The RCA in the Larger Picture: Facing Structural Realities

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The seismic shudders which ran through mainline Protestantism during the 1970s and 1980s rumbled under the Reformed Church in America (RCA) as well. Dramatic membership declines were accompanied with ideological controversy and institutional finger-pointing. In unprecedented numbers, Reformed Church people seemed to be leaving the denomination, going...well, no one was quite sure. But a myriad of solutions was proposed—from button-down, three-piece-suiters in the pulpit, to a return to Calvinist basics, to a near-callous fatalism that the denomination’s time had come, and gone.

In order to get a better handle on the underlying structural and institutional forces which seemed to be driving the membership declines, we initiated an extensive study of the national context within which the RCA carries out its ministry. What follows is our analysis of these forces. Inevitably, we present one vantage point for understanding the RCA’s quandary. Some of what we have to say is consoling, some is hopeful, and some is rather grim.

Several underlying insights guide our discussion: 1) The patterns of membership gains and declines experienced in the RCA were not unique to the RCA. Indeed, most Protestant denominations experienced much the same pattern, some concurrently with us, some a decade or more later. 2) The changes are longstanding and generally predate any of the ideological debates of "left" and "right" which are both audible and high voltage. In fact, this noisy polemic seems to have had little to do with the changes. 3) The RCA has been blessed by remarkable leaders over the long haul; church executives and seminary professors, pastors and lay leaders have been—and continue to be—committed, active, creative, and generous Christians. To look for an explanation of the RCA’s ill fortunes in the ranks of its leadership is to be both morally inappropriate and objectively unfair. Indeed, had the leadership been less dedicated and able, the RCA’s condition might be considerably worse. These insights lead to a final one: we must look to the social structural context within which the RCA and other denominations function in order to learn what happened to the membership trends.
Membership Trends

The history of the RCA’s membership has not always been so dour. As Figure 1 illustrates, for much of the last century, the RCA’s membership was on a steady, upward trajectory. From the mid-1800s until the mid-1960s, membership grew from just under 30,000 to just over 230,000. Similarly, the Sunday School involvement of RCA members gathered so much steam during the late nineteenth century that in the latter decades the people in Christian education classes outnumbered the communicant members of the denomination.

But the new century brought changes. First there was a leveling off of Sunday School involvement. Beginning in the 1920s, a decline in adult Christian education reduced the Sunday School participation relative to the denomination’s membership. One of the myths among church "number-crunchers" has been the notion (fostered by short-term studies of the 1960s) that a decline in Sunday School enrollment is roughly a five-year harbinger of denominational membership declines. However, as can be seen in these data, the RCA’s Sunday School enrollment drop predated the membership decline by two generations. Since the 1940s it has paralleled the membership pattern.

The 1950s are often heralded as the modern heyday of religious growth. Indeed, RCA membership (which had leveled off briefly during the Depression and World War II) blossomed from 176,000 to 233,000 between 1945 and 1965. Seen in the long term, however, this growth merely resumed the general upward thrust of the previous century. Thus, in spite of its building programs and evangelical zeal during the 1950s, the RCA merely kept pace with its earlier growth trends.

However, all that changed in the mid-1960s. What was first murmured about at the RCA’s headquarters during the late 1960s became a cause of denominational concern in the mid-1970s. We simply were not growing anymore. Each year our membership was shrinking. What was going on? Institutional restructuring (a catchword of the late 1960s and early 1970s) and left-wing rhetoric (especially in controversial pronouncements from the General Synod and from local judicatories) were the easy and initial targets. It was not until late in the decade that mainline Protestants began to realize that they were not alone in the numerical decline, so denomination-specific explanations were insufficient explanations.

