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OLD FIRST CHURCH: GROWTH MODELS

John N. Vaughan

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"First Church" is the name that graces church signs everywhere across the North American landscape. You find them among Baptists in Rhode Island, Methodists in Atlanta, Congregationalists in Boston, Presbyterians in Manhattan, and many other places. Mere mention of the name suggests tradition and in many instances community durability.

Positive traits that "First Church" is historically noted for include its city-wide ministry; its role as a religious, social, and sometimes political voice speaking from the heart of the city's central business district; a pastor known for his skill as a speaker and community leader; significant financial resources; often times the largest membership in the city or state; and a large team of highly trained ministry staff members recognized as specialists.

Two of the most notable books written about "First Church" during the past twenty years include *What's Ahead for Old First Church* co-authored by Ezra Earl Jones and Robert L. Wilson¹ and *The Expanded Mission of Old First Churches* co-authored by Raymond J. Bakke and Samuel K. Roberts.²

¹Ezra Earl Jones and Robert L. Wilson, *What's Ahead for Old First Church*, New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1974.

²Raymond J. Bakke and Samuel K. Roberts, *The Expanded Mission of Old First Churches*, Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1985.

The study by Jones and Wilson surveyed "the results of a three-year study of more than three hundred downtown congregations in over one hundred cities across the country."³ Cities in the study are described as being medium to large in size. The viewpoint is unapologetically sociological in its focus. The researchers noted:

The depth and breadth of the crisis facing Old First Church can be seen by examining recent membership statistics. To take one denomination as an example, an analysis of membership trends ... in seventy-nine cities across the United States shows that seven out of ten churches lost members during the period 1960 to 1973 ... Thus one-half of the churches lost more than one-fifth of their members. An additional 18 percent experienced a 5 to 20 percent decrease.⁴

The Bakke and Roberts study is a follow-up of a meeting with more than one hundred participants, leaders in the American Baptist Church denomination, called the National Consultation on Old First Church. The consultation met at First Baptist Church of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania from November 7-9, 1984.

This present study, in contrast to those mentioned above, attempts to identify characteristics of "First Churches" experiencing growth and listed among the five hundred fastest growing churches listed in Vol.3, No.6 1988 issue of *Church Growth Today*. Only Anglo congregations are represented in this study. Each congregation was contacted and interviewed individually. A total of 21 questions were asked of each congregation. Most churches were able to respond to all 21 questions. Gratitude is owed to each of them for helping make the conclusions of the study more complete.

The 64 churches are located in 62 cities and represent 10 affiliation or denominational groups (Assemblies of God, Disciples of Christ, Church of God - Anderson, Church of the Nazarene, General Association of Regular Baptists, Independent Baptist, Southern Baptist Convention, United Methodist Church, Presbyterian Church in America, and Presbyterian Church USA). Each of the congregations reported a net gain in Sunday morning worship attendance, including all children, of at least 100 people during the period 1986-1987.

³Jones and Wilson, x.

⁴Ibid. viii.

Since 45 of the 64 churches in the study are Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) churches (largest non-Catholic denomination in the U.S. and reports nearly 40,000 congregations), the results of the survey are segmented into percentages by (1) Southern Baptist churches, and (2) other churches. Also, due to the high percentage of SBC congregations, the results to the questions were weighted to insure a more reliable correlation and for significance of the sample churches. Percentages listed below are within SBC or other categories, not the total combined sample of churches, unless otherwise indicated.

The decision to give separate summaries for SBC and the other churches has been made to allow each group to make its own comparisons: (1) among its own category, and (2) with SBC churches. The intent is not to cast either group against the other. Remember that ALL of these congregations are listed among the fastest growing churches in the U.S. They are among the top one-tenth of the top one percent of the churches in the nation in their growth. For some, their recent growth initiative represents shattering a plateau or decline growth pattern that has held them in bondage for decades. Each church is to be commended for new growth against barriers that face all churches sooner or later.

History, even their own, suggests that their growth may have limited duration. This should signal a call for you to serve as their intercessor in prayer that both you and they might know renewed boldness in this final decade of the twentieth century to be mighty in Spirit. The Kingdom of God and the mandate of the Great Commission (Matthew 28:19-20) requires it. May God help us all!

SUMMARY OF THE RESEARCH DATA

1. **CHURCH RELOCATION HISTORY.** A total of 77 percent of the 64 churches reported having changed addresses since their founding dates. Both SBC and other churches tend to have moved 1 or 3 times. Only 1 SBC church has moved more than 5 times (8 moves since the year 1780), while the other churches moved a maximum of 4 times. Overall, 77 percent of the SBC churches have relocated and 73 percent of the other churches have relocated sometime during their history.
2. **CHURCH RELOCATION (PAST 10 YEARS).** When the time frame was narrowed to the churches that have moved during the past decade, as compared to the total lifetime of the congregation, the percentages were much

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smaller. Among SBC churches, 18 percent reported having relocated during this period, as compared to 16 percent of the other churches.

