

The New Holy Clubs: Testing Church-to-Sect Propositions

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The familiar sect-to-church theory holds that successful sects will gradually become more church-like over time, reducing the level of tension they hold with their environment. H. Richard Niebuhr (1929), the originator of sect-to-church theory, took it for granted that transformation was possible only in the church-like direction — that churches could not reverse the process and become more sect-like. Recent theoretical developments, however, suggest that under certain conditions, and where groups are market-dependent, religious organizations will shift in the direction of higher tension with their environment (Stark and Finke 2000). Using recent data from Methodist congregations, we test selected propositions from these new theoretical developments.

INTRODUCTION

It is the received wisdom that, once begun, the sect-to-church process is irreversible and that “secularization” is an absorbing state from which faith never returns. H. Richard Niebuhr (1929), the originator of sect-to-church theory, took it for granted that transformation was possible only in the church-like direction — that churches could not reverse the process and become more sect-like. He theorized that only the lower classes want high tension faith and that sects are turned into churches when they are taken over by the upper classes. Because, in Niebuhr’s view, the lower classes are incapable of reclaiming a church from elite control, no church ever could be transformed back in the sect-like direction.

While there have been several very insightful case studies of individual congregations that switched away from liberalism (especially Warner 1988), we have been unable to find even a hint in the theoretical literature that *denominations* can become more conservative, except for Benton Johnson’s (1963:543)

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suggestion in a footnote that a shift in that direction "is at least conceivable." Indeed, our own historical research highlights how organizational revivalism, commitment, and growth tend to come from new sectarian movements, as the mainline denominations become more secularized and fall into decline (Finke and Stark 1992; Stark and Bainbridge 1985).

But our more recent theoretical developments suggest that under certain conditions, and where groups are market-dependent, religious organizations will shift in the direction of higher tension with their environment (Stark and Finke 2000). We define tension as the degree of distinctiveness, separation, and antagonism between a religious group and the "outside" world, and view the concept as a continuum. The familiar sect-to-church process illustrates how religious groups can move from the high tension end of the continuum (demanding sects) to the low tension end (mainline churches). The more recent theoretical arguments suggest, however, that religious groups might also opt for higher levels of tension, increasing their distinctiveness, separation, and antagonism with the surrounding environment.

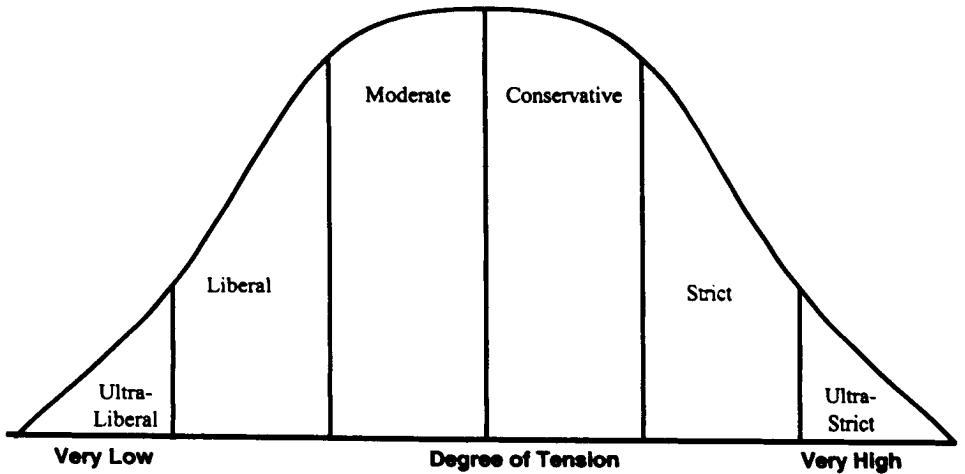
This essay reviews selected portions of this theory and uses data on United Methodist congregations to test specific predictions on the effects such shifts will have on the religious organizations. Within the bosom of some of the lowest tension (or most liberal) American denominations there are now sufficient cases of clergy and congregations opting for greater tension to let us demonstrate that the transformation of sects into churches is entirely reversible and produces increased organizational vigor. In contrast, as low tension denominations opt for even lower levels of tension, they also opt for lower levels of commitment and participation.

