

# AMERICAN DENOMINATIONAL STUDIES: A CRITICAL ASSESSMENT

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## Introduction

For years Lilly Endowment, Inc. has supported research and reflection on a wide range of issues concerning the churches in North America. Perhaps none of that research, however, has received more attention or been more controversial than the numerous studies of mainstream Protestantism funded by the Endowment from the late 1970s to the early 1990s.

This essay is neither a detailed summary nor a comprehensive review of this vast literature, much of which has been reviewed extensively in both academic and church publications. I will, however, sketch a broad overview of that literature, situate it in its time and context, highlight a few of its major insights/findings that have endured, identify a number of issues and questions yet to be addressed, and reflect on its possible usefulness, especially to pastors and other religious leaders as well as scholar/educators, in the early twenty-first century.

Several factors explain the appearance of this literature in the 1980s and 1990s, but the most important is that membership in virtually all mainstream Protestant denominations had begun to decline by 1965, and concern about that fact had become widespread among denominational leaders by the mid-1970s. Not incidentally, the appearance of Dean Kelley's *Why Conservative Churches Are Growing* in 1972 generated immense controversy over the possible reasons for that decline. Kelley's thesis seemed to be that theologically conservative churches grew because they made stricter demands of their members in terms of behavioral expectations, doctrinal affirmations, and so forth; conversely liberal church decline resulted from the flexibility, tolerance, and low demands for which they were known. Moreover, some of his language was almost inflammatory, such as his claim that "the churches are dying today not because they are merely religious but because they are not very religious at all". In the absence of better explanations, Kelley's thesis may have received more attention than it deserved, and it certainly should have been understood more accurately than it was. Kelley himself said subsequently that he should have entitled

the book, “Why Conservative Churches Are Strong”—a subtle difference, perhaps, but an important one.<sup>1</sup>

For these and other reasons, by the mid- to late-1970s, concern about the declining condition of mainstream Protestantism was widespread, and two questions in particular begged for answers: 1) just how bad is it and 2) how did we get here? That is to say, church leaders and scholars were wondering in what ways and to what extent mainstream churches were actually in decline and what had led to that state of affairs. A combination of curiosity and concern encouraged a number of (largely mainstream Protestant) scholars to turn their attention to these questions.

Under the creative leadership of its Vice President for Religion, first Robert Lynn and later Craig Dykstra, Lilly Endowment, Inc. began to fund a number of these scholars to try to answer those questions. As suggested by an internal 1990 evaluation of this grant program, the Endowment was particularly eager to stimulate larger, “systematic analysis of whether, how, and why these once-prominent religious bodies find themselves in such notable perplexity.” The evaluation went on to note that these grants had several goals: “first, to cultivate a climate of inquiry into the changes affecting Mainstream Protestantism; second, to assess the significance of these changes for American society as a whole; and finally, to contribute to the deepening integrity of the institutions under scrutiny. The grant program was thus at once critical and normative: it was designed to contribute to a critical understanding of American religion, and at the same time to lend support to the afflicted institutions in their time of perceived crisis.”

The grants, then, sought to answer three main questions: 1) what happened? 2) what does it mean? and 3) what should we do about it? With these goals in mind, the Endowment launched a major scholarly inquiry into the American mainline Protestant denominations, a scholarly inquiry with a decidedly practical purpose. For most of the scholars and certainly for the Endowment, this effort was motivated by a deep concern for the well being of congregations and denominations. The Endowment wanted, if possible, to contribute to the revitalization of these denominations and a rejuvenation of their role in American public life.

The majority of the research projects were funded and conducted between the mid-1980s to early 1990s, by which time awareness of mainstream Protestantism’s increasingly fragile state was widespread. Most of the research results appeared in print between 1985 and 1995. Typical of these efforts was the project that led to one of the earliest of these published studies—Dean Hoge and David Roozen’s *Understanding Church Growth and Decline 1950-1978*.<sup>2</sup> In their introduction, the editors laconically describe the project’s origin. They note that, although membership declines in 1960s had caught many

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<sup>1</sup> Dean Kelley, *Why Conservative Churches Are Growing* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1977; orig. publ. 1972.), p. vii-viii. The quotation is from p. xx.

<sup>2</sup> Dean R. Hoge and David A. Roozen, eds. *Understanding Church Growth and Decline 1950-1978* (New York: The Pilgrim Press, 1979), p. 18.

denominational leaders by surprise, these leaders were seriously worried about them by 1973. By way of response, the United Methodist Church, United Church of Christ, and United Presbyterian Church independently had commissioned studies of their declines. In 1975, a group of researchers embarked on a collaborative study of the same problem, a study funded by a 1976 grant from Lilly Endowment. "The purpose was to provide information and interpretation to denominations and local congregations, enabling them to make better-informed decisions." The project convened working group meetings in 1976, 1977, and 1978 followed by a national symposium in 1978 and publication of the book in 1979. This pattern of research followed by conferences and publications became fairly standard.

In fact, a similar desire "to provide information and interpretation to denominations and local congregations" in the interest of "better-informed decisions" motivated most of the Lilly-funded works that followed. A list of some of the most significant of those works (admittedly a subjective judgment) illustrates both the intensity of the scholarly effort that ensued, and the relatively narrow time frame in which they appeared. It also suggests the focus of the works that were produced. Following, then, is a somewhat arbitrary, chronological list of the major book-length denominational studies funded by the Endowment. For a more complete list, see the list of 46 projects, 39 books, and 27 articles listed on this web site.<sup>3</sup>

- Dean Hoge and David Roozen, *Understanding Church Growth and Decline 1950-1978* (1979)
- Robert S. Michaelson and Wade Clark Roof, *Liberal Protestantism: Realities and Possibilities* (1986)
- Wade Clark Roof and William McKinney, *American Mainline Religion: Its Changing Shape and Future* (1987)
- Robert Wuthnow, *The Restructuring of American Religion* (1988)
- William Hutchison, ed., *Between the Times: The Travail of the Protestant Establishment in America, 1900-1960* (1989)
- Milton J Coalter, John M. Mulder, and Louis B. Weeks, eds., the Presbyterian Presence series, 7 volumes, 1990-92
- Newell Williams (ed), *A Case Study of Mainstream Protestantism: The Disciples' Relation to American Culture, 1880-1989* (1991)
- Phillip Hammond, *Religion and Personal Autonomy* (1992)
- Wade Clark Roof, *A Generation of Seekers: The Spiritual Journeys of the Baby Boom Generation* (1993)
- Jackson Carroll and Wade Clark Roof, eds., *Beyond Establishment: Protestant Identity in a Post-Protestant Age* (1993)
- David Roozen and Kirk Hadaway, eds., *Church and Denominational Growth: What Does (and Does Not) Cause Growth and Decline* (1993)

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<sup>3</sup> Resources for American Christianity website,  
<http://www.resourcingchristianity.org/WhatsBeenLearned.aspx?ContentRelationID=14>

Dean Hoge, Don Luidens, and Benton Johnson, *Vanishing Boundaries: The Religion of Mainline Protestant Baby Boomers* (1994)  
Robert Bruce Mullin and Russell E. Richey, eds., *Reimagining Denominationalism: Interpretive Essays*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1994.  
Milton J Coalter, John M. Mulder, and Louis B. Weeks, *Vital Signs: The Promise of Mainstream Protestantism* (1996)  
Russell E. Richey, Dennis M. Campbell, and William B. Lawrence, eds., United Methodism and American Culture series, 4 volumes (1997-99)

All of these appeared within a twenty-year span, and most of them in just ten. Many other books appeared as well not to mention hundreds of journal articles, speeches, and other occasional pieces. The years from 1979-99 saw, then, a torrent of research-based analysis of the changing fortunes of American mainline Protestantism.

Although it is difficult to characterize such a large body of literature without caricaturing it, a few basic facts should be highlighted. First, it should be noted that these Lilly-funded denominational studies focused on a particular period in the history of the predominantly white, mainstream Protestant denominations. (A number of other Lilly grant programs focused on other religious traditions and other racial/ethnic groups.) In particular, the research focused on the post-World War II experience of the eight so-called mainline or mainstream denominations: Episcopal Church, Presbyterian Church (USA), American Baptist Churches, Reformed Church in America, United Methodist Church, United Church of Christ, Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

As Carroll and Roof note in their *Beyond Establishment*, these denominations emphasize engagement with the world, and, for a time in American history, they assumed an almost unexamined, custodial role in the culture. As Clark Gilpin nicely put it in his essay on theological education in the book, mainstream Protestants were confident “that the values to which they aspired were congruent with the heart of things”. But, within a few decades of the end of World War II, it was clear that American culture no longer supported mainstream Protestantism.<sup>4</sup>

Second, in terms of academic discipline, the vast majority of the projects considered in this essay and noted on this web site were conducted by historians and sociologists. To be sure, the Endowment also funded a great deal of theological reflection during this period. But most of those projects focused on other topics than mainstream Protestantism such as theological education, Christian faith and life, and formation and education of people in faith. The mainstream Protestant literature, especially in the early years, remained principally historical and sociological. Most of the theological discussions of mainstream Protestantism appeared somewhat later, partly in response to calls from the historians and

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<sup>4</sup> Jackson W. Carroll and Wade Clark Roof, eds., *Beyond Establishment: Protestant Identity in a Post-Protestant Age*. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1993), pp.19-20. Clark Gilpin, “The Theological Schools: Transmission, Transformation, and Transcendence of Denominational Culture,” in Carroll and Roof, *Beyond Establishment*, p. 194.

sociologists. Almost inevitably, then, the initial disciplinary focus on sociology and history determined the kind of questions asked initially and the kind that could be answered or at least addressed successfully.

