

Chapter Two

New Church Development and Denominational Growth (1950–1988):

Symptom or Cause?*

Penny Long Marler and C. Kirk Hadaway

*If you want to grow something to last a season—
plant flowers.*

*If you want to grow something to last a lifetime—
plant trees.*

*If you want to grow something to last through eternity—
plant churches.*

Anonymous, quoted in Hesselgrave (1980:38)

Statistics from several American Protestant denominations provide unprecedented opportunity to explore the impact of new church development. An analysis of the post-World War II period is especially critical as these several decades have witnessed a veritable “boom and bust” in both new church development (hereafter NCD) and denominational membership growth. Indeed, data are rich, if not perfect, enabling us to examine a few older theories and some newer hunches.

In a recent survey of twentieth-century Presbyterian new church development, Bullock (1991:27) concludes:

New church development is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for overall denominational membership growth. Vital denominations will engage in new church development and expand, regardless of the economics. Churches that lack a core vitality will decline. The lack of a strong new church development program, therefore, is as much a symptom of deeper underlying problems as it is the cause of denominational decline.

So, Bullock has determined that NCD is more likely a “symptom” of membership growth or vitality across a denomination. The inference is that simply

beginning an aggressive program of NCD will not guarantee membership growth in a given denomination. Instead, NCD appears to be just one component—albeit an important one—of a denomination-wide growth trend. While this claim seems plausible, Bullock provides little evidence of the specific factors that contribute to overall denominational “vitality.”

Bullock argues that the slowdown in NCD (and membership growth) is the direct result of: (1) changes in denominational priorities from evangelism and church extension to social justice issues; (2) the rising costs of new churches; and (3) in general, an increasingly specialized and fragmented denominational bureaucracy (see also Brooks, 1990). His observations are similar to those voiced years earlier by Ezra Earl Jones, a prominent United Methodist executive. Jones named high building costs, the over-churching of the suburbs in the 1950s, and the failure to meet the church development needs of racial and ethnic groups in the inner cities as the sources of denominational woes (Jones, 1976:10ff.).

However, even growing denominations—like the Southern Baptist Convention and the Assemblies of God—started fewer churches from the mid-1960s to the mid-1970s. Membership growth rates also declined among these evangelical denominations. During the same period, NCD in the mainline dropped perilously, and declines in membership followed. Several commentators point to the general social and political turmoil of those years as the source of the overall slowdown (Towns, Vaughan, and Seifert, 1987). Perhaps, but as Jones (1976) hints, it is also likely that past church extension activity and racial unrest were at least indirectly related. The white, middle-class suburbanization of the 1950s (and the accompanying “churching” of the population in these areas) exacerbated the social and economic problems of inner cities and their largely racial/ethnic populations (Winter 1962). Symptom or cause?

In response to a denomination-wide pinch during the 1960s, mainliners retreated to a “survival-goal” theme (Perry, 1979; see also Metz, 1967:103-16). The focus of denominational activity narrowed to institutional survival. And, in the push-and-pull of a number of interest groups, church extension was explicitly or implicitly adjudged too costly, too tainted by white, middle-class stigma, or too “evangelical.” Consequently, rates of NCD plunged—and so did overall denominational membership.

Evangelicals, on the other hand, translated membership declines as a lack of evangelistic zeal. They responded with increasing attention to personal witnessing programs, church planting, and the burgeoning “church growth” movement (Amberson, 1979; Brock, 1981; Chaney, 1982; Hesselgrave, 1980; Hodges, 1973; McGavran and Arn, 1974, 1977; Moorhous, 1975; Towns, 1975; Redford, 1978; Starr, 1978; Tidsworth, 1979; Wagner, 1976). The results in most cases included increases in NCD and renewed

membership growth—although percentage gains for most evangelical denominations began a downward turn in the 1980s (despite continued programs of church extension).

What is the lesson of the post-World War II period? Denomination-watchers conclude that economics, priorities, and careful planning are important. But most agree that something more is at work in denominations that thrive numerically in spite of adverse social, geographic, institutional, and economic circumstances. Bullock (1991:27) calls it vitality; Schaller (1991:229) dubs it "Great Commission Growth"; Melvin Hodges (1973:25-27), an Assemblies of God spokesperson, unabashedly calls it the Holy Spirit. Descriptively, the characteristic might be best labeled "resilience": the organizational ability to recover from or adjust easily to misfortune or change.

Happily, Schaller (1991), provides some handles for quantifying the complex relationship between NCD and denominational growth. These are measurable "hunches" that flow from his wealth of practice wisdom:

1. Newer denominations grow faster and start more churches than do older denominations.
2. Denominational growth is strongly related to two factors: new church development and growth in average congregation size.
3. Growing denominations have started at least 20% of their churches within the last twenty-five years.
4. New churches grow faster if they start larger, that is, with at least 200 at the first worship service.
5. Churches tend to grow fastest in high population areas experiencing rapid rates of in-migration.

Fortunately, the data on hand allow us to test Schaller's hypotheses—and even to extend them. For example, the growing number of racial/ethnic church starts and racial/ethnic affiliations raises questions about their contributions to denominational growth. On the subject of congregational size, Schaller's observation about increasing size is at odds with a hunch that the presence of a "superchurch" suppresses the number of new church starts in a given locale. These and other provocative possibilities are pursued in this study.

Because of our explicit interest in denominational growth and decline, NCD is examined with an eye to this larger relationship. With clear indebtedness to Schaller and others, the following analysis tests three primary assumptions:

Assumption 1. Growing denominations have higher rates of NCD and an increasing average congregation size.

Assumption 2. Growing denominations plant churches in areas that are “geographically favorable”—that is, in areas of high population growth, high in-migration rates, and/or unchurched people groups.

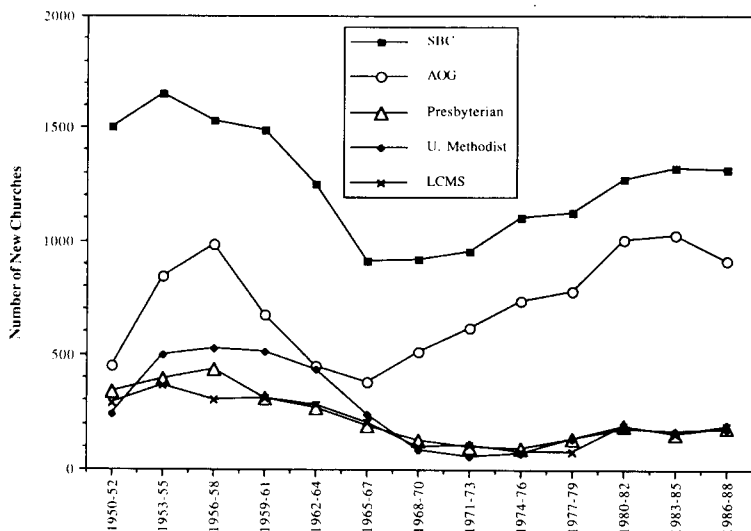
Assumption 3. Growing denominations demonstrate *resilience* to the degree that they adapt to changing social conditions and sustain growth across congregational age, size, and location factors.

Findings Related to Assumption Number 1: Rates of NCD, Average Congregation Size, and Denominational Growth

New Church Starts: Trends

The first step in unraveling a possible relationship between NCD and denominational growth is to examine trends in NCD in several denominations from 1950 to 1988. Our purpose is to show whether there is any discernible pattern to NCD activity in various denominations over time; and if there is, we wish to determine if such a pattern parallels trends in denominational growth over the same period. To accomplish this task, yearly data on NCD were collected from denominational agencies and matched with denominational yearbook data on membership. Complete information was obtained from five denominations.¹

FIGURE 2.1
New Churches for Five Denominations: 1950–1988



As can be seen in Figure 2.1, there is a definite pattern to NCD activity over the past twenty-eight years. For evangelical and mainline denominations alike, the late 1950s were very good years for NCD. By the early 1960s, however, NCD activity was beginning to subside. For the two evangelical denominations (the Southern Baptist Convention and the Assemblies of God) the low ebb was reached in the mid- to late-1960s, with the years 1965-67 recording the lowest levels of NCD. For mainline denominations, the decline began at the same time, but rather than turning around in the early 1970s, NCD levels continued to decline well into the 1970s.

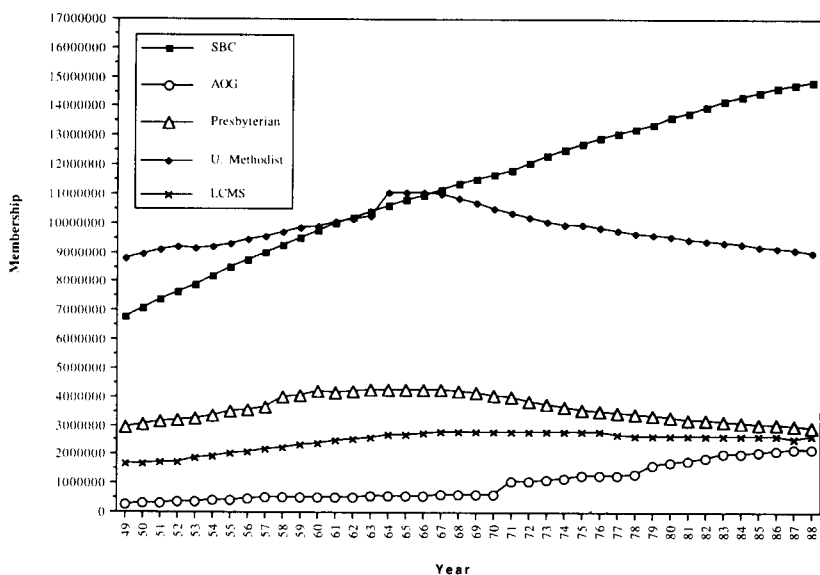
In the two evangelical denominations, NCD rebounded strongly in the 1970s. In recent years NCD activity in the Southern Baptist Convention has almost reached the levels recorded by this denomination in the 1950s. The Assemblies of God has done even better. This denomination started more new churches in the 1980s than it started in the 1950s.

New church development among mainline denominations also rebounded—although it took longer to do so. However, levels of NCD in the 1980s remain far below those recorded during the 1950s and the first half of the 1960s. In fact, the mainline denominations seem to have converged on about the same number of new churches to start each year (even though these denominations vary widely in size, and presumably in resources available for NCD).²

Trends in Denominational Membership

For anyone who has observed denominational trends over the past several decades, it should be apparent that the downturn in NCD occurred at about the same time that mainline denominations began to plateau and then decline in membership (see Kelley, 1977:3-8; Roozen and Carroll, 1979:22-25).³ In Figure 2.1, it can be seen that membership problems began in earnest around 1965-68 for the three mainline denominations that are included. The decline among United Methodists (UMC) and Presbyterians (PCUSA) began earlier than for the Lutheran Church, Missouri Synod (LCMS); it also has continued longer, and has been more serious in magnitude among these two mainline bodies.⁴ The two evangelical denominations, on the other hand, have grown during the entire twenty-eight-year period displayed in the figure. For Southern Baptists (SBC), the growth has been slow and steady, while for the Assemblies of God (AOG) it appears rapid and fitful. It should be noted, however, that the abrupt shifts in 1971 and 1979 for the Assemblies of God were statistical adjustments rather than one-year surges in membership growth.⁵ Even if we ignore the two artificial jumps, growth still has been impressive for the Assemblies of God.

