Chapter Nine

Growth or Decline in Presbyterian Congregations

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Mainline Protestant denominations in the U.S. have had membership declines from the middle 1960s until today, and the declines have evoked a vigorous debate about the cause. Why are so many congregations declining? What is the role of congregational leadership and priorities, the role of community changes impacting churches, the role of national leadership, and so on? The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), the subject of this chapter, has also experienced a polarization of theological views that has compounded the debate. Each faction has its own ideas about what is ailing the denomination.

Sociological research on Presbyterian congregational growth or decline was at its greatest intensity in the 1970s. Several studies were completed, most notably a nationwide study by a task force commissioned by the United Presbyterian Church U.S.A. General Assembly in 1974. It serves as a background for the present effort.

The task force gathered empirical data on 681 congregations. Nationwide random samples were made from three categories of local churches in the denomination—the 10% fastest growing between 1968 and 1974, the 10% fastest declining during that period, and those experiencing typical loss, but less than 20% (the typical membership loss was 15.4%). Between 200 and 300 churches in each category agreed to participate, and each was sent a "church questionnaire" asking about the church and community, to be filled out by a knowledgeable person, and sets of "member questionnaires" for designated types of active members. The task force made a report in 1976. In 1976 to 1978 a team of sociologists analyzed the total set of data, producing an article in the 1979 book, *Understanding Church Growth and Decline 1950–1978*; the authors were W. Clark Roof, Dean Hoge, John Dyble, and Kirk Hadaway.

The research team assessed the importance of nearly 500 factors for congregational growth or decline, using the data from all 681 congregations. All the variables were classified as contextual (describing the community context where the church was located) or institutional (describing the church's pro-

gram, leadership, recent history, and so on). (For details see the excursus at the end of the chapter.) The researchers computed a membership change measure (1968–74), by dividing the 1974 membership figure by the 1968 figure. Then they measured the impact of the numerous factors on membership change. The overall variance explained in membership change was 26%; 14.6% was explained by contextual variables, which were entered first into the analysis, and 11.4% more by institutional factors.

Other studies done in the 1970s and 1980s came to similar conclusions. Contextual factors turned out to be stronger than institutional factors, yet *both* were important (see McKinney, 1979; McKinney and Hoge, 1983). The present study is a partial replication and expansion of the 1975 study, using more recent data.

Data and Methods

Shortly after the merger between the United Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. (North) and the Presbyterian Church in the U.S. (South) in 1983, the denominational Research Unit asked Hartford Seminary's Center for Social and Religious Research to assist it in carrying out the Presbyterian Congregational Profile Study. The purpose was to help identify needs of the congregations and to serve as a baseline for future research. In 1985 the research team drew a sample of 1,000 congregations stratified by region and size. The sample was random geographically, but larger congregations were slightly oversampled and smaller congregations slightly undersampled for two reasons. One reason was to include enough congregations of each size, since the predominant number of congregations was small. The second reason was to report more accurately the denomination's membership within regions. While the majority of congregations are small, the majority of members are in the larger congregations.

The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) has Korean-language congregations in many areas, but the research team decided not to include them in the study due to language difficulties.

Letters were sent to the pastors in the sample to request participation. A total of 707 said yes, and they were sent two kinds of questionnaires. The first was a Fact Sheet asking about congregational characteristics and programs, to be filled out by the pastor or session clerk (the "session" is the highest elected lay committee in a Presbyterian congregation). The second questionnaire was for all members of the session, asking them to report about their congregation's life. A total of 6,362 of the session questionnaires was filled out from 615 congregations, and Fact Sheets were returned by 593 churches. All analysis was done on these 593, and the unit of analysis was the congregation. During

the analysis we found ten cases with incomplete or erratic membership data, and we removed them, leaving 583 congregations.

The session questionnaire data were aggregated into mean scores or percentages and added to the Fact Sheet data from each congregation. We added denominational yearbook data (membership and financial data from 1970, 1980, and 1985) and U.S. Census data from the zip code area in which the congregation is located. The census data measured the population and economic characteristics of the zip code area in 1970 and 1980, with some projections for 1985 made by the National Planning Data Corporation. The result of these efforts was a rich set of data on these congregations, including objective information on zip code areas. (Two earlier articles based on this data provide more information about the study and sample—Roozen and Carroll, 1989; and Carroll and Roozen, 1990.)

