

# **THE GROWTH RECORD**

## **REVISITED**

**Part One: Correcting the Record**

**Part Two: Understanding the History**

**by**

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## Part One: Correcting the Record

Throughout this academic year, Harding University is celebrating 75 years of service to the church. There are many ways in which Harding and other Christian schools have contributed to the growth of the church. There are some interesting parallels between the growth of Harding and the growth of the church. In the second part of this study, we will consider how the history of this growth should be understood. Before we do that, however, we first need to correct the record concerning the growth of the church.

There are some significant dates and events in the history of how Harding University has developed over the years. It is helpful to note conditions in the church at each of these points in history. In Part Two, we will see how the church spread throughout the nation while Harding grew. But first, we will focus on the numerical growth among Churches of Christ at key points in the historical record and note what was going on with the Harding story at each of these times.

1890 2,000 congregations; 100,000 members; 1:630 member-to-population ratio  
(See Table 1)

1891 David Lipscomb and James A. Harding established the Nashville Bible School with Harding as the first president.

1901 James A. Harding moved from Nashville to Bowling Green, Kentucky, as the first president of Potter Bible College. Harding's son-in-law, J. N. Armstrong, was one of the Bible teachers at Potter.

1905 J. N. Armstrong and several other teachers left Potter, with Harding's blessings, to establish a Christian school west of the Mississippi: Western Bible and Literary College in Odessa, Missouri.

1906 2,649 congregations; 159,658 members; 1:477 member-to-population ratio  
(See Table 2)

1908 J. N. Armstrong and several other teachers moved from Odessa, Missouri, to Cordell Christian College in Oklahoma, where Armstrong served as president until that school closed in 1919.

1916 5,570 congregations; 317,937 members; 1:290 member-to-population ratio  
(See Table 3)

- 1919 J. N. Armstrong became president of Harper Bible College in Kansas, and served there from 1919 until 1924.
- 1924 Harper College merged with Arkansas Christian College in Morrilton. The school was then named in honor of James A. Harding.
- 1926 *6,226 congregations; 433,714 members; 1:244 member-to-population ratio (See Table 4)*
- 1934 Harding College moved from Morrilton to Searcy. In 1936, George S. Benson became president of Harding College.
- 1936 *6,700 congregations; 500,000 members; 1:246 member-to-population ratio (See Table 5)*
- 1965 Dr. Clifton L. Ganus, Jr. became the third president of Harding and served until 1987. In 1979, Harding College became Harding University.
- 1980 *12,719 congregations; 1,239,612 members; 1:102 member-to-population ratio (See Table 6)*
- 1987 Dr. David B. Burks became Harding's fourth president.
- 1997 *13,080 congregations; 1,255,834 members; 1:119 member-to-population ratio (See Table 7)*

These tables show a remarkable period of growth among Churches of Christ that parallels the growth of Harding University. There are, however, some serious problems with the data reported in some almanacs and yearbooks. News reports based on these sources have presented a very distorted picture. A syndicated news article on this subject recently appeared in newspapers throughout the nation. Churches of Christ in the United States, according to this story, have declined from three million members in 1980 to less than half that number today, only 1,280,838. Church members who have accepted this report as being true have become discouraged. **It is important to note, however, that this report is not accurate. Churches of Christ in the United States have *more* members now than in 1980. The "decline" is simply the results of corrections and changes in the way the statistics are reported.**

The 1990 figure of 1,280,838 members was accurate as a report of how many people are actually identified and are on the membership lists of the 13,097 congregations. The 1980 figure of 3,000,000 members was an estimate that included the people who had been baptized, at one time were members of a congregation, and would still list "Churches of Christ" as their religious preference, but who do not attend church anywhere and whose names are not on any congregation's membership list.

*Comparing these two statistics is like comparing apples and oranges. They just are not comparable.* Furthermore, the estimated number of members was too high because it was based on an estimated number of congregations that was far too high.

In order to understand what has happened, one needs to know where these figures came from and why they were reported as they were. The United States Census Bureau used to publish *Religious Bodies*, a two-volume report prepared in the middle of each decade.<sup>1</sup> When the government stopped publishing that report, the National Council of Churches filled the void by sponsoring the *Yearbook of American and Canadian Churches*.<sup>2</sup> The Association of Statisticians of American Religious Bodies (generally known simply as ASARB) has prepared reports for 1952,<sup>3</sup> 1971,<sup>4</sup> 1980,<sup>5</sup> 1990,<sup>6</sup> and is now preparing for a study in 2000. It is important to note that *Religious Bodies*, the *Yearbook*, and *Church Membership* (the ASARB report) all simply published the figures provided by various religious bodies. Most of these reports came from the official denominational statistician at the headquarters of each denomination. In some cases, however, a group or category of independent congregations has no central denominational organization or headquarters.

There are several church groups listed in the 1990 edition of *Church Membership* that are made up of independent congregations that are not affiliated with any denominational organization:

- ◆ Black Baptist: 6,955,723 members and 8,737,667 adherents in independent congregations that are not affiliated with any of the 36 Baptist denominations;
- ◆ Independent Non-Charismatic: 1,363 congregations with 1,207,173 adherents
- ◆ Independent Charismatic: 829 congregations with 794,254 adherents;
- ◆ Congregational Christian Churches: 29,390 members and 36,679 adherents in 239 congregations that did not affiliate when other Congregational Christian Churches established a central denominational organization;
- ◆ Christian Churches and Churches of Christ: 966,976 members and 1,213,188 adherents in 5,238 congregations that remained independent when other Christian Churches organized the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ); and,
- ◆ Churches of Christ: 1,280,838 members and 1,681,013 adherents in 13,097 congregations that have no central denominational organization.

That is a total of 13,669,977 people who, in 1990, attended an independent congregation that was not affiliated with any denomination. There were 20,766 such congregations not counting the Black Baptist and there were probably around 70,000 congregations in that group. Reports concerning these groups did not come from the official denominational statistician at denominational headquarters. They came from some "contact person." When the Census Bureau was publishing *Religious Bodies*, it had a list of such people. The editor of the *Yearbook* used that same list. ASARB is still using it.

That is how the figures were reported for Churches of Christ and the Christian Churches. Both groups have historical roots in the Restoration Movement led by such people as Barton Stone, Thomas Campbell, and Alexander Campbell. In the nineteenth century, all of the heirs of this movement were reported together. Shortly after the Civil War, these two groups divided



over Bible interpretation, instrumental music in worship assemblies, and the missionary society. In 1896, however, the Census Bureau was still listing these two groups as a single religious body. Then the editor of the *Christian Standard*, unofficially representing the Christian Church, and the editor of the *Gospel Advocate*, unofficially representing the Churches of Christ, asked the Census Bureau to list these two fellowships as separate religious bodies. These editors provided the estimates of congregations and members that the Census Bureau reported. The editors of these two papers are still listed as the "contact persons" for these two groups. The 1906 edition of *Religious Bodies* was the first to give separate reports on the Christian Church and the Churches of Christ.

There is no reason to doubt the accuracy of the reports for the 1906, 1916, and 1926 editions of *Religious Bodies*. The editors of the *Gospel Advocate* who provided these figures appear to have been making a careful and honest effort to count all of the congregations among the Restoration Movement heirs that did not use instrumental music (the most obvious distinction between the Christian Church and the Churches of Christ). Around two-thirds of these congregations that did not use instrumental music were similar enough to one another that no significant barriers to fellowship existed among them. Approximately one-third of the congregations, however, had some doctrine or practice that set them apart and limited their fellowship with other Churches of Christ. These limited fellowship groups would have included One Cup, Non-Class, and Premillennial congregations, along with the Mutual Edification group that opposed Christian colleges and "located preachers" (the group led by Daniel Sommer).

While the 1906-1926 figures appear to be accurate, the 1936 figures reported in *Religious Bodies* seem to be far too low. The person who provided the figures for 1936 may have counted only the mainline congregations and perhaps only those that agreed with him on all issues that he regarded as important. The historical records that I have been able to find indicate that the 1906-1926 growth curve continued through 1936. If it did, the 1936 report should have listed 6,700 congregations with 500,000 members. Instead, the report listed 3,815 congregations with only 309,551 members. This error started a period of reports that were far too low.

It is important to note that the editors of *Religious Bodies*, the *Yearbook*, and *Church Membership* published the figures that were given to them. If a denominational statistician or a "contact person" in a fellowship of independent congregations did not send in a report, the usual practice of these editors has been to report the most recent figures available. It appears that the *Yearbook* editor did not receive any reports on Churches of Christ prior to 1951. The *Yearbook* figures from 1939 through 1950 were simply the numbers reported earlier by the Census Bureau. Churches of Christ generally had a rather negative attitude toward the National Council of Churches. Requests for information coming from that organization may have been ignored. What the *Yearbook* reported from 1939 through 1950 was not new. It was just the 1936 or 1926 data from *Religious Bodies* repeated over and over. This made it appear that Churches of Christ had exactly the same number of congregations and members in 1950 as in 1926 with no growth at all. The historical records and the memories of those of us who lived through all or part of this period indicate that Churches of Christ grew steadily up through the end of World War II and then grew rapidly.

The editor of the *Yearbook* still uses the editor of the *Gospel Advocate* as the "contact person" for Churches of Christ, just as the Census Bureau did beginning in 1906. There is some indication, however, that the editor of the *Yearbook* made some attempts to obtain data from other sources. When Reuel Lemmons was editor of the *Firm Foundation*, he had some contact with the editor of the *Yearbook*. Some Christian college presidents were also contacted by the *Yearbook* editor. We cannot be sure, therefore, who sent the reports to the *Yearbook* editor between 1951 and 1980. What we can know is that someone sent the *Yearbook* editor some reports that listed far too many congregations and members.

Those who provided the reports to the *Yearbook* editor seem to have had a rather good idea about the number of members in the average congregation and they also seem to have had a list of the churches. Unfortunately, most lists of churches at that time had a lot of duplications. The *Yearbook* reports from 1951 through 1980 listed far too many congregations. I think that I can understand why. Some of the congregations that I preached for back during that period had used several different congregational names and different mailing addresses over the years. These congregations generally received two or more copies of most mailings addressed to churches. Such inflated mailing lists may have contributed to exaggerated estimates of membership. After that exaggeration started in 1951, it kept on growing as the estimates got larger and larger.

The number of congregations reported in the *Yearbook* in 1951 was 14,500. By 1959, that number was up to 16,500. Just one year later, the number had grown to 17,500. In 1962 it reached a high point with a report of 18,680 congregations. After that, the reports began to moderate. In 1980, however, the *Yearbook* was still reporting 17,000 congregations. Churches of Christ have never had that many congregations in the United States.

The number of members reported in the *Yearbook*, however, was far too exaggerated to have been explained entirely by inflated mailing lists. What appears to have happened is that the membership reports for 1951 through 1980 involved a different kind of statistic. Instead of reporting the number of people who were actually members of the local congregations, there seems to have been an effort to estimate the total number of people in the nation who would list "Church of Christ" as their religious preference if anyone ever asked them.

Those who provided the *Yearbook* data from 1951 through 1980 may have been concerned about an unfavorable comparison with the denominations that include a large number of non-resident, non-attending members in their reports. Churches of Christ also have non-resident, non-attending "members," but they had not been included in the reports from 1906 through 1950. Churches of Christ conducted or participated in a lot of religious census studies in the period between 1945 and 1965. These studies usually found a large number of people who had been baptized and at one time were members of a congregation of the Churches of Christ, but at that time they were not members of any local congregation. In fact, these census studies often found that there were more of these non-attenders than there were members in all the local congregations. Those who provided the reports to the *Yearbook* may have felt justified in reporting membership estimates twice as large as the number actually claimed as members by all the congregations in the nation. If a person starts with an accurate estimate about the number of

members in the average congregation, then multiplies that by an inflated estimate about the number of congregations, and then doubles that figure to account for all the non-attenders, that would explain the exaggerated reports about the total number of members.

There is a better way to correct for non-attenders. There should be no exaggeration in the report of membership. There should, however, be a report of attendance. The average attendance in Churches of Christ is very close to the total number of members. That does not mean that all of the members attend every service. However, the number of members who are absent is usually equal to the number of children and visitors who are present. In many denominations, average attendance is less than half the number reported as members. Comparing attendance figures is a better way of giving an accurate picture. Exaggerating membership figures is not a good idea.

Exaggerated reports made it appear that in just one year, between 1950 and 1951, Churches of Christ more than doubled the number of members, from 433,714 to 1,000,000. Between 1951 and 1959, the reported figure grew from 1,000,000 to 1,750,000. One year later, in 1960, the figure was up to 2,000,000. The 1962 report listed 2,163,493. By 1963, the report had grown to 2,250,000. By 1967, the report was up to 2,350,000. It reached 2,400,000 in 1970; 2,500,000 in 1978; and 3,000,000 in 1980.

The problem with these exaggerated figures was that many members of the Churches of Christ believed them. In saying this, I am not being critical of these people. I believed those reports myself until I learned better. In 1980, many members believed that there really were 3,000,000 members in 17,000 congregations of the Churches of Christ in the United States. That set these members up for a really great shock and disappointment when they learned that the real membership figure is less than half that large. It would have been better to report the actual number of members in all the congregations and simply explain that many denominations count membership in different ways.

