

## Chapter Eight

# Is Evangelistic Activity Related to Church Growth?

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**T**he goal of membership growth at the individual congregational level, while not universally accepted as desirable, is quite pervasive among Protestant religious denominations in the United States. Indeed, in many denominations, where adherents call themselves “evangelical,” growth (or lack of growth) is a dominant indicator of success (or failure). Growing churches are perceived to be effective in “winning the lost” and are thus contributing toward the fulfillment of Christ’s great commission. Stable and declining churches, on the other hand, may not be seen as necessarily failing in their efforts to reach people for Christ, but they are often viewed less positively than are growing churches.

The perceived link between church growth and evangelistic success suggests a hypothesis: higher levels of evangelistic activity are associated with higher rates of membership growth at the congregational level. This hypothesis, while frequently voiced by members of the “church growth movement” has not been tested in any systematic way. That is the purpose of this chapter.

### **Research on Evangelistic Activity and Church Growth**

Research into the influence of evangelistic activity on church growth has been rare. Studies by Bibby and Brinkerhoff (1973, 1983) and Bouma (1979) have shown that evangelizing secularized “outsiders” has been a minor source of growth for conservative churches when compared to the influence of higher birth rates and more successful retention of geographically mobile members. On the other hand, Hadaway (1978), Hadaway and Roof (1979), and Nelson and Bromley (1988) have shown that smaller conservative denominations and sects grow primarily through attracting members from outside their ranks, though not necessarily from proselytizing “nones.” Clearly, a distinction must be made between evangelizing the small percentage of Americans who say they have no religion and broader efforts to attract inactive Christians, members of other denominations, and persons who have moved. Because such a small proportion of the population say they are

"nones" (about 8%), few churches can be expected to see much growth through evangelizing this population. However, more general efforts at evangelizing the "unchurched" and outreach efforts to attract church shoppers hold greater chance for success.

The first direct test of the relationship between evangelistic activity and church growth was provided by a major study of church membership trends conducted by the United Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. in 1976. The results of this study were reported by the General Assembly Mission Council (1976) and by Roof, Hoge, Dyble, and Hadaway (1979). In general, the Presbyterian membership trends study found positive, but rather weak, relationships between indicators of recruitment activity and church growth. The strongest correlate asked, "Overall, to what extent are members of your congregation involved in recruiting new members?" This item produced a correlation of .17 with percent membership change—significant, but not very strong. Other questions, such as contacting new residents in the community, following up worship service visitors with personal contacts, and the presence of an organized program for recruitment produced even weaker correlations with growth, on the order of .05 to .06. Further, a yes/no question dealing with the training of members in evangelism was not related to growth and a question on recruitment of church school pupils actually produced a negative correlation with growth. Given these findings, it was no surprise that recruitment activities added very little to the explained variance in church growth when statistical controls were in effect.

Finally, a study that compared churches on membership plateaus with churches that had experienced rapid growth after years of stability showed that evangelistic activity was a major predictor of "breakout growth" (Hadaway, 1991). This study was an effort to determine the major predictors of congregational revitalization (measured by membership and attendance change). Particular attention was given to the development of sensitive measures of growth-related institutional characteristics. Results suggested that previous studies may have underestimated the impact of institutional factors on church growth.

### **Methods of Research**

In order to examine the relationship between evangelistic activity and church growth, a lengthy questionnaire was created and distributed to roughly equal sets of growing, plateaued, and declining Southern Baptist churches in early 1988. The survey contained 102 closed-ended questions. Its purpose was to test a variety of church growth assumptions and hypotheses among metropolitan Southern Baptist churches. A total of thirty-four questions dealt with evangelism, outreach, and recruitment.

Sample selection procedures were similar to those used in the earlier United Presbyterian study. Rather than a simple random sample of churches from the entire Southern Baptist Convention, random samples were taken from sets of growing, plateaued, and declining churches. This strategy was employed in order to reduce the substantial error component that plagues church growth studies. Periodic roll cleaning, sloppy record keeping, and the tendency of most churches to have inflated membership rolls reduces the value of a membership change variable when taken in a general sample.

