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## The State of the Unions—Denominations in the 21st Century

Robert Wenz

*King's College and Seminary*, drbobwenz@hotmail.com

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**The State of the Unions—Denominations in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

**Bob Wenz<sup>1</sup>**

Church history points to no more fertile soil for the multiplication of denominations than early American history. The Reformation plowed up the soil with the teaching that the Bible could be read, understood, and even interpreted apart from the Magisterium of Rome. As the colonies in “New World” began to be settled a century later—a century marked by religious wars in Europe — each of the colonies became a refuge for disgruntled or persecuted sects from Europe. Puritan Congregationalists dominated Boston and the Bay Colony. The Dutch, with their reformed groups, were dominant in New York. The German Lutherans [from *Deutschland*] have long been mistakenly called the Pennsylvania Dutch ever since someone forgot the “e”. Roman Catholics settled in Maryland—where the first religious toleration laws were enacted—where their religious freedom mirrored the up and down status of Catholicism back home (at one time the Puritans fled Maryland for Virginia only to return later and burn every Catholic Church in Terra Maria). So, from the time that Roger William was expelled by the Congregationalists from Massachusetts in 1638 and headed to the wide-open spaces of Rhode Island to begin a new baptistic denomination, denominationalism sprouted and blossomed and bloomed here in North America as no where else. The soil and the climate proved ideal. With the First Great Awakening came the establishment of Methodism in the South and Mid-Atlantic colonies, making Wesley’s Methodism the largest denomination in the U.S. with 135,000 adherents [in a nation of 1.5 million] by the time John Wesley finally climbed off his horse and entered his eternal rest. The Colonial era ends with even more denominational fragmentation in New England as Congregationalism divided when Unitarians that were drawn away from their orthodox Trinitarian

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theology by the Enlightenment and its Deism. As colonies became states, many maintained their officially supported churches—some well into the 1800's.

The era of 1830-1880 reveals another season of great denominational fecundity. The election of Andrew Jackson ushered the Nation into an era marked by empowerment of the individual [before the term entrepreneurialism] and by a burgeoning individualism in an age of westward expansion and a spirit of Manifest Destiny. During this period hundreds of independent sects, utopian societies, and theocratic communities—such as Oneida, New York and the seven Amana Colonies in Iowa—proliferated like bacteria in a Petri dish. Only a fraction of those movements, spawned by American individualism and entrepreneurialism spilling over into the stream of Protestantism, have survived. Most were started by strong individuals, and most withered and died with the founder. There are notable exceptions: the *Russellites* who still exist as the *Jehovah's Witnesses*; the *Mormons* who survived a crisis leadership transition to *Brigham Young*; and the *Millerites* who continue today as the Seventh Day Adventist Church through the persistence of Ellen G. White.

The Civil War brought a spiritual mitosis to many denominations as they divided at the Mason Dixon Line, some never to reconnect again. This new seasons of denominationalism, including the Southern Baptists who organized in the late 1840's, was the result of political/theological movements rather than individual initiatives.

The early 1900's would also see a spike in denominationalism prompted by both the Azusa Street revival of 1906 as well as the Fundamentalist-Modernist controversy [beginning in the 1880's] that culminates in the Scopes Trial in 1925. Debates and swirling conflicts over orthodoxy, new theologies and neo-orthodoxies during this era spawn new denominations.

But, sadly, denominationalism has served to turn many away from Christianity as they have renounced the divisiveness as proof that with everyone claiming to have the truth, the truth is too elusive to be found. And, clearly, since the fragmentation of orthodox Christianity cannot bring joy to the heart of God, and, as it seems that the Body of Christ continues to move away from the unity for which Christ prayed, we need to ask what possible purpose could be served by 1,500 denominations.

At various times denominations have served a number of different and valid purposes, three of which are worth highlighting:

1. Denominations have enabled Christians **to do things together that could not have been done by individuals or**

**even by individual congregations.** Of course, this primarily focuses on establishing colleges and seminaries, sending missionaries and planting churches—and the development of camping facilities. Between 1830 and 1860 the four major denominations in the U.S. [Presbyterian, Baptist, Congregational and Methodist] established 135 colleges where previously only 25 had existed. The early 1800's marked the rise of the modern missionary movement with Judson and William Carey [in England].

