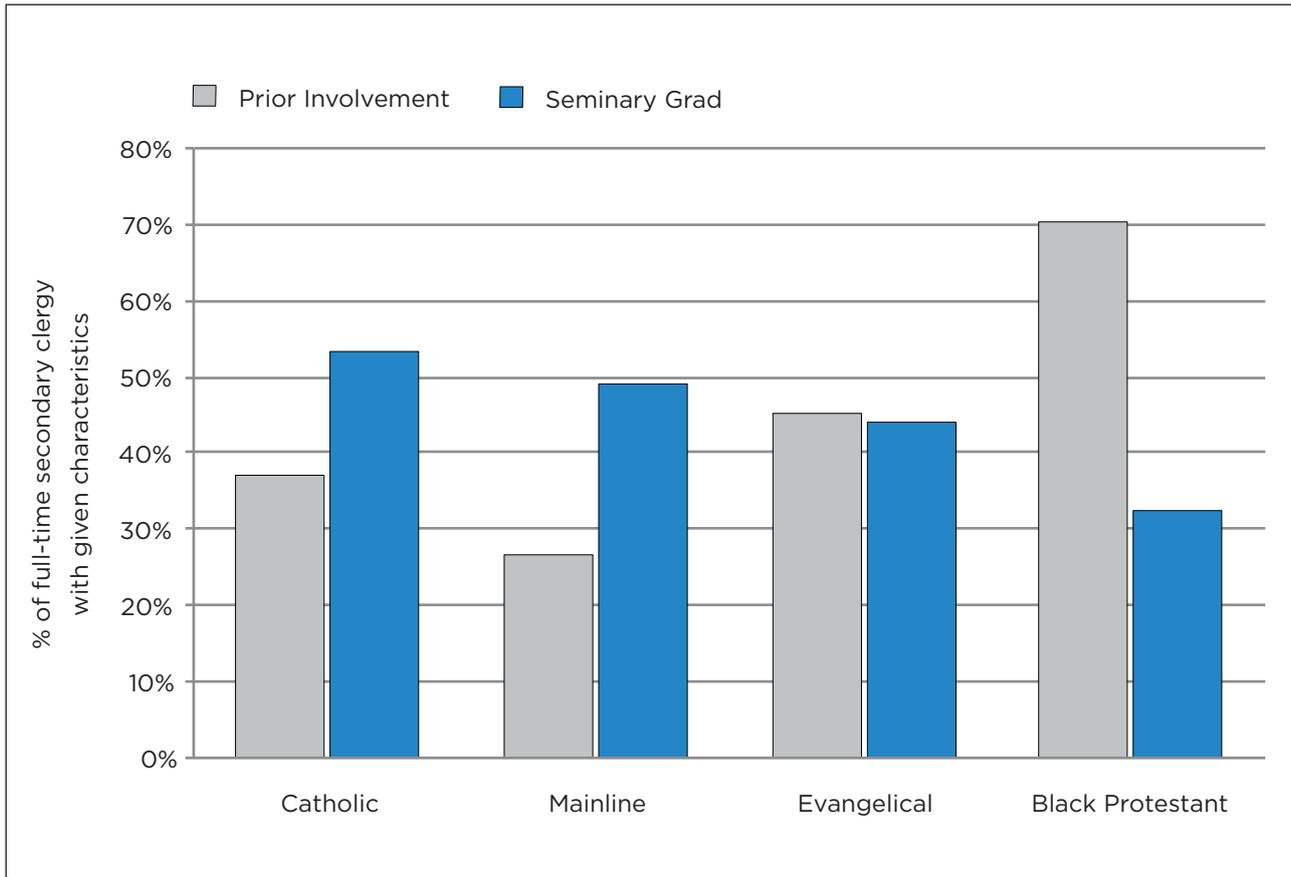
ministerial staff had a degree from a seminary, theological school, or other religious training institution. Note that these are not directly comparable to the head clergy percentages in the previous paragraph because the head clergy percentages refer to graduate degrees while these secondary clergy values refer to credentials that are not necessarily graduate degrees. The percent of secondary ministerial staff with graduate degrees likely would be lower than the percent with any sort of religious leadership credential.

Religious differences in the educational level of secondary ministerial staff look much like the religious differences in the educational level of solo or senior pastoral leaders: Catholics and mainline Protestants have the most educated secondary staff while evangelicals and black Protestants have the least educated secondary staff. The NCS data hint at a possible decline in seminary education among full-time generalist secondary staff within evangelical congregations, but we do not have enough information to conclude with confidence that we see such a trend.

Across religious traditions, 49% of full-time and 55% of part-time secondary ministerial staff in 2012 were drawn from the congregations in which they currently work. (As with staff titles, we have information about secondary staff members' prior involvement in the congregation only for congregations with up to 3 ministerial staff members.) We have comparable information about solo and senior pastors only in 2006, when only 23% came from their current congregations. And congregations with less educated secondary ministerial staff are more likely to draw such staff from within the congregation itself. The secondary ministerial staff within African American congregations are most likely to have been drawn from within the congregation, followed by the secondary staff within evangelical churches. Mainline Protestant congregations are the least likely to hire secondary ministerial staff from within.

Overall, secondary ministerial staff within mainline Protestant and Catholic churches are more professionalized – more highly educated and less likely to be drawn from within the congregations that they serve – than the secondary ministerial staff within evangelical and black Protestant churches. Of course, formal training and prior involvement in the congregation are not mutually exclusive paths to ministerial work. Large congregations are more likely to have people with seminary training among their members who they can draw on for staff positions, and some congregations try to identify future leaders and help them obtain formal training for ministerial work. In general, though, there seem to be two different models of ministerial work operating within American congregations, one that emphasizes formal education and one that emphasizes personal connection to the congregation and on-the-job training, and different religious groups lean towards one or the other of these models. These differences are somewhat visible when looking at solo or senior pastoral leaders, but they are especially evident when looking at secondary ministerial staff.

So, while it's still true that the majority of congregations are led by a white, middle-aged male, pastoral leaders of American congregations are an older and more ethnically diverse group in 2012 than



**Figure 17** Professionalization of full-time secondary clergy as shown by prior involvement in congregation and seminary education, by religious tradition, 2006 & 2012 combined, for congregations with two or three full-time clergy

they were in 1998. There also is a lot of variation across religious groups in the ethnic, gender, and educational composition of clergy, as well as in the prevalence of leaders who serve multiple congregations or are bi-vocational. Perhaps the most interesting and surprising finding about congregational leadership is how few women serve in lead pastoral positions even though dozens of religious denominations are in principle open to female leaders and even after several decades of relatively high female enrollment in seminaries. Demographically, the secondary ministerial labor force within American congregations is quite different from solo and senior pastoral leaders, raising the question of whether, in time, congregations' primary leaders will look more like today's assistant, associate, and specialized ministers. Or will

a combination of theological, economic, and sociological factors continue to prompt congregations to look to different types of people as secondary ministerial staff than for primary religious leaders?

Knowing something about the demographics of pastoral leaders and the range of staff configurations within congregations should help congregations situate themselves within the broader landscape of American religion. It may also help congregational leaders better understand the context within which they work and minister.

## 6. Race and Ethnicity

American congregations have become more ethnically diverse since 1998, and the NCS helps us to better understand the nature of that increased diversity. A key point is that there are two senses in which American congregations have become more ethnically diverse. First, the population of congregations has itself become more diverse. Most noticeably, there are more predominantly Hispanic congregations, with 8% of churchgoers attending predominantly Hispanic congregations in 2012, compared to only 1% in 1998. (By “predominantly” Hispanic we mean that 80% or more of the regular attendees are Hispanic.)

Even more remarkable, however, is the change that is occurring *within* congregations. In short, congregations have become more internally diverse since 1998. The percentage of people attending congregations in which no ethnic group constitutes at least 80% of the regular attendees increased from 15% in 1998 to 20% in 2012. This is a steady and notable increase in the percent of congregations in which no one group has an overwhelming majority of the people. Moreover, as of 2012 only 57% of people attended predominantly white congregations, down from 72% in 1998. Perhaps most striking, only 11% of American churchgoers were in an all-white congregation in 2012, in contrast with nearly 20% in 1998. That means that only about half as many people were in all-white congregations in 2012 than were in such homogeneous congregations as recently as 1998 (Fig. 18).

Focusing on predominantly white congregations – those where at least 80% of adults are white and non-Hispanic – we can see that, even when congregations remain predominantly white, they were less white in 2012 than they were in earlier years. The presence of Latinos, Asians, and African Americans in predominantly white congregations has increased steadily since 1998. In 2012, clear majorities of churchgoers in predominantly white congregations were in congregations with at least some African Americans (69%) or Hispanics (62%), (Fig. 19) and almost half (48%) were in congregations with at least some Asians. In fact, 82% of attendees were in congregations with at least some non-white presence. These are all notable increases since 1998. The increase has occurred mostly among Protestants, who are catching

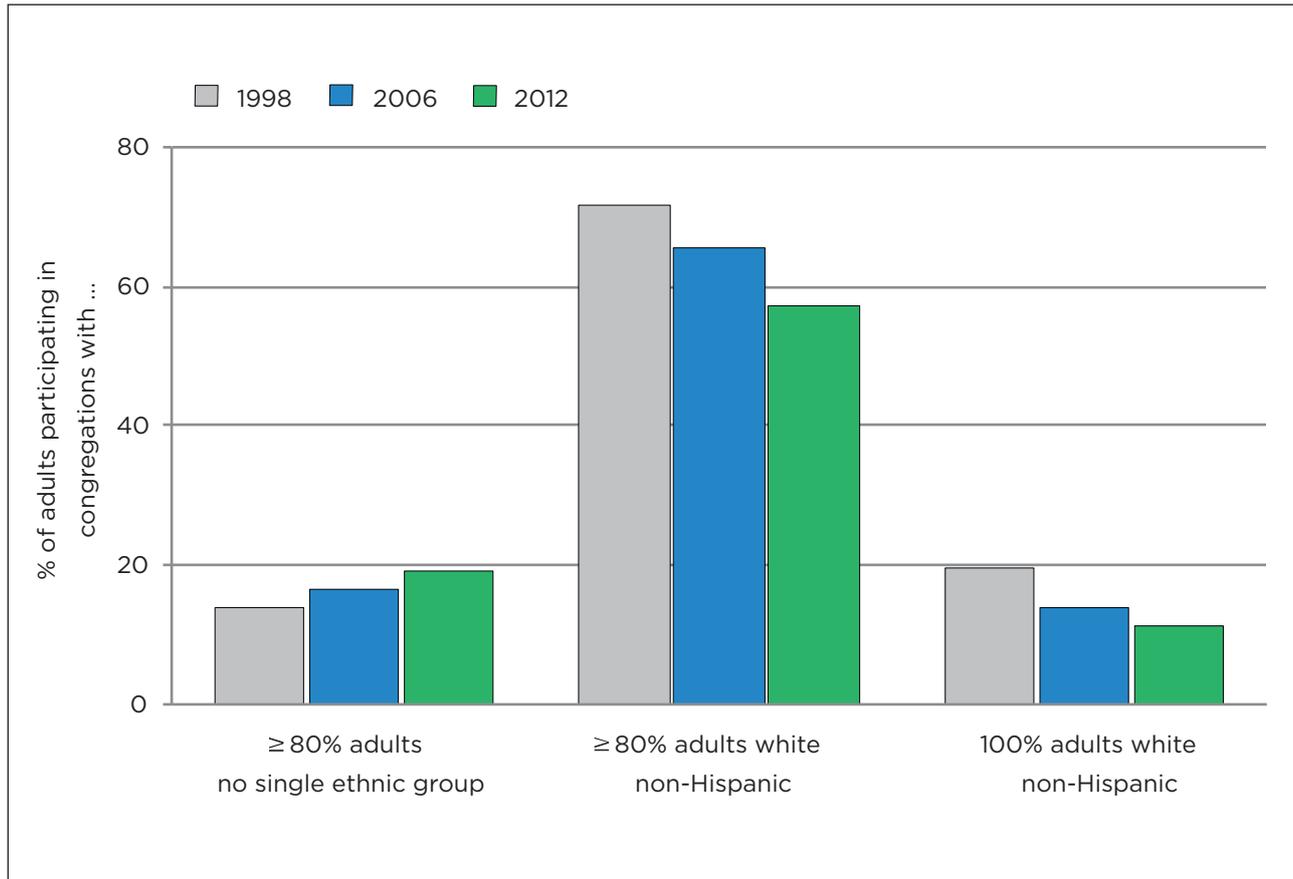


Figure 18 Increasing ethnic diversity over time in U.S. religious congregations

up to Catholics, for whom 90% of parishioners in predominantly white churches were in congregations with at least some non-white or Hispanic people in both 1998 and 2012.

Interestingly, there is no corresponding increase in ethnic diversity within predominantly black congregations. In 2012, 65% of attendees in predominantly black churches were in congregations with at least some non-black participants, but this number has not increased over time. This means that churchgoers in predominantly white congregations are more likely to experience at least a small measure of ethnic diversity in worship than attendees of black congregations.

We do not want to overstate the magnitude or significance of increasing ethnic diversity within American congregations. 86% of American congregations (containing 80% of religious service attendees) remain overwhelmingly white or black or Hispanic or Asian. Still, driven by developments such as

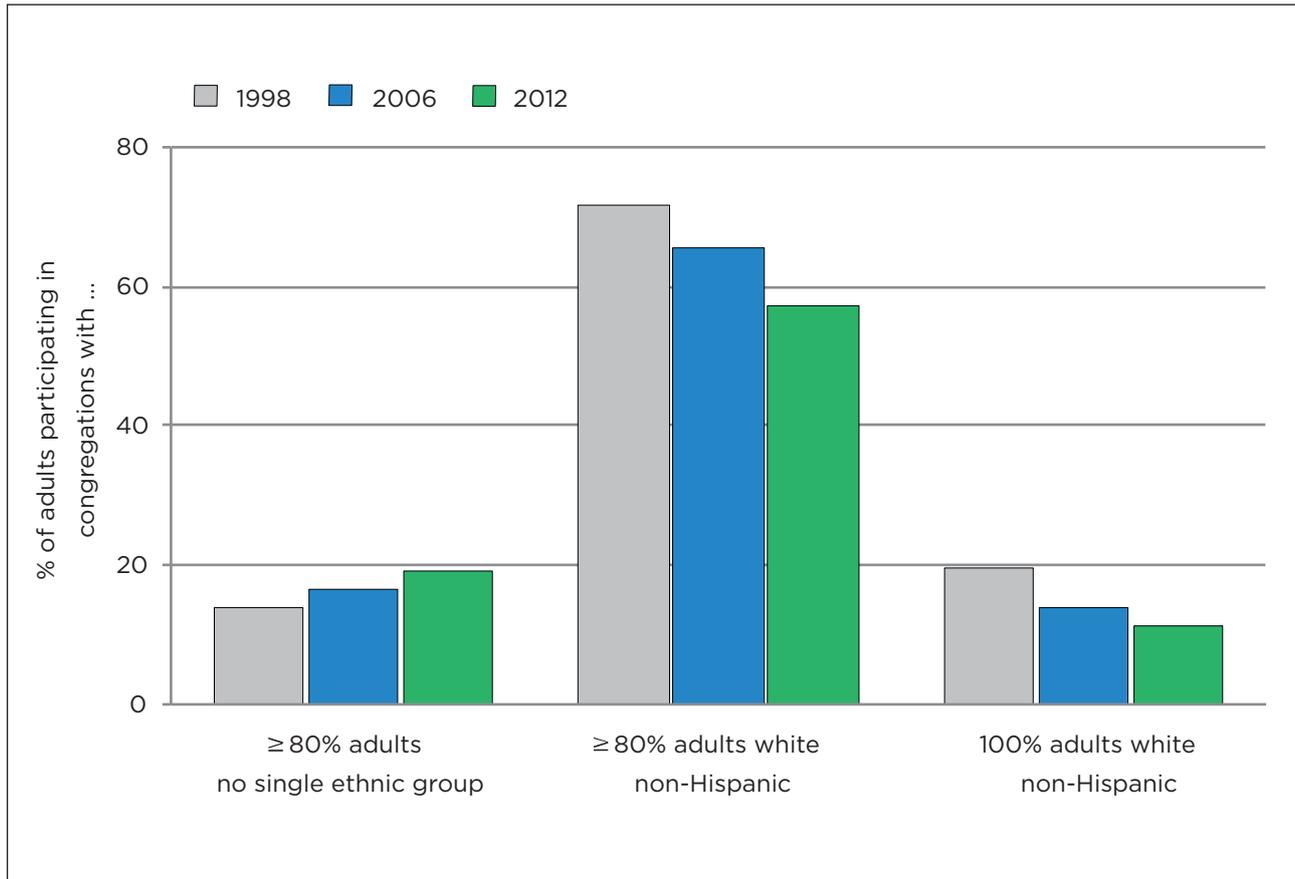


Figure 19 Increasing participation of racial and ethnic minorities in primarily white congregations

immigration, increased interracial marriage, and increased educational attainment among African Americans, there is noticeably more diversity. A growing minority presence in predominantly white congregations represents progress in a society in which race and ethnicity still divide us.

There are some systematic differences between congregations that are more and less ethnically diverse. Diverse congregations – meaning congregations in which no one race or ethnic group comprises more than 80% of the people – are larger. In 2012, people in congregations with at least 250 adults were twice as likely as people in smaller congregations to be in an ethnically diverse congregation (25% versus 12%). Diverse congregations also have more young people. In 2012, only 13% of people attending congregations in which most people were older than 60 were in diverse congregations, compared with 23% attending diverse congregations where fewer than half the people are that old. Interestingly,

congregations with more low-income people were more ethnically diverse in 1998, but that difference all but disappeared in 2012 because ethnic diversity increased to a greater extent in wealthier congregations.

Different religious groups also manifest different diversity patterns. For example, the presence of immigrants increased over time in both Catholic and white Protestant congregations, but Catholic churches are much more likely to have recent immigrants than Protestant churches. As of 2012, 80% of Catholics were in a church with at least some recent immigrants, compared to only 43% for white evangelicals, 33% for white mainline Protestants, and 17% for black Protestants. This heavy presence of immigrants in Catholic churches is of course because most recent immigrants are from Latin America, especially Mexico, and most of those immigrants are Catholic.

The increase in the particular form of diversity within congregations that we have highlighted – more predominantly white congregations with a small number of minority people – raises an obvious question: Does the presence of even a few African Americans, Hispanics, Asians, or recent immigrants in a predominantly white congregation affect that congregation's life in important ways? Will a clergy person with even one black family in the pews talk about race, about the relationships between communities and the police, or about other racially charged issues in quite the same way as he or she would if that family was not there? Will the congregation with even one Latino family approach immigration reform in quite the same way? How this particular form of increasing pluralism might change (or not change) congregations deserves additional research and reflection.

## 7. Civic Engagement

Congregations mainly focus on collective worship, religious education, and pastoral care of their members. At the same time, however, almost all also serve the needy in some fashion, and about one third are politically active, engaging in efforts to promote social or cultural change they deem desirable or prevent social or cultural change they deem undesirable. In this section we explore these aspects of congregations' civic engagement.

### 7.1 Social Services

Serving the needy in some capacity is by far the most common way in which congregations are civically engaged beyond their walls. In 2012, the vast majority of congregations (87%) reported some involvement in social or human services, community development, or other projects and activities intended to help people outside the congregation, including sending small groups of their members to assist people

in need either within the U.S. or internationally. Since larger congregations do more social service work, this means that virtually all Americans (94 %) who attend religious services attend a congregation that is somehow active in this way.

Congregations engage in a great variety of social service activities, but some types of activities are much more common than others. The single most common kind of helping activity involves food assistance, with more than half (52 %) of all congregations – almost two-thirds (63 %) of congregations active in social service – mentioning feeding the hungry among their four most important social service programs. Addressing health needs (21 %), building or repairing homes (18 %), and providing clothing or blankets to people (17 %) also were among the more commonly mentioned activities, though they were much less common than food assistance. Even more rarely mentioned by congregations as one of their most important four social service projects are those requiring longer-term commitments and more intensive interaction with the needy. Programs aimed at helping prisoners, victims of domestic violence, the unemployed, substance abusers, and immigrants, for example, each are listed by fewer than 5 % of congregations as one of their most important four programs, and only 11 % of congregations place any one of these activities on their top-four list (Fig. 20).

Categories like *food assistance* or *housing/shelter* encompass a great deal of variation both in the nature of the specific activity and in the intensity of congregational involvement in that arena. Food assistance, for example, includes donating money to a community food bank, participating in a Crop Walk fundraiser, supplying volunteers who serve dinner at homeless shelter once a month, or operating a food pantry or soup kitchen. Congregations might address housing needs by organizing a team of volunteers to participate in a Habitat for Humanity project, or they might partner with city government to build affordable housing. Health assistance includes providing wheelchair ramps or home cleaning for disabled people, hosting health fairs or speakers on health-related issues, or supporting water projects in poor countries. In general, congregations' social service activities fall on the less intensive side of this range. Only 14 % of congregations have at least one staff member devoting at least a quarter of their work time to social service projects. And, even excluding congregations who say that they do no social services, the median congregation in 2012 spent only \$1,500 directly on its social service activities, which amounts to about 1.8 % of the average congregation's budget.

While these may be small numbers, note that they do not include special offerings collected for specific charitable purposes, the dollar value of their in-kind contributions to community organizations, or the dollar value of staff time in congregations where staff work on social service projects. In fact, congregations' absolute contributions to community well-being are substantial. If 14 % of the more than 300,000 congregations in the United States have a staff person devoting quarter time to social services,

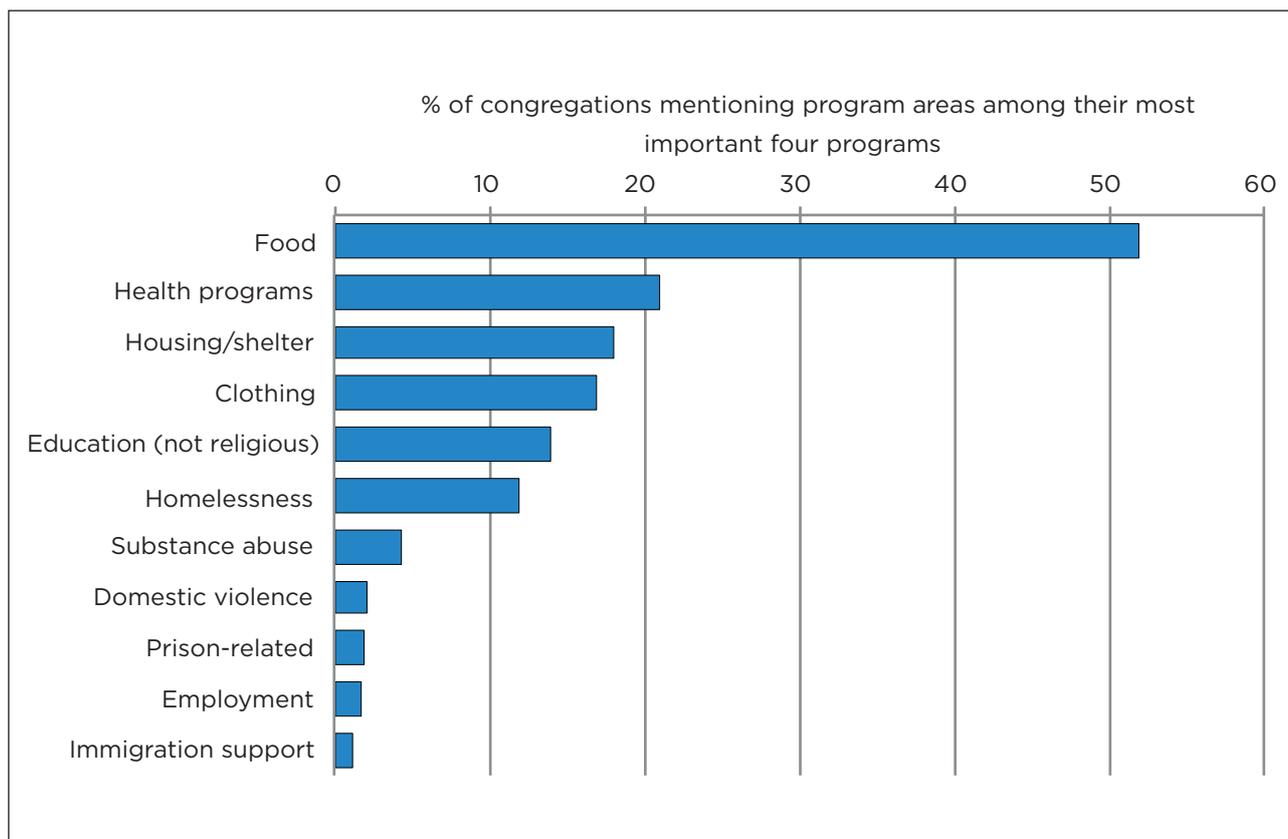


Figure 20 Congregational participation in selected social service program areas, 2012

that means that more than 40,000 congregations are engaged in that way. And, of course, congregations also support social service work through donations to denominational social service organizations like Catholic Charities, Lutheran Social Services, and Jewish Family Services.

Overall, though, the typical and probably most important way in which congregations pursue social service activity is by organizing small groups of volunteers to carry out well-defined tasks on a periodic basis: fifteen people spending several Saturdays renovating a house, five people cooking and serving dinner to the homeless one night a week, ten young people spending a summer week painting a school, ten people traveling to the sight of a natural disaster to provide assistance for a week, and so on. In this light, it is no accident that congregations are most active in areas like food assistance and home repair in which small groups of volunteers focused on a bounded task can be put to best use. Congregations are very good – perhaps uniquely good in American society – at mobilizing small groups of volunteers for this kind of work.

## 7.2 Politics

Congregations' political activity may receive more media attention than their social service work, but fewer congregations are politically active than do social services. In 2012, one-third (34 %) of congregations (containing 55 % of attendees) engaged in at least one of the 8 political activities the NCS asked congregations about. Since larger congregations are more politically active than smaller congregations, and since the number of people exposed to political opportunities in their congregations is at least as important as the number of politically active congregations, we focus both on the percentage of congregations that engaged in various political activities within the past year (or within past two years for voter guides) and the percentage of religiously active people who attend congregations engaging in each activity. The most common type of activities are making announcements about political opportunities during worship services (15 % of all congregations, containing 24 % of attendees), distributing voter guides (13 % of congregations, containing 24 % of attendees), participating in demonstrations or marches (13 % of congregations, containing 25 % of attendees), and registering voters (11 % of congregations, containing 23 % of attendees). The least common forms of political involvement are organizing a group meeting to discuss politics (6 % of congregations, containing 13 % of attendees) and hosting elected officials (5 % of congregations, 11 % of attendees) or political candidates (5 % of congregations, 6 % of attendees) as speakers (Fig. 21).

There are important differences between religious groups in both the extent and character of their congregations' political involvement (Fig. 22). Catholic parishes were the most likely to be politically active, in the sense of reporting at least one type of religious activity in 2012 (75 %). Evangelical Protestant congregations were the least likely to be active (23 %). Black (45 %) and mainline (33 %) Protestants fell in between. Although there are too few Jewish synagogues in the NCS sample to have great confidence in specific numbers, there are enough in the sample to say that synagogues' level of political involvement is about as high as it is for Catholic parishes. While larger congregations are more politically engaged than smaller congregations, the religious tradition differences remain even when comparing similarly sized congregations.

Roman Catholic congregations outpaced congregations in other traditions on several types of activity, but they especially stand out when it comes to participating in demonstrations or marches and lobbying elected officials. African American congregations are particularly likely to participate in electoral politics, hosting more political candidates and government officials as speakers than other groups, and registering voters much more than white Protestant churches, and about as often as Catholic parishes. Mainline and evangelical Protestants engage in politics less often than Catholics and black Protestants, but when they do, mainline churches are most likely to alert their people about opportunities for political involvement (for example, encouraging people to participate in an upcoming political meeting or event),

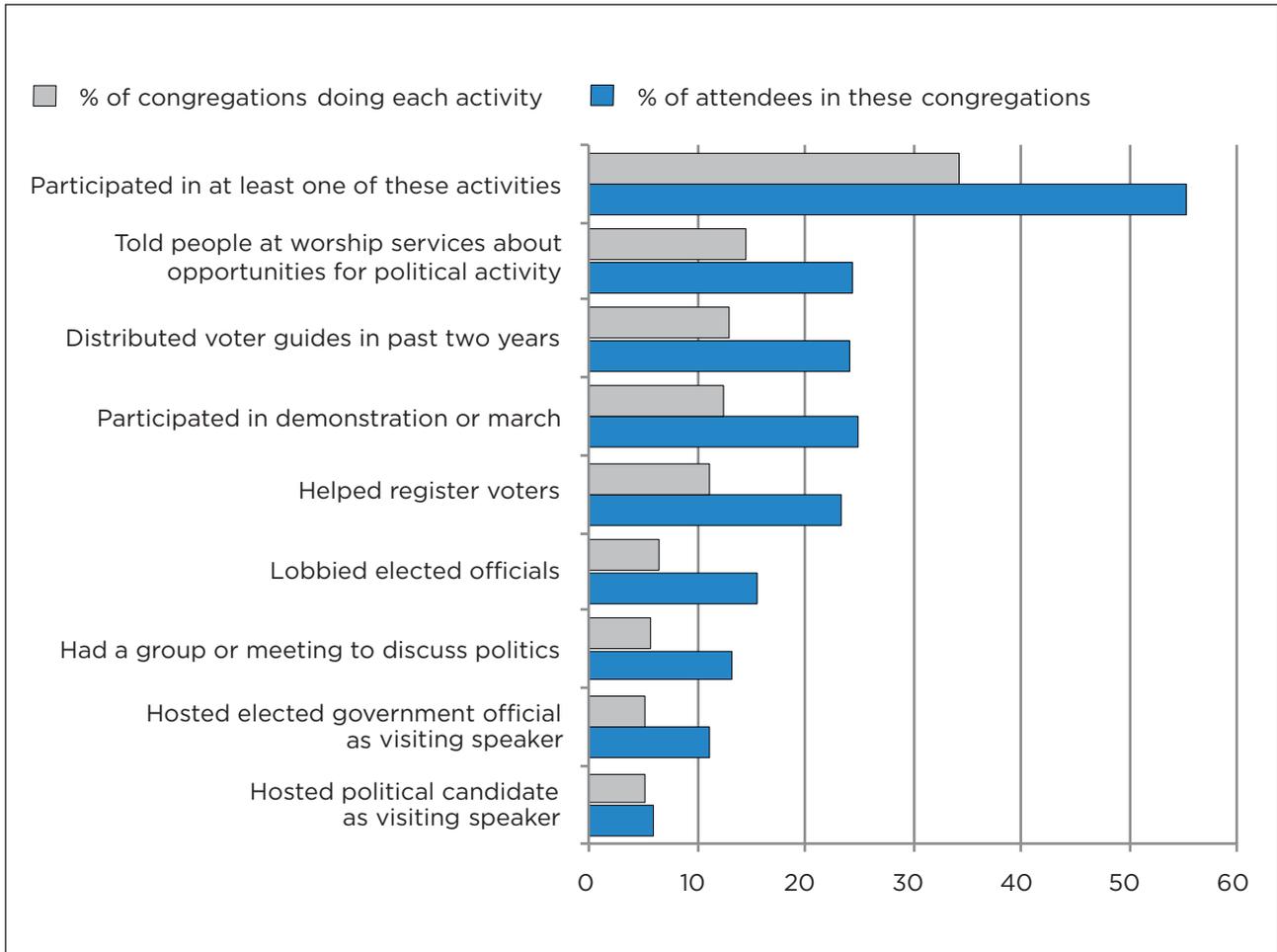


Figure 21 Congregational participation in political activities within the last year, 2012

and evangelical churches are most likely to distribute voter guides. None of these political activities are completely monopolized by a single religious tradition, but clear modalities are present, and these patterns have not changed since the first NCS in 1998.

