

## A SOCIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

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Where are we? That depends on who you mean. It depends on how you define the word *we*. Social scientists considering this question would be concerned about the social realities created by shared perceptions. One of those social realities is the perception shared by a group of people who identify with one another and thus see themselves as being a group. They define the group as "we" and others as "they."

Consider this personal example. I have some things in common with all the five billion people who live on this earth today, but 70 per cent of these people do not even claim to be Christians. I have more in common with the 30 per cent who say that they are Christians, but most of these people have historical traditions, organizations, beliefs, and practices that I do not share. I have more in common with most Protestants than I do with most Catholics. I have more in common with the members of conservative denominations than with members of liberal denominations. I have much in common with all the heirs of the Restoration Movement, but I have less in common with the liberal group known as the "Disciples of Christ" than I do with a more conservative independent fellowship known in some areas as the "Christian Church" and elsewhere as the "Church of Christ." There is much that I have in common with members of these conservative Christian Churches and Churches of Christ that identify with the North American Christian Convention, but these congregations use instrumental music in their worship assemblies and defend the practice by arguing that the silence of the Scriptures is evidence of

divine approval. These differences limit my fellowship with this group. I find my own sense of identification and belonging with those heirs of the Restoration Movement who are called "churches of Christ" and who do not use instrumental music in worship or regard the silence of the Scriptures as evidence of divine approval.

Any time you get two Christians together and dig deep enough, you will find some issue on which they disagree. Some disagreements, however, do not seem to create a barrier to fellowship. Among churches of Christ in the United States, around ten thousand congregations with approximately one million members are similar enough to one another that no barriers to fellowship exist among them. The rest—around three thousand congregations with less than thirty thousand members—have some doctrine or practice that sets them apart and limits their fellowship with other churches of Christ.

Among the heirs of the Restoration Movement and especially among those fellowships that call themselves "churches of Christ" and do not use instrumental music in worship, within-group differences are often greater than between-group differences. From a social science perspective, however, what is significant is the way those involved perceive the situation. A sense of group identification exists when people are willing to ignore the within-group differences and notice only the between-group differences.

According to the New Testament, there is one and only one church. If Christians were perfect, that is all one would have to say. Christians, however, are not perfect. There have been many divisions throughout the history of Christendom. But as we consider these divisions, we should be careful to avoid sectarianism. It seems to me that it would be sectarianism of the worst sort if I were to define the one true church as being limited to those who agree with me on all issues I regard as important and differ only on those issues I am willing to ignore. On the other hand, it would show a terrible lack of love and concern if I were to ignore the many ways in which I honestly believe others to be in error. The only solution to this dilemma, in my opinion, is for me to engage in an open dia-

logue with others explaining to them what I believe, why I believe it, and why I cannot accept their views. But I must be careful to approach such a dialogue in a non-judgmental manner. There are some areas where the Bible has already pronounced God's judgment. Those who do not even claim to believe in Jesus Christ obviously are not Christians. As I understand the teaching of the Bible, those who have not yet been baptized for the remission of sin are not yet members of God's church. In some other areas, however, the matter is not quite so clear. No individual is perfect, and no congregation is perfect; I do not know how imperfect a church must be before God removes the symbolic lampstand of his presence. There are some areas where I believe I must leave it up to God to determine who is and who is not a part of his church. Indeed, all such judgment must be left up to God.

One faces the danger of sectarianism in any definition of the word *we* that distinguishes the "we" from the "they" in any sense that implies an inappropriate judgment regarding who is saved and who is lost. It is possible, however, to use a social science perspective in discussing the social realities that exist in the perceptions of those involved without making any inappropriate judgments about who is or is not a part of the one true church.

Having said that, I can now define the terms of this discussion. I am not talking about the world. I am not talking about all of Christendom. I am not talking about all the heirs of the Restoration Movement. In part of this discussion, I will be talking about all thirteen thousand congregations in the United States that call themselves "churches of Christ" and that do not use instrumental music in worship, although I recognize that around three thousand of these congregations are not in fellowship with the great majority of other congregations. In other parts of the discussion, I will be talking about the ten thousand congregations of the churches of Christ in the United States that are in fellowship with one another.

