

At Home and Abroad

The Changing Contours of American Religion

Throughout most of our nation's history, religion in America has conjured up images of local activity. "Church" means a church building with a local address. People gravitate to these homey places of worship because their friends and neighbors do. The pastor or priest knows them and cares about their problems. The church is part of the local community. Few images capture this sense of proximity better than Norman Rockwell's 1953 *Walking to Church*. Mom, dad, and the three kids stroll happily past the barber shop and the Silver Slipper Grill, with the church steeple rising in the background no more than a block away.¹ Half a century later, the church may be further from one's neighborhood, but its orientation is still local.

The local focus of American religion comes through loud and clear when people talk about their congregations. Jack Mitchell, a member of a Presbyterian church in suburban Chicago, illustrates how prominently local considerations leap to mind as people discuss their places of worship. Mr. Mitchell is now in his sixties and has been attending the same church for more than thirty years. It is a typical middle-class congregation of about 350 members. He and his wife attend worship services every Sunday, except when they are traveling, and both have served on various committees, including the congregation's board of elders. When they first started attending, their children were young. He says they were "looking for a family-oriented church." The pastor, he recalls with muted enthusiasm, was "a capable man." What drew them was mainly the con-

gregation, “the people.” And over the years, through good times and bad, including some tensions in the congregation that resulted in families leaving, it has been this sense of family that has kept him involved. He does of course have loyalties beyond the congregation itself. For instance, he says he is proud to be a Presbyterian and holds no particular grudges against the denomination. He notes in passing that the congregation sponsors “a girl who was a missionary over to Africa.” But his voice is most animated when he talks about what is happening locally. He tells a long story about the church’s roof and why it is more “handsome” now than in the past. He relates another story about a decision the church made to build a nursing home on an adjacent property. The church building and the nursing home next door give him a tangible sense of what it means to be part of a congregation. The congregational singing, the weekly sermons, and the familiar flow of the worship services do too. Above all, it is still the people who gather there from week to week who make the church his home. It is “this feeling of congregational togetherness” that he likes best, “this one big family type of thing.”

Mr. Mitchell’s perspective is not unusual among American churchgoers. Although he has been involved more actively and over a longer period in one congregation than have many people, his emphasis on family and community is no different from the language newcomers typically use to describe what they like about their congregations. A recent newcomer at a Baptist church in Saint Louis says she especially appreciates the “small family-like atmosphere.” A member of a Catholic parish in an older urban neighborhood in Milwaukee stresses the “spirit of community here,” adding that “people know each other and like each other.” A couple who recently joined a downtown Methodist church in Dallas describe it as “very friendly” and note that it was actually a homemade pie from the church that showed just how friendly it was.

Church, family, and homemade pie. Congregations pride themselves on being friendly. The best ones do function like caring families. Members talk about community because it is a manifestation of Christian ideals. Knowing one another and supporting one another is what it means to be the body of Christ. They also talk about community because it seems to be missing in other parts of their lives. They do not feel emotionally close to people in their sprawling, anonymous neighborhoods or at work. For American Christians, the local church is thus special precisely because it is local. It is a secure and familiar space composed of people who gather there regularly and form bonds as strong and as enduring as those in one’s own family.

Research demonstrates the extent to which U.S. congregations are locally oriented. Finances are a telling indication of this orientation. Although most congregations are affiliated with a denomination or some denomination-like entity, the typical congregation expends less than 5 percent of its income supporting that larger organization.² Nearly all congregations own their own building and have at least one clergy person, and these items account for the biggest items in the typical congregation's budget. Weekly worship services are the centerpiece of most congregations' activities, and, although it is possible to watch religious services on television or listen to religious radio programs, it is still the norm for American churchgoers who participate in religious services to attend in person. At a majority of churches, most of those who do attend live within a ten-minute drive of the church.³ Among all church members, 80 percent claim that at least three of their closest friends are fellow members of their congregation.⁴ Between half and two-thirds of congregations help sponsor various service activities, such as soup kitchens or tutoring programs, and these are generally local or at least in the same community.⁵ Ethnographic studies show that people think of their congregations as places of warmth, acceptance, and friendship.⁶ Members typically identify more closely with a particular congregation than they do with such remote entities as denominations, and few know much about the national offices of their denominations.⁷ Even if they are newcomers to their congregations, they will have shopped for one that is convenient and seems likely to provide them with friends similar to themselves.⁸