Subsequent research has pointed to several critical factors in these downward trends. Of greatest importance has been the dramatic drop in the birthrate throughout the middle and upper-middle class strata of the United States. From a postwar high of nearly four children per adult female, the nation’s birthrate declined to about one-half that figure by 1990. This drop and its impact on Protestant church membership is reflected in Figure 2 which combines data on membership change for the fourteen largest denominations in the United States, including The United Methodist Church, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), the
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, and the Southern Baptist Convention. These changes closely parallel the birthrate pattern for this period. That pattern follows a similar path when compared with the RCA membership data. This leads to a critical conclusion: During the last century, RCA (and other Protestant) membership trends were principally dependent upon "natural growth"—the retention of the youth born into and raised in the denomination.\(^7\)

During the late 1950s and early 1960s the United States birthrate dropped dramatically (due in part to the broad dissemination of birth control technology and the changing roles of women), and a decline in church membership soon followed.\(^8\)

The so-called "baby boom" generation was another component in this decline. Massive changes in life-style (delayed marriages, delayed childbirth, high divorce rates) within this generation were not always welcomed in the church. Furthermore, the privatizing of religion (articulated as a personal relationship between Jesus and the believer on the right, and as an individualistic "Sheilism"\(^9\) dissociated from institutional formulation on the left) has dealt the RCA—and much of American religion of all stripes (from conservative to liberal to "new age" to non-Western)—a severe blow. Baby boomers ask, If we can generate a personal theology, why should we have to contend with the disruptive and compromising life of communal religion?\(^10\)

By staying away from the church, baby boomers foreclosed on Protestantism's principal source of membership growth (or maintenance), natural growth from within. It is important to note, however, that many baby boomers, despite their institutional absence, consider themselves committed Christians. Furthermore, they have very positive memories of the church, and under the proper circumstances (principally defined as having to do with religious education for their children or with personal struggles over life's negative experiences) they would return to the fold. That return, however, would be on their own terms and would maintain their concern for individual autonomy in religious matters.

While the numerical decline of the RCA has been most evident over the last two decades, in the larger picture, the RCA has been losing "market share" for much of the twentieth century. Figure 3\(^11\) shows clearly that since 1916, the RCA's proportion of American Protestantism has been steadily declining. This means that, relative to other Protestant groups, a smaller and smaller proportion has been part of the RCA. This drop began during a period of numerical growth in the denomination and continued without acceleration when the denomination lost members. As suggested earlier, the RCA's membership trends reflect larger forces in American society than the vagaries of institutional Weltanschauung. It is best to acknowledge this so that the task of church-building can be shorn of its internecine squabbling.
One of the earliest denominations in the New World, the RCA began in the seventeenth century along the eastern seaboard, principally in New York and New Jersey. In company with the American frontier, the RCA marched west during the next two centuries, founding churches in western New York and Pennsylvania, and then amid the great forests and plains of Ohio and Indiana. When in the 1840s and 1850s Dutch immigrants arrived in Michigan and Iowa, the "demographic center" of the denomination (that geographic point at which equal members lived in each direction) began to shift from the East Coast.

As Figure 4 presents, in 1906 three-quarters of the RCA’s membership attended churches in the eastern synods, with another quarter in the Midwest (including the current regional synods of the Great Lakes and Mid-America). However, since that time, the membership balance has shifted dramatically; by 1940 "only" 61 percent were in the East, and 38 percent were in the Midwest. Throughout this period, the western churches numbered only a handful, and there were few others outside of these three regions. By 1990 the dominant region of the RCA had become the Midwest, with over half of the denomination’s members. Fewer than a third currently reside in the East, and for the first time the West—with eleven percent of the denomination—is a significant minority. During the late eighteenth century, the demographic center of the RCA was just west of New York City. It is our estimate based on fifteen years of RCA surveys that the demographic center now rest somewhere in southern Michigan.

These regional shifts among the membership of the RCA reflect larger migration patterns of the United States. Since the turn of the century, the nation’s population has moved inexorably west- and southward. According to the United States Census Bureau, the demographic center of the population has moved from near Baltimore, Maryland in 1970 to southwest of St. Louis, Missouri in 1990. The eastern population declined from 28 percent in 1910 to 20 percent in 1990; similarly, the Midwest population dropped from 33 percent in 1910 to 24 percent in 1990. In these two regions, the RCA has always been disproportionately high. That is, larger proportions of the denomination have lived in these areas than would be expected given the region’s proportion of the total United States population. Meanwhile, the southern section of our country has maintained about a third of the nation’s population, while the West has grown from seven percent in 1910 to over 20 percent in 1990.

