

This Month's *Christian Chronicle*: We Are Losing Our Children

This month's *Christian Chronicle* headlines the first in series of articles evaluating the growth (or lack of growth) of the Churches of Christ. <http://www.christianchronicle.org/modules.php?name=News&file=article&sid=611>.

The critical statistic is that the Churches have grown only 2.6% from 1980 to 2006. This is not the *annual* growth—it's the *total* growth. The annual rate is less than 0.01%. In fact, the rate is so low, it's within the margin of statistical error.

Now, at the same time, the U.S. has grown 32.2%, so we are not remotely keeping up with the growth of the nation. Now, some would protest that much of this growth is due to immigration, much of it illegal, and the fairer measure would be to compare our rate of growth to the biological growth of the U.S. population. In particular, the fairest comparison would seem to be to the rate of growth of the non-Hispanic white population, as this would back out much of the immigration and fairly consider the actual birth rate of the typical member of the Churches of Christ. Of course, the Church also has black members, and the black reproductive rate has been higher, until 2002, than for whites (the net birth minus death rates are now about the same). And so, this comparison would understate the problem. However, I have no way of determining the percentage of blacks to whites in the U.S. Churches of Christ, and so I work with the non-Hispanic white population figures only.

The non-Hispanic white US population, from 1990 to 2002 grew 5.2%,¹ which is an annual rate of 0.43%, or 4.35 times the rate at which the Churches of Christ grew. In other words, we've grown at a rate that's about 23% of the biologic rate of growth of non-Hispanic white Americans. If all we did was convert our own children and keep them in the Church, we'd be growing at 4.35 times the current rate. Obviously, this means we aren't even converting our children or, at least, keeping them in the Church.

To figure what percentage of our own children are staying in the Church, we need to compare the birth rate of non-Hispanic white Americans to the growth rate of the United States church. By adding back the death rate of non-Hispanic whites in 1993 (about the mid-point of our sample), we get a 1.33% general birth rate and a retention rate in the Church of 0.91%, meaning that we are keeping—at most—68.5% of our children in the Church.

But these assumes we convert no one at all other than our own children, and of course, this isn't true. If our conversation rate were as low as 0.5% of our membership per year (1 conversion per 200 members), we'd only be keeping 30% of our children.

¹ (198,691,529 non-Hispanic white population in 2002 - 188,725,372 non-Hispanic white population in 1990) / 188,725,372 = 5.28%. Taking into account compounding, this is an annual rate of 0.43%. Divide this by the rate of growth in the Churches of Christ, you get 4.35. See <http://wonder.cdc.gov/controller/datarequest/D1>.

Now, this claim has been disputed by some. In the September 2005 issue of the *Gospel Advocate*, Robert K. Oglesby argues that “We are NOT losing the majority of our young people; in fact, our drop-out rate is much lower than for some groups.”² This is just as wrong as can be. Growing does not mean keeping our children. It simply means that the rate of baptisms slightly exceeds the death and drop out rate. Indeed, our growth is as much attributable to our own people living longer as to conversion.

Let me suggest this exercise. Sit down and make a list of every high school senior your church has had in the last 10 years. Write the names down. Then check around and see how many are active members of the Church today. I can’t think of a better test of the efficacy of our youth ministries.

The obvious problem is our failure to convert our own children. The less obvious but equally important (to God) question is our failure to evangelize the lost. Think about it: our nation grew over 32% in the last 26 years, with a very large piece of this representing immigration. Many of these immigrants were already believers. And yet, we’ve been very slow to establish ministries to the Hispanic population. Legal or illegal, they are souls. And people experiencing major life transitions are often the easiest to reach for Jesus. And what could be a greater transition than moving to a new country, often away from family?

I think it was Rick Atchley who said that because we failed to send missionaries to Mexico, God is sending the Mexicans to us. He may be right. We’ve certainly managed to fumble away the two greatest evangelistic opportunities God has given us: our own children and the massive wave of immigration from the south.

We need to get over our denial regarding our own children and take thoughtful, proactive steps to end the outflow of souls. The starting point is to teach a better, truer theology. Another step is to be more authentic, that is, to be truer to our mission, to actually walk the walk. Finally, we’ve got to stop coddling the saved and do what it takes to save the lost. If you want to know what it will take, ask them.

Remember that list I asked you to make? Call all the kids who’ve left the Church and ask them why—and then, if you can do so without violating God's word, fix the problem. There’s nothing like a little data to make problem solving go better.

And then go start a Hispanic ministry.

² “The Sky is Falling,” p. 17