

# INSTITUTIONAL INFLUENCES ON GROWTH IN SOUTHERN BAPTIST CONGREGATIONS

KEVIN D. DOUGHERTY  
CALVIN COLLEGE

REVIEW OF RELIGIOUS RESEARCH 2004, VOLUME 46:2, PAGES 117-131

*Recent trends in church growth research emphasize the influence of institutional factors in generating organizational growth. However, confusion exists over how internal factors relate to growth and which are most influential. Pitfalls of limited longitudinal data and a lack of attention to both direct and indirect influences limit past studies of church growth. To reduce confusion, this paper distinguishes structural characteristics from more malleable institutional aspects. The basic premise is that congregations grow by creating belonging, which in turn elevates membership participation. A causal, structural equation model is proposed to test seven hypotheses. The model tests relationships of structure, participation, and growth, using three waves of self-reported data from 35,202 Southern Baptist congregations. Findings affirm the primary importance of participation in promoting congregational growth and relegate organizational characteristics of age, size, and staffing to secondary roles of influence.*

Growth is a measure of success in most organizational fields. Religious organizations are no exception. Growth is a means of long-term survival as well as success for denominations and congregations. Academics and clerics debate sources of religious growth. While the debate continues, a convincing line of research points to the importance of features internal to religious organizations (Wilken 1971; Kelley 1972; Iannaccone 1994; Iannaccone, Olson and Stark 1995; Iannaccone 1996). Central among the institutional factors is the level of membership participation. This paper sorts out the relative effects of organizational structure and participation on growth at the most localized level of religious organization, the congregation. It embeds the analysis in a larger discussion of religious belonging.

Efforts to understand growth in religious organizations often focus on the denominational level. This misses the point that it is congregations that are the most significant carriers of religion and the primary arena for religious belonging (c.f., Warner 1994). Until recently, a dearth of congregational data was largely to blame. In addition, research designs that regress a pooled growth measure on independent variables measured at one point in time fail to capture the causal ordering of influences. Findings belie indirect and joint effects. I propose a causal model that depicts congregational growth as an intertwined function of age, size, staffing, and participation. To test my conceptual model, I employ three waves of longitudinal congregation data from the 1985, 1990, and 1995 Southern Baptist Convention Annual Church Profile.

## MODELING CONGREGATIONAL GROWTH

No tasks are more important for congregations than the provision of meaning and belonging. Stephen Warner (1994) describes American congregations as voluntary, socially achieved communities. He cites "fellowship" as their master function. Thus, the extent to which individuals commit to a religious community and participate in fellowship determines in large

part the potential for organizational survival and success. Congregations rise and fall based on the commitment and participation of voluntary members. It is well established that vibrant, vital congregations grow (McGaw 1980; Houglund and Wood 1982; Dudley and Cummings 1983; Donahue and Benson 1993; Hadaway 1993; Iannaccone et al. 1995; Dudley and Roozen 2001).

Iannaccone, Olson, and Stark (1995) draw on resource mobilization theory to explain the connection between commitment and growth. They contend that religious organizations with high levels of commitment generate surplus resources of time and money. These resources, in turn, may be expended on activities that help attract and retain members. Contributions of time allow for expanded congregational programming. Laity may lead gender-specific ministries, age-specific ministries, small groups, and other church-based special-interest groups, all of which provide points of connection and fellowship for present and prospective members. Financial contributions pay for physical facilities, staff, and services. Surplus financial resources give congregations advantage in the maintenance and operation of these domains. Hence, the origins of congregational growth lie in the participation of a committed laity.