What issues do politically active congregations address? The 2006 NCS asked congregations that lobbied elected officials or participated in a demonstration to tell us in an open-ended way what issues they lobbied or marched about. The 2012 NCS then asked lobbying and marching congregations if they lobbied or marched about four of the most commonly mentioned issues in the 2006 survey: poverty, abortion, same-sex marriage, and immigration. The results are informative. When congregations lobbied

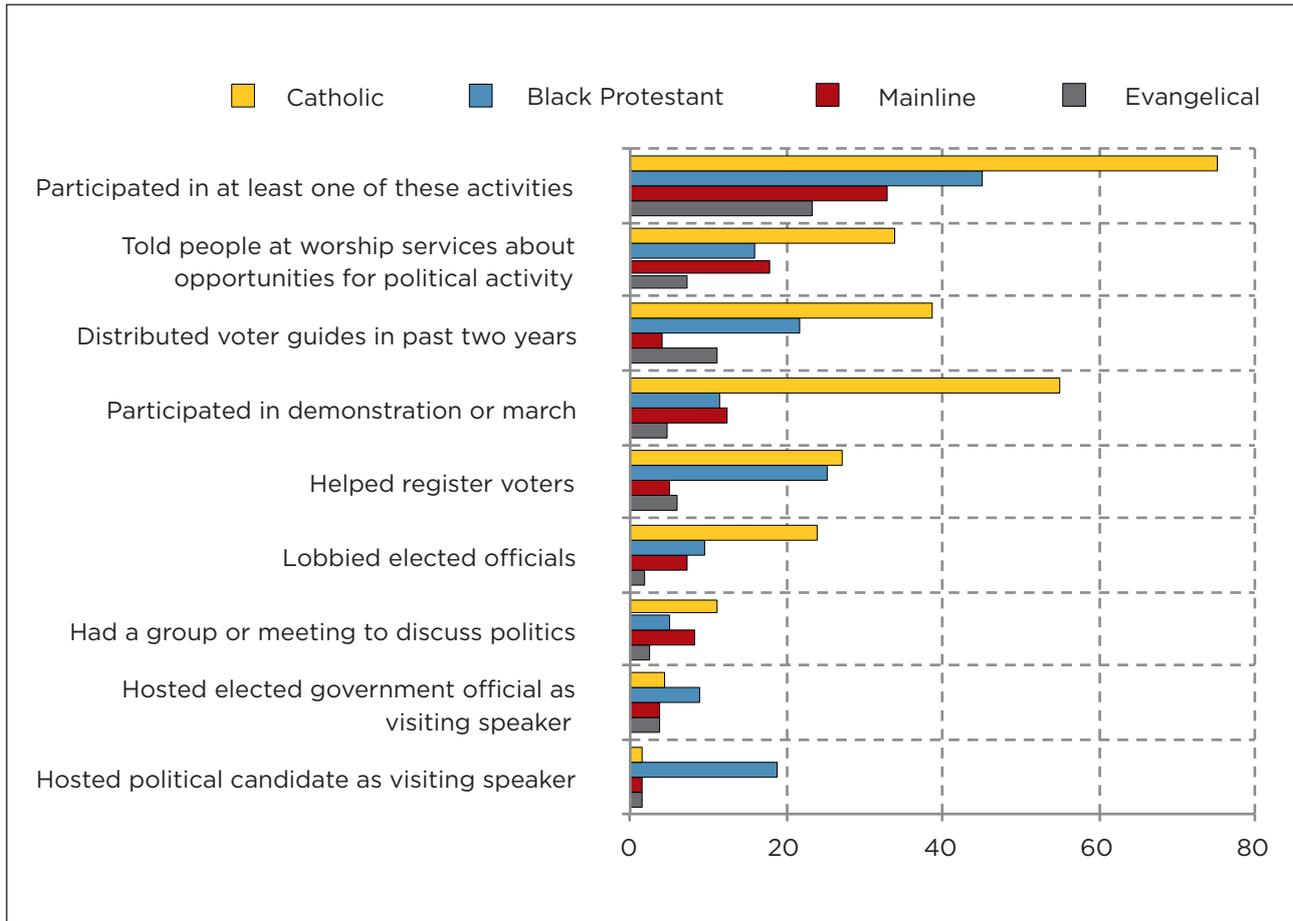
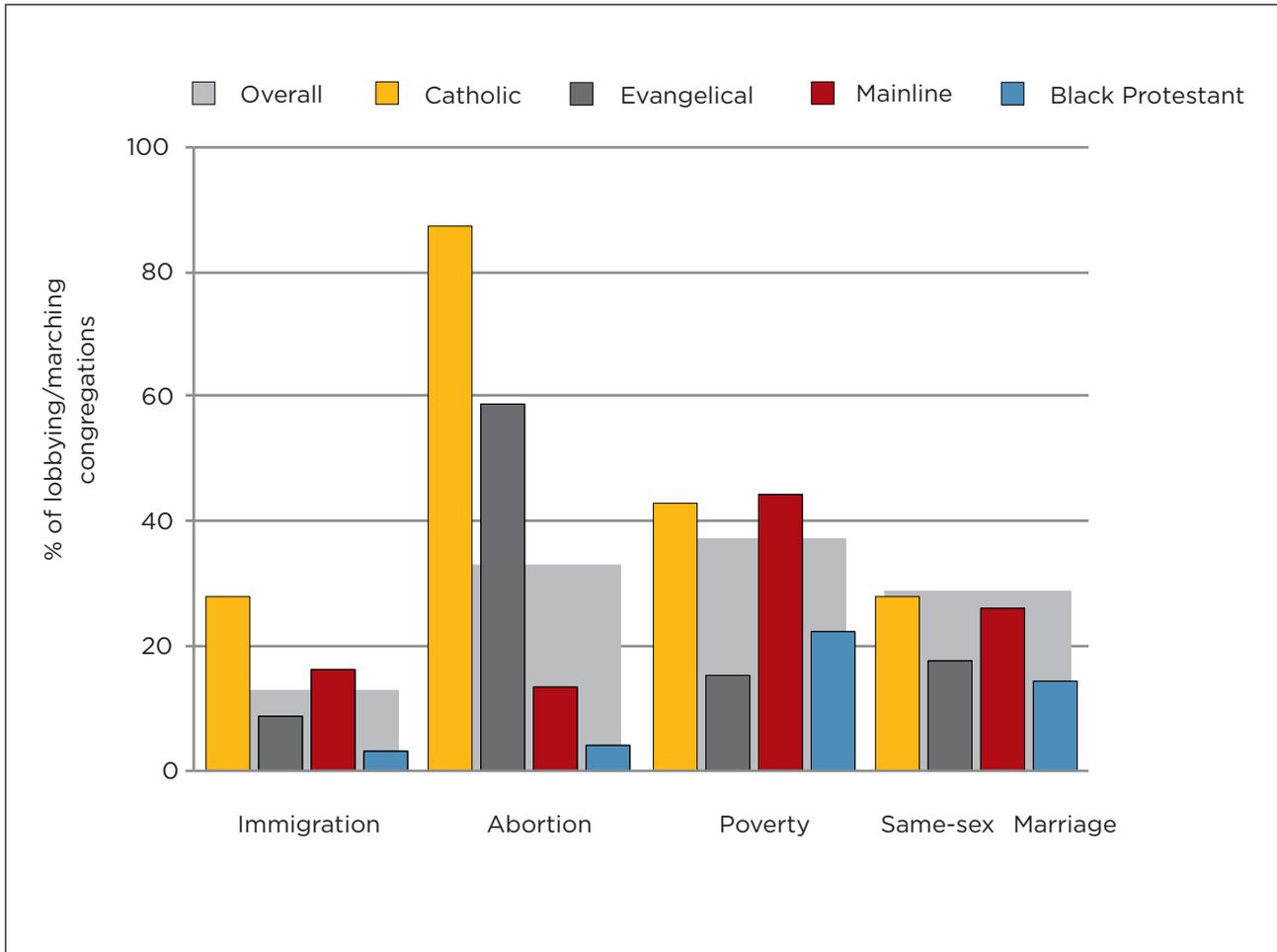


Figure 22 Congregational participation in political activities, by religious tradition, 2012

or marched, they did so in approximately equal measure around issues of poverty, abortion, and same-sex marriage, and less so about immigration. About one third of lobbying or marching congregations focused on poverty (37%), abortion (33%), or same-sex marriage (29%), while 13% focused on immigration (Fig. 23, overall-category). Remember that these numbers are a percentage of the 15% of congregations who lobbied or marched about *something*. Calculated as a percentage of *all* congregations, only 6% lobbied or marched about poverty and only 2% about immigration.

As with types of political activity, religious groups tended to focus on different issues when they lobbied or marched in 2012 (Fig. 23). Compared to other groups, Roman Catholic congregations were especially focused on abortion, and they lobbied or marched about immigration noticeably more than did



**Figure 23** Issues about which congregations lobbied government officials or joined marches and demonstrations, by religious tradition, 2012

congregations in other traditions. Evangelical Protestants were much more active on the issue of abortion than they were on any other issue, while black Protestants were more politically active on poverty-related issues than they were on any other issue. Mainline Protestants and Catholics outpaced other groups when it came to lobbying or marching on poverty-related issues. (Taken as a whole, the varied group of non-Christian congregations lobbied or marched about same-sex marriage at a much higher rate than did Christian congregations, which is why the overall involvement level on that issue is higher than that of any individual Christian religious tradition.)

The open-ended issue responses in the 2006 NCS revealed another key feature of congregation-based political activity. With one important exception, congregation-based lobbying and demonstrating or marching tends to be extremely one-sided. Although many churchgoing Americans are pro-choice, congregation-based activism about abortion is almost entirely on the pro-life side. Although many churchgoing Americans believe in restricting immigrants' rights, congregation-based activism on immigration is almost entirely on the pro-immigrant side. The one exception to this one-sidedness is same-sex marriage and, more broadly, equal rights for gays and lesbians. On this issue, congregation-based political activism is about equally split between the two sides. Religious opposition to same-sex marriage is well-known and well-publicized, but, in fact, there is about as much congregation-based activism on the pro-gay side as there is on the anti-gay side. This is an important corrective to conventional wisdom about how religion and politics intersect on this issue.

Overall, it seems fair to say that, when congregations turn their attention to their surrounding communities, they focus more on serving the needy than trying to effect systemic change. And the most typical way in which congregations serve the needy outside their walls is by organizing small groups of volunteers to carry out well-defined tasks on a periodic basis. Congregations are very good at providing small groups of volunteers, and doing this over and over again, for a variety of purposes, may be congregations' special niche in the complex web of government agencies, nonprofit organizations, extended families, and informal social networks that constitute a community's social services system. Since delivering social services rarely, if ever, is a congregation's primary mission, and since congregation members are not immune to the time crunches created by family and work pressures faced by many Americans, it makes sense that this emerges as a particularly common way for congregations to serve their communities.

## 8. Inclusivity

The cultural and theological divide between theologically and politically liberal and conservative denominations and congregations is a well-established fact of American religion. In 2012, leaders of 12 % of congregations said that their congregations were theologically "more on the liberal side," 63 % said that their congregations were "more on the conservative side," and 25 % said that their congregations were "right in the middle."

Looking beyond these self-descriptions to congregational practices, two of the clearest markers of being liberal or conservative are the extent to which women exercise formal public leadership, and whether or not gays and lesbians are welcome as leaders. Whether or not women and homosexuals are

ordained to full clergy status, and whether or not they can serve in some official lay leadership roles, are issues that often are settled at the denominational rather than the congregational level, at least for congregations affiliated with denominations. But there still is considerable variation among congregations in the norms and practices regarding lay leadership inclusivity even within denominations that officially welcome or officially prohibit women and homosexuals as lay leaders. In this section we describe some of this variation, and significant change over time, in congregations' inclusion of women and homosexuals. Overall, there is a clear trend towards greater inclusiveness of both women and homosexuals, albeit with substantial variation across religious traditions.

## 8.1 Women and Congregational Leadership

As we documented earlier in this report, women lead only a small minority of American congregations, and we do not detect any increase since 1998 in the overall percentage of congregations led by women. At the same time, by asking congregations if a woman could serve as the head clergy person of their congregation, we see that acceptance in principle of female pastoral leaders is much more common than the presence of female pastoral leaders, and it has increased even since 2006. In 2012 women could *in principle* be the sole or senior pastoral leader in 58 % of congregations, up from 49 % of congregations (Fig. 24). This change mainly indicated increased acceptance of female leaders at the congregational level among Protestants.

At the same time, there are large differences among Protestants in the acceptance of female head clergy, as 90 % of congregations within mainline denominations accept female leaders in principle, compared to 70 % of black Protestant churches and only 41 % of white evangelical churches.

Unsurprisingly, congregations are more accepting of women exercising leadership in ways other than full pastoral status. In 2012, 68 % of congregations allowed women to preach at a main worship service, 79 % allowed women to hold any volunteer position a man can hold, 86 % allowed women to teach classes containing adult men, and 87 % allowed women to serve on the congregation's governing body (Fig. 24). If there is a trend, it is in the direction of greater inclusion of women in these lay leadership roles, although it may be that gender equality has extended about as far as it will go when it comes to teaching classes and serving on governing boards, with only about 10 % of congregations disallowing women from those roles.

Religious tradition differences in the acceptance of women in lay leadership positions mainly mirror their differences in accepting women as head clergy. Nearly all white mainline Protestant congregations allow women to serve in any of these lay leadership capacities, and white evangelical Protestant churches are the most restrictive, with about one-quarter prohibiting women even from serving on a governing board or teaching a class containing adult men. Black Protestant churches approach white mainline

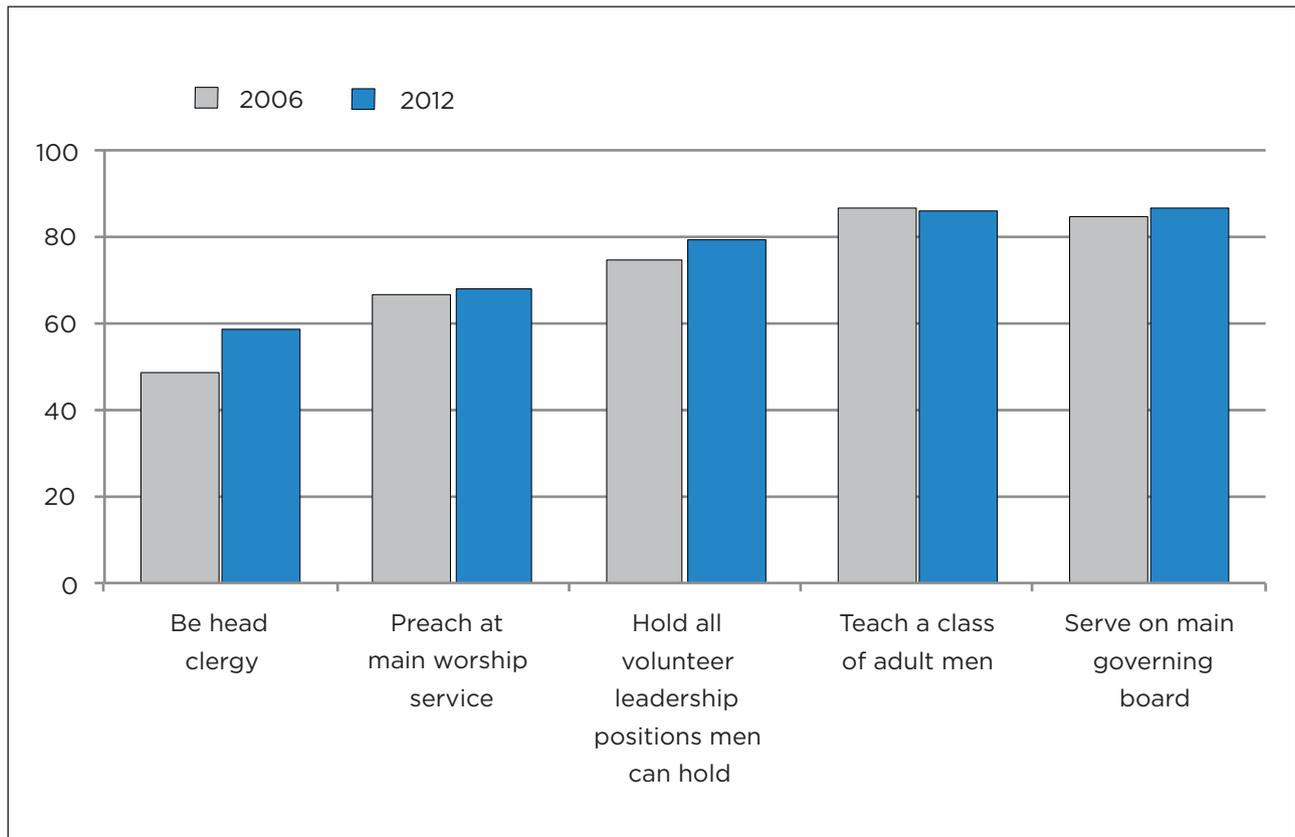


Figure 24 Percent of congregations that allow women to participate in selected activities

churches in their levels of gender inclusiveness for lay leadership. The Catholic pattern stands out because Catholic parishes are highly inclusive of women as lay leaders (with about 90% allowing women to serve in any lay leadership position, including the governing board and teaching classes containing men) while universally excluding women from the priesthood and (almost universally) also from preaching.

## 8.2 Gays and Lesbians

Increasing acceptance of gays and lesbians is of course one of the most well-known public opinion shifts in recent years. This change also seems to be happening at a remarkably fast pace within religious congregations. The 2006 and 2012 NCS's asked whether or not an openly gay or lesbian couple in a committed relationship would be permitted to be full-fledged members of the congregation, and whether or not such people would be permitted to hold all volunteer leadership positions open to other

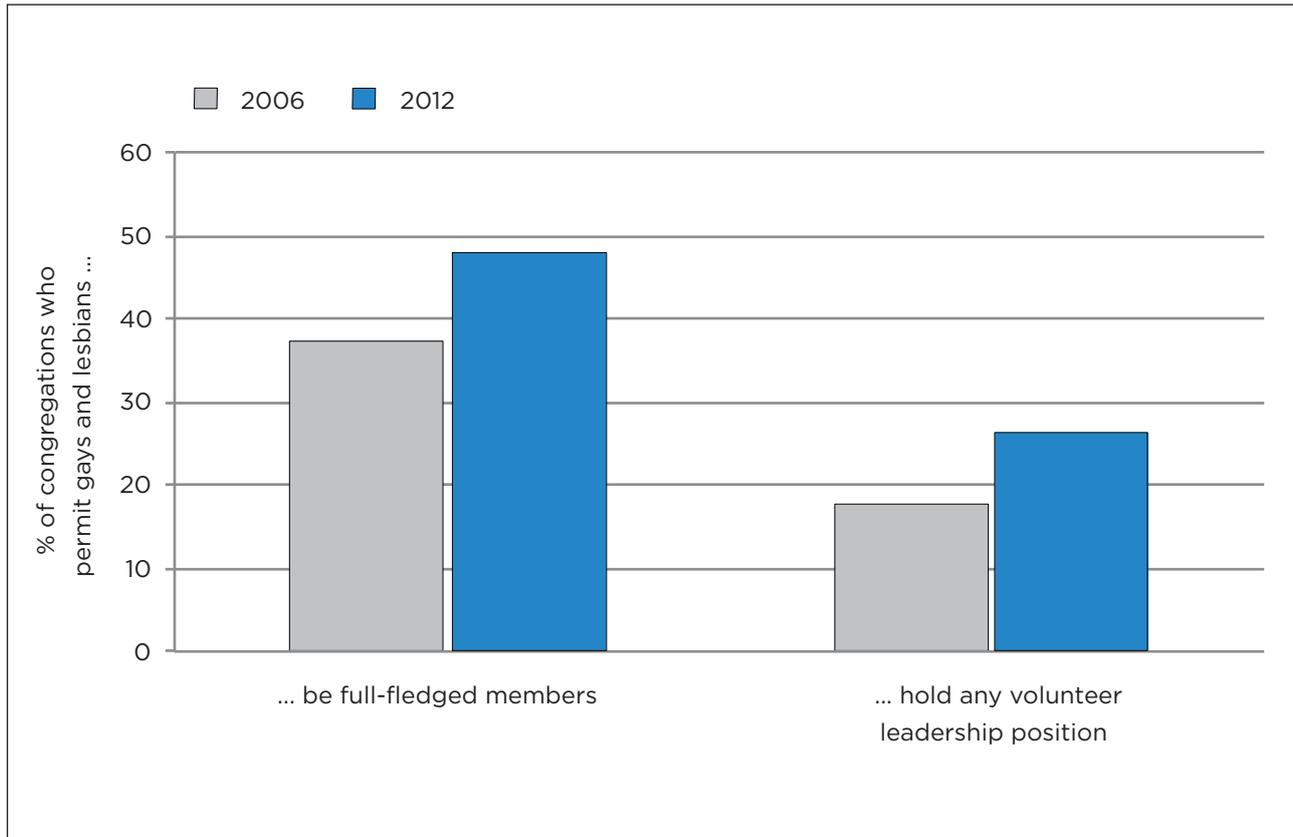


Figure 25 Increasing acceptance of gays and lesbians in U.S. congregations

members. In just six years, the number of congregations whose leaders said that gays and lesbians could be full-fledged members increased from 37% to 48%. The number of congregations whose leaders said that no volunteer leadership positions were closed to gays and lesbians increased from 18% to 27% (Fig. 25).

Like with gender inclusiveness, these aggregate statistics hide major differences across religious groups in their acceptance of gays and lesbians. In contrast to the overall trend, for example, there seems to be less acceptance of gays and lesbians among Catholic churches in 2012 than there was in 2006. The number of Catholic parishes whose leaders said that gays and lesbians could be full-fledged members decreased from 74% to 54%. The number of Catholic parishes whose leaders said that no volunteer leadership positions were closed to gays and lesbians declined from 39% to 26%. This decline may reflect a backlash among some Catholic Church leaders against the legalization of gay marriage, a backlash

evident in well-publicized instances of long-term teachers in Catholic schools losing their jobs, and long-term members denied communion, after marrying a same-sex partner. This result should not be interpreted as declining acceptance of gay and lesbian members and volunteer leaders among the Catholic rank and file, who, in line with national public opinion trends, have become more accepting of homosexuality.

Evangelical Protestant churches are the least likely to accept gay and lesbian members (23 %) and leaders (4 %). There may be greater acceptance of gay members among evangelical churches (up from 16 % in 2006, an increase that is not statistically significant), but there is not even a hint of increased acceptance of gay lay leaders. At the same time, however, the increased acceptance of gays and lesbians as members among black Protestant churches (from 44 % of congregations in 2006 to 62 % in 2012) and mainline Protestant churches (from 67 % of congregations in 2006 to 76 % in 2012) was remarkably large for just a six-year period. Similarly, gays and lesbians as volunteer leaders were increasingly accepted in black Protestant churches (from 7 % in 2006 to 22 % in 2012) and in mainline Protestant churches (from 54 % in 2006 to 63 % in 2012). Therefore, the growing acceptance of gays and lesbians in congregations as a whole is driven by changes among these two groups.

None of this means that congregations that say they restrict homosexuals have no gay or lesbian participants or leaders; nor does it mean that there are no leadership opportunities for women among groups that limit those opportunities. We also should not assume that congregations that have no official restrictions are truly and fully inclusive and welcoming of all who come. There surely are congregations who consider themselves fully inclusive but in which a gay couple would not feel welcome or women would encounter obstacles to leadership. The gap between ideals and practices often is a large one. Mainline or evangelical, liberal or conservative, inclusive or exclusive – these labels may sometimes describe ideals more accurately than practices. Still, there are real differences in practice, and together these practices and ideals constitute important lines of division within American religion and, more broadly, within American culture.

## 9. More Findings from the National Congregations Study

We have highlighted some of the most interesting NCS findings, but there are many additional observations that we do not have space to pursue here. For example:

*Some congregations provide health services for their members and broader communities.* Twenty-eight percent (28 %) of congregations have some organized effort to provide members with health-focused programs, and 29 % have a group that exercises together or otherwise promotes physical activity. Many congregations also have groups that support people with terminal illness or chronic health problems (47 %), people struggling with drug or alcohol abuse (38 %), people with mental illness (23 %), and people with HIV/AIDS (7.5 %).

*More congregations are paying attention to management of congregational and personal finances.* The number of congregations that held meetings within the past year to discuss managing congregational finances increased from 47 % in 1998 to 66 % in 2012. Similarly, the number of congregations with a group or meeting that focused on personal finance management increased from 22 % of congregations in 1998 to 31 % in 2012.

*Spanish-speaking and Hispanic-heritage congregations have become a more important component of American Christianity, and there is substantial diversity among the congregations attended by Hispanics.* To get a better idea of how Hispanic people and congregations fit within the larger religious picture, and to better document diversity among Hispanic congregations, the 2012 NCS included an oversample of congregations attended by Hispanics. Most Hispanic churchgoers are in Catholic churches (63 %), but almost one third (31 %) are in evangelical Protestant congregations. About half of Hispanic churchgoers (48 %) attend predominantly Hispanic congregations, and about one-third (34 %) attend a congregation with an Hispanic senior or solo pastoral leader. Nearly half (43 %) attend a congregation with a Spanish or bilingual Spanish-English main worship service, and an additional 31 % attend a congregation with at least one worship service in Spanish or bilingual Spanish-English.

*International connections are significant for many congregations.* Within the last year, almost one third (30 %) of congregations, containing 50 % of religious service attendees, hosted a visiting preacher or speaker from outside the United States. Many congregations (27 %) sent a group abroad to help people in need, and 19 % sent money directly to another congregation outside the United States. About 1 in 5 congregations (18 %) have recent immigrants among their regular participants, and 10 % of head or solo clergy were born outside the United States.

## 10. Conclusion

Many people are familiar with at least one religious congregation – their own. But you gain important perspective from seeing your own congregation within a larger context. Is your congregation typical or atypical? Does it exemplify current trends, or is it resisting those trends? The NCS provides the context that makes it possible to answer these questions and others. We have highlighted some of the most important findings, but there are many more to find in our reports, and even more waiting to be discovered in the data.<sup>7</sup> We hope you find something in this report that is informative, thought-provoking, or useful in the ongoing effort to better understand American religion.

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<sup>7</sup> For more information visit us at: <http://www.soc.duke.edu/natcong/>.

# The Barometer of Parish Performance

## A typology of Protestant parishes in Germany by the Social Sciences Institute of the Evangelical Church in Germany (SI of the EKD)<sup>1</sup>

Hilke Rebenstorf

In Germany, there is no really established tradition of studies relating to parishes and congregations. Since the 1960s such studies have been carried out erratically rather than systematically; and whereas up until the 1960s the focus still lay heavily on sociological observations of church parish members and their relationship to the local community and its representatives, later research was more inclined to be concerned with issues of organizational sociology and with analysing examples of best practice with a view to determining what conditions could promote the growth of the church. This specific orientation of research into church parishes or congregations gave rise to what appeared to be a systematic blind spot. There are, for example, virtually no descriptions that go beyond the anecdotal of the parishes' perceptions of themselves, their activities, their involvement in the community, their relationships with other church organizations and with the superordinated tiers of ecclesiastical management, or the motivation of the professional staff and the honorary or volunteer workers in the parishes.<sup>2</sup> There are a number of reasons for this blank space on the research map,<sup>3</sup> one of which is certainly to be seen as being closely

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1 *Translator's note:* "EKD" = "Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland". The EKD itself translates its name into English, for example on the English pages of its website, as "Evangelical Church in Germany"; but in fact "evangelisch" means "protestant" rather than "evangelical". The EKD is not "evangelical" as that term is normally understood in English. At various points in the following text I have therefore used "Protestant" rather than "Evangelical" to refer to the EKD.

2 Exceptions to this are studies of the Christian ministry as a profession, most of which are however restricted in their coverage to a single church province (e.g. Kronast 2005; Magaard/Nethöfel 2011; Schendel 2014), and isolated studies relating to honorary or voluntary workers (e.g. Horstmann 2013), which however generally did not circulate outside the church and so did not come to the knowledge of a broader public (though this does not apply to the parish studies conducted by Herbert Linder, which however are restricted to the Lutheran Church in Bavaria). Furthermore, the focus lay clearly on questions as to how parishes are organized, leading to the development of a typology (cf. Lindner 1994), rather than on more comprehensive studies of the kind that are here found to be lacking.

3 For an overview see Rebenstorf et al. 2015, 3–33; Rebenstorf 2017.

related to the organizational structure of the churches in this country – an organizational structure that is fundamentally different from that existing in the United States. In order to illuminate the specific nature of the German parochial structure in the context of the international comparisons that this volume is concerned with, this contribution opens with a brief overview of how the Evangelical (Protestant) Church in Germany is organized and of the position of the individual parish within it.<sup>4</sup> This is followed by a presentation of the “Barometer of Parish Performance” compiled by the Sozialwissenschaftliches Institut der Evangelischen Kirche in Deutschland (SI – EKD: the Social Sciences Institute of the Evangelical Church in Germany), explaining the context in which it has been created, the design of the study, and some of its core findings and of the questions that remain unanswered.

## 1. The structure of the EKD and the position of the parish within it

The Evangelical Church in Germany (EKD) is the umbrella organization of (at present) 20 Protestant member churches or provinces, Lutheran, Reformed and Uniate; only in the case of Bavaria do the territorial boundaries of one of these churches coincide with those of a *Land*, i.e. a political state of Germany. Until the demise of the German Empire, the Protestant Church had the status of an established state church, and enjoyed the privileges associated with that status. The Roman Catholic Church enjoyed a comparable status, guaranteed by concordats.<sup>5</sup>

When the state churches were disestablished in 1919, the relationship between the Protestant church and the State was regulated anew in a whole host of contractual agreements: independently of this, the concordats with the Roman Catholic Church remained in existence or in some cases were renegotiated. These ecclesiastical agreements and concordats conferred upon the two Christian denominations the status of institutions incorporated under public law. This status, together with a number of Articles in

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4 Such a brief presentation for purposes of comparison must of necessity dispense with detail; it cannot and is not intended to be a comprehensive discussion of ecclesiastical theory or history.