There is no need for this confusion. The 1906-1926 figures in *Religious Bodies* appear to be accurate reports concerning the number of congregations and members. We now have accurate data from 1979 through 1997 on the number of congregations and members. Furthermore, I have survey data from 1965 through 1980 on the shape and direction of the growth curve. We can use these data to provide a more realistic estimate for those years when *Religious Bodies* and the *Yearbook* were reporting figures that were far too low (1936-1950) and for the years when the *Yearbook* reported figures that were far too high (1951-1980). Four graphs that do this are included at the end of this material. Figure 1 shows the reported number of members and Figure 2 gives a more realistic estimate of membership. Figure 3 shows the reported number of congregations and Figure 4 gives a more realistic estimate concerning the number of congregations.

Since 1965, I have been doing survey research studying patterns of church growth and decline among Churches of Christ in the United States. Those surveys could not determine the number of members, just the shape and direction of the growth curve. In 1973, I started writing

articles warning church leaders that the rate of growth was declining and that if that trend continued, growth would stop in 1980. After that, if the trend continued, membership would begin to decline. What actually happened was that the first of those predictions came true. The rate of growth continued to decline until it reached the zero level in 1980. The second prediction, however, has not come true--at least not yet. The growth curve has not declined significantly since 1980, but it has remained flat. There has been no significant growth or decline in total membership since 1980.

Mac Lynn has made what is, by far, the most important contribution to serious studies in this area. He has been gathering data on the location, character, and size of Churches of Christ since 1973. This work was published in a series *Mission Bulletins*,<sup>7</sup> three editions of *Where the Saints Meet*,<sup>8</sup> and several editions of *Churches of Christ in the United States*,<sup>9</sup> Dennis C. Kelly, working independently, came up with figures that are almost identical to those reported by Mac Lynn.<sup>10</sup> The agreement of these two sources indicates the validity of both.

Dr. Lynn has reported the following figures for the number of congregations, members, and adherents (members plus children) in four different years.<sup>11</sup>

	1979	1990	1994	1997
Congregations	12,762	13,174	13,013	13,080
Members	1,240,820	1,284,056	1,260,838	1,255,834
Adherents	1,601,661	1,684,872	1,651,103	1,647,078

The 1997 membership total is about two percent lower than the 1990 total. But the 1990 figures included a group now known as the "International Church of Christ" and formerly known as the "Boston/Crossroads Discipling Movement." They wanted to be included in the 1990 directory. By 1994, they had decided that they no longer want to be identified with other Churches of Christ. If their totals are removed from the 1990 figures, the decline from 1990 to 1997 is less than one percent. The trend for the past two decades has been essentially flat with no significant growth or decline.

The most recent figures, 1994 and 1997, may indicate that a slight decline has begun. But that decline is only 0.4 percent over the three-year period. The best word to describe this growth curve is "plateaued." Churches of Christ have not grown significantly in the past two decades, but they have not declined significantly either. Population in the United States is now three times as large as it was at the beginning of this century and four times as large as it was in 1890. But membership among Churches of Christ in the United States is now **seven** times as large as it was when membership was reported in that 1906 Census Bureau study and more than 12 times as large as it was in 1890. All of these figures, however, deal with totals for the entire nation. These national totals do not reflect what is going on in all parts of the country. Churches of Christ in the "Bible Belt" states, from West Virginia to Texas, are either plateaued or declining, **but congregations in the U.S. mission field states are growing.** Nation-wide totals for Churches of Christ in the United States have not increased significantly since 1980, **but the dramatic decline that many people have reported is a myth.**





## **Part Two: Understanding the History**

According to an old African saying: "A pigmy can see farther than a giant if the pigmy stands on the shoulders of the giant." We stand today on the shoulders of the giants of yesterday. We owe a great debt of gratitude to those who have gone before us. But if we are true to them, to ourselves, and to our God, we must always try to improve. One way for us to improve is to understand our own history. History is important because the way we understand our past influences our perception of who we are today and that self-image influences what we will become in the future.

### **A History of Harding University Serving Churches of Christ**

Harding University and other Christian schools have made important contributions to the growth of the church. While we cannot prove a direct cause-effect relationship between the growth of Christian schools and the growth of the church, we can demonstrate a strong positive correlation. What seems most likely is that the growth of Christian schools has resulted in more church growth and the growth of the church has contributed to the growth of Christian schools.

The Harding story has roots that go back more than 75 years. Two hundred years ago many visionary leaders believed that there was a great need for a spiritual revival, a new reformation, a restoration of New Testament Christianity. Barton Stone, Thomas Campbell, and Alexander Campbell were the three most influential leaders of this effort. Some historians, therefore, have called this the "Stone-Campbell Restoration Movement." Three religious groups that are heirs of this movement are listed in *Churches and Church Membership in the United States 1990*.

### **Heirs of the Restoration Movement**

#### **Churches of Christ**

The fellowship of independent congregations known as "Churches of Christ" is the largest of these three groups. In 1990, Churches of Christ in the United States had 13,097 congregations, 1,280,838 members, and 1,681,013 adherents--a figure that includes members and their children who have not yet been baptized. There is a lot of diversity among these congregations. In general, however, this is the most conservative of the three heirs of this movement. These congregations come the closest to the doctrines and practices of such pioneers as Barton W. Stone, Thomas Campbell, and Alexander Campbell.

## **Disciples of Christ**

The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) is the smallest of these three groups. In 1990, they reported having 4,035 congregations, 677,223 members, and 1,037,757 adherents in the United States. This group is the most liberal of the Restoration Movement heirs. They have changed the most. In 1849, they organized the American Christian Missionary Society. Churches of Christ opposed the Missionary Society arguing that there is no biblical authority for any church organization above the level of the independent local congregations. Shortly after the Civil War, the Christian Church started using instrumental music in the congregational worship assemblies. Churches of Christ objected to that practice on the basis of the same argument concerning the lack of biblical authority. In 1906, the federal government's census of religious bodies, for the first time, reported separate data for the Christian Church and the Churches of Christ.<sup>12</sup> But this division did not take place in 1906. That is just when it was recognized by the federal government. The division took place shortly after the Civil War, and it was virtually complete by 1890.

The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) continued to change following this division in the late nineteenth century. They rejected the Restoration Movement in favor of the ecumenical movement. They led the effort to merge denominational organizations. They started practicing open membership accepting people who wanted to transfer membership into one of their congregations without ever being baptized. Many of their leaders came to accept a much more liberal theology that questioned the inspiration and authority of the Bible. In the 1950s, they established a central denominational headquarters with an increasing level of control over the local congregations. They no longer claim to be nondenominational. Some of their congregations are still relatively conservative, but most have far more in common with liberal Protestant denominations than they do with their Restoration Movement roots. They have tried to merge with several liberal Protestant denominations. Thus far, however, these unification efforts have not been successful.

## **Christian Churches**

The third fellowship to emerge among the heirs of the Stone-Campbell Restoration Movement is identified in almanacs and yearbooks as "Christian Churches and Churches of Christ." Some of these congregations use one designation and some use the other. All of these congregations use instrumental music and that sets them apart from the larger group known as "Churches of Christ." In the 1950s, these congregations refused to accept the denominational "restructure" plan of the Disciples. Historically, they are closer to the Disciples. In general, however, their doctrines and practices are much closer to those of the Churches of Christ than to the Disciples. Most of their members still believe in the restoration plea. They do not see themselves as being a denomination. They do not have a denominational headquarters. In 1990, they had 5,238 congregations, 966,976 members, and 1,213,188 adherents, so they are almost as large as the Churches of Christ.

## A Dramatic Contrast

Although there are more than 240 denominations in America today, there are only 15 American religious groups that have more than one million adherents. All three of these heirs of this Restoration Movement are in that category. Only 11 denominations have more adherents than the Churches of Christ. Only 10 have more members. Only three have more congregations. Only four are present in more counties. When dispersion is adjusted for group size, the three heirs of this Restoration Movement head the list with Churches of Christ as the most dispersed. Among the religious groups with more than one million adherents, only four are growing faster than the Christian Churches or the Churches of Christ. When growth is counted by the increase in the total number of adherents, rather than by percentages, only eight denominations in America are growing faster than the Christian Churches or the Churches of Christ, while 230 are experiencing less growth.<sup>13</sup> Among the 15 American religious bodies with more than one million adherents, the Disciples had the largest percentage of decline between 1980 and 1990.

Things have not always looked the way they do today. Consider the contrast as once again we review the history of Harding University and note the parallel growth of the Churches of Christ. This time, however, our focus will be on how the church spread throughout the nation.

*1890 17 states with no congregations; 17 other states with fewer than 1,000 members each; over half of the members were in just three states--Tennessee, Texas, and Kentucky; more than one-fourth of the members (27%) were in Tennessee. (See Table 1)*

1891 David Lipscomb and James A. Harding organized Nashville Bible School.

1901 James A. Harding moved to Bowling Green, Kentucky, as the first president of Potter Christian College. His son-in-law, J. N. Armstrong, was one of the Bible teachers.

1905 J. N. Armstrong and several of the teachers at Potter, left with Harding's blessings to establish Western Literary and Bible College in Odessa, Missouri.

*1906 16 states with no congregations; 16 other states with fewer than 1,000 members; more than half of the members were still in three states--Tennessee, Texas, and Kentucky; more than one-fourth of the members (25.9%) were in Tennessee. (See Table 2)*

1908 Armstrong and several teachers left Odessa, Missouri, to Cordell Christian College in Oklahoma, where Armstrong served as president until that school closed in 1919.

*1916 16 states with no congregations; 8 other states with fewer than 1,000 members each; over half of the members were in three states: Texas, Tennessee, and Arkansas--but Texas by then had the largest membership and Arkansas had replaced Kentucky as the state with the third largest membership. (See Table 3).*



- 1919 Armstrong became the president of Harper Christian College in Kansas. He continued in that position until 1924.
- 1924 Harper College merged with Arkansas Christian College in Morrilton. The school was then named in honor of James A. Harding.
- 1926 *13 states with no congregations; nine other states with fewer than 1,000 members each; over half of the members lived in four states: Texas, Tennessee, Arkansas, and Oklahoma. (See Table 4).*
- 1934 Harding College moved from Morrilton to Searcy. In 1936, George S. Benson became the second president of Harding College. He continued in that position until 1965.
- 1936 *Only six states with no congregations; 13 others with fewer than 1,000 members each; over half of the members in three states--Texas, Tennessee, and Oklahoma. (See Table 5).*
- 1965 Dr. Clifton L. Ganus, Jr. became the third president of Harding College. In 1979, Harding College became Harding University. Dr. Ganus served as president until 1987.
- 1980 *Congregations in all 50 states; only 10 states with fewer than 1,000 members each; half of the members in five states--Texas, Tennessee, Alabama, Oklahoma, and Arkansas. (See Table 6).*
- 1987 Dr. David B. Burks became Harding's fourth president.
- 1997 *Congregations in all 50 states; only nine states with fewer than 1,000 members each; over half of the members in five states--Texas, Tennessee, Alabama, Arkansas, and Oklahoma. (See Table 7).*

There are others who are far better qualified than I am to tell the details of Harding's story. I would especially recommend the biography of J. N. Armstrong written by L. C. Sears.<sup>14</sup> My purpose is simply to view the Harding story from a church growth perspective and to focus on the contributions Harding University has made to the Churches of Christ.

### Contrasting Views of History

My view of this history, however, is quite different from the views expressed by some writers. Some seem to have projected their own personal journey onto the history of the Churches of Christ. I have talked to some Christians who came to realize that this is what they had done. They started with a very legalistic works orientation and did not really understand the doctrine of grace until they matured. When they projected their personal story onto our shared history, they assumed that all Churches of Christ in the past had a legalistic works orientation and

only recently discovered the meaning of grace. That is how projection works. Fortunately, these Christians studied the writings of some pioneers who fully understood the meaning of grace. That is when they realized that they had been projecting their personal story onto our history. That may have happened with some Christians who still do not realize that they are projecting. Of course, I cannot read their minds or judge their motives. I try, therefore, to assume the best. But I am still concerned about some interpretations that seem to be misleading.

### **From Sect to Denomination?**

Recently I have been especially concerned about the interpretation by Richard Hughes in his book *Reviving the Ancient Faith*.<sup>15</sup> My main objection to Hughes' approach is the way he organizes the story. Churches of Christ, according to Hughes, "began as a sect in the early nineteenth century and evolved into a denomination during the course of the twentieth century."<sup>16</sup> He explains how this happened in a section with the heading "From Sect to Denomination: Transition at Harding College."<sup>17</sup> Hughes argues that J. N. Armstrong represented the sectarian view and that George S. Benson was primarily responsible for changing this view and turning Churches of Christ from a sect into a denomination. Hughes does not use these terms in a strictly theological sense. He uses historical/sociological language. But I still object. This seems to me to be a situation in which the use of inappropriate or inadequate categories taken from sociology or history may have important theological implications. I do not intend this to be a review of Hughes' book, but I will make frequent references to it because it represents a viewpoint that is being accepted by a growing number of people--a viewpoint that I believe is wrong. As I understand this history, most Churches of Christ were not sectarian in the nineteenth century and most have not become denominational in the twentieth century. To understand why I cannot fully accept Hughes' interpretation, you need to know his definitions of some key terms.

