CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Various surveys show that since the early 1960s, church attendance in the United States has fallen by 10-12 percent, and involvement in other forms of church social life (Bible study groups, socials, educational programs, etc.) has declined by between 25 and 50 percent. Actual attendance could be significantly lower, researchers note, because survey respondents tend to overreport involvement in the life of the church. Consistent with what we repeatedly hear, mainline denominations have suffered the greatest declines during this time. Perhaps even more ominous are the results of polls that reveal our attitude to the body of believers. Almost 80 percent of Americans who believe in God assert that participation in a church community is not a necessary part of their faith (Vander Broek 2002: 11).

Annual Study Reveals America Is Spiritually Stagnant

The annual State of the Church survey, a representative nationwide study of the nation's faith practices and perspectives by the Barna Research Group of Ventura, California was released today, showing that while Americans remain interested in faith and consider themselves to be religious people, little has changed in relation to the religious practices of Americans in recent years (Barna 2001).

Christianity is stagnant in the West and particularly in the United States. A decline in church attendance numbers, long a commonly held belief, is confirmed by research (cf. Hoge & Roozen 1979; Gallup 1988; Roozen & Hadaway 1993; Putnam 2000). Additional research has determined that regardless of the approximately 325,000 Protestant churches, 1,200 Christian radio stations, 300 Christian television stations, and 300 Christian colleges in the United States and the collection and investment in the period between 1985 and 2000 of $500 *billion* in ministry (buildings, missions, schools etc.), the net change in the number of committed Christians in the United States was statistically insignificant and the social influence of the church is marginal at best (Barna 1985-2002, cf. Marler & Roozen 1993: 253). The purpose of this opening chapter is to review the ways the situation is being addressed by the academy and the church, and then to propose an additional field of research intended to explore the potential of identifying

congregations where intrinsic human spirituality appears to have come under the leadership of the Spirit to engage and influence secular community.

<div align="center">1.1 PRINCIPLES, STRATEGY, AND ENGAGEMENT</div>

A survey of the literature suggests that until recently the overwhelming approach has been a focus on religiously- or institutionally-derived strategies of church growth and community engagement. Bayer (2001: 2ff) terms the institutionalization of the Christian religion "Christendom," and Carroll (1998: 2) following Canda (1988: 30-46) defines the religious approach as a "set of organized, institutionalized beliefs and social function."

1.1.1   Institutional or religiously derived approaches: The Christendom Model

In these approaches, declining church growth, falling levels of committed Christians and a general contraction of Christianity in the West are approached as problems that can be solved using existing strategies of institutionalized Christianity to convey religious values, communicate religious beliefs, and promote religious rituals as intrinsic parts of community engagement. Ron Johnson (1999: 307) calls this strategy of engagement the "corporate" model, because it focuses on the internal praxis of Christianity in terms of an organization constructed in corporate fashion, with:

> [B]y-laws, constitutions and structures that narrowly define its mission . .
> . [The corporate model] view[s] the church as an institution in society
> which fulfills spiritual functions the way other institutions fulfill business,
> government, educational, or labor needs.

Locating Christendom as "that part of the world where it is assumed that the Christian faith, whether evidenced by a state church or not, is recognized as the dominant religious and cultural force," Bayer (2001: 9, 10) notes that a persistent belief in the

centrality of Christianity has led to an adherence to a set of images which paint

Christendom as:

- A hierarchical system in which authority flows from the top down,
- A religious structure within which the marginalized are subjects without voice,
- [Having] a propensity to be obsessed with its own growth and institutional health,
- [A point of view where] Salvation [is] seen as within the church,
- See[ing] a need to keep itself well positioned within the dominant society,
- [Having] a need to draw exclusive lines between who is in and who is out,
- [Condoning the] use of biblical texts as a weapon against outsiders,
- [Seeing theology] in terms of handed-down doctrine, *orthodoxy,* and
- Focus[ing] on bringing [people] in so that they might meet God in the church.

