UNDERSTANDING POLITY IN RELATIONSHIP TO THE DNA OF DENOMINATIONS

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Introduction

Polity deals with ways in which organizations structure their existence and engage in the exercise of leadership in relation to these structures. In this regard, polity is a subset of the larger reality of ecclesiology, which concerns both the existence and nature of the church. Much attention has been paid in recent years to rethinking ecclesiology in relationship to church life in the United States, but less attention has been paid to assessing the formal realities of church polity. While seemingly endless books continue to appear proposing how to address the organizational structures and leadership practices of the church, few of them interact seriously with formal church polity.

It is the premise of this 2006 edition of the *JRL* that it is profoundly important to bring a more critical reflection to the issue of church polity in thinking about and reframing the denominational structures of the church, especially their organizational patterns and leadership practices. The various articles in this edition of the journal are intended to offer a beginning for such critical reflection. This present article is intended to serve as a backdrop in providing a larger framework for understanding the emergence and development of the denominational church in the United States. It attempts to do so by identifying various aspects of what might be called the DNA of denominational church life. This larger framework is intended to provide perspective on thinking more clearly about polity in relation to the particular denominational churches discussed in the other articles.

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The Denominational Church

The denominational church is one of the primary expressions of the visible, institutional church in our context.[1] This type of church began to be formally organized during the late Colonial period, and by 1800 there were approximately thirty-six major denominations in the newly formed United States. Rapid expansion of this system took place during the nineteenth century so that by 1900 there were over two hundred such organizational expressions of the church. Although the rate of expansion slowed somewhat during the twentieth century, the number of denominations has continued to multiply.[2] Today we have a complex array of organizations that now constitutes denominationalism in the United States. The challenge for persons working in this context is to try and make sense of the diversity of denominational, organizational churches as expressions of the church of Jesus Christ. Key questions about this challenge include the following: Where did they come from? How do we explain their origins? What do they share in common? How are they unique?

All of these questions, however, give rise to yet a deeper question, How are we to understand historically and theologically the reality of these denominations, and the principle of denominationalism that under girds them, in relationship to the visible church of Jesus Christ that the Spirit of God has created and continues to create in the world? This is a question about ecclesiology—what is the church? It is also a question about polity—how should the church organize and structure its life? These are issues which this essay seeks to explore. In particular, we will attempt to discern something of the DNA[3] that

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[1] This essay takes the position that visible, institutional church consists of a variety of forms including congregations along with their judicatories and denominational structures, in addition to para-church organizations, and various other institutions and movements.

[2] Robert Wuthnow, *The Restructuring of American Religion* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press), 20-21.

[3] Significant advances have been made in recent years in the field of genetics, where the mapping of the genetic make-up of living forms has become

appears to be inherent to the denominational, organizational church[4], which has come to be the normative expression of the church in the United States. In identifying this DNA, there are some dimensions that appear to be more common to all denominations—what will be labeled as *foundational*. Other dimensions appear to be working within the overall genetic make-up that affect some but not all denominations—what will be labeled as a *strain*. Finally, this essay will identify the inherent make-up of a missional understanding of the church and suggest ways in which this understanding might be utilized to rethink and reframe the ecclesiology of the denominational, organizational church.

Perspectives on Denominations and Denominationalism

Denominations are part of the air we breathe regarding our experience with the church. Interestingly, these denominations tend to function so much as a part of our worldview in relation to the church that it is hard for most of us to conceive of the church in different terms. This represents, as much by default as by design, our basic understanding of what it means to be the church in the United States. But, as Martin Marty notes, denominations entered the ecclesiastical storyline fairly

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common. The field of genetic engineering has grown up alongside of these developments. Genetic engineering is defined as, "Genetic engineering, genetic modification (GM) and gene splicing are terms for the process of manipulating genes, usually outside the organism's normal reproductive process." This essay argues that the denominational, organizational church, as it came to expression in the United States has a unique genetic make-up, or DNA, and that there is both the need and opportunity to bring the DNA of a missional ecclesiology into play in reframing this type of church in more missional terms. Wikipedia, the Free Encyclopedia, accessed October, 12, 2006, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Genetic_engineering.

[4] The concept of the "denominational, organizational church" is used throughout this essay to depict a particular type of church that had its formative development within the colonial setting of what eventually became the United States. This essay argues that this is a unique type of church that needs to be understood in terms of its inherent and constructed characteristics.

late, coming into formal existence in the United States only in the late 1700s.[5]

It was in England, in the midst of the struggles to reform the Anglican Church during the 1600s, that the denominational conception of the church was first developed. The Dissenting Brethren at the Westminster Assembly in the 1630s-40s, many of whom became Independents, used the term to denote different organizational expressions of the church—to *denominate* these expressions. They were objecting, at that time, to the establishment of a national church on a Presbyterian model,[6] and they were guided by two major convictions: (a) to attempt to follow the primitive pattern and example of the Apostles; and (b) not to make present judgments and practices binding on the future.[7]

While affirming the principle of conscience, they also sought to find a way to practice unity in the midst of diverse expressions of the church. Inherent in their understanding was that the existence of multiple denominations was possible. This made the denominational church different in intent from a sectarian church, or sect, that viewed itself as the only true church. This also mediated against viewing every schism that resulted in a new denomination being seen, necessarily, as legitimate.[8] While the views of the Independents initially did not carry the day, a dramatic change in policy was adopted by the Parliament following the Glorious Revolution of 1688 with the passage of the Act of Toleration in 1689. This act provided for at least limited religious freedom for some denominations such as the Congregationalists, Baptists, and Quakers. Roman Catholics, however, continued to be excluded. These developments in England during the 1600s served as an

[5] Martin E. Marty, *Righteous Empire: The Protestant Experience in America* (New York, NY: The Dial Press, 1970), 67-68.
[6] Winthrop S. Hudson, "Denominationalism as a Basis for Ecumenicity: A Seventeenth Century Conception," in Russell E. Richey ed., *Denominationalism* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1977), 24.
[7] Ibid., 24-25.
[8] Ibid., 39.

important backdrop for promoting the principle of religious freedom among the diverse churches that came into existence in the newly formed colonies that were to eventually become the United States.

The more neutral understanding of the term "denomination," as conceived by its early proponents, was always commingled with theological and confessional understandings as different denominations sought to distinguish their identities. But inherent within their separate identities was an understanding that other denominations were also legitimate expressions of the church. The challenge of working out this understanding in a practical way became most evident in the American colonies in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Here the discussions of the *theory* of the denominational church that were taking place in England interacted with the *pragmatic necessity* to come to terms with the patterns of immigration and the diverse churches that were the result.

The storyline of the denominational, organizational church unfolds from the colonies to our day through several developmental phases that will be discussed in more detail below. At this point, it is interesting to note how various church leaders and scholars have assessed denominations and denominationalism. The following are illustrative of the diverse views regarding this phenomenon that have been expressed over the past several hundred years.

Denominations Viewed as Basically Being Neutral
John Wesley (1703-1791)[9]
I…refuse to be distinguished from other men by any but the common principles of Christianity. …I renounce and detest all other marks of distinction. But from real Christians, of whatever *denomination* (emphasis added), I earnestly desire not to be distinguished at all. …Does thou love and fear God? It is enough!

