

Is the Episcopal Church Growing (or Declining)?

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Is the Episcopal Church growing or declining? Since mainline denominations, generally, are mired in decline, the answer to that question should be obvious. But for the Episcopal Church the question cannot be answered so easily. Unlike the United Methodist Church, the Presbyterian Church (USA), the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), the United Church of Christ and so many other mainstream Protestant bodies, the Episcopal Church experienced intermittent growth in membership and attendance during the late-1980s, 1990s and thus far into the new millennium. This growth and the optimism it fostered helped birth the 2020 movement and made its ambitious goals seem more than wishful thinking.

Yet in the days following the General Convention of 2003, other voices have been heard, reminding us of our membership losses—saying that we once had over a million more members than we have today. We are a declining denomination, or so we have been called, and because of a vote taken at General Convention, we can expect to lose even more members.

So what is the truth? Is the Episcopal Church growing or declining? Unfortunately, answering that question is made difficult by changes in denominational membership reporting and lack of attention to quality control in the canonical data collection. This report is an effort to unpack the problems surrounding membership trends in the Episcopal Church and hopefully to answer the question of growth or decline with objective clarity.

Membership: Unadjusted and Adjusted Patterns

The Episcopal Church Annual, also known as *The Red Book*, includes a table that tracks Episcopal statistics from 1880 to the present. Communicant totals begin in 1880, whereas baptized membership statistics commence in 1930. If one simply finds the high point of Episcopal membership in *Red Book* tables (1966) and compares that figure (3,647,297) with the total members in 2002 (2,320,221), it would seem that the Episcopal Church lost well over a million members during the last 35 years. But any suggestion that the pattern of loss has been consistent and intractable over this period is incorrect. As shown in Figure 1, the pattern is anything but consistent after the decline began. The

trend line is quite odd, in fact, and must be interpreted in light of changes in reporting procedures.

Figure 1
Episcopal Church Membership (Unadjusted): 1930-2002

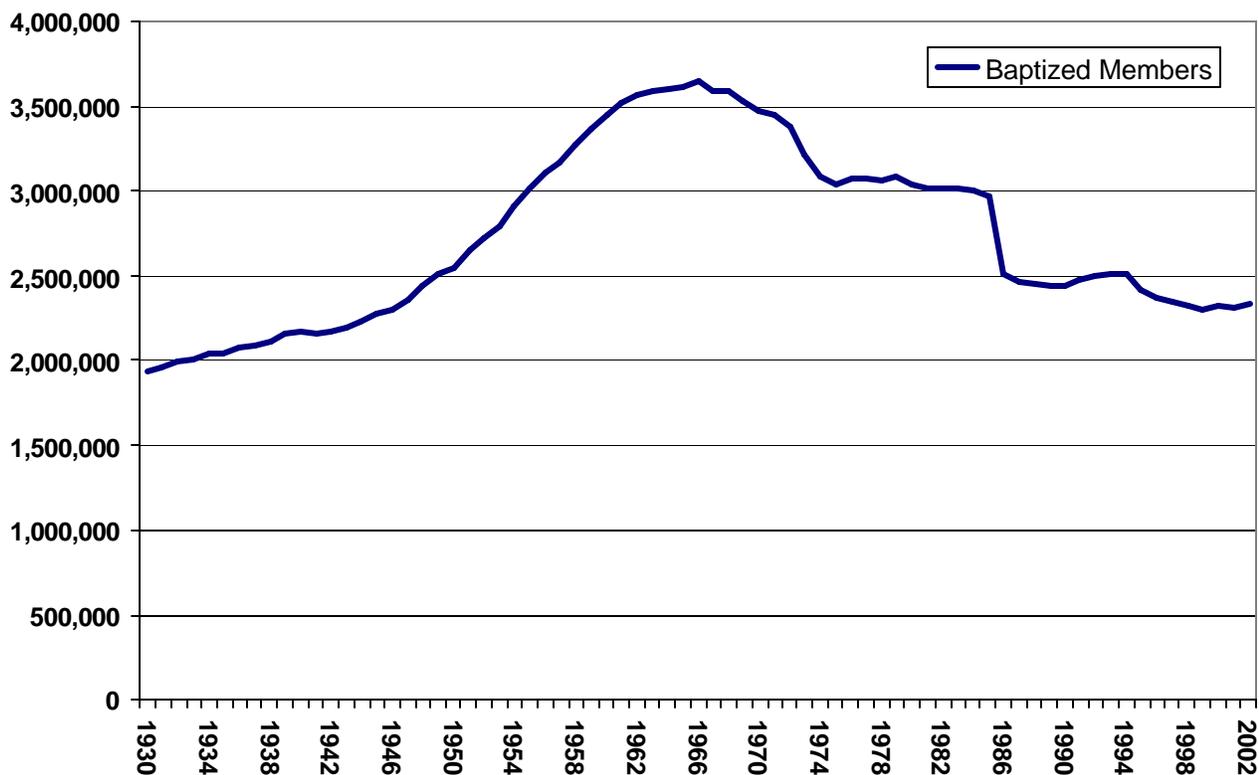


Figure 1 shows that Episcopal membership grew steadily from 1930 to the mid-1940s and then accelerated during the post-war “baby boom” years. Growth began to slow at the end of the 1950s and dropped below 1 percent a year from 1962 to 1966. The first year of decline was 1967, when the Episcopal Church lost 62,684 members or -1.7%. More declines followed with especially large losses in 1973 and 1974 (-5.2% and -3.9%, respectively).

After 1974 the decline moderated. One year of loss was followed in some cases by a small gain, but the overall pattern was a plateau with a slight downward slope from 1974 to 1985.

In 1986 Episcopal membership apparently dropped by almost half a million persons (468,100). But this huge one-year “decline” is a statistical anomaly. Two changes were made in 1986 and both acted to reduce the recorded number

of baptized members. The first change was the removal of all members from non-domestic dioceses. In previous years Province IX (Mexico, Central America and northern South America) and extra-provincial/territorial churches (Europe, armed forces, Haiti, Micronesia, Philippines, Taiwan & Virgin Islands) were included in the baptized member total. In 1985 non-domestic churches accounted for 233,185 of the 2,972,607 baptized members in the Episcopal Church. So about half of the membership loss from 1985 to 1986 resulted from this “adjustment” and was not due to membership losses among Episcopal churches in the 50 states.

Parochial Report revisions in 1986 also included a significant change in the reporting of baptized membership. Although the canon defining a baptized member was not revised, the reporting form changed greatly that year. Prior to 1986, Episcopal parishes were asked simply to report “all baptized persons in the congregation.” All computations of additions and losses and judgments about the activity or inactivity of parishioners referred previously to communicants rather than to baptized members. In the 1986 Parochial Report the heading under STATISTICS (Canon I.16) was revised to state: “CURRENT INFORMATION About Active Members” (emphasis added). Under the “Membership” heading the following definition is used: “all persons active in the congregation whose baptism has been recorded in this Church.”

