Sizing Up the Shape of the Church

George R. Hunsberger

This issue of the Reformed Review contains a collection of articles whose aim it is to "size up" the Reformed Church in America, with a look at the fortunes of the whole as well as the experience of several of its parts. The articles include a look at the past and hints of dreams for the future. They pay attention to factors both within and without the church.

But there is an essential problematic which remains to be uncovered. It becomes evident when the myth-breaking study of Roger Nemeth and Donald Luidens takes a prescriptive turn. The advice that "the RCA needs to be more intentional about outreach to groups that have been poorly represented in the past" if membership trends are to be reversed comes on the heels of their dramatic news that during the last century, the RCA has essentially grown, and now declined, in membership as a consequence of the rate of having babies. How does a centuries-long habit in which "membership trends were principally dependent upon 'natural' growth" shift toward a new spurt of intentionality in recruitment? What historic character or quality would that shift hope to draw upon? What would it take to recast dramatically the corporate culture of the churches, and where does the hope lie that the churches could or would, with a flash of recognition, decide to make such dramatic changes? What would motivate the change?

The suggestion to "be more intentional"—i.e. beef up our evangelistic fortitude—too easily underwrites the now all-too-familiar habit of thinking that the signs of crisis in the church are really not so dire, that with a bit of tweaking and tuning, a mild course correction can turn the fortunes around, and that if we try harder we can move out of the doldrums.

But the crisis is dire. Tuning the engine and trying harder will not change the growing malaise in the churches or their increasing experience of being finally and firmly "disestablished" from roles of importance we thought we had in the larger society. The fundamental crisis we are facing is the one Douglas John Hall calls a crisis of thinking. In particular, it is a crisis of thinking about what the church is and how we fit into the scheme of things in the world. Or, perhaps more accurately, the crisis is that we have not thought carefully, critically or theologically about our assumptions regarding the church and have failed to notice how much they have been shaped by the character of American life in this "modern" world.
Shape, Not Size

Our current crisis of size is only a symptom of deeper and broader changes in the form and place of religious life in North American society. The crisis of size should therefore be recognized as a signal that we are facing a more pressing crisis, a crisis of shape. The fact that we experience the current crisis primarily as one of size is itself one of the important clues to the crisis of shape: We have come to regard the church as being in the religion business and right now sales are down!

The crisis of shape about which I am speaking is by its nature a theological crisis, and one of great magnitude and consequence. It is theological because it has to do with how we understand what was and is in God’s mind regarding this social configuration called "church." But it is important to clarify that in calling attention to the theological nature of this crisis, I am not contradicting one of the most important points made by Nemeth and Luidens. They show that the factors involved in the decline of the denomination "are longstanding and generally predate any of the ideological debates of 'left' and 'right' which are both audible and high voltage." In fact, they say, "this noisy polemic seems to have had little to do with the changes." They show that the winding down of the RCA's "market share" of American church adherents was well under way at the beginning of the century and the shift of monies from denominational to local and congregational needs occurred well before the turbulent 1960s.

But to find reasons for decline in the broader social context does not mean that there are not internal, theological ones. Luidens, in collaboration with several other scholars, demonstrates this point. In an article entitled "Mainline Churches: The Real Reason for Decline," Luidens and his companions report the findings of a study of the religious attitudes and practices of baby boomers who had been confirmed in mainline Protestant churches (in particular, the Presbyterian Church [USA]) during the 1960s. They found that "the single best predictor of church participation turned out to be belief—orthodox Christian belief, and especially the teaching that a person can be saved only through Jesus Christ." They concluded that mainline denominations "seem to be weak in the sense of being unable to generate and maintain high levels of commitment among a substantial portion of their adherents." This they attribute in part to the fact that denominational leaders did not, in response to the currents of modernity, "devise or promote compelling new versions of a distinctively Christian faith. They did not fashion or preach a vigorous apologetics."
advice is that "if the mainline churches want to regain their vitality, their first step must be to address theological issues head-on."

