

A CASE STUDY OF GROWTH AND DECLINE: THE CHURCHES OF CHRIST, 2006-2016

Stanley E. Granberg

Abstract

The group known as the Churches of Christ is one of America's largest religious bodies with over 1.5 million adherents and congregations in all fifty states. Like many U.S. Christian bodies, the Churches of Christ have entered a time of decline. This article is a case study of the Churches of Christ and describes the group's growth and decline, with a specific focus on the years 2006 to 2016. The movement's current state of health is assessed, and the impact of new church planting as the engine for movement growth is described. The article ends by addressing three hard challenges and three bold strategies that the Churches of Christ might employ to promote a new period of growth.

INTRODUCTION

Case studies have been at the heart and soul of the Church Growth Movement. The group known as the Churches of Christ is one of three religious streams arising from the 19th century American Stone-Campbell

movement.¹ The Churches of Christ as a distinct movement was first recognized in the 1906 edition of *Religious Bodies*.² By the end of the twentieth century, the Churches of Christ formed the sixteenth most populous Christian body in America.³ This movement's size and influence in American Christianity make it an instructive case study in these early years of the twenty-first century.⁴

My purpose with this study is to describe the numeric status of the Churches of Christ along with a prescriptive analysis to provide solid information on which this body can consider options for its future. The article begins by presenting the growth facts of the Churches of Christ in relation to the other major religious bodies in the United States. Next, it presents the growth of the Churches of Christ historically with a specific focus on 2006 to 2016. Finally, the paper prescribes three hard challenges and three bold strategies that could lead to a new period of growth and kingdom impact.

CHURCHES OF CHRIST IN THE AMERICAN RELIGIOUS LANDSCAPE

Donald A. McGavran famously described the lack of clear, numeric understanding of a church or Christian body as the universal fog that blinds religious leaders.⁵ We need to reduce the fog to clearly understand our situation. The descriptive task begins by comparing the status of the Churches of Christ in relation to other Christian religious bodies. This will help answer the question many raise in our post-denominational world: "Why should we care what is happening in any historic, Christian body?"⁶ The numeric data on religious bodies in America used here is

1 D. Newell Williams, Douglas A. Foster, and Paul M. Blowers, *The Stone-Campbell Movement: A Global History* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2013), 1.

2 E. Dana Durand, *Religious Bodies: 1906* (Washington: Department of Commerce and Labor. Bureau of the Census, 1910), 28.

3 The Association of Religion Data Archives | Quality Data on Religion, accessed May 1, 2017, <http://www.thearda.com>.

4 This article discusses the mainstream Churches of Christ without specific reference to the International Churches of Christ.

5 Donald A. McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1972), 57.

6 David Lose, "Do Christian Denominations Have a Future? Huffington Post, August 22, 2012,

published by the Association of Statisticians of American Religious Bodies (ASARB) through the American Religious Data Archives (ARDA).⁷ This data contains information on two hundred and seventy religious bodies reporting the number of adherents (all participants in churches) and congregations for 1980, 1990, 2000, and 2010.

The Churches of Christ compose one of only twenty-one religious bodies in America reporting over one million adherents in each decade reported by ARDA. The largest of these are the Catholic Church (59 million adherents in 20,589 churches in 2010), the Southern Baptist Convention (almost 20 million adherents in 50,816 churches in 2010), and non-denominational churches (over 12 million adherents in 35,496 churches in 2010).⁸ In 2010, the Churches of Christ ranked thirteenth in the number of adherents (1,584,162) and seventh in the number of congregations (12,584), giving it the lowest average number of adherents per congregation (126) among groups larger than one million.⁹ At this size, the Churches of Christ represent a significant body of affiliated churches and leaders who are organically connected, have the capacity to organize activity and bring resources to bear on behalf of the kingdom of God.

Geographically, the Churches of Christ are most concentrated in five southern states: Texas, Tennessee, Alabama, Arkansas, and Oklahoma. These five states contain more than fifty percent of the total number of adherents. This is consistent with other Christian bodies that also tend to concentrate in regions. Despite this southern concentration, Church of Christ congregations exist in 2,427 (77%) of the 3,142 U.S. counties and county-equivalents. Only five Christian bodies have a congregational presence in more counties: the United Methodist Church, the Roman Catholic Church, the Southern Baptist Convention, non-denominational churches, and the Assemblies of God. This makes the Churches of Christ

http://www.huffingtonpost.com/david-lose/christian-denominations-over_b_1616233.html.

7 Clifford Grammich et al., 2010 U.S. Religion Census: Religious Congregations & Member Study, report (Association of Statisticians of American Religious Bodies, 2012), accessed May 11, 2017, <http://rcms2010.org>.

8 See 2010 U.S. Religion Census, accessed July 19, 2018, http://www.usreligioncensus.org/press_release/ACP%2020120501.pdf. A full copy of tables and graphs used in this article can be requested from the author at sgranberg@kairoschurchplanting.org.

9 By adherents, the Churches of Christ ranked 16th in 1980, 17th in 1990, and 16th in 2000.

one of the most widely dispersed Christian bodies with a footprint that spans the United States.

