

## ABSTRACT

Title of Dissertation:           RETAILING RELIGION: BUSINESS  
  PROMOTIONALISM IN AMERICAN CHRISTIAN  
  CHURCHES IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

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Evangelist Billy Graham once remarked, “We are selling the greatest product on earth – belief in God – why shouldn’t we promote it as effectively as we promote a bar of soap?” His comparison is misleading in its simplicity, since it strikes at the heart of the complex relationship between religion and the modern American marketplace. *Retailing Religion* examines how American Christian churches in the twentieth century promoted their institutions and messages by adopting modern public relations, advertising, personal sales, and marketing techniques from the secular business community.

*Retailing Religion* develops four principal themes. First, Christian churches in the twentieth century followed the promotional trends of corporate firms with only a slight lag time. Second, this borrowing nurtured the growth of rationalism and individualism in American Christianity, which contributed significantly to the religion’s modernization. This transformation was especially pronounced in churches’ growing dependence on

rational methods and numerical metrics, and in their transition from a producer orientation to a consumer orientation. Third, church promotional efforts increased not the secularization but the pluralization of American Christianity by erecting a platform for cooperation among churches, denominations, and religions. Fourth, church promotionalism fostered an ongoing tension between their sacred mission and their secular methods. Wrestling with this tension, both advocates and critics of church promotion labored throughout the century to develop historical, theological, and pragmatic arguments to defend or denounce the practices. The tension was so complex and often contradictory that some of the strongest advocates for religious retailing were also its biggest critics.

The key historical actors in this study are the leading pioneers and practitioners of church promotion: organizations such as the Religious Public Relations Council; experts such as Gaines Dobbins, Philip Kotler, Peter Drucker, and George Barna; pastors such as Robert Schuller, Bill Hybels, and Rick Warren; and critics such as David Wells and Os Guinness. In tracing their adoption, development, implementation, and dissemination of the latest business promotional methods, *Retailing Religion* provides a broad portrait of American religion's struggle to remain both faithful to the divine and relevant to the world.

RETAILING RELIGION: BUSINESS PROMOTIONALISM IN AMERICAN  
CHRISTIAN CHURCHES IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

by

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For my grandfather, John A. Hardin, “Sr.”  
Thanks Papa.

## Acknowledgements

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I owe my love of history and my interest in American religious history to Grant Wacker. As an undergrad, I studied civil engineering at The Citadel and abhorred the subject of history. However, years later, while studying theology at Duke University, the curriculum forced me to enroll in Dr. Wacker's course on American Religious History. I loved it. I still remember meeting with him after class one afternoon and expressing my newfound interest in the subject. He suggested that I consider pursuing a PhD, and I laughed. How could a civil engineer complete a PhD in history? Yet, I was crazy and naïve enough to try and Dr. Wacker was ambitious and kind enough to take me under his wing as an alien in the discipline while I completed my Masters. Along the way, he introduced me to Jim Gilbert, a professor in U.S. History at the University of Maryland.

In May 2004, after graduating from Duke, I moved to Washington, D.C. to enroll as a doctoral student with Dr. Gilbert.

While studying at the University of Maryland, two men, Jim Gilbert and David Sicilia, played an inestimable role in my development as a scholar and in the genesis and completion of this dissertation. Dr. Gilbert introduced me, through his books and courses, to the contested spaces with “indistinct boundaries,” where religion negotiates its identity with other institutions and systems of meaning in American culture. He also went to bat for me when few were willing to take a risk and give an engineer an opportunity to be a historian. Without his scholarship and his support, my doctoral career would not exist. David Sicilia, or “Boss,” introduced me to the fascinating field of business history. The idea for this dissertation developed in his course on the history of American business and economics. Since then he has remained an ardent supporter of my academic career, shepherding me through comprehensive examinations, a prospectus defense, and the production of this dissertation. His sense of humor, his wisdom, and his friendship have been invaluable, and I cannot thank him enough for his service and his kindness to me. I am also grateful to the other members of my dissertation committee for taking the time to provide me with their feedback and questions: David Freund, Robert Nelson, and Miles Bradbury.

Outside of the university, there have been countless friends that supported, encouraged, and coached me throughout this endeavor. Mark Dever introduced me to the intricacies of Christian ecclesiology and fed my appetite for the subject. Throughout the development of this project, he has been an invaluable resource of information and creative thinking. His enthusiasm for this dissertation has often been much greater than

my own, and his encouragement, guidance, and friendship have been absolutely crucial in its completion. I also thank Connie Dever, Justin Sok, Garrett Conner, and many, many members of the Capitol Hill Baptist Church, who assisted me by repeatedly asking about this project, discussing the topic, tracking down sources, and even reading bits of drafts. Thanks to Matt and Ashley Wells for graciously hosting me in their home on repeated trips to Philadelphia. Other friends specifically helped me navigate the waters of graduate school. From their own experience, they gave me examples and suggestions on how to survive and sometimes even excel as a doctoral student. Among them particularly were Jon White, Chris Esh, Ian Drake, Khalil Habib, and Will Inboden. I also owe a special debt of gratitude to Greg Anderson, Maria Robles, and the rest of the crew at the Bruegger's Bagels on Wisconsin Avenue in Washington, D.C. where I consumed gallons of caffeinated drinks and wrote the majority of this dissertation. They made the writing process very enjoyable with lots of laughs and lots of cinnamon raisin bagels with peanut butter.

My family has also been a constant source of support and encouragement along the way. As I have shifted from engineer, to golf course builder, to golf instructor, to minister, and finally to graduate student, my mother, Martie, aka "Mookie" or "Mook-dawg," has always supported me. No one could ask for a more magnificent, loving, funny, wise, caring mother. I will never be able to repay her for all of the sacrifices and energy that she has given for my successes, but I hope that this dissertation will stand as a small monument to her labor and love. I am also thankful to my brother, Dan, for his interest in my research and his encouragement of an older brother that could never seem to get out of school.



During my second semester at the University of Maryland, I met a student at a rival school, the University of North Carolina, named Jessica Roeger. The next semester, I asked her to marry me, and a semester later, to my great joy, she did. Since then she has been by my side throughout this adventure. In fact, she has carried me through most of it. All along the way, she has graciously supported my other marriage, to this dissertation. Now that it is complete, I anxiously await our next adventure. It is the greatest privilege of my life to have her as my wife, and there are no adequate words to express my adoration and appreciation of her.

My only disappointment in this dissertation is that my grandfather, John A. Hardin, “Sr.” or “Papa,” did not live to see its completion. He was always quick to ask, “How’s the thesis Johnny Boy?” and even appeared interested as I went on and on about it. He would then remark with his trademark slogan, “that’s grand.” Any successes that I have had throughout my life, I owe in great part to his generosity, his example, and his expectations. I am deeply grateful to him for his love and support. It is an indescribable honor for me to dedicate this “grand” dissertation to him.

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## Abbreviations

JAH	Joint Archives of Holland, Holland, Michigan
JBCL	James P. Boyce Centennial Library, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Louisville, Kentucky
PHS	Presbyterian Historical Society, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania
RPRCC	Religious Public Relations Council Collection, Presbyterian Historical Society, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

## Introduction: Wrestling with Demons

In 1925, the Pasadena Community Church in St. Petersburg, Florida, was searching the local community for three more members in order to reach a total of twenty, the number required by the Methodist Church to establish a congregation. With winter residents reluctant to transfer their membership, the church's future was in peril. Few would have guessed that the Pasadena Community Church would not only be established but also become the first church in the United States where a person could enjoy a service in the convenience and comfort of his automobile in the parking lot. These founders could not have guessed that their church would be part of the inspiration for Robert Schuller's 1955 drive-in church, which would grow into the Crystal Cathedral, host of the most popular religious television show in the 1980s. Nor could they have foreseen that through their inspiration, Schuller would be the primary catalyst in launching a church marketing movement that would help breed megachurches across the country. No, in 1925, all they could predict was that they would in fact have a church – because in November they found their last three members. They were my great, great grandmother, Mrs. Bama Sims, my great grandmother, Ethel Sims, and my grandmother's older sister, Sara.<sup>1</sup>

I grew up hearing stories of my great grandmother's church in Florida, where people could participate in the church without ever leaving their car. They simply drove

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<sup>1</sup> Guy V. Aldrich, *Seven Miles Out: The Story of Pasadena Community Church, St. Petersburg, Florida, 1924-1960* (Tampa, FL: Florida Grower Press, 1965), 6-7.

up into a parking lot and listened to the church service over loud speakers while receiving directions from a minister, the “Sky Pilot,” who stood on an outdoor platform. As a boy in Rock Hill, South Carolina, I fidgeted each Sunday on the stiff, wooden pews of St. Johns United Methodist Church and longed to “sit in church” in the car. I dreamed of a church like my great grandmother’s, one that would meet my desires for comfortable, modern convenience. Perhaps those dreams are how I found myself, years later, leading a rock band in weekly services at a megachurch that met not in a religious building, but in an old hotel. I was a regular participant in a modern Protestant church that adopted the forms and practices of entertainment and business to attract more people. I was a participant in a ritual of religious retailing that my great grandmother had played a part in creating.

Recently at a seminar, one of the participants noted that graduate students often embark upon a dissertation as a means to wrestle with their demons. I am uncertain as to what demons lay behind this work. However, I am quite sure that my great grandmother and my brief tenure as a megachurch “rock star” fan the flames of this inquiry. Both have driven me to explore what happened within broad swaths of American Christianity that introduced drive-in parking lots and rock bands into churches. How did churches become more like shopping malls than temples? How does religion compete in the secular marketplace yet remain sacred? What are the origins of church marketing? Who were the principal retailers of religion? Such questions about the relationship between religion and the marketplace drive this dissertation, which examines the origins, development, and proliferation of business promotionalism in American Christian churches in the twentieth century.



### *Christianity in the American Marketplace*

This is a story of how Christianity's most basic institutions, churches, competed in the modern marketplace of ideas, services, and products by adopting and adapting the promotional values and methods of commercial institutions. These sacred producers traded in their vestments and robes to don the suits of the modern salesperson and walk through the markets speaking to the modern consumer. In the process, they transformed American Christianity, matching its forms, messages, and sources of authority to those of American commerce and culture. It is a story of what James Gilbert and Miles Bradbury describe as "cultural parallelism," religion's effort "to embody in some degree the institutions and aspirations of the secular society."<sup>2</sup> This incarnational project has been at the core of the religion since its inception.

The last words of Jesus, recorded by Matthew, were his "great commission" to his followers to "go and make disciples of all nations."<sup>3</sup> Ever since, Christianity has been a conversionary religion, its followers faithfully taking its message into the marketplaces of the world. Yet this mission has posed significant challenges to Christian institutions as they have labored to offer vibrant, relevant messages in contemporary idioms while remaining faithful to ancient, transcendent directives of the divine. In this act of translation, of proselytization, Christianity, an otherworldly religion, has continually adopted and adapted worldly practices and principles.<sup>4</sup> In the United States, this process

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<sup>2</sup> M. L. Bradbury and James B. Gilbert, *Transforming Faith: The Sacred and Secular in Modern American History* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1989), x.

<sup>3</sup> Matthew 28:19 (New International Version).

<sup>4</sup> John 15:19; 17:16.

of acculturation has been particularly acute since the nation does not endorse an official religious institution. The American free market is also a free religious market, where religious groups must compete with one another and with other cultural institutions for assets and adherents. As James Gilbert notes, “The marketplace and competition constitute the most fundamental institutional framework of American religion.”<sup>5</sup> In America, the rhythms and melodies of the competitive marketplace fundamentally shape the doctrines and rituals of Christianity.

In competing in the marketplace, Christian churches have found it advantageous to embrace the strategies of commercial institutions from leadership to management, from administration to bureaucratization; however, none compares with promotion in breadth of adoption and depth of influence. Since the early eighteenth century, American Christianity has appropriated the promotional principles and practices of the marketplace to retain and gain market share. The first principal religious retailer was George Whitefield. In partnership with his close friend, newspaperman Benjamin Franklin, Whitefield used advanced publicity, publishing, and advertising as mechanisms to attract thousands to his revivals across the American colonies in the 1730s and 1740s.<sup>6</sup> Christian leaders of the nineteenth century, such as Henry Ward Beecher, Charles Finney, Billy Sunday and Dwight L. Moody, followed Whitefield’s lead, advertising their

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<sup>5</sup> James B. Gilbert, “The Difference of American Religion” unpublished manuscript, cited with permission, 3.

<sup>6</sup> Harry S. Stout, *The Divine Dramatist: George Whitefield and the Rise of Modern Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1991); Frank Lambert, ‘*Pedlar in Divinity*’: *George Whitefield and the Transatlantic Revivals* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002).

revivals, meeting in secular venues, and employing rational methods of persuasion to make converts.<sup>7</sup>

Yet the shift in American society at the turn of the twentieth century from a culture of production to one of consumption catalyzed an unprecedented enthusiasm and embrace of business promotionalism in Christian churches. In the new consumer society of the twentieth century, Christian churches faced a more complex and competitive marketplace than before. At the dawn of the century, a new commercial ethos emerged in American society. Rapid growth in industry, transportation, and communication had created a national marketplace and flooded it with new goods and services. In order to sell these new products, a new professional class of advertising and public relations experts arose to develop and implement modern promotionalism. These promotional pioneers used sophisticated methods to encourage Americans to pursue pleasure and gratification in the consumption of goods and services. The new strategies and ethos spread rapidly throughout the country. However, consumptive virtues and aggressive promotionalism posed a challenge to American Protestants, who historically believed that consumption for pleasure was sinful. Yet, at the same time, they believed churches must competitively promote in the marketplace to survive. Churches therefore faced a dilemma. They could maintain traditional values and methods, risking alienation from a shifting society; or they could adapt to modern commercial ideas of consumption and methods of promotion to pursue growth. Most chose the latter, employing the latest

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<sup>7</sup> Laurence Moore, *Selling God: American Religion in the Marketplace of Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994); William G. McLoughlin, *Revivals, Awakenings, and Reform: An Essay on Religion and Social Change in America, 1607-1977* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1978); Jeanne Halgren Kilde, *When Church Became Theatre: The Transformation of Evangelical Architecture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

theories and practices in advertising, public relations, publicity, personal sales, and marketing to attract more customers.

#### *Four Themes in Religious Retailing*

Christian churches in the United States, throughout the twentieth century, followed the same trends in business promotionalism, with little or no lag in adoption behind corporate firms. This is one of the four principle themes of this dissertation. Although church retailing methods never matched the sophistication or complexity of those in broader industry, they followed the same basic patterns.

The century began with a production-oriented market. Industries produced goods and services without significant concern for customer desires. Selling these products depended upon aggressive forms of advertising and personal sales to increase public awareness and desire for the products. Churches adopted a similar approach, employing basic advertising practices to promote services and messages developed by clergy. They were, however, slower in adopting personal sales methods, only beginning to use them in the 1940s. Yet churches immediately employed the methods of business public relations, which had simultaneously grown alongside advertising in corporations as a means to shape public opinion about institutions.

By the 1950s, American religion enjoyed a period of significant expansion, buoyed in part by an expansive network of experts and practices in church advertising, public relations, and personal sales. At the same time, however, churches were undergoing a significant transition that pervaded business promotionalism. A consumer orientation was replacing a producer orientation in business. Instead of aggressively

promoting universal products, industries began altering products fashioned for market segments. Most businesses made this transition to a marketing framework in the postwar era, and churches followed suit. Emphasizing customer surveys, altered services, messages designed to appeal to segments of the population, and aggressive promotion, churches made the transition to a consumer orientation. By the 1980s, pastors Robert Schuller, Bill Hybels, and Rick Warren, among others, had laid the foundation for a sophisticated church marketing industry to rival that of American commerce and business. At the end of the century, marketing dominated much of American Christianity, promulgated by a phalanx of guidebooks, consultants, scholars, and pastors, all taking their cues from the market.

Another theme of this dissertation is that business promotionalism contributed to the modernization of American Christianity, nurturing the growth of rationalism and individualism within Christian churches. In the process of transferring the modern methods of the market, churches also carried over the modern forms and values of the market.

Promotionalism nurtured a growing rationalism in American Christianity, exhibited by growing dependence on logical methods, on numerical measurements of success, and on methodological experts. Industrialization introduced to American culture a new confidence in professional experts to understand, predict, and control events and outcomes. In converting customers, churches increasingly trusted in a mastery of methods and in the laws of the market, over the mystery of God. They relied on carefully calculated procedures and systems that promised to guarantee predictable and repeatable

growth. In measuring the success of methods, they relied not upon the Bible or tradition, but upon numerical results. For guidance in implementing the methods, church leaders looked not to theologians but to the wisdom of marketplace experts. They also looked to public opinion.

The American free market is a democratic domain where corporations and institutions live and die by public opinion. If individuals are not interested in a product or service, then it ceases to exist. The individual is therefore the center of the market, the pivot point on which production and consumption twist and turn through time. In the twentieth century, the shift in business from a production orientation to a consumption orientation elevated this authority of the individual. As Christian churches made the same transition, authority in religious doctrine and ritual increasingly moved from clerics to consumers. Instead of looking to the Bible, tradition, and one another for guidance in shaping their churches and messages, Christian leaders looked out to the needs and wants of individuals in the marketplace.

The adoption of promotional methods also nurtured the pluralization of American Christian churches, the third theme of this dissertation. Sociologist Peter Berger defines pluralism as “a situation in which diverse human groups (ethnic, religious, or however differentiated) live together under conditions of civic peace and in social interaction with each other.”<sup>8</sup> In a revision of his secularization theory, he argues that modernization in religion is not a process of secularization, but of pluralization. Throughout the century, church promotion provided a platform of modernization that encouraged pluralization in

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<sup>8</sup> Peter Berger and Anton Zijderveld, *In Praise of Doubt: How to Have Convictions Without Becoming a Fanatic* (New York: Harper One, 2010), 7.

American Christianity. Churches, denominations, and religions, regardless of their doctrinal and ritual differences, worked together in retailing religion.

Cooperation through promotion grew out of a confidence among church leaders that promotional methods do not alter products. Church promotion advocates argued that the practices of business promotionism were neutral tools. One could, as Billy Graham said, sell religion like soap, because methods were like capsules that transferred messages without altering them. This confidence in neutral exchangeability also meant that different religions could use the same methods of promotion. One could sell Methodism the same as one sold Presbyterianism or even Buddhism. And indeed, such diverse religious retailers often cooperated to develop and practice church promotion.

Churches worked together in promotion both to improve and to implement their methods. In improving their promotion, local churches often hosted conferences and workshops with experts in advertising, journalism, and marketing. Pastors from a variety of religious traditions attended to refine their promotion practices. Organizations evolved to coordinate the professionalization of the church promotion industry. By the end of the twentieth century, such organizations and conferences had expanded across the nation and included representatives from a variety of Christian denominations as well as other religions. Churches also cooperated directly in promotion, combining their resources to overcome the often cost-prohibitive hurdles of advertising. Over time, these efforts expanded to become national campaigns. Although participating churches disagreed over the messages and products that they promoted, they agreed on methods.

Although churches resolved the tensions among each other about the need for religious promotion, they were unable to resolve the tensions within the art and science of religious promotionalism itself. The final theme of this dissertation is that in explicitly embodying both the sacred and the secular through church promotion, American Christianity nurtured a persistent tension or set of contradictions that promotion advocates labored to reconcile through complex defenses, and that opponents sought to eradicate with varying levels of criticism.

In embracing the methods of the marketplace, American Christian churches walked a fine line between the sacred and the secular. The marriage of retail and religion was, in some ways, a match made in heaven. Both endeavors persuade individuals to accept a belief system regarding immaterial (religious) or material (secular) deliverance.<sup>9</sup> Thus, many advertising pioneers were sons of preachers, and executives referred to their public relations professionals as “missionaries” who labored to convert “the public.”<sup>10</sup> Yet despite this affinity, even the most fervent church promotion advocates argued that religion was different from retailing. Religion claims to be sacred, to be set apart, to be rooted in the transcendent and therefore not subject to the valuations and fluctuations of culture or of the market. Its religious claim depends on its differentiation from the world. The project of church promotion violated this boundary of distinction; it explicitly introduced the principles and practices of the world into religion. Church promotion advocates, therefore, had to wrestle with the tension of standing in the stream of the

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<sup>9</sup> Mara Einstein, *Brands of Faith: Marketing Religion in a Commercial Age* (London: Routledge, 2008), 78.

<sup>10</sup> Richard S. Tedlow *Keeping the Corporate Image: Public Relations and Business, 1900-1950* (Greenwich, CT: JAI Press, 1979), 10.



marketplace while convincing others, as well as themselves, that the current did not alter their course.

Proponents of business promotionalism in churches carefully constructed rhetorical anchors to tether their methods to the divine shoreline. They defended the inclusion of market methods in religion by pointing to examples of early business promotionalism in the Bible and church history. They argued that Jesus was the first marketer, that the disciples were advertising experts, and that Martin Luther knew the value of public relations. These advocates also created a rhetorical wall of separation between the church and the market by denouncing the evils of business methods and contrasting them to the purified forms of promotionalism employed by churches. This delicate dance of condemning the source and style of the very methods that one also endorsed often left church promotion experts in a tangled web of contradictions. For some religious leaders, such inconsistencies and defenses were unacceptable. As Jesus drove the retailers out of the temple with a whip, so too did some religious leaders hope to drive retailing from the churches.<sup>11</sup> However, opposition remained elementary and scattered until the 1990s, when the sophistication of church marketing stirred an unprecedented tidal wave of criticism. As the twentieth century closed, the debate over church promotion was just beginning in earnest.

### *Subjects and Boundaries in Examining Religious Retailing*

This study traces the principal sources of American Christian church promotion throughout the twentieth century. It is broad in scope yet limited to figures and

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<sup>11</sup> Matthew 21:12; Mark 11:15; John 2:15.

institutions that led the movement. Both conservative and liberal Protestant churches are the principal subjects because they were the pioneers in church promotion. Similar scholarship typically has focused on only one side of the Protestant aisle, liberal or conservative. Carl Abram's *Selling the Old-Time Religion* examines conservative evangelicals, while Susan Curtis's *A Consuming Faith*, and Richard Hudnut-Beumler's *The Almighty's Dollar* study mainline churches.<sup>12</sup> This dissertation bridges the divide by including both. It also considers Roman Catholic institutions in the places where they stepped into the promotional arena. And whereas other scholarship typically confines its attention to church advertising, this work considers all leading forms of promotionalism: advertising, public relations, personal sales, publicity, and marketing.

Most scholarly work on the relationship between religion and the consumer society in America studies consumers. Sociologists Robert Ellwood's *The Fifties Spiritual Marketplace* and *The Sixties Spiritual Awakening*, Robert Wuthnow's *After Heaven*, and Wade Clark Roof's *Spiritual Marketplace*, as well as theologian Vincent Miller's *Consuming Religion*, all examine how the increasing privatization, rationalization, and relativization of modernity (and post-modernity) altered religious desires among adherents and how they used and interpreted religion.<sup>13</sup> While these

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<sup>12</sup> James David Hudnut-Beumler, *In Pursuit of the Almighty's Dollar: A History of Money and American Protestantism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007).

<sup>13</sup> Wade Clark Roof, *Spiritual Marketplace: Baby Boomers and the Remaking of American Religion* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999); Robert Wuthnow, *After Heaven: Spirituality in America Since the 1950s* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998); Robert S. Ellwood, *The Sixties Spiritual Awakening: American Religion Moving from Modern to Postmodern* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1994); Robert S. Ellwood, *The Fifties Spiritual Marketplace: American Religion in a Decade of Conflict* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1997); Vincent Jude Miller, *Consuming Religion: Christian Faith and Practice in a Consumer Culture* (New York: Continuum, 2004).

authors consider how religion changed in its consumption, this dissertation focuses on how religion changed in its production.

There are some scholarly examinations of how religious producers adopted the methods of the marketplace and adapted religious products to suit consumers, yet very few of them have studied local churches. The more popular subject has been the parachurch. Parachurch institutions are independent from churches, established to direct and execute particular religious missions. Without a regular congregation at its core, or church oversight of their operations, the parachurch overtly functions much like a business, so its adoption of business practices is hardly controversial or complex. Yet, as Stephen Ellingson notes in *The Megachurch and the Mainline*, “It is vital to make congregations the focal point because they are the primary organizations that teach, practice, and remake religious traditions.”<sup>14</sup>

Unlike other religious institutions, local churches have been the foundation of Christianity since the first disciples of Jesus gathered. A church is basically a local gathering of Christians who subscribe to similar doctrine and who submit to the leadership of local clerics. In Protestantism, it is the denominations, but more particularly, the actual local churches, that serve as the headwaters out of which the vital elements of doctrine and practice flow. In order to trace the growth and impact of the modern marketplace on American Christianity, one must study the transformations of the local producers, the churches.

Perhaps a conspicuous absence in this work is the electric church, or commercial religious programs. While the electric church indubitably altered the production and

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<sup>14</sup> Stephen Ellingson, *The Megachurch and the Mainline: Remaking Religious Tradition in the Twenty-First Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 8.

consumption of American religion, it did not play a significant role in local church promotion. Certainly commercial programming of church services over radio and television increased public awareness of a church's presence and influenced public opinion of it. However, such broadcasts were typically not undertaken as a promotional strategy. Experts throughout the twentieth century offered little guidance in such endeavors. More than that, the scholarship on the electric church is immense, so significant attention to it here would be redundant.

In order to explore and explain long-term structures and shifts in religious promotionalism, this study, unlike others, casts a wide chronological net. Most other works on Christian churches and the marketplace do not proceed beyond 1930, including Susan Curtis's *A Consuming Faith*, Ben Primer's *American Protestantism and Business Methods*, Carl Abram's *Selling the Old Time Religion*, Rolf Lunden's *Business and Religion in the American 1920s*, and Gary Smith's "Evangelicals Confront Corporate Capitalism."<sup>15</sup> While there have been some descriptive pieces written on the megachurch phenomenon in the late twentieth century – such as Ralph Ellingson's *The Megachurch and the Mainline*, James Twitchell's *Branded Nation*, G.A. Pritchard's *Willow Creek Seeker Services*, and Stewart Hoover's "The Cross at Willow Creek" – they are still restricted to brief time periods.<sup>16</sup> This dissertation, in contrast, paints the broader

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<sup>15</sup> Gary Scott Smith, "Evangelicals Confront Corporate Capitalism: Advertising Consumerism, Stewardship, and Spirituality, 1880-1930," in *More Money, More Ministry: Money and Evangelicals in Recent North American History* (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans Pub. Co, 2000), 39-80; Rolf Lunden, *Business and Religion in the American 1920s* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1988).

<sup>16</sup> James B. Twitchell, *Branded Nation: The Marketing of Megachurch, College Inc., and Museumworld* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2004); G. A Pritchard, *Willow Creek Seeker Services: Evaluating a New Way of Doing Church* (Grand Rapids, Mich: Baker Books, 1996); Stewart M. Hoover, "The Cross at Willow Creek: Seeker Religion and the Contemporary Marketplace," in *Religion and Popular Culture in America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).

landscape of church promotion in America, providing a necessary context for other specific studies.

### *A Brief Outline of the Chapters*

Chapter 1 traces the establishment, escalation, and stalemate of the church promotion industry in both advertising and public relations between 1900 and 1939. Most scholarly work on religious retailing has focused on the development of church advertising from 1900 to 1929; therefore, the chapter stands, in large part, on the shoulders of their work. Yet it adds the creation and expansion of religious public relations as well as an overview of a lethargic religious retail industry in the 1930s.

After a decade of slow progress in church promotion, several professionals arose in the 1940s to set the trajectory of the industry for the next several decades. Chapter 2 explores the lives and influence of seven of these key promotional experts who wrote guidebooks, spoke at conferences, and created academic courses for the next generation of religious retailers. The majority of them were journalists by trade, and they established a new emphasis within church promotion on publicity and public relations.

In the 1950s, the church promotion industry enjoyed an explosion of growth along with the rapid expansion of public participation in American Christian institutions. Chapters 3 and 4 explore this broad period of religious prosperity from 1945 to 1965. Chapter 3 focuses on the development of the religious public relations industry and the challenges its professionals faced. The primary subject is the Religious Public Relations Council, which rallied its members to answer the public outcry for more religious news and develop sophisticated methods of promotion. As it grew, the RPRC also labored to

defend the inclusion of corporate public relations methods in religion and to disassociate the sources of those methods from religion.

Within church promotion a consumer orientation also grew, which is the subject of chapter 4. It examines how the adoption of personal sales methods encouraged reliance among churches on surveys of public opinion, which gradually led to the centrality of customer needs in determining church doctrines and rituals. This shift was evident in the church construction boom of the era, which created Christian institutions that offered the latest in technology, comfort, and convenience to attract new customers. Meanwhile, a missionary in India, Donald McGavran, developed his own theories about how to grow a church. Though he did not adopt his methods directly from the market, his emphasis on a customer orientation would encourage the development of church marketing in the decades to come.

Chapter 5, unlike the others, focuses entirely on the life and influence of a single individual, Robert Schuller. Between 1955 and 1975, Schuller laid the foundation for a church marketing industry through his innovative embrace of marketing's four Ps: price, place, product, and promotion. Though he did not explicitly use the language of marketing, his practices captured their essence and his dissemination of them spawned a church marketing industry. However, before considering that industry, chapter 6 steps back to explore the many changes that the 1960s and 1970s brought in other sectors of church promotion, particularly public relations and advertising. In both fields, cooperation grew among mainline Protestant denominations, Roman Catholics, and Judaism. As these different faiths united around promotion, they shifted their messages

from overtly religious themes to social justice initiatives. They also explored new forms of national advertising through radio and television.

While mainline Protestants employed public relations and advertising methods in an effort to slow their membership declines, evangelical Protestants looked to marketing as a means to grow their churches. Chapter 7 examines the development of a church marketing industry, led by both professors and pastors. As marketing expanded in the 1980s into nonprofit applications, scholars first stepped into the field of church promotion. However, their influence remained negligible as churches looked to pastors for wisdom in marketing, principally Robert Schuller. Two of his disciples, Bill Hybels and Rick Warren, built enormous evangelical churches that would spread church marketing principles and practices across the nation. Chapter 8 examines how their efforts, combined with those of a rising tide of experts, particularly George Barna, generated a sophisticated industry of church marketing that dominated the field of church promotion in the 1990s. It also considers the rise of a sophisticated movement of opposition to church promotion, unlike anything seen before in the field.

#### *Options for Further Study*

This dissertation does not give considerable attention to several interpretive categories, in part because of the broad scope of the work, in part because these categories did not appear to be as significant as many others. However, gender, regionalism, race, and class may prove to be useful perspectives in future studies of business promotionalism in churches.

As James Gilbert traces in his work, *Men in the Middle*, there is a “gender gap” in religion, one that religious institutions have sought to overcome through their promotionalism.<sup>17</sup> Studies focused, as is Gilbert’s, on the content of promotional material can illuminate the role gender played in shaping religious retailing. However, in this broader, institutional study of the leading producers in church promotion, this category did not appear as a significant issue or construct. The same is true regarding the role of region in church promotion. Though there were clear geographic shifts – such as that from the traditionalism of Norman Vincent Peale in New York to the innovation of Robert Schuller in California – regional differentiation did not play a significant role in the shape of church promotion. While leaders in church marketing were typically Sunbelt churches, a principal pioneer, Bill Hybels, was based in Chicago. And although church public relations began in the northeast, at mainline denominational headquarters, it quickly spread to the south and west. Meanwhile, the religious producers behind the innovations and applications of church advertising and marketing developed and endorsed national trends. Nor were the trade journals, guidebooks, and associations relegated to regional contexts. For these and other reasons, this study concentrates on national developments.

Race and class may also prove to be useful categories for future examination of church promotion. This study focuses on white, affluent males and their churches because they were the leading professional pioneers and experts in church promotion throughout the century. This is not to suggest that other churches, particularly black and Hispanic institutions, did not also adopt business promotionalism or create unique

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<sup>17</sup> James Gilbert, *Men in the Middle: Searching for Masculinity in the 1950s* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 107.



strategies. Black churches employed marketing practices in the latter part of the century to build megachurches. Many other churches also used marketing methods to establish Hispanic congregations or multi-ethnic services. Specific studies of such churches, including local churches in the Sunbelt and in inner city contexts, could provide fascinating insight into the role that race played in shaping church promotion. Similar examinations of class in church promotion might yield information helpful in understanding how and why churches attract particular demographic groups. This kind of work might examine the continuity between the middle-class appeal of churches in the 1950s and the targeting of the baby boom generation in the 1980s. Segmentation marketing could also provide fertile soil for considering the ways that churches have discriminated in their retailing based on race, class, and other categories.

Perhaps my great grandmother would have been proud to see me leading a rock band in a church worship service. She might have joined others in defending the practice of adopting secular styles for sacred services by asking the common question, “Why should the devil have all the good music?” She might have asked the same question in the 1930s to defend her own church, “Why should the devil have all the good drive-ins?” This is a story about those questions, about churches wrestling with demons, working to seize and sacralize the devil’s methods to attract a crowd for the divine. It is a study of a precarious pageant in the consumer century, as American Christian churches labored to attract customers by performing in the modern marketplace without being consumed by it.

## Chapter 1

### Ads & PR: Retailing Religion in the New Consumer Society (1900-1939)

Nineteen twenty-nine stands out in American memory as the year that the stock market crashed and the Great Depression began. It was the end of an era of massive economic expansion and prosperity in the United States. Yet in one industry, it was the beginning of a new era of professionalization and expansion. One month after Black Friday, the first national organization wholly devoted to church promotion, the Religious Publicity Council (RPC), held its inaugural meeting. The founding members of the RPC had met a few months earlier for a conference on religious promotion. Presenters described the latest developments in promotional media that churches were using – outdoor posters, “car cards,” newspaper ads and stories, and secular magazine stories.<sup>1</sup> They also discussed how to take advantage of motion pictures and radio to draw attention to local churches. There was general excitement among the group. Religious publicity, having developed momentum as a respectable and necessary practice in the last three decades, was becoming professional. Not only were there a plethora of instructional guides and several experts in the field, but denominations were recognizing the importance of modern promotion in religion. In her conference address, Rachel McDowell, the religious editor for the *New York Times*, boasted that whereas no religious

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<sup>1</sup> March 1929 Conference Program, March 19-20, 1929, folder “1929 Conference,” box 4, Records: 1952-1988 (88-0630), RPRCC.

denomination employed a publicity secretary in 1909, the scene had changed completely in the twenty years since. Here were twenty-four full-time religious promotional experts gathered to discuss the industry, she said, surveying the room.<sup>2</sup> In retrospect, McDowell was right; the 1929 meeting marked a new vibrancy in church promotion, one that would continue throughout the remainder of the century.

From 1900 to 1939, the promotional industry established itself in not only the American economy, but also in the broader American culture. Significant changes in the structures of industry and commerce catalyzed the emergence of experts, organizations, and methods in advertising and public relations. These specialists helped engender a new consumer ethos in the country, one through which people sought meaning and therapy in the acquisition of goods and services. American Protestant Christianity readily adopted these strategies and values as a means of spreading their message, competing with other institutions for members and allegiance, and in the process bringing about key changes in American society.

In adopting the promotional methods of the marketplace, Protestant churches embarked on a century-long journey of increased cooperation and modernization, but also internal tension and division. The adoption of modern business promotionalism in Protestant churches exacerbated a tension embedded in American Christianity since 1630 when John Winthrop called his fellow Puritan colonists to live in the world but not of it, to be a “Citty [sic] upon a Hill, the eies [sic] of all people are upon us.”<sup>3</sup> Churches claimed an otherworldly, or divine, directive in their principles and practices, yet they

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<sup>2</sup> “Roster of Attendees,” March 20, 1929 (Exhibit B), folder “History National Religious Publicity Council 1929-1934,” box 4, Records: 1952-1988 (88-0630), RPRCC.

<sup>3</sup> John Winthrop, “A Modell of Christian Charity,” in *American Sermons: The Pilgrims to Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York: Literary Classics of the United States, 1999), 42.

labored to be a witness to the world around them. In the twentieth century, in an effort to attract new adherents, to grow their institutions, Christian churches explicitly employed the methods of the world to sell the messages of the other world. This apparently incompatible pairing would prove a principal tension throughout the century in American Christianity.

Ironically, as liberal and conservative Protestants divided in the early twentieth century, one of the few points of harmony between them was the use of business promotionalism. Even while they disagreed about the role of, say, modern hermeneutics in determining doctrine and practice, they agreed on the role of modern promotional methods in selling their institutions. Church leaders across the scriptural spectrum closely followed the latest trends in business promotion, beginning with an emphasis in advertising and then moving to a focus on public relations. In so doing, these churches – largely unwittingly – began to modernize. They substituted a faith in rational methods and quantifiable metrics of success for a faith in the mystery of God. They also increasingly looked to promotional experts instead of theological experts for guidance in their doctrine and practices. This shift would exacerbate the tension in church promotion, although not much initially. For the first four decades there was little opposition as American Protestant churches readily adopted the advertising and public relations methods of the new consumer society.

### Division in Theology – Unity in Methodology

Between 1900 and 1939, modernization animated two significant, simultaneous transitions in American Protestantism: division and commercialization. Ironically, as

modernization split American Protestantism into two oppositional camps over theological disagreements, it joined them in an embrace of commercial values and practices. The appeal of modern business methods was so seductive that although Protestants could not agree on fundamental tenets of their faith, they readily agreed on how to sell it. In fact, cooperation gained momentum throughout the twentieth century, as differing religions and sects increasingly found common ground in promotional methods and collaborated to develop ways to promote and grow their churches. However, in the first half of the century, there was no direct cooperation across the theological divide; the divide was too fresh and too wide.

A fissure opened because liberal Protestants accepted modern interpretations of Christianity, while conservative Protestants rejected them. Liberal Protestants embraced new scientific theories, such as evolution and higher criticism, which questioned the accuracy and authority of the Bible. They sought to interpret Christianity with modern hermeneutics, thereby adapting Christian sources of authority, doctrine, and practice to modern values and natural law. Many also emphasized the social dimensions, or public manifestations, of Protestantism; they strived to bring the Kingdom of God to earth by remaking society. Conservative Protestants, on the other hand, sought to preserve the historic forms of Christianity and maintain classical orthodoxy. They held firmly to the doctrines of the inerrancy of the Bible, the divinity of Jesus Christ, and the virgin birth. Unlike liberal Protestants, who focused on public exercises of faith, conservative Protestants stressed private faith, personal conversion, faith in Jesus Christ for salvation, and internal reformation of the individual. Yet while the two sides held fundamentally

opposed views on Christianity, they agreed on how to promote it. In their efforts to combat one another, to improve society, and to recruit followers, both sides eagerly embraced the business and consumer ethos of the early twentieth century as a means to spread their faith and grow their churches.

The conservative response to modernism in American Protestantism had been building since the late nineteenth century, but it grew significantly between 1910 and 1915 in the fundamentalist movement, in large part thanks to the press and modern business. Over a five-year period, an oil millionaire's idea to formalize and disseminate the basic tenets of traditional Protestantism actuated the production of twelve volumes entitled *The Fundamentals*. Though they did not have a large impact in the marketplace of ideas, they became the foundation for unity in the fundamentalist movement.<sup>4</sup>

Historian Douglas Carl Abrams provides the most comprehensive and insightful examination of how these fundamentalists and other conservative Protestants fervently embraced the values and methods of the consumer culture in the early twentieth century. He notes that some of the most significant leaders in conservative circles within American Protestantism had advertised prior to the twentieth century. Popular evangelists such as Dwight L. Moody, J. Frank Norris and M.B. Williams were aggressively advertising in newspapers and on billboards. Moody advertised in the "amusement" section of the papers, and Norris advertised his sermons in the local newspaper. Williams, presaging the strategy of Robert Schuller, built a large tabernacle that would attract attention through its publicity as a spectacle. Moody held his revivals

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<sup>4</sup> George Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture: The Shaping of Twentieth Century Evangelicalism, 1870-1925* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), 118-119.

in secular buildings such as the Pennsylvania Railroad Freight Depot.<sup>5</sup> He also advertised it in newspapers and on billboards, posters, and signs.<sup>6</sup>

The proliferation of modern business promotionalism among conservative Protestant churches was a striking sign of the infiltration and acceptance of modern advertising in American Protestantism. In one sense, the ready adoption of advertising in fundamentalist circles made sense. These Protestants focused principally on making converts, saving souls. They found advertising an attractive mechanism, as evangelism was very similar to sales. Yet in another sense, such methods were incongruous with conservative denunciations of the modern world. Conservative Protestants rejected rational explanations for supernatural events such as the virgin birth. They also opposed modern scientific theories like evolutionary biology and textual criticism of the Bible. Nevertheless, throughout the nineteenth century, conservative Protestants often led the way in adopting and innovating modern methods to spread their evangelical message.

In the early twentieth century, however, liberal Protestants became the leaders at church promotionalism. The primary conduit for the commercialization of American Protestantism in the first decades of the twentieth century was a liberal form, the Social Gospel movement. The Social Gospelers were Progressives driven by Protestant belief and conviction. As historian Ben Primer explains, “Progressives believed that they had discovered the means to achieve order and social harmony in an age of chaos.”<sup>7</sup> Many Progressives valued rational planning, bureaucratization, and promotion as primary

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<sup>5</sup> Anne C. Loveland and Otis B. Wheeler, *From Meetinghouse to Megachurch* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2003), 83. The freight depot was donated to Moody by John Wanamaker.

<sup>6</sup> Douglas Carl Abrams, *Selling the Old-Time Religion: American Fundamentalists and Mass Culture, 1920-1940* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2001), 27-8.

<sup>7</sup> Ben Primer, *Protestants and American Business Methods* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1979), 66.

instruments in effecting social change. They believed that the new approaches to rational planning and organization in business, if applied properly, could achieve efficiency throughout society. They used new promotional methods to publicize and broadcast social injustices and their own proposed solutions. Social Gospelers applied these methods to reform society as agents of God, in an effort to usher in a heavenly kingdom on earth. Noting how devoted they were to the cause, historian R. Laurence Moore writes: “The alacrity with which Social Gospelers embraced the slogans and tools of advertising, financial growth, and efficient scientific management assumed almost apocalyptic significance.”<sup>8</sup> The Social Gospelers utilized the tools of the market to bring the fruits of heaven. Such solutions made sense to religious leaders in an age of business.

In the early twentieth century, a commercial and industrial society interpreted, framed and expressed American Christianity in the idioms and values of business. For many, Jesus made sense not so much as a pre-modern Jew in Palestine, but as a sage of modern business expertise and efficiency. The “most celebrated adman” of the age, Bruce Barton, presented Jesus as the first business expert, and people passionately embraced this vision, making Barton’s book, *The Man Nobody Knows* a bestseller in 1925.<sup>9</sup> In *A Modern Church Program. A Study in Efficiency*, Albert McGarrah added to this conceptualization of Jesus, calling him the “first efficiency expert.”<sup>10</sup> According to the *Moody Bible Institute Monthly*, the Bible was not so much a collection of spiritual

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<sup>8</sup> R. Laurence Moore, *Selling God: American Religion in the Marketplace of Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 211.

<sup>9</sup> *The Man Nobody Knows* sold 250,000 copies in just eighteen months. Stephen R. Fox, *The Mirror Makers: A History of American Advertising and its Creators* (New York: Morrow, 1984), 101,108.

<sup>10</sup> Albert F. McGarrah, *A Modern Church Program: A Study of Efficiency* (New York: Fleming H. Revell, 1915), 100.



wisdom from an ancient people, but a how-to book of business success.<sup>11</sup> In this spirit, American Protestantism turned to modern business methods as a means to succeed in the increasingly competitive marketplace.

Both conservative and liberal Protestant leaders framed a church as a corporation, subject to the laws of the marketplace and responding with modern solutions. The man who popularized the label “fundamentalist” noted that one pastor’s church was “bustling with life like a great department store.”<sup>12</sup> Other conservative Protestants also referred to churches as department stores, to converting souls as “big business,” and to pastors as corporate leaders.<sup>13</sup> One of the most significant pioneers in modern advertising, John Wanamaker, was an elder in a Presbyterian church. He created a new means of advertising, using full-page newspaper ads, for his department store in Philadelphia and in a reversal, thought of his stores as cathedrals.<sup>14</sup>

The Social Gospel movement also thought of churches as corporations and adopted modern efficiency and bureaucratic methods. By 1900, the “Progressive fascination with organization, efficiency, and system” provided readily applicable solutions for increasing church influence.<sup>15</sup> One notable promoter of such methods in the Social Gospel movement was Shailer Mathews, who wrote *Scientific Management in the*

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<sup>11</sup> Advertisement, *Moody Bible Institute Monthly* (November 1921), 664, quoted in Abrams, 13.

<sup>12</sup> William B. Riley, “Sunday Night at the Sanctuary or the Picture Show?” *Baptist World* (February 15, 1917, reel 2, quoted in Abrams, 12.

<sup>13</sup> Abrams, 13.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>15</sup> Primer, 57.

*Churches* in 1912.<sup>16</sup> Mathews fervently believed that Frederick Winslow Taylor's theory of scientific management, which had just been published, could introduce a division of labor for the divine and make churches more efficient and thereby more effective in bettering society. "The Christian spirit must be institutionalized if it is to prevail in an age of institutions," Matthews argued.<sup>17</sup> Many agreed, and labored to build larger Christian institutions.

In his *Protestants and American Business Methods*, Ben Primer traces the rapid growth of structural bureaucratization in American Protestantism between 1876 and 1929. He argues that the rapid growth of religion between 1890 and 1920 added a new complexity to American religion that demanded new solutions.<sup>18</sup> The expansion of churches and their denominational agencies required new methods for managing finances, staffs and facilities.<sup>19</sup>

The corporate framing of churches led to the establishment of at least two journals in the 1920s. The first was *Church Management: A Journal of Parish Administration*, founded in October, 1924. The editor in chief, William H. Leach, provided the monthly journal, which was a one-stop shop for all church leaders to learn the latest methods and ideas on everything necessary to be a modern minister. It advertised all things church related from choir robes to pews. It provided sermons and prayers, instructed in managing and raising finances, and even offered a social network for pastors to trade their churches in the summer months. The business ethos of the 1920s saturated it with

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<sup>16</sup> Shailer Mathews, *Scientific Management in the Churches*. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1912).

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, quoted in Primer, 72.

<sup>18</sup> Primer, 44.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 52.

an emphasis on business methods of modern management and promotion. A consumer ethos drove the journal as it fed churches' passion to use the new and improved devices and furniture to attract the modern consumer. A successful church was a modern church, equipped with the latest and greatest, according to the editors of *Church Management*. A successful church also was a church that utilized modern promotion strategies. The Southern Baptist denomination provided a similar resource in its journal, *Church Administration*, produced by the new Department of Church Administration, formed in 1927 by future church promotion expert Gaines Dobbins.<sup>20</sup>

### A New Era of Advertising in Business & Religion

While, American Protestantism's embrace of organization and efficiency was substantial, this paled in comparison with its adoption of promotional methods, particularly advertising. According to Laurence Moore, "The subject of church advertising and publicity filled a disproportionate amount of the church manuals that emphasized efficiency and business-like management."<sup>21</sup> Historian Rolf Lunden agrees, stating that the most "significant business method adopted by the church in its struggle for survival was advertising."<sup>22</sup> Whether conservative or liberal, Protestants eagerly embraced the latest methods of marketplace advertising to retail religion.

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<sup>20</sup> Walter B. Shurden, *Sunday School Board: Ninety Years of Service* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1981), 49.

<sup>21</sup> R. Laurence Moore, *Selling God: American Religion in the Marketplace of Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 213.

<sup>22</sup> Rolf Lunden, *Business and Religion in the American 1920s* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1988), 76.

In the 1925 August issue of *Church Management*, B.F. Martin wrote a column summarizing his recent address to a number of ministers in Des Moines, Iowa. Looking around at the burgeoning use of advertising in churches, he predicted that, “Church advertising will be a science some day.” He noted that churches were advertising in small ways, using bulletin boards, steeples, and letters, but he called for them to do more and be more aggressive. Specifically, he suggested they use more newspaper advertising and cooperate more with one another to coordinate city-wide advertising campaigns.<sup>23</sup> Between 1900 and 1939, Martin’s prophecy would come true. Built on the foundations of a rapidly expanding advertising industry in the marketplace, church promotion grew as an integral component in both conservative and liberal Protestantism and focused on advertising methods.

As religious leaders increasingly looked to the market for guidance, they welcomed a new kind of professional into their ranks: the church promotion experts. These experts produced church advertising guides and participated in national advertising organizations. They encouraged the adoption of modern advertising methods, the development of popular marketplace forms, and cooperation among churches in their promotion. Although their methods were much less complex than those of their counterparts in bigger industries, church promotionalists adopted the same kinds of basic market innovations – such as “Reason Why” advertising and methods of direct mail, outdoor signs, and entertainment forms – to sell Protestantism in the first part of the twentieth century.

### *Corporate Advertising Grows & Sells Redemption*

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<sup>23</sup> B.F. Martin, “Co-operative Advertising,” *Church Management* 1 (August 1925): 523.

In the last decades of the nineteenth century, advertising began to evolve. Previously, advertising presented basic product information to potential consumers. It did not generate interest in a product as much as notify customers of its availability. Advertising agencies worked to sell ad space in newspapers and magazines, but not to create ads. However, as more products crowded the shelves and advertisements competed for space, producers sought new ways to catch the customer's attention. They did so, cultural historian T.J. Jackson Lears explains, by introducing "illustrations, brand names, trademarks, slogans, anything that might attract the attention of a busy, restless, and easily bored consumer."<sup>24</sup> National advertising expanded rapidly, as branded products emerged. With it grew the industry of advertising. Demand for advertising experts expanded, and the industry began to develop through professionalization and the creation of new methods.

Advertising professionals were writing instructional guides and offering their services to well-paying clients early in the new century. They formed professional organizations to codify the industry and crown the experts. In 1904, advertisers established the first national organization to promote the industry: the Associated Advertising Clubs of the World. They met together in national conferences to discuss the latest methods. They also cooperated in attempts to improve the public image of advertising. As historian Stephen Fox explains, advertising retained "an odor of snake oil." In literature and drama, the public displayed a continuous mistrust of the advertising

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<sup>24</sup> T.J. Jackson Lears, "From Salvation to Self-Realization: Advertising and the Therapeutic Roots of the Consumer Culture, 1880-1930," in *The Culture of Consumption: Critical Essays in American History, 1880-1980*, ed. Richard Wightman Fox and T.J. Jackson Lears, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1983), 18.

agency.<sup>25</sup> In response, the Associated Advertising Clubs of the World made “Truth in Advertising” its official slogan in 1911. Regardless of image, the profession grew, so that by 1917 independent advertising agencies produced 95 percent of national advertising.<sup>26</sup> The same year, the Associated Advertising Clubs of the World dissolved and reformed as the American Association of Advertising Agencies.<sup>27</sup>

In the early twentieth century, advertisers began appealing to customers’ felt needs and desires instead of simply trying to attract customers’ attention. The pioneers in this advertising strategy were Albert Lasker and Claude Hopkins, who by 1904 had established “Reason Why advertising.” As Lears explains, “Ironically, it was not reasonable at all: Hopkins refused to appeal to a buyer’s reason by listing a product’s qualities; on the contrary he addressed nonrational yearnings by suggesting the ways his client’s product would transform the buyer’s life.”<sup>28</sup> As advertising firms expanded, they used this new therapeutic method of promotion. Many employed psychological consultants to explore ways of arousing human desire through advertising. Announcements of products and their qualities were replaced by sophisticated ads that associated the product with a promise to improve the consumer’s well-being. They were no longer selling the product but rather, as Roland Marchand writes, they were selling

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<sup>25</sup> Stephen R. Fox, *The Mirror Makers: A History of American Advertising and its Creators* (New York: Morrow, 1984), 67.

<sup>26</sup> Daniel Pope, *The Making of Modern Advertising* (New York: Basic Books, 1983), 144.

<sup>27</sup> Fox, 68-9.

<sup>28</sup> Lears, 49.

“leisure, enjoyment, beauty, good taste, prestige, and popularity.”<sup>29</sup> The right purchase could end one’s fears and satisfy one’s deepest desires.

Twentieth century advertising promised salvation through consumption. According to Lears, “By the 1920s the symbolic universe of national advertising markedly resembled the therapeutic world described by sociologist and cultural critic, Philip Rieff, a world in which all overarching structures of meaning had collapsed, and there was ‘nothing at stake beyond a manipulative sense of wellbeing.’”<sup>30</sup> This universe was also expanding, as advertising grew exponentially after World War I and into the 1920s. Between 1918 and 1920 alone, the value of advertising in America doubled from \$1.5 billion to \$3 billion.<sup>31</sup> Perhaps no one better grasped this new view of consumption and the expanding role of advertising than Calvin Coolidge, who occupied the White House during much of the 1920s. In a 1926 address to the American Association of Advertising Agencies, the president framed the responsibility and work of these “advertising ministers” as spiritual and “part of the greater work of regeneration and redemption of mankind.”<sup>32</sup> He further contended that advertising could save humanity.

For their part, church leaders contended that advertising could save humanity by saving religion. In the 1920s, the promotion industry was becoming the salvation of religion – by selling the product that claimed to save. While American Protestants called

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<sup>29</sup> Roland Marchand, *Advertising the American Dream: Making Way for Modernity, 1920-1940* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 24.

<sup>30</sup> Lears, 55.

<sup>31</sup> Fox, 77.

<sup>32</sup> Transcript of Coolidge Speech, “Address...before the American Association of Advertising Agencies, Washington, D.C., October 27, 1926,” from Hand Copies: Speeches of President Calvin Coolidge, container 3, vol. 5, Everett Sanders Papers, American Memory, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. [http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/D?cool:4:/temp/~ammem\\_WPXA](http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/D?cool:4:/temp/~ammem_WPXA) (accessed January 24, 2011).

the American people to place their faith in Jesus, they increasingly placed their own faith increasingly in advertising. Yet they had to learn how to advertise effectively, so they turned to a rising tide of experts to carry them into a sea of church growth.

### *Charles Stelzle Sells Sacred Institutions*

As churches adopted the methods of business promotionalism, particularly advertising in the early twentieth century, they looked to experts for guidance. Throughout the century, experts in religious promotion would arise across American Christianity. The first pioneers in the field emerged in the first decade of the century, and were principally on the liberal side of the Protestant divide. Chief among them was Social Gospeler Charles Stelzle. Working in various urban missions and studying at the Moody Bible Institute in Chicago, Illinois, Stelzle was ordained as a minister in the Presbyterian Church in 1900.<sup>33</sup> He quickly became known for his tireless dedication and work in redressing the plight of the working class. For Stelzle, the work of the church was the work of the labor movement. He argued that both church and labor “believe in the salvation of society” and seek “the complete emancipation of humanity.”<sup>34</sup> His purpose was to increase the work of the local church to help the worker.

Ironically, Stelzle found that the best model for labor reform was the corporate form so responsible for the plight of the working class. Stelzle believed that if he could make the church more efficient, like a business, then it could achieve unimaginable success. He worked to improve the operations and functions of churches by making them

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<sup>33</sup> Susan Curtis, *A Consuming Faith: The Social Gospel and Modern American Culture* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2001), 257.

<sup>34</sup> “Sees Labor Linked Closely to Church,” *The New York Times*, September 5, 1927.



more business-like. In 1913, the Efficiency Society established a Church Efficiency Committee, on which Stelzle served, along with the Secretary General of the Federal Council of Churches, which was the primary cooperative agency for Social Gospel focused churches.<sup>35</sup> More so, however, Stelzle spent his energy on one particular area of business success, advertising. Church advertising became the central focus of his career, and he became the central pioneer and leader in the field.

Stelzle was the first to publish a comprehensive, expert guide to church advertising, *Principles of Successful Church Advertising*, in 1908.<sup>36</sup> This seminal work quickly became the standard by which all other work on the subject would be judged until the 1930s.<sup>37</sup> Stelzle insisted that the only way for the church to fulfill its mission in ministry was for it to achieve maximum visibility and to offer products that appealed to the modern person. This two-pronged approach became the hallmark of church promotion in the twentieth century. Christian leaders would work tirelessly to attract attention to their institutions and products in the marketplace through advertising and publicity. They would also work tirelessly to alter their products, institutions, and delivery systems through public relations and marketing, to compete with popular goods and services in the marketplace.

The direct advertising methods that Stelzle and his peers recommended for churches were basic. While much of the advertising industry developed elaborate

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<sup>35</sup> Primer, 76.

<sup>36</sup> Charles Stelzle, *Principles of Successful Church Advertising* (New York: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1908).

<sup>37</sup> Moore, 214; Gary Scott Smith, "Evangelicals Confront Corporate Capitalism: Advertising Consumerism, Stewardship, and Spirituality, 1880-1930," in *More Money, More Ministry: Money and Evangelicals in Recent North American History*, ed. Larry Eskridge and Mark A. Noll (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2000), 46.

magazine and newspaper advertisements, churches focused on basic methods of promotion. In fact, church promotion would not match industry sophistication until the end of the century, before which it always remained just a few steps behind in basic applications. Most of early church advertising consisted of materials that a church could pay a printer to produce for a small fee. Many were direct mailings such as bulletins, calendars, and church papers. Local churches were encouraged to develop mailing lists and send professionally produced materials about what the church offered. Pastors were also encouraged to cultivate the habit of writing carefully crafted letters that invited potential customers to visit the church. Outdoor advertising was another popular form of early church promotion. It could range from something as traditional as a steeple or church bells to a more modern form like billboards and lighted signs. Historian Susan Curtis describes methods that Stelzle endorsed: “admission cards, announcements, huge billboards and signs, gospel wagons, notices in street cars, messages in the amusement columns of the local newspaper, photographs and news stories, and candle-illuminated, muslin-covered wagons bearing notices of meeting times and places of special worship services.”<sup>38</sup>

Stelzle believed that the survival of American Protestantism in a competitive marketplace depended on customer support. Church promotion was not just a mechanism to improve society; it was a necessity to preserve Christianity. Stelzle and other promotion advocates believed that churches were rapidly losing market share in the early twentieth century. As a glaring example, whereas the steeple of the Trinity Church had been the highest point in Manhattan in 1880, in 1913 it sat in the shadows of

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<sup>38</sup> Curtis, 260.

corporate skyscrapers all around.<sup>39</sup> Stelzle recommended, as a solution, that churches utilize community surveys to determine the language of potential customers as they talked about their desires and interests.<sup>40</sup> Including the customer's voice in determining how the church would be represented was a significant step in church promotion. In future years, opinion research would play a large role in church promotion, ultimately forming its very foundation in the 1970s. Although the technique remained limited in application in the 1920s, its use by Stelzle's was a mark of his foresight and pioneering influence. It also revealed that though church advertising was basic, lagging behind the industry in complexity, it was still reasonably quick to adopt the chief theories of promotion.

#### *An Industry Develops Around Experts and Cooperation*

In generating such ideas in church promotion, Christian Reisner joined Charles Stelzle. Reisner was the pastor of Grace Methodist Episcopal Church in New York, and first made his mark on church promotion in outdoor advertising. He was close friends with O.J. Gude, whose company was responsible for the innovative electric lighted advertising signs on Broadway.<sup>41</sup> Through a partnership with Gude, Reisner placed four large electric signs on top of his church and placed billboards with catchy slogans throughout the city.<sup>42</sup> Following his success, he wrote his own book on church

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<sup>39</sup> Roland Marchand, *Creating the Corporate Soul: The Rise of Public Relations and Corporate Imagery in American Big Business* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 9.

<sup>40</sup> Charles Stelzle, *Principles of Successful Church Advertising* (New York: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1908), 36-7.

<sup>41</sup> S.N. Holliday, "Through the Years," *Signs of the Times*, May 1931, 30-1, 56-7.

<sup>42</sup> Lunden, 80.

promotion in 1913: *Church Publicity: The Modern Way to Compel Them to Come In*.<sup>43</sup>

In his guide, Reisner by and large recommended the same basic practices and methods as Stelzle. However, one unique addition was a survey of 150 Protestant pastors on which advertising methods they had found most effective.<sup>44</sup> In so doing, he opened a dialogue between ministers on the strengths and weaknesses of methods that could grow churches. This dialogue expanded. As interest in church advertising increased, so did cooperation in developing the profession and putting it into service for churches. As Smith details, church advertising associations began popping up in major cities such as Philadelphia and St. Louis. As many as 200 pastors in New York alone studied church advertising in newly minted courses.<sup>45</sup> One of the first places that these pioneers looked for professional development was to the Association of Advertisers of the World.

As church advertising grew as an industry, and more practitioners joined its ranks, many of the maturing experts in religious advertising sought camaraderie and instruction in the Association of Advertising Clubs of the World. In fact, they became such a significant segment in the profession and the organization that it created a church advertising department with Christian Resiner serving as president.<sup>46</sup> The purpose of the department was to “present to the churches the truth about church advertising.”<sup>47</sup>

Members hosted the first church advertising national conference in 1916. The following

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<sup>43</sup> Christian F. Reisner, *Publicity: The Modern Way to Compel Them to Come In* (New York: Methodist Book Concern, 1913).

<sup>44</sup> Smith, 47.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

<sup>46</sup> Lunden, 80.

<sup>47</sup> W.B. Ashley, *Church Advertising: Its Why and How: Papers Delivered Before the Church Advertising Section of the Twelfth Annual Convention of the Associated Advertising Clubs of the World* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1917), 4.

year, W.B. Ashley published a collection of several of the lectures given at the conference, *Church Advertising: Its Why and How*. Composed by experts from across the industry, each lecture highlighted the absolute necessity for religion to adopt the successful methods of advertising. They taught preachers how to be modern salesmen, how to make “religious information appetizing,” how to create display advertisements for newspapers, and how to use outdoor advertising.<sup>48</sup> Each speaker identified the Christian church as the pioneer in advertising. They argued that God advertised with a burning bush, Jesus used supernatural powers to attract attention, and churches were the first outdoor advertisers, using steeples.<sup>49</sup> On the first page was a picture of Daniel E. Weigle’s church in the host city, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. It was a traditional stone building with stain glass windows, crowned with a conspicuously modern, large illuminated sign that announced the name of the establishment, “The Friendly Church.” In the caption, Ashley explained that in five years, membership at the church had tripled and weekly attendance had grown from 50 to 1,000, all because of advertising, and the increase in giving had more than covered the promotional expenses.<sup>50</sup> Religious promotion professionals continued to gather to learn from experts such as Weigle.

In 1920, the Associated Advertising Club’s Church Department held another convention, and its addresses were again published, this time by Francis H. Case. The *Handbook of Church Advertising* hit the stands in 1921 and recommended the same methods and appeals as before.<sup>51</sup> The Church Advertising Department in the Associated

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 8, 143.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 21, 96, 28.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Francis H. Case, *Handbook of Church Advertising* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1927).

Advertising Clubs of the World also worked to build a stronger support network for the churches. In April 1923 – at the request of Rev. Dr. Christian Reisner, pastor of the Chelsea Methodist Church and president of the Church Advertising Department of the Associated Advertising Clubs of the World – the National Advertising Commission adopted a resolution that asked all local commercial advertising clubs to provide their expertise to local churches. In his appeal for the resolution, Reisner rallied support by describing Jesus as an advertising expert who used miracles to “attract the people to worship.”<sup>52</sup> Religion was a natural advertiser, he argued, in many ways the originator of advertising, and now it was time for the advertising industry to give back to its ancestors, to help the churches. Cooperation among the churches themselves also was growing.

Churches combined their resources and skills to produce promotional materials and campaigns on a local and national scale. “Go To Church” campaigns were one of the primary forms of such cooperation during this period. In various cities across the country, churches of different denominations worked together to fund and facilitate such campaigns. Because advertising was expensive and cost prohibitive for smaller churches, cooperation enabled them to participate in modern promotional outreach. Because the churches had different doctrine and practices from one another, they would settle on promoting a broad theme that they could all agree on, such as the importance of going to church. One such campaign was held in 1919 and 1921 for three months at a time in Concord, New Hampshire. The ads encouraged people to go to the church of their choice, instead of a particular one, because it was good for both individuals and for the

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<sup>52</sup> “Advertisers to Aid Church,” *New York Times*, April 26, 1923.

community.<sup>53</sup> On a grander scale, in 1926, the International Advertising Association (IAA), formerly the Associated Advertising Clubs of the World, decided to conduct a national campaign to promote religion between Christmas and Easter in 1927. Plans for the campaign were sent out to 250 advertising clubs across the United States, as well as many in England, Germany, France, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand.<sup>54</sup> Rev. Dr. Charles Stelzle, elected that same year as President of the Church Advertising Department, coordinated the drafting of the advertising messages by more than 100 clergymen. For Stelzle, this was a chance to sell more than religion. It was an opportunity to demonstrate how far religion had come in mastering and utilizing the latest “philosophy and methods” of the advertising industry. According to Stelzle, the two fields were becoming synonymous: “to proclaim religion is an advertising man’s job.”<sup>55</sup>

This amalgamation of methods was at the same time altering the messages. As the advertising industry promoted the benefits of products, so too did the churches. Christian church advertising increasingly sold religion as a means to enjoy an abundant life. Lears argues that liberal Protestantism became more a matter of morale than morals.<sup>56</sup> Advertising was a conduit of this shift. Consider the winner of the IAA’s 1926 contest for the best church advertisement. The ad was the central piece in the campaign, whose theme was “Why Go to Church.” It was a full-page advertisement in newspapers across the United States. In the poster’s text, the central appeal was: “You want happiness, contentment, prosperity. You can’t have these alone. You get them only as

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<sup>53</sup> Harold H. Niles, “Co-operative Church Advertising,” *Church Management* 1 (May 1925): 383.

<sup>54</sup> “Notables Will Aid in ‘Selling’ Religion,” *New York Times*, October 18, 1926.

<sup>55</sup> “Advertising Men to ‘Sell’ Religion,” *New York Times*, August 30, 1926.

<sup>56</sup> Lears, 35.

you help those around you to win them too! So, why not join with your neighbors in praying as well as in working for them? ... Go to church!”<sup>57</sup> According to the ad, a church was not a place for a relationship with God, for eternal salvation. It was a place for relationships with other people, for temporal salvation from unhappiness.

A previous cooperative meeting, the Associated Advertising Clubs of the World 1916 church advertising conference demonstrated similar shifts. In explaining the success of his “Friendly Church,” Daniel Weigle emphasized the necessity of psychologically appealing to the customers. Religion, he argued, had to be sold like other products; it had to be advertised for its benefits, for what it could do to bring the abundant life. Many of the speakers explained that simply providing information about a church in an advertisement was no longer sufficient. One had to give specific reasons for why a person should go to church.<sup>58</sup> One advertising consultant, W.R. Hotchkin explained that both churches and commerce “must appeal to the desires of human nature.” “The most vital element in advertising a church to outsiders is the living picture of the joy, satisfaction, comfort and peace,” he added, “expressed by the people who are members of the church.”<sup>59</sup> The reason for the success of automobile sales, according to Hotchkin, was that they showed people how much pleasure there was in owning one. The “selling points” of the church were the benefits that it offered the individual.<sup>60</sup> Church advertising, these men argued, had to publicize the good life that religion offered

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<sup>57</sup> “Win \$1,000 Award for Church Poster,” *New York Times*, August 14, 1929.

<sup>58</sup> Ashley, 46.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 79, 83.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 84-5.



in the here and now. One of the ways they promised to deliver such benefits was through offering more services and new forms for entertainment.

*Introducing Full Service/Commercial Churches to Meet All Needs*

Historian James Hudnut-Beumler describes the institutional church movement in the early twentieth century that captured, particularly, the Progressive desire to reform the local community by offering more services. “In addition to worship and instruction, institutional churches offered many opportunities for fellowship, self-improvement, social service, and participation in athletics. An institutional church offered programs seven days a week.”<sup>61</sup> An institutional church was a full-service church. It offered much more than sermons and songs on Sundays. It was a seven-day church that had a large kitchen, a gymnasium, a parlor, a library, and a fellowship hall. It was as much a community center as a worship center. This was an effort, as Hudnut-Beumler explains, to reform society. However, it was more than that.

What Hudnut-Beumler fails to note is that it was also a promotional strategy. The institutional church movement was itself an advertising mechanism. Churches could attract more people if they offered more services to meet community desires. They advertised all the facilities and benefits that were available to customers. They especially highlighted the many ways that they offered commercial entertainment.

Churches increasingly emulated and included the most popular forms of entertainment in order to attract more customers. Charles Stelzle believed that one of the primary purposes of the church was to provide for the many community demands,

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<sup>61</sup> James Hudnut-Beumler, *In Pursuit of the Almighty's Dollar: A History of Money and American Protestantism* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 2007), 258.

including the need for entertainment.<sup>62</sup> In 1917, Christian Reisner agreed, writing that, “In this modern day people must be entertained. They will go into despair and suicide if laugh [sic], fellowship and bright thoughts are not furnished them.”<sup>63</sup> This was by no means a new notion in American Protestantism. Historians R. Laurence Moore, James Kilde, and James Hudnut-Beumler all explain in detail how churches increasingly reconfigured their places of worship to emulate popular entertainment spaces such as the theater in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.<sup>64</sup> Theater seating of curved rows replaced straight pews, and stages replaced enclosed pulpits.

Conservative Protestants also emulated such popular secular forms of the marketplace in their churches. In 1925, the Moody Memorial Church opened its doors in Chicago and looked much like a Roman coliseum from the outside. Inside, the auditorium could seat 5,000 people. The minister preached from a platform that stood in front of a choir loft large enough for 750 voices. Presaging the removal of religious symbols from churches in the 1970s, the church looked like a coliseum from the outside and had no crosses on it.<sup>65</sup> Another example was Aimee Semple McPherson’s Angelus Temple in Los Angeles, opened in 1923. The church had an enormous auditorium that at times accommodated 7,500 people. McPherson addressed the crowd from a platform where she used stage sets to illustrate her sermons. The services included a 100-person choir with a full orchestra. The baptistery was filled by a waterfall that poured in from a

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<sup>62</sup> Curtis, 258.

<sup>63</sup> Ashley, 53-4.

<sup>64</sup> Moore; James Halgren Kilde, *When Church Became Theatre: The Transformation of Evangelical Architecture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005); Hudnut-Beumler. Also see Loveland.

<sup>65</sup> Loveland, 100-01.

stream backdropped by a painting of the River Jordan. Painted clouds covered the ceiling of the auditorium.<sup>66</sup> All these elements and forms left behind “churchly” looking churches. They looked more like entertainment venues.

Many churches utilized commercial entertainment as a method of promotion. In the early twentieth century, baseball and the movie industry held prominent roles in American life, ushering in new forms of commercial entertainment with which churches competed for market share. Whereas in the nineteenth century more people had gone to church than to any form of entertainment, with the opening of movie theaters at the turn of the century, the trend reversed. Movies offered an attractive alternative to church functions, and local churches soon sought ways to compete.<sup>67</sup> Churches boasted a “full line-up” of entertaining programs that included social events and services. They advertised at baseball games, opened small theaters, built gymnasiums, and operated swimming pools.<sup>68</sup> Reisner used baseball in the 1910s as a platform to promote his church services, which included players from the New York Giants in services and in advertising at the games.<sup>69</sup> As movies gained popularity, Curtis explains, churches increasingly adopted the language and forms of motion pictures between 1914 and 1918. Experts instructed ministers to be the “stars” of the show and to have “personality” with a

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 100-05.

<sup>67</sup> Moore, 222.

<sup>68</sup> Curtis, 237.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

good “supporting cast” on a stage. They commonly referred to the congregation as an audience.<sup>70</sup>

Churches also emulated the corporate forms of the marketplace. In the spirit of the business ethos, some built skyscraper churches that could offer superior facilities and services. One of the most prominent was the Broadway Temple in New York, which recruited church advertising expert Christian Reisner to serve as its minister in the 1920s. The first few floors of the skyscraper were devoted to the church while the other floors were rented for office space and apartments. The twenty-four story tower was crowned with a thirty-foot cross bathed in light. An advertisement for the church described the “Methodist Church lifting the light-flooded Cross into the skyline of America’s greatest city, so prone to forget the Church, God’s visible body on earth. A flashlight at the foot of the Cross will send a stream of light 150 miles out to sea, and so prove to thousands seeking these shores that New York appreciates religion.”<sup>71</sup> Not only would this church sell itself and its message, intoned the ad, it would also sell the entire city of New York. New York also was home to the fundamentalist Calvary Baptist Church, a sixteen-story structure dedicated in 1931. At a cost of \$2 million dollars, it had an auditorium that could seat 1,000 people, an enormous organ, and five stories dedicated to the work of the church. In the remaining eleven stories, the church operated as the Hotel Salisbury.<sup>72</sup>

Other cities across the country also boasted skyscraper churches. In Chicago stood the Chicago Temple of the First Methodist Episcopal Church in Chicago. It rose

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 236-37. Many of these trends had developed especially in the work of Finney and Beecher – see Kilde, Hatch, and Moore.

<sup>71</sup> Advertisement, *New York Christian Advocate* 101 (September 9, 1926): 1245, quoted in Lunden, 82.

<sup>72</sup> Loveland, 98

558 feet into the sky. A modern church at the cost of \$4 million dollars, it included a 2,000-seat auditorium, gym, clubrooms, and educational facilities, while the rest of the building housed offices. The minister, Rev. John F. Thomson, was known as “the prophet of profit.”<sup>73</sup> There were similar churches in San Francisco, Minneapolis, and Detroit. The churches in San Francisco and in Minneapolis housed hotels. The Detroit church rented much of its building out to various businesses and tenants.<sup>74</sup> These churches and others mirrored the business forms of the marketplace.

Some churches offered recreational attractions. Articles in *Church Management* showed large groups of people in churches using bowling alleys or billiard tables. In 1931, Brunswick had a contest to give away a free billiards table. The church that sent in the best description of their experience offering billiards at their church could win another table.<sup>75</sup> Some articles on how to keep people interested in a church by changing “the bill frequently” and using more drama in the pulpit. Others continued promoting the use of motion pictures in worship services.<sup>76</sup> Douglas Abrams estimates that by 1923, nearly 15,000 churches were showing motion pictures in their services, schools, and special events.<sup>77</sup>

### *Church Radio Broadcasts Sacred Messages*

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<sup>73</sup> Lunden, 83.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 88.

<sup>75</sup> Brunswick Advertisement, *Church Management* 7 (December 1930): 35.

<sup>76</sup> William S. Mitchell, “Fighting for Crowds,” *Church Management* 9 (October 1932): 10; John N. Link, “Motion Pictures in the Church Program,” 9 (December 1932): 143; Albert P. Stauderman, “Building Attendance Through Entertainment,” *Church Management* 13 (August 1937): 556.

<sup>77</sup> Abrams, 96.

Some churches also began to utilize the other major media development in the 1920s, the radio. More *Church Management* articles on the subject explained that the radio was a tool to convert more people, instead of a means to advertise a church directly.<sup>78</sup> But not all articles were favorable. One argued that the power to broadcast a sermon into another church's territory was to steal their parishioners.<sup>79</sup> Meanwhile conservative churches continued to use radio to reach more people.<sup>80</sup>

Many churches embraced the commercial culture by utilizing the radio as a means to transmit their message to a larger audience. Transmitters arose on the tops of churches as they purchased licenses to create their own radio stations.<sup>81</sup> As low-power stations, they broadcast locally and raised community awareness of their offerings. One of the first churches to broadcast a service on the radio was Calvary Episcopal Church in Pittsburgh, beginning in 1921. In an unintentionally symbolic move, the radio technicians dressed in choir robes so as not to distract anyone in the service.<sup>82</sup> These apostles of radio literally sacralized the secular device by cloaking themselves in sacred garments. Within four years, nearly seventy churches were broadcasting their services.<sup>83</sup> However, in 1925, Herbert Hoover ended the dispersion of radio station licenses. Many

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<sup>78</sup> Edward L. Wertheim, "Reaching the Unchurched By Radio," *Church Management* 9 (April 1933): 357-8, 366.

<sup>79</sup> "Ethical Implications of Sermon Broadcasting," *Church Management* 1 (November 1924): 75.

<sup>80</sup> Joel Carpenter, *Revive Us Again: The Reawakening of American Fundamentalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 23-4.

<sup>81</sup> Erik Barnouw, *A Tower in Babel: A History of Broadcasting in the United States to 1933* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966), 99.

<sup>82</sup> Luther F. Sies, *Encyclopedia of American Radio, 1920-1960* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2000), 372.

<sup>83</sup> Abrams, 35.

commercial organizations therefore purchased the licenses of churches, while allowing the churches to continue broadcasting on Sundays.<sup>84</sup>

Although Laurence Moore argues that “radio was Protestantism’s dream medium of advertising,” church promotion experts in the era did not seem to see it as such. Even William Leach’s 1930 book, one of the primary texts in early church promotion, *Church Publicity*, only devotes a page and a half to radio.<sup>85</sup> Leach focuses on church radio’s use for broadcasting services, not as a means to advertise. Although the radio did attract local listeners and altered the way Americans consumed religion, it was not seen by the experts as a principal method of advertising a church.

The notable exception was the conservative Protestants, who continued to use the radio aggressively to spread their message in the 1930s. Religious historians have explained how conservative Protestants utilized the new technology much more effectively than liberal Protestants.<sup>86</sup> Radios had multiplied exponentially early in the decade, doubling in number in the first five years of the 1930s. Radio was, as historian Stephen Fox describes it, “nursed and financed by advertising.”<sup>87</sup> Yet conservative Protestants also did not use radio for explicit advertising of their churches. Instead, they capitalized on the eighteen million radios in 60 percent of the homes across the nation to

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<sup>84</sup> Barnouw, 174.

<sup>85</sup> William H. Leach, *Church Publicity: A Complete Treatment of Publicity Opportunities and Methods in the Local Church* (Nashville: Cokesbury Press, 1930), 150-51.

<sup>86</sup> Tona J. Hangen, *Redeeming the Dial: Radio, Religion, & Popular Culture in America* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2002); Margaret Lamberts Bendroth, “Fundamentalism and the Media, 1930-1990” in *Religion and Mass Media: Audiences and Adaptations*, ed. Daniel A. Stout and Judith M. Buddenbaum (London: Sage Publications, 1996).

<sup>87</sup> Fox, 150.

spread their message.<sup>88</sup> They broadcast their services and created new programs, the most successful of which was Charles Fuller's *Old-Fashioned Revival Hour*, launched in 1930. By the end of the decade, the show had 15 to 20 million listeners across the country.<sup>89</sup> Overall, conservative radio was much more popular than liberal radio because the former had to pay for its broadcasts since they were more dogmatic and controversial. The cost, in turn, forced them to be more provocative and competitive, in a self-reinforcing cycle. In contrast, liberal Protestant programming was free time, or "sustaining time," donated by the stations as a public service.<sup>90</sup> Ironically, the commercial requirements for the fundamentalists, who in word shunned modernity, elevated their success and popularity in the 1930s. Nevertheless, both fundamentalist and liberal Protestants used the radio very little for direct advertising, though the benefits of exposure appear to have been valuable.

In 1910, Stelzle began practicing what he preached in religious promotion. He put into action his theories on church advertising when the Presbyterian Church granted him a two-year experiment ministering in the Labor Temple in downtown New York City. He immediately went to work selling Protestantism with the latest commercial methods and trappings available. As Susan Curtis writes, "Stelzle's gospel was an item to market, and the temple was his spiritual marketplace."<sup>91</sup> One of his first acts was to utilize the latest in outdoor advertising to attract attention to the temple. He built an

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<sup>88</sup> Carpenter, 130.

<sup>89</sup> Abrams, 58-9.

<sup>90</sup> Hangen, 12.

<sup>91</sup> Curtis, 259.



enormous electric sign to broadcast the name of the church, and placed two bulletin boards each on the bordering streets that announced upcoming events at the church.<sup>92</sup> He studied the methods of the successful theaters and adopted their language and forms of entertainment, offering continuous “programs” and “acts” for his “audience.”<sup>93</sup> He worked tirelessly to professionally transition from one phase to another in the services, orchestrating his movements and all elements of the event for maximum dramatic effect. (Forty-five years later, Robert Schuller would utilize each of these techniques to great renown.). Stelzle’s church also hosted viewings of popular movies.<sup>94</sup> The end of Stelzle’s two-year experiment came in 1912, and with unprecedented success in numerical growth. Thousands had joined the church, bringing a steep rise in donations.

Eventually Stelzle gave up straddling the two worlds he had tried to meld together. Seeing great evidence for the value of his advertising methods, and frustrated with the upper management of the Presbyterian church, he decided to cease being a prophet for religion and focus full time on being a prophet of promotion. He opened his own advertising business in New York.<sup>95</sup> Stelzle had been on the leading edge of church promotion, advocating and teaching church advertising, adopting marketplace forms in churches to attract more customers, and leading cooperative efforts. As he left the field, another form of promotion was spreading throughout American Protestantism, public relations.

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<sup>92</sup> Ibid.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

<sup>94</sup> Moore, 214.

<sup>95</sup> Curtis, 265.

## A New Era of Public Relations in Business and Churches

By the 1930s, the predominant method of promotion in churches was public relations. Most historians that have written on the role of business methods in religion have blurred the lines between public relations and advertising, using the words and concepts interchangeably. Yet there was a distinct difference, and to conflate them is to miss a significant transition in the 1920s and 1930s, a transition that set up the future of church promotion in the middle of the twentieth century. Before considering how public relations developed in churches, it is helpful to consider the broader establishment and spread of the public relations industry.

### *Public Relations Grows to Defend Corporations*

Public relations is a slippery concept to define. As with other terms related to promotion, different people employ it to mean different things. It can include, or be included in, definitions of publicity, press relations, advertising, marketing, and promotion. In order to clear up the confusion, one can return to the source, the field's founding father, Edward Bernays. Bernays defined public relations as the molding of opinion or the "engineering of consent." He explained that public relations is "the attempt, by information, persuasion, and adjustment, to engineer public support for an activity, cause, movement or institution."<sup>96</sup> More recently, Richard Tedlow has similarly defined public relations as "the controlling of news about an individual or organization by planned and organized effort through informing and cultivating the press and through encouraging the corporation itself to alter its policies in accord with perceived public

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<sup>96</sup> Irwin Ross, *The Image Merchants; the Fabulous World of Public Relations* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1959), 15.

desires."<sup>97</sup> Although nearly seventy years separate these definitions, both have at their core the same practices. Public relations strives to engender public favor for anything from a local business to an international industry by studying public opinion, using existing press outlets, and when necessary altering institutional policies. Publicity, therefore, is an integral component in public relations and is not to be confused with advertising. While advertising typically is the purchased promotion of a product and is recognizable as such, publicity is more subtle and less costly. It uses free press coverage in multiple media outlets to provide abundant and favorable information about an institution. Thus, the central element in the public relations machine is the press agent who works with the press to secure media attention and direct its message. The work of these agents, and of public relations, began in the late nineteenth century as, Tedlow explains, "an institutional response to the problem of managing the business reputation."<sup>98</sup>

Stated differently, public relations began as a defensive measure. Roland Marchand traces the origins of public relations to the industrial disruption of historian Robert Wiebe's island communities.<sup>99</sup> With industrialization came a rapid increase in the size of corporations. Their sheer enormity, compared with other institutions in American life, made them an oddity and presented enormous hurdles for fitting in to the "nexus of relationships" in America. Public relations began as a means to create such relationships. It gave the corporation a personality, made it human, made it familiar, made it accessible to the public. This served two communities. Externally, it worked to court the public

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<sup>97</sup> Tedlow, xviii.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid., 196.

<sup>99</sup> Robert H. Wiebe, *The Search for Order, 1877-1920* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1967).

favor, while internally it worked to legitimize the institution's existence and methods to its employees, consequentially making them ambassadors of the company. As Marchand writes, public relations advisers created and maintained a "corporate soul."<sup>100</sup> This corporate soul became increasingly important for industry leaders at the turn of the century as they paid more attention to the economic and political impact of public opinion on operations. The need to do so was nowhere more necessary and developed than in the railroads.<sup>101</sup>

As in so many other aspects of modern business operations and management, the railroad led the way in systematically developing modern public relations. Railroads served a vast customer base and their organizations were so large that they rapidly lost touch with the public. They lacked the personal relationships necessary to ensure public acceptance. It fell to the press to establish that relationship, and the railroads had to ensure that the press would be favorable.<sup>102</sup> Thus, the earliest forms of public relations used the press to shape and mold broad public opinion, either by courting the favor of reporters or through actual ownership of press organs.<sup>103</sup> Railroads would "wine and dine" reporters to persuade them to report favorable news about the company, or they would purchase newspapers and print articles that were really more like advertisements. One of the early publicity agents for a railroad was Ivy Lee, who was the son of a

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<sup>100</sup> Marchand, 2-5.

<sup>101</sup> Tedlow, 7.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid., 197.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid., 7-8.

Georgia minister.<sup>104</sup> He sought to use the press to inform the public about the Pennsylvania Railroad. Other businesses followed suit and began to hire press agents who spent their time calling the newspapers' attention to company events and prerogatives that they felt were not only newsworthy, but also were shining examples of the beneficence and good of the company.

Public relations picked up speed as a sophisticated and formalized industry in the early twentieth century because of increasing "bigness" in the marketplace, but also as a response to the Progressive movement. During the Progressive era, muckrakers and other reformers brought public scrutiny on the business operations of the increasingly industrialized American society. Public relations expanded as a means to counteract the attacks, to present the company's side of the story to the public, to defend its practices and its purposes. Yet as Tedlow notes, public relations was not just a reaction to public attack, it was also a means to "increase efficiency" in the new landscape of large corporations.<sup>105</sup>

Public relations also was good for improving internal opinions about an institution. As companies increased in size and scope, they grew more impersonal. The relationships between owners, managers, and laborers formalized with increasing size and bureaucratization. As well, the implementation of Taylorism, or scientific management, was increasingly reducing the autonomy of workers. These changes on the factory floors increased labor disputes and generally disrupted the flow of production. One means to assuage labor protest was welfare capitalism. Another means to deal with

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<sup>104</sup> Scott M. Cutlip, and Allen H. Center, *Effective Public Relations*, 5<sup>th</sup> ed. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1982), 79.

<sup>105</sup> Tedlow, 19.

this “human problem” was public relations. It became the connective tissue between the levels of management in the corporation, and between the corporation itself and the public. Given the scale of the corporation and the public, the press was the best means to massage these relationships. Public relations publicized all of the good things that a company did, how well the management cared for the workers, and how the workers served the company. Efforts like welfare capitalism and public relations were a means to reassure management of their care for the workers and to reassure the workers of the purposes of their work.<sup>106</sup> As an effective tool, public relations grew steadily in business until its acceptance and use multiplied rapidly after the First World War

In World War I, public relations had an opportunity to demonstrate the breadth and success of its methods. As Edward Bernays bluntly explained, “It was, of course, the astounding success of propaganda during the war that opened the eyes of the intelligent few in all departments of life to the possibilities of regimenting the public mind.”<sup>107</sup> Prior to the war, public relations had been just one more new business method. During the war, it became one of the primary tools of the United States government to raise support from the American people for the war effort. In the Committee for Public Information, the government established an entire organization solely devoted to developing public relations methods and employing them throughout the nation. Bernays, himself, was in great part responsible for this. Utilizing his experience during the war, he developed theories on “engineering public consent.” His first book on the subject, *Crystallizing Public Opinion*, was published in 1923. He also began a course that year in the subject at New York University. Bernays was not alone in his interest. Prior to 1917 there were

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<sup>106</sup> Ibid., 16-7.

<sup>107</sup> Edward L. Bernays, *Propaganda* (New York: Liveright, 1928), 27-8.

only eighteen books on public opinion, publicity, and public relations. However, between 1917 and 1925, an additional twenty-eight titles were released.<sup>108</sup> By the end of the war and the beginning of the 1920s, public relations, especially when it came to managing relations with the press, was an increasingly important component in American business.

The 1930s was also a period of growth for the broader public relations industry. While advertising suffered from economic downturn, public relations actually benefited. Franklin D. Roosevelt placed a premium value on public relations in promoting his presidency and agenda.<sup>109</sup> Unfortunately for the business community, FDR directed much of his public relations effort at denouncing the practices and values of the business community, especially in the middle of the decade.<sup>110</sup> In response, many corporations increased their use of public relations methods to protect their reputations, which seeded the growth of many public relations firms.<sup>111</sup> Counterattacks against the New Deal led to the establishment of public relations in many corporate organizations.<sup>112</sup> Even the advertising industry launched its own public relations campaign to improve its image.<sup>113</sup> These efforts bolstered the industry and its expansion reverberated in American Protestantism.

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<sup>108</sup> Cutlip, 86.

<sup>109</sup> Stuart Ewen, *PR!: A Social History of Spin* (New York: Basic Books, 1996), 247-48.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, 289-90.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, 292.

<sup>112</sup> Marchand, 203.

<sup>113</sup> Ewen, 293.

### *Public Relations Expands to Defend and Publicize Churches*

Public relations began in religion, as it had in industry, as a defensive measure. As many leaders in Protestant churches were churning out books and advice on how to advertise religion, others were just beginning to experiment with public relations. Some churches were surprisingly quick to adopt the methods, many doing so before the First World War.<sup>114</sup> One of the first religious organizations to venture into the uncharted waters of religious public relations was the Trinity Episcopal Church in New York City. Motivated, much the same as many other institutions in the Progressive era, to respond to public attacks, the Church employed the new Pendleton Dudley public relations firm, in 1909. Many in New York accused the church of exploiting its renters in its church-owned housing. Using existing media outlets, churches like this worked to improve their image in the public. Just three years later, in 1912, the Seventh Day Adventist Church also came under public scrutiny. The church fervently opposed Sunday laws that prohibited various activities and transactions on Sundays. Many attacked the church for taking such a stand, so it established the nation's first denominational publicity bureau with the former sports editor of the Baltimore American newspaper as the publicity director. The department began responding to the acrimony and courted public favor by using the newspapers.<sup>115</sup>

Two years later, in 1914, the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod established the American Lutheran Publicity Bureau (ALPB).<sup>116</sup> An expert with years of experience in

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<sup>114</sup> Marchand, 90.

<sup>115</sup> Cutlip, 82; "Walter L. Burgan, Church Publicity Director, Dies," *Washington Post*, July 26, 1940.

<sup>116</sup> "Lutheran Publicity Chief Ends Career of 39 Years," *New York Times*, January 1, 1953.



newspaper and periodical writing and publishing directed this bureau, like the others. The ALPB developed external relationships with newspapers to encourage them to print positive stories on the denomination. It also developed internal news sources for church members. Other denominations began publishing newspapers and magazines that informed their constituents of the latest events in the denomination. Such stories helped build unity through the denomination and raise support from members. In all of these activities, American Protestantism was increasingly focusing on the value of public opinion. As these trends continued, the guiding question in church policy became not What does the Bible or church tradition say? but rather What will the public think?

These denominational public relations and publicity offices shifted into high gear immediately following World War I as the majority of the large Protestant denominations launched national fund-raising campaigns to combat rampant financial instability in ever-growing organizations. Capitalizing on the successful tactics employed by the government and other organizations such as the Red Cross during the war, they used the latest techniques in “scientific propaganda” and publicity to convince their members to give money.<sup>117</sup> Establishing a publicity department in 1919 to serve the purpose, the Episcopal Board paid for the advertising expertise of Barton and Durstein, Inc. to get their campaign off the ground.<sup>118</sup> The same year, the Southern Baptist organized a “75 Million Campaign”; the Disciples of Christ launched a “War Emergency Campaign;” and the Methodists wrapped up a “Centenary Campaign.”<sup>119</sup> While many of these bureaus developed some form of advertising to promote their churches, the majority of their

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<sup>117</sup> Primer, 99.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid., 99, 104.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid., 99-100.

attention focused on utilizing the press to build favorable impressions of their institutions. They were quickly learning that their best weapon in promotion was not a paid advertisement or a billboard but publicity in the general media.

In the 1920s, though advertising grew rapidly in churches, the center of gravity was shifting to publicity. As a contributor to the Southern Baptist *The Newspaper and Religious Publicity* observed in 1925: “There is no greater agency known to mankind today for the spreading of the teachings of Christ Jesus than the daily press.”<sup>120</sup> The majority of the books published on religion promotion in the 1920s no longer had “advertising” in the title, but rather “publicity.” *Church Management* continued to carry advertisements for bulletin boards, church bells, and the like, longer articles on how to advertise were rare. Instead, there were numerous pieces on publicity and using the local press.<sup>121</sup> One such article, written by the editor of *Church Management*, William Leach, explained how “St. Paul was a very good publicist.”<sup>122</sup> Publicity was quickly becoming the favored means of religious promotion.<sup>123</sup> By the end of the 1920s, many of the national denominations supported press liaison offices, not so much for advertising, but for public relations.

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<sup>120</sup> Richard Beall Niese, *Newspapers and Religious Publicity* (New York: Doran, 1925), vii.

<sup>121</sup> William H. Leach, “Publicity for the New Pastor,” *Church Management* 5 (February 1925): 321; William H. Leach, “Publicity for the Minister,” *Church Management* 5 (March 1925): 403; Fred W. Tezise, “Publicity to Reach Students,” *Church Management* 5 (September 1925): 801; Austin J. Hollingsworth, “Pre-Publicity,” *Church Management* 5 (September 1925): 853.

<sup>122</sup> William H. Leach, “The Background for Religious Publicity,” *Church Management* 5 (July 1929): 716.

<sup>123</sup> It was also the popular word to describe church promotion. Whereas all of the discussion prior to the 1920s had been on advertising, after the 1920s it was on publicity. William Leach explains in his introduction to *Church Publicity* that in using the term he meant advertising, printing and publicity. Nevertheless, the majority of the book focuses on using news sources and printing. Leach, *Church Publicity*, 13.

This trend culminated in the formation of a national organization for religious publicity professionals. In 1929, several of the leading professionals in religious publicity met together to establish a national organization that could unite and develop the industry of promoting religion. On March 19th and 20th, 1929, publicity experts from major religious denominations and missions organizations around the country gathered at The Chalfonte Hotel in Atlantic City, New Jersey, for the second interdenominational Conference on Religious Publicity, the first having met in 1927. Held in conjunction with the annual Conference on the Promotional Work of the Church, the publicity conference focused on church missions in foreign nations, and most speakers spoke about how to use the press to inform the public of international missions work. Several attendees decided they should create a permanent organization to promote the development of the profession and nurture relationships among all its practitioners.<sup>124</sup> A few days later, on March 28, several conference attendees met again to draw up recommendations for the “Religious Publicity Council.” After meeting again on several occasions to finalize the purpose, polity, and shape of the organization, they gathered for their first annual convention eight months later, on November 26<sup>th</sup> and 27<sup>th</sup>, at the Hotel Washington in Washington, D.C. There they approved a constitution with seven articles and elected three officers, officially establishing the Religious Publicity Council.

The Religious Publicity Council at its inception reflected the larger shift in religious promotion from advertising to publicity and public relations. As explicit in its title, it was committed above all to increasing the use and expertise of religious publicity. Of the twenty-nine RPC charter members, nineteen had the word “publicity” in their job

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<sup>124</sup> “Report of the Findings Committee,” Exhibit F, folder “History National Religious Publicity Council 1929-1934,” box 4, Records: 1952-1988 (88-0630), RPRCC.

title. The original constitution stated: “The purpose of the Religious Publicity Council shall be to bring together religious publicity representatives for interchange of ideas and experiences, conference on common problems, and such cooperative efforts as may develop.”<sup>125</sup> In order to clarify this purpose, M.E. McIntosh defined religious publicity at the inaugural meeting as “any broadcast message, printed or spoken, that is about religions or religious organizations.”<sup>126</sup> A broad definition, to say the least, “religious publicity” could be any number of ways of communicating the messages of religion to the broader public. Thus, it also included the advertising methods that were popular in the early twentieth century. The 1929 conference reflected this breadth of interest, as members discussed everything from posters, to radio, to magazine articles, to paid advertising. They even passed a resolution to promote an increase in paid advertising in the press.<sup>127</sup> However, their second resolution addressed the particular form of publicity that would be at the center of the organization for the rest of the century, public relations.

The second resolution of the inaugural constitution suggested, “every local church should have a [publicity] representative who shall be responsible for seeing that the church’s news is accurately and promptly presented to the local press.”<sup>128</sup> Although the RPC’s charter members may have understood publicity generally in very broad terms, they specifically practiced it as using existing media to report news on churches in favorable ways; they were primarily interested in promoting public relations as press

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<sup>125</sup> “In the Beginning,” Chapter 1, *RPRC: A 50-Year Reflection*, box 1, Records: 1952-1988 (88-0630), RPRCC.

<sup>126</sup> “All in the Name,” Chapter 2, *RPRC: A 50-Year Reflection*, box 1, Records: 1952-1988 (88-0630), RPRCC.

<sup>127</sup> “Publicity Increase Urged on Churches,” *Washington Post*, November 27, 1929.

<sup>128</sup> “Findings,” Exhibit E, folder “History National Religious Publicity Council 1929-1934,” box 4, Records: 1952-1988 (88-0630), RPRCC.

agents. Most of the members worked in some form of journalism, as opposed to as advertising agents. They worked with the press. The central question for the Religious Publicity Council, for decades to come would be how to best nurture cooperation between “Church News and the Secular Press.” Yet another question, much more subtle but just as important, would prove to be perhaps the most difficult to answer. Could they use commercial methods associated with lies, manipulation, and propaganda to promote a product that claimed by its nature to be pure, honest, and beyond the influence of the market. Could they use what many argued were the devil’s tool of deceit to sell God?

In the 1930s, only one church promotion organization still made the news every now and then – the Religious Publicity Council. While religious advertising organizations faded into obscurity, religious publicity kept a foothold in the major mainline denominations. These denominations had created large organizational bureaucracies and complex department structures. The publicity departments in them continued to work through the decade. The professionals who staffed them generated denominational publications and solicited newspaper coverage for their institutions. The RPC continued to meet, but its membership remained stagnant. Meanwhile churches suffered membership declines and utilized the established methods of publicity to try to hold steady in their numbers. Public relations therefore continued as a defensive tool in American Protestantism.

For its part, public relations became a dominant form of promotion in the 1920s and remained vibrant even through the 1930s. In response to the growing impersonality of business and the attacks on its practices, public relations developed as a mechanism to

utilize existing press outlets and a means to shape public opinion about a business. Churches immediately followed suit, adapting the methods for their own defensive use against attacks on their beliefs and practices. Other churches noted the success of such publicity methods and gradually engaged in public relations as an offensive mechanism to improve their public visibility and favor. As experts in the field arose, they created a professional society in the Religious Publicity Council to develop their profession. Their focus on measuring and courting public opinion nurtured the trend in American Christianity to shift authority and sovereignty in religious doctrine and practice to the individual consumer. This process of democratization would accelerate in the coming decades. It would create a tension between religion's claims to reflect other worldly directives and its actual directives from public opinion.

Yet another tension would also mark the public relations efforts in religion. Corporations began using public relations methods to redefine their corporate image as one of "charitable or educational character." They hoped to identify their nature and purpose with esteemed institutions such as universities, hospitals and religious organizations.<sup>129</sup> Ironically churches already had such an image in society, yet in using commercial methods, risked damaging associations with maligned commercial institutions and practices. The RPC argued that they could purify such methods, but what if their message required manipulation to sell it.

### Jesus is the Problem: Tension in Religious Promotion

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<sup>129</sup> Marchand, 164-65.

Throughout the twentieth century, even the strongest advocates for church promotion would reveal signs of uncertainty and discomfort in efforts to retail religion. Most of them recognized, in some small degree, that business promotionalism, or at least its reputation, included values and principles that were incongruent with religion. They argued that Christianity is pure, truthful, selfless, and good. Meanwhile, many in society argued that promotionalism, in contrast, is deceptive, manipulative, selfish, and evil. The project, therefore, for many church promotion advocates was one of creating a distinction between themselves and the broader industry. They sought ways to purify “worldly” methods by pursuing truth.

One leader of this initiative was E.A. Hungerford. In his address to the national convention of the RPC in 1932, Hungerford unwittingly summarized the challenge ahead for church promotion. He charged the public relations professionals with two tasks. One was the necessity of setting religious public relations apart from the rest of the industry. “The publicity of any church should *truthfully* [emphasis added] interpret the program of the church publicized.” He argued that church promotion could not be like marketplace promotion. It had to be honest at all times, never deceptive or manipulative. While this first task dealt with how to promote, the second dealt with the purpose for promotion. “The publicity of any church should reveal a program which is likely to find a generally *favorable public reaction* [emphasis added].”<sup>130</sup> Church promotion’s task, according to Hungerford and other advocates of the field, was to engender favorable public opinion and interest. These two primary goals in the practice of church promotion would persist throughout the century. Promotion was to be both truthful and engender public interest.

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<sup>130</sup> E.A. Hungerford, “Major Emphasis in Church Publicity in a Time of Depression,” Manuscript (Exhibit C), folder “History National Religious Publicity Council 1929-1934,” box 4, Records: 1952-1988 (88-0630), RPRCC.

Yet, what Hungerford failed to recognize, as did many church promotions experts and professionals to follow, was that they may have been advocating for an impossible combination of tasks. In reality, they sought to hold together two poles that were magnetically opposed to one another. The magnetic charge that pushed them apart was the Christian doctrine they promoted.

This was because the Christian message and its institutions were not by their nature necessarily acceptable to the public. In order to court public interest with a truthful method, the product had to be, by its nature, broadly favorable. However, if the product was not favorable, then either the message and method had to be altered or the interest of the public had to be sacrificed. Yet many, like Hungerford, assumed the former. Hungerford assumed that the religious institutions that the RPC members represented were naturally favorable to the public. As long as this was true, a truthful religious public relations professional was a successful religious public relations professional. The problem, though, was Jesus.

*The Religious Publicity Council is a Protestant Christian Organization*

The RPC was founded as a Protestant Christian organization. At their first formative gathering, in 1929, the majority of the speakers worked for major Protestant denominations, such as the Protestant Episcopal Church, the Methodist Episcopal Church, the Northern Baptist Convention, the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A., and the National Council of Congregational Churches. All the first members of the organization also worked for Protestant denominations except for a few that were employed by four different church-related agencies such as the Y.M.C.A. and the Federal Council of



Churches. Those who did work for denominations were for the most part in their international and domestic missionary departments. From the very beginning, then, the RPC was an organization of those who worked for Protestant Christian institutions and who were committed to the spread of the Christian message or Gospel.

The strictly Christian orientation of the RPC was evident also in the members' language. One of the first speakers, and a charter member, M.E. McIntosh, reminded all gathered of the Christian purpose that bound them together. The goal of public relations, he said, was to "express religion in terms of life," but not just any religion, the "gospel of Jesus."<sup>131</sup> The gospel of Jesus was the unifying principle for the RPC, whose members believed this was the most significant message on the planet. As Walter I. Clarke said at the 1934 convention, "The Church has the best thing in life to offer to humanity, the saving and regenerating gospel of Jesus Christ."<sup>132</sup> Throughout the 1930s and 1940s, speeches given at the RPC conventions and correspondence between members included countless references to Jesus Christ. Even the national Secretary of Commerce, Daniel C. Roper – who addressed the RPC in 1934 to raise support for the NRA codes – talked about Jesus. He gave his support to the work of public relations, arguing that the country needed the "teachings of Jesus to pull America out of the Depression."<sup>133</sup> Others

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<sup>131</sup> M.E. McIntosh, "What Are the Important Differences Between Religious Publicity in General and Publicity Especially Designed to Secure Financial Support for Missionary and Other Benevolent Work?" March 19-20, 1929, Manuscript, folder "History National Religious Publicity Council 1929-1934," box 4, Records: 1952-1988 (88-0630), RPRCC.

