



the state of religion

Religious Life In Hampton Roads

Writing in 1831, Alexis de Tocqueville observed, “Religion in America takes no direct part in the government of society, but it must be regarded as the first of their political institutions.” Early in the 20th century, commentator G.K. Chesterton described the United States as “a nation with the soul of a church.” Such sweeping commentary is embedded in the heart and history of this region, state and nation. **Why?**

Hampton Roads is the cradle of America’s religious life. From the journals of the first settlers at Jamestown, one learns that on April 29, 1607, “... after the revered fashion of old Christian explorers and discoverers, they set up a cross on the spot of their first landing and called that place Cape Henry.” Thus, we have a record of the beginning of religious life for what was to become the first permanent English settlement in the new world. Upon entering the Chesapeake Bay, explorations took place westward along the river that would be called the “James” and it was agreed that an island many miles upstream, to be named “Jamestown,” would be the site of the first settlement.

From Capt. John Smith’s journal, these words:

“When we first went to Virginia I well remember we did hang an awning [which is an old sail] to three or four trees, to shadow us from the sunne; our walles were rales of wood; our seats unhewed trees till we cut planks; our Pulpit a bar of wood nailed to two neighbouring trees. In foule weather we shifted into an old rotten tent; for we had few better, and this came by way of adventure for new.”

“This was our church till we built a homely thing like a barne, set upon cratchets, covered with rafts, sedge and earth; so was the walls. The best of our houses [were] of like curiosity; but the most part far much worse workmanship, that neither could well defend [from] wind or raine. Yet we had daily Common Prayer, morning and evening; every Sunday two sermons; and every three months the Holy Communion, till our minister died; but our prayers daily with an Homily on Sundaies we continued two or three years after till our preachers came—that is, the next preacher to come after the death of Mr. Hunt.”

We also know that there were several enforcements by law for those who missed services of worship. Prescribed punishments included time in the stockade, floggings or even the death penalty! Other than for sickness or guard duty, no allowances were made for absence from church worship.

The early history of the Virginia colony is one of Anglican (Episcopal) history. From the cross planted on the beach at Cape Henry, to the thatch-roofed church in the Jamestown settlement, the progression of history followed immigrant patterns, mostly of English colonists and, therefore, Anglican parishes. In Hampton Roads today, one finds historic churches in many places. One of the more historic is St. Paul’s Episcopal Church in Norfolk. A parish brochure states: “When Norfolk was laid

out in 1682, the 'Burying Ground,' or churchyard for Elizabeth River Parish was included. A chapel may have been in that location since 1641, but it is certain that by 1690 a more elaborate wood-and-brick church was under construction at the corner of what is now St. Paul's Blvd. and City Hall Ave. It was replaced in 1739 by the present church building. It is now the oldest building in Norfolk and its only pre-Revolutionary War structure." On the Peninsula, Bruton Parish in Williamsburg continues in a structure built in 1715. Many believe it is the longest continuous house of worship in the United States. A number of early patriots (including George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Patrick Henry and George Wythe) worshipped at Bruton Parish during sessions of the House of Burgesses. St. John in Hampton, built in 1728, is another parish with a long and distinguished history. It barely survived the British invaders of 1812.

Virginia's support of its English state church did not blur the patriots' concern for religious liberty. Following the Revolutionary War and the break from England, the wish to uphold religious liberty became popular mandate. Indeed, Jefferson's tomb inscribes his personally written epitaph: "... author of the Declaration of Independence, of the Statute of Virginia for Religious Freedom, and father of the University of Virginia." The statute, which was enacted by the Virginia legislature in 1786, reads in part,

"Be it therefore enacted by the General Assembly, That no man shall be compelled to frequent or support any religious worship, place or ministry whatsoever, nor shall he be enforced, restrained, molested, or burthened in his body or goods, nor shall otherwise suffer on account of his religious opinions or belief; but that all men shall be free to profess, and by argument to maintain, their opinions in matters of religion and that the same shall in no wise diminish, enlarge, or affect their civil capacities."

