

DENOMINATIONS: NEW CONNECTIONS AND NEW PATTERNS

By: Elmer Towns

A revival of church planting is energizing the Protestant Christian world that is leading to new denominations or a redefining of the traditional idea of denominations. With a renewed fervor for New Testament evangelism, new Christians are being assembled into new churches and these new churches are connecting¹ together to complete the Great Commission.

When someone says “denomination,” most Christians think of the different brands of the Protestant Christian church. Some of the best-known Protestant denominations are Presbyterian, Baptist, Methodist, Lutheran or Episcopal. However, there are many others. They differ in functional purpose, size, management style, conditions for joining, and rules of management. Most of all they differ in doctrinal beliefs, life-style expectations, styles of worship and methods of ministry. One source suggests there are over 4,400 Protestant denominations.²

If there are that many, some questions immediately arise. What is the source that produces so many denominations? Are they all motivated by the same need? Which one is closest to the truth? Did God originally plan for the existence of denominations? Since they exist, what can we learn from them? How can they be effective, or how can God use them in the present world?

There are many definitions of the word “denomination” or “denominationalism. The word to denominate means, “To number.” One of the clearest explanations is found in the *All*

¹ The word *connection* is a synonym for denominations that have been used in ecclesiastical literature for a few hundred years to describe the joint efforts of evangelism and discipleship among churches.

² *Wikipedia, denominations.* <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Denomination>

Nations English Dictionary, “A group of people having the same religious beliefs.”³ Note the core strength of a denomination, “Religious beliefs.” So the heart of a denomination is religious beliefs about God and spirituality. But that does not explain how they function, their method of connecting churches, their governance, nor the purpose for which they come together.

Webster’s Dictionary limits the definition to churches or congregations. “A religious organization uniting a single legal and administrative body, a number of local congregations.”⁴

This definition focuses on churches connecting together. It seems to exclude such groups as partnerships among individual Christian groupings for ministry, inter-faith organizations and Christian organizations that supply Christian resources to both Christians and churches.

A Christian denomination is a connection of churches that is known by its name, organization, leadership and it is separated from one another by commitment to doctrine/theology. Also, each denomination has a unique standard of Christian behavior, worship expression, and principles of ministry, with ecclesiastical authority to carry out its purpose or function. The division between denominations is as varied as the differences in doctrine, behavior, worship and ministry. Many times historical heritage or cultural differences or national identities were a primary reason for the formation of a denomination.

Recognition from one Christian denomination to another varies to the degree to which they recognize the authority of another group, or their agreements on interpretation of scripture, and the application of Christian ministry. Some denominations believe that they are the only unique representation of the Christian faith, while other denominations agree on the essentials or

³ *All Nations English Dictionary*, Colorado Springs, Colorado: All Nations Literature, 1992, (s. v. “denominations”).

⁴ *Webster’s Dictionary*, Springfield, Massachusetts: G. & C. Merriam Company, 1976, (s. v. “denominate”).

fundamentals of the Christian faith, but allow disagreement from other denominations on secondary issues of Christianity.

A Protestant denomination may be defined as a collection of churches, joined together by mutual belief in a doctrinal statement, worship model, or method of ministry. It has its own particular organization and administration, recognizing its clergy, operates through building/facilities that function as places of worship, education of laity, and preparation for ministry through colleges/universities/seminaries.

Today new denominations are being formed around the world, but are not following the traditional pattern of the old denominations that have been seen in Western civilization.⁵ These new denominations are defying traditional Western approaches to church-connection, i.e., Protestant Christian denominations. Originally, most Christian denominations on the foreign mission field reflected the systems of organizations that originally connected churches together on the field, and with churches back home. But a new spirit of nationalism in the third world reflects the rise of new business and political endeavors. In many places new churches and denominations are not following Western examples and directions. They are doing church in an indigenous and entrepreneurial manner, many times unique to its culture.

