

may have more than one wife at the same time), which the church historically approved but had to disapprove if it wanted to be accepted under American law. Later, the Mormons fought over and eventually changed their original position forbidding black people from holding leadership positions. We may expect more internal conflicts in many denominations as they deal with the changing societies in which they function and the changing views of their members.

There are a growing number of churches, some very large, that declare themselves “nondenominational.” These churches are now the fastest-growing segment of the church world. The leaders of these churches do not feel that they need some denominational leaders standing above them telling them what to do, telling them how to pray, or taking a share of their collections. So they declare themselves independent. Some of these churches, those with 2,000 or more members, are called **megachurches**. In any given week, the largest of these—currently Joel Osteen’s Lakewood Church in Houston, which sits 16,000—may have 45,000 people attend its three services.

According to Mark Chaves (2004) and other religious scholars, however, denominations are not the key organizational aspect of American religion. Instead, the most important level of organization is the local **congregation**—the specific church or temple or mosque that people actually attend.

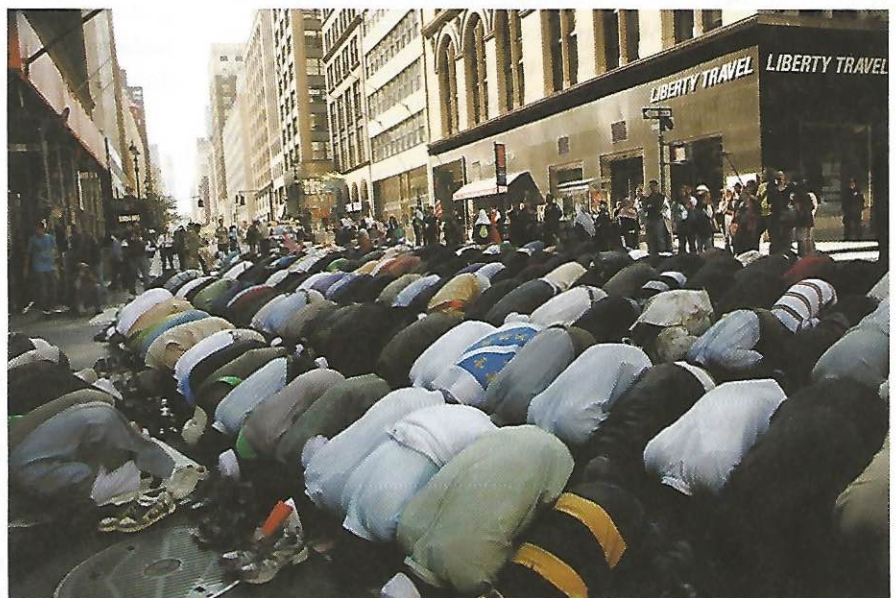
Because congregations are founded and disbanded with great frequency, and because there are many institutions that may or may not be congregations, it is difficult to get exact figures for the number of congregations in America. Nevertheless, it has recently been estimated that there are about 335,000 religious congregations in the United States (Chaves 2004). Of these, about 300,000 are Protestant and kindred churches, and 22,000 are Catholic and Orthodox churches. Non-Christian religious congregations are estimated at about 12,000.

More than half of all congregations are regularly attended by less than 100 individuals. In other words, there are many small churches in America, often with part-time or unpaid ministers, or even no minister at all. On the other hand, more than half of all church attendance is actually in the largest churches (top 10 percent in size). Interestingly, several of these large churches, including Lakewood, are nondenominational.

The enormous supply of churches must mean that there is a tremendous demand for church among Americans.

In fact, large numbers of Americans do go to church regularly, although not as many as they think. In surveys, 40 to 45 percent of Americans—about 118 million people—report that they went to church the past week. However, it appears that Americans overstate their attendance. Research that counted people in the pews in one county found that only about 20 percent actually attended in a specific week—half of the 40 percent who claimed they had attended in a telephone survey. It seems that people who think of themselves as regular churchgoers don’t want to “mislead” the survey by admitting they didn’t go last week. And half of them didn’t (Chaves, Hadaway, and Marler 1993).

Organized religion will not go away soon, at least in the United States. And not only religious people like to go to church. Some who are not really believers in any religious doctrine, or even in god at all, still attend some religious services and may even describe themselves as religious. As Durkheim argued so long ago, many people go to church for the shared experience—the celebration of community, family, and common identity. As the many Jews in New York who go to Christmas services and love the music know, and the many Christians who attend Jewish Passover seders know, people often love ritual—if not all ritual, at least the rituals they learn as part of their communities. Many people attend religious services on one or two days a year—Catholics going to Christmas Eve mass, Jews attending services on the High Holiday days, and so forth—which is a very minimal but nonetheless real involvement. Common rituals can be shared by all church members and are a sign of their togetherness. *Collective effervescence* is what Durkheim called it, and the church has always been important for providing that experience.



Communities come together to participate in a ritual, that is, a scripted collective activity that employs certain cherished symbols.