Congregational Diversity and Attendance in a Mainline Protestant Denomination

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One of the surprising oversights of existing research on racially/ethnically diverse congregations is the inattention to how racial composition relates to patterns of attendance. Is diversity associated with attendance growth, stability, or decline? A popular assumption from the Church Growth Movement is that cultural homogeneity is a foundation for growth, but recent research challenges this long-standing belief. We test these competing views with longitudinal data from over 10,000 congregations in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA). We examine the relationship between changes in racial/ethnic diversity and changes in average weekly attendance over a 19-year time period (1993–2012). In spite of the ELCA's denominational push for racial diversity in its local churches, our analysis finds increasing racial diversity associated with decreasing average attendance, most notably during the 1990s. To conclude, we discuss the implications of our findings for congregations and denominations.

Keywords: *race, congregations, growth, attendance, denomination, diversity.*

INTRODUCTION

Multiracial congregations—congregations in which at least 20 percent of attenders are not members of the majority ethnoracial group—have become a firmly established arena of social scientific study (for a recent survey, see Edwards, Christerson, and Emerson 2013). Multiracial congregations are rare (Emerson and Smith 2000), difficult to achieve (Emerson 2006), and raise profound questions regarding persistent ethnic and racial tensions in the United States (Cobb, Perry, and Dougherty 2015; Hawkins and Sinitiere 2014; Martí 2012). Despite a surge of interest in multiracial congregations, understanding the structural dynamics of these congregations remains a challenge due to the lack of extensive, in-depth data at the congregation level. The majority of research on diverse congregations has utilized a qualitative, case studies approach drawing on ethnographic data (Barron 2016; Becker 1998; Christerson, Edwards, and Emerson 2005; DeYoung et al. 2003; Edwards 2008; Emerson 2008; Garces-Foley 2007; Jenkins 2003; Martí 2005, 2008, 2009a, 2010, 2012, 2015; Stanczak 2006). The few quantitative analyses

available rely on crude measures of diversity, most often typifying congregations based on a minimum threshold, and consequently lacking analysis of more detailed demographic data from congregations (Edwards 2008; Northwood 1958; Yancey and Emerson 2003; Yancey and Kim 2008). These studies treat "diversity" as a binary state such that a congregation either *is* racially diverse or it *is not*. As a result, the degree of diversity in congregations is obscured as are the organizational implications of *becoming* more or less diverse.

Indeed, the overall lack of specificity in measuring congregational diversity results in the inability to address important questions regarding multiracial congregations. One of the earliest and most pressing questions regarding diversity concerns the relationship between diversity and congregation size. Does diversity stimulate or suppress attendance growth? A pervasive "conventional wisdom" regarding diversity and size emerged in the latter 20th century drawn from church growth "theorists" Donald McGavran (1955) and C. Peter Wagner (1976, 1984, 1987) who touted the homogeneous unit principle and suggested that racial diversity was to be avoided (DeYoung et al. 2003:123–25). Though their ideas were not scientifically tested, this did not prevent champions of "church growth theory" from promoting ethnoracial homogeneity for increasing congregational attendance and, by implication, believing that diversity would hinder growth. Evidence from case studies of growing multiracial churches planted in the 1990s suggests that pastors of these churches intentionally went against a "known" church growth principle, aggressively promoted by their mentors, from a conviction of the need to pursue racial integration as a religious value (e.g., Martí 2010:209). Hence, popular beliefs that diversity suppresses attendance conflict with recent case studies that reveal growth amid diversity (e.g., Garces-Foley 2007; Martí 2005). Systematic quantitative analysis has not examined the relationship between diversity and congregational attendance more comprehensively.

To fill this gap and to more rigorously address widely promoted beliefs stemming from the homogeneous unit principle, this study seeks to expand our understanding of multiracial congregations by operationalizing the level of diversity at a congregation level as a changeable characteristic to answer a significant question: What is the relationship between congregational diversity and congregational size over time? We take advantage of a unique, longitudinal data set to examine diversity as a *dynamic* rather than a static characteristic of congregations. Specifically, using data spanning 19 years from the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), we measure *changing levels of diversity* within congregations and test for corresponding *changes in their average weekly attendance*. Although our analysis is from congregations within one denomination, the ability to pursue this question with a large, longitudinal, and comprehensive data set of congregations using detailed information on their membership offers the opportunity to yield important insights into the complex relationship of race and change in American congregations.

RACIAL DIVERSITY AND THE PROSPECTS FOR GROWTH IN CONGREGATIONS

The racial composition of the United States is changing. By mid twenty-first century, the numeric majority of the U.S. population will be nonwhite (U.S. Census Bureau 2012). Even though residential segregation by race remains a reality in the United States (Logan and Stults 2011), neighborhoods and communities are part of the changing complexion of American society. Congregations, as voluntary organizations, keenly feel changes in the community. It is difficult to sustain the membership of a congregation in a declining population. Community transitions in age structure, social class, and sexual orientation similarly present challenges to congregations. One of the most persistent external challenges to congregations, however, has been demographic shifts in race and ethnicity.

