

Introduction to the Alabama Report

The wellbeing of every community depends on harnessing the contributions of its citizens. Sustaining viable communities requires places where people can gather, work together, and learn to trust one another – where we generate what Robert Putnam has called “social capital.”¹ We depend on the neighborhood associations and political action groups, parent associations and leagues of civil rights activists, as well as the churches, synagogues, and mosques that provide places of concern, belonging and action. This is a report on the work being done by such religious organizations and their community partners in Rural Central Alabama.

In 1997, the Hartford Institute for Religion Research launched the “Organizing Religious Work” project in an effort to document and better understand what people of faith are doing in their communities and which organizations enable them to accomplish their goals. You can find additional information about the study and about our Institute on the web, at “hrr.hartsem.edu.” We think you will find many of the resources there helpful to you, but you will especially be able to follow up with more detail on many of the findings in this report. Just click on the “current projects” button.

For this study, we selected seven research sites: Albuquerque, Nashville, Chicago, Hartford, rural counties in Alabama, rural counties in Missouri, and Seattle. Our work in Alabama included Chilton and Dallas counties, and was assisted by Professor Penny Marler, along with Daryl Healea, a research team based at Samford University. These seven areas allowed us

to catch a glimpse of the country as a whole (and our results have been statistically weighted to approximate known characteristics of the nation’s congregations and their attenders).² Across the country, we talked with representatives of 549 congregations and surveyed all the attenders in 32 of them. We also gathered information on nearly 6000 connections between congregations and other organizations, and we talked with nearly 200 representatives of those organizations. We compiled all the surveys, transcribed and analyzed all the interviews, and this is a report on what we have found.

Throughout the nation, more than 300,000 congregations provide a point of gathering, worship, and community engagement for the roughly half of Americans who participate on a regular basis in them. They range from small storefronts to huge mega-complexes, from traditional Protestants and Catholics to newer arrivals like Hindus and Muslims. The sheer pervasiveness of these organizations makes them impossible to ignore for anyone who is looking for ways to mobilize energy toward the good of communities. What we will see in the pages to follow is that they are already remarkably involved in serving both their own members and the larger community. But they do not do their work alone. It is by weaving together a network of money, volunteers, and other supports that service agencies and congregations *together* do good in their communities. We hope that this report will remind you of how important that is, highlight for you the key partners in your community, and inspire your own imagination in thinking about how you can be involved.

A Preview: Congregational Connections in Rural Central Alabama

Rural Central Alabama's congregations are important links in the delivery of the services and activities that make the area a better place in which to live. The average congregation in this region provides money, volunteers, space, in-kind donations, and/or staff time to

A total of 2.75 community outreach organizations

- ✓ On average, 1 of these provide *direct services* – food, clothing, and shelter -- to people in need. Congregations connect to organizations like the Chilton County Emergency Assistance Center, the Department of Human Resources, and the Red Cross.
- ✓ 1 connection might be to support activities that enhance the *educational, health and cultural life* of the community, such as scout troops or tutoring programs, or to support various self-help groups, such as AA or Promise Keepers.
- ✓ In a few congregations, 1 connection enables long-term *community development* (such as through Habitat for Humanity) and/or makes possible political and social advocacy (such as through SCLC).
- ✓ In the 43% of Alabama congregations that engage in *evangelistic* outreach (beyond their own congregation or denomination), there are connections to an average of 1 religious organization that helps them engage in their mission work. This might be the Gideons or an overseas missionary.

And all of this is in addition to the work they do through their own individual congregation, through their denomination, or by way of the encouragement they give to their own members to be personally involved. Not all congregations are equally involved, and different congregations emphasize different kinds of activities or different sorts of organizational partners. But the overall level of connection between congregations and community organizations is considerable. Only six of the 40 Rural Alabama congregations we interviewed reported that they did no work that connected them beyond their own internal or denominational organizations.

In the sections that follow, we will look more closely at who these congregations are and what they do. Before we return to a more detailed look at their community connections, it is important to put them in perspective...

I - The Work of Congregations What Comes First?

While congregations are intimately involved in the good work that is done in every community, their primary task is not the delivery of social services or supporting cultural organizations. Their primary task is the spiritual wellbeing of their members. Across every tradition and in every region, congregations agree – their ***highest priority is providing opportunities for vital spiritual worship.*** That is where leaders put the most energy, and that is the first thing members look for when they are seeking a place to join.

Some people might think that this spiritual activity is irrelevant to the larger community, that it is “otherworldly.” It is certainly true that the effects of a worship service are less easily measured than the effects of a food pantry or job training program. But worship services can make a real difference, too. People we have interviewed tell us that worship is a time when they put their individual priorities in perspective, reminding themselves of what is really important in life. Participating in worship and religious ritual reminds people that they are not the center of the universe and that they should care for others. Congregations of all sorts are places that teach people to “do unto others” as they would wish others to do unto them.³ Even people who disagree about many other things, agree that this is at the heart of being a religiously-faithful person. And they agree that it is important for children to have a place that teaches them right from wrong. In a society that

often seems at moral loose ends, congregations provide a community in which values are discussed and modeled for the good of children and adults alike.

The link between worship and everyday life was made by the pastor of a large Chicago African-American Baptist church. He said, “All of us are in the same boat. My main burden is to get us to see the need to move closer to the Lord, to exercise our gifts, to get out there and exercise our faith, to help somebody, to be real Christians, and to be committed to what we're about.” The same message was voiced in a different way by the pastor of a mid-sized Seattle Episcopal parish:

“I think most people who come here have recognized that they need spiritual and ethical moorings in their lives. It's not just working and consuming and spending leisure time, there has to be a spiritual pursuit.... We're not holding up a model of the church that says we live in another age and everything's black and white. We're saying, these questions have been around in different forms for a long time and there's a way in which one can journey through life without becoming totally unglued. I think that people are looking for a way to make a difference in the world. We're seeing a real interest in outreach here. People want to reach out and help others. People are also looking for something that's

transcendent from their lives.
They come to worship and want
to have a spiritual experience.

The Rabbi of a large Hartford Conservative Jewish synagogue, describing a “Havurah” (prayer and study) group, said, “When we get together, there’s a great hunger for basics and for kind of a spiritual dimension, the poetry behind the concrete action. We try to provide that whenever possible.” And the pastor of a mid-sized Southern Baptist church in Seattle returned to the theme of helping members make connections between their spiritual lives and everyday situations. “In members’ daily life, there is a lot of possibility for compromise. There’s a lot of temptation to do a lot of things. And just that week-by-week encouragement, the focus on being connected with God, encountering God -- we strive to do that.”

This religious perspective on life can also be empowering. People who occupy low-status and marginal positions in society can be reassured of their own self-worth and inspired to action. Religious experiences and visions can provide a critical perspective against which to judge the world and toward which to work for change.⁴ Religious traditions often provide alternative ways to look at the world and offer people the promise that God will help them. Even worship that appears to have little to say about this world may give important spiritual strength to the worshippers.

What else do congregations do?

The work congregations put second on their list – right behind worship and spiritual life – is “fellowship.” They see

themselves as a family, a community of people who care for each other and do things together. Again, there is very broad agreement about how important this work is. Across religious traditions, regions, class, and ethnicity people agree about what is most basic to congregational life. Leaders say they work hard at providing this family-like atmosphere, and members say they are looking for a warm, friendly community when they choose a congregation to join.

Again, it would be easy to dismiss this inward-looking emphasis as irrelevant, perhaps even harmful, to the larger community. The danger that many see is that people may gather in congregations that are insular, basking in the warmth of people just like themselves, and perhaps despising those who are different. Such a barricade mentality is clearly unhealthy, and some congregations are guilty.

But there are also good reasons to celebrate the “bonding” that is going on inside congregations. As Robert Putnam has recently argued, in his book *Bowling Alone*, every society needs the “social capital” that is generated when people gather in voluntary organizations, working and playing together.

- ◆ As we learn to communicate with each other and trust each other, we provide a vital network that helps to hold society together.
- ◆ As we work together, debating and organizing to get things done, we also provide valuable opportunities for people to learn the civic skills they need for participation in democracy.⁵

- ◆ And as we care for each other through thick and thin, we pick up much of the first-line social service delivery that might otherwise have to be done by government agencies.

All of the work that congregations do at building up a caring, functioning internal community pays off for the larger community, even if indirectly.

Even the insularity of some congregations is not all bad. When a group of people is disadvantaged in the larger society, the existence of an alternative community is critical. African Americans have long known that black churches were a vital refuge. What happened there on Sunday morning (and throughout the week) enabled community leadership development, celebrated and preserved a unique culture, created a space where the rules and authorities of the other culture were suspended, and provided a staging-ground for action. Today (as throughout our history), dozens of immigrant communities are discovering similar benefits.⁶ And in an American culture that

is less committed to assimilation than it used to be, congregations of all sorts are places where the many unique cultures of this nation are nurtured and passed on. Earlier immigrant congregations sometimes disappeared after their members (or their children) learned English. But that may not happen with this newer generation. Both because discrimination persists and because they wish to preserve their particular cultural and religious heritage, children and grandchildren are maintaining the hundreds of Korean and Mexican and Chinese churches that have been founded in the last three decades. In our extraordinarily diverse society, congregations are a healthy way for us to express that diversity.