[9] As quoted in Sydney E. Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1972), 381.

Denominations Representing a Functional Catholicity
Gilbert Tennet (1703-1764)[10]
All societies who profess Christianity and retain the foundational principles thereof, notwithstanding their different denominations and diversity of sentiments in smaller things, are in reality but one church of Christ, but several branches (more or less pure in minor points) of one visible kingdom of the Messiah.

Denominations as a Result of the Voluntary Principle
Robert Baird (1798-1863)[11]
Baird devoted one of the eight sections of his book to explaining the voluntary principle … (and) concluded that the voluntary principle "has brought gospel influences to bear in every direction."

Denominations as the Ethical Failure of Christianity
H. Richard Niebuhr (1919-1962)[12]
Denominationalism in the Christian church is … a compromise, made far too lightly, between Christianity and the world…. It represents the accommodation of Christianity to the caste-system of human society…. The division of the churches closely follows the division of men (sic) into the castes of national, racial, and economics groups.

Denominations Rediscovering their Essential Unity
Martin Marty (1928-)[13]
The Protestant churches in the nineteenth century are usually pictured as having a centrifugal momentum. By their missionary activity, every move they made seemed

[10] As quoted John Corrigan and Winthrop S. Hudson, *Religion in America*, 7th ed., (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson – Prentice Hall, 2004), 104.
[11] As quoted Roger Finke and Rodney Stark, *The Churching of America 1776-2005: Winners and Losers in Our Religious Economy* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press), 2005, 6.
[12] H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Social Sources of Denominationalism* (New York, NY: New American Library, 1929), 6.
[13] Martin E. Marty, *Righteous Empire: The Protestant Experience in America,* (New York, NY: The Dial Press, 1970), 244.

to spin them out from a spiritual center through a competitive principle to divisions all over the world. In the twentieth century their momentum has been centripetal: they noted the limits of their competition and division … and began to draw back together in the ecumenical, or Christian unity, movement.

Denominations as a Market Economy of Christianity
Finke and Stark (2005)[14]

Some readers may shudder at the use of market terminology in discussions of religion, but we see nothing inappropriate in acknowledging that where religious affiliation is a matter of choice, religious organizations must compete for members … The fate of these (denominations) will depend upon (1) aspects of their organizational structures, (2) their sales representatives, (3) their product, and (4) their marketing techniques.

This diversity of interpretations illustrates the deep ambivalence that is a part of the heritage associated with denominational, organizational churches. We have them, and they are not going to go away, but how are we to understand them in relation to their being expressions of the church of Jesus Christ?

The Emergence of the Denominational, Organizational Church

In general, the conception of the denominational church developed against the backdrop of the established church. In particular, it emerged within the context of the established state church of England. In England in the 1530s, Henry VIII followed the pattern of the other northern European countries by carrying out a magisterial reformation and establishing the Anglican expression of the Protestant church. Each country in northern Europe by the late 1500s, in addition to England, had adopted one expression of the Protestant church as its national church, whether Lutheran (i.e.

[14] Finke and Stark, 8-9.

Germany and the Scandinavian countries), Reformed (i.e. the Netherlands), or Presbyterian (i.e. Scotland). Inherent within these multiple established national churches was the key underlying principle of denominationalism—*diverse expressions of the church being accepted as legitimate*. Each of these diverse national churches, however, still exercised ecclesiastical dominion over a particular geographic area. In doing so, they were not required to develop a theological understanding of how to live alongside one another. This also allowed them to be quite aggressive in persecuting what they viewed as sectarian groups, such as the Anabaptists and Mennonites on the continent, and the Puritans, Independents, Baptists, and Quakers in England.

The understanding of the established church is quite different from that of the denominational church. In the *established church*, the church's self-understanding is that it serves as the primary location of God's presence on earth through which God can be encountered. The active work of God in the world is centered, in general, in the church as the gathered community and, in particular, in the ministry of the word and sacraments. In contrast, the denominational church, as it came to expression in the colonies, has a self understanding that is more functional, or instrumental, in nature. It understands itself as being in existence to accomplish a purpose on behalf of God in the world. It is "unlike any previous 'church' in Christendom, it has no official connection with a civil power whatsoever" and therefore finds its organizational logic around an inherent "purposive" intent.[15] This follows the logic of organizational sociology that all organizations inherently seek to accomplish some goal.[16] The denominational church represents an organizational self-understanding around a purposive intent. The

[15] Sidney E. Mead, "Denominationalism: The Shape of Protestantism in America," in Richey, 71.
[16] Mary Jo Hatch, *Organizational Theory: Modern, Symbolic, and Postmodern Perspectives* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1997), 119-122.

contrast between these two understandings is illustrated in the table below.

ESTABLISHED CHURCH	DENOMINATIONAL CHURCH
Self-understanding: Exists as the primary location of God's presence on earth through which the world can encounter God, with this authority being legitimated by the civil government.	Self-Understanding: Exists as an organization with a purposive intent to accomplish something on behalf of God in the world, with this role being legitimated on a voluntary basis.

The established church came into existence in the fourth century when Christianity was made the official religion of the Roman Empire. The situation that resulted has become known as Constantinian Christendom. This form continues to this day within many Catholic and Orthodox countries, as well as within a variety of Protestant national churches.[17] While these churches all have an organizational make-up, the key to their legitimacy within their self-understanding is that their presence represents the primary horizon of God's activity in the world,[18] with their presence being legitimated by civil authority.

[17] Clearly there are different understandings regarding the rationale for the established church among Roman Catholics, Orthodox, Lutherans, and Calvinists, but common to all is the core understanding that the established church represents the primary location of God's activity in that particular location, since the boundaries of the church's domain are the same as the boundaries of the world that it possesses. For the specifics regarding the differences among established church views Ernst Troeltsch, *The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches, Volume II*, provides a helpful treatment. (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1912, reprint 1992).

[18] An example of this perspective is found in the Westminster Confession of Faith (1646) in Chapter XXV, *Of the Church* where one reads in section II, "The visible church…is the kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ…" This announcement of Jesus concerning the kingdom (see footnote references in the confession to this section) made the visible church and God's kingdom on earth the same entity.

The problems associated with this understanding became painfully evident in the wars of religion that raged throughout Europe from the late 1500s into the early 1600s. The eventual solution accepted at the Peace of Westphalia in 1648, *whose realm, whose religion,* ended these hostilities but left unresolved the core self understanding of the established church.[19] This is reflected in the continued efforts by most established churches in persecuting other expressions of the church—what they labeled as *sects*.[20]

It is important that the discussion about the denominational church include at least two different organizational expressions. On the one hand, there are specific congregations that follow the logic of the denominational, organizational church. They are organized on a voluntary basis around a purposive intent. On the other hand, there are associations of such congregations along with their judicatories and national structures that have come to be known as "denominations." Independent congregations organized on a voluntary basis around a purposive intent are, in essence, expressions of the same inherent logic that is found in the denominational, organizational church. This has profound implications for the church in the United States where numerous *independent* congregations continue to be formed, since many define themselves as being "non-denominational." While they may not be a denomination in technical terms, they are, in fact, denominational in functional terms relative to their inherent organizational logic.

