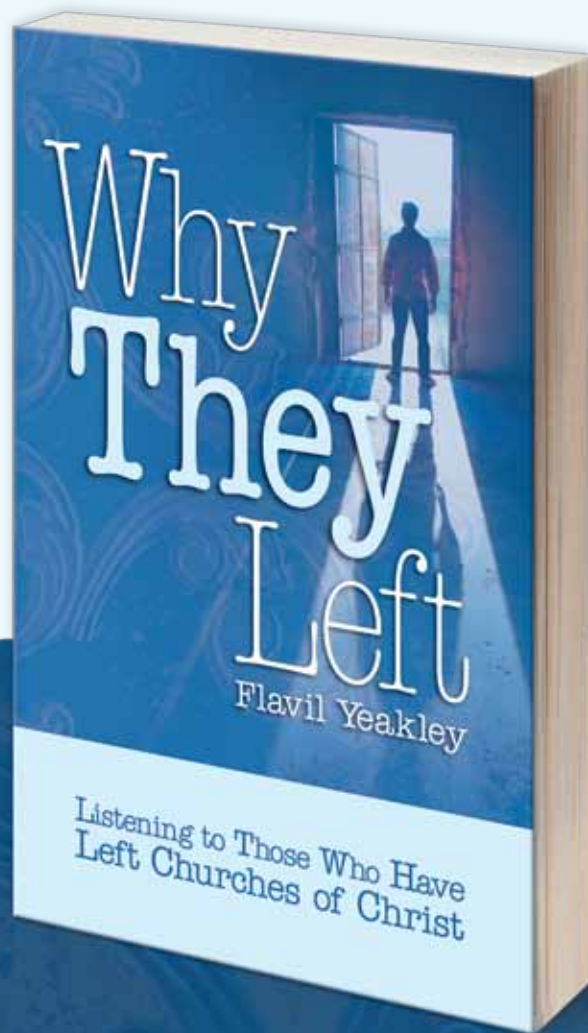


STUDYING PATTERNS OF GROWTH AND DECLINE

Book Excerpt From Why They Left

by Flavil R. Yeakley Jr.



They wanted to know more about the people who are leaving Churches of Christ – where they are going and why they are leaving. I agreed to study those issues.

Students in preaching classes often need to be reminded, “Text without context is pretext.” The same thing is true when studying patterns of growth and decline in the Churches of Christ throughout the United States.¹ Those patterns need to be considered within the context of what is happening among all religious groups in the United States.

This is especially true in regard to what happens when young people grow up and leave home. Sociologists have known for a long time that early adulthood is a time in life when there is typically a decline in church membership, church attendance and other indicators of religiosity.

Most leaders in Churches of Christ regard any loss of the younger generation as being too high. But some think that this is happening for the first time with the present generation of young adults and that it is happening only in the Churches of Christ. They take this loss as evidence that

something is seriously wrong with Churches of Christ.

When some of those who are leaving are our children or grandchildren, it is small comfort to know that this phenomenon is not new or limited to Churches of Christ. But such knowledge might help to keep church leaders from making the wrong changes.

Changing Climate of Receptivity

Virtually all American religious groups grew from 1945 until 1965, the two decades following the end of World War II. Since then, however, a change has taken place in the religious climate of the nation. One way to see this change is to compare the growth rates of the fastest-growing major denominations in the last three decades of the 20th century.

This can be done with data from three recent decadal studies.² Table 1 shows the denominations that had the highest growth rates in three recent decades: 1970s, 1980s and 1990s. Notice how much those growth rates have declined.

Comparisons of growth rates are considered valid only within size categories. The comparison here is limited to the 14 American religious groups with 1 million or more adherents each.³ In the 2000 study, more than 90 percent of the adherents claimed by Christian religious bodies in America belonged to one of these fellowships.

This kind of comparison is an indication of a culture's receptivity to the gospel. Donald McGavran, the father of the modern Church Growth Movement, suggested that churches should "occupy resistant fields lightly" and use more resources in places where people are more receptive.⁴ He was not suggesting that Christians give up on areas such as the United States, Canada and Western Europe where people today are less receptive to the Christian message. But studying the receptivity of a culture tells where evangelism needs to start.