The Virginia statute became a basis for Article VI in the U.S. Constitution guaranteeing religious freedom. Article VI reflects both philosophical toleration of ideas and realistic political considerations. The religious preferences of the states already were quite diverse. There were Puritans in much of New England, Congregationalists in Connecticut, Baptists in Rhode Island, Catholics in Maryland, Dutch Reformed in New York and New Jersey, Quakers and Germans (Lutherans, Moravians and Mennonites) in Pennsylvania, and Anglicans in many of the other colonies including influential Virginia). There never was a serious question of establishing a single state church such as in Europe.

Religious Life Today In Hampton Roads

"Varied and vibrant" must be the words used to describe religious life in Hampton Roads today. From colonial, constitutional protections onward, the religious landscape of Hampton Roads has indeed been broad. **The U.S. census no longer records religious preference, so nearly all of the data concerning religious denominations now are self-reported by religious groups themselves, or they emanate from polls or estimates. A cursory glance at regional telephone books reveals listings for approximately 1,450 distinct religious communities in Hampton Roads.** There is a huge predominance of "Christian" churches, yet congregations also include 22 Jewish synagogues, four Islamic centers, three Unitarian churches, one Sikh and one Ba'hai gathering. A recent column in The Virginian-Pilot (Liz Szabo, Oct. 23, 2001) estimated there is a Muslim population of approximately 2,300 in Hampton Roads. Individual congregations may vary in size from a handful of members to several thousand members in the "mega-church" models.

That said, a January 2002 survey conducted by the Social Science Research Center at Old Dominion University revealed that 89 percent of respondents identified with the Christian faith as their affiliation. Table 1 reports the approximate numbers of various Christian congregations.

These numbers are informative, but do not tell all. Only 49 Roman Catholic congregations are listed, but Roman Catholics tend to have large memberships in each parish. The Roman Catholic population for the region is estimated at 100,000 and has seen an increase of 17,000 members between 1997 and 2001 (The Virginian-Pilot, Oct. 27, 2001). A simple count of the number of Catholic parishes does not reflect this.

The largest denomination in Hampton Roads, however, is the Baptists. Approximately 170,000 people in Hampton Roads belong to a variety of Baptist churches, according to the Glenmary Research Center in Atlanta.

Many trace the increased religious diversity in the United States and in the region to the Immigration Act of 1965, which eliminated the quotas linking immigration to national origins. Since then, Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, Sikhs, Zoroastrians and new varieties of Jews and Catholics have arrived from around the world. Indeed, there are now more Muslims in the United States than either Episcopalians or Presbyterians.

The theme of *variety* shows itself in many ways across the religious terrain of Hampton Roads. Consider *architecture* as one element of variety. Historic Bruton Parish in Williamsburg was constructed such that parishioners could keep their feet warm via hot bricks and closed pew doors. There was also a seat section for the colonial governor and his entourage, and balconies for plantation slaves and students from the College of William and Mary. Many pre-colonial and colonial churches are magnificent, such as the cathedral-type Gothic churches from the 19th and 20th centuries with some fine examples of delicate stained glass. There are also the plain meeting rooms of church buildings where Protestants emphasized the virtues of *simplicity*. One may find attractive Byzantine interiors in many Orthodox churches. There are also great examples of contemporary church architecture in grand structures of steel and glass with escalators, gyms and theaters. Some churches such as Bank Street Baptist Church in Norfolk have renewed themselves by changing locations and building contemporary sanctuaries.