It is now clear that the denominational, organizational church has undergone several phases of development over the past two-hundred plus years, but the core genetic code of an organizational self-understanding

[19] The Peace of Augsburg in 1555 established this principle, but it was not until the end of the 30 years of religious wars and the Peace of Westphalia in 1648 that this principle became the accepted practice. See Eric W. Gritsch, *A History of Lutheranism* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2002), 109-113.
[20] Troeltsch, 461-494, 671-673, 691-694.

around a purposive intent remains at the center of its existence. This tends to place the emphasis more on matters of polity, how the church is organized and administered, than it does on ecclesiology—how the church's nature or essence is understood.

The European national churches had confessions, which addressed the ecclesiology of the church, but these had been formulated from the perspective of a church exercising domain over its territory. The polities associated with this understanding of ecclesiology relied on magistrates for support. This did not fit the new reality facing the emerging denominations in the American colonies where various churches occupied the same space geographically. The ecclesiologies and polities undergirding these churches, of necessity, came into question. But the emerging denominations, mostly out of pragmatic concerns for creating viable organizations, tended to focus more on redefining the church around polity in relation to its purpose than in rigorously re-examining the assumptions of the ecclesiology that stood behind it.

This crucial distinction leads us to the important conversation that is now emerging regarding a missional understanding of the church. This understanding works primarily from the perspective of ecclesiology and understands the church's identity, its nature or essence, in relation to the Triune God and the mission of God in the world. Issues related to this conversation are taken up in the final section of this essay.

DNA of Denominations and Denominationalism

Purposive–*Developing a functional ecclesiology primarily around a purposive intent* (foundational).

Organizational–*Developing an organizational self-understanding to support the purposive intent* (foundational).

Formation of the Denominational, Organizational Church in the U.S.

Interestingly, immigrants from both the European state churches and many of the persecuted sects began to settle after 1600 within the colonies of what eventually became the United States. Here they found that a different core identity was required to give legitimacy to the church. As noted above, this alternative conception came into existence as an *organizational self-understanding around a purposive intent*, what this essay is referring to as the *denominational church*. By the mid-to-late 1700s, the denominational view of the church in the colonies, soon to become states, became the normative understanding of the diverse associations of congregations that had formed. It is helpful to trace this development in a bit more detail in order to more fully unpack the DNA of denominations and denominationalism.

The Colonial Experience 1600s-1780s

The formation of the American colonies was the result of diverse interests. Some were economic, some were political, and some were social, but embedded in the colonial experience there were also deeply religious motives. Many of the more radical sectarian groups in Europe immigrated to the colonies to secure their religious freedom, especially the Puritans, Baptists, Quakers, and Mennonites. Some of these groups, such as the Puritans in the New England colonies, attempted to set up their own version of what might be identified as a type of state church, what some have inappropriately labeled as a theocracy.[21] But dissenting groups within these colonies soon challenged this approach in the name of religious freedom, such as the Baptists in Rhode Island. The seeds of religious diversity in all the colonies had been planted by the mid-1600s and began to take deep root by the early 1700s.[22]

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[21] Ahlstrom, 146-150.

[22] Corrigan and Hudson, 47-48.

Religious Diversity

The religious diversity in the colonies included immigrants that represented the established churches of Europe, such as Lutheran, Dutch Reformed, Scottish Presbyterian, and Anglican. They soon found themselves living alongside other Christian faith traditions that had also emigrated from Europe such as the Quakers and Mennonites, and new groups that emerged from within the colonies such as the Baptists. During this period, some colonies chose establishment—Anglicans in the South (New York, Maryland, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Georgia) and Congregationalists in the North (Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Vermont, and Connecticut). However, in the middle colonies (Rhode Island, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and Delaware), it was not possible for any one group to be dominant.

In the middle colonies the tradition of religious freedom quickly gained currency.[23] Even in those colonies that established either the Anglican Church or the Congregational Church, the presence of denominational diversity soon came to expression based on the call for religious freedom.[24] While the Roman Catholic Church at that time functioned as an established church that expected to have domain, political realities in the colonies soon necessitated that the Catholic Church also had to function alongside other churches largely as another denominational expression of the church.

The de facto acceptance of religious diversity became common in all of the colonies by the early 1700s, even in those that had established a particular church. This shared experience of religious diversity throughout the colonies required a new imagination for conceiving the church and how to organize congregations. The old formula of a state church with an establishment identity that allowed it the privilege of persecuting other Christian

[23] Hudson, 62-63; and Ahlstrom, 200-213.
[24] Hudson, 51-52; and Ahlstrom, 184-199.

sects was obsolete almost from the beginning, although some vestiges of it lingered into the late 1700s.[25]

The Two Strains of Reformation and Restoration

It is important to note the two diverse strains that make up those organizations that became fully developed denominations.[26] One group represented denominations resulting from the immigrants coming from the established state churches of the magisterial Protestant Reformation of Europe—churches from the *left*. These churches from the left worked out of the premise of *ecclesia semper reformada*, the church is always reforming—Reformation. In the new context of the colonies and emerging states, they had to re-contextualize their European understandings of ecclesiology, polity, and liturgy to fit the new setting. For example, the Anglicans, who became Episcopalians in 1785, found they had to forgo the practice of parish boundaries that was familiar in England.[27]

In contrast to these denominations that represented churches on the left, there were other groups—churches from the *right*. They sought to create something new within the emerging nation and took their starting point from one of the principles stressed by the Dissenting Brethren (Independents). This was the practice of going back to biblical foundations to restore the church to its original intent—Restoration. The denominations that represent this restoration impulse stand in contrast to those that represent the reforming impulse and represent what might be called "made in America denominations."

There are numerous such *made in America* denominations, some of which came into existence during the colonial period such as some strains of Baptists, and others which came into existence during the revivals associated with the Second Great Awakening in

[25] Ahlstrom, 151-165.
[26] Mead, "Denominationalism: The Shape of Protestantism in America," in Richey, 73-75.
[27] Ibid., 76.

the early decades of the nineteenth century, such as the Disciples of Christ and the Churches of Christ. Scores of other newly forming denominations followed this pattern throughout the nineteenth century. A variation of this pattern came to expression with the Methodists who melded the role of Bishops from Reformation influence through Anglicanism with congregational polity from Restoration influence and the emphasis on democracy in the American context.

Free-Church Ecclesiology

The formation of this new identity, what is here being identified as the *denominational church with an organizational self-understanding around a purposive identity*, drew on a number of historical developments in relation to clarifying its ecclesiology and polity. One such development was using free-church ecclesiology as the norm for understanding the emerging denominations within the colonies. Free-church ecclesiology had emerged during the Protestant Reformation among the Anabaptists over against the established conception of the European national churches. The Anabaptists conceived of the church primarily in terms of being a gathered social community of believers who possessed the freedom to associate and the right to govern their own affairs.[28]

More influential, however, for the development of free-church ecclesiology in the colonies was the work of English Baptists who formulated their foundational principles in the Savoy Declaration in 1658.[29] An earlier representative figure of this tradition, John Smyth (1554-1612) had developed a free-church view of the church first in England, and later in exile in the Netherlands. He emphasized the importance of obedience and a biblical form of church organization as also being essential for the church in addition to the word, sacraments and the

[28] See, for example, the Dordrecht Confession (1632) that was adopted by the Mennonites, especially *Article VII* of THE CHURCH OF CHRIST.
[29] Ahlstrom, 94.

gathered assembly of God's people.[30] As noted earlier, even though many churches in the colonies brought with them the ecclesiologies and polities of their European state churches, the new context of religious diversity required adjustments almost from the beginning.[31] The primary adjustment made by all toward the end of the 1700s with the formal separation of church and state, was the adoption of free-church ecclesiology. They adopted this either as their formal ecclesiology, or at least as an overlay on their previous established, state-church ecclesiology.

