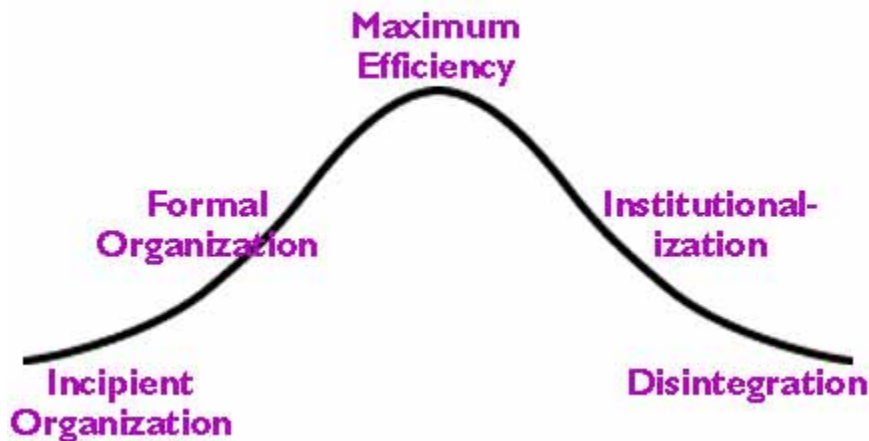


# Shall We Reinvent Our 100 Year Old Denomination? Surveying Organizational Models

## INTRODUCTION

David Moberg has described the life cycle of religious organizations in *The Church as a Social Institution*. His model suggests five predictable stages.

FIGURE 1



In the beginning of the ascending curve there is a phase of *incipient organization* characterized by a negative reaction to existing churches, emotional enthusiasm for the new church, and diffused leadership. Second, as the age and effectiveness of the organization increase, there is a phase of *formal organization* characterized by membership commitments, specification of goals, symbolic separation from the larger society, and a gradual move from charismatic leaders to rational or bureaucratic leaders. Third, as the curve rises to a crest, there is a phase of *maximum efficiency* characterized by decisions based on research, increased tolerance of other groups and society, rapid expansion of the formal organizational structure, and rapid growth. Fourth, in the descending curve there is a phase of *institutionalization* characterized by an established bureaucracy, declining support for the distinctives that helped bring the group into existence, increased diversity of beliefs, interests, and commitment, and membership becomes passive and remote from leadership. Finally, the curve declines to nothingness in a phase of *disintegration* characterized by loss of members' confidence in the institution and its leaders, formalism, indifference, obsolescence, absolutism, red tape, patronage, and corruption. There tends to be, according to Moberg, a curvilinear relationship between church age and effectiveness. For many years effectiveness and growth increase as age increases, however, midway in the life of the institution the reverse begins to be true.<sup>1</sup>

Moberg doesn't attach duration to the various phases of the life cycle. The speculation, or myth, that religious institutions have a 100-year cycle probably originated with an observation by a student of Roman Catholic religious orders, who noted that every time a new religious order was created, it tended to cool off after about 100 years. Others picked up on this observation and began applying it to contexts quite different from those in which the observation was originally made. Since the Church of the Nazarene is approaching its centennial and because growth of the church in the USA has slowed, the topic of continuing and revitalizing a religious movement, or reinventing the denomination, has been chosen.

In order to deal adequately with the topic the advice and insight of several specialists was enlisted. Dale Jones, Ken Crow, Rich Houseal, and Stan Ingersol were asked to help with the task. The group has met monthly, except August, since April of last year.

Our study began with the group sharing personal perceptions of various denominations' developmental patterns. Assorted data were collected and studied along with the 2000 Religious Congregations Membership Study (RCMS). Particular consideration was given to denominations with more than 50,000 adherents in 1952 that had shown more than 50% growth by 2000.

