Circulation of the Saints (2)

A shift in the pews

In increasingly large numbers North American Christians now prefer nondenominational churches. The independent-megachurches Willow Creek in Chicago and Mars Hill Bible Church in Grandville, Michigan, and other similar churches are beneficiaries of this shift in thinking about denominations, which was impacted by the anti-establishment mood of the 1960s. But history attests that the idea of nondenominational Christianity is not entirely new. For example, in the late 1920s in Grand Rapids, Michigan, Martin DeHaan converted his Calvary Reformed Church (Reformed Church of America) to a Calvary nondenominational church and drew in more than 2,000 people every Sunday. But the changing trends in American culture in mid-20th century further eroded denominational loyalty. And today established denominations mean less to many churchgoers than ever before. Many began to ask: "Why stay loyal to one's denomination when there is a smorgasbord of church options available?"

Loss of Denominational Loyalty

Rev. Wesley Denyer of St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church, Brampton, Ont., argues that "denominational loyalty is a thing of the past." He says that people will try their own denominational flavour first, but they won't hang in there if the church is not meeting their spiritual and community needs. Furthermore, the loss of denominational loyalty, and the rapid numerical growth of the independent megachurches contribute to the dwindling influence of denominations." Another trend is the hiding of the "brand-name" by mega-churches which belong to a denomination. I find it disturbing that most denominational churches that are megachurch in size downplay their denominational identity. Why not be up front about one's identity? For instance, the Granger Community Church in northern Indiana - a Willow Creek look alike - is part of the United Methodist Church, but there's no way to tell that from its signs, advertisements, or Web site.

Denominational Loyalty

In his *Denominations Near Century's End* Martin E. Marty defines a denomination as "the most manifest form of the organized church." And he comments that "taken together, denominations remain vivid to any who own a phone book with Yellow Pages or who want to choose which clustering of congregations, which more-than-local part of the organized should serve as an instrument of expressing their faith." When I read the religion section of *The Grand Rapids Press* the other day I was struck by the bewildering variety of denominations listed in the church pages. I wonder what a non-Christian must think about all the church ads if he should want to attend a service? But Grand Rapids only reflects what is happening worldwide. The number of Christian denominational bodies in the world, which stood in the year 1900 at 1,880 distinct denominations, rapidly increased from year to year throughout the century. In 2000 the

total was 33,800 distinct and organizationally separate denominations.Today the growth rate is nearly one new denomination every day.
In Canada there are approximately 100 denominations. Some have come about as Canadian denominations separated from their American counterparts. Geographical differences mark out some denominations. Others have been formed due to theological or personal conflicts. To add to the complexity, immigrants perpetuated their Western European heritage by sharpening their distinctive identity with both a denominational and national image. That's why there are Norwegian Lutheran, German Evangelical, Swedish Methodist, and Welsh Presbyterian churches and so on. And with immigration from Asia there are now Chinese Alliance and Korean Presbyterian churches.

For many years Canadians were loyal to their denominations. In the first census, in 1871, almost all of them identified with a religious group. Membership and weekly attendance remained high through the 1950s. The Church made significant contributions to Canadians. In rural Canada, life revolved around the church and school. Members expressed their loyalty by willingly sending money to denominational headquarters where decisions would be made on how those dollars would be allocated. The "circulation of the saints" was virtually unknown. When one moved to a new community, a Presbyterian would look for a Presbyterian church and a Methodist would attend a Methodist church. The same was true for members of the Reformed family of churches. Denominational membership was a lifelong commitment. Few would leave their denomination without a very strong and compelling reason for doing so. But times changed.

Postdenominationalism

The late 20th century saw the beginning of postdenominationalism. Dr. Paul E. Pierson, former Presbyterian missionary in Brazil and Portugal, cites as example the mission boards on which he served which were multi- ethnic and multi-denominational, and worked with a variety of churches overseas. The British evangelical theologian Alister E. McGrath argues that denominationalism is a typical European phenomenon, which in the course of years has been exported worldwide. He notes that practice has taught that denominational structures are expensive and that they usually have their own agendas. He also claims that often individual congregations find denominational ties more of a hindrance than a help. McGrath doubts that a denomination as a form of living together as churches can be maintained in the 21th century.

Cultural changes adversely affected churches. The erosion of denominational loyalties, the decline in the power of kinship ties, and the growth of consumerism have made it relatively easy for many Christians to switch their allegiance from one denomination or independent church to another. An increasing proportion of newcomers to the community, discontented church members, and people on a self- identified spiritual pilgrimage frequently "shop" several congregations in their search for a new church home. Younger church members are likely to give more generously to worthy causes of their choice in which they can have a say. They are no longer as committed to denominational "ministry shares" as the older generation. In other words, congregations

now function in a far more competitive environment than was the pattern in the 1950s and 1960s.

Denominational Instability

Denominations have been plagued by instability as people drifted in and out. Often breaking from institutional sterility, doctrinal confusion, or creeping theological liberalism, conservatives urged a return to the fundamentals of their faith. During the 19th century the splitting of old denominations and the forming of new ones in the United States accelerated with such a rapid speed that it has become impossible to list all the churches which claim to be an "authentic" church. The Presbyterian theologian Charles Hodge (1797-1878) said that the "unblessed ambitions of restless individuals" had made schism a major problem in his day. The fragmentation created a real desire for unity among Christians. The early decades of the 20th century were marked by great ecumenical activity and interest. By the late 20th century denominational leaders continued to promote ecumenicity but the average member in the pew became less and less interested. They became more and more focussed on the ministry of their own local church.

The brokenness of the Church fuels a negative image. Never has so much been written about the unity of the church, but never has an age seen such disunity. The late Dr. Martin Lloyd-Jones spoke of the endless divisions that have taken place among "men who have held the same evangelical faith. They have divided over personality; they have divided on subtle, particular emphases." And he noted, "There is a multiplicity of denominations, and men do not hesitate to set themselves up and to start denominations – not in terms of vital truth but in terms of matters which are not even secondary, but of third-rate, fourth-rate, even perhaps twentieth or hundredth-rate of importance."

For instance, evangelicals have split over the question whether Christ will return before or after the Great Tribulation. The infighting among evangelicals has also blemished the body of Christ. In his *The American Hour. A Time of Reckoning and the Once and Future Role of Faith,* Os Guinness mentions that the 1980s was notable for the ferocious campaign of vilification of Christians against their fellow Christians. He claims that "ecclesiastical politics has always been more vicious than secular politics." For example, Guinness says that the Southern Baptists have good cause to know the wisdom of their own saying that in "ecclesiastical politics they choke you to death while they're praying for you."

In the midst of all this ecclesiastical confusion many have to come to believe that instead of emphasizing the differences among Christians, they should focus on what they have in common. Consequently, clear denominational affiliations have become increasingly blurred and unimportant to many believers at the grassroots level. What matters instead for them are spontaneity, intimacy, and sincerity and freedom rather than doctrine and orthodoxy. In the process there has been a movement away from the older denominational identifications toward blockbuster megachurches and also toward

home-based groups of every sort. In his book *The Very Large Church* Lyle E. Schaller comments, "The most impressive success story of contemporary ecumenism is the migrations of millions of adults out of Roman Catholic and denominationally affiliated Protestant congregations into new and rapidly growing nondenominational or independent churches."

(To be continued)

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