

The Annual Well-Church Assessment

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When my sons were little, every year we went to the doctor's office for their "well-boy" checkups. During other office visits we attended to emergencies—fevers, sore throats, various rashes—but at the well-boy check, the doctor and nurses covered more of the basics. They poked and prodded, listened and observed, weighed and measured, and evaluated several markers of children's health. They often showed us growth charts and indicated how the boys compared in height and weight with other males their age.

Comparative Statistics offers us something of an annual well-church assessment for our denomination. With the help of clerks, treasurers, and others at every governing body level, the staff at Research Services has once again compiled data about membership, congregations, ministry, finances, and worship attendance, and in some cases they have set those alongside data from other years. The resulting fifteen tables give us a good snapshot of some dimensions of our institutional health.

Like most annual physicals, *Comparative Statistics 2007* surfaces good news, issues of concern that get our attention, and data that may be just plain interesting to ponder. Take membership (Tables 1-6), for example. We know what the concern is: The PC(USA) continues to lose members, at a rate of about 2% per year. We also know that as congregations choose to leave the denomination, the membership loss figures may increase for a few years. But this picture is never as bad as it could be, because our total membership losses are somewhat offset by the good news of modest growth. Churches continue to be planted; some presbyteries show growth rather than decline; and with God's grace mergers may be forming stronger congregations. It is true that none of these efforts have recently stemmed the tide of our overall membership decline, but what can we learn from these successes? What is going on in particular areas of the country that fosters growth: Is it innovative leadership, demographic change, new ways of doing church, or maybe a sudden love for things Presbyterian? These data cannot answer our questions, but they give us worthwhile things to ponder and interesting paths to pursue.

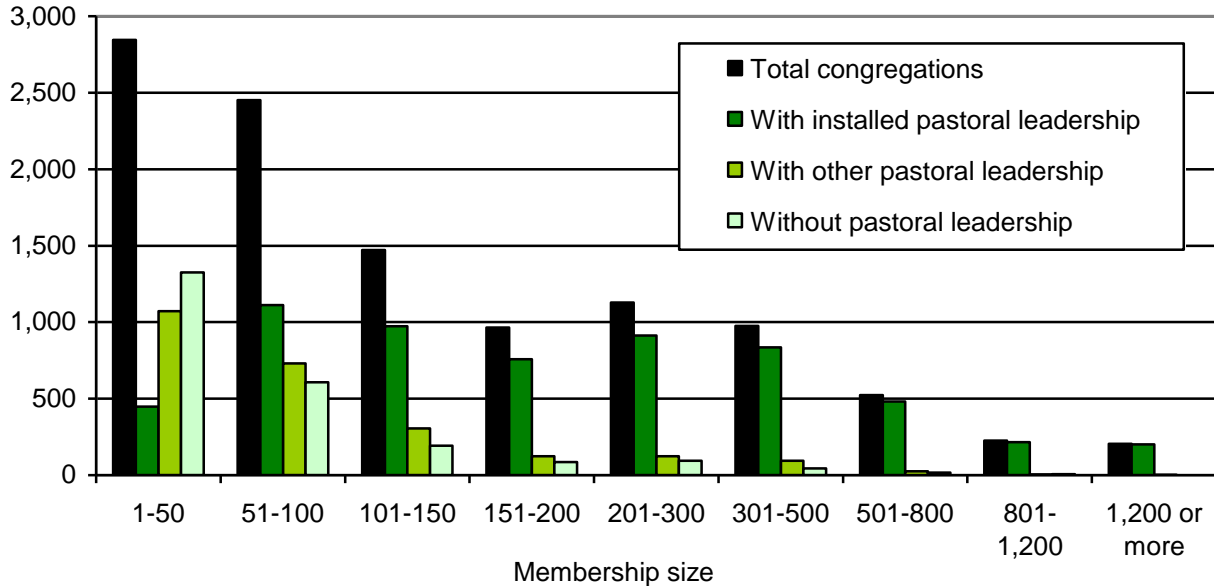
Small Churches

What grabs my attention in the membership and ministerial data is the information about small congregations. Table 2 indicates that the vast majority of our congregations are small; nearly two-thirds have 150 or fewer members.