The 1916 Census of the United States listed the nation’s most urbanized denominations. At the top of the list were Jews (with over 90 percent urban), followed by Episcopalians (55 percent urban), and the RCA (44 percent urban). Almost from its inception in New Amsterdam, the RCA has had a significant proportion of its membership living in rural environs as well as urban centers. In 1916, more than half the denomination’s members lived in rural
areas. This proportion had plummeted to less than 25 percent by 1991, a trend that closely reflects the long-term decline of the rural population across America (see Figure 5).

These larger migration trends in the United States have been accompanied by tremendous contextual shifts in the RCA. With the rest of the country, we have picked up our bags and moved both west and somewhat south. In addition, we have left our rural roots for suburban and mid-size cities. These "complexion changes" have inevitably changed the way that we "do church" in the RCA.

**Congregational Size**

According to sociologists Roger Finke and Rodney Stark,¹⁷ a major change in organizational thinking reached Protestant circles in the late 1800s. With the ascendance of industrial and business institutions, American corporate culture began to stress efficiency and organizational rationality in all operations. Big business brought on formalization, specialization, and rationalization of operations and thinking.

The church was not immune to these trends. Under the auspices of "good stewardship," church functionaries (led in large measure by distinguished lay leaders in the business and industrial communities) began a process of consolidation of small (primarily rural) congregations throughout mainline Protestant communities. These well-meaning efforts were predicated on the notion that church professionals (pastors) were being poorly utilized (inefficiently employed) in churches because they were spread so thinly across multiple, small congregations (in yoked pastorates, for instance). These leaders believed that combined congregations would result in more efficient service and increased benevolent giving.

Finke and Stark argue that this rationalizing and consolidating movement led directly to the demise of a sense of religious community among members of mainline congregations. The only religious vitality (and potential church growth) today, they contend, takes place among congregations which are intimate and personal—that is, small. Impersonal congregations lose their religious fervor and inevitably decline into a bland lifelessness.

While there may be debate about their overall argument, there is no doubt that consolidation and rationalization have marked American Protestant congregational life for the last century. In the RCA this has resulted, among other things, in the growth of the average congregation for much of the last century (see Figure 6), peaking in the 1960s at over 250 members. In recent years there has been a downturn in that number, perhaps reflecting the resilience of congregations in the face of membership decline (that is, congregations are harder to lose than are members). Behind this general trend is a record of amazing stability.
Figure 7 presents the percent of RCA congregations in various size categories—ranging from under 100 to greater than 500—in the decades since 1920. It is immediately apparent that the RCA has always been a denomination dominated by smaller congregations. Throughout this period, more than two-thirds of the congregations have had fewer than 200 members. At the other extreme, the percentage of RCA congregations with 400 or more never exceeded about 15 percent. Meanwhile there have been slight variations among the categories: the number of congregations under 100 dipped slightly during the 1950s and 1960s, turning upward in subsequent years; on the other hand, the number of congregations between 200 and 300 rose slightly during that period, and then dropped again.

While the RCA has been a denomination of small congregations, the membership of the RCA has been largely enrolled in mid-size to larger congregations. As Figure 8 shows, between 1920 and 1980 more than 40 percent of the RCA members were in congregations of over 400. However, in the years since the highs of 1960, the percent in large congregations has begun to fall, reaching a low of about 35 percent in 1990. At the very extreme end of this scale, membership in churches of over 1,000 has grown slightly (from about six to a high of ten percent) by 1990. On the other end of the scale, while more than 30 percent of the RCA’s congregations have under 100 members, fewer than 10 percent of the membership attend these small churches.

