

Plumbing The Heart of God's People

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The annual *Comparative Statistics* bring to mind the vision of the prophet Amos who saw “a man standing by a wall with a plumb-line in his hand.” In the vision, the Lord asked Amos what he saw and sketched destructive consequences of Israel’s failure to learn from a plumb-line set “to the heart of my people.” These statistics are a plumb-line set to the heart of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). Like the plumb-line, they do not tell the consequences of trends and patterns they measure and disclose. Discerning and responding in faith to those consequences is left to God’s people in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) whose heart is measured. There is of course no guarantee that we will get it right, any more than Israel got it right in the time of Jeroboam. (See Amos, chapter 7.)

Introductions to recent *Comparative Statistics* suggest a variety of approaches to discerning their plumb-line implications.

Freda Gardner (in 2001) evoked stories behind the numbers and heard them speak “another call to faithfulness as God’s people in our part of Christ’s body in the world.”

In 2002 Jack Marcum sketched the emergence of a two-tiered church: one tier of mid-size and large congregations that are rich in ordained leadership (no clergy shortage); the other tier of very small churches with fewer than 100 members and clergy-poor (severe clergy shortage). (Between 2002 and 2005, the number of these very small congregations increased by almost 4%, and their share of all PC(USA) churches increased from 45% to 47.5%.)

Jack Rogers celebrated evidence of growth, actual and potential, in racial-ethnic membership and leadership in 2003 and concluded: “In some ways *Comparative Statistics* is like a snapshot of a really big family. It increases our appreciation of the goodness of God to us They remind us of our responsibility to expand this family and to pass on the Good News of God’s love to the next generation.”

Last year Andy Sale warned against ignoring the statistics and what they tell about the heart of the church: “. . . if we do not utilize what we collect, or do not ask for more detailed and critical information about where we are going, we are not being faithful stewards of the graces God is giving to us.”

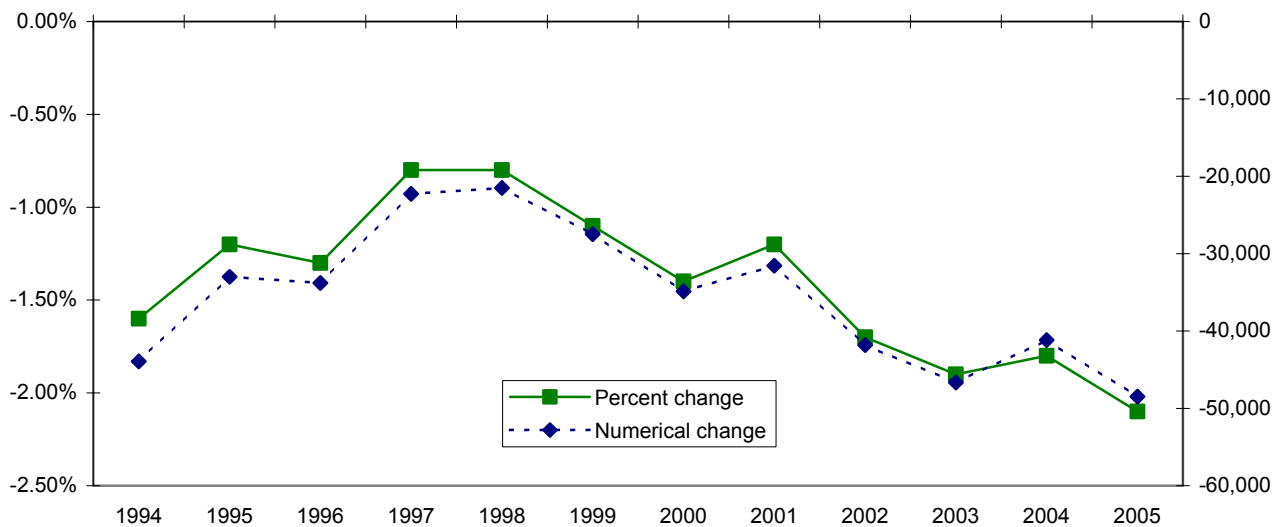
Thirty years or so ago, Martin Marty brought curiosity about Presbyterian statistics to one of his M.E.M.O. pieces on the inside back cover of *The Christian Century*. He greatly admired the way Presbyterians annually hold up a statistical plumb-line to their measurable life. When the General Assembly published its statistics for that year, Marty turned them over for analysis to his statistically talented son. The younger Marty projected demographic and fiscal trend lines, and Marty Sr. interpreted the patterns in a fictional obituary of “The Last Presbyterian.” As I recall, the last spiritual

heir of Calvin, Knox and Witherspoon described by Marty died in Charlotte, North Carolina, in 2038. In the last year of her life she contributed billions and billions of dollars to the Presbyterian Church.

Ever since Marty’s tongue-in-cheek interpretation of Presbyterian statistics, the trends he played with have held.

1. Annually we lose members. In 2005 we set a new record loss at 2.1%. (Jack Marcum reported that the 1.7% loss in 2002 was the largest since 1981. This figure appears to be trending upward: 1.9% in 2003; 1.8% in 2004; 2.1% in this year’s report. See Figure 1.)

Figure 1
Annual Net Membership Loss, 1994 to 2005



2. Annually we celebrate increased giving (giving increased by \$147,000,000 in 2005, to just over \$3 billion). The statistics recognize that more and more dollars stay in congregations and are directed by congregations to activities and causes outside the Presbyterian denominational system, but shed little specific light on how this dynamic affects the system’s ministries and mission.

