

GROWTH TRENDS OF NEW CONGREGATIONS IN THE METROPOLITAN SOUTH

A Study of Church Growth Factors Among New Congregations
in Large Urban Areas Where Southern Baptists
are Numerically Strong

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A STUDY OF CHURCH GROWTH FACTORS AMONG NEW CONGREGATIONS
IN LARGE URBAN AREAS WHERE SOUTHERN BAPTISTS
ARE NUMERICALLY STRONG

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this study is to identify some of the variables which influence the direction of numerical change in membership and financial strength of new congregations in urban areas where Southern Baptists are the predominant religious group by number of congregations and members. Texas was used as a representative area because of the relative strength of the denomination, because the state has had phenomenal growth in urbanization, because more than 250 new congregations have been organized there since 1960, and because of the interest of the state mission staff in such a research.

Acknowledgements

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his personal involvement in the organizing of over fifty churches in Houston during the past ten years proved to be of inestimable worth to the project.

Method of Study

There were four sets of data assembled for this study: 123 Baptist General Convention of Texas (BGCT) churches in metropolitan associations (SMSA's) that were organized between 1964 and 1969; 52 BGCT churches affiliated with the Union Baptist Association (Houston) that were organized between 1960 and 1969; 50 BGCT churches organized since 1953 that had received church extension aid from the BGCT; and 65 BGCT Latin American churches for whom data were available in 1969.

Preliminary examination of the data for the 123 churches 1 to 5 years since date of organization, revealed the need for special details on a select sample of churches. Thus Houston was selected but the age of churches was expanded to include all that were organized since 1959 and reported data in 1969 association minutes. The data in this study do not include churches that were organized and did not report in 1969 (perhaps because they disaffiliated with their association, chose not to report, or have disbanded).

The examination of the 123 churches also revealed the need to study the churches that received church extension aid from the Baptist General Convention of Texas. These totalled 50 churches.

The preliminary study also revealed the need to isolate Anglo churches from Latin American congregations since there appeared to be a predominance of the latter among the slower growing groups of churches. Only those Latin churches are included which fully reported data in 1969.

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Study Variables

The table below lists the variables that were assembled for each set of churches.

TABLE 1
STUDY VARIABLES BY SETS OF CHURCHES IN THE STUDY

Variables	Church Set			
	Texas	Houston	Aid	Latin
Number of Churches	123	52	50	65
Date of Organization	X	X	X	X
Resident Members	X	X	X	X
Average Sunday School Attendance	X	X	X	X
Total Receipts	X	X	X	X
Pastor's Salary	X	X	X	X
Total Mission Gifts	X	X	X	X
Total Cooperative Program	X	X	X	X
Value of Property	X	X	X	X
Total Church Indebtedness	X	X	X	X
Amount of Debt Paid '69	X	X	X	X
Number of Sunday School Officers and Teachers	a	a	a	a
Year of Members Church had the Year Organized	X	X	a	
Relocation (Inner City to Open Country)	X	X	X	
Number of Persons Enrolled in Sunday School:				
Ages 9-16	X	X	X	
Ages 17 and Older	X	X	X	
Social-Economic Class		X		
Number of Years as a Mission		X		
Started from a Split (yes/no)				
Received Pastoral Aid (yes/no)		X		
Number of Leaders Sent from Sponsoring Church		X		
Had Serious Problems Since Organization (yes/no)		X		
Original Site was Purchased		X		
Year First Unit Constructed		X		
Number of Building Units Added		X		

^aInsufficient data reported.

Comparison of Fast Growing and Slow Growing Churches

The mean average number of resident members was calculated for the churches organized within each year by sets. Those churches for that year which fell below the mean were classified as below average size churches while those which rose above the mean were classified as above average size churches in number of members. Then,

using Pearson's Product Moment Correlation Coefficient statistic to test linear correlation we were able to establish trends in church growth.

Trends in Rate of Growth

The larger churches in the Texas-123 set, which we will refer to, hereafter, as "faster growing," appear to increase by about 75 resident members per year, an annual increase of 20%. The smaller churches, which we will refer to as "slower growing," appear to increase by about 12 resident members per year, an annual increase of 12%. Table 2 reports the number of churches by their pattern of growth and the number of years since they were organized as a church.