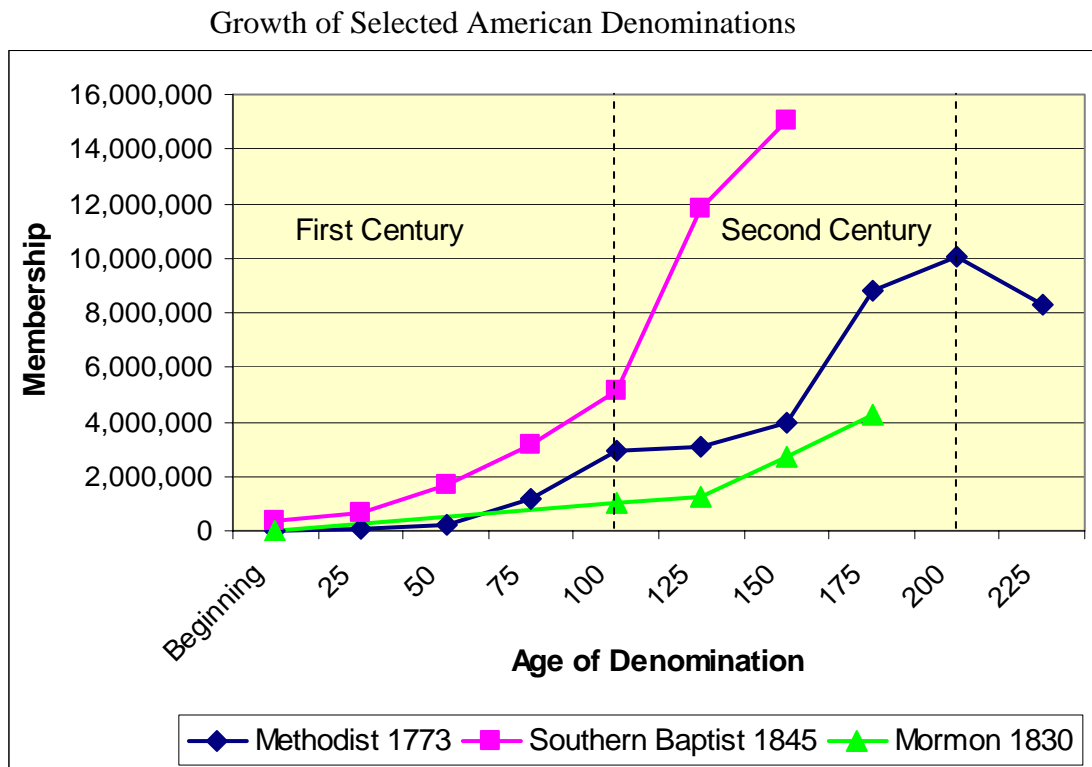
## DENOMINATIONS

The review of the RCMS data revealed 17 denominations over 50,000 in 1952, which were in the range of 100 years old or older that had grown more than 50% during the past 48 years.<sup>2</sup>

1. Assemblies of God
2. Baptist General conference
3. Catholic Church
4. Christian Reformed Church in North America
5. Church of God (Anderson, IN)
6. Church of God (Cleveland, TN)
7. Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints
8. Church of the Nazarene
9. Evangelical Covenant Church
10. Evangelical Free Church of America
11. Free Methodist Church of North America
12. International Church of the Foursquare Gospel
13. International Pentecostal Holiness church
14. Reformed Church in America
15. Seventh-day Adventist Church
16. Southern Baptist Convention
17. The Wesleyan Church

At least three of these American denominations do not conform to the stereotype of “just one century of effectiveness.” While membership in those groups—now part of the United Methodist denomination—did plateau at the century mark, even better gains were shown later in their second century. Southern Baptist growth actually increased at the century mark. Mormon growth remained steady at their hundredth anniversary, but picked up later in the century.

FIGURE 2



*Reported figures closest to each quarter-century were used.*

Whatever the source for the “century myth,” it cannot have been based on the realities demonstrated by these groups.

The Reformed Church in America is the oldest denomination in the USA and it grew over 50% from 1952 to 2000. However, the denomination changed the way it reported adherents during this time frame. This made it difficult to make valid observations.

The Roman Catholic Church in the USA was the largest religious organization in the study. It experienced significant growth from 1952 to 2000. Its growth was probably the result of immigration and elevated birth rates among Catholic families, rather than organizational revitalization. However, their

organizational success in managing religious orders is noteworthy. So also was the attempt at renewal by the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965).

The Southern Baptist Convention experienced rapid growth in its first century and explosive growth in its second 100 years. Its growth in the past half-century is traceable to expansion into the North. Membership growth in traditional SBC states, such as Georgia, the Carolinas, Florida, Texas and Virginia, has not kept pace with population growth. Perhaps a strategy of expansion into new territories was an attempt at revitalization. Immigrant evangelism, another expansion strategy, has been a strong point for the SBC and accounts for significant portions of their growth. Making a primarily white denomination a multicultural mosaic might also be considered an attempt at reinventing the denomination.

The United Methodist Church enjoyed its best growth in the USA during its second century. So, even though it has experienced significant decline during the last several decades, a review of its history during its growth years may provide insights into renewal.

The Mormon Church has been growing rapidly for the past 50 years and is over 150 years old. It appears to have grown with an emphasis on community and family. It has many features that distinguish it from Orthodox Christian churches, but because of its recent efforts to be regarded as a Christian body, we decided to include it in the study.

The other denominations were either younger or only slightly older than 100 years. For this reason we did not include them in the study. However, the remarkable growth of the Assemblies of God denomination suggested that they should be included in the study. The AG appears to have grown by appealing to the masses. It is generally understood that the masses are more receptive to Christianity than the classes. A denomination focusing on, and appealing to societal masses will experience greater success than denominations that focus on people in higher socio-economic categories. It is not clear that this has been an intentional revitalization strategy of the AG. It is more than likely the result of an organizational emphasis on divine healing and mystical phenomenon. As such it was not so much an attempt at revitalization as it was the expression of a denominational culture.

## FINDINGS

Actual analysis of historical membership figures indicates that the one hundred year mark need not mark the end of our effectiveness. In fact, several groups have shown better growth in their second century. We need to reflect on the principles that may have enabled better growth in these and other groups.

But first, we do need to acknowledge that much of the growth seen by many denominations during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries depended on demographic factors. Much of the nation, while religious, was not always connected to specific denominations or worship centers. Much of the growth came as the gospel was proclaimed in newly developing territory and churches were established in areas with no previous Christian witness. Such development is not likely to recur during our second century. However, immigration is likely to continue at a large rate, bringing potential Christians to our communities. And the much-discussed post-Christian era in America already means that increasing numbers of Americans need to be incorporated into worshipping communities. We may not be able to start churches on the frontiers of development, but evangelism will be as important in our second century as it was for the Southern Baptists and for those who became United Methodists.

Many denominational groups have grown significantly and undoubtedly many have improved in various ways and achieved considerably greater organizational strength. The Southern Baptist Convention showed a sufficiently dramatic increase in growth to suggest that some institutional factor may have accounted for their growth. There may have been several factors that contributed to the noteworthy increase in growth, but expansion out of the south into the remainder of the USA appears to be the primary factor. In some respects this is comparable to a denomination including in its statistics growth from outside the USA.