One significant aspect of congregations that influences participation is a sense of belonging. The work on conversion exemplifies that people come to embrace a faith, even a deviant faith, as their attachments to members inside the faith group begin to outweigh their attachments to those outside the group (Lofland and Stark 1965; Lofland 1966). Converts find a sense of religious belonging. Belonging entails group members recognizing their interdependence. Durkheim (1893) saw this as a key component of the "organic solidarity" that would provide unity and cohesion in modern, differentiated societies. At the organizational level, interdependence binds group members and helps foster group identity. It provides a powerful motive for in-group participation. As people become embedded in a religious group, they develop knowledge, skills, and relationships that they will take great effort and even sacrifice to preserve (Iannaccone 1990). Sacrifices including martyrdom attest to the pervasive influence of some faith groups. Eugene and Anita Weiner (1990) point out that the convictions and actions of early Christian martyrs were in fact a group phenomenon. The 1997 ritualistic mass suicide of 38 members of the Heaven's Gate cult in Southern California punctuates this point. In many less dramatic ways, contemporary social movement literature makes clear the importance of identifying with a movement or cause in explaining individual participation (Snow et al. 1986; Snow and Benford 1988; McCarthy 1994; Whittier 1995; Neuhouser 1998). Notable in this regard is the influence of organizational structure. The organizational structure of a congregation can enhance or impede the sense of interdependence, which undergirds belonging. A structure that fosters connections for present members and potential members holds great potential for participation and growth.

Unfortunately, past research on church growth often confounds structure and participation under the broad rubric of "institutional factors." To clarify causation, McKinney and Hoge (1983:65) suggest that institutional factors be distinguished between "congregational characteristics" and "institutional action factors." Congregational characteristics represent dimensions of the congregation that are not easily changed, including membership size, physical facilities and budget. Institutional action factors, on the other hand, are the more malleable aspects of leadership, programming, theological orientation, and level of membership commitment. The tendency to conflate unchanging congregational characteristics with changeable institutional action factors results in specification errors that imperil much work surrounding institutional causes of growth. I attempt to address this peril by



separating institutional factors into congregational characteristics of structure and the institutional action factor of participation. From disparate sources of literature on organizational dynamics, several key structural dimensions emerge as causally related to participation and growth: age, size, and staffing. I explore each of these dimensions, derive specific hypotheses, and situate these hypotheses into a causal model.

### *Age*

An established line of research connects congregation age (i.e., the years that a congregation has existed) to growth. Hadaway (1990) shows new church development to explain a substantial portion of denominational growth within the Southern Baptist Convention. Young Southern Baptist congregations grow faster than do old congregations (Jones 1979). These findings give credence to an organizational lifecycle theory; whereby, the infancy and adolescence of a new religious organization correspond with rapid growth (Moberg 1962).

Unfortunately, positing a direct effect from congregation age to growth overlooks a significant mediating influence. Perhaps paradoxically, long histories often depress aggregate levels of belonging and participation in congregations. It might seem that a congregation serving a community for three or more generations would provide an enduring source of social interconnection. While this can be true, the dysfunction of a long history is that institutionalized patterns develop in which a few members shoulder the work for many. Religious leaders talk of the 80/20 rule, where 80 percent of the work is done by 20 percent of the people. Rationalized myths and rituals govern the operation of many formal organizations (Meyer and Rowan 1977). Informal norms become institutionalized. They relegate what tasks get done, how they get done, and who does them. Within religious organizations, institutionalized norms can take on a sacrosanct quality. Certain practices within the congregation are seen as not just the ways things *have been done*, but the way things *should be done*. The unfortunate result of these ritualized myths and rituals for congregations is an institutionalized inefficiency.

New congregations, more so than more established organizations, require an active investment by laity to survive. Few congregations begin with large staffs and debt-free facilities. Rather, laity muster their resources to build a structure for their new congregation. Once established, organizations show a path dependency in their behavior (Levinthal and March 1981; Cohen and Levinthal 1990; Levinthal 1997). Patterns, including those of belonging and participation, turn into impediments to change. In an ethnographic study of 23 congregations in changing communities, Ammerman (1997) finds congregation age to be a consistent influence mitigating the ability of a congregation to adapt. Supporting Ammerman's findings, Dudley and Roozen (2001) discover from the over 14,000 congregations participating in the Faith Communities Today Study that older congregations in contrast to congregations founded more recently are less open to change and lack a sense of energy and purpose. Consequently, congregation age represents an indirect deterrent to growth as mediated by decreasing participation. The presumed effect of congregational age on participation stands as my first hypothesis.