TABLE 2

NUMBER OF "FASTER GROWING" AND "SLOWER GROWING" CHURCHES BY YEARS
SINCE ORGANIZED IN THE TEXAS 123-SET

Years Since Organized	Pattern of Growth	
	Faster Growing	Slower Growing
1	7	7
2	8	14
3	7	10
4	9	10
5	8	15
6	6	22

The Houston churches in the Texas-123 set were almost evenly divided between fast and slow, eleven fast and ten slow. When five more years were added to the sample, thirty-one more churches were included. In the new set the faster growing appear to increase by about 15 resident members per year, an annual increase of 4%, while the slower growing appear to increase by about 8 resident members per year, an annual increase of 5%. Closely parallel to the growth rate was the beginning size of these two groups of churches; the slower growing were organized with about 110 members while the faster growing started with approximately 300 resident members.

The Texas-Aid churches were not divided between faster growing and slower growing because the rate of growth did not follow a straight trend line. The churches

that received aid were larger than average when compared to the Texas-123 set. They showed only slight increases during their first four years of existence, then began to accelerate spectacularly. Churches between one and four years since organization averaged between 200 and 250 members. During the fifth year there appeared to be an increase of 25; during the sixth year, an increase of 40; during the seventh year, 60; the eighth, 75; the ninth, 100; and for the tenth year, there appeared to be an increase of between 135 and 150 members per church to an average size between 650 and 700 resident members, an increase of about 25% the tenth year.

A totally different pattern is defined from the data on Latin American churches. Only four churches in this set reported more than 400 resident members. The largest with 749 members is 52 years old, the second largest has 665 members and is 71 years old. The "faster growing" churches among Latin American congregations increased in membership on an average of three to four additional members per year while the slower growing averaged less than one additional member per year. The faster growing churches in this set constituted with a larger number of members than did the slower growing congregations, 150 and 40 members, respectively. Table 3 reports the expected church size after selected years from date of organization.

TABLE 3-A

EXPECTED NUMBER OF RESIDENT MEMBERS BY AGE OF CHURCH FOR LATIN AMERICAN CONGREGATIONS IN TEXAS BY PATTERN OF GROWTH

Age of Church	Expected Membership Size	
	Slower Growing	Faster Growing
10	46	185
20	53	225
30	61	260
40	70	290
50	81	320

Church planners should be responsive to different types of churches because certain types require longer periods of time to gain numerical strength. The study of the interplay of variables that follows will attempt to provide data from which insights can be gained.

Location as a Factor

Size of City

Table 4 shows that more churches tend to have been started in the large metropolises than in the medium size and smaller metropolises. The table also shows that the churches in the larger metropolises also tend to be among the faster growing. The medium size metropolis seems to have had an overabundance of slower growing churches with 17 out of the 18 churches started, so classified.

TABLE 3-B
NUMBER OF "FASTER GROWING" AND "SLOWER GROWING" CHURCHES BY
SIZE OF CITY IN THE TEXAS-123 SET

Population of City	Faster Growing		Slower Growing	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
50,000 - 250,000	16	41	33	59
250,000 - 500,000	1	5	17	95
500,000 or more	30	48	32	52
Total	47	39	72	61

The fact that the faster growing churches are more likely to be in larger cities may be related to the social composition of the neighborhood and subdivisions. That is, the larger cities have more "likeminded" people living in a given segment of the city and, thus, are more easily attracted in large numbers to the new church. A new church in a medium size city does not have the large population to call upon who are of similar life style (income, education, vocation, family patterns, housing taste, etc.) as is present in the large metropolis. The small metropolis tends to be more isolated and therefore its culture is more likely to be homogeneous.

Suburban and Neighborhood

To test these suppositions the data on Union County (Houston) were carefully cross-tabulated. These congregations were divided according to neighborhood-inner city, suburban and fringe city locations. The neighborhood-inner city churches appeared to have a measurable rate of membership growth, starting with about 70 members and increasing to 325 in ten years while the suburban churches began with approximately 300 members and as many began to lose members as gained, thus no patterns could be accurately defined. Only seven churches fell into the fringe city category, so no growth trend could be determined; however, from the neighborhood/suburban split several important differences can be seen.