No single denomination possessed characteristics that made it a convincing model—particularly for the Church of the Nazarene. Lacking a specific model we sought, from several older denominations, most of which are still growing, to identify several practical lessons. Admittedly, suggesting that a compilation of characteristics from a variety of denominations might serve as a model leaves much to be desired. Yet, given the subtle nature of organizational culture, even an apparently perfect model might fail to provide an effective plan for revitalization. So, in an effort to provide a composite model we are suggesting the following principles which appeared to be influential in helping those denominations grow after their centennial.

Our first characteristic of a model for revitalization is this: ***A denomination needs to maintain focus while providing flexibility.*** The Roman Catholic Church demonstrates that this virtue is possible by its ability to allow internal diversity while maintaining unity in doctrine and liturgy. Over the centuries, new religious orders, each with its own distinctive emphasis, were permitted to grow within the Roman Catholic Church. Religious orders functioned largely as mini-denominations within the larger world of Roman Catholicism, and the rise of new religious orders, which has gone on since the Seventh Century, has continued up through the Twentieth. In the modern period, this

ideal of “diversity within unity” is evident in yet another way: The Roman Catholic Church’s ability to be a global church, embracing more tongues and more racial and ethnic groups than any other Christian body. Indeed, one in every two self-identified Christians in the world is a Roman Catholic; one in every six persons in the world is one.<sup>3</sup> And Catholicism continues to be an expanding missionary presence in Asia and Africa. Despite continual expansion and encounters with the divisive forces of modernity, there has not been a significant schism within the Roman Catholic Church since the Sixteenth Century. Today the Roman Catholic mass in West Africa is a high-energy experience that contrasts dramatically the Catholic mass as it is experienced in many places within Western cultures. With the notable exception of the first half of the Sixteenth Century, when Protestantism fractured Western Christianity, the decision to permit diversity within unity has been fundamental to Roman Catholic growth in all ages of its development, and we observe that creating a balance that maintains focus but provides flexibility is a key characteristic for the revitalization of a religious group.

A second characteristic is *the multiplication of leaders at all levels of the church*. American Methodism’s growth provides a strategic example of the benefits when leadership multiplies at all levels of the church, from lay leadership up through bishops. Early Methodism’s basic unit was the class meeting, comprised roughly of a dozen people, and the key local leader was the class leader—a lay position. The life of holiness was to be lived out in the world; individual believers were held accountable for their Christian lives by the class, as the leader examined each person in turn before the other class members. There were four Methodist classes in and around Davenport, New York, when Phineas Bresee grew up there in the 1840s and ‘50s. His father-in-law, Horace Hebbard, was a class leader, and Phoebe Palmer, whose ministry gave rise to the Wesleyan holiness movement, was a class leader in New York City.<sup>4</sup> By virtue of strong lay leadership, Methodist clergy did not have to be stationed in a single place and could be deployed more widely than clergy of other denominations. They traveled circuits with up to 30 preaching points and dozens of classes under their general care, preaching, organizing new classes, appointing class leaders, and helping class leaders develop their skills as spiritual guides. As Methodism grew, the number of district superintendents (or “presiding elders”) grew. The number of bishops likewise grew proportionally, and northern Methodists had 18 bishops in 1891; southern Methodists, somewhat smaller, had a proportional number of bishops. By that date, Methodists had saturated America more thoroughly than any other denomination and had been America’s largest Protestant denomination for over a half-century. They would continue to grow steadily for another 80 years.

The post-Civil War desire of Methodist circuit preachers for single assignments led to the decline of the class meeting and its lay leader, shifting

local leadership from the laity to an increasingly professionalized clergy. One result: This reduced the organization's capacity to create new groups and expand into new areas. While Methodism continued to grow until the mid-1960s, its rate of growth was affected, and by 1930 the Baptists had overtaken the Methodists as the largest group of American Protestants.

In contrast to the Methodist pattern, expansion of the size of the Board of General Superintendents in the Church of the Nazarene has not kept pace with denominational growth. In 1908, three general superintendents oversaw 18 districts—a ratio of 1:6. By 1928, there were 56 districts, and the Board of General Superintendents' expansion from three to four permanent members dropped the ratio from 1:19 to 1:14. In 1952, with 99 districts, adding a fifth general superintendent dropped the ratio from 1:25 to 1:20. And in 1960, with approximately 113 districts, adding a sixth general superintendent dropped the ratio from 1:23 to 1:18. The Board of General Superintendents has not expanded since 1960, but the number of districts has grown to over 420, ballooning the ratio until it stands today at 1:70.<sup>5</sup> (By comparison, the United Methodist bishop of Kansas oversees 11 districts and district superintendents, while his counterpart in Missouri oversees 12—typical ratios in their denomination.)

This has prevented the Board of General Superintendents from becoming more diverse. If the number of General Superintendents had grown proportionally with the denomination, it is possible the first non-North American General Superintendent, the first non-white American General Superintendent, and the first female General Superintendent, would already have been elected and the Board of General Superintendents would reflect a diversity like that of the denomination as a whole.

Because there was a limited number of general superintendents in 1980, a new level of organizational structure—the Regional Director—was created, adding another layer of organizational insulation between the district superintendent in Africa, Asia, the Pacific, and Latin America and his/her responsible general superintendent.

The cost that would have been incurred by increasing the size of the Board of General Superintendents is now being paid to operate Regional offices with their Regional Directors, who function in many ways as assistant General Superintendents but lack the authority of a General Superintendent.

To understand how this has changed the equation, consider that J. B. Chapman argued that the district superintendent should be considered the “assistant General Superintendent” in a place.<sup>6</sup> The Regional Director, however, fills that role and in much of the world increases the distance between the district superintendent and the General Superintendent.

The limited number of General Superintendents has resulted in North American districts being treated fundamentally differently than districts elsewhere. Ideally a District Superintendent in New Delhi or Nairobi should be as able to pick up the phone and talk to his General Superintendent as directly as would the superintendent in Indianapolis or Los Angeles.

