

The State of Religion in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) in 2004

By The Reverend M. Anderson Sale

Associate Pastor Stated Supply, Quaker Memorial Presbyterian Church
(Lynchburg, VA); Former General Presbyter, Missouri Union and Peaks
Presbyteries

In the early 1800s, the minutes of many presbyteries included an annual narrative report of “The State of Religion” in that body. It was a compilation of the ministries and missions of its pastors and congregations, as well as some aspirations for the coming year. From this humble beginning have arisen our annual statistical reports from each of our sessions, which serve as the basis for the following 2004 *Comparative Statistics*—a description of “the state of religion” within our denomination. In statistical tables, we are enabled to measure trends that focus our attention on the past year, as well as to compare ourselves with those who have gone before us. We can assess the strength of our fidelity to God’s call in Jesus Christ to discipleship in these days.

Describing the State of Religion

From one year to the next, the following *Comparative Statistics* tables draw a picture of what God has been doing in the Holy Spirit. This is a purely “descriptive task,” indicating what has happened in the past year. Later in this essay, I will make an appeal for a more “prescriptive” format to help us better focus our denominational energies and resources for the future.

Membership

Table 1 tells us about our congregations and membership, which continue a ten-year trend of slow attrition (averaging 1.3% membership loss per year; 1.8% in the last year). In 2004, a few more congregations were dissolved and fewer churches merged than the previous year. **Table 2** charts the distribution of congregations within our regional synods. A pattern continues—63% of our congregations have no more than 150 members, and 43% of our largest congregations are in southern states. **Table 3** presents membership as a percent of population in each state. Note that Presbyterians are most prevalent in Pennsylvania and South Carolina (close to 2% of the population). Nationwide, 0.8% of the population is within our folds. **Table 4** records the median size of congregations and membership gains and losses in each presbytery and synod. Interestingly enough, the presbyteries with larger median size congregations (e.g., San Diego and Peace River) had high percentage losses, while smaller ethnic presbyteries (e.g., Eastern Korea and Midwest Hanmi) had significant percentage membership gains. The largest presbytery in 2004 is Greater Atlanta with 46,985 members, and the smallest is Dakota with 914. Only the Synod of Puerto Rico and 27 of 173 presbyteries showed net growth. **Table 5** reflects the racial-ethnic composition of congregations by synods, with the Northeast having the greatest number and percentage of minority congregations and a net growth of seven such churches in 2004. **Table 6** names the 15 largest

congregations in 2004 (the same 15 as in 2003), their location, presbytery, and synod. Membership among these 15 congregations declined by 2.1% from 2003. (See Figure 1 on page 4 for the ten-year trend in total membership among the 15 largest congregations. Note that the specific churches that rank among the 15 largest has changed over this period.)

Ministers

Table 7 shows information about ministers within the denomination over the last nine years. It shows a slight increase in the number of ministers, candidates, and ordained women, while the number of “active ministers” (those who are not retired) continues a slow decline. **Table 8** presents the number of ministers in a variety of calls for each synod, with the largest numbers of both active and retired ministers in the Synod of Mid-Atlantic (see Figure 2). **Table 9** addresses the number of active ministers by call and gender in the last six years and reveals few significant trends. The one exception is that the numbers of women serving as Pastors/Co-pastors, Supply Pastors, and in other calls have reached an all time high.

Finances

Table 10 accounts the individual contributions and the disbursements of congregations to local program and mission for each presbytery and synod, with over \$2 billion being offered in 2004 (a 2.5% increase over 2003) and an average per member annual gift of \$852.72. Midwest Hanmi Presbytery had the highest per member average contribution (\$1,660.20). The average percent of disbursements to local program and local mission was 71.3% of total receipts. **Table 11** reports that the total receipts of congregations from all sources is approaching \$3 billion, and **Table 12** displays parallel information for congregational expenditures, showing an average of \$1,330 per member. **Table 13** presents the Validated Mission Expenditures of congregations within presbyteries and synods and ranks those bodies on a per member basis. The denomination had a total of \$129 million in Validated Mission Expenditures in 2004, with an average of \$54.63 per member. The Synod of Mid-Atlantic achieved a 31.2% increase in per member expenditures, with Charlotte Presbytery increasing by a whopping 221.3%.

Prescribing the State of Religion

What do these Comparative Statistics tell us about God’s future for the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)? Some things the current format can tell us. But there are also many energies and movements which are not described in our 2004 statistical “state of religion.” What is happening to our members, ministers, and finances? How is the Holy Spirit at work in these figures? What other numbers might we need to understand God’s future and the priorities for the Kingdom? How are the “Great Ends of the Church” (G-1.0200) being manifested? In the 21st century we may need a new set of figures to prescribe “the state of religion” in our midst.