To compare rates of growth, church growth researchers use decadal growth rate (DGR), which allows norming for comparison across religious bodies and differing spans of time.¹⁰ Comparing religious bodies with over 1 million adherents between 2000 and 2010, eleven of these twenty-one religious bodies reported growth. Only the top five bodies reported significant adherent growth: 1) Latter Day Saints (45.47%), 2) Seventh-day Adventists (29.46%), 3) Jehovah's Witnesses (18.60%), 4) Assemblies of God (14.94%), and 5) the Church of God, Cleveland, TN (13.94%).¹¹ Six reported positive growth rates of less than one percent, and ten reported negative growth rates ranging from the Churches of Christ at -3.73% to the African Methodist Episcopal Church at -54.95%. The Churches of Christ group ranks twelfth on this adherent list with a decline of 61,422 adherents and a DGR of -3.73%.¹² Ten bodies reported a growth in the number of churches. Those bodies reporting over 1,000 new churches were the Southern Baptists (9,302, 22.41% DGR), Latter Day Saints (2,086, 18.12% DGR), and Seventh-day Adventists (1,158, 25.69% DGR). The Churches of Christ ranked thirteenth with -443 churches for a DGR of -3.4%.

Which church bodies have grown the fastest? Table 1 compares the fastest-growing religious bodies in America since 1970. Encouragingly, the rate of growth, which had almost declined by half in each decade up to 2000, increased among the top-ranked growing bodies of 2000-2010. Three of these four (Latter Day Saints, Adventists, and Jehovah's Witnesses) are typically considered outside the bounds of traditional, historic Christianity, and the Assemblies of God are part of the charismatic stream.¹³ This calls

10 Bob Waymire and C. Peter Wager, *The Church Growth Survey Handbook* (Milpitas, CA: Global Church Growth, 1984), 16.

11 A growth rate of 5% or more is considered growth. Between +5% and -5% is a plateaued group, Church Growth Associates, "Church Growth Rate," accessed May 30, 2017, <http://www.mychurch-growth.com/church%20growth/agr.php>.

12 The Excel formula used for calculating decadal growth rates is: $=(\text{Cell Now}/\text{Cell original}) ^ (10/\text{years}-1)-100\%$. From "Calculating Decadal Growth Rates" by Bruce D. Seymour, accessed March 28, 2017, <http://ocresearch.info/?q=wiki/calculating-decadal-growth-rates>.

13 "Index of Cults and Religions." Index of Cults and Religions | Watchman Fellowship, Inc., accessed

for further investigation as to why these particular bodies are growing when most of the other religious bodies are not. Is it their strategic approach, theological conviction, member enthusiasm, cultural connection, or another factors driving this growth?

Table 1: Fastest Growing Religious Bodies by Decade, 1970-2010

Decade	Christian Body	Growth Rate	U.S. Growth Rate
1970s	Assemblies of God	70.0%	11.5%
1980s	Assemblies of God	35.0%	9.8%
1990s	Latter Day Saints	16.1%	13.2%
2000s	Latter Day Saints	45.5%	9.7%
	Seventh-day Adventist	29.4%	
	Jehovah's Witnesses	18.6%	
	Assemblies of God	14.9%	

Source: the ARDA.org.

When comparing the Churches of Christ to other Christian bodies of over one million adherents, the Churches of Christ are in the top ten percent by numbers of adherents and congregations. During the decade 2000–2010, the Churches of Christ demonstrated a trend of decline with an adherent loss of -3.73%. While a DGR of less than 5% is not considered significant by church growth standards, this trend bears watching. Compared to these other Christian bodies, the Churches of Christ did not decline as rapidly as some; but since 2000, the Churches of Christ dropped from the ranks of growing bodies to declining bodies.

May 19, 2017, <http://www.watchman.org/index-of-cults-and-religions/#S>.

CHURCHES OF CHRIST AS A BODY

The last, formal church growth report on the Churches of Christ was published by Flavil R. Yeakley Jr. in 2008.¹⁴ Yeakley reported that despite some concerns about decline, from 1980 to 2000 the Churches of Christ group was slowly growing. Table 2 shows the evidence Yeakley used to support this conclusion. Unconventionally, rather than comparing the rate of growth by decades, the standard approach, Yeakley reported his growth statistics first for the combined decades of 1980-2000 and then from 1980 to 2006. The result was that the growth which occurred in the 1980s was distributed over the 1990s, giving the appearance that the Churches of Christ were still growing slightly. Even a cursory glance raises the question, “Aren’t these numbers declining?” This is a question that will be clarified later. Yeakley observed that the states which grew were those “U.S. mission field’ states” where missionaries had been planting new congregations. The states where decline occurred were those with “the greatest concentration of congregations, members, and adherents”; they were not planting new congregations.¹⁵

Yeakley’s Growth Statistics for Churches of Christ, 1980-2006

Decade	Adherents	Members	Congregations
1980-2000	2.8%	2.0%	2.4%
1980-2006	2.5%	2.1%	1.9%

Source: Yeakley, 2008, 11.

