

# THE PARISH PAPER

## IDEAS AND INSIGHTS FOR ACTIVE CONGREGATIONS

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December 2010 - Volume 18, Number 12

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### Fifty Years Later: What Has Changed?

By 2005 Americans were beginning to accept the fact that “We are now living in the twenty-first century.”

Five decades earlier we were firmly entrenched in the middle of the twentieth century.

How has the passage of a half century changed the context for local church ministry?

**1. Back in 2000 the late Peter Drucker said that for the first time in history a large and growing number of human beings are convinced that they really have a choice regarding their future.** Instead of inheriting their future—as a result of when, where, and to whom they were born—people now are able to design their own future. What are the consequences of that big change?

- The nearly quadrupled number of independent nations on this planet between 1945 and 2005
- The sharp increase in resistance to outside authority
- The spread of terrorism
- The rising demand for internal leadership—instead of leadership by outside political forces similar to what many European countries exerted when they pulled the strings of financial-puppet colonies on distant continents

On the religious scene in America, the most widely studied consequence of that resistance to external authority has been the emergence of thousands of completely autonomous nondenominational Protestant congregations averaging more than 500 at weekend worship.

Perhaps the second most widely studied consequence has been the relocation of millions of Americans who were born, baptized, reared, and confirmed in a parish of the Roman Catholic Church to active participation in an independent Protestant megachurch.

A third consequence has been the erosion of inherited institutional loyalties—similar to the loss of loyalty to the famous “Big Three” which consisted of General Motors, Chrysler, and Ford; loss of loyalty to daily newspapers; and loss of loyalty to service clubs, restaurants, airlines, political parties, and religious organizations (including theological seminaries).

**2. Perhaps the most widely ignored change is a product of two trends: the freedom to choose and the growth of large institutions.** Several generations ago, nineteenth century America began an era of building a completely new type of institution:

- A few institutions—such as the railroads, the national government, and a modest proportion of factories—were big.

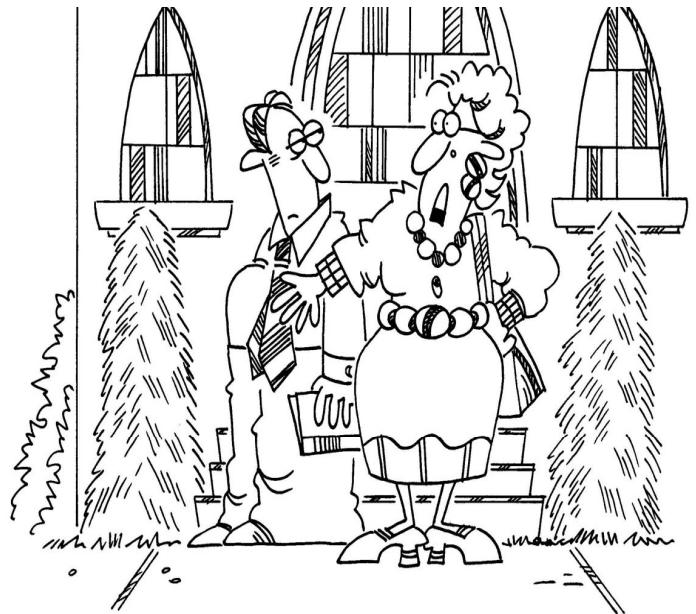
- But at that time most of the institutions were small. The long list of examples included public schools, Protestant congregations, family owned and operated general stores, dairy farms, post offices, and the owner-operated factory that employed three or four people.

One big indicator of this change to large institutions: The number of one-teacher public schools in the U. S. plunged from 200,100 in 1916 to only 474 in 1996.

A more highly visible example of the shift to big institutions is the public high school with 3,000 students.

Another example of this shift toward big institutions is the emergence of Protestant megachurches averaging 2,000 to 18,000 at weekend worship.

A highly visible consequence of this shift to larger institutions is the growing number of Protestant congregations with a 40- to 100-acre site that often includes a Christian day school and three different times and venues for the corporate worship of God.



