

# CONCLUSION

## Chapter Seventeen

# Church Growth in North America:

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## The Character of a Religious Marketplace

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**W**hat is happening?" So Hoge and Roozen (1979) begin their conclusion to *Understanding Church Growth and Decline: 1950–1978*. I could start similarly. Or, the question could be posed in the past tense: "What *happened* to churches and denominations over the past decade?" The present tense still seems appropriate because the changes that began with the first rumble of Martin Marty's "seismic shift" continue to shape religion today.

The studies in this book examine denominations, congregations, and individual religious participation from many angles. Taken together, this research tells us much about the nature of religion in America. The studies also are linked by a common concern with growth (or the lack of growth). This final chapter draws from all three sections and related literature to describe how churches and denominations grow or fail to grow in the current religious marketplace.

### **The Times, They Were A-changin'**

The 1960s were a watershed decade for mainline denominations. In the first few years, mainline denominations were growing numerically—as they had since the colonial era. By the mid-1960s, however, the mainline began to decline in membership. These declines slowed in the mid- to late-1970s, but did not stop. In fact, mainline denominations continue to lose more members

than they gain. Historians suggest that this downturn is nothing new. And it is true, in several other eras Protestant denominations failed to keep up with the growth of the American population. But in the 1960s, mainline Protestant denominations not only failed to pace population growth, they also experienced membership *decline*. This was new, and its effect on the collective psyche of mainstream American Protestantism was profound.

Since only mainline denominations declined numerically and since the declines began in the 1960s, explanations for membership loss tend to focus on conservative/mainline differences and on the impact of the sixties counter-culture. This approach sheds some light on the problems of the mainline, but paints a somewhat distorted picture of conservative denominations and cultural/demographic change. The chapters in this volume present a more balanced perspective.

The shape of American society and American denominations during the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s sets the stage for understanding the current religious scene. A quick survey of major changes across these decades provides needed clarity.

**Denominational growth rates dropped in the 1950s as a direct result of declines in the birthrate.**

Rates of membership growth surged in the 1940s for all denominational families (see Hunter 1987:205). It was an atypical era in many respects. During this decade marriage rates climbed to record levels, and the baby boom began. The church capitalized on these changes by following new families to the suburbs and providing family oriented programming.

The birthrate peaked in the early 1950s and began to decline before the end of the decade. This decline accelerated as more women entered the work force and oral contraceptives became available in the 1960s. At the same time, rates of denominational membership growth dropped. The declines were steep and parallel.

**Changes in social and religious values influenced the church in the sixties.**

The cultural ethos of the 1960s affected churches in several ways. Changing values regarding divorce, birth control, age of marriage, and optimal family size led to *additional* declines in the birthrate. The birthrate eventually dropped below replacement level fertility for white Americans. Further,

birthrates were especially low among highly educated persons—the primary constituency of the mainline.

Churches also were affected by changing values regarding church membership, church attendance, and the proper role of religious authority. Young adults, in particular, were more likely to question the value of religious institutions. They were less likely to participate in churches. In fact, many young adults dropped out of religion altogether (Glenn, 1987).

We can speculate that declining birthrates would not have led to actual membership losses in the mainline if additional cultural and demographic changes had not occurred in American society during the sixties. The rising divorce rate, dramatic increases in labor force participation among women, as well as delayed marriage and child-rearing were all linked to changing cultural values. Smaller families, for example, were not only considered to be more practical from an economic perspective, they also were considered a morally appropriate response to the “population explosion.”

**Conservative denominations were affected by cultural and demographic changes, although not to the extent of the mainline.**

Declining rates of membership growth affected all denominational families in the 1950s and early 1960s. This fact did not register with denominational leaders at the time because net increases in membership remained substantial. In fact, as pointed out in the first chapter, mainline membership losses were seen as aberrations in the early years of decline. At the same time, growth concerns were considered less important than other church priorities. Serious efforts to understand the declines and reverse them did not start until the mid-1970s—a decade after the losses began.

Because of close ties to mainstream culture, the liberal mainline was hit harder by social change than other denominations. Mainline families had fewer children on average than conservative Protestant families. In addition, the children of mainline families were more likely to drop out of the church once they became adults. Mainline denominational programs also were affected. In the 1960s and 1970s, church planting and evangelism became lower priorities for the mainline (see Greer, chapter 3).

