

Chapter Four

Growth and Decline in an Inclusive Denomination:

The ABC Experience

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No other Protestant denomination in the United States has as much racial/ethnic diversity as the American Baptist Churches in the USA.¹ Major shifts in the absolute and relative size of the racial/ethnic groups in the ABC have taken place in the past thirty years, resulting in a decline in the white majority and an increase in the nonwhite minority. This chapter describes these changes and analyzes their institutional and contextual sources.

A description and analysis of the overall pattern of decline in the ABC must include the differing patterns of decline and growth among racial/ethnic groups in the denomination. Changing patterns of denominational mission support are also important in order to understand the current state of the ABC.

This case study is instructive for denominations other than the ABC. Many denominations share the intent of the ABC of becoming more inclusive and of ministering to racial/ethnic populations. Many denominations also share with the ABC the recent patterns of decline in the numbers of white churches and white members.²

Trends in the Number of Churches

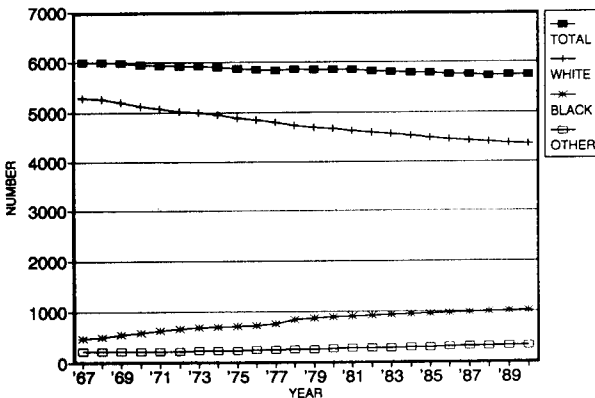
There has been a steady decline in the number of churches in the ABC over the past twenty-five years.³ In 1967 the denomination contained 6,001 churches. In 1990 the number of churches had dropped to 5,737 churches—a 4% decline. This trend masks very different patterns for the racial/ethnic constituent churches in the ABC. During this period the number of white churches declined by 17.5%, whereas the number of African-American churches increased by 112.6% and the number of other churches (Hispanic, Asian, Native American, Haitian) increased by 52%. The numbers of churches at the beginning and end of this period are shown in Table 4.1.

TABLE 4.1
Number of Churches in ABC/USA

	1967	1990	change	% change
Total	6,001	5,737	-264	-4.4
White	5,295	4,370	-925	-17.5
African-American	485	1,031	+546	+112.6
Other	221	336	+115	+52.0

The trend lines in the number of churches for the entire ABC, and for sub-groups are smooth and consistent from 1967 to 1990. These lines are graphed in Figure 4.1. White churches decreased steadily, whereas black churches and "other" churches increased in number throughout the period of study.

FIGURE 4.1
Number of Churches—ABC/USA
1967–1990



It is clear from Table 4.1 that the greatest absolute change in the number of ABC churches from 1967 to 1990 is the loss of 925 white churches. That represents a net average loss of more than 44 churches a year for twenty-three years. Since new white ABC churches were started throughout that time period, the real number of white church loss is closer to an average of 52 churches per year.

Churches are lost to the ABC by (1) disaffiliation from the denomination, (2) church closings due to insufficient membership base, and (3) church mergers. In the ten-year period from 1980 to 1990, 659 churches withdrew from the ABC, closed, or merged. Of that number, 65% withdrew, 31% closed, and 4% merged into another church.

White ABC churches that disaffiliate usually do so in protest of ABC ecumenical relationships (such as participation in the National or World Council of Churches) or in protest of policy statements or resolutions from the ABC. Some churches leave the denomination because they see the ABC as changing. It doesn't "feel" like it did in the past. The increasing racial/ethnic diversity (along with different styles of mission, leadership, and relationships) is not seen as a positive change by all churches. The continuing theological and evangelical/mission diversity is also hard for some to accept. As a result, independence is attractive to some congregations.

ABC churches that close are predominately white and are usually located in small towns and rural areas of the Northeast, Mid-Atlantic, and North Central regions. Baptists, along with Methodists in the nineteenth century, were active in establishing churches on the frontier as the population moved west. These areas, from the Hudson River to the Great Plains, north of the Mason-Dixon line, have experienced demographic shifts during the past two decades that have played important roles in the closing and merging of many white ABC churches.