The faster growing new churches of Houston tend to be suburban, white collar and are more likely to receive pastoral aid than the slower growing churches. Table 4 contradicts this statement because it implies the lack of any tendency for the faster growing churches to be suburban.

TABLE 4
LOCATION OF CHURCHES BY RATE OF GROWTH IN THE HOUSTON-52 SET

Location	Rate of Membership Growth		Total
	Faster	Slower	
Neighborhood	12	11	23
Suburban	10	12	22
Total	22	23	45

Why was this true contrary to the volume of literature which heralds the suburban success syndrome? Table 4 does not look deeply enough to accurately describe the situation. Table 5 reveals a serious class factor that relates to earlier statements about differing life styles. The data from Table 4 are divided further between white collar and blue collar class distinctions.

TABLE 5
LOCATION OF CHURCHES BY RATE OF GROWTH AND OCCUPATION CLASS

Location	Class				Total	
	White		Blue		White	Blue
	Faster	Slower	Faster	Slower		
Neighborhood. . . .	4	1	8	10	5	18
Suburban.	7	5	3	7	12	10
Total	11	6	11	17	17	28

These data on Table 5 are very significant. First, note how white collar congregations tend to be faster growing than blue collar congregations. Second, note how the blue collar congregations tend to be located in neighborhood settings and the white collar tend to be suburban. Third, note the effect of the congregations in their "natural" settings: blue collar churches have better "success" in neighborhood areas, in suburban areas white collar churches are much more "successful," while in neighborhood areas those few congregations that are predominantly white collar are most likely of all to grow larger. The unusual success of white collar churches in the older areas is probably related to two factors; the scarcity of new white collar congregations in the apartment areas and the desire of the more prosperous blue collar residents to identify with a "better class of people."

Table 6 reveals a tendency for pastoral aid to be related to the class differences in the two geographical areas also.

TABLE 6
 LOCATION OF CHURCHES BY OCCUPATION CLASS AND PASTORAL AID

Location	Class				Total	
	White		Blue		Aid	None
	Aid	None	Aid	None		
Neighborhood	4	1	4	14	8	15
Suburban	11	1	4	6	15	7
Total	15	2	8	20	23	22

These data indicate a bias for pastoral aid to go to suburban and white collar churches. A new factor is introduced on Table 7 which removes the ten congregations which formed as splits from another congregation. None of these ten received pastoral aid.

TABLE 7
 LOCATION OF CHURCHES THAT HAD A POSITIVE BEGINNING BY OCCUPATION CLASS AND PASTORAL AID

Location	Class				Total	
	White		Blue		Aid	None
	Aid	None	Aid	None		
Neighborhood	4	1	4	7	8	8
Suburban	11	0	4	4	15	4
Total	15	1	8	11	23	12

These data reduce the discrepancy some and possibly reflect more accurately a view of the planners to put priority on suburban congregations because of the growth potential in that locational setting rather than a white collar preference. These data may be interpreted as a call for re-evaluating where such aid is given or it may confirm the present strategy. One thing these data do reveal; that is, the blue collar persons seem to seek a separation from a previous congregational setting because nine of the ten splits resulted in the formation of a blue collar congregation. More will be said about this later.

Program as a Factor

Sunday School Attendance

Resident membership figures closely parallel the Sunday School average weekly attendance figures in both faster and slower growing churches; that is, as either rises the other is likely to rise also. Among the faster growing churches the Sunday School Attendance figures seem to be the more significant indicators of change by correlating more strongly to change in total receipts, total mission dollars, cooperative program gifts, and indebtedness. On the other hand, among the slower growing churches the resident memberships acts as the more significant indicator of change by correlating more strongly to change in each of the factors stated above, except total mission dollars and cooperative program gifts. These observations seem to imply that the slower growing churches (predominantly blue collar) get their main membership increase through contacts in public worship, rather than contacts through the Sunday School. It may be that the larger portions of the total income are received during the public worship in the slower growing churches compared to the higher portion received by the faster growing churches through their Sunday School activities. This proposition might not rest so much on the fact that the leadership in the slow growers do not use their Sunday School activities effectively but that nature of the people being reached follow different

patterns of religious behavior; they may attend worship long before joining either the church or the Sunday School; further, they may make the offering more an act of worship than the faster growing churches.