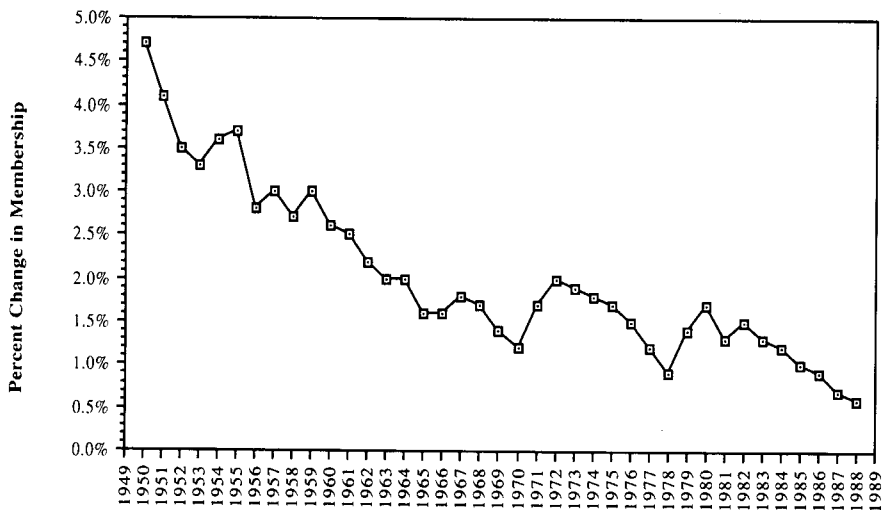
FIGURE 2.2
Membership for Five Denominations: 1949–1988



Mainline decline, when compared to continued evangelical growth, has led some observers to suggest that evangelical denominations have grown at the expense of the mainline, or that there has been something of a conservative resurgence during this period (see Roof and McKinney, 1987:23-25). The membership curves seen in Figure 2.2 show what seems to be steady growth—growth that was not affected by the social and cultural changes that devastated mainline denominations during the same period. This is misleading, however, because the figure does not show what happened to the *rate* of membership growth among evangelical denominations. Growth continued, but these denominations grew less rapidly than before. In Figure 2.3, for instance, it can be seen that the rate of membership growth for the Southern Baptist Convention declined almost unabated from 1950 to 1970. Southern Baptist churches avoided decline at an aggregate level, but the SBC certainly experienced no true resurgence during the past three decades. In fact, SBC growth is now at its lowest level ever.⁶ Clearly, the social and cultural changes affecting the mainline also affected evangelical denominations.

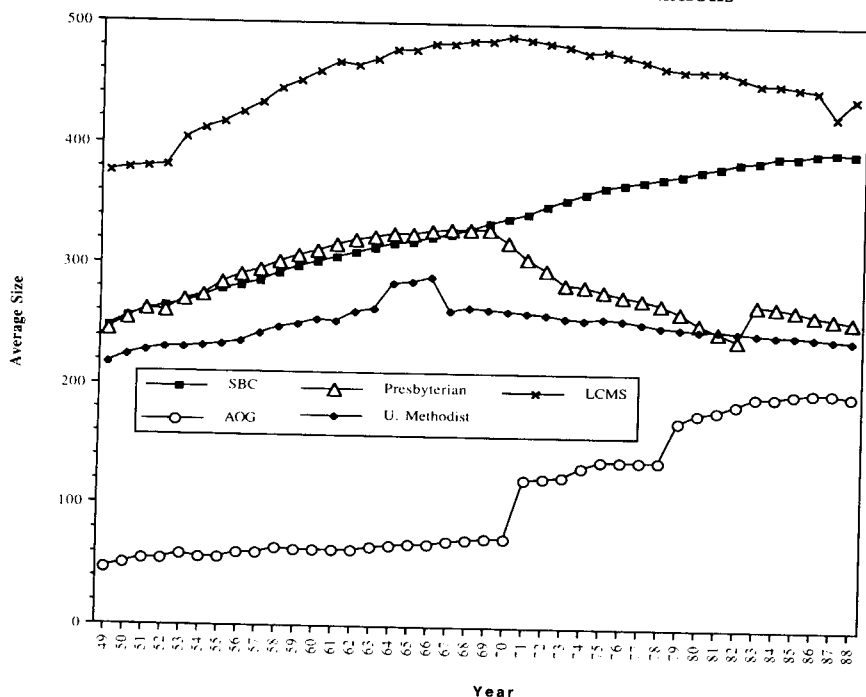
Another interesting twist to denominational membership trends over the past several decades is that changes in the average size of congregations precisely parallel the membership curves shown in Figure 2.2 (see Figure 2.4

FIGURE 2.3
Membership Change in the SBC by Year: 1950–1988



for trends in average size). As noted earlier, Schaller (1991) hypothesized that growing denominations should experience increases in average congregational size. His hypothesis is confirmed, and perhaps this should not be too surprising—since average congregational size is simply the total membership of a denomination divided by its number of churches. Still, the similarity between the patterns seems rather amazing, because it does not have to be so close. A growing denomination could record all of its gains through the accumulation of new small churches, and thereby decline in average size. On the other hand, a plateaued denomination *could* experience an increase in the average size of its congregations if it was closing many smaller churches. However, it would appear that a drop in average size of congregations seems to occur along with: (1) overall membership losses; (2) declines in a denomination's number of congregations; and (3) drops in NCD. Conversely, the historical pattern for many denominations shows that overall membership growth is accompanied by growth in average congregational size. In fact, without this effect, membership growth would have eluded many denominations in years past because NCD rates were too low to keep up with the loss of congregations—much less to add to the rate of membership growth by increasing the total number of congregations.

FIGURE 2.4
Average Size of Churches in Five Denominations



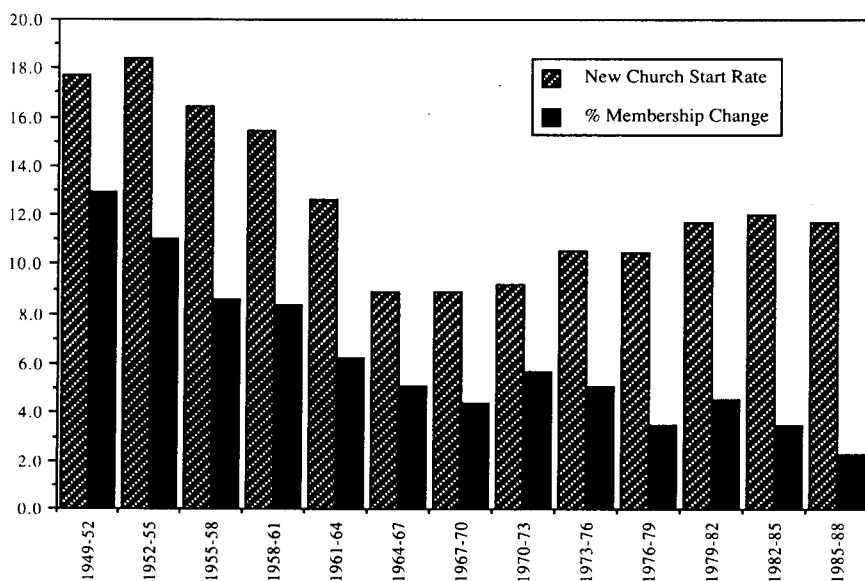
Membership Change Compared to Rates of New Church Development

If there is a link between NCD and denominational growth we would expect that the historical pattern of membership change since 1949 should look roughly (or precisely) similar to the pattern of new church starts. That is, percentage rates of membership growth should be high in the 1950s and early 1960s, decline in the mid- to late-1960s, continue to be low during much of the 1970s, and then rebound in the late 1970s or early 1980s. In the next series of figures we look at this relationship within five denominations.

In the Southern Baptist Convention it is obvious that the decline in denominational membership growth paralleled a drop in NCD from 1952 to 1973. Declines in the rate of membership growth were accompanied by declines in the new church start rate (new churches per 1,000 existing congregations), and when the decline in membership change bottomed out and began to increase slightly in the early 1970s, a similar pattern occurred in NCD. However, from 1973 to 1988, the patterns diverged. NCD continued at rather high

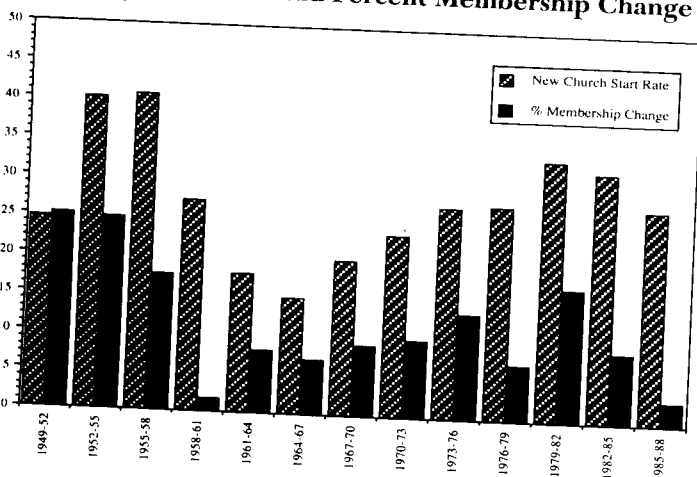
levels, while membership growth dropped. A scattergram (not shown here) of the relationship between the NCD rate and denominational growth reveals a similar pattern—an almost perfect correlation through 1973, and virtually no correlation thereafter. Schaller's hypothesis that growing denominations start more churches—regardless of social conditions—may be relevant here. However, there is some question as to whether this is a sign of “resilience” within the Southern Baptist Convention or an organized bureaucratic response to the slowdown in membership growth. (See Figure 2.5.)

FIGURE 2.5
SBC NCD Rate and Percent Membership Change



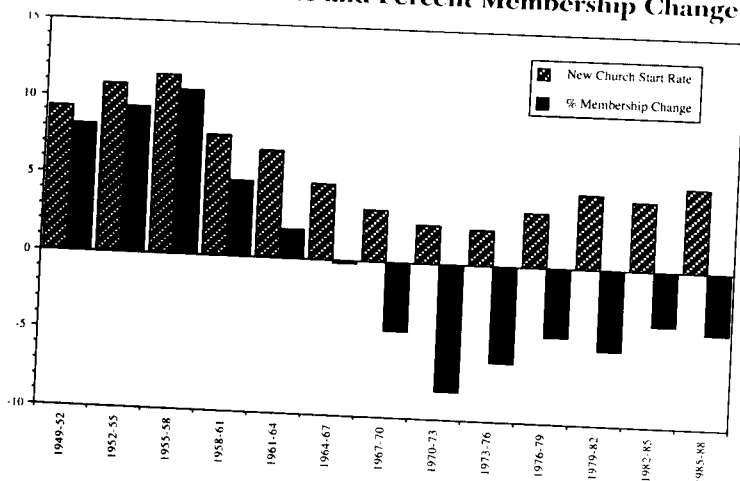
For the Assemblies of God the similarity between historical patterns of NCD and denominational growth is clear, but the erratic nature of membership change makes interpretation somewhat more difficult. However, if the odd fluctuations are ignored the two change curves seem remarkably similar. The best years were during the 1950s. Rates began to slow in the late 1950s and throughout the 1960s. The picture became more positive in the 1970s, especially in NCD, before sliding in both areas during the 1980s. Even though the directional pattern of change in both areas tends to be parallel for the Assemblies of God, the fluctuations in the growth rate should reduce the correlation between rates of NCD and percent membership change. (See Figure 2.6.)

