Church-closing rate only one percent: More "churning" among evangelicals

by John Dart in the May 6, 2008 issue

With a dozen regulars or fewer attending services, the 150-year-old Kinderhook United Methodist Church in rural Illinois near the Mississippi River shut its doors this Easter. That Sunday was also the last for St. Michael and All Angels Episcopal Church in Cincinnati, where only 16 households were putting something in the collection plate. “The service was as solemn as the funeral of a child,” a deacon told the city’s newspaper.

Last August, Rogers Heights Christian Church in Tulsa, which peaked at 600 members about 50 years ago, was disbanded. Church leaders decided to donate the building and cash reserves to the Oklahoma Disciples Foundation.

Contrary to these examples, many congregations’ deaths go relatively unnoticed, so the question remains: How many congregations shut their doors each year? And is the mortality rate for churches different from that of other organizations?

A new study finds that only 1 percent of U.S. religious congregations go out of existence each year, “which is among the lowest mortality rates ever observed for any type of organization,” according to an article to be published in the June issue of the *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*.

Researchers looked again at 1,234 congregations surveyed in the 1998 National Congregations Study, directed by Mark Chaves, then at the University of Arizona. In 2005, graduate students at the Arizona campus checked on how many of those congregations were still active—using the Internet and church directories, making telephone calls and, on occasion, driving by the buildings.

Shawna Anderson, a Ph.D. candidate at Arizona, directed the follow-up research and coauthored the study with sociologist Chaves, now a professor at Duke University. The rate of dissolution in secular institutions—from volunteer social-service groups to child-care centers and peace organizations—usually has been higher, they said.

“Religious congregations have a particularly low mortality rate, but this is not necessarily good news,” said the authors.

“We don’t think this means that the church population is particularly healthy relative to other kinds of organizations,” Chaves said in an interview. “We think it means that whereas in other arenas the weakest organizations shut down, the weakest churches have ways of staying alive for a longer time. So a very low mortality rate doesn’t necessarily mean a superhealthy church population.”

Though theological disputes, changing neighborhoods or natural disasters such as hurricanes can precipitate a congregation’s demise, church officials say that closures typically occur after a slow decline in members and resources.

The 1 percent fallout figure matches the current mortality rate in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). Thirty-seven congregations closed during 2007, leaving a net 3,773 congregations by year’s end, said Disciples yearbook editor Howard Bowers.

The Disciples denomination, based in Indianapolis, is more than halfway to its goal of starting 1,000 new churches by 2020. In its attempt to plant more new churches each year than the number that dissolve, the denomination “seems to be doing better the last two years than the two years before,” Bowers said.

Dave Olson, director of church planting for the Evangelical Covenant Church, said his independent research shows that in the 1990s about 3,200 churches closed each year—or 1.1 percent of U.S. Christian congregations. Having assembled a database of 200,000 churches over two decades, Olson puts the number of Christian churches at 305,000 after eliminating instances of dual affiliations and congregations of the “nonorthodox” Mormon, Christian Science and Jehovah’s Witnesses denominations.

In his book *The American Church in Crisis* (Zondervan), published this year, Olson wrote a chapter on church closure rates. “In the 2000s, it has been 3,700 a year,” Olson said in an e-mail interview.

“Up to half of the closed churches are new churches that did not survive,” Olson added. A “surprising fact” is that mainline churches tend to have lower closure rates than evangelical churches do. He sees an inverse correlation: the fewer churches that close, the more the denomination declines; the more churches that close, the more the denomination grows.

Chaves said that observation makes sense: “Basically, there is more churning” in the evangelical groups, “more people coming in, but also more people leaving.”

The new study’s “plus and minus” sides struck a chord with James Wind, president of the Alban Institute, a Virginia-based nonprofit that seeks to strengthen congregations. Impressed with “the tenacity of congregations in this country,” Wind said that despite many churches’ refusal to change or to admit major obstacles, “something very valuable keeps them together, and we can’t just dismiss that without helping them to move forward in the healthiest way.”

Failing churches that accept the inevitable sometimes use their remaining assets the way the Disciples church in Tulsa did—to benefit a related institution.

A small United Methodist congregation in South Carolina, at its closing in 2006, donated $8,000 in scholarship money to Spartanburg Methodist College. In Connecticut, North Canton Community United Methodist Church, struggling with rising interest rates on a mortgage, received from the shuttered Trinity UMC in New Britain a $438,000 windfall from endowments and sale of its property.

And Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary in January received a $1.5 million grant—its largest-ever gift—from the 119-year-old First Lutheran Church of Los Angeles, which shut down two years ago. That portion of the property sale by the synod endowed a chair at the seminary in Reformation theology and history.