American Mainline Protestantism
A Study Guide

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Introduction

Welcome to an exploration of religious life in North America during the 20th century, and particularly to a study of a complex and important shift in American culture from a period of a widely perceived religious homogeneity to a time of greater religious diversity.

During the early part of the 20th century a coalition of several denominational traditions known as Mainline Protestants shaped the public religious culture of the United States. Mainline Protestantism was not initiated by any particular leader, nor did it take shape around an event; instead it emerged from the coalescing of several impulses, institutions, and traditions. Mainline Protestant religious actors and institutions collaborated in shaping the educational, cultural, political and moral life in the United States and Canada for several decades. At the end of the century, however, Mainline Protestantism was widely perceived to be in "decline" as its membership figures dropped, its political influence lessened, and its institutions lost funding. This study guide provides an overview of extensive Lilly Endowment sponsored scholarly and general investigations of these changes.

The ecumenical embrace of Mainline Protestantism no longer encompasses the religious diversity of North America, for several reasons: a waning interest in institutional forms of church life, new immigration, middle class migration out of cities, the expansion of southern urban centers, along with the decline of rural communities across the continent. These factors have been studied by Mainline Protestant churches for a long time, as they have sought to understand and respond to challenges they have faced in their communities.

The economic processes that have disrupted the traditional stronghold of American Mainline Protestantism in small towns and Northern cities have contributed to the shift, while theological reflection on the social crises of racism, genocide, and poverty have challenged traditional pietistic readings of the bible and Protestantism's more individualistic forms of religious devotion. While Mainline Protestantism may be in
decline, secularism seems not to be taking the place of religious commitment. America has not become less religious but instead has become home to one of the most religiously diverse cultures in the world.

The historians, sociologists, and theologians who researched and wrote the books and articles referenced in this study guide have engaged in a collaborative venture funded by the Lilly Endowment. The endowment’s support of graduate work as well as focused investigation by senior scholars generated a published conversation among scholars about the fortunes of the Protestant Establishment or Mainline Protestantism. The religious bodies involved include American Baptists, Episcopalians, Evangelical Lutherans, Presbyterians, Methodists, Disciples, and United Church of Christ denominations.

Figuring out which religious groups belong to Mainline or Establishment Protestantism has not been easy. Lutherans are often reluctant partners, and other denominations like the historic Black Churches are more recent collaborators. As is typical of a movement, Mainline Protestants are identified by commitments and principles that they hold: They are pioneers of ecumenical alliances, promoters of high-minded theological education and everyday Christian literacy, and stewards of coordinated Christian relief work. People moved by these commitments and ideals have provided community and religious leadership for American society.

This guide provides an introduction to results from several years of investigation into the dynamics of religious adherence in the United States and Canada. Readers interested in the story of American Protestantism in general as well as those who wish to focus on the fortunes of individual denominations will be able to follow this guide to identify fruitful areas for further reading. The books and articles indexed here are not limited to the few Mainline Protestant denominations listed above. Roman Catholic experience finds its place in the material, particularly insofar as the developing ecumenical relationships brought churches into closer collaboration. Scholars have also investigated religious life beyond the parameters of denominations. The research thus represents the multifaceted dimensions of American religious life. Immigrants who encountered Protestant cultural dominance, Native Americans who faced pressure to assimilate, and believers who invented a religious life out of bits and pieces of America’s popular culture find their place alongside the more traditional but still changing forms of congregational participation practiced in Mainline Protestantism.

The support of the Lilly Endowment also made a broader and more independent scope of investigation possible than any one denomination, or even a cluster of them could have provided. As a result these studies have not been sponsored directly by denominations. Scholars have consequently placed the question of declining Protestant influence in a wider and more critical context. The material that follows in this study
guide thus provides an example of a new way to study denominations that gets beyond insider accounts, and likewise avoids the nostalgic mode. By asking new questions of America's religious culture, and the Protestant Mainline in particular, these writers render new insights not only into the ways that religious institutions change and adapt but also into the ways in which religious impulses have been displaced or relocated to other cultural venues. The scholars who have begun to pose these questions hope that others will take up their lead, and even embark on new investigations. The study guide itself provides the mechanism to encourage a wider circle of interested people in congregations, in denominational institutions, and in seminaries, universities and colleges to look at their institutions and churches with a realistic sense of what kind of role they might play within the broader context of America's religious pluralism.

In order to approach such a broad range of religious topics this study is divided into nine sections. Each section can be studied independently or in sequence. Suggested readings in each section provide material for reflection and discussion. Each topical area also contains links or references to studies in other sections, so readers can course through the material in a variety of ways. There are multiple entry points into the study of American Protestantism.

1. Mainline Protestant Churches and Denominations
2. Popular culture and religion: Seeing American Protestantism as a cultural form
3. Religion in Context: Regional Religious Establishments
4. Congregational Life
5. Forming the Faith: Family and Community
6. Theological Traditions and Trends
7. Social Sources of Theological Development: Civil Rights and Cultural Diversity
8. The Public Presence of Mainline Protestantism
9. What comes next for the Mainline? Protestantism or Pluralism?

Session One: Mainline Protestant Churches and Denominations

**Readings:**


**Overview:**

Mainline or Mainstream Protestantism needs to be examined in fresh ways both by historians and by members of churches. One of the promising ways to do this is to reexamine the role and significance of denominations and denominationalism in American life. Studies of individual denominations that examine its institutional development in isolation, such as insider histories, will not enlighten many readers or even keep them awake, but broader investigations that reveal how denominations responded to or influenced larger cultural patterns can shed light on the ways that religious communities and traditions relate both positively and negatively to American life.

Mega-churches, with their full service programming and their location in America’s fast growing suburban landscapes, have become the fashionable new source of religious identity for millions of Americans. As these churches grow, they spend resources to develop their own varied services, say Roger Nemeth and Donald Luidens ["Paying Peter and/or Paul: Church Finances and Congregational Vitality," in *Reformed Vitality: Continuity and Change in the Face of Modernity*, Lanham, MD, 1998, p. 122] by tapping a ready source of income: the money previously passed on to denominations. Spending and ministering locally, these churches make a huge impact in their own communities, but do not connect their parishioners with institutions and ministries of "far away" denominations. The kinds of ministries they provide for young families with children are, however, particularly costly. These growing congregations, like congregations with a high percentage of elderly parishioners, are expensive to maintain. Denominations will find that congregations skewed in either direction — toward growth or toward decline — will be spending most of their resources on themselves and passing little on to their headquarters.

Nancy Ammerman looks at denominations and sees a brighter future. She articulates the reasons that denominational structures have persisted in American life in a Christian Century article entitled "New Life for Denominationalism" [vol. 117, no. 9 (March, 2000): 302-307]. Arguing that denominational affiliation provide identity for significant segments of the American population, she claims that denominations created and still define the structure of America’s religious pluralism.