These observations concerning the slower growing churches are even more pronounced in the study of Latin American congregations.

Predominant Age of Persons Enrolled in Sunday School

The neighborhood churches tended to have a higher percentage of their Sunday School enrolment seventeen years of age and older while the suburban churches had larger numbers of children and youth in proportion to their total Sunday School enrolment. These facts confirm the literature which discusses the dominant role the young family plays in the suburbs and the presence of older families in the more static areas of the city. These data do pose another question which asks if it may not indicate that the young families or at least the families with many children are not being reached by these churches in established neighborhoods. Certainly every congregation must be led to carefully survey the potential of its immediate neighborhood to be sure the needs of all persons are being met with a reconciling spiritual ministry.

Other Organizations

Data were not collected on any of the other church program organizations but similar research by the Department of Survey and Special Studies of the Home Mission Board using attendance and enrolment figures reveal no significant correlation except that the smaller the congregation, the less likely they are to have the other organizations. Thus, when a church increases in membership to a certain size, they are more likely to add the other organizations; but we cannot conclude that the adding on of these organizations cause numerical growth in the unit.

Other Dimensions of "The Program"

Further research needs to be conducted in the areas of the other dimensions of what the congregation refers to as "the program" of the church. These dimensions would relate to the evangelistic emphasis in the program, the spirit of enthusiasm about the future of the congregation and its activities, the degree of involvement in outreach efforts and mission action projects, the level of interpersonal relations (social cohesiveness), the commitment of the church to certain theological beliefs, the role of the church in educating children and so on. Most of these dimensions are a reflection of the theology and practical philosophy of "church work" of the pastor (and staff) rather than composite of attitudes and sentiments of the congregation.

Some clue to life style differences and patterns of church growth size can be noted on Table 8. The occupation-class structure of the congregations are examined in greater detail by faster and slower growth patterns, remembering that the faster growing are much larger than the slower growing. The conclusions that can be drawn from these data are that the laboring-class congregation either prefers a smaller size group with which to associate or the population to which they appeal are not "joiners" or their needs are satisfied without the more specialized ministries of a larger congregation or any one or more of several other possibilities.

TABLE 8

NUMBER OF CONGREGATIONS IN THE HOUSTON-52 SET BY PATTERN
OF MEMBERSHIP GROWTH AND OCCUPATION CLASS

Predominant Occupation-Class	Growth Pattern ^a	
	Slower	Faster
Professional . . . . .	. .	2
Professional and Non-Professional White Collar	1	4
Non-Professional White Collar	1	. .
Non-Professional White Collar and Skilled Blue Collar.	4	5
Skilled Blue Collar.	3	6
Skilled Blue Collar and Laborer.	2	1
Laborer.	12	4
Total.	23	22

^aIncluding only neighborhood and suburban congregations.

Very closely associated with the conclusions above are data concerning sur-
moil in the fellowship. Table 9 displays the interplay of these several factors
by location.

TABLE 9

NUMBER OF CONGREGATIONS IN THE HOUSTON-52 SET BY LOCATION, OCCUPATION CLASS
AND HISTORY OF TURMOIL IN THE FELLOWSHIP

Occupation-Class	History of Turmoil				Total
	Organized from a Split		Positive Beginning		
	Later Problem	No Problem	Later Problem	No Problem	
Neighborhood					
Blue Collar. . .	2	3	6	7	18
White Collar . .	1	1	1	2	5
Suburban					
Blue Collar. . .	1	1	3	5	10
White Collar . .	. .	1	1	10	12
Total					
Blue Collar. . .	3	4	9	12	28
White Collar . .	1	2	2	12	17

These data reveal that 43% of the blue collar congregations experienced some type of turmoil or problem after they were organized, without it being necessarily related to whether they began from a split or not. In contrast only 18% of the white collar congregations experienced later crises. These data appear to add to the earlier conclusions about the size differential in congregation since there appears to be a greater propensity for turmoil in blue collar congregations. Perhaps the white collar member who tends to be more affluent and better educated has a greater sense of security while the blue collar member senses a tension between his material "success" and the middle class image; a tension which manifests itself in insecure and tense relationships, even in his church.