It appears the multiplication of leaders at all levels of the church is necessary for a vital denomination. When leadership is truncated at any level, the organization will be negatively affected.

The third characteristic is *an expansion mentality*. There is a near direct correlation between an increase in the number of churches and an increase in attendance/membership. In recent decades the SBC has developed this characteristic more effectively and comprehensively than other denominations. They have multiplied Sunday school classes, started thousands of new churches, expanded into the North and West regions of the USA and launched intentional and intensive efforts to reach immigrant and multicultural populations.

New church development peaked in several American denominations during the 1950s and early 1960s. C. Kirk Hadaway documented this peak and the subsequent decline in a study presented at the 1979 joint annual meetings of the Religious Research Association and the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion, "Factors Influencing New Church Development in Ten Denominations."<sup>7</sup> He observed the high level of new churches in three groups (United Presbyterians, United Methodists, and Southern Baptists) and theorized that there were two major reasons for the peak: A period of renewed interest in church participation when evangelistic concerns outweighed other denominational values and a rapidly expanding number of young families locating in new suburbs.

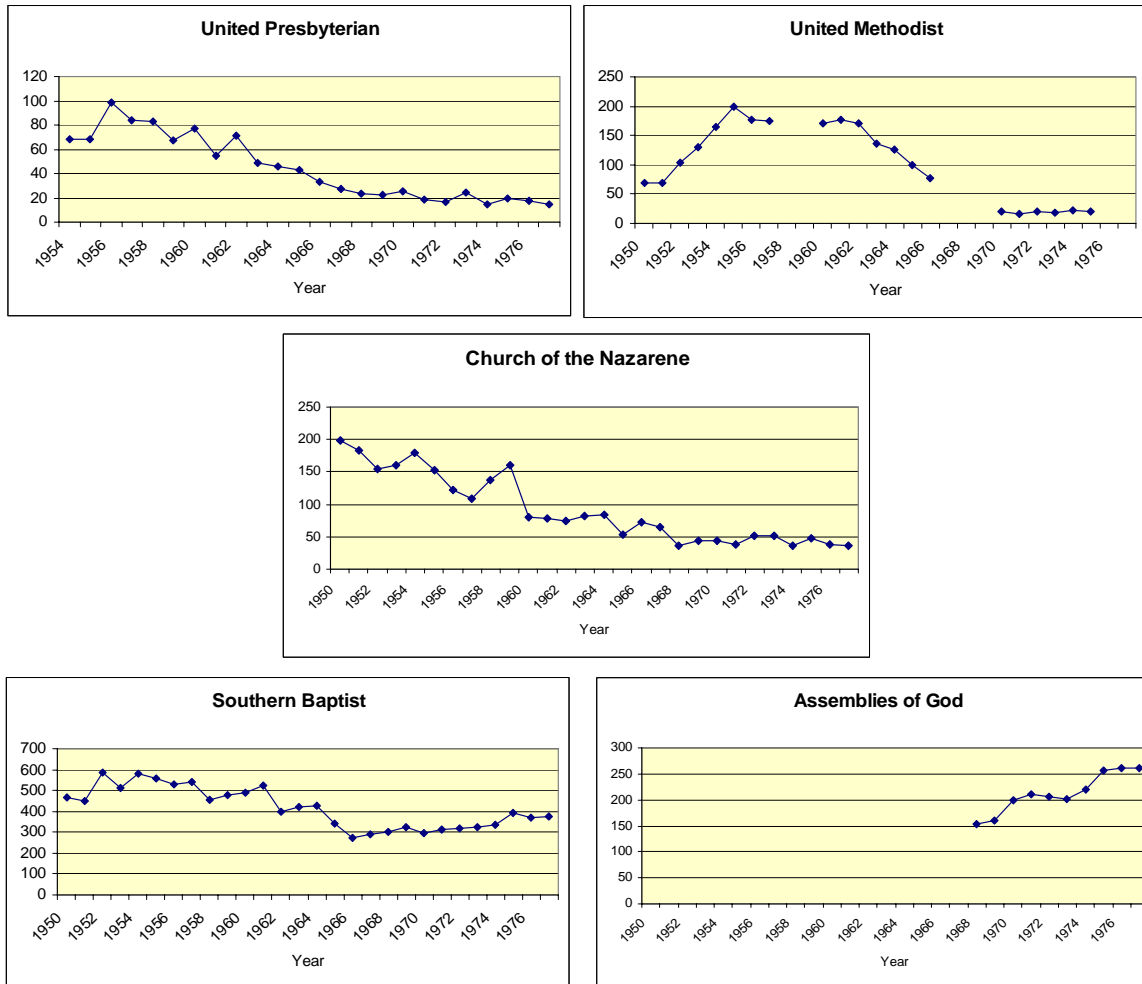
The 1950s and '60s peak in new church development was soon followed by a slow down. In these three and seven other denominations (Presbyterian, U.S., United Church of Christ, Lutheran Church, Missouri Synod, American Lutheran Church, Lutheran Church of America, Disciples of Christ, and Assemblies of God) both the numbers and rates of new churches declined significantly during the 1960s and were very low by the mid-1970s. Hadaway theorized that this change came partly as a result of saturation, but also may have been the result of an overall decline in religious interest, rising costs for new churches, failures among the new churches with resulting changes in denominational policies, as well as concerns about suburbanization, ecumenism, and such social issues as civil rights and the Vietnam War.