Another study which has gained a lot of attention is the seven volume series on *The Presbyterian Presence: The Twentieth-Century Experience*. In the concluding volume, the editors of the series (Milton J. Coalter, John M. Mulder, and Louis B. Weeks) draw together the fruits of the massive study. There they write that "fragmentation of its life and witness...best explains the historical contours of twentieth-century American Presbyterianism." This interpretation has value, they say, because it suggests that "the problems of American mainstream Protestantism are not due simply to human mistakes or institutional missteps; rather, the difficulties are part of the broad process of modernization that has shaped so much of twentieth-century American culture."  

Having summarized the most important findings of the study, Coalter, Mulder, and Weeks conclude with "An Agenda for Reform" (chapter 9). The agenda in the end is a theological one. They suggest five crucial "theological questions posed by these epochal changes." The fourth is especially pertinent to the theological issue I am raising about the "shape" of the church:

> Why, after all, is there a church—an ordered community of Christians? Why is faith a communal experience, rather than a private one? Swirling beneath the sociological trends in American society is not only the institutional crisis of American Presbyterianism and mainstream Protestantism but the haunting query of individuals about the need for and purpose of the church. . . . [T]he church's community must have a forthright and compellingly persuasive vision of what the church is and should be for Christian witness.

While we need to understand the sociological trends that influence our churches, our calling to witness faithfully to Jesus Christ requires that we also give keen attention to the theological issues implicated in our analysis of the trends.

What I am suggesting is this. Beneath the ebb and flow of contextual factors lies a substructure of commonly accepted notions about the church and its public role which has gone largely undetected. There is need for theological analysis that goes beyond discussions about the changing context or the effect of ecclesiastical debates and gets at this substructure.

**The Church as a Vendor of Religious Services**

What is the present shape of the church? The question must be asked honestly. Simple references to biblical phrases or creedal definitions may mask what is really operating in our day-to-day notions, which have much more to do with our actions and choices. David Bosch addressed this issue in lectures on the eve of the publication of his major work, *Transforming Mission.* He said
that we Protestants have inherited a particular view of the church from the Reformers. Their emphases on the marks of the true church—the right preaching of the gospel, the right administration of the sacraments, and the exercise of church discipline—have bequeathed to us an understanding that the church is "a place where certain things happen." However, in this century this view has been changing. The fruits of the missionary movement and the emergence of a global church have led us to see that the church is essentially "a body of people sent on a mission." This he identified as a crucial element in the "emerging ecumenical paradigm" of mission.

Bosch has surely put his finger on an important twentieth-century rediscovery of a biblical perspective. But is that the way that congregations conceive themselves and live? In North America, we live out of a very different model, even when we mouth formal statements like the one Bosch articulates. We are not very far from the notion that the church is "a place where certain things happen." Our common language betrays that. Church is something we "go to." We ask, "Where is your church?" The word may refer to a building, but even when it does not it tends to refer to an institution as embodied by officers and/or staff or to a set of programs offered according to a certain schedule of days and times. So, when I was a child, we talked about "going to Sunday School and church," a statement in which the word "church" referred to the Sunday morning 11:00 o’clock worship service.

More specifically, though, our contemporary notion is a variation on the "place where" way of defining the church. In the North American setting, we have come to view the church as "a vendor of religious services and goods" (Figure 1). To this notion we attach the language of production, marketing,
sales, and consumption. A congregation becomes a retail outlet or franchise of the denominational brand. Staff at all levels become sales and service representatives. The denomination is the corporate headquarters in charge of everything from research and development to mass media imaging.

Most of us value the use of many business-like techniques and procedures in the life of the church but would be aghast at the suggestion that we fundamentally operate out of a model of the church as a business, a vendor of religious services. But consider the unconscious and unquestioned form of many of our carefully worded mission statements. It is amazing how many are cast something like this: "The mission of Anytown Community Church is to nurture its members in Christian faith and equip them for service and witness to Christ in the world." What follows tends to detail the educational, worship, witness, and justice commitments of the church. But notice how the text reads. The mission of this church is to nurture its members. In a statement like that, to what does the word "church" refer? It sits over against the members, for whom it has a mission to do certain things. Church here refers either to the official governing body that feels responsible to meet the needs of the congregational members or those outside it, or to the staff whom they charge with that responsibility. But the members are not conceived, in such a statement, as being the church and themselves having a mission on which they have been collectively sent. Instead, they are the customers, the regular consumers for whom the religious services and goods produced by the "church" are intended. On such a model, evangelism devolves into membership recruitment, which may more accurately be called "capturing market share." This kind of "church" is in the business of religion and its livelihood is dependent on having a sufficient number of satisfied, committed customers.