*H1: As a congregation ages, it will display lower levels of participation.*

### *Size*

A second congregational characteristic impacting growth is organizational size. Social networks are critical to the perpetuation of religion in general and congregations more specifically. Group size is a basic, distinguishing characteristic of Charles Horton Cooley's (1902) concepts of primary group and secondary group. The type of intimate, personal

attachments that characterize a primary group build from face-to-face interactions and cooperation occurring within a small group, whereas secondary groups are larger with interactions taking on a more formal and task-specific orientation. The intimacy of social networks is pivotal to the spread of new religions (Stark 1987, 1996). Religions grow through "a structure of direct and intimate interpersonal attachments," according to Stark (1996:20).

Social connections within a congregation constitute a distinctive resource—a form of capital—that makes possible strategic change and effective performance (see Stark and Finke 2000). As an organization grows, the connections between individuals often become more diffuse. Signaling a shift from primary group to secondary group, a weakening of in-group ties accompanies the advent of administrative structure. Increasing organizational size spurs an expansion in the administrative component of an organization (Blau 1970). In congregations with few members, one pastor handles preaching, visitation, and a host of other "professional" duties. Conversely, mega-churches of several thousand members employ staffs of specialists for diversified ministry areas. Larger organizations also develop structures and rituals that shape internal interactions among laity and clergy. The routinization of such structures reduces the extent to which the religious organization can or does limit out-group interaction (i.e., reducing strictness) (Iannaccone 1994). Church growth experts Lyle Schaller (1983) and C. Peter Wagner (1984) assert that clergy-laity relations get more distant and lay involvement declines as congregations exceed 100 members. Baptism rates in the Southern Baptist Convention tell a similar story. Small Southern Baptist congregations show a higher rate of baptisms and grow proportionately faster than larger congregations (Jones 1979). Finke (1994) notes the increasing size of the average Southern Baptist congregation as a shift away from sectarian status and toward lower performance. Thus, size represents an influential determinant of growth. Three hypotheses test the indirect and direct effects of this congregational characteristic.

*H2: Congregational size will positively relate to the number of paid staff in a congregation.*

*H3: As congregational size increases, overall rates of participation will decrease.*

*H4: Increasing congregational size will inhibit future congregational growth.*

### **Staffing**

A third congregational characteristic shaping growth relates to personnel. Congregations, like corporations, develop bureaucratic structures composed of paid staff. As noted, the rationalized myths and related ceremonies of institutionalized organizations provide stability but also constrain opportunities for widespread participation and expansion (see Meyer and Rowan 1977). Institutionalization constrains individual action (Zucker 1977). People lose a sense of ownership in a group when they have no say in its operation. Martin Luther's call for reform was a summons for common people to have unmediated access to the divine. It was a call to return the church to the people. The "ministry of the people" is an idea firmly embedded in the Reformation tradition of denominations like the Southern Baptist Convention. As in early Methodism, Baptist congregations emerged and spread rapidly in the nineteenth century based on the initiative of laity and untrained clergy (Hatch 1989; Ammerman 1990; Finke and Stark 1992). The development of denominational seminaries and clergy certification supplanted lay leadership with religious experts. Congregations hire trained clergy to fulfill the responsibilities that untrained laity performed in past generations. While this progression seems a step forward for congregations newly able to afford paid leadership, the cost to the congregation is often high. Growth seems to fol-



low those religious organizations that de-emphasize paid staff. The recent growth in membership and notoriety of decentralized religious organizations such as Calvary Chapel and Vineyard Christian Fellowship is illustrative (see Miller 1997). So, I offer two hypotheses tying paid staff to participation and congregational growth, respectively.

*H5: Increases in paid staff will produce lower levels of participation.*

*H6: Increases in paid staff will reduce congregational growth.*

### **Participation**

More directly related to growth, however, are institutional action factors related to participation. Voluntary organizations live and die by the involvement of their members. An active membership heightens the competitive dynamics of a voluntary organization (McPherson and Rotolo 1996). Religious organizations, like other voluntary associations, finance and facilitate operations principally through the monetary and temporal investment of committed members. Iannaccone et al. (1995) denote laity commitments of time and money as "resources" that enable religious organizations to both survive and succeed. Indeed, Dean Kelley (1972) implies in his influential book, *Why Conservative Churches are Growing*, that the commitment of members – the very origin of "strong" organizations – propels growth.<sup>1</sup> A bevy of additional research supports the positive link between participation and growth (Hougland and Wood 1982; Meyers and Olson 1991; Iannaccone et al. 1995). Participation influences growth due to the social nature of religion.