To say that American congregations are locally oriented is not to say only that most of their activities happen at a particular place. Researchers have also found that church members often hold what might be called a "localistic" worldview. For instance, in a study of North Carolina church members, sociologist Wade Clark Roof found that the more active churchgoers preferred local news to national or international news and expressed greater loyalty to their local communities than less active church members did, and these differences remained when Roof took account of differences in age and levels of education.⁹ In another study, researchers found similar patterns among Jews.¹⁰ A national study of Episcopal churches using ethnographic methods and qualitative interviews documented a striking emphasis among clergy and members alike on "local loyalty" and an equally notable sense that the "linkages between local congregations and wider structures are . . . ineffectual and growing weaker."¹¹ Drawing on statistical data from a national study of congre-

gations from a range of denominations, sociologist Nancy Ammerman demonstrated that congregations do have linkages but that these are usually with other local organizations instead of with national or international bodies. For instance, of more than 1,200 such linkages involving human services, 83 percent were with local partners while only 17 percent were with national or international organizations.¹² “Overwhelmingly, interorganizational involvement is aimed at assisting the needy and providing services that enhance the general well-being of *local communities*,” Ammerman observed.¹³ “Local” did not mean the immediate neighborhood of the church itself. But it did mean the general environs of the congregation, such as the town or suburb in which it was located, as opposed to activity concerned with helping people in another region or part of the world.

Besides the obvious fact that it is convenient and perhaps more interesting to focus religious energies on nearby instead of faraway activities, several features of contemporary life in the United States contribute to this emphasis on local activities. One is the entrepreneurial ethos from the business world that infuses American culture and that increasingly encourages a managerial style among clergy and other church leaders. The managerial style emphasizes numeric growth as the premier sign of congregational success. It links clergy salaries, promotions, and prestige with attaining this kind of success. It elevates congregational autonomy as a facilitator of such success, while identifying larger denominational structures as impediments. With potential congregants characterized by fewer denominational loyalties and greater tendencies to engage in denominational switching, the autonomous congregation that focuses on its own programs and local priorities is thus in the best position to succeed.

A related factor is the widely noted tendency for churchgoers to adopt the same consumerist mentality that they do in negotiating commercial transactions. The watchwords of this consumerist mentality are personal gratification and efficiency. Gratification means focusing first and foremost on satisfying one’s personal needs and desires, including those of one’s immediate family. Efficiency means doing so by incurring the least possible cost. Faced with making a decision among the various churches available in one’s community, the religious consumer will thus choose the one that offers the best Sunday school program for one’s children, the greatest chances of finding a suitable mate if one is single, the most convenient location, the most inspiring sermons, the clearest moral guidelines, or some other attractive feature, while avoiding such costs as having to

spend money on programs from which there is no immediate personal benefit. Of course the calculations involved are never quite this crass or explicit. On balance, they nevertheless favor congregations that supply the most attractive incentives, secure the greatest commitment from their members, and keep the resulting resources in-house for the congregation's own growth and development.

Another aspect of American life that reinforces a localistic emphasis in congregations is what some observers refer to as alienation from large bureaucratic structures, or simply anti-institutionalism. Although it is difficult to establish the precise nature and sources of this alienation, it is perhaps evident in the large proportion of Americans who tell pollsters they are concerned about the alleged breakdown of community. If not exactly demonstrated in books claiming to document the collapse of community in America, it is at least expressed in the widespread popularity of such books.¹⁴ In the face of seemingly intractable economic forces and large impersonal governmental structures run by politicians with little apparent interest in the common person, the warmth and security of the local congregation becomes especially appealing. Devoid of linkages or obligations beyond its own walls, the local church is a private space, an extension of one's home in which familial relationships prevail. It is, in Victor Turner's words, a manifestation of *communitas*, a protected place of "anti-structure."¹⁵ Within this sheltered enclave, a person weary of the travails of the bureaucratized world can find solace and comfort.

This desire to retreat from the wider world fits handily with yet another feature of contemporary life: the experiential legitimation of truth. There is no evidence that Americans have abandoned such core tenets of religious doctrine as belief in the existence of God or the divinity of Jesus. Yet, when asked if they find biblical teachings or personal experience more credible for spiritual guidance, nearly half opt for personal experience.¹⁶ Truth is validated not by tradition or institutional authority but by firsthand knowledge gained from personal experience. Clergy and other religious leaders have by no means given up on truth claims rooted in tradition or institutional authority. But they do increasingly play into the desire for authenticated individual experience. The congregation becomes a therapeutic community. The love of Christ is felt directly as people gather in small support groups or participate in sharing the Eucharist. To be a member of the church means primarily being part of the gathered community, *koinonia* (fellowship) taking precedence over dogma. The experience of worship becomes the hallmark of the Sunday service. All

this of course happens most effectively in a local setting. The experience is more intense and authentic when it is shared with the believers who make up one's local congregation.