Research has documented the explosive growth of Christianity in the Global South and Orient Crescent.⁶ A new spirit of church planting is driving this growth of Christianity. This

⁵ In 2013, the author, Elmer Towns, retired as dean of both the School of Religion and Liberty Baptist Theological Seminary at Liberty University. That gave him time and freedom to travel to churches and ministerial gatherings in 19 nations, being invited by national (indigenous) churches (not primarily extensions of Western Christianity). He visited large churches and emerging denominations that were an extension of these large churches. He did not travel with or was sponsored by traditional Western foreign mission organizations (either denominational or independent mission organizations). The opinion of new denominations came from his experience and observation.

⁶ The growth of Christianity is reported in books by Elijah J. F. Kim, *The Rise of the Global South: The Decline of Western Christendom and the Rise of Majority World Christianity* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock

energetic spirit of church planting seems to be filtering back to the United States, and Western civilization.⁷ The explosive growth of Christianity has been documented by research, but mass media (both Christian and secular), have not yet been involved in telling this story.⁸

Historically Western Christianity has attempted to spread its message through a number of evangelistic methods.⁹ Some of these were street preaching, mass arena evangelism, (illustrated by Billy Graham campaigns), literature evangelism, radio and television evangelism, scripture distribution, door to door soul winning, humanitarian acts of mercy that led to evangelism, educational evangelism (K-12 schools, plus colleges and universities), personal evangelism, and even church planting evangelism. Most of these methods were being driven by confrontation evangelism where the lost person was presented the gospel and asked to make a commitment to Jesus Christ.

The phrase *cross cultural* evangelism was adapted to communicate the gospel from a Western orientation into the different cultures of the world.¹⁰ These methods have had various degrees of success and resulted in Christianity being established in many nations and tribes. But great growth has been seen in some countries through the leadership of second or third

Publishers, 2012), and Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Rise of Global Christianity* (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 2011).

⁷ God uses different evangelistic methods to reach lost people in different cultures. As cultures change over time, a new or another method will become effective to reach the new challenge. An evangelistic method is the application of an evangelistic biblical principle to reach people living in a culture influenced by time and space. When God uses a method, it can be called an “anointed method” because of its spiritual ability to influence people toward God. It also suggests when culture changes, then a different method is needed. However, a principle is different. It is a universal rule or standard used to carry out the will of God, i.e., trans-cultural and trans-temporal.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Elmer L. Towns, Gen. Ed. *A Practical Encyclopedia of Evangelism and Church Growth* (Ventura, California: Regal Books, 1995), 298.

¹⁰ Ibid., 122.

generation national or indigenous ministry. They have built on the biblical message heard from Western missionaries then adapted Christian ministry to their indigenous culture.

Western Christianity seems to focus on: buildings, programs, (organizations), and methods. Jerry Falwell, founder of the world's largest Christian university said, "God is not interested in buildings, programs, and methods, He is interested in people."¹¹ Falwell meant the primary focus should not be on outward expressions of Christianity, but on the true meaning of knowing Christ personally for salvation. Christianity is a religion where the person has a personal relationship with Jesus Christ.

Traditionally, Western missionaries have developed churches and denominations through their Western organizational eyes. A church or group of churches were characterized by their doctrinal distinctives, and their unique method of ministry and worship. That resulted in church facilities that represented Western culture. Their success was judged by counting new converts and churches. These growing numbers confirmed the effectiveness of their unique ministry. Therefore, denominations were judged by the success of its brand, i.e., all churches in the denominations look alike, act alike, believe alike, and minister alike.

The explosive growth of new planted churches in the Global South has produced new denominations or a re-defining of denominations because of their new qualities that accentuate their growth and effective ministry. Since Ecclesiastes suggests there is nothing new under the sun (Ecc. 1:9), these new denominations are not "creatively" new, but they are packaging the life, energy and power of the gospel into what appears to be new packages. But perhaps they are returning to some of the previous forms or expressions of Christian ministry and church

¹¹ This motto appears on a large plaque at the grave of Jerry Falwell Sr., buried at The Mansion, Liberty University campus, Lynchburg, Virginia.

connectionism seen in the early church. Some might even suggest these new packages of denominations are more biblical than traditional expressions of denominations.