THEORETICAL FOUNDATION FOR RENEWAL

In recent work we have shown that demand for religion approximates a bell-shaped curve (Stark and Finke 2000). That is, if we place religious demand on the "tension" continuum, with one end focusing on the supernatural to the fullest extent possible and the other end accepting only a remote and inactive conception of the supernatural, few will seek either extreme. Instead, the demand for religion will rise as we move away from each extreme, reaching a peak as we fall midway between the two ends of the continuum (see Figure 1). Few want a religion that forces complete submission, requiring a life of isolation from the secular society. Likewise, few want a religion whose god is so distant and powerless as to offer little assistance in daily living and few promises for the life hereafter. To the extent people seek religion, and not all do seek religion, the demand is the highest for religions that offer close relations with the supernatural and distinctive demands for membership, without isolating individuals from the culture around them. People are drawn, then, to religions that fall midway between the far ends of the continuum.

FIGURE 1

A Hypothetical Distribution of Religious Niches



When applied to religious groups, this bell-shaped curve of religious demand helps explain the size of the market segment to which a group will appeal. When a group limits its appeal to either extreme of the continuum, it is confined to a small portion of the market. The ultra-strict sects, communes and religious orders, and the ultra-liberal New Age and Unitarian/Universalists are each appealing to a very limited segment of the total market. As groups appeal to the center of the continuum, however, the size of the potential market rises. Thus, most Americans are members of a congregation that falls somewhere between these two extremes.

This bell-shaped demand curve also helps explain the changing fortunes of religious movements progressing through the familiar sect-church transition. Initially, when a strict sectarian group eliminates some of the most onerous costs of membership, moving the group away from the one extreme, the group can appeal to a larger segment of the population and increase their opportunities for membership growth. This was evident in the Methodists (Sweet 1933) in the 19th century, just as it is evident in the Assemblies of God in the 20th (Poloma 1989). But if a group continues reducing tension with the secular society, it can move to the other end of the continuum and will once again be appealing to a smaller market segment. The Puritans offer one example of this process. Beginning near the ultra-strict end of the continuum as a small sect of the Anglican Church in the early 17th century, they gradually tempered their teachings and became the most respected and dominant colonial church in New England, known as the Congregationalists. Over the course of the last two centuries, however, the Congregationalists (now the United Church of Christ)

have continued to reduce their tension with society and their membership has continued to fall. By moving away from the highest tension end of the continuum the Puritans increased their opportunities for growth, but their more recent move to the other extreme of the continuum has again decreased the size of the market to which they appeal. Moreover, because other mainline denominations have made a similar transition, they are facing increasing competition in a relatively small market.

This raises several obvious questions. First, why don't they move back? If growth tempts sects to reduce their strictness, growth should also tempt declining mainline congregations to increase their tension with society. Second, if they attempt to increase tension, under what conditions will this church-to-sect (increasing of tension) process occur? Third, if they attempt to increase tension by regaining a lost religious intensity and clear religious demands, will they once again appeal to a larger segment of the total market? Will congregations that attempt to regain tension show more organizational vitality than those attempting to further reduce this tension?

So, is the declining mainline willing to "move back" to a higher level of tension? Although the answer to the first question is still open to debate at the denominational level, the answer is clear at the local churches. All of the mainline denominations have grassroots movements, supported by local congregations, that are attempting to increase tension with the secular culture. In the case of two conservative mainline denominations, the Southern Baptist Convention and the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod, the more conservative factions have been successful in curbing efforts to reduce tension for the denomination as a whole (Ammerman 1990). For traditional mainline churches there have been few significant changes at the denominational level, but the growing local movements are clearly evident. The new movements are showing signs of vitality at the local level and are increasingly displaying a presence at the national conventions.

To understand this potential church-to-sect transition, however, it is important to address the second question and understand the conditions under which it might occur. We argue that this process will rely on an unregulated religious economy and local congregational support. Only in an unregulated religious economy are the churches fully market-dependent. That is, without the support of the people they can and do die out.

- #1. *The church-to-sect process is far more likely to occur in relatively unregulated religious economies where the survival of all religious groups rests on market processes than in regulated economies featuring subsidized denominations.*

In regulated economies, where the state-supported churches draw their members only from the moderate to liberal niches, they will not benefit from growth as they are not at the mercy of the market. To the contrary, when clergy are civil servants (as they are in Germany and Scandinavia), they have more to gain from

empty churches (which make no demands on their time) than from full ones. For this essay our attention will focus only on the relatively unregulated U.S. market.