In the 2000 study conducted by the Association of Statisticians of American Religious Bodies (ASARB), less than half the people in the United States were claimed as adherents by any local congregation of any of the

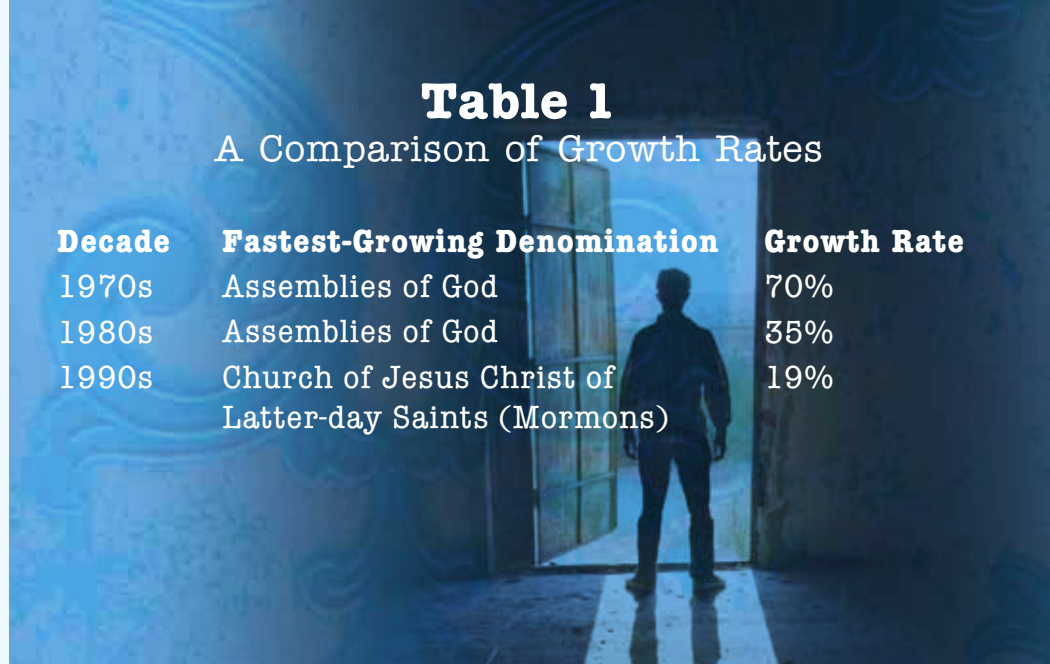


Table 1

A Comparison of Growth Rates

Decade	Fastest-Growing Denomination	Growth Rate
1970s	Assemblies of God	70%
1980s	Assemblies of God	35%
1990s	Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons)	19%

Christian groups listed on page 26.

That study was based on reports from the headquarters of denominations and reports by researchers studying groups of independent congregations. The same pattern of decline, however, was reported in a major study done with interviews of a very large random sample of individuals. According to the *U.S. Religious Landscape Survey 2008* conducted by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, "More than one-quarter of American adults (28%) have left the faith in which they were raised in favor of another religion – or no religion at all."⁵

Also significant was the fact that "the number of people who say that they are unaffiliated with any particular faith today (16.1%) is more than double the number who said that 20 years earlier. Among Americans ages 18-29, one-in-four say that they are not currently affiliated with any particular religion."⁶

A Different Kind of Outcomes Assessment Research

After moving to Harding University in 1990, I served as director of the Office of Outcomes Assessment along with my teaching duties in the College of Bible and Religion and my work as the Director of the Harding Center for Church Growth Studies. The Office of Outcomes Assessment is responsible for doing the kind of survey research and statistical analysis needed for periodic reviews by accrediting agencies.

In 2005, Dr. David B. Burks,

president of Harding University, told me that for several years the presidents of Christian colleges and universities had been discussing the need for some collective research on outcomes of Christian higher education. He asked me to prepare a proposal for research that would provide reliable and recent answers to some questions of special interest to the presidents of Christian colleges and universities. These questions also included some that were of interest to all church leaders.