The old denominations were characterized by doctrinal distinctives, organizational programs, and measured effectiveness. But, new churches and new denominations are emphasizing the message (gospel), vision and values.

The message is Jesus. He died for you, and His resurrection gives you a new transformed life. Doctrinal conformity is not the primary intention in a gospel presentation, but Christianity is presented as a relationship with Jesus Christ; it's knowing Him intimately. The church is Jesus because the Bible calls it His body (Eph. 1:22-23). Planting a church is introducing people to Jesus, it doesn't begin with doctrinal distinction, or programs, or facilities.

New churches in the Global South are not built on confrontation evangelism, but relationship evangelism when unsaved friends and family come into a relationship with Jesus through these already saved and in a church. People are not confronted with their sin, but they see and experience Jesus as the solution to their sin as He forgives their sin. While evangelism and discipleship are eventually necessary, these new churches do not emphasize programs, buildings, or outward organizations. The lost must be loved as a person because they are important to God. They are shown how God meets their needs, and changes their life.

They develop new values of walking with God, being indwelt with Christ, putting Jesus first in all things. They grow in fellowship with new friends and new relationships. When Jesus lives in new believers, He also lives in their churches. They express their faith through their culture by the way they talk, inter-relate with other Christians and the world. Both Christians and churches influence their culture by their lives impacting their environment. As a result, their churches reflect their culture as they change their culture. They are the body of Christ where He

indwells people, brings them together, motivates them to serve, and is worshiped by them.

Therefore, churches are the result of salvation that transforms them. And these churches influence other newly planted churches. And that transforming salvation becomes a connection of churches that is also called a denomination. New churches and new denominations are being created because of the power of the Gospel.¹²

Growth of Church Planting and Denominations

The following is not listed in order of importance, or strength, or even in historical order, nor is it a complete list. These are observations of church planting and denominational building.

1. *Planting new churches by multisite church*¹³ *expansion*. One of the great pictures of church planting is the Jotabeche Church (affiliated with Pentecostal Holiness denominations) in Santiago Chile, which began in 1911.¹⁴ This church grew out of the influence of the Azusa Street revival in California. The Jotabeche Church is perhaps one of the first modern multisite

¹² In 1973, all 420 Liberty University students were given a free trip to England to study the First Great Awakening comparing its similarity to the explosion and expansion of Thomas Road Baptist Church which had the largest gospel telecast on 220 stations in the United States. The church was the 9th largest in America as described in *The 10 Largest Sunday Schools and What Made Them Grow*, by Elmer Towns, Baker Book House, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1969 (bestselling list for 14 months). The author lectured that John Wesley built one of the largest denominations in the world following the dynamics of his conversion that prioritized three things: 1. Message (the gospel), 2. Vision, completing the Great Commission (The World My Parish), and 3. Values, i.e., prayer, Bible teaching, holiness, small assemblies (called classes), responsibility that led to accountability. Wesley retained enough of the organizational structure of the Church of England (Episcopal government that focused authority in position/persons), rather than adapting the representative Presbyterian authority, or a congregational authority found in Baptist churches. Jerry Falwell's dramatic conversion influenced his church planting and church government, just as John Wesley's conversion influenced his formation of the Methodist denomination. Falwell's "Episcopal" church government led to the church's growth, and his unique message, vision, and values were foundational to Liberty University becoming the largest Christian university. (Liberty University has produced more pastors and church staff ministries than any other seminary/college/ministerial training institution in the past 40 years). The power of the gospel is the source for the growth of the Methodist church, Thomas Road Baptist Church, and all other growing churches.

¹³ A multisite church is a church that meets in multiple locations . . . to create multiple worship opportunities within the same congregation with multiple times and sites. "Multi-Site Church," *Wikipedia* <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Multi-sitechurch> (accessed September 26, 2017).

