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Deregulated Faith: The Decline of Mainline Protestantism and the Rise of Non-denominational Mega churches in the United States, 1970s–Present

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Abstract

Mainline Protestant Churches were very predominant in American public religion until the mid-20th century, when they lost half to three-quarters of their members' to nondenominational Churches since 1965, and nondenominational Churches, many of which are mega churches, grew at a much faster rate than Protestant Churches. There has been the debate of what caused it. Some say theological liberalization is to blame. Others point to secularization or demographic change, or to competition in the market. Researchers are still divided on the trend. The popular media interprets it differently. It sees the growth of mega churches as evidence of the victory of conservative religion. This paper briefly summarizes that discussion. It is a blend of ethnographic and quantitative research that are recent. The aim is to discuss the meaning of the reversal. There are three key findings. The divide was primarily between two opposing views on fertility, rather than theology. The vast majority of the losses on the mainline are due to disaffiliation, not evangelical churches. And transfers are the source of most mega church growth, not new converts, as members move from a declining mainline church. Discussion suggests that the question of organizational form is the determining factor, not doctrine; the doctrine of the autonomous congregation did not win, it was the efficient competitive unit that won. The paper not only concludes that the American Protestantism in the post-mainline era is a consolidation and not a realignment. It also that the mega church "acquired rather than seized" the field that was deserted by the mainline church, and that today's nondenominational churches face the same secularizing pressures that the mainline church faced.

Keyword: Mainline Protestantism, mega churches, nondenominational Christianity, secularization, religious disaffiliation, congregational studies.

Introduction

Will Herberg could speak in 1955 of America as a "country of Protestants, Catholics and Jews" and Protestantism was defined by the historic Protestant denominations that educated the nation's chaplains and that were represented at presidential inaugurations by their ministers. Today, the

biggest single Protestant population in the U.S. is found in no particular faith. As at today the numbers of Americans who identify themselves as nondenominational are difficult to estimate, but it is about approximately 21 million, or about the same size as the largest Protestant denomination, the Baptist church, and just one-fifth of the membership of the Catholic Church (Grammich, 2023).

This inversion is one of the most well documented ones in the sociology of religion. In the mid-1960s (1963 or 1965) the absolute numbers of mainline Protestant denominations reached their peak and have fallen almost annually since. Pew Research Center (2025) estimated that the mainline Protestants represented some 18% of adults in the U.S. in 2007, declining to some 15% in 2014 and 11% in 2023–2024. In the same time frame, “nondenominational” Americans went from being a negligible group to between one-tenth and one-seventh of adults (Burge, 2023). The Hartford Institute for Religion Research (Thumma & Bird, 2020) found that weekly attendance at Churches with 2,000 or more members – or so-called Mega Churches – was a handful at the time of their investigation in the early 1970s, increased to several hundred by the early 1990s, and reached about 1,750 by 2020.

Statement of the Problem

Conservatives are often interpreted as winning the battle of church growth in the mainline’s battles for declining attendance. And the result is often interpreted as a sign of the triumph of conservative Christianity over liberal Christianity in a “zero-sum” matchup in which the mainline is losing. This reading is not very compatible with the data. Evangelical growth has been stagnant or declining since about 2007. The Southern Baptist Convention at the same time has seen its membership decline annually since 2006, and most of those who exit the mainline Protestant denominations are no longer religiously affiliated, but are rather religiously unaffiliated (Burge, 2022; Chaves, 2017). When the Protestant movement is both shrinking in size and is itself decreasing in the overall population, there needs to be more to an explanation than a preference for Protestant doctrine.

Objective of the study

This paper aims at consolidating the state of the art of both trends, thereby making it possible to evaluate four competing explanatory frameworks, namely the theological strictness, the demographical, the religious-market competition and the secularization approach aimed at fostering organizational alternative. The thrust of its argument is that rather than having Americans abandon liberal theology for conservative theology, what has changed since 1970 is the switch from one organizational technology of religion to another. The denomination was replaced by the congregation as an autonomous firm, operating in a metropolitan marketplace and creative in designing what it offered as a niche. The decline of the mainline churches and the rise of the mega churches both are a result of denominational deregulation.

