Chapter Ten

Congregational Growth and Decline in Indiana Among Five Mainline Denominations[1]

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Since the mid-1960s most mainline Protestant denominations have been losing members. This study of churches affiliated with five mainline denominations in Indiana reveals a similar pattern of membership loss. Between 1980 and 1988 all five denominations lost members, but they did so at dramatically different rates. Within Indiana, the Lutheran Church, Missouri Synod, lost only 2% of its members.[2] The United Church of Christ lost 6%, The United Methodist Church lost 10%, the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) lost 11%, and the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) lost a staggering 22% of their members between 1980 and 1988.

Discouraging as these figures may be to mainline church leaders, the denominational totals tell only part of the story. Not all mainline churches are declining. More than a quarter of the congregations included in this study had net gains in membership between 1980 and 1988, and one church grew by more than 1,200%. What accounts for these differences? Why are some mainline congregations growing, while most are declining? Are congregations at the mercy of changing times? Or are there steps a church can take to turn things around even when they belong to denominations that are in decline?

This chapter identifies a variety of factors affecting the growth and decline of congregations. Some are beyond the control of congregations, but others are factors a church can change. Six important conclusions arise from these findings.

1. Congregations that emphasize growth and evangelism can grow (or at least slow their decline), but only 37% of the churches in this study emphasize growth.
2. If churches want to grow, they need to have an openness to change and an orientation to serving the needs of persons outside the local congregation rather than just the needs of current members.

3. Emphasizing social action programs may limit growth somewhat, but this is not a cause of denominational decline for mainline denominations, since only 8% of these churches have such an emphasis.
4. As in previous studies (e.g., Hoge and Roozen, 1979), membership trends are heavily influenced by community population trends. However, the influence of demographic factors declined during the 1980s in Indiana because there was less variation in population growth rates among Indiana communities.
5. The growth rates of small churches and churches in smaller communities are less affected by community population changes than are the growth rates of large churches and churches in larger communities.
6. Denominational differences in growth rates are major, but are not explainable using the variables contained in this study.

Data Sources and Methods

The data for this chapter come from three sources, a survey conducted in congregations, census data at the zip code level, and church yearbook data (including membership and giving statistics). The census data were purchased from National Planning Data Corporation and are organized by zip code for all zip codes in Indiana. The data include actual census data for 1970 and 1980, as well as estimates for 1984 and projections for 1989.

The survey was conducted in early 1986. Questionnaires were mailed to 1,424 congregations in the state of Indiana associated with six denominations (the Christian Church [Disciples of Christ], the Episcopal Church, the Lutheran Church, Missouri Synod, the Presbyterian Church [U.S.A.], the United Church of Christ, and The United Methodist Church). Each church received a single questionnaire to be filled out by the pastor or a knowledgeable church leader. The questionnaire asked for self-descriptions of the congregation, program emphases, methods used by the church to increase membership and giving, presence or absence of church conflicts, subjective assessments of changes in the surrounding community, and similarities or differences between congregation members and people in the local community. The survey did not ask about actual levels of membership or giving since this information is available from church yearbooks.

A total of 641 usable questionnaires were completed for a return rate of approximately 45%.[3] However, most of the analysis below is based on a smaller group of 457 churches for which it was possible to match questionnaire data with census data and membership data for both 1980 and 1988.[4] Because the appropriate annual yearbook data for the Episcopal congrega-

tions were not easily available at the time of data entry, the Episcopal churches (only thirty churches) were excluded from this analysis.

This chapter uses regression methods to identify factors related to percentage change in church membership from 1980 to 1988.[5] Following Carroll, Dudley, and McKinney (1986), this chapter examines four types of predictor variables: context, identity, process, and program. Contextual variables include census data for the zip code in which the church is located, as well as estimates of community characteristics made by the questionnaire respondents. Variables having to do with church identity include denominational affiliation, church size, and assessments made by questionnaire respondents concerning where their church fits on a series of seven-point scales in which the two end points of the scales are opposite descriptions of congregations. For example, respondents were asked to indicate whether their congregation is "more influenced by its history and tradition" (coded as a 1) or "more influenced by contemporary ideas and trends" (coded as a 7). The only process variable contained in this study concerns the presence or absence of major church conflicts in the past ten years. The program variables include per capita giving in 1980, sources of church income, and a series of questionnaire items in which respondents indicate how much various types of programs are emphasized at the respondent's church and how effectively these programs are carried out.

