

Part One

DENOMINATIONAL GROWTH AND DECLINE

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At the end of each year, denominational research (or yearbook) offices tally their total number of churches and the total number of members included in those churches. If the number of members added through new churches and through the growth of existing churches exceeds the number of members lost, the denomination grew. If losses through declining churches and through the closing of congregations exceeds the number of members gained, the denomination declined. Then the good news (or bad) is handed over to anxious denominational executives.

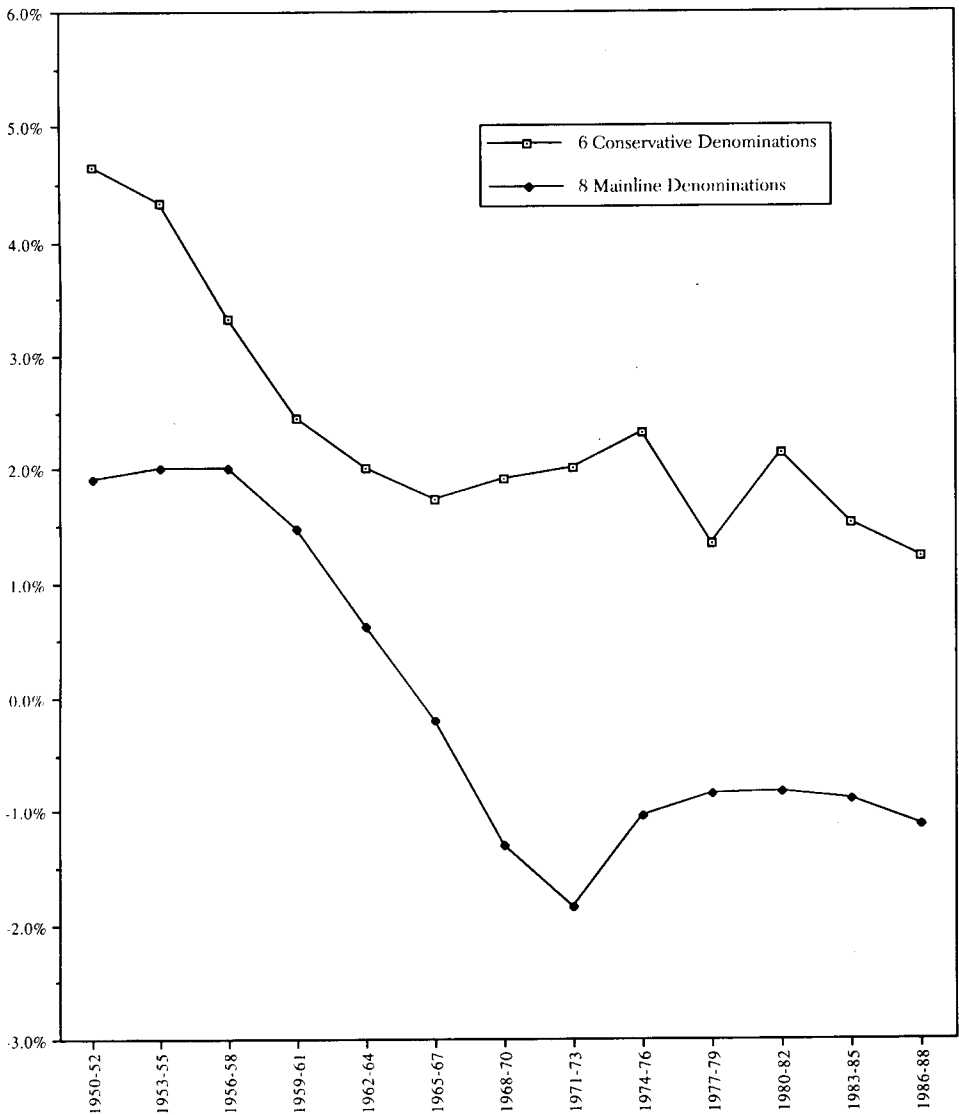
Interestingly, less than two percentage points separated the growth of the Southern Baptist Convention and the decline of The United Methodist Church in 1988. Spread among over seventy-five thousand churches in the two denominations, that difference is minuscule. So comparing a typical Southern Baptist church with a typical United Methodist church does not sufficiently explain the growth of one denomination or the decline of the other.

The complex equation that results in growth or decline at the denominational level is the subject of the chapters in this section. Why do some denominations grow and others decline? As we see it, denominational growth is heavily affected by the national context. Denominational growth is also affected by what Hoge and Roozen (1979) call national institutional factors. These factors include denominational character (what a denomination *is*) and denominational actions (what a denomination *does*). And although the three (context, character, and actions) are separated for purposes of discussion, they are very much related.