Facilities as a Factor

Investment in Property

Do churches with better facilities tend to grow more rapidly than churches with poor facilities? The only item of data with which we can test for an answer are the figures reported as "value of church property (including pastorium)." As the data have been assembled we have noted that the larger the membership, the larger the income and if the income is larger, then there will be a larger investment in property. Thus, from the data we do note that, if anything, all faster growing churches have substantially more money invested in property than slower growing churches but it cannot be concluded that the lack of property means slow growth or slow growth means limited property. The data do seem to indicate that the white collar and suburban congregations have more invested in property which is probably related to their desire for more elaborate and specialized ministries and activities.

Cross-tabulations of date of organization, date site was purchased, date first unit was constructed, the number of additional units built and pastoral-aid reveal several important facts. First, churches formed from splits tend to immediately purchase a site and construct a first unit. Second, excluding the splits, congregations which receive pastoral aid tend to erect their first unit sooner than congregations that do not receive aid. It is possible that the outside aid releases local money so it can be applied on facilities more quickly while congregations which must support their pastor have to prolong the erection of facilities longer. Third, only six out of twenty-eight blue collar congregations erected more than one unit while eleven out of seventeen white collar congregations did so. The comparison of 21% to 64% is quite significant to the study of the different lifestyles and congregational expectations of the two occupation-classes.

Over-Investment and Debt

One assumption which has been voiced broadly in church extension philosophy has been that new churches must avoid over-investment in property. This assumption is supported by the data in this study. The faster and slower growing churches were divided into several sub-groups according to the per capita dollars invested in property and tested concerning the correlation among seven selected variables. Among the smaller churches, the data indicated that when the investment was beyond \$1,000 per member, increase in resident membership and Sunday School attendance could not be predicted and per capita to missions decreased. Among the larger churches, increase in resident membership and Sunday School attendance could still be predicted to rise but when the investment ranged beyond \$1,000 per member, per capita to missions decreased. Thus we conclude that where a church grows slowly and over-investment occurs (and correspondingly excessive debt), membership and attendance increase could be stifled and, for sure, mission gifts will be unusually small. Where the church is growing more rapidly its increase may or may not be retarded by heavy debt but mission gifts do tend to be smaller as the investment (and debt) rises.

Affluence as a Factor

Income Level of the Membership

Occupation-class designations do not adequately reflect a true picture of differences in income levels and since no direct data were available concerning the income level of the membership we proceeded to test the assumption that the per capita receipts by the churches were an adequate indicator of income differences. We then methodically selected two income samples from the slow growing and two samples from the faster growing churches and calculated the contrasting income levels to represent lower income and higher income churches within each group.

By applying the same methodology to both samples we thus came up with surprising similarity. Among the slower growing churches, those designated as low income congregations were those 20 churches whose per capita receipts ranged from \$90 to \$190 in 1969 and the high income were the 19 whose per capita receipts ranged from \$255 to \$370. Among the faster growing churches, those designated as low income were 18 whose per capita receipts ranged from \$125 to \$210 and the high income were 14 whose per capita receipts ranged from \$255 to \$350. The similarity of income between these sets of churches lead us to conclude that per capita church income is not a measure of affluence nor does it act as an indicator of whether or not a church will increase rapidly.

One of the principles upon which we have based our philosophy of starting new churches has been that churches started among the middle class will have a better chance at growth than those started among the less affluent. These data do not support that concept, in fact they tend to nullify the general assumption. The real difference lies in the comparison of the group extremes in the occupation-class designations used in this study. Table 10 illustrates the contrast but shifts the myth from a middle class versus lower class difference to a professional versus laboring class distinction where the difference in income is more certain. In the other class groupings income levels differ little.

TABLE 10

NUMBER OF CONGREGATIONS BY PROFESSIONAL/LABORER OCCUPATIONS AND
RATE OF GROWTH IN MEMBERSHIP

Rate of Growth	Predominant Occupation	
	Professional	Laborer
Faster	6	4
Slower	1	12

Stewardship of Church Members

The lack of difference in per capita income as researched above reflects the fact that the blue collar member tends to be a better tither, a more generous supporter of his church, than is the white collar member. At times we have been led to assume that where the people give better to the church, we can be assured of greater "success." This is true, if by the statement we mean they will be able to pay their pastor better and erect a more expensive building; but, these data do not support the idea that the church will increase in membership more rapidly. In fact, the data used for the income level of the membership, above, seems to imply that the assumption has been inoperative during the last five years in the Texas Metropolitan areas included in this study (Texas-123 and Houston-52).

