



Trends

A study on Protestant denominations was recently released based on figures compiled by Association of Religion Data Archives. It tracked attendance growth and decline for the years 2000–2010.

Of the twenty-seven larger Protestant denominations, which grew the fastest? The Covenant. We grew by 33 percent in that period. Interestingly, all three “cousin” denominations that formed out of the same Scandinavian immigrant renewal movements in the late 1800s were among the four fastest growing groups (Evangelical Free Church second, Baptist General Conference fourth).

Seventeen of the twenty-seven are in some state of decline. The biggest losses have been in the seven mainline denominations, with all eroding in attendance by at least 10 percent, and five by more than 20 percent. Several evangelically oriented groups have also seen a downturn. For example, Church of the Nazarene, Christian and Missionary Alliance, Christian Reformed, and Missouri Synod Lutheran all lost attendance.

When you factor in population growth, the figures are even more sobering. Population in the United States grew by 9 percent during the study period. Anything under 9 percent growth, then, is an indication of weakening impact. By that measure, a whopping twenty-one of twenty-seven church bodies lost ground.

I have disparate feelings as I look over the data. I am grateful to serve a movement with momentum. And I am deeply challenged by what the future holds for the witness of Christ on this mission field.

The Covenant may never be the biggest, but because of our smaller size I do believe we can serve as a “controlled laboratory” where lessons can be learned and shared with others who are expressing interest in learning more about us.

From a strictly analytical perspective, there are four observable factors I note to others. The first is the relative strength in of our established base of churches in the aggregate. In any given period, some established churches (which we define as more than ten years old) are going to be gaining ground while others might be having a tougher time. In the total network, you hope

this balances out to relative stability in the system. That has generally been the case for us; it is not the case for groups in decline. It is the stable platform on which all of our other mission and ministry advances are dependent. It is harder than ever for a congregation to gain traction for the future. You may attend a church where you feel that keenly. I want to assure you that we invest a lot in our established base of churches, and will continue to do so.

The second factor is church planting. In 1992 former president Paul Larsen and then-chair of the Council of Superintendents Glenn Palmberg (who would become Paul’s successor), led the Covenant to a defining recommitment to our mission here in the United States and Canada, and to do so through church planting. We retooled our processes and engaged this priority across regional conferences. As a result, over the years we have consistently started one new church every two to three weeks. We hold the conviction that the local church is God’s basic strategy for impacting the world. If we want to see more mission, we want to start more churches.

The third factor is our commitment to the mosaic of the kingdom of God. Half of the churches we start are among populations of color or intentionally multiethnic, and now comprise 27 percent of all congregations. Gathered at the communion table are names like Swanson and Rodriguez; Hedberg and Yee; Lund and Kwok. We are more reflective of the kingdom of God, and better positioned to reach the entirety of the rapidly changing mission field right here.

A fourth factor is the phenomenon of large churches, a dynamic beyond the Covenant but which is evident in our fellowship. We have more large churches and our large churches are larger than ever. For example, a decade ago a church with 500 in attendance would be one of the largest twenty-five congregations. Today we have forty churches of 600 or more.

But I am convinced our impact is not

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CONTINUED ON PAGE 29

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COMPASS BEARINGS

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 5

based in measurable factors but in identity. We live in an increasingly post-Christian, postmodern, multi-ethnic environment. As such, people are hungering for a faith of authenticity, not plasticity; biblical depth and spirituality, not simply practicality; a faith that proclaims God's love and then demonstrates it; that takes on the hurts of the world; that takes seriously the vision of a kingdom that bridges, as the Apostle Paul states, ethnicity, gender, and class.

That is precisely who we are at our best. May we live squarely in this: who we are underlies our momentum as much as what we do. More on this next month. ■