¹⁴ "Chile's Super Church," described the book by Elmer Towns, John Vaughan, and David Seifert, *The Complete Book of Church Growth* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 1981).

churches (one central location and many satellite churches) located throughout the city of Santiago, Chile. The main location is the Cathedral on the main street of Santiago, which seated 19,000 people 40 years ago (today seats 14,000). There are about 20 temples surrounding the city seating from 400 to 2,000 each. Next, there are over 80 churches, each averaging up to 400 in attendance. In addition, there are approximately 100 Sunday school missions, each one planted to become a church and/or temple.

The Jotabeche Church has had only one pastor at a time over the years, with lay preachers in each temple and church. All believers are a member of the central church, and take Communion only once a year on Good Friday at the central location. Visiting members from surrounding temples and churches populate the huge Sunday night crusades. Originally, the church was known for its giant parades as its members walked through the streets, inviting visitors to go with them to the central church for a great Sunday evening celebration.

Now there are multiple Jotabeche churches scattered throughout Chile in most of the major metropolitan areas. The original Santiago church has around 140,000 members combined in the cathedral, temples and churches. But there are over five million believers in all of the other Jotabeche (multisite) churches throughout Chile. They do not consider themselves a denomination, but each church is a fellowship of like-minded satellite congregations.

Is the Jotabeche Church a denomination or several multisite churches? If it's not either, what is it? If you visit Chile today, you will find similar Jotabeche churches in many major cities throughout Chile. They do not call themselves one national-local church. By Western assumption they are a national denomination. Perhaps not, each multisite in each city may be a denomination.¹⁵

¹⁵ See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Graha_Bethany_Nginden.

2. *One church expanding through planting other independent churches.* The Bethany Church in Surabaya, Indonesia, is affiliated with the Church of God (Cleveland, Tennessee), and has an attendance of 140,000 in multiple services each Sunday.¹⁶ Because of the growth of the Bethany Church, Pastor Alex said to me, “There are more Pentecostals in Indonesia, than any other nation in the world.”¹⁷ This is amazing considering Indonesia has the fifth largest population in the world and has more Muslims than any other nation. This one church has planted a network of over 700 churches throughout the Islands of Indonesia. This network is held together organically by the evangelistic message, vision and values of Pastor Alex Tanuseputra, not necessarily by organization and programs.

3. *Agency church planting (denominational and/or local church agency).* The World Harvest Church, Suva, Fiji, is a single church with 4,000 weekly worshipers.¹⁸ Originally, Pastor Suliasi Kurulo was an engineer working for the government. He was a Methodist, who began knocking on doors on a smaller island to win people to Christ. He eventually began a church and together with his church went to every home on their island witnessing for Christ. Then he planted more churches that were independent. However, with a passion for all of the 300 plus inhabited islands of Fiji, he moved to Suva, that nation’s capital, and began another church, the World Harvest Center in 1991. From that central location he has knocked on every door on all the islands of Fiji. Through the World Harvest Center he has planted multiple churches on every island, some islands of Fiji have at least 10 churches. Then his vision motivated him to plant

¹⁶ Alex Tanuseputra founded the church in 1977. The church is affiliated with the International Church of God, Cleveland, Tennessee. He also has planted 700 churches that are an extension of his ministry on the various islands of Indonesia.

¹⁷ Information received from conversation with Pastor Alex Tanuseputra while visiting Surabaya, Indonesia, in 2014.

¹⁸ See http://whcpageowner.wixsite.com/worldharvestcenter/about_us.

churches on other islands in the Pacific Ocean, the Indian Ocean, and now has churches in Central and South America with a total of over 6,500 churches planted. His goal: plant over 100,000 churches. Is this a denomination, or a network of churches? This is probably not a multisite church, although Pastor Suliassi has great influence to keep all his churches true to biblical doctrine, and Christian standards of living.