<sup>132</sup> Summary of Address by Walter I. Clarke, April 12, 1934, Appendix C, folder "History National Religious Publicity Council 1929-1934," box 4, Records: 1952-1988 (88-0630), RPRCC.

<sup>133</sup> Summary of Address by Daniel C. Roper, April 12, 1934, folder "History National Religious Publicity Council 1929-1934," box 4, Records: 1952-1988 (88-0630), RPRCC.

commonly referred to the RPC message and work as promoting “Christianity,” “Jesus Christ,” the “Word,” and the “Gospel,” as well as combinations of these terms.<sup>134</sup>

However, throughout these first decades, the organization remained only unofficially Christian. Though its members solely talked about and worked in Christianity, they took no steps to assert that the RPC was only a Christian organization. Formal recognition would not come until the 1950s. In the 1929 constitution, charter members chose not to include the word “Christian.” Instead, they used the general term “religious” to describe their purpose and ends. This did not change for the next two decades, as there remained no official allusions to Christianity in subsequent constitutional amendments and resolutions. In fact, so strong was the desire to maintain this plasticity in definition that a 1951 effort to change it was opposed. That year, at the annual convention, several members recommended that the organization change its name from the National Religious Publicity Council to the National Protestant Council of Public Relations.<sup>135</sup> Not only was this recommendation denied, it was never even pursued. Thus, the de facto definition of the RPC would remain ambiguous in constitution, but clearly de jure as a Protestant organization, given the membership and the words they chose to express their purpose.. This strict devotion to promoting the message of Jesus Christ would prove particularly challenging.

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<sup>134</sup> A few examples: Joseph E. Boyle, “Selecting Ideas for Church Public Relations,” *NRPC Counselor* (March 1951), box 5, Records: 1952-1988 (88-0630), RPRCC; Clifford P. Morehouse, Excerpts of Address: “Public Relations – An Avenue of Evangelism,” *NRPC Counselor* (Autumn 1952), box 5, Records: 1952-1988 (88-0630), RPRCC; D.H.C. Read, Excerpts of Address: “Speak to the Present!” *NRPC Counselor* (March 1952), box 5, Records: 1952-1988 (88-0630), RPRCC; Myrta Ross, “Getting the Message to the Local Community,” *NRPC Counselor* (Spring 1954), box 5, Records: 1952-1988 (88-0630), RPRCC; John Heuss, “The True Function of a Local Church,” Manuscript, April 08, 1954, folder “1954 Convention,” box 6, Records: 1929-1985 (89-1115a), RPRCC; Convention Brochure, folder “1958 Convention,” box 6, Records: 1929-1985 (89-1115a), RPRCC.

<sup>135</sup> “All in the Name,” Chapter 2, *RPRC: A 50-Year Reflection*, box 1, Records: 1952-1988 (88-0630), RPRCC.

*The Customers Killed the Salesman*

In his first letter in the Bible, John, a disciple of Jesus, writes, “Do not be surprised, my brothers, if the world hates you.”<sup>136</sup> This may seem an odd statement to other Christians from a founding figure in Christianity. Why would the world hate these early Christians? Jesus himself answered this question on numerous occasions, as recorded in the Bible. In a prayer to God the Father, Jesus says, “I have given them your word and the world has hated them, for they are not of the world any more than I am of the world.”<sup>137</sup> According to Jesus, his followers would be scorned because they would have God’s word. It was precisely because the disciples had the message of God, as given by Jesus, that the world would hate them. People would despise these messengers of Christianity. Even more to the point, Jesus said at another time, “All men will hate you because of me, but he who stands firm to the end will be saved.”<sup>138</sup> Here, Jesus was even more specific in saying that all people will hate Christians for one reason, because they are Christians, because they are believers in and messengers of the teachings of Jesus. In fact, according to historical accounts Jesus was right, all but one of the twelve original messengers for Jesus were killed for what they represented. Lest one forget, Jesus himself was killed for the message of Christianity after all of his followers abandoned him.

This suggests that Christianity may actually not be agreeable to the preferences and predilections of society. There was something offensive about this religion,

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<sup>136</sup> 1 John 3:13 (New International Version).

<sup>137</sup> John 17:14.

<sup>138</sup> Matthew 10:22.

something that could push people away, drive them to hate those who represented it. Perhaps it was Jesus' claim to be God, or his demands that followers leave behind their worldly possessions, or his diagnosis of the human condition as selfish and corrupt. Whatever it might have been that pushed people away and led them to kill the original messengers, there was something about the "product" that offended. Thus, Hungerford's assumption that a truthful representation of Christian institutions would be publicly favorable could be problematic. Of course, Christians could emphasize the more universally favorable beliefs and practices of Christianity, such as care for the poor and love for neighbor. But would these be half-truths, deceptively hiding the more disagreeable issues from public view? Church promotion advocates had a challenging road ahead of them, laboring to purify the methods of the marketplace and faithfully represent their product, while attracting broad public interest.

Historian Alan Raucher explains the ways in which the public relations business sought to improve its reputation and defend its role in the economy by associating itself with psychological theories and other admirable methods.<sup>139</sup> Just as public relations labored to make itself more scientific, religious public relations would spend the rest of the century laboring to make itself more religious. The challenge that faced the professionals of the RPC and other church promotion experts and practitioners was: How do you favorably represent that which is not necessarily favorable, and do so without surrendering integrity and transparency? If they only represented half-truths or twisted the facts to court public opinion, would they be any "better" or more "pure" than their

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<sup>139</sup> Alan R. Raucher, *Public Relations and Business, 1900-1929* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1968), 116.

secular publicity counterparts? Would they be any different from any other institution in the marketplace? Would there be anything sacred about their work? The RPC, and other experts, hoped to accomplish the larger task of promoting a religion that could be unfavorable by using the methods of a profession known for deception, and yet not compromise accuracy or core religious principles and values. This was a tall order and it plagued the endeavor throughout its history. The search for an answer was the central dilemma.

### Defending & Opposing Church Advertising

Despite the proliferation of business promotionalism in Christian churches – and the apparent incongruities in the application of one to the other – there were few protests. Over the first four decades of the century, one can only find murmurs of concern and opposition. Most religious leaders accepted the practices as not only necessary but appropriate for churches in their effort to compete with other institutions and products in the American consumer society. However, even in their endorsements, church spokesmen suggested such criticism or internal concern existed by their defenses and justifications for the place of promotional methods in religion. There were also more explicit concerns, expressed in various public forums by a few critics of church promotion. Though their voices were few and weak, they touched on the obstacles that all church promotion advocates would face throughout the century as they sought to carve out a proper space for marketplace methods in American Christian churches.

#### *Pragmatic & Historic Defenses*

In the early twentieth century, some ministers and experts offered basic reasons and defenses for using the latest in advertising to promote a church. They typically pursued two courses of argument: pragmatic and theological/historical. Throughout the century, these would remain the two key lines of defense against both internal concerns and external criticisms of church promotion. In the pragmatic defense, the proponent pointed to the success of the methods in other venues and to the absolute necessity for religion to use the methods to remain competitive. In the theological/historical defense, church promoters presented examples from the Bible and church history to demonstrate that promotion always had been a part of Christianity.

One religious promotion expert of the 1920s provided both of the angles of defense. In his 1925 guide, *The Church and Printer's Ink*, Ralph Gilbert provided three pragmatic reasons and several theological/historical reasons to utilize business promotionalism in churches. In his pragmatic defense, Gilbert explained that, first, the church has the greatest message; second, advertising is the best way to reach people; and third, "The Church has no right not to use this way." In this last reason, Gilbert explained that churches were not operating at full capacity and thus were obligated to do whatever necessary to "fill the pews." It was incumbent upon churches to use promotional methods. They had a duty employ methods that worked. However, Gilbert also explained that such methods always had been used to spread Christianity. Gilbert noted that not to advertise would be to deny the promotional legacy of the religion's patriarchs. In his formulation, as a means to gain attention, Isaiah walked around nude, Jeremiah hid a girdle in the Euphrates river, and Ezekiel made a tile into a toy city. Most importantly,

he wrote, Jesus was lifted up on a cross to attract people.<sup>140</sup> Many others in the other guides and in articles seconded these defenses. Conservative, Paul Rader agreed in his sermon, “Who Put the Ad in Advertising?” He answered that it was God who put the ad in advertising and had provided advertisements of himself in the rocks and the “greatest advertisement ever read,” John 3:16.<sup>141</sup>

Similarly, a few years before, Francis Case also provided defenses for church promotion. In 1921, Case carefully outlined the reasons why a church should advertise. Fundamentally, he argued from a historical/theological perspective that it is the “divine commission” of the church “to bring itself and its work before all people.” Advertising also would express the church’s message in a form that “modern man” could understand. It would rouse people to participate in the church, and it would attract the “nonchurched multitude.”<sup>142</sup> Best of all, according to Case, it could do all this economically. Advertising could, he explained, “reduce production costs.” Case explained that advertising offered economies of scale – that it cost the same to produce a church service for a few or for many. Therefore, if many more came, the income would rise, as would the dissemination of the product, while costs did not increase. Advertising, therefore, increased profitability.<sup>143</sup> Such defenses may have been partially a response to criticisms of church promotion, though there were very few during the era.

### *Ripples of Opposition*

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<sup>140</sup> Ralph V. Gilbert, *The Church and Printer's Ink* (New York: Fleming F. Revell Company, 1925), 17-8.

<sup>141</sup> Paul Rader, “Who Put the Ad in Advertising?” n.d. reel 4, Rader Papers, quoted in Abrams, 43.

<sup>142</sup> Case, 17-22.

<sup>143</sup> Ibid.

In the first twenty years of church promotion, few critics arose to challenge the adoption of business promotionalism in churches. As Abrams explains, even in the most conservative of Fundamentalist circles there was little or no criticism of using advertising in churches.<sup>144</sup> This seems particularly surprising at a time (c. 1911) when criticism against the advertising industry at large was substantial enough to push it to launch a “truth in advertising” movement.<sup>145</sup> Perhaps the lag in church promotion adoption and its more simplistic methods accounted for the delay in church promotion criticism, which began in the 1920s. Criticisms of commercial promotion methods in churches did increase in the 1920s and 1930s. There had been isolated instances of opposition in the 1920s, which expanded in the following decade as public dispersion of business grew.

Some Christians opposed the influence of advertising on American culture. The *Christian Advocate* published a piece in 1926 that raised concerns about the anti-Christian values of greed and materialism that advertising engendered in the culture.<sup>146</sup> The pastor of an episcopal church in New York warned against the evils of publicity in general. He explained that significance was now assigned to things based on their public exposure because of advertising and publicity. This trend, he argued, would displace the true values of Christianity in society.<sup>147</sup> Similarly, Presbyterian minister, Morgan Phelps Noyes warned the graduating class of 1935 at Union Theological Seminary to reject publicity in their churches. He insisted that it was “pernicious” and had no place in

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<sup>144</sup> Abrams, 30.

<sup>145</sup> Pope, 203-04.

<sup>146</sup> “Jesus and the Advertising Pages,” *Christian Advocate*, February 18, 1926.

<sup>147</sup> “Publicity Mania Scored for Distorting Values; Dr. Bernadin Pleads for Simplicity,” *New York Times*, August 29, 1932.



religion.<sup>148</sup> Noyes' concern was specifically with the application of commercial methods to religion. In 1923, resident advertising expert Joseph Van Raalte wrote of a similar concern in the *Washington Post*. He argued that Bibles and religion should not be advertised on billboards because they were the wrong medium to promote religion to people. He asserted that one could not promote "Solomon and soap" or "Matthew and malted milk" the same.<sup>149</sup>

One pastor obviously agreed with these concerns and wrote a book aimed in part at denouncing such promotion practices. Episcopal bishop Charles Fiske wrote *The Confessions of a Puzzled Parson* in 1928. His ninety-page book expressed his many concerns about the adoption of business methods in religion. "America has become almost hopelessly enamored of a religion that is little more than a sanctified commercialism; it is hard in this day and this land to differentiate between religious aspiration and business prosperity."<sup>150</sup> The sensationalism of ministers, electrical advertising signs, and entertainment in services reduced God to a product, argued Fiske. He balked at church's "selling Jesus Christ."<sup>151</sup>

A future leading theologian, Reinhold Niebuhr, joined his criticisms. In the 1920s, Niebuhr was a young pastor in Detroit and not yet a public intellectual or source of neo-orthodox theology. As a local minister, he expressed concerns about church promotion. Niebuhr pointed to church advertising in newspapers as a clear indication of the commercialization of American Christianity. He noted as early as 1924 that church

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<sup>148</sup> "Seminary Graduates Warned on Publicity," *New York Times*, May 22, 1935.

<sup>149</sup> "Human Nature on the Half Shell," *Washington Post*, December 2, 1923.

<sup>150</sup> Charles Fiske, *The Confessions of a Puzzled Parson, and Other Pleas for Reality* (New York: C. Scribner's Sons, 1928), 14.

<sup>151</sup> *Ibid.*, 74.

advertisements demonstrated a “vulgar” pride and sensationalism in their attempts to attract more people. With their captivating titles for topical sermons that attracted crowds, advertising now replaced sermons that carefully examined the Bible.<sup>152</sup> He listed similar criticisms in his 1929 *Leaves from the Notebook of a Tamed Cynic*, a collection of Niebuhr’s observations as a young pastor of a church in Detroit, Michigan. In *Cynic*, he wondered why so many Baptist and Methodist churches were increasingly offering “vaudeville programs and the hip-hip-hooray type religious services.” He worried that “The vulgarities of the stunt preacher are hardly compatible with either the robust spiritual vitality or the puritan traditions of the more evangelistic churches.” The churches did this, he feared, because religion had been recalibrated among the masses as simply an emotional experience. Entertainment was the only way to satisfy them. “There is something pathetic about the effort of the churches to capture these spiritually vacuous multitudes by resort to any device which may intrigue their vagrant fancies,” Niebuhr lamented.<sup>153</sup> Yet his criticisms sat in virtual isolation.

In the 1930s, there was little or no opposition to church promotion. This is particularly surprising given the general public opinion of the advertising industry. The 1930s were difficult years for advertising. Whereas advertising volume grew from \$1.4 billion in 1919 to over \$3 billion in 1929, its value fell to \$1.3 billion just four years later.<sup>154</sup> As revenues decreased, criticism increased. Prior to 1930, representatives of the muckrakers and consumer movement criticized the misrepresentation and exploitation of

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<sup>152</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, “What Are the Churches Advertising?” *Christian Century*, December 27, 1924.

<sup>153</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, *Leaves from the Notebook of a Tamed Cynic* (New York: Richard R. Smith, 1929), 162-64.

<sup>154</sup> Walter A. Friedman, *Birth of a Salesman: The Transformation of Selling in America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), 196; Fox, 118-19.

advertising agencies. However, they did not oppose the basic values of consumption and commercialism that supported the methods.<sup>155</sup> Even so, opponents attacked advertising for promoting consumption in a time of want. Historian Stephen Fox provides numerous cultural examples of specific attacks on advertising. One of note was the creation of a popular magazine, *Ballyhoo*, that used satire to criticize advertising's values of pride, envy, and deception.<sup>156</sup> Even the president of the AAAA proclaimed in 1934 that society had turned against the advertisers.<sup>157</sup> Yet as historian Gary Smith notes, few conservative and liberal Protestants criticized the values and methods of commercial advertising in religion.<sup>158</sup>

One likely reason such criticism did not arise was that advertising subsided among churches as a topic of great interest during the 1930s. As Douglas Abrams notes, "The Great Crash and the deepening depression did more than scriptural admonitions had done to sour them [conservative Protestants] on the excesses of the business civilization."<sup>159</sup> By the early 1930s, concerns about stewardship and fundraising were supplanting discussions on advertising and publicity in many American Christian churches. Considerably fewer books were published on church promotion, and those that were written, addressed publicity more than advertising. After all, publicity was free and advertising could cost a great deal. As churches' slashed their budgets and removed advertising line items, publicity became the primary, if not sole, promotional tool. There

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<sup>155</sup> Smith, 52-3.

<sup>156</sup> Fox, 122-23.

<sup>157</sup> *Ibid.*, 126.

<sup>158</sup> Smith, 53.

<sup>159</sup> Abrams, 49.

were exceptions – a church would buy a new sign or run a newspaper advertisement – but they were usually accompanied with innovative ways to raise the money to pay for it.

In fact, the key subject of discussion became the means to pay for the promotion, not the promotion itself. Articles in *Church Management* also turned their attention to fund raising. A major concern in the 1930s was clearly how to increase the giving of the congregation, not how to increase the size of the congregation. The new tools were no longer neon signs and fancy letters, but offering envelopes.<sup>160</sup> In addition, the organizations and meetings formed around church advertising began to fade into obscurity with few announcements of events, meetings or news in the local newspapers.

Between 1900 and 1939, there were traces of criticism against church promotion. Recognizing the potential incongruities between religion and marketplace methods, some advocates and experts provided both pragmatic and theological/historical defenses for the conjoining of the two. Meanwhile, some pastors and theologians raised concerns about the effects that such developments could have on religion. Nevertheless, the criticisms remained sparse and brief. By the 1930s, however, the collapse of the American economic system compelled church leaders to reconsider their confidence in business promotionalism and their priorities with limited resources. They turned their attention from promotional methods to focus on fund raising techniques. They questioned their pragmatic arguments for utilizing marketplace methods to increase church attendance. So severe was this uncertainty and reexamination that even one of the most significant pioneers in the field, Christian Reisner, reneged on his earlier commitment to promotional methods. In 1937, he recommended that ministers continue to use direct

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<sup>160</sup> Multiple Issues, *Church Management* 9 (October 1932 – September 1933).

mail as a means to attract people, but went on to say that “miscellaneous newspaper, radio or billboard publicity has not, as a rule, proven very effective.”<sup>161</sup> One of the leading advocates had lost confidence in the power of advertising and publicity in American Christian churches. Yet such confidence would soon return as the 1940s ushered in a new era of vitality in church promotion.

## Conclusion

The October 1940 issue of *Church Management* summarized the confusion in the church promotion industry at the conclusion of the 1930s. One article proposed that in attracting people to a church, “We cannot emulate the commercial organization by sending solicitors into their homes. We cannot shout the merit of our ‘ware’ through the medium of newspaper and billboards.”<sup>162</sup> The author, F.G. Alpers, insisted that the commercial means of advertising were not permissible in religion, especially not through newspapers, billboards, and salesmen. He recognized the public criticisms of advertising and feared that associating with the industry would invite public scorn of churches. Yet an article just a few pages prior provided in-depth instruction on how ministers could write “news worthy” press releases to garner free publicity. In contrast to Alpers, the author of this piece argued that the methods of the marketplace, particularly public relations, were invaluable for churches. An advertisement in the same issue boasted of guaranteed success if one was to “Advertise Your Church with This Illuminated

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<sup>161</sup> William H. Leach, “New Techniques for Church Attendance,” *Church Management* 13 (September 1936): 592.

<sup>162</sup> F.G. Alpers, “When Tower Bells Sing,” *Church Management* 17 (October 1940): 45.

Bulletin.”<sup>163</sup> Finally, an editorial in the same issue of *Church Management* explained how the National Christian Mission had successfully trained a sales force to visit homes directly. It provided detailed instruction on training church sales people and the latest methods to convince someone to attend church. Thus, in a single issue of the flagship journal religious advertising was excoriated and praised. Such contradictions and arguments would continue throughout the century and present retailing religion with intractable challenges.

The period between 1900 and 1939 set the stage for a century of church promotionalism, and although the methods would change, the challenges would remain the same. A priesthood of experts in religious retailing had arisen. Following their lead, many churches had embraced advertising methods and begun experimenting with public relations strategies. The industry of church retailing had even expanded to the point of professionalization with the establishment of an organization for full-time church promoters. In applying the founders’ methods, these early adopters had begun to introduce new levels of modernization in American Christian churches and opened up a space for contention over the church’s relationship with the world. Although enthusiasm for the methods of market promotion subsided in the 1930s, it would reemerge in the 1940s thanks mainly to the efforts of a handful of religious journalists. This next generation would usher church promotion into its next era, a period built on journalism and consequentially public relations. They, too, would wrestle with the tensions latent in using marketplace methods to retail religion.

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<sup>163</sup> Advertisement, “Advertise Your Church With This Illuminated Bulletin,” *Church Management* 17 (October 1940): 65

## Chapter 2

### Journalism: Building a Foundation for Religious Promotion (1940 – 1952)

The expansion of religion in American life in the post-war era generated a vigorous supply and demand for modern methods of religious promotion. As pastors looked for the latest trends in church promotion, a flurry of how-to guides hit the market. In the 1940s, the number of guides and related materials nearly doubled from those produced in the 1930s. In the 1950s, the number doubled again. This phenomenal growth placed the experts of the 1940s in a unique position, with the opportunity to lay the foundations for an industry. With very little written on the subject in the 1930s, they looked back to the religious advertising leaders of the 1920s, such as Charles Stelzle, Christian Reisner, and Francis Case. Yet these works were limited to advertising techniques of nearly twenty years prior. The experts of the 1940s, therefore, leaned heavily on their own experience in advertising and particularly in journalism to establish the gold standard in church promotion for decades to come, a standard that would center more on press relations and the growing field of public relations than advertising. In the books they wrote, the speeches they gave, and the classes they taught, they set the basic patterns, dialogues, and issues that would shape the industry until new practices in church marketing would change the rules and plays of the game in the mid-1970s.

The influence of these few experts appears in their numerous citations in the many guides written in the 1950s and the years beyond, the formal education programs

that they established for the field, and their references to one another. As a handful of new church promotion advocates emerged in the 1950s, 60s and 70s, they typically cited these experts of the 1940s. However, the greatest credit to their influence was that after 1951, only one more person, Ralph Stoody in 1959, would publish a guide that could compete in popularity and citations with the experts of the 1940s. They were, of course, not the only ones to publish books during this ten-year period on church promotion. There were several others. One of the more notable was written by economist and business expert Roger W. Babson. His book, *The Open Church Door*, presented a model for a “modern” church open seven days a week that would focus on service to the community and present its sermons on radio and television.<sup>1</sup> Yet books such as these were similar to the major texts of the period, and later church promotion experts did not cite them as frequently, if at all. This chapter, therefore, considers the work of seven principle experts, their careers, and their instruction guides: Carl F.H. Henry, Roland E. Wolseley, Gaines S. Dobbins, John L. Fortson, Stanley Stuber, Stewart Harral, and Willard Pleuthner. In their work, one can see the growth of a church promotion industry built on public relations through journalism, proliferated through education, and uncertain about the “dignity” of its methods.

## Church Promotion Trends in the 1940s

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<sup>1</sup> Babson, Roger Ward, *The Open Church Door, For Bringing People to the Church: a Project in Adult Religious Education* (Newton Center, MA: Andover Newton Book Store, 1942).



Both the advertising and public relations industries expanded in the 1940s. In 1941, Americans spent \$2.2 billion on advertising - in 1950, \$5.7 billion.<sup>2</sup> Advertising firms grew with demand, as did the methods and strategies they recommended. Yet the real growth was in public relations. In the 1940s, corporations continued to defend against the imperatives of the New Deal culture in America. Public relations was a popular weapon, and it expanded as a vital component in American business. By 1949, *Forbes* magazine reported that 4,000 corporations had public relations programs and 500 public relations firms supported the efforts of those that did not.<sup>3</sup> In combatting the New Deal, the field also shifted from a focus on commercial objectives to broader political ones. Stewart Ewen explains “public relations assumed an increasingly evangelical tone.”<sup>4</sup> It sought to promote broader ideas that would push against the encroachment of the state in American society. Yet it also began to assume a larger “evangelical tone” in converting the religious opinions of the public.

Throughout the decade, public relations expanded in religion, though religious applications lagged behind the rest of the field. In 1943, the editorial board of *Church Management* argued that the “most serious failure of the modern church” was its lack of effective public relations effort.<sup>5</sup> In response to this glaring weakness, church promotion experts recommended simple strategies and methods that did not shape political thought, but merely encouraged positive public regard for churches. They instructed religious

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<sup>2</sup> Stephen R. Fox, *The Mirror Makers: A History of American Advertising and its Creators* (New York: Morrow, 1984), 170, 172.

<sup>3</sup> “Business is Still in Trouble” *Fortune*, May 1949, 67-71, quoted in Stuart Ewen, *PR!: A Social History of Spin* (New York: Basic Books, 1996), 357.

<sup>4</sup> Ewen, 357.

<sup>5</sup> “The Churches Need Effective Publicity,” *Church Management* 20 (October 1943): 7.

leaders in using the local press and media outlets in combination with traditional advertising strategies. The most popular word to describe this enterprise, between 1940 and 1951, was publicity.

According to many Christian leaders, as summarized in *Church Management*, if the churches were to succeed and communicate with the world beyond their doors, they needed a “good publicity agent to sell the church to the world.”<sup>6</sup> The term publicity had grown in popularity in the 1930s, used to describe any form of advertising, public relations, and journalism. The church promotion experts of the 1940s used the term expansively, envisioning a more comprehensive promotional system. They included more methods to advertise, more ways to court public opinion, and more outlets to present a message to the community. The most significant alteration in the period was the expansive role of journalism as the foundation for church promotion. Many of the methods and messages that they suggested were simply refrains of those recommended by the advertising experts of the 1920s like Charles Stelzle and Christian Reisner. Before considering the impact of journalism on church promotion, it is helpful to consider the patterns that continued from the previous era.

In 1951, students Rex Lawson and James Flanagan both finished their theses on church promotion, which map the popular methods employed at the time. Lawson’s “Church Publicity and the Local Church,” written at Butler University, included surveys of 143 local churches in different denominations and found that eighty percent of the churches believed “publicity” to be “very important.”<sup>7</sup> James Flanagan’s “A Study of

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Rex Lawson, “Church Publicity and the Local Church” (Bachelor of Divinity Thesis, Butler University, 1951), 123.

Local Church Publicity” at Drake University included a survey of 122 Disciples of Christ churches in the state of Iowa, many of which agreed.

Both studies found that various forms of outdoor advertising remained popular in informing local residents and visitors about a church’s existence and services. According to Lawson’s survey, 37 percent of churches used some form of advertising outdoors, whether it be billboards, street banners, posters, or signs in front of churches.<sup>8</sup> The instructional guides of the period recommended all of these methods, also including electric and neon signs, just as they had in the 1920s. However, endorsements for electronic chime and public address systems supplanted previous suggestions for building church steeples and installing church bells as a means to attract attention.<sup>9</sup> These new systems were more versatile, capable of providing music for the community, but also able to project announcements. Such new sound systems could also project worship services into other rooms and out from the building.<sup>10</sup>

Direct mail advertising remained very popular among the experts. Despite the cost of postage and printing, mailing information directly to members and visitors was an affordable form of church promotion. Options included a myriad of different letters that welcomed visitors, thanked members, and informed the community. According to Flanagan’s survey, 80 percent of ministers used such letters on a regular basis to develop

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 115.

<sup>9</sup> Weldon Crossland, *How to Increase Church Membership and Attendance* (New York: Cokesbury Press, 1949), 155; Carl F.H. Henry, *Successful Church Publicity: a Guidebook for Christian Publicists* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1943), 198.

<sup>10</sup> Henry, 199.

relationships with the community and encourage attendance at church.<sup>11</sup> Ministers could also purchase or produce cards of all shapes, sizes, and colors to send out that announced upcoming events at the church. Others produced “parish papers” or church newsletters that could provide extensive information on the church to the community. Yet the most popular method was the weekly bulletin.<sup>12</sup> Lawson discovered that 96 percent of the churches he surveyed mailed church bulletins out each week to inform the community of upcoming services.<sup>13</sup> Bulletins were also at the top of the recommendations given by the experts in their instruction guides. Most recommended all of these methods and explained how to produce them. They also provided specific instructions and recommendations on the latest equipment to aid in producing such materials.

Church promotion in the 1940s took advantage of recent technological innovation. The guides of this period provided detailed comparisons of the cost and quality of different publication machines such as the duplicator and mimeograph.<sup>14</sup> They explained how to use each to create attractive, yet affordable, bulletins, letterhead, and parish papers. Visual aides were also a topic of discussion as many guides recommended that a sixteen-millimeter film projector was a must-have for any church.<sup>15</sup> *Church Management* believed it so important that they allocated eight pages, an enormous article

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<sup>11</sup> James M. Flanagan, “A Study of Local Church Publicity” (Master of Arts Thesis, Drake University, August, 1951), 31.

<sup>12</sup> Willard A. Pleuthner, *Building up Your Congregation: Help from Tested Business Methods* (Chicago: Wilcox & Follett, 1950), 105.

<sup>13</sup> Lawson, 117.

<sup>14</sup> Henry, 180, 183.

<sup>15</sup> Gaines S. Dobbins, *Building Better Churches: A Guide to the Pastoral Ministry* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1947), 393; John L. Fortson, *How to Make Friends for Your Church, a Manual on Public Relations* (New York: Association Press, 1943), 122.

for that journal, to a piece on “The Use of Visual Aids in the Church.”<sup>16</sup> There were also countless advertisements for the latest projectors, film screens, and audio players. Companies like Victor advertised their “16mm Sound Motion Picture Projectors” with the headline, “New high in church attendance!”<sup>17</sup> By the late 1940s, the bulk of advertisements in the journal were for projectors and accompanying films that taught the bible stories. Experts and ads claimed that showing films, both religious and secular, could attract larger crowds at any religious function.

Showing church advertisements during films, and broadcasting on radio and television were other approaches for growth. In 1941, Irving Mack of the Filmack Trailer Company produced a number of generic “Come to Church” trailers for churches to purchase and provide to local theaters. As of January 1941, he had received well over a 1,000 orders for the trailers.<sup>18</sup> As the radio industry expanded, more churches experimented with religious programming on the airwaves. They did not run advertisements on the radio as much as they broadcasted their Sunday services, conducted interviews with religious figures, and offered Bible story dramatizations. The majority of guides now included a chapter on using the radio. They suggested programming options, explained how to work with local stations, and projected that in the future many people would participate in church by listening at home.<sup>19</sup> Rex Lawson

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<sup>16</sup> “The Use of Visual Aids in the Church,” *Church Management* 21 (July 1945): 17-26.

<sup>17</sup> “Using the Duplicator to Stimulate Interest,” *Church Management* 23 (October 1946): 50; Advertisement, “Victor 16mm Sound Motion Picture Projectors,” *Church Management* 23 (February 1947): 27.

<sup>18</sup> H.L. Williams, “Use the Movies to Build Church Attendance,” *Church Management* 17 (January 1941): 232.

<sup>19</sup> Fortson, 110-13; Henry, 172; Pleuthner, 110; Roland E. Wolseley, *Interpreting the Church through Press and Radio* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1951), 181.

noted that 45 percent of the churches he surveyed in 1951 used radio for promotion.<sup>20</sup>

Television, though not nearly as widely employed, was also mentioned in most guides as a means to “publicize” a church. Yet despite the changes in church promotion through radio and other new technological developments, the greatest shift in church promotion in the 1940s was in journalism and press relations.

### Journalism Leads Church Promotion: Carl F.H. Henry & Roland Wolseley

In 1941, the Religious Publicity Council collaborated with Union Theological Seminary to host a conference on the “Church and the Press.” Promotional material promised that at the conference, “Church executives and publicists will meet with practicing newspapermen to talk over their common interests as fashioners of public opinion.”<sup>21</sup> A perennial problem that they discussed was the lack of space given to religious institutions and news in the “secular press.” They also lamented the lack of expertise among ministers in writing for the press. Numerous editors of national newspapers and magazines spoke at the conferences, instructing the attendees on how to write religious news so that it would be attractive to editors and get printed. Six years later the RPC cooperated with the Associated Church Press to share a similar conference, focusing on the topics of “The Church Press in Today’s World,” “Improving the Product of the Church Press,” and “The Church Press and Great Causes.”<sup>22</sup> This focus in the

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<sup>20</sup> Lawson, 114.

<sup>21</sup> Minutes Written by Richard T. Baker, February 28, 1941, folder “Early Minutes,” box 4, Records: 1952-1988 (88-0630), RPRCC.

<sup>22</sup> Program Outline for the “National Religious Publicity Council Annual Meeting” on April 16-19, 1947, folder “Early Minutes,” box 4, Records: 1952-1988 (88-0630), RPRCC.

1940s on the role of the press and journalism in religious promotion was an important shift.

The most distinct difference in the 1940s guides, in comparison to those of the 1920s and 1930s, was the new prominence of journalism. Journalists had been involved in business public relations since the first decade of the century. They had played a minor role in church promotion as well. Yet in the 1940s, they became the principal figures. Perhaps the most striking feature of this change was the background of the experts that now led the industry. Nearly all were professionally trained and accomplished journalists, as opposed to the advertising experts of the 1920s and 30s. As their work took center stage, the center of church promotion shifted from advertising to religious journalism. Throughout their careers, these men worked tirelessly to instruct pastors in the advantages of writing, publishing, and press agency in a church.

They opened up a new subfield of journalism for religion that would increasingly form the core of church promotion, especially in public relations. Religious journalism was not limited to just the use of the secular newspapers to spread news about churches, but included the journals and publications that the churches themselves generated. It was an effort to improve and increase the utilization of writing in promoting Christianity and the churches that provided its messages and services. The secular press changed as well, to meet the demands of church promotion. By 1946, more than half of the newspapers with a circulation larger than 500,000 had a religious or church editor on staff to work with churches in publishing the latest religious news.<sup>23</sup> Denominations also established their own press bureaus. They hired journalists to produce in house journals and release

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<sup>23</sup> Henry, 96-7.

information to the press. According to James Flanagan's study, by 1951, the local newspaper was the most "generally accepted means" to promote among local churches. He found that 98 percent of the churches surveyed used the newspaper in some form to publicize. Rex Lawson discovered as well that 95 percent of the churches he studied used the newspaper.<sup>24</sup> Of these, around 90 percent submitted news stories about special events while many even wrote a regular column or feature.<sup>25</sup> All of these churches looked to the 1940s experts for guidance in practicing religious journalism.

### *How to Write for the Press*

The primary hurdle in religious journalism for local churches was scaling the wall between a minister and a newspaper editor. One local editor expressed her frustration with ministers in a *Church Management* article. Roberta White's 1944 article, "I Know More about Churches than Most Ministers," quoted church promotion expert Carl F.H. Henry in her criticism. "The day is past when a man is qualified for religious journalism merely because he is a preacher, though he has an aggravated flair for writing."<sup>26</sup> Journalism had developed professionally beyond the common communication skills of the local preacher. If a church was to work with the press effectively, ministers had to learn the techniques and values of modern journalism, which according to the experts was well worth the effort.

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<sup>24</sup> Lawson, 96-7.

<sup>25</sup> Lawson, 97; Flanagan, 36.

<sup>26</sup> H. Roberta White, "I Know More about Churches than Most Ministers," *Church Management* 20 (February 1944): 50.



The books of the 1940s were confident that religion was of interest to the public, and if ministers could learn how to deliver news about their church in an acceptable form to a local editor, it would make it in the papers. Each of the experts worked with or for the press in some capacity. They spoke from experience. They believed that the people were interested in reading about religion and that the editors were proud of the churches' work in the community.<sup>27</sup>

They recommended that ministers go to great lengths to cultivate relationships with the editors of local papers. Journalism professor, Roland Wolseley, suggested that preachers work on the side for a newspaper to get a first-hand experience. Experts also celebrated that ministerial students were beginning to take journalism courses, cultivate relationships with local editors, and learn the proper format of writing for the press.<sup>28</sup>

The most common information in the guides instructed ministers in recognizing “newsworthy” events and presenting the information in an acceptable format. Newspapers would not carry a story about just any event; it had to be something of particular interest that would catch the public’s attention. It was also not to be simply an advertisement. Experts repeatedly warned ministers not to use the press for free advertising, as it would burn bridges with local media outlets. If a minister had a genuine event however, he had to create a professional news release so that the local press could easily report it. Thus, writing “copy” and creating press releases were the most popular topics in all of the guides. They instructed ministers to study the newspapers and learn what makes for good “copy.” The format was important: how much space to leave

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<sup>27</sup> Stewart Harral, *Public Relations for Churches* (New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, 1945), 47, 51.

<sup>28</sup> White, “I Know More,” 51.

between lines and words, the size of the margins, and the grammar.<sup>29</sup> In addition, a minister had to be sure to write a good first paragraph or “lead,” which efficiently highlighted all of the major points of the event.<sup>30</sup> Guidebooks explained how to select the proper photographs and include them in the release. As well, they provided detailed comparisons of the newest machines that produced promotional materials and directions how to operate them, such as a mimeograph machine.<sup>31</sup> All of this expertise could help a local minister improve the exposure and reputation of his church in the local community through the press.

There were three particular advantages to religious journalism as a promotional method. The first was that newspaper publicity ensured widespread dissemination. Unlike a billboard, a sign in front of a church, or a bulletin, newspapers in the 1940s were on millions of doorsteps, in people’s kitchens, and in their bedrooms. Well-written and well-placed religious journalism could catch the attention of an enormous audience. A second advantage was that it was free. Whereas advertising and direct mailing could cost a great deal, a story or column in the newspaper about one’s church cost nothing. It was essentially free advertising. Lastly, newspapers represented an objective opinion to a community. If the news said good things about a church, public opinion was more likely to take their word for it. This was a paramount step in the growth of church public relations. Advertising was what a church thought about itself, but religious journalism was what others thought about a church. There was no better way to court public favor than to court favorable reporting by local journalists. Thus, the expansion of religious

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<sup>29</sup> Henry, 184.

<sup>30</sup> Harral, 52.

<sup>31</sup> Henry, 184.

journalism in the 1940s was in many ways the necessary foundation for the religious public relations boom of the 1950s. It prepared the way by training churches how to be press agents and mold public opinion.

Two men in particular, Carl F.H. Henry and Roland Wolseley, stood out as catalysts in the growth of the field. An examination of their professional backgrounds, education, guidance, and theological training demonstrates the growth of religious journalism in promotion and its influence. Churches had to learn how to write well and use existing media outlets to familiarize the public with their services. These men centered their instructional guides and their work on helping church staff, particularly ministers, harness the potential of print media.

#### *A Conservative Theologian & Journalist: Carl F.H. Henry*

Carl F.H. Henry, a well-known and well-published theologian, left an indelible mark on Christian journalism in the twentieth century. In 1956, he accepted Billy Graham's offer to serve as founding editor of the evangelical periodical, *Christianity Today*, which today enjoys a weekly readership of nearly 290,000.<sup>32</sup> In his influential role, he set the course for the journal and became an evangelical leader. Yet it was thirteen years prior, while teaching philosophy and religion at Wheaton College, that he first changed the world of religious journalism. In 1943, he wrote his second book, *Successful Church Publicity*, later released in a second edition after World War II.<sup>33</sup> At the time, Henry was a little known figure in Christianity, but his book established him as

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<sup>32</sup> "Christianity Today," Christianity Today International, <http://www.ctiadvertising.com/print/christianity-today> (accessed August 5, 2010).

<sup>33</sup> Carl F. H. Henry, *Successful Church Publicity: a Guidebook for Christian Publicists* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1943).

an expert on church promotion. Though it included material on all forms of “publicity,” the bulk of it was devoted to instruction in Henry’s field, religious journalism. He believed that churches must invest in journalism. Henry wrote, “Its use is so effective that religious journalism . . . is next in importance to the preaching of the Gospel.”<sup>34</sup> For Henry, a journalist by trade, much of the success of Christianity depended on effective religious journalism. If churches were to grow and Christianity was to spread, then church promotion must increasingly utilize religious journalism. Thus, Henry offered his own expertise in both journalism and ministry to help churches improve.

By the time that Carl F.H. Henry completed his undergraduate degree, he had a number of years of experience in journalism. He first began working in the field as a sports writer while still in high school. After graduation, he worked for the *Islip Press* in New York as a salesman, learning that if he printed the names of local people in the paper, they would buy a subscription.<sup>35</sup> After some time in sales, he began working as a reporter for the paper. Later, while studying at Wheaton College in the mid-1930s, he worked as the editor at local papers: *The Smithtown Star*<sup>36</sup> and then the *Port Jefferson Town Echo*. He also reported on the region for the *New York Tribune*.<sup>37</sup> After graduation in 1938, in recognition of his skills in journalism and publicity, the Moody Bible Institute offered him a job in their public relations office. However, he declined and pursued a

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<sup>34</sup> Henry, 73.

<sup>35</sup> Carl F.H. Henry, *Confessions of a Theologian: An Autobiography* (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1986), 34.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.

<sup>37</sup> Dean G. Peerman and Martin E. Marty, *A Handbook of Christian Theologians* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1984), 583.

master's degree at Wheaton and then a doctorate in theology at Northern Baptist Seminary.<sup>38</sup>

Henry began working in Christian ministry while still a graduate student, serving as a youth pastor and an interim pastor for two local churches. These experiences gave him firsthand knowledge of the challenges that a pastor faced in increasing church attendance. When he finished his doctorate, instead of remaining in ministry, he began pursuing a second doctorate, a doctorate in philosophy at Boston University, simultaneously teaching at Northern Baptist Theological Seminary. At Northern Baptist, he taught theology and introduced a new subject, religious journalism.<sup>39</sup> In the 1940s, schools across the country were experimenting with courses in religious journalism to better equip ministers in promotion. Henry, along with other experts, was the driving force behind these developments. Upon completing his second doctorate, he returned to Wheaton to teach philosophy and religion for a few years. Throughout the remainder of his career, Henry would encourage the growth and improvement of religious journalism, and more broadly church publicity.

Throughout the century, church promotion advocates subtly defended the inclusion of marketplace methods in religion by pointing to their historical origins, Henry was no exception. In *Successful Church Publicity*, Henry offered the reader a detailed history of journalism in the Christian faith. He first drew the reader's attention to the expertise of the biblical authors in their writing, comparing the gospel writers to "reporters" that effectively relayed the news about Jesus' life. He argued that these

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<sup>38</sup> Henry, *Confessions*, 62.

<sup>39</sup> Timothy Larsen, D. W. Bebbington, and Mark A. Noll. *Biographical Dictionary of Evangelicals* (Leicester, England: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 297.

publicists wrote the New Testament as a publicity text that spread the “message of the Redeemer.”<sup>40</sup> He also noted the publicity value of the Old Testament, highlighting how its authors recorded “newsworthy” events, such as the fall of the walls around Jericho, which would capture the interest of the reader<sup>41</sup> Henry then led the reader on a brief tour through Christian church history, pointing out the importance of religious journalism. From Martin Luther’s publicizing the Roman Catholic Church’s errors in the *95 Theses* to the work of the English and American puritans, the public press was an important component in spreading Christianity. Henry also traced the growth of religious journalism in the modern age, particularly in specific denominations.<sup>42</sup> In so doing, he relied heavily on Ralph Stoady’s “monumental” work, *Religious Journalism, Whence and Whither?*, which in its publication alone demonstrated the growing interest in religious journalism. One of the key recent developments that Henry pointed out was the establishment of the Religious News Service by the Federal Council of Churches in 1934. By 1945, they had begun offering photographs to news outlets across the nation. By the writing of the book, they were providing between twenty-five and forty religious stories a day.<sup>43</sup> Nevertheless, according to Henry, Christianity continued to fail in capturing the promotional value latent in religious journalism as a publicity mechanism.

Though the leaders of Christianity through the ages had been publicity experts, Henry believed that religion had surrendered the expertise and authority of the field to secular institutions, a trend that had to change. In 1957, at a church publicity clinic

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<sup>40</sup> Henry, *Successful Church*, 26.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 19-26.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 29-74.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 94-6.

sponsored by the Religious Publicity Council, he explained that, “For too long secular promotion has borrowed great words and themes of Christianity to fill them with a secondary content that grieves spiritual sensitiveness.”<sup>44</sup> Christianity had the tools and message for great promotion value, according to Henry but the secular marketplace had hijacked them to sell worldly-goods. He believed that religion was the natural promoter, had been in the driver’s seat of promotion, and had let it slip away. Religion now had to take control of publicity, use it to promote products that are more valuable, he argued. “By inspiring new forms and a loftier message, it [the church] must enable the very techniques and content of publicity to bring the avenues of promotion into the service of spiritual truth and righteousness.”<sup>45</sup> Yet in order to accomplish such a goal, churches and their leaders had to learn how to navigate the halls of modern journalism. Henry sought to equip them to do so, as did another journalism expert, Roland Wolseley.

*A Religious Journalism Scholar: Roland Wolseley*

Roland Wolseley joined Carl F.H. Henry in promoting the growth and development of religious journalism. However, while Henry encouraged the field with his highly trained theological background and from within theological circles, Wolseley had no theological training and worked purely in a secular setting. Yet like so many others in church promotion, despite their different contexts and religious beliefs, the methods that they recommended were similar.

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<sup>44</sup> Kenneth Dole, “Need for Good Publicity in Religion is Stressed,” *The Washington Post and Times Herald*, October 12, 1957.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

Roland Wolseley's how-to guide, *Interpreting the Church through Press and Radio*, provided a detailed guide for ministers in religious journalism, written by a true expert in the field.<sup>46</sup> Wolseley spent his entire life working and teaching in religious journalism. He began by writing for the student newspaper and editing a literary magazine while in preparatory school at Schuylkill Seminary near Reading, Pennsylvania.<sup>47</sup> He also worked as a correspondent for several newspapers.<sup>48</sup> Part of his job at one was to retrieve news from the local churches, since they did not routinely provide information to the newspapers. This was his first exposure to religious journalism and he discovered that ministers were uninterested in and incapable of providing news material to the press. Yet he admits "in these early days, I did not see the importance of religion news nor realize how miserable was the coverage of it by most general papers. There it was considered unimportant unless it brought in substantial amounts of advertising revenue, as at Christmas and Easter."<sup>49</sup> Even the city editor of the paper, who worked on the side as a pastor, would only print the churches' news if they paid to advertise in the paper.<sup>50</sup> As a result, the church news section was "a swamp of paid and unpaid notices of sermon topics and other Sunday church news" that left no room for other religious news and information.<sup>51</sup> Over time, Wolseley would become one of the most significant influences in altering this pattern. In equipping pastors to

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<sup>46</sup> Wolseley, *Interpreting*.

<sup>47</sup> Schuylkill Seminary was a "combination four-year preparatory school, two-year junior college, and theological seminary" where Wolseley studied literature, not theology. Roland Edgar Wolseley, *Still in Print: Journey of a Writer, Teacher, Journalist* (Elgin, IL: David C. Cook Foundation, 1985), 33.

<sup>48</sup> Wolseley, *Intrepreting*, 36-7.

<sup>49</sup> Wolseley, *Still in Print*, 38.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*



improve their preparation and presentation of news to the local press, he would help foster the religious journalism boom of the 1940s and 1950s.

Wolseley graduated from the Medill School of Journalism at Northwestern University in 1928. Throughout his education, he had worked as a journalist, writing for the *Friday Literary Review* in the *Chicago Evening Post*.<sup>52</sup> His first full-time job was in the public relations department of the Pennsylvania Railroad, where, for three years, he labored to improve the public image of the railroad and to advertise its services.<sup>53</sup> During this time, in 1930, he began guiding the office staff at the First Methodist Church in Evanston, Illinois on how to prepare news releases and prepare news copy for local papers.<sup>54</sup> His work was one more example of the transition that local churches were making from paid advertising to utilizing existent press outlets for free publicity. It also reflected the increasing interest by local papers to accept and use church news. He notes in his autobiography that while his role in the church may have seemed normal by the 1980s, in the 1930s it was not. He writes, “Fifty years ago ... individual churches rarely organized their publicity and public relations activities systematically. They had no skilled persons to draw upon – or so they thought.”<sup>55</sup> This latter point is central to appreciating the influence of the marketplace on religion. In Wolseley’s estimation, the same as Henry’s, a skilled person was necessary to guide a church in publicity.

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 50.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 56.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 58; H.L. Williams, “Church Issues Press Manual,” *Church Management* 18 (February 1942): 21-2.

<sup>55</sup> Wolseley, *Still in Print*, 58.

According to experts like Wolseley, the best church promotion worker was always someone who worked as a secular “newspaperman.”<sup>56</sup> He and others recommended that a church find a secular expert in their membership and place them in charge of publicity. This dependency on non-clergy expertise would be a hallmark of church promotion throughout the century. Wolseley suggested that this expert be surrounded by a committee of “housewives” who had the necessary flexibility in their schedules to serve best. He would meet with the committee for a “three-session workshop in news gathering and writing, with emphasis on writing,” that he offered in the fall each year.<sup>57</sup> His program proved so successful that other churches sought his expertise, so he began offering clinics.<sup>58</sup> In 1942, he wrote a brief instruction book for circulation, summarizing the lessons he had given, entitled “Press Chairman’s Manual.”<sup>59</sup> Later, he expanded the manual into his detailed guide, and he developed his instruction into academic courses at numerous schools.<sup>60</sup>

With the onset of the Great Depression, Wolseley sought more training in journalism through master’s and doctoral study at the Medill School of Journalism. While in school, he worked both teaching journalism in local Chicago schools and practicing journalism as a reporter and editor at the Evanston *Daily News-Index*.<sup>61</sup> Upon completing his degrees, Wolseley turned to a career in education. In 1938, he became a

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 59.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 58-60.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 59.

<sup>59</sup> Williams, “Church Issues Press Manual,” 21-2.

<sup>60</sup> Schools would include: Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary, Candler Seminary at Emory University, and Syracuse University. Wolseley, *Still in Print*, 60.

<sup>61</sup> Wolseley *Still in Print*, 60-1.

full-time professor of journalism at Northwestern University, where he remained until 1946.<sup>62</sup> Fired from Northwestern for his pacifist convictions, he began teaching at Syracuse University, where he would remain for twenty-six years. During his career, he wrote over 1,000 articles and a number of books on journalism, including his most popular, *Black Press U.S.A.*, a comprehensive history of black journalism in the United States.<sup>63</sup> Wolseley also spent a great deal of effort on developing the subfield of religious journalism. In the fall of 1949, he launched a graduate program in religious journalism at Syracuse University's School of Journalism. Wolseley taught the first two courses for this track: religion writing and a seminar on religion journalism.<sup>64</sup> While developing this graduate program in religious journalism, he also published his most significant work in the field, *Interpreting the Church through Press and Radio*.<sup>65</sup>

Wolseley's church publicity tome, *Interpreting the Church through Press and Radio*, hit the stands in 1951 at just over 300 pages in length. Much like the others, Wolseley's included more than just religious journalism. He provided instruction on radio, television, denominational publications, parish publications, church bulletins, billboards, calling cards, fans, flyers and more. Yet the primary subject was his specialty, journalism. He carefully unpacked the nuances of publicizing a church through the "tools of interpretation" such as duplicator machines, and the "media of interpretation" like newspapers, magazines, and radio. In describing each, he helped the reader to determine

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 62.

<sup>63</sup> "Roland Wolseley, 94, Syracuse Professor," *New York Times*, June 29, 1998; Roland E. Wolseley, *The Black Press, U.S.A.* (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1971).

<sup>64</sup> Wolseley, *Still in Print*, 21-2.

<sup>65</sup> Wolseley, *Interpreting*.

which would best serve his/her particular needs and resources. Several chapters also focused on the typical subjects of creating press releases, editing, working with editors, and making events “newsworthy.”<sup>66</sup> In a *Church Management* article, published the same year and entitled “Publicizing the Gospel,” Wolseley recommended that if ministers were to perform their role as reporter and news writer, they must get more experience. He suggested that all ministers work for the local newspaper so that they could learn first hand how to utilize the press effectively.<sup>67</sup>

Wolseley, like Henry would continue in his diligent work to expand the field of religious journalism in the service of promoting churches. He became an active member of the Religious Publicity Council and wrote numerous articles through the coming decades on the subject of how to work with the press. In 1955, Roland Wolseley published *Careers in Religious Journalism*.<sup>68</sup> In it, he sought to open up the field of religious journalism to another generation. He described the many opportunities for utilizing the skills of a journalist in promoting and nurturing religion in the United States.<sup>69</sup> However, his greatest contribution may have been his tireless work to build a religious journalism program at Syracuse University, and to offer his expertise to other schools that sought to educate ministers in the subject. His desire to build an educational infrastructure for religious journalism and promotion was shared by others in the 1940s, particularly Gaines Dobbins.

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

<sup>67</sup> Roland E. Wolseley, “Proven Media for Churches,” *Church Management* 28 (October 1951): 40, 43-8.

<sup>68</sup> Roland E. Wolseley, *Careers in Religious Journalism* (New York: Association Press, 1955).

<sup>69</sup> Wolseley, *Still in Print*, 91.

## Religious Journalism Education Grows: Gaines Dobbins

In the 1940s, religious public relations, particularly religious journalism, grew as a discipline in academic institutions. In her article that criticized the ineptitude of ministers in press relations, Roberta White cited one glimmer of hope. She noted that more ministers were beginning to take journalism courses in their seminary training.<sup>70</sup> Both Henry and Wolseley made significant contributions in this area. Henry taught a few classes in religious journalism and urged seminaries to create courses in the field.<sup>71</sup> Wolseley launched an entire program at Syracuse University.<sup>72</sup> Because of the work of these men, and others, by 1951, Wolseley could celebrate in his guide that there were numerous courses offered across the country at major universities, small colleges and seminaries on church publicity, particularly religious journalism. He listed specifically that there were new courses at Oklahoma Baptist University, which had a religious journalism fraternity, Lambda, Lambda Lambda, founded in 1947. Other schools offered courses, such as Candler Seminary at Emory University, The Chicago Theological Seminary, Andover-Newton Theological School, and the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary.<sup>73</sup> Marvin C. Wilbur, future executive director of the RPC, was the director of Promotion and Publicity at Union Theological Seminary and offered a course on modern communication for religion. Joseph Boyle, former director of the Publicity Department of the Episcopal Church taught a similar course at Columbia University, as did former

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<sup>70</sup> White, "I Know More," 50-1.

<sup>71</sup> Henry, *Successful Church Publicity*, 85.

<sup>72</sup> Wolseley, *Still in Print*, 21-2.

<sup>73</sup> Wolseley, *Interpreting*, viii, 37.

public relations director for the Federal Council of Churches, John L. Fortson. Yale Divinity School offered curriculum options for students interested in religious journalism and the relationship between religion and the press. Hamma Divinity School provided a similar course entitled, “The Ministry of Writing” that included the study of publicity, advertising, and creating direct mail tools.<sup>74</sup> The following year, even the religiously unaffiliated University of Georgia offered a course on the essentials of journalism for “pre-ministerial” students.<sup>75</sup> Yet no one did as much to develop a curriculum and emphasize the necessity of training ministers in modern business values and methods, as did the professor of church efficiency at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Gaines S. Dobbins.

Over the course of his career from 1916 to 1978, Gaines Dobbins had an enormous influence in the adoption of business methods in churches in the early and mid-twentieth century. He wrote over 4,900 articles and thirty-three books while personally teaching thousands of future ministers at a number of Southern Baptist seminaries. Like Henry and Wolseley, the first job that Gaines Dobbins ever held was as a journalist.

Transition marked Dobbins’ early career, jumping around to numerous journalism and ministerial jobs, all the while collecting experience and wisdom to guide others in combining the two fields. In 1904, while still in high school, Dobbins began working at the local newspaper in Hattiesburg, Mississippi. He continued to work as a journalist while attending college at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. However, in 1912, he left the world of journalism to work as the pastor of the New August Baptist

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<sup>74</sup> “Courses in Religious Communication,” *NPRC Counselor* 1 (March 1951), box 5, Records: 1952-1988 (88-0630), RPRCC.

<sup>75</sup> *NPRC Counselor* 3 (Autumn 1952), box 5, Records: 1952-1988 (88-0630), RPRCC.

Church. He left the church the next year, and finished the remainder of his degree while serving as pastor of the Temple Baptist Church. As he ministered to the congregation, he completed his dissertation entitled, "Southern Baptist Journalism" and graduated with a doctorate degree in theology in 1914. With both education and experience in journalism and ministry, he accepted the pastorate at Galilee Baptist Church in Gloster, Mississippi. Two years later, he moved to the First Baptist Church of New Albany, Mississippi. Only nine months later, he left the ministerial world to return to journalism as an editor for the Southern Baptist Sunday School Board and the missionary journal, *Home and Foreign Fields*.<sup>76</sup> Meanwhile, he began reading all of the latest books on efficiency and business management.

Much like Washington Gladden, Charles Stelzle, and others, Dobbins was intrigued by the increases in effectiveness that efficiency could bring to an organization or institution. In his own experience as a pastor, he had been terribly frustrated in how poorly he thought seminary had prepared him for the challenges of managing a church. They had taught him how to preach, but not how to lead and administer an organization.<sup>77</sup> He was disappointed that, as he believed, church leaders knew nothing of business, yet they directed the world's most important business enterprise.<sup>78</sup> Dobbins' vision for the church was a modern vision, a church measured by its sophistication, complexity, and

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<sup>76</sup> Polly Hargis Dillard, "Gaines S. Dobbins: Shaper of Religious Education," pamphlet in the *Shapers of Southern Baptist Heritage* series (Nashville, TN: Historical Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention, 1987).

<sup>77</sup> Gaines S. Dobbins, "50 Years of Church Administration as I Have Seen it Unfold," *Church Administration* (December 1967): 5.

<sup>78</sup> Gaines S. Dobbins, *The Efficient Church* (Nashville: Sunday School Board of the Southern Baptist Convention, 1923), 11-2, 25-6.

organization of service.<sup>79</sup> Yet no one was training preachers to be modern business leaders. In 1920, the president of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, E.Y. Mullins offered Dobbins the opportunity to use his background in journalism and his fascination with efficiency to correct this void in pastoral training. Offered the opportunity to establish a new department of practical studies, Dobbins eagerly accepted and in 1920 became the professor of church efficiency and Sunday School pedagogy at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky.

Over the course of the next thirty-six years, Dobbins developed, at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, perhaps the most comprehensive curriculum and accompanying material in the nation, to train ministers to function as corporate executives. He armed them with the latest marketplace methods to organize, lead, and promote their churches. Dobbins had a vision to make church administrators out of preachers, to make specialized, efficient businesses out of churches. Yet in the summer of 1920, as he developed the first course, “Church Efficiency,” there were no books, no other courses, no resources on the subject. He, therefore, began writing his own textbook, published in 1923 and entitled *The Efficient Church*.<sup>80</sup> It covered everything from organizing a church staff to creating a budget item for advertising, to creating press releases for the local newspapers. His son explained in a biography of his father that *The*

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<sup>79</sup> Gaines S. Dobbins, *Building Better Churches: A Guide to the Pastoral Ministry* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1947), 158. In 1927, in addition to his responsibilities at the seminary, Dobbins helped to establish the Department of Church Administration for the Southern Baptist Convention. As a division of the Sunday School Board, it was responsible for equipping pastors with the necessary resources to administer, efficiently and effectively, their churches. They began publishing a monthly magazine in the 1920s, entitled *Church Administration*, which much like *Church Management*, provided resources for churches in organization, finances, and other administrative issues. For more information, see Walter B. Shurden, *Sunday School Board: Ninety Years of Service* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1981), 49.

<sup>80</sup> Dobbins, *Efficient Church*.



*Efficient Church* drew primarily on Dobbins' experience and interest in "communication theory, a restating of journalistic principles" and "the writings of the efficiency experts in the field of business." These experts were primarily Harrington Emerson, Frederick W. Taylor, and Roger W. Babson.<sup>81</sup> Between 1941 and 1951, he continued designing business models for churches in two more significant guidebooks, *Building Better Churches* in 1947 and *The Churchbook* in 1951.<sup>82</sup> All three books were important texts in his ever-expanding curriculum. However, before considering the curriculum, it is important to note his particular emphasis on promotion.

Though Dobbins' courses and books dealt extensively with all the many facets of administering a church like a business, there always remained a focus on promotion. He wrote that, "The Christian church is an agency of promotion, seeking to forward the greatest enterprise in the world."<sup>83</sup> Primarily, churches were promotional institutions, he believed; it was their primary responsibility to spread a message, to sell a product.

Dobbins wrote,

Other institutions may utilize publicity and promotion as adjuncts to their main business, but the business of a church or its minister is that of publicizing and promoting. Quite properly, we would shrink from the advertising of a church or its minister for the sake of notoriety or special advantage; but the church that goes out of the publicity and promotion business has gone out of business!<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> Austin C. Dobbins, *Gaines S. Dobbins: Pioneer in Religious Education*, (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1981), 63-4.

<sup>82</sup> Over this ten-year period, Dobbins wrote and published seven books; Gaines S. Dobbins, *Building Better Churches: A Guide to the Pastoral Ministry* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1947); Gaines S. Dobbins, *The Churchbook: A Treasury of Materials and Methods* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1951).

<sup>83</sup> Dobbins, *Building Better Churches*, 387.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

As he explained, "All worth-while publicity has three objectives: to attract attention, to develop interest, and to effect decision and action. Are not these precisely the objectives of a Christian church?"<sup>85</sup> Dobbins' effort to help ministers improve their awareness and practice of promotion was to help them better understand the core of Christianity. After all, Dobbins argued, "The Bible is a book of publicity and promotion."<sup>86</sup> Fidelity to the Bible was fidelity to publicity. A failure to promote the church was a failure to serve God. He asked, "With what guilt would we be chargeable if we ignored these vast potentialities for making Christ and the gospel known to all men!"<sup>87</sup> He explained, "Because the church and all that it offers are for people, it is under deep obligation to reach people through every proper and effective means."<sup>88</sup> It was Dobbins charge, through his teaching and writing, to train ministers to employ the latest methods to promote Christianity. A church that promoted was a church that was faithful to the Bible.

In the development of Dobbins' curriculum one should note the expansion of the academic program, the growing emphasis on promotion in business methods for churches, and the increasing role of journalism in those methods. As noted, the first course introduced, in the fall of 1920, was entitled "Church Efficiency." The course description explained that in the course, "The student is introduced to the principles of business and industrial efficiency which have revolutionized the business world." They studied the "pastor as an executive" as well as the latest methods in "church advertising"

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<sup>85</sup> Dobbins, *Churchbook*, 217.

<sup>86</sup> Dobbins, *Building Better Churches*, 386.

<sup>87</sup> Dobbins, *Churchbook*, 218.

<sup>88</sup> Dobbins, *Building Better Churches*, 388.

and “stewardship and finance.”<sup>89</sup> The course description remained the same in the following years except that the word “publicity” replaced “advertising” in 1926, reflecting the broader shift in church promotion from advertising to publicity.<sup>90</sup> In 1943, the field was growing and an expansion of the curriculum brought a new category, “Vitalizing the Church Program,” with three new courses. They were “Worship,” “Stewardship,” and “Religious Journalism.”<sup>91</sup> This new class on religious journalism reflected the growing interest in using the press to promote religion. The course description explained that it would cover, “The justification for religious journalism; an evaluation of modern media of publicity; an adequate program of publicity for the church; the techniques of religious journalism; the aims of religious journalism; creative writing.”<sup>92</sup> Note that part of the curriculum was to learn the “justification for religious journalism.” This starting point highlights the tension that laid at the foundation of using such methods in religion. Dobbins had to both equip his students to use religious journalism and to defend it.

In the 1940s, the course titles and descriptions changed to reflect the centrality of journalism in promoting a church. The 1944 religious journalism course stated that journalism would bring vitality to a church by bringing in more people “through the

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<sup>89</sup> Catalog of The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1921-1922, Archives and Special Collections, JBCL, 45.

<sup>90</sup> Catalog of The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1926-1927, Archives and Special Collections, JBCL, 51.

<sup>91</sup> Catalog of The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1944-1945, Archives and Special Collections, JBCL, 54.

<sup>92</sup> Catalog of The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1946-1947, Archives and Special Collections, JBCL, 53.

creative use of attractive publicity.”<sup>93</sup> Renamed “The Ministry of Writing,” the new description read,

Pastors, teachers, missionaries, directors of education are called upon to promote their work in many ways through writing and printing. In the first period of this study, attention will be given especially to the techniques of writing – newspaper style, journalistic English, the preparation of manuscripts, the use of publicity media, writing for the denominational press, writing for the newspapers, preparing the church bulletin, successful letter writing, effective advertising, etc. Consideration will also be given to the mechanics of thesis writing.<sup>94</sup>

In 1948, the course “Vitalizing the Church Program” changed to “The Ministry of Writing and Promotion.” Whereas previous courses had included church publicity and promotion as a part of the curriculum, now the course dealt exclusively with the subject. In the first term students learned how to plan a publicity program for a church, the importance of public relations, how to prepare advertising copy, and the “psychological principles of writing and promotion.” The second term dealt with journalism and how to write for a newspaper or magazine about religious subjects. In the third term, Dobbins taught students the principles of creative writing.<sup>95</sup> By the end of the 1940s, Dobbins had created a comprehensive course curriculum for future ministers on using journalism for church promotion. Dobbins’ vision for education in church publicity, however, extended beyond journalism.

Dobbins’ taught that there were two primary entry points into the church, through which to attract and include people, the worship service and the Sunday school. The

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<sup>93</sup> Catalog of The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1947-1948, Archives and Special Collections, JBCL, 60.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, 61.

<sup>95</sup> Catalog of The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1948-1949, Archives and Special Collections, JBCL, 64-5.

worship classes considered how “modern” churches too often neglected the importance of an effective service of worship to revitalize a church. By tailoring a church service to incorporate popular elements and desires in American culture, a church could improve its attendance.<sup>96</sup> Even more significantly and effectively, according to Dobbins, a Sunday school program could boost attendance. Much of his career was dedicated to improving Sunday School pedagogy for the sake of better religious instruction. Yet it was also another angle on improving church promotion. Dobbins believed that if a church could operate more like a school, it could attract people from the community to take advantage of the educational opportunities. He referred to his theories as the “science of Sunday School enlargement,” one more example of his confidence in rational programs and methods to improve churches.<sup>97</sup> Thus, all of his work in developing the School of Religious Education at Southern Seminary was in part a means to improve church promotion, to grow churches. In the 1980s, Rick Warren and Bill Hybels would promote a different entry point into the church through “seeker sensitive services,” but for Dobbins, the worship service, and more importantly, the Sunday School were the keys in moving the community into the church.

In 1956, Dobbins decided to take his expertise elsewhere. He retired from his position as the dean of the School of Religious Education and accepted the job of “distinguished professor of church administration” at Golden Gate Theological Seminary in Berkley California. He would continue to develop resources for educating ministers to run a church like a business, but he had completed the groundbreaking elements of his

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<sup>96</sup> Catalog of The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1947-1948, Archives and Special Collections, JBCL, 60.

<sup>97</sup> Dobbins, *Building Better Churches*, 199; He also talks about this subject in *The Churchbook* on page 124.

work. Dobbins had helped build for future ministers a system of education in using business principles, particularly promotion, to manage and grow churches. Other experts were working simultaneously to build systems of cooperation in promotion.

### A Platform for Cooperation: John Fortson, the R.I.A.L., and Stanley Stuber

Throughout the twentieth century, churches of different denominations and even different religions increasingly found religious promotion a common ground on which to cooperate. Often times in the secular marketplace, producers in the same industry, that typically compete with one another, find it beneficial to work together to promote their entire industry. One can take the familiar “Beef, it’s what’s for dinner” ad campaign as an example. Similarly, religious producers have often believed it in their best interest to put their theologically competitive disagreements aside in order to unite and promote religion more broadly. Of course, this requires that the participants surrender the unique doctrinal aspects of their product and concentrate on the most broadly acceptable religious principles that they share. As such, the more liberal and mainline Protestant denominations have historically been more prone to cooperate in promotion. In fact, it was the remnant of the Social Gospel movement, which led in cooperation around promotion in the 1940s. They encouraged churches to work together in promotion as a means to improve appearance in the community, build platforms for greater unity, and reduce promotional costs. One mark of modernity is an increasing pluralization, and in religion, promotion helped to develop a pluralism, or acceptance of diversity and cooperation within it, among denominations and faiths. In the 1940s, these efforts

drastically increased, thanks in great part to the work of the Federal Council of Churches, and seen directly in the work of a few of its employees.

*John Fortson & the Federal Council of Churches*

The Federal Council of the Churches of Christ in America, by 1939, represented twenty-two different denominations. Created in 1909 as a flagship organization in the ecumenical movement, the FCC worked to unite churches around the “essential oneness” of worshipping Jesus Christ.<sup>98</sup> In unity, they sought to combine their resources and efforts to combat the nation’s social injustices. Its founders were Social Gospel proponents, including Charles Stelzle, and advertising played a role in the organization’s work.<sup>99</sup> However, it was not until the 1940s that they created an internal department to direct promotional work within the organization and within member churches. In so doing, the FCC became a leader in directing cooperative promotional drives within and among churches. They would unite churches in broad campaigns and produce generic promotional materials for local use, all of which were broad enough in message for a diversity of churches to use them. In pursuing publicity cooperation, they sought to improve public opinion about religion, open dialogues between religions to create understanding, and cut costs in promotion.

In 1940, the Federal Council of the Churches of Christ in America christened a trial public relations department with John L. Fortson at the helm. This influential

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<sup>98</sup> Mark A. Noll, *A History of Christianity in the United States and Canada* (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans, 1992), 307.

<sup>99</sup> Sydney E. Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972), 803.

position at the department's inception gave Fortson a unique platform from which to shape the industry of church promotion. Prior to 1940, the Laymen's Cooperating Commission of the FCC had been handling all of the public relations work for the organization. However, with an increasing emphasis on the role of public relations in churches and the need for expertise on the subject, the workload had increased, and many agreed on the necessity to form a "comprehensive Public Relations Program" to better serve the twenty-two participating denominations.<sup>100</sup> They created the Public Relations Department in 1940 for a trial period and hired John L. Fortson as its director. In their first six months, on a budget of \$7,500, they prepared news releases for other departments and an advertising plan as a "popular" means of presenting the message of Christianity."<sup>101</sup> They also prepared news releases for the biennial meeting of the FCC. At the conclusion of the trial period, Fortson petitioned for the department's permanent status.

In a report on their achievements and future goals, Fortson defended the need for a permanent public relations department in the FCC. He explained that they hoped to prepare magazine articles in conjunction with the department of evangelism, produce radio programs, develop newspaper-advertising campaigns, prepare a public relations handbook for churches, and arrange for "motion pictures on religious subjects." He also explained that over two-thirds of those responding to a survey supported the

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<sup>100</sup> "Minutes of Meeting of Laymen's Cooperating Commission on December 5, 1939," folder 11 "Private Schools, Public Relations, Publications," Part H. Women's Cooperating Commissions, 1928-1951, Series III: Departments, Commissions, and Committees, 1894-1952, box 69, RG 18, Federal Council of the Churches of Christ in America Records, 1894-1952, PHS.

<sup>101</sup> "Minutes of Meeting of Public Relations Commission of Federal Council of Churches, January 27, 1941," folder 11 "Private Schools, Public Relations, Publications," Part H. Women's Cooperating Commissions, 1928-1951, Series III: Departments, Commissions, and Committees, 1894-1952, box 69, RG 18, Federal Council of the Churches of Christ in America Records, 1894-1952, PHS.



establishment of a permanent public relations program for the FCC. A public relations department was a necessity, he argued, “for the widest proclamation of Christianity as a way of life at a time when the inner sanctions of religion and of democracy alike are in peril.” Convinced of the need, the FCC voted in December 1940 to make the Public Relations Program permanent.<sup>102</sup>

Under the direction of Fortson, the department continued to grow, preparing advertisements for local churches, coordinating the publicity for national events, and informing the press on significant meetings of the council. Where the workload was too great, they hired the Institute of Public Relations, Inc. as a consultant, an organization that had none other than George Creel, the former chairman of the U.S. Committee on Public Information, on its advisory staff.<sup>103</sup> In 1943, Fortson reached beyond the grasp of the FCC and provided his expertise to all local churches in his book, *How to Make Friends for Your Church*.<sup>104</sup> The guide provided the typical recommendations of the other experts in the 1940s, with an emphasis on religious journalism, but also on cooperation.

In *How to Make Friends for Your Church*, Fortson argued that community cooperation was one of the most effective publicity methods. He explained that, “The

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<sup>102</sup> “Report for Six Months – July 1940 to January 1941” of the Public Relations Program and “Report for Six Months – July 1940 to January 1941” of the Public Relations Program, folder 11 “Private Schools, Public Relations, Publications,” Part H. Women’s Cooperating Commissions, 1928-1951, Series III: Departments, Commissions, and Committees, 1894-1952, box 69, RG 18, Federal Council of the Churches of Christ in America Records, 1894-1952, PHS.

<sup>103</sup> John W. Darr to Walter W. Van Kirk, May 4, 1943, folder 9 “Institute of Public Relations March – Nov 1943,” Part A. Department of International Justice and Goodwill, 1907-1950, Series III Departments, Commissions, and Committees, 1894-1952, box 34, RG 18, Federal Council of the Churches of Christ in America Records, 1894-1952, PHS.

<sup>104</sup> John L. Fortson, *How to Make Friends for Your Church, a Manual on Public Relations* (New York: Association Press, 1943).

ideal arrangement is: a community public relations committee functioning through the council of churches, in collaboration with individual church committees. Each group assists the other.”<sup>105</sup> According to Fortson, better publicity came from better organization among churches. A community wide committee could direct church collaboration, so that the resources of each could be better focused and utilized. Fortson provided details on how to form such a community wide committee and select the best members for it. He also explained that such a committee would, in its formation, provide positive publicity. He writes, “Divisiveness, in so far as it produces inefficiency and weakens the voice of religion, is in itself bad public relations.”<sup>106</sup> In Fortson’s opinion, division within religion reflected poorly on all of religion. The more that religious sects could demonstrate to the public that they could put their differences aside and work together, the more the public would accept religion. Thus, a broad based “Go-to-church campaign” would strengthen ties between the Roman Catholics, Protestants, and Jews and improve public opinion of them.<sup>107</sup> As an example, Fortson described the “United Every-Member Canvass” in Newton, Massachusetts in 1941 that united twenty-seven Protestant churches and one Jewish Synagogue. He also participated in such efforts.

As an ambassador and expert in cooperative efforts for religious public relations, Fortson frequently participated in local efforts. In communities, churches created cooperative organizations such as the Greater Hartford Federation of Churches in Hartford Connecticut. Among other things, the organizations would sponsor conferences for member ministers to attend to learn from one another. In 1946, the Greater Hartford

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<sup>105</sup> Fortson, 70.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid., 69.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid., 77

Federation hosted such a conference, entitled “Public Relations in the Field of Religion.” The keynote speaker was John Fortson, joined by Ralph Stoody, director of Methodist Information for the Methodist church. Fifty-five different churches were represented at the conference, giving a sense of how large the degree of cooperation was in such regional organizations.<sup>108</sup> The subjects of discussion, typical for the 1940s, centered around religious journalism, and the other speakers were all editors and journalists from the local newspapers.<sup>109</sup> Fortson also spoke at the Washington Church Press Association.<sup>110</sup>

In 1948, John Fortson resigned from his position as director of public relations for the Federal Council of Churches. He left to focus on teaching his “Institutional Public Relations” course at Columbia University and to work as the public relations director for the National Society for the Prevention of Blindness.<sup>111</sup> The applications poured in to replace him. The majority of the applicants had no professional religious experience. Instead of working for church denominations, they were employees of advertising agencies on Madison Avenue, universities, organizations like the Red Cross, and corporations such as General Motors. Many were also journalists at various newspapers and magazines. Their lack of religious experience reveals the extent to which secular skills in methods were more valuable than theological expertise in messages. Yet there was one candidate who did have some religious experience, Donald C. Bolles, the

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<sup>108</sup> “Meeting Will Discuss Aid of Publicity,” *The Hartford Courant*, September 29, 1946.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid.

<sup>110</sup> “Church Group to Hear Fortson,” *The Washington Post*, April 10, 1943.

<sup>111</sup> “Courses in Religious Communication,” *NPRC Counselor* 1 (March 1951), box 5, Records: 1952-1988 (88-0630), RPRCC.

publicity director of the American Council for Judaism.<sup>112</sup> It was not Protestant experience, or Christian experience for that matter. Yet the emphasis was not on the theological or doctrinal content of the product, but the method to sell it. He was hired by the Executive Committee because of his religious publicity background plus his “long experience with the Associated Press and also because of his inside knowledge of how commercial public relations organizations work.”<sup>113</sup> The next year, he helped direct the largest cooperative advertising campaign in religious history, the Religion in American Life Campaign.

#### *The Religion in American Life Campaign*

*Newsweek* magazine reported in December 1949 on the “biggest mass selling of religion ever attempted in America.”<sup>114</sup> The Religion in American Life (RIAL) campaign had just finished its national “Find Yourself through Faith: Come to Church This Week” advertising effort. For the month of November, the RIAL, conducted by the Advertising Council and sponsored by the Federal Council of Churches, the Synagogue Council of America, and eighteen other religious organizations, ran religious advertisements developed by the J. Walter Thompson advertising company, across the country. The intention, as reported by *The New York Times*, was “to impress upon Americans the importance of religion and religious institutions and to urge everybody to attend and

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<sup>112</sup> Donald C. Bolles Resume, folder 16, box 17, RG 18, Federal Council of the Churches of Christ in America Records, 1894-1952, PHS.

<sup>113</sup> Samuel McCrea Cavert, General Secretary to Roy G. Ross, April 22, 1948, folder 16, box 17, RG 18, Federal Council of the Churches of Christ in America Records, 1894-1952, PHS.

<sup>114</sup> “Come to Church,” *Newsweek*, December 12, 1949, quoted in Volker Rudi Henning, “The Advertising Council and its Religion in American Life,” (PhD diss., University of Tennessee, 1996), 58.

support the church or synagogue of his choice.”<sup>115</sup> All told, the value of the space, radio time, and posters was estimated at \$3 million, not including the donated services of the J. Walter Thompson to develop the advertising.<sup>116</sup> The campaign began with a radio address by President Truman.<sup>117</sup> Truman reminded Americans “the basic source of our strength as a nation is spiritual.” He encouraged Americans to devote themselves to their own religion and to “support generously” their preferred religious institutions.<sup>118</sup> The campaign also included 2,913 advertisements in 480 newspapers across the nation, all of which encouraged church attendance for the sake of the well-being of the person and the community.<sup>119</sup> They also printed 5,000 outdoor posters that read “Find Yourself through Faith – Come to Church This Week.”<sup>120</sup>

The Advertising Council, which directed the campaign, formed as the War Advertising Council, not long after the attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941. It worked throughout the war to raise support for bond drives, enlistments and other government initiatives. Yet it also existed as a mechanism to improve public opinion of advertising. It could show the public that advertising could do good, a tool for noble purposes.<sup>121</sup> At the end of the war, the Council transitioned into a peacetime operation under the name,

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<sup>115</sup> “Faith Campaign Planned,” *New York Times*, October 19, 1949.

<sup>116</sup> Brendan M. Jones, “Go-To-Church Ads Win Wide Support,” *New York Times*, December 25, 1949.

<sup>117</sup> “Truman on Radio Sunday,” *New York Times*, October 27, 1949.

<sup>118</sup> “Text of Truman Speech on Religious Faith,” *New York Times*, October 31, 1949.

<sup>119</sup> Jones, “Go-To-Church.”

<sup>120</sup> J. Howard Rutledge, “Ad-Men’s Giveaway,” *Wall Street Journal*, November 17, 1949.

<sup>121</sup> Robert Jackall and Janice M. Hirota, *Image Makers: Advertising, Public Relations, and the Ethos of Advocacy* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2000), 41.

Advertising Council.<sup>122</sup> Its 1949 experiment in advertising religion was regarded as a success in its inaugural year. The RIAL continued and expanded each year after 1949. In its second year, it boasted in the diversity of its membership, consisting of twenty Jewish and Protestant churches as well as a few Roman Catholic parishes.<sup>123</sup> It also enrolled more local support with 3,000 different communities participating, displaying advertisements created by the J. Walter Thompson Company.<sup>124</sup> By 1951, 9,985 such advertisements ran in 1,694 newspapers, an over 400 percent increase in just two years. They also produced thousands of outdoor posters and car cards, 89,129 of them in 1951.<sup>125</sup> The program would continue until 1992, gathering the resources of the business community and the religious community to drive national advertising for religious belief and practice, and uniting different denominations and religions around promotional efforts.

The third year of its support for the RIAL campaign, the Federal Council of Churches reorganized as the National Council of Churches. A planning committee directed the transition, which consisted of smaller committees, one of which was the “Committee on Public Relations and Publicity.” The staff executive for this committee was Donald Bolles, the current director of FCC publicity. The chairman was another religious promotion expert and major proponent of cooperation, Stanley Stuber.<sup>126</sup>

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<sup>122</sup> Rutledge, “Ad-Men’s.”

<sup>123</sup> Henning, 148.

<sup>124</sup> “Religion’s Revival Sought for Nation,” *New York Times*, October 29, 1950.

<sup>125</sup> “Church Advertising Raises Attendance,” *New York Times*, February 8, 1952.

<sup>126</sup> “Planning Committee for the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A.” Letterhead, folder 15, Series II: General Secretary, 1898-1951, box 17, RG 18: Federal Council of the Churches of Christ in America Records, 1894-1952, PHS.

*An Extension of the Social Gospel: Stanley Stuber*

There was perhaps no more a direct descendent from the Social Gospel movement than Stanley Stuber. Following in the steps of Social Gospel leader, Walter Rauschenbusch, Stuber graduated from the Rochester Theological Seminary and set out on a quest to expand both religious influence in society and cooperation within religion. The majority of Stuber's research and writing explored the fault lines of dispute within religion, in hopes of helping to mend them through mutual understanding. His master's thesis examined the theological differences between Lutheranism and Calvinism. In many of his fourteen books, he explored the history of denominational divisions. He also sought to help Protestants and Roman Catholics understand one another that they might work together. He labored in the spirit of fostering greater cooperation and shrinking divisions within religion. Throughout his career, Stuber encouraged cooperative promotional efforts not just as good public relations material, or as a more efficient use of resources, but because it opened up lines of communication between denominations and faiths. He argued that in cooperating for promotion, unity and understanding could overcome religious disagreements.

In 1928, Stuber accepted his first job after graduation. He was the pastor of First Baptist Church in Clifton Springs, New York. He served as the pastor for ten years then left to become the chaplain at Clifton Springs Sanatorium until 1941. In his career, he hoped to carry the banner for the Social Gospellers that had gone before but stumbled in the 1930s. Stuber thought of himself as "an ecumenical Baptist who 'got along with people of all faiths.'" In 1941, he went to work for the Northern Baptist Convention as

their National Secretary for Publicity. Serving in this position until 1949, Stuber established himself as an expert on church promotion, culminating in the 1951 publication of his *Public Relations Manual for Churches*. He spent the rest of his career as the general secretary, executive director, or director for several different councils of churches and authored fourteen more books.<sup>127</sup>

Stuber's public relations manual was very similar to that of the other 1940s experts. He recommended how to make church grounds attractive and how to use the radio, the duplicator machines, and the newspapers to attract attention and build favorable public opinion. He emphasized the necessity to build a "widespread restoration of confidence in Christianity."<sup>128</sup> He argued that there was little use in promoting local churches if Christianity on a whole did not demonstrate a unity and service to the community. Therefore, cooperation was at the top of his suggestion list. One chapter in the manual was entitled "How to win friends through co-operation [sic]." In it, he explained that all of public relations flowed through cooperation.<sup>129</sup> He described a myriad of ways that churches could improve their reputation in the community by working together and with other organizations. Like Fortson, he endorsed the local councils of churches that united pastors and opened channels of understanding.<sup>130</sup> As Stuber believed, if churches were to display the unity that Jesus Christ had prayed for, they had to continue cooperating and focusing on the ideals of love and "brotherhood"

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<sup>127</sup> Robert E. Johnson, "Stanley I. Stuber (1903 – 1985)," American Baptist Historical Society, [http://www.abhsarchives.org/docs/The\\_Global\\_Market\\_en.pdf](http://www.abhsarchives.org/docs/The_Global_Market_en.pdf) (accessed July 13, 2010).

<sup>128</sup> Stanley I. Stuber, *Public Relations Manual for Churches* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, 1951), 29.

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.*, 156.

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*, 155.



that they had in common.<sup>131</sup> Many churches were increasingly following Stuber's and others' advice.

By the 1940s, publicity directors at the different denominations were meeting together regularly to hold workshops and discuss the tools of the trade. They also gathered to implement and maintain standards for religious publicity. In 1940, many of these directors in Washington, D.C. met for the first time to create the Washington Church Press Association.<sup>132</sup> At future meetings, they heard from various experts in the fields of promotion and met at a variety of locations such as the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints Chapel.<sup>133</sup> They also gathered to review one another's work in church publicity.<sup>134</sup> In 1944, they held a series of monthly lectures entitled "Helpful Hints on Religious Publicity" for Protestant, Roman Catholic, and Jewish clergy.<sup>135</sup> One of the co-founders of the organization was *The Washington Post* church editor, Robert Tate Allan, who also served as president of the organization and was very involved in the RPC.<sup>136</sup> Tate was one of the pioneers in religious news. In 1938, he had convinced *The Washington Post* to treat religious news like other news, moving it from the "notice-publicity class" to the standard news class and writing about it throughout the week, not just on Sundays. He also created a column devoted to relaying excerpts from local Sunday sermons, and as *The Washington Post* described, "set out to make the Saturday

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<sup>131</sup> Ibid., 154.

<sup>132</sup> "Organization of Church Press Club Discussed," *Washington Post*, June 22, 1940.

<sup>133</sup> "D.C. Church Publicity Directors to Meet," *Washington Post*, February 15, 1941.

<sup>134</sup> "Church Publicity To Be Criticized At Meeting Tonight," *Washington Post*, September 28, 1942.

<sup>135</sup> "Publicity for Churches Talks' Topic," *Washington Post*, January 8, 1944.

<sup>136</sup> "D.C. Church Press Group to Meet on Monday Night," *Washington Post*, September 24, 1942.

church pages just as newsy as the rest of the paper.”<sup>137</sup> Others also worked to create cooperative promotion campaigns.

Cooperative efforts among churches in publicity continued to grow in the 1940s. In Belmar, New Jersey, in 1941, the Kiwanis Club developed a “Go-to-Church” campaign, to encourage people in Belmar to go to church on November 23 and 24. The mayor endorsed in the papers the creation of “Go-to-Church” days. They established a publicity committee and a home visitation committee. The publicity committee sent religious news to the papers and used “store window placards, parcel and package stickers, window stickers for homes, business cards, etc...” to promote the churches. They printed 15,000 stickers. They hung banners across Main Street. Church attendance doubled. County newspapers reported the story across the state.<sup>138</sup> In 1942, the Rev. Dr. Allen E. Claxton, minister of Broadway Temple Washington Heights Methodist Church, sponsored an ecumenical “Go-to-Church Movement” that hung “beautifully lithographed posters on subway platforms.” Catholic, Protestant and Jewish congregations supported it.<sup>139</sup>

There were other such cooperative efforts. The International Council of Religious Education was an organization representing forty-two different denominations. It worked to improve the religious education of American society. In 1943, the Governor of Illinois, Harold E. Stassen, began his presidency of the organization by urging “newspaper men, radio artists, advertising men, and laymen in other fields to put their

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<sup>137</sup> “Display Ad 9 – No Title,” *Washington Post*, April 4, 1943.

<sup>138</sup> Lawrence G. Atkinson, “Belmar Goes to Church,” *Church Management* 17 (April 1941): 413-4.

<sup>139</sup> “Colorful Posters Bring This Message Daily to Millions in New York Subways,” *Church Management* 19 (October 1942): 9.

professional talents to work for the church.” He hoped that these experts could introduce “ingenious devices” that would make religion “attractive” to youth in America.<sup>140</sup> The same year, in Kansas City, Missouri, ten churches cooperated to create a letter to send all new members of their local community. On the back of the welcome letter, they listed the churches’ names and encouraged the new resident to visit one of these churches that “are striving to make this community the very best possible place in which to live.”<sup>141</sup> Cooperative promotion was growing, but with it grew the universality of the promotion and the loss of religious distinctiveness in the promotion.

Cooperation in church promotion forced churches to sacrifice their distinctive characteristics. In order to join with those that held different religious convictions, churches had to embrace what was little more than universal moral principles as their product. They promoted themselves as service organizations that were good for the community. Such a surrender of religious distinctiveness and theological conviction opened the door for greater influence by marketplace experts. If there was not anything unique in religious promotion, then a non-religious person could promote it. Thus, in the 1940s, marketplace experts increasingly provided direct assistance in church promotion.

### Marketplace Experts: Willard Pleuthner & Stewart Harral

All of the experts of the 1940s had in common that they began their careers in secular journalism. However, most of them had also worked in ministry and a few had

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<sup>140</sup> John Evans, “Stassen Urges Aid in Church Education Field,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, February 9, 1943.

<sup>141</sup> “Churches Cooperate in Inviting New Residents,” *Church Management* 19 (May 1943): 56.

theological training. Ironically, however, the two religious promotion experts who were arguably the most widely known and sought after in the 1940s were the least religious, Willard Pleuthner and Stewart Harral. Both Pleuthner and Harral were very involved in Protestant churches throughout their lives. Religion was an important part of their identity. However, neither ever worked in ministry nor trained in it. They held no theology degrees or pastoral experience. What they did have was experience and training from the cutting edge of the secular advertising and public relations industry. Their popularity and influence demonstrated one of the most important aspects of religious promotion in the 1940s, the overwhelming influence of the secular marketplace. Increasingly, the “religious” in religious promotion took a back seat to the “promotion.” Throughout the decades to come, churches would rely more and more on the experts of the marketplace to guide the practices of the sacred in attracting new people. Theological issues and concerns diminished for the sake of advertising methods and messages that were proven to work best.

By 1952, both Willard Pleuthner and Stewart Harral were well known experts in the promotional business. Pleuthner was a vice president at one of the largest and most successful advertising firms in the country, Batten, Barton, Durstine & Osborne. Harral was the Director of the Public Relations school at the University of Oklahoma, the first accredited public relations program in the United States.<sup>142</sup> Both were very popular speakers and spent a good deal of time on the road addressing various conferences and meetings on the keys to successful advertising and promotion in a variety of industries. Despite both having strictly “secular” professional careers, in the 1940s they managed to

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<sup>142</sup> Helen Cody Baker, “Review of *Public Relations for Higher Education*,” *The Social Service Review* 17, no. 1 (March 1943):115-6.

establish themselves as religious experts by each publishing a book on the subject. Harral's book, *Public Relations for Churches*, was released in 1945, and Pleuthner's *Building Up Your Congregation* in 1950.<sup>143</sup>

#### *University Public Relations Expert: Stewart Harral*

By 1942, Stewart Harral was a rising star and pioneer in the public relations field. His background was specifically in journalism, having completed a master's degree in the field at the University of Oklahoma in 1936. While in school, he also worked as a journalist at a few different newspapers in Colorado and Oklahoma. In 1939, however, he began working as the director of press relations, and as a professor of journalism, at the University of Oklahoma. Collecting his expertise in the subject, he provided guidance for others in using public relations for non-profit institutions with the publication of his first book, in 1942, *Public Relations for Higher Education*.<sup>144</sup> In it, Harral provided a comprehensive examination and explanation of the different methods that an educational institution could employ to improve public opinion and gain public support. He hoped that these two "social institutions," the press and the university, could work together to further the achievements of each, to the betterment of society. Three years later, he sought to join the press with another important social institution, the church, in his book, *Public Relations for Churches*.

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<sup>143</sup> Stewart Harral, *Public Relations for Churches* (New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, 1945); Willard Pleuthner, *Building up Your Congregation; Help from Tested Business Methods* (Chicago: Wilcox & Follett, 1950).

<sup>144</sup> Ibid.; Stewart Harral, *Public Relations for Higher Education* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1942).

A shorter book than many of the others, *Public Relations for Churches*, offered similar suggestions on the subject. Harral wrote the book out of his concern that competition in the marketplace was growing and if churches were to retain the “support of the people in this competitive age,” they had to have a public relations program.<sup>145</sup> As he succinctly stated, “the church still has a ‘selling’ problem of great magnitude.”<sup>146</sup> The quotation marks he used around the word “selling” indicated his discomfort with the term in religion, but the book expressed his confidence that the means of “selling” through public relations were necessary in religion. He provided the typical solutions for the period of press relations, direct mail, newsletters, and billboards. Harral also gave detailed instructions on matters such as how to develop a “telephone personality” that would win favor among the public through proper phone etiquette.<sup>147</sup> At the end of the book, he included sample letters for pastors to use in connecting with the community.<sup>148</sup> He also provided a substantial bibliography of other books in subjects such as public relations, advertising, public opinion, letter writing, and news and feature writing. Yet all of the books were written by secular experts and none were written specifically for religion.<sup>149</sup> The ability to transfer such commercial expertise into religion catapulted Harral into the spotlight of church promotion.

Harral’s success in journalism only continued to multiply after *Public Relations for Churches*. In 1951, he resigned as the director of press relations for the university and

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<sup>145</sup> Harral, 8.

<sup>146</sup> Ibid., 16.

<sup>147</sup> Ibid., 79-80.

<sup>148</sup> Ibid., 122-26.

<sup>149</sup> Ibid., 127-131.

became the director of public relations studies in the school of Journalism at Oklahoma University and a full professor of journalism. He also offered all of the opening prayers at OU home games. By 1964, he estimated that he had given over 3,000 speeches in the United States and Canada.<sup>150</sup> Unfortunately, Harral died that year at the age of fifty-eight while giving a speech at the American Occupational Therapy Association convention. Despite his death, his influence in religious public relations continued. In his honor, there is a Stewart Harral Memorial Scholarship, awarded to five junior or seniors in the Public Relations sequence that he created at the University of Oklahoma.<sup>151</sup> The Public Relations Student Society of America chapter at the University, established in 1959, is also named the Stewart Harral Chapter.<sup>152</sup> In a 1973 article, “You’ve Got to Go Sell Your Church” John Horgan recommended that public relations could be the solution to a “case of apathy on the part of the congregation”. He quoted several times from Harral’s *Public Relations Handbook* to rally support for improving the use of modern promotion methods in religion. Horgan concluded with Harral’s words, “The church still has a selling problem of great magnitude.”<sup>153</sup> It was a mark of Harral’s enduring legacy.

*Madison Avenue Advertising Expert: Willard Pleuthner*

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<sup>150</sup> “Stewart Harral Dies in Denver Wednesday Night, State Mourns,” *Denver (AP) Ada Evening News*, October, 29, 1964.

<sup>151</sup> EDU in Review, “Stewart Harral Memorial Scholarship,” <http://www.eduinreview.com/scholarships/stewart-harral-memorial-scholarship> (accessed July 19, 2010).

<sup>152</sup> The Gaylord College of Journalism & Mass Communication, “90 Years of Journalism,” The University of Oklahoma, <http://faculty-staff.ou.edu/B/Catherine.M.Bark-1/JMCHistSite2.html> (accessed July 19, 2010).

<sup>153</sup> John Horgan, “You’ve Got to Go Sell Your Church,” *The Times*, Saturday, December 1 1973.

Perhaps the strongest advocate for “Madison Avenue methods” in religion, and assuredly the most “secular” in his advice, Willard Pleuthner was also the most well known expert in the field. An active member of the Methodist church, his real passion and love was for advertising. This was evident in 1937, when while teaching advertising and sales promotion at the University of Buffalo, he left his church not over doctrinal disagreements but because the pastor refused to advertise. Pleuthner joined St. Paul’s Cathedral, a church that embraced his expertise and skills in advertising. He began offering sales clinics for local clergy.<sup>154</sup> Thus began Willard Pleuthner’s foray into religious promotion.

When Pleuthner moved to New York to take over the Royal Crown Cola account for B.B.D.&O., he began attending another church and helped to put in place a number of modern promotional strategies. At the same time, he began compiling his ideas for the burgeoning field and in 1950 published them in the book, *Building Up Your Congregation*, with nineteen official endorsements by advertising and religious leaders, to include Bruce Barton and Norman Vincent Peale. Whereas some of his predecessors had reaped some notoriety with their own how-to guides on the matter, Pleuthner’s was an instant run away success. The first printing of 9,600 copies sold out in a month, a second printing saw similar success. A revised third edition hit the shelves in 1950, and it was translated into Japanese in 1952.<sup>155</sup> Time magazine even noted the advertising executive’s popularity and featured an article, “Religion: The Sales Approach,” on him

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<sup>154</sup> J.J.N., News of the Advertising and Marketing Fields, *New York Times*, December 21, 1952.

<sup>155</sup> “Religion: The Sales Approach,” *Time*, December 11, 1950; John R. Scotford, “The Case for the Spread-Out Church: Decentralizing the Local Church” 47 (June 1952): 15-6, 18.



the same year.<sup>156</sup> He would go on to become a popular speaker for church promotion conferences, such as one held by the Southern Convocation of the Episcopal Diocese of Washington in 1956 and the annual Commission on Public Relations of Los Angeles area Methodist Church banquet in 1958.<sup>157</sup>

In *Building Up Your Congregation*, Pleuthner was clear on his motive for bringing to the service of religion, the best that the secular promotional industry had to offer. He believed that it was the best means of “converting more people to the Christian way of life,” which was necessary to keep “civilization from destroying itself.”<sup>158</sup> He recommended that churches look to other secular experts such as Stewart Harral and more religious experts, specifically John Fortson and Carl F.H. Henry, for assistance. In order to provide further guidance, he went on to survey 2,600 different clergy to produce a follow up guide entitled, *More Power for Your Church*. In both, he also relied on the expertise of Joseph E. Boyle<sup>159</sup>, another vice president at B.B.D.&O., as well as Lee Hastings Bristol, Jr., the advertising manager for Bristol-Meyers.<sup>160</sup> In all of his recommendation for secular expertise, perhaps the most surprising element of Pleuthner’s book was his lack of concern for the tension in using secular methods to promote sacred messages and institutions. Whereas all of the other founders included defenses for using

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<sup>156</sup> Scottford, 15-6, 18.

<sup>157</sup> “Episcopal to Hear Ad Man,” *Washington Post and Times Herald*, October 27, 1956; “Advertising Man Church Speaker,” *Los Angeles Times*, April 12, 1959.

<sup>158</sup> Pleuthner, 3.

<sup>159</sup> Boyle also collaborated on John Fortson’s book, and he was elected chairman of the National Council of Churches public relations department at its first meeting in 1951.

<sup>160</sup> J.J.N., News of the Advertising and Marketing Fields, *New York Times*, December 21, 1952.

their methods and attempted to draw the lines between those strategies that were appropriate for religion and those that were not, Pleuthner made no such effort. Examining these dynamics helps to shed light on the challenges and tensions in church promotion. Though there was not a great deal of opposition against church public relations and religious journalism during the 1940s, the content of the expert's guides points to the tension.

### Dignity: Tension in Religious Promotion

The latent tension in utilizing the secular to promote the sacred was apparent in the language and defenses of the period. Of particular interest in Pleuthner's book, *Building Up Your Congregation*, is a chapter entitled "Dangerous Dignity." If there were any word mentioned more in the 1940s in conjunction with religious promotion than "dignity" it would be hard to find. Much like their predecessors, every proponent of modern promotional methods and messages had to wrestle with the tension in selling religion in the marketplace. To some extent, most recognized the latent threat that the machinations of the marketplace could somehow corrupt religion. Many used the subject of dignity to differentiate between appropriate and inappropriate sales methods. Yet Pleuthner was aggressively hostile towards dignity. In his chapter, "Dangerous Dignity," he wrote, "Too much dignity usually means too little progress."<sup>161</sup> For Pleuthner, concerns about dignity were roadblocks to change. He believed that the term was merely an instrument wielded by conservative forces to prevent churches from adopting

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<sup>161</sup> Pleuthner, 5.

“successful forms of planning, selling, and advertising.”<sup>162</sup> Jesus was undignified, Pleuthner argued. He attracted attention and gained publicity by performing miracles that authorities of the time consider unacceptable.<sup>163</sup> If the church was to grow it had to cast aside worries with dignity and use the best and newest techniques of big business that worked. This no holds barred approach to church promotion was not shared by all and was a contentious and paradoxical issue among many experts.

Before the experts of the 1940s discussed the matter of dignity, it appeared in advertisements to promote various tools that could attract attention to a church. Journals such as *Church Management* advertised many methods and instruments. In making their appeal to the local pastor, they sought to assuage fears about the tool’s worldly influence on religion. Thus, they sometimes noted that the product would not threaten the “dignity” of the church. In 1927, one contributor explained that most outdoor church advertising was not “worthy of the dignity of the house of God.” However, bulletin boards could be dignified if they were artistic, therefore suitable for promoting a church.<sup>164</sup> A 1928 advertisement for a Flexume Electric Display promised to attract attention while maintaining dignity.<sup>165</sup> In 1940, F.G. Alpers promoted the installation of carillon bells, “an ‘advertising medium’ that is at once insistent, effective and in full keeping with the dignity of the church.”<sup>166</sup> The next year, there was an ad for a bulletin

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<sup>162</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>163</sup> “Religion: The Sales Approach.”

<sup>164</sup> Charles Richard Miller, “Outdoor Church Advertising,” *Church Management* 1 (April 1924): 341-42.

<sup>165</sup> Advertisement, “Flexume Electric Display,” *Church Management* 5 (January 1929): 293.

<sup>166</sup> F.G. Alpers, “When Tower Bells Sing,” *Church Management* 17 (October 1940): 45.

board that gets the message out with “proper dignity”<sup>167</sup> And dignity continued beyond the 1940s. A 1956 advertisement for a new auditorium seat with a wooden pew end on it promised that it would “create quiet dignity and comfortable atmosphere for impressive church services.”<sup>168</sup> The majority of the church promotion experts in the 1940s also addressed the subject of dignity.

In his 1951 thesis on church publicity, the concerns that so many had over dignity surprised James Flanagan. After reading several of the primary texts for his research, he explained that he could not understand why “some church administrators express the belief that any kind of advertising is beneath the dignity of the Church.”<sup>169</sup> He, like Pleuthner, could not comprehend why there was a concern. However, others like Dobbins and Fortson wrestled with the complexity of the tension. This complexity restrained some from recommending all commercial methods for religious promotion.

Most experts, unlike Pleuthner, sought to assuage concerns for a loss of dignity in promotion, instead of rejecting such worries. Many of them, like Dobbins and Fortson, would acknowledge concerns about dignity; draw a distinction between dignified and undignified methods, then paradoxically endorse all methods. Gaines Dobbins argued that maintaining dignity in church promotion was a matter of ensuring simplicity in the methods. He explained that church promotion could be dignified if it was not ornate and direct. He wrote, “Strained efforts at effect, catch-penny phrases, slang, would-be humor, slovenliness of diction, do not comport with the dignity of the religion of Jesus Christ and

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<sup>167</sup> William Robert Catton, “Getting the Most From Your Bulletin Board” *Church Management* 17 (September 1941): 720.

<sup>168</sup> Advertisement, “International Seat,” *Church Management* 33 (October 1956): 60.