The churches in the sample were quite typical. In 1985 the median size of the congregations in the sample was 142 members, and the mean was 210. Sunday worship attendance averaged 108. The average year of the congregation's founding was 1890, and the average year of beginning worship at its present location was 1923.

The present study differs from the earlier one in four important ways. First, it contains objective data on the community—not just descriptions of the community by pastors or session leaders. The new data include census information on the zip code area in which the church is located, while the earlier study had to rely on ratings of the "neighborhood within a half mile of your church building" made by knowledgeable persons in each church. The zip code area is typically larger than a half-mile radius. Second, the new study gathered different kinds of institutional variables. Since the overall project had a broader agenda than just growth or decline, some topics were studied more thoroughly than in 1975, others less. Third, the new study includes both former denominations. Whereas the 1975 study looked at UPCUSA (northern) churches only, the 1985 data include both northern and southern churches.

The fourth difference requires a word of clarification. The 1975 task force decided to study trends over a six-year period, since this seemed long enough that short-range fluctuations or chance occurrences would have little impact, yet short enough that the influence of particular pastoral leadership styles and programs could be isolated. If a longer period of time had been studied, more pastorates would have been involved, and the effect of pastoral leadership might have been obscured. In the new study we extended the span to eight years, 1980 to 1988, for two reasons. First, the institutional data were from 1985, and we wanted to include as recent membership information as possible. We had 1980 membership data, and we stretched the study period

to eight years, thus moving 1985 nearer the middle of the time span under study and improving the time sequence of the variables (since explanatory variables should be measured as early as possible). Second, membership decline among Presbyterian churches had by now continued unabated for more than two decades, making us less convinced that individual pastorates or programs were decisive. By 1988 it no longer seemed so important to be able to isolate leadership of individual pastors, and a longer time span seemed useful.[1]

The new study thus has a technical improvement over the earlier one: the measurement of the institutional variables was during the time period under study. These variables were measured in 1985, near the middle of the 1980–88 period. In the 1975 study this was not possible, and the task force had to rely on 1975 questionnaire information attempting to describe the state of the congregation about five years earlier to use it to help explain trends from 1968 to 1974.

Data Analysis

Because of the numerous variables available, we began exploratory analysis by correlating the many predictor variables with church growth or decline from 1980–88 and also from 1985–88. For the 1985–88 time span, we found only weak and ambiguous results, thus we dropped it from consideration. Apparently three years is too short a span for a clear analysis.

Most of the congregations in our sample experienced membership decline from 1980 to 1988. Fifty-four percent lost 10% or more of their membership; 26% were within 10%, up or down, of their 1980 figure, and 20% gained 10% or more. The median membership change was a 12% loss. Losses were greater among the congregations formerly belonging to the United Presbyterian Church U.S.A. (northern branch), but the proportion is unclear, partly because by 1980 many congregations and their presbyteries in the border states were aligned with both denominations in union presbyteries.

Part of this pattern is attributable to population shifts in the U.S. in the 1980s. While the areas of greatest membership in the UPCUSA (from the Great Lakes eastward through New York) experienced population losses, the areas of strength for the PCUSA (Virginia, the Carolinas, and Florida) were more stable and, in some cases, growing. Thus one underlying factor explaining growth or decline of individual congregations is overall population movement within the U.S. The regions with least membership decline in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) in the 1980s were the South and South Central regions.

In accordance with past research, we categorized factors affecting growth or decline into local contextual and local institutional factors. This categorization was first set forth by Roozen and Carroll (1979) and later used by other researchers (Roof et al., 1979; Warner, 1988; Wuthnow, 1989). We lacked information on nationwide factors, so our analysis was solely at the local level. A third category was added in the present study—"congregational demography." It encompasses the level of affluence in the congregation, age of members, and rate of member turnover. Such variables cannot be conceptualized as part of the environment in which a church organization operates, since members are critical resources of congregations. And these variables cannot easily be classified as institutional factors, which include programs, policies, leadership, and cultural factors in church life. Unlike institutional factors, they cannot be easily changed through intentional action. Thus we have kept them in a distinct third category. In the 1975 study the researchers did not include these factors because of uncertainty about how to interpret them.

Findings

Over 200 predictor variables were available for the analysis. We correlated all of them with the membership change measure and retained only those having correlations significant at or near the .10 significance level. This is a very weak requirement, chosen to avoid deleting any variables that could possibly be important in later subgroup analyses or that could be interesting but not perfectly measured here.

