

# Belief Style, Congregational Climate, and Program Quality

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*Michael J. Donahue and Peter L. Benson*

**M**uch of the empirical literature on congregational growth and decline has centered on sociological and sociodemographic influences (e.g., Hoge & Roozen, 1979). Fewer studies have examined the influence of beliefs and attitudes held by members. A congregation is a collection of believers; does it matter what they believe? Or perhaps belief style or “religious orientation” matters: Are congregations whose members’ faith emphasizes love of neighbor more likely to report growth than those who emphasize love of God? Then again, perhaps congregational climate, the impression the members have of how the congregation “feels” (“warm” or “intellectually challenging”), has more influence. Other contributions to this volume suggest just such an effect. Lastly, how does the perceived quality of congregational programming, including worship and education, influence growth or decline?

The study presented here examines each of these domains (demographics, belief, climate, and program quality) to understand their influence on congregational growth and decline. A recent large-scale study of congregational life allows consideration of these questions in a denominationally diverse, nationally representative sample of congregation members.

## The Effective Christian Education Study

*Effective Christian Education: A National Study of Protestant Congregations* (Benson & Eklin, 1990; Rohlkepartain, 1993) was funded by the Lilly Endowment and the participating denominations: Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), United Church of Christ, and The United Methodist Church.<sup>1</sup> It involved the completion of lengthy survey instruments by nationally representative samples of pastors, Christian education coordinators, Christian education teachers, adults, and youth in each denomination. Among the concepts measured were belief content and style; various forms of religious involvement (e.g., congregation involvement, church attendance, private devotion, monetary contributions, exposure to religious media); con-

gregational "climate"; congregational loyalty; perceptions of congregational emphases (e.g., evangelism, social justice, member support); and characteristics of members (education, income, marital status, racial/ethnic identification, and rural/urban residence).

In addition, ECE included a wide variety of measures concerning Christian education. These included exposure to Christian education across the lifespan, and the availability and quality of various Christian education programs in one's present congregation.

Answers to questions about many of these areas were obtained from all of the participants in the survey. Other ratings—most notably quality of programs, availability of resources and the like—were probed in particular detail with the coordinators and teachers of religious education, and the pastors.<sup>2</sup>

This study examines the relations between this constellation of variables and congregational growth and decline. It focuses on the pastors, Christian education staff, and adult members of the participating denominations.

## Method

### Survey Sampling

In 1988, lengthy surveys were administered in nationally representative samples of congregations. In each of the five participating denominations, 150 congregations were sampled, stratified by four categories of congregational size. A total of 492 congregations participated (66% of those invited), with participation rates ranging from 73% (ELCA) to 58% (UMC) within denominations.

Nonparticipating congregations tended to be those whose leadership was in transition. The participating congregational samples were compared with the known national characteristics of the participating denominations and found to be proportionally representative on a range of demographic factors. Participation rates (about 60%) were similar to those observed in other large-sample surveys of church bodies (see also Castelli and Gremillion, 1987) as well as those reported by the 1990 U.S. Census before its follow-up procedures (United States GAO, 1990).

Within each participating congregation, a project director was asked to arrange survey administration for the pastor, the coordinator of Christian education, and up to ten Christian education teachers. In addition, ten adult members randomly sampled from the membership rolls were invited to participate. Survey sessions were governed by a set of standardized procedures described in a detailed administration manual. Careful procedures were established to guarantee and preserve confidentiality for each

respondent. Survey sessions ranged from one and a half to two and a half hours in length.

In each of the denominational samples of congregations, about 65% of the randomly chosen adults and teachers participated. About one-half of the nonrespondents did not participate due to illness or travel during the survey administration sessions. In all five denominations, samples slightly overrepresent females, and underrepresent inactive members.

### Analytical Procedure

***Congregations included in the analysis.*** Our interest in these analyses concerns the congregational characteristics that predict growth or decline in membership. Therefore, each congregation is treated as a single unit. The adults in a congregation are represented by a single mean score on any given question. In order to ensure that such means were based on a reasonable number of respondents, only those congregations in which at least six adults responded were included. This reduced the total number of congregations available for analysis to 384, a 22% reduction. In addition, for some variables, the ratings of the Christian education teachers, the coordinator of Christian education, and the pastor were combined into a single "leadership" mean. This approach was employed primarily to obtain composite ratings of the effectiveness of the individual congregation in particular areas: e.g., overall program quality, or perceived congregational support for Christian education.