Third, while the majority of the researchers involved in the mainstream Protestant literature were men, a number of prominent women scholars were involved as well. See, for example, the authors in Catherine Prelinger (ed.), *Episcopal Women: Gender, Spirituality and Commitment in an American Mainline Denomination*.<sup>5</sup> In addition, scholars like Nancy Ammerman, Dorothy Bass, Adair Lummis, Penny Marler, and Barbara Brown Zikmund made major scholarly contributions to the inquiry.

Fourth, the intended audience for this literature, at least initially, seems to have been an academic one. Based on my reading, most of the grantees initially wrote for their colleagues in the academy (seminary and university) and for denominational leaders at all levels. Although they certainly wanted pastors to know what they were finding, they apparently paid relatively little attention to pastors as they wrote, and most of the books and articles have an academic tone about them as a result. That is not to say, however, that the literature was of little value to pastors then (1985-1995) or now.

Finally, the works highlighted here reflected the time in which they were produced (the 1980s and 1990s) and virtually all emphasized the importance of the 1960s as the critical turning point in the twentieth-century history of American Protestantism. By the mid-1980s, scholars concurred that the American religious landscape had changed in dramatic ways since the 1960s, and the identity and nature of those changes had come under sustained scholarly scrutiny.

This vast literature certainly does not speak with one voice. Although it reaches consensus on some issues, it is inconclusive on many others. But it represents a vast repository of informed reflection and analysis on a historically influential, still significant portion of the American religious landscape. Moreover, this literature, inconclusive as it may be, has profoundly shaped the contemporary understanding of American mainline Protestantism, including reasons for membership decline, the changing institutional infrastructure of American religion, the rapidly changing cultural context, and the development of religious alternatives. The Endowment's grants also intended to help churches and denominations, and they have surely done so.

That being said, it is also the case that none of the researchers claim to have found the definitive answer for any congregation or denomination. Partly this reticence reflects the tentative nature of this scholarship. Virtually any historian will tell you that he or she cannot

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<sup>5</sup> Catherine M. Prelinger, ed., *Episcopal Women: Gender, Spirituality and Commitment in an American Mainline Denomination* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992). Its contribution to the discussion was to point out that the very structures of at least this one denomination were deeply informed by society's preconceptions of proper male and female roles.

tell precisely what “X” caused what “Y”, except in the simplest of circumstances. Nor do sociologists, even with all their statistical correlations and probabilities, claim to explain fully what caused the current situation in American religion. But their reticence also acknowledges that the complexities are simply too numerous in any given case to permit of simple answers.

## **MAJOR THEMES AND FINDINGS**

Given that much of this literature is now over ten years old, it is worth asking what it told us about mainstream Protestantism and whether those findings have held up over time. That is, what did we learn and is it still true? Given the size and complexity of these research projects and the literature they produced, it is impossible to summarize them both adequately and briefly in a single essay. What follows, then, does not purport to be a comprehensive account of either the themes or the findings. But, with this limitation in mind, I have identified several of the major themes and findings of this literature and have grouped them under three broad headings: membership decline, cultural displacement, and denominational implications. (Please note, however, that some findings fit equally well under more than one of these headings.) The basic claim of each grouping is as follows:

- 1) Protestant membership decline was as serious as had been feared, but its causes were far more complex.
- 2) In addition to membership loss, mainline Protestantism also experienced a profound displacement from the center of the broader culture to its periphery. The causes of this cultural displacement were also complex.
- 3) The difficulties experienced by the mainstream denominations resulted from the interplay of broader cultural factors and internal institutional decisions and policies.

### **Membership Decline**

For reasons suggested above, most of the earliest research, including for example Hoge and Roozen, *Understanding Church Growth and Decline* and Roof and McKinney, *American Mainline Religion*, focused heavily on mainstream Protestant membership decline after 1965.<sup>6</sup> They also noted the continued growth after 1965 of a number of more theologically conservative religious denominations. Both the popular and religious press quickly picked up these headline-grabbing conclusions, reflecting perhaps the enduring influence of Dean Kelley’s 1972 *Why Conservative Churches are Growing*. But, in fact, these researchers provided a much subtler, more complex account of membership change

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<sup>6</sup> Hoge and Roozen, *Understanding Church Growth and Decline* and Wade Clark Roof and William McKinney, *American Mainline Religion: Its Changing Shape and Future* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1987).

than did Kelley. They noted, for example, that the rate of mainline membership loss eerily paralleled the slowing rates of conservative membership growth.<sup>7</sup> They also paid considerable attention to each of the following phenomena: 1) mainstream decline after 1965, 2) conservative growth after 1965, 3) the growth of independent megachurches, 4) the changing meaning of religious affiliation, and 5) the important role of cohorts in membership patterns. At the risk of oversimplification, a brief word on each is in order.

Everyone agreed that virtually all mainstream Protestant denominations experienced from the mid-1960s a sharp decline in membership that leveled out to some extent in the late 1970s but remained negative. Between 1965-1990, for example, the United Methodist Church lost 19.5% of its members, while the Presbyterian Church (USA) lost 33.1% and the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) lost 45.8%.<sup>8</sup> In fact, as several studies subsequently pointed out, the mainstream Protestant growth rate had begun to decline by the early 1950s. This perception of mainstream Protestant decline, including membership decline as one of several negative indicators, was one of several motivations behind the denominational grants made by Lilly Endowment, and it appeared in almost all the earlier works produced by those grants. For example, Michaelsen and Roof noted that membership decline was one of several “indicators pointing to a loss of institutional vitality”, and employed versions of the word “decline” no fewer than seven times on only two pages.<sup>9</sup>

The first chapter of Roof and McKinney’s *American Mainline Religion* also cited the issue of membership loss. But they emphasized as well a more general displacement of mainline Protestantism from the center of the culture since the 1960s in face of greater religious individualism and an expanded moral and religious pluralism.<sup>10</sup> They also acknowledged that the 1950s represented an unusual summit of Protestant influence that was altered forever by the significant developments of the 1960s.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> David A. Roozen and C. Kirk Hadaway (eds.), *Church and Denominational Growth: What Does (and Does Not) Cause Growth or Decline* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993), p. 38.

<sup>8</sup> Milton J Coalter, John M. Mulder, and Louis B. Weeks, *Vital Signs: The Promise of Mainstream Protestantism* (Grand Rapids: William B Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1996), p. 21. Detailed denominational membership information from 1950-1990 may be found in the appendices of Roozen and Hadaway, *Church and Denominational Growth*, pp. 393-395. See also the tables and charts in Roof and McKinney, *American Mainline Religion*.

<sup>9</sup> Robert S. Michaelsen and Wade Clark Roof, eds., *Liberal Protestantism: Realities & Possibilities* (New York: The Pilgrim Press, 1986), pages 6-7.

<sup>10</sup> See Roof and McKinney, *American Mainline Religion*, pp.11-39. They summarize elements of decline on page 21.

<sup>11</sup> Roof and McKinney, *American Mainline Religion*, pp. 22 and 27. See page 11 for the discussion of developments in the 1960s.

A few authors, however, questioned the appropriateness of the metaphor of decline, claiming that it erroneously took the 1950s as the benchmark against which to measure membership gains and losses. Hadaway and Roozen, for example, pointed out that even in the 1950s the Protestant rate of growth had begun to falter. Taking a longer historical view, William Hutchison claimed that the percentage of the population identifying itself as Protestant had been declining since at least the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. In light of that fact, said Hutchison, “the striking thing about the cultural authority of twentieth-century Protestantism is not its diminution but its persistence. . . and a degree of religious and cultural hegemony significantly out of proportion to Protestant or mainline strength in the American population.” Although questioning the appropriateness of the decline metaphor in terms of membership loss, Hutchison did, however, confirm the decline of the Protestant establishment, “as reality, but even more as rhetoric”. As these and other sources suggest, the metaphor of decline almost always implied two concerns: membership loss and cultural displacement. Despite any number of attempts to deny or nuance the metaphor of Protestant decline, it persists to this day.<sup>12</sup>

At the same time, a number of conservative denominations were growing, in some cases rapidly. For example, the Assemblies of God increased 281% during those years, while the Southern Baptists increased a comparatively modest 39%.<sup>13</sup> But, although their membership continued to increase throughout the twentieth century, scholars noted that their rate of growth began to decline in the early 1950s at more or less the same rate as in the mainstream denominations. Since their rate, remains positive, however, those denominations continue to grow.<sup>14</sup> The literature often seemed almost preoccupied with conservative Protestant growth. These denominations seemed to be growing while the mainstream denominations were declining; their cultural influence with politicians and media seemed to be increasing while the mainstream became all but invisible. Hadaway and Roozen, for example, noted that while mainstream Protestant membership was about the same in 1991 as in 1949, membership in conservative denominations (e.g. the Southern Baptist Convention) and denominational movements (e.g. Assemblies of God) doubled and tripled respectively in those years. Much of the literature under consideration

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<sup>12</sup> C. Kirk Hadaway and David A. Roozen, *Rerouting the Protestant Mainstream: Sources of Growth & Opportunities for Change* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), p. 27. Hutchison, William R., ed., *Between the Times: The Travail of the Protestant Establishment in America, 1900-1960* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), pp. 304-05, 308. See also the article by Peter Smith on the Presbyterian General Assembly in *Louisville Courier Journal* (June 28, 2004) or the note on Presbyterian membership loss in the *The Christian Century*, June 29, 2004, p. 13.

