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HISTORICAL PERSEPCTIVE

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The Rain of God: RCA Growth and Decline in Historical Perspective

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In a lecture at Hope College in April 2004, Harvard professor Diana Eck[1] described the growing religious pluralism in America. She listed a number of new mosques and temples being built, and then exclaimed, "Everything's growing!" But in most mainline[2] Protestant churches the

[1] Diana L. Eck has written a number of books, two of which are *Encountering God: A Spiritual Journey from Bozeman to Banaras* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2003) and *A New Religious America: How a "Christian Country" Has Now Become the World's Most Religiously Diverse Nation* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2001).

[2] The term *mainline* refers to Protestant denominations such as the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, United Church of Christ, Presbyterian Church USA, United Methodist Church, Christian Church/Disciples of Christ, and Protestant Episcopal Church. Mainline sometimes means large denominations, but it is also used to describe denominations that have historically had a great deal of influence in American culture. Some scholars have noted that *sideline* may be a more accurate term, since many of the denominations that were large and influential in the 1950s and '60s have relatively little cultural impact in the twenty-first century. Mainline has also been used to describe churches that are relatively assimilated to cultural values. In the debate over war with Iraq, however, mainline Protestant churches were more likely to question American participation, while evangelical churches were more likely to support it. The Reformed Church in America is much smaller than the mainline churches listed above, but has been considered part of the mainline because it has cooperated with other denominations in various ecumenical efforts. Some RCA members resist

opposite is true. Almost everything is declining. The Reformed Church in America peaked at 225,000 communicant members in 1967 and now has about 175,000 members.[3] The Presbyterian Church lost 300,000 members in the last ten years.[4] There are now more Muslims in America than Episcopalians or Presbyterians.

The mainline decline has been the source of much anxiety, handwringing, and debate. Some church growth experts blame the churches for their decline. If churches preached the gospel and did not get distracted with social issues, they would grow. If denominations had not become so hopelessly bureaucratic and top-heavy, they would grow. If only churches were interesting and relevant, they would grow. Some sociologists have tried to reassure the mainline churches that it isn't really their fault. Nobody goes to church any more. Baby boomers had fewer children. Secularization means that religion is not very important to people. Social and cultural factors led to decline.

However, it is also clear that thousands of cars pour into churches like Willow Creek and Mars Hill and Saddleback every weekend. It's hard to take much comfort in the secularization thesis or the lower birth rate when it's obvious **some** churches are growing—ones that are rarely labeled Presbyterian or Methodist or RCA. So most mainline churches are trying to discern how they can grow, and imitation often seems like the best solution. The megachurches are only too happy to help and have provided dozens of books, seminars, and strategies that promise to

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that label. Most mainline denominations, including the RCA, have experienced varying degrees of internal tension between mainline and evangelical mentalities. See Robert Wuthnow, *The Restructuring of American Religion* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988).

[3] Statistics about the RCA in 1967 were obtained from a chart compiled by Donald A. Luidens. Current statistical information was taken from the RCA website <www.rca.org/synod/minutes/2003/gsc.php#stats>.

[4] Statistical information about the Presbyterian Church is from their <website www.pcusa.org/cps/statistics.htm>.

help a church grow.[5] Denominations are eager to start growing because there is no future in constant decline. A few years ago the General Synod of the RCA voted to become the fastest growing denomination in the U.S. in the next ten years. That has since been more realistically fleshed out into a ten-year goal to start new congregations and revitalize existing ones.[6]

In many denominations there is resistance to this emphasis on growth from those who say it makes the denomination obsessed with numbers and survival and who fear that churches will lose their history, theology, liturgy, and order. The church is called to be faithful, not successful, these critics say.

Clearly, the issue of growth gets at the heart of who we are as congregations and as denominations. To put it a bit crudely, growth is a sign that people like us. Growth indicates that we are competing effectively with other denominations or congregations and tells us that we have something to offer that people want. Many people think of growth as a sign of God's approval. God rewards faithful and committed congregations and denominations with more people. Growth means we are true to the gospel.