The order of these categories (context, identity, process, and program) corresponds to the amount of direct influence a congregation can have over the variables in each category. Congregations can do little, short of relocation, to improve their community context. A church can change its identity, but only slowly. Congregational identity is largely the product of recent history. Thus, to remake congregational identity, one must make new history, a process that takes time.

Churches have even more control over process variables, variables like communication patterns, methods of decision making, and presence or absence of church conflicts. However, such changes require that leaders and members first have an awareness of the current state of these processes and know how to change them.

Among the four categories of variables examined in this chapter, congregations have the most control over church programs. Leaders and members usually know what these programs are. They are clearly reflected in budget statements and weekly bulletins. This explicitness makes programs the easiest to change (assuming change is desired!).

By separating these variables into four types, it is possible not only to see which factors have the most influence on church growth rates, but also to identify those characteristics that a church can most effectively change if it wants to grow.

Factors Related to Growth

Table 10.1 gives an overall view of the relative importance of the various growth-related factors. The variable descriptions in the left-hand column are grouped into the four general categories described above: context, identity, process, and program. Within these categories, similar variables are grouped into clusters. The first numerical column shows the zero-order correlations (without statistical controls) of these variables with percentage membership change (1980 to 1988). While the data set includes many variables that could potentially be included in regression equations, Table 10.1 includes only variables that correlate with congregational growth at the .10 level of significance or less.

The second column shows the standardized betas for regressions using only the variables in each cluster. The third column shows the proportion of total variance in growth rates (adjusted R^2) that is accounted for by the variables in each cluster. The fourth column shows the adjusted R^2 for each of the four categories of variables.[6]

The last column shows the increment in adjusted R^2 added by each category of variables, that is, the additional proportion of variation in growth that is explained by a category of variables above and beyond that which is explained by earlier categories of variables. Thus, the value shown in this column for program variables is .09, indicating that church programs account for an additional 9% of the variation in church growth above and beyond the effects of the other four categories of variables. The final row, at the bottom of Table 10.1, shows that, taken together, the variables "explain" about one-quarter of the variations in church growth rates. That is, the adjusted R^2 for all variables equals .269.

Context

Taken together, the demographic (contextual) variables explain a little less than 9% of the variance in growth rates in this study. Table 10.1 shows that the adjusted R^2 for the contextual variables is .086. This figure is considerably lower than the results reported by Thompson, Carroll, and Hoge (elsewhere in this volume) for Presbyterian churches. Moreover, community context accounts for only about 32% of the total variance explained by all the variables in this study of Indiana churches. This figure is quite low compared to the findings reported in the earlier volume (Hoge and Roozen, 1979) in which contextual variables accounted for more than half of the explained variance in growth rates.

TABLE 10.1
Variables in Final Analysis: Zero-order Correlations, Standardized Regression Betas Within Clusters, and Explained Variance for Clusters and Types