The decline in the number of white churches is due in part to contextual factors, such as demographic shifts. The decline is also due to internal or institutional factors, such as diversity of theological stands and membership diversity.

Much of the African-American growth in the late 1960s and 1970s can be attributed to the influence of key black leaders and to the prominence of civil rights issues in the ABC. The relationship that Martin Luther King, Jr. and other Southern Christian Leadership Conference organizers had with American Baptists was a major reason for African-American churches becoming related to the ABC. The Ebenezer Baptist Church of Atlanta, pastored by Martin Luther King, Sr., joined the ABC in 1960. Martin Luther King, Jr. was a graduate of Crozer Theological Seminary, an ABC institution.

There are many educational factors behind the increase in African-American participation in the ABC. The roots of this influence stem from the denomination's commitment to black education following the Civil War. Northern Baptists were prominent in founding and funding colleges and seminaries in the South. Later, Baptist seminaries in the North were important in training black church leaders who became influential in the ABC.

Parallel to the educational factors that influenced black participation in the ABC were denominational concerns for human and civil rights. From its early stands for abolition and education, the ABC contributed to the growing movement for social justice through policy statements, resolutions, political action, and by civil protests. In the mid-1970s, an ABC program called Fund of Renewal sought to raise \$7.5 million for minority education and inclusion in the denomination. While the financial goal was not realized, this program of breaking down racial barriers in regions, associations, and between churches contributed to minority growth in the ABC.

It could be noted that the Congregational/UCC tradition can recall a similar history of involvement in black education and civil rights concerns. The difference between African-American attraction to the UCC and the ABC is due in large part to two factors. The first is polity. Both the ABC and UCC maintain the autonomy of the local church as a manifestation of the Body of Christ, empowered to act in all matters of life and faith. There are, however, differences such as: definitions of what defines a cooperating church; how standards are enforced; per capita support expectations; and the denomination's role in pastor selection. It may be a question of "freedom" or it may be a question of "laxity," but African-American churches have more autonomy in the ABC and African-American Baptist denominations than they would have in the UCC.

The second factor is the ease with which an African-American Baptist church can add an ABC affiliation without a name change and without disaffiliating from another denomination.⁴ In various regions of the ABC, the increases in the number of African-American ABC churches can be traced to the regional leadership's openness to accept, and even to recruit, black congregations. In the 1960s and 1970s, ABC agencies actively recruited African-American churches and pastors in the South to affiliate with the ABC. The number of black ABC churches in the South doubled between 1967 and 1973 (from 70 to 144 churches) and grew another 150% by 1978.

Another reason for the increase in the numbers of African-American churches in the ABC is economic. Because of the growing endowment in the ABC retirement plan and an excellent record of management of funds by the Ministers and Missionaries Benefit Board, the ABC retirement plan (and the related health plan) has become a major economic benefit for ABC pastors, lay workers, and ABC churches. Black pastors and churches were actively recruited by the Ministers and Missionaries Benefit Board, out of a concern to help churches provide a financial support for pastors. Since none of the Baptist denominations that are primarily African-American have such a plan, this economic benefit has been attractive for African-American pastors and congregations.⁵

Thus, the important institutional factors that have contributed to the increase in the number of African-American churches in the ABC are:

1. The leadership and influence of key black leaders in the denomination
2. The historic mission of the ABC in minority education and civil rights
3. The name and polity of the ABC, which allows for confederation
4. The active recruitment of African-American leaders and churches by key white leaders
5. The economic benefits of a well-managed retirement plan

The two contextual factors that affected the increase in the number of African-American ABC churches were the broader civil rights movement in the nation, and demographic changes among the black population. Black population growth in the South and the West, as well as in the urban centers of the Mid-Atlantic, coincided with the location of growth of African-American churches in the ABC.

In 1967, the 485 black churches in the ABC were 8% of its 6,001 churches. In 1990, the 1,031 black churches made up 18% of its 5,737 churches.

In the past ten years, the number of ABC Hispanic churches has increased from 203 churches to 228 churches—a 12% increase. At the same time, Hispanic population growth for the nation was 53%. Although much of this population increase was in areas where the ABC has not had a strong presence, this contextual factor has been important in the growth of Hispanic churches in the ABC.