Church as Voluntary Organization

A parallel development that fed into the conception of the denominational church during the colonial experience was the understanding that religious freedom required that the church be established on a voluntary basis. While immigrants into the colonies carried many patterns of European society, new social constructions were also required. The recently arrived European immigrants, in attempting to construct a new social order, turned to the use of voluntary societies for much of this work.[32] John Locke conceptualized the notion of the voluntary character of the church in 1689 in his *A Letter Concerning Toleration*.[33]

> A Church I take to be a voluntary society of men joining themselves of their own accord in order to the public worshipping of God in such manner as they judge acceptable to Him,... I say it is a free

[30] Miroslav Volf, *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1998), 23-24, 131-134.

[31] A helpful discussion of the shift to the gathered church as a voluntary organization in the midst of the breakdown of the parish system is provided by Hudson, 52.

[32] Hudson, 52, 162-165.

[33] Locke, an English exile in Holland, wrote this letter to his Dutch friend Philip von Limborch in 1685, and in it he called to end the oppression of people who held unorthodox religious beliefs. The letter was published without Locke's permission after he returned to England following the "Glorious Revolution" of 1688.

> and voluntary society. Nobody is born a member of the church;… since the joining together of several members into this church-society … is absolutely free and spontaneous, it necessarily follows that the right of making its laws can belong to none but the society itself; or at least to those whom the society by common consent has authorized thereunto.

Locke used the notion of social contract to conceive of the church similar to what he had done in regard to developing the social order of civil society. This view was ratified within the English experience that same year with the formal adoption of the Act of Toleration. The freedom to develop the church on a voluntary basis first became legitimized in England, but came to its more prominent expression in the emerging colonies that would become the United States. It required only a small step to marry a voluntary society understanding of the church with a free-church ecclesiology. As a result, the emerging voluntary associations of congregations in the 1600-1700s gradually became formal denominations by the late 1700s. The pattern of understanding church life in the United States as being voluntary in nature came to be the normative expression of church life.

Divine Destiny or Civic Responsibility

Most of the immigrants into the colonies in the 1600s brought with them the expectation of being able to exercise religious freedom. But many of them, especially those representing churches on the right, also brought a keen sense that it was God's *providence* that was providing them with an opportunity to do so in this new land. This was especially the case for the Puritans in New England, although the Quakers in the colony of Pennsylvania held similar views. The voice of Puritan John Winthrop is illustrative of this viewpoint:

> God had 'sifted a whole nation' in order to plant his 'choice grain' in the American wilderness, but his purpose was more far-ranging … Their role, John Winthrop had reminded them, was to be 'a

> city set on a hill' to demonstrate before 'the eyes of the world' what the result would be when a whole people was brought into open covenant with God. As part of God's program of instruction, they were to provide the nations with a working model of godly society and by contagion of their example were to be God's instruments in effecting the release from bondage of all mankind. [34]

This perspective represented a rather high view of God's unique blessing on what became know as the American experiment. It also introduced a strain into the DNA of Christianity in the United States that is still very much alive.

Not all of the newly emerging churches, however, held to this view. This tended to be more the case among the churches on the left such as the Anglicans, Presbyterians and Lutherans. But many from these emerging denominations did develop what might be called a strong sense of *civic responsibility* especially during the mid-1700s as tensions with England began to grow and calls for independence began to increase. The call for patriotic loyalty in supporting the revolutionary cause was nurtured by many of these churches just as it was among churches from the right. The end result, whether because of a view of divine destiny or of civic responsibility, was that churches took on the responsibility to support public policies particularly when matters of national security were at stake. This co-mingling of God and country from these different perspectives became important strains within the DNA of denominationalism, strains that are still very much alive today. Especially in times of war, political leaders among the churches have actively mined both of these strains.

The outlines of the denominational church were beginning to come clearly into focus by the mid-1700s. The call for independence and the Revolutionary War

[34] As quoted in Winthrop S. Hudson, *Religion in America: An Historical Account of the Development of American Religious Life* (New York, NY: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1965), 20.

furthered its formation. With the formal separation of church and state, this pattern became institutionalized. In the first amendment of the Bill of Rights as proposed in 1789, a provision was made for the legal separation of church and state. No church would be established. Every church would be protected to practice religious freedom. The organizing principle of denominationalism was affirmed with this decision, which gave impetus to the further development of the denominational, organizational church. Within the last two decades of the 1700s, representatives of numerous church bodies in the newly formed United States met to form national organizations, i.e. the Methodists in 1784, Episcopalians in 1785, and Presbyterians in 1789.[35]

The newly emerging denominations had to adapt themselves to the dynamic context of the colonies as movements toward becoming the United States began to unfold. In the midst of the constitutional decision to separate church and state, the churches on the left had to give up the practice built into their European shaped polities that relied on the magistrate to privilege the church within civil society. The churches on the right had to create new forms that would give the church shape within the democratic social order that was emerging. All of the emerging denominations, whether from the left or the right, had to re-contextualize or contextualize themselves within the dynamic setting of the newly formed United States.

DNA of Denominations and Denominationalism

Religious Diversity – *Acceptance of religious diversity as a norm for church life* (foundational).

Confessional Reforming or Biblical Restoring – *Relying on either confessional reformation or biblical restoration to help the church adapt to a new context* (strains).

Free Church Ecclesiology – *Developing a free-church ecclesiology within the practice of democratic ideals* (foundational).

[35] Hudson, 138-146.

Voluntary – *Engaging in the formation of churches on a voluntary basis* (foundational).

Divine Destiny or Civic Responsibility –*The co-mingling of God and country in the support of national policies or purposes* (strains).

Further Development of Denominations and Denominationalism

Since the formation of denominations reflected the contextual realities of the colonial setting, it is no surprise that this expression of the church has been fairly dynamic over the past two hundred years. There are at least four phases of further development of the denominational, organizational church that can be observed during this period.[36]

The Denominational, Organizational Church 1790-1870

The denominational, organizational church was a unique creation within the American setting that was largely the pragmatic result of a variety of circumstances and events, which were usually rationalized biblically and theologically after the fact, if at all.[37] As noted early, church historian Martin Marty views them as a turning point in the history of the church, one that departed from the previous fourteen hundred years of the church's self-understanding.[38]

As the newly emerging denominations began to form, they had to adopt polities to guide their organizational development. Immigrants from the churches on the left brought with them confessional understandings of the church as well as organizational polities that had been shaped by the assumptions of Constantinian Christendom and the established church. These polities

[36] These four phases are introduced as a framework for understanding denominations by Russell E. Richey's article "Denominations and Denominationalism: An American Morphology," in Robert Bruce Mullin and Russell E. Richey, *Reimagining Denominationalism: Interpretive Essays* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1994), 77-90.

[37] Richey, *Denominationalism*, 19-21.