In order to reduce error variation selection criteria were used to ensure that the churches that were called growing were really growing, and that the churches that were called declining were really declining. Growing churches were defined as congregations that experienced increases of 15% or more in total membership and increases of 10% or more in Sunday school average attendance from 1981 to 1986. Further, to be called growing a church must have experienced a net increase of at least one member in four out of five years over the same period. Plateaued churches were defined as congregations that experienced increases or declines of 5% or less in total membership and Sunday school average attendance from 1981 to 1986. In addition, no church could be included in the plateaued population that had growth or decline greater than 5% during any one year. Declining churches were defined as congregations that experienced losses of 15% or more in both total membership and Sunday school average attendance. Declining churches also lost at least one member in four out of the five years from 1981 to 1986.

Although restrictive, the above criteria prevented labeling churches as declining when they had only cleaned their rolls, or labeling a declining church as growing because of a reporting error in a single year, or because they were padding their membership rolls. The scheme was not foolproof, of course, but it was much better than simply categorizing churches based on membership change from time one to time two.

Questionnaires were sent to the pastors of 990 metropolitan Southern Baptist churches. Of these, 113 were found to have no pastor and were removed from the sample. Of the remaining 877 churches, 543 returned usable survey forms, for an effective response rate of 61.9%. This rate of response was judged to be good for a mail questionnaire of eight pages. To check for possible response bias, nonresponding churches were compared to responding churches on a wide variety of items taken from the Uniform Church Letter—a lengthy form that is filled out by nearly all Southern Baptist churches on an annual basis. No significant differences were found between responding and nonresponding churches in size, location, baptisms, and a number of other variables.

After data from the responding churches were received, coded, and checked for errors, the data set was merged with Uniform Church Letter data for 1981 to 1987. In this way additional independent variables were added.

### **Southern Baptist Versus Presbyterian Data**

The purpose of the survey used in this project was to examine many potential correlates of church growth, not to replicate previous surveys. Although similar in some respects, there were major differences between the *Membership Trends* study conducted by the United Presbyterians and the present study of Southern Baptist churches. Still, comparing the results of the two surveys on the one item they share may be instructive.

Most of the items relating to recruitment in the Presbyterian study were judged to be inappropriate for inclusion in this project. In some cases the language used did not communicate well to Southern Baptists, while in other cases a "list format" was used in the question design that typically reduces response and lowers correlations with the dependent variable. One question was repeated, however. It asked, "Overall, to what extent are members of your congregation involved in recruiting new members." Response categories were: (1) extensively, (2) moderately, (3) minimally, and (4) not at all. This item showed the strongest correlation with growth of any recruitment item on the Presbyterian survey.

Before comparing responses, it should be noted that the growing church category for the Presbyterian churches was 5% or greater growth over a six-year period (1968-74). Their plateaued category or "typical" church declined by 21% or less, and their declining category lost 30% or more of their members during the same six years. The Southern Baptist growing church category has a higher cutoff level, the plateaued category of Southern Baptist churches is more restricted than is the middle category of Presbyterians (and contains some churches with modest growth), and the rapidly declining category of Presbyterian churches is restricted to churches declining at a more rapid pace than was true for Southern Baptists (but Presbyterian churches had an extra year to log the decline). Further, the Southern Baptist churches were 100% metropolitan, whereas the Presbyterian churches should be around 60% metropolitan, if their reporting churches were representative of the larger denomination (see Hadaway, 1988).

Table 8.1 compares the Presbyterian data to the Southern Baptist data. As can be seen, Southern Baptist churches in each of the three growth/decline categories are more likely to report extensive or moderate involvement of their members in recruitment. The difference is relatively small among

declining churches (only 6 percentage points when the extensively and moderately categories are combined), but it increases among plateaued and growing churches. For growing churches the difference is 24 percentage points. It also can be seen that the relationship between congregational involvement in recruitment and church growth is much stronger among Baptist churches than it is among Presbyterian churches. For Presbyterian churches the correlation (Pearson's  $r$ ) was .17, while for Southern Baptist churches the value was .28.

**TABLE 8.1**  
**Involvement in Recruitment by Church Growth Among**  
**United Presbyterian and Southern Baptist Churches**

Involvement in Recruitment	United Presbyterians			Southern Baptists		
	Growing (N=190)	Plateaued (N=203)	Declining (N=221)	Growing (N=194)	Plateaued (N=186)	Declining (N=160)
Extensively	5%	1%	3%	14%	3%	4%
Moderately	40	26	29	55	38	34
Minimally	53	67	63	29	56	56
Not at all	2	6	5	1	3	5
	Pearson's $r = .17$			Pearson's $r = .28$		

From these data it is not possible to determine whether the differences observed reflect differences between Presbyterian churches and Southern Baptist churches or were due to methodology that more efficiently separated the three groups, and thus made prediction easier. The answer is probably, "a little of both."

