

CHAPTER HIGHLIGHTS

# THE STATE OF NONPROFIT AMERICA

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LESTER M. SALAMON *editor*

## **Chapter 8 Highlights** **RELIGIOUS CONGREGATIONS**

Mark Chaves

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# RELIGIOUS CONGREGATIONS \*

Mark Chaves

American religious congregations find themselves beset by important ambiguities as they head into the new millennium, according to a new analysis of America's religious congregations prepared by Mark Chaves, professor of sociology at the University of Arizona. Although more than 90 percent of Americans say they believe in some sort of higher power, weekly religious service attendance has declined continuously over the past three decades—from about 40 percent in 1965 to 25 percent in 1994. Meanwhile, the Bush Administration is creating expectations of religious-congregation involvement in social problem-solving that the vast majority of congregations are unlikely to meet.

This analysis is part of a broader assessment of *The State of Nonprofit America* coordinated by Dr. Lester M. Salamon of the Johns Hopkins University and published by the Brookings Institution Press in collaboration with the Aspen Institute.

**Declining Membership.** Among the challenges confronting U.S. religious congregations, one of the greatest will be maintaining membership. Statistics show religious activity reflects the general decline in civic participation that America has recently experienced. Increasing immigration from Latin countries could protect the Roman Catholic Church from this phenomenon, but only in part.

**Loss of Clergy.** What is more, Catholics are the most affected by yet another challenge—the loss of qualified clergy. The Catholic Church, however, is not alone in confronting this problem. While there are sufficient numbers of qualified clergy to meet current needs in other denominations, substantial numbers of congregations are unable to attract them due to low salaries or undesirable locations. Jewish congregations, which pay their religious leadership the best, are the least affected by this trend.

**Financial Strains.** The problems of declining membership and loss of clergy are directly related to the deepening financial problems that religious congregations in America are experiencing. Well-endowed congregations are a rarity. The median congregation has only about \$1,000 in savings. Budgets, too, are surprisingly small; the average annual budget is only \$55,000.

**The Challenge of Charitable Choice.** One potential source of new funding for congregations—the government—presents what Chaves considers the most significant challenge of the coming decades for congregations: how to strike the right balance between their member-serving role and their public-serving one. The growing "charitable choice" movement, which encourages new partnerships between government and religious organizations in solving social problems, has exacerbated the long-standing tension between those two roles, Chaves says.

Although religious congregations are more public-serving than many other membership organizations, only a minority of them engages in delivering social services in any serious way. Only 7 percent of all congregations have a staff person devoting at least one-quarter of his or her time to social service projects, and the median dollar amount spent by congregations on such projects totaled only \$1,200 in 1998. Except for some of the largest congregations, few are equipped to handle community service efforts.

Thus, Chaves argues, if congregations are to play a meaningful role in helping to solve public problems, they will have to develop the management systems necessary to administer grant money and accommodate the demands for public accountability that these funds also bring, something religious congregations have been reluctant to do. In the end, Chaves believes religious congregations have a contribution to make in the public arena, but one that is likely to be far less extensive, and to raise far more challenges, than current policy proposals acknowledge.

\* Adapted from “Religious Congregations” by Mark Chaves in Lester M. Salamon, editor. *The State of Nonprofit America*. Washington: The Brookings Institutions Press, 2002. Published in cooperation with the Aspen Institute.

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Chapter highlights are from “Religious Congregations” by Mark Chaves, a chapter in *The State of Nonprofit America*, edited by Lester M. Salamon and published by the Brookings Institution Press in collaboration with the Aspen Institute.

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