The church-to-sect process will also rely on local congregational support. Endowments and staff cuts allow denominational offices to continue business as usual, despite a rapidly declining membership. The local churches, however, are fully market dependent and rely on members for survival.

#2. Initial shifts towards higher tension will occur primarily at the congregational level and will be reflected at the denominational level as a cumulative result of congregational shifts.

Recall that at the most liberal end of the church-sect spectrum, the clergy usually are substantially more liberal than the majority of their remaining members (Glock, Ringer, and Babbie 1967; Hadden 1969; Wuthnow 1989). Therefore, an increase in tension at the local level should generate immediate favorable, face-to-face responses from the rank-and-file. Finally, a small number of clergy can implement changes at the local level, without receiving denominational support.

The final question addresses the heart of this essay. If declining mainline congregations increase their tension with the secular society, will they appeal to a larger segment of the total market, leading to potential growth? Earlier we argued that as high tension sects begin to decrease their tension, they shift from smaller to larger market niches, which brings with it the opportunity for increased growth. Conversely, as moderate religious bodies shift towards even lower tension (move into the liberal end of the spectrum) they move away from larger market niches towards smaller ones, with a consequent reduction in their potential membership base.

#3a. As a religious body in a very low state of tension moves to an even lower state of tension, it moves to smaller market niches and has a decreased opportunity for growth.

Of course, should a liberal body then reverse the process and move in the direction of higher tension the potential for growth increases again

#3b. As a religious body in a very low state of tension moves to a higher state of tension, it moves from smaller to larger market niches and has an increased opportunity for growth.

Using data on United Methodist congregations in the California-Nevada conference, we will test propositions 3a and 3b. Although movements attempting to increase tension are evident in all mainline denominations, as noted earlier, these movements are especially active in the United Methodists. Moreover, United Methodists are being torn in a struggle between movements attempting to increase tension with the secular society and those that are trying to reduce it still further. This offers us an ideal opportunity for testing proposi-

tions 3a and 3b. How do the mainline congregations vying for increased tension compare with those trying to reduce it?

METHODISTS

The Methodists are well-known as one of the classic cases of sect-to-church transformation. Although founded in England, it was the American branch of Methodism that truly prospered. Unleashed from the threat of state intervention, Bishop Asbury's band of uneducated, poorly dressed, and plain-spoken itinerants sparked revival fires throughout the new nation. At the prodding of Asbury, camp meeting revivals became the "battle ax and weapon of war" for converting sinners, and local class meetings promoted and monitored the renewal efforts throughout the year (Asbury 1958:453). The young Methodist movement skyrocketed from 2.5 percent of all church adherents in 1776 to 34.2 percent in 1850, then constituting the largest religious body in the nation, with 117 members per 1,000 Americans.

But changes were on the horizon. In 1855 the famous itinerant Peter Cartwright complained that his Methodists had "almost let camp meetings die out," class meetings were being neglected, and the itinerants were dismounting and replacing the local lay preachers (Cartwright 1856:523). Changes were also evident in the education and affluence of Methodists. Methodists didn't open a seminary until 1847, but by 1880 there were, under official control of the Methodist Episcopal Church, 11 theological seminaries, 44 colleges and universities, and 130 women's seminaries and schools (Sweet 1933:333). Rapidly rising Methodist affluence was soon evident in attractive clergy salaries and the rapidly increasing value of church properties. Soon Methodist divines received the social prestige and respect once reserved for the colonial mainline denominations: Congregationalists, Episcopalians, and Presbyterians.

Indeed, the Methodists long ago became full members of the "mainline," not only in terms of prestige, but also as a source of dissenting sects. This reached crisis proportions with the advent of the Holiness Movement towards the end of the nineteenth century. The Methodist bishops refused to tolerate grass-roots revivalism within the ranks and ejected the most active proponents of Holiness just as the Wesley brothers had been ejected by the Anglican establishment a century before. In response, the rebels "called for all true holiness Christians to come out of Methodism's church of mammon" (Melton 1989:37). And come out they did, founding many new religious denominations including the Church of the Nazarene. By the early twentieth century the most sect-like congregations and leaders had left and the Methodist Episcopal Church continued its climb to greater cultural prestige and acceptance.

