

# Reflections On Mainline Church Leadership

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I have been asked to review the literature generated over the past 15 years or so by Lilly funded studies regarding "mainstream" Protestantism and, through the lens of my own ten years of experience as the recent (1993-2003) head of a mainline communion (the Disciples of Christ), to reflect on implications for mainline congregations, denominations and ministry. A daunting task, but one I embrace with hope and conviction.

"Mainline" or "mainstream" is a sociological term that refers to those denominations whose members were primary shapers of American culture from the 1600's till about 1960. Usually included in the list of mainline denominations are the following: American Baptist, Disciples of Christ, Episcopal, Evangelical Lutheran Church of America, Presbyterian (USA), Reform Church of America, United Church of Christ, and United Methodist. Some of these eight are successor bodies that reflect mergers of two or more mainline groups.

## Why Bother?

"Denomination" means something very different in regard to mainline churches today than it did two hundred years ago. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the mainline denominations and their predecessors were highly sectarian. While these denominations shared a common vision of a Protestant America and cooperated in some ways to bring it about, each also understood *itself* to be in some sense the most or only faithful embodiment of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

In contrast, today these denominations are all engaged together in a multitude of ecumenical expressions, works and dialogues with each other and beyond. Though particular forms and practices continue to differ in significant ways from one mainline denomination to another, we recognize one another's ministries and feel free to share in one another's celebrations of the Lord's Supper. While we each, no doubt, feel most comfortable "in our own clothes," no one believes their own denomination to be the most faithful embodiment of the Gospel. In fact, all mainline "heads of communion"

would make the case that each tradition brings its own gifts to the mix of American Christianity and helps to balance the excesses of everyone's individual communions.

While denominations *can be* and *sometimes are* self-serving and counter-productive, especially when they succumb to the temptation to become ends in themselves, they are still a valuable structure within American Christianity for which a suitable substitute has yet to be found.

"In what sense are they a 'valuable structure?'" I think this is a question worth lingering over a bit, especially in the midst of an era in which Americans are consumed with anxiety, religion wraps itself in the flag, patriotism daily crosses over the line into nationalism, fundamentalism is on the rise around the world, and our government seems bent on American Empire and is justifying it in evangelical Christian terms.

First, in a time when fundamentalism is sweeping all the religions of the world, it is valuable to have traditions that seek to *hold faith and reason together*. While we have seen fundamentalism creeping into many mainline congregations, the larger mainline denominational identities all maintain that *faith and reason do belong together*. This is an important core value that is worth keeping before 21<sup>st</sup> century Americans.

Second, and related, the colleges, universities and seminaries that are rooted in the mainline denominations are engaged in education rather than indoctrination.<sup>1</sup> At a time when public and private institutions alike are moving toward technocratic approaches that encourage narrow views of the world, the mainline churches still celebrate and support *liberal arts education*.<sup>2</sup>

Third, the mainline denominations represent a world view that *analyzes reality both in terms of individuals and systems*. This is a particularly important corrective to an American ethos of radical individualism that tends to see good and evil in individual terms only. Any truly biblical notion of justice must appreciate the systemic nature of evil as well as the individual's propensity to sin. Furthermore, at its best, mainline Christian theology is self-critical and teaches the need for all systems to be self-critical (including the American national system itself).

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<sup>1</sup> While it may be argued that mainline denominational schools were originally established for the purposes of indoctrination (or something very much like it), it is a reflection of the maturation of mainline Christian educators that they responded to the challenges of modernism in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century with a commitment to openly seek truth rather than remaining doctrinaire. See Dorothy C. Bass's article, "Teaching With Authority?: The Changing Place of Mainstream Protestantism in American Culture." *Religious Education* 85(2):295-310, Spring 1990 for a helpful discussion of the change in our educational institutions and their context.

<sup>2</sup> The fact that a smaller proportion of denominational offerings are going to support these liberal arts institutions obscures the fact that most of the individual donors upon which these schools are so dependent are willing to contribute primarily because their mainline denomination/congregation has taught that to do so is a good thing!

