

## **Enthusiasm and Congregation Growth: Evidence from the United Methodist Church**

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### **Abstract**

*Using a data set of over 800 churches from the North Georgia United Methodist Conference we find support for congregation growth being associated with internal factors specific to individual churches such as worship attendance (time commitment), identified givers (money commitment) and new believers joining the congregation (evangelism commitment). External factors such as income growth, location, competition, and population growth are not associated with growing churches. However, churches can still grow even if they lose members. Worship attendance as a proxy for member enthusiasm in growing churches is positively associated with predominantly female, newer, and youthful congregants, but in declining churches is associated with congregations that are predominantly white.*

**Keywords:** church growth, United Methodist Church, enthusiasm, time commitment, money commitment, evangelism commitment.

### **1. Introduction**

The United Methodist Church (UMC) is the third largest denomination in the U.S. However, like other mainline Protestant denominations such as Lutheran, Episcopal, and Presbyterian, the UMC is losing members. The 2010 Yearbook of American and Canadian Churches reported that membership of the UMC dropped by nearly 1% in 2008. In response the UMC commissioned a survey of nearly all of its 33,000 US churches to find out what its growing churches were doing. The responses suggested that there were four key drivers of church vitality: small groups and programs, worship service, lay leadership, and the pastor.

Many academic studies of church growth have concentrated on the growth (and decline) of denominations. By contrast, this paper examines congregation growth within individual churches of the North Georgia United Methodist Conference - the largest UMC conference in America. Its mission is to nurture people of faith and to aggressively reach seekers of faith. Our analysis complements that of the UMC survey in that we find church growth is associated with member enthusiasm within the congregation.

### **2. Literature Review**

Why do churches grow or decline? A substantial academic literature is being collated that answers this question. Olson, D.V.A (1989), for example, suggests friendships; Iannaccone (1994), strictness; Bruce, Woolever, Wulff, and Smith-Williams (2006), the input of worshipers; and Iannaccone, Olson, and Stark (1995), religious resources. Recently, De Wetter (2011) and Roozen (2008) used the concept of church vitality as a proxy for church health as well as growth. These researchers showed that contemporary worship, one that gave worshipers a sense of God's presence in worship, was a catalyst for congregational vitality and member growth. However, a common theme running through many of these studies is some measure of enthusiastic, committed, or active members.

Haywood (2005) suggests that church enthusiasts are involved in the recruitment process for a limited period of time, and their presence in the church community is central to successful evangelism efforts that add new members mainly through conversions of unbelievers. It is this subset of the church that drives growth through their ability to reproduce themselves. Though member losses play a role in church growth, failure to reach a threshold of “reproduction potential” is a more powerful driver in declining churches.

Kelley (1986) attempted to explain “why conservative churches are growing.” His conclusion was that conservative churches were able to attract and retain an active and committed membership. Iannaccone (1994) supports this conclusion, suggesting that strict churches are able to screen out members who lack commitment and therefore reduce free riding. Using a measure of distinctiveness as a proxy for strictness, Iannaccone (1994) confirms that more conservative denominations are growing faster than more liberal denominations.

Bruce et al. (2006) using data from the Presbyterian Church (USA), found that churches were more likely to be growing when (1) larger percentages of worshippers are growing spiritually; (2) the percentage of worshippers who started attending in the previous five years is larger; and (3) larger percentages of worshippers see their leaders as empowering. However, they find that a measure of enthusiasm “participating in the congregation” is not important. Being a regular attendee of worship services, involved in small groups such as Sunday school, and holding leadership roles were not significantly associated with church growth. However, Dudley and Cummings (1983) found that for Seventh Day Adventists the percentage of members meeting in small groups was positively associated with church growth.