<sup>169</sup> Flanagan, 3.

his church.”<sup>170</sup> Church publicity “should never be crude or coarse or cheap.”<sup>171</sup> There was, according to Dobbins, a way to use the methods and maintain dignity. Yet paradoxically, in another book he wrote that no forms of publicity decreased the church’s dignity, for it is the purpose of the church to publicize. In fact, according to Dobbins, the guilty would be those who allowed concerns for dignity to keep them from taking advantage of modern methods.<sup>172</sup> He argued, like Pleuthner, to not publicize was to err.

Fortson, similarly and paradoxically, acknowledged that many people believed that modern methods are “somewhat vulgar and beneath the dignity of the Church.” He responded simply with the question, “Why should the devil have all the good tunes?”<sup>173</sup> Fortson appeared to be unconcerned with questions of dignity that called into question the applicability of popular trends and methods. If a song was popular, then it had a place in the church where people would come to listen to it. Yet despite his rejection of the dignity problem, it lingered in his mind. Regarding a sample in his book of a mimeographed advertisement, Fortson writes, “Notice how various sizes of type give dignity and style to this page.”<sup>174</sup> Though Fortson plainly dismissed dignity as a concern, he could not move beyond it.

This confusion over the dignity of religious promotion troubled journalists as well. Dudley Glass, writing in *The Atlanta Constitution* in 1943, noted that many preachers were performing promotional “stunts” such as preaching from a canoe and

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<sup>170</sup> Dobbins, *Building Better Churches*, 390.

<sup>171</sup> *Ibid.*, 388.

<sup>172</sup> Dobbins, *Churchbook*, 218.

<sup>173</sup> Fortson, 5.

<sup>174</sup> *Ibid.*, 156.

performing weddings in hot air balloons. These stunts garnered a great deal of attention, and were newsworthy. As Glass explained, they were an effective and “pretty good” means of advertising. Not all agreed, as he noted, but those who thought such practices “undignified,” had passed away. He believed that publicity stunts in religion were dignified. Yet Glass went on to write that he was torn over the stunts. As a newspaper journalist, he appreciated the publicity effort, yet he still preferred a “dignified service in a dignified atmosphere.” Glass had just said that publicity stunts were no longer considered undignified, then in the next breath said he was torn about them because he preferred a religion that was dignified.<sup>175</sup> Such uncertainty over the question coupled with a requirement to discuss it, persisted throughout religious promotion.

One debatable means to determine if methods were dignified was to consider the message that they promoted. Carl F.H. Henry had significant reservations about many publicity methods and drew specific parameters around what was acceptable. Henry warned that, “To center the publicity appeal in anything but the church’s essentially religious character secularizes its emphasis, trains its prospects to look for special attractions and ultimately defeats its own purpose.”<sup>176</sup> He believed that sensational appeals, special music, unusual services, and entertainment were inappropriate for attracting attention to a church. Instead, a church should focus on publicizing the incompleteness of life without Jesus Christ, the moral contribution of Christianity, the

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<sup>175</sup> Dudley Glass, *Atlanta Constitution*, “Pulpit Publicity: Is Stunt Stuff Quite the Thing?” July 15, 1943.

<sup>176</sup> Henry, *Successful Church Publicity*, 118.

disadvantage of man who does not attend church.<sup>177</sup> A church's promotion should focus on its religious contributions, its representation of the eternal, according to Henry.

However, others believed that the more "worldly" services of a church were its most appealing attributes. Gaines Dobbins, who shared a significant amount of theological training with Henry, argued that the appeal must be more than just broader than eternal promises, it must be not to just meet spiritual human needs but all human needs. Such needs included day care, job training, activities, counseling and other social services. Roland Wolseley agreed, arguing that when it came to determining appropriate messaging, a church's most attractive aspect is "what it is doing."<sup>178</sup> Such a strategy also avoided divisive issues of doctrine and theology.

Publicizing the services that a church offered, the more general benefits of happiness, and a good life, circumvented the difficult subjects of theology that many experts discouraged. It was easier to promote consumer values and desires of abundance and well-being. Throughout the century, this trend would prevail, and the experts of the 1940s were no different. Wolseley strongly discouraged promoting any specific religious doctrines that could divide people. Instead, publicity should concentrate on universal religious principles attractive to all.<sup>179</sup> Fortson agreed, citing a scientific study of reading habits showing that people preferred learning about "courageous living" instead of theology or church history.<sup>180</sup> Dobbins worried that promoting theology or the details of

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<sup>177</sup> Ibid.

<sup>178</sup> Wolseley, *Interpreting*, 277.

<sup>179</sup> Wolseley, *Still in Print*, 71.

<sup>180</sup> Fortson, 12-3.

religious belief would be to promote a particular institution instead of Jesus Christ.<sup>181</sup> Jesus did not come to “establish a theology,” argued Harral, but to “show a way of life.”<sup>182</sup> If a church hoped to promote successfully, according to the experts it had to avoid controversial, theological subjects.

According to some, one strategy to avoid an undignified association with the secular promotion industry was to use church bells. In the monthly journal *Church Management*, there was an article written almost every month in the early 1940s about the benefit of installing church bells in one’s church. They explained that though bells may cost a good bit up front, they were well worth the investment in the end. They would boost church attendance by alerting all of those in the community to the vibrancy of one’s church. They argued that bells were not only effective but also served the community by filling the air with music. Though they never directly stated it, this was a subtle public relations angle. By providing the community with music, a church could attract attention and court public favor by serving the community. Bells also circumvented many arguments against advertising your church. As F.G. Alpers explained, “Here is an ‘advertising medium’ that is at once insistent, effective and in full keeping with the dignity of the church.”<sup>183</sup> More poignantly though, Alpers explained that bells were one of the only avenues available for effective promotion, because it avoided association with the advertising industry. He wrote, “We cannot emulate the commercial organization by sending solicitors into their homes. We cannot shout the

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<sup>181</sup> Dobbins, *Building Better Churches*, 392.

<sup>182</sup> Harral, 23.

<sup>183</sup> Alpers, “When Tower Bells Sing,” 45-6.



merit of our 'ware' through the medium of newspaper and billboards.”<sup>184</sup> What the church could do, was toll its carillon bells.

Many churches turned towards the modern alternative to a tower of bells, an amplification system. Companies like Rangertone, Inc. manufactured large speaker systems that could be installed in a church tower to project the singing or preaching from within the church into the community. Some churches cited, for publicity purposes of the systems, that their attendance had grown by up to a third thanks to the system. As well, it offered a service to the community because they could use the system to broadcast community events.<sup>185</sup> In a 1946 advertisement for J.C. Deagan, Inc, a manufacturer of church bells, they described a poll for them the Chicago Temple. The Temple is full every Sunday and claims to be the tallest church in the world, and in a survey of their membership, they found that twenty-four percent of the people first attended because “they heard the music of the bells.”<sup>186</sup>

Another strategy was to display a bulletin board in front of the church that announced service times, upcoming events, and sermon topics. William Catton wrote in 1941 that religious advertising was so thoroughly accepted that there was no reason for its defense. However, there was reason to identify that there were certain means of advertising that were inappropriate to religion. In his opinion, you could not sell your church the same as selling shoes, but you could use a more appropriate tactic, a bulletin

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<sup>184</sup> Ibid.

<sup>185</sup> M.R. Robinson, “City Adopts Church Towertone,” *Church Management* 18 (December 1941): 30-1; James R. Uhlinger, “There is Music in the Air,” *Church Management* 21 (January 1945): 36-9.

<sup>186</sup> Advertisement, “J.C. Deagan, Inc.,” *Church Management* 22 (April 1946): 5.

board.<sup>187</sup> Bulletin boards were an exemplary advertising method because, according to Catton, they were inexpensive and enabled a church to present its message everyday with “entire self-respect and proper dignity.”<sup>188</sup> Beyond such appeals to dignity in justifying methods and tools, many experts simply offered pragmatic defenses.

Throughout the century, pragmatism would stand at the center of defenses for utilizing commercial methods in religious promotion. Dobbins argued that since advertising was basically salesmanship, the best test of success was results. If the method worked, then it should be utilized.<sup>189</sup> Pleuthner more directly stated, as was his style, “To fill more pews we must find the right appeal and then propel that appeal. This means that any churchgoing appeal must be pragmatic.” Quoting William James, he continued, “That which works is true.”<sup>190</sup> In a *Church Management* article, E.L. Murchison similarly argued that though advertising appeared to “cheapen” religion, it was the most effective means to spread it.<sup>191</sup> Many experts agreed that if it worked it was right for religion. In order to find what worked, what people wanted, they increasingly recommended the use of opinion surveys. By polling the local community, churches could determine what most attracted people to attend church. Though this method would not fully develop until the 1970s, in the 1940s, it was beginning to take root.

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<sup>187</sup> William Robert Catton, “Getting the Most From Your Bulletin Board,” *Church Management* 17 (September 1941): 719-20.

<sup>188</sup> *Ibid.*, 720.

<sup>189</sup> Dobbins, *Building Better Churches*, 391.

<sup>190</sup> Pleuthner, 76.

<sup>191</sup> E.L. Murchison, “Churches Should Advertise,” *Atlanta Daily World*, November 30, 1946.

The debate over whether commercial methods were appropriate for churches, and if so, how to determine which ones suited, continued in the 1940s, and would for the rest of the century. While each of the proponents of church promotion endorsed the methods of the marketplace, they also tried to draw boundaries around which ones were acceptable as a means to maintain the “otherness” and “dignity” of religion. In their efforts, they let many gray areas. One example was Roland Wolseley’s repudiation of “sensationalistic” publicity, then warning to be not dull in promotion.<sup>192</sup> This apparent contradiction and large gray area pervaded church promotion as ministers wondered what was appropriate. Some experts recommended various tests to make the assessment, one of which was pragmatism. Such discussions would continue throughout the century, and become livelier as the use of commercial methods grew in churches and the methods became increasingly consumer-oriented.

### Organization: A Comprehensive Approach to Church Promotion

In the 1940s, there was a growing emphasis on the benefit of a more comprehensive and organized approach to church promotion. In many churches, promotion was simply a haphazard effort led by the minister who had very little training in the field and only intermittently implemented strategies to grow. The experts had a larger vision for church promotion. They believed that it would be exponentially more effective if directed by experts, planned carefully, and practiced continually. Such a confidence in human ability was a mark of the growing rationality in religion. Whereas before, ministers trusted in the providence and mystery of God for church growth, they

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<sup>192</sup> Wolseley, *Interpreting*, 8.

were now turning more and more to the abilities and machinations of humanity. Ultimately, this trajectory would bring about the reign of public relations in the 1950s and 1960s. Churches would develop and fund complex promotional campaigns utilizing multiple methods to court the favorable opinion of their surrounding community. Yet in the 1940s, the seeds were just being sown.

Most of the founding fathers strongly recommended that every church develop a publicity committee to coordinate and direct a myriad of promotional efforts. Gaines Dobbins, among others, argued, “a church should organize for publicizing just as it does for preaching, teaching, training.”<sup>193</sup> The best means to do so was to create a permanent publicity committee that would have the same priority and influence as the finance committee in church operations.<sup>194</sup> This committee would relieve the pressure on the minister, and could employ the assistance of experts in various promotional fields to guide activities.<sup>195</sup> The director of the committee should be an expert in promotion. Henry and others recommended that it be a “newspaper man” who would know how to best work with the press.<sup>196</sup> Others, like Dobbins, argued that the director of publicity should be a full time position on the church staff, dedicating all of his energy towards developing an annual publicity program.<sup>197</sup> They should have a sufficient library available that includes the latest books on “journalism, radio, television, techniques of

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<sup>193</sup> Dobbins, *Churchbook*, 218.

<sup>194</sup> Henry, *Successful Church Publicity*, 123; Stuber, 239-40.

<sup>195</sup> Harral, 91-2.

<sup>196</sup> Pleuthner, 82.

<sup>197</sup> Dobbins, *Building Better Churches*, 389; Dobbins, *Churchbook*, 218.

publicity and advertising.”<sup>198</sup> The experts also sought to equip the committee to utilize the proper promotional outlets. They offered instructions on how to determine the best medium for church publicity, be it radio, newspaper, or even television. They also addressed the necessity for financial support to make promotion successful.

The success of a local church’s publicity efforts depended on the prowess of their publicity committee, but also on the commitment of financial resources to their work. Dobbins explained that, "The church budget should provide generously for publicity expense, which in turn will be budgeted according to need, opportunity, expected returns.”<sup>199</sup> In *The Churchbook*, Dobbins provided detailed guidance in establishing the appropriate budget for publicity. At least five percent of the total budget should be dedicated to promotion efforts. Of that amount, forty percent for newspaper space, twenty percent for weekly bulletins, twenty percent for direct mailing, and the remaining twenty percent for other materials and outsourcing.<sup>200</sup> As Dobbins and others calculated, the cost of publicity was ultimately negligible because of the returns that it brought in increased attendance, which translated into increased financial giving.<sup>201</sup> Such increases in a concern for promotional planning also translated into the growth of public relations in churches.

By 1951, religious promotion experts were beginning to distinguish between public relations and publicity. They explained to their readers and listeners that public relations was a comprehensive plan to shape public opinion. In his *Public Relations*

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<sup>198</sup> Dobbins, *Churchbook*, 218.

<sup>199</sup> Ibid.

<sup>200</sup> Dobbins, *Building Better Churches*, 389.

<sup>201</sup> Dobbins, *Churchbook*, 218.

*Manual for Churches*, Stuber describe the difference as, “Public relations is the total accomplishment; publicity is a tool used along the way to the goal.” Publicity itself, as he described it, is best understood as “news engineering”, it was religious journalism.<sup>202</sup> The stage had been set for the 1950s, a period of explosive growth in religious public relations and the expansion of American religion in American life.

## Conclusion

On the heels of a decade where church promotion languished, the 1940s provided a fresh space for new industry leaders to step into the fray and provide the expertise that would catalyze a church promotion expansion in the 1950s. While all of these experts guided their readers through tried and true methods of previous decades, they introduced a fresh source of influence: journalism. Each of the experts had a background in journalism and injected the church promotion industry with it. Many of them also had a theological background, but not all of them. A few of the experts had no theological or pastoral training. They brought a new level of marketplace expertise to church promotion, devoid of religious influence. Such reliance on marketplace models nourished a principal tension in religious promotion. Churches had to determine what methods of advertising and public relations, often maligned as manipulative and deceptive, were acceptable in religion. In order to do so, the experts developed defenses for their methods and provided general guidelines to prevent using those varieties of promotion that could corrupt religion. They also applied rhetorical strategies, using the word “dignity” to demarcate the good from the bad in religious promotion. Their efforts

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<sup>202</sup> Stuber, 238-9.

to make sense of the complexities in using the worldly to promote the other-worldly often left them caught in their own contradictions. Nevertheless, they pushed the wagon train of church promotion forward into the frontier. In the 1950s, they would discover a fertile land of religious interest in America and provide the resources to generate a boom in church promotion and defense for its existence.

## Chapter 3

### Rapid Growth: Promotion & Paradox in a High Demand Economy (1945-1965)

On June 06, 1956, the Religious Publicity Council (RPC), formerly the Religious Publicity Council, had grown large enough that it applied for incorporation as a federal-tax exempt organization. They applied under the provision that they were an organization formed “exclusively for religious” purposes, and under section 501(c)(3) were eligible for exemption. However, two years later, on June 27, 1958, the U.S. Treasury Department denied their request. The Department argued that the NRPC was in fact not a religious organization, but a “business league.” They wrote,

From an examination of all the information presented, it is evident that while some of your purposes and activities may have educational and religious aspects your primary purpose is that of promoting the common professional interest of your members and the religious public relations as a whole. ... Moreover, while some of your purposes as stated in your Constitution may be religious and/or educational in character, it is clear from a total reading of Article II of that document that you are not, with any definiteness, restricted to the attainment of religious or educational objectives such as would be required of an organization seeking exemption under section 501(c)(3) of the Code.<sup>1</sup>

Though the NRPC emphasized its religious identity, the government believed its business identity was dominant.

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<sup>1</sup> J.F. Worley Chief, Exempt Organizations Branch, U.S. Treasury Department to National Religious Publicity Council c/o Reverend Marvin C. Miller, June 27, 1958, folder “RPRC Original Incorporation Papers,” box 4, Records: 1952-1988 (88-0630), RPRCC.



The NRPC could not accept the government's assessment of its purpose and identity as a business league. Since its inception in 1929, the Council had worked tirelessly to equip and encourage the favorable reception of religion in American society. On December 29, 1958 the executive secretary for the NRPC, Marvin Wilbur submitted a deposition of protest to attorney Ted Kupferman, to send to the U.S. Treasury. In the letter of protest, Wilbur argued that the NRPC was not a business league but was a religious organization. He wrote, "Stating it simply and in the vernacular, the purpose of the National Religious Publicity Council is to 'sell' the Church and Religion by modern means of communication." He concluded, "In summation, the National Religious Publicity Council is not a business league or an organization for the common interest of its members, but rather to advance the Church and Religion in the community by means of modern techniques."<sup>2</sup> According to Wilbur, these were not fundamentally business professionals; they were religious leaders that devoted their professional lives to expanding religion; they promoted churches, not corporations. On March 17, 1959, the federal government acceded and granted that the NRPC was, "organized and operated exclusively for religious and educational purposes." For the moment, members of the NRPC could rest easy in the assurance of their identity and purpose. They were religious laborers who purified the methods of the marketplace to promote otherworldly institutions.

The NRPC's application for classification as a tax-exempt organization represented two of the primary developments in the religious promotion industry: expansion and tension. In expansion, their desire to incorporate was a mark of their

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<sup>2</sup> "Protest in the Matter of the Application of the National Religious Publicity Council for Exemption from Federal Income Tax – Draft," December 29, 1958, folder "RPRC Original Incorporation Papers," box 4, Records: 1952-1988 (88-0630), RPRCC.

confidence as an institution. After 1945, the public relations industry in religion expanded rapidly thanks to a growing demand for religion in America and an expanding supply of public relations expertise in the market. Whereas other public relations fields expanded in defense of industries under assault by government and public opinion, religious public relations actually expanded during a time of favorable public opinion. Yet as it grew, so did the tension in religious retailing. As the NRPC and other religious promotion experts broadened the applications of business promotionalism in churches, they wrestled more stridently with justifying the inclusion of such worldly methods in other worldly institutions. They fought to prove that their work was more than business, that it was religious. The NRPC pursued a two-pronged strategy in creating such a space for public relations in religion, articulating a *freedom from* and *freedom to* defense. They rhetorically denounced the public relations industry and praised the truth of their own message and methods as a mechanism to demonstrate a *freedom from* the marketplace. They also created and employed theological, historical, and pragmatic arguments to support the inclusion of public relations methods in religion to demonstrate a *freedom to* participate in the methods of the marketplace. The complexity and apparent contradictions in this strategy reiterate the significance of the tension latent in promoting other worldly institutions with worldly methods. Between 1945 and 1965, the religious public relations industry expanded rapidly and with it, the effort to establish religious public relations as religious not business.

## Religion & Public Relations Saturates America

Between 1945 and 1965, religious public relations exploded in growth. Since 1920, it had been slowly eclipsing advertising in the religious promotion industry. In the 1940s, religious journalists had brought press relations and a more comprehensive public relations approach to the forefront in church promotion. Incredible expansion in the methods and their application soon followed. One example was the rapid growth of the Religious Publicity Council. The RPC began in 1929 with just twenty-nine members and by 1956 had 276, a gradual increase over nearly thirty years. This rate of growth rapidly escalated over the next twelve years as the RPC nearly tripled in size, growing to 740 members by 1968. Such expansion was the result of two significant shifts in the United States during the 1950s. The first was the growth of the public relations industry during the period. The second was the increasing role of religion in American civic life. As the American people grew in their receptivity and demand for religion, the public relations tools available to promote it became readily accessible. The NRPC was poised to take advantage of both trends as business promotionalism rapidly increased its presence and influence in American Christianity.

*Public Relations Boom: The Expansion of the Industry*

Historian Roland Marchand describes World War II as a “public relations war.”<sup>3</sup> The war provided corporations an opportunity to align their public image and purpose with the noble causes of the Allied struggle across the oceans. They also used the opportunity to continue their struggle against the ideals of the New Deal, associating it

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<sup>3</sup> Roland Marchand, *Creating the Corporate Soul: The Rise of Public Relations and Corporate Imagery in American Big Business* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 317.

with the totalitarianism of the Axis powers.<sup>4</sup> These opportunities expanded the public relations industry and by the end of the war, it was poised to surge in growth with the general opinion of business. In 1946, Peter Drucker noted that large corporations had become “America’s representative social institution.”<sup>5</sup> Though the corporate world had been on the fence of public opinion since the end of 1920s, the war restored its prestige, particularly the large corporations. By 1951, according to a University of Michigan study of public opinion, 76 percent of the people surveyed approved of big business in America.<sup>6</sup> These expansions provided the largest growth of public relations in its history. A 1946 survey by the Opinion Research Corporation showed that nine out of ten companies had increased spending on public relations.<sup>7</sup> By 1950, most large companies not only had a separate department for public relations, but often times the head of the department was a vice president in the organization. In his 1959 book on the public relations industry, *The Image of Merchants*, Irwin Ross observed, "Public relations is without doubt one of the most volatile and fastest-growing service trades in the United States today."<sup>8</sup> With such growth, the industry sought to formalize its place in the American marketplace. It did so through the formation of professional organizations and educational programs.

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 322.

<sup>5</sup> Peter F. Drucker, *The Concept of the Corporation*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: John Day, 1972), 5, quoted in Marchand, 360.

<sup>6</sup> Richard S. Tedlow, *Keeping the Corporate Image: Public Relations and Business, 1900-1950*, (Greenwich, Conn: JAI Press, 1979), 149.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 151.

<sup>8</sup> Irwin Ross, *The Image Merchants; the Fabulous World of Public Relations* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1959), 13.

The first professional organizations for public relations agents were dinner clubs that gathered in the late 1930s and early 1940s. Two of these clubs later merged in 1948 to create the Public Relations Society of America, which remains today the primary national organization for the public relations industry.<sup>9</sup> The formation of such organizations enabled the creation of professional standards and their proliferation through the ever-expanding membership. Such standards gave the occupation an air of respectability and laid the groundwork for recruiting both clients and the next generation of public relations men and women.

Part of the professionalization of public relations in the 1950s was the education of practitioners in the latest methods and values. By 1947, at least thirty colleges were teaching forty-seven different “public relations” courses. Boston University created the first public relations graduate school that same year, despite the continual confusion over what exactly fell within the sphere of public relations and how to define the field.

Roland Marchand, captures the rapid accession of public relations in American society by looking at General Motors. By 1939, General Motors had a public relations budget of two million dollars supporting a staff of fifty. The year before, the Public Relations Director Paul Garrett said that, “the time will come ... when the big jobs in industry will be bossed not by the technicians of production, engineering or merchandising but by the generalissimo of public relations.” Marchand explains, “only half a decade later he could matter-of-factly categorize the major problems with which

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<sup>9</sup> Tedlow, 157-8.

management had contended in recent years – government relations, unions, community relations – as all falling within the province of public relations.”<sup>10</sup>

By the late 1940s, public relations had become one of the driving engines of American business. Simultaneously, in religion, the Religious Publicity Council had been nurturing the adoption of public relations ideas and methods in religious institutions. They believed that if religion was to compete in the marketplace, it had to adopt the latest methods of the market, in this case, public relations. However, the RPC was “doubly blessed” because the institutions that they represented also were experiencing their own boom in American life in the 1950s.

#### *Religion Boom: The Growth of Religious Practice in America*

In the early 1940s, the future of American Christianity appeared ominous to many religious leaders. Ministers like Thomas Warner noticed declining church membership around the nation and warned that churches may not be around in the future.<sup>11</sup> Similarly bleak were the results of the Federal Religious Census of 1936, released in 1941 and printed in the journal, *Church Management*. They revealed that the number of churches had decreased between 1926 and 1936, dropping from 232,154 to 199,302.<sup>12</sup> Many compared this decline to the significant increase in attendance at movies, football games,

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<sup>10</sup> Paul W. Garrett, *Public Relations – Industry’s No. 1 Job*, pamphlet, April 22, 1938, GM; Paul W. Garrett, *Management – Tell What You Stand For*, pamphlet, September 26, 1944, 16-17, BL, quoted in Roland Marchand, *Creating the Corporate Soul: The Rise of Public Relations and Corporate Imagery in American Big Business* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 357.

<sup>11</sup> Thomas H. Warner, “A Sermon Calendar for a Year,” *Church Management* 17 (July 1941): 604.

<sup>12</sup> “Federal Religious Census of 1936,” *Church Management* 17 (July 1941): 650.

and other entertainment venues.<sup>13</sup> They worried that the Americans were losing interest in churches that appeared irrelevant in modern society. Yet within just ten years, these concerns transformed into jubilant optimism. Whereas the total annual income collected by American churches dropped from \$800 million to \$400 million in the early 1930s, by 1952, it had leapt to \$1.2 billion.<sup>14</sup>

Between 1945 and 1965, “getting religion” became one of America’s favorite past times. Though historians and sociologists debate the extent to which religious conviction and devotion actually increased during this period, it is clear that participation in mainstream, institutional religion became a more visible component of American culture.<sup>15</sup> Despite earlier forecasts of despair, by the early 1950s it was clear that religion in the United States was growing rapidly. New churches were popping up across America to meet the religious demand, and members of the RPC eagerly reported on this expansive growth in American religion. At the 1954 annual convention of the RPC, Dr. Charles F. Masterson gave an address entitled “The Religious Influence on the American Scene” highlighting the many marks in American society of a rapid increase in American affinity for religion, particularly Christianity. He cited that since 1940, churches had added twenty-two million members, twice the growth rate of the population overall.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> “Church Attendance Lags,” *Church Management* 20 (December 1943): 7.

<sup>14</sup> Felicia Anthenelli, “Old Time Religion,” *Wall Street Journal*, May 24, 1952.

<sup>15</sup> In *The Churching of America: 1776-2005*, Roger Finke and Rodney Stark demonstrate that church attendance did increase during this period. However, sociologist Christian Smith makes the point, “Hypothetically, a church’s pews could be completely filled with regular attenders who are exceptionally uncommitted, uninformed, and apathetic religiously – who perhaps want nothing more than a place to meet useful business contacts and the status they think is associated with being an upstanding, churchgoing citizen of their community.” Christian Smith and Michael Emerson, *American Evangelicalism: Embattled and Thriving* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 20.

<sup>16</sup> Charles F. Masterson, “The Religious Influence on the American Scene,” *NPRC Counselor* 4, no. 2 (Spring 1954), box 5, Records: 1952-1988 (88-0630), RPRCC.

Religious journals like *Church Management* headlined with articles that celebrated the dawn of a new era of religious growth, with articles such as, “American Protestantism in Its Greatest Decade: Phenomenal Growth Numerically and Economically.”<sup>17</sup> The National Council of Churches reported that nearly sixty-one percent of all Americans in 1956 were church members.<sup>18</sup> At the 1956 annual RPC convention, Oxie Reichler, the editor of the *Yonkers Herald Statesman*, reported to the RPC that there were 5,000 new congregations established in 1954 alone and that they estimated an additional 70,000 churches would be constructed before 1966.<sup>19</sup> According to a U.S. census poll in 1957, 96 percent of Americans claimed to belong to a religious tradition.<sup>20</sup> In the early 1950s, the *Atlanta Journal* asked citizens what they believed to be the community’s greatest asset. Nearly 100 percent responded that it was the church.<sup>21</sup> These increases in religious attendance and adherence were accompanied by, and possibly catalyzed by, a growing civic emphasis on religion.

There are few better examples of an increasing civic religion in the United States than the role of Dwight Eisenhower, the U.S. president from 1953 to 1960, as high priest over American religion. Throughout his presidency, Eisenhower repeatedly expressed the necessity for the American people to be a religious people. Much of this was in part because he recognized how important religious participation was to the American people.

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<sup>17</sup> “American Protestantism in Its Greatest Decade: Phenomenal Growth Numerically and Economically,” *Church Management* 29 (January 1953): 22.

<sup>18</sup> “Church Statistics,” *Church Management* 33 (October 1956): 53.

<sup>19</sup> Oxie Reichler, “An Address,” April 13, 1956, folder “1956 Convention,” box 6, Records: 1929-1985 (89-1115a), RPRCC.

<sup>20</sup> Edwin S. Gaustad and Leigh Eric Schmidt, *The Religious History of America* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2002), 341.

<sup>21</sup> *NRPC Counselor* 3, no. 2 (Winter 1953), box 5, Records: 1952-1988 (88-0630), RPRCC.



Prior to running for president he remarked to evangelist Billy Graham, “I don’t believe the American people are going to follow anybody who’s not a member of a church.”<sup>22</sup> Once elected, Eisenhower ensured that he officially met this American expectation by becoming the only U.S. President ever baptized while in office. He went on to use his “pulpit” to preach the importance of religion in American life, making remarks such as, “Our form of government makes no sense unless it is founded on a deeply felt religious faith.”<sup>23</sup> In signing the bill to add “under God” to the pledge of allegiance, he noted that such an addition was a mark of “our country’s true meaning.” For Eisenhower, to be an American was to be religious. He was also joined in his endorsement of religion by the U.S. Congress that not only passed the bill regarding the Pledge of Allegiance but also passed a bill in 1956 to add “In God We Trust” to all U.S. currency. If that were not enough, Eisenhower was endorsed publicly by two of the most recognizable religious leaders in the country, Billy Graham and Norman Vincent Peale.

Both Peale and Graham, along with religious figures such as Fulton J. Sheen, became household names in the 1950s thanks to their utilization of mass media and publicity. Before pursuing a career in ministry, Peale worked in journalism as a reporter in 1920. This may have contributed to his awareness for the importance of publicity. Soon after, Peale grew a church in Syracuse, in part, through aggressive advertising and creative programming.<sup>24</sup> He then expanded his popularity at the Marble Collegiate

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<sup>22</sup> Martin Marty, *Modern American Religion: Under God, Indivisible, 1941-1960* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 3:305.

<sup>23</sup> Mark Silk, “Notes on the Judeo-Christian Tradition in America,” *American Quarterly* (Spring 1984): 65, quoted in Alan Cecil Petigny, *The Permissive Society: America, 1941-1965* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 67.

<sup>24</sup> Roy M. Anker, *Self-Help and Popular Religion in Early American Culture: An Interpretive Guide* (Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press, 1999), 105-8.

Church in New York City with a nationally syndicated newspaper column and a national radio broadcast, *The Art of Living*.<sup>25</sup> By 1954, the program was on 125 radio stations, and his new television program was on 130 stations.<sup>26</sup> Nine years previously, he harnessed the power of print by launching a national magazine *Guideposts*. Yet Peale's greatest success came with the publication of one of his many books, *The Power of Positive Thinking*.<sup>27</sup> Between 1952 and 1955, it remained on the *New York Times* bestseller list, and sold one million copies.<sup>28</sup> Peale built his career in great part on utilizing the media and publicity, as did Billy Graham.

Billy Graham's career began thanks to publicity at a Los Angeles revival in 1949. After four weeks of meeting and preaching in a large tent, attendance was waning. However, Graham knew the importance of attracting celebrities for publicity value, a lesson learned while an itinerant evangelist for Youth for Christ. Fortunately for Graham, Stuart Hamblen, a radio personality was converted and began promoting the Graham revivals. Media attention grew rapidly and by the end of the revival, Graham was a celebrity who had hosted over 300,000 people at the revival.<sup>29</sup> National news media picked up Graham's story, including William Randolph Hearst who instructed journalists to "puff Graham."<sup>30</sup> Religious revival rapidly became a subject of national

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 110.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Norman Vincent Peale, *The Power of Positive Thinking* (New York: Prentice-Hall, 1952).

<sup>28</sup> James David Hudnut-Beumler, *Looking for God in the Suburbs: The Religion of the American Dream and Its Critics, 1945-1965* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1994), 48; Anker, 114.

<sup>29</sup> Joel Carpenter, *Revive Us Again: The Reawakening of American Fundamentalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 223-25.

<sup>30</sup> Darryl G. Hart, *That Old-Time Religion in Modern America* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2002), 80-1.

news.<sup>31</sup> This expansive growth in religious interest, carried by the media, presented the RPC with a new opportunity, real growth. As religion and public relations grew in America, so too did the RPC in its membership, structure, and function.

The best news of all for the RPC was that a greater percentage of these churches recognized the importance of public relations. More churches, with more members, with more demand, meant more public relations professionals. In 1960, the RPC reported that “an estimated 1,000 specialists, many of them former newspaper or broadcasting professionals, now are employed by religious organizations in relaying information about their affairs to press, radio and television outlets.”<sup>32</sup> Religious public relations grew as an industry, in great part, because the American people now had a hunger for religious subjects and information. There was a high demand for religion, providing churches a unique opportunity for growth if they could tap into the market. They turned to public relations as a means to attract new customers.

#### *An Opportunity: America Wants More Religious News*

The interest among Americans in religion provided the public relations industry a unique opportunity to influence public opinion. Previously, proponents of religious public relations justified the industry by pointing to the increasing irrelevancy of religion in American life. Public relations was a defensive tool for survival. However, in the 1950s, it became a tool to take advantage of an opportunity. To use a biblical metaphor, the field was now ripe for harvest, and the laborers were few. The industry had to grow

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<sup>31</sup> Carpenter, 226.

<sup>32</sup> “Editor Find Religion Sells Newspapers,” *NRPC Counselor* 10 (Winter 1960), box 5, Records: 1952-1988 (88-0630), RPRCC.

and it had to take advantage of the hunger among a religious people for religious news. If these religious public relations professionals could provide the right information in the right formats, they could expand the customer base of American religion enormously. While commercial public relations employed complex strategies of identifying with the “common man” and supporting free enterprise, churches simply sought to attract more local attention. They rallied one another, to grow the profession and to take advantage of this new opportunity.

At the 1958 RPC convention, the assistant general news manager of the United Press Associations, William C. Payette, rallied the attendees by noting how important religious news had become in American society. He explained that “religion is a major force in human affairs” and that “the resurgence of interest in religion in recent years has been accompanied by a noticeable increase in the public’s demand for intelligent reporting of religious news.”<sup>33</sup> Making much of this growing public demand for better and more prolific religious news was a common theme of the RPC in the 1950s. Many pointed out that even the secular press now recognized that it had to report on religion to appeal to the American reader. The RPC highlighted that *Time* magazine reported in 1954 on the World Council of Churches meeting in Evanston that a turning point had been reached where the US press now recognized the importance and validity of religious news.<sup>34</sup> The Spring Counselor in 1954 proudly reported that the managing editor for the Religious News Service had stated, “Daily newspapers thru-out the US are finding it

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<sup>33</sup> News Release, April 17, 1958, folder “1958 Convention,” box 6, Records: 1929-1985 (89-1115a), RPRCC.

<sup>34</sup> *NRPC Counselor* 5 (Autumn 1954), box 5, Records: 1952-1988 (88-0630), RPRCC.

necessary to print more religious news in order to retain their readers.”<sup>35</sup> The *Counselor* article then it made it clear what this meant for religious public relations, “Now let’s all get busy pounding typewriters.” That same year, a representative of the Ladies’ Home Journal reported to the National Council of Churches that there had been a “very real upsurge of interest in religious articles.”<sup>36</sup> In 1955, *Church Management* reported that all of the major press outlets who now saw that churches were “vital community organizations” shared the rapidly growing interest in religion.<sup>37</sup> The same year, the RPC quoted *Newsweek* magazine that the “increase of press coverage of religion is nothing short of phenomenal. Press discovering that religion sells papers.”<sup>38</sup> James W. Carty, Jr. reported in the *Counselor* in 1960 that journalism editors across the nation were recognizing that, “100,000,000 Americans are affiliated with some religious institution and that these millions want to read about the activities of their churches and synagogues as much as about what is happening in the schools or courts or at city hall.”<sup>39</sup> The hunger for religious news was voracious in America, and the RPC was rallying to feed it.

The translation for the religious public relations industry was clear; they had to get busy building a national profession. They had to properly equip churches to meet the demand while it was high. In 1956, Ed Greif, of public relations agency Banner & Greif, spoke to the Yale Divinity School. He explained the steep increase in the last ten years in

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<sup>35</sup> *NRPC Counselor* 4 (Spring 1954), box 5, Records: 1952-1988 (88-0630), RPRCC.

<sup>36</sup> “Minutes of Advisory Committee Meeting Central Department of Public Relations, March 24, 1954,” folder 39 “Public Relations,” Series II: Roy G. Ross, 1954-1963, box 8, RG 4, NCC General Secretary, 1950-1973, PHS.

<sup>37</sup> “How Will the Church Building Boom Last?” *Church Management* 31 (August 1955): 4.

<sup>38</sup> *NRPC Counselor* 5 (Summer 1955), box 5, Records: 1952-1988 (88-0630), RPRCC.

<sup>39</sup> James W. Carty, “Editors Find Religion Sells Newspapers,” *NRPC Counselor* 10, no. 1 (Winter 1960), box 5, Records: 1952-1988 (88-0630), RPRCC.

interest in religious news. He warned them, that if the religious news did not get out, the churches were to blame. “The churches,” he contended, “are at fault in not training preachers and other church workers in the arts of providing the press with newsworthy church stories.”<sup>40</sup> Leaders in the church promotion industry, such as Donald Bolles explained at denominational conventions, “The climate in this country never has been more favorable to religion than right now.” As such, Bolles believed that “it is important to the churches that they utilize every possible channel to give people the information that will impel them to a favorable decision.”<sup>41</sup> The response that followed within the profession was in many ways astounding. The religious public relations industry expanded exponentially.

#### *Retailing Religion Boom: The Growth of the Religious Promotion Industry*

The RPC enjoyed phenomenal growth between 1945 and 1965, most particularly in the 1950s. The decade was a time of increasing corporatization throughout American Protestantism. In organization, denominations like the Southern Baptist Convention hired professional corporate consultants, such as Booz Allen, to restructure their institutions.<sup>42</sup> The Presbyterian Church paid Cresap, McCormick and Paget to offer consultation in management, particularly in lowering operational expenses.<sup>43</sup> Churches

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<sup>40</sup> “Churches Advised to Improve Their Public Relations,” *Hartford Courant*, January 10, 1956.

<sup>41</sup> “Wider Church Publicity Used Advocated,” *Los Angeles Times*, October 29, 1954.

<sup>42</sup> Nancy Ammerman, *Baptist Battles: Social Change and Religious Conflict in the Southern Baptist Convention* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1990), 61.

<sup>43</sup> Christopher D. McKenna *The World’s Newest Profession: Management Consulting in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Cambridge, 2006), 126; The Presbyterians have always been very open to reorganizational change, see Richard Reifsnyder, “The Reorganizational Impulse in American

also hired administrators to manage and lead their increasingly business-like institutions. As a sign of such growth, the National Association of Church Business Administration formed in 1956 and began hosting annual conferences.<sup>44</sup> In church promotion, public relations continued to grow. At the 1959 convention, the RPC celebrated its thirtieth anniversary and the president, Robert E.A. Lee, proudly exclaimed that recently there had been a “transition among us from a mere idea of religious publicity to the broader concept of religious public relations. We can be truly grateful that our churches have finally found out that the tools and techniques of promotion and publicity can be dedicated to God and used for sacred purposes.”<sup>45</sup> If anyone doubted Lee’s proclamation of success in the industry, all they had to do was look around the room at all of the new faces to see the evidence. By 1959, the RPC was in a state of rapid expansion, as was the entire church promotion industry.

Some churches hired secular promotion experts as their pastors. In 1955, Theodore Henry Palmquist asserted that marketplace methods were easily transferrable to religion. He left his career in advertising to serve as the pastor of the Foundry Methodist Church in Washington, D.C. Speaking of the transition from sales to religion, Palmquist said, “I only changed the products that I advertise from things made by the hands of man to the things that make men.”<sup>46</sup> The Parkville Congregational Church in Brooklyn, New York appointed Robert Weeks Barron a former director for the N.W. Ayer & Son

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Protestantism: The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) as a Case Study, 1788-1983” (PhD diss., Princeton Theological Seminary, 1984).

<sup>44</sup> National Association of Church Business, “NACBA History” <http://www.nacba.net/index.html> (accessed May 13, 2008).

<sup>45</sup> NRPC Report of the President to the 30<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Convention, April 9, 1959, folder “NRPC National Convention 1959,” box 6, Records: 1929-1985 (89-1115a), RPRCC.

<sup>46</sup> “An Ex-Advertising Man Named Capital Pastor,” *New York Times*, April 14, 1955.

advertising agency as its pastor in 1961.<sup>47</sup> These were more signs of the increasing confidence in and influence of the marketplace methods in religion.

Every major Christian denomination in the United States had a public relations department by 1960. One of the first, if not the first, denomination to create a full time public relations department was the Seventh-Day Adventist in 1912, directed by a former sports editor.<sup>48</sup> Consequentially, by 1960 it was one of the larger public relations operations with forty fulltime employees.<sup>49</sup> By 1950, the United Methodist Church's public relations department, the Commission on Public Information, was the largest of any public relations staff and budget among the denominations. Directed by Ralph Stody, it continued to grow in the 1950s, beginning the decade with a budget increase from \$47,000 to \$67,000, a "nine-man" office, and approval to open new offices in New York, Chicago, Nashville, and San Francisco.<sup>50</sup> They enjoyed another increase in the budget in 1956 and opened a new information office in Washington, D.C.<sup>51</sup>

Other denominations added public relations departments in the 1950s. In 1952, the Episcopal Church employed its first public relations specialists. Others followed, adding a public relations expert or department to their staff to include the Christian Churches (Disciples) in 1954, Union of American Hebrew Congregations in 1956, and

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<sup>47</sup> "Ex-Ad Man to Be Ordained Today," *New York Times*, June 19, 1961.

<sup>48</sup> "Walter L. Burgan, Church Publicity Director, Dies," *Washington Post and Times Herald*, July 26, 1940.

<sup>49</sup> Kenneth Dole, "News of the Churches: Public Relations Men are Key Church Aides," *Washington Post and Times Herald*, August 1, 1959.

<sup>50</sup> "Methodists Told to Use All Publicity," *Washington Post and Times Herald*, October 22, 1950.

<sup>51</sup> "Methodists to Open 4<sup>th</sup> News Office," *Washington Post and Times Herald*, May 28, 1956.



the Church of the Nazarene in 1957.<sup>52</sup> Also in 1957, the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. approved expanding its public relations department with a new office of information in New York.<sup>53</sup> The Roman Catholic Church held their first national seminar on church public relations in 1959 at Manhattan College.<sup>54</sup> That same year, Ralph Stoody told the Associated Press that the field of religious public relations had expanded rapidly in recent years, with over 1,000 specialists. Many of them, he explained, were previously newspaper editors but were now employed by religious organizations. Churches recognized the value, he said, of good public relations in religion and were spending more than one million dollars a year on it.<sup>55</sup> Other evidence for this development was in the role of public relations in interdenominational organizations.

The newly minted National Council of Churches (NCC), created in 1951 when twelve interdenominational organizations joined together, ensured that its public relations office grew with the organization. At the time of the merger, five of the twelve organizations had their own public relations departments. Both the International Council of Religious Education and the Federal Council of Churches had a director of public relations and an administrative assistant. The other three, the Home Missions Council, Foreign Mission Conference and the United Church Women, shared a joint public

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<sup>52</sup> Kenneth Dole, "News of the Churches: Public Relations Men are Key Church Aides," *Washington Post and Times Herald*, August 1, 1959.

<sup>53</sup> "Presbyterians to Expand Public Relations Activity," *Washington Post and Times Herald*, May 18, 1957.

<sup>54</sup> John Wicklein, "Catholics to Scan Public Relations," *New York Times*, August 22, 1959.

<sup>55</sup> Kenneth Dole, "News of the Churches: Public Relations Men are Key Church Aides," *Washington Post and Times Herald*, August 1, 1959.

relations office entitled the Missions Public Relations.<sup>56</sup> The decision was made to roll all of these into one Central Department of Public Relations to direct the preparation and release of all NCC related news to all public media sources. Their official purpose, as stated in their by-laws, was twofold. First, their mission was “to assist in the presentation of the Christian Gospel through the use of all public relations media and techniques.” Second, they were “to create a favorable attitude toward the work of the cooperating churches and the work of the Council.”<sup>57</sup> The January, 1951 issue of the *Counselor* was nearly wholly devoted to describing the department and its purpose. The first executive director was Donald C. Bolles, who served in the position until 1959. He had an initial operating budget of \$92,860, which grew to \$130,000 just two years later.<sup>58</sup> The total staff consisted of three public relations specialists and two secretaries in the New York office, and there was one specialist and one secretary in the Chicago office. The name of the department was changed in 1956 to the Office of Public Relations and then again to the Office of Information in 1960.<sup>59</sup> This latter name change may have been an attempt to sever association between the work of the office and the public relations field whose reputation was steadily declining in the public eye. Yet for now, the field remained an important and popular fixture in the organization.

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<sup>56</sup> Donald Bolles, “The Role of Public Relations in the National Council of Churches,” November 13, 1953, folder 9, box 10, RG 15, National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of American Records, 1951-1974, PHS, 1.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

<sup>59</sup> Presbyterian Historical Society, “Presbyterian Historical Society, Finding Aid to Record Group 15: National Council of Churches of Christ in the United States of American – Department of Information Records, 1951-1974,” <http://history.pcusa.org/finding/phsncc15.xml> (accessed February 10, 2010).

The expansion of the religious public relations industry included growth also in professional education. Following on the work of Gaines Dobbins, Roland Wolseley and others in the establishment of several classes and programs in religious journalism in the 1940s, more schools added such curricula. However, they focused more broadly on publicity and public relations. In 1954, the Religious Newswriters Association met in Boston and listened to a panel discuss, "Should the Seminaries Teach Press Relations?" The panel, representing a diverse number of churches, agreed that it should be taught and must be pressed as a necessary curriculum addition.<sup>60</sup> Perhaps in response, beginning in 1955, the Los Angeles Baptist Theological Seminary offered a Publicity Course for pastors.<sup>61</sup> The following year, Yale University offered a workshop in church promotion, and the Washington Baptist Seminary introduced a lineup of courses in "Church Publicity and Public Relations."<sup>62</sup> In 1957, a student at Ohio University wrote a thesis on the state of "the National Religious Organizations Having Full-Time Public Relations Programs." Delfina Greco found that church public relations programs were growing at the journalism schools of Northwestern University, Columbia University, the University of Missouri, and the University of Texas.<sup>63</sup> Dissatisfied with their progress, Columbia University announced in 1962 that they would be focusing even more on churches in

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<sup>60</sup> Betty Driscoll Mayo, "Clergy Told of Duty in Public Relations," *Christian Science Monitor*, May 5, 1954 .

<sup>61</sup> "Baptist School Offers Courses to Pastors, Laity," *Los Angeles Times*, August 27, 1955.

<sup>62</sup> "Baptist Classes to Start," *Washington Post and Times Herald*, September 12, 1956; "Public Relations In Religion is Workshop Topic," *Hartford Courant*, January 8, 1956.

<sup>63</sup> Delfina Eleanor Greco, "A Survey of the National Religious Organizations Having Full-Time Public Relations Programs" (Master's Thesis, Ohio University, 1957), 8.

their Public Relations program.<sup>64</sup> These increases in training provided more practitioners for the field as more individuals pursued religious public relations as a profession.

In Greco's survey of the industry, she noted the primary responsibilities and trends of the denominational public relations offices and experts. Of the twenty-three denominations that replied with full-time public relations programs, all diligently used the newspapers to disseminate information about churches in the denominations.<sup>65</sup> They also sent press releases to magazines such as *Newsweek* and *Time* and produced internal church publications.<sup>66</sup> Many of them also created filmstrips, promotional displays for conferences, and records or tapes for audio promotion. Almost half of the denominations produced television programs for local station use as well as radio programs for national programming and local use.<sup>67</sup>

While several of these public relations offices were centralized, most were spread across local districts. The Southern Baptist Convention had 150 full-time public relations employees working in forty-five different offices. The Methodists had public relations offices in fourteen episcopal areas.<sup>68</sup> All of them worked to provide local church news clinics and workshops for churches. The increasing size alone of the Southern Baptist Convention public relations offices catalyzed the creation of another professional organization, the Baptist Public Relations Association.

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<sup>64</sup> "Church Public Relations Put in Columbia Courses," *New York Times*, June 21, 1962.

<sup>65</sup> Greco, 38.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 39, 42.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 75.

Twenty-four Baptist public relations professionals established the Baptist Public Relations Association at the Southern Baptist Convention annual meeting in 1954. They immediately began holding workshops to develop their profession and train local churches. Experts such as Ralph D. Churchill, the director of publicity and associate professor of journalism at the Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary hosted such clinics and joined local secular newspaper editors and public relations specialists in instructing ministers.<sup>69</sup> Part of their work was also to assuage many denominational leaders' concerns that public relations was "manipulative" and would bring "Wall Street type" communication into the denomination.<sup>70</sup> They were, in part successful, as their role grew. By 1959, nearly 100 people attended their workshop at the national convention, and 147 attended in 1964.<sup>71</sup> Meanwhile, the membership of the RPC also grew.

The increase in membership in the RPC during the 1950s and early 1960s was significant. Prior to the 1950s, the organization recognized growth in the industry and felt it necessary to codify its own expansion with a name change. In 1949, the Religious Publicity Council officially became the National Religious Publicity Council (NRPC). It was an organization that hoped to stretch across the nation, organizing religious public relations throughout the country. Such aspirations came to fruition in the 1950s. Between 1956 and 1962, the organization's membership more than doubled, to reach 600 members. It would reach 740 members by 1968. Confidence was high, and they predicted that such increases would continue. By 1970, they hoped to have 950

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<sup>69</sup> James H. Cox, *We've A Story to Tell: A History of Baptist Public Relations Association, 1953-1987* (Brentwood, TN: Baptist Public Relations Association, 1986), 17-22.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 31, 40.

members, then 1,250 by 1971.<sup>72</sup> These hopes would not be realized, but the optimism of the organization reflected the greater optimism in the industry.

The demands of a rapidly increasing membership and agenda required that the NRPC take significant steps to improve its administrative operations. The responsibilities of organizing the national meetings taxed the strictly volunteer workforce. Members were unable to work with others in their area, because they were too focused on nationally organizing. As a solution, in 1948 Erik Modean, the vice president of the NRPC, suggested that a local chapter be established in New York City. This local chapter could focus solely on organizing local meetings and activities as well as recruit new members. They readily adopted the suggestion and so began a new federal form of organization for the NRPC. The national chapter would manage national issues while local chapters could be chartered in major cities by local members. The first two created, in 1948, were in New York City and Washington, D.C. Others followed, and by 1963, there were fifteen chapters, the most that the organization would ever have, dropping back to thirteen in the 1970s and remaining at that number in 2009.

Chapters popped up all across the country, spreading the influence of the NRPC and religious public relations with it, to the entire nation. By 1970, there were chapters in Atlanta, Houston, Minneapolis, Southern California, Northern California, and Puget Sound, just to name a few. What had once been a regional organization based in New York City, now had a national presence. The NRPC was the premiere national organization for religious public relations. Anticipating this development, the members in 1949, on the edge of its greatest period of growth, had voted to add “National” to the

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<sup>72</sup> R.I.S.E. Description, *RPRC Counselor 17* (Spring 1968), box 5, Records: 1952-1988 (88-0630), RPRCC.

name.<sup>73</sup> Now, ten years later, their vision had become a reality. The National Religious Publicity Council stretched from one coast to the other. Not only that, exactly ten years later, in 1959, the NRPC picked up an international chapter with the acceptance of the Toronto, Canada chapter.<sup>74</sup> These expansions in members and geographic influence, led the NRPC to alter the locations of its annual conventions as a means to serve its national clientele.

Formed at an annual convention, the NRPC's national gathering always had been its principal event. The bulk of the organization's work focused throughout the year in planning the meeting, from its speakers, to topics, to hotel accommodations and meals. In the early years of the NRPC, the members primarily lived in New York City, the home of many denominational offices and news services. As such, in the first thirty years, twenty-six of the conventions were held in New York City. The exceptions were three meetings in Washington, D.C., and one in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.<sup>75</sup> However, with the creation of local chapters throughout the United States, and a much larger membership to support it, the conventions began to move to other cities after 1958. A few of the cities that hosted, in addition to the previous three, were Chicago, Minneapolis, Dallas, Nashville, St. Louis, Indianapolis and Houston. As a result of the new locations, and the rapid increase in membership, attendance at the conventions grew. Having only exceeded 100 attendees at one convention prior to 1958, 111 in 1955, attendance averaged around 140 in the 1960s. These increases following the 1958

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<sup>73</sup> "All in the Name," Chapter 2, *RPRC: A 50-Year Reflection*, box 1, Records: 1952-1988 (88-0630), RPRCC.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>75</sup> "Spread the Base," Chapter 5, *RPRC: A 50-Year Reflection*, box 1, Records: 1952-1988 (88-0630), RPRCC.

convention coincided with an expansion in the duration of the meeting. Prior to 1958, annual conventions had convened for little more than a day, beginning around noon on a Thursday and ending at around three o'clock on Friday. However, in 1958, they started on Wednesday at six o'clock in the evening and went until three o'clock on Friday, nearly doubling the length of the convention. By 1962, they were meeting for three days, typically beginning on Sunday afternoon and finishing mid-day on Wednesday. Not only was the organization expanding in the breadth of its reach, it was also expanding in the depth of its historical consciousness.

Members in the 1950s recognized the unique growth of the NRPC and of religious public relations in general. They believed that their organization had played a fundamental role in building this industry, and they sought to explore it. In pursuit of the origins and meaning of the "Council", they created the office of NRPC historian in 1956. They charged the officer with developing a historical record of the organization and its work. Elisabeth J. Husted who helped the NRPC prepare to celebrate its thirtieth anniversary three years later originally held the position.<sup>76</sup>

However, the most significant change in the NRPC administration was the creation of the position of Executive Secretary. The Executive Secretary was the first employee of the NRPC, albeit a part-time position. The membership had determined that the workload and responsibilities were simply becoming too great for purely volunteer work. They therefore created the position and asked member Marvin C. Wilbur, the assistant secretary of promotion of the General Council of Presbyterian Church USA and the twice-former president of the NRPC New York chapter, to take the job. He did so in

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<sup>76</sup> *NRPC Counselor* 6 (Summer 1956), box 5, Records: 1952-1988 (88-0630), RPRCC.



1959 and remained at the helm of the NRPC until 1986, when he retired after forty-five years as a member of the organization.<sup>77</sup>

Another mark of the NRPC's expansion was the creation of an official organ, entitled *The Counselor*. The first edition of the NRPC Counselor appeared in November 1950. For the first two years it was written on a type writer and mimeographed for distribution. In 1952, however, the NRPC began setting it in type and including photographs. The newsletter remained the same for the next four years. The NRPC began producing it as a professionally published and laminated fold out newsletter with an official logo in 1956. The next year they produced three issues in one year as opposed to two. In 1960, they made the *Counselor* a quarterly newsletter that included numerous photographs, articles on the industry, updates on members, and recommendations for better religious publication methods.

The period between 1945 and 1965 was one of exponential expansion in American religion, public relations and religious public relations. The promotional industry in religion grew as an eagerly religious nation clamored for more religious news and engagement. Experts arose to provide denominations and churches the tools to feed this need and make the most of the opportunity to spread Christianity by spreading the growth of its institutions. The NRPC was one mark of this growth as it rapidly developed in its organization and membership. As the period came to a close, the NRPC celebrated its expansion and at their national convention in 1963, they changed their name to reflect recent shifts in the industry. The organization was international with chapters in Canada,

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<sup>77</sup> "Annual Convention Recap," *NRPC Counselor* 9 (Summer 1959), box 5, Records: 1952-1988 (88-0630), RPRCC.

so they removed the geographic limit from their name. As well, public relations had become the dominant form of promotion and publicity in religion, so they gave their title more specificity in their realm of expertise. The new name was the Religious Public Relations Council (RPRC).<sup>78</sup> However, despite a new name, the organization was haunted by the same old challenges. They labored to sell otherworldly religion with worldly marketplace methods. In order to defend their profession, the RPRC labored in an unorganized, unofficial campaign to prove that they were different from the rest of the public relations industry, that their methods were pure and sanctified.

### Disassociation & Defense: Public Relations in Religion

Reverend Herbert Rugg worked as the editorial secretary of the National Council of Congregational Churches and was a charter member of the Religious Public Relations Council. Elected the first chairman of the organization at the inaugural meeting in 1929, he was an ardent supporter of the RPRC and of religious public relations. He helped to create and grow an organization whose sole purpose was to promote the use of public relations in religion. Yet he did it with great reservations. He expressed his concerns in 1932 in an address to the RPRC. Rugg said, "It cannot be too emphatically stated that the ideals and methods of big business as we actually find them in operation today cannot be appropriated unaltered by the church to the advancement of religion. Religion cannot be 'put over' or 'promoted' or 'sold' as a piece of merchandise."<sup>79</sup> According to Rugg, the methods of the market were contaminated. They must not be used "unaltered" in

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<sup>78</sup> Meeting Minutes, March 28, 1963, folder "1963 Convention," box 6, Records: 1929-1985 (89-1115a). RPRCC.

<sup>79</sup> "Report of the Radio Committee," December 16-17, 1932, folder "History National Religious Publicity Council 1929-1934," box 4, Records: 1952-1988 (88-0630), RPRCC.

religion. M.E. McIntosh, another charter member had expressed the same concern. He said that religious public relations could not be associated with the damaging ideas and practices of public relations.<sup>80</sup> Members of the RPRC believed that public relations experts were hucksters, peddlers in persuasion, image-makers. Yet they saw themselves as laborers for a higher calling, a noble cause that called for a purity of values and methods that the public relations industry lacked. According to them, while the public relations industry was ruthless and conniving, religion was to be genuine, honest, and selfless. Religious public relations professionals had to figure out a way to purify public relations, to make it sacred, and as the industry grew between 1945 and 1965, they worked tirelessly to do so.

*Public Relations: A Devious and Pernicious Profession*

Since its inception, the public relations profession has been held with little esteem in American society. In 1927, one *Printers Ink* writer noted that a public relations agent was, “the only man in the world proud of being called a liar.”<sup>81</sup> Another considered the press agent “the direct descendant of P.T. Barnum, astute author of immortally funny hoaxes which were at the same time cruel and more than a little repulsive.”<sup>82</sup> Yet such criticism of the public relations industry was not unfounded. One had to look no further than the philosophy of the industry’s patriarch, Edward Bernays. In his book

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<sup>80</sup> M.E. McIntosh, “What Are the Important Differences Between Religious Publicity in General and Publicity Especially Designed to Secure Financial Support for Missionary and Other Benevolent Work?” March 19-20, 1929, folder “History National Religious Publicity Council 1929-1934,” box 4, Records: 1952-1988 (88-0630), RPRCC.

<sup>81</sup> *Printer’s Ink*, July 21, 1927, 179, quoted in Tedlow, 34.

<sup>82</sup> Will Irwin, “The Press Agent: His Rise and Decline,” *Collier’s*, December 2, 1911, 24, quoted in Tedlow, 34.

*Crystallizing Public Opinion*, Bernays defined public relations as “the engineering of consent.”<sup>83</sup> He believed it was the means to tap into the human psyche and pull the strings of desire and opinion. Richard Tedlow describes Bernays’ strategy and tactics. Bernays “promoted his client’s interest by subtly manipulating public opinion through careful association of his products with favorable stereotypes and by playing on public prejudices. Objective considerations of value and truth were irrelevant to the public relations man’s world. What counted was public acceptance.”<sup>84</sup> Such a disregard for truth and for the public was distasteful to many and unacceptable for religious leaders. Other industries also found such deception unacceptable.

In 1910, when the railroads created the Bureau of Railway Economics, they made it clear that they did not approve of the public relations industry. The railroads, no saints of industry, explicitly stated that no one in the organization was to bring “the stigma attaching to the so called ‘Publicity Bureaus’ that have developed during recent years and have justly excited the antagonism of the newspapers.”<sup>85</sup> As the captains of the railroad industry saw it, the public relations industry had an even worse reputation than their own. They could gain public favor by distancing themselves from such a poorly regarded industry.

The close cousin of public relations, advertising, also offered voices of consternation and criticism for public relations. Many advertising professionals worked to distance themselves from a “toxic” association with public relations. In his 1924

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<sup>83</sup> Edward L. Bernays, *Crystallizing Public Opinion* (New York: Liveright, 1923).

<sup>84</sup> Tedlow, 182.

<sup>85</sup> Albro Martin, *Enterprise Denied* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1971), 25, quoted in Tedlow, 35.

article, “The Parasite, A Truth or Two About So-Called Publicity,” in *Printers Ink*, Franklin Russell described a primary difference between these two “arts” of persuasion.

He wrote:

The man who is hired to use his specialized training as a writer, as an artist, and as a judge of good topography to present the merits of a definite product over the signature of the manufacturer or seller of that product, and solely inside of advertising space which has been bought and paid for by that manufacturer or merchant, is certainly enacting an open role which is very different from that of the man who remains behind the scenes and manipulates various stage devices for purposes best known to himself and those who employ him.<sup>86</sup>

The difference according to this one observer was that advertising was not covert or deceptive, it was direct and straight forward. It was more honest. Public relations on the other hand, advertises and persuades in places where the consumer does not expect it, does not assent to it. As Tedlow argues, “Publicity was reprehensible because it involved getting something for nothing and took people by surprise, while advertising helped support the medium that carried it and included a frank declaration of its source.”<sup>87</sup>

These views were not universal, and many advertising agencies recommend that corporations utilize public relations counselors.<sup>88</sup> However, though many advertising departments employed publicity specialists by the mid-1950s, competition and slander between the two industries continued.<sup>89</sup> Even at home around the promotion family table, public relations was often greeted with glances, and sometimes gazes, of disdain.

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<sup>86</sup> Franklin Russell, “The Parasite: A Truth or Two about So-Called Publicity,” *Printer’s Ink* (June 12, 1924): 145, quoted in Tedlow, 171.

<sup>87</sup> Tedlow, 171.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, 172.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, 174.

Since prior to World War I, the public relations industry had sought to develop a better reputation in the society. Bernays worked to dignify it by changing its language. He used titles such as “counsel” to identify experts. He also taught a course on it at New York University, and he tried to create a professional association, though it never materialized. However, others pushed forward the initiative, which eventually resulted in the establishment of the National Association of Public Relations in 1944. Much the same as the RPRC, members would gather for luncheons to listen to guest speakers and discuss the latest practices in the industry. They also presented awards for outstanding examples of public relations prowess.<sup>90</sup> In an effort to establish an air of respectability, they created universal standards of ethics and practices. Yet as Tedlow concludes, writing in 1979 on the history of the industry, “charlatanism pervaded public relations at mid-century, even within the most established firms, and it is by no means absent today.”<sup>91</sup> To make matters worse most of the public associated public relations with advertising and disdained both. A 1946 survey revealed that 41 percent of Americans did not trust advertising, and in 1950, another survey found that 80 percent of Americans believed advertising to be manipulative.<sup>92</sup> Historian Stephen Fox notes that a dozen fictional novels between 1946 and 1958 painted “a consistent picture of the advertising world: false in tone, tense in pace, vacant and self-hating, overheated and oversexed.”<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> Ibid., 157.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid., 161.

<sup>92</sup> Stephen R. Fox, *The Mirror Makers: A History of American Advertising and its Creators* (New York: Morrow, 1984), 200.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid., 206.

In the 1950s, nothing demonstrated the popularity of criticizing public relations like the success of Vance Packard's book, *The Hidden Persuaders*.<sup>94</sup>

Published in 1957, Vance Packard's attack on the promotion industry writ large spent eighteen weeks on the bestseller list. Selling over a hundred thousand copies in the first year, the book excoriated the promotion industry's use of sociology and psychiatry to delve into the subconscious of consumers in the name of sales.<sup>95</sup> Packard predicted a future where "hidden persuaders" would manipulate the thoughts and desires of the American populace through subliminal messages and concealed tactics. Clearly, given the success of the book, many Americans agreed or at least worried about the possibilities. As Fox observes, whether or not Packard's claims were accurate, the book revealed a great deal about the public perception and opinion of advertising and other promotional methods. Americans had "a fear of being manipulated by dark, unseen forces."<sup>96</sup> They worried about the role and influence of promotionalism.

The RPRC was all too aware that many looked down upon their industry. Much of American society looked at public relations not only with suspicion, but with disdain. Such public scorn and derision led many members of the RPRC to doubt their work. What if the public was right about public relations, it was deceptive? How could they work in a space where the sacred and secular so acutely overlapped? As noted, they identified themselves as Protestant Christians, but they also identified themselves as public relations specialists. Yet the values, principles, and methods of these two fields did not appear to be congruous, let alone complimentary. The members of the RPRC,

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<sup>94</sup> Vance Packard, *The Hidden Persuaders* (New York: David McKay Co., 1957).

<sup>95</sup> Fox, 185-86.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, 186.

therefore, dedicated a great deal of their time to reconciling these two spheres with an internal public relations campaign. They worked tirelessly, employing various methods to construct a positive image of their own institution, religious public relations.

The RPRC focused on two tactics to reconcile religion and public relations. In the RPRC's explanation for introducing a published newsletter, the *Counselor* in 1950, it summarized these two tactics. It gave four principle reasons for the house organ, the first two of which regarded increasing community in the organization. The RPRC hoped to build greater camaraderie among its members and to nurture a more efficient exchange of "technical know-how." The other two reasons regarded the effort and need to disassociate with the broader industry. These were aimed directly at dealing with the challenge of combining religion and public relations. They stated that the *Counselor* was to help in "Working toward better standards and practices of church P.R." and the "Development of a basic philosophy – theology, if you will – of religious public relations and communication, which will undergird and establish our profession as a dignified and worthy calling within the Christian church – essential in today's communication-conscious world, to the advancement of the Kingdom."<sup>97</sup> The RPRC would work tirelessly first, to clean up religious public relations by separating it and purifying it with the truth of their message and second, to justify its place in the religious enterprise with both theological and pragmatic defenses. In these efforts, they labored to articulate a *freedom from* the public relations industry and a *freedom to* participate in it. They worked rhetorically to create a space for public relations in religion.

*Disassociation: Internal Attacks on Public Relations (Freedom From)*

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<sup>97</sup> Mimeograph without Title, folder "1949-50," box 4, Records: 1952-1988 (88-0630), RPRCC.



Given the history of disdain for the public relations industry, it is not surprising that in a 1951 public address, Richard Baker stated very clearly that the business of public relations is “a formula of evil.” He continued, it could be “a complete science of how to work on people’s emotions, reason, judgment, decisions, actions to yield a desired result.”<sup>98</sup> For the first third of his speech, Baker described, in detail, the manipulation, cynicism, and abuse of power that characterized the use of public relations. Though such derision for the field was typical in American society, it would have appeared very atypical for a man such as Richard Baker. Baker was a professor of journalism at Columbia University addressing hundreds of religious public relations professionals at the Religious Publicity Council’s annual convention. Instead of praising the public relations profession among some of her strongest devotees, he was denouncing it. Yet this was a common ritual at such conventions and in the RPRC circles.

Each year, speakers at the RPRC annual convention added their voices to the chorus of criticism against the field of public relations. These were not outside opponents to the field; they were the proponents and practitioners, repeatedly denouncing their own profession. The organization even went so far as to regularly publish attacks on public relations in their quarterly house organ, the *Counselor*. These many assaults on many fronts were not aberrations but coordinated tactics to create a space of disassociation, to set themselves apart from the secular field as something different, something sacred. By exposing all of the errors and threats latent in public relations, they could establish the field as other to their own, though they used the same methods.

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<sup>98</sup> Richard T. Baker, “This Business of Ours,” Manuscript, April 5, 1951, folder “Minutes of the National Religious Publicity Council 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Convention April 5-6, 1951,” box 4, Records: 1952-1988 (88-0630), RPRCC.

One of the criticisms of public relations, launched internally by religious public relations leaders, was that it introduced a dangerous level of cultural accommodation, sacrificing religious doctrine or “truth” for consumer desires. The chaplain at Edinburgh University, D.H.C. Read articulated these concerns in a speech, quoted and summarized in the *Counselor*. He first noted the growing tendency of churches to use the “methods of modern business, high pressure advertising, public opinion polls, mass suggestion, and success stories to swing the masses into the Church.” Then he warned that the danger in this practice, this adoption, “lies in the subtle shift of emphasis from the objective truth of the Christian Gospel to its pragmatic value to society.”<sup>99</sup> Read went on to explain, that by utilizing the practices of public relations, church officials were focusing too heavily on what people wanted to hear. In pursuing church growth, the message would be compromised to please the listeners and attract them. A focus on modern methods of business was, as Read succinctly put it, transforming “the Gospel challenge of ‘Repent and Believe’ into the cynical technique of ‘How to Win Friends and Influence People.’”<sup>100</sup> Read believed that public relations drained the objectivity and challenge out of religion because it altered it. It made religion more about suiting the consumer, comforting them, and not challenging them to be different.

Two years later, in 1954, the Rector of Trinity Church in New York City, John Heuss, echoed a similar fear. He argued that modern business methods were like a cancer, not only altering the message of religion, but the institutions as well, making the churches more like businesses. Heuss addressed the RPRC members at their 1954 annual

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<sup>99</sup> D.H.C. Read, “Speak to the Present!” *NRPC Counselor* 2 (March 1952), box 5, Records: 1952-1988 (88-0630), RPRCC.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*

convention and warned them that the church was increasingly betraying its “world-influencing revolutionary claims” because of the influence of promotional activity. He explained that churches were devoting more and more time to their business affairs than to their ministerial obligations. The result was a growing confusion in the differences between a church and a business.<sup>101</sup> Ironically, the very public relations people that sought to clearly define the churches to the public, were blurring the identity of the church. The diagnosis was clear for Heuss. “We have gone wrong in our leadership by over-emphasizing the promotional aspect of the church's life to the point where nearly every church fits neatly into the culture of middle-class community life.”<sup>102</sup> As Heuss believed, and as he informed the RPRC members, public relations had opened the door for worldly influence on churches.

Others, after identifying such threats, then praised the RPRC for avoiding them. The organization itself adopted a statement of Professional Aims in 1955 to set them apart from the industry. It marked each member as a “servant of Jesus Christ” committed to “avoid misleading statements, unfair comparisons, inaccuracies, derogatory comments and extravagant claims.” They also resolved, in what resonated with concerns about dignity, to “exercise good taste in the use of language and illustrations.” Religious public relations was different for it exercised such excellence in standards, according to the members. Moreover, the members, as they resolved, were not competitors in a cut-throat

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<sup>101</sup> John Heuss, “The True Function of a Local Church,” April 08, 1954, Manuscript, folder “1954 Convention,” box 6, Records: 1929-1985 (89-1115a), RPRCC.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid.

market but colleagues committed to supporting one another.<sup>103</sup> They were different, and many speakers echoed this sentiment.

At the 1963 convention, Paul Swensson addressed the RPRC members and used a religious phrase to decry public relations. He suggested that “PR men” attach a “4-word rider” to the Golden Rule of Matthew 7:12. The rule states that one should, “do to others what you would have them do to you.” Swensson added the words, “but do it first” to the end as a way of relating the cut throat spirit of the business. In contrast, he applauded the members of the RPRC in their efforts to “aspire to a greater and finer PR image.” He commended them, “Your society, if I may borrow again from the Master of Parables [Jesus] is like ‘a good tree which cannot bring forth evil fruit.’”<sup>104</sup> In his compliment to the RPRC, Swenson insinuated that the public relations business is a business that produces evil, but the RPRC produces good. Very similar to Baker’s description, twelve years earlier, of public relations as a formula for evil, Swenson was aiding the RPRC to create a space of separation. The members of the RPRC were using the methods to pursue better ends; they were different.

Such reprimands of the worldly methods of promotion and their influence on religion continued throughout the 1950s and into the early 1960s. In several issues of the *Counselor* in 1963, critiques of public relations, very similar to those of Baker, Read and Heuss ten years earlier, were still evident. One was a piece by an RPRC fellow, Louis Cassels that called churches to not focus on enhancing their image and promoting themselves, but instead focus on the “Kingdom of God.” He stated that churches must

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<sup>103</sup> “Professional Aims for Religious Public Relations Personnel,” April 22, 1955, *NRPC Counselor* 5, no.3 (Summer 1955), box 5, Records: 1952-1988 (88-0630), RPRCC.

<sup>104</sup> Paul S. Swensson, “The Treasure of Tomorrow’s Reporters,” April 22, 1963, folder “1963 Convention,” box 6, Records: 1929-1985 (89-1115a), RPRCC.

“tell the good news of Christ” instead of adapting the culture of the public relations world which only promotes the “institutional interests of your client.”<sup>105</sup> Until the middle of the 1960s, members of the RPRC worried that their efforts to promote religion could actually diminish religion by just promoting institutions. They feared they could also hurt religion by taking advantage of people. Whereas their intent was to help people by spreading religion, the methods of public relations often depended on the manipulation of people.

RPRC members and speakers criticized the tendency of public relations methods to manipulate people. An article, by Eugene Carson Blake, the president of the National Council of Churches, in a 1955 *Counselor* enumerated six points that set religious public relations apart. At the foundation of all six points, according to Blake, was the biblical passage Micah 6:8. He wrote that the “the task behind any public relations program was Micah 6:8 ... ‘What doth the Lord require of thee, but to do justly, and love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God?’”<sup>106</sup> He then explained, in his first point, that for public relations to be done justly, the institution must not attempt to fool the public.”<sup>107</sup> In other words, there was the potential and the opportunity to deceive in public relations, but as made clear in the Bible in Micah, religion must not manipulate. Instead it must be just and merciful. Thus, numerous RPRC members denounced the low view of humanity at root in the public relations industry’s manipulation of the public.

One of the strongest attacks on the use of public relations in religion came from J. Robert Nelson at the 1961 annual convention, and it focused on the treatment of people.

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<sup>105</sup> Louis Cassels, “Christian Communication Goal of Public Relations,” *NRPC Counselor* 13, no. 3 (Spring 1963), box 5, Records: 1952-1988 (88-0630), RPRCC.

<sup>106</sup> Eugene Carson Blake, “Six Points!” *NRPC Counselor* 5, no. 2 (Winter 1955), box 5, Records: 1952-1988 (88-0630), RPRCC.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*

He vehemently insisted to the public relations professionals that “whatever the temptation may be to emulate the advertising go-getters and employ his techniques for the manipulation of mortal minds and glands, the churches must see and heed the signs around this area of propaganda: No Trespassing. For such trespasses may not be forgiven.”<sup>108</sup> As he clearly stated, modern methods of promotion manipulated people. These methods presuppose, in his own words, that people are “stupid fish waiting to be driven into a net.”<sup>109</sup> This, for Nelson and others, went against everything that religion stood for, particularly Christianity.

Public relations values opposed orthodox Christianity’s emphasis on the dignity of humanity, they believed. According to the Bible and Christian teaching, human beings, unlike all other creatures, were created in God’s image. They were created to worship God and exist in a unique relationship with him. As such, they are to be treated with great respect, care, and love. The assumption that they are ignorant and are to be manipulated for other ends is scandalous to such Christian doctrine. Public relations, therefore, was in many ways anti-Christian because of how it treated and regarded human beings. Whereas churches were to care for and nurture humanity, according to Nelson and others, public relations used humanity for institutional growth. The industry, they argued, saw people as an impersonal mass, gullible and ignorant, to be used for the good of the institution. These methods switched the priorities; they made the people the servants of the institution and not vice versa.

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<sup>108</sup> J. Robert Nelson, “Ethical Dimensions of Christian Public Relations,” April 17, 1961, Manuscript, folder “1961 Convention,” box 6, Records: 1929-1985 (89-1115a), RPRCC.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid.

When addressing the RPRC in 1962, Martin Marty noted that the appropriate view of people was the answer to purifying the methods of secular public relations for religious purposes. He agreed with many other speakers, in noting the tendency of public relations to represent a certain “evil” impulse in society. Yet he was clear to note that public relations was not inherently evil. As noted by so many others, it could be used for evil, to misrepresent and manipulate, but it could also be used for good. This argument appeared throughout the century as a defense for church promotion. Many would argue that public relations, or advertising and marketing, are but neutral tools that have no inherent value.<sup>110</sup> They believed that the methods only become “evil” when used for illegitimate purposes. The goal of the RPRC, therefore, was to use this tool for good. The solution, according to Martin Marty, was to wield the tool with a theological understanding of people as individuals. Marty explained that trouble entered in when the public was treated as a faceless mass and not as a collection of individuals. He suggested that if the religious public relations professionals would look upon the people of the public with a theological acuity, and not treat them as a mass that is a means to an end, then the methods borrowed from secular public relations would be safe. Then, these professionals could join the, “theologians, historians, preachers, prophets, evangelists, teachers” as interpreters of the church.<sup>111</sup> Yet, many asserted, if they failed to do so, they

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<sup>110</sup> In 1944 one person argued, “They have damned advertising, instead of damning the misuse thereof. Advertising is a scientific field of applied psychology. It can be used for good enterprises or illicit purposes.” George W. Crane, “The Worry Clinic: Use Advertising Methods to Attract Churchgoers,” *The Atlanta Constitution*, March 16, 1944. Another example was one pastor’s argument for advertising as a neutral tool. Robert Alden, “Advertising: Earnest Pastor Fills the Pews,” *New York Times*, February 17, 1961.

<sup>111</sup> Martin E. Marty, “Theology and Public Relations,” April 10, 1962, folder “1962 Convention,” box 6, Records: 1929-1985 (89-1115a), RPRCC.

would be guilty of manipulation and deception, and the same tactics utilized in communism.

Given the association between communism and public relations propaganda, it is not surprising that some members of the RPRC compared the dangers of their field to those of communism. In J. Robert Nelson's 1961 message, he directly associated the work of public relations professionals with the methods of communism. He noted that communism, or as he called it, "the 'BIG LIE,'" had created a culture of demagogic lying and public gullibility around the world. Public relations, he argued, because of how it treats people can be in many ways similar to, if not a tool of, Communism.<sup>112</sup> Two years prior, the *Counselor* devoted the majority of its print space to an article by Tom Driver of Union Theological Seminary. In "The Tongues of Men and Angels: Truth, Power and Love in the Act of Communication," Driver dispelled the myth that communication is a neutral act that shares the truth without alteration or contamination. In fact, he argued that communication is not only corruptible, but is powerful and destructive. He explained that human beings lust for the power to control others, and communication provides the perfect means to accomplish such a task. As an example he pointed to the "frighteningly demonic" adversary, communism. He wrote, "Russian propaganda is diabolically clever and is not hampered by the considerations of truth and love that I have been advocating." Driver's point was that communication, like public relations and other modern promotional methods, can be used to manipulate people to support institutions, even evil ones such as communism. His remedy was truth and love. If these two virtues marked the communication, then it would be pure.

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<sup>112</sup> J. Robert Nelson, "Ethical Dimensions of Christian Public Relations," April 17, 1961, folder "1961 Convention," box 6, Records: 1929-1985 (89-1115a), RPRCC.



Throughout the twenty-year period, many of the members used references to truth as a means to distinguish their own practices from those of the secular profession. When asked by the *Harvard Business Review* in 1959 about the veracity of public relations, David Finn replied, “In public relations, truth is a hard word.”<sup>113</sup> Yet all are familiar with the phrase, “truth in advertising.” Written in the “Baltimore Truth Declaration” in 1913, and later adopted by the Advertising Federation of America, “truth in advertising” is a common phrase in American culture.<sup>114</sup> It is the goal, or at least stated goal, of all promotional work. People want the truth, and advertising, marketing, and even public relations professionals typically promise to deliver it. Yet within the Religious Publicity Council, truth was even more valuable than to the rest of the industry. When they said “truth” they meant as Jesus said, “the way, the truth, and the life” they were talking about the message of Christianity, the gospel. They were not just being truthful, they were selling the truth. Their product was the truth, and that, they argued, set them apart.

The truth for the RPRC was an anchor that held it in place. As Nelson explained, “It[truth] may seem a burdensome hindrance to the propagandist, or a romantic and distinctly unprofitable idea to the advertising executive. But for the Christian man, and especially the Christian journalist or publicist, such a standard of truth should be regarded honestly and cheerfully as a minimal requirement in his writing and speaking.”<sup>115</sup> They encouraged one another to hold fast to the truth and not allow the methods of the marketplace to corrupt it. The “Prayer of a Religious Journalist” from the Fall 1964

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<sup>113</sup> “Struggle for Ethics in Public Relations,” *Harvard Business Review* 37, no. 1 (January-February 1959): 56, quoted in Tedlow, 206.

<sup>114</sup> Daniel J. Boorstin, *The Image; Or, What Happened to the American Dream* (New York: Atheneum, 1962), 213.

<sup>115</sup> Nelson.

*Counselor*, included, “Deliver us, O Lord ... from caring for smooth expression more than for rugged truth.”<sup>116</sup> After all, as they articulated repeatedly, the press did not care for truth, only attention and popular opinion. Douglas Carter detailed this point in a 1954 *Counselor*. Carter explained, “McCarthy has been able to build up notoriety and a certain amount of popularity simply because the modern newspaper is a gossipy old woman, glibly tattling whatever it hears.”<sup>117</sup> He continued, the press writes the story not based on what they know to be fact but on the “headline grabbing talent” that McCarthy has in what he says. Thus, “because of the time-honored custom of the press, they must write the story that conforms to the set formula for news rather than to any regard for Truth (with a capital T).”<sup>118</sup> The RPRC sought to represent the truth with the “neutral” tools of a sullied industry. They worked diligently to create a rhetorical purification and disassociation of the public relations methods.

*Defense: Justifying Public Relations in Religion (Freedom To)*

Though a great deal of energy was directed by RRPC members at disassociating themselves from the public relations business, there was also a significant effort to defend the inclusion of public relations within the religious enterprise. This was one more angle of defense, or attack, on defining their identity and carving out a place for the profession in the religion “industry.” One line of defense was historical. Ralph Stoody wrote in 1950, “The church is a publicity natural. It was the first practitioner, though

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<sup>116</sup> “Prayer of a Religious Journalist,” *RPRC Counselor*, 13 (Fall 1964), box 5, Records: 1952-1988 (88-0630), RPRCC.

<sup>117</sup> Douglas Carter, *RPRC Counselor* 4 (Spring 1954), box 5, Records: 1952-1988 (88-0630), RPRCC.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*

unconsciously so, of the techniques now known as public relations.”<sup>119</sup> A large part of the internal and external public relations campaign for the profession itself in religion stood on the assertion that Christianity by its very nature was promotional. Repeatedly, at conventions and in publications, religious public relations professionals reminded one another that their business was not only relevant for religion, not only necessary in the twentieth century, but was the faithful use and development of methods introduced millennia ago in religion. Public relations was new only in name, for in technique and strategy it was as old as Christianity. Whereas Bruce Barton showed the world that Jesus had been a strong man of business innovation, the RPRC wanted the world to know that Jesus was also a successful public relations guru and pioneer. They highlighted how important figures in Christian history were in effect public relations professionals.

In a piece for the RPRC Counselor in 1963, Joseph Boyle, vice president of the J. Walter Thompson advertising firm, argued that the public relations professional was a descendant of a well-known biblical figure, Aaron. He recalled how Moses, the God ordained leader of the Israelites had doubted his ability to convince the leaders of Israel to follow him out of Egypt. He continued,

Then Jehovah said unto him: 'Is there not Aaron, thy brother? I know that he can speak well. *He shall be to thee a mouth and thou shalt be to him as God.*' From this it would appear that Aaron was one of the early commissioned advertising men. Advertising and public relations men and women - Christians who have the know-how in Communications - can be (many already are) the Aarons of the present to the Church.<sup>120</sup>

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<sup>119</sup> Ralph Stoody, "Publicity Goes to Press," *NRPC Counselor* 1 (November 1950), box 5, Records: 1952-1988 (88-0630), RPRCC.

<sup>120</sup> Joseph E. Boyle, "Advertising Principles Are Relevant to the Churches' Problems of Communication," *NRPC Counselor* 13 (Spring 1963), box 5, Records: 1952-1988 (88-0630), RPRCC.

Boyle suggested a significant parallel. The comparison provided a biblical stamp of approval on the religious public relations profession. Not only was the field good and right, it was following in the lineage of the brother of Moses. Just like Aaron, these public relations men and women bore the onus to communicate God's message to the people. They had been given the expertise and know-how, now they were to apply it to the most upright of tasks, the spread of Christianity. Besides, as Boyle explained, the business of advertising/public relations was the same as that of the church. He wrote, "To inform, to remind, to convince, to move to action. These are prime objectives of advertising. To teach, to summon, to convert, to move to action. These are primary objectives of the Church."<sup>121</sup> One RPRC member aligned their work with that of Jesus' original disciples. He remarked that, "Surely the Gospel would not have spread had the Apostles not been public relations experts."<sup>122</sup> The principle was the same for both RPRC members. They believed that the original evangelists were public relations experts, and as public relations experts, the RPRC was a gathering of evangelists.

Others seized upon the parallel between evangelism and public relations. The autumn edition of the *Counselor* in 1952 carried an excerpt from a report given by Dr. Clifford P. Morehouse to the Third World Conference on Faith and Order. In his speech he said, "Public relations ... may be properly considered as a form of Christian Evangelism. The concern of the early Christians was to publish the glad tidings of the mighty acts whereby Jesus and His disciples turned the world upside down."<sup>123</sup> He

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<sup>121</sup> NRPC Washington Chapter: Instructional Booklet, 1957, box 13, Records: 1929-1985 (89-1115a), RPRCC.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid.

<sup>123</sup> Clifford P. Morehouse, "Public Relations – An Avenue of Evangelism," *NRPC Counselor* 3, no. 1 (Autumn 1952), box 5, Records: 1952-1988 (88-0630), RPRCC.

explained that monks were the “public relations men of their day,” because they spent their time copying the message of Christianity to distribute it. Monks were early publicists, religious journalists that informed the public about Christianity.<sup>124</sup> In order to carry the Christian message to the corners of the earth, Morehouse argued, the churches must employ individuals, like monks, devoted to the task of utilizing the latest means of communication. Who better to turn to for modern communications and promotion than the public relations experts?

According to other RPRC members and guests, monks were not the only pre-twentieth century public relations specialists. Ralph Stoody argued that one of the major church publicity practitioners was father of the Protestant Reformation, Martin Luther. According to Stoody, Luther had, “inaugurated the use of a new and powerful weapon in the age long war against evil-printer’s ink.”<sup>125</sup> He argued, Martin Luther successfully tapped into the power of “printers ink” to attack evil in the world. Luther had been a pre-modern advertiser, according to Stoody, printing up his attacks on Roman Catholic doctrine and his foundational works for the Protestant Reformation. Stoody contended that through the press, public relations expert Martin Luther had literally “reformed” much of the world, spreading the Christian message.

In 1953, Elsie Culver suggested that the RPRC deliberately align their work with the work of evangelism. Members of the RPRC considered her idea and, “endorsed in principle to get top theologians and churchmen at the Evanston WCC Assembly and

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<sup>124</sup> Ibid.

<sup>125</sup> Ralph Stoody, “Publicity Goes to Press,” *NRPC Counselor* 1, no. 1 (November 1950), box 5, Records: 1952-1988 (88-0630), RPRCC.

elsewhere to recognize the evangelistic basis of [their] profession.”<sup>126</sup> As public relations professionals in religion, they believed themselves heralds of Christianity, following in the footsteps of former evangelists like the disciples, the monks, and other faithful Christian witnesses. They hoped that others, both inside and outside the profession would recognize the evangelistic tenor of their work and accept their contributions to religion.

Another popular defense for using public relations in religion was that modern methods were the best means to communicate with the modern public in an understandable language. This purpose, and defense, was foundational for the RPRC. At their first meeting to discuss establishing the organization, in 1929, the committee stated that they:

deplore the tendency of the theological seminaries to use a specialized language that cannot readily be comprehended by the man on the street or in the back pew and recommend that seminaries so revise their courses in homiletics that the Christian message may be presented in more simple language.”<sup>127</sup>

This effort, to make religion understandable to the “man on the street” served as a clarion call of purpose to the members of the RPRC. They believed that they had the greatest message for the good of the world and humanity, and it was imperative in the name of evangelism, to interpret it through popular mediums in a simple language.

Popular mediums were the specialty of public relations professionals, so they said, and were necessary if religion were to connect with people. Yet churches, RPRC members argued, clung to antiquated methods of communication. The solution, as one

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<sup>126</sup> Elsie Culver’s “Interesting Note,” *NRPC Counselor* (Spring 1953), box 5, Records: 1952-1988 (88-0630), RPRCC.

<sup>127</sup> “November 26, 27 1929: Washington DC Meeting,” folder “History National Religious Publicity Council 1929-1934,” box 4, Records: 1952-1988 (88-0630), RPRCC.

member wrote, was that churches could still present Christianity in preaching, but they must also, “spread it through the religious and secular press, the motion pictures, the radio and television, that again every man may hear, through the medium that he best understands, what God is doing through His Church today.”<sup>128</sup> The failure to adopt such modern means of communication, argued RPRC members, was not only unfortunate, it was unacceptable. Myrta Ross succinctly summarized this argument in her article in the *Counselor* in the spring of 1954:

Perhaps the warning we most need is lest our message be too largely to ourselves, to church people, instead of gearing them to reach the vast multitude of unchurched. The crowds are at the movies, home listening to radio or viewing TV, at the theatre, at work, reading newspapers, magazines, and books enroute. Our story calls for writers with skills varying from intellectual and theological approaches to the dramatic and emotional. But our Christian gospel, lived and followed, has the answer for all the people. Let’s get it to all the places where the people are, relating its power to their needy lives, at all times, by all means, using all media.<sup>129</sup>

According to many members of the RPRC, public relations was necessary in religion if Christianity was to fulfill its mandate to spread throughout the larger culture. It was the means to turn outwards, to the public. Public relations could make religion accessible by making the message accessible. It also could make the message understandable.

As discussed at the charter meeting, the RPRC hoped to promote a move away from “specialized language.” Logelin echoed this sentiment at the national convention in 1963 saying, “For if any of us are to win ... public understanding we must get away from the technical jargon of our own occupation, and learn to speak another language - that of

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<sup>128</sup> Clifford P. Morehouse, “Public Relations – An Avenue of Evangelism,” *NRPC Counselor* 3, no. 1 (Autumn 1952), box 5, Records: 1952-1988 (88-0630), RPRCC.

<sup>129</sup> Myrta Ross, “Getting the Message to the Local Community,” *NRPC Counselor* 4 (Spring 1954) box 5, Records: 1952-1988 (88-0630), RPRCC.

the audience for our message. We must forsake the polysyllabic and incomprehensible verbiage.”<sup>130</sup> As evidence for this necessity, he quoted Genesis 11:7, “Come, let us go down and confuse their language so they will not understand each other.”<sup>131</sup> Logelin explained that the methods of public relations would help to overcome the confusion that exists in language. Ironically, though, the quote he used were God’s words, and the confusion was God’s means to prevent humans from glorifying themselves. Despite his misinterpretation, Logelin, the Vice President of a major steel company, was working to use the Bible to support the imperative to make Christianity more comprehensible to the public. After all, as D.H. Read argued, “preaching is more akin to good journalism than to a literary essay.” He agreed with Logelin, and others, that public relations solved “the problem of speaking to the man in the street who is sometimes, or never, in the pew.”<sup>132</sup> Public relations spoke the language of the average person. Yet it was not only necessary to make the message more understandable for the sake of faithfulness to the religion, but also as a means to preserve the religion itself. It would also serve the public good in doing so.

As Myrta Ross said, the Christian message was “the answer for all the people.”<sup>133</sup> According to members of the RPRC, Christianity was the product, the solution that the American people needed. Withholding the message by not tapping into modern methods was to neglect the good of American society. As the *Counselor* explained in 1951,

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<sup>130</sup> Edward C. Logelin, “The Church and Industry – Together in Community,” folder “1963 Convention,” box 6, Records: 1929-1985 (89-1115a), RPRCC.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid.

<sup>132</sup> D.H.C. Read, “Speak to the Present!” *NRPC Counselor* 2 (March 1952), box 5, Records: 1952-1988 (88-0630), RPRCC.

<sup>133</sup> Myrta Ross, “Getting the Message to the Local Community,” *NRPC Counselor* 4 (Spring 1954) box 5, Records: 1952-1988 (88-0630), RPRCC.



“People in increasing numbers admit they cannot face the world without the comfort, assurance and inspiration of a sound religion interpreted in terms they can understand. The ministry of the written word and its sister ministry of audio-visual evangelism have a peculiar function for such times as these.”<sup>134</sup> People needed Christianity, and the methods and skills of the public relations industry was uniquely capable of delivering, argued the RPRC members. In fact, it was so well positioned to deliver that the *Counselor* contended that God had created these methods for this purpose. It read, “Humbly we submit that ... the Lord has been strengthening our hands and helping us improve our techniques during the past decade.”<sup>135</sup> This was a slightly different approach with the same argument, public relations was an ordained profession.

Whether God ordained public relations or not, the members of the RPRC were convinced that religion could use the methods. They were certain that religion had to utilize every available means to grow churches, to do the work of God. If commercial practices worked to sell products, then the RPRC believed it must baptize the methods and use them to sell religion. In the conclusion of a 1964 speech, the vice president of the J. Walter Thompson Company, Robert Colwell, expressed this sentiment. He recalled talking with a Jesuit Father who noted the success of commercials in increasing sales. The Father said, “I keep trying to find a way to make man's predicament and God's grace equally vivid. Until I do that I feel I have failed. If this can be done successfully for something so trivial [Dristan tablets], aren't we under an obligation to find how to do it

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<sup>134</sup> *NRPC Counselor* 1 (January 1951), box 5, Records: 1952-1988 (88-0630), RPRCC.

<sup>135</sup> *Ibid.*

for the most important thing in the world?”<sup>136</sup> RPRC members believed that they were under such an obligation. They had to find a way to take the tarnished methods of commercialism, purify them, and use them for “good.” Yet the effort to make religious public relations sacred and distinct from the rest of the industry was difficult. As they labored to build a wall of separation and to justify their methods, they created a sort of paradox. Repeatedly, after explaining how public relations was different in religion, speakers and writers would actually show that it was not. They would recommend the very practices that they had just denounced. More subtly, they would demonstrate how difficult it is to determine when public relations goes too far, when “method triumphs over content.”<sup>137</sup> This paradox, revealed how deeply difficult it was to create a distinct public relations field in religion.

#### *A Paradox: The Rejection and Promotion of Public Relations*

The spring issue of the 1963 *Counselor* demonstrated the paradox of the RPRC. While arguing that religious public relations was different, they were also arguing that it was the same. One article warned that importing public relation methods could sacrifice the integrity of the message by favoring the importance of the method.<sup>138</sup> Another article summarized Louis Cassels concern that church public relations professionals had “adopted too much of the attitudes of the rest of the craft which believes that the main

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<sup>136</sup> Robert T. Colwell, “Can Advertising Principles Help the Church?” *RPRC Counselor* 14 (Winter 1964), box 5, Records: 1952-1988 (88-0630), RPRCC.

<sup>137</sup> “A Dilemma,” *NRPC Counselor* 13 (Spring 1963), box 5, Records: 1952-1988 (88-0630), RPRCC.

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid.*

part of a PR job is to advance the institutional interests of your client.”<sup>139</sup> Both of these articles made it clear that there were distinct differences between religion and public relations; they could not be mixed without injurious results. Yet in the same issue, another article summarized an address by Joseph E. Boyle, the Vice President of the J. Walter Thompson advertising Co. and an active participant in the NRPC. The address stated precisely the opposite sentiment of the other two articles. The *Counselor* quoted his conclusion, “Finally, there is nothing incompatible so far as I can see between communications for the Church and communications for business. The techniques are the same - or should be.”<sup>140</sup> Here in the same issue of the RPRC newsletter, there were endorsements, condemnations, and warnings of using the methods of the public relations industry in religion. This was the confusion that abounded in this space of overlap.

The confusion was clear in some speaker’s direct rebuttal of RPRC efforts to distinguish and purify public relations methods in religion. One of the most egregious was G.E. Blackford’s address at the 1954 convention, excerpts of which the *Counselor* quoted in the fall of that year. Blackford began by noting what other RPRC members emphasized, that the Christian message had to be interpreted to the “man on the street” by religious public relations. Yet instead of continuing by noting the dangers of message corruption, he encouraged alterations. He suggested that in promoting church events it is best to bring in “dancing girls.” He said, “we try to bring in some ‘dancing girls’ as a plus factor, to assure attention and elevate the piece into interest. The use of ‘dancing girls’ to spice the interest is as old as time. They are stock item in entertainment of every

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<sup>139</sup> Louis Cassels, “Christian Communication Goal of Public Relations,” *NRPC Counselor* 13, no. 3 (Spring 1963), box 5, Records: 1952-1988 (88-0630), RPRCC.

<sup>140</sup> Joseph E. Boyle, “Advertising Principles are Relevant to the Churches’ Problems of Communication,” *NRPC Counselor* 13 (Spring 1963), box 5, Records: 1952-1988 (88-0630), RPRCC.

sort.”<sup>141</sup> Blackford was pushing back against two significant RPRC arguments. The first was that one should not alter the message for the sake of building interest. The second was that one should not explicitly describe religion as entertainment. In fact, in case there was any lack of clarity, he continued, “And what is successful entertainment? It is just information successfully sold to the public -- whether it's a play, a sermon, a movie, advertising copy or a publicity item on a religious subject.”<sup>142</sup> A sermon was another form of entertainment, to be promoted the same as any other form, according to Blackford. These assertions flew in the face of the many efforts of the RPRC to create distinctions. Instead of disassociating religious public relations with the industry, he was explaining how similar they were and encouraging the use of even the more deceptive tactics in the industry. His advice in conclusion was “package the product, make it look good, color it up, make it attractive, surround it with factors that make it look as important as it really is, dramatize it, sell it!”<sup>143</sup> Perhaps he was merely expressing what many were thinking. Their responsibility was to sell religion, it was to make it look good. Other speakers did not just contradict the RPRC but contradicted themselves.

In 1965, while public favor was turning away from Christianity, and the RPRC was drifting more towards pluralism in its membership and inclusive definitions of its product, Richard Wilson gave a speech at the annual convention that summarized the past and looked to the future. He began with an all too familiar repudiation of public relations in religion. His evidence was a *Newsweek* poll of college students cited by organization

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<sup>141</sup> G.E. Blackford, “The \$64,000,000 Question,” *NRPC Counselor* 5 (Autumn 1954), box 5, Records: 1952-1988 (88-0630), RPRCC.

<sup>142</sup> Ibid.

<sup>143</sup> Ibid.

president David Gockley. In it, he called the members attention to the institutions that were ranked at the bottom, those that the public had the least confidence in, “the Democratic Party, the press, advertising, organized labor, and organized religion.”<sup>144</sup> He drove the point home, “Organized religion is suspected of phoniness.” Wilson explained that the truth was that public relations in religion had messed things up. He explained, “There is a big similarity between the church's image and the advertiser's image.”<sup>145</sup> The truth, according to Wilson, was that public relations had contaminated the church; it had infected it with the deception of advertising. The problem was, “The effort in advertising of trying to say everything good about a product and hiding all that is bad. The effort in the church of saying that everything is good in a church and nothing is bad.”<sup>146</sup> Wilson was clear, public relations had hurt religion. The solution, it would seem, would be for churches to be more honest, not to employ public relations and advertising to create false images. Yet in paradoxical RPRC fashion, Wilson recommended the opposite.

Wilson’s solution to help the churches overcome the damage wrought on their reputation by public relations was, to increase the use of public relations. The solution, he asserted, was to update communication with the public by using the latest methods. The solution was to meet, “the need for new words and new methods of communication.” His solution was,

Our Sunday School teachers have to be smarter. Our religious drama has to be more interesting and less religious in its presentation. Our religious music has to include more 20th century music. The Lutheran Hymnal has fewer songs that I have fingers that were written in the 20th century. Our

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<sup>144</sup> Richard Wilson, “The Truth Hurts,” Manuscript, box 6, Records: 1929-1985 (89-1115a), RPRCC.

<sup>145</sup> Ibid.

<sup>146</sup> Ibid.

religious bodies have to sponsor more art shows, movies, commercials, and revues like you saw last night. There are missionaries on your payroll, but very few writers.<sup>147</sup>

The solution, for Wilson, was not to purify religion of public relations influence but to increase it. Churches must decrease their traditional religious patterns, he argued, and increase their utilization of the methods and attractions of the worldly marketplace. How do you overcome a phony public relations generated image of everything being good in the church, according to Wilson, you update its methods and you, “Tell those people that it's not dark and foreboding ... it's not dull and stilted. Tell them that it's a wonderful place to be.”<sup>148</sup>

Wilson's solution summarized the challenge facing the RPRC. They hoped to utilize the commercial methods of promotion without the baggage of commercial manipulation and deceit. They sought to use the methods without the values that supported those methods, without the values that the rest of society associated with those methods. In so doing, they recommended the very thing that they denounced. After laboring, rhetorically, to create a distinction between religious public relations and commercial public relations, they recommended the very same methods. After developing historical and biblical justifications for using public relations methods in religion, they demonstrated how these methods could realize their greatest fears. After 1965, this confusion of purpose and identity would only grow more abstruse. The organization would embrace Wilson's, and others', advice to focus more on the methods, and as a result, the certainty and distinctiveness of their product would become more elusive.

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<sup>147</sup> Ibid.

<sup>148</sup> Ibid.

In his book *PR*, Stuart Ewen describes his meeting in 1990 with the father of public relations, Edward Bernays. He explains that in Bernays, he “encountered two different people.” The first Bernays believed that public relations was a response by institutions to an increasingly vocal and dynamic democratic people. The second Bernays “saw the public as a malleable mass of protoplasm” that could be engineered and manipulated.<sup>149</sup> This complex juxtaposition of serving the public and manipulating the public was precisely the tension with which the RPRC had to reconcile. Yet for them it was even more complex because they represented religious institutions and divine products. Between 1945 and 1965, they constructed rhetorical tools to demonstrate a freedom from the industry and a freedom to participate in the industry. This delicate dance, however, left them in a bog of contradictions and complexity that would continue to plague the field of church promotion.

## Conclusion

Promotionalism in American Christianity expanded rapidly between 1945 and 1965, supported by an increase in American religious interest and burgeoning public relations industry in the marketplace. The growth presented churches and organizations like the RPRC with a new opportunity to expand the strategies and practices of church promotion. However, as the industry grew, so too did the challenges of reconciling the use of marketplace methods to sell a religious message. Though the promotional industry in religion found itself mired in a swamp of contradictions, by 1965 it was confident that

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<sup>149</sup> Stuart Ewen, *PR!: A Social History of Spin* (New York: Basic Books, 1996), 399.

a new era had dawned in retailing religion. The RPRC looked to the future with great hope and anticipation, though their aspirations were not to be realized as America changed rapidly in the turmoil of the late 1960s. The agenda of the RPRC would change with it, as would the rest of the church promotion industry. Yet one of the changes was not so much a result of social revolutions as it was of business revolutions. Throughout the twentieth century, the trajectory of business was a move from a production orientation to a customer orientation. In this shift, authority in production transferred to the consumer. In the 1970s, church promotion would introduce such a transition through marketing. Between 1945 and 1965, church promotion laid the foundations for the transition by tuning churches to a greater sensitivity in meeting the modern consumer's needs.