(Bayer 2001: 148-156)

But now, Bayer (2001: 7-20) notes, secularism and religious pluralism have

increasingly diminished the central role of Christianity as the dominant religious and

cultural force in Western society.[1] As a result, like it or not Christianity is entering a new

phase of its history in which, Bayer believes, these images are no longer sustainable. A

new paradigm of identity and function must be constructed, reflecting a new ethos.

Bayer (2001: 9 and passim) terms this new paradigm "post-Christendom," and proposes

a new set of images, the counterpoint of those set out above. "Post-Christendom," he

writes (2001: 148-156),

- [Is] a system where leadership and direction are shared by those set apart, trained, and commissioned, and by those of every rank and status,
- [Enjoys] new forms of ecclesial life in which the marginalized become mentors for the whole church,
- [Has] a propensity to focus its life on generating evidences of the reign of God,
- [Has a point of view wherein] Salvation is seen as being in the world,
- Is willing to live on the margins of society,

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[1] The issues of secularism and religious pluralism will be further explored in Chapter Two.

- [Celebrates] evidences of the reign of God wherever and among whomever they appear,
- [Employs] the uses of [biblical] texts as stories, metaphors, celebrations, and testimonies to God's grace,
- [Sees theology] in terms of doing the truth, *orthopraxis*, and
- Focuses on sending [people] out that they might meet God in the world.

In practice, while in general institutional approaches are by definition "Christendom" approaches, coupling church tradition (e.g. prayer, worship, sacraments), with contemporized interpretations of established, pre-existing biblical, traditional (that is, institutionalized) principles, it would be neither accurate nor fair to say that all are equally constrained by an either/or approach to the institutional or Christendom paradigm. As both church and academy embrace new strategies of social engagement, the line between Christendom and post-Christendom has become increasingly blurred in recent years and the resulting strategies often have, to varying extent, a foot in both camps. For example in establishing mission as a fundamental *raison d'etre* for the church Van Engen (1996: 89) identifies four "scriptural words" – *koinonia, kerygma, diakonia,* and *marturia*, which he then further develops in contemporary terms as key features of community engagement. Van Gelder (2000: 151-154) adds to Van Engen's quartet four more – worship, discipling, visioning, and stewarding – again with contemporized interpretation and application. Other proposals focus on developing a single identified characteristic of community engagement by the church. For example Hauerwas (1991) and VanderBroek (2002) explore the potential of Christian community; Carson (2000) and Kallenberg (2002) deal with the expansive issue of proclamation as evangelization; Farnsley (2003) identifies service and addresses it in the specific context of a social welfare system; and Bosch (1991), Van Engen (1996), Knitter (1996), Kirk (2000), and Kostenberger & O'Brien (2001) explore various aspects of the role of

mission. In addition to these rather more technical and formulaic approaches may be added some works intended to translate the sometimes complex issues of community engagement into practice. Rendle and Mann (2003) for example provide extensive information on how to develop church leadership and congregational meeting agendas, control the lengths of meetings, manage meetings, identify ministries, manage conflict, identify issues and the like. By use of anecdotes, examples, outlines, and reported experiences of others Barna (1999) translates general, academic principles of church organization and leadership, worship, education, stewardship, and outreach into practical "habits of effective churches." In terms of specific strategies Gaddy and Nixen (1995) use extensive textual outlines, pictures and examples that help transform the theory of worship into meaningful praxis and Johnson (1994), by means of explanations and examples renders the complexities of communication – especially the fine distinctions between listening and hearing – into practically applicable strategies of ideas transmission between congregations and their leaders, and congregations and their communities.

Even where there has been a consistent movement in academia toward a more comprehensive and contemporary approach in terms of the new paradigm Bayer (2001) identifies (see for example Spong 1998, 2001; Van Gelder 1999; McGrath 2002; Wood 2003); there remains in most proposals a glaring absence of the centrality of the Spirit (Guder 1998: 142-182 and Nel 2003: 12ff & 225ff, are among rare exceptions). Indeed, where Bayer contrasts Christendom with post-Christendom as a change in what may be termed Christian sociology, Canda (1998: 573, see also Sherwood 1998) contrasts the institutional/ Christendom approach with the spiritual, which he describes as the "basic

human drive for meaning, purpose, and moral relatedness among people, with the

universe, and with the ground of our being."   Carroll (in Canda 1998: 2) adds:

> Several authors (Dudley & Helfgott 1990; Ortiz 1991; Titone 1991)
> distinguish between the two concepts as follows: spirituality refers to
> one's basic nature and the process of finding meaning and purpose
> whereas religion involves a set of organized, institutionalized beliefs and
> social functions as a means of spiritual expression and experience.