Most of the churches have remained at their present location during the past 10 years. This does not imply, however, that relocation is not a possibility during the next decade for some of the churches. Those most likely to relocate are those who continue to lose members to suburban churches and who are increasingly unwilling or unable to minister to the newer population now living within the church's geographical community.

3. DISTANCE OF RELOCATION FROM ORIGINAL SITE. While both SBC and other churches tended to relocate 1 to 3 miles from the former site, some merely relocated within a one-mile perimeter of the previous site. One-fourth of all SBC churches reported having moved less than one mile. Though the reason for such a short move was not asked, the most likely reason seems to have been for expansion reasons.

Other churches tended to be 1.5 times more likely to relocate 5 or more miles from their former location. This represents 6 percent of SBC churches as compared to 16 percent of the other churches.

4. FOUNDING DATE OF CHURCHES (i.e. AGE). While Baptist churches in North America date back to Roger Williams and Dr. John Clarke (both in Rhode Island) during the early 1600's, the Southern Baptist Convention dates its formation as a denomination to 1845. A large number of the older churches belonging to the SBC were already thriving prior to that date.

Among the SBC churches in this study, 22 percent were established prior to 1850. The other churches reported 26 percent of their number were birthed before 1850. Non-SBC churches were 2 times more likely to have been established as new churches since the start of this century (38 percent of all SBC churches and 74 percent of the other churches).

DATE CHURCHES WERE FOUNDED (PERCENT BY AFFILIATION CATEGORIES)

	Pre- <u>1800</u>	1800- <u>1850</u>	1851- <u>1875</u>	1876- <u>1900</u>	Post- <u>1900</u>	Post- <u>1950</u>
SBC	2%	20%	22%	27%	29%	9%
Others	5	21	0	16	53	21

NOTE: (1) Not all "Other" churches knew their founding date.
 (2) "Post-1950" is also included in "Post-1900" data.

5. **SANCTUARY CAPACITY (PRESENT).** Interestingly, 18 percent of the SBC churches (as compared to 63 percent of the other churches) reported sanctuary attendance capacities for under 1,000 worshippers in a single service. This also means that 77 percent (2 churches were unsure of capacity) of the SBC churches reported sanctuary capacities of 1,000 or larger.

SBC churches were 2 times more likely to have sanctuary capacities of either 1,000-1,999 or 6,000 or larger than the other churches. They were 3 times more likely to have an auditorium of 2,000-2,999 capacity than other churches.

6. **NEW SANCTUARY BUILT (PAST 10 YEARS).** Both categories of churches reported an equal percent of new auditoriums being built during the past decade (38 percent of SBC churches and 37 percent among other churches).

7. **SANCTUARY ENLARGEMENT (PAST 10 YEARS).** SBC churches were nearly 2 times (1.8) more likely to have enlarged the seating capacity of their sanctuaries than were other churches (53 percent SBC; 32 percent of others).

8. **NEW SENIOR PASTOR (PAST 10 YEARS).** More than half of both categories of churches reported calling a new pastor during the past decade (58 percent for both SBC and others). This also means that 42 percent of both SBC and other churches grew to be one of the fastest growing churches in the nation under the leadership of the same pastor they have had for more than 10 years.

9. **NUMBER OF FULL-TIME ORDAINED STAFF.** Non-SBC churches were nearly 2 times (1.9) as likely to report five or fewer full-time ordained staff members as growing SBC "First" churches. SBC churches were nearly 3 times (2.8) more likely to have 6 staff members in this category and nearly 4 times (3.7) more likely to have 8 full-time ordained staff members.

This means that SBC churches are nearly 4 times (3.7) as likely to have a large team of 6-10 ordained staff members as other churches. The data also indicates that non-SBC churches report (among the sample churches) 1.5 times as many churches with 1-5 full-time ordained staff members.

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NUMBER OF FULL-TIME ORDAINED STAFF
(Percent of Total Churches in Each Category)

	<u>1-2 STAFF</u>	<u>3-4 STAFF</u>	<u>5-6 STAFF</u>	<u>7+ STAFF</u>
SBC	9%	25%	34%	29%
Others	32%	32%	16%	10%

10. NUMBER OF FULL-TIME UNORDAINED STAFF. Summary results indicate that "Other" churches are 2 times (2.1) times more likely to have 1-6 full-time unordained staff members. SBC churches by contrast are nearly 4 times (3.8) more likely to report 7-35 full-time unordained staff members than other churches. Among SBC churches, 37 percent report 6 or fewer full-time non-ordained staff members compared to 78 percent of the other churches.

