

CHAPTER 1

THE DECLINE OF TRADITIONAL DENOMINATIONS

The Nature of the Crisis

According to farmer Roger Toquam of Blooming Prairie, Minnesota:

In the late 1970s the farmers had a string of good years and good prices. People felt very good about the farming industry. Kids wanted to come back to farm with dad and so farmers started to expand and buy land and new machinery. Lending institutions were eager to give the farmers as much money as they wanted to borrow. No one questioned whether the farmer could pay the loans back or not, there was even competition between loan officers as to how much they would lend out and they would throw parties when they hit a certain level of money borrowed out.¹

In the 1980s, Midwest farmers began to experience a crisis. Several factors interdependently impacted one another: there was a changing climate towards world commerce, big business entered the farming sector, interest rates sky rocketed, and grain prices dropped.² As a response, lending institutions called in land loans and put more land on the market, which drove land prices lower. For example, land that once sold for \$3500 per acre now sold for \$600, and these changes forced farmers to make a paradigm shift or cease existence. The crisis impacted many smaller family farms primarily, and others who lacked the necessary capital reserves to survive. They could no longer sustain themselves, even with government subsidies. The selling of the farm, its land, resources,

¹ Roger Toquam, e-mail message to author, March 3, 2003.

² Ibid.

and way of life for generations produced an intensive grieving process for many Midwesterners. The farmers that survived and thrived made adjustments, even radical changes, and adapted to the new rapidly changing world.

Interesting parallels exist between the changes in American farming during this period, and changes taking place in the church and society. The state of many churches, particularly rural, small town, and inner-urban congregations is difficult, and many churches may die or merge with other churches. Schaller has written that a church requires a membership of at least 250 with an adult attendance of over 150 to remain economically viable within a traditional denomination.³ The average household gives about 2 percent of its income for church ministry. Congregations must make difficult choices because half of all Protestant congregations in the United States average fewer than seventy-five at worship, and two-thirds involve less than 110. Schaller's thoughts have significant ramifications. If Schaller is accurate, surviving churches must grow in size, or per capita giving must radically increase. The alternative is the loss of full-time professional pastors.⁴

Church institutions are in decline, based upon the numeric decline of traditional Protestant Mainline churches. Figure 1 demonstrates the continual decline in worship attendance with a sharp decline during the last decade from 1992 to the year 2003.

³ Lyle Schaller, *The New Reformation: Tomorrow Arrived Yesterday* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1995), 57-58.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 58.

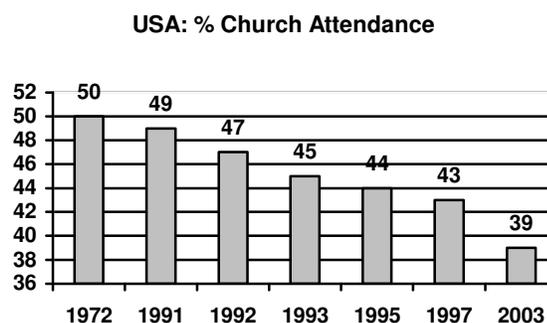


Figure 1⁵

Another way of examining the decline of traditional denominations is through analyzing the loss of membership and loss of churches by particular mainline Protestant denominations in the United States. Six denominations (The Christian Church or Disciples, Episcopal Church, Presbyterian Church (USA), Reformed Church in America, United Church of Christ, and the United Methodist Church) are declining in the number of congregations currently functioning, members nationwide, and members per congregation. The actual decline for the six denominations includes: 1968 (75,421 churches) to 1994 (66,374) indicating a decline of 12 percent.⁶ Total inclusive membership in 1968 of 22,557,463 declined to 17,535,366 in 1994, a decline of 22 percent.⁷ This rapid decline following a prosperous period for the church is cause for serious concern.

This time of change has serious implications for traditional congregations. Gibbs wrote:

⁵ Gibbs, "Growing Churches in a Post-Christendom World," 3.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid., 4-5.

Mike Regele has no doubt that hundreds of local congregations will close their doors for the last time. Most of the reasons for this pessimistic prognosis are to be found within society and the tragic fact that so many churches are failing to discern the signs of the times and neglecting to seek the spiritual discernment and vitality to meet the challenges. The forces reshaping our culture are too many and too strong. We see signs of social fragmentation and collapse everywhere.⁸

The church is at a time of crisis, and new approaches to ministry are required.

Webster's New World Dictionary defines crisis as a "decisive moment or a turning point."⁹ The present situation is a defining moment for the church, and it can make important decisions. As the farm crisis led to revolutionary changes in American farming, the current decline of participation in mainline churches creates a crisis or turning point that prompts the church toward revolutionary change.