***Measures of congregational growth and decline.*** Two measures of congregational growth and decline were employed in these analyses. The first was a question that appeared at the end of the survey completed by pastors: "Compared to 5 years ago, is the size of your church growing, remaining steady, or decreasing?" Possible responses were (1) decreasing significantly, (2) decreasing a little, (3) remaining steady, (4) growing a little, or (5) growing significantly.

This measure obviously has a number of drawbacks. First is the problem of "halo effect," also known as "illusory correlation" (Markus & Zajonc, 1985). Perceptions tend to be altered to form a consistent image, either positive or negative. It might be argued that when congregations have a positive climate and active members, that there is a general tendency to perceive everything as rosy, and to report the congregation as "growing" even if the actual numbers are not increasing.

To address some of these concerns, a second measure of congregation growth/decline was also employed, based on the number of members the congregation reported to the national denominational office for the years 1983 and 1988. National office staff of each of the participating denomina-



were weighted in order to make the data representative of the combined national distribution for the denominations. This had the effect of giving the United Methodist congregations a stronger impact on the findings than that of the remaining denominations. Additional by-denominational analyses were also conducted for comparison purposes.

## Results

Two sets of analyses were performed, one employing the denominational yearbook data, and the other based on the pastor's ratings of the growth in the size of the "congregational family." The correlation of these two measures of congregation growth/decline and the entire group of variables described above were calculated. After determining the set of variables with high correlations, the relations were further explored through regression analysis.

### Zero-order Correlations

**Across all participating congregations.** Table 11.1 shows the variables that correlated .20 or greater with either the pastor's estimate of congregational growth/decline, or the log of the change ratio derived from denominational yearbooks. They have been arranged in descending order based on the correlation with the pastor's estimate, and those measures that correlated +0.20 or better only with the change ratio are listed at the end.

Most notable about this list is what is absent. The hypothesis that originally motivated these analyses—that either the content or style of belief of a congregation might be related to growth or decline—is rather effectively refuted. No particular religious belief, nor any of the styles of belief or "religious orientations" addressed in these surveys was correlated +0.20 or stronger to congregational growth or decline. These measures included overall faith maturity, growth in faith maturity during the previous two or three years, "orthodoxy," "vertical" religion, "horizontal" religion (see Davidson & Knudsen, 1977), religious centrality, church importance, and God concepts.

The correlations of the variables in Table 11.1 with the change ratio are generally less strong, and whether or not a characteristic is correlated with the change ratio is in fact unrelated to whether it is correlated to the pastor's estimate of growth or decline.<sup>6</sup> The larger number of correlations between the pastor's subjective estimate of change and the various attitudes and perceptions of the other members of the congregation renews concerns that some of the findings here may be influenced by the "halo effects" discussed above. Nevertheless, the remainder of the discussion will concentrate on the correlations based on the pastor measure.

**TABLE 11.1**  
**Zero-order Correlations of  $\pm .20$  or Stronger Between Measures**  
**of Congregational Growth/Decline and Various Congregational**  
**Characteristics**

Source <sup>1</sup>	Congregational Characteristic	Pastor Estimate	Log Change Ratio
Adult	Helps Members Make Friends	.47	.07
	Supports Members in Hardship	.42	.06
	Teaches Denominational Heritage	.42	.07
	Promotes Intergenerational Contact	.42	.19
	Warm Climate	.42	.12
	Quality of Worship	.41	.15
	Teaches Caring Skills	.41	.08
	Utilizes Members' Talents	.41	.15
	Helps Members Appreciate Rituals	.40	.13
	Helps Members Develop Faith	.37	.12
	Helps Members Apply Faith to Life	.37	.12
	Quality CE <sup>2</sup> for Teens	.36	.19
	Quality CE for Children	.36	.16
	Pastor	Year Congregation Founded	-.33
Adult	Teaches Faith Perspective on Morals	.32	.12
	Congregational Loyalty	.30	.03
Leader Adult	Youth CE Emphasizes Moral Values	.30	.21
	Youth CE Emphasizes Spiritual Development	.30	.11
	Helps Members Examine Global Impact of Life-style	.30	.08
	Quality of Bible Instruction	.29	.11
Leader	Emphasizes Youth CE Teacher Training	.29	.28
	CE Programs Are Publicized	-.29	-.16
Adult	Thinking Climate	.28	.08
	Involves Members in Leading Worship	.28	.07
	Involves Members in Community Service	.27	.04
Pastor	% of Adult Members Attending Weekly	.27	.25
	Mission: <sup>3</sup> CE for Teens	.27	.25
Adult	Helps Members Discuss Faith	.27	.14
Leader	Youth Programs Encourage Questioning	.27	.11
Pastor	% of Membership Active in CE	.27	.22
	Mission: Strength for Daily Life	.26	.08
Adult	Quality CE on Political Issues	.25	.12
	Quality CE on International Issues	.25	.00