Active engagement by members in the life of a church confirms and affirms religious belonging. High levels of satisfaction with the congregation and pastor prompt members to participate (Hoge and Roozen 1979b). Reciprocally, congregational participation bolsters satisfaction (Hougland and Wood 1982). As in retail commerce, satisfied customers are the best advertisement for congregations. Hence, faith spreads as adherents share their beliefs with family and friends because the risk involved in believing and trusting a transcendent god is mitigated by others who believe the same (Stark 1996; Stark and Finke 2000). Laity, as they increasingly invest in their religion, gain more direct experience to share with family and friends. The investment increases the density of social networks and congregational identity for members. A powerful progression begins with belonging leading to participation and participation leading to growth. Research acknowledges the link between belonging and growth (McGaw 1980), but often misses the sequence of influences that connects belonging to growth. Hypothesis seven tests the crucial mediating role of participation.

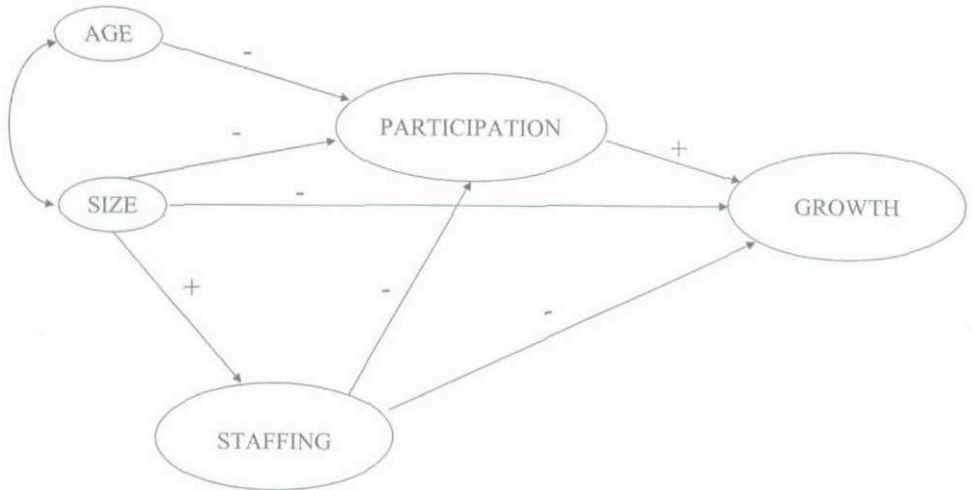
*H7: High levels of participation will promote congregational growth.*

Figure 1 presents a conceptual model of congregational growth. Seven hypotheses specify causal links between structure, participation, and growth. Signs indicate the direction of hypothesized effects. To test the conceptual model, I turn to longitudinal data from the largest Protestant denomination, the Southern Baptist Convention.

## **DATA AND METHODS**

The Southern Baptist Convention counts 16 million members (Lindner 2003). Between 1985 and 1995, the Convention grew eight percent while mainline denominations including Episcopalians and Methodists continued several decades of decline. The congregational polity structure of the Southern Baptist Convention makes it a useful population through which to explore congregational determinants of growth. Data for this analysis come from three waves of the Southern Baptist Convention Annual Church Profile (ACP).<sup>2</sup>

**Figure 1**  
**Conceptual Model of Congregational Growth**



The ACP is a census of Southern Baptist congregations. A clerk from each congregation completes a self-report form that is collected by the Convention at the end of each associational year. The form gathers information on structure, programs, and performance in Southern Baptist congregations. I use data from 1985, 1990, and 1995. The use of three waves of data offers a marked improvement over longitudinal designs with only two points of observation (Rogosa 1988), especially for modeling change as a multi-stage process. Sample sizes for each year total 36989, 38042, and 43467, respectively. Typically, the response rate by congregations to the Convention's annual survey is about 96 percent (Hadaway 1989). Iannaccone (1996) cautions against analyses of participation and growth based on a single denomination. He cites the restricted variance of congregational variables in single denomination samples as a methodological pitfall that leads to an underestimation of the effect of internal factors. In addition, Hadaway (1989) raises the concern that measuring change in congregational membership is highly problematic. If membership size is overestimated at "time one," then calculations of change at "time two" will be underestimated, and vice-versa. Assessing growth or decline depends heavily on the accuracy of the baseline measure. However, the Southern Baptist Convention remains a valuable population due to the congregational diversity within the denomination and the consistency with which the Convention gathers its own data. While measurement error is always a concern, the direction of any bias is likely to be consistent across the three waves of data.