Definitions and sources, as well as methodological limits

The term “mainline Protestant” is used to mean the following denominations: United Methodist Church, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), Episcopal Church, United Church of Christ, Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), and American Baptist Churches USA. These are not doctrinal, but institutional: they have common ties with each other ecumenically in the National Council of Churches and in cultural health in the northern and coastal United States. The phrase "ecumenical Protestantism" is a more apt description than "mainline" or "liberal" of this attitude that Hollinger (2022) uses to characterize his own era.

In keeping with the tradition of the Hartford Institute, a "mega church" is one that meets at least 2,000 people or more each week, and is a Protestant church (Thumma & Travis, 2007). This is a rather arbitrary but analytically convenient dividing line between the congregation as a community and the congregation as a formal organization having departments, paid specialists and organized communications.

The category 'Nondenominational' is the one that is the least stable. It includes all those congregations which have no formal affiliation as well as those that are loosely networked, such as through Calvary Chapel, Acts 29, or the Association of Related Churches, and those who don't know — or report to be "just Christian" without knowing — the formal status of their

congregation. A large part of this group's rise was due to the loss of knowledge of their own denominations among those who attend worship, not to a decline in the number of people who attend a specific denomination, according to Burge (2023).

Explicit mention should be made of any data limitations. The reports of membership of denominations are self-collected, lag the reality by 2-3 years, and incommensurably counted: The Episcopal Church reports members who have been baptized, the United Methodist Church reports members who have made a profession of faith. There are high rates of congregational attendance in self-reports of attendance, with head-count validation studies suggesting actual attendance may be nearly half the amount of reported attendance (Voas, 2016). The count of mega churches is based on self-report from congregations and inconsistent interpretations of whether or not multisite campuses are considered to be one congregation or multiple congregations. In this paper figures should be taken as giving information about direction and order of magnitude, but not to the decimal.

Research design and method: The research design adopted for this study is the thematic literature review. It synthesizes three evidences. The first is denominational administrative data, such as annual yearbooks, statistical reports and the decennial Religion Census, all of which provide long series but with little comparability. The second is survey data from a sample of churches that is representative nationally, and for which we have both self-reported identity and comparability, such as the General Social Survey and Pew Research Center's (2025) Religious Landscape Study. The third is congregation-level research, especially Chaves' (2017) National Congregations Study and the surveys conducted by the Hartford Institute, in which congregations are studied directly, but not as often.

When these sources contradict each other, the paper gives preference to congregational data for questions related to organizational form and survey data for questions related to identity, because each instrument measures specific and different things. The result is considered strong where all three meet (as they do when people are interested in concentration, where the direction of

mainline decline is expressed, and where the youth disaffiliate). In the analysis below, claims based on one source are identified as such.

Theoretical Framework: Four Competing Accounts.

The Strictness Thesis

The single most influential explanation is that of Kelley (1972): *Why Conservative Churches Are Growing*. Religious groups are supposed to provide meaning, Kelley said, involves "expensive commitment" and groups that reduce their requirements are "doomed to disappear. Later, Flynn (2010) provided a rational-choice formalisation: Strict groups exclude free riders, and increase the cost of being a member of the group, thereby increasing the average contribution level and hence the quality of the collective good supplied.

Within denominations, however, higher-demand congregations kept their members better than less demanding congregations until the 1980s, and higher-demand denominations did not keep members as well as lower-demand ones. However, it has become very weak. Marwell (1996) argued that it is hard to measure strictness without also measuring growth, the growth that it is meant to explain. More harmful, the seeker-centred mega church is clearly not "gatekeeping" in Kelley's sense: it is casual, it is treated as a therapy session, it has a low doctrinal threshold and it is intentionally designed to make it easy for the seeker to join up (Sargeant, 2000). If strictness was the source of growth, there wouldn't be the most successful churches in the last 50 years in the form that they are in.

