

## Part Two

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# THE GROWTH AND DECLINE OF CONGREGATIONS

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**W**hy do some churches grow and others decline? That is the central question addressed by the chapters in this section. Our concern also is with the link between congregational and denominational growth. By understanding why congregations grow, it is possible to identify potential sources of denominational growth.

In this section, we find that evangelism is a major source of congregational growth. It follows that denominations with more evangelistic churches see more growth at an aggregate level. In addition, we find that newer churches grow faster than older churches. It also follows that younger denominations and denominations that start more new churches will have an advantage over denominations that start few new congregations. Growing denominations, however, are not growing simply because they start more new churches, and declining denominations are not declining because they lose more churches than they "plant." Growing denominations are expanding in membership because they have proportionately more growing congregations than they have declining congregations (see Marler and Hadaway, chapter 2). Factors that encourage local church growth are critical to understanding *denominational* growth.

This section has three major components: (1) an introduction to church growth perspectives, (2) tests of church growth strategies, and (3) analyses of the factors associated with growth and decline in congregations. The first chapter, by Inskip, introduces the divergent research concerns of the "church growth school" and social scientists. The next two chapters test the effectiveness of church growth strategies. Do programs designed to produce growth actually do so? The final four chapters address the relative influence of a number of factors related to church growth and decline. Hadaway looks at the role of evangelism in producing church growth among Southern Baptist congregations. Thompson, Carroll, and Hoge consider factors associated with the growth or

decline of Presbyterian churches. The same general approach is taken by Olson and Donahue and Benson with data from several denominations.

In order to understand why some churches grow and others decline, it is necessary to understand the way social forces influence church membership change. Hoge and Roozen (1979) argue that the growth of a local congregation is affected by its environment and by its own actions. They also argue that these factors—the context and the institution—operate at the local and national levels. Thus, Hoge and Roozen conclude that the church responds to social forces at four primary levels: national institutional, national contextual, local institutional, and local contextual.

This approach proved useful. The following chapters suggest helpful modifications to the Hoge and Roozen scheme, however. Two studies (Hadaway, chapter 8 and Thompson, Carroll, and Hoge, chapter 9) show that the institutional dimension can be subdivided meaningfully into what an institution *is* and what an institution *does*. In addition, it is difficult to study the effect of national institutional and national contextual factors on the fortunes of local churches. We are then left with three primary influences at the congregational level: the local context, institutional character, and institutional actions.

Social-scientific studies of church growth and decline underscore the importance of the local context. By contrast, members of the “church growth school,” church growth consultants, and other advocates of “practice wisdom” emphasize the importance of institutional factors—what the local church is able to do in order to grow. Although these groups or observers generally talk past one another, Ken Inskeep suggests that the issue is one of balance rather than neglect. Further, the differences in emphasis between the two groups are highly related to their goals. Church growth writers are interested in reaching more people for Christ. Their focus, naturally, is on what churches as institutions can do to grow, and thereby achieve their evangelistic aims. The context is viewed by church growth writers as either a help in this process or a hindrance. While contextual factors are not ignored, they are not the primary focus. Conversely, social scientists are often accused of “environmental determinism.” But as Inskeep notes, this label is unfair because social scientists never suggest that the local context determines whether a church grows or declines. They tend to emphasize the local context for two reasons. First, almost everyone agrees that the local church is affected by its immediate context. And second, the availability (and accuracy) of census data makes it relatively easy to measure local contextual change.

The chapters that follow consider the context of church growth, but they also look very closely at the power of the church as an institution. These are the most balanced studies to date on church growth and decline. What factors are related to growth or decline at the local level? We have identified

eight areas for comment. Not all are major sources of growth (or decline), but all address serious church growth concerns. This list may be used as a guide when reading the chapters that follow.

**1. Members of growing churches exhibit greater institutional commitment and greater desire for growth than members of plateaued and declining churches.**

According to the studies by Hadaway and Donahue and Benson, members of growing churches are more active, on average, than members of nongrowing churches. Commitment and interest levels are higher. Growing churches “feel” different from nongrowing churches—and this climate difference is as much a result of growth as it is a cause. Still, in growing churches, there is a sense that this is “the place to be.” Members don’t want to miss out if they are in town, so they attend more regularly.

Further, the chapter on evangelism by Hadaway and the chapter by Royle show that the “desire” for growth is related to both increased membership and additions. Desire for growth leads to institutional actions designed to produce growth. The fact that members want to grow also helps churches in other ways. Churches that desire growth seem friendlier and more welcoming to newcomers. Such churches exude a different “spirit” that visitors find attractive.

**2. Growing churches emphasize outreach and (or) evangelism.**

Outreach seems to be the single most important action a church can take if it wants to grow. Even though some authors have minimized the effects of evangelism in reaching the unchurched (see Inskeep, chapter 5), the empirical evidence suggests that outreach is important to church growth. The effects of outreach and evangelism are reported in the chapters by Royle, Hadaway, Olson, and Thompson, Carroll, and Hoge. In fact, this is the most consistent finding in the section.