	Zero-order correlation	Standardized Beta	Adj. R^2 for cluster	Adj. R^2 for type	Increment to Adj. R^2
1. Community Context					
A. Census Data					
Percent Change in Population 1980–89	.2123	.130*			
Median Age 1980	−.1199	−.130*			
Percent Hispanic 1980	−.0935	−.074			
Percent of Adults with 9-11 Years of Formal Education 1980	−.1616	−.081	.052		
B. Informant's Assessments of Community					
New Single Family Housing Development	.1739	.153*			
General Business Development	.1339	.095*			
School Closings	−.0936	−.077	.041		
C. Informant's Assessments of Similarity Between					
Congregation and Community Racial Similarity	.1565	.131*			
Economic Status Similarity	.1377	.109*	.031	.086	.086
2. Congregational Identity					
A. Informant's Assessments of Congregation					
Congregation is more influenced by "its history and tradition" than by "contemporary ideas and trends."	−.1788	−.177*			
Congregation is primarily oriented to serving "its own members" rather than "the world beyond its membership."	−.0827	−.014			
Congregation is "known as a prestigious church in the area" more than "not considered one of the status churches in the area."	.0323[1]	.039			
Congregation's approach to individual salvation is "decidedly evangelistic, stressing a definite conversion experience" rather than emphasizing "education, nurture, and gradual growth in faith."	.0400	.036	.028		
B. Denomination					
United Church of Christ	.0717	.055			
Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)	−.0003	−.008			
Lutheran Church, Missouri Synod	.2096	.159*			
Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)	−.2644	−.208*			
United Methodist Church	.0110	−[2]	.084		
C. Church Size in 1980	−.0474[1]	−.047	.000	.127	.090
3. Process					
Major Church Conflict in Past 10 Years	−.0700	−.070	.003	.003	.000
4. Program					
A. Current Church Program Priorities					
Christian Education (Youth and Adults)	.1086	.100*			
Local Evangelism	.0941	.098*			
Social Action (Study and/or Action by Members)	−.0725	−.082*			
World Mission Support	.0737	.076	.023		
B. Current Effectiveness of Programs					
Worship	.1015	.099*			
Local Evangelism	.0701	.065	.010		

	Zero-order correlation	Standardized Beta	Adj. R^2 for cluster	Adj. R^2 for type	Increment to Adj. R^2
C. Programs Receiving Greater Emphasis Compared with 10 Years Ago					
Christian Education (Youth and Adults)	.0913	.074			
Local Evangelism	.0542	.073			
World Mission Support	.1258	.130*	.020		
D. Strength of Stewardship Efforts					
Stewardship Education Programs	.0701	.104*			
Overall Emphasis on Stewardship 10 Years Ago	−.0652	−.078	.010		
E. Finances					
Per Member Giving in 1980	.1359	.130*			
Percent of Income from Endowments	−.0848	−.044			
Percent of Income from Regular Offerings	.1456	.111*			
Percent of Income from Special Offerings	−.0672	−.029	.031		
F. Importance of Church Growth					
Overall Membership Recruitment Emphasis	.2074	.175*			
Preaching and Personal Involvement of the Pastor in Membership Recruitment	.1509	.094*	.046	.103	.090
Total Adjusted R^2 All Variables			.269		

[1]Both congregational prestige and church size become much more important variables when entered into regression along with the denominational dummy variables (see text for explanation).

[2]No Beta is shown for the Methodist dummy variable since dummy variable regression requires that one of the denominations not be included in the regression equation.

The apparent drop in ability of demographic variables to explain church growth may be due to differences in the number and quality of variables (both contextual and noncontextual) used in this, as compared to earlier studies. Alternatively, the importance of demographic variables may actually have decreased since the 1970s. While there are important differences between the variables used in this study and the variables used in previous studies, two pieces of evidence suggest that contextual variables may have lost some of their explanatory power over time.

First, others in this volume report similar declines in the importance of contextual variables. Second, among the 899 Indiana congregations for which I have membership figures in 1970, 1980, and 1989, the correlations between population change and church growth decrease considerably from the 1970s to the 1980s. In the period from 1970 to 1980 the correlation is .253 (R^2 = .064). In the period from 1980 to 1988 it is .186[7] (R^2 = .035), almost a 50% drop in the ability of population change to explain membership change.

What would cause such a drop? A quick study of population trends in Indiana shows that in the communities where these churches are located, average population increases were almost 10% during the 1970s, but fell to only +3% in the 1980s. More importantly, there was less variation in population growth rates during the 1980s,[8] that is, the gap between the most rapidly declining and most rapidly growing areas is not as great. During the same time the means and standard deviations of church growth rates changed little.

In regression and correlation, when one reduces the range of variation of one variable while the variation in the second variable is constant, correlations and R^2 values will diminish even if the underlying causal process is unchanged. This appears to have happened in Indiana. During the 1980s there were fewer differences in community growth rates that could be used to explain differences in church growth rates. Thus, the correlations have diminished even if the potential effects of major community changes have not.