The Demographic Thesis

The strongest criticism of theological accounts came from Hout and his co-workers (2001). They showed that the major portion of the change in the relative size of each denominational group before the mid-1970s was due to differences in fertility between mainline and conservative Protestant women, and that these differences stemmed from differences in the use of contraception, education, and urbanization among the groups before the mid-20th century. Following 1975, differentials in fertility started to decline, and the mechanism of operation changed to differential retention of the young. This is a rephrasing of the problem in a positive way: During much of the

time, the mainline was not losing an argument, but a birth rate. It also accounts for the uniformity of decline across bodies with different polities and theologies since the education/class variable is more predictive of fertility levels than doctrine.

The Religious-Market Thesis

StudyCorgi. (2023) characterized American religion as a lightly regulated competitive economy, with denominations rising or falling in strength based on their entrepreneurial abilities. This is the perspective that the primary line was not as successful as a new comer to the market due to a lack of experience, professionalism and persuasiveness. When Warner (1993) spoke about the "new paradigm" he shifted the focus in the study of religion away from the assumption that modernity is the enemy of religion and brought agency and voluntarism to the fore in congregational studies.

The supply-side account sheds light on the mega church and the mainline but is only part of the picture. The core hypothesis of its predictive power on religious vitality has not held up well to scrutiny. The cross-national and cross-county correlations initially offered in its support were found to be sensitive to measurement choices and in some cases changed sign. Its more specific defect in this instance is that it has not stopped aggregate decline: It is the sector with the most successful entrepreneurial supply model that is now growing as a part of a declining market, and the most aggressively marketed congregations in the country live alongside the highest rates of disaffiliation in American history. The market framework is a better way to describe the way the participants are redistributed across the congregations than the volume of participation they can be redistributed (Ejara, March 6, 2022)

The Secularization Thesis

From the 1970s to the 1990s, the percentage of Americans indicating they have no religion was near 7%. In the last measurement, this figure has increased to 30 percent of Americans, from 14 percent in 2000 and 23 percent in 2014. Hout and Fischer (2002) suggested that much of this increase was due to political backlash as moderate and liberal Americans witnessed religious hardening into a partisan identity from the mobilization of the Religious Right and became

disaffiliated. This was expanded upon by Putnam and Campbell (2010) and the concept became an “aftershock” of the 1960s, the conservative response, and the liberal “counter-response.”

Extensions of the analysis are made in recent work. Bullivant's (2022) research on “nonverts” (religious upbringing with no current religious affiliation) found the American pattern as part of a wider Anglophone one. More, though, Smith (2025) contends that traditional religion has become not just unconvincing to younger Americans, but has lost any cultural currency that it once might have had as a result of its inability to capture the assumptions that once made it seem reasonable. In contrast, Davis and Graham (2023) concluded that people do not disaffiliate rapidly and for doctrinal reasons but rather for secondary ones: life-stage changes, disappointment with church, and relocation.

The impact of this has been particularly debilitating to the mainline. Its members were over-represented by the type of people who were most likely to leave and its moral commitments posed few doctrinal obstacles to its members leaving. In Hollinger's (2022) succinct summary, ecumenical Protestantism lost the church and became part of the culture with its pluralistic, civil rights, feminist, and critical scholarship. In a brief summary, Hollinger (2022) states that Protestantism became a part of the culture, and that the church was lost as Protestantism became ecumenical, and its commitments to pluralism, civil rights, feminism, and critical scholarship were ambient to educated American life.

Findings 1: The Contours of Mainline Decline.

The trajectory itself is also analytically salient in that there is a remarkable uniformity across the bodies with varying theologies, regional bases, and politics.