The chapters in this section employ a broader definition of evangelism than door-to-door witnessing or street-corner preaching. The relationship is between recruitment efforts (including evangelism) and growth. As Olson puts it, the key is an “outward orientation.” Churches that are primarily concerned with their own needs are unlikely to grow.

The importance of outreach, evangelism, and recruitment cannot be overemphasized. Indeed, evangelistic activity is the only program variable that retains a strong relationship to growth when statistical controls are in effect. Quality worship, Christian education, and many other programmatic

variables are related to growth, but most have little independent effect. By contrast, the independent effect of evangelistic activity is quite strong.

### **3. Growing churches are newer and younger.**

Older churches and churches dominated by older persons are less likely to grow than newer churches and churches with a large proportion of younger adults. The presence of school-age children also seems to help.

Newer churches tend to grow faster than older churches. This is another consistent finding in the section. Even when other factors are controlled, the age of a church is strongly related to church membership change in Hadaway's evangelism chapter and in the chapter by Donahue and Benson. Also, in the previous denominational section, the chapter by Marler and Hadaway shows that church age is strongly related to church growth in very different denominations. It is not so much that old age hurts; it is that younger age helps.

New churches have a "window of opportunity" for growth. After about fifteen years, however, the likelihood for growth drops greatly. To a certain extent, the growth of young churches reflects their location. Many are in growing suburbs (see Marler and Hadaway). But even when we control for population growth, the influence of (young) age remains. As Olson suggests elsewhere (Olson, 1989), the members of newer churches have fewer close friendship ties in the church, and most persons desire more friends. Newer churches can integrate newcomers more easily than older churches where friendship cliques are well defined and difficult to join.

Younger church members also help congregations grow. This is evident in chapters by Hadaway, Donahue, and Benson, and Thompson, Carroll, and Hoge. Churches that are dominated by older members present a number of barriers to growth. These churches tend to be located in older residential neighborhoods near inner cities. Their programs and worship styles do not fit the needs and interests of young families and single adults. For many reasons, then, churches with disproportionate numbers of older members are less attractive to younger prospects.

As a church ages the situation grows worse. Members die or move away, and they are not replaced. The concentration of older persons increases and the church becomes progressively less likely to attract young adults. By contrast, churches that are dominated by young families do tend to grow. Such churches tap into the largest population cohort. Again, some of this success is a result of sheer demographics. For example, churches located in growing suburbs have a "ready supply" of young families. Churches in older neighborhoods, however, have proportionately fewer young families. Of course,

demographics are not the whole story. Young adults are a hard-to-reach population. Churches that are able to reach this group are doing something programmatically beyond business as usual. They are offering programs and activities that no one else is offering, or they are offering a superior product (program). Baby boomers, after all, are church shoppers who make the "church choice" only after careful deliberation.

**4. The influence of demographic variables has decreased, but it remains important.**

Population growth, particularly as evidenced by new housing construction, remains a major source of church growth. Churches in growing areas grow faster, on average, than churches located in areas of population stagnation and decline. This is true for all churches, white or black (see Marler and Hadaway in this volume). This is hardly a surprise. Most clergy know from experience that churches in growing suburbs are more likely to grow than churches in older neighborhoods. As Olson suggests, however, the slowing rate of population change in urban America (due to population growth, population decline, racial transition, and white flight) means that the influence of demographic factors is reduced. Fewer churches are surrounded by booming suburban neighborhoods, and fewer churches experience rapid neighborhood transition. The growth of "programmatically poor" churches in suburban neighborhoods is less likely—as is the decline of "programmatically rich" churches in racially changing communities. The result is a lower correlation between population change and church growth. The potential influence remains, but when population change slows, the influence of the context decreases.

Yet the context of the church cannot be ignored because all churches are affected by their settings. *The character of the context makes it that much easier or that much harder for a church to grow.* Population growth in the form of newer housing helps churches grow, as does a large proportion of baby boomer families. Racial transition and large percentages of older persons lessen the chances for growth.

**5. The influence of congregational conservatism has never been strong and may have diminished.**

Earlier studies of United Presbyterian and Southern Baptist congregations showed a modest relationship between conservatism and church growth. Current research shows no increase between the two. In fact, conservatism remains a minor correlate of growth among Southern Baptist churches. And

by contrast, Thompson, Carroll, and Hoge find that there is a small association between growth and *liberalism* among Presbyterian churches.

A connection between conservatism and growth is implied in the work of Dean Kelley (*Why Conservative Churches Are Growing*). Kelley's major point, of course, has nothing to do with conservatism per se. His primary thesis is that "strict churches are strong." "Social strength" tends to be accompanied by growth; and strict churches tend to be conservative. The connection is not direct, but it follows that conservative churches should be growing. They are, or at least they were, but the reasons for this growth have little to do with strictness. There is no clear relationship between strictness at the local congregational level and church growth.