Amid broad demographic shifts, we know that race plays a powerful sorting function for voluntary groups in the United States (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, and Cook 2001). Religious congregations are no exception. The vast majority of American congregations are largely

homogeneous in terms of race (Emerson and Smith 2000). As neighborhoods change, many congregations do not. In 1998, the average U.S. congregation was 10 times less diverse by race than was the neighborhood (census tract) in which it stood (Emerson 2006). The prevailing pattern for congregations in changing communities is to maintain their existing identity, even when it results in decline (as it often does, see Ammerman 1997; Dougherty and Mulder 2009). Some congregations choose to relocate, thereby adding to the racial turnover of neighborhoods (Mulder 2015). Far fewer congregations adapt to changing racial circumstances (Ammerman 1997). For those that pursue adaptation, the process of internal change is worth studying.

Considerable attention in recent years has gone to uncover how and why some congregations transcend racial divisions (Dougherty 2003; Dougherty and Huyser 2008; Emerson 2006; Garces-Foley 2007; Martí 2005, 2008, 2009a, 2010, 2012). One of the surprising oversights of existing research is the inattention to how internal ethnoracial change impacts growth or decline in congregations. The need to examine the relationship between diversity and congregational size is due in large part to a persistent, yet unexamined, popular belief that came out of the Church Growth Movement. Most prominently, Donald McGavran (1955, 1970) inspired congregation leaders with a missiological "theory" for evangelization, which involved the assumption that "homogenous cultures" allow religious proponents to speak to whole groups at a time with the potential to produce whole group conversions. The homogeneous unit principle became a practical guideline for church growth (Wagner 1979). Unfortunately, it did not articulate carefully defined concepts but leaned on a fairly simple understanding of people groups or "tribes" and a presumption of discernible, bounded subcultures (among other shortcomings; see McClintock 1988). To buttress their suppositions, church growth "theorists" attempted to draw on available social scientific research. Noting the strong tendency toward homogeneity in voluntary organizations led them to argue that focusing on homogeneous populations was an efficient means to foster group conversions. This line of thinking eventually coalesced into an assertion that people resist crossing cultural lines to join a faith community; therefore, pastors should create places where non-churchgoers are culturally comfortable (Yancey 2003:29–38). The targeting of supposedly static, culturally congenial racial populations became a basis for outreach and church planting for more than three decades.

In assessing church growth assertions, we find that quantitative research that tests the relationship between diversity and growth is limited, and the results of these studies are decidedly mixed. Using cross-sectional data and a dichotomous measure of diversity (multiracial vs. not multiracial), Yancey (2003) found that multiracial Christian churches (both Catholic and Protestant) were more likely to have grown in the past year than nonmultiracial churches; however, Yancey provides neither an analysis nor an explanation to account for the discovered difference in growth. In a 2010 dissertation, Maier used the U.S. Congregational Life Survey to test the homogenous unit principle. He found no evidence for either homogeneity or heterogeneity by race related to change in congregation size over a five-year time period. The analysis is more thorough, still it is based on cross-sectional data and a dichotomous dependent variable of growing versus not growing (Maier 2010).

Although few studies focus explicitly on the relationship between diversity and congregational attendance, a close reading of available social scientific literature on multiracial congregations provides potential rationale for understanding the relationship. Looking at recent research, two main arguments emerge. One argument is that racial diversity in congregations is associated with difficulty or decline. Specifically, church growth "theorists" merely assumed a relationship between diversity and growth, whereas more recent research both acknowledges the rarity of diverse congregations and seeks to understand the mechanisms that allow the momentum of homogeneity to be overcome. It is clear that congregations with multiple racial groups face challenges at retaining members, especially members in the statistical minority group and those that strongly affiliate with their racial/ethnic background (Christerson and Emerson 2003; Martí 2005; Scheitle and Dougherty 2010). The explanation is that groups with less representation possess less

power in congregations and therefore less of a sense of belonging (Djupe and Gilbert 2006). Thus, members of underrepresented groups do not identify as strongly with the congregation (Martinez and Dougherty 2013), and they are at greater risk of leaving. Racial diversity in congregations also brings with it the challenge of potentially awkward or strained cross-ethnic/interracial inter-actions. In her study of a Los Angeles church, Garces-Foley (2007) described how racial diversity in a pan-Asian congregation caused ethnic tensions, which made participating in church more of an effort. Leaders of this multiracial church preached a "theology of discomfort" that recog-nized the difficulty of social gatherings with people of different backgrounds and emphasized the spiritual responsibility of Christians to practice hospitality, welcome the stranger, and put aside one's own preferences, such that enduring the experience of diversity becomes an expression of true spiritual discipleship. In another study that manifested the strain of diversity on attendance focused on Asian-American ministries on college campuses, Kim (2006) observed that when blacks led worship characterized by an "African American gospel style" whites failed to accom-modate difference and simply left to join another ministry that was white-dominant. The "cultural discomfort" was not solely among white students either. Second-generation Korean Americans expressed similar sentiments favoring homophily. One member explained: "It is not like I can't worship with, say, a black person next to me, but it is just I am used to . . . being with Koreans all the time, you kind of get set. . . . It is just more comfortable to worship with other Korean Ameri-cans" (Kim 2006:81, 115). Although such losses of attendance may be compensated by additions of "diversity-friendly" or "boundary-crossing" attendees who already appreciate and welcome cross-ethnic interactions (Garces-Foley 2007), this assumption has not been methodicly tested across a large number of congregations.

