Chapter One
American Protestant Congregations and their Future

Protestant Christianity has had a prominent place in public life in the United States since the founding of the first colonies. Massachusetts was founded as a theocracy, dominated by the Puritans; Virginia functioned like England, with an Anglican state church; and in Pennsylvania, where a variety of Protestant Christian denominations were permitted to flourish, the Quakers dominated the government of the colony (Lambert, 2003). By the time of the writing of the Constitution and the Bill of Rights, separation of church and state had come into some fashion as a way to construct government, but the founders believed that Protestant Christianity was the best way to teach moral behavior, so the education system continued to draw heavily on Protestant values (Lambert; Ahlstrom, 1975; Noll, 2001). During the 1800s, this religious outlook strongly influenced daily life: the Bible was taught in public schools, presidents called for days of prayer and fasting during times of crisis, and both sides during the Civil War claimed their positions followed from Christian values (Ahlstrom; Marsden, 1991). During the twentieth century, immigrants brought other religions to the United States, pluralism and secularism gained strength in part because of urbanization, and the influence of Protestant Christianity began to wane to some extent (Marsden). At the end of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first, Protestants again began to find a voice and reclaimed some of the influence they had exercised throughout U.S. history, but in new forms (Noll, Carpenter, 1997; Kellstedt and Green, 2003; Hunter, 1987).

Protestant Christianity in the United States is distinct in several ways when compared with the rest of the world. The cultural influence of Protestant Christianity, coupled with U. S. government deregulation (Finke and Stark, 2005), has resulted in a society that participates in religious congregations at a significantly higher rate than in other industrialized countries, with the majority of those congregations and participants

being Protestant (Chaves, 2004). The deep divisions between conservative and liberal Protestants in the United States are also unusual when compared with the rest of the world (Freston, 2001; Williams, 1997). Wuthnow (1988) argues that in the decades since World War II, American religion has undergone a significant restructuring, so that now the greatest division – conservatives versus liberals – cuts across denominational groupings. Some scholars (such as Kniss, 1997) argue for other ways of describing the issues that divide Protestant Christians in the United States; others (such as Noll, 2001) note that Protestantism in the United States is complex and varied and that even labels such as "evangelical" obscure the diversity within conservative Christianity.

Despite these differences in describing the diversity in conservative and liberal strands within American Protestantism, most scholars agree that church attendance over the past few decades has shifted. Since the 1960s, mainline churches have declined in membership and attendance, while conservative churches are growing in numbers and influence (Noll; Finke and Stark; Ostling, 2000; Hoge, Johnson, & Luidens, 1994; Hunter, 1987). These shifts in church attendance patterns have precipitated an extensive literature about the future of the American church. A 1991 book, *The Once and Future Church* (Mead), spawned a series of books that address the future of the American church. Additional titles from other publishers reveal a growing concern among congregational leaders about the relevance of the church in changing times and the implications of the shift in church attendance patterns; such titles include *Future Church: Ministry in a Post-seeker Age* (Wilson, 2004), *The Present Future: Six Tough Questions for the Church* (McNeal, 2003), *Changing Church: How God is Leading His Church into the Future* (Wagner, 2004), and *The Postmodern Parish: New Ministry for a New Era* (Kitchens, 2003). These and other books, published by major religious presses, have been accompanied by numerous magazine articles and seminars for ministers focused on similar topics. They demonstrate the increasing interest in the future of the church on the part of religious leaders. This study grew out of that concern.