Providing a gathering place, then, is part of the “work” congregations do for their communities. The next section of this report turns to the question of just what sorts of religious gathering places there are in Rural Central Alabama and how they compare to the rest of the nation.

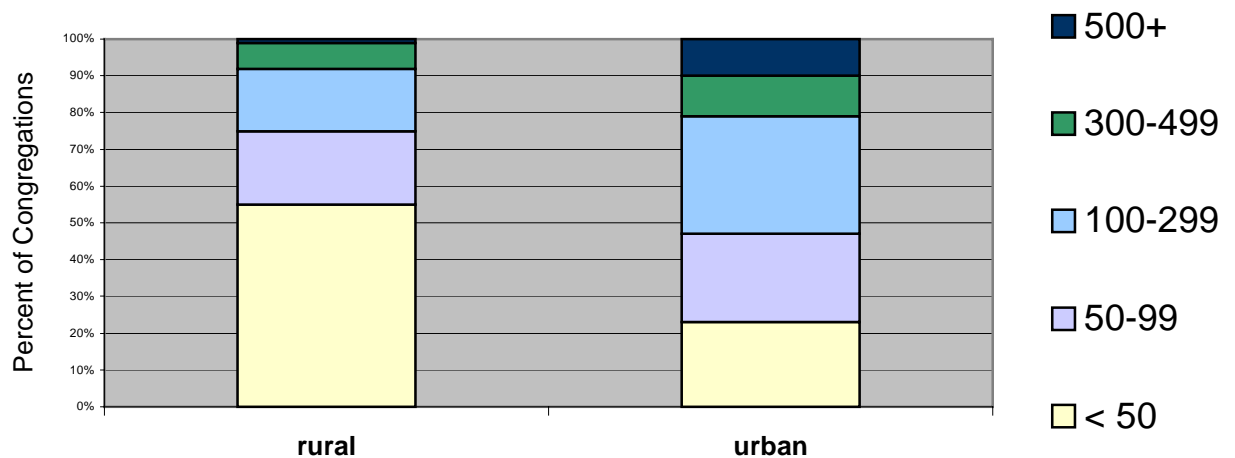
II - The Religious Scene

How Are Rural Central Alabama Congregations Distinctive?

How big are Rural Alabama's congregations? One of the most significant aspects of a congregation's life is simply its size. Larger congregations have more resources – of all sorts – than smaller ones. While most *people* are in moderate-to-large congregations, most *congregations* are quite small. In the country as a whole, half of all congregations have fewer than 75 regular participants! In rural areas, the average size is less than 50.

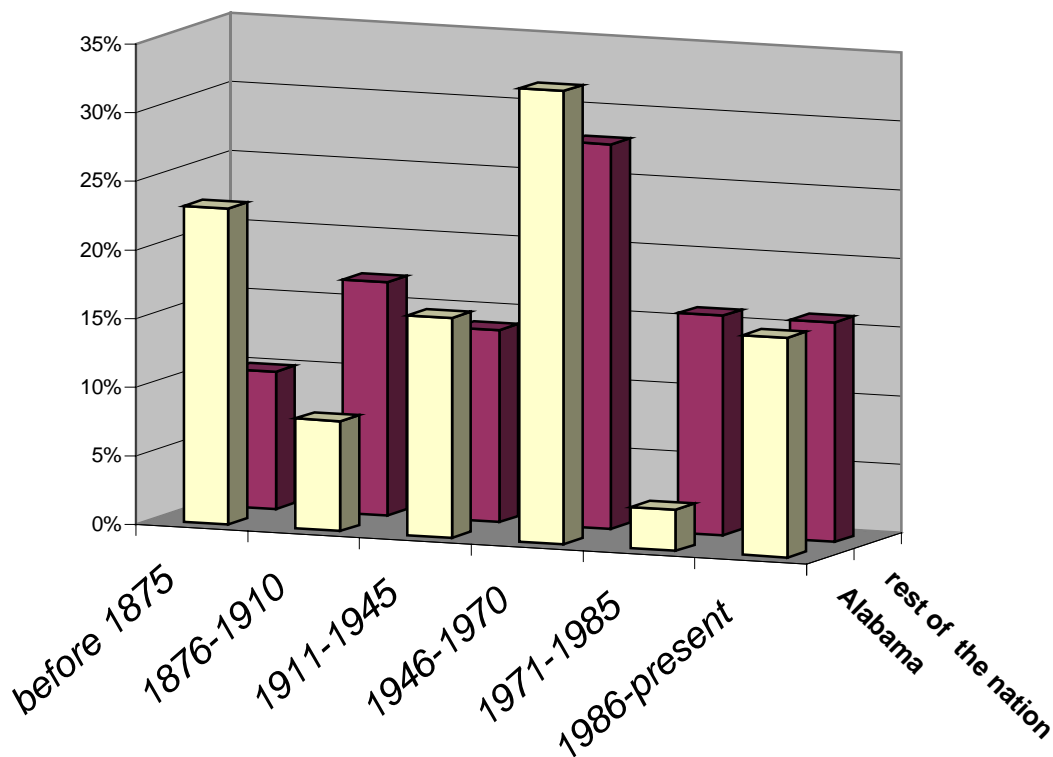
In both Missouri and Alabama – our two rural sites – over half the congregations have fewer than 50 participants on an average weekend. Only 8% have attendance of over 300. This stands in contrast to urban areas, where nearly a quarter of congregations have more than 300 regular participants.

Figure 1: Congregational Size (average weekly attendance)

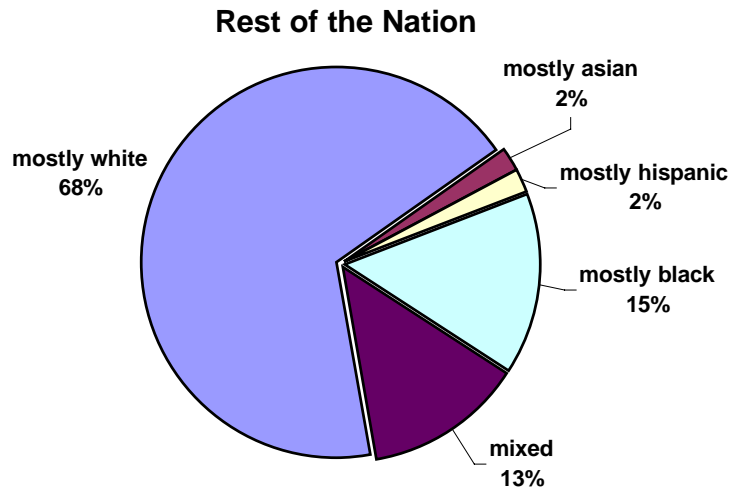
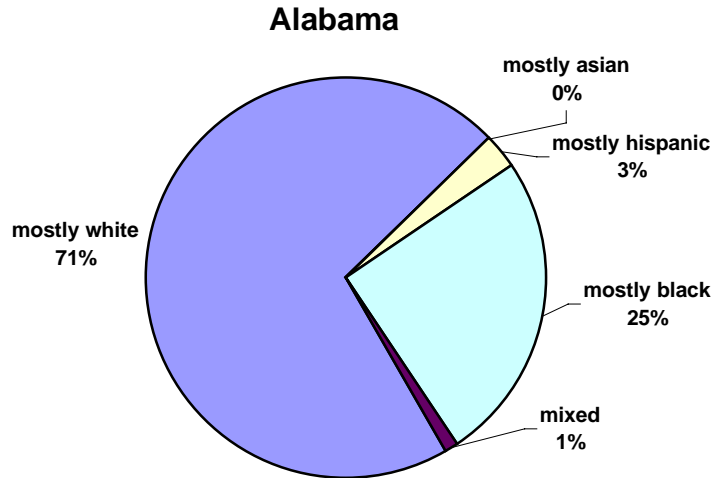


How old are Rural Alabama's congregations? Quite old. Over a quarter were founded before 1910. As in the rest of the country, there was a flurry of religious activity in the “baby boom” years after World War II. Very few of today's rural Alabama congregations were founded in the 15 years following 1970, but as in the rest of the country, there has been a significant rebound since 1985. Still, one in five of the area's congregations has been founded since 1970, and like the rest of the country, these newest congregations are extremely likely to be Conservative and/or Pentecostal, often founded as independent churches, not part of any established denomination.