Fourth, it is mainline theology and biblical interpretation that has made it possible for *women and other historically marginalized people to participate more fully* in the mainline church and in the wider community (though this is certainly only a work in progress both in and beyond the church!).

Fifth, the mainline churches exemplify *overseas involvements that are marked by partnership with indigenous people rather than by colonialism*. Mainline theology is most often able to differentiate between the United States and the Realm of God. This is an important witness to Americans, a people who have tendencies toward empire.

It can and will be argued, of course, that all of the demonic approaches above (the separation of faith and reason, indoctrination, extreme individualism, marginalization of people, and colonialism) have been hallmarks of the mainline church in the past and, of course, there remain elements of these in mainline church life and practice. Nevertheless, these things are not supported by any authentic mainline witness today.

Before consenting (or even rejoicing!) in the "killing off" of mainline denominations, we must ask, it seems to me, what will stand in the cultural breach resulting? Certainly there are other authentic and effective voices within the American Christian scene including, for example, those of the historic African American communions and the historic peace churches. But do any of these have the institutional potential of the mainline denominations which, even in their weakened state, have more 40 million members?

Until such time as an effective alternative embodiment of these values can be developed, it is important to help the mainline denominations find greater health. The seeds of the development of such an "effective alternative embodiment" are among us in the form of the fruits of current and past ecumenical dialogues and newly developing ecumenical relationships and working partnerships for the sake of mission. Yet these remain seeds that can hardly stand up to the harsh climate of the post-modern world. The development of such an "effective alternative embodiment" is no longer being intentionally nurtured by the National Council of Churches.<sup>3</sup> So, whence will such an "effective alternative embodiment" come?

It must be remembered, of course, that the development of such an "effective alternative embodiment" is not simply a top-down undertaking. As William Newman writes in reflection upon the merger that created the United Church of Christ, "...organizational mergers may be invented top down, but identities flow from the bottom up. In other words, religious identities are primarily local in nature."<sup>4</sup> This means, in

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<sup>3</sup> While I believe the National Council of Churches of Christ in the U.S. A. could be a marvelous setting for such a conversation, it has moved its focus away from faith and order and almost entirely to advocacy. Meanwhile, local and regional ecumenical entities have been experiencing their own crisis: see "The Crisis of Local and Regional Ecumenism" by Gary Peluso, in *Mid-Stream* 32(4):1-14, October, 1993.

<sup>4</sup> *Beyond Establishment: Protestant Identity in a Post-Protestant Age*, Jackson Carroll and Wade Clark Roof, eds. Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993, p. 306.

part, that any "new embodiments" will necessarily be born in response to the needs of *congregations in mission* (as opposed to congregations in mere survival mode), and will have to be nurtured by these faithful local expressions of the faith.

Thus I would make the case that mainline denominations must not be replaced so much as reinvented. However, this reinvention will necessarily involve a partnership between the local, middle and national leadership and must also be undertaken in conversation with, and often in partnership with, ecumenical partners.

## The Context

"Mainline" is, of course, no longer a very descriptive term for denominations, since much that is represented in such a term no longer describes reality. Some have suggested "side-lined," or "old line." My personal choice would be "modern denominations," since each of these communions were shaped by and during the modern era and we now find ourselves in a "post-modern" era. However, with others, I accept the fact that "mainline" is the common parlance and that trying to change this moniker is probably a waste of time and energy.<sup>5</sup>

However, recognizing that we are now in a "post-modern" time is crucially important. As "Dorothy" would say, we're not in Kansas anymore, and if we act like we are, things aren't going to make much sense. It's not even "Kansas" in Kansas anymore, at least not as Dorothy understood Kansas.

After centuries of being in a place of privilege in American culture, and decades of remarkable institutional growth, the mainline churches have been in decline by most any significant measure since about 1968. The number of members, giving to denominational causes beyond the congregation, the number of congregations, and the number of ministers has steadily declined. About the only thing rising has been the average age of the membership and the amount of conflict! There are bright spots in denominational life, of course, and some congregations are doing remarkably well, but taken as a whole, mainline denominations have been steadily shrinking since 1968.