<sup>13</sup> Coalter, Mulder, Weeks, *Vital Signs*, p. 22. See also Roozen and Hadaway, *Church and Denominational Growth*, pp. 38-39. Roozen & Hadaway also reported in *Rerouting the Protestant Mainstream* pp. 22-30 that Pentecostal denominations like the Assemblies of God grew at a much faster rate in the 1960s and 1970s than conservative denominations like the Southern Baptist Convention.

<sup>14</sup> For a vivid illustration, see the graph on page 38 of Roozen and Hadaway, *Church and Denominational Growth*. About 1965, the Protestant line plunged below 0% rate of growth while the conservative line has remained in positive territory.

was an implicit response to Dean Kelley's still-controversial contention that strict conservative churches had grown and would continue to grow while tolerant, mainstream churches would continue their long decline.<sup>15</sup>

A sub-set of this literature on conservative Protestantism was a small but growing discussion of independent megachurches, seemingly the most antithetical to mainstream Protestantism and the new darling of the media. Perhaps the most sophisticated discussion was Donald Miller's *The Reinvention of American Protestantism*, a portrait of three rapidly-growing, conservative Protestant movements: Calvary Chapel, the Vineyard Fellowship, and Hope Chapel. In addition to particularly evocative descriptions of these groups, Miller proposed that the source of their appeal was that they provided access to the sacred through spirited worship, their reliance on the Bible for guidance in daily life, and their emphasis on small group spirituality. He also cited the benefits of their decentralized organizational structure and their enthusiastic commitment to growth.<sup>16</sup>

Related to the question of membership decline at the denominational level was a series of concerns related to individuals and the changing meaning of religious affiliation. They included at least the following: A) Why do so many persons who claim a religious allegiance to a particular denomination not belong to a church? B) Why do people switch from one denomination to another, and why do others simply drop out of religious affiliation altogether? C) What are the implications of such switching for denominational growth or decline?

Researchers discovered, for example, that the number of people who claimed a particular religious affiliation (Presbyterian, for example) often exceeded the reported Presbyterian membership.<sup>17</sup> Carl Dudley described them as "believers but not belongers,"<sup>18</sup> and Kirk Hadaway began to call these persons "mental members" or "mental affiliates."<sup>19</sup> This issue

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<sup>15</sup> Hadaway and Roozen, *Rerouting the Protestant Mainstream* p. 25. For discussions of Kelley, see, for example, Roof and McKinney, *American Mainline Religion*, pages 19-20 and 148-149. See also Dean Hoge, "A Test of Theories of Denominational Growth and Decline" in Hoge and Roozen, *Understanding Church Growth and Decline*, pp. 179-197.

<sup>16</sup> Miller, Donald E., *Reinventing American Protestantism: Christianity in the New Millennium* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

<sup>17</sup> Milton J Coalter, John M. Mulder, and Louis B. Weeks, *The Re-Forming Tradition: Presbyterians and Mainstream Protestantism*. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1992), p. 83.

<sup>18</sup> Cited in Roof & McKinney, *American Mainline Religion*, p. 52.

<sup>19</sup> C. Kirk Hadaway, "Denominational Defection: Recent Research on Religious Disaffiliation in America" in Milton J Coalter, John M. Mulder, and Louis B. Weeks, eds., *The Mainstream Protestant "Decline": The Presbyterian Pattern*. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1990), pp. 102-121.; and C. Kirk Hadaway and Penny Long Marler, "Toward a Typology of Protestant 'Marginal Members'" in *Review of Religious Research* 35 (1993):34-54.

raises many questions about the enduring legacy of religious affiliation and the possibility of tapping this pool of mental affiliates for future church commitment.

Of course, as every pastor knows, not all those who grow up in a particular religious tradition and remain committed to the faith retain membership in the religious tradition of their youth. In fact, citing research from the late 1970s, Roof and McKinney note that fully 40% of Protestant church members have switched their religious allegiance at least once.<sup>20</sup> Hadaway and Marler, using data from the General Social Survey (1973-1990), found a somewhat lower switching rate ranging from 30-38% among liberal and moderate Protestants during those years.<sup>21</sup> Such “switchers” became a major research focus during the 1980s for several reasons. On the one hand, it was simply an interesting research question. On the other hand, researchers soon found that the patterns were not uniform. Some groups benefited from persons switching in, while other groups clearly lost. Moreover, researchers soon discovered that there were variations in levels of religious commitment. In some mainstream denominations, those switching “in” were less committed and involved than those switching “out.” Even if the numbers switching in and out were the same, that situation would represent a net loss in vitality for that particular denomination.<sup>22</sup>

A related but separate question had to do with the young. It soon became clear that mainstream Protestant denominations were losing an increasing percentage of their young persons. Where were they going: to other denominations (sometimes) or to no religious affiliation (more frequently)? Indeed, the research established clearly that the mainstream’s failure to retain its young was a major contributing factor to membership loss. Conversely, the ability of more conservative denominations (such as the Southern Baptist Convention or Assemblies of God, for example) to retain their young was a major factor in their membership growth.<sup>23</sup>

This attention to the religious fate of the young focused new attention on the impact of generational cohort on American religious life. In fact, C. Kirk Hadaway insisted that

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<sup>20</sup> Roof and McKinney, *American Mainline Religion*, p. 165.

<sup>21</sup> C. Kirk Hadaway and Penny Long Marler, “All in the Family: Religious Mobility in America,” *Review of Religious Research* 35 (1993):101.

<sup>22</sup> See Roof and McKinney, pp. 177-179; Hadaway and Marler, “All in the Family: Religious Mobility in America,” pp. 97-116. For a study comparing switching among the Disciples, Presbyterians, and Baptists, see C. Kirk Hadaway, “Denominational Switching, Social Mobility, and Membership Trends,” in Newell D. Williams, ed., *A Case Study of Mainstream Protestantism: The Disciples’ Relation to American Culture, 1880-1989* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1991), pp. 491-508.

<sup>23</sup> On the mainstream Protestant failure to retain the young, See Donald P. Smith, “Closing the Back Door: Toward the Retention of Church Members” in Coalter, Mulder, Weeks, *Mainstream Protestant “Decline”*, pp 97-98. See also Dean R. Hoge, Benton Johnson, and Donald A. Luidens, *Vanishing Boundaries: The Religion of Mainline Protestant Baby Boomers* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994), pp. 7,49. On the conservative success in doing so, see Hadaway and Roozen, *Rerouting the Protestant Mainstream*, p. 40-41, 49, and Roof and McKinney, *American Mainline Religion*, p. 242.

changes in religion tend to occur by cohorts. Generations, as a rule, tend to retain their level of religious participation over time, but the participation level of the next generation may be quite different.<sup>24</sup> In the Lilly-funded research in question, the featured cohort has been the “baby boom” generation that came of age during the decade of 1960s, precisely as the major changes in mainstream Protestantism were occurring. In fact, the scholarship was largely written by baby boomers about baby boomers, with somewhat less focus on the children of baby boomers and subsequent generations.<sup>25</sup> Age cohort, then, was a major variable in the literature.

In sum, a large cluster of Lilly-funded research focused on the issue of mainstream Protestant membership decline and illuminated the nature of that decline as well as the limits of the metaphor itself. In the course of their work, researchers identified a number of important, interrelated issues having to do with individual religious affiliation: joining, switching, dropping out, and the collective effects thereof. Although this initial research was absolutely essential to enable us to understand what was going on in American religious life in the last half of the twentieth century, it did not tell the whole story.

In fact, the widespread concern over the state of mainstream Protestantism was only partially accounted for by the pervasive membership decline of those denominations. Equally disconcerting, perhaps, was the growing realization that mainstream Protestantism no longer enjoyed the prominent place in American culture. It had lost its quasi-establishment status, and its future appeared to be one of radical cultural displacement.

## Cultural Displacement

Consequently a second major cluster of grants focused on the broad cultural context that influenced American mainstream Protestantism in significant ways, including the issues of: 1) disestablishment, 2) the ascendance of personal autonomy in matters of religion, 3) the argument over a religious culture war, and 4) the growth of higher education. It is to that cluster of research findings I now turn.

The underlying assumption behind all of that research was that mainstream Protestant denominations had moved from the center of the culture to its periphery. There was no firm consensus among researchers on many details of these broad cultural changes, some of them praised and others deplored. But virtually none disputed the fact that the cultural prominence of mainstream Protestant denominations had vanished almost without a trace in a world of increasing religious pluralism. The historically dominant Protestant

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<sup>24</sup> C. Kirk Hadaway, “Denominational Defection” in Coalter, Mulder, Weeks, *Mainstream Protestant “Decline”*, p. 105.

<sup>25</sup> See, for example, Hoge, Johnson, and Luidens, *Vanishing Boundaries* and Wade Clark Roof, *A Generation of Seekers: The Spiritual Journeys of the Baby Boom Generation* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1993). See also James W. Lewis, “Baby Boomers: the Lapsed and the Loyal,” a review essay of *Vanishing Boundaries* by Hoge, Johnson, and Luidens in *The Christian Century*, May 18-25, 1994, pp.534-537.

denominations no longer played the prominent role in American culture that they had enjoyed in the first half of the century.

Many of these developments reflected similar development in other areas of the culture, including the political, economic, and social realms. For example, if denominations were losing brand loyalty, so also were labor unions and political parties. In particular, a number of cultural shocks during the 1960s had important implications for American religious life, including a growing distrust of institutions (especially religious and political ones), a growing gap between generations, and a new emphasis on personal autonomy in all things, including religious choice. Although these developments had implications for all religious groups, they seemed to have especially serious implications for mainstream Protestant congregations and denominations.