FIGURE 2.6
Assembly NCD Rate and Percent Membership Change



For the three mainline denominations, patterns of NCD and membership change also tend to co-vary. New church start rates were highest in the era of greatest denominational growth and lowest in the era of most severe denominational decline. Further, in more recent years (from the mid- to late-1970s and in the early 1980s) new church start rates have increased and membership declines have moderated.

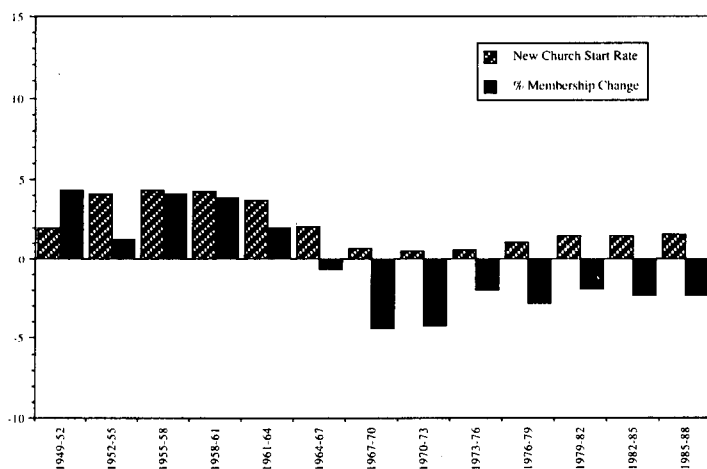
FIGURE 2.7
Presbyterian NCD Rate and Percent Membership Change



For the Presbyterians the declines in membership were most serious from 1970 to 1976, but losses have continued at a rather alarming rate into the 1980s. The new church start rate has followed the same pattern. The rate of NCD was highest in 1955 to 1958, as was the rate of membership growth. The lowest years of NCD came in 1970 to 1976, and it was during this six-year interval that membership losses were the greatest for Presbyterians. (See Figure 2.7.)

For the United Methodists, membership losses were most severe from 1967 to 1973. However, it should be noted that the severity of the losses (in percentage terms) has never been as great as for the Presbyterian Church. Declines have continued for the United Methodists to the present without much fluctuation. Like the Presbyterians, membership losses were most severe at the same time that the NCD rate reached its lowest levels—1967 to 1973. Both areas have seen slight improvements since then, but there is no sign that would suggest that a return to growth is imminent. (See Figure 2.8.)

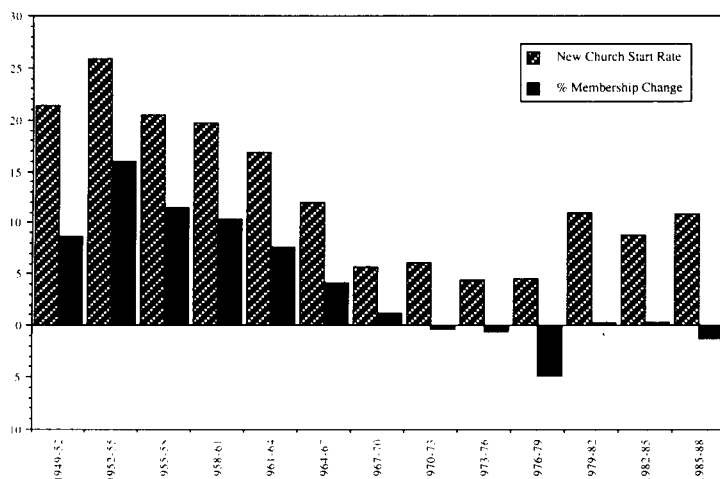
FIGURE 2.8
Methodist NCD Rate and Percent Membership Change



For the Lutheran Church, Missouri Synod, the transition from rapid growth to membership decline took longer. The membership growth rate began to drop in the mid-1950s and continued to slide into the late 1970s. The worst years of loss came in the 1976-79 period. This was during the period of schism. It has been estimated that perhaps as much as two-thirds of the decline over this three-year period resulted from the loss of churches during the denominational conflict.⁷ The LCMS gained members over the next six years, before losing again in the latest three-year period (1985-88).

NCD was highest in the 1950s—higher in terms of the *rate* than the Southern Baptist Convention during this period. A long, steep decline followed, however, before the NCD rate reached its low ebb from 1973–79. Not surprisingly, this low point in NCD coincided with the years of greatest membership loss in the Lutheran Church, Missouri Synod. (See Figure 2.9.)

FIGURE 2.9
LCMS NCD Rate and Percent Membership Change



In the previous series of figures we also see evidence that the late 1980s have not been kind to American denominations. In fact, rates of membership change worsened in four of the five denominations during the last three years of study. Only The United Methodist Church avoided this pattern, but even here the rate of membership decline remained unchanged—it did not improve.

The Correlation Between New Church Development and Denominational Growth

It should be apparent that NCD rates and denominational membership change are highly correlated—even if a causal connection cannot be established. In order to measure the extent of this correlation we computed the rate of NCD as well as percent membership change for each year from 1950 to 1988.⁵ The NCD rate was computed by multiplying the number of churches started in each year by 1,000 and then dividing this total by the number of churches in the denomination in the previous

year. This gives the number of new churches started per 1,000 churches in the denomination.

When all denominations are combined, the correlation (Pearson's r) between the new church start rate and percent membership change was .76—a very strong correlation. Given the similarity in trends shown in the last series of charts, an even stronger correlation may have been anticipated. Part of the reason that the correlation was not higher might be traced to meaningless yearly fluctuations in the rates. However, when we recomputed the correlation based on three-year intervals, the Pearson's r coefficient was raised only slightly to .82. The major reason for the suppression in the correlation can be found in denominational differences.

For individual denominations the correlation between percent membership change and the NCD rate was strongest in the Presbyterian Church and in the Lutheran Church, Missouri Synod ($r = .89$). It was also extremely high for The United Methodist Church ($r = .86$) and for the Southern Baptist Convention ($r = .78$). However, it was a surprise to discover that the correlation for the Assemblies of God was much lower (only .46). The Pearson's r coefficients using one- and three-year intervals of measurement can be seen in Table 2.1.

TABLE 2.1

Correlation¹ Between Percent Membership Change and NCD Rate

	One-Year Intervals ²	Three-Year Intervals
All Denominations	.76	.82
SBC	.78	.84
AOC	.46	.50
United Methodist	.86	.88
LCMS	.89	.94
Presbyterian	.89	.95

¹Correlation coefficient is Pearson's r .

²Measurement of membership change and new church development was based on one-year intervals in this case. That is, percent membership change was computed from 1949 to 1950, from 1950 to 1951, and so forth. The new church development rate for 1950 was the number of new churches added to the denomination in 1950 per 1,000 existing churches in 1949.

It is interesting that the lowest correlations between new church starts and denominational growth are found among the two denominations with by far the highest rates of NCD. For the SBC, the slightly lower correlation can be attributed to the divergence of trends over the past decade. This denomination has continued to start churches at a rapid pace, while its membership

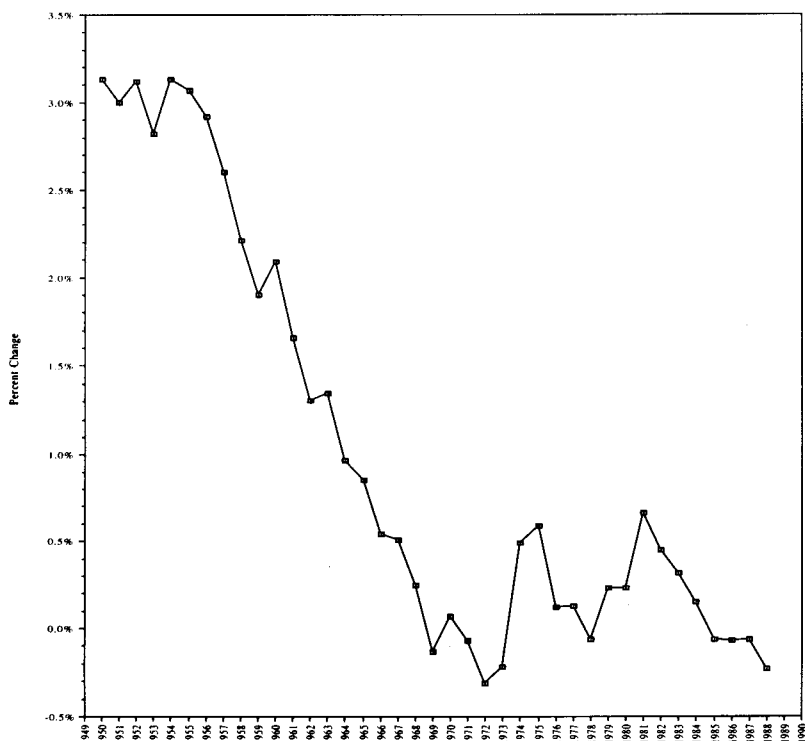
growth rate has suffered. For the Assemblies of God this finding is somewhat harder to interpret. Even though the basic pattern of change among the two variables has been similar over the past twenty-eight years, the magnitude of change has been quite dissimilar in many of the years. In 1949 to 1952, for instance, the Assemblies of God had a relatively modest new church start rate (as compared to the rest of the 1950s for this denomination, not in comparison to other denominations), but grew dramatically in membership. New church development then rose substantially over the next six years. Membership growth remained strong from 1952 to 1955, but then fell off in 1955 to 1958. From 1958 to 1961 the NCD rate remained fairly high. However, membership growth plunged to a very low level. Similarly, in the 1980s, levels of new church development remain high, but denominational growth has slowed dramatically. This erratic pattern produced the lower correlation among the Assemblies of God. It should be noted, however, that a correlation of .50 is not low, by any standard. Still, it is in great contrast to coefficients among other denominations that approach a perfect correlation.

This "low" correlation among the Assemblies of God seems odd in light of the fact that their rate of NCD has been much higher than any other denomination. Further, in 1988, 21.7% of Assemblies of God churches reported a date of organization within the previous ten years. This is in contrast to 8.3% of SBC churches, 5.6% of Presbyterian churches, 4.7% of American Baptist Churches, and only 2.5% of United Church of Christ churches. The Assemblies of God is a young denomination, which is composed of newer churches. So it is clear that new churches are a major source of growth for the Assemblies of God. Why is the correlation not higher? It is possible that for the Assemblies of God high levels of NCD are a sign of organizational resilience. A resilient denomination will start many new churches in periods that do not encourage this activity and are not conducive to denominational growth.

For mainline denominations and for the Southern Baptist Convention, a high correlation between NCD and denominational membership change was expected and found. The meaning of this correlation is not readily apparent, however, because the actual number of members added through high levels of NCD or lost through low levels are not enough to explain the growth of the SBC or the declines of the mainline. One possible explanation for the high correlations is that rates of NCD may be a "barometer of the times." When the times are favorable to American churches, denominations will plant new churches, but when times are bad, few new church starts will be attempted. Is it possible that a "period effect" exists that may explain changes in NCD *and* changes in membership growth? To test this idea we computed an average membership change for each year from 1950 to 1988, based on fourteen denominations.⁹ The resulting graph is shown in Figure 2.10. Its

basic shape should be quite familiar, given the figures shown earlier. We then computed a partial correlation between NCD and percent membership change for each denomination controlling for this period effect. This was an effort to determine whether rates of membership growth tend to be higher in years when the NCD rate is higher, irrespective of the general pattern of membership change among Protestant denominations in American society.