So rather than answering a single question about the number of baptized persons in the church, in 1986 congregations were asked about baptized members at the beginning of the year, additions through baptisms (adults and children), persons restored from inactive status, received by transfer, lost by death, persons who became inactive or left without transfer, and transfers to other congregations. Additions were to be added to the membership total from the previous year, a new total computed and losses subtracted from that figure, resulting in a current year active baptized membership total. Churches were also asked how many members were adults (16 years or older) and how many were children. Baptized adults and children were summed and the total was supposed to equal the current year total that resulted from the additions and subtractions from the previous year.

In summary, reporting was changed in 1986 from baptized persons in the congregation to persons active in the congregation whose baptism had been recorded in this Church. The notion of activity was added along with a record of their baptism. Furthermore, churches were supposed to know how old their members were and keep track of additions and losses—including losses due to

inactivity. In order to comply with the new Parochial Report form, churches had to examine their membership rolls and categorize members by age and activity. As members were moved from the general membership category to either the active or inactive baptized membership roll, the new “active baptized member” total was necessarily lower than the previous “baptized member” total. Not surprisingly, membership dropped greatly in 1986.

The Parochial Report form remained unchanged with respect to membership from 1986 to 1990 and as can be seen in Figure 1 Episcopal Church membership continued on the slowly declining plateau that was evident prior to the artificial drop of 1986. In 1991, however, all explicit mention of “active member” was removed and the loss category, “became inactive or left without transfer,” was replaced with: “removed for other reasons.” Another change that occurred in 1991 was the practice of ignoring prior-year corrections made by rectors and vestries before applying additions and losses to the membership of the church. From 1991 to 1994 the treasurer’s office of the Episcopal Church used the prior year-end figure from congregations and adjusted it with the reported increases or decreases during the current year (rather than using the “corrected prior year figures” entered by churches, which tended to be lower). Changes in the reporting form and “rolling over” year-end numbers combined to accentuate the growth of the Episcopal Church from 1991 to 1994. However, it should be mentioned that the Episcopal Church grew in 1990, a year prior to the changes, so not all of the growth during this period was artificial.

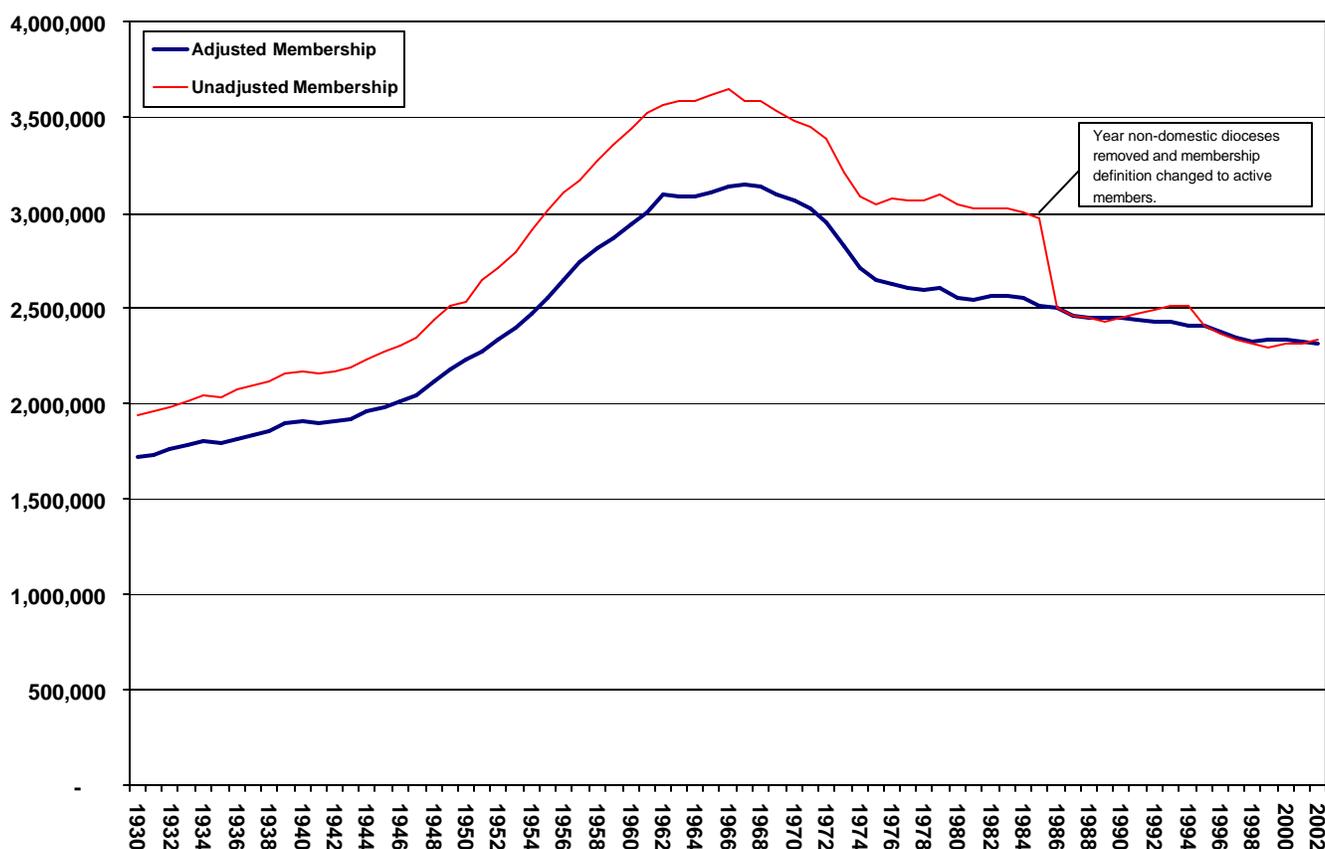
Membership was adjusted downward in 1995 to “fix” previous changes in the Parochial Report totals, resulting in a very large decline that year. In 1996 “transferred to inactive status” was returned to the Parochial Report form along with a line for corrections (apparently to allow churches to adjust prior-year membership numbers without entering figures that differed from the actual Parochial Report submitted in the prior year). These changes probably contributed to the membership losses experienced from 1996 to 1998.

In 1999 the Parochial Report form was greatly simplified and churches were no longer asked to report the various components of increases and decreases in membership, only the totals in those two categories. Losses due to “removal to active status” was continued in the workbook that churches used to calculate their membership, however, and the Parochial Report form also resurrected the explicit emphasis on active baptized members that was seen from 1986 to 1990. The term “active baptized members” is used three times in the membership

section of the 1999 Parochial Report. Membership reporting has remained unchanged from 1999 to the present.