A total of thirty-two variables were retained; all the others had very weak correlations with membership growth or decline. Of course, some of the variables we abandoned may be important in specific settings but not in the overall national sample. For example, the level of affluence of the neighborhood may be predictive of church growth in big cities but not in the overall sample. We could not follow up all these possibilities. Rather, we selected the thirty-two variables with the most overall importance empirically and limited analysis to them. They formed fifteen categories or "clusters," each measured by one, two, three, or four variables:

I. Community Context
  (A) Change in Affluence
  (B) Population Change
  (C) Age
  (D) Educational Attainment
  (E) Women's Labor Force Participation
  (F) Housing and Residential Mobility
  (G) Community Type

II. Congregational Demography
(H) Membership Composition and Change
III. Institutional Factors
(I) Christian Education Program
(J) New Member Recruitment and Integration
(K) Theology
(L) Relations to Other Churches
(M) Facilities
(N) Influence in Decision Making
(O) Congregational Climate

The clusters are listed roughly in order of causal precedence, with the community context variables first, then the congregational demography variables, then the institutional factors.

Table 9.1 shows the associations of these thirty-two variables with growth or decline from 1980 to 1988. The zero-order correlations are shown in the first column. The middle column gives standardized regression coefficients (betas) for variables in each cluster, controlling for other variables in that cluster. The right-hand column shows variance explained by each cluster.

TABLE 9.1
Variables in Final Analysis: Zero-order Correlations[1], Regression Coefficients Within Clusters (Betas)[2], and Explained Variance for Clusters

	Zero-order Correlation	Beta	R^2 for Cluster[3]
I. Community Context			
A. Change in Affluence			
Per capita income, percent change 1969–79	.13	.13*	.02
B. Population Change			
Percent change 1970–80	.31	.20*	
Percent change 1980–85	.30	.15*	.11
C. Age			
Percent 35 to 44, change 1980–85	−.04	−.01	
Percent 45 to 64, change 1980–85	.26	.23*	
Percent 65 and up, change 1980–85	.14	.09	

	Zero-order Correlation	Beta	R^2 for Cluster[3]
Ratio of widowed persons to persons age 18 or older	−.19	−.04	.07
D. Education Attainment			
Some college or more	.20	.20*	.04
E. Women's Labor Force Participation			
Proportion of mothers who work full-time outside the home	−.11	−.11*	.01
F. Housing and Residential Mobility			
Proportion of dwellings built after 1970	.28	.20*	
Ratio of persons over 18 living in same house entire life to all persons over age 18, 1980	−.26	−.11	.08
G. Community Type (reported by pastor)			
Urban south versus others	.00	.02	
Suburban south versus others	.22	.22*	.04
II. Congregational Demography			
H. Membership Composition and Change			
Percent of members with over $35,000 household income	.08	.05	
Percent of members age 35 to 54	.10	.03	
Percent of members age 55 and older	−.13	−.07	
Percent of members in two-parent households with school-age children	.13	.08*	.02
III. Institutional Factors			
I. Christian Education Program			
Session's desire for pastor's emphasis on youth and children	.06	.01	
Church school size, percent change 1970–85	.38	.38*	

	Zero-order Correlation	Beta	R^2 for Cluster[3]
Christian education emphasizes faith and contemporary issues	.02	−.01	.14
J. New Membership Recruitment and Integration			
Pastor's weekly hours spent on new member recruitment	.17	.17*	
Percent of session agreeing "quality of preaching" is among 3 top reasons new members join congregation	.14	.10*	
Percent of session agreeing "evangelistic outreach" is the thing congregation does least well	−.09	−.06	.05
K. Theology			
Theological liberalism	.21	.21*	.04
L. Relations to Other Churches			
Joint worship services with non-Presbyterian congregations	−.13	−.09*	
Easy for outsiders to see how congregation differs from other churches in the area	.24	.23*	.06
M. Facilities			
Percent of session agreeing fellowship space is "about right" in size	.26	.07	
Percent of session agreeing sanctuary space is "about right" in size	.25	.14*	
Percent of session agreeing education space is "about right" in size	.32	.22*	.12

	Zero-order Correlation	Beta	R^2 for Cluster[3]
N. Influence in Decision Making			
Pastor's influence in the congregation	.24	.24*	.06
O. Congregational Climate			
Significant conflict in congregation in last two years	−.10	−.05	
Members excited about congregation's future	.34	.33*	.11

[1]All zero-order correlations were significant near or below the .10 level.
[2]Among the regression coefficients (Betas), * indicates significant at the .10 level. Betas show relationships while controlling for other variables in the cluster.
[3]R^2 shown for each cluster is the adjusted R^2.