## Chapter 4

### Customer Sovereignty: Meeting Needs and Desires (1945 – 1965)

According to many historians, the history of marketing can be divided into a triadic model of principal phases. The first phase was the “production/product era” where businesses focused “on increasing the volume of well-made products at low cost.”<sup>1</sup> The second phase was the “selling/sales era” marked by “aggressive sales, advertising and other promotional efforts.” The final phase was the marketing era, which “focused heavily on consumers’ needs and wants.”<sup>2</sup>

Richard Tedlow unpacks these phases in his book, *New and Improved*. He explains that in the second phase, “products and marketing strategies had a changeless quality about them.”<sup>3</sup> Two prime examples were Ford’s Model T automobile and Coca-Cola. Both were “universal” products, only available in one size and one color or flavor.<sup>4</sup> There were few choices available to customers, and sales depended on convincing the customer that they desired the product, instead of adapting the product and its options to suit the customer’s desires. Aggressive advertising and public relations drove sales. In

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<sup>1</sup> Kazuo Usui, *The Development of Marketing Management: The Case of the USA, C. 1910-1940* (Aldershot, England: Ashgate, 2008), 5.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Richard S. Tedlow, *New and Improved: The Story of Mass Marketing in America* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 1996), 6.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 6-7.

phase three, however, markets shifted to a consumer orientation. Instead of aggressively promoting a universal product to the entire market, firms began to change the product to suit a segment of the market. Product alteration and market segmentation were the two principle alterations that ushered in the contemporary era of marketing. Pepsi introduced the “Pepsi Generation” a promotion campaign focused on teenagers, and General Motors offered a “car for every purse and purpose” with a variety of automobiles.<sup>5</sup> These market transitions, from unification to segmentation, varied from industry to industry in their timing. Some began as early as the 1920s and others not until after World War II. It was in this latter era that churches began to move into the third phase.

Though churches did not fully embrace marketing practices and philosophies until the late 1970s, as early as the 1940s they were beginning to shift from a phase two: producer orientation to a phase three: consumer orientation. The foundation for the change was in the increasing utilization of sales programs and surveys to promote churches. These tactics introduced consumer opinion into the process of determining what products to offer. As a result, churches redesigned their institutions around modern values in comfort and convenience during a period of growth in religion and affluence. In such shifts, church promotion experts and their followers endorsed a dependence upon rational studies and planning as well as a confidence that a church’s purpose was to serve the individual. In introducing such marks of modernity, they also continued to wrestle with the tension of adopting marketplace methods and values in churches. Yet as before, the new strategies prevailed and by 1965, many churches were dressed for a long dance with consumer sovereignty.

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 7.

## Door-to-Door: Selling and Surveying Religion

A customer orientation depended upon knowing the desires of potential customers, information collected through surveys. Surveys had been prevalent in the broader public relations industry since the 1920s and 1930s. Public relations specialists used them as a mechanism to gauge public opinion of the institutions that they represented.<sup>6</sup> Yet they had not played a significant role in religious promotion. This changed in the 1940s as church promotion experts increasingly recommended using surveys, yet not to support public relations as much as door-to-door sales. In the 1950s, door-to-door sales became a principal method in church promotion. Though it had a much more brief tenure in popularity than other methods, it was a common form for a number of years. During that period, it introduced demographic surveys to churches in the form of “prospect lists.” These surveys grew in complexity as market research became more important to churches in shaping product development. In adopting survey methods and uses, the churches lagged behind the rest of the marketplace and used simple forms. Nevertheless, they aggressively adopted such methods. Between 1945 and 1965, both door-to-door sales and surveys nurtured a growing customer sovereignty in American Christianity.

### *Churches Adopt Door-to-Door Sales Methods and Build Prospect Lists*

The religious promotion industry lagged behind the business community in its utilization of door-to-door sales techniques. Though the door-to-door sales industry had

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<sup>6</sup> Stuart Ewen, *PR!: A Social History of Spin*, (New York: Basic Books, 1996), 181.

been going strong since the 1920s, it was not until the 1940s that many church promotion experts began advocating for developing local church sales forces.<sup>7</sup> In the process, they helped introduce community surveys to churches. In order to carry out a sales strategy, churches needed the names and addresses of people in the local community to visit. Basic, demographic surveys could provide this information and were commonly referred to as “prospect lists.” Prospect lists set the stage for future surveys of customer opinion that would form the backbone of a customer oriented religious marketplace. In creating prospect lists, training a local sales force, and working to secure the sale, churches increasingly adapted a customer orientation in their promotion.

During the 1920s, door-to-door salesmen and saleswomen helped to build the consumer society. As manufacturing increased by 60 percent, more industries produced consumer goods and depended on professional sales teams to move the products into American homes.<sup>8</sup> Door-to-door salesman, and some saleswomen, became a standard fixture of the local community.<sup>9</sup> However, by the early 1930s, as the Great Depression set in, sales plummeted along with the reputation of the salesperson.<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, while industries turned their attention to building public relations operations, door-to-door sales forces continued to grow.<sup>11</sup> As they did, churches took notice.

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<sup>7</sup> One of the first instances is a 1940 article explaining how to develop a sales force in a local church. Ross L. Holman “Volunteer Salesmen Sell This Church,” *Church Management* 17 (November 1940), 116-18.

<sup>8</sup> Walter A. Friedman, *Birth of a Salesman: The Transformation of Selling in America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), 192-93.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 194.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 228-31.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 242.

Though the inaugural 1923 issue of a magazine solely devoted to the principles of salesmanship, *Opportunity*, declared, “Every normal being is a Salesman” and listed “the minister” as the first example, it was in 1940s that ministers truly began to train as salesmen.<sup>12</sup> Some had noted the congruities between sales and Christianity in previous decades. The most prominent example was Bruce Barton whose 1925 best-seller, *The Man Nobody Knows*, described Jesus as an expert salesman.<sup>13</sup> Barton and others that would follow argued that because Jesus was a salesman, it was a natural fit for church members to sell religion in door-to-door sales. Nevertheless, even with such an endorsement, many sought to separate religion from the marketplace, so they gave the method a more sacred or “dignified” name. They called it “Visitation Evangelism.”<sup>14</sup> One of the first mentions of the technique under this title was in 1934 in *Church Management* where a pastor noted that traditional forms of mass evangelism were giving way to “Visitation Evangelism.”<sup>15</sup> He explained that in visitation evangelism, the first step a minister had to take was to survey the community and create a “prospect list” of potential customers to contact.

Prospect lists were the most common form of a rudimentary, community survey. In 1928, W.G. Price explained the importance of conducting a community survey. He recommended that an area of interest be divided into groups of forty homes. The information to be gathered was basically census data. Yet it was not for the purpose of

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<sup>12</sup> H.L. Fogleman, *Opportunity* 1, no. 1 (June 1923), 23, quoted in Friedman, 198.

<sup>13</sup> Bruce Barton, *The Man Nobody Knows: A Discovery of the Real Jesus* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1925).

<sup>14</sup> Weldon Crossland, *How to Increase Church Membership and Attendance* (New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, 1949), 42.

<sup>15</sup> A. Earl Kernahan, “The New Visitation Evangelism,” *Church Management* 11 (October 1934): 40.

learning about the community as much as it was to establish relationships with neighbors of the church.<sup>16</sup> Over time, however, such efforts of data collection became sources for creating prospect lists.

In 1951, Gaines Dobbins called the prospect lists a “program of discovery” and described it as a “near science.”<sup>17</sup> A list consisted of people in the local community that were not affiliated with a church. It could also include members of the church who had not been participating for some time. Both groups could be targeted by a church’s door-to-door sales force.<sup>18</sup> A minister could create a list in several different ways. The simplest was to examine the church rolls, and list the contact information for those members that no longer attended. A minister would also ask members to list friends and relatives in the area that did not attend a church. Sunday school children were asked for their parents’ information if they did not attend the church. Visitor cards were another valuable resource.<sup>19</sup> Visitors to a church would fill out an information card, providing their contact information, which was added to the prospect list for sales visits. Other ministers, however, were more creative.

One preacher employed a very aggressive tactic in tracking down new possible congregants to build his prospect list. He would pay a woman, per name acquired, to visit apartment complexes in the city and write down the names and addresses of all the

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<sup>16</sup> W.G. Price, “Making the Most of a Community Survey,” *Church Management* 5 (December 1928): 174-76, 185-86.

<sup>17</sup> Dobbins, Gaines S. *The Churchbook: A Treasury of Materials and Methods*. (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1951), 123.

<sup>18</sup> Weldon Crossland, *How to Increase Church Membership and Attendance* (New York: Cokesbury Press, 1949), 50.

<sup>19</sup> Ross L. Holman, “Volunteer Salesmen Sell This Church,” *Church Management* 17 (November 1940): 116-18; Robert R. Yelderman, “Prospecting for Prospects: The Important Start in Your Plan of Personal Evangelism,” *Church Management* 25 (November 1948): 48-9.

residents. Then the pastor, William Hunter, would send an “attractive” letter to the addresses inviting them to attend John Hall Memorial Presbyterian Church. He had found that this method of what he called direct-mail evangelism was very successful in “flush[ing] out prospects from the ‘unchurched’ and new people in the community.” In his article in *Church Management*, he also recommended specific kinds of new duplicator machines that pastors should use to produce the letters. In addition, he provided specific advice on how to format the letter properly, in such a way as to maximize a positive reception. In spite of his arguably nefarious name collection method, Hunter did warn that there were limits on acceptable methods of promotion. He suggested that ministers never advertise more than they could actually deliver, lest they corrupt the church with worldly methods.<sup>20</sup> Gaines Dobbins also had sales advice for pastors, but using door-to-door methods.

Gaines Dobbins recommended that ministers reach out to the people on their prospect list as a salesperson would in making a sales pitch and closing a deal. He encouraged pastors to use the visitor’s information cards from worship services to identify people to visit. The pastor was to treat the visit like a sales call. Dobbins recommended that a pastor avoid creating “sales resistance” by not initialing asking direct questions such as “Are you a Christian?” or “To what church do you belong?” Instead, the pastor had to follow the secret to success in all sales, according to Dobbins; he had to have “an unfeigned interest in the person.” The salesman pastor, had to ask

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<sup>20</sup> William M. Hunter, “Direct-Mail Evangelism May Help – So: Preacher – Sell Your Church!” *Church Management* 29 (February 1953): 18-20, 22, 58-9, 65.

questions about the individual and find common ground.<sup>21</sup> Patience was required to establish rapport and “create favorable attitudes” then move to explaining the Christian message. After giving the sales pitch, the pastor, according to Dobbins, had to “press for a decision as well like any good businessman in making a sale.”<sup>22</sup> Other ministers however, relied on the congregation to make the sales calls.

According to church promotion experts like Dobbins and Weldon Crossland, pastors could also train members of their congregations to be a door-to-door sales force. Dobbins instructed pastors to develop a “visitation evangelism program.” He explained that visitation cards should be created from the survey information of “unsaved” people and “unchurched” people in the area. Then a meeting should be held to train the volunteers who will go visit the prospects.<sup>23</sup> Dobbins warned though that the pastor should not ask for just any volunteers, but carefully select the sales team and bear in mind that “men will be more successful than women.”<sup>24</sup> Weldon Crossland agreed that a church had to select the sales force carefully. He suggested recruiting the more “intelligent” and “persuasive” members of the church.<sup>25</sup> Once selected, the volunteers were to attend a sales training session, commonly scheduled as a mid-week dinner. The dinner could also be a pep-rally before sending the teams out on their sales calls.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Gaines S. Dobbins, *Building Better Churches: A Guide to the Pastoral Ministry* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1947), 347.

<sup>22</sup> Dobbins, *Building Better Churches*, 348.

<sup>23</sup> Dobbins, *Churchbook*, 130.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 132.

<sup>25</sup> Crossland, 51.

<sup>26</sup> Holman, “Volunteer Salesman” 118.



Dobbins provided church leaders specific guidelines for the dinner.<sup>27</sup> He explained that there should be a series of “supper meetings,” where the food is on the table by 6:15, the assignments are given in the first fifteen minutes, there is instruction provided at 6:45, and then at 7:15 the workers leave for visitations. He recommended four nights of calling on homes and then a week of evangelistic preaching for the sake of the visitors.<sup>28</sup>

Just as in the training, the sales visits were to be well-organized and planned events. Dobbins recommended that teams of sixteen volunteers each be assigned 100 prospects to visit.<sup>29</sup> The assigned prospects, he continued, should be grouped by zones, to simplify the visitation schedule. Dobbins suggested that within each team, salespersons be paired with a partner because that was how Jesus did it.<sup>30</sup> Weldon Crossland recommended that a minister not only divide lists of prospects by location but also code them according to their prominence in the community. The strongest sales team in the church, he suggested, was to visit the more well respected and known prospects.<sup>31</sup> This was an early form of segmentation, identifying the most valuable investment in the community. An endorsement from the pillars of the community would attract others to a church. It was a rational calculation, determining which people would yield the greatest return. It also treated people like commodities instead of as “God’s children,” basing their worth on their exchange values instead of their humanity.

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<sup>27</sup> Dobbins, *Churchbook*, 134.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 131.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> Crossland, 55.

These sales visits, as Dobbins suggested, were to be a year round task. He wrote, “Visit systematically and continuously, using so persuasively the inducements of friendship and good salesmanship to attract those who have been found that they will come once and again, eventually being won into the full life of the church and then going out to win others.”<sup>32</sup> In each visit, these sales people were equipped with the latest methods and expertise of commercial sales.

Throughout the literature, many church promotion experts relied heavily on secular sales models and language in advising pastors. They believed that the methods of selling the sacred and the secular were compatible. One clear example was a pastor who hosted a play to demonstrate the similarities. He wrote a script that the youth of the church performed in which a salesman visited a married couple and attempted to sell them an electric heater. After the first act, the audience, made up of church members, had to identify and discuss the mistakes that the salesman made in his electric heater pitch. Then in the second act, the same salesman visited the same couple, but this time to sell them on the church, yet making the same mistakes as before. The minister concluded the play by explaining how the church must be sold effectively by avoiding the mistakes of a bad salesman.<sup>33</sup> The point could not have been any clearer that selling the church was the same as selling a heater.

Weldon Crossland believed that door-to-door sales was a key weapon in the arsenal of growing a church. He insisted that, “Only by calling on them [people in the community] in their homes and offices can they be persuaded to enter the Lord’s house

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<sup>32</sup> Dobbins, *Churchbook*, 124.

<sup>33</sup> Harold S. Knight, “Drama Game Sells Lay Evangelism,” *Church Management* 19 (November 1942): 26-27.

and worship with his people.”<sup>34</sup> So important was this tactic, that he devoted an entire chapter of his book to outlining the methods of a “successful insurance salesman.” He carefully applied the rules to selling a church.<sup>35</sup> He offered suggestions such as “Make a favorable impression immediately,” approach family members “in the order of their probability of commitment,” and “encourage your prospect to talk” to gather helpful information in making the sale.<sup>36</sup> Yet Crossland’s emphasis on secular sales methods did not compare with those of C.S. Lovett.

In 1954, C.S. Lovett published a booklet entitled *Soul Winning Is Easy* that translated the latest in sales psychology for churches.<sup>37</sup> As one may surmise from the title, Lovett described sales techniques that he believed guaranteed successful results. The title alone reflects the confidence that many had in utilizing methods of the market to achieve the purposes of God. Such faith in rational methods to accomplish the mysterious work of God was another mark of the adaptation of modern values in American Christianity. In the guide, Lovett explained in vivid detail, and illustrated with photographs, precisely what an individual should say and do in order to sell Christianity to another person. One example was his instruction on how to close the sale:

Say to him [the prospect]: ‘Bow your head with me.’ Do not look at him when you say this, but bow your head first. Out of the corner of your eye you will see him hesitate at first. Then, as his resistance crumbles, his head will come down. Your hand on his shoulder will feel the relaxation

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<sup>34</sup> Crossland, 20.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 70.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 74-9.

<sup>37</sup> C.S. Lovett, *Soul Winning is Easy* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1954). The book was published in ten more editions, the last in 1967.

and you will know when his heart yields. Bowing you head first, causes terrific psychological pressure.<sup>38</sup>

Lovett used such instructions of “psychological pressure” throughout his guide. He explained, “God has given us a unique tool in psychology and it plays an important part in soul-winning today.”<sup>39</sup> His methods depended on a psychological understanding of the “prospect” and a careful progression of questions and answers that would assure the success of the sale. In concluding, he reiterated how simple the technique would be and encouraged the reader to learn the Bible verses listed, memorize the transition lines, and begin practicing with friends. Such confidence in the sales methods of the marketplace continued in churches, though the techniques began to lose favor.

Developing prospect lists and training church members to serve as salesman and saleswomen of the church continued into the early 1950s, but soon faded as advertising, public relations and even marketing methods became dominant.<sup>40</sup> Lovett’s reliance on psychology in his sales techniques marked an increase in studying and understanding customer motivations and desires. As these interests expanded, church promotion shifted towards a marketing posture. “Prospect list” and “sales force” disappeared from the parlance, replaced by phrases like “meeting needs.” Church promotion continued to begin with the customer, determining their desires and then planning the product to

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<sup>38</sup> C.S. Lovett, *Soul Winning Made Easy*. ([La Habra, CA?]: Lockman Foundation, 1959), 50.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 63.

<sup>40</sup> Richard Ehlers, “An Adventure in Publicity: Ten Men and the Gospel,” *Church Management* 30 (December 1953): 32; A. Eugene Bartlett, “Winning and Keeping New Members,” *Church Management* 30 (February 1954): 22- 4; Lester F. Heins, “Electronics in the Church,” *Church Management* 31 (May 1955): 13, 64-5.

attract those desires. This trend followed on the heels of a larger shift toward customer research in the marketplace.

*Market Research: A Growing Foundation in Promotion*

Before churches could begin marketing, there had to be a foundational shift from a product orientation to a consumer orientation. Church leaders had to begin to look to the customer to determine the form and content of the church. While many churches and church promotion experts worked on developing a door-to-door sales force to grow a church, surveys grew in importance as a mechanism to identify the “felt needs” of potential customers. As consumer research and sovereignty increased in the broader marketplace, it assumed a greater role in church retailing.

Montgomery Ward was a pioneer in placing the customer at the center of a retailing philosophy. By the 1870s, he promised in his catalogs a “Satisfaction Guarantee – or your money back.”<sup>41</sup> This short phrase placed the customer in the driver’s seat. If the customer did not approve of the service or product, then it could be returned. The customer was sovereign. In the 1920s as the center of America moved from rural areas to urban areas, Ward and Richard Sears began shifting their catalog retail business to local department stores.<sup>42</sup> In the department stores, they continued to keep the customer at the center of retail, diligently laboring to satisfy their desires. Other industries pursued this same end and began relying on customer research to guide their business practices.

Some corporations began paying more attention to customer research in the 1930s. Roland Marchand explains how General Motors began questioning its customers

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<sup>41</sup> Tedlow, 271.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 293.

in the early 1930s. They began sending questionnaires to potential customers in various communities. The questionnaires were a mechanism to determine what people wanted in a car. GM quickly recognized the value in the method and by 1933, they created a separate division to administer the process, titled the “GM Customer Research Staff.” The feedback from the inquiries not only gave GM an advantage in satisfying public desires, but they also used their new “customer based” business philosophy as a propaganda piece to improve their image.<sup>43</sup> They promoted themselves as a corporation that was particularly sensitive to the demands and good of the customer. By the 1950s, many more businesses were elevating the centrality of customer research in their operations.

Though the timing differed among industries, principally in the 1950s, there was a broad shift in the American marketplace from a “company orientation” to a “consumer orientation.” This transition was a significant stepping-stone on the way to a segmented market where retailers would alter and appeal their products and their promotion to target consumers. This alteration stood upon widespread consumer research. Historian William Wilkie argues that the “clearest shift” in the field of marketing was the “increasing dominance of marketing research.”<sup>44</sup> Bartels agrees, “The most imposing substantive change in marketing in the post-1950 decades has been the rise of research and writing on consumer behavior.”<sup>45</sup> As the marketplace sought to please the customer, it sought firstly to identify the customer and discern his or her preferences. Much of the

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<sup>43</sup> Marchand, Roland, *Creating the Corporate Soul: The Rise of Public Relations and Corporate Imagery in American Big Business* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 231.

<sup>44</sup> William L. Wilkie, *Consumer Behavior* (New York: Wiley, 1986), 130.

<sup>45</sup> Robert Bartels, *The History of Marketing Thought* (Columbus, OH: Publishing Horizons, 1988), 259.

shift relied on an increase of behavioral analysis in the social sciences. The director of market research for N.W. Ayers and Sons, Inc., Arthur Blankenship, wrote three books that brought his expertise in psychology to the field. They were *Consumer and Opinion Research* (1943), *How to Conduct Consumer and Opinion Research* (1946), and *Market and Marketing Analysis* (1947).<sup>46</sup> One permutation of this shift in advertising and sales was motivation research.

Historian Stephen Fox demonstrates that in much of advertising, “Motivation research (MR) replaced the older statistical techniques of polling and counting with esoteric methods borrowed from the social sciences, especially depth psychology and psychoanalysis.”<sup>47</sup> In the 1950s, major advertising firms increasingly created MR departments to discover the latent motivations behind consumer purchases. The shift was evident, as well, in sales. Salespersons were now expected to know their market, understand human behavior, and respond to customer desires in their presentation, in a way that they had not before.<sup>48</sup> Gone were the days of “canned” presentations. Thus, in the 1950s, consumer research rapidly expanded across the marketplace. Consumer research was by no means as sophisticated in churches, yet a growing interest in measuring consumer interests and desires was evident.

By the late 1940s, the growing consumer orientation in the marketplace gripped the church promotion industry. Surveys had become a much more significant component

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 132; Albert Breneman Blankenship, *Consumer and Opinion Research; The Questionnaire Technique* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1943); Albert Breneman Blankenship, *How to Conduct Consumer and Opinion Research; The Sampling Survey in Operation* (New York: Harper, 1946); Myron Samuel Heidingsfield and Albert Breneman Blankenship, *Market and Marketing Analysis* (New York: H. Holt, 1947).

<sup>47</sup> Stephen R. Fox, *The Mirror Makers: A History of American Advertising and its Creators* (New York: Morrow, 1984), 183.

<sup>48</sup> Bartels, 76.

in promoting a church, according to the experts. In the 1920s and 1930s and into the 1940s, surveys were discussed very little, and were basic collections of local demographic information. They were a means to build prospect lists. This changed though in the late 1940s. The shift is evident in Gaines Dobbins' 1947 *Building Better Churches* and 1951 *The Churchbook*. In his 1923, *The Efficient Church*, Dobbins explained in a few pages how to do a basic community survey.<sup>49</sup> He suggested identifying the population size, the nationalities present, the types of industry and average wages, the games that the youth enjoyed, and the kinds of roads. Yet he never explained how to use the information. His later books, on the other hand, dedicated entire sections to how a church should conduct and use surveys. This change was also evident in the increasingly central place of “meeting needs” in the work of church promotion experts. They recommended that churches use surveys to determine what the needs of potential customers. If a church could offer satisfaction to those needs, then more people would patronize the institution. Thus, in the 1940s and 1950s, church experts laid the groundwork for church marketing methods by emphasizing the necessity for sophisticated measurements of public demographics and needs, so that churches could tailor products to attract more customers.

*“The Customer is Always Right” & “Meeting Needs” in Churches*

After 1945, church promotion explicitly began moving the customer to the center of product and service development, a trajectory that would eventually lead in the 1970s

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<sup>49</sup> Gaines S. Dobbins, *Building Better Churches: A Guide to the Pastoral Ministry* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1947); Gaines S. Dobbins, *The Churchbook: A Treasury of Materials and Methods* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1951), Gaines S. Dobbins, *The Efficient Church* (Nashville: Sunday School Board of the Southern Baptist Convention, 1923).



to church marketing. Stewart Harral may have been the most progressive in recognizing and advocating the future patterns of church marketing. In his 1945, *Public Relations for Churches*, Harral wrote of the centrality of public opinion in guiding church leadership decisions in a way that no one had before. The purpose of public relations had always been engendering public favor; however, it principally concerned determining how the public interpreted a church. It sought to correct public misconceptions about the institution. Harral's alteration was to say that, "Public opinion studies provide you with a kind of chart and compass for your ship."<sup>50</sup> In other words, according to Harral, the orientation of the church and its services should be based principally on public opinion, not simply presented in such a way as to be generally acceptable to the public.

He recommended that pastors should use polls, symposiums, research studies, and community surveys to determine what people want in a church. He wrote, "Any policy ... should be formed and carried out in relation to its effect on all elements of your public ... procedures should be carried out in such a way as to win public approval."<sup>51</sup> He pointed to Jesus' methods in defense of these suggestions. Harral wrote, "Long before Gallup polls and modern techniques of measuring public attitudes the Master asked his disciples, 'Who do men say that I the Son of man am?'"<sup>52</sup> Harral was identifying a consumer orientation in Jesus' strategies for spreading his message.

Harral's advocacy for such a shift to a customer orientation is surprising to find as early as 1945, however, even more surprising is Harral's suggestion for targeting a

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<sup>50</sup> Stewart Harral, *Public Relations for Churches* (New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, 1945), 35.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 38-9.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

market audience. Though segmenting in church marketing would not develop until the 1970s, Harral wrote in 1945, “Determine exactly what people you want to reach. What groups should be studied and approached? Who are their leaders? ... What are the best channels for reaching these groups? ... Where is the area of agreement between their views and yours?”<sup>53</sup> He advocated for appealing to a specific segment in the population. A church, according to Harral, should tailor its programs, its appearance, and its message to the interests of a particular set of customers.

Harral associated these changes in religious production with a larger movement in the marketplace, the establishment of the “customer-is-always-right” era.<sup>54</sup> A year prior to the release of his book, an anonymous article appeared in *Church Management* entitled “The Customer is Always Wrong.” In it, the author rebuked the church as the one institution that functioned with the assumption that the customer is always wrong, and the preacher is always right. The author argued that if churches were to prosper, they must devote greater attention to the customer’s desires and opinions, and less to that of the minister.<sup>55</sup>

Harral, seconded this pronouncement, explaining that, “The light was dawning. Business leaders and others were beginning to realize that operation in the public interest is essential.”<sup>56</sup> Yet while the marketplace was only now recognizing this truth, according to Harral, Jesus had known it millennia before. Harral described Jesus as a modern man who recognized the absolute necessity of public opinion and the

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 34-5.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 21.

<sup>55</sup> “The Customer Is Always Wrong,” *Church Management* 21 (October 1944): 58.

<sup>56</sup> Harral, 21.

importance of communicating aggressively with the broader community.<sup>57</sup> Harral wrote, “It would be easy to multiply examples, each showing his [Jesus] remarkable power of interesting people by speaking in terms of their wants and beliefs.”<sup>58</sup> Harral’s framing of Jesus as a religious leader that met people’s wants as a means to attract them, would prove an invaluable component in the customer sovereignty shift in religious production. He was setting up a key defense for church marketing, that Jesus was the original marketer.

It was not the idea of “meeting needs” that was new and different but the designation of who defined those needs. The notion that a church should focus on meeting people’s needs in the community was by no means a revolutionary concept. As Harral noted, Jesus clearly taught the necessity to meet the needs of people. The question, though, was what are those needs and who is best equipped to define them. Traditionally, the clergy determined people’s needs based on interpreting Scripture and tradition. Most argued that the primary need was reconciliation with a God whose wrath and judgment humanity would one day suffer because of its sin. The Christian message was that the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross as payment for the penalty of sin met this need. However, that message had changed, particularly in the early twentieth century, with the rise of liberal Protestantism.

Needs were now temporal: food, shelter, comfort, happiness, etc.... As churches increasingly entertained alterations to their services in order to attract more people, they began to look to the customer to define such needs that a church should meet. This was the shift from a company orientation to a customer orientation. A church would not offer

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 18-9.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 40.

solutions to the needs that it identified, but instead offer solutions to the needs that the customer identified. In reality, though the language was that of meeting needs, it was in reality more a matter of meeting wants and desires. As Harral explained, “Only by making contact with the other person's wants can we hold his attention. Only through these wants of his can we hope to influence him in any way whatever.”<sup>59</sup> Between 1945 and 1965, meeting wants slowly took center stage in discussions of attracting people to the church.

Harral recognized the challenges that this could present to a church, sacrificing a traditional message and product for one that meets modern consumer wants. Though Harral had no significant theological education, he realized that ceding authority to the customer in defining the very purpose of Christianity could alter the religion. Yet like others, he was uncertain how to resolve the tension it created. Instead of presenting a solution, he left the tension hanging, writing, “The pastor is a spokesman for the gospel, but at the same time he must keep attuned to the voices which come from his congregation.”<sup>60</sup> Harral’s prescription was to guard the traditional message but be ready to make the necessary alterations to interest the customers. Just as the RPRC members struggled with the contradiction, so too did Harral, as did many to follow him.

After Harral, the language of “meeting needs” increasingly accompanied recommendations for surveys in church promotion. In 1946, the executive vice president of the Wisconsin Council of Churches scolded churches for not making “thorough

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 39.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 40.

objective surveys of their programs and services in relation to community needs.”<sup>61</sup> The next year, Dobbins’ new book stated in a chapter entitled “Organizing to Meet Human Needs,” that a pastor must build a “church passionately concerned with human needs and practically equipped to meet those needs.”<sup>62</sup> This chapter included detailed sections on surveying to discover what those needs are and how well the church is meeting them. This was in stark contrast to his earlier books that only briefly mentioned surveys. Unlike his earlier books, he provided an entire section entitled, “A Survey of Community Responsibilities and Needs” that cites the Gallup Polls, and outlined how to conduct a thorough survey of the community.<sup>63</sup>

The growing popularity of surveys showed in 1951 with several religious promotion experts endorsing their importance. Roland Wolseley’s 1951 guide addressed the subject, instructing church leaders to conduct a “sociological and religious survey” of their community, survey the church’s services, then develop “a program to meet the needs so discovered.”<sup>64</sup> Gaines Dobbins’ 1951 *The Churchbook* echoed Wolseley’s call.<sup>65</sup> The same year, an article in the *Counselor* joined the chorus, as did professor of journalism at Columbia University, Richard T. Baker’s address before the Religious

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<sup>61</sup> Ellis H. Dana, “A Pattern for Church Public Relations,” *Church Management* 22 (September 1946): 8-10.

<sup>62</sup> Dobbins, *Building Better Churches*, 153.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 167.

<sup>64</sup> Roland E. Wolseley, *Interpreting the Church through Press and Radio* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1951), 13-15.

<sup>65</sup> Dobbins, *Churchbook*, 32.

Public Relations Council.<sup>66</sup> Baker called the attendees to encourage churches to conduct more surveys and develop particular messages for targeted audiences.<sup>67</sup>

Whereas earlier surveys gathered basic information on residents in the community, in a census format, the new surveys that helped meet needs sought specific information on customer preferences. Church promotion experts believed that a church must know precisely what people want in a church. Weldon Crossland recommended in 1949 that a minister should survey the congregation to determine why they attend the church.<sup>68</sup> He reiterated that you must know “Why do people come to church?”<sup>69</sup> Armed with this information, the pastor could then “Plan improved church services and special sermons that will deserve and hold larger congregations.”<sup>70</sup> Willard Pleuthner similarly instructed ministers to find out what the members believe are important issues and preach on those, providing in his guide a “sermon material survey” for ministers to use.<sup>71</sup> He suggested some reasons that people may stop attending: unfamiliar hymns, solicitations for money, minister out of touch, inadequate greeters. He even recommended churches hire a professional reporter to study those that do not attend the church any longer to determine the reasons.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> David M. Church, “What is P.R.?” *NRPC Counselor* 2 (March 1952), box 5, Records: 1952-1988 (88-0630), RPRCC.

<sup>67</sup> Richard T. Baker, “This Business of Ours,” folder “1950 – 1951,” box 4, Records: 1952-1988 (88-0630), RPRCC.

<sup>68</sup> Crossland, 116.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 118.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 119.

<sup>71</sup> Willard A. Pleuthner, *Building Up Your Congregation: Help From Tested Business Methods* (Chicago: Wilcox & Follett, 1950), 26.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

Dobbins recommended that a church must discover why people do not respond to mere invitations to the church. He suggested that possible reasons would be poor health, distance of travel, they prefer to sleep-in, they dislike the music, or they dislike the preaching.<sup>73</sup> He recommended that a follow-up question was also necessary, asking if there was anything that the church could do to “overcome your difficulty.”<sup>74</sup> One minister, James Doty, reported in a 1950 issue of *Church Management* how successful this method had proven for him in attracting more attention.<sup>75</sup> Another 1950 article explained the method and success that a church had found in conducting a detailed survey of the congregation’s desires and opinions, then altering the service and programming to better suit what people wanted. The article also quoted Dr. Scott M. Cutlip a professor of public relations at the University of Wisconsin, and author of one of the principal public relations textbooks. He had helped conduct a local church survey and told attendees at a Pastors Conference in 1948 that,

The market place of public opinion is a bedlam of clamorings for the limited attention and the fleeting interest of our citizens – thus to make the church’s voice heard, the church must use with skill all the techniques of public opinion, research and communication media which are available today.<sup>76</sup>

If churches hoped to survive, experts believed that they had to listen more carefully to the desires of the American people.

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<sup>73</sup> Dobbins, *Churchbook*, 124-25.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 125.

<sup>75</sup> James Edward Doty, “Dollars and Sense in Church Publicity: How Big Must a Church Be to Advertise?” *Church Management* (April 1950): 15-6.

<sup>76</sup> Elsie Kamsler Nelson, “When A Church Surveys,” *Church Management* 26 (July 1950): 36, 38, 40, 42-3.

Church promotion expert, John Fortson, endorsed the importance of customer research to advertising for a church. He claimed to have learned from the director of the General Motors' Customer Research Staff the necessity of accurately evaluating the customer.<sup>77</sup> He suggested that before advertising, a church had to develop "a program planned to meet the spiritual needs of the people." Then, it had to create "a means of presenting and interpreting that program attractively and forcefully."<sup>78</sup> At the root was a careful study of the community and its desires. He recommended that a few ways to collect such information was to conduct public opinion polls, study the local news, and have "Truth Sessions" where leaders from the community could come and comment openly on the church.<sup>79</sup> He also explained that the public is not a homogeneous unit, but divided into different groups with similar preferences. Therefore, a church had to be certain it was studying all of the groups so as not to have a skewed perception of the public needs and desires.<sup>80</sup> This was not so far as to target specific groups, which would be paramount in church promotion in the future, but it was a key step in recognizing the groups.

In the 1980s, academic scholars would turn their attention to promoting churches, yet long before, one such scholar offered guidance. Robert Wentworth, professor of marketing at Syracuse University, contributed an article in 1956 to *Church Management* that emphasized the necessity for ministers to match a church's product to the

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<sup>77</sup> John L. Fortson, *How to Make Friends for Your Church, a Manual on Public Relations* (New York: Association Press, 1943), 8.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 20-1.



“fundamental needs and desires” of the customer. He, like others, recommended that to grow the church, it had to conduct extensive research on its message, the audience, and the broader market.<sup>81</sup> Sermons must always appeal to self-interest, he wrote.<sup>82</sup> He suggested testing sermons like advertisements for effectiveness, inviting critics to come, listen, and review them. The critics should also “make a time and motion study and a general inspection of the service, including housekeeping details, the adequacy of the music, the preacher’s voice, the cordiality of the ushers, etc., as seen by a ‘stranger within the gates.’”<sup>83</sup> This suggestion would become very popular nearly fifty years later with the establishment of “mystery worshiper” consultant agencies. Firms would send “undercover” worshipers to churches to evaluate their customer service. Yet for now such recommendations for surveys would gradually increase into the early 1960s with articles in *Church Management* recommending sending questionnaires to the community and church members to determine what they thought about the church’s services, appearance, and community involvement.<sup>84</sup>

In 1955, one of the editorial writers for *Church Management* criticized the churches’ inattention to the customer. He explained, as Harral had ten years previously, that it was a terminal mistake in business to think that the customer is wrong. Yet

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<sup>81</sup> Robert B. Wentworth, “Why Don’t Clergymen Study Advertising?,” *Church Management* 32 (June 1956): 8, 47-9.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 48.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>84</sup> “Redeemer Lutheran Church Questionnaire,” *Church Management* 38 (April 1962):47-8; Willard A. Scofield, “What Do Your Church Members Think?” *Church Management* 38 (July 1962): 10, 13; Lyle E. Schaller “What Factor Brings in the Most Members? Who Joins First Church?” *Church Management* 40 ( July 1964 ): 10-1, 13.

churches, he argued, blame a lack of attendance on the customer instead of blaming the church leadership. Instead, he insisted, a minister should recognize the problem lies with the church, and should improve the services to make them more popular. It could be the preaching, or the choir's performance, or the church building that drives away the customer.<sup>85</sup> The minister had to tune all of them to the customer's desires. He continued by explaining that a minister should also stop "accusing everyone of being a sinner." To do so was to assume again that the customer is wrong.<sup>86</sup> Such measures revealed a growing confidence in rational studies and planning as the foundation of an effective church, instead of a dependence upon the mystery of God. They also demonstrated an increasing alteration in the identity of a church as a place that exists to serve the desires of the individual. Both this rationalism and individualism were key marks of the modernization of American Christianity through church promotion.

The same year of the article, 1955, in California, Robert Schuller was putting all of this critic's suggestions into place. He would build his church on a detailed community survey and tailor both his theology and ecclesiology towards one purpose, to please and attract the customer. His church growth methodology would build churches from the ground up that captured the most entertaining and interesting elements that the culture desired. His ability and willingness to alter significantly the form of the church represented another significant shift of the period, the willingness and desire to build churches that catered to modern consumer desires of comfort and convenience. Yet

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<sup>85</sup> Robert B. Wentworth, "Why Don't Clergymen Study Advertising?" *Church Management* 32 (June 1956): 8, 47.

<sup>86</sup> W.H.L., "The Customer is Always Wrong?" *Church Management* 32 (November 1955): 5

though he was unique in his radical abandon in creating such churches, others were taking advantage of the prosperity of the 1950s to build consumer suited churches.

### Promoting Religion through Modern Comfort & Convenience

In 1941, Pastor Eliam West began a system of surveying public opinion in his community. He divided the area into 116 geographical units and assigned a husband and wife team to each unit. Each pair was responsible for visiting those homes at least four times a year. In his own visits, he discovered that many people did not attend church because the service time at eleven was inconvenient for them, so he began offering an early service and an evening service. He also began providing special services like Favorite Hymn Sunday and Guest Sunday to appeal to the desires of the people.<sup>87</sup>

Kinsey M. Merritt, the public relations director for the Railway Express agency, conducted his own survey in 1945 of why people did or did not attend church. He found that the top reason most did not attend was that they found religion “impractical.” Religion did not relate to their daily lives; it did not offer them anything that they needed. This result was not surprising, religious promoters had been calling for religion, for some time, to focus more on how it could help people. However, perhaps more surprising was that 51 percent of those surveyed said they would attend church if it were more “physically comfortable.”<sup>88</sup> The next year an Atlanta journalist explained that religion

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<sup>87</sup> William H. Leach, “Would You Like a Filled Church in Summer?: The Minster Can Have That If He Really Wishes It, Says This Pastor,” *Church Management* 26 (February 1950): 17.

<sup>88</sup> John Evans, “Laymen Urged to Be Church’s Press Agents,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, December 7, 1945.

must be more physically beautiful to attract people.<sup>89</sup> Religious leaders were recognizing that people did not want a religion that simply met their spiritual needs. They wanted a religion that also satisfied their modern consumer desires. In a church, they wanted comfort, beauty, convenience, variety, and choice.

If a church were to grow, many believed it had to accommodate to modern desires. Gaines Dobbins insisted that churches had to relinquish their “prosaic, dull, monotonous program.” Churches, he continued, needed a desperate overhaul; throughout they had to find ways to be “more original and creative, more vital and attractive.”<sup>90</sup> Dobbins insisted that one means to compete in the marketplace was to update the facilities, to create the “modern church building.” He argued, it had to be beautiful and it had to be well equipped, with the latest in audio and visual equipment, musical instruments and other resources.<sup>91</sup> In the 1950s, church leaders followed Dobbins’ advice, attracting modern consumers by taking advantage of technological innovation, the popularity of the automobile, and the expanding suburbs, to create churches that provided comfort and convenience.

### *Technology and the Necessity of Modern Machines*

One of the more affordable and effective means to improve your church’s promotional efforts and attractiveness to the community was to take advantage of new technology. Whereas advertisements for church bells had consumed much of the ad

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<sup>89</sup> E.L. Murchison, “Churches Should Advertise,” *Atlanta Daily World*, November 30, 1946.

<sup>90</sup> Dobbins, *Building Better Churches*, 166.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, 166-67.

space in *Church Management* in the 1930s and 1940s, new products began to replace them in the 1950s. By 1956, there were fewer advertisements with pictures that showed people on their way to play golf, stopped in their tracks and lured into the church by the chiming of the bells.<sup>92</sup> This is not to suggest that bells passed out of popularity.

Advertisements remained such as Schulmerich Carillons that boasted a bell tower would serve as both effective advertising and public relations. They stated, “Residents will gain new awareness of your Christian role in the community. Attendance at services is bound to increase, as will opportunities for civic leadership.”<sup>93</sup> Yet the bulk of advertisements were increasingly for modern amplification systems. Companies like Rangertone, Inc. manufactured large speaker systems that could be installed in a church tower to project the singing or preaching from within the church into the community. Some churches boasted that their attendance had grown by up to a third thanks to the system. As well, they boasted, the system offered a service to the community because they could use it to broadcast community events.<sup>94</sup> In arguing for new equipment in churches, John Fortson explained that the use of a sixteen-millimeter sound motion picture projector had helped increase attendance by 73 percent.<sup>95</sup> Projectors could be used in a number of applications, he explained.

The St. Paul’s Lutheran Church developed a new way to use technology as a means to attract more people to their church. During the week, they began offering a

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<sup>92</sup> *Church Management* 33 (December 1956).

<sup>93</sup> Advertisement, “Schulmerich Carillons” *Church Management* 34 (April 1958): 36.

<sup>94</sup> M.R. Robinson, “City Adopts Church Towertone,” *Church Management* 18 (December 1941): 30-1; James R. Uhlinger, “There is Music in the Air,” *Church Management* 21 (January 1945):36-9.

<sup>95</sup> Fortson, 122-23.

small chapel to the public that had recorded organ music playing and celebrities reading the Bible.<sup>96</sup> They also offered an “overflow church” which was a large social room where they had a television showing the service. They found that many people were not ready for “direct participation in a liturgical worship service” so they could go to this room.<sup>97</sup> Drive-in churches would also work to meet this desire to worship in anonymity. Twenty years later evangelical pastors such as Bill Hybels, would offer separate worship services all together for those that were not comfortable engaging in a church service.

Machines were advertised as the solution to low attendance in any given church. Manufacturers claimed that they could cut the cost and labor in producing direct mail materials, and they could make them more professional in appearance. An advertisement for the Mimeograph Duplicator asked, “What makes a family come to church?” The answer, provided for the reader, was finely produced publications to include letters, bulletins, church newspapers and printed sermons.<sup>98</sup> A 1949 ad asked, “What can I do to fill my church on Sunday mornings?” The proposed solution was mimeographing equipment in your church.<sup>99</sup> A 1950 advertisement for the Vari-Typer promised to provide “flexible publicity for churches” through its range of options in producing copy for news editors and other church publications.<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> Lester F. Heins, “Electronics in the Church,” *Church Management* 31 (May 1955): 13.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, 64-5.

<sup>98</sup> Advertisement, “The Mimeograph Brand Duplicator,” *Church Management* 24 (January 1948).

<sup>99</sup> Advertisement, “What can I do to fill my church on Sunday mornings?” *Church Management* 25 (February 1949).

<sup>100</sup> William M. Hunter, “Flexible Publicity for Churches: The Vari-Typer Has Many Uses,” *Church Management* 26 (July 1950): 52, 54.

Many believed that professional production was a key element in retailing a church. The director of the Department of Public Relations for the Disciples of Christ explained that, “The results of church mimeographing, I am sure, has kept thousands out of the church. There is nothing worse than a poorly mimeographed letter.”<sup>101</sup> Churches, he argued, had to avert such a disaster by producing all material “professionally” on the latest equipment, he suggested. This was guaranteed, he assured, to grow your church. John Fortson recommended showing the community that a church was on the cutting edge in its use of modern technology. He suggested using more pictures in publications, especially photographs of “new church equipment being inspected by members.”<sup>102</sup> The pictures not only revealed a professional expertise in their use, but also showed very clearly that the church was not caught in the past. However, another option, recommended by many experts, was to purchase materials that were actually produced by “professionals.”

Several companies offered direct mail materials that they would tailor to a church’s needs and produce for the very best in quality and appearance. Franklin Hubbard, a former sales representative for scientific testing instruments, worked as a minister and recommended several sales letters that he developed. He had created numerous letters for various occasions that a local minister could order and send out to his congregation and community. In his sales pitch, he noted that the work of the minister was the same as the work of an instruments salesman, both worked in “selling an

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<sup>101</sup> Ralph C. Neill, “Public Relations – Practically Nothing?” *Church Management* 34 (September 1958): 12.

<sup>102</sup> Fortson, 120.

exclusive product.”<sup>103</sup> He believed that retailing religion was the same as retailing other products, and so the methods of one would be effective for the other.

In addition to letters, other organizations recommended and provided parish papers. All-Church Press offered a weekly newspaper that would tailor the first page to a subscribing church and the rest would include religious news from around the nation. In 1957, they had 300 subscribing churches and produced 200,000 copies a week.<sup>104</sup> The National Religious Press also produced parish papers and they boldly promised that each one “will increase church attendance, act as assistant pastor, keep the community and non-resident members informed, aid the church or pastor financially.”<sup>105</sup> This was a tall order for a publication, but many ministers believed that such technological advances could deliver incredible results. They were certain that modern machines would attract modern people. They were also certain that pleasing appearances would do the same.

### *Appearances and the Importance of Image*

In the late 1940s and the 1950s, the appearance, or image, of a church increasingly became a point of focus in church promotion. Some experts argued that churches were dying because they focused too much on the spiritual senses and not enough on the physical senses. Such churches were simply unattractive, they contended. If a church were to attract people and grow, it had to concentrate on its image, said the experts, and it had to be attractive both internally and externally. This was another form

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<sup>103</sup> Franklin C. Hubbard, “Sales Letters and Church Administration,” *Church Management* 33 (April 1957): 29.

<sup>104</sup> Ralph C. Neill, “Public Relations – Practically Nothing?” *Church Management* 34 (September 1958), 11.

<sup>105</sup> Advertisement, “The National Religious Press,” *Church Management* 35 (October 1958): 39.



of public relations, engendering public favor by beautifying the community. A manicured lawn, trimmed shrubbery, and beautiful flowers could revitalize a church by courting public approval, according to many.<sup>106</sup> Such emphases on appearance elevated the church custodian to be one of the most valuable publicity professionals on the church staff. His responsibility to keep the church grounds and interior attractive and clean was paramount if a church was to grow.<sup>107</sup> The image of a church, its appearance, was a form of public relations, publicity, and even advertising, and it assumed a new level of importance after 1945.

One of the principal issues raised by experts and pastors regarding the appearance of a church was its lighting. Long before churches hired “mystery worshipers” to evaluate their facilities, the “Observer” wrote a critical column in *Church Management*. The Observer was an anonymous contributor to the journal that would visit churches and report on how the churches functioned as institutions. In 1947, he described the lighting in the church that he most recently visited. The article, entitled “Why Don’t Churches Use More Light?” asked why churches are so poorly lit. He noted that the bulletin boards outside were not lit, the doors were not clearly marked, and the newspapers could not provide publicity light because the church did not inform them of events. He concluded that, the proper lighting of a church building could be a “beacon to God, to love and

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<sup>106</sup> David I. Day, “Shabby Churches Don’t Inspire,” *Church Management* 18 (December 1941): 15-6.

<sup>107</sup> William M. Hunter, “Direct-Mail Evangelism May Help – So: Preacher – Sell Your Church!” *Church Management* 29 (February 1953): 18-20, 22, 58-9, 65.

loyalty.”<sup>108</sup> Many agreed with the Observer that improper lighting was one of the reasons for a decline or lack of church attendance.

Others argued that lighting a church at night, both from the interior and the exterior could catch the attention of the community. Ronald Schwandt, pastor of First Lutheran Church in Manitowoc, Wisconsin, agreed on the importance of proper lighting. He wrote in 1958 “the cost of \$5 a week to floodlight our church is mighty cheap advertising. Advertising for God is our biggest single project night and day.”<sup>109</sup> Many ministers recommended that churches strategically install floodlights. This “cheap” form of advertising would remind members of the community that the church was there and in business.<sup>110</sup> Just as important to many was the appearance of the church inside.

Whereas congregations had traditionally gathered in buildings shaded in greys and dark colors, the new churches of the 1950s injected color into the gatherings. Consultants recommended bright, vivid colors in sanctuaries to create a sense of beauty. The majesty of a church service was no longer found in the simple and plain but in the panoply of colors and materials that were available. One mark of this transition was in choir robes. Robes had traditionally been a solid uniform color that minimized the presence of the individual so that attention was on the song. The choir member was to blend into the background, and not be entertaining or on display. The beauty was in the music itself, the words of the song, and not in the performance. Yet now, as one article

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<sup>108</sup> Observer, “Why Don’t Churches Use More Light?” *Church Management* 23 (September 1947): 17-8.

<sup>109</sup> Roland L. Schwandt, “Automatically Controlled Floodlighting: Does Your Church Die At Sundown?” *Church Management* 37 (February 1961): 27.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid.; “Poor Street Lighting Reduces Church Attendance,” *Church Management* 22 (May 1946): 10.

endorsing more color in choir robes explained, “Americans are realizing that ... tradition must be interpreted and understood in terms of modern thinking to be of value to today’s world.”<sup>111</sup> Others endorsed the increasing use of bright colors in other places in the churches. One person wrote, “the appeal of color in pews and church seating is being recognized and used. Many brilliant colors such as maroon, red, deep blue, or light blue appear in pew ends and cushions.”<sup>112</sup> An attractive interior had to be paired with an attractive minister.

Just like the church itself, the minister had to appear his best for the sake of appeal. Gaines Dobbins insisted that a minister must be dressed well and avoid any distracting appearances or mannerisms.<sup>113</sup> In his regular *Church Management* column, “Methods Which Produce” Elisha King wrote that, “A pastor’s laundry is quite as valuable as his library.” As important as what the minister said and did, was how he looked doing it. Many years later pastors like Rick Warren would take this principle another step, focusing not on a professional, tidy appearance, but a casual appearance that connected with a causal generation. In addition, King also explained that a church also had to have clean toilets, and at least two of them.<sup>114</sup> The appearance of other representatives of the church was also important.

The degree to which many believed that appearances were primary in church growth was reflected in the attention given to ushers. Many believed that the usher was

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<sup>111</sup> “Why Color in Choir Vestments?” *Church Management* 35 (January 1959): 38.

<sup>112</sup> William H. Leach, “What’s New in Church Seating? Let the People Be Seated,” 36 (April 1960): 50-2.

<sup>113</sup> Dobbins, *Churchbook*, 164.

<sup>114</sup> Eliasha A. King, “Methods Which Produce,” *Church Management* 20 (January 1944): 24-7.

second only to the minister as the most important person in the worship service. Church promotion expert Eugene Dolloff explained, “To be cordially greeted by a confident, neatly-dressed, optimistic usher, and to be graciously and skillfully shown to a seat, goes a long ways to ‘selling the church.’”<sup>115</sup> Others agreed, in numerous articles in *Church Management* from the late 1940s to the mid-1960s. They all outlined the fundamentals of a successful usher. Among the recommendations, ushers should be of an appropriate age, good appearance, well dressed, have a good memory, and be cordial with an appealing smile. Some experts were confident that such an usher would be certain to get “people to attend church services with greater regularity.”<sup>116</sup> Such aesthetics were increasingly a fundamental component in selling a local church, as consumers valued the appearance, the image, as much as the substance.

### *Comfortable & Convenient Churches*

A cartoon in 1946 captured the growing imperative among ministers that they must provide comfort and convenience to attract people. In the cartoon, two men are walking out of a church next to a sign that advertises the church and its services. The sign reads: “Open All Summer, Splendid Music, Good Preaching, Cool & Comfortable.” As the two men are walking from the church, one man says, “You can just bet people will attend summer services when a church plans as carefully as this.”<sup>117</sup> Many pastors now endorsed these elements as necessities for a church. They were certain that people would

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<sup>115</sup> Eugene Dinsmore Dolloff, “Second Only to the Minister,” *Church Management* 40 (September 1964): 14.

<sup>116</sup> A. Stanley Keast, “Ten Commandments for Church Ushers,” *Church Management* 33 (October 1956): 37.

<sup>117</sup> Cartoon, *Church Management* 22 (June 1946): 9.

come to the church if you advertised good music, comfort, and convenience. They provided and advertised air conditioning, a professional choir, multiple services to choose from, and ample parking, among other features in order to attract the modern consumer.

Before megachurches offered Frappuccino bars in the 1980s, local churches offered a much more simple, yet significant, convenience to those that would attend, air conditioning. Historically, a significant drop in attendance during the summer months plagued churches. Because attendance dropped so severely during these warmer periods, pastors would often take an extended vacation in the summer. However, air conditioning offered a new solution to attract more people and a reason for pastors to stay in the office. After World War II, air conditioners were affordable and proliferated in sales. In the early 1940s, several churches began establishing “air conditioning committees” to examine the effect that the installation of air conditioning in a church could make in attendance. As they studied others that had installed such cooling systems, they found that within just two to three weeks attendance increased in many places as much as 25 percent.<sup>118</sup> Soon, air conditioner manufacturers recognized the value for churches and began advertising directly to churches, promising attendance improvements. One example was Frigidaire, who advertised regularly in religious journals like *Church Management*, claiming in bold print that the installation of their air conditioning system would “Increase Summer Church Attendance!”<sup>119</sup> By the mid-1950s, advertisements for different air conditioning systems and their promises to raise attendance filled the pages of *Church Management*. As well, churches listed in their newspaper advertisements that

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<sup>118</sup> Margaret Ingels, “Air Conditioning in Churches,” *Church Management* 17 (May 1941): 481.

<sup>119</sup> Advertisement, “Frigidaire Air Conditioners,” *Church Management* 29 (March 1953): 19.

their services were air-conditioned. In the early 1960s, churches were still prominently listing “air conditioned” in their local ads.<sup>120</sup> Churches not only promised spiritual rewards and an improved life, but also a break from the summer heat. They also offered a choice of worship services.

In the name of convenience, many churches in the 1950s began introducing multiple worship services.<sup>121</sup> The primary reason to increase the number of services was to accommodate the growing crowds of religious participants across the nation. The second reason was “the choice of more than one service leads to increased attendance and the resulting benefits.”<sup>122</sup> Proponents argued that many people preferred an earlier service, because it left the rest of their day open. They were more likely to attend a church service if it did not interfere with their schedule. John Fortson described increasing the number of services as a necessary ‘modern’ adjustment.<sup>123</sup> Like commercial advertisements, many argued that the extra expenses to host an additional service would ultimately pay for themselves through increased giving. More services, meant more people, which meant more revenue. Demonstrating the growing appeal of this method, a survey in 1956 found that among seventy-nine churches polled, all but thirteen had been offering multiple services in the last six years, while most had added

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<sup>120</sup> “Church Advertisements,” *Washington Post Times-Herald*, July 14, 1962. Several churches in Washington D.C. highlighted their air-conditioned services in their advertisements.

<sup>121</sup> Frank Fitt, “The Second Service Gains Ground: New Program for American Protestants,” *Church Management* 29 (March 1953): 52, 54-5.

<sup>122</sup> Edwin A. Lane, “Multiple Services: Pro & Con,” *Church Management* 33 (December 1956): 12, 50-1, 57.

<sup>123</sup> Fortson, 11-2.

them in just the last three years.<sup>124</sup> Such changes worried some, however, and raised the question of whether or not such alterations could alter the nature of a church.

While churches sought to make their accommodations more comfortable and convenient, they did not want to sacrifice “dignity.” The changes and appeals to customer preferences, many feared, threatened to tarnish the sacred. Therefore, churches sought ways to maintain a “dignified” integrity while adopting modern convenience. One of the best examples was the exchange of stadium chairs for pews. Many clergy believed that if the seating were more comfortable, more people would attend the church services. A solution was to replace old, hard pews with padded chairs. However, many more traditionally minded people associated padded chairs with theaters and found them therefore inappropriate for a church. They argued that to lose the pews was to lose the appearance of “rigidity and regularity so essential in the liturgical church.”<sup>125</sup> As a solution, International Seat manufactured a chair/pew hybrid. The innovation was a row of cushioned auditorium seats, but on the end seats, instead of an armrest, there was a large wooden side of a pew. They were rows of theater seats with pew caps, or facades on the ends. The company promised that this new seat would give a church the best of both worlds, comfort to attract people but also sacred beauty. They explained that “International individual chairs help create quiet dignity and comfortable atmosphere for impressive church services.” Best of all they boasted, these “individual seats can increase attendance and attentiveness in your church?”<sup>126</sup> Another company, American

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<sup>124</sup> Lane, “Multiple Services,” 12.

<sup>125</sup> “Pews or Chairs?” *Church Management* 28 (January 1952): 20.

<sup>126</sup> Advertisement, “International Seat,” *Church Management* 33 (October 1956), 60.

Seating began producing similar seats with pew facades, which they advertised would combine “beauty and comfort” for increased church attendance.<sup>127</sup> Yet the most popular method to provide both greater comfort and convenience to churchgoers addressed a different kind of seat, the seats of an automobile.

### *Automobiles & Drive-In Churches*

As more and more Americans moved to the suburbs after World War II, they depended on automobiles to travel, whether it be to work, shop, vacation, or church. In 1930, the number of automobiles registered in the United States was twenty-three million. By 1945, there were only twenty-six million. However, the number had doubled by 1955 at fifty-two million.<sup>128</sup> As a result, churches began making appropriate adjustments to cater to an increasingly auto-centric culture. Other industries had already innovated solutions to the challenges of the automobile, such as the supermarket. Prior to the 1930s, most grocery markets were conveniently located in the center of town. However, by the mid-1930s, convenience meant ample parking. Large market corporations like Kroger, A&P, and Safeway had to make adaptations to remain competitive in a changing marketplace. They opened supermarkets outside of traditional centers of commerce where vacant lots were available for parking.<sup>129</sup> Churches sought to make similar adaptations, though not until nearly twenty years later. Cars were a challenge for most churches because they, like the markets, served foot traffic and were

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<sup>127</sup> Advertisement, “American Seating,” *Church Management* 34 (October 1957).

<sup>128</sup> Louis P. Cain, Historical Statistics of the United States “Table Df339-342 - Motor Vehicle Registrations, by Vehicle Type: 1900-1995,” *Highway Statistics, Summary to 1995* (1997).

<sup>129</sup> Tedlow, 240-43.



located in downtown areas where parking was limited. They had to find creative ways to accommodate a growing population bound to its automobiles.

Churches made minor changes in their advertising to adapt to the popularity of the automobile, one example was the church sign. A church sign had been a popular advertising methods since the beginning of the century. However, churches built and placed them to attract sidewalk traffic. As more people rode by churches in automobiles, instead of walking by churches, the signs had to change appropriately. Regular contributor and church building consultant, John R. Scotford, recommended that churches learn a lesson from the gas stations. Their signs were easy to read from the road. Church signs were difficult to read. They used a gothic font that was hardly legible at higher speeds. They also faced out from a church, running parallel to the sidewalk. Gas station signs were perpendicular to the road, easy to read like a billboard. Gas station signs were also concise while church signs were crowded with text and information. Scotford recommended only including the church name, the address, and the hour of the main service on the sign.<sup>130</sup> Yet more than signs had to change.

Parking lots became one of the most valuable assets for any institution that hoped to attract customers. If the customer could not conveniently park, then they may not come at all. Churches needed to add parking, but lacked the space. This problem grew along with automobile sales and by the mid-1950s, it was a significant concern for many churches. Pastors believed that new supermarkets with large parking facilities had conditioned people to the convenience of not walking, especially in poor weather, and that they would have to provide comparable convenience or suffer drops in attendance.

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<sup>130</sup> John R. Scotford, "Help Your Church Get Attention: Can They Find Your Church," *Church Management* 35 (December 1958): 12.

One minister argued that ample parking was as important to the church as the pews and the pulpit.<sup>131</sup> Again, one should note the primacy of convenience, ranking parking, like the appearance of the minister, the same as the preaching of the religious message. Notably, an issue of *Church Management* in 1953 had two articles on the subject of parking, where none appeared before. One addressed the challenge of limited parking space. As a solution, it explained that many downtown churches purchased neighboring buildings and demolished them to build parking lots.<sup>132</sup> Churches that did have available parking made a point to highlight it in their newspaper advertisements. Advertisements began to include lines such as “Adequate Free Parking” luring potential customers to visit a church where parking was convenient. Yet by the mid-1950s, many churches were proposing a new solution to attracting members of the automobile culture.

The most convenient option for a family was never to leave the comfort of their automobile. They could simply pull into a parking lot and enjoy a church service from the comfort and convenience of their family automobile. In the mid-1950s this new trend spread rapidly, the drive-in church. It was the ultimate in comfort and convenience, the perfect church for the modern family. It also uniquely presented religion in a typically secular entertainment venue and to an autonomous family. In many ways, the drive-in church was a leap forward in church promotion, melding modern entertainment and religion. Though the Drive-In Church caught on in the 1950s, its roots were actually in a Florida church from the 1930s.

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<sup>131</sup> Roland E. Turnbull, “Do Church Parking Lots Pay?” *Church Management* 32 (October 1955): 17, 52, 56.

<sup>132</sup> “Need More Parking Space?” *Church Management* 29 (March 1953): 14, 26.

In 1957, the Pasadena Community Church in St. Petersburg, Florida used a public address system to broadcast its services across acres of parking lots that weekly accommodated between 1,500 and 2,500 parked automobiles. In each of these cars was a family who were attending church in the convenience and comfort of their own car. Another 1,500 people seated on benches outdoors joined them, also listening to the service through the sound system and watching it through a large window in the side of the sanctuary.<sup>133</sup> The church first put the idea into action in 1937 when the church placed an amplifier and speaker outside so that infirmed members could remain in their cars and hear the service.<sup>134</sup> In 1942, they constructed a platform in the “outdoor chapel” for an assistant minister, known as the “Sky Pilot” to lead the car worshipers whose cars were rapidly increasing in number. At the Easter service that year, 639 people listened to the service from the comfort of their 417 cars in the “Garden Sanctuary.”<sup>135</sup> The increasing popularity and demand of this outdoor sanctuary led to a major \$75,000 renovation project that included a state of the art public address system installed by the Western Electric Company, and a beautification project of the grounds.<sup>136</sup> The result was a drive-in church that in 1951 could accommodate 2,507 cars at its Easter Service. As more and more churches looked for ways to appeal to the automobile owning American, they looked to the Pasadena Community Church as an example.

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<sup>133</sup> Bert Ennis, “Electronics and the Drive-In Church,” *Church Management* 33 (February 1957): 16-7, 62-3.

<sup>134</sup> Guy V. Aldrich, *Seven Miles Out; The Story of Pasadena Community Church, St. Petersburg, Florida, 1924-1960* (Tampa, FL: Florida Grower Press, 1965), 72.

<sup>135</sup> *Ibid.*, 92.

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.*, 113, 115.

The early 1950s brought a number of drive-in churches across America. In 1950, the pastor of the First Congregational Church in Alexandria, Minnesota read about Pasadena Community Church and began hosting services in a local drive-in theater. He would preach from the top of the projection booth to the cars below at a 9:00 AM drive in service, and then return to his church for a 10:30 AM service. They stopped hosting them in the winter due to inclement weather, but the services were so popular that they offered them again in the summer of 1951 and enjoyed record attendance. He credited the success of the services to the lack of a denominational label, only using familiar hymns, and the convenience of the automobile. People could pull in for a service on their way to play golf or go on a picnic. They did not have to worry about dressing up, since they stayed in their cars, and childcare was not an issue because they could stay in the car. He also heavily advertised the services, sending out cards to homes and placing posters in store windows.

Others followed, seizing hold of this means to provide informal, convenient, comfortable services that took the churches to the automobiles. A Lutheran church in Buffalo, New York reported that while only 200 people attended its church, 700 attended its services in the local drive-in theater. They too used aggressive advertising outlets, paying for advertisements in the Saturday paper, a sign at the drive-in, circulars in local motels, and sending post cards to homes.<sup>137</sup>

By 1954, *Church Management* offered sermon themes for services held outdoors in drive-in theaters to serve the rapidly growing number of drive-in churches.<sup>138</sup> Some

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<sup>137</sup> Martin J. Hoepfner, "Drive-In Services Are Here to Stay: Hundreds Attend Open Air Services," *Church Management* 29 (March 1953): 38-9.

<sup>138</sup> "Sermon Themes for Outdoor Services," *Church Management* 30 (February 1954): 14.

found that drive-in churches were appealing because they broke denominational boundaries without a direct affiliation. Others explored cooperative efforts through drive-in churches. In New York, several local churches worked together to provide services in a local drive-in theater. The following year, Robert Schuller established the most successful drive-in church in America, which would one day evolve into one of the largest television ministries in the world, broadcasted from the Crystal Cathedral.

Whereas many churches offered drive-in services as supplements to their regular church services, Robert Schuller established the Garden Grove Community Church as strictly a drive-in church. Established in Orange County, California, Schuller's drive-in church could hold up to 1,500 cars, and by its second year had over 1,000 people regularly attending.<sup>139</sup> In response to those who worried about the lack of "dignity" in a drive-in church, *Church Management* reported that Schuller had established a "set up to provide the semblance of a worship center."<sup>140</sup> At the center of it all was a collapsible twenty-six foot cross. The journal reported that, "When raised each Sunday, it [the cross] transforms the otherwise bare asphalt acreage into a dignified place of worship, with blue sky and fleecy clouds for its ceiling, complete even to a twenty-voice choir and electric organ."<sup>141</sup> Other drive-in churches also strove to maintain some traditional church elements in their modern venues. They would emphasize the importance of a choir, an organ, ushers, and traditional hymns. Schuller suggested to other churches, that a drive-in church could be the solution to their challenges in attracting crowds. He explained,

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<sup>139</sup> "Gaining a Wider Audience for the Gospel by The Drive-In Church," *Church Management* 33 (August 1957): 15.

<sup>140</sup> Ibid.

<sup>141</sup> Vesta Victoria, "Worshippers on Wheels," *Church Management* 35 (January 1959): 19.

“even a downtown church in the traditional edifice might solve many of its decentralization problems by adopting such a plan.”<sup>142</sup> Many churches agreed with Schuller, and renovated their churches or built new ones, creating a boom in church construction.

### *A Church Construction Boom in the Suburbs*

The suburbanization of America presented the ideal opportunity to build the modern church. After World War II a lack of housing in the cities, explosive growth of families looking to live independently, low interest veteran loans, and the low cost of land among the farms surrounding cities sparked the creation of suburbs across the nation.<sup>143</sup> These new “villages” outside of the cities required the infrastructure of roads and institutions to support them. Rapidly growing families needed churches to attend, especially those that offered services for their many baby boom children. Churches seized upon the opportunity of demand, as well as increased tithing, to construct new churches that appealed to the modern, affluent, educated consumer. The F.W. Dodge Corporation reported that 1,480 churches were built in 1946 and that only four years later the number had more than doubled to 3,726 new churches.<sup>144</sup> In 1948, 250 million dollars were spent on church construction; by 1954, it was up to 500 million dollars.<sup>145</sup> Anticipating the boom, *Church Management*, had begun including more articles and

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<sup>142</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>143</sup> James David Hudnut-Beumler, *Looking for God in the Suburbs: The Religion of the American Dream and Its Critics, 1945-1965* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1994), 2-3.

<sup>144</sup> Felicia Anthenelli, “Old Time Religion,” *The Wall Street Journal*, May 24, 1952.

<sup>145</sup> Glenn D. Everett, “Church Construction Tops One Billion Dollars a Year,” *Church Management* 37 (May 1961): 22.

advertisements on church architecture and building campaign financing. They predicted in 1959 that the industry would remain between \$800 million and \$1 billion for each of the next ten years while the U.S. Department of Commerce predicted \$950 million that year.<sup>146</sup> However, the value of church construction exceeded their expectations, reaching over a billion dollars in 1960, as reported by *Time* magazine.<sup>147</sup>

The growth of the church construction industry was clear in the publications for ministers, such as *Church Management*. The journal shifted a great deal of coverage and advertisements to church construction resources. Guidebooks and consulting agencies appeared to provide professional assistance in planning and building new churches. They offered expertise on choosing architects, purchasing land, and meeting building codes.<sup>148</sup> Predicting the rise in church construction, *Church Management* published its first official church construction issue in October 1944. From that issue forward, they increasingly included articles and advertisements for matters and products related to building a “modern” church that could attract more of the community. Many contributors explained that such adaptations were paramount if churches were to remain viable in the entertainment driven marketplace. A letter to the editor argued that innovations in entertainment had raised people’s expectations in what they saw and heard in a church.<sup>149</sup> If a church was to grow, they argued, it had to meet these new expectations.

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<sup>146</sup> “Church Building Levels at High Altitude,” *Church Management* 35 (March 1959): 7.

<sup>147</sup> “Art: The New Churches,” *Time*, December 26, 1960.

<sup>148</sup> Patrick Allitt, *Religion in America Since 1945: A History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 34-5.

<sup>149</sup> “Letter to the Editor: Constructive Changes Count” 18 (October 1941): 55.

These new churches were to be significantly different in their architectural forms, to include their rooms, layout, and facilities. Increasingly, architects wrote articles on different designs for churches, replacing many of the previous articles by ministers on how to develop particular services and dedications. Churches would have kitchens and fellowship halls to draw people from the community for social functions. They would have spacious parking lots to provide convenience for the expanding flotilla of automobiles in America. Some communities even had laws that required a minimal number of parking spaces per seats available in the pews. Churches also built special offices for pastors and for counseling.<sup>150</sup> One of the more radical forms that accompanied the boom in church construction was the “Spread-Out Church.” Some architects suggested that the way of the future for churches was not in a building but in a campus. They argued that such a layout provided flexibility and would ease foot traffic congestion. Campus churches could be built around accessibility to the parking lot.<sup>151</sup> One *Church Management* contributor made it plain that “new churches should be oriented toward the parking lot rather than the street.”<sup>152</sup> These churches, according to experts, needed the latest in entertainment and service equipment.

Advertisements for church equipment increased. Ads for floor wax, kitchen appliances, windows, tables, chairs and projectors replaced previous ads for carillons, organs, and bell towers. Companies offered the latest in audio video equipment and climate control systems for churches to compete with modern theaters. The demand for

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<sup>150</sup> Allitt, 34.

<sup>151</sup> John R. Scotford, “The Case for the Spread-Out Church: Decentralizing the Local Church,” *Church Management* 28 (June 1952): 15-6, 18.

<sup>152</sup> John R. Scotford, “Where Shall We Park? Auto Space May Decide Your Future” *Church Management* 29 (October 1952): 32.



such tools made churches the third largest market for tape recorders.<sup>153</sup> *Church Management* contributors discussed how to build for acoustic excellence and where to place a choir so to produce optimum sound quality. There were also advertisements for new consultant organizations that specialized in church fund raising. The first of such ads appeared in *Church Management* in the mid-1940s and by the early 1950s, dominated the journal with two to three page advertisements detailing their services offered and success in building fund campaigns.

The desire for greater flexibility in adapting church facilities to different needs and uses appeared in the increase of ads and articles on the utility of partition systems. Partitions could collapse or be unfolded to turn a large space into many smaller spaces or vice versa.<sup>154</sup> Such fixtures helped downtown churches compete with the many new, modern churches. They could alter their older building configuration to attract people with more kids programs and other services. Yet they still struggled to find ways to provide parking, among other features, in an effort to lure the modern consumer.<sup>155</sup>

Historian Patrick Allitt explains that the new churches of the 1950s sought to be distinctive from the modern construction around them. While many architects celebrated the modernist designs, many others worried that such forms were not appropriate for churches. They hoped to maintain, as one consultant wrote, “hallowed associations” with traditional church architectural patterns.<sup>156</sup> Questions of “dignity” haunted these church

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<sup>153</sup> Anthenelli, “Old Time.”

<sup>154</sup> Advertisements for partitions in fellowships halls grew in prominence in *Church Management* after 1950.

<sup>155</sup> “How to Keep a Church Downtown,” *Church Management* 34 (July 1958): 12.

<sup>156</sup> Allitt, 35.

innovators, who sought to maintain religious purity while adapting to the demands of the modern consumer. The result was a plethora of architectural church designs that sought to incorporate modern values and ideals in their forms. The changes were one more mark of the increasing shift in American Christianity's institutions to a customer driven enterprise. Churches were readily conducting surveys to determine customer needs and reconstructing their building and services to meet them. Meanwhile, one man was helping to formulate a new philosophy to support this reorientation, Donald McGavran.

### Donald McGavran & the Church Growth Movement

Just as the RPRC began with a focus on foreign missions, so too did the Church Growth Movement in the work of Donald McGavran. McGavran was born in India in 1897 and served as a missionary there between 1923 and 1951. In the 1930s, he worked as the executive secretary and treasurer of the United Christian Missionary Society in India. While in this post, he grew increasingly frustrated by the large amount of resources spent and the small amount of conversions and results seen. He looked for wisdom from others, and according to Church Growth Movement scholar, Thom Rainer, found missiologist Roland Allen and Methodist Bishop J. Waskom Pickett. From Allen he learned a "boldness and fierce pragmatism" much like Robert Schuller's and other church promotion experts, to adopt any method that worked. In Pickett, he adopted the "principle of receptivity." Pickett argued that limited resources should be utilized only on those people who are most likely to accept the Christian message. The strategy was a refrain of the efficiency focus in the Social Gospelers' adoption of business methods. Studying the work of these men in the context of his own missionary work led McGavran

to write a book that would mark the beginning of the Church Growth Movement.<sup>157</sup>

Though the movement would never explicitly promote church marketing or consumer sovereignty, it helped lay the groundwork for such strategies. Through it, McGavran disseminated the philosophies of target marketing, pragmatism, and success in numbers.

In 1955, Donald McGavran published *The Bridges of God*.<sup>158</sup> By 1956, the book was a bestseller and germinating the growth of what would become one of the largest movements dedicated to marketing the church, the Church Growth Movement. The thesis of McGavran's book was that in order to grow, churches must find ways to build bridges, or relationships, with individuals in the community. This proposition was not ground breaking; however, the manner that he suggested to build such bridges was revolutionary. McGavran introduced what he called the "homogenous unit principle." Later, he summarized it, "Men like to become Christians without crossing social, linguistic, or class barriers."<sup>159</sup> He suggested that a church must strategically target those individuals who are socially wholesome and best situated to receive the message of the church.<sup>160</sup> This was the receptivity principle. In other words, churches should not waste their resources marketing broadly but should use surveys to identify the people that are most similar to the people in the church. These individuals are most likely to purchase the product. Thus, a church should sell itself to the customers that have the most in

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<sup>157</sup> Thom S. Rainer, *The Book of Church Growth: History, Theology, and Principles* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1993), 28-30.

<sup>158</sup> Donald McGavran, *The Bridges of God: A Study in the Strategy of Missions* (New York: Friendship Press, 1955).

<sup>159</sup> Donald McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1980), 198.

<sup>160</sup> McGavran, *Bridges*, 96.

common with the producers. Through his introduction of the homogenous unit principle, McGavran had introduced churches to segmentation marketing. Though he did not express it in these specific business terms, the philosophy was the same. If a church were to grow, he argued, it had to select a segment of the market and pour all of its resources into attracting that target market.

McGavran's pragmatic theory required that a church judge the success or failure of methods by the metric of numbers. This rationalistic foundation marked the growing modernization of churches. Growing a church was becoming more of a science. He evaluated churches much the same as one would the productivity of a business. He measured growth by size and if a method did not increase church size, then he rejected it. He stated very clearly that if a church does not grow by 50 percent each decade then it should be shut down and the resources allocated elsewhere.<sup>161</sup> In the tenth chapter of his book, McGavran gave a detailed comparison between churches that require too much capital investment and still fail, and churches that require fewer startup costs, support themselves, and grow by more than 50 percent in a decade.<sup>162</sup> The distinction was that the successful churches market themselves to segments of the population that are most likely to find interest in the product. Such principles, articulated in his book would continue to spread in American Christianity as he transformed his book into an institution.

In 1961, the same year that Robert Schuller opened his new Walk-In/Drive-In church, Donald McGavran opened his Institute of Church Growth. Northwest Christian

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<sup>161</sup> Ibid, 113.

<sup>162</sup> Ibid, 125.

College in Eugene, Oregon was the home of the Institute. There McGavran gathered others to teach and study church growth principles. The classes, however, were restricted to career missionaries and yet influential in shaping American Christian church practices.<sup>163</sup> They published three case studies and the *Church Growth Bulletin*, which quickly grew in dissemination and influence.<sup>164</sup> In 1965, Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, California asked McGavran to relocate the Institute to its campus, where it became the cornerstone of the Fuller School of World Mission. The school quickly became the central point in an industry of world mission organizations and institutions, with a graduate school that continued to study the keys to church growth. The rising tide of evangelicals was the most populace group in the school, embracing McGavran's methods for efficiently growing churches in other nations.<sup>165</sup>

In 1970, McGavran made his last primary contribution to the movement with the publication of what he called the *Magna Carta* of the movement, *Understanding Church Growth*.<sup>166</sup> All of McGavran's philosophies and methods stood on his confidence that "church growth principles" exist. A principle, he later defined as "a universal truth which, when properly interpreted and applied, contributes significantly to the growth of churches and denominations."<sup>167</sup> This absolute faith in "scientific" principles that guarantee achieving the purposes of God reflected an increasing modernization in

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<sup>163</sup> David Cook, "The Americanization of the Church Growth Movement" *Journal of the American Society for Church Growth* 11 (September 2000): 17.

<sup>164</sup> Rainer, 37.

<sup>165</sup> Cook, 18.

<sup>166</sup> Donald McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, Rev. ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1980).

<sup>167</sup> Donald McGavran and Win Arn, *Ten Steps for Church Growth* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1977), 15.

churches, a dependency upon rational methods. The list of principles was ever expanding as the Institute discovered new methods that guaranteed growth. Some were marketing philosophies: the homogenous unit principle that encouraged target markets, the strategic program development principle that created services based on the needs of the target customer, and the scientific research principle that generated detailed studies of potential customers.<sup>168</sup>

In 1972, C. Peter Wagner joined McGavran in a deliberate shift to teach these methods and principles of church growth to American church leaders. They published *How to Grow a Church* the next year, applying their principles to an American context and writing the book, unlike *The Bridges of God*, for a popular audience.<sup>169</sup> The movement had surrendered its foreign missions focus to help grow churches in America.<sup>170</sup>

The American Church Growth movement continued to grow after the mid-1970s. Buoyed by the Institute for American Church Growth along with the teaching and numerous publications of C. Peter Wagner, Win Arn, and Lyle Schaller it had a profound effect on the shape and philosophy of Christian churches in America. Wagner's 1976 book, *Your Church Can Grow*, would alone sell over 100,000 copies.<sup>171</sup> Though the movement would have a significant influence and mirror many of the strategies of business promotionalism in its sociological and philosophical emphasis on targeting specific customer markets and market research, it would never be explicitly a marketing

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<sup>168</sup> McGavran, *Ten Steps*.

<sup>169</sup> Donald A. McGavran and Win Arn, *How to Grow a Church* (Glendale, CA: Regal Books, 1973).

<sup>170</sup> Cook, 19.

<sup>171</sup> Rainer, 57; C. Peter Wagner, *Your Church Can Grow* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1984).

movement. The Church Growth Movement did not transfer strategies and methods directly from businesses, but did endorse similar principles and is important to note in its dissemination and reinforcement of a customer sovereignty philosophy.

## Conclusion

In 1980, the Robert H. Schuller Institute for Church Leadership, which labored to spread principles of how to grow a church, celebrated its tenth anniversary. They ran a full-page advertisement in magazines such as *Christianity Today*. The ad listed some of the speakers at the special conference that year, including George Gallup, Jr. representing the emphasis on public opinion in church marketing. Gallup was the guru of opinion surveys, and his prominence at the conference reflected how important such surveying had become in church promotion and growth. Another speaker was C. Peter Wagner, the leader of the Church Growth Movement. The ad ended with a lengthy endorsement from Donald A. McGavran, the founder of the Church Growth Movement. The Schuller Institute embodied the partnership between Gallup, McGavran, and Schuller in growing churches. All three advocated for the importance of public opinion, segmenting markets, and creating products to meet needs. Their methods stood on a foundation built between 1945 and 1965, of looking to the sovereignty of the consumer in shaping the practices and principles of American churches to attract customers.

The third phase of church promotion, modern marketing, sought to grow churches by determining market segments' felt needs, offering services and institutions to meet those needs, and heavily promoting those services. This emphasis on the customer's authority in American church development began in the early post-war era with the

adaptation of door-to-door sales methods and their surveys. The opportunity to build modern churches in the suburbs that could utilize the latest in technology and image to provide comfort and convenience offered churches a unique chance to build churches around customer preferences of comfort and convenience. Yet these practices had not coalesced into a comprehensive marketing philosophy. They were instead disparate theories endorsed by various experts. Yet among them, one man stood out as the most influential in adapting business promotionalism for churches in the post-war period. In his innovative pageantry, pragmatism, sensitivity to the customer, and rabid abandonment of concerns over dignity, Robert Schuller would stand as the turning point from phase two to phase three, from church public relations to church marketing, as the dominant promotional philosophy in American Christianity.



## Chapter 5

### Robert Schuller: Introducing Church Marketing (1955 – 1980)

In the early 1980s, Robert H. Schuller's church enjoyed international notoriety for its eighteen million dollar Crystal Cathedral building, its 10,000 members, and its nationally syndicated televised show of Sunday morning services called the "Hour of Power." Schuller himself was an international celebrity with several best-selling books and frequent television appearances, aside from his own broadcasts. Yet in December of 1982, the nation took notice of Schuller for a different reason; he was losing his tax-exemption in Orange County. The county asserted that the exemption from taxation was only for religious organizations, and Schuller was operating a business. Though the Crystal Cathedral was a church and held religious services, it also rented space to several local businesses. As well, it charged for exercise, weight reduction, counseling, and music classes. More importantly, the church frequently hosted secular concerts and charged admission. Billings ranged from Victor Borge to Tony Bennett to the Prague Chamber Orchestra. One state official described Schuller's church as "flagrantly commercialized." Thus, the county demanded that the Cathedral repay taxes of \$475,000 and anticipate annual taxes of \$250,000.<sup>1</sup> Schuller responded that his church was a religious organization and should not have to pay taxes. In the end, the county won.

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<sup>1</sup> "Schuller Socked for Back Taxes," January 1, 1983, folder "News Clippings – Tax exemption, 1982, 1983," Box 30, Robert H. Schuller Collection, H93-1188, JAH.

This debate highlights the tension in selling religion in the marketplace. Robert Schuller had innovated the ideas and methods to build an enormous church. However, he had done it by adopting the most popular elements of secular entertainment and the most effective methods of modern marketing. This created an amalgamation of religion and commerce that many no longer recognized as religion. Similar to the Religious Public Relations Council, there was confusion over whether the institution was religious or business. One journalist captured the complex blend in his description of Schuller as a “mildly demonic, gray-haired Howdy Doody” that has crafted the perfect “marriage of religion and the Sears, Roebuck corporate ethos.”<sup>2</sup> Another journalist similarly called Schuller, “the Henry Ford of organized religion.”<sup>3</sup> Schuller’s expertise, ingenuity, and success in sales created an empire, but in the process, he radically blurred the lines between the sacred and secular.

Robert H. Schuller was the most important figure in American, perhaps global, religious promotion in the twentieth century for two principle reasons, his radical disregard for the influence of market methods, and his establishment of a means to distribute his methods to other churches. First, whereas his predecessors had wrestled with the tension in selling the sacred, Schuller did not. There are no signs in his letters, interviews, and memoirs of an awareness or concern for the pitfalls of selling religion like soap. Schuller was wholly committed to growing a church and was willing to try any methods if they meant increased sales. This devotion to growth captured the customer orientation ethos of the marketplace. In tuning his church to the needs of the customer,

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<sup>2</sup> Nicholas Von Hoffman, “Give Me That Drive-In Religion,” *Washington Post*, May 14, 1975.

<sup>3</sup> Russell Chandler, “A Bold Experiment in Modern Religion Arrives at a Milestone,” *Los Angeles Times*, March 17, 1975.

Schuller introduced marketing to American Christianity. Second, he influenced the nation through his methods distribution system. Schuller established the means to train thousands of pastors to utilize his marketing system in religious retail. Pastors, who believed that Schuller's strategies were transferrable across denominations, flocked to his institutes and books to learn the secrets of his success. No one could articulate his influence more clearly than the great promoter himself, "I [Schuller] advocated and launched what has become known as the marketing approach in Christianity."<sup>4</sup> In order to appreciate his leadership in developing and spreading church marketing, it is helpful to consider briefly the principles of marketing.

Marketing management, or "marketing" as it is commonly understood today, is the management of an organization's exchanges with its customers. The marketing manager focuses on four central components of the "marketing mix" to ensure that the exchange is efficient and mutually beneficial. A four p mnemonic summarizes the mix: product, price, place, and promotion. Marketing scholars Gary Armstrong and Philip Kotler define a *product* as "anything that can be offered to a market for attention, acquisition, use or consumption that might satisfy a want or need. It includes physical objects, services, persons, places, organizations, and ideas."<sup>5</sup> The product in religious marketing can, therefore, be the doctrine, the childcare, the counseling, or any number of services. The *price* is the cost that the customer bears to obtain the product. In the case of religion, this can include the offering, donations, or even time. The *place*, as defined

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<sup>4</sup> Gregory A. Pritchard, *Willow Creek Seeker Services: Evaluating a New Way of Doing Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1996), 51.

<sup>5</sup> Gary Armstrong and Philip Kotler, *Marketing: An Introduction* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2000), 219, quoted in Wendy L. Martin, "Marketing My God: Adherent Perspectives on Marketing by Houses of Worship," (PhD diss., University of Illinois, 2007), 89.

by Armstrong and Kotler, can include “physical site locations, site design, and distribution activities to gain access to the site.”<sup>6</sup> Marketing scholars Sanjay Mehta and Gurinderjit Mehta explain that in religion, place can include everything from the location of the church to the sound system, children’s facilities, and floral decorations.<sup>7</sup> In other words, place refers to everything about the physical space in which the religious product is offered and how it speaks to the customer. Lastly, *promotion* is a form of communication with the target audience. Advertising, public relations, and personal sales are all a part of promotion. In considering the four components of the marketing mix, one can see that over time, marketing came to appropriate all of the promotional tools that churches had been using. Throughout his career, though Schuller rarely called his methodology marketing, he developed and advocated these principles as the best means to grow a church.

This study of Schuller’s marketing ideas, practices, and influence differs from other scholarly examinations. Academic scholarship on Schuller has remained surprisingly sparse. There is only one academic book-length biography on Schuller, Dennis Voskuil’s *Mountains into Goldmines: Robert Schuller and the Gospel of Success*.<sup>8</sup> Others such as English scholar Roy Anker have written chapters, articles and dissertations on Schuller’s theology, rhetoric, and influence on televangelism and the

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<sup>6</sup> Martin, 91.

<sup>7</sup> Sanjay S. Mehta and Gurinderjit B. Mehta, “Marketing of Churches: A National Survey,” *Review of Religious Research* 3, no. 2 (December 1989): 175-182, quoted in Martin, 91.

<sup>8</sup> Dennis Voskuil, *Mountains into Goldmines: Robert Schuller and the Gospel of Success* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983).

mega-church movement.<sup>9</sup> This chapter is different as it relies in part on primary sources from Schuller's archival collection, offers a unique examination of Schuller's flair and style in building and retailing his churches, and considers the entirety of Schuller's career until 1980. It places Schuller in the larger stream of twentieth century church promotion. In so doing, it considers how he presaged a new way of "doing church" by turning up the volume on the promotional methods that churches had been previously using. Schuller laid a foundation for church marketing in his absolute focus on the needs and desires of the customer, his lack of reservations to meet them with the most attractive and entertaining form of Christianity in the history of the Church, and his ability to disseminate his methods across the nation.

### Formulating & Implementing Church Marketing (1950 – 1970)

Robert Schuller argued, "The secret of winning unchurched people into the church is really quite simple. Find out what would impress the non-churched people in your community."<sup>10</sup> Another of his favorite mantras throughout his career was, "Find a hurt and heal it, find a need and fill it."<sup>11</sup> These principles captured the increasing consumer orientation of the market in the 1950s. Schuller sought to give people what impressed them, what they desired, what they felt they needed, so that they would attend his church. In so doing, he shifted the locus of authority from the producer to the

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<sup>9</sup> Roy M. Anker, *Self-Help and Popular Religion in Early American Culture: An Interpretive Guide* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1999).

<sup>10</sup> Pritchard, 51.

<sup>11</sup> Michael Nason, *Robert Schuller, the Inside Story* (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1983), 93.

consumer, and built a church around entertainment and pageantry that could compete with nearby Disneyland and Anaheim Stadium. As one journalist concisely summarized:

He [Robert Schuller] selected a strategic place in the freeway grid, defined his market area as every unchurched person within 10 traffic lights or 20 minutes' drive, pre-tested his product and then began to sell like crazy. His techniques are those of mass merchandising: advertising, celebrity appearances, entertainment, multiple activities, something for everyone, and giveaways.<sup>12</sup>

Schuller's rabid abandonment of traditional church theology and ecclesiology made the most of the trends in the 1950s to emphasize customer sovereignty and provide a church that could attract the modern consumer.

In the 1960s, Schuller developed his innovative methods that in principle represented the core strategies of marketing. He altered his product to suit the demands of the marketplace after conducting a careful study of the desires and needs of the available customers. He offered the product in a place that attracted customers and at a price that required little sacrifice. Finally, he promoted all of it with a unique energy and manner. By adopting this four p strategy, he built a rapidly growing church that looked more like a shopping mall for religion than a church. By the end of the 1960s, Schuller was poised to become a national star and an inspiration to preachers who longed to be successful religious retailers.

#### *Robert Schuller's First Church: (1950 – 1955)*

Born in 1926, Robert H. Schuller grew up in Sioux County, Iowa. He faithfully attended a Dutch Reformed church until he graduated from high school and traveled to Holland, Michigan to attend the denomination's Hope College. He had dreamed of being

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<sup>12</sup> Von Hoffman, "Give Me."

a preacher since he was a boy sitting in awe of his Uncle Henry, a missionary to China. As he recalled in his autobiography, he frequently imagined the day when he would preach and “people in the pews would be inspired by me.”<sup>13</sup> This brief comment revealed a great deal about the man. His interest in religion was in great part driven in his interest in making much of himself. This rhythm would drive his ruthless self-promotion and pageantry throughout his career.

Upon completing his degree at Hope, Schuller enrolled in the Western Theological Seminary to earn a Master of Divinity degree. In 1950, a month after graduation from Western Theological Seminary, and a week after his wedding, Schuller became the pastor of Ivanhoe Reformed Church in Dolton, Illinois. In his brief tenure as pastor at this church, the roots began to grow for what would one day blossom into a formalized church growth philosophy that would change the face of church promotion.

Ivanhoe was a small church with only thirty-five members.<sup>14</sup> Schuller quickly discovered that his sermons on theology and doctrine did not interest people and the church did not grow. As a solution, he resurrected the “outgoing, entertaining youngster” from his theatrical days and began telling inspiring stories. More people began to attend the services, so he stuck with the formula.<sup>15</sup> This metric of success, numbers, would prove fundamental in Schuller’s ministry philosophy.

A mark of rationalization, size would always be the measure of success for Schuller. Throughout his career, he would repeatedly cite numbers as evidence of the

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<sup>13</sup> Robert H. Schuller, *My Journey: from an Iowa Farm to a Cathedral of Dreams* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2001), 56.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 161.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 171.

validity of his methods. The growth of his church, attendance at seminars, dollars raised and spent - all of these measurements were the guides in his actions and the defenses for them. Schuller first turned to numbers as his metric of success when he graduated from seminary. He explained that in ministry, "I didn't have a grade or a test score to tell me where I was succeeding and where I was failing. For this feedback I had to rely on the audience. If the congregation grew, I was succeeding. If it didn't grow - or God forbid, if it went down in numbers - then I was failing."<sup>16</sup> The most important factor for Schuller was not whether he interpreted the Bible correctly, or taught Christian doctrine faithfully, it was if people found him entertaining and wanted to hear more of him. Whenever others raised criticism against him throughout his career, he pointed to the numerical growth of his church, and suggested that the critic follow the winner. According to Schuller, the winner was always the biggest. In his economy, quality was quantity. Thus, where other churches wrestled with the depth of spiritual growth of their members, Schuller never seemed much bothered with such matters, as long as they kept coming. In order to grow the mission of Ivanhoe, he turned to a popular method of church promotion, a prospect list.

By the early 1950s, church promotion experts were recommending door-to-door sales and prospect lists as a mechanism for church growth, and Schuller was an eager follower. He compiled his prospect list by going door to door in the community and gauging how interested each household was in trying Christianity. After each visit, he ranked the prospects with a grade of A, B, C, or D based on how likely they were to visit his church. Regularly, he mailed invitations to those that ranked well, and called on them by phone. Even at this early stage, Schuller was discovering the practice of market

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 163.



segmentation, pursuing only those customers that were most prone to respond to his sales pitch. As a result, the church continued to grow.<sup>17</sup> All the while, he began to develop his ministry around a simple phrase, reflective of the growing consumer orientation in the marketplace, “Find a need and fill it.”<sup>18</sup> Though he did little at the time to develop this theory, he was already building the consumer orientation foundation of his future church promotion and growth philosophy.

Two years into his pastorate at Ivanhoe, Schuller sought, like many other churches in the early 1950s, to modernize by updating the sanctuary and adding more space for programs such as Sunday school. He hoped to make the church more “exciting” and sought the expertise of well-known Chicago architect, Benjamin Franklin Olson. Schuller recalled in his autobiography the invaluable lesson that Olson provided when Schuller worried about the costs of creating a church that would grab others attention and inspire them. Olson said, “Never compromise on the fine details in design, Art – not money – must have the last word.”<sup>19</sup> Schuller would take these words to heart and throughout his career always hire famous architects to create a place that would embody the modern sensibilities and catch the attention of possible customers, regardless of cost. This principle would afford him strategic opportunities for publicity.

In order to raise the money for his building, Schuller hired a professional fundraising firm. The firm’s representative gave Schuller a book entitled, *Ride the Wild Horses*, which was a collection of sermons by J. Wallace Hamilton, the senior pastor of the Pasadena Community Church in St. Petersburg, Florida, the first drive-in church in

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 172-74.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 171.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 179.

America.<sup>20</sup> Schuller was impressed with the message of the sermons, but more so with the ingenuity of the church to offer drive-in services. It reminded him of a drive-in Lutheran church that he had attended on his honeymoon in Iowa.<sup>21</sup> These two examples would prove the inspiration for his church services in California, and serve as the platform for his international publicity and influence.<sup>22</sup> This period would soon begin as, despite the growth of Ivanhoe, Schuller remained restless and accepted the opportunity to move to California to start a new church.

In 1955, Robert Schuller, his wife Arvella, two children, and a new organ arrived in Garden Grove, California to establish a new church. Schuller, however, could not find a building or office space in which to meet, so with memories of J. Wallace Hamilton and his own honeymoon, he rented the local Orange County Drive-In Theater. This venue for Schuller's church meetings would prove the perfect combination of religion and entertainment, appropriately in the shadows of Disneyland and Anaheim Stadium. People would attend church in a space where they were accustomed to being entertained. Schuller would work tirelessly to be certain that they were not disappointed, but first he had to attract them. As he recalled at a convention in 1984, now all he "needed was an audience."<sup>23</sup> This language is important because it is the same sort of entertainment and theater language that church leaders in the 1920s used when they began seeing their

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<sup>20</sup> James Wallace Hamilton, *Ride the Wild Horses! The Christian Use of Our Untamed Impulses* (Westwood, NJ: Revell, 1952).

<sup>21</sup> Schuller, *My Journey*, 180.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 205.

<sup>23</sup> Robert H. Schuller "Making Your Ministry Relevant to People's Needs" in *The Work of An Evangelist: International Congress for Itinerant Evangelists Amsterdam, The Netherlands*, ed. J.D. Douglas (Minneapolis: World Wide Publications, 1984), 748.

churches as more of an entertainment venue to attract people. In order to build his audience, Schuller set to promoting his first service.

*A Drive-In Theater Church (1955 – 1960)*

The week prior to March 27, 1955, residents of Orange County found a peculiar advertisement in their newspapers. It read, “On Sunday morning, March 27, 1955, Orange County’s newest and most inspiring Protestant church will hold its first service at 11:00 A.M. in the Orange Drive-in Theater, at the intersection of Highway 5 and Chapman Avenue.” An additional tag line read “Come as you are in the family car!” and “Admission Free.” Others saw full-page ads that, when unfolded, invited them to “Southern California’s Beautiful Drive-In Church.” The ad heralded all that would be available at the service, to include “Outstanding choral singing,” “Story time for the youngsters,” and “Inspiring preaching.”<sup>24</sup> Reading the ads, one would have thought it was a well-established, large church, yet the truth was that there were only two members, Schuller and his wife, and it had never before met. Such exaggerated promotion would prove one of the hallmarks of Schuller’s career.

One of Schuller’s philosophies of church growth was that “success feeds on the image of success.”<sup>25</sup> Christopher Lasch notes that the emphasis on success defined not by genuine achievement, but by the image of achievement, was a mark of an increasingly

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<sup>24</sup> Schuller, *My Journey*, 207; “Southern California’s Beautiful Drive-In Church” Advertisement, folder “Crystal Cathedral Garden Grove Community Church - Background Material, 1955 – 1980,” box 5, Robert H. Schuller Collection, H93-1188, JAH.

<sup>25</sup> Voskuil, 14.

narcissistic culture in the 1950s and 1960s.<sup>26</sup> As he explains, success was increasingly “ratified by publicity.”<sup>27</sup> Schuller adopted this cultural value in his promotion, the value that Daniel Boorstin had excoriated in his book *The Image*, which denounced the creation of the pseudo-event, where value is based not on truth but perception and popularity.<sup>28</sup> Schuller cashed in on this shift in American culture, laboring in every way to create an image of success.

Just as Schuller’s advertisements exaggerated the image of the church, so too did the service itself. For the very first service, he borrowed a local choir and asked that each member drive in a separate car so that the parking lot would look more “successful.”<sup>29</sup> As a result, of the cars that arrived for that first service, the majority belonged to the borrowed choir. He also spent all of the church’s seed money, \$500, on constructing its image by utilizing popular promotion methods of the time. He ensured that all of the “leaflets,” or bulletins, for the services were professional in appearance, printed and not mimeographed. Each had a full color picture of a religious painting on the front. He also bought a sign to advertise the church services, a fifteen foot cross to put on the snack bar that served as the platform for the service, and a trailer to haul his organ to the service. The organ was a key component, like the cross, in providing a “dignified” atmosphere to the service. As noted, he also paid to have the service advertised in the local newspapers. Schuller then made certain that all of Orange County knew about the “success” of this

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<sup>26</sup> Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations* (New York: Warner Books Ed, 1979), 59.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 60.

<sup>28</sup> Daniel J. Boorstin, *The Image; Or, What Happened to the American Dream* (New York: Atheneum, 1962), 212.

<sup>29</sup> Schuller, *My Journey*, 212.

first service by sending a press release to all of the local papers the next day. In it, he lauded all of the wonder and excitement of the outdoor service.<sup>30</sup> Yet he wanted to promote the church more directly with people and find out what they wanted in a church. He, therefore, turned to a popular method of the day that he had used at Ivanhoe, polling public opinion.

Schuller took to the streets to study the potential customers in the area and determine what they wanted in a church. In the first year, he personally visited over 3,500 homes in the surrounding community.<sup>31</sup> He first asked the residents “Are you active and involved in a church?” If they said yes, then he moved on to the next house. If they said no, then he replied, “You’re intelligent, so you must have good reasons why you don’t go.” He proceeded to ask why they did not go to church and what might interest them in attending. As his biographer and administrative assistant records, Schuller discovered that people did not like drab churches, old music, or un-friendly attitudes. Michael Nason writes, “They wanted a place where they could feel comfortable, where they wouldn’t feel someone was pointing the finger at them all the time. They wanted to be inspired not put down.”<sup>32</sup> These residents reflected the same attitudes that other churches in the 1950s were working to attract. Church leaders sought to build churches that offered comfort, convenience and a choice of services. Schuller set to developing a church that would “meet those needs.” He did so by using the principles of marketing. He began designing a church around the customer’s preferred *product* at an attractive *price* and *place*, and he aggressively *promoted* it. As biographer Dennis Voskuil

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 214; Voskuil, 18.

<sup>31</sup> Schuller, “Making Your Ministry,” 749.

<sup>32</sup> Nason, 57-9.

explains, the home surveys were the beginning of his career long passion to worry not about what Christians thought of the church, but instead focus on what would impress the people that did not go to church.<sup>33</sup> His venue, a drive-in theater, was a key asset in this pursuit.

The drive-in theater offered Schuller a marketing advantage in price, place and promotion. As explained in the previous chapter, drive-in churches were gaining in popularity in the 1950s with their appeal to the expanding automobile culture. The venue offered a low price to the customer because they could attend in their casual clothes, in the convenience of their car, and without the trouble of interacting with other people. The place was appealing as a popular and attractive entertainment venue in the 1950s. The promotion was natural because of the newsworthy value of a church meeting in such an odd location. Yet much of Schuller's promotion was in how aggressively he utilized the standard methods of the time.

Throughout his career, Schuller was absolutely committed to the importance of publicity and advertising. As he explained in a personal letter only nine years into his career, "Publicity and promotion is a field in which I have been intensely interested. I have seen in local church work what good promotion can do."<sup>34</sup> Throughout his career, he aggressively promoted his church and all of its events through paid advertising, public relations, and a visually striking facility. Between 1955 and 1985, he filled newspapers with full-page advertisements of the church. Journals and magazines were full of articles on Schuller and his unique ministry, and television channels were full of his "Hour of

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<sup>33</sup> Voskuil, Chapter 3.

<sup>34</sup> Robert H. Schuller to Rev. George Douma, Feb. 27, 1959, folder "Crystal Cathedral - Correspondence, 1956-1959," box 4, Robert H. Schuller Collection, H93-1188, JAH.

Power” services. The mail service was also full of his innumerable direct mailings. Schuller sent professional letters and cards to all prospects that he could locate. He also sent out a weekly press release to all of the local newspapers, and personally wrote letters to magazines inviting them to write a piece on his church.