Concern with this loss of cultural influence led numerous researchers to turn their attention to the relationship (both historical and contemporary) between mainstream Protestant denominations and the broader culture. In doing so, they found the concept of a third disestablishment to be useful. Although the Protestant churches were legally disestablished in all the states by the 1830s, they retained a broad cultural authority into well into the twentieth century. Beginning in the 1920s, according to Robert Handy, Catholics and Jews joined them at the table of broad religious influence—Protestantism’s “second disestablishment”. A consensus developed among Lilly-funded researchers (and others) that a “third disestablishment” began in the 1960s, as Protestantism’s broader influence in the culture dissipated. Reasons given for that development were many, including: the triumph of personal autonomy and individual choice in matters of religious affiliation as well as other areas of life; the growing religious diversity of the political, business, and religious elites; the rise of Billy Graham and other evangelicals to national prominence; a vaguely defined secularization; and inattention by the media to mainstream Protestant issues and personalities. But all agreed that Protestant influence was not what it once had been.<sup>26</sup>

As noted above, a number of scholars emphasized the role of choice and personal autonomy in the loss of ascribed religious affiliation. That is, following the 1960s, persons (especially the young) typically selected their own religious affiliation rather than adopting naturally the religious affiliation of their parents. Roof and McKinney note, for example, that “religion is highly voluntary in contemporary America—a matter ultimately of personal choice and conscience.”<sup>27</sup>

Perhaps the most thorough discussion of this development was Philip Hammond’s *Religion and Personal Autonomy: The Third Disestablishment in America*. Hammond argued that

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<sup>26</sup> Robert T. Handy, *A Christian America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), cited in Phillip E. Hammond, *Religion and Personal Autonomy: The Third Disestablishment in America* (Columbia, South Carolina: University of South Carolina Press, 1992), pp. 9-10. See also Carroll and Roof, *Beyond Establishment*, pp. 12-13.

<sup>27</sup> Roof and McKinney, *American Mainline Religion*, p. 43.

increased personal autonomy is reflected in declining local ties of all sorts (including religious ties) and an attraction to alternative moral standards. Both of these not only affect the level of parish involvement, but, more importantly, they affect the very meaning of parish involvement as well. That is to say, even for those who remain active in a local congregation, the meaning of that involvement tends to shift. No longer does it express what Hammond calls a “collective-expressive” commitment to the group; rather it reflects an “individual-expressive” commitment. The individual judges the religious group, not the other way around.<sup>28</sup> This increasing commitment to personal autonomy was thus a powerful cultural development, impacting both those who affiliated with a denomination and those who rejected them all. An unavoidable implication of this development for the mainstream Protestant denominations was that they had to “win” their young to religious allegiance; they could no longer assume it as a given. Unfortunately, according to researchers like Roof and McKinney and Hadaway, mainstream Protestantism did a particularly poor job at that task, compared to some other denominations.

Related to the question of mainstream Protestantism and culture was the complex issue of a culture war between conservatives and liberals—whether it existed and, if so, what it looked like. The questions were more numerous than the answers. Among the most ardent defenders of the idea was sociologist, James Davison Hunter, who claimed that “America is in the midst of a culture war that has and will continue to have reverberations not only within public policy but within the lives of ordinary Americans everywhere. . . This cleavage is so deep that it cuts across the old lines of conflict, making the distinctions that long divided Americans—those between Protestants, Catholics, and Jews—virtually irrelevant.”<sup>29</sup> The culture war theory claimed that American culture was increasingly divided between (to use the most common, if unsatisfactory, terms) liberals and conservatives. This division characterized religion, politics, and broader cultural attitudes, especially toward questions of sexuality.

Among other Lilly-funded efforts, Robert Wuthnow’s pathbreaking *The Restructuring of American Religion*, was perhaps the most influential discussion of the subject. Wuthnow claimed that, by the 1980s, a pronounced division between religious liberals and religious conservatives existed as much within denominations as between them. In fact, he speculated that “conservative Baptists and conservative Catholics may share more in common than conservative with liberal Baptists. And liberal Methodists may have greater empathy with liberal Baptists than they do with conservatives in their own denomination.” Wuthnow also noted that, compared with the 1960s, the split between liberals and conservatives was more consistent across all the issues in question in the 1980s.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Hammond, *Religion and Personal Autonomy*, pp. 16-17. See also Roof and McKinney on the “new voluntarism” in *American Mainline Religion*, pp. 40-71.

<sup>29</sup> James Davison Hunter, *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America* (Basic Books, 1991), pp. 34, 43.

<sup>30</sup> Robert Wuthnow, *The Restructuring of American Religion: Society and Faith Since World War II* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), pp. 221, 225. A quite different perspective on the issue was proposed by Douglas Jacobsen and William Vance Trollinger Jr., *Re-forming the Center: American*

This whole discussion about a religious culture war, of course, was part of a much broader discussion about the nature of American culture, including its political culture. In fact, one of the continuing gaps in the literature on mainstream Protestantism is a fuller discussion of the relationship between religious developments and analogous major developments in other areas of cultural life, including the arts, politics, and business. Although they did not develop the point, Hadaway and Roozen noted that “few denominations today are growing or declining rapidly. This may suggest that all institutionalized religious groups . . . are increasingly (and similarly) at risk in American culture.”<sup>31</sup>

Mention of Wuthnow’s book raises the question of higher education and its possible contribution to the cultural displacement of the mainstream Protestant denominations. This is a particularly important issue for several reasons. First, members of the mainstream denominations, as a rule, have been among the best educated of American Christians, and their educational level increased steadily after World War II. But, according to Wuthnow, these higher educational levels tended to correlate rather strongly with denominational switching and decreased religious commitment.<sup>32</sup> According to Wuthnow, “the net result of the 1960s, therefore, was to create a new basis of cultural cleavage—a cleavage that fell largely along educational lines and that cut through most of the established religious organizations. Whereas ethnic and regional divisions had once been the chief basis along which religious communities had divided, educational levels now became an increasingly important mode of religious differentiation.”<sup>33</sup>

If this is true, does increased education contribute to the problem of decreasing religious affiliation by the mainstream Protestant young? If so, what should be done about it? One option, posed rhetorically by the authors of *Vanishing Boundaries* is to reject the developments of the last few decades:

Stop sending children to non-religious, liberal colleges. Stop the historical criticism of the Bible. Stop encouraging cross-cultural learning. Discourage interfaith marriage. Raise barriers between the denominational faith community and other people in society. Then people would know who is in and who is out, and boundaries would reappear. In sum, move the Protestant communities away from the center of the culture of higher education today, toward the encapsulated faith communities of the past. For generations some

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*Protestantism, 1900 to the Present* (Grand Rapids: William B Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1998) and a number of related articles that sought to define a viable centrist position in the midst of conflictual Protestantism. See also Richard G. Hucheson, Jr. and Peggy Shriver, *The Divided Church: Moving Liberals and Conservatives from Diatribe to Dialogue* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999).

<sup>31</sup> Hadaway & Roozen, *Rerouting the Protestant Mainstream*, p. 29.

<sup>32</sup> Wuthnow, *Restructuring American Religion*, pp. 89, 160-61.

<sup>33</sup> Wuthnow, *Restructuring American Religion*, p. 163.

other religious groups have been doing this, for example, the Amish and the Orthodox Jews. They prove that the option is possible in reality, not just in theory. We describe this option here to demonstrate how far-fetched it is. It calls for an about-face from a century of mainline Protestant creativity.<sup>34</sup>

As the authors suggested, the revitalization of mainstream Protestantism, if it is to occur, lies along a different path.

## Denominational Implications

I have examined so far two clusters of grant-related projects focusing on mainstream Protestantism. The first dealt principally with several issues related to Protestant membership decline. The second explored the increasing cultural displacement of that formerly prominent segment of the American religious landscape. Taken together, the effect on the denominations was disastrous, and a third major cluster of research funded by Lilly Endowment grants focused on the implications for the denominations themselves. A number of these grants supported individual research projects. But the major thrust of the Endowment's grantmaking in this area was in the form of major grants to support large, collaborative studies of three mainstream Protestant denominations: the Presbyterian Church (USA), the United Methodist Church, and the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ).

The first and largest of these was the Presbyterian Presence series based at Louisville Presbyterian Seminary and directed by Milton J Coalter, John M. Mulder, Louis B. Weeks. Funded by grants made from 1985-87, the research resulted in seven volumes published between 1990 and 1992 as well as *Vital Signs*, a summary volume designed for a general readership and published in 1996.<sup>35</sup> A second major study, based at Duke Divinity School and led by Dennis Campbell, Russell Richey, and William Lawrence, focused on the United Methodist Church and produced four volumes published between 1997 and 1999.<sup>36</sup> A smaller study of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) was funded in 1988 and resulted

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<sup>34</sup> Hoge, Johnson, and Luidens, *Vanishing Boundaries*, p. 207.

<sup>35</sup> The seven volumes of The Presbyterian Presence Series were edited by Milton J Coalter, John M. Mulder, and Louis B. Weeks and were published by Westminster John Knox Press. The titles were: *The Presbyterian Predicament: Six Perspectives* (1990); *The Confessional Mosaic: Presbyterians and Twentieth-Century Theology* (1990); *The Organizational Revolution: Presbyterians and American Denominationalism* (1992); *The Mainstream Protestant "Decline": The Presbyterian Pattern* (1990); *The Pluralistic Vision: Presbyterians and Mainstream Protestant Education and Leadership* (1992); *The Diversity of Discipleship: The Presbyterians and Twentieth-Century Christian Witness* (1991); and *The Re-Forming Tradition: Presbyterians and Mainstream Protestantism* (1992). In addition, they produced a summary volume, *Vital Signs: The Promise of Mainstream Protestantism* (Grand Rapids: William B Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1996).