As indicated in the charts below, the pattern of 1950s – '60s peaks in new church development followed by sharp declines was experienced both in mainline and evangelical churches. United Presbyterians, United Methodists,

Southern Baptists, and Nazarenes each experienced relatively high levels of new church starts in the mid-1950s with significant declines by the mid-1960s. The two mainline denominations, UPC and UMC, remained low, throughout the period Hadaway studied. In contrast, the two evangelistic denominations, AG and SBC were recovering and showing increases in new churches by the late 1960s.

Figure 3

Number of New Churches



It is helpful to understand that the Nazarene experience was part of a larger pattern in America. However, the fact that the Nazarene pattern in the late 1960s and '70s was more like the mainline denominations' low plateau than like the evangelistic denominations' beginnings of recovery of new church development is both interesting and disturbing.

Hadaway theorized that “In order to avoid decline in the present and produce growth in the future a denomination must replace its dying churches with healthy churches in areas of population growth.” Furthermore, churches like the AG and SBC “tend to maintain higher rates of new church formation and to be less affected by adverse changes in the religious interest of the population.” This appears to be the result of several significant characteristics. These denominations have a strong commitment to evangelism. They have few rules governing new church formation. They are more open to lay pastors or minimally prepared pastors. They accept small as well as large congregations. And they place primary responsibility for new church development at the local level.

A fourth characteristic is *attraction of the masses*. The Pentecostal Churches generally, and the AG specifically, demonstrate the validity of this quality. People in the upper categories of the socio-economic scale do not have the same motivation to value future rewards as the underprivileged. Working class people living with, or under the threat of poverty are more likely to respond to services that lift people out of the mundane and to a message of deliverance and eventual justice. More affluent people are less likely to be attracted by the promise that God will lift up the poor and bring down the mighty (Luke 1: 52-53).<sup>8</sup>

John Wesley was from the privileged classes, well educated, comfortable in the cultural setting of Oxford, but according to D. Michael Henderson, he believed that if “England were to be reformed according to any biblical pattern, it would have to begin with the workers, the miners, the rude peasants who were beyond the reach of the established church.”<sup>9</sup> When Phineas F. Bresee organized the Church of the Nazarene in Los Angeles, charter members included people who were well educated, affluent, and socially prominent, however according to Timothy L. Smith, most of the members were “recent converts from the poorer sections of Los Angeles.” In fact, “The chief aim of the church was to preach holiness to the poor.”<sup>10</sup> Working class and marginalized people were welcomed and attracted by the ministries of both Wesley and Bresee.

One of the challenges facing denominations is that if they are effective in ministry, they tend to move away from their beginnings among the responsive masses and toward the less responsive privileged classes. As this happens, the movement tends to become more respectable and stable but less effective in outreach. Wesley’s description of this tendency, and liability, was that he did not “see how it is possible, in the nature of things, for any revival of religion to continue long. For religion must necessarily produce both industry and frugality, and these cannot but produce riches. But as riches increase, so will pride, anger, and love of the world in all its branches.”<sup>11</sup>

The often experienced denominational rise in social status tends to work against continuing or renewing ministry among the less fortunate. Liston Pope observed that as a religious group grows it “begins to reach out toward greater influence in society. ...In the process it accommodates gradually to the culture it is attempting to conquer, and thereby loses influence over those relatively estranged from that culture. It counts this loss a gain as its own standards shift and it attracts an increasing number of persons who enjoy the cultural and economic privileges of the society.”<sup>12</sup> As the culture of the church, including buildings, methods, values, and programs are adjusted to the new class, it tends to become less open to and appealing for the classes left behind.

This outcome does not appear to be inevitable. While rising social status in the denomination might result in abandonment of the masses, it may instead result in effective ministry among both the underprivileged and the privileged classes. Like Wesley and Bresee, well educated, affluent, and socially prominent Nazarenes may choose to continue the heritage of intentionally reaching out to less fortunate people. As seen in figure 1 above, the Methodist church continued to be effective far beyond the end of its first century and long after the early converts had become productive citizens. Rising social class evidently did not prevent Methodists from continuing their mission including expansion of the church among new groups that still existed on the edges of society.

A fifth characteristic is *retention of young people*. For a denomination to achieve significant presence in a society it must retain its youth as well as reach outside converts. Denominations that tolerate the loss of large numbers of their youth across the years have difficulty maintaining a significant presence in society.

During the past 50 years mainline churches, particularly, experienced large losses of their youth which contributed to overall membership losses. Several explanations for the losses have been advanced but Carl Dudley concluded “The primary (although not the only) cause of membership decline is the churches’ inability to attract and hold young members.”<sup>13</sup> He goes on to explain that a conflict in values lies at the foundation of youth attrition.<sup>14</sup>

In discussing “Young Dropouts” Kirk Hadaway identified four groups of young dropouts and observed that a major reason for dropouts in three of the groups was that the young people “...have adopted values that are in clear contrast to those of most Americans who attend church regularly.”<sup>15</sup>

Many of these young dropouts are Catholic, yet, Hadaway observes, “...they cannot bring themselves to join another faith that might be somewhat closer to their own values.”<sup>16</sup> The response of one young catholic dropout was revealing, “The indoctrination worked....”<sup>17</sup>

Rodney Stark and Roger Finke have expressed this practice in the form of a proposition: “Under normal circumstances, most people will neither convert nor reaffiliate. Here we see why children usually adhere to the faith of their parents and relatives. By doing so, they protect their kinship ties. By remaining within the faith of those to whom one is attached, one maximizes social capital by retaining the good opinion of others. Research shows that most people do remain within the religious organization in which they were raised”<sup>18</sup>

While mainline churches have been experiencing annual losses in membership, the Catholic Church and the Southern Baptist Convention have managed to continue their growth. The Catholic Church continues to report the entire family, even if one or more members of the family are in fact dropouts. The SBC readily admits that there are several million of their members they cannot locate. It is difficult to determine if comparable record keeping practices by all denominations would equalize these differences.