The fact that congregations encourage—and are encouraged in—a local emphasis in these various ways does not mean that Christianity in the United States is weak. The view that American churches are faltering is often a starting point in discussions of America's role in the wider arena of world Christianity. If American churches are weak, then hope for the future lies chiefly in sitting back and learning from the more vibrant churches that exist elsewhere. But that view is too simple. It runs contrary to the fact that American churches remain considerably stronger than those in most other wealthy nations of the world and, indeed, have shown remarkable resilience even in comparison with their American predecessors of a generation or two ago.¹⁷

The point is rather that any consideration of the transnational role of American churches must acknowledge the overwhelming predisposition of congregations to be local. This predisposition is by no means unique to the contemporary period, but it does mean that churches' activities abroad are always conceived in relationship to their ministries at home. It means, too, that the recent globalization of American Christianity is all the more interesting because it has occurred at a time when many factors have encouraged congregations to retreat into their own local programs.

TRANSCENDING THE LOCAL

The mandate for Christian congregations to engage in ministry beyond their immediate locale is expressed most clearly in the New Testament teaching known as the Great Commission (Mark 16:15): "Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature." Acts 1:8 emphasizes the same mandate: "You shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and unto the uttermost parts of the earth." The early church established a pattern of congregations commissioning and financially supporting apostolic ministries. Paul and Peter, along with Mark, Thomas, and others, traveled widely, spreading the gospel through Asia Minor, to Rome and Alexandria, and as far as India. However, the subsequent diffusion of Christianity was not accomplished primarily through local congregations' supporting ministries abroad. The spread of Christianity came in large measure from conquest and territorial rule as individual leaders, particularly Constantine, converted to Christianity and declared it the

official religion. Christianity spread through persecution, as congregations fled and became diasporic communities in new locales. It also spread through the witness of itinerant evangelists and traders. By the sixth century, the Western church was sufficiently organized that ministries abroad were centrally commissioned under papal authority, much like ambassadors and emissaries sent by secular authorities. In 597, for instance, Pope Gregory sent Augustine and forty other monks to evangelize the British Isles. This pattern expanded during the Middle Ages through the establishment of monastic orders, including the Benedictines, Franciscans, and Jesuits, who took on the responsibility of representing the church abroad. These religious orders played a significant role in carrying Christianity to the New World during the Spanish imperium of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Local parishes were involved in these efforts, but their role consisted largely of paying mandatory tithes. The Protestant Reformation did not greatly alter this pattern, although the religious conflicts of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries resulted in a new diaspora of religious dissenters, such as the Huguenot community that fled to Brazil and the Puritans who settled in North America.¹⁸

Local congregations assumed a more direct role in overseas evangelistic and humanitarian efforts during the nineteenth century, especially in Great Britain and the United States, where missionary societies emerged as voluntary organizations. Prior to this time, local congregations had mostly assisted in founding and supporting new congregations within the American colonies themselves by sending itinerant preachers and taking up special collections. Catholic leaders and the heads of Protestant denominations increasingly provided supervision and funding for new congregations. As the European population in North America increased, congregations of immigrants often sent money directly to other congregations seeking to provide places of worship for immigrants of similar ethnic or national origin. Precedent was thus established for congregations to consider needs beyond their own communities. The arrival of large numbers of immigrants in urban areas at the end of the nineteenth century further established this precedent, as congregations contributed to settlement house projects, relief chests, and other urban ministries.

The earliest missionary societies in the United States raised money by finding ways to do so without compromising the budgets of local churches. During the first decade of the nineteenth century, what became known as female cent societies raised money by asking women to save a penny a week by tightening household budgets in small ways.¹⁹ These

societies, organized by churchwomen, led within a few decades to the development of hundreds of ladies' associations that raised funds for foreign missions and gradually drew their congregations into a more sustained supporting role. Whereas the larger organizations for missions, such as the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, developed centrally coordinated programs, the ladies' associations adopted specific missionaries and supported specific projects, thus anticipating the direct congregational support that was to become popular during the last third of the twentieth century.²⁰

Local churches balanced ministries abroad with ministries at home primarily by cooperating with governing boards that transcended specific congregations, such as missionary societies, church councils, conferences of bishops, synods, presbyteries, and the like. Each congregation paid an "apportionment" to this larger body, which in turn allocated funds for evangelistic and relief work in other domestic locations and in other countries. During the course of the twentieth century, numerous other ways of linking local congregations with wider ministries gradually emerged. Independent mission boards assisted congregations in working directly with missionaries. Some congregations developed partnerships with congregations in other countries. A large number of humanitarian, relief, and economic development agencies also came into existence during the last half of the century.