Established in 1968 with approximately 11 million members in the United States, the United Methodist Church has seen decline annually since then and currently has roughly 6.3 million members, although its ongoing disaffiliation crisis has caused it to drop to 8.3 million members in the recent past. From 2019 to 2023, approximately one-fourth (7,600) of U.S. congregations broke away from the UMC in response to the issue of sexuality, primarily forming the new Global Methodist Church, which would have approximately 5.4 million members. In the

mid 1960s, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and its predecessor denominations had approximately 4.25 million members, with less than 1.2 million members remaining today, and several hundred congregations moving to the ECO and Evangelical Presbyterian Church since 2011.

The Episcopal Church reached a high of almost 3.4 million baptized members and is estimated to have approximately 1.5 million members, averaging some 400,000 on Sundays. Evangelical Lutheran Church of America, which was created in 1988 with 5.3 million members, now has less than 3 million. It has been more than 2 million members of the United Church of Christ today than it was; it now has about 700,000 members, while the Disciples of Christ has shrunk from about 1.8 million to a few hundred thousand.

Three Aspects of this fall should be Highlighted.

Firstly, absolute decline began by the late 1950s as mainline growth rates began to converge, well before other publicized progressive changes (Roof & McKinney, 1987), such as women's ordination, sexuality debates, and so on. Any account of the culture wars of the 1990s and 2000s needs to account for a trend that extends 30 years back.

Secondly, it does not represent any “defection” to conservatives, but an overall lack of retention and replacement. The modal departing mainline Protestant is no longer Protestant (Bullivant, 2022; Burge, 2023), as evidenced by both panel and retrospective data. The changes in body from mainline to evangelical were genuine in the 1970s and 1980s but not significant enough to explain the numbers of defections.

Thirdly, a lack of membership did not necessarily correspond with a lack of physical plant or endowment, or even of the most prestigious positions, and the result was a remarkable institutional imbalance: denominations that were losing their members, the membership being old, the members being overburdened with real-estate and pension burdens, but the number of members being insufficient to cover the obligations. By the 2010s, significant portions of mainline congregational budgets were dedicated to carrying out services in 19th-century building, to which they were attached for double-digit attendance on Sundays. This discrepancy of assets and adherents limited the action of the mainline in reacting to competition. The endowments and the sale of properties

supported operations long after it was necessary to restructure, with the ironic result that adaptation was delayed. The inherited wealth of the mainline reduced its motivation to reform when deficits occurred, and it was precisely those signals that might have led to reform that were avoided.

The age structure exacerbates the difficulty and now determines the end result. The median age of the mainline Protestants is the oldest of the major religious groups in the U.S. today, meaning that even if recruitment were to cease a significant portion of the mainline Protestant membership will be lost due to mortality within the next 20 years. To reverse the decline in this environment would take not just a steadier retention rate but positive growth rates which have not been seen by the denominations in 60 years. There is an arithmetic difference between the mainline's condition and that of the mega church sector: Both are under the secularizing pressures, but only the latter has a demographic profile that makes recovery impossible.

These factors are worsened by a supply-side factor. The mainline requirements of ordination during the 20th century came together to produce a highly credentialed, costly clergy corps that was soon becoming obsolete by the 1990s (Ammerman, 2005). Nondenominational and network churches didn't have the same filter, so they could validate their leadership based on the growth of their congregation, and they would train the staff in house. A 7-year production line for pastors will never be able to plant congregations at the rate of a zero-year production line, at least if the same strategy is applied.

Findings II: The Rise of the Nondenominational Mega church begins on June 1, 2021.

The crowd would not be all that large. Auditorium churches for masses were the product of nineteenth-century revivalism; the multiprogram campus of the institutional-church movement preceded the Angelus Temple (1923). This Temple had an auditorium capacity exceeding 5,000 people, radio, and celebrity leadership. Not so much the presence of large churches was the problem after 1970, but the proliferation of large churches, their institutional independence and the development of a replicable "model" with clear methods and training pathways.

Four developments converged.