Table 15 and Figure 1 remind us that staffing patterns in small congregations are quite different from those in larger churches. Approximately 40% of small churches have installed pastoral leadership, about a third have pastoral leadership of another sort (interim, stated supply, commissioned lay pastors, etc.), and over a quarter are without pastoral leadership, though many are surely supported with strong

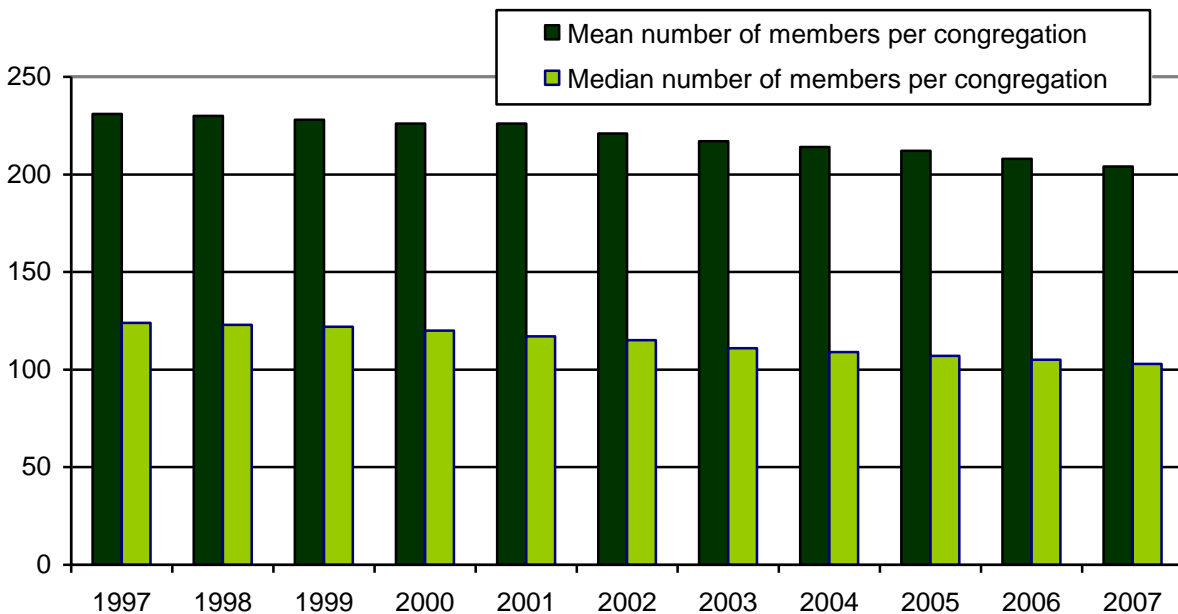
lay leadership. Compare this to churches that have 800 or more members. Hardly any of those congregations are without installed pastoral leadership.

Figure 1
Number of PC(USA) Congregations with Various Types of Pastoral Leadership by Membership Size, 2007



These figures are not surprising, but they are interesting to ponder. What are we doing as a denomination to provide resources and support for the small churches in our midst? What unique needs do these churches have? How do we need to think differently about supporting ministry and mission in smaller churches, as opposed to medium-sized or larger ones? These are important questions for us as a denomination, because data indicate that the average size of congregations in the PC(USA) is shrinking. (See Figure 2.)

Figure 2
Mean and Median Size of PC(USA) Congregations, 1997-2007



Finances

Happily, Tables 10-13 in *Comparative Statistics* demonstrate that financial giving continues to grow in our church. Individual contributions have once again increased, and that is a sign of institutional health in many of our congregations. Indications that much of that increased giving was allocated to local church programs also signals health at the local level (see Table 12).