Iannaccone et al. (1995) found that faster growing denominations demand and receive larger commitments of time and money from their members. They argue that a church’s survival depends on the number of members who devote time over and above standard worship attendance. They found that those denominations that have higher percentages attending religious services “several times a week” are faster growing. They also found that those faster growing churches have members who contribute more in dollars. They suggested that a fully defined model of growth would also include variables such as the religious content, organizational goals and commitment to growth, members’ socioeconomic attributes, competing churches, as well as economic, social, and demographic trends, among many others. However, when some of these variables are used as independent variables, they do a much poorer job of predicting denominational growth than do time and money commitment. Their data limitations, however, prohibit them from running regressions with all the variables at the same time. Turning to a single denomination, the United Church of Christ, they measure money as per capita contributions and time as the ratio of attendance to members. These two variables are positively associated with growth.

Our data set on over 800 United Methodist churches in Georgia allows us to approach a more completely specified model of church growth that includes variables Iannaccone et al., (1995) and others were not able to include. For example, we include variables to measure local competition from other churches, local population and income growth, and elements of the socioeconomic attributes of the congregation. We also extend the measures of commitment developed in Iannaccone et al. (1995) to include not only time and money, but also evangelical commitment. The next section describes our empirical model.

### **3. Model**

The starting point for our member enthusiasm model is Hayward’s (2005) general model of church growth and decline. The basic assumption of his model is that optimal church survival is the result of a core of enthusiastic members who recruit new enthusiastic members into the church. His assumptions as outlined on p181 are:

1. Unbelievers are converted, and recruited, into the church through contact with a subset of believers, called enthusiasts.
2. After a period of time, the enthusiasts cease to be active in conversion, remaining in the church as inactive members.
3. The enthusiastic period starts immediately after an unbeliever is converted.

As Hayward suggests, “a church needs to make enthusiasts not just converts if it is to avoid extinction” (p191). Our premise is that enthusiastic members do more than recruit non-members to become enthusiasts (evangelism-commitment). Enthusiasts add value to their church by validating the purpose and vision of the church.

They help transform their congregation with spiritual vitality; therefore, member transformation brings a higher level of commitment, which can be demonstrated by contributions of their resources in time and money commitment to their church. To summarize, enthusiasts bring vitality and growth to their church via conversions from non-members and transformations from less committed members.