Figure 2: Founding Dates for Congregations



What is the ethnic composition of Rural Central Alabama’s congregations? Almost all have 90% or more members of a single ethnic group – in this case either white or African American. A few congregations have begun to appear to serve the growing Latino population. In the years ahead, however, as the immigrant population grows, this group will surely grow. Alabama is also notable for the nearly complete absence of congregations that claim significant diversity (our “mixed” category).



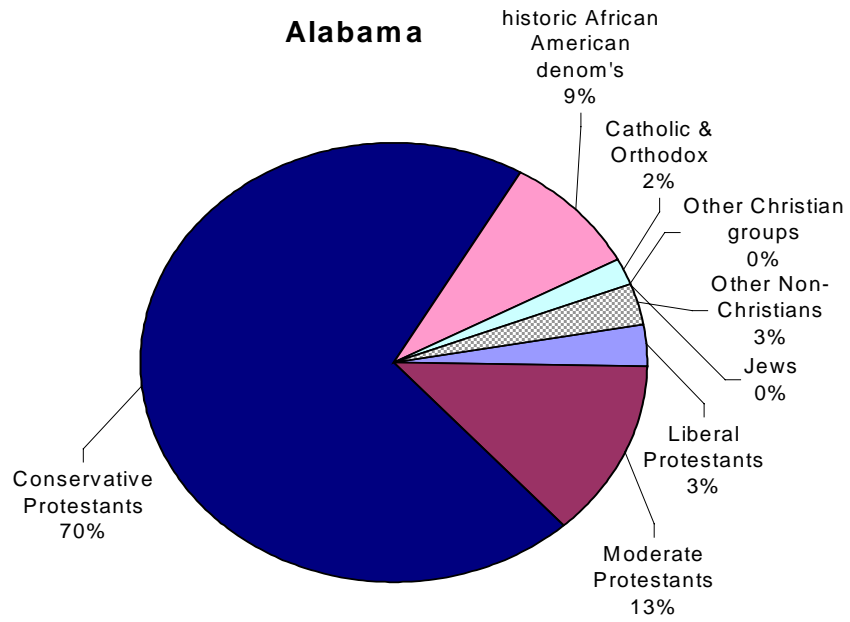
What about religious diversity? We need to know more about congregations than just their age and size and demographics. There are, of course, religious differences, as well. One way to take a measure of the religious traditions in a community is to look at the particular denominations and faiths that are represented. Christian groups can be seen as clustering around categories such as Liberal Protestant (groups like Presbyterians, Episcopalians, and the United Church of Christ), Moderate Protestant (like Methodists, and Lutherans, for instance), Conservative Protestant (like pentecostals, independent churches, Southern Baptists, and Nazarenes), Roman Catholic or Eastern Orthodox groups, and the historic African American denominations (like the Church of God in Christ, the AME, or the National Baptists). In addition, there are other Christian groups, like the Jehovah's Witnesses or Mormons. Beyond the Christian tradition, there are Jewish groups, and other non-Christian groups (like Muslims and Buddhists). In the nation as a whole, for instance, over half of all congregations are in the various conservative Protestant traditions, and only small (but growing) numbers are outside the Protestant/Catholic part of the circle.

Rural Central Alabama's mix is highly distinctive.

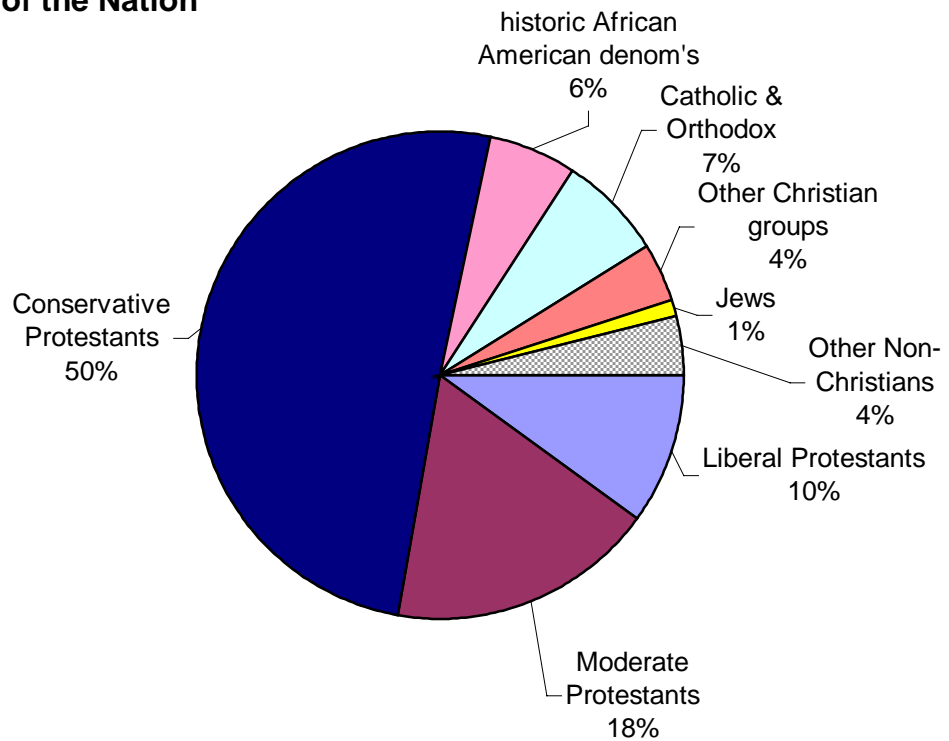
- ✓ Given the area's demographics, it is not surprising to find slightly more than average numbers of African American churches. Our sample, in fact, probably under-represents these churches.
- ✓ We also found no Jewish synagogues, almost no Catholic parishes, and very few congregations outside the Christian tradition.
- ✓ And, of course, Conservative Protestants are simply an overwhelming presence in this region. The Liberal Protestant tradition is almost completely absent, with the area's Moderate Protestants made up mostly of conservative Methodist churches.

It is important to note here that the percentage of congregations in a given group does not necessarily parallel the percentage of participants in that group. Catholic churches, for instance, are much larger than the average Protestant church, so fewer congregations does not mean fewer participants.

Figure 3: Religious Traditions of Congregations



Rest of the Nation



Another way to look at the religious landscape is to see how congregations think about *what they ought to be doing in the world*. We asked those we interviewed to tell us how important various activities and emphases were to their congregations. Some congregations, of course, combine more than one emphasis, but they are classified here according to what they rated highest. Three clusters of activities emerged from their answers. Note also that while the term “evangelism” is a particularly Christian term, other kinds of congregations sometimes valued similar activities and ranked these statements highly.

Those we’ll call “*member-oriented*” gave especially high ratings to

- providing fellowship activities for members
- providing counseling and other services for members
- fostering members’ spiritual growth

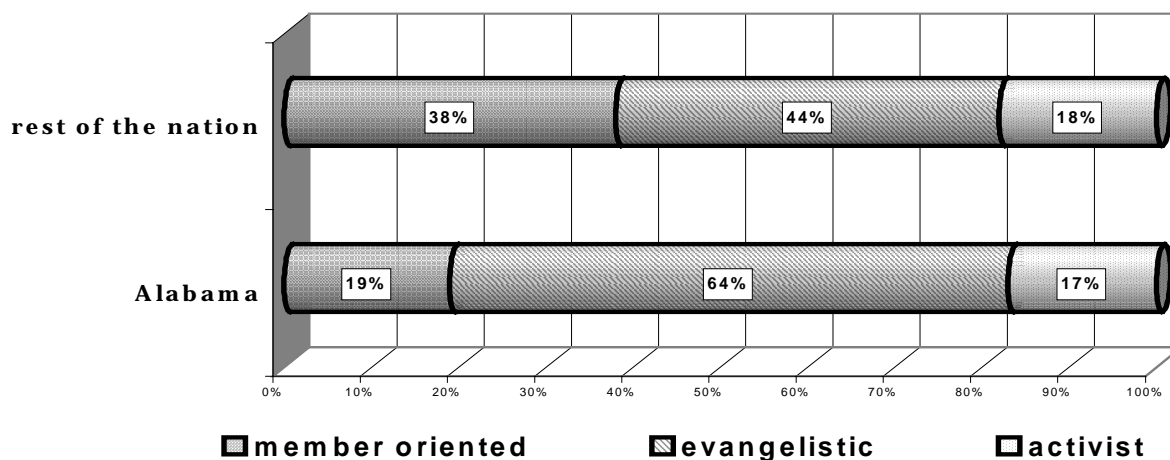
Those we’ll call “*evangelistic*” gave especially high ratings to

- maintaining an active evangelism and outreach program, encouraging members to share their faith
- helping members to resist the temptations of this world and prepare for a world to come
- preserving the truths of the religious tradition

Those we call “*activist*” gave especially high ratings to

- promoting social change in this world by organizing and speaking out against injustice
- serving the poor and needy