As a result of these developments, congregations and individual members now have ample opportunities to initiate activities that extend beyond the local community and even to other countries. Church members have a broad range of options for supporting these wider ministries, such as taking short-term mission trips sponsored by congregations, doing individual volunteer work abroad, and sending letters or e-mails. Besides direct expenditures of money or time, church members also routinely make choices about difficult issues involving the wider world through indirect means, such as working for legislation to promote or restrict free trade, helping refugees, or protecting the global environment. What is also evident from the historical record, though, is that purely voluntary programs organized only at the local level have seldom been the preferred pattern for addressing wider needs. Congregations participated in wider efforts because political arrangements or leaders at the highest levels of church authority required them to or because they could do so in small ways through church boards and parachurch organizations. Apart from this, congregations' record of translocal involvement was until recently spotty, either helping other congregations when there was some

direct affinity or pitching in because an occasional leader with exceptional charisma encouraged them to do so. If congregations are currently engaged in wider activities, it is because these activities have become more firmly grounded in sustainable institutional practices.

GLOBAL REALITIES

The situation in which American church members now find themselves is one of unprecedented opportunities for engagement in the experiences of people whose lives are quite different from their own. A large minority of the churchgoing public has traveled abroad, witnessing firsthand the diversity of lifestyles and cultures. A growing minority of American church members are immigrants, and for them, transnationalism has literally meant crossing borders and adapting to cultural differences. Television makes it possible to visualize, say, a street in Marrakech or a refugee camp in Somalia more vividly than ever before. The Internet further expands these possibilities. The resulting potential for awareness about human needs beyond the borders of one's own community or nation is thus greatly increased. This is not to say that the typical church member is necessarily cognizant of these needs at a deep level or is particularly mindful of them from day to day. It is to say that newspapers and television bring daily reports of suffering, hunger, and violence from around the world.

It is a truism to say that suffering has always been the plight of the human condition; moreover, there is usually enough suffering close to home so that people in the United States do not have to look abroad to find it. Yet the realities of global media, travel, trade, and economic interdependence make it difficult to ignore the extent to which suffering prevails in the wider world. Figures compiled by the United Nations, for instance, suggest that more than 800 million people in the world are malnourished. More than a billion lack access to clean water. Six million children under the age of five die annually as a result of hunger. Three million children die each year from waterborne disease. More than twenty-two million people have died from AIDS, leaving at least thirteen million children without mothers.²¹ The people who suffer most have been helped very little by the expansion of global trade, and by some indications their situation has worsened. That expansion has, if anything, increased the huge discrepancies between the rich and the poor. Currently, the amount of money that the richest 1 percent of the world's people make each year equals that of the poorest 57 percent. More than

a billion people worldwide struggle to survive on less than a dollar a day.²²

In addition to these manifest physical needs, the church's historic mission of preaching, teaching, and making disciples of all nations remains far from being fulfilled, at least to those who interpret this mission in terms of numeric gains for Christianity. Some 2.6 billion of the world's 7.8 billion people are estimated to be adherents of Christianity, meaning that nearly two-thirds of the world's population belong to some other religion or none. Opinions differ, of course, about how to interpret such figures and about whether they are meaningful at all. Some authorities, for instance, point to rapid growth among Christian groups in Africa or Latin America and conclude that Christianity is clearly on the ascendancy. Others are not so sure, especially when sagging participation rates at churches in western Europe are considered. But from the number crunchers themselves, the best estimates are that adherents of Christianity have hovered at 33 to 34 percent of the world's population for the past century and that this level is likely to remain steady for at least another half century.²³

Whether Christianity expands or remains constant, many observers of the international scene point to the growing possibilities of religious conflict and the need for sustained interreligious dialogue and creative theological reflection. Political scientist Samuel P. Huntington's prediction of escalating tensions between Christians and Muslims has been particularly notable.²⁴ Religion and religious conflicts have thus reentered debates among international relations specialists and experts on economic development in ways that would have been inconceivable a few decades ago. "At a time when the notion of a global 'clash of cultures' is resonating so powerfully—and worryingly—around the world," writes United Nations Human Development Programme administrator Mark Malloch Brown, "finding answers to the old questions of how best to manage and mitigate conflict over language, religion, culture and ethnicity has taken on renewed importance."²⁵ International relations scholar Daniel Philpott emphasizes that people across the globe seek "to worship and submit to their God, to protect and defend their mosques, temples, shrines, synagogues, and churches, to convert others to their faith, to reside in a realm governed by *sharia*, to live under a government that promotes morality in many spheres of society, to draw on their faith to extend civil rights to minorities and women, and to practice forgiveness and reconciliation in the wake of decades of injustices."²⁶ Is it any wonder, he asks, that these activities have a profound impact on societies and the relationships among societies?