As Figure 9 illustrates, relative to the rest of the Christian denominations in the United States (including Roman Catholics, for whom large parishes are the norm), the RCA continues to have a disproportion of smaller churches. During a period when the supposed advantages and prospects of "mega-churches" are being widely touted, the RCA has been able to maintain smaller congregations as its norm.

The RCA and Gender

The issue of women in ecclesiastical office has been vigorously debated in the RCA. While the polity question has been largely resolved, the "no-winners" solution has left the ideological divisions very much in place. In our 1991 analysis of RCA laity, we found that there is little debate about including women as voting members of congregations or serving as missionaries and Sunday school teachers. However, there is significant variation in attitudes about women holding the offices of the church: three-quarters feel that women may hold the office of deacon (with regional differences ranging from 62 to 98 percent); seven out of ten feel women may serve as elders (ranging from 52 to 97 percent); and six out of ten agree that women may be ordained as clergy (ranging from 45 to 91 percent).

One of the structural issues underlying—and undoubtedly affecting—this debate has been the periodic shift in gender composition of the RCA. As Figure
10 shows, during the early decades of this century, the proportion of males grew from decade to decade, reaching a peak of about 44 percent during the Great Depression. The United States Census Bureau discontinued the count of religious affiliation at that point. When we resumed our studies in 1976, the level was still (again?) at 44 percent. Since that point, however, the gender composition of the RCA has shifted dramatically; in our 1991 survey we found that roughly 33 percent of the denomination was male. When these proportions are projected to the denomination's membership, it appears that "the number of women in the church has grown from about 116,000 to 137,000" between 1976 and 1991. On the other hand, "since 1976, the number of males in the RCA has dropped from about 100,000 to 65,000."19

Several explanations for this drop in male participation present themselves: 1) there continues to be an aging of the membership, and since females tend to outlive males, the gender shift may reflect this factor; 2) males in their 40s and above, prime candidates for congregational leadership positions, may have left the church in protest of the incursion of women into "their" roles; and 3) young males may not be as interested in religion as they once were.

Each of these suggestions is related to age, a dimension which Figure 11 examines. We observe very little difference across the age groups. Indeed, until we selected out members over eighty, we found virtually no difference: there are twice as many RCA women as RCA men at each stage of the age pyramid. Aging is not a factor in the gender imbalance in the RCA. Nor did wide-spread dissatisfaction with women's involvement drive away males of office-holding age. Finally, youngsters are no more likely to be female than are other age groups.

In fact, the only age group out of step with others is the 25-40 year old bracket. We can only offer the pure conjecture that this modest increase in the female to male ratio reflects the fact that women/mothers are more likely to return to the church when their children are of Sunday school age. The overriding conclusion from Figure 11 is that something external to age—something about the way that Christianity (or religion in general) is seen—is more attractive to women than to men.

**Giving Patterns in the RCA**

One final structural pattern—common to other Protestant denominations as well—has had a major impact on the life of the RCA.20 During the period following World War II, the members of the RCA began to spend greater proportions of their donations on their local congregations rather than on external projects (such as denominational or synodical activities). This shifting pattern has taken place in the midst of (despite?) a period of unprecedented growth in giving.21
When contributions to RCA churches are adjusted for inflation (using 1990 standard dollars) and for the size of the denomination's membership, a remarkable pattern emerges. As Figure 12 presents, for almost 100 years, from the 1850s through the early 1940s, contributions to the RCA stayed at roughly $195, plus or minus $30. However, beginning in the late 1940s, on the heels of the Depression and World War II and at the threshold of the massive church building efforts of the 1950s, real dollar contributions began to turn upward. Together with much of the middle and upper-middle class in the nation, the members of the RCA experienced a spectacular growth in disposable income. This was reflected in increased giving to the church.22

Where did these funds go? As Figures 13 reveals, they went to cover local congregational expenses. Throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, roughly three out of every four per capita, real dollars were spent on congregational needs. Thus, beginning with the end of World War II—at the very point that the per capita, real dollar contributions began to accelerate in the RCA—funds were increasingly absorbed by local congregations.