### **This Church Shopper Went to Market; This Church Member Stayed Home**

The counter-culture “cooled” long ago, although the values of the sixties’ generation did not die. Instead, they were absorbed into the value structure of the dominant culture. As a consequence, two counter-cultural values per-

sist: a distrust of institutions (formerly, the establishment) and the importance of “doing your own thing.”

Hardly anyone says they are against the “establishment” anymore, nor is the phrase “do your own thing” part of everyday speech. Yet, these orientations still survive. Baby boomers, in particular, retain little taken-for-granted respect for institutions and traditions. They also believe people should be free to live life on their own terms—so long as no one gets hurt. When fused with the long-standing tradition of individualism in America, these changes lead to a kind of “religious consumerism.”

According to Roof and Johnson (chapter 14), “More than their parents, they (boomers) are apt to ‘shop’ with a consumer mentality for both a congregation and denomination that meets their personal, ideological, and family needs.” Similarly, Marler and Roozen state in chapter 12, “Our analyses show that the increasing dominance of religious consumerism, as a form of cultural individualism, is the most important change in the American religious marketplace of the late 1980s.” Bibby (chapter 13) makes similar observations about the Canadian situation. In fact, the consumerist approach of “religion a la carte” in Canada is further developed than it is in the United States.

To use Marler and Roozen’s terminology, North Americans feel free to choose church or not, and the “church choice” is increasingly dependent on personal tastes more than a background of traditional belief and practice. This context of increased freedom of choice “cuts both ways” in relation to church involvement. “‘Choice’ includes both the choice to participate, as well as the choice not to participate in the life of religious institutions” according to Marler and Roozen (chapter 12). Indeed, many have chosen to opt out of religion altogether. Yet for others, religious individualism as church consumerism works to clarify commitments. Those who choose church in the nineties do so more for their own satisfaction and interest than social habit, parental legacy, or ethnic tradition.

The social and cultural changes we describe are neither “bad” nor “good” for churches in North America—at least from an organizational perspective. They do present a challenge, however, because churches historically are slow to change. Yet in this religious marketplace, change is essential because successful churches are churches that respond quickly to the preferences of increasingly careful church shoppers. This aptly describes the approach of a new breed of entrepreneurial congregations. Churches like Willow Creek Community Church in Illinois and Saddleback Valley Community Church in Southern California were organized from their inception to appeal to consumer oriented baby boomers. Their growth is nothing short of phenomenal. Perhaps it goes without saying that the theological and ethical implications of such approaches will be the subject of much debate among theologians and church leaders.

## The Situation in the Denominations

Given the changing demographic and cultural context of the United States (and Canada), what is the situation in the denominations and their churches? Clearly, these shifts affected everyone. Yet the religious sector not only was influenced, it also responded. A few of these reactions made the situation worse from a growth perspective. For example, the mainline went with the flow of the culture and de-emphasized evangelism. Other responses, like the emergence of megachurches and the parachurch movement, are clear evidence of the resilience of American religion.

Considering the diversity of denominations and their churches, it is likely that some churches will always be growing somewhere. The mainline may now be on the sideline, but there are many mainline congregations that buck the trends and grow. Conversely, many conservative congregations are in decline. Nevertheless, it is possible to characterize the situation in each denominational family from the perspective of that denomination as well as the local church or parish.

### Mainline Protestants

Mainline Protestantism has many growth related problems. Oddly enough, however, a few denominational leaders insist that the liberal mainline—in particular—is poised for growth. These leaders suggest that denominations like the Episcopal Church and the United Church of Christ now have a clearer sense of identity (strongly liberal—rather than theologically mixed) and are ready to move forward. Few admit a possible scenario: that persons who didn't fit the new liberalized denomination left or chose not to join in the first place. Although, continuing liberal-conservative clashes within mainline denominations even raise questions about such liberal unanimity. Theologically conservative members remain, even in liberal denominations, and usually are very active in their churches.

Put bluntly, mainline denominations retain few visible characteristics that suggest a future of growth. Birthrates remain extremely low among the predominantly white, middle-class constituency of most mainline churches. And as the "baby bust" generation enters childbearing years, the prospects for a new surge in the number of young white families with children are not promising. It is also an open question whether boomers who returned to church because of their children will remain active once their children reach confirmation age (Marler and Hadaway, 1993).

Rates of denominational switching and disaffiliation are high for mainline Protestants (Roof and McKinney, 1987; Hadaway, 1991*b*; Hadaway and Mar-

ler, 1993). Denominational loyalty is low. Mainline baby boomers are less active in church than their parents were and the children of boomers are receiving much less exposure to church traditions and beliefs than the boomers themselves.