In their study, Nemeth and Luidens give hints along this same line. They report the findings of Roger Finke and Rodney Stark that "a major change in organizational thinking reached Protestant circles in the late 1800s." Following developments in industry and business, churches incorporated models of efficiency and rationalization, implementing consolidation and specialization with a view toward an "economy of scale." They conclude: "Finke and Stark argue that this rationalizing and consolidating movement led directly to the demise of a sense of religious community among members of mainline congregations." 

Nemeth and Luidens go on to show how "the postwar professionalization of the church and the decline of traditional volunteerism" (which may not be so unconnected as they imply) affected congregational spending patterns. They report that dominant concerns in that era included such things as raising the standard of services, upgrading programs and facilities, widening the scope of programs offered, and using paid professionals to run programs, which were
part of the congregations' engagement in a "heightened competition for new members."  

The difficulty comes when we fail to see that these developments are all theological. Nemeth and Luidens imply they are not, an implication which is heightened by their (rightful) emphasis on the influence of the context on membership trends. But many trends, particularly external ones which shape the church's self-understanding, are very theological and must be examined as such.

For example, the structural revolution in the churches at the beginning of the century is important because it is part of a much longer development that has shaped the American church's notion of itself and has structured its life. The pervasiveness of this "shaping" is underscored by the approach used in the study of Finke and Stark to which Nemeth and Luidens refer. The study assumes an economic understanding of religious life and practice which has been characteristic of the American setting. Finke and Stark defend the persistent use of "market" terminology by making the case "that where religious affiliation is a matter of choice, religious organizations must compete for members and that the 'invisible hand' of the marketplace is as unforgiving of ineffective religious firms as it is of their commercial counterparts." They use "economic concepts such as markets, firms, market penetration, and segmented markets to analyze the success and failure of religious bodies" and in the process evaluate clergy as sales representatives, religious doctrines as product, and evangelization techniques as marketing techniques.

Finke and Stark do not defend this approach as a good theology of the church but as the necessary historical and sociological tool for assessing its disestablishment, a situation which resulted in churches operating like business firms in a religious economy. And "religion is not like a commercial economy in that they consist of a market made up of a set of current and potential customers and a set of firms seeking to serve that market." This form of analysis, they believe, best corresponds to the experience of the churches. But by making their case, they show how much the churches of North America have come to live out of a longstanding notion that a church is a vendor of religious services and goods.

A Body of People Sent on a Mission

It is frankly hard to conceive of the reaction Christians of the New Testament era would have had to the notion of the church as a religious vendor. It is thoroughly foreign to the New Testament portrayals of the nature and style of the church's presence in the communities of that time. The New Testament never envisioned a church which was defined in so economic a way. Churches were not business firms. They were living, pulsing communities grasped by the news that the light and salvation of the world had come in Jesus Christ. As a consequence, their relations to the world were changed. They represented to the
world the news *that has* seized them. They did not look for religious customers, they gave the gospel away to the spiritually hungry and thirsty.\(^{16}\)

The prevalence of the vendor notion in our understandings *today*, and the disjuncture between that notion *and* anything the New Testament suggests, bring *us* face-to-face with the most basic of theological questions. The question is crucial, especially in a day when we struggle so hard as denominations *and* congregations to ascertain our identity. Our *identity* crisis must reach to this level of theological *engagement* if we are to find our way again.

How then do we shift from the structure of church life which revolves around the vendor notion to one which forms itself around the *notion that we are* "a body of people sent on a *mission*"? If we do not recognize that to be a tall *order*, we have not grasped the seriousness of the difference. And if we think that we can easily extricate ourselves from one operating assumption *and* implement another, we do not comprehend how historically rooted the church *always is* and *must be*. But our historical rooting can never be an excuse for avoiding change. We are always subject to the gospel's call to make fundamental departures from assumptions about ourselves which the surrounding society holds. It is that call which we need to allow.