The primary problem has been that, beyond the obvious statistical decline itself, we have not really understood what has been happening to us in this nearly forty years of incredibly rapid social change. That is, there has been a drastic change in the relationship between the mainline church and American culture, what has been termed "Cultural disestablishment."<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Dorothy C. Bass, "Reflections on the Reports of Decline in Mainstream Protestantism", Chicago Theological Register 80(3):5-15, summer 1989 (see note 1, p. 14).

<sup>6</sup> Some of the most helpful *historical* treatments of this phenomenon include Robert T. Handy's A Christian America: Protestant Hopes and Historical Realities, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (NY: Oxford University Press, 1984) and Between the Times: The Travail of the Protestant Establishment in America, 1900-1960 (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1989). Among the most helpful resources in interpreting the *meaning and implications* of "cultural disestablishment" is Beyond Establishment: Protestant Identity

The *first* disestablishment in the United States was *legal*, which was accomplished through the First Amendment to the Constitution, providing for the *separation of church and state*. This meant that, unlike most of 18<sup>th</sup> century Europe (whence came all Christian denominations in the U.S. at the time), the state and federal governments did not designate one religious tradition as the *official* religion of the realm.<sup>7</sup>

Nevertheless, Protestant religious leaders hoped for and worked toward a kind of "*voluntary* establishment" of Protestantism in which the culture and the life of the nation would be based upon Christian ideals and Christian faith. It would be "voluntary" in the sense that it would be based upon *choice* rather than law. While in those early days most American church leaders recognized fellow Protestants as partners in the evangelization of the new nation, they also each hoped that their own communion would become *the* voluntarily established church of the land! Thus, fueled by a sometimes uneasy mix of cooperation and competition, a kind of Protestant "crusade" to make the United States a "Christian nation" began.

Though never achieving complete "voluntary establishment," Protestantism nevertheless managed to achieve a large measure of dominance within American culture. By the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, Protestants comprised the vast majority of the formal and informal political, economic, and educational leadership of the land. This is why the mainline denominations came to be called "mainline." They were clearly identifiable with mainline American culture itself, giving it shape and being shaped by it.

The *second* disestablishment in the U.S. was *cultural* disestablishment. This was a process by which Protestantism lost its preeminence in American culture. It began in the 1920's due to factors such as the public's disillusionment following World War I, the conflict fueled by the modernist-fundamentalist debate, the rising confidence in science over against religion, and the mass migration of people from the farm to the city (which is always disorienting). Mainline Protestantism appeared to regain some of its status during the crisis of World War II and immediately after with the rise in attendance and the starting of many new mainline congregations in the newly forming suburbs of the 1950's. However, the respite was temporary and in the 1960's we saw the whole "mainline" cultural milieu of the country begin to disintegrate.

The mainline "cultural consensus" was driven by a white Anglo-Saxon male Protestant perspective. But with the rise of the civil rights movement and the anti-war movement, the images of Bull Connor's dogs, burning American cities, and body bags served up nightly on network television, this consensus began to unravel and new voices clamored to be heard. 1968 is widely regarded as *the* signature year of the disintegration of

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in a *Post-Protestant Age*, Jackson Carroll and Wade Clark Roof, eds. (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993) and *American Mainline Religion: Its Changing Shape and Future*, Wade Clark Roof and William McKinney (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1987).

<sup>7</sup> However, pockets of establishment lasted until the 1820's, most notably in Maryland.

American mainline culture and thus the cultural disestablishment of the mainline churches in the United States. It is precisely in 1968 that we see the beginning of the dramatic drop in the vital statistics of the eight mainline churches.

The response of mainline church leadership was mostly failure to understand what was happening and denial. However, we ought not be too hard on these leaders. After all, who can discern a major social shift *as it is happening*? It usually takes a decade or more for scholars to understand such major shifts, why would we expect church leaders to recognize it immediately? Also, denial was easy as short term statistical ups and downs are a regular feature of institutional life.