The growth in the number of Hispanic ABC churches was also influenced by institutional factors. Mission work by the denomination in Mexico and Cuba dates from the 1860s; in Puerto Rico, from the 1890s. Today, only the churches in Puerto Rico are counted as churches of the ABC/USA, but this early mission activity has influenced Hispanic church growth in mainland USA. ABC refugee programs for waves of Cuban and Central Americans have also contributed to Hispanic church growth within the ABC.

While the number of Asian-American ABC churches was small in 1980, the growth rate for the decade ending in 1990 was larger than for Hispanic churches. The number of Asian churches grew from twenty-two in 1980 to forty-seven in 1990—an increase of 114%. In the general population, Asian and Pacific Islanders experienced a growth rate of 108%.

The denomination's investment in Asian missions began in 1813 in Burma and spread to Siam, China, and India by 1835. Baptist work in Japan was estab-

lished in 1872 and in the Philippines in 1901. Refugee resettlement of Southeast Asians also has contributed to an increase in the numbers of Asian-American churches in the ABC. New church development has involved Hmong, Cambodian, Indonesian, and Korean segments of the population.

There also is substantial regional variation in ABC rates of growth and decline. In the Western and Southern areas of the U.S., the number of ABC churches has increased slightly since 1967, while the greatest decline has been in the North Central region of the nation.⁶ Over the past twenty-three years in the ABC: (1) the number of white churches declined in all sections of the U.S., (2) the number of African-American churches increased in all sections, doubling in the West and tripling in the South, (3) the number of "other" churches increased in all sections except for the North Central region, where the decline was slight.

Trends in Resident Membership

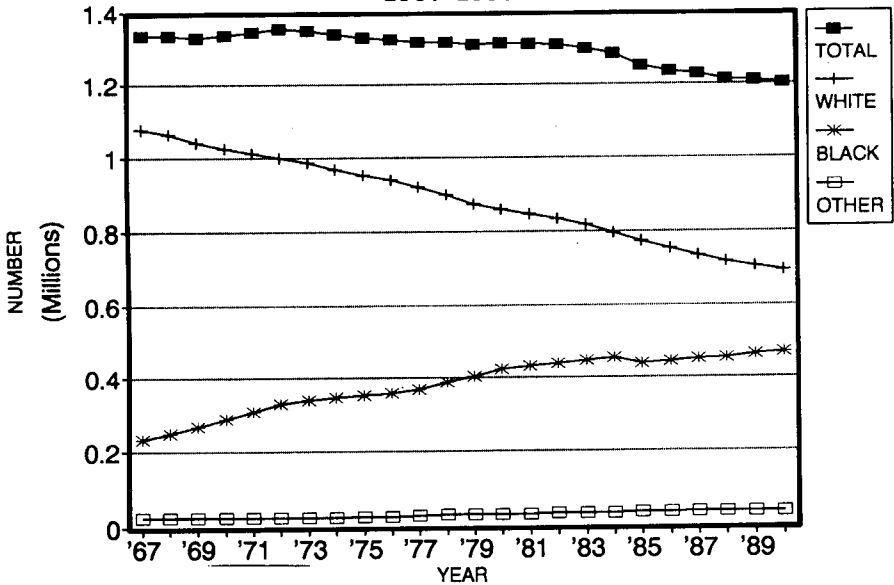
Total resident membership in the ABC declined by 10% since 1967—as compared to a 4.4% decline in the number of churches.⁷ Thus, ABC membership losses due to fewer churches are exacerbated by membership losses from declining congregations. This membership decline is due to a steep decline in the number of white members. For every three members of white ABC churches counted in 1967, only two could be counted in 1990. In this period, the membership of African-American ABC churches almost doubled. Other ethnic churches experienced a 69% growth in membership. Table 4.2 shows the absolute and percent changes in resident members.

TABLE 4.2
Resident Membership in the ABC/USA

	1967	1990	change	% change
Total	1,335,342	1,201,741	-133,601	-10.0
White	1,077,388	693,701	-383,687	-35.6
African-American	234,894	469,101	+234,207	+99.7
Other	23,060	38,939	+15,879	+68.9

The patterns of change in resident membership as shown in Figure 4.2 reveal that slight increases were recorded in 1970, 1971, and 1972 as the African-American membership rose more than the white membership decreased. A similar situation occurred in 1980.