Throughout most of the twentieth century, the Methodist clergy have pressed for increasing liberalism (Peters 1985; Finke and Stark 1992). Their success in doing so has been mirrored by a corresponding decline in membership

— what once was by far the largest Protestant body in the nation has experienced a century of decline. In 1890, 84 of every 1,000 Americans were Methodists. In 1990 there were only 36. This was *not* due to the growth of Catholics or to any general decline in church membership. As the Methodists slumped, the Southern Baptists increased their “market share” from 33 per 1,000 in 1890 to 61 in 1990, while the Assemblies of God and the Church of God in Christ went from 0 to 9 and 22 per 1,000 respectively. Meanwhile, the church membership rate increased from 45 percent of the total population in 1890 to about 65 percent in 1990.

As the century passed and the bad news continued for the Methodists, there has been growing discontent among the rank-and-file who have remained within the church and repeated efforts have been made to return to the higher tension stance on which the church’s original success was based.

CLERGY AND THE NEW HOLY CLUBS

The origins of Methodism can be traced to the Holy Club at Oxford, an outside the church organization, led by the Wesley brothers for young men determined to revive the spirituality of the Church of England. Today, somewhat similar “Holy Clubs” are attempting to revive the United Methodist Church.

One of the first new “Holy Clubs” was the Good News movement founded by Charles W. Keysor. In 1965 Keysor was asked to write an article for the Methodist minister’s journal, *New Christian Advocate*, outlining the central tenants of evangelical Methodists. After Keysor’s essay “Methodism’s Silent Minority” appeared, he received over 200 letters and phones calls from other Methodists, mostly pastors, lamenting their lack of contact with other evangelical Methodists and their feelings of being “cut off from the leadership of [their] church” (*Circuit Rider* 1989:6). So, less than a year later, Keysor launched *Good News* magazine. Incorporated as “A Forum for Scriptural Christianity” and seeking the revival of the United Methodist Church, *Good News* quickly became more than a magazine. By 1970 the *Good News* board sponsored their first national gathering, attracting 1,600 Methodists; and by 1976 they sponsored a newsletter for seminarians (*Catalyst*), published their own church school literature, launched efforts to promote evangelical delegates and statements at the General Conferences, established the Evangelical Missions Council, and promoted the founding of renewal groups at local conferences (Heidinger 1992:14-19). As the circulation of the *Good News* magazine swelled to 20,000 and the growing list of services increased, many expected the young movement to split from the church like the holiness groups of the past. But the leaders of the movement have consistently denied any desire to split from the denomination, insisting that they are “dedicated to the spiritual renewal and theological reform of our United Methodist Church” (*Circuit Rider* 1989). In this they resemble

earlier reformers such as Benjamin Titus Roberts (who founded the Free Methodists in 1860 after being expelled by the Methodist Episcopal Church for protesting the move to lower tension) and the many leaders of the Holiness Movement. The ability of contemporary conservatives to avoid expulsion seems due to the unwillingness of the Methodist bishops to impose any corresponding punishment on the constant challenges to their authority from the lower tension direction.

A second national movement dedicated to the renewal and reform of the Methodists is the Confessing Movement, so called because its members subscribe to a confessional statement issued in the Spring of 1994 reaffirming the traditional teachings of the United Methodist Church and pledging to "vigorously challenge and hold accountable those that undermine this confession." *Christianity Today* described the Confessing Movement as seeking to "put boundaries on what is acceptable practice and belief within United Methodism" (Zipperer 1995:105). Started by a group of 92 United Methodist laity, clergy, bishops, and professors in 1994, the number signifying support increased to 960 churches and 18,000 individuals by 1996. By the fall of 2000 the numbers supporting the Movement continued rising to 1,363 congregations, 3,473 pastors and 609,642 members, and these numbers appear to be poised for continued growth.

Both the Confessing Movement and the Good News are attempting to increase the denomination's tension with the dominant culture by re-establishing clear boundaries. By affirming the authority of the Bible, the divinity of Jesus Christ and a return to Wesleyan doctrine and discipline, they are also taking firm stands against many competing beliefs and behaviors in the United Methodist Church. Their stances against racial and gender prejudice and for increasing support for the poor have been embraced by all factions of the church. But their repudiation of divorce, homosexual practices and abortion, and their refusal to acknowledge sources of spiritual salvation, other than Jesus Christ, has placed them in sharp opposition to many other Methodists.

Yet, despite all of the attention given to these national movements, some of the most effective efforts to unite evangelical Methodists occur in the local conferences. These efforts first began after the founding of the Good News movement and have escalated in recent years. The Confessing Movement is making an effort to network these local movements and they now report conference coordinators in 60 of the 66 conferences.¹ As the local clergy and laity are better mobilized, the high profile debates once reserved for national conventions are now being staged at the local conference.