Community Context

The predictive power of each cluster is shown in the right column. Cluster A shows that increased affluence of the community is weakly predictive of Presbyterian church growth. Another indicator of social status is educational attainment, in Cluster D. In communities with higher proportions of persons with a college education background, membership growth was more likely.

The strongest contextual factor predicting church growth is population growth in the zip code area (Cluster B). Population growth was also the strongest predictor in the 1975 study.

In Cluster C, an increase in the proportion of persons forty-five and older is positively related to growth, particularly increased numbers of persons age forty-five to sixty-four. A high number of widowed persons in the community is inversely related to membership growth.

Having a high proportion of mothers in the neighborhood working full-time is slightly correlated with decline, rather than growth, in Presbyterian churches (Cluster E). The reasons are unclear but probably have to do with types of families living nearby and with time demands on working mothers. Having new housing in the neighborhood (built after 1970) is strongly associated with church growth. Both an increase in housing in the zip code area and the replacement of old housing by new housing seem to give churches new opportunities for growth (Cluster F).[2] As Cluster G shows, being in the urban South is associated with membership growth. (Other similar measures such as suburban South, urban West, and so on, were tested, but none were important.)

Congregational Demography

In past research on Presbyterian and United Church of Christ congregations, congregational affluence has been found to be a predictor of membership growth (Roof et al., 1979; McKinney, 1979). It is again in the present study (see Cluster H). Based upon the pastor's estimate, the percent of members with annual household incomes over $35,000 is associated with growth.

Having proportionately more members in the thirty-five to fifty-four-year-old age group is conducive to growth; higher percentages of members aged fifty-five to seventy-four is not. Having more families with two parents and school-age children is also conducive to growth.

Institutional Factors

Certain church programs have an effect. Activities regarding children, youth, and Christian education were consistent and positive predictors of membership change (Cluster I). This is particularly so for growth in the church school, the strongest single predictor of church growth in the data.[3] Two items measuring the approach taken by the church school, however, proved not to be predictors. One asked whether the approach stresses faith and contemporary issues (shown in the table). Another measured whether the approach of the church school is more traditional and Bible-centered (not shown in the table).

Membership recruitment activities are important for growth (Cluster J). Congregations that do a poor job of evangelistic outreach are less likely to grow. In the area of evangelism, pastors can make a measurable difference, as many writers on church growth have emphasized (e.g., Wagner, 1979; Johnson, 1989). Pastors who report spending relatively more of their work time on new member recruitment tend to have growing memberships. These findings have a certain consistency: time and energy invested in evangelism are characteristic of growing congregations. Also related is the finding that churches are growing in which session members more often report that "quality of preaching" attracts new members. Other researchers have pointed out the significance of preaching for growing congregations (e.g., Hartman and Wilson, 1989).

Being theologically liberal (as estimated by session members) was a plus for church growth (Cluster K). This finding is contrary to much that is written about church growth today. The session questionnaire also included several measures of theological strictness, but none were related to growth or decline (and are not shown here).

Consistent with the expectations of Kelley (1977), who argued that involvement in ecumenical activities hinders growth, we found (in Cluster L) that participation in joint worship services with other denominations was mildly predictive of decline. Also, being a church that clearly differs from other churches in the area is predictive of growth, and, conversely, being a church like others nearby predicts decline.

The physical facilities of the congregation make a difference in membership change (Cluster M). Member satisfaction with the sanctuary, educational, and fellowship space was clearly conducive to growth. Of the three, satisfaction with educational space is the most important.

Items regarding decision making in the congregation and the congregation's morale were also tested. Among a number of decision makers listed in the questionnaire, only the session's estimate of the degree of the pastor's influence over decision making was positively related to membership change. Greater pastoral influence is positively related to growth (Cluster N).

Cluster O has two measures of congregational climate. The most important is the report by session members that members are excited about the congregation's future. This is a major predictor of church growth.[4] The experience of significant conflict in the congregation during the past two years (reported by the pastor) is associated with declining congregations.[5] The actual question asked, "In the past two or three years, has your congregation experienced any serious conflicts?" so our information does not span all eight years under study. Our analysis probably underestimates the impact of conflict.