However, denial persisted long past the time when it became evident that these statistical declines represented long term trends, not just short term "blips." Still, I would not characterize continued denial as a failure of individual leaders so much as a *systemic* failure. Organizational systems (and especially *modern* organizational systems) love nothing so much as homeostasis and will do almost anything to avoid change. Thus, even those individual leaders (whether congregational, middle judicatory or denominational) who have sought to draw attention to the changed context in which the mainline churches find themselves have often been dismissed, worn down, and/or undermined.

In the face of marked institutional decline, the time has now arrived when no one can reasonably or credibly deny that we are living in the midst of a cultural *sea change*. The challenge *now* is to respond in a way that is rational and not driven by panic or desperation! This challenge is all the greater since middle judicatory and denominational leaders generally have so much less in the way of financial and other resources with which to work.

So, what are some of the implications of the new context and what do we need to do in these "mainline" denominations? This is the subject of the remainder of this essay.

### **Leaders Must Tend to Their Own Spiritual and Emotional Needs**

The demands placed on organizational leaders of all kinds these days are great. But the demands on leaders of rapidly declining institutions are enormous. When one assumes a role of leadership in a mainline denomination these days (whether in middle judicatory or national offices), it is like jumping into an ocean whirlpool: you must start swimming and you must swim fast! The initial rush of energy that comes to most of us from the sense of honor and affirmation at having been chosen for such a role may power a person for a few months. But it is not long before one is drawn into a struggle for personal and institutional survival. The more anxious and unhealthy the system, the more one is constantly being pushed, pulled, by-passed and manipulated. No where is the adage more true: "When you are up to your hips in alligators, it is hard to remember that the original objective was to drain the swamp!"

Most people who are chosen for these roles, and who feel *called* to these roles, are pastors: persons with deep sensitivity to the feelings of those around them. In every mainline organization with which I am familiar, the atmosphere is so emotionally charged as to be overwhelming to the pastoral heart. Yet, as pastors, their natural tendency is to want to engage the feelings of those around them at a *heart* level. Thus, there is the challenge of remaining emotionally connected while maintaining one's legitimate and necessary emotional boundaries. One can speak of this as engaging the pastoral *head* so as not to deplete the pastoral *heart*. Yet, as the inevitable weariness of long hours and too much travel sets in, it is harder and harder to maintain the necessary personal differentiation.

This means it is absolutely essential that the leader engage in the spiritual and personal disciplines needed. This certainly includes the spiritual disciplines of Bible study, prayer, silence and regular worship in a place where one is not the leader. But it also means a discipline of time with family, time with friends and establishing an effective peer support group.

Many mainline ministers, in whatever setting, have never established such spiritual and personal disciplines for themselves. This means they have been writing bad checks against spiritual accounts into which they have not made significant deposits in years. This is a prescription for vocational, professional and moral failure. In denominational leadership, where one does not even have the benefit of experiencing the rhythm of the church year, it can be fatal to the spirit!<sup>8</sup>

### **Keep Asking the Three Most Important Questions**

Besides addressing the *incredible* daily demands of an anxious system, there is the larger responsibility of bringing the system itself to some measure of health and effectiveness. This means that you must not allow yourself to be drawn into the anxiety and dis-ease of the system. But how does one stay differentiated? My experience suggests that leaders must daily keep three questions before themselves.

The first question is, "What time is it?" As circumstances change over time, systems must respond with appropriate change in order to remain healthy and effective. However, because anxious systems love homeostasis even more than health, they encourage their members to engage in denial. Thus, the institutional culture in mainline denominations will do its best to convince you that it is 1955! It is not 1955, nor even 1968 or 1988. One must constantly ask, "What time is it *now*?"