Meanwhile, there was little change in the per capita, real dollar allocations being made to extra-congregational causes (see Figure 13). While there was a slight increase during the early postwar years, the proportion has remained remarkably steady since 1970.

It is important to note, especially in light of subsequent ideological debates that have sometimes faulted the denomination's elected and professional leadership for a) failing to put enough emphasis on missions, or b) putting too much emphasis on "social/political causes," that the diverting of funds toward congregational needs occurred long before the turbulent 1960s and 1970s. Indeed, as Figure 14 shows, the gap between congregational expenditures and extra-congregational expenditures continues to widen in a steady pattern.

This raises the question, "Why?" In an earlier article, we discovered this change was almost entirely due to two factors: the postwar professionalization of the church and the decline of traditional volunteerism.23

Since the 1940s, there has been an unparalleled effort to "raise the standard" of services available in our churches. Along with other branches of American religion, the RCA engaged in heightened competition for new members during the suburbanization of postwar America. Congregations of every size broadened the scope of their programs and upgraded their facilities to better position themselves for the challenge. They opened their doors to a myriad of quasi-religious organizations, from Alcoholics Anonymous to Christian day care centers. In addition, they turned increasingly to paid professionals to run their programs.

While RCA pastors have long been subject to rigorous academic standards, the introduction of new social-scientific paradigms—in particular those related to pastoral counseling and to church growth—complicated theological education.
Moreover, a plethora of "specialists" has been developed to answer congregational demands for "youth educators," "small group leaders," "preachers," and "new-church planters." Recognizing the demands on their pastors, church members have begun to pay them salaries appropriate to their hours of effort and years of training. Insurance premiums, pension payments, continuing education funds, and other benefits have also been added to congregational budgets.

The other major factor which explains increased congregational expenditures is the loss of volunteer hours. Like most denominations, the RCA has traditionally relied heavily on women to donate their time and talents in such areas as education, music, outreach, and special ministries. Because of the increasing number of women in the labor force, however, many churches today tend to rely more on paid, non-ordained staff. Parishioners' rising expectations that all church staff should have appropriate professional qualifications have intensified this trend.

In sum, the sizable increase in congregational expenditures is "explainable"; it does not reflect a concerted effort to gore denominational programs; it does not reflect a conscious effort to protest ideological changes at the denominational level. Rather, it is the natural consequence of a deliberate effort by congregations throughout the denomination to pay for what they perceive as "important" ministries in their own setting.

What had been a long-term norm (25 to 30 percent of a congregation's offerings would go to "external programs") has collapsed. External programs are now relegated to leftovers after congregational expenses have been met. This shift has occurred at a time when the cost of doing mission—especially in the inflation-prone Middle East, Japan, and South America—has dug deeply into the budget portion allocated for denominational benevolences. The result has been a major shrinking of RCA involvement in world and domestic missions, historic hallmarks of RCA identity. For the first time since 1932, the RCA has fewer than 100 missionaries throughout the world.24

Discussion

Where does all this lead? Although some of the social-structural trends discussed arise out of the life of the RCA and have direct policy implications for the church, most do not. Any discussion of the RCA's future and how it can address current problems will be better informed by knowing which forces are within our control and which are beyond it.

Perhaps the trend which concerns the church most is the decline in membership since the late 1960s. Our own work, and that of many others, indicates that this trend, universal within mainline Protestantism, has also begun to appear in more conservative circles. Most historic denominations have been heavily dependent upon natural growth, and all are clearly affected by the
downturn in the birth rate during the same period. Low fertility rates are not amenable to denominational manipulation. Yet, uncovering this pattern behind the decline in membership suggests that if it is to be reversed the RCA needs to be more intentional about outreach to groups that have been poorly represented in the past.