Tension and discomfort of cross-ethnic/interracial interactions lead us to suspect that diversity is associated with the suppression of growth or a decline in attendance. However, recent research provides alternative arguments that suggest diverse congregations are more likely to grow. First, diverse congregations have an inherent opportunity to appeal to a wider pool of potential partic-ipants. Some researchers point to a segment of Americans for whom interracial interactions are common and expected; these individuals help drive a growing demand for racially heterogeneous congregations since they desire, expect, and actualize diversity through the pursuit of diverse social interactions (Emerson 2006; Garces-Foley 2007; Martí 2005, 2010). A prime example is Madison Square Christian Reformed Church, in Grand Rapids, Michigan. It is the most racially diverse congregation in the Christian Reformed Church denomination. It grew from a mission outpost with 88 members in 1970 to nearly 2,000 in weekly worship services by 2000, and its racial diversity was a central attraction for many members (Dougherty and Mulder 2009). Also, diverse congregations allow for the inclusion of second- and third-generation immigrants who feel less connected to the ancestral cultures of their parents and grandparents and more connected to a generalized American mainstream culture. Mosaic is a large, multiethnic congregation in Los Angeles that promotes various interests and affinities to connect members (Martí 2009a, 2009b). Mosaic members consistently characterize themselves as "being ethnic" without having to "act" ethnic, perceiving themselves as not constrained to relate to others solely based on their ascribed ethnic or racial identity (Martí 2005:157). Furthermore, the opportunity to engage in diverse interactions, connect with various networks of affinity, and participate in mainstream American culture as potential mechanisms for linking diversity and congregational growth is perhaps best exemplified by the American megachurch. These popular Protestant churches with over 2,000 in weekly attendance are six times more likely than the average Protestant congregation in the United States to be multiracial (Thumma and Travis 2007). Consistent with linking diversity and growth, congregations with higher percentages of racially/ethnically diverse members foster opportunities for a greater number of relational connections. The variety of member involvements both in the congregation as well as in the broader community enhances a congregation's ability to expand its resource base across demographic groups. Thus, existing research suggests that

congregations not only "overcome" the challenges of diversity but can actually leverage their diversity to grow numerically.

To test these competing claims, we pursue a national study with longitudinal data from congregations and more detailed measures of diversity and growth. Our study takes advantage of multilevel statistical analysis to simultaneously consider diversity and growth inside congregations as well as changing demographic conditions in the county outside their doors. And, by systematically looking at changes in the demographic composition of congregations alongside changes in their attendance over time, we are able to more finely assess the relationship between diversity and congregational size.

DATA AND METHODS

Data for this study come from two sources: the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) and the U.S. Census Bureau. High-quality, longitudinal information on both attendance and racial/ethnic composition of congregations makes the ELCA a valuable source of data. In cooperation with the research office of the ELCA, we have information from over 10,000 ELCA congregations at five points in time: 1993, 1998, 2003, 2008, and 2012. In effect, we have a census of congregations from one prominent mainline Protestant denomination. The time span of these data allows us to examine the pattern of change within congregations. We also utilize county data from the 1990, 2000, and 2010 U.S. Census in order to measure environmental conditions relevant to congregational growth or decline. As a result, we have a longitudinal, multilevel data set. Our final sample consists of 11,096 congregations nested within 1,694 counties.

We must acknowledge from the outset that congregational data from one mainline Protestant denomination constrain the scope of our study. The ELCA is not representative of all denominations or even all Protestant denominations in the United States. The denomination has a distinct history and cultural heritage. Certain shared beliefs and liturgical practices similarly characterize ELCA congregations. Theology and liturgy are not variables available in these data. Nevertheless, these data are useful for this study because: (1) the ELCA is a large denomination with a recent history paralleling other mainline Protestant groups; (2) the denomination collects annual information on attendance and race/ethnicity from affiliated congregations; and (3) the denomination is publicly committed to racial and ethnic integration.

The ELCA is the largest Lutheran denomination in the United States. It formed in 1988 through the merger of the Lutheran Church in America, the American Lutheran Church, and the Association of Evangelical Lutheran Churches (Mead 1995). The denomination began with over 5 million members. A steady decline in membership followed. In 2012, membership rolls counted 3.95 million (Evangelical Lutheran Church in America 2013). These members were 93.7 percent white (non-Latino), 2.5 percent black, 1.7 percent Latino, and less than 1 percent, respectively, from Asian, other, and Native American.