If mainline Protestants equate growth with success, it is no surprise they are having a crisis of confidence. In the 1950s mainline Protestant denominations were extremely successful. Suburban churches grew quickly as the World War II generation settled down to raise their large families. Religion was the fashionable thing to do for young families: it was a way to meet people, make business contacts, and find friends.

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[5] Two such books, written by Rick Warren, are: *The Purpose Driven Life: What on Earth Am I Here for?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002) and *The Purpose Driven Church: Growth without Compromising Your Message and Mission* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995).

[6] *The Acts and Proceedings of the 197th Regular Session of the General Synod, Reformed Church in America 2003,* 61-66 (hereafter cited as *Minutes of General Synod*).

By the late 1960s, that view of religion had radically changed. As the Baby Boomer generation came of age, they questioned many aspects of life that their parents assumed were rock solid. The Boomers decided that parents were squares. Police officers were pigs. Government officials were corrupt. The Vietnam era was evil. And churches were boring, irrelevant, and out of touch with the Now Generation.[7]

Not every Baby Boomer drew the same conclusions. However, the fact that even students at Central College in Pella, Iowa, protested against the war suggests that the lack of trust in authority figures ran deep during these years.[8] Many of the nation's Boomers left the church and did not come back. Because they were such a large percentage of the population, their dropping out made a difference. They didn't bring their children or their money. Those who stayed in the church had about half as many babies as their parents did. Women were more likely to go to work and less likely to volunteer at church. Busy families easily dropped out. Church membership figures, which had consistently increased for two centuries, now began to decline. When denominations realized that the decline was not merely temporary, they began to wonder what they were doing wrong. Had they failed? Were they no longer faithful? Interesting? True to the gospel? Relevant? Meaningful?

A simplified version of the explanation most sociologists give for mainline decline might be this: The birth rate changed, the view of religion changed, and some people quit going to church. These external factors had a

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[7] For more about the Baby Boomer generation, see Wade Clarke Roof, *A Generation of Seekers: The Spiritual Journeys of the Baby Boom Generation* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1993) and Dean R. Hoge, Benton Johnson, and Donald A. Luidens, *Vanishing Boundaries: The Religion of Mainline Protestant Baby Boomers* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1994).

[8] Kenneth Weller, conversation with author, 12 October 2003. Dr. Weller was president of Central College 1970-1990.

great deal to do with broad cultural patterns and social demographics.[9]

Other scholars diagnosed the problem quite differently. They observed that millions of people attended church each week, but many of them chose to attend more conservative churches, which were growing. Perhaps mainline churches were more likely to decline because something was wrong with them. Dean Kelley tried to explain one such internal factor in his 1972 book *Why Conservative Churches Are Growing.*[10] Kelley believed that strict or conservative churches that demanded a lot of their members in terms of belief and commitment had more loyal members. They allowed no flexibility or fuzziness, but simply told their members what to believe and how to act. These members remained far more committed to their churches, and their denominations grew.

The book engendered a great deal of debate. Kelley had used the RCA as an example of a mainline church that had declined, and the Christian Reformed Church as an example of a strict church that grew. He failed to mention that the CRC had grown primarily because it attracted a large number of Dutch immigrants who came to the U.S. and Canada in the 1950s.

Some church growth strategists said churches did not grow because they took unpopular stands on the Vietnam War or the Civil Rights movement. Their positions alienated members who left and joined more conservative churches. Sociological research did not support this argument, but people remained convinced that it explained mainline decline.

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[9] For a variety of sociological perspectives on church growth and decline, see Dean R. Hoge and David A. Roozen, eds., *Understanding Church Growth and Decline: 1950-1978* (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1979) and David A. Roozen and C. Kirk Hadaway, eds., *Church and Denominational Growth* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993).

[10] Dean Kelley, *Why Conservative Churches Are Growing: A Study in Sociology of Religion* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972).