**Figure I: Member Enthusiasm Model depicting conversions, reversions and progressing levels of commitment**

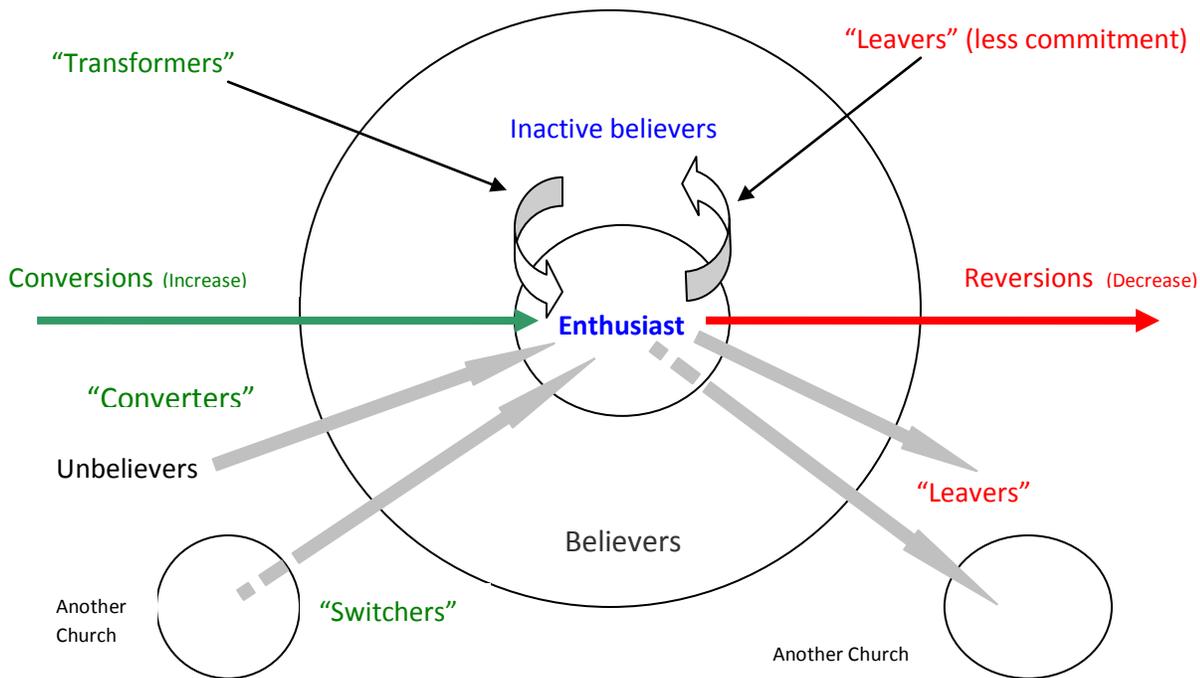


Figure I represents levels of commitment. People outside the circle are unbelievers who are not a part of any church. The area inside the circle represents members of a church. The periphery of the circle represents uncommitted and inactive members or visitors. In the center circle are the core members, enthusiasts, who fully commit their time, money and evangelistic efforts to the church.

Members can change their level of commitment, represented by arrows transforming members either toward or away from enthusiasts. When enthusiasts are created, members are “transformed”. When enthusiasts are lost, members are considered “leavers” because they left one level of commitment for another. Spiritual vitality and member growth is improved when enthusiasts are gained from either conversions (unbelievers to enthusiasts or switchers from other churches) or transformations (inactive members to enthusiasts). Enthusiasts are lost due to death or reversions (leavers who leave for another church or to inactive believers). As enthusiasts are created, the church benefits with more time, money and evangelism commitment.

The three broad categories of commitment are further subdivided. Four evangelism-commitment variables represent enthusiasm through non-member conversions. The specification *new* is the summation of new members via profession of faith (converter) or switching from other UMC churches or other denominations (switcher). We also include the variable *prep* for the number of people on the church’s preparatory role in 2005. Natural growth and decline also occurs through births and deaths, therefore our measure of reversion, *lost*, is the summation of members transferring to another UMC church or denomination, those being withdrawn by the conference, and death. While we do not know the number of births per congregation from our data, we have some idea of the age of the congregation; *young* is the number of children and youth in all classes and groups. All these variables are measured as a percentage of members at the beginning of the study period (Iannacconne et al. (1995) do the same).

Variables that represent enthusiasm through member transformation include four time-commitment variables and five money-commitment variables. The first time-commitment variable is *worshiper*- the average attendance at the principal weekly worship as a percentage of membership in an individual church at the beginning of our study period, 2005. This is a similar proxy for enthusiasm as used in Iannaccone et al. (1995), Roozen (2009) and de Wetter et al. (2010). This percentage represents congregational members who are actively involved in their church by attending weekly services. Most churches, however, have a list of members who are not actively engaged in the church but remain on the church roles as inactive members. In our sample the average *worshiper* percentage in 2005 was 51.74%, suggesting that just over half a congregation are enthusiastic and just less than half are inactive believers. We also include three other time-commitment measures of enthusiasm (all measured in 2005): *adults*, *Sunday school attendance* and *missions*. The first variable is adults in all classes as a percentage of membership while the second is Sunday school attendance as a percentage of membership. Finally, we measure the number of people involved in missions as a percentage of membership. All of our enthusiasm variables are measured at the beginning of the study period, i.e. 2005. The first two terms (*adults* and *Sunday school attendance*) have been used before in analyzing church growth (Bruce et al. 2006; and Dudley and Cummings, 1983) while the third term is unique to this study.

Financial variables that reflect member money-commitment include the church's *assets*, including the value of the church, land, building, and equipment, as well as any parsonage, furniture or any other financial assets. Churches with more assets, such as new family life centers or meeting halls may be better able to attract regular churchgoers. Churches receive revenue from several sources including *pledges* from members, money from people who identify their giving (*identified givers*), people who do not identify their giving (*non-identified givers*), as well as interest, the sale of assets, fundraisers, and building-use fees. We use *pledge* as well as money received from *identified giver* and *non-identified giver* in this study (all in \$ million, all measured in 2005) as additional financial variables. Churches that have larger revenues may be in a better financial position to evangelize. Hayward (2005) and Olson, D (2008) recognize that the ability of enthusiasts to bring in new members who may also become enthusiasts is in some cases limited by demographic and economic factors within the community the church is located. We therefore include in our model five external variables.