Schuller commitment to aggressive promotion blossomed while pastoring his drive-in church. As noted, he advertised in local newspapers, paying for large ads. Schuller placed a number of large block ads local papers each week, announcing the “beautiful” service, its upcoming “inspirational” message, and the large number of people that had recently attended.<sup>35</sup> In the local papers there were frequently photographs of the drive-in church services or the construction taking place to build the new chapel. There were also announcements of when Schuller was scheduled to travel and preach at other churches.<sup>36</sup> From the beginning, Schuller sent a weekly press release to the local newspapers to inform them of upcoming events and celebrate the “success” of the previous gathering. These press releases were very professional in appearance and conformed to the standards of the secular press. They also included photographs to be included with any pieces written on the church. Each always mentioned the number of people in attendance, and the number of cars.<sup>37</sup> He sent such releases to magazines like *The Church Herald*, boldly requesting publicity and even consideration for a cover story,

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<sup>35</sup> Advertisement Clippings File, folder “Crystal Cathedral Press Clips & Audio Reports, 1955-1959 (Folder 1),” box 15, Robert H. Schuller Collection, H93-1188, JAH.

<sup>36</sup> Newspaper Clippings File, folder “Crystal Cathedral Press Clips & Audio Reports, 1955-1959 (Folder 1),” box 15, Robert H. Schuller Collection, H93-1188, JAH.

<sup>37</sup> “Garden Grove Community Church: Church Service,” Press Releases, folder “Crystal Cathedral News Releases, 1956 – 1963,” box 6, Robert H. Schuller Collection, H93-1188, JAH

while promising to purchase advertising space in the near future.<sup>38</sup> The success of his press release campaign is evident in the abundant news coverage that the church received in its first two years. For a church of only 200 members, the number of newspaper articles on the services was astounding.

Schuller also employed the popular methods of sending out a weekly church newsletter, entitled the “Community Church News.” Even in its infancy in the mid-1950s, it was several pages in length, professionally produced, and exhaustive in detail about the life of the church. As a testimony to Schuller’s success with the newsletter, it would continue well into the 1980s. Schuller also paired it with countless letters and cards that he would send to his prospect list, inviting them to come see the many “exciting,” “new,” “inspiring” events at the church. These events provided him another promotional platform and represented another fundamental in Schuller’s marketing ecclesiology.

A key tenet in Schuller’s ministry philosophy, from the beginning, was showmanship, pageantry, and entertainment. Much like church promoters before him, Schuller sought to emulate the most popular forms in the market place, especially entertainment. At an early age, he, much like George Whitefield, had equated preaching with drama.<sup>39</sup> As a senior in the local high school play, Schuller thought to himself at the end of his performance, “what a pleasure preaching will be if I can just remember to have

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<sup>38</sup> “Article for the Church Herald, August 8, 1956,” Letter, folder “Crystal Cathedral - Correspondence, 1956-1959,” box 4, Robert H. Schuller Collection, H93-1188, JAH.

<sup>39</sup> See Frank Lambert, *Pedlar in Divinity’: George Whitefield and the Transatlantic Revivals, 1737-1770* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994) and Harry S. Stout, *The Divine Dramatist: George Whitefield and the Rise of Modern Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans, 1991).



fun and entertain my audience.”<sup>40</sup> Yet it was more than just drama, it was an unquenchable drive to impress with the most stupendous show available.

Most biographers and commentators on Robert Schuller note his love and flare for extravagant showmanship. Much like P.T. Barnum long before him, Schuller created magnificent sights and sounds to accompany his ministry, giving it an alluring mystique in its grandeur. His biographer Nason called it Schuller’s interest in “pageantry” and noted,

He seems to know instinctively what advertising executives go to school to learn - you've got to keep your product before the public. You must have visibility. It's not that Bob equates the gospel of Jesus Christ, the very power of the living God, with everyday household products such as toothpaste or toilet tissue. It's just that people are people, and they are very predictable most of the time. The same principles that work to sell toothpaste also work to reach the unchurched for Christ.<sup>41</sup>

Everything about Schuller’s church was carefully calculated to impress and catch the attention of the potential customer. As he wrote, “Beauty generates enthusiasm. Beauty marshals enormous support.”<sup>42</sup> Just like Barnum, he sought to beat the competition by offering the “greatest show on earth.” In his promotional material, he constantly used words like “exciting,” “new,” “the only one of its kind,” and “don’t miss it” to describe the church. He also used innumerable exclamation points to crown his claims with emphasis and enthusiasm. They litter all of his documents. Such tactics promoted the events he held at his church in the early years.

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<sup>40</sup> Schuller, *My Journey*, 74.

<sup>41</sup> Nason, 104-05.

<sup>42</sup> Robert H. Schuller, *Your Church Has a Fantastic Future!: A Possibility Thinker's Guide to a Successful Church* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1986), 77.

Schuller also continually developed special events to promote his church. He frequently hosted special guest speakers, instrumentalists, and choirs, requesting that each send as much publicity material ahead of time as possible. He would post the material around town and place ads in the papers while sending out announcements to his prospect mailing list.<sup>43</sup> Schuller scheduled countless dedication services and issued accompanying advertisements to promote them. One example was the dedication of a redwood chancel for the snack bar, which Schuller described as “the first chancel of its kind in an American Drive-In Church.” Such services provided Schuller the opportunity to host well-known guests as a means to attract a larger audience. The popular minister, Norman Vincent Peale hosted this particular dedication, and was one of Schuller’s most valuable assets in the first years of the church.<sup>44</sup>

As biographer Dennis Voskuil notes, Schuller believed that “if you want an audience, invite popular guests.”<sup>45</sup> Schuller began doing so from the outset and without regard for the beliefs of the guests. He invited them based on their popularity, not on their theology. Schuller’s guests represented a broad diversity of religious beliefs, but were similar in their fame. He worked tirelessly to boost his success by associating with others’ success. Throughout his career, Schuller repeatedly noted that his closest friends were the three “best known religious figures” Billy Graham, Norman Vincent Peale, and Fulton J. Sheen, all of which preached in his pulpit.<sup>46</sup> Schuller was right in as far as these

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<sup>43</sup> “Louis Wendell to Hope College Publicity Department, March 10, 1959,” folder ““Crystal Cathedral – Correspondence, 1956-1959,” box 4, Robert H. Schuller Collection, H93-1188, JAH.

<sup>44</sup> “Robert H. Schuller to Mrs. Doris V. Phillips, May 8, 1957,” Letter, folder “Crystal Cathedral – Correspondence, 1956-1959,” box 4, Robert H. Schuller Collection, H93-1188, JAH.

<sup>45</sup> Voskuil, 19.

<sup>46</sup> “Archbishop Sheen Speaks to 12,000 in Garden Grove,” *Los Angeles Times*, March 6, 1972.

men were the three most influential and recognized retailers of religion in the 1950s.<sup>47</sup> Incidentally, all three had built their careers on publicity. Each recognized, as did Schuller, the value of media attention. Yet of the three Peale provided Schuller more than just a model in publicity and promotion.

Robert Schuller and Norman Vincent Peale developed a close professional and personal relationship over the years. Schuller had looked to Peale's style as a popular form of preaching and noted that many of the homes he visited in the 1950s had Dr. Peale's popular book, *The Power of Positive Thinking*, on their coffee tables.<sup>48</sup> He hoped that if he could tie Peale's name to his church, it would attract interest. Thus, he asked Peale, a minister in the same denomination as Schuller, for a written endorsement of the new church, which Peale provided and Schuller included in a phalanx of full color, promotional brochures. Schuller then invited Peale to preach at the drive-in church on June 30, 1957.<sup>49</sup> In his letter to Peale, Schuller embellished the description of his church, inviting him to preach at "the largest church in Orange County, with parking for 1,700 cars."<sup>50</sup> Of course, the church was very small in attendance, but it was true that it was large in parking; after all, it was a drive-in theater. Peale accepted and Schuller advertised extensively in the Orange County and Los Angeles newspapers, touting that "Everyone will have a comfortable seat by an open window, with your own speaker!"<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Robert S. Ellwood, *Fifties Spiritual Marketplace: American Religion in a Decade of Conflict* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1997), 12.

<sup>48</sup> Anker, 148; Norman Vincent Peale, *The Power of Positive Thinking* (New York: Prentice-Hall, 1952).

<sup>49</sup> Schuller, *My Journey*, 226.

<sup>50</sup> Voskuil, 19.

<sup>51</sup> Schuller, *My Journey*, 227.

6,000 people attended in 1,700 cars.<sup>52</sup> The strategy had worked, and Schuller would continue to host the biggest celebrities that he could at his church. This was more difficult in the 1950s when the church remained obscure. Nevertheless, two years later, he invited Senator Everett Dirksen to preach at the church, boasting as always in its proximity to Disneyland, drive-in features, and the “eight thousand” people that attended the Peale service.<sup>53</sup> The same year he invited the local mayor to attend the ground breaking for a new church building.<sup>54</sup>

Schuller’s church did not remain confined to a drive-in theater and nameless for long. The church officially organized on September 27, 1955, six months after its inaugural service, as the Garden Grove Community Church. In choosing the name, Schuller intentionally left out the denominational affiliation because he feared that it could push some people away.<sup>55</sup> While, continuing to meet in the drive-in theater, they immediately began work on a more permanent, traditional facility. The denomination had purchased land to build a church and Schuller began looking for an architect. When a church member suggested someone that designed cattle barns and would design the church free of charge, Schuller balked. He had learned that “Art – not money – must have the last word!”<sup>56</sup> Schuller already knew the value of place in promoting his church

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<sup>52</sup> Anker, 148.

<sup>53</sup> “Robert H. Schuller to Senator Everett Dirksen, June 8, 1959,” Letter, folder “Crystal Cathedral - Correspondence, 1956-1959,” box 4, Robert H. Schuller Collection, H93-1188, JAH.

<sup>54</sup> “Robert H. Schuller to Mayor Louis Lake Aug. 25, 1959,” Letter, folder “Crystal Cathedral - Correspondence, 1956-1959,” box 4, Robert H. Schuller Collection, H93-1188, JAH.

<sup>55</sup> Voskuil, Chapter 2.

<sup>56</sup> Schuller, *My Journey*, 218-19.

and the importance of using the church building as an asset in attracting attention and interest.

One of Schuller's priorities was always to provide an attractive place for his church services. He wasted no expense on ensuring that it maintained a contemporary entertainment feel combined with an ostentatious religious dignity. Even in the drive-in theater, he had worked hard to create a religious setting. As one journalist recorded, Schuller "has created an inspiring spirit of dignity and reverence by designing a huge collapsible chancel, the only one of its kind in the United States." The chancel was a large triangle of three red wood beams that supported a twenty-six foot cross. He continued, "When raised each Sunday, it transforms the otherwise bare asphalt acreage into a dignified place of worship, with blue sky and fleecy clouds for its ceiling, complete even to a twenty-voice choir and electric organ."<sup>57</sup> Even this journalist noted that Schuller's efforts brought a "dignified" aura to the drive-in theater, sacralizing an otherwise secular venue. Schuller, hoped in his new building to achieve the same impressive effects, so he hired the best architect that he could find to design it and construction began immediately.

The Garden Grove Community Church built a 250-person chapel, complete with an outdoor roadside sign from the Standard Directory Company, and dedicated the facility on September 23, 1956.<sup>58</sup> The church, however, did not stop meeting in the drive-in theater. Schuller explained that a member of the congregation was paralyzed and could only attend in a car, so they continued to offer supplemental services in the drive-in

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<sup>57</sup> Vesta Victoria, "Worshippers on Wheels," *Church Management* 35 (January 1959), 19.

<sup>58</sup> Schuller, *My Journey*, 224; "Robert H. Schuller to Standard Directory Company, October 18, 1956," folder "Crystal Cathedral - Correspondence, 1956-1959," box 4, Robert H. Schuller Collection, H93-1188, JAH.

theater to accommodate her. The dual services created a tight schedule for Schuller. He began his Sundays presiding over a chapel service in the new building at 9:30 AM with around 200 people in attendance. He then drove three miles to hold the other service in the Orange County Drive-In Theater at 11:00 AM for another 200 people.<sup>59</sup> As the church continued to grow in popularity, and Schuller continued to offer a variety of options for his customers, the number of services increased. By 1959, they were holding four services.

Though the worship services accommodated the attendees, they were exhausting for Schuller and his staff. To alleviate the challenges, Schuller began planning on how to merge the church and the theater, driven by the inspiration of J. Wallace Hamilton who had done it successfully in St. Petersburg, Florida.<sup>60</sup> As a solution, the congregation voted to build a large combination “Walk-In/Drive-In” church.<sup>61</sup> Following his principles, Schuller looked for the best architect he could find. Ultimately, he sought out Los Angeles architect Richard Neutra, whose picture Schuller had seen on the cover of *Time* magazine.<sup>62</sup> Together, they would design and build a church that helped to usher Schuller on to the international stage.

### *The First Walk-In/Drive-In Church (1961 – 1969)*

The Sixties would prove to be a period of phenomenal growth and expansion for Robert Schuller’s Garden Grove Community Church. He continued to develop his

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<sup>59</sup> Schuller, *My Journey*, 224, 233.

<sup>60</sup> Voskuil, 20.

<sup>61</sup> “The Consistory to Friends, June 22, 1959,” Letter, folder “Crystal Cathedral - Correspondence, 1956-1959,” box 4, Robert H. Schuller Collection, H93-1188, JAH.

<sup>62</sup> Schuller, *My Journey*, 249.

popular theology, expand his facilities, and he began writing books. The national press paid more and more attention to his unique church facility and ever-growing number of visitors and members attended on Sunday mornings. Meanwhile, Schuller continued to develop and implement his church growth philosophies, adapting his product, place, price, and promotion to “impress” more people. By the end of the ten-year span, he would have a refined system of thought and practice, paired with the resources to launch a church growth industry that would help change the face of American Christianity.

Schuller’s church began the new decade with a venue that surpassed any before it in mixing entertainment with religion, offering a uniquely “comfortable” and “convenient” religious place that caught the attention of the national press. In 1961, the Garden Grove Community Church left behind the traditional facility they had built only five years earlier and moved into their new building. Schuller claimed that it was the “first indoor-outdoor church.” A thousand people, five hundred of them seated in automobiles, attended the first service in the new Walk-In/Drive-In church on November 6, 1961. Robert Schuller presided as Dr. Norman Vincent Peale, once again, preached to the congregation.<sup>63</sup> Though the congregation was only five years old, they already had 781 members in 1960. By 1970, they would have 5,188.<sup>64</sup> They would also have an additional facility in the Tower of Hope, built in 1968 to accommodate the church’s expanding counseling ministry and administrative staff. Both buildings provided Schuller a platform for publicity unlike anything he, or perhaps any minister, had held previously.

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 264.

<sup>64</sup> Nason, 93.

Before they broke ground on the new Walk-In/Drive-In church, Robert Schuller began rallying the press to cover the construction project. He sent extensive information to architectural journals requesting that they write an article on this revolutionary church. He also repeatedly asked his architect, Richard Neutra, for design information to submit for architectural awards contests. The design did win an award in the New York Times Real Estate section.<sup>65</sup> It also won the “Award of Excellence” from the American Institute of Steel Construction in New York City, and was featured in national press media such as *Art and Architecture*, *The New York Times*, and *Life*. International magazines also wrote pieces on the church and by 1963 Schuller enjoyed global attention, featured in countless news pieces and architectural journals around the world.<sup>66</sup> All of this attention was a testament to his aggressive publicity style and his foresight to create a place that would attract attention.

There was much about the church to catch potential customers’ attention. The church itself, designed by Neutra, was an astounding structure. At a cost of one million dollars, the *Los Angeles Times* called it the “church of tomorrow.” It held 2,500 people with a “choice” of remaining in one’s car or sitting in the “dignified sanctuary” that could hold up to 1,000 people.<sup>67</sup> Separating the sanctuary from the drive-in section was a 150-foot long reflection pool with twelve fountains in it, one for each of Jesus’ Apostles. As

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<sup>65</sup> “Robert H. Schuller to Richard Neutra,” Three Letters dated: September 9, 1959, January 12, 1962, and June 15, 1962, folder “Crystal Cathedral – Correspondence – Richard Neutra, 1959-1962,” box 4, Robert H. Schuller Collection, H93-1188, JAH.

<sup>66</sup> “Local Church Gaining International Attention,” News Release, September 4, 1962, folder “Crystal Cathedral News Releases, 1956 – 1963,” box 6, Robert H. Schuller Collection, H93-1188, JAH; Clippings File, folder “Crystal Cathedral Press Clips & Audio Reports, 1960-1973 (Folder 2),” box 15, Robert H. Schuller Collection, H93-1188, JAH.

<sup>67</sup> Spencer Crump, “Church Offers First Indoor-Outdoor Rites,” *Los Angeles Times*, November 12, 1961.



former church executive Nason explained, the fountains “were rigged, in the true tradition of Schuller showmanship, to a switch in the pulpit so that he could turn them on and have them shoot twelve feet into the air so that their shimmering arcs could be seen easily from either the sanctuary itself or the half circle of four hundred cars parked in the drive-in portion of the church.”<sup>68</sup> There were also four bell towers, one for each of the Gospels in the Bible, joined by a singular 110-foot Gold Cross. The exterior of the new facility looked very little like a church. It lacked many of the traditional Christian symbols and architecture of a church as Schuller feared they would make visitors “nervous.”<sup>69</sup> The interior, on the other hand, did have many of the traditional marks of a church, but with a modern twist.

Schuller and Neutra ensured that the church maintained a religious “dignity” but also appealed to the modern consumer. The sanctuary did have pews, however, as described on promotional postcards, they were a “very modern type of church pew, again the first of its kind, they are completely upholstered.”<sup>70</sup> On the altar stood a cross that they approximated to be the same size as the one on which Jesus was crucified.<sup>71</sup> Included in the altar was a stone that Schuller himself brought back from Mars Hill where, according to the book of Acts, the Apostle Paul had preached.<sup>72</sup> So that the attendees in their cars could be a part of the interior of the church, it had a 24-foot wide

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<sup>68</sup> Nason, 97.

<sup>69</sup> Schuller, *My Journey*, 265.

<sup>70</sup> Robert H. Schuller to Beloved Friends, Draft on Claridge Hotel Stationary, folder “Crystal Cathedral News Releases, 1956 – 1963,” box 4, Robert H. Schuller Collection, H93-1188, JAH.

<sup>71</sup> Crump, “Church Offers.”

<sup>72</sup> Robert H. Schuller to Friends, June 19, 1961, folder “Crystal Cathedral – Correspondence, 1960-1961, 1965,” box 4, Robert H. Schuller Collection, H93-1188, JAH.

and 25-foot high glass door that slid open on Schuller's command. An extension of the church pulpit/platform stretched out to the parking lot as a balcony. Schuller was free to walk back and forth as he preached from the interior to the exterior, so that all attendees could see him. So that those outdoors could hear, the parking lot was fitted with 104 "high fidelity speakers" connected by, as Schuller described, "electronic equipment rivaling that of a radio station." The outdoor ushers were properly equipped to offer communion to all of the automobiles in attendance. In his press releases and promotional materials, Schuller capitalized on all of these features, repeatedly pointing out the church's pioneering design and attractions<sup>73</sup> Though, as Schuller explained, most new members came because they learned about the church through "silent advertising," the mere visibility of the church facilities.<sup>74</sup> Given the success of this strategy, it is of no surprise that he continued to increase the facility's visibility throughout the decade.

Having opened the new "Walk-In/Drive-In Church" in 1961, to great fanfare, Schuller continued to create events and add structures to grab the attention of the public. One of the earliest was the "Good Shepherd" statue that he purchased in 1964 for \$21,000 and placed on the church grounds.<sup>75</sup> Prominently displayed in a beautifully landscaped partition, it became a popular attraction and a familiar icon of the church. Schuller ensured that people knew of it by producing postcards with a color picture of the statue. On the back of each post card was a brief description of the church and its worship services. They also described the "3,000 pound bronze, 24 carat gold plated

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<sup>73</sup> News Releases File, folder "Crystal Cathedral News Releases, 1956 – 1963," box 6, Robert H. Schuller Collection, H93-1188, JAH.

<sup>74</sup> Dan L. Thrapp, "Size of Church Vital to Success, Pastor Says," *Los Angeles Times*, February 21 1970.

<sup>75</sup> Nason, 101-03.

statue of Christ.”<sup>76</sup> Other postcards were also available. A few had aerial photographs of the “Walk-In/Drive-In” church, and photographs of the interior, brilliantly lit. Each had a description of the church, including the service times, name of the architect, and a list of Schuller’s markers of success, the number of windows, cars, and sanctuary seats. Other postcards had pictures of another of Schuller’s spectacular additions to the church, the Tower of Hope.

The Tower of Hope was Schuller’s next effort to meet the needs of the community, and in the process make an impression. Designed by Robert Neutra, it offered a 24-hour counseling service available to anyone that dialed N-E-W-H-O-P-E, a phone number that Schuller secured by running a phone line from another city, Anaheim.<sup>77</sup> Upon completion, it was one of the tallest buildings in Orange County and Schuller’s office sat on the twelfth floor, just below a two-story chapel.<sup>78</sup> Ever the showman, Schuller never missed an opportunity for ceremony and publicity. Ten months prior to the completion of the tower, he held an elaborate lighting ceremony. The ninety-two foot cross had just been erected on top of the tower, bringing its tip to a height of 252 feet. Two thousand people gathered for a banquet before the ceremony and then lined up outside of the tower. Each person put their hand on the shoulder of the person in front of them. As the final hand touched Schuller’s shoulder, he called the tower from a telephone and the cross came to life, shining in a brilliant white.<sup>79</sup> Schuller followed this ceremony with an official dedication on September 18, 1968, with Norman Vincent Peale

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<sup>76</sup> “Good Shepherd” Post Card, folder “Crystal Cathedral Garden Grove Community Church - Background Material, 1955 – 1980,” box 5, Robert H. Schuller Collection, H93-1188, JAH.

<sup>77</sup> Schuller, *My Journey*, 283.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 285.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 282.

presiding as usual. Aside from the visibility of such stupendous church facilities, Schuller continued to use direct mailing as a key promotional tool.

One of the primary methods by which Schuller promoted his church was a continuous stream of P.T. Barnum like announcements to his prospect list and the members of the church. A successful mailing campaign depended on an adequate prospect list. In the early 1960s, Schuller continued to expand his prospect list. He asked his congregation to make 1,600 phone calls to the prospect list to invite people to the start of a new “series of sermons that can transform lives!”<sup>80</sup> In a letter he provided them the precise script to use on the call, how to record the information about the person and their level of interest, and report it back to the church. Equipped with this information plus the mailing addresses of his many members and visitors, Schuller could reach a phenomenally large audience with his mailings.

Schuller mailed a number of different types of publicity and promotional materials to sell his church. Each week, he mailed a card with “A special message from” the church. The cards served as promotional aids, briefly revisiting the great success of the service the previous Sunday and promising even greater excitement and inspiration in the coming Sunday service. There were also frequent letters sent out that described in detail the beauty, dignity, and majesty of a previous event. One such letter described overflowing crowds at a dedication for the new church. Schuller exclaimed that “The audience was the largest Protestant congregation ever gathered in the history of Orange County, Southern California!” He also recalled that as Peale preached “Over and over again one heard the expression, ‘Never in my life have I experienced such a thrilling

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<sup>80</sup> Robert H. Schuller to Friend, May 11, 1962, folder "Crystal Cathedral Membership Mailings, 1960-1963," box 6, Robert H. Schuller Collection, H93-1188, JAH.

religious emotion as I did Sunday morning.” Even Peale called it, “one of the greatest experiences of my life.”<sup>81</sup>

In reading through the letters, bulletins, and other materials produced by Schuller for his congregation, one is struck by the frequency of a few words: new, exciting, and thrilling as well as the liberal use of exclamation points. Every Sunday was billed as an event that one would regret missing, “the greatest Sunday of the year,” one that will deliver the largest crowd yet.<sup>82</sup> One hears echoes of Barnum’s circus publicity for “the greatest show on earth.” Materials frequently also listed the number of new members that would soon join the church, a number that was always at least 100, and the many programs available throughout the week, emphasizing their variety, number, and popularity.<sup>83</sup> These direct mailing techniques accompanied an unending onslaught of advertising and press relations practices, with innumerable paid advertisements, press releases, and personal letters to members of the press. Yet despite Schuller’s willingness to experiment with any methods that attracted crowds, he did draw the line some places.

Maintaining the historic standard and concern of “dignity” in a worship service, Schuller prevented some people from attending. In 1968, he ordered his ushers to bar any “barefooted, or guitar carrying, or other ‘hippie’ people” from entering the church. He believed that their attire was “improper,” though in a letter to a visitor he explained that it had nothing to do with what they were wearing, only that they blocked the aisles

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<sup>81</sup> Robert H. Schuller to Friends, November 14, 1961, folder "Crystal Cathedral Membership Mailings, 1960-1963," box 6, Robert H. Schuller Collection, H93-1188, JAH.

<sup>82</sup> Direct Mailings, folder "Crystal Cathedral Membership Mailings, 1960-1963," box 6, Robert H. Schuller Collection, H93-1188, JAH; Direct Mailings, folder "Crystal Cathedral Membership Mailings, 1965," box 6, Robert H. Schuller Collection, H93-1188, JAH.

<sup>83</sup> Weekly Direct Mailing Cards, folder "Crystal Cathedral Membership Mailings, 1965," box 6, Robert H. Schuller Collection, H93-1188, JAH.

and sat on the floor.<sup>84</sup> These limited boundaries of appropriate dignity, however, were aberrations and exceptions to the rule with Schuller. Overall, he continued to develop and implement successful methods and attract enormous crowds without reservation.

By 1970, the church was exploding with growth. The sanctuary had been expanded in 1967 to accommodate 1,400 people, and the parking lot was increased in 1970 to hold 1,400 cars. Yet the church was still holding four services to accommodate the enormous crowds and to offer options to the consumers. Schuller's methods, by his own standards, were an enormous success. The size of the church had grown exponentially, as had his own popularity. Now that his methods had the numbers to support their effectiveness, he began to focus on spreading them more broadly in the 1970s.

In a 1968 issue of *Church Management*, the Director of Methodist Information in Birmingham, Alabama, Joe Moore, provided a check list of the ways in which a church "speaks" to the public. Each of the criteria reflected a post-1945 concern for image, comfort, and customer sovereignty. The first matter was the church grounds, which should be clean, well lit, and have adequate parking. Another was the church sign that should be visible to cars. In addition, the ushers and greeters must be friendly. The church entrance must also be friendly, and the church bulletin must be attractive with plenty of "white space." The sanctuary should be clean along with the bathrooms. Lastly, the minister must be attractive with shined shoes, no dandruff on his suit, a

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<sup>84</sup> Robert H. Schuller to Curt Roberts, December 4, 1968, folder "Crystal Cathedral – Correspondence, 1968-1973," box 4, Robert H. Schuller Collection, H93-1188, JAH; Memorandum from Robert H. Schuller to Head Ushers in Sanctuary, November 27, 1968, folder "Crystal Cathedral – Correspondence, 1968-1973," box 4, Robert H. Schuller Collection, H93-1188, JAH.

pressed robe, and responsible with paying the bills on time. Most importantly though, Moore insisted that in all of these elements, “The Church must serve the needs of people regardless what they may be.”<sup>85</sup> These metrics of success for a church were the marks of Robert Schuller. By 1968, he had built the model modern church that focused on these characteristics in attracting the modern consumer. His church focused principally on providing an attractive product, uniquely tailored to the desires of the Orange County customers.

Schuller provided the shopping center church that *Church Management* contributor Walter Grimes had envisioned in another 1968 issue of the journal.<sup>86</sup> Schuller’s Drive In/Walk In church offered the convenience and choices of the modern day shopping mall. Built on the image of success and promotional savvy, Schuller had built a monument to his expertise in retailing religion. In fact, his church had become such a model to others that in 1962 and 1967, it was on the cover of the *Church Management* journal.<sup>87</sup> Over the course of the next few years, he would codify his philosophy for building a successful church, and begin spreading it across the nation.

### Training Others in Church Marketing (1970 – 1975)

Robert Schuller became a household name in the 1970s. In 1970 alone, he launched both a quarterly church growth conference for church leaders and a television

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<sup>85</sup> Joe Thomas Moore, “How Does Your Church Rate? The Local Church Speaks,” *Church Management* 44 (April 1968): 15-6, 23.

<sup>86</sup> Walter R. Grimes, “Why Not? A Shopping Center Church?,” *Church Management* 44 (February 1968): 21-2.

<sup>87</sup> “Garden Grove Community Church,” *Church Management* 39 (October 1962): 15-20; *Church Management* 43 (March 1967).

broadcast of his church service, entitled the “Hour of Power.” By 1975, both would be national successes, and all major media outlets would regularly feature articles on the popular preacher of “positive thinking” and “church growth.” That year, sixty stations across the United States carried the “Hour of Power” telecasts and around 2.5 million people watched the church service each week.<sup>88</sup> A variety of celebrities regularly made guest appearances, including Doris Day, Tommy Lasorda, Chuck Colson, George Foreman, Jesse Jackson, and Eldridge Cleaver.<sup>89</sup> With each guest followed newspaper articles about their appearance on the show, promoting the church. The guests also demonstrated Schuller’s increasing diversity in his church, representing a wide range of denominational and religious affiliations. One such notable guest was Roman Catholic radio celebrity Fulton J. Sheen, who made national news preaching at Schuller’s church. Schuller himself made international news. While visiting the Soviet Union, he stumbled upon a picture of himself in the museum in Leningrad’s Museum of Atheism and Religion.<sup>90</sup> This event demonstrated Schuller’s growing fame, but also his keen sense for publicity. He ensured that the *Los Angeles Times* ran a story on his unexpected discovery. He also generated publicity and broadened his customer base by beginning to hold his Easter services in the Hollywood bowl, and “of course” aggressively advertising them.

In the 1970s, Schuller continued to develop his promotional tactics. He continued to run regular full-page advertisements for the church services in the *Los Angeles Times*

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<sup>88</sup> Chandler, “Bold Experiment.”

<sup>89</sup> Clipping File, folder “Press Clips & Audio Reports, 1977 (Folder 5),” box 15, Robert H. Schuller Collection, H93-1188, JAH; Clipping File, folder “Press Clips & Audio Reports, 1976 (Folder 4),” box 15, Robert H. Schuller Collection, H93-1188, JAH.

<sup>90</sup> John Dart, “Pastor See His Photo in Leningrad Museum,” *Los Angeles Times*, October 7, 1972.



and send press releases to multiple media outlets.<sup>91</sup> Yet he added the power of television. Television carried his church services into the homes of people around the globe. Just as he had secured an endorsement from Norman Vincent Peale to publicize the first services of his church, Schuller used a picture of Peale and written endorsement in advance publicity for his first televised services. Schuller planned to run the ads on the “business pages, sports pages, and women’s pages” in all of the local papers.<sup>92</sup> Not only did the broadcasting of the services increase his publicity, but it also brought a level of production precision calculated for maximum entertainment and dramatic value that even Schuller had lacked before. A stage manager would call for silence in the congregation, or as Schuller called it, the ‘live audience.’ The fountains outside would come to life, the enormous glass doors would slide open, and the cameras cut to Schuller. Then Schuller, as he describes it, “boomed” “‘This is the day the Lord has made! Let us rejoice’ – I throw my arms up and walk toward the camera, but I look out beyond it. ‘- and be glad –’ I thrust my head forward, pausing for an emphasis... ‘in it!’ The organ booms.”<sup>93</sup> This increased pageantry and publicity became hallmarks of his increasingly refined church growth philosophy that he began to spread across the nation.

### *A Comprehensive Church Growth Philosophy*

In the 1970s, Schuller congealed his disparate promotional strategies into a formal, comprehensive philosophy of church growth, which he disseminated throughout

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<sup>91</sup> Advertisement Clippings File, folder "Advertising Tear Sheets, 1977," box 5, Robert H. Schuller Collection, H93-1188, JAH.

<sup>92</sup> Robert H. Schuller to Norman Vincent Peale, January 12, 1970, folder “Crystal Cathedral – Correspondence, 1968-1973,” box 4, Robert H. Schuller Collection, H93-1188, JAH.

<sup>93</sup> Schuller, *My Journey*, 310.

the country through his church growth conferences. Schuller was a pioneer in his methods, but more so a pioneer in creating an industry that focused solely on the secrets to growing a large church, building a large religious retailing firm. There had been numerous church promotion experts before him. However, he uniquely created a cottage industry for church promotion, generating ideas, providing real life examples, and hosting conferences. He also uniquely provided marketing advice, though he never explicitly used marketing language. Schuller proudly touted his pioneering influence, noting in an interview, “An undisputed fact is that I am the founder, really, of the church-growth movement in this country.”<sup>94</sup> In another interview, he remarked, “I advocated and launched what has become known as the marketing approach in Christianity.”<sup>95</sup> Though Schuller has a history of exaggeration and self-aggrandizement, in this case, he was right. His labor in the early 1970s in systematically promoting a philosophy of church promotion that was in effect a modern marketing mix, set the stage for the development of megachurches that defined success by size and liberally utilized any and all methods to compete in the marketplace.

Schuller’s philosophy of church growth centered on his conviction that a church is a retail outlet. He, like Dobbins and others before him, believed that the local church “must understand itself as a complex business enterprise. The retailers of religion are the local churches, who are supplied and supported by the wholesalers - the denominational headquarters and theological seminaries.”<sup>96</sup> In recalling the first weeks of his services in the drive-in theater, he wrote of a “sense” that God challenged him to “just get out there

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<sup>94</sup> Pritchard, 51.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid.

<sup>96</sup> Voskuil, 44.

like you're supposed to and sell your product!"<sup>97</sup> By the 1970s, he was comparing churches to shopping malls, and believed that a successful church would be like his church, "a 20-acre shopping center for Jesus."<sup>98</sup> A shopping center must have a retailing philosophy, so he developed what he called the "Principles of Successful Retailing" for churches. By 1970, Schuller was articulating in interviews that there were four key principles to grow a church: accessibility, inventory, surplus parking, and integrity.<sup>99</sup> The first three would remain the core of his philosophy, but he ironically dropped integrity and added visibility, possibility thinking, service, and good cash flow in later years. He explained each of them in his 1974 handbook, *Your Church Has Real Possibilities!*, which, published in ten printings by 1983, and served as the textbook for his Institute for Successful Church Leadership until 1986 when *Your Church Has a Fantastic Future*, replaced it.<sup>100</sup> A brief examination of these principles will offer insight into Schuller's new philosophy.

The first two principals were accessibility and inventory. Schuller wrote, "Logically, the first thing a businessman needs is a good road to his place of business."<sup>101</sup> He had discovered in his own experience the value in locating a church by a major highway and in an accessible location, by meeting in a popular drive-in theater. Schuller believed that churches had to surrender their traditional locations in downtown areas, in

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<sup>97</sup> Schuller *My Journey*, 216.

<sup>98</sup> Schuller, *Your Church*, 29.

<sup>99</sup> Thrapp, "Size of Church."

<sup>100</sup> Schuller, *Your Church*.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

the center of the community, and relocate to the suburbs, on major roads, where automobiles could easily access them.

Secondly, Schuller argued that if a church was to succeed in retail, it must have a sufficient inventory. He asserted that, “The strength of the modern church is in its inventory!”<sup>102</sup> According to Schuller, a church will not attract people if it cannot offer a variety of services that its customers demand. He had found this to be true in his door-to-door surveys. In his survey, not one person said they wanted to know the Bible or theology, so he gave up on his plan to preach expository sermons, offer Bible classes and prayer meetings, and serve the sacraments. Instead, he setup a program to offer counseling programs for alcoholics, events for singles, and help for parents in raising their children.<sup>103</sup> Yet in order to offer such a broad inventory, a church had to be large. Thus, for Schuller, the size of the church was fundamental for success. In order to deliver the right services, a church must be large, he argued. No church will grow with “cheesy little programs” that small churches offer, according to Schuller.<sup>104</sup> He argued that a church must have at least 4,000 members before it could truly succeed.<sup>105</sup> Yet neither of these principles was as important as the third, surplus parking.

Of all of his principles and keys to church growth, according to Schuller, there was one that arose in importance above all the rest, surplus parking.<sup>106</sup> He wrote, “I feel so strongly about surplus parking, I would say it is the number one criterion that must be

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<sup>102</sup> “Spiritual Shopping Center,” *Newsweek*, July 5, 1971.

<sup>103</sup> Schuller, “Making Your Ministry,” 750-51.

<sup>104</sup> Thrapp, “Size of Church.”

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>106</sup> Schuller, *Your Church*, 13.

met in order to grow.”<sup>107</sup> Schuller argued that “you may have a beautiful sanctuary, with marvelous pews and a gorgeous organ and an exciting preacher, but if people can’t park their cars they will never stop and come in.”<sup>108</sup> This statement reveals a great deal about Schuller’s assumptions. The first is that he assumed that people are attracted to a church based on the aesthetics and comfort of it, not the religious message. The second is that people are willing to pay a very low price for religion. If they cannot conveniently park, then they will not attend. Yet Schuller had demonstrated that these principles were true for many, as his focus on abundant parking and catering to the new automobile culture had helped to ensure exponential growth. He had also ensured such growth by implementing one of his other principles, possibility thinking.

Schuller named his central theological system possibility thinking, and it accounted for much of his popularity. He had developed the system over time, and it was highly controversial in Christianity. Schuller’s theology began with the consumer, with the modern individual. He believed that if you were to attract the attention of an “unchurched” person, you had to begin with a doctrine of humanity instead of a doctrine of God.<sup>109</sup> He believed that Christianity made people feel inferior and should instead address the human need to feel valuable and content. In his book *New Reformation*, he explained that, “For the church to address the unchurched with a theocentric attitude is to invite failure in mission.”<sup>110</sup> Schuller’s theology, was in his own terms, more of a

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<sup>107</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>108</sup> “Spiritual Shopping Center.”

<sup>109</sup> Scott Lee Guffin, “An Examination of Key Foundational Influences on the Megachurch Movement in America, 1960-1978” (PhD diss., Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1999), 119.

<sup>110</sup> Robert H. Schuller, *Self-Esteem, the New Reformation* (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1982), 12.

psychology than a theology, it focused on “person-centered” problems.<sup>111</sup> Schuller did not spend much time reading the Bible in preparing his sermons but focused on periodicals and contemporary psychology books and articles. He explained, “I spend three 8-hour days a week on my sermons. ... I read a lot, but not what most preachers read. Little theology. I read newspapers. ... I want to know what is happening in the world, to human beings, the contemporary psychology.”<sup>112</sup> Schuller’s theology was actually a modern psychology.

In brief summary, Schuller’s theological construct, or psychological message, centered on self-esteem. Orthodox Christian doctrine teaches that sin is a condition of human evil, which separates humanity from the God who is holy and perfect. Humans must therefore trust in God’s aid through the crucifixion of Jesus and the work of the Holy Spirit, to overcome the evil in their hearts that works itself out in thoughts, words and actions. Schuller argued to the contrary that sin is not a condition of evil but “an inborn absence of faith.” Thus, the solution is not to generate “guilt” that catalyzes action to turn from evil, but instead to generate “trust and positive hope.”<sup>113</sup> According to Schuller, humanity most needs self-worth and dignity. If people realize that they are themselves valuable, loved by God and created in God’s image, then they can conquer doubt, or sin, and achieve what they desire. In Schuller’s teaching, Christianity was a means to improve self-esteem. One critic described Schuller’s theology as “a blend ... of social, economic, and political entrepreneurial worship, blessed by the precepts of

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<sup>111</sup> Chandler, “Bold Experiment.”

<sup>112</sup> Thrapp, “Size of Church.”

<sup>113</sup> Schuller, *My Journey*, 126-7.

religion, and tailored to prosperous, aspiring, but anxious middle-class America.”<sup>114</sup> It was a representation of the increasingly therapeutic ethos in America.

Historian T. J. Jackson Lears argues that there was a fundamental change in American culture in the early twentieth century. The moral climate shifted, he explains, “from a Protestant ethos of salvation through self-denial toward a therapeutic ethos stressing self-realization in this world”<sup>115</sup> In the 1950s, popular religion across the nation tuned in to this pursuit for self-realization. As Donald Meyer explains, the postwar psychology insisted “upon the concept of ‘self’ as the heart of an adequate psychology and an adequate therapy.”<sup>116</sup> This therapeutic psychology grew as a principle theme in American religion in the twentieth century among middle-class, white Protestants.<sup>117</sup> In the 1950s, much of American Christianity became a means to improve and pursue one’s worldly satisfaction in the individual self.

The three principal religious figures of the decade, Norman Vincent Peale, Fulton J. Sheen, and Billy Graham taught this therapeutic form of the religion. All three produced books that framed Christianity as a means to achieve happiness and success. Norman Vincent Peale published the runaway bestseller, *Power of Positive Thinking* in 1952, Roman Catholic Fulton J. Sheen released *Way to Happiness* in 1954, and

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<sup>114</sup> John M. Mulder, “The Possibility Preacher,” *Theology Today* 31, no. 2 (July 1974): 158.

<sup>115</sup> T.J. Jackson Lears, “From Salvation to Self-Realization: Advertising and the Therapeutic Roots of the Consumer Culture, 1880-1930,” in *The Culture of Consumption: Critical Essays in American History, 1880-1980*, ed. Richard Wightman Fox and T.J. Jackson Lears, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1983), 3.

<sup>116</sup> Donald B. Meyer, *The Positive Thinkers: Popular Religious Psychology from Mary Baker Eddy to Norman Vincent Peale and Ronald Reagan* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1988), 306.

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*, 211.

evangelical revivalist Billy Graham added *Secret of Happiness* in 1955.<sup>118</sup> As historian James Hudnut-Beumler explains, Norman Vincent Peale's religion was a guide to successfully living the American dream. He offered a "psychological faith" that promised the devotee "wealth, health, and happiness." Fulton J. Sheen offered a similar faith in his wildly popular radio and television programs. Thirty million people watched his "Life is Worth Living" television broadcast each week to find a solution to their modern American woes. Sheen prescribed, much like Peale, building the inner strength to believe, desire, and pursue a dream, to live a successful life.<sup>119</sup> Both gave specific techniques, modern step-by-step solutions to modern, middle-class anxiety. Schuller was the climax of this trajectory in the 1960s and 1970s.

In extending the theology of Norman Vincent Peale and adding an ecclesiology driven by promotion, Schuller embodied the therapeutic ethos of America in an unprecedented manner. As sociologists Wade Clark Roof and William McKinney note, while the quest for "greater personal fulfillment" and "the ideal self" is "as old as the American experience, social scientists and cultural historians are generally agreed that in the sixties and seventies this quest was pursued with particular intensity."<sup>120</sup> In 1978, while Robert Schuller rocketed into national prominence, Christopher Lasch wrote, "The contemporary climate is therapeutic, not religious. People today hunger not for personal salvation ... but for the feeling, the momentary illusion, of personal well-being, health,

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<sup>118</sup> Robert S. Ellwood, *The Fifties Spiritual Marketplace: American Religion in a Decade of Conflict* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1997), 13; Fulton J. Sheen, *Way to Happiness* (Garden City, NY: Garden City Books, 1954); Billy Graham, *The Secret of Happiness; Jesus' Teaching on Happiness As Expressed in the Beatitudes* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1955).

<sup>119</sup> James Hudnut-Beumler, *Looking for God in the Suburbs: The Religion of the American Dream and Its Critics, 1945-1965* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1994), 60-4.

<sup>120</sup> Wade Clark Roof and William McKinney *American Mainline Religion: Its Changing Shape and Future* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1989), 8.



and psychic security.”<sup>121</sup> Schuller’s popular theological message was precisely just such a therapeutic product. It was a building block for what Lasch called the “culture of narcissism.” It provided comfort to a detached, middle-class people who sought to conquer their insecurities with reassuring messages that they were a “grandiose self” in God’s eyes. Other forms of advertising reflected this focus on the self.

Historian Gary Cross describes the tipping of the balance between society and individual toward the self in the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>122</sup> Cross explains that in advertising, after the 1950s producers stopped portraying groups or families using their products and instead displayed individuals using them. The period was one of increasing individual consumption, of more focus on the self. The radical nature of the period was in many ways an outcropping of consumption without limits as individuals sought to be liberated from constraints, to be a free and fulfilled self. Schuller’s church provided them a means to such fulfillment and freedom. In Schuller’s product, God existed to nurture the individual’s pursuit of success and achievement. Through his message and his promotion, Schuller nurtured the modern preeminence of the individual. A church, according to Schuller, existed to serve the individual. His descendants in evangelical megachurches would appropriate the same strategies to attract the modern individual, though they would frame it in more traditionally Christian terms and values.

Schuller’s framework of sin as a lack of self-esteem, and his use of God as a means to temporal and material satisfaction, were well suited for a modern therapeutic and consumption oriented audience, but pushed against orthodox Christian doctrine. Yet

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<sup>121</sup> Lasch, 7.

<sup>122</sup> Gary S. Cross, *An All-Consuming Century: Why Commercialism Won in Modern America*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 181.

the product's success in increasing attendance justified it to Schuller. He believed that every church should teach "possibility thinking" in order to grow. Part of his reasoning was his conviction that church leaders not preach on contested subjects, but stick with broadly acceptable messages. He believed that the pulpit is "not the place to deal with a controversial issue" Such issues, he contended, must be dealt with in more intimate, classroom settings<sup>123</sup> In planning his services, Schuller and his wife would skip over the Bible verses that "came across as negative."<sup>124</sup> In one sense, Schuller was right to recognize what many religious public relations experts before him had ignored: orthodox Christianity can be an offensive message that pushes people away. Instead of trying to gloss over it like the experts before him, he simply altered the core of it to be more agreeable to a wider audience. He also found that "possibility thinking" in making key decisions for the church was effective. Instead of being concerned with the costs of projects, he encouraged churches to pursue any project that promised to do "great things for God," and meet human needs.<sup>125</sup>

The last three retailing principles for religion, according to Schuller, were service, good cash flow, and visibility. Schuller explained that to retain customers, you had to provide them with good service. This meant training your lay people like sales people, to provide the best service to the customers. He personally ensured that volunteers, such as ushers, realized the gravity of their position, that they like the "clerk

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<sup>123</sup> "Tom Snyder Interview," Transcript, folder "Crystal Cathedral Robert H. Schuller - Interviews, 1976," box 26, Robert H. Schuller Collection, H93-1188, JAH.

<sup>124</sup> Schuller, *My Journey*, 306.

<sup>125</sup> Schuller, *Your Church*, 26.

in the department store” could win or lose the sale in attracting people.<sup>126</sup> With regard to cash flow, though it was a principle, Schuller did not say a great deal about it other than that a church should not be afraid of debt.<sup>127</sup> His basic philosophy of not worrying about financial constraints and anticipating the possibility for anything to happen if you believe in it, precluded him from speaking much on financial responsibility. Instead, he focused on the utility of debt in starting new projects. Such new projects were the jewels of his last principle, visibility. Schuller’s emphasis on promotion through visibility was a key component in his success. As he explained, “It’s amazing how the Holy Spirit can use advertising power!” He continued, “you can’t over-advertise.” He recommended that pastors utilize billboard advertising, create exciting programming, use direct mailing, and dedicate at least 5 percent of the church budget to “enthusiastic advertisements” and publicity.<sup>128</sup> For one service alone, in 1971, Schuller spent \$20,000 in advertising.<sup>129</sup> He argued that exciting programs and enthusiastic publicity were two of the “miracle-working” keys to guaranteed success.<sup>130</sup> Success, after all was the measure of acceptable methods.

Perhaps the foundational principle under Schuller’s entire philosophy was a pragmatic commitment to do whatever it takes to impress the people around you. His suggestions all worked towards this one goal, impress people, which stood on a consumer

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<sup>126</sup> Robert H. Schuller to Friend, October 25, 1960, folder “Crystal Cathedral Membership Mailings, 1960-1963,” box 6, Robert H. Schuller Collection, H93-1188, JAH.

<sup>127</sup> Schuller, *Your Church*, 27.

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

<sup>129</sup> Robert H. Schuller to Most Revered Fulton J. Sheen, April 24, 1972, folder “Crystal Cathedral – Correspondence, 1968-1973,” box 4, Robert H. Schuller Collection, H93-1188, JAH.

<sup>130</sup> Schuller, *Your Church*, 137, 141, 144-45.

orientation foundation. In order to impress people, he said, you have to meet their needs. In order to know their needs, you have to conduct extensive studies of the people, as he had done. Thus, he recommended at all of his Institutes that church leaders survey their communities. He argued that they must find out what people want in a church, and then design their church to meet those needs. As he summarized in his instructional guide book, “The secret of winning unchurched people into the church is really quite simple. Find out *what* would impress the non-churched people in your community and find out *who* would impress them. Find out what kind of *needs* exist in the private lives of the unchurched people in your community.... Go out and make a big, inspiring impression on these non-churched people!”<sup>131</sup> This marketing principle of defining a target market and designing products to appeal to them would become fundamental in the church growth industry, in great part because of Schuller’s articulation of it. Also, because of his relentless devotion in spreading it.

#### *New Conferences to Promote Church Promotion*

Schuller’s religious retailing philosophy had an incredible impact on churches across the nation, in large part, because of his quarterly conferences. Schuller launched the Institute for Successful Church Leadership in 1970. They held four institutes each year, with church leaders from across the country and across denominations, both liberal and conservative, attending. The diversity was another mark of the assumption that methods were transferable between churches regardless of message. It also demonstrated the function of church promotion as a platform for modern plurality in religion.

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<sup>131</sup> Ibid., 128.

Each one of the conferences consisted of four days of seminars that explored the secrets to Schuller's success in building an enormous church while other churches dwindled.<sup>132</sup> Schuller opened each Institute with the attendees gathered together at the drive-in theater where his church had begun. This inaugural meeting set the stage for Schuller's emphasis on modern methods in attracting more customers. The first Institute was held from February fourth to the seventh with seventy-eight church leaders in attendance.<sup>133</sup> As was standard for any Schuller christening, Norman Vincent Peale preached for the Sunday services that weekend.<sup>134</sup> Schuller recalled his words to the first participants of what would grow to be an enormous conduit of church growth philosophy and practice. He instructed the leaders, "if you want to win unchurched people, drop the label from your name. Call it a community church. And program your church services and your sermons and your activities to appeal to the spiritual needs of the unchurched."<sup>135</sup> This marketing philosophy would stand at the foundation of the Institute's instruction to thousands of church leaders. Having begun in 1970, within two years the Institute had already hosted over 1,000 pastors and laypeople.<sup>136</sup> Attendance continued to grow as Schuller's popularity grew, and as his principles disseminated throughout American Christianity.

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<sup>132</sup> Anker, 150.

<sup>133</sup> "Church Will Sponsor Institute on Leadership," *Los Angeles Times*, January 8, 1970; Schuller, *My Journey*, 291.

<sup>134</sup> Robert H. Schuller to Norman Vincent Peale, January 4, 1970, folder "Crystal Cathedral – Correspondence, 1968-1973," box 4, Robert H. Schuller Collection, H93-1188, JAH.

<sup>135</sup> Schuller, *My Journey*, 291.

<sup>136</sup> "Church Aide Named Chief of Institute," *Los Angeles Times*, October 15, 1972.

Schuller ensured that the Institute was well advertised. Always using the language of business, Schuller urged Wilbert Eichenberger, the Institute's director, to "sell" the institute "to anybody that you can! Money back guarantee!"<sup>137</sup> Eichenberger followed the directive. Advertisements for the Institute appeared in magazines across the country. From the very beginning, testimonials from satisfied attendees were included in letters and ads promoting the events. Schuller himself wrote to the editor of the *Christian Herald* and extended a "Press courtesy" inviting him to attend one of the institutes free of charge.<sup>138</sup> Other press coverage came from skeptical pastors who attended the Institute and then wrote articles for various periodicals, relaying their pleasant surprise at the event and its usefulness.<sup>139</sup> Schuller also hosted special conferences that carried a great deal of publicity value.

In its fifth year, the Institute sponsored a "Convocation on Church Growth" with the support of other organizations such as Donald McGavran's Institute for Church Growth of Fuller Theological Seminary and the Regal Publishing Company. Whereas the quarterly institutes were restricted to 150 attendees, Schuller expected over 3,000 church leaders at the "Convocation."<sup>140</sup> Featured speakers were Donald McGavran, founder of the official Church Growth Movement, C. Peter Wagner, D. James Kennedy, pastor of a large Presbyterian church in Florida, and W.A. Criswell, pastor of a large

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<sup>137</sup> Robert H. Schuller to Wilbert Eichenberger, February 9, 1970, folder "Crystal Cathedral – Correspondence, 1968-1973," box 4, Robert H. Schuller Collection, H93-1188, JAH.

<sup>138</sup> Robert H. Schuller to David Poling, February 25, 1970, folder "Crystal Cathedral – Correspondence, 1968-1973," box 4, Robert H. Schuller Collection, H93-1188, JAH.

<sup>139</sup> Wilfred Bockelman, "The Pros and Cons of Robert Schuller," *Christian Century* 92 (August 1975): 732-5; Browne Barr, "Finding the Good at Garden Grove," *Christian Century* 4 (May 1977):424-27.

<sup>140</sup> "Jerusalem Meeting to Be Held in February," *Los Angeles Times*, August 10, 1974.

Baptist church in Texas.<sup>141</sup> Other speakers were also pastors of very large churches around the country. Around 400 church leaders attended according to Schuller's account in the press, significantly less than his expectations listed in promotional materials.<sup>142</sup> At the conference, in his address, Schuller focused on reiterating that many churches failed because they did not meet human needs.

The Institute's most notable influence may not have been in the thousands of pastors that attended it as much as in just two pastors that attended, Bill Hybels and Rick Warren. These two ministers would go on to build enormous megachurches and lead a church marketing movement with their church growth conferences and materials. Both attended the Institute in the mid-1970s and employed a significant amount of Schuller's methods in their infant churches. Hybels was so convinced of Schuller's keys to success that after attending in 1975, he returned in 1976 with twenty-five key staff and lay leaders from his church.<sup>143</sup> Regarding both Hybels and Warren, Schuller fondly noted that his "students outran their teacher" in their success.<sup>144</sup> They also outran him in their innovative use of marketing in religion. Chapter 7 considers in greater detail, how Schuller impacted these two pastors and how they changed the church marketing industry. Suffice it to say that both attended the Institute and looked to Schuller as a primary inspiration in their careers. Schuller himself, continued to take great pride in his

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<sup>141</sup> "First American Convocation on Church Growth," Brochure, folder, "Crystal Cathedral Robert H. Schuller Institute for Successful Church Leadership, 1975 – 1980," box 26, Robert H. Schuller Collection, H93-1188, JAH.

<sup>142</sup> "Leading Clergymen Hold Church Growth Congress," February 22, 1975, Clipping, folder "Crystal Cathedral Press Clips & Audio Reports, 1974-1975 (Folder 3)," box 15, Robert H. Schuller Collection, H93-1188, JAH.

<sup>143</sup> Kimon Howland Sargeant, *Seeker Churches: Promoting Traditional Religion in a Nontraditional Way*. (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2000), 196.

<sup>144</sup> Schuller, *My Journey*, 292.

student's work and success. Reflecting on Bill Hybel's use of his principles, Schuller remarked, "I am so proud of him [Hybels] ... I think of him as a son."<sup>145</sup> Yet before Hybels and Warren mainstreamed Schuller's larger marketing philosophy of church growth, drive-in churches in the 1970s popularized his original strategy.

### *The Spread of Drive-In Churches*

In a radio interview in 1976, Robert Schuller estimated that there were sixty to seventy drive-in churches in America thanks to his Institute of Successful Christian Leadership.<sup>146</sup> While that number may have been a bit exaggerated, there were certainly a number of them that had popped up to imitate Schuller's success. As mainline churches suffered through a "membership tailspin" after the mid-1960s, they were looking for any methods that could turn things around.<sup>147</sup> The *New York Times*, *Boston Globe*, and *Los Angeles Times* reported the strategy of the Reformed Church in America to fight declining membership with drive-in churches.<sup>148</sup> The *Chicago Tribune* reported on the success of drive-in churches in the mid-west, crediting their origin to Schuller's church in southern California, "the birthplace of the drive-in culture."<sup>149</sup>

Many noted Schuller's success and began offering their own drive-in services, particularly churches in his own denomination, the Reformed Church in America (RCA).

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<sup>145</sup> Pritchard, 56.

<sup>146</sup> "The Dan Daniel Show with Dr. Robert Schuller," June 17, 1976, Transcript, folder "Crystal Cathedral Robert H. Schuller - Interviews, 1976," box 26, Robert H. Schuller Collection, H93-1188, JAH.

<sup>147</sup> John Dart, "Gaining Membership," *Los Angeles Times*, June 29, 1973.

<sup>148</sup> Ibid.; John Dart, "Drive-in Worship Closing Gap," *Boston Globe*, July 14, 1973; "Reformed Church in America Emphasizes Drive-In Services," *New York Times*, July 22, 1973.

<sup>149</sup> Clarence Page, "Drive-in Services Popular," *Chicago Tribune*, September 2 1973.



The RCA's embrace of Schuller's model was led by Harold Hakken, the head of development for the Western Synod and a former advertising executive.<sup>150</sup> By 1973 there were at least eighteen such drive-in churches across the country offering year round drive-in services to attract new customers.<sup>151</sup>

Between 1968 and 1972, the nine Reformed churches offering drive-in services in the Southern California-Arizona area, enjoyed a net gain of 2,080 people while mainline churches around them declined.<sup>152</sup> The Rev. William Miedema credited the doubling of his congregation to the drive-in facility that people drove by and thought, "I want to attend there sometime; it's beautiful."<sup>153</sup> The RCA credited the success of the drive-in churches to the nondenominational approach of the services, 'how to be happy' sermons, and the "promotional flair on the part of the pastors."<sup>154</sup> All were principles of Schuller's which he had shown to be successful. Like Schuller's, the majority of the churches avoided explicit affiliation with a denomination. They sought to disentangle their brand from the baggage of a religious tradition. They had ambiguous names such as "Church of the Rockies," "Lake Park Drive-In Church," and "The Glass and Garden Drive-In Church."<sup>155</sup> By the mid-1970s there were enough of them for the *Los Angeles Times* to publish a drive-in church guide.

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<sup>150</sup> "Reformed Church in America Emphasizes Drive-In Services" *New York Times* July 22, 1973.

<sup>151</sup> Dart, "Gaining Membership."

<sup>152</sup> Ibid.

<sup>153</sup> Ibid.

<sup>154</sup> Ibid.

<sup>155</sup> Ibid.

In 1976 John Dart published “Park & Pray: A Guide to the Drive-In Churches of Southern California” in the *Los Angeles Times*.<sup>156</sup> Eight of the eleven were RCA churches. He explained that it was actually Emanuel Lutheran Church that held the first drive-in services in Southern California, but only during the summer. It now featured “singing fountains,” a light, water and music display that was turned on at the beginning and close of each service. In the guide, Dart listed other “attractions” at each of the churches. One was a “large relief map of biblical Israel” another was held at a cabin that overlooks “an old windmill and water wagon” while another was in front of a landscaped field that holds a choir loft. He noted that the Great Hope Missionary Baptist Church in Los Angeles is the only black congregation with drive-in services.<sup>157</sup> All of these churches offered services much like Schuller’s and focused on providing similarly attention arresting attractions and services.

Schuller’s success in marketing extended beyond influencing drive-in churches and carried him to other venues where he could share his expertise. One example was the Sales and Marketing Council of the Building Industry Association of California who hosted him as the guest speaker for a seminar on “merchandising new homes.”<sup>158</sup> Robert Schuller had become an expert in not only religious retailing, but also all retailing.

In the early 1970s, Robert Schuller continued to develop his church growth philosophy and began to spread it across the country. His principles, though not explicit

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<sup>156</sup> John Dart, “Park & Pray: A Guide to the Drive-In Churches of Southern California,” *Los Angeles Times*, October 12, 1976.

<sup>157</sup> Ibid.

<sup>158</sup> “Marketing Workshop Scheduled by BIA Group,” *Los Angeles Times*, April 25, 1976.

in their affiliation, represented a marketing approach to religion. He focused on adapting the forms and messages of a church to meet the needs and desires of the modern consumer. He argued that if a church were to succeed it must be large and operate as a shopping center for Jesus. It had to embrace and develop seven principles of growth: accessibility, inventory, visibility, possibility thinking, service, good cash flow, and most importantly, surplus parking. Each of them represented a unique sensitivity to the market, a radical willingness to do anything to attract the unchurched, and an adoption of a mid-twentieth century American therapeutic emphasis on the actualization of the self. Schuller successfully spread his philosophy by establishing an institution wholly devoted to training ministers in his retailing religion methodology. Thousands of ministers attended and embraced the Schuller mantra, to include Rick Warren and Bill Hybels. These two pastors, specifically, would generate a church marketing explosion in the 1990s, and propel Schuller's philosophy into an era of influence unlike anything that even the great "possibility thinker" could have envisioned. However, in the meantime, Schuller would continue to enjoy rapid growth in popularity and influence, but also pay the price of criticism.

### Rapid Growth & Rampant Criticism (1975 & Beyond)

The Monday after Schuller's first drive-in service in 1955, he received a call from a fellow Reformed Church minister. It did not take but twenty-four hours for Schuller to face his first critic. The pastor denounced Schuller's advertising and "passion pit" service.<sup>159</sup> This was the beginning of a career of criticism against Schuller. As his

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<sup>159</sup> Schuller, *My Journey*, 213.

notoriety increased, so too did the objections and faultfinding, especially after 1975. Both liberal and conservative Christians criticized Schuller for his messages and methods. Yet most that disagreed with his messages, his theology, did not object to his methods. They, like so many others, believed that the two were distinct and that one could employ Schuller's marketing strategies without adopting his theology. Representatives of an array of denominations gathered at his conferences and read his books, exhibiting the space that promotionalism created for ecumenical cooperation and agreement. While such church leaders studied Schuller's methods, Schuller was formulating a plan for a church that would embody all that he had learned about religious retailing. In the Crystal Cathedral, he would provide the world a model of church marketing that would blur the lines between entertainment, the marketplace, and religion in a manner unprecedented. After 1975, Robert Schuller would enjoy both the blessings and curses of exponential church growth.

### *Criticism Builds of Schuller's Theology & Ecclesiology*

Critics of Schuller focused on two particular issues. The first was his theological system of "possibility thinking." Numerous articles in various journals and periodicals appeared between 1975 and the late 1980s criticizing Schuller's overtly "American" theology that promoted the pursuit of material prosperity. Schuller actually did expend a great deal of energy responding to these attacks and defending his theological system. He wrote books such as *Self-Esteem* in such an effort and countless personal letters to his critics.<sup>160</sup> The other issue that critics attacked was his marketing mentality that packaged

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<sup>160</sup> Schuller, *Self-Esteem*.

and sold religion like a commodity in the marketplace. This critique also struck at the heart of the American consumerist focus of Schuller's ecclesiology.

A 1974 article, "The Possibility Preacher" by John Mulder in the periodical *Theology Today* provided a cogent representation of both critiques. Mulder criticized Schuller for his materialistic message that encouraged Christians to pursue wealth, presented "with all the beguiling appeal of a J. Walter Thompson advertising campaign."<sup>161</sup> Both Schuller's message and method were the brunt of attack. Another example was a visit of Schuller's to Wheaton College. Schuller recalled that when he spoke at Wheaton College, he was greeted with signs of protest at the library that read, "Schuller doesn't preach the gospel," "Schuller is building a monument to himself," and "Give the fifteen million dollars to the poor!"<sup>162</sup> While the first sign criticized Schuller's message, the other two condemned Schuller's construction of an enormous \$15 million church building. Some ministers in training, like John Wilbur a first year student at Princeton Theological Seminary denounced Schuller's "gimmick" religion as a mark of ministers losing touch with congregations.<sup>163</sup> Such criticisms came from both conservatives and liberals.

Schuller had critics on both sides of the Christian spectrum. On the left, liberal Christians denounced Schuller's lack of concern for social justice. They condemned Schuller's refusal to recognize social injustices and approach controversial subjects, for

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<sup>161</sup> Mulder, "Possibility Preacher," 159.

<sup>162</sup> Schuller, *My Journey*, 383.

<sup>163</sup> John Wilbur, "Can a Shot of the Secular Bring New Life to Seminaries?" *New York Times*, April 3, 1977.

fear of pushing people away, like poverty, racism, and starvation.<sup>164</sup> On the right, conservative Christians criticized his notion of sin, and his substitution of psychology for a biblical doctrine of God. Both argued that Schuller's message and methods were reflections of American materialism and self-interest. Yet others, while disagreeing with his theological principles, found his church growth methods helpful and approved of their proliferation and use.

Several of Schuller's critics only condemned his message, while approving of his church growth methods. Like others before them, and after them, they assumed that the two could be separated from one another, that the message was distinct from the method and the method was a neutral tool. One example was Browne Barr, a mainline pastor that contributed a piece on Schuller to the *Christian Century*. Barr attended Schuller's Institute in 1977. In his article, he criticized Schuller for a lack of social justice work and added that Schuller had no more understanding of the gospel than the evangelicals that followed him.<sup>165</sup> He joined other liberal Christians in noting Schuller's absence in preaching on social issues, particularly Vietnam and Watergate. He also criticized Schuller of sexism, because he did not recognize females as pastors.<sup>166</sup> Yet he admired Schuller's methods in attracting unchurched people to hear a message, and he believed that mainline churches could learn from his methods. This detachment of message from method was the reason that Schuller hosted such a diversity of church leaders at his conferences. As Barr noted, among his fellow attendees at the Institute were pastors from a Four Square Gospel Church, the Church of God, the Assembly of God, and various

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<sup>164</sup> Bockelman, "Pros and Cons," 734.

<sup>165</sup> Barr, "Finding the Good," 425.

<sup>166</sup> *Ibid.*, 426.

mainline denominations.<sup>167</sup> By the early 1970s, the mainline denominations were rapidly losing members, so their presence at Schuller's conferences was not surprising. This pattern was but one more step in a long trend of church promotion providing a platform for increasing ecumenism and inter-faith cooperation.

One of the more entertaining attacks on Schuller was in a conservative Christian satire magazine, *The Wittenberg Door*. A sort of Mad Magazine for evangelicals, it used humor to raise important questions and critique trends in Christianity. The June/July issue in 1975 featured a detailed interview with Robert Schuller. In the interview, the magazine questioned Schuller about the lack of community in his church since people could attend in the anonymity of their vehicles. They also questioned his continuous insistence that his church was the "biggest and the best." Yet the interviewer graciously did not attack Schuller, but raised appropriate questions given his deviation from traditional ministry methods.<sup>168</sup> However, on one page of the interview, the magazine included a fictional advertisement for a church growth leadership conference that looked very similar to many of Schuller's ads for his conferences. This fictional one would meet in glamorous Hawaii and offer sessions on how to create your own television show, write a bestselling book, pour millions of dollars into the "biggest and best" sanctuary, create the image of a successful ministry tycoon, and master "Marketing the Ministry." Other subjects would include how to make a larger salary, franchise your church, and learn from the Mormons. All of these subjects indirectly criticized Schuller for building a business empire concerned more with popularity and money than fidelity to orthodox

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<sup>167</sup> Ibid., 427.

<sup>168</sup> "Door Interview: Robert H. Schuller," *Wittenberg Door* (June-July, 1975): 8-20, folder "Crystal Cathedral Press Clips & Audio Reports, 1974-1975 (Folder 3)," box 15, Robert H. Schuller Collection, H93-1188, JAH.

Christianity. The *Wittenberg Door* clearly disapproved of both Schullers messages and methods. They listed the host of the fictional conference as Towers of Babel Promotions, a reference to the tower that God destroyed in the Old Testament because it was the product of humans thinking they were God.<sup>169</sup>

A few years later, in 1979, the magazine featured another critique of Schuller. In two columns, the magazine listed two lists of what one could purchase for \$15 million. In the first column was a long list of items including feeding the poor, providing shelter, medicine, and water around the world, and building seminaries in other nations. The other column had one item, the Crystal Cathedral, Schuller's mammoth church construction project. The illustration suggested that Schuller was spending an exorbitant amount of money on a church building, when the funds could be used for purposes better suited to the Christian mission.<sup>170</sup> Schuller described the pieces on him in the *Wittenberg Door* as a "vicious attack" in a "fundamentalist Christian magazine."<sup>171</sup> Yet in a letter to the publication prior to the interview, he wrote of how he was "impressed with your unique publication" and that it was an honor to be the subject of its upcoming feature article.<sup>172</sup> The editor had sent him a past issue, yet Schuller lacked the wisdom to either read it or recognize it as a conservative humor publication that attacked its subjects

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<sup>169</sup> "First Annual International Church Growth and Pastor's Leadership Conference," *Wittenberg Door* (June-July, 1975): 12, folder "Crystal Cathedral Press Clips & Audio Reports, 1974-1975 (Folder 3)," box 15, Robert H. Schuller Collection, H93-1188, JAH.

<sup>170</sup> "How to Spend \$15,000,000.00," *Wittenberg Door* (1979): 13, folder "Articles / Editorials About Robert H. Schuller, 1963-1985," box 1, Schuller, Robert H., Papers, W91-1042, JAH.

<sup>171</sup> Schuller, *My Journey*, 383.

<sup>172</sup> "Robert H. Schuller to Denny Rydberg, May 13, 1975,) Letter, folder "Crystal Cathedral – Correspondence, 1975 1," box 4, Robert H. Schuller Collection, H93-1188, JAH.



through sarcasm. Perhaps, he thought so highly of the press' attention, that he assumed any publicity would be good publicity, and was blind to the potential for an attack.

The criticisms continued well into the 1980s. Articles by theologians and journalists such as David Singer, David Wells, Clair Johnson, Lloyd Billingsley, and Annabelle Wenzke all criticized Schuller for his theology and methods.<sup>173</sup> In 1982, Schuller sent 250,000 copies of his new book *Self Esteem, The New Reformation* to Protestant and Roman Catholic leaders across the nation.<sup>174</sup> In response, he received a great deal of mail that criticized his theological arguments. A 1982 letter from a pastor excoriated Schuller for saying that our deepest need is to feel good. He insisted that the need was instead to be reconciled to God, not to feel good. More broadly, he criticized Schuller for “twist[ing] the gospel to make it popular.” Others joined in his critique of the book, denouncing Schuller’s interpretation of the Bible. One even quoted Mark 8:33 in conclusion, “Get out of my sight Satan. You do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men.”<sup>175</sup> Perhaps in a twisted way, Schuller may have considered this a compliment. His theology and ecclesiology admittedly began with a doctrine of humanity. He sought in all efforts to utilize the “things of men” to attract enormous numbers of men, women and children to his church. Though he attracted a substantial

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<sup>173</sup> Clair Johnson, "Robert Schuller: Crystal Cathedral or Glass Menagerie?" *Dialog* 20 (1980): 243-4; David Singer, "The Crystal Cathedral: Reflections of Schuller's Theology," *Christianity Today*, August 8, 1980, 28-9; David F. Wells, "Self-Esteem: The New Confusion," *Reformed Journal* (October 1983): 15-8; Annabelle S. Wenzke, "Robert Schuller's New Reformation," *Dialog* 23 (1984): 32-7; Lloyd Billingsley, "The Gospel According to Robert Schuller," *Eternity* (November 1983): 22-7.

<sup>174</sup> Robert H. Schuller, *Self-Esteem, the New Reformation* (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1982).

<sup>175</sup> Ken Johnson to Robert H. Schuller, December 14, 1982, folder "Crystal Cathedral Robert H. Schuller – Manuscripts – Self-Esteem: The New Reformation, 1980-1982," box 26, Robert H. Schuller Collection, H93-1188, JAH.

volume of criticism, he continued to thrive at the helm of a church marketing phenomenon.

*Schuller's Church & Influence Continue to Expand*

Despite the growing criticism, Schuller's popularity and fame continued to spread through the 1980s. In the late 1970s, the press was full of articles on the "possibility" preacher and his unique church and broadcast services. Magazines such as *Time*, *People*, *Fund Raising Management*, *The Saturday Evening Post*, and *New West* featured stories on Schuller.<sup>176</sup> As mainline churches continued to decrease rapidly in number and attendance, Schuller conspicuously surged ahead in growth. As one journalist noted in the *Wall Street Journal*, while others failed, Schuller was "a bubbly, dynamic preacher who has turned a relentlessly positive-thinking theology and shrewd marketing into a plenteous harvest of souls - and cash."<sup>177</sup> His membership had exploded from 2,100 in 1965 to more than 8,000 by 1976.<sup>178</sup> Meanwhile, pastors flocked to the Institute of Successful Church Leadership to learn the tools that could help them turn their churches into a similar success story.<sup>179</sup> He also garnered public attention by such publicity

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<sup>176</sup> Clippings File, folder "Press Clips & Audio Reports, 1977 (Folder 5)," box 15, Robert H. Schuller Collection, H93-1188, JAH.

<sup>177</sup> William M. Abrams, "Religion, Inc. 'Possibility Thinking' And Shrewd Marketing Pay Off for a Preacher," *The Wall Street Journal*, August 26, 1976.

<sup>178</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>179</sup> Dennis E. Shoemaker, "Schuller Shooting," *Theology Today* 31, no. 4 (January 1975), 350-55, folder "Crystal Cathedral Press Clips & Audio Reports, 1974-1975 (Folder 3)," box 15, Robert H. Schuller Collection, H93-1188, JAH.

maneuvers as sponsoring a float in the Tournament of Roses parade.<sup>180</sup> Yet much of the attention on Schuller focused on his next great publicity scheme.

Schuller unveiled in 1975, at the twentieth anniversary celebration of the church, to the 7,000 people in attendance, a grand vision for an expansion of the Garden Grove Community Church. Schuller's plan was to build a 40,000 square foot communications center at a cost of two million dollars, a fourteen-story retirement center at six million dollars, and an all glass "crystal sanctuary" at ten million dollars that could seat 4,700 people.<sup>181</sup> Schuller, ever the opportunist for impressing a crowd, gave details on the enormous dimensions of the buildings and their features. Attending the great ceremony were many celebrities such as Art Linkletter, Norma Zimmer and George Beverley Shea. There was also a fireworks show at the conclusion and everyone received a small shovel that doubled as a pen to fill out pledge cards to pay for Schuller's new dream.<sup>182</sup>

Following standard Schuller promotional procedure, he hired one of the most popular architects of the period to design the Crystal Cathedral, Philip Johnson. Much like Schuller's discovery of Neutra through *Time* magazine, he found Johnson when *Time* declared him one of the "leading names in architecture today."<sup>183</sup> Schuller asked Johnson to design a building of all glass that could hold three thousand people. He added, "It will have to be such a masterpiece that it will attract the money we need to build the structure! It will have to grab the imagination of sophisticated and successful people!"<sup>184</sup> It also

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<sup>180</sup> "Three Religious Floats Enter Rose Parade," *Los Angeles Times*, December 25, 1976.

<sup>181</sup> Russell Chandler, "Expansion Spectacular," *Los Angeles Times*, November 26, 1975.

<sup>182</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>183</sup> Schuller, *My Journey*, 344.

<sup>184</sup> *Ibid.*, 346.

grabbed the attention of the press, with countless articles in magazines such as *Vogue*, *The New Yorker*, *The New York Times Magazine*, and a cover story in *Time*.<sup>185</sup> All of them celebrated Johnson and his revolutionary designs, including the Crystal Cathedral.

In 1980, Schuller celebrated two significant milestones. The first was the tenth anniversary of the Robert H. Schuller Institute for Church Leadership. Full-page advertisements in periodicals like *Christianity Today* promoted the anniversary event and the speakers, which included George Gallup, Jr. The same year, the Crystal Cathedral opened to the public with a fund-raising concert by Beverly Sills with seats reserved for Frank Sinatra and Mickey Rooney among others. Schuller promoted the event with large advertisements in newspapers such as the the *Los Angeles Times* where it ironically appeared next to a large ad for a popular “male exotic dancer” at Chippendales.<sup>186</sup> This juxtaposition of Schuller’s church and exotic dancing reflected the often peculiar pairing of religion and entertainment that Schuller had worked so tirelessly to introduce.

The publicity paid off and three thousand people attended, paying \$1,500 a ticket.<sup>187</sup> Though the event was principally to raise the remaining \$4.5 million for the building, it was also a publicity expert’s dream in itself. The church had advertised the uniqueness of the event, proclaiming that each person who purchased a seat would have their name permanently engraved on a plaque on the seat, “a lasting remembrance of a

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<sup>185</sup> Clippings File, folder “Press Clips & Audio Reports, 1978 (Folder 6),” box 15, Robert H. Schuller Collection, H93-1188, JAH; Periodical Clippings, folder “Press Clips & Audio Reports, 1979, January – September (Folder 7),” box 15, Robert H. Schuller Collection, H93-1188, JAH.

<sup>186</sup> “Beverly Sills Benefit Recital,” *Los Angeles Times*, January 13, 1980.

<sup>187</sup> “1980 The Dream Becomes a Reality!,” Internally Produced Booklet of Historical Highlights, folder “Crystal Cathedral Garden Grove Community Church - Background Material, 1955 – 1980,” box 5, Robert H. Schuller Collection, H93-1188, JAH

once-in-history event.”<sup>188</sup> The press responded to the hype of the event, and Schuller rejoiced that they were there “in full force.” He wrote, “The three major networks, the wire services, the big-name papers - it was a PR man’s dream come true.”<sup>189</sup>

Unfortunately, for Schuller, the dream turned into a nightmare as the acoustics of the building distorted Sills’ voice and left the audience aghast. The next day, the press wrote scathing reviews. Nevertheless, soon after, they held the first Crystal Cathedral service with a section of the balcony reserved for members of the press and an army of volunteers to direct traffic in the twenty-acre parking lot.<sup>190</sup> Thousands attended and the Crystal Cathedral became another shining example of Schuller’s success, and a platform for further expansion in his ministry.

By 1990, nearly three million Americans tuned in to *The Hour of Power* each week with an additional twenty million viewers in another 180 countries.<sup>191</sup> During the 1980s, he had successfully created a televangelism dynasty by marketing his broadcasts to middle-class Americans from his modern and visually striking Crystal Cathedral. Other televangelists had enjoyed similar success, using television in the 1970s and 80s to target niche markets with their religious programming.<sup>192</sup> Yet Schuller had marketed more than just a television show. He had marketed his entire church to the Orange County Community and created a ripple effect that would alter religious retailing in the coming decades.

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<sup>188</sup> “Display Ad 528,” *Los Angeles Times*, January 13, 1980.

<sup>189</sup> Schuller, *My Journey*, 392.

<sup>190</sup> *Ibid.*, 397.

<sup>191</sup> Anker, 147.

<sup>192</sup> Cross, 208.

In the 1970s, the Crystal Cathedral became a popular venue for major entertainers to perform such as comedian Victor Borge and performers from the Lawrence Welk Show.<sup>193</sup> Eventually, its popularity and Schuller's determination to entertain the unchurched led to his loss of tax exemption and status as a religious institution. Schuller had built an enormous church, a new kind of church, one focused on attracting attention and increased numbers of people. He had focused his whole theology and ecclesiology on the pursuit of growth. As he explained to a visitor at the Walk-In/Drive-In church, "We're trying to impress non-Christians and non-churched people. We are trying to make a big, beautiful impression upon the affluent non-religious American who is riding by on this busy freeway."<sup>194</sup> Though he managed to attract many more people than just those on the freeway nearby, he also managed, in the process, to create an institution that explicitly defied distinctions between the sacred and secular. Such a deliberate and prominent amalgamation attracted criticism in the late 1970s, though most of it addressed his message and not his methods. Schuller continued to endorse his methods and his message to pastors and customers across the country, and even the world.

## Conclusion

Aimee Semple McPherson's Foursquare Gospel denomination held their 19<sup>th</sup> annual convention in 1941. The leaders of the denomination used the convention as an opportunity to encourage all of the churches to use advertising and news sources to attract

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<sup>193</sup> "The Crystal Cathedral Festival of Concerts," Advertising Tear Sheets, folder "Robert H. Schuller Crystal Cathedral," box 1, Robert H. Schuller Collection, H93-1188, JAH.

<sup>194</sup> Schuller, *Your Church*, 117.

more attention. The majority of the speakers focused on the importance of advertising. However, one, in a sign of things to come, explained the opportunity available for free publicity by inviting the local press to attend church services. In order to make the news, he suggested that “when they come in, give them a show. Let them have something to photograph.”<sup>195</sup> He elaborated that in giving a “show” he meant that people should be speaking wildly in tongues and “falling on their backs.” Such extreme behavior would be of particular interest to news reporters who would then, through their stories, attract the attention of the community. Such a brazen effort to promote a church through outrageous displays was isolated in the 1940s. However, by the 1960s, such attention grabbing tactics were taking hold in churches. No one understood better how to use such showmanship in attracting a crowd as Robert Schuller.

Schuller centered and developed both his theology and ecclesiology around the methods that most successfully attracted customers to his church. His approach was purely pragmatic. If it increased attendance then it was appropriate for a church. In his own words, he did not seek to convert anyone to a religious doctrine, but simply provide, “inspiration, entertainment and a basic commitment to Jesus Christ.”<sup>196</sup> His theology was a therapeutic Christianity that encouraged and equipped the individual self to achieve happiness and success. Yet his theology did not make him as unique as his methodology, a consumer oriented ecclesiology that provided comfort, convenience, and spectacle. While he passed on the therapeutic Christianity of Norman Vincent Peale, he did it, as Dennis Voskuil writes, with a new flair and style that “always sought to portray

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<sup>195</sup> “Publicity Held Aid to Church,” *Los Angeles Times*, August 22, 1941.

<sup>196</sup> Schuller, *Your Church*, 135.

excellence in a community marked by hedonism.”<sup>197</sup> While Peale preached in an old church in New York, Schuller carved out a new church in the Sunbelt, in a land of “dominance of entertainment consumerism that would displace the stodgy commercial sway of New York's financial empire.”<sup>198</sup> Schuller created a church in what one historian calls “the experimentation zone of American culture.”<sup>199</sup> In that space, he managed to launch a new era in church promotion: church marketing.

In the 1960s, many of Schuller’s emphases in promoting and growing a church were reverberating throughout the church promotion industry. Articles in *Church Management* increasingly suggested the necessary centrality of the automobile in the modern church, with expanded parking.<sup>200</sup> They recommended that churches develop an easily accessible, informal, drive-in facility where people can attend without having to engage other people.<sup>201</sup> In articles and in the 1969 RPRC Handbook, there was a notable increase in the importance of a church’s appearance. Landscaping, lighting, and housekeeping were fundamental for church success, they argued. One author defended that such measures were but physical means to a spiritual end. He quoted the 84<sup>th</sup> Psalm noting the effect that beauty had on an individual in pointing them towards God.<sup>202</sup> Some went so far as to purely rate a church based on its aesthetic qualities, with a total

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<sup>197</sup> Voskuil, 153.

<sup>198</sup> Ibid., 154.

<sup>199</sup> Anker, 154.

<sup>200</sup> Edgar B. Madsen, “Parking and Your Church,” *Church Management* 44 (December 1967): 14-16.

<sup>201</sup> Harold M. Mallett, “A Different Approach: This Church Needs to Be Built!” *Church Management* 38 (June 1962): 8-9, 18-9.

<sup>202</sup> Arthur West, “Church Operations” in Suggs, James C. *Handbook on Church Public Relations : for Local Congregations of All Denominations*, ed. James C. Suggs (New York: The Council, 1969), 52.



disregard for its doctrine. They graded churches on their signs, greeters, bulletins, grounds, and minister's personal appearance.<sup>203</sup> One article explained, when building a new facility, how to use an architect for greater publicity.<sup>204</sup> Another explored the benefits of locating a church in the local shopping center, and another described the advantages found in actually starting a church in the Landmark Shopping Center in Alexandria, Virginia.<sup>205</sup> Yet perhaps the most noticeable change was the emphasis on measuring the public's desires and meeting their needs.

By the 1970s, church promotion was shifting to a definitive emphasis on the centrality of the customer. These changes were evident in the Religious Public Relations Council. In the 1969 RPRC Handbook, nearly every article highlighted the fundamental importance of evaluating the community, designating the target audience, and altering the product to meet those needs. This infiltration is particularly striking because the RPRC was an organization of public relations professionals. While they had always been attuned to public opinion, it had not played such a significant role in shaping church policy. This new attentiveness to public opinion and desires was not the four "P's" of marketing, but it was the foundation for a phase three strategy of segmentation marketing. Churches were beginning to define the customer, analyze the customer, create products to meet the customer's needs, and aggressively promote through advertising and publicity to get the customer's attention. Yet as this change worked its

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<sup>203</sup> Willard D. Crunkilton, "Capitalizing on First Impressions" *Church Management* 40 (December 1963): 30; Joe Thomas Moore, "How Does Your Church Rate? The Local Church Speaks" *Church Management* 44 (April 1968): 15-6, 23.

<sup>204</sup> Agnes Gibbs Ford, "How To Use An Architect In Building a Church," *Church Management* 42 (January 1966): 9-10.

<sup>205</sup> Walter R. Grimes, "Why Not? A Shopping Center Church?...", *Church Management* 44 (February 1968): 21-2; "The Church in the Market Place," *Church Management* 45 (October 1968): 19, 39.

way through the church promotion industry, and the RPRC, there were other significant changes in the profession.

## Chapter 6

### Radical Changes: Pluralism, Truth, & Mass Media (1965 – 1980)

At the behest of the Religious Public Relations Council, forty-one religious public relations experts gathered for a week at Syracuse University in 1971. Members of the RPRC, the Associated Church Press, the Catholic Press Association, and the North American Region of the World Association for Christian Communication gathered to deal with a crisis. As explained by Burton Marvin, a professor of public communications at Syracuse University, they assembled to confront the “organizational, doctrinal and issues-related turmoil within American religion in the last decade and the challenges and dilemmas faced by communications officers in this field.”<sup>1</sup> The language of “turmoil,” “challenges,” and “dilemmas” captured a sense of urgency that was new in religious public relations. Gone were the days of celebrating growth in religion and abundant opportunities for religious communications. This was a new era, a time of rapid cultural change that left the religious public relations professionals on their heels trying to determine how to recover. Whereas prior to 1965, the RPRC had a difficult job because the opportunities for religious expansion were great and the demand for their work was

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<sup>1</sup> Michael V. Reagen and Doris S. Chertow, *The Challenge of Modern Church-Public Relations* (Syracuse: Publications in Continuing Education, Syracuse University, 1972), 1.

boundless, now it was difficult because as they noted at the Institute, “millions of Americans have clearly rejected traditional organized religion.”<sup>2</sup>

This gathering at the Institute on Modern Religious Communications Dilemmas was but one-step as the RPRC and the church promotion industry worked to find a new path forward. If Americans were rejecting their institutions, how were they to respond? Clearly, the images that they had worked so diligently to craft, the profession that they had worked to justify and define, had ultimately, not worked. The American people were turning their backs on religious institutions. What could be done to recover the public favor? Their answer was simple enough, change. Like the culture that they sought to reach in the market, the RPRC would implement significant changes in the late 1960s, beginning in 1965.

Between 1965 and 1980, there were three significant changes in religious promotion: a growth in inter-faith cooperation, a shift from doctrine to politics in message, and the adoption of a new advertising strategy. Since the beginning of the century, church promotion had provided a fertile field for the growth of cooperation among those that held diverse religious convictions. After 1965, as American cultural pluralization increased, church promotion advocates were among the pioneers in encouraging inter-faith dialogue. This expanding cooperation accompanied, and perhaps influenced, a shift from promoting a message of truth to advocating for a method of truth. Instead of uniting to promote specific Christian messages and institutions, the RPRC united to encourage truthfulness in their methods and promote a universal advocacy for social justice.

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<sup>2</sup> Reagen, iii.

The shift to truth in method instead of message responded to two requirements in the RPRC. The first was that, as they grew more diverse, for the sake of unity they had to mute the role of religious conviction and doctrine in the organization. Instead of uniting around a particular doctrinal message or set of institutions, they centered their identity on their truthfulness in methods. This was an attempt to maintain a space of distinction between themselves and the rest of the promotion industry. It was also an effort, secondly, to overcome the “credibility gap” in America where the public’s trust of institutions and public relations waned significantly. Yet truth in method was not the only alteration; they also adopted a social and political agenda calling for moral action. This too provided a more inclusive message and point of unity for an increasingly diverse organization.

The third change during the era was the expansion of church advertising on radio and television. In the late 1960s, churches and denominations developed pioneering ads for broadcast across the airwaves. In doing so, they looked to the expertise of secular experts in advertising to an unprecedented extent. Radio and television advertising provided another avenue for direct business influence on religion as churches assumed that masters of methods did not have to be masters of their message. Between 1965 and 1980, the church promotion industry, and the RPRC specifically, embarked upon three significant changes in order to attract customers in a rapidly changing culture; they increased inter-faith cooperation, altered their messages, and embraced advertising on radio and television.

## Religious Participation Shrinks – Religious Public Relations Grows

Beginning in 1965, not a national convention or issue of the *Counselor* went by that did not in some way bemoan the plummeting reputation of religious institutions in American public life. While the 1950s were a period of expansion in American religious participation, the latter 1960s were a period of significant reduction. In the late 1960s, church attendance throughout the United States declined at an increasing rate. The decrease was especially severe in the mainline Protestant churches. As the majority of the RPRC members continued to represent these churches, the decline in American religious observance hit the organization with a notable intensity. Nevertheless, the RPRC continued to expand, though at a much more gradual pace than before. After 1965, as the experts of religious public relations offered jeremiads on the decline of institutional religious participation in America, they continued to enjoy growth in the industry and predict further expansion.

The RPRC, by 1965, was significantly concerned about the decline in American confidence in religious institutions. The theme for the convention that year was “To Tell the Truth” and it promised to address “the challenge to present honest, intelligent, relevant, theologically-orientated content by means of effective, professional, quality communicative techniques and procedures.”<sup>3</sup> A few speakers described “the challenge” in vivid detail, citing disturbing data from recent polls. The newly elected president of the RPRC explained that less than 50 percent of students surveyed by *Newsweek* had much confidence in religious organization. Richard Wilson, a former advertising agent, discussed the same results pointing out that the institutions least trusted were “the Democratic Party, the press, advertising, organized labor and organized religion.” He

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<sup>3</sup> Promotional Brochure, folder “1963 Convention,” box 6, Records: 1929-1985 (89-1115a), RPRCC.

summarized, “Organized religion is suspected of phoniness.”<sup>4</sup> Religious institutions were suffering in the polls of American society. The institutions of the RPRC members, primarily mainline churches, were also suffering in membership.

After 1965, membership and participation in American religious institutions declined, particularly in the mainline denominations. George Gallup Jr.’s polling in 1967 found that church attendance among Americans had dropped from 49 percent in 1958 to 44 percent that year. The majority of the decrease was in the next generation. Young adults between the ages of twenty-one and twenty-nine had dropped out of church at twice the rate of older Americans.<sup>5</sup> The mainline churches, the older denominations in America, suffered the brunt of the decrease in institutional religious practice. Historian Mark Noll provides figures that demonstrate the trend. He explains that between 1965 and 1985:

the United Methodist Church lost 17 percent of its members, the United Church of Christ lost 19 percent of its members, the Episcopal Church lost 20 percent of its members, the two largest Presbyterian bodies lost 28 percent of their members, the American (i.e., northern) Baptists lost 37 percent of their members, and the Disciples of Christ lost 42 percent of their members.<sup>6</sup>

These were substantial losses.

Some worried that religion was losing its impact on American culture as people abandoned it in the late 1960s. Perhaps the most visible sign was the development of a theology that expressed the decline. Between 1965 and 1969, the *New York Times* and

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<sup>4</sup> Richard Wilson, “The Truth Hurts,” April 6, 1965, folder “1965 Convention,” box 6, Records: 1929-1985 (89-1115a), RPRCC.

<sup>5</sup> Edward B. Fiske, “Poll Gets Views of Churchgoers,” *New York Times*, January 19, 1967.

<sup>6</sup> Mark A. Noll, *A History of Christianity in the United States and Canada* (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans, 1992), 468.

*Time* magazine, among other news sources, reported on the “Death of God” movement.<sup>7</sup> Led by a handful of theologians, the movement argued that God was no longer a part of the modern world. The 1969 RPRC *Handbook* cited a Gallup Poll that 70 percent of adults believed religion was no longer significant in American society. Only twelve years before, in 1959, the opposite had been true with 69 percent of adults confident that religion was increasing in its influence.<sup>8</sup> Though the future of religious institutions in America did not look bright, the profession of religious public relations had glimmers of hope.

Despite the decline of participation in American Christian institutions, many remained optimistic about the future of the religious public relations industry. Whereas the growth in religious participation in the 1950s had created a multitude of opportunities for industry growth, in the late 1960s and into the 1970s, the desperation of religious institutions to survive buoyed the success of religious public relations. Southern Baptist public relations expert, W.C. Fields forecasted in his 1971 convention address that religious public relations jobs would continue to increase. He estimated that there were nearly 2,500 religious public relations professionals, and that the growing cooperation in ecumenism promised the creation of even more job opportunities.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, the RPRC

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<sup>7</sup> Judith M. Buddenbaum and Debra L. Mason, eds. *Reading on Religion as News* (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 2000), 265-66.

<sup>8</sup> Marvin C. Wilbur, “The ‘What’ and ‘Why’ of Church Public Relations” in *Handbook on Church Public Relations: for Local Congregations of All Denominations*. 1st ed., ed. James C. Suggs (New York: The Council, 1969), 2.

<sup>9</sup> “News Release, April 22,” folder “RPRC Convention Photos 1971,” box 6, Records: 1929-1985 (89-1115a), RPRCC.



membership continued to grow. Whereas there were 276 members in 1956, there were 740 in 1968 and nearly 1,000 by 1980.<sup>10</sup>

Nevertheless, confidence for the future of religion was low. At the 1971 convention Russell Shaw, the Director of the National Catholic Office for Information, noted that even though there were more people working in Catholic Public Relations than ever before, 500, “the state of institutional religion at the same time is perhaps worse than it’s ever been in our lifetime.”<sup>11</sup> In 1973, the new president, David Gockley, remained optimistic that religion would grow. However, he made an important distinction between religion as an institution and religion as a spiritual mood of the individual.<sup>12</sup> His prophecy would prove true as Americans, particularly the baby boom generation drifted from the formal, traditional religion of their parents and looked to individual conceptions of religion. In the 1970s and 1980s, the megachurch movement, utilizing marketing methods would capture this group. However, for now, Gockley and others in the RPRC continued to pursue public relations as the solution.

A mark of the RPRC’s growth and their influence in promoting religious public relations was the growing success of their handbooks. The RPRC published its first *Handbook on Church Public Relations* in 1969. A collection of instructional articles by

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<sup>10</sup> “The Religious Public Relations Council, Inc. Directory 1980-1981,” box 5, Records: 1952-1988 (88-0630), RPRCC; “The Religious Public Relations Council, Inc. 1965-66 Directory,” box 5, Records: 1952-1988 (88-0630), RPRCC.

<sup>11</sup> “News Release, April 22,” folder “RPRC Convention Photos 1971,” box 6, Records: 1929-1985 (89-1115a), RPRCC.

<sup>12</sup> Interview with David Gockley, *RPRC Counselor* (August 1973), box 5, Records: 1952-1988 (88-0630), RPRCC.

members of the organization, the RPRC sold it to denominations and local churches.<sup>13</sup> In 1976, they published a second handbook, which RPRC executive director Marvin Wilbur noted at the time was “having unusual success.” Endorsements for it appeared among broader public relations industry publication such as the “Practical Public Relations” newsletter and in the PRSA July “National Newsletter” mailing. Because of such recommendations and promotion by the RPRC, the April published handbook sold over 30,000 copies by August. This was an enormous improvement over sales of the 1969 handbook, which had sold 37,000 copies over the course of six years.<sup>14</sup> Orders for the news handbooks came in from all over the country. They also came in from all over the world. Churches in Australia, Puerto Rico, Papua New Guinea, Germany, Ireland, Kenya, and Finland all ordered multiple copies. Many international recipients wrote letters to Wilbur to congratulate him on such a useful resource and thank him for helping them better manage the promotion of their churches.<sup>15</sup> The widespread success of the handbooks reflected the increasing inter-denominational and inter-religious cooperation in church promotion.

### Pluralism and Cooperation Grow in Church Promotion (1945 – 1972)

Interfaith cooperation expanded rapidly in the 1960s. Relations between Roman Catholics and Protestants in America improved, marked by the election of a Roman

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<sup>13</sup> James C. Suggs, ed. *Handbook on Church Public Relations: for Congregations of all Denominations*, 1<sup>st</sup> ed. (New York: The Council, 1969).

<sup>14</sup> Wilmer C. Fields, ed. *Religious Public Relations Handbook: for Local Congregations of all Denominations* 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: Religious Public Relations Council, 1976); *RPRC Counselor* (August 1976), box 5, Records: 1952-1988 (88-0630), RPRCC.

<sup>15</sup> RPRC Handbook Reviews, box 5, Records: 1952-1988 (88-0630), RPRCC.

Catholic, John F. Kennedy, as president of the nation. The Second Vatican Council and the social and political issues of the decade opened new spaces for cooperation between Christians.<sup>16</sup> Meanwhile, significant immigration reform in 1965 opened the American borders to a host of other religions that previously only held a minor stake in the culture. The growth of such religions as Islam, Buddhism, and Hinduism created a climate of growing religious pluralism in the nation.

The RPRC responded by calling for changes of their own. Though they had formed as an exclusively Protestant organization, by the mid-1960s they were entertaining proposals to open their membership to Roman Catholics and other religions. Church promotion had always provided a platform for cooperation among denominations. Where church leaders could not agree on their theological messages, they could agree on their promotional methods. They assumed that a church could adapt a secular method or rival denomination's strategy without importing their message. As pluralism grew in American culture, the church promotion industry was poised to offer a significant forum for growing ecumenism among denominations and religions. The RPRC was therefore a fertile field for interfaith cooperation and they implemented several official changes to lead in religious pluralization.

*Flashback: Foundations for Greater Inclusivity (1945 – 1959)*

In order to trace how the RPRC became an interfaith organization, it is necessary to consider a significant shift to doctrinal openness that began in the mainline denominations in the 1940s. Though cooperation among churches had always sounded a resounding note in the church promotion industry, there were limits in the RPRC. The

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<sup>16</sup> Noll, 538-39.

organization began with the exclusive purpose of expanding Protestant churches. They rooted their identity and unity not in the methods of sales, but in the doctrinal message of Protestant Christianity. As such, their membership was limited to those that affirmed Protestant religious beliefs.

In the years prior to 1965, as the RPRC members' denominations began relaxing doctrinal commitments. As an example, in 1946, the Federal Council of Churches, the primary representative organization for mainline denominations, and a primary partner to the RPRC, considered including the Universalist Church of America in its membership. Yet the FCC constitution stated a commitment to belief in "Jesus Christ as ... divine Lord and Savior," a doctrine that Universalists rejected. Nevertheless, four out of ten delegates to the FCC voted for inclusion.<sup>17</sup> Already by the mid-1940s, mainline church leaders were considering the option of cooperating with religious institutions that had fundamentally different core beliefs. This pattern accelerated as denominations shifted to a more inclusive concept of the divine that emphasized love and acceptance instead of judgment and exclusion.

The growing tolerance in doctrine catalyzed a move away from conversion-directed evangelism in mainline churches. In 1948, at the First Assembly of the World Council of Churches, the majority of attendees agreed on an official endorsement to proselytize Jews. However, six years later at the Second Assembly of the World Council of Churches, delegates voted down a similar statement that emphasized the necessity to convert Jews to Christianity.<sup>18</sup> Mainline denominational publications such as *The*

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<sup>17</sup> Alan Cecil Petigny, *The Permissive Society: America, 1941-1965* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 67.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 83.

*Christian Century* were glad to see that that any commitment to convert Jews had been avoided.<sup>19</sup> This new hesitancy to evangelize reflected in a 25 percent decrease, over the course of the 1950s, in foreign missions donations among leading churches.<sup>20</sup> A survey of church members in Northern California in the mid-1960s represented the change. The survey found that 33 percent of Episcopalians, 29 percent of Methodists, and 21 percent of Congregationalists did not believe they should convert Jews to Christianity. Only 7 percent of Congregationalist clergy, 12 percent of Methodist clergy, and 13 percent of Episcopalian clergy believed that “being of the Jewish Religion” would “definitely” or “possibly ... prevent salvation.”<sup>21</sup> This change presented the RPRC with an acute challenge.

Of the twenty-nine charter members that created the RPRC, most represented the missions department of their denominations. They created the organization to promote conversion. In a 1951 Counselor Joseph Boyle, the vice president of advertising giant, the J. Walter Thompson Company, reminded the members that it was their responsibility to convert through their work.<sup>22</sup> Yet five years later at the 1956 Convention, others began challenging this assertion. The editor of the *Yonkers Herald Statesman*, Oxie Reichler, wrote, “I certainly hope that nothing we put on our church pages will be angled to convert anybody to anything – that should be carefully eliminated. It is little short of scandalous, to my way of thinking, to use a secular newspaper page for proselytizing or

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<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 84.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 85.

<sup>21</sup> Charles Y. Glock and Rodney Stark. *Christian Beliefs and Anti-Semitism* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), 75, 78, quoted in Petigny, 86.

<sup>22</sup> Joseph E. Boyle, “Selecting Ideas for Church Public Relations,” *NRPC Counselor* 1, no. 3 (March 1951), box 5, Records: 1952-1988 (88-0630), RPRCC.

propaganda purposes on behalf of any group.”<sup>23</sup> Reichler’s concern may not have been representative of the bulk of the RPRC members, but it was the opening of a new dialogue in the organization.

An interest in removing conversion from the purposes of the RPRC required an increase in tolerance for other religious belief systems. There was space for such a change as though the RPRC had been dedicated to conversion from its inception, its definition of Christianity had remained relatively abstract. There are no records of any real substantive dialogues among members about theology. They frequently described their uniting purpose as the representation of “Jesus Christ,” “Christian Gospel” and “the Word.” Such terms were specific enough in that they were Christian, but broad enough to not create disagreements among members. There was a general understanding that the RPRC was strictly a Protestant organization that labored to improve the spread of their faith. However, by the end of the 1950s, they were entertaining motions to loosen their already vague product definition and include other religious systems.

The RPRC increasingly entertained the validity of other religions and their ability to “improve” Christian doctrine. In 1959, while RPRC founder Herbert Rugg celebrated the growth of Christianity, he also celebrated the ways that Christianity was changing.

He said:

In depth, religion has never been so well founded; never has the study of the nature, the origin and the history of religion been so widespread and especially never has knowledge about the Bible and Biblical times been so comprehensive and general. The change has been from repression to expression, from Puritanical restraint to greater freedom for individual,

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<sup>23</sup> Oxie Reichler, “An Address,” April 13, 1956, folder “1956 Convention,” box 6, Records: 1929-1985 (89-1115a), RPRCC.

personal life. In religion today, as never before, the trend is toward life that is more successful, more full, more truly joyous.<sup>24</sup>

Christianity was leaving behind the days of “repression” and “restraint” for new days of openness, flexibility, and liberation, he argued. The next year, Douglas V. Steere, a professor at Haverford College and Quaker philosopher also called for greater inclusion. He advocated for Christians to engage “Oriental Religions.” He argued that other religions should benefit, not threaten Christianity. Engaging with other beliefs would humble their message, he said. He suggested that they “present Christ vulnerably” such that these other religions will help them to appreciate new “facets of Christ.” In doing such, he continued, Christ “may be wounded over again, so long as we believe His message to be valid.”<sup>25</sup> Steere hoped that the promotion experts would remain faithful to the message of Christ, but be ready to accept alternative understandings of that message. This was not an invitation to reject the message of “the truth” but to expand its definition. Yet such an expansion would undermine the traditional identity and unity of the organization as they welcomed other religious belief systems to the table.