Discussions of the physical needs and spiritual quests of the world's population invariably raise thickets of arguments and counterarguments, proposals, and questions. For instance, an influential segment of America's business and political elite believes that the world's problems can best be solved by the spread of free market capitalism. Others believe the solution lies in propagating American-style democracy, while still others anticipate that only the imminent return of Christ will put an end to the current state of affairs. In these scenarios, the average church in the United States has such a small role to play that playing any at all hardly matters. However, the extreme cynicism represented in these views appears not to be widely shared. Religious leaders generally agree that churches should be involved in ministries to the wider world. The questions, rather, are what is being done and what can be learned from these efforts?

WHAT ARE CHURCHES DOING?

Researchers have paid so little attention to the transcultural activities of American churches that it has until recently been difficult to answer even the simplest questions about what is currently being done. Although countless studies of church leaders and church members have been conducted, hardly any of these have ventured into topics involving programs outside the United States. Those that have included such topics provide only scant evidence, and this information has evoked more questions than answers. For instance, sociologist Mark Chaves's National Congregations study found that only 8 percent of Americans attend congregations that sponsor or participate in "programs explicitly mentioning beneficiaries outside the United States, including Crop Walk."²⁷ But it is likely that the reference to Crop Walk directed respondents' thinking toward social service or fund-raising activities and discouraged them from considering the foreign missionaries their congregation might have been sponsoring. A national study of individuals conducted by political scientist John C. Green also suggested that congregational support for international ministries may be relatively rare. When asked if they had given time or money to support "international programs," only 11 percent of those surveyed said they had done so through a religious venue, while another 13 percent said they had through a secular venue.²⁸ However, no questions were asked about informal programs or other forms of individual involvement that may have been influenced by congregational participation. These national results must also be weighed against

evidence that in some settings congregations are more likely to be involved in international ministries. For instance, social scientist Ram Cnaan's research among Philadelphia churches (which are larger, more urban, and more involved in other social ministries than congregations nationally) found that nearly a quarter of congregations (22.3 percent) claimed to be involved in helping provide "international relief" services—about the same proportion that helped sponsor soup kitchens or prison ministries locally.²⁹

If existing surveys have provided little information about international programs, other evidence suggests that American churches in the aggregate are doing quite a lot to support missionary work and humanitarian ministries abroad. Figures collected by Protestant mission agencies and denominations in 2001 showed that there were 42,787 U.S. citizens working full-time as missionaries in other countries, representing an increase of approximately 16 percent over the previous decade, and significantly higher than the comparable number in the 1950s, at the often assumed height of overseas missionary endeavors. In addition, approximately 65,000 non-U.S. citizens and foreign nationals were working in other countries under full sponsorship by a U.S. agency. Besides this, as many as 350,000 Americans had spent between two weeks and up to a year abroad serving as short-term mission volunteers, and an estimated one million (a number that may have been considerably higher) had served for less than two weeks. In total, U.S. churches contributed more than \$3.7 billion for overseas ministries, an after-inflation increase of 45 percent over the previous decade.³⁰

It is worth underscoring what these figures suggest about the involvement of American churches in ministries abroad because they run counter to a popular view about such ministries. In the popular view, ministries abroad began to falter in the 1960s, at which time they were left largely in the hands of independent evangelical agencies, and even these efforts began to diminish by the 1990s. In contrast, the numbers of Americans engaged in both short- and long-term foreign missions efforts and the amount of money spent suggest that the United States still plays a very significant and increasing role. Other evidence also supports this view. For instance, World Vision International, Catholic Relief Services, and the Salvation Army are among the world's largest international relief and development organizations, and each, while thoroughly international in organization and administration, secures a large share of its revenue from individual donors within the United States and, for that matter, depends increasingly on the U.S. government for funds.³¹

The fact that American churches provide substantial assistance to foreign missionary efforts and to humanitarian agencies does not mean that these programs necessarily stand high on the list of financial priorities of most congregations. Nevertheless, American churches are able to sponsor these global programs because the United States is a rich country and because U.S. churches continue to be generously supported by a large share of the population. Scholars generally agree that there are between 300,000 and 350,000 local congregations in the United States and that as many as 60 to 65 percent of the adult population claims membership in at least one of these congregations. Between 40 and 45 percent of the adult population are estimated to be active members of a religious congregation, meaning that they participate in religious services at least a few times a month, while between a quarter and a third of the public participate regularly in services at their congregations. Figures reported in *Giving USA 2006* showed that Americans gave a total of \$260.3 billion to various kinds of charities and voluntary organizations, of which \$93.2 billion went to religion.³² Thus, if churches set aside even 5 percent of that amount for international programs, the amount available would be in excess of \$4 billion.