**Denomination:** In the American context, a church that recognizes it is only a part of the universal body of Christ. A denomination has typically made its peace with the dominant culture in which it exists.

**Sect:** A religious organization that insists that it--and it alone--constitutes the entirety of the kingdom of God. Typically, a sect stands in judgment both on other religious organizations and on the larger culture in which it exists.<sup>18</sup>

For Hughes, all churches are either sects or denominations, and there are two factors that define the difference. One factor is the attitude toward the dominant culture. According to this view, a sect rejects the larger culture, but a denomination has made its peace with that dominant culture. The other factor is how Christians judge other believers. A sect, according to Hughes, views its members as being the only saved people and judges that all other believers are lost. A denomination, on the other hand, judges other believers to be saved and therefore sees itself as only a part of the spiritual family of God.

Hughes sees Alexander Campbell and Barton Stone as representing opposite views regarding the culture. He argues that Campbell was overly influenced by Scottish Common Sense Realism, which he calls "Baconianism," after Francis Bacon, the founder of the scientific method. Hughes claims that "In antebellum America, many Christians embraced the *Baconian* perspective, insisting that the scientific method could unlock even biblical truths with scientific precision."<sup>19</sup> Campbell accepted a postmillennial eschatology, which Hughes defines as a belief that "human beings will usher in the millennium, or the final golden age, by virtue of human progress."<sup>20</sup> Stone, however, accepted a premillennial view that was much more pessimistic about human progress ushering in the millennium. According to Hughes' interpretation, J. N. Armstrong was highly influenced by the pessimistic outlook of Harding, Lipscomb, and Stone. Under the leadership of Armstrong, according to Hughes, Harding College and the Churches of Christ generally were sectarian in their pessimistic view of human progress. They remained isolated and aloof from the dominant culture. This began to change, however, when George S. Benson became the president of Harding College. Benson was a crusader against communism and a promoter of the free enterprise system. Unlike Lipscomb, Harding, and others who did not believe that Christians should vote or hold political office, Benson taught that Christians should be actively involved in politics in order to promote these American values. For Hughes, this marked a shift from sectarian pessimism to a more denominational outlook on the possibility of human progress.

### An Alternative Viewpoint

There are several ways in which I disagree with Hughes' definitions. First of all, I have a problem with the way Hughes interprets Campbell's postmillennialism. My own understanding of Campbell and other postmillennial writers is that they were very optimistic about the power of the gospel to convert the world and usher in a golden age of peace on earth. In this, they may have been similar to those who believed that the scientific method and human progress would create such a golden age. But their emphasis on the power of the gospel to convert people, I believe, was quite different. Furthermore, I cannot accept his definition of sect and denomination based on how Christians judge other believers. While that definition is probably valid in so far as it goes, it omits a very important dimension. Hughes allows only two options. I must either judge other believers to be lost or judge them to be saved. I want another option--one in which I do not judge other believers at all, but instead leave the judging up to God. If the main defining difference between sect and denomination is whether I judge other believers to be lost or saved, then I do not believe that I fit into either category.

I also am troubled by Hughes' view that all religious groups are either sects or denominations. In the Sociology of Religion there are other categories and other defining characteristics. Various textbooks in this field that I have studied list several possibilities.

A *denomination*, in this typology used in the Sociology of Religion, has a central organization with some degree of control over the local congregations. In an organizational sense of the term, an individual cannot join a denomination. An individual can join a congregation, but

it is the congregation that joins the denomination. A denomination is an organization of congregations--not an organization of individuals. Among the modern heirs of the Stone-Campbell Restoration Movement, the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) would fit this denominational category.

A *sect* is defined by its negative judgment of other believers and its negative attitude toward the dominant culture, just as Hughes has suggested. But in the Sociology of Religion, there is also an organizational definition. Sects typically exist as independent congregations with little if any central organization. Some writers make a distinction between *sect* and *institutionalized sect*. An institutionalized sect is a fellowship of independent local churches, but it has various informal arrangements involving institutions (schools, child care agencies, etc.) that perform some of the functions typically performed by denominational headquarters. Sects, however, do not have such institutions. By this kind of definition, Churches of Christ that identify with the non-institutional, non-class, or one cup fellowships would be in the *sect* category, while the "mainline" congregations would be in the *institutionalized sect* category. Similar distinctions can be noted among the Christian Churches.

In popular use, however, a "denomination" is just a group of people who see themselves as a group and who are identified by some name. By that definition, all religious groups are denominations. Remember that "denomination" is not a Bible word or a Bible concept. It is a sociological/historical term. In the popular use of the term, Churches of Christ are generally called a denomination.

### **How the Church Can Be Nonsectarian and Nondenominational**

Do you know the difference between the big "C" Church of Christ and the little "c" church of Christ? The little "c" church of Christ is what you read about in the Bible. The big "C" Church of Christ is what you read about in the telephone directory--or in almanacs, yearbooks, or history books. The little "c" church of Christ includes all of the saved. Would we claim that the big "C" Church of Christ includes all of the saved? Some would make that claim, and I believe that Hughes is right in suggesting that this is one of the defining characteristics of sectarianism. But I do not believe that most of us would make that claim today. Furthermore, I do not believe that most of the pioneers of the Restoration Movement would have made that claim in the nineteenth century. Many of the pioneers used to say, "We do not claim to be the only Christians, but we are trying to be Christians only." There may have been more sectarianism among the Churches of Christ in the nineteenth century and there may be more denominationalism among Churches of Christ today, but I do not believe that Churches of Christ in general were a sect in the nineteenth century or that Churches of Christ in general are a denomination today.

There are, however, people in the Churches of Christ today who believe that the pioneers were wrong in trying to restore the nondenominational church of the New Testament. They believe that nondenominational Christianity is impossible. But I believe that they are wrong. We can belong to independent congregations that are not affiliated with any denominational



organization and in that sense be nondenominational. We can avoid the sectarian extreme of judging other believers to be lost and the denominational extreme of judging them to be saved in spite of what we see as serious errors in what they teach and practice. We can simply leave the judging up to God and in that sense be both nonsectarian and nondenominational. We can most certainly avoid making peace with the dominant culture and in that sense be nondenominational, even if that means being called "sectarian." And we can surely avoid accepting a denominational view of the church. Contrasting views concerning the nature of the church are at the very heart of the difference between sectarianism and denominationalism.

### **How We View the Nature of the Church**

The sectarian says, in effect, "The one true church consists of me and all the people who agree with me on all issues that I decide are important." The sectarians say, "We are not a denomination because we are right and other groups of believers are denominations because they are wrong." This, of course, is a very self-centered definition. But this is the basic reality concerning the sectarian view.

Denominationalism, on the other hand, defines the one true church as consisting of all the denominations--not all local congregations and not all Christians, but all *denominations*. Most, however, would admit that a person can be a true Christian and not belong to any denomination. It would seem, therefore, that sociologists and historians should have more than two categories. In addition to sects and denominations, there should be a category for fellowships of independent congregations that are not affiliated with any denominational organization. After all, as noted earlier, more than 10 percent of the adherents of religious groups in America today belong to such independent congregations.

I do not accept either the sectarian or the denominational view. I certainly do not believe that the one true church is made up of denominations. Denominations are human organizations that exist without the approval of God. In the New Testament, I read about the church as a universal spiritual fellowship of all the saved, and I also read about the local congregation. I do not find any biblical authority for a level of church organization that is larger than the local church and smaller than the universal church.

There have been many leaders from many different religious backgrounds who have shared this nondenominational view of the church. Charles Haddon Spurgeon was one of the greatest Baptist preachers in history. He preached in a large tabernacle in London, and people came by the thousands to hear him preach. Spurgeon said that he longed for the day when the name "Baptist" would be gone and forgotten forever. He taught that there will be no Baptists in heaven. No Methodists. No Presbyterians. He told his Baptist congregation that if they went to heaven it would not be *because* they were Baptists, and they would not go to heaven *as* Baptists. He told them that if they went to heaven it would only be *because* they were Christians, and they would go to heaven only *as* Christians. In much the same way, I would say that if we go to heaven, it will not be *because* we are heirs of the Stone-Campbell Restoration Movement, not even because

we are members of the "mainline" big "C" Church of Christ. If we go to heaven, it will only be because we are Christians, and we will be in heaven only *as* Christians. We will go to heaven because our names are written in the Lamb's Book of Life, not because our names are on the membership roll of a congregation listed in some directory of churches. That view is at the heart of what it means to be nondenominational, and it most certainly is possible to hold that view.

The idea that the church can and should be nondenominational is becoming very popular today. The greatest church growth that is taking place in America today is in the category of "independent churches." A few years ago at a meeting of the American Society for Church Growth, we heard a report on a survey of seminary students throughout the nation. More than half of them said that they wanted to plant an independent congregation that would not be affiliated with their own denomination. The Willow Creek Community Church, the largest church in America, has some denominational roots in some of its doctrines and practices, but functionally it is an independent congregation. The Saddleback Community Church in Orange County, California, where Rick Warren is the pastor, has Baptist roots. But they deliberately decided to avoid using the name "Baptist."<sup>21</sup> If you have read Leith Anderson's book *Dying for Change*, you know that his Wooddale Church did the same thing.<sup>22</sup> In 1973, Elmer Towns wrote a book with the title *Is the Day of the Denomination Dead?*<sup>23</sup> Towns argues that denominations are organizational dinosaurs that soon will become extinct. He claims that big churches can help little churches and thus perform every function now performed by denominational headquarters--and do it better.

A sectarian, of course, would say that all of these independent congregations are really denominational because they all teach and practice some things that are wrong. It is clear, however, that many leaders in other religious groups think that congregations can be nondenominational. It really would be sad if leaders among the Churches of Christ gave up this idea at the very time that others are beginning to accept it. In *Discovering Our Roots*, Allen and Hughes correctly point out that there have been several restoration movements.<sup>24</sup> This idea was not unique to the Stone-Campbell movement. But the fact that others have tried to do the same thing does not make it wrong. I still believe that the restoration of nondenominational New Testament Christianity is possible. I do not believe that restoration is something that was accomplished and finished more than a century ago. In my opinion, that is a very sectarian view. I think of restoration as an on-going process, a challenge facing every generation in the church. But I am still a restorationist, and I still believe that the church can be both nonsectarian and nondenominational.

## How We View the Dominant Culture

But what about Hughes' view that a negative attitude toward the dominant culture defines a group as being sectarian? This is what Hughes calls an "apocalyptic worldview." He defines this view as "An outlook on life whereby the believer gives his or her allegiance to the kingdom of God, not to the kingdoms of this world, and lives as if the final rule of the kingdom of God were present in the here and now. Such a perspective inevitably generates a counterculture lifestyle."<sup>25</sup>

Frankly, I do not really find much that is objectionable in that worldview as Hughes describes it. I am not a postmillennialist, but I am very optimistic about the power of the gospel to convert sinners, and I am optimistic about the growth of the church. I am not a premillennialist, but I am not at all optimistic about science or any kind of human effort ushering in a golden age. It seems to me that the culture around us is sick. It is bad and getting worse day by day. The longer I live, the more I am persuaded that Christians must have a counterculture lifestyle. We must not make our peace with the dominant culture. I do not want us to withdraw. But isolation is not the only alternative to acceptance of the dominant culture. A strategy of constructive engagement is what we need. We should be good citizens, but our primary allegiance is to the kingdom of God. And if that kind of attitude makes me sectarian, then so be it.

I really do not think that the views of Armstrong and Benson toward the dominant culture were all that different. What was different was how they applied that view. And we may differ from person to person, time to time, and place to place in how we apply it. But we still need to accept that view.

### **How We View the Nature of Truth**

There are many areas where I cannot make peace with the dominant culture. Perhaps the most fundamental issue is how the dominant culture views truth. The popular idea today is that in spiritual matters--issues dealing with beliefs, values, and morals--*absolute truth is not possible, knowable, or propositional*. That statement, of course, cannot be true. It is self-contradictory because it is a statement of an absolute truth that is knowable and it is stated in the form of a proposition. Leaders of the liberal denominations have made peace with the dominant culture and this is the view they accept concerning the nature of truth.

There is, however, an opposite extreme, a sectarian view, that is equally wrong. The sectarian not only believes that absolute truth is possible, knowable, and propositional, but he also believes that he knows it all perfectly. According to this view, there is no difference at all between absolute truth and our perception of that truth. Sectarians believe that they do not interpret Scripture: they just obey it. Those who take this position like to quote the KJV translation of 2 Peter 1:20, "no prophecy of the Scripture is of any private interpretation." They take this verse out of context to prove that when they read a passage of Scripture, they do not interpret it: instead, they simply teach it and practice it. But even in the KJV, the very next verse makes it clear that the subject being discussed here is the *origin* of prophecy--not the process of reading or hearing and understanding that prophecy. If we do not attribute meaning to a speaker or writer, there is no communication.

