



The Board of Pensions
of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)

Here is the church
Here is the tall steeple
Look inside and ...?



The Board of Pensions
of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)

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Biography

Alexander S. McLachlan (universally known as Sandy) was born in Scotland and educated at Glasgow University and Trinity College Glasgow gaining the degrees M.A. and B.D. He received a scholarship from McCormick Theological Seminary in Chicago, Illinois, and obtained his Master of Theology degree. He served two congregations in the Church of Scotland before coming to the U.S. in 1983 as pastor of Oak Cliff Presbyterian Church in Dallas, Texas. He served on COM and CPM in Grace Presbytery for a number of years and was particularly interested in pension and compensation issues. He served as a Director of the Board of Pensions and was Vice-Chair of the Pension Committee. He joined the staff of the Board of Pensions in 2001, and works in the Office of the President where he performs targeted research and studies demographic trends in pursuit of the mission of the Board. He has contributed articles and research input to several of the booklets published by the Board in recent years. He became a U.S. citizen in 1989. He and his wife, Mary, a Texas native, live in Duncanville, Texas.

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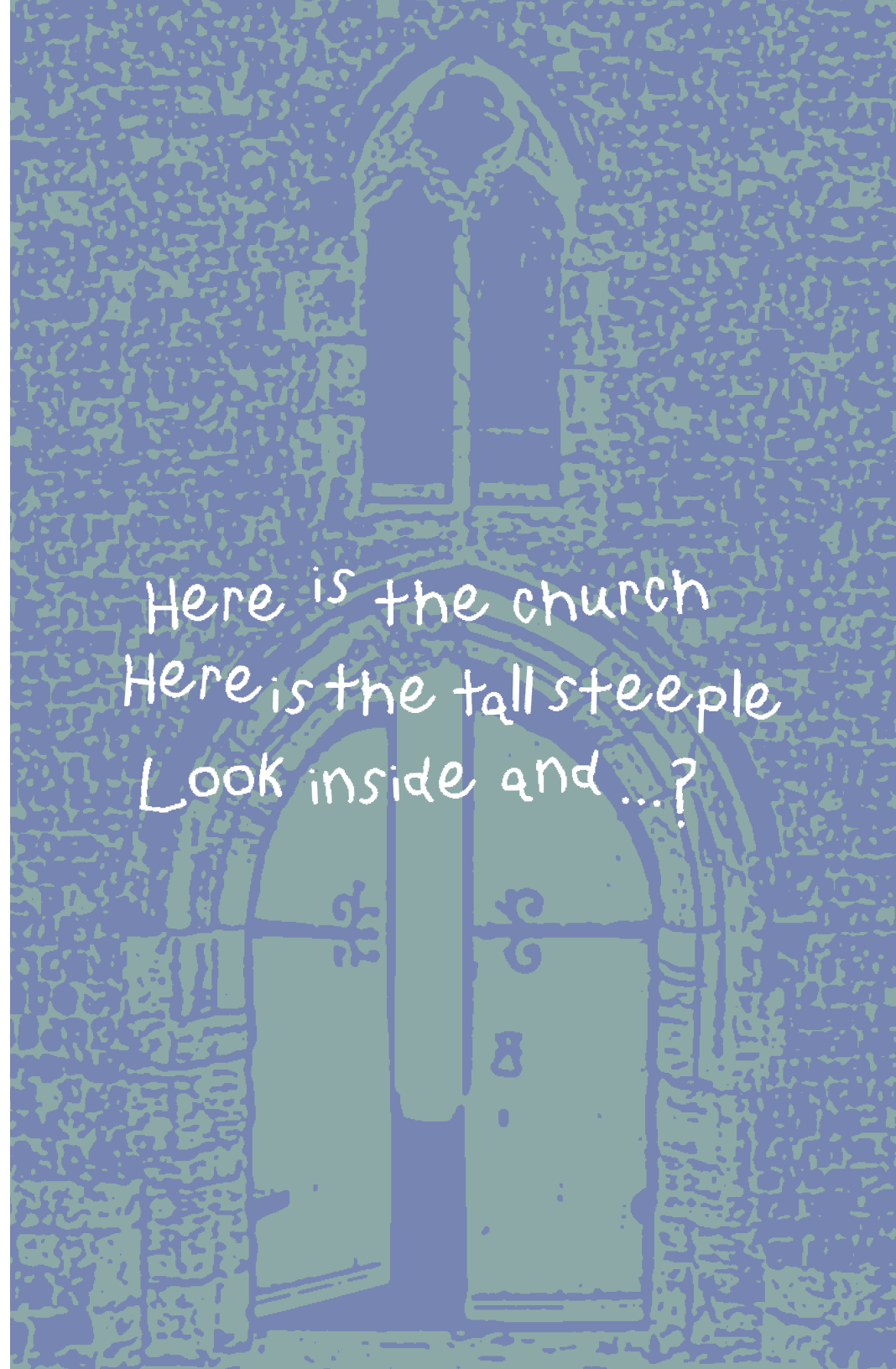
* now serving another congregation.

Retired Pastor	Church	City, State
Rev. Lawrence Wood	Church of the Hills Presbyterian Church	Duluth, GA
Rev. Robert Meneilly	Prairie Village Presbyterian Church	Prairie Village, KS
Rev. Jefferson K. Aiken, Jr.	First Presbyterian Church	Allentown, PA
Rev. Gene Bay	Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church	Bryn Mawr, PA
Rev. Louis Zbinden, Jr.	First Presbyterian Church	San Antonio, TX
Rev. David McKechnie	Grace Presbyterian Church	Houston, TX

Seminary Faculty	Seminary	City, State
Rev. Laura Mendenhall	Columbia Seminary	Decatur, GA
Rev. Dean Thompson	Louisville Seminary	Louisville, KY
Rev. William Carl	Pittsburgh Seminary	Pittsburgh, PA
Rev. Craig Barnes	Pittsburgh Seminary	Pittsburgh, PA
Rev. Ted Wardlaw	Austin Seminary	Austin, TX
Rev. Michael Jinkins	Austin Seminary	Austin, TX

Non-Parish	Position	City, State
Mr. Tom Cousins		Atlanta, GA
Rev. Tom Tewell		Atlanta, GA
Rev. Ed Albright	Executive Presbyter	Atlanta, GA
Rev. Marcia Myers	Director Vocation Agency	Louisville, KY
Rev. Eric Hoey	Director Evangelism and Church Growth	Louisville, KY
Rev. Tom Taylor	Deputy Executive Director for Mission	Louisville, KY
Jack Marcum	Coordinator Research Services	Louisville, KY

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Acknowledgments

I wish to express my appreciation to several of my friends and colleagues at The Board of Pensions of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) for their help with this publication.

My thanks go to Rob Maggs, who not only assigned me this most satisfying project but who also offered helpful insights, constructive criticism, and constant encouragement throughout the process.

Andy Browne, Bill Forbes, Phil Gehman, Frank Maloney, and Peter Sime read earlier drafts, pointed out errors, and made helpful suggestions that enabled me to improve the quality of my work.

