

New life for denominationalism: It's no longer taken for granted

by [Nancy Ammerman](#) in the [March 15, 2000](#) issue

On the cusp of the 21st century, a strange thing is happening. Congregations—not all, but a noticeable number—are choosing to highlight their denominational particularities. While for some this might not seem so strange, for much of the 20th century highlighting denominational differences has been considered by many to be somewhat suspect. Early in the century, H. Richard Niebuhr wrote, “Denominationalism thus represents the moral failure of Christianity. . . . Before the church can hope to overcome its fatal division it must learn to recognize and to acknowledge the secular character of its denominationalism.” Despite whatever good sectarian revivals may do at renewing the church, he condemned divisions based on denomination because the denominations were laden with ethnic, racial and class-based divisions.

Perhaps out of repentance, and perhaps out of ecumenical idealism, many 20th-century Protestants were moved to join Niebuhr in portraying denominationalism as an evil to be overcome. Ironically, at the same time that formidable denominational bureaucracies were being constructed, the theological, ritual and social practices that sustain a distinct religious tradition were being eroded.

That erosion was coming both from within and from without. Not only were theologians and preachers often apologetic about their tradition’s peculiarities, but larger cultural forces were making it difficult for those traditions to sustain themselves. Whether we point to “secularization” or “modernization” or merely mobility and rising levels of education, the cultural and social base on which the once-dominant denominations built their fiefdoms has all but disappeared—the lingering reality of racial division being the glaring exception. Isolated European ethnic enclaves and insulated enclaves of privilege, however, have seen their boundaries opened. And without those intact cultures, the assumption was that the denominational divisions would disappear as well.

The erosion of denominational culture was not, of course, always celebrated. Many express real regret at the world that has been lost. No one has described that old denominational world better than Garrison Keillor. Responding to last summer's concordat between Episcopal and Lutheran churches, he treated his radio audience to an extended ballad on Lutheran culture.

I was raised in Iowa, went to Concordia,
Swedish, I'm proud to say.
Got a job at Lutheran Brotherhood,
And I never was sick one day.

We sit in the pew where we always sit,
And we do not shout Amen.
And if anyone yells or waves their hands,
They're not invited back again.

We've got chow mein noodles on tuna hotdish
And Jello with cottage cheese,
And chocolate bars and banana cream pie,
No wonder we're on our knees.
This is the church where we sing Amen
At the end of every song.
The coffee pot is always on
Cause the meetings are three hours long.

I'm a Lutheran, a Lutheran, it is my belief,
I am a Lutheran guy.
We may have merged with another church
But I'm a Lutheran til I die.

Do Lake Wobegon Lutherans still exist? Or are they the nostalgic figment of a storyteller's imagination? Have denominational identities eroded beyond recognition? And if some congregations are choosing denominationalism, who and where are they?

To take a measure of just such questions, the Hartford Institute for Religion Research, with funding from the Lilly Endowment, sent a team of researchers into the field in 1997 and 1998. We conducted interviews in 549 congregations, did more

extensive observations and interviews (including a survey of congregants) in 35 of them, and took note of related research in eight denominations. Those national groups range from the Episcopal Church and the United Church of Christ to Assemblies of God and Vineyard churches. But our local interviewing encompassed the entire range of religious bodies found at the seven sites where we interviewed (Seattle, Albuquerque, Chicago, Nashville, Hartford, and clusters of rural counties in central Missouri and central Alabama). Included are 91 different denominational and other religious groups, including 51 congregations that are nondenominational or interdenominational and another 22 that are part of more informal networks.

We found that taken-for-granted denominational culture does still exist. It is strongest in precisely the sorts of places one might expect—rural locations more than urban; southern and midwestern regions more than in the rest of the country; and among Catholics and very sectarian groups (such as Jehovah’s Witnesses) more than in any sector of Protestantism. Among all the Protestant congregations in which we interviewed, 32 percent of those in the Northeast reported a strong denominational identity, while 70 percent of those in the South did. Eighty-four percent of the rural congregations were strongly denominational, while just under half (49 percent) of the urban ones were.