NUMBER OF FULL-TIME NON-ORDAINED MINISTRY STAFF
(Percent of Total Churches in Each Category)

	<u>1-5 STAFF</u>	<u>6-9 STAFF</u>	<u>10-35 STAFF</u>
SBC	36%	26%	34%
Others	63%	15%	6%

11. STAFF FOR PRESCHOOL MINISTRY (FULL-TIME). A significant variation exists between the two categories of churches in this area. "Preschool" is defined as children from birth through age 5. A separate question is later provided for information about full-time staff member specifically for Children (Grades 1-6). Church responses for the "preschool" staff question indicate:

STAFF FOR PRESCHOOL MINISTRY (FULL-TIME)
(Percent of Churches in Each Category)

	<u>YES: Full-Time Staff</u>	<u>NO: Full-Time Staff</u>
SBC	40%	60%
Others	21%	79%

12. STAFF FOR CHILDREN'S MINISTRY (FULL-TIME). While a majority of both categories of churches (SBC and Others) reported having no specialized full-time staff member (ordained or unordained) for preschool children and their parents, the opposite was discovered for specialized ministry staff for children (grades 1-6). It should be noted, however, that a few staff in this later category ("children") indicated that they have a dual responsibility for both preschool and children.

STAFF FOR CHILDREN'S MINISTRY (FULL-TIME)
(Percent of Churches in Each Category)

	<u>YES: Full-Time Staff</u>	<u>NO: Full-Time Staff</u>
SBC	67%	33%
Others	52%	48%

13. SUNDAY A.M. WORSHIP SERVICES. More SBC "First" churches reported having only 1 morning worship service (36 percent vs. 32 percent among other churches). More "Other" churches, however, tend to report either 2 or 3 Sunday morning worship services. When the sample is equally weighted to compensate for the large number of SBC churches, the percent of "Other" churches significantly outnumber SBC churches in reporting more than 1 morning worship service. The figures below represent the unadjusted total percentage.

SUNDAY MORNING WORSHIP SERVICES
(Percent of Churches in Each Category)

	<u>1 AM Service</u>	<u>2 AM Services</u>	<u>3 AM Services</u>
SBC	36%	51%	13%
Others	32%	53%	15%

14. SUNDAY A.M. WORSHIP ATTENDANCE (1989). Average Sunday morning worship attendance clusters at 500-3,000 among most of the SBC "First" churches and between 500-2000 for other churches. SBC churches are nearly 2 times (1.9) more likely to report worship attendance above 1,000 each week. Other churches are also 2 times (2.1) more likely to have attendance below the 1,000-attendance above 3,000 people.

SUNDAY MORNING WORSHIP ATTENDANCE (1989)
 (Percent of Churches in Each Category)

	<u>100-999 AM Worship Attendance</u>	<u>1,000+ AM Worship Attendance</u>
SBC	22%	76%
Others	54%	43%

15. SUNDAY AM WORSHIP ATTENDANCE (1979). When this question was asked, only 80 percent of the churches in the total were able to effectively estimate their Sunday morning worship attendance a decade ago. Information shared by the churches, in both categories, proved to be comparable to current percentages. Both groups indicated that nearly 2 times as many of their own churches had a weekly attendance of less than 1,000 people.

SUNDAY MORNING WORSHIP ATTENDANCE (10 YEARS AGO)
 (Percent of Churches in Each Category)

	<u>100-999 AM Worship Attendance</u>	<u>1000+ AM Worship Attendance</u>
SBC	49%	21%
Others	84%	10%

16. SUNDAY PM WORSHIP ATTENDANCE (1989). Sunday evening worship attendance was not reported in this study by 11 percent of the churches. Observations from information shared by the 89 percent of the responding churches reveal that nearly one-third (30 percent) of the SBC churches and one-tenth (10 percent) of the other churches exceed 600 in their Sunday evening services. Most churches in both groups will regularly have less than 600 attend on Sunday evenings.

SUNDAY EVENING WORSHIP ATTENDANCE
(Percent of Churches in Each Category)

	<u>Less Than 600</u> <u>Sunday PM Attendance</u>	<u>More Than 600</u> <u>Sunday PM Attendance</u>
SBC	57%	30%
Others	74%	10%

17. MID-WEEK WORSHIP ATTENDANCE. When asked about attendance for this gathering time, a total of 13 percent of the churches were unable to give a definite attendance for various reasons. The following information is based on answers provided by the other 87 percent. The majority of both SBC (74 percent) and other churches (70 percent) reported less than 600 attending the mid-week service. Only SBC churches (26 percent of their total) have more than 600 attending during this time.