[38] Marty, *Righteous Empire,* 67-68.

assumed institutional domain and focused primarily on ordering the internal life of the denomination around a series of representative assemblies at the local, regional, and national assemblies. For the most part, the churches from the left adapted this organizational pattern into their new polities, in many cases by simply adopting with minor adjustments the European national church polity.[39] The churches on the right tended to follow this pattern of developing a series of ascending assemblies at the local, regional and national levels, although they tended to give much less authority to the regional judicatories and national assemblies. Most followed a more congregational approach to polity.

Developments during the colonial period challenged some of the underlying assumptions embedded in the assembly-structured polities, especially the notion that if you were born into the parish you were baptized into the church. There were no structures in place for reaching persons outside of the church. The new situation of religious diversity, and the challenge of reaching vast numbers of un-churched persons, especially on the frontier beyond the Allegany Mountains, led the newly emerging denominations to rely on the formation of special societies to engage in what came to be known as *home missions*.[40] This work on the frontier was paralleled by the formation of other societies to engage in what became know as *foreign missions*.[41] There were earlier precedents for forming these societies, such as the Anglican mission organizations of the Society for the Propagation of Christian Knowledge (SPCK, founded 1698) and the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel (SPG, founded 1701).[42] But more important was the work of William Carey, who in 1792 conceived of the

[39] We find, for example, the Presbyterians adapting and adopting the Book of Order developed by the Westminster divines in the 1640s, and the Reformed Church in America adopting the polity of Dordt developed in 1619.
[40] Hudson, 103-104; and Ahlstrom, 382-383.
[41] Hudson, 159-168.
[42] Elwyn A. Smith, "The Forming of a Modern American Denomination," Richey, 111.

independent *mission society* as a preferred structure for engaging in missionary work.[43] The formation of such mission societies in the early 1800s in the United States represented a remarkable organizational development in the life of the church that paralleled in many ways the development of denominations.

By the early 1800s, de Tocqueville would identity this characteristic as one of more unique features of the emerging American society.[44] The rich fabric of voluntary associations within the colonies included many that were secular in origin, but also many others that were religious. While there were hundreds of such religious societies that were formed locally or regionally, seven of them managed to gain national prominence by the early 1820s: American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (1810), American Bible Society (1816), American Education Society (1816), American Colonization Society (1816), American Sunday School Union (1824), American Home Missionary Society (1826), and American Temperance Society (1826).[45] These structures, while reflecting the democratic principles being nurtured in the colonies, were also the natural extension of the logic of the voluntary basis of the church in relation to a free-church ecclesiology.

The formation of mission societies deeply impacted the genetic code of the denominational church that was emerging with its organizational self-understanding around a purposive intent.[46] While many focused on evangelizing and reaching the un-churched, others were formed to promote specific moral agendas, such as the

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[43] William Carey proposed the formation of a mission society as the way to fund the work of missionaries. William Carey, *An Enquiry into the Obligation to Use Means for the Conversion of the Heathens* (London, England: Hodder and Stoughton, 1892), 82-83.

[44] As quoted by Ahlstrom, 386, from Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (1835).

[45] Fred J. Hood, "Evolution of the Denomination Among the Reformed of the Middle and Southern States 1780-1840," in Richey, 145.

[46] William W. Sweet, *The Story of Religion in America* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, (1930) reprint 1975), 155-171.

temperance and anti-slavery movements. These moral crusades sought to transform personal views as well as shape public policy. The involvement of churches in such moral crusades was a common theme throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and continues to this day. There is an expectation among most denominations in the Unites States that they are responsible to help shape public behavior, and they often seek to utilize the democratic political process to achieve this end.

Being developed alongside of the inter-denominational societies in the early 1800s were structures internal to the denominations that came to expression as committees and boards. They were established to function under the authority of the regional and national assemblies and became responsible to help manage the growing mission work taking place both at home and abroad. Representative of this trend were the Presbyterians who formed a standing committee on missions in 1802 and then a Board of Missions in 1816. Initially, these structures sought to coordinate and integrate their efforts with the inter-denominational mission societies.[47]

The challenges associated with bringing the gospel and the church to the frontier also led to the adoption of some different approaches to ministry. One of the more significant of these was the development of the *revival* or *camp meeting* with its emphasis on nurturing personal piety. This approach to ministry became prominent especially during the Second Great Awakening. These events served as much as social gatherings as they did religious events, as people in isolated settings took opportunities to gather in order to experience community. The revivals soon took on a life of their own, however, and became a regular part of denominational life, especially among the Baptists, Methodists, and the newly formed Disciples and Churches of Christ. The use of revivals to foster personal piety and to stimulate growth is a pattern that continues to this day in some denominations. The development of

[47] Ibid., 147.

the revival also led to the adoption of a variety of *new methods* to reach people with the gospel, which included such innovations as the anxious bench, itinerate preachers, and Sunday Schools.[48]

The use of these new methods of ministry also contributed to the development of another key stain in the DNA of denominationalism—new denominations started on the margins. The acceptance of religious diversity and the separation of church and state created greater freedom for new denominations to be readily started. Populations segments that were not accepted by existing denominations and newly arriving immigrant groups often took opportunity to form their own denominations, a pattern that continues to the present time. Interestingly, it was some of the upstart denominations during the nineteenth century (Baptists and Methodists) who outpaced the Congregationalists and Presbyterians in growth so that by the 1860s representatives of these upstart denominations (Baptists and Methodists) had become the largest.[49]

It is very important to note in the unfolding storyline of the denominational, organizational church in the U.S. that one other type emerged during this period—new denominations that were started from below. This involved the enslaved Black population. Some from this population were included within existing White congregations as marginalized participants. But significant numbers of Black slaves also developed their own forms of church in the midst of their bondage. These forms were often patterned on White precedents, especially those of the Baptist and Methodists. Prior to the Civil War, these groups functioned as an "invisible church," but they quickly took on institutional expression following the Civil War.[50] The importance of the Black church, which emerged from below, should not be

[48] See Marty, 68; Hudson, 150-157; and Ahlstrom, 429-454.
[49] Finke and Stark, 55-116.
[50] E. Franklin Frazier, *The Negro Church in America* (New York, NY: Schocken, 1974), 14, 35-51.

underestimated in terms of how it contributed to forming identity and providing a voice for the Black population, an identity and voice that came to full expression during the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s.

It was not long before tensions began to surface within some denominations over the use of the new measures on the frontier. Conflict was especially evident among the Presbyterians, and led eventually to a split between the Old School and New School Presbyterians in 1837.[51] This split caused the Old School leaders to distance themselves from the inter-denominational mission societies in order to form their own denominational boards and agencies that could be controlled by their national assembly. Other denominations soon replicated this pattern such that it became the norm by the late 1830s.

The expanding work in managing missions and other support services had led to significant changes. What had earlier been committees or boards that were made up of active pastors and lay leaders became formal, denominational agencies at the national level that had permanent staff.[52] The purpose of such agencies was to plan for and coordinate the expanding ministries of domestic and foreign missions, along with emerging ministries such as Christian education and publishing houses. With these changes, the basic structure of the modern denomination was now in place—a series of representative assemblies that governed the work of denomination-specific boards that in turn supervised agencies with professional staff.