When the pioneers of the Restoration Movement said such things as "We have no creed but Christ" or "We speak where the Bible speaks and we are silent where the Bible is silent," that could be understood as a highly sectarian statement--a claim that their belief system was not an interpretation of Scripture but was exactly the same thing as the absolute truth of the Bible. But that slogan can also be understood as a goal, rather than as a boast about what we have

accomplished. And if that is not the meaning that the pioneers intended to communicate, it is the meaning that they should have intended to communicate.

There are people in the church today who take a sectarian approach. They are blinded by the illusion of absolute certainty. You cannot have a genuine dialogue with these people because they are not really present. They will not defend their perceptions *as perceptions*. If you disagree with them, it must be because you are ignorant or evil. Your disagreement, they say, is not really with them: it is with the Bible.

I believe that sectarianism is wrong and denominationalism is also wrong. As Christians discuss these internal issues, we sometimes associate sectarianism with a conservative, right wing position and denominationalism with a liberal, left wing position. A "liberal," by this definition, is a Christian whose conscience approves of something that my conscience condemns; and a "conservative" is a Christian whose conscience condemns something that I approve. That is, of course, a very self-centered definition. But it is also how most of us, in practice, use these terms. Anyone to the left of me is too liberal, and anyone to the right of me is too conservative. Most of us think of ourselves as being exactly in the middle. I know that I do. The difference between me and the people who take what I regard as a sectarian position is that I admit this human limitation. I recognize it. I try, therefore, not to take my self-centered definitions too seriously. They act as though their self-centered definitions are exactly the same thing as absolute truth.

### **A Different Perspective on the Harding Story**

I do not believe that George S. Benson and Harding College turned the Churches of Christ from a sect into a denomination. Whether you are speaking theologically or using historical/sociological language, that is not what happened. That is not what we are celebrating this year. If I had to select just one word to describe what I believe the real contribution of Harding University has been it would be the word *balance*.

Armstrong believed in the value of Christian education. When he established Western Bible and Literary College in Odessa, Missouri, he was bitterly opposed by Daniel Sommer. The definition of sectarian really fits Sommer. But Armstrong said that he was willing to have Sommer speak at the school in Odessa and explain why he believed that such schools were wrong. Does that kind of openness sound sectarian?

Sectarians do not tolerate diversity, but J. N. Armstrong did. One of the strongest criticisms directed against Armstrong was that he was "soft on premillennialism." Armstrong was never a premillennialist. He did, however, believe that the church should avoid division over this issue. The criticism of Armstrong on this matter, however, was essentially that he was not sectarian enough.

Sectarians do not change, or at least they do not admit that they have changed. I once heard a preacher boast "I have not changed his mind in more than 40 years." That rigid attitude



has not been characteristic of Harding University. James A. Harding did not believe that preachers should receive a "stipulated salary." In 1910, Harding had a written debate with L. S. White over this issue. Harding lost. We do not hold that view today. We have changed. J. N. Armstrong shared the views of Harding and Lipscomb who believed that Christians should not vote or hold political office. We do not teach that today. We have changed. Harding, Lipscomb, Armstrong, and many others of that era taught that Christians could not serve in combat. The ministry of James D. Bales illustrates how we have changed on this. Bales debated both sides of that issue at different times. Dr. Bales once told me that he not only debated both sides, he *won* on both sides!

Armstrong was a pacifist. Most of the faculty and students at Cordell Christian College were pacifists. Some were not. But Armstrong accepted all of them regardless of their position on this issue of conscience. When World War I started, draft boards automatically recognized members of some denominations as being conscientious objectors. If the denomination's written creed or historical tradition clearly affirmed a pacifist position, its members were granted exemption from combat. Since Churches of Christ did not have a formal written creed, draft boards did not grant the conscientious objector exemption to its members. Alvin York, the most decorated hero of World War I, was a member of the Churches of Christ and a conscientious objector when he was drafted. He changed his views only after being in combat. Some pacifists from Churches of Christ went to prison over this issue. Armstrong went to the federal government to argue this case. He explained that Churches of Christ have no formal written creed and all members are expected to study the Bible for themselves and come to their own conclusions in such matters of conscience.

Armstrong's approach in this matter was one that tolerated diversity, and that is not sectarian. But the people who opposed Armstrong and his faculty at Cordell Christian College because of their pacifism were not willing to tolerate such diversity. The defense council in Cordell issued a formal order to the school's board of trustees that the "institution be so reorganized as will unreservedly conform to all military policies and requirements of the government in order to successfully carry on the war and that no half-way compliance will be tolerated."<sup>26</sup> They demanded that all at the school who shared Armstrong's views regarding a Christian's participation in war be removed immediately. All of the teachers and all but one board member shared Armstrong's view on this matter. Armstrong decided to close the school rather than to compromise on this issue of conscience.

W. D. Hockaday, from Granite, Oklahoma, was the chairman of the board at Cordell Christian College. Hockaday was persecuted by the people of Granite because of his views on the war issue. His nephew, who was not a student at Cordell, was so strong in his anti-war views that he could not in good conscience accept even a noncombat role. Ben Randolph, a student at the college, shared this position. Both of them were sent to Leavenworth Penitentiary, along with others who took the same position.

Sears' account of what happened is worth considering seriously.

Armstrong visited them there and gave them what encouragement he could. But their sincerity was severely tested. A special representative, they understood from Washington, pleaded with them, and tears ran down his cheeks as he told them that they would be shot at daybreak unless they accepted some kind of service. But all replied that they could accept none. Next morning they faced a firing squad, blindfolded. They heard the command, 'Present arms, aim!' But the word 'fire' was never given."<sup>27</sup>

This kind of intolerance was never characteristic of Armstrong, but it was characteristic of many who opposed him. When Sommer opposed Armstrong's school in Odessa, Missouri, he claimed to have a lot of Bible evidence in support of his position, but he never presented it in a forum where his arguments could be answered. Instead, he used ridicule, misrepresentation, insult, and threats in an effort to force the school to close. Later, when Armstrong was accused of being "soft on premillennialism" it was Armstrong who was tolerant of diversity--not his critics. It was these critics who used misrepresentations, insults, and threats. It was the critics of Armstrong who were sectarian in this matter, not Armstrong.

I most certainly would not claim that Churches of Christ have never had a sectarian element. I believe, however, that there has also been a nonsectarian element in Churches of Christ and that nonsectarian element certainly included J. N. Armstrong. The sectarians were not the majority. They just made more noise.

When Armstrong left Cordell, he served as president of Harper College in Kansas. All of the members of that school's board of trustees were opposed to the practice of having Bible classes in the church. When Armstrong went to Harper, he reserved the right to speak in defense of Bible classes, but he never tried to force his views on the non-class brethren in the Harper Church of Christ. Does that really sound like a sectarian?

I simply cannot accept the view that Armstrong led Harding College and the church during a sectarian period and that George Benson turned the church from a sect into a denomination. There was a sectarian element in Churches of Christ in the nineteenth century, and there is still a sectarian element in Churches of Christ as we draw near the end of the twentieth century. There was a denominational element in the Restoration Movement during the nineteenth century. They became the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). Churches of Christ at the end of the twentieth century once again have people who accept a denominational view of the church. But these extremes, in my opinion, were not and are not characteristic of a majority of the members and congregations among the Churches of Christ.

### **Challenges Facing Churches of Christ**

Churches of Christ have always faced challenges from both sectarian and denominational extremes. In between, however, there has been a large but quiet majority. Studies of generational cohorts have identified the generation that came before the baby boomers as the "silent

generation.” Some politicians used to call us the “silent majority.” That might be a good term to describe the moderates in the Churches of Christ. But perhaps the time has come for us to speak. Sectarianism is wrong and we should condemn it. Sectarian tactics are especially damaging to the church. When we see brethren using the tactics of misrepresentation, personal attack, ridicule, insult, gossip, and slander, we should speak out in opposition to such tactics. We must not allow our critics to control us through the use of threats and intimidation.

I hope that we continue to resist such efforts, but in a gentle, humble, and loving manner. After all, these critics are our brothers and sisters in Christ. We need to continue our dialogue with them. Whenever possible, we need to heal past divisions and avoid future divisions. For example, I think that we ought to get back together with the non-class brethren. If you will check the attendance records and notice the difference between Bible class attendance and Sunday morning worship attendance, you will find that we have more anti-class people than they do. And if we can put up with people who do not go to Bible class out of laziness, would it be all that hard to put up with people who do not go to Bible class out of conscience? I would like to see us get back together with the non-institutional brethren. I do not know why we ever split over church cooperation. We have never cooperated enough to make it worth fighting over in the first place. We could even get back together with the one cup brethren. We could drill a big hole in the middle of our cup tray where they could put the one big cup they have always used, and we could keep on using our little individual cups. There really was a congregation that did that as a way of avoiding division over the cups issue. I am not willing to strain my religion through the narrow sieve of another brother’s conscience or give veto power to those strong brethren who use the “weak brother” argument. But we could do a lot more to find some way to compromise.

But how do we deal with those to our left? I hope that we will continue to engage in a constructive dialogue with them. They are also our brothers and sisters in the family of God. But I would suggest that we not give a platform to those who prove to be wolves in sheep’s clothing. We have some in the Churches of Christ who no longer believe that the restoration plea is valid. They do not believe that it is possible for us to be nondenominational. Some would like for us to start using instrumental music in our congregational worship assemblies or at least stop teaching against that practice. A few would like to have women preachers and women elders with no distinctions between the roles of men and women in the church. We have some who now question the place of baptism in the plan of salvation. We have some who question the inspiration and the authority of the Bible--some who say that the Bible is “thought inspired,” but not “word inspired.”

A few years ago, when people changed on issues like this, they left the Churches of Christ and affiliated with the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). This is the position of the Disciples on all of these issues. What we have today, however, is that some people are changing on these issues and yet they are staying in the Churches of Christ and using their influence to persuade the rest of us to change as they have changed. They are in some of our pulpits. They teach in some of our schools and use the claim of “academic freedom” to justify their position. And I believe in academic freedom just as I believe in freedom of conscience. But it is not honest to sail under false colors and pretend to be what you are not. I do not want these people who take a liberal

denominational view to leave. I want them to stay. I am willing to engage in a frank, open, and honest dialogue with them. But I want them to be completely open and honest about what they believe, how they have changed, and what they want to do with the Churches of Christ in the future. I am not suggesting that it is wrong for people to have their own ideas about what Churches of Christ should be and should do in the future. It is not wrong to have an agenda. What is wrong is to hide that agenda.

A problem that I have noticed with some who take a liberal denominational view of the church is that they are not willing to defend their positions. In their preaching, teaching, and writing, they occasionally drop bombshells and then go off and leave them. They usually will not take part in a genuine dialogue where their views will be challenged. They want to be in control of the program and stack the deck in their favor. If they are challenged about something they have said, their response most often is to dismiss it by saying, "It is not an issue." What that means is that they want the freedom to say whatever they want to say without accepting the responsibility to explain and defend the positions they have taken.

We need more dialogue. What we have now is a lot of "duologue," two monologues going on at the same time that never meet. We ought to be willing to listen with an open mind to those who are far to the right and far to the left of us. Then we must search the Scriptures to see if what they say is true. We must prove all things and hold fast to what is good. I do not think that we can depend on those to our right or to our left to provide a forum for open and honest dialogue. Those of us in the middle will have to do it or it will not be done.

### Conclusion

Harding University partakes of a heritage that is more than 75 years old, a heritage that teaches all of us some important lessons, a heritage that honors the command God gave to Joshua more than 3,000 years ago: *"Only be strong and very courageous; be careful to do according to all the law which Moses My servant commanded you; do not turn from it to the right or to the left, so that you may have success wherever you go."*<sup>28</sup>

I believe that the time has come when the silent majority must speak. We must stand up and be counted. We must have the courage to do what is right in spite of opposition. We can no longer define success simply in terms of how little criticism we receive. We must speak out against divisive tactics. We can no longer remain silent concerning the sectarianism of those to our right or the liberalism of those to our left who accept a denominational view of the church.

Silence is not always golden. Sometimes it is just plain yellow.