5 In the years just before and after the establishment of the German Empire there was a tense relationship between the State and the Roman Catholic Church, expressed in what became known as the “Kulturkampf” (“Cultural Struggle”). This led to a realignment of the relationship between the two sides, but in the end did not bring about any abatement of the Church’s privileged position (see for example the overviews presented by Kinzig 2009; bpb 2015; Nicklis 2012). For a comprehensive presentation from a sociohistorical perspective of how more recent church history fits into the overall picture, see also Kaufmann 2011.

the 1919 Weimar Constitution, enabled the Churches to retain a number of their previously existing privileges. The greater part of the laws and agreements adopted at that time were taken over by the Federal Republic of Germany in 1949; relevant articles in the Weimar Constitution were incorporated into the Basic Law (Constitution) of the Federal Republic.<sup>6</sup> The Churches are, for example, explicitly entitled to give religious instruction in state schools, they have seats and voting rights on the Supervisory Boards of the public-service broadcasting organizations, are represented on parliamentary Ethics Commissions, are consulted in legislative procedures etc. Above all, however, they are largely permitted to manage their internal affairs autonomously, including, among other things, in respect of conditions of employment, in which field they are explicitly allowed to deviate from the provisions of general employment law and to some extent also from those of the Anti-Discrimination Act.<sup>7</sup> A key aspect of these agreements for the Churches and thus also for the parishes is the right to levy church tax, which is collected (in return for a fee) by the state tax authorities. Accordingly, church membership is recorded by the state authorities concerned. This means that a person who wishes to leave the church has to make a declaration to that effect at a register office or local court or before a notary public; declaring it only to a church authority is not sufficient.

Each of the member churches of the EKD has its own constitution or statutes governing among other things the status of the parishes and the rights and duties of the clergy and the parochial church councils, whose members act in an honorary capacity. In some member churches there are separate parish regulations specifying these things in more detail. The federal structure of the EKD gives rise to a number of variations on what is fundamentally the same organizational model. What is common to all is synodical government, under which there are synods at all hierarchical levels both within any member church and at the EKD level, which decide on legislation and statutes, endorse the actions of ecclesiastical governing bodies, elect the members of those bodies and the like. Even though the fundamental principle is that at least half of the members of a synod must be lay people and that the members of a synod are elected as delegates of the next lower level in each case, there are nevertheless substantial dif-

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6 Article 140 of the Basic Law of the Federal Republic of Germany provides that Articles 136, 137, 138, 139 and 141 of the Weimar Constitution shall form part of the Basic Law. These articles, among other provisions, guarantee of the freedom of religious association and determine the status of the Churches as bodies incorporated under public law, their right to levy church tax, their right to organize themselves autonomously and the protection of Sunday as a day of rest.

7 The Churches are not the only institutions to be granted such exceptions; but the exceptions they enjoy go further in some respects, for example with regard to the right to sanction officials and employees who do not conduct their lives in an acceptable manner, than the *Tendenzschutz* (protection of groups representing particular interests) provided for in Sec. 118 of the *Betriebsverfassungsgesetz* (“Works Constitution Act”).

ferences between the member churches of the EKD in respect of the proportions of non-elected members, who belong to the synods *ex officio* or are appointed to them and attend meetings and take part in the synods' decision-making processes. As a result, the “fundamentally democratic ‘self-governance’ on the individual levels”<sup>8</sup> is subject to certain degrees of divergence. Similar modulations are also to be found in the systems of supervision, reporting and accountability. For example, parishes are subject to visitations at regular intervals by the next higher level of the three-to-four-tier church hierarchy, represented by the person responsible for exercising spiritual leadership on that level: but whereas in some EKD member churches these persons are democratically elected by the synod, in others they are appointed by the church's top level of management. Such visitations are performed on the basis of a Visitation Act, which in different churches may place the emphasis more on the aspect of consultancy and advice or on that of disciplinary supervision. Such differences are to be found on the other hierarchical levels as well. In each member church it is the task of the *Landeskirchenamt*, the central church administration, to monitor compliance with the numerous Acts of Synod, ecclesiastical statutes, agreements, regulations etc.; where disputes arise, jurisdiction lies with a system of church courts embracing several instances. Thus to apply the terminology of models of governance, the organization of the “state” churches or church provinces falls into the category of “hierarchical self-governance” (Pruisken/Coronel 2014).

One peculiarity of the Protestant Church in Germany is the territorial pattern not only of the “state churches” or church provinces that compose the EKD, but also of the parishes within them. There is no corner of Germany that is not covered by the organization of both the Protestant and the Roman Catholic Church. Every town, every village, every street, every house and every flat is located in an area belonging to a specific parish. The number of clergy and of other professional church staff depends on the number of church members living in this area. If there are several ordained ministers employed in one parish, it is as a rule divided up into pastoral areas, so that not just a parish but a specific person within a parish is responsible for each church member, depending on precisely where he or she lives. Should a member of a parish prefer to be looked after by a different member of the clergy team, he or she can apply for this to be effected, and as a rule it is no problem, but in purely legal terms it does require an administrative act. Thus in Germany, as a distant legacy of the parochial system of the former established churches, we have a rather strange situation that is practically unique in the world whereby we

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8 “Die grundsätzlich demokratische ‚Selbstgovernance‘ auf den einzelnen Ebenen”, as Insa Pruisken calls it in her lecture “Governance der Religion? Zum Verhältnis von Organisation, Staat und Religionsgemeinschaft” (“Governance of Religion? On the Relationship between Organization, State and Faith Community”) given at the Annual Conference of the Sociology of Religion Section of the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Soziologie at the Lichtenberg Kolleg of the University of Cologne on 15–16 April 2016.

have free choice of our doctors, for example, but not of our clergy: church members are always assigned automatically to a particular parish and thus to a particular minister.

So the German Protestant church parish is quite a strange entity: while enjoying fundamentally democratic self-organization, it is embedded in the regulatory structure of a territorial church province reminiscent of a government department and characterized by a multitude of laws, ordinances, directives and supervisory bodies, and which also plays a major role in its finances.<sup>9</sup> At first glance, the parish would appear to be limited in its opportunities to shape its own life and to develop any degree of vitality, particularly since the clergy form part of the institutional structure as proclaimers of the Gospel with civil servant status. Studies performed as early as the 1950s revealed that in contrast to the situation in the United States parish life was not at all lively. On the contrary, the parishes appeared to be strongholds of traditional ritual and traditional people, jarring with the revolutionary spirit of the 1960s (see for example Grossbölting 2013; Wegner 2012). This, however, was always too short-sighted a view. Church parishes also offer enormous scope for the exercise of freedom. On the one hand, “Members of the clergy [...] are free with regard to the form and content of their proclamation of the Gospel, and are bound only by the obligations deriving from their ordination [...] and the statutes of their churches”.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, the parishes are managed by bodies of lay people whose elected members, since they act in an honorary capacity, can only to a limited extent be subjected to sanctions imposed by church bodies. As members of the parochial church councils they must of course comply with ecclesiastical laws and regulations; as individuals, however, they are independent and therefore in principle in a position to contribute unorthodox, uncomfortable, anarchical or quite simply unusual new ideas and to work on getting them adopted.<sup>11</sup>

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9 Church tax is not paid directly by church members to their parishes, but is collected by the tax offices, paid over to the church’s central administration, and then forwarded via a multi-stage procedure to the parishes (though there are a few member churches of the EKD where the money is paid directly to the parishes). The advantage of this procedure is that poor and rich parishes are more or less automatically put on an equal footing. About a third of the members of the Protestant Church are liable to pay church tax. Church tax accounts for around half of church income. A proportion of the church tax is paid by the member churches to the EKD to cover the costs of central and joint activities and responsibilities.

10 “Pfarrerinnen und Pfarrer [sind] in Gestaltung und Inhalt ihrer Verkündigung frei und nur an die Verpflichtungen aus der Ordination [...] und an die Ordnungen ihrer Kirche gebunden”: *Pfarrdienstgesetz* (“Clergy Service Act”) of the EKD, Sec. 24.

11 This factor, the participation of a majority of lay people, is often belaboured to characterize the Protestant Church in Germany in contrast to the Roman Catholic Church. It is indeed the case that the synods, as church “parliaments”, are chiefly made up of lay people. However, the executive bodies responsible for fleshing out and implementing the decisions made by these laity-dominated synods are firmly in the grip of theological or legal experts – who also, incidentally, have usually been responsible for preparing the decisions made by the laity in the synods.

## 2. The “Barometer of Parish Performance” – questions asked in the study, and its design

### 2.1 Questions and theoretical background

As we have seen, not enough empirical research into the Protestant parish has yet been conducted, highly relevant though the parish or congregation is both theologically and sociologically. Theologically, a church would not be able to exist without a congregation. Sociologically, the parish is a fundamental grass-roots form of the kind of community that is essential to society.

It is also the case that theology, when it looks at the parish, is less interested in empirical findings than in theoretical concepts. When analysing the way parishes are constituted and the tasks they perform, theologians are increasingly less interested in the way the parochial system lays down fixed territorial boundaries within which the parish seeks to provide a basic level of religiously orientated services, and more concerned with three attributes that appear to be vital when defining a parish or congregation.

These are:

- “spiritual life” (Bible-based and conscious of a divine mission);
- the institutional character with “the characteristics of participation and stakeholding”; and
- organizational characteristics relating to management, representation and the relationship to the church as a whole.

(Hauschildt/Pohl-Patalong 271–284)

According to Pohl-Patalong, even temporary gatherings as manifested in weekend seminars, training courses etc. may also be labelled “congregations” (in this context that seems a more appropriate term than “parish”), being organized along a functional principle (Pohl-Patalong 2015: 7f.).

In sociological terms as well, too little research has been conducted into Protestant parishes. The reason is that with the leading paradigms in the sociology of religion, such as individualization, pluralization and the privatization of religion, the individual has become the focus of attention (see Pollack 2015; König/Wolf 2013; Körs forthcoming). And organizational sociology has fundamental problems with religious organizations, since these are atypical organizations in a number of respects (see Petzke/Tyrell 2012).<sup>12</sup>

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12 For an overview of various models of how church organizations come into being, considered from a theological point of view, see Wegner 2003.

Within the church itself, on the other hand, it is explicitly the parishes themselves in their quality as territorial areas which are the object (or one might almost say the plaything) of plans for ecclesiastical reform debated and decided on by church management bodies on higher hierarchical levels. As the debate about the reform process initiated around a decade ago and entitled “Kirche der Freiheit” (“Church of Freedom” – EKD 2006) has shown, this is often done without the requisite knowledge of the concrete local parameters involved (see for example Hermelink/Wegner 2008; Karle 2010; Karle 2009). Given the situation regarding research, it is all too easy to understand how this lack of empirical insights arises.

Therefore, the chief reason for conducting the “Barometer of Parish Performance” was the realization that a huge void existed and that it was important in terms of church policy to fill this void. This need was all the more pressing in view of the movement towards making sweeping reforms. On the other hand, because there has been such a lack of research over a period of decades, the gap is now so big that there were several issues and concerns all crying out to be examined simultaneously in the “Barometer of Parish Performance”.

The first concern was simply to perform some basic stock-taking: of programmes, target-group activities, the use of organizational development and management methods, contacts to parishes in the local environment, relationships with the other tiers of the ecclesiastical hierarchy, assessments of the parish’s development and the structural focuses in the programmes and activities offered.

One key issue concerned how parochial church councils saw themselves and their own socio-demographic make-up, the motivations driving people to become involved, the direction desired in terms of programme content and the council members’ satisfaction with their own activities.

This initially fundamentally descriptive approach was accompanied by an analytical model of the societal coordination of actions, which is fundamental when inquiring into the question of collective management of the type that applies to parochial church councils: what maxims are decisive in day-to-day work and in actual decision-making processes?

Since the 1980s, the social sciences have taken the approach that a functioning society can never be based solely on one social coordinating mechanism. Neither governmental regulation, nor market forces nor the rationality of the social community (“*Gemeinschaft*”) alone are sufficient to both foster and control social integration: as postulated in the “regulator” model, all three forces are involved simultaneously to varying degrees. Depending on the area of society concerned, these three mechanisms are enhanced by or replaced by other coordinating mechanisms (see Streeck/Schmitter 1985). In the “Barometer of Parish Performance” we adopted the model proposed by Helmut Wiesenthal (2005) of market, organization and community as social regulators. We believe this model best reflects the internal potency of parishes and their parochial church councils:

- In various areas, church parishes are subjected to market forces. They compete not only in the fields of spirituality and the meaningfulness of life (see for example Stolz 2013), but also in the areas of welfare and education, and in the cultural sector with their choirs and orchestras.
- Church parishes are bureaucratic organizations. They are subject to ecclesiastical regulations, have employees, administer resources, buildings and land and run a number of different facilities.
- Parishes are communities which are characterized by something like a family atmosphere and within which groups form. The clergy and other salaried staff cannot act in a manner contrary to the atmosphere of their workplace or the group, as they rely on acceptance by the people concerned (see for example Lindner 1994, Geller et al. 2002).

The core interest therefore lay firstly in revealing what the factors are that determine control processes in parishes, and secondly in relating these to the “well-being” of the parish. Consequently, for several years the working title of the “Barometer of Parish Performance” was “How is the parish doing?” (“Wie geht’s der Kirchengemeinde?” – Ahrens/Wegner 2012).

In addition to the question regarding the extent to which parishes are driven by market, organization and community, that regarding whether in respect of any activity religious, social or cultural content was to be given priority was also of interest. This topic will however only be touched upon briefly in the rest of this article.

## 2.2 Structure of the study

Due to the prominence of issues relating to the paradigms of control in church parishes, the study mainly focused on the management body of a parish: the Parochial Church Council or Council of Elders. In order to obtain specific and meaningful information on Protestant parishes in Germany and their parochial church councils, a representative sample of 10% of the parishes of each member church of the EKD<sup>13</sup> was taken. In the spring of 2013, 1,508 parishes were written to and asked to take part in the study whose working title at the time was “How is the parish doing?” Together with the invitation to take part in the study, each parish selected received questionnaires to be filled in by each member of its parochial church council. Each parish also received a general covering questionnaire designed to capture some basic data on the parish. This general questionnaire was completed and returned by 803 of the parishes contacted, representing a response rate of 53%.

Of the personal questionnaires, a total of 3,980 were completed and returned from a total of 1,010 parishes. Unfortunately it is not possible to derive an exact response rate from these figures, as we cannot

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13 The minimum number of parishes included in each sample was 20; so that in the cases of the smaller member churches the sample even comprised up to one-third of the parishes.

determine the precise numbers of parochial church council members in each parish. We do however know the aggregate number of elders in each provincial church; and on the assumption that of this total number the percentage holding office in the parishes approached for the survey will correspond, at least approximately, to the percentage of the parishes of the church province concerned selected for inclusion in the sample (i.e. in most cases 10%: see above and Footnote 13), we can estimate the response rate of the elders in those parishes as being around 30%. Due to the fact that the samples taken were not proportionate across all member churches and to the differing response rates for each member church, the data was weighted for the analyses.

### 3. Findings – some selected results

As outlined above, this study of Protestant parishes in Germany was designed to pursue a variety of issues. In the following, only a selection of the results is presented, covering areas that we believe are particularly relevant to the future of the Protestant parish. These are:

- The relationship of the parishes and their church councils to other tiers in the church’s management hierarchy;
- The relationship of the social coordinating mechanisms of “market”, “organization” and “community”;
- The question of the extent to which the parochial church council is indeed a managing body in the parish;
- Possible limitations of the church council.

#### 3.1 The relationship of the parochial church councils to other tiers in the church hierarchy

In connection with the process of further centralized planning, for example with regard to ecclesiastical reform, and also with the continuing debate on policy within the church, the question as to how church leadership at the different hierarchical levels is perceived at grass-roots level, i.e. in the parishes, is a crucial one. Among church leaders there is a fundamental assumption that “Whatever we suggest will be rejected anyway”; in other words, the expectation is that the response to any proposal will be negative to dismissive. Empirical findings tell a different story. It is not rejection that shapes the relationship, but rather either positive responses to or else a total lack of interest in the proposal concerned, depending on how far removed from the grass-roots the tier of the church hierarchy concerned is.

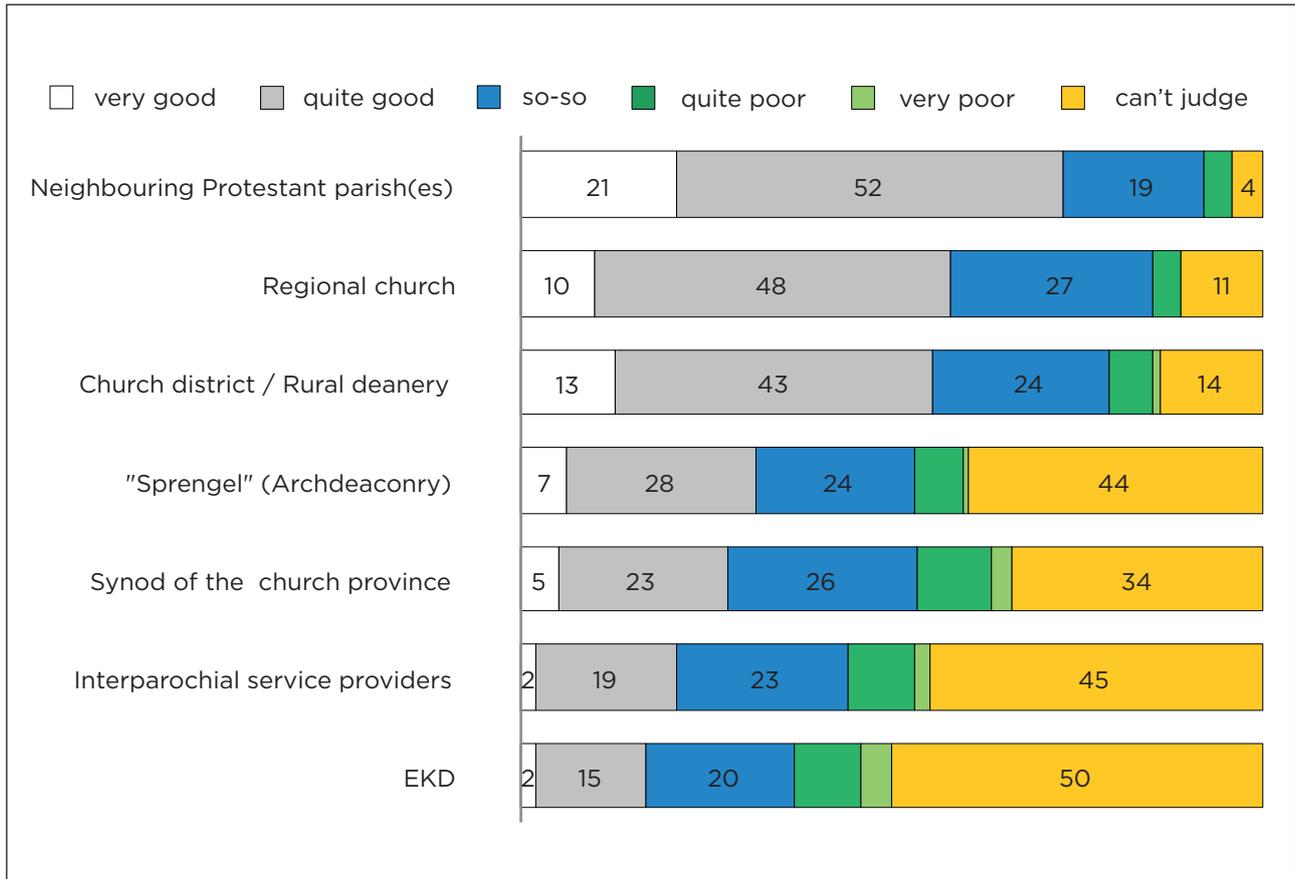


Figure 1 “How do you evaluate the current relationship of your parish with the following church organizations?” (results in %)

The relationship with neighbouring Protestant parishes is rated as good (see Fig. 1). Also predominantly positive are the evaluations of the relationship to the next higher levels, the regional church and the church district.<sup>14</sup> But even in this case, more than one in ten of the parish elders admitted that they were not able to assess the relationship at all. And this proportion rises the higher up one looks in the church hierarchy. Already at the level of the “Sprengel” – an area comprising a number of church dis-

14 A “regional church” is essentially an association of formally equal neighbouring parishes; the church district (“Kirchenkreis”) on the other hand, approximately equivalent to an Anglican “rural deanery”, exercises supervisory functions vis-à-vis the parishes, but is also there to support them.

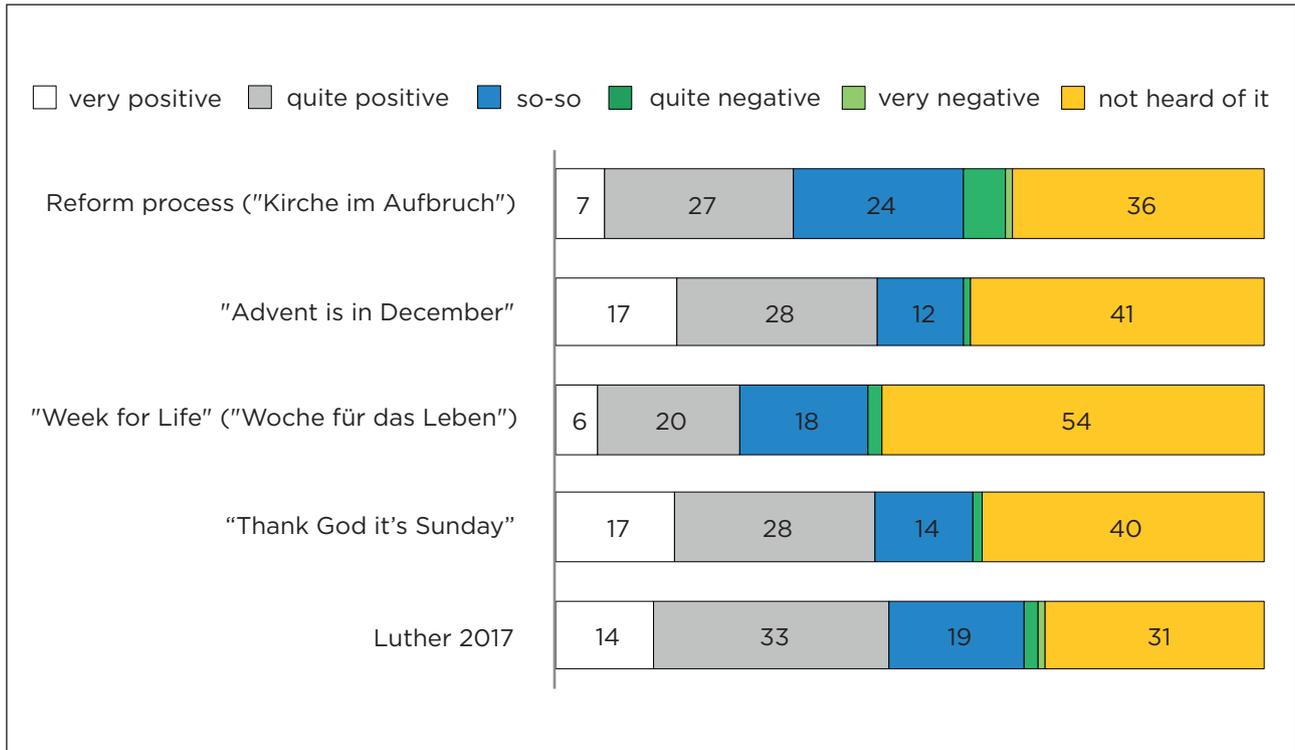


Figure 2 "How do you evaluate the following church activities?" (results in %)

tricts, approximately equivalent to an Anglican archdeaconry – almost half of those asked admitted that they were not in a position to evaluate the relationship. And even in respect of church offices offering services at an interparochial level, such as consultancy programmes for parishes, 45% of those asked were not able to evaluate the relationship while a further 23% took refuge in the evasive ambiguousness of the category “so-so”.

In the case of the question relating to the perceived influence of the various levels of the church hierarchy which are formally in a position to exert influence, the picture is similar (no Figure).

A further indication with regard to the relationship of the parishes to the Church as a whole is provided by the assessments of church initiatives and activities. In our 2013 study, members of the parochial church councils were asked to rate some of these initiatives. In this case too there was a widespread lack of knowledge (see Fig. 2). Between one-third and a good half of those asked said that they had not heard of the initiatives – though we are not talking about ordinary rank-and-file church members here, but about members of parochial church councils. A detailed analysis based on the func-

tion exercised by the person concerned and the length of time for which he or she had been involved in the parochial church council shows that salaried church employees have a broader knowledge of the initiatives than those working in an honorary capacity, while among the honorary staff those who exercise other specific functions on the parochial church council or in church management in general are better able to make assessments than those who have no other role. Nevertheless, these figures show a degree of distance, or even of lack of interest, when it comes to other church bodies, and a tendency to be self-absorbed.

These findings bring the issue of the mechanisms that govern the management of church parishes and of how the players perceive themselves into sharper focus.

### 3.2 The social coordinating mechanisms of “market”, “organization” and “community”

The question concerning the relationship between the coordinating and control mechanisms of market – organization – community were put to the church elders in the questionnaire in several ways. They were asked what motivated them to become involved in the parochial church council and in organizing parish work generally, and about which among the individual programmes were especially important to them and how work on the parochial church council was organized.

A community-orientated element is top of the list when it comes to the personal reasons why people get involved in the work of the parochial church council, namely a team spirit based on trust. This is very important to 84% of the church elders asked and important to a further 14% (see Fig. 3). Trailing a long way behind, but still in second place, is an organizational aspect: just under half of those asked said a clear management structure was very important and a further third thought it was important. This was followed by four aspects which are of virtually equal importance: the community aspect of contact with other members of the parochial church council, the community aspect of having a shared interest in working for the parish, and the organization aspect of taking responsibility for the planning and implementation of parish work. In sixth place came a market-orientated aspect: that of boosting the prominence and image of the parish in the public arena. All in all, motivations associated with an awareness that church programmes should possess market appeal are at the bottom of the scale in terms of their relevance and importance.

Similar results emerge regarding what is currently most important to church elders in parish work (Fig. 4). Top of the list is “Strengthening togetherness”, with 71% saying this is very important and a further 26% saying it is quite important. An organization aspect, “Setting targets and checking if these are met”, lags quite a long way behind in fifth place, but is nevertheless very important to 22% of those asked and quite important for a further 43%, so that overall two-thirds of church elders do feel it to be

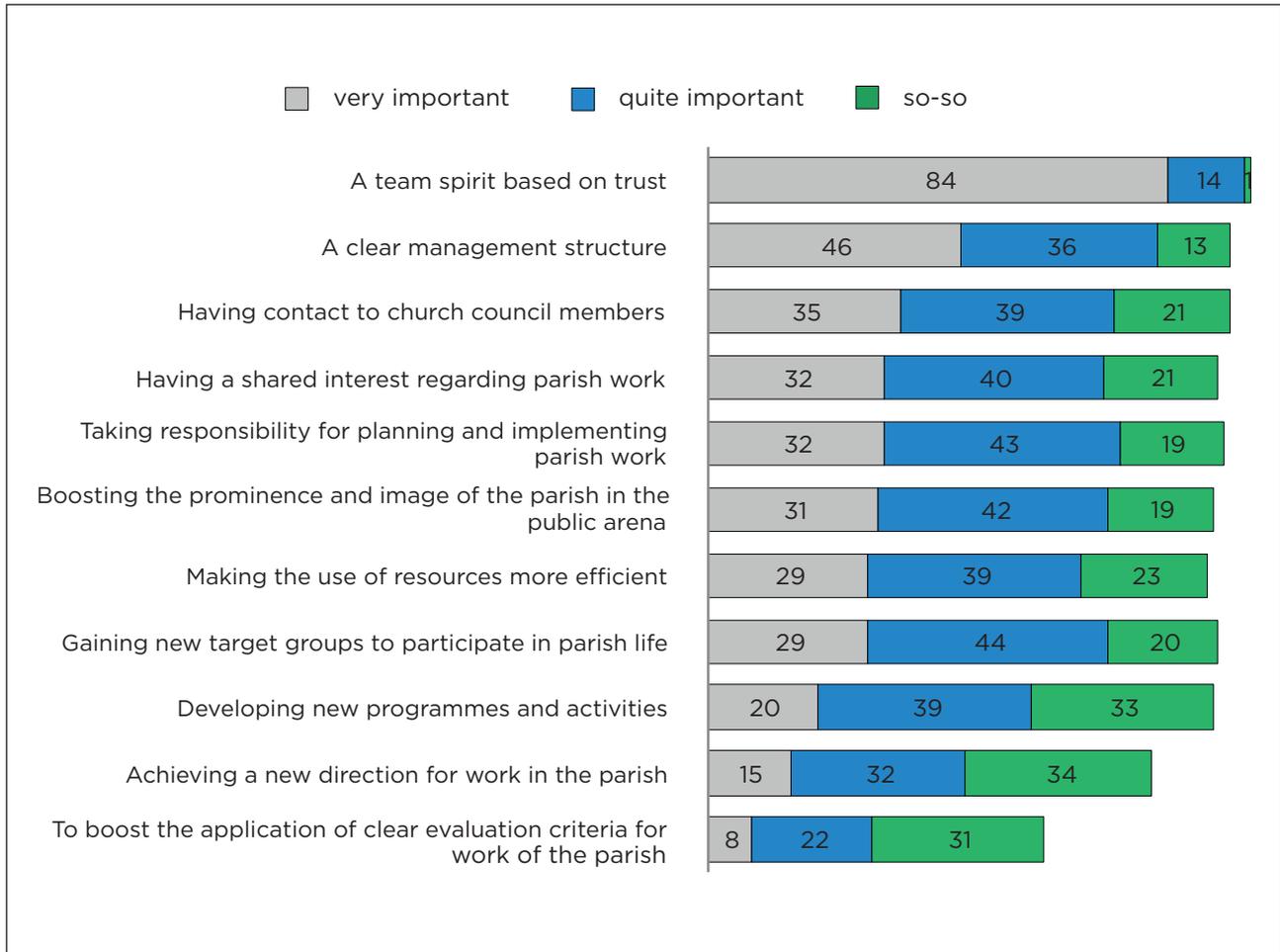


Figure 3 “How important are the following points to you personally regarding your involvement on the parochial church council?” (results in %)

important in parish work. The market-orientated element of competitive offerings, on the other hand, lies way behind and come last.

These generalized observations suggest that in the interplay of the coordinating mechanisms of market, organization and community, the community regulator is turned up to the full and the organization regulator half way, but that the market mechanism is very much neglected. But this picture is incomplete. It needs to be complemented by some more precisely differentiated assessments of different areas of parish work by the people surveyed.