While the majority of ELCA members are white, the denomination has pushed to become more racially inclusive. The denomination has adopted multicultural ministries and mission strategies as well as promoting and implementing racial diversity within church staffs, boards, and leadership teams. At its inception in 1988, the ELCA set a goal to have 10 percent of denomination members to be nonwhite within a decade. In 1993 the ELCA issued a social statement promoting racial justice. The statement called for leaders and congregations to repent of racism, confront any signs of it, and advocate for racial justice in both their congregations and communities (Evangelical Lutheran Church in America 1993). Because of the ELCA's stated ambition for racial/ethnic diversity, denominational data include careful counts of race and ethnicity in congregations. The ELCA records the proportion of congregation members in six racial/ethnic groups: white, African American, Asian American, Hispanic/Latino, Native American, and other. From these racial proportions, we are able to reliably estimate racial diversity within ELCA congregations over time.

Variables

Our dependent variable in this study is change in average worship attendance over time. We calculate a change score by subtracting attendance at one point in time from attendance at a previous point in time, for instance, attendance in 2012 minus attendance in 1993. During this 19-year period, values on the resulting variable ranged from –1,811 to 1,732. Values less than zero indicate decreasing attendance in a congregation. Values greater than zero indicate increasing attendance. A value of zero denotes that a congregation's attendance was the same at the two points in time.

Racial Diversity. To measure racial diversity, we employ the entropy index. The entropy index is an interval-level variable that measures the evenness of representation for groups within a given population, calculated as

$$H = -\frac{\sum_{k=1}^{K} P_k \log P_k}{\log P_k}$$

where P_k = the proportions of individuals in group *k,* and K = the number of different racial/ethnic groups present in the congregation (White 1986). The entropy index is a standardized scale ranging from 0 to 1, where 0 signifies only one racial or ethnic group present and 1 represents equal proportions of two or more racial/ethnic groups within the organization. The index considers not only the total number of racial groups present within the congregation but also the relative size of each group. It is a valuable marker of diversity in congregations, since the parity of racial group proportions is tied to congregational stability (Christerson, Edwards, and Emerson 2005; Martinez and Dougherty 2013; Scheitle and Dougherty 2010). The measure also allows us to estimate how the racial mix of members impacts congregational performance, which a dichotomous measure of multiracial/not multiracial would not capture. The entropy index has become a common way to measure varied forms of diversity in congregations (Adler 2012; Dougherty 2003; Dougherty and Huyser 2008; Schwadel 2009; Schwadel and Dougherty 2010).[1] We use proportions for the six racial groups recorded by the ELCA to calculate an entropy index for each year of data. We compute change scores by subtracting values for the entropy index at different points in time in the same way that we measure change in attendance.

Congregational Controls

We control for other influences on congregational growth at congregation and county levels. Since the size of a congregation at an earlier date has a direct impact on size at a later date, we control for attendance at Time 1 in each model. Thus, we utilize a variation of the regressor variable approach by employing our dependent variable at Time 1 as a predictor of the change in this variable from Time 1 to Time 2 (Taris 2000). We use a log transformation to remedy the highly skewed distribution for congregation size. We also control for congregation age by subtracting year founded from Time 1 in each model. Higher values on this variable represent older congregations. Finally, we account for congregational diversity at Time 1 using the congregation's entropy index for that year. This allows us to test racial diversity as a static characteristic in keeping with previous research.

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[1]The Herfindahl Index is a measure of market concentration that is frequently applied to measure diversity within markets and organizations. The entropy index is strongly correlated with the Herfindahl Index (in 2012 ELCA data, r = -.894). We ran all the models in this study with the Herfindahl Index in ancillary analyses, and all of the results were consistent with the ones shown employing the entropy index. We favor the entropy index because it fits with previous research on this topic and it matches our conceptual interest in diversity better than the Herfindahl Index, which is a measure of internal homogeneity.

County-Level Controls

We incorporate county-level controls obtained from 1990, 2000, and 2010 Census data. We utilize a series of binary variables to account for geographic region: Northeast, Midwest, West, and South. South serves as the contrast category in all models. We control for change in county population size by subtracting the total population (measured in thousands) at the first point of time in each table (1990 or 2000) from the population at the last point of time in each table (2000 or 2010). Since the ELCA is a predominantly white denomination, we also measure the percentage of whites in counties for the first point of time in each table (1990 or 2000) as well as the county change in percent white. We do this by taking the county proportion of whites in 2010 or 2000 (Time 2) and subtracting the white proportion in 2000 or 1990 (Time 1). We recognize that county-level data are not an ideal representation of a congregation's community. Census tracts or block groups would be preferable. Unfortunately, we do not have data for these smaller geographic units surrounding ELCA congregations. We rely on counties as a proxy for external environment as done in other studies involving congregations (Blanchard 2007; Perl and Olson 2000; Polson 2015; Stump 1998).

Analytic Strategy

We present our findings in two stages. First, we present descriptive statistics to show changes in racial diversity and average attendance within ELCA congregations. Second, we present findings from multilevel, multivariate analysis. Multilevel modeling is necessary because we have congregational data nested within county-level data (Hofmann 1997). Multilevel regression is a valuable tool since it corrects for biased standard errors commonly found within ordinary least squares regression models applied to hierarchical data. Due to the geographic clustering of ELCA congregations across the United States, the residuals for congregations within counties do not match the "independence" assumption in single-level regression models and therefore require an alternative estimation strategy. Multilevel models take the within-county covariance between congregations into consideration for modeling congregation-level effects (Hofmann 1997; Luke 2004).