The analysis focuses on congregations in existence from 1985 through 1995. Past research makes clear that Southern Baptist churches with more recent founding dates grow more readily than older congregations in the Convention (Jones 1979; Hadaway 1990). The purpose of this study is to examine the institutional factors of established organizations. By restricting the analysis, the total sample size becomes 35202 (a 19 percent decrease from the original pooled sample). Tests for attrition bias reveal that congregations missing from the sample in 1990 and 1995 do not differ significantly from those retained in the sample.



Structural dimensions of congregational age and size stand as my independent (exogenous) variables. Age measures the number of years prior to 1985 the congregation was founded.<sup>3</sup> The square root of total congregational membership in 1985 serves as the measure of congregation size. As is common in organizational data, Southern Baptist congregations show substantial skew and kurtosis on numerous measures. A square root transformation preserves meaningful zero values (e.g., no official members or no money spent on staff) while rescaling the distribution of the variable to approximate a normal distribution. The transformation helps ensure that a small number of outlying observations do not bias the overall generalizability of the findings. To control for the likely interrelationship of age and size, the error terms of the variables are allowed to correlate in the estimated model.

A measure of congregational staffing appears in the conceptual model as a dependent (endogenous) structural variable. The staffing variable is the square root of money spent in 1985 on church salaries, including pastor, church secretaries, janitor, etc. The limited number of variables in the ACP data prevents the construction of multivariate latent constructs for staffing and other relevant concepts.

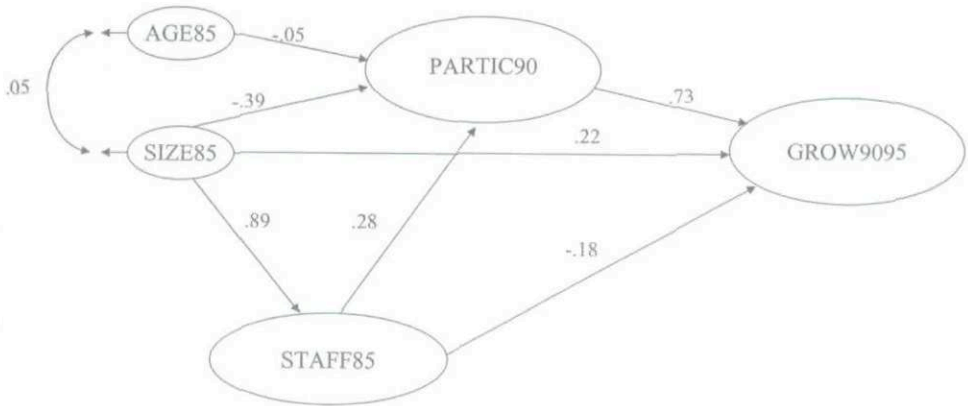
Participation and growth serve as main endogenous variables in the conceptual model. Worship attendance and Sunday school attendance represent measures of participation employed in this analysis. Within the Southern Baptist Convention, Sunday school attendance is a principal means of participation and cause of congregational growth (George 1992). Similar results turn up in other denominations (Doyle and Kelly 1979; McKinney 1979; McGaw 1980). The variables of worship attendance in 1990 and Sunday school attendance in 1990 are proportional measures. Worship attendance in 1990 is the average Sunday A.M. worship attendance for a congregation divided by the total congregational membership for the same year. Sunday School attendance in 1990 measures the average number of persons attending Sunday School weekly divided by the total membership. Unfortunately, the selection of available measures limits more complete tests of participation. People participate in church in a variety of ways. For example, small groups became an increasingly common way for individuals to participate in congregational life in recent decades (Wuthnow 1994). Small group involvement, lay leadership, and even financial contributions are not measurable with these data.