The second question is, "Where am I?" The institution will inevitably try to convince you that you are doing ministry in a place other than where you are actually. It is likely a "place" where little needs to change, where things just need to be maintained and the

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<sup>8</sup> A helpful primer in spiritual disciplines for mainline Protestants is Practicing Our Faith, Dorothy C. Bass ed. (San Francisco, Jossey-Bass, Inc., 1997).

mission is non-threatening and crystal clear: *do more of the same only do it harder and faster!* If you are in a denominational ministry, the institution will try to convince you that the headquarters building *is* the definitive place of reality and that any place else, where things appear to be different, is just an anomaly.

The third question is, "What am I doing here?" This may be the most important question of all in a context where so many people are dedicated to their own agendas or are being used by the system to distract you from yours. "What did God call me here to do? What did the church call me here to do? How does what I am doing *today* fit with my overall purpose and objectives?"

These three questions are so important because institutional culture is so powerful that if we are not consciously thinking about these things, we will be swept along by the currents of the system's own hubris.<sup>9</sup>

### **Continually Clarify the Mission of the Institution**

In the face of the incredibly rapid social change we have witnessed since 1968 especially, all mainline churches have drifted somewhat in our understanding of our identity and mission. We have become rather confused about who and what God is calling us to be. It is urgent that we regain clarity in these matters. In the absence of such clarity, we have tended to focus on survival and recovery of the institutional strength we have lost.

It is not only mainline denominations as a whole that need greater clarity about their mission. Congregations and middle judicatories have drifted in their sense of purpose. My experience as a congregational minister, a middle judicatory minister and a head of communion suggests that a primary key to vitality is a clear sense of mission that is related to the cultural and geographical context in which the congregation is situated. Within the matrix of the gifts and resources of the congregation, the middle judicatory, the denomination and the needs of those who live in their midst, the mission can be found. However, in our sense of loss and our growing sense of panic, we have tended to make the survival of our institutions the focus of our thought and activity rather than the needs of those who live in our midst.

Most mainline heads of communion have led their communions in some kind of "mission clarification" process in recent years, but the institutional angst is so deep and the

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<sup>9</sup> See the article, "Leadership That Matters," by Anthony B. Robinson, *Christian Century* 116, December 1999:1228-1231. Staying differentiated and remaining a "non-anxious presence" are essential leadership skills for the mainline church. I share Robinson's enthusiasm for the authors James MacGregor Burns, Edwin H. Friedman and Ronald Heifetz. I would underscore the value of Heifetz's Leadership Without Easy Answers (Cambridge, MA, Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1994) and would recommend in addition: A Failure of Nerve, by Edwin H. Friedman (Bethesda Maryland, The Edwin Friedman Estate/Trust, 1999) and Primal Leadership, by Goleman, Boyatzis and McKee (Boston, Harvard Business School Press, 2002).

losses so threatening that national, middle and local expressions of the church are mostly unmoved by the development of such statements, no matter how profound or eloquent. Most leaders continue to be plagued by fear, territorialism, depression and a sense of hopelessness and/or cynicism.

This does not mean that the effort to clarify the mission is wrong or useless. However, it does mean that such a process of clarification cannot be finished in a sermon or two, a year or two, a book or two, or even by a "head of communion" or two. Clarification of the mission is a process that must be ongoing. It must be the beginning of every conversation about what to "be and do" nationally, regionally and locally.

The mission of mainline denominations that was "inherited" from the 19<sup>th</sup> century was to create a Christian *world*. The mainline churches threw themselves into this endeavor, especially from the 1880's through the 1950's. But by the 1960's, the churches that had been planted on other continents (one thinks especially of Africa) were growing and succeeding so well as to overshadow their American founders. At this same time, mainline church leaders were also realizing how culturally colonialist American mission endeavors had often been and began moving away from paternalistic approaches and toward *partnerships* with the indigenous churches.

This would have been a good time for mainline church leaders to begin thinking of the United States itself as the primary mission field again. But, alas, in the face of mounting losses, *maintenance* became our primary mission field! In the early 1960's, we almost stopped establishing new congregations entirely. This only hastened our losses and meant that much of the nation's new political and economic power was moving to places where few new mainline congregations were found (the city core and the new suburbs), which only hastened our loss of cultural influence.