MID-WEEK WORSHIP ATTENDANCE
(Percent of Churches in Each Category)

	<u>Less Than 600</u> <u>Mid-Week Attendance</u>	<u>More Than 600</u> <u>Mid-Week Attendance</u>
SBC	74%	26%
Others	70%	0%

18. SUNDAY SCHOOL ATTENDANCE (1989). Sunday school attendance appears to be of greater importance to Southern Baptist churches than among the other churches in the sample. If it is not more important, it appears to be noticeably more effective among the Southern Baptist churches and contributes to their visibility in greater numerical growth.

In all except the 100 to 499 Sunday school attendance category, the Southern Baptist sample churches exceeded all "Other" churches in other attendance categories (from less than 100 attending to over 1,000 attending). Only SBC churches reported Sunday school attendance above 3,000 people. While SBC churches were more than 4 times (4.3) as likely to report adjusted Sunday school attendance above 1,000 people and creative exchange churches, the

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"Other" churches were nearly 2 times (1.8) as likely to have attendance each Sunday of less than 1,000 people.

The non-SBC churches reported a total of 47 percent of all their churches having less than 500 people in Sunday school each week compared to only 7 percent of the SBC churches.

AVERAGE WEEKLY SUNDAY SCHOOL ATTENDANCE
(Percent of Churches in Each Category)

	<u>Less Than 500</u>	<u>500-999</u>	<u>More Than 1000</u>
SBC	7%	27%	66%
Other	47%	16%	16%

19. TOTAL NEW MEMBERS (1988). The probability of a "First" church receiving more than 200 new members (total new member count) provides a vivid contrast among the sample churches.

The category "Other" churches overwhelming (by 69 percent of these churches) reported receiving from 1-199 new members during the year 1988. An additional 21 percent received a total of 200-399 new members. By contrast, a total of 74 percent of the SBC churches reported receiving more than 200 new members during the same year. The SBC churches were the only churches receiving more than 400 new members during the 12 month period.

NEW MEMBERS RECEIVED DURING 1988
(Percent of Churches in Each Category)

	<u>Less Than 200</u>	<u>200-399</u>	<u>More Than 400</u>
SBC	26%	45%	29%
Other	69%	21%	-

20. BAPTISMS REPORTED (1988). Each church was asked to indicate the total number of persons baptized during the year 1988. This allowed maximum opportunity for variation and freedom in the practices and guidelines definition to each congregation.

Nearly half (47 percent) of the SBC churches reported less than 100 baptisms during the year. This compares to 74 percent of the "Other" churches included in the study. This is a high percentage for both categories of sample churches. Only SBC churches reported more than 300 persons baptized in 1988.

TOTAL PERSONS BAPTIZED DURING 1988
(Percent of Churches in Each Category)

	<u>Less Than 100</u>	<u>100-299</u>	<u>More Than 300</u>
SBC	47%	42%	6%
Other	74%	16%	-

21. TRANSFER MEMBERS (NEW) FROM OWN AFFILIATION OR DENOMINATION (1988). Each church was asked this question so that an estimate could be made of the number of new members being received from the same affiliation (or different affiliation) as the sample church.

Each church was asked to estimate the percent of new members transferring into their church from other churches within their own affiliation if they were uncertain of the exact number. Some churches knew exactly while other elected the estimation option. While not ideal, it is still the only information available. The following table indicates answers provided by the churches. Non-SBC churches indicate a much higher percentage of new members transferring into their churches as coming from churches outside their own affiliation than do SBC churches. Denominational loyalty appears to be a marked characteristic for SBC members who decide to transfer membership among fast growth "First" churches.

TRANSFER MEMBERS RECEIVED FROM OWN AFFILIATION (1988)
(Percent of Churches in Each Category)

Total Transfer (of all new members) by percent	Response	
	SBC	Others
20%	2%	37%
30%	7%	11%
40%	9%	-
50%	20%	11%
60%	7%	-
70%	16%	5%
80%	18%	16%
90%	20%	5%

Hopefully, if you serve in a "First Church" or if you are consultant to these special churches, the above information can be of help as you plan for future growth. As a consultant to consultants, this writer's attempt has been to place information in your hands that would not normally be available to your ministry. May God find us pleasing and useful for His purposes in kingdom growth through His churches.