Figure 4: Percent of Congregations Holding Various Mission Orientations



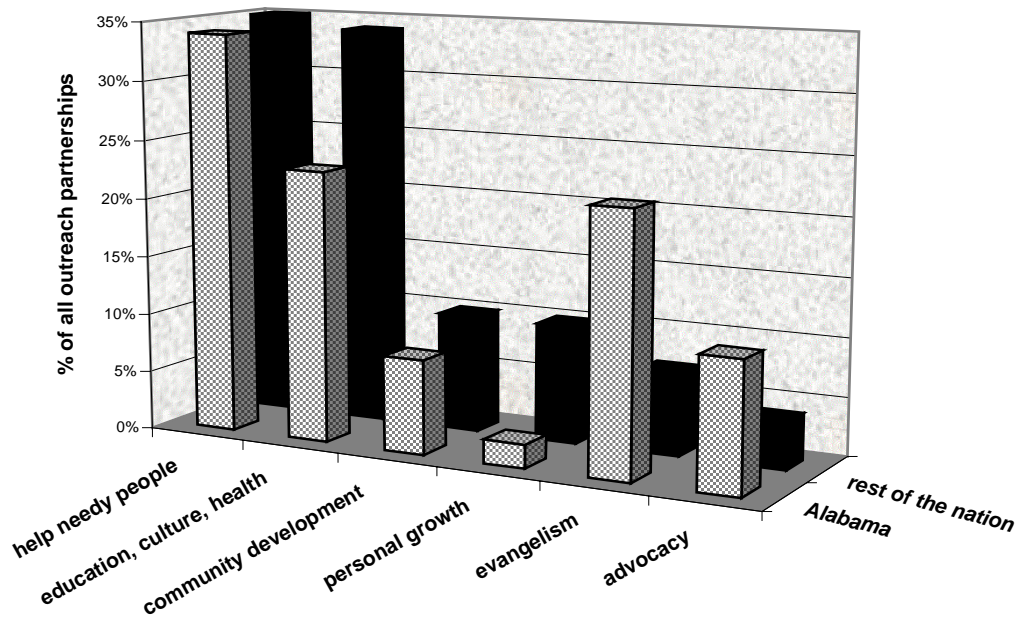
Compared to the rest of the country, and true to its Conservative Protestant make-up, rural central Alabama has significantly more congregations whose primary orientation is evangelistic. There are comparatively few whose orientation is toward simply serving their own members. But because of the African American churches in the region, there are an average number of congregations oriented toward changing this world. As we will see in a few pages, these “mission orientations” make a real difference in how congregations engage with the community.

III - Congregations Reaching Out to the Community: The Details

As we saw at the beginning, congregations in rural central Alabama are solidly connected to the rest of the area's voluntary and social service sector, reporting, on average more than 2 connections to groups that provide for the wellbeing of the community in a variety of ways. In addition to the work they do in providing for the spiritual wellbeing of their own members and the caring fellowship they provide for those members, rural central Alabama's congregations are important links in the delivery of the services and activities that make the area a better place in which to live.

These congregations come in all shapes and sizes and have different religious ideas and traditions from which they draw. It's time now to take a closer look at the community work they do. As we looked at all the information we gathered on the work congregations were doing in partnership with other community organizations, we asked about what kinds of work was being done. While congregations understandably spend most of their energy taking care of the spiritual and social wellbeing of their members, when they turn their attention to the larger community, just what do they seek to accomplish?

Figure 5: Most Frequent Outreach Partnership Activities



Throughout the country (and even more so in this area), the number-one activity that draws congregations into partnership with other community organizations is **direct service to people in immediate need**. Whether the need is for food or clothing, shelter or other emergency aid, congregations help to supply the resources that make this work possible. Among the organizations through which these Alabama congregations most frequently work are:

- Red Cross
- Local ministerial associations
- Department of Human Resources
- Chilton County Emergency Assistance Center

These services take a variety of forms in communities around the country. Here are some of the voices we heard:

- A Missouri pastor remembered, “When the government stopped that assistance program [distributing ‘commodities’] like that, then it kind of fell into the local communities to start working with either food banks or food pantries and try to bring it together.” Not only does this county ministerial association maintain a food bank, they also have arrangements with various local businesses to provide gasoline, medicine, groceries, and the like.
- In Albuquerque, the director of Storehouse rattled off these numbers for yearly contributions to poor people in the community: “somewhere between 38,000 and 42,000 bags of clothing. We’re projecting over 100,000 meals. We will help 250 families with furniture.”
- In Chicago, a representative of Hesed House told us, “We feed, clothe and shelter very poor homeless people.

And hopefully, try to give them reason to hope again.”

- In Middletown, near Hartford, St. Vincent de Paul Place provides hot meals, clothing, and “supportive housing,” a program aimed at helping homeless people get the services they need in order to stay off the street.
- In Nashville, Room in the Inn includes both shelter facilities and a “Guest House” unit for people who arrive too intoxicated to be admitted to the shelter. When they sober up, counseling and medical assistance is available.
- In Seattle, Northwest Harvest provides food and meals, but its major task is serving as the primary distribution system for other shelters and feeding programs around the state, buying truckloads of beans and cargo containers full of rice, in addition to receiving food donations from dozens of congregations and businesses. The director explained that the total “amounts to close to 15 million pounds of food a year. We distribute only through non-profit 501C3 organizations....They in turn give it to people who present themselves in need.”

Central Alabama’s congregations reflect the priorities seen in other communities – when people are in immediate need, congregations want to be part of the solution. People want to salve some of society’s wounds, and most of them recognize that they cannot respond to all the need around them with only their own resources. They need to work with others, pooling money, personpower, and expertise that can go beyond a quick handout at the door.

Educational, Cultural, and Health Activities

Congregations cooperate with other voluntary organizations in other important community activities, as well. This is the second most common activity nationwide, as well as in Alabama (see Figure 5). Everywhere you look among the congregations we interviewed, there are scout troops and nursery schools, senior centers and sports leagues – all existing independently of any single congregation, but often housed and supported by religious groups in cooperation with others in the community. In addition, there are arts organizations that use religious buildings for rehearsals, performances and lessons. Congregations support formal and informal programs of tutoring, after-school care, and literacy classes. They contribute to programs of education and service provision that surround issues as diverse as AIDS, unwanted pregnancies, handicapped persons, adoption, and more. They support and refer parishioners to counseling centers of all sorts. And they cooperate with others in delivering spiritual care to people in hospitals, nursing homes, on college campuses, and even in police and fire departments.

These needs are less basic than the food, clothing, and shelter provided by human service organizations, but they are no less essential to community life. They bring together persons from throughout a community who share a concern or interest, and they mobilize the resources of a diverse set of persons and organizations to respond to those needs. In helping to provide for the social, health, educational, and cultural needs of the community, congregations – working through affiliated organizations of all sorts -- play an important role in enhancing community life.

Community Development Activities

On-going efforts to build up the strength of a community are captured in our “community development” category (see Figure 5), although this sort of partnership work is not especially prevalent in central Alabama. Most of these are all-purpose associations more common in cities than in the countryside – block watch groups, neighborhood associations, civic clubs, and the like. They take on tasks as mundane as trash pickup and as complicated as policing issues. Some of them attempt to implement longer-term changes that are needed to make the community a better place to live.

Providing permanent affordable housing, for instance, has become a widespread concern, and the premier organization that has mobilized the energies of congregations in all parts of the country is Habitat for Humanity. No other form of community economic development activity has anything like the presence of Habitat among congregations.

About a quarter of conservative Protestant churches participate in such civic-minded activities, while around half of the liberal and moderate Protestant, African American, and Catholic parishes have at least some tie to a group working for community betterment.⁷

Another organization with which some congregations work is Heifer Project, an Arkansas-based ministry that provides livestock as a means toward economic self-sufficiency in communities around the world. Seattle-based World Vision is another development organization with a significant base of support among the congregations we surveyed. Both World Vision and Heifer Project work primarily overseas; *local* economic development partnerships are considerably more rare.

African American churches were more than three times as likely (22% v 6% in other traditions) to name a local economic development group as a partner. While the idea of “community development corporations” is getting a good deal of attention these days, it is the rare congregation that has taken on this sort of economic partnership.

Self-help and Personal Growth Groups

Much more specialized work is done by people who gather in small groups to help themselves and each other to deal with specific problems and interests – again a form of activity more common in cities than in rural Alabama. By far the best known and most widespread of these organizations, of course, are the Alcoholics Anonymous and other 12-step groups for narcotics addicts, overeaters, and even “sex and love addicts.” Congregations across the religious spectrum provide support for these groups, but liberal Protestant churches are especially likely to be involved.

As numerous as AA groups are in the basements of American churches and synagogues, there are an equal number of other support and spirituality groups, as well. Here we are not counting groups run as part of the congregation’s own internal programming. Beyond the church’s own Sunday School classes and men’s and women’s groups, about one in three congregations also hosts or provides resources to a support and growth group that encompasses persons from beyond its own membership.