FIGURE 4.2
Resident Membership—ABC/USA
1967–1990



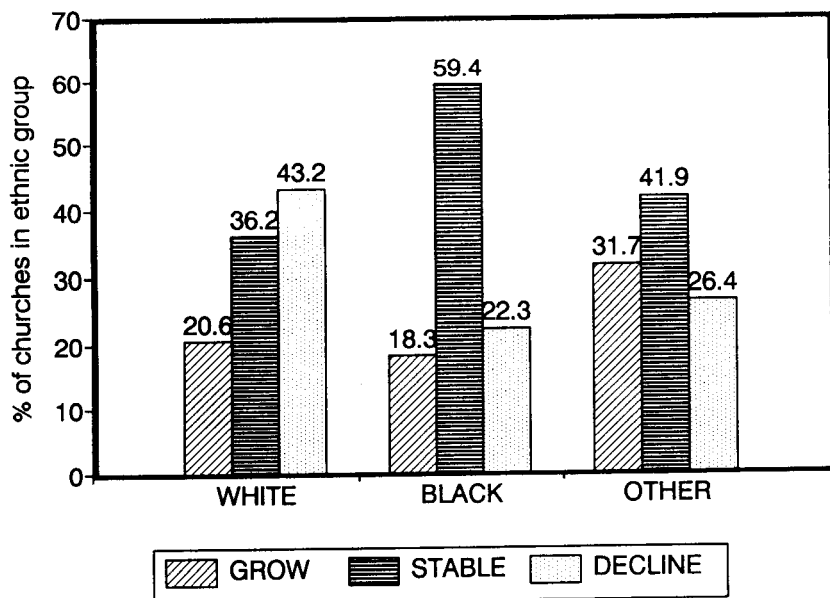
Only the South recorded an increase in resident members over the twenty-three-year period. In this region African-American membership grew faster than white membership declined. The increase in the number of Hispanic ABC churches in Puerto Rico also contributed to the growth rate in the South.

The growth of the “other” churches is important, although the white decline and African-American increase is the more significant story. This “other” category is made up of Hispanic, Asian, Native American, Haitian, and European ethnic constituents. Each deserves a description and analysis in its own right, but cannot be dealt with in appropriate detail here. Hispanic and Asian constituencies have been growing, while Haitian churches in the ABC are relatively new. The size of the Native American constituency has not changed much in recent years, whereas the number of distinctly European churches has declined.

In terms of resident members, the “other” category constituency of the ABC has grown from 1.7% of the ABC in 1967 to 3.4% in 1990. At the same time the African-American constituency has grown from 17.6% to 38.6% of the ABC, and the white constituency has declined from 80.7% to 58.1% of the denomination.

Another way of seeing membership growth and decline is pictured in Figure 4.3. This chart shows resident membership change over a five-year period from 1984 to 1989. Churches that increased resident membership by 10% or more in that time span were placed in a "grow" category, those that declined by at least 10% were placed in a "decline" category, and the rest were called "stable."