Nothing close to a full answer to our question can be given here. But several aspects of the necessary re-forming of the church may begin to indicate something of the path on which we must go.

1. We need to *localize* our sense of the church. This is the burden of the recent organizational ferment in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). *The study* edited by Coalter, Mulder, and Weeks traced the rise of the "corporate denomination" *beginning* at the end of the nineteenth century. "The denomination as a corporation is a bureaucratic, hierarchical organization dependent on managers and capable of delivering goods and services to congregations as well as mobilizing and coordinating support of national and international mission causes."\(^{17}\) Some have suggested this led ultimately to a two-church model: the national, corporate church and the local church of the congregations. The widening gap between the two *brought* about the unraveling of the corporate denomination and the outcome is not entirely evident. What is evident, however, is that "the congregation is now the locus of power and mission in American Presbyterianism." Recent *restructuring* in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) *intends* to imbed that understanding in the denominational structures. This shift in the locus of mission makes denominational systems nervous. Frequently in Reformed and Presbyterian circles it leads to a knee-jerk charge of "creeping congregationalism." In reality the shift is a reversal of the "creeping denominationalism" of the last centuries and a reemergence of what I would prefer to call "congregationism." "Congregationalism" refers to the system of church government which maintains the autonomy of the local
congregation. "Congregationism" retains a sense of the mutuality and accountability of congregations with each other, but stresses that the mission and identity of the church takes form most essentially in the local congregation.\textsuperscript{18}

This shift of locus provides a critique of the vendor model of the church, which became especially prominent in the corporate denomination. Another line of critique shows how the corporate denomination was designed around a "modern" style of business organization which is itself experiencing change in a postmodern situation. Nancy Ammerman has provided an analysis of the current struggles within the Southern Baptist Convention which suggests that we are seeing the emergence of new forms of denominational style. The contrast is between modern organizations (of which the corporate denomination is an example) and postmodern ones. What made sense as an economy of scale in the modern organization has now become subject to a pluralized and fragmented marketplace (religious or otherwise) in which one size does not fit all. Ammerman illustrates the forces at work in this transition by giving a series of comparisons. In regard to the activities of the organization, it means a shift from mass production to finding niches. In regard to technology, it is based on the shift from technological determinism to a range of technological choices. As regards organization, it entails a shift from highly specialized to highly generalized styles. Regarding relationships, it means a move from a large and centralized organization to a decentralized and flexible one.\textsuperscript{19}

Two movements are going on here. On the one hand, the locus of the church’s vitality and mission is being reassigned to the local congregation. On the other hand, there are revised patterns emerging in denominational structures. What must be observed is that these shifts, important as they are, do not get at the root of the problem. They do not fully enough question the vendor notion of the church. The shift to a postmodern style may relieve the pressures building in a modern organization, but denominations may continue to function in a vendor manner. If the shift from a denominational locus of identity and mission to a congregational one in any way opens up a critique of the vendor model, then it simply begs the question at the congregational level. As Coalter, Mulder, and Weeks observe, "the impulse toward incorporation permeated congregations, as well as national structures."\textsuperscript{20} So a shift from a modern to a postmodern organization would be as important for the congregation as it is for the denomination. But even more fundamental is the question about whether a vendor model is theologically faithful or adequate. In addition to localizing the church, therefore, we must test the way local congregations structure their life and look for the revolutions that are needed there.

2. A number of practical shifts will be necessary if we are to move from treating the church as a vendor of religious services to being a body of people sent on a mission.
a. **A shift from program to embodiment.** It makes a difference whether a church is oriented toward producing programs and services for potential consumers, or committed to cultivating habits of life which help us be faithful to the gospel together. The latter focuses attention on how we embody the gospel and how we make it light, salt, seed, and aroma for the world around us. Our identity as a community of disciples must again be the center of our life together. Programs must be clearly subservient to that purpose. Programs are not for consumption but for growth.