The Church Growth Movement that began with missiologist Donald McGavran and continued by C. Peter Wagner of Fuller Theological Seminary provided American pastors with a model of goals, measures, and demographic data that were derived from missions in other countries. In 1970, the market research, facility design and psychologically sensitive approach of preaching were taught to thousands of pastors at an institute Robert Schuller organized from a Garden Grove, California drive-in theater, including several who would go on to found mega churches. This new template became popular in the Jesus Movement and in the Calvary Chapel: Congregations organized around informal networks; casual dress; guitar-driven worship; expositional preaching (Miller, 1997). Lastly, the seeker-church movement came about as a result of Bill Hybels' door to door surveying of unchurched suburbanites.

This influenced Willow Creek Community Church's weekend services to focus on common concerns with church, while deepening the theology in midweek small group classes. In 1980, Warren was led to establish Saddleback Church based on similar analysis – formalized in *The Purpose Driven Church* (1995). The Willow Creek Association was formed in 1992 and eventually brought together thousands of congregations, of various denominations, through conferences and curricula that were formerly the monopoly of denominations (Sargeant, 2000).

The multisite model was introduced in the 2000s, with one pastor of the preaching team reaching various different campuses through video, and each having a local staff member to look after the children, Ministry Relations and hospitality. Twenty years later, from a few in 2000, there were more than a thousand multisite congregations. Churches such as Life Church and North Point Community Church, Church of the Highlands, and Lakewood Church all made it to the tens of thousands per week (Thumma & Bird, 2020). This was a way to separate the functions that were so tightly coupled as pastor and facility from what was now a separation of function into a brand and a preacher, functioning much like a franchise system. Supportive infrastructure grew out of church-planting networks and conference circuits, leadership podcasts, curriculum publishers, and

worship-music licensors: services that resemble churches but are not in any way under denominational control.

A Number of Elements of Structure Account for the Success of the Form

Metropolitan geography: The mega church is an invention of the automobile suburb and, subsequently, the exurb, and demands low cost land and lots, road access, and people who are willing to drive from a more convenient church to their preferred location. Postwar suburbanization and Sunbelt migration provided all three, while core urban strength was maintained in older northern cities and small towns (which were losing population) and the congregations were trapped into older urban locations which they would be unable to sell or duplicate.

Breakdown of ascribed Identity: Denominational affiliation was primarily inherited, up until the mid-20th century, and was related to ethnicity and class. The affiliation to a denomination, which used to be linked to ethnicity and class, was replaced by a liberal-conservative split (Wuthnow, 1988). Denominationally labelled churches have lost their signalling power, however, and the local church brand that is well programmed and has strong communicators is now a better signal than the national brand. Consistent with Roof (1993) who tells of baby boomers choosing which denomination to attend based on experience and quality.

Organizational Autonomy: Independent congregations can choose the worship style, hire non-ordained staff, and allocate resources as they please, without restrictions from pension obligations, apportionments or property trust clauses, and plant campuses without the approval of the denomination. The irony of these pretend anti-institutional churches was pointed out by Ammerman (2005) and Chaves (2017): the churches are the most bureaucratized of the American religious faith, only in this case, it's a local bureaucracy and not a denominational one.

Technology and Worship: A large auditorium could be made possible by the use of amplification, video projection, and stage lighting. Alongside the use of drums and projected text, late 1990s through today, a common repertoire of worship music emerged from outside of denominational hymnals created by contemporary music groups from Maranatha, Vineyard,

Hillsong, Passion, Bethel, and Elevation. A shared repertoire of contemporary worship music developed beyond denominational hymnals beginning in the late 1990s and continuing today, with the drum and projected text practice following the same trajectory (Chaves, 2017).

Scale Economics: A youth group of 3,000 will likely be able to afford a full-time youth pastor, professional musicians, a licensed counselor, and a graded children's program. Whereas a youth group of 90 will not likely be able to afford a part-time youth pastor. This amenity gap is correlated highly to family with children which are the ones most likely to lead to institutional survival and is exacerbated by each exit.