If the definition of membership had remained constant and if non-domestic dioceses were still included in ECUSA totals the huge decline in 1986 would not have occurred. So what would domestic Episcopal Church membership look like without all of the Parochial Report changes? In order to develop a more realistic picture of membership trends it is first necessary to remove non-domestic dioceses from 1930 to 1985 (adding Alaska and Hawaii back in prior to statehood, however).¹ Second, it is necessary to adjust for the presence of non-

Figure 2
Episcopal Church Membership Trends: 1930-2002



active members from 1930 to 1985. This was done by computing an expected loss from 1985 to 1986 (based on the average loss four years prior to that

¹ This was done using the Red Book's Table of Statistics, which breaks ECUSA membership totals by Province and Diocese. This table gives Domestic and Overseas totals rather than undifferentiated total that is included in the Comparative Statistics table.

interval and four years after) and then calculating the proportion active in 1986 (by dividing the known 1986 active value by the estimated total member value in 1986 using the expected loss figure subtracted from the 1985 total member value). A third procedure was to use cleaned Parochial Report membership data from 1991 to 2002 rather than the statistics reported in the *Episcopal Church Annual* (the Red Book). The 2002 figure is a final total that also appears in the 2004 *Episcopal Church Annual*. Figure 2 adds the adjusted membership totals to the unadjusted figures that were plotted in Figure 1. As can be seen above, the adjusted membership curve is much cleaner and lacks the peculiar drop in 1986 and the odd up/down pattern of the early 1990s.

Using adjusted membership figures, the Episcopal Church lost 829 thousand active members between 1967 and 2002. The average rate of decline was 0.8%. The most serious losses were in 1973 and 1974, when the church declined by 4.5% and 4.2%, respectively. Since 1980 the Episcopal Church has lost 228,000 members for an average yearly rate of decline of 0.4%. From 1998 to 2001 membership was rather stable, increasing by 322 members. However, in 2002 membership dropped by 8,201 active baptized members, or 0.4%. Last year (2002) was not a good year statistically for membership or average worship attendance.

In terms of membership, the Episcopal Church declined seriously during the late 1960s and early 1970s. Since then the decline has moderated into a near-plateau. But what about average Sunday worship attendance and communicants?

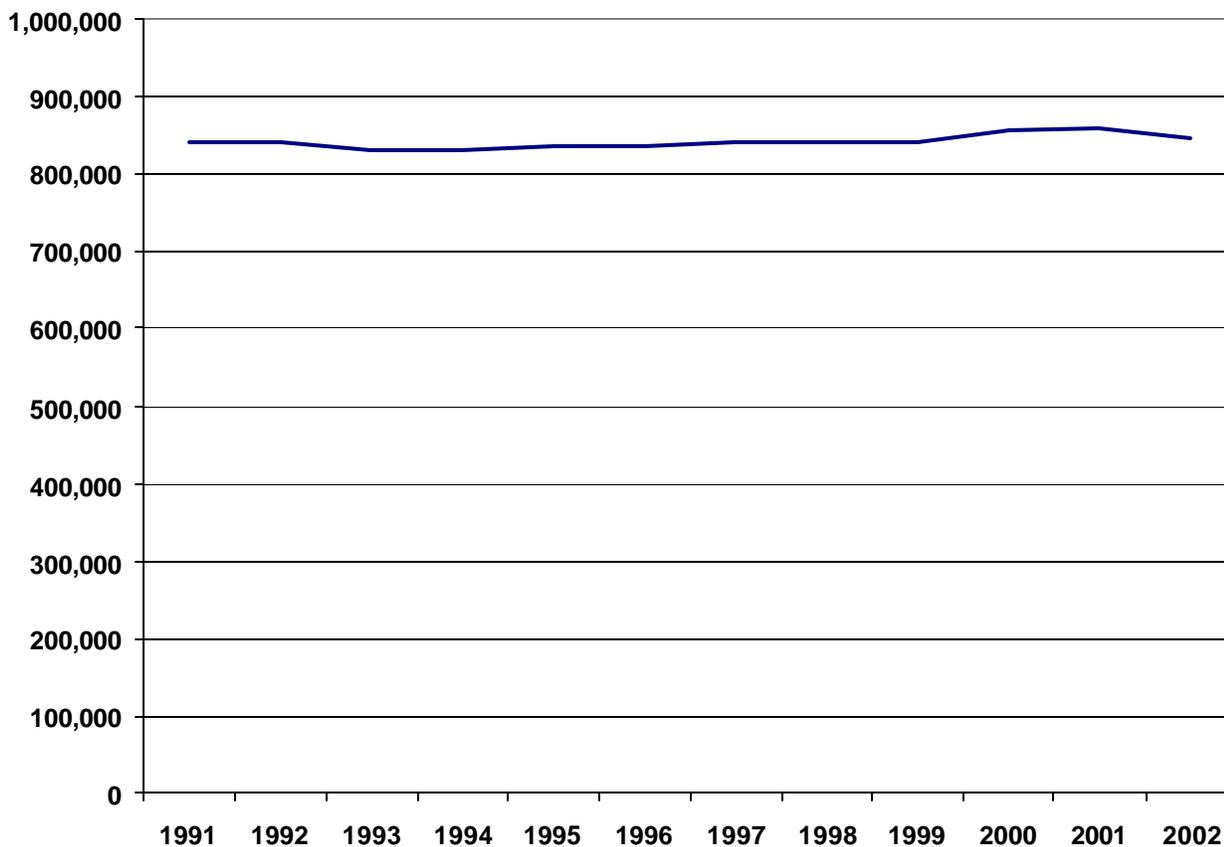
Worship and Communicant Trends

Prior to 1991, churches were not asked to report average Sunday worship attendance. Instead, attendance was only recorded at key worship services during the liturgical year: First Sunday in Lent, Easter Sunday, Pentecost Sunday and first Sunday of Advent. For that reason and because yearly national totals for the five Sundays are not available, reporting of attendance is limited to the more recent years shown in Figure 3.

As can be seen below, average Sunday worship attendance (ASA) has been relatively flat during the 12 years displayed. However, rather than a net decline during this period (as was the case for membership), attendance shows a slight upward trend. Cumulative average attendance grew by 6,823 persons from 1991 to 2002—a gain that would have been much larger without the decline of 11,926

in attendance during 2002. A close look at the chart shows that attendance dropped from 1991 to 1994, before rising steadily from 1994 to 2001. The large drop in 2002 was not the result of big declines in a few large congregations. Rather, it was a fairly broad-based decline.