In addition to the hierarchal nature of congregations within counties, these data are longitudinal. They cover 19 years, 1993 to 2012. As described, we use change scores to measure congregation- and county-level characteristics over time. Change scores are common in longitudinal analysis (Allison 1990, 1994; Winship and Morgan 1999). Although we have congregational data at five points of time, we have Census data for only three points of time, and the dates of these two levels of data are not identical.[2] Consequently, statistical techniques such as event history analysis or fixed/random/mixed effects models are not appropriate for these data, since these techniques assume that variables in each model correspond to the same units of time.[3] Our

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[2]The reason that dates for our two data sources do not match is idiosyncratic to this research project. We initially launched the study in 2009. We requested congregational data in five year intervals from the ELCA Research Office. At that point in time, relying on data by decade would have given us only two data points (1990 and 2000). In keeping with recommendations for longitudinal research (Singer and Willett 2003), we wanted at least three data points. The ELCA Research Office gave us access to data from 1993, 1998, 2003, and 2008. We matched these data to Census data for the closest possible years (1990 and 2000). The research project ended up extending longer than anticipated. As a result, we added congregational data for 2012 and Census data for 2010.

[3]We did estimate mixed effects models for comparison with our findings. The results from the mixed effects models (available upon request) were consistent with the results we present below. These parallel results give credibility of our analysis. They also help us address the issue of reverse causation (i.e., change in diversity may *result from* changes in attendance). Mixed effects models control for time when estimating the correlation of racial diversity and attendance. Thus, the time dimension is not built into the variables in the analysis. Controlling for time, racial diversity remains negative and significant in predicting attendance at a later date.

Table 1: Mean racial diversity and weekly attendance in ELCA congregations

Year	Racial Diversity	Weekly Attendance
1993	.064	144
1998	.072	141
2003	.081	134
2008	.094	119
2012	.123	112

use of change scores matches other contemporary research using panel data (Lim and Putnam 2010; Musick and Bumpass 2012). In our multivariate models, we estimate separate models for three different time periods. We begin by examining the full 19 years, 1993 to 2012. We proceed to estimate models for two shorter intervals, 1993 to 2003 and 2003 to 2012.

Null models (not shown) found significant variation across counties (the second-level unit of measure) for each dependent variable, confirming the need for multilevel modeling. For each time period, we estimate two models. The first model is a conditional model with congregation-level effects specified. The second model is a conditional model with congregation- and county-level effects specified. Congregation-level variables in all models are fixed measures, and all continuous variables are grand mean centered in order to provide a more meaningful intercept (Wang, Xie, and Fischer 2012).

RESULTS

First, we look at changes in all ELCA congregations over the 19 years. Using a dichotomous variable to classify "multiracial congregations" in which no single racial or ethnic group represents 80 percent or more of participants, very few ELCA churches reached this threshold. Multiracial churches represented 1.2 percent of the denomination in 1993, 1.4 percent in 1998, 2.0 percent in 2003, 2.4 percent in 2008, and 3.6 percent in 2012. Hence, 96.4 percent of ELCA churches were "not" multiracial in 2012. The dichotomous variable misses subtle racial/ethnic shifts happening within congregations, whether or not they ever reach the status of "multiracial." The entropy index as a numeric scale allows us to take a closer look at racial/ethnic variation in congregations.

Table 1 lists the average level of racial diversity and average attendance in ELCA congregations. As seen in percent multiracial, level of internal diversity increases successively across the five points in time. ELCA congregations became slightly more diverse; nevertheless, ELCA congregations continue to be far more homogeneous than heterogeneous in terms of race. As a comparison point, the typical American congregation in 1998 had a mean entropy index score of .17 (Dougherty and Huyser 2008). Even in 2012, ELCA congregations were less racially diverse than the average U.S. congregation from more than a decade earlier. From 1993 to 2012, average attendance in ELCA congregations decreased in linear fashion. The typical ELCA congregation had 144 participants in weekly worship services in 1993, 141 in 1993, 134 in 2003, 119 in 2008, and stood at 112 in 2012. The vast majority of ELCA congregations (84.2 percent) experienced declining attendance between 1993 and 2012. In these declining congregations, attendance dropped by 57 participants on average. This is compared to the 14.9 percent of congregations that grew in attendance by an average of 54 participants. Less than 1 percent of ELCA churches reported the same attendance in 1993 and 2012. The bulk of shrinking congregations signifies membership decline for the denomination.