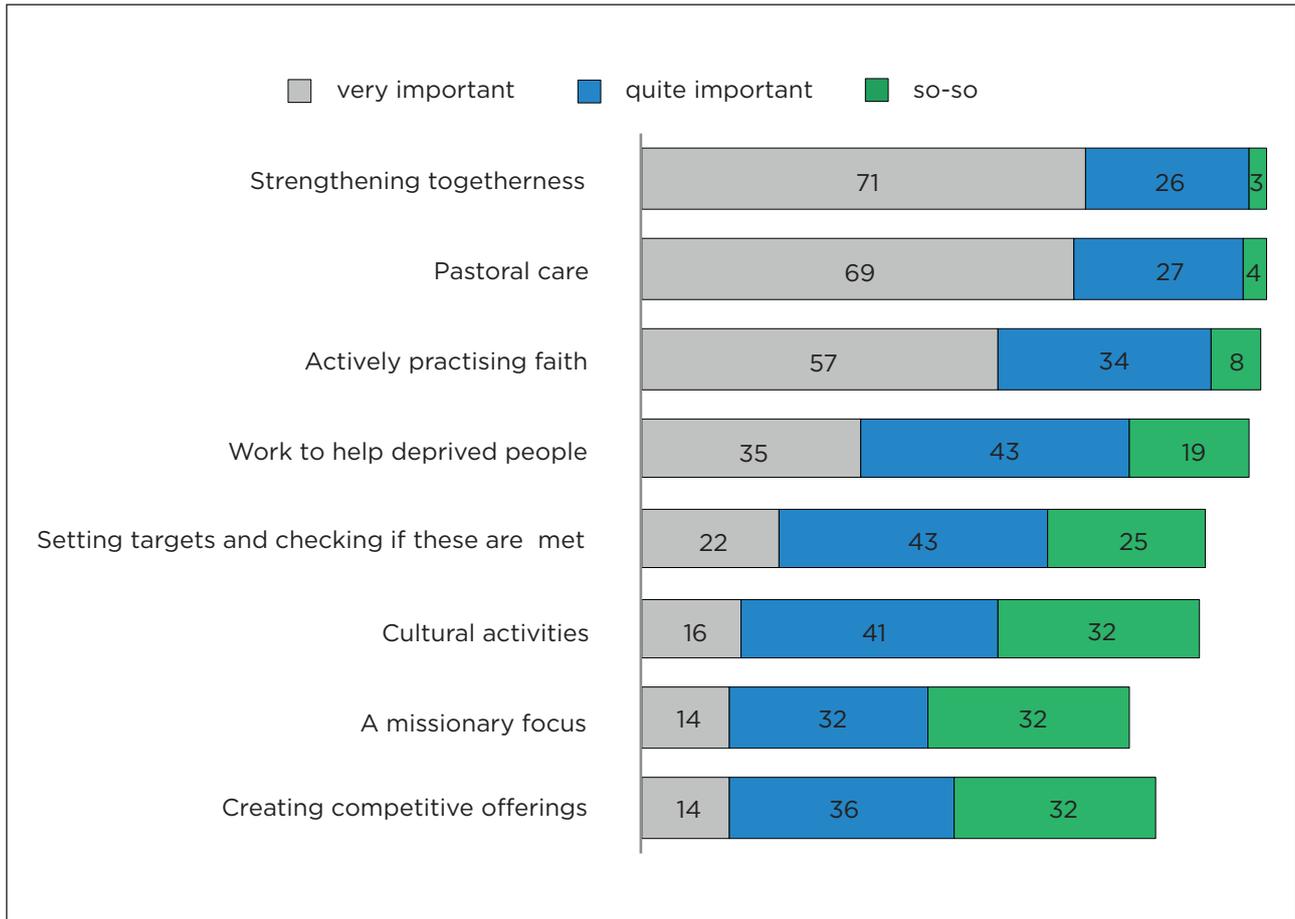


Figure 4 “How important are the following points to you overall in your parish?” (results in %)

With reference to a range of 21 programmes and activities, members of the parochial church councils were asked to state what was especially important to them at the present moment:

- that those taking part in/making use of these programmes and activities should be well acquainted with each other – *community*;
- that the numbers of those taking part in/making use of these programmes and activities should increase – *market*;
- that new programmes/projects should be developed – *market*;
- that criteria laid down in advance should actually be met – *organization*.

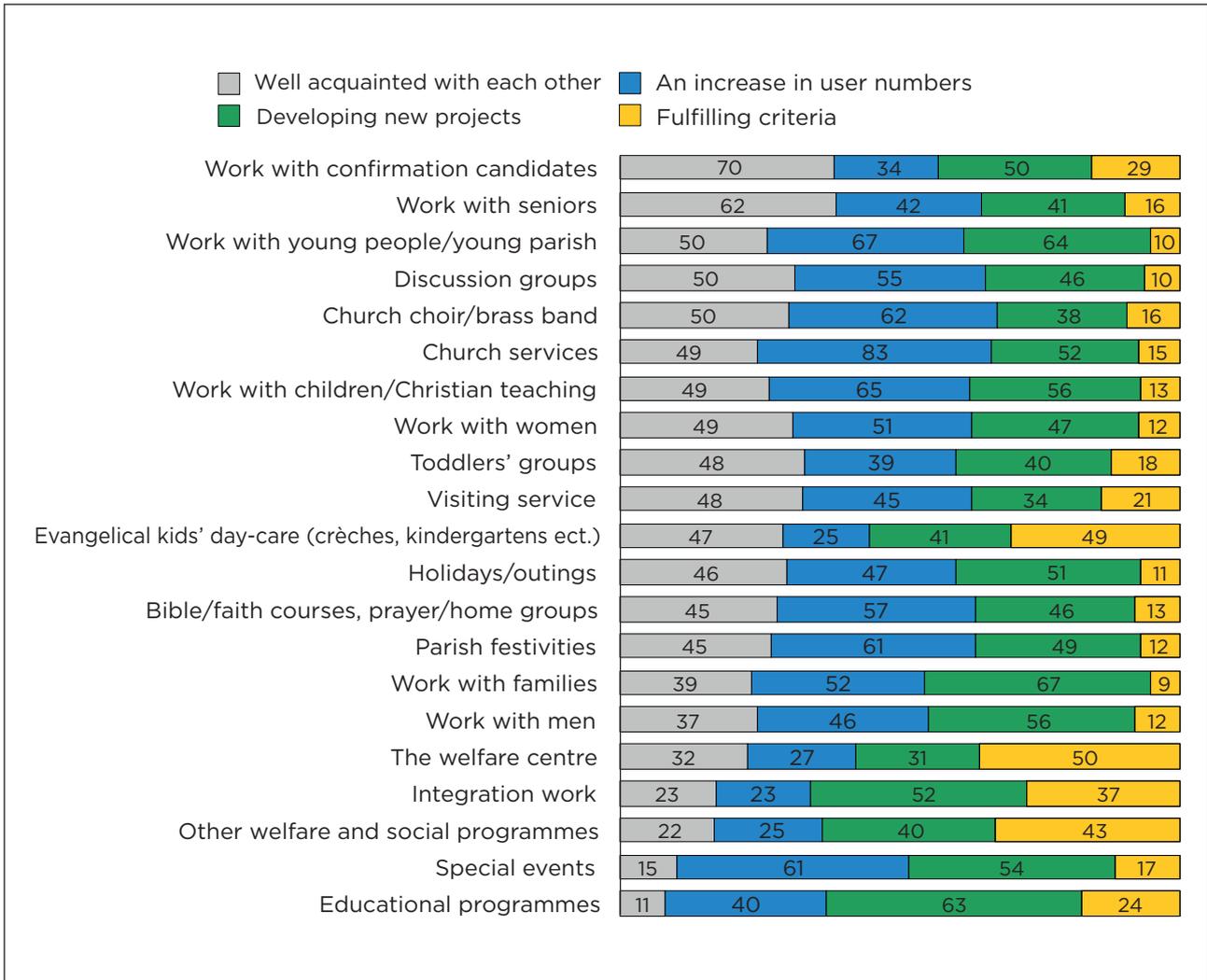


Figure 5 “What is particularly important to you at the moment in the various areas? You can select up to three options” (results in %)<sup>15</sup>

For each activity the participants could select up to three of these aspects. The result shows a thoroughly differentiated understanding of market – organization – community. Figure 5 shows the percentage of respondents selecting each of the four aspects mentioned. In order to provide a more intuitively

15 See the Appendix for the actual wording of the question in the questionnaire and for the answer options.

understandable presentation of the weighting of the M-C-O (market, community, organization) aspects, a standardized overall scale was applied. The market aspect of increasing the numbers of people taking part in programmes and activities is an aim that is almost universally accepted, and so will not be discussed further here. But it is also clear that the desire to develop new programmes and projects is very strong. In the case of work with young people and children, or with families and men, it is much more important than the desire that the people taking part should be well acquainted with each other. Particularly striking, however, are the peak values recorded several times for the selection of the organization aspect, i.e. that criteria that have been established must be fulfilled. This is especially the case with regard to social programmes and projects, for example kindergartens, welfare centres, integration work and other social and welfare offerings.

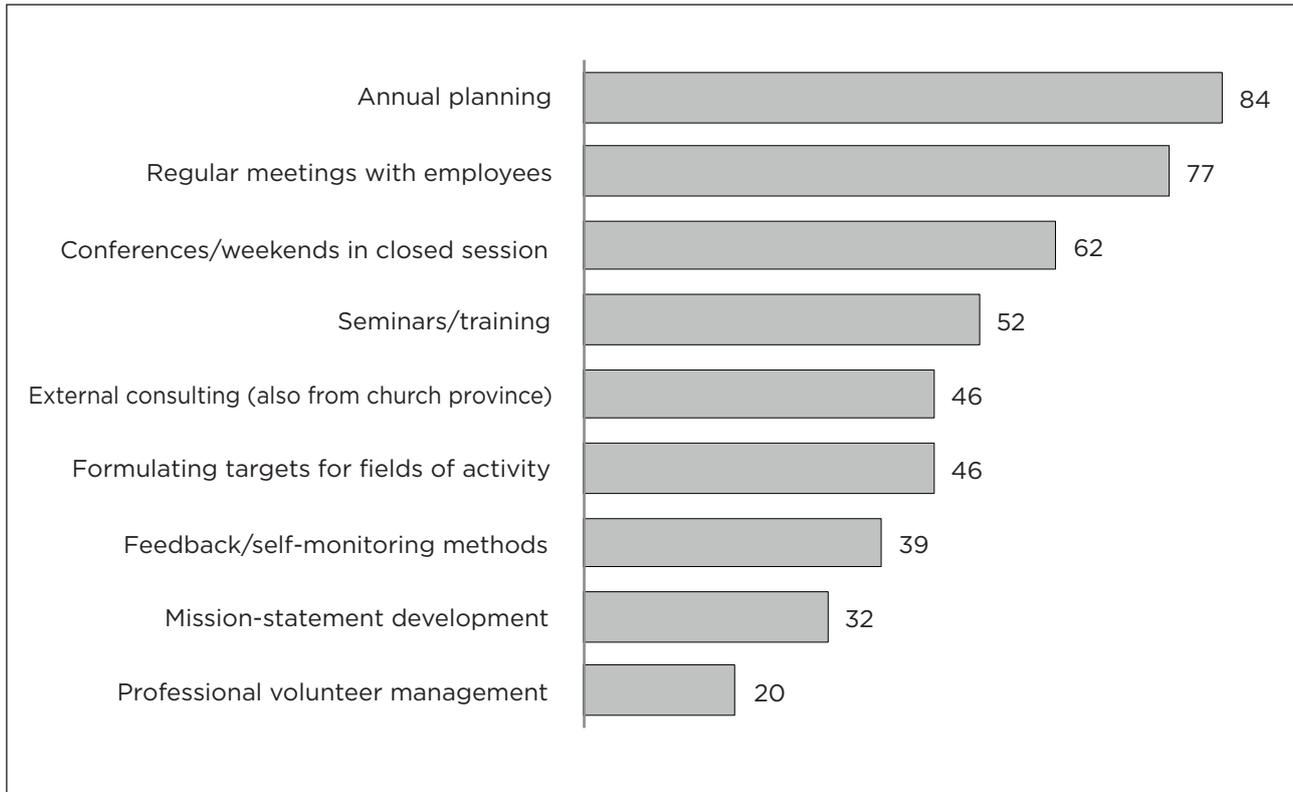
To summarize, it is clear that the coordinating mechanism of community dominates overall. In view of its theological significance, this appears obvious: the church is intended to be a gathering of people, and a gathering means a community. Furthermore, church regulations explicitly require the principle of consensus to prevail, so that conflicts and rivalries will be nipped in the bud. As a control mechanism, the market plays a very minor role; but organization aspects play a substantial one. To show how these come to be incorporated into the work of the parochial church council, there follows a brief outline of the use of organizational development methods there.

As shown in Figure 6, annual planning procedures and regular staff meetings are widespread. Conferences or weekends in closed session are also frequently mentioned. There is a certain tradition attached to such events, which are purely internal matters. However, where external organizations are involved such procedures are made use of much less frequently: thus only 52% of those asked said that it was normal for them to attend seminars and training courses,<sup>16</sup> and only 42% said that they attended external consultancy sessions – which explicitly included consultancy services provided for the parishes by the church provinces. Procedures such as the formulation of objectives and targets for fields of activity and the development of mission statements are relatively time-consuming and complex, and usually require external consultants or training; 46% and 32% of the respondents respectively said that such procedures were used.

The emphasis on the community aspect, the relative lack of attention paid to the market dimension and the apparently at least slightly ambivalent attitude to organizational development procedures raise the question as to how members of parochial church councils see their role in managing the parishes. Are they themselves aware of a link between the work they do and the development of the parish?

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16 Replies to another question aimed at examining in detail the way work on the parochial church council was organized showed that attendance at parish management seminars and training courses too was relatively infrequent.



**Figure 6** “Various methods are used in parishes in order to improve the work/activities of the parish internally. What’s the situation in your parish? Do you use these types or methods in your parish?” (results in %)

### 3.3 Is the parochial church council really a governing body?

The specific factors applying to a religious organization – or perhaps only to the parishes of the officially structured Protestant Church? – make it hard to identify the locus of management and control. Standard organizational models quickly reach their limits in this respect, as the familiar dilemmas of the institutionalization of religion show (see Wohlrab-Saar 2011: 177–184; O’Dea 1961). In addition, religious organizations possess some core characteristics that do not merely make them atypical as organizations, but also call into question all efforts to manage them. For example, they lack “any clearly defined purpose [...] which could serve as a point of reference for processes of organizational self-control”<sup>17</sup> (Petzke/

17 “[...] an einem klar konturierten Zweckmuster [...], welches als Referenzpunkt organisatorischer Selbststeuerungsprozesse in Anspruch genommen werden kann.”

Tyrell 2012: 292). Furthermore, there is an implicit aversion to decision-making. Organizations are *per se* places where decisions are made. According to Petzke/Tyrell, religious organizations, and in this case particularly churches, typically consider themselves not to be entitled to make decisions, because in the final analysis everything is God's will. Of course, Petzke/Tyrell go on to say, decisions are taken all the time nonetheless, and are of course contingent on circumstances; but this quality of contingency tends to be neutralized by adherence to doctrinal principles<sup>18</sup> (Petzke/Tyrell 2012: 290).

In other words, it is by no means a matter of course that parochial church councils should see themselves as active management and control bodies of their parishes.<sup>19</sup> But where they do, it should be possible to determine a link between how they manage the parish and how they see the situation that the parish finds itself in. As the "success" of a parish can scarcely be determined in terms of any general indicators – as growth, for example, can<sup>20</sup> – we have deliberately chosen a subjective measurement in our study. We asked the church elders how they viewed the general situation in their parishes. As a result, they were able to draw not only on quantitative indicators but also, depending on their individual preferences, take into account other indicators such as faith, community, external impact, (theological) profile etc.

An initial overview of relationships – in this case only bivariate correlations – between assessments of the current situation of the parish (see the central area of Fig. 7), assessments regarding past performance and future expectations (the left-hand and right-hand areas of Fig. 7), and the use of various management and controlling methods<sup>21</sup> in the work of the parochial church council and the administration of the parish (the top and bottom of Fig. 7) shows the following:

- There is a strong correlation between the way parochial church council members evaluate the parish's development over the past five years and their satisfaction with the current situation in general (Pearson's  $r = .520$ ). The correlation between how they evaluate past performance and what they expect for the future is less pronounced (Pearson's  $r = .383$ );

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18 The best-known such doctrine is doubtless the Roman Catholic doctrine of papal infallibility, which was one of the factors that gave rise to the "Kulturkampf" in Prussia. On the "Kulturkampf" see Footnote 5 above.

19 Nevertheless, management is included in the relevant church laws and directives as a role of a parochial church council. It is tacitly assumed that management functions are indeed carried out, and these are divided up into various types (e.g. Lindner 1994, Chapter X) and examined empirically in various qualitative studies (e.g. Härle et al. 2008; Elhaus/Wöhrmann 2012; see also Wegner 2014).

20 Even growth can be defined in various ways: an increase in the number of nominal members, the number of occasional services (baptisms, marriages etc.) carried out, the numbers of people attending services, the number of people volunteering to take on honorary activities etc. On this problem, see also Härle et al. 2008.

21 See the Appendix for the actual wording of the questions in the questionnaire and how the index was formed.

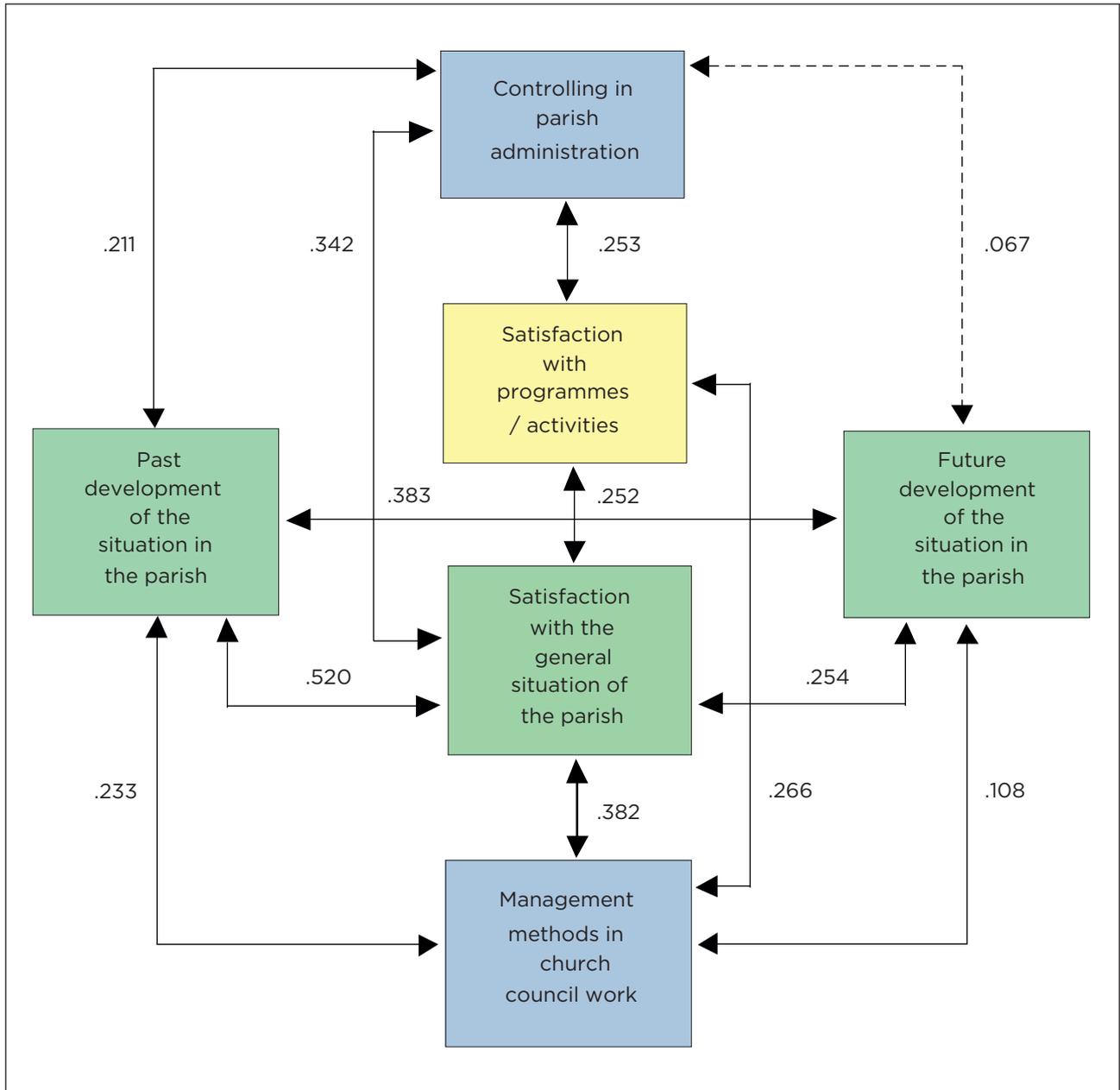


Figure 7 Links between the general situation of the parish and the use of management and controlling tools (bivariate correlations, Pearson's  $r$ )<sup>22</sup>

22 See Appendix for details of index construction.

- Moderate correlations exist between the use of controlling procedures in the administration of the parish and of management procedures in the work of the parochial church council on the one hand and satisfaction with the current general situation of the parish on the other (Pearson's  $r=.342$  and  $.382$ );
- Less pronounced, but still clearly perceptible, are the correlations between satisfaction with the programmes/activities currently offered by the parish on the one hand, and three other factors: the use of controlling procedures in the administration of the parish (Pearson's  $r=.253$ ) and of management processes in the work of the parochial church council ( $.266$ ), and satisfaction with the situation of the parish in general ( $.252$ );
- The correlation between satisfaction with the general current situation and the evaluation of prospects for development over the next five years is equally strong (Pearson's  $r = .254$ );
- The correlations between controlling in the administration and management techniques in parochial church council work on the one hand and the assessment of the parish's performance over the past five years on the other are only slightly weaker (Pearson's  $r=.211$  and  $.233$  respectively);
- By contrast, the correlations between the use of controlling in the administration and of management techniques in parochial church council work on the one hand and expectations regarding future development on the other are weak (Pearson's  $r =.067$  and  $.108$  respectively).

The findings shown here at a bivariate level are corroborated in multivariate procedures. The evaluation of the parish's current situation is relatively easy to explain (see Table 1). The information given on the use of management methods in the work of the parochial church council and of controlling in the parish administration, and on the number of organizational development methods used (see Fig. 6) and of programmes and activities in the parish (see Fig. 5), and also the feeling that involvement in the parochial church council is at least occasionally considered to be a strain, is alone sufficient to explain 18% of the variance in levels of satisfaction regarding the general situation of the parish. Organization does appear to be useful, the most important aspects being the use of management methods and controlling. It is quite a different matter if we try to explain the expectations for the future. In this case, the use of management methods and controlling does nothing to provide an explanation; however, the number of good organizational development methods used, the number of programmes and activities in the parish and the strain that work on the parochial church council engenders do. But all in all these reasons are relatively negligible and only account for 4%.

**Table 1** Explanation of satisfaction with the parish's general situation and of expectations for its future development (multiple regression, beta values, significant at the 95% level at least)<sup>23</sup>

	Satisfaction with the general situation of the parish		Expected development of the parish in the next five years	
Use of management methods	.231	.236	not significant	not significant
Controlling in parish administration	.161	.165	not significant	not significant
Number of organizational development methods used	.071	.047	.113	.078
Involvement in the parochial church council is a strain	-.072	-.067	-.055	-.044
Number of activities in the parish	.082	.056	.103	.075
Expected demographic development		.121		.232
Eastern/western Germany (1 = eastern, 2 = western)		.053		not significant
Religious focus desired		.035		.053
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	.184	.203	.040	.094

In order to determine the relative weighting of the organizational parameters, that is to say the factors that the church elders can influence themselves as against other aspects mentioned in the literature, we supplemented the list of independent variables in another model. The importance of differences in demographic development, the distinction between regions where the population is growing and ones where it is shrinking, is a factor that is now impacting all areas of social planning and is also attracting the attention of ecclesiastical sociology (see Dünkler et al. 2014). For this reason, the expected population development in the parish was also included as a further determinant. In Germany, the vast differences in religious culture as between the eastern and western parts of the country clearly point to the need to make a comparison between the eastern and western states (see Müller et al. 2013). The market model that is very widely used in the US to explain religious dynamism emphasizes the relevance of doctrinal rigour in the growth of parishes (see Iannaccone 1994). In the case of Europe, this assumption is

<sup>23</sup> See Appendix for details of index construction.

controversial (see Stolz et al. 2011; Pickel 2010), but qualitative studies do point to a clear religious stance having a certain relevance in Germany too (see Härle et al. 2008). For this reason, we have included in our explanatory model the responses to the question as to how strongly religious parochial church council members wanted their parishes to be.<sup>24</sup>

This procedure leads to only a small increase – to 20% – in the extent to which the variance in respect of satisfaction with the current situation of the parish can be explained, and the powerful predictive force of the two core organizational variables is maintained. However, the relevance of the expected development of the population also becomes clear, as it comes to occupy third place among the predictive factors. As regards the expected future development of the parish, the amount of the variance that can be explained does rise to as much as 9% if further factors are included: in this case the expected development of the population figures turns out to be the strongest predictor. If assessment of development in the past were also to be included, it would increase the degree to which satisfaction with the current situation can be explained to 36%, and in respect of future expectations to 20%.

The differences in the strength of the correlations between the evaluations of past performance, of the current situation and of future development led us to typify parishes in accordance with these three characteristics. To do so, the details provided by each church elder were aggregated on the level of the parishes. The statistical procedure of cluster analysis led to the identification of ten types of parish. This is not the place to go into the whole typology in detail.<sup>25</sup> Rather, only a few aspects will be highlighted by asking the question: in those parishes that (subjectively) feel the outlook to be poor, what is it that gives rise to such pessimism?

### 3.4 The same initial situation – different expectations

In Figure 8 the types of parish are arranged in two dimensions. The vertical axis shows the degree to which market and organizational aspects are taken into account in the parishes; the higher up in the chart a type is located, the greater the role that these aspects play. The horizontal axis represents the assessment of the general situation of the parish and its development: the further to the right a type is located, the more positive the evaluation overall, the further to the left a type is positioned, the more negative it is. The arrow in the background represents the correlation between the extent of the role

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24 In respect of both the individual programmes and activities in the parish and the parish's overall focus, the church elders were asked to state how social, cultural or religious they thought these should be. The three characteristics were not mutually exclusive, but each was to be rated in the manner of a regulator model (see Rebenstorf et al. 2015).

25 For a detailed analysis see Rebenstorf et al. 2015: 167–176.

played by market/organizational aspects and the feeling of “well-being” in the parish.<sup>26</sup> It is clear that there is a correlation, but also that there are some pronounced exceptions. To shed some light on the possible reasons why the link between organization and a feeling of well-being in the parish sometimes breaks down, there follows a brief comparison between three of the types which are very similar in terms of their organizational characteristics, but very different where the feeling of well-being is concerned. These three types are:

- The average, satisfied (western) parish (599 parochial church council members, 147 parishes): “The way things are is the way they were and the way they will go on”;
- The parish that is in good state but views the future with scepticism (590 parochial church council members, 126 parishes): “The past and present are good – but the future doesn’t look rosy”;
- The (western) rural parish in free fall (43 parochial church council members, 13 parishes): “We fared well in the past, but are doing badly now and the future will be catastrophic”.

Relatively similar characteristics that these three types share are not just that they apply some organizational development methods (even if these differ), but that they all three see their past performance in a very positive light. But when evaluating the current situation, the rural type lags behind and when assessing the future it even sees itself “in free fall”; while another type is sceptical and yet another satisfied. How can these differences be explained?

Some initial pointers are given by the parochial church council members’ own comments on the causes of the expected development, which they included in their questionnaire responses as open-ended answers.

Noticeable above all are the expected changes in the situation with regard to resources – both financial and human. The frequency with which people from the “satisfied” type of parish expect to be affected by austerity measures or financial bottlenecks is below average, but among church elders of the other two types of parish it is markedly above average. Another aspect is the development of the parish’s size as a result of the ageing of the population, people moving away from the parish, families moving into it, or changes in the general environment. Those with an optimistic outlook mention negative developments in this respect with below-average frequency, the sceptical with above-average frequency and the very pessimistic at a substantially above-average rate. The last-mentioned also fear increasing regionalization, leading to cutbacks in staffing. Accordingly, they also mention the excessive workloads of both salaried and honorary staff more frequently.

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<sup>26</sup> This is not a precise statistical correlation.

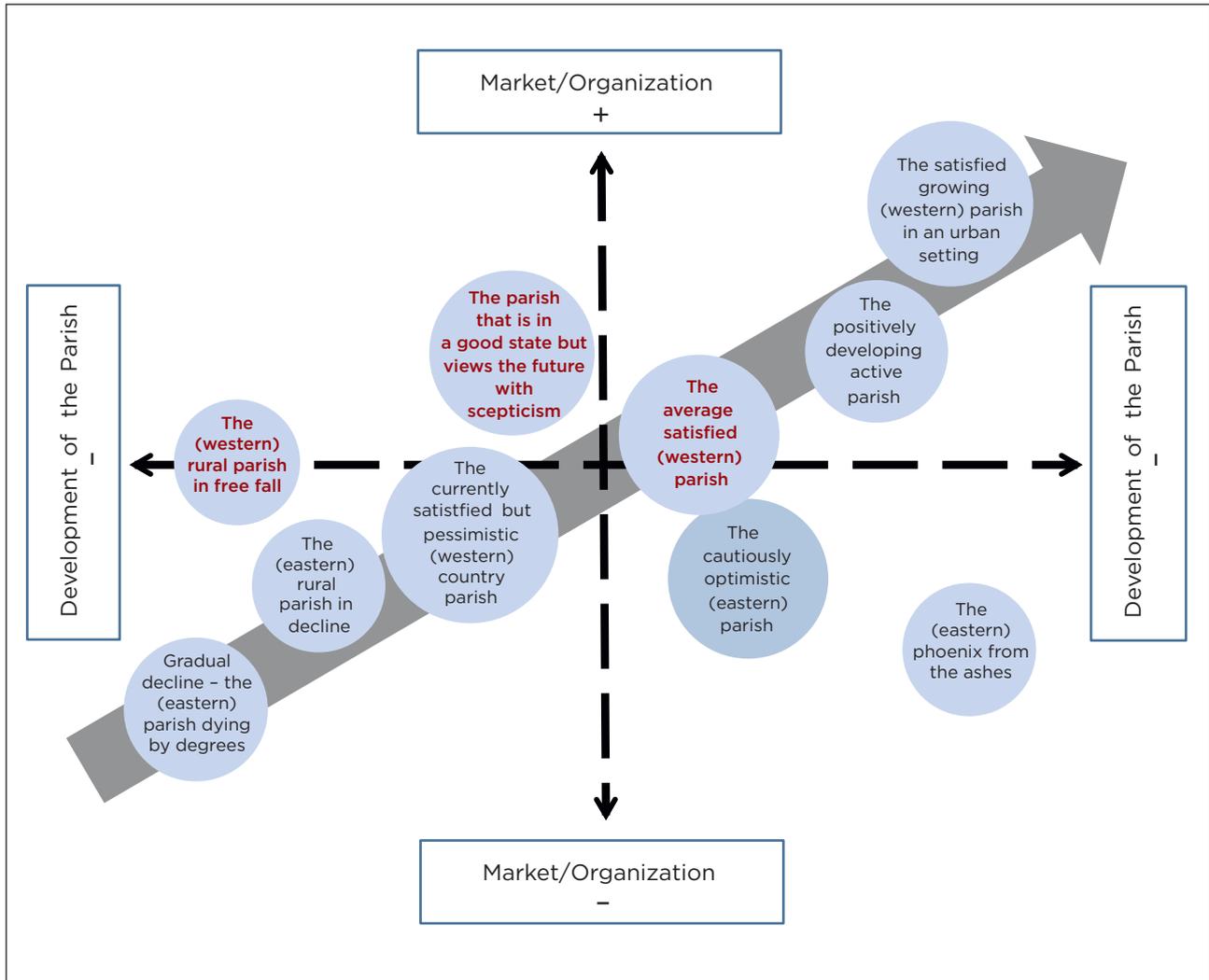


Figure 8 A typology of protestant parishes

Unfortunately it is not possible to check all these references to resources, amalgamations/region-alization, demographic change and overly heavy workloads in the data collected via the questionnaire, because the number of cases is often too small. However, the comparison shows no differences worth mentioning between these three types of parishes: there is virtually no difference in how many full-time clergy and parish secretaries these have. In the “parishes in free fall”, however, there are no salaried deacons and vergers. If the forecasts of the statistical offices and the German Federal Institute for Re-

search on Building, Urban Affairs and Spatial Development<sup>27</sup> (BBSR) are to be believed, the demographic changes that are feared are a realistic prospect for rural parishes. Accordingly, they are indeed very likely to be faced by excessive workloads as a result of not having enough staff, while at the same time the distances that have to be travelled increase. The “parishes in free fall” are not affected by amalgamations and regionalization to any significantly greater extent than the sceptical or satisfied ones – which indicates that these processes can be structured very differently. However, it is noticeable that the types of parish that (at least subjectively) are threatened with decline are all for the most part located in rural areas, while those making the most positive comments are in urban ones.