Thus, it is past time for us to consider anew what our mission is in this land, especially in the face of our diminished resources and in the face of our cultural disestablishment and loss of influence. Who are we called to be *now* and what are we called to do *now*?

### **Lead in Casting a Vision**

A vision is simply a snap shot of what the institution would look like if it were doing the clarified mission in the actual context (both internal and external) in which it finds itself. To paraphrase the proverb, "Without a vision, the institution perishes." A vision, if adequately related to the mission and the context, can create and release new energy.

A carefully stated vision also has the power to create a "big picture." In the absence of a *big* picture, the individual cells of organization within the institution (individual congregations, middle judicatory bodies, or denominational programmatic units, etc.) will tend to create their own smaller visions which may serve to build up the strength of that individual cell but without really strengthening the whole body (even though their individual vision statements will almost always *sound* like they are serving the whole

body!). The larger body may end up looking like Popeye, with grossly over-developed arms and scrawny legs (and no spinach to miraculously make them work together as needed!). Creating a "big picture" vision is an essential function of leadership.

### **Clarify the Role of Denominational Structures**

Denominational structures have served many purposes through the last two centuries in America. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, denominations were focusing primarily on starting new congregations and developing leadership. By the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, the facilitation of mission overseas had become a primary role. In the 1960's, in the face of the Civil Rights struggle and the Viet Nam War, witnessing for social justice became a core role of denominational structures (social justice had long been on denominational agendas, but it now became a more central role).

By the 1980's, in the face of decline, denominational structures became more and more preoccupied with maintenance and survival issues (especially that of the individual denominational units themselves rather than that of the congregations or the whole denomination). Though such activity was usually couched in mission and "whole church" *terms*, the primary energy was given to defining a sustainable niche for the individual denominational units themselves, trying to make their own unit indispensable and "bullet proof", rather than really addressing the health of the larger body.

Without a clarification of the mission of American denominations in the face of the church's changed relationship to the culture, denominational structures will continue to be driven by their own maintenance and survival rather than by a relevant sense of mission. This manifests itself in an effort on the part of individual denominational units (middle and national) to become *hubs of control* (the default "modern" role) rather than hubs of communication and networking (the default "post-modern" role).<sup>10</sup>

There is a precise correlation between individual denominational units being "hubs of control" and the rise of para-church organizations that operate as "hubs of communication and networking!" In the face of this, one can't help but reflect on Jesus' words, "Whoever seeks to save their life will lose it...."

### **Learn from Marginalized Communities**

How can mainline denominations flourish after cultural disestablishment? Perhaps the best place to look for clues is to look at communities of faith that have survived on the margins of their host cultures for centuries. The first example that comes to mind is the Jewish people. How have the Jews survived as a distinctive people throughout three thousand years of history? Sometimes they were dominant in their homeland, as in the

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<sup>10</sup> The same dynamics can be seen in individual congregations, of course. A helpful book in thinking about a new sense of purpose rooted in mission is The Church Confident, by Leander Keck (Nashville, Abingdon Press, 1993).

time of David. But the overwhelmingly majority of years have been spent in captivity or subjection to someone: Egypt, Babylon, Assyria, Rome, Europe....

They have not done it by holding uniformly to one doctrine. Indeed, the doctrinal differences between various parties of Judaism is proverbial. They have not done it by keeping themselves completely apart from the culture around them (though some segments of Judaism have attempted this). Indeed, much of their most sacred scripture originated in interaction with other cultures, including those of Egypt and Mesopotamia.

Judaism maintained its identity, even as it adapted to various cultural settings and relationships (sometimes friendly, often hostile), by very intentionally nurturing their own sense of identity and purpose. They did this by telling and remembering their story in liturgy, song, seasonal celebration, and rites of passage and very intentional education from generation to generation. While there are many characters comprising their story, the primary hero of their story is God.