Worship and music also exhibit important elements of variety. From pipe organs to guitars and keyboards, the music of religion is rich and varied in Hampton Roads. From Bach chorales at historic St. Luke's Church in Smithfield to the rich, Southern gospel harmonies at Mount Gilead Missionary Baptist Church in Norfolk, from Gregorian music to Islamic chants, the feast of music is unending. One may hear bell and chime choirs, wonderful symphonic orchestras or the plaintive voice of a single cantor. Thousands of area volunteers and paid staff give of their time for choir rehearsals and performance schedules. Worship traditions also include everything from interpretive dance ensembles to the burning of incense. Many denominations feel some tension between "contemporary" and "traditional" approaches to worship. Some have responded with eclectic worship offerings and actively advertise those options to the community. Sunday still is the predominant day of worship for Christian congregations, but dozens of churches offer services on other days, or attempt to reach their flocks via the radio, television or the Internet.

The spectrum of preaching and pastoral homilies reveals the breadth of church doctrinal history and tradition, which ranges from scholarly interpretations of a text to emotional, and intensely personal, sharing at congregations such as the Church of God in Christ in Newport News, Rock Church in Virginia Beach and Calvary Revival Church in Norfolk. Sermons vary from five minutes to more than an hour, depending on church custom. Leader attire also varies, from elaborate albs and chasubles

Table 1
CHRISTIAN CONGREGATIONS IN HAMPTON ROADS

Denomination	Number of Congregations
Non-or-inter-denominational (Protestant)	362
Baptist	218
Pentecostal and/or Holiness	184
Methodist	112
Presbyterian	69
Church of God/in Christ	67
Episcopal	51
Roman Catholic	49
Church of Christ	47
Lutheran	33
Assemblies of God	30
Christian	26
United Church of Christ	26
African Methodist Episcopal/Zion	21
Disciples of Christ	17
Jehovah's Witnesses	17
Full Gospel	16
Seventh Day Adventist	13
Christian Science	12
Mormon	12
Nazarene	10
Orthodox	9
Quaker	6
Salvation Army	3

patterned from Roman times, to coat and tie, to black robe/academic gown, to the most casual of everyday clothing. Many congregations encourage “comfortable” attire for parishioners as a way to be more welcoming. There is little doubt that those who attend services have become less formal in their dress over the past decade.

Next consider the act of *prayer*. Within Hampton Roads, one can find Muslims kneeling several times a day at the Muslim Center of Tidewater, and Jews, heads bowed, wearing yarmulkes at Congregation B’nai Israel in Norfolk. Roman Catholics at St. Matthews in Virginia Beach or Holy Angels in Portsmouth may pray with the aid of rosary beads and kneel before candles at side altars. Members may pray in “tongues of the spirit” at the New Covenant Church in Hampton, swaying with arms raised and extended, while at St. Andrew Presbyterian Church in Suffolk they stand with heads bowed, eyes closed and hands folded. Some pray with arms outstretched and hands opened toward the heavens, while others, such as Episcopalians and Lutherans, may kneel and recite liturgical responses practiced with reverent memorization since childhood. Some may chant, clap or even collapse as part of the “form” of prayer. Worshipers at the Church of God in Christ in Newport News may shout “Amen!” to both sermon and prayer, or to words from a solo anthem or hymn.

HAMPTON ROADS, AND U.S. TRENDS

The region’s religious landscape reflects *distinctive characteristics peculiar to the Hampton Roads metropolitan area.*

- Hampton Roads is home to approximately **100,000 active-duty military personnel** (more than 80,000 in the U.S. Navy) and the entire Department of Defense population, including active-duty personnel, reserves, retirees and family members, totals more than 300,000 in an area with an overall population of 1.5 million. All branches of American military forces are represented within the region. All base commands are staffed with chapels and/or chaplains who serve a large population, and many ships carry chaplains with them when they deploy abroad. Chapels on each base offer a wide range of religious services to military personnel of all faiths. Typically, these chapels are utilized by many different faiths, including those outside the Christian tradition. Many chapel programs include components of worship, religious education, fellowship and marriage/family/counseling services.

Military personnel often join local congregations and nearly every faith community in Hampton Roads reports active or retired military personnel within its membership. Participation in service/outreach programs also is encouraged, and ship crews and other military groupings often volunteer in wide-ranging community service projects such as Habitat for Humanity, soup kitchens, tutoring, recreational events, and various other community needs and services.