## 4. Summary and questions still open

To summarize, we have been able to formulate five key conclusions and some questions that still need to be answered:

1. There is a wide gulf between parishes and bodies higher up in the church hierarchy. This distance has less to do with rejection than with inadequate knowledge or perhaps lack of interest or any feeling of being affected.
2. Among the social coordinating mechanisms, it is community that dominates. Considering the church’s congregational character and the desire for consensus, this is not really surprising.
3. The organizational aspect is very important, even if it does differ from area to area. This aspect reveals clear correlations with the “well-being of the parish”, at least in the past and the present. In the subjective perception of the church elders, expectations for the future are relatively independent of this factor.
4. This correlation, even if it is not one that can be statistically demonstrated, is recognizable in the typology of parishes, which is based on aggregations of subjective assessments of the situations of parishes in the past, present and future.
5. A massive difference is revealed between parishes regarding the evaluations of their general situations and future development. These differences appear to derive to some extent from the parochial church council’s organizational endeavours, but also to some extent to be dependent on external forces. It is no coincidence that the types of parishes with the poorest perspectives are predominantly rural ones.

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27 Bundesinstitut für Bau-, Stadt- und Raumforschung (im Bundesamt für Bauwesen und Raumordnung).

There is a great temptation to put forward a causal interpretation of the results presented here. One tends to assume that using organizational development methods or management and controlling procedures has a positive impact on the well-being of parishes. Other parishes would then only need to introduce procedures of these kinds to prevent any negative developments. Some factors do indeed speak in favour of this interpretation. On the other hand, the structural characteristics of the types of parish that fear negative developments, or have already experienced or are experiencing such developments, also permit another interpretation. Organizational development, management procedures and controlling assume that a certain infrastructure is already in place. People with expertise and time are required to set appropriate processes in motion. Training is needed, if possible locally, to equip people with the requisite skills. What are required are people who live locally and can be approached. These conditions do not exist everywhere. There is a lack of appropriate infrastructure – not only ecclesiastical but economic infrastructure too, particularly in rural areas with shrinking populations in both eastern and western Germany.<sup>28</sup>

In view of these findings, I believe that we have to face up to the fundamental question as to whether we are witnessing increasing polarization between winner and loser parishes, and therefore a process in which the church is reflecting developments in society as a whole. In addition to analysing best-practice examples, perhaps it is time to look at unsuccessful parish development models in order to better understand the hurdles and obstacles. There are many factors that we are not aware of yet, because there has been a lack of research for such a long time. The survey we have carried out highlights areas where there is a need for future research.

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28 Eberhard Hauschildt comes to a very similar conclusion in his qualitative study of rural parishes. See Hauschildt/Heinemann 2016.

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## Appendix: Questions, answers and areas evaluated in Figures 5, 7 and in Table 1

**Figure 5** “Below, we would like to know what is particularly important to you *at the moment* in the various areas of your work in the parish. You can select *up to three options* in each row. (Please also mark options with a cross which are only offered in the church region, diocese, affiliated parish)

- that those taking part are well acquainted with each other
- that the number of those taking part is increased
- that new programmes/projects are developed
- that criteria set are fulfilled

**Figure 7** List of the questions and items included in the indices

### 1. Controlling in parish administration

“How do you rate the way your parish is organized and managed? Please rate each comment and state to what extent it applies to your parish” (use a scale ranging from 5 = absolutely true to 1 = is not true at all)

- Decisions are quickly put into practice
- Clear job descriptions exist for all employees
- Areas of responsibility are clearly demarcated
- Checks are run to ensure decisions are implemented

### 2. Satisfaction with programmes/activities

“And how satisfied are you with the areas you work in in your parish?”

Scale from 1 = very dissatisfied to 5 = very satisfied

Responses totalled and standardized according to the number of offerings

### 3. Past development of the parish’s situation:

“If you look back over the past five years, has the general situation of your parish improved or worsened over this period?”

- It has improved a lot (5)
- It has tended to improve (4)
- It has stayed the same (3)
- It has tended to get worse (2)
- It has got a lot worse (1)

#### **4. Future development of the situation in the parish**

“And now please imagine your parish’s position in five years’ time. Will the general situation have improved or worsened over this period?”

- It will have improved a lot (5)
- It will probably have improved (4)
- It will have stayed the same (3)
- It will have tended to get worse (2)
- It will have got a lot worse (1)

#### **5. Satisfaction with the situation of your parish in general**

“How satisfied are you all in all with the current situation of your parish?”

- Very satisfied (5)
- Quite satisfied (4)
- So-so (3)
- Quite dissatisfied (2)
- Very dissatisfied (1)

#### **6. Management methods in parochial church council work**

“To what extent do the following statements apply to the work and organization of the parochial church council?” (Answer on a scale of 5 = absolutely true to 1 = absolutely untrue)

- We inform the parochial church council regularly about our next objectives and performance standards.
- The parochial church council strives to develop working and decision-making processes.
- Members of the parochial church council are given roles that match their skills, e.g. in committees, jobs in the parish itself.
- Members of the parochial church council regularly take part in parish-management training courses.
- New members of the parochial church council are familiarized with their roles and trained.

Table 1 List of the questions and items in the indices

**1. Use of management methods – see above.**

**2. Controlling in parish administration – see above.**

**3. Number of organizational development methods**

Index formed by totalling the responses to the question in Fig. 3.6

**4. Involvement in the parochial church council is a strain**

“To what extent do the following statements apply to your own experience on the parochial church council?” (Answer on a scale of 5 = absolutely true to 1 = absolutely untrue)

- My workload is often too heavy
- I frequently don’t have enough time for my private life

**5. Number of activities in the parish**

Index formed by totalling the items from a list of 21 activities

**6. Expected demographic development:**

“In terms of numbers, how do you rate the development of the population in the area your parish is located in?”

- To increase significantly (5)
- To probably rise (4)
- To remain stable (3)
- To probably drop (2)
- To drop dramatically (1)

**7. Religious focus desired**

“And what focus do you want your parish as a whole to have?”

Use the following scale to rate the three focuses “religious”, “social” and “cultural”:

- Pronounced (3)
- Average (2)
- Very little/not at all (1)



# The Barometer of Parish Performance

## A Response

Ulla Schmidt

### 1. “The Barometer of Parish Performance”: opening up an integrative approach in congregational studies

Without doubt the recent study “The Barometer of Parish Performance” represents a much-needed and welcome addition to the growing literature on congregational studies.<sup>1</sup> It provides valuable insights regarding the EKD, the Evangelical (i.e. Protestant) Church in Germany.<sup>2</sup> But equally important, it is also a major contribution to methodological and theoretical questions in this field.

It applies an integrative perspective, one in which mechanisms of social organization and important priorities for parish life and activities are explored in conjunction. To what extent are parishes socially structured according to mechanisms of market, organization or community? And are they primarily orientated towards a religious, a social or a cultural focus in their life and activities?

Questions about mechanisms and concerns relating to the steering and coordination of parishes are analysed in combination with questions about substantial profile. Organizational matters are not from the outset viewed as purely administrative, “technical” and non-theological matters without any bearing on the core mission and identity of a parish and church, but as potentially connected to questions about ecclesiological and theological identity. Not only does this very clearly reveal the nature and significance in terms of practical theology of questions about church structure and organization (Hermelink 2011: 27), it also offers a methodological possibility to analyse and reflect critically on the links and connections between

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1 “Congregational studies” appears to be the commonly used English term, but given that in a German context we are talking about territorially defined communities I will be using “parish”.

2 *Editor’s note:* “EKD” = “Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland”. The EKD itself translates its name into English, for example on the English pages of its website, as “Evangelical Church in Germany”; but in fact “evangelisch” means “protestant” rather than “evangelical”. The EKD is not “evangelical” as that term is normally understood in English.

organizational structuring and practices in parishes, as well as a wider theory as to how the theoretical concept of any given church is manifest in local church life. In particular, it opens up the perspective of analysing and understanding how forms and patterns of communication, whether orientated towards market dynamics, organization or community, might be intertwined with church life and practices in other respects. It thereby offers a deeper understanding of the dynamics that go into shaping the life of the parish.

Furthermore, this methodology may be productive in revealing possible complexities and contradictions in parish life, for instance the ways in which different forms of organizational structuring might be at cross purposes, or potentially conflicting substantial profiles might be pursued at the same time. In short, it provides a chart that is able to reveal the complex and composite nature of Christian parishes, including within the organized structures of the northern European majority churches.

## 2. Types of social coordination of congregations: clearly distinguishable or inseparably blended?

The study adopts a perspective according to which parishes can be structured by three different forms of social coordination: market, organization and community. Each of these represents a different pattern of logic of social action: different ways of leading or governing it, and different ways of conceptualizing its purposes and objectives. In terms of market, mechanisms of competition are the important structuring elements. Parishes are structured and governed in the light of a concern for how different programmes, activities, practices etc. will attract participants and attendees. The profile and individual activities are shaped with an eye as to how well they will do in terms of participation and support in a climate where there might be competing alternatives, either from other churches or from a variety of non-church agents. Parish activities are structured according to mechanisms of competition, how they will thrive and attain participation and support, in competition with rival alternatives within the church or outside. They are organized based on expectations regarding how church members, like other people, act as customers in a market. Claims to this effect, namely that religious life is influenced and shaped by economic forces, have been offered by various scholars over recent years (cf. Martikainen/Gauthier 2013). This perspective provides a welcome alternative to the very familiar ones whereby religious life is primarily understood as being affected by cultural dynamics, by factors such as secularization, individualization and detraditionalization or retraditionalization.

As organizations, parishes are socially structured in terms of plans and strategies, objectives and performance, management of employees and resources. In this, congregations are considered similar to other organizations, and operate accordingly, adopting the coordinating mechanisms that also govern organizations for example in the private sector or in the non-profit sector of civil society.

As communities, congregations are structured by people associating and acting together for the sake of a common good or concern, not simply with a view to promoting their own self-interest. They identify with a cause and act together out of a shared sense of purpose and commitment to it; this may be a shared set of beliefs, values of solidarity and mutuality, shared practices and conventions etc.

As a theoretical account of social coordination, these three forms might very well be distinct, representing three clearly different patterns of logic underlying social action: one coordinated through competition to meet demand, one through management according to plans, strategies and bureaucratic structures, and one through collaboration, solidarity and a shared effort for the common good.

The obvious question is whether these three forms of social coordination are equally distinct and clear-cut when used as analytical concepts in order to explain the complexities of empirical material relating to parishes. Do the complexities and pluralities of concrete parish life lend themselves to being structured neatly along these categories? That, I suggest, is perhaps less certain. What might very well be clearly different patterns of logic in theory, might in practice and in the real world easily become intermingled.

A prominent feature of organizations, and not only of for-profit, private enterprises but also to a considerable extent of public organizations following the public sector reforms of the 1990s, is that market mechanisms become tools of leadership and for the steering of organizations. Not only are organizations expected to provide competitive services that are demanded and used by people; in addition, the extent to which they provide services that meet this demand also becomes a managerial tool, a tool used to lead the organization, in the sense that performance in relation to defined objectives feeds back into the organization, and in doing so compels the organization to undertake some kind of change or modification if this should be shown to be necessary.

The dynamics of such forces are not unknown to churches or parishes either. Most parishes are likely to seek to attract attendees and participants for their activities and services as the study also demonstrates. But additionally, some of them might also make use of this objective, and in particular the degree to which it is achieved, as tools of leadership in the parish, for example by modifying the activity, following up on staff or volunteers etc. Market mechanisms are increasingly used for organizational and managerial purposes, even in churches and parishes, and organizational models tend to incorporate market

mechanisms as a central principle in leading and managing the organization.<sup>3</sup> In other words, market and organization might in practice be less clearly separated patterns of logic underlying the social structuring of parishes.

A related point is how one type of social logic might become overriding and “trump” the others. A consideration frequently offered in relation to the broad wave of neo-liberalism that spread during the 1980s was that it led to an increasing marketization of goods or services. The logic of the market spread throughout various domains of public social life, and became a dominant mode in the coordination of social transactions, including in areas such as the distribution of common goods or services that had previously followed a quite different logic. In a similar vein, it has also been argued that with the comprehensive public reform wave partly driven by neo-liberal ideas, what spread was not only market ideas, but in a wider sense a feeling of identity as an organization. Social structures and units that had originally had little or nothing to do with the concept of “organization” – universities, housing associations, sports clubs, and quite possibly churches – came to perceive and define themselves as organizations, adapting corresponding self-descriptive language, forms of leadership etc. (Rövik 2007). What this might imply is well accounted for in “The Barometer of Parish Performance”: the use of visions and strategy plans, managerialism, and the effective distribution and use of resources in order to achieve predefined objectives. “Organization” is then not simply one form of social structuring alongside or in combination with others, but might become a dominant one, a form of logic of social action that also pervades other social forms, for example communities or institutions. A similar argument might be made for the social logic of the market: that rather than being one of a triad, it becomes all-pervasive, starting to dominate and invade the others.

The point is that although these forms of social coordination are theoretically clearly distinct from each other, in reality they might be much more intermingled, or one of them might occupy a predominant position overriding the other two. This raises the question as to how methodologies for studying congregations are suitable or adequate for detecting complexities of this kind in social structuring and coordination. In particular, it is highly significant whether or not methodologies are able to reveal situations or cases where one form of social structuring, say organization, starts to permeate and feed into the logic of a different form, say community, without it really being noticed or articulated by the agents. This could hypothetically be the case where the forming of new fellowships, relational arenas etc. becomes permeated – if not necessarily entirely determined – by the logic of how to increase attendance and participation.

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3 These are well-known observations from a number of studies of the driving forces of various forms of public management, cf. Schmidt 2016.

The methodological approach of this study seems to presume that the three types of social structuring appear in their “pure” forms, untainted by the others, and that for example the logic of market does not intrude into the congregation as organization, or that the logic of organization does not intrude into its character as community. But can one be certain that this is necessarily the case?

### 3. Parishes and local church leaders

The material of the study is collected from local church leaders, in the form of individual questionnaires to a number of leaders in a random selection of parishes in each “provincial” church, in addition to one “cover questionnaire” providing relevant background information for each parish. Although it is not stated explicitly, the latter questionnaire too is apparently answered by one of the church leaders. The material is thus a combination of data about the parishes and about the local church leaders. “Local church leaders” are the pastors and other employed staff, as well as elected leaders in parish and church councils at various levels. This is indeed highly valuable material, allowing combined analyses of ordained and lay ministry, professionals and volunteer elected leaders.

The study provides a wealth of interesting material regarding how church leaders evaluate different parish activities with regard to importance, quality and satisfaction, and profile, and analyses connections with a variety of relevant background variables. Both the mechanisms for social coordination and the substantive profile are thus mapped in terms of the perceptions and assessments of the local church leaders. This invites some further reflections regarding church leaders as informants about local parishes.

There seem to be two alternatives for understanding in what sense local church leaders are informants regarding the local parish. One would be to view them as experts or elites, and in that capacity likely not only to be well-informed regarding central features of the parish, but also to be central agents or “movers”. Thus their priorities would be likely to have a significant impact on the profile of the parish and the processes within it. If their subjective opinion is that “a team spirit based on trust”, or “boosting the prominence and image of the parish in the public arena”, are what they consider important to their involvement, these things will most likely also be hallmarks of their engagement. Consequently, they are also likely to shape the profile and structuring of the parish. This approach relies on a rather modernistic rational understanding of organizations, where they are viewed as efficient structures for coordinating resources and work-tasks as efficiently as possible, designed and implemented by a leadership at the organizational pinnacle. In that perspective, organizations directly reflect the decisions and intentions of their leaders, and are to a considerable extent the causal results of what leaders and leaderships set in motion.

It is debatable whether this is the best way to understand organizations, and perhaps particularly whether churches and parishes – and their leaders – can be adequately understood as organizations by this approach. An alternative approach would be to see them as social constructs of meaning. From that perspective they can be viewed as ways of creating meaning, as attempts to form constructs that express their organizational form directly or symbolically. Identifying any specific church as an organization of a particular kind would then be not so much a matter of trying to account objectively for a given social reality and set of interactions, but rather a way of defining its effectiveness as an instrument to realize the intentions of decisions made and plans drawn up at the pinnacle of the organization. Church organization would then be a symbolic expression or interpretation, clothed in organizational forms, of how the people concerned understand their church. From this point of view, leaders would then not be seen primarily as the “drivers” or “designers” of organizations, but rather as being themselves embedded in constructs of what their church means to those who are involved in it, and as being communicators of these constructs of meaning that they are a part of. In such a perspective parish leaders of various kinds are obviously still highly relevant as providers of information about their churches: not in the sense of factual information about “what they are and how they are likely to develop”, but in the sense of their reflecting predominant ways of constructing, formulating and articulating what their churches mean to them. The information they provide reflects images, ideas and conceptions of how they like to see their churches, rather than the “real”, objective social reality of the churches concerned.

This distinction has implications for how to understand the findings of the study, especially with regard to the three forms of social coordination and the three kinds of profile of work and activities: religious, cultural or social. According to the findings in the study, community takes precedence as the dominant form of social coordination, with organization as a close second, whereas market is only a distant third. And with regard to the prioritization of the different kinds of profile, a social profile of the parish and its activities is by far the most favoured kind, with a religious profile as good second. Only a small proportion supports a cultural profile as one which should be strongly characteristic of the Church; but there is a large percentage that thinks it should characterize the parish and its activities to a medium degree.

In the light of the above, however, these findings should not necessarily be interpreted to mean that the parishes are overwhelmingly structured according to the logic of community or of organization, nor that their activity profiles are predominantly orientated towards the social and religious. Although the findings do certainly not preclude this from being the case, the question is whether this is really the most or the only adequate interpretation of their significance, that is, whether they primarily inform about the actual social coordination and profiling of parishes. Do they not perhaps rather inform about how parish elders want to believe and articulate that the parishes are structured and profiled? Are they not perhaps

to be understood as articulations of the meanings parish elders associate with the concept of the church, rather than information about an actual social reality? In that case they are findings about how parish elders talk about their parishes and would like to see them structured and profiled, namely according to a logic of community and perhaps organization, but not according to a logic of market. The interesting thing might then not be that parishes are less structured according to market logic, but that the parish elders want to avoid the language of market and marketization in their images and constructions of their parishes. The image they are eager to convey is one of community, but also one of a well-planned organization, efficiently managed in accordance with its overall objectives.

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# Congregational Development in Europe and the US

## A Commentary on the Presentations by Prof. Mark Chaves and Dr. Hilke Rebenstorf

Kati Tervo-Niemelä

I want to thank the organizers for this opportunity to comment on the highly interesting lectures by Professor Mark Chaves from the United States and Dr. Hilke Rebenstorf from Germany. It is a great honour for me to be able to do so.

Both of these lectures dealt with the core issues and themes of this conference: the current situation, changes that have been taking place in parishes and congregations and insights into possible future developments – Mark Chaves in an American context and Hilke Rebenstorf in a German one. I will be taking up some ideas from both of these presentations. But since Professor Ulla Schmidt is concentrating on Hilke Rebenstorf's presentation in her commentary, I will comment on Mark Chaves's presentation slightly more.

I want to first summarize some of the developmental trends outlined in the two presentations. Both of the studies show the complexity of congregational development: we cannot simply say that parishes and congregations are developing in a certain direction, but rather that there are many different trends and patterns in the development which are partly dependent on the contexts of the various congregations. The German "Barometer of Parish Performance" study that Hilke Rebenstorf presented and especially her brilliant categorization of parishes show that in a German context many urban, especially western, parishes are strong and vital and have a bright vision of their future, while some of the rural, especially eastern, parishes are in a difficult situation and are pessimistic about their future development. At the same time it has to be kept in mind that there are many other contextual matters which have a great influence on developments, including the ethnic make-up of a church community and its theological orientation, as the US congregational study shows.

The US study which Professor Chaves presented shows developments in many directions. First of all, it shows a similar development to what we have previously tended to see mainly in Europe: namely that church attendance is declining in the US as well, perhaps not as dramatically as in many European countries, but still declining, resulting in a lower average participation per service. However, that is not the only trend by any means.

At the same time, the number of large congregations especially has been growing, while the number of medium-sized congregations especially has been declining. This may be linked to a phenomenon Hilke Rebenstorf talked about: namely that many urban parishes are doing very well while the situation in a rural context is often very different.

If we look at the findings of the US study we gain the impression that church communities are becoming increasingly open and less exclusive, meaning that they seem to be increasingly willing to welcome members, both lay people and paid workers, with diverse backgrounds. Congregations are increasingly diverse in ethnicity, women are increasingly accepted in leadership positions and congregations are also increasingly open towards gay and lesbian members.

However, with regard to openness to diversity in the US it is important to point out that even though there has been a clear move towards openness, it is still only in a quarter of the congregations that all unpaid volunteer leadership positions are open to gays and lesbians living in committed relationships – that is still fairly low, indeed looked at from a Nordic perspective it appears extremely low. Furthermore, in only 58% of congregations is a woman allowed to be a head clergyperson or primary pastoral leader, in only two-thirds (68%) of congregations can a woman preach at the main Sunday service, and only 11% of congregations actually have a female leader (Chaves 2015). Even though there were increases in these percentages between 2006 and 2012, they are fairly moderate ones. It seems that the days of advances in gender equality in the congregations are more or less over, and that the situation has more or less stabilized at its current level. It seems that the number of congregations with a basically conservative stance in relation to gender roles has remained more or less the same over recent years.

It has been said that the ordination of women to the ministry has been one of the biggest transformations in 20th-century Christianity (e.g. Chaves 1996; Chaves 2015). It has changed both the institutional lives of the churches and the lives of those women who have been ordained (Chang 1997). In the 21st century many churches have been undergoing a major transformation in their attitudes to gay and lesbian couples. This change towards an increased acceptance of gays and lesbians has been very rapid in society in general as well as in church congregations. Based on the US study and a lot of other research, it seems very likely that the changing attitude to gays and lesbians will be the biggest transformation of Christianity in the 21st century. But to what extent can we say that these two transformations are linked: to what extent is the increasing acceptance of the ordination of women a factor that has led to the increasing acceptance of gays and lesbians? What we have been seeing in the context of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland is that it has been predominantly female clergy who have been in favour of granting gay and lesbian couples wider rights in the church. For example, even in 2016 the blessing of gay and lesbian couples is still not permitted in the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland, and when we asked in 2006 whether clergy had been performing such blessings nevertheless, only 2% said that they had, and

all of these were women (Niemelä 2011). At the present time too, the general attitude of female clergy is more positive towards extending gay and lesbian rights in the church (Niemelä 2011).

US congregations are also increasingly active in social service; their interest in the needs of the community has been increasing rapidly. In 1998 only one-third, 37%, of congregations had a group to assess community needs, while in 2012 the proportion was 57% (Chaves 2015). A similar trend has been visible in the Nordic countries and their former, or in some cases still extant, established state churches. The underlying question raised by this is to what extent congregations are at the same time losing their special character as congregations, meaning groups of people who assemble primarily for religious worship, and becoming primarily social service providers. Research among the clergy in the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland shows that here too a development of this kind has been fostered by the increase in the number of women in leadership positions and as ordained clergy: the work orientation of women is broader than that of men, and often directed towards helping in a broad sense. It would be interesting to explore the extent to which the same link between an increase in social service orientation and an increase in the number of women in leadership positions is also to be found in the US. An analysis of the changes in the work orientation of the clergy in Finland has shown that there is a clear shift in the direction of a greater orientation towards helping people in need and especially towards justice and equality, while the orientation towards spreading the Gospel and missionary efforts of the church has been declining (Tervo-Niemelä 2016).

**Table 1** Changes among Lutheran clergy in Finland: summary according to Tervo-Niemelä 2016

<b>Clergy in the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland – declines and increases</b>	
DECLINING	INCREASING
Male clergy	Female clergy
Mission orientation	Promoting equality
Importance of evangelization	Promoting justice
Importance of reading and teaching the Bible	Importance of education
Prayer life	Promoting the rights of minorities
Work as a mission in life to which one is totally devoted	Self-fulfilment
Work as a God-given vocation	Willingness to forge a career
	Willingness to serve and help people
FUNCTION: stressing the spiritual tasks of religion	PERFORMANCE: applying religion to social problems
CONSERVATIVE THEOLOGICAL ORIENTATION	LIBERAL THEOLOGICAL ORIENTATION

Furthermore, the American study shows the dilemma of “Ageing clergy – Ageing members – Fewer children”; the problem of fewer children is especially visible in mainline congregations. As my next point I now want to take a special look at parishes and congregations from the perspective of the younger generations. When trying to predict future developments, it is often wise to look at the younger generations. So if we do so, what kind of future do we see for parishes and congregations? I would like to expand the discussion of the future prospects for church communities to take in other countries, looking especially at the future prospects for Protestant congregations in Europe based on young people and their relationships to their churches.

Firstly, I want to go back to the results Dr. Hilke Rebenstorf presented in relation to church council members and their expectations and motives with regard to their voluntary work in church councils (see Hilke Rebenstorf’s Figures 3 and 5). In general the results show that for the church council members, to put it frankly, it is in general more important just to be together with each other in a good team spirit than to develop the parish or implement new activities or programmes in the parish. However, if we look at Dr. Rebenstorf’s Figure 5, the situation seems more positive. In that Figure the respondents of the survey were asked what they saw as being particularly important in different areas of church work. I want to take a look at those areas in which the respondents want to see the number of participants increase. The top three such areas are: church services (83% see it as important that the numbers of participants should increase), work with young people / youth church (67%) and work with children / Christian teaching (65%). A willingness to welcome children and young people into their activities and to increase their number is in itself a sign of a vital parish. It shows that the parishes themselves want to continue to exist and to be important for the next generation too. Based on the respondents’ views the basic picture we get is that EKD parishes are in general at least fairly vital and willing to invest in the younger generation. However, based on this figure alone we cannot tell if there are differences between parishes, if there are parishes in which the general attitude is that there is no point in investing specifically in the younger generation, but that the parish should just continue as it is. I would guess that this is most likely a problem in some of those rural parishes with negative future prospects (which are in the bottom left-hand corner of Hilke Rebenstorf’s typology diagram), and where the age structure is such that parish councils are not motivated to invest to the younger generation.

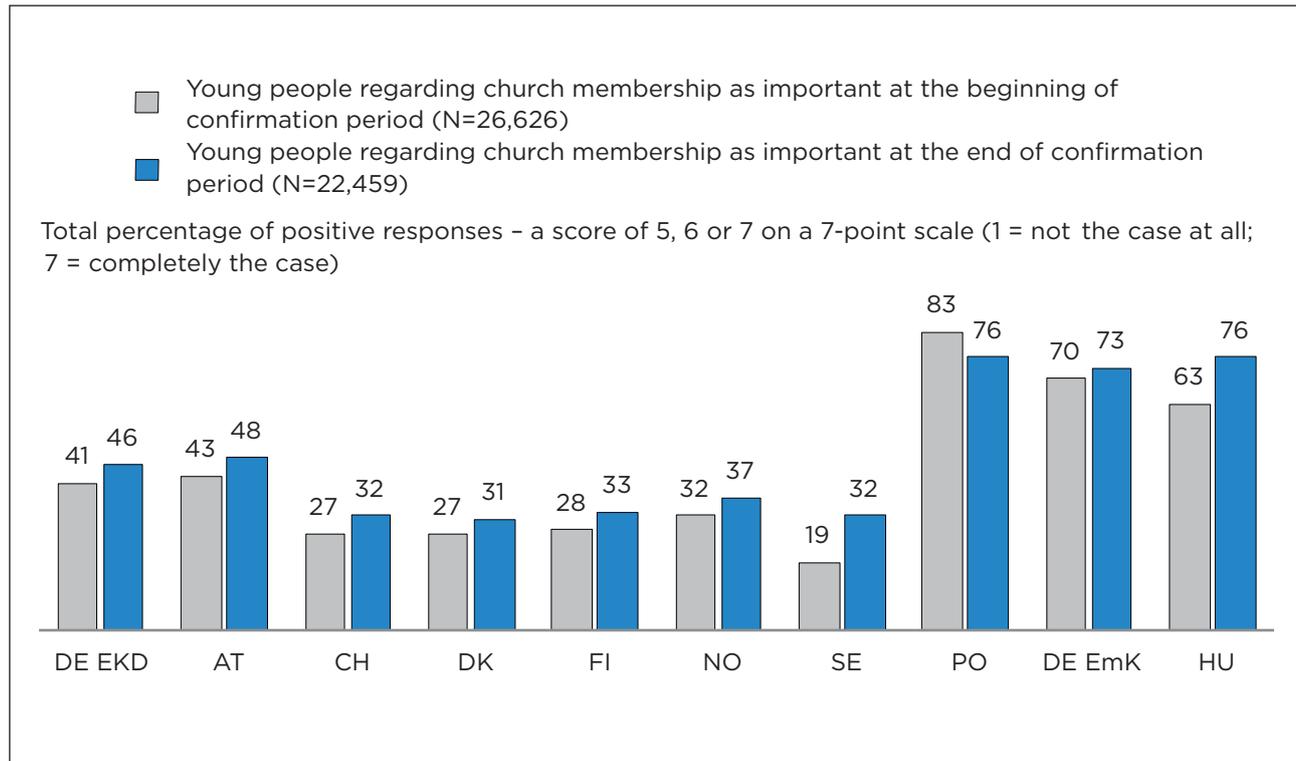
A longitudinal study we conducted among Protestant young people in Europe before and after their confirmation time and two years later provides some information on the future outlook for the Protestant churches and their parishes in Europe in general, and it also allows us to find out what is peculiar to each of the participating countries, and thus how the situation in parishes of the “official” German Protestant Church, the EKD, differs from that in other European Protestant churches (Schweitzer et al. 2015). The 2<sup>nd</sup> International Study of Youth and Confirmation was conducted in the following countries

and churches: 1) Germany: EKD and Methodist Church, 2) Switzerland: Reformed Church, 3) Poland: Lutheran Church, 4) Hungary: Reformed and Lutheran Churches, 5) Austria: Lutheran and Reformed Churches, 6) Finland: Lutheran Church, 7) Sweden: Lutheran Church, 8) Norway: Lutheran Church and 9) Denmark: Lutheran Church. The churches we studied operate in very different settings. Some of them are majority churches, some of them very small minority churches. The confirmation rates too differ greatly (see Table 2).

