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## Recent Patterns of Growth and Decline among Heirs of the Restoration movement

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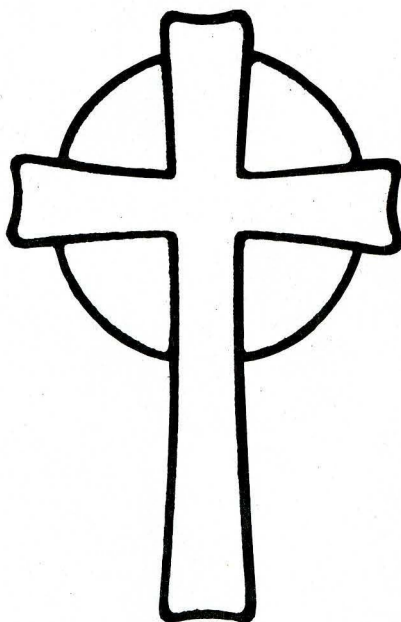
# Restoration Quarterly

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# RECENT PATTERNS OF GROWTH AND DECLINE AMONG HEIRS OF THE RESTORATION MOVEMENT

FLAVIL YEAKLEY, JR.

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Three heirs of the Restoration Movement are listed in most almanacs and yearbooks. One such reference work is *Churches and Church Membership in the United States 1990*.<sup>1</sup> The three Restoration Movement heirs are listed in this work:

Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)

4,036 congregations, 677,223 members, 1,037,757 adherents

Christian Churches and Churches of Christ

5,238 congregations, 966,976 members, 1,213,188 adherents

Churches of Christ

13,097 congregations, 1,280,838 members, 1,681,013 adherents.

The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) no longer identifies with the Restoration plea. They now identify with the Ecumenical Movement and its effort to merge denominational organizations. They are no longer a nondenominational fellowship. Since their "restructure" in the 1960s, they have become a denomination in the formal sense of that term. Theologically, they have little in common with the other heirs of the Restoration Movement.

The two other heirs of the Restoration Movement are very similar to each other. Both Churches of Christ and the Christian Churches and Churches of Christ are categories of independent congregations rather than denominations with central organizations and formal connections among local churches. These two groups differ over the use of instrumental music in congregational worship assemblies, but there is far more diversity within each of these fellowships than there is between them. When the question is "How many people share an identification with the Restoration Movement?" it is important to consider both of these fellowships.

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<sup>1</sup>Martin B. Bradley, Norman M. Green, Jr., Dale E. Jones, Mac Lynn, and Lou McNeil (Atlanta: Glenmary, 1991).

### The Relative Size of the Restoration Movement Heirs

There are at least 245 religious groups that are currently active in this nation.<sup>2</sup> The 15 largest religious groups—those with one million adherents or more—account for 81.6 percent of all the adherents in the nation.<sup>3</sup> All three of the Restoration Movement heirs are on this list of the 15 largest religious groups in America (as shown in Table 1: Churches of Christ in 12th place, Christian Churches and Churches of Christ in 13th place, and the Christian Church [Disciples of Christ] in 15th place). When the ranking is based on the number of members rather than adherents, Churches of Christ move up to 10th place, Christian Churches and Churches of Christ remain in 13th place, and the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) remains in 15th place. Based on the number of congregations, Churches of Christ move up to 4th place; Christian Churches and Churches of Christ remain in 13th place; the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) moves up to 14th place.

Table I  
The 15 Largest Religious Groups in America  
Ranked by Number of Adherents

Catholic Church	53,385,998
Southern Baptist Convention	18,940,682
United Methodist Church	11,091,032
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America	5,226,798
Presbyterian Church (USA)	3,553,335
Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints	3,540,820
Lutheran Church (Missouri Synod)	2,603,725
Episcopal Church	2,445,286
Assemblies of God	2,161,610
United Church of Christ	1,993,459
American Baptist Church	1,873,731
Churches of Christ	1,681,013
Christian Churches and Churches of Christ	1,213,189
African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church	1,142,016
Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)	1,037,757

<sup>2</sup>Bradley, ix-xviii.

<sup>3</sup>Church statisticians use the "adherent" figures to compare religious groups that count membership in different ways. The adherents include all full, confirmed, communicant members and also their children and other regular participants who are not counted as members.

### Relative Growth Rates of the Restoration Movement Heirs

In order to make the comparisons valid, decadal growth rate percentages are compared within church-size categories. If a denomination had 1,000 members in 1980 and grew to 1,500 by 1990, that would be a 50 percent decadal growth rate achieved with the addition of only 500 members. Churches of Christ would have to add more than half a million members, and the Catholic Church would have to add more than 25 million to match that same growth-rate percentage. Church statisticians, therefore, generally compare decadal growth rates in three church-size categories: the religious groups with (1) 1,000,000 or more adherents, (2) 100,000 to 999,999 adherents, and (3) fewer than 100,000 adherents.

Table 2 lists the 15 largest religious groups in America ranked by 1980-1990 decadal growth rates. Christian Churches and Churches of Christ were in 5th place on this list with a decadal growth rate of 7.56 percent. Churches of Christ were in 6th place with a decadal growth rate percentage of 5.20 percent. The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) was in 15th place, with the largest decline among the 15 largest groups (-14.45 percent).