Variables That Were Not Significant

It is important to mention some of the variables that proved not to be related to church growth or decline and thus were eliminated from Table 9.1. Many of them have been mentioned by past analysts of church growth.

Among community context measures, the presence of school-age children and adolescents in the zip code area was not significantly related to membership change, contrary to past research.[6] The presence of significant proportions of never married adults was not related to membership change in the 1980s. Also not related to membership change was the proportion of the population that was female, the proportion of housing units that were rented versus owned, the proportion of the population that was nonwhite, and growth in that proportion from 1980 to 1985.

For congregational demographics, nonsignificant predictors of membership change included the ratio of attendance to membership, the proportion of members under age twenty, the ratio of average church attendance to

seating capacity, the proportion of lifetime members, the length of time since the congregation began worshiping in its present location, and the ratio of members under twenty and members over seventy-five to their relative proportions in the community.

Among institutional indicators, none of the social justice orientation and activities items were associated with membership change, contrary to much conventional wisdom. We looked at a large number of programs such as food pantries, soup kitchens, scout troops, or renting facilities to community groups, but none were related to church growth. Also, none of the internal programming items were important, except for those related to Christian education, especially for children and adolescents. Attempts to correlate numerous stewardship programs and emphasis items were fruitless. None of the indicators of worship diversity and activity were significantly related to membership change. Finally, pastoral tenure and most of the items measuring how pastors divide their work time were not related to membership change, with the exception noted above for time spent on new member recruitment activities.

Relative Importance of Clusters of Variables

We also wished to assess the overall importance of different kinds of factors. As Table 9.1 showed, our predictor variables are in three categories—community context, congregational demography, and institutional factors, labeled I, II, and III. We made overall regression analyses including all the thirty-two variables in these categories, entering I first, then II, then III, following earlier practice. It would seem likely that community context has a more important causal impact on congregational demography and program than vice versa.

The results are shown in the first line of Table 9.2. The second column of the table shows the proportion membership change (− 12% for the total sample), then the last three columns show the adjusted R^2 for category I, I + II, and I + II + III. Community context accounts for 16% of the variance, congregational demography accounts for an additional 4%, and institutional factors account for another 12%, adding up to 32% of the variance explained.

In the 1975 study, the variables measured were more specifically focused on growth and decline, and they explained 26% of the variance—14.6% explained by contextual factors and 11.4% by institutional factors. The new study had more explanatory power. Why? One way to check is by controlling for the regions of the nation studied. In 1975, only the UPCUSA congregations were included—almost none in the South. Therefore in a separate calculation we removed the South from the new data and looked at only the non-South (388 congregations). The result is shown near the bottom of Table 9.2 after "Non-South." (For details see Table

A9.3 in the Supplemental Appendix, available from Hartford Seminary Center for Social and Religious Research.) The explained variance was 9% for the community context, 4% for congregational demography, and 16% for institutional factors, for a total of 29%.

TABLE 9.2
Membership Change in Twelve Subgroups and Variance Explained by Three Sets of Clusters in Twelve Subgroups (Adjusted R^2)

			Variance Explained (Adj. R^2)		
	Number	Median Change	I (7 clus.)	I+II (8 clus.)	I+II+III (15 clus.)
Total Sample	583	−.12	.16	.20	.32
Church Size:					
1–100	98	−.06	.13	.16	.34
101–250	206	−.10	.08	.15	.27
251–500	135	−.15	.09	.14	.22
501 and over	110	−.11	.43	.49	.57
Community Types:					
Large City	110	−.18	.41	.42	.61
Suburb of City	79	−.10	.29	.29	.40
Small City	112	−.08	.12	.12	.25
Town and Country	237	−.12	.07	.20	.30
Region:					
Northeast	135	−.16	.03	.07	.28
Midwest	165	−.15	.10	.13	.23
West	84	−.08	.00	.01	.36
South	183	−.06	.19	.21	.32
Non-South	388	−.14	.09	.13	.29
Church Age:					
<1901	348	−.12	.19	.22	.31
1901–50	133	−.18	.26	.30	.48
1951–85	102	−.06	.11	.11	.47

Note: The number given is for the regression analysis in the subgroup. Some cases were lost due to missing data.

In the present study we had three categories of variables, not two, and the most exact comparison of 1975 and the 1990 studies would ignore congregational demography and look only at community context and institutional factors. In 1975 the figures were 14.6% and 11.4%; in the present study they were 9% and 16% in the non-South. The relative importance of context has dropped, and the importance of institutional factors has risen.