Table 10.1 shows three separate clusters of contextual variables. The first comes from actual census data. Within this cluster, percentage change in population is the most important predictor. Churches are more likely to grow in growing communities. Additionally, mainline churches appear not to grow well in communities with a large proportion of older residents. This is probably because such communities often have fewer new, and as yet unchurched, persons moving in who are available for recruitment. Finally, mainline churches also do not do well in communities in which the residents are dissimilar to most mainline attenders in their race and education. They grow poorly in areas with many Hispanics and where average educational levels are low.

The variables in the second cluster are based on the questionnaire respondent's assessment of community trends. While these assessments are not as

objective as the actual census figures, they correlate well with church growth (perhaps because respondents judge community trends by church trends) and moderately well with the actual population changes.

The third cluster of contextual variables differs from most previous studies since the items focus on the degree of similarity between the congregation and the community. Mainline congregations grow best in communities that are racially and economically similar to the congregation.

While the contextual variables appear less important than in earlier studies, their role is still significant. Unfortunately, there is little a church can do, other than relocation, to change its demographic context. However, it is worth noting that large churches and churches in large communities appear to be more affected by contextual variables than small churches and churches in small communities.

Table 10.2 shows the adjusted R^2 values from regressions predicting church growth using only the contextual variables. In the upper part of Table 10.2 the churches have been broken into groupings of approximately equal size (based on membership in 1980). The growth rates of the smallest churches in the study, those with less than 162 members in 1980, are not affected in any measurable way by the contextual variables used here. They neither grow nor decline in response to demographic change.

Similarly, churches in small communities are little affected by the demographic trends of their communities. Table 10.2 shows that the impact of contextual variables increases with the number of people living in the same zip code as the church. Unfortunately the data set does not include the actual populations of the towns or cities in which churches are located. However, a careful comparison of these towns and cities with the population of each church's zip code shows that city size and zip code population are very closely related. There are a few small zip codes located in large cities, but not enough to significantly affect the overall results in Table 10.2. Zip code population is a fairly good proxy measure for community size.

The findings in Table 10.2 are quite robust, that is, they are consistent over time and with different subsets of churches. The same two patterns are apparent in separate analyses (not shown here) for the period of 1970 to 1980. Moreover similar results have been obtained by Thompson, Carroll, and Hoge (in this volume), Roof et al. (1979), and McKinney (1979). Other analyses also not shown here suggest further that church size and community size work together in an additive fashion. Small churches in small zip codes are affected the least by community population changes. Small churches in large communities and large churches in small communities are moderately affected by population change. Finally, large churches in large zip codes are most responsive to population change.

TABLE 10.2
Variance in Church Growth Explained by Contextual Variables by Church and Community Size

	Median Number of Cases	Membership Change 1980–88	Variance Explained by Context Adj. R^2
Total Sample	440	−8.8	.086
Members in 1980			
1–161	106	−7.2	.000
162–289	114	−8.0	.115
290–523	110	−9.6	.204
524 and over	117	−8.8	.130
Zip Code Population in 1980			
1–4,282	109	−7.2	.014
4,283–14,166	110	−5.6	.106
14,167–27,888	113	−10.4	.132
27,888 and over	116	−11.2	.198

Identity

Returning to Table 10.1, one sees that of the four categories of variables, the variables measuring congregational identity are the strongest predictors of membership change. They account for nearly 13%[9] of the variance in church growth and about 47% of the total explained variance in this study. This strength is largely due to the denominational affiliation variables (discussed below), but other church identity factors are important.

The first cluster of identity variables includes informants' self-assessments of the congregation. Among this cluster the first variable is most important. Respondents at the most rapidly growing churches say their churches are more influenced by "contemporary ideas and trends" than by "history and tradition." While some might interpret this distinction as a proxy for theological liberalism versus conservatism, the correlations of this item with other questionnaire items suggest a quite different pattern, a pattern that explains why this item is a predictor of membership growth.

Churches that are more influenced by "contemporary ideas and trends" are less likely to say the congregation is primarily oriented to "serving its own

members" as opposed to "the world beyond its membership" (r = −.395), more likely to say they engage in social action (r = .224), more likely to place a strong emphasis on church growth (r = .199), more likely to say they have effective evangelism programs (r = .136), more likely to have a minister who puts a high priority on church growth (r = .127), and less likely to say they are "one large family" rather than a "loosely knit association of individuals and groups" (r = −.099).

