

Holy franchise: Franchise churches

by [Martin E. Marty](#) in the [February 22, 2005](#) issue

The dictionaries of saints leap alphabetically from St. Frances of Rome to St. Fremund, with stops along the way to a half dozen St. Francises. The saint I was looking for, however, was unlisted: "St. Franchise." I learned about him from Omega Services and Consultants. OSCON was trying to sell me a trip to Kerala, specifically to Cochin, with the promise that we would visit "Vasco Da Gama Church (St. Franchise Church).

St. Franchise, where are you now that we need you? We live in America where we confess the creed: "I believe in One, Holy, Catholic, Apostolic and Marketable Church." Such a church appears wherever Christianity is free and not established, which means not needing to be marketed. It cannot appear where the church is unfree and thus uncompetitive and unadvertisable.

Fifty years ago in a classic essay Sidney E. Mead listed "competition" as a main feature of the denomination, that modern, mainly American invention. Like it or not, the Orthodox, Catholic, Anglican and Mormon bodies find sociologists calling them denominations, however their members think of themselves. Now denominational competition is diminishing, a fact that leads some to say that therefore the denomination itself is disappearing.

Before there can be substitutes, the old terminological carcass has to be dragged away, or at least reduced, as some suggested prefixes illustrate. My Web search turns up 365,000 citations of "nondenominational," 5,790 of "postdenominational," 943 of "undenominational," all of them coming to mean "antidenominational."

What should we call the new social form? Some have proposed "megachurches," "the emergent church," "etc." (which could mean "the etceterachurch").

Only recently have I become aware that sociologists are now writing about another new form, derived from what business leaders call "the franchise model of organization." The faith franchisers, we are told, will become so dominant that they will displace tired old traditional forms such as "congregation" and "communion."

Patrick Kampert gave a fair-minded report in the *Chicago Tribune* (January 16) on the phenomenon: “GOD™: It worked for burgers, now churches try franchising.” The article focused on “multisite” churches and their “satellite campuses.” Their backers, being competitive, are polemical. Jim Hilmer, a Florida marketing consultant, commented: “Most churches are pretty staid and tradition-bound.” These aren’t.

The franchise churches tend to have a base—a quasidenominational virtual headquarters, from which signals of worship and activity get beamed to other sites. These full-service organizations have to offer fast-food operations, theaters, game rooms, athletic facilities, soft rock, kids clubs and many other things which the competing franchise church also offers.

So is the denomination dead or merely being transformed? The megachurches and franchise churches promote seminars, publishers, networks, conferences, evangelism projects, credentialing agencies, consultants—the things the denominations that they despise once did. Make room, *Yearbook of the American and Canadian Churches*, for one more “denomination,” the “Franchise Church, Inc.”

Franchise churches, which depend on advertising, may be overadvertising themselves at the moment. Yet they can be doing the works of God, so we see them within our ecumenical spectrum which reaches from tent revivalists to high Orthodoxy. Let’s gift them with a new name. It’s waiting for them in Kerala: St. Franchise.