The keyboard skills of Deborah Bernard transformed rough drafts, notes, and hand scrawled edits into a presentable finished document.

And the editing of Holly Baker was so seamlessly effective that inaccurate punctuation, dubious grammar, and sloppy sentence construction were polished and improved.

None of these folks ever made me feel that my requests were an imposition; rather, they gave generously of their time and expertise, and I gratefully acknowledge my thanks to them all.

Alexander S. McLachlan

Pastor Interviews

Active Pastor	Church	City, State
Rev. Woody Garvin	Valley Presbyterian Church	Paradise Valley, AZ
Rev. Ralph Meredith	Mountain View Presbyterian Church	Scottsdale, AZ
Rev. Bernard Nord	Desert Palms Presbyterian Church	Sun City West, AZ
Rev. Paul Watermulder	Burlingame Presbyterian Church	Burlingame, CA
Rev. Douglas Kelly	Christ Presbyterian Church	Carlsbad, CA
Rev. Scott Farmer	Community Presbyterian Church	Danville, CA
Rev. Gary Dennis	La Canada Presbyterian Church	La Canada, CA
Rev. Mark Brewer	Bel Air Presbyterian Church	Los Angeles, CA
Rev. John Huffman	St. Andrews Presbyterian Church	Newport Beach, CA
Rev. Bruce Humphrey	Rancho Bernardo Community Church	Rancho Bernardo, CA
Rev. Michael Ladra	First Presbyterian Church	Salinas, CA
Rev. Mike McClenahan	Solana Beach Presbyterian Church	Solana Beach, CA
Rev. Peter Barnes*	First Presbyterian Church	Boulder, CO
Rev. Russell Kane	New Hope Presbyterian Church	Castle Rock, CO
Rev. James Singleton	First Presbyterian Church	Colorado Springs, CO
Rev. Sam Schreiner III	Noroton Presbyterian Church	Darien, CT
Rev. George Wirth	First Presbyterian Church	Atlanta, GA
Rev. Scott Weimar	North Avenue Presbyterian Church	Atlanta, GA
Rev. Vic Pentz	Peachtree Presbyterian Church	Atlanta, GA
Rev. Marnie Crumpler	Peachtree Presbyterian Church	Atlanta, GA
Rev. Scott Black Johnston*	Trinity Presbyterian Church	Atlanta, GA
Rev. David Burns	Trinity Presbyterian Church	Atlanta, GA
Rev. Joanna Adams	Morningside Presbyterian Church	Atlanta, GA
Rev. Gibson Stroupe	Oakhurst Presbyterian Church	Decatur, GA
Rev. Caroline Leach	Oakhurst Presbyterian Church	Decatur, GA
Rev. Thomas Haygood	Columbia Presbyterian Church	Decatur, GA
Rev. J. Todd Speed	Decatur Presbyterian Church	Decatur, GA
Rev. In Soo Jung	Korean Community Church	Duluth, GA
Rev. Sam Henderson	First Presbyterian Church	Marietta, GA
Rev. Lane Alderman	Roswell Presbyterian Church	Roswell, GA
Rev. Pamela Driesell	Oconee Presbyterian Church	Watkinsville, GA
Rev. John Buchanan	Fourth Presbyterian Church	Chicago, IL
Rev. Christine Chakoian	First Presbyterian Church	Lake Forest, IL
Rev. Fairfax Fair	Highland Presbyterian Church	Louisville, KY
Rev. Edward Harding, Jr.	Prince Georges Community Church	Bowie, MD
Rev. John Crosby	Christ Presbyterian Church	Edina, MN
Rev. Timothy Hart-Andersen	Westminster Presbyterian Church	Minneapolis, MN
Rev. Robert Burkins Sr.	Elmwood United Presbyterian Church	East Orange, NJ
Rev. Curtis Jones	Elmwood United Presbyterian Church	East Orange, NJ
Rev. Stephen McConnell*	Liberty Corner Presbyterian Church	Liberty Corner, NJ
Rev. David Joynt	Toms River Presbyterian Church	Toms River, NJ

All of the pastors with whom I spoke are intelligent and perceptive leaders who have a clear focus. Yet all of them are aware that no congregation, perhaps especially the larger congregation, has a guaranteed future.

These are difficult times for the church. The old familiar ways do not work any more, and we are still trying to discover what will work to grow our congregations. One African-American pastor told me, “For the first time we have black youth who are unchurched. In our community we have never experienced that before.” That is a succinct and accurate summary of the dilemma facing the church. More and more people from all of the varied backgrounds in our society do not see the relevance of, or a need for, the church as it is currently structured, and the church has not yet found a way to reach them. Many Presbyterians are reluctant to try new ways of doing church. They do not like or want to embrace that which seems different. There is a generational gap in our congregations, and those in the 25 to 45 age range are notably missing from our pews. They are either in the new paradigm churches or are not attending any church at all. One seminary president shared his opinion that “they are not going to come back to us, and we need to fish upstream to avoid losing the next generation.”

In my judgment, in the midst of all the uncertainty about its future that confronts the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), the larger congregations and their leaders have a significant role to play. Many of them have continued to grow in the decades following the sixties. All of them have remained stable throughout more than forty years of denominational decline. They provide worship in several different styles that are attractive to their members. They have much more age-diverse congregations, with many more youth and young adults, than the rest of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). They have a passionate and demonstrable commitment to mission, in a wide variety of forms. And finally, it is undeniable that membership losses are much smaller in the larger congregations. As a result of my odyssey around the church, I am certain that the larger congregations of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) will play an important role in the future of the church. They are not of themselves the future, but they will be part of it.

God is still calling the church to new things, and we can be confident that God will equip us for these challenges. I want to conclude from where I started. Yes, when our grandchildren become adults they will still have a Presbyterian church as good as, but very different from, their grandparents’.

Introduction

“I want our children and grandchildren to grow up in a Presbyterian church that is as strong and vibrant as the one in which we grew up.”

This challenging statement from Robert W. Maggs, Jr., President and Chief Executive of the Board of Pensions, was the basis for my project, in which I looked at the dynamics and demographics of some of the largest membership congregations in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). The Board of Pensions is concerned about the ongoing decline in membership in the PC(USA) but at the same time is committed to building future leadership for the church. My task was to visit with large-congregation pastors, both active and retired, as well as seminary faculty and denominational leaders, to gain their insights and observations.

In pursuit of this project, I spent almost a year traveling all over the country and interviewed more than seventy individuals. Initially it was hoped that I might learn of some “best practices” of the larger churches that could be adapted by some smaller churches, many of whom seem to be struggling. It quickly became evident that much of what is accomplished by the larger churches is possible because of the “critical mass” they possess in terms of staff and resources. What also emerged even more clearly from my research is that exciting and relevant ministry is happening all over the PC(USA). Perhaps we have become so despondent over depressing statistics that it is difficult to see beyond them.

I spent a great deal of time listening and learning, and the experience was exciting. I want to thank everyone who gave of their time graciously and willingly and shared their thoughts and opinions candidly and freely. It deepened my appreciation for the men and women who serve God in the ministry of the PC(USA) all across the country.