This study is also grounded in my own experience as an ordained minister in the Presbyterian Church (USA). I served two congregations in the Seattle area in pastoral roles. In one of those congregations, I oversaw all the congregational communications and spent many hours in conversation and contemplation of questions of congregational identity: Who are we as a congregation and how can we best represent that reality in our publications? How can we as a congregation best serve in this rapidly changing world? How can we position ourselves to be a church for the future? As a student and budding scholar in the field of communication studies, these questions intensified. This study brings together the growing interest on my part and on the part of other religious leaders in the future of the Christian church in the United States, the central role played by individual congregations in that future, and the ways congregations communicate who they are and what they do. This study focuses on three groups of churches chosen because they represent possible future directions for Protestant Christianity in the United States: megachurches, vibrant liberal/mainline churches, and emergent churches. These three groups do not by any means represent the diversity within American Protestant Christianity, much less the complexity of the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches, but they do capture some of the life and energy among Protestants today that seems to indicate trends for the future.

The Churches in this Study

I turn now to a discussion of the three kinds of churches chosen for this study. Megachurches are generally defined as churches with a sustained average worship attendance of more than 2,000, which equates to less than 1% of the nation's churches. According to one researcher, using data that is several years old, the nearly 300 megachurches that have been identified in the United States are home to almost 20 percent of total churchgoers (Chaves, 2004).[1] According to another group of scholars,

[1] Nothing magical happens when a congregation's membership passes 2,000. A congregation of 1900 members and another congregation of 2100 might be very similar in philosophy and priorities. However, the body of congregations identified as megachurches make a practical object of analysis. The vast majority of them are theologically conservative; only a handful of liberal/mainline churches reach a membership of 2,000. In addition, the large size and commensurately large budgets of these

the number of megachurches in the United States and Canada in 2005 was more than 1200 and increasing rapidly (Thumma, Travis, & Bird, 2005). Megachurches offer a dazzling array of programs to meet churchgoers' needs and wants (Hart, 2004; Wilson, 2000). They are usually evangelical in their theology,[2] affirming the authority and inspiration of the Bible[3] and the need for personal faith in Christ in order to be saved from sin (Henry, 1974).[4] Evangelical churches are considered to represent the conservative end of the theological spectrum of Protestant Christian churches, a distinction that originated in the early twentieth century when some other churches, which came to be called "liberal and modernist" became increasingly concerned with effecting social change rather than evangelism (Marsden, 1991).[5] Megachurches have recently attracted the attention of news media because of their remarkable growth over recent decades (Mahler, 2005), as well as the fact that their pastors are gaining a national voice, both in politics and in the culture at large. For example, some megachurch pastors seem to have played an active role in the politics of the 2004 presidential election (Sharlet, 2005). Another example is *The Purpose Driven Life*, one

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congregations result in complex and varied websites with abundant ways of presenting organizational identity and exercising persuasion.

[2] Thumma (2001) found that 92% of people who attend megachurches state the Bible is absolutely foundational as a source of authority. Thumma, Travis, & Bird (2005) asked megachurch leaders "What is the closest description of the theological identity of the majority of your church's participating adults?" and received these answers: Evangelical 56%, Charismatic 8%, Pentecostal 8%, Moderate 7%, Traditional 5%, Seeker 7%, Fundamentalist 2%, Other 7%.

[3] Marsden (1991) notes a range of views within evangelicalism about the exact nature of the "authority and inspiration" of the Bible. Opinions range from inerrancy, which asserts that the Bible is "absolutely errorless" (p. 37), to a view that insists on the authority of the Bible as a necessary guide to the life of faith, without viewing it as errorless.

[4] Noll (2001) cites four questions that have been used in research to identify "evangelical conviction": crucicentrism ("through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, God provided a way for the forgiveness of my sins"), biblicism ("the Bible is the inspired word of God" or "the Bible is God's word, and is to be taken literally, word for word"), conversionism ("I have committed my life to Christ and consider myself to be a converted Christian"), and activism ("it is important to encourage non-Christians to become Christians") (p. 31).