Other internal reasons given for decline included liberal theology, growth of bureaucracy, and denominational staff that did not have the best interests of the church at heart. It was easy to make accusations, and difficult to prove any of these arguments.[11]

The important point for this essay is that whatever the reasons for it, decline caused high anxiety among mainline Protestants and for good reason. As the numbers dropped, it became more and more difficult to pay the denominational bills for staff and programs. Most mainline denominations have experienced several major budget cuts resulting in people losing jobs and programs being severely cut. Mainline decline caused deep pain and anguish for a number of denominational staff people, so it is no surprise they felt anxious about church growth. Denominational survival was, and is, at stake.

So why is a historian writing about church growth? Some people argue that the past is part of the problem. We have been stuck in our traditions, our ethnic enclaves, and our dull hymnbooks. We need to break free of all that and start fresh. The way we operated in the past is at best irrelevant and at worst a dead weight. As a historian, however, I continue to believe that a denomination is shaped, for good and ill, by its theology, its past, its social context, and its arguments. The world of 2004 is radically different from the world of 1854, or even 1954, and yet we struggle with similar theological issues. The wise and unwise decisions made in the past continue to affect us.

I will now discuss two periods in RCA history: first, the 1830s to 1850s, and second, the 1950s and beyond.[12]

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[11] For examples of these perspectives see books by Win Arn, C. Peter Wagner, and Donald McGavran.

[12] Two sources have shaped my thinking on this topic. The *Church Herald*, the RCA denominational magazine, was published weekly in the 1950s and is a rich source of information about church life. For the nineteenth century I used the State of Religion Reports that were published annually in the *Minutes of General Synod*. During the

During these two periods the RCA was struggling with issues of growth. History does not provide any miraculous solutions to contemporary issues, but I hope that these reflections will raise some questions about what it means to be a denomination.

During the 1820s and '30s the fires of revival were burning over many of the east coast states. Charles Finney was the most famous of the revivalists. He had been a lawyer but gave up the law when he felt called to plead the case for God. He had a dramatic and forceful style of presenting the gospel, and he encouraged people to make a decision for God. Finney criticized the Calvinist belief that God only saved some people, those who had been elected or chosen before the beginning of time. Finney said that was wrong. People did not need to wonder and worry whether God had chosen them. They simply had to choose for God.[13]

Finney advocated several New Measures, including a lengthy series of nightly revival meetings, praying for sinners by name, and allowing women to pray in public. He also used the Anxious Bench, a seat at the front of the congregation where people went to receive special prayer when they were concerned about their souls.

Finney's revivals helped to move the theological tone of American religion further away from Calvinism and toward a Methodist or Arminian theology that emphasized human freedom of the will. Revivals also helped produce a network of benevolent societies that gave Christians an outlet for their considerable spiritual energies. These societies encouraged missionary work, care for the poor,

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nineteenth century these reports were drafted by committees based on the State of Religion Reports they received from regional synods, which were based on reports from classes, which were based on reports from church consistories. These reports may not be completely representative, and are certainly subject to the bias and interests of the authors, but they do offer a sense of what was happening in the RCA.

[13] William McLoughlin, *Modern Revivalism: Charles Grandison Finney to Billy Graham* (New York: Ronald Press, 1959).

theological education, and the production of Bibles and tracts.

RCA attitudes about church growth in the mid-nineteenth century were shaped in this context of revivalism. The State of Religion Reports spoke in glowing terms of the rain of God descending, or the refreshing dews, or abundant showers of grace. RCA ministers were happy to see people being converted and then using their newfound spiritual energy in the service of the church and the gospel, but many of them were deeply troubled by the theological implications of revivalism. Religion did affect the heart, but the new measures seemed too emotional and disorderly. They could be used to manipulate people's emotions and frighten them into the kingdom. RCA ministers feared that such conversions were not genuine and would not last.[14]