**Table 2** Percentages of church members and confirmation rates in 2014 in the countries and churches studied in the 2<sup>nd</sup> International Study of Youth and Confirmation in Europe (Schweitzer et al. 2015)

	Church	Membership of this Church (% of total population)	Confirmation rate (% of total population)
<b>Germany</b>	EKD	31	about 30
<b>Germany</b>	Methodist	< 1	
<b>Austria</b>	Lutheran and Reformed	4	about 3
<b>Switzerland</b>	Reformed	30	20
<b>Denmark</b>	Lutheran	78	70
<b>Finland</b>	Lutheran	75	85
<b>Norway</b>	Lutheran	75	63
<b>Sweden</b>	Lutheran	66	30
<b>Poland</b>	Lutheran	< 1	
<b>Hungary</b>	Reformed and Lutheran	12 (Ref.) 2 (Luth.)	8

The results of the 2<sup>nd</sup> International Study of Youth and Confirmation may help us to make some assumptions with regard to the future of these European Protestant churches in different countries and their parishes or congregations. Based on the findings of the study, the situation in the minority churches is very different from that in the larger or majority churches. Small in number, but very committed to their churches, the members, including those in the younger age-groups, are willing to remain members in the future and regard their membership as important. This applies to Lutherans in Poland, Methodists in Germany and Lutherans and Reformed in Hungary – all of these small minority churches in their



**Figure 1** The percentages of young people regarding church membership as important at the beginning (t<sub>1</sub>) and at the end (t<sub>2</sub>) of their confirmation period in different countries (Schweitzer et al. 2015)

country. The situation in minority churches cannot be directly compared with that in the majority churches. It is however clear that attachment to the church among the young generation of church members is low in the Nordic countries, where the church membership rate is still fairly high but has been clearly declining during the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and one does not need to have any special talent to predict that it will continue to decline. In Switzerland too, the percentage of committed young people is low. Based on this study, the general situation is not at all bad in the German EKD, where almost half of the young people regard it important to belong to the church (Schweitzer et al. 2015).

Furthermore, the study on youth and confirmation work showed the same as many other studies: namely that parents and their relationship to the church and its faith are the most meaningful factor in determining young people's attitudes towards the church and its faith – and remain so right up to confirmation (Schweitzer et al. 2015). Parental influence has been revealed by many studies and cannot be overestimated. At the same time it highlights the importance of the work that is done in the parishes

among families and children, which is also – as shown in the German Barometer of Parish Performance Study – seen by church council members as the most important area of church work.

Lastly, I want to take a more practical view of the issue and ask: is there anything that the parishes/congregations themselves can do to strengthen young people's commitment to the church? Our study showed that the confirmation preparation time itself can strengthen confirmands' commitment to church membership, it can strengthen their faith and also activate their willingness to participate in church activities. However, how the confirmation preparation time was perceived also had an influence: it is important that young people should get a feeling of being welcome in the parish, and the feeling that their questions are addressed and that they are able to have fun (Niemelä and Hamori 2015). These are experiences which explain positive developments during confirmation preparation time and they tend to activate young people's relationship to their church. Furthermore, the use of music and participatory learning methods had many positive consequences (Niemelä and Ilg 2015).

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# The Established and the Newcomers

## Resources and Relationships of Congregations in the Swiss Religious Field

Jörg Stolz / Christophe Monnot

### 1. Introduction

At least since the work of Max Weber (1978 [1920]) and Pierre Bourdieu (1991), scholars have claimed that religious groups may compete for public recognition and resources in religious fields. In such fields, legally or de-facto established groups are often privileged in comparison to non-established groups of “newcomers”. However, since fields are social spaces of struggle, and incumbents are continually challenged by newcomers, privileged positions may be redistributed over time.

Generally speaking, “establishment” refers to preferential treatment of one or more religious groups, their members, or their institutions. If such preferential treatment is afforded by the state, we speak of *legal establishment* (Whelan, 1990). This may take many forms, including paying clergy salaries, collecting church taxes, harassing religious competitors, or giving preferential access to positions in schools, hospitals, media, or the military. If the preferential treatment is afforded by society (without explicit legal backing), we speak of *de facto establishment* (Beyer, 2013).<sup>1</sup> This is the case when groups are given special rights because they seem to naturally belong to the place, e.g. because of a long tradition of incumbency, or because they are in the majority. De facto establishment may also involve negative stereotyping and discrimination of groups that are not de facto established.

An important body of sociological literature has suggested that the relationship between established and non-established religious groups can be seen as a social *field*. The idea itself – though not the term – goes back to Max Weber (1978 [1920], pp. 424f., 439f., 1158f.), who described how “priests” (the “religious establishment”) would combat both “prophets” and “magicians” (the “newcomers”). Weber

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1 For an interesting view on the complexity of “varieties of establishment”, see various chapters in Fallers Sullivan/Beaman (2013). Much of the relevant literature can be found under the heading of “State-Religion Relations”. For an overview of such relationships in the countries of the EU see Robbers (2005).

saw “priests” as keepers of religious tradition who deliver an official religious message on the basis of an “office” in an often bureaucratically organized “church”; “prophets” as preachers of a new religious message on the basis of personal revelation and charisma who lead a small group of believers – a “sect”; and “magicians” as solving individual problems in miraculous ways on the basis of personal charisma, often without a religious community. This insight was generalized into the idea of “social fields” by Bourdieu (1980, 2000 [1972]), who saw social (political, artistic, philosophical etc.) fields everywhere in social life. Bourdieu also applied the field concept to the religious sphere (Bourdieu, 1971a, 1971b, 1987, 1994a; Bourdieu & Saint Martin, 1982).<sup>2</sup> According to Bourdieu, fields are “structured spaces of positions” around a common goal (“enjeu”) and including different types of symbolic capital, in which there is a battle going on “between the newcomer who tries to break through the entry barrier and the dominant agent who will try to defend the monopoly and keep out competition” (Bourdieu, 1994b, p. 67).<sup>3</sup> Thus in both the Weberian and the Bourdieusian versions of the religious field, established (“orthodox”) groups and actors defend their privileged position and try to exclude newcomer (“unorthodox”) groups from different positions in the field.

Established groups may try to defend their privileged position against newcomers in various ways. A first possibility is to *limit contact with the newcomers* in order to prevent them from participating and enjoying the established groups’ privileges. Norms of social closure are set up, and members of one’s own group who transgress these norms are seen as traitors or as people who have been contaminated by contact with the outsiders. In the famous community study by Elias and Scotson (1994 [1965]) the established group “excluded all members of the other groups from non-occupational social contact with its own members” (p. xvi). Means of social control (“blame-gossip”) were used to keep the established group’s own members in line. A second possibility is to *create a negative social image of the outgroup and a positive social image of the ingroup*. The outgroup is said to have all kinds of negative attributes contrasting with the positive attributes of the ingroup. It is then argued that one could not possibly extend the privileges of the ingroup to the outgroup as well. Again, the Elias and Scotson study is a good example: the established group was convinced that the newcomers (who were sociologically exactly the same, only they had arrived later) were unclean, not well educated, poor and unsocial, and called them by names such as

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2 For a critique of Bourdieu’s approach to the definition of religion and the religious field see Pollack/Rosta (2015, p. 57f.).

3 Other literature that treats the importance of the established/newcomer structure in religion in a different way is to be found under the category “economics of religion” (Iannaccone, 1998). Here, the relationship between different religious groups is not called a “field”, but a “religious economy” or “religious market”. For a recent appraisal and critique see De Graaf (2013).

“evacuees”, “refugees”, and “cockneys” (Elias & Scotson, 1994 [1965], p. 96f.). A third possibility is to *appeal to the state and the officials in power*, to show them the importance of the established group for the state and society. The goal is to convince the state and its officials to continue to grant legal establishment (Fligstein & McAdam, 2011).

Remarkably, even though the religious field concept rests in important ways on the competitive relationships and power struggles between religious suppliers (leaders, congregations), there have to date been very few quantitative studies that describe such fields on the congregational level (see, however, Körs [2017]).<sup>4</sup>

Introductory texts routinely describe Weberian and Bourdieusian religious field theory as holding great promise for sociological analysis – but they have trouble in pointing to concrete studies that actually apply the concept at the level of inter-group competition (Dianteill, 2003; Knoblauch, 1999, p. 212ff.; Pickel, 2011, p. 238ff.; Rey, 2004, 2007; Schultheis, 2007; Swartz, 1996). Thus empirical applications of the concept have so far mainly looked at the individual (and sometimes the intra-denominational) level, focusing on the social backgrounds and power-relationships of different types of bishops (Bourdieu & Saint Martin, 1982),<sup>5</sup> “spiritual capital” (Rey, 2004), self-identification as spiritual or religious (Streib & Hood, 2013), phenomena of individualization in the religious field (Pollack & Pickel, 1999) or the acceptance of homosexuals in Anglicanism (Brittain, 2011; McKinnon, Trzebiatowska, & Brittain, 2011).

One important reason why the established/newcomer structure has not yet been empirically described in detail in respect of religious fields has been the absence of appropriate data. The Swiss National Congregations Study (NCS), conducted in the winter of 2008–2009, allows us for the first time to assess in relation to a whole country key differences between established and newcomer congregations with regard to the congregations’ organizational and membership characteristics.<sup>6</sup>

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4 Körs (2017) maps and describes congregations in the city of Hamburg. Many of her findings are strikingly similar to ours.

5 The one empirical application of the theory of religious field that Bourdieu contributed himself concerned the French Catholic hierarchy (co-authored with Monique de Saint Martin). Bourdieu and Saint Martin (1982) argue that the image of unity of the episcopate hides a struggle between bishops from a modest social background (“oblats”) and others from an upper-class social background (“héritiers”). These findings are also discussed in a more theoretical manner in Bourdieu (1994a).

6 We thus take up the invitation to engage in congregational studies made in Ammerman/Jackson et al. (1998). There are, of course, various interesting European studies on the congregational level: see for example Rebenstorff/Ahrens/Wegner (2015), Hero/Krech/Zander (2008), Giordan (2013). We are not, however, aware of any other congregational study that allows comparisons to be made over the whole religious field of a given country.

We define the term “*congregation*” as “a social institution in which individuals who are not all religious specialists gather in physical proximity to one another, frequently and at regularly scheduled intervals, for activities and events with explicitly religious content and purpose, and in which there is continuity over time in the individuals who gather, the location of the gathering, and the nature of the activities and events at each gathering” (Chaves, 2004, pp. 1–2). This definition covers the groups historically established in Europe, as well as those in the process of implantation (Monnot & Stolz, 2014).

*Switzerland* is an appropriate country in which to study the established/newcomer structure, because in the course of its history a very clear case of religious establishment has emerged (Stolz & Buchard, 2014).

The Reformed and Roman Catholic denominations are established in what may be called an *intermediate church-state system* (Landeskirchentum) (Cattacin et al., 2003; Pahud de Mortanges, 2007).<sup>7</sup> In such a regime, the churches are not part of the state, but are recognized by the state to be separate – although still state-regulated – institutions under public law. The political and the religious territorial community (Gemeinde) are most often completely identical. Such “Landeskirchen” or “Cantonal Churches” have special rights in that they have privileged access to state officials, are permitted to offer pastoral care in public institutions such as hospitals, schools, state-controlled media, universities etc., and may receive state subsidies and be allowed to use public buildings free of charge and to levy an obligatory church tax. They also have duties in that they have to introduce democratic governance and lay open their finances. The strength of legal establishment is extremely different in the various cantons, ranging from very strong to very weak (SSK, 2009); but even in the cantons with the weakest church-state relations (Geneva and Neuchâtel), the Reformed and Roman Catholic denominations enjoy at least some kind of public recognition and privilege.<sup>8</sup>

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7 Historically, the intermediate church-state system (Landeskirchentum) grew out of a strong church-state system (Staatskirchentum) that was still in place in the 18th century (Vischer, Schenker, & Dellsperger, 1994, p. 182ff.). When going over to an intermediate church-state system, cantons naturally initially recognized only their own traditional denomination; but during the 20<sup>th</sup> century the “other” large denomination was recognized in all cantons as well (and sometimes the Old Catholic denomination too).

8 In this paper, we do not focus on the causal effect of the strength of establishment, but instead compare established and non-established congregations on a variety of dimensions (for an investigation of the causal effect of strength of establishment see Stolz/Chaves [2017]).

Religious groups that are not established often came much later: non-established Christian groups split off from the established churches or immigrated in the 19<sup>th</sup> or 20<sup>th</sup> century, while most non-established non-Christian groups immigrated only from the 1960s onwards (Baumann & Stolz, 2007a; Bochinger, 2012). The non-Christians who have been in the country the longest are the Jews, whose communities can be traced back to the Middle Ages and who were granted full citizenship in 1866 (Gäbler, 1999; Kupfer & Weingarten, 1999). These newcomer groups have remained – with very few exceptions<sup>9</sup> – without public recognition.

In public discourse, the legal establishment of the Reformed and Roman Catholic Churches is strongly legitimated by several arguments, the most important being that these churches (1) have a long history in Switzerland and preserve the Christian heritage of the country;<sup>10</sup> (2) embrace the vast majority of the population; and (3) offer a kind of “public service” (welfare, help for the needy) not only for their own members but for everybody (Winzler, 2005). This legitimation has come under increasing pressure, especially because points (2) and (3) seem to be less and less true (Stolz & Ballif, 2010, p. 49). Since ever greater numbers of individuals are either without any religious affiliation or are members of non-Christian religions, it is increasingly difficult for the established Christian churches to argue that they represent the whole population and that their services are important for everybody. Thus several cantons (e.g. Basel Stadt, Vaud, Fribourg) have changed their constitutions to allow public recognition of newcomer groups as well.

The main points here are (1) that in Switzerland there has been a historical development of a clear established/newcomer structure; (2) that the establishment of the established groups is currently threatened; and (3) that we have representative data on congregations of all religious traditions. This allows us to answer our *central empirical question*: Are established religious congregations in the Swiss religious field privileged when it comes to resources and if so, do they defend these privileges by excluding newcomer congregations?

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9 By 2008 there were other groups that enjoyed some form of public recognition. Old Catholics enjoy strong establishment, comparable to the Reformed and Roman Catholic Churches, in nine cantons, while specific Jewish congregations have some kind of recognition in six cantons (see Appendix). All these groups are small and for the sake of clarity we exclude them from our analysis. Non-established Jewish congregations are included. Our results are similar with or without this exclusion.

10 Very often, this is now expressed as the “Judaeo-Christian heritage”, thus including the Jews in the group that represents the roots of Swiss culture. This is, of course, a very new kind of thinking. On the difficult history of the integration of Jews in Switzerland see Kupfer/Weingarten (1999).

Based on the literature, we try to gain focus by concentrating on two hypotheses:

1. That the established groups have more income, staff and property than non-established groups, even when various background factors and the numbers of participants are used as statistical controls.
2. That the established groups seek ecumenical contacts mainly among themselves, thus excluding newcomer groups from privileged positions in the field.

This article seeks to contribute to (a) the general literature on the empirical description of established/newcomer structures and religious fields, and (b) the specific literature on the religious situation in Switzerland. Our main point is that the field concept and the established/newcomer structure lend themselves very well to a description of the religious situation in Switzerland, but that established groups – in a very central point – do not behave as expected. That is, they do not exclude, but include, competitors in order to keep their privileged position.

The *plan* of the paper is as follows: After an introduction, we describe the method in Part 2. We then show in Part 3 that the legitimization of the legal establishment of Reformed and Roman Catholic congregations is threatened because of the diminishing numbers of official members and attenders. In Part 4 we show how established congregations are privileged concerning resources, even when various background variables are taken into account. Part 5 demonstrates that established congregations try to maintain their privileged status not by excluding, but by including competitors. We close with a Summary 6.

## 2. Method

The National Congregations Study Switzerland (NCSS) was conducted in 2008/09 (Monnot, 2013; Stolz et al. 2011). It was modelled on the National Congregations Studies conducted in the United States in 1997–98, 2006/7 and 2012 (Chaves, 2004; Chaves & Anderson, 2008; Chaves et al., 1999).<sup>11</sup>

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11 The National Congregation Study Switzerland (NCSS) was conducted by Christophe Monnot and Laurent Amiotte-Suchet and directed by Jörg Stolz and Mark Chaves. For a detailed account of the methodology of the NCSS, see Monnot (2013). For more details about the U.S. NCS, see <http://www.soc.duke.edu/natcong>.

## 2.1 Sampling and data collection

In order to create the sampling framework, a count of all local religious groups in Switzerland was conducted between September 2008 and September 2009.<sup>12</sup> This was done by combining all available sources of information, including existing lists of local religious groups produced by churches and religious federations; existing lists (published or not) drawn up by scholars; existing lists appearing on institutional websites or in directories or databases; and interviews with informed individuals within the religious milieu. All this information was collated and reviewed to identify local religious congregations. A congregation was retained in the final list only if it appeared in two independent sources of information. From the resulting list of 5,734 congregations of all religions in Switzerland, a sample of 1,040 religious congregations, stratified to over-represent religious minorities, was chosen. For every chosen congregation, one key informant (in most cases the spiritual leader) was interviewed by telephone in 2008–9 in one of the three national languages.<sup>13</sup> The approximately 250 questions focused on concrete and verifiable congregational practices as well as on the tangible characteristics of the organization for which the respondent could provide reliable information. The response rate was 71.8%.<sup>14</sup>

## 2.2 Operationalization and data analysis

Our key independent variable is a seven-step measure combining *religious tradition and a dummy variable measuring whether the religious tradition is legally established or not*. The variable distinguishes “Christian established”, “Christian non-established”, “Jewish”, “Muslim”, “Buddhist”, “Hindu” and “Other”. The “Christian established” category includes only Reformed and Roman Catholic congregations. The dummy variable measuring establishment captures whether a religious tradition was publicly recognized as an institution

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12 The American and Swiss NCSs used different sampling strategies. See Monnot (2013) for more sampling details of the Swiss case.

13 Being a key informant survey, the obvious question is if the key informant will give valid and reliable answers to our questions. The literature has shown a large number of possible biases, e.g. the false consensus effect (the informant falsely believes that other members of the group have similar opinions to him or her), effects of limited information of the key informant etc. etc. Our solution to this problem is not to ask the key informant any questions on the values and beliefs of the congregation members or on the goals or missions of the congregation, but only questions concerning directly observable facts. It has been shown that the answers to such questions are normally very valid and reliable. For example: key informants are normally well able to answer the question: Including you/the leader, how many people currently work in this congregation as full-time paid staff?

14 This is the RR1 response rate as defined by AAPOR (2009).

of public law or of public interest in 2008 or not. We relied on the information in Cattacin et al. (2003), Pahud de Mortanges (2007), and Frey (1999).

De facto establishment was conceptualized in terms of the duration of the presence of the congregation and majority status. *Duration of presence* of the congregation was measured by asking the key informant what year the local religious group was founded in. *Majority status* was measured as the percentage of the population of Switzerland / the canton concerned according to the Census 2000 (Bovay, 2004). We used the information on de facto establishment not as a separate independent variable, but to provide a further description of the establishment situation in Switzerland.

A first set of dependent variables focuses on the “success” of the rituals of the religious traditions by looking at different types of members, at the age and gender of attenders, and at changes in attendance over the last 10 years. The number of *official members* in established groups was calculated according to the Census 2000 following Bovay (2004). Further information on *membership structure* was gathered by asking the key informant how many persons were associated in any way with the religious life of the congregation (“members with any link”), how many persons participated regularly in the religious life of the congregation (“regular members”), and how many persons were present at the last regular religious celebration (“attenders”). *Change in attendance* was measured by asking the key informant on a 5-point scale whether the number of regular participants, as compared to 10 years earlier, had grown by more than 10 per cent, grown by 10 per cent or less, stayed stable, shrunk by 10 per cent or less, or shrunk by more than 10 per cent. *Social attributes of attenders* were measured by asking the key informant what percentage of participants at the last ritual were individuals in the age ranges 18–35, 36–60 and 60+. Similarly, the percentage of female participants was asked.

A second set of dependent variables concerns the *resources* of the congregation in respect to wealth, staff and type of building. *Congregations’ income* was measured by asking the key informant to specify the total amount of congregational income from all sources during the past year. This variable was logged (log 10) in our analyses. *Spiritual leader’s income* was measured by asking the yearly salary of the spiritual leader. *Staff attributes* were measured using three variables. Two dummies indicated whether or not the spiritual leader was paid and whether or not this person was working full-time for the congregation. A third variable measured the number of part-time and full-time staff. *Building attributes* were measured with three dummies indicating whether or not the building in which the ritual took place was built for religious purposes, whether or not the congregation was the owner of the building, and whether or not the building was subject to any kind of protection or preservation for historical reasons.

A third set of dependent variables concerned relationships with other congregations and exclusivism. *Relationships with other congregations* were measured by asking whether or not the congregation had organized joint rituals with other congregations, whether or not the congregation(s) joining in those rituals

belonged to the same religious tradition as the surveyed congregation, and, if this was not the case, what kind of religious tradition the other congregation(s) belonged to.

*Exclusivism* was operationalized with four dummy variables. Two dummies measured whether congregations would accept individuals as fully-fledged leaders if they lived in an openly gay relationship and if they lived in cohabitation without being married. A third dummy variable asked if the congregation had a group that discussed other religions (yes/no). A fourth dummy – only for Christian congregations – asked if the congregation considered the Bible to be the literal and inerrant word of God.

Finally, three *control variables* are included in our models. The *size of the community* where the congregation is located was measured by an 8-level variable, based on Swiss government data, ranging from 1 (fewer than 1,000 inhabitants) to 8 (100,000 or more). The *traditional denomination of the canton* was measured by two dummy variables where 1 denotes respectively the existence of a Catholic or Reformed tradition in the canton. If both dummies are zero, this means that the canton has a mixed denominational tradition. The canton's denominational traditions were coded according to Pfister (1984). *Strength of regulation* in the different cantons is measured with a version of the scale described in Chaves and Cann (1992), adapted to capture as much of the inter-canton variation as possible.<sup>15</sup> The scale ranges in principle from 0 to 10, though no canton received a score of 0, 9 or 10. Coders used information given in Frey (1999) and SSK (2009). Inter-coder reliability was .87, with discrepancies resolved by the first author. As shown in Table A1 in the appendix, the coding procedure yielded a distribution of cantons across the establishment scale that seems qualitatively correct.

### 3. Duration of presence in the canton and (threatened) majority status

As mentioned above, much of the legitimation of the legal establishment of the Reformed and Roman Catholic Churches rests on their historical importance and their majority status. In what follows, we will analyse the extent to which these arguments can be backed up empirically. We will see that the reasons for legal establishment are coming increasingly under pressure.

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15 See Stolz & Chaves (2017) for details of the scale. For a recent overview, comparison and evaluation of different scales of church-state relationships – including the one used in this paper, see Traunmüller (2012). We chose an adapted Chaves/Cann scale since it allows the central church-state variation in Switzerland to be conceptualized and measured in a very straightforward way.

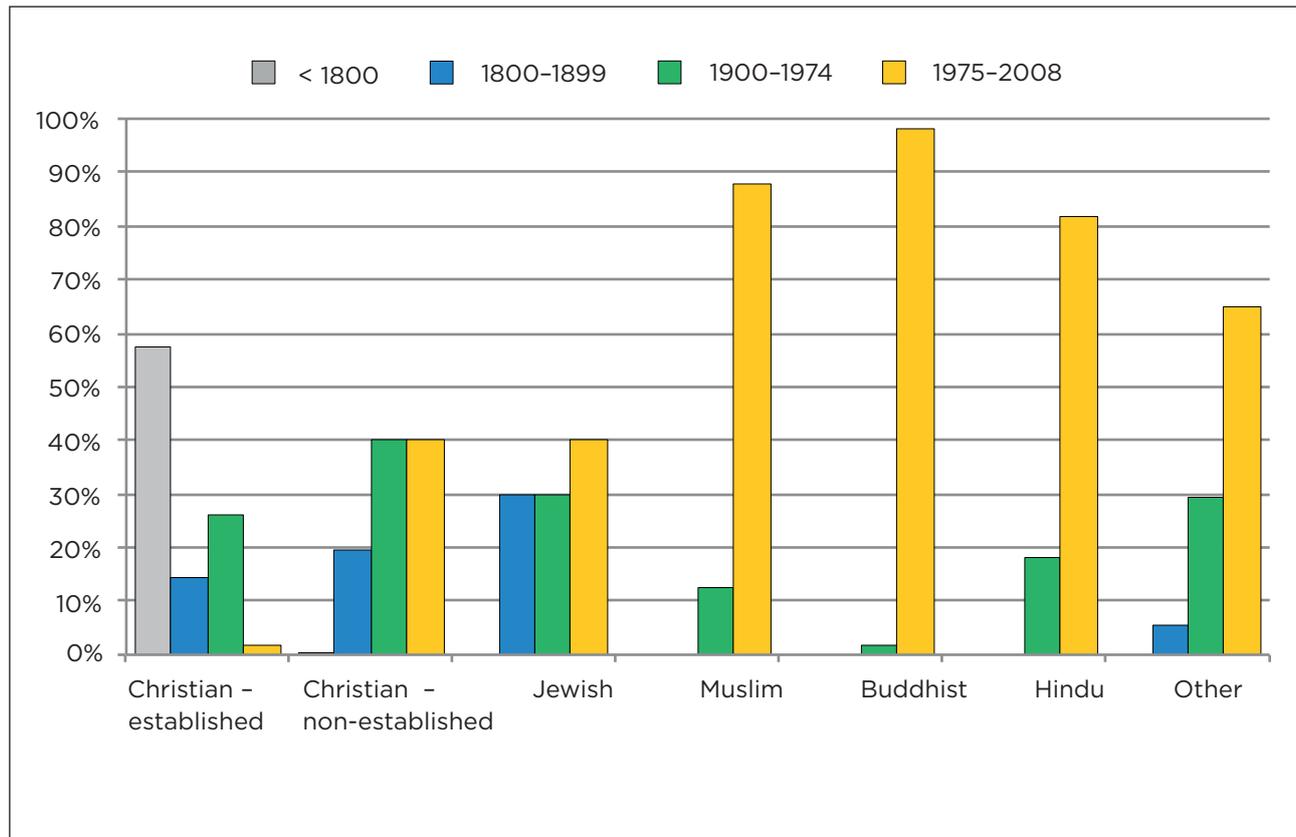


Figure 1 Year of foundation, by religious tradition

Note: Differences are significant where  $p < .001$ .

Let us first look at the *duration of presence* in the country. As can be seen in Figure 1, more than 55% of established congregations were founded before 1800: indeed, the median established Christian congregation was founded in 1690! By comparison, Christian non-established and Jewish groups are much younger, with median foundation years of 1950 and 1971 respectively. Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu and Other groups are much younger still. Most of them have been founded since 1975 (median foundation years: 1992, 1997, 1991 and 1987 respectively). We are truly faced with a situation of established and newcomer congregations.

Turning to *majority status*, Table 1 shows that the Reformed and Roman Catholic denominations together make up roughly half of all the congregations in Switzerland (NCS 2008) and 74.8% of the resident population (Census 2000). All other groups are much smaller and have both fewer congregations and fewer members. The majority situation differs according to canton: rural cantons are traditionally

Roman Catholic, while urban cantons are traditionally predominantly Reformed (Baumann & Stolz, 2007b; Bovay, 2004).<sup>16</sup> But the overall finding is that taken together, the two established denominations are in a majority position, especially when it comes to official members.

**Table 1** Numbers of congregations and their official members, by religious tradition

	Congregations <sup>(1)</sup>		Individuals <sup>(2)</sup>	
	N	%	N	%
Reformed	1,094	19.1%	2,408,049	33.0%
Roman Catholic	1,750	30.5%	3,047,887	41.8%
Old Catholic	35	0.6%	13,312	0.2%
Evangelical	1,423	24.8%	60,253	0.8%
Orthodox Christians	58	1.0%	131,851	1.8%
Other Christians	399	7.0%	115,207	1.6%
Jewish	33	0.6%	17,914	0.2%
Muslim	315	5.5%	310,807	4.3%
Buddhist	142	2.5%	21,305	0.3%
Hindu	189	3.3%	27,839	0.4%
Other	296	5.2%	7,982	0.1%
None	-	-	809,835	11.1%
No indication	-	-	315,766	4.3%
<b>Total</b>	<b>5,734</b>	<b>100.0%</b>	<b>7,288,010</b>	<b>100%</b>

Notes: (1) NCS Census 2008, according to Stolz/Chaves/Monnot/Amiotte-Suchet et al. (2011).

(2) Census 2000 according to Bovay (2004).

16 Swiss cantons have either a Reformed, a Roman Catholic or a mixed religious tradition. This goes back to the time of the Reformation (Maissen, 2010; Vischer et al., 1994). During that time, the big city cantons and their territories became Reformed, while the rural cantons stayed Roman Catholic. There was, in other words, a “*cuius regio, eius religio*” (“who rules the land determines its religion”) system. This was abolished in 1848 and freedom of religion introduced.