The first is *population growth* of the county the church is located in from 2005 to 2008 taken from the census bureau. We also include a dummy variable equal to unity if the church is located in a *rural* county in 2005 as identified by the Georgia Department of Revenue. Some churches in the sample are part of a *charge* where several churches share a pastor and other resources. A church's ability to recruit new enthusiasts may also be determined by the number of other churches in the area. We therefore include a variable *competition* that is the number of UMC churches located in the county a church is located in. We also collected the number of all churches (all denominations) in the county from the Association of Religion Data Archives, but found this was highly correlated with the number of UMC churches ( $\rho = 0.96$ ). We measure the percentage change in personal income per capita from 2005 to 2008, for the county in which the church is located (*income growth*).

Overall, we include eighteen independent variables, thirteen internal (specific to an individual church) and five external (relating to a group of churches). The internal variables representing member enthusiasm include four evangelism-commitment, four time-commitment and five money-commitment variables. These variables have low correlations with each other; the highest correlation is between income growth and UMC competition at -0.53.

Since the conference's mission for each church is "to nurture the people of faith and to aggressively reach seekers of faith", our dependent variable measuring *church growth* is the percentage change in membership between 2005 and 2008. Each denomination may use different definitions of membership, which could confound the definition of enthusiasm and growth across those denominations. However, since our study is based on churches from the same denomination (United Methodist Church) that issue is avoided. Our primary research question is how this change in membership is associated with the member enthusiasm. Since all of our independent variables, other than population and income growth, are measured at the beginning of the study period (2005) we can be sure that these variables preceded growth and are not the result of growth. Summary statistics for our variables are presented in table I.

Table I: Summary statistics

Variable	Definition	Commitment variable (internal or external)	Mean	Standard deviation
<i>new</i>	New members via profession of faith, joining from other UMC churches or other denominations as a percentage of membership in 2005	Evangelism (internal)	5.42	6.30
<i>prep</i>	Number of people of the church's preparatory roll as a percentage of membership in 2005.	Evangelism (internal)	8.35	9.33
<i>lost</i>	Summation of members transferring to another UMC church or denomination, withdrawal by the conference or death, as a percentage of membership in 2005	Evangelism (internal)	6.01	19.20
<i>young</i>	Number of children and youth in all classes and groups as a percentage of membership in 2005	Evangelism (internal)	18.79	19.54
<i>worshiper</i>	Average attendance at the principal weekly worship as a percentage of membership in 2005	Time (internal)	51.74	29.99
<i>adults</i>	Number of adults in all classes as a percentage of membership in 2005	Time (internal)	26.04	20.75
<i>Sunday school</i>	Number of people in Sunday School as a percentage of membership in 2005	Time (internal)	21.34	15.83
<i>missions</i>	Number of people involved in missions as a percentage of membership in 2005	Time (internal)	0.60	2.29
<i>assets</i>	Value of all church assets in 2005 (in \$ million)	Money (internal)	2.685	7.484
<i>pledge</i>	Value of pledges in 2005 (in \$ million)	Money (internal)	0.16	0.49
<i>identified giver</i>	Value of money received from identified givers in 2005 (in \$ million)	Money (internal)	0.11	0.23
<i>non-identified giver</i>	Value of money received from non-identified givers in 2005 (in \$ million)	Money (internal)	0.01	0.02
<i>population growth</i>	Percentage population growth of the county in which the church is located from 2005-2008	Demographic (external)	7.00	5.29
<i>rural</i>	Dummy variable equal to unity if the church is located in a rural county in 2005	Demographic (external)	0.18	0.38
<i>charge</i>	Dummy variable equal to unity if the church is a member of a charge in 2005	Economic (external)	0.24	0.43
<i>competition</i>	Number of UMC churches in the county in which the church is located (in 2005)	Economic (external)	23.67	19.49
<i>income growth</i>	Percentage personal income per capita growth of the county in which the church is located from 2005-2008	Economic (external)	11.80	5.06
<i>growth</i>	Percentage change in membership from 2005-2008		3.77	35.69