Alexander S. McLachlan
Assistant to the President

Here is the church, Here is the tall steeple, Look inside and ...?

It was folksinger Bob Dylan who, in the sixties, first proclaimed that “The Times They Are A-Changin’.” The nation was just beginning to undergo a radical social and cultural transformation, and no part of society, including the Presbyterian Church, was immune from its effects. To understand the state of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and the challenges it faces today, we must look to a world seemingly far removed from it.

From Woolworth to Wal-Mart

For most of the twentieth century, “Woolworth” was the dominant name in retail. Every city had a Woolworth store. The Woolworth building in New York was a world-famous landmark. Originally a “five-and-dime,” it had grown and diversified, and by 1979, the year of its centenary, it was the largest retail store chain in the world. Today, less than thirty years later, the name Woolworth and its many stores are nowhere to be found in the U.S.¹

In 1962, Sam Walton opened the first Wal-Mart Discount store in Arkansas. In the four decades since, Wal-Mart has grown, expanded, and diversified its enterprise. It is the largest grocery and toy retailer in the United States, and according to Fortune Global 500, it is both the world’s largest private employer and the world’s largest corporation by revenue. Ironically, in 1997 Wal-Mart replaced Woolworth on the Dow Jones Industrial Average, and Woolworth closed its last remaining U.S. stores.

What went right for Wal-Mart and wrong for Woolworth? As market conditions changed, one adapted and became the market leader. The other made wrong decisions, was slow to adapt, and became less and less relevant. The eighties saw the arrival of the “big box” stores. Every shopping center now had The Home Depot, Lowe’s, PetSmart, Office Depot, Staples, Target, and all the other now-familiar names. Wal-Mart transformed itself from a small-town discount chain to a colossus with a supercenter in every major urban and suburban area, offering the ultimate “one-stop” shopping experience. The world of retail had changed in less than twenty years.

At the same time, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) was also discovering that change was challenging the religious “Woolworths.” The religious “Wal-Marts” were gaining ground.

¹ What remains of Woolworth is now Foot Locker, the athletic footwear store.

the Korean community. The pastor indicated that many of the newly arriving immigrants were not Christians, far less Presbyterians, in Korea. They come to the church because of the language and to meet others within the Korean community in the greater Atlanta area. The opportunity to make these important social connections opens the door for evangelism and conversion, and accounts in part for the rapid growth of this congregation.

Some of the larger congregations will survive as “niche” churches. I suspect this will be particularly true of those congregations that emphasize formal traditional worship. There will always be a certain percentage of the church-attending population that prefers classical music and traditional worship, and they will be drawn to these congregations. Although many of the larger congregations began life serving a particular community, more and more of them are now describing themselves as “regional” churches. In a highly mobile society people will drive longer distances to attend a church that offers a distinctive worship style, theological emphasis, or programs that they find attractive. The pastors of churches with a regional focus say, “We are identified as the progressive/evangelical/justice-oriented/contemporary worship church in this area. People who want this type of emphasis will come here from all over the area, some driving for almost an hour.” Even as new ways of doing church continue to emerge with their emphasis on the smaller and more relational, I think that the larger congregations — be they neighborhood, niche, regional, or some combination of these — will continue to survive.

The Past Is Not Always Prologue

Anyone seeking to invest in a mutual fund is advised in the prospectus that past performance does not guarantee future growth. That is also true for the large congregation. Many churches that a generation ago had large memberships and excellent attendance are now shadows of their former selves. Many huge sanctuaries, once filled with hundreds of worshippers, now house a handful, almost exclusively elderly and virtually lost amid the vast, empty spaces. The buildings are in a state of decay and disrepair. Shifting populations, changing demographics, and the growth of new suburbs are a few of the factors of change. In some instances a succession of disastrous pastorates or internecine strife within the congregation precipitated the decline. As indicated earlier, a few of the larger Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) congregations seem to be facing major problems.

I have little doubt that the large membership congregations will survive, although in what precise forms is more difficult to predict. There have always been large congregations, and the phenomenon of critical mass will enable them to continue. The multi-staffed church with an excellent quality of worship, a variety of relevant programs, and a commitment to mission will continue to thrive. That said, however, these churches will thrive only if they continue to change. Some of the larger congregations are dropping the brand name “Presbyterian” from their signage or are at best minimizing its size.¹⁹ They are using terms such as “Community Church” to describe themselves. When asked why they made this change, the responses were clear: “Using the name Presbyterian will not bring anyone through the door, and it adds no value to our ministry,” and “People are looking for a church, not for a Presbyterian church,” and “We are called to make disciples, not Presbyterians,” and “The purpose of ministry is to win people for the Kingdom, not for the Presbyterian Church.” One African-American pastor in a growing NCD was brutally forthright: “In this community the name Presbyterian means white, middle class, and formal. To call ourselves Presbyterian would be the kiss of death.” I do not doubt the correctness of his judgment, but given the long commitment of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) to civil rights and social justice, it was discouraging to hear that stereotypes remain. The dropping of the Presbyterian name is by no means a universal trend, but there are indications that it is a growing one.

In our increasingly multicultural society, there is concern that the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) needs to become more diverse. The General Assembly has set the goal of ten percent minority membership by 2010, with the hope that this number will double in the subsequent decade. There are very few signs of this diversity in the larger congregations, all of which seem to be virtually monolithic in their racial make-up. Since many of these congregations can be found in very affluent neighborhoods, there may be relatively few signs of diversity in their communities, but these are inevitably coming. In the Bellevue area of Washington State, which is the heart of Microsoft country, the pastor indicated that there are rapidly growing Asian and Russian communities. In his judgment, the church has to figure out a way to connect with these communities, which it has not yet done, and it has to be soon or it will be too late. The 1,600 member Korean congregation in Duluth, Georgia, serves as a social hub for members of

¹⁹ This is also true of some larger Methodist congregations.

Heartaches by the Numbers

In 1965, the membership statistics of the Presbyterian Church began an inexorable decline. Since then, there has not been a single year in which the membership has not declined. As a denomination, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) has lost about half of the membership it recorded in 1965. Coupled with this membership decline is a constant aging process. On average, a Presbyterian Church congregation gathered to worship on a Sunday morning has a majority of members age 55 or older. The heads of the worshippers that bow in prayer are thatched with gray, or highlighted with blue, or shiny with baldness. The names on the roll of most Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) congregations closely match those of the AARP. It was not always so. Throughout the 1940s and 1950s, the mainline congregations experienced growth in membership. The Presbyterian Church had clout, status, and influence. We Presbyterians, along with the other mainline denominations, were the kings of the religious hill and our reign would last forever, or so we thought! Yet in the forty-three years from 1965 to 2008, the Presbyterian Church² has seen a membership loss of forty-six percent. No other mainline denomination has lost a larger percentage of members. Compounding that statistic is the fact that during the same period, other denominations, all outside the mainline, have shown real growth.³

In his preface to “Comparative Statistics 2006,” produced by Research Services of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), Dr. Carl S. Dudley highlights these statistics and does not shrink from challenging the Presbyterian Church:

Presbyterians, who are confessionally committed to the realism of hard facts, must recognize that other traditions are doing better in attracting new members. There is no simple answer about why other denominations seem to be making connections where we are not, but many have equated their growth to lively music, liturgical worship, and spiritual engagement. Question among ourselves and with others, ‘What can we learn from what others are doing?’⁴

² The statistics for the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) before 1983 include those of the UPC and the PCUS.