The biggest question left unresolved in their formation was the relationship between the formal denominational boards and agencies to the previously formed assembly structures of the new national denominations. The initial logic of the denominational church vested its organizational self-understanding

[51] Elwyn A. Smith, "The Forming of a Modern American Denomination," in Richey, 108-136, provides a helpful perspective on this conflict.
[52] See Smith in Richey, 108-136.

around a purposive intent in its representative assemblies at the national, regional, and local levels. Now a new organizational dimension was placed into the mix, the denominational agency with its representative board. Which would lead? Which was to be subordinate? It soon became clear that the assembly structures would maintain primary control.

By the mid-to-late 1800s, the modern organizational, denominational church had become the norm for church life in the United States. Congregations of a particular denomination usually differentiated their existence from others primarily in terms of confessional distinctions, with these distinctions being related to the different polities of the Congregational, Presbyterian, and Episcopal forms of church government. But underneath these confessional and polity differences lay the elements of a common genetic code as identified above. Being added to the DNA of denominations during this period were the following traits:

DNA of Denominations and Denominationalism

Representative of Assembly Structures at the Local, Regional, and National Levels – D*enominations developed a representative assembly governance system (foundational).*

Moral Crusades – *The mobilization of churches to transform public behavior and shape public polity, often by using the political process* (strain).

Revivalism and Piety – *The inner life of denominations being continuously energized through the use of revivals and the call to a life of piety* (strain).

Mission Societies – *Denominations partnering with specialized mission societies to carry out particular ministries (strain).*

Boards and Agencies for Mission and Service – *Specialized ministries being organized around denomination-specific boards and agencies* (foundational).

Upstart Denominations from the Margins – *Marginalized groups forming new denominations that provided identity, and often access to the broader society given time (strain).*

New Denominations from Below – *Enslaved population of Blacks forming new denominations from below that provided both identity and voice in the midst of social, economic, and political restrictions (strain).*

The Churchly Denomination 1870-1920

Coming out of the Civil War, most denominations began to develop more elaborate infrastructure as the frontier rapidly filled in, and as cities began to grow. By the latter part of the 1800s, another phase in the development of the denominational, organizational church became discernable. Refined methodologies for developing new congregations were developed, especially in the West with standardized plans for constructing church buildings, and existing congregations adapting previous approaches to ministry to new conditions, as illustrated in the development of urban revivalism.[53]

Most churches began to take on a more comprehensive programmatic approach to their ministries during this time. The pattern that was followed often found a denomination either copying or co-opting one of the ministries of an inter-denominational society and then bringing that activity in house under the management of its own board and agency. In education this was especially evident in the mainstreaming of the Sunday School movement within denominational programming. As this ministry was brought in house by almost all denominations during the mid-to-late 1800s, standardized curriculums for the expanding Sunday School systems were put into place by denominational publishing houses.[54] Similarly, denominational youth ministries began to come into existence by the late 1800s, often patterned after the para-church ministry of Christian Endeavor.[55]

A comprehensive approach to ministry began to take shape in most denominations during this period. By the

[53] Hudson, 246-254.
[54] Hudson, 246-254; and Ahlstrom, 741-742.
[55] Ahlstrom, 858.

turn of the century new urban congregations were engaged in fully implementing this ministry approach. One began to see congregations develop comprehensive programmatic activities such as: the building of extensive educational buildings that accommodated classes for instruction broken down by age and gender; the formation of robed choirs; the building of recreational facilities for family activities; and the establishment of church libraries. In effect, a comprehensive total church program was being put into place that would deal with members from cradle to grave.[56]

Another development that occurred during this period was the fracturing of various denominations along liberal and conservative lines in what became known as the modernist-fundamentalism controversy. The result, more often than not, was the formation of new denominations by groups of conservatives who separated from their parent denominations.[57] A variety of factors contributed to the theological debates that stood behind this fracturing, including the following: the teaching of evolution, the introduction of higher criticism in biblical studies, the emergence of the social gospel, and rising levels of education among both pastors and parishioners within many denominations. This new dividing line between denominations added to the growing complexity of denominationalism for the churches in the United States as they took up the challenges of a new century.

DNA of Denominations and Denominationalism

Programmatic – *Denomination-specific programs were developed by the national church and delivered to the congregations for their ministry* (foundational).

Comprehensive – *The denominational programs put into place sought to address the whole of life of the members, from cradle to grave* (foundational).

[56] Mullins and Richey, 82-84.

[57] Ahlstrom, 805-824.

Liberal and Conservative Denominations –
Denominations began to identify themselves in terms of their theological stance (strains).

The Corporate Denomination 1920-1970

While the suggested date that divides the previous phase from this one is somewhat arbitrary, a discernable shift became evident within denominational church life during the first decades of the new century. As noted above, the growing complexity of the churchly denomination required new ways for structuring and managing the church. Interestingly, this occurred around the same time that the newly emerging field of organizational management was gaining influence. Although several sources were involved in the formation of this new social-science discipline, the most important for denominations in the United States was the stream stemming from Frederick Taylor and what became know as Scientific Management.[58] This movement focused on bringing productivity and efficiency into the business organization. It did so by deskilling tasks, organizing similar work-activities into functional units, and building command and control systems through the establishment of hierarchical bureaucracy.

This movement found an early voice in the emerging world of complex churchly denominations through the work of Shailer Mathews, Dean of the Chicago School of Divinity, who in 1912 published *Scientific Management in the Churches*. The focus was on treating the church as "something of a business establishment."[59] The increasingly rationalized world of the modern bureaucracy began to become the norm for denominational church life. Boards and agencies at the

[58] In the early decades of the twentieth century at least three streams emerged, which were: Scientific Management by Frederick Taylor (1911); Administrative Management by Henri Fayol (1919), and Bureaucracy by Max Weber (1924).

[59] Shailer Matthews, *Scientific Management in the Churches* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1912).

national level increasingly adopted corporate forms of organization and management as the number of departments was expanded and numbers of staff were added.

Also during this period an increasing number of ministers were becoming seminary trained, leading to a growing professionalism of the clergy, as well as, an increased importance for seminaries within denominational church life. In the midst of this, denominations were becoming complex, organizational systems with multiple boards and agencies at the national level. Over time, these national level structures began to find their counter-parts at the regional level, and even to some extent at the local level, where organized committees tended to parallel the design of the national church.

By the end of World War II, when the rapidly growing suburbanization of the church took place, most denominations were well positioned to wage the campaign of starting new franchise congregations in cooperation with their judicatories. High birth rates for over two decades (the baby-boom generation from 1946-64), an expanding middle class, increasing levels of education, the mass-produced automobile, three dollar a barrel oil, a newly expanding interstate highway systems, and the creation of the thirty year fixed-rate mortgage, were all key factors that contributed to suburbs became the new destination of choice.[60] Migration from both the central cities and rural areas fed the growth of these suburbs. Continued high levels of denominational loyalty during this period allowed for the rapid growth of suburban congregations by almost all denominations.[61]

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[60] The dynamics of this new suburban growth are captured well by David Halberstam, *The Fifties* (New York, NY: Villard Books, 1993), 131-143. In this section he discusses the beginning of mass produced suburban housing as it was developed at Levittown, NY.

[61] A Gallup poll in 1955 found that only 1 in 25 persons switched from their childhood faith as an adult, whereas by 1985 1 in 3 persons were found to have switched, as reported by Wuthnow, *The Restructuring of American Religion*, 88.