**Table 2** Official members and attenders: changes and attributes by religious affiliation

	Christian, established	Christian, non-established	Jewish	Muslim	Buddhist	Hindu	Other	None
Official members (%) <sup>(1)</sup>								
1970	95.8%	1.6%	0.3%	0.3%		0.1%		1.1%
1980	91.5%	2.0%	0.3%	0.9%		0.2%		3.8%
1990	84.7%	3.4%	0.3%	2.2%		0.4%		7.4%
2000	74.9%	4.2%	0.2%	4.3%		0.8%		11.1%
2010 <sup>(2)</sup>	66.6%	5.5%	0.2%	4.5%		1.1%		20.1%
Change 1970–2000	-29.2%	+3.9%	-0.1%	+4.2%		+1%		+19.0%
Attenders								
Attenders (last weekend) <sup>(3)</sup>	50	70	53	80	10	12	14	
Regular members <sup>(3)</sup>	100	80	80	60	20	15	15	
Members with any link <sup>(3)</sup>	500	110	200	200	35	40	30	
Ratio: attending/any link <sup>(4)</sup>	10.0%	63.6%	26.5%	40.0%	28.6%	30.0%	46.7%	
Change in attendance (last 10 years)								
Grown (%)	21.2%	44.6%	54.5%	61.7%	63.6%	46.9%	36.8%	
Stayed the same (%)	32.3%	24.1%	18.2%	35.0%	25.0%	28.1%	42.1%	
Shrunk (%)	46.4%	31.3%	27.3	3.3%	11.4%	25.0%	21.1%	
Attributes, attenders								
Attenders 60+ (%)	58.2%	28.5%	30.9%	17.6%	12.3%	22.2%	24.5%	
Attenders 18–35 (%)	14.2%	29.7%	32.0%	40.7%	25.7%	30.7%	24.0%	

Notes: All overall differences significant where  $p < .001$ .

(1) According to Bovay (2004, p. 110).

(2) According to Medienmitteilung OFS 19.6.2012: Ein Fünftel der Leute konfessionslos (One-fifth of people without religious affiliation) – corrected version.

(3) We use the median.

(4) Ratio of the medians.

Interestingly, this legitimation is increasingly threatened by the fact that the established churches are less and less in a position to claim that they embrace the whole of the Swiss population or that their services are geared to everybody (Monnot, 2012).

The percentage of individuals who are *official members* of either the Reformed or the Roman Catholic Church dropped from 95.8% in 1970 to 66.6% in 2010. At the same time, the number of individuals without any religious affiliation has risen from 1.1% to 20.1%, while the proportion of Christians of non-established groupings and Muslims, taken together, has increased to about 8%.

The picture is no more encouraging for the established churches if we look at *attendance*. While they still have many more official members than all other religious groups, the number of individuals actually participating in their local religious groups is relatively small and is only a tiny fraction of the official members. The ratio of attending members to members with any link to the congregation is lower for established congregations than for the congregations of all other religious traditions. Established congregations are twice as likely to have shrunk in attendance over the last 10 years (46.4%) than to have grown (21.2%) – in stark contrast to all other types of congregations, which on average have more often grown than shrunk. Finally, established congregations have a very high average age (58.2% of attenders are 60+) compared to the congregations of all other religious traditions, meaning that they are not able to draw in younger generations and pointing to future losses of attenders once the older generations have died.

Our main point here is that Switzerland is an almost textbook example of a country where there are two established religious groups – Reformed and Roman Catholic – while (almost) all other groups are non-established. The established position of these two groups, however, is threatened because of waning numbers of official and attending members.

## 4. Resources

Our first hypothesis claimed that established groups would have more resources than non-established groups – regardless of the success of their religious rituals. In this section we look at the first part of the hypothesis, the resources.

The results are very clear. What is striking is not so much the direction of the covariations, but their magnitude. Established Christian congregations have on average far more resources than non-established congregations. This is true of income, staff, and type and ownership of buildings.

The median established Christian congregation has an *annual income* of SFr 400,000; this is more than three times what the median non-established Christian congregation collects, about 17 times more than the median Muslim congregation receives and more than 50 times what Buddhist, Hindu or Other congregations live on. The richest non-Christian congregations are Jewish with a median income of SFr 200,000.

These differences in income are partly reflected in substantial differences with regard to *staff*. Of established Christian congregations, 97.5% have a paid spiritual leader, in 72.1% of the cases this spiritual leader works full time. The percentages are again much lower for non-established congregations. Thus only 62.7% of non-established Christians pay their spiritual leader and only in 45.4% of the cases is this person employed full time. For all other religious traditions, the percentages are much lower still – except, again, for the Jews. Looking at the numbers of paid staff (part-time and full-time), we find that the median established Christian congregation employs five paid staff, the median non-established Christian congregation only one – and the median Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu and Other congregations none at all!

Concerning *buildings*, almost 100% of established Christian congregations have the use of a building built explicitly for religious purposes. In 84.6% of the cases they are the owners of this building, and in 72.4% of the cases it is a protected heritage building. Again, the differences from non-established Christians (58.6% buildings built for religious purposes; 56.4% owners; 17.3% protected heritage buildings) are important and the differences as against Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus and Others are huge. In this area once again, it is the Jewish congregations that resemble the established Christian congregations most closely.

These differences between established and non-established congregations *cannot be attributed to other underlying variables*. In fact, the findings are robust and highly significant even when we check for the influence of cantonal regulation, the size of the political community, the denominational tradition of the canton, or even the number of regular participants or participants with any link to the religious congregation.<sup>17</sup>

The striking differences in resources between established and non-established congregations are evidently rooted both in legal and de facto establishment. It is legal establishment, with its possibility of levying an obligatory church tax even from members who are completely without any other link to the congregation, that creates such a large income for established Christian congregations and that accounts

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17 We do not show the models here for lack of space. Note that we did not introduce the number of regular participants and participants with any link at the same time for reasons of collinearity.

for such high percentages with paid full-time and part-time staff. And it is because of de facto establishment that they almost all have their own churches at their disposal – often ancient buildings worthy of protection.

**Table 3** Financial resources, staff and type of building by religious tradition

	Christian, established	Christian, non-estab- lished	Jewish	Muslim	Buddhist	Hindu	Other
Financial resources							
Annual income of congregation <sup>(1)</sup>	400,000	130,000	200,000	22,500	7,250	7,000	2,450
Income of spiritual leader <sup>(1)</sup>	95,000	50,000	67,500	0	0	0	0
Staff							
Paid spiritual leader	97.5 %	62.7 %	88.9 %	33.9 %	6.5 %	10.3 %	9.8 %
Full-time spiritual leader	72.1 %	45.4 %	44.4 %	30.5 %	0.0 %	3.4 %	7.3 %
Paid staff (part-time and full-time) <sup>(1)</sup>	5	1	2	0	0	0	0
Building							
Religious building	97.9 %	58.6 %	72.7 %	28.8 %	8.0 %	5.6 %	8.5 %
Owner of building	84.6 %	56.4 %	81.8 %	37.9 %	18.0 %	11.4 %	14.3 %
Protected heritage building	72.4 %	17.3 %	30.0 %	10.3 %	14.3 %	0.0 %	9.3 %

Notes: All differences are significant where  $p < .001$ .

(1) We use the median. We calculate the income regardless of whether the cost of spiritual leaders appears in the budget or not.

## 5. Relationships

Field theories are built on the assumption that the established will try to preserve their privileges as against newcomers. This is the second hypothesis we attempt to test in our special case by looking at the actual behaviour of Swiss congregations. Do established congregations exclude non-established groups in order to preserve their threatened privileges?

It turns out that the hypothesis fails (Table 4). Established Christian congregations do not seem to try to exclude other religious groups. On the contrary, they are both very inclined to be open to engaging in ecumenical and interreligious contacts, and comparatively tolerant concerning the religious and social diversity of their members. In the past year, established Christian congregations have engaged in a joint ritual with another congregation more often than any other religious tradition. In roughly 70% of the cases, this other congregation was of a different religious tradition from theirs (against 56% for non-established Christians). In most cases, this common ritual was with another Christian congregation, in roughly 1/3 of the cases with another non-established congregation. In comparison, these numbers show somewhat more openness to ecumenism and interreligious dialogue than among non-established Christians and clearly more openness than among all the other religious traditions (at least when it comes to the items used here).

There is much socio-historical evidence that corroborates this finding of *strategically trying to preserve establishment privileges by including instead of excluding other religions*. To give just three examples: (1) In various cantons (e.g. Vaud, Fribourg) established churches have actively helped to put into place new constitutions that allow other religions to be publicly recognized (admittedly through a form of establishment that is less far-reaching than that which already exists for the Roman Catholic and Reformed denominations) (Loretan & Weber, 2013). (2) Established churches have also engaged in important ways in ecumenical and interreligious dialogue and have shown themselves to be the central organizing actors of these endeavours, often gaining a positive social image in society by doing so (Bürgisser, 2009; Köne- mann & Vischer, 2008). (3) The example that shows the strategic aspect of this interreligious dialogue best is probably the foundation of the “Council of Religions” in 2006, with six members representing the Reformed, Roman Catholic, Old Catholic, Jewish and Muslim faiths. This council was founded in order to furnish politicians with a partner for dialogue that represents the most important religious voices in Switzerland, and had the (at least implicit) goal of winning back the leadership in public discourse for the established churches (Baumann & Stolz, 2007a, p. 368).

Table 4 Joint ritual and exclusivism according to religious tradition

	Christian, established	Christian, non-established	Jewish	Muslim	Buddhist	Hindu	Other
Joint ritual with							
another community	83.3	73.9	45.5	56.1	59.2	38.9	50.0
another community of a different tradition	68.4	56.0	27.3	42.4	30.6	19.4	30.0
Exclusivism							
Discussion group on another religion*	43.2 %	42.1%	45.5 %	48.5 %	30.0 %	25.7 %	43.3 %
Bible inerrant	28.8	80.6	-	-	-	-	-
Acceptance of gays (as leaders)	57.1% <sup>(1)</sup>	8.7 %	40.0 %	14.5 %	97.8 %	66.7 %	44.6 %
Acceptance of cohabiting non-married couple (as leaders)	89.4 %	21.8 %	50.0 %	48.4 %	97.8 %	85.7 %	56.1 %

Notes: All differences are significant where  $p < .001$ , unless marked with \*.

(1) Concerning acceptance of gays, Reformed are significantly more open than Catholic congregations.

We do not mean to say that established churches engage in ecumenical and interreligious activity *only* for strategic reasons. Quite clearly, a genuine belief in the inherent importance of such endeavours is often involved (Bürgisser, 2009, p. 51); also, the theology of established congregations has been very dialogue-minded since the 1960s (Bernhardt, 2008, p. 52). We only say that strategic considerations are very probably *also* involved.

These findings, however, do not show that established Christian congregations are free of interests, strategic behaviour and possible exclusion practices. From our experience of the Swiss religious field and from the literature we know that (1) to a certain extent, established churches *have to* engage in ecumenical and interreligious dialogue practices as part of their establishment status obligations. Consequently, many churches put a certain percentage of work for ecumenical and interreligious practices into the job descriptions of their clergy (Bürgisser, 2009, p. 52); (2) ecumenical and interreligious dialogue practices

by established Christian congregations are not necessarily without strategic interest for these congregations. Organizing such dialogues creates a good societal image and enables the congregations concerned to wield power in the religious field. In fact, the more substantial educational and financial resources of established Christian congregations produce the effect that the very large majority of interreligious activities are organized by established Christian congregations (Bürgisser, 2009, p. 46); (3) there are exclusion practices concerning interreligious dialogues. Some more conservative Jewish or Muslim groups or new religious movements like LDS (Mormons), Raelians or Scientology are rarely or never invited.<sup>18</sup> Despite these caveats, however, we have to acknowledge the fact that established Christians do not try to protect their power by keeping to themselves, but engage in multiple dialogic practices.

In a similar vein, we find that established Christian congregations do not stand out with regard to different items that may be grouped under the heading “*exclusivism*”. Compared to non-established Christians, they are about as likely to have a discussion group on another religion, they are much less likely to believe the Bible to be inerrant (27.8% for established Christians against 80.6% for non-established Christians) and they will strikingly more often accept gays and cohabiting unmarried persons as their members and leaders (in the table we show only data for leaders). While some religious traditions seem to be even more open in some of these respects (especially Buddhists and Hindus with regard to liberal views on homosexuality and cohabitation), it is fair to say that Christian established congregations cannot be described as particularly exclusive.

## 6. Conclusion

We set out to examine two influential theoretical ideas in the sociology of religion: firstly, that de facto and legally established religious groups are privileged and have more resources than non-established groups, regardless of the success of their religious rituals, and secondly, that they defend their privileged positions and try to exclude newcomer groups from different positions in the field.

We were able to address these questions as we had the first National Congregation Study in a European country to hand, and since the Swiss religious field may be seen as an almost textbook exam-

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18 An interesting reaction to such exclusion practices was the foundation of a group of excluded religious movements that formed an interreligious organization (the CLIMS) in 1997, bringing together LDS, Scientology, the Unification Church, Sukyo Mahikari and the Fraternité Blanche Universelle. For more information on the CLIMS see <http://www.clims.ch/index.php>.

ple of the both legal and de facto establishment of Reformed and Roman Catholic congregations, while (almost) all other congregations are not established.

We find that established congregations are indeed strongly privileged and have much more plentiful resources than non-established congregations – even though they have relatively low and shrinking attendance and an ageing attender structure. Another way of putting this is that the establishment situation of established congregations is clearly threatened. If fewer and fewer individuals use the rituals of these groups and the membership structure of active members is ageing, then the privileged positions of these congregations will appear less and less legitimate.

Other than expected, established groups do not seem to compete with newcomer groups by using exclusion strategies. Congregations with much power and plentiful resources do not seem to seek to distance themselves generally from those lacking in power and with less resources. On the contrary, established groups explicitly seek ecumenical and interreligious contacts. Established congregations are among the religious groups that are most open to ecumenical and interreligious rituals. Furthermore, they are very tolerant concerning individual social and religious diversity.

As already suggested above, we do *not* think that this invalidates the basic Weberian and Bourdieusian intuition of strategic field interaction of religious groups. Rather, the observed behaviour can itself be seen as a strategy by established groups to keep their threatened establishment status. In fact, established groups may use inclusion strategies first, in order to attain again to a kind of majority status. While losing members themselves, they can create a coalition of large religious groups: firstly, in order to thereby retain the legitimacy of the coalition; secondly, in order to present themselves as organizers of ecumenical and interreligious dialogue, thereby demonstrating their important function for society; and thirdly, in order to meet the expectations of the state, which would otherwise threaten negative consequences for them.

Of course, this paper has its limits. Firstly, this being a descriptive-comparative paper, we have not looked at the explanatory question as to how much the differences found are caused by different levels of strength of establishment or other factors (see for this Stolz / Chaves [2017]). Secondly, in the interest of brevity we have not been able to go into many intra-religious differences in more depth. Thirdly, our results are evidently not generalizable beyond the Swiss case. We suspect, however, that similar situations might be observed in other European countries.<sup>19</sup>

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19 See the study already mentioned by Körs (2017) on Hamburg; Vejrup Nielsen and Kühle (2011), who describe the Danish Folkekirke as established, rich, threatened in its establishment – and very inclusive; and for the Nordic folk churches in general Gustafsson (1990).

Our contribution has been to apply one of the central theoretical tools of the sociology of religion – the religious field concept and more specifically the established/newcomer structure – to the religious situation in a whole country, and to show that new insights can be gained.

We would welcome further studies in other countries, in order to see whether similar differences between established and non-established congregations can be observed and whether established congregations equally seek to strengthen their situation by including rather than excluding newcomers.

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## Appendix

Table A1 Legal establishment of religious groups and strength of religious regulation in Swiss Cantons (in 2008)<sup>20</sup>

	Reformed	Roman Catholic	Old Catholic	Jewish (some)	Strength of establishment <sup>(1)</sup>
GE	●	●			1
NE	●	●	●		2
AG	○	○	○		3
AR	○	○			3
NW	○	○			3
BS	○	○	○	○	4
SH	○	○	○		4
AI	○	○			4
GL	○	○			4
GR	○	○			4
ZG	○	○			4
LU	○	○	○		4
SZ	○	○			4
TG	○	○			4
SG	○	○	○	○	4
OW	○	○			5
SO	○	○	○		5
UR	○	○			5
TI	○	○			5
VS	○	○			6
FR	○	○		○	6
BL	○	○	○		6
VD	○	○		●	7
JU	○	○			7
ZH	○	○	○	●	8
BE	○	○	○	○	8

○ = strongly recognized (as corporate bodies under public law)

● = weakly recognized (as playing a role in public life)

(1) According to adapted Chaves/Cann regulation scale

20 Since 2008, some additional groups have been (weakly) established: the Christengemeinde (a free Evangelical Protestant congregation) in BS in 2010 and two Alevi groups in BS in 2012.



# Congregational Churches in China

## The Growth of the Mustard Seed

Aiming Wang

### 1. Introduction: the background situation

Since the 1950s and right down until today, the administration of religious affairs in China has been characterized by the model of direct management through the responsible government office SARA, the State Administration for Religious Affairs. Only the five religions recognized by the state are integrated into this government administrative framework, namely Buddhism, Taoism, Islam, Protestantism and Catholicism, whereby Protestantism and Catholicism are regarded as two distinct religions. In the socio-political field there are five tiers of government, an administrative apparatus being established at each level all over the country. In concrete terms, this means that each of the five official religions is organized through a national association, a provincial association, a county association and a town or district association. From the perspective of the world religions, such a model of administration of religious affairs, or of the religion-state (which has a much wider significance than simply the churches and the state) could be described as a model of para-governmental organizations dressed in religious clothing.

With regard to Protestantism in China, these five levels of the administration are the only legal organizations involved in managing all issues relating to the Church. The Party apparatus and the government apparatus work together in the field of religious affairs. The TSPM/CCC (the Three-Self Patriotic Movement and the China Christian Council) are effectively a single legal organization with two labels that runs and controls all the affairs of the Protestant Church. Thus for a period of several decades already, the ecclesiastical organizations have been replaced by this huge government machinery.

In fact, the so-called Post-Denominational Church in China is essentially a propaganda construction or a slogan without any real content or theological rationale.

Briefly, the history of the Protestant Church in China since the 1950s breaks down into three periods:

- a. 1950s–1980s. During the first period, all churches, meeting places or house gatherings outside the TSPM were strictly illegal, and those involved in them risked imprisonment under the political regulations masquerading as law. Decisions by the leadership of the TSPM were always supported by the judicial system of the state, which automatically reflected the powerful forces of the official ideology. Against this background, it was very dangerous for people to make complaints or critical suggestions even from within the official church system. The leaders of the TSPM were particular persons nominated directly by the political authorities who exercised their powers with extreme rigour, much more so even than the Party leadership did in everyday matters. This attitude continues until today. During the national catastrophe of the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) all religious activities and religious organizations were forbidden, on the grounds that according to Marxism-Leninism, the state ideology, they all represented superstition and anti-scientific illusions.
- b. The second period was that of the 1980s and 1990s. During the era of Deng Xiaoping, who launched the policy of openness and reform in socio-economic fields, individuals acquired more and more personal freedom. Non-official churches appeared outside the TSPM and grew up all over the country. The main aim of these “house churches” was to obtain approval from the authorities through the local TSPM/CCC. Class struggle was replaced by the aim of building up the economy, and the government permitted and even encouraged individual wealth; and usually the wealthy persons concerned came from the business community outside the government enterprises.
- c. The third period is that of the past decade or so. The most remarkable feature of Protestantism is the speed with which independent churches are developing outside governmental control, whether by the TSPM/CCC or by other agencies. The theological quality of these independent churches is much higher than is to be found within the TSPM/CCC system. Missionary influences from South Korea, North America and Southeast Asia (Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore, Indonesia etc.) are becoming the dominant forces in establishing churches, missionary units, theological seminaries, charities of all kinds and evangelical institutions at all levels of society. The Christian communities that have become established among middle-class people and the university campus fellowships may be regarded as the two outstanding manifestations of the independent churches in today’s China.

Thus the present situation in China is that there are truly two church systems coexisting within the country’s church/state model. We can use the terms “official church” and “house churches” to denote these two forms of Protestantism in today’s China.

## 2. The Church, politics and the emergence of a potentially rational model in China

If we approach Protestantism in China by inquiring into matters relating to church order, or the ministry of the Church, or the ecclesiastical system, we will quickly come to the core of our research, which is the congregational form of Christian community. This is because the congregational churches have become the true church form at the grassroots, no matter whether inside the TSPM/CCC system, the official church organization, or in the system of the house churches. It is against this background that in considering the future model of the Church, we can take the congregational model as being the most rational model (in the Weberian sense).

- a. There are about 57,000 churches throughout over the country under the aegis of the TSPM/CCC, with its five tiers of governmental administration. Although the administrative framework of the TSPM/CCC is simply part of the political administration under the absolute domination of the government with its political and ideological criteria, these churches do care for the rank-and-file believer by teaching the Scriptures, and the local pastors work very hard on behalf of the ordinary members of their congregations. It is necessary to state this in order to correct the misunderstandings and mistaken views concerning the churches and pastors of the TSPM/CCC system. We must recognize that most of the TSPM/CCC pastors are faithful and evangelical in their attitude despite being profoundly dependent on ordinary believers who are generally pietists of a very “low” tendency, absorbed in pure individual spirituality without the will to engage with the secular world. Thus even in the case of the TSPM/CCC churches the congregational order is gradually becoming the most effective model. Lay believers play a much more important role in church governance than the local government officials, or even than the pastors.
- b. In the churches outside the official administrative structure – i.e. the free churches or house churches – the congregational order is much more obviously prevalent than other ecclesiastical traditions such as the Episcopal or Presbyterian systems. Applying sociological observation to the ecclesiological views of these independent Christian communities, with all the diversity they display in different parts of the country, can be confusing, and the contradictions that become apparent may make it difficult for us not to lose our way. It is a challenge to sociologists and theologians to explain why this is!
- c. Weaknesses in the theological discourse have led to misunderstandings and a lack of clarity with regard to the relationship between the official church at the grassroots level and the independent

churches in their state of illegality. What is certain is that the designation “Post-Denominational Church” is simply a political slogan and pure propaganda. The independent churches in the urban areas, on the basis of their theological positions and the political situation, strictly refuse any kind of contact with the TSPM/CCC system.

### 3. The congregational church as the “rational” or “logical” form of church order

More and more independent churches have adopted theological doctrines and ecclesiological principles derived from the Reformed tradition (which includes Calvinism, Puritanism, Presbyterianism, the Baptist churches etc.), although there has never been any well-organized structure of Chinese theological scholarship. At any rate, solemn and authentic declarations of admiration and respect for the Calvinist heritage have become widely manifest in China.

The Overseas Chinese Evangelical churches could become vital sources of inspiration and support for these independent churches in China.

Theologically, these congregationally organized churches have strongly affirmed the truth of Redemption through the Cross. For them, the uniqueness of this truth is paramount over and above all other spiritual and ideological systems. The teachings of John Calvin and Martin Luther, and the Patristic heritage going back to the Apostolic tradition, are neither foreign nor “proper” national values, but are universal and common to all believers. In this respect, narrow nationalism has become less and less influential among these churches.

Politically, the congregational churches are greatly attached to the principles of civil society and basic rights, especially religious freedom, democracy and the rule of law. Thus their political orientation has given rise to conflict or potential conflict between them and the authorities.

From the ethical point of view, Melancthon’s doctrine of “The Third Use of the Law” as it was historically applied by Calvin and his disciples can enable us to understand fully and clearly what lies behind the congregational tradition. It is possible to use the doctrine of the Third Use of the Law as a way of approaching the doctrines of double predestination, providence, common grace etc. as they relate to membership of the Church. It is special election through grace that moves the members of the congregational churches to establish their churches as special communities of the Elect. This sets them very much apart from the megachurch in China, which will receive anybody who comes in off the streets to attend worship, even though they will leave again immediately afterwards. The pastors would then have no idea

who such people attending their services were. But the congregational churches restrict membership and discipleship by applying strict criteria of duty and responsibility. Thus we can say that among the western historical traditions, the one that the congregational churches of today's China most closely resemble is that of the Brethren.

Thus the ethical perspective of these churches demands that special grace should be manifest in their members through their devout behaviour in areas such as confession, testimony and vocation; sometimes they display a much stricter morality than the average person.

I regret that my English is not sufficient to describe the true nature of their spiritual life in the community; but I will try my best to do so briefly in simple terms. Their sufferings and hardships in their situation of illegality in today's society have made them joyful and happy to be members of Christ's Church. To use terms from Church history that are appropriate to these communities' missionary background, the glorification of Jesus Christ on the Cross is guiding them down the road followed in the past by the Non-Conformists, the Pilgrims and the Puritans.

## 4. Conclusion: some reflections and solutions

In the congregational churches in China, the principle of *sola scriptura* blends at the practical level with that of the priesthood of all believers. To understand the situation of the Church there, we have to take a wide and comprehensive view. This means that we need to adopt a political perspective drawn from the theories of Max Weber, who has profoundly influenced perceptions of the Reformation and modern capitalism since the 1980s.

According to Weber, there have historically been three ideal types of political domination or legitimate authority: 1) charismatic domination (familial and religious); 2) traditional domination (patriarchs, patrimonialism and feudalism); and 3) legal domination (modern systems of law, constitutional government, the rule of law, bureaucracy).

The regime in China essentially falls into the category of traditional domination (patriarchs, patrimonialism, and feudalism). But despite their fundamental loyalty to the orthodoxy of the State, more and more intellectuals are paradoxically eager to move China in the direction of legal domination. They have recognized that such legal domination embraces universal values such as human rights, the rule of law, democracy, a system of checks and balances, individual freedoms, constitutional government etc. The government with its grounding in Leninism is obviously facing a dilemma between economic freedom and political totalitarianism. As a result, tensions are building up which make the situation more and more

complicated. As intellectual Christian communities have grown up rapidly in the non-official system, Protestantism is beginning to pay a high degree of attention to issues of socio-political responsibility and political reform.

At this point we need to describe the challenge to the system represented by the independent churches with their congregations drawn from this intellectual class. Although the adherents of these churches do not represent a majority of the Christians in China in terms of their absolute numbers, their quality has already led to their becoming dominant and to their exerting an influence in the public domain that is much stronger than that of the official church.

There are a number of points of concern relating to these congregational churches in the Chinese world (in Mainland China and in the Chinese communities of North America, Southeast Asia etc.):

1. The congregational order often ignores the great traditions of the historic Church, especially with regard to doctrine and rules. Individual biblicistic interpretation of the Scripture is the supreme authority, much more powerful than the heritages of the great ecclesiastical past or of the theologians of the denominational traditions. In this situation there is less and less evidence of any denominational stance among these independent congregational churches in China. From an external perspective the congregational churches in China look rather like Christian groups or communities that lack fundamental elements of the historical Church;
2. The pastoral ministry is dominated by the Trustee and Board model. In concrete terms, this means that fully-trained and theologically educated pastors who are interested in a particular position must submit an application to these bodies and be prepared to accept strict restraints laid down by the deacons, as the leaders or elders of the congregation are usually called. In practical terms, the deacons are governed more by individual moralistic judgments than by theological principles and the rules of the Church;
3. In addition, there are also congregational churches that exist by virtue of individual charismatic leadership and operate as family undertakings. They adopt many aspects from the model of the independent preacher in the United States, but reject the formal mechanisms of the North American system, i.e. the principles of separation of church and state, the rule of law etc. Such congregations are springing up fast, just as commercial family businesses are.

To conclude, some possible solutions:

- a. Congregational churches in general need to be constructed on the foundation of the revelation of Scripture; therefore great attention must be paid to systematic study and research, including exploration of the academic achievements accumulated historically in the West. The tendency towards individual interpretations of the Bible should be corrected; although this kind of approach, centring on the moralistic understanding of the individual preacher rather than on the Gospel and Jesus Christ, has become popular in Asian churches;
- b. In order to provide a corrective to nationalism and individual charismaticism it will be a very necessary and urgent task to pursue objective studies of the denominational traditions of the historic Church. Even with regard to church order in congregationalism there are very rich resources in the history of the Western Church which can be taken as references for the development and support of the independent churches – Calvinism and the Reformed tradition currently being the dominant tradition for those Christian intellectuals who have established so many independent churches all over the country.
- c. Civil society, public theological discourse, democracy, constitutional government etc. must be important topics for theologians and leaders of the congregational churches in China if they want their churches to play a very special role in bringing about modernization in the sociopolitical field.
- d. The concept of congregational churches in China must be defined in such a way as to include the Little Flock or Local Church movement created by Watchman Nee. In many places in China the Local Church movement has been and still is misunderstood as heresy or a cult. But according to my research into the texts of Watchman Nee and his followers over a period of some ten years, congregational churches of this kind fall into the category of non-credal churches like the Waldensians. They have been growing very rapidly in China and in other countries over the last 30 years.
- e. If we are to really organize forces to support evangelization and mission in China, we should emphasize the importance of academic work and theological education. So far, academic research and studies on the heritages of Luther, Zwingli, Melanchthon, Calvin etc. have been very weak, and there is little writing in Chinese. It is absolutely essential to create a special institute or society dedicated solely to this kind of ministry.



# **International Congregational Studies – Research into German Parishes and Congregations**

Findings and challenges in a newly discovered field that has recently come to the attention of researchers in the areas of Practical Theology and the Sociology of Religion

Eberhard Hauschildt

This article reports on an international conference in Frankfurt (Germany), with presentations by Nancy Ammerman, Mark Chaves (both USA), Jörg Stolz (Switzerland), Henk de Roest (Netherlands) and Aiming Wang (China). The important contributions made by quantitative empirical comparative congregational studies and by qualitative empirical case studies are highlighted. A global study would be desirable. The path that a first study by the “Sozialwissenschaftliches Institut der EKD” has embarked on concerning the perceptions of elders in the parishes of this nationwide Protestant church in Germany should be further pursued. Academics need to become more aware of the importance of case studies, both as a field of research and also as a tool of church development. Older literature relevant to this field of research, which was often published in somewhat obscure publications, also needs to be identified.

## **1. A new field of research**

From 21 to 23 March 2016 a Conference took place at the Protestant Academy in Arnoldshain, arranged in cooperation with the Sozialwissenschaftliches Institut (Social Sciences Institute) of the Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland (EKD). This event was remarkable for the diversity of those participating: in addition to several highly reputed academics from abroad, they also included parish clergy, a few church voluntary workers, some intermediate-level church leaders and people studying for doctorates in Practical Theology. This report is intended to outline some particularly interesting research findings that were presented at the Conference. At the same time, it is hoped that it will demonstrate how an awareness of a new field of research crystallized in the course of the Conference: a field which raises its own specific issues that demand to be investigated, and whose significance for ecclesiastical practice should by no means be underestimated.

At first sight it may seem surprising to talk of a “new field of research” in this connection. It has always been a matter of course that the church parish and everything that happens in it should be the subject of close scrutiny both within the church and in the field of Practical Theology. The interest that Practical Theologians devoted to the “living parish” and the “building up of the parish” in the 1980s has switched to an interest in “church and parish development”.<sup>1</sup> The debate on the nature of the parochial system and of the role of the parish church within it, and on other ecclesiastical spaces, on “fresh expressions” here and regionalization there, is being carried on with great intensity, and provides a demonstration of what contradictory images exist of the ideal parish or congregation. So what can and should be new about that?