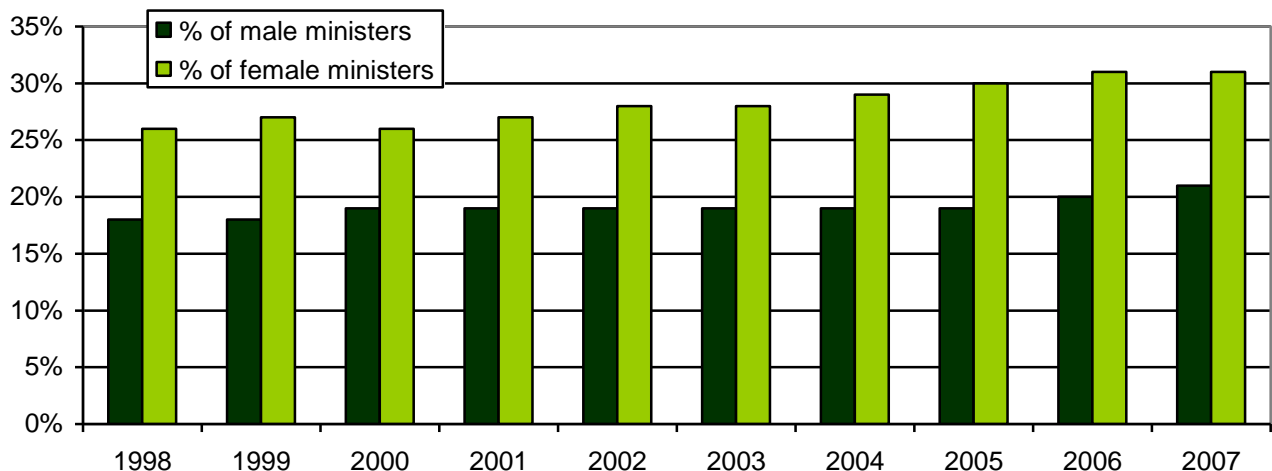
The decline in validated mission expenditures (also documented in Table 12) is an issue of legitimate concern to many, because these decreases threaten the institutional health of presbyteries, synods, and the General Assembly. What explains this funding shift? Many suggest that dissatisfaction with regional or national governing bodies is at the heart of decreased mission giving, but there may be other factors at work. Note the decrease in capital expenditures. Does this indicate financial pressures in congregations? We know that demands on local church budgets are severe: energy costs, benefits requirements for employees, emergency and routine maintenance for aging buildings, and opportunities for innovation demand funding. Perhaps there are more stresses and strain at the local level than we anecdotally account for when pondering the shifts we see in funding patterns across the church.

Ministry

Perhaps the most significant resource in our denomination is its human leadership—lay and ordained. In Tables 7-9 and 14-15, *Comparative Statistics* gives us a glimpse into our clergy demographics. Note the good news that God continues to call men and women to Christian ministry in the PC(USA). Table 7 indicates that we continue to have a good number of candidates and clergy. This is another sign of denominational health—we continue to attract capable leaders whose love for and commitment to the church is profound. Of possible concern is the 2007 decline in numbers of candidates. If this is just a one-year anomaly, then we need not worry. But if the decline continues then we will need to ask ourselves some hard questions about how we attract and support candidates and clergy.

The Presbyterian Church continues to call women to ministry, which I believe is also a sign of health. A concern, though, is the increasing numbers of women (and men) serving outside the categories of traditional ministry. (See Figure 3.)