Southern Baptist churches have much more of an evangelistic reputation than do Presbyterian churches, and there is also probably a wider range of outreach activity among Baptist churches than there is among Presbyterian churches. Both denominations have churches that are doing nothing in this area, but the activities of the most outreach-oriented Southern Baptist churches are probably far beyond the comfort level of most Presbyterian churches that also emphasize recruitment. On the other hand, the more restrictive definition of growth used in the Southern Baptist survey is also likely to have produced some of the differences shown in Table 8.1. The Presbyterian survey categorized many churches as growing that actually showed little gain. For a church of 100 members to grow by one member per year does not seem like much growth, but such a church would fall into the

Presbyterians' growth category. Restricting growth to 15% or more in the Southern Baptist survey seems somewhat more appropriate because it excludes churches that are on statistical plateaus. It is possible that levels of evangelistic activity and recruitment provide a way of discriminating primarily between growing churches and churches that are not growing, rather than between plateaued and declining churches. If this is the case, restricting the growing church category to churches that show substantial growth may work to increase the size of the association produced between recruitment and church growth.

### Basic Relationships

Thirty-four questions on the Southern Baptist church growth survey dealt with some aspect of evangelistic emphasis, evangelistic activity, outreach, and recruitment. Of these items all except one were associated with church growth in the expected manner. That is, growing churches tended to score higher on measures of evangelistic emphasis and activity than did plateaued or declining churches.

The one item that was related to growth in a reverse manner asked, "Has your church targeted any specific groups for intensive outreach efforts, or are you simply trying to reach anyone who will respond?" Even though the association was negative, its magnitude was essentially zero ( $\gamma = -.0006$ ). This question appears to be a limited test of Wagner's (1976) and McGavran's (1970) homogeneous unit principle, which suggests that a church should try to reach "our kind of people" if they want to achieve rapid growth. The true source of the question, however, is Lyle Schaller's (1983) book, *Growing Plans*. In a chapter on the middle-sized church, Schaller indicates that churches that answer the question, "Who are the folks you are making a special effort to reach?" with the response, "No special group, we're open to serving everyone who comes here" are typically passive congregations that are declining in numbers (Schaller, 1983:69-70). However, results from this survey of Southern Baptist churches indicate essentially no difference between growing and declining churches in response to the question employed. Interestingly, plateaued churches were least likely to be "trying to reach several key target groups."

Four other questions on the survey were related to church growth in the expected manner, but the relationship was insignificant at the .05 level. These questions asked (1) is personal evangelism the most important aspect of a pastor's work? (2) does the pastor regularly take laypersons on witnessing visits? (3) is the pastor personally involved in training laypersons for evangelistic outreach? and (4) does the church have greeters to meet people as they come to

the church on Sunday morning, and if so, do they record the names of newcomers so they can be visited later? This last question, which was asked in two parts, was also drawn from Schaller's *Growing Plans* (page 74). Having greeters was significantly related to growth ( $\gamma = .25$ ), but the combined question, while related to growth, dropped in magnitude to insignificance.

Despite the few items that produced small relationships with growth, the large majority of the evangelism/recruitment questions produced relatively strong, significant relationships. Gamma values for these significant items ranged from .09 for a question asking pastors to rate the "concern for the lost" in their congregation, to .46 for an item asking pastors to rate their church on "winning the lost, evangelism." Pearson's  $r$  coefficients ranged from .08 to .35.

Table 8.2 shows the relationships for nine questions that were associated with growth at a fairly substantial level.

**TABLE 8.2**  
**Evangelism Indicators by Church Growth**

	Growing (N=194)	Plateaued (N=187)	Declining (N=162)	(Gamma)
1. Rate your church: Winning the lost, evangelism (% exceptional or good)	51.3%	17.4%	16.1%	.46
2. Regular program for evangelism training? (% yes)	58.0	34.9	25.6	.44
3. Evangelism campaign in past 3 years? (% yes)	66.8	35.7	35.0	.42
4. Does the church have an effective Sunday school outreach program? (% yes)	53.1	34.3	22.4	.43
5. Involvement of members in recruitment (% extensively or moderately)	69.6	40.9	38.8	.40
6. How often is the visitation program conducted? (% weekly or more than weekly)	75.8	50.8	43.7	.35
7. Concerted effort to enroll as many as possible in Sunday school to increase attendance? (% yes)	61.3	40.0	35.2	.35