Further perspective on the resources of American religion can be gained by comparing the United States with the second-most populous Christian country in the world—Brazil. With a population (in 2000) of 170.1 million, 91 percent of whom are Christian, Brazil figures prominently in discussions of how the center of gravity in global Christianity is shifting to the Southern Hemisphere. In raw numbers, the 155 million Christians living in Brazil and the 192 million Christians living in the United States give an appearance that the two countries are nearly equivalent. But differences need to be considered as well. In the United States the average Christian receives an annual income of \$26,980, whereas the average annual income of a Christian in Brazil is \$3,640. Not surprisingly, Christian organizations are much more numerous and better supported in the United States than in Brazil. For instance, Brazil has more than twice as many Catholics as the United States, but the United States has more than twice as many Catholic parishes as Brazil does, and the ratio of priests to parishioners is six times higher in the United States than in Brazil.³³ Overall, Catholic and Protestant churches take in approximately nine times as much money annually as churches in Brazil. According to one estimate, there were at least 2,300 Christian service organizations in the United States, compared with 250 in Brazil.³⁴ Other reports have suggested that at least 1,200 missionaries from the United States are

currently working in Brazil.³⁵ The point of such comparisons is not to diminish the importance of indigenous churches in Brazil, many of which have experienced explosive growth in recent decades. It is rather to emphasize that churches in the United States have enormous capacity to support ministries both at home and abroad. Were a family in the United States to pledge a tenth of its annual income to foreign missions, for instance, that pledge would cover the annual salary of a missionary in Brazil for nearly a year; in contrast, a similar pledge in Brazil would have to be made by seventy-five families to support a missionary in the United States.

Besides providing assistance to international programs, American congregations also have the capacity to influence their members' attitudes toward international policy and other government programs. In a previous study I found that 81 percent of the American public claimed to be "quite" or "fairly" interested in "international human rights issues" and 68 percent expressed the same level of interest in "relief and development programs for people in Third World Countries." Three-quarters (74 percent) of the public said religious organizations should become "more active" in "making Americans aware of hunger and poverty in other countries." Regular churchgoers were more interested in these issues and supportive of church involvement than were infrequent attendees. At least a quarter of churchgoers said they had heard sermons in the past year on such topics as poverty and the environment.³⁶ In another study, three-quarters of self-identified Christians said the United States should be actively involved in world affairs, and their theological orientations were related to their views of just exactly how the nation should be involved. Theological "moderates or liberals" were more likely than were religious conservatives (defined as "fundamentalists, evangelicals, charismatics, or Pentecostals") to favor economic involvement, whereas the reverse was true for military involvement. When asked if they thought globalization was mostly good or mostly bad for the United States, a majority of both groups thought it was mostly good (but religious conservatives were almost twice as likely as moderates or liberals to say that globalization was mostly bad).³⁷

On balance, the evidence that has been collected in previous studies, while inconclusive, does suggest that American churches are engaged in transcultural ministries and have the potential to be even more engaged. The issue is not that congregations and other religious organizations are doing nothing. It is rather one of understanding more precisely what they are doing and the factors that are currently influencing congregations'

decisions about these ministries. American churches may be only one small part of larger economic, humanitarian, and evangelistic efforts. Yet these congregational efforts hold enormous potential not only for what they may contribute to the rest of the world but also for how they affect the lives of church members.

THE DISAPPEARING OTHER

One other aspect of the present situation must be introduced as background for considering the global outreach of American churches. *New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman provides a way of bringing this issue into focus. Friedman is a gifted writer whose work has given him the opportunity to travel widely and rub shoulders with interesting people in many parts of the world. His insights often serve better as sound bites than as in-depth analysis, but his writing raises interesting questions about how the world is changing. In *The World Is Flat* Friedman argues that people everywhere—and the places where they live and work—are increasingly becoming interchangeable.³⁸ A journalist can play golf in India just as easily as in California and in either location meet people who work for Microsoft or IBM. It makes no difference to Microsoft's Bill Gates if his employees are in Fresno or Bangalore. Friedman's image of a flat world captures this sense of interchangeability. It matters little to Wal-Mart's customers if the toaster oven they purchase was manufactured in Caracas or Shanghai so long as it is cheap. The Bank of America customer is probably not even aware that his or her account may be kept in Delhi or that a direct marketing call from the bank may be routed through Bangladesh.