2. Denominations have served **to protect doctrinal distinctives and identities**, and in some cases to champion new theological trends or distinctives. In times of significant theological and even social upheaval (i.e. abolition, theological liberalism) this has been necessary as believers and congregations alike have gone through theological refinements and realignments.
3. At times denominations have **served the “franchise” purpose**, establishing familiar and comfortable brand churches nationally or regionally for a mobile American population.

Obviously, the landscape is changing. It is no longer a landscape of blossoming and blooming. It is rather a landscape marked by withering, fallen petals, and some new and different shoots budding:

- Some denominations are **merging or consolidating** districts/regions/presbyteries, effectively reducing regional overhead. This serves to reduce the burden on churches to support both a national organization and a regional association.

- Increasingly, denominations are questioning the **relative value and cutting their publications ministries**—whether that is the monthly denominational magazine or distinct book publishing enterprises. The Christian and Missionary Alliance recently closed CPI, its bankrupt publishing subsidiary, that was more than three million dollars in debt.

- The Conservative Baptist Association, which spun off of the American Baptist Convention USA in the late 1940's, has itself fragmented. With churches increasingly unwilling to voluntarily fund a national denominational ministry structure of any kind (it was the unified mission of the ABC that was a major bone of contention originally), the national structure has collapsed and been replaced by a group of regional associations of varying viability. What keeps the CBA from fragmenting completely is it's nationally based missions organization, which some observers think may not be enough glue to do the job long term.

- The mainline American Baptist Churches USA, from which the CBA split off, has experienced its own major shake out over the issue of homosexuality, with nearly 800 of its 2000 actual congregations [3500 ABC churches are dually aligned] disconnecting themselves and migrating to form the **Cornerstone Church Network**, a distinctly evangelical group meticulously avoiding the use of the word denomination. The Cornerstone Church Network is seeking to reinvent the American Baptist movement by creating a network of churches in which each church must identify itself as a MODEL [Best Practices] church, a MENTOR church or a MENTORED church—thereby defining clearly a interactive support relationship between its member churches. The goal of this “missional group” [to use the nomenclature of the emergent church movement] is to create a structure where churches assist each other to fulfill the Great Commission rather than to expend their energies in the care and feeding a bureaucratic national ministry monster.

- Of course, the Episcopal Church USA is an example of a denomination that is going through major internal realignment. Deeply split over the elevation of Vicky Gene Robinson to Bishop in New Hampshire, many churches and dioceses are choosing to remain Episcopal but to dissociate from the American wing of the church, aligning themselves with clearly evangelical bishops from Africa and Asia.

**The reasons for the deterioration of denominations** are not terribly difficult to determine. The lack of commitment to a denomination on the part of the church is a natural result of declining interest and affinity for denominations among the church as a whole. Contributing to this trend are the following factors that are expressions of the changing external environment in which everyone seeks to do.

1. **Accelerating American church migration**—people move from church to church and community to community and seek a church that “meets their needs” with little regard for denominational affiliation [although with some regard for theological and cultural familiarity that might be associated with a familiar denomination]. Brand loyalty may be utterly unimportant to many American Christians, although to those who regard it as important, it is VERY important.
2. **Lack of American willingness for association** [fear of encumbrance]. In a culture where seemingly no one will sign up for a church event ahead of time, wanting always to keep their individual options open in case something better appears on the radar screen, church mem-

bership is no longer the means of association with a church. Attendance is the focus. Commitment is regarded as off-putting and many churches are willing to overlook commitment for attendance. At times it appears to some observers that no one joins anything for fear of being encumbered in any way. Churches—especially independent ones—have accommodated the culture of non-commitment by ignoring the whole issue outright. As the number of “pastor led” or “staff led” churches grows, the utility of church “membership” evaporates.