	Growing (N=194)	Plateaued (N=187)	Declining (N=162)	(Gamma)
8. Does Sunday school have a regularly scheduled time for visiting prospects? (% yes)	74.1	53.8	49.4	.34
9. Do members receive field training in how to visit and win the lost? (% yes)	81.9	65.8	60.4	.34

The first line of Table 8.2 shows the relationship of church growth to the question asking pastors to rate their church in "winning the lost, evangelism" as either "exceptional," "good," "average," or "below average." The gamma value is based on the full range of responses, but the percentages shown in the table combine the exceptional and good categories. As can be seen, 51.3% of the 194 pastors of growing churches rated their churches as exceptional or good in evangelism, as compared to only 17.4% of plateaued churches and 16.1% of the declining churches. Obviously, the pastors of growing churches are much more likely to rate their churches as effective in evangelism than are plateaued or declining churches. The relationship is strong and dramatic. It also shows that this variable, like many other evangelism and outreach items, provides better discrimination between growing churches and the other two types than it does between plateaued and declining churches. Apparently, certain types of evangelistic activity may help explain why some churches are able to grow rapidly, but they do not help much in explaining why some churches remain on the plateau, rather than decline.

The second item in Table 8.2 deals with evangelism training and produces a stronger, more linear relationship with church growth. Evangelism training *does* help discriminate between plateaued and declining churches. The last item in the table also deals with evangelism training and produces a similar relationship. Apparently, however, many more churches in all three growth/decline categories use evangelistic field training than have regular programs for evangelism training. Some churches must train their members in evangelism as the need arises, or occasionally, rather than as an ongoing emphasis of the church.

The third item in Table 8.2 dealt with whether the church had participated in any sort of programmed growth or evangelistic campaign during the past three years. Six currently available types were given as examples and



pastors responded either "yes" or "no." The results indicated that 66% of growing churches had used such campaigns, as compared to only 35% of plateaued and declining churches.

Questions 4, 7, and 8 all dealt with Sunday school outreach and visitation. The strongest association with growth was shown in a question that asked pastors if their church had an effective Sunday school outreach program. This question was essentially a Sunday school recruitment item rather than a true evangelism measure. Question 7 dealt with a particular Sunday school growth strategy that is promoted by certain agencies of the Southern Baptist Convention. Churches are encouraged to enroll as many persons as possible in their Sunday school, whether these persons are Christians, current attenders, or not. By having these persons on the roll, they will be contacted continuously, invited to functions, and so forth, just like active Sunday school members. As a result, many who are enrolled will begin to attend, thus eventually increasing average Sunday school attendance. Apparently, this strategy is related to growth. In question 8 it can be seen that regular Sunday school visitation of prospects is quite widespread among Southern Baptist churches. Of growing churches, 74% have such a visitation time, as compared to only around half of plateaued and declining churches.

Involvement of members in recruitment (item 5) was discussed in the previous section in comparison to the Presbyterian survey. As noted earlier, it produces a fairly substantial relationship with growth.

Finally, in item 6 pastors were asked if their church had a definite, regular visitation program, and if so, how often was it conducted. These two questions were combined to form a single variable with response categories that ranged from "more than once a week" to "no regular visitation program." This item produced a gamma of .35 and a Pearson's  $r$  coefficient of .26 with the three-category church growth variable. As can be seen, over three-quarters of growing churches conduct visitation at least once a week, as compared to half of plateaued churches and 43.7% of declining churches.

The relationships shown in Table 8.2 clearly demonstrate that evangelistic emphasis and training, evangelistic activity, outreach, prospect visitation, and general recruitment efforts are all related to church growth, and in most cases the relationship appears to be quite substantial. Such findings appear to indicate that previous research efforts may have underestimated the relationship between evangelism/recruitment and growth, or that the relationship is simply much stronger in conservative Protestant denominations like the Southern Baptist Convention.

### **An Evangelism/Outreach Scale**

In order to estimate the overall impact of evangelistic activity and emphasis on church growth, it is useful to create an evangelism/outreach scale. Once created, this scale is employed with statistical controls to estimate the total amount of variance explained in church growth.