Figure 3
Episcopal Church Average Sunday Worship Attendance: 1991-2002

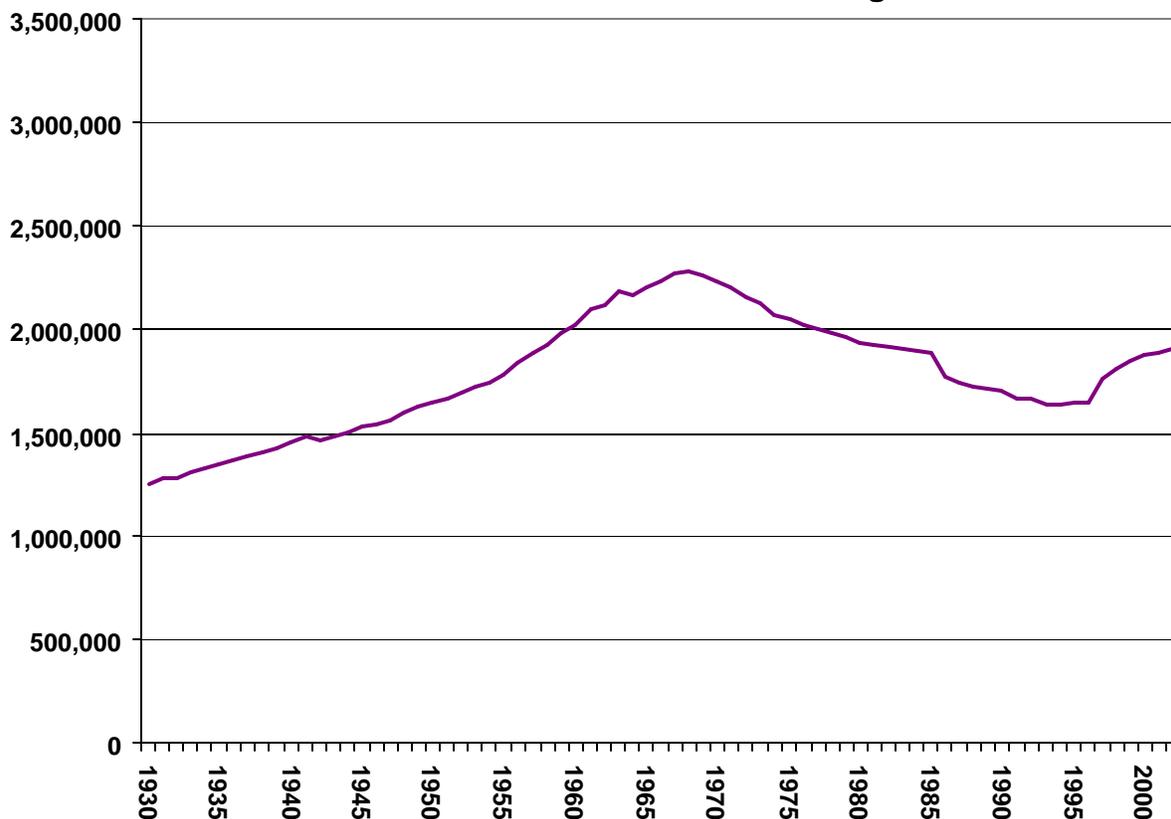


Communicants in Good Standing—the trends for which are shown in Figure 4—followed a track similar to the adjusted membership figures seen in Figure 2, except that after 1996 the communicant figures began to rise suddenly. Not surprisingly, this change in trajectory was also the result of a change in definition. But unlike the change in the definition of membership which caused a decline, the change in the definition of Communicant in Good Standing resulted in substantial growth.

For most of the period plotted in Figure 4, being counted as a Communicant required that the individual was confirmed and had taken communion at least three times during the previous year. To be a Communicant in Good Standing

required that a member was a communicant and also was active in the church (over and above taking communion at least three times). However, in 1985 the canon defining communicant in good standing was revised, deleting the requirement of confirmation. A member was a baptized person. A communicant was a baptized person (member) who had received communion at least three times. According to the revised canon, Communicants in Good Standing were communicants who “have been faithful in corporate worship, unless for good cause prevented, and have been faithful in working, praying and giving for the spread of the Kingdom of God.”

Figure 4
Domestic Communicants in Good Standing: 1930-2002



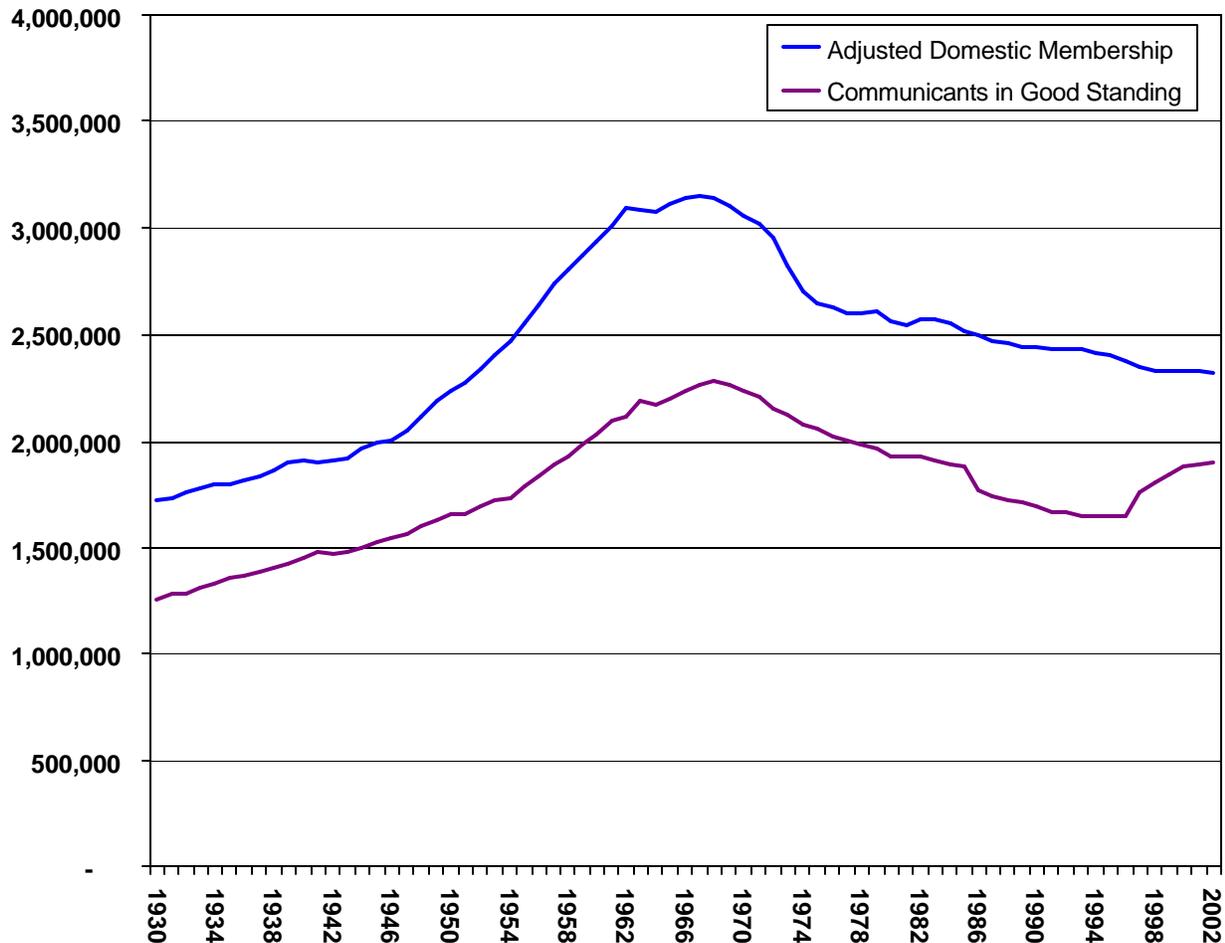
As can be seen in the above chart, there was no abrupt change in the reporting of Communicants in Good Standing when the change in the canons was made. The apparent reason was that the Parochial Report form and workbook did not reflect the canons. Oddly, however, 1986 was the first year that the Parochial Report form explicitly asked for Confirmed Communicants in Good Standing—even though the canons included no such category as of 1985 or thereafter. Further, the Parochial Report revision of 1991 actually included a reference to