<sup>36</sup> The four volumes of the United Methodism and American Culture Series were edited by Russell, E. Richey, William B. Lawrence, and Dennis M. Campbell and published by Abingdon Press. The titles were: *Questions for the Twenty-First Century Church* (1999); *Doctrines and Discipline* (1999); *The People(s) Called Methodist* (1998); and *Connectionalism: Ecclesiology Mission and Identity* (1997).

in a large, one-volume work on the Disciples published in 1991.<sup>37</sup> Finally, as noted above, *Episcopal Women*, edited by Catherine Prelinger and published in 1992, focused specifically on gender issues in the Episcopal Church.

Much of this research on mainstream Protestantism was conducted against a backdrop of denominational conflict. If membership had declined so sharply and if the denominations had been disestablished so completely, surely someone was to blame, claimed many a denominational critic. Some critics bluntly charged their opponents with theological heterodoxy while others maintained that the denominations were simply doing the job badly. Still others, more charitably, argued that the changing cultural context in which denominations existed made it impossible for them to do their jobs as before. The researchers, by and large, were less interested in criticizing the denominations than in revitalizing them, and their research contributed to a significantly enhanced understanding of changing denominational realities and challenges, including at least the following: 1) membership and money, 2) the changing role of denominations, 3) internal political battles over controversial social issues, 4) a growing indifference to denominations, 5) the ascendance of the congregation, 6) the persisting importance of theology, and 7) the need to retrieve a vital denominational ecology.

Research on membership and money issues was related to the cluster of grants on membership decline described above. As noted there, mainstream Protestant membership began declining about 1965. The denominationally specific research focused on those membership patterns in the PCUSA, UMC, and Disciples. Previous Lilly-funded research had confirmed that giving patterns to denominations had also changed more broadly as well, with congregations retaining a greater percentage of contributions for local causes, sending less to the national denominational structures. Mark Chaves, for example, reported that “congregations spend proportionally more of their money supporting their local operations than the 1950s “ but noted that “per capita giving to denominations has not declined.”<sup>38</sup> Over time, the decreased resources at the national level led in the case of most mainstream denominations to major reductions in staff and program, sometimes accompanied by physical relocation of the denominational headquarters in an effort to save money. As Nancy Ammerman put it, “the organizational apparatus once sustained by 10 million members cannot be sustained by 8 million members.”<sup>39</sup> The combination of

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<sup>37</sup> Newell D. Williams, ed. *A Case Study of Mainstream Protestantism: The Disciples' Relation to American Culture, 1880-1989* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1991).

<sup>38</sup> Mark Chaves and Sharon L. Miller, eds., *Financing American Religion* (Walnut Creek, CA.: Alta Mira Press, 1999), pages 174-75. Chaves' conclusion to this book also appears on this web site. For details of the Presbyterian situation, see Scott Brunger, “Global and Local Mission: Allocation of Giving in the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. and The United Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A., 1923-1989” in Coalter, Mulder, and Weeks, *The Organizational Revolution*, pp. 154-170. For the United Methodist experience, see Charles E. Zech, “Determinants of the Denominational-Mission Funding Crisis: An Evaluation of Three Hypotheses” in Richey, Lawrence, and Campbell, *Connectionalism*, pp. 245-264.

<sup>39</sup> Nancy T. Ammerman, “Studying Denominations: Challenges for a New Century, *Journal of Presbyterian History* 79 (2001): 184.

membership and financial losses constituted a major threat to the well being of denominations. Although research facilitated greater understanding of the way these factors contributed to denominational weakness, it did not provide a solution to either one.

A small number of studies looked at the changing role and function of denominations over time. Perhaps the most influential were several essays in the Presbyterian Presence series. In his "The Incorporation of the Presbyterians," for example, Louis Weeks described the process in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century by which the denomination organized itself along the lines of the secular business corporation. As the denomination became more complex and its resources more abundant, the informal, almost amateur, organizational structure was increasingly inadequate. Adapting patterns taken from the increasingly successful industrial sector, "the church became a corporation, and the implications have been both positive and negative".<sup>40</sup>

Perhaps even more influential has been James Hudnut-Beumler and Craig Dykstra, "The National Organizational Structures of Protestant Denominations: An Invitation to a Conversation".<sup>41</sup> In that essay, the authors proposed three successive metaphors for denominational organization over time: a loose constitutional confederacy (18<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> centuries), the considerably more organized corporation described also by Weeks (19<sup>th</sup>-20<sup>th</sup> centuries), and the "regulatory agency" of the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. According to Hudnut-Beumler and Dykstra, the corporate model began to fail around 1960 as financial resources generated budget and program cuts and consensus dissolved "about what the corporation would and should do and produce."<sup>42</sup> In the absence of other compelling models, denominations began to behave very much like regulatory agencies, in order to manage the distribution of shrinking financial resources. Although the model endeared itself to no one, the authors suggested it would probably endure until some "new and compelling vision emerges of what a national denominational organization might fruitfully be."<sup>43</sup> That vision has not yet emerged.

Research on denominational implications also looked at the issue of internal denominational conflict over controversial social issues. Prior to the research, many denominational critics had claimed that official denominational support for controversial,

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<sup>40</sup> Louis Weeks, "The Incorporation of the Presbyterians," in Coalter, Mulder, and Weeks, *The Organizational Revolution*, pp. 37-54; see especially p. 22.

<sup>41</sup> James Hudnut-Beumler and Craig Dykstra, "The National Organizational Structures of Protestant Denominations: An Invitation to a Conversation", in Coalter, Mulder, and Weeks, *The Organizational Revolution*, pp. 307-331.

<sup>42</sup> Hudnut-Beumler and Dykstra, "The National Organizational Structures of Protestant Denominations," p. 321.

<sup>43</sup> Hudnut-Beumler and Dykstra, "The National Organizational Structures of Protestant Denominations," p. 330.

“liberal” causes (financial aid to black activist Angela Davis, the ordination of women, etc) had alienated the more conservative constituency and contributed to membership loss. As a matter of fact, researchers found little support for this conclusion. Indeed, they discovered (little comfort to denominational officials, I fear) that the rank and file were often uninformed about and unaffected by denominational positions on these issues one way or another. That is, they were not upset over denominational policies of which they were unaware.<sup>44</sup>

Nonetheless, in several denominations at the present time serious conflict persists over several “hot button” issues. (The identify of the specific issues seems to change over time, with ordination of homosexuals as of this writing replacing previous issues like resistance to the Vietnam War or the ordination of women). But as several scholars have noted, such conflict often tends to occur between contending denominational elites, left and right respectively, and its effect on membership and financial contribution is probably less severe than many denominational critics claim.<sup>45</sup>

Indeed, one of the major findings (or confirmations) of the research on denominations is a growing indifference to denominations. As confirmed by the extensive research on denominational switching described above, denominational affiliation is now a choice, not an “ascribed status” received at birth. Cradle members of the United Church of Christ may well join a UCC church when they move, but they are just as likely to join another church or drop out of church altogether.<sup>46</sup> Denominational loyalty is very thin indeed. Congregational loyalty, on the other hand, often remains quite strong.

Another major finding of virtually all the major denominational studies—Presbyterian, Methodist, and Disciples—was that the center of gravity in denominational life had moved from the denomination to the congregation.<sup>47</sup> The reasons for this shift were many and complex. In a number of ways, in fact, congregational support of denominations appeared

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<sup>44</sup> Hoge, Johnson, and Luidens, *Vanishing Boundaries*, pp. 177-178.

<sup>45</sup> As Weeks and Fogelman noted, there appear to be two parallel churches—one congregational, where most people reside, and the second a denominational church dominated and populated by the denominational governing elite. In the PCUSA, at least, (and not only there), conflict and misunderstanding often exist between the two. Louis Weeks and William J. Fogleman, “A ‘Two Church’ Hypothesis,” in *The Presbyterian Outlook* (March 26, 1990): 8-10 and Louis Weeks, “Revisiting the ‘Two-Church Hypothesis’ After Seven Years,” in *The Presbyterian Outlook* (November 17, 1997): 6-7, 18. In *Vanishing Boundaries*, p. 180, Hoge, Johnson, and Luidens confirm that denominational conflict is more likely to occur between denominational elites rather than at the grassroots.

<sup>46</sup> See Roof and McKinney, *American Mainline Religion*, pp. 162-181, especially pp. 170-175. See also Hoge, Johnson, and Luidens, *Vanishing Boundaries* for a detailed account of the Presbyterian situation.

<sup>47</sup> See, e.g. Coalter, Mulder, and Weeks, *Re-Forming Tradition*, p. 113; Jackson W. Carroll and Wade Clark Roof, “United Methodist Congregations in North Carolina and California: Regional and Generational Trends,” in Lawrence, Campbell, and Richey, *The People(s) Called Methodist*, pp. 55-83, especially page 80; and Richard L. Hamm, *From Mainline to Frontline* (Lexington, KY: Lexington Theological Quarterly, 1996), pp. vi, 55.

to weaken. Congregations relied less on denominations for curricular and other resources, and studies of giving patterns showed that congregations retained an ever-larger percentage of their resources for local causes rather than denominational ones. At the individual level, as confirmed by the research on switching, individuals tended to choose a congregation on the basis of specific congregational factors (size, program, etc) instead of denominational label. Denominational loyalists certainly existed; there just weren't many of them. In sum, the focus of religious health and vitality appeared to have shifted from denominations to congregations.

