



# CONGREGATIONS IN AMERICA

*Mark Chaves*

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More Americans belong to religious congregations than to any other kind of voluntary association. What these vast numbers amount to--what people are doing in the over 300,000 churches, synagogues, mosques, and temples in the United States--is a question that resonates through every quarter of American society, particularly in these times of "faith-based initiatives," "moral majorities," and militant fundamentalism. And it is a question answered in depth and in detail in *Congregations in America*.

Drawing on the 1998 National Congregations Study--the first systematic study of its kind--as well as a broad range of quantitative, qualitative, and historical evidence, this book provides a comprehensive overview of the most significant form of collective religious expression in American society: local congregations. Among its more surprising findings, *Congregations in America* reveals that, despite the media focus on the political and social activities of religious groups, the arts are actually far more central to the workings of congregations. Here we see how, far from emphasizing the pursuit of charity or justice through social services or politics, congregations mainly traffic in ritual, knowledge, and beauty through the cultural activities of worship, religious education, and the arts.

Along with clarifying--and debunking--arguments on both sides of the debate over faith-based initiatives, the information presented here comprises a unique and invaluable resource, answering previously unanswerable questions about the size, nature, make-up, finances, activities, and proclivities of these organizations at the very center of American life.

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An unchurched observer might conclude that American congregational life centers on political or social service activities...[But] using his pioneering 1998 National Congregations Survey, the first study to delve into the specific activities of a truly representative sampling of the nation's religious congregations, [Chaves] finds that politics and service programs are not the main draws. Indeed, most congregations put little effort into community work...What congregations are most engaged in, Chaves reveals, are cultural activities. That includes education and the many components of worship, of course, but also the generally less-remarked-upon activities of producing and consuming art and culture, particularly musical and theatrical performances, outside of worship.

--Jay Tolson, U.S. News and World Report

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