canon I.17.3 (which mentioned nothing about confirmed status). The Parochial Report nevertheless asked for: “Those confirmed communicants who for the previous year have been faithful in working, praying, and giving for the spread of the Kingdom of God.” Even more oddly, the Parochial Report form of 1996 correctly stated canon I.17.3 (which said nothing about confirmation), but still asked for Confirmed Communicants in Good Standing. Finally, in 1997 the Parochial Report asked for Communicants (members receiving communion three times), Communicants in Good Standing (accurately reflecting the canon) and also Confirmed Adult Communicants. At this point Communicants in Good Standing replaced Confirmed Communicants in Good Standing, thus allowing baptized persons who had not been confirmed to be included in the communicants in good standing category. Not surprisingly, the number of communicants in good standing increased greatly in 1997 and continued to rise thereafter.

It would seem that active baptized members and communicants in good standing are converging (see Figure 5 below) and indeed, many churches report the same figures for each. Perhaps this should not be surprising because the difference between the two became less than clear. Canon I.17.2 (2000 edition) defined an “adult communicant” as a communicant sixteen years of age or older but nowhere in this edition of the canons is there a definition of a communicant. The impression that communicants in good standing are simply active members is reinforced by the 2003 Parochial Report workbook that defines Communicants in Good Standing (incorrectly) as “all baptized members (of the reporting congregation), who, regardless of age, have been faithful ‘in corporate worship, unless for good cause prevented,’ and ‘in working, giving and praying for the spread of the Kingdom of God.’” This statement is inaccurate because canon I.17.3 defining Communicants in Good Standing refers to communicants, not to baptized members.

In 2003 canon I.17.2 was revised to include the previous definition of communicant “all members of the church who receive Holy Communion at least three times during the preceding year.” So as of 2003, Communicants in Good Standing are communicants (defined by taking communion three times) who are also faithful in worship, and in working, giving and praying for the spread of the Kingdom. But even though the canons became clear in 2003, the 2003 Parochial Report workbook is not consistent with them and more and more churches are reporting the same figure for active baptized members and communicants in good standing.

Figure 5
Domestic Adjusted Membership & Communicants in Good Standing:
1930-2002



Ideally, of course, the Parochial Report form and the Parochial Report workbooks should reflect the canons and the canons should include meaningful definitions of active members, communicants and communicants in good standing. Also, changes to these definitions should not change as rapidly as they have during the past two decades.

In summary, worship attendance in Episcopal churches has been stable through the 1990s and thus far into the new millennium, but unlike membership the plateau has a slight upward rather than downward trend. With regard to communicants in good standing, it would appear that the rapid growth from 1997 to the present should not be taken seriously, due to the changing definition.

Making Sense of the Trends

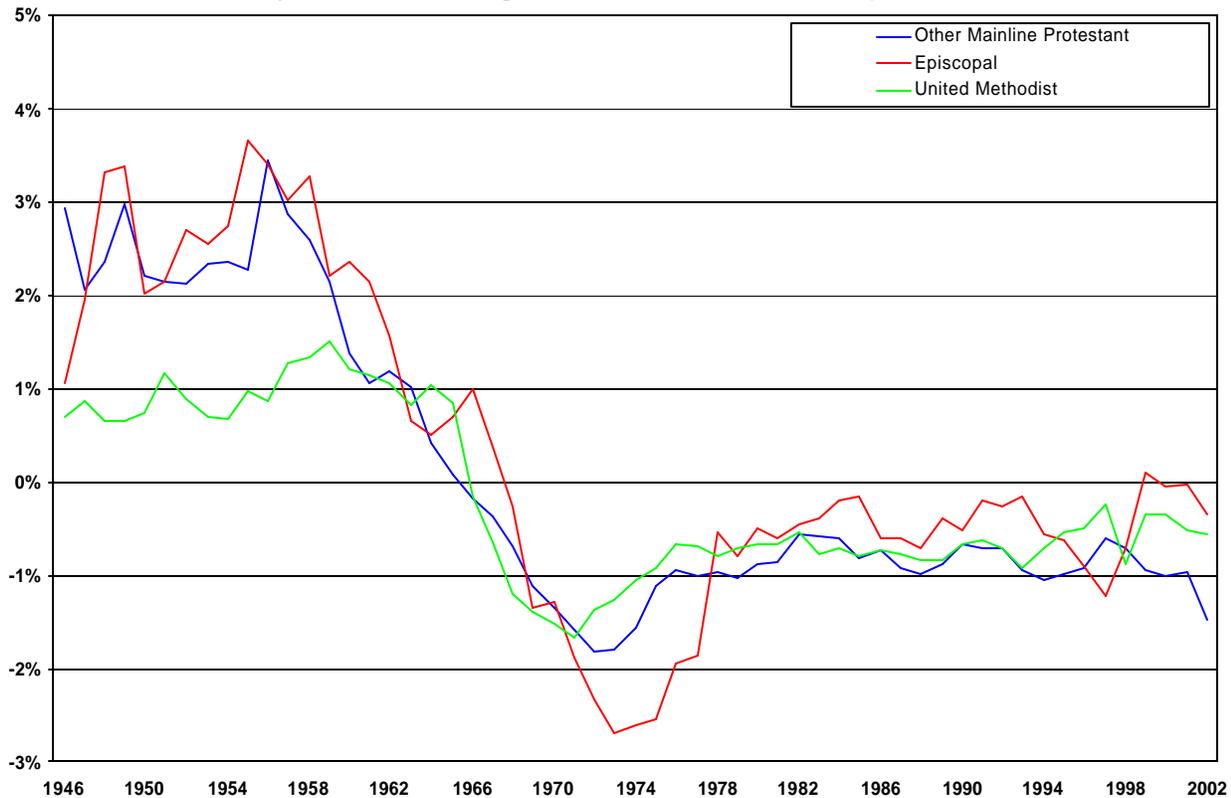
All mainline church bodies in the United States grew rapidly during the post-World War II “baby boom.” However, mainline denominations (which include the Episcopal Church, the American Baptist Churches, the Christian Church [Disciples of Christ], the Church of the Brethren, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the Presbyterian Church [USA], the Reformed Church in America, the United Methodist Church and the United Church of Christ) saw their rates of growth begin to slip during the late 1950s and by the mid-1960s most began declining in membership. Once decline began it proved intractable. Growth has eluded all mainline denominations since 1966 and although the decline has moderated in a few church bodies, losses in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), Presbyterian Church (USA), and United Church of Christ continue to be severe. In 2002, for instance, the Presbyterian Church (USA) lost almost 42,000 members or 1.7% of its total membership and the United Church of Christ lost over 28,000 members or 2.1% of its membership. By contrast, Episcopal losses in 2002 were slightly over 8,000 members and 0.4% of our membership.