GAINING PERSPECTIVE

Since 2000 there has been a growing concern that the Churches of Christ group has not fared well. Articles in *The Christian Chronicle*, the most widely distributed newspaper in this fellowship, addressed the perceived decline of the Churches of Christ numerous times.¹⁶ A 2002 report by Stanley E. Granberg standardized the 1980-2000 growth statistics by decades rather than taking them as a whole as Yeakley did. This report showed that there was growth in numbers of adherents, members, and congregations during the 1980s with a minimal decline during the 1990s.¹⁷ The report concluded that the Churches of Christ possibly hit its high point sometime during the mid-1980s when the trend shifted from growth to loss.

We can now clarify this situation. Table 3 provides a comprehensive look at the growth pattern of the Churches of Christ from 1890 to 2016.¹⁸ Looking down the columns for DGR Members and DGR Churches, there is strong growth prior to 1980 and low growth moving to decline beginning in 1990. The bottom two rows report multiple decades, as Yeakley did. While we could follow Yeakley saying that the Churches of Christ group was growing from 1980 to 2000, this statement hides the fact that the trend of decline had already started by 1990 and has been picking up speed since.

16 Seventeen articles were published by *The Christian Chronicle* from February 2001 to January 2008 dealing with the perceived decline of Churches of Christ, <http://www.christianchronicle.org/continuing-coverage/are-we-growing>, accessed May 11, 2017.

17 Stanley E. Granberg, *The Churches of Christ in the United States: A Visual Review of Growth and Decline, 1980-2000*, report (Portland, OR, 2002), 2.

18 Carl H. Royster, *Churches of Christ in the United States: Includes all 50 States and the Territories*, DVD, Nashville: 21st Century Christian, December 2006 and December 2016. This report only uses the fifty states. The five territories were removed to make the numbers comparable to earlier data.

Table 3: Revised Growth Statistics for Churches of Christ, 1890-2016

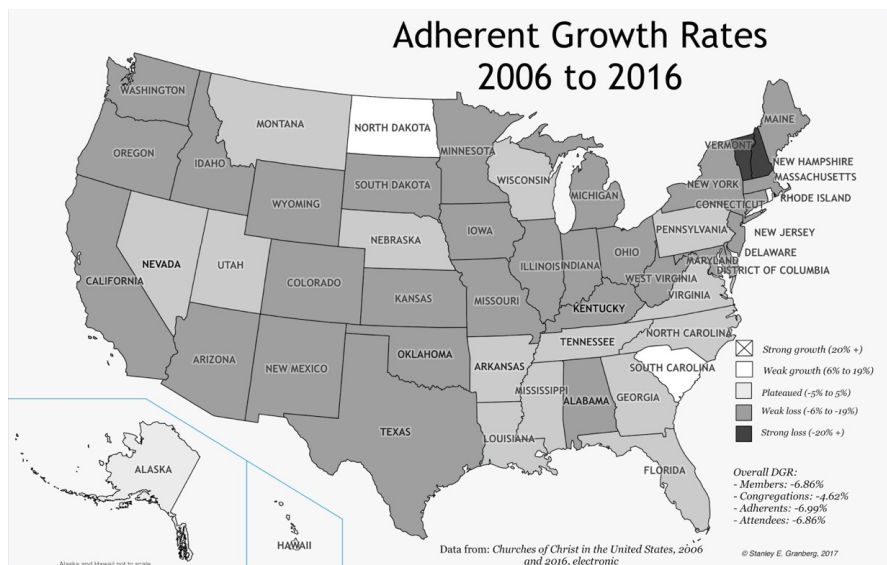
Years	Members	Congregations	Adherents	DGR Members	DGR Churches	DGR Adherents	DGR Years
1890		2,000	100,000	NA	NA	NA	
1906	159,658	2,649		NA	19.20%	NA	1890-1906
1916	317,937	5,570		99.17%	110.27%	NA	1906-1916
1926	433,714	6,226		36.42%	11.78%	NA	1916-1926
1936	500,000	6,700		15.28%	7.61%	NA	1926-1936
1948	682,172	10,089		51.16%	40.65%	NA	1936-1948
1980	1,239,612	12,719	1,600,177	20.52%	7.51%	NA	1948-1980
1990	1,284,056	13,027	1,645,584	3.59%	2.42%	2.84%	1980-1990
2000	1,262,808	13,027	1,645,584	-1.50%	0.00%	0.00%	1990-2000
2006	1,255,030	12,818	1,622,563	-1.25%	-3.18%	-2.78%	2000-2006
2010		12,584	1,584,162	NA	-3.40%	-3.73%	2000-2010
2016	1,177,783	12,237	1,509,877	-6.15%	-4.53%	-6.94%	2006-2016
				1.01%	1.20%	1.41%	1980-2000
				-4.36%	-3.83%	-5.24%	2000-2016

Sources: Yeakley, *Growth Record*, 1998 and *Good News*, 2008, TheARDA.org, and *Churches of Christ in the United States*, 1982, 1991, 2000, 2006, 2016.