Is this a result of the different data used in 1975 and in 1990? That is, do research studies using census data for contextual variables find lower associations between context and church growth than do studies using pastors' ratings of contextual factors? If so, this may explain the changes in findings from 1975 to the present study. Fortunately a Baptist study of church growth used both kinds of measures, providing a comparison. In a study of Baptist congregations from 1981 to 1987, zip code area population change correlated .30 with congregation growth or decline, while pastors' estimates of neighborhood growth or decline within a mile of the church correlated at .37.[7] Pastors' ratings seem to produce an overestimate of the importance of community change. Of the two, census data are the more reliable.

In short, the change in measurement method from the 1975 study to the present study very likely caused the lower estimate of the importance of contextual factors in the non-South. We are led to believe that the earlier estimate was too high and that the estimate in the non-South in the present study is better.

The situation is complicated by the addition of southern churches in the present study. Churches in the South are more influenced by their communities, for better or worse, than those in other regions, as the lower part of Table 9.2 shows. Thus, by adding southern churches to the sample the estimate of contextual influence rises. We are left with a conclusion similar to that in 1975, that contextual factors are slightly stronger than institutional factors in the whole denomination.

Maybe the change in outcomes is due to actual change in society. Has the society itself changed? The answer is not very clear, but we doubt if social change was very great. All census reports indicate that changes in the rate of neighborhood movement and residential mobility in the 1970s and 1980s were small.[8]

Analysis of Influences Within Subgroups

Because we were concerned with how the overall model fares in different types of congregations and locations, we looked at four sets of subgroups:

church size in 1980, community type, region, and the period in which the congregation was founded. Past research has shown that these subgroups vary in congregational growth and decline. The remainder of Table 9.2 shows the statistics for the subgroups.

The smallest congregations, those with 100 or fewer members in 1980, declined the least: an average of 6%. The larger congregations varied in rates of decline with the 251–500 member churches declining the most at 15%. Congregations in large cities were hardest hit by declining membership (−18%), followed by town and country churches (−12%), suburban congregations (−10%), and small city churches (−8%). Congregations in the Northeast and Midwest experienced the steepest declines (−16% and −15%, respectively), while churches in the West (−8%) and South (−6%) declined less.

The total explanatory power of our model for each subgroup is seen in the righthand column. The model is the most effective in explaining growth or decline for three types of churches—large churches, churches in large cities and suburbs, and churches founded since 1900. The reasons are not all the same. The models explain change in large churches, city churches, and suburban churches because contextual factors greatly influence them. For them, as the community goes, so go the Presbyterian churches. The models explain change in churches founded since 1900 for a different reason—for them the influence of institutional factors is much greater.

Our model is weaker for explaining changes in smaller churches. They seem less dependent on community context and deliberate actions, as several researchers have suggested (e.g., Carroll, 1977; Dudley, 1978; and Rothage, n.d.).

The breakdown by church age at the bottom of Table 9.2 does not distinguish between churches founded in recent years. The question arises if churches founded in more recent years have different rates of growth or decline. In Table 9.2 we see that the median decline in churches founded since 1951 was 6%. For churches founded in 1951 to 1960 the decline was 7%, and for churches founded since 1960 it was 5% (not shown in the table). The two periods are similar.

We could not test the overall model statistically for the most recent churches due to the low number of cases, but we could look at correlations with individual measures. There were fifty churches founded in 1951–60 and fifty-one since 1960. The correlations for the latter group were clearly stronger. (The correlations in the 1951–60 group were similar to the total sample.) The correlation between growth-or-decline and educational attainment in the community (Cluster D) for the churches founded since 1960 was .41, compared with .20 in the total sample. The correlation with location in

the suburban South versus all others (Cluster G) was .35, compared with .22 in the total sample. The correlation with growth in the church school (Cluster I) was .53, compared with .38 in the total sample. The correlation with hours spent by the pastor in new member recruitment was .47, compared with .17 in the total sample. The correlation with session perception that evangelism is done poorly (Cluster J) was −.32, compared with −.09 in the total sample. The correlation with adequacy of education space (Cluster M) was .41, compared with .32 in the total sample. It is obvious that our model is very effective for recently founded churches, even though we cannot demonstrate it statistically due to the limited number of cases.