Figure 6 displays trend lines for the Episcopal Church, the United Methodist Church and other mainline denominations. Rather than graphing actual membership, this chart displays yearly percent membership change.² As can be seen in the chart, the trend line for the Episcopal Church has tracked quite closely to other mainline denominations. Growth rates declined precipitously from the mid-1950s to the mid-1970s and then began to moderate. From 1950 to 1974 the only meaningful difference between the pattern for the Episcopal Church and other mainline denominations was that the Episcopal decline was more severe during the early-1970s.

The United Methodist Church (which includes almost as many members as the combined totals of the six denominations in the other mainline Protestant category) had a much lower rate of growth during the “baby boom” years than the other mainline bodies. This church began declining for the first time in 1966 and saw its percent change trend line begin to track closely to the pattern of other mainline denominations through the mid-1990s.

² The original membership trend lines on which these percent change figures are based have been “smoothed” in order to minimize the effect of aberrant reporting years.

Figure 6
Yearly Percent Change in Mainline Membership: 1946-2002



After bottoming out in the early 1970s, the Episcopal rate of membership decline began to improve greatly and by 1980 the loss rate was consistently better than the United Methodist Church and other mainline denominations. So even though the Episcopal Church has not seen consistent membership growth, we are not declining at the same rate as other mainline denominations—a state of affairs that has existed for over two decades.

Efforts to interpret mainline decline date back to 1972, the year Dean Kelley published *Why Conservative Churches are Growing*.³ Kelley's work was followed by Dean Hoge and David Roozen's 1979 edited volume, *Understanding Church Growth and Decline*—which was the first effort to test Kelly's ideas and other interpretations of mainline decline.⁴ Additional research was brought to bear on

³ Dean M. Kelley, *Why Conservative Churches are Growing* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1972).

⁴ Dean R. Hoge and David A. Roozen (eds.), *Understanding Church Growth and Decline: 1950-1978* (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1979).

the issue in another edited volume, *Church and Denominational Growth* (edited by David Roozen and myself in 1993) and *Rerouting the Protestant Mainstream* (also by Hadaway and Roozen, 1995).⁵

Although some may be tempted to follow the simplistic logic of *Why Conservative Churches are Growing* and blame mainline decline on liberalism and lack of strict membership requirements on the part of mainline churches, the facts simply do not support such an argument. Conservative Protestant denominations (particularly the large conservative groups like the Southern Baptist Convention) are not growing at the expense of mainline bodies. They did not begin to grow faster as the mainline declined. Like the mainline, they saw their rates of membership growth drop greatly during the 1960s and 1970s, but they simply did not drop far enough to produce declines.

The parallel trend of declining growth rates among both mainline and conservative denominations points to an overriding societal pattern that transcends theology and church growth strategy. That society-wide pattern is the supply of new people: the birth rate.

Figure 7 shows that yearly changes in the mainline church membership (8 denominations, including the Episcopal Church) track extremely closely to the birth rate for white Americans (who make up the primary constituency of mainline denominations).⁶ The association is so strong that it produces a correlation of .94 (0 being no relationship and 1.0 being a perfect relationship). In statistical terms, 88% of the year to year variation in mainline membership can be explained by the birth rate. And as can be seen in the chart, the correlation would be even higher except that around 1990 the two rates began to diverge. The birth rate began to decline steadily (reaching a historic low in 2002), whereas the rate of membership change among mainline denominations continued at about the same rate until dropping rather severely in 2002.

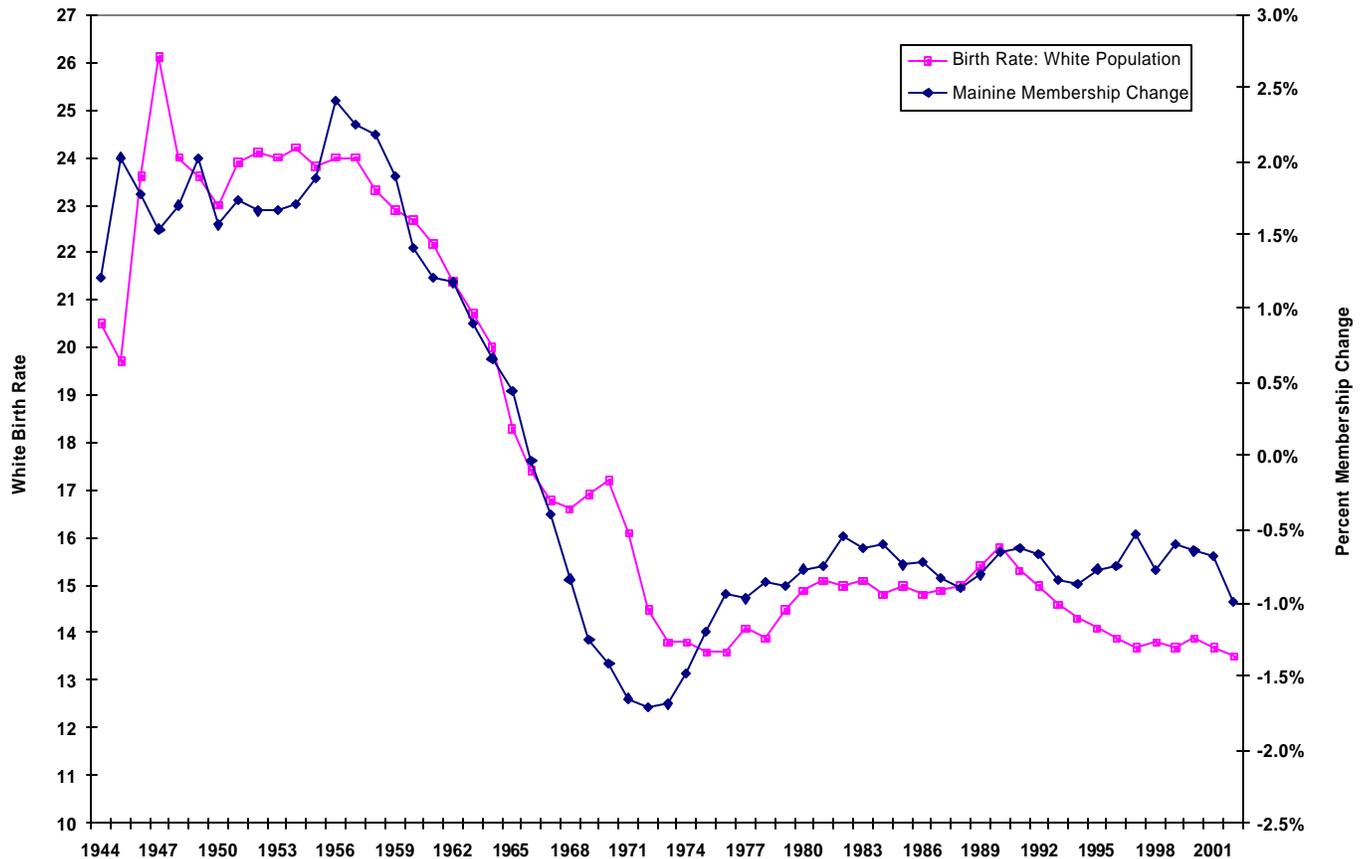
If we replace the mainline trend line in Figure 7 with the Episcopal Church, the correlation with the birth rate is a bit less (.89 rather than .94). This slightly lower association between the birth rate and Episcopal membership change results from the fact that in the early 1970s Episcopal decline was more serious than the

