

# Naming Protestant Churches in America

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AMONG THE MAJOR PROTESTANT DENOMINATIONS in America today almost none have any rules or regulations governing the selection of church names. Even recent mergers of several of the largest denominations have done nothing to alter the general reliance upon local congregations to choose their names. Only the Christian Scientists, Jehovah's Witnesses, and Latter-Day Saints have systems for naming their churches that are controlled by a central headquarters. However, many bodies have central authorities that approve church names, but none is likely to exert pressure to force a congregation to change the name it has selected. It may be said in a broad sense, that approving authorities usually are concerned with little more than seeing that congregations do not duplicate a name within a limited geographical area so as to create confusion.

During the past few years I have corresponded with officials and representatives in the national headquarters of more than forty Protestant denominations with the largest national memberships and have asked about policies and practices in naming churches of the respective denominations. I present here a summary of the information I have gathered, and point to trends apparent in an examination of large numbers of local church names in many denominations.

Although most of us are likely to jump to the conclusion that there are great and marked differences between the various Protestant denominations, nevertheless, since all are Christian and all are Protestant, a broad common base underlies them all, regardless of the individual differences that may otherwise characterize them. Largely because of this common foundation upon which they are built, they follow much the same principles and practices in naming their churches.

The most striking aspect of the question is that only a very few denominations have any fixed onomastic principles or policies. Actually, this is not surprising in the light of the reasons for the establishment of Protestantism, one of the distinctions of which is its general reliance upon the local congregation for self-government, a feature of which is the selection of its own name.

Most of the Protestant denominations, however, require that names chosen by local bodies be approved by a higher authority. In most instances approval is no more than a formality or a matter of business record, but with a few denominations it is a more serious consideration. However, in letter after letter I have been told such things as these: The Methodist Church holds, "... local churches are supreme in this matter; there is no requirement for approval." The Seventh-Day Adventists say, "We have complete freedom in choosing names, although counsel is usually taken with the local conference officer." The American Baptist Convention states, "Names of individual churches ... are selected by the local congregation. The congregation has complete freedom in the choice of its own name." The Protestant Episcopal Church explains, "In the creation of new congregations the choice of a name would be left to the decision of a majority of those sharing in the organization, subject to the approval of the bishop of the Diocese." In actual practice, though, the names of new churches usually come about in such reasonable ways that there never is any real debate on the matter.

Names designating the location of churches — including names of cities and towns, sections and localities, subdivisions and shopping centers, highways and streets, rural areas and crossroads, and geographical features — constitute the largest single category of church names among American Protestant denominations. Thus, one finds in cities and towns in all parts of the country churches with such names as Chestnut Hill Presbyterian Church, Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church, Greenwood Street Baptist Church, Market Square Methodist Church, and Capitol Heights Evangelical and Reformed Church. In rural areas there are churches with such names as Oak Grove, Blue Springs, Cedar Run, Warwick River, Hickory Valley, Long Hollow, and Scotch Ridge.

During the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when Americans were vastly conscious of expansion throughout the country, material growth was looked upon with a particular kind of pride. In the founding and growth of a community or city the first congregation of a denomination to establish itself took pride in being the first. Thus, we find in cities and towns everywhere First Baptist churches, First Methodist churches, First Presbyterian churches, and the like. In each instance the numeral indicates merely that the church was the first of its denomination to be established in the community, and no other prestige was intended by its founders. Although in most cities today we find churches of various denominations called the First church, numbers beyond the First are rare and often broken in sequence, even though they exist.

Designating a church as the First, however, has a special significance for the Unitarians; and uniting with the Universalists has scarcely diminished that significance. In 1957 one of the officials of the Unitarian Church explained, "As of the last twenty years, most of the Unitarian churches established stick to the title FIRST UNITARIAN CHURCH OF . . . . . The use of the word 'First' is more than a numeral designation with us. Coming out of the old New England Congregationalism, we acquired, in the split in the early 1800's, many of the 'First Parish' churches. Therefore, it is a historical suggestion that makes this a favorite with us."

Not all denominations, though, number their churches. The Seventh-Day Adventists, for instance, generally follow the practice of naming their churches for their locations. This identifies the local church with the town or village in which it is located; or, in a city, with a section or street. The Episcopalians have never numbered their churches; and *The Episcopal Church Annual, 1956*, (p. 15) comments with a degree of satisfaction, "And we are very grateful that no parish has been so lacking in imagination as to call itself 'First Episcopal'!" In recent years there has been a general movement among Protestant denominations away from numbering churches, for it is felt that numbers carry with them no religious or spiritual significance.