b. **A shift from committee to team.** We are being committee-ed and counciled to death in our churches. In many of them, the primary way that a member actively participates in the church beyond attending worship is serving on a committee. Most of our volunteer time is then spent in planning and policy-making functions which remain one step removed from actual involvement in ministry. In reflections on "The Changing Shape of the Church," Ed White of the Alban Institute notes the trend "from an emphasis on program to an emphasis on ministry: Instead of preplanned programs which get organized and carried out according to a set pattern, there will be more willingness to approach the world with open hands and to respond to what one finds."\(^{21}\) As groups come together and discover their context, calling, and gifts, a ministry team forms with an energy never achieved by a committee.

c. **A shift from being clergy-dominated to being laity-oriented.** Ed White adds this to his list of trends: "From an emphasis on professional Christians (clergy), who are center stage in the gathered church, to Christian professionals who are ministering in the world and in the workplace: It is the laity who will be the 'leaven in the lump' as agents of renewal in our failing institutions."\(^{22}\) When the primary involvement of members is sitting on planning and policy committees, is it any wonder that they look to staff to implement programs and that staff have difficulty "giving ministry away," as Bruce Larsen is fond of putting it?

d. **A shift from recruitment to mission.** The two words move in opposite directions. Recruitment is the orientation inherent in the vendor church, which tries to attract people to be regular and committed consumers of its programs and services, that is, to be satisfied customers. Mission moves in an opposite direction. It moves outward. It is concerned about giving the gospel away, not getting people in.

e. **A shift from entrepreneur to missionary.** In recent years it has become fashionable to advocate a shift in pastoral style "from maintenance to mission." Among other things, leaders are challenged to move from being passive and responsive to being active and proactive. Based on a vendor model, this new "mission leader" becomes an entrepreneur instead of a mere manager. Yet if we are to move beyond the vendor model, we need to be clearer about what a missionary leader is. A true missionary leader is one who forms the kind of
community which embodies and represents in its life, deeds, and words the reign of God which Jesus announced is here.

3. We will need to revise our notions of *viability*, especially as we apply them to the small church and to new church development. What do we think makes a church viable? By what standard do we determine what a *real* church is? Does viability assume certain levels of financial resources? Does it assume a certain set of programs? Does it assume paid, professional leadership? According to the vendor model of the church the answer to all of these questions is yes, and this is where the greatest stress is felt in our churches. It is felt especially in smaller churches where a sense of inferiority sets in because they cannot support a full-time pastor or sustain a full array of services and programs. It is felt in new church developments where there is pressure to become a *"real church"* in terms of facilities, programs, staffing, and budget. The articles in this issue by Stephen Norden, and Nancy Clark attest to the struggles that result for pastors and congregations alike when they try to be viable, vendor churches.

Look at the way we approach new church development in many of our mainstream denominations. Operating with a vendor notion of the church, we ask the marketing question: Where will a church of our type (brand?) have a good chance of succeeding? What would happen if we asked instead the mission question: Where is there a need for the healing presence of a Christian community? The marketing question is asked in order to determine cost effectiveness. The mission question invariably leads to something which is more costly than effective. But is this not the nature of our calling? Pondering the difference between these two questions, we may find new ways to think about small and new churches. Pondering the difference, we may even find innovations in small and new churches which will help us re-form all of our churches as missionary communities.

ENDNOTES


9. David J. Bosch, in lectures given at Western Theological Seminary, April, 1991.

10. Nemeth and Luidens, 89.


16. It may be worth noting that much church growth literature appears to contradict this understanding of the New Testament. In that literature, the concern for size and growth so characteristic of churches living out of a "religious economy" model is defended as theologically appropriate because the Great Commission leads us to expect growth as a dynamic of the church. But even when that growth criterion is redeemed as it is in the hands of Charles Van Engen (who makes "yearning for growth," and not growth itself, the mark of the true church), what remains unexamined is the operative notion of "church" with which we are dealing and the way that has been so reshaped in our modern American experience that the biblical growth motifs become irrelevant to it. The biblical motifs speak of a form
of church other than a "vendor of religious services." (Cf. Charles E. Van Engen, *The Growth of the True Church* [Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1981].)


18. Discussions on the theme of the unity and catholicity of the church at the New Delhi (1961) and Uppsala (1968) assemblies of the World Council of Churches give shape to such an understanding.