The debate about denominations and their usefulness to congregations continues to focus on whether church growth is aided or hurt by a strong denominational affiliation. Congregations that follow the advice of church growth experts are often directed to shed
denominational labels, which arguably may stand in the way of attracting new members. Mainline denominations — Episcopal, Baptist, Disciples, Presbyterian, Methodist, Reformed, Lutheran, United Church of Christ — have experienced declining membership and finances, and have curtailed many programs and publications. The remaining members have much less understanding and loyalty to their denominational tradition.

Since denominations are just not as visible or influential even for their own members as they were in 1950, readers might wonder why one should embark on an in depth study. The writers who have tackled this question have examined the many factors that contribute to the complex place of Protestantism in contemporary North American culture, and though their work takes account of the numbers, it also reveals that these institutions and traditions should not be discounted, as they have been veterans at adapting to new roles in relationship to American culture throughout their long histories. A series of case studies of Presbyterians, Methodists, and the Disciples of Christ, together with other comparative studies of denominations outside the "mainline" such as the Charismatic movement and the Pentecostal denominations, show how each of these denominations have reinvented themselves throughout their history.

When denominational and institutional church life is analyzed, and given an American fascination with numbers and statistics, a focus on growth and decline is almost inevitable. A comprehensive denominational study by the United Methodist Church produced a valuable series of books edited by Russell Richey, Kenneth, Rowe, and Jean Miller Schmidt. Methodism was founded as a breakaway movement from a stale establishment, and flourished as a religious institution that captured the spirit of the expanding American nation. In revisiting Methodist history in order to study why the fortunes of Methodism may have changed, the five year project aimed to achieve three objectives:

1. To provide a careful, fresh estimate of the history of Methodism in America, with particular attention to its twentieth-century experience,

2. To attempt a portrait of United Methodism at the dawning of a new century, and,


Accompanying the book series is a valuable collection of source material used by the historians. In The Methodist Experience in America: A Sourcebook, volumes I and II, readers can review primary sources documenting the internal dynamism within the Methodist movement.
concluding volume makes specific recommendations for constitutional changes in the Methodist Book of Discipline.\(^1\)

The investigative work on the United Methodist Church is pioneering because it examines the denomination in the context of many other social forces, utilizing sociological analyses as well as critical historical tools. Kenneth Rowe, in his chapter entitled "Redesigning Methodist Churches," in vol. 1, links the Romanesque style of church building popular among newly middle class Methodists in the large cities of the late 19\(^{th}\) century to their evangelical sensibilities as well as their concern for social status: "Methodism shunned classical architecture, whose imitation of pagan temples seemed an inappropriate way to express Christian faith. Gothic and Romanesque-revival styles, to even the most casual observer, marked the spiritual and temporal prosperity of the church."

The collaborative work of Richey, Campbell and Lawrence on the Methodists is matched by a similar work on Presbyterians. Milton J Coalter, John M. Mulder, and Louis B. Weeks have guided a team of researchers and scholars in a study of Presbyterianism in the 20\(^{th}\) century. Work on the Disciples tradition, A Case Study of Mainstream Protestantism: The Disciples' Relation to American Culture, 1880-1989, edited by D. Newell Williams noted earlier, shares in focusing scholarly attention to the intersection between popular culture and Mainline Protestantism. Throughout these studies, writers document the porous boundaries between Protestant mores and values and the styles and aspirations of popular culture. Whether in building sanctuaries or providing community leadership, Methodists, Disciples, Episcopalians, and Congregationalists were alike in assuming that they had a central role to play in defining the identity of and guiding their community.

Though there is new interest in denominational structures and their resilience on the part of social and cultural historians, these new methods of study and examination may also help members of the churches themselves appreciate the complex nature of their own tradition. While old fashioned church history aimed to inspire a rather uncritical loyalty, the newer methods may be able to provide a foundation of a more critical respect for the way that denominational leaders of the Mainline Protestant Churches went through a process of relinquishing a prominent social role to become committed players in a broader religious pluralism. Historians who follow this line of interpretation, as outlined by William Hutchison in Religious Pluralism in America, leave nostalgia behind and pick up again the socially minded and purposeful spirit that seems always able to find a way to make itself known among Mainline Protestants.\(^2\)

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Questions for the Session:

In several studies mentioned, the introductory chapters by the editors give the readers a sense of the lively debate that obtained among the participants as they sought to define the Protestant Mainline, or Mainstream, or Establishment, as these several denominations are collectively referred to. Each of these names suggest that a discussion of these churches is also a discussion of the dynamics of religious power and influence within American culture.

- Do denominations reflect as closely as they once did the popular religious culture of American Protestantism?
- Which aspects of religious life in America today seem to fall outside the boundaries of denominational religion?

Session Two: Popular Culture and Religion: Seeing American Protestantism as a Cultural Form

Readings:


Overview:

During the last couple of decades of scholarship in American religion, those who study the "white bread" variety of Protestantism — the Mainline Protestant Establishment — have had a rather hard time of it. While colleagues studying Japanese monastic practices, godly dieting, immigrant letter writing, or teenage devotional journals have stimulated quite a bit of interest in the broad range of topics that might be covered in an introduction to American religion, those who have focused on the stalwart traditions and rather ordinary practices of Mainline Protestantism have had to fend for themselves in finding an interested audience. Protestants did not go on pilgrimages or desert sojourns; they did not invent any new recipes that would stimulate any scholarly appetites. They seemed inert when prodded for new information; their institutions,
denominational structures, schools, programs, and councils participated so fully in America's professional and bureaucratic evolution that their methods, organizational principles, and vision seem almost self evident, and the motives of their leaders transparent. So it is that American Protestantism blends almost seamlessly into the surrounding secular culture that the churches themselves have become custodians of much more than a specialized religious tradition; they could almost be seen as guardians of a form of cultural conformity. The much touted "decline" of Mainline Protestant denominations has also coincided with the anti-institutional individualism that has increasingly characterized American popular culture in the past several decades.

As interest in institutional forms of religion has waned, or suffered from this cultural challenge, religion as lived outside the bounds of denominationalism has become an important theme in contemporary scholarship about American Religion. Pioneered in relationship to European studies of everyday life, and particularly the forms of religion practiced by laity outside of the control of establishment clergy, the methods of investigation into popular religion have been taken up also by American scholars of religion. Those who have focused on Roman Catholicism have been able to put these methods developed in Europe to more immediate use than have scholars of Protestantism.