At the moment, few topics polarize local Methodist conferences more than the question of same-sex marriages. One of the most heated recent debates has

¹ This information was provided by the executive director of the Confessing Movement, Patricia Miller.

been in the California-Nevada conference, where the highly publicized marriage of a lesbian couple at St. Mark's United Methodist Church in Sacramento, California provoked strong statements from both sides. The Confessing Movement, and other evangelical Methodist movements attempting to increase the church's tension with the secular society, strongly opposed the marriage, while those attempting to further liberalize the church actively supported and celebrated the same-sex marriage. This clear division in the same conference allows us to offer an initial test of hypotheses 3a and 3b. How does the growth and organizational vitality of congregations pressing for increased tension compare with those trying to reduce it?

TENSION AND ORGANIZATIONAL GROWTH

The California-Nevada Conference offers an opportunity to identify pastors pressing for less tension with the secular society and those who are seeking more. Long before the same-sex wedding in Sacramento was held, each side organized for battle. The stage was set back in 1996 when the United Methodist Church's top legislative body added a statement to their Social Principles stating: "Ceremonies that celebrate homosexual unions shall not be conducted by our ministers and shall not be conducted in our churches." In September of 1997, Methodist pastor Jimmy Creech performed a union for two women in Omaha, Nebraska and was narrowly acquitted by the church on March 13, 1998. Then on October 17, 1998, two prominent lay leaders from the California-Nevada Conference announced that they would be married at St. Mark's Methodist Church. The two women, along with their many supporters, offered this as an opportunity to celebrate their union and to challenge the existing policies of the United Methodist Church. They invited United Methodist pastors to show support for gay and lesbian marriages by serving as co-officiants at the wedding, whether in person or in absentia.²

The Confessing Movement and the Good News Movement were equally clear in their opposition to this union. A series of statements were released, but the most attention was given to a press conference held the day before the wedding by the Evangelical Renewal Fellowship (ERF), an informal fellowship of evangelical pastors and laity loosely aligned with the Confessing Movement. The president of the ERF described the couple as his friends, and asked fellow evangelicals not to disrupt the ceremony, but he was unequivocal in his opposition to the wedding, calling the relationship a sin and citing the Bible and the United Methodist's Book of Discipline as the foundations for his opposition.

² The information on these recent events was taken from the United Methodist News Service (www.umc.org), billed as the "official news agency of The United Methodist Church."

These series of events placed the conference pastors into two distinct camps: pastors siding with the Evangelical Renewal Fellowship and seeking more tension, and pastors supporting same-sex marriages and seeking less tension — a large additional group includes those who did not commit to either side. Obtaining lists for each side of the battle was relatively easy. Following the marriage ceremony, Affirmation, an organization of United Methodists for gay, lesbian and bisexual concerns, used their web site to post the names of the 167 clergy serving as co-officiants at the wedding (www.umaffirm.org). Of this list, 92 clergy were from the California-Nevada Conference. As for the evangelical clergy, the Confessing Movement gave us a list of 109 California-Nevada Conference clergy who were members of the Evangelical Renewal Fellowship. There was no overlap between the two lists.

We then turned to the *General Minutes of the Annual Conferences of the United Methodist Church*, an annual publication reporting on every church and pastor in the denomination, to identify each pastor's appointment. Because the lists were from 1999, and the most recently published *General Minutes* was from 1997, a few of the clergy were located in different conferences or were not in the 1997 *Minutes*.³ We only selected the pastors who were listed in the California-Nevada conference in the 1997 *Minutes*. In the end, we were able to locate 88 of the 109 evangelical pastors and 84 of the 92 officiant pastors from the local conference. The vast majority of the conference pastors, 589, were not identified with either side.

Table 1 lists the three groups of clergy and their appointments. The most striking result is that over three-fourths of the evangelical clergy are working in the local churches and only 17 percent are retired. In contrast, 43 percent of the officiant clergy and 35 percent of the remaining conference pastors are retired, with less than one half of the officiant pastors working in a local church. The small differences between the officiant clergy and the remaining conference clergy is probably due, in part, to the risk involved in violating existing policies of the church. The co-officiants were publically defying the Social Principle passed in 1996 banning Methodist clergy from performing same-sex unions. Clergy who are retired, or not in a local congregation, would have less to lose.