## NOTES

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11. Lynn, 1997, p. 15.
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17. Hughes, pp. 151-160.
18. Hughes, pp. xii-xiii, in his Glossary.
19. *Ibid.*



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22. (Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers, 1990).
23. (Nashville: Thomas Nelson ).
24. Leonard Allen and Richard Hughes (Abilene: ACU Press, 1988).
25. Hughes, pp. xii.
26. Sears, p. 156.
27. Sears, p. 158-159.
28. Joshua 1:7 (New American Standard)

Figure 1

**CHURCHES OF CHRIST IN THE UNITED STATES:  
REPORTED NUMBER OF MEMBERS**

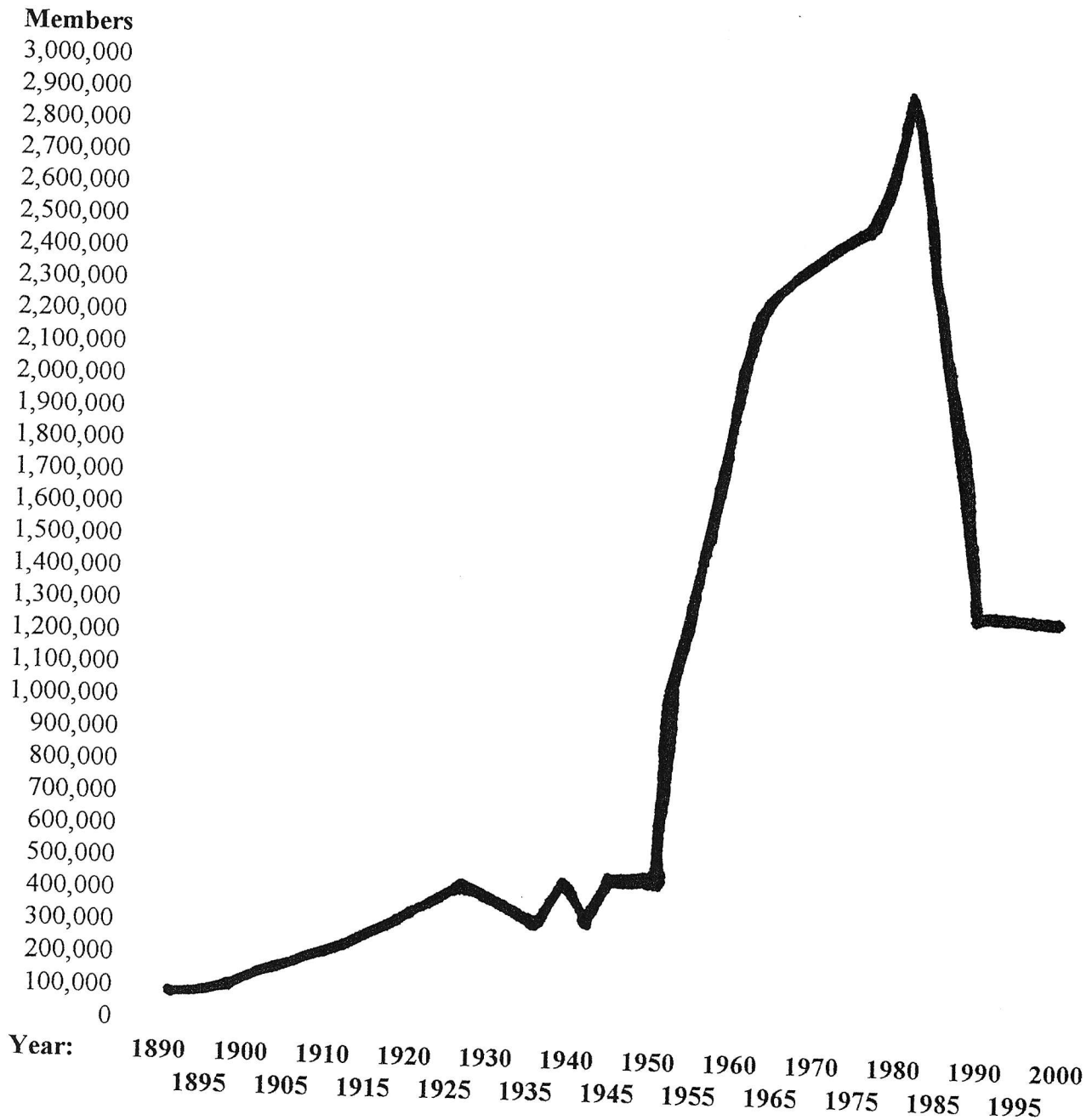


Figure 2

**CHURCHES OF CHRIST IN THE UNITED STATES: A MORE REALISTIC  
ESTIMATE OF THE NUMBER OF MEMBERS**

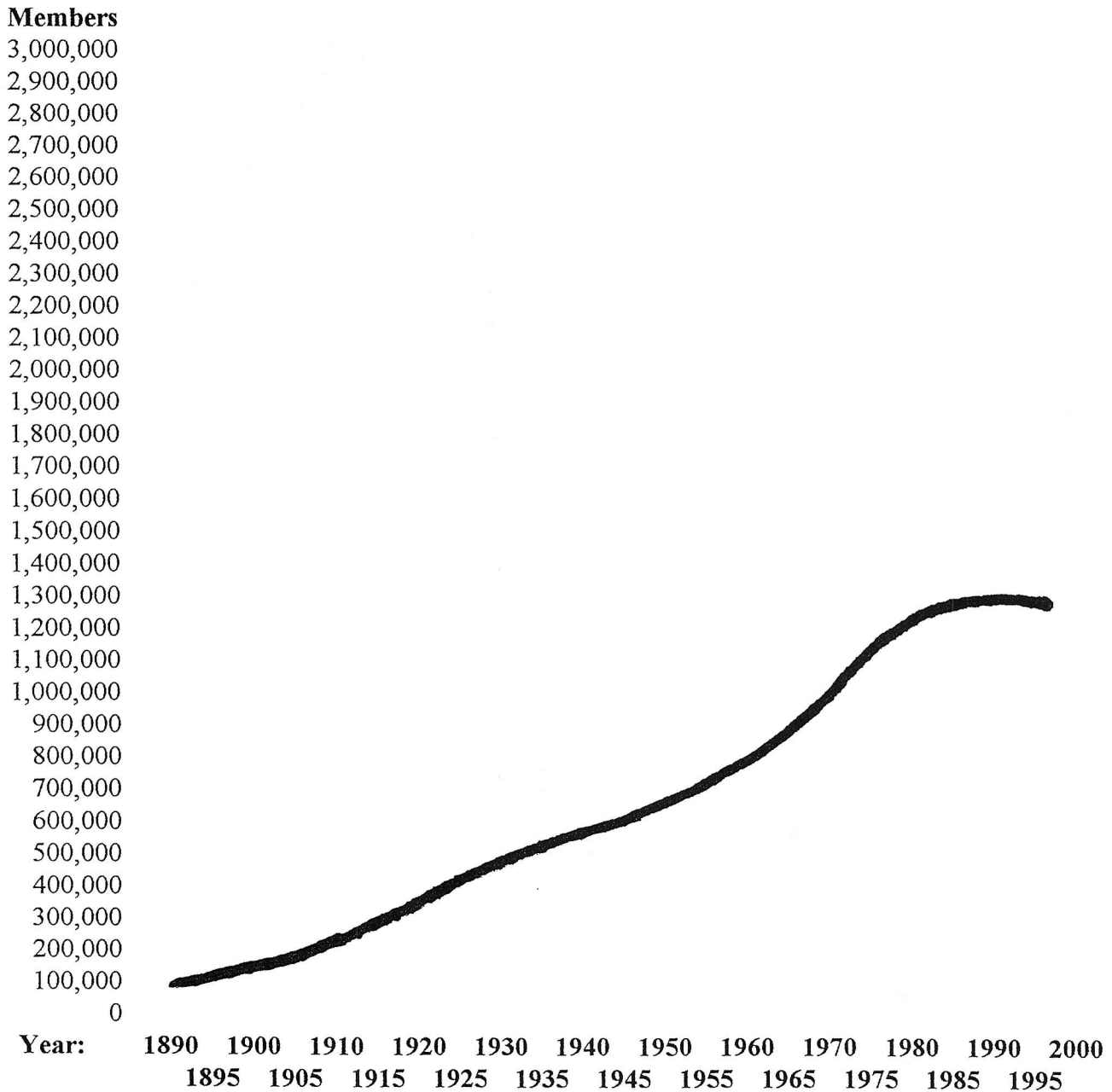


Figure 3

**CHURCHES OF CHRIST IN THE UNITED STATES:  
REPORTED NUMBER OF CONGREGATIONS**

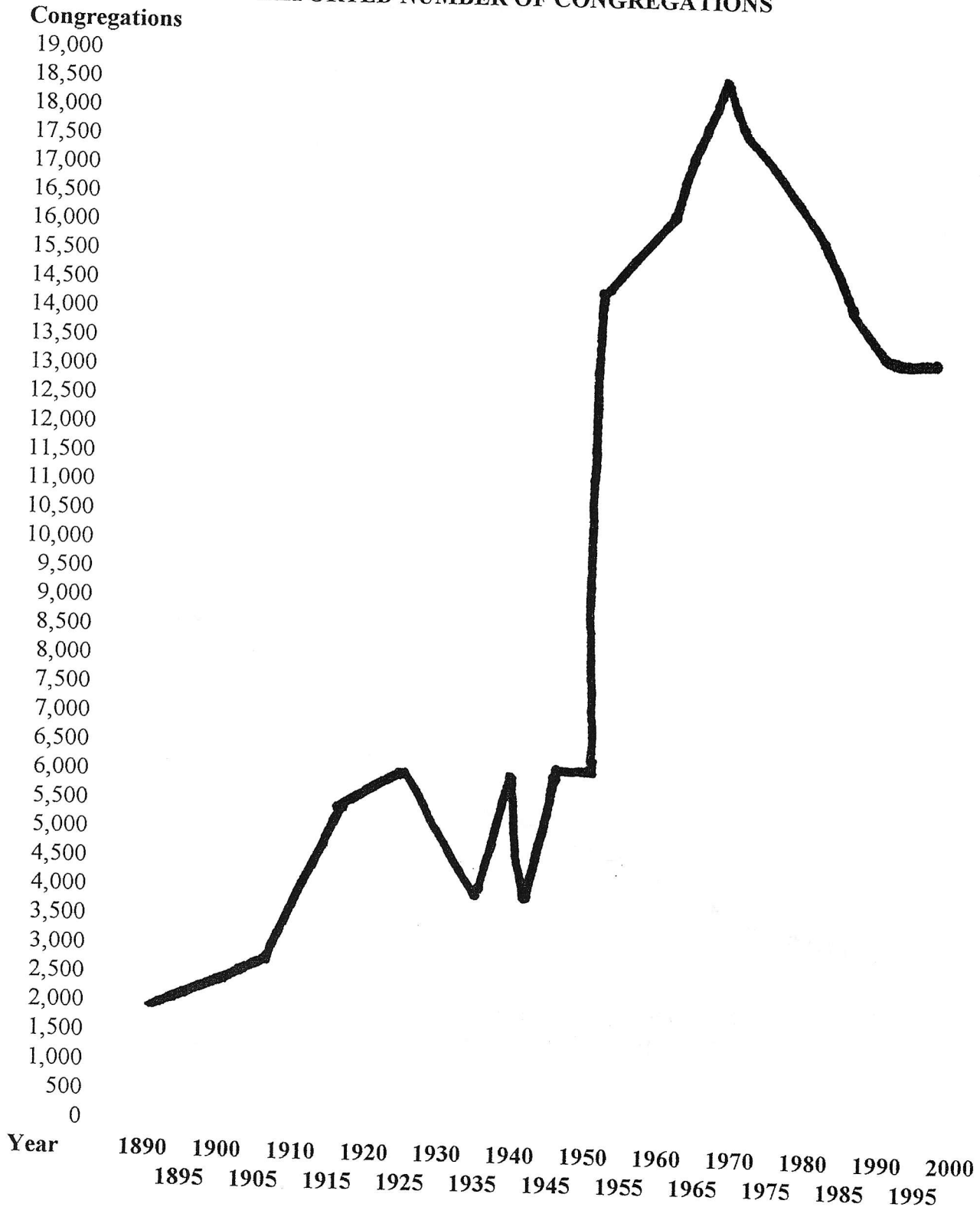


Figure 4

**CHURCHES OF CHRIST IN THE UNITED STATES: A MORE REALISTIC  
ESTIMATE OF THE NUMBER OF CONGREGATIONS**

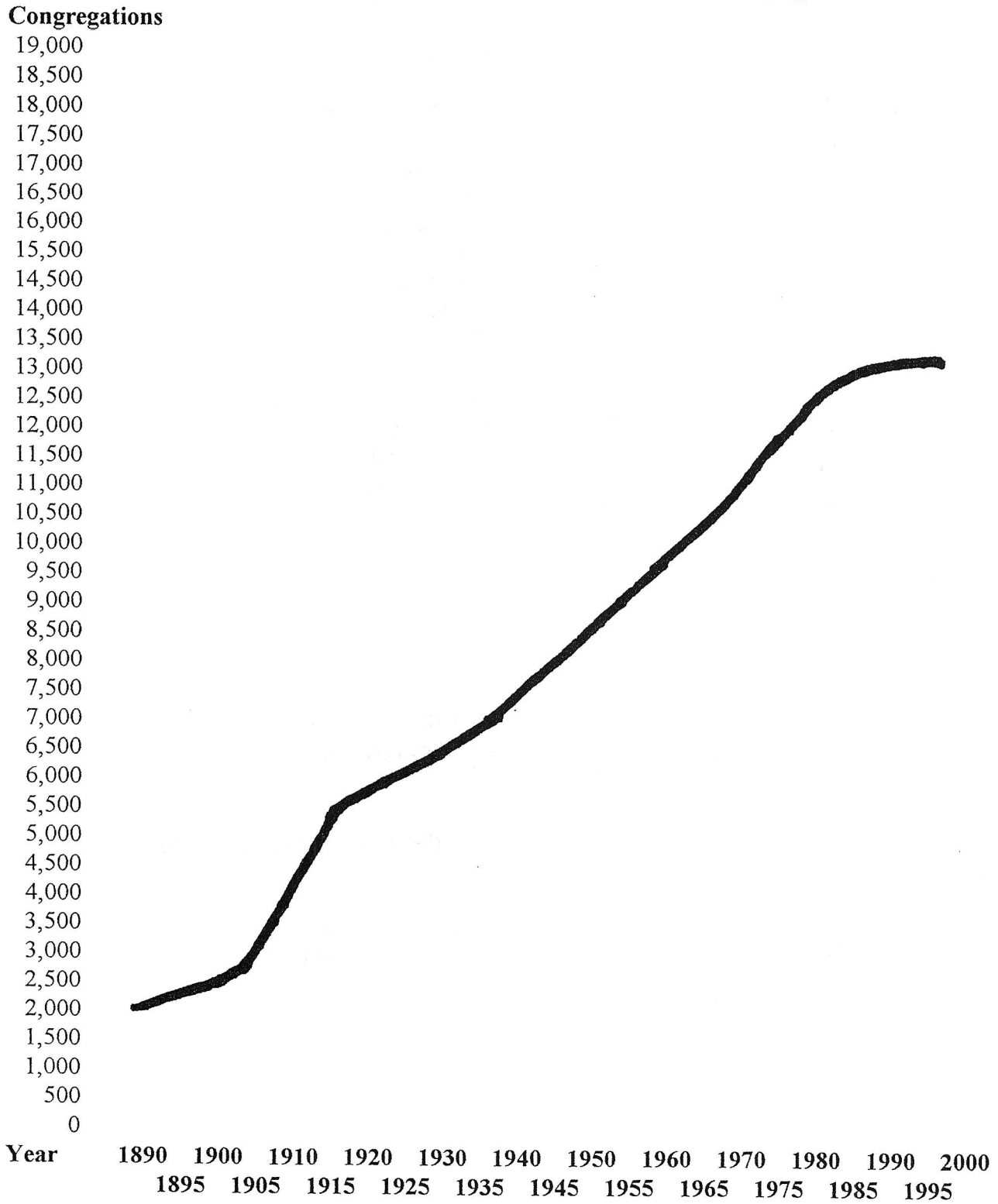




Table 1

**STATES RANKED BY THE ESTIMATED NUMBER OF MEMBERS  
IN THE CHURCHES OF CHRIST, 1890**

Based on the 1906-1926 growth curve projected back to 1890.

States	Members	Percent	Cum. %	States	Members	Percent	Cum. %
Tennessee	27,000	27.0	27.0	Connecticut	0		
Texas	15,000	15.0	42.0	Delaware	0		
Kentucky	8,500	8.5	50.5	Maryland	0		
Arkansas	7,500	7.5	58.0	Massachusetts	0		
Indiana	6,500	6.5	64.5	Minnesota	0		
Alabama	6,000	6.0	70.5	Montana	0		
Missouri	5,000	5.0	75.5	Nevada	0		
Ohio	4,500	4.5	80.0	New Hampshire	0		
Oklahoma	4,000	4.0	84.0	New Jersey	0		
Illinois	3,500	3.5	87.5	North Dakota	0		
Kansas	3,000	3.0	90.5	Rhode Island	0		
West Virginia	2,000	2.0	92.5	South Carolina	0		
Mississippi	2,000	2.0	94.5	South Dakota	0		
Iowa	1,000	1.0	95.5	Utah	0		
Florida	700	0.7	97.2	Vermont	0		
Georgia	500	0.5	97.8	Wisconsin	0		
Michigan	500	0.5	98.3	Wyoming	0		
California	300	0.3	98.6				
Pennsylvania	300	0.3	98.9				
Nebraska	200	0.2	99.1				
Washington	100	0.1	99.2				
Louisiana	100	0.1	99.3				
Oregon	100	0.1	99.4				
North Carolina	100	0.1	99.5				
Maine	100	0.1	99.6				
New Mexico	100	0.1	99.7				
Virginia	100	0.1	99.8				