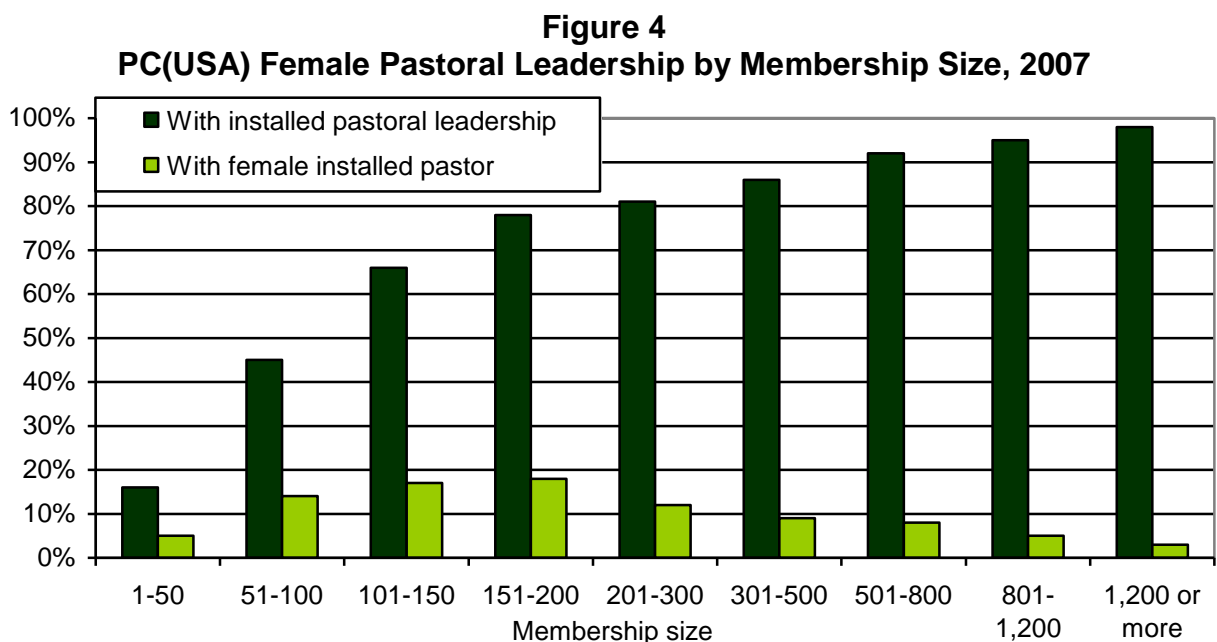
Figure 3
PC(USA) Active Ministers Serving in Other Positions, 1998-2007



Other positions include the categories "other professionals" and "other."

To be sure, the percentage increases between 2002 and 2007 are quite small, but the consistent growth in clergy serving in other professions or being classified as “other” may be an area of concern. Further research would surely be needed to ascertain how much of this momentum can be attributed to clergy serving in new areas of ministry (spiritual direction, for example), retiring, being homemakers while their kids are small, or deliberately moving away from ministry.

A more serious concern is raised in Table 15, in which *Comparative Statistics* documents the strength of the stained glass ceiling in the Presbyterian Church. (See Figure 4.)



As has been true for over half a century, some of our strongest and best pastors are women, but it is clear from these figures that clergywomen are unlikely to be hired to serve as heads of staff in our biggest congregations. Perhaps that is not surprising, but for many of us it is a discouraging reminder of the gender inequality in the church, which persists despite the significant progress we have made in this area.

Conclusion

Usually at my sons’ well-boy checkups, we heard the same things every year. My boys were consistently in the same percentiles of weight and height that they were the year before, for example. Rarely were there big surprises. Our well-church assessment is similar. *Comparative Statistics 2007* reminds us of things we have heard before. Pockets of growth, consistently strong giving, deep commitment to local congregations, and a steady stream of capable leaders continue to give us much for which to be grateful. Yet, at the same time, we have work still to do, to make our growth more robust and reverse our overall decline, support our smallest congregations, strengthen mission giving, and provide full opportunity for many of the capable clergywomen in our midst.

Once you dig into this book, you will undoubtedly discover additional strengths, concerns, and questions about the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). I encourage you to read and interpret vigorously; compare different tables, bring out former volumes and see what trends you can identify; put new pieces together. *Comparative Statistics* is informative, provocative, and a strong contribution to our self-understanding as a denomination.