These include the usual religiously-focused groups like Bible study and prayer groups. But even more common are sports leagues and support groups for people encountering both mundane and extraordinary challenges in living. There are parenting groups for

“Mothers of Preschoolers (MOPS)” and weight control groups, including Take Off Pounds Sensibly (TOPS) and Weight Watchers. There are groups dealing with birth defects and disability, as well as groups for people who have encountered less common difficulties – Turret syndrome, Lyme Disease, and incest, to name a few of those we found. There are even groups for transvestites and for Christian motorcycle enthusiasts, for people recovering from divorce and people who are victims of violence.

In urban areas, small groups can be an effective means for sustaining social and emotional bonds and promoting mutual aid – something done more informally in the country.⁸ In cities, when one or two people see a need, they often make their interest known through and beyond their own congregation. They draw on the networks of knowledge and communication that can be tapped there and often end up housing the resulting group in the parlor or fellowship hall.

Evangelistic Outreach Activities

Evangelism is another activity in which religious people encounter persons outside their own religious community in an effort to change the world for the better – one soul at a time. In supporting such efforts, the scope of the congregation’s concern is often enlarged to include a public much wider than their immediate locale. It is this sort of evangelical activity, in fact, that most commonly involves congregations in connections beyond the local region. From Jamaica and Haiti to Mexico and Lebanon and Bosnia and Nigeria, many congregations – rural and urban alike -- are directly connected to missionaries they support, hearing from them about the cultures, challenges, and needs of those distant places, and often sending delegations to deliver goods and work

alongside overseas missionaries. It is a set of partnerships in which rural Alabama's congregations are much more likely to be involved than are congregations elsewhere.

Public Advocacy

In addition to these on-the-ground efforts to build up community well-being, a few congregations – especially this area's African American churches -- also make connections with organizations that allow them to give voice to public policy concerns. From the environment to health care and from civil rights to animal rights, congregations sometimes pursue the cause of justice in this world through advocacy organizations that include:

Southern Christian Leadership Conference, The Audobon Society, Bread for the World, Children's Defense Fund, Fellowship of Reconciliation, Interfaith Alliance -- as well as the March for Jesus and Life Chain

In most cases, congregations participate with local chapters of large national groups, but the national and international scope of the issues being addressed draws

congregations into a large public arena. African American churches were the only ones in our study to report alliances with specifically political or voter education organizations. Their members, in turn, were also the most likely to report that they participate in political activities in the community.

Summary. The largest proportion of congregational energy goes into providing relief for people in need, but nearly as much is directed at the education and self-improvement of others who may be less immediately needy. The kinds of things we often think about when we think about "activist" congregations are actually relatively rare. Few are involved in economic development or policy advocacy, and almost none in overtly political groups. Rather, congregations are working with other community organizations to provide more immediate enrichment and relief. By combining efforts with other organizations, aid and services are provided far beyond what any one congregation could do and with a far more diverse set of partners than would be possible if work were confined to denominational channels alone.

IV - How Do Congregations Help?

Just what kinds of commitment do such outreach partnerships entail? Rarely does a partnership involve a whole congregation on an on-going and intense basis. But rarely is it something about which they know or care little. We attempted to find out as much as we could about these connections, and in about half the cases we were able to discern some countable measures of what is being invested (see Table 1). Where our informant did not know the answers to our specific questions about volunteers, contributions, and other aspects of the connection, we have erred on the conservative side and counted as if no such contributions exist, so the numbers in this Table clearly underestimate the amount of contributions being made by congregations to their outreach partners.

Table 1: Levels of Involvement with Outside Organizations -- National Averages

	Mainline Protestant	Conservative Protestant	African American Protestant	Catholic	Weighted Total*
% with at least one community connection	93%	90%	84%	91%	87%
% of Churches that provide volunteers to at least one organization	86%	73%	65%	77%	74%
Average Number of Organizations to which the Church sends volunteers	3.71	2.54	2.21	2.91	2.80
% of Churches that provide space to at least one organization	72%	51%	66%	76%	57%
Average Number of Organizations to which the Church provides space	3.06	1.30	1.35	2.33	1.76
% of Churches that donate material goods to at least one organization	49%	23%	28%	28%	30%
Average Number of Organizations to which Churches donate material goods	.85	.35	.30	.60	.48
% of Churches that donate money to at least one organization	67%	41%	27%	27%	45%
Average Number of Organizations to which Churches donate money	4.32	1.95	1.59	2.73	2.53
Average total contributions to non-denominational outreach organizations	\$3404	\$4199	\$ 727	\$4878	\$3538

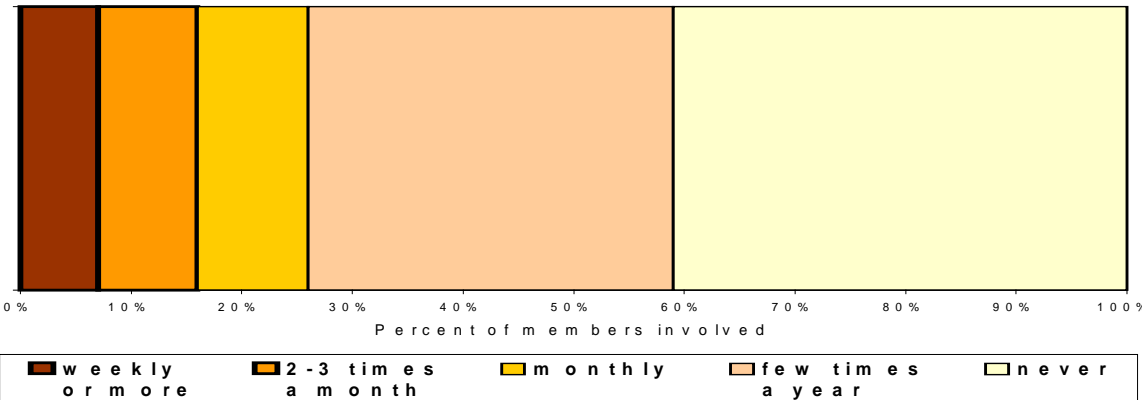
**Included in Total, but not in the other columns are 14 "Other Christian" cases, 10 Jewish synagogues, and 11 other non-Christian groups.*

Even with incomplete information, the numbers are substantial. Well over half of all congregations have at least one outside organization that uses **space** in their buildings (either donated outright or made available at minimal cost).⁹ On average, in fact, there are nearly two such organizations for every congregation. If nothing else, congregations are valuable to their communities because they provide meeting space and other facilities to support the work of organizations beyond their own membership.

What congregations contribute is not just empty space; it is also person-power. Each congregation contributes, on average, **volunteers** to three organizations, and 74% report that they send volunteers to help in at least one group. For the groups to which they send volunteers, the median number of members who are involved is five, with a few reporting literally dozens of routine volunteers.

That, of course, does not begin to count the number of groups in which individual members work, not as official representatives of their congregations, but at least in part because their congregation encourages such activity.¹⁰ As we see in Figure 6, *Fifty-nine percent of the individual members we surveyed claim that they participate in community service organizations at least a few times a year.* In addition, seventy-nine percent claim that they at least occasionally provide informal service to people in need.

Figure 6: Involvement of Members as Volunteers in Community Service Organizations – National Averages

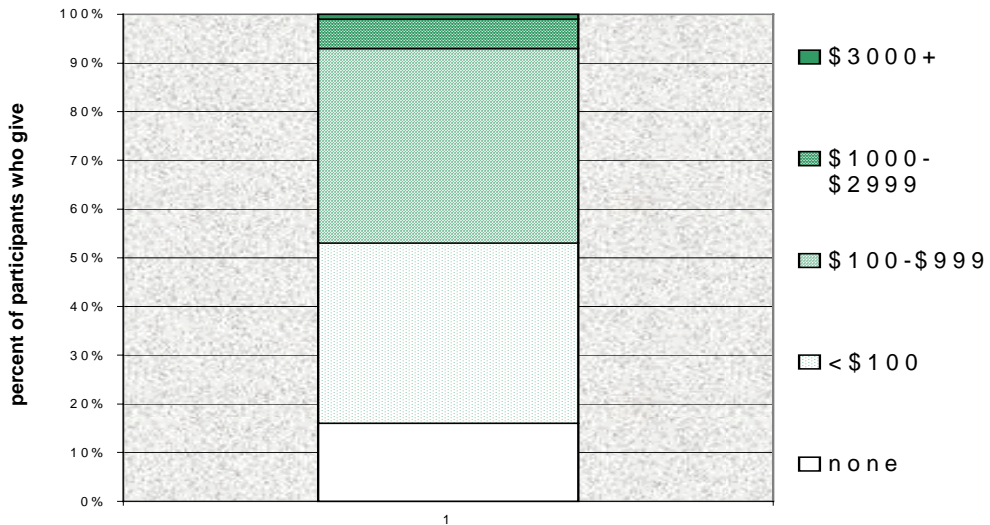


The connections go beyond volunteers and space. On average two or three organizations receive **money** from each congregation, amounting, on average, to nearly \$1500 per organization per year.