Colorado	100	0.1	99.9				
Arizona	40	<0.1	99.9				
Idaho	30	<0.1	99.9				
New York	20	<0.1	99.9				

**US Total 100,000  
(2,000 congregations)**

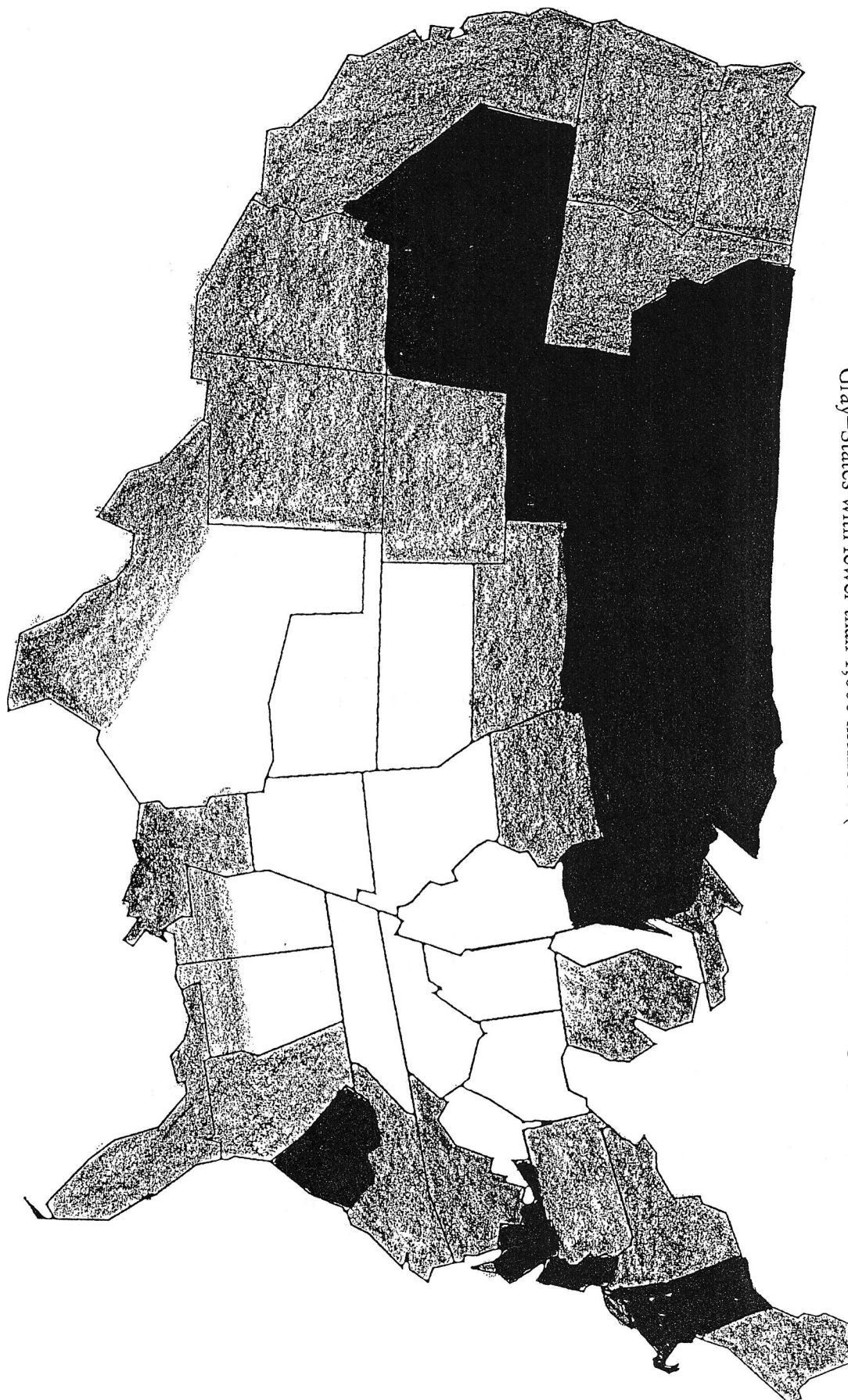
**US Population in 1890: 62,979,766**

**Member-to-Population  
Ratio: 1:630**

Map for Table 1

Churches of Christ in the United States, 1890

White=States with 1,000 members or more; Black=States with no congregations  
Gray=States with fewer than 1,000 members (or an area with no congregations)



**Table 2**

**STATES RANKED BY THE NUMBER OF MEMBERS  
IN THE CHURCHES OF CHRIST, 1906**

Source: *Religious Bodies* (Washington, D.C.: United States Census Bureau)

States	Members	Percent	Cum. %	States	Members
Tennessee	41,411	25.9	25.9	Connecticut	0
Texas	34,006	21.3	47.2	Delaware	0
Kentucky	12,451	7.8	55.0	Maryland	0
Arkansas	11,006	6.9	61.9	Massachusetts	0
Indiana	10,249	6.4	68.3	Minnesota	0
Alabama	9,214	5.8	74.1	Montana	0
Oklahoma	8,074	5.1	79.2	Nevada	0
Missouri	7,087	4.4	83.6	New Hampshire	0
Ohio	4,954	3.7	87.3	New Jersey	0
Illinois	3,552	2.2	89.5	North Dakota	0
Kansas	3,216	2.0	91.5	Rhode Island	0
Mississippi	3,155	2.0	93.5	South Carolina	0
West Virginia	2,594	1.6	95.1	South Dakota	0
Iowa	1,477	0.9	96.0	Utah	0
Florida	1,060	0.7	96.7	Vermont	0
Georgia	1,046	0.7	97.4	Wyoming	0
Michigan	838	0.5	97.9		
California	761	0.5	98.4		
Pennsylvania	729	0.5	98.9		
Nebraska	492	0.3	99.2		
Washington	488	0.3	99.5		
Louisiana	421	0.3	99.8		
Oregon	408	<0.3	99.9		
North Carolina	295	<0.2	>99.9		
Maine	137	<0.1	>99.9		
New Mexico	129	<0.1	>99.9		
Virginia	120	<0.1	>99.9		
Colorado	114	<0.1	>99.9		
Arizona	52	<0.1	>99.9		
Idaho	46	<0.1	>99.9		
New York	44	<0.1	>99.9		
Wisconsin	8	<0.1	>99.9		

**US Total 159,658**  
**(2,649 congregations)**

**US Population in 1900: 76,212,168**

**Member-to-Population**  
**Ratio: 1:477**

**Map for Table 2**

**Churches of Christ in the United States, 1906**

White=States with 1,000 members or more; Black=States with no congregations  
Gray=States with fewer than 1,000 members (or an area with no congregations)

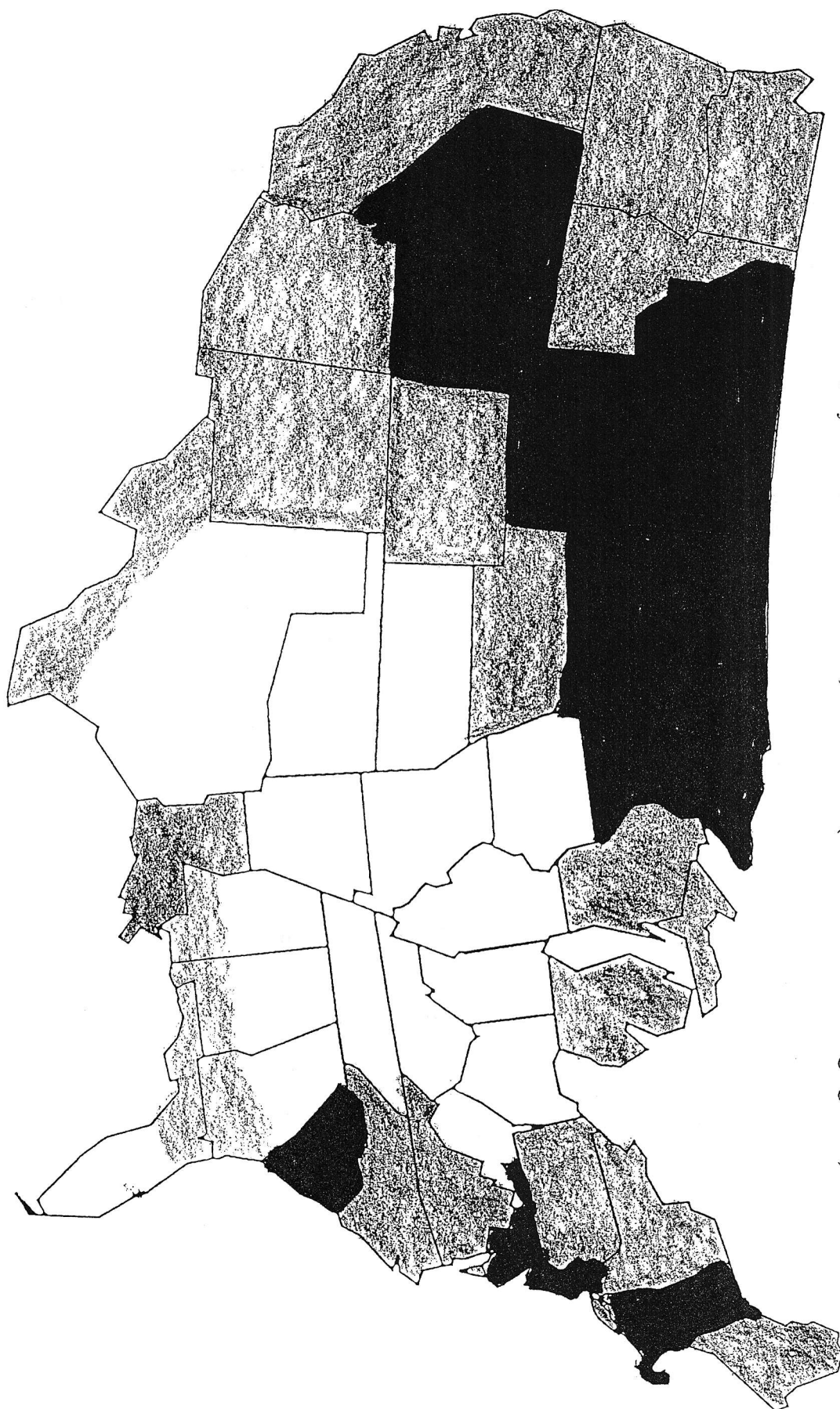


Table 3

**STATES RANKED BY THE NUMBER OF MEMBERS  
IN THE CHURCHES OF CHRIST, 1916**

Source: *Religious Bodies* (Washington, D.C.: United States Census Bureau)