#### *Considering Cooperation with Roman Catholics and Jews (1959 – 1963)*

Relaxing doctrinal commitments in the RPRC brought shifts in the identity and constitution of the organization. Talking the talk of religious openness and pluralism was one thing, but to make significant changes in the organization’s structure was wholly another. The first hint of such change appeared ironically at a convention devoted to the

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<sup>24</sup> Kenneth Dole, “News of the Churches: Religion’s Revival Defended by Editor,” *Washington Post*, April 18, 1959.

<sup>25</sup> Douglas V. Steere, Manuscript, “31<sup>st</sup> National Convention Binder,” Box 6, Records: 1929-1985 (89-1115a), RPRCC.

immutability of the organization's message. The 1963 theme, "Changeless Voice – Changing World" suggested that their message did not change. Yet the actions of the Long Range Planning Committee suggested otherwise. The RPRC had remained changeless in its membership since its inception. However, as the theme noted, the world was changing. They formed a Long Range Planning Committee to help strategically expand the organization and the influence of religious public relations.<sup>26</sup> Concern over doctrine was waning, the culture was moving away from religious institutions; they believed they too had to change if the churches were to survive. One of their recommendations was an official consideration for offering membership to Roman Catholics and Jews.

Roman Catholics were exploring the use of modern communication methods, particularly in public relations, by 1960. In 1959, the Roman Catholic Church in the United States created a public relations department. A staff of three, under the direction of Rev. John E. Kelly operated on an inaugural budget of \$25,000. They produced materials for local churches and encouraged dioceses to hire part-time public relations professionals.<sup>27</sup> That first year, from August 24 to 28 in 1959, 105 Roman Catholics attended the first national Catholic seminar on religious communications.

Gathering in 1959 at Manhattan College in New York City for the first national Roman Catholic communications conference, the new recruits in the industry listened to a number of speakers that included several bishops and the keynote speaker, T.J. Ross. Ross was a public relations expert, a senior partner with one of the founders of the

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<sup>26</sup> Minutes of Meeting, March 28, 1963, Box 6, Records: 1929-1985 (89-1115a), RPRCC.

<sup>27</sup> Kenneth Dole, "News of the Churches: Public Relations Men are Key Church Aides," *Washington Post and Times Herald*, August 1, 1959.



industry, Ivy Lee. In his address, Ross drew the similarities between public relations in “business institutions” and “the Church,” and he provided enumerated lists of how to engage in successful public relations.<sup>28</sup> Others, such as the Reverend Albert Nevins, disparaged that Protestants were way ahead of Roman Catholics in using public relations bureaus with large budgets to grow their institutions. After listing Protestant successes in the field, he stated, “Yet we who have a divine command, who have truth itself, worry about ‘dignity’ and leave the field open to our competition and to the soap salesmen. If mass communications are used to sell soap and breakfast cereals and Protestantism, when are we going to make full use of them in selling Catholicism?”<sup>29</sup> Both Ross and Nevins represented a new Roman Catholic interest to adopt any methods that worked in promotion. Yet though they spoke of Protestants as competitors, and the Roman Catholic product as the real truth, there were Jewish and Protestant guest speakers at the conference.

A number of local business public relations and advertising experts, several of which were from Protestant circles, spoke at the conference. Two of them were prominent members of the RPRC, Marjorie Hyer, Associate Director of the Office of Communication for the United Church of Christ and future religion editor at The Washington Post, and Ralph Stoody known in the RPRC as “the dean of church public relations.” Their contribution was so significant, that the foreword of the published addresses from the conference offered them a “special thanks” along with Nathan L. Roberts, the Director of Public Relations for the Combined Campaign of American

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<sup>28</sup> *The Church and Communications Arts* (Washington: Bureau of Information National Catholic Welfare Office, 1959), 3.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 90.

Reform Judaism.<sup>30</sup> RPRC Protestants were cooperating with Roman Catholics and Jews in developing religious public relations. However, it was strictly on Roman Catholic turf; the RPRC was not ready to offer an official partnership within its ranks.

The RPRC first considered the proposal to include Roman Catholics in its membership at a 1961 Board of Governors meeting. Some Roman Catholics had been attending local RPRC members as guests in the late 1950s, yet they could not participate as full members.<sup>31</sup> Most of the members opposed extending membership to Roman Catholics, arguing that, “the National Religious Publicity Council is basically a Protestant organization.”<sup>32</sup> C. Stanley Lowell represented the opposition in a letter. He argued, “there are many problems of religious publicity which have a distinctly Protestant character and orientation.”<sup>33</sup> He believed that the differences between Protestants and Roman Catholics were significant enough to prevent cooperation in promotion. However, the tide was turning against him and his colleagues. Others wrote letters to Marvin Wilbur asking that membership opportunities be made available to Roman Catholic and Jews “in light of the widening circle of ecumenical activities.”<sup>34</sup> In support of the latter, the RPRC began allowing “non-Protestants” to apply for associate memberships. This significant step in allowing “outsiders” in to the ranks of the RPRC stood until the 1963 convention when the Long Range Planning Committee

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., iii.

<sup>31</sup> “Strength in Numbers,” Chapter 3, *RPRC: A 50-Year Reflection*, box 1, Records: 1952-1988 (88-0630), RPRCC.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> C. Stanley Lowell to Rev. R. Dean Goodwin, January 17, 1961, box 4, Records: 1952-1988 (88-0630), RPRCC.

<sup>34</sup> Letter from Charles De Vries, December 31, 1962, box 4, Records: 1952-1988 (88-0630), RPRCC; Letter from R. Dean Goodwin, May 17, 1961, box 4, Records: 1952-1988 (88-0630), RPRCC.

recommended that the Board of Governors allow for “the establishment of a fraternal membership category for Jews and Catholics.”<sup>35</sup> They also resolved, that in the meantime, local chapters could recommend such individuals for Associate or Fraternal membership.

The possible extension of membership to Jews and Roman Catholics in the RPRC was a seismic shift for the organization. Not only was the RPRC considering allowing non-Protestant Christians to join, but members of a different religion, Judaism. Historically, the members had wrestled even as a cohesive group of Protestant Christians with defining the product they offered to the public. Now, they were considering adding other members who fundamentally disagreed with them on what defined the truth, the message that purified their methods. These inclusions would make any real agreement on the truth as their message, virtually impossible. Without such agreement, they could not root their identity as religious promoters in any uniquely religious message that would distinguish them from the rest of the industry. Instead, they would shift their attention to a unity in methods and universal, political messages of justice.

*The RPRC Surrenders its Protestant and Christian Identity (1966 – 1972)*

In 1966, the RPRC still remained an exclusively Christian organization, but stood on an uncertain foundation of decreasing doctrinal exclusivity and increasing calls for inclusivity. At the opening session of the annual convention that year, the president of the RPRC, David Gockley, addressed the gathered members, “Greetings to you my

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<sup>35</sup> “Strength in Numbers,” Chapter 3, *RPRC: A 50-Year Reflection*, box 1, Records: 1952-1988 (88-0630), RPRCC.

fellow Christians who labor in public relations.”<sup>36</sup> Perhaps, Gockley was weighing in on what was becoming an increasingly contentious issue of debate over the exclusivity of the membership. Maybe he wanted to make it explicit that this was a Christian group. However, at the convention that would follow over the next few days, two significant decisions would lead the group in a direction that would eventually make such a greeting as “my fellow Christians” a thing of the past.

The purely Christian membership of the RPRC gathered in 1966 to discuss the convention theme, “Reaching a Restless World,” and by the time they disbanded for the year, they had set in motion the steps to include a larger representation of the world in their membership. The first step was the Long Range Planning Committee’s decision to “study full membership of Catholics and Jews.”<sup>37</sup> After meeting, they recommended to the Board of Governors that they “consider bylaw changes to include Catholics into membership.”<sup>38</sup> The proposed change would alter an amendment in the constitution, which would now state that any person could join who “serves a *Christian* communication or denominational body.” The change would remove Protestant as a descriptor of what sort of Christians could join. The next year, 1967, the membership approved the alteration. Now anyone who worked for an institution that claimed to be Christian could join the RPRC.

At the 1969 convention, and those that followed, the prominence of Roman Catholic members and issues demonstrated the degree to which the RPRC had changed.

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<sup>36</sup> David W. Gockley, “The More Excellent Way,” April 18-21, 1966, folder “1966 Convention,” box 6, Records: 1929-1985 (89-1115a), RPRCC.

<sup>37</sup> “Strength in Numbers,” Chapter 3, *RPRC: A 50-Year Reflection*, box 1, Records: 1952-1988 (88-0630), RPRCC.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

One of the key speakers in 1969 was the former Director of the US Catholic Conference's Office of Public Information, Robert M. Donihi. He reported on the use of public relations in Catholic churches, and the need for bishops to listen more to their public relations advisers. At the same convention, the president of the RPRC, Winston Taylor, appealed to the example of the highest-ranking Roman Catholic, Pope Paul VI as an archetype of openness to change. He had presided over the 1965 conclusion of the Second Vatican Council, which revised the church's liturgy and stated that "elements of sanctification and of truth are found outside the confines" of the Roman Catholic Church.<sup>39</sup> Taylor explained that Pope Paul VI had "opened the windows to let in fresh air, and we need to keep them open because not all the dust and cobwebs are yet blown out of our religious institutions and practices." He continued, "I am convinced that people need to be educated and motivated to see the need for change within religion as in other areas, and to see how they can work with change rather than fighting it."<sup>40</sup>

At the convention in 1971, Kenneth Woodward, like Taylor two years prior, applauded the work of the Second Vatican Council. He proclaimed that "it was the beginning of religion changing." Russell Shaw, the Director of the National Catholic Office for Information celebrated that there were now more public relations experts than ever before in the Roman Catholic churches, around 500.<sup>41</sup> Yet their membership in the

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<sup>39</sup> The Vatican, "Dogmatic Constitution on the Church Lumen Gentium," [http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_const\\_19641121\\_lumen-gentium\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html) (accessed February 10, 2011).

<sup>40</sup> Winston H. Taylor, "Presidential Address," Manuscript, folder "1969 Convention," box 6, Records: 1929-1985 (89-1115a), RPRCC.

<sup>41</sup> "News Release, April 22, 1971" folder "RPRC Convention Photos 1971," box 6, Records: 1929-1985 (89-1115a), RPRCC.

RPRC remained small, and as late as 1979, the cover story of the *Counselor* reported on means to recruit Roman Catholics for membership.<sup>42</sup>

In the mid-1960s, discussions opened on the possibility of uniting the entire industry of religious promotion, regardless of religious belief. According to the *Counselor* in 1966, an interest in cooperating with professional communicators in other religions had been taking building for several years.<sup>43</sup> So that year, the same year that members suggested Roman Catholics and Jews be allowed membership, a committee was created to begin planning a “joint Religious Communications Congress” to meet in 1970.<sup>44</sup> The aim was to bring together all practitioners of religious public relations, regardless of religious affiliation. In a letter sent to all invited organizations, the steering committee outlined the purpose of this church promotion congress. “We will discuss our common goals, the tools with which to do the job, and share our resources while at the same time save travel, time and money by concentrating these varied groups and their resources in one tremendous Religious Communications Congress.”<sup>45</sup> The proposal was a bit out of place since the RPRC was still not allowing Roman Catholics and Jews to join. Yet it clearly represented a trajectory of greater inclusion and an assumption that these organizations could unite around their methods and an increasingly inclusive definition of truth and doctrine.

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<sup>42</sup> “Roman Catholics Being Urged to Consider RPRC,” *RPRC Counselor* (February 1979), box 5, Records: 1952-1988 (88-0630), RPRCC.

<sup>43</sup> “Joint Religious Communications Congress,” *RPRC Counselor* 16, no. 1 (Fall 1966), box 5, Records: 1952-1988 (88-0630), RPRCC.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>45</sup> “Religious Communications Congress,” Letter, folder “Religious Communications Congress 1970”, box 6, Records: 1929-1985 (89-1115a), RPRCC.

The RPRC joined twenty-six Roman Catholic, Protestant, and Jewish communications organizations as the official sponsors of the interfaith convention in Chicago, in April 1970. In attendance were 400 representatives of forty-one different religious public relations groups.<sup>46</sup> The same year, the RPRC welcomed Jews into its membership with a change in its by-laws. In 1966, they had changed the laws to include all Christians. Now they replaced “Christian” with “any religious.” The by-laws read that a person eligible for membership was, “any person who devotes a major portion of his service in professional public relations to *any religious* [emphasis added] communion, organization, or related agency duly accredited by the board of governors.”<sup>47</sup> Jerry Hatfield led this change in policy as president of the NY Chapter of the RPRC and a community relations director for Religion in American Life, Inc. After having received several Jewish applications for membership in the local chapter in New York, he had begun pressing the organization to open its doors wider. Frustrated by what he interpreted as “foot-dragging,” he issued a strident defense for including other religions:

What is holding us back? The argument we hear most often is that the public relations task of the Christian church is so highly specialized that it cannot share its particular concerns with public relations practitioners of the Jewish faith without ‘watering down’ the special ministry to which we are called. Your Executive Committee is saying the age of defending ‘the one true faith’ has passed as we learn to work together in the service of one true God. As we see it, the techniques of serving Him through modern media are not the sole possession of believers in any set of doctrines or dogmas. Our decision to include Catholics in our membership just a few years ago was made on this very premise.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> “Religious News Service: Religious Media Urged to Follow Common Agenda on Social Concerns,” April 13, 1970, folder “Religious Communications Congress 1970,” box 6, Records: 1929-1985 (89-1115a), RPRCC.

<sup>47</sup> “Jews Included in RPRC!” Memo, folder “Religious Communications Congress 1970,” box 6, Records: 1929-1985 (89-1115a), RPRCC.

<sup>48</sup> “Strength in Numbers,” Chapter 3, *RPRC: A 50-Year Reflection*, box 1, Records: 1952-1988 (88-0630), RPRCC.

Hatfield defended the motion for greater inclusion by pointing to a new conviction, that doctrinal distinctions had dissolved and all religions pointed to the one God. Others now agreed, and the membership approved the motion. They had taken the doors to membership off the hinges. Any religious public relations professional could join, not just Christian or Jewish, but any religion.

Hatfield's argument, and its broad acceptance, demonstrated once again the growing confidence that religious public relations professionals could find unite around the methods and a loosely defined God. Yet in Hatfield's effort to increase the effectiveness of the organization, he was helping to erase what little unity they had held in a distinctively religious message. This pluralization would undermine the RPRC's efforts to distinguish itself from rest of the public relations industry.

After 1970, the RPRC aggressively pursued expansive religious diversity in the organization. They amended the "Professional Aims for Christian Public Relations Personnel" to suit their new identity. A sort of credo for every member of the organization adopted in 1955, the aims began, "As a servant of the Lord Jesus Christ, and dedicated to the task of making His church and its mission more widely and more favorably known, I aim." The Board of Governors now deleted references to "Lord Jesus Christ," "Christian" and "church." Substituted were words such as "my faith" and "religious group."<sup>49</sup>

The RPRC also altered the purpose of the organization to be more inclusive. In 1969 the purpose read, "to establish, raise and maintain the standard of public relations throughout the Churches and church-related agencies." The next year the purpose read,

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<sup>49</sup> "Matters of Concern," Chapter 6, *RPRC: A 50-Year Reflection*, box 1, Records: 1952-1988 (88-0630), RPRCC.



“to establish, raise, and maintain the high standards of public relations and communications to the end that religious faith and life may be advanced.” The alteration reflected a new initiative not to promote churches as much as universal principles in faith and life. Membership definitions also changed, with the membership described in 1969 as, “persons who devote a major portion of their service to any Christian communion, interdenominational body, or church-related agency in professional public relations activities.” Membership in 1970 “consists of persons who devote a major portion of their service in professional public relations activities to any religious communion, organization, or related agency.”<sup>50</sup> By 1970, the RPRC was officially “inter-faith.”

The organization continued to pursue “inter-faith” cooperation, particularly as a means to improve religious promotion. In 1971, at the national RPRC convention, both Richard Cohen, past president of the Jewish Public Relations Society, and Russell Shaw, Director of the National Catholic Office for Information worried, as Shaw said, that “the state of institutional religion ... is perhaps worse than it’s ever been in our lifetime.” The solution they prescribed was “interfaith cooperation.”<sup>51</sup> Cohen explained that religions, instead of arguing, should share strategies and goals. He believed that, “Public relations people because of the nature of their assignments in their organization can play a particularly useful role in the kind on inter-action among our various faiths.”<sup>52</sup> Religious public relations professionals must be the ones, he concluded to “say to each other in this

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<sup>50</sup> “RPRC 1969-1970 Supplement Directory,” box 5, Records: 1952-1988 (88-0630), RPRCC. “RPRC 1970-1971 Supplement Directory,” box 5, Records: 1952-1988 (88-0630), RPRCC.

<sup>51</sup> News Release, April 22, 1971, folder “RPRC Convention Photos 1971,” box 6, Records: 1929-1985 (89-1115a), RPRCC.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

day of cultural pluralism that our differences are useful, vital, and demand respect.”<sup>53</sup> Many agreed and the religious diversity and cooperation among religious promotional professionals continued to grow.

In 1980, nearly 1,300 religious promotion experts gathered at the Religious Communication Congress. The new diversity of the industry shined brightly at the Congress. There were forty-nine different groups represented in the attendees from religions that varied between Hare Krishnas to Mormons to Unitaritans.<sup>54</sup> After the conference, in the fall 1980 issue of the *Counselor*, the current RPRC president Thomas Brannon celebrated the pluralism of the industry. He wrote, “Strength in diversity is probably nowhere more applicable than in the case of RPRC. I continue to be amazed at the unity and fellowship, which exists among us. Maintaining both is our continuing challenge.”<sup>55</sup> The diversity was indeed amazing as only fifteen years earlier, the RPRC had held firmly to the exclusivity of a strictly Protestant membership that promoted only Protestant churches and doctrine. In serving as a forum for cooperation, the RPRC had been a pioneer in the pluralization of much of American Christianity. Yet, as Brannon recognized, this diversity brought with it a “continuing challenge” in preserving unity.<sup>56</sup>

### Religious Promotion Adopts New Messages (1965 - 1980)

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Lillian Moir, “News Release: Congress Wrapup,” May 16, 1980, folder “RCC/80 News Releases,” box 6, Records: 1929-1985 (89-1115a), RPRCC.

<sup>55</sup> “President’s Column,” *RPRC Counselor* (Fall 1980), box 5, Records: 1952-1988 (88-0630), RPRCC.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

The first day's "Morning Worship" service of the 1980 Religious Communication Congress reflected the changes in the pluralization of the organization and its work. Instead of hymns and traditional Christian music, or any kind of explicitly religious music, the service music was that of Aaron Copland, J.S. Bach, Antonin Dvorak, and Leonard Bernstein.<sup>57</sup> The topics of discussion had little to do with religious doctrine. There was also little to no mention of Jesus Christ. Specific references or propositions regarding any one religion no longer suited such a diverse gathering, and this presented a significant challenge for the organization.

The pluralization of the RPRC complicated the organization's incessant effort to distinguish its identity and profession from that of secular promoters. They had argued that their promotion of "the truth" made them different; it purified their methods. However, the changes after 1965 removed "the truth" from their shelves. Now, in cooperation with other religions, they could no longer endorse particular religious doctrines or institutions to unite and distinguish their industry.

Their solution was two-fold. One strategy was to emphasize not the truth of the RPRC message, but the truthfulness of the method. In part, this was a response to eroding American confidence in institutions. As the Pentagon Papers, Watergate scandal, and other incidents shattered public trust of establishments of authority in American life, the RPRC labored to differentiate its institutions by highlighting the integrity in its practices. Another strategy was to embrace and unite around what historian Hugh McLeod describes as a new "dramatic religious radicalization" that accompanied the "political radicalization" of American culture. He explains that in the late 1960s, many

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<sup>57</sup> "Religious Communications Congress/1980 Program," box 7, Records: 1929-1985 (89-1115a), RPRCC.

Roman Catholic and Protestant churches altered their agenda, focusing on “action ‘in the world’, political engagement, and a stress on service rather than defense of the institution, pious practices, or undue attention to theological abstractions.”<sup>58</sup> Instead of promoting particular institutions and doctrines, the RPRC sold social justice. Thus, in the late 1960s and beyond, much of the church promotion industry promoted, sought to unite its professionals in, and define its identity in a moral crusade and the truth of its methods.

*The Religion in American Life Campaign Promotes a New Message*

The changes in the Religion in American Life campaign represented the changes in much of American Christianity and its promotion. Since its inception in 1949, the program of national religious advertising had grown tremendously. While in 1956, it had utilized \$7.5 million in time and space for advertisements, by 1975, it was using \$23 million.<sup>59</sup> As it expanded in scope, so too did its diversity.

The pluralization of the RIAL greatly surpassed even its ecumenical origins. In its start, it represented Protestant, Jewish, and Roman Catholic organizations. However, when it ended in the 1990s, there were fifty-four different groups involved, including Unitarians, Eastern Orthodox, and Muslims.<sup>60</sup> In advertisements, they boasted about the benefits that their sponsorship of community programs encouraged by bringing different religions together. One example in the 1970s was the creation of both ecumenical worship services and a daycare in a small town. These programs, according to the ad,

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<sup>58</sup> Hugh McLeod, *The Religious Crisis of the 1960s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 142-43.

<sup>59</sup> Volker Rudi Henning, “The Advertising Council and its Religion in American Life” (PhD diss., University of Tennessee, 1996), 133.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 148-49.

brought Roman Catholics and Protestants together who had previously loathed one another.<sup>61</sup> Yet this increasing diversity, both in the organization and in society, required significant changes in the product that it sold. It could not promote church attendance, but had to embrace a broader message that all religious supporters could rally behind and that the public would accept. Moral action in society became the new message.

Since 1949, the Religion in American Life campaign had sold the importance of church attendance across the United States, but in 1965, the product changed. The original purpose of the RIAL campaign, as stated in 1956, was to “strengthen the place of religion in personal and community life by urging all Americans to attend regularly the church or synagogue of their choice.”<sup>62</sup> The initial campaign focused its efforts on encouraging people to attend a weekly church service in their community. The first slogan was “Find yourself through faith. Come to church this week.”<sup>63</sup> Advertisement slogans identified the church as the place to be refreshed, to deal with life’s troubles, and to find faith. In 1956 President Eisenhower delivered a typical RIAL message, urging Americans to regularly support and attend local churches.<sup>64</sup> However, this message began to change in 1964. The slogan that year included the same encouragement to attend church, but it added that a person should “put their faith to work.” David Gockley, executive vice-president of the organization, explained that the RIAL campaign changed its primary message from “go-to-church exhortations” to “putting religious faith to work.”

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<sup>61</sup> “Display Ad 49” *Washington Post*, December 17, 1973.

<sup>62</sup> Henning, 106.

<sup>63</sup> Edward B. Fiske, “Redefined Values in Religion Urged,” *New York Times*, January 22, 1967.

<sup>64</sup> “President Urges Full Support for U.S. Religious Activities,” *Washington Post*, Oct. 31, 1953.

Beginning in 1965, the campaigns focused on “major social problems and ... sources of spiritual strength to meet real-life moral challenges.”<sup>65</sup> Examples of the change are clear in the shift in slogans. The 1966 slogan was “God’s work must truly be our own. Put your faith to work...today.” In 1967 it was “United we stand. Divided we fall. Put your faith to work. Today.” The slogan of 1969 was a little more subtle, but still in the same spirit, “Break the hate habit. Love your neighbor.”<sup>66</sup> This last one mentioned nothing of religion or even faith, and demonstrated how far the RIAL had moved from its original intention.

In following the RIAL campaign, New York Times journalist Edward Fiske noted that “promoting religion follows the same fashions that affect the selling of detergents and politicians. In brief: institutional religion is out; ecology and other social concerns are in.”<sup>67</sup> The 1972 themes included addressing urban decay, shoplifting and bribery.<sup>68</sup> Advertising for moral action had replaced advertising for churches. The purpose was not raising church attendance but raising political action and moral engagement in contemporary problems. The change followed the trends of religious cooperation and public interest. The product had to be a faith that was more amorphous, more universally acceptable in society.

The new message did present a particular threat. While claiming to be a religious message, it varied very little from secular concerns with moral action. The product was losing its religious distinctiveness. Some recognized the threat, the risk that their

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<sup>66</sup> David Gockley “Advertising,” in James C. Suggs, *Handbook on Church Public Relations: for Local Congregations of All Denominations*, 1st ed. (New York: The Council, 1969), 22.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

<sup>68</sup> Edward B. Fiske, “How Nice to Be No. 1,” *New York Times*, October 29, 1972.

promotion would cease to be religious. Rev. Walter D. Wagoner, a pastor in the United Church of Christ, warned that religion could find in its effort to remain “relevant” to the culture, that it could lose its distinctive religious character. He cautioned, “Let’s not become so secular that we forget that there is another realm.”<sup>69</sup> The RPRC would face the same threat as it enacted similar changes. They had worked diligently, prior to 1965, to carve out distinctiveness from the rest of the promotion industry, now they would begin to lose what little ground they had gained. The transition was apparent in how the organization changed its understanding and use of the truth.

*The Truth Changes in the RPRC: Truth as Method not Message*

After 1965, truth took on a new dimension in American culture. Daniel Boorstin noted, in the early 1960s, a significant transition in promotion. He explained that there was a widespread “shift in common experience from an emphasis on ‘truth’ to an emphasis on ‘credibility.’” The change was that, “All of us ... are less interested in whether something is a fact than in whether it is convenient that it should be believed.”<sup>70</sup> As Boorstin argued, American culture no longer appreciated or even desired to know what was factually true. The real issue was the utility of the thing. If it suited the individual, then it was true. What mattered was did it appear true, was it represented accurately and honestly.<sup>71</sup> The significance of believability eclipsed the significance of truth.

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<sup>69</sup> Edward B. Fiske, “Redefined Values in Religion Urged,” *New York Times*, January 22 1967.

<sup>70</sup> Daniel J. Boorstin, *The Image; Or, What Happened to the American Dream* (New York: Atheneum, 1962), 212.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*

This public demand for believability increased as public scandals revealed how advanced the art of obfuscation had become. Because of the Vietnam War, and later the Watergate affair, the greater public was growing more and more suspect of the veracity of public institutions. Many blamed the public relations industry for the rampant beguilement. Richard Tedlow notes that, “By the early 1970s, the term, ‘public relations’ was being widely used in liberal journals as an antonym for truth. ‘The time for lies, cover-ups, public relations posturing, and cute maneuvers is over,’ thundered the *New York Times* in a Watergate editorial in April of 1973.” He continues, “The blame for Watergate was repeatedly laid at the door of public relations maneuvers and mentality, despite the fact that no professional public relations counselors were among Nixon’s entourage.”<sup>72</sup> If the field had been the mistrusted cousin in the modern business family of the 1950s, by the mid-1970s it was the prodigal son. It had betrayed the public trust but still hoped to return to good graces. The RPRC stood in the middle of this struggle and worked to be more trustworthy in their work.

The RPRC shifted its point of unity and identity from the truth of the message to the truth of the method as a means to regain public confidence. Beginning in 1965, while many in the RPRC continued to use the word “truth” to refer to “eternal truths,” others more frequently used it to describe honest communication.<sup>73</sup> The theme of the 1965 convention was “To Tell the Truth...” The promotional brochure explained that “To Tell the Truth a man must need it, know it, and probe it. You will be challenged to test the truth you think you know. To begin to understand again your need for it. To join in a

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<sup>72</sup> Richard S. Tedlow, *Keeping the Corporate Image: Public Relations and Business, 1900-1950* (Greenwich, CT: JAI Press, 1979). 205.

<sup>73</sup> David W. Gockley, “The More Excellent Way,” Report of the President, April 18-21, folder “1966 Convention,” box 6, Records: 1929-1985 (89-1115a), RPRCC.



competent search for it.” Yet the irony was in who would instruct them in the truth, not theologians, but professionals from secular fields.

The brochure continued, “Seminars staffed by the finest people available from the Twin Cities’ top quality advertising and public relations agencies will offer the best in professional guidance.” It then quoted Psalm 43:3, “Oh send out thy light and thy truth; let them lead me, let them bring me to thy holy hill and to thy dwelling.”<sup>74</sup> Truth was changing, it was tossed around without meaning. The brochure suggested that the truth that these pr men and women would learn to tell, was the truth expressed in Psalm 43:3, an eternal truth, the truth of God. Yet would they look to the “finest” experts in local advertising and public relations agencies for this truth? The truth they would learn from them was how to promote honestly. Though subtle, this transition was significant for the RPRC. The truth was changing, it was no longer the truth of Psalm 43:3, it was more the truth of how to represent an institution, truth in communication.

There were at least two primary catalysts for the shift in “the truth” in the RPRC, the increased ecumenism and the growing credibility gap. Both accelerated in the 1970s. As demonstrated, the RPRC grew much more inclusive of not only other denominations but also other religions in its membership. The diversity of the membership eliminated the historic center, particular doctrinal convictions, of identity and unity in the organization. A new focus on “the truth” as method instead of “the truth” as Jesus Christ, eased the transition. This new focus also sought to overcome another problem. A new attention to truthfulness in methods could regain public trust, they hoped.

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<sup>74</sup> 1965 RPRC Convention Brochure, folder “1965 Convention,” box 6, Records: 1929-1985 (89-1115a), RPRCC.

The RPRC recognized that the public relations field was under assault. John Gillies wrote in the Fall *Counselor* on the damage done to the PR industry by the Watergate scandal. He lamented that the public “again, will view PR as puffery, flackery, and image building. And, unfortunately, cover-up.” As a possible course of action he suggested, “We may have to find a new name for our profession. The prostitution and abuse of PR has been enormous.”<sup>75</sup> The editor of the Chicago Sun-Times, Ralph Otwell explained the significance of the crisis. He stated that “It is a joint crisis of disbelief and distrust that confront both journalism and the church, creating for all of the media a growing problem of credibility.”<sup>76</sup> The American people no longer trusted the media, according to Otwell, and that meant that people no longer trusted the churches because they used the media to communicate. Tom McNally lamented that the Pentagon’s public relations program had further nurtured the public’s suspicion of the profession. The best solution as he saw it was “to tell it like it is.”<sup>77</sup> At the 1973 convention, Richard A. Hahn, the Director of Public Relations for the Cummins Engine Company, warned to “Watch your credibility gap.” He reemphasized the necessity to be truthful.<sup>78</sup> In order to overcome the “credibility gap” in American society, the RPRC believed it had to focus on the truth of their methods.

In an effort to purify their image and separate themselves from other public relations sectors, the RPRC enacted resolutions. They could no longer distinguish

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<sup>75</sup> John Gillies, *NRPC Counselor* (August 1973), box 5, Records: 1952-1988 (88-0630), RPRCC.

<sup>76</sup> Ralph Otwell, “New Dimensions of Credibility,” April 8, 1970, Manuscript, folder “Religious Communications Congress 1970,” box 6, Records: 1929-1985 (89-1115a), RPRCC.

<sup>77</sup> Tom McNally, “What is the Future of Religious Public Relations,” *RPRC Counselor* (November 1973), box 5, Records: 1952-1988 (88-0630), RPRCC.

<sup>78</sup> “Hahn: Watch Your Credibility Gap,” *RPRC Counselor* (May 1973), box 5, Records: 1952-1988 (88-0630), RPRCC.

themselves from the public relations field by the truth of their message, so they pointed to the truth of their method. In 1966, they proposed a code of ethics for the membership. It included several resolutions that dealt specifically with being honest and accurate in all representation. A member was not to “intentionally disseminate false or misleading information” or claim independence when actually serving the private interest of a client.<sup>79</sup> Eleven years later at the annual convention entitled “Who Believes Us? The Credibility of Religion in the Market Place” they issued a “Resolution on Truth.” The RPRC resolved that it would “affirm the ideal and practice of straightforward, honest, responsible interpretation and reporting of information concerning religion.”<sup>80</sup> The brief document mentioned the “credibility gap” specifically at least five times. At the convention, one of the guest speakers reiterated the necessity of the RPRC strategy to achieve truth in method. Other religious promotion experts took some of the same steps.

The Baptist Public Relations Association found itself in the same situation as the RPRC and also labored to clean up its methods. The organization had enacted a Code of Ethics in 1962 and a Code of Professional Standards in 1964 as a means to set themselves apart from an “unethical” industry. Though this may have worked as a rhetorical strategy, unfortunately it was little more. In 1971, one member of the BPRC put the Code of Ethics to the test. They brought charges against another member for violating the Code of Ethics. However, ironically, the BPRC decided that fellowship was more

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<sup>79</sup> “Proposed Code of Ethics for Religious Public Relations Council,” April 1966, folder “1966 Convention,” box 6, Records: 1929-1985 (89-1115a), RPRCC.

<sup>80</sup> “Resolution on Truth,” April 22, 1977, folder “1977 Convention,” box 7, Records: 1929-1985 (89-1115a), RPRCC.

important that judgment and did not pursue the charge.<sup>81</sup> In the BPRA, cooperation trumped truth.

In the RPRC, the organization continued to develop its effort to be truthful in method, looking to some experts from the larger field of promotion. White House Correspondent, Forrest Boyd, addressed the RPRC in 1977 on the challenge to “communicate believably” to an increasingly skeptical public. Having covered the man at the center of the credibility gap, Richard Nixon, Boyd shared his own advice on how religious institutions could avoid the path that Nixon took with the public. He explained that image is important in promotional work, but one must be careful. He continued, “The legitimate way to think of image is as a true reflection or representation of the real thing. It should be authentic, in other words. It should not be a distortion - neither better than the real thing, nor worse than the real thing. And it should not be an illusion, that is strictly a fabrication or a lie.”<sup>82</sup> In his advice, he repeatedly used the words “authentic,” “integrity” and “honest.” This was the truth now for the RPRC. The truth was the representation.

The desire for truth in method was clear two years prior in the attention given the featured speaker at the 1975 convention, Jack Anderson. The *Counselor* in February provided a glowing article on Anderson. It held him up as a fierce warrior of truth, utilizing the media to expose the facts otherwise hidden behind layers of government deception and corruption.<sup>83</sup> This was who the members of the RPRC hoped to be now.

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<sup>81</sup> James H. Cox, *We've A Story to Tell: A History of Baptist Public Relations Association, 1953-1987* (Brentwood, TN: Baptist Public Relations Association, 1986), 34, 40, 53.

<sup>82</sup> Forrest Boyd, “Communicating in the Market Place: The Real Nixon,” April 22, 1977, folder “1977 Convention,” box 7, Records: 1929-1985 (89-1115a), RPRCC.

<sup>83</sup> *RPRC Counselor* (February 1975), box 5, Records: 1952-1988 (88-0630), RPRCC.

They did not seek to communicate the truth of the Gospel, but the truth of communication itself. They wanted to be transparent conduits of information, enlightening the American public to the social ills of the age. In many ways, they were returning to the roots of church promotion in the Progressive era. Yet they were also engaged in their own public relations campaign for their industry. They had to convince the public that they could be trusted. Anderson's advice was "never lie, never misrepresent, and ... try to get the truth out."<sup>84</sup> The emphasis on no secrecy resounded in their convention materials that repeatedly exclaimed, "It's no secret!" in describing the events and benefits of the convention.<sup>85</sup> They also directed the campaign towards themselves. At the convention, they wore buttons that read "Proud to be in PR."<sup>86</sup> It was all an effort to resuscitate their profession.

Another dimension in the credibility gap, according to the experts, was not just truth in the method but an increasing lack of church relevance to society. Many in the RPRC argued that churches had lost touch with American culture and individual desires. They were not believable because they appeared so disinterested in the public, in current issues and current travails. Historian Sydney Ahlstrom in 1977 explained to the members, "There's a genuine credibility gap on a theological level between what's spoken from the pulpit and what people can understand or apply to their daily lives."<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> Jack Anderson, "Best Public Relations is Truth," *RPRC Counselor* (May 1975), box 5, Records: 1952-1988 (88-0630), RPRCC.

<sup>85</sup> "No Secret!" *RPRC Counselor* (May 1975), box 5, Records: 1952-1988 (88-0630), RPRCC.

<sup>86</sup> "Proud to be in PR," *RPRC Counselor* (May 1975), box 5, Records: 1952-1988 (88-0630), RPRCC.

<sup>87</sup> Sidney Ahlstrom, "The Public and the Churches Reflections on the Lasting Effects of a Traumatic Era: 1960-1976," Manuscript, April 1977, folder "1977 Convention," box 7, Records: 1929-1985 (89-1115a), RPRCC.

According to Ahlstrom the message was no longer relevant. The message had to change; it had to affect people and their lives. According to many, if the RPRC hoped to overcome the credibility gap, it had to do more than be truthful in method, it had to offer a new message.

*The Message Changes in the RPRC: Politics Not Doctrine & Institutions*

In the mid-1960s there was a notable shift in the RPRC, like that of the RIAL, from the promotion of religious institutions and their core belief systems, to the promotion of universal religious principles and their application in society. As the RPRC altered its focus from Christian promotion to religious promotion, as it promoted inclusivity in religion, it could no longer unite around exclusive religious doctrines. It also documented a similar desire among the public for less institutional religion, and more inclusive moral imperatives.

Since its inception, members and guest lecturers of the RPRC had occasionally noted that religious institutions must demonstrate a compassion and interest in larger social challenges. In fact, as historian Susan Curtis argues, one of the primary means by which religious institutions had first tasted the allure of advertising and other promotional methods was through their use in the Progressive era to publicize social ills. Though these elements had always been present in the RPRC, they had remained on the back burner, only mentioned infrequently as a means to court public favor; this all changed after 1965.

Beginning in 1966, the RPRC moved the message of social justice to the front burner of its agenda. Gone was the language of evangelism and conversion, now the

organization would promote social change through political action and community involvement. Instead of Jesus, conversion, and church attendance, the RPRC now focused on brotherly love and social justice, concepts much more easily digestible for the broader public and among its diversity of members.

Prior to the mid-1960s, RPRC members discussed messages of moral action in society, but without any definitive commitment to them. One example was at the 1958 convention, which hosted a panel on the subject of the “Moral Implications of Today’s Imperatives...” One of the panelists was Professor Hugh C. Wolfe from the Department of Physics at Cooper Union. He expressed his concern for the apparent soft voice of churches about the arms race. He argued that the time was right for a U.S. push for a “controlled disarmament.” Another member of the panel was Dr. Roy Bough, professor of economics at Columbia University. He argued, “there is no moral excuse for poverty in this country.” He discussed the state of poverty in much of the world, yet did not draw distinct connections to churches’ roles in the issue.<sup>88</sup> These were soft calls for more attention to social issues; however, others reminded the RPRC of a different purpose.

At the Thursday night awards dinner, Dr. Paul C. Empie, the Executive Director of the Lutheran Council, made it clear that political crusades must not distract churches. “The Christian concern is not one of creating a pressure-bloc to lobby for legislation incorporating the views of the church,” he argued. Empie noted that it is the role of the church to “stimulate clear thinking” among people about national issues, but political involvement is not the way to accomplish such goals. Though he believed social matters were important, he warned that churches should not focus on political issues. Instead, he

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<sup>88</sup> “Churches Challenged on National Problems 4-18-58,” Religious News Service Bulletin, folder “1958 Convention,” box 6, Records: 1929-1985 (89-1115a), RPRCC.

reiterated, these experts must remain committed to interpreting the “Gospel” to the public.<sup>89</sup> Yet by the mid-1960s, the tide began to turn and social justice issues increasingly garnered attention in the RPRC. A growing proportion of speakers at conventions and contributors to the *Counselor* addressed moral influence in society instead of methods to promote Jesus.

The annual convention in 1966 was the first in which advocates for social action commanded a significant amount of attention. At the convention, a professor from Vanderbilt University, Dan Grant, addressed the members with a talk entitled, “Mixing Politics, Public Relations, and Religion.”<sup>90</sup> Grant stated emphatically “Any Christianity which does not make an impact on government decisions at all levels is counterfeit religion.”<sup>91</sup> He urged all of those present to get their churches and their parishioners more involved in attacking racial discrimination, poverty, and war through political activism. His central point was that Christianity must influence government decisions. He stated, “You public relations workers for religious groups have an awesome responsibility and a tremendous opportunity, for you must interpret politics and religion to the people of the church, and to the public at large.”<sup>92</sup> Religious public relations professionals, according to Grant, were to use their expertise and influence to inform people’s political action.

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<sup>89</sup> “Dr. Empie Urges Church Admit Errors 4-18-58,” Religious News Service Bulletin, folder “1958 Convention,” box 6, Records: 1929-1985 (89-1115a), RPRCC.

<sup>90</sup> “Theme: Reaching a Restless World,” Convention Highlights, folder “1966 Convention,” box 6, Records: 1929-1985 (89-1115a), RPRCC.

<sup>91</sup> “Exhibit A-6 4/20/66,” folder “1966 Convention,” box 6, Records: 1929-1985 (89-1115a), RPRCC.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid.



Getting involved in promoting social justice could also win the favor of the public, according to Dr. Sam Proctor. A speaker at the 1966 convention, Proctor was the special assistant to Sargent Shriver in the Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO). The OEO was Lyndon Johnson's principal weapon in the "War on Poverty." As director of it, Shriver, the founder and former director of the Peace Corps, served as the commanding general of the campaign to eradicate poverty in America. Proctor's basic message to the 132 gathered religious public relations counselors was that the church must do something about poverty. He explained that the impoverished see white Protestants as barriers to economic prosperity. "They see the church as a middle-class club that does not really relate to the teachings of Jesus Christ."<sup>93</sup> He argued the religious public relations experts had to change the church's image by addressing poverty.

Alan Geyer, the editor of the *Christian Century* magazine, also promoted the value in being more involved in social issues. At the 1970 RPRC convention that met before the larger Congress convention, he called on the communicators to fix their problems of credibility and irrelevance by looking to political action. He argued that institutions could regain public approval if they demonstrated how they could "empower human beings to become and to be." He criticized churches though for only "talking a lot about doing things, but never doing them." The solution was "to perceive the church as a political institution."<sup>94</sup> Churches, according to Geyer, had to surrender their doctrine and not allow it to order the power and work of the church. He stated, "...politics need to be liberated from the dungeons of doctrine, whether religious or managerial, which keep so

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<sup>93</sup> "Theme: Reaching a Restless World," Convention Highlights, folder "1966 Convention," box 6, Records: 1929-1985 (89-1115a), RPRCC.

<sup>94</sup> Alan Geyer, "Toward a Political View of Religious Journalism," Manuscript, folder "Religious Communications Congress 1970," box 6, Records: 1929-1985 (89-1115a), RPRCC.

many possibilities of human fulfillment in chains.”<sup>95</sup> The church had to engage in politics and use its power to rally the people to change the world.<sup>96</sup> In so doing, they could not only make the world a better place, but also improve their public image in the process.

Beyond restoring credibility to their institutions, the RPRC members believed that a shift in message to political advocacy would address the important issues of the day. Some of the social justice matters that they promoted were eradicating world hunger and poverty. One speaker recommended that churches promote strategies to increase food production and establish a long-term birth control plan.<sup>97</sup> Rabbi Marc H. Tanenbaum, director of Interreligious Affairs for the American Jewish Committee in New York, asked that religious institutions convince the government to spend \$20 billion of an \$80 billion defense budget on the “Third World” challenges of population increase, poverty, and disease. A panel that followed consisted of Roman Catholic and Protestant representatives, who all agreed on Rabbi Tanenbaum’s statements.<sup>98</sup> Meanwhile, President Nixon’s communications chief, Herbert Klein raised another issue in 1969. Though the RPRC may have hoped that he would give them insight on his management of the press and news in the White House, instead he focused on the problem of

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<sup>95</sup> Ibid.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

<sup>97</sup> “Exhibit A-4 4/19/66,” folder “1966 Convention,” box 6, Records: 1929-1985 (89-1115a), RPRCC.

<sup>98</sup> “Religious Media Urged to Follow Common Agenda on Social Concerns – Monday, April 13, 1970,” Religious News Service Bulletin, folder “Religious Communications Congress 1970,” box 6, Records: 1929-1985 (89-1115a), RPRCC.

malnutrition and encouraged them to be the tools for churches to inform the public of it.<sup>99</sup> The RPRC also took up the cause of promoting freedom of the press, specifically supporting the Universalist church that was under investigation for publishing volumes of the Pentagon Papers.<sup>100</sup> The next year, 1973, they warned that the first amendment was under an unprecedented assault in the freedom of speech.<sup>101</sup> Another matter of interest was the fight against smoking.<sup>102</sup> However, none of these issues received as much attention as that of race and gender equality.

### *The New Centrality of Racial & Gender Justice in the RPRC*

In the late 1960s, many mainline denominations began affirming the arguments and actions of the Black Power movement, and providing spaces for their meetings.<sup>103</sup> Historic, white Protestant churches whose members had been many of the guardians of privilege in America supporting a radical, black separatist movement was an surprising development. Yet it represented the growing interest in calls for race and gender equality across the country in both mainline Protestant and Roman Catholic churches. The RPRC provided a forum well suited for such discussions. By the late 1960s, they had broadened their membership, were adopting moral issues as their message, and moving to use their influence for political change. Given this foundation, the RPRC and other church promotion experts increasingly took up the cause of racial and gender equality.

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<sup>99</sup> Press Release, folder “1969 Convention,” box 6, Records: 1929-1985 (89-1115a), RPRCC.

<sup>100</sup> *RPRC Counselor* (Dec 1972), box 5, Records: 1952-1988 (88-0630), RPRCC.

<sup>101</sup> *RPRC Counselor* (March 1973), box 5, Records: 1952-1988 (88-0630), RPRCC.

<sup>102</sup> *RPRC Counselor* (December 1972), box 5, Records: 1952-1988 (88-0630), RPRCC.

<sup>103</sup> James Hudnut-Beumler, *Looking for God in the Suburbs: The Religion of the American Dream and Its Critics, 1945-1965* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1994), 176.

In 1969, the subject of racial injustice took center stage at the RPRC convention and at the BPRA convention. At the Baptist convention, the keynote speaker focused his message on excoriating all forms of racial injustice and prejudice. There were no “how to” sessions on public relations techniques, just sessions on racism and hunger.<sup>104</sup> In his RPRC address, Woodie W. White, the executive secretary of the Commission on Religion and Race of the United Methodist Church, described the “dehumanization” of black people and called the RPRC members to help people understand black power and to defend Martin Luther King Jr. and his work.<sup>105</sup>

The RPRC president seconded White’s concern over discrimination in American society. In his address, he noted that Martin Luther King Jr. had been assassinated a year ago during the convention. He rallied the members to correct a pressing image problem in churches. While churches told the public that all were welcome, they only truly expected people similar to themselves come join them. He argued that it was the responsibility of religious public relations to combat this trend and help make churches more racially diverse. One way to do that, he explained, was to eradicate the “lack of color” in the RPRC membership.<sup>106</sup> Ironically, in the same address, Taylor called for an increased discrimination in churches.

One of the central ironies in religious promotion after 1965 was a desire to eliminate discrimination while promoting church growth methods that encouraged discrimination. While he called for eradicating racial prejudice in religious public

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<sup>104</sup> Cox, 48-9.

<sup>105</sup> Press Release, folder “1969 Convention,” box 6, Records: 1929-1985 (89-1115a), RPRCC.

<sup>106</sup> Winston H. Taylor, “Presidential Address,” Manuscript, folder “1969 Convention,” box 6, Records: 1929-1985 (89-1115a), RPRCC.

relations, the RPRC president in 1969 also said, “We surely need to do better at identifying our audiences and discriminating among them. There is a thin line between tailoring the message to audience appeal and being dishonest, but we have adequate room to work on the right side of it. In some cases we need to reach out much more widely, but in others to realize the limits of our ‘in’ audience.”<sup>107</sup> This contradiction captured one of the new paradoxes in the RPRC. As they pursued greater inclusivity among religions and races, they endorsed marketing methods that deliberately discriminated based on polling and demographic data. Just as they turned to rooting out explicit discrimination in their messages, they were increasing implicit discrimination in their methods.

Racial reconciliation was a principal issue at the 1970 RPRC convention. One speaker, Will Campbell, excoriated churches for only promoting their own institutions. He explained that such an act was a mark that the churches were “inflicted with the cancerous cells of racism” and that they upheld tyranny and aided the “rapid rise of the police state.”<sup>108</sup> Another speaker, Alan Geyer celebrated the development of black liberation theology and stated that the press was too “white wash.”<sup>109</sup> In response, the RPRC adopted a “Race Resolution” that urged all chapters to enlist more members from minority groups, especially racial minorities.<sup>110</sup> Appropriately, the top award for RPRC in 1970 went to a minister for a reconciliation program that dealt with poverty and racial

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<sup>107</sup> Ibid.

<sup>108</sup> Will Campbell, “Ethnicity, Ethics, and the 70’s,” Manuscript, folder “Religious Communications Congress 1970,” box 6, Records: 1929-1985 (89-1115a), RPRCC.

<sup>109</sup> Alan Geyer, “Toward a Political View of Religious Journalism,” Manuscript, April 9, 1970, folder “Religious Communications Congress 1970,” box 6, Records: 1929-1985 (89-1115a), RPRCC.

<sup>110</sup> “RPRC Race Resolution,” folder “Religious Communications Congress 1970,” box 6, Records: 1929-1985 (89-1115a), RPRCC. in Religious Communications Congress 1970.

justice.<sup>111</sup> In such measures, the religious promotion industry was ahead of the larger industry.

The Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) found in 1966 that blacks held a smaller percentage of jobs in advertising agencies than other industries like insurance and banking.<sup>112</sup> Partly in response, blacks formed the Group for Advertising Progress in 1968 to offer support, community, and models of achievement for their work in the industry. As one black advertising agent noted, “The first, toughest job in America is to try to make it in advertising and be black or Puerto Rican.” Yet the industry did not pursue measures like the RPRC to include blacks and other minorities. Frustrated by the lack of support, William Sharp spoke at the American Association of Advertising Agencies meeting in 1968, “You white advertising folks are a lot happier about the progress of integration than us black advertising folks.” Some advances were made, offering curriculum and training for minorities in advertising, but few real gains were made.<sup>113</sup> The issues continued into the 1970s in both the industry and in the RPRC.

Several conventions in the 1970s addressed matters of inequality in race and gender. At the 1972 convention, the RPRC passed a resolution to support black journalists that were reporting on liberation movements in Africa.<sup>114</sup> The organization also lamented the exclusion of ethnic minorities and women from work in broadcast

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<sup>111</sup> Awards Summary, folder “Religious Communications Congress 1970,” box 6, Records: 1929-1985 (89-1115a), RPRCC.

<sup>112</sup> Stephen R. Fox, *The Mirror Makers: A History of American Advertising and its Creators* (New York: Morrow, 1984), 281.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*, 283.

<sup>114</sup> *RPRC Counselor* (July 1972), box 5, Records: 1952-1988 (88-0630), RPRCC.

media.<sup>115</sup> Perhaps as a sign of their interest in the matter, they elected the first female president of the organization in 1973, Paula Becker. She then provided advice on how to get more women and minorities involved in the industry.<sup>116</sup>

The year before, the Baptist Public Relations Association elected its first female president, Catherine Allen, who celebrated her election as a commitment to the “women’s lib movement.”<sup>117</sup> At the 1974 RPRC convention, Megan McKenna, editor of a Roman Catholic literature series, challenged the members to use their expertise to speak for those in the community with no voice.<sup>118</sup> Yet in 1978, they lamented that they still were failing to incorporate minorities and resolved to work harder to recruit them.<sup>119</sup> Such a commitment reverberated in 1981 when they decided to move their convention from South Carolina since it did not vote in favor of ratifying the Equal Rights Amendment.<sup>120</sup>

Social issues remained a primary concern throughout the 1970s. The 1975 convention met in the capital of political action, Washington, D.C. The theme of the convention, “Eyeing the Capitol” was a subtle reminder of the shift in attention within the RPRC from spreading the truth to encouraging social and political activism. Led by Congressman Barber Conable, a panel discussed the importance and methods of

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<sup>115</sup> *RPRC Counselor* (Marc 1973), box 5, Records: 1952-1988 (88-0630), RPRCC.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>117</sup> Cox, 55.

<sup>118</sup> Megan McKenna, “The Theology of Women in Communications,” *RPRC Counselor* (November 1974), box 5, Records: 1952-1988 (88-0630), RPRCC.

<sup>119</sup> Resolutions of 1978 Convention, *RPRC Counselor* (May 1978), box 5, Records: 1952-1988 (88-0630), RPRCC.

<sup>120</sup> *RPRC Counselor* Commemorative (1979), box 5, Records: 1952-1988 (88-0630), RPRCC.

“lobbying and religious-political activism.”<sup>121</sup> A workshop at the 1977 convention focused on “The Church in Politics.” The adoption of the “Resolution on Truth” at that convention summarized the continuing efforts of the RPRC. After stating that the members would work to be honest in their representation of information, the resolution continued that they would increase their effort to promote the issues of “freedom of the press and other information, women’s rights, ethnic and religious freedom and equality, conservation and wise use of energy and resources, among other issues affecting human dignity and well-being.”<sup>122</sup> The RPRC passed a related resolution in 1978 at the convention. In it, they remembered Martin Luther King, Jr.’s assassination and resolved to improve in hiring minorities in the field and in bridging the gaps between races and culture.<sup>123</sup> Such issues continued to be at the forefront of the organization into the 1980s.

Racial and gender equality were primary subjects at the Religion Communication Congress in 1980. Racial injustice remained a primary issue with the keynote speaker Benjamin L. Hooks, the Executive Director of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and the Former Commissioner, Federal Communications Commission, encouraging all to stand against the “sweep of conservatism” that “has threatened to roll back’ civil rights advances made in recent years.”<sup>124</sup> He also attacked the resurgence of militant racism among whites, and Jimmy

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<sup>121</sup> “Press Release 2-26-75,” folder “1975 Wash. Convention,” box 7, Records: 1929-1985 (89-1115a), RPRCC.

<sup>122</sup> “Resolution on Truth,” April 22, 1977, folder “1977 Convention,” box 7, Records: 1929-1985 (89-1115a), RPRCC.

<sup>123</sup> News Release, April 7, 1978, folder “1978 Houston Convention,” box 7, Records: 1929-1985 (89-1115a), RPRCC.

<sup>124</sup> Lilian Moir, “Congress Wrapup,” News Release, May 16, 1980, folder “RCC/80 News Releases,” box 7, Records: 1929-1985 (89-1115a), RPRCC.



Carter's cuts in federal spending that would affect blacks.<sup>125</sup> As well, the newly formed Society of Blacks in Religious Communications decried the "sea of white faces" at the Congress.<sup>126</sup>

Two seminar leaders attacked racism and sexism. Mary Lou Redding, managing editor of *The Upper Room* and Lionel C. Barrow, Jr., dean of the school of communications at Howard University, led a seminar together. Redding criticized religious denominations for perpetuating sexism in their language and refusal to ordain women. Barrow explained that the civil rights struggle could not end "until racism and segregation are eliminated from white churches." He also implored them to hire more minorities.<sup>127</sup> Another seminar discussed the importance and means of "Eliminating Racism/Sexism in Religious Communication."<sup>128</sup> These were the new agenda of the RPRC, social and political change.

The changes that the RPRC, and the church promotion industry, underwent after 1965 are clear in two principal speakers at the Religious Communications Congress in 1980: Pope John Paul II and Jimmy Carter. At the Congress, 1,295 participants from eighteen countries watched a videotaped address recorded for them by Pope John Paul II. The presence of a Roman Catholic, let alone the Pope, at an RPRC convention would have been unimaginable before 1965. Yet the growing inclusivity of the organization had

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<sup>125</sup> Ibid.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid.

<sup>127</sup> "Racism/Sexism Seminar No. 8," News Release, May 15, 1980, folder "RCC/80 News Releases," box 7, Records: 1929-1985 (89-1115a), RPRCC.

<sup>128</sup> "RCC/80" Program, "RCC/80 News Releases," box 7, Records: 1929-1985 (89-1115a), RPRCC.

made a space for him to address the Congress. The leader of the Roman Catholic Church encouraged them, saying, “The service of humanity through the medium of the truth is something worthy of your best years, your finest talents, your most dedicated efforts.” He continued, “may I say to you what I said to the journalists at the United Nations: ‘Be faithful to the truth and to its transmission, for truth endures; truth will not go away. Truth will not pass or change.’”<sup>129</sup>

Yet truth had changed. The RPRC rarely spoke of truth as an eternal reality but as a method, as a form in transmission. The message had also changed. These church promotion experts had turned their attention to matters of social and political action. This new focus on promoting political agenda instead of churches stood out in the selection of who should close the Congress, U.S. president, Jimmy Carter.<sup>130</sup> Carter was not a theologian, not a religious leader, not even a promotion expert. He was a politician. Much of church promotion had shifted from promoting a local church to promoting political and social issues in society. There were other changes apparent at the Congress as well.

Marketing and the importance of market research were also important subjects at the Congress. Public opinion took center stage as George Gallup, Jr. provided a seminar entitled “The Public View of Religion”<sup>131</sup> Sister Elizabeth Thoman of the National Sisters Communications Services seconded this call to consider public opinion. In her address, she encouraged “churches to engage in research and market segmentation efforts

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<sup>129</sup> “Pope John Paul II Special Message to Religious Communication Congress/80,” Manuscript, folder “RCC/80 News Releases,” box 7, Records: 1929-1985 (89-1115a), RPRCC.

<sup>130</sup> Lilian Moir, “Congress Wrapup,” News Release, May 16, 1980, folder “RCC/80 News Releases,” box 7, Records: 1929-1985 (89-1115a), RPRCC.

<sup>131</sup> Congress Program, folder “RCC/80 News Releases,” box 7, Records: 1929-1985 (89-1115a), RPRCC.

when working with media projects.” She inquired of the participants if “they were prepared to change their attitudes to meet the needs of their audiences, pointing out that the ‘real role of public relations is responding to the needs of the audience.’”<sup>132</sup> These emphases highlighted the growing confidence among church promotion experts in the sovereignty of the customer, though by 1980 evangelical Protestants were leading in utilizing such marketing principles. Yet mainline Protestantism had been making significant strides in advertising through mediums also dominated by evangelicals, radio and television.

### Provocative Advertising in Mass Media & Its Critics

Residents of Baltimore heard unusual advertisements on their radios in 1978. One comforted the listener, “We take care of Sunday morning growlers at First and Franklin Street Presbyterian Church. We serve coffee, donuts and the Sunday paper before and after the service. And we keep our services lively, so even if there’s an occasional ... (lion growl) ... nobody notices.” Another said, “‘Let’s face it a dull Sunday service is a real snore. Well Baltimore, it’s time to wake up ... at First and Franklin Street Presbyterian Church.’”<sup>133</sup> Both were ads for a local church, and they appealed to the listeners fear that church could be boring and interest in excitement and free food.

Written by a secular advertising agency, the Emery Advertising Agency, these radio ads presented a church as exciting and interesting. Much like Robert Schuller’s

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<sup>132</sup> “RPRC Keynote” News Release, May 13, 1980, folder “RCC/80 News Releases,” box 7, Records: 1929-1985 (89-1115a), RPRCC.

<sup>133</sup> “Church Ads Are Intended to be ‘A Little Unusual,’” *The Sun*, December 7, 1978.

church, this church sought to attract people by offering an entertaining option to the community. The pastor's explanation for his promotion method and the message reveals much about the spirit behind it. He said, "if you don't do something a little off-the-wall, a little unusual, even a little controversial, nobody's going to notice you." He continued, "They [the commercials] say church is exciting, that the Christian faith has a sense of humor, that the church can laugh at itself, that it is not authoritarian, that we are just like guys not in the church who are trying to make our lives have some sense, and that there is no separation between the sacred and the secular."<sup>134</sup> Both the message and the medium represented the growing readiness among churches to relinquish concerns for dignity in advertising. They were offering excitement, humor, and a lack of authority in commercials and services, created by business consultants, that could be as secular as they were sacred.

In the late 1960s, churches adopted two significant strategies in commercial promotion that had been in place for forty years in the rest of the marketplace. Whereas churches had been on the cutting edge in the 1920s and 1930s in using the radio to spread their messages and attract new customers, they failed to grasp the potential of the radio for direct advertising campaigns. Commercialism was the financial backbone of radio and later television. Yet it was not until the 1960s that denominations and local churches joined commercial institutions in supporting radio and television through advertising. Similarly, churches had failed to reach out to the promotional consultants of the business world. They had instead relied on internal experts to transfer methods into the religious industry. In part, one reason was the effort to maintain a distinction between the sacred and the secular. The direct consultation of a secular firm in promotion may have been to

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<sup>134</sup> Ibid.

direct of an association between a church and a business. However, in the late 1960s, many churches and denominations dropped their inhibitions and turned to the independent consultants of commercial promotion to develop aggressive advertising campaigns on radio and television.

### *Radio & Television Advertising Campaigns*

The broader advertising industry of the 1960s took a significant turn with a “change in management” of the leaders in the field. In 1965, the phrase “creative revolution” appeared as a means to describe this period of advertising as new firms led the field by pushing beyond the traditional limits and prescriptions of the industry.<sup>135</sup> Agencies like Doyle Dane Bernbach (DDB) cast aside standards and blazed new trails in advertising, leaving behind the science and theory of the previous period. The results were ads like those for Volkswagen that were unorthodox in their images, artistic phrases, and honesty.<sup>136</sup> Church promotion also experienced its own sort of “creative revolution” in the 1960s as it increasingly used radio and television, and it pushed advertising content beyond the boundaries of taboo.

Radio was anything but new in religion by the 1960s. Preachers had been broadcasting their sermons and messages on local radio stations since the 1930s. Church promotion experts had been recommending its use as a powerful tool for advertising and publicity since the early 1940s.<sup>137</sup> In 1946, *Church Management* created a department of

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<sup>135</sup> Fox, 256.

<sup>136</sup> Ibid., 241, 257-58.

<sup>137</sup> Richard K. Morton, “Ministers on the Air,” *Church Management* 18 (December 1941): 25.

“The Church and Radio” to help keep readers up to date on developments in radio and religion. They noted in the article that many churches had radio committees. The journal began running a regular column each month on the church and the radio.<sup>138</sup>

Churches also began to experiment with using television to attract more people. In 1948, pastor Paul Nagy noticed that taverns were inviting people to come in and enjoy not only a meal, but the opportunity to watch a television, as a promotional pitch. He thought that a similar tactic could work for his church, so he purchased a fifty-two inch “set” and the church hosted the “Louis-Walcott fight.” Much to his pleasure, over 150 people came to the event at the church, and he continued hosting similar events to attract people to the church.<sup>139</sup> By 1949, the San Francisco Theological Seminary had a Radio and Television Department to train pastors in utilizing the two mediums effectively. The director of the department even produced a weekly news script service for pastors. Entitled, “Headlines Around the World” it was a fifteen-minute news synopsis that local radio broadcasters could use to provide non-denominationally based religious news to their local community.<sup>140</sup> Yet despite these steps and uses, by the late 1950s many still lamented that the tools were under-utilized.<sup>141</sup>

One of the first denominations, likely the first, to experiment using the radio for national advertising was the United Presbyterian Church. In 1959, they began two pilot projects, advertising the denomination in newspapers across the country and not in the

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<sup>138</sup> The Church and Radio, *Church Management* 22 (March 1946): 22.

<sup>139</sup> Paul Nagy, Jr., “Television Comes to the Church,” *Church Management* 25 (November 1948): 41.

<sup>140</sup> Marshall B. Hodge, “Adams Has the Know How... Broadcasting Good News,” *Church Management* 30 (March 1954): 11-2.

<sup>141</sup> Cecil C. Smith, Jr., “You May Think So, but Radio is Not Dead,” *Church Management* 35 (June 1959): 21.

religion section. They tested the strategy in Rochester, New York, running ads, created by a local advertising agency, for twenty-four weeks.<sup>142</sup> The advertisements focused on the assistance churches offered for personal trials. However, the denomination determined that it was not a successful venture, and decided to cancel the project. Four years later, they experimented again, but this time with advertising jingles on the radio.<sup>143</sup>

In the 1960s, denominations increased their use of radio and television to build much larger advertising campaigns that could compete with secular commercials. Whereas, they had previously devoted their energy to equipping local churches to advertise, now they centrally produced more sophisticated ads for radio, television, and newspapers that could be used across the country.

The pioneer was the United Presbyterian Church, who hired Stan Freberg in 1963 to produce a series of radio commercials. Freberg brought business expertise in advertising to religion as a California comedian and advertising agent who had previously written jingles for Chun King chow Mein and Contadina tomato paste.<sup>144</sup> One journalist noted that his Presbyterian “commercials for God evolved to a level that matched the sophistication and appeal of secular advertising – catchy slogans, singing jingles and humor.”<sup>145</sup> In the tests, they ran 900 spots a week in Detroit and 78 percent of listeners polled said they were prompted to “wonder about God,” 65 percent discussed the spots with friends and 6 percent talked to ministers. The methods were a success and they

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<sup>142</sup> George Dugan, “Test Ads Backed By Presbyterians,” *New York Times*, May 20, 1959.

<sup>143</sup> Peter Bart, “Advertising: Church to Test Radio Jingles,” *New York Times*, July 19, 1963.

<sup>144</sup> Peter Bart, “Advertising: Presbyterians in Radio Drive,” *New York Times*, April 20, 1964.

<sup>145</sup> “Trying to Sell God has Become Big Business,” *The Sun*, December 23, 1975.

launched the campaign in fifteen cities.<sup>146</sup> In Chicago alone, the ads played 6,000 times on thirty stations in just three weeks.

Yet there was internal opposition. Hundreds of church leaders wrote the denominational headquarters complaining about the ads that they were inappropriate for religion. However, the director of the program remained confident, that even the critics would change their minds after hearing the ads and seeing their success.<sup>147</sup> His confidence, much like Schuller's, was in the pragmatic defense of the method, an increase in numbers.

Others began experimenting with similar national campaigns. The Mennonite Church tested radio spots in Indiana and Pennsylvania.<sup>148</sup> In 1965, the United Church of Christ, only eight years old, tried running advertisements in the Washington, D.C. newspapers, but not in the religion section and not in the typical religious font of gothic. They hired a secular public relations agency in New York to create the ads, and split the cost between the national denomination and the local churches.<sup>149</sup> The experiment proved successful, and they launched similar campaigns in Ohio, Pennsylvania, and California.<sup>150</sup> The same year, the National Council of Churches distributed a series of television commercials to member churches across the nation. By the 1970s Episcopalians, United Methodists, and the Catholic Order of Franciscans were all

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<sup>146</sup> Bart, "Advertising: Presbyterians."

<sup>147</sup> Ibid.

<sup>148</sup> Ibid.

<sup>149</sup> "Church Advertises for Members," *New York Times*, September 5, 1965.

<sup>150</sup> "Advertising Pays Off," *New York Times*, March 27, 1966.



creating and running radio and television commercials.<sup>151</sup> In 1979, three Roman Catholic Dioceses combined their resources to launch a \$70,000 advertising program for twelve weeks in the Delaware Valley on both television and the radio.<sup>152</sup>

In the mid-1970s, local churches joined denomination in producing their own advertisements for mass media. In 1973, the First Presbyterian Church and the Franklin Street Church in Baltimore, Maryland were losing members quickly and decided to merge and pursue radical promotional methods as a means to survive. Renamed the First and Franklin Street Presbyterian church, one of the pastors, Bill L. Bearden, a former Sears advertising agent, began using Schuller like methods of promotion in 1975. Launching a \$17,000, three month advertising campaign, they used three billboards, radio commercials, full-page ads in *Baltimore* magazine, and direct-mailings to 5,000 homes.<sup>153</sup> The campaign informed people that “together we can do a lot of wonderful things.” The wonderful things listed were not traditional religious objectives but “social things like cocktail parties and coffee hours.”<sup>154</sup> The church hosted parties for new members and punctuated worship services with “publicity stunts” such as people shouting out in different languages to show diversity. In 1975, the pastor of Sunset Acres Baptist Church in Shreveport, Louisiana filmed 60-second commercials that played during Monday Night Football. The ads had a sports theme, with the pastor standing in the rough of a

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<sup>151</sup> “Trying to Sell God Has Become.”

<sup>152</sup> Margaret Yao, “Big Pitch for God: More Churches Try Advertising in Media,” *Wall Street Journal*, December 31, 1979.

<sup>153</sup> Antero Pietila, “First and Franklin Presbyterian Plans Ad Drive ‘to get it together,’” *The Sun*, October 4, 1975.

<sup>154</sup> Weldon Wallace, “City Church Split Over Sometimes Unusual Methods of Attracting New Members,” *The Sun*, March 21, 1976.

golf course, suggesting that viewers let “God help them with the rough places of life.”<sup>155</sup> Such strategies marked a growing readiness among churches to speak in the idioms and mediums of the broader culture.

Television and radio were different from newspapers in that the audience was very specific. Promoters had to take into consideration what demographic of people would tune into a particular station and program. It provided them an opportunity to experiment in and learn about target marketing. As early as 1959, one pastor recommended that each church must be careful in choosing the kind of program during which it would advertise on the radio. They must determine first if they want to reach women, men, or children.<sup>156</sup> One church in Cleveland in 1979 ran its radio advertisements only on the fine-arts station to attract its target customer, an educated, professional person. They also placed ads in the local university newspaper and programs at Orchestra concerts.<sup>157</sup> One religious organization took full advantage of targeting options, along with other promotion methods to gather enormous support and public attention, Jim Jones’ The People’s Temple.

The People’s Temple promoted through advertising and press relations to create a positive public image. The organization began with only small forays into church promotion in 1968, defending its reputation against public scrutiny by taking out large ads in the *Ukiah Daily Journal*, though under the name of “private citizens” not the

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<sup>155</sup> “Trying to Sell God has Become Big Business,” *The Sun*, December 23, 1975.

<sup>156</sup> Cecil C. Smith, Jr., “You May Think So, But Radio is Not Dead,” *Church Management* 35 (June 1959): 22.

<sup>157</sup> Yao, “Big Pitch.”

official church.<sup>158</sup> By 1972, they were using radio spots, leaflets, letters, newsletters, letters to newspaper editors, and a new monthly journal. However, they hid their authorship in the materials to create the impression that it was an outsider's positive opinion. Their press releases carried the letterhead of a "front organization" called the *California Sun Times*.<sup>159</sup> The Temple also, in Schuller style, did things to attract favorable press. They donated \$4,400 to several local news organization "in the defense of the free press," which earned them a citation by a local congressman.<sup>160</sup> They traveled to Washington, D.C. and cleaned up the Capitol grounds, which landed a favorable editorial in *The Washington Post*.<sup>161</sup> In 1977, they received a Freedom of the Press Award from the National Newspaper Publishers' Association, for marching to defend the Press.<sup>162</sup> Such laudatory press coverage provided material for them to send to news outlets in other markets. However, because they had so carefully tailored their image depending on the audience, they had to be careful not to send contradictory accounts. As historian John Hall explains,

Once, while instructing a secretary to get some publicity flyers out to a progressive ally, he [Jim Jones] cautioned, 'Don't send him Andersonville, because it says something about the Lord, loving the Lord, and a bunch of bullshit.... Be sure to give him material with numbers that impress, but with,' Jones paused to laugh, 'some sort of statistical consistency.'

Such effective promotional management earned Jones an invitation to the RIAL's twenty-eighth anniversary dinner in 1977 as a representative of one of the 100 "most

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<sup>158</sup> John R. Hall, *Gone from the Promised Land: Jonestown in American Cultural History* (New Brunswick: Transaction Books, 1987), 150.

<sup>159</sup> *Ibid.*, 154.

<sup>160</sup> *Ibid.*, 155.

<sup>161</sup> *Ibid.*, 157.

<sup>162</sup> *Ibid.*, 159.

influential and effective congregations across the country.” Jones donated \$2,500 to the campaign and gladly attended the banquet. He sat next to other religious advertising experts such as Robert Beusse of the U.S. Catholic Conference and the chairman of the J. Walter Thompson Agency.<sup>163</sup> Jones’ success in rallying support for his institution demonstrated the power of church promotion and the opportunities to use it in deception. He was a testament to the challenges that faced church promotion advocates in purifying their profession.

Other religious sects used modern advertising and public relations as a stepping-stone to compete with more established brands. Two well-known religious groups that utilized church promotion methods after 1965 to help establish a public presence were the Church of Scientology and the Mormon Church. Established by L. Ron Hubbard in 1953, the Church of Scientology began a \$650,000 ad campaign on national television and in national magazines in 1978.<sup>164</sup> The campaign propelled them into national prominence. Yet one of the most well-known and successful religious advertising campaigns was that of the Mormon Church.

Since 1945, the Mormon Church had been growing impressively throughout the United States. By 1999, the Church had expanded from a post-war membership of one million to ten million.<sup>165</sup> Early in their existence, the Church established a new Department of Public Communications at their headquarters in Salt Lake City, Utah. Among the staff were the editor of a religious newspaper, the Public Relations director at

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<sup>163</sup> Ibid., 159-60.

<sup>164</sup> Robert Gillette and Robert Rawitch, “Scientology: A Long Trail of Controversy” *Los Angeles Times*, August 27, 1978.

<sup>165</sup> Patrick Allitt, *Religion in America Since 1945: A History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 64.

Brigham Young University, and a local secular newspaper editor.<sup>166</sup> In the early 1970s, they, along with others, began using mass-media outlets for national advertising. They hired Bonneville Communications to create and lead an advertising campaign.<sup>167</sup> In the 1980s, their television ads pervaded national broadcasting. At the 1982 RPRC convention, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints won two awards for their advertising campaigns.<sup>168</sup>

After 1965, the RPRC increasingly recommended radio and television advertising methods. The 1969 Handbook had an article dedicated to “Broadcasting” that introduced using mass media tools in promotion.<sup>169</sup> The spring issue of the *Counselor* in 1973 reported on the success of the Lutheran Church in America’s Department of Press, Radio, and Television in stimulating church attendance by creating ads for television and radio. The ads were created to target particular listening and viewing audiences, and the department was satisfied with the results.<sup>170</sup> In 1974, the *Counselor* included an article on why Cable TV was, for churches, such a popular form of communication with the public.<sup>171</sup> Though many churches relied on the RPRC and other religious experts for guidance in navigating the waters of multi-media promotion, others increasingly turned to marketplace experts.

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<sup>166</sup> *RPRC Counselor* (August 1973), box 5, Records: 1952-1988 (88-0630), RPRCC.

<sup>167</sup> Kim Foltz, “Advertising: Shop Seeks to Spread Its Wings,” *New York Times*, July 3, 1990.

<sup>168</sup> “Two Mormon Church ads are awarded ‘Wilburs’ by Public Relations Council,” *Religious News Service*, April 27, 1982, box 7, Records: 1929-1985 (89-1115a), RPRCC.

<sup>169</sup> Nelson Price, “Broadcasting” in *Handbook on Church Public Relations: for Local Congregations of All Denominations*, 1<sup>st</sup> ed., ed. James C. Suggs (New York: The Council, 1969), 13.

<sup>170</sup> “Sioux City Project: Testing Media to Extend Outreach,” *RPRC Counselor* (March 1973), box 5, Records: 1952-1988 (88-0630), RPRCC.

<sup>171</sup> *RPRC Counselor* (February 1974), box 5, Records: 1952-1988 (88-0630), RPRCC.

With the increase in large budget campaigns using mass media outlets came a greater reliance in religious promotion upon secular experts in the field. In 1911, Proctor & Gamble, was possibly the first organization to hire an outside advertising agency to promote its new product, Crisco.<sup>172</sup> In the 1960s, churches, similarly, began more readily hiring external consultants to produce their advertising campaigns. Large denominations were also looking to management consultants. Both the Episcopal Church and the U.S. Catholic Conference hired Booz, Allen & Hamilton in 1967. The following year, the Jesuits looked to Arthur D. Little, Inc.<sup>173</sup> Yet enlisting advertising consultants remained primary.

Several examples have already been given of marketplace consultation in religious advertising; however, a few more help illustrate the extent of the outsourcing. In 1977, the Baptist General Convention of Texas embarked upon a 1.5 million dollar advertising campaign. They hired the Bloom Advertising Agency to create a series of radio and television commercials, as well as newspaper and billboard advertisements. The campaign, entitled “Good New Texas” also included an aggressive personal sales visitation program.<sup>174</sup> Co-chair of the program, Lloyd Elder explained that the program “is not a goodwill campaign for the convention. It is not church advertising. It is going with the best product we have, and that is the gospel of Jesus Christ.”<sup>175</sup> Elder was clearly uncomfortable with the association of religion with sales, though he was aggressively engaged in it, denying that they were advertising their churches and their

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<sup>172</sup> Fox, 81.

<sup>173</sup> Christopher D. McKenna, *The World's Newest Profession: Management Consulting in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 126-30.

<sup>174</sup> William Martin, “The Baptists Want You,” *Texas Monthly*, February 1977, 83.

<sup>175</sup> *Ibid.*, 85.

message. The Baptists chose the Bloom agency after a committee of seventeen listened to pitches by several agencies. They determined that “Bob Bloom is a good salesman.” Yet Bob Bloom was also a Jew, a potential point of conflict for a Christian advertising campaign. However, a confidence in his mastery of the methods and their transferability between industries, trumped any concerns for Bloom’s Jewish faith and lack of Christian belief.<sup>176</sup> A mastery of methods was more valuable to churches than a modicum of understanding the message.

Many others looked to the marketplace experts in the 1970s. The Southern Baptist Convention hired the Timerite advertising agency in 1972 to help it produce and broadcast advertisements.<sup>177</sup> In 1975, the chief of the telecommunications office for the Archdiocese of Baltimore, John J. Geaney, hired the Mathis, Burden and Charles advertising agency to develop radio ads for reconciliation, to prepare for the new rite of penance in 1976 during Lent. He explained that turning to the professionals for help in spreading the gospel was necessary because they could translate theological language into common language. This had always been a key argument for religious advertising. Geaney went on to defend “Madison Avenue” as not manipulative.<sup>178</sup> The Seventh-Day Adventists hired Tony Romeo, an “adman” with Doyle, Dane, and Bernbach to develop a newspaper advertising campaign that would distinguish the Adventists from other religions. They were not as concerned with Romeo’s lack of familiarity with their own

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<sup>176</sup> Ibid., 87.

<sup>177</sup> “Trying to Sell God has Become Big Business,” *The Sun*, December 23, 1975.

<sup>178</sup> Antero Pietila, “Ad Firm to do Church Spots,” *The Sun*, August 13, 1975.

theology since they did not plan on promoting it, only a general “Adventist lifestyle.”<sup>179</sup> Yet such explicit amalgamations of sacred and secular worried some opponents of advertising methods among churches.

### *Opposition to Church Commercialism*

Not everyone approved of using television and radio for church promotion, but advocates always responded quickly in defense. Some worried that in utilizing the medium, churches were sacrificing religious demure for more crass secular principles of attraction. When the First and Franklin Presbyterian church began playing its ads in Baltimore, opponents called the tactics “tacky” and argued they were inappropriate for a church. The minister and former advertising executive, Bearden, defended the methods. He argued, “I don’t feel that this is commercial. I feel that this is taking a modern idiom to express an ancient message.”<sup>180</sup> A popular defense among church promotion advocates, Bearden also intimated that he was only following in the footsteps of great Christian leaders before him. He said, “Just as Luther used printing to put the Bible in the hands of the masses, we’re using the media, in an age when we don’t read books any more, to put a 30-second capsule of the Christian faith in the hands of the people.”<sup>181</sup> Most agreed with defenses like Bearden’s, yet their remained opposition.

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<sup>179</sup> Constance D’au Vin, “Ad Campaign Is Launched by Seventh-Day Adventists,” *The Washington Post*, June 23, 1978.

<sup>180</sup> Antero Pietila, “First and Franklin Presbyterian Plans Ad Drive ‘to get it together,’” *The Sun*, October 4 1975.

<sup>181</sup> “Church Ads are Intended to Be ‘a little unusual,’” *The Sun*, December 7, 1978.



When the Lutheran Church in America began distributing 2,700 media kits in 1977, some opposed it, saying that the “church is ‘going too commercial.’”<sup>182</sup> Methodists in Indiana argued that the church had “succumbed to Madison Avenue” when it launched a \$65,000 ad campaign. Historian and religion commentator, Martin Marty, worried that advertising could adversely affect the churches. He wrote in the late 1970s, “You [churches] feel you have to be more sensational than the competition.... You’ve got to have a minister who has more vitality, lower necklines on the soloist, an NFL football star. If you don’t have it, then you won’t get attention.”<sup>183</sup> Such adaptations, according to the critics, would replace the religious content with attention grabbing secular content. A network program producer of TV Guide, Richard Doan, remarked “that religion ads are ‘terribly slick and they fit in very well with the cornflakes ads and all that. But what do they say? How much religion is there in them?’”<sup>184</sup> Ironically, this secular professional in television worried that religion was becoming too secular. He hoped that they could remain distinct. Similarly, New York columnist Harriet Van Horne criticized the campaign to oppose the “death of God” theology. She said, “When television begins to sell God in this fashion, the ancient concept of religion as a personal, private experience will suffer serious damage.” While the suggestion that religion was ever a “private experience” is questionable, her criticism of advertising churches resonated with many, even many of the advocates.

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<sup>182</sup> Yao, “Big Pitch.”

<sup>183</sup> Ibid.

<sup>184</sup> “Trying to Sell God”

Some of the church advertisers recognized the danger of relying heavily on secular experts and using secular channels to advertise, so they, like the RPRC, tried to create a distinction between themselves and the rest of the industry. Peter O'Reilly, the broadcasting director for the Paulist order of Catholic priests, ran advertisements on the radio and television in the late 1970s, but was clear to point out his discomfort. He explained, "In a broad sense, this is advertising but there really is a difference between offering you a lifestyle and selling a bar of soap. We just don't want to be classified as huckstering something."<sup>185</sup> Another Roman Catholic, Sister Elizabeth Thoman, a media consultant and founder of National Sisters Communications Service, similarly sought to create a distinction, but did so by changing the terminology. She explained that nuns typically shun publicity because they live selfless lives, and they have a "general uneasiness that seems to accompany the mention of public relations." Therefore, Sister Thoman preferred to use the term "public information" instead of "public relations" to mark a distinction and ease the nuns concerns.<sup>186</sup>

Despite the concerns of many, both advocates and opponents, about church advertising, others remained committed to the absolute necessity for it. Philip Larson published an article in a 1967 issue of *Church Management*. He blamed "older members" in churches for opposing "Madison Avenue stuff." He warned that such a refusal spells disaster for the church because it closes the door on a "vibrant, progressive" church. He explained that for a church to succeed, the church leaders must be schooled in "Madison Avenue stuff." Among the issues of Madison Avenue stuff, he listed the

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<sup>185</sup> Yao, "Big Pitch."

<sup>186</sup> Kathleen Hendrix, "Religious Publicity: Giving the Word on the Word," *Los Angeles Times*, January 10, 1979.

“perfection of the product” and determining what areas of the community will produce prospective members.<sup>187</sup> These methods, altering products and targeting customers, would become the center of church promotion in the 1980s and 1990s as marketing took center stage in church promotion.

Between 1965 and 1980, many churches began using the radio and television not to only broadcast their services and messages, but to advertise their churches. Though advertising financially built these mediums, churches had not previously seized upon these opportunities to promote. As they stepped into the commercial advertising arena over the airwaves, they looked to secular experts in an unprecedented manner. Though churches had previously utilized the expertise of the market, they had depended principally upon experts within the sacred institutions to make the transfer. There had been exceptions like Stewart Harral and Willard Pleuthner in the 1940s, yet in the late 1960s they became the rule in radio and television advertising. Churches and denominations hired advertising agencies to develop their ads and spread them throughout the marketplace. This crossover depended upon a confidence among religious leaders that the methods did not affect the messages. They believed, like so many before them, that someone foreign to the sacred message could promote it more effectively than its producers. Such a confidence in crossover, and subjugation of the message to the primacy of the method would continue to characterize church promotion as marketing gained traction in religion.

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<sup>187</sup> Philip M. Larson, “Advice for Struggling Churches: That Madison Avenue Stuff,” *Church Management* 44 (December 1967):13.

## Conclusion

In 1965, the members of the NRPC gathered in Minneapolis Minnesota for their annual conference, the theme: “To Tell the Truth...”<sup>188</sup> Little did any of them know that this conference would serve as a channel marker, or even a turning point, in the shape of the organization. The changes that followed would alter the meaning of “truth”, the constitution of the organization, and their focus on methods. Minor vibrations that had been ruminating under the surface for the past few years would erupt to respond to what appeared a crisis in their business. At the convention, the RPRC president David Gockley sounded a call to arms. He cited the results of a recent poll conducted by *Newsweek* magazine among college students across the country. As *Newsweek* reported, these students were losing faith in institutions. The surprise, as Gockley presented it, was not that these individuals were turning away from institutions; it was that they were abandoning the one institution built on truth. He said, “We who are representative of the institution dedicated to ‘the truth’ should be rudely awakened by the fact that less than half of those interviewed feel confident in The Church and in her message.”<sup>189</sup> It was one thing, he thought, for people not to trust the banks and the military, but another not to trust the churches, the warehouses of truth. Gockley and the RPRC pursued fundamental changes in religion and religious promotion, because individual opinion drove their industry.

Between 1965 and 1980, church promotion changed drastically. The field had experienced significant change before, but never was change so deliberately sought

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<sup>188</sup> Promotional Brochure, folder “1965 Convention,” box 6, Records: 1929-1985 (89-1115a), RPRCC.

<sup>189</sup> David W. Gockley, “The More Excellent Way,” Report of the President, April 18-21, folder “1966 Convention,” box 6, Records: 1929-1985 (89-1115a), RPRCC.

among the practitioners. Church promotion experts, particularly in the RPRC, welcomed cooperation with other faiths and religions, emphasized the truth of their method instead of their message, and embraced a message of moral crusade. They also engaged in television and radio advertising across the country, hiring secular experts to create “catchy” advertisements that would attract an American public that appeared to be walking away from institutional religion.

While many of these changes may have worked on a local level to grow churches, on the whole, the mainline denominations that embraced them, continued to decline in membership. The RPRC members could not manage to stop the bleeding in their representative institution. Yet others were successfully building church empires with the methods that Robert Schuller had pioneered and popularized. In the late 1970s and the 1980s, church marketing took hold, particularly in evangelical circles, and fomented a religious retailing phenomenon.

## Chapter 7

### Professors, Pastors, & Professionals: Building the Church Marketing Infrastructure (1975 – 1989)

The 1960s and 1970s were decades of significant change for the Religious Public Relations Council, ushering in a new era of cooperation among religious institutions and a new message to promote. Change was the watchword of the period, and there was another change beginning to take shape both in the organization and in church promotion at large. Whereas the beginning of the century had been a period in religion primarily of advertising, and the middle of the century had been a period of public relations, after 1975 it was a period focused on marketing.

Religious public relations remained a principle function in denominational offices. In 1977, the Baptist Public Relations Association reached 300 members, with representatives from all twenty-one of the Southern Baptist Convention's agencies and institutions.<sup>1</sup> By 1986, when they published an internal history of their organization, they had 400 members.<sup>2</sup> The RPRC continued to thrive as well, with a growing membership and expansive publications providing guidance for denominations and churches in public relations and other promotional methods. Yet the industry was changing and the centrality of marketing in religion was evident even in an organization committed to

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<sup>1</sup> James H. Cox, *We've A Story to Tell: A History of Baptist Public Relations Association, 1953-1987* (Brentwood, TN: Baptist Public Relations Association, 1986), 67.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

public relations. The shift is clear in the RPRC's four handbooks published between 1969 and 1990.

The principal marketing components appeared in the handbooks to include surveying the community, establishing a target market, identifying felt needs, and altering the product to attract the customer. In the 1969 handbook, several contributors recommended considering the target of promotion and appealing to their specific "appetites and emotions."<sup>3</sup> By 1976, the target audience was central with the majority of the contributors beginning each article with the question "Whom do you want to reach?"<sup>4</sup> They recommended that advertising, public relations, publicity, and other strategies for growth begin with defining the target customer. Articles in the 1982 handbook emphasized the importance of researching the target. David Gockley suggested using professional surveys and services to study the audience and determine their unmet needs.<sup>5</sup> Lundell Smith and Monica McGinley made similar recommendations, while others continued to stress the importance of the target audience. In the next handbook, published in 1988, the term marketing appeared for the first time. In "Advertising, Marketing, and Direct Mail" Linda Robbins explained segmentation and the four p's of marketing, then concluded with a brief defense that Jesus and his apostles were

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<sup>3</sup> David Gockley, "Advertising," in *Handbook on Church Public Relations : for Local Congregations of All Denominations*, ed. James C. Suggs (New York: The Council, 1969), 19; John H. Tietjen, "Community Relations," in *Handbook on Church Public Relations : for Local Congregations of All Denominations*, ed. James C. Suggs (New York: The Council, 1969), 50; Robert M. Donihi, "Hitting the Target," in *Handbook on Church Public Relations : for Local Congregations of All Denominations*, ed. James C. Suggs (New York: The Council, 1969), 46.

<sup>4</sup> Wilmer C. Fields, *Religious Public Relations Handbook: For Local Congregations of all Denominations*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: Religious Public Relations Council, 1976). Winston Taylor, J.C. Durham, Jr., Russell Shaw, and Charles De Vries all emphasized the importance of identifying a target audience and considering their desires.

<sup>5</sup> David W. Gockley, "Advertising the Spiritual Dimension," in *Religious Public Relations Handbook: for Local Congregations of All Denominations*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., ed. Charles DeVries (New York: The Council, 1982), 32-5.

marketers.<sup>6</sup> This progression in an organization committed to public relations was but a small ripple of a much larger wave beneath the surface of church marketing.

Though church marketing did not erupt in popularity and sophistication until the early 1990s, the seeds were sown in the fifteen years prior. Principally, there were two fields of growth. The first was new to church promotion; it was an expansion into the academy. Beginning as early as 1959, marketing scholars researched, developed, and fought for marketing applications in religion. The second was an extension of Robert Schuller's work in the decades prior. His example catalyzed the growth of a new form of churches, seeker churches, which enjoyed attendance numbers over 2,000 and developed marketing methods to create and sustain their growth. The majority of these churches were evangelical, marking another shift in American religion as the center of gravity in Protestantism moved from mainline denominations to conservative churches. These developments in marketing joined a growing reliance on secular experts in the fields of promotion. As a result, in the late 1970s and in the 1980s professors, pastors, and professionals laid the charges for an explosion of church marketing.

### Professors: Scholars Take an Interest in Church Marketing

In 2006, Best Business Books published the *Concise Encyclopedia of Church and Religious Organization Marketing*.<sup>7</sup> The editors intended to provide “novice marketers with basic theories and terms in easy-to-understand language.” It was a one-stop shop for an A-to-Z explanation of the theoretical and practical nuances of the church marketing

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<sup>6</sup> Linda Robbins, “Advertising, Marketing, and Direct Mail” in *Religious Public Relations Handbook for Local Congregations*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed., ed. James H. Steele (Gladwyne, PA: The Council, 1988), 34-6.

<sup>7</sup> Robert E. Stevens, Bruce Wrenn, David Loudon, and Henry Cole, *Concise Encyclopedia of Church and Religious Organization Marketing* (Binghamton, NY: Best Business Books, 2006).



industry. This guide was different from the many religious promotion guides that had preceded it throughout the twentieth century. It was different in that it addressed marketing and not advertising or public relations, but more importantly, it was different in its authorship. None of the contributors were experts in religion or even experts in secular fields of promotion. Instead, they were professors. They each had a doctorate and held a chair in an academic department at a higher education institution. Among them, Robert Stevens was a Professor of Marketing in the Department of Management and Marketing at the University of Louisiana at Monroe. He was also the co-editor of the *Journal of Ministry Marketing & Management*. David Loudon was the Professor of Marketing in the School of Business at Sanford University. He had also served as a former co-editor of the *Journal of Ministry Marketing and Management*. Bruce Wrenn was a Professor of Marketing in the School of Business and Economics at Indiana University South Bend. Henry Cole was the Associate Professor of Marketing and the Chair of the Marketing Department at the University of Louisiana at Monroe. Their encyclopedia was a mark of how significantly the subject of church marketing had grown as a field of academic scholarship.

Prior to 1975, the principles of marketing had gained traction in American religion, but they lacked a clear articulation. Stewart Harral, Robert Schuller, and the Religious Public Relations Council members, among others, had been gradually introducing to churches the concepts of a customer orientation, meeting consumer needs, and segmenting the market. Yet they lacked the language and concepts to develop a comprehensive and explicit marketing approach for religion. This all began to change in 1975 as scholars in the field of marketing shifted their attention to applications in

nonprofit institutions. The field of social or organizational marketing developed, and many of its pioneers studied religious marketing. They sought to develop a scholarly field and equip religious leaders to employ marketing in expanding their institutions. Though the field began slowly, by the 1980s religious marketing was developing as an independent and vibrant area of academic inquiry.

### *The Development of the Managerial Marketing Field*

Marketing is difficult to define because the field has changed significantly over time and ultimately fragmented into a number of schools of thought and practice. Most historians of marketing divide its history into three or four eras. Each marks a significant transition in the foundational principles and scope of the field. By 1970, as marketing scholars Eric Shaw and Brian Jones outline, the field of marketing was so broad as to “subsume all social interactions, relationships and exchanges among humans, thereby obscuring the subset of human social activity uniquely related to the marketing system.”<sup>8</sup> As a result, there are currently at least ten schools of marketing with various subfields. Marketing has become all things from political campaigns to family relationships to religion.<sup>9</sup>

Marketing, as a field of academic study, began between 1900 and 1910 in the Midwest with a concern for the delivery and pricing of agricultural goods.<sup>10</sup> Whereas business experts had previously focused on the study of production, they turned their

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<sup>8</sup> Eric H. Shaw and D.G. Brian Jones, “A History of Schools of Marketing Thought,” *Marketing Theory* 5, no. 3 (2005): 242, 271.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 272.

<sup>10</sup> Frederick E. Webster, Jr., “The Changing Role of Marketing in the Corporation,” *The Journal of Marketing* 56, no. 4 (October 1992): 1-17.

attention to distribution.<sup>11</sup> Yet it was primarily a descriptive field. Marketing scholars sought to understand and explain the basic social and economic processes that determined the shape of the agricultural market. By 1920, the field began to grow beyond agriculture. It broadened in scope as mass production innovations, new systems of distribution, and technological development in products, expanded markets.

A growing infrastructure of conferences, publications, and organizations in the 1930s supported the expansion of the field.<sup>12</sup> Promotional practitioners organized the American Marketing Society in 1930, which began publishing journals on the subject of marketing in 1935. They merged with the National Association of Teachers of Marketing and Advertising in 1937 to form the American Marketing Association.<sup>13</sup> Marketing scholars discussed the relationships between the various phases of production and distribution in markets. The field centered on trade flow: from transportation, to storage, to intermediaries and wholesalers. It also included studying the impact of government regulation, pricing policy, supply rationing and advertising on economic efficiency.<sup>14</sup> In all of this, marketing remained focused on describing processes and determining values.

After 1945, the field of marketing shifted from describing market operations and studying system efficiency to both prescribing managerial solutions to market challenges and studying consumer behavior. The conclusion of World War II brought a substantial alteration in the American marketplace. The decline of military mobilization brought

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<sup>11</sup> William L. Wilkie and Elizabeth S. Moore, "Scholarly Research in Marketing: Exploring the '4 Eras' of Thought Development," *Journal of Public Policy & Marketing* 22, no. 2 (Fall 2003): 117.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 119.

<sup>13</sup> Robert Bartels, *The History of Marketing Thought*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Columbus: Publishing Horizons, 1988), 28-9.

<sup>14</sup> Wilkie, "Scholarly Research," 123.

increased industrial production that generated supply surpluses, and the general surge in American affluence created a vibrant consumer market. The field of marketing grew and altered with it. The field steadily expanded with AMA membership increasing from 4,000 in 1950 to 17,000 in 1980.<sup>15</sup> It altered in taking interest in the subjects of employment and market research.<sup>16</sup> It became more of a business activity.

In 1948, the AMA redefined marketing as “The performance of business activities directed toward, and incident to, the flow of goods and services from producer to consumer or user.”<sup>17</sup> As a business activity, marketing took a managerial approach, focusing not on describing processes as much as handling, “problem solving, planning, implementation, and control in a competitive marketplace.”<sup>18</sup> Instead of examining economic processes, marketing adopted the responsibility of managing a firm’s exchanges with its customers. Business, with marketing at its center, shifted from a focus on profit-maximization in market transactions to a focus on creating and managing long-term relationships with customers.<sup>19</sup> Marketing management accomplished this purpose through what Neil Borden would label the “marketing mix” in 1964. Within transactions, marketing focused on “distribution channels, price, product planning, selling, and advertising.”<sup>20</sup> In a 1960 textbook, *Basic Marketing: A Managerial Approach*, Jerome McCarthy simplified the “marketing mix” with the four P mnemonic: price, product,

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 124.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 123.

<sup>17</sup> Webster, “Changing Role,” 2.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>20</sup> Shaw, “History of Schools,” 257.

place, and promotion.<sup>21</sup> These were the four essential responsibilities of the marketing manager, to improve each so to maximize customer satisfaction.

In the late 1960s, managerial marketing expanded the field's horizons. Early marketing did not include matters of production.<sup>22</sup> This changed with the introduction of the marketing mix in managerial marketing, as the product became one of four key components in the field. Another significant shift was the development of the consumer behavior field in marketing. In response to the burgeoning post-1945 consumer marketplace, marketing minds began to study consumers. Early market research had focused principally on collecting socio-demographic profiles, income levels, and geographic spread in a market. However, as the field developed it increasingly drew on sociology and psychology to consider consumer behavior. The first step for marketing in consumer behavior studies was the 1955 book, *The Life Cycle and Consumer Behavior*, which as summarized by William Wilkie, focused on "consumer purchasing, attitudes, socio-demographics, advertising research, and the controversial area of motivation research."<sup>23</sup> In the 1960s, a number of textbooks appeared on consumer behavior, yet many scholars point to one that began the field of consumer behavior in earnest, James Engel, David Kollat, and Roger Blackwell's 1968, *Consumer Behavior*, published in its eleventh edition in 2006.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> E. Jerome McCarthy, *Basic Marketing: A Managerial Approach* (Homewood, IL: Irwin, 1960).

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 259.

<sup>23</sup> Wilkie, "Scholarly Research," 128; Lincoln H. Clark, *The Life Cycle and Consumer Behavior* (New York: New York University Press, 1955).

<sup>24</sup> James F. Engel, David T. Kollat, and Roger D. Blackwell. *Consumer Behavior* (New York: Holt, Reinhart, and Winston, 1968).

The authors of *Consumer Behavior* explained that a new era had dawned in business, one where the sophistication of the supply chain had introduced a new consumer orientation that required a careful analysis of consumer needs and desires.<sup>25</sup> They argued that a sophisticated means of studying consumers was necessary. The field of “consumer behavior” was the solution. It examined “the acts of individuals directly involved in obtaining and using economic goods and service, including the decision processes that precede and determine these acts.”<sup>26</sup> It principally studied why consumers act as they do in the marketplace.

One of the authors, James Engel, would later apply these theories in developing a style of Christian evangelism that focused on generating an interested and positive reception by a customer. In 1980, Engel’s peers recognized him as the founder of consumer research.<sup>27</sup> As much as he influenced marketing, he also influenced Christian proselytization. He applied his expertise in consumer research to Christian applications in his 1975 book *What’s Gone Wrong with the Harvest*, which introduced the “Engel Scale.”<sup>28</sup> The scale provided a measurable means of determining how close a person is to a religious conversion and how to adjust to secure the conversion. In form and purpose, it was a more sophisticated sales method than that of C.S. Lovett and others in the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s. It also represented the increasing rationalization of religion in a

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., v.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>27</sup> CENGAGE Learning, “Marketing,” [http://www.cengage.com/asiahed/instructor.do?disciplinenumber=3070&product\\_isbn=9780170129770&courseid=MK13&codeid=2A5E&sortByShow=&sortBy=&instructorFlag=true&newProducts=false&codeFlag=false](http://www.cengage.com/asiahed/instructor.do?disciplinenumber=3070&product_isbn=9780170129770&courseid=MK13&codeid=2A5E&sortByShow=&sortBy=&instructorFlag=true&newProducts=false&codeFlag=false) (accessed September 16, 2010).

<sup>28</sup> James F. Engel and Hugo Wilbert Norton, *What’s Gone Wrong with the Harvest?: A Communication Strategy for the Church and World Evangelization*. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Pub. House, 1975).

human dependency on methods and systems to guarantee results. At the same time, Engel helped Philip Kotler and others expand the field of managerial marketing to be a comprehensive business activity that carefully coordinated the production, distribution, and promotion of products to maximize customer satisfaction, incorporating the latest in consumer behavior analysis. The two scholars collaborated to expand the applications of marketing.

### *Marketing Expands to Social Applications*

In the late 1960s, while the RPRC shifted its message and methods to address social injustices, marketing experts likewise explored ways that marketing could improve the “equity and operations” of society.<sup>29</sup> They considered ways to apply their expertise to problems in public policy, consumer protection, and questions of social responsibility among firms. This was a significant departure from orthodox marketing. Scholars sought to utilize business strategies in non-business contexts.

The first articulation of this new marketing paradigm was a seminal 1969 article written by Philip Kotler and Sydney Levy. They argued that marketing was applicable to all fields of exchange. They explained that, “The marketer is a specialist at understanding human wants and values and determining what it takes for someone to act” Thus anyone that has something to ‘sell’ (defined as persuading or influencing) can utilize marketing (marketing management).<sup>30</sup> Ultimately, Kotler and Levy would establish a new school in marketing, “social marketing.” However, these proposed extensions would prove controversial. Though the article created a quite a stir, they were

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<sup>29</sup> Wilkie, “Scholarly Research,” 130.

<sup>30</sup> Shaw, “History of Schools,” 258.

not the first to suggest such applications. In fact, the first to do so, insisted that marketing be used specifically in religion.

Ten years before the Kotler and Levy article, in 1959 while Schuller was completing his Walk-In/Drive-In church, the Dean of the College of Commerce at the University of Notre Dame, James Culliton, suggested that religious institutions should take advantage of the marketing field to improve church growth. He presented these arguments in an article entitled, “A Marketing Analysis of Religion: Can Businesslike Methods Improve the ‘Sales’ of Religion?” published in the recently launched journal of the Kelley School of Business at Indiana University, *Business Horizons*. Culliton, like so many before him, noted that religion was not effectively competing in the modern marketplace. His specific example was to compare the ownership of televisions with church membership. According to his data, in the 1950s, considerably more people engaged in the television market than in the religious market.<sup>31</sup> He believed that marketing could reverse the trend.

Culliton argued that new advances in the field of marketing would enable religion to compete successfully in a field of innumerable brands. He argued that all business is democratic because its vitality depends solely on the support of individuals. The key to raising support, he argued, was to find the right combination of the four p’s of the marketing mix.<sup>32</sup> In religion, according to Culliton, religious leaders have neglected to address them. The root of this neglect, he continued, was in the refusal to shift from a product orientation to a consumer orientation.

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<sup>31</sup> James W. Culliton, “A Marketing Analysis of Religion: Can Businesslike Methods Improve the ‘Sales’ of Religion?,” *Business Horizons* 2, no. 1 (1959): 85.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 88.