Up to about fifty years ago a generally accepted practice among the several branches of the Methodists, Baptists, and Presbyterians was the naming of churches for benefactors. Other denominations

indulged in this practice less frequently or not at all. In recent years, however, names like Hancock Memorial Church have become less and less attractive as Protestants of all denominations have come to prefer church names with more positive Christian meaning.

The names of saints in church names are avoided by most Protestant denominations because they are generally associated with Catholicism. The Episcopalians, however, widely use saints' names; and the Evangelical United Brethren, the Church of the Nazarene, various branches of the Presbyterian faith, and several sects of the Lutheran faith, all permit churches named for saints even though none carries the practice very far.

An official of the American Baptist Convention speaks for several branches of the Baptist faith when in terms of theory he says, "In view of our type of polity and our history as one of the free churches it would be quite unusual to find a Baptist church named after one of the Saints. After all, in our tradition the word 'saint' is just another term for the word 'christian.' Since we have no special category of Saints, there would be no reason why a Baptist church would want to name a church after a Saint, as might be done appropriately in some other tradition." However, the *American Baptist Yearbook, 1959*, includes a surprising number of churches named for saints, churches scattered from New York and Philadelphia to Seattle and Tacoma. The saints for whom Baptist churches are named are limited to St. John the Baptist, St. Paul, and a few of the apostles, St. John being the favorite. Even though Baptist churches named for saints are indeed rare, the very existence of a few is dramatic evidence of the validity of the Baptists' claim of giving absolute freedom of self-government to the local congregations.

A firm position in regard to using saints' names for churches has been held by the Church of the Brethren, and by the American Unitarian Association before it merged with the Universalist Church of America. A spokesman for the Brethren stated that among their congregations, "There is a strong avoidance of such names as refer to saints or apostles"; while a spokesman for the Unitarians said, "If a group wanted to call their church 'Saint' something or other, we certainly would lift an eyebrow."

Biblical personages for whom churches are named are restricted to a few particular categories. The male saints are considered

suitable subjects for church names in several denominations, but the Episcopalians seem to be the only Protestants who name churches for female saints — and the name of the Virgin Mary is avoided by all Protestants excepts the Episcopalians. In addition, they also seem to be the only Protestants to name churches for saints who have lived since biblical times and who are, therefore, not mentioned in the New Testament.

As highly respected as they are among Gentiles, the patriarchs of the Old Testament are too closely associated with Judaism for Protestant churches to be named for them. Except for the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:30–37) and the centurion of matchless faith, who asked Christ to heal his servant by merely saying the word (Matthew 8:5–13; Luke 7:1–10), I have found no Protestant church named for a biblical personage who has not achieved sainthood — and sainthood excludes Old Testament figures.

While Protestants are united in drawing from the New Testament personal names for the names of their churches, there is a wide divergence among them in their use of biblical place-names. A comparatively small number of places provide names for the great majority of Protestant churches bearing biblical place-names, and the names divide themselves about equally between the Old and New Testaments. The significance of places associated with Christ, such as Bethlehem, Calvary, Gethsemane, Nazareth, and Olivet, is obvious; but the number of such names is limited, and less well-known place-names have been called into service. Thus, many churches of various denominations are named for places related to Christ's ministry such as Bethany, Bethesda, Canaan, Emmaus, Galilee, and Jerusalem. Other churches are named for places associated with the apostles and their teaching, such as Antioch, Berea, Corinth, Ephesus, Macedonia, Nicopolis, and Sardis. However, Protestants of many faiths have also turned to the Old Testament for place-names like Bethel, Beulah, Ebenezer, Gilead, Goshen, Hebron, Lebanon, Mizpah, Moriah, Mount Carmel, Pisgah, Sharon, and Shiloh. These names are numerous in rural areas and especially among the Baptist churches. Regardless of their popularity as church names, though, many of the biblical places whose names are widely used are mentioned only once or twice in the Bible, some being places of little or no significance in Christian doctrine.

In some denominations, particularly in branches of the Presbyterian, Methodist, and Lutheran faiths, we see a fairly widespread use of names and terms — including names of persons and places — of historical meaning in each faith. Presbyterians, for instance, have named many churches for such figures in their early history as Calvin, Knox, and Hus. Westminster also is a popular name with them, because the Presbyterian Confession of Faith was drawn up in 1643 at the Westminster Assembly of Divines. Since the Confession of Faith is frequently referred to as a covenant, the term Covenant itself as a church name is of special importance to Presbyterians. The Methodists have named churches for their early leaders — Wesley, Asbury, and Embury. The name Lutheran memorializes the founder of the sect, and Augsburg (Augustana) and Eisleban are places of significance in the history of the church. Indeed, “Reformation” is not an uncommon Lutheran church name.