According to Marler and Roozen (chapter 12), liberal Protestants “embody a consumer orientation toward religion to a much greater extent than either conservative Protestants or Roman Catholics.” Many liberal Protestants attend infrequently. Some have gotten the message from their churches that infrequent attendance is acceptable (Marler and Hadaway, 1993). But for liberal Protestants who do attend, the church choice is best characterized by the phrase, “what church?” Marler and Roozen find that liberal Protestants are less motivated by denominational or theological loyalty. Instead, they choose a church and attend “because it is warm, provides personalized meaning, has a clearly ‘spiritual’ focus, is not ‘too organized,’ is not ‘too restrictive’ and has just enough—but not too much—emphasis on social justice.” Unburdened by guilt or communal restraint, mainliners are free to attend wherever (and whenever) they want without making a specific commitment.

At the national and the judicatory level, evangelism and new church development were re-emphasized in the 1980s (Greer, chapter 3). Yet, these programs still do not receive the priority (or funding) they did prior to the 1960s. Consequently, their impact on growth is limited. The number of new churches started annually, for instance, does not nearly equal the number of churches lost.

If mainline denominations are serious about reversing their declines, greater effort must be made. New church planting strategies must be created, and leaders in existing congregations must learn to appreciate the value of evangelism and adult Christian education. New priorities mean renewed programmatic actions. Thus, training and resources are necessary. Finally, it seems clear that one key for future growth is the ability of mainline denominations to reach beyond their traditional white constituency—without losing it. As Green and Light have shown, the ABC has been successful at the former, but not the latter.

Both the liberal and moderate mainline have large numbers of strong, stable churches. Some of these churches responded to cultural and demographic changes and grew. Few, however, harnessed the kind of entrepreneurial spirit that seems necessary for rapid growth. Mainline denominations would benefit from a greater variety of church types (including innovative entrepreneurial churches).

Simply trying to be “the church for all people” in a community is no longer enough in the new religious marketplace. The day of the generalist is gone. The market savvy specialist is more in keeping with the times. Openness to

change is required, as is an open orientation to the world. That means acceptance (something that mainline churches often do well) and the willingness to tell others about one's product. Implied in this statement is the fact that the churches must have products—that is, something specific to sell. Churches in conservative denominations are programmatically oriented. They provide programs fashioned to meet people's needs and interests. Mainline churches, by and large, do not. They must provide people oriented programs if they are to compete—not with conservative congregations, but for their own constituencies.

### Conservative Protestants

The differences between some conservative denominations and the mainline are only a matter of degree. The conservative branches of the Lutheran family (Lutheran Church, Missouri Synod and Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod) certainly resemble the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (which is considered mainline) more than they resemble the Southern Baptist Convention. The same is true for the Cumberland Presbyterian Church. These conservative branches of mainline denominational families, along with the Southern Baptist Convention, share three traits: slow growth, bureaucratic structure, and biblical conservatism. They vary greatly in other respects: polity, evangelistic orientation, and theological heritage.

Two questions are of most interest regarding these denominations. Why are they growing, and why are they growing so slowly? One obvious reason for their growth is that mainstream conservative denominations have a considerably larger percentage of congregations that are growing rather than declining. Some of this is due to the context. The United Methodist Church and the Episcopal Church, for instance, might have grown rather than declined over the past few years if over 80% of their churches were located in the South (as is the case for the Southern Baptist Convention). Even considering contextual factors, however, mainstream conservative denominations are more growth oriented than liberal/mainline denominations. Particularly in the Southern Baptist Convention, new church development and evangelism receive strong emphasis. Such actions flow from an evangelical ideology.

Mainstream conservative denominations also tend to be programmatically strong—they provide excellent training and abundant resources for their churches. A high priority on adult Christian education programs is part of this, as is the effort of denominational agencies to provide resources with a clear doctrinal agenda at modest cost. Denominational seminaries reinforce this emphasis by offering training in specialized program areas.

Considering all these strengths, why are mainstream conservative denominations not growing faster? These denominations share something else with the mainline. Their largest group of churches are plateaued—neither growing nor declining rapidly. By and large, these stable congregations are neither innovative nor market driven. Instead, they are supported by tradition and a clear sense of the way things “ought” to be done. Many baby boomers find such churches rather stilted, dull, and even unfriendly. They lend stability to a denomination, but they prevent rapid growth.