Thousands of congregations were started as local franchises by their particular denomination. The logic of the denominational church with its organizational self-understanding around a purposive intent was now coming to full expression as the good life of the American dream was packaged into the suburban ideal.[62] It was an ideal to which millions aspired, but which was mostly realized by the emerging, white middle class. The darker side of this suburban success was what Gibson Winter labeled in 1962 as the *suburban captivity*.[63] With its profound success during the two and half decades from 1945-1970, the denominational, organizational, suburban congregation extended the logic of the organizational self-understanding around a purposive intent of the denomination to a new level.

The primary logic of the previous city-neighborhood congregation had continued to be a mixture of intergenerational relationships that operated in the midst of an increasing programmatic structure that was fed by the denominational agencies. But in the suburban congregation, relationships became largely functional in the midst of high rates of mobility. Here a corporate identity came to be established primarily around shared programmatic activities.[64] It is interesting that the small group movement began to emerge during this time to try and bring some sense of social community back into congregational life. The organizational, programmatic phase of the denominational church was now in full bloom. What is interesting to note is how rapidly this type of congregation imploded in the midst of the dramatic cultural shifts of the 1960s and 1970s, which will be discussed in the next section.

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[62] Halberstam.

[63] Gibson Winter, *The Suburban Captivity of the Churches: An Analysis of Protestant Responsibility in the Expanding Metropolis* (New York, NY: The MacMillan Company, 1962).

[64] Ibid., 96-101.

DNA of Denominations and Denominationalism

Corporate – *Denominations took on a corporate character as they turned to modern management and organizational approaches to govern their internal lives* (foundational).

Professional – *Ordained Ministry in many denominations became increasingly professionalized* (strain).

Franchise Model of Congregational Development – *Most denominations developed a franchise approach to starting and developing new congregations* (strain).

Diversity: Downsizing, and Regulation Versus Strategy, Growth and Networking 1970 to Date

As noted above, dramatic changes disrupted the growth patterns of the denominations in the 1960s-1970s. A whole range of movements defined the transition that took place, including the following: the civil rights movement, the youth movement/counter-culture, the feminist movement, the ecological movement, and the anti-war movement. What is important to note is the rapid collapse of institutional identity among the emerging generation, a shift that had huge consequences for the denominational church.[65] The boomer generation left the church in greater numbers than any previous generation and came back in fewer numbers. The starting of new congregations by denominations as franchise models came to a screeching halt by the mid-1970s.[66] Standardized, denominational educational curriculums went into decline and most were out of business by the 1980s. In the midst of these dramatic changes, the denominational, organizational church entered into yet another phase of development, one that is marked especially by increasing diversity and divergence.

The increased cultural diversity evident in the broader society in the 1960s began to become evident within

[65] Wade Clark Roof and William McKinney, *American Mainline Religion: Its Changing Shape and Future* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1987), 48-57.

[66] Lyle E. Schaller, *44 Questions for Church Planters* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1991), 13-36.

denominations by the 1970s. Associated with this diversity was an increasing divergence of theological viewpoints, illustrated well in how persons viewed the role of women or regarded abortion. Liberal and conservative views that had previously divided denominations from one-another, now began to divide denominations internally.[67] This pattern has continued in denominations and is currently being played out around the issue of human sexuality. New alliances of conservative or liberal groups made up of like-minded persons from among a variety of denominations are now common. In addition, the formation of coalitions and the exercise of advocacy politics has increasingly become the primary format for internal denominational decision-making regarding matters affecting theological policy.

Another dimension of the diversity that developed within denominations during this time is an increasing divergence on matters of theological policy between national church leaders and the local congregations. Many local congregations within denominations continue to be more theologically and socially conservative than they perceive their national church to be. In the face of this, national church leaders often cast their roles in terms of taking a prophetic stand, and often label the resistance they encounter as a form of insipid congregationalism, especially when financial resources for denominational ministries are not forthcoming. Many congregations, in turn, are involved in trying to re-contextualize their ministries in the midst of substantial changes. In doing so, it is not unusual for them to turn to outside groups for inspiration or ideas, since denominational programming no longer exists or is viewed as less relevant. In pursuing their local ministries it is also not uncommon for them to use more of their financial resources in developing programming, upgrading buildings, or hiring additional staff.

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[67] Dean R. Hoge, *Division in the Protestant House: The Basic Reasons behind -Iintra-church Conflicts* (Loiusville, KY: Westminster Press, 1976).

Overall, revenue to national church offices is dramatically down. This, in turn, has led to the continued downsizing of national agencies and church-wide staff for many of the former mainline denominations.[68] The median age of members of most mainline denominations now exceeds the national median age, in many cases by 20 plus years (55 plus verses 35).[69] These shifts have led some of the former mainline denominations to attempt to create internal versions of approaches pioneered by evangelical denominations or independent congregations, i.e. becoming seeker sensitive, developing small groups, employing contemporary worship, etc. But overall, these denominations have tended to become more *regulatory* in character. When denominational loyalty is lost, one option available is to turn to rules and procedures to seek compliance.

In contrast to what is happening in many former mainline denominations; there are scores of more conservative or evangelical denominations that are showing positive growth trends, such as the Southern Baptists, Assemblies of God, Christian Missionary and Alliance, and Church of God (Cleveland).[70] In addition, there has been a rapid expansion of the number of independent congregations.[71] What might be labeled as market-driven, or mission-driven models of church have influenced many of these denominations and independent congregations.[72] The seeker-church phenomenon pioneered by Willow Creek is probably the most influential, especially as it came to be the purpose-

[68] The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, newly formed in 1987 is a case study of the continuing pattern of denominational downsizing at the national level as revenues to church-wide continue to decline. Most other mainline denominations follow a similar trend.
[69] Roof and McKinney, 152-155.
[70] Ibid., 150.
[71] Ibid., 148-151.
[72] Craig Van Gelder, *The Essence of the Church: A Community Created by the Spirit* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2000), 20-21.

driven church by Saddleback community church under the leadership of Rick Warren.[73]

Usually at the heart of these various market-driven and/or mission-driven models is a theology of the great commission, where mission is understood primarily as something the church must do. This follows the inherent logic of the denominational church as having an organizational self-understanding around a purposive intent. Accompanying this development has been the emergence of the association network. These networks are comprised of congregations that are self-selecting in their participation. A good example is the Willow Creek Association that was formed in 1992 by the Willow Creek Community Church.[74] Interestingly, this association network is identified as not being a denomination, but it may, in reality, actually be a new expression of the denominational form.

Clearly we are in a period of transition in the life of the denominational church. From the 1960s to the present time, new movements have continued to emerge to give direction in the midst of the changes taking place. All of them follow the inherent logic of the denominational church as having an organizational self-understanding around a purposive intent. In this regard, all of them tend to treat the church in primarily functional or instrumental terms. The church renewal movement of the 1960s and early 1970s focused on trying to make existing structures more relevant to a new

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[73] Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1995).