³ The Assemblies of God, the Church of the Nazarene, and the Southern Baptist Convention are among the denominations that have shown overall growth since 1965. The statistics are quoted and attributed by Dr. Carl S. Dudley in “Comparative Statistics 2006,” page 4, Research Services, PC(USA). Every mainline denomination has experienced a membership loss, with the numbers for the PC(USA) being the worst.

⁴ *ibid*

Perhaps the bigger question for our denomination is not “What can we learn?” but “Are we even willing to learn?”

The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) is largely comprised of smaller congregations. That is not a criticism; rather it is a statement of fact. At present, there are 10,792 Presbyterian Church congregations, and of these only 431 have more than 800 members, and 7,733 have 200 members or less. Each year an increasing number of churches cease paying Board of Pensions dues. This means they no longer have a called and installed pastor. They do not cease to be a congregation; instead, they choose to be served by a Stated Supply, Commissioned Lay Pastor, or some other form of alternative ministry rather than a full-time pastor. At that point the majority, but by no means all, of these churches go on a “life support” system. They still have Sunday worship, maybe the odd Sunday School class and a Women’s Circle (the Presbyterian Women’s organization has an incredible and inspiring ability to survive), but little more. Evangelism, Justice, Mission, Outreach, and Social Witness Ministries are generally beyond the scope and energy levels of such congregations.

The number of Presbyterian Church congregations has remained fairly stable, as has the number of active ministers. However, smaller membership congregations, especially those in small and isolated communities or areas with few employment opportunities, find it very difficult to call a pastor. Even if such congregations want and can afford to call a full-time minister, few candidates express an interest in serving them, and consequently these congregations experience long and discouraging vacancies. Many pastors, because of their spouse’s employment, are “tethered” to specific areas. For others, the low salaries, lack of good schools, social isolation, and few, if any, job opportunities for their spouse make them reluctant to seek such calls. Thus, the imbalance remains; the Presbyterian Church has no shortage of ministers but rather a shortage of ministers willing to serve in areas of the country where there are the most vacancies. Most, it would seem, would like to serve a “tall steeple” church — i.e., one with a membership of more than 1,200 members, located in a bustling community, and paying a much higher salary. Unfortunately, there are only 205 such congregations in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).

Equally discouraging has been the failure of the denomination to plant, tend, and grow new congregations. In the years 1997 to 2007, the Presbyterian

There was also a general consensus that the quality of candidates for ministry was not of the highest caliber.¹⁷ A retired tall-steeple pastor who was serving as an interim for a large congregation seeking a pastor lamented that there were few candidates available with the necessary combination of skills required by that congregation.¹⁸ Another commented that many of the pastors of the larger churches are in their 50s or older and added, “I don’t see anybody warming up in the bullpen.”

From the narrower perspective of the Board of Pensions, with our emphasis on Stewardship of Self, it was encouraging to see that, with one exception, all of the pastors I interviewed are in good physical shape. They are in different age groups, ranging from their early 40s to mid-70s, but all of them clearly take their health and fitness very seriously. Perhaps that, too, is related to personality type. Nonetheless, when the number of Presbyterian clergy who avail themselves of preventive health checks is decidedly below the national average, it was good to note that this group of pastors is engaging in Stewardship of Self.

The Future?

The only consensus that arose from these conversations about the future for the church is that it will have to be different, or there will be no Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) to debate. There was universal acknowledgment that what the church currently is doing is not working, and has not worked for some time. When more than forty years have passed with a continual statistical decline allied to a failure to attract and keep younger people in active membership, no one would deny that serious problems exist. The evidence suggests that the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) may be assigned to the dustbin of history if we do not soon change course. One pastor summed up the current situation with stark clarity: “We are a dying church. We have more than 4,000 members but we are still dying. It will just take us longer!” What can we do to safeguard our future — to staunch, if not reverse, the decline towards eventual extinction of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)? This question is being asked not only by congregations but also by middle governing bodies and General Assembly entities, which seem to be endlessly engaged in trying to redefine their roles. There is, however, no consensus as to what the future might look like.

¹⁷ See *Report on Clergy Recruitment and Retention to the 216th General Assembly (2004) of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)* by the Board of Pensions.

¹⁸ This may explain in part why many large congregations call an associate pastor from another large congregation as Head of Staff.

The dress style of the pastors changes with the westward journey. I follow the culture of the Board of Pensions and so dress fairly formally, always in a coat and tie. In the East most of the pastors I met with were similarly dressed, maybe not always with a tie but still more often than not. In Texas and Arizona, pastors might not wear a coat or tie but always wear an open-necked dress shirt. On the West Coast I felt over-dressed. Pastors typically dressed in short-sleeved golf or Hawaiian shirts, worn outside their chinos or jeans, and were just as likely to meet with me in Starbucks as in the church office. All this was a refreshing reminder of how diverse Presbyterians are.

The large-congregation pastors with whom I talked covered the entire theological spectrum. Some openly espoused a liberal theology, others clearly identified with a more conservative theological perspective, and still others held various positions in between. What was surprising was that the majority of them indicated that, as Head of Staff of a large congregation, personality type was more important than theology. It takes a particular set of gifts to lead a large congregation. As one pastor put it, “Methodology is more important than theology.” All of these pastors are grounded and know what they are doing. They have the skills to be the Head of Staff of a large congregation — skills that are necessary for the particular and peculiar challenges of the larger church. A pastor of a church that is one of the flagship churches in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) candidly acknowledged that “I would be a disaster in a hundred member rural church. I do not have these skills.” Several indicated that there were many members in their churches who disagreed profoundly with their theology. Yet these folks had no intention of going elsewhere. They had an appreciation for the quality of the worship, a commitment to the mission of the church, and a clear understanding that the pastor is not the object of worship.¹⁶

Many spoke of the aspects of ministry that they missed. Where there are more than a thousand people in worship, the pastor often lacks a personal relationship with members and may not even know their names. Members can be hospitalized or have some other type of crisis and the pastor may never hear about it. The need is met by the church but not by the Head of Staff, and for some that is difficult. Because of this, some pastors of even the largest congregations try to set aside one afternoon a week for hospital or pastoral visitation, but it never seems to be enough and sometimes other time pressures make such visits impossible.

¹⁶ Plus, eventually the pastor will die, retire, or take another call.

Church added 307 New Church Developments (NCDs); this seems a wholly inadequate number in an era of population growth and in view of the rapid development of new sub-divisions in every major city and community. Although new areas have developed and grown, we Presbyterians are disproportionately rooted in older and declining communities. Many of our NCDs seem to plateau at about 200 to 300 members. In my travels researching this project, I have come across, or heard of, only four Presbyterian NCDs that have come close to or passed the 1,000 member mark, although I am sure there may be others.⁵ Membership numbers are by no means the only sign of growth and vitality, but the ability of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), in areas of favorable demographics, to build new churches and attract new members is completely surpassed by a host of “new paradigm churches.”⁶ Finally, in the same decade, the Presbyterian Church dissolved 609 congregations. The implications are clear: If a denomination is closing churches at twice the rate it is planting new ones, that does not qualify as a growth strategy. It is little wonder that there are heartaches by the numbers.