FIGURE 2.10
Period Effects (Based on Fourteen Denominations)



Zero-order correlations between the period effect and membership change ranged from a "low" of .64 for the Assemblies of God to .94 for the Lutheran Church, Missouri Synod. Because of these strong relationships it was no surprise that the correlations between NCD and membership change were reduced when the statistical control was in effect. However, it was something of a surprise that the greatest reduction in correlation was for the Southern Baptist Convention and for the Lutheran Church,

Missouri Synod. In fact, for the SBC the correlation was reduced from .78 to $-.30$. (NCD rates remained positively associated with membership change in the LCMS, but the correlation was reduced greatly.) This reduction occurred because the correlation between the NCD rate and percent membership change was weaker than the correlation between: (1) the period effect and membership change, and (2) the period effect and the NCD rate. So for these two denominations, levels of both membership growth and NCD seem to be a function of the times. They maintain fairly high rates of NCD because this activity is consistent with their conservative ideology. The primary motivation for NCD is outreach. New churches are a way of expanding into new populations and exposing them to a gospel witness. Fluctuations in this rate do not reflect changes in the strength of this ideology or hard work, but changes in the dominant culture. The motivation to start new churches is constant, but the feasibility and success of this activity is dictated by the times. And in recent decades, the shift away from the liberal values of the 1960s helped conservative denominations more than mainline denominations.¹⁰

The Methodists and Presbyterians were affected by the times as well. However, there was a residual effect, which suggests that new churches also may be a barometer of the degree to which these denominations are willing to work and plan for growth. Lacking the movement quality of the Assemblies of God and the conservative ideology of the Southern Baptist Convention (and LCMS), new churches must result from organized, bureaucratic efforts. Although greatly affected by the demographic and cultural changes in American society, the fortunes of these denominations lie in the direction towards which their efforts and resources are channeled.

For Assemblies of God the pattern is entirely different. The times affected their membership growth rate substantially, but the impact of this period effect was much lower on their rate of NCD. Further, the correlation between NCD and membership growth was reduced when controlling for the period effect, but the drop was not large. This denomination retains something of a movement quality that enables it to grow more than would be expected in "bad" times and to start more new churches than would be expected in good times or bad. In addition, its growth rate and NCD rate may drop in response to movement-related problems that are not reflected in the larger culture.¹¹

New churches translate directly into large numbers of new members for the Assemblies of God, but the growth of this denomination in any given year results from many factors—not just NCD or a favorable cultural context. Unlike the other denominations considered here, the Assemblies of

God does not have a large group of stable, highly institutionalized churches that keep overall membership statistics smooth and even. Three-quarters of AOG churches are either growing or declining. Few are on the plateau (see Table 2.5). The precarious balance between the set of growing churches and the set of declining churches tends to make membership statistics erratic from one year to the next. The result is a relatively low correlation between rates of NCD and membership change, and it is a correlation that is reduced only slightly when we control for period effects.

The Impact of New Churches on Membership Change: 1983–1988

From an accounting perspective, new churches cannot logically hurt a denomination's rate of membership change. Unlike older churches that only add the difference in membership between, say, 1983 and 1988, new churches add their full membership to a denomination's total in 1988. Some of these new congregations may well be in decline by 1988, but this decline is not recorded—only their growth from zero to whatever their membership stands in 1988. So the question is not whether new churches help a denomination's "bottom line" in terms of membership, but how much they help.

To answer this question it was necessary to turn to a different source of data: the actual membership records of individual congregations (both old and new) in several denominations. Unfortunately, it was not possible to use the same five denominations analyzed above. Data tapes on all congregations were not available from The United Methodist Church or the Lutheran Church, Missouri Synod. So these denominations were replaced by the United Church of Christ and the American Baptist Churches. Tapes supplied by these two denominations (also the SBC, AOG, and the Presbyterian Church, U.S.A.) contained membership data, dates of organization, and other variables for 1983 and 1988. Subsequent analysis is based on data from these five denominations.

For the SBC, new churches (those organized from 1983 to 1988) added 214,120 members to the denomination. From 1983 to 1988 the overall denomination grew 4.7%.¹² Subtracting the members contributed by new churches leaves the denomination with a growth of 3.2%. Thus, the Southern Baptist Convention would have grown without its new churches, but the rate of growth would have been reduced.

For the Assemblies of God the impact of new churches was even more substantial. New churches added 97,805 members to the denomination

from 1983 to 1988.¹³ The total denomination grew by 11.3% over these five years. However, without new churches the growth of Assemblies of God congregations would be reduced to 4.0%. This suggests that not only did the Assemblies of God grow more (in aggregate percentage terms) through new churches than the SBC, but that older Assemblies of God churches were more likely to grow than were older Southern Baptist churches.¹⁴ Indeed this is the case. Additional analysis shows that among churches that existed in 1983 and 1988, 38% of Assemblies of God churches experienced growth of more than 10%, as compared to 30% of Southern Baptist Churches.

Declining denominations are losing members in spite of the new churches that they organize. In the case of the American Baptist Churches, the overall membership loss was 1.7% from 1983 to 1988. New churches helped to moderate the declines experienced by older churches in this denomination. Without the 11,214 members added by new ABC congregations, the denomination's overall membership loss drops to -2.4%. Presbyterian losses were even greater. The overall loss was 5.5% from 1983 to 1988. Without new churches, this loss would have been 6.9%.

Calculating aggregate losses for United Church of Christ congregations in the same manner as for the other four denominations was not possible using the data available because churches that died or left the denomination between 1983 and 1988 were not included on the data tape. Thus, any losses that we compute should be substantially greater. Nevertheless, the UCC churches included in the data set lost 2.4% on an aggregate level. Without new churches this loss would have been 2.9%.

Findings Related to Assumption Number 2: NCD as a Denominational Growth Strategy

New Churches: A Way of Reaching into New Populations or of Keeping up with One's Members?

Denominations differ in the extent to which they are concentrated in certain regions of the nation. Of the five denominations for which we have individual church data, the Southern Baptist Convention is the most regionally defined. As can be seen in Figures 2.11A, 2.11B, and 2.11C, it is in southern states that the concentration of churches greatly exceeds the expected frequency.¹⁵ Further, SBC concentration tends to be either extremely heavy or very light. Virginia provides the only exception to this rule.

FIGURE 2.11A

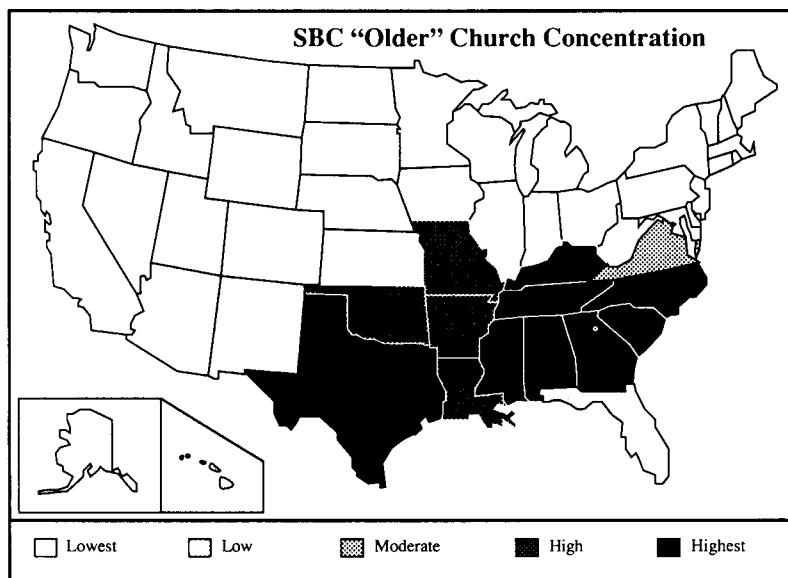


FIGURE 2.11B

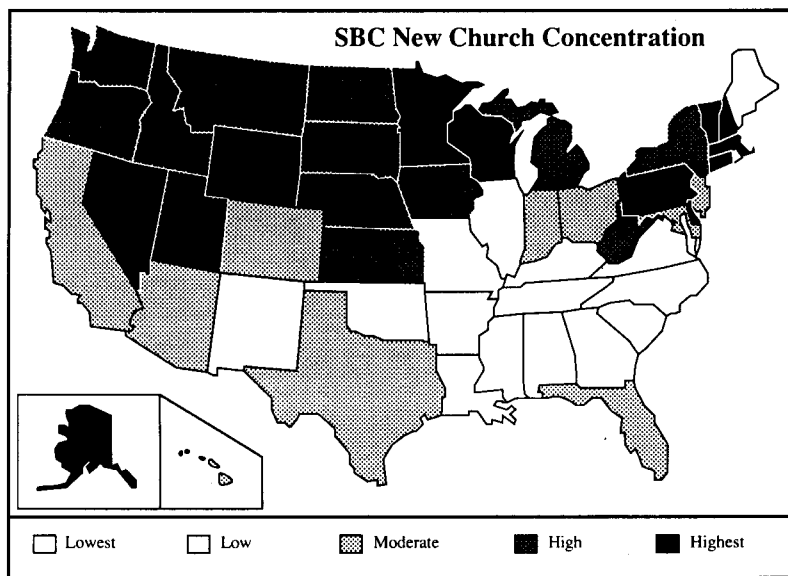
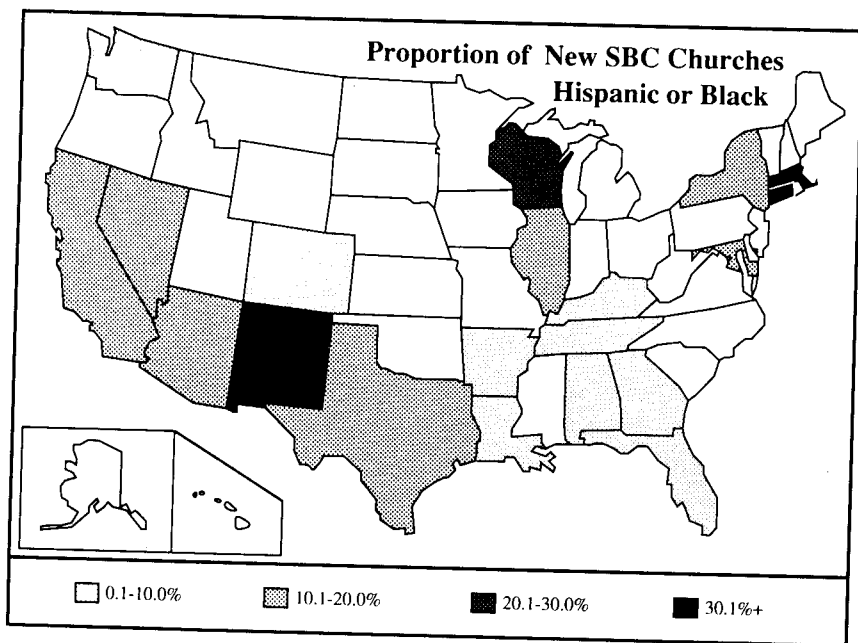


FIGURE 2.11C



Where are Southern Baptists starting new churches? Rates of NCD are highest outside their region of concentration—Southern Baptists are starting churches “where they are not.”¹⁶ In some ways this should not be surprising, because the density of concentration in the South would seem to preclude a high rate of NCD in most southern states. Further, there is a new church development strategy operating at the national level to plant at least one church in what are called “unentered counties” and to concentrate church extension in the largest metropolitan areas of the United States—most of which are located outside the South. For these reasons, NCD rates are higher in nonsouthern states.