But more important than any of those contextual factors, a congregation’s sense of identification with a particular denominational tradition is closely tied to how many of its members grew up in the tradition. Relatedly, individuals who themselves have “switched” are less likely to say that denomination is important to them. Which is the chicken and which the egg is hard to say. But congregations full of “switchers” are much less likely to report that denomination is an important part of the way they “do church” (49 percent versus 69 percent of congregations with few switchers).

The phenomenon of “switching” is relevant to a lot of congregations. Indeed, nearly three-quarters of the white Protestant congregations we studied reported that half or more of their members grew up in another denomination. African-American Protestants are much less denominationally mobile. Only 11 percent of the ones in which we interviewed people had similar numbers of switchers in their pews. Similarly, almost all the Catholic parishes contain mostly people who grew up Catholic.

If most churches face the reality that half or more of their members did not grow up with the programs, heroes, liturgies and lore of the denomination, surely those

denominational cultures are increasingly fragile. Given all that, it is perhaps surprising that 55 percent of the Protestant congregations we studied—slightly more among conservatives, slightly less among liberals—report that they consider themselves strong standard-bearers of their denominational tradition. While there is plenty of evidence here to support a worry that mobility and modernism are producing “vanishing boundaries,” it is also clear that those boundaries have not vanished entirely. Not every congregation that is full of modern, urban, mobile parishioners has chosen to deemphasize denominational identity. Even among congregations in which denomination is not a matter to be taken for granted out of shared heritage, nearly half report that they consider themselves strongly in the denominational camp.

How do they manage it? As we carefully sorted through what people had to say in congregations where one would expect denominational boundaries to have blurred, some interesting patterns emerged.

Those who have lesser denominational attachments seemed resigned to their fate. They take declining distinctions as a given. At a small Hartford United Methodist Church we heard, “I think that’s true across the U.S. People are no longer loyal to a denomination so much.” And at a large Albuquerque Presbyterian church the refrain was similar. “Our younger generation is not nearly as loyal to the denomination as our older individuals.” Like this Albuquerque pastor, they often talked about how their older members still care about the denomination, but younger ones have no such loyalty. Few of them seem to welcome this state of affairs, but they do not seem to think they can do anything about it, either.

In striking contrast, those for whom denomination is a salient identity seemed to be working rather consciously to make it so. They do not expect to be just like every other church or to appeal to every person, and they do not expect that their tradition will survive without effort. Said an Episcopal rector in Albuquerque: “We consider ourselves traditional in a very intentional way. And we study and try to integrate the theology of the church—the traditional theology of the church. We study the Bible. We celebrate the Eucharist in a very traditional way. . . . So we really value our tradition, and we are not trying to be all things to all people. We are saying we’re going to present this wonderful rich tradition we have in a way that is open.”

Similarly, in a Seattle exurb, the pastor of a Lutheran (ELCA) church described the congregation this way: “There is an unabashedly Lutheran, really strong emphasis on the grace of God that permeates our preaching and teaching. We emphasize incarnational theology—that God becomes one with us—and word and sacrament—that God uses means.”

In many of these congregations, the effort is simply to make sure that the denominational ethos permeates worship and teaching. But in many others, the efforts are specifically didactic. As new members from other traditions join, they are intentionally taught the distinctive beliefs and traditions of their new fellowship. At a small, newly established Southern Baptist church in Nashville, the pastor told us: “Currently we are in a training program, a training session, of what we as Baptists believe. We have a number of new members who have not been Baptist all their lives, who are new Christians, who don’t know what they believe or why they believe it. . . . The series will last probably about six weeks.”

And in the growing suburbs of Nashville, where New South mobility is bringing lots of non-Methodists into an old traditional Methodist church, another pastor reported: “Every year I try to do, after I do the confirmation class for the kids, a series of four to five weeks on United Methodist beliefs. I offer it during Sunday school time. Anybody who wants to come can come. Last year I was amazed. It was packed. I mean there were entire Sunday school classes that just said we’re going to go to this.”

In other words, denominational identity is intentionally pursued in this group of churches. It is important to acknowledge that, like most congregations, they are very aware of the way in which they are free to shape their own particular lives around a wide variety of traditions and practices. Only among the most sectarian groups (such as Mormons and Jehovah’s Witnesses) do we find the absence of such functional local autonomy. But almost no mainline Protestant congregations exist in a denominationally insulated cocoon anymore. Worship practices and music can be borrowed from publishers, conferences, megachurches, and books of all sorts. Mission can be done in cooperation with any of hundreds of agencies specializing in everything from home building to prison ministry. And educational resources can be obtained from dozens of major publishers that may offer materials far slicker and less expensive than denominational lines.