For instance, regional demographic shifts toward the South and West speak to denominational efforts at church growth. The RCA continues to be largely concentrated in areas that comprise a shrinking percentage of the nation's population. These trends suggest initiation of more church starts in the growth areas of the South and West, areas that have had little experience with, or knowledge of the RCA. The opportunity for growth in these regions is matched by the challenge to articulate a denominational identity to people unfamiliar with our historic creeds or collective memories.\(^{25}\)

The RCA has always been a denomination of predominately small congregations. Today we have nearly the same proportion of small congregations that existed at the turn of the century, and it is doubtful that this figure will change substantially in the near future. Small congregations have generally been associated with heavy financial burdens—often one-half or more of a small congregation's annual budget is devoted to compensating its pastor. While substantial fixed costs are certainly a reality for many small congregations, the intimacy of interaction and friendships found in small groups is precisely why many people are drawn to and stay in these churches. The denomination's role in helping small congregations find creative solutions to their financial problems will probably need to increase in the years ahead.

On the other end of the spectrum, the RCA has a long history of mid-to-large size congregations (300-700 members). These churches have been able to retain a strong sense of community while becoming increasingly professional and formalized. It is important that the denomination work to sustain the health of these congregations as well.

While it is doubtful whether (in this century) the RCA has ever had an equal number of men and women, recent declines in male membership should be of vital concern. It is clear from our research that the disproportionate number of women over men is true of every age group. This raises many serious questions about the religious socialization of boys and girls and the expectations that the church has of fathers. There is an urgent need for discussion and further research in these areas if the denomination is to address this critical problem.

Finally, the trend for congregations to retain greater proportions of their financial resources for their own purposes represents a very real increase in the cost of "doing church." Increases in compensation for ordained and non-ordained staff have been particularly dramatic. Perhaps the time has come for the denomination to help congregations develop volunteer programs. Although many working-age women have less time to volunteer to the church, the
retirement age population of the church will continue to grow for the next few decades. This group has experience, commitment, and time to offer the church. Exciting and innovative use of this group could help offset recent losses of volunteer hours and could stem the need for more paid staff.

At the same time, denominational programs deserve renewed support from congregations. Pastors and consistories have to be reminded of their obligations to the larger church. They must examine their congregational budgets to discover whether internal services are being supported to the neglect of wider benevolence programs, mission outreach, and church extension efforts.

Conclusion

This paper presents a few of the trends forming the broader social structures within which the RCA functions. Some are ubiquitous, affecting all denominations regardless of theological or doctrinal position. Others are more confined to the RCA and therefore more amenable to denominational policy and programming. By reviewing some of their causes and consequences, we hope to promote discussion about what the RCA can (and cannot) do to face the many challenges and opportunities of its future.
FIGURE 2
ANNUAL CHANGE IN 14 DENOMINATIONS' MEMBERSHIP AND US BIRTH RATE: 1950 - 1992
FIGURE 3
RCA PERCENTAGE OF PROTESTANT POPULATION

( PERCENT )

FIGURE 4
REGIONAL BREAKDOWN OF RCA MEMBERSHIP

PERCENT

WEST
MID-WEST
EAST
Figure 5

Rural Population of U.S. and RCA
FIGURE 7
PERCENT OF RCA CONGREGATIONS BY SIZE

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FIGURE 8
RCA MEMBERSHIP BY CONGREGATION SIZE
(PERCENTAGE OF TOTAL RCA MEMBERSHIP)

(_PERCENT)


LT100 100-199 200-299 300-399 400-499 GT500
PERCENTAGE OF CONGREGATIONS IN EACH SIZE CATEGORY - 1990

CONGREGATIONS BY SIZE

FIGURE 9
FIGURE 10
GENDER COMPOSITION OF RCA MEMBERSHIP

(PERCENT)
FIGURE 11
GENDER COMPOSITION OF RCA MEMBERSHIP BY AGE GROUP
1991

(PERCENT)

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FIGURE 12
TOTAL RCA GIVING PER CAPITA

1990 Constant Dollars
FIGURE 13
RCA CONGREGATIONAL AND DENOMINATIONAL GIVING PER CAPITA

1990 Constant Dollars

- CONGREGATIONAL + DENOMINATIONAL

FIGURE 14
GAP BETWEEN CONGREGATIONAL AND DENOMINATIONAL GIVING PER CAPITA: 1856 - 1990

1990 Constant Dollars

[Graph showing the gap between congregational and denominational giving per capita from 1856 to 1990.]
ENDNOTES

1. Various components of this study have been funded by the Lilly Endowment, Inc., the Reformed Church in America, and Hope College. Linda Warner, Troy Suess, and Kari Harmsen have assisted in data gathering and analysis. The authors acknowledge their debt to these organizations and persons.