And about a third supplement their monetary contributions to at least one organization with **other material goods** –food, clothing, furniture, Christmas gifts, and the like – collected by the members.

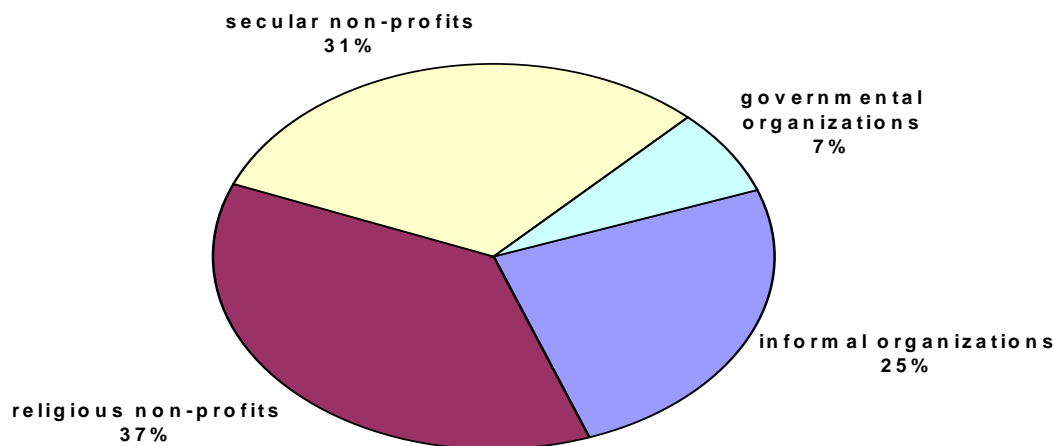
Congregations also encourage their individual members to give to causes in the community. As Figure 7 shows, only one in six of the participants we surveyed said that they gave nothing to secular causes. In fact, in mainline (liberal and moderate) Protestant congregations, 11% claimed to contribute \$1000 or more, compared to 5% of conservatives, 7.5% of Catholics, but 13% of respondents in African American churches who gave that generously.

Figure 7: Annual Giving to Secular Charity by Individual Religious Participants – National Averages



This pattern of multi-faceted participation with outside organizations is present across the nation at roughly the same levels. Our research sites do not differ significantly from each other, but there are differences across religious traditions. Almost all religious traditions are at least minimally involved, but the level of activity in Jewish and mainline Protestant congregations tends to be higher than in conservative, African American, and Catholic churches. Mainline churches send volunteers to, provide space for, and give money and goods to roughly twice as many organizations. Across all the traditions, the average number of volunteers per group is the same, so given that mainline churches support more groups, their total number of volunteers is therefore considerably larger than the total coming from other traditions. Monetary contributions, however, are different. Mainline Protestants spend a similar number of dollars, but spread them among more groups. Along with contributions from virtually all other religious groups, their resources help to sustain the community.

Figure 8: Just what sorts of organizations do congregations work with?



How Congregations Organize. Our first discovery is that many of the “organizations” through which congregations do their work are not formal organizations at all. They are often simply *informal partnerships* among two or more congregations, partnerships that have no staff of their own and often not even a name. This is as common in the cities as in rural areas. Many food pantries and clothes closets are run this way. A group of congregations agrees informally that one will collect, store, and distribute furniture, while another will take care of the food, and a third will collect clothing. They may notify various social service agencies of the arrangement so that needy persons can be referred to the right place. This network of caring may never show up

on anyone’s annual report, but it is a critical link in the safety net in many communities.

Equally informal are the groups who share a common interest or concern and form a self-help or support group. Rather than being part of a formal national network (like AA, for instance), many are simply community folk who decide to get together. In urban areas, we found Alzheimers and disability support groups and groups that gather to practice Aikido, Irish Step Dancing, or Zen meditation, for instance. Many (although not all) of the sports leagues we encountered were similarly informal. They have an on-going existence and a recognizable identity, but there is little if any financial or legal infrastructure.

But by far the most important of these informal groups are the clergy associations that are present in nearly every community. They offer clergy an opportunity to share their burdens with others who understand, but often the prayer and fellowship of these groups is specifically directed at needs and concerns in the community, and the concerns expressed in prayer spill over into concrete actions the group may undertake.

Among the most common tasks of clergy associations is working out the sorts of informal social service arrangements we just mentioned. Churches and synagogues are obvious stopping points for people in need, but it is hard for a pastor or rabbi (or a secretary) to make a judgment about what is best when someone knocks on the door. By banding together, and often by enlisting the help of local merchants, congregations establish some semblance of rationality in a situation they find otherwise frustratingly ambiguous. If everyone cooperates, each has a sense that appropriate help is being delivered.

Not surprisingly, the *religious nonprofit sector* is the largest block of organizations through which congregations do their work in the community (see Figure 8). Nearly half of the human service connections and over half of the links to community development groups are links to formal religious nonprofit organizations -- Community Centers and shelters, food pantries and rescue missions, pastoral counseling centers and refugee resettlement programs, prison ministries and drug rehab programs, senior centers and AIDS ministries.

It is important to note that these religious nonprofits bring together people from a

wide variety of religious traditions (and often people of no tradition at all). Even an identifiably denominational group, such as Catholic Charities or Lutheran Social Services is very likely to have tangible support from persons and congregations outside that denomination. When they serve their communities, religious people rub shoulders with an often unlikely array of people from beyond their own traditions.

Secular nonprofits are also important players. While they may have some congregational donors and volunteers that come through religious channels, their work is defined primarily in secular terms. About one third of all the human service, community development, and culture/education/health connections that congregations have are connections to explicitly secular organizations. Education and self help work is, in fact, more often accomplished through secular groups. From literacy programs to choirs and dance troops, secular community benefit organizations often receive space, volunteers, and monetary support from congregations.

The other activity in which secular nonprofits are the dominant player is policy advocacy. As we saw above, congregations provide support to groups as diverse as Amnesty International, the Sierra Club, and Physicians for Social Responsibility. Such secular groups are considerably more common than religiously based ones (such as Interfaith Alliance or Bread for the World) in the advocacy partnerships cited by congregations.

Particularly common in rural Alabama are partnerships between congregations and

various *governmental organizations*, especially the county welfare offices. Also common are connections between congregations and schools, and most often those connections involve members in tutoring and other support programs. In addition, elsewhere, congregations are often partners in public projects that are run by parks departments, police departments, and chambers of commerce. In Chicago, for instance, a number of congregations participate in the CAPS (Chicago Alternative Policing Strategy) program. One church in Hartford provides resources for special activities at the public library. And in both of our rural locations, churches have especially close working relationships with the county welfare office. Social workers know which churches to call when there are emergency needs.

These partnerships all began long before the current discussion of “charitable choice” or “faith-based organizations.” They are part of the long-standing pattern of more informal cooperation between

religious groups and government. In none of these cases was a congregation receiving government funds to support any service activity.¹¹

It is worth noting that in other regions, mainline (liberal and moderate) Protestant congregations are much more likely to make connections to secular nonprofits and governmental agencies than are conservative, African American, or even Catholic churches, but that pattern is less true in Alabama.

Again, we see that the connections between congregations and their communities are both extensive and diverse. Some connections are very informal, some through formal organizations. Some are through other religious groups, while others link congregations with secular nonprofits and public agencies. And some of the connections are indirect, through the giving and volunteering that members undertake on their own.

V - Explanations for Congregational Involvement

Not every congregation is equally involved in providing services to the larger community through organizational partnerships beyond their own denomination. A variety of factors differentiate the most actively-connected from others.

Some expect regions to be different from each other, but that is not the case. Congregations in the midwest are not unlike the rest of the country – net of the other factors (especially religious traditions) that make them distinctive. Congregations in rural areas are less involved in outside partnerships than are urban ones, but the educational and racial composition of the congregation makes no difference, other things being equal.

On the other hand, not surprisingly, **resources** are a significant part of the story. The more money a congregation has in its budget, the more connections it is likely to form, and the more high-income parishioners it has—over and above the size of the budget—the more connections it can sustain. It is money, in fact, not sheer size, that makes a difference.

