

Interim Report of the Study Group to Research Denominational Membership Decline

The 125th General Assembly (Ervine additional motion, A&P 1999, pg. 32) asked the Life and Mission Agency to convene a study group to research (a) the causes of congregational membership decline in the past five years, and (b) present proposals for the recovery of congregational health.

A study group has been convened and meets in Southwestern Ontario. The members are: The Rev. Dr. Peter Coutts, The Rev. Dr. Terry Ingram, The Rev. Gloria Langois, The Rev. Dr. Stuart Macdonald, Corresponding Member, The Rev. Carey Nieuwhof, The Rev. Christine O'Reilly, Corresponding Member, The Rev. Karen Timbers, The Rev. Heather Vais.

The causes of the numerical decline of The Presbyterian Church in Canada are complex. They involve issues relating to rural and urban life, demographics, societal change, congregational health, mission and vision. The study group feels that another exhaustive report to General Assembly will not solve the problem. Restoring viable churches to health and vitality must be an act of congregational and presbytery will.

Principles which contribute to growth can be discerned. Congregations which grow and are vital in the Christian mission have several things in common. They are healthy, have relevant ministries, they consider growth a high priority, they are inviting and welcoming to newcomers and they are mission-, not maintenance-orientated.

The committee continues to meet and is examining the statistical data from the Acts and Proceedings of previous General Assemblies. We have been declining in numbers for 35 years, but many leaders in our denomination still feel no sense of urgency. Our initial figures show that the rate of decline is not only continuing, but seems to be increasing. In studying the Presbyterian statistics, we hope to provide a greater sense of clarity about where the decline has been happening, and to provide correctives to some myths about our decline. While this information can be helpful, we want to avoid being weighed down by what is wrong with our denomination. What can reverse the spiral of decline? The statistical analysis is pointing to the fact that we need to respond sooner rather than later.

If we wish to reverse the trend of decline and ill health, The Presbyterian Church in Canada needs more than just large numbers of people attending church. Recovery of congregational health is a spiritual process that is guided by the Holy Spirit. Numbers can be important, but they do not tell the whole story, nor are they an indication of genuine faith. A lack of numbers does pose a threat to the long-term health of the denomination and is certainly one indicator of our spiritual health.

The Interim Report

The membership of our denomination peaked in 1964 with 202,566 members and has been in decline since then. At the end of 1998, it stood at 135,958, down by one third since that high water mark 35 years before. Over the past 20 years the rate of decline has been increasing. Between 1978 and 1988 we lost 10,000 members. Between 1988 and 1998 we lost 20,000 members. The steepest rate of decline occurred most recently, averaging 3.0% per year between 1994 and 1998. If one examines only the final denominational totals for membership every year, one will find isolated years of membership increase in 1983, 1986, 1989, 1994 and 1998. However, these apparent increases appear to be more a product of inaccuracies in completing the annual statistical forms, typographic errors in the Acts and Proceedings, as well as the consequences of congregations not submitting returns every year (170 churches failed to do so in 1998.) In contrast, if one compares the denomination's totals annually for "members added" and "members removed", one finds that every year more people have been lost than gained. In fact, the basic trend over the past 20 years has been that the gap between these two figures has grown.

One often hears the comment that "worship attendance is a truer measure of membership and participation compared to how many people are on the rolls." Our hunch is that this is probably true. Over the past two decades worship attendance has been relatively stable – especially compared to our dropping membership — hovering in the 80,000 to 82,000 people range. That being said, the sharp decline in membership in 1996 and 1997 showed in worship attendance figures as well, which now stands in the 74,600 to 76,600 people range.

Regardless of how one measures decline, decline continues to happen and appears to be happening faster.

The news is not universally bad, however. Between 1978 and 1998, the actual loss in membership from established congregations was 36,090 members. Over that same time period, however, The Presbyterian Church in Canada saw the creation of 62 new congregations which contributed 5,128 new members over all, reducing the net loss to 30,962 people. New church development has proven to be a positive response to the membership decline in many older, established congregations. However, our current rate for establishing new churches can only provide a modest response to our situation.

There are no surprises when it comes to looking at the regional sources of decline over the past twenty years. Rural areas—especially in southwestern Ontario, southwestern Manitoba and Saskatchewan—have been hit particularly hard, as well as the urban churches of the presbyteries of East Toronto (down 32%,) West Toronto (down 46%) and Montreal (down 50%.) In contrast, areas which experienced significant population growth over the past 20 years,

predominantly communities suburban to our major urban centres, have seen increases in membership. It would seem that "as goes the neighbourhood, so goes the Presbyterian Church." But this is not the complete answer. We can learn from the experience of the presbyteries of Calgary-MacLeod and Vancouver Island that a priority on church growth and new church development can make a significant difference.