Table 2  
The 15 Largest Religious Groups in America  
Ranked by Decadal Growth Rates, 1980-1990

Assemblies of God	34.04%
Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints	31.89%
Southern Baptist Convention	16.33%
Catholic Church	12.39%
Christian Churches and Churches of Christ	7.56%
Churches of Christ	5.20%
African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church	4.51%
Lutheran Church (Missouri Synod)	-0.73%
American Baptist Church	-2.45%
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America	-2.85%
United Methodist Church	-3.99%
United Church of Christ	-4.89%
Presbyterian Church (USA)	-11.45%
Episcopal Church	-13.39%
Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)	-14.45%

Another way to compare patterns of growth is to consider the increase in the total number of adherents reported by various religious groups. A comparison of growth-rate percentages in large and small church bodies would not be valid. However, small denominations would be justified in claiming that they grew more than larger denominations if, in addition to having a better decadal growth-rate percentage, they also had a larger increase in the total number of adherents. Table 3 lists the 10 fastest-growing religious groups in America ranked by the growth in number of adherents. Christian Churches and Churches of Christ are in 9th place on this list. Churches of Christ are in 10th place. The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) are not on this list because they had a net loss in number of adherents.

Table 3  
The 10 Fastest-Growing Religious Groups in America  
Ranked by Growth in the Number of Adherents

Catholic Church	5,883,846
Southern Baptist Convention	2,658,990
Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints	856,076
Assemblies of God	548,955
Seventh Day Adventists	234,451
Church of God (Cleveland, TN)	220,759
Christian and Missionary Alliance	101,222
Foursquare Gospel Church	89,018
Christian Churches and Churches of Christ	85,263
Churches of Christ	80,836

Some may wonder how it can be that Churches of Christ grew in the 1980s because of the fact that in 1965 Churches of Christ had reported a membership of 2,500,000; yet Mac Lynn's 1980 census study found fewer than 1,300,000 members.<sup>4</sup> But comparing these two figures is like comparing apples and oranges. These are different kinds of statistics. The 1965 figure of 2,500,000 was an estimate of how many people in the nation would say that they are members of the Church of Christ if anyone ever asked them. The 1980 figure of just under 1,300,000 was a report of how many people were actually identified with a local congregation. When a church conducts a religious census of its community, it typically finds that fewer than half of the

<sup>4</sup>*Churches of Christ in the United States* (Nashville: Gospel Advocate, 1991) xviii.

people who claim to be members of the Church of Christ are actually identified with a local congregation.

Another factor to consider is that the 1965 figure of 2,500,000 was based on an exaggerated estimate of the number of local congregations. Some of the lists in 1965 were highly inflated because they reported the same congregations several times if they had used different mailing addresses over the years. The inflated estimate in 1965 was that there were 19,000 Churches of Christ in the United States. That figure was wrong. There never were that many. But people took that inflated estimate of 19,000 congregations, multiplied that by the average number of members per congregation, and then doubled that figure so as to include all those who would say that they are members of the Church of Christ if asked.

Churches of Christ in the United States did not decline in membership between 1965 and 1980.<sup>5</sup> The nationwide surveys that I have conducted every year for the past two decades indicate that in 1965 there was an annual growth rate of 5 percent, but the rate of growth declined by an average of 0.33 percent per year until it reached zero in 1980. Notice, however, that a decline in the rate of growth does not mean a decline in membership. Those surveys indicate a growth of 40 percent between 1965 and 1980. And if a 40 percent growth in 15 years sounds like an exaggeration, remember that the Assemblies of God grew by 34 percent in the 1980s and by 70 percent in the 1970s. Churches of Christ had even larger decadal growth rates in the two decades following World War II.

The church-growth surveys that I have conducted since 1980 indicate that there was a slight decline in total membership in the 1980-1984 period. But the direction changed in 1984; the decline ended in 1985; and there was some modest growth throughout the last half of the decade. According to Mac Lynn's census research, Churches of Christ between 1980 and 1990, grew by 3.2 percent in the number of congregations, 3.5 percent in the number of members, and 5.2 percent in the number of adherents.<sup>6</sup> It is important to note, however, that this includes all kinds of Churches of Christ. The situation is somewhat different for the "mainline" Churches of Christ, i.e., those in fellowship with the majority of other Churches of Christ. One third of the Churches of Christ in the United States have some doctrine or practice that

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<sup>5</sup>Jim Woodroof did not properly understand this when he said, "According to Flavil Yeakley, it should be noted that the actual decline from 3 million occurred in the years before 1980." James S. Woodroof, *The Church in Transition* (Searcy: The Bible House, 1990) 12. There was no decline. There never were 3,000,000 members actually identified with all the local congregations of the Churches of Christ in the United States.

<sup>6</sup>Lynn, xviii.

sets them apart and limits their fellowship with other Churches of Christ. These congregations account for 18 percent of the total membership.

If the figures from the Discipling Movement led by Kip McKean are not counted, the growth rate for all other kinds of Churches of Christ in the 1980s was only 2 percent. But that does not mean that the "mainline" congregations grew by only 2 percent. Most of the limited fellowship groups declined. The "mainline" congregations grew in membership by about 5 percent in the 1980s.

Mac Lynn has just completed his 1994 update for the computer software version of *Churches of Christ in the United States*. The latest figures include 686 more congregations than were reported in 1990. Some of this increase reflects growth and some reflects better reporting. The 1994 membership figure is 1,260,838. That is 23,218 fewer than reported in 1990. That decline reflects the separation of the Discipling Movement into a new fellowship now known as the International Church of Christ that is no longer identified with Churches of Christ. But that decline also reflects the continued decline of the limited fellowship groups—such as the Non-Institutional, Non-Class, One Cup, Mutual Edification, and Premillennial churches.

The most encouraging thing in Mac Lynn's latest figures is that the mainline Churches of Christ now number 9,448 congregations with 1,090,165 members. That is a 5 percent increase in the number of congregations and a 9 percent increase in the number of members since the 1990 census. What this means is that the improvement that began in the late 1980s has continued. And if the 1984-1994 trend continues, Churches of Christ will conclude the 1990s with a decadal growth rate of over 20 percent.