Running on empty: The problem of the mainline

by Nancy Ammerman in the June 28, 2005 issue

For at least the past generation, mainline Protestants have been worried about declines in membership. One camp has taken up the rallying cry of conservatives (and some vocal sociologists) who claim that theological “strictness” and clear church-culture boundaries mark the path to reversing this decline. Others have claimed that the church’s aim is not to be “successful” by the world’s standards. If God wants the people to come, they will come.

After more than a decade of studying American congregational life (and a lifetime of investment in Baptist congregations), I am convinced that neither of these stances is helpful.

Since I am going to talk about success, I should begin by saying what I mean by that term. Christian churches exist to worship God, to teach and nurture people in the faith, and to spread the Good News (in the many ways they understand themselves to be called to do that). All of those things presume that there are distinctively Christian things to do and that having a group of people to do them beats trying to carry on alone. Managing to gather an ongoing group of people who regularly do these things together is my definition of success.

One of the challenges of our times is that gathering a group is complicated. The people we are with at any given moment are likely to be only one of the dozens of “gatherings” of which we are a part over the course of a week, and none of those groups overlaps perfectly with the people, values and concerns of the others. Few of us live in “parishes” where everyone knows everyone else and all go to the same church. In the average urban or suburban Protestant congregation, less than half the participants live within ten minutes’ drive of the church, up to a third have moved to the community in the past five years, about half were brought up in another denomination, and less than a quarter have been in that congregation all their lives. We don’t share a common culture in which the values and practices of the church

can be taken for granted.

So churches have to be intentional if they are to create a sense of Christian identity and belonging of any sort. Gathering takes work, but it is essential. As a sociologist, I'm naturally curious about how people do that work.

A team of researchers and I recently talked with people in 549 randomly selected and widely diverse congregations in seven representative locations across the country. We asked not only what they are trying to accomplish, but also how they actually spend their time and energy each week.

One pattern especially stood out from this research: the religious groups that spend the least organizational energy on the core tasks of worship and religious education are the mainline Protestant ones.

For most mainline Protestant churches (except Episcopal and Lutheran ones), worship happens just once a week, and there are no groups (like altar guilds) spending time during the week planning and supporting worship activities. If any adults do gather during the week, it is likely to be in a small Bible study or book discussion group involving a tiny fraction of the adult membership. Many choose not to schedule any adult religious education on Sunday morning, often because children's classes take place during worship and the expectation is that everyone goes home after worship.

Not only do mainline Protestants often opt for Sunday school in lieu of worship for their children, they also rarely have any religious education for children during the week. That 45 minutes or so on Sunday morning are the sum total of the intentional teaching they do. Mainline churches are more likely to sponsor a scout troop than to have any weekday religious education for their children. And hardly any of them sponsor or support a religious day school. (The exceptions are the few remaining Lutheran schools and the historic elite Episcopal academies.) White mainline Protestants seem to be putting all their hopes for creating a distinct Christian identity in the basket of Sunday morning worship for adults and Sunday school for children.

This situation may seem so normal to mainliners that they forget that many of their neighbors do things very differently. Many Catholic families send their children to parish schools, and most send them to religious education classes. Jewish families support weekday Hebrew schools at their synagogues, and increasing numbers

select Solomon Schechter schools for elementary education. Both Catholics and Jews also put considerable energy into enculturating adult converts who come from other traditions. Conservative Protestant churches have Sunday school classes for all ages (including adults), multiple worship services and weekday children's groups. African-American churches extend their time of worship well into Sunday afternoon and return for multiple activities throughout the week. Mainline Protestants are the odd group out with their minimalist organizational structure.

My hunch is that this pattern reflects the historic relationship of mainline Protestants to American culture. Other traditions, each in its own way, have recognized their outsider status. Their ethnic heritage or theological traditions have not historically been reinforced by other institutions in American society, and they have built structures to compensate for that absence. Indeed, many of these other groups have explicitly sought to equip their members for cultural resistance and survival in an unfriendly environment. Because the mainline was "mainline," the environment was assumed to be friendly and supportive.

It may always have been bad ecclesiology to depend on the culture to carry the gospel, but today it's also bad sociology. Churches that wish to perpetuate distinct Christian traditions need not become an oppositional counterculture, but they do have to tend more intentionally to building their own religious traditions.

Creating a community *of faith* out of people who don't live near each other and haven't known each other all their lives requires more than a few minutes at coffee hour after the service. Helping them figure out how their faith asks them to live requires more than even the very best preaching can provide in one Sunday service.

In spite of our overscheduled busyness, changing this pattern isn't impossible. We found plenty of mainline churches where members gather in creative ways to tell each other the stories of their lives and to learn the stories of their faith. Nor does a deep investment in congregational life take people away from service in the world. Both my research and other recent studies make clear that serious participation in congregations leads to more active community service, not less. Members who come to more than just Sunday services are more likely to volunteer in the community than are those who are less involved.

But that shouldn't be surprising. At least since Pentecost, spending time together in worship, eating together, taking care of each other and sharing both possessions and the Good News with the community have been inextricable and mutually

nourishing parts of the life of the church.