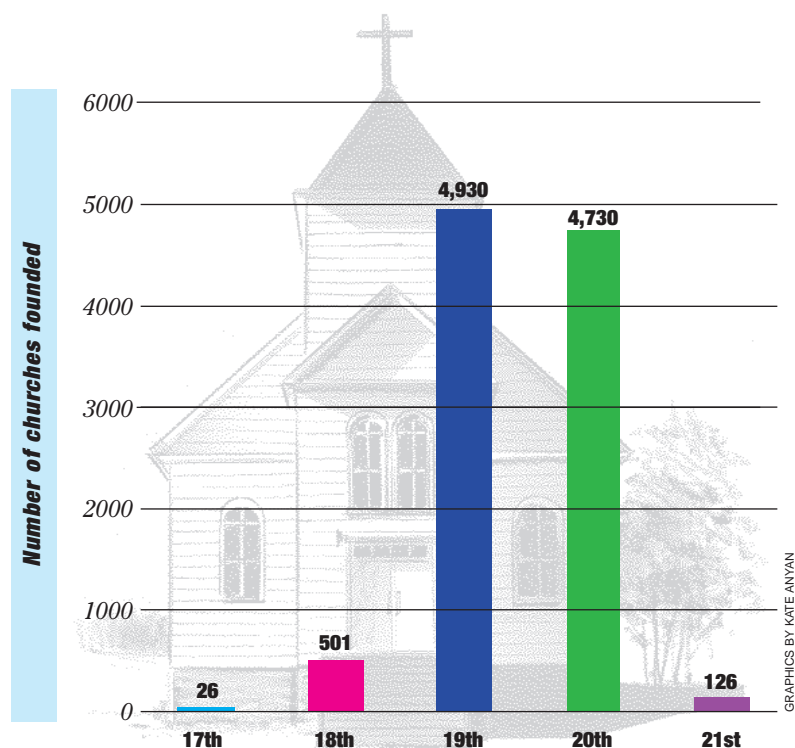


GO FIGURE

JACK MARCUM



Birth dates of congregations

Typically this column features some of the most current statistics on Presbyterians. But this month I'm reversing course and looking at the oldest datum we have for each congregation: the year of founding. The results provide an interesting window on the history of Presbyterian churches in the United States.

Most of today's Presbyterian congregations have been around a while. The median year of founding is 1896, indicating that one-half of our congregations were established prior to that date. Several date back to colonial days, including 26 congregations (0.3 percent) founded in the 1600s—three of them in 1640, the earliest year in the records. Another 247 (2.4 percent) were created in the 75 years prior to the Declaration of Independence (1701–1775), and even more (254 or 2.5 percent) in the last 25 years of the 18th century.

The number of current churches founded in the 1800s is large, with more established later (1,813 or 17.6 percent, between 1876 and 1900) than earlier (584 or 5.7 percent, between 1801 and 1825) in the century. In fact, more of today's congregations were founded in the 19th century (47.8 percent) than in the 20th (45.9 percent). (The gap is probably larger still, since mergers of two or more existing congregations are given a new start date. A look at congregations merged out of existence in 1999 shows that 40 percent of them were originally founded before 1900.)

The largest single-year totals in the 19th century were 100 each in 1883 and 1889. However, the largest single-year growth in the number of churches is found in the 20th century, during the "religious revival" of the 1950s: 114 current congregations were founded in 1957 and 111 began in 1958. Overall 841 congregations, or 8.2 percent of existing churches, began life in the 1950s.

What the research shows

Most PCUSA congregations have deep roots. As new generations have come and gone, these institutions have adapted and, in many cases, thrived: Of congregations that grew between 1999 and 2004, 48.6 percent were founded before 1900. Clearly, the large numbers of enduring congregations are an important source of strength and continuity for the Presbyterian Church.

That so many congregations have existed for decades or longer can also have downsides. Many have facilities that are old and in need of repair. Typically they cost more than newer ones to heat and cool. And often they are located away from areas of recent population growth.

Learning how best to draw on this rich congregational legacy and yet continue to have the flexibility and resources to respond to shifting population trends remains an important challenge for the PCUSA in the 21st century.

By contrast, relatively few current congregations—176 or 1.7 percent—were established during the Great Depression of the 1930s. More recent decades are also lightly represented. In the 1970s, 311 (3 percent) of current congregations were started, and in the 1990s, 379 (3.7 percent). The first decade of the 21st century is on course to create a total of 322 congregations. □