The Mormon Church appears to have a high rate of retention of their youth. Since they have only recently been included in religious congregations, they have not been incorporated in the dropout studies. There may be some ground for assuming that their emphasis on family and youth missionary work contributes to a high level of retention of their youth.

It is difficult to say what the retention rate of Nazarene youth is or should be. In a ten year longitudinal study of retention of Seventh-day Adventist teenagers, Roger L. Dudley—after several pages of explaining the difficulties of coming to such conclusions—determined that “...at least 40 percent to 50 percent of Seventh-day Adventist teenagers in North America are essentially leaving the church by their middle 20s.”<sup>19</sup>

Dudley found that when other variables were controlled the three strongest predictors of youth not dropping out were having biological parents who were still married and together, more frequent worship with family, and the teen’s intention to remain an active member when they get out on their own. Dudley concluded that, “Having parents who are still together is the best insurance that young persons will not drop out of the faith fellowship. When this is combined with family worship, it is evident that strong families are key to retention of the youth. Building and maintaining such families should be a major task of religious communities.”<sup>20</sup>

The Catholic Church, the Jewish faith, and Mormons have practices that might be understood as rites of passage for young people. For Catholics it is Confirmation. The Jewish Religion has Bar Mitzvah for its youth. Mormons have a very extensive missionary program for its youth.

The Church of the Nazarene does collect a few statistics about the involvement of children and youth. One such figure is the children (less than 18 years of age) of members received by profession of faith. In 2004 there were 8,810 children (whose parents were Nazarene) who became members of the Church of the Nazarene. They represent 29% of all professions of faith—a proportion that for the last 10 years has consistently ranged from 26% to 30%.

Nazarene higher education is often thought of as a way to retain our youth, but the percentage of college age Nazarenes attending a Nazarene university has slid from 46% to 32% over the last 20 years. The factors contributing to this decline are being discussed elsewhere, but the implication of having fewer youth connected to the Nazarene family through higher education will probably have a negative impact on retention.

The potential of youth retention is significant to the growth of the denomination. Since 1970, approximately 650,000 youth have been a part of the Church of the Nazarene.<sup>21</sup> This number represents the potential of Nazarenes between the ages of 12 and 46 if we had 100% retention. Anyone older than 46 or younger than 12 today is not included in this potential total. Additionally, anyone coming to the Church of the Nazarene after their 12<sup>th</sup> birthday is not included.

Compare this potential of 650,000 with our current enrollment between the ages of 12 and 46—approximately 292,000<sup>22</sup>—or our membership of 636,416, or worship attendance of 524,814, and you begin to see the importance of youth retention to denominational growth. Based on these approximations the maximum retention rate for Nazarene youth is 45%, but we all know it is lower than this because of new people between the ages of 13 and 46 who have started attending Nazarene churches. How much lower I'll leave for our discussion time.

After reviewing the research literature, five keys to youth retention were summarized in an article by Christian Smith and David Sikkink.

“First, greater religious commitment and religious similarity of parents and intentionality in parents transmitting their faith to their children is a key factor increasing the chances of their offspring carrying on in the religious traditions of their parents. Second, the quality of relationships between parents and their children matters a lot, with positive, affectionate, and cohesive parent-child relationships increasing the religious commitment and retention of offspring. Third, traditional family structure increases religious retention; situations with married biological parents increases the religious retention of offspring, and subsequent childbearing by offspring reduces the chance of apostasy. Fourth, many life course transitions involving social

disruptions—marriage, divorce, geographical relocation, etc.—significantly increase the chances of religious switching and dropping-out. And fifth, status and ideological discrepancies between religious adherents and the groups to which they belong (e.g., educational differences, disagreements on normative standards) tend to increase the chances of religious switching and sometimes apostasy.”<sup>23</sup>

These five characteristics comprise our hypothetical model. Our model probably deserves not only critical evaluation of its validity but also careful consideration of its potential for bringing renewed growth and vitality to the denomination. Several recommendations can be set forth on the basis of the practical lessons we have identified.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

### **1. Maintain focus while providing flexibility.**

In his classic work on *The Social Teachings of the Christian Churches and Sects*, Ernst Troeltsch, father of the social study of religion, argued that a new religious organization takes shape around a dominant idea. The propagation of the dominant idea gives rise to the organization and shapes its early development.<sup>24</sup>

A religious organization that intends to stand in continuity with its own past should know clearly the dominant idea (and its corollaries) that gave rise to it. But like other social organizations, religious groups pick up accretions over time. These accretions can take the form of new religious ideas that infiltrate the organization at a later point in time, programs and ministries, or new modes of organization. Accretions can promote the core ideas or obscure them. They may even promote the core ideas in one era, and overshadow and obscure them in a later one. Accretions can even compete with core ideas for dominance within the organization.

The ongoing debate over “worship wars” provides an angle for viewing this problem in its practical dimensions. Is “traditional Nazarene music,” influenced by the American gospel music tradition, essential to the Church of the Nazarene? Or can contemporary Christian music be as “Nazarene” as gospel music? What about an older and more classic hymnody linked to Luther, Watts, and Wesley, and associated with a formal liturgy? Is such worship “un-Nazarene”? There are, in fact, people within the Church of the Nazarene who are attracted to liturgical worship, others who vehemently affirm contemporary Christian worship, and those who insist on the vital importance of “traditional Nazarene worship.” But is worship style anything

other than an aesthetic choice? Is any particular worship style essential to the dominant idea that gave rise to the Church of the Nazarene, or a necessary correlate of that dominant idea? If one concludes that a particular worship style is essential to what it means to worship “as a Nazarene,” then it would follow that this essential characteristic must also be imported into other cultures—Asian, African, Latino—something that thoughtful people would hesitate to do.

