

Brief Description for Norton Herbt's Dissertation

From 1945-2000, nondenominational churches in America developed from a scattering of independent congregations to one of the largest categories of churches in the nation. This dissertation addresses two questions: What is the historical genealogy of nondenominational churches in modern America? And, is there a recognizable nondenominational church identity? First, I survey the origins and development of Protestant denominationalism from the Reformation through the early twentieth century. I also provide important sociological perspectives on churches and sects, a working definition of a nondenominational church, and several examples of nondenominational churches from nineteenth-century America. Second, I bolster national statistics about nondenominational church growth by presenting a quantitative analysis in one geographical area: metropolitan Denver. My findings challenge the notion that nondenominational churches only emerged around the turn of the twenty-first century. At least since the fundamentalist movement of the early twentieth century, nondenominational congregations have increased steadily in numbers. In the postwar era, they matched and then outpaced every other group of churches. Third, I trace the local histories of four nondenominational churches in Denver from 1945-2000. Utilizing church records, newspaper articles, and oral histories, I tell each of their stories and describe the characteristics and values they embodied. I suggest that these four congregations are representative of four subtypes of nondenominational churches: Bible churches, prosperity churches, Jesus People churches, and seeker churches. I also contend that their traits and experiences within the cultural context of Denver are emblematic of larger national trends across the postwar era. Finally, I argue that each subtype of nondenominational church helped to construct, shape, and deepen a recognizable nondenominational church identity. This identity is grounded in three core traits: conservative doctrine, evangelistic conviction, and an independent spirit.