Rather than being taken for granted as the principal suppliers of resources for denominational programs, denominations increasingly began to emphasize that they exist to serve congregations. Actually making this shift successfully, however, has proved to be a major challenge. Congregations of many sizes and situations may be vital, of course, regardless of denominational health.<sup>48</sup> But obviously the ideal situation is healthy congregations in healthy denominations.

Despite the predominance of sociologists and historians among the early researchers, the literature eventually began to emphasize the importance of theology and theological reform in denominational life, although the nature of the issue varied by denomination. In the case of the Disciples study, for example, a lively question for the denomination in the first third of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was whether or not theology (as distinct from philosophy of religion) was a legitimate part of a denominational tradition that claimed no authority but the Bible. For the Disciples, then, the very legitimacy of theology was a denominational issue only recently settled.<sup>49</sup>

By contrast, the attention in the Methodist volumes to the distinctives of Wesleyan theology and their importance over time and in the present is quite striking. Virtually every one of those volumes argued for the importance of a contemporary retrieval of theological concepts such as "connection", scriptural holiness, and the Methodist quadrilateral of scripture, reason, tradition, and experience. The Methodist series also emphasized the importance of theological retrieval, but it did so with a distinctively Methodist accent. Dennis Campbell noted, for example, that "among the conclusions of the study of United Methodism and American Culture is the conviction that the idea of connection as a theological principle has eroded in twentieth-century America and that a recovery of connection is essential to the future of the church."<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> See, for example, Cynthia Woolever and Deborah Bruce, *Beyond the Ordinary: 10 Strengths of U.S. Congregations*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), pp. 109-122.

<sup>49</sup> See Williams, *Case Study of Mainstream Protestantism*, pp. 18-23,138,164.

<sup>50</sup> Dennis Campbell, "Introduction" in Campbell, Lawrence, and Richey, *Doctrines and Discipline*, p. 4. See also L. Gregory Jones, "What Makes 'United Methodist Theology' Methodist?" in Campbell, Lawrence, and Richey, *Doctrines and Disciplines*, pp. 79-95.

For their part, the authors in the Presbyterian Presence series noted that a number of challenges facing the Presbyterian Church (USA) were theological at their core. They noted, for example, that the deeply held commitment to pluralism and theological diversity since the 1960s contributed to Presbyterian uncertainty about just what Presbyterians believe.<sup>51</sup> To a considerable extent, therefore, the Lilly-funded literature insisted on the importance of internal theological factors as well as broader contextual factors in accounting for the contemporary state of mainstream Protestantism.

Related to this issue of theological renewal was the increasing call in the literature for the retrieval of a denominational ecology of spirituality. According to a number of researchers, the mainstream denominations had allowed an entire ecology of nurture and spiritual practice to wither, not so much from hostility as from inattention.

According to these accounts, the mainstream denominations developed throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries a complex system by means of which they incorporated the young into the faith, nurtured persons to spiritual maturity, developed religious leaders, and strengthened their institutions. Researchers in the Presbyterian Presence series, for example, cited several serious effects of a weakened denominational ecology. A neglect of practices like Sabbath observance and family devotions weakened the denomination's ability to nurture its members, as did certain developments in Christian education curricula.<sup>52</sup> A decision to decrease the attention to campus ministry undermined the historical Presbyterian commitment to higher education and the ability of its church-related colleges to retain the loyalties of its young and contributed to its inability to attract talented young persons into the ministry.<sup>53</sup> An inattention to new church development in favor of inner city redevelopment efforts inadvertently undercut one of the principal strategies by which, we now know, denominations grow.<sup>54</sup> Similarly, according to Coalter, an inability to hold together both evangelism and social justice ministries accelerated denominational decline.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> See John Mulder and Lee Wyatt, "The Predicament of Pluralism: The Study of Theology in Presbyterian Seminaries Since the 1920s" in *Pluralistic Vision*, pp. 68-70. See also Coalter, Mulder, and Weeks *Re-Forming Tradition*, p. 140, and *Vital Signs*, p 40.

<sup>52</sup> Coalter, Mulder, and Weeks, *Re-Forming Tradition*, pp 220-21. Craig Dykstra and J. Bradley Wigger, "A Brief History of a Genre Problem: Presbyterian Educational Resource Materials," in Coalter, Mulder, and Weeks, *The Pluralistic Vision*, pp. 180-204.

<sup>53</sup> Coalter, Mulder, and Weeks, *Re-Forming Tradition*, pp. 156-160. Ronald C. White, Jr., "Presbyterian Campus Ministries: Competing Loyalties and Changing Visions," in Coalter, Mulder, and Weeks, *The Pluralistic Vision*, pp. 126-147.

<sup>54</sup> Robert Bullock, "Twentieth-Century Presbyterian New Church Development: A Critical Period, 1940-1980," in Coalter, Mulder, and Weeks, *Diversity of Discipleship*, pp. 55-82. Jerrold Lee Brooks, "Reaching Out: A Study of Church Extension Activity in Mecklenburg Presbytery, North Carolina, 1920-1980," in Coalter, Mulder, and Weeks, *The Mainstream Protestant "Decline"*, pp. 177-197.

<sup>55</sup> Milton J Coalter, "Presbyterian Evangelism: A Case of Parallel Allegiances Diverging," in Coalter, Mulder, and Weeks, *Diversity of Discipleship*, pp. 33-54, especially p. 35.

As strong ecologies strengthened denominations, so weakening ecologies weakened them. The cumulative result of these developments was a decline in spiritual vitality that accompanied, if it did not cause, declining membership and cultural influence.

What can be done? According to Benton Johnson, denominational “attention must once again be paid to nurturing the spiritual needs of individuals, to providing moral guidance in their intimate relations, to promoting peacemaking and celebration of diversity within the church itself, and to devising new and distinctive forms of spiritual practice that can generate energies for Christian service.”<sup>56</sup> Other researchers concluded much the same thing.<sup>57</sup>

The ecology metaphor is particularly apt, inasmuch as the constituent elements in an ecological system (even apparently insignificant ones) depend on each other in complex, sometimes delicate, ways in order that both the system and its constituent elements can survive. In addition, the ecology metaphor itself provided a new way to talk about denominational particularities, distinguishing, for example, the Presbyterians (where education was central) from the Methodists (where the particular ecology included questions as diverse as connection and hymn singing).

I have, then, grouped several major findings of the research on mainstream Protestant denominations under three main themes: membership decline, cultural displacement, and denominational implications. Other groupings are equally plausible. But anyone familiar with this literature will acknowledge the prominence therein of these three themes.

## Contextual and Institutional Factors

Through each of these three themes, however, runs a common thread. Repeatedly, researchers distinguish between the contextual factors that have influenced the mainstream Protestant denominations but over which they have little control and those internal institutional factors that they are able to influence. A contextual factor, for example, is the fact that the birth rate of the main population group making up mainstream Protestantism (middle class persons of European descent) has been falling for years. There is little that religious leaders can do about that situation. On the other hand, many of the mainstream denominations reduced the priority of new church development and

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<sup>56</sup> Benton Johnson, “From Old to New Agenda: Presbyterians and Social Issues in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century” in Coalter, Mulder, and Weeks, *The Confessional Mosaic*, p. 235. See also Benton Johnson, “On Dropping the Subject: Presbyterians and Sabbath Observance in the Twentieth Century,” in Coalter, Mulder, and Weeks, *Presbyterian Predicament*, pp. 90-108, especially p. 107. See also Hoge, Johnson, and Luidens, *Vanishing Boundaries*, p. 178.

<sup>57</sup> See, for example, William B. Lawrence, “Introduction” in Lawrence, Campbell, Richey, *The People(s) Called Methodist*, pp. 8, 18-20; L. Gregory Jones, “What Makes ‘United Methodist Theology’ Methodist?”; and Hadaway and Roozen, *Rerouting the Protestant Mainstream*, pp. 112-114.

campus ministries during the 1960s and 1970s—institutional policies over which denominations have a great deal of control.<sup>58</sup>

Researchers thus pointed out that the external environment in which churches existed had an impact on their well being, but so also did their internal policies and institutional decisions. If this is an obvious point, it is also an important one. The research on mainstream Protestantism illuminated both the broad context and the internal institutional dynamics in significant ways. A full understanding of the situation, of course, requires both. For example, as a rule, newer churches with younger members in growing areas (like the burgeoning suburbs of the 1950s) were more likely to grow than established churches with older members in areas of little or no population growth. In that particular case, the contextual factors of church age, membership age, and suburban location were extraordinarily important.<sup>59</sup> That importance does not mean, however, that congregational growth is impossible outside of such a context, but it does mean that it might be more difficult.

Indeed a particularly important conclusion of the research was that the major changes in mainstream Protestantism were informed by the complex interplay between broad contextual factors and internal institutional dynamics. Historians and sociologists almost instinctively focus on contextual factors, of course, and it is perhaps not surprising that their research provided an incredibly rich account of the cultural and social context of mainstream Protestantism since mid-century. A possible danger, of course, is that some readers might assume that context is destiny and that denominations and congregations are simply the victims of fate. An equally dangerous assumption, beloved by some denominational critics, is that the perilous state of denominations resulted solely from bad bureaucratic decisions unrelated to external developments.

To their credit, however, the Lilly-funded researchers emphasized both factors. In particular, they emphasized that the situation facing mainstream Protestantism resulted from the complex interplay of contextual and internal institutional factors.