In other words, an emphasis on "contemporary ideas and trends" as opposed to "history and tradition" reflects an outward rather than an inward focus, a focus on the needs of nonmembers and people outside the church as opposed to current members. Lyle Schaller has consistently argued (e.g., 1968, 1981) that such an outward focus is a necessary prerequisite for membership growth. On the other hand, it is natural for a church with an inward focus to stress "history and tradition," to focus on the past and the practices of the past. Such practices once served current members well and continue to meet their needs (else they would not still be attending). But past practices do not often serve the needs of potential new members. To attract new members, Schaller argues that a church must have an openness to change and an emphasis on programs that serve nonmembers (e.g., evangelism, social action).

Congregational prestige, the third item in the self-assessment cluster, has a low correlation and standardized beta. However, this variable becomes more important when it is included along with the denominational variables in regressions. This is because the denominations differ in the prestige accorded to their churches by the questionnaire respondents. (Respondents in the denomination with the smallest membership losses, the Lutheran Church, Missouri Synod, were least likely to describe their church as "prestigious.") But within each denomination, more prestigious churches fared better than less prestigious churches.

Similarly, Table 10.1 suggests that 1980 church size, the third identity cluster, has little effect on church growth. But like prestige, size becomes important when it is included along with denomination in regression equations. Once the differences in average church size across denominations (due to different definitions and standards of membership) are taken into account, it becomes apparent that, within these denominations, smaller churches declined the least and grew the most. However, one should view this finding cautiously. Marler and Hadaway (1992) found that the relationship between size and growth rates varies by denomination.

Table 10.1 shows that denominational affiliation affects congregational growth more than any other variable in this study. While unsurprising to those who have read Dean Kelley's *Why Conservative Churches Are Growing* (Kelley, 1972), it is perhaps the most puzzling finding of this study. The

data examined here suggest that denominational affiliation is very important, but these data reveal nothing about *why* denomination is so important. What is it about belonging to a particular denomination that affects congregational growth rates? In technical language, the variance in church growth rates explained by denominational affiliation is not shared with any other variables in the study (including measures of evangelism and emphasis put on church growth). Including these and other variables into regression alongside denominational variables fails to reduce the betas for the denominational variables. In simpler terms, none of the other variables measured in this study can explain away, or explain why, some denominations are declining faster than others.

Obviously there is something about denominational affiliation that explains the major differences in their growth rates both nationally and in Indiana. Unfortunately, this study contains no variables that account for these differences. Notably, it does not include measures of theological conservatism or strictness, the variables most often thought to explain denominational growth rates (Kelley, 1972; Iannaccone, 1989). Denominational differences are important, but this study cannot tell us why.

Process

As shown in Table 10.1, churches that experienced "serious" conflicts over "theological, social, financial, administrative, interpersonal, or other issues" during the past ten years were slightly less likely to grow than churches without such conflicts. This finding is unsurprising but important. A better measure of church conflict might show an even stronger negative correlation with membership growth.

Program

Churches that want to grow can grow or at least slow their declines. This is the most important finding from among the program variables, and one of the most important findings in this study. This longtime assertion of church growth advocates (e.g., Wagner, 1976) appears to receive strong confirmation even among these mostly declining mainline congregations. This assertion is supported by the adjusted R^2 for the last program cluster, by the betas for variables indicating that evangelism receives a high priority or a higher priority than it did ten years ago,[10] and by the findings of Hadaway and of Thompson, Carroll, and Hoge (in this volume).

The good news is that churches that want to grow can grow. The bad news is that few of the churches studied here emphasize growth. Only 37% of the

respondents in the sample say that their church places a "strong" or "very strong" emphasis on membership recruitment. This suggests that membership declines have more to do with a desire for growth than with the techniques of church growth programs. Churches that place a low value on membership growth, compared to other goals, are unlikely to emphasize recruitment programs. If denominational leaders present such churches with elaborate plans for growth, plans that may have worked in more willing congregations, little growth seems likely. As I discuss below, factors related to congregational identity play an important role in determining which churches want to grow and thus the likelihood that they will implement programs that lead to membership growth.