Nevertheless, the sociological and anthropological methods that historians have applied to American religion can yield some interesting insights. Examples of this kind of creative investigation are collected in *Reimagining Denominationalism*, edited by Mullin and Richey. One chapter that illustrates this style of work is Robert Orsi's " 'Have You Ever Prayed to St. Jude?': Reflections on Fieldwork in Catholic Chicago." He shows how investigation into religious practice can shed light on other social realities. The devotion to St. Jude was "invented" or emerged during the middle of the 20th century among young women who experienced profound economic and social limitations. Orsi's work poses questions about the ways that religious life both reflects and provides room for a creative response to significant frustrations and want.

David Morgan's study of a Protestant icon, Warner Sallman's painting of the Head of Christ, in the book *Icons of American Protestantism* provides an example of a devotional object that was widely used by Protestants and was also highly visible in America's popular culture. An earlier essay in the Christian Century by Morgan, on October 7, 1992, introduced this line of thought about popular religious practice to a wide readership. American religious historians have also applied these investigative methods to a broad range of religious experience as reported in David Hall's edited volume *Lived Religion in America: Toward a History of Practice* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1997).
Questions for the Session:

When the lines between Protestantism and culture begin to get a bit blurry, it is all that much harder to figure out what we are studying when we examine Mainline Protestantism. A good beginning for any reader or group wanting to get beyond a superficial assessment of the meaning of American Protestantism today would be to attempt to articulate the image or impression of American Protestantism that is the current "default setting" in the reader's or the study groups' mind. These may be vague impressions, or a set of images or practices, or stories or anecdotes that illustrate how Protestants exhibit a sense of social responsibility.

This exercise will introduce readers to the problems of definition that confronted the writers. When asked to chart the course of the American Protestant Mainline, it was sometimes difficult for investigators to imagine or define boundaries between the churches themselves and the cultural environment in which they operated. The blurry contours of what some began to call the Protestant Establishment might indicate that defining this religious culture and describing the areas where it has enjoyed institutional presence and power would touch upon many facets of American life. Extracting Mainline Protestantism from its imbedded place within a broad American cultural landscape may, however, convince some that Mainline Protestantism is more of a culture than it is a religion.

- Does scholarly fascination with religious life outside of institutional structures like denominations mirror a similar disinterest or disloyalty to the denomination among current church goers?

- How should we define Mainline Protestantism? Does Mainline Protestantism have rituals, or cultural practices that are distinct? What kind of food do Mainline Protestants eat? Is there any religious significance to these cultural practices among Protestants?

Session Three: Religion in Context: Regional Religious Establishments

Readings:

- Any of the 8 volumes in the Religion by Region Series, Mark Silk, general editor. [The series profiles 8 geographic regions of the United States and volumes are being published beginning in 2004.]
Christianity in Appalachia: Profiles in Regional Pluralism, Bill Leonard, ed. (University of Tennessee, University of Tennessee Press, 1999). The volume includes historical overviews of the several denominational traditions in Appalachia. Reading several of them will give readers an appreciation for the ways that a region's particular history affects religious experience.


Overview:

Modern interpreters write about Mainline Protestantism as though it represents a recognizable style of religious life throughout the many geographies of North America, but the environments in which its churches and institutions minister produced significant regional variations in religious culture. From South to North, Midwest to Mountain, patterns of religious life as well as the dominant religious establishment reflect aspects of local experience and history that frustrate easy generalizations. A significant finding of recent research that has used a regional lens is that there have been multiple and subtle variations on the theme of religious establishment.

Much of the material in this reader's guide is drawn from conference papers and edited volumes. A regional analysis is well served by this approach, for students are able to obtain information, for instance, on the full spectrum of Evangelical experience in Canada, from Pentecostalism to Anglicanism. In the conference on Canadian Evangelicalism that produced the volume edited by Rawlyk, for instance, the particular religious context of midwestern North America is explored. The challenges of reaching rural and urban populations with the gospel inspired Evangelical leaders to imagine a movement to transform the whole of Canadian and North American society. Later leaders have settled on working their own corner of the kingdom. The grandiose visions of liberals and conservatives alike make for instructive reading. What we may learn from these micro studies is that every place has found reasons to imagine itself as at least important to, if not central to, what they imagine as God's great design.

With a regional framework as the governing category for analysis interpreters are able to realize exceptionally well grounded interpretations of the dynamics affecting religious life as it is locally practiced. In the reading listed above from the Religion by Region Series, edited by Mark Silk at the Greenberg Center for Religion in Public Life at Trinity College in Hartford, Connecticut, readers can survey nine distinct regions of the United States. In each region, historic patterns of settlement and religious development resulted in variable patterns of religious dominance and influence. These affect the public image of religion in the region, and influence the role that other religious traditions might play. New England's now numerically dominant Roman Catholics, for instance,
inhabit a cultural landscape defined by an historic Protestant Establishment. Town greens, town meetings, and community drop-in centers built by Protestants continue to provide public meeting space for community discernment even though these churches currently represent a minority of the church going population. Though there is a vibrant religious pluralism that is now developing in the region, and while Roman Catholic schools, hospitals, and congregations define the city landscapes, Protestant churches maintain their longstanding role as stewards of community life in the suburbs and small towns.

A range of studies on the religious situation in Canada provide an instructive comparative dimension for a study of North American religion. The sociological analyses and the historical accounts of religious developments in that country mirror many of the same dynamics as appear in United States studies, but also reveal the distinctive religious culture that developed there.

The special case of the United Church in Canada provides readers with a comparative study of Mainline Protestant churches that achieved a higher level of internal organization. The churches that united to form the United Church in Canada defined and institutionalized their social and public commitments during the 1920's and 30's. The "founding vision" of this merger is explored in a dedicated issue of the Toronto Journal of Theology, entitled *Christianizing the Social Order: A Founding Vision of the United Church of Canada*. Robert Handy's article in the volume is helpful for United States readers. He compares the founding of the United Church to the concurrent and much less integrated ecumenical effort in the United States that formed the Federal Council of Churches. Of special interest is the role of the "social gospel" both in the merger in Canada and in the ecumenical movement that oriented the social vision of the National Council of Churches in the United States.³

Regionalism affected Canadian religious experience as well. A study of trans-border evangelical networks between centrist fundamentalists in the United States and Evangelicals in Winnipeg provides an important counterpoint to the picture of Protestant United Church networks in Eastern Canada with the originators of the National Council of Churches of the United States.⁴


While religious leaders in the first part of the 20th century could be ambitious about the prospects for their churches, a more sober mood characterizes Canadians today. A cluster of studies named after the sociologist Reginald Bibby who conducted numerous surveys and research efforts in the 1970’s recorded changing patterns of church affiliation and religious activity in Canada. The work of profiling the shifting affiliations of Canadians continued throughout the 1990’s.

