

## **The Rest of the Story**

Kris M. Valerius

When I was in high school, my father would drop me off at school on his way to work. Every morning, we would listen to the news/talk-show stations on the radio—just what every high school student enjoys. One of the segments that came on every morning was Paul Harvey’s “The Rest of the Story.” On some mornings, my trip would end just short of hearing the end of the story. Of course, being the “too cool” teenager, I was too embarrassed to ask my dad about the ending of the story. In this case, being too cool was unfortunate because I always learned something from the ending segment, and it often was more interesting than the first part.

I think the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) statistics are a lot like those commentaries by Paul Harvey. We look at the headline and think we know the entire story.

This year, 9,609 churches (88 percent) returned statistical data to their presbyteries. Of those 9,609 churches, 46 percent reported gains or maintained their previous membership. I am one of those “glass is half full” types of people. This is an exciting number to me! We have gotten so caught up in the overall loss figures that we forget to notice those churches that report growth and are doing well. We should be celebrating that 46 percent!

One of the best-keep gems of our statistics is hidden in the certificate transfers within our churches. Certificate transfer refers to the number of persons received or dismissed from active membership via a letter of transfer from or to another church [Book of Order, G-5.0101e and G-10.0302b(1)–(2)]. Every year our certificate gains are higher than our certificate losses. Why is this special? It means more Presbyterians return to churches each year than are leaving the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). I have read story after story about how Presbyterians are running away from the church, but this figure indicates that more want to return than leave.

Another interesting aspect is the continued increase of ministers of the Word and Sacrament. Even with the continued decline in the total number of churches, people are still feeling the call to ministry. For me, this shows hope for the future church.

I’ve mentioned several positive notes regarding membership trends, but at the other end of the spectrum is the most telling one—our baptism figures. This figure has continued to decline. In 2006, our adult baptisms averaged less than one per church (.75). The figure for children baptized was almost three children per church (2.78). The decline in baptism translates to a decline in new Presbyterians.

The bottom line: For growth to appear, our overall losses need to go down and our overall gains need to go up. The 2006 picture shows we lost fewer people, but we also brought fewer into the church. Not the formula for growth.

I still feel encouraged about life in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). Even though the statistics show an overall loss in 2006, there are still many things to celebrate among those statistics.

And now you know the rest of the story.

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