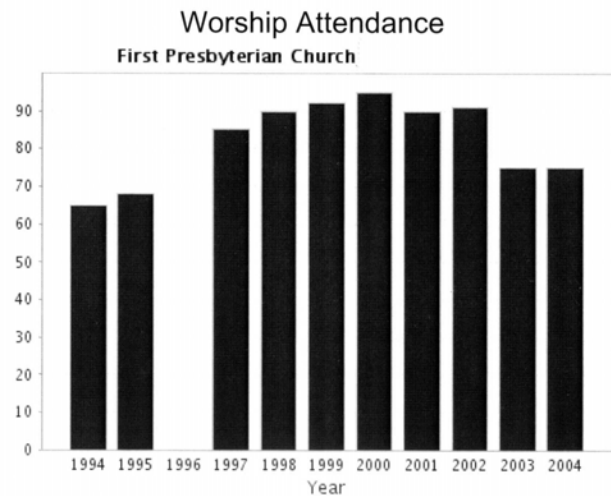


# Stability and Change in a Cornopolis Congregation

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July 2005



Can congregations with traditional worship services experience the presence of God? Must post-millennium congregations change in order to experience growth and vitality? Conventional wisdom holds that U.S. mainline Protestant congregations are fading away in part because they have failed to develop contemporary worship styles, with drums, electric guitars, PowerPoint presentations, and video clips.

To research these issues, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) Research Services office identified the three PC(USA) congregations for which the following were true: (1) A representative of the congregation had participated in the Cooperative Congregational Studies Project's Faith Communities Today 2000 survey; and (2) That representative had indicated the following about his or her congregation: worship at the congregation was not at all informal, very much included formal liturgy, and very much had a sense of God's presence.<sup>1</sup> What light might we shed on the conventional wisdom about lifeless traditional worship by learning about mainline Protestant congregations with worship that is *both* formal *and* filled with the presence of God?

I selected for study one of these three congregations, which I'll call First Presbyterian Church of Cornopolis, in part because I was familiar with the geographic area in which the church is located, and in part because visiting the area was affordable.<sup>2</sup> In addition, the church was the one of the three identified congregations that had lost the fewest members since 2000. This was potentially important, as I was trying to connect worship style with congregational vitality and numerical growth.

### **A Struggling Congregation in a Struggling Community**

First Presbyterian Church in Cornopolis is a congregation like many in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). It is a historic congregation in a rural town. Both the congregation and the town are more than 150 years old. The congregation's building, with a bell tower, pipe organ, and adjoining pastor's home, sits across the street from a town park. Relatively small, it has approximately 150 members, and approximately half of that number, on average, worship at the single Sunday service. Many active in the congregation have longstanding roots there, as their parents and/or in-laws attended there. The congregation has been struggling somewhat as of late. It had no installed pastor for nearly two years and lost members and suffered modest attendance declines during that period.

Cornopolis, population 2,600, is located in the largely rural central part of a Midwestern state, typical of wide swaths of Middle America. The area suffered actual population decline, with the decline of its

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<sup>1</sup> The FACT 2000 survey asked congregational representatives: "How well do the following describe your worship service with the largest attendance?" Possible responses were "very well," "quite well," "somewhat," "slightly," and "not at all." The dimensions of worship on which this question asked respondents to assess their congregations included: "It is informal"; "It includes formal liturgy"; and "It has a sense of God's presence." Representatives of three in five PC(USA) congregations contacted (541; 61%) completed and returned the survey. Of these, representatives of one in two (5%) indicated worship was not at all informal. A quarter (24%) said worship at their congregations very much included formal liturgy, and two in five (38%) said worship very much had a sense of God's presence. For more information on the FACT 2000 survey, in general, see: [http://fact.hartsem.edu/research/fact2000/executive\\_summary.html](http://fact.hartsem.edu/research/fact2000/executive_summary.html). For more information on PC(USA) congregations' responses to the FACT 2000 survey, see: <http://www.pcusa.org/research/fact2.htm>.