2006 TO 2016: A DECADE OF LOSS

Now to the question: how did the Churches of Christ fare from 2006 to 2016? The map in Figure 1 visualizes the distribution of Churches of Christ adherents across the United States. The group's churches are found in all fifty states, and more than 50% of the total number of adherents, members, attendees, and congregations are concentrated in just five states: Texas (adherents 22.29%), Tennessee (13.78%), Alabama (7.29%), Arkansas (5.49%), and Oklahoma (4.84%). These states are colored dark gray. In light gray are the fifteen states where Church of Christ adherents are one percent or more of the total number of Church of Christ adherents. The thirty states not colored each contain less than one percent of the Church of Christ adherents. These should be considered domestic mission field states.¹⁹

Figure 2.



Sources: Churches of Christ in the United States, 2006 and 2016 electronic versions.

The decline in members, adherents, and churches is important as a predictor for the future as well as descriptive for the present. Descriptively, the loss of members, adherents, and churches reflects the past: the Churches of Christ have been in a negative growth pattern since at least 1990, a period of almost thirty years. This means that few members or ministers younger than fifty years of age have experienced a dynamic, growing church situation. The implications of this loss of experience in growth will be discussed later. For prediction, we look at the change in adherents and congregations. Change in adherents tells us what is most likely to happen in the next decade. The number of adherents minus the number of members provides a general estimate of children, those most likely to become members in the next decade. The adherent loss of -6.94% predicts fewer new members entering through biological growth. Change in numbers of congregations is the best predictor of the evangelistic growth that can be expected over the next twenty-five years.²⁰ With a congregational loss of -4.53% we can predict an accelerating loss of members, adherents, and congregations.

²⁰ Yeakley, *Good News*, 27-28.

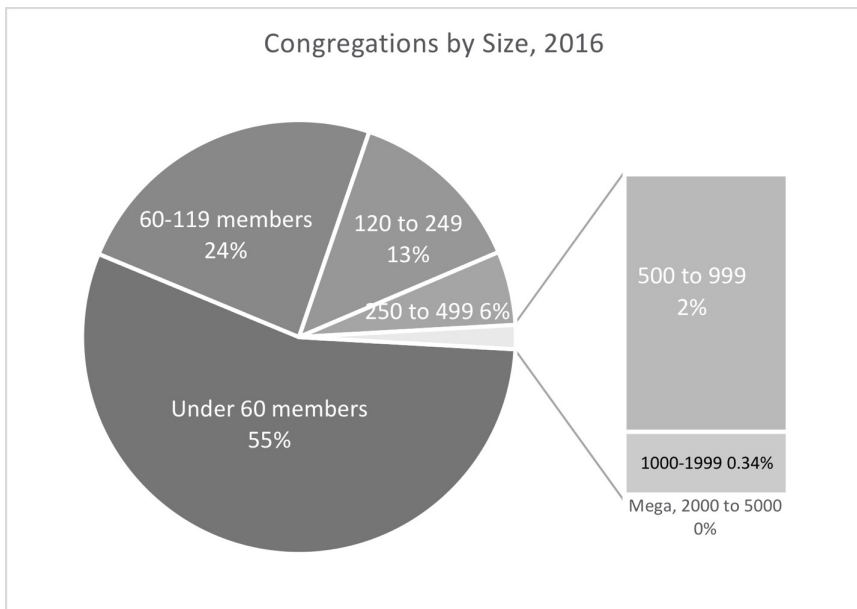
CHARACTER OF CONGREGATIONS

Churches under two hundred in attendance with a single staff pastor and nuclear family dynamic are considered small.²¹ The overwhelming majority of Church of Christ congregations—92%—are small. Figure 3 shows the distribution of congregations by size. The average congregational attendance in 2016 was ninety-four people. Two-thirds of all attendees attended a church with fewer than 250 people. A stunning revelation is that 6,791 (55%) Church of Christ congregations have an average attendance of just thirty-four people. This statistic means that the typical congregation is the size of a micro-church or a missional community, though most of these smallest of the small churches lack the reproductive capacity (leadership vision, available people, and mission finances) to add new members or plant new churches.²²

21 Gary L. McIntosh, *One Size Doesn't Fit All: Bringing Out the Best in Any Size Church*, (Grand Rapids, MI: R.H. Revell, 1999), 88.

22 Todd Wilson, *The Emerging Micro-Church Era: Addition, Reproduction, Multiplication? 10 Questions to Consider*, (Exponential white paper, 2017) and Mike Breen, *Leading Missional Communities (S.I.: 3DM, 2013)*.

Figure 3.



Source: *Churches of Christ in the United States*, 2016 electronic edition.

Finally, the Churches of Christ group is no longer a rural movement. If one asks pastors of the Churches of Christ if they consider their movement rural or urban, most will say rural. However, according to the 2010 ASARB research report, 76% of Church of Christ congregations exist in urban areas. Over half of the churches, 55% of Church of Christ congregations, are in metropolitan counties (counties containing an urban core of at least 50,000 people), and another 21% are in micropolitan counties (those with urban cores between 10,000 and 50,000 people).²³ The Churches of Christ group can now be described as an urban movement.