⁵ David A. Roozen and C. Kirk Hadaway (eds.), *Church and Denominational Growth* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993); C. Kirk Hadaway and David A. Roozen, *Rerouting the Protestant Mainstream* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995).

⁶ The birth rate is the number of births in the year per 1,000 persons in the population.

mainline as a whole and during the 1990s and thus far into the new millennium, Episcopal decline is less serious than the rest of the mainline.

Figure 7
Birth Rate and Mainline Annual Percent Membership Change, 1944-2002

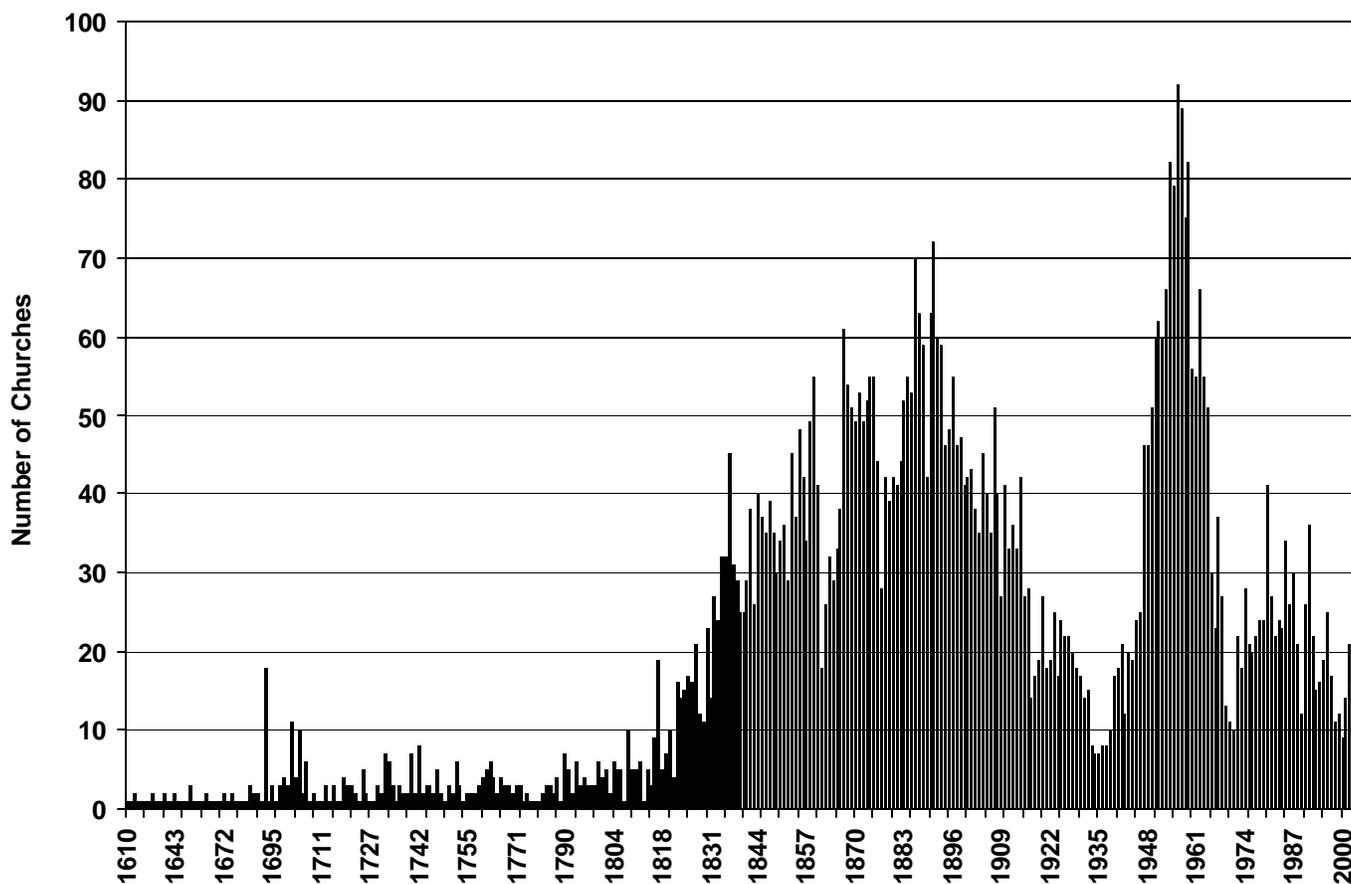


During the 1950s the birth rate was abnormally high and for several years during that decade the growth rate of mainline denominations exceeded the rate of population growth. Not only was it an era when most young (and many not-so-young) couples were having babies, but it also was an era when people were expected to take those babies with them to the “church of their choice”—increasingly in new suburban congregations.

The Episcopal Church grew at an astounding rate during the 1950s and not surprisingly, much of this growth occurred in new congregations. During the 1950s and early 1960s the Episcopal Church started new churches at a rate that exceeded most conservative, evangelical Protestant denominations. For

instance, from 1950 to 1952 the Episcopal rate of new church development (churches started per 1,000 existing congregations) was equal to the Assemblies of God and higher than both the Southern Baptist Convention and the Lutheran Church, Missouri Synod. From 1959 to 1961 the same situation was true and from 1962 to 1964 the Episcopal rate of new church development exceeded the Assemblies of God, the Southern Baptist Convention, the Lutheran Church, Missouri Synod and all other mainline denominations that keep records on new churches.⁷ Figure 8 shows clearly that more new Episcopal churches were started per year during the 1950s and early 1960s than in any other era.

