

All church is local: Behind the statistics

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [July 31, 2002](#) issue

One of the reports the stated clerk makes to the General Assembly of my church when it gathers for its annual meeting is about statistics: how many members we gained and lost, how many infants were baptized, how much money the people put in the plate. For Presbyterians—and in varying degrees for Methodists, Episcopalians, Lutherans and others—this is a sobering moment. Gary Luhr, in the communications office of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), reported recently that the average net loss of Presbyterians has been 1.2 percent per year for 36 consecutive years, for a total loss of 1.7 million members.

That statistic drives some Presbyterians crazy. Luhr observes that conservative critics blame the trend on liberal denominational leaders and liberal social causes espoused and supported by denominational policy. A recent healthy development in the conversation, however, is the acknowledgment that church decline or growth is more about demographics than anything else. The church's research office knows that more than half the Presbyterian churches in the nation are in small towns and rural areas with declining populations. We have churches for a population that is no longer there.

The other demographic fact that is beginning to be acknowledged has to do with the birth rate. Father Andrew Greeley, a distinguished sociologist when he's not writing popular novels, has completed a study in collaboration with two academic colleagues on the "demographic imperative" in religious change. Greeley and colleagues discovered that in the past century conservative women had more children than mainline women and that this fact accounts for three-fourths of the numerical trend in religious membership. They also discovered that there has been no massive conversion of mainline Protestants to conservative denominations.

We also know that denominations that establish new congregations grow. We know that one of the worst mistakes is to abandon campus ministries. And we know that

what happens locally, congregationally, is absolutely critical.

In this issue Donald Luidens reviews five books about congregational growth and vitality. Each book is different. Each is helpful in understanding the religious environment in which most of us live. Each identifies myths, offers suggestions for new approaches, and reminds us that every congregation is unique and requires unique—and creative and faithful—leadership.

I love something Douglas John Hall said in *Professing the Faith*: “Tradition is not a static theory, a great deposit of inert material. . . . Tradition . . . involves not only what is handed over but also those to whom it is handed. Tradition is a living thing because its being received . . . always entails discovery, surprise, nuance, interrogation and (above all) struggle.”