3. **The pragmatism of church growth.** Church names are increasingly determined by marketing [and the target audience] rather than denominational or doctrinal identity in any way. Wooddale Church in Edina, Minnesota, a significant and outstanding church in the Twin Cities used to be called Wooddale Baptist Church. It was one of the first congregations to go generic when surveys revealed that 80% of the community would never attend a church with the name Baptist in its name. Wooddale reasoned that a name change requiring no theological compromise was a small price to pay to potentially reach thousands more people in their community. It may well be, however, that the lack of name identity psychologically softens the glue that holds a church to a denomination.
4. **Many megachurches [defined as 2500+], if they are denominationally connected, have eclipsed their own denominations in terms of resources, staff, budget, etc.** With 950 in the U.S. and one more each two weeks, these churches have drawn significant attention, sometimes disproportionate to their overall statistical significance. At a time when denominations need the support of their largest member churches, many megachurches see denominations as having NOTHING to offer them. A reversal from the trend of fifty years ago when denominational structures were populated by the pastors of the largest member churches, today’s megachurch pastors rarely participate in denominational governance or meetings unless asked to speak. There are those who question whether the megachurch is here to stay—who wonder if the next generation will continue to pay the bill for huge properties, huge staffs, etc., even in light of the economies of scale—following the declining pattern of denominational support of the last twenty five years.

5. The **impact of the internet**. This could serve to introduce another issue, the impact being as subtle as it is pervasive.
6. The **decline in biblical and theological literacy**. According to Barna's data, evidence of a widespread decline in biblical literacy and an informed world view is overwhelming. This is reflected in the decline or plateau of Christian publishing that extends well beyond the sphere of denominations. *Christianity Today*, celebrating its 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary remains stable but generally flat in terms of its printed periodicals even as it works to more effectively carve out an electronic identity and market. According to recent research at one seminary, there was a marked shift from scholarly to popular in *Christianity Today* when CTI moved from Washington to Wheaton in the mid-70's and capitulated to market forces. Other periodicals like *Eternity*, *Moody Monthly* have ceased to exist. Overall Biblical and historical ignorance is growing rather than decreasing, resulting in a cut-flower generation of Christians that not only do not feel connected to their denominational roots, they frequently don't know that they have roots.
7. **The poor health of many local churches**. The statistic that eighty percent of American churches are on a plateau or in decline is not new. But a recent statistic from Focus on the Family is attention-getting even if it is statistically hard to document: nearly 80% of the churches in the U.S. are "conflicted," with one fourth of those described as TOXIC. Most are in this condition because they have lost their Biblical mission and have settled for self-perpetuation as the primary value as the focus is increasingly on the internal environment.

But the single most significant reason that the rose of denominationalism is withering is that denominations themselves have. . .

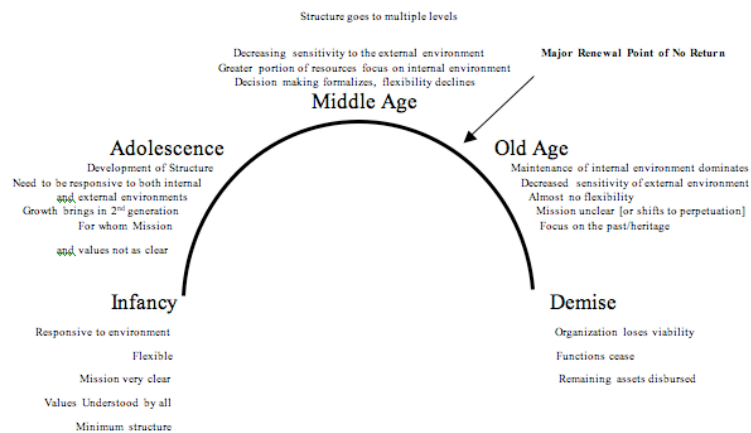
8. . . . gone from being organizations with a clear vision to **being institutions to be maintained and even monsters—with ever increasing appetites—to be fed**. They have turned their attention from the external mission to an internal mission of maintenance or survival—and sometimes even mere self-perpetuation.