<sup>2</sup> I promised my informants that I would disclose neither their identities as individuals nor the identity of the congregation in any summary of my research. It does no harm to give the actual name of the congregation.

mining and manufacturing industries and a restructuring of the agricultural sector (larger farms).<sup>3</sup> The population is predominantly Anglo and aging, with younger people moving away for schooling and work. Many people in Cornopolis commute for office, manufacturing, and service jobs to a neighboring metropolitan area, approximately 30 minutes away.

## **Multiple Research Methods**

I employed a multi-method research design for my study of First Presbyterian Church in Cornopolis. I conducted in-depth interviews with fifteen individuals: eleven active members, three former pastors, and the pastor of another Protestant congregation in town. All but one of these were telephone interviews. One of the active members I interviewed is also the chief executive of a local financial institution. I employed snowball and quota sampling in order to identify these individuals.<sup>4</sup> When it became apparent to me that there was no current pastor, I contacted the clerk of the congregation's session (the governing body of PC(USA) congregations) and the immediate past interim pastor. Ironically, the interim pastor referred me to the pastor of another Protestant congregation in town, and this pastor is the person who referred me to the financial institution president, who in turn referred me to other members, and so on. I employed quota sampling in as much as I tried to interview women and men, older people and younger people, and newcomers and long-timers in the congregation.

My study also included participant observation, interpretation of the language used in documents, and analysis of numerical data that other organizations had gathered (usually for other purposes). My family and I participated in a First Presbyterian Church worship service in June 2005. This service was somewhat unusual in that it took place on the Sunday before the congregation's new pastor arrived. Before and after the service, I met a number of people whom I had already interviewed or would later interview. After the service, I also conducted an interview and toured the congregation's facilities. My family and I then toured the town. I also reviewed a congregational history, a new congregational mission statement, the PC(USA) congregational information form that the congregation's pastoral nominating committee had completed, congregational newsletters, and a history of the town. In addition, I reviewed: (1) institutional data the congregation has supplied the PC(USA) on membership, worship attendance, Christian education participation, and financial contributions; (2) Census 2000 data on the town, the county, and the nearby metropolitan area; and (3) responses to surveys that a regional research institute at a nearby university had conducted.

## **Popular Pastors in Comfortable Congregations**

Before I embarked on this study, one of my colleagues predicted I would find two things: (1) Congregations grow if congregants like the pastor—If congregants like the pastor, they tell other people good things about the congregation and invite others, which in turn brings more people into the congregation; and (2) Most people are involved in congregations in which they feel comfortable. They're

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<sup>3</sup> The town population shrank between 1980 and 1990 and increased only 66 people between 1990 and 2000. The population of the surrounding county shrank between 1960 and 1970 and between 1980 and 1990. The population of the nearby metropolitan area shrank during the 1980s.

<sup>4</sup> Researchers employing snowball sampling identify and recruit for study a small initial sample of individuals, then ask these identified individuals to refer researchers to additional individuals. Researchers employing quota sampling divide a population into groups, such as African-American and Anglo, and Protestant and Roman Catholic, and aim to assemble samples of people from that population (for example, 10 percent African-American Protestant, 10 percent African-American Roman Catholic, 40 percent Anglo Protestant, and 40 percent Anglo Roman Catholic). In this case, I made sure to balance my interviews among women and men, long-time and newer members, and younger, middle-aged, and older adults.

not looking to change the congregation or themselves radically. This conservatism applies to worship, as well. This is more or less what I found.

The congregation and the surrounding town loved the man who served as installed pastor from 1996 to 2003 (and his family). We'll call him Paul Lincoln. During this time congregants talked with others in the community about the pastor and about the congregation in very positive terms.<sup>5</sup> People around town also met Pastor Lincoln in community activities. The congregation's membership, worship attendance, and Christian education enrollment grew, even though the town's population was stagnant. Pastor Lincoln and his wife took on many responsibilities in the congregation and the community. Pastor Lincoln's wife directed the adult choir and a new bell choir. Pastor Lincoln officiated at the funerals of many locals who were not First Presbyterian members.