Members

We can see the broad trend that membership continues the slow 1% decrease each year, but we cannot see why this is happening. There are many speculations on this pattern, but there are no data to give prescriptions on how best to proceed in the future. How can the presence or lack of evangelical outreach be statistically described? Or better still, how can we honor the places of outreach and growth? We know the raw data of losses and gains. Given that the “other losses” category accounts for more of our membership losses than transfers or deaths, is there a better way

to understand why members are “going out the back door”? How many, when, and what types of worship services does a church have? The current statistics ask for average Sunday worship attendance, but don’t capture the richer picture of a congregation’s worship life. What about church school? We currently collect information about the numbers enrolled in Christian education. How can we better describe the variety and diversity of a full weekly Christian Education program? Spiritual formation is a key element in religious communities. Where are the statistical formulations to describe this growth in discipleship? A church historian has suggested that we may need to take a longer and deeper look at the congregational membership trends than the ten-year description provided by our current *Comparative Statistics*.

Ministers

The variety and shifting patterns of ministerial calls and pastoral services provided by trained and ordained leadership are well described in our current data. But what will we need in the future and how do we gather data that will value the changes needed? What kind of “on the job” training do our ordained ministers and elders receive? How can we prescribe this important element in a congregation’s life by asking for comparable data annually? How are ministers supported by presbyteries and their congregations? Should there be an annual reporting of continuing education benefits for lay officers and ministers alike? Why are increasing numbers of ordained ministers of the Word and Sacrament not choosing pastoral and parish ministry? Women, second-career ministers, and ethnic pastoral leaders also need more prescriptive statistical valuing in the future.

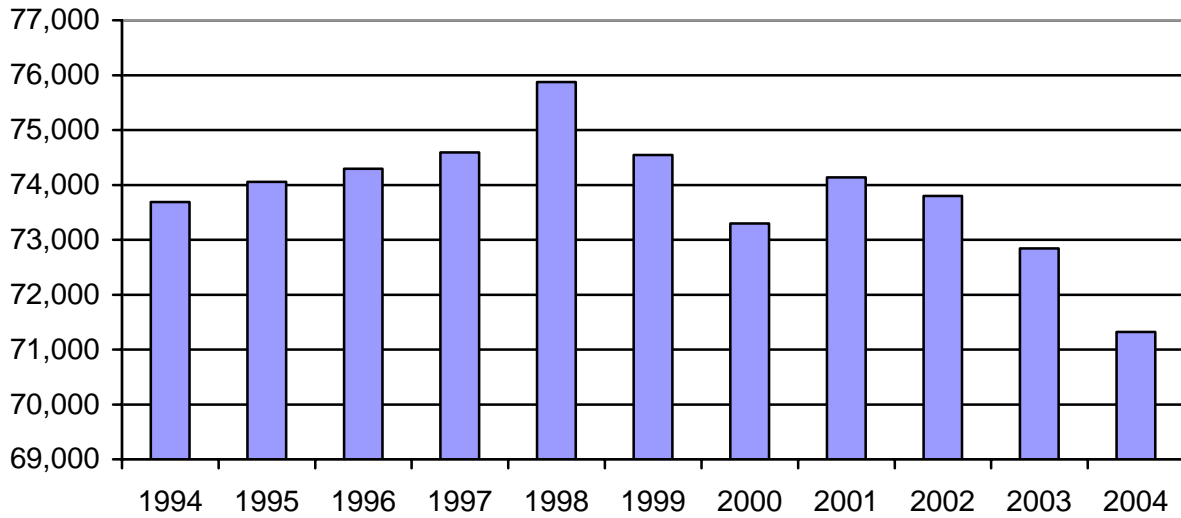
Finances

It is well documented that, overall, the finances of most congregations are increasing each year. Yet more mission funds are being utilized locally for projects that historically have been undertaken by the larger governing bodies. This clear trend has an effect on congregations’ expectations about the mission budgets of presbyteries, synods, and the General Assembly. However, the current statistics do not ask about the financial affairs of our presbyteries or synods. How much is being spent by presbyteries and synods on the critical areas of new churches and church redevelopment? Mission projects? Evangelism? Parish support? Leadership development? Administration? Per capita expenses? Perhaps by gathering this type of data annually, our comparative statistics could generate new energies within our middle governing bodies for God’s future among us.

Conclusion

One might view the annual statistical reports of our congregations and these consequent Comparable Statistics reports as a confused set of ambiguous figures being forced into unclarified expectations for a denomination seeking to describe only where it has been. How can we better collect and share information that will set directions for the future “state of religion” of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)? Descriptive materials are only useful when they lead to prescriptive directions. Our annual compilations reflect a great deal of faithful accounting. But 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 that God is giving to us, to our congregations, and to our whole denomination.

Figure 1
Total Membership in the 15 Largest Congregations, 1994-2004



Note. The specific churches that rank among the 15 largest has changed over this period.

Figure 2
Total Number of Active Ministers by Synod, 1994 and 2004