The first step in creating the evangelism/outreach scale is to examine the structure of the items to be employed. In order to do this, the twenty-four evangelism/outreach items that are significantly related to growth are subjected to factor analysis.<sup>1</sup> This procedure suggested six factors, which were treated as subscales of evangelism/outreach.

For each individual factor, the survey questions that were most central to the factor were combined, and the resulting six variables compared to the church growth measure.<sup>2</sup> Each subscale was refined by alternatively adding or deleting items and determining the effect on the subscale's correlation with church growth. After the scales have been refined they are combined into an overall evangelism/outreach scale.<sup>3</sup> The resulting scale is composed of fourteen of the original twenty-four evangelism/outreach items.

Among the churches included in this survey, scores on the scale range from 24 (high evangelism) to 70 (low evangelism). The scale produced a Pearson's  $r$  correlation of .46 with church growth. This was a substantial increase over the correlation of the strongest member of the scale with growth, which produced a Pearson's  $r$  of .35. A correlation of this size (.46) indicates a very strong relationship with growth, especially given the nature of data used.

The scale also appears to be reliable. The fourteen items produce a standardized alpha coefficient of .83. The items used in the scale are listed in Table 8.3.

By squaring the Pearson's  $r$  coefficient it can be determined that the evangelism/outreach scale accounts for approximately 21% of the variance in the three-category measure of church growth and decline. For an institutional variable, this is a surprisingly large amount of variance explained given the results of previous studies. It indicates that evangelistic/outreach activity and emphasis are quite important to church growth.

In order to examine the relationship of evangelism and church growth more fully, the evangelism/outreach scale was divided into five roughly equal categories (from high to low) and crossed against the church growth measure. The results can be seen in Table 8.4 and are quite dramatic.

Of the growing churches, 42% scored high on the evangelism/outreach scale as compared to only 11% of the plateaued churches and about 6% of the declining churches. Further, when the top two categories of evangelism/outreach are combined, the percentage of growing churches soars to a full 74%, as compared to just under 23% of declining churches. This represents a difference of 51 percentage points, and produces a very strong gamma coefficient of .52.

TABLE 8.3

**Items Included in the Evangelism/Outreach Scale**

	Pearson's <i>r</i> with growth
1. Rate your church: winning the lost, evangelism	.35
2. Participation in programmed growth or evangelistic campaign?	.27
3. Involvement of members in recruitment?	.28
4. Does the church have a regular program for training members in evangelism?	.27
5. How often is the visitation program conducted?	.26
6. Does the church have an effective Sunday school outreach program?	.26
7. Rating of church: evangelistic to unevangelistic	.23
8. Concerted effort to enroll as many as possible in Sunday school to increase attendance?	.22
9. Does Sunday school have a regularly scheduled time for visiting prospects?	.21
10. Number of visits made by church staff (adjusted for church size)	.20
11. Do members receive field training in how to visit and win the lost?	.19
12. Has church sent out a brochure or other mass mail-out to community residents?	.17
13. Do people who visit your worship service and make themselves known receive a visit?	.14
14. Most SBC pastors place too much emphasis upon soul winning (coded in reverse)	.12

**TABLE 8.4**  
**Evangelism Scale by Church Growth**

Evangelism/ Outreach Scale	Growing (N=166)	Plateaued (N=155)	Declining (N=136)
High 1	42.2%	11.0%	5.9%
2	31.9	18.7	16.9
3	12.0	21.9	19.1
4	10.2	23.2	31.6
Low 5	3.6	25.2	26.5
Gamma = .52      Pearson's r = .46      p < .0001			

Once again, however, we see that the relationship is not linear. Whereas growing churches are much more likely to score high on the evangelism/outreach scale than are plateaued and declining churches, there is not much difference between plateaued and declining churches. Apparently, evangelism explains growth, but is of little value in explaining decline.

### The Impact of Evangelism in a Multivariate Context

The next step was to examine the impact of evangelism/outreach on church growth in a multivariate context. Does the strong relationship hold even when controlling for other institutional variables and for the social context of the church? The tables that follow help answer this question.

For this line of investigation all items included on the survey were examined, along with a number of questions from the Uniform Church Letter.<sup>4</sup> Further, demographic information for the zip code surrounding each church was added to the "record" and correlated with church growth. Demographic data were supplied by CACI and are based on the 1980 United States Census with 1989 estimates.