The first reports provided a pioneering model of examining the importance of context and external factors for the health and vitality of churches. The later studies give readers something even more valuable in that they provide a longitudinal study of the role of religion in a particular culture. The result is an ongoing report on social trends in Canada, written in an accessible style. See especially Bibby, Reginald. *The Bibby Report: Social Trends Canadian Style.* (Toronto: Stoddart, 1995).

Regional studies of Protestantism in the United States unveil many different sub-categories for analysis. Urban ministry efforts and civil rights advocacy that emerged in the 1960’s and 70’s have been eclipsed by the widespread practice of youth groups going on mission trips to fix houses, usually to the same areas. Evangelical Christians may have an even stronger sense of mission to other regions, as they muster via technological rallies to protest against liberal justices. Regional differences in religion and culture play a subtle role in shaping the imagination of American Protestants.

**Questions for the Session:**

- Will regional differences persist in the next century of American religious life or will mass media communication erode locally shaped identities?
- Can denominations maintain national policies and identities in the context of strong regional difference?

**Session Four: Congregational Life**

**Readings:**


**Overview:**

Two very different types of readings open this section on Congregational life. The first reflects a common genre in the study of Mainline Protestantism, the concern for denominational growth and decline in relationship to the congregation. Numerous studies represented in this volume will give the reader a representative sampling of the kinds of information that can be gleaned from surveys and data on congregational vitality. The second reading focuses in on the state of congregational health as it is reflected in an almost universal aspect of congregational experience: music and worship.

One assumption of church executives who presided over denominational budgets was that healthy congregations would make healthy denominations. The link between congregations and their denominations are not so simple and direct, however, for congregations are not in the driver's seat when it comes to shaping and guiding denominations. While denominational mission boards could scan the growing suburban landscape in the immediate post WWII era and plant churches that would soon become denominational standard bearers, a noticeable trend affecting denominations today is the fact that many growing congregations attribute their success to the shedding of denominational labels. A "go it alone" style that promotes local spending at the expense of giving to the denomination is now touted not only by ultra Congregationalist churches but also by mega-churches coming out of Lutheran and Methodist traditions.

Those who study the stewardship or benevolence giving by congregations write that trends and patterns in giving offer clear signals of the decline of denominational identity on the part of congregations. One major finding of a study done by Roger Nemeth and Donald Luidens on the Reformed Church in America reported that very large and growing congregations have become models for a new "post denominational" style of church growth. They grow independently of their sponsoring denomination, successfully adapting to suburban lifestyles by spending resources on programming for members rather than on wider ministries of their church body. Money stays close to home to provide for the expanding needs of the young families and young professionals who live in young subdivisions without community services.⁵

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Many factors contribute to a disconnect between congregations and denominations. In addition to the financial patterns discussed above, social, theological, and political factors may come into play. Evangelical and other independent Protestant churches competed more successfully for members and have challenged the historic leadership role of ecumenically minded Protestant churches. An even greater challenge to Mainline denominations is posed by the increasing individualism and fragmentation of American and Canadian culture, which in the religious realm appears in a form of anti-institutional religious orientation that favors the exploration of spiritual practices and expressive, personal faith styles rather than the corporate, communal forms reminiscent of denominational piety. The recent efforts of denominations to respond to these devotional changes by developing new worship resources illustrates the difficulty of holding a tradition together in the context of the fragmentation of taste and practice in contemporary culture.

Musical tastes change with the times and with generations, while congregations and their ministers feel responsible for maintaining a connection with past practice. A host of musical and spiritual memories are powerfully present whenever a group of people gather for worship. Linda Clark, in her work *Music in Churches: Nurturing your Congregation's Musical Life*, found that musicians in an Episcopal congregation were painfully aware that "wrangling about musical style was a surface manifestation of a deeper theological conflict," and that "the music program is a lightening rod for general discontent." This gives all the more reason to study musical and liturgical changes that have roiled Mainline denominations in recent years, conflicts only superficially masked by recent obsessive media attention to policies regarding homosexuality.6

A comparison of the development of two denominational hymnals — the United Church of Christ's *New Century Hymnal* 1995 and the Southern Baptist Convention's *Baptist Hymnal* 1991 — in Steve Marini's recent book, *Sacred Song in America: Religion, Music, and Public Culture*, illustrates how fraught the relationship between congregations and denominational agencies can become when the "spiritual memory bank" represented in the local traditions of congregational singing are taken for granted or swept aside in the interest of one or another worthy principle.

Those who agitate to bring hymnals up to date and to make worship more contemporary, and thereby more relevant, confront equally fervent guardians of song traditions that had defined previous generations. Newer technologies that enable congregations to produce their own worship resources, to download text and music into readable, consumable bulletins make hymnals almost obsolete in many congregations. The texts of these easily singable songs, however, as they flash across the screen, give

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6 Clark, *Music in the Church*, p. 72.
Congregants little time for in-depth theological reflection, nor can the screen be used for personal devotions.

Post-hymnal Protestants have also moved beyond the denominational educational curriculum, and the publishing houses of Mainline Protestantism are struggling to survive. Congregations were once supplied with resources that provided concrete and objective reminders of connections that they had with other congregations in their denomination. With many more options and resources, and with the ability to produce materials in-house, congregations today will need to find new reasons to need each other.

Questions for the Session:

- In what ways are denominational traditions and connections manifest in local congregations?
- Do the extended programs provided by mega churches have social implications for the surrounding community?
- Do the religious practices and worship styles of Mainline Protestants convey their social and political orientation? Do the religious practices and worship styles of Evangelical Protestants and/or of Roman Catholics do the same? What kind of shaping effect do songs and hymns have on the sensibilities of the worshipper?

Session Five: Forming the Faith: Family and Community

Reading:

Overview:

The politics of the family are present beneath the surface of most current political battles, from gay marriage to attempts to change the rules of the United States Senate. The popular call for family values has a religious edge to it, cutting through conventional civil discourse to demand that politicians take stands, and that citizens choose one or the other side in a widening cultural divide. Both "sides" of this cultural divide would agree that families today face challenges that are unprecedented and debilitating. They disagree, however, on what should be done about it.