MOVEMENT HEALTH

While there are many instruments available to measure the health of individual congregations, such as the Natural Church Development survey, there are few instruments available to measure the health and

²³ "U.S. Religion Census 1952 to 2010," Religion in America: Demographic Maps | U.S. Religion Census, accessed May 28, 2017, <http://www.rcms2010.org/maps2010.php>.

vitality of an entire religious fellowship or network, other than those that measure whether it is growing or declining. David T. Olsen suggests benchmarks for “healthy denominational species” based on the percentages of its churches by age.²⁴ Figure 4 displays Olsen’s church age ratios for a healthy movement compared to the 2016 estimated ratios for the Churches of Christ. Olsen argues that in a healthy movement at least half of the movement’s congregations should be below forty years of age, the age when reproductive capacity and initiative are at their highest. The remaining congregations, those older than forty years, while often lacking the generative capacity to grow or reproduce new churches, typically have lots of supporting resources to give. To grow, a movement must plant at least 2% of its total number of churches each year. This doubles Lyle Schaller’s 1% rule—that a movement must plant 1% of its total number of congregations each year in order to maintain itself—for growth.²⁵ At the bottom are churches that are closing, primarily because they are aging out in their life cycle.²⁶ Such legacy churches often are repositories of financial resources via their real estate holdings. Olsen argues that legacy churches should deliberately close before they spend their resources in a desperate bid to keep their church open, and they should repurpose those funds into new churches.²⁷ In practice, among many denominations and networks, repurposing such legacy churches provides primary financial resources for planting new congregations that have more vitality and a better chance to reach the rising generation of unchurched Americans.²⁸

24 David T. Olsen, *The American Church in Crisis: Groundbreaking Research Based on a National Database of over 200,000 Churches*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2008), 125.

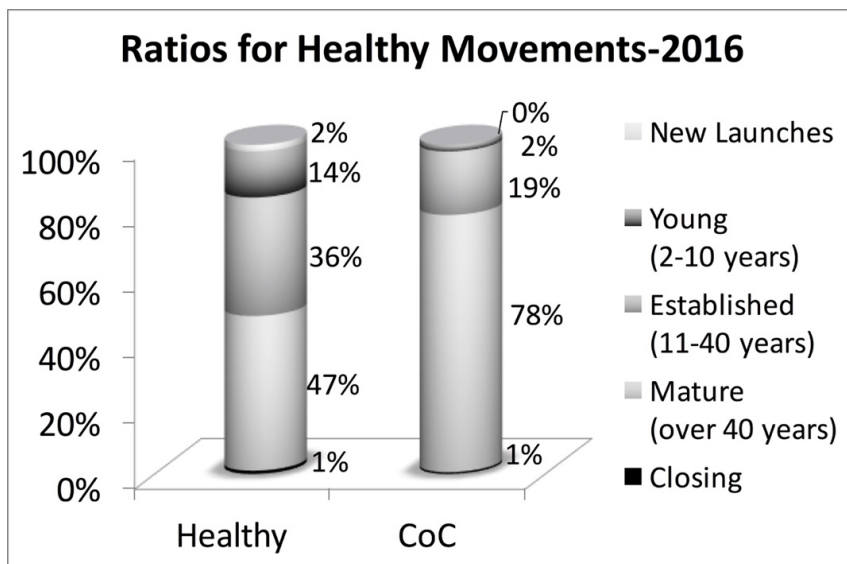
25 Lyle Schaller, *44 Questions for Church Planters* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1991), 12.

26 Gary L. McIntosh, *Taking Your Church to the Next Level: What Got You Here Won't Get You There* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2009), 30.

27 The CoFC started the Heritage 21 Foundation in 2016 to help dying churches close. The foundation considers a church distressed and dying when it averages fewer than fifty people in attendance, with the majority above fifty years of age, six or fewer giving families and not able to keep a full-time pastor on staff. See also McIntosh, *Next Level*, 80-81.

28 Stephen Gray and Franklin Dumond, *Legacy Churches*, (St. Charles, IL: ChurchSmart, 2009).

Figure 4.



As a movement, the Churches of Christ group is out of balance with two-thirds of congregations being older than forty years. Only 21% of Church of Christ churches are in the young and established years, when reproduction is more natural and achievable. From 2006 to 2016, 581 congregations closed; at 58 congregations closing per year, fewer than 1% (0.55%) of churches are closing. While church closings are sad, for the health of the movement, more declining and dying churches need to close. These closing churches are a tremendous, untapped resource for funding new churches. The church planting rate is so low, as will be demonstrated in the next section, that it does not register a significant percentage.