That spirituality may be derived from institutional programs or strategies is not

argued. Indeed the presence/guidance of the Spirit is almost invariably invoked during

the implementation, if not the development, of such programs. But the Holy Spirit and

spirituality *per se* are not an intrinsic quality of institutionally-derived (or indeed even of

much post-Christendom) curricula of social engagement by the church. At least one

scholar suggests why this may be. In his introduction to one of the rare contemporary

works on the Spirit and spirituality in society, David May (in Marshall 2003: ix) writes:

> Most of us attempt to live Christian lives, yet in the daily rhythms
> sometimes a sense of the thinness of participation occurs. Instead of
> feeling the fullness of Christian faith, we have shallow encounters that
> reveal how pavid our experiences truly are. We may be unable, or perhaps
> more accurate to say, unwilling to figure out what is lacking, but we have
> sensed it. Like an empty chair at the table or a loved one absent from a
> family picture, incompleteness is felt. Awkwardly, we continue moving to
> the music that springs from our Bibles and religious traditions, but we
> glide alone across the dance floor for lack of a partner. Molly Marshall
> has sensed and named the missing partner; it is the Spirit. *While much
> contemporary theological writing focuses a spotlight on the Waltzing God
> and Christ, the Spirit has been relegated to one of the chairs along the
> wall of the ballroom* (emphasis added*).*

1.1.2   Spiritually-derived approaches

Where the institutional approach follows a patterned system of beliefs, values,

and rituals, the idea of spiritual purpose derives from a basic human drive for meaning,

purpose, and moral relatedness among people, with the universe, and with the ground of

our being. To be sure, in some instances, the idea of "basic human drive," expressing as a "self-discovered purpose," has led people away from the church. Harries (2002: x) remarks that there is a "growing number of people who are feeling their way toward a spiritual understanding of life but who do not feel at ease with a great deal of traditional religion." "Spiritual" people often object to any single iteration of religion not only because they believe it limits the possibilities of spiritual experience, but also because they believe it curtails a wider human experience of the world – of other religions, of the occult, of astrology, of self-determined personal beliefs and values. However, many people still *are* finding a sense of spirituality within the church and such spirituality does not always derive from institutional/academic programs in consequence of such programs. Rather, it often seems to arise as part of a congregational dynamic and presents itself as a congregational ethos. Such congregations fit Bayer's (2001: 160ff) "post-Christendom" paradigm which, some differences in detail excepted, is in fact but an echo of the descriptive criteria for the *hermeneutical* congregation supplied by Lesslie Newbigin (1989).

Recognizing that the Christendom model of strategic engagement is no longer tenable, Newbigin (1989: 223, cf. Guder 1998: 142-182) proposes that the new initiative of community engagement must come from the congregation: "Congregations," Newbigin (1989: 233) asserts, "exist for the sake of those who are not members, as a sign, instrument, and foretaste of God's redeeming grace for the whole life of society."

To be these kinds of congregations, maintains Newbigin (1989: 227-232), they must become the "hermeneutic of the gospel" in society, each congregation exercising its faith by missionally engaging the community in which it is situated. The key factor in

developing such a congregation, notes Newbigin (1989: 227), is the centrality of Jesus in the life of the community of faith. He writes:

> Jesus […] formed a community. This community has as its heart the remembering and rehearsing of his words and deeds, and the sacraments given by him through which it is enabled both to engraft new members into its life and renew this life again and again through sharing in his life through the body broken and the lifeblood poured out. It exists in him and for him. He is the center of its life. Its character is given to it, when it is true to its nature, not by the characters of its members but by his character.

 In other words, the faith community Newbigin describes is led by Jesus. But in Newbigin's view, how is that leadership manifested?