But the key finding from Table 1 is that the evangelical clergy are not retired clergy holding on to the remnants of past memories. They tend to be clergy who are active in the local church. As we have argued elsewhere, we postulate a reversal of the time-honored conflict between a "progressive" young clergy and their "reactionary" superiors. The evangelical clergy are "Young Turks" seeking to free themselves from superiors committed to "progressive" theology.

³ Although we could not determine the exact reasons for each omission, some of the clergy on the lists were still in seminary in 1997, and therefore were not included in the *Minutes*.

TABLE 1

Appointments for "Evangelical" and "Officiant" Pastors in the California-Nevada Conference of the United Methodist Church

	Pastors in California-Nevada Conference		
	Pastors in Evangelical Renewal Fellowship*	Pastors Serving as Officiants**	Remaining Pastors affiliated with the Conference***
% in Congregation	78.4 (69)	48.8 (41)	53.0 (311)
% Retired	17.0 (15)	42.9 (36)	35.0 (207)
% in Extension Ministries	3.4 (3)	6.0 (5)	9.3 (55)
% Disabled or on Leave	1.1 (1)	2.4 (2)	2.7 (16)
N =	88	84	589

* The list of clergy serving as co-officiants for the same-sex marriage in Sacramento was taken from the Affirmation web site (<http://www.UMAFFIRM.ORG>) two days after the wedding ceremony (January 18, 1999).

** The list of clergy who are members of the Evangelical Renewal Fellowship was provided by Debbie Thompson and Patricia Miller of the Confessing Movement.

*** The list of pastors for the conference was taken from the most recent *General Minutes of the Annual Conferences of the United Methodist Church* (Babbitt 1998).

After identifying the pastors' appointments, we then collected data on their churches' attendance, expenditures and membership as measures of organizational vitality. To allow us to measure changes in local churches over time we went back to the 1995 *General Minutes* and collected 1994 data on the same measures. Since three congregations had two pastors who were officiants and two congregations had two pastors that were members of the Evangelical Renewal Fellowship, the 41 officiant pastors served 38 congregations and the 69 evangelical pastors served 67 congregations. These data allow us to offer an initial test of hypotheses 3a and 3b.

Table 2 compares the organizational vitality of congregations based on the affiliation of their current pastor. The officiant pastors, those trying to further reduce the church's tension with the culture, have been faring poorly. For each of the three areas showing change over time, attendance, membership and expenditures, they have suffered substantial losses. By contrast, the congregations headed by evangelical clergy, those trying to increase tension, showed substantial gains in attendance and expenditures, little change in membership, and display the highest rates of attendance and expenditures per member for 1996.

Yet, because Methodist pastors typically change congregations on a regular basis, many of the changes attributed to pastors in Table 2 could be misleading.

Some of the pastors had only recently arrived at their churches and had no effect on the changes that preceded their arrival. To control for this, we constructed a second table (Table 3) comparing congregations of the officiant and evangelical clergy, where they had been in the congregation from 1994-96. Notice that for the officiant pastors, nearly one-half (45 percent) had changed congregations during the past three years, whereas only one-quarter of the evangelical pastors had changed churches. Thus, Table 3 reports on the 50 evangelical pastors and the 21 officiant pastors who had remained at the same congregation from 1994-96.

TABLE 2

The Impact of "Evangelical" and "Officiant" Pastors in the
California-Nevada Conference of the United Methodist Church*

	California-Nevada Conference Churches:		
	With an Evangelical Pastor in '96*	With an Officiant Pastor in '96**	Remaining Congregations
Change in attendance, 1994-96	5.1%	-4.9%	2.1%
Change in expenditures, 1994-96	6.0%	-2.2%	7.0%
Change in membership, 1994-96	-0.8%	-4.0%	0.3%
Attendance per 1,000 members, 1996	546	454	487
Expenditures per member, 1996	636	591	524
N =	67	38	248

* Data on congregations were taken from the 1995 and 1997 *General Minutes of the Annual Conferences of the United Methodist Church* (Nielsen 1996; Babbitt 1998).

* The list of clergy serving as co-officiants for the same-sex marriage in Sacramento was taken from the Affirmation web site (<http://www.UMAFFIRM.ORG>) two days after the wedding ceremony (January 18, 1999).

** The list of clergy who are members of the Evangelical Renewal Fellowship was provided by Debbie Thompson and Patricia Miller of the Confessing Movement.