Congregational Studies, as they initially developed in the United States,<sup>2</sup> are a direction of research that reflects first and foremost the American experience and not the different situation prevailing in Europe with its parochial type of church structure. Congregations in the United States are much more likely to find themselves facing an immediate threat to their existence. If they are not able to secure their own existence – which always means as a first priority that they have to be able to live on the financial contributions of their members – then they will cease to exist. And so within in the congregations themselves – and equally in the denominations of Christianity to which they belong – there exists a strong interest in knowing what it is that protects church communities from suffering such a demise. At the same time, in view of the multiplicity of denominations, such a question also immediately implies an interest in knowing to what extent congregations of other denominations are faced by the same challenges. And if they are, this in turn raises the question as to whether it is possible for the denominations to learn from each other, and if so to what extent. As a result of both these factors, “congregational studies” automatically possess (1) the character of comparative studies as between denominations and (2) a strongly practical orientation. As early as the 1960s it was becoming apparent that the older liberal (Protestant) churches – the so-called “mainline churches” – in the United States were losing “market share” both to the theologically more conservative congregations and to the new charismatically orientated ones. This phenomenon needed to be explained. The “Handbook for Congregational Studies”, which appeared in 1986, may be considered exemplary in providing an overview of the directions of research (Carroll et al. 1986). It can, incidentally, be downloaded from the internet free of charge.

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1 For an overview of the current state of research see Kunz/Schlag 2014; on the theology of the parish or congregation, see Kunz 2015.

2 According to information provided by Henk de Roest (see below), the term was coined in 1979. Congregational Studies are also widely pursued in the United Kingdom.

## 2. Are the parish communities of the “official” German churches “congregations”? – Changes and variations in a religious form of association that exists all over the world

Nancy Ammerman, Professor of the Sociology of Religion at Boston University, is co-editor of the standard work of the last two decades: “Studying Congregations. A New Handbook” (Ammerman et al. 1998). In the first part of her reflections as presented to the Conference she enquired into the matter of how far the “congregation” concept can in fact have a strictly descriptive character at all, and to what extent it was suitable for use in comparable studies.

A “congregation” in Ammerman’s understanding of the term is a kind of self-organized religious gathering, typically meeting every week for the purposes of religious ceremonial which are also linked to other purposes (for example cultural or social ones). There are two notable external factors that impinge on this. The first is: is such a phenomenon politically and legally permissible, and how and to what extent is it regulated and in some cases afforded public support? And the second: what are the religiously orientated cultural expectations that exist in the society it is set up within? A third factor, but this time impacting from within, is the extent to which, and the manner in which, congregations are shaped by voluntary participation and work. The situation in the United States is that the political framework of the relationship between the state and the religious denominations does not provide for individual faith communities to enjoy any legally privileged status, and that both in society in general and within the faith community concerned there are particularly strong expectations with regard to the active involvement of its members. The fact that such patterns permeate the whole of society can be explained from a historical perspective. Among the first religious groups a strongly critical attitude towards the concept of a state church prevailed. As a result, it was of great importance to the new arrivals of each successive wave of immigration that they should be able to gather in religious congregations drawn from the group’s own membership – congregations which they had to organize for themselves. In Europe, on the other hand, issues arise that point in the opposite direction. One concerns the extent to which special political support for particular communities or churches still exists or no longer exists. Another is the extent to which the continued existence of the parochially organized communities of what was originally intended to be a “church for everyone” today gives rise to bureaucratic and cultural exclusions.

The “congregation”, then, can be seen to be a phenomenon which, while more strongly represented in some geographical regions than in others, is nevertheless to be found throughout the world. There are certainly countries in the world in whose dominant religion the formation of “congregations” is a

quite atypical feature (e.g. Islamic countries or countries in which one of the Asian religious traditions dominates); but the spread of Christianity and migrations of people of every religion have led to congregational patterns now also being found in regions where the congregational phenomenon was previously unknown. In sub-Saharan Africa there has been a radical change since the beginning of the twentieth century, with congregations now dominating the scene, while in Europe the parishes of the former state churches have taken on congregational features.<sup>3</sup> Non-Christian religions too, when their members migrate, form congregations – for example Islamic or Buddhist or Hindu congregations – at their new places of settlement. Even in Asia there is a certain trend in Hinduism and Buddhism for individual groups also to establish themselves on the congregational model. Despite this, congregationalism is definitely not the only social form that religion can assume today.

Gerhard Wegner, the Director of the Social Sciences Institute of the EKD, stated as his opening proposition that it is possible, precisely on the basis of a comparison between the United States and Europe, to distinguish between two ideal types of local church community: a congregational model and a parochial model derived from the earlier state churches. Further important distinguishing features between the two are geographical coverage and integration into church structures on a more than local level. On the other hand, the definitions of a congregation enjoying widespread currency at the present time are deliberately formulated in such a way that in seeking to define what local churches everywhere have in common they also embrace church communities in the German-speaking countries. A “congregation” is considered to be

“a social institution in which individuals who are not all religious specialists gather in physical proximity to one another, frequently and at regularly scheduled intervals, for activities and events with explicitly religious content and purpose, and in which there is continuity over time in the individuals who gather, the location of the gathering, and the nature of the activities and events at each gathering.”<sup>4</sup>

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3 While the Pietist movement had led to the formation of separate communities conceived on the congregational model at an even earlier date, a movement that should be mentioned as having brought about a geographically comprehensive shift in attitudes in the parishes of the Protestant state churches in Germany from the end of the nineteenth century onwards was Emil Sulze’s “Gemeindebewegung” (“Parochial Movement”), which gave a decisive impetus in the direction of the ideal of the active, living community.

4 Chaves 2004: 1f. The definition is so long and complicated in order to distinguish the phenomenon described from (for example) other religious social forms such as monasteries, pilgrimages, one-off events, the followers of religious television programmes, organizations promoting religious social events or welfare programmes and tours by religious music groups or missionary groups.

### 3. Questions and selected findings from quantitative empirical studies – two comparative investigations in the field of Congregational Studies

Thus the comparison that is to be made now goes far beyond the boundaries of the Christian churches. The term “congregations” embraces not only those who attend Christian church services, but equally the Jews who attend the synagogue and the Muslims who attend the mosque, and also those who frequent Buddhist or Hindu temples. In practice, it is not only in the United States that communities practising other religions have taken on the character of congregations. Rather, in societies that are increasingly pluralistic in religious terms and whose state constitutions are religiously neutral, a trend in the direction of this kind of self-organization can be seen to exist across religions and throughout the world. It is leading to a proliferation of small, self-financing organizations that are not only religious but also sociable in character and include a person who leads the worship and sacred ceremonies (including delivering a reflective religious discourse) and exercises pastoral care.

#### 3.1 Current trends in United States congregations – the “National Congregations Study”

So how are the congregations in the United States doing? Mark Chaves, a Professor at Duke University who specializes in the sociology of religion, reported to the Conference on the representative “National Congregations Study” (Chaves/Eagle 2015).<sup>5</sup> Its current data relates to the year 2012, and is all the more valuable because comparisons with the two previous surveys also make developmental trends apparent. The oldest of these National Congregations Studies goes back only to 1998, and is thus a quarter of a century later than the earliest of the EKD’s investigations of church membership. But even so, the three studies taken together provide interesting insights into current developments in the United States. And such developments take place particularly quickly there, since church members, quite of their own free choice, change their allegiance at much more frequent intervals.

But first, something about the shares of the various denominations and groups of denominations in the total number of congregations surveyed. Even the biggest denomination, the Southern Baptist

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5 The brochure can be downloaded from the internet at <http://www.soc.duke.edu/natcong/study.html>; as can the data (!), enabling interested persons to do further work on it themselves.

Convention, currently represents only 10% of religious congregations. Of those denominations that are linked to the major European communions – such as the Reformed Church (Presbyterian Church), the Protestant Uniate Churches (United Church of Christ), the Lutherans (Evangelical Lutheran Church of America) and the Anglicans (Episcopal Church) – none can claim more than 4% of the congregations. Only the Roman Catholics, at 6%, are somewhat larger and manage to assemble large numbers of church attendees everywhere, so that their share of the total number of people regularly going to church is much higher – at no less than 28%! But in terms of the numbers of congregations, the dominant players on the scene continue to be the Protestant Christians. All non-Christian communities taken together, including those that one might refer to as “cults”, make up only 6.6% of congregations and 4.7% of attendees. The Protestant churches account for a total of some 84% of congregations and 69% of people attending church. As is customary in the United States, these churches are assigned for the purposes of the study to one of three groups of denominations. Of these, the one with the smallest number of congregations is that of the “Mainline Protestants” (20% of all congregations in the United States). The “Black Protestants” come just ahead of them at 21%;<sup>6</sup> while the “Evangelical Protestants”, with 46% of congregations (Chaves/Eagle 2015: 3), more than outnumber the sum of these first two groups together.

From a European viewpoint, the United States appears to be *the* western country above all from which we hear reports of growing congregations and full churches. In fact, however, the difference is smaller than it is perceived to be: it should be remembered that the proportion of those who actually attend church several times a month is in fact estimated at between 20% and 25% of the total population, and even those who are members of a church congregation without attending so frequently represent less than 50%.<sup>7</sup> Chaves presented data indicating that the average numbers of attendees at principal church services and of those who go to church regularly have both declined continuously over the past fourteen years, by more than 10% altogether. The percentage of older people among churchgoers has grown by more than it has in the population as a whole. The number of children in the congregations, on the other hand, has declined,

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6 According to Chaves, congregations whose members are not predominantly black but “white” are assigned to one of the other two groups of Protestant congregations. Congregations are slowly becoming more ethnically diverse: the number of congregations in which none of the four major ethnic groups (Asian, Black, Hispanic, White) makes up more than 80% of those attending services has increased from 15% (1998) to 20% (2012), while the percentage of congregations in which more than 80% of the members are “white” has declined from 72% to 57% (Chaves/Eagle 2015: 20). According to Chaves’s lecture at the Conference, however, even in 2012 the percentage of non-white spiritual leaders in the congregations with European roots was still no more than 8%.

7 See e.g. [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/john-shook-phd/churchgoers-now-a-minority\\_b\\_1537108.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/john-shook-phd/churchgoers-now-a-minority_b_1537108.html).

most strongly in the mainline churches. All this shows that the area of secularization is just another one in which the United States is not so much an exception to the rule as simply a further variant.

The following trends are identifiable in the period since 1998, in addition to a slow ethical modernization (for example in the attitude to homosexuals)<sup>8</sup> despite the much more strongly conservative religio-ethical environment as compared with Europe: (1) the percentage of congregations not linked to any wider ecclesiastical organization (“non-denominational congregations”) has risen from 18% to 23%; (2) the proportion of congregations with expressive behaviour during worship (e.g. applauding, raising the arms when praying, drumming during the service) has increased; (3) the percentage of all people attending church who belong to medium-sized congregations (100 to 500 regularly attendees) has fallen, while in particular that of congregations with more than 1,500 people at ordinary services has risen correspondingly. It is not at all easy to explain the success of such “mega-churches”. Chaves considers it probable that there are several factors contributing, though the degree of impact of each is unclear: (a) services at which first-time visitors can feel at home without bringing any previous experience with them other than the kind also provided by major concerts offer lower thresholds to attendance than more traditional forms of service; (b) these large churches also offer professional programmes for particular groups of attendees (such as parents with children of crawling age, schoolchildren, teenagers etc.), while in medium-sized churches such activities are increasingly being discontinued or are less able to fulfil the ever-increasing expectations that people have of an attractive “event”; (c) below-average frequencies of attendance and below-average levels of giving are found more frequently in such churches than in ones where it is easier to maintain a good overview of what is going on. Thus the average monetary contribution to support the work of the church is 50% lower in congregations with 1,000 or more attendees than in those with between 100 and 300. Is this an expression of a trend towards rather less committed participation, comparable to other countries, in the United States as well? Or is it due to the fact that where the number of attendees is so high, a smaller contribution per person is required to cover the congregation’s running costs and salaries?

And incidentally: US congregations too do indeed recruit the great majority of their churchgoers from the surrounding area, measured in terms of the time it takes to get there by car. The proportion of attendees who are prepared to make a journey taking more than thirty minutes remains unchanged at 5% (Chaves/Eagle 2015: 36).

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8 In her response to Mark Chaves’s contribution, Kati Tervo-Niemelä, Professor for Practical Theology at the University of Helsinki, put forward the thesis that the contribution made by women occupying leadership positions in the congregations to their ethical modernization needed to be considered in more detail. See Tervo-Niemelä 2013.

### 3.2. Does the abolition of church tax lend more “vitality” to congregations? – The Swiss study

Jörg Stolz, a sociologist of religion at the University of Lausanne, reported on a recent comparative study of congregations in Switzerland (see also Stolz et al. 2015). This study is of great interest in relation to the drawing of comparisons between the United States and Europe. As is well known, the overall picture in Switzerland is in many respects similar to that in Germany: the scene is dominated by one major Protestant church (in this case, the Reformed Church) and the Catholic church, and there has been a substantial increase in the number of people without any religious affiliation since the mid-1950s. The data from the Swiss study provides figures that evince the expected differences between Switzerland’s Protestant cantonal churches, which are similar to the “established” German provincial churches, and its “free churches”, which as a rule are more biblically conservative. The cantonal churches show lower levels of church attendance among their members; they offer a more liberally intellectual climate of worship (as against either a charismatic model or a conservative one based on a denominational liturgy in the free churches);<sup>9</sup> and they display a substantially higher degree of ecumenical openness.

It is in particular possible to draw conclusions from the circumstance that in Switzerland, other than in Germany, the legally defined relationships between the state and the cantonal churches of the two major denominations differ very widely from canton to canton. There are three main categories: firstly a practically state-church model with clergy salaries paid by the state; secondly, statuses resembling those enjoyed by the mass churches in Germany, which are funded by a church tax; and thirdly, situations similar to that found in France, with strict separation between church and state and churches financed by the voluntary contributions of their members. Clear limits are set to the possibility of a greater degree of financial equalization by means of transfers between the cantonal churches: the levels of any such transfers would have to be determined by a plebiscite or by a vote among the members of the congregations. Thus Switzerland is a place where it is possible to investigate a hypothesis that raises its head at regular intervals in Germany too, particularly among critics within the churches of such “church of the people” situations. According to this hypothesis, saying goodbye to the idea of church tax would lead to a revival of the parishes. A new “vitality” or vigour would arise among parish congregations – with an inviting and missionizing climate in services and the kind of joyfulness among the attendees that is to be seen in the free churches. The consequence would be renewed growth in congregations, as the parishes would become more active and more attractive, with a new commitment to the recruitment of new members/missionizing.

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9 The only exceptions among congregations of a free church kind are those of the Old Catholic Church, whose mentality resembles those of the major churches.

In order to test this hypothesis, congregations were compared on the basis of the three funding models that exist in different cantons: direct state subsidies, church tax, and donations expected from and requested of the members. The findings were unambiguous. (1) The distinctions between these three models, which have generally existed in Switzerland for many decades, have no measurable impact on the situation in the parishes in respect of the above-mentioned markers of “vitality” and renewal. (2) The parishes of the major churches that are financed by donations quite simply have less money available as compared to those funded by church tax. Indeed, they have very considerably less: just under 20% of the funds available to parishes financed by church tax. But there is practically no difference between their situation and that of the parishes financed directly out of the state budget at a level determined by plebiscite: they too have only just over 20% of the funding available to parishes financed by church tax. (3) Now one might suppose that at least the free churches and the non-Christian faith communities would draw advantage from the abolition of church tax. But here too, the figures are unambiguous: they too benefit in practice from the church tax model. The free churches in cantons where the major churches are financed by donations have 60% less cash available than those in cantons with the church tax model. Similarly, non-Christian congregations in such cantons have some 50% less money available. Nor does the model of direct state funding bring any positive effects for the Christian free churches or for the non-Christian congregations.

It may be added at this point that another document presented at the Conference was the “Barometer of Parish Performance” of the Social Sciences Institute of the EKD – an initial representative survey of church parishes in Germany, though restricted to those of the Protestant “provincial” churches (Rebenstorf et al. 2015). The sociologist of religion Hilke Rebenstorf presented data collected from members of parochial church councils which had then been used to construct a typology of Protestant parishes. In this typology, the parishes were categorized according to their perceptions of developments in recent years and of those to be expected in the coming years, combined with differences in the extent to which they concerned themselves with organizational methods and matters of market orientation. In practice, the strongest factor leading to a differentiation between optimistically and pessimistically inclined church elders turned out to be the local demographic situation. While most parishes fall into categories in which pessimistic and optimistic assessments are more or less balanced, the type category of parishes with a pessimistic attitude was very small in comparison and consisted exclusively of ones in peripheral rural locations in eastern Germany. Parishes with an optimistic attitude, on the other hand, also a type that was found comparatively rarely, were exclusively to be found in urban situations in western Germany. In order to make sure that there is no misunderstanding of this finding it is important to make clear that it does not mean that all rural or eastern German parishes are particularly pessimistic, or that all urban western German parishes are particularly optimistic. Rather, it shows how strongly the

varying demographic developments in different areas of the country as a whole are reflected in extremely optimistic or pessimistic assessments. And it shows how very much most church elders resemble each other, both in their blends of pessimism and optimism, and also in their perception of a certain but not all too marked degree of concern with market and organizational aspects.<sup>10</sup>

### 3.3. And away from the countries of the west? – A Chinese theology professor’s assessment of Christian congregations in China

Professor Aiming Wang, a theologian at the Nanjing Union Theological Seminary in Wenzou, reported on his impressions of the situation of congregations in China. This is shaped by the fact that while on the one hand there are recognized churches whose top-level leadership is subject to the supervision of the Chinese Communist Party, there are also congregations that are relatively independent. Some of these belong to the recognized Post-Denominational (Protestant) Church, but many of them being independent even of that: these are the so-called house churches, which may however in some cases assemble not in private houses but in large church buildings endowed by private sources. On the one hand, the traditions of the nineteenth-century European missionary churches do still exert an influence at local level and among the rural population. Thus while the structures of the recognized Protestant church were made interdenominational (because the State wanted to have one single hierarchically organized Protestant church), congregations belonging to it may nevertheless still retain *de facto* an affinity to the classic distinctions between the Protestant denominations. On the other hand, the universities are running an intellectual import business in Western philosophy, which also includes the writings of theological authors, partly intermediarized by the work of Max Weber (whose interpretation of Confucianism, according to Professor Wang, attracts

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10 In her response to Hilke Rebenstorf’s contribution, Ulla Schmidt, Professor of Practical Theology at the University of Aarhus, asked critically whether the questions put to parochial church council members in the “Barometer of Parish Performance” survey were really such as to allow data on organizational and on market processes to be collected in a manner permitting them to be distinguished from each other. I believe this query to be justified. The theoretical framework of the study laid down “bureaucratic organization” and “market” as social coordination mechanisms standing in opposition to each other, whereas in the items asked about, and even more so in the practices of the parishes as seen and experienced by the church elders, the desire for a successful presence on the market and the use of management tools derived from the practices of business administration were lumped together in a single complex. Even in bureaucratic organizations, organization has long been permeated by the ideal of a modern system displaying market awareness. Where other factors seem to resist this trend, they arise much more out of the persisting influence of the Protestant church’s traditional institutional character as a provider of religious services to the entire population within the boundaries of the parish.

great interest and wider acceptance in China than it does in the west). Among the projects for translation into Chinese is one for the translation of the entire Weimar edition of Luther's writings. Augustine too is much debated. There is a great demand to learn the philosophical and theological implications of classical texts from their interpreters, and a great interest in doing so. Thus there are fluid transitions between an intellectual and an existential interest in such European texts as express themselves on matters relating to the deepest truths. At the same time there is a strong charismatic model, put over by autonomous Christian groups practising a charismatic form of piety. Thus intellectual groups may switch backwards and forwards between being study groups and being Christian house church congregations. All this taken together explains why estimates of the numbers of Christians in China are widely divergent. Whereas official statistics place the figure at between twenty and thirty million, there could in fact, according to other estimates, be congregations in China consisting of a total of ninety million persons or more.

## 4. Qualitative empirical research into congregations

### 4.1. Tools for the comparison of the characteristic features of congregations, taken from the field of Congregational Studies

Nancy Ammerman, the first part of whose presentation of her ideas was reported on above, also presented to the Conference a model for analysing congregations. Following this model, it is possible to question congregations with different cultures about how they deal with fundamental matters and how they solve particular challenges. All congregations (1) do things ("activities"), (2) produce visible objects ("artefacts") and (3) communicate their views of things ("accounts"). They (4) develop structures of leadership and (5) orientate themselves within their respective local contexts. Thus an analysis of individual congregations should contain information as to what features are present in these five functionally delineated fields in each individual case.

Among the *activities* there are (a) predominantly spiritual/religious activities (with ritual, celebratory, faith-building, educational and missionary formats), (b) community-building activities, (c) service activities (for the salaried staff of the congregation, for volunteers, for people in need of assistance; information activities and activities of cooperation with other organizations) and (d) activities related to organizational procedures. It is in the field of service activities that the congregation reaches out beyond its own boundaries. It does this both horizontally, extending beyond the membership of the congregation concerned, and also vertically, going outside the local context and thus also relating to a church organization or a network of congregations above the local level.

As far as the *artefacts* are concerned, a fundamental distinction can be made between those that serve predominantly to give expression to the congregation's own identity and those that provide an overall view of its world. The whole spectrum of perceptible forms of expression and material objects is of significance in any analysis of the culture of a congregation.

With regard to *accounts*, the narratives through which the congregation's views and attitudes are communicated, on the one hand the nature of the communication, the language chosen and the technical or insider terminology used play an important part. On the other hand it is significant how what is narrated is presented either as part of the narrator's own history – the history of the congregation or of the church itself – or else is incorporated into a no less than cosmic total narrative of the meaning, purpose and ultimate destiny of the world. It is clear how extensively the (religious) traditions of the congregation concerned influence the point of view here, and have to be modified to take account of the present day situation.

*Leadership*, which consists in being able to influence the way things get done, is subject to both external and internal influences. The impact of traditions external to the congregation in some cases involves the extent to which it is possible for the leadership of the church as a whole to intervene. But internal structures also exert their influence. This may involve the presence of expertise that can be exploited in realizing intentions, or the influence of relationships and identities. Another factor is the extent to which it can be presented as a (moral) duty to perform any activity.

The *local context* represents something like an ecological niche for each congregation, conditional upon its geographical and demographic situation and upon any existing elements of style or content. Furthermore, the impact of elements of the local culture on resources and on the competitive environment has an influence too.

It is clear that such congregational research will apply the methodology of cultural science and even of ethnography. In this it is very decisively at odds with the preoccupation with theological texts (literature from the field of Practical Theology about congregations, orders of service, hymns etc., but also in recent times more and more interviews) that is familiar from classic (Practical) Theology. But it also goes beyond the established subdisciplines of that field that focus on either church services (homiletics and liturgics), instruction (religious education), care for those in need (pastoral care and church social services), persons exercising spiritual leadership (pastoral theology) or questions of efficient operation. It takes as its starting point the assumption that a congregation is something of a multipurpose institution with multifunctional groups (Ammerman spoke of the "multipurpose congregation"). It seems to me that in terms of Practical Theology the exciting thing is then to work out how this can be combined in any given parish or congregation with a Christian orientation towards the one God and the one Christ. What kinds of hierarchies, in the plural, or what kinds of contradictions will arise in the congregation's theological view of itself or in actual parish practice?

## 4.2. Qualitative Congregational Research in the Netherlands: On the Value of Case Studies

Whereas practically all the previous Conference input had concentrated on all-round overviews, the Dutch practical theologian Henk de Roest of the Protestant Theological University, Amsterdam/Groningen, in his contribution directed the listeners' attention to the possibilities of *qualitative* empirical congregational studies. The strength of such studies lies in the fact that they concentrate more on internal processes, and thus get closer to the reality existing in any given congregation and to what its members are interested in. Typical of this approach is the use of diverse methods of a (quantitative and) qualitative nature. As I would formulate it: the church congregation, as a multipurpose phenomenon, also requires a plurality of methodological approaches to research it. De Roest emphasized that the methods included in the mix in such a case need to be selected in order to be appropriate to the matter under investigation, rather than using a single type of methodology that may produce particularly "objective" but insufficiently complex descriptions, findings and conclusions, because the investigators have overlooked its limited scope.

Some interesting analyses of congregational processes are available, for example one on the life cycles of congregations (de Roest et al. 2007) or on the dynamics that are set in motion when churches close down (de Roest 2014). As an example, de Roest presented a piece of recent research into the effects of sexual abuse in a congregation on how the victims experienced the effect on their relationships with that congregation. In this case, the researchers did naturally work with narrative interviews, but also and above all planned and realized the whole project right from the beginning together with affected persons. It became apparent that (1) the dynamics can only be understood if the story of the cases of sexual abuse is itself narrated; (2) an essential part of these dynamics is formed by the dynamics of loyalties and responsibilities within the congregation as a whole; (3) for the victims it is important to regain control over their lives by being able to determine for themselves their own positions in the dynamic processes within the congregation in the single dimension of the relationship between central and marginal positionings. A *de facto* consequence of this is that it is then a question of whether it is the person or persons responsible for the abuse who go away, or who remain, or the victims. In all the cases investigated, it was ultimately the victim that left the congregation.

Studies of internal processes and individual cases are all the more valuable the more it is not only the academic researchers who participate in the "valorization" (to use de Roest's term) of such research. The people who occupy positions of leadership in congregations and churches or are undergoing training for such a ministry should also participate, as should the congregations and their members themselves. What applies to qualitative interviews, namely that such a research model intensifies the religious self-perception of the interviewees, applies all the more to case studies in the field of congregational studies. What is important is that the knowledge gained through research should also be disseminated. In the study on

dealing with sexual abuse in the congregation, it became clear to what an extent the need of the congregation as a whole to get back to business as usual in practice further excluded the victims; and this was equally the case where the matter was put in the hands of specialists, being as a result removed from the congregations' immediate agendas. Thus the research project also had the effect that it could be experienced as an exercise in enabling people in the congregation to support the matter being brought out into the open, and to learn to give visible assistance and solidarity to those who had been victims.<sup>11</sup>

## 5. Tasks for future research and its practical benefits

Quantitative comparative congregational studies help to develop a picture of the particular strengths and weaknesses of certain types of congregation in their respective cultural contexts. In this respect it would be desirable if a project could also be carried out on an international scale in future that would investigate the situation in particularly diverse contexts all around the world – a study more or less comparable with the German “Religionsmonitor” publication.<sup>12</sup>

The studies carried out so far already show very clearly what it is that goes to make up a church community of the established/liberal parochial type, which on a global scale is a minority phenomenon even among Protestants. Its weakness is in the field of gaining new members – in producing children to provide a new generation, keeping the members it has and recruiting new ones. Its strength lies in the benefits it bestows on society as a whole: it succeeds in taming the ambivalent phenomenon of religion, contributes to an educated community culture and produces scholarly religious professionals who are able to participate in the general academic discourse.

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11 Christiane van den Berg-Seifert, *Ik sta erbuiten – maar ik sta wel te kijken. De relationele dynamiek in geloofsgemeenschappen na seksuele grensoverschrijding in een pastorale relatie vanuit het perspectief van primaire slachtoffers*. [I am on the outside – but I am still watching. Relational dynamics in congregations in the aftermath of clergy misconduct from the perspective of the primary victims], Zoetermeer/NL.

12 Cf.: <https://www.bertelsmann-stiftung.de/de/unsere-projekte/religionsmonitor/> – The fact that congregational studies can be pursued in the United States with the broad-based participation of actors from the field of the Sociology of Religion is also, incidentally, connected with the matter of funding. It is above all the funds contributed by a Foundation, the “Lilly Endowment” (which supports projects in the fields of religion, education and community development) that have been a decisive factor in this phenomenon.

In these respects public theology and an institutionalized church represent substantial benefits to society. But they also demand and consume substantial resources. *De facto*, a funding system based on the church tax model shows itself to be a particularly effective way of meeting this need, and one particularly beneficial to all those concerned: society, the churches that work with it, but also all other congregation-like religious groups. In my opinion, the importance of the findings of the Swiss Congregational Study can scarcely be overestimated. The church tax funding model is by no means secure for all time. But if the Swiss Congregational Study's findings are correct, there are a whole bundle of demonstrably good reasons why the church tax funded churches are fully entitled to beat the drum, including before the responsible people in local government, for the services they perform for everybody in society. In Germany, for example, this includes services in the fields of emergency pastoral care and the telephone counselling service, religious education and university courses, not to mention those that are of benefit to civil society and to the cultural and social fields. And it is equally necessary to give theological recognition to these types of activity, as activities both performed within the congregation and radiating out beyond the boundaries of the parish, and to endow them with the necessary resources.

But the findings in the field of qualitative empirical studies of congregational processes are also of great significance. Up until now, Practical Theology has left substantial blank spaces on the map; and in terms of the attention paid by church authorities it did not seem to be such a pressing matter if aspects of the work in a parish were unsuccessful, since the parochial sources of funding and institutionalized resources would remain available nevertheless, quite irrespective of success or failure. There are many sectors concerned with congregational matters: Practical Theology at the universities, those responsible for the supervision of curates, centralized church advisory services to the parishes, and individual parishes and congregations with their leaders and members. It will be important in future that these sectors should work together much more intensively than has been the case up to now on joint projects dealing with case studies in the field of congregational studies. The knowledge generated by such measures will be of equal benefit to both the practitioners and the theoreticians, to the provincial church level and to the local parishes. There are practices that still lack a proper theoretical foundation, such as the two distinct phases of clergy training (plus further in-service training during the first years in office), the training provided for volunteers, all kinds of service provided by the provincial church, and the way individual cases are presented merely as isolated occurrences without being related to more generally applicable frameworks – there are plenty of examples. It seems to me that it would be of great benefit to bring these resources into relationship with each other through cooperative projects, despite the complexity of such undertakings. There have, for example, long been opportunities for such measures within the framework of university theology courses. Parish internships as part of such a degree course would be a starting point for making more deliberate use of a number of activities, including observation of congregations,

participation in their life, assistance by superordinated levels of ecclesiastical organization and academic reflection; these could all contribute to the construction of a joint process of learning and research that would enable knowledge about the dynamics of congregations to be acquired and disseminated.

The Evangelische Akademie Arnoldshain and the Social Sciences Institute of the EKD are among the institutions planning to continue to devote themselves to the theme of congregational studies in their forthcoming programmes. Those currently working for doctorates in Practical Theology were able to go away at the end of this Conference with many new ideas and stimuli. Practitioners involved in the leadership of congregations, as well as honorary parish staff and people in the middle level of administration, were also able to take a lot away with them. It remains a further task for the future to feed the expertise that they possess more deliberately into the discussion processes.

And finally, there is a further task remaining for Practical Theology: that of reviewing the literature, and in particular the empirical studies that form part of it (which do indeed exist, though they are in some cases forgotten and in other cases to be found in somewhat obscure publications). Where they are relevant, they should be put to renewed use as contributions to the issues that congregational studies are currently engaged in researching.

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