Figure 9: Effect of Budget Size on Community Involvement – National Averages

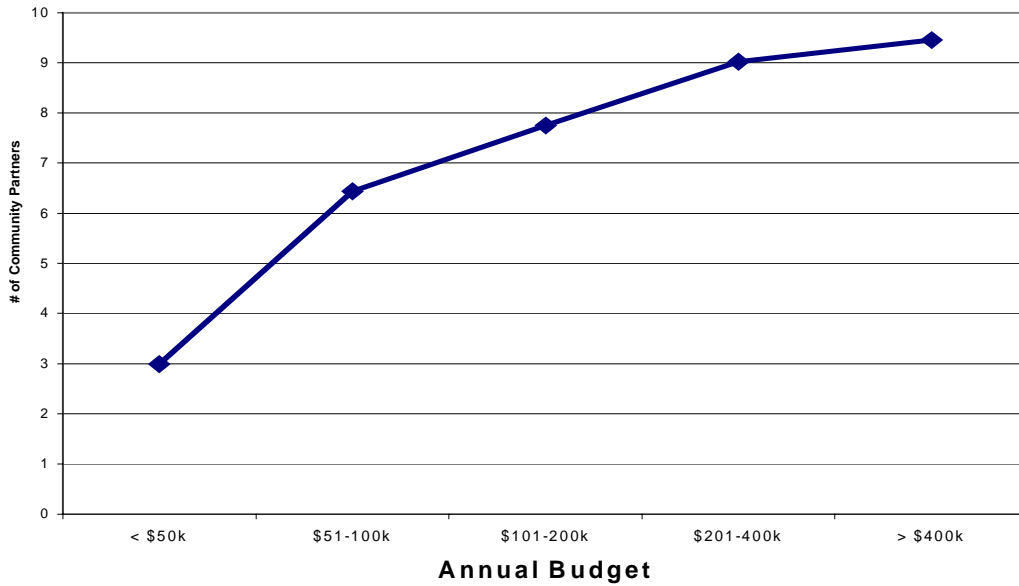
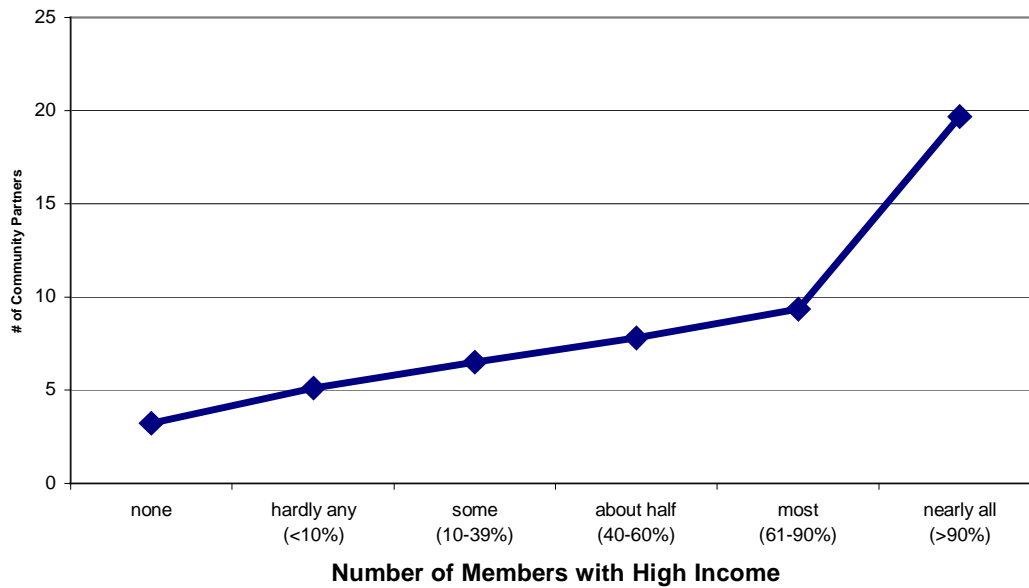
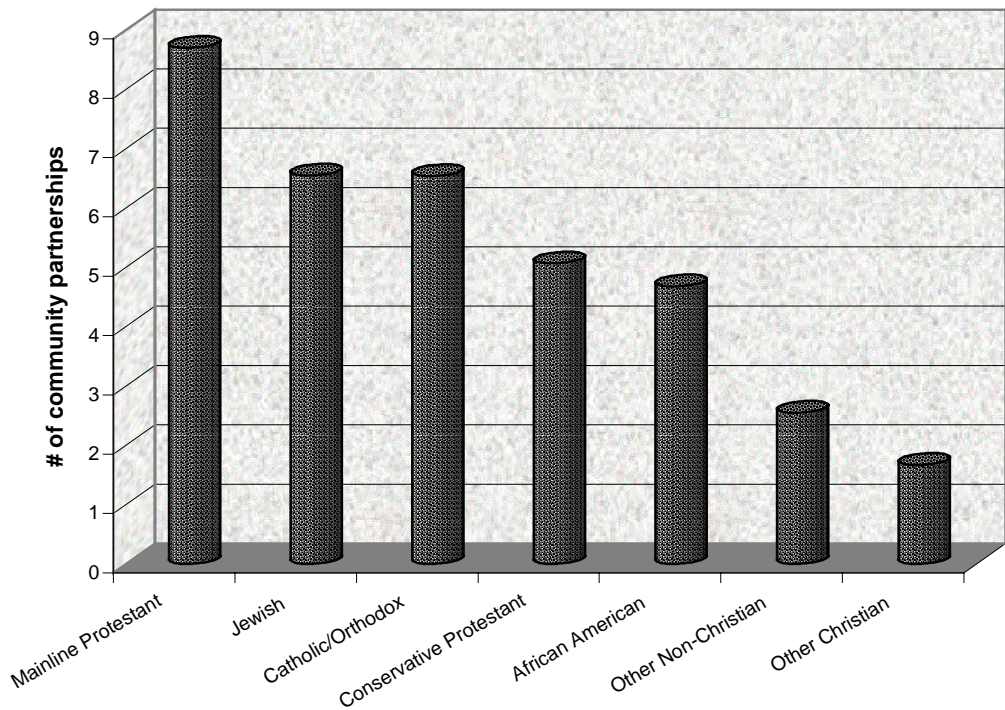


Figure 10: Effect of Member Income on Community Involvement – National Averages



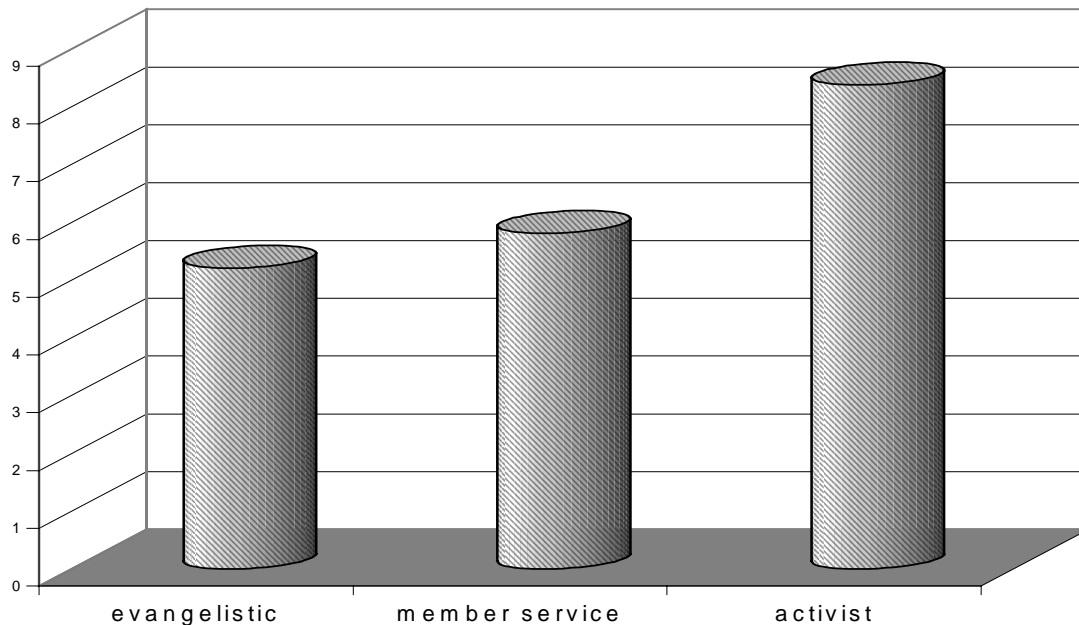
The differences we have seen, then, are partly a matter of money and context -- bigger congregations with bigger budgets do more -- but more than that there are real differences based on a congregation's situatedness within a particular religious tradition (see Figure 11). Forming alliances with groups beyond one's own doors is an organizational strategy that exists in virtually all Christian and Jewish congregations, but it is a pattern that was historically set by the congregations in the Mainline Protestant tradition. All other things being equal, those congregations are still more heavily invested in community partnerships than are congregations in other religious traditions. In addition, their individual members are more likely to be personally involved in community organizations, politics, and giving monetary support to charitable work. Catholic and Jewish congregations are not far behind in their level of involvement. Those least involved with outside partnerships are the new immigrant (non-Christian) groups and the "other" Christian groups, such as Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses.

