

# A Look at What Others Are Doing

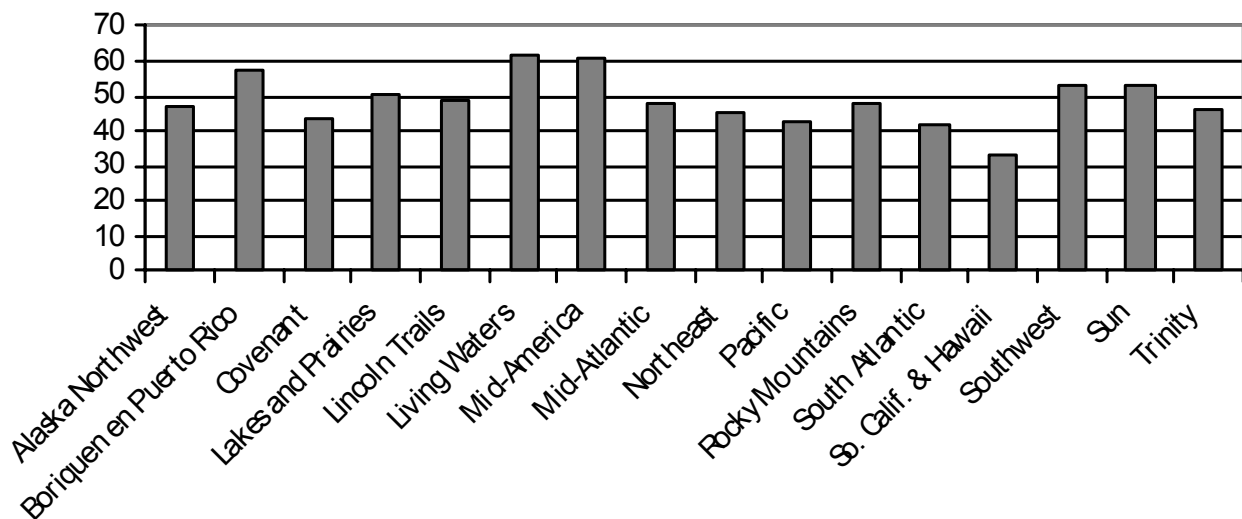
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This book is like the old story of the farmer who found a large ostrich egg and brought it home to his chicken coop where he called all the hens together. When he showed them the large ostrich egg, he announced, “Well girls, I just wanted you to see what others are doing.”

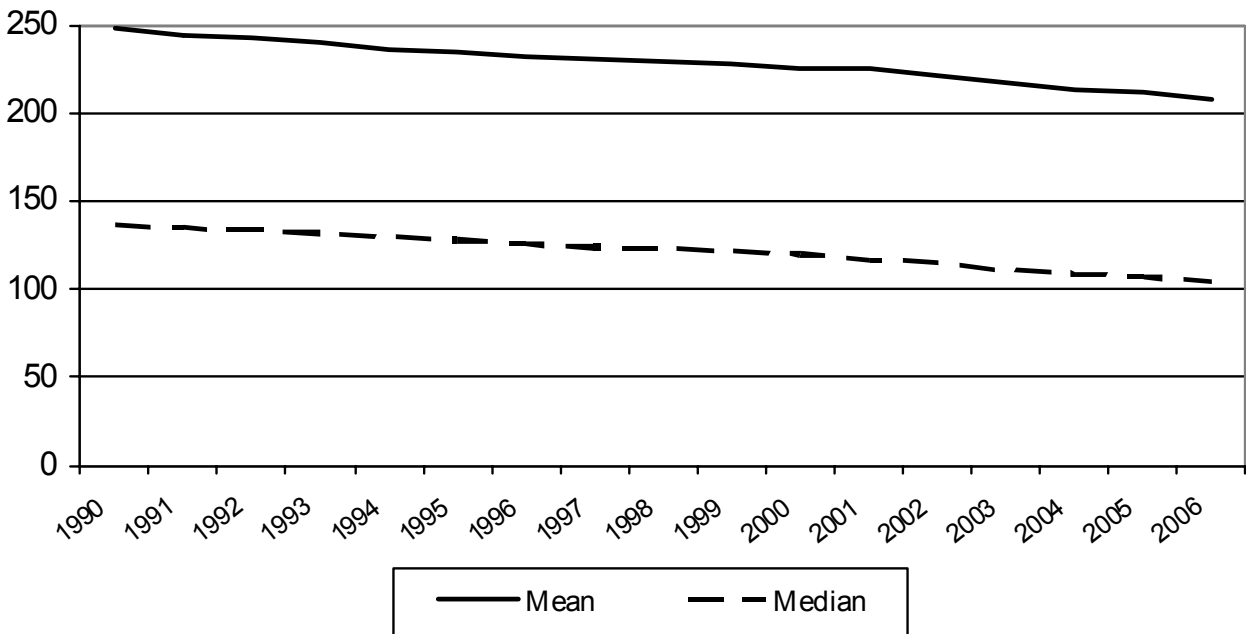
*Comparative Statistics 2006* is an opportunity for each of us to see what others are doing. It offers tough reality testing, which may not be comfortable for congregations (or anyone) to do. Of course, statistics do not constitute the total reality, sometimes not even the most important part. But these numbers do provide a variety of windows on church, where money or members or modes of leadership can be compared within and among particular populations.