The more surprising figures come from looking at the sources of decline as it applies to congregational size. Over all, the larger the congregation:

- the greater the probability that it experienced membership decline,
- the greater the rate of the decline.

Over the past 20 years, 54.6% of the total membership loss came from our largest 104 congregations. About 80% of the total loss came from congregations with 250 or more members, even though these congregations represent only 21% of all our churches. By way of comparison, the PCC in 1978 had 357 congregations with less than 60 members. While this was our largest single group of congregations (one third of our churches), this segment accounted for only 1.8% of the total membership loss. For some unknown reason, the trend for membership decline tends to tail off as congregations decline to the 75 member mark. This appears to be the most stable size of church in our denomination. Also noteworthy, one third of the congregations with memberships under 125 people experienced some degree of growth over the study period. Smaller churches were more likely to grow than larger ones.

While larger churches appear to have been most at risk for membership loss, we know that the smallest congregations were most at risk for closing. The risk for these congregations, however, has not come through membership decline as much as at the hands of inflation combined with stagnant memberships and financial uncertainty. Budget creep tends to kill the smallest churches. In our smallest churches, it can also be the loss of one family of good givers or the need to replace the building's furnace that can make all the difference in the world between holding on and having real difficulty. As a result, since 1978 92 congregations (representing 25% of our smallest churches) ceased to exist, either through closure or amalgamation.

While membership loss has come substantially from larger congregations, we note that, as a denomination, our concern has been greater for the smaller church and its future. This has led our study group to speculate that the Presbyterian Church, culturally, is more concerned with the actual closing of congregations than with numerical decline. It is easy to understand why. A small congregation which closes is a powerful symbol of our over-all decline. By comparison, the slow but steady and dramatic decline in a larger church is not as visible, and the fact that they still remain large can lead some to assume that

they face no risks. Membership loss in the larger church means different kinds of risks: the reduction in church programs, an increased reliance on trust funds to maintain budgets, dealing with debates about decreasing support for *Presbyterians Sharing*... in order to meet congregational needs, the possibility of having to let staff go with the consequent effect on congregational life, and the risk of no longer being able to meet long-held members' expectations. We acknowledge and affirm that the future of our smaller congregations is a real concern. This study demonstrates the realities they face. But the concern for the future also needs to be extended to our larger churches which face different, yet equally real threats. About 15% of our congregations, representing our largest churches, provide almost half of the income to *Presbyterians Sharing*... If the large churches continue to decline in membership, then they may well have a greater effect on the future of the denomination than smaller congregations.

The story of membership decline in The Presbyterian Church in Canada is an old one which we have not taken too seriously as a denomination. Our hunch is that membership growth and decline are priorities for people mainly as it relates to their own congregation, not the denomination. Yet, we suspect that even at the local level there has been a great deal of ambivalence about it. Even during the 1980's, when we set a national goal to "double in a decade" and our national structure put a great deal of effort and resources into this goal, membership still declined by about 10,000. The lesson this experience teaches us is that growth happens, first and foremost, at the congregational level. It rests in the hearts and abilities of our congregational leaders, the willingness of congregations to do something new, and the priority of presbyteries to make outreach a priority. The Life and Mission Agency wishes to support and resource congregational efforts for growth, but the first step must be the choice by congregations to take this initiative locally. Denominations don't add and lose members; congregations do.

For us, the more important observation is not that we continue to decline, but the fact that as a denomination we are changing. The "status quo" is not simply getting uniformly smaller. Rather, we are becoming a different kind of Church. We should note:

- that we are increasingly becoming a denomination of smaller congregations
- that with each passing year the threshold for financial viability creeps higher, raising the bar for how small a church can get and still survive
- that there are now more Presbyterians in the Presbytery of London than in Manitoba and Saskatchewan combined
- that our presence in the province of Quebec has declined by 50% over the past 20 years
- that membership loss in our denomination has been more of an urban experience and the closing of congregations has been more of a rural experience

- that we are increasingly becoming a suburban church
- that there is a new, small cadre of congregations which have demonstrated an ability to grow and become vital, which may take on a mantle of leadership in our denomination as declining churches begin to struggle with how they must change
- that some congregations will not be able to overcome the challenges presented by the changes in their neighbourhoods, and will continue to decline despite their efforts
- that we continue to be a church with 2/3's of our membership in southern Ontario, with 1/3 of our total membership within the daily commuting distance to Toronto
- that, as a denomination with a significant proportion of our membership being seniors and as a denomination with a poor track record in evangelism and church growth, decline for the foreseeable future will be inevitable.