- Hampton Roads is the home location of the extensive national and global ministries of **the Rev. M.G. “Pat” Robertson**. The son of a prominent Virginia congressman and senator, Robertson completed both a law and seminary degree before settling here in 1959. With \$70 in his pocket, he purchased a bankrupt television station in Portsmouth, raised money and in 1961 went on the air with CBN (Christian Broadcasting Network). Today, it is one of the world’s largest Christian television networks with programming in 180 nations using 71 languages. He also founded a host of other faith-related enterprises: International Family Entertainment (the “Family Channel,” a satellite delivery cable TV network which sold in 1997 for \$1.9 billion), Regent University, American Center for Law and Justice, Operation Blessing (International Relief and Development Corp.) and The Flying Hospital as ministry extensions. CBN’s “700 Club” is one of the country’s longest-running shows and reaches an average of a million viewers daily, according to the Regent University Web site. Robertson also has been active politically and often is associated with conservative issues as well as various Republican Party causes and candidates. Dr. Robertson once was a candidate for president of the United States and continues to be considered a formidable political power.
- Approximately three in every 10 Hampton Roads residents are **African Americans**, who have a rich and active religious history. It is difficult to gauge whether it remains true that “the Sunday morning worship hour is the most segregated time each week in the U.S.” Nonetheless, casual observation suggests that while many denominations have congregations in the region that are predominantly African American in membership, only a small proportion of any denomination’s congregations appears to be substantially integrated. Among denominations, Muslims appear to exhibit the highest degree of racial integration.

There are many strong and significant African American churches throughout Hampton Roads. Large Southside churches include Calvary Revival Church and Grove Baptist Church, and on the Peninsula, churches such as First Baptist

Church in Newport News. Education and outreach continue to be a focal point for African American churches. Prime examples of these activities are found within Bank Street Baptist Church in Norfolk and First Baptist Church in Newport News. African American churches often fulfill social and economic roles well beyond those of Caucasian churches.

- A significant and historically influential **Jewish population** exists in Hampton Roads. Recent studies indicate that Hampton Roads boasts about 6,600 Jewish households with an estimated population of 14,600 (Steven Vegh, The Virginian-Pilot, March 14, 2002, and the Peninsula Jewish Community Center). Vegh reported that 53 percent of the “south-side” households (5,400 total households, 11,000 people) are in Virginia Beach, up from 50 percent in 1994, while 33 percent are in Norfolk, down from 37 percent in 1994. The rest were distributed among Chesapeake, Portsmouth and Suffolk. Fifty-eight percent of Jews actually are members of a synagogue. The Hampton Roads region claims temples and synagogues that identify with each of the three major Jewish traditions: Orthodox, Conservative and Reformed.

Hampton Roads Jewish Americans always have placed strong emphasis upon charitable and social endeavors, support for human and civil rights, and ecumenism. “It’s not the ‘social Gospel,’ it’s the ‘social Torah,’ ” commented an activist Jewish American who cited Judaism’s long commitment to social justice and *mitzvoth*, or good deeds.

The Hampton Roads Religions Survey

During January 2002, a stratified, random sample of 747 individuals was interviewed for the “State of the Region” report. The goal of the survey was to learn more about the religious activities and preferences of Hampton Roads residents. The relatively large size of the sample permits us to say that were we to take another sample of the same size, in at least 95 percent of the cases the results would deviate no more than + or - 3.6 percent from the results reported here.

All of the survey respondents lived in one of the designated Hampton Roads municipalities. As Table 2 indicates, with the exception of Portsmouth, the distribution of respondents across municipalities closely matched the population from the 2000 census.