Various items from all three sources were significantly related to church growth. These predictors were divided into three broad categories: (1) contextual variables, (2) congregational characteristics, and (3) institutional (programmatic) variables.<sup>5</sup>

The first group of items concerned the social context of the church. This set included variables such as population growth, racial transition, the proximity of other Southern Baptist churches, the age and condition of the houses and businesses in the area, the buying power of community residents, and many other items. The second set of variables were "structural," rather

than programmatic. They tapped characteristics of the church itself and of its members, rather than its location or its activities. One such characteristic concerned the age distribution of members. What proportion are elderly or are in the prime "baby boomer" cohort? Several questions were combined to form a scale that tapped this characteristic. Other variables in this set dealt with the congregation's date of organization, the age of its sanctuary, the length of the current pastor's tenure, the proportion of adult members in professional or managerial occupations, and so forth.

The final set of items included programmatic variables as well as institutional measures designed to tap nonprogrammatic actions and orientations of members. Even though some of these measures *could* be considered congregational characteristics, they were included in this section because they may be altered through education and exhortation. One such item is the degree to which church members favor innovation over tradition.

Multiple regression analysis was conducted within subsets of items to determine those variables which best predicted church growth in a multivariate context.<sup>6</sup> Variables that contributed to the total explained variance at the .05 significance level were selected for further analysis. Eventually the list of variables in each set was reduced to five contextual variables, five items measuring congregational characteristics and seven institutional variables.

In the top third of Table 8.5 it can be seen that contextual variables explain 22% of the variance in church growth. In other words, at least 22% of church membership change can be explained by the social setting of a church. One variable dominates this set in terms of predictive power: the percentage of housing that was built from 1975 to 1980. Churches that are in areas with a large proportion of new housing are more likely to grow than are churches where the housing stock is older. Other significant items included the pastor's perception of growth in the community (as reported in 1983 on the Uniform Church Letter), racial transition in the community (a negative relationship), the condition of nearby residences and businesses, and the distance to the nearest SBC church. Southern Baptist churches are more likely to grow in areas that are growing in population, where racial transition is minimal, where nearby residences and businesses are in good repair, and where other SBC churches are not in close proximity.

The second set of variables was much more predictive of church growth than was the social context. Variables measuring congregational characteristics accounted for 34% of the variance in church growth. Again, one variable dominates. In this case it is the age structure of the church. Churches with a smaller proportion of elderly members, with a smaller proportion of Sunday school classes for the elderly, and with a larger proportion of members in the thirty to forty-four age group (in 1988) were much more likely to grow. In

addition, congregations that have a larger proportion of adult members who are professionals and managers were more likely to grow, as were younger churches (both in terms of date of organization and in age of the current sanctuary). Finally, churches that Schaller (1975) has labeled "ex-neighborhood churches" (churches where most of the active members once lived nearby, but have since moved away and drive back to worship) were less likely to grow than were churches that were not of this type.

**TABLE 8.5**  
**Multiple Regression:**  
**Three Sets of Church Growth Predictors**

	Pearson's r	Beta
<i>Contextual Variables</i>		
1. % of Housing Built 1975-1980	.33	.26
2. Pastor's Perception of Population Change (1983)	.30	.14
3. Racial Transition (Increase in % Black)	-.14	-.14
4. Condition of Nearby Houses and Businesses	.21	.13
5. Distance to Nearest SBC Church	.19	.11
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup> = .22		
<i>Congregational Characteristics</i>		
1. Age Structure	-.47	-.32
2. % of Adult Members Professionals or Management	.33	.19
3. Year Congregation Organized	.22	.13
4. Age of Sanctuary	-.35	-.12
5. Church Is "Ex-Neighborhood" (Members Drive Back)	-.21	-.08
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup> = .33	R <sup>2</sup> Set 1+Set 2 = .34	
<i>Institutional Variables</i>		
1. Evangelism/Outreach Scale	.46	.26
2. % of Members Attending Worship	.23	.15
3. Ratio: Sunday School Enrollment to Membership	.29	.13
4. Hours Pastor Spends Counseling Members	.27	.12
5. Live in Past/Dream About Future Continuum	-.35	-.11
6. Innovation/Tradition Continuum	.35	.11
7. Loving/Cold to Visitors Continuum	.23	.09
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup> = .35	R <sup>2</sup> Set 1+Set 2+Set 3 = .43	