FIGURE 4.3
Growth Status by Race/Ethnicity—ABC/USA
1984–1989

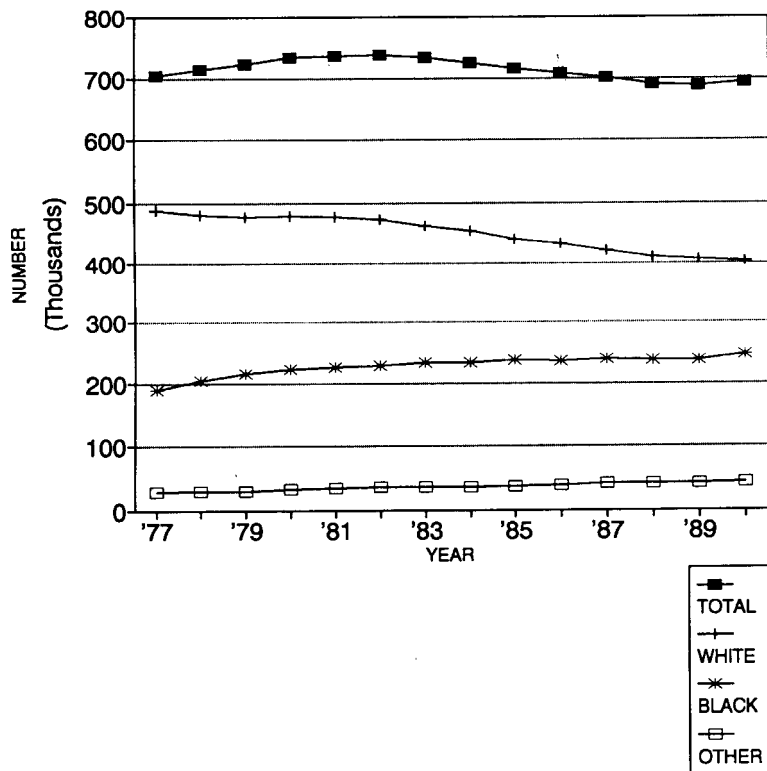


It is clear that some white churches are growing (about one in five). It is also clear that some African-American churches are declining (about one in five). It is important to note that the proportion of white declining churches is approximately twice that of the other groups.⁸

Trends in Worship Attendance

Worship attendance from 1977 to 1990 shows a pattern of change that differs somewhat from the graphs seen earlier.⁹ From 1977 to 1990, worship attendance rose until 1982, fell until 1989, and rose again in 1990. That overall pattern, as well as attendance for white, African-American, and other churches is graphed in Figure 4.4.

FIGURE 4.4
Worship Attendance—ABC/USA
1977–1990



Increases in the total ABC are due to the fact that African-American and “other” gains are greater than white losses. Also, the decline in white worship attendance since 1977 has not been as sharp as the decline in white resident membership. The white worship attendance decline was slight prior to 1983, greater until 1988, and shows signs of moderation since 1988. White worship attendance even increased in the North Central section in 1990, the region of greatest white membership decline over the past twenty-three years.

Table 4.3 shows the changes in worship attendance and membership from 1977 to 1990. The largest percentage gains are for worship attendance and resident members for “others.” These gains are primarily for Hispanic and Asian churches within the “other” category. Worship attendance for these groups grew by 56%.

TABLE 4.3
Worship Attendance and Resident Membership in the ABC/USA:
1977 and 1990

	1977	1990	change	% change
Total				
Worship Attendance	704,587	694,385	- 10,202	- 1.5
Resident Members	1,318,070	1,201,741	- 116,329	- 8.8
White				
Worship Attendance	487,997	404,190	- 83,807	- 17.2
Resident Members	919,821	693,701	- 226,120	- 24.6
African-American				
Worship Attendance	188,728	246,832	+58,104	+30.8
Resident Members	368,075	469,101	+101,026	+27.4
Other				
Worship Attendance	27,862	43,363	+15,501	+55.6
Resident Members	30,174	38,939	+8,765	+29.0

For "others" the number of worship attenders was greater than the number of resident members in 1990. Figures 4.5 and 4.6 show the result of this effect on 1990 membership and worship totals.

FIGURE 4.5
1990 Resident Membership ABC/USA

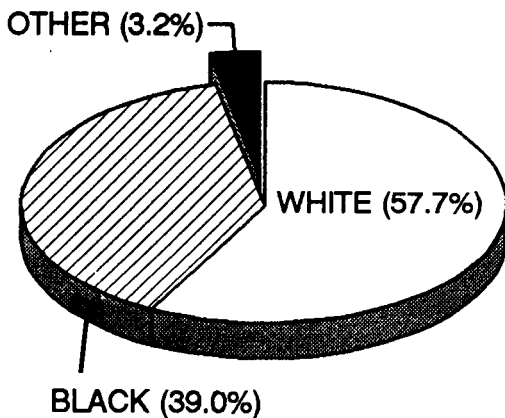
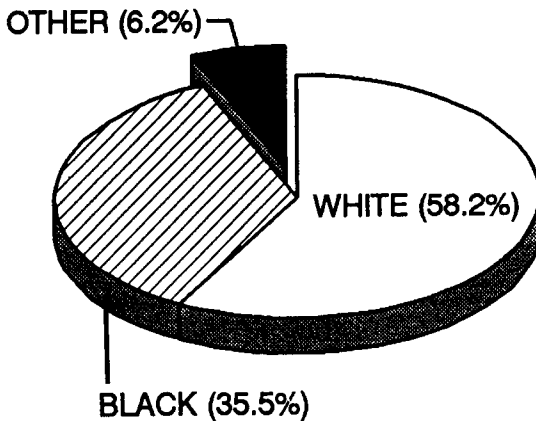


