

EXCERPT



***Beyond Church and Parachurch***  
*From Competition to Missional Extension*

May 13, 2025 | \$20, 208 pages, paperback | 978-1-5140-0957-4

Ward's vision dismantles the silos that fragment evangelical efforts, urging us to view the church as an interconnected ecosystem of apostolic networks.

## The State of the Church

The changes in the church have been so rapid that the latest reports are obsolete almost as soon as they have been published, but the overall trends are clear and striking.

In 1945, 75 percent of American adults were members of a church, a number that held reasonably steady until 2000 (70 percent). Just twenty years later, that number had dipped to 47 percent. The steepest declines can be seen among Gen-Xers and millennials: among the latter group (born 1981 to 1996), only 36 percent claimed formal membership in a church in 2020.

In addition, while the initial declines were most drastic among mainline denominations and Christians who identified as progressive or liberal, more conservative branches of Christianity are no longer immune to the trends. The Southern Baptist Convention, the largest Protestant denomination in the United States, lost nearly half a million members in 2022 alone. Overall, SBC membership has experienced steady decline, from a peak of 16.3 million in 2006 to 13.2 million in 2022.

The general decline in participation in church life can be seen on the ground in contracting congregations: The median congregation today has around sixty-five attendees, down from a median of 137 people in 2000. As smaller congregations struggle to stay afloat, church closures have risen. In 2019, there were more church closures than openings in the United States, and that was before the COVID-19 pandemic, which only exposed and accelerated the trends.

The decline in religious participation, which has been referred to as “the great dechurching,” has been accompanied by a sharp increase in Americans who claim no religious affiliation (a.k.a. the “nones”), who now comprise about 28 percent of US adults. While the latest data suggests that the rise of the nones may be slowing overall, young adults continue to leave the church in droves.

In addition, trust in institutions and clergy continues to fall, as a host of highly public scandals and the #ChurchToo movement have rocked the religious landscape and organizations across the theological spectrum, from Roman Catholic to Southern Baptist to nondenominational churches and networks, leading to an unprecedented lack of public trust in the church, organized religion, and individual clergy. As of 2024, fewer than one-third of Americans rated clergy as highly honest and ethical—lower than nurses, police officers, and chiropractors, although still higher than politicians, lawyers, and journalists.

All this points to the largest and fastest religious shift in the history of the United States. Yet there are signs of hope on the margins. It must be noted that in the United States, almost all the decline of Christianity has been among white Americans. But in some denominations, such as the Roman Catholic Church, losses of white attendees have been offset by Hispanic immigration.

Elsewhere around the world, an unprecedented wave of displaced persons has taken a vibrant Christianity back to the Western countries that once sent missionaries to them. Simply put, immigrants and refugees are bringing with them a strong faith and building strong faith communities, reflecting a shift in influence in American society that can also be seen in the church worldwide. Additionally, it is well documented that the center of world Christianity has shifted from the West (Europe and North America) to the Global South, including Latin America, Asia, and Africa.



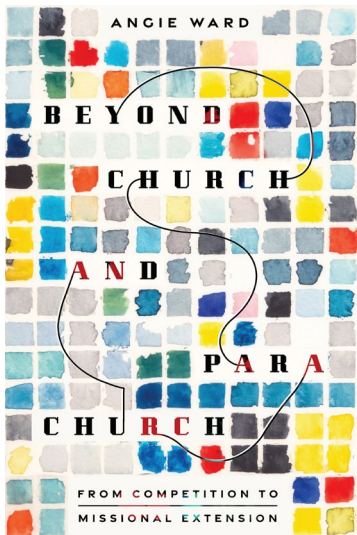
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## The State of the Parachurch

While the Western church in general and the American church in particular are experiencing significant decline, what has become commonly known as the parachurch sector has continued to grow. It is difficult to gain an accurate count of these types of organizations because of reporting requirements and classifications, but sociologist Christian Scheitle calculated an informed estimate of around 20,000 religious public charities in the United States in 1997, which grew to 58,000 organizations just ten years later. Today, according to some estimates there are over 100,000 distinct parachurch organizations in the United States alone and another 35,000 in the United Kingdom.

In their book, *The Prospering Parachurch*, Wesley Willmer, J. David Schmidt, and Martyn Smith developed a parachurch taxonomy, describing sixteen classifications of organizations that encompassed 208 unique types of organizations! Their broad categories included:

- Arts/Culture
- Associations
- Audiovisual/Media
- Camps/Conferences
- Constituency-Based Ministries
- Consulting
- Counseling/Guidance
- Education
- Environmental/Agricultural
- Evangelism
- Health Care
- Legal Assistance/Political Action
- Missions
- Printed Media
- Relief and Development
- Social Services