Pastor Suliassi says, “If you stick a pin into the center of the earth at Jerusalem, the pin comes out at Fiji, ‘the ends of the earth.’” His motto, “From the ends of the earth, to the rest of the earth.”¹⁹

4. *Planting house churches.* The house church movement in China is located almost everywhere in the country, but almost no one knows how to find one. Without advertisements, sanctuaries or buildings, or any type of publicity; the Chinese house church (also known as the underground church or unregistered church) has become one of the most powerful Christian movements in the world.²⁰ Also, without outside support or strategy, the movement continues to grow supernaturally.

Unofficially, there are more than 130 million believers in China. While there is an official Three-Self Church in China, with a registration of approximately 23.5 million members, almost 100 million people assemble in house churches in homes, apartments, restaurants and other places. Observers suggest there were no underground churches in 1949 when the Communists took over China, yet today Christianity has exploded through house churches in this country of 1.5 billion people. China represents one-fifth of the world’s population, and its

¹⁹ Suliassi Kurolo, *From the Ends of the Earth* (Indianapolis, IN: Christian Mission Fellowship International, 2014). See life story.

²⁰ “The Unseen But Ever-Present Influence of House Churches,” in book by Elmer Towns, *The Ten Most Influential Churches in the Past Century* (Shippensburg PA: Destiny Image Publishers, 2015), 39.

government is considered unfriendly to Christianity, if not hostile. The house church movement has grown without the aid of foreign missionary originations, denominational structure, programs or influence from outside nations.

Within the house church movement are groups, but they do not call themselves a denomination or some other similar term. When the Communist government took over, there was hostility to anything Western, and they associated denominations with the West. So today, there are groups such as The True Jesus Church, Jesus Family, and the Shouters (there are many others). These groups seem to function for Identificational purposes, not for organizational, financial or resource support. And surely not an organization to plant more churches. Church planting does not come from a central “connection,” but from individual Christians motivated to begin a new house church or with house churches dividing into two or more house churches.

5. *A mother church with home cells.* The Yoido Full Gospel Church has grown through home cells throughout the city of Seoul, South Korea, to become one of the largest churches in history with over 760,000 believers in 2008. David Yonggi Cho founded the church in 1958, and it grew to about 3,000 in attendance within a few years. Early in the growth of the church, Cho had a heart attack while baptizing one Sunday after the third Sunday morning service in the 2,400-seat auditorium. Cho then realized he could not pastor or build the church on his own strength.

During his recuperation, Cho came up with a strategy to use small home cells, placed strategically in every part of the city, to reach and nurture people for Jesus Christ. Each cell would be an extension of his church where the Word of God was taught, people worshiped God, prayed, fellowshiped and spoke/prayed in tongues as evidence of the baptism of the Holy Spirit, ninety percent of church offerings were received in each cell. By 1978, Cho reached 100,000

people, and the church was on a growth spiral. The secret of its growth was the continuous addition of home cells. Cho stated, “Just as the physical body grows by the division of cells, so the local church body grows by the division of cells.”²¹

By 2008, when Cho retired, the church had reached 760,000 in attendance, with 32,000 small groups and 50 satellite congregation locations throughout the city and in other areas.²² At that time Cho released all the satellite congregations and the cell groups associated with each. Today, the church has approximately 500,000 members.

6. *One church planting media churches.* Glory of Zion International Ministries in Corinth, Texas, has 1,500 worshippers in residence each weekend but includes another 30,000 who worship online.²³ All worshipers also fellowship and minister to one another via the Internet. All come into church membership through a membership class taught online. When Pastor Chuck Pierce baptizes a new believer in water in Corinth, Texas, other new members are baptized at the same time around the world. The same unity is experienced with the Lord’s Table.

Chuck Pierce planted this church in Denton, Texas, then later added Internet outreach in 2004. This church includes 5,000 Internet house churches organized with a leader-shepherd who oversees a group of believers who gather to view the Sunday services via computer. The house church averages 2 to 25 believers (more than a biological family). While some Internet churches claim a larger viewership, this church is influential because viewers have made a commitment-

²¹ Ibid. 70.