In the bottom third of Table 8.5 it can be seen that of the seven institutional variables that emerged from the subset regression analysis, the most powerful predictor (by far) was the evangelism/outreach scale.<sup>7</sup> Also fairly important was the percentage of members attending worship on an average fall Sunday. Other variables significantly related to church growth when statistical controls were in effect included the ratio of Sunday school enrollment to resident membership,<sup>8</sup> hours the pastor spends counseling members, the tendency of church members to "live in the past," the tendency of church members to favor innovation over tradition, and the extent to which members are nurturing to visitors. Churches with a high ratio of Sunday school enrollment to resident membership, where a larger percentage of members attend worship on an average Sunday, where the pastor spends a large amount of time counseling members, where members are future oriented, where members tend to value innovation over tradition, and where members are loving to visitors are more likely to grow than are churches that lack these characteristics. This set of seven variables explained 35% of the variance in church membership change—the most of any set.

It can be argued that the three sets of variables have a natural order in terms of causation. That is, the context is causally prior to the other two sets of variables, because the church rarely has any control over its setting. Congregational characteristics may be influenced by the context (for example, a church may be composed of older persons because there are only older persons in the neighborhood), but congregational characteristics are not likely to have a direct influence on the context. Similarly, institutional variables have no effect on the context. Using this logic, it can be stated that 22% of the variance in church growth can be explained by the demographic setting alone. To determine the value of the other two sets in predicting church growth, it is necessary to see how much additional variance they explain beyond the 22% attributed to the context.

It also can be argued that congregational characteristics are causally prior to the institutional variables. The characteristics of the church and its members probably constrain institutional activity and orientation more than the reverse. This is clearly true for the date of organization, the age of the sanctuary, and the status of the church as "ex-neighborhood." However, it is likely that the age structure of a church is determined, at least to a certain degree, by the activities and orientation of members. Likewise, the presence of professionals and managers results, in part, from the type of programming, the leadership style of the pastor and other institutional variables. Nevertheless, it seems more appropriate to place institutional variables *after* congregational characteristics.

As can be seen in Table 8.5, adding congregational characteristics to the contextual set increased the explained variance from 22% to 34%—a gain of 12 percentage points in our ability to predict church growth. Adding institutional variables adds another 9 percentage points, resulting in a total explained variance of 43%. In other words, these seventeen variables explain almost half of the total variation in church growth.

In Table 8.6 all seventeen items were entered into a regression equation in stepwise fashion. Seven were found to be statistically significant.<sup>9</sup> Decreasing the number of variables from seventeen to seven does not reduce the variance explained in church growth. In fact, the adjusted  $R^2$  increases slightly. The seven variables explained 44% of the variance in church growth. The beta coefficients on the right side of the table indicate that *the evangelism scale is the most important predictor of church growth*. However, the age structure of the congregation rivals evangelism in magnitude. Both variables are extremely important predictors of church growth and dwarf the other variables in terms of impact.

Another significant predictor of growth was the proportion of housing built since 1975. Growth is easier in areas with newer housing. This is an influence that overshadows the effect of sheer population growth in the community. SBC churches also tend to experience more growth when they are not too close to other churches of the same denomination. In addition, younger churches are more likely to grow than are older congregations. Churches that have a large proportion of their members who attend on a regular basis are more likely to grow, as are churches that maintain a high ratio of Sunday school enrollment to resident members.

**TABLE 8.6**  
**Multiple Regression: Variables Combined**

Independent Variables	Pearson's r	Beta
1. Evangelism/Outreach Scale	.46	.29
2. Age Structure	-.47	-.22
3. % of Housing Built 1975–1980	.33	.14
4. Distance to Nearest SBC Church	.19	.13
5. Year Congregation Organized	.22	.12
6. % of Members Attending Worship	.23	.11
7. Ratio: Sunday School Enrollment to Membership	.29	.10
Adjusted $R^2 = .44$		



### Institutional Factors Are Important

This chapter examines the possible relationship between evangelism and church growth. Previous studies had shown that a relationship existed, but that it was weak and was of relatively little importance when compared to other predictors—especially those dealing with the context of the local church. There seemed to be some question, however, whether the questions employed to measure evangelistic effort and emphasis were adequate to make a generalization to all Protestant denominations in the United States. Further, subjective evidence suggested that evangelism might be more important than had been previously shown.