Source <sup>1</sup>	Congregational Characteristic	Pastor Estimate	Log Change Ratio
Leader	Youth CE Promotes Intergenerational Contact	.25	.12
	Youth CE Innovative, Creative	.24	.11
Pastor	Mission: Members Find Purpose in Life	.24	.02
	Mission: CE for Children	.24	.13
	Mission: Provide Love, Support	.24	.02
	CE Staff Person Present	.24	.00
	% Age 12-18	.24	.26
	% High School Youth Active in CE	.23	.21
Leader	Youth CE Is Active Learning Process	.23	.10
	Emphasizes Adult CE Teacher Training	.23	.18
	CE Programs for Parents	.22	.13
Pastor	% Adults College Graduate	.22	.03
	Mission: Evangelism	.22	.13
Adult	Quality CE for Adults	.22	.03
Leader	Adult CE Is Active Learning Process	.21	.15
Pastor	% of Children Active in CE	.21	.18
	% of Congregation 70 or Older	-.21	-.31
Adult	Involves Members in Peace and Justice Issues	.21	.02
	Teaches About Other Faiths	.21	-.02
Pastor	% Jr. H.S. Youth Active in CE	.20	.10
	% Annual Budget Devoted to CE	-.14	.26
Leader	Youth CE Program Has Clear Purpose	-.18	-.23
	Leadership Committed to CE	.19	.21

<sup>1</sup>"Adult" indicates information based on the mean response of six to ten adults in the congregation. "Pastor" indicates information drawn from surveys unique to pastors. "Leader" indicates that the measure is based on mean responses of the pastor, coordinator of Christian education, and teachers of Christian education.

<sup>2</sup>CE = Christian Education

<sup>3</sup>"Mission" indicates one of a series of questions concerning the pastor's impression of the degree to which a particular issue is considered important to that congregation.

**Note:** N varies from 355 to 310; all  $p < .0001$ .

The results displayed in Table 11.1 indicate several things. Chief among them is that growth is largely in the hands of the congregation. It is related to trying hard to be a community of faith: supporting the membership, teaching the denominational heritage, utilizing members' talents, helping the members develop their faith and apply it to their lives. This is a picture of a

congregation in which the membership is strongly "engaged"; not warm and fuzzy, but warm and focused.

**By denomination.** The across-denomination analyses displayed in Table 11.1 allowed us to examine the relative impact of characteristics that might be relatively constant (relatively high or relatively low) within a specific denomination. Table 11.2 examines effects within denominations.

**TABLE 11.2**  
**Ten Strongest Zero-order Correlations Between Reports of**  
**Congregational Growth/Decline and Various Congregational**  
**Characteristics, by Denomination**

Source <sup>2</sup>	Congregational Characteristic	Denomination <sup>1</sup>				
		DC	ELC	PC	UCC	UMC
Adult	Helps Members Make Friends			.41	.45	.58
	Supports Members in Hardship	.38	.34	.41	.39	.47
	Teaches Denominational Heritage					.58
	Warm Climate			.34	.43	
	Quality of Worship	.43	.38	.39		.46
	Promotes Intergenerational Contact					.62
	Teaches Caring Skills	.36		.43	.39	
	Utilizes Members' Talents	.38			.39	.48
	Helps Members Appreciate Rituals				.34	.53
	Quality CE for Teens	.41				.51
Quality CE for Children		.34			.46	
Pastor	Year Congregation Founded	-.39				
Adult	Congregational Loyalty				.38	
Leader	Emphasizes Training Youth CE Teachers				.34	
Adult	Involves Members in Community Service			.34		
Pastor	% of Adult Members Attending Weekly		.33	.35		
	Mission: Strength for Daily Life			.34		
	Mission: CE for Children	.38				
	% High School Youth Active in CE	.36				
Adult	Quality CE on Political Issues		.32			
Leader	CE Programs for Parents	.38				



Source <sup>2</sup>	Congregational Characteristic	Denomination <sup>1</sup>				
		DC	ELC	PC	UCC	UMC
Pastor	% Adults College Graduate		.38			
Leader	Emphasizes Adult CE Teacher Training		.32			
Pastor	% of Congregation 70 or Older				-.39	
	% Jr. H.S. Youth Active in CE	.36				
Leader	Leadership Committed to CE	.45				
	Youth Included in Worship				.35	
	Adult CE Well-Organized		.37			
Pastor	Mission: Support Members in Crises			.40		
	Average Adult Income	.46	.38			

<sup>1</sup>For denominations, DC = Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), N = 46 to 66; ELC = Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, N = 60 to 69; PC = Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), N = 46; UCC = United Church of Christ, N = 59 to 67; UMC = United Methodist Church, N = 55.