The writers of *From Culture Wars to Common Ground* examine the challenges to family life through wide ranging interviews and surveys, with specific attention to the experience of five families. These studies on the family emerged out of a Lilly sponsored "Religion, Culture, and Family Project," which sought to determine in part whether the decline of intact family life, the rise of therapy, the focus on the individual, and the influence of feminism had any connection to the decline of the Protestant Mainline. While researchers who participated in the conferences, which spanned six years in the mid 1990's, did not come to a single point of view on the family, they did contribute to a process that resulted in a common text, which advances what they call "the idea of the equal-regard family and the concepts of a critical familism and critical marriage culture." Family structure needs to change, they argue, from the ideal of the industrial family with one breadwinner and a housewife to a model that supports two wage earners and dual parenting. Their focus on the family is not designed to re-institute a "soft" patriarchy, but instead to recognize that the economic shifts that have expanded opportunities for women, and to identify aspects of the Christian and Jewish tradition that point toward and support an ideal of mutuality in marriage and parenting.\(^7\)

One learning from the extensive interviewing was that home-based worship and devotional practices were the primary means by which families passed on their religious culture to their children. These modern findings reassert the historical pattern where devotional life in the family was a constituent part of the wider Protestant Mainline culture. These religious practices were important sources of strength and resilience for these families, and they provided additional ways for them to feel a connection to their church as an extension of their family life. With the rise of divorce, the increase of serial marriage and non-traditional families, the connections between families and their church community are often frayed and even broken. The passive response of churches to the crisis in many families has weakened both families and congregations. Today a need for lessons on marriage and family life might be a necessary addition to the older devotional practices of Protestants.

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\(^7\) Browning et al, *From Culture Wars to Common Ground*, p. viii.
Perhaps the most divisive of these new lessons on the family is the contemporary debate over homosexuality. Wendy Cadge wades into these deep and roiling waters with her chapter, "Vital Conflicts: The Mainline Denominations Debate Homosexuality," in The Quiet Hand of God: Faith Based Activism and the Public Role of Mainline Protestantism. She makes the point that Mainline Protestant denominations provide vital and rare social space for discussion of this contentious cultural issue. Even though the debates have been withering for the churches, which face the threat of schism even for broaching the topic, Cadge argues that the mere willingness of Mainline denominations to sponsor studies, to debate resolutions on gay marriage and to reconsider their ordination practices has made a contribution. The openness of Protestant Churches to holding discussions has given legitimacy to the topic of homosexuality and to the many voices who have entered the discussion. The internal dissension within the several denominations over the issue also gives the lie to the notion that Mainline Protestantism is monolithic in its opinions. The debate will continue to affect the public presence of Protestantism, and provide the impetus for political reaction for some time to come. [More on this topic in Session Eight]

The constructive proposals that emerge from the numerous studies on Mainline Protestantism usually include a plea for more effective educational efforts to help young people and church people in general to understand more effectively how to live out their faith in a complex society. It has been discouraging for churches to read the results of the Search Institute's research into the actual level of Christian knowledge among members of churches. Completed in 1990, the Institute's report has been widely reported within church groups, and a number of denominations have responded with innovative educational programs. The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, partly in response to the Search Institute study designed a "Discipleship" model for educational ministry that has been especially successful with adults. This interaction between independent study processes and the decision making process of denominational programmatic units is an important dimension of the institutional ecology of Mainline Protestantism. At least at the national level, denominations register some response to studies. The various denominations, however, do not have the same ability to translate their national vision into local practice.

Just as there are divisions in congregations that separate families from full participation in church life, there are also many forms of disassociation that divide denominational families. Educational programs within denominations must compete with multiple, alternative, sources of information and authority. A coherent Mainline Protestant family culture, or community culture, has yet to be articulated in ways that would find widespread attention, much less support from the vast majority of America's disconnected Mainline Protestants.
Questions for the Session:

- While Protestantism since the time of the Reformation has been credited with focusing on the individual rights of the believer, much of the current cultural debate over the family pins the blame for its so called "decline" on the unfettered rise of individualism. Is individualism the reason for a whole host of society’s problems? Is it reasonable to expect Mainline Protestant traditions to find ways to address this concern without challenging its commitment to the individual conscience?

- Another way to look at churches is to conceive of them as social networks rather than as assemblies of individual believers. Can this more communal vision of church survive within the context of political polarization over sexual and cultural politics?

Related reading:

Lisa Sowle Cahill's participation in the Lilly sponsored “Religion, Family, and Culture” project resulted in an in depth study of Roman Catholic theological and ethical positions on sex and marriage in the context of late 20th century feminist, scientific, and Protestant ethical reflection. Her book, Sex, Gender, and Christian Ethics (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1996, provides readers with a nuanced and constructive Catholic position on the topic of family and sexuality. She urges that the Roman Catholic church becomes more credible in its advocacy of equality for women so that important insights on the social and communal dimensions of sexual life get a wider hearing.

Session Six: Theological Traditions and Trends

Readings:


Overview:

Mainline Protestant denominations currently face criticism from conservatives within their folds for neglecting theological foundations and confessional traditions in favor of social justice movements and political advocacy. These charges are not new. Theological work has not been all that visible within the bureaucratic structures of the denominations, and scholars who would puzzle out the changes in emphasis and focus have to look in the records of Mission Boards, campus ministry initiatives, urban ministry efforts, ecumenical involvement and other programmatic areas in order to find the evidence they seek. All too often, scholars find that denominational programs and initiatives rely more often on simplistic formulae than on measured examination and testing of assumptions. The masterful case study of the Disciples of Christ denomination, one of the examples for our reading in this section, details the several ways in which the theological traditions of the denomination underwent considerable change during the last century. Since the Restoration Movement upon which this denomination was founded demurred on having a theology at all, it would be futile to look for explicit articulation of theological principles, or critical reflection on them, at least during the first years. But it took quite a few years for this simplistic notion to pass.

Rising to the challenge of providing new theological warrants for pursuing justice goals, several Mainline denominations participated in the Reimagining Conference in 1993. It was also sponsored through the National Council of Churches. Social goals for diversity and inclusive church structures became even more controversial when the theological language of traditional Christianity was challenged. R. Marie Griffith, in a chapter in the Reimagining Denominationalism volume noted that conservative journals from the Methodist and Presbyterian churches wrote such negative reviews of the Reimagining Conference that even Church Women United came under scrutiny for heresy. Another casualty of the social justice inspired venture into theological thinking came when the director of the United Methodist Church’s Women’s Ministry Unit, Mary Ann Lundy, resigned under pressure from conservative critics of the event.

Even if feminist theological innovation within the Mainline has gone into a more quiet phase, Protestants continue to be embroiled in ongoing theological discussion, or debate, especially over the issue of homosexuality. Wendy Cadge, in her chapter discussing this controversy in the volume The Quiet Hand of God, thinks that this effort by churches to provide a place to discuss and argue over the role and meaning of homosexuality in our culture makes a notable contribution even if resolution is long in coming, for it gives space for a conversation that is very difficult to have in other venues.