Only a few sects have uniform procedures for naming their churches. The Christian Scientists stem from The Mother Church, The First Church of Christ, Scientist, in Boston, Massachusetts; and all local churches are considered branches of The Mother Church. Thus, they are designated simply by number and locality, without the definite article, e.g., First Church of Christ, Scientist, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; Second Church of Christ, Scientist, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; etc. The numbers are assigned in the order of the formation of the congregations and of their recognition by The Mother Church.

The Church of God, Anderson, Indiana, considers itself “not, strictly speaking, a denomination. That is, in the ecclesiastical sense. It is a movement and an association of local churches.” Its accepted practice is to call its local congregations Church of God, with the distinguishing name of locality, which may be the name of a city or town, or of a section or street. A few bodies call themselves First Church of God, but the Executive Council of the church questions the propriety of such a name even though it has neither the power nor the desire to change it.

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints is organized along unusual lines, and naming its local churches follows a special pattern. The church is divided into stakes, and the stakes into wards. The wards are usually numbered in each stake, and the

wards are also named for their locations. If there were a town named Jonesville, for example, in which there are five wards, one would be called the Jonesville Ward and the others the Jonesville Second, Third, Fourth, and Fifth wards. This is not a universal pattern, for growing wards upset it. If the Jonesville Fifth Ward, for instance, becomes too large it might be divided into the Jonesville North Fifth Ward and the Jonesville South Fifth Ward.

Jehovah's Witnesses also favor a uniform practice in naming their churches, which is administered by their national headquarters. They have adopted the name Kingdom Hall for their places of assembly, regardless of where they are located; and they refer to the local bodies by location, e.g., the Milton, Pennsylvania, Congregation of Jehovah's Witnesses, with the meeting hall called the Milton Kingdom Hall. In metropolitan areas congregations are divided as they grow in numbers so that none is composed of more than two hundred Witnesses. Thus, in New York City there are the New York Congregation, Brooklyn Center Unit; New York Congregation, Upper Bronx Unit; and the like.

As for present trends in naming churches, several can be observed. Administrative leaders of all denominations are seriously concerned with the responsibilities of naming churches. They all are anxious to see names that are in good taste and in keeping with their respective theologies, as well as names that accurately describe and distinguish. Hence, almost all denominations are turning from the practice of numbering their churches. While naming churches for their locations continues to be the most common practice with most sects, it is also one that is widely deplored because it has no religious significance. Leaders of most major denominations prefer names with religious and spiritual meaning. They approve of names related to the Deity and the Trinity and names related to Christ. Hence, such names as Divine Providence, Our Father, and Holy Trinity, as well as names like Our Savior, The Good Shepherd, and The Redeemer, are growing in popularity with various denominations. Terms related to the mysteries of faith, such as the Ascension, the Resurrection, and the Incarnation, are likewise looked upon with favor. In addition, theological concepts like Faith, Hope, and Charity, and Grace, the Holy Cross, and the Holy Sacraments are also widely considered as appropriate for church names.

In keeping with today's general return in secular living to things of the past, naming churches also turns back to an earlier time. Names with a touch of nostalgia have an appeal. Hence, names like *The Little Country Church* and *The Little Church in the Wildwood*, both of which may be found in cities and in residential suburbs, are used by several congregations. Poetic and picturesque names are also being sought. Among the United Presbyterian churches there are, for example, the *Chapel by the Sea*, Nelscott, Oregon; the *Church of the Rockies*, Estes Park, Colorado; and the *Church of the Crossroads*, 242 East Fourteenth Street, New York City. The Northern Baptist Association includes churches called *Rising Sun*, *Lonesome Dove*, and *Pilgrim Rest*. The Episcopalians have combined the names of saints with such hyphenated phrases as *-by-the-Sea*, *-in-the-Fields*, *-in-the-Woods*, *-in-the-Wilderness*, and *-on-the-Campus*. There are also Episcopal churches named *Beloved Physician*, *Divine Blessing*, *Heavenly Rest*, and *Holy Comforter*. Even purely descriptive names take on an air of the quaint in other denominations with churches being called *The Brick Church*, *The Old Redstone Church*, and *The Little Gray Church*. The romantic attachments that have grown up around the name — and the church itself — of *The Little Church Around the Corner* (*Church of the Transfiguration*, New York City) are universally known. Local attractions sometimes supply such names as the *Presbyterian Church of the Northern Light* in Juneau, Alaska, and the *Presbyterian Church of the Roses* in Santa Rosa, California.

Thus, according to this evidence, we may conclude that in the immediate future we shall see the continued use of three currently popular categories of church names: poetic and picturesque names, names of religious significance, and local names.