The next most important program cluster concerns finances. Those churches that had higher per capita giving at the beginning of the study period (1980) were more likely to grow in the years that followed. This could mean that higher per capita giving reflects higher member commitment (a quality likely to attract outsiders). Or it could be that higher giving levels enable these churches to fund new staff and programs that attract outsiders.

Interestingly, churches that grew between 1980 and 1988 had *lower* per capita giving in 1988, at the end of the study period. This initially puzzling result confirms a similar observation based on a national sample of Christian (Disciples of Christ) congregations (Meyers and Olson, 1991). What appears to happen is that growing churches necessarily have many new members, members who initially, at least, are likely to give less money to the church, thus lowering per capita giving. Attracting new members probably serves to increase temporarily the number of "free riders" who depend upon the commitment of old-timers to foot the bill.

Results for the stewardship program cluster suggest that growth is also associated with the strength of stewardship education programs. If such programs increase per capita giving, they may encourage growth for the reasons discussed above. The negative relation of growth with strength of stewardship programs ten years ago probably reflects the tendency for growing churches to think they do most things better than they did in the past.

The variables in the first and third program clusters suggest that an emphasis, or an increased emphasis, on evangelism may lead to growth. Similarly, churches that emphasize world mission have higher growth rates. Perhaps this is because such an emphasis is compatible with evangelical activities. Alternatively it may reflect a general concern for nonmembers, a concern that appears to make churches more open to growth. Finally, a strong emphasis on Christian education is also associated with growth.

The correlation and beta for the social action variable in the first program cluster suggests that churches whose members place a stronger emphasis on

social action relative to other church programs are somewhat less likely to grow. However, an emphasis on social action cannot explain the membership losses of mainline denominations since very few of the churches in this study have such an emphasis. When respondents were asked to rank seven program areas according to the emphasis each area receives in their church (the source of the variables in the first program cluster), 65% of the respondents said that social action received the least emphasis. Only 8% ranked social action fourth or higher. While these few churches have somewhat lower growth rates, a social action emphasis cannot account for the membership decline of mainline denominations.

The second program cluster includes items asking about the effectiveness of programs rather than the emphasis these programs receive. Not surprisingly, effective evangelism programs are associated with growth. But one cannot tell if respondents estimated the "effectiveness" of evangelism programs by asking themselves whether or not the church had been growing.

The effectiveness of worship is also positively related to congregational growth. Again, respondents may estimate "effectiveness" based on how well their church is growing. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that while only sixteen of the churches rated the effectiveness of their worship as "unsatisfactory," these same churches experienced an average decline of 20% between 1980 and 1988. This compares to an average loss of 5% among the remaining churches. Worship is important for these mainline churches. In fact, 83% of the informants said that worship receives more emphasis than any other church program.

The Critical Role of an Outward Orientation

Table 10.1 highlights the factors that are most strongly associated with membership growth in congregations. However, some of these factors are beyond the control of most congregations. Contextual variables are important, but churches cannot change their context unless they relocate. Similarly, denominational affiliation is important, but most churches are not willing or able to switch denominations (and such a change probably would not help). In contrast, churches have more control over programs. Table 10.1 shows that program variables play an important role in growth. This is an important finding.

Churches that want to grow can take positive steps to improve their membership trends. Stating matters in this way, however, forces the question of growth back one step. Why do some churches want to grow while others do not? The fact that only 37% of these churches place a high emphasis on new member recruitment suggests that many churches place a low priority on

growth. Without such an emphasis, churches are unlikely to institute the programs that can foster growth. What separates these churches from those that place a high priority on new member recruitment?

The critical difference appears to be between churches that have an outward orientation (emphasizing the needs of nonmembers) versus churches with an inward orientation (focusing on members' needs more than nonmembers). This difference is reflected in many of the church identity variables, variables that turn out to be good predictors of the emphasis put on new member recruitment.