The role of congregations in providing a space for communities to discuss contemporary issues, or as stated in the argot of church leaders: "to host difficult conversations," and the ways that congregations provide meeting space for a variety of programs and services is an aspect of the ancient Christian practice of hospitality. In one of the readings suggested for this section, Christine Pohl investigates Christian practices as sources for theological and community renewal. She notes how the Christian practice of hospitality fashioned a community that was able to overcome the alienation of a hostile cultural environment and foster courageous witness. Encouraging practices rather than right thinking, however, poses challenges to traditional ways of employing theology in the church. Quoting Joan Chittester, she notes: "Hospitality is one of those things that has to be constantly practiced or it won't be there for the rare occasion." Hospitality, moreover, is the work of all people in the community, not the preserve of an elite corps of theological leaders. The recent examination of Christian practices by theologians gets behind, or beneath, the surface of traditions and denominational structures to "deconstruct" the ways that these institutions were fashioned. The work of these scholars is similar to the work of those historians and cultural analysts who investigate the presence of religion in popular culture, but the theologians advance that analysis by proposing a constructive agenda for the churches. [More on this topic in Session Two]

An example of the way that the focus on communal practices might be put to work can be seen in the work of overcoming racial and social injustice, the communal task of incorporating new members into fellowship, and the myriad ways in which congregations function to bridge generations. These tasks can all be seen not only as theologically important but also as socially meaningful ways to communicate the gospel in an individualistic and fragmented culture. Constructive theological work that addresses these aspects of congregational life provide substantial guidance for leaders and members of churches seeking to invigorate ministries.

Theological traditions in North America have porous boundaries, and new theological work undertaken by theologians can be accessed by other church groups. The ecumenical foundations for biblical, social, theological, and spiritual analysis provides a common vocabulary and vision for wholeness that invites broader participation and engagement. In addressing inequities, for instance, Mainline Protestants have become supporters of significant theological reflection on liberation theology that draws on the American experience with race, as in Dwight Hopkins' proposal for Black Theology, Down, Up and Over: Slave Religion and Black Theology (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2000). Addressing the ways that theology needs to be written to relate directly to the culturally alienated, J. Deotis Roberts' focuses on the role of African origins in

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8 Pohl, Making Room, p. 176.
Africentric Christianity: A Theological Appraisal for Ministry (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 2000). The more general approach of Hopkins and the more particular focus of Roberts demonstrate two very different proposals for rejuvenating the church even though both presume that theological traditions can be recovered or refashioned in order to provide resources for denominational and congregational revitalization.

[More on this topic in Session Seven]

Studies that probe the theological issues that surface as Mainline Churches negotiate a transition from one of cultural dominance to one of participation in a broader religious pluralism include work by S. Mark Heim, professor at the Andover Newton School of Theology in Massachusetts. He writes in the Christian Century about the ways that traditional Christian theological topics like atonement ought to be addressed for modern readers and also how the classic Christian tradition might think theologically about religious pluralism, or approach the work of interfaith dialogue. In addition to his shorter articles, readers may also refer to two larger works, Salvations: Truth and Difference in Religions (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Press, 1995), and The Depth of the Riches: A Trinitarian Theology of Religious Ends (Grand Rapids, MI: W. B. Eerdmans, 2001).

Questions for the Session:

• How important is a theological tradition for modern church goers?

• Should sociological factors impinge on theological investigation and analysis? If so, how?

Session Seven: Social Sources of Theological Development: Civil Rights and Cultural Diversity

Readings:

• Conrad Cherry, Hurrying Towards Zion: Universities, Divinity Schools, and American Protestantism (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1995).


• Dwight Hopkins, Down, Up and Over: Slave Religion and Black Theology (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2000).
Overview:

Long before the civil rights movements and anti-war protests of the 1960's and 70's, and the liberation theologies and feminist deconstruction of theological language that appeared in the 1980's and 90's, Protestant theological training anticipated the idealism of these movements by instilling a sense of social responsibility in its ministerial students. What was different at the beginning of the 20th century, however, was that Mainline Protestant denominational leaders perceived very little tension between their role as custodians of culture and their role as social reformers. Churches welcomed the processes of modernization which made possible the professionalization of social work, the expansion of universities and colleges, and the bureaucratization of denominational leadership. These very developments in turn provided the institutional structures and modes of engagement that kept church leaders alert to social forces and trends. American theological attention focused on ways that God was immanent in the culture; if it had any judgments to make, these pertained to the relative progress each section of society was making towards an imagined earthly Zion.

Conrad Cherry’s study of University Divinity Schools provides a detailed examination of the ambitious goals of Protestant leaders when they stood at the helm of the cultural ship and could, they thought, respond to the winds and steer the craft in the direction they wanted. The tidy arrangements that had worked at smaller denominational colleges and seminaries did not, however, expand in manageable ways. The universities became multiversities containing a diversity of faculties and programs that heeded no common center or organizing vision. As divinity schools were sidelined within their own institutions, universities were themselves sidelined in the culture as students in the post war protest generations railed against the authority of institutions. The questioning of authority that excited a generation of students had its counterpart in several important theological developments that have defined the programs and policies of Mainline Protestant churches since the 1970's.

Liberation theologies offer religious identity and purpose that is free of the corruption of enslaving ideologies and institutions. These theological programs inform a Protestant Mainline that has definitely stepped out of any kind of establishment role. An example of the "prophetic" role that supplanted their earlier "priestly" responsibility can be seen in the vigorous condemnation by young leaders of the complicity of an establishment oriented Protestantism in the racial segregation of the south.

Mobilized by its seminarians and young people, Protestant churches took stock of their own programs and policies and developed strategies to counter the racism they detected in their own structures of leadership. Mainline Churches sought to recruit "minority" membership and leadership, assuming that the future of a vibrant and relevant church would be dependent on its ability to integrate. They poured money into
urban ministry programs. Ministerial training was also opened up to women and to those seeking ministry as a second career, thereby challenging centuries of local custom and tradition. Hymnals and worship resources were purged to expunge exclusive language. These efforts to reform the language and practice of Protestant congregations met resistance, but also articulated for Protestants a continuation of their socially progressive and reformist agenda.

As white churches sought to become more welcoming to "minorities," they encountered a new challenge. Leaders within the Black community, and later the Latino, Native American, and Asian groups began to develop a deeper sense of the value of their distinctive cultures and experiences. As they explored their unique histories, many became less enthusiastic about an uncritical assimilation into American society. The reading cited above, Charles Marsh's local study of several key actors in the civil rights struggle in Mississippi during the 1960's, portrays the complicated ways that black and white leaders, both segregationists and civil rights activists, entered the struggle over race with a fungible theological language but soon needed a sharper vocabulary. While Mississippi's experience is an intense case study to examine, the stark portraits that emerge illustrate the complexity and difficulty that faced Mainline Protestant denominations, especially in the North, as they sought to remain relevant in this transformative struggle.