#### 4. Results

The North Georgia United Methodist Church collects data from the individual churches in its district on an annual basis and makes the data available on their website. There were 812 churches that had complete data for 2005 and 2008. These churches averaged a growth rate of 3.77 percent over the three years i.e. a little over 1% per annum – higher than for the denomination as a whole. The results of our regression are presented in column 1 of table II and show that three of our measures of member enthusiasm are significantly correlated with church growth: one evangelism-commitment variable: *new* members as a percentage of all members; one time-commitment variable: *worshiper* (worship attendance as percentage of membership); and one money-commitment variable: *identified giver*. A fourth time-commitment variable, *adults*, is marginally significant (p=10.3).

**Table II: OLS regression of congregation growth**

Variable	Commitment level	All churches	Growing churches	Declining churches
<i>intercept</i>		-10.467*	9.898	-10.456*
		(-2.00)	(1.31)	(-1.80)
<i>New</i>	Evangelism	0.745***	0.460	0.125
		(2.72)	(1.27)	(0.75)
<i>prep</i>	Evangelism	0.078	-0.123	0.102
		(0.93)	(-1.34)	(0.85)
<i>lost</i>	Evangelism	0.185	0.289**	-0.054
		(1.26)	(2.26)	(-0.50)
<i>young</i>	Evangelism	-0.024	-0.177*	0.137
		(-0.28)	(-1.67)	(1.33)
<i>Worshiper</i>	Time	0.121**	0.142*	-0.075
		(2.01)	(1.79)	(-1.05)
<i>adults</i>	Time	0.222	0.246	0.058
		(1.63)	(1.29)	(0.65)
<i>Sunday school</i>	Time	-0.135	-0.109	-0.088
		(-1.06)	(-0.83)	(-0.81)
<i>missions</i>	Time	0.299	0.393	0.052
		(0.76)	(1.27)	(0.13)
<i>assets</i>	Money	0.042	0.032	0.185*
		(0.43)	(0.55)	(1.72)
<i>pledge</i>	Money	-1.74	-1.333	-9.007
		(-0.86)	(-0.89)	(-1.36)
<i>identified giver</i>	Money	4.290*	0.299	8.639
		(1.70)	(0.11)	(0.92)
<i>non-identified giver</i>	Money	-58.061	-91.293	-104.396
		(-0.84)	(-1.20)	(-0.89)
<i>population growth</i>		0.351	0.356	-0.159
		(0.97)	(0.62)	(-0.80)
<i>rural</i>		2.630	0.651	2.604
		(0.78)	(0.13)	(1.12)
<i>charge</i>		-2.055	-4.018	-0.357
		(-0.85)	(-1.16)	(-0.18)
<i>competition</i>		-0.005	0.021	0.004
		(-0.07)	(0.18)	(0.08)
<i>income growth</i>		-0.208	-0.498	-0.011
		(0.68)	(-1.02)	(-0.05)
R-squared		0.07	0.08	0.08
F statistic		4.69	3.05	0.99
N		812	442	370

Note: Heteroskedasticity robust t stats in parentheses. \* p<0.1; \*\* p<0.05; \*\*\* p<0.001.

Attracting *new* members from converters or switchers has a significantly positive impact on church growth. Increasing the abundance of *new* members by ten percentage points will increase church growth 7.45 percentage points. These new members, according to Hayward's model, are more likely to be enthusiasts as they actively choose a new church. The coefficient on *worshiper* suggests that a 10 percentage point increase in the worship percentage will lead to 1.21 percent higher growth rate in church membership. Finally, an extra thousand dollars from *identified givers* is associated with increased growth of 4 percentage points.