Research Methods

- More than 2,000 students at 11 Christian colleges and universities participated in a student survey.
- More than 2,500 alumni of these same schools participated in an alumni survey.
- Eighty leaders of campus ministries conducted by Churches of Christ at state-supported colleges and universities provided data on these ministries, and 404 students involved in campus ministry activities responded to a survey.
- In a cluster sampling of 100 congregations, church leaders provided data on 4,993 young people in their congregations who had graduated from high school in the previous 10 years, 1997-2006.

Some of the Results

- One percent of the adherents in the 100 congregations of the cluster sample graduated from high school each year. That is exactly the

Major Christian Religious Bodies in the United States Ranked by Number of Adherents in 2000

Religious Bodies	Adherents
Catholic Church	62,035,042
Southern Baptist Convention	19,881,467
United Methodist Church	10,350,629
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America	5,113,418
Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormon)	4,224,026
Presbyterian Church (USA)	3,141,566
Assemblies of God	2,561,998
Lutheran Church (Missouri Synod)	2,521,062
Episcopal Church	2,314,758
American Baptist Church in the USA	1,767,462
United Church of Christ	1,698,918
Churches of Christ	1,645,584
Christian Churches and Churches of Christ	1,439,253
Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)	1,017,784

same as the percentage in the U.S. population generally.

- Among the 4,993 young Christians who graduated from high school while attending these 100 congregations of the cluster sample, 80.2 percent went on to attend college. That is well above the national average of just a little less than two-thirds of high school graduates going on to attend college.

- Among the college-bound recent high school graduates in the 100 congregations of the cluster sample, 37.5 percent attended a Christian college or university. That is far higher than the estimate of 15 percent we have often heard in recent years.

Retention Rates in Churches of Christ

In the early 1990s, there was some nationwide research conducted by Lewis, Dodd and Tippens that included an estimate of retention rates in Churches of Christ.⁷ Their estimate was that only 55 percent of the young people growing up in Churches of Christ maintain that church affiliation after they grow up and leave home. That leaves 45 percent who do not.

That 55 percent figure is exactly what I found in more than 100 congregational

assessments, however, I found something different about the rest. I found that around 33 percent leave Churches of Christ as soon as they grow up and leave home, and they never come back to Churches of Christ. However, the remaining 12 percent stop attending Churches of Christ when they leave home but then return to Churches of Christ after they mature, get married and start having children. Those, however, are not recent estimates.

Among the 4,993 young people in the 100 congregations of the cluster sample used in this study – those who graduated from high school between 1997 and 2006:

- 58.2 percent are still members of some local congregation of the Churches of Christ;
- 21.1 percent have joined some other religious group; and,
- 20.7 percent have no present religious affiliation.

Among more than 2,500 alumni of 11 Christian colleges and universities, 85.1 percent are still members of the Churches of Christ.

These, of course, are just two “snapshots” and not the whole picture. The alumni surveys were distributed by the Office of Alumni

Relations at each of the 11 participating schools, and that may have biased the results. Alumni who had not divorced and who were still members of the Churches of Christ may have been more likely to respond.

I have seen some survey results conducted at websites that appear to be visited more by people who have left Churches of Christ and people who have divorced. Those surveys may be biased in the opposite direction. Reality is probably somewhere in between.

The focus, then, is on improving the retention rate. The goal of this study is to help church leaders learn what they can do to reduce the number who leave.

Going on to the Next Step

The character of the congregation in which young Christians grow up, the decision they make about college and their level of involvement with another congregation after they leave home were the three factors identified in this study associated with retention rates. I reported these findings to the presidents of Christian colleges and universities in the 2008 meeting of the Christian Higher Education Foundation.

I thought that this would be my final report to them. It turned out, however, that they had more research questions they wanted answered. They wanted to know more about the people who are leaving Churches of Christ – where they are going and why they are leaving. I agreed to study those issues.