Black theologians developed a liberationist theology out of their examination of this struggle. Controversies emerged early in the examination of African American religious experience, however, as scholars and historians disagreed about the degree to which African religious elements may have survived the transition of slavery, and if so what to make of their persistence theologically. In addition the imposition of the owner's religion on the slave population provided another controversial element in the mix.

Our readings include Dwight Hopkin's argument that Black liberation theology draws its power and purpose in good part from the slave experience. He points out that a black theology that does not include this profoundly dehumanizing reality is not dealing with liberation but with some other kind of sentimental hope. Hopkin's constructive theology of liberation provides an example of the ways in which a Mainline Protestant constituency that includes the voices of African American members will be able to draw on a much richer history and experience as it seeks to minister effectively in the 21st century.

Dwight Hopkin's approach to recovering sources for a constructive black theology addresses a methodological debate among those who advocate for liberationist perspectives in theology. He uses the tragic experience of slavery in order to build a theological foundation, indicating that he finds it possible to work from this history, violent as it has been, in order to find the pattern of freedom that can be life giving even
today. A contrasting liberationist approach is advanced by J. Deotis Roberts in *Africentric Christianity: A Theological Appraisal for Ministry* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 2000), who argues for reclaiming a history that predates the enslavement of Africans. Thus, Egypt is claimed for Africa, and not included in the precursors to Western Civilization. He says that recovering an African cultural world view will instill pride while a focus on the slave experience, even as filtered through the Exodus narrative, positions African Americans as a subject people, not as agents of their own dignity. Methodological debate about sources have counterparts within Feminist, Womanist, and Mujerista discussions as well. Many self identified groups have taken up the task of working on defining liberationist models that deconstruct and set aside older, hegemonic traditions.

The struggle against racism, taken up by church people during the 1960's in order to advance a vision of an integrated society has given way to newer visions and models that ironically tend to preserve distinctiveness, both via the popular media, and among intellectuals on the basis of a newly articulated theological and cultural rationale that celebrates the particularism of a group. As a challenge to the older vision of integration and assimilation, theology articulated in this new key explores how diversity ought to be cultivated, extended, and fashioned as a part of a separatist, and maybe pluralist vision for society.

Mainline Protestant church leaders have just begun to grapple with the challenges this poses to their mostly consensual understanding of the churches’ role in American culture. The America of segregated towns and fashionable cities that mid-century Protestants sought to transform does not exist anymore. The towns and cities have declined while suburban, and ex-urban developments have created multiple centers and lifestyle trajectories that do not intersect with the older order of civic life. American churchgoers now relate to a niche culture, and churches seem not to be able to overcome these fragmenting orientations.

**Questions for the Session:**

- Mainline Protestant commitment to a range of human rights issues — the civil rights struggle, urban ministry, women's leadership, and gay and lesbian inclusion — has not always been popular with the people in the pews. Did their heavy focus on social justice issues weaken Mainline Protestantism's role in public life?

- What are the sources for theological and social renewal in the various Protestant churches? Are the concerns of American and Canadian churches too focused on their own national identities to the exclusion of global concerns?
Session Eight: The Public Presence of Mainline Protestantism

Readings:


- Anthony B. Robinson, "Leadership that Matters," *Christian Century* 116 (Dec. 15, 1999): 1228-1231 lays out the reason for more in depth study and what leaders who practice it can provide for congregations.

Overview:

President George W. Bush's recent emphasis on promoting a "culture of life" in the United States together with the efforts of religious conservatives to protect Ten Commandment monuments in public parks has brought the issue of the relationship of Church and State to a wide political audience. In quieter ways, government support for "faith-based initiatives" like abstinence based sexual education, soup kitchens, after school programs in inner cities, and neighborhood childcare programs creates opportunities for churches to become more visible in their communities as providers of services.

As government policy shifts social welfare efforts to church based delivery systems and conservative activism focuses attention on beleaguered markers of a more homogeneous culture, Evangelical Protestant groups seem ready to shore up the foundations for an established church in America. They are eager to assume the role once held by Mainline Protestant churches. The term "Protestant Establishment"
serves for some interpreters, especially William Hutchison, as an apt term to describe the de facto role that Mainline Protestants played as a religious force in relationship to American political and social life.

The volume edited by William Hutchison, *Between the Times: The Travail of the Protestant Establishment in America, 1900-1960*, explores the shifts that Mainline Protestants experienced in what is usually thought of as the hey day of Protestant influence: the first half of the 20th century. Internal tensions within this "establishment," however, indicated that the fragmenting dynamics of professionalization, and the challenge of relating effectively to a developing mass media culture had already begun to challenge the foundations long before the turmoil of the civil rights and anti-war protests of the 1960's and 70's. Virginia Brereton's chapter on the role of Women's groups, "United and Slighted: Women as Subordinated Insiders" describes Protestant women leaders who wielded considerable social clout but lacked power and authority within their respective denominations, and thus had reason to pursue their goals via other venues. Dennis Voskuil in "Reaching Out: Mainline Protestantism and the Media," reminds readers of a time when Mainline Protestants sponsored religious programs that ran in prime time. A new and competitive strain of Evangelicalism arose in the 1950's, and Mark Silk's "The Rise of the 'New Evangelicalism': Shock and Adjustment" gives readers the background on the rise of the "two party system" in American Protestantism during that decade. Extending the historical examination of Protestantism back to the early years of the 20th century makes clear that the displacement of the Protestant Establishment from its prominent position on the social landscape was not a surprise result of a conservative cultural reaction to the 1960's, but a more deliberate development, and not entirely unintentional.

Mainline Protestant leaders stepped out of the once prominent public role they held in the middle of the 20th century. On a wide variety of issues they grew critical of government policy and strained their once cosy informal relationships with the powerful. Anthony Dunnavant describes how during the 1930's Disciples began to lament the increasing militaristic language used by politicians, and became wary of nationalistic rhetoric. Mainline denominations began to put more energy into ecumenical and international efforts and took an increasingly critical stance vis-a-vis social injustice at home. American and Canadian Protestant churches turned their energy toward responding to racism and poverty, and attacking unjust systems.

In a study of urban ministry edited by Clifford Green, *Churches, Cities, and Human Community: Urban Ministry in the United States 1945-1985* (Grand Rapids, MI: W. B. Eerdmans, 1996), the various denominational strategies for addressing urban change are profiled. Mainline and Roman Catholic churches alike focused considerable attention to city neighborhoods, where their expensive facilities were located, just at the time that they developed a prophetic rhetoric of change. With language and actions that
dismantled a cooperative relationship with civic leadership, a concurrent suburbanization process made downtown churches obsolete. As their members moved away, Mainline Protestants began to recognize that they were spending their cultural capital, and had in various ways lost public visibility and presence.