What are growing churches doing that the others are not? To answer this question we re-run our regressions breaking them into two samples (Table II, columns 2 and 3). One sample contains those churches, which are experiencing a decline, or no change, in membership (n=370). The mean rate of decline in membership over the three years is 12.85%. The second sample contains those churches that increased their membership (mean = 17.68%) between 2005 and 2008 (n=442). The significant variables associated with positive church growth are the evangelism commitment variables *lost* and *young*, as well as the time commitment variable *worshiper*. The only variable associated with declining churches was their *assets*. The positive coefficient suggests that larger church assets are associated with lower rates of decline. It seems likely from the previous results that new members are more likely to be enthusiasts, but transformed less committed members may also contribute.

According to Roozen (2009) and De Wetter (2010), the primary evidence of a congregation's spiritual vitality (enthusiasm) is the presence of God among members attending worship. Therefore, our variable, *worshiper*, appropriately approximates the concept of member enthusiasm or spiritual vitality. Other characteristics of the congregation may be associated with enthusiasm, for example gender, race or age. We therefore use the percentage of the church members who are *female* and *white* in addition to our previously defined *young* variable. In addition to these congregational variables, we include the church's assets and level of giving. To test these hypotheses we regress our measure of spiritual vitality, *worshiper*, on these other variables. The results are presented in table 3.

**Table III: Church characteristics and enthusiasm (vitality)**

	All churches	Growing churches	Declining churches
<i>intercept</i>	27.738** (2.33)	-0.635 (-0.04)	59.048*** (3.27)
<i>female</i>	0.404** (2.36)	0.752*** (3.02)	0.109 (0.49)
<i>white</i>	-0.073 (-1.87)	0.046 (1.16)	-0.225** (-2.55)
<i>new</i>	0.929*** (4.10)	1.173*** (4.07)	0.098 (0.26)
<i>young</i>	0.198** (2.42)	0.108 (1.09)	0.317** (2.24)
<i>assets</i>	-0.314 (-1.43)	-0.285 (-0.94)	-0.334 (-0.82)
<i>pledge</i>	-4.669 (-1.30)	-4.731 (-0.91)	-6.089 (-1.25)
<i>identified giver</i>	-8.090 (-1.14)	-7.565 (-0.85)	-19.458** (-2.11)
<i>non identified giver</i>	-3.711 (-0.04)	79.003 (0.42)	-102.883 (-1.54)
R-squared	0.12	0.14	0.15
F statistic	8.07	4.99	4.68
N	812	442	370

Note: Heteroskedasticity robust t stats in parentheses. \* p<0.1; \*\* p<0.05; \*\*\* p<0.001.

Looking first at all churches (column 1) the attraction of new members is important for spiritual vitality. Recall Hayward (2005) suggests it is new members who are enthusiastic for a limited period of time. Of the congregational variables, the percentage of the membership that is *female* has a positive effect on enthusiasm. This is in line with Hadaway, who states that men tend to be less religiously active. The percentage of the membership that is *young* has a positive association with enthusiasm. Interestingly, spiritual vitality is never associated with giving or the church assets. Building a new family life center or encouraging increased offerings will not generate enthusiasts. Looking at growing churches (column 2), the only variables that are associated with spiritual vitality are *female* and *new*. In declining churches (column 3) the percentage of the membership that is *white* has a negative coefficient. This suggests that as the percentage of the membership becomes more homogenous and white, vitality declines.

## 5. Discussion

These results support several of Hayward's results. First, Hayward's model predicts "a church needs to make enthusiasts not just converts if it is to avoid extinction" (p191). This is illustrated by the positive and significant coefficients on *worshiper*, *new*, and *identified giver*. Note, however, that the coefficient on *new* is .745: not all *new* members become enthusiasts. Haywood (2005) states "only a fraction of the new converts are enthusiasts. The remainder become inactive believers straight away and never play a part in the recruitment process, perhaps due to shyness, social isolation or because their conversion came about for social reasons only, lacking any deep conviction". (p181/2) It may seem that we are predicting growth based on measures that are themselves measures of growth. We believe however, that there are several groups within a congregation including a core of enthusiasts who recruit and convert *new* members. The outer circle (see figure I) contains the inactive believers: a group of people who are attending worship services but are not enthusiasts. It takes time for unbelievers (outside the circle) and inactive believers to be recruited and converted.