<sup>2</sup>See Table 11.1 for explanation of labels and abbreviations.

Note: All  $p < .007$ .

All of the top nine characteristics from Table 11.1 appear again here, and all but one of the denominations display at least four of the nine. The most distinctive pattern is associated with the Lutherans. In that denomination, the pastor's perception of growth and decline is most strongly associated with the pastor's assessment of the member's income, negatively associated with the year the congregation was founded, and next most strongly associated with the pastor's perception of the member's level of education. Aside from support in hardship, the emphasis on interpersonal contact present in the other denominations is not evident here.

**By congregation size.** In order to examine the possible influence of congregational size on these correlations, the congregations were divided into three groups: those whose pastors reported their congregation had fewer than 200 members (36%), those reporting 200 to 500 members (38%), and those reporting more than 500 members (26%). These three categories were then designated "small," "medium," and "large," and the ten highest correlates of congregational growth for each of these groups were examined. Table 11.3 presents the findings.

It is clear from Table 11.3 that each size of congregation has its own emphases. The "top ten" correlates for each of the three groups produces a list of twenty-four different characteristics; only four are shared by two of the

types, and only one by all three. Perhaps most distinct is the emphasis on personal belief among the mid-sized congregations. It is here that issues of social justice, as reflected in concern for global issues and the poor, and a rejection of "exclusivity," is found to be associated with growth.

**TABLE 11.3**  
**Ten Strongest Zero-order Correlations Between Reports of**  
**Congregational Growth/Decline and Various Congregational**  
**Characteristics, by Congregation Size**

Source <sup>2</sup>	Congregational Characteristic	Congregation Size <sup>1</sup>		
		under 200	200-500	500+
Adult	Helps Members Make Friends	.49	.39	.57
	Supports Members in Hardship	.46	.42	
	Teaches Denominational Heritage			.52
	Promotes Intergenerational Contact	.50		.54
	Warm Climate		.38	.57
	Quality of Worship	.61		
	Teaches Caring Skills	.46	.40	
	Utilizes Members' Talents		.32	
	Helps Members Appreciate Rituals	.49		
	Helps Members Develop Faith			.46
	Quality CE for Teens			.48
	Quality CE for Children	.50		
	Teaches Faith Perspective on Morals	.46		
	Helps Members Examine Global			
Leader	Impact of Life-style	.47		
	Quality of Bible Instruction			.49
	Youth Programs Encourage Questioning			.52
	Quality CE on International Issues	.47		
	Emphasizes Adult CE Teacher Training		.34	
	Personal Concern About Global Issues		.57	
	Personal Concern for Poor		.37	
	Congregational Loyalty, Active Adults			.50
	Belief: Only Christians Will Be Saved		-.31	
	Overall Quality of Adult CE			.49
Pastor	CE Programs Emphasize Liberation Themes		.33	

<sup>1</sup>For small congregations, N = 114 to 116; for medium, N = 108 to 125; for large, N = 63 to 79.

<sup>2</sup>See Table 11.1 for explanation of labels and abbreviations.

Note: All  $p < .001$ .

Some of the size differences also reflect the different emphases and styles often attributed to various-sized congregations. Small churches tend to emphasize warmth, family, and informal networks, whereas larger congregations place more emphasis on programs and established structures (see Foltz, 1990). This parallel suggests that congregations that accept the dynamic of their size—rather than trying to overcome them—are more likely to grow.

It should be noted that the five denominations that participated in the study varied somewhat in their distribution across the three size categories employed here. While Disciples of Christ, Presbyterian, and United Church of Christ congregations have similar small-medium-large percentage distributions (approximately 45%-35%-20% in each case), Lutheran congregations are more heavily concentrated in the mid-range (26%-49%-25%) and the Methodist congregations in these analyses were more likely to be large (17%-31%-52%).