Echoing suggestions of Stewart Harral and other religious promotion experts, he argued that “religion's product designers and promoters have been in ... the ‘egocentric predicament,’ that is, designing a product as they thought it ought to be rather than for the benefit of the free consumer and promoting it as if they were God himself rather than His agents and servants of God and man.”<sup>33</sup> Culliton prescribed that religion must adopt a consumer orientation and coordinate all elements of its business around the customer if it were to succeed in the market. The difference between Culliton’s recommendation and that of Harral and others, was that Culliton was calling for marketing scholars to provide the solutions.

Like the advocates that preceded him, Culliton recognized the threat that marketing could pose to religion. He noted that utilizing marketing did not mean that religion should be “completely subject to the whims of potential customers.” Instead, he continued, it “must have some integrity.”<sup>34</sup> Yet he believed that marketing adaptations could be made to make religion more attractive, while still preserving its essential features.

Some wrote to *Business Horizons* to protest Culliton’s article. A Jewish rabbi feared that a customer orientation in religion would “lead to anarchy and downright hypocrisy.”<sup>35</sup> He intimated that religion must be shaped “from above and not below.” The precepts of religious doctrine were based on God’s inspiration and revelation, not on the customer’s felt desires, he argued. Ultimately, the rabbi explained, those who followed this route altered “the image of God into a rock-and-roll jitterbug-loving

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 91.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> "Comments from Our Readers," *Business Horizons* 2, no. 3 (Autumn 1959): 12-4.

enthusiast.”<sup>36</sup> Culliton responded that since customers naturally desire what religion offers, there would not be any significant alteration to the essentials of religion. The modifications necessary to increase its popularity in the market would be minimal, he asserted.<sup>37</sup> This assumption that the customer’s subjective needs rightly defined religion would stand at the foundations of church marketing. The debate over this principle, however, would not develop until the 1990s. In the meantime, marketing scholars began to explore Culliton’s suggestion, beginning with Kotler and Levy’s 1969 article and work.

With the article in 1969, Philip Kotler and Sydney Levy began exploring opportunities to broaden the reach of marketing beyond business. Kotler was a professor of marketing at Northwestern University and worked as a consultant to numerous companies on marketing. Later known as the “Father of Social Marketing,” he and Levy had been studying consumer behavior in nonprofit contexts, and they believed marketing could be useful in promoting social causes.<sup>38</sup> They proposed this expansion for the field of marketing by pointing out the many ways that non-commercial organizations utilized marketing tools. Their term for this form of marketing was “Organizational Marketing.” They argued that all organizations, because of the influence of modern methods and specialization, performed “classic business functions.” They explained that all organizations therefore utilize marketing whether they recognize it or not.<sup>39</sup> This typical argument was that every church competes in the marketplace and cannot help but use

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 12-4.

<sup>38</sup> Bartels, 256.

<sup>39</sup> Philip Kotler and Sidney J. Levy, “Broadening the Concept of Marketing,” *Journal of Marketing* 33, no.1 (1969): 10-5.

marketing; therefore, they may as well learn how to do it effectively. As they stated, “The choice is whether to do it well or poorly, and on this necessity the case for organizational marketing is basically founded.”<sup>40</sup>

Their 1969 article did stir controversy. In response to the Kotler and Levy article, David Luck, professor of marketing at Southern Illinois University, protested that their piece stretched marketing too broadly. In “Broadening the Concept of Marketing – Too Far” Luck argued that Kotler and Levy were redefining marketing to include all enterprises that planned and promoted in their operations. His example was a religious one. He wrote, “The clergyman who was pondering his church’s programs and had considered himself to be a theologian and spiritual leader turns out to be a marketer.”<sup>41</sup> Luck feared that marketing would change religion.

Luck also worried that organizational marketing would change marketing, that the discipline would lose its identity. He argued that Kotler and Levy defined marketing too broadly, including all forms of planning and promotion as marketing. By their definition of organizational marketing, advertising, public relations, promotion, and planning were all marketing. He proposed a more limited conception, that marketing be only concerned with transactions in the marketplace and include “buying and selling.” After all, as he noted, “a church does not sell its religious and redemptive services.”<sup>42</sup> Yet his point was the root of the conflict. Luck assumed religion was not sold like other products, Kotler and Levy assumed that it was.

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>41</sup> David J. Luck, “Broadening the Concept of Marketing Too Far,” *Journal of Marketing* 33, no. 3 (1969): 53.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 54.

Luck also argued that the wrong motivation lay behind expanding the field. He believed that Kotler and Levy sought to develop organizational marketing as a sort of salve for their own souls. Marketing, like the other promotion fields, had a reputation for manipulation and avarice. Thus, many of its practitioners hoped to perform a sort of penance. They could atone for the ill uses of marketing by using it for good in the non-profit sector. Marketing's assistance to churches, hospitals, and schools would redeem it.<sup>43</sup> Yet, in a rejoinder, Kotler and Levy denied this motive.<sup>44</sup> However, one can detect, in their defense and promotion of marketing, a robust effort to morally justify, or perhaps redeem the field. They, as other church promotion advocates, labored to distinguish marketing from other methods.

The primary distinction that Kotler and Levy highlighted was that marketing does not manipulate the customer. They argued that most people misunderstood marketing. Many, they explained, thought of marketing as “selling, influencing, persuading.”<sup>45</sup> They contended that opponents wrongly associated marketing with the manipulation and profit mongering of Madison Avenue. However, as they explained, marketing is quite the opposite; it is “the concept of sensitively serving and satisfying human needs.”<sup>46</sup> Its customer orientation, they argued, set it apart from other promotional methods that used fear and manipulation to force sales. Instead, they continued, marketing develops a product based on what people want, and then makes it readily available. By their definition, marketing serves the customer first.

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Philip Kotler and Sidney J. Levy, “A New Form of Marketing Myopia: Rejoinder to Professor Luck” *Journal of Marketing* 33, no. 3 (1969): 55.

<sup>45</sup> Kotler, “Broadening the Concept,” 15.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

By their logic, marketing was a logical choice for religious promotion. Countless experts had wrestled throughout the century with reconciling the manipulative tactics of secular promotion and the “pure” products of the sacred. Here now was a form of promotion, more than that, an entire framework for growing and delivering a product, tailor made for religion in its concern and regard for the customer. In putting the customer first and not sales, marketing could care for humanity in a way that other methods of public relations and advertising had not.

Kotler elaborated more on the distinction between marketing and sales in an interview conducted by Peter Drucker and published in his 1990 book, *Managing the Non-Profit Organization*.<sup>47</sup> Even in 1990, Kotler remained frustrated by the inability of most people to clearly define and understand marketing. He offered a definition, “The most important tasks in marketing have to do with studying the market, segmenting it, targeting the groups you want to service, positioning yourself in the market, and creating a service that meets needs out there. Advertising and selling are afterthoughts.”<sup>48</sup> He continued more to the point, “The contrast between marketing and selling is whether you start with customers, or consumers, or groups you want to serve well - that's marketing. If you start with a set of product you have, and want to push them out into any market you can find, that's selling.”<sup>49</sup> In contrast to the promotion experts of earlier decades, Philip Kotler recommended that heavy investments in advertising were a mistake for churches. Marketing, he argued, would enable churches to put people first. According

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<sup>47</sup> Peter F. Drucker, *Managing the Non-Profit Organization: Principles and Practices* (Harper Collins Publishers, 1990).

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 74.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*

to Kotler, a church could, and should, begin with customer research, then segment the market, then develop the programs and services to please targeted groups, and then effectively promote the programs.<sup>50</sup> This approach meant that researching and understanding consumer behavior would be fundamental.

In 1969, consumer behavior continued to grow in marketing. Kotler provided the foreword for the first published collection of consumer behavior cases. The preface stated that, “This book was developed on the premise that modern executives must obtain the ability to interpret and use sophisticated research reports.”<sup>51</sup> The cases were to help students learn how to more accurately and effectively interpret consumer behavior and apply it in developing and delivering products.

Kotler provided the foreword for another important work in marketing in 1972 that addressed the subject of segmentation. In *Market Segmentation: Concepts and Applications*, Kotler noted, market segmentation was “becoming increasingly viewed as a key construct in marketing science.”<sup>52</sup> In segmentation, firms targeted a particular consumer group within the larger marketplace. The refinement of products to meet consumer needs required this focus, for a product could be designed to only suit a limited group of similar interests.

By 1990, in the Drucker interview, Kotler had formulated “STP Marketing” which stood for Segmenting, Targeting, and Positioning. As he explained, “you cannot be all things to all people, so you have to find your own uniqueness, which gives you a

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 82-3.

<sup>51</sup> Roger D. Blackwell, James F. Engel, and David T. Kollat, *Cases in Consumer Behavior* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1969), vii.

<sup>52</sup> James F. Engel, Henry F. Fiorillo, and Murray Alexander Cayley, *Market Segmentation; Concepts and Applications* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1972), vii.

competitive advantage”<sup>53</sup> Segmentation would thus develop into a key principle in marketing, particularly in churches. Kotler, in fact, used a church as an example in 1990.

He explained,

On the one hand, a church should go after every person who wants a religious experience, and so on. It should therefore be a very diverse institution. On the other hand, marketing would suggest that it would be more successful if it defined its target group, whether it might be singles, divorced people, gay people, or whatever. The interesting thing about diversity is that most customers don't like to be with people who are not like themselves.<sup>54</sup>

This tension that Kotler noted, the imperative for a church to be diverse, and yet the tendency for diversity to repel people, highlighted a future point of opposition to church marketing. Many religious scholars and leaders would attack the marketing imperative to attract people by discriminating and building homogeneous institutions. One possible solution that Kotler proposed was that a church must develop different ministries for different groups.<sup>55</sup> Churches had to be more specialized, he suggested. This in great part explains both Peter Drucker's and Robert Schuller's preference for large churches. Large churches were successful churches because they had the resources to target many different groups and meet their diverse felt needs. Kotler and others began to unpack these principles with regard to religion in the 1970s and 1980s.

### *Scholars Explore Religious Marketing*

Philip Kotler's first comprehensive exploration of marketing applications for non-profit institutions, to include churches, was a 1971 book, *Nonprofit Marketing*. Kotler

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<sup>53</sup> Drucker, *Managing the Non-Profit*, 77.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 78.

explained to Drucker in 1990 that he wrote *Nonprofit Marketing* because not-for-profit institutions were considering finance and management innovations but not those in marketing.<sup>56</sup> In the book, Kotler brought specific marketing applications to the table for non-profits. He published it again in 1975, but under the title, *Marketing for Nonprofit Organizations*, and it stood as the only textbook on the subject.<sup>57</sup> Later editions carried the title, *Strategic Marketing for Nonprofit Organizations* and included numerous examples of churches using various marketing principles and practices.<sup>58</sup>

In 1979, Kotler published an article entitled “Strategies for Introducing Marketing into Nonprofit Organizations” in the *Journal of Marketing*.<sup>59</sup> He wrote the article as a ten-year anniversary piece, considering how the field of nonprofit marketing had developed since its inception with his and Levy’s 1969 article. It began with a defense for the use of marketing in the “third sector,” not-for-profit. Kotler explained that this sector provided key services in society, yet was not flourishing and needed assistance. He provided dismal numbers to demonstrate the “marketplace problems” of institutions such as colleges, hospitals, and churches.<sup>60</sup> The key to their survival, he argued, was that “third sector administrators must begin to think like marketers.”<sup>61</sup> Thankfully, he noted, after his and Levy’s 1969 article, some scholars began to investigate such applications

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 73.

<sup>57</sup> Philip Kotler, *Marketing for Nonprofit Organizations* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1982).

<sup>58</sup> Philip Kotler and Alan R. Andreasen *Strategic Marketing for Nonprofit Organizations* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1991).

<sup>59</sup> Philip Kotler, “Strategies for Introducing Marketing into Nonprofit Organizations,” *Journal of Marketing* 43, no. 1 (January 1979): 37-44.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 37.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 38.



and marketing was being applied “to such areas as college recruiting, fund raising, membership development, population problems, public transportation, health services, religion, and arts organizations.”<sup>62</sup> He then proceeded to summarize how such an organization could introduce marketing into its operations by developing the appropriate committees and hiring the right consultants and managers. It is interesting to note that for positive examples, he did not mention religion. Though the field of nonprofit marketing was steadily growing, and Kotler could cautiously celebrate, it was not expanding in religion, at least in scholarly work. However, the next year, in 1980, there were two significant efforts to inject new vitality into the scholarly work in religious marketing.

The first volley of the 1980s that roused new interest in nonprofit marketing, to include religious marketing, was an article by Leonard Berry. Religious marketing scholars note Berry’s piece as an important channel marker in the field. In his article, “Services Marketing is Different,” Berry, a professor of commerce at the University of Virginia, sought to explain how marketing could be useful for nonprofits, but that significant distinctions had to be considered in the adoption. Ironically, Berry, a marketing scholar and not a theologian or pastor, was one of the few to recognize that promotion methods could not be directly transferred from the market to religion. Whereas pastors and religious promotion experts argued the strategies that sold soap could sell religion, a marketing scholar argued to the contrary. His contention was based on the difference between providing a service and providing market goods.<sup>63</sup> A few of the differences that he noted were that services are “consumed but not possessed” and

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Berry is currently the Distinguished Professor of Marketing at the Texas A&M University. Mays Business School at Texas A&M University, “Dr. Leonard L. Berry,” [http://wehner.tamu.edu/mktg/faculty/berry/#bio\\_sketch\\_anchor](http://wehner.tamu.edu/mktg/faculty/berry/#bio_sketch_anchor) (accessed on Dec. 6, 2010).

therefore performance is essential. As well, services are consumed in relatively the same moment that they are produced, thus the producer is typically present at the time of consumption. The service is also produced by a number of people instead of machines, which means there is an element of variability in the product and requires proper training of producers. Each of these distinctions, according to Berry, required that marketing scholars begin adapting modern marketing philosophy and strategy to suit these particular conditions. This call to arms at the beginning of the decade attracted an increase in interest that would slowly build throughout the 1980s.<sup>64</sup>

The same year, Philip Kotler spoke at a workshop entitled “Teaching and Research in Public and Nonprofit Marketing” at the American Marketing Association’s 1980 Marketing Educators’ Conference in Chicago. He explained that declining religious institutions could find well-needed assistance in marketing; however, it would be hard to get such organizations to “talk marketing.”<sup>65</sup> He explained that religious leaders hoped to use marketing, but they needed to develop theological support for their use. Kotler recognized the tension and barriers in promoting the sacred with the secular. He said, “If they [religious leaders] can find a biblical quotation, then it legitimizes marketing. They want to pass our words through a theological filter.”<sup>66</sup> He also expressed enthusiastic support for an opportunity to collaborate in marketing scholarship with the Church Growth Movement. As he noted, the movement had been engaging in marketing

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<sup>64</sup> Leonard Berry, “Services Marketing is Different” *Business* (May-June 1980): 24-9.

<sup>65</sup> “Kotler Tells Workshop: Marketing Can Offer Useful Perspective to Declining Churches,” *Marketing News* 14, no. 4 (August 22, 1980): 1-2.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

activities but with little true marketing analysis.<sup>67</sup> Kotler clearly recognized the similarity between Donald McGavran's "homogenous unit principle" and target/segmentation marketing. However, he also recognized, much to his dismay, that churches were not coming to him for consultation. Yet he believed that national conferences among denominations were an opportunity for a marketing speaker to teach churches how to employ marketing methods.<sup>68</sup> Whether such opportunities for cross over from the academy to the church would materialize remained to be seen. Yet several did respond to the call to work on the subject within the walls of the academy.

Soon after Berry's article and Kotler's speech, marketing scholars turned specifically to the question of religious marketing. Between 1981 and 1985 there were eight papers given on religious marketing at the Southern Marketing Association meeting. The next year, 1986, there were three empirical studies conducted on the views and acceptability of marketing and advertising methods among both the clergy and the public. Over the course of four empirical surveys in the 1980s, various scholars found that religious leaders looked favorably on using marketing methods, though preferring not to use the commercialized language of "marketing" and "selling." However, they also discovered that the public was much less approving of religious marketing.<sup>69</sup> These

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> B.J. Dunlap, Patricia Gaynor, and W. Daniel Rountree, "The Viability of Marketing in a Religious Setting: An Empirical Analysis," in *Marketing, Theories and Concepts in an Era of Change: Proceedings of the Annual Meeting of the Southern Marketing Association, Atlanta, Georgia, November 16-19, 1983*, ed. John Summey (Carbondale, IL: Southern Marketing Association, 1983), 45-8; Gregory M. Gazda, Carolyn I. Anderson and Donald Sciglimpaglia (1984), "Marketing and Religion: An Assessment of the Clergy," in *Marketing Comes of Age: Proceedings of the Annual Meeting of the Southern Marketing Association, New Orleans, Louisiana, November 14-17, 1984*, ed. David M. Klein and Allen E. Smith ([Carbondale, IL?]: The Association, 1984); William C. Moncrief; Charles W. Lamb, Jr., and Sandra H. Hart (1986), "Marketing the Church," *Journal of Professional Services Marketing*, 1 (Summer 1986), 55-

findings reflected a trend that stretched the century. Churches were eager to adopt business promotionalism, but worried about the association with the market because the public disapproved of the methods.

By the end of the 1980s, many remained frustrated by the lack of religious marketing scholarship. Bob Cutler attempted to pump new life into the field by publishing an examination of all the previous scholarship on the matter. He conducted a thorough study of all national proceedings and publications by scholarly marketing associations and found only thirty-five articles, 80 percent of which were published in the 1980s. Of the articles, six were on marketing techniques in religion, four on the clergy's attitudes towards marketing, and six on consumer behavior in religion.<sup>70</sup> He rallied others to support the subject because as churches were declining, they were attempting to utilize marketing solutions but without proper guidance from scholarly work.<sup>71</sup> He, just as many others had, feared that a primary reason for the lack of research and acceptance was a misunderstanding of marketing. He believed that if scholars could research and write more on the subject, it could grow in use, and churches could grow as a result.

The lack of marketing scholarship was not a symptom of a lack of desire for marketing among pastors. In 1989, Stephen W. McDaniel of Texas A&M University published a survey on the acceptability of marketing in churches.<sup>72</sup> The study, printed in the *Review of Religious Research*, revealed that most church leaders looked upon

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63; McDaniel, Stephen W., "Marketing Communication Techniques in a Church Setting: Views on Appropriateness," *Journal of Professional Services Marketing* 1 (Summer 1986), 39-54.

<sup>70</sup> Bob D. Cutler, "Religion and Marketing: Important Research Area of a Footnote in the Literature?," *Journal of Professional Services Marketing* 8, no. 1 (1991): 155.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 153.

<sup>72</sup> Stephen W. McDaniel, "The Use of Marketing Techniques By Churches: A National Survey," *Review of Religious Research* 31, no. 2 (December, 1989): 175-82.

marketing favorably. McDaniel sent a questionnaire to 1,000 pastors of a variety of churches to collect his data. He also sent a separate questionnaire to 1,250 members of the public. The 290 responses from pastors demonstrated a general optimism towards using marketing methods in their churches. These results, McDaniel noted, supported the results of others' surveys. One of them, conducted in 1984, found that the majority of clergy in California approved of marketing.<sup>73</sup> The other, a 1986 study, revealed that the majority of ministers surveyed in Texas were interested in utilizing business methods to operate their churches.<sup>74</sup>

McDaniel did find, though, that most clergy were suspicious of efforts to "update" church doctrine.<sup>75</sup> Though they welcomed new methods, new messages made many of them uneasy. These results, again, demonstrated the inherent tension latent in church marketing. While most religious leaders favored it, they worried about the impact of the secular marketplace on the sacred institutions. Nevertheless, there was clearly an interest in religion to learn more about marketing. In the nineties, many scholars would work to supply the demand with their research and arguments. However, whether anyone would listen was another issue entirely.

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<sup>73</sup> Gregory M. Gazda, Carolyn I. Anderson, and Donald Sciglimpaglia, "Marketing and Religion: an Assessment of the Clergy," in *Marketing Comes of Age: Proceedings of the 1984 Southern Marketing Association Meeting*, ed. David M. Klein and Allen Smith ([Carbondale, IL?]: The Association, 1984): 78-80.

<sup>74</sup> William C. Moncrief, Charles W. Lamb, Jr., and Sandra Hile Hart, "Marketing the Church" *Journal of Professional Services Marketing* (Summer, 1986): 55-61, quoted in Stephen W. McDaniel, "The Use of Marketing Techniques by Churches: A National Survey," *Review of Religious Research* 31, no. 2 (December 1989): 181.

<sup>75</sup> McDaniel, "Use of Marketing," 180.

Since Culliton's first suggestion to develop a field of religious marketing in 1959, over a period of thirty years, several scholars had considered the subject. Some of the most prominent figures in marketing, Philip Kotler and James Engel, led the way in incorporating religion into the purview of academic marketing theory and practice. By the end of the 1980s, the field was growing, yet it still remained small and isolated. Though there appeared a demand among pastors for guidance in marketing, they were not looking to these scholars. There was one scholar, however, who did cross over and had a tremendous influence on churches and their marketing. Peter Drucker would provide a bridge between the academy and the churches. In the process, he would personally nurture two of the most influential figures in church marketing, pastors Bill Hybels and Rick Warren. Where marketing scholars stood on the periphery of church marketing, Hybels and Warren stood in the center, cultivating an immense industry through their pioneering applications of marketing concepts in their own churches and disseminating their principles across the nation.

### Pastors: Church Leaders Develop & Implement Marketing

Peter Drucker may be the most well-known business expert in America, recognized by many as the "Father of Modern Management." Drucker was born in Vienna in 1909. A refugee from Nazi Germany, he immigrated to the United States where he began teaching management courses. Following the success of his book, *Concept of the Corporation* in 1946, he eventually became a professor of management at the Graduate Business School of New York University from 1950 to 1971. In 1971, he helped establish an executive MBA program at the Claremont Graduate School, and the

management school was renamed in his honor in 1987. He taught at Claremont until 2002. In total, he wrote thirty-nine books and consulted all sizes of organizations, from many of the largest corporations across the globe to small entrepreneurial ventures. Though he is known as the “Father of Modern Management” and is most recognized for his work with corporations, throughout his career, Drucker was driven by his interest in religious organizations.

In 1989, Peter Drucker explained why he was originally attracted to the field of management. He said to an interviewer for *Leadership* magazine, “I became interested in management because of my interest in religion and institutions.” The prompt for the question was Drucker’s recent turn in his career to the examination and discussion of modern religious institutions.<sup>76</sup> Drucker, himself an Episcopalian, had studied theology since he was a teenager. However, his theological beliefs and interests did not enter public discussion until 1989 when he began addressing the challenges of managing large churches. In a 1998 letter, Drucker explained his work with churches. He believed that since they were “the most important community organizations” they must be made “effective.” However, Drucker stated that the “seminaries simply do not prepare priests and ministers to build and run a congregation.” Thus, he gave up on them and determined, with friend Bob Buford, to equip the clergy to manage and develop their churches.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> Peter Steinfeld, “A Man’s Spiritual Journey From Kierkegaard to General Motors,” *New York Times*, November 19, 2005.

<sup>77</sup> “Correspondence from Peter Drucker to Carolina Biquard, 1998-07-15,” July 15, 1998, Drucker Digital Archives, Claremont University Consortium, Claremont Colleges Digital Library, Claremont, CA, [http://ccdlib.claremont.edu/cdm4/item\\_viewer.php?CISOROOT=/dac&CISOPTR=2738&CISOBX=1](http://ccdlib.claremont.edu/cdm4/item_viewer.php?CISOROOT=/dac&CISOPTR=2738&CISOBX=1) (accessed July 16, 2009).

Like many of the experts in religious promotion, Drucker believed that religion would flourish where it were more sensitive to peoples' felt needs than committed to historic doctrines.<sup>78</sup> He therefore promoted marketing for religion, and all nonprofits, particularly with his 1990 book, *Managing the Nonprofit*. Drucker wrote the book to provide assistance for non-profits as their businesses, built on volunteers, fund raising, and a diversity of customers, required specialized methods.<sup>79</sup> In it, he, like Berry before him, explained that selling in nonprofit organizations is different from profit organizations, because the product is an intangible. The non-profit, he explained, sells a "concept" instead of a "product." Therefore, it depends more on market research and market segmentation. As Drucker wrote, "you have to know what to sell, to whom to sell, and when to sell."<sup>80</sup> He continued, the "marketing must be built into the design of the service."<sup>81</sup> In other words, for a nonprofit, such as a church, marketing was a fundamental component of all planning and selling. He emphasized that it must begin with knowing the customer, "to figure out what they want and how to reach them."<sup>82</sup> Then, he advised, the nonprofit must develop different messages for different market segments.<sup>83</sup>

Drucker believed that churches were a prime example of the benefits of marketing. In 1990, he wrote a piece on Marketing 101 for the *Wall Street Journal*. He

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<sup>78</sup> Steinfels, "Man's Spiritual Journey."

<sup>79</sup> Drucker, *Managing the Non-Profit*, xv.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 54.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 56.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 66.



provided three examples of marketing failures: GM automobiles, American fax machines, and department stores. He then provided one marketing success story, “pastoral” churches. The lesson he highlighted in these churches was their capitalization on demographic changes. While traditional, mainline churches lost members, innovative churches grew because they targeted “the emergence of the new educated, affluent two-earner family.” Drucker explained that traditional churches saw this group as “non-customers” but the new churches saw them as “potential customers.” They discovered their “needs” and created churches to meet those desires, he argued.<sup>84</sup>

What Drucker did not explain in the article was the central role he played in helping those churches adopt and develop their marketing expertise. Where Kotler failed to influence churches significantly, Drucker succeeded. Drucker, in partnership with Bob Buford, created a network to permeate churches with modern marketing techniques. The relationship began when Buford looked to Drucker personally for advice upon inheriting a cable television business. One bit of advice, from Drucker, was to develop a career in parallel to his business career. Buford looked to his religious convictions.

In reflection, Buford pointed to two sources of thinking that “kind of run together” and drove his life. The first, he said was “basically the life and thought of Jesus Christ.” The second was “the life and thought ... or more the thought of Peter Drucker.”<sup>85</sup> He explained, “Peter [Drucker] and others helped me to find a focal point, which is ... what was at that time, the rise of the large church, what’s now called the

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<sup>84</sup> Peter Drucker, “Marketing 101 for a Fast-Changing Decade,” *Wall Street Journal*, November 20, 1990.

<sup>85</sup> “Oral History Interview of Bob Buford,” December 22, 1999, Drucker Digital Archives, Claremont University Consortium, Claremont Colleges Digital Library, Claremont, CA, <http://ccdlib.claremont.edu/cdm4/document.php?CISOROOT=/dac&CISOPTR=494> (accessed July 16, 2009), 31-2.

megachurch.”<sup>86</sup> Buford decided to combine Jesus and Drucker, to help churches with business principles and practices.

Buford chose “to not focus on the doctrinal and theological side of the work ... but on the pragmatics.”<sup>87</sup> At Drucker’s suggestion, Buford began by teaching churches Drucker’s three questions that stood at the core of his business philosophy. The questions capture the necessity to look at a business from the consumer’s perspective.<sup>88</sup> The questions were, first, “What is our business?” second, “Who is the customer?” and third, “What does the customer consider value?” In 1984, Buford established the Leadership Network to create a forum for innovative church leaders and a means to disseminate Drucker’s philosophies. He focused on the “successful and large congregations among the Evangelicals,” as recommended by Drucker.<sup>89</sup> Over time, they built a mailing list of 15,000 churches and began offering conferences and local meetings to pastors without regard for denominational or religious differences.<sup>90</sup> Just as organizations before them, they created an ecumenical platform for a variety of religious leaders to work together in developing and adopting promotion methods.

Between 1975 and 1990, Peter Drucker helped provide the foundation for a church marketing movement that gradually gained steam in megachurches across America. These churches embraced a phase three marketing stance in their seeker

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<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 21.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

<sup>88</sup> Peter F. Drucker to Robert P. Buford, September 22, 1986, Drucker Archives, Drucker Institute, Claremont Graduate University, Claremont, CA, Document received as an attachment to an email from archivist Jacob High, July 17, 2009.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

<sup>90</sup> “Oral History of Bob Buford,” 24.

sensitive orientation that sought to discern and meet the needs of the modern consumer. The two principal architects of the church marketing movement were both students of Peter Drucker and Robert Schuller, pastors Bill Hybels and Rick Warren. Employing the marketing strategies of customer sovereignty, meeting felt needs, and aggressive promotion that they learned from Drucker and Schuller, Hybels and Warren catalyzed a church marketing industry that would take American churches by storm in the 1990s.

*Seeker Churches: A New Way to “Do Church”*

In a 2001 interview, Peter Drucker told Forbes magazine that the megachurches were the “most important social phenomenon in American society in the last 30 years.”<sup>91</sup> In the 1970s, a new movement began in Christianity that centered on unusually large churches and emphasized attracting new adherents. Most commonly referred to as the seeker church or seeker-sensitive movement, its principal markers and proponents were new megachurches. A megachurch is a church that has at least 2,000 members. Their eruption came as a surprise to many in a period of rapidly declining church attendance. While there were a number of factors that created the circumstances for their rise, the secret to their success was in great part a new seeker philosophy that was in principal a phase three marketing strategy of customer sovereignty.<sup>92</sup> In his study of seeker churches, sociologist Kimon Sargeant defines a seeker church as “one that tailors its programs and services to attract people who are not church attenders.” He continues to

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<sup>91</sup> Leadership Network, “Peter F. Drucker,” Leadership Network Feature, November 14, 2005, <http://www.pursuantgroup.com/leadnet/advance/nov05o.htm> (accessed May 06, 2008).

<sup>92</sup> See Guffin’s dissertation for his argument of the five factors: Scott Lee Guffin, “An Examination of Key Foundational Influences on the Megachurch Movement in America, 1960-1978” (PhD diss., Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1999).

explain that what defines them is a core “innovative, customer-sensitive church programming.”<sup>93</sup> At the foundation of these churches was a marketing philosophy to develop a church based on popular desires in the surrounding community. They were customer driven in their messages and methods, and they were to be the centrifuges that would spawn a church marketing explosion in the 1990s. Before considering the expansion of their principles, it is helpful to consider their basic marketing attributes.

The seeker churches arose to supply the religious demands of a market of detached, autonomous, therapeutic baby boomers. Historian Patrick Allitt keenly notes that “one way religious Americans responded to urban sprawl was ... by doing some sprawling of their own.”<sup>94</sup> He explains that the expanding Sunbelt cities spawned “subsidiary urban centers” that “organized around shopping malls.” These suburbs became a principal home for Americans in the 1970s as their percentage of total residents in the country eclipsed that of urban areas. Suburban growth continued in the 1980s, capturing 46 percent of Americans by 1990.<sup>95</sup> In these “Mall-lands” of choice, megachurches arose to serve the baby boom generation. Robert Schuller was an early pioneer in this area, and other pastors of large churches, particularly in the Sun-Belt region such as Rick Warren, followed suit. These churches provided denominationally unaffiliated religious institutions that offered the variety and satisfaction of a shopping center to this generation that had detached from its parents’ religious traditions.

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<sup>93</sup> Sargeant, 4.

<sup>94</sup> Patrick Allitt, *Religion in America Since 1945: A History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 227.

<sup>95</sup> Sargeant, 39.

Sociologists, like William McKinney and Wade Clark Roof, call the baby boomer detachment with tradition the “new voluntarism.” It is an accelerated form of the American individualism that Alexis de Tocqueville observed in the nineteenth century. The baby boomers are a generation of radical individualists, expressed most poignantly in their revolutionary spirit during the 1960s and 1970s. In their revolution, they rejected the traditional institutions and social orders of their parents. McKinney and Roof argue that this individualism bled over into their religious affinities in the new voluntarism. They explain that the boomers “are bound less than ever before to inherited faiths, are deeply subjective in their religious choices, and are looking to a range of experts and resources for help in cultivating their spiritual lives.”<sup>96</sup> Sociologist Kimon Sargeant describes new voluntarism as a “subjectivist and therapeutic understanding of religious participation that is based less on duty or obligation and more on whether it meets people’s needs.”<sup>97</sup> He summarizes this religious culture in three “essential traits.” They are that religious participation is seen as a choice, religious thought is therapeutic focusing on the enhancement of the self, and religious institutions and authority are suspect.<sup>98</sup>

The success of the seeker church was in its ability, as Sargeant explains, to create a church model that could attract the spirit of the new voluntarism. These churches addressed “consumerists, therapeutic, and anti-institutional cultural ethos by offering seekers choices, meeting their personal needs, and pioneering informal and culturally

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<sup>96</sup> Roof, *Spiritual Marketplace*, 110.

<sup>97</sup> Sargeant, 164.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*

contemporary forms of worship.”<sup>99</sup> These churches were poised to meet the demands of baby boomers that were prepared, now with children and searching for commitment, to engage in organized religion on their own terms.<sup>100</sup> They were able to meet those demands because through marketing principles and practices they were equipped and prepared to discern the needs of their target market and meet them with creative products. In short, marketing equipped churches to attract a generation of modern consumers.

The marketing methodology, and not theology, characterize and unite seeker churches. Their unity, much like other conglomerates in church promotion before them, was in method, not message. They represented a diversity of denominations. However, the most of them were broadly evangelical and leaned towards traditional theological beliefs, unlike the members of the RPRC. While mainline churches scrambled to use public relations and advertising methods, more traditional, evangelical Christians readily adopted the methods of church marketing.

The marketing emphasis on customer sovereignty suited evangelical forms of religion because they are more individualistic versions of Christianity than the mainline brand. Evangelicals, while gathering in community each Sunday, emphasize the relationship between the individual self and God. Mainline Christianity, on the other hand, stresses the relationship between God and the Christian community as well as that community’s relationship with the surrounding community on earth. As such, evangelical churches are more naturally predisposed to tailor their services to meet the needs of the individual consumer.

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<sup>99</sup> Ibid.

<sup>100</sup> Roof, *Spiritual Marketplace*, 247.

Evangelical churches also can offer religion at an attractive price for a generation wary of commitment. Evangelical religion requires an intellectual assent in its individualist emphasis. Unlike mainline Protestantism, there are few communal expectations or obligations, so an evangelical can easily participate in a seeker church while remaining autonomous and offering very little in time and service. In other words, evangelicals could offer the customer a cheap church service.

Evangelical churches were also better prepared to redefine their ecclesiology to suit modern entertainment and mass media interests among consumers. Evangelical religion had always been out in front of mainline traditions in innovating and mastering the use of mass media to retail its products. Throughout the twentieth century, they creatively utilized radio, television, and the press, to fund, refine, and spread their message.<sup>101</sup> By the early 1980s, according Gallup polling and Nielsen data, one in three American viewers watched religious programming on television, referred to as the “electric church.” The majority of religious television in 1980 featured evangelical programming, at a value of \$600 million a year, an increase from \$50 million a year in 1970.<sup>102</sup> Such modern mass media broadcasts enabled ministers, such as Robert Schuller and Jerry Falwell, to build enormous churches whose services were seen across the country. In 1988, the most popular religious television show was Robert Schuller’s “Hour of Power,” seen in 1,394,000 homes each week.<sup>103</sup> This actually marked a decline from 1986 when 1,963,000 homes tuned in to Schuller, before the scandals that shrunk

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<sup>101</sup> Razelle Frankl, *Televangelism: The Marketing of Popular Religion* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1987), 3-4.

<sup>102</sup> Erling Jorstad, *Popular Religion in America: The Evangelical Voice* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1993), 31.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

the televangelism market.<sup>104</sup> Evangelical use of radio had also expanded rapidly. In 1973, 111 radio stations provided at least twenty-four hours of religious programming each week. By 1979, the number of stations had increased to 449, and by 1989, it was 1,052 stations.<sup>105</sup> The electric church indubitably increased evangelical support in local churches, financed many megachurches, and altered the way that Americans consumed religion, but it also reflected the adaptability of evangelical churches to use the latest technology and forms of the media culture. In seeker churches, they utilized this expertise to create services and forms that attracted their target customers.

Though the majority of seeker churches were evangelical, their methodology trumped any endorsement of a traditional theology. As Sargent argues, their theology remained broadly defined, avoiding specific doctrinal articulation while centering on general statements of faith.<sup>106</sup> They also steered away from messages of intolerance and instead portrayed God as one who “loves you, is proud of you, believes in you, and will give you strength to stand up to the forces of evil in the world.”<sup>107</sup> Though they were more traditional theologically than Robert Schuller, they still, like him, emphasized sin’s evil effects on an individual person temporal life rather than its offense to God and eternal consequences.<sup>108</sup> As Sargeant summarizes, “seeker churches introduce seekers to the Christian message by presenting the exclusivist theology of evangelicalism in the friendly guise of an egalitarian, fulfillment-enhancing, fun religious encounter with

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<sup>104</sup> Ibid., 38.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid., 39.

<sup>106</sup> Sargeant, 101.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid., 86.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid., 95.



God."<sup>109</sup> They provided a Christian doctrine that continued to elevate the centrality of the self and the quest for fulfillment.

Sargent argues that seeker churches had little concern for questions about truth because they focused on questions of success. They shaped their church based on what works to attract the most people, not on doctrine.<sup>110</sup> The most viable methods, they found, were the basic methods of marketing. They expanded Schuller's central marketing principle that a church must work to deliver on a customers' felt needs in both its services and theology. Sargeant summarizes, "seeker churches present a more plausible model of Christianity - a model that fits with pervasive cultural understandings about choice, individualism, autonomy, the importance of the self, therapeutic sensibilities, and an anti-institutional inclination common today."<sup>111</sup> They work to subjugate traditions to contemporary preferences. This effort reflected in their buildings and decor. They met in theaters, elevated the use of images, and removed traditional Christian symbols or at least updated them. In all of these ways, they "do church" in a manner that appeals to the target customers of the modern marketplace.

The seeker churches of the 1970s and beyond were the culmination of church promotion history. Their philosophy was nothing new, it was but a more complex and planned version of the desire to give the customer more choices. In the 1930s, churches sought to offer more community services, seven days a week. In the 1950s, they offered more worship services with more variety. In the 1970s and beyond, megachurches, with their enormous resources, escalated the same methodology. They offered more options,

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<sup>109</sup> Ibid., 99.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid., 129.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid., 31.

more choices, more convenience, and more comfort, to attract customers. The difference though, or the innovation, was the advent of market segmentation and a new willingness to radically alter the church to suit the market. Their enormous size meant enormous budgets and armies of volunteers that could provide more and more “products” for consumers.<sup>112</sup> They functioned as modern shopping centers for Jesus, just as Robert Schuller had predicted years before. These seeker churches in their success would, like Schuller’s church, develop their philosophies of church marketing and spread them throughout the nation to eager pastors searching for ways to grow in a turbulent religious marketplace.

The two most influential individuals in the seeker church movement were Bill Hybels and Rick Warren. Both men built enormous churches on church marketing philosophies and methods that they gleaned personally from Robert Schuller and Peter Drucker. They created a church marketing empire through the success of their own churches and the spread of their ideas. Scholars in various disciplines have written about both pastors, particularly Warren with his enormous success as an author, and there is no need to re-write it. However, it is helpful to consider the specific ways in which these pastors transferred the marketing ideas and practices of business, and applied them in their own churches, and began to spread them to other churches. Their pioneering use of church marketing built the industry as it stands today.

*Bill Hybels: Church Marketing in Chicago*

In college, Bill Hybels studied business, not theology, and his career as a pastor reflected this inverse in education. In 1972, he walked away from his father’s vegetable

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<sup>112</sup> Ibid. 107.

business to move to Illinois and work for a Christian youth organization. That year, he and friend Dave Holombo began hosting their own weekly bible study for teens. In an effort to attract “unchurched” teens, the next year they created “Son City,” an “outreach service” that incorporated popular music, entertainment, and relevant messages.<sup>113</sup> They designed the meetings to attract non-Christian teenagers, their target market. Hybels taught the study and Holombo contributed his own contemporary music style. In fact, Holombo had left his previous church because as Lynne Hybels explains, “he felt stifled musically.”<sup>114</sup> It is worth noting this decision because it reflects Holombo’s priorities in a church, not the doctrine but the style. One remembers other church promotion advocates such as Willard Pleuthner who left their churches over matters of promotion and style instead of doctrine.

Together Holombo and Hybels grew the seeker service while at the same time also leading another service for “believers” called “Son Village.” This model of a service for “believers” and a different service for the “unchurched” would become a cornerstone of Hybel’s philosophy. He would build a megachurch around a customer centered philosophy that offered special services for a targeted unchurched market.

The most significant influence on Hybels’ understanding for how to build and grow a church was Robert Schuller. By the fall of 1974, the burden of a large youth ministry was souring relations with the host church, South Park Church, and Bill Hybels began considering possible options. One was to start a new church. While examining the potential of such a venture, in April 1975, Hybel’s read Robert Schuller’s *Your Church*

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<sup>113</sup> Lynne Hybel and Bill Hybels, *Rediscovering Church: The Story and Vision of Willow Creek Community Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1995), 29-33.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

*Has Real Possibilities*. Schuller's advice and inspiration provided the catalyst Hybels needed to leave South Park Church and move to Palatine, Illinois to establish a church with kids from Son City.<sup>115</sup>

In 1975, Hybels and Holombo, inspired by Schuller, quit their jobs and started a new church in Palatine, Illinois. Schuller's *Your Church Has Real Possibilities* provided the foundation for the church.<sup>116</sup> Hybels required that all of the leaders at Son City read it. He then attended Schuller's Institute for Church Leadership in 1975 and took all twenty-five of the key leaders at "Son City" back to the Institute the next year. They began the church the same way that Schuller had twenty years earlier. They went from house to house conducting a survey, asking people if they attended a church.<sup>117</sup> If they did not, they asked why not and recorded the answers.<sup>118</sup> There were five basic reasons given: 1) churches always ask for money 2) church services are boring 3) services are predictable 4) sermons are irrelevant to the real world 5) pastors make them feel guilty and ignorant.<sup>119</sup> These results became the foundation for creating a church that would attract those that did not attend church. Willow Creek Community Church began that fall.

Whereas Robert Schuller held his first service in an *outdoor* drive-in theater, Bill Hybels' held his in an *indoor* theater. On October 12, 1975, they gathered at the Willow Creek Theater in Palatine, Illinois. They chose the location because, according to Bill

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<sup>115</sup> Ibid., 51.

<sup>116</sup> Robert H. Schuller, *Your Church Has Real Possibilities* (Glendale, CA: GL Regal Books, 1974).

<sup>117</sup> Sargeant, 197.

<sup>118</sup> Thomas A. Stewart, "Turning Around the Lord's Business" *Fortune*, September 25, 1989.

<sup>119</sup> Sargeant, 19.

Hybels' wife Lynne, "its proximity to main roads gave it easy *accessibility* [emphasis added] and because it had *adequate parking* [emphasis added]." <sup>120</sup> One may recall that accessibility and parking were two of Schuller's imperatives for a successful church. The theater also could seat 970 people, had a "huge stage" and a large lobby for childcare. It would be the home for their church over the next six years. <sup>121</sup>

They held their first official service on October 12, 1975 with 125 people in attendance. <sup>122</sup> Lynne Hybels described it, "The music was loud, the drama was raucous, and Bill walked on the stage with no notes, no pulpit – just a Bible, and an outline engraved in his mind." <sup>123</sup> In the services, they used secular music that related to the morning's theme and complex drama presentations. They also offered special events to attract attention and visitors to the theater. Much like Schuller, they provided concerts, holiday events, luncheons, breakfasts, anything to arouse interest from the community. <sup>124</sup> By the end of the year, over 1,000 were attending and within three years, attendance had risen to almost 3,000.

As the church continued to grow through the 1970s, Hybels began investigating building a permanent facility. In doing so, he trusted in part upon the man who had successfully built an enormous church facility, Robert Schuller. In 1976, the leaders of "Son City" had sat down with Schuller at the Institute. Schuller said to them, "If God chooses to do a miracle, you'd better be ready for it. Don't buy a thimble of land. Buy a

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<sup>120</sup> Hybels, *Rediscovering*, 59.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.* 62.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*, 66.

fifty-gallon drum.”<sup>125</sup> In response, they decided to purchase ninety acres. At the principal fund raising event to purchase the land, Schuller gave the keynote address. Who better than the man that secured international attention, in large part, due to his success in publicizing, funding, and building modern church facilities? On the heels of Schuller’s speech and Hybel’s efforts to raise the money, they purchased the land. Construction began on the modern church building in June 1979 in the midst of enormous internal turmoil shifting from a team led organization to a hierarchical organization with Hybels at the head.<sup>126</sup> The increasing complexity and size of the church required the transition, according to Hybels. As they sorted out the new corporate structure of the organization, the church held its first service in the new building on February 15, 1981.<sup>127</sup>

In 1981, meeting in their new facility, the church began to expand its community services. Among them, they established a women’s ministry and singles’ ministry, The youth ministry grew with a new junior high organization called Sonlight Express and a Sunday School program called Promiseland.<sup>128</sup> The new church increasingly resembled a shopping mall with its panoply of customer services and continuous operations. It also resembled Schuller’s church in form, though in doctrine it remained more orthodox. In 1982, it shifted even further from Schuller’s theological circles. As Schuller’s teaching received greater criticism, Willow Creek worked to pull away from him.

Hybels looked beyond Schuller, in 1982, to others for wisdom in growing and leading a church. On matters of theology, he began to study the work of pastor and

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<sup>125</sup> Ibid., 69.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid., 81.

<sup>127</sup> Sargeant, 191.

<sup>128</sup> Hybels, *Rediscovering*, 98.

theologian R.C. Sproul. Sproul informed Hybels' understanding of the holiness of God, but the two vehemently disagreed over methods of evangelism.<sup>129</sup> After spending time at Sproul's Ligonier Valley Study Center, Hybels began to emphasize more orthodox theological issues in his teaching. On matters of managing a large organization, he read Peter Drucker. Hybels assigned Drucker's *The Effective Executive* to his entire staff for reading.<sup>130</sup> He also adopted Drucker's three customer centered questions as the foundation for Willow Creek's philosophy.<sup>131</sup> The influence of Drucker on Hybels was substantial, yet there is little mention of it in Willow Creek's literature. Drucker, on the other hand, noted that Hybels credited Drucker's work as a principal part of his success in building a church. Drucker said in an interview, "He [Hybels] did market research ... and he built the church to satisfy these expectations and he claims that he learns it out of my books."<sup>132</sup> Schuller also praised Hybels and references his influence on Hybels' work. He stated to an interviewer, "I am so proud of him [Hybels]... I think of him as a son."<sup>133</sup> Hybels however, did not return the compliment.

Willow Creek has remained historically quiet regarding its history with Robert Schuller. Sociologist Gregory A. Pritchard notes that in his research most of the staff members at Willow Creek neglected to discuss Schuller's influence on their church. He points specifically to an article on the tenth anniversary in the new building. In speaking

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<sup>129</sup> Ibid.

<sup>130</sup> Sargeant, 199; Peter F. Drucker, *The Effective Executive* (New York: Harper & Row, 1967).

<sup>131</sup> Sargeant, 1.

<sup>132</sup> "Interview with Peter Drucker 2001-12-05," December 5, 2001, Drucker Digital Archives, Claremont University Consortium, Claremont Colleges Digital Library, Claremont, CA, [http://ccdlib.claremont.edu/cdm4/item\\_viewer.php?CISOROOT=/dac&CISOPTR=2176&CISOBOL=X=1](http://ccdlib.claremont.edu/cdm4/item_viewer.php?CISOROOT=/dac&CISOPTR=2176&CISOBOL=X=1) (accessed July 16, 2009).

<sup>133</sup> Gregory A. Pritchard, *Willow Creek Seeker Services: Evaluating a New Way of Doing Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1996), 56.

about the director of the student ministry, Dan Webster, the article elided saying directly that Webster had been on Schuller's staff previously and that Hybels recruited him while Hybels served as a consultant at Schuller's church.<sup>134</sup> Schuller is also absent in Lynne Hybel's detailed account of the birth and growth of Willow Creek Community Church. She only mentions Schuller twice, and with little attention to his influence. Nevertheless, the connections and the commonalities are clear.

As the church grew, Hybels developed Schuller's principles and created a much more complex and sophisticated system of target marketing. In order to focus on a target consumer, Willow Creek constructed a representative of their target market and named him "Unchurched Harry." They define Unchurched Harry by lifestyle characteristics. He was between the ages of twenty-five and forty-five, married with children, well educated, and lived in the middle-class suburbs.<sup>135</sup> The target was strikingly reflective of Hybels himself. He explained, "Generally a pastor can define his appropriate target audience by determining with whom he would like to spend a vacation or an afternoon of recreation."<sup>136</sup> One can see the similarities with McGavran's homogeneous unit principle. In order to ensure the elements of attraction, Hybels adopted the language, clothing, customs and lifestyle of Harry.<sup>137</sup>

After identifying Harry, Willow Creek determined his felt needs. They found that Harry's principal felt needs were personal fulfillment, a sense of identity, companionship,

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<sup>134</sup> Ibid., 294.

<sup>135</sup> Ibid., 67-8.

<sup>136</sup> Ibid., 62.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid., 126.



marriage, family, relief of stress, and a moral anchor that gives meaning.<sup>138</sup> The church then subdivided Harry into specific groups. One of these subgroups was “Hostile Harrys.” Hostile Harrys have a negative opinion of Christianity. “Curious Harrys” find Christianity intriguing and are open to exploring it, and “Sincere Harrys” are committed to trying Christianity. The church developed different strategies to attract each of these Harrys to Willow Creek.

Unchurched Harry was not alone, as there were also Unchurch Marys, however, Harry remained the principal target. Hybels admitted in an interview that he targeted males instead of females. He explained, “We shoot unashamedly for the male, and that's somewhat controversial. But our feeling is that it's tougher to reach men than it is women. Men seekers are real tough to reach. So if we set our standards at reaching unchurched males, we'll probably in so doing reach larger numbers of females.”<sup>139</sup> In order to be certain that they properly understood Harry, the church continually utilized several forms of research.

Hybels surpassed Schuller in researching his target customers. He implemented a comprehensive and continuous system to be sure that the church could precisely target Harry. Pritchard explains the four types of research that the church conducted. The first was in personal relationships that the staff and volunteers developed with those that did not attend church. The second was through retreats. The retreats could be planned getaways where varieties of people were invited to attend and discuss current trends and interests among possible customers. Another kind of retreat was for a group of the staff and volunteers to attend a local cultural event and study what attracted people.

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<sup>138</sup> Ibid., 70-3.

<sup>139</sup> Ibid., 62.

Professional research organizations provided the third kind of research. The church would hire professional consultants and research firms to provide specialized data about the community. This form helped to create an industry in professional demographic research for churches. The fourth method was Bill Hybels' personal research in his interaction with unchurched people.<sup>140</sup> Each of the four methods enabled the church to adjust continually its understanding of how to best interest the "unchurched" members of the community.

These research methods worked and Willow Creek continued to grow in size and influence in the 1980s. By 1983, weekly attendance at Willow Creek had grown to 4,600.<sup>141</sup> In 1985, 5,000 were attending each week, and by the close of 1987, there were 9,000 attending the three weekend services, with one on Saturday night.<sup>142</sup> At the close of the decade, there were more than 11,000 members.<sup>143</sup> This numerical success caught the eye of the media in the late 1980s. Much to the Hybels' chagrin, the press noted the parallels between Willow Creek's methods and those of the modern marketplace. Like many before them, the Hybels were uncomfortable using marketplace language to describe their methods. Lynne Hybels wrote,

More often than not we cringed as we read or heard analyses provided by reporters who used the language of business to describe what was happening at Willow Creek. The congregation became 'consumers.' Seekers became 'potential customers.' Our 1975 survey became a 'demographic analysis.' Finding effective ways to address people's needs became 'marketing savvy.'<sup>144</sup>

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<sup>140</sup> Ibid., 63-5.

<sup>141</sup> Hybels, *Rediscovering*, 100.

<sup>142</sup> Ibid., 101.

<sup>143</sup> Sargeant, 191.

<sup>144</sup> Hybels, *Rediscovering*, 103.

Though the Hybels and other church leaders squirmed at the language, it did accurately describe how they had successfully built an enormous enterprise. Their discomfort simply marked the tension that had always been latent in using such techniques to retail religion. Nevertheless, they continued to employ the methods and began to spread them to other churches.

As attendance exploded the church began fund raising in 1989 to build a \$23 million building of 210,000 square feet that would include a gym, classrooms, conference rooms, and a “complete food service area.”<sup>145</sup> Hybels’ influence also increased dramatically as he began traveling around the world to teach other pastors how to create a “seeker-targeted ministry.”<sup>146</sup> In the 1990s, his methods would continue to spread and his church would continue to grow. He would become the premiere church growth expert in America along with another pastor who also aggressively used church marketing strategies, Rick Warren.

*Rick Warren: Church Marketing in Orange County*

Unlike Hybels, Rick Warren trained for ministry in a theological school, not a business school, and from an early age sought to build an enormous church. Warren’s fascination with large churches is clear in how he recalled his journey to build the Saddleback church. He began it by describing a 350-mile drive to hear the pastor of the world’s largest Baptist church speak in 1973. Afterwards, as Warren recalled, the pastor laid his hands on Warren and prayed that one day he would lead a church twice the size

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<sup>145</sup> Ibid., 104-05.

<sup>146</sup> Ibid., 103-04.

of his own.<sup>147</sup> In pursuit of this prophecy, and as a fourth generation Southern Baptist, Warren pursued an M.A. at the Southwestern Theological Baptist Seminary in the late 1970s.

While in seminary, Warren continued to study large churches. He wrote a personal letter to the 100 largest churches in America, asking them to share the keys to their “success.” He then visited one of the largest and fastest growing churches in the nation, Robert Schuller’s Garden Grove Community Church. In his last year of seminary, Warren, along with his wife, drove to California to attend Robert Schuller’s Institute. While his wife was skeptical of Schuller’s methods and message, they both left impressed. Schuller would go on to become a key influence on Warren. As his wife recalls, “We were captivated by his[Schuller’s] positive appeal to nonbelievers.”<sup>148</sup> Much like Hybels, Rick Warren would work to build a church that targeted the “unchurched” and do so with Schuller’s methods.

Warren began by hosting a bible study in his Saddleback Valley home in 1979. In church marketing fashion, he had chosen the area because census data indicated that it was growing faster than any other place in the country.<sup>149</sup> Ironically, Robert Schuller’s church was in the same county. In fact, Warren’s description of the church’s beginning sounds much like Robert Schuller’s. Reading it is eerily similar to reading Schuller’s account of his journey. Both exuded enormous confidence in their retelling, emphasized repeatedly listening to the audible voice of God, noted that they received unsolicited

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<sup>147</sup> Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Church: Growth Without Compromising Your Message & Mission*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1995), 25-6.

<sup>148</sup> In his retelling of the church’s history in *The Purpose Driven Church*, Warren does not mention this visit and the influence of Schuller, nor does he mention the influence of Peter Drucker.

<sup>149</sup> Warren, *Purpose Driven*, 34.

donations, and used innumerable exclamation points throughout the description.

Whereas Schuller described arriving with nothing more than his family in the car with an organ on a trailer in 1955, Warren recalled that he arrived in California with *only* his wife, infant daughter and just a U-Haul truck in 1979.<sup>150</sup> Warren, like Schuller, also sought to attract people that did not belong to other churches.<sup>151</sup> He began, like Schuller and Hybels, with an extensive door-to-door survey in the community to discern the “felt needs.”<sup>152</sup>

Warren explained that Schuller’s door-to-door method inspired his own. He had read about it in Schuller’s book, *Your Church Has Real Possibilities*, the same formative book for Bill Hybels. Warren may also have known of the survey from attending Schuller’s Institute. In his own door-to-door survey, Warren modified Schuller’s questions and had his own five that he asked each household. First he asked, “What do you think is the greatest need in this area?” He then assessed if they attended a church, which if they did, he, like Schuller, moved on to the next house. If they did not, he asked, “Why do you think most people don’t attend church?” The most common responses were that church is boring, church members are unfriendly, churches are interested in my money, and concerns for the quality of child care. He then followed with, “If you were to look for a church to attend, what kind of things would you look for?” Then his last question, he explained, he modeled on Jesus’ questioning, “What could I do for you? What advice can you give to a minister who really wants to be

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<sup>150</sup> RickWarren.com, “Saddleback Church: History,” <http://www.rickwarren.com/about/saddlebackchurch> (accessed January 23, 2011).

<sup>151</sup> Warren, *Purpose Driven*, 35-9.

<sup>152</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

helpful to people?”<sup>153</sup> This was, of course, another means of following the important step in marketing of assessing felt needs. It was also another instance of defending marketing methods by pointing to Jesus’ practice of them. Recording his survey results, Warren began to construct a plan for a church that would attract members of the community.

The church began, not in a theater, but in his condominium. However, from the first gathering of fifteen, he had a date set for an inaugural service in twelve weeks. One week before the first service, Warren launched a direct mail advertising campaign that rivaled the publicity of Robert Schuller, sending 15,000 “hand addressed” and “hand stamped” letters promoting the church.<sup>154</sup> He also held a dress rehearsal to ensure that the service would proceed without any flaws.<sup>155</sup> This promotional and programmatic approach to the service echoed Schuller’s emphasis on advertising, showmanship, and production.

Saddleback Community Church began officially with a public service on Easter day in 1980 with 205 people in attendance at of all places, a theater, the Laguna Hills High School Theater.<sup>156</sup> In his sermon, Warren, like a C.E.O., laid out a statement of vision for the church. He described his dream to build a church of “20,000 members” on “at least fifty acres of land.”<sup>157</sup> Much like Schuller, success for Warren was size; it was

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<sup>153</sup> Ibid., 190-92.

<sup>154</sup> Ibid., 41.

<sup>155</sup> Ibid., 42.

<sup>156</sup> Saddleback Church, “History,” <http://www.saddleback.com/aboutsaddleback/history> (accessed January 23, 2011); Warren, *Purpose Driven*, 44.

<sup>157</sup> Saddleback Church, “Saddleback Church: Vision,” <http://www.rickwarren.com/about/saddlebackchurch> (accessed January 23, 2011); Warren, *Purpose Driven*, 43.

numbers. He had a vision for a successful church. Though he may not have realized it then, he would realize his dream by utilizing the latest methods in church marketing.

Unlike Schuller, Warren did not set to building his dream church immediately. As he wrote in 1995, in the first fifteen years of the church, they used seventy-nine different buildings. He recalled that they met in “four different high schools, numerous elementary schools, bank buildings, recreations centers, theaters, community centers, restaurants, large homes, professional office buildings, and stadiums, until finally we erected a 2,300-seat high-tech tent. We were filling the tent for four services each weekend before we built our first building.”<sup>158</sup> Warren’s strategy was somewhat different than Schuller’s. Like Schuller he began by meeting in spaces that were familiar to the public. Schuller met in a drive-in theater, and Warren met in school theaters. Yet while Schuller quickly built a modern church that attracted a great deal of publicity, Warren continued meeting in familiar marketplace locations. His target customer could feel more comfortable going to the places that he and she went throughout the week, the bank, the schools, the theaters. His church truly took on the forms of the marketplace by literally gathering in the marketplace. In these spaces, he could still apply the principles that he believed were fundamental to growing a church.

Warren, just as Schuller had, outlined his principles for growing a church in a popular book, *The Purpose Driven Church*, published in 1995. It provides a window into the marketing methods that he used to build a mega-church in the 1980s. The most important principle, he argued, in growing a successful church was to define a purpose, thus the title of the book. The second most important principle was to use target marketing practices, particularly to define a target. He devoted a chapter to explaining

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<sup>158</sup> Warren, *Purpose Driven*, 45-6.

the importance of defining a target and aiming for it. Warren began, as others before him, with a defense for the strategy, pointing to Jesus as an example of a targeted ministry in how he sent the disciples out to particular groups of people. Warren also explained how the gospels were written for different target audiences.<sup>159</sup> He, like others, also argued that it is possible to separate the method from the message. He wrote, “The Bible determines our message, but our target determines when, where, and how we communicate.”<sup>160</sup> He moved on to explain that the targeting process begins by surveying the community. First, he described, information must be collected to define the target “geographically, demographically, culturally, and spiritually.”<sup>161</sup> Once these categories were used to define the target customer, a “composite profile” could be created and personalized. Whereas Hybels called his “composite profile” “Unchurched Harry,” Warren called his “Saddleback Sam.”

Warren provided detailed information on “Saddleback Sam.” He is in his “late thirties or early forties. He has a college degree and may have an advanced degree. He is married to Saddleback Samantha, and they have two kids, Steve and Sally.”<sup>162</sup> Warren described Sam’s profession, his preferences in leisure, music, and attire, and his desire to live in anonymity.<sup>163</sup> Warren also explained, like Hybels, that a key in defining the target is to be sure that he is very similar to the pastor and leaders of the church.<sup>164</sup> This was

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<sup>159</sup> Ibid., 158.

<sup>160</sup> Ibid., 157.

<sup>161</sup> Ibid., 160.

<sup>162</sup> Ibid., 169.

<sup>163</sup> Ibid., 170-2.

<sup>164</sup> Ibid., 173.



McGavran's homogenous unit principle, which Warren had read about back in 1974 while a missionary in Japan.<sup>165</sup> The argument, as Warren restated it, was that a church could most successfully grow by attracting people that are similar to the people that are already at the church. Hybels had done the same in defining his target as the type of person he would want to invite to share a vacation. Once the target was defined and identified, Warren recommended like all other marketers, building the church to meet the target's felt needs.<sup>166</sup>

Warren specifically created a worship service suited to attract the target, what he called a seeker service. He designed the "music style, message topics, testimonies, creative arts, and much more" based on the interests of the target. He offered several general recommendations. Sounding like Schuller, he suggested that the services must be easily accessible with convenient meeting times, "surplus parking," childcare, and maps to the church on local advertisements.<sup>167</sup> Church services must be fast paced, fluid, and concise like television programs and other entertainment forms, he continued, and prayers and messages should be short. He also explained that a church should "allow visitors to remain anonymous in the service."<sup>168</sup> This mark of modernity had been touted in the 1950s as one of the major benefits of the drive-in church service, the ability to remain an anonymous individual. A person could attend church in their car and never have to interact with other people. Warren hoped to build a service, that though it was not drive-in, would afford the same luxury. Also, like the recommendations of the 1950s,

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<sup>165</sup> Ibid., 29.

<sup>166</sup> Ibid., 197.

<sup>167</sup> Ibid., 254-55.

<sup>168</sup> Ibid., 259.

Warren suggested that the meeting space should be bright and inviting, with lots of open space and sufficient lighting. The seating should be comfortable and no expense should be spared for the sound system, he added. The plants and landscape must be attractive and the temperature in the building should be kept on the cool side. Finally, he stated, the restrooms must be kept clean.<sup>169</sup> All of these suggestions could have been lifted straight out of the 1950s, Warren simply enacted them on a larger scale, and developed the details around a target consumer instead of the broader community.

Warren also provided detail on a few of the nuances of the worship services. He wrote an entire chapter on selecting the music for a church. He admitted that his greatest regret in building his church was that he did not concentrate more resources on creating the type of music program that the target most wanted.<sup>170</sup> He argued that, “the style of music you choose to use in your services will be one of the most critical decisions you make in the life of your church.”<sup>171</sup> He suggested that a church replace the organ with modern instruments, not make visitors sing, and speed up the songs.<sup>172</sup> In preparing sermons, Warren recommended that a pastor create titles that attract attention with the target customer. Though he did not use the word, he described it as a form of advertising, piquing the interest of the community to come visit the church.<sup>173</sup>

Warren guided the reader through how to design a sermon that would also appeal in content to the target. The key was to preach on the target’s felt needs, a strategy he not

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<sup>169</sup> Ibid., 254-269.

<sup>170</sup> Ibid., 279.

<sup>171</sup> Ibid., 280.

<sup>172</sup> Ibid., 285-92.

<sup>173</sup> Ibid., 299.

only explained but defended. He wrote, “Beginning a message with people’s felt needs is more than a marketing tool! It is based on the theological fact that God chooses to reveal himself to man according to *our* needs!”<sup>174</sup> He also suggested preaching from a newer translation of the Bible and choosing Bible verses that are more easily understandable.<sup>175</sup> This emphasis on clear communication that is easy for people to understand is a refrain of much of the RPRC’s impulse to update religion by updating its language and concepts.

Also like the RPRC, Warren defended his methods. He dedicated a portion in the beginning of his 1995 book to defend his church growth philosophy and methodology against attacks on church marketing. His strategy was to denounce several myths, the first being that mega churches are only interested in attendance, or increasing numbers. He explained that while advertising will bring people, it would not keep them.<sup>176</sup> This appears a significant oversight by Warren since marketing is more than advertising and develops services that will appeal to people so to keep them.

Warren continued by addressing other “myths.” He defended against arguments that “growing churches are somehow ‘selling out’ the Gospel in order to grow.”<sup>177</sup> He noted that Jesus’ ministry attracted large numbers of people. He responded to allegations that to be contemporary is to compromise. Yet one of the most interesting myths was not the myth itself but Warren’s advice in response. The myth was that there is a singular secret to growth. Warren’s response, in part, was “never criticize what God is

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<sup>174</sup> Ibid., 295.

<sup>175</sup> Ibid., 297.

<sup>176</sup> Ibid., 48.

<sup>177</sup> Ibid., 53.

blessing.”<sup>178</sup> Though in Warren’s words it sounds sacred, the sage wisdom is nothing more than pragmatism. It is very similar to Charles Finney’s justification for his “new methods” in the nineteenth century. “The results justify my methods,” argued Finney. “Show me the fruits of your ministry, and if they so far exceed mine as to give me evidence that you have found a more excellent way, I will adopt your views.”<sup>179</sup>

Ultimately, Warren agreed with Finney, arguing that if it works, then do not argue with it because God must be behind it. The mediator of good and bad, of true and false, as had Robert Schuller argued, was does it work. If it increases the numerical size of a church, they contended, it is an appropriate method.

Robert Schuller was not the only influential figure in Warren’s pragmatism and commercial strategies, like Hybels, Warren looked to the wisdom of Peter Drucker. In a 2005 interview, Warren cited Peter Drucker as one of his three most important role models, the other two, Warren’s father and Billy Graham. Many journalists and scholars have noted that in Warren’s office hangs a signed print of Drucker’s “three questions.”<sup>180</sup> The questions provided the customer orientation foundation of Warren’s church marketing. In his strategies, he sought to define his business, identify his customer, and determine what the customer desired. Not only did Drucker influence Warren’s customer focus in building a church but also his innovation. Warren credited Drucker with teaching him to innovate always, to move on beyond the projects that have worked, to change constantly. Warren and Drucker met for biannual sessions to discuss Warren’s

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<sup>178</sup> Ibid., 62.

<sup>179</sup> William G. McLoughlin, *Revivals, Awakenings, and Reform* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1978), 126.

<sup>180</sup> Leadership Network, “Peter F. Drucker,” Leadership Network Feature, November 14, 2005, <http://www.pursuantgroup.com/leadnet/advance/nov05o.htm> (accessed May 06, 2008).

strategies and methods in marketing and managing his church. In one of the meetings Drucker asked Warren, “Don’t tell me what you’re doing, Rick. Tell me what you stopped doing.”<sup>181</sup> In a personal letter to Drucker, Warren thanked him for teaching him this key concept of “systematic abandonment” to remain “young” and “innovating.”<sup>182</sup> This emphasis on change was an important component for the RPRC and for Rick Warren and the seeker churches. Both sought constantly to be on the cutting edge in order to attract greater market share.

One of Warren’s changes was to begin offering his own conferences, much like Schuller’s, to promote his methods of church growth. He held the first conference in 1985 with thirty pastors in attendance. By 1999, they would have 75,000 pastors that had attended.<sup>183</sup> In using these methods, Warren built an enormous church, just as he had always sought to do. By the end of the 1980s it had grown exponentially in membership and the methods that Warren used to do it were beginning to spread, like Hybels, across the nation. Throughout the 1990s, Saddleback Community Church would continue to grow, and with it Rick Warren’s reputation as a church growth expert rapidly escalated, helping to foment a church marketing industry explosion.

Bill Hybels and Rick Warren, between 1975 and 1990, capitalized on the marketing methods of Robert Schuller and Peter Drucker to improve traditional church

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<sup>181</sup> Rich Karlgaard, “Peter Drucker on Leadership,” *Forbes*, November 19, 2004.

<sup>182</sup> “Correspondence from Rick Warren to Peter and Doris Drucker, 1999-02-03,” February 3, 1999, Drucker Digital Archives, Claremont University Consortium, Claremont Colleges Digital Library, Claremont, CA, <http://ccdlib.libraries.claremont.edu/cdm4/document.php?CISOROOT=/dac&CISOPTR=2305> (accessed July 16, 2009).

<sup>183</sup> Sargeant, 10.

promotionalism and build enormous seeker churches. The success of their churches caught the attention of America and provided them a unique platform to spread marketing philosophies throughout religion in a manner unprecedented in church promotion. Their strategies would generate as much controversy as they would a revolution in church forms, but in the meantime other churches were creating similar controversy by hiring secular experts to produce their advertising campaigns.

### Professionals: Churches Hire More Marketplace Experts

Though marketing was catching on in church promotion between 1975 and 1990, advertising remained a vibrant promotional option for churches. While many pastors and other religious leaders looked to Robert Schuller and others in religious institutions to advise them on marketing, many, particularly mainline denominations, looked to secular experts in advertising. Though the trend had begun in the late 1960s, it accelerated in the 1980s as more and more denominations hired secular advertising agencies to develop professional ad campaigns for their churches.

This “outsourcing” is important to note because it contrasted with the work of marketing scholars. Scholars, since 1969, had been exploring the differences between promoting a religious product and a secular product. They identified important distinctions and sought to adjust marketing to suit new church applications. In hiring secular ad agencies, however, many denominations assumed that selling a religious product was the same as a secular product. They believed that the firms that were most successful promoting soap in the marketplace would also be so in promoting religion. As the president for the advertising agency Bozell, Jacobs, Kenyon, and Echardt, so clearly

stated, “It doesn’t matter if you’re selling packaged goods or a church ... you’re still selling a product.”<sup>184</sup> The proposed similarity in selling soap and religion aggravated the complex tension in promoting religion. As churches hired secular advertising agencies, they juxtaposed religion with marketplace products, highlighting the complexities in selling other worldly products with worldly methods.

In the case of the Mormon Church, their secular advertising agency had to establish boundaries on the types of products that it could represent, so as not to create a troublesome association between the faith and other values. In the early 1970s, the Mormon Church hired Bonneville Communications to create its advertising campaigns. Bonneville’s services however were not limited to just religious advertising. The agency developed ads for other “firms,” but there were limits. They only worked for organizations that they and the Mormon Church deemed as “wholesome.” Their acceptable clientele included the Boy Scouts of America and Major League Baseball. However, overtime they sought to expand their list of clients. In 1990, they began working for fast food restaurants like Hardees. Yet they expanded their clientele carefully since the Mormon Church provided 40 percent of their business. They abstained from promoting products with which the church staunchly disapproved, such as cigarettes and alcohol. Yet the exercise of such limits was the exception and certainly not the rule.<sup>185</sup>

Many churches hired advertising agencies based on their success with promoting popular products and without concern for the products themselves. One of the extreme examples was the Church of the Nazarene’s choice of an ad agency. In the mid-1980s,

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<sup>184</sup> Aimee L. Stern, “Putting Faith in Madison Avenue,” *New York Times*, December 27, 1987.

<sup>185</sup> Kim Foltz, “Advertising: Shop Seeks to Spread Its Wings,” *New York Times* July 3, 1990.

they hired Rumrill-Hoyt, a New York based advertising agency. While the agency produced religious advertisements for the church, it also created advertisements for its two largest clients, Bacardi Rum and the New York lottery.<sup>186</sup> Though these clients produced alcohol and gambling, which many would say is the antithesis of Christian practice, in the religious promotion economy such a conflict was not a significant hurdle. Late in the 1990s, one church garnered national media attention when it hired the J.J. Sedlmaier Productions Company to produce a church commercial. The organization, at the time, created what many called “irreverent cartoons” for the comedy television show, Saturday Night Live. The senior minister, Gene Bolin, defended the association as an appropriate measure to attract “non-churchgoing Generation Xers and baby boomers.”<sup>187</sup> Bolin, like others, believed that an advertising agency’s sensitivity to the customer market gave them an advantage in promoting religion.

Protestants were not the only churches to hire secular expertise to improve their promotion; Roman Catholic organizations did as well, juxtaposing the sacred and the secular. In order to recruit priests for the Sacred Heart Seminary, the Archdiocese of Detroit hired the renowned N.W. Ayer’s agency to create ads. Yet while they produced billboards, newspaper ads, and spots for radio and television to promote the seminary, the agency developed ads for their largest client, General Motors.<sup>188</sup> Another Roman Catholic organization, the Catholic Archdiocese of New York hired B.B.D.O. for nearly \$400,000 to produce ads for their “Come Home at Christmas” campaign. While

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<sup>186</sup> Ronald Alsop, “Advertisers Promote Religion in a Splashy and Secular Style,” *Wall Street Journal*, November 21 1985.

<sup>187</sup> Carol Marie Cropper, “Advertising: An Irreverent Agency Creates a Campaign to Help a Fledgling Episcopal Church Expand Its Reach,” *New York Times*, May 15, 1998.

<sup>188</sup> Paula Span, “Try Him, You’ll Like Him!” *Washington Post*, December 20, 1987.



B.B.D.O.'s principal clients were Pepsi, Dodge, and Wisk, they created Roman Catholic ads for 4,700 subway cars and 1,500 buses. They also placed an electronic ad for the Archdiocese in Times Square.<sup>189</sup>

Such associations sometimes pushed the boundaries of religious advertising and stirred significant controversy. Perhaps the most pioneering and controversial religious advertising of the 1980s was that of the Episcopal Church. A parish in the denomination created the Episcopal Ad Project in 1978. The man at the helm was Reverend George H. Martin. His intention was to use provocative advertisements to catch people's attention by shocking them with a borderline irreverence. He hired a local advertising agency, Fallon and McElligot, in Minneapolis to create the advertisements.<sup>190</sup> One of the ads was a jab at conservative Christian churches who emphasized the need for a person to be "born again" through Jesus Christ. It read, "The Episcopal Church welcomes you. Regardless of race, creed, color or the number of times you've been born."<sup>191</sup> Another ad showed Jesus wearing a suit and drinking a martini, the caption read, "Unfortunately, you can't meet God's gift to women in a singles' bar."<sup>192</sup> Many worried that Martin was going too far in his sensationalistic advertising. In defense, he too pointed to Jesus.

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<sup>189</sup> Span, "Try Him"; Aimee L. Stern, "Putting Faith in Madison Avenue," *New York Times*, December 27, 1987.

<sup>190</sup> Bruce Buursma, "The Ad Controversy: Episcopal Parish's Old Message, New Medium," *Washington Post*, November 29 1986.

<sup>191</sup> Ronald Alsop, "Advertisers Promote Religion In a Splashy and Secular Style," *Wall Street Journal*, November 21 1985.

<sup>192</sup> Bruce Buursma, "Parish Running Religion Up Ad Flagpole," *Chicago Tribune*, October 31, 1986.

Martin argued that his methods were Jesus' methods; both drew crowds with short, provocative parables.<sup>193</sup>

As church promotion before, Martin's ads provided a forum for ecumenical cooperation among churches. As many as 650 churches, representing a multitude of denominations including the United Methodist Church and the United Church of Christ, purchased one of Martin's Christmas ads.<sup>194</sup> By 1987, the Episcopal Ad Project had sold newspaper advertisements to over 3,000 different churches across the nation. This diversity demonstrates the universality of the advertisements, that churches with differences in doctrine could use the same advertisements to promote their services. It also shows a lack of theological concern in their advertising. In fact, the project continues today as the "Church Ad Project" where any church can purchase "head turning ads for a heart-turning faith."<sup>195</sup> Available are posters, postcards, door hangers, radio ads, and print advertisements. All of them are broad enough in message and product to fit any church and allegedly unique enough to catch the attention of the public.

Another instance of hiring a secular public relations agency raised a significant bit of opposition in 1990. The Roman Catholic Church in the United States hired the firm Hill & Knowlton to develop a campaign to oppose abortion. Ironically, the agency, in the quintessential demonstration of pairing opposing values in the sacred and secular, also developed campaigns for Playboy Enterprises and the Warner-Lambert Company, a

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<sup>193</sup> Stern, "Putting Faith."

<sup>194</sup> "Episcopal Ads Put Jesus in Business Suit – and Some People Are Offended," *The Sun*, January 5, 1985.

<sup>195</sup> Church Ad Project, "About Us," <http://churchad.com/aboutus.cfm> (accessed January 12, 2010).

contraceptives manufacturer.<sup>196</sup> The Roman Catholic Church was deferring to the wisdom and expertise of an organization that promoted two products of which the church explicitly disapproved: pornography and contraception.

Some noted the conflict of interest and publicly expressed their opposition. Eugene Kennedy, a professor at Loyola, wrote a piece in the *New York Times*, and raised a larger related concern. He argued that public relations firms are only necessary when the truth is not sufficient. He criticized the Roman Catholic bishops, stating “Good shepherds do not invite wolves to help them tend the flocks.”<sup>197</sup> In excoriating the public relations industry and tying it to Jesus, he also wrote that, “The bishops have found a way to drive the money changers back into the temple.”<sup>198</sup> While George Martin had argued for the Episcopal Church that Jesus used provocative advertising methods, Kennedy was arguing that Jesus had thrown such ambassadors of avarice and commerce out of the churches. The Reverend John A. Vivilanti, wrote a letter to the editor of the *New York Times*, voicing similar concerns to Kennedy’s.<sup>199</sup> He intimated that the Gospel should be spread through the example of people’s lives and not through the words and machinations of professionals.

Some of the advertising professionals, perhaps to avoid such entangling controversies, represented only sacred products and institutions. One such firm was Church Growth, Inc. in Monrovia, California. They began working in the late 1980s for the United Methodist Church of Whitefish Bay in Wisconsin to help it stem a significant

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<sup>196</sup> Eugene Kennedy, “Catholic Bishops’ Big P.R. Blunder,” *New York Times*, April 19, 1990.

<sup>197</sup> Ibid.

<sup>198</sup> “Public Relations Firm to Present Anti-Abortion Effort to Bishops,” *New York Times*, August 14, 1990.

<sup>199</sup> John A. Vivilanti, “Selling Church’s View,” *New York Times*, April 26, 1990.

loss in membership. Between 1970 and 1985, the denomination suffered a 45 percent loss in membership, and lost nearly 540,000 of the faithful from 1980 to 1988. Thus, the local church in Whitefish Bay was willing to pay \$13,000 for the agency to help them develop strategies to grow. Among them were holding more community services in the church such as aerobics classes and utilizing mass direct mailings to advertise. The success of the methods spurred the church on to offer workshops for surrounding churches, helping others learn the secrets of their success.<sup>200</sup>

While some experts only provided religious consultation to churches, others provided religious expertise to the broader marketplace. In Detroit, Michigan two black pastors went into the advertising business, establishing the Cognos Advertising Agency. They explained that no one knows the black community as a market better than a preacher does, and promotion is the natural task of the preacher. One of the preachers stated, “We do that[advertising] every Sunday as preachers. We package a difficult concept, the Christian religion, and sell it all the time.”<sup>201</sup> This, as they saw it, made them experts in advertising. Yet the tension between the fields of religion and sales was evident in their largest account, the Michigan State Lottery. Here were two preachers using the sales techniques of religion to promote a form of gambling. Many criticized such explicit examples of using religious methods to promote what they believed was a vice. Yet the preacher’s defense, their confidence in knowing the community, represented a key element in church promotion, understanding the target market.

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<sup>200</sup> “Marketing Techniques Help Church Find New Members,” *Washington Post*, October 21, 1989.

<sup>201</sup> “Advertising: An Unusual New Shop in Detroit,” *New York Times*, April 23, 1990.

Many churches looked to experts to help them research their surrounding community, so that they could make the appropriate adjustments to attract more people. The 1980 census provided a unique opportunity for agencies to utilize new computing technology and offer “professional” analysis of comprehensive research to churches. Instead of expending resources to collect demographic data on the potential customer pool surrounding a church, the church or agency could simply tap into the results of the national census. The United Presbyterian Church elected to study the census data itself, and then send the pertinent information to its congregations. The United Church of Christ hired the National Planning Data Corporation to analyze the results for them and provide a report on the communities surrounding their churches. The national office sent an eleven-page report summarizing the information to each of the 6,400 congregations in the denomination. Another organization, Census Access for Planning in the Church, also provided computer aided analysis of demographic information to churches. For fifty dollars, they would give a church, in any denomination, a “congregational profile” that provided market details.<sup>202</sup> In 1982, Russell D. Bredholt, wrote a letter to Robert Schuller explaining his new “professional surveys” for local churches. He credited George Gallup as his inspiration, and he insisted that these surveys would equip churches to better advertise, set goals, and respond to public opinion.<sup>203</sup> Schuller responded with

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<sup>202</sup> Charles Austin, “Churches See Computer as a Tool to Lure Flock,” *New York Times*, October 23, 1982.

<sup>203</sup> Russell D. Bredholt to Robert H. Schuller, October 6, 1982, folder “Crystal Cathedral Robert H. Schuller – Manuscripts – Self-Esteem: The New Reformation, 1980-1982,” box 26, Robert H. Schuller Collection, H93-1188, JAH.

characteristic enthusiasm.<sup>204</sup> A few articles in the third edition of the RPRC's handbook, released the same year, also recommended utilizing experts for surveys.

The RPRC urged congregations to utilize the many polls conducted by experts. These polls, they recommended, could form the foundation of a strategic effort to identify a target audience, determine their felt needs, and then reach them with appropriate messages, media, and services. In his article entitled, "Advertising the Spiritual Dimension," former Executive Vice President of the Religion in American Life campaign, David W. Gockley recommended that churches begin with professional local surveys. He specifically suggested studying the research of a local public school system or chamber of commerce. He also recommended national studies like the Gallup polls: "Religion Survey of 1982" and the "1978 study of the Unchurched Americans." In addition, he pointed to studies of people's preferences regarding religion. One was a publication of the Princeton Religious Research Center, "Emerging Trends" and the other was the Connecticut Mutual Life Insurance Company "Report on American Values in the '80s: The Impact of Belief."<sup>205</sup>

Another RPRC article, "Community Relations: Love Your Neighbor As Yourself" by Lundell D. Smith, suggested that local churches utilize their own members to conduct interviews of potential markets, instead of paying for professional results. However, he specified that a church should hire a professional research firm to develop the surveys. In driving home the importance of this exercise he wrote, "Remember, this

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<sup>204</sup> Robert H. Schuller to Russell D. Bredholt, October 25, 1982, folder "Crystal Cathedral Robert H. Schuller – Manuscripts – Self-Esteem: The New Reformation, 1980-1982," box 26, Robert H. Schuller Collection, H93-1188, JAH.

<sup>205</sup> David W. Gockley, "Advertising the Spiritual Dimension" in *Religious Public Relations Handbook: For Local Congregations of All Denominations*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., ed. Charles DeVries (New York: The Council, 1982), 32-3.

work, whether formal or informal, is forming the foundation for your future decisions.”<sup>206</sup> Surveying the community, assessing felt needs, identifying the target market were all foundational in church promotion now. Though many churches utilized professional advertising agencies and advertised aggressively in the marketplace, marketing had become the central form of religious promotion.

## Conclusion

In 1977, sociologist J. Russell Hale published his book, *The Unchurched, Who They Are and Why They Stay Away*.<sup>207</sup> In it, Hale discussed the results of his study of people who were religiously unaffiliated, and he provided a taxonomy of their reasons for remaining so. His investigation represented a rampant concern among religious leaders, the steady decline in American participation in religious institutions. Churches sought to know why they were shrinking and how to stop it. In his approach to the study, asking people why they were not religious, Hale indirectly recommended that churches listen to what people wanted in a church.

This solution, the adoption of a consumer orientation, was growing in certain pockets of America. In the halls of the academy, marketing scholars were increasingly investigating the applications of their field in church promotion and growth. In innovative seeker churches, Rick Warren and Bill Hybels were applying the lessons of Peter Drucker and Robert Schuller to create marketing success stories for other pastors to

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<sup>206</sup> Lundell D. Smith, “Community Relations: Love Your Neighbor As Yourself” in *Religious Public Relations Handbook: For Local Congregations of All Denominations*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., ed. Charles DeVries (New York: The Council, 1982), 46.

<sup>207</sup> James Russell Hale, *The Unchurched: Who They Are and Why They Stay Away* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1977).

emulate. In both camps, professors and pastors were advancing the modernization of American Christianity by tuning it to consumer sovereignty and meeting modern felt needs of choice and therapy. They created churches that could attract what sociologist Robert Bellah calls the “me generation.”<sup>208</sup> Perhaps unbeknownst to them, they were also tilling the soil for a crop of enormous controversy in the 1990s as their methods spread and other church leaders opposed the changes that were introduced. Meanwhile, however, controversy was already simmering in the 1970s and 1980s as churches increasingly hired secular agencies to produce their advertising campaigns. These churches believed the transferability of promotional methods meant that an agency that could sell a product in the market could also sell religion. As they labored to do so, they juxtaposed the promotion of religion with the promotion of what many religious Americans considered vices, demonstrating the tension in selling religion in the marketplace. Despite such blatant tensions and contradictions, the methods would continue to expand in the 1990s as more churches looked to experts in church marketing to help attract more customers, and a firestorm of controversy erupted around them.

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<sup>208</sup> Robert Bellah coined the term “sheilaism” to describe the me generation’s formulation of their own subjective religious styles centered on the self instead of traditional religious formulation in institutions. The name came from a woman he interview, named Sheila, who had constructed her own personal religion by selecting pieces from various religious sources. Robert Neelly Bellah, *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life : with a New Preface* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008).



## Chapter 8

### Marketing Wars: A Sophisticated Church Marketing Industry & Its Opponents (1990 – 1999)

*Newsweek* magazine heralded 1976 as “the year of the Evangelical.” The recognition marked how far evangelicals had traveled since the 1950s in establishing their presence and exerting their influence in all sectors of American life. They had moved from a sectarian abdication of public life, in the 1920s, to a prominent role in it, in the 1970s. A conviction that American society was rapidly secularizing, abandoning its Christian moral roots, drove evangelicals to pursue such a vibrant role in shaping American political, as well as intellectual and social, direction. Media savvy drove much of their success in rousing converts and support for their efforts. By the 1980s, the Religious Right and televangelism were spreading the evangelical message across the nation, and the movement grew with it. Ironically, though these conservative Christians promoted a traditional religious faith, they did it through some of the most innovative and modern methods available. They promoted objective moral propositions and ideals with a contradictory subjective, pragmatic approval of modern methods. They labored to turn America back to the sovereignty of God by using rational, calculated tools that depended on the sovereignty of humanity. By the 1990s, one of the key instruments in their toolkit of growth was business promotionalism, particularly marketing.

During the 1990s, evangelicals continued to expand their study and employment of marketing principles and methods, and became the leaders in church promotion, creating a sophisticated industry of church marketing. Evangelicals built enormous megachurches across the nation, which stood as beacons of the success of church marketing. Megachurches were practitioners of marketing, but also producers of marketing materials, advertisers of its benefits, and distributors of its practices. These churches spawned organizations that replaced denominations as a new system of association for churches, connections built not on doctrine and tradition but on business practices. New experts arose – professional church marketers – who wrote detailed instructional guides and offered consulting services for local churches. Marketing scholars also crossed over into pastoral influence through the expansion of religious marketing as a field and the publication of accessible and comprehensive references on the subject. These many areas of growth in church marketing created a large, sophisticated industry unlike anything before in church promotion.

However, while the '90s was a decade of unprecedented church marketing sophistication, it was also a decade of unprecedented church marketing criticism. Between 1992 and 1997, a number of pastors and theologians, principally evangelical, published articles, chapters, and books that denounced the principles and practices of church marketing. Ironically, the very same catalysts that drove church marketing also drove its opposition. Evangelicals embraced modern business methods because they believed that their own numerical growth and public influence were rapidly waning with growing secularization. Yet such an aggressive and public employment of marketplace methods struck many as a form of secularization. Both the increasing breadth of church

marketing proponents and the increasing depth of the developments and employment of the practices and principles troubled many. As a result, a deluge of opposition, unlike anything ever seen in church promotion, spread in the 1990s. The criticisms were both numerous and well publicized, but they were also sophisticated. Gone were the criticisms of church promotion as simply undignified. These critics developed complex arguments that connected marketing in churches with the greater secularization and modernization of Christianity. The rise of a sophisticated criticism movement to a sophisticated industry of church promotion made the 1990s a decade of unprecedented advocacy, adoption, and opposition in church promotion.

### Pastors, Professionals & Professors: Sophistication in Church Marketing

In the 1990s, American Christianity seemed in crisis. While mainline denominations had been decreasing for some time, in the 1990s, the evangelicals believed they too were in a period of decline, if not stagnation. In a 1995 survey, sociologist Kimon Sargeant documented this concern. He found that 97 percent of seeker church pastors were convinced that religious influence in America was “too low.” Additionally, 62 percent believed, despite the rapid growth of megachurches, that their religious influence was decreasing. In response, evangelicals increasingly embraced and promoted marketing principles and practices as a component in a broader church growth methodology.

There were three principle producers and distributors in the church marketing industry. One was the megachurch. Whereas in 1980, there had only been fifty churches with an attendance greater than 2,000, by 2005 there would be nearly 900 in the United

States.<sup>1</sup> The pastors of these churches wrote books, hosted conferences, and established associations to spread their marketing secrets for growth. Another producer and distributor was a new bevy of church marketing professionals, particularly George Barna. They produced countless materials in consumer research and church marketing for local churches. The last producer and distributor was the academy. Religious marketing scholars in the 1990s not only increased their research and development but also wrote books for pastoral audiences and application in local churches. In combination, these three principle contributors created a sophisticated church marketing industry in the 1990s, unlike anything before in church promotion.

*The Pastors: Warren, Hybels, & Others*

In 1995, sociologist Kimon Sargeant surveyed hundreds of churches in the Willow Creek Association, an organization that promoted Hybels' growth methods. The survey revealed that the vast majority of the churches used marketing. Of the 462 churches that responded to the survey, 70 percent agreed with Sargeant's statement, "The church must develop a marketing orientation in order to reach people effectively." Accordingly, 86 percent agreed that a church must be engaged in targeting a defined segment of the market. Sargeant found that the majority of the churches also continued to use many of the promotional methods that had been popular throughout the century. A full 96 percent advertised through modern media outlets, and 72 percent used direct mailings to promote their churches. Additionally, 31 percent still conducted door-to-door

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<sup>1</sup> Kimon Howland Sargeant, *Seeker Churches: Promoting Traditional Religion in a Nontraditional Way* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2000), 136-37.

visitations, hearkening back to the door-to-door sales methods of the 1940s and 1950s.<sup>2</sup> The majority, 84 percent, also still believed that a church must meet the “felt needs of seekers.” So strong was the sentiment that only 6 percent of the churches actually disagreed with it.<sup>3</sup> These results demonstrated the degree to which a consumer orientation had gripped many Christian churches across the country. As churches looked for more guidance on effectively retailing religion with such principles, a more sophisticated church marketing industry developed, supported in great part by the successful megachurch pastors of the era.

In the 1990s, the seeker church model and the Church Growth Movement continued to expand, both buoyed by the principles and practices of church marketing, particularly a customer orientation. By the 1990s, the conspicuous growth of megachurches across the nation caught the eye of both religious leaders and the public. Church Growth Movement leader Lyle Schaller attributed the expansive growth in these churches to business promotionalism: a “focus on attendance” instead of membership, “more persuasive public relations and advertising,” and “a consumer orientation.”<sup>4</sup> Numerous pastors and seminary professors wrote books in these fields, and in the process continued to disseminate marketing thought. They also wrote articles in religious journals, doubling references to “marketing” every five years since 1976, to reach fifty-

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 110.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 115.

<sup>4</sup> Scott Lee Guffin, “An Examination of Key Foundational Influences on the Megachurch Movement in America, 1960 – 1978” (PhD diss., Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1999), 334-35.

three references between 1991 and 1995.<sup>5</sup> Two of the most popular of these resources were both published in 1995.

After 1990, Bill Hybels and Rick Warren continued to develop, refine, and teach their church marketing methods. In 1995, both pastors published their first books on church growth methods, Hybels' *Rediscovering Church* and Warren's *The Purpose Driven Church*. Each reprised how they successfully grew their churches and provided instructions on how to achieve similar success. While Hybels' book was principally biographical, Warren's was more of a systematic methodology on how to grow a church, particularly through marketing practices, and it was the more successful. Warren noted that in just four years, the book had been translated into seven languages and sold over 300,000 copies.<sup>6</sup>

Warren and Hybels also continued to deepen the connections between churches and business in their work. Warren's *Purpose Driven Church* included numerous endorsements from leaders and experts in business. Corporate leaders adapted the book's philosophy for their own operations and improving their customer satisfaction. Hybel's Willow Creek church, with a weekly attendance of 27,000, hired a Stanford M.B.A. and former business consultant, Greg Hawkins, as well as former reporter and editor for *The Chicago Tribune*, Lee Strobel.<sup>7</sup> The church also served as a case study for the Harvard Business School. It became a permanent part of the school's curriculum and other

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<sup>5</sup> Bob D. Cutler, and William A. Winans, "What Do Religion Scholars Say About Marketing? Perspectives from the Religion Literature," *Journal of Professional Services Marketing* 18, no. 2 (1999), 135.

<sup>6</sup> Rick Warren, <http://www.saddleback.org/rickwbio.htm> (accessed March 10, 1999), quoted in Guffin, 329.

<sup>7</sup> Gustav Niebuhr, "Where Religion Gets a Big Dose of Shopping-Mall Culture" *New York Times*, April 16, 1995; Charles Trueheart, "Welcome to the Next Church" *The Atlantic Monthly* 278, no. 2 (August 1996), <http://www.theatlantic.com/past/docs/issues/96aug/nxtchrch/nxtchrch.htm> (accessed June 6, 2010).

business schools readily adopted it, including Stanford and Northwestern Universities. The author of the study, James Mellado, later joined the Willow Creek staff as the president of the Willow Creek Association. The Association marked another important expansion in church marketing.

The sophistication of church marketing and the modern reliance on experts in methods, led to a reformulation of denominational affiliations in the 1990s. Instead of the historical denominations of churches, formed around doctrinal convictions, new pseudo-denominations began, based around similarities in methodological convictions. The two most prominent were Bill Hybels' Willow Creek Association and Rick Warren's Purpose Driven Network. Both offered membership opportunities to churches that included conferences, books, church growth materials, newsletters, and connection with other "innovative" pastors' experimenting with modern methods like marketing.

In Hybels' words, he created the Willow Creek Association in 1992 to "respond to the needs of seeker-oriented ministries worldwide."<sup>8</sup> Willow Creek had been holding conferences to train pastors since 1985, with around thirty in attendance. Under the Willow Creek Association, they developed the conferences into a complex, international consultant organization. By 1994, the Association had fifteen full-time staff members and worked with more than 1,000 churches.<sup>9</sup> It also provided another platform, as had other church promotion organizations, for increased cooperation among a diversity of religious institutions.

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<sup>8</sup> Trueheart.

<sup>9</sup> Lynne Hybels, and Bill Hybels, *Rediscovering Church: The Story and Vision of Willow Creek Community Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1995), 125.

Hybels celebrated the diversity of the organization, writing in 1995, “It has been exciting to watch the WCA cross denominational, racial, and cultural barriers and encourage a spirit of cooperation, encouragement, and mutual benefit between diverse ministries.”<sup>10</sup> Sargeant found that the WCA membership of the early 1990s was principally Baptist and Nondenominational, but also included Presbyterians, Holiness, United Methodist, Churches of Christ, Pentecostal, and Lutheran among others.<sup>11</sup> This ecumenical spirit continued to flourish, and by 1999, 75,000 church leaders from a multitude of denominations had attended the conferences.<sup>12</sup> By 2000, the WCA “denomination” had 5,000 churches as members.<sup>13</sup> Clearly, their membership paid off. Sargeant discovered, in a survey he conducted, that between 1990 and 1995, 75 percent of the member churches increased their weekly attendance, and only 2 percent actually suffered declines.<sup>14</sup> Similarly, churches also flocked to Rick Warren’s Purpose Driven Network. In 2011, he described it as a “global coalition of congregations in 162 countries” that had trained 400,000 religious leaders.<sup>15</sup>

While many pastors and their protégés looked to the independent experts of Willow Creek and Saddleback, some sought to generate their own research and recommendations in the field. The number of dissertations and theses written on

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 125.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 27.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Purpose Driven Life.Com, “Rick Warren,” <http://www.purposedrivenlife.com/en-US/AboutUs/AboutTheAuthor/AboutTheAuthor.htm> (accessed January 6, 2011); Purpose Driven Church “What is a Purpose Driven Church?” <http://www.purposedrivenchurch.com/en-US/AboutUs/WhatIsPD/What+is+PD.htm> (accessed January 6, 2011).



marketing in churches grew significantly in theological schools and seminaries. Whereas only one dissertation had been written prior to 1990 on marketing in religion, eleven were penned between 1990 and 1993. This was by no means an explosion of scholarship, but the rapid increase demonstrated a real surge in marketing interest among churches and the schools that equipped their pastors. Dissertations about the methods and effects of advertising and public relations in growing local church attendance also grew in number. This greater interest in church promotion scholarship among seminarians remained popular into the twenty-first century.

Many church leaders, in the 1990s, continued to recommend and emulate Robert Schuller's "shopping center mentality." As they had throughout the century, church leaders looked to the successful retailers in the marketplace for guidance in growing their churches. Guides like Lyle Schaller's, *The Seven Day a Week* church, instructed pastors in operating churches like malls, offering a panoply of services, at considerable convenience, and throughout the week.<sup>16</sup> One megachurch pastor, Ed Young, pointed to a different model of the "shopping center mentality." The staff of Young's church, Second Baptist in Houston Texas, known as "Exciting Second" studied in detail the operations of Disney World.<sup>17</sup> What greater example was there of a shopping mall that attracted millions of people with its products and its entertainment packaging. At Exciting Second, Young adopted many of Disney's techniques and offered his customers café, three gymnasiums, and even a parade of floats that moved through the parking lot entertaining guests. Young's goal, as recommended by Schaller, was to create a "user-friendly" church, a church that catered to the customer's desires for services,

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<sup>16</sup> Lyle Schaller, *The Seven Day a Week Church* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1992).

<sup>17</sup> Sargeant, 54.

entertainment, and convenience. A popular word among churches captured this marketing imperative: quality.

Whereas dignity had been the goal of the 1950s in promotion, in the 1990s it was quality. Church promotion experts emphasized the necessity to offer a quality product with quality service. As Schaller explained, “One of the central selling points in recent years for automobiles, television sets, single-family homes, restaurants and luxury hotels has been the word *quality*.”<sup>18</sup> Quality summarized the customer orientation of church promotion. A church was in the business of providing exemplary customer service and satisfaction.

An excellent example of this new emphasis on quality was Stan Toler and Alan Nelson’s book, *The Five Star Church: Serving God and His People with Excellence*.<sup>19</sup> Toler and Nelson argued that their corporate training in customer service and quality management well equipped them to develop and operate a “five star church.” They argued that because churches, just like hotels, are in the business of attracting people, they should operate with five-star quality. This argument represented, in churches, the modern confidence that a church is a business, not theological expertise and the modern requirement to, as they quoted Peter Drucker, “Satisfy the customer first, last and always.”<sup>20</sup> The key to such satisfaction was not just in the message, but in every element of the business. As Toler and Nelson diagnosed, “We [churches] turn people off with less-than-professional publicity, lousy sound or crummy carpeting, and we end up losing

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 72.

<sup>19</sup> Stan Toler and Alan Nelson, *The Five Star Church: Serving God and His People with Excellence* (Ventura: Regal Books, 1999).

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, 30.

people and dollars instead of attracting people and dollars.”<sup>21</sup> In order to grow a church, a church had to produce with quality. In order to determine exactly what to produce, a church had to study the latest data on potential customers.

In the sophistication of church marketing, research grew as a fundamental component. Research had been an important part of retailing religion since the 1940s; however, in the 1990s it grew in complexity and professionalism. Gone were the days of Schuller and Warren’s amateur door-to-door surveys. Now, experts provided detailed studies of demographic profiles to aid churches in identifying their target markets and meeting their “felt needs.” One of the earlier and more popular books was Lee Strobel’s 1993 *Inside the Mind of Unchurched Harry and Mary*.<sup>22</sup> Strobel, a former journalist at *The Chicago Tribune* who joined the Willow Creek Community Church staff in 1987, wrote the book to unpack in detail the research of Willow Creek regarding its target market. He brought the expertise of journalism, which church promotion had valued for decades. Yet he coupled it with demographic research. With a foreword by Bill Hybels, Strobel described the book as an “introduction” to Harry and Mary, the typical American’s who do not attend a church. It also included a comprehensive recollection of his conversion from Atheist to Evangelical Christian, adding a personal example of an “unchurched” person. Two years later, church marketing expert George Barna wrote *Casting the Net: The Unchurched Population in the Mid-Nineties*, which similarly provided pastors data on the customers that they hoped to attract in the market.<sup>23</sup> Other

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid, 46.

<sup>22</sup> Lee Strobel, *Inside the Mind of Unchurched Harry and Mary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993).

<sup>23</sup> George Barna, *Casting the Net: The Unchurched Population in the Mid-Nineties* (Glendale, CA: Barna Research Group, 1995).

such books would follow, particularly in the early twenty-first century. As well, professional consultant agencies appeared to provide similar information and services. Their establishment in the church marketing market is examined in the next section.

Churches and their denominations also continued to produce promotional materials and pursue advertising and public relations strategies in the 1990s. Denominations continued to hire consultants to help them produce professional advertising campaigns. In 1997, the United Methodist Church paid \$500,000 to a commercial agency to produce three thirty-second television advertisements. The ads, consistent with post-1965 mainline advertising, did not promote a particular religious message but rather the need to serve in the local community. Most ads in the 1990s reflected the new pervasive marketing mentality in American Christianity. In nearly all promotion, Christian churches stood on a customer orientation and in a segmented marketplace. The Evangelical Lutheran Church of America spent even more – nearly \$3 million – on an agency that created two television advertisements, each targeted at a different demographic group.<sup>24</sup> Church promotion in the 1990s was a sophisticated marketing philosophy. Much of this sophistication was the work of one person, George Barna.

### *The Professionals: George Barna & the Rise of Church Marketing Consultants*

The premier expert of church marketing in the 1990s was, without contest, George Barna. Between 1988 and 2005, George Barna published thirty-eight books, many of which focused on how to grow a church and were bestsellers. Barna grew up as

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<sup>24</sup> Lisa Miller, “Religious Advertising Converts, Moving Toward a Tougher Sell,” *Wall Street Journal*, February 24, 1998.

a Roman Catholic and studied sociology at Boston College with a minor in religion. In graduate school at Rutgers University, he studied political science and cultivated an interest in polling. After graduation, he had a conversion experience at a Baptist church and became an evangelical Christian. Around the same time, he began working for a media research firm. Frustrated working for a secular organization, he and his wife moved to Wheaton, Illinois where he began work in fundraising for a Christian media organization. On weekends, they began attending a new church, Willow Creek. Hybels' marketing methods that had successfully built Willow Creek Community Church inspired George Barna. Barna wished there were 100,000 churches just like it in the United States. Pritchard aptly notes that Barna would become basically a "publicist" spreading the marketing methodology of Willow Creek across the globe.<sup>25</sup> He even points out that two of the words in Barna's early book titles, "user friendly" and "vision" were lifted directly from the common lingo at Willow Creek. Publicist or pioneer, Barna succeeded in fomenting a sophisticated church marketing industry and standing as the principle expert of it.