This process results in a percentage of attendance to membership that is greater in growing churches (55.64%) than in declining churches (47.09%). We argue that identified givers may also be categorized as enthusiasts; pledges are often made by current members and non identified givers are often casual or temporary visitors to a church. Identified givers show their enthusiasm by a money commitment over and above pledges (if a member) or by additional giving out of identification with the purpose and vision of the church.

Significant variables among growing churches are *worshiper*, *young*, and surprisingly, *lost* members as a percentage of all members. The latter is surprising since no study has associated member loss with church growth! The sign on the *lost* members suggests that churches still grow even as they lose members. Maybe this is because, as Hayward identifies, churches with enthusiastic members may tolerate member turnover better than stagnant or declining churches. Another explanation for the healthy result of member losses may be reflected in the research of Roozen (2008), Bruce et al (2006) and Warren (1995) who found the importance in members embracing their church's purpose and vision. Churches with rapid growth may acquire members who discover that they do not agree with the vision and then leave to seek another church with a more compatible vision. This type of member loss is distinct and healthy for growing churches because unity and mission is built among like-minded members. In addition, member loss may be healthy for the enthusiastic believer who chooses to leave and join another church rather than become inactive or uncommitted.

Further, "if the reproduction potential is inadequate, then stemming losses will not avoid extinction" (p191). Even though the declining churches are losing members, this is not as important as their lack of enthusiasts. As Hayward says "often great emphasis is placed on retaining adults and children in order to turn a church around. However, if its reproduction potential is too low, then the church's inability to reproduce enthusiasts, not its losses, is at the heart of its decline" (p191). Declining churches seem to fall into this trap: the positive coefficient on *young* in column 3 of Table III suggests that declining churches are indeed placing too much emphasis on retaining children without creating enthusiasts. Moreover, we have seen that growing churches do not have to have a young congregation and churches can still grow even if they lose members. Maybe this is because, as Haywood identifies, it is new members who are enthusiastic, so the loss of older members does not hurt growth.

The other time-commitment factors involving church groups that were not associated with growth were participation in *adults*, *Sunday school*, and *mission* groups. These categories are traditionally associated with member interests and are established entities within churches. Social cliques and established relationships may deter new enthusiasts from participation. Additionally, these activities are usually a subset of enthusiastic believers. Perhaps a better measure would be to study the number of new groups of adults, Sunday school classes or mission projects to better reflect member enthusiasm.

Despite support for several of Haywood's hypotheses, our independent variables do a poor job of explaining the variation in church growth (R squared = 0.07). This value is not, however, out of line with other studies, for example Iannaccone et al. (1995), and reflects the "noisiness" of the data. As Iannaccone et al. suggest, given the noise associated with the data, the fact that some variables are significantly associated with church growth suggests they are pretty strong indicators. Additionally, the F-statistic is large ( $F(17, 794) = 4.69$ ,  $p = 0.0000$ ) suggesting the regression as a whole is significant. Certain intangible measures, like *ecclesia* - the gathering of people for the spiritual purposes of worship, relationship, and discipleship using the Holy Spirit - are unique to Protestant religious construct and to local church health. The ability of economics to bridge the chasm between tangible measures and less tangible ecclesial measures may be another contributor to the low R squared values among these types of religious studies.

Interestingly, the external economic and demographic variables are never significantly associated with church growth. These non-determinants include whether a church is in a *rural* county, the level of local *competition*, *population growth*, and *income growth*. These results are interesting because intuition and previous academic and theological works suggest that they should be associated with church growth. The most powerful demographic determinant has been *population growth*. For example, Olson, D.T. (2008) found population growth is positively associated with overall church growth and Iannaccone (1995) found population growth is specifically associated with growth in the United Church of Christ. Iannaccone (1994) finds that household income is positively associated with denominational growth. Finke and Stark (1992) find that the presence of competing organizations is important. Perhaps external demographic variables have less to do with church growth today because of sociological changes in family mobility.