For example, in *Rerouting the Protestant Mainstream*, Hadaway and Roozen assume this interplay in their discussion of the factors influencing church growth.<sup>60</sup> They note that, while certain contextual factors are important “predisposing factors” for or against growth, congregational actions can make a difference even if they require a radical change in congregational ethos.<sup>61</sup> Indeed although evangelism programs were a major institutional

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<sup>58</sup> See, for example, *The Re-Forming Tradition* volume in the Presbyterian Presence series for a good summary of many of the findings for Presbyterians, including the confluence of such contextual factors as declining birthrates and such institutional factors as new church development (p. 87).

<sup>59</sup> See Roozen and Hadaway, *Understanding Church and Denominational Growth*, pp. 130-133 and *Rerouting the Protestant Mainstream*, pp. 59-61.

<sup>60</sup> Hadaway and Roozen, *Rerouting the Protestant Mainstream*, pp 55-72.

<sup>61</sup> Hadaway and Roozen, *Rerouting the Protestant Mainstream*, pp 58-72.

factor often correlated with church growth, the correlation was not always a simple one. Evangelism programs seemed to be most effective when they “fit” the broader congregational and denominational ethos. But evangelism programs launched in congregations uninterested in growth rarely succeed.<sup>62</sup>

Other research points to both the effectiveness and the limits of denominational new church development efforts. Robert Bullock notes that, for example, “new church development is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for overall membership growth. New church development cannot by itself compensate for existing churches that are no longer growing.”<sup>63</sup>

This distinction made in the literature between internal institutional factors and broader contextual ones is absolutely crucial to an understanding of the fortunes of mainstream Protestantism. Individual pastors, congregations, or denominations can do little or nothing to change the cultural context in which they work. Faced with this reality, they need to avoid the temptation of assuming that their context absolutely determines their fate and that they are powerless to respond. But, on the other hand, understanding that context is crucial in responding faithfully and creatively to it. Discerning and implementing the internal institutional strategies that can revitalize congregations and denominations in this cultural context is, of course, the task of creative and resourceful religious leaders.

This collusion of cultural context and internal institutional factors is terribly important and serves as something of a litmus test for observers or partisans of a particular religious tradition. “Neutral” observers tend to emphasize the powerful role of contextual factors in explaining a particular denomination. Partisans, on the other hand, are likely to downplay context in favor of an emphasis on internal institutional factors. This fact has important ramifications for denominational conflict. Critics of denominations can hardly blame denominational officials for demographic trends or major cultural turns like the 1960s. But they can (and do) criticize denominational officials for any manner of institutional factors—decisions about evangelism or women’s ordination, for example. Emphasizing a balance between contextual and institutional factors may please no one.

As I noted above, however, the key in the local situation is how pastors, denominational officials, and other religious leaders discern and negotiate the interplay between contextual and institutional factors. They will be aided in that discernment by this research on both contextual and institutional factors and, especially, on the interplay between them. For example, a 1979 assessment of the variable influence of contextual and institutional factors on church growth concluded that “contextual factors are slightly stronger” but went on to

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<sup>62</sup> Hadaway and Roozen, *Church and Denominational Growth*, pp. 133-13; Hadaway and Roozen, *Rerouting the Protestant Mainstream*, pp. 67-68. See Hadaway, “Is Evangelistic Activity Related to Church Growth?” in *Church and Denominational Growth*, pages 185-86, for a good, if brief, discussion of the interplay between local contextual factors for a congregation (age, location, etc) and such institutional factors as evangelism.

<sup>63</sup> Robert Bullock, “Twentieth-Century Presbyterian New Church Development”, p. 82.

note that both sets operate, independently and probably in interaction with each other, in shaping church trends. The issue is not really one set of factors versus the other, but rather the conditions under which one or the other predominates in influence, or how the two together explain trends neither can account for alone”.<sup>64</sup>

## **PRESCRIPTIONS, ASSESSMENT, AND QUESTIONS TO BE ANSWERED**

### **Prescriptions**

Although descriptions of the situation in the literature on mainstream Protestantism outnumbered prescriptions for remedying it, there was no shortage of the latter. A number of these prescriptions came in the form of books from pastors or denominational officials, several of which books were funded by the Louisville Institute, a Lilly Endowment program based at Louisville Presbyterian Seminary. Notable, for example, were: Richard Hamm’s *From Mainline to Frontline*, Gary Charles, *The Bold Alternative: Staying in Church in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, and R. Robert Cueni, *Dinosaur Heart Transplant*. Some of those books specifically addressed the conflictual situation in denominations and congregations, such as Jack Haberer, *GodViews: The Convictions that Drive Us and Divide Us* and Joseph Phelps, *More Light, Less Heat: How Dialogue Can Transform Christian Conflicts into Growth*. A more recent and somewhat different prescription advocating a “re-traditioning” mainstream Protestantism is Diana Butler Bass, *Strength for the Journey: A Pilgrimage of Faith in Community*.<sup>65</sup>

Other prescriptions came from some of the major research projects we have been considering, such as *Vital Signs* on the Presbyterian experience, *Questions for the Twenty-First Century Church* on the Methodist experience, and *Rerouting the Protestant Mainstream*. These books, along with others, argued for responses such as renewed attention to new church starts, a renewal of campus ministry efforts and other efforts to restore religious concern to church-related campuses, worship renewal, and so forth.

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<sup>64</sup> See Wade Clark Roof, Dean R. Hoge, John E. Dyble, and C. Kirk Hadaway, “Factors Producing Growth or Decline in United Presbyterian Congregations,” in Hoge and Roozen, *Understanding Church Growth and Decline*, pages 198-223; the quote appears on pages 222-223. See also Wayne L. Thompson, Jackson W. Carroll, and Dean R. Hoge, “Growth or Decline in Presbyterian Congregations” in Roozen and Hadaway, *Church and Denominational Growth*, pp. 188-207.

<sup>65</sup> Richard L. Hamm, *From Mainline to Frontline: An Invitation to Dialogue with the General Minister and President*; Gary W. Charles, *The Bold Alternative: Staying in Church in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (Louisville: Geneva Press, 2001); R. Robert Cueni, *Dinosaur Heart Transplant* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2000); Jack Haberer, *GodViews: The Convictions that Drive Us and Divide Us* (Louisville: Geneva Press, 2001); Joseph Phelps, *More Light, Less Heat: How Dialogue Can Transform Christian Conflicts into Growth* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998); Diana Butler Bass, *Strength for the Journey: A Pilgrimage of Faith in Community* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 2002).

Perhaps the most influential call for reform, however, came a few years after much of the literature on mainstream Protestantism appeared, namely Dorothy Bass' *Practicing Our Faith* and the publications and web sites that followed in its wake (produced by the Lilly-funded Valparaiso Project on the Education and Formation of People in Faith, not covered in this essay).<sup>66</sup> The turn to religious practices has provided a rich vocabulary for Christian usage (the very notion of "practice", for example, as well as attention to specific practices like Sabbath keeping and hospitality). But it has also spawned an abundance of practical experiments around the country that have had a broad impact on churches from coast to coast. To cite just one example, this "practices literature" has stimulated an influential new model of youth ministry.<sup>67</sup>

One implication of all these prescriptions for renewal is that religious vitality can occur at the congregational level, even when the denominational level seems resistant to it. These prescriptive works also suggest that the institutional response of congregations and denominations is not fully determined by the contextual situation, even though they are inevitably informed by it.

This, I think, is where the literature on mainstream Protestantism may be of special interest to pastors. For whatever else it may have told us, the literature was unanimous in asserting that religious institutional health requires spiritual vitality, characterized by attention to transcendence, vital worship, and healthy religious practices. If not a sufficient, they are at least a necessary, condition for Protestant renewal.

## An Assessment

The Lilly-funded literature on mainstream Protestantism establishes beyond a doubt that there is no return to the days of denominational domination of the American religious landscape. Historical and demographic developments have paved a "one-way street" to disestablishment. But if the literature acknowledges the declining significance of denominationalism, it underscores what can be done at other levels (especially the congregation) to revitalize Christian faith.<sup>68</sup> Even Nancy Ammerman's organizing religious

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<sup>66</sup> Dorothy C. Bass, ed., *Practicing Our Faith: A Way of Life for a Searching People* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1997). As of this writing, project publications include the following: Dorothy C. Bass and Don C. Richter, eds., *Way to Live: Christian Practices for Teens* (Nashville: Upper Room Books, 2002); Dorothy C. Bass, *Receiving the Day: Christian Practices for Opening the Gift of Time* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 2000); Stephanie Paulsell, *Honoring the Body: Meditations on a Christian Practice* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 2002); Christine D. Pohl, *Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition* (Grand Rapids: William B Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999); Thomas G. Long, *Testimony: Talking Ourselves into Being Christian* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 2004). See also their related web sites: <http://www.practicingourfaith.org> and <http://www.waytolive.org>.

<sup>67</sup> See, for example, Mark Yaconelli, "Youth Ministry: A Contemplative Approach," in *The Christian Century*, April 21-28, 1999, pp. 450-454.

<sup>68</sup> See Hadaway & Roozen, *Rerouting the Protestant Mainstream*, pp. 120-122 and Nancy T. Ammerman, "Connecting Mainline Protestant Churches with Public Life," in Robert Wuthnow, and John H. Evans, *The*

work project acknowledges a much-reduced role for denominations in a far more complex institutional ecology.<sup>69</sup> The task is not to restore denominations to their former 1950s glory (which was, after all, an aberrant moment in time) but to reconceive the denominational role within a new, complex set of historical and cultural conditions that we now understand (thanks to this literature) more thoroughly than ever before. Notwithstanding its limits, this enhanced understanding is a significant achievement.