The variations by region are surprisingly small. The main finding seems to be the relatively greater impact of community context on churches in the South and the greater impact of institutional factors in the West. (The reader should remember that subgroups with small numbers of cases, like the West with only eighty-four cases, have lowered adjusted R^2 solely for statistical reasons.)

Analysis of Specific Factors Within Subgroups

Although Table 9.2 signals differences in factors supporting church growth in different subgroups, it provides no specifics. We searched for more detail through regression analyses within the subgroups. The analyses are statistically identical to the overall analysis in Table 9.1. The results are shown in Table A9.1 in the Supplemental Appendix. We will summarize them here.

As noted earlier, community context had immense effect on churches with over 500 members. The most powerful predictors for these churches were Clusters B and F, referring to overall population change in the zip code area, the houses built since 1970, and the percent of persons in the community who lived in the same house their whole adult lives. These community changes strongly determined if the largest churches grew or declined, but they had limited impact on other churches.

The impact of institutional factors also varies by size. It is a bit greater for small churches than for large ones. However, the analysis found that two factors are very important for churches over 500 members—the church school and efforts for evangelism (Clusters I and J).

The type of community in which the church is located is also very important. Churches in large cities are the most affected by changes in their context and also by institutional factors. Our analysis is most suitable for explaining their histories. Suburban churches are also greatly affected by community changes. For city churches the most influential factors are change in economic level in the zip code area, population change in the zip

code area, and increase in young adults and middle adults in the zip code area. Being in an educated community also is important for growth in city churches.

For churches in suburbs the most influential factors are population change in the zip code area and being in an educated community.

It should be no surprise that city churches also grow or decline more than others depending on their leadership and program—especially their church school, their evangelism efforts, and the adequacy of their physical facilities. These three factors explain a large portion of their growth or decline. The situation for suburban churches, small city churches, and town and country churches is similar but less crucial; institutional factors explain less.

How about variation by region of the nation? Community variables are the most influential on southern churches—especially population change in the zip code area, change in the number of young adults and middle adults in the zip code area, and houses built since 1970. Why these variables have affected southern churches more than others is unclear.

Institutional factors were most important in the Northeast and West—especially the church school, the adequacy of the physical facilities, and the effort given to evangelism.

Finally, does it matter how old the congregation is? Yes, the more recently the church was founded, the more crucial are institutional factors for its growth or decline. The most consequential factors for churches founded since 1950 are church school, adequacy of physical facilities, and effort expended in evangelism. These are the same institutional factors we have found to be important before. Community context is a bit more predictive of growth or decline of churches founded between 1901 and 1950—especially the number of houses built since 1970 and the percentage of people who have lived their whole adult lives in the same house.

In a Declining Church, Context Outweighs Institutional Factors

What can we say about membership growth and decline in congregations of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) in 1980–88 as compared with 1968–74? First of all, the overall picture is one of continuing membership decline. The causes of the earlier decline are probably still in place. From 1980 to 1988 the median change was a decline of 12%. There were some growing congregations: 20% gained 10% or more. Many of these congregations were in the South.

When we tried to account for growth or decline, we used the same strategy as the researchers used in the 1975 study. We looked at correlations of all of our variables with the membership change from 1980 to 1988 and

retained those variables correlated with change. They were able to explain 32% of the variance as compared with 26% in 1975.

We arranged the variables in three sets—contextual factors, congregational demography, and institutional factors. As in 1975, contextual factors were a bit stronger than institutional factors. In the non-South the contextual factors were weaker in the present study than in the 1975 study, but for some reason they were stronger in the South, so that our overall estimate of the relative strength of the two is unchanged: contextual factors are a bit more explanatory. The measures of congregational demography added a bit more explanatory power than in 1975. It seems likely that the power of contextual factors weakened a bit from the earlier study to this one.

The factors making for growth and decline of large churches and big city churches are clearest in our data. Being located in areas of *growth* in total population, in per capita income, and in the proportion of middle-aged persons was positive for membership growth, as was being located in areas where there is a high level of education and a greater proportion of newer housing. Growth was also more likely in the urban and suburban South. Growth was negatively affected by having a high proportion of widowed persons, a high number of working mothers, and a low rate of geographical mobility. Taken as a whole, this set of contextual variables suggests the kinds of communities in which PCUSA congregations do best and worst. That they do best in growing, more affluent, better-educated communities where the housing stock is newer, is no surprise given all past research.

Congregational demography variables were less important than contextual or institutional factors, but it is true that congregations with a greater proportion of affluent, middle-aged members, and a higher percentage of members in two-parent households with school-age children are more likely to be growing.