What distinguishes congregations where denominational traditions are valued and sustained from those that resign themselves to their “generic” fate is the way they undertake three key practices of congregational life—worship, mission and education. In the face of multiple curricular choices, they opt for their own denomination’s educational materials. In the face of vast changes and blending of worship styles, they emphasize the distinctiveness of their own tradition. And even when working with many other partners, they highlight the good programs and mission work of their own denomination.

For a congregation full of switchers to choose its own denomination’s Christian education curriculum is a conscious statement about the importance of the views reflected therein. Where distinctive denominational beliefs were highlighted in our interviews, those congregations were much more likely to have opted for denominational curricula. And where switcher congregations are using denominational materials, they are much more likely to report a strong sense of connection to the tradition. As we have already heard, pastors in these congregations are intentional about teaching their newcomers what it means to be a part of the denomination. One Presbyterian pastor was especially eloquent in this regard:

For me it’s very important to talk about what it means to be Presbyterian from a theological perspective. . . . The reality is that there are some things about us that are unique theologically, and the first one is John Calvin’s doctrine of special providence and—horror of horrors—his doctrine of predestination. When we stop talking about what it means, about what predestination means, we’ve stopped understanding what it means to be Presbyterian. . . . [We need to talk about] the kind of theological energy, the kind of theological positivism that is part of the Presbyterian heritage. . . . All year long I intersperse sermons that are theologically based. I talk about theology. . . . When I do new-members stuff I talk about the things that are essential to all Christians and then to Reformed Christians and then to Presbyterians. These are the doctrines that are important to Presbyterians, why we’re Presbyterians. Something has got to hold us together more than the offering plate.

This church, where more than half the congregation grew up outside the Presbyterian tradition, uses denominational curriculum in its Sunday school. These

are not people for whom curricular choices are being made out of longstanding habit, out of never having experienced any other materials. It is hard to tell which comes first, but it is very clear that a decision not to use denominational curricula is strongly linked to lower levels of denominational identity and loyalty.

Denominational strength is not just about belief and curriculum, however. It is also about nurturing a distinctive pattern of worship. We already heard that in what the Albuquerque Episcopal rector said about his tradition. More than any other group, Episcopalians pointed to their worship traditions—not to beliefs—as the force binding them together. A Hartford rector said:

Let me just say that usually Episcopalians do not have theological or doctrinal disputes. That's because we're not a doctrinal church. [However], there's the Book of Common Prayer which is our worship book. . . . It is what we are bound to . . . everyone is praying the same thing. The idea of community is heightened by that, and individuality is dropped, which I think is a pretty good thing. People come to church—being connected to God and to each other is a good thing. . . . Good or bad, that's how we do it. If you go around and interview every other Episcopal church in the area, you'll find that book in the pew. There's a level of comfort in that. We like that.

Even Episcopal members we surveyed who did not grow up in the Episcopal Church said that the parish's denominational identity was important to them in choosing to join. This distinct liturgical tradition, precisely because it is distinct, is attracting new adherents.

In a very different way, the new movement known as the Vineyard is also creating a worship-dominated identity. Not a formal style, mind you, but just the opposite. Two Chicago Vineyard leaders put it this way:

Some of it is stylistic—like there are churches that are “tie all the way,” and it is pretty formal, whereas the Vineyard is pretty laid back. You have guys in jeans playing in the band. There's a flavor about the Vineyard. It's nonpretentious. No hype. . . . You know, we like that laid-back style. And the people that come and stick like that style and the worship.

A Vineyard joke has it that St. Peter will know the Vineyard pastors at the Pearly Gates because they will show up in jeans. But even more than the informal attire, the Vineyard is a major producer of “praise chorus” style music that permeates every occasion of worship with a distinctive feel. Some describe it as part of the Vineyard “DNA.”