Denominational Growth Is Affected by the National Context

All three chapters in this section underscore the strong link between denominational membership trends and changes in the national context. The chapter by Marler and Hadaway shows that a profound “period effect” influenced most denominations over the past thirty years. This leads to our first point.

FIGURE P1.1
Membership Change in Six Conservative and
Eight Mainline Denominations



Major mainline and conservative denominations share virtually identical patterns of membership change.

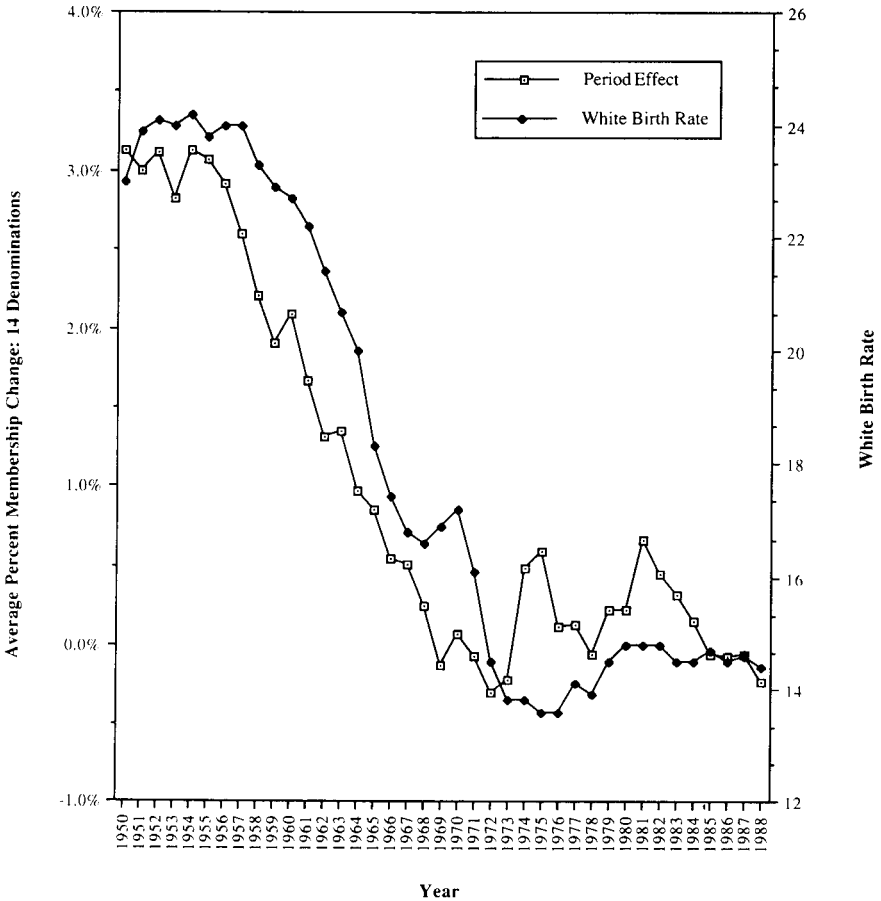
Denominations, mainline and conservative alike, experienced rapid growth in the 1950s. But as early as the mid-1950s average rates of percentage membership growth began to decline. This decline was steady and drastic until it reached a low point in 1972. At that point, growth rates bottomed out, rebounded slightly, then fell more slowly. With the notable exception of smaller Pentecostal/Holiness groups (see chapter 1), there was no conservative resurgence in the 1970s. Conservative church growth paralleled the decline of the mainline. This pattern can be seen in Figure P1.1.¹

Why did diverse denominations experience similar patterns of membership change? Part of the answer is demographic. And the link of demographic transitions to church membership trends is clear and direct. Rates of membership growth dropped along with the birthrate and population growth. The proportion of young children in the population also declined. This leads to our second point.

Denominational growth is heavily influenced by the birthrate.

As shown in Figure P1.2, the link between the white birthrate and membership change is particularly strong. Why? Obviously, the relationship is tied to the supply of young children of “baptizable” age. Denominations tend to grow as the supply of potential members increases. Interestingly, however, the correlation between the sheer supply of young children and membership change is lower than the correlation between the birthrate and membership change. The birthrate is especially important because it reflects changes in social attitudes regarding children and families *and* changes in the supply of young children. Churches are for families—particularly families with children (or families that used to have children) (Marler, 1992). Mainline and conservative churches do better in eras when having children is perceived as important.² Demographic studies show that the birthrate dropped during the 1950s and 1960s. Further, the proportion of married couple households with children also fell, and continues to fall. The economy, the movement toward two-income households, and the passage of the baby boom generation through the family life cycle all influenced this change. The extent of these demographic changes is also tied to changes in the general culture. Smaller families become the norm, rather than the exception, and being single loses much of its social stigma. The church was affected both by demographic and cultural change.