Having at one time pastored a congregation that one year led the denomination in both denominational and missions giving, I believe I know of which I speak. I was struck by a congratulatory letter from a denominational executive that ended

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tersely: *Keep the dollars coming!* The message was clear enough: You and your church exist to support the denomination. It appears at times that there is no longer a pretense of the original purpose for the denomination to support, encourage, and strengthen its member churches.

It may well have been Dr. Robert Wright of Arizona State University, one of the first scholars in the field of organizational behavior, who first developed a “life-cycle model” for organizations that is certainly as compelling as it is insightful. It reveals why denominations are in their current state of decline—and suggests that some may succeed in renew themselves while others will not. As organizations grow and age from infancy to adolescence to middle age, it is inevitable conflict and competition between the EXTERNAL ENVIRONMENT [the marketplace or real world] and the INTERNAL ENVIRONMENT that develops [structure, policies, values—expressed and assumed—traditions, personal relationships which together create a corporate culture]. With age denominations become increasingly focused on maintaining the internal environment and increasingly out of touch with the external environment.



Today many denominations find themselves at “Old Age”—which has more to do with attitude and characteristics than the year they were founded.

- Maintenance of internal environment dominates
- Decreased sensitivity of external environment and little flexibility
- The original mission is fuzzy or compromised by the focus given to internal maintenance issues

**Some** have concluded that denominations are on the brink

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of demise and not worth the renewal effort, suggesting that some denominations would not or will not survive the radical re-posturing that they need. Some argue that denominationalism itself has past the point where even radical renewal will restore viability because the purposes for which denominations have existed in the past are irrelevant—that is a harsh reality some don't want to face.

Yet, even as many denominations are struggling, we need to recognize that new denominations or quasi-denominations are being established.

- Sovereign Grace Ministries, a distinctively reformed Charismatic denomination is actively recruiting and cultivating like-minded congregations nationally as the outgrowth of a mega-church. Granted, it has only 40 churches scattered across the US and in six countries, but there is much ambition to create a new denomination along doctrinal lines.

- So also the Willow Creek Association, the Association of Life Giving Churches, the Vineyard Association, and the network of Calvary Chapels have served some of the same rolls as their denominational older brothers.

But clearly, these associations have even generally **less connective tissue** than their predecessor. The head of one fairly new denomination acknowledged privately that less than half of the 600 member churches contribute any financial support to the national organization. Willow Creek Association members do little more than purchase materials and receive discounted registrations for training conferences from the association. These new associations have come into existence with a mission of serving their constituents rather than being served by them, but have been confronted by the question of where the resources come from to serve the constituents.

**On a more local or regional level**, successful churches in major metro areas are planting new churches on a **very connected basis**—Fellowship Bible Churches in Texas, Harvest Bible Church in Chicago, Central Christian Church in Las Vegas—or simply establishing **multiple branch campuses** or electronic satellite campuses in a metro region in order to leverage their assets. It may well be that large churches that plant satellite churches and maintain strict control and ownership, do so because they recognize that glue of voluntary affiliation no longer has much holding power—and refuse to put their major capital investments at risk in the next generation that rises up and knows not the patriarch or sponsoring mega church. Wooddale Church is a rare exception with its broad kingdom perspective, having in recent years planted churches in the Twin Cities re-

gion with Presbyterian, Congregational and Baptist identities and affiliations.

**Denominations which have reversion clauses** in the bylaws of their member churches may still have an effective way to *keep* congregations in the fold. However, they have also found that not only is it *not* a guarantee of viability, it may even negatively impact congregational health for a variety reasons beyond just negative name or negative brand.

It comes as no surprise that denominations to a certain degree reflect the same aging process that is going on in many of their member churches. Many denominations recognize the fact that planting new churches is essential to revitalizing their denomination. Noting again that with 80% of the churches in the US on a plateau or in decline, denominations are responding to data that conversion growth of church plants is 10 times that of established churches. Whether denominations are capable of taking the radical steps needed to restore their viability remains to be seen. Unlike General Motors, which can simply announce the closing of plants that are not profitable and shift the assets to new plants, denominations have not yet been willing to be quite so draconian.