The data from the cluster sample of 100 congregations had already provided some general results regarding some who are leaving Churches of Christ. The indirect approach used in that study partially overcame the problem about those who have left Churches of Christ not responding to our surveys. In that approach, church leaders provided objective answers to a few questions, but that did not give those who have left an opportunity to speak. Something else was needed.

The approach used in the present study involved setting up a website to host an online survey called “Why I Left Churches of Christ.” An article in *The Christian Chronicle*, the leading newspaper read by members of the

Churches of Christ, announced this survey. The presidents of Christian colleges and universities personally contacted people they knew who had left Churches of Christ and asked them to consider responding to this online survey.

These presidents encouraged members of their faculties to do the same thing. Many of the church leaders in the congregations of the original cluster sample made personal contacts asking former members to participate in this study. By the time the website was taken down in July 2009, more than 300 individuals had written essays responding to a few basic questions:

- Why did you leave Churches of Christ?
- Where did you go?
- What is your present religious affiliation?
- Are your spiritual needs being fulfilled better in the church you are now attending than they were in Churches of Christ? If so, how?
- Do you have any advice for leaders in Churches of Christ that might help them do a better job of ministering to those who have not left?

I did not teach Bible classes at Harding University in the summer of 2009. Instead, I carefully read all of the essay responses looking for patterns and themes. I had the help of others in doing content analysis. This is a departure from the kind of analysis I have usually done in survey research. But as I told the presidents, "Sometimes words are more important than numbers."

In this kind of research, it is not essential to have a very large sample. What is essential is that there are enough responses to include all of the kinds of things people are saying. By the time we passed the 200 or 250 mark in this study, the responses did not say much that was new. They just said the same things in different words. That repetition, however, was very useful. It added to the richness of the database, and it provided more variety in the personal stories. It also helped to rank categories of responses according to how often they were mentioned.

Frankly, I have found it extremely difficult to read these stories. A few

of the respondents are very angry, and often I can understand their anger. Far more of the stories are about people who have been hurt and neglected. As I read their stories, I identified with them and honestly felt their pain.

I also felt grief for the failure of Christians in general and church leaders in particular to care enough to reach out to these people before they left or to seek them after they left in an effort to bring them back. However, my hope and my prayer are that the readers of these stories will learn from them so that Churches may improve their ministry to those who have not left. □

Flavil R. Yeakley Jr., Ph.D., has been a researcher and statistician for more than 40 years. Yeakley was the director of the Harding University Center for Church Growth Studies for more than 20 years and has written several books and papers on church growth and church leadership. He may be contacted at fyeakley@harding.edu.

Endnotes

1 The little "c" "church of Christ" is what one reads about in the Bible. The Big "C" "Church of Christ," or "Churches of Christ," is what one reads about in the Yellow Pages, a directory, almanac or yearbook. It is a social/historical reality concerning a group of Christians who are similar enough to one another that they see themselves as a group that can be identified by a name.

2 Bernard Quinn and others, *Churches and Church Membership in the United States*, 1980 (Atlanta: Glenmary Research Center, 1982). Martin B. Bradley and others, *Churches and Church Membership in the United States*, 1990 (Atlanta: Glenmary Research Center, 1992). Dale E. Jones and others, *Religious Congregations and Membership in the United States 2000* (Nashville: Glenmary Research Center, 2002).

3 Church statisticians use the term "adherents" to include all of the full, confirmed, communicant members plus their children who attend church services but who are not yet baptized or not yet confirmed. It is an estimate of the total church family.

4 Donald A. McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970).

5 *U.S. Religious Landscape Survey*, Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, Washington: Pew Research Center, 2008) 5.

6 U.S. Religious Landscape Survey 5.

7 David K. Lewis, Carley H. Dodd and Darryl L. Tippens, *The Gospel According to Generation X* (Abilene: ACU Press, 1995).

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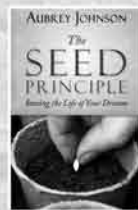
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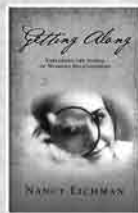
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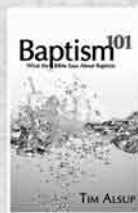
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