People no longer attend their local church but commute across county lines to find the right church home.

Financial variables have been studied extensively to determine if they have an impact on church growth. In our study, only *identified giver* was found to be a significant variable. Most of our financial variables, the amount of money received by a church from pledges and other giving, are not significantly associated with growth. The lack of significance on the *pledge* variable may be because pledges are a lagging indicator of church growth with newcomers and the less-committed members in a church feeling a responsibility to give, only after a period of time. This is consistent with findings from De Wetter (2011) and Olson, D.T. (2008). Good financial health does not correlate with either church vitality or the absence of conflict, but a church's poor financial condition does correlate with increased conflict.

Finding *identified givers* as significant to church growth is unique to our study. We argue that identified givers fall into the highest level of commitment category, enthusiasts. *Pledge* giving is member giving that is expected based upon a prospective promise, but identified giving is member giving that is spontaneous and distinct from pledge giving. Identified giving therefore represents transformed or converted members with increased commitment. They are providing unexpected money regardless of their pledge status. *Non-identified giving* is casual giving that is generally made by visitors and/or uncommitted members and represents the smallest of the three categories. Anecdotal experience as well as casual discussions with members of other Christian denominations who serve on finance committees suggests that this type of church financial accounting is not unique; however, we are not familiar with any study on this subject.

Declining or stagnant churches are associated with their *assets*. The positive coefficient suggests that larger church assets are associated with lower rates of decline. More assets may stem the tide of decline for a while but it is these churches' inability to create enthusiasts that is threatening their survival.

An enthusiastic congregation has a higher percentage of females. This is in agreement with Hadaway (2006), who states that men tend to be less religiously active. However, as the membership becomes more homogenous and white, vitality declines. This is in line with other research (Hadaway, 2006), which finds that predominantly white congregations are least likely to grow. Hadaway suggests that multi-racial congregations tend to have more dynamic, exciting, and inspirational worship services. Roozen (2008) shows that spiritual vitality is associated with contemporary worship, youth activities, evangelism and recruitment efforts, sense of mission, developing a vision, and a strong sense of self.

## **6. Practical Implications**

Church growth is a complex phenomenon. For instance, growth over time may not reflect the state of church health at a particular moment. Church growth and church health are interrelated but not the same. The tools of modern economics helps us study religious organizations, but it is important to recognize that the less tangible ecclesial aspects, unique to Protestant religious construct, may be more difficult to study using typical church databases.

Enthusiastic members of a church are active in recruiting new members and converting them to Christianity. In addition, enthusiasts create a kind of organizational excitement and devotion that attracts nonmembers and members to transform themselves to higher levels of commitment. Hadaway (2006), Roozen (2008) and de Wetter et al. (2010) identify these kinds of members as spiritually vital. All agree that it is these members who drive church growth and health.

Church growth is driven by enthusiastic members. This enthusiasm is multi faceted and manifests itself in time, money and evangelism commitments. Church leaders will note that all these variables are internal to a specific church. Indeed, external factors have little effect on church growth. They can no longer blame their poor performance on economic or demographic factors.

We associate larger giving from identified givers with church growth and we have argued that this supports the member enthusiasm model. However, the exact relationship between giving, enthusiasm and growth is complex and could be understood better. For example, why is *identified giver* positively associated with congregational growth, but negatively associated with vitality in declining churches? Another novel finding in this study is that growing churches are associated with members leaving. It represents a flux of members moving in and out.

Though conventional wisdom suggests that members look for a church compatible with their beliefs, more research needs to be done to determine the primary reason for this flux. It is not known if the leavers are less committed members who no longer identify with the growing enthusiasm and perhaps new stricter demands placed on them, or if the leavers are new enthusiastic members who did a poor job of vetting their new church and decide to seek a church with a purpose and vision more compatible to their own.

Denominational leaders and religious researchers should consider these factors when studying member enthusiasm in the church organizational-ecclesial construct. However, research is necessary to determine if these results are present in other Christian denominations, or indeed other religions. There is still much research that needs to be done to understand what makes a church congregation enthusiastic, spiritually alive, and vital.

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