Being a changing Church raises many questions:

- Does numeric decline within congregations reflect, and have an impact on, the state of the faith of those who gather in our churches?
- What priority do our churches have for evangelism and church growth? Numeric decline would suggest that it is quite small.
- Are our congregations willing to make room for new generations of members?
- Have we assumed for too long that large churches are simply big versions of smaller ones? Have we neglected the unique needs of the larger church in our assumption that the troubles lay predominantly at the doors of smaller churches?
- What should presbyteries be doing differently, knowing the unique trends and trials of their region?
- What will be the impact of continuing decline on our national budget, especially the more rapid decline of the larger churches? If new church development has been one point of success for the national structure in fostering membership growth, should we be doing more?

Rather than simply mourn our continuing decline or turn a blind eye to its mounting evidence, we should continue to explore how we are changing. A new Presbyterian Church is emerging . . . whether we like it or not, whether we act proactively or passively. This should be an era of watchfulness, experimentation, openness, sharing, learning, faithfulness and prayer. As part of that watchfulness this committee is asking that the annual statistical report for the year 2000 be modified to include a segment for demographic information from congregations. It is important to have a detailed picture from a demographic perspective of who we

are as a Church. The statistics found in the Acts and Proceedings give information about what we have experienced as a denomination in the past. A demographic breakdown of our national membership will provide a clearer picture of what we might expect in the near future. To help the study group make accurate forecasts, it is important to know the demographic make-up of the denomination. Completion of a demographic questionnaire will help the study group in its task. The committee will provide the information required for the form.

Our annual summary of statistics found in the Acts and Proceedings is an historical record of where we have been, but these numbers alone do little to help us forecast what we might expect. With the aid of the Church providing us with demographic figures for our congregations, our report next year will provide a better sense of what we can expect in the years to come. In a sense, then, this report outlines what has happened. Next year's report will give us a glimpse of what will happen. A demographic snapshot of our denomination, however, will only be realistic if congregations make the effort to fill out this new segment of the statistical form and return it. To see to it that this happens, our study group is recommending that we be empowered to recruit people in each presbytery to encourage and support congregations to do just that. The more comprehensive our demographic data is, the better our forecast can be.

Recommendation

That the Study Group to Research Denominational Membership Decline be empowered to recruit one corresponding member in each presbytery to help facilitate the gathering of demographic information from each of the congregations within their bounds.

Recommendation

That a demographic form be mailed to congregations to be completed by January 31 of 2001.

Two **turn-around conferences**, one for rural and one for urban churches, are planned. The study group will look at congregations from across the denomination who have reversed their membership decline. The principles and practices which helped them in this process will be shared with the entire denomination. The committee is preparing a final report for the 127th General Assembly. As part of this interim report, we share the following insights. The committee appreciates the support of the Church in our efforts and will share pertinent information as becomes available.

Below are some assumptions and guiding principles from Canadian experts which detail the factors necessary in congregational health and recovery.

Reginald Stackhouse, an Anglican minister and former principal at Wycliffe College at the University of Toronto, has recently written a book (*Alive Again*, Anglican Book Centre, 1999) detailing the stories of Canadian churches which have grown in the last decade. These include Presbyterian churches as well as Lutheran, Anglican, Roman Catholic and United; both urban and rural, old and new, large and small. Based on his research, Dr. Stackhouse concludes that the five factors that contribute to church growth and recovery are:

Prioritization for growth: They are intentional about growing and keep growth at the top of their agenda.

Responsiveness to people's needs: They address the questions that people are asking. Their ministries are relevant to the needs of the people.

Quality: They pay attention to detail and do everything—worship, music, preaching, buildings, pastoral care, and Christian education to the best of their abilities.

Creativity: They are imaginative, creative and innovative when rising to challenges with fresh thinking.

Personal touch: They know the names of individuals within the church and are friendly, welcoming and inclusive to new and old members alike.

Donald Posterski has surveyed hundreds of Canadians and has asked the question, *Where's a Good Church?* (Wood Lake Books 1993.) He examined the opinions, beliefs and preferences of those who have found a good church and those who were looking for a meaningful expression of their faith.

Four cornerstones emerged from these discussions:

- **Orthodoxy**—in touch with truth (conventional Christian doctrine)
- **Community**—in touch with personal needs
- **Relevance**—in touch with times
- **Outreach**—in touch with the needs of others.

Dr. Reginald Bibby has been a commentator on the Canadian church scene for more than two decades. In his most recent book, *There's Got to be More! Connecting Churches & Canadians* (Wood Lake Books 1995,) he lays out his main observations for what the Canadian church needs to do to respond to our current situation:

- Be clear about what you want to accomplish . Develop congregational goals, then act on them.
- Be clear about interests and needs. The key is to have a good fit between what people need and what the church is doing.
- Be clear about what you offer and which needs you really can meet. No churches can do it all.
- Have ongoing contact. Growth comes from personal relationships with potential members.
- Do it together. There is a great diversity of interests and needs in our communities. Imagine what might happen if local congregations of the same denomination purposefully planned to specialize in specific areas of service.