To test if increasing diversity and decreasing size are correlated in ELCA congregations, more rigorous analyses are necessary. Table 2 presents two models predicting the change in attendance in ELCA congregations from 1993 to 2012. In Model 1, increasing racial diversity in

Table 2: Effects of change in racial diversity on change in attendance, ELCA congregations, 1993–2012

	M1: Conditional Model, Level 1 Effects Specified		M2: Conditional Model, Level 1 and Level 2 Effects Specified	
	Estimate	SE	Estimate	SE
Intercept	−37.696***	1.101	−32.919***	2.122
Congregation Level				
Change in diversity, 1993–2012	−30.405***	5.760	−27.588***	5.984
Diversity, 1993	−3.032	8.553	6.768	9.374
Attendance, 1993[a]	−37.569***	1.016	−37.177***	1.021
Congregation age	−.174***	.017	−.181***	.017
County Level				
Northeast[b]			−3.734	3.099
Midwest[b]			−7.938**	2.593
West[b]			−7.061*	3.094
Change in population, 1990–2010[c]			.001	.001
Proportion white, 1990			24.702**	8.296
Change in proportion white, 1990–2010			−3.411	12.367
−2 log likelihood	110,901.8		110,877.4	
AIC	110,905.8		110,881.4	
BIC	110,916.6		110,892.2	
N (Congregations)	9,636		9,636	
N (Counties)	1,634		1,634	

[a]Attendance is logged.
[b]Contrast group is South.
[c]Change in population is measured in thousands.
*$p \leq .05$; **$p \leq .01$; ***$p \leq .001$.

congregations is associated with declining congregational attendance. Congregations that were larger in 1993 experienced a greater decline in attendance between 1993 and 2012 than smaller congregations in 1993. The age of the congregation is significantly associated with changes in attendance as well, with older congregations experiencing decline. However, a congregation's racial diversity in 1993 is not significantly related to changes in attendance.[4]

County-level variables are included in Model 2 in order to account for external, environmental influences on congregational growth or decline. All of the significant congregation-level variables in Model 1 remain significant in Model 2. ELCA congregations in the South experienced more

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[4]Although we are using a census of ELCA congregations, we report statistical significance in our models. In a strict technical sense, statistical significance is less meaningful for census data since there is no sampling error. Other sources of error still exist, however. ELCA data come from a survey of congregations, which is subject to nonresponse bias, for example. Therefore, we include standard errors, and associated tests of significance, to assess the risks of measurement error in these data.

Table 3: Effects of change in racial diversity on change in attendance, ELCA congregations, 1993–2003

	M1: Conditional Model, Level 1 Effects Specified		M2: Conditional Model, Level 1 and Level 2 Effects Specified	
	Estimate	SE	Estimate	SE
Intercept	−11.259***	.991	−5.737**	1.832
Congregation Level				
Change in diversity, 1993–2003	−26.246***	7.478	−22.546**	7.701
Diversity, 1993	−15.975*	7.236	−7.584	7.836
Attendance, 1993[a]	−2.980***	.880	−3.198***	.891
Congregation age	−.174***	.014	−.174***	.016
County Level				
Northeast[b]			−6.266***	2.846
Midwest[b]			−7.858*	2.329
West[b]			−6.776***	3.849
Change in population, 1990–2000[c]			.051***	.009
Proportion white, 1990			16.888	21.809
Change in proportion white, 1990–2000			.190	.197
−2 log likelihood	126,812.2		126,272.0	
AIC	126,816.2		126,276.0	
BIC	126,827.1		126,289.3	
N (Congregations)	11,096		11,096	
N (Counties)	1,694		1,694	

[a] Attendance is logged.
[b] Contrast group is South.
[c] Change in population is measured in thousands.
*$p \le .05$; **$p \le .01$; *** $p \le .001$.

growth in attendance from 1993 to 2012 than congregations in the Midwest or West; however, no significant difference existed between congregations in the South and those in the Northeast. There is a positive correlation between the proportion of the county that was white in 1990 and changes in congregational attendance between 1993 and 2012. ELCA congregations experienced growth in counties with dense white populations in 1990 accounting for the change in both the white proportion and the change in the county population. Even accounting for county-level controls, congregations that increased in diversity from 1993 to 2012 experienced a significant loss of attendees during that same time span ($b = -27.59$, $p \le .001$).

Changes in congregational attendance from 1993 to 2003 are analyzed in Table 3. Again, we see a negative relationship between changes in diversity and changes in attendance. In Model 1, we also see a negative relationship for a congregation's racial diversity in 1993 and its attendance over the next decade. More diverse ELCA churches in 1993 lost more attendees over the next decade than did less diverse churches in the denomination. Congregation size in 1993 and congregation age are correlated with decreases in attendees.