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The Shifting Religious Landscape

Those who study religious demographics conclude that the percentage of Americans who attend a religious service at least one a month has remained fairly constant over the last thirty years. What has changed — and changed dramatically — is the type and size of congregation in which they worship. The “big boxes” did not just arrive in the new shopping centers; they also appeared on the religious horizon.

In 1975, the Willow Creek Community Church was established in Barrington, Illinois, and in 1980, the Saddleback Community Church was established in

⁵ These four congregations are Mountain View United in Scottsdale, Arizona; New Hope in Castle Rock, Colorado; The Church of the Hills in Duluth, Georgia; and Zionsville in Zionsville, Indiana.

⁶ To classify these new mega-churches is difficult. Some are independent, and some are affiliated with Calvary Chapel, the Vineyard Christian Fellowship, Hope Chapel, or some other group, either formally or loosely. Thus, I have chosen to use the term “new paradigm churches” coined by Donald Miller in “Reinventing American Protestantism” as the most comprehensive way to describe these congregations.

Laguna Hills, California. These two nondenominational congregations are the best known representatives of the mega-church in the United States. During the eighties, churchgoing habits among Protestants underwent enormous change. The number of people going to church remained relatively static; what changed was their choice of church. This fueled the exponential growth of new paradigm churches all across the country that we have seen in the decades since. “To be a mega-church, a church must have a minimum of two thousand members. In 1970, there were only ten such churches. Today it is estimated that more than eight thousand mega-churches exist in the United States.”⁷

These new churches came offering two new gifts directed to the younger generation. They made effective use of current technology, and their music was both contemporary and upbeat. Young folks felt an immediate connection, appreciating the fact that these churches were using “their” technology and playing “their” music. Youth left the congregations of their parents and enthusiastically joined the new and different congregations that were speaking to their religious needs in ways that seemed relevant to them. One pastor told me that when Willow Creek opened he was serving a congregation in the area. The mainline congregations were sure this exodus of their younger members was just a passing phase. Give them a couple of years, the novelty will wear off, and they’ll be back, was the conventional wisdom. As he pointedly put it, “These churches are still waiting.”

The response to the new churches by many mainline church members, including Presbyterians, has been mainly negative. They dismiss the new churches as being lightweight and superficial, totally lacking in substance. Some Presbyterian pastors who tried to broaden the scope of the music and lighten the style of worship were quickly embroiled in “worship wars,” and not a few lost their pulpits; meanwhile the membership exodus continued unabated. Mainline congregations’ disdain for the new churches demonstrated both a hint of arrogance and a lack of understanding of church history. It conveniently ignored the fact that many younger people would not have been in church or involved in matters of the faith but for these new congregations. Many of these younger people left the Presbyterian Church because they found its worship boring, dull, and meaningless, and the best that could be offered was criticism of the churches of their choice.

⁷ Quoted in McIntosh, Gary L. “One Church, Four Generations.” (Baker Books, 2002) p. 20.

which the Head of Staff of the larger congregations and the *Book of Order* radically differ concerns the calling of the next Head of Staff when the incumbent retires or leaves. That large congregations invariably face a long vacancy is felt to be unnecessary and detrimental to the life of the congregation. No major business enterprise would tolerate a two-year hiatus between CEOs, because to do so would have serious negative effects on the organization. Likewise, the insistence of the presbytery to have an Interim Pastor serve for a long period of time is not without its critics, and these critics are not confined to the Head of Staff of the larger congregations.¹⁴ More and more of the larger congregations (and some presbyteries) are devising strategies to circumvent the *Book of Order* and procedural mandates in the call process for the Head of Staff. More and more pastoral nominating committees are finding our processes to be more of a hindrance than a help. Not all of these attempts have been successful, but some have, and they continue to be formulated and implemented.

In talking with the pastors of larger congregations all across the country, some major differences in style and practice and one surprising similarity emerged. Large Presbyterian congregations exist from Connecticut to California and from Minnesota to Florida. There are some noticeable geographical differences. By and large congregations east of the Mississippi tend to be more formal. They are certain to offer a traditional worship service but not necessarily a contemporary one. In traditional Bible Belt cities such as Atlanta, Charlotte, Dallas, and Houston, large churches of every denomination abound. The culture is still influenced by church, although less than it used to be, and church attendance is higher than in the rest of the nation. The further west one goes, the more the religious landscape changes. More contemporary worship services are offered, and frequently contemporary worship is the “main” service and the style is less formal. In California it can even be difficult to find a traditional service. There are fewer churches, and the prevailing culture is much less sympathetic to the church. In California and the Pacific Northwest, it is estimated that only around ten percent of the population attends worship of any kind. Thus, the mission of the church is much more starkly defined. Churches do not grow by adding some former Baptists, Catholics, Lutherans, or Methodists to the rolls; they grow by evangelizing and winning over the unchurched.¹⁵

¹⁴ One seminary president wondered if, for every vacancy, “it was necessary for an interim to spend two years vacuuming down the walls.”

¹⁵ The pastor of a large congregation in Southern California with a significant ministry to youth and children told me that at least one-third of the children participating in the various programs came from a family that is totally unchurched.

buy into it without too many problems, I realize that my dream was not big enough!”

Two factors are equally important to successfully staffing the large congregation. First, good, competent staff has to be hired, and second, they have to be trusted to get on with doing their job. The Head of Staff cannot be a micromanager; that is a recipe for disaster. Clearly there has to be oversight and accountability of staff, but that is light years away from micromanagement. Several pastors stated that if the Head of Staff is into micromanagement that is a sure sign the congregation is unhealthy. Building a competent staff can be time-consuming, but many of the churches I visited had the same core staff group for a number of years and every pastor pointed to that as a sign of strength. One seminary president told me that for a church staff to function successfully what were called the four “s” words had to be in place: There had to be no secrets, no subversions, no surprises, and lots of support. That concept seemed to be in place in many of the congregations I visited.

The opinion that the governing structures of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) are irrelevant to the ongoing mission and ministry of the local congregation was fairly commonly held by the Head of Staff. A few are actively involved in their local presbytery, but most see little value in such participation and rarely attend the meetings. Allied to this perception is a belief that the voice, counsel, and input of the larger congregations are disregarded and under-valued within the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). Whether right or wrong, this perception needs to change, and change at every level of our polity.