Revivalism challenged the most deeply held RCA beliefs about the nature of God and humanity. Reformed theology asserted that God was sovereign in all matters, but especially in human salvation. People could not simply choose God, because all their human capacities—will, emotion, intellect—had been damaged by sin. Only God's grace enabled a person to repent and believe. God chose

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[14] In 1832 the State of Religion Report discussed the appropriate techniques or "means" of proclaiming the gospel. "The sovereignty of divine Grace we recognize and adore, and at the same time we perceive the evidence that God is pleased to employ and to honor the means of salvation which he himself has instituted....No *new* Gospel is to be invented, nor are we to expect the sanction of Heaven to any means of grace of man's invention. But, that God does bless the due, dilligent [*sic*] and earnest improvement of his own gracious institutions; and that *without* their improvement, we may not expect his blessing, we are not permitted to question" (*Minutes of General Synod 1832*, 46). But about the protracted meetings that Finney used so successfully these authors observed, "These meetings, however, are so easily capable of abuse, that wherever they are held, in conducting them the soundest christian discretion is always necessary. No excitements should be encouraged, that are not based upon and controlled by the word of God" (*Minutes of General Synod 1832*, 47).

from the beginning of time who would be saved, not because God foresaw their faith, but simply because of grace.

Then, as now, the doctrine of predestination raised many questions. Taken to an extreme but not illogical conclusion, it could imply that people can do absolutely nothing to bring about their salvation. If God chooses them, they are saved. If God does not choose them, they will not be saved. And if people cannot bring about their own faith, it follows that no one can bring another to faith. If God chooses whom to save before the beginning of time, why bother with missionary work? Why try to convert people? Why make any effort for the kingdom?

This extreme passivity was unacceptable in the nineteenth-century RCA. They believed that God was sovereign and the source of salvation, but they were equally convinced that God used humanity to carry out the divine purpose in salvation. People could not simply sit back and do nothing.

The RCA was trying to preserve two significant beliefs: divine sovereignty and human responsibility. They sought a tenuous middle path between what they saw as two evils: one, taking credit for salvation, and two, doing nothing about salvation. They used this language in 1831. "Occupying as we do, a place of happy medium between the extremes of Arminianism on the one hand, and Antinomianism on the other, we exalt the name of Jehovah and humble the pride of human sufficiency, ascribing the undivided glory of salvation to the sovereignty and omnipotence of divine grace, while at the same time we maintain the personal and solemn responsibilities of men,...absolve the throne of God from all blame, and present the whole charge of transgression at the door of the sinner's heart and conscience."[15] God is the only source of salvation, and yet people are responsible for their sinfulness and their failure to be saved.

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[15] *Minutes of General Synod 1831*, 350.

This was a paradox that John Calvin and the Dutch Synod of Dort and the Puritans puzzled over. How can the church proclaim that salvation is completely the work of God while also encouraging church members to engage in evangelism and support missionary societies? They concluded that God chose to use human efforts, and specifically the efforts of the church, to bring about salvation. God used ordinary means, such as preaching, prayer, and Christian education. But they did not believe that God worked through New Measures, with all their emotion, enthusiasm, and disorder, because these gave too much credit to human effort.

Revival occurred about half the time during the 1830s. Revival meant that the rain of God had fallen on a church or an area, and more than the usual number of people had joined the church on confession of faith. The low point of the decade was a bank failure and financial panic in 1837. The RCA interpreted this as divine judgment which brought stubborn, arrogant people to humility and faith. It also brought them to daily prayer meetings at 5:00 a.m.![16] Much revival occurred in 1837 and 1838, but the State of Religion Reports noted that revival resulted from the use of ordinary means: preaching, teaching the Heidelberg Catechism, prayer meetings, and house visitation.[17]

The next year's Report was more grim. Fifteen hundred were received on confession, which was quite high, but several classes complained that their churches were cold and barren. A few churches experienced the rain of God, but others did not, and wondered why they failed when others succeeded.