Religious organizations need to periodically reassess themselves and distinguish between that which is permanent in Christianity and that which is transient. In other words, they need to maintain their focus while striving for flexibility. And they should never absolutize those things which reflect merely the habits and preferences of a particular time, place, or culture.

This is closely associated with the principle of “unity in essentials, liberty in non-essentials, and in all things charity.” This aphorism goes back to the minor Protestant reformer Peter Meldinius (or Petrus Meiderlinus), and it was affirmed by John Wesley and Phineas Bresee, among others, in their times. Indeed, Bresee repeated the aphorism often during the Church of the Nazarene’s early years<sup>25</sup>.

Religious organizations need to be open to new movements that revitalize and renew. In the past quarter century, Nazarenes had to adjust to the rise of Nazarene Compassionate Ministries and the Work and Witness program. While each helped promote the denomination’s core values in new ways, the emergence of each altered existing patterns of service and mission and required readjustments within the church. Flexibility is the key.

## **2. Multiplication of leaders at all levels of the church.**

While the Church of the Nazarene has multiplied the number of pastors and district superintendents over the years, the multiplication of lay leaders and general superintendents has not been comparable. In particular, Nazarenes need a robust sense that every Christian is called into ministry as a part of the body of Christ. In that sense, baptism is not only a sacrament of the church but a summons to ministry for each of us. To some degree, the decline of the Methodist class meeting was partially compensated by the rise of strong lay leadership in the Sunday school class, and that was the system that Nazarenes inherited. But Sunday school as an institution is in sharp decline within American Protestantism today, and the Church of the Nazarene is no exception. A deliberate cultivation of lay leadership, coupled with a strong sense of being the people of God, can help revitalize a denomination.

To suggest an increase in the number of General Superintendents would be a recommendation in contrast with the idea of designating one General Superintendent as president of the Board of General superintendents. The

latter would “reengineer” the church into a different type of organization. “Revitalizing” our historic organizational structure appears to be a more satisfactory approach. Perhaps increasing the number of General Superintendents to a ratio comparable to the 1960 ratio of General Superintendents to districts would foster organizational revitalization by providing direct General Superintendent Leadership to the various segments of the denomination.

### **3. An expansion mentality.**

Decline in new church development during the 1950s and early 60s was common for denominations. Recovery in the 1970s was not. The probable reasons for the AG and SBC recovery of new church evangelism suggest two recommendations for the Church of the Nazarene. First, recognize and affirm the value of congregations of all sizes in a variety of settings. Find ways to support not only lay and ministerial leaders who serve in impressive churches and settings, but also those who serve in small, difficult places. Second, continue to give priority to the U.S.A./Canada Mission/Evangelism Department’s NewStart program which shifts responsibility from districts back to local churches.

### **4. Attraction of the masses.**

When John Wesley set out “to spread scriptural holiness throughout the land,” England, like contemporary America, was not a society experiencing holiness. According to D. Michael Henderson, in order to achieve his audacious goal Wesley “had a difficult choice to make: Would he aim at reformation of the nation from the top down, working among the intellectuals and the aristocracy to bring them back to their evangelical moorings? Or, would he take the message of holiness directly to the people, the countless hordes of England’s illiterate and unchurched working class? That decision faces every new generation of Christian leaders and must be answered with renewed commitment with each successive effort toward awakening the church.”<sup>26</sup>

As our generation seeks again to redeem a nation, the wisdom of Wesley’s choice is clear. The condition of the nation and the character of our heritage cause us to recommend a continuing, intentional expansion of ministry among the millions of unchurched working class and marginalized people.

### **5. Retention of young people.**

Research suggests that strong families are a key in the retention of youth. Helping families stay together and build healthy relationships should be a high priority for our denominational family.

The Church of the Nazarene also needs events and experiences in the life of its youth that bind them tightly to the denomination. Historically, attending a Nazarene College has been effective in bonding youth to the denomination. Currently, a decreasing percentage of Nazarene youth are attending Nazarene colleges. Other means of retaining our youth need to be explored.

Some rite of passage would be helpful. Such plans are available and could be implemented denominationally. Also, a denomination wide emphasis on youth involvement in mission prior to high school graduation might contribute significantly to retention of youth.

In early 21st century American culture, emphasizing individual spirituality, without also providing denominational anchors, will leave our youth open to generic Christianity and likely result in low retention rates.

## CLOSING REMARKS

Preparing this paper has been one of the most delightful episodes of my life. Working on a specific topic for a whole year with Dale Jones, Ken Crow, Rich Houseal and Stan Ingersol has been a wonderful and rewarding experience—to say nothing of the ten or more lunches.

Now that the paper is finished I have tried to reflect on the original assignment and the degree to which we were able to accomplish the task. It is possible that the second century of the Methodist Church might provide a model of continued and increased vitality. The growth graph shows that during its first century the Methodist Church grew to approximately three million. It grew to ten million in its second one-hundred years, with most of the increase occurring in the last half of its second century.

It didn't look this clear when we began the study or even most of the way through our work. When you are in the foothills they usually block your view of the high mountains. Further study of the second century of the Methodist Church might be a worthwhile project.

Never-the-less, we believe the composite model we have advanced has much to commend it. It may, in fact, be a more usable model than a single denomination that has its own distinctive purpose and unique organizational culture.