### **6. Correlates of growth vary by location and church type.**

Among other factors, congregation type and location affect growth. Smaller churches and churches in rural areas are less affected by their contexts and by institutional change. This finding is consistent with past research on church growth. In rural areas and small towns, rapid growth is difficult. At the same time, rapid decline is very unlikely. This tendency toward stability results in part from demographic factors. Rural areas and small towns experience less dramatic changes in population than metropolitan neighborhoods. There is no suburbanization, no urban decay, no white flight, no racial transition, no rapid population growth, and no rapid population decline in most rural areas. Institutional factors also are at work. Rural churches and small town churches are slow to change. These congregations are often dominated by longtime members who prefer that things be done "like they've always been done." For contextual and institutional reasons, therefore, very little seems to impact the growth of churches in small towns and rural areas.

For churches in metropolitan areas, the situation is entirely different. Great demographic possibilities exist for growth and decline. In addition, urban churches appear to be more open to change than rural churches.

Region is also an important factor in relation to growth. Church growth is more likely in certain parts of the nation—particularly in the South—than it is elsewhere. In general, the subculture of the South supports churches. In some declining mainline denominations, growth is rare outside the South. Regional factors, then, do encourage growth. As shown by Thompson, Carroll, and Hoge, correlates of growth are stronger in the South among Presbyterians. Programmatic growth strategies work in this region. In the Northeast, by contrast, growth is difficult regardless of what a pastor and a church try to do.

**7. Denominational affiliation is a significant correlate of growth, over and above the actions taken by a local church.**

A culture of growth is not limited to a region, however. As discrete subcultures themselves, religious denominations either encourage or discourage growth (see Marler and Roozen, chapter 12). The liberal/mainline subculture, for example, is not particularly friendly to church growth. Even when researchers control for evangelism, commitment, location, and other factors, the churches in conservative denominations do better than the churches in more liberal denominations. This is seen in the chapter by Olson and in the earlier chapter by Marler and Hadaway. In liberal/mainline denominations, growing churches are suspect. The pastor of a large, growing United Church of Christ congregation in Connecticut even suggested that other mainline pastors think that the pastor of a growing church must have “sold out” in order to grow—resorting to questionable marketing techniques and other “gimmicks.”

In some denominations, an ethos exists that encourages growth-related activities and insulates the denomination from social change. Evangelical churches, apparently, are less affected by their social contexts. Their aggregate rates of growth may parallel the trends seen in mainline denominations, but evangelical churches tend to fare better in both “good” times and “bad.”

**8. Programmatic efforts to achieve growth often result in more activity than sustained growth.**

The “activity effect” is seen clearly in the two program evaluation chapters (Royle, chapter 7 and Hadaway, chapter 6). Growth consultations and programmed growth campaigns often produce a flurry of activity in a local church. The activity may produce short-term growth if the level of excitement in the congregation grows, and if that excitement is channeled into activities designed to attract and incorporate visitors. But such growth rarely lasts very long.

This finding is a little distressing because one of the major reasons for studying growth and decline is to determine what changes must be made in order to transform nongrowing churches into growing churches. Clearly, doing so is a difficult process. Why? Because in order to grow substantially and to continue to grow, lasting changes must be made in the structure and character of nongrowing churches. Church growth writers contend that we now know what churches must do in order to grow. The problem is getting churches to be what they ought to be and do what they ought to do. This is a tall order because actions flow from identity—they cannot simply be applied like a thin veneer to the surface of a church. The change must be deeper.

Efforts to change the orientation of nongrowing churches often result in actions that produce short-term growth. The activity and new directions provided by a church growth plan, for example, often produce a sense of excitement and heightened commitment. Visitors are attracted to the church, and members tell their friends about it. More growth results, but the growth will not last unless growth-producing actions are: (a) clearly connected to a congregation's sense of overall purpose and direction, and (b) intentionally structured into the daily organizational life of the church. Unfortunately, this does not happen in many cases. After a year of growth, most churches that participate in programmed evangelistic or church growth efforts settle back into previous patterns of stability or decline (see Hadaway, chapter 6).

The distinction between "what is" and "what can be" is a major sticking point for social researchers and advocates of the church growth movement. The empirical analysis of social researchers focuses on "what is." "What can be" only follows by projection: Findings may lead to programmatic implications. But by and large, social scientists avoid saying "do this and it will help your church grow" or "don't do this because it tends to lead to decline." Without clearly stated implications, it is difficult for denominational program leaders or local church pastors to use social research on church growth.

By contrast, church growth writers are very practical. They tell church leaders what to do and how to do it. They are less concerned with "what is" and more concerned with "what can be." This future orientation breeds a tendency to move rapidly from casual observations of exemplar growing churches to general prescriptions for action. Most church growth writers depend upon case studies of large, growing congregations rather than careful analysis of the factors associated with growth and decline across a sample of congregations. The implication of this method is that nongrowing churches can grow by emulating the activities of a few "successful" growing congregations. "What worked for one church will work for another" is the guiding principle behind this approach. And while the maxim may prove true in some cases, it is still important that such strategies be tested to see how likely they are to produce the desired change across congregations.

More research is needed on church growth and decline, and the chapters included here fill part of that need. We now know much more about the characteristics associated with growth. In addition, we know more about the probable success (or failure) of specific programmatic actions. The next step is to integrate these findings with the existing literature and to create an ongoing process in which research leads to action—and in turn—to more evaluation. The process should continue, but first it must begin.