To wit: we can only wonder what would happen if the philosophy of Jack Welch, retired CEO of General Electric, was implemented by a denominational President or General Superintendent. Welch purged the bottom 10% of the GE professional staff and 10% of the business units every year. If a denomination implemented Welch's policy [which earned him the moniker of Neutron Jack], every church that was in the bottom 10% of productivity in a given year would be shut down and the assets used elsewhere.

But the whole enterprise of supplanting old churches with new ones is easily short-circuited. Old age makes denominations slow to change, and are often unwilling to set new courses that appear radical. They too often settle for incremental change. Planting new churches is expensive financially. Closing plateaued churches is also expensive, but the costs are clearly not financial alone. Replacing plateaued congregations is difficult and dangerous. Established congregations can remain on plateaus for years before discontent actually manifests itself in something other than internal strife. [Recall that 80% of the churches in the US are "conflicted" and that one-fourth of those are "toxic."].

Many churches now seek to renew themselves by "going contemporary" and find little long term difference except to perhaps alienate a major segment of their constituents, resulting in

unintentional church plants [splits]. For denominations or churches to turn back the clock of the aging process and move from old age to a state of viability requires more than or less than “going contemporary.” It involves asking very probing questions about both the INTERNAL ENVIRONMENT of the existing organization as well as researching thoroughly the EXTERNAL ENVIRONMENT. A series of simple questions serve as an adequate springboard.

*The Question of Identity*

We’re all familiar with the definition of a fool as someone who continues to do the same thing over and over again expecting different results. Breaking out of that requires a long look in the mirror. Do you really have a sense of mission? Is it clear? What are your assets? Strengths? Weaknesses? Style? What is your corporate culture? What is your niche? What are your boundaries of tradition, heritage?

Exploring, questioning, and truly understanding the internal environment [culture] is essential. Edwin Friedman is quoted as stating that *self definition* was more important than expertise on the subject of change. The better you know who you are (beliefs, values, goals, etc.) the greater your chance of getting through periods of major transition and change. As many Willow Creek “wannabes” have learned over the past twenty-five years, real faith is always tied to a specific setting and that imitation never works. Real faith, write Kouzes and Posner in *The Leadership Challenge*, means to be unique, requiring the courage and giving the freedom to be ourselves and not other people.

What is your particular external environment? How has it changed? How is it changing? For many organizations—denominations, churches, para-church ministries—a careful and thorough study of the external environment [some would use the word “market place”] can lead to a renewed vision or mission.

But more important than a newly crafted vision is the second question.

*How are you going to get there?* Some would argue that “Where are you going?” is the next question. Where are you going is at the heart of the question of vision. I prefer a different question. Most of us know what the mission is. Most of us know what the purpose is, or at least used to be. Whether it is a church, a denomination, or a para-church ministry, we are all about the fulfilling the Great Commission, expanding the kingdom, making disciples. We do that in a variety of ways depending on the specific ministry to which God has called us. But usually the

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struggles in ministry are not related to knowing the mission or having a vision.

I admit that I have grown weary of “vision” after having spent most of my 30 years in ministry in what I call the “Vision Era.” At times it seems that many mistakenly assumed that vision was almost magical for some while for others it was a matter of closing ones eyes tightly and picturing a grand successful future. But vision casting is really much more about: *How are we going to accomplish what we know from God’s word is our task?* I recently visited a church that stated its vision to plant 5000 new churches by the years 2040. They have yet to plant a church in their first decade, but this is their clearly declared vision statement, without reference to how they were going to accomplish this. As Russ Bredholt writes in *The Future of Denominations*:

It seems as if the more we talk about a subject, such as vision, the less we have. It is a popular word mostly undefined. Visions do not have to be very clear or complete. They do have to provide a path and allow people to learn along the way. We often refer to Hebrews 11:8 and the description of Abraham when speaking about direction. “By faith Abraham, when he was called, obeyed by going out to a place which he was to receive for an inheritance; and he went out, not knowing where he was going.” In other words, if we live by faith, details are not going to be made available up front. Abraham had a “sense” of direction without knowing the details. His greatness lies in trusting God to know all things and reveal them when He so chooses. The destination was the “city.” Abraham knew someday that is where he would be.