DEMOGRAPHICS

Sixty-four percent of the sample respondents were white, 28 percent black, and 7 percent Hispanic, Filipino, Asian, or some other race or ethnicity. This closely reflects the actual population of the region. Thirty-seven percent of the sample participants were male, and 63 percent were female. Fifty-seven percent were married, 25 percent were single and never married, and 18 percent were widowed, separated or divorced. Forty-one percent of respondents had at least a college degree. Forty-nine percent worked in an occupation considered professional, managerial or sales, while 14 percent were retired, 2 percent unemployed and 5 percent active military. Eighty-three percent of respondents had lived in Hampton Roads more than three years, while 6 percent had lived in the area less than a year. The average age of the respondent in this sample was 44 at the time of the survey.

Sixty-two percent of those surveyed said they participate in a particular faith community or congregation. Of these, 72 percent said they attend services almost every week, a percentage that exceeds reported national averages by approximately 30 percent! (One suspects some respondents exaggerated their religious commitment.) However, only 62 percent indicated they actually were attached in some way to a specific congregation’s activities. Table 2 indicates area religious preferences. Sixty-nine percent of those who participated in a faith community or congregation had been a member for more than three years. Twelve percent had been members for less than a year.

Table 2
RELIGIOUS PREFERENCES
IN HAMPTON ROADS

Baptist	32 percent
Roman Catholic	17 percent
Independent	11 percent
Methodist	8 percent
Pentecostal	7 percent
Episcopal	4 percent
Presbyterian	4 percent
Lutheran	2 percent
African Methodist Episcopal	2 percent

By comparison to the most comprehensive portrait of religious identification in the United States today (the American Religious Identification Survey 2001 conducted by City University of New York), 52 percent of adults in America are Protestant, 24.5 percent are Catholic, 14.1 percent adhere to no religion, 1.3 percent are Jewish and .5 percent are Muslim. In 1990, 86 percent of the American population claimed to be Christian, but that figure declined to 77 percent by 2001.

Meanwhile, the non-Christian population increased during the same decade, from 3.3 percent to 3.7 percent and, most significantly, those claiming “no religious identification” increased from 8 percent to 14.1 percent. Both nationally and within Hampton Roads, the “unchurched,” non-religious segment of the population appears to be growing quite rapidly.

Reflecting national trends, those who are actively religious within Hampton Roads are more conservative than the population at large:

- 45 percent “conservative” or “somewhat conservative”
- 28 percent “liberal” or “somewhat liberal”
- 23 percent “moderate.”

Nationally, the proportion of all citizens who identify themselves as conservatives or liberals is approximately equal. **Nevertheless, those who profess a strong attachment to religion and who attend religious services regularly are considerably more conservative than the population as a whole and much more likely to have voted Republican in the 2000 election.** Hampton Roads appears to mirror these relationships, though it is curious that the survey also revealed that the typical member of a congregation believes that his/her congregation is more conservative than he/she is. The typical member of a Hampton Roads religious congregation believes that he/she is a bit more tolerant and liberal than those who sit next to them in the pews.

When asked whether their congregation/faith community participates in political activity, 20 percent said they participated sometimes, 12 percent said “on a regular basis,” and 57 percent said “rarely or never.” Congregational political activity levels vary dramatically among religious traditions in Hampton Roads. Political activity or “issues education” is more common among African American congregations and fundamentalist Protestant denominations than it is among Roman Catholics or historically mainline Protestant denominations such as Episcopalians and Methodists. African American congregations tend to be associated with Democratic Party issues and efforts, while the more fundamental Protestant groups are generally aligned with the Republicans. It is not unheard of in either tradition for a pastor to endorse a particular candidate from the pulpit or to instruct congregational members “what the Christian viewpoint is” on a particular issue.

When respondents were asked, “Would you say that your congregation/faith community emphasizes personal devotion or community outreach?” 43 percent said “outreach,” 41 percent said “both” and 16 percent said “personal devotion.” Thus, it appears that the typical member of a religious community within Hampton Roads believes that community outreach and activism are a very important part of their religious experience. Participation and financial support do not always back up these words, however. Pastors and religious leaders report that community involvement in their congregations typically is carried out by a small proportion of their members and that one of their most difficult challenges is to convince congregation members to financially support community outreach activities, especially those at a national or international level.