In the American context, African-Americans provide another example. They developed their own unique identity which was neither simply African nor simply American. They survived the violent and crushing experience of slavery by developing their own liturgy, song, and story that could be passed from generation to generation. They have *remembered* who they were and are. While there are many characters comprising their story, the primary hero of their story, too, is God.

The Black Church experience continues to be so powerful for so many African Americans, even those who have "made it" in mainstream American culture, because the Black Church helps them remember who they are and where they come from. They are reminded that they are *survivors* in a culture that clearly wants to remake them into "Negro Saxons," a culture that at its racist core wants to *exclude* them no matter how much they may adapt and assimilate to white culture.

The "lost ten tribes of Israel" were lost precisely because they ceased rehearsing and remembering their own story and allowed themselves to be completely assimilated into the cultures about them. Likewise, Black Americans who lose touch with their own heritage lose the power to retain their sense of self in the face of the forces of assimilation and racism.

If the experience of these two marginalized communities is historically normative, and I believe it is, then a fundamental key to maintaining the viability of the "mainline," now "old line modern," church communities is to foster our own identity. We must intentionally educate ourselves and each succeeding generation about who we are, or we will become the "lost eight tribes of American Christianity."

We need to revitalize our rituals and our teaching in a way that does not simply seek to preserve obsolete structures and patterns but which makes clear the difference between *our* core values and those of the cultures around us.

## Address the Gap in Christian Education

The theological divide we see in America today could be characterized as being between those who take a pre-modern (fundamentalist) approach to religion, those who take a modern approach, and those who are post-modern in approach. However, the more worrisome divide is that between those who have some form of Christian education (not mere indoctrination) and those who have little or none.

The simple fact is that, on the whole, the mainline denominations have not done a good job of Christian education since before 1968. The average mainline member is nearly completely unacquainted with the contents of the Bible, let alone having any meaningful framework for interpreting and applying the scriptures to daily life in the post-modern era. Mainline members are similarly without a disciplined prayer life, are typically poor contributors compared to their more conservative counterparts, and are not well acquainted with the history or core values of their denominational tradition.

Though religiously ignorant, these people are not stupid. They have remained a part of the mainline church for a number of reasons, including: loyalty to the church in which they were raised; the hope that something will "click" at some point; and the inability to disconnect faith and reason easily and thus to move to a "faith *without* reason" kind of church. However, post-modern culture is powerful and, in the absence of systematic Christian nurture including education, participation in corporate worship and meaningful fellowship, the radical individualism of our times will eventually overwhelm the reasons for remaining in the mainline church.

In the absence of basic knowledge of the Christian tradition generally and their own denominational tradition particularly, members are easy prey for pop culture notions of Christianity. Even more disturbing is the fact that when members leave the mainline church, they don't typically move to either New Age sects or fundamentalist churches. Most simply find that organized religion no longer addresses their felt needs! This is due in large measure, I believe, to the fact that most members of mainline churches do not know their own traditions and symbols well enough to effectively draw from them. Thus, a primary element of renewal will be effective Christian education that will help create an effective "belief system" for members and that will help them participate in church life and find meaning in worship.<sup>11</sup>

I do hope this essay is helpful to leaders who long for the renewal of the mainline church. As I said at the beginning, it *does* matter! But to lead in this endeavor, my own experience indicates that one must take seriously each of the tasks I have named

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<sup>11</sup> Helpful resources include: "Studying Denominations: Challenges for a New Century" by Nancy T. Ammerman, Journal of Presbyterian History 79, no. 3 2001:183-197 (see also the end notes of this article); Dean R. Hoge, Benton Johnson, and Donald A. Luidens, Vanishing Boundaries: The Religion of Mainline Protestant Baby Boomers, Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1994.

above. Namely: (1) tend one's own spiritual and emotional needs, (2) keep asking those three most important questions (What time is it? Where am I? What am I doing here?), (3) lead in clarifying the mission of the institution continuously, (4) lead in casting a vision, (5) lead in clarifying the role of denominational structures continuously, (6) learn from historically marginalized communities, and (7) lead in addressing the gap in members' knowledge and appreciation of their church's tradition and ethos.