[5] This brief summary of evangelicalism does not attempt to do justice to many of the complexities of the movement. For example, significant twentieth century movements within evangelicalism include as dispensationalism, the holiness movement, Pentecostalism, and the African American evangelical experience. Marsden (1991) describes evangelicalism as a "kaleidoscope," with such diverse elements as Mennonite peace churches, black Pentecostals, Episcopal charismatics, Nazarenes and Southern Baptists. He notes, "It is a grouping for which no one party could presume to speak," and it has unity "only in the broadest sense" (p. 65).

of the best-selling books of all time, which was written by Rick Warren, the pastor of one of the most influential megachurches, Saddleback Community Church (Wilson, 2000; Yancey, 2005; the Church Report, 2005; Christianity Today, 2004).

A second group of churches that have received attention in recent years are vibrant liberal mainline churches. The term "liberal" refers to their historic alignment with progressive ideals promoting social justice (Marsden, 1991), and the term "mainline" refers to their identification with mainline denominations.[6] Research indicates that Protestant congregations which have grown and thrived in recent decades are largely conservative (Iannaccone, 1994; Tamney, Johnson, McElmurry, & Saunders, 2003; Olson, 2001, Finke and Stark, 2005), and only a small percentage of liberal/mainline Protestant churches have broken this pattern. According to Wellman (2002), these vibrant liberal churches have a demanding theological and moral vision that integrates thought and action, remains in dialogue with other religious perspectives, nurtures spiritual disciplines, and advocates an egalitarian moral perspective. Diana Butler Bass (2004, 2005, 2006), who directed a research study on what she calls vital mainline congregations,[7] writes that these congregations have found new vitality "through an intentional engagement with Christian tradition as embodied in faith practices such as discernment, hospitality, testimony, contemplation, and justice," and that these congregations are "not message-centered so much as mystery-centered communities" (2005, p. 14). In the light of growing political debate about the role of religion in public life, these congregations are noteworthy because of their advocacy for disenfranchised groups for whom the government has reduced funding in recent years and their insistence that care for the poor, not military might or free enterprise, is the first responsibility of a "Christian" nation. These churches are

[6] Mainline Protestantism is defined by the Pew Forum as "the left, center and liberal wings of the Episcopal Church, USA; the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America; the Presbyterian Church (USA); the Reformed Church in America, the United Church of Christ, and the United Methodist Church, and smaller denominations with similar beliefs." (www.religioustolerance.org, 2006) See also Hamilton and McKinney (2003).

[7] The three-year study that Bass directed is The Project on Congregations of Intentional Practice, funded by the Lilly Endowment, Inc., and located at Virginia Theological Seminary in Alexandria, VA, the largest seminary of the Episcopal Church in America. Bass studied mainline congregations that consider themselves to be moderate or liberal.

entering – or perhaps more accurately, re-entering – into the public sphere because of the emergence and growth of a progressive religious voice in politics (Wallis, 2005; Dart, 2006).

Emergent churches are evangelical in theology like megachurches, but usually much smaller. Emergent church leaders seek to minister in a culture that has experienced two major shifts in recent years, the shift from modernism to postmodernism and the shift from Christendom to post-Christendom (Gibbs and Bolger, 2005). Emergent churches are populated largely by younger Christians who reject the "big box" megachurches with their fast-paced programs and black-and-white answers (Carson, 2005) and who do not find meaning in many traditional worship styles which are linear, word based and abstract. Emergent church leaders suggest that they "may look back to what they are emerging *from* more than they look forward to what they are emerging *into*" (Gibbs and Bolger, p. 28, italics in original). Emergent churches have been described as image-based – that is, visual images play a significant part in their worship and congregational life – with an emphasis on the significance and centrality of Christian community. They consciously draw on ancient Christian tradition in the areas of spiritual disciplines and in their understanding of Christian community. In addition, they have a penchant for embracing mystery, beauty, ritual, high technology, environmentalism, and the arts. Common in worship are dramas and incense, as well as participatory elements such as prayer stations and communion tables. Emergent churches have gained recent media attention, both in the religious and secular press, because they represent a rapidly growing form of evangelicalism which, with their young demographic and conscious engagement with contemporary culture, may represent the future – or a future – of the church (Bader-Saye, 2004; Crouch, 2004; Norman, 2005; Asay, 2005; Orozco, 2005; Lindsay, 2003, Yancey, 2005). Seminary professor D. A. Carson writes that the "emerging" or "emergent church" movement, "though scarcely a dozen years old, exerts an astonishingly broad influence" (p. 9). This influence, Carson notes, can be seen a wealth of literature and the number of conferences focused on the emergent movement.