In 1517, Martin Luther started a revolution when he nailed ninety-five theses on the door of castle church; this became a turning point and led to a reformation of God's church.¹⁰ As a leader within the church, Luther demanded transition and transformation. Luther challenged the church to move from primarily functioning as a hierarchical-driven institution to become a movement of the people of God.¹¹ The current ecclesiastical signs of plateau and decline demand a transition and transformation, or continued stagnation may lead to the church's demise. North American Christianity is in the midst

⁸ Gibbs, *ChurchNext*, 15.

⁹ Webster's New World Dictionary: (1986), s.v.. "Crisis."

¹⁰ Kenneth Scott Latourette, *A History of Christianity* (New York: Harper and Row, 1953), 708-709.

¹¹ Erwin McManus, *An Unstoppable Force: Daring to Become the Church God Had in Mind* (Loveland, CO: Group, 2001), 186.

of a potential paradigm shift that may move the church from an institutional mentality to the concept of the church as an organism.¹²

McManus discusses this re-formation and paradigm shift: “When a new paradigm emerges, one’s learning in the former paradigm may become irrelevant and in fact detrimental to success in the new paradigm.”¹³ Barker explains that the critical rule to surviving and thriving in a new paradigm is the “back to zero” rule; he suggests that when a paradigm shifts, everything goes back to zero. “In a sense, it’s time to shake the ‘Etch-A-Sketch,’ clear the slate, and start afresh.”¹⁴ For example, Martin Luther reengaged the Scriptures, and he detached himself from many traditional assumptions related to church doctrine. Although much of Luther’s vision for the church was not completed, it had an enormous impact on church history, practice, and the rise of Protestantism.¹⁵

Much of the established North American church culture remains unmoved by changes occurring in society and culture. I believe it is critical that mainline churches recognize the present crisis with a sense of urgency and response. This begins with a form of confession and repentance. For the church, this involves admitting it is moving in

¹² Greg Ogden, *The New Reformation: Returning the Ministry to the People of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1990), 29.

¹³ McManus, *An Unstoppable Force*, 187.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Latourette, *A History of Christianity*, 703.

the wrong direction, that it may have misplaced priorities, be stricken with pride, or have perpetuated cultural compromises and settled comfortably into relaxed lifestyles.¹⁶

Lewis and Watkins suggest that confession must lead the church from complacency to contagion:

We must painfully and with great sorrow admit that the flimsy efforts we pass off as bridges are not really bridges at all. They are so much hot air and as such, are as insubstantial as clouds or dreams. The true measures of a church are not “how many” but “how loving,” not “how relevant” but “how real.” Confession means reading afresh the words of Jesus Christ about his concept of the church—“salt” and “light”—and being grief stricken over how far our churches fall short.¹⁷

Christians may not understand or recognize the crisis because “most Christians don’t perceive the church to be in the most severe struggle it has faced in centuries.”¹⁸ Feeling a desperate loss or discontent with the current state of the church is a precursor to confession that leads to repentance.

Repentance is born from or through confession. Morris wrote, “The basic meaning of repentance is to turn around or reverse the direction of one’s thinking and action.”¹⁹ For the mainline church, this means an effort to turn around a large ship that has been moving ahead. With a typical weekly worship attendance of 30 percent, it is

¹⁶ Robert Lewis and Rob Wilkins, *The Church of Irresistible Influence* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001), 73.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 71-72.

¹⁸ George Barna, *The Frog in the Kettle: What Christians Need to Know about Life in the Year 2000* (Ventura, CA: Regal, 1990), 123.

¹⁹ Linus Morris, *High Impact Churches* (Westlake Village, CA: Christian Associates International, 1993), 87.

clear that low expectations have produced minimal results.²⁰ Traditional mainline churches will either continue an aimless trajectory or will respond and avoid continued decline. This requires confession, repentance, and a new ecclesiastical direction. This paper asserts that biblically-based and theologically sound strategies can be crafted to make, mature, and mobilize disciples sent apostolically as missionaries.

The Root Causes of Decline and the ELCA

This chapter has documented the American, mainline, institutional church decline that has taken place during the last thirty to forty years of the twentieth century. This section of the paper attempts to identify the cultural changes that have led to the root causes of the decline. There are numerous books and studies that have examined the causes of decline. For our purposes and brevity, the following are a select summary of these findings based on Lyle Schaller's insights.

ROOT CAUSES OF MAINLINE DECLINE SUMMARY

- 1. Change of Context.** Established mainline churches of the pre-1950's who were once the winners of previous decades have become the losers of the post-1950 competition.²¹ Younger generations have made these old systems obsolete. As mainline churches continue to age, younger generations are seeking alternative church venues to meet their current interests and tastes.
- 2. Religious Revival.** Since the 1950's Evangelicals have been demonstrating a passionate spirituality only sparsely evident among mainline Protestants. In a competitive world, people go to where the action is.
- 3. The Liberal-Evangelical Divide.** Due to the above, a division has grown from a once unified Protestant unity in opposition to Roman Catholicism.²²

²⁰ "ELCA Membership Slips Below 5 Million in 2003" *CrossRoads* (Iowa City, IA: ELCA Southeastern Iowa Synod, 2005), 7.