Respondents also were asked to react to several statements about the scope of influence their congregation/faith community has on individual lives, the neighborhood, the region, the nation and the world. Table 3 reports these results.

Scope of Influence	Percent Who “Agree” or “Strongly Agree”
My congregation/faith community greatly influences <i>individual lives</i>	90%
My congregation/faith community greatly influences my <i>neighborhood</i>	52%
My congregation/faith community greatly influences the <i>Hampton Roads region</i>	65%
My congregation/faith community greatly influences <i>the nation</i>	49%
My congregation/faith community greatly influences <i>the world</i>	51%

Influences relating to *individual lives* centered upon teaching and speaking “the Word” or Christian values and morality; mission outreach which teaches about God, the Bible or spiritual matters; and community service (meeting the needs of people outside the membership) and counseling/support/fellowship activities.

Influences relating to *neighborhood* included community outreach/involvement/service teaching and prayers directed toward the local area.

Influences relating to the *Hampton Roads* region included charity work, fund raising, shelter/food/medical/counseling, and educational support as part of congregational ministries and teaching ministries.

Influences relating to *the nation* included political/social issues, outreach/mission work and national organizations’ influences such as Christian Coalition, Southern Baptist Conference and other networking relationships.

Influences relating to *the world* included missionary work (mainly global), worldwide church relationships/networks (denominational), outreach and community involvement.

Respondents also were asked, “How important is it that your faith community/congregation welcome newcomers?” Ninety-three percent said “fairly important” or “very important.” This high percentage reflects the perceived need to welcome the newcomer in Hampton Roads into the life of religious communities. If approximately one-fourth of the population is military-related, and some 75,000 college students live within the region, then the demands on the faith communities to “welcome strangers” are enormous. The transience of people in the region may be the reason why 93 percent believe that ministries of welcome and hospitality are so vital. The poll found congregations engaged in: 1) greeting visitors at the door and at fellowship time during or around the worship service (153 respondents); 2) introducing visitors during the worship service (90 respondents); and, 3) collecting names, addresses and phone numbers on visitor information cards so that follow-up contacts may be made (64 respondents).

With regard to ecumenical and inter-faith climate among Hampton Roads congregations, 49 percent said their faith communities are actively engaged in some form of ecumenism, 27 percent said they are open to the idea but not actively engaged, and 14 percent said they are not actively engaged and probably won’t be. When asked what forms such ecumenism takes, respondents indicated joint educational opportunities with other communities; joint worship; pastor exchanges; openness to attendance in the other communities; and community services, including food banks, soup kitchens, shelter, emergency and other economic cooperation among the congregations. Some sharing of holiday worship also occurs, and some attention is given to recreational/social activities and cooperative witness and evangelism efforts.

Finally, 74 percent of the respondents said their faith community/congregation was growing, 22 percent said their congregations were stable and 4 percent believed they were losing members. This is an interesting response in that other evidence suggests many congregations actually are experiencing falling membership and attendance. Nonetheless, among the growing churches, respondents believed these were the main factors:

1. Accepting, welcoming, caring by congregations with family atmosphere as the personality of the congregation
2. Content of the service: the word of God, preaching/teaching
3. Leadership/personality of the minister/preacher.

In point of fact, the size of more than a few congregations has declined. Indeed, this is true for entire denominations. However, there are contrary, somewhat disputed, polls suggesting church attendance in the United States increased from 1939 (41 percent) to 2001 (47 percent) and that it remains the highest in any developed country. Nonetheless, respondents did not exhibit any consensus on why their faith communities/congregations might be declining.