The Therapeutic Register: A preacher who is interested in bringing people into the Church, will preach about marriage, parenting, anxiety, debt, and vocation in the language of self-improvement. Bowler (2013) identified a similarly parallel and partially overlapping tradition in the prosperity gospel that was significant in large Black and Pentecostal congregations that combines therapeutic self-help with a focus on material blessing. This register is a radical reduction in entry costs and provides an excellent good (personal flourishing) for which there are many secular substitutes.

Discussion: Consolidation of the Resources instead of Realignment

One prerequisite to triumphalist interpretations of mega church growth is that mega church growth was occurring during the era of a shrinking American Protestant population.

The structural fact that drew the conclusion of Chaves (2017) study on the National Congregations Study is that American congregations are becoming more concentrated. The median congregation has 60-70 regular members, but the median individual attender belongs to a congregation that has several times as many members, and the largest 10% of congregations accounts for about half of the churchgoers. This concentration has been slowly rising since the 1990s. There have not been any smaller congregations left behind, only those that were emptied out, while the larger ones grew. Therefore, transfer growth is a significant part of much mega church growth.

Prior church involvement is strongly reported by mega church attendees, and researchers in the mega church world have consistently confirmed that there is growth in conversion, but it is

minority (Thumma & Bird, 2020; Thumma & Travis, 2007). The mega church is really better described as a streamliner than an evangelistic program, and can be seen as an engine that serves as an aggregator, squeezing out smaller producers with better amenities, more programs, and higher musical quality.

There are two additional complications to the picture. First, evangelical Protestantism has not increased since about 2007, and, the losses of the Southern Baptist Convention since 2006 are now nearing the losses of the mainline in rate. It's the growth of the non-denominational part, partly due to authentic growth of congregations and in part because of re-labelling; that is, denominational congregates have been stripped from signage, and respondents have forgotten about their denominations they never valued (Burge, 2022). Second, the racial make-up of the sector confounds suburban-White narratives. Large Black congregations embraced similar organizational models with different theological orientations, and multiracial congregations grew from just a handful of these churches in 1998 to about 16% of American congregations by 2019, primarily in large nondenominational congregations (Dougherty & Emerson, 2018). Emerson and Smith (2000) maintain that this is the real effect of institutional change and that these can often do so through the lens of white cultural norms.

The results are accompanied by a measurement issue which needs to be specifically stated. If a high level of self-reported attendance, as suggested by head-count validation, is not actually accurate, then the entire field has been smaller than survey data suggests and is shrinking for a longer period of time (Hadaway & Marler, 2005). The flip side of that is that the mega church count – based on congregational self-reporting and subject to obvious incentives to inflate the counts – may inflate the size of the mega church sector in a world of real mega church concentration. The direction of this literature is better known than the magnitude and specific totals should only be considered as estimates within wide ranges.

This merges also questions as to what religious involvement is now. The typical size of half of worshippers is in the largest 10%, and with half of worshippers attending face-to-face worship, this has increasingly become a medium with a small group as an add-on. Weak institutional

attachment, which may be bolstered by worship at the local level (as is found elsewhere in audience-scale worship), is more likely to lead to disaffiliation than doctrinal change. Davis and Graham (2023) have demonstrated this from their findings about most departures being gradual and nontheological.

The mainline haven't been passive. It has embraced modernity in terms of services, small-group programs, church-growth consulting, new-church-start projects, and even new-church experiments since the 1980s (Marti & Ganiel, 2014). These efforts weren't wrong, but were too little and too late to make up for the underlying age structure.

These are recent works from the series *Turbulence*, 2015 – present.