Every denominational leader I know—and I know many—have no doubt about the mission: to do together what individual churches cannot do by themselves, to protect a doctrinal distinctive, etc. They all have a clear vision of what a healthy robust association looks like when they close their eyes and do the envisioning: planting hundreds of churches, sending hundreds of missionaries, expanding seminaries—and increased prayer and giving to make it all happen. But what is lacking is the clear vision of the PATH, not the goal. If we return to the Wright Model we see the impasses.

In some cases, the denomination becomes so focused on the INTERNAL ENVIRONMENT that it becomes a bureaucracy, even a monster to be fed. There is a lack of real understanding of the EXTERNAL ENVIRONMENT, not just in the world of the

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unchurched, but even with the environment of the church world.

The world of the church outside the wall of headquarters has changed dramatically since the majority of church buildings were built in the 1950's. As the era of Builder Generation—with its commitment to institutions and its practice of tithing—passes off the scene and leave center stage the Boomers and Busters and Gen-Xers, denominations have only reluctantly become aware of and acknowledged tendencies of those—even Christians—born after 1945:

- they care very little for institutions or institutionalism.
- they give sparing, sporadically, and they give specifically or strategically [some would say selfishly] to special projects they know first hand—but decreasingly to things they see as “overhead.”
- they are mortgaged to the gunnells and have little discretionary income.
- they live among a post-loyal generation where little loyalty is received and little is given anywhere in the culture.
- they are dominated by a cut flower mentality, as though they believe that the church came into existence only when they joined it. History, heritage and tradition—well, they are just so 20<sup>th</sup> century! They don't know history or want to know history, resulting in a complete lack of historical perspective about the church and even their country.
- they are used to having what they want and having it without waiting—they want ownership of the organization and the vision within a short period of time.
- they want desperately to be part of something successful.
- they have, of course, little allegiance to a church, a denomination, or even a doctrinal distinctive
- they often see the church as a religious institution that markets religious services and goods in an increasingly competitive marketplace, buying into the religious consumer mentality

Some organizations are still hoping that there will be enough loyalty remaining that their team can still win one more for the Gipper. That seems doubtful. Bredholt writes:

If you are a denominational leader, don't look for much help in carrying forward the essence of your beliefs and values among outsiders. While you can learn methodology and market sensitivities from various sources, it would not be wise or constructive to allow the church you serve to be defined by those who have little or no interest in its future. . . . A time of major transition and

change is an opportunity for renewal and revitalization.  
. . . Revival is not the discovery of something new. Re-  
vival is acting in a radical way on an old truth.

These are the realities. As Max Dupree wrote: “The first duty of a leader is to define reality.” That is the reality of denominationalism today. The trends that we see in denominations will continue to shape or impact the external environment in which all of us seek to do ministry.

Writer

Wenz, Robert. Address: 9946 Red Sage Drive, Colorado Springs, CO 80920. Email: *drbobwenz@hotmail.com*. Dr. Wenz received a B.A. and an M.A. degree in Speech Communication [1971 and 1973] from Arizona State University, an M.A.R. degree from Trinity Evangelical Divinity School [1976] and a D. Min. from Bethel Theological Seminary [1990]. Following twenty-five years of pastoral ministry in Michigan, New York, Los Angeles and Washington D.C., he served for three years as Vice President of National Ministries for the National Association of Evangelicals. Currently he teaches part-time at both the King's College and Seminary and Pikes Peak College [Colorado Springs] and is working to develop Total Worship, a worship and preaching ministry of coaching and teaching for congregations and pastors. He is the author of *Room for God? A Worship Challenge for the Church Growth and Marketing Era* [Baker Book] and a regular contributor to *Christianity Today*.

#### NOTES

1. Following twenty-five years of pastoral ministry Dr. Bob Wenz served as Vice President of National Ministries for the National Association of Evangelicals. Currently he coaches worship and preaching with Total Worship. He also teaches philosophy and Christian Thought at The King's College and Seminary and Pikes Peak College in Colorado Springs. He did his theological training at Trinity University and earned his D. Min. from Bethel University.