The Assemblies of God is much less regionally defined than the SBC. In fact, less than half of the congregations in this denomination are located in states shaded moderate to highest concentration, as compared to 80% of SBC churches (see Figures 2.12A and 2.12B).¹⁷ Like Southern Baptists, Assemblies of God are also planting new churches “where they are not.” However, they appear to have concentrated NCD efforts particularly in three rapidly growing western states, in growing “Sunbelt” states, and along the eastern seaboard from Maine to Florida.

FIGURE 2.12A

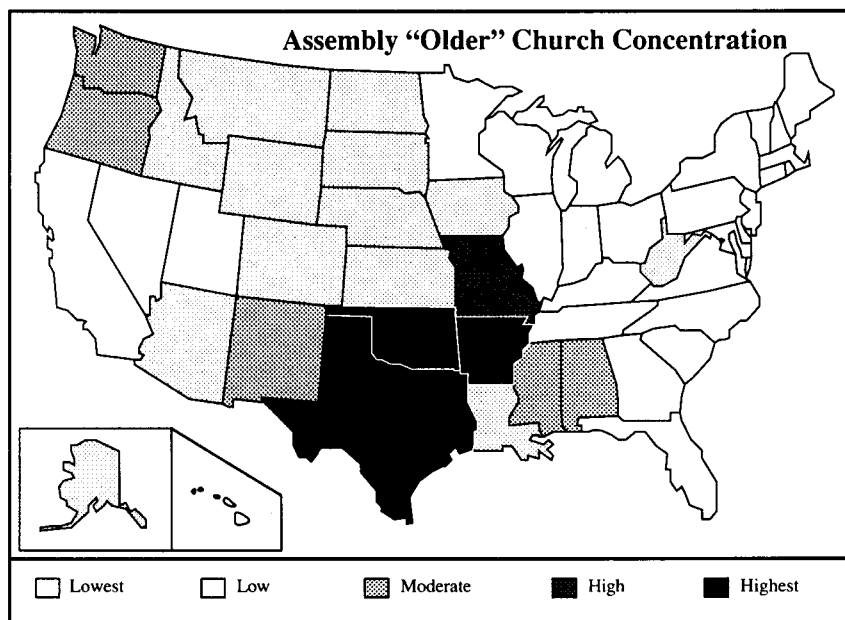
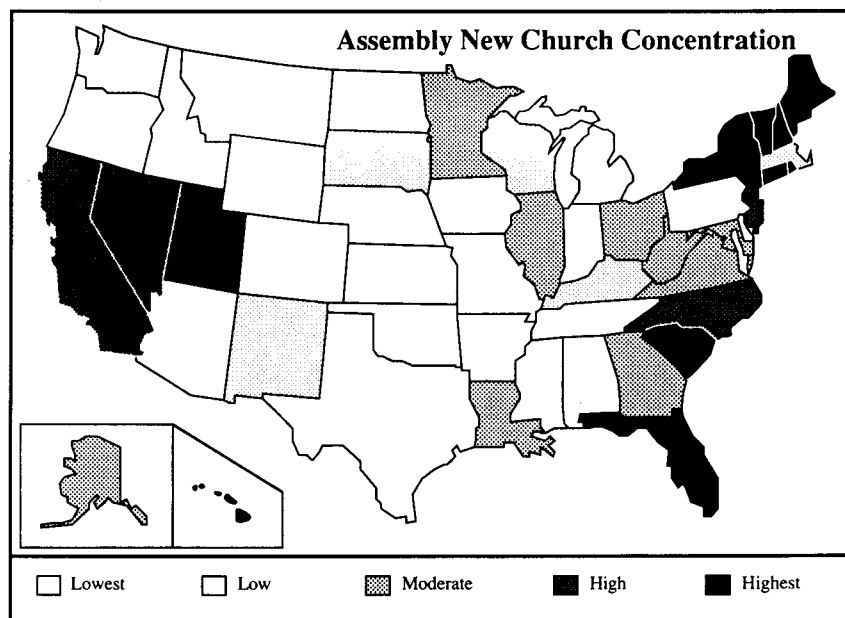


FIGURE 2.12B



For the American Baptists, the heaviest concentration of churches is in the Northeast and in the East North Central region of the United States (Figures 2.13A, 2.13B, and 2.13C). Because the American Baptists have not started many new churches in recent years, few states have high NCD rates (for a state to be shaded the denomination must have started at least two churches in that state from 1983 to 1988). Rates are highest in the Far West, where a relatively large number of new churches have been started, and in Missouri, where only a few have been started.¹⁸

FIGURE 2.13A

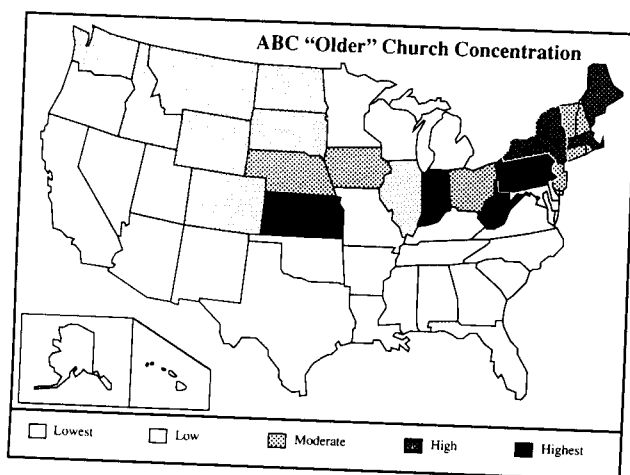


FIGURE 2.13B

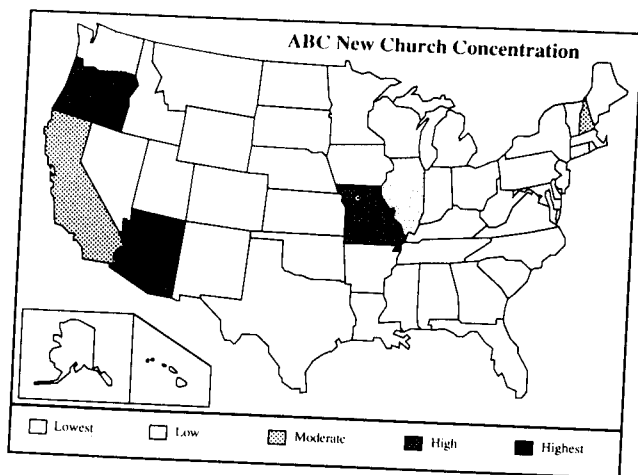


FIGURE 2.14B

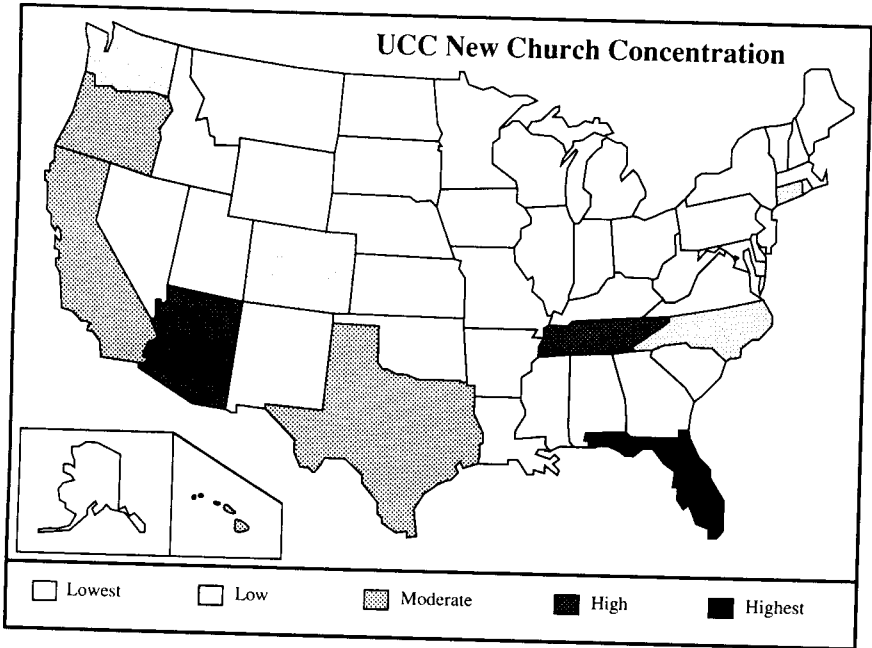


FIGURE 2.14C

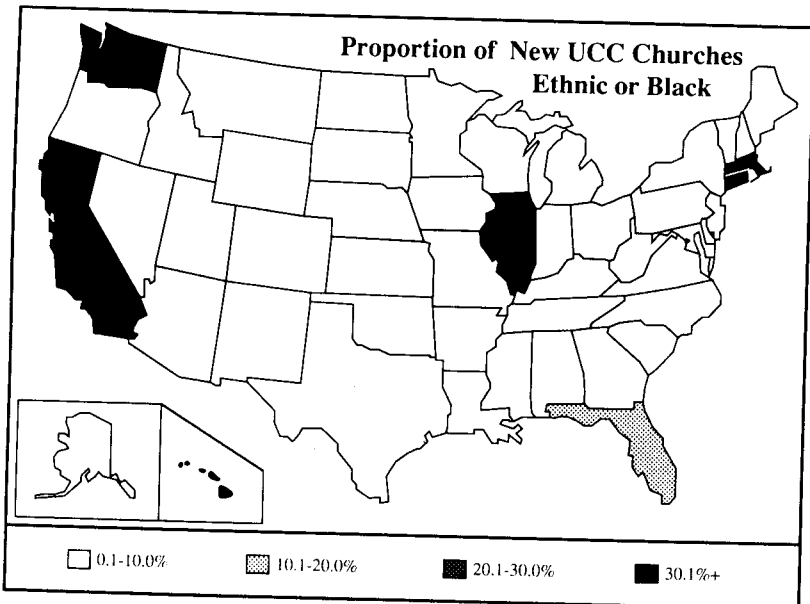
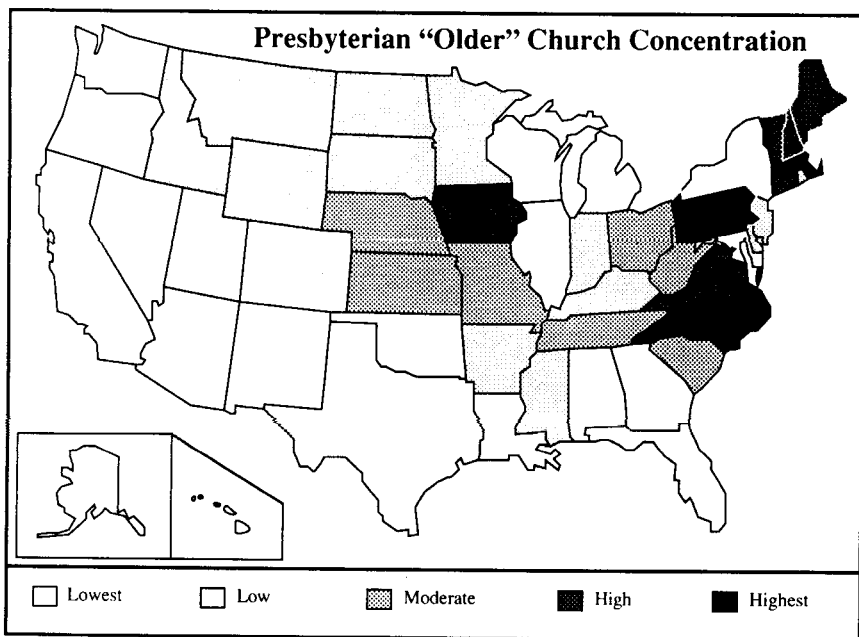