FIGURE P1.2
Period Effect and White Birthrate: 1950–1988



Cultural shifts affect denominational growth through changes in priorities.

Cultural change affects what people see as important. Priorities change. One of the ways that cultural change affects the church is through denominational structure and actions. As shown by Greer, particularly, and also by

Green and Light, denominational priorities changed as the culture did. This is especially true for the mainline. To some extent, new denominational priorities were necessary because of new socio-economic realities. For example, new churches were more costly and more difficult to start in the 1970s. Nevertheless, most of the change in structure and policy can be traced to changing ideology. In the case of the American Baptist Churches, Greer notes that "evangelism which aimed solely for individual conversion was (seen as) too narrow and simplistic, failing to challenge all of society with the full claims of the gospel." Evangelism was redefined and "a new church development famine ensued" as "other priorities concerned BNM (Board of National Ministries) staff, including the political and cultural upheaval of the nation."

Denominational Growth Is Affected by Denominational Character

A shared national context explains parallel patterns of decline in percentage rates of membership growth, but it does not explain continuing differences in the numerical "bottom line" between conservative and mainline denominations. Conservative denominations may have experienced slower growth at the same time that the mainline experienced decline—but conservatives remained "in the black." This gap existed in the 1950s and persists today.

Conservative denominations are still growing; the mainline is still in decline.

The pattern of conservative denominational growth and mainline decline has been constant since the mid-1960s. And as Marler and Hadaway point out in the first chapter of this section, conservative denominations were growing faster, on average, than mainline denominations—even in the 1950s. Some of this growth differential was due to demographics. Indeed, conservative denominations have higher birthrates on average than mainline denominations (Roof and McKinney, 1987). Conservative denominations also have younger constituencies, and some are concentrated in growing areas of the nation. Yet these differences alone do not explain the numerical gap between conservative and mainline denominations.

Conservatism is related to growth, but not to strictness.

Dean Kelley's *Why Conservative Churches Are Growing* set the stage for research, controversy, and confusion over the sources of church growth and

decline among conservative and mainline denominations. Kelley's book is more about denominational growth than it is about the growth of local churches, and it is more about institutional vitality than it is about growth. In fact, in a later article Kelley noted that a more appropriate title of his book would have been, "Why Strict Churches Are Strong."

Research has provided little support for what has been called "the Kelley thesis." Conservative churches are more likely to grow than liberal/mainline churches (in most studies, but see Thompson, Carroll, and Hoge in this volume). Conservative denominations also are more likely to grow than liberal/mainline denominations. Strictness (Kelley's main point), however, is unrelated to growth within liberal or conservative families. Kelley's "theory" is best understood as one of sectarian survival—not congregational or denominational growth. The theory explains how sectarian groups maintain their viability in a culture that does not share their values. Yet it neither explains the growth of sectarian groups that are strict nor the growth of conservative, nonsectarian groups that are not strict. Even more telling is the fact that Kelley's theory fails to explain why strict, nonevangelical sects frequently experience very little growth.

What is it about conservatism that produces growth? Two factors stand out: (1) a higher level of ideological commitment to evangelistic action, and (2) a lower level of secularism. Conservative denominations tend to be evangelical, and this evangelicalism is related to growth-producing actions such as personal evangelism and new church development. Conservative denominations also are less secularized. Along with a stable, concrete set of traditional beliefs, they retain a greater sense of otherworldliness. As such, churches in conservative denominations are better able to maintain strong symbolic boundaries between what is religious and what is not (see Hunter, 1983). All other things being equal, this characteristic encourages growth because religious meaning separates churches from other voluntary, communal institutions.

Some conservative denominations are "resilient."

Marler and Hadaway suggest that some denominations act like social movements. Commitment is high and goals are widely shared. Leaders and members feel that they have a mission to convert the nation. As a result, growth-related actions are less affected by the context because great effort will be made despite the appropriateness of such actions. If the times (or the territory) discourage proselytizing, resilient denominations are usually up to the task. Whether twenty or a hundred calls are needed to "harvest a lost

soul," they will be made; whether a neighborhood is demographically "favorable" for growth or not, a new church is just as likely to take root and flourish there.