²² “An international interactive congregation built on the Internet,” Chapter 20, *The Ten Most Influential Churches of the Past Century*, 193.

²³ Ibid. 194.

vow to the church through a membership class, have become regular financial givers (through PayPal), and pray for one another and with one another through the Internet.²⁴

Another Internet church is LifeChurch, located in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma. It has 16 satellite campuses in cities around the United States and multiple Internet campuses and is the largest church in the United States with over 60,000 each week. Its worship service has more than 50 viewing times via the Internet in most time zones.²⁵ Craig Groeschel is the founding pastor (1994), and the other innovative leader is Bobby Gruenewald.

The church's Internet outreach is similar to a church media ministry, so is it a denomination? It could become a recognized denomination if it organizes itself into a functioning body. At the same time Glory of Zion may be a denomination because it attempts to tie its members into community worship and outreach ministry qualifying it as perhaps a multisite church, or even an emerging denomination.

Christ Fellowship in Palm Beach Gardens, Florida, another leader in Internet churches, has a large Internet outreach with more than 50,000 views weekly. Todd Mullins is the pastor,²⁶ and there is a paid pastor who serves the Internet members, along with staff. The church counts loyalty by the amount of offerings received, which is around \$4 per viewer.²⁷ Since this church already has nine other satellite churches, plus an online campus in the West Palm Beach area and surrounding areas, it is a multisite church.

²⁴ Elmer Towns, *The Ten Most Influential Churches of the Past Century*, 193-194.

²⁵ Ibid., 194.

²⁶ Elmer Towns and Tom Mullins, "The Journey of Christ Fellowship to an Online Church," *Online Churches: An Intensive Analysis and Application* (Lynchburg, VA: Liberty University Press, 2015).

²⁷ Ibid.

I. Summary and Conclusion²⁸

Everywhere early Christians went (by choice or persecution), they witnessed Jesus Christ's power in their lives; and as a result, new churches were born or planted. They didn't go to plant churches, but as a result of their going, new believers were baptized and new churches were assembled. Their Christian life had dramatic growth, and one of the results was a new church. They didn't primarily go to plant a new church; they talked about Jesus everywhere they went. And isn't a church the assembly of Jesus with His people?

Then churches began expanding their witness and influence by joint outreach through satellite campuses that could be described as multisite church, or satellite churches, or outreach from shared ministry. Slowly, shared ministries were organized as they supported one another in reaching lost people for Jesus. With time and new generations of shared ministry by churches, they became organized entities with leadership, standards, and measurements of growth. Because they were numbered—denominate—they were called denominations.

Around the world today, new explosive church planting is one of the most efficient ways the Great Commission is being completed. As churches share their enthusiasm of outreach and discipleships with one another, new partnership, or denominations are being formed. Their purpose is not to build an organization, or develop programs, or emphasize a method of worship

²⁸ In 1974, the author published his first observation about denominations in *Is The Day of the Denomination Dead?* Elmer Towns, Thomas Nelson Publishing Co. Nashville, Tennessee, 1973. Old denominations were dying because: (1) A survey of statistics revealed a decline in attendance, membership, offerings, ordained ministers and the number of churches. (2) Growth of theological liberalism in their seminaries and ministries. (3) The inevitable erosion taught by sociologist Ernest Troeltsch in the Sociological Cycle of Church-denominational decline and death, and (4) The sudden emergence of super aggressive mega churches. The author did not project his research far enough into the future. He did not see the results of spiritual revival and commitment to conservative doctrine that would make these churches grow and multiply and lead eventually to new explosive denominations.

or ecclesiastical expression: new denominations are being created to complete the Great Commission in our generation.²⁹

²⁹ “And the Good News about the kingdom will be preached throughout the whole world, so that all nations will hear it, and then the end will come” (Matt. 24:14).