During the 1840s the spiritual health of the church rose and fell somewhat inexplicably. In 1841, for example,

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[16] Firth Haring Fabend, *Zion on the Hudson: Dutch New York and New Jersey in the Age of Revivals* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2000), 51.

[17] *Minutes of General Synod 1838*, 132.

the Classis of Schenectady welcomed 461 new members, or forty-six per church. The State of Religion Report that year praised the sovereign mystery of God in salvation. God sows the seed, and when the time is right, it will grow and bear fruit. The next year Classis Schenectady was ashamed to report far fewer conversions. The RCA now found it difficult to remember that God made the seed grow when the time was right. Instead, they grieved over the small number of conversions. They wanted revival to happen every year.

The Report for 1844 said that it had been a peaceful and prosperous year. The authors reminded RCA members not to take credit for their efforts: "To perform duty is our part: to give success belongs to him [God]."[18] Church members could pray and work and persevere, but God determined their success.

This was difficult to remember when there were minimal outpourings of the Spirit, as was the case in 1845. Classes reported that people were cold and worldly. Very few were converted. The authors of the 1845 Report believed that God was angry with them and had withheld the rain of divine grace. It did not seem possible that God would simply choose not to send the rain. So the authors concluded, "We know that while God is sovereign upon his throne, giving and withholding according to his own pleasure, still it is a rule of his kingdom that he usually deals with his people according to the measure of their fidelity in his service. ...And he has pledged the continued smiles of his countenance to those only whose lives are characterized 'by patient continuance in well doing.'...In view of this principle of the divine economy...are we not forced to the conclusion that sin rests upon our church, and that she is suffering rebuke and chastisement because of her transgression? We are constrained to confess that we have

[18] *Minutes of General Synod 1844*, 314.

departed from the Lord, and in judgment he has departed from us."[19]

There were fewer confessions of faith during the next two years (although still about one thousand), and the Report noted that this fact should awaken their anxiety. Usually God blessed prayer and effort with spiritual fruit, but the lack of fruit suggested a failure to pray, give, and live appropriately. Only God brings success and growth, the authors insisted, and yet almost immediately they called the church to more piety, more labor, more zeal. The authors concluded, "We have no right querulously to chide God, as though he were the cause of our barrenness, since he has not forgotten to be gracious,...but we may...plead with him to deliver us from the bondage of our own evil hearts, and the temptations of the Evil One." If God could not be responsible for these lean years, then obviously the people were, and the authors called them to action. "We must be more pious, if we would make, by God's blessings, the glory of our Church to appear; we must teach the gospel more simply, and rely upon it more confidently,...if we would succeed in triumphing over error."[20]

The RCA grew from about twenty thousand communicants in 1820 to about eighty thousand in 1880. This is significant growth, and yet RCA leadership regularly lamented that the church was not doing better. The RCA got itself into something of a theological jam here. God is utterly free to save or not to save. God sends refreshing rains or doesn't. God gives no reasons for these actions. And yet the RCA decided that if God does not send the rain, it must be their fault. They must be doing something wrong. They concluded that God "usually deals with his people according to the measure of their fidelity in his service."[21] But that creates a theological problem. If God is dealing with them

[19] *Minutes of General Synod 1845*, 437.
[20] *Minutes of General Synod 1846*, 36.
[21] *Minutes of General Synod 1845*, 437.

according to what they do, then salvation is no longer a free gift given according to God's good pleasure.

They would resist this interpretation. They would insist that God wants to be gracious, but is hindered by the unfaithfulness of the people. Or God's co-workers have not carried out their responsibilities. But it appears that they backed themselves into a corner. They said that God is sovereign, and yet claimed to know that God *usually* works *this* way. They insisted that salvation is God's initiative, but also held that if God doesn't send the revival rains they expect, then it must be a result of their sin.

A second implication is that the refreshing rains or seasons of blessing quickly came to be viewed as the norm. If it was good to have showers in one year, it would be better to have them every year. If the rains came