Numerous studies on the factors in this decline in influence point to sociological and demographic shifts that worked against these heavily urban and Northern denominations. At the same time, these churches invested heavily in expanding their ministry to other races and ethnic groups.

Accounting for the relative strength of Protestantism's public presence by counting the raw numbers in the pews tells only one part of the story, however, since Protestants as "Mainliners" were never only acted upon by wider cultural forces. As establishment figures and networked leaders, pastors and laity alike recognized and understood that the challenges they faced demanded critical thinking and a corresponding theological creativity. They were thus prolific writers, thinkers and doers as they faced shifting audiences and attempted to retain and redefine their purpose as churches. As they explored new forms of leadership and closed some ministries in order to focus more specifically on carefully identified goals, Mainline Protestants learned to operate, according to Robert Wuthnow in *The Quiet Hand of God*, as quiet and persistent partners and advocates within the system rather than as outsiders and prophetic critics.

Evangelical advances at the expense of Mainline presence has often been referred to with more embattled language than is warranted, as though these two parties within America's religious culture had met each other on a level field. In fact the studies reveal a more telling story of Mainline Protestants leaving the contest before the Evangelicals arrive on the scene. "The culture wars" so familiar to those who follow political religion thus appear to be a kind of battle in which there was really only one side fighting for an easy victory and getting some good headlines.

For more insight on getting beyond culture war dynamics and efforts to "reform the center" see the work of Douglas Jacobsen, e.g., "Reforming a Sloppy Center by and with Grace," in *Interpretation* 51, no. 2 (April, 1997): 159-174.

**Questions for the Session:**

- As religious bodies seek influence or a voice in public arenas what are the factors that affect their ability to get a hearing?

- Do religious groups benefit when they have politics on their side?
Additional resources for discussing the role of religious faith and public life:

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**Session Nine: What comes next for the Mainline? Protestantism or Pluralism?**

**Readings:**


**Overview:**

Is there a future for mainline Protestantism? Leonard Sweet gave an early read in a summary chapter for *Liberal Protestantism: Realities and Possibilities*, published by Pilgrim Press back when the culture wars were heating up in 1986. His theme: "Can a Mainstream change its course?" highlighted the tensions within the notion of religious leadership represented by these Protestant churches. Sweet zeroed in on whether the mainline traditions represent "movement" or a more static "culture." In response to the beleaguered status of mainline Protestantism he asked these churches to examine whether they represented "a culture or a movement within a culture. Is mainline Protestantism a set of institutions or is it constituted by the activities and goals of agencies?" He would opt for understanding and possibly renewing mainline Protestantism as a "movement" rather than shoring it up as an "establishment."

While American Protestantism may find a way forward by returning to its heritage of reforming activism, as Leonard Sweet recommended, other scholars suggest that mainline Protestants in America might be more fruitfully examined and understood as an establishment rather than a movement. They suggest that exploring the European
religious experience in a post-establishment mode could lend insight to American researchers. Wade Clark Roof, Jackson Carroll, and David Roozen reflect on studies of European post-war religious life in *The Post-War Generation and Establishment Religion: Cross-cultural Perspectives* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1995). They write that many of the shifts away from institutional religion in these cultures mirror the patterns in American religion. Generational shifts in Europe in the post-war period resulted in more individualized, voluntary groups and practices. Seeking "spirituality" rather than community, religious seekers define themselves over against, behind, and beneath presumed establishment cultures and orthodoxies. Mainline Protestantism understood as establishment, may provide a convenient foil for similar seekers in North America.

Whether mainline denominations provide sanctuary for religious seekers, or as institutions claim the center in the religious landscape of the evolving North American culture will depend greatly on the vitality and relevance of local congregations and their work to instill denominational loyalty for an increasingly mobile population. Independent mega-churches near urban and suburban settings are growing while small towns and rural areas where denominational churches once held sway are losing population. The shifts in geography are matched by cultural reorientations. Religious life in the United States and Canada will inevitably adapt to these cultural changes and the mainline Protestant churches will have to be creative if they wish to hold on to their role as community leaders. In spite of these negative trends for denominations, the future is not necessarily so bleak. In one of the readings listed, Nancy Ammerman writes about the results of investigations into denominational vitality conducted by the Hartford Institute of Religious Research. After interviewing in 549 congregations distinctive patterns emerged. There is more denominational loyalty in rural areas and the South, less in urban and Northeastern regions. Among those who had switched denominations, loyalty to the new church was not as high as it was for congregations made up of people who had grown up in that tradition. African American congregations are composed overwhelmingly of cradle members exhibiting denominational loyalty. When denominational affiliation has been carefully taught, members are loyal.

In a heated political climate, religious polarization emerges as a real possibility. Given their consensus oriented approach to community leadership, Mainline Protestants may need some prompting to see how cultivating denominational loyalty would enhance their public ministry. Mainline traditions have their experience in ecumenical friendship that can provide a framework for an expanded conversation among religious bodies. The biography of John Perkins included in the readings for this section demonstrates how a Black preacher who understood how to speak to White Southerners on evangelical terms had some success in stimulating an evangelically oriented social conscience. These kinds of personal networks provided models for Jim Wallis, who has recently written *God's Politics: Why the Christian Right is Wrong and Why the Left Just Doesn't Get It* (San Francisco, CA: Harper San-Francisco, 2005). These social justice oriented
ecumenical networks that intentionally include evangelicals might overcome some of our current polarization.

Evangelicals provide only one possible direction for ecumenical effort. Mainline Churches have many other potential partners. The broader embrace of the ecumenical impulse followed by Mainline Protestants ought to issue in a robust participation in America's Religious pluralism, according to William Hutchison, in *Religious Pluralism in America: The Contentious History of a Founding Ideal*, one of the readings in this section. Whether drawing from their activist past or their sense of responsibility for culture, Mainline Protestants have entered many fields, at home and abroad, with energy and commitment. Now that new immigration has made North America home to the world's diverse religious traditions, the old missionary debates about religion and culture have become immediately relevant to Americans who now experience a global diversity even in their own neighborhoods. Perhaps the biggest test that denominations and congregations of all religious orientations face is to determine the boundaries of their ministry and mission. Christians remember the story of the Good Samaritan as one that asks this question of boundaries. The disciples asked Jesus, who seemed to extend his concern to people they hadn't considered: "Who is my neighbor?" Mainline Protestant churches will need to ask this question, and then engage in the kind of generous listening that will make their sanctuaries places of purposeful encounter as our neighborhoods and culture become more diverse.

**Questions for the Session:**

- How important are the clergy for defining Mainline Protestantism in the context of pluralism?

- William Muehl, professor of Preaching at Yale Divinity School advised students to prepare sermons with the newspaper in one hand and the bible in the other. Would this advice have to be modified today? How?

**Further reading:**