States	Members	Percent	Cum. %	States	Members	Percent	Cum.%
Texas	71,542	22.5	22.5	Connecticut	0		
Tennessee	63,521	20.0	42.5	Delaware	0		
Arkansas	26,239	8.3	50.8	Maryland	0		
Kentucky	24,216	7.6	58.4	Massachusetts	0		
Oklahoma	21,700	6.8	65.2	Minnesota	0		
Alabama	20,943	6.6	71.8	Nevada	0		
Indiana	16,512	5.2	77.0	New Hampshire	0		
Missouri	13,160	4.1	81.1	New Jersey	0		
West Virginia	10,342	3.3	84.4	North Dakota	0		
Ohio	9,004	2.8	87.2	Rhode Island	0		
Illinois	6,726	2.1	89.3	South Carolina	0		
Mississippi	5,994	1.9	91.2	South Dakota	0		
Kansas	5,573	1.8	93.0	Utah	0		
Florida	2,865	0.9	93.9	Vermont	0		
Georgia	2,671	0.8	94.7	Wisconsin	0		
Iowa	1,534	0.5	95.2	Wyoming	0		
Michigan	1,398	0.4	95.6				
New Mexico	1,333	0.4	96.0				
Pennsylvania	1,295	0.4	96.4				
Louisiana	1,268	0.4	96.8				
Nebraska	1,252	0.4	97.2				
Washington	1,194	0.4	97.6				
California	1,149	0.4	98.0				
Oregon	1,133	0.4	98.4				
North Carolina	951	0.3	98.7				
Virginia	841	0.3	99.0				
Colorado	588	0.2	99.2				
Idaho	364	0.1	99.3				
Arizona	239	<0.1	99.4				
Maine	153	<0.1	99.5				
Montana	41	<0.1	99.6				
New York	16	<0.1	99.7				

**US Total: 317,937**  
**(5,570 congregations)**

**US Population in 1910: 92,228,496**

**Member-to-Population**  
**Ratio: 1:290**



**Map for Table 3**

**Churches of Christ in the United States, 1916**

White=States with 1,000 members or more; Black=States with no congregations  
Gray=States with fewer than 1,000 members (or an area with no congregations)

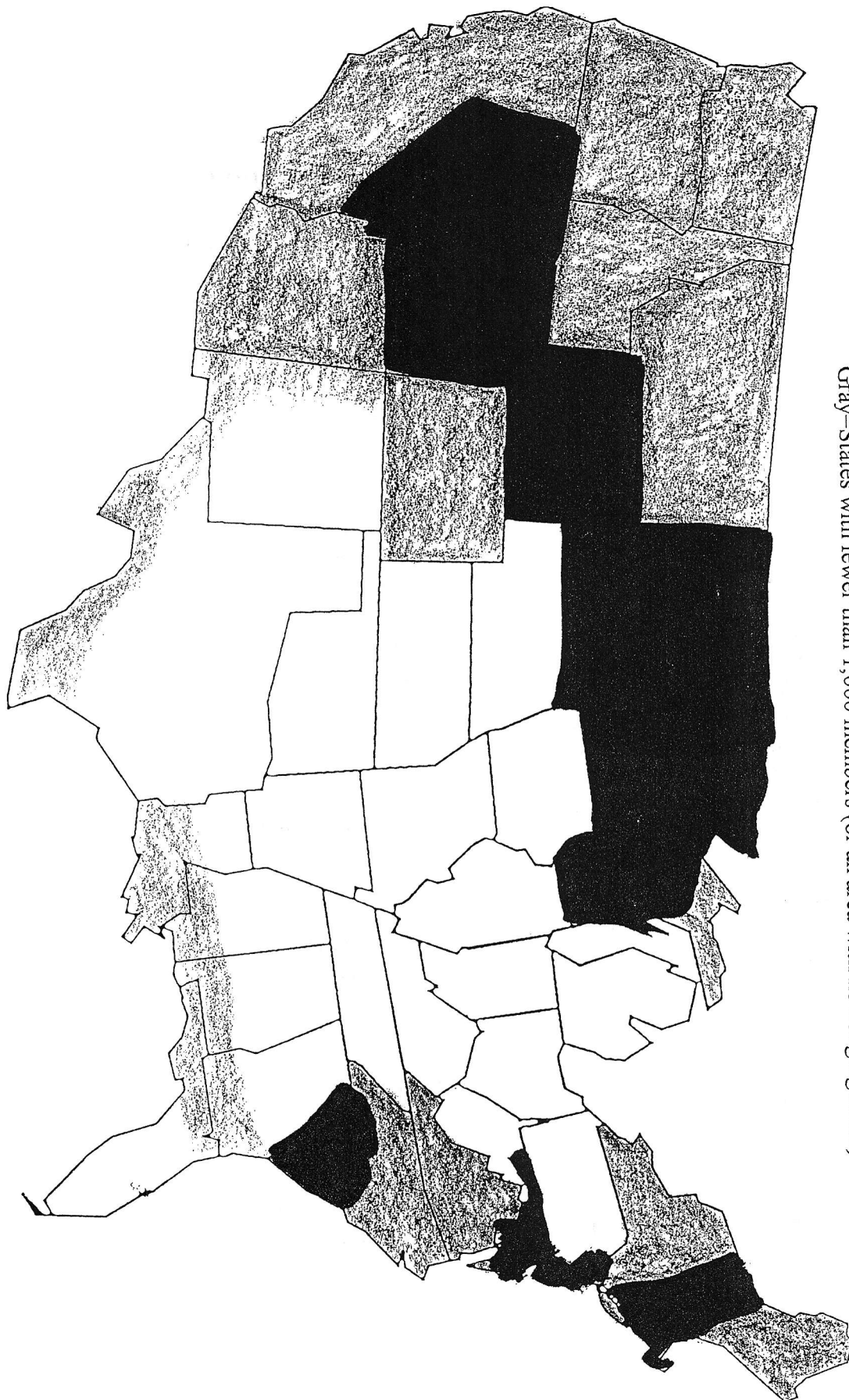


Table 4

**STATES RANKED BY THE NUMBER OF MEMBERS  
IN THE CHURCHES OF CHRIST, 1926**

Source: *Religious Bodies* (Washington, D.C.: United States Census Bureau)

States	Members	Percent	Cum. %
Texas	98,909	22.8	22.8
Tennessee	72,015	16.6	39.4
Arkansas	39,678	9.1	48.5
Oklahoma	34,645	8.0	56.5
Alabama	30,115	6.9	63.4
Kentucky	29,539	6.8	70.2
Indiana	21,419	4.9	75.1
Missouri	19,260	4.4	79.5
West Virginia	13,660	3.1	82.6
Ohio	11,257	2.6	85.2
Illinois	10,017	2.3	87.5
Kansas	8,983	2.1	89.6
Mississippi	6,968	1.6	91.2
Florida	6,159	1.4	92.6
California	4,438	1.0	93.6
Georgia	4,039	0.9	94.5
Iowa	4,032	0.9	95.4
Louisiana	2,240	0.5	95.9
Michigan	2,156	0.5	96.4
Pennsylvania	2,135	0.5	96.9
New Mexico	2,032	0.5	97.4
Colorado	1,477	0.3	97.7
Nebraska	1,269	0.3	98.0
Oregon	1,102	0.2	98.2
Washington	1,069	0.2	98.4
North Carolina	1,013	0.2	98.6
Arizona	816	0.2	98.8
Virginia	700	0.2	99.0
Idaho	411	<0.1	99.1
South Carolina	352	<0.1	99.2
New York	182	<0.1	99.3
Montana	154	<0.1	99.4
Maine	117	<0.1	99.5
Wisconsin	73	<0.1	99.6
New Jersey	47	<0.1	99.7

States	Members
Connecticut	0
Delaware	0
Maryland	0
Massachusetts	0
Minnesota	0
Nevada	0
New Hampshire	0
North Dakota	0
Rhode Island	0
South Dakota	0
Utah	0
Vermont	0
Wyoming	0

**US Total: 433,714**  
**(6,226 congregations)**

**Growth Rate, 1906-1926:**  
**86% per decade**

**US Population in 1920: 106,021,537**

**Member-to-Population**  
**Ratio: 1:244**

Gray=States with fewer than 1,000 members (or more than 1,000 members)

Gray=States with fewer than 1,000 members (or more than 1,000 members)

Table 5

**STATES RANKED BY THE ESTIMATED NUMBER OF MEMBERS  
IN THE CHURCHES OF CHRIST, 1936**

Source: 1906-1926 growth curve projected to 1936 as a correction to  
the data in *Religious Bodies, 1936* (Washington, D.C.: United States Census Bureau)

States	Members	Percent	Cum.%	States	Members	Percent	Cum.%
Texas	137,000	27.4	27.4	Montana	<250	<0.1	>99.9
Tennessee	80,000	16.0	43.4	Maine	<200	<0.1	>99.9
Oklahoma	42,000	8.4	51.8	New Jersey	<200	<0.1	>99.9
Alabama	33,000	6.6	58.4	Maryland	<100	<0.1	>99.9
Kentucky	33,000	6.6	65.0	Wyoming	<100	<0.1	>99.9
Arkansas	26,500	5.3	70.3	Connecticut	<100	<0.1	>99.9
Indiana	21,000	4.2	74.5	Massachusetts	<100	<0.1	>99.9
Missouri	16,500	3.3	77.8	Minnesota	<100	<0.1	>99.9
Ohio	15,500	3.1	80.9	Nevada	<100	<0.1	>99.9
West Virginia	13,500	2.7	83.6	Utah	<100	<0.1	>99.9
California	10,500	2.1	85.7	Delaware	0		
Mississippi	10,000	2.0	87.7	New Hampshire	0		
Florida	10,000	2.0	89.7	North Dakota	0		
Georgia	8,000	1.6	91.3	Rhode Island	0		
Kansas	7,500	1.5	92.8	South Dakota	0		
Illinois	7,000	1.4	94.2	Vermont	0		
New Mexico	5,000	1.0	95.2				
Michigan	4,500	0.9	96.1				
Louisiana	4,000	0.8	96.9				
Pennsylvania	2,000	0.4	97.3				
Oregon	2,000	0.4	97.7				
Iowa	1,500	0.3	98.0				
Colorado	1,500	0.3	98.3				
Wisconsin	1,500	0.3	98.3				
North Carolina	1,500	0.3	98.9				
Washington	1,000	0.2	99.1				
Arizona	1,000	0.2	99.3				
Virginia	1,000	0.2	99.5				
Nebraska	1,000	0.2	99.7				
South Carolina	500	0.1	99.6				
Idaho	<500	<0.1	>99.8				
New York	<500	<0.1	>99.9				

**US Total: 500,000**  
**(6,700 congregations)**

**US Population in 1930: 123,202,624**

**Member-to-Population**  
**Ratio: 1:246**

The US total of 309,551 reported to the Census Bureau is far too low. It may have reflected "mainline" congregations only and it probably underestimated even them. The percentages used in this table are based on the 1936 Census Bureau report, but the total is assumed to have been around 500,000 which would be in line with the trends for the previous reports (1906, 1916, and 1926).

# Churches of Christ in the United States, 1936

A map of the state of Ohio, showing its county boundaries. The map is oriented vertically. The counties of Cuyahoga, Lorain, and Summit are shaded in black. The counties of Cuyahoga, Lorain, Summit, and Franklin are shaded in gray. The rest of the state is white.