Another reason for the slow growth of mainstream conservative denominations may be simply their high level of expectations. These denominations expect their members to be involved. They are not “strict” in Kelley’s sense, but the norms for active membership are different from those of the mainline. Therefore, Marler and Roozen conclude that “Conservative Protestants are very clear about what church they belong to and attend” and “Conservative Protestant membership is increasingly characterized by a set of inherited, biblically focused beliefs.” The result is an active, committed core membership. Southern Baptist and Lutheran churches tend to hold onto their members. Lacking the spiritual fervor and lively worship of charismatic churches, however, mainstream conservatives are less able to replace those they lose. Their growth remains heavily dependent on relatively high birthrates and membership retention.

The Southern Baptist Convention differs from other mainstream conservative denominations in that it has many entrepreneurial churches that seem only peripherally “denominational.” These churches are market driven, innovative, and quite conservative. In this respect the Southern Baptist Convention resembles the Assemblies of God, rather than the Lutheran Church, Missouri Synod. These megachurches often see themselves as benefiting the denomination more than the other way around. And this may be true. Such churches are a major source of growth in both the Southern Baptist Convention and the Assemblies of God (see Marler and Hadaway, chapter 2; and Hadaway, 1991c).

The Assemblies of God, and many smaller evangelical sects, share the theological conservatism and evangelistic orientation of the Southern Baptist Convention. They share few other characteristics, however. They have fewer heavily institutionalized, nongrowing congregations, higher rates of new church development, more additions through denominational switching, and higher rates of denominational growth.

Indeed, Pentecostal/Holiness groups exhibit a movement quality. Members tend to be “true believers” who attend “religiously” and give generously. True sectarians, they are less influenced by the culture. Thus, they are able to grow in very unlikely circumstances. The unique combination of doctrinal



clarity and organizational flexibility increases the chances that these churches will grow in good times and bad. Further, parachurch resourcing has made them market-wise and their experiential theological framework has made them, curiously enough, “touch points” of expressive individualism.

Nevertheless, with flexibility and responsiveness comes volatility. These denominations exhibit a “boom or bust” pattern of growth or decline. The vast majority of their congregations are growing or declining. They do not have a large base of stable churches that checks wide swings in denominational growth rates. Decline is possible, almost overnight, as the Assemblies of God found in the late 1980s. In general, however, these denominations and fellowships are growing. Given the segmentation of American society, the fact that they seem “out of step” with the dominant culture may be to their advantage.

### Catholics and Black Protestants

Despite growth in the sheer numbers of self-identified Catholics, the average Roman Catholic attends Mass much less frequently today than was the case in past decades. Self-reported attendance may have stabilized in the 1970s, but poll data on religious affiliation suggest that membership problems are not over. Disaffiliation is high and switching to other denominational families is increasing (Roof and McKinney, 1987; Hadaway and Marler, 1991). The situation is even worse among Catholic baby boomers (see Roof and Johnson, chapter 14). People are still born into the Catholic Church and continue to see it as “THE church.” Yet the Catholic subculture is changing. As Marler and Roozen note in chapter 12, Catholics who attend regularly are institutionally committed and feel their parish “is warm and meaningful with a clear spiritual focus.” In other words, they are acting more and more like religious consumers rather than a captive audience.

The growth charts in chapter 1 present a misleading picture of health. The Catholic Church counts all persons assumed to be baptized Catholics in each parish, whether or not they have ever received Mass in that parish. The Catholic Church may be growing in terms of affiliates, but any growth in active membership is likely the result of immigration and high birthrates among Hispanics.

What conclusions can be made about the black church in America? Unfortunately, the largest black denominations are not able to collect systematic membership records from their churches; so research is limited. Nevertheless, it is clear that many black churches are healthy and growing. As was true for Holiness/Pentecostal churches, worship is the key to growth in the black

church. Programs such as Christian education and organized evangelism are secondary. Indeed, evidence of such worship based institutional health is easily observed by driving past black churches in almost any city at noon or 1:00 P.M. on Sundays. Black churches and Pentecostal churches are often packed—with standing room only. This is in great contrast to the typical mainline or traditional conservative church.

Are black denominations growing? The apparent health of black churches suggests so. In addition, Hadaway (1991c) and Marler and Hadaway (chapter 2) find that black churches in historically white denominations are growing much faster on average than white churches. Other sources of growth include the almost “involuntary” nature of church participation among blacks in the South and continued high levels of attendance in the North (see Nelsen and Kanagy, chapter 15). The evidence also suggests that cultural changes in the 1960s and 1970s had less effect on black denominations than white denominations. Birthrates remained high for blacks, and anti-institutionalist attacks did not target the black church. According to Nelsen and Nelsen (1975), even “as conflict over basic values grew, the black church prospered in the 1960s.”