2. Figures 1 through 14 can be found in the Appendix.

3. Dean M. Kelley, in his landmark study Why Conservative Churches Are Growing (New York: Harper and Row, 1972) "took these data public" and opened the rhetorical debate about conservative versus liberal denominations.


5. One of the most important contributions to this debate is Dean Hoge and David Roozen (eds.), Understanding Church Growth and Decline: 1950-1978 (New York: The Pilgrim Press, 1978). A follow-up to this study has just been completed and finds that many of the patterns of decline experienced in the mainline have been mirrored among more conservative churches. See David Roozen and C. Kirk Hadaway (eds.), Church and Denominational Growth: What Does (and Does Not) Cause Growth and Decline (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993).

6. This figure is taken from a recent study of Marginal Members by C. Kirk Hadaway and Penny Marler, in an unpublished reproduction presented at a conference on Marginal Members in Orlando, Florida, October 1993. Publication is forthcoming.

7. Some may argue that the RCA, as an ethnic denomination, has been able to grow due to the in-migration of Dutch citizens. An analysis of immigration patterns, however, shows that there was virtually no impact (since 1850, following in the arrival of several thousand Dutch immigrants into western Michigan and central Iowa) on RCA membership due directly to Dutch immigration. By contrast, the Christian Reformed Church has been much more aggressive in drawing recent arrivees into their ranks. An indication
of this success is the fact that in 1916, the height of Dutch immigration into the U.S., 50 percent of the CRC was male—a graphic reflection of the male-dominated immigration patterns among the Dutch of that period.

8. Although this pattern was first noted among "liberal" Protestant denominations, recent evidence suggests that it is being repeated among more "conservative" churches as their memberships become more affluent and begin to practice birth control.


11. Data for Figure 3 come from the respective U.S. Bureau of the Census’ Statistical Abstracts of the United States (Washington, D.C.) and the respective denominational yearbooks of the RCA.

12. The RCA dates its origins to 1628 with the establishment of a congregation in New Amsterdam (later Manhattan, New York) under the leadership of Peter Stuyvesant and other functionaries of the Dutch East Indies Company. See Arie Brouwer, Reformed Church Roots (New York: Reformed Church Press, 1977) for further details.

13. The few Canadian congregations in the RCA were deleted for these analyses because they represented, in the earliest period, fewer than 1 percent of the denomination and in recent years just over that figure.


15. In 1860, 1870, 1880, 1890, 1906, 1916, 1926, and 1936, the U.S. Census Bureau included religious affiliation items in its counting. These data have been used to extend our understanding of RCA patterns back into the last century and are reflected in Figures 5 and 10.


20. Roger J. Nemeth and Donald A. Luidens, "Congregational Vs. Denominational Giving: An Analysis of Giving Patterns in the Presbyterian Church in the United States and the Reformed Church in America," presented to the annual meeting of the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion, in Raleigh, N.C., October 1993; forthcoming in *The Review of Religious Research* (1994). The results of this study are summarized in the following text; for a fuller rendering of the argument, please consult this article.

21. Data for this analysis are taken from the "Orange Book," *The Minutes of the General Synod of the RCA, 1850 through 1991*.

22. These data do not say that members gave greater proportions of their income to the church; indeed, the evidence of our surveys (and those of many other researchers) suggests that higher income members give smaller percentages of their income than do poorer persons. Rather, the data suggest that, even at a lower percentage giving level, wealthier RCA members contributed more to the church during the years since World War II.


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