As a historian, I naturally focus on the importance of time and historical change in the literature on mainstream Protestantism. On the one hand, the historian researchers have reminded us that mainstream Protestantism in the United States has developed over more than two centuries. That development process has not always been smooth, and its outcome has never been a foregone conclusion. It was not inevitable that mainstream Protestants should be so influential in the culture shortly after World War II, nor is it inevitable that they should labor in relative obscurity in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century. But it is not at all surprising that the denominations developed in response to the conditions of their own time. For example, it is unsurprising that in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, the denominations should have emulated the organizational patterns of successful business corporations. Moreover, if today denominations can count on less “brand loyalty” from their members, they share that circumstance with labor unions and political parties. Even the brand loyalties to commercial brands come and go (who remembers TWA, Studebaker, or Montgomery Ward?).

As they face the future, then, denominations can remind themselves on the basis of their own history that, although their response is not predetermined, they must respond to the cultural conditions of their own time, and they must do so without the broad, implicit cultural support of the 1950s. The dominance of personal autonomy in matters of religion, for example, is unlikely to wither away in our lifetime. But, as any number of observers have pointed out, that devotion to personal autonomy has been accompanied by a spiritual hunger. Although mainstream Protestants have not done particularly well in addressing that hunger, some of the “practices literature” has demonstrated that those denominations do have abundant resources in their histories and traditions to do so. (See above on their need to recover their ecologies of nurture.) Likewise, the time has apparently passed for large, centralized religious bureaucracies in favor of de-centralized networks of religious organizations. Denominations and congregations cannot restore their earlier context; they can, however, respond creatively to their new one.

Sometimes of course, there is continuity within change. The contemporary “culture war”, for example, has a certain timeless feel about it, even though the presenting issue in dispute has changed over time—from slavery, to biblical authority, to evolution, to prohibition, to women’s ordination, to race relations, to abortion, to questions of sexual orientation. In

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*Quiet Hand of God: Faith-Based Activism and the Public Role of Mainline Protestantism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), pp. 153-54.

<sup>69</sup> Nancy Ammerman, “New Life for Denominationalism”, in *The Christian Century*, March 15, 2000, pp. 302-307.

some form, conflict is likely to endure among American Christians. But denominations have survived these cultural battles for decades; they will likely endure them for many more.

Is this literature useful for pastors? Yes and no. Insofar as pastors work mainly at the local congregational level, and this literature focuses almost exclusively on other than the congregational level, its usefulness may be limited. But, insofar as the local congregation is always embedded in a larger social and cultural context and preaching the gospel always involves inculturation, understanding this broader cultural level is important too. On the one hand, the literature will confirm many things that good pastors already know. It will come as little surprise, for example, that religious affiliation and commitment are as much a matter of theology as demography. But it will also help them identify more clearly some of the social and cultural realities that shape the work of the pastor and the role of the church in this time. In this sense, it makes essential reading.

To an impressive extent, much of the necessary descriptive task has been completed on the original questions posed by the researchers. For example, we probably know as much about reasons for Protestant membership decline in the 1960s and denominational switching as we can or need to know. We even know a good bit about the theological/ecological reconstruction that needs to be undertaken, although we are not as far along on this task. Ultimately, of course, the actual reconstruction is the task of pastors and denominational leaders, not researchers. But scholars can still help. Robert Wuthnow suggests that the decline of denominationalism “represents a clearing of the decks so that other kinds of restructuring could emerge”, and scholars like Nancy Ammerman have risen to the challenge of describing some of that restructuring. Her work on denominational networks, for example, represents considerable progress in understanding the issue of the broader organizational ecology within which denominations do their work today and how denominations have begun to adapt to it.<sup>70</sup> Such work can be of genuine assistance to congregations and denominations around the country that are trying to respond in creative and faithful ways to the changing context that has been so carefully described in the literature.

## Questions Still to be Answered

Notwithstanding the impressive progress made so far, important issues remain that could benefit from additional attention by academic researchers. They include at least the following.

Just how can Christians best pass on the faith to their young? A great deal has been done on this topic. Much more remains to be done.

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<sup>70</sup> Wuthnow, *Restructuring American Religion*, p. 11. Nancy Ammerman, *Pillars of Faith: American Congregations and their Partners* (Berkeley: University of California Press, forthcoming in 2005).

How does a Christian congregation and how do Christian denominations retain religious integrity and particularity in a country and world that is increasingly religiously pluralistic? What is the special role, if any, for mainstream Protestantism in a religiously pluralistic American culture? Despite the fact that Christians maintain a huge numerical dominance in the culture, the presence of numerous other religious traditions, along with no religious tradition, represents a new challenge for American mainstream Christians, who can sense that mere tolerance may not be enough. Research and reflection on this issue has only just begun.

A related issue is the need for a great deal more comparative work on American religion in light of Christian experience in other countries. Historians like Mark Noll and others have emphasized the importance of the transatlantic context for American religious history, and Philip Jenkins has stressed the importance of the rapid Christian growth in the developing world.<sup>71</sup> But, once again, much remains to be done.

As Mulder and Wyatt suggest, researchers of mainstream Protestantism have paid relatively little attention to Pentecostalism, despite the fact, as Donald Miller, Harvey Cox, and others have pointed out, that it is the fastest growing and most dynamic movement afoot in contemporary Christianity, both here and abroad.<sup>72</sup> As some of the research considered here has shown, Pentecostalism does not necessarily follow the pattern of evangelicalism or fundamentalism. Moreover race and ethnicity complexify the situation in important ways. To date, the principal mainstream Protestant response to Pentecostalism has been avoidance. That will not be adequate in the years ahead.

The relationship between religion, gender, race, ethnicity, and class is an additional important, but controversial, area for continuing research. Much has, of course, been written on race and gender and, increasingly, on ethnicity. But research on religion and socioeconomic class, including the so-called “new class”, remains relatively slim by comparison.

Finally, although a great deal has already been written on the subject, researchers should continue to explore the relationship between religion and public life in the United States. This is, admittedly, an immensely complex subject, intertwined as it is with theology, “hot button” social issues, political allegiances, and so forth. Moreover, especially because of its political ramifications, it is likely to remain extremely controversial. But this is also an extremely important religious topic, especially for a tradition like mainstream Protestantism that has insisted on a vigorous engagement with the world as part of its religious mission. Researchers have certainly established that mainstream custodianship for the culture and

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<sup>71</sup> Mark A. Noll, *The Old Religion in a New World: The History of North American Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002); Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

<sup>72</sup> Mulder and Wyatt, “The Predicament of Pluralism,” p. 67.

public life has ended. But what relationship succeeds that abandoned pattern remains to be seen.

Researchers are surely right to identify the retrieval of spiritual practices as essential to congregational vitality. Right as well are those researchers who have identified the need for a revitalized ecology of nurture if denominations are to play a vital role. Assessing the specific ecological elements to be deployed is, of course, likely to be a complex and controversial process. But that the ecology needs sustained attention is surely beyond reasonable doubt.

## CONCLUSION

The mainstream Protestant denominations will not be saved by research. But they can be threatened by ignorance and inattention. Had the Lilly funded research considered in this essay not existed, it would have been necessary to launch those research efforts as soon as possible. The fact of the matter is that that body of research constitutes a particularly rich resource for mainstream Protestant leaders. Understanding and deploying that resource on behalf of the church is a worthy challenge for talented pastors and other religious leaders and an act of faithful stewardship.

What, then, does the future hold for mainstream Protestant denominations? As grim as the situation may appear to be, it is too early to predict their demise, partly because they are such complex, multifaceted entities. As Nancy Ammerman notes, denominations are at one and the same time theological entities, organizations, and cultures, all three of which currently are in flux. This theme of flux amidst continuity is probably inevitable. In the future, denominations surely will not be what they have been, but we do not yet know what they will be. They do, however, have real assets to carry into that future. Dennis Campbell, for example, cites the substantial resources of what he calls Methodism's "residual establishment," including, among others, congregations, colleges, theological schools, publishing interests, and pension funds. Likewise Craig Dykstra and James Hudnut-Beumler note that "the mainstream Protestant denominations are blessed with theological, communal, and organizational resources of immense power, which in a new day and probably in a new way will be shaped for the good of many."<sup>73</sup>

In an article in the *Journal of Presbyterian History*, Russell Richey, after surveying five stages in United States denominational history, wonders if "the present denominational crisis may well, like those in the past, be the process by which the denominations reconfigure themselves and so redefine the field or family (denominationalism)". Illustrating

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<sup>73</sup> Nancy T. Ammerman, "Denominations: Who and What Are We Studying," in Robert Bruce Mullin and Russell E. Richey, eds., *Reimagining Denominationalism: Interpretive Essays* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), pp. 111-133; Craig Dykstra and James Hudnut-Beumler, "The National Organizational Structures of Protestant Denominations", in Coalter, Mulder, and Weeks, *The Organizational Revolution*, p. 331; Dennis M. Campbell, "Does Methodism Have a Future in American Culture?" in Richey, Lawrence, and Campbell, *Questions for the Twenty-First Century Church*, p. 19.

both the concern about and the care for denominations characteristic of the researchers studied here, Richey concludes by suggesting that “denominations and denominationalism may, in some new configuration, prosper in the new post-Protestant pluralism of North American society.”<sup>74</sup> Should such a future lie ahead, it will, in no small measure, build on the scholarly work funded by Lilly Endowment and will represent still another chapter in the rich history of American denominationalism.

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<sup>74</sup> Russell Richey, “Denominationalism in Perspective, *Journal of Presbyterian History* 79 (Fall, 2001): 199-213; the specific quotations are from pages 201 and 211.

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