Corporations are eternal, and Marty’s big picture statistical question about the future of the Presbyterian family is still on the table. When will those two trend lines—people down, dollars up—rest in peace? Will a Presbyterian church continue to exist after the last Presbyterian has flown the coop, left by the back door, or died? Is our denominational future prophetically revealed in fates of seminaries that long ago closed their doors, yet live on as foundations, without library, faculty or students? When the people are all gone, who will turn out the lights, who will manage accumulated resources in perpetuity, and to what purposes will those resources be put?

Another big picture question arises from the *Comparative Statistics*’ display of PC(USA) membership by region and state/territory (Table 3). Today the Presbyterian share of population does not exceed 2% in any state or territory. In all but eleven states and the District of Columbia, the Presbyterian market share is less than 1% in 2005. The “high density” states are shown here:

State	Number of Members 2005	Members as a Percentage of State Population 2005	Members as a Percentage of State Population 1980	Percentage Change Over 25 Years
Pennsylvania	235,577	1.9%	3.4%	-44.1%
South Carolina	81,028	1.9%	2.4%	-22.2%
North Carolina	159,676	1.8%	2.9%	-36.4%
Iowa	49,773	1.7%	3.0%	-43.6%
Nebraska	28,003	1.6%	3.1%	-48.4%
Virginia	105,071	1.4%	2.2%	-36.4%
Kansas	35,083	1.3%	2.7%	-53.0%
South Dakota	9,247	1.2%	2.2%	-42.5%
District of Columbia	6,452	1.2%	2.0%	-42.2%

The column with the percentage change over the last 25 years shows that the high-density states on the East Coast and in the Plains have lost between 22% and 53% of their market share in the last quarter century (see map below).

Figure 2
Percentage Change in Percent of State Population that is Presbyterian, 1980 - 2005

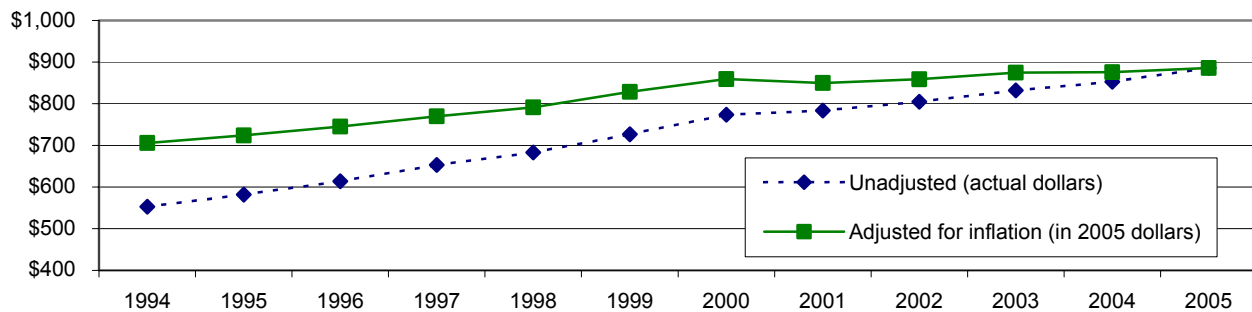


The market share statistics invite comparisons outside the boundaries of the church in other directions. These figures suggest, for example, that any Presbyterian who attends a football game, a state fair, or any other gathering that draws a cross section of American society will be outnumbered by homosexual fellow-citizens, by about ten to one.

Martin Marty’s trend lines—dollars up, people down—are written between the lines in a political statistic: the numbers of Presbyterians elected to the U.S. Congress have held steady at a little below 10% (Senate and House of Representatives combined) while the numbers of Presbyterians in the electorate have shrunk. In the 108th Congress, 15 Senators and 37 Representatives (9.7% for both houses) report their religious affiliation as Presbyterian.

The pattern—a very small religious community whose members are politically successful in proportions far greater than their numbers—makes sense when the affluence reflected in per member giving is taken into account (see Table 11 and Figure 3). Per member giving has continued to rise through four decades of membership losses. It is reasonable to hypothesize that Presbyterian membership rolls include a solid share of people who also belong to the American minority that underwrites ballooning costs of electoral politics and has access to candidates who are elected. Indeed, a 2005 Presbyterian Panel survey found that 15% of member households have incomes of \$150,000 or more.

Figure 3
Per Member Annual Contributions, 1994 to 2005



Meanwhile, the *Comparative Statistics* do not illuminate directly challenges faced by presbyteries and synods as a result of changing patterns of support. The statistics show that *something* is happening; they are mute when asked about choices and forces driving change that presses relentlessly onward. Especially in the West, presbyteries and synods have to cope with vast distances, a tiny membership base, and challenges to ministry and mission in a multi-ethnic, multi-language environment. Support for work in this vast region has come historically from the whole church through the General Assembly, but that funding source now has shrunk dramatically. Throughout the West (and in some other parts of the country) the story between the lines in the 2005 statistics is about reinventing Presbyterian identity in sharply reduced circumstances that are the painful counterpoint to overall affluence and fiscal growth. Sometimes Presbyterians in the economically hard-pressed parts of the church, watching their presbytery and synod eliminate staff, services and mission programs, wonder whether this denomination, proud of global mission success and national presence and reach, is in a process of survival-driven retrenchment to a bi-coastal existence.

Amos saw a vision of a man standing by a wall with a plumb-line in his hand. The annual *Comparative Statistics* are a plumb-line dropped against the church’s stewardship of the gifts of grace, energy, intelligence, imagination and love that guide its life. They offer an annual opportunity to examine faithfulness measured in rows and columns. (Presumably God has methods for evaluating things that escape our yardsticks. That’s a question for another day.) I hope you bring to these statistics a passion and love for the church that lets this plumb-line beckon you into all that the heart of God’s people fears, longs, and hopes for.