Descriptive statistics are among the most basic research tools of the social sciences. Dr. Mac Lynn's census of churches of Christ in the United States provided a very important contribution to that kind of statistical research. His census fig-

ures are reflected in the book *Churches and Church Membership in the United States 1980*, which lists churches of Christ as having 12,719 congregations with 1,239,612 members in this nation.

There are several measures of central tendency that are important in descriptive statistics. The most familiar of these measures of central tendency is the mean. Mean congregational size is calculated by dividing the total number of members by the total number of congregations. Based on the census figures mentioned above, mean congregational size would be 97.46 or just under 100 members in the typical congregation. The mean, however, is a statistical abstraction. No congregation actually has 97.46 members. Some have 97 members and some have 98 members, but no congregation has 97.46 members. Furthermore, the mean can be highly influenced by the nature of the distribution. For example, if ten college professors live on the same block with a multimillionaire, mean family income on that block will be much higher than the actual income of those ten professors. The mean is not always the best measure of central tendency.

The median is often a better measure of central tendency. The median congregation among churches of Christ in the United States, for example, is a congregation of such a size that half of all other congregations are larger than it and half are smaller. If you go through *Where the Saints Meet*, the directory edited by Dr. Lynn, and rank order the congregations from the largest to the smallest, you will find that there are just 28 congregations listed with 1,000 or more in membership; just over 200 congregations with 500 or more members; less than 1,500 congregations with 200 or more members; less than 3,500 congregations with 100 or more members; and if you continue all the way down to the median you will find that half of all the congregations listed have 43 or more members and the other half have 43 or less in membership—or they have no size indicated. I have done some random sampling among the congregations with no size listed and virtually all of them have less than 43 members. I feel confident, therefore, that median congregational size is no more than 43. However, this calculation of the median included

all the congregations listed in *Where the Saints Meet*, not just those that are in fellowship with one another. If the calculation is based only on the ten thousand congregations that are in fellowship with one another, both the median and the mean would be somewhat larger. Median congregational size would then be close to 50 and mean congregational size would be around 100.

Another way of looking at central tendency is to ask: What size congregation does the average member attend? Answering that question requires a calculation of the median counting the total number of members in congregations of various sizes, from the largest to the smallest. Such a calculation indicates that half of all members of the churches of Christ in the United States attend congregations with 160 or more in membership and the other half attend congregations with 160 or less in membership. That, however, applies only to the ten thousand congregations that are in fellowship with one another. The typical member of one of the isolated fellowships attends a much smaller congregation.

When compared with the churches of Christ in the United States, the Catholics have thirty times as many members, but less than twice as many congregations; the Baptists have ten times as many members, but less than three times as many congregations; the Methodists have eight times as many members, but less than three times as many congregations; the Mormons have twice as many members, but only half as many congregations; the Lutherans have twice as many members, but only one-third as many congregations; the Presbyterians have almost as many members, but only one-third as many congregations. One of the most unique characteristics of churches of Christ in the United States is the large number of very small congregations and thus the very small median congregational size. One cannot start a local congregation of most denominations without the permission of that denomination's headquarters, but anyone can start a local congregation of the churches of Christ.

Some congregations have been started for the wrong reason, in the wrong place, at the wrong time, and in the wrong way. In many communities, there are several small struggling con-

gregations in the same part of town competing with one another in their effort to reach the same segment of the population. However, in many of those same communities, there is a need to plant some new congregations to reach segments of the population not now being reached by existing congregations.

In my opinion, there should be some congregational mergers in some places so that the churches of Christ in the United States would have the money and the manpower needed to plant the new congregations that need to be planted. Realistically, however, I must admit that such mergers are not likely to happen. Merging two or more congregations successfully is probably the most difficult task church leaders ever face. Most mergers are survival mergers rather than growth mergers. Perhaps survival is better than its alternative. However, studies of congregational mergers indicate that within five years after the average merger, attendance in the merged congregation will be down to the level that it was before the merger in the larger of the congregations involved in the merger. If a congregation of two hundred members merges with a congregation of one hundred members, typically within five years the attendance in the merged congregatin will be back down to two hundred. For this and many other reasons, I recognize that mergers are not likely to become very common. What is more likely to happen is that congregations that are not doing what they ought to do will gradually die as their members move away and go to congregations that are doing what they ought to do.