### **Slowly Changing Worship**

During this time worship at First Presbyterian changed in subtle ways. The congregation discontinued the use of lay worship leaders who had opened worship, and the congregation participated more in responsive and unison readings (more liturgy). In addition, congregants greeted each other and talked about good news and prayer concerns during the service. The pastor stepped down from the pulpit onto the floor for this sharing of celebrations and concerns. Some of these innovations made worship at First Presbyterian less formal, but the service remained essentially traditional.<sup>6</sup> No doubt largely for this reason, the First Presbyterian Church representative who completed the Faith Communities Today survey in 2000 described the congregation's worship as formal, liturgical, and providing an experience of the presence of God.

What has made worshipers at First Presbyterian experience the presence of God to such an extent? Many of the active members I interviewed identified the congregation's glorious music as one of the reasons. The congregation features an old pipe organ played by a talented and experienced musician, and its choir has boomed since Pastor Lincoln's time. The 1974 hymn book used in worship features old-time hymns many congregants grew up singing.<sup>7</sup> For me, the most spiritual moment during the First Presbyterian service I attended was during the singing of the final hymn, "Be Still My Soul."

Congregants I interviewed also labeled the congregation as friendly. Many in the congregation have known each other for years, and no doubt the greeting and sharing of celebrations and concerns during the service, as well as in Christian education classes, have helped them learn even more about each other. Several of my informants made fun of themselves and other Presbyterians as the "frozen chosen." They also, however, identified some of these increasingly informal elements of worship as bringing the congregation together and closer to God. On the Sunday I was there, worshipers greeted each other, my family, and me enthusiastically, and a woman in her 80s struck up a lively conversation with my wife during fellowship after the service.

Worship at First Presbyterian grew more informal during the year and a half that the church's first clergywoman led the congregation. We'll call her Dee MacDonald. Lay worship leaders returned.<sup>8</sup> Pastor MacDonald experimented with unorthodox sermon delivery methods. She turned some sermons

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<sup>5</sup> Some congregants called the pastor "St. Paul."

<sup>6</sup> This was during a time when the Methodist congregation down the street was embarking on what turned out to be a failed experiment with contemporary worship on Saturday evenings.

<sup>7</sup> A longtime member I interviewed said about the hymns: "I don't even have to read the words, half the time."

<sup>8</sup> Indeed, on the Sunday my family and I worshiped at First Presbyterian Church, we faced a relatively unfamiliar sight in a Presbyterian church: a worship service begun by a layman in his early 20s.

into postmodern multi-character dramatic readings. These readings often featured laypeople from the congregation in starring roles. Most controversially, she also sometimes took off her shoes. Many in the congregation were, however, already devastated by the sudden departure of Pastor Lincoln and his family, and some were leery about a woman pastor leading the congregation. For some of these congregants, in particular, the sermon delivery innovations went too far.

Others in the congregation appreciated the pastoral care and community building Pastor MacDonald helped lead in the aftermath of several unexpected deaths among congregants. They also appreciated Pastor MacDonald's push for more lay leadership.<sup>9</sup> Certainly, the congregation seemed very involved at the time of my visit there. Separate mission study and pastor nominating committees had spent much of the previous year developing the statements I reviewed and finding a new pastor. Trustees were busy renovating the pastor's residence next to the church. The leader of the mid-summer Vacation Bible School that regularly attracts a couple of dozen children from non-First Presbyterian families delivered a spirited push, in the service, for VBS involvement. Deacons had made sure that good food greeted those of us at the fellowship hour after the service. The choir typically takes the summer off, but my informants told me that the choir members acquitted themselves well at the special service the following Sunday.