> [I]n the Synoptic gospels, the mighty works of Jesus are the work of God's kingly power, of his Spirit. So also with the disciples. It is the Spirit who will give them power and the Spirit who will bear witness. It is not that they must speak and act, asking the help of the Spirit to do so. It is rather *in their faithfulness to Jesus they become the place where the Spirit speaks and acts* (Newbigin 1989: 118, 119, emphasis added. Cf. Nel 2003: 242, 245, Guder 1998: 142-182).

The difference between the strategy of Newbigin (1989) and that of institutionally/ academically-derived approaches is that the latter tends to invoke the Spirit as assistant to a humanly-determined strategy. The Spirit is co-opted, as it were, to participate in what humankind qua the institution has planned. In a post-Christendom congregation, a congregation that is the hermeneutic of the gospel, the Spirit is the animating principle, or force; the ethos of the congregation *is* the strategy; for by its nature it embodies the speech and action of the Spirit; it is the vehicle through which the Spirit speaks and acts; indeed, in its speech and action it *is* the Spirit.   Further, where Christendom may be characterized as centripetal, with an inward, self-centered focus impelled and sustained by tradition; the post-Christendom congregation may be characterized as centrifugal, having a focus outward into the community that is impelled and sustained by the Spirit.

1.1.3   Holistic Congregations

Centrifugal, "Hermeneutical" congregations of the type described in the preceding paragraphs have also been characterized as "holistic" congregations, and their community engagement as "holistic ministry." Stokes and Roozen (1991: 186) note:

> [H]olism is in many ways a response to the challenge of the multiplicity of social and religious forces that erode a congregation's unity of vision, and it is an affirmation that a congregation's inherited and confessed, formal and informal, web of symbolic meanings, values, and commitments – that is, its culture – always consciously or unconsciously informs pragmatic choices made among the diverse alternatives of program, process, and context with which every congregation is continually confronted.

As will be further discussed in chapter two, Spirit-led, or holistic, congregations are becoming an emerging field of study within the broader context of congregational studies. That such congregations may be developed by following the institutionalized approaches outlined above is not argued. However congregational studies also highlight the fact that the Spirit spontaneously permeates certain congregations even when those congregations are not informed by institutionally-derived or -driven programs of community engagement. The purpose of this study is to focus on such spontaneously motivated hermeneutical/holistic congregations in order to determine if they share something of the same spiritually-driven *ethos*, and if that ethos, as Newbigin asserts, develops out of the centrality of faith in Jesus Christ in the life of the congregation.

1.2 PROBLEM STATEMENT

The problem this research addresses is the situation outlined in the opening paragraphs, namely, the stagnancy of the Christian church in the United States of America. The focus of this research is on congregations described above as "holistic." Working from the principle that such congregations have a set of characteristics that

underlie their holistic ethos – an ethos that embodies the speech and actions of the Spirit – the main aim of this research is an attempt to determine those basic characteristics. The major question to which this study seeks an answer is: Is there an identifiable ethos of holistic congregations?

In addressing this problem and given that a "holistic congregation" is one that largely conforms to the profile developed by Newbigin, the following questions are asked:

1. What are the key individual and collective characteristics of members of holistic congregations?
2. How do those individual and collective characteristics differ from those of members of non-holistic congregations?
3. What conclusions may be drawn from identified characteristics in terms of the development of congregational ethos?
4. To what extent are the various characteristics reproducible?

1.3 THE RESEARCH HYPOTHESIS

The premise of this study is that there is a distinct ethos of congregations that engage in holistic ministry. The intention of the research is to identify and define the underlying characteristics that engender such an ethos, anticipating that:

If there is an ethos common to congregations that engage in holistic ministry, and if it can be discerned, generalization of that ethos will help other churches make a difference in their communities.

1.4 METHODOLOGY

The design of this study is empirical, inductive, effect-to-cause research. In such research the effect is traced back to a theoretical cause. In this case, a causal link is suspected between successful community engagement by a church and the ethos of that church.