There have been four events that have challenged the mega church model. Some Americans now use evangelical for political instead of theological purposes. And the politicization of the term – as "evangelical" became one for political purposes after 2016 – made the retreat from controversy increasingly difficult for the seeker church to maintain, with survey findings indicating that politicization of the term is a growing issue (Burge, 2022; Perry & Whitehead, 2020). Governance failures: where independent congregations lack the capacities and structures to build in on their own, poor governance was exposed during the collapse of Mars Hill Church and Bill Hybels's resignation from Willow Creek Church in 2018 over allegations of misconduct.

And COVID-19 brought Median attendance at congregations plunged during the pandemic, while the larger congregations were able to manage the disruption with existing digital infrastructure and staff capacities. The Christian share of American adults seems to have plateaued in recent years at about 62% (as revealed in data from Pew (2023-2025) and PRRI (2024)). If it continues, it will not bring about a renewal of the mainline, but may signal a new balance of religious power – one which is smaller and more compact than the secular one that is European – rather than continued deterioration toward European-style secularization.

Implications for Theory

The four frameworks suggested here are not supplanted by the organizational reading, but are reshuffled. Demography sets the initial conditions, secularization provides the long-run trend,

and market dynamics provide the description of the reconfiguration of the pool of participants; organizational form describes the reconfiguration of the pool of producers captured by that reconfiguration. For this reason the strictness thesis is still thought to be important for the individual commitment, though not in the institutional case, since it is the most well-organized congregations that grew the most, and not the strictest ones.

There are two potential outcomes of these theories. It is not that secularization and religious-market theory are really at odds; it may be that they are simply dealing with different spheres: market dynamics are valid in determining the distribution of aggregate demand, while secularization is valid in determining aggregate demand. Second, it creates predictions that do not come true when dealing with a congregation as a firm, such as barriers to entry, economies of scale, and the cost of governance of autonomy as an external cost. A structural theory predicts that governance scandals will be more likely to occur if there is no outside oversight to a congregation, while a doctrine-centered theory does not.

Limitations

The conclusions are limited by three factors. The sources used here differ in the level of analysis (individuals in surveys, congregations in the National Congregations Study, members in denominational yearbooks) making it difficult to reconcile the different sets of data, and other analysts may include or exclude different factors in their interpretations. Second, the term "nondenominational" has a negative connotation and its apparent growth is always subject to "reclassification" as other denominational categories are added; no current data set is able to distinguish clearly between "growth" and "definitional drift." Third, the results in this post-pandemic redistribution patterns section are based on data that are recent and have not yet been confirmed with longer time series; thus, these results are not as conclusive as those discussed in the historical trends section.

Conclusion

The familiar line of argument - that liberal churches are losing members because they are liberal, conservative churches are gaining members because they are conservative – is only

superficially true. But evangelical membership has also fallen since about 2007, which means that growth can't be attributed solely to the strictness thesis that it is often used to promote. At the same time, the doctrinally lax seeker mega church is not exactly planted in harmony with the doctrinally rigorous strictness thesis to which it is often assigned. An organisational account is a better match with the evidence. The denomination was a product of a religious market with the structure of inheritance, geographical and ethnic. With the suburbanization of parish geography, the mobility of people loosened ethnic religious identity, and religious affiliation became more personal, so denominational coordination became a drain rather than an asset on efficiency and the autonomous congregation was more efficient. Geographically rooted, slow to change, old, and with unpaid institutional commitments, the big manna was mainline Protestantism the most vulnerable to this change. The mega church was just that which suited a deregulated, nondenominational market.

Adaptation to a market, however, is not the same as expansion of market. The evidence suggests consolidation: the Protestant population as a whole has declined and its weekly attendance has focused into smaller but bigger congregations while overall Protestant attendance has been on a long-term downward trend. The terrain abandoned by the mainline, and subsequently claimed by mega churches — and whether they will hold on to that ground, or will lose it as well, will be dependent on the same forces that have influenced the preceding five decades: fertility, young people's attachment, and the political hue of religious identification. Longitudinal panel data, systematic study of governance in autonomous congregations and improved measurement instruments that are able to identify "denominational relabeling" from "nondenominational growth" should be emphasized in future research.

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