Of course people in different parts of the world are not truly interchangeable, any more than the globe is literally flat. But the idea of an emerging sameness or homogeneity has become increasingly popular. In the literature on globalization, for instance, writers point to the homogenization of tastes that comes about through fast food chains, such as McDonald's, and specialty franchise shops, such as Starbucks, or through the global economic clout of such businesses as Microsoft and the Bank of America. Inexpensive clothing produced in China or Guatemala, resulting in hordes of teenagers around the world dressed interchangeably in T-shirts and blue jeans, is another example. Yet another is the diffusion of a common culture centered in Western music, television programs, and motion pictures. The argument is not that people everywhere are becoming exactly the same or that they no longer have freedom to make

their own choices. It is just that the choices are more likely to fall within a certain range of options dictated by a kind of global shopping mall.

Analysts of religion have been making a very similar argument. In *The Next Christendom* historian Philip Jenkins has popularized the idea that Christianity is now a truly global religion, centered increasingly in Africa and Latin America, where population growth rates are much higher than in Europe and North America.³⁹ Jenkins's argument is not that the entire world is Christian (or will be anytime soon). Indeed, he emphasizes the differences and potential conflicts between Christian and Muslim populations and within Christianity itself. Yet his book underscores an important point that mission specialists and church leaders at the grassroots have been observing for a long time: when Christians from the United States go abroad or think about helping people in other countries, they more easily see these people as being no different from themselves than at any time in the past. People elsewhere are no longer Serepta's heathen, marked by radical superstition and paganism that places them outside the fold. They are now fellow Christians who share the same beliefs and practices, though inflected with some cosmetic ethnic differences, just like the person in an adjacent pew at one's own church.

This emerging sense of global oneness, as it is sometimes called, has resulted in a dramatic reorientation in academic thinking about Christian missions. In their widely read *Missional Church*, Darrell Guder and his associates describe both a "radical shift" in the way society views the church and a "paradigm shift" in scholarly thinking about missions. They call for local congregations to rededicate themselves to being "missional" and to move beyond the traditional "sending-receiving mentality" that engaged congregations in raising money to be sent to mission enterprises elsewhere. As part of this shift, they observe that "local congregations are beginning to see their own context as their mission."⁴⁰ Although a superficial reading of this argument might lead to the conclusion that local churches should simply pull back from supporting transnational endeavors, the larger point is that churches can no longer rely on familiar practices or models of mission. The world has in this sense become flat. There is no longer a distinctly American Christendom from which to engage in activities aimed at spreading the gospel to those in other parts of the world who are outside the fold.

In the social sciences, an erosion of distinctions between "us" and "them" is generally regarded as a positive development. Such distinctions are often the basis for misunderstanding and prejudice. In the case of American Christianity, it is easy to see that historic distinctions between

the Christians here at home and non-Christians abroad were often tinged with a paternalistic attitude that diminished the full humanity of those living in other parts of the world. Few would deplore the erosion of markers distinguishing the “other” in this way. A flat earth is more consistent with research showing that a genuine spirit of compassion is nurtured not by feeling superior to an other but by emphasizing one’s common humanity.⁴¹

But there is a wrinkle. Disappearance of the other also signals an erosion of identity. It becomes harder to know who “we” are in the absence of an other who differs from us. Communities nearly always establish their identity by symbolically or ritually demarcating themselves from others (initiation rites, insignia, mascots, loyalty oaths, and membership fees all serve this purpose). Historically, the other has always been important to the identity of religious communities. The stranger might be welcomed but was clearly in a different category from blood members of the tribe. Laws prohibiting usury applied to dealings with insiders but not to outsiders. “We” were the chosen people, the elect, the saved, and others were not. Christians set themselves apart from Jews in this way, as did Protestants from Catholics, and in other instances one Protestant denomination from another. Small denominations and minority religious groups distinguished themselves as outsiders to the dominant culture, while larger and better-established groups kept their distance from what they called “cults.” None of this cultural posturing necessarily involved overt discrimination or conflict, although it often did. It was done subtly and in good faith as people met for worship, picked up implicit signals about who they were and who they were not, and interacted differently with insiders and outsiders.