High levels of commitment and ideological fervor, however, tend to encourage volatility. In fact, churches in denominations like the Assemblies of God have a "boom or bust" quality. Large numbers are growing, but large numbers also are declining. And unlike mainline denominations or older conservative denominations, the Assemblies of God has fewer stable churches.

In some ways, more resilient, movement-like denominations are similar to older conservative denominations, and in some ways, they are very different. As shown by Marler and Hadaway, groups like the Southern Baptist Convention and the Lutheran Church, Missouri Synod have large numbers of stable, plateaued congregations. In this respect, these traditionalistic conservative denominations look more like the mainline. One feature that groups like the Assemblies of God and Southern Baptists share, however, is the fact that much of their growth comes from large entrepreneurial, independent-minded congregations. Mainline denominations have fewer congregations of this type.

Denominational Growth Is Affected by Denominational Actions in the Case of the Mainline

Mainline denominations were hurt by changes in the national context, and they have neither an evangelistic ethos nor organizational resilience. This may explain the declining growth rates of the mainline in the 1950s and the parallel trends in mainline and conservative growth rates in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s. But it does not completely explain why the mainline actually lost members from 1965 to the present. Marler and Hadaway's research suggests that mainline membership trends are related to denominational priorities. This link is important, because as seen in the other two chapters (particularly the chapter by Greer) there were major shifts in denominational priorities during the 1970s.

Mainline priorities changed.

In some mainline denominations the meaning of evangelism changed. Greer points out that in other mainline denominations evangelism and new church development retained their historic meaning but lost personnel, budget dollars, and organizational visibility. Other priorities—particularly those

related to ecumenism, organizational restructuring, and social justice—came to the forefront. If programmatic emphasis on growth-oriented procedures is related to growth, then it is not surprising that mainline denominations experienced more difficulties than conservative denominations.

Conservative denominations were not immune to the changes that affected the priorities of mainline agencies. In the Southern Baptist Convention during the 1970s, traditional approaches to new church development were replaced with experimental techniques in a few areas. While there was increased emphasis on social justice concerns in some conservative denominations, there was never a complete reorientation of denominational priorities, however. Traditional evangelism and new church development efforts continued to receive the lion's share of denominational mission funds.

Changed denominational priorities produce new (and unexpected) challenges.

What denominations do at the national level makes a difference. This is seen clearly in Green and Light's case study of the American Baptist Churches. Changing denominational priorities resulted in a policy of racial inclusion. New African-American churches were started and existing African-American churches were invited to join the ABC. Other denominations had similar emphases, but none were as successful as the ABC. The result is a significant shift in the racial balance of this traditionally white denomination.

Without adding black churches, the membership trend for the ABC would look much like that of the UCC or the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). By adding black churches, the ABC avoided severe membership losses. Yet radical change in the policies and constituency of the ABC led to an unexpected consequence. It has accelerated the loss of white churches and white members. Further, differences in assumptions regarding denominational support place a greater and greater financial burden on the remaining white churches in the ABC.

A change in denominational priorities in all mainline denominations resulted in fewer new churches. This is clear in all three chapters in this section. Staff cuts and declining interest in new church development combined with higher start-up costs and decreased success rates to produce this effect.

Mainline membership trends are tied to denominational priorities.

Marler and Hadaway conclude that mainline denominational growth is related to goal-directed planning. All other things being equal, mainline denominations increase their chances for growth when they place a high priority on growth-related tasks. Mainline denominations are affected by the culture and the birthrate. But the evidence suggests that they could grow, or at least moderate their declines, by re-emphasizing evangelism and new church development.

From a sociological perspective, we have a relatively good grasp of what helps and what hinders growth. But what price are denominational executives (and their loyal congregations) willing to pay to change their priorities? Talk of "price" and "priorities" raises the issue of base commitments and ultimate concerns. And rightly so, for behind convenient sociological solutions, this question tests deeper, soteriological convictions.

Re-energized growth programs must compete for dollars and priority.

To some extent, mainline denominations have re-emphasized church growth. Yet Greer shows that funding levels for church growth have *not* kept pace with inflation. As a consequence, staff cuts have reduced new church development efforts to minimal levels. Evangelism and new church development now compete with many other programs for money and clout. While these programs are no longer considered "embarrassing" by mainline denominational officials, they have not regained their former prominence. In an era of slow population growth, high divorce rates, high building costs, and increased competition for time, denominations must work harder than ever to prevent membership loss. For the mainline, church growth efforts to date have not been sufficient to reverse numerical decline.