The research began with the identification of a specific geographic area (greater metropolitan Atlanta) as the locus for research. This was followed by the establishment of criteria to determine the requirements for identifying a church as "holistic" in its ministry. (The term "holistic" is explained below and in Chapter 2.) Efforts then focused on identifying the Target group of churches from which the Sample would be drawn. As is further described in Chapter Three, because of the abundance of churches of all kinds in the circumscribed geographic area, the research intentionally identified mainstream protestant denominations as the Target group. Preliminary survey instruments were then developed and sent to randomly selected churches of the Target group in the circumscribed area. From the respondents, a group of ten churches participated in the research: five that maximally exhibited the effect – holistic ministry – (as defined by the established criteria) and five whose ability to be totally holistic was impacted by their minimal community outreach ministries. To the extent possible, the significant differences between churches at each end of the ministry spectrum were limited to their practice of outreach ministry, while factors of location, congregational size and denomination of holistic churches were largely mirrored in the non-holistic churches.

Actual research was guided by Heitink (1999: 228-231) and Van der Ven (1998: 125ff). Heitink (1999: 229) asserts that research falls under any one, or a combination, of three types – descriptive, exploratory, and explanatory – and that in any given study these types are usually combined either as complementary pairs – for example. as explorative-descriptive, or exploratory-explanatory – or to explain the method of testing, as for example in testing-descriptive, or testing explanatory.   The nature of this study – testing the hypothesis proposed above – therefore must, as Heitink (1999: 231) writes:

[G]ive clarity whether certain relationships, which are thought to exist on theoretical grounds, can be detected in reality or in the human consciousness . . . A sound academic suspicion ensures that this research seeks to falsify specific hypotheses. This is the only way to detect what can withstand criticism.

This being the case, then the differences between the churches studied must be the subject of both *descriptive* and *explorative* research, as follows.

1.4.1   Descriptive

This initial phase of the research set out to answer the question as to "how" communities are engaged by the ten selected churches. Observational in form, it studied the manner in which the participating churches undertook community engagement practices. It noted the differences in each church's overall strategy of engagement as well as the ways individual members and groups participated, or did not participate, in the strategy.

1.4.2   Explorative

The explorative phase asked the "why" questions of community engagement. The intent here was to find the underlying motive(s) that drive Christian individuals and groups to engage, or to avoid engagement with, their communities. The purpose was to attempt to identify the criteria necessary to the ethos that underlies holistic ministry. Tools used in this part of the research were both quantitative and qualitative in form. In terms of the former, data collected were of two kinds. The first related to congregational size and demographics, church location, community demographics, ministries (Sunday school, worship, choir, community), income, staff (numbers, positions/ responsibilities etc.), small group activities, political programs, "12-step" programs (e.g. Alcoholics Anonymous) and the like. This information was collected from a combination of sources

such as the church leadership, congregational interviews, and empirical observation. The second kind of quantitative data was derived from congregational surveys which asked typical demographic questions as well as questions about length of attendance/membership, ministry programs, emphases, participation, leadership roles, travel times to church, beliefs and values, and other background information. These surveys were modeled on Ammerman 1997: 377-380 and Sider and Unruh 1999 (see also Chapter Three and Appendix 2, below). Qualitative data was collected through what Ammerman (1997: 371ff) calls "Focus Questions." Focus questions are questions asked during small group interviews and are intended to help gain a picture of the character, or ethos, of the church and its congregation: congregational history, ecology, culture, processes, leadership, resources, theology and so forth. (See Appendix 3.)

The data accumulated through the activities described were kept in two discrete data blocks; one comprising information from the five holistic churches, the other from the five churches whose holism was impacted by reduced community engagement practices.

The next step was analysis of the data block of information from holistic churches to see if the research hypothesis – that churches heavily engaged in community ministry shared a similar ethos or culture – could be substantiated. The two blocks of data (i.e., that of the holistic churches, and that of the non-holistic churches) were then compared to highlight differences, which led to the final step of forming some tentative conclusions based on the findings.