Table 4: Effects of change in racial diversity on change in attendance, ELCA congregations, 2003–2012

	M1: Conditional Model, Level 1 Effects Specified		M2: Conditional Model, Level 1and Level 2 Effects Specified	
	Estimate	SE	Estimate	SE
Intercept	−29.061***	.755	−31.859***	8.584
Congregation Level				
Change in diversity, 2003–2012	−3.101	4.434	−2.075	4.448
Diversity, 2003	5.445	5.091	8.784	5.725
Attendance, 2003[a]	−31.668***	.671	−31.549***	.678
Congregation age	−.022	.012	−.029*	.012
County Level				
Northeast[b]			−.487	2.154
Midwest[b]			−2.153	1.820
West[b]			−2.498	2.172
Change in population, 2000–2010[c]			.001	.001
Proportion white, 2000			4.485	8.284
Change in proportion white, 2000–2010			4.463	8.348
−2 log likelihood	104,923.8		104,919.9	
AIC	104,927.8		104,923.9	
BIC	104,938.6		104,934.7	
N (Congregations)	9,664		9,664	
N (Counties)	1,625		1,625	

[a]Attendance is logged.
[b]Contrast group is South.
[c]Change in population is measured in thousands.
*$p \leq .05$; **$p \leq .01$; ***$p \leq .001$.

Model 2 in Table 3 incorporates county-level variables. Diversity in 1993 becomes nonsignificant when we add these variables; all other significant variables in Model 1 are again significant and in the same direction in Model 2. Congregations in the South experienced a greater increase in attendance between 1993 and 2003 than did congregations in any other region. Moreover, ELCA congregations grew in counties where population grew from 1990 to 2000. The racial composition of a county does not seem to impact ELCA attendance during this time period. Neither proportion white nor change in proportion white is statistically significant in Model 2.

Table 4 predicts change in attendance from 2003 to 2012. Interestingly, while the coefficient for change in diversity is negative, it is not statistically significant. In contrast to our findings from the previous decade (shown in Table 3), changes in diversity are not statistically related to changes in attendance from 2003 to 2012. Additionally, higher levels of racial diversity within a congregation in 2003 are not significantly related to either growth or decline. Consistent with Tables 2 and 3, congregation size at Time 1 (2003) is correlated with losing more attendees over the nine year period. Older congregations experienced decline. Model 2 incorporates county-level

controls. The significant congregation-level results do not change and none of the county-level variables are significant during this time span.

DISCUSSION

The ELCA is a denomination that desires racial diversity in its congregations. It has made pronouncements and set goals. Yet, our findings reinforce the difficulties associated with such an ambition. From 1993 to 2012, ELCA congregations did grow more diverse, but they did not grow in size. The extent of racial diversity at Time 1 (i.e., diversity in 1993 or diversity in 2003) was not related to changes in congregational attendance in most of our models. Simply having diverse members at one point in time did not correspond to growth or decline in ELCA churches. Hence, diversity itself is not a detriment to growth; rather it is *changes* in a congregation's racial/ethnic composition that create difficulties. Specifically, increases in internal diversity were paralleled by successive decreases in the number of participants attending weekly worship services. As revealed in these data, the attempt to reach new demographic groups failed to spur growth in the typical ELCA church. These results held even when considering the size and age of the congregation and features of the external environment, namely, changing racial composition and changing population size.

However, the negative relationship between changes in congregational diversity and changes in attendance is not constant over time. If we only looked at aggregate data across two decades, we would miss this fact. Since 2003, increasing diversity has not significantly predicted declining attendance in ELCA congregations. The coefficient for changes in diversity is still negative in Table 4, but it is not statistically significant. The significant intercept tells us that ELCA congregations overall decreased in size, regardless of congregational diversity, size, age, or location. We can only speculate as to why. Perhaps the costs of diversity were higher in the final decade of the 20th century than at the start of the 21st century. Some scholars point to a rising demand for racially diverse places of worship (Emerson 2006; Garces-Foley 2007). Alternatively, it could be that conditions not tested in our models have displaced the dilemma of race in ELCA congregations. For example, debates over human sexuality have echoed loudly in the ELCA and other denominations in recent years.

Our results point out several other interesting correlates to growth or decline. Older congregations lost more participants. The negative coefficient for congregation age in our multilevel models reflects late-life liabilities facing congregations (Dougherty, Maier, and Vander Lugt 2008). As a congregation's history stretches, patterns get established that can make a congregation unwilling or unable to adapt to changing circumstances. It is widely recognized that new congregations are more prone to grow than are older congregations (Hadaway 1990; Jones 1979; Moberg 1962). A congregation's history has implications for racial diversity as well. It is easier to plant an intentionally multiracial congregation than to transition an established congregation from racial homogeneity to racial heterogeneity (Emerson 2006; see also Martí 2008). Whether a congregation is new or long-standing, racially homogeneous or racially heterogeneous, other environmental factors weigh on attendance. There is some indication that ELCA congregations fare best in predominantly white counties and counties with growing populations. ELCA congregations in the South also experienced more growth than did ELCA congregations in other regions of the country. Yet, these county-level findings were not consistent across all of our statistical models. We must again acknowledge the shortcomings of county data for measuring the effect of external environment. Los Angeles County in California is an apt illustration. The county covers 4,752 miles and has a population of 10 million. It includes Malibu, which is 88 percent white non-Hispanic, and Compton, which is .8 percent white non-Hispanic (Mapping 2015). Depending on location in the county, ELCA congregations face very different demographic circumstances. Thus, our analysis likely underestimates the importance of the environment because counties are an imperfect proxy of a congregation's local community.