Figure 11: Level of Involvement with Community Organizations in Various Religious Traditions – National Averages



While denominational traditions make a significant difference in the degree to which congregations are involved in community partnerships, the particular “mission” orientation of the congregation makes a difference, as well (see Figure 12). Even within a given denomination, some congregations have a more “activist” orientation, while others are “member oriented,” and still others are “evangelistic.” All other things being equal – that is, congregations in the same tradition, with similar budgets, in similar locations and with similar memberships – the particular theological orientation of the congregation makes a difference in how it relates to the community.

Figure 12: Effects of Mission Orientation on Community Involvement – National Averages



These mission orientations can characterize both congregations and the individuals in them. Not every “activist” person is in an “activist” congregation, for instance. Congregations that define their mission in terms of social change are more involved in the community, but so are individuals who see their goals in life as seeking justice and serving the needy. The religious ideas and orientations that are nurtured in congregations shape both the activities of the congregation itself and the involvements of its individual members. Alabama has the lowest level of connection of any of our research sites – partly because of the dominance of Conservative Protestants and the prevalence of an evangelistic orientation, but also because churches are smaller and have fewer resources.

VI - Denominational Connections

Some of what congregations do within a local area is channeled through their own particular denomination's agencies. A diocese, district, or other regional "judicatory" may maintain funds and programs that serve needy people, help to advocate for social reform, and contribute to community well-being in a variety of other ways. These efforts are not always very visible. Almost none of the regional judicatories we have examined makes policy advocacy a high and visible priority, although many channel resources to regional religious coalitions that more visibly lobby and work for change, often speaking in behalf of the whole religious community. One denominational leader described the role of ecumenical bodies as "sort of a lightning rod for some of the activists in the churches." Because regional denominational bodies are often made up of quite diverse congregations, they may not advertise all the work they do, even when they *are* actively involved.

We found that 20% of the congregations we surveyed mentioned at least one denominationally-sponsored local outreach effort they support. Those actively involved with other, non-denominational, local partnerships were neither more nor less likely to be involved with their denomination. People who fear that involvement with "parachurch" organizations will undermine denominational loyalty will find nothing to worry about in our findings. **What congregations do through religious and secular non-profits, informal coalitions and government alliances, is *in addition to, not instead of,* what they do with**

their denominations. Both forms of connection help congregations to extend their care for the community, neither at the expense of the other.

Local denominational involvement is not a matter of demographics or resources or size. Rather, being involved in the community in a denominational mode seems to vary depending on the denomination in question. Catholics, for instance, are more likely to do work for their community through their local diocese than Protestants are to do work with their regional office (30% v 20%). Among Protestants, Episcopal churches, Southern Baptists, the Church of God in Christ, and Seventh-Day Adventists were more likely to report local outreach efforts undertaken through their denominations than are groups like Unitarians or Baptists (other than Southern Baptists).

An A.M.E. pastor in Chicago, describing his local A.M.E. ministers group, said, "We have a concern about our youth...We talked about doing a program jointly where [a nearby] college would have an opportunity to talk to first of all a lot of black ministers out there, and we would try to get a number of youth there too....Another initiative for us is health care. We're going to be setting the alliance up so that on a given day we can advertise that at any AME church you can get your blood pressure taken." An Albuquerque Catholic priest noted that "in the whole archdiocese, all the parishes participate. We have a mission weekend, to pray and financially help. We have about 7-8 collections a year for missions or mission

programs.” And a neighboring Episcopal parish in Albuquerque noted how connections in the diocese enabled them to enlarge a mission program they had started. “We opened it up a few years ago to anyone in the diocese that wanted to join us. Last year for example, they took 3 different teams to Honduras for 2 weeks each.” Even small and rural Southern Baptist churches in Missouri and Alabama pointed with pride to their support for

SBC-sponsored regional food pantries, children’s homes, and retirement facilities.

These denominational connections, then, add to the work congregations are doing through other organizations in the community, as well as facilitating connections that spread throughout the world. Here again, the pooled resources of many people make good work possible.

Conclusions: ***What have we learned, and where can we go from here?***

There is a dense and complex web of connection in every community – a web that binds together the agencies that serve the community with the congregations in which people of faith gather. Those communities of faith are first and foremost places where people gather for spiritual strength and moral guidance, where they find a caring community in which to express themselves and find a home. Even when congregations have no overt ministries or other connections in the community, they serve us well by doing these basic religious tasks.

But beyond what congregations do for their own members, they also participate in myriad ways in the supportive web that enhances community life. That web makes possible a wide array of services to needy people, as well as self-help groups and educational enrichment, evangelism and political activism. As you think about your own participation in central Alabama’s support network, we hope you will reflect on questions like these.

1. How might existing connections between congregations and service agencies be broadened? Which congregations need to be invited to become involved?
2. How can community needs be better communicated among a wider range of concerned groups?
3. What groups share common concerns and ought to be working more closely with each other?
4. How might congregations more intentionally explore the religious ideas and traditions that are the reason for this work? Do volunteers know *why* they do what they do, and how does that sense of purpose give them strength? Do congregations know why they give, and does that sense of mission help them make well-considered decisions?
5. Social service agencies are often supported by a wide diversity of religious groups. How might agencies more intentionally provide opportunities for donors, volunteers, and clients to be more aware of each other, talking and working together so that their common concerns are discovered, experienced, and expressed?
6. What sorts of informal alliances can facilitate getting things done? When can we get along without a professional staff?
7. How can congregations be creative partners with governmental organizations? What sorts of things can congregations do without risking “unnecessary entanglement”?
8. Which religious organizations, if any, are best positioned to take advantage of “charitable choice”? Which existing partnerships have lessons to teach as government urges new “faith-based” initiatives?
9. In the midst of all this, how can we protect the ability of congregations to do their religious work, valuing the diverse traditions they nurture and the spiritual perspectives they contribute to their members and to the community?

Endnotes and Suggestions for Further Reading

¹ Robert D. Putnam's book, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000), is one of the most important recent sources of data and reflection on the state of community life in the U.S.

² We are able to establish "weights" for our sample thanks to the National Congregations Study, which gathered data on a representative sample of all U.S. congregations. To read more about this important study, see Mark Chaves et al., "The National Congregational Study; Background, Methods, and Selected Results," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 38, no. 4 (1999).

³ I have written about this "golden rule" orientation among American Christians in "Golden Rule Christianity: Lived Religion in the American Mainstream," in *Lived Religion in America*, ed. David Hall (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997). This article is also available on-line at http://hrr.hartsem.edu/sociology/sociology_online_articles.html.

⁴ Andrew Billingsley, writing about active black churches, for instance, says "we have found in our studies and observations that churches without dynamic and spirit-filled worship programs are not likely to sustain active community building activities. The two seem to reinforce each other." His book, *Mighty Like a River: The Black Church and Social Reform* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000) is one of many good sources on African American churches.

⁵ The book *Voice and Equality*, by Sidney Verba, Kay Schlozman, and Henry Brady (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995) provides persuasive evidence on the civic role of congregations.

⁶ Further reflections on the role of religious pluralism in our society can be found in R. Stephen Warner's article, "Changes in the Civic Role of Religion," in *Diversity and Its Discontents: Cultural Conflict and Common Ground in Contemporary American Society*, edited by Neil J Smelser and Jeffrey C. Alexander (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999). His *Gatherings in Diaspora: Religious Communities and the New Immigration* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998, edited with Judith Wittner) is a fascinating collection of accounts of contemporary immigrant congregations.

⁷ The distinctive contributions of Mainline Protestants to public life are explored in *Quietly Influential*, edited by Robert Wuthnow and John Evans, and due out from University of California Press in 2001.

⁸ Robert Wuthnow has written about the work of small groups in *Sharing the Journey* (New York: Free Press, 1994)..

⁹ Partners for Sacred Places (<http://www.sacredplaces.org>) has documented the extensive contributions made by congregations who occupy historic buildings. Additional research on congregational contributions to social service delivery can be found in Ram Cnann's book, *The Newer Deal* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999).

¹⁰ Wuthnow has also written a great deal about volunteering, including *Acts of Compassion: Caring for Others and Helping Ourselves* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991); *Loose Connections: Joining Together in America's Fragmented Communities* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998); and "Mobilizing Civic Engagement: The Changing Impact of Religious Involvement," in *Civic Engagement in American Democracy*, edited by Theda Skocpol and Morris P. Fiorina (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 1999).

¹¹ A good discussion of likely congregational involvement in "charitable choice" government-funded activities can be found in Mark Chaves's article, "Religious Congregations and Welfare Reform: Who Will Take Advantage of 'Charitable Choice'?", *American Sociological Review* 64 (1999):836-846. Additional information can be found in the research of John Bartkowski, accessible at http://hrr.hartsem.edu/sociology/sociology_online_articles.html.