### Regression Analysis

The length and complexity of data displays discussed thus far preclude cogent summary. Such mind-numbing “laundry lists” of variables, while informative for those with interests in specific content areas, becloud larger issues concerning which characteristics are most strongly related to congregational growth and decline. Since many of these variables are interrelated, how much of this is redundant? The way to address this issue is through multiple regression. This allows an analysis of the degree of unique correlation between these congregational characteristics and congregational growth or decline.

As a first stage in conducting these analyses, sets of congregational characteristics were created, “congregational themes” as it were, whose relation with church growth/decline had been demonstrated in the earlier analyses. These themes were:

**Demographics** (from the pastor survey): (a) Year Congregation Founded; (b) Percent of Congregation Age 12-18; (c) Percent of Congregation 70 or older; (d) Percent of Adult College Graduates.

**Congregational impact** (from the adult survey): (a) Teaches Denominational Heritage; (b) Helps Members Develop Faith; (c) Helps Members Apply Faith to Life; (d) Helps Members Discuss Their Faith; (e) Teaches Faith Perspective on Morals; (f) Quality of Christian Education on Political Issues.

**TABLE 11.4**  
**Partial Multiple Correlations for Regression Models**  
**Predicting Pastor's Perception of Church Growth**

Model Employed	Partial R
<b>Demographics (N = 233)</b>	
Pastor: Year Congregation Founded	-.34*
Pastor: % of Congregation Age 70 or older	-.15
<b>Congregational Impact (N = 312)</b>	
Adult: Teaches Denominational Heritage	.42
Adult: Helps Members Develop Faith	.13
<b>Program Quality (N = 321)</b>	
Adult: Quality of Worship	.41
Adult: Quality of CE for Children	.18*
<b>Congregational Climate (N = 321)</b>	
Adult: Helps Members Make Friends	.47*
Adult: Promotes Intergenerational Contact	.19
<b>Congregational Mission (N = 318)</b>	
Pastor: Mission—CE for Teens	.27
Pastor: Mission—Strength for Daily Life	.18*
<b>Educational Programs (N = 304)</b>	
Leader: Emphasizes Adult CE Teacher Training	.26
Pastor: CE Staff Person Present	.17
Leader: Youth Programs Encourage Questioning	.14
<b>Grand "Best Predictor" Model (N = 255)</b>	
Adult: Helps Members Make Friends	.48
Pastor: Year Congregation Founded	-.23
Adult: Quality CE for Children	.17
Pastor: Mission—Strength for Daily Life	.14

**Note:** Partial R values are reported if they are .10 or greater; all  $p < .05$ .

**Program quality** (from the adult survey): (a) Quality of Worship; (b) Quality of Bible Instruction; (c) Involves Members in Community Service; (d) Quality of CE for Teens; (e) Quality of CE for Children; (f) Quality of CE for Adults.

**Congregational climate** (from adult survey): (a) Helps Members Make Friends; (b) Supports Members in Hardship; (c) Warm Climate; (d) Promotes Intergenerational Contact; (e) Teaches Caring Skills; (f) Utilizes Members' Talents.

**Congregational mission** (from pastor survey): (a) CE for Teens; (b) Strength for Daily Life; (c) Members Find Purpose in Life; (d) CE for Children; (e) Provide Love and Support; (f) Evangelism.

**Educational program** (from the pastor and "leadership" surveys): (a) Emphasizes Youth CE Teacher Training; (b) Emphasizes Adult CE Teacher Training; (c) Youth Program Encourages Questioning; (d) Youth CE Program Is Active Learning Process; (e) Adult CE Program Is Active Learning Process; (f) CE Staff Person Present.

Each of these themes was analyzed separately. The congregational characteristics for each "theme" were used to predict the pastor's estimate of church growth and decline. The results of this analysis are displayed in Table 11.4.<sup>7</sup> The table displays only those predictors that had partial R values of .10 or higher, after controlling for all of the other characteristics in that theme.

Each of the themes produced a small set of important characteristics. In general, both age of congregation and member age works against growth, while program quality, congregational impact, climate, mission, and educational program dynamics seem to promote growth. Christian education has a rather robust effect, as its influence is seen in perception of impact (e.g., Teaches Denominational Heritage), perception of program quality (Quality of Education for Children), mission (e.g., CE for Teens), and educational program development (CE Teacher Training, CE Staff Person Present, and Youth Programs Encourage Questioning). This finding is consistent with previous analyses of ECE data, indicating a powerful impact for well-conducted Christian education programs in all areas of congregational life.