### **Possible Challenges**

I studied First Presbyterian at a critical time, during a two-month hiatus between Pastor MacDonald's departure and the arrival of a new installed pastor.<sup>10</sup> This was, in some ways, an ideal time to ask former pastors and active members to talk about the historic relations among the pastors, congregation, and community. From the vantage point of summer 2005, the two most recent former pastors with whom I spoke, both now serving other congregations, identified several key challenges they thought the congregation they both still love faces. The possible challenges these pastors identified were: worship style, gender roles, pastor workload, collective reflection, and fund raising.

**Worship Style.** Worship was my main initial interest. Pastor Lincoln clearly believes the conventional wisdom that mainline Protestant congregations must shift to contemporary worship styles or fade away. "The old pipe organ thing doesn't work with 27-year-olds," he said. But Pastor Lincoln also indicated that it would have been a disaster for him to have tried to force contemporary worship on First Presbyterian. The people already in the congregation are comfortable with traditional worship. It's the people the congregation does not reach (especially younger people), who either never set foot in the church or don't keep coming back, who would respond more to contemporary worship, Pastor Lincoln suggested.<sup>11</sup> Most people I interviewed indicated they were more comfortable with traditional worship, although many appreciated the informalizing innovations of the Lincoln-MacDonald years. Responses to a question about whether the congregation should consider adopting contemporary worship varied widely. "No!" declared a longtime member, adding, "unless that would make more people come." Countered a newer member: "A contemporary service would be kind of cool."

**Gender Roles.** Challenges in two key areas also tested how far the congregation would go with progressive gender roles.<sup>12</sup> No one I interviewed openly questioned whether women could serve as pastors. The two-time chairperson of the congregation's pastor nominating committee did, however, set conditions for acceptance of any pastor (no clergy couples, no single or childless pastors) that might make it difficult for many women to qualify in practice. The hymnbook the congregation uses clearly identifies

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<sup>9</sup> Pastor MacDonald has described the congregation, when she arrived in Cornopolis, as "pastor-dependent."

<sup>10</sup> Active members described the incoming pastor in excited tones as a younger version of Pastor Lincoln.

<sup>11</sup> Pastor Lincoln also hinted that contemporary worship might not work in a traditional worship space with pews.

<sup>12</sup> Pastor MacDonald identified gender roles as a possible challenge for the congregation.

God as male. In fact, a 1990s First Presbyterian debate about whether to adopt this hymnbook or a PC(USA) hymnal apparently hinged in part on the congregation's degree of comfort with what we now call inclusive language.<sup>13</sup>

**Pastor Workload.** Both Pastor Lincoln and Pastor MacDonald indicated that they believe that the Lincolns accumulated too many responsibilities during their time in Cornopolis. Pastor Lincoln said that his own personality might have been partly to blame. He focused specifically on the extent to which he became the pastor for the whole town. Lincoln said this happened in part because his participation in community activities put him in contact with many non-First Presbyterian members. The responsibilities on which he focused were the many funeral services he conducted for non-members. A couple of other informants pointed to the existence of a pastor's residence (a manse) within feet of the other church buildings. Pastor Lincoln's predecessor suggested that this geographic arrangement helped put him and his family on call much more than forty hours a week. Most active members I interviewed indicated that they had no idea why the Lincolns left. Pastor burnout was a key reason, Pastor Lincoln suggested.<sup>14</sup>

**Collective Reflection.** Pastor MacDonald indicated that a chief reason she became interested in serving in interim pastor positions was that she wanted to help congregations reflect, collectively, on their mission and ministries and to consider new directions. She said that First Presbyterian seemed open to many of the innovations that she suggested, but did not seem interested in talking among themselves about new directions. An example she gave was the Worship Committee. This committee, she said, would work hard to pin down details about worship services, even helping implement MacDonald-era changes. Committee members were not, however, going to sit down to brainstorm about possible changes in worship.<sup>15</sup> This lack of interest in collective discernment and strategic planning disappointed Pastor MacDonald somewhat. "They're looking to maintain the status quo," she said.