Because so many of the poll respondents named outreach and community service as important aspects of their congregational/faith community life, there is little doubt that the region is the beneficiary of a great amount of charitable work through offerings from those who identify with religious communities. Though local polls may prove inadequate for assessing regional patterns of giving, some national statistics have been advanced. Robert A. Sirico, president of the Acton Institute for the Study of Religion and Liberty in Grand Rapids, Mich., wrote in the Dec. 24, 2001, issue of the Wall Street Journal, “In the weeks after the Sept. 11 attacks, Americans displayed astounding levels of generosity, donating \$1.3 billion

to the victims. Nor was this unusual. Two percent of the American GDP, or \$203 billion, is voluntarily donated to charity each year, a level of giving that has been stable for 40 years.” **Religiously active people give two-thirds of all charitable dollars in the United States and donate 3.4 percent of their incomes annually, while people who do not profess or practice a faith give less than 1.5 percent.**

There are other “good neighbor” derivatives from those affiliated with religious communities. Specifically, April 2002 poll results from the U.S. Congregational Life Survey of over 300,000 worshipers in more than 2,000 U.S. parishes found the following:

- Almost three-quarters (73 percent) donated money to a charitable organization other than their congregation.
- Almost half (49 percent) prepared or gave food to someone outside their family or congregation.
- More than one in four (30 percent) loaned money to someone outside their family.
- More than one in five (23 percent) helped someone outside their family find a job.
- More than one in five (22 percent) cared for someone outside their family who was very sick.
- Religiously active individuals are more likely to vote than the average American (76 percent of worshipers voted in the November 2001 election compared to 50 percent of the U.S. population at large).
- In the last year, 21 percent worked with others to try to solve a community problem.
- Nineteen percent contacted an elected official about a public issue in the last year.

These are impressive differences in behavior and are supportive of the notion that religiously active people in Hampton Roads (and throughout the United States) live different lives from others and have different value systems. Indeed, even antagonistic observers of the above phenomena no doubt would be inclined to say that, whatever their origin, they are desirable behaviors and are part of the glue that keeps society together.

Finally, in a very small, random (and quite unscientific) sampling of Hampton Roads clergy, each was asked to estimate the percentage of their congregation who were native to Hampton Roads (36 percent estimate) and from outside the region (64 percent estimate). Many of the “outside the region” individuals have military connections. Thus, clergy were asked, “What do you perceive to be the most pressing needs of military persons/families?” Their answers:

- Relocation and transition support
- Family support during deployment and personal crises
- Sense of community/belonging and involvement
- “Godspeed” and “welcome home” rituals
- Advocacy of high pay (an intriguing response that focuses only indirectly on religious needs)
- Roots and stability for even “short-time” members or visitors.

When asked, “What do you wish the religious community would address in this region?” their answers included:

- More interfaith/ecumenical dialogues
- More cooperative outreach and social ministries
- Regional identity formation (an interesting response with only some religious connotations)
- Economic justice, housing and transportation for the poor, and race relations.

When asked, “What do you believe are the strengths of the religious community in Hampton Roads?” answers included:

- Compatibility
- Respectful, educated, skilled clergy
- Ecumenical vision
- Significant ministries by the faith communities
- Diversity issues (both theological and ethnic) were perceived to be strengths.

The Notion Of Excellent Congregations

What makes one religious community or congregation more successful than another? In the late 1990s, Professor Paul Wilkes of the University of North Carolina, Wilmington, funded by a grant from the Lilly Foundation, conducted a parish/congregation study project of what excellence looks like in the life of a congregation. One portion of the study specifically looked at Roman Catholic parishes and another looked at Protestant congregations. Other religious traditions were not considered. Wilkes described excellent congregations as “having missionary authenticity. Excellent congregations are identified as those that impact the lives of their people and are making a difference in their communities.” Within Hampton Roads, seven congregations were identified as being especially effective in their ministries (see Table 4).

What is there about these congregations that has made them vibrant and successful? They

tend to be congregations that draw their membership from throughout the region rather than from a highly localized geographic area. They are risk-taking and entrepreneurial and willing to stretch their notions of their ministries, especially with respect to the community. The laity occupies a central role in the life of all of these congregations, and these congregations typically hold the Bible as their core rather than as a merely useful reference for their worship and beliefs. These congregations tend to have skilled, veteran pastors who have been in place for years. Typically, they have active youth and young-adult programs.