Having thus sifted through the variables and obtained a subset of thirteen that are important across these six domains, a "grand model" was constructed. In this analysis, the thirteen congregational characteristics that had emerged as the strongest predictors across the six congregational themes were combined in a single analysis. The results of that analysis are also displayed in Table 11.4. Here again, only the strongest predictors are displayed, those with partial R values of .10 or higher after controlling for each of the remaining twelve predictors.

The "grand model" is composed of four rather different elements. One (Helps Members Make Friends) reflects climate. Strength for Daily Life is a

congregational impact variable. And a third (Quality CE for Children) represents a focus of educational effectiveness.

It is important, in considering this last model, not to think that these four areas are the only ones that require attention. Each of these congregational characteristics are correlated with others (e.g., *Helps Members Make Friends* correlates .77 with our measure of a "Warm" climate), and it is the nature of regression analysis to take the single strongest correlate and disregard other variables to the extent that they are related to those predictors. It is best, then, to think of these four predictors as representative of a broader body of concerns; to think of them as areas of effort that would embody a variety of conceptually related characteristics.

### **Warm, Focused Christian Education Promotes Growth**

Early publications examining findings from the Effective Christian Education project document a strong relation between educational program emphasis and quality and the formation of individual faith (Benson & Eklin, 1990). This analysis demonstrates that the impact of Christian education also extends to congregational growth and decline. High quality Christian education, therefore, appears to support both individual and institutional growth.

From a practical point of view, the findings suggest that much of church growth is in the hands of the membership. While some "fixed" or "unalterable" demographic factors also play a role (e.g., *Year Congregation Founded*), they are far from dominant in explaining growth. This is good news, indicating that congregations are not at the mercy of prevailing demographics, but can in fact foster growth through program changes that are directly related to their mission as a faith community.

The single strongest "fixed" factor, and the only major negative predictor of congregational growth is the year in which the congregation was founded. It is probable that this is largely a demographic artifact. Churches are founded because populations are growing. New churches founded in growing areas will display relatively rapid growth, at least partially because it is easier for a new, small church to show large percentage growth than for a larger church to show similar percentage growth. Lastly, the absence of this effect for "Year Congregation Founded" when the congregations are analyzed by the three separate size categories suggests that it is not the case that old congregations, per se, are likely to grow.

Finally, a note about climate. Congregational "warmth" is often mentioned as the precursor to growth. This study addresses this issue in several ways:

1. The characteristic "Helps Members Make Friends," so highly correlated with warm climate, was a factor in congregations of all sizes, and in three of the five denominations. It was also the strongest predictor in the "grand" model. Thus, climate is important, but not the sole issue in church growth.
2. Program quality was found to be an important predictor of growth, even in such "traditional" areas as teaching the denominational heritage.
3. Both program quality and fostering a "thinking climate" were found to be predictive of growth. This suggests, as we have noted, that perhaps congregations interested in growth should not be as concerned about being "warm and fuzzy" as being "warm and focused": focused on who they think they are, on their members as individuals rather than as a group, on what they have to offer for the new member, and on what their membership as a whole has to offer the wider community.

### **Future Research**

It must be noted that one of the hypotheses with which this research was begun, reflected in the title of this chapter, was not supported. There is little evidence here, aside from some correlates of growth/decline in mid-sized congregations, that belief style or content has much relation to the growth or decline of congregations in the denominations examined here. Churches with theologically and/or socially liberal members are as likely to grow as congregations with a more conservative orientation. This finding runs counter to the oft-cited maxim that associates growth with theological conservatism (e.g., Kelley, 1972).

But perhaps the effects of the content of belief are better expressed, not in terms of the content, but through their diversity or unanimity. Are congregations in which the majority are in theological agreement with one another more likely to grow than those congregations that are more heterogeneous? One congregation may be liberal, another conservative, and both may grow as theological liberals and conservatives seek them out. In such a circumstance, the growth or decline of these congregations are directly related to the beliefs of their members, but looking for a specific type of belief related to growth would be ineffective. People who "strongly agree" with a particular belief statement are making one church grow, while people who "strongly disagree" are attending another. In the current study, in which we have no more than ten respondents per congregation, we do not have a sufficient statistical base to examine such a possibility. But perhaps on a later survey, single items or brief scales might be included in large samples of large numbers

of congregations. Such an approach would better measure the influence of beliefs on the climate of the congregation, and thereby the influence of theology on growth or decline. It may yet be shown that it is not any particular theological orientation, but taking a stand (as opposed to being lukewarm) that leads to growth (see Rev. 3:15-16).