**Fund Raising.** Pastor Lincoln's concern about what Christians often term mission funding, stewardship, or financial giving brings together several of the issues I've outlined above. With or without contemporary worship or a woman pastor, a congregation that continues to grow like First Presbyterian did during Pastor Lincoln's tenure may ultimately need more staff, especially if the congregation wants to curb or prevent pastor burnout. That, however, requires more fund raising if not also collective reflection and planning.<sup>16</sup> Pastor Lincoln indicated that he was unsure whether First Presbyterian, including its more generous and affluent financial supporters, would have been willing to provide the money needed to hire additional staff (such as an associate pastor, Christian educator, and/or youth pastor). Without additional paid staff and/or volunteer labor, congregations can't grow without increasing the workload on the existing staff, including the pastor, Pastor Lincoln suggested.

### **Vitality Without Growth or Transformation?**

In spite of all of the challenges that First Presbyterian Church faces, I see the congregation's experiences as an example not only of struggle but also of vitality. Despite its recent struggles, what was apparent in my congregational visit and in my interviews was excitement and activity. The congregation is excited

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<sup>13</sup>On my Sunday at First Presbyterian Church in Cornopolis, one of my informants sang a solo about God called "He." To be fair to First Presbyterian, women have served in many lay leadership roles in the congregation, and the choir director, clerk of the session, and two-time pastor nominating committee chairperson are all women.

<sup>14</sup> To be fair to the congregation, the pastor nominating committee identified this as a challenge on which the congregation should work with the new pastor

<sup>15</sup> In fact, the Worship Committee works, but never meets.

<sup>16</sup> Pastor Lincoln indicated that his current congregation was considering doing all of the above.

about the new pastor, the new pastor is excited about the congregation, and the congregation is very involved in the church's various ministries.

Results of this study suggest that mainline Protestant congregations, fortified by slow change in worship and elsewhere, can thrive and experience the presence of God even with relatively traditional worship services. Congregational vitality? Yes. Slow change? Yes. Rapid numerical growth and/or radical transformation? Not right now.

Was my colleague who tied congregational growth to satisfaction with the pastor and staying in a comfort zone right? To a large extent. Is the conventional wisdom that mainline Protestant congregations offering traditional worship are fading away on target? Not entirely. First Presbyterian's cultural and economic setting (the Cornopolis area), as well as the culture and history of this particular congregation, no doubt also affect the congregation's current situation. Whether traditional worship, vitality, slow change, and even growth can all commingle in the long run, in Cornopolis and elsewhere, is a matter for further research and discussion.

### **Reflections on the Research Experience**

I should caution that there were several out-of-the-ordinary aspects of this study. I caught this congregation in an unusual situation, in between pastors. With no pastor and a clerk of the session and worship committee that seemed cautious about the study, it was ultimately through a pastor of another congregation that I began to interview members of this congregation. My original idea had been to interview only the pastor by telephone before a visit, join the congregation in worship, and lead a focus group discussion among members of the Worship Committee. Later I also considered interviewing people in the community to gain background information about the community and gauge perceptions of First Presbyterian. I ended up interviewing fifteen people. None of the interviews involved group discussion (all were one-on-one), and all but one were off-site, by telephone. I interviewed three former pastors but only one community leader who was not part of the congregation. I also failed to obtain detailed financial information from the congregation, other than what is publicly accessible through the denomination. Nevertheless, one-on-one telephone interviews—both before and after my visit—worked well. Catching the congregation between pastors, I have already argued, offered a great opportunity to ask former pastors and congregants to talk frankly about historic relations among First Presbyterian's pastors, congregation, and the Cornopolis community. I am uncertain to what extent, if any, it made any difference for my study that I appeared at First Presbyterian with my family. I am also uncertain to what extent it might have made any difference that I, an Asian American researcher, appeared at this predominantly Anglo congregation with my Anglo wife and stepson.