In *Outside the Fold* the comparative literature scholar Guari Viswanathan documents the fascinating story of what happened in nineteenth-century England with the disappearance of the religious other. At the height of Britain’s colonial empire it became economically and politically expedient to imagine that all religions were interchangeable, at least if those who practiced them in the colonies no longer took them very seriously and behaved as civilized people were expected to behave. She writes that “in the expectation that Indians were more acceptable if they were no longer practicing Hindus or Muslims, it was considered profitable to make good Englishmen of them, even if it was unlikely or even undesirable for them to be good Christians.” But once it became the empire’s official practice to turn “Hindus into non-Hindu Hindus, or Muslims into non-Muslim Muslims” in the colonies, the

same logic came home to roost in attitudes within England itself. "A nation of good Englishmen was a more realistic goal than a nation of good Anglicans."⁴² Contrary to the familiar charge that Anglicanism declined simply because it was an established state church, then, this argument emphasizes a transcultural perspective that associates the diminishing strength of the church at home with the way in which the "other" was perceived abroad.

A flat-earth perspective in which American Christians view themselves simply as an indistinguishable aspect of global Christianity may not suggest an outcome resembling that of nineteenth-century Britain. It is interesting, though, that some of the strongest proponents of the paradigm shift implied by the rise of global Christianity have little to say about the continuing role of churches in the United States. For instance, Jenkins devotes more attention to the possibility of other countries sending missionaries to the United States than the reverse and hardly mentions the humanitarian and relief work of American churches at all. In the absence of a clear vision of the "other" abroad, it is also interesting that the various branches of American Christianity seem to be shoring up their identities by experimenting with "others" of their own, whether through likening themselves to an exile-like community, as some writers suggest, or by identifying themselves through the symbolic politics of popular social and moral issues as an embattled minority of true believers.⁴³ For our purposes, the main implication of this new flat-earth perspective toward global culture and global Christianity is the uncertainty it produces for local churches as they consider their role in missions and service work abroad.

TRANSCULTURAL CHURCH

The globalization of American Christianity is becoming evident in the extent to which congregations and individual Christians in the United States are engaged in transcultural activities, such as supporting overseas missionaries and relief workers or sending medical teams abroad, and registering interest in U.S. policies and the work of humanitarian agencies in other countries. It is also measurable in the degree to which the self-identity of American Christianity includes a normative commitment to the wider world, as expressed in the idea of a transcultural church. "Transcultural" is of course an ambiguous word. Its connotations are similar to those of "transnational," because the activities at issue take place outside of or are concerned with people who live outside of the na-

tional boundaries of the United States (such as doing volunteer work in another country). However, “transnational” has two meanings that limit its usefulness in the present context.

One connotation, suggested by the common phrase “transnational corporation,” points to something massively large and existing as a significant economic presence in several countries (such as Microsoft or Exxon). That connotation may well apply to an entity such as the Roman Catholic Church or the Anglican Communion, but otherwise is hardly the most suitable phrase for the sporadic, small-scale, border-spanning activities in which U.S. congregations are engaged, let alone attitudes and beliefs that are not truly located in other countries at all. The other connotation of “transnational” is emphasized by scholars of immigration, who restrict its meaning to a category of immigrants that travels back and forth between two countries, perhaps maintaining residences in both, and is at least bicultural enough to be quite different from the kind of person who lives only in one place.⁴⁴ This, too, fails to capture the variety of ways in which congregations and church members engage in boundary-crossing activities.

It is important to understand the special sense in which I use the term here. Transcultural does not mean simply being exposed to different ethnic or regional customs within the United States, and it does not mean that a person enjoys getting out once in a while, for instance, to eat at an ethnic restaurant. Transcultural means being involved in or interested in activities that take place outside of the United States and holding attitudes about such issues as international trade or military intervention that affect people in other countries besides the United States. In this sense, most Christians in the United States are indeed transcultural, although the degree to which they are varies, as does the character of their activities and attitudes.

I refer to “transcultural church” in the singular to emphasize the deliberate ambiguity that has always surrounded discussions of the Christian church. Christians understand the church to be the earthly and historical manifestation of the body of Christ. It is thus one body, a singular entity, diverse in functions and united in spirit, although geographically dispersed. This is not the same thing as “Christendom,” a term that connotes more internal organization and political recognition than is currently the case and for that reason has rightly been criticized and largely rejected by scholars of Christianity. To speak of the church, singular, serves as a reminder that Christians within the United States and around the world do bear an affinity with one another, even though this affin-

ity is sometimes overshadowed by huge differences in local customs, practices, and beliefs. At the same time, the fact that “church” takes on its primary and most significant meanings within local congregations also points to the fundamental plurality of church and hence to the common sentiment that “my church” is one of “many churches” in the community, nation, and world. To be a transcultural church is thus to be the church in both this singular and plural sense—to understand that the local congregation of which someone is a member is also part of the global church that spans local and national boundaries.