To measure growth, I follow past research and employ a measure of proportional change in membership, dividing total membership in 1995 by total membership in 1990 (c.f., Bedell and Jones 1992; Iannaccone et al. 1995). Like the difficulty present in measuring organizational effectiveness more broadly (Scott 1998; Forbes 1998), methodological disputes center on the assessment of congregational growth (Hadaway 1989; Iannaccone 1996; Hadaway and Marler 1996; Hoge 1996). Attempts to get around these disputes by using a multivariate latent construct proved unsuccessful. Factor analysis combining membership growth with growth measures of Sunday school enrollment and total receipts for the same five-year period failed to produce a reliable latent variable. Nevertheless, proportional change in membership as a single item indicator is a common and comparable measure of growth in extant literature. Appendix A reports the correlation matrix and descriptive statistics for each of the aforementioned variables.

### ***Analytic Plan***

Structural equation modeling tests the direct and indirect linkages between structure, participation and growth. The seven hypotheses specify causal paths of the proposed struc-

**Figure 2**  
**Structural Equation Model of Congregational Growth**



Note: Standardized maximum likelihood coefficients displayed. All coefficients significant at  $p < .05$ . See Table 1 for parameter estimates, proportions of explained variance, and goodness-of-fit statistics.

tural system shown in Figure 1. I estimate the structural equations with LISREL 8.54 (Jöreskog and Sörbom 1996). The advantage of structural equation modeling is the causal ordering it allows and the ambiguity it tolerates in relation to constructs (Hiitt, Gimeno, and Hoskisson 1998). I import data into LISREL using an asymptotic covariance matrix based on Pearson's product-moment correlation coefficients. The linear transformations conducted on several explanatory variables in conjunction with the asymptotic covariance matrix allow me to employ the preferred maximum likelihood estimation (Kline 1998). Maximum likelihood estimation is valuable in that it possesses desirable characteristics including minimum variance and unbiasedness (Schumacker and Lomax 1996).

## FINDINGS

Congregational characteristics and institutional action factors are important predictors of congregational growth. These characteristics display interrelationships that call into question the validity of treating all institutional factors as independently and directly related to growth however. The conceptual model fits these data well and the relationships between structure, participation, and growth follow closely the stated hypotheses. Figure 2 portrays the estimated structural equation model. Returning to my hypotheses, I first put forward that congregation age would negatively impact participation. The model supports this hypothesis. Older congregations show proportionately less member involvement than do young congregations. Older congregations also seem to be larger than younger congregations, as revealed by the significance of the error covariance for age and size. Both direct and joint effects of age on participation are negative. Thus, despite the weakness of the direct effect, I retain age in the estimated model to highlight the interrelated impact of structural variables on participation as well as to demonstrate the likely misspecification of positing a direct relationship from age to growth.



The influence of congregation size extends beyond joint effects with age. My second hypothesis contends that larger congregations require more paid staff. Indeed, Figure 2 shows a dominant positive effect of size on staffing. This supports an indirect connection of size to participation. As is well established in prior literature, congregation size also has a direct effect on participation. The effect is negative, as predicted in hypothesis three. There is a clear shift from laity to paid leaders in large congregations. Surprisingly though, large congregations show a propensity to grow, contradicting my fourth hypothesis. Perhaps larger congregations, even those with a substantial number of free riders, possess greater monetary and volunteer resources to put toward growth than do smaller congregations. Potential non-linear relationships between endogenous variables and size and age were explored, but linear estimation procedures consistently produced the most robust estimates.

**Table 1**  
**Maximum Likelihood Estimates and Fit Statistics**  
**For Model of Congregational Growth**

Variables	STAFF85	PARTIC90	GROW9095
AGE85 <sup>+</sup>	—	-0.05** (0.0001)	—
SIZE85 <sup>+</sup>	0.89** (0.065)	-0.39** (0.002)	0.22* (0.012)
STAFF85	—	0.28** (0.0002)	-0.18* (0.0008)
PARTIC90	—	—	0.73** (0.310)
R <sup>2</sup>	.79	.04	.52
Minimum Fit Function Chi Square			60.03 (p=0.00)
Satorra-Bentler Scaled Chi Square			0.12 (p=0.998)
Degrees of Freedom			4
RMSEA			0.00
Goodness of Fit Index			1.00
Adjusted Goodness of Fit Index			1.00
Normed Fit Index			1.00
Non-Normed Fit Index			1.00
N			31185

Note: Standardized estimates shown; standard errors are in parentheses.