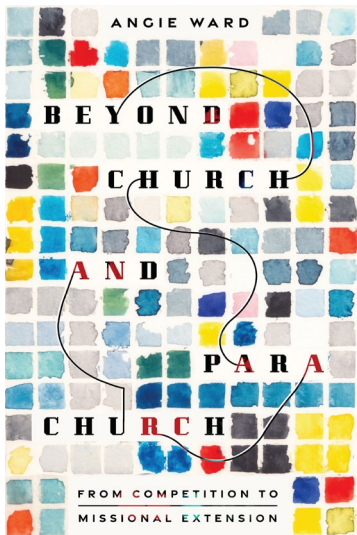
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Sociologist Christian Scheitle later distilled these categories into ten primary sectors, from largest to smallest in terms of percentage of overall parachurch market share:

1. Charismatic Evangelism
2. Relief & Development
3. Education & Training
4. Publishing & Resources
5. Radio & Television
6. Missions & Missionary
7. Fellowship & Enrichment
8. Advocacy & Activism
9. Fund-Raising, Grant-Making & Other
10. Unspecific

These categories encompass everything from televangelists to K–12 Christian schools, to global missions agencies to justice ministries and charitable foundations, plus newer types of ministries that defy easy categorization, such as social media ministries and podcasts.

It's easy to see how these specialized organizations have enormous impact. No part of the world is untouched by their collective work. In fact, in some parts of the world, the parachurch has saturated the religious landscape and everyday Christian experience.

But there's the rub: to many, the proliferation of parachurch organizations and their extended reach has come at the expense of the authority, impact, and financial well-being of the local church. On the other hand, it could be argued from a social science perspective that churches and parachurch organizations are part of an ever-changing religious market in which the decline of one entity—congregation, denomination, sector—is often accompanied by the rise of another. Is the parachurch the nemesis of the local congregation or simply a reimagining and reorganizing of the body of Christ within the broader religious landscape? At the very least, the parachurch is a force to be reckoned with.

—adapted from chapter two, “Where Are We?”



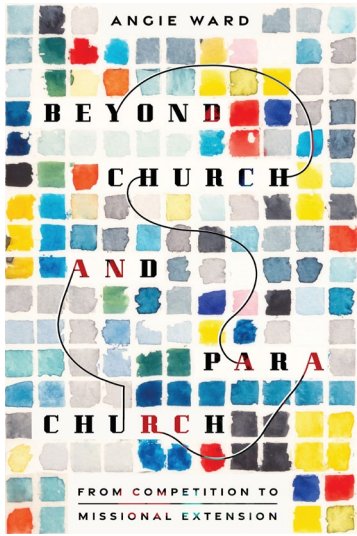
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## Q & A



### ***Beyond Church and Parachurch*** *From Competition to Missional Extension*

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Angie Ward is director of the Doctor of Ministry program and associate professor of leadership and ministry at Denver Seminary. She is the author of *Uncharted Leadership: 20 Case Studies to Help Ministry Leaders Adapt to Uncertainty* and *I Am a Leader: When Women Discover the Joy of Their Calling*. Angie has over thirty-five years of leadership experience in church, nonprofit, and higher education ministry.

## Collaboration Without Competition

### **What motivated you to write this book?**

**Angie Ward:** Evangelicals are notorious for weak or non-existent theology. I realized my own deficiencies during an aha moment while I was teaching a ministry leadership class years ago. I realized I knew more about leadership than I did about the church, that this was a problem given my job was to teach ministry leaders, and that I wasn't the only one who had this deficiency. This has led to competition between church and "parachurch" members, leaders, and organizations.

### **What is distinctive about *Beyond Church and Parachurch*?**

**Angie:** This book challenges readers to examine and elevate their ecclesiology, moving toward a deeper understanding of the whole church—individual believers, local congregations, and parachurch structures—as necessary partners in God's mission.

### **What are the five main things you want readers to take away from your book?**

**Angie:**

1. The importance/need of this missional moment for a greater understanding of the whole church and our role as individuals and organizations
2. A deeper understanding and love for the body of Christ in all its expressions
3. The weakness of a structural/institutional framework for fostering greater collaboration and kingdom ministry
4. A new paradigm and vision of "missional extensions" that involves every individual and organization in a web of kingdom work around the globe
5. Ideas of practical steps they can take to move toward enacting the missional extensions paradigm in their own context

### **Is there anything else you want to let us know about the book?**

**Angie:** I want to call readers to greater understanding, commitment, and partnership for the sake of the gospel.



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## Angie Ward, Professor of Leadership and Ministry

**Angie Ward** (PhD, Southern Baptist Theological Seminary) is director of the Doctor of Ministry program and associate professor of leadership and ministry at Denver Seminary.

Angie Ward is a leadership author and teacher with over thirty-five years of leadership experience in church, nonprofit, and higher education ministry. She thoroughly knows and “gets” the world of ministry and the life of the leader. Angie is known for her genuine love for those in ministry, her down-to-earth style, and her unique ability to see and explain complex concepts and systems.

Angie is an award-winning regular contributor to Christianity Today leadership publications. She is also a highly regarded teacher and collaborative leader.

She is the author of *Uncharted Leadership: 20 Case Studies to Help Ministry Leaders Adapt to Uncertainty* and *I Am a Leader: When Women Discover the Joy of Their Calling*.

Visit Angie’s website at [www.angiewardphd.com](http://www.angiewardphd.com)



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