Several important implications stem from this health check. First, because of the overwhelmingly high percentage of mature churches, the reproductive potential of the movement is low. Hayward’s limited enthusiasm model says that this loss of reproductive potential is due to the lack of enthusiasts—active believers, typically two years or less in their faith—who generate recruitment of more new believers.²⁹ Second, mature

churches typically lack reproducing believers; thus, few churches over forty years of age grow in any significant way.³⁰ Third, not only does the lack of reproduction limit the growth potential of existing churches, but the lack of growing, reproducing churches also negatively impacts the ability of the movement to plant new churches. Craig Whitney, Director of Training for Stadia, said, “The [church planting] success rate of the guys with experience in dynamic, growing churches is phenomenal. Among those without that experience, no matter what their ability and experience, they just have too much to overcome. They lack the working models that push them towards success.”³¹ What Whitney means is that even if significant resources for planting are unlocked by repurposing the capital of closing congregations and the motivation to plant is ignited among the existing congregations, the ability and experience to successfully plant new churches currently is low. The two church planting ministries operating in the Churches of Christ, Kairos Church Planting and Mission Alive, have found all three of these factors—lack of funding, low motivation from established churches, and lack of experience-based skill among church planters—to be significant challenges to the successful planting of new churches.

HISTORY OF CHURCH OF CHRIST CHURCH PLANTING

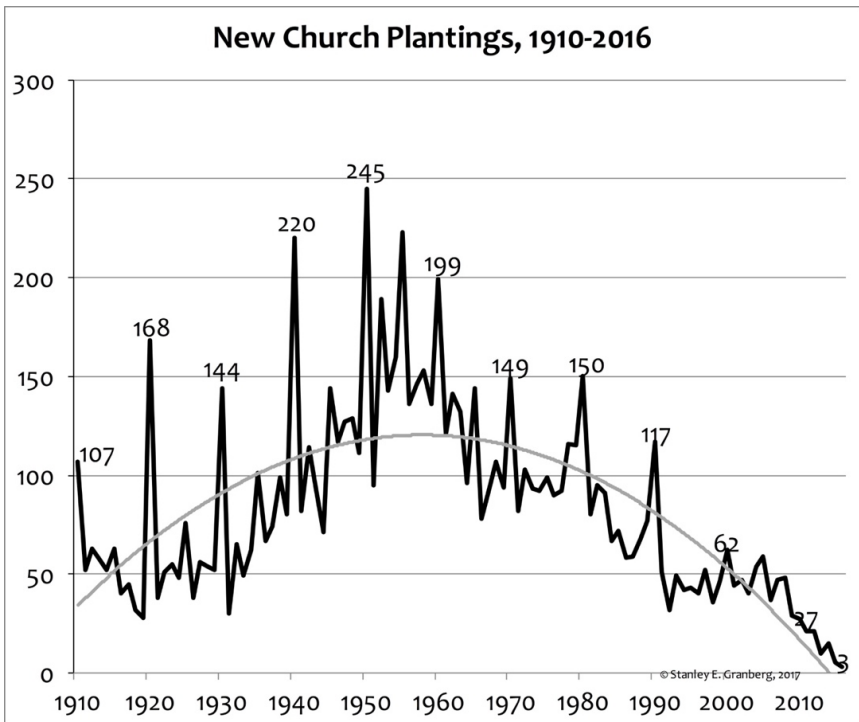
When the Churches of Christ were first recognized as a separate religious body in 1906, there were 2,649 congregations with 159,658 members (refer to Table 3). Forty years later, there were 10,089 congregations with 682,172 members, over three times the number of churches and members. Figure 5 plots the known church plantings year by year from 1910 to 2016.³² Note the spikes that occur at the beginning of almost every new decade. In those years Schaller’s 1% rule was typically achieved. The psychological motivation that drove these spikes can only be guessed. The high-water mark was 1950 when 245 churches were listed as having started. From 1990, the lack of any significant new church planting work is radically evident.

30 McIntosh, *Next Level*, 31.

31 “Craig Whitney Interview,” Telephone interview by author. February 17, 2016.

32 Note: these numbers include only those churches that were still existing and included in the *Churches of Christ in the United States*, 2016 edition. Therefore, these numbers represent a sampling rather than actual numbers.

Figure 5.



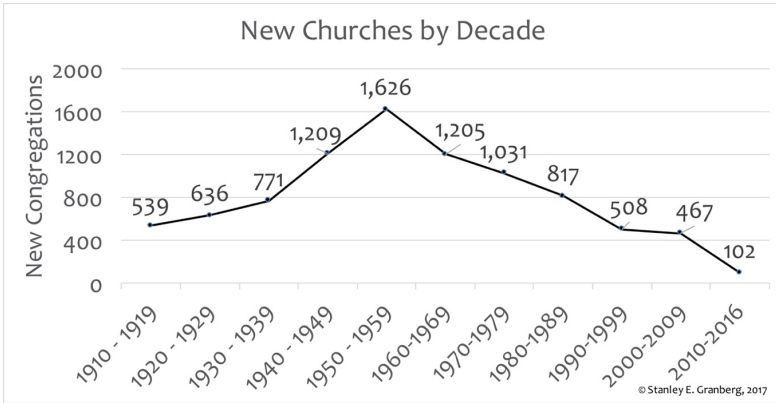
Source: *Churches of Christ in the United States*, 2016 electronic edition.