<sup>+</sup> Correlation of error covariances significant at  $p < .01$ .

\*  $p < .05$     \*\*  $p < .01$  (two-tailed test)

Table 1 reports the parameter estimates for staffing and the other endogenous variables. Size significantly increases the importance of paid staff in a congregation, explaining 79 percent of its variance. However, congregational staffing has mixed effects on growth. As a direct effect, large staffs reduce congregation growth as predicted in hypothesis six. Indirectly, though, paid staff seems to enhance opportunities for growth by increasing levels of member participation. This finding challenges my fifth hypothesis. Instead of creating complacency among laity, large staffs may extend the breadth of programming which helps foster greater membership involvement. Research by Wilson et al. (1993) identifies this positive role of staffing. Clearly, the function of paid staff in a congregation is more complex than presented in this analysis. Further research is needed to sort out the joint effects of size and staff on participation.

As expected, the most important finding connects participation and growth. Participation, a multivariate latent construct composed of worship attendance (factor loading  $R^2=0.83$ ) and Sunday school attendance (factor loading  $R^2=0.86$ ), is the strongest of all institutional predictors of growth. Supporting hypothesis seven, participation significantly and positively relates to growth in Southern Baptist congregations. The origins of this involvement are not readily attributable to these congregational characteristics however. Age, staff, and size are statistically significant predictors, but they account for only four percent of the variance in participation. Overall, the model accounts for 52 percent of the variance in growth. Among Southern Baptist churches, internal factors explain a little over half the growth. This exceeds, but does not invalidate, the 30 to 50 percent margin that Hoge and Roozen (1979c) accord to local institutional factors in explaining growth. Room for speculation remains. Is the unexplained variance in participation and growth due to missing measures of participation or contextual variables? These data cannot answer this question.

An examination of fit statistics reported in Table 1 demonstrates that the conceptual model appropriately fits these data. The Minimum Fit Function Chi Square is significant, which is not surprising given the large sample size and non-normality of these data. Adjusting the fit function for non-normality, the Satorra-Bentler Scaled Chi Square (0.12;  $df=4$ ;  $p=0.998$ ) is nonsignificant. Other measures further attest to model fit. The Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA=0.000) falls well below the 0.05 suggested minimum (Bollen 1989). All other fit statistics likewise surpass 0.90, which is the recommended threshold for good fit (Schumacker and Lomax 1996).

## CONCLUSIONS

Institutional factors are significant to congregational growth. By looking inside the congregation, it is possible to see at least partially how organizations cultivate members' commitment and belonging to the faith and the fellowship. Past research clouds the ways in which institutional factors directly and indirectly influence growth due to unclear institutional concepts, shifting units of analysis, and limited longitudinal data. I attempt to offer some clarity with the introduction of structural equation modeling and three waves of congregational data to investigate causal relationships of structure, participation and growth. I follow the recommendation of McKinney and Hoge (1983) and separate institutional factors into congregational characteristics and institutional action factors. Three conclusions emerge from my findings.

First, I support a growing line of research on church growth and affirm that within the Southern Baptist Convention membership participation is the strongest institutional pre-



dictor of growth in congregations. High rates of participation demonstrate a strong sense of belonging among existing members. People are attracted to a place where they can belong. Congregations that cultivate belonging for present and potential members are the ones that grow. This should provide a hopeful message for religious leaders. Growth is not merely a byproduct of solid structures or a favorable external context. As championed by the church growth movement, malleable aspects of the congregation can and will shape growth. This is a theme that also resonates within classic strategic management literature. Organizational structure may be relatively stable and change only slowly, but the successful organization commits a part of the structure to find and implement adaptation (March and Simon 1958). Adaptation commonly begins at the lowest level of organizations. From past to present, decentralized, laity-driven faith groups have been most successful at adapting in innovative ways (Dudley and Cummings 1983; Hatch 1989; Finke and Stark 1992; Miller 1997). The key adaptation needed in congregations is the on-going ability to mobilize membership involvement. This is the realm of institutional action factors. Therefore, congregations desiring growth must not let building campaigns, professional staff, and programmatic initiatives obscure their most important institutional resource. The wise investment for the congregation is an investment in members' participation.