FIGURE 4.6
1990 Worship Attendance ABC/USA



Trends in ABC Mission Support

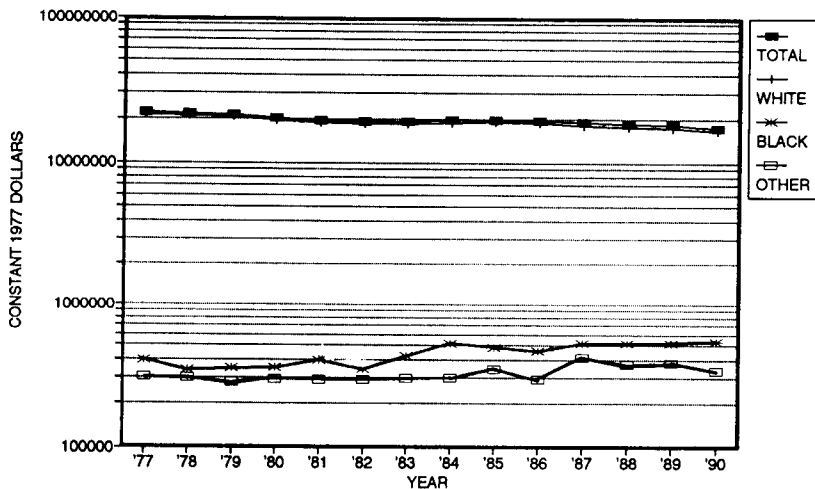
Although the ABC has reported increased amounts of giving for the denomination's mission program, the rate of increase has not kept pace with inflation. This analysis of trends in American Baptist Mission Support (ABMS) is based upon the value of money given in 1977 (constant) dollars. The decline of mission support in constant dollars helps explain the decrease in the number of denominational staff.

Table 4.4 shows that the value of ABMS has declined about \$4.5 million in a thirteen-year period, with white ABMS falling \$4.6 million in value from 1977 to 1990.

TABLE 4.4
American Baptist Mission Support (ABMS)
in Constant 1977 Dollars for 1977 and 1990

	1977	1990	change	% change
Total	\$21,867,826	\$17,411,467	-\$4,456,359	-20.38
White	21,171,740	16,539,074	-4,632,666	-21.88
African-American	392,986	537,058	+144,072	+36.66
Other	303,100	335,335	+32,235	+10.64

FIGURE 4.7
 American Baptist Mission Support—ABC/USA
 1977–1990 (Log Scale)



Not surprisingly, the decline in ABMS has been the greatest where the decline has been the greatest in white churches and white resident membership, i.e., the North Central and Mid-Atlantic regions. African-American ABMS support increased in the sections of the nation where the greatest increases in African-American ABC churches and resident members were recorded, i.e., the South and the West.

Trends in ABMS support are shown in Figure 4.7, plotted on a logarithmic scale. This graph shows that year-to-year fluctuations were not large. It also shows how much white contributions controlled the total. In 1990, white ABMS giving was 95% of the total ABMS giving, while African-Americans contributed 3.1%, and Hispanics contributed 1.4%.

In any given year between 1977 and 1986, from 86% to 90% of all ABC churches gave to ABMS. The percentage of white churches giving varied from 94% to 95%, while for African-American churches it was 58% to 63%. For Hispanic churches, it varied from 73% to 84%, and for Asian churches, it was as high as 77%.