There are also two areas of church polity and practice where the universal opinion of the Head of Staff differs from the official line. The first is in the requirement that the Head of Staff be uninvolved in the selection of an Associate Pastor. There was no quarrel with the concept that a congregational search committee is an important part of the process, but the notion that the Head of Staff be absent from the process is totally disregarded. The compatibility of the church staff is key to the efficient functioning of the congregation, and the Head of Staff must be an integral part of the final selection process. In all of these instances it seems that the presbytery or the Committee on Ministry can say what it likes but its objections will be ignored since the Head of Staff believes that she or he must be involved in the selection process for any Associate Pastor. The other issue on

Of more concern was the lack of appreciation of church history. The working of the Spirit of God in God’s creation is never static. At times the history of God’s church shows vast, almost tectonic changes; at other times the movements are more subtle and almost imperceptible, but there is always change. Some of the resentment directed at the new paradigm churches by the mainline denominations seems to be sour grapes over the new churches’ success and their own loss of prominence. Such thinking forgets that God’s purposes are still being worked out. The current religious landscape is changing; this is not its permanent or final form. As Presbyterians struggle with their current period of decline and wrestle with a different religious landscape, we forget that in the history of God’s church many things came to pass but nothing came to stay.

The ongoing membership decline has, in my judgment, had other negative effects upon the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). Nothing we have attempted has staunched the flow of more than forty years of decline in growth. As a result we have become disillusioned, angry, and bitter, and have turned our angry feelings inward, engaging in four decades of in-fighting. The current twenty plus years of battling over “ordination standards” is simply the latest in a long line of internal struggles.⁸ In no way do I ignore the passionate, deeply held convictions of those on both sides of this issue. Nevertheless, I cannot help but feel that if the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) were experiencing four decades of growth, exciting NCDs were springing up all over the country, and all our ministries were expanding, we would not be consumed by this divisive and potentially destructive issue. We would be too excited and enthusiastic about spreading the good news to allow ourselves to get caught up in lesser things. However, for a number of reasons since the 1960s, the focus of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) has been in towards itself. Have we forgotten that is the opposite direction to which God has always called his people?

The age of the mega-church is far from perfect and certainly not permanent. Yet the mega-church is here now, so there is little to be gained from bemoaning that the “times are out of joint” and hunkering down to wait for a better day to dawn. In the United States today more people than ever are unchurched. In some parts of the country, less than ten percent of the population attends church. Yet we are still called to proclaim the good news of the Kingdom. Many Presbyterians,

⁸ cf. the Angela Davis controversy in the 1960s.

along with many other Christian brothers and sisters, are trying to discern what God is calling them to do and be in these new, difficult, and challenging times. The words “emerging,” “missional,” and “transformational” are often heard as we attempt to find the right path. My project has been to look at how some of the larger Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) congregations are doing ministry in this time of uncertainty. To further quote Carl Dudley, “A strong minority of our churches is doing well, but the majority is marginal and struggling.”⁹ There has been no shortage of writers and others exploring the signs of sickness, but my task is to look at the signs of health.

Answering Some Questions and Dispelling Some Myths

The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) has 1,930 congregations with 500 members or more, which means roughly eighteen percent is considered “large.” As a general rule, more Presbyterians worship in these churches on any given Sunday than in the remaining 8,862. There are only 205 really big Presbyterian churches with a membership of 1,200 or more, and it is these congregations that were mainly, but not exclusively, the focus of this project. The decline in membership over the forty-two years did not have the same impact on these larger congregations. “Comparative Statistics,” published annually by Research Services of the PC(USA), lists the membership of the fifteen largest churches.¹⁰ I compared these over the past decade and found that the membership decline in these congregations was only 2.3 percent, and in some years these churches had a net increase in membership. (There has been no year since 1965 when the overall statistics of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) have not shown a decline.) I raised with my colleague Jack Marcum, the Coordinator of Research Services, the question of whether the membership pattern of these fifteen churches reflected a wider trend among larger congregations. He graciously provided the following membership trends between the years 1997 and 2007, which reveal an interesting pattern:

Church size in 1997	Membership decline by 2007
100 largest congregations	6.5%
200 largest congregations	7.6%
500 largest congregations	9.8%
Entire Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)	15.3%

⁹ Dr. Carl S. Dudley “Comparative Statistics 2006” p. 3.

¹⁰ Over the decade studied, only nineteen churches appeared on the list, so there is not a great deal of movement. This is perhaps another indication of lack of growth within the PC(USA).

80s, and they lack the younger age groups. Their programs are those that were prevalent in a past generation. Fewer people are joining because the atmosphere is too stuffy and formal. Congregational leadership remains the prerogative of those with long established family tenure who hold true to the traditions upon which the church was built. New leadership and ideas are neither promoted nor encouraged. In all of these churches there are tensions between the pastor and the entrenched leadership. For the church leaders, the status quo serves them well, and they do not consider that they may need to do some things differently — so they just open the doors and assume people will come. The pastor, on the other hand, appreciates the great history and tradition that has made the church strong but also realizes that society has changed: The days of the great preaching station, the Protestant Cathedral, and the church attendance pattern of the 1950s have gone and will never return. The pastor sees and understands the need for change and wants to retain the best of the past while seeking to move forward. But again, the leadership perceives no need to do anything other than what they have always done. Thus, these congregations are becoming “beached whales,” and it is going to be very difficult to turn them around. They are not going to disappear overnight, but absent any creative new thinking and action, in ten years’ time the 1,500 members will be down to under 1,000, and in another ten years less than 300 members will worship in a once magnificent sanctuary that used to accommodate four times that number. To borrow a popular metaphor, while a lot of good things may be happening on some of the decks, “The Titanic” is still taking on water.

The Head of Staff

As referenced earlier, the Head of Staff has to be a visionary and an entrepreneur in a denomination that does not encourage such gifts. The people who fill this role have to be “outside the box” thinkers, and it is no surprise that the preaching and programs of these congregations are creative, innovative, and relevant. The Head of Staff has to see the bigger picture, not just of the next year but five years down the road. She or he has to dream the dream, share the vision, and then persuade the leadership and the congregation to follow. This person always strives to push the envelope just a little bit further and encourages the congregation to move outside its comfort zone. As one pastor said in our interview, “Whenever I go to the session with a dream and I share it with them and they

winds of discontent always blow. The danger for the pastor in the larger congregation is that he or she may pay too much attention to this vocal and opinionated group, which at most is less than twenty percent of the active membership, and be side-tracked by them. One cannot help but speculate if there is any other profession in which a person who had an approval rating in excess of eighty percent would be as constantly threatened by a small minority.

Because larger congregations have a host of programs for all age groups and their campuses are hives of energetic activity with large numbers of folks obviously involved and engaged, it is too easy to assume that nearly every member is an active participant. The truth is that many folks choose to attend a large church so that they can “hide.” They crave anonymity and do not want to be involved in church life other than to attend services with the frequency (or infrequency) of their choice. That is not possible in a church where strangers and visitors are immediately recognized. There they will be bombarded with friendly invitations to join in a myriad of church activities, encouraged to become involved, and if they miss a couple of Sundays somebody will check up on them. For many, probably for most people, that is what they appreciate about being part of a church family, but others react differently. This latter group will be found in the larger congregation. Thus, it cannot be assumed that the large, bustling congregation with its array of programs has a significantly larger percentage of membership participation than other sized congregations. In every large congregation there are a lot of folks hiding out. Ironically, they are in the church to hide from the church.