TEN PARKING SPACES WAS PLENTY IN 1920...  
MOST PEOPLE LIVED IN THE NEIGHBORHOOD  
AND WALKED TO CHURCH...  
ARE YOU SAYING WE NEED A LARGER PARKING LOT?

Still another consequence of this shift to larger institutions is the growing number of large Protestant congregations with two-to-eight “satellite” worship services miles away from the congregation’s central campus.

Another major consequence of this trend toward larger institutions: Most Americans born before 1940 grew up in a culture of small institutions—such as the one-room school and the small church. But the children born in America since the 1950s have been reared in a culture of big institutions. Thus, about 16 percent of all Protestant congregations now account for at least one half of the combined worship attendance of all Protestant churches in America on the typical weekend. The big are growing in size and the small are struggling to survive.

**3. The growth of one-person households.** In 1959 one out of every eight households in the United States consisted of one person. In 2005 that proportion had increased to one out of four. Among the numerous explanations for that change are affluence, people getting married later, and a six-year increase in the average life expectancy of sixty-five-year-old Americans.

Another part of this changed context: The capability of Americans to meet and make new friends tends to diminish with age. One consequence is a sharp increase in the number of mature adults in America who live alone. Another consequence is a sharp increase in the number of retired women who gather regularly to sew, knit, or make quilts (working together on a common task is one way to meet and make new friends).

Then, too, an uncounted number of households now include adherents of two or three congregations.

These changes help explain to us why congregations now need a larger number of households to produce a hundred worshipers on the typical weekend than was true in the 1950s.

**4. A change in the sequence by which unmarried women become married women and mothers.** People concerned about family life note a major change in what they have long viewed as the normal sequence:

- For unmarried women age 20-24, the annual birth rate per 1,000 women climbed from 10 in 1940-41, to 41 in 1980, to 73 in 2005.

- For unmarried women age 25-29, the annual birth-rate per 1,000 women climbed from 7.2 in 1940, to 34 in 1980, to 68 in 2005.

- For unmarried women age 30-34, the annual birth-rate increase per 1,000 women was 5 in 1940, 21 in 1980, and 47 in 2005.

- For unmarried women age 35-39, the birth-rate increased from an annual average of 3.4 births per 1,000 women in 1940, to 10 in 1982, to 24 in 2005.

Yes, people still get married and have children, but not necessarily in that order. Nor do as many people who have children get married at all, compared to people in the American population fifty years ago.

**5. The growing demand for “improved service to the customer.”** What many commentators have called “consumerism,” plus the arrival into adulthood of the babies born after World War II, plus the fact that the number of licensed motor vehicles in the U. S. now exceeds the number of licensed drivers, has expanded the service area of most Protestant congregations.

How far do people travel to come to your church? A typical response is, “About two or three times the distance they traveled in 1955.” (A common exception to that formula is “Old First Church Downtown.”)

One consequence is the demand for more church-owned off-street parking. Another is greater competition among the churches for future constituents.

**6. A huge increase in the number of Christian congregations in the United States that have established a continuing relationship with one or more “sister churches” on other continents.** Typically, this includes a seven-to-fifteen-day trip by those American laity to work in ministry with fellow Christians in that sister church. One consequence: the large number of Americans, many of whom were born before 1950, who return and say, “That experience has transformed me from a believer into a disciple.”

**7. The change in focus from “a new beginning happens by moving people into church membership” to “a new beginning happens by transforming Christian believers into deeply committed disciples of Jesus Christ.”** One widely used conceptual framework affirms the concept that one’s personal faith journey consists of five stages: (1) seeker, (2) new believer, (3) eager learner, (4) disciple, and (5) apostle. (Other observers see this as a six-stage sequence.)

Thus, a growing number of Protestant congregations now schedule three worship experiences each weekend. The sermon in one of those services is directed at people in stages 1 and 2 (seekers and new believers). The message in the second of those three services is designed for the “eager learners.” The sermon in the third worship service is designed for “disciples and apostles.”

One consequence of this change has been the creation of two categories of membership: “Community” for people in the first three stages and “Covenant” for people in the fourth stage. Only those in the fourth stage have a vote at congregational meetings.

Yes, congregations are now in the twenty-first century! That makes big differences in how worshipers view their congregations and how congregations do their ministries!