When church starts are graphed by decade (Figure 6), the pattern is clarified. In the growth years (1906 to 1950), there were about as many new churches planted by decade as there were from 1950 to 2009, except that the number of existing churches was far smaller. Between 1906 and 1948, 7,440 new congregations were planted from a starting base of 2,649 congregations. In these first forty years, more than two and one-half times as many churches were planted as originally existed. From 1948 to the year of the highest recorded number of congregations, 13,027 in 1990, only 2,938 new churches were planted from a base of 10,089 congregations.³³ In

³³ Bobby Ross, Jr., "Church in America Marked by Decline," *The Christian Chronicle*, January 22, 2009, accessed January 28, 2009, <http://www.christianchronicle.org/article/church-in-america-marked-by-decline>.

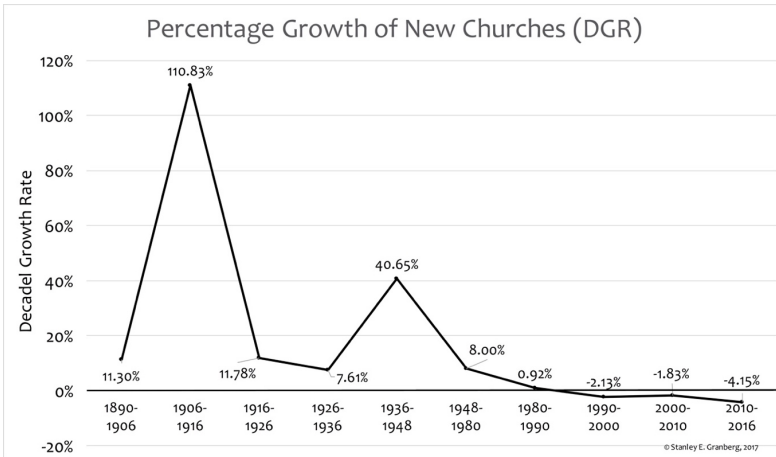
the second forty years, only one-third the number of 1948 congregations were planted. The picture is further refined in Figure 7, which displays the percentage of growth or decline in numbers of churches by decade. During the amazing decade of 1906 to 1916, the growth in number of new churches was 111%. A second bump occurred from 1936 to 1948 when the growth in new congregations was over 41%. Since 1990 there has been a decreasing number of new churches planted.

Figure 6.



Source: *Churches of Christ in the United States*, 2016 electronic edition.

Figure 7.



SUMMARY

The Churches of Christ form the thirteenth-largest Christian body in America, with congregations existing throughout the United States. The Churches of Christ reached their zenith in about 1990 with 1,645,584 adherents and 13,027 churches. A trend of decline set in at that point, which has now become a significant loss. The current state of health of the movement must be classified as poor, given that almost 80% of congregations are in the mature and declining stages of life where reproductive will and capacity are low. The high point of Church of Christ church planting occurred in about 1960, twenty-five years before the Churches of Christ reached their maximum numbers of adherents, members, and churches. This lag time between the planting of new churches in significant numbers and the growth of adherents and members means that it will take the Churches of Christ most of this century to make a turnaround and see results.

HARD, BOLD PLANS

Donald McGavran encouraged us to make hard, bold plans. Thus, I end this article with what is hard and what is bold. Having worked extensively with the Churches of Christ fellowship across time and geography, I present three hard challenges that I believe we must address to set a foundation for future growth, and I also present three bold strategies that could change the course of our future.

HARD CHALLENGES

The following three challenges are hard because they are deeply embedded, DNA-level aspects of the Churches of Christ that seem to hold it back, even cripple it, from engaging 21st century America; they affect our confidence that we can be useful ambassadors, harvesting new souls for the kingdom of God.

Challenge #1: Reorient the Hermeneutic from a Closed to an Open Perspective.

The Churches of Christ practice a restrictive hermeneutic described as command, example, and necessary inference.³⁴ While “thus saith the Lord” is an appropriate operating principle, we have added a subtext that says, “What is not addressed is not allowed.” Our traditional hermeneutic requires explicit permission to do something. Without that explicit permission, we find ourselves forbidden to do anything different. To change our course of decline in the 21st century, we must explore the other side of this hermeneutical coin, the side of freedom and openness. On this other side, unless something is expressly forbidden, we are free to explore it based upon biblical principles. This freedom is part of our faith heritage. The Independent Christian Churches operate with such an open hermeneutic. On the mission field of Kenya, I discovered that, at our best, the Churches of Christ form a fellowship that deeply desires to obey the God of the Word, implicitly trusting the Word of God to guide us to creatively engage the world of God. We are at our best when we live out of this perspective.

Challenge #2: Restore Apostolic Leaders as Part of Our Leadership System.

For a non-centralized, non-denominational fellowship, the Churches of Christ have a strongly hierarchical, congregational leadership system. In its most traditional form, a congregation is led by a committee of elders with deacons and teachers as permanent workers. Pastoral staff members are hired to work under the oversight of the elders, who can also fire on any pretense or personal discretion. This structure creates a maintenance orientation designed to keep the system stable. This stability-oriented leadership system is not capable of creating or releasing the innovative, growth-producing activity necessary to change our decline trajectory. We must adopt the Ephesians 4:11 understanding that restores the full circle of biblical leadership.³⁵

34 Williams, *Stone-Campbell Movement*, 159.

35 This idea of APEST leadership from Ephesians 4:11 is thoughtfully engaged by Alan Hirsch, <http://www.alanhirsch.org/books>. A circle model of leadership that has strong research support is described by Stanley E. Granberg, “Circle of biblical leadership,” Kairos Church Planting, August 31, 2011,

Challenge #3: Enliven the Experience of God among Us.