Another problem facing the larger congregation is that some of them have become bastions of civic religion. As one pastor pointedly phrased it, “This congregation is the Rotary Club at prayer.” There are a few large congregations in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) that I would designate as “beached whales.” These churches are mired in the 1950s. At one time they were the great “Protestant Cathedral” in their community. When churchgoing was in its heyday, everyone who was anyone attended that church. The civic, financial, judicial, legal, political, and social leaders in the community were members of that congregation. Those days have gone, and these churches are in conflict and trouble. They are still large congregations, still well attended, still affluent, worship in beautiful sanctuaries with a very formal worship style, and have a variety of programs. But the majority of the members are in their 60s, 70s, and

Thus, clearly, for the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), it appears that the larger the congregation, the smaller the decline in membership.

Most of the denomination’s larger churches have been large for a long time. Some are more than a hundred years old. Some were founded in the 1940s and 1950s, and many of these congregations continued to grow during the sixties, seventies, and eighties. This was totally contra-cultural, for these were decades of membership decline. Many of these churches have memberships of 1,500 and above. Interviews with pastors of large congregations indicate that in the last twenty years these churches have tended to plateau. They have not significantly declined; rather, they have remained relatively stable. With normal membership turnover these churches have to add around 200 members per year (or the equivalent of a family of four each Sunday) just to remain stable. That in and of itself

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is no small accomplishment! Among congregations that have experienced significant growth in the last two decades are Fourth Presbyterian, Chicago, Illinois; Christ Church, Edina, Minnesota; Chapel Hill Presbyterian, Gig Harbor, Washington; First Presbyterian Church, Salinas, California; Community Presbyterian, Danville, California. The trend toward more people

worshipping in the larger Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) congregations mirrors the “big box” contemporary religious culture change in both the new paradigm and mainline churches that has been documented by other researchers.¹¹

There is a perception that the voice, counsel, and input of these congregations are disregarded and under-valued in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). That was certainly the opinion of a great many of the large-church pastors I interviewed. Many felt that their presbyteries ignore them and are unaware of or disinterested in the problems peculiar to larger congregations. There is also an underlying resentment by other clergy towards these pastors and their congregations. On the other hand, many of the larger church pastors “could not be bothered with presbytery” or saw it as “a waste of time.” By virtue of their membership numbers, all of the larger congregations are entitled to have four or more elders as

¹¹ Lecture by Mark Chavas entitled “All Churches Great and Small: Mega-churches in Context.” Given to the Religious Research Association in 2005 and subsequently published in “The Review of Religious Research.”

commissioners at a presbytery meeting. Yet many of the pastors indicated that it was difficult to find even one or two elders willing to attend the meeting and the pool of reluctant attendees was invariably limited to those who were retired. This relative absence of representation from the larger congregations probably extends throughout the structures of the church. It is not in the best interests of the denomination to have the big churches running the show. It is equally not helpful if that pool of leadership talent, both clergy and lay, feels itself to be excluded.

From my interviews I would estimate that as a general rule when a congregation has a total of 800 people or more in attendance at Sunday worship, whether at one or more services, it has reached a point of “critical mass.” At that point the congregation has the resources, both in terms of numbers and finances, to fund a wide and diverse range of programs and to hire the necessary staff to administer these programs. This highlights one of the main differences between the few large Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) congregations and the many smaller congregations. A congregation that has 200 or fewer members in worship on Sunday is well below the point of critical mass. It can neither provide a wide range of programs nor afford the necessary staff to administer them.

Characteristics of Larger Congregations

Well established in their communities, these larger congregations both engage and identify with these communities. They offer a veritable smorgasbord of programs and ministries for every demographic group. They have well staffed and equipped pre-schools, kindergartens, and in some cases day schools for the children; daytime Bible study groups for stay-at-home mothers (with nursery care provided); and lunchtime Bible studies for retirees. One congregation I visited has a Bible study for men at 6:00 a.m. with an average attendance of seventy men, mainly under the age of 40, who then go off to work. They have Sunday School classes for singles, young parents, parents with teenage children, empty nesters, single-again and retirees, as well as the full range of educational programs for children and youth. They offer divorce recovery and coping-with-loss workshops. They have several choirs beginning with the very young all the way up the adult chancel choir. They bring in outside experts from the community and academia to lead four- to six-week discussion groups on topics of interest. All of the larger congregations, regardless of geographic location, offer this kind of extensive programming.

Yet Not Without Problems

It might be tempting to conclude that once a congregation reaches critical mass in terms of worship attendance, staff, financial health, and mission involvement that stability would continue uninterrupted. Sadly, this is not true, and some larger congregations face potentially serious problems. Several congregations have faced significant community opposition as they have attempted to improve and expand their facilities. Fears of too much parking in neighborhood streets, too many people coming and going on Sundays, and new and larger church buildings or parking lots diminishing the quality of neighborhoods are among the problems that have confronted these congregations. There have been lawsuits, restraining orders, the passage of restrictive ordinances by municipal governments, and the denial of applications for variances, special exceptions, and building permits. Congregations that for decades have served their communities now find these same communities to be their most vocal opponents. Rancho Bernardo Community Presbyterian in San Diego, California, had to abort its plans to build a multi-million dollar separate satellite facility because of denial of planning permission resulting from organized community opposition. A new building project at St. Andrews Presbyterian Church, Newport Beach, California, had to be drastically scaled back and was made more costly for the same reason. There are other areas of the country where new buildings or expansions have been approved, but approval is no longer the given it used to be. Some large congregations located in mature, established neighborhoods face major parking dilemmas and have no alternative but to run shuttles from remote locations, because they have no hope of receiving planning permission for additional parking. As societal attitudes towards organized religion slowly shift, churches are no longer universally regarded as good or desirable neighbors. They frequently face community opposition that would have been unheard of a generation ago.

While it is true that a congregation of 1,500 members is less susceptible to being held to ransom by a handful of organized, dissatisfied, and disgruntled members than is a church of around 200 members, nonetheless malcontents abound everywhere. Every church has them, although no church wants them and certainly does not need them. It has been estimated that around ten percent of the members in any church dislike the pastor for whatever reason and want to “get” him or her. Add to this mix another ten percent, who, absent a life, will passively support the active dissidents. Thus, even in the strongest congregations

pediatric hospice care in the city and built and funded a home for prostitutes who want to rehabilitate themselves. Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and Fourth Presbyterian in Chicago, Illinois, provide extensive after-school learning and other educational and social outreach ministries in some of the most economically deprived areas of these cities. The “Stewpot” ministry to the homeless of First Presbyterian Church in Dallas, Texas, has rightly won local civic and national acclaim. First Presbyterian in Boulder, Colorado, and University Presbyterian in Seattle, Washington, have significant ministries to the thousands of university students who are part of their communities. Elmwood United Presbyterian Church in East Orange, New Jersey, purchased and adapted a piece of property into a community center. There they staff a daycare, run parenting classes for single mothers, staff after school and youth programs, and have created a film and recording studio with state-of-the-art equipment. Not surprisingly their youth choir has produced best-selling CDs and won numerous awards.