Adaptation, especially to racial and ethnic change, is a daunting process for congregations. When community residents no longer resemble a congregation's parishioners, attracting new members from the community can be difficult. Previous research documents how congregations add racial or ethnic diversity. Much less is known about the consequences of increasing diversity within a congregation. Our findings from ELCA churches help clarify why so few congregations successfully adapt. We offer several conclusions below. Our conclusions are both cautionary and constructive.

Our first conclusion may seem grim. ELCA congregations that attracted members of other races and ethnicities ended up losing more members than they gained. In short, increasing diversity corresponded with decreasing attendance. This is precarious for a congregation already in decline, but it aligns with past research revealing the challenges that can accompany racial diversification efforts in congregations (Christerson, Edwards, and Emerson 2005; Edwards 2008; Emerson 2006; Martinez and Dougherty 2013; Scheitle and Dougherty 2010). At the same time, homogeneity does not ensure growth. Challenging the homogeneous unit principle, neither homogeneity nor heterogeneity by race was associated with changes in attendance in ELCA congregations. It was the process of *becoming more diverse* that correlated with decreasing congregation size. While our findings suggest that racial/ethnic change is difficult for congregations, we do not intend to discourage Lutheran clergy and congregants from reaching out to nonwhite neighbors. Instead, our findings call attention to the fact that diversification efforts are not an easy solution to combat congregational decline. As noted in past research, successful outreach to diverse neighbors is best guided by a proactive mission rather than a reactive mandate (DeYoung et al. 2003; Emerson 2006; Yancey 2003).

A second conclusion builds upon the first. The demographic composition of a denomination is not easily changed. Despite bold ambitions and targeted goals, the ELCA remains a denomination populated overwhelmingly by whites. Members may not all be German or Scandinavian, but they are white. The cultural heritage of a denomination may become a restriction when the pool of potential adherents dries up. This holds true in other ethnic denominations as well, such as the Christian Reformed Church where the Dutch heritage of the denomination has made diversification efforts difficult (Dougherty and Mulder 2009). To be diverse, it seems that congregations need to find new ways of expressing their denominational tradition or potentially distance themselves from it. Current congregation members hold substantial responsibility for these efforts. The path toward congregational diversity often starts with leaders (Emerson 2006; Martí 2005, 2008, 2012; Yancey 2003), but the type of organizational transformation required to sustain diversity depends on congregation members (Becker 1998; Edwards 2008). A similar pattern is evident in Protestant colleges in the United States where college-sponsored initiatives are largely ineffective at attracting and retaining a racially diverse student body, but student-led efforts make a difference (Yancey 2010). Changing the racial composition of a congregation or college cannot be accomplished by administrative decree.

Third, our findings imply that congregations with long histories may become incapable of making changes necessary to accommodate members from different cultural backgrounds. We acknowledge the importance of congregational history as well as external context in shaping opportunities for diversity and for growth. Long-time members of a congregation can sustain an internal culture that caters to their preferences. As long as a location has others who share those same preferences, a congregation will have a stable future. But when an external environment changes, congregations that fail to change face an uncertain future in replenishing members. Overall, the ability to adapt is a challenging but essential feature of congregations located in changing communities (Ammerman 1997; Martí 2005).

Our findings raise other interesting questions that data limitations prevent us from answering. Most notably, are nondenominational congregations more adaptable? Without a denominational

heritage to sustain, are they able to change in ways that accommodate participants of different backgrounds? It is interesting to note that many of the largest Protestant churches in the United States are nondenominational and possess a fair amount of racial diversity (Thumma and Travis 2007). We use data from a single Christian denomination, and it is a denomination with declining membership. It may be that the relationship we find between diversity and decline in ELCA congregations is a product of some other influence. Another weakness of the study is our inability to control for such influences, including more proximate measures of external environment. Also, the benefit of longitudinal congregational data from the ELCA comes with the drawback of a limited number of independent variables. For example, we do not know the motivations behind increased racial diversity within congregations. This is significant since past research shows that reacting to changing external demographics is generally less successful than proactive, mission-driven efforts to diversify that are guided by strong internal leadership (Emerson 2006). We also cannot gauge the influence of theology on growth or decline. Absolute beliefs and demanding doctrines have been argued as spurring growth in religious groups (Finke and Stark 2005; Kelley 1972). Unfortunately, there are no measures of theological beliefs in these data for us to test this possibility. We are also unable to measure the effects of pastoral education and training or variations in liturgy and music. Finally, we have no way to account for ELCA churches that closed. ELCA congregations disappear from denominational records for multiple reasons, including closing, merging, or leaving the denomination. Our data track congregational decline but not ultimate demise.

Although difficult, denominations can increase their racial and ethnic diversity. Synthesizing our findings with previous research, it appears that transformation is not as simple as adding members of other races/ethnicities to established congregations. Rather, it is new congregations that hold the most promise for changing the racial/ethnic composition of a denomination since new congregations open the possibility for bringing together different racial and ethnic groups from the start and staying that way into the future. Consequently, denominations that find ways to plant successful, multiracial congregations may be most likely to grow in size and diversity.

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