For example, recruitment programs receive more emphasis in churches that are primarily oriented towards reaching the world beyond the members rather than "serving [their] own members" (r = .209), in churches that are more influenced by "contemporary ideas and trends" rather than "history and tradition" (r = .199), in large churches (r = .165), in churches that take a "decidedly 'activist'" approach to social issues (r = .148), and in churches whose approach to individual salvation is "decidedly evangelistic," stressing a definite conversion experience (r = .074).

Interestingly, both evangelistic and social activist churches are more likely to emphasize growth. What is important is an outward orientation focusing on nonmembers and a willingness to institute programs that serve their needs. Thus, while the presence or absence of certain programs has a direct effect on membership growth, church identity factors have an indirect, and perhaps more decisive effect on church growth. They determine whether a church will institute the programs that make growth possible.

There is a second way that an outward versus an inward focus affects growth. Churches that place a high emphasis on serving the needs of "the world beyond [the] membership" are much more affected by population trends. They grow more when their communities grow and they decline more when their communities decline. The correlation between population change and membership change among these churches is .303. In contrast, this correlation drops to .190 among churches that place a moderate emphasis on nonmembers' needs and drops even further to .134 among churches that put more emphasis on members' needs.[11]

The relationship between population growth and church growth is weakest among the churches with an inward focus. Such churches are less affected by demographic change. They retain more of their members when their community is in decline but they are also unable to recruit many new members when their community is growing. Why is this true?

Elsewhere (Olson, 1989) I argue that inward churches are likely to be churches where members are bound together by strong ties of fellowship leading to high retention but where the tightly-knit character of these ties

prevents the quick absorption of newcomers (leading to low recruitment). Longtime members (who are usually plentiful in such churches) have many rewarding family-like ties to one another. In fact, Schaller (1982) suggests that such churches, usually small churches, come closest to being a "ministry of the laity." Genuine caring and support is strong in these churches. Strong bonds of fellowship prevent members from leaving even when they become dissatisfied with other aspects of church life. Such churches resemble large families.

But strong fellowship ties are a two-edged sword. The longtime members of such churches, since they already have many rewarding church friendships, have little time, energy, or need to develop additional ties with potential newcomers. Thus newcomers find such churches cliquish, feel unaccepted and unloved, and leave to look for a more welcoming church. The saturation of church fellowship networks lowers recruitment potential, but the rewarding character of these ties keeps retention rates high.

Churches with an inward focus tend not to emphasize growth since growth requires the disruption of the large family of fellowship. After all, how many families would prefer to double or triple in size? And how many children truly rejoice at the birth of a new sibling? Growth requires a focus on nonmembers' needs and thus threatens to take away resources from current members. Moreover, the possible success of church growth programs threatens to dilute the richly rewarding family-like ties often found in inwardly directed churches.

The inward versus outward dimension may also explain why small churches and churches in small communities are not as affected by population change (see Table 10.2). Such churches are more likely to reveal identity traits characteristic of inwardness. For example, small churches are more likely to be describe themselves as "one large family" ($r = .228$), more likely to be influenced by "history and tradition" ($r = .140$) as opposed to "contemporary ideas and trends," and more likely to be oriented to "serving [their] own membership" ($r = .125$). These identity traits are also more likely to be found in churches located in smaller communities (partly because church size and zip code population are related [$r = .272$]). Thus a tendency towards inwardness among small churches and churches in small communities may also explain why these churches are so little affected by either community growth or decline.

The Will to Grow

This study suggests that churches, even churches in declining mainline denominations, can improve their membership statistics by placing a high

emphasis on growth. However, it also finds that many churches do not want to grow because growth threatens to disrupt the many benefits members receive from belonging to an inwardly focused congregation.

Leaders who want a church to grow must be concerned about the types of programs and techniques that best foster growth. But such programs are unlikely to succeed in inwardly focused churches. Thus leaders interested in growth must also think carefully about how to change the identity of such churches from an inward focus on members' needs to an outward vision for the needs of nonmembers. Leaders need to be aware that such changes threaten the loss of many valuable assets common to inwardly focused congregations, assets like strong ties of fellowship and caring. They also risk the loss of long-term members who are alienated by the changing church identity.

It may not be possible to preserve the benefits of inwardness and also have a strong outward focus conducive to membership growth. However, the best church growth plans and the best churches will be those that manage to do both well.