[74] From the Willow Creek web site (accessed August 30, 2006) http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Willow_Creek_Community_Church. "In 1992, the Willow Creek Association was created as a way to link together churches for the purpose of, "Reaching increasing numbers of lost people." The WCA develops training and leadership conferences and resources for its member churches. The Willow Creek Association is often confused with Willow Creek Community Church, or mistaken for a denomination, however it is a distinctly separate organization which has close affiliations with Willow Creek Community Church. There are more than 11,000 member churches, which come from 90 denominations, and 45 different countries."

generation in the midst of a rapidly changing context. The church growth movement of the 1970s and early 1980s placed emphasis on evangelism and focused largely on pragmatic technique. By the 1980s and early 1990s, the church effectiveness movement brought the wider range of social-science, organizational perspective to bear on trying to manage and lead congregations through renewal and growth in the midst of change.[75] This latter movement has recently morphed into what is now the church health movement.[76] Parallel to this is the emphasis that is now being placed on pastoral excellence.[77]

Efforts to renew the church and transform denominations continue to be made. But the core genetic code of the denominational church as having an organizational self-understanding around a purposive intent has yet to be sufficiently examined to allow for this. Those who have gone this route tend to still work inside of the same assumptions of a functional approach to ecclesiology and polity, a view that gave birth to the denominational church to begin with.[78]

DNA of Denominations and Denominationalism

Internal Diversity – *Many denominations are now divided internally between competing interests often rationalized around diverse theological commitments* (strain).

Retrenchment by Some and Growth by Others – *Many former mainline denominations are in decline while some more conservative denominations are showing growth* (strains).

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[75] Darrell Guder, et. al., *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 72-73.

[76] Many denominations have adopted this approach by using the program of Christian A. Schwarz, *Natural Church Development: A Guide to Eight Essential Qualities of Healthy Churches* (St. Charles, IL: ChurchSmart Resources, 1996).

[77] Grants being made available over the past few years by the Lilly Endowment, Inc. for developing and sustaining pastoral excellence are illustrative of this.

[78] See, for example, the recent book by Episcopal Bishop Claude E. Payne and Hamilton Beazley, *Reclaiming the Great Commission: A Practical Model for Transforming Denominations and Congregations* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2000).

Organizational Efforts at Renewal – *Many denominations and congregations employing organizational renewal strategies to pursue growth and develop health* (strain).

New Networks and Associations – *What appears to be a new denominational form is emerging as networks or associations* (strain).

Rethinking Denominationalism from a Missional Church Perspective

The past several decades have seen a seemingly endless obsession with trying to discover strategies to help denominations and congregations become more effective or successful. Consistent with the DNA of the denominationalism, these strategies are usually defined in relation to carrying out the purpose of the church. Unfortunately, most of these strategies have failed to interact critically with the formal polity of particular denominations within which they were being applied. Simply put, in attempting to renew the church you can't get there from there. Two things are necessary. It is essential to probe deeper beyond just trying to re-claim the purposive intent of the church. To do so, it is essential to bring a focus on both ecclesiology and polity and to bring these into conversation with the historical development of denominations.

The argument of this article is that the denominational, organizational church has been profoundly shaped by historical developments related both to European roots as well as the changing context of the United States. This has tended to give birth to an operational ecclesiology and polity for the denominational church that is more functional, or instrumental in character. Standing in contrast to these developments, the missional church conversation over the past decade has re-introduced a discussion about the very nature of the church, its essence, in relation to thinking about ecclesiology and shaping polity. In this conversation, being missionary is no longer understood primarily in functional terms as something the church *does*, as is the case for the denominational, organization

church. Rather it is understood in terms of something the church *is*, as something that is related to its nature. This represents a *change of kind* in the conversation about the church where ecclesiology, once more, is front and center as the framework for thinking about polity.

Returning to this fuller discussion about ecclesiology is crucial if we are to break the impasse created by the functionalism that has come to be associated with the denominational, organizational church. But returning to this discussion from a missional perspective is even more critical if we are to live into all that God intends regarding the church created by the Spirit. This discussion has been popularized largely by the fast becoming seminal work published in 1998, entitled *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America*.[79] That volume explored how the discipline of missiology, understanding God's mission in the world, is inter-related with ecclesiology, the study (ology) of the church (ecclesia). The result was the construction of a missional ecclesiology, or in short hand, the concept of the "missional church."

In the missional church conversation the focus shifts to the world as the horizon for understanding the work of God, and God's redemptive work in the world as the basis for understanding both the nature and purpose of the church. In taking this approach, the *organizational self-understanding around a purposive intent* of the denominational church is replaced by an understanding of the church as being *created by the Spirit and missionary by nature*. The table below illustrates this contrast of perspectives.

The missional church conversation brings together two streams of understanding of God's work in the world. First, God has a mission within all of creation—the *missio Dei*. Second, God brought redemption to bear on all of life within creation through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. This redemptive work of God through Christ is best understood in terms of its

[79] Darrell L. Guder, ed., *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1988).

announcement and inauguration by Jesus as the presence of the *kingdom of God* in the world.

DENOMINATIONAL CHURCH	MISSIONAL CHURCH
Self-Understanding: Exists as an organization with a purposive intent to accomplish something on behalf of God in the world, with this role being legitimated on a voluntary basis.	Self-understanding: Exists as a community created by the Spirit that is missionary by nature in being called and sent to participate in God's mission in the world.

A missional understanding of God's work in the world from this perspective is framed as follows. God is seeking to bring God's kingdom, the redemptive reign of God in Christ, to bear on every dimension of life within the entire world so that the larger creation purposes of God can be fulfilled. The church's self understanding of being missional is grounded in the work of the Spirit of God who calls the church into existence as a gathered community, equips and prepares it, and sends it into the world to participate fully in God's mission.

This missional church perspective understands that the Spirit creates congregations and that their existence is for the purpose of engaging the world in bringing God's redemptive work in Christ to bear on every dimension of life. In being true to their missional identity, they can never function primarily as an end within themselves—the tendency of the self-understanding of the established church. In being true to their missional identity, they can never be satisfied with maintaining primarily a functional relationship to their contexts and communities—the tendency of the self-understanding of the denominational church. The missional church has a different genetic code.

The kingdom of God, the redemptive reign of God in Christ, gives birth to the missional church through the

work of the Spirit. Its nature, ministry, and organization are formed by the reality, power, and intent of the kingdom of God. The church participates in God's mission in the world because it can do no other. It was created for this purpose. This purpose is encoded within the very make-up of the nature of the church. It is missionary by nature.

In the biblical framework outlined above, the missional church is identified as living between the times. It lives between the now and the not yet. The redemptive reign of God in Christ is already present, meaning that the power of God is fully manifest in the world through the Gospel under the leading of the Spirit. But the redemptive reign of God is not yet fully complete as the church looks toward the final consummation when God will remove the presence of sin and create the new heavens and new earth.

Summary

This essay has attempted to identify characteristics of the DNA that are present within denominations and denominationalism as they came to expression in the United States. An organizational self-understanding around a purposive intent was the primary logic identified that seems to characterize the denominational, organizational church. From this baseline, other foundational characteristics as well as particular strains of DNA were examined. These historical developments of the church are important to understand when one attempts to reflect carefully on the ecclesiology of the church and its polity—its organizational structures and leadership practices. It contrasts to the DNA of denominationalism. It was proposed that the missional church conversation offers a more fundamental approach to rethinking both ecclesiology and polity, and thereby providing perspective for reframing the church in our context.