A second conclusion from this research is the inherent difficulty in capturing all relevant causes of growth in a single conceptual model. Participation is crucial, but it is not the sole explanation of growth. A host of internal and external influences shape the performance of congregations. Related to belonging, a faith tradition or a denomination may establish a type of "subcultural identity" that stimulates vitality and growth (Smith 1998; Evans 2003). A distinct identity appears equally important to performance at the congregational level (Ammerman 1997). In addition to belonging, meaning represents an essential function of congregations and a correlate of performance. Kelley (1972) argued that the provision of meaning is the primary determinant of strength for churches. He saw strictness, the demands made by faith groups on members, as a prerequisite to strength. Regrettably, the limited variables available in these data prevent me from testing the performance implications of organizational identity or strictness among Southern Baptist congregations. Likewise, I lack variables to gauge the relative effects of contextual factors from a congregation's external environment (e.g., Hoge and Roozen 1979a).

The present study also does not depict the dynamic character of congregational performance. Growing congregations eventually become large congregations. Performance has implications for organizational structure. Growth creates pressures towards formalization and professionalization which conflict with drives in many voluntary associations to remain small, informal and member-focused (Knoke and Prensky 1984; Klausen 1995). Growth brings other problems for religious organizations, including less dense social networks, more free riders, and diminished competition and entrepreneurship (Stark and Finke 2000). Extensions of the model need development in order to include the reciprocal effects of growth on structure and participation.

Finally, I want to stress the value of this methodology for exploring organizational dynamics. Structural equation modeling provides a means to depict direct and indirect relationships and helps address the measurement of difficult concepts. Better data and additional measures are necessary. Nonetheless, further congregational analyses for other denominations and religious traditions can readily proceed. The conceptual model I propose is tentative, but testable. It sheds needed light on the most important form of religious organization: the congregation.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

An earlier version of this paper was presented at the 2000 annual meeting of the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion in Houston, Texas. I gratefully acknowledge the support of Calvin College in funding the final preparations of the manuscript for publication. Address correspondence to Kevin D. Dougherty, Department of Sociology and Social Work, Calvin College, 3201 Burton Street SE, Grand Rapids, MI 49546-4450; [dougherty@calvin.edu](mailto:dougherty@calvin.edu).

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> To be clear, Kelley's central thesis was about church strength not church growth (see Kelley 1986:xvii). He saw strict/serious/demanding churches as strong, with growth a byproduct of strength.

<sup>2</sup> The data were downloaded from the American Religion Data Archive (ARDA). For more information go to: [www.TheARDA.com](http://www.TheARDA.com).

<sup>3</sup> Discrepancies in the Year Founded across survey waves required correction. Differences of less than 10 years I replaced with the mean of the two dates. Differences larger than 10 years I recoded missing.

## APPENDIX A

## CORRELATIONS AND DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS OF VARIABLES

	AGE85	SQRTTM85	SQRTST85	WORATT90	SSATT90	GROW9095
AGE85	1.000					
SQRTTM85	.056**	1.000				
SQRTST85	.000	.891**	1.000			
WORATT90	-.052**	-.130**	-.062**	1.000		
SSATT90	-.044**	-.113**	-.047**	.867**	1.000	
GROW9095	-.028**	-.020**	-.014**	.049**	.049**	1.000
Mean	70.43	18.11	154.20	0.34	0.28	1.43
Std. Dev.	46.49	9.76	106.11	0.37	0.32	9.69
Minimum	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Maximum	303.00	162.08	1977.34	40.00	40.00	921.00

\*  $p < .05$       \*\*  $p < .01$  level (two-tailed test).

Notes: N=31282. Variable definitions provided below.

AGE85=1985- year founded;

SQRTTM85=square root of 1985 total membership;

SQRTST85=square root of 1985 staff salaries (in dollars);

WORATT90=1990 average Sunday AM worship attendance/1990 total membership;

SSATT90=1990 average number of persons attending Sunday School weekly/1990 total membership;

GROW9095=1995 total membership/1990 total membership.

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