It is important to note, however, that the movement of members from one congregation to another does not constitute true church growth. Jesus called us to be fishers of men, not keepers of the aquarium who simply move the fish from one tank to another. Survey research that I have been conducting for two decades indicates that churches of Christ in the United States are not growing the way they once did. These surveys have been based on nationwide random samples with follow-up among those not responding originally and with statistical analysis of the obtained results. Sample size in the early surveys was small and thus the margin of error was rather large. The mean growth rate observed in these surveys, however,

offers the best estimate currently available.

Surveys do not provide information on membership size, just on the rate of growth or decline. However, Dr. Lynn's census in 1980 provided a reliable estimate of total membership. One can take that 1980 figure as a starting-point and then add or subtract based on the percentage of growth or decline observed in my nationwide surveys. That provides an estimate of the total membership in other years.

Year	Percentage of growth or decline	Estimated membership
1965	5.00	835,404
1966	4.71	877,141
1967	4.44	918,472
1968	4.06	959,240
1969	3.68	998,169
1970	3.40	1,034,909
1971	3.08	1,070,226
1972	2.67	1,103,212
1973	2.35	1,132,661
1974	2.04	1,159,325
1975	1.72	1,182,985
1976	1.38	1,203,321
1977	1.03	1,219,912
1978	0.66	1,232,483
1979	0.32	1,240,671
1980	0.01	1,244,904
1981	-0.34	1,246,149
1982	-0.68	1,241,912
1983	-1.01	1,233,467
1984	-0.49	1,227,420
1985	0.02	1,227,448
1986	0.50	1,233,585

Although these are the best available estimates, there are several factors that could make them inaccurate. The early samples were based on the listing in *Where the Saints Meet*

before that directory was based on Dr. Lynn's census research. Larger congregations were more likely to be listed. Growing congregations that moved several times were often listed at each address and thus growing congregations were more likely to be included in the sample. Furthermore, the growth percentage was calculated by comparing total membership at the beginning and end of each year. There is some evidence that early in this period many congregations had inflated membership lists and tended to clean up the lists over the years. The further away from the 1980 date in the above figures the less reliable the estimate of membership would be. In a recent article in *Image*, Mike Casey presented historical evidence indicating that membership may have been larger than indicated here early in this period. The historical evidence, of course, is based on estimates provided by those who were familiar with the brotherhood and not on the kind of census research Dr. Lynn conducted in 1980. It should also be noted that the 1986 growth rate figure listed above is only a preliminary estimate since that study is not yet completed.

Even with these limitations, however, the surveys of growth rates provide some interesting data. There was a remarkably consistent pattern of change from year to year with that change averaging -0.33 per cent per year. At first this was a decline in the rate of growth and then it became a decline in total membership, but the pattern of change was consistent from 1965 through 1983. Beginning in 1984, this pattern started changing. If the 1965-1983 trend had continued, there would have been declines of 1.33 per cent in 1984, 1.67 per cent in 1985, and 2.0 per cent in 1986. Instead, the decline in 1984 was only 0.49 per cent; in 1985 there was a very small growth of 0.02 per cent; and the preliminary analysis indicates that in 1986 there was a more substantial growth of 0.5 per cent. This three-year pattern indicates that the recent decline has ended and churches of Christ in the United States have started growing once again.

In a recent issue of the *Christian Chronicle*, Dr. Lynn reported that churches sending him their current membership figures indicate a growth of around 3.0 per cent since his 1980 census. The article noted, however, that this estimate was



not based on a scientific sample. My surveys are based on random samples, and they indicate a net loss of 2.08 per cent in the 1980-1986 period, but they also indicate that the decline has been reversed and membership by 1990 should be above the 1980 level—although not by much. I suspect that congregations that are growing are more likely to report their current membership figures to Dr. Lynn and those that are declining are more likely to say nothing about it. These surveys, however, are only estimates. We will have to wait for the 1990 census to know for sure.