²¹ Schaller, *A Mainline Turnaround*, 38.

²² *Ibid.*, 20.

4. **Higher Expectations and Commitment of Church Membership.** Again, churches that raise the bar of discipleship by expecting more of their constituents have typically shown growth. Most mainline churches adhere to a low expectation membership model resulting in a large inactive church roster.
5. **Higher Expectations from Church Membership.** Institutions in general (hospitals, universities, protestant churches) are becoming much larger today than in 1900 or 1950. Thereby, raising expectations and increasing demand for more extensive and specialized ministry. Many smaller churches cannot satisfactorily meet such demands.²³ Hence, the one generalist pastor and a part-time secretary model falls short of what Twenty-First Century people desire and expect now.
6. **Need for Multiple Options.** Many mainline protestant churches offer only one or two options for worship and discipleship education. Multiple worship options and locations are essential today in meeting diverse multi-generational tastes and learning styles.
7. **The Drive for an Egalitarian Society.** This societal change has implications for churches to greatly expand the role of the laity. Mainline churches have promoted a dependence on a clergy-centered system that has become overburdened with overwhelming care-giving demands. Empowering the congregation in ministry is essential for increasing health and survival.
8. **Vertical Structures to Horizontal Partnerships.** A disconnect has been created as mainline Protestant congregations have sent financial resources to do the ministry for them locally and globally. A new era of mobilizing congregational members has arisen to equip and send out members as ministers in service in the community and abroad. This includes partnering with local congregations and companion congregations in other parts of the world.²⁴
9. **The Change of Immigration Patterns.** Established mainline Protestants reached Western European immigrants well. Mainline churches have struggled to reach the new wave of Asian, Latino, and Pacific Rim immigrants. As these mainline churches naturally grew through the natural growth or feeder mechanism of immigration, these churches need to examination how to meet the newcomers where they are.
10. **The Erosion of Denominational Loyalty.** In the 1950s most congregations expressed their loyalty by turning to their denomination for many goods and services. During the past forty years, however, the growing demand for relevance, quality, customized services and products, creativity, new approaches, and economy has led many congregations to purchase these goods and services from parachurch organizations, theological schools, state universities, profit-

²³ Ibid., 23.

²⁴ Ibid., 30.

driven corporations, megachurches, retreat centers, and independent entrepreneurs.²⁵

No one church or denomination has the resources to combat these factors simultaneously, and prioritization is required to develop an action plan that addresses the root causes. Gibbs has identified ten major themes among the root causes; however, the following four themes derived from Gibbs' work are the most relevant to the First Lutheran Church context.²⁶ The themes will be described in more detail in chapter three.

1. Incremental change has moved into chaotic change. Change is no longer gradual, predictable, and able to be anticipated with accuracy; therefore, change can appear quickly and without warning. The church can become aware and wise in facing the reality of rapid, chaotic change. Ongoing evaluation and strategic planning with alternative solutions in mind are essential in order to respond to change expediently.

2. Mainline church membership is characterized as passive and disconnected. Gibbs believes a hunger exists for a rich, real, spiritual life among Americans, but mainline churches have not responded to this desire adequately.

3. Modern mainline churches lack a missional mindset. Many churchgoers understand church to be a place to attend, not a place where people are equipped and empowered as ministers to be sent out missionally to service.

4. Hierarchies can limit the spread of effective ministry. Clergy have been expected to do the ministry for the people. A more effective model has clergy and staff

²⁵ Ibid., 33-34.

²⁶ Gibbs, "Growing Churches in a Post-Christendom World."

multiplying and training lay ministers to carry out the work of ministry. Modern mainline churches practice hierarchical, independent organizational structures. A move towards partnering with other churches can expand the influence of the gospel.

The experiences of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America (ELCA) parallel the challenges confronting mainline American Protestantism. The Rev. Lowell G. Almen, ELCA secretary, reported, “The baptized membership of the ELCA slipped below 5 million in 2003.”²⁷ Parochial reports indicate the continuous decline is due to a decrease in the number of new members, the disbanding of thirty-six congregations, and “roll cleaning” in many remaining congregations.²⁸ For example, “In 2003, ‘roll cleaning’ resulted in a loss of 181,022 members on top of 186,162 members in 2002. Those reductions occur when long inactive members who indicate no interest in continued participation are removed from the congregation’s membership rolls.”²⁹

