

**Religious Individualism, Religious Relativism,  
and Reformed Identity  
among Christian Reformed Church Members at the  
Turn of the Millennium**

Corwin Smidt  
[smid@calvin.edu](mailto:smid@calvin.edu)

James Penning  
[penn@calvin.edu](mailto:penn@calvin.edu)

Department of Political Science  
Calvin College  
Grand Rapids, MI 49546

Paper prepared for presentation at the 2006 Conference Meeting of the International Society for the Study of Reformed Communities, Princeton, New Jersey, July 9 -12, 2006

[From *Evangelicalism: The Next Generation*, pp.89-80 . Various analysts have suggested that the problems of meaning and identity are greater in pluralistic societies than in homogeneous societies (Hackney 1997; Powell 1997). Religious symbols and interpretations may not only provide meaning for individuals within pluralistic societies but also serve as important sources of identity. Research in a variety of fields has suggested that people frequently react to others in group terms. This tendency to view others as well as oneself in terms of group categories “helps individuals to establish a sense of both personal and social identity by providing a basis of comparing themselves to the rest of society” (Conover 1988, 58-59). ]

[Self-identification or self-categorization implies the conscious choice of a particular identity. By choosing an identity, one creates internal markers or boundaries that highlight the differences and similarities between oneself and others. Such categorizations serve to increase perceptions of differences between the groups to which one does and does not belong and decrease perceptions of differences within the groups to which one belongs (Glynn et al 1999, 165).

Does accepting an evangelical self-identification matter?]

### **Contemporary Challenges to Denominational Vitality**

While it is unclear how much of a threat secularization is to contemporary denominations, few social analysts would dispute that powerful social forces exist to challenge the vitality of denominational life today. Generally speaking, religious groups embody human efforts to institutionalize particular theological movements and patterns

of religious life. Denominational organizational structures are formed to provide order, facilitate communication, and expedite ministry. In addition, denominations usually promote particular boundaries of social and cultural behavior, while providing their members with particular religious identities. In this light, it is important to recognize that denominations such as the CRC and RCA are historical entities and are, at least in part, human creations. They have not always been present in the life of the Christian church, but emerged at particular points in human history.

The Reformation provided an alternative to the Roman Catholic Church as the structure by which the church was united within one religious body. Denominational structures emerged as a means to find a workable consensus in the midst of the dissent and differentiation that occurred in the wake of the Reformation (Wentz 1998, 29). Most denominations have, over the course of time, come to view their own particular entity to be both a legitimate and a self-sufficient representation of “Christ’s church.” At the same time, they have not necessarily seen themselves to be the only legitimate representation of the church. Thus, most denominations, within limits, are willing to concede the authenticity of other denominations, even as they claim the primacy of their own.

Certainly, over the past several decades, there have been a number of important social and cultural changes within North American life that have important ramifications for the vitality of denominational life. The period from the end of World War II into the early 1950s was one of relative stability, if not growth, in American religious life. However, by the late 1960s and early 1970s, important changes were taking place in nearly every major religious institution (Roof and McKinney 1987, 11-39). These changes have affected all denominations, as the theological, ritual, and social practices

that have served to sustain distinct religious traditions and denominational life are now being eroded. Whether one points to “secularization,” the increased geographic mobility of all Americans, or the dramatic rise in levels of education, the cultural and social bases on which many denominations were built have all but disappeared. Moreover, the isolated ethnic enclaves that served to sustain many denominations have seen their boundaries become relatively porous, if not disappear altogether. All of these changes make it increasingly difficult for denominations to sustain themselves in the ways they have in the past.

### **Individualism**

Denominational life has been influenced by the individualistic, subjective, and anti-institutional spirit of contemporary American life. Given these particular cultural values, religious faith today is coming to be shaped more by the personal preferences and values of the believers themselves and less by the social and ethnic characteristics of religious groups that served to sculpt denominational life in the past.

While these changes are not likely to lead to the disappearance of religion or to the full demise of denominational life, they certainly will serve to redefine its nature. Religious faith will be shaped less by the social characteristics of groups of Americans and more by their personal preferences and values. Even now we are seeing a shift from “the religious” to “the spiritual,” as many Americans willingly define themselves as spiritual while rejecting ties to “organized religion.” And, it is likely that such an emphasis on spirituality will continue to gain cultural currency over the next several

decades, while many denominations may experience; at the same time, a continued decline in attendance.

With this severance of individual spirituality from institutional religion and its collective authority, believers will increasingly exhibit personal autonomy, as individuals become more and more idiosyncratic and eclectic in forging their religious faith. Spiritual people will increasingly feel free to select the particular components of faith and practice to which they subscribe, combining fundamental beliefs from one religious tradition with elements of other culturally available religious perspectives. As congregants become more reluctant to accept religious teachings simply on the basis of the authority of outside sources, churches will increasingly lose their ability to define what constitutes the religious good for members.