Table 6

**STATES RANKED BY THE NUMBER OF MEMBERS  
IN THE CHURCHES OF CHRIST, 1980**

Source: Mac Lynn's census of congregations as reported in  
*Churches and Church Membership in the United States 1980*

States	Members	Percent	Cum.%	States	Members	Percent	Cum.%
Texas	278,820	22.5	22.5	Nebraska	3,709	0.3	97.7
Tennessee	174,355	14.1	36.6	Iowa	3,574	0.3	98.0
Alabama	89,208	7.2	43.8	New Jersey	2,986	0.2	98.2
Oklahoma	71,728	5.8	49.6	Wisconsin	2,632	0.2	98.4
Arkansas	70,139	5.7	55.3	Idaho	2,433	0.2	98.6
California	68,842	5.6	60.9	Massachusetts	1,797	0.1	98.7
Kentucky	46,158	3.7	64.6	Montana	1,721	0.1	98.8
Florida	44,829	3.6	68.2	Alaska	1,548	0.1	98.9
Ohio	38,863	3.1	71.3	Wyoming	1,361	0.1	99.0
Missouri	38,334	3.1	74.4	Nevada	1,330	0.1	99.1
Indiana	29,883	2.4	76.8	Connecticut	1,269	0.1	99.2
Georgia	27,776	2.2	79.0	Minnesota	1,269	0.1	99.3
Mississippi	26,483	2.1	81.1	Maine	799	<0.1	99.4
Illinois	24,419	2.0	83.1	Delaware	740	<0.1	99.5
Michigan	23,919	1.9	85.0	South Dakota	733	<0.1	99.6
West Virginia	22,969	1.9	86.9	Vermont	700	<0.1	99.7
Louisiana	17,513	1.4	88.3	Hawaii	691	<0.1	99.8
New Mexico	13,975	1.1	89.4	New Hampshire	603	<0.1	>99.9
Kansas	13,544	1.1	90.5	Utah	588	<0.1	>99.9
Colorado	12,103	1.0	91.5	D.C.	573	<0.1	>99.9
North Carolina	11,136	0.9	92.4	North Dakota	343	<0.1	>99.9
Virginia	10,610	0.9	93.3	Rhode Island	156	<0.1	>99.9
Arizona	10,461	0.8	94.1				
Washington	10,164	0.8	94.9				
Oregon	8,647	0.7	95.6				
Pennsylvania	7,000	0.6	96.2				
South Carolina	6,691	0.5	96.7				
New York	5,431	0.4	97.1				
Maryland	4,057	0.3	97.4				

**US Total: 1,239,612**  
**(12,719 congregations)**

**US Population in 1980: 226,542,203**

**Member-to-Population**  
**Ratio: 1:102**

Map for Table 6

White=States with 1,000 members or more; Black=States with no congregations

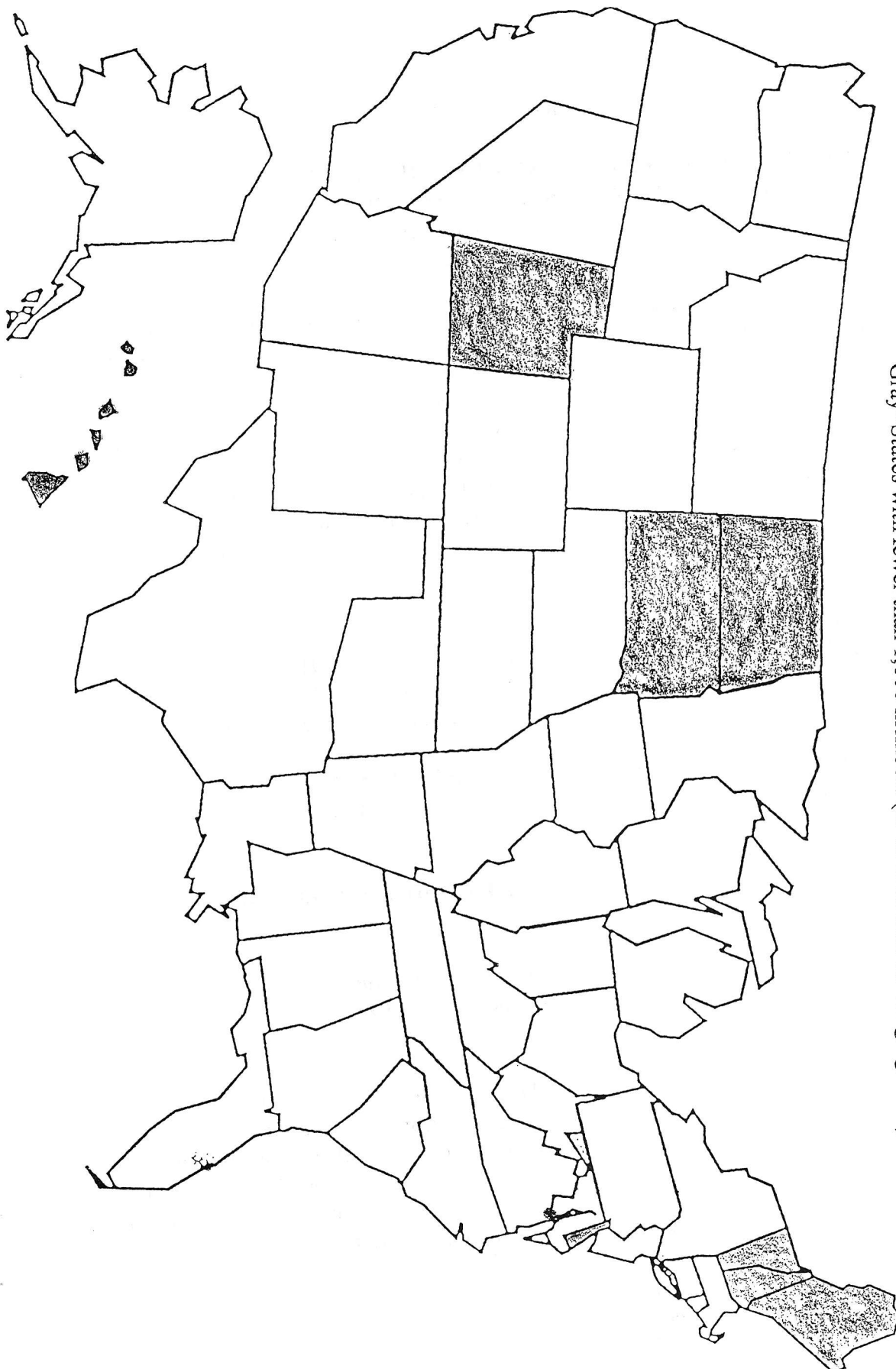


Table 7

**STATES RANKED BY THE NUMBER OF MEMBERS  
IN THE CHURCHES OF CHRIST, 1998**

Source: Mac Lynn, *Churches of Christ in the United States, 1997*  
(Nashville: 21st Century Christian)

States	Members	Percent	Cum.%
Texas	288,475	23.0	23.0
Tennessee	167,536	13.4	36.4
Alabama	91,614	7.3	43.7
Arkansas	67,190	5.4	49.1
Oklahoma	64,903	5.2	54.3
California	64,253	5.1	59.4
Florida	54,057	4.3	63.7
Kentucky	44,894	3.6	67.3
Ohio	36,038	2.9	70.2
Georgia	35,063	2.8	73.0
Missouri	33,826	2.7	75.7
Mississippi	32,118	2.6	78.3
Indiana	29,132	2.3	80.6
Michigan	23,059	1.8	82.4
Illinois	21,794	1.7	84.1
Louisiana	19,165	1.5	85.6
West Virginia	18,468	1.5	87.1
North Carolina	15,297	1.2	88.3
New Mexico	14,679	1.2	89.5
Kansas	14,093	1.1	90.6
Colorado	12,383	1.0	91.6
Virginia	11,353	0.9	92.5
Arizona	11,252	0.9	93.4
Washington	10,686	0.9	94.3
South Carolina	9,451	0.8	95.1
Oregon	8,649	0.7	95.8
Pennsylvania	7,511	0.6	96.4
New York	7,007	0.6	97.0
Maryland	6,630	0.5	97.5
New Jersey	3,567	0.3	97.8
Nebraska	3,411	0.3	98.1
Wisconsin	3,198	0.3	98.4
Iowa	3,018	0.2	98.6
Idaho	2,388	0.2	98.8
Minnesota	2,004	0.2	99.0
Montana	1,994	0.2	99.2
Massachusetts	1,855	0.2	99.4

States	Members	Percent	Cum.%
Alaska	1,704	0.1	99.5
Connecticut	1,610	0.1	99.6
Wyoming	1,560	0.1	99.7
Nevada	1,495	0.1	99.8
Delaware	1,015	>0.1	>99.9
South Dakota	882	>0.1	>99.9
New Hampshire	813	>0.1	>99.9
Hawaii	765	>0.1	>99.9
Maine	698	>0.1	>99.9
Utah	696	>0.1	>99.9
Vermont	506	>0.1	>99.9
D.C.	491	>0.1	>99.9
North Dakota	373	>0.1	>99.9
Rhode Island	367	>0.1	>99.9

**U.S. Total: 1,255,834**  
**(13,080 congregations)**

**U.S. Population in 1990: 248,709,873**

**Member-to-Population**  
**Ratio: 1:119**

The 1990 population was four times as large as the 1890 population. Churches of Christ, however, have more than 12 times as many members today as in 1890. The number of members has grown more than three times as fast as the population.

# Churches of Christ in the United States, 1997

**Table 8**

**CHURCHES OF CHRIST IN THE UNITED STATES, 1998 STATISTICAL DATA**

<b>States</b>	<b>Churches</b>	<b>Members</b>	<b>Attendance</b>	<b>Adherents</b>	<b>Population</b>
Alabama	892	91,614	93,501	118,679	3,985,964
Alaska	27	1,704	1,841	2,380	406,021
Arizona	137	11,252	11,241	14,474	3,665,228
Arkansas	753	67,190	68,291	86,545	2,338,531
California	691	64,253	62,074	83,393	29,760,021
Colorado	149	12,383	13,384	16,528	3,201,944
Connecticut	25	1,610	1,815	2,336	3,287,116
Delaware	10	1,015	860	1,318	666,168
D.C.	4	491	473	630	638,333
Florida	513	54,057	52,392	71,145	12,604,788
Georgia	410	35,063	35,226	47,277	6,388,610
Hawaii	13	765	882	1,025	1,108,229
Idaho	44	2,388	2,783	3,520	1,006,749
Illinois	293	21,794	21,536	29,093	11,414,791
Indiana	351	29,132	29,260	38,321	5,537,454
Iowa	71	3,018	3,327	4,100	2,776,755
Kansas	180	14,093	14,095	18,534	2,478,218
Kentucky	623	44,894	46,345	58,049	3,685,296
Louisiana	230	19,165	18,350	25,879	4,183,439
Maine	22	698	813	1,007	1,227,928
Maryland	49	6,630	6,131	8,317	4,743,474
Massachusetts	28	1,855	2,027	2,564	6,016,425
Michigan	191	23,059	21,296	31,027	9,228,782
Minnesota	42	2,004	2,363	3,007	4,375,099
Mississippi	373	32,118	30,437	42,566	2,559,236
Missouri	460	33,826	34,893	43,380	5,081,546

**Table 8 (continued)**

<b>States</b>	<b>Churches</b>	<b>Members</b>	<b>Attendance</b>	<b>Adherents</b>	<b>Population</b>
Montana	48	1,994	2,291	2,842	798,898
Nebraska	52	3,411	3,726	4,637	1,577,159
Nevada	24	1,495	1,594	2,049	1,193,412
New Hampshire	14	813	951	1,187	1,109,252
New Jersey	38	3,567	3,552	4,563	7,730,188
New Mexico	168	14,679	14,029	19,317	1,495,569
New York	97	7,007	7,158	9,407	17,962,804
North Carolina	189	15,297	15,086	21,500	6,623,411
North Dakota	7	373	430	562	638,800
Ohio	434	36,038	35,934	47,750	10,847,115
Oklahoma	609	64,903	64,100	83,831	3,143,865
Oregon	119	8,649	9,476	11,786	2,834,308
Pennsylvania	138	7,511	7,783	10,060	11,883,236
Rhode Island	7	272	367	397	1,003,464
South Carolina	112	9,451	9,330	12,663	3,488,185
South Dakota	24	882	1,032	1,259	698,207
Tennessee	1,463	167,536	173,084	219,051	4,833,184
Texas	2,200	288,475	268,428	375,863	16,852,521
Utah	17	696	777	1,069	1,722,850
Vermont	10	506	561	692	562,758
Virginia	157	11,353	12,142	14,980	5,295,090
Washington	130	10,686	11,720	14,822	4,866,692
West Virginia	288	18,468	18,799	23,675	1,822,802
Wisconsin	67	3,198	3,632	4,679	4,803,544
Wyoming	32	1,560	1,837	2,135	453,588
<b>U.S. Totals</b>	<b>13,025</b>	<b>1,254,885</b>			<b>248,709,873</b> <b>(1990 Census)</b>