Some of these comparisons are limited and specific, measuring contemporary figures only among ourselves, for example, the profiles of churches by membership size and financial support. Some comparisons are regional by state, presbytery, and synod (see Figure 1). Some are historical, comparing trends over a number of years (see Figure 2). Some of the regional comparisons are measured over time, reflecting the patterns of historical differences between areas of the country where Presbyterians have been more numerous and areas or cultures where significantly fewer Presbyterians have clustered in the past.

**Figure 1**  
**Percent of Small Congregation with 100 or Fewer Members, by Synod**



**Figure 2**  
**Mean and Median Number of Members Per Congregation, 1990-2006**



Although Presbyterians may take this report for granted, please note that this annual publication of *Comparative Statistics* is utterly unique among religious bodies—no other denomination has carefully gathered as much material, or retained it (in more or less comparable categories) for so many years. The publication of these facts reflects something basic to our Presbyterian way of thinking. Some say it reflects our dismal Calvinist character—that we are always too ready to look on the dark side of everything. I prefer to think of this annual report as simply more evidence that we are a Confessional Church committed to seeing ourselves as honestly as possible, “the good, the bad, and the ugly,” as we are now, and as we are becoming over time.

Reading these pages along with you is an amazing array of unlikely colleagues who, like you, want to gain some perspective on the day-to-day doings of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). Some are consultants and teachers, like author-consultant Lyle Schaller, who wants to match new church starts with the number of closings, or former moderator-teacher Jack Rogers, who has used this publication in a class actually held at the General Assembly. Some readers are strong advocates for particular segments within the church, like leaders among ethnic caucus groups or proponents of more recognition for the gifts of women in leadership. Some are denominational executives, who are sometimes trying to discern national trends and explore their causes and other times checking the performance of the place where they are located as compared with others nearby or with national norms. Sometimes readers will use the information for affirmation; sometimes for motivation of their constituent groups, saying, like the farmer, “I just wanted you to see what others are doing.”

Some readers of this report are pastors affirming their sense of call where they are, or perhaps wondering if they are being called into another section of the country or another expression of ministry. Some are institutional fundraisers, who use these trend lines to develop projections for estimating the level of support for their causes, or local church stewardship committees seeking criteria to measure the commitments of their own local congregations. Some are scholars in Ph.D. programs of secular universities, and some are organizational analysts in high-end consulting firms. On the other hand, some are our church leaders who use the same attendance and financial figures as statistical

measures for changes in the profile of far more illusive spiritual values and personal commitments. Countless different people are making use of these data in this amazing little book.

Despite its detail, the structure of *Comparative Statistics* can be understood rather easily. **First, Tables 1-6: Institutional Report** presents growth and decline of churches throughout the country, with profiles of congregations by size and racial-ethnic composition, and concluding with an answer to that often asked question, Where are our largest churches? **Second, Tables 7-9, plus 14: Leadership Report** shows the distribution of ministry by call (function), gender, and racial-ethnic composition, identified by region and showing changes over (recent) years. **Third, Tables 10-13: Financial Report** presents receipts and expenditures in synods and presbyteries throughout the country, with two concentrated summaries (Tables 11 and 12) and a fascinating addendum (Table 13) on “Validated Mission” that puts outreach in perspective. **Finally, Table 15: Integrated Report** combines all the elements above in a more contemporary and comprehensive picture of congregational dynamics (an extract of Table 15 is presented below), where each row and column suggests a sermon of bad news, with, perhaps, an ending that’s upbeat and hopeful.

### Number of Congregations, How They Are Served, Worship Attendance, and Giving Information by Membership Size — 2006

Membership Size	Number of Congregations	Total Number of Installed Pastors <sup>1</sup>	Congregations with Female Installed Head or Co-Pastor <sup>1</sup>	Median Size of Session	Average Worship Attendance as a % of Membership	Average Contributions Per Person in Worship <sup>2</sup>
1-50	2,768	555	166	6	81.3%	\$968.81
51-100	2,476	1,206	360	7	64.7%	\$1,016.21
101-150	1,480	1,061	247	9	59.7%	\$958.98
151-200	992	813	177	11	56.9%	\$991.02
201-300	1,120	1,004	140	12	53.5%	\$930.29
301-500	1,035	1,116	102	15	51.0%	\$1,007.29
501-800	541	808	37	17	49.1%	\$1,028.19
801-1,200	237	468	9	21	44.4%	\$1,035.74
1,200-1,600	105	248	6	24	43.1%	\$1,128.05
1,601 or more	105	378	2	29	41.8%	\$1,280.56
<b>Total<sup>2</sup></b>	<b>10,859</b>	<b>7,657</b>	<b>1,246</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>51.7%</b>	<b>\$1,040.43</b>

<sup>1</sup> Installed pastors are pastors, co-pastors, associate pastors, and designated pastors.