The Churches of Christ group has typically been a heady, intellectually oriented movement. Both our places and practices of worship are designed to remove emotional content and symbolism. The rule of “decently and in order” (1 Cor. 14:40) has been used to emphasize hearing the word of God to the neglect of experiencing the presence of God. If we expect “not-yet” believers to find anything of worth in our gatherings, the experience of God must become our new scorecard. When God shows up, lives will never be the same.

BOLD PLANS

History and research have proven true C. Peter Wagner’s assertion, “Planting new churches is the most effective evangelistic methodology known under heaven.”³⁶ Timothy Keller further expands Wagner’s view about church planting,

The vigorous, continual planting of new congregations is the single most crucial strategy for (1) the numerical growth of the body of Christ in a city and (2) the continual corporate renewal and revival of the existing churches in a city. Nothing else—not crusades, outreach programs, parachurch ministries, growing megachurches, congregational consulting, nor church renewal processes—will have the consistent impact of dynamic, extensive church planting.³⁷

If the Churches of Christ expect to make a reversal from decline to growth, church planting must be our core, strategic activity. Given this fact, the following three bold strategies would, from my perspective, provide the most immediate leverage to accomplishing kingdom expansion through this fellowship.

accessed May 29, 2017, <http://kairoschurchplanting.blogspot.com/2011/08/circle-of-biblical-leadership.html>.

36 C. Peter Wagner, *Strategies for Growth: Tools for Effective Missions and Evangelism* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1987), 168.

37 Timothy Keller, “Why Plant Churches?” Redeemer.com, 2009, accessed May 29, 2017, http://download.redeemer.com/pdf/learn/resources/Why_Plant_Churches-Keller.pdf.

Strategy #1: Deliberately Close Older, Declining Churches to Repurpose the Resources from Their Lands and Buildings for the Planting of New Churches.

The Churches of Christ can expect to see up to 4,000 congregations, one-third of the group's total, close in the next twenty-five years. If the average real estate revenue were just \$350,000 per church (a very conservative amount), these closings would produce \$1.4 billion. Investing half of that money into new churches, supporting each new church with \$250,000, would result in 2,800 new churches. God has already provided a tremendous storehouse of resources. Most Christian fellowships and denominations already fund much of their church planting through such repurposing efforts.³⁸ As a first step to accomplishing this strategy, the Heritage 21 Foundation was founded in 2016, with this mission: "To partner with declining churches to help them faithfully preserve and repurpose their resources for new kingdom work."³⁹

Strategy #2: Develop an Apprentice Leadership System to Train Next Generation Leaders to Plant New Churches and Missionally Lead Existing Churches

Experience in healthy, growing churches has become the most predictive factor for successful church planters. We need to create a pipeline for missional leaders through two-year, paid apprenticeships in our healthiest churches. If our top one hundred churches would keep four apprentices in training on a rotating basis, graduating two apprentices each year, then in twenty-five years we would produce five thousand experienced, missional leaders to plant those 2,800 new churches. A backbone of resources for apprentices called *Emerging Leader Training* has already been developed by Kairos Church Planting.⁴⁰

Strategy #3: Work Together in Regional Network Relationships to Plant New Churches.

The Independent Christian Churches effectively practice this network strategy through evangelistic associations across the United States. If the Churches of Christ would work together in networks of four to six congregations, these networks could pool resources, provide a new church

nucleus from members, and receive the benefits of learning how a new church engages its community. Such networks would create pockets of regional church planting.

CONCLUSION

This paper is a case study of the growth and decline of the Churches of Christ, one of the major religious bodies in America. Over the last twenty-five years, the Churches of Christ shifted from a growing to a declining fellowship. Yet, with our extensive resource base of congregations, a fruitful theological heritage, and a competent core of dynamic leaders, there is the opportunity to grow again for God's kingdom purposes. One of my church planting mentors, Gary Rohrmayer, said, "It has taken all the rest of American Christianity to get us to the point where we are planting as many new churches as we see closing. The Churches of Christ form a sleeping giant that could turn the tide in our favor."⁴¹ This is our monumental task for the 21st century.

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About the Author

Stanley E. Granberg is the founder and Executive Director of Kairos Church Planting, a church planting ministry of the Churches of Christ. He earned his Ph.D. from the Open University via the Oxford Centre for Mission Studies. He was a church planting missionary in Meru, Kenya, and he taught on the faculties of Lubbock Christian University, Cascade College, and Harding School of Theology. He is a certified coach and strategy consultant. He is also a founding director of The Heritage 21 Foundation. Contact him at sgranberg@kairoschurchplanting.org.