Another inspiring example of large-church commitment to mission is Highland Park Presbyterian Church in Dallas, Texas, which helped create, financially supports, and provides worship space to All Nations Presbyterian Church, a thriving congregation of members from different African countries with their own pastor. This vibrant, multicultural congregation blossoms in the heart of one of the most upscale, white neighborhoods in the country. The House of Hope, a newly built facility on the campus of Tom’s River Presbyterian Church in New Jersey, is the focus of faith-based community ministries. It is the ecumenically supported clearing house and resource for ministries to the homeless in the community. Community Presbyterian Church in Danville, California, is engaged in a multi-million dollar building program. This is not to provide more space for Sunday church activities but to provide space for weekday community based programs as the congregation is invested and involved in the whole life of the community. Roswell Presbyterian Church in Roswell, Georgia, is in the forefront of advocating for and supporting affordable housing projects in a wealthy community where such housing is lacking. Several churches send teams of doctors, dentists, and nurses from within their memberships to host free healthcare clinics at least annually in Guatemala, Malawi, Mexico, and other Central American and African countries. The list of mission programs is varied, extensive, impressive, and totally reflective of the Presbyterian commitment to evangelism and social and economic justice.

All of them offer more than one worship service, and generally these services have different worship styles. Most churches offer at least one service that features “traditional worship” and another that features “contemporary worship.” Sunday School is usually offered at more than one time and is often concurrent with a worship service. Many pastors lament that their parishioners will only commit to one hour on a Sunday.¹² Parishioners may attend church and their children attend Sunday School at the same time. The worship service may or may not have a brief time for children in the sanctuary before the children are dismissed to Sunday School. Some congregations have readjusted their strategy, recognizing the myriad of choices for young people on Sundays, principally in sports, which have made church-focused activities much less of a priority. Accordingly, some churches are holding their youth and Sunday School activities at a time that does not conflict with these other events. Others offer “family based” worship services early on Sunday mornings or on Sunday evenings. These new strategies are a pragmatic (if somewhat reluctant) realization that church-based activities can no longer assume priority even among church members.

The use of the terms “traditional” and “contemporary” in describing and defining worship services is often imprecise. A traditional service generally implies the wearing of robes by clergy and choir, the use of the Presbyterian Hymnal, the pipe organ serving as the principal musical instrument, and choral anthems being selected from the classical tradition of church music. However, some congregations use a hymnbook other than the Presbyterian hymnal, and choirs may on occasion offer an anthem from a contemporary composer or from a musical tradition or genre that is different from the classical norm.

The term “contemporary” is equally hard to define. Some pastors of congregations that offer contemporary worship use terms such as “blended,” “eclectic,” “non-threatening,” or “worshipper-friendly” to describe the style of worship. A contemporary service generally means an absence of robes, worship led by a praise band, the use of screens rather than hymnbooks, and the projection of many visual images. These services may take place in the sanctuary or in some other part of the church facility. The one exception to this rule that I found is First Presbyterian Church in Salinas, California. This congregation spent \$22 million for a purpose-built Worship Center across the street from the existing

¹² In the “Bible Belt” adults are still willing to attend both church and Sunday School, devoting two hours to religious activities. Outside of that geographic area it is almost universally one hour only.

church building. This high-tech, state-of-the-art facility rivals that of any new paradigm church, with its theatre-style seating, enormous projection screens, surround sound system, and professional worship bands. There are plans to build a Children's Center next door. The pastor stated that worship attendance had grown from 300 to more than 1,500 at multiple worship services. I am not aware of any other Presbyterian congregation that has gone as far out on this particular limb successfully. Although it is generally true that the choice of worship style is age-related, that is by no means a universal truth. In every congregation that offers more than one worship service there are a number of older adults who prefer and attend the contemporary service. Equally, there are a number of under-40-year-olds whose preference is for worship in the traditional style.

A number of churches, particularly on the West Coast, have a service or services that are defined as "hard rock." These services generally are held at a time not associated with the regular worship hours, are specifically aimed at 18-to-25-year-olds, and reach their target audience in impressive numbers. The music has a "hard edge" and would be equally unappealing to those who appreciate the music of Bach or the Beatles.

The larger congregations have a very different demographic in worship attendance than the majority of Presbyterian churches. The average age of the worshippers is younger, and there are many families with children. Ministries to children, youth, and young adults are strongly emphasized and are well funded and staffed. These congregations have a commitment to excellence in everything they do. If they have a contemporary service, the quality of the music has to match the quality in the traditional one. Amateur hour is totally absent from the worship service. The preaching at every service is biblically grounded, well prepared, and proclaimed with both quality and depth. These congregations hire competent staff and allow them to do their job without micromanagement. The Head of Staff has to be both an entrepreneur and a visionary, and therein lies the dilemma for the church. Without these gifts the church cannot grow and flourish, but on the other hand the polity of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) does not exactly encourage an entrepreneurial and visionary approach to ministry.

The most exciting and uplifting characteristic of the larger congregation is the total commitment to mission. Every pastor I interviewed was unanimous in his or her opinion, that without mission being a major component in the life of the church, these churches would not and could not be what they are. This mission

must be one the congregation fully supports with their involvement and their dollars and which is an important part of the identity of that congregation. Somewhat surprisingly, the type and nature of the mission is less important than the fact that the congregation is mission-oriented and driven. The mission of the congregation may be locally focused, or it may be regional, national, international, or a combination of these, but a commitment to mission exists in all of these congregations. Of course, a commitment to mission is certainly not the hallmark of larger congregations alone. Many churches of all sizes eagerly embrace mission as a priority and accomplish great things. However, once again, the critical mass possessed by the larger congregation increases the scale and scope of their operation. What is also true is that these mission endeavors are for the main part the product of the energy, enthusiasm, and dollars of the local congregation. The structures of the presbytery, synod, and General Assembly are not part of this process and are deemed for the most part to be irrelevant to such mission. This statement is not an opinion or judgment as to what ought to be but rather a statement of what I found to be the case.¹³

The most exciting and uplifting characteristic of the larger congregation is the total commitment to mission.

All of these stories of mission are worth telling, but space constraints limit me to a representative selection. First Presbyterian Church in Atlanta, Georgia, makes a tremendous commitment in terms of dollars and resources in the fight against homelessness, which is a major social problem in that city. North Avenue Presbyterian Church in Atlanta hosts a daycare for preschool children who spend their nights in a homeless shelter. Following the shooting death of a young police officer in Atlanta, Peachtree Presbyterian Church took out and pays for a \$100,000 life insurance policy on every policeman in the city of Atlanta as an acknowledgment of the debt that is owed by the community to its police department. The federal Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP) emanated from a program begun in the seventies by Fox Chapel Presbyterian for the children of unemployed Pittsburgh steelworkers. The same congregation set up a facility for

¹³ Mission-oriented activity outside of denominational structures is not practiced exclusively by larger congregations. The 225-member congregation where I regularly worship has an ongoing commitment to the work of Habitat for Humanity. The support for this project, as far as I can judge, in terms of dollars and involvement comes from the members and has nothing to do with the presbytery.