The importance of institutional factors, which the congregation can consciously do something about, is shown in this study. Most important are factors relating to Christian education programs, emphasis on evangelistic outreach (especially by the pastor), and quality preaching. Facilities are also important, especially educational facilities. Congregations described by their sessions as theologically liberal are slightly more likely to be growing. And congregations that have a positive view of their future are growing.

We found much variation in the strength of the various factors from location to location, from small churches to large churches. It is inappropriate to generalize about what makes for growing or declining churches without talking about location, size, region, and age. Unfortunately, many vague generalizations are being spread today, creating more confusion and disappointment than positive results.

To sum up: No single factor explains why some churches grow and others decline. It is a combination of factors, many of which we have isolated and measured. We were able to explain 32% of the variation in growth or decline, which is quite good for sociological research. The rest of the variation is due to peculiar local, accidental, and unmeasured factors we were unable to study. These findings can probably be generalized to congregations of other similar denominations. Churches vary by size, community type, region, and so on. In the future we must learn to specify what affects growth and decline in particular types of congregations in particular locations. That task awaits further study.

Excursus: "Factors Influencing Presbyterian Congregational Growth or Decline in the 1980s"

Details of the 1975 Study

The Presbyterian Special Committee to Study Church Membership Trends was appointed in 1974 to help denominational leaders understand the decline. Its final report, *Membership Trends in the United Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A.*, was published in 1976, and a later analysis of the data was done by Roof et al. (1979), in the *Understanding Church Growth and Decline, 1950–1978* volume. Research methods are described in both reports.

The task force studied congregational growth or decline in the 1968–74 period. It randomly selected 350 churches in the "growth" category (5% or more growth in 1968–74), 350 in the "decline" category (30% or more decline), and 350 in the middle of the spectrum, which was about 15% decline. Of these 1,050 congregations, 802 agreed to take part. In autumn 1975 the task force sent out two kinds of questionnaires: first a "church questionnaire," which asked a number of factual questions about the community, the congregation, the church program, and so on, to be filled out by a knowledgeable person; and second, a packet of six to fifteen "individual questionnaires" to be given to designated categories of active parishioners. More questionnaires were sent to large congregations than to small ones; an average of 6.5 were returned. As a result of this method, the persons filling out the individual questionnaires were relatively active lay members, not a random sample.

The researchers aggregated the data from the church questionnaires and the individual questionnaires for each congregation, resulting in nearly 500 variables covering neighborhood context, characteristics of members, congregational leadership program, leadership, conflict, and so on. No census data on each church's community were available. The unit of analysis was the congregation.

First, the researchers computed a membership change measure, 1968 to 1974, by dividing the 1974 membership figure by the 1968 figure. Then they computed zero-order correlations between all 500 variables and the membership change measure. A majority of the variables were found to be useless because of a weak correlation with membership change, because they unduly overlapped other variables, or because they were on topics (such as evaluation of presbytery or synod staff) on which the respondents lacked knowledge. After initial screening, twenty-three of the contextual, and seventy-two of the institutional variables were retained for further analysis. The contextual variables were organized in four clusters: Affluence, Demographic Change, Community Facilities, and Church Competition. The institutional variables were organized in fifteen clusters, including Membership Satisfaction with Worship and Program, Pastor, Social Action, and Congregational Harmony and Cooperation. Then, through use of multivariate analysis, the researchers assessed the importance of each cluster separately and the overall importance of contextual and institutional factors. Finally, the analysis was repeated within strata of church size (with no useful result) and within each of six community types—growing area in a large city, nongrowing area in a large city, growing area in a suburb of a large city, nongrowing area in a suburb of a large city, small city, and town and country.

Results of Regression Analyses of Subgroups

This section contains detailed regression tables from the new data. The four tables in the Supplemental Appendix (Tables A9.1, A9.2, A9.3, and A9.4) depict betas and adjusted R^2s for analyses within each of four church sizes, four community types, four regions of the nation, and three ages of the congregation (based on founding dates). All the R^2s are adjusted downward using the standard adjustment formula of SPSSX. The formula is based on the number of cases and the number of variables in the regression, and it most deflates the R^2 when N is low and the number of variables is high. In subgroups with N less than 100 the adjustment greatly deflates R^2 when a large number of predictors are being used, even as much as from .20 to .01 and from .61 to .36. The reader should remember this when comparing columns having greatly different Ns.