Table 4

EXCELLENT PROTESTANT AND ROMAN CATHOLIC CONGREGATIONS IN HAMPTON ROADS

Holy Spirit Roman Catholic Church	Lynnhaven Parkway, Virginia Beach
Ascension Roman Catholic Church	Princess Anne Road, Virginia Beach
Calvary Community Church	Tower Place, Hampton
First Baptist Church	Kempsville Road, Norfolk
First Lutheran Church	Colley Avenue, Norfolk
Rock Church of Norfolk	Little Creek Road, Norfolk
St. Paul’s Episcopal Church	St. Paul’s Boulevard, Norfolk

Sources: “Excellent Protestant Congregations: The Guide to the Best Places and Practices,” published by Westminster/John Knox Press, 2001; and “Excellent Catholic Parishes: The Guide to the Best Places and Practice,” published by the Paulist Press, 2001

A Look At The Future Of Religion In Hampton Roads

What generalizations can we make about current religious life in Hampton Roads and what can we say about its future?

- 1) The number of individuals identifying themselves as “Christian” is decreasing at the same time the number of individuals claiming non-Christian affiliations is increasing. Further, the number of those who self-identify as “un-churched” is increasing. Increasing religious diversity is a fact, and some argue that religion gradually is losing its central place in American society.
- 2) Small congregations are vulnerable to the loss of members, depletion of energies and the lack of economic resources. An increasing proportion of Christians in Hampton Roads is attracted to larger, “mega-church” congregations such as that at Rock Church. In Hampton Roads and elsewhere, the fastest-growing churches are independent congregations founded in the past few decades.
- 3) “Local” congregations and their ministries seem to be the action centers for mission activity and exhibit a degree of “disconnect” from denominational, national and global allegiances. In some sense, denominations are going out of style. It remains to be seen if labels such as Methodist, Episcopal and Baptist will hold great meaning 50 or 100 years from now.
- 4) Religious use of the Internet is exploding in volume. More than 1 million religious sites now populate the Internet and are visited by 25 million people each month. According to the Wall Street Journal (June 10, 2002), the Web site of Live Oak Baptist Church near San Antonio recorded an amazing 556,000 “hits” in March 2002. Some church services are shown in entirety over the Internet. The relationships fostered by the Internet often challenge traditional notions of religious communities and congregations.
- 5) Ministries of welcome and hospitality create a climate for the newcomer and the “seeker” to find a niche and a sense of belonging. They are especially critical to individuals choosing a faith community—more so than denominational identities.
- 6) Lay members of congregations are increasingly likely to lead worship services.
- 7) People want significant “serving” opportunities and those who have satisfactory experiences usually become strongly committed to congregations that provide such experiences.
- 8) There is a hunger and thirst for teaching/training in faith traditions. Even so, there is great diversity here. Some people want simplistic, “bottom-line” faith and are “doctrinal minimalists.” Others wish for deep and expansive knowledge of traditions, of histories and of beliefs in great and studied detail. Some of these same dynamics compete with respect to worship styles—for example, “contemporary” and “traditional.”
- 9) While “mega-churches” continue to prosper, there nonetheless also has been a proliferation of small, frequently ad hoc “group” or “theme” ministries, for example, those dealing with military wives or welfare recipients. Such ministries address perceived short-term needs for relationships, however temporary such relationships turn out to be. This is especially true in Hampton Roads, with its large, transient military and college populations.
- 10) Religious faith runs deep in the American experience and continues to do so. Americans continue to be more actively religious than their largely European ancestors.
- 11) The 20th century will be known as one of the most significant times for ecumenism. Yet, it is not clear whether churches will find enhanced or diminished lives as a result. Some commentators predict loss of identity in a “religious melting pot.” Others believe identities and traditions are enhanced as new self-discoveries of histories and traditions accompany this venture. Which bend in the road will this movement take?