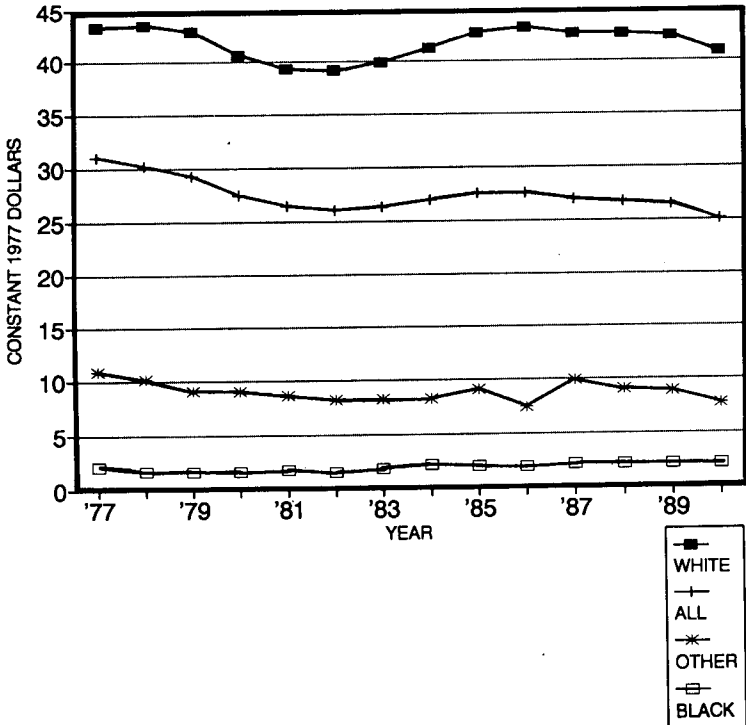
When comparing American Baptist Mission Support from African-American churches to white churches, several differences must be considered. In the first place, a higher percentage of African-American churches are aligned with more than one denomination than are white churches. In the second place, African-American churches have traditionally committed a higher per-

centage of their mission dollars to local church mission projects in health, housing, education, and so on, than to denominational projects and programs.

For the "other" churches, lower economic circumstances of refugees and other immigrants, along with start-up costs associated with newly formed churches, are major factors in this mission support phenomenon.

Another way to understand the changes in the denomination's mission support is to analyze per capita (by worship attendance) giving to ABMS. For all ABC worship attenders, per capita ABMS giving dropped from \$31 per attender in 1977 to \$25 per attender in 1990. African-American per capita ABMS increased slightly, while white and other per capita mission giving declined. The trends line for all groups in Figure 4.8 shows an up-and-down pattern of change.

FIGURE 4.8
ABMS Per Capita (Worship Attendance)—ABC/USA
1977-1990



Implications

What are the implications of this study for the future of the ABC, and what is the environment for dealing with the implications? Planners and decision makers must resist the temptation to key on limited data and assert, "We have bottomed out," or "Our worship attendance is increasing." It takes more than two data points to define a trend, and it takes broad analysis to forecast the future. This study focused only on racial/ethnic groups, and ignored age of congregations and members, as well as types of church locations. Though other studies are needed at regional and national levels, it is possible from this study to offer some hypothesis for future development.

The trends in this study indicate that further erosion of white membership is to be expected, that further erosion of mission support of ABMS is to be expected, and that gains in black, Hispanic, and Asian members will not offset white decline. Institutional factors such as a slower decline in white worship attendance in the last two years may produce positive changes. Contextual factors such as the hoped-for return of the baby boom generation to church participation also may affect the future of the ABC. Planners, however, must take account of the past if favorable scenarios are to be realized in the future.

Unless mission giving patterns increase sufficiently to overcome the effects of inflation, cuts in denomination staffing and programming will continue. The ABC experienced cutbacks in many regional and national programs. Regional and national boards must face the probability that the retrenchment is not over. If retrenchment continues it will cause major tensions in the ABC over mission priorities, the kinds of services and programs offered, and the future mission orientation of the denomination. Cuts will not be uniform in all areas and endeavors. Since there are differences in mission goals, priorities, and funding between ABC racial/ethnic cohorts, arguments are certain to divide along racial/ethnic lines on some issues.

If trends continue, it is reasonable to expect that in the next twelve to fifteen years the traditional white majority will become the white minority. If that possibility casts fear in the hearts of many American Baptists, the denomination will face a stormy future. Changes in racial/ethnic participation in the last two decades have raised issues with which the denomination is now struggling. Justice and fairness issues about affirmative action within the denomination have been resolved at the policy level, but changing practices in recruiting and hiring has been slow. Questions of power and responsibility will continue to be crucial in the ABC.

As ABC leadership continues to affirm pluralism and inclusiveness in its public life, and as the nonwhite membership approaches white membership

in size, it remains to be seen if white disaffiliation will increase. There is no model upon which to pose a prediction. Disaffiliation from white churches because of racial/ethnic diversity was a minor factor in the past, however.

If inclusion is to be realized in the ABC, it must work at all levels from the General Board to national and regional boards, and to the local churches. Inclusion requires that the wants, goals, needs, and values of all members and all local churches be considered in designing the mission goals of the denomination in the future.

The challenge before the ABC leadership at all levels is to bring about inclusion at the very time it must wrestle with diminishing resources.