The only troubling signs for the black church are extremely low levels of church participation among youth in northern inner cities. According to Nelsen and Kanagy, “the future of the black church in the city is really dependent in the long term on the black church’s ability to involve the less educated, younger adults who currently have little predisposition—and possibly even disdain—for it.” For the present, however, the black church appears considerably vital.

### **Growth Futures**

What does the future hold for denominations in the United States in the 1990s? The easy answer, and the answer that is most likely to be accurate, is “more of the same.” In other words, no dramatic “seismic shift” is in the offing, but the gentle rumblings of decline will continue. Still, the example of Canada presented by Reginald Bibby in chapter 13 should serve as a warning to churches and denominations in the United States. A “great American drop-off” could occur in the United States, just as it did in Canada (Bibby, 1987).

The danger is that no one will recognize the meaning of the warning, and American denominations will continue to “do church” in the same way. Perhaps more baby boomers will return to the church; perhaps the next generation of young adults will be more religious than their parents; perhaps revival will come to America. Perhaps. Hoping will not change present realities, however.

The reality is that individuals are approaching the church in a much different way than they did in the past. Religious choices were always available, but now Americans are acting on those choices. Several chapters in this volume used “religious consumerism” or a similar term to describe this orientation. Denominational loyalty is down as a result. A church choice is made increasingly on the basis of personal likes and dislikes. For some Americans this means increased church commitment, and for others it means no commitment at all—at least to the institutionalized church. Yet recent research suggests many have chosen a third option: marginal commitment. This group has decided to withhold judgment. It is the “soft underbelly” of the church, a group that retains a denominational identity, but rarely attends. The eventual decisions of this group (and their children) may determine the growth future of Protestants and Catholics in America (Marler and Hadaway, 1993).

What about the local church? Obviously some churches will be more successful than others in a deregulated religious economy. The research in this book tells us that evangelistic churches are most likely to grow. It also tells us that growth is rapid in new churches and in large entrepreneurial congregations. The religious consumer wants a friendly, warm, caring church where he or she can worship God in a meaningful way. Churches that have these qualities and that work for new members tend to be growing congregations.

Most churches could grow if they were more responsive to the needs of their members and potential members. Few Americans are hostile toward the church. Even the most critical persons think that the church has something to offer someone. Entrepreneurial churches understand that they must be interesting and inviting. Ministries are provided to meet needs, and needs are discovered through actually talking with and listening to people.

We began this book by focusing on denominations. Now I end with them. How must they respond to the current religious economy? Denominations must acknowledge that they exist in a deregulated religious market. There are no more monopolies and not much brand loyalty. An open market means greater competition. Churches and individuals are free to choose products from a much wider variety of sources. In fact, parachurch organizations capitalized on this trend earlier by catering to the needs of independent churches and denominations without publishing houses. Now the market is wide open. In this environment denominations must provide better products or they will lose market share.

Who is the denomination’s target? In the past, the proper target was church leadership. In the days of strong, almost taken-for-granted denominational loyalty, clergy and selected lay leadership served—quite functionally—as representatives of church membership in denominational forums. Yet as Marler and Roozen observe, a cultural shift toward a more individual locus of

control raises questions about “trickle down” denominationalism. Indeed, denominational loyalty is reduced because denominations remain a mystery to many church members. Members see and hear little other than controversial pronouncements, news of conflict, and appeals for funds. Denominational staff complain that the laity don’t understand, and the laity think denominational staff are out of touch.

In a real sense, denominations must rediscover their constituency and allow their constituency to rediscover them. How can this be done? First steps would include reconceiving the role of local church clergy as *links to* rather than *proxies for* the membership. The denominations need to take their message in clear ways directly to the individual church member. Better programs of denominational education for local congregations would not hurt. Focus groups with laity are another way, as are national and regional gatherings—where the business is not business.

Despite slow and erratic growth in denominations and congregations, the picture is not entirely bleak. Church growth is possible because churches grow. Denominational growth is possible because denominations grow. America has a very rich and strong religious economy. Obviously there are no easy answers during almost inevitable periods of religious disinterest and stagnation. If leadership were a little more imaginative and farsighted, growth would happen faster. But not much faster.