Figure 8
Number of Episcopal Churches by Year Founded



⁷ Data on Episcopal new church development are from the Parochial Report database at the Domestic and Foreign Missionary Society. Data on new church development in other denominations are from Penny Long Marler and C. Kirk Hadaway, "New Church Development and Denominational Growth (1950-1988): Symptom or Cause?" in David A. Roozen and C. Kirk Hadaway (eds.), *Church and Denominational Growth* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993), pp. 47-86.

But by the mid-1960s things had changed greatly. Not only had the birth rate dropped (due to the widespread availability of artificial contraception in 1965 and increasing numbers of women in the labor force), but the culture was becoming much less supportive of the church. The latter was particularly true among the baby boomers themselves—the very group that fueled the church growth of the 1950s. Even though they had been reared in the church as children, many did not return to the church as adults. So as the supply of children dropped, the rate of membership retention among young adults also declined, and the result was membership decline, even though the overall white population continued to increase (albeit at a much slower pace).

The rate of new church development also plummeted in the Episcopal Church as shown in Figure 8, above. The same pattern can be observed for other mainline denominations, but in the Episcopal Church the new church development rate during the 1950s was higher and so the drop was more extreme.

As noted earlier, all denominations—mainline and conservative—were affected adversely by social changes occurring in the 1960s and 1970s. However, mainline denominations were hit hardest by the changes because declines in the birth rate were much more severe among the more highly educated white population. (Among conservative Protestants and Mormons the birth rate remained much higher than for the mainline, insulating these groups from the full effect of declines in fertility).⁸

In 1972 the birth rate for American women had declined to the point where it was below replacement level (an expected 2.1 children born per woman).⁹ However, the population has continued to grow because the baby boom produced so many women who were entering their child-bearing years—and because of immigration. Fertility rates since 1972 have remained below replacement level, although the rates in the 1990s and thus far into the new Millennium are not as low as they were in the mid-1970s.

The birth rate for white, non-Hispanic women is the lowest of any racial/ethnic group. As of 2000, white, non-Hispanic women were averaging 1.8 children per women (through their entire child-bearing years) as compared to 2.5 births for

⁸ See Michael Hout, Andrew Greeley, Melissa J. Wilde. 2001. "The Demographic Imperative in Religious Change in the United States." *American Journal of Sociology* 107(2):468-500.

⁹ "Motherhood: The Fertility of American Women, 2000," *Population Profile of the United States: 2000* (Internet Release), 4-1. Also see "Reproduction Rates for 1990-2002 and Intrinsic Rates for 2000-2001: United States," *National Vital Statistics Report*, Vol. 52, No. 17, p. 2.

Hispanics.¹⁰ In addition to race and ethnicity, educational attainment and family income are highly related to the birth rate. Not surprisingly, American women with a graduate or professional degree have the lowest birth rate, followed by women with Bachelor's degrees. Also, women in families earning \$75,000 or more have very low birth rates, as do women in families earning \$50,000 to \$74,999.¹¹ The Episcopal Church has the highest proportion of members among mainline denominations who are college graduates and in households earning \$75,000 or more.¹² As a result, the birth rate among Episcopalians is much lower than the national average—and even lower than the population of non-Hispanic whites. A reasonable estimate, based on education and race, is approximately 1.5 children per woman (compared to the replacement level of 2.1) for Episcopalians.

The Episcopal Church is losing population share primarily because our members have relatively few children and because immigration has become an increasing source of population growth. From 2000 to 2003 45% of U.S. population growth was from immigration.¹³ Relatively few of these immigrants were non-Hispanic white persons, the primary constituency of the Episcopal Church.

Our primary constituency has been a declining share of the U.S. population for decades and the rate of demographic pluralization is increasing. The non-Hispanic white population grew by only 0.3% in 2002 and the population share of non-Hispanic whites declined from 76% in 1990 to 68% in 2002.

The Episcopal Church, like other mainline denominations, retains a relatively low percentage of children born to its members. However, unlike other mainline denominations, the Episcopal Church attracts (through switching and conversion) more than it loses. The problem is that most of the members the Episcopal Church attracts are adults—and most are past their child-bearing years.

The bottom line is this: given the demographic characteristics of our members, sustained growth is increasingly unlikely unless we begin to reach out beyond our historic constituency.

¹⁰ "Motherhood: The Fertility of American Women, 2000."

¹¹ "Fertility of American Women: Population Characteristics," *Current Population Reports*, P20-526, 2000, p. 4.

¹² C. Kirk Hadaway, *A Report on Episcopal Churches in the United States* (New York: Domestic and Foreign Missionary Society, 2002), p. 17.

¹³ Table NST-EST2003-04-Cumulative Estimates of Population Change for the United States and States: April 1, 2000 to July 1, 2003 (Washington, DC: Population Division, U.S. Census Bureau, 2004).

Conclusions

It is easy to look at the unadjusted membership trends for the Episcopal Church and say the sky is falling. But to do so would be irresponsible and inaccurate. A more sober look at the statistics (membership and attendance) reveals that we have reached a plateau of sorts—from which we can slide into a new decline or begin growing again. The problems facing the Episcopal Church are daunting due to the nature of our main constituency. As long as we are a predominantly white denomination with aging, affluent, highly educated members, growth will be increasingly difficult. There is hope, however, because the Episcopal Church is attractive to people brought up in other religious traditions and to unchurched seekers, and statistically the Episcopal Church is the healthiest denomination in the mainline. But it will require much more than business as usual to expand into other constituencies (the less educated, immigrants, Hispanics, the unchurched). It will take new churches and a new openness among our existing parishes. It will take having something to offer newcomers that changes lives.

The degree to which our statistics reflect the “state of the mainline” and mirror population trends could be taken as an excuse for all of our membership problems. Demographic trends provide an explanation for the much of the decline, but they also suggest that much of what we have done during the last 50 years is to ride a series of cultural waves. Like all other denominations we started many new churches in the 1950s and like all other denominations we cut back severely on new church development during the 1960s and 1970s. Evangelism became an embarrassment and adult religious education was relegated to obscurity. Even the renewed culture-wide interest in spirituality caught us by surprise and we remain largely unprepared to deal with the interest that unchurched seekers are directing toward our churches.

Finally, it should be noted that denominational growth (and decline) is not the same as congregational growth (and decline). The Episcopal Church declined by 8,201 members in 2002. That represents an average loss of 1.1 member per church—too few to be noticed in most congregations. We have many vibrant healthy churches and also many declining congregations. Unfortunately, declines among the latter tend to cancel out growth among the former. Clearly we need more vibrant healthy churches, but growing as a denomination will require systemic changes, so that the average loss of 1.1 might turn into an average gain of 1.1, 2.2, or even more. Even tiny gains across a denomination of 7,300 churches would produce growth of a kind that we have not seen since 1966.