

THE CONGREGATION

People congregate for a wide variety of reasons. They gather for the purpose of committing crime, for carrying out good deeds, and for festive occasions. The Protestants and Catholics of Ireland have recently been gathering in order to throw water filled balloons and gas filled bottles at each other!

But what we are considering here is what the dictionary calls a "religious congregation". That is a group of people who belong to a church or "religious" organization. Currently there are "religious organizations" that are dropping the word "church" from their name. They are substituting terms that they feel have more appeal for contemporary generations. They are distancing themselves from the concept of "denomination". Of course they are creating a new informal form of "denomination". In the history and development of our Country, denominations have been guiding lights and have performed highly significant roles. Of course our denominations have had their imperfections, points of misplaced zeal, rough places. But they have led this Nation in establishing schools, hospitals, community betterment programs, and setting worthy ethical and moral standards. Now changes are occurring. It appears that the traditional denominations are waning. A different kind of worshipping congregation is being established. Where this trend will lead we do not know.

How much time does the average church member give to considering what it means to be a member of a "congregation"? Probably not a great amount. Perhaps they make no great distinction. Individually we are church

members. But as church members we are members of a "Congregation". The congregation is the "Body", the vital living organism. Someone has said, "Now we live in a bubbling chaos of popular culture". It is the congregation that converts that "bubbling chaos" into a steady stream of "community values". As a part of the congregation, each member should have a part in that conversion!

Mark Chaves, a sociologist, in "Congregation In America" finds 300,000 congregations, parishes, temples, synagogues... etc... in America! The 'median' congregation has an attendance of 75 regular participants. They have a budget of \$56,000. There are many other interesting facts, or opinions revealed by the study. But the interesting conclusion is: these congregations are not highly involved in social services, civic affairs, or political activities. Rather, congregations tend to be concerned with immediate, short-term needs, that do not require long-term commitments, or services. Fortunately, that summation does not apply to the Presbyterian denomination which has many long-term commitments in social service and civic affairs arenas. However, many members of Presbyterian congregations are not aware of, or highly committed to these affairs.

If we are, indeed, living in a "bubbling chaos of popular culture", how are church members caused to feel that they are members of the 'congregation', the "Body"? How do they come to feel that they are involved in the commitments of the "Body"?

On an occasion I attended a Sunday worship service that got off to a very good start: the call to worship, the the invocation, the opening hymn...

then came the 'passing of the peace'... the pew where I was seated was half vacated in seconds. I could see the people had gone to the far side of the sanctuary and were engaged in excited conversation, greetings and the like. Such was happening at various places in the assembly... thus, in a great 'bubbling chaos of greetings and gossip' the congregation dissolved into an assembly of congregates. No longer a "congregation"! The great redemptive and remedial prayer of hope and peace was pushed aside.

To be a congregation in the 'church' sense, the members must be on the same 'beam', engaged in a corporate endeavor, pursuing a recognized mission. The congregates are in a state of oneness. When a congregation, as an act of faith, is in such a state it has great influence, great power, and effects change. Do the members of our churches reflect upon the meaning of membership in this fashion? Are church programs and messages designed so as to promote the concept of congregational mission?

Today in our Nation the Christian faith is facing, perhaps, the greatest challenge in the history of our Country. Faith symbols, by court action, are being removed from public arenas. A Supreme Court decision has just made it legal for private property, homes, to be confiscated for corporate development. The taxing of Church property is being debated. Some 'religion groups' are dropping the word 'church' from their name. Religious freedom is no longer an accepted freedom!

What is happening in and to our congregation? Are they truly 'mission' promoting congregations. Historically, Presbyterians have sought to cultivate Mission-Oriented congregations...

leading the Nation, going into all the world, promoting freedom, justice, mercy, and peace. Its model was that of Jesus Christ calling the disciples and giving them a big commission, "Go into all the world, win disciples, baptize them, teach them, and make them into missionaries"!

Well, that is still the purpose of the Church and its members! And that is much more than just a big bubble of chaos looking for ways of attracting followers!

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