Barna established his own Christian marketing research organization, the Barna Research Group, later Barna Group, in Southern California in 1984. Ironically, their office was less than a hundred miles from Robert Schuller's Crystal Cathedral and Rick Warren's Saddleback Church. The purpose of the firm was to provide marketing expertise to Christian organizations, including churches. However, Barna financially supported his business by conducting market research for the Disney Channel.

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<sup>25</sup> Gregory A. Pritchard, *Willow Creek Seeker Services: Evaluating a New Way of Doing Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1996), 61.

In 1988, Barna provided a survival guide for churches entitled *Marketing the Church*. “My contention, based on careful study of data and the activities of American churches,” he wrote, “is that the major problem plaguing the Church is its failure to embrace a marketing orientation in what has become a marketing-driven environment.”<sup>26</sup> Barna believed, like many before him, that the survival of the Christian church depended upon embracing the modern promotional methods of the marketplace, which in the 1990s, was marketing.

It is important to note a distinction that Barna drew in his framework for the growth of a church. He identified two areas of growth, spiritual and numerical. He chose to allow others to address matters of spiritual growth, and he took it upon himself to provide methods for numerical growth. Barna was confident that the methods of the market could be imported into churches to generate numerical growth and remain quarantined from intermingling with matters of spiritual growth, positively or negatively. This assumption was another incarnation of the basic historical confidence that marketplace methods were neutral tools, transferrable to sacred purposes regardless of message. Yet unlike others, Barna offered few biblical references or historical Christian defenses for his principles in his early works. Since he was only dealing with numerical matters, and not spiritual ones, he apparently believed that he did not need spiritual explanations. His purpose was to provide numerically justified methods to pastors so that they could replicate the success of the Willow Creek Community Church, yet he soon grew frustrated with how pastors were using his research data.

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<sup>26</sup> George Barna, *Marketing the Church: What They Never Taught You about Church Growth* (Colorado Springs: Navpress, 1988), 23.

By 1991, Barna was uncertain that he should continue working in Christian research and marketing. He felt that the churches he was supplying with information were not utilizing it properly. He wondered if it was even worth producing. However, like Schuller, Hybels, and Warren before him, he claimed that he “heard the Lord clearly speak” and encourage him to continue.<sup>27</sup> He dropped Disney as a client, and focused his firm’s energy on feeding the growth of churches in America. They began publishing the Barna Report, which provided a survey of American values and religious views. The reports provided religious leaders a sort of compass to help them navigate the altering currents of American culture. They reflected Barna’s modern assumption that the right data properly interpreted and the right methods properly implemented would guarantee church growth. He began providing seminars, consultation, and guidebooks for churches to teach these methods. However, someone had to teach them how to use the data. Barna, therefore, began providing seminars and consultations for churches. He also wrote more books and provided material on a new website. Three of his early, influential books were *The Frog in the Kettle* (1990), *User Friendly Churches* (1991), and *A Step-by-Step Guide to Church Marketing* (1992).<sup>28</sup>

In Barna’s three successive books on church marketing, he provided pastors across America an easily accessible and understandable means to study their customers, target them, and alter their products to attract them. Each of the three books gave the reader innumerable charts, graphs, and statistics to help guide them in building churches

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<sup>27</sup> Tim Stafford, “The Third Coming of George Barna,” *Christianity Today*, August 5, 2002, 37.

<sup>28</sup> George Barna, *The Frog in the Kettle: What Christians Need to Know About Life in the Year 2000* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1990); George Barna, *User Friendly Churches: What Christians Need to Know About the Churches People Love to Go To* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1991); George Barna, *A Step-by-Step Guide to Church Marketing: Breaking Ground for the Harvest* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1992).

that could grow in the contemporary marketplace. In contrast to this abundance of statistical data, there were very few references to the Bible or Jesus. His methods, in fact, had little to do with religion at all, nor did his definitions of success. In Barna's estimation, a successful church was a "church that is in touch with the needs of those it wants to serve."<sup>29</sup> Yet, like his predecessors, Barna was careful to build a wall of separation between his methods and those of the marketplace.

In *A Step-by-Step Guide to Church Marketing*, he replaced the four p's of marketing with related, but less commercial, principles for churches. Instead of product, a church was to produce *relationships* with Jesus. The price was a *commitment* by the "person" of their intellect and emotions. Instead of a place, a church marketed a *presence of Believers*, that was always "on display" for the world to see. Finally, the promotion of a church was the *word-of-mouth* sharing that the members of the church do in telling others and showing their lives.<sup>30</sup> This exchange in language made marketing seem more appropriate for churches by framing the methods in traditionally accepted forms. This supported Barna's often-repeated argument that churches had always been in marketing.<sup>31</sup> Defending this contention, he provided a unique appendix in this latest guidebook.

Barna's first appendix in *The Step-by-Step Guide to Church Marketing* was a collection of nine Bible studies. Barna's previous books said very little about the Bible. However, by 1992, he felt it necessary to include several detailed studies of the Bible that

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<sup>29</sup> Barna, *User Friendly Churches*, 15.

<sup>30</sup> Barna, *Step-by-Step*, 24-5.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.



provided a “biblical perspective on marketing your ministry.”<sup>32</sup> Each of the studies walked through several passages in both the Old Testament and New Testament with accompanying questions. The questions help the reader explore the ways in which biblical figures utilized marketing philosophies and methods to minister to those around them. Barna had provided the means for the pastor to discover on their own that the Bible blessed marketing. This was a new level of sophistication in defending the place of marketing in churches. Such a comprehensive defense of church marketing was most likely a direct response to the growing assault on the industry.. This controversy will be explored in detail later in this chapter.

In addition to defending church marketing, *The Step-by-Step Guide to Church Marketing* explicated Barna’s “Seven-Step Solution” in implementing church marketing. The solution was not new for anyone that had previously studied marketing, but the detail of the processes was groundbreaking in church promotion. Barna began with how to collect accurate quantitative data about the community. He explained several means to gather the data from government, research, and professional organizations. He also suggested methods for gathering qualitative data using focus groups and local interviews. A church could also follow his comprehensive guidance for creating a survey, issuing it, calculating the results, and making sense of them. According to Barna, church leaders then had to plan a marketing strategy that included a carefully crafted vision. It also included positioning, assessing a church’s resources and reputation, then segmenting the market and focusing on a target audience. Barna’s guide then began to look like the guides of the 1940s, ‘50s and ‘60s. It explained the different communications outlets, how to use them effectively, and what messages to express.

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 219.

By the time of the 1992 guide's publication, Barna was establishing his place at the helm of the church marketing ship in American. An article in *Christianity Today* in 1992 christened him the "church's guru of growth."<sup>33</sup> He would continue to hold that title for many years to come. Throughout the 1990s and after 2000, the Barna Group grew and Barna vociferously continued to write and publish popular books on church marketing and religious trends. He quickly became a household name in evangelical circles and the standard source of all statistics related to Christianity. However, though Barna was the leading church marketing consultant and promoter of the period, he was one among many in a newly flourishing industry of church marketing professionals.

Beginning in the 1980s, a new church marketing consultation industry arose to meet the growing demand among churches for expert guidance in attracting customers. This was a new development in church promotion. Previously, churches had looked to professionals in the marketplace for business promotion consultation. Now they had their own consultants, wholly devoted to church marketing. Some of them specialized in providing demographic information, such as the Percept Group. Launched in 1987, it offered churches and denominations detailed demographic and ethnographic information for their surrounding communities. They could, and still do, provide anything from "an introductory "FirstView" report for a single zip code area to a comprehensive "PeopleArea" study of the United States or any other uniquely defined region or ministry area in-between."<sup>34</sup> These sorts of services gave churches the information necessary to target, segment, and determine felt needs. Other organizations provided services that

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<sup>33</sup> Steve Rabey, "Will Change Undo the Church?" *Christianity Today*, October 26, 1992, 82.

<sup>34</sup> Percept Group, "Welcome to PerceptGroup.com," <http://www.perceptgroup.com/Home/starters/welcome.aspx> (accessed April 30, 2008).

were more comprehensive. One of the earlier examples was Breakthrough Media, established in 1980. It specialized in providing a full range of communication and promotion services to local churches. It explained to churches that their services stood on two principles. The first was a “deep appreciation for the individual: their felt-needs and interests ... their dreams and aspirations.” The second was a commitment to creating “sensitive and artistic communication, marketing tools, and ministry strategies.”<sup>35</sup> Both principles demonstrate the organization’s use of what was the modern language of church marketing: felt needs, marketing, strategies, service, etc.... Many more firms that promoted these ideas opened for business in the 1990s.

A number of church marketing consultant agencies joined Barna’s in the 1990s. Almighty, Inc., launched in 1992, provided professional communication services for churches, from marketing strategies to branding, from direct mail to press releases, and from advertising to capital campaigns.<sup>36</sup> The next year, John Manlove Advertising, in Pasadena, Texas, began offering its “high-level creative and marketing expertise” to local churches that were using “consistently unimpressive” marketing tools..<sup>37</sup> They offered consultation on branding, logos, newsletters and other communication strategies from experts with “a blend of theological training, pastoral leadership experience, creativity, and brand development with Fortune 500 companies.”<sup>38</sup> As the internet began to grow in

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<sup>35</sup> Breakthrough Media Navigating the Heart, “Our Story,” <http://www.breakthroughchurch.com/story.htm> (accessed June 10, 2008).

<sup>36</sup> Almighty, “Branding and Communications Experts for Churches, Ministries and Faith-based Businesses,” <http://www.almightyconcepts.com/home.html#> (accessed June 10, 2008).

<sup>37</sup> John Manlove Church Marketing, “Our History,” [http://www.churchmarketing.com/aboutus\\_history.html](http://www.churchmarketing.com/aboutus_history.html) (accessed June 10, 2008).

<sup>38</sup> John Manlove Church Marketing, “Brand Development,” [http://www.churchmarketing.com/products\\_services.html](http://www.churchmarketing.com/products_services.html), (accessed June 10, 2008).

popularity, they secured the website “churchmarketing.com.” Other church marketing consultant firms joined them. Among them were Artistry Marketing, Alliant Studios, Inc., Mustard Seed Studio, and Church Max.<sup>39</sup> Dr. Thom Rainer and Dr. Chuck Lawless, both Southern Baptist theologians, created the Rainer Group, which also offered consultation for over 500 churches and denominations between 1990 and 2005.<sup>40</sup> One consultant of particular note was marketing scholar Norman Shawchuck who established Shawchuck & Associates, Ltd.<sup>41</sup> Shawchuck’s firm sought to apply the marketing strategies and methods that had been developing among marketing scholars since 1959. In the 1990s, they continued to labor in the field, devoting scholarly attention to church marketing.

### *The Professors: Religious Marketing Scholarship Expands*

Though scholarly work on religious marketing had increased in the 1980s, many scholars, like Bob Cutler, remained frustrated with the field. Cutler expressed his frustration in a 1991 article, “Religion and Marketing: Important Research Area or a Footnote in the Literature?” He lamented that though churches were increasingly using marketing methods and strategies, they were doing it without the necessary guidance of

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<sup>39</sup> Artistry Marketing, Home Page, <http://www.artistrymarketing.com> (accessed June 10, 2008); Alliant Studios, “Branding & Advertsing,” <http://www.alliantstudios.com> (accessed June 10, 2008); Bagwell Marketing, “ChurchMax.com Church Marketing & Promotion,” [www.churchmax.com](http://www.churchmax.com) (accessed June 10, 2008); Mustard Seed Studio, “Mustard Seed Studio Creative Solutions for Innovative Churches,” [www.mustardseedstudio.com](http://www.mustardseedstudio.com) (accessed June 10, 2008).

<sup>40</sup> The Rainer Group, “A Note from Thom Rainer,” <http://www.rainergroup.com> (accessed June 10, 2008). In 2005 Thom Rainer began working for LifeWay Christian Resources and The Rainer Group became The Lawless Group. Lifeway Christian Resources, “Thom S. Rainer,” <http://www.thomrainer.com/about-dr-thom-rainer.php> (accessed January 14, 2011).

<sup>41</sup> Shawchuck & Associates, Ltd., Home Page, <http://www.shawchuck.com/html/welcome.htm> (accessed June 10, 2008).

scholarly research on the subject.<sup>42</sup> He explained that though James Culliton had opened the field in 1959, it remained largely ignored. Cutler had conducted a thorough study of all national proceedings and publications by scholarly marketing associations and found only thirty-five articles written on religious marketing. Of them, 80 percent were published in the 1980s. The field was gaining momentum, but not quickly enough, according to Cutler. In order to provide a foundation for further research, he cataloged the previous articles. Six of them were on marketing techniques in religion, four on the clergy's attitudes towards marketing, another six on consumer behavior in religion, six more on the influence of religion on marketing, three case studies, and then ten that he labeled miscellaneous.<sup>43</sup> This amounted to very little in Cutler's estimation, and he hoped that other scholars would assist him in filling the void.

Cutler encouraged his peers to engage in the field. He reported that the surveys of attitudes towards marketing found that most clergy favorably viewed marketing. He interpreted this acceptance as an open door for more scholarship.<sup>44</sup> He provided several proposals for such studies. Some could study how different denominations and churches were employing different marketing management strategies.<sup>45</sup> Others could update and expand on James Engel's "psychographic profiles for churchgoers."<sup>46</sup> There was also room, according to Cutler, for scholarship on religious ethics in marketing and on

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<sup>42</sup> Bob D. Cutler, "Religion and Marketing: Important Research Area of a Footnote in the Literature?" *Journal of Professional Services Marketing* 8, no. 1 (1991), 153.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 155.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 159.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 161.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*

religious organization's interaction with political marketing.<sup>47</sup> Though not all of these subjects were taken up, religious marketing scholarship did begin to increase.

In 1992, several scholars published the first academic book solely dedicated to the religious marketing and written for a pastoral audience. Previously, scholarly publication had been limited to a few journal articles and conference papers for other scholars. The authors of this book would prove to be the most prolific scholars in the field. *Marketing for Congregations: Choosing to Serve People More Effectively*, was a collaboration of Bruce Wrenn, a Professor of Marketing in the School of Business and Economics at Indiana University along with professors at Northwestern University: Norman Shawchuck, Gustave Rath, and the most renowned name in marketing, Philip Kotler.<sup>48</sup> Written for pastors, the book's opening endorsement was that of Rick Warren. Warren wrote, "This is the most comprehensive and helpful book on church management and marketing I've read. It's worth the price of ten books. It's indispensable for ministry in the 1990s."<sup>49</sup> It was certainly "comprehensive," at 424 pages.

*Marketing for Congregations: Choosing to Serve People More Effectively* marked another step in the sophistication of church marketing in its complexity and academic credentials. It explained the nuances of marketing concepts, marketing research, market segmentation, and market planning. Several chapters also provided expertise on "designing your program offerings" and "communicating with key publics" through advertising and public relations. The authors provided responses to historic criticisms

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 161-62.

<sup>48</sup> Norman Shawchuck, Philip Kotler, Bruce Wrenn, and Gustave Rath, *Marketing for Congregations: Choosing to Serve People More Effectively* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1992).

<sup>49</sup> Shawchuck, *Marketing for Congregations*.

against marketing such as it wastes money, is manipulative, and desacralizes religion.<sup>50</sup> Included were charts, graphs, worksheets, samples, and other tools to help pastors implement a plan to establish, measure, and achieve objectives in the market. One particular chart depicted the Willow Creek Community Church's "product portfolio" as an example of how to design programs to meet "Missional Objectives," by which, they meant, attract target markets.<sup>51</sup> In conclusion, the authors provided lists of other marketing resources for pastors. Yet none of the recommendations were from religious sources. As much as religious marketing scholars hoped that religious institutions would look to them for wisdom, they were not interested in what religious guides in the field had to contribute. All of the books recommended were written by other scholars in nonprofit consumer research, marketing, public relations, and promotion. The authors also suggested looking to other experts in the field by providing a list of directories of local marketing consultants.<sup>52</sup>

The growth of religious marketing as a scholarly field was also evident in the creation of a new journal. In 1985, Haworth Press had begun publishing the *Journal of Professional Services Marketing* to explore marketing applications in nonprofit service industries. Ten years later, in 1995, they introduced the *Journal of Ministry Marketing and Management* with Robert Stevens and David Loudon serving as the editors. The two academics had collaborated before on another Haworth Press publication, a marketing

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 38-41.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 243.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 383-91.

guide for pastors entitled *Marketing for Churches and Ministries*.<sup>53</sup> On the journal, contributors Philip Kotler, Norman Shawchuck, Gustave Rath, and Bruce Wrenn, among others, joined them. While marketing remained the focus of the journal, it included articles on team management, finances and facility management. The creation of a journal devoted to religious marketing was a significant milestone for a scholarly field that had struggled to gain a foothold in the academy. It provided a forum for publication and discussion, an incubator for the growth of the field. However, Haworth Press published the last issue in 2002, and the journal ceased to exist. In its title, the last article in the last issue captured the essence of the journal, a devotion to developing church marketing: John Considine's "Developing a Marketing Plan for Religious Organizations."<sup>54</sup>

By 2002, scholarly work on religious marketing was dwindling, though the field flourished in churches and consultants. Articles, papers and books had been scattered across the 1990s. The scholarship of Wrenn, Kotler, Rave, Considine, Shawchuck, and others had appeared in several journals, principally in the *Journal of Professional Services Marketing* and the *Journal of Ministry Marketing and Management*. John Considine had published another "how-to" guide in 1995, *Marketing Your Church: Concepts and Strategies*. Marketing scholarship in Europe had also turned its interest to churches. A 1997 publication *Marketing in the Not-for-Profit Sector*, produced on behalf of the largest professional marketing management organization in Europe, the Chartered

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<sup>53</sup> Robert E. Stevens and David L. Loudon *Marketing for Churches and Ministries* (New York: Haworth Press, 1992).

<sup>54</sup> John Considine, "Developing a Marketing Plan for Religious Organizations," *Journal of Ministry Marketing & Management* 7, no. 2 (2002): 51-67.



Institute of Marketing, devoted an entire chapter to “Churches in the marketplace.”<sup>55</sup> It cited the American experts: George Barna, John Considine, Philip Kotler, Stephen McDaniel, Bruce Wrenn, Robert Stevens, and David Loudon. However, despite this expansion, by 2000, academic scholarship on religious marketing seemed to be slowing. Bruce Wrenn, along with Phyllis Mansfield, conducted a study to measure the field and diagnose the causes of its lethargy.

In 2001, scholars Bruce Wrenn and Phyllis Mansfield surveyed the field of church marketing in an article, “Marketing Religion: A Review of Two Literatures.” They were glad to report that the field was expanding. Indeed, church marketing, in the 1990s, had expanded into a sophisticated and broad industry supported by a growing bevy of megachurch pastors and associations, professional experts, and religious marketing scholars. Each had contributed to a detailed analysis and development of particular marketing applications in religion. Thousands of churches were using the methods and reaping significant growth as a result. However, in noting the expansion of the field, Wrenn and Mansfield also noted a peculiarity in religious marketing.

Wrenn and Mansfield remained frustrated with the inability of scholars to invest fully in “broadening marketing thought into the religious realm.”<sup>56</sup> They argued that a primary roadblock in researching and applying religious marketing was a unique feature in church marketing, opposition. They explained, “This anti-marketing sentiment is

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<sup>55</sup> Margaret Kinnell and Jennifer MacDougall *Marketing in the Not-for-Profit Sector* (Oxford: Butterworth-Heinemann, 1997), 158-75.

<sup>56</sup> Bruce Wrenn and Phyllis Mansfield, “Marketing Religion: A Review of Two Literatures,” *Journal of Ministry and Marketing Management* 7, no. 1 (2001): 68.

unique to the broadening of marketing to include religious organization – in no other not-for-profit arena can we find a series of entire books devoted to discussion of why marketing practices should not be adopted by organizational administrators.”<sup>57</sup> Wrenn and Mansfield identified something new in church promotion, a strong movement of opposition against it. In the 1990s, as church marketing spread in its dissemination and sophistication, it catalyzed an unprecedented opposition movement that criticized the industry.

### Opposition: Church Marketing in Conflict

In the 1990s, the church marketing industry reached its apogee in sophistication and application. Ironically, at the very moment that it ascended to its pinnacle, it attracted the most severe and complex criticism of any church promotion form in history. Over a five-year span, between 1992 and 1997, a staunch, complex, theologically-driven opposition movement to church marketing erupted and presented a serious challenge to what had been an unimpeded expansion of church promotion in the twentieth-century. The majority of the critics identified with the evangelical Protestant tradition. There were some exceptions in a few mainline participants. However, for the most part, conservative Protestants fired repeated volleys upon the ever-expanding territory of church marketing.

The broad target of their opposition was the secularization and modernization of Christian churches. Different critics attacked different names and theories. Some specifically denounced marketing, others referred to church growth philosophies or pragmatism, and some simply modernity. Nevertheless, in each, at the root were the

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 72.

philosophies and practices of marketing. They criticized how marketing had introduced a consumer orientation, emphasis on meeting individuals' subjective needs, and dependence on human rationality into Christian churches. In such analyses, identifying marketing as a principle conduit of modern values into American Christian churches, they were correct. They accurately noted the changes that marketing, and business promotionalism on the whole, had carried to the shores of American Christianity. Although their claims that church marketing secularized and opposed the principles of Jesus and the Bible remain debatable, one cannot deny that in the 1990s, church marketing faced an oppositional movement unlike anything before in church promotion.

#### *Opposition Gradually Builds Prior to the 1990s*

Opposition to church promotion was not new. Many religious leaders had been concerned about the impact of promotional methods and criticized their adoption since their introduction. Most critics condemned such techniques as “beneath the dignity” of a church, as “vulgar” and “cheap.” They argued that such methods would “profane” and corrupt religion by introducing the “pernicious” and “amoral” philosophies of the advertising and public relations industries. Religion associating with such means of manipulation and profiteering was unconscionable, they argued. Such concerns continued into the 1990s. However, the complexity of the criticisms did not progress beyond brief, isolated denunciations of tacky, manipulative methods that threatened the sacred nature of religion. There were few books or even articles that delved below the surface to explore why such methods were ill suited for religion. There were no attempts to develop a philosophical rebuttal. Instead, there were only scatter shot critiques with

little evidence to corroborate assertions. This was one place where church promotion did not follow the trends of business promotion, for criticism of business promotionalism was pronounced.

Both the advertising and public relations industries suffered repeated assaults throughout the twentieth century. Such criticisms have been considered in earlier chapters; however, two representative works are worth noting. One was Vance Packard's *The Hidden Persuaders*, which in 1957 strongly criticized the lack of morality in the manipulative methods of advertisers. Another was Daniel J. Boorstin's *The Image; or, What Happened to the American Dream*.<sup>58</sup> Boorstin blamed the American people for sacrificing the truth for credibility by making public opinion the test of acceptability. This shift enabled, he argued, advertisers, journalists, and public relations professionals to become the arbiters of truth through their fabrication of events. Yet there were few translations of such arguments to religion. There was Charles Fiske's book, *The Puzzled Parson*, which was re-issued in 1968, perhaps recognizing what appeared to be a climate ripe for criticism against church promotion.<sup>59</sup> However, as he had in the 1920s, apart from rare editorials and passing comments by theologians, Fiske stood alone in his criticisms and concerns. This all changed in the 1990s.

Sophisticated and numerous criticisms of church promotion arose in the 1990s because the field of church promotion had changed significantly. As considered, after 1975, church promotionalism swept over American Protestantism through the popularity of church marketing. By the 1990s, the field was simply much more visible on the

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<sup>58</sup> Vance Packard, *The Hidden Persuaders* (New York: David McKay Co., 1957); Daniel J. Boorstin, *The Image; Or, What Happened to the American Dream* (New York: Atheneum, 1962).

<sup>59</sup> Charles Fiske, *The Confessions of a Puzzled Parson, and Other Pleas for Reality* (Freeport, NY: Books for Libraries Press, 1968).

religious landscape and open to assault. However, more importantly, church marketing was very different from advertising and public relations. The distinction was in the philosophical foundations and practices of marketing, and how they altered churches. In marketing, a turn to a customer orientation in meeting felt needs, a discrimination in market segmentation, and an ascendance of marketplace experts over theological experts reached its climax. Though these elements had been present in business promotionalism all along, it was in marketing where they became the central force in shaping a church. A strong opposition movement emerged because the principles of promotion had taken the wheel of Protestant ecclesiology and steered the ship into what some believed were treacherous waters of cultural accommodation.

The irony was that many advocates of church marketing, such as George Barna and scholar Bruce Wrenn, believed that people opposed church marketing because they misunderstood it. Advocates believed that if they could clearly define marketing and demonstrate that it was actually a purer form of marketplace interaction because it was not selling, but serving, meeting the needs of the customer, that all churches would readily accept it.<sup>60</sup> Yet, it was precisely because many church leaders *did* understand marketing, that they opposed it. It was because marketing, unlike advertising and public relations, visibly transferred modern values of rationalism, individualism, and pluralism, into churches, that critics denounced it. Some observers noted these trends as early as the 1950s, though they failed to connect them with business promotionalism in churches.

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<sup>60</sup> Bruce Wrenn, "Can (Should) Religion Be Marketed?" *Quarterly Review* 14, no. 2 (Summer 1994): 118; Robert E. Stevens, Bruce Wrenn, David Loudon, and Henry Cole, *Concise Encyclopedia of Church and Religious Organization Marketing* (Binghamton, NY: Best Business Books, 2006), 77.

Two critics of American religion in the 1950s laid the foundations for the criticisms of church marketing in the 1990s. Though they did not identify business promotionalism as a root cause, they did note the infiltration of modern values into American religion, which historian James Hudnut-Beumler explores. He explains that Will Herberg's *Protestant, Catholic, Jew* criticized religion's adoption of the American values of "autonomy, individualism, and class consciousness."<sup>61</sup> In the book, Herberg sought to explain why religion had grown in popularity during the period, and then explored the reality that though religion was more popular it had little transformative effect on people's lives. The problem, as Herberg identified it, was that the religions in America had assimilated to a common religion of the "American Way of Life" that boiled down to a democratic faith of pragmatic individualism. Ultimately, religion, he argued, had accommodated to the modern values of American culture.<sup>62</sup> Similarly, according to Hudnut-Beumler, in *The Noise of Solemn Assemblies*, sociologist Peter Berger argued that though religion in America was growing in the marketplace, it was a new "cultural religion."<sup>63</sup> It was a "leisure time" religion that did not change society but supported established systems of meaning, according to Berger.<sup>64</sup> Religion, he argued, was "this worldly." According to Hudnut-Beumler, Berger believed that religion had so embraced the morals and psychology of the modern society, that it no longer stood distinct as an

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<sup>61</sup> Will Herberg, *Protestant, Catholic, Jew; An Essay in American Religious Sociology* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1960).

<sup>62</sup> James Hudnut-Beumler, *Looking for God in the Suburbs: The Religion of the American Dream and Its Critics, 1945-1965* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1994), 110-20.

<sup>63</sup> Peter L. Berger, *The Noise of Solemn Assemblies; Christian Commitment and the Religious Establishment in America* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1961).

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid*, 38-39, quoted in Hudnut-Beumler, 145.

institution or system of belief. In fact, he believed that Christianity now stood as a barrier to true “other-worldly” religion.<sup>65</sup> Such severe criticisms of religion’s accommodation to modern values of individualism and hedonism, among others, would serve as the foundation for future critiques of church marketing.

Nearly thirty years later, in 1989, two professors in the divinity school at Duke University, William Willimon and Stanley Hauerwas, raised similar concerns to Herberg and Berger. In *Resident Aliens*, they argued that beginning with Constantine’s support of Christianity in the early fourth century, Christianity had been consumed with making itself and its message “credible to the modern world.”<sup>66</sup> The Christian project, they contended, had always been an apologetic effort to transform and express Christianity in a manner acceptable to society. In the modern world, Willimon and Hauerwas continued, this significantly altered Christianity.

Willimon and Hauerwas provided numerous examples and explanations of Christian accommodation to the modern world, but three specific matters bear particular consideration. They pointed to three recent alterations in Christianity, each of which, though they did not name marketing, was in part a result of its adoption. The first was a customer orientation. They wrote, “The church become one more consumer-oriented organization, existing to encourage individual fulfillment rather than being a crucible to engender individual conversion into the Body [the church of Jesus Christ].”<sup>67</sup> Another was the initiative to make religion simply a “private matter of individual choice” that

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<sup>65</sup> Hudnut-Beumler, 145-55.

<sup>66</sup> Stanley Hauerwas and William H. Willimon, *Resident Aliens: Life in the Christian Colony* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989), 19, 24.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

fenced religion from public life. The last was the reduction of Christianity to a social justice activism. They explained that this message rendered faith in God unnecessary “since everybody already believes in peace and justice even when everybody does not believe in God.”<sup>68</sup> Though they did not name examples or discuss marketing, they were identifying trends in evangelicalism and mainline Protestantism, both of which had been nurtured, if not partially introduced, through promotionalism, specifically marketing.

Though Willimon and Hauerwas never criticized marketing, the arguments that they raised regarding Christianity’s accommodation to modernity, tilled the soil for a more sophisticated criticism of religious promotionalism. The critiques of the 1990s did not attack the methods of promotion for manipulation, deception, and corporate values. Instead, they criticized the broader, deeper values of modernity that animated promotional philosophies and practices. *Resident Aliens* had raised concerns about the cost that Christianity had paid to retail itself, to engender positive public opinion. Others would soon name marketing as a root cause of this accommodation.

### *A Tsunami of Opposition*

A 1991 *Christianity Today* article, “Church Growth’s Two Faces” was the first shot of the war with church marketing.<sup>69</sup> Parro’s criticism was modest and lacked any real sophistication. It focused purely on specific practices. At the outset, he admitted that churches had always responded to the market and that church marketing was not new. However, he argued that using felt needs as the starting point for building a church was new. However, in reality it had been growing since the 1940s. This “new” felt

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 37.

<sup>69</sup> Craig Parro, “Church Growth’s Two Faces,” *Christianity Today*, January 24, 1991.



needs orientation, he believed had some positive elements. The contributions were a focus on “people,” “stewardship,” “outreach,” “church-based ministry,” and “inclusiveness of faith.” However, he wrote, there were also significant errors to consider “because marketing generally operates on unbiblical assumptions, it exposes the church to further secularization.” Parro’s concern was that marketing contradicted faithfulness to the Bible in four significant ways.

Parro briefly outlined four means by which church marketing was antithetical to the Bible. The first was that marketing reduces people to consumers and targets. In contrast, he argued, the Bible reveals that people need more than just their “felt needs” met. They also need “forgiveness and a relationship with God.” The second biblical contradiction was that marketing defines the product based on the consumer, and entertains to attract. In so doing, he continued, it compromises its message in the interests of popularity. The third incongruence was that marketing is based on research, which reduces the complexity of life and people to mere numbers and statistics. The final problem with marketing was that it becomes the savior of a church. A church places its faith in the methods that guarantee success instead of in God and prayer. These were all significant concerns of Parro’s, yet he was not convinced that they nullified religious marketing. In the end, he left marketing as an option, though providing strong indictments against its possible effects.<sup>70</sup>

Parro’s 1991 article was a small tremor that signaled the tsunami of opposition that soon washed over the land of church marketing. Between 1992 and 1994 theologians, pastors, and seminary professors produced a number of articles, essays, and

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 19.

books dissecting church marketing and denouncing its negative impact on Christian churches. Chief among them were Douglas Webster, Os Guinness, Phil Kenneson, David Wells, Bill Hull, and John MacArthur. Each brought a unique perspective on the field, yet there were great similarities between them, which will be explored. One unexpected similarity was that most of them, like Parro, were very gracious in their criticisms. Almost every opponent mentioned at some point that they did not wholly reject church marketing. They carefully noted some degree of appreciation, understanding, or even approval of some elements in the field. In his essay, "Is the Church Growth Movement Really Working?" Bill Hull endorsed the improvement of church communication, leadership, and even weekly bulletin aesthetics.<sup>71</sup> In a chapel lecture at the Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, David Wells, who had written an article of criticism against Robert Schuller in 1984, approved of the church marketing proponents desire to see churches grow, make a church more "hospitable to outsiders," and tune the sensitivities of a church to the needs of "the people in the pews."<sup>72</sup> Os Guinness also applauded the positive contributions of the philosophy.<sup>73</sup> However, they all agreed that it went too far and needed to be checked.

The same as proponents of church marketing, opponents of church marketing tapped into different reservoirs of evidence to defend their arguments that church marketing went too far. Some presented methodological critiques, examining the

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<sup>71</sup> Bill Hull, "Is the Church Growth Movement Really Working?" in *Power Religion: The Selling Out of the Evangelical Church*, ed. by Michael Horton (Chicago: Moody Press, 1992), 141.

<sup>72</sup> David F. Wells, "Marketing the Church: Analysis and Assessment, Part 1," *Faith and Mission* 12, no. 2 (Spring 1995): 13-4.; David F. Wells, "Self-Esteem: The New Confusion" *Reformed Journal* 33, no. 10 (October 1983): 15-8.

<sup>73</sup> Os Guinness, *Dining with the Devil: The Megachurch Movement Flirts with Modernity* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1993), 20.

practices of church marketing in vivid detail and demonstrating how they philosophically contradicted the purposes and meaning of Christianity. Some of them included minimal references to passages from the Bible or to the lives of historic figures in the religion. Others, such as pastor John MacArthur, principally depended upon the Bible to dissect church marketing defenses. In fact, MacArthur offered a categorical theology that included detailed explanations of Christian doctrine.<sup>74</sup> His primary dependence upon the Bible is evident in a six page “Scripture Index” in the back of the book that helped the reader locate the hundreds of Bible verses that peppered the monograph.<sup>75</sup> Despite these distinctions, in their critiques, they all targeted one particular source of church marketing.

In addressing church marketing, all of the critics placed the cross hairs of their assault on George Barna. Repeatedly, quotations from Barna’s books appear in the critiques. Other marketing and church growth representatives did appear in the critical works, particularly Bill Hybels, Lyle Schaller, Donald MacGavran, Rick Warren, and even Peter Drucker. Yet the Barna quotations oftentimes outnumbered all of the others combined. Barna served as the principle spokesperson, advocate, and villain in the opposition movement. This proliferation demonstrates the extent to which Barna had already established himself by the early 1990s as the leader of the church marketing movement. It also represented the frustration latent in the work of marketing scholars such as Bruce Wrenn, who sought to educate the church marketing community, but could not seem to garner much attention from the practitioners or their opponents. Not until the late 1990s would critics address the church marketing scholars. In the meantime they

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<sup>74</sup> John MacArthur, *Ashamed of the Gospel: When the Church Becomes Like the World* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1993), 153-72.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 245-50.

focused on Barna, and in their critiques, they all addressed a fundamental concern in church marketing, the role of felt needs.

### *Should Churches Meet Felt Needs?*

One can summarize the primary contention of all the early church marketing opponents in two words, felt needs. Like Parro, they argued that marketing philosophies and practices opposed biblical principles in several ways. However, at the core of each criticism was church marketing's primary goal of maximizing its exchanges with customers by meeting their felt needs. Since the late 1940s, meeting felt needs had steadily advanced as a central means and end in church promotion. Once a church established that its goal was to meet felt needs, its purpose became satisfying the demands of individuals. It assumed a customer orientation, where the customer defined the purpose of a church by determining what the church produced. Many theologians and pastors noted this alteration in authority and rang the alarm bells. In their estimation, if a church focused on meeting felt needs, it surrendered a theocentric view of Christianity for an anthropocentric one. A church that existed to meet felt needs, according to the critics, was a church defined by man and not by God. It was a church driven by man and not by God; a church that they believed failed in its divine purpose.

One of the problems in meeting felt needs, according to critics David Wells, Douglas Webster and Os Guinness was a failure to recognize necessary distinctions in an individual's needs. As professor of theology at Gordon Conwell Seminary, David Wells wrote, a church's purpose is encouraging and equipping people to surrender to "Christ's sovereignty over all of life and declaring the necessity of obedient submission to him and

to the truth of his Word.”<sup>76</sup> Yet, he argued, a church’s failure to recognize two kinds of needs led them to fail in their purpose. Wells outlined these two categories as “spiritually good” and “spiritually detrimental” needs.<sup>77</sup> Similarly, Douglas Webster, professor at Tyndale Seminary in Toronto, Canada outlined these two categories as “relational needs” and “tangible conveniences.”<sup>78</sup> Both drew attention to the difference between worldly desires and spiritual needs. In worldly desires, humans seek pleasure and excitement; while in spiritual needs, they seek reconciliation and fulfillment in the divine. The problem, as Webster argued, was that in confusing the two, the “human search for meaning and significance is translated into a restless quest for excitement and escape.”<sup>79</sup> People therefore, as Wells explained, incessantly labor to gratify their desires and subjective wants through self-fulfillment in therapy and entertainment.<sup>80</sup> Thus, they argued, in meeting the customers’ needs as defined by the customer, churches encouraged the pursuit of worldly self-interest and actually prevented people from pursuing spiritual needs.<sup>81</sup> Instead of training people to sacrifice and surrender their lives to God, churches equipped people to serve themselves.

Another fault that some critics identified in the centrality of meeting felt needs was the reduction of a church to a mere business. As demonstrated, Christian leaders had

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<sup>76</sup> David F. Wells, *God in the Wasteland: The Reality of Truth in a World of Fading Dreams* (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans, 1994), 76.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 74.

<sup>78</sup> Douglas D. Webster, *Selling Jesus: What's Wrong with Marketing the Church* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1992), 75.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 80-1.

<sup>80</sup> Wells, *God Wasteland*, 74.

<sup>81</sup> Webster, 82.

been framing a church as a business since the beginning of the century. However, what they meant by business had changed. With marketing, as former doctoral student of William Willimon and Stanley Hauerwas, Phil Kenneson argued, a church was a business because it was a “service agency that exists to satisfy people’s ‘felt needs.’”<sup>82</sup> The problem in this conceptualization, according to Kenneson, was that it placed the individual at the center of a church’s identity and purpose. As a result, he wrote, “the church is not constitutive of the Christian’s identity, but merely functions as an aid to this personal relationship [with Jesus].”<sup>83</sup> Marketing, therefore, reduced churches to support mechanisms for a person’s self-interest. As Wells noted, in so doing a church “surrender[s] its character as a gathering of the people of God for worship, proclamation, and service.”<sup>84</sup> Kenneson agreed that with the individual as the primary end of a church, “no longer is the church about God.”<sup>85</sup>

In a church no longer about God, critics argued that meeting felt needs eliminated the difficult doctrines of Christianity. In an effort to attract, churches majored on people’s interests and minored on disagreeable elements in the religion. As David Wells summarized in his chapel address, “Marketing fails because it allows human need and human experience to determine the desirability of the product.”<sup>86</sup> In targeting felt needs, churches altered their products to suit customers so severely that they jettisoned that

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<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 337.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 340.

<sup>84</sup> David F. Wells, “Marketing the Church: Analysis and Assessment, Part 2,” *Faith and Mission* 12, no. 2 (Spring 1995): 14.

<sup>85</sup> Webster, 341.

<sup>86</sup> Wells, “Marketing Part 2,” 16.

which was unique and necessary in Christianity, argued the critics. As Bill Hull, pastor and administrator in the Evangelical Free Church of America, intimated, Christianity is “confrontational in its very nature.”<sup>87</sup> In making it attractive, he argued, the religion became simply another form of a “worldly” therapy or philosophy. Wells noted this trend in seeker churches like Willow Creek, where changes were “undertaken to woo people into the kingdom by eliminating from the church all that’s strange to unbelievers so they feel as at home at the church as they would in the mall buying a shirt and tie.”<sup>88</sup> In making churches more like shopping malls, according to such critics, churches actually had become little more than shopping malls. They catered to the “worldly” desires of humanity and avoided anything that might damage sales.<sup>89</sup> In contrast, critics noted that Jesus was neither as fearful of rejecting people nor interested in meeting felt needs.

Two brief examples of critics using biblical examples to denounce meeting felt needs are of Douglas Webster and John MacArthur. Webster examined the biblical event where Jesus fed five thousand people. He argued that the incident refuted the contention by church marketing advocates that Jesus met “superficial felt needs.” Webster explained that the audience was more interested in Jesus’ methods, his exciting signs and wonders, than his message. The crowd sought to meet its felt needs of hunger and amazement, but not its spiritual need. In response, Jesus fled the crowd. Webster argued that Jesus did not seek to be popular or simply give people what they wanted.<sup>90</sup> Similarly megachurch pastor, John MacArthur pointed to an event in the New Testament church

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<sup>87</sup> Hull, 144.

<sup>88</sup> Wells, “Marketing Part 1,” 7.

<sup>89</sup> MacArthur, *Ashamed*, 24, 46.

that was anything but “user-friendly.” Two church members, Annanias and Sapphira withheld money from the church that they made selling land and then lied about it. As a result, God struck them both dead. As MacArthur noted, this event revealed a lack of concern on God’s part for meeting needs and attracting people to a church.<sup>91</sup> He also argued that the Apostle Paul did not seek to meet people needs and satisfy their pleasures. Instead, he wrote, “What made Paul effective was not marketing savvy, but a stubborn devotion to the truth.”<sup>92</sup>

In a related argument, critics also pointed to the tale of the rich young ruler in the Bible. Webster explained that a wealthy young man approached Jesus and asked how to get eternal life. As Webster explained, Jesus did not respond with a marketing approach, sensitive to the ruler’s desires. Instead, when the man explained that he had kept God’s commandments, Jesus told him to give up all his wealth. The demand was too great, and the young man walked away from Jesus, valuing more his success, wealth, and prestige. The man, argued Webster, chose his “needs” over Jesus’ demands.<sup>93</sup> Webster also drew the correlation that this rich young ruler was the most similar biblical figure to the most popular target of church marketing, baby boomers. He argued that baby-boomers were well-educated, affluent, consumers that were reluctant to surrender their pursuit of choices, wealth, and happiness. He explained that in targeting the felt needs of such people, churches were catering to the rich young ruler.<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>91</sup> Ibid., 51.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid., 90-1.

<sup>93</sup> Webster, 67-8.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid., 60-3.



Church marketing critics traced this central focus on meeting felt needs to an improper diagnosis of the problems that churches faced. The opponents agreed that churches were right to identify that adjustments needed to be made in their purposes and practices.<sup>95</sup> However, many churches, they contended, prescribed the wrong solutions because such churches could not accurately assess the problem.

Kenneson, Webster, and social critic Os Guinness explained that the marketing lens through which church marketing proponents studied the problem impeded their judgment.<sup>96</sup> They argued that proponents diagnosed a church's health with the wrong tools. Kenneson explained that proponents only measured success with numerical metrics; they focused only on the quantifiable characteristics of a church.<sup>97</sup> Therefore, in diagnosing the problems of the church, marketers charted measurable qualities: attendance, contributions, and satisfaction. As such, according to Kenneson and Webster, instead of assessing a church's spiritual and theological strength, which are not quantifiable, marketing proponents measured a church's market strength. They defined success, argued MacArthur and Webster, by "affluence, numbers, money, or positive response" instead of theological tenets. The solutions they recommended to improve market performance, therefore, were market solutions, not theological ones.<sup>98</sup> As Webster noted, in the marketing solution, "the product is customer satisfaction, not

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<sup>95</sup> Ibid., 41-2.

<sup>96</sup> Philip D. Kenneson, "Selling [Out] the Church in the Marketplace of Desire" *Modern Theology* 9, no. 4 (October 1993): 320; Guinness, *Dining* 20.

<sup>97</sup> Kenneson, "Selling in Marketplace," 324, 332.

<sup>98</sup> MacArthur, *Ashamed*, 28-9; Webster, 128.

spiritual maturity.”<sup>99</sup> In other words, opponents provided an almost deterministic formulation to explain the introduction of marketing into churches. Because individuals measured a church’s success with market standards, they were certain to provide market solutions. Thus, the root of the problem was not the solutions, the methods, but the internalized values and visions of the marketplace. Proponents’ methods revealed, argued the opponents, a much deeper and more disastrous commitment to market values.

The argument was subtle but critical. Church marketing opponents argued that the endorsement of market solutions required the endorsement of market values. George Barna and other proponents of church marketing had continuously defended their methods by pointing to the historic presence of marketing in churches. Many even contended that churches, and Jesus specifically, had originated marketing. Proponents argued that marketing was semantics, a new name for a historic practice. Therefore, according to Barna and others, church marketing recognized and improved upon the original practices of churches. Yet Barna also defined marketing as a “way of thinking.” Kenneson argued that marketing is more than language and more than methods, and that Barna had alluded to this truth in calling it a “way of thinking.”<sup>100</sup> According to Kenneson, Webster, Guinness and other opponents, marketing was a completely new and different set of assumptions and beliefs about what a church is and what it does. They stated that marketing was much more than a neutral methodology, as so many proponents had argued. It was an entire worldview, complete with its own set of assumptions and values. These values, argued opponents like Guinness and Wells, were very modern.

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<sup>99</sup> Webster, 128.

<sup>100</sup> Kenneson, “Selling in Marketplace,” 324.

*In a Church, Marketing Equals Modernity*

Opponents argued that in adopting the methods of the marketplace, churches had tuned their guidance system, their purpose, to the rhythms of modern values. All of the church marketing opponents explained that churches had wrongly assimilated the values of the world in adopting the methods of the world. As Webster summarized, “Judging from the apostolic tradition, the church was never meant to compete with IBM or Disney World on the world’s terms, but on God’s terms.”<sup>101</sup> In their work, two opponents, Wells and Guinness, defined the “world’s terms” in detail and connected marketing with a much larger “accommodation” and surrender of authority in Christianity to modernity. Of the two scholars, Guinness was the first to publish his contentions. He also offered the most holistic analysis, arguing that in practice and thought, modernity, partially through marketing, replaced God as the animating principle in Christianity.

Guinness traced the Christian churches’ acceptance of modernity to its acceptance of church growth principles. In his 1993 book, *Dining with the Devil*, he unpacked this argument, which he had introduced in a former essay entitled, “Sounding Out the Idols of Church Growth” in a 1992 edited volume, *No God, But God*.<sup>102</sup> He argued fundamentally, “The impact of modernity in the United States means that the Christian faith has lost much of its integrity and effectiveness in shaping the lives of believers.”<sup>103</sup> He explained that through adopting the methods of the marketplace, Christianity had

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<sup>101</sup> Webster, 53.

<sup>102</sup> Os Guinness, *Dining with the Devil: The Megachurch Movement Flirts with Modernity* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1993); Os Guinness, “Sounding Out the Idols of Church Growth” in *No God but God: Breaking with the Idols of Our Age*, ed. Os Guinness & John Steel (Moody Press: Chicago, 1992).

<sup>103</sup> Guinness, *Dining*, 16.

invited modernity into the churches. Guinness first introduced this broad criticism, without the concern for the marketplace, in his fictional 1983 work, *The Gravedigger File*.<sup>104</sup> He presented the book as a collection of memos given to the author in secrecy by a spy that had been working with an organization to destroy the Christian church. The memos were to be published to reveal to Christians the covert undermining that was under way. The “gravedigger thesis” of the book, as it has since been called, was that the Christian church “is the single strongest contributor to the rise of the modern world, yet the church has fallen captive to the modern world it helped to create.”<sup>105</sup> Guinness argued that the church had dug its own grave by feeding that which threatened to devour it, modernity. The title of his book, *Dining with the Devil*, alluded to this disastrous relationship. He drew the title from sociologist Peter Berger’s analogy of engaging modernity. Berger warned that if a person was to dine with the devil of modernity, he must use a long spoon, because modernity slowly draws you in until without realizing it you are left with nothing.<sup>106</sup> Guinness hoped to alert others to the danger of flirting with modernity, and began by helping them to understand modernity.

Guinness defined modernity generally as, “the character and system of the world produced by the forces of development and modernization, especially capitalism, industrialized technology, and telecommunications.”<sup>107</sup> Guinness identified three

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<sup>104</sup> Os Guinness, *The Gravedigger File: Papers on the Subversion of the Modern Church* (Downers Grove, Illinois: Intervarsity Press, 1983).

<sup>105</sup> Justin Taylor, “An Interview with Os Guinness about the Gravedigger Thesis,” The Gospel Coalition <http://thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/justintaylor/2010/03/04/an-interview-with-os-guinness-about-the-gravedigger-thesis> (accessed January 6, 2011).

<sup>106</sup> Guinness, *Dining*, 31.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

“damaging trends” of modernity: privatization, pluralization, and secularization.<sup>108</sup> In privatization, “modernity produces a cleavage between the private and public sectors of life,” and religion is relegated to the private. In pluralization, modernity offers a multitude of belief systems to be held by individuals.<sup>109</sup> In secularization, Guinness wrote, “modernity removes successive sectors of modern society from the decisive influence of religious ideas and institutions.” He presented modernity as an empire of thought, values, and behavior that “is the great alternative to the kingdom of God.” Its animus towards God, he summarized by quoting Philip Rieff, “What characterizes modernity, I think, is just the idea that men need not submit to any power – higher or lower – other than their own.”<sup>110</sup> In modernity, therefore, humans are encouraged to be their own Gods, and therefore at war with God. Modernity, he continued, therefore pushed people away from God’s house, the church. This created a crisis for Christian churches; the predominant cultural values opposed them. They lost adherents, and sought a solution. Yet, an improper diagnosis led to the improper solutions of the seeker church movement, of marketing. In their solutions, argued Guinness, churches ironically endorsed the very spirit of modernity from which they hoped to rescue Christianity. David Wells joined him in this critique.

The same year that Os Guinness published *Dining with the Devil*, theologian David Wells published his first in a series of books addressing the threat of modernity to Christianity, *No Place for Truth; or, Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology?* The

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<sup>108</sup> Ibid., 48.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid.

<sup>110</sup> Philip Rieff, *The Feeling Intellect* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1990), 280, quoted in Guinness, *Dining*, 49.

second book was his 1994 *God in the Wasteland*, which included an appreciation for Os Guinness reading the manuscript.<sup>111</sup> In the second, Wells wrote, “Modernity presents an interlocking system of values that has invaded and settled within the psyche of every person. Modernity is simply unprecedented in its power to remake human appetites, thinking processes, and values. It is, to put it in biblical terms, the worldliness of Our Time.”<sup>112</sup> This worldliness, as Wells estimated, and others had warned, was in the process of reducing the centrality of theology in churches. One of the primary means in which it was occurring was through church marketing.

Wells described this rapid adoption of marketing as “a sea change,” to the students and faculty at Southeastern Theological Baptist Seminary in 1994.<sup>113</sup> This change, he continued, introduced a series of substitutions in churches. He wrote, “Technique is being substituted for truth, marketing action for thought, the satisfaction of the individual for the health of the church, a therapeutic vision of the world for a doctrinal vision, the unmanageable by the manageable, organism by organization, those who can preach the Word of God by those who can manage an organization, the spiritual by the material.”<sup>114</sup> In each of these substitutions, Wells argued, business strategies were replacing traditional Christian beliefs and practices with worldly, marketplace values.

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<sup>111</sup> Wells, *God Wasteland*, x.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

<sup>113</sup> Wells, “Marketing Part 1,” 5.

<sup>114</sup> Wells, *God Wasteland*, 86.

Wells and Guinness were not alone in raising concerns about modernity. Both contributed chapters to a collection entitled *Faith and Modernity*, published in 1994.<sup>115</sup> In the same volume as Guinness' original essay, Thomas Oden's "On Not Whoring After the Spirit of the Age" also rang the alarm bell over the dangers of modernity encroaching on Christianity. Though he did not connect the threat directly with marketing, the marks of concern were similar. Oden offered four "motifs" of modernity. The first was autonomous individualism that admires the "self-sufficient, sovereign self." The second was "narcissistic hedonism." The third was "reductive naturalism" where all explanations are reduced to formulas of quantifiable, predictable natural causation. The fourth was "absolute moral relativism" where judgment on true and false, right and wrong are determined by individuals and cultures.<sup>116</sup> In considering the marks of modernity, as outlined by these critics, one can reduce them to one principle concern that pervaded all marketing critiques.

In church marketing criticism, the most disconcerting mark of modernity was the primacy of the sovereign, rational individual. This mark has already been noted in the opponents' focus on denouncing the purpose of meeting felt needs. Critics identified such a purpose as the enthronement of an anthropocentric framework in American Christianity, an establishment of the sovereign individual's subjective longings at the core of a church's identity. However, this mark of modernity is worth further examination because it supported other lines of criticism in its emphasis on rationalism.

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<sup>115</sup> Philip Sampson, Vinay Samuel, and Chris Sugden, eds., *Faith and Modernity* (Oxford: Regnum Books International, 1994).

<sup>116</sup> Thomas C. Oden, "On Not Whoring After the Spirit of the Age" in *No God But God: Breaking with the Idols of our Age*, ed. Os Guinness and John Steel (Chicago: Moody Press, 1992), 193-94.

Guinness connected church marketing's "exaltation of numbers and of technique" in its solutions with the broader marks of a rationalized, secularized culture. In such a culture, he argued, there is a pervasive confidence in the ability of humanity to organize, plan, and control events and outcomes. Guinness criticized what he called a "love of possessing" and "desire for control" that permeated many churches. He noted that the effort to plan all elements of a church, from the parking lot to the prayers, removes much of the mystery in religion. As he wrote, "Something of the impossible-to-predict, category-shattering sovereignty and grace of God is walled off."<sup>117</sup> Thus, according to Guinness, in church marketing, human self-reliance became the philosophical foundation of a church and effectively removed dependence upon God. Kenneson also argued this point, explaining marketing churches embraced the rationalist mindset of modern culture instead of the non-rational elements of religion. He added that it also elevated the pursuit of control, which is antithetical to a religion of surrender and trust in that which is irrational.<sup>118</sup>

MacArthur also criticized church marketing's reliance on human methods. He connected the trend with a larger theological issue, Arminianism. In Arminianism, as MacArthur defined it, human will and not God's will is the principal actor in the act of salvation. MacArthur believed that marketing advocates implicitly embraced Arminian theology. He argued that in their dependence and confidence on planning and methods, they believed that humans ultimately make the decision for salvation. Therefore, much like Charles Finney in the nineteenth century, church marketers believed that if a person could be persuaded, they could be converted. Such a disregard for God's role in

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<sup>117</sup> Guinness, *Dining*, 51.

<sup>118</sup> Kenneson, "Selling in Marketplace," 334-35.



salvation was detestable to MacArthur and in his opinion bankrupted the philosophies and methods of marketing. Ultimately, MacArthur's contention pointed to a larger concern with the consumer orientation in churches, the sovereignty of humans in church doctrine and practice instead of the sovereignty of God.<sup>119</sup> Webster also excoriated this trend, even quoting John MacArthur. He explained that church marketing always shifted the emphasis in a church away from "Christ's sufficiency, God's sovereignty, biblical integrity, the power of prayer, and Spirit-led ministries. The result is a man-centered ministry that attempts to accomplish divine purposes by superficial programs and human methodology rather than by the Word or the power of the Spirit."<sup>120</sup> This church shift to a modern confidence in the sovereign, rational individual had deeper historic roots according to John MacArthur and David Wells.

Some of the early church marketing opponents recognized that church marketing had historical roots. They argued that the core issues in church marketing were the fruit of seeds planted in the past. The most thorough, in providing historical context, was John MacArthur whose entire book weaved the fight against church marketing and pragmatism into the narrative of English minister Charles H. Spurgeon's own fight in the late nineteenth century in the Downgrade Controversy. Taking its name from an article written by Spurgeon in 1887, the controversy involved his repeated denouncement of the "down grading" of the Bible's authority in churches. MacArthur framed the confrontation as Spurgeon's fight to demonstrate the dangers of stepping away from the

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<sup>119</sup> MacArthur, *Ashamed*, 85.

<sup>120</sup> John MacArthur, *Our Sufficiency in Christ* (Dallas: Word Pub., 1991), 152, quoted in Webster, 132.

historic doctrines of Christianity.<sup>121</sup> MacArthur believed that he was involved in the same struggle as Spurgeon, in opposing pragmatism and church marketing. Os Guinness pointed to a similar point of origin. He argued that modernity first crept into churches in the late nineteenth century through modernist Christianity, which was Spurgeon's opponent at the time. Guinness explained that modernity continued to creep into Christianity as churches increasingly courted social approval. As a definitive turning point in this change, he pointed to the World Council of Churches' 1966 declaration, "The world must set the agenda for the Church."<sup>122</sup> This impulse, he explained, spread as marketing introduced an "audience centered" orientation for churches, even among evangelical circles.

David Wells characterized the history of church marketing as a "march from the American Revolution to George Barna."<sup>123</sup> He argued that Barna's marketing prescriptions for churches were only possible because of a long shift in American churches, a shift that began with the American Revolutionary War.<sup>124</sup> The general trend, he explained, was one of decreasing respect and adoration for authority in churches. As evidence, he highlighted Nathan Hatch's argument in the *Democratization of American Christianity* that fervor for democracy during the American Revolution bled into churches.<sup>125</sup> An anti-cleric sentiment developed and carried through the nineteenth

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<sup>121</sup> MacArthur, *Ashamed*, 21.

<sup>122</sup> Guinness, *Dining*, 58-9.

<sup>123</sup> Wells, *God Wasteland*, 84.

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*, 62.

<sup>125</sup> Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989).

century with a growing distaste in many sectors of Christianity for formalism and authority. Such populist fervor, Wells argued, generated a reverence in America for the audience, for the crowd, the masses.<sup>126</sup> In the nineteenth century, as modernity took hold, capitalism became a dominant system of meaning and understanding. Everything became a market, including religion.<sup>127</sup> He continues, these changes laid two key foundations for Christianity, particularly evangelicalism. The first established “that the audience is sovereign” and the second “that ideas find legitimacy and value only within the marketplace.”<sup>128</sup> Wells argued that both meant that ideas are rendered true or false based on the people’s acceptance of them and determination of if they work. In other words, the history of church marketing, according to Wells, was a growing consumer orientation in religion that stood on a philosophical foundation of pragmatism.

Though Wells noted that the corporatization of American Christianity was a root cause of church marketing, it is interesting that other critics did not recognize or highlight the historic roots of business promotionalism in churches. The growing consumer sovereignty in Christianity, the drive to meet felt needs, the emulation of shopping malls, was not new in the 1990s nor even in the 1950s for that matter. Church promotionalism had been slowly injecting these philosophies and practices into American Christianity for decades. However, it took the popularity of marketing, the practice of marketing in megachurches, and the explicit articulation of marketing in guides and conferences to attract the attention of these critics.

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<sup>126</sup> Wells, *God Wasteland*, 63-5.

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*, 85.

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*, 67.

### *A More Sophisticated Opposition*

In 1995, the evangelical magazine, *Faith Today*, featured a debate on church marketing between pastors Dave Collins and Herb Barber, called “The Marketing Approach.” Collins, arguing in favor of church marketing, defined it very simply as the presentation of “information about a product or service designed to meet a need.”<sup>129</sup> Meeting needs, he argued, as had the marketing opponents, was the “key ingredient of any marketing program.” He defended such programs by explaining that God was a marketer through the prophets and John the Baptist. Collins also employed the popular argument that Jesus met people’s needs. Overall, Collins’ piece was an elementary reprise of other marketing advocates’ defenses. It added nothing new to the debate, but perhaps did expose many to a basic defense for church marketing. Herb Barber’s retort was also a reprise. He argued that church marketing methods did not adapt an ancient message to contemporary language, but removed the offence of the message and radically altered it. As Douglas Webster had argued previously, Barber suspected that a marketing Jesus would not have pushed away the rich young ruler but would have given him coffee and a comfortable message to keep his interest.<sup>130</sup> If a church, he contended, marketed itself, it “candy-coated” the Christian message, eliding the subject of sin and sacrifice to make a church appealing. He summarized, “Sin is something more serious than ‘messing up’ and salvation is something more glorious than ‘getting your life on track.’”<sup>131</sup> These

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<sup>129</sup> Dave Collins, “The Marketing Approach: God’s Way or the Wrong Way? The Age-Old Method” *Faith Today* (September/October, 1995): 22.

<sup>130</sup> Herb Barber, “The Marketing Approach: God’s Way or the Wrong Way? Candy-Coated Gospel” *Faith Today* (September/October 1995): 23.

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*

more simplistic approaches to the “Marketing Approach” were followed by more sophisticated pieces.

In 1996 and 1997, there were several additions to the church marketing opposition movement. Though it had only been a few years since the first books and articles criticizing church marketing, much had happened in the field. Marketing scholars had published several articles and books on religious marketing. Rick Warren and Bill Hybels had both released their guide books on their own marketing methods that enable them to build enormous seeker driven churches. The new critical works reflected these changes. In targeting representatives of church marketing, critics did not focus as heavily on George Barna. They added Hybels and Warren. More importantly, however, they added religious marketing scholars, especially Philip Kotler. In so doing, some of the critics devoted a new attention to more complex and scholarly definitions and explanations of church marketing instead of the earlier more simplified conceptualizations of the practices and philosophies.

In 1996, one brief, critical piece restated the argument of the years before. John D. Hannah argued that attempts to reach the culture through a “market-driven, pragmatic view of life and its meaning” had introduced the ideas and sensibilities of modernity to churches.<sup>132</sup> He identified the symptoms as the same increase in “the penchant to systematize and organize information,” a growing cultural pluralism, which Guinness defined as secularism, and an increasing “privatization” of truth.<sup>133</sup> However, the other

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<sup>132</sup> John D. Hannah, “Evangelicalism, Conversion, and the Gospel: Have We Sold Our Heritage for Relevance,” in *The Coming Evangelical Crisis*, ed. John H. Armstrong (Chicago: Moody Press, 1996), 155.

<sup>133</sup> Hannah, 155-56.

two critical pieces of 1996 provided new arguments and evidence against church marketing.

In 1996, David Doran, local church pastor and president of the Detroit Baptist Theological Seminary, published *Market Driven Ministry*, a unique critique of church marketing. Doran's work recapitulated much of what had gone before in the tsunami of opposition. However, it was different in its comprehensive description of religious marketing from both a scholarly and pastoral perspective. In his book, he quoted extensively from Norman Shawchuck's *Marketing for Congregations* and Philip Kotler's *Principles of Marketing*.<sup>134</sup> After defining marketing, he explained, in detail, the process of implementing a marketing philosophy in a church. Frequently citing academic texts, he described establishing a strategic plan, identifying a target market, and implementing marketing methods to attract the market and maximize customer satisfaction.<sup>135</sup> Doran seems to have been so confident that a right understanding of church marketing would sufficiently discredit itself that he allowed provided these detailed and complex descriptions with little to no comment.

Doran coupled his scholarly representation of church marketing with a detailed biblical exegesis of the principle passages that proponents used to defend the practices. He represented both George Barna's and Leith Anderson's interpretations of 1 Corinthians 9:18-23 and Acts 17:22-31. Then Doran explained how their interpretations and applications were flawed.<sup>136</sup> He generally attacked the argument that Jesus was a

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<sup>134</sup> David M. Doran, *Market Driven Ministry: Blessing or Curse* (Detroit: Detroit Baptist Theological Seminary, 1996), 12-5.

<sup>135</sup> *Ibid.*, 17-36.

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.*, 43-9.

successful marketer. Doran noted that Jesus gathered very few followers and died with only a handful. He also intimated that Jesus frequently gave messages that pushed people away and spoke in parables to confound his listeners. In refutation of the modern admiration for the sovereign, rational individual, Doran explained that Jesus, to the contrary, was an authoritarian who had very little regard for the democratic will of the people.<sup>137</sup>

Doran also included references to previous critical works, including John MacArthur's *Ashamed of the Gospel*, Douglas Webster's *Selling Jesus*, David Well's *God in the Wasteland*, and Os Guinness' *Dining with the Devil*. Much like these critics, his opposition boiled down to a concern that in church marketing, methodology had replaced theology. He summarized that "theology is not very marketable; meeting felt-needs is."<sup>138</sup> In focusing on meeting needs to convert humans, he continued, churches exude a false conceit that denies human depravity, and they replace the authority of God with the authority of the customer.<sup>139</sup> As well, he intimated, such churches remove "the offense of the gospel."<sup>140</sup> Thus, the principle criticism of church marketing had not changed, just some of the evidence and the direction towards the scholarly field.

Another unique addition to the oppositional corpus was G.A. Pritchard's 1996 *Willow Creek Seeker Services: Evaluating a New Way of Doing Church*.<sup>141</sup> Like the majority of the church marketing critics, Pritchard was a self-avowed evangelical

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<sup>137</sup> Ibid., 10-1.

<sup>138</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>139</sup> Ibid., 53-5.

<sup>140</sup> Ibid., 64.

<sup>141</sup> Gregory A. Pritchard, *Willow Creek Seeker Services: Evaluating a New Way of Doing Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1996).

Christian. Yet Pritchard was different because he provided perhaps the only critique of church marketing from an academic platform. Pritchard's book was an adaptation of his doctoral dissertation at Northwestern University in sociology. In his work, Pritchard sought to carve a new path in examining church marketing through a focused sociological study of a marketing church, Bill Hybels' Willow Creek Community Church.<sup>142</sup> His book, however, addressed larger subjects than just church marketing. He described all of Willow Creek's many methods and the reasons behind them, while also offering a critical analysis of them. Though he cited other critics such as Os Guinness and John MacArthur, and he quoted from George Barna and Philip Kotler, Pritchard leaned more heavily on sociologists Peter Berger and Robert Bellah, as well as fourth century theologian Augustine.<sup>143</sup> Unlike other critics, Pritchard also very rarely quoted the Bible to support his arguments. Instead, he compared religious marketing to commercial marketing to illustrate his points. It was also unlike other critiques in that he invited the staff of Willow Creek to proof read and comment on the manuscript. He received mostly positive feedback from the church's leaders as well as from other significant figures like Robert Schuller.<sup>144</sup>

In his examination, Pritchard outlined the ways in which Willow Creek's uncritical use of methods reaped unintended consequences. He wrote, "their mistakes are rooted in a superficial understanding of the American culture and an inadequate grasp of Christian theology."<sup>145</sup> He criticized Willow Creek's failure to recognize that cultural

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<sup>142</sup> Pritchard, 14.

<sup>143</sup> Ibid., 60.

<sup>144</sup> Ibid., 15-6.

<sup>145</sup> Ibid., 207.



tools are double-edged swords and those that wield them, often injure themselves.<sup>146</sup> He explored several dangerous swords, one of which he argued, was the “allure of marketing.” In summary, Pritchard argued, like Kenneson and other critics before him, that marketing is not, as advocates proclaimed, value neutral. Instead, he explained, marketing shapes the way that an individual sees and interprets the world.<sup>147</sup> It is also, he continued, cold, calculating, and manipulative. Yet his primary concern regarding marketing was, like those before him, that it ceded sovereignty to the audience in shaping religion and its institutions.<sup>148</sup>

Pritchard’s last chapter is worth noting because it engaged one of the transitions in the Religious Public Relations Council. The RPRC began in 1929 with a strict commitment to the truth of its message. However, over time it focused more on the truth of its method as the message changed to accommodate a plurality of interests. Pritchard’s chapter, entitled “The Loss of Truth,” described Willow Creek’s lack of serious intellectual engagement with questions of truth. He explained that the staff lacked any significant theological education and that the majority of the theology was actually contemporary psychology. The problem, he summarized, was the pragmatism of the church. Like the RPRC, and like Robert Schuller, Hybels, Pritchard argued, had adopted the methods that worked while surrendering fidelity to exclusive truths, or even a concern for them. Pritchard called Hybels the “ultimate pragmatist who is willing to use

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<sup>146</sup> Ibid., 208.

<sup>147</sup> Ibid., 244.

<sup>148</sup> Ibid., 248-49.

any aspect of academia – if it helps further his agenda.”<sup>149</sup> He even quoted Hybels’, “I’m a pragmatist, and I measure things by whether or not they work.”<sup>150</sup> This pragmatism was a hallmark of church promotion, and it troubled G.A. Pritchard.

The next year, 1997, James Street joined Phil Kenneson in expanding Kenneson’s original 1993 article on church marketing into a monograph entitled, *Selling Out the Church: The Dangers of Church Marketing*. In it, Kenneson leaned in part upon his former Duke University professors, authors of *Resident Aliens*, William Willimon and Stanley Hauerwas. Hauerwas even wrote the foreword for the book. Hauerwas poignantly noted, illustrating the popularity of marketing, that a book on theology could possibly sell 5,000 copies, whereas a book on church marketing would easily sell tens of thousands of copies.<sup>151</sup>

Though the book elaborated on the same principles and presuppositions as the 1993 article, it was more sophisticated in its analysis. It paid more attention to ironies in church marketing and provided a brief history of the marketing field.<sup>152</sup> It also examined the race, class, and consumer discrimination latent in the methods, as well as the values latent in the most basic selection and analysis of data.<sup>153</sup> It also provided more biblical examples to defend concerns with church marketing. Among them was an analysis of Jesus feeding the 5,000 and an examination of events surrounding Moses’ spies gathering

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<sup>149</sup> Ibid., 278.

<sup>150</sup> Ibid., 280.

<sup>151</sup> Philip D. Kenneson, *Selling [Out] the Church: The Dangers of Church Marketing* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1997), 11.

<sup>152</sup> Ibid., 22, 37-8.

<sup>153</sup> Ibid., 95, 98-9.

data in the Promised Land.<sup>154</sup> While the principle target remained George Barna and each chapter included references to Barna book titles, they too added Philip Kotler to their hit list.

Opposition to church marketing continued into the twenty-first century with an essay by church pastor Phil Newton.<sup>155</sup> Perhaps in response to the rapidly growing popularity of Rick Warren, Newton did not focus on George Barna as others had, but addressed Warren. He argued that Warren's use of Jesus feeding the 5,000 as a defense for marketing was deeply flawed. Like Kenneson and Webster, Newton explained how Warren misinterpreted the passage, failing to recognize that the crowd was only interested in miracles and food, not spiritual truth.<sup>156</sup> Newton, also like his predecessors, pointed to the Apostle Paul as a model for not simply meeting needs.<sup>157</sup> In addition, Newton provided some historical context. Writing at the end of the twentieth century, he compared church marketing to the practices of an early proponent of church promotionalism in the twentieth century, Henry Emerson Fosdick. Fosdick had been the preeminent modernist Protestant preacher in the 1920s and an advocate for church advertising. Newton identified a common thread in Fosdick and Warren. He quoted Fosdick, "Nobody who talks to the public so assumes that the vital interests of the people are located in the meaning of words spoken two thousand years ago."<sup>158</sup> Fosdick

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<sup>154</sup> Ibid., 80, 120.

<sup>155</sup> Phil A. Newton, "The Pastor and Church Growth: How to Deal with the Modern Problem of Pragmatism," in *Reforming Pastoral Ministry: Challenges for Ministry in Postmodern Times*, ed. John H. Armstrong (Wheaton, Crossway Books, 2001), 267-68.

<sup>156</sup> Ibid., 267-69.

<sup>157</sup> Ibid., 271-72.

<sup>158</sup> Ibid., 273.

believed that a church had to deliver a product that spoke to contemporary needs, interests, and language. Newton argued that Rick Warren made the same assumptions and substitution for ancient Christian truths.<sup>159</sup> It was the same comparison that John MacArthur and David Wells had drawn, connecting church marketing with early Christian liberalism. As a century of church promotionalism closed, Phil Newton stood among church marketers and denounced their methods by pointing to their origins in the beginning of the century.

#### *Internal Opposition to Purify Promotion Continues*

In the early 1990s, there were still marks of internal opposition that sought to purify the methods of promotion and marketing. While external opposition labored to purge churches of promotionalism, internal opposition sought to justify religious promotionalism by separating it from the industry. In 1993, *Leadership* magazine, a publication of *Christianity Today*, included an article entitled, “Contending for the Truth ... in Church Publicity.” The title alone suggested that the juxtaposition of truth and publicity would seem odd to many. However, the author, Wayne Kiser, argued that the two words belonged together. He wrote, “when churches tell the truth, they can establish a solid reputation in the community.” In other words, it was the same argument from decades earlier. Advertising could be effective, as could public relations, if the methods were purified with the truth. He provided an example of such a purification process. A church, he explained, had chosen not to advertise sensational claims that it was exciting and new. Instead, the churches promotion was “truthful.” It merely advertised that it

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<sup>159</sup> Ibid.

wanted to know other people's names. Kiser contended that such a realistic promotion, one that told the truth, made business promotionalism appropriate for churches.<sup>160</sup>

A 1993 article in *Christianity Today*, "Will the Great Commission Become the Great Ad Campaign" similarly argued for a purer form of promotion in churches. The article appeared at first glance to be an attack on church promotion. However, its author was noted marketing scholar, James Engel.<sup>161</sup> Though Engel had written extensively on using consumer behavior studies in evangelism, he warned to not reduce efforts to proselytize to just marketing, pragmatism, and numbers. He admitted that in his earlier years he supported "media-driven strategies to reach the masses" but was now more hesitant. Engel's hope was to depend not purely on strategies, and allow the Holy Spirit to work. Thus, half way through the article, it appeared to the reader that Engel had his own conversion experience, turning from marketing. Engel had created the necessary space between his methods and those of the marketplace. He then went on to endorse church marketing. Engle explained that Jesus knew his "seekers" and their needs. Jesus appropriately altered the message and the medium to suit the particular audience, argued Engel. This emphasis on market research and product adaptation demonstrated clearly that Engel had not so much turned from marketing, as sought to clean it up for the purposes of churches. He hoped to distance it from secular market applications.

The Roman Catholic Church made a significant effort to fence its promotional methods from the marketplace. In 1997, they published "Ethics in Advertising," a thirty-

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<sup>160</sup> Wayne Kiser, "Contending for the Truth...in Church Publicity: When You Tell Others About Your Church, is Honesty the Best Policy?" *Leadership: A Publication of Christianity Today, Inc.* 14, no. 1 (January 1993): 112.

<sup>161</sup> James F. Engel, "Will the Great Commission Become the Great Ad Campaign," *Christianity Today*, April 26, 1993.

five page pamphlet on matters, as quoted in the *New York Times*, such as “truthfulness in advertising, the preservation of human dignity, the manipulation of children and citizens of developing countries, and the influence of advertising on politics and the media.”<sup>162</sup> The *Times* noted, though, that the pamphlet did not condemn the advertising industry, it only raised concerns about potential unethical behavior in adopting its methods. The Roman Catholic Church had clearly grown concerned about the effect of advertising on society, however, not so concerned that it was ready to cut ties with the industry and its methods.

In the 1990s a new, complex, comprehensive, and sophisticated opposition movement to church marketing had erupted. Driven by theologians and pastors, it produced several books and articles that attacked church marketing from several angles. Principally, it denounced the customer orientation in church marketing that ceded authority in churches to the consumer by defining a church as an agency that meets felt needs. They explored the value systems that such practices transferred into Christianity and some argued that church marketing had opened the door to the secularization of the religion by inviting in modern values. Through the decade, the opposition grew in its sophistication as well as dissemination. This growth continued into the twenty-first century. Other critics arose to write books such as Udo Middelmann’s *The Market Driven Church: The Worldly Influence of Modern Culture on the Church in America* (2004), James Sundquist’s *Who’s Driving the Purpose Driven Church* (2004), and Gary Gilley’s *This Little Church Went to Market: Is the Modern Church Selling Out* (2005).

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<sup>162</sup> Tamar Charry, “Advertising: The Roman Catholic Church Gets Mixed Reviews on Its Foray into Advertising’s Big Issues,” *New York Times*, March 31, 1997.

David Wells also continued to write book in his series, one of which directly assaulted church marketing, *The Courage to be Protestant: Truth-Lovers, Marketers, and Emergents in the Postmodern World* (2008).<sup>163</sup> The battle over marketing in churches was far from over.

## Conclusion

In the 1990s, church marketing grew too big and too sophisticated for American Christianity to ignore. Church promotion had been developing and spreading throughout American Protestantism since the opening of the century. Through the evolution and expansion of church advertising and church public relations, more and more churches adopted and adapted the promotional practices of the marketplace as a strategy to increase their size. In so doing and following the trends of the business community, churches slowly shifted to a consumer orientation and embrace of marketing. The success of such methods spawned megachurches across the country that stood as a testimony to the utility of modern marketplace strategies. As these churches grew, the public took notice, and other churches took an interest. An industry began to grow in the 1980s, which exploded in both breadth and depth in the 1990s. Riding a tide of growth in megachurches, professional experts, and scholars, church marketing redefined the practices, and even beliefs, of churches across the country. It also caught the attention of a number of religious leaders that were uncomfortable with such shifts.

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<sup>163</sup> Udo W. Middelmann, *The Market-Driven Church: The Worldly Influence of Modern Culture on the Church in America* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2004); James Sundquist, *Who's Driving the Purpose Driven Church? : A Documentary on the Teachings of Rick Warren* (Oklahoma City: Bible Belt Publishing, 2004); Gary Gilley, *This Little Church Went to Market: Is the Modern Church Selling Out?* (Webster, NY: Evangelical Press USA, 2005); David Wells, *The Courage to Be Protestant: Truth-lovers, Marketers, and Emergents in the Postmodern World* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 2008).

The tension in church promotion, which had remained mostly an internal struggle among church promotion advocates throughout the century, became a public and external struggle in the 1990s. Throughout the century, churches had been gradually shifting authority to the customers. However, the shifts were often times imperceptible and did not draw much public attention. Yet the growth of marketing made this shift explicit and generated widespread publicity as churches and religious leaders arose to build an industry out of church marketing. This new depth and breadth in church promotion caught the attention and concern of many religious leaders, primarily evangelical. In response, they launched an oppositional strike on church marketing unlike anything undertaken in church promotion before. Opponents argued in books, lectures, and essays that churches, in trying to change the world and stepping deeply into the marketplace, had fallen in, becoming too much like the world and losing their unique message. These critics contended that churches had surrendered to the values of modernity and replaced the sovereignty of God with the sovereignty of the customer in determining belief and practice. They assaulted the emphasis in churches to meet felt needs and segment the market. As they entered the twenty-first century, their arguments were growing in sophistication along with the church marketing industry.

Both proponents and opponents of business promotionalism in churches would continue to grow in popularity and would continue to exert significant influence on American Christianity. As the twenty-first century arrived, there were no signs of resolution in the conflict, after all, even the strongest advocates for church promotion had at one time or another been uncertain, or at least uncomfortable, with the language and methods of business in religion. It was not a natural fit to sell the products of the



otherworldly with the tools of the worldly. Debate, tension, development, and cooperation in business promotionalism would continue among American Christian churches as they labored in retailing religion.

## Afterword

The end of the twentieth century was certainly not the end of church promotion. In fact, the twenty-first century may prove to be a more dynamic era of business promotionalism in religion than the period before. In just the first decade, the industry has grown exponentially. Church marketing has come to dominate the doctrinal and ritual planning of many churches in a manner unprecedented in the history of religious retailing. In briefly considering developments over the last ten years, one can see how several pioneers of the twentieth century remain essential engineers in the design and construction of the church promotion industry in the twenty-first century.

### *The Religious Public Relations Council*

The Religious Public Relations Council still strives to improve religious promotion among its 500 members.<sup>1</sup> As the twentieth century ended, the organization changed its name to the Religion Communicator's Council (RCC). The new title represents the Council's commitment to improving all forms of religious promotion from public relations to marketing to web development. Operationally, the RCC continues to publish the *Counselor*, though now it is also available online as the *e-Counselor*, and a

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<sup>1</sup> Homepage, Religion Communicators Council, <http://www.religioncommunicators.org> (accessed March 14, 2011).

handbook, now in its seventh edition.<sup>2</sup> Members also continue to meet for a national convention each year and gather regularly among the thirteen local chapters to discuss “programming and networking.”<sup>3</sup> Many of the subjects of interest remain the same as before: writing and formatting a press release, working with editors, broadcasting on radio and television, and advertising locally. Yet changes in communication and promotion have introduced new discussions and methods, such as branding, graphic identity, photo editing, web development, social media strategy, and viral videos and video production.<sup>4</sup>

One thing the RCC has not changed is its commitment to change, especially in promoting pluralization and social justice initiatives. In 2010, the organization sponsored another interfaith Congress for communicators from an unprecedented array of religions to gather around the theme, “Embracing Change: Communicating Faith in Today’s World.” Christian, Muslim, Hindu, and Jewish speakers joined marketing, public relations, journalism, and photography experts in addressing the Congress. Many encouraged religious communicators to use their platforms to increase understanding and cooperation among different faiths.<sup>5</sup> Speakers at the 2011 national convention, such as

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<sup>2</sup> “Newsletter Archive,” e-Counselor, Religion Communicators Council, <http://www.religioncommunicators.org/mc/page.do?sitePageId=111576&orgId=recc> (accessed March 14, 2011).

<sup>3</sup> “About Us,” Religion Communicators Council, <http://www.religioncommunicators.org/mc/page.do?sitePageId=64510&orgId=recc> (accessed March 14, 2011).

<sup>4</sup> Religion Communicators Handbook, Religion Communicators Council, <http://www.religioncommunicators.org/mc/page.do?sitePageId=71976> (accessed March 14, 2011); “Communicating Outside the Box,” RCC Convention 2011, Religion Communicators Council, <http://www.religioncommunicators.org/mc/page.do?sitePageId=71889&orgId=recc> (accessed March 14, 2011); “Workshops,” RCC Convention 2011, Religion Communicators Council, <http://www.rccongress2010.org/program/workshops.shtml> (accessed March 14, 2011).

<sup>5</sup> “Speakers and Leaders,” RCCongress 2010, <http://www.rccongress2010.org/speakers/index.shtml> (accessed March 14, 2011).

Diana Eck, director of the Pluralism Project at Harvard University, also advocated for expanding interfaith dialogue.<sup>6</sup> The 2011 convention also demonstrated the RCC's commitment to promoting social justice and political action with speakers that ranged from a "feminist political economist" to the associate director of the White House Office of Public Engagement. Attendees toured the historic sites in the Civil Rights Movement.<sup>7</sup> In the twenty-first century, the RCC remains a vibrant advocate for church promotion, religious change, and social justice.

The mainline denominations represented in the RCC also continue to adopt and adapt advertising and marketing programs in an effort to curb membership decline. By the end of the century, the primary mainline denominations had lost more than 25 percent of their members since 1965.<sup>8</sup> The United Methodist Church is a prime example. After 1970, the denomination began losing about 77,000 people per year.<sup>9</sup> Towards the end of the century, the UMC launched a large "Igniting Ministry" advertising campaign that branded the church with the slogan "Open hearts. Open minds. Open doors." which emphasized the inclusivity of their churches in receiving all customers.<sup>10</sup> More recently, in May 2009, the denomination began another advertising campaign entitled "Rethink

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<sup>6</sup> Deb Christian, "Use of New Communication Venues Necessary to Spread Message of Hope," *RCCongress 2010*, <http://www.rccongress2010.org/news/dianaeckplenary.shtml> (accessed March 14, 2011).

<sup>7</sup> "Communicating Outside the Box," RCC Convention 2011, Religion Communicators Council, <http://www.religioncommunicators.org/mc/page.do?sitePageId=71889&orgId=recc> (accessed March 14, 2011).

<sup>8</sup> James B. Twitchell, *Branded Nation: The Marketing of Megachurch, College Inc., and Museumworld* (New York: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 2004), 71.

<sup>9</sup> James B. Twitchell, *Shopping for God: How Christianity Went from in Your Hear to in Your Face* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2007), 167.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 168-69.

Church” for a four-year period at a cost of \$20 million.<sup>11</sup> The title alone reflects the denomination’s effort to redefine itself in a pluralistic and competitive age. Also, the UMC office for communications offers videos and step-by-step instructions for local churches on creating, implementing, and evaluating a sophisticated marketing plan along with innumerable resources for promoting through advertising and social media.<sup>12</sup> Other denominations joined the Methodists in continuing to aggressively direct similar national campaigns and equip their local churches for promotion.

### *Church Marketing: Megachurches, Consultants, & Scholars*

The size and number of megachurches continues to grow across the country, spreading the use of religious marketing. In 2005, Bob Buford’s Leadership Network and Hartford Seminary’s Hartford Institute for Religion Research conducted a survey of American churches. The survey found 1,210 megachurches that enjoyed a weekly attendance, on average, of 3,612.<sup>13</sup> The same year, Joel Osteen’s Lakewood Church in Houston, Texas, broke a weekly attendance record of 30,000. The Southern Baptist denomination began planning to implement similar marketing methods to establish 1,800 new churches. Members hoped to create different types of churches to appeal to different target markets. A representative of the denomination stated, “We have cowboy churches

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<sup>11</sup> “The United Methodist Church launches \$20 million ‘Rethink Church’ advertising campaign,” May 1, 2009, PRNewswire, Multivu, <http://multivu.prnewswire.com/mnr/rethinkchurch/38177/> (accessed March 14, 2011).

<sup>12</sup> “Church Marketing Overview,” United Methodist Communications, [http://www.umcom.org/site/c.mrLZI9PFKMG/b.5160951/k.54F3/Church\\_Marketing\\_Plan.htm](http://www.umcom.org/site/c.mrLZI9PFKMG/b.5160951/k.54F3/Church_Marketing_Plan.htm) (accessed March 14, 2011).

<sup>13</sup> Jane Lampman, “Megachurches’ Way of Worship is on the Rise,” *Christian Science Monitor*, February 6, 2006.

for people working on ranches, country music churches, even several motorcycle churches aimed at bikers.”<sup>14</sup> These are mere samples of the expansion in the industry.

The growth in church marketing since 2000 is too large to begin to unpack. One needs only type “church marketing” into any internet search engine to be inundated with books, websites, consultants, conferences, materials, and courses on the subject.

Seminary professors like Thom Rainer have written several books on studying, understanding, and targeting customers. His books alone include *The Unchurched Next Door* (2003), *The Bridger Generation* (2006), *The Unexpected Journey: Conversations with People Who Turned from Other Beliefs to Jesus* (2005), and *The Millenials* (2011).<sup>15</sup>

George Barna has written nearly four dozen books on church marketing, and the Barna Group has released more than 400 books.<sup>16</sup> The flood of books on church marketing, church branding, and church growth is astounding. Consultant organizations also continue to enter the industry, such as Guest Check, Inc., which began offering its “mystery” inspection services where an employee anonymously attends a church and rates its cleanliness, hospitality, and relevancy.<sup>17</sup> Marketing scholars still study religious marketing and provide their work to church leaders through recent publications like the

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<sup>14</sup> William C. Symonds, Brian Grow, and John Cady, “Earthly Empires: How Evangelical Churches are Borrowing from the Business Playbook,” *Businessweek*, May 23, 2005.

<sup>15</sup> Thom S. Rainer, *The Unchurched Next Door: Understanding Faith Stages As Keys to Sharing Your Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003); Thom S. Rainer, *The Bridger Generation: America's Second Largest Generation, What They Believe, How to Reach Them* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 2006); Thom S. Rainer, *The Unexpected Journey: Conversations with People Who Turned from Other Beliefs to Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005), Thom S. Rainer and Jess Rainer, *The Millenials Connecting to America's Largest Generation* (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 2011).

<sup>16</sup> “George Barna,” Tyndale House Publishers, [http://www.tyndale.com/10\\_Authors/author\\_bio.php?authorID=30](http://www.tyndale.com/10_Authors/author_bio.php?authorID=30) (accessed March 4, 2011).

<sup>17</sup> Derek Wook, “‘Mystery Worshipping’ Takes Hold in US Churches,” December 17, 2008, *Religion Press Release Services* email received on December 17, 2008.

*Concise Encyclopedia of Church and Religious Organization Marketing* (2006) and *Building Strong Congregations: Attracting, Serving, and Developing Your Membership* (2009).<sup>18</sup> Other key pioneers in the field continue to disseminate church marketing expertise. But some have stumbled.

### *Robert Schuller & the Crystal Cathedral*

Robert Schuller's aggressive promotionalism continued in the twenty-first century. In 2001, he held an elaborate ceremony to break ground on another construction project. The United States Naval Academy glee club performed, the architect smiled for the cameras, and confetti rained down on all the attendees as balloons rose into the air. The event began the construction of the International Center for Possibility Thinking and garnered ample publicity.<sup>19</sup> Four years later, Schuller's skills in attracting a crowd shone brightly with his \$2 million Christmas production that opened to a sold-out crowd of 2,508.<sup>20</sup> The same year, Schuller celebrated the fiftieth anniversary of his church. It had grown exponentially since the drive-in theater in 1955, permanently altering much of the American Christian church landscape through Schuller's development, employment, and dissemination of marketing principles.

Schuller built the success of his church on his careful planning in production and promotion, but without his direction, it began to suffer. He announced to his

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<sup>18</sup> Robert E. Stevens, Bruce Wrenn, David Loudon, and Henry Cole *Concise Encyclopedia of Church and Religious Organization Marketing* (Binghamton, NY: Best Business Books, 2006); Bruce Wrenn, Philip Kotler, and Norman Shawchuck *Building Strong Congregations: Attracting, Serving, and Developing Your Membership* (Hagerstown, MD: Autumn House Publishing, 2009).

<sup>19</sup> Robert H. Schuller, *My Journey: from an Iowa Farm to a Cathedral of Dreams* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2001), 511.

<sup>20</sup> Ann Pepper, "Glory Presenting History," *Orange County Register*, November 25, 2005.

congregation on January 1, 2006, that he would retire as pastor of the church, with his son stepping into the role by the end of the month.<sup>21</sup> Over the following years, turmoil followed with changes in leadership and a 30 percent decline in financial giving. The church eventually laid off 140 people, reduced its television ministry by 50 percent, cancelled concert events, and sold its 170-acre retreat center, which was soon leased by Rick Warren's church. The cuts, however, were not enough. In October 2010, the church filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy, with outstanding debts of nearly \$44 million.<sup>22</sup> Whether Schuller's church can recover from such severe financial straits remains to be seen. However, it is likely that without Schuller's dynamic personality and promotional flair, the Crystal Cathedral's glimmer will continue to dull and fade away.

#### *Bill Hybels & Willow Creek Community Church*

Bill Hybels' Willow Creek Community Church continues to grow. By 2005, the church was meeting in a \$72 million building with enough parking for 4,000 cars, and enough seats for 7,200 people. It also offered a panoply of "affinity groups for everyone from motor-cycle enthusiasts to weight-watchers." The choir consisted of 500 people, while celebrity singers such as country music star Randy Travis regularly gave performances. The church had also franchised, establishing several "satellite churches" in the Chicago area. The Willow Creek Association, by 2005, had more than 10,500 churches that subscribed to their services and enjoyed annual earnings of \$17 million.

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<sup>21</sup> Ann Pepper, "Rev. Schuller Steps Down." *The Orange County Register*, January 1, 2006; Erika I. Ritchie and Deepa Bharath, "Saddleback Takes Control of Crystal Cathedral Retreat," *Orange County Register*, May 11, 2010.

<sup>22</sup> Deepa Bharath, "Crystal Cathedral Blames a Few Creditors for Bankruptcy," *Orange County Register*, October 18, 2010.



The organization also provided conferences for over 100,000 people a year with headlining speakers such as business expert Jim Collins and former U.S. president, Bill Clinton. According to one study, the church's brand compared with Nike and John Deere in its loyalty and recognition.<sup>23</sup>

Hybels made national headlines in October 2007, not for his church marketing influence but for a moment of "repentance." At a national conference, Hybels admitted that his church had made a "mistake" in focusing on the breadth and diversity of their programs instead of the depth of individual's spiritual lives. The confession followed from a book written by the Executive Pastor of Willow Creek, Greg Hawkins. *Reveal: Where Are You?*, a study of the condition of churches in America, revealed a spiritual shallowness pervaded the programs.<sup>24</sup> Many reported Hybels' statement as a mark of repentance from his role in the seeker church movement.<sup>25</sup> If this were true, then it was a significant turn against church promotion by one of its primary advocates.

Many critics of church marketing and church growth doubted that Hybels' statements or the book were anything but the same promotionalism. Michael Horton, a professor at Westminster Seminary, stated, "Having a survey tell you that you need to add 'discipleship' to the list of technologies that we're trying to make more efficient doesn't solve the fundamental problem." He explained that surveys are the root of the

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<sup>23</sup> "Jesus, CEO: America's Most Successful Churches are Modelling Themselves on Businesses," *The Economist*, December 20, 2005.

<sup>24</sup> Greg L. Hawkins, Cally Parkinson, Eric Arnson, and Bill Hybels, *Reveal: Where Are You?* (Barrington, IL: Willow Creek Resources, 2007).

<sup>25</sup> "Willow Creek Repents," October 18, 2007, *Out of Ur*, [http://www.outofur.com/archives/2007/10/willow\\_creek\\_re.html](http://www.outofur.com/archives/2007/10/willow_creek_re.html) (accessed March 14, 2011).

problem because they treat Christianity as a “product” and people as “consumers.”<sup>26</sup> Phil Johnson, executive director of John MacArthur’s audio distribution organization, “Grace to You,” also doubted Hybels’ sincerity. He argued that the minister’s statements were merely a “slick announcement about Willow Creek’s latest program.” Hybels had ignored criticisms of the marketing, seeker-sensitive philosophy for years, wrote Johnson, and this was only a means for Hybels to navigate around his staff’s revealing data that the criticisms were true.<sup>27</sup> Whether or not the “repentance” was genuine, Hybels’ ministry and support of church marketing have not appeared to waiver in the years since.

*Rick Warren & Saddleback Valley Community Church*

Rick Warren’s popularity and influence expanded significantly in the first decade of the twenty-first century. In 2002, his new book, *The Purpose Driven Life*, elevated him to expert status and renown unlike that known by another pastor in the twentieth century.<sup>28</sup> The book quickly became the “fastest-selling nonfiction book of all time” at twenty-three million copies by 2005, and it was translated into fifty-six languages.<sup>29</sup> In 2003, Warren reported that thousands of churches were working through his “40 Days of Purpose” plan, and he expected 15,000 to do so in 2004. Many corporations and

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<sup>26</sup> Warren Cole Smith, “Willow Creek Offers Half Hearted Repentance,” December 1, 2007, *The Charlotte World*, <http://www.worldnewspaperpublishing.com/news/FullStory.asp?loc=TCW&ID=1582> (accessed March 14, 2011).

<sup>27</sup> Phil Johnson, “A Two-Part Rant Prompted by Things I Found in My In-Box,” October 22, 2007, *PyroManiacs*, <http://teampyro.blogspot.com/2007/10/still-not-clear-on-concept.html> (accessed March 14, 2011).

<sup>28</sup> Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Life: What on Earth Am I Here For?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002).

<sup>29</sup> Symonds, “Earthly Empires”; Martin Bashir and Deborah Apton, “Rick Warren and Purpose-Driven Strife,” June 22, 2007, ABC News <http://abcnews.go.com/print?id=2914953> (accessed March 14, 2011).

organizations even adopted Warren's strategy, leading their staffs through the plan. Participants included Coca-Cola, Wal-Mart, the Green Bay Packers, NASCAR drivers, the LPGA, and the Oakland Raiders.<sup>30</sup> Though the book did not promote marketing, it succeeded, in part, thanks to Warren's familiarity with modern marketing, and it elevated the influence of his 1995 *The Purpose Driven Church* and church marketing philosophy.<sup>31</sup>

Warren's influence spread on the heels of his success. In 2004, *Time* magazine designated Warren one of the "16 People Who Mattered in 2004."<sup>32</sup> The next year they selected him as one the 100 most influential people.<sup>33</sup> By that time, *The Purpose Driven Church* had sold more than 1 million copies in at least twenty languages.<sup>34</sup> Reportedly, several universities have used it as a textbook.<sup>35</sup> In an article in *Forbes* magazine, Rich Karlgaard called *The Purpose Driven Church* the "best book on entrepreneurship, business, and investment that I've read in some time."<sup>36</sup> Warren established the Purpose Driven Network to produce materials and host conferences on his church marketing

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<sup>30</sup> "Peace Plan," Saddleback Church, [http://www.saddleback.com/story/6213.html%20%20\(accessed%20February%202025](http://www.saddleback.com/story/6213.html%20%20(accessed%20February%202025) (accessed February 25, 2011)

<sup>31</sup> Gwendolyn Driscoll, "Modern Marketing Techniques Drive 'Purpose-Driven' Product," *Orange County Register*, September 29, 2006.

<sup>32</sup> "People Who Mattered: Rick Warren," *Time*, December 19, 2004.

<sup>33</sup> Sonja Steptoe, "Rick Warren," *Time*, April 18, 2005.

<sup>34</sup> "Welcome to Pastors.com," (accessed November 30, 2004), quoted in William Bland Mason, Jr. "A Critical Analysis of the Purpose-Driven Hermeneutic of Rick Warren" (PhD diss., Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2005), 95.

<sup>35</sup> "Rick Warren," Saddleback Resources, <http://www.saddlebackresources.com/en-US/Sermons/RickWarrenBio.htm> (accessed February 25, 2011).

<sup>36</sup> Rick Kargaard, "Purpose Driven," *Forbes* February 16, 2004.

strategies. By 2011, the Network claims to have trained 400,000 religious leaders in twenty-two different languages.<sup>37</sup>

Despite Warren's aggressive marketing of his book and his church, he remained uncomfortable with an association with business promotionalism. In 2005, he tried to block the publication of a book that included a study of how he marketed *The Purpose Driven Life*.<sup>38</sup> The book, *Pyromarketing*, worried Warren because it described in detail his explicit use of modern marketing.<sup>39</sup> He stated in that he wanted to ensure everyone realized that "the worldwide spread of the purpose-driven message had nothing to do with marketing or merchandising. Instead it was the result of God's supernatural and sovereign plan."<sup>40</sup> Warren also argues in the "Purpose Driven Network" website that it is a mistake to accuse his "seeker-targeted strategy for evangelism" of being a "marketing ploy."<sup>41</sup> Like church promoters before him, regardless of success, Warren labors to distinguish between church promotion and the marketplace.

### *Church Marketing Critics*

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<sup>37</sup> "What is a Purpose Driven Church?" Purpose Driven Church, <http://www.purposedrivenchurch.com/en-US/AboutUs/WhatIsPD/What+is+PD.htm> (accessed February 25, 2011).

<sup>38</sup> Driscoll, "Modern Marketing."

<sup>39</sup> Greg Stielstra, *PyroMarketing: The Four-Step Strategy to Ignite Customer Evangelists and Keep Them for Life*, (New York: HarperCollins, 2005).

<sup>40</sup> Juli Cragg Hilliard, "'Pyro' Goes Ahead; Warren Weighs In," *Publishers Weekly*, August 29, 2005.

<sup>41</sup> "Who We Are," Purpose Driven Church, [http://www.purposedrivenchurch.com/PurposeDriven/MCMS\\_Templates/Legacy/Generic/AboutUsTemplate.aspx?NRMODE=Published&NRNODEGUID=%7bA7F460DB-392C-4ADE-9B5F-FA7F92F77E49%7d&NRORIGINALURL=%2fen-US%2fAboutUs%2fWhoWeAre%2fFAQ%2ehtm&NRCACHEHINT=Guest#trueseeker](http://www.purposedrivenchurch.com/PurposeDriven/MCMS_Templates/Legacy/Generic/AboutUsTemplate.aspx?NRMODE=Published&NRNODEGUID=%7bA7F460DB-392C-4ADE-9B5F-FA7F92F77E49%7d&NRORIGINALURL=%2fen-US%2fAboutUs%2fWhoWeAre%2fFAQ%2ehtm&NRCACHEHINT=Guest#trueseeker) (accessed March 14, 2011).

As church promotion, particularly marketing, has grown in the last decade, so too has the movement that has opposed it. Many of the same critics from the 1980s and 1990s continue to assault the practices of church marketing, what some call the Disneyfication of religion or the creation of Walmart Churches or McChurches. Much of the opposition has been directed at Rick Warren in response to his increasing popularity and influence. Books such as Warren Smith's *Deceived on Purpose* (2004), James Sundquist's *Who's Driving the Purpose Driven Church?* (2004), Noah Hutchings' *The Dark Side of the Purpose Driven Church* (2005), Daniel Chew's *Driven Away by Purpose* (2006), Marshall Davis' *More Than a Purpose* (2006), and Armin Hammer's *Rick Warren & the Modern Church: Purpose Driven Disaster* (2007), criticize Warren's marketing philosophy and theology.<sup>42</sup> These pastors, theologians, and social commentators all worry that Warren's models are undermining true Christianity and God's purpose for a church.

Others criticize church marketing more broadly. As mentioned in Chapter 8, several new critics arose to publish books on the subject. Also, previous critics, such as David Wells, have continued to denounce the practices for creating "a church world completely reconfigured around the sales pitch."<sup>43</sup> Many opponents have broadened their criticisms to address what they interpreted as a growing consumerism in American

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<sup>42</sup> Armin Hammer, *Rick Warren & the Modern Church: Purpose Driven Disaster* (Fort Worth, Tex: Longbeard Press, 2007); Warren Smith, *Deceived on Purpose* (Magalia, CA: Mountain Stream Press, 2004); Daniel H.C. Chew, *Driven Away by Purpose* (Longwood, FL: Xulon Press, 2006), Marshall Davis, *More Than A Purpose: An Evangelical Response to Rick Warren and the Megachurch Movement* (Enumclaw, WA: Peasant Word, 2006); Noah W. Hutchings, *The Dark Side of the Purpose-Driven Church* (Bethany, OK: Bible Belt Publishing, 2005); James Sundquist, *Who's Driving the Purpose Driven Church? : A Documentary on the Teachings of Rick Warren* (Oklahoma City: Bible Belt Publishing, 2004).

<sup>43</sup> David F. Wells, *The Courage to Be Protestant: Truth-lovers, Marketers, and Emergents in the Postmodern World* (Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2008), 13.

Christianity. In *Consuming Religion*, Roman Catholic theologian Vincent Miller explained how the consumer culture has reduced religious doctrine to shallow, visual stimulation. He blamed the democratic impulse and the reduction of identity to the individual, at the roots of marketing and advertising, for part of the transition.<sup>44</sup> In *Consuming Jesus*, theologian Paul Metzger criticized marketing for enabling churches to nurture race and class divisions in a consumer society.<sup>45</sup> Such opposition to church marketing continues to expand along with the industry itself.

In the twenty-first century, church promotion remains both a phenomenally popular and highly contentious industry in American Christianity. Though Robert Schuller's influence has subsided, his disciples Bill Hybels and Rick Warren continue to spread business promotionalism, particularly marketing, in churches across the country and throughout the world. They, along with a bevy of experts, have helped introduce new methods – particularly related to the internet as churches use social media, viral videos, and webcasts – to sell their institutions and messages. Yet it is difficult to predict future shifts. One can be certain, however, that whatever innovations the market pioneers, churches will be close behind, adopting and adapting the latest methods of business promotionalism in retailing religion.

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<sup>44</sup> Vincent Jude Miller, *Consuming Religion: Christian Faith and Practice in a Consumer Culture* (New York: Continuum, 2004), 70, 113.

<sup>45</sup> Paul Louis Metzger, *Consuming Jesus: Beyond Race and Class Divisions in a Consumer Church* (Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2007), 6-7.

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