Not everyone has such a worship tradition on which to draw, of course. Even where liturgy and theology do not seem to be providing any distinct denominational links, some congregations maintain their loyalty because their denomination helps them accomplish their mission. Whether it is a calling to evangelize the world or a calling to provide for the material needs of the world (or both), no single congregation can do it alone. When we asked congregations about what they get from their denominations, the most common response—from liberals no less than conservatives—was a sense of participation in a global mission. Far more often than they named any service the denomination provides to them, they talked about how their denominational mission and relief agencies do good work that they want to support.

Congregations that recognize the value of that work, emphasizing the denomination’s service in the world, are more likely to describe themselves as strongly shaped by the denominational tradition. Catholics often pointed to Catholic Relief Services, just as Methodists pointed to their relief agency. When the world needs help, we’re there, they said. The genius of the system kept a Seattle Southern Baptist pastor—otherwise distant from his Texas traditions—linked to the SBC. “We give money cooperatively through Baptist channels. It’s what is called the Cooperative Program. Supporting missionaries around the world and in various places in the country, you know, in a pooled-resource sort of thing.” A neighboring Church of God in Christ pastor said this about his denomination: “When you look at a broader level, national and international, it’s a very exciting organization, doing some very innovating and exciting things. So I try to get our people to go to any international or national thing. . . . I believe God is going to be doing something through this denomination that’s going to be spectacular in America.”

And noted the Methodist pastor who’s teaching her Nashville suburban newcomers how to be Methodist: “The bishops’ initiative two years ago was on ministry with the poor and marginalized. This congregation has embraced that wholeheartedly. . . . This year’s initiative fell right into that. It is an initiative on children and poverty, and that is where we ended up going with the ministry.”

Assemblies of God pastors, along with those in other evangelical denominations, pointed to the visits of missionaries as flesh-and-blood evidence of what the denomination does. In a world in which these same congregations have (on average) connections to nine outreach organizations other than those of their denomination, they still highlight and promote the work done in their name by national and international denominational bodies. Congregations with a strong sense of identity were no less externally connected than those that downplay their tradition, but they highlight the denominational threads running through their outreach to the world.

Across a wide range of traditions, congregations today find themselves dislodged from taken-for-granted routines. Their pews contain nearly as many who grew up outside the denomination as “cradle” members. People who have never even attended a church outside their own tradition are virtually unknown. The range of religious experience, religious resources and potential mission partners on which church leaders can draw is mind-boggling. And the vast majority of congregations assume that they can make many (if not all) the necessary choices about how they stitch those scraps into a unique local patchwork. For nearly half the Protestant churches in which we interviewed, the result was a quilt with few distinctly denominational motifs. Whether drawing on civic liberalism, popular evangelicalism or simply pragmatic and ad hoc collections of cultural and programmatic elements, their response is the pattern many pundits have come to expect.

But for the other half, an intentional retrieval and construction of tradition is replacing the Lake Wobegon Lutherans with New York and St. Paul Lutherans—their Lutheranism no longer taken for granted, but now chosen; no longer a matter of enclave and birth, but now a matter of faith and practice. These congregations see their theological heritage as a gift, intentionally teach newcomers about the faith, and celebrate their own unique worship traditions. They may, in fact, assert their own retrieval of the denominational tradition over the versions represented in national denominational offices. Still, most choose to use their own denomination’s educational curriculum, and many cherish the national and international denominational connections that enable them to do good work in the world. Not every congregation does all these things, but the more they engage in these intentionally denominational choices, the stronger their overall sense of rootedness in the tradition.

Remarked the Presbyterian pastor who wants to teach his members about Presbyterian theology:

It's not to say that because I am Presbyterian that I don't listen to other things, or don't think that there's value in all this other stuff. I have a really good friend who is Methodist, and he and I are just always amazed at how similar we are. But we're also different. That's good, for God's sake. Good.

Perhaps we need to reopen our dialogue with Niebuhr. These congregations in which distinct denominational identities are being chosen and nurtured do not seem to be the worse for it. Most are vital and growing, and few if any are isolated or hostile to the outside world. Rather than disappearing, their boundaries have been reconstructed in ways that seem to keep them open and connected to a larger world. Unlike the denominationalism Niebuhr feared, they are building distinctions based more on ritual and doctrine than on social divisions. In the midst of a bewildering and mobile world, they have found places to stand. Theirs is an experiment in blending tradition and openness that bears watching.