In summary, each of the three kinds of congregations holds a distinct place in Protestant Christian congregational life and each is connected to contemporary American culture in a different way. These three kinds of congregations are found all over the United States in urban, suburban and small town settings. They span the range of congregational size, with megachurches at the large end of the spectrum and emergent and mainline churches spread mostly across the small and mid-sized range. They also span the range of the theological spectrum historically found in Protestant churches, with megachurches and emergent churches on the more conservative side and the liberal mainline churches on the liberal side. In addition, these three kinds of congregations represent possible future directions for Protestant Christianity in the United States: megachurches because they have proliferated so rapidly in recent years and because a growing percentage of churchgoers attend megachurches, vibrant liberal churches because of the recent rise of progressive religious voices in politics, and emergent churches because of their young demographic and because they seek to express the Christian faith in forms appropriate for the post-Christendom, postmodern culture. A careful examination of these three kinds of churches gives insights into the patterns of congregational life that are relevant for discussion about the future of American Protestant Christianity.

A research approach grounded in communication scholarship is valuable for examining aspects of the philosophies and priorities of these churches. Since its beginning, the Christian church has embraced the significance of communication. The Gospel of John refers to Jesus as “the Word” (John 1:1); elsewhere in the New Testament God is said to have “spoken to us by a Son” (Hebrews 1:2); and the Apostle Paul, in his letters, refers seven times to his call to “proclaim the gospel” (e.g., Romans 1:15). Early Christians understood the narrative texts and letters of the New Testament to be one form of the proclamation of the gospel, while preaching was another (Wallace, 1974). As early as the fourth century, Augustine (1958) began to apply principles of classical rhetoric to the analysis of biblical texts and preaching, with the goal of encouraging Christians to use effective communication methods in their

proclamation, and indeed the late medieval period saw a flowering of the analysis and teaching of preaching using such principles (Murphy, 1974). Christians in the United States have frequently embraced the newest and most effective means of communication for the sake of proclaiming the gospel, from circuit-riding preachers in the seventeenth century to Christian book and pamphlet publishers in the eighteenth century (Ahlstrom, 1975; Finke and Iannaccone, 1993). More recently, twentieth-century American Christians established hundreds of magazines, publishing houses, radio stations and television programs (Carpenter, 1997; Finke and Stark, 2005; Noll, 2001; Smith, 1998). And today, use of the World Wide Web ("web" from here on) might be viewed as the latest step in the savvy communication practices of American Christians (Larsen, 2001; Larsen, 2004).

This dissertation focuses on the web practices of Protestant congregations to understand their role in contemporary Christian ministry and to try to discern patterns that will influence the future of Protestant Christianity in the United States. Websites are integrally connected to the future of the church because so many aspects of congregational life are now represented on websites, which are becoming a primary means of promotion for congregations as well as a place for connection for members and attenders. Many new forms of communication and engagement are possible through congregational websites: online donations and signups for events, discussion forums for the whole congregations or for subgroups within the congregation, audio and video presentations of sermons or entire worship services, and targeted recruitment for events and service opportunites. All of these new opportunities are shaping the church for the future and are worthy of study. The kinds of congregations studied here represent three possible future directions for the church. Many of the findings of this study provide information about trends and patterns of ministry in these kinds of congregations. These findings can inform discussions of strategy and philosophy for individual congregations and their leaders, as well as denominational leaders, as they seek to guide the Christian church into the future and as they seek to meet the needs of people living in a postmodern consumer culture.