Table 3 provides additional support for the findings from Table 2. Churches headed by an evangelical pastor for 3 or more years show a hefty 7.5 percent increase in attendance, a 6.1 percent increase in expenditures and a slight increase in membership (0.9 percent). Overall, clergy continuity tends to heighten the positive effects of the evangelical clergy. For the officiant clergy, however, continuity does little to curb the decline. When officiant pastors remain at the same congregation for 3 years or more, all of the measures of organizational vitality continue to decline by 2 percent or more. The rate of decline slows for attendance and membership, but the decline in expenditures actually jumps from -2.2 percent to -6.0 percent.

The results of Table 2 and 3 provide initial support for hypotheses 3a and 3b. When congregations in a low state of tension with their society move to an

even lower state of tension, they appeal to a smaller market niche and decrease their opportunity for growth. Conversely, when congregations in a low state of tension with their society move to a higher level of tension, they appeal to a larger market niche and increase their opportunity for growth.

TABLE 3

The Impact of "Evangelical" and "Officiant" Pastors Who Have Remained at the Same Congregation Three Years or More*

	California-Nevada Conference Churches:		
	With an Evangelical Pastor 94-96*	With an Officiant Pastor 94-96**	Remaining Congregations
Change in attendance, 1994-96	7.5%	-3.5%	1.0%
Change in expenditures, 1994-96	6.1%	-6.0%	6.5%
Change in membership, 1994-96	0.9%	-2.3%	-0.6%
Attendance per 1,000 members, 1996	567	443	485
Expenditures per member, 1996	634	597	536
N =	50	21	282

* Data on congregations were taken from the 1995 and 1997 *General Minutes of the Annual Conferences of the United Methodist Church* (Nielsen 1996; Babbitt 1998).

* The list of clergy serving as co-officiants for the same-sex marriage in Sacramento was taken from the Affirmation web site (<http://www.UMAFFIRM.ORG>) two days after the wedding ceremony (January 18, 1999).

** The list of clergy who are members of the Evangelical Renewal Fellowship was provided by Debbie Thompson and Patricia Miller of the Confessing Movement.

CONCLUSION

We are well aware that these modest attempts to examine hypotheses on the church-to-sect process do not provide a conclusive test. Yet, we think there are important substantive and theoretical reasons why this trend should not be taken lightly by scholars or church leaders. First, evangelical movements are arising within the traditional mainline churches and they are not being led by aged traditionalists grasping for past memories, nor are they attempting to start new religious movements. Instead, the pastors of the Evangelical Renewal Fellowship, like evangelical movements in other denominations, are younger pastors actively ministering to local congregations and are seeking changes within the denomination. As reported earlier, 78 percent of the pastors in the Evangelical Renewal Fellowship hold appointments in a local church, compared to 49 percent of the officiants and 53 percent of the remaining clergy.

Second, as predicted by our hypotheses, the time-honored sect-to-church process can be reversed. Given the counter-reformation, we should have known this all along. Yet, little in the way of theory or past research has suggested that

this is possible. Our initial results show that when pastors of liberal denominations attempt to increase their congregations' tension with society, they experience an increase in organizational vitality. Conversely, when pastors of liberal denominations attempt to further reduce their congregations' tension with society, they continue to lose organizational vitality. As we argue more completely elsewhere, when religious groups move too far to either extreme, they are appealing to an increasingly smaller segment of the religious market (Stark and Finke 2000).

The final point is that the theoretical developments in this area offer a promising overlap with recent theoretical developments in other areas of sociology. Recently, Popielarz and McPherson (1995:702) proposed that voluntary organizations remain relatively fixed in social space because they "lose members at the edge of the niche faster than in the center. This differential loss of members at the edge of the niche keeps groups from spreading unchecked in social space." In the past, that "rule" has had limited application to religious organizations, precisely because religious movements *do not* remain fixed in social space. If the trends reviewed in this essay are long-term, and the renewal groups (such as the Confessing Movement) remain within their respective denominations, this raises an important theoretical question. Could offsetting tendencies to move towards the center stabilize the religious marketplace with firms coming to rest within specific niches? If so, this would conform to Popielarz and McPherson's (1995) "rule" that voluntary organizations tend to become fixed in social space, losing members from the edge of their niche.

Whether increases in tension should be called shifts towards a less liberal outlook, towards greater strictness, or revivals, may be a matter of taste. But, whatever they are called, they raise a series of intriguing substantive and theoretical questions for religion scholars.

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