

Brand loyalty: Mainline persistence

by [Martin E. Marty](#) in the [May 20, 2008](#) issue

On the way to the airport for my TWA flight to St. Louis, I gassed up at the Standard station. When I got to the airport, my plane was delayed so I had time to drop in on Crown Books and then stopped at the Rexall concession to get some aspirin. Having an hour to kill in the club before takeoff, I put on my earphones and listened to the tape I had purchased the day before at Rose Records. I ran into N. N., a biggie at International Harvester who keeps me up to date on trends in his business. He spotted me because I was wearing my conventional bow tie, but he, in his tailored suit, seemed to be looking down on me in my off-the-rack Hart Schaffner & Marx three-piece number. We parted quickly because I had to grab a snack. I bought a Wimpy burger and boarded the plane.

Stop. In case any of you missed it, the foregoing was all a fantasy. *None* of the brands mentioned here still exists. Such is the way of the world we take for granted in these days of mergers, bankruptcies, competition, new tastes and changing communities.

Count on me to find parables for church life in this condition. Some who point to change and decline of denominations and congregations speak with envy about how the secular market prospers, while church people remain powerless to retard its effects. Religious organizations are taunted for not keeping up with the trends and therefore suffering demise.

In the face of those who are sure that Catholics, mainline Protestants, Reform Jews and certain kinds of evangelicals are in a slump or going bankrupt and disappearing, I got curious about the lasting power of religious organizations. From the reference shelf I picked out *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* from 60 years ago, March 1948. From the section "Organized Religion in the United States," I checked out brand-name survival there.

Note the names of standard-brand churches that survive: Adventist bodies, African Methodist Episcopal Church, National Baptist Convention, Southern Baptist Convention, American Baptists, Church of the Brethren, Presbyterians, Reformed

Church in America. The Roman Catholic Church and the Salvation Army have kept company with Disciples of Christ, Church of God in Christ, Latter-day Saints and Lutherans galore as survivors who limped along into the next millennium with the United Methodist Church.

It's true that some, like the Southern Baptist Convention, thrive more than others. Some have changed: the Congregational Christians and the Evangelical Reformed members were among the very few who changed names in ways that make continuity hard to discern. I could not find in the *Yearbook 2008* the various streams of Spiritualists, which had a sizable membership in 1948 but, ironically, have lost market share in a time when everyone wants to be "spiritual" but few want to institutionalize the impulse.

Anything but a triumphalist, I am not boasting about survivors. Some continuity could be as much the result of lethargy as it is of creativity; maybe no one cares enough to kill off the stragglers. But I am not complaining either, because most of these religious groups, with demography against them and internal assaults besetting them, have hung in there and creatively outlasted those many brands that so very recently looked permanent.