Other Research Variables

Length of Time as a Mission and Outside Assistance

As already noted congregations which were formed from a split constitute immediately. The data also indicate there is a strong tendency for blue collar congregations to organize quickly but there are several factors that may strongly influence their decision. First, blue collar congregations are less likely to receive pastoral aid and second, if they have a sponsoring church they less likely had leaders sent by that church to help them get started. On the other side of perimeter highways the white collar suburban missions more likely had sites furnished for them, pastoral aid was supplied and the sponsoring church sent about twenty workers to help them get started. Table 11 shows the difference in leadership assistance by location and class.

TABLE 11

AVERAGE NUMBER OF LEADERS SENT FROM SPONSORING CHURCH TO HELP
THE MISSION GET STARTED BY LOCATION AND OCCUPATION CLASS

Predominant Occupation Class	Location	
	Suburb	Neighborhood
Blue Collar	4.5	3.1
White Collar	16.8	13.6

Table 12 reveals that, excluding splits, white collar missions stay on mission-status longer than blue collar missions.

TABLE 12

NUMBER OF CONGREGATIONS BY YEARS AS A MISSION AND OCCUPATION CLASS^a

Predominant Occupation Class	Years as a Mission		
	None	One	Two or More
Blue Collar	10	1	10
White Collar. . . . .	. .	. .	14

^aExcluding splits.

The rate of growth and length of time as a mission do not show any significant correlation though the tendency is for the slower growing churches to either constitute immediately or wait five or more years. Of the twenty-three slower growing congregations, fourteen constituted immediately, three between two and three years and six waited five or more years. The faster growing were more evenly distributed with six constituting immediately, four constituting in one or two years, seven in three years and five in four years.

CONCLUSIONS

The findings of this study seem to point to several principles to which church planners should be responsive in their work.

1. The socio-economic and ethnic structure of the new congregation greatly determines the ultimate size of the membership and its physical and program requirements (see pages 5-14, 17-19).

2. Pastoral aid appears to allow a congregation to build facilities more quickly (see page 15).

3. Pastoral aid seems to be designated more frequently to the larger suburban and white collar congregations than to smaller congregations and smaller cities (see pages 9 and 15).

4. Volunteer leaders to help a new work get started tend to be related to larger suburban and white collar missions but not to blue collar missions (see page 18).

5. Blue collar congregations tend to "go-it-alone" more frequently than white collar congregations; that is, they remain a mission briefly, rarely get pastoral aid, and rarely have a sponsoring church send leadership to help them get started (see pages 9, 12, 14, and 18).

6. Congregations which were formed from splits are not any more prone to future conflicts than the "well sponsored" missions (see page 14).

7. Over-investment in facilities tends to retard membership growth and attendance; however, its greater effect seems to be in diverting funds from the support of missionary causes (see page 16).

8. Per capita support of churches do not differ significantly between suburban and neighborhood, blue collar and white collar, or slower growing and

faster growing. Affluence, as measured by high status occupations, does not assume a church of a better income. The blue collar member can be said to be more generous since his gifts equal his more affluent counterpart though his personal income is much less. Only at the extremes of laborer compared to professional do income and church growth relate and this seems to be a life style difference more than an income or stewardship difference (see pages 16-19).

9. The lack of volunteer leaders to help new work get started in blue collar neighborhoods may signify two important facts: one, the laboring class "prospect" may prefer (be attracted to) an indigenous work rather than one that is "transplanted" by outside leaders and, two, the leaders are leaders and may therefore have a personal life style which attracts a white collar constituency since as leaders they tend to be "better read." Only two of the sixteen congregations which are predominantly made up of laborers had outside help; both are slow growing. Only four congregations that were predominantly made up of laborers were fast growing but they did it alone (see pages 7, 10-15, and 17).

Much more research is needed for church planners to be adequately informed of the factors which are operative in church growth. It is hoped that this paper has provided a beginning step in the acquiring of this knowledge and that some fruitful directions are given for more precise research in the future.