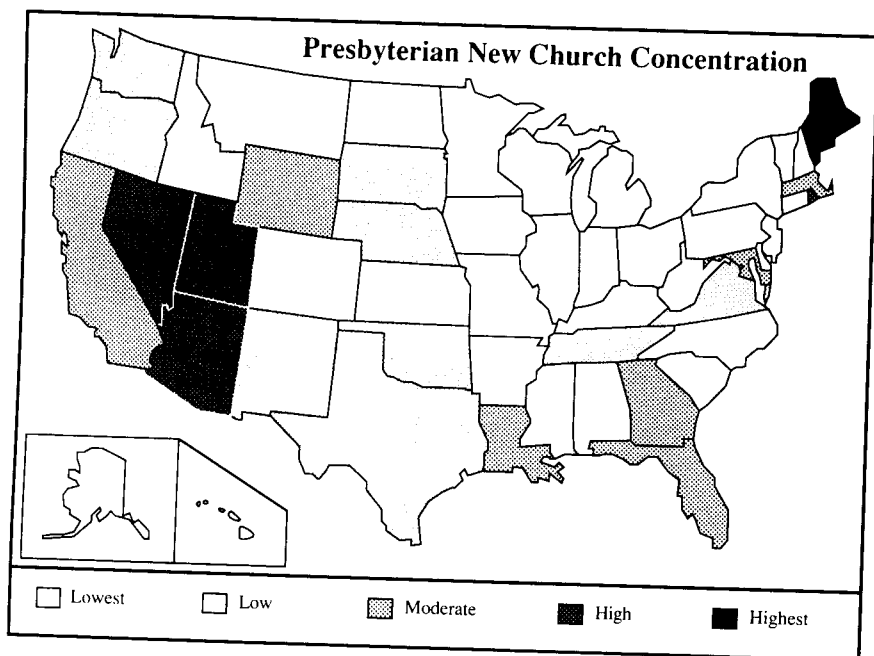
FIGURE 2.15A



Like American Baptists and Assemblies of God, Presbyterian churches are dispersed across several regions of the United States (Figures 2.15A, 2.15B, and 2.15C). In fact, their pattern of concentration looks remarkably similar to that of the ABC, but with more of a Middle Atlantic-Southern shift. Relative to the population, Presbyterian concentration is highest in Pennsylvania, North Carolina, Virginia, and Iowa. New church development rates are highest in the Far West, the Sunbelt, and in scattered other states. Like the Assemblies of God and the UCC, it would appear that Presbyterians are combining efforts to start new churches "where they are not" with a growing state strategy.

Is there any pattern to regional rates of NCD? Specifically, are growing denominations like the Assemblies of God and the Southern Baptist Convention starting a disproportionately larger number of new churches in growing states or in states with higher levels of in-migration? The answer is yes and no, and in the case of the "yes" it is difficult to tell whether there is any strategy behind the trend. The correlation (Pearson's r) at the state level between population growth and NCD rates are .46 for the UCC, .43 for the Presbyterian Church, .30 for the

FIGURE 2.15B



AOC, .28 for the ABC, and .12 for the SBC. All five denominations have higher rates of NCD in states that are growing in population. Is this happenstance, strategy, or simply the fact that it is easier to start new churches in states where the population is growing? More than likely it is a little of each, with some denominations leaning more toward strategy than others. (See Figure 2.16.)

The relationship between levels of population mobility and NCD is less close. Again, the two denominations with the most severe declines in membership have the strongest state-level correlations (.28 for the UCC and .26 for the Presbyterian Church). For the denomination with the most rapid growth over the past twenty-eight years, the state-level correlation is the lowest: $-.02$ for the Assemblies of God. The correlation for the ABC is .24 and for the SBC it is .14. Few conclusions can be drawn from this state-level comparison. Further, Schaller's hypothesis concerning in-migration probably is more applicable to community levels of in-migration and to the ability of new churches to grow where they happen to be planted rather than to the tendency of a denomination to plant churches in states with high levels of in-migration. Unfortunately, this thesis could not be tested with the data on hand.¹⁹

FIGURE 2.15C

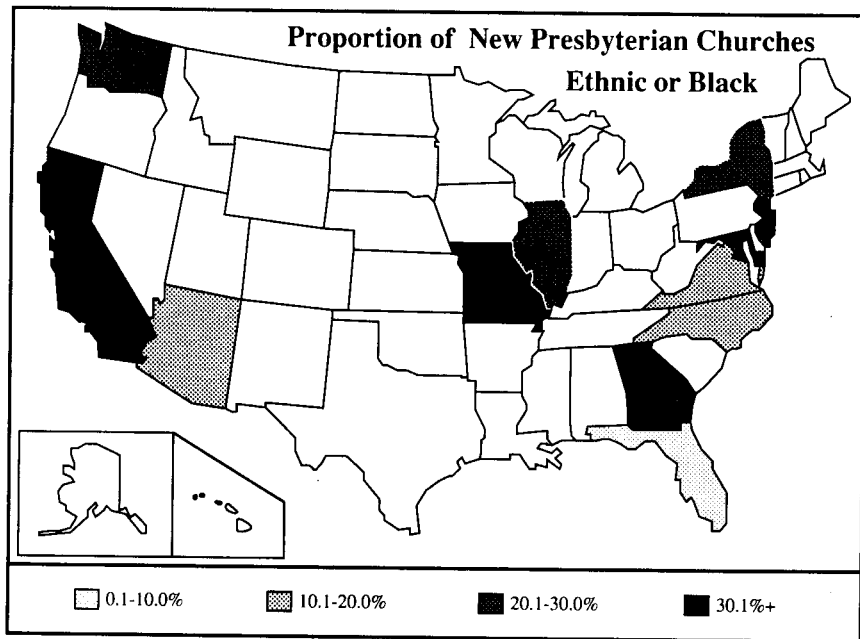
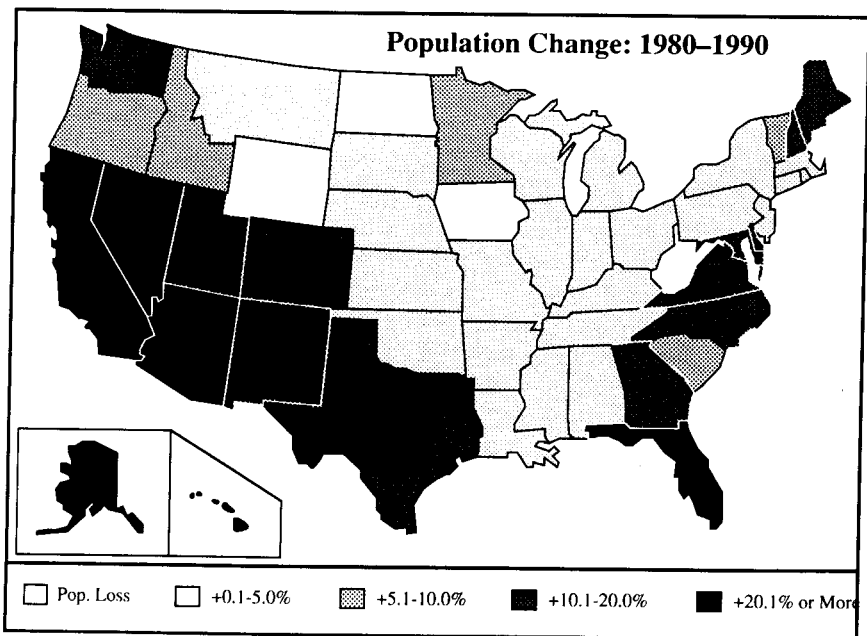


FIGURE 2.16



The fact that the UCC, the Presbyterian Church, and the ABC seem to be focusing their limited church extension efforts in states that are demographically "better" than other states raises the possibility that they are being more careful and intentional about where they start new churches than the Southern Baptist Convention. Indeed, most church extension guides produced by mainline authors emphasize the "careful" approach (see Jones, 1976). For the SBC the "quality" of a region has been irrelevant. Much more attention has been given to the degree to which an area has been "reached" with the gospel—with judgments in this area being based primarily on the existence of SBC churches, rather than on the proportion of the population that is "churched."

All denominations have targeted NCD outside their regions of concentration. So in this sense, NCD is a way of reaching into new territory (although not necessarily into new populations) for mainline and conservative denominations alike. However, the next question that can be posed is whether *new churches* grow better outside the region of concentration. The answer is no for all denominations except for the United Church of Christ. In the other four denominations newer churches (those formed in 1972 to 1982) in states of concentration are just as likely to grow as newer churches in states outside the region of concentration. However, among older churches (organized prior to 1972) there is a trend for churches to see more growth on average outside the region of concentration in all denominations, again except for the UCC.

New Churches and Community Population Characteristics

In the past, the acknowledged strategy for NCD was to target growing suburbs. Changing denominational priorities, as well as the growth potential of ethnic congregations have changed this approach somewhat, but the question remains whether new churches tend to be planted in demographically "better" areas. The answer is a definite yes, especially in reference to population growth. As shown in Table 2.2, for "older" SBC churches (those formed prior to 1983), the mean population change in the zip code where the church is located was +25.6% between 1970 and 1980. For new churches (organized from 1983 to 1988) the mean population change was +46.4%. In the AOG the percentages were +26.8% (older churches) and +37.2% (new churches). For the ABC, older churches saw an average of 9.6% population growth in their zip codes, as compared to an average 26.1% population gain for new church zip codes. For UCC churches and Presbyterian churches the differences were even more dramatic. The mean population change in zip codes surrounding older Presbyterian churches was +17.1%. By contrast the mean for new Presbyterian

churches was +63.7%. For older UCC churches the mean population change was +14.3%, as compared to an average 61.9% gain for zip codes around new UCC churches.

TABLE 2.2
Average Percent Change¹ in Zip Code
Population for New Churches² and Older Churches³

	New Churches	Older Churches
SBC	46.4%	25.6%
AOG	37.2	26.8
ABC	26.1	9.6
UCC	61.9	14.3
Presbyterian	63.7	17.1

¹Population change in zip codes surrounding churches was measured from 1970 to 1980.

²New churches were organized from 1983 to 1988.

³Older churches were organized prior to 1983.