This information supports the idea of a passive membership, as do the following reports. “About 1.5 million or 30 percent of all baptized [ELCA] members participate in worship each week.”³⁰ The year 1991 was the last time an ELCA membership gain occurred, and the gain was only 4,438, roughly one percent.³¹ Inskip wrote:

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, large numbers of young people who were baptized in the church began to defect. This large-scale defection has had serious implications for all mainline denominations. This generation,

²⁷ “ELCA Membership Slips Below 5 Million in 2003,” 7.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

particularly those born in the later years of the baby boom, is much more likely to think of participating in organized religion as optional, something to be purchased (or not purchased) as it is needed, or when it is appealing. In turn, religion as a commodity casts congregations into the realm of religious vendors where more and more “firms” are competing for fewer and fewer “customers.” Some congregations have readily adjusted to these new circumstances and others have not.³²

The ELCA demonstrates multiple signs of decline shown by passive membership, lackluster worship attendance, a consumer mentality, an insulated edifice mentality of Lutherans stuck in the pew, and drawing few non-Lutherans or non-Christians to faith or church connection. Drawing from Inskip’s research, the edifice mentality is strong among Lutherans because “three of every four Lutherans have been raised from childhood as Lutherans.”³³

There are several recent developments in the ELCA that show signs of hope. The ELCA has provided congregations resources to explore and assess local demographics. Local area synod Assistants to the Bishop are trained in Natural Church Development techniques and serve as coaches. Strategic plans for both discipleship and evangelism have been created for ELCA congregations to use and adapt in their context. A move from a maintenance mode to increased church health and mission may be emerging in the ELCA in response to this crisis. I believe an emphasis on intentional apostolic

³² Kenneth W. Inskip, *The Context for Mission and Ministry in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America* (Chicago: ELCA Department for Research and Evaluation, May 12, 2003), Executive Summary.

³³ Kenneth W. Inskip, *Religious Commitment in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America: Findings from the Faith Practices Survey* (Chicago: ELCA Department for Research and Evaluation, July 23, 2001), 4.

discipleship that is missional in its impact will significantly improve the ELCA's overall health and future growth.

The challenges found at First Lutheran Church (FLC) in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, are similar to those identified in mainline American Protestantism and the ELCA. The community of Cedar Rapids has grown 9 percent from 1990-2000, but FLC has experienced the same numeric membership and worship attendance for over forty years. Incremental program changes were made from the 1960s to the early 1990s. Despite signs of growth in making and maturing disciples, FLC's effectiveness in equipping apostolic disciples sent out to service is lacking. A clergy-centric dependency remains strong while congregational leadership increases only gradually. It is evident that FLC could benefit from a clear strategic plan of making, maturing, and mobilizing apostolic disciples for service in the harvest fields of Cedar Rapids, Iowa.

The next chapter describes the FLC ministry setting in greater detail. This information and an understanding of the ministry context are essential for the development of apostolic discipleship ministries at FLC. The thesis of this paper is that biblically and theologically sound strategies can be developed that mature, mobilize, and equip FLC congregants for apostolic discipleship. In the next chapter and in this paper, "evangelical" protestant will encompass the three expressions found in Figure 2, although will mostly refer to Young Evangelicals. Webber's depiction of the Young Evangelicals, shown in table 1 below, describes emergent churches that are thriving in making, multiplying, and mobilizing disciples for mission.

Table 1.³⁴ Webber's Depiction of Evangelicals from 1950 through 2000.

	<u>Traditional Evangelicals</u> <u>1950-1975</u>	<u>Pragmatic Evangelicals</u> <u>1975-2000</u>	<u>Young Evangelicals</u> <u>2000</u>
Theology:	Christianity is a rational world view	Christianity is a therapy, meets needs	Christianity is a faith fellowship
Apologetic:	Facts	Christianity gives meaning, and can be experienced	"The Great Story". Faith lived out in community is apologetic
Church paradigm:	Constantine model: respectable religion	Culturally sensitive, market-oriented	Missionary church, counter-culture
Church style:	Neighborhood, village, parochial	Megachurch, suburban, market-oriented	Small, back to the city, cross-cultural
Leadership style:	Pastor centered	Management model, CEO common priesthood	Team ministry, common priesthood
Youth ministry:	Church centered programs	Missionary programs, weekend camps	Prayer, Bible reading, worship, social action
Training:	Sunday School, information	Meeting generational needs	Interaction of all generations living in community
Spirituality:	Following rules	Wealth and success	Living authentically'
Worship:	Traditional	Modern	Convergence
Art:	Forbidden	As illustration	As incarnation
Evangelization:	Large events	Seeker-sensitive	Process evangelization
Activists:	Start Evangelical social activities	Needs-based (drug rehabilitation, help for divorced people...)	Rebuilding cities and neighborhoods

³⁴ Robert Webber, *The Younger Evangelicals* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 2002), 18.