In order to test the relationship between evangelism and church growth more adequately, a wide variety of evangelism/outreach questions were included on a church growth survey; and to reduce the inevitable error component when dealing with church statistics, very rigorous definitions of growth, plateau, and decline were developed. The results showed that, indeed, various measures of evangelistic activity, evangelistic emphasis, simple outreach, and evangelistic training were related to church growth in a substantial way. Further, the various measures of evangelism worked together, so that an evangelism/outreach scale produced a stronger relationship with growth than did any single evangelism measure.

Another major finding was that evangelism is of value in discriminating between growing and nongrowing churches, but not between plateaued and declining churches. The vast majority of rapidly growing churches score high in evangelistic emphasis, while plateaued and declining churches tend to score a great deal lower. However, declining churches do not tend to score much lower than do plateaued churches on the evangelism scale. This makes a certain amount of sense. Plateaued churches are not very evangelistic. If they were, perhaps they would be growing. Declining churches are also not very evangelistic. If they were, perhaps they would be growing as well. The two nongrowing groups (plateaued and declining churches) share low levels of evangelism.

Multiple regression analysis reveals that the impact of evangelism and outreach remains, even when controlling for the influence of the context, age, and location of a church. In fact, *evangelism appears to be the only programmatic activity that retains a meaningful relationship with church growth when statistical controls are in effect*. Other institutional correlates are important, to be sure, but most are things that are hard for a congregation to control.

It would be difficult, for instance, for a church to change the age structure of its membership, even though a younger age structure seems essential to

church growth for most congregations. Churches that are successful in reaching the large "baby boom" cohort and their children are more likely to grow than churches that are dominated by the elderly. This is not surprising but it also is not easy to change. Most churches would love to reach the boomer generation, but have been unable to do so.

Church location is even more of a "given." Churches exist in social settings. New housing nearby helps churches grow. Why? Because new housing implies population growth of a particular type: suburban growth. SBC churches do better in areas where the population is increasing through the addition of new, single-family housing. SBC churches also do better in areas where their competition is limited. Growth among SBC churches is best on average outside the South and in growing areas that have yet to become "overchurched." Growth is very difficult in older urban and suburban neighborhoods where past population growth fueled the development of too many churches. Now these churches must compete for a dwindling supply of new residents.

The age of a congregation also is a "given." New churches are more likely to grow than are older congregations. This holds even when controlling for the context. New churches, like all new organizations, are more permeable and accepting because friendship networks have not yet solidified (Olson, 1989). Thus, assimilation of new members is easier.

A high percentage of members who attend on an average Sunday implies commitment and perhaps a congregation that has some elements of a social movement. When members are in town, they will attend. This is important for a church that wishes to grow, but it also is difficult to create. How does a church induce commitment among its members or transform itself into a social movement? The answer is not clear, especially from a programmatic perspective.

The weakest significant predictor of church growth is the ratio of Sunday school enrollment to resident membership. To a certain extent this variable reflects action on the part of the church, but there also is a component that is hard to control. A high ratio means that the Sunday school enrollment is close in magnitude to the resident membership of a church (and in some cases, the enrollment is larger than the membership). Churches that make a concerted effort to expand their enrollment through growth campaigns tend to have a high ratio. A high ratio is expected to enhance growth because it implies that a large number of those on the Sunday school roll will be prospects. Members can then "work" this list and draw these marginal Sunday school members into the church. Many churches try this, but apparently it is only those congregations that are successful in adding many persons to the Sunday school roll that achieve growth. So the effort is not enough—what is important is success at the effort.

The major questions suggested by this research concern the source of the differences between these findings and previous efforts to measure the influence of evangelism/outreach on church growth. Are these differences due to the fact that earlier studies looked at denominations that were relatively unevangelistic and that contained much smaller proportions of rapidly growing churches? Are the differences due primarily to differing methodology, or have the times simply changed? It is likely that all three possibilities contributed to the effect seen in Table 8.6. Denominations that have very small numbers of rapidly growing churches and where evangelism is not emphasized would necessarily produce smaller relationships with growth. Similarly, methodology that mingles plateaued churches with growing congregations would also tend to reduce the correlation between evangelism and church growth. And finally, all of the studies in this section on congregational growth suggest that the impact of institutional factors on church growth seems stronger in the late 1980s than it was a decade ago.

Evangelism is an important influence on church growth—at least among Southern Baptist churches. Its importance within mainline denominations seems clear, as well. It would appear that the relationship is stronger than was previously estimated. Evangelism may be the most important one thing church leaders can do if they want their church to grow.