Newer churches tend to be located in areas with newer housing, with higher housing values, and with a higher proportion of college graduates. On the other hand, newer churches were also more likely to be located in areas with a higher proportion of multifamily housing, a greater proportion of Hispanics, and a greater proportion of renters. For Assemblies of God, the American Baptist Churches, and the United Church of Christ (but not Southern Baptists or Presbyterians), new churches were more often found in areas with a greater proportion of African Americans. Zip codes surrounding new ABC and UCC churches were more likely to have a higher proportion below the poverty level than were zip codes surrounding older ABC and UCC churches.

So do new churches tend to be planted in demographically better areas for growth? Again, the answer is yes. In fact, in the ABC, even new African-American and ethnic congregations tend to be located in areas of greater population growth than do older African-American and ethnic congregations. However, these demographic findings do seem somewhat contradictory in some cases (e.g., higher housing values and more poverty). This is due, no doubt, to the fact that denominations are starting a variety of new churches. Unlike the 1950s, new churches in the 1980s (and 1990s) are no longer exclusively suburban. Many new churches are located in the inner city and are targeted to ethnic populations or designed for specific types of urban ministry.

New Churches Among Racial/Ethnic Groups

For predominantly white "Anglo" denominations, expansion into new populations has meant NCD among non-Anglo racial/ethnic groups as well as NCD outside their region of concentration. New ethnic churches have allowed denominations to find new sources of growth and to ameliorate the embarrassing legacy of segregation in their histories. For some denominations new African-American or ethnic churches have helped augment the slumping development of new Anglo churches. For other groups, new black and ethnic churches have become the dominant mode of NCD. In the ABC, for instance, 65% of the churches organized from 1983 to 1988 were ethnic or black.²⁰ This is in contrast to only about 20% of American Baptist churches organized prior to 1983.

A total of 31% of new UCC churches are black or ethnic, as compared to 26% of new Presbyterian churches and an estimated 28% of new Assemblies of God churches (up from around 22% ten years ago). For the SBC, reliable data were not available on the issue until 1990. Analysis among reporting churches indicated that 20% of new SBC congregations (organized from 1985 to 1990) were predominantly ethnic or black in membership). In all five denominations ethnic and black congregations are greatly over-represented among new churches. For the AOG the proportion of ethnic or black new church starts is about twice the proportion of non-Anglo churches in the denomination (although it may be higher). For the other four denominations the over-representation of black and ethnic churches is far greater. In Table 2.3 it can be seen that 5% of older Presbyterian churches are black or ethnic in comparison to 26% of new Presbyterian churches. Similarly, only 8% of older UCC churches are black or ethnic in comparison to 31% of new UCC congregations. And finally, 20% of new SBC churches are ethnic or black in comparison to only 5% of existing SBC congregations. Without new black or ethnic churches, NCD rates would be much lower in all five denominations.

In Figure 2.13C it can be seen that in ten states (and in Washington, D.C.) over three-quarters of new ABC churches are ethnic or black. For the other four denominations the proportion of non-Anglo churches is less than for the ABC. Nevertheless, a number of states have a high proportion of new churches that are ethnic or black. For instance, in Figure 2.11C it can be seen that in Massachusetts, Connecticut, Wisconsin, and New Mexico, a sizable proportion of new SBC churches are Hispanic or black. For the Presbyterian church, several states with high rates of NCD also have high proportions of new churches that are ethnic or black. These states include

California, Arizona, Georgia, and Maryland. Likewise, for the UCC, states with high rates of NCD and a large proportion of new black or ethnic churches include California, Hawaii, and Florida. In these states predominantly white denominations are expanding into new territory by NCD outside their region of concentration and among nontraditional populations. (See Figure 2.14C).

TABLE 2.3
Percent of Churches Black or Ethnic by Denomination

	New Churches	Older Churches
SBC*	20%	5%
AOG (est.)	28	14
ABC	65	20
UCC	31	8
Presbyterian	26	5

*Figures for Southern Baptist churches were based on the 1990 Uniform Church Letter. New churches were those organized from 1985 to 1990. For other denominations, new churches were those organized 1983 to 1988.

How much do new ethnic or black churches add to the growth of a denomination? And do new ethnic churches grow faster than new Anglo churches? We only have data on three denominations to answer these questions. Ethnic and black churches are more likely to grow than Anglo churches in all three denominations.²¹ However, as shown in Table 2.4, the magnitude of the difference in the percentage of churches growing is not as large as might be expected between Anglo churches and black/ethnic churches. Still, the aggregate result of this relationship is rather substantial. In the ABC, older ethnic churches grew by 7.9% from 1983 to 1988. Older Anglo churches lost 6.8% over the same period. Thus, the growth of older black and ethnic churches combined with the addition of many new black and ethnic churches helped to moderate the decline of this denomination.

In the Presbyterian Church, older black or ethnic churches did not fare as well. They declined by 3.5% at an aggregate level. However, older Anglo churches did even worse, declining by 6.2%. When new ethnic churches are combined with older ethnic churches, the entire set of ethnic churches grew by 7.0% from 1983 to 1988. When new Anglo churches are combined with older Anglo churches, the entire set of Anglo churches declined by 5.0% during the same period. Thus, as for the ABC, ethnic

and black congregations helped moderate the decline of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).²²

TABLE 2.4
Percent of Churches Growing¹ by Racial/Ethnic Status

	Older ² Black or Ethnic	Older Anglo
ABC	23.6%	18.9%
UCC	29.8	17.0
Presbyterian	23.8	15.7
	Newer ³ Black or Ethnic	Newer Anglo
ABC	38.9%	58.5%
UCC	41.4	52.7
Presbyterian	48.	46.2

¹Growing churches were those with over 10% increase in membership from 1983 to 1988.

²Newer churches were organized from 1973 to 1982.

³Older churches were organized prior to 1973.

Differences existed between denominations in the likelihood of *newer* racial/ethnic churches (those formed after 1972) to grow as compared to *newer* Anglo churches. As shown in Table 2.4, in both the ABC and the UCC, newer Anglo churches were more likely to grow than were newer black/ethnic churches. For the Presbyterian Church, however, newer black/ethnic churches were slightly more likely to grow than were newer Anglo churches. New churches tend to grow, whatever their ethnic makeup. After a church is no longer new, the prospects for continued growth seem to be better for non-Anglo congregations.

Findings Related to Assumption 3: NCD and Denominational Resilience

Our final assumption concerns the relationship of denominational resilience to NCD and denominational growth. As indicated earlier, there are some intangible aspects to denominational growth, but we expected that these intangibles would have very tangible correlates. Schaller suggested that

the churches in newer denominations would be more likely to grow than the churches in older denominations. As can be seen in Table 2.5, the "newest" of the five denominations (the Assemblies of God) has the largest proportion of growing congregations.²³ If we only consider the percent of churches growing, it is clear that this denomination probably has a larger share of "resilient" congregations. But the picture is more complex than that, because the Assemblies of God also has the second largest proportion of *declining* churches (after the Presbyterians).

Again we see evidence that the AOG is distinct from the other four denominations. It retains something of a movement ("boom or bust") quality. Churches are either growing or declining. Few are stable institutions on the plateau. For the SBC, on the other hand, the proportion declining is very low (only 18%) but the proportion on the plateau is huge. Clearly, the least resilient denomination of the five (as indicated by this criteria) is the Presbyterian Church. This denomination has the smallest percentage of growing congregations and by far the largest proportion of declining churches (42%). UCC churches tend to be on the plateau or declining, as do American Baptist churches.

TABLE 2.5
Percent of Churches Growing,¹ Plateaued,² or Declining:³
1983-1988

	Growing	Plateaued	Declining
SBC	30.5%	51.9%	17.6%
AOG	38.3	25.4	36.3
ABC	19	47	32.4
UCC	18.0	52.6	29.3
Presbyterian	16.2	41.4	42.4

¹Growing churches were those with over 10% increase in membership from 1983 to 1988.

²Plateaued churches were those with between +10% and -10% change in membership from 1983 to 1988.

³Declining churches were those with over 10% decline in membership from 1983 to 1988.

We also have suggested that growing denominations may demonstrate organizational resilience to the degree that their congregations sustain growth across congregational age, size, and location categories. Do the churches in resilient denominations grow "across the board"? If the answer is yes, this would mean that the churches in such denominations are less affected by outside forces that tend to encourage or constrain the growth of

most congregations. On the other hand, it is possible that in growing denominations each size, age, or location category will simply contain a larger percentage of growing congregations.

Previous research on the relationship between age of church and membership growth showed that among SBC churches, newer congregations were much more likely to grow than were older congregations (Hadaway, 1990:371). This observation led to the assumption that low levels of NCD would lead to a larger proportion of slower-growing older congregations in a denomination. Do these findings hold for other denominations as well? And what does this say about denominational resilience?

TABLE 2.6
Percent of Churches Growing by Date of Organization

	Oldest Churches	1928-47	1948-57	1958-72	1973-82
SBC	22.4%	27.9%	33.9%	42.7%	62.5%
AOG	34.8	34.8	36.0	40.9	48.8
ABC	17.8	20.3	25.3	27.0	46.1
UCC	16.4	21.4	18.9	24.5	47.5
Presbyterian	13.0	19.2	18.7	22.8	46.8

Data for the American Baptist Churches, the United Church of Christ, and the Presbyterian Church also reveal a fairly substantial, but curvilinear relationship between age of congregation and percentage of churches growing. As shown in Table 2.6, a smaller percentage of newer ABC, UCC, and Presbyterian churches were growing (46.1%, 47.5%, and 46.8%, respectively) than were newer Southern Baptist churches (62.5%). But all four denominations are similar in that there was a very large difference between the newest set of congregations (organized from 1973 to 1982) as compared to the next youngest set of congregations (organized from 1958 to 1972). For SBC churches the difference was 19.8 percentage points, while for ABC churches the difference was 19.1 percentage points. Similarly, the differences between the two youngest groups of churches in percent of churches growing were 24 percentage points for the Presbyterians, and 23 percentage points for the United Church of Christ. In these four denominations, new churches were very likely to experience growth. However, the positive effect of this "newness" does not last very long.

Among Assemblies of God congregations, the pattern was somewhat different. The relationship between age of church and growth was present, but

it was also weak because newer churches were only slightly more likely to grow than older AOG churches. In other words, AOG churches were more likely to sustain growth across age categories. Newer AOG congregations were less likely to grow than were newer SBC congregations. On the other hand, older AOG congregations were more likely to grow than older SBC congregations. Age seems to matter less among AOG churches. Instead, resilience, as measured by percent of churches growing, is spread rather evenly among churches of different ages.

A similar effect is seen in the area of church size. For both Southern Baptists and Assemblies of God congregations there is something of a "U-shaped" relationship between church size and aggregate membership growth. Both smaller and larger churches tend to do better in terms of growth than do mid-sized congregations. For Southern Baptists, the smallest churches do the best (by far). Churches that had between one and fifty members in 1983 grew by an aggregate 20%. For Assemblies of God, the percentage gain was lower among small churches (+11%), but it was still substantial if compared to the American Baptists and Presbyterians. Small ABC churches declined by 12% overall. Likewise, small Presbyterian churches declined by 11%.