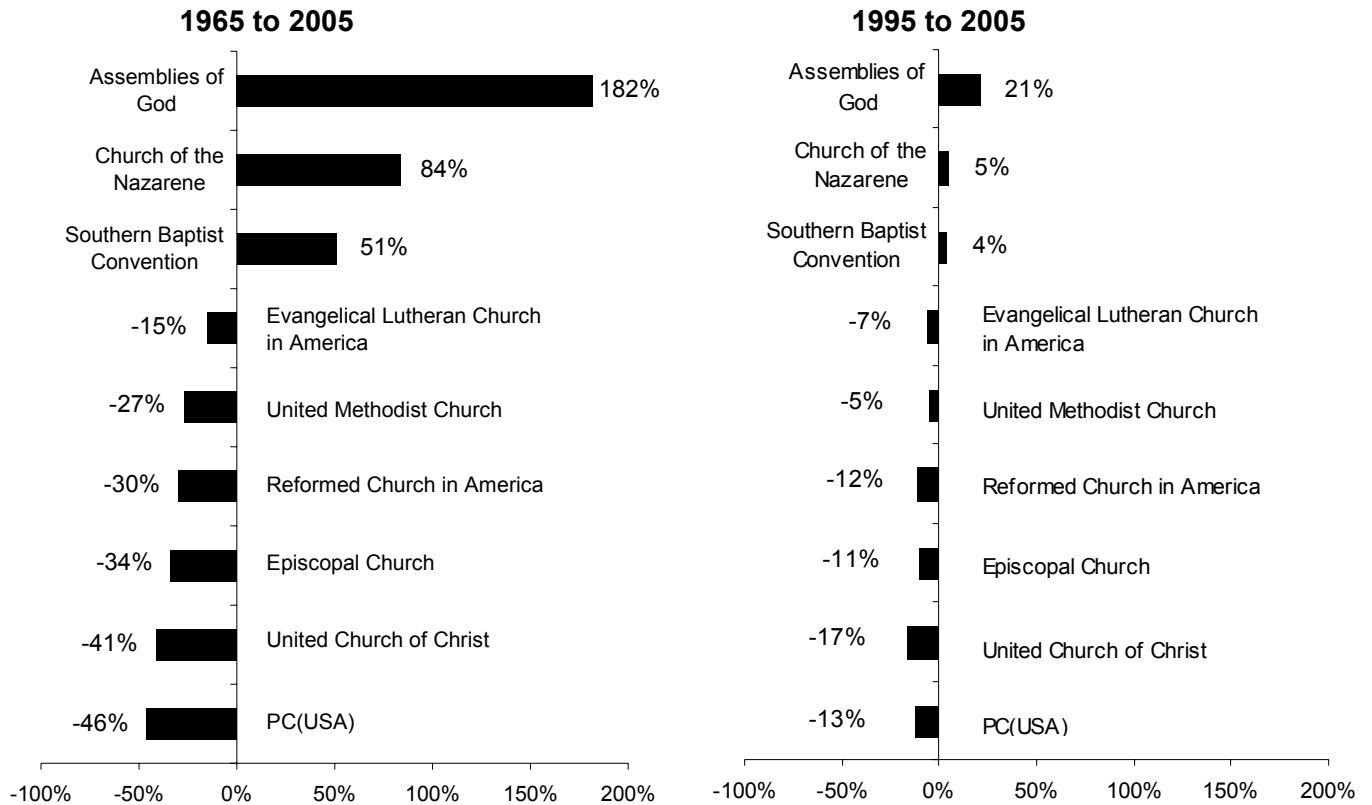
<sup>2</sup> Calculated as total contributions divided by average worship attendance for only those congregations reporting both.

<sup>3</sup> This number is less than the total number of congregations shown in Table 1 because there were 31 congregations with no members.

The great threat that hovers over the future of the Presbyterian Church is reflected in Table 1 and Figure 2 of *Comparative Statistics 2006*, namely the continuing decline in membership. A careful reading of subsequent tables will show that a strong minority of our churches is doing well, but the majority is marginal and struggling. Therein lies hope, and a challenge. To set this Presbyterian report in a larger context, see the comparisons with other denominations for two time periods in Figure 3

(below). When we see our Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) in comparison with other denominations, the challenge is even more serious, and perhaps the hope is more obvious.

**Figure 3**  
**Percent Membership Change**



Source: *The Yearbook of American and Canadian Churches, 2005* (New York: National Council of Churches); compiled by Hartford Institute for Religion Research, Hartford Seminary.

Presbyterians, who are confessionally committed to the realism of hard data, must recognize that other religious 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. It is not a question of what Presbyterians are doing wrong, but rather what are others doing right. In your search for next steps, this annual *Comparative Statistics of 2006* asks the old farmer’s question, among ourselves and with others, “What can we learn from what others are doing?”