Our search for a model of denominational renewal has led us to a voluntary response to the question "Shall We Reinvent Our 100 Year Old Denomination?" We prefer the word "reclaim" as the description of the revitalization we believe is possible. We want to see the church reclaim the focus and flexibility that allowed several disparate groups to come together

and form the Church of the Nazarene. We believe reclaiming the expansion of both local and general leadership will contribute to the growth of the denomination. Reclaiming our original passion to spread Christian Holiness across the land will result in the multiplication of worshipping units in the USA and around the world. We have no doubt that reclaiming our original commitment to the masses, particularly the poor, will open vast fields of evangelistic opportunity. Reclaiming our commitment to provide spiritual development for our youth, even though the cost is high, will result in the Nazarene heritage being extended far into the future.

—Kenneth Crow, Richard Houseal, Stan Ingersol, Dale Jones, Bill Sullivan

---

<sup>1</sup> David Moberg, *The Church As A Social Institution; The Sociology Of American Religion*, Englewood Cliffs, N.J., Prentice-Hall, 1962, p. 118-126.

<sup>2</sup> Dale E. Jones, et. al., *Religious Congregations & Membership in the United States*, Nashville, Glenmary Research Center, 2000.

<sup>3</sup> David B. Barrett, et. al., “Status of Global Mission, 2005, in Context of 20th and 21st Centuries,” *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, Vol. 29, No. 1 (January 2005): 29. Barrett places the world population at 6.45 billion people, the number of Christians at 2.14 billion, and the number of Roman Catholics at just under 1.12 billion.

<sup>4</sup> For a general description of the Methodist class and its emphasis on lay leadership, see Wade Crawford Barclay, *Early American Methodism 1769-1844*, Part I, Volume Two: *To Reform the Nation* (New York: Board of Missions and Church Extension of the Methodist Church, 1950), pp. 338-342; also see Carl O. Bangs, *Phineas F. Bresee: His Life in Methodism, the Holiness Movement, and the Church of the Nazarene* (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press, 1995), pp. 28-29, 38. Free Methodist bishop Wilson T. Hogue noted that “the office of class-leader is a unique feature of Methodist economy. . . . By the employment of lay leaders the church’s advantages for the spiritual oversight, discipline and edification of her membership have been greatly multiplied, and the results of preaching and pastoral service on the part of her regular ministers have been remarkably augmented and conserved. It is said that there are about thirty thousand class-leaders in the Methodist Episcopal Church alone . . . [so that] the total number of class-leaders in all the Methodisms of this country must be an aggregate in the neighborhood of fifty thousand.” Wilson T. Hogue, *The Class Meeting as a Means of Grace*, Fourth Edition (Shoals, Ind.: Old Paths Tract Society, n.d.), p. 47.

<sup>5</sup> *Nazarene Messenger* (Nov. 19, 1908): 2; *Journal of the Seventh General Assembly of the Church of the Nazarene*, p. 4; *Manual*, 1928, pp. 157-163; *Manual*, 1952, pp. 217-231; and “The Church at Work,” *Holiness Today* (Feb. 2004): pp. 38-39.

<sup>6</sup> J. B. Chapman, Sermon during the Induction Service for General Superintendent [G. B.] Williamson, Kansas City, Missouri, April 23, 1946, pp. 2-3.

<sup>7</sup> Kirk Hadaway, “Factors Influencing New Church Development in Ten Denominations,” Paper presented at the joint annual meetings of the Religious Research Association and the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion, San Antonio, 1979.

<sup>8</sup> Max Weber, *The Sociology of Religion*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1963, pp. 98-107.

<sup>9</sup> John Wesley’s Class Meeting, Nappanee, Indiana: Francis Asbury Press, 1997, p. 22.

<sup>10</sup> Timothy Smith, *Called Unto Holiness*, Kansas City: Nazarene Publishing House, 1962, pp. 110, 113.

<sup>11</sup> John Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley*, Facsimile edition, Kansas City: Nazarene Publishing House, 1872, XIII, 260-261.

<sup>12</sup> Liston Pope, *Millhands and Preachers*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1942, p. 119.

<sup>13</sup> Carl S. Dudley, *Where Have All Our People Gone?* New York: The Pilgrim Press, 1979, p. 33.

---

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 39.

<sup>15</sup> C. Kirk Hadaway, *What Can We Do About Church Dropouts?* Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1960, p. 69

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 78.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 79.

<sup>18</sup> Rodney Stark and Roger Finke, *Acts of Faith*, Berkeley: University of California Press, p. 119.

<sup>19</sup> Roger L. Dudley, *Why Our Teenagers Leave the Church*, Review and Herald Publishing Association: Hagerstown, MD, 2000, p. 35.

<sup>20</sup> Roger L. Dudley, "Youth Religious Commitment Over Time," *Review of Religious Research*, 1999, volume 41, p. 118.

<sup>21</sup> This figure was computed by taking the enrollment number of youth ages 12-14 each year, dividing the number by 3, and adding the yearly totals together from 1970 to 2004.

<sup>22</sup> This figure was computed by adding the enrollment totals for youth (ages 12-23) with the enrollment total for adults ages 24 to 34, and half of the enrollment total for adults ages 35-54. The 12 to 46 age total is 37% of total enrollment.

<sup>23</sup> Smith, Christian and David Sikkink, "Social Predictors of Retention In and Switching From the Religious Faith of Family of Origin," *Review of Religious Research*, 2003, volume 45, p. 190-191.

<sup>24</sup> Ernst Troeltsch, *The Social Teachings of the Christian Churches and Sects*

<sup>25</sup> Carl O. Bangs, *Phineas F. Bresee: His Life in Methodism, the Holiness Movement, and the Church of the Nazarene* (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press, 1995), p. 227.

<sup>26</sup> John Wesley's Class Meeting, p. 21.