As can be seen in Figure 2.17, among both the AOG and the SBC, aggregate growth rises substantially among the *largest* churches in each denomination. This goes against conventional wisdom, because it is logistically (and statistically) easier for a small group of any kind to experience larger percentage gains than it is for a large group. In these two denominations, however, churches with over 1,000 members are more likely to grow and to experience larger aggregate gains than are churches with only a few hundred members. This suggests that for both the SBC and the AOG, denominational growth is dependent on the growth of both small (and often new) congregations and very large churches. Again, Schaller is supported. And this may point to yet another source of resilience because the presence of large, growing congregations—some of which are relatively young—provides models to entrepreneurial young pastors who would like to build large, growing congregations themselves. Further, the growth curve for the AOG is flatter than for the SBC. Size has less effect on the aggregate growth (and average growth) of AOG churches—providing more support for the resilience thesis.²⁴

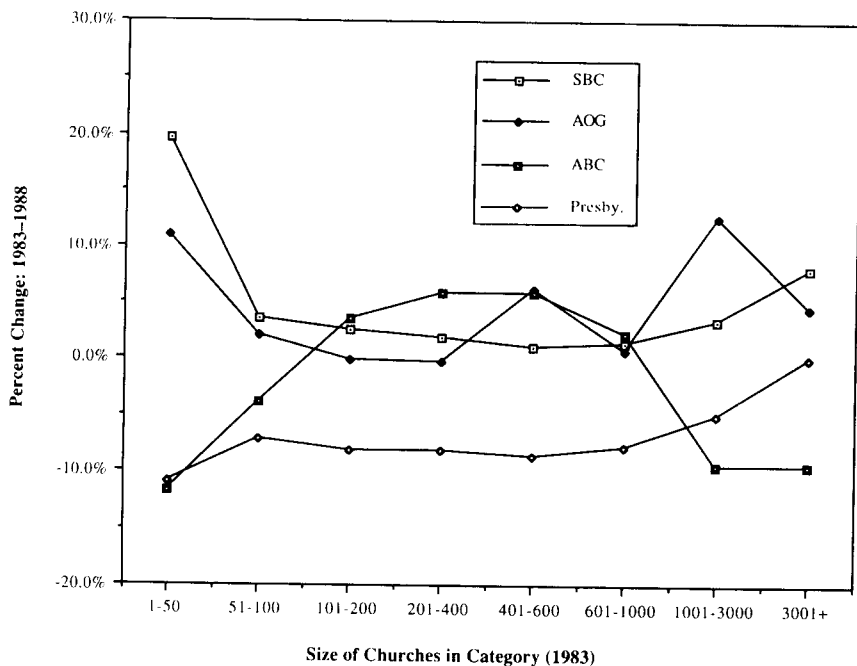
For ABC and Presbyterian churches the relationship is quite different. In the ABC, it is the smallest and largest churches that experience the largest aggregate declines. The largest ABC congregations collectively lost 9.4% of their members from 1983 to 1988. In addition, the smallest ABC churches lost 11.8% of their members. But among those churches that existed in *both* 1983 and 1988, the smallest churches were more likely to grow. This finding

is not hard to explain. For growing denominations the smallest set of churches contains many new, growing congregations that will not be small for long. However, in a declining denomination, the smallest set of churches contains many dying churches that will not be with the denomination for long. Those that survive are more likely to grow, but their growth does not compensate for the loss of other small congregations.

A third pattern is evident for Presbyterian churches. Like the ABC, their smallest churches do poorly in terms of aggregate growth. However, decline is pervasive in this denomination. Congregations in the middle range do no better than smaller congregations in aggregate terms. Unlike the ABC, the Presbyterians retain substantial numbers of larger, prestigious churches. These churches allow the growth curve to inch into "the black" among those congregations with more than 3,000 members. But what is striking about the curve for Presbyterians is the fact that it is so flat. If pervasive resilience can produce a flat curve on some correlates of growth (as in the case of the AOG), then it is also possible for a pervasive lack of resilience to do the same.

FIGURE 2.17

**Percent Change in Aggregate Membership by Size Category:
1983-1988**



Additional Findings Related to Church Size

Among the many hypotheses outlined by Schaller (1991) in his book on new church development is the idea that new churches are more likely to grow if they are started larger—preferably with 200 persons or more attending the initial worship service. The logic is that such churches are able to bypass the “single cell” stage of organization and are less likely to become “stuck” at one of the typical points of plateau.

Unfortunately, it was not possible to test this hypothesis directly. We had no way of knowing worship attendance at the first worship service. As an alternative, we looked at membership growth from 1983 to 1988 among those churches organized in 1982 or 1983 by size category (as measured in 1983). Results indicate that in the Assemblies of God, the SBC, and the Presbyterian Church, growth was most likely among smaller churches. For the SBC and the AOG, growth was most likely in the category of one to fifty members. These denominations had very few *new* churches with 200 or more members in 1983 (3% of new AOG churches and 10% of new SBC congregations were this large in 1983). New Presbyterian churches were larger on average than new SBC or AOG churches (13% were over 200 in 1983), however, growth was most likely in the category of fifty-one to one hundred members (Presbyterians had very few *new* churches with less than fifty-one members in 1983). If one plans intentionally to become a megachurch, it may help to begin with over 200 members, but larger initial size (at date of organization) apparently is not required to predict the relative likelihood of growth among mainline and evangelical congregations.

A second hypothesis related to church size (not from Schaller in this case) is that very large churches may suppress NCD and the overall growth of the denomination in the area in which they are located. This hypothesis was not supported. We looked at counties that had churches with 3,000 members or more in 1983 (4,000 or more for the SBC). Results indicate that for the SBC, AOG, and ABC, the rate of NCD is substantially higher on average in areas with superchurches, as compared to the rate for the entire denomination. Further, it appears that while superchurches tend to show more growth than do the smaller congregations in their communities, the overall growth of a denomination's churches in a community with a superchurch is not hurt. In fact, aggregate percentage membership growth in such communities tends to exceed that of the overall denomination. This effect was marginal for Southern Baptists, a little stronger for American Baptists, but very strong for the Assemblies of God. AOG churches in communities with superchurches grew over three times faster than the national average.

Discussion

Growing denominations have higher rates of NCD. This is very clear. In the 1950s, all five denominations that were analyzed had relatively high rates of both NCD and membership growth. Further, membership growth tended to be greater in denominations with higher rates of NCD. In later years, all denominations experienced declines in NCD, and all denominations experienced erosions in their rates of membership growth. But not all denominations declined in membership. The two that avoided membership declines were those that maintained higher rates of NCD. Among mainline denominations, membership decline was least severe for the Lutheran Church, Missouri Synod—a denomination with a rate of NCD that has tended to be much higher than the Presbyterian Church or The United Methodist Church.

Growing denominations also have an increasing average congregation size. This has been true throughout the twenty-eight-year period of investigation. Southern Baptist churches and Assemblies of God congregations experienced increases in average size from 1950 to the present. On the other hand, the mainline denominations began to decline in membership at the same time that the average size of their congregations began to shrink.

All denominations tend to plant churches in areas that are demographically favorable and outside their region of concentration. This seems particularly true with regard to NCD and state-by-state patterns of population growth. It must be added, however, that new churches tend to be located in "demographically favorable" areas and among receptive populations *even in declining denominations*. The highest correlations between NCD rates and population growth were found for the Presbyterian Church and for the United Church of Christ—at both the state level and at the zip code level.

It is also true that all five denominations are making major efforts to expand beyond their Anglo base into African-American and ethnic populations. This push appears to be somewhat greater in proportional terms among declining denominations. However, it is possible that relatively little effort at the denominational level is involved in the ongoing business of racial/ethnic NCD. Once started, this activity may gain a life of its own and be carried by the ethnic populations rather than by denominational agencies. Further, the proportion of new churches that are ethnic or black may be so small in mainline denominations because so few Anglo churches are being started—rather than because so many ethnic or black churches are being dismantled.

Even the most rapidly growing denominations experienced rather severe downturns in NCD during the 1960s. However, not all denominations were drastically affected by the changes as were others. Apparently, some

denominations have a certain resilience that helps them adjust more readily to the times. They experienced membership growth and started new churches—even when doing so was costly and the success rate was low. Oddly enough, among such denominations the statistical link between rates of NCD and rates of membership change is likely to be less tight. For particularly resilient denominations, the NCD rate may remain high even when membership growth is difficult. The net effect is a somewhat lower correlation between NCD and membership change.

Finally, it is clear that growing denominations have a larger proportion of growing churches and their churches tend to sustain growth across congregational age, size, and location factors. This was particularly true for the Assemblies of God. AOG churches were more likely to grow, even in those categories that discourage growth in most denominations. On the other hand, the growth pattern of SBC churches looked more like the growth pattern of mainline churches. The only difference was that for the SBC, the percentage of churches growing was greater in each category. The clear exception to this generalization was in the relationship between size of congregation and church growth. For both the SBC and the AOG, large churches were almost as likely to grow as small churches. Indeed, we can speculate that large, growing churches provide models that may inspire potential church planters. These examples show what is possible. But denominations that lack such models may find it difficult to encourage people to become church planters.

Conclusion

Earlier we referred to several statements by Bullock (1991) concerning NCD and denominational growth. His remarks led to our main research question: Is NCD a cause or a symptom of denominational membership growth? Our examination of the data suggests, simply—it depends. In some denominations, NCD is more a cause of growth. In others, NCD seems to be a symptom of something else—something deeper, and perhaps, less programmable.

The Assemblies of God is an interesting and instructive case. New churches have added more to its growth than to any other denomination. At the same time, the rate of NCD appears to be symptomatic of something else—a certain organizational resilience or movement quality (to which growth in membership is closely tied). So for the Assemblies of God, new churches are both a *cause* and a *symptom* of growth.

New churches also add something to the growth of the Southern Baptist Convention and the Lutheran Church, Missouri Synod. However, new churches do not contribute very many new members (in percentage terms);

and increases in the rate of NCD are not associated with increases in membership growth when period effects are controlled. The 1970s and the 1980s, in general, provided a favorable climate for these conservative, noncharismatic denominations—and they benefited from this climate. So, for these two denominations, NCD is more a *symptom* than a cause of denominational growth. In eras where membership growth occurs, these denominations start many new churches, but it is the *era* that makes both (membership growth and NCD) more likely.

When NCD is symptomatic of growth, evidence of a link between the two can be found in various places in a denomination. Growing denominations start more new churches and simultaneously, have increased numbers of “megachurches” (1,000+ members). Indeed, large, successful churches seem to give the needed stimulus for budding church planters. They provide inspirational models to follow. This has been important for growth among the Assemblies of God and the Southern Baptist Convention.

Finally, for mainline denominations, we have shown that little growth has come from new churches in recent years, because these denominations have simply started so few. However, growth has been enhanced in those eras in which they have started many—even when controlling for period effects. So for the mainline, new churches are more a cause of growth than they are a symptom of growth. When these denominations make the effort to start new churches, they tend to grow (or at least moderate their declines). When they do not make the effort, they tend to decline.

New churches are not the only answer for denominational growth. Yet they are important, both as a potential source of some growth, and as a barometer of other things that affect membership growth.²⁵ For some denominations, levels of NCD may indicate overall organizational resilience, for other denominations they may indicate hard work and success in reaching goals, and for still other denominations, they may reflect how “friendly” social and geographical conditions are to churches, both new and old.