Associated with such increasing individualism is likely to be greater emphasis on religious tastes than on religious heritage. As churches seek to attract and hold “spiritual people” as part of their particular congregations, the distinctive emphases of denominational theological traditions will become more a quaint historical legacy rather than a foundation of congregational life. Certainly, there will continue to be members who favor a distinctive and consistent theological emphasis reflecting a particular religious tradition; nevertheless, congregations will increasingly engage in niche marketing to attract distinctive types of parishioners to join their particular fellowships.

### **Demographic Changes**

In addition to cultural changes, various demographic transformations are already significantly shaping and molding denominational and congregational life. Declining

birth rates are affecting the vitality of many congregations, as denominational growth is no longer linked to large family size, the pattern that long prevailed in most denominations in the United States—particularly ethnically based churches like the RCA and CRC. Moreover, declining birth rates leads to an eroding economic work force with a resulting increased demand for employees to extend their traditional working hours. This demand has had a significant impact on churches' ability to draw on the outreach volunteers which traditionally undergirded the vitality of congregational life.

Coupled with such lower birth rates has been an increase in life expectancy. Over the last century, the average age of populations in developed countries has risen dramatically. Churches have been challenged to address the spiritual and physical needs of an aging membership while still engaging young members. This has been further complicated by the distinctly different forms of worship preferred by the younger and older constituencies within the church. Many senior members have been the strongest supporters, financially and actively, of local congregations; yet, they are finding that “their” styles of traditional worship are being transformed by newcomers. These divisions between those favoring more traditional forms of ministry and those promoting more contemporary forms of worship and ministry, divisions which are often age-related will likely sharpen both within and across congregations.

### **The Distinctive Nature of the CRC and RCA**

Other challenges confronting the CRC and RCA are somewhat more distinctive to them. Since neither denomination's polity is congregational in nature, both the CRC and RCA are struggling with the anti-denominational spirit of our day that erodes loyalty to each body. A spirit of congregational independence is increasingly common in both the

CRC and RCA, reflected in a broad decline in financial decline in giving toward denominational programs and agencies. On a congregational level, it is evidenced by the decision by individual parishes to eliminate the denomination's name from their letterhead and identification signs in favor of such generic names as "Community Church" or "Neighborhood Fellowship."

In addition, the theological positions of both denominations within the current spectrum of American Protestantism create a distinctive challenge for both the CRC and the RCA. The level of theological orthodoxy expressed by RCA and CRC clergy as a whole places them within the middle of the spectrum of contemporary American Protestantism (Guth et al. 1997; Smidt 2004). While this central positioning may have certain advantages,<sup>4</sup> it poses other challenges to denominational vitality since groups that fall at the extremes tend to have more distinct religious identities. To the extent that unique religious identities undergird and sustain religious vitality, then those churches and denominations in the "middle" may have more difficulty over time maintaining their religious identity and vitality than those at the extreme edges of the continuum.

## **Opportunities**

With religious life less supported and reinforced by other institutions of society and more a matter of individual choice, how might new churches be planted, sustained, and grown? How can older churches thrive in such a context? The answers given by scholars and church development experts have usually related to "meeting people's needs," developing distinctive identities and ministries, and "niche marketing." In their haste to meet prevailing "market demands," the supply of religious products is often

packaged in a relatively uniform fashion, so that “one size fits all.” With conformity in religious packaging, there is little choice in religious life, and any decline of religious belief, affiliation, of practice might simply be a function of limited “consumer options.” Therefore, in order to enliven existing and new churches, “supply” may simply need to be brought into better conformity with “demand.” This may be accomplished with a wider variety of congregations which promote different mission tasks, different worship styles, different theological emphases, and different programs to allow increased choice and greater religious involvement among the members of a community or society.

Associated with this shift in focus from a “demand” to a “supply” side is a sharpening of congregational identity and distinctiveness. Many churches have been encouraged over the past decades to develop unique mission statements and form distinct ministries; other to focus on forging a sense of community. Some may choose to emphasize social justice, while others may focus on evangelism. Still other congregations focus on worship, emphasizing either a more liturgical or a more contemporary style.

Such individualism and voluntarism could as easily serve as the basis for religious revitalization as for the undermining of religion. The very ease with which people are able to shift from one religious affiliation to another can lead eventually to a greater moral and value consensus within specific religious bodies (Roof and McKinney 1987, 69-70). Indeed, it would appear that switching between denominations is today less reflective of upward (or downward) social mobility as was true in the past. Instead, such changes are motivated more by considerations of moral culture than socioeconomic status (Roof and McKinney 1987, 218-222; Hadaway and Marler 1991, 222). Church goes

who share a common faith outlook or worship style may cluster around particular religious bodies identified with those moral values and ministry efforts of which they approve. Thus, while religious affiliation in contemporary America may be much less “tribal” in nature than was previously the case, the reforming of congregations on the basis of common beliefs and styles may reflect “the freedom of Americans to choose with whom they will congregate in service to their most basic values” (Warner 1993, 1007). Conceivably, therefore, religious groups could forge clearer social and religious identities as they become more homogenous in nature.