1.5 LIMITATIONS

The research is limited in a number of ways. First, effect-to-cause studies show only the probable frequency of the cause in cases of a given effect, not the probable frequency of the effect in cases of a given cause. (That is, the application of any determined causative principles in the target group is no guarantee that such churches will enjoy the same successes as the sample, rather, it can only be said that they might have a greater tendency for success.) Second, the research was undertaken in a local geographic, not to say metropolitan, area. Because there are subtle (and not so subtle) variances between communities, the applicability of the results outside the target area will necessarily be questionable. Third, the research could only be undertaken in churches agreeing to participate in the investigation and among congregants of those churches willing to answer comprehensive questionnaires and engage in lengthy interviews. Such agreement introduces a bias in the research, the range and extent of which is unknown. Fourth, the objective data accrued are developed from responses to a finite set of survey instrument questions. There is a limit to the time people are prepared to spend responding to surveys and questionnaires, no matter how committed the respondents may be to the research (or their church). This time limit restricts the number, length, type and complexity of questions included. It is inevitable therefore that certain questions that others might consider significant are omitted.   Fifth, a church is an organism; while statistical information will deliver quantitative information – church membership, membership demographics (age, family size, income, race/ethnicity, giving etc.), attendance, participation, growth, budget and the like, such information says little about *affect*, the feelings, moods, emotions and attitudes that drive individuals and

groups. Such qualitative information can only be gleaned through a process of dialog in which the biases of both the interviewer and interviewee may be introduced. Finally sixth; the research is a small-scale, exploratory study limited to a data set of just ten churches; the extent to which any data developed may be extrapolated to other churches is therefore extremely restricted.

<div align="center">1.6 STRUCTURE OF THE THESIS</div>

Following this introductory chapter, chapter two provides a more in-depth discussion of "communities," "spirituality" and "meaningful engagement," these being the significant terms of the research. Included will be the nature and historical development of contemporary society and the problems it presents vis-à-vis the church; a brief overview of Congregational Studies, the broad genre of this study; a presentation in greater detail of the "congregation as hermeneutic" theory of community engagement presented by Newbigin (1989); and an enlargement on the concept of holistic ministry and the role it holds as the locus of research in examining the proposed hypothesis. Chapter three discusses the geographical location of the research and the research design, methods, and implementation procedures of a small-scale inductive, empirical, effect-to-cause study intended to identify the ethos of those churches that meet the developed criteria of "holistic" churches as compared to a second group of "non-holistic" churches. Chapter four contains the written reports of the interviews held in participating churches and includes something of each church's location, history, congregational demographic, denominational affiliation, active membership, the church's annual budget, the number of engaged community ministries, and the thoughts and opinions of interviewees. Finally,

chapter five summarizes the subjective and objective results of the research, and presents some preliminary conclusions.

1.7 TERMINOLOGY

In general, terms will be explained as they are introduced in the text. However, the terms community, church, hermeneutic, gospel, holistic ministry, and meaningful engagement, already introduced, will be dealt with immediately.

1.7.1 "Community" and "society" are used interchangeably as descriptive of the general population within the limited geographic sphere of one or more churches, but having no significant relationship with any particular church. Where the modifier "faith" or "Christian" is used, it means mean the population with a declared affiliation to the Christian church.

1.7.2 "Church" and "congregation" are used interchangeably as descriptive of communities that gather on the basis of a common faith in Jesus Christ. In addition, other than in the names of churches, the capitalized "Church" is used of the Church Universal, whereas "church" is used of individual churches.

1.7.3 "Hermeneutic" is understood throughout this thesis, in juxtaposition to the Gospel, to mean both *interpretive* and *explanatory* and is used exclusively as the adjective modifying the noun "Gospel." Thus hermeneutic is understood to be the interpretation and/or explanation of the Gospel.

1.7.4 "Gospel" is understood to relate exclusively to that body of literature relating to the life and teachings of Jesus Christ as recorded in the first four books of the New Testament of the Christian Bible, namely Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.

1.7.5 **"Holistic Ministry"** is used as defined by Sider, Olson, and Unruh:

> By holistic ministry we mean first of all a wholehearted embrace and integration of both evangelism and social ministry so that people experience spiritual renewal, socioeconomic uplift, and transformation of their social context (2002: 25 n1, cf 16, 17).

> Holistic ministry is further explained in chapter two.

1.7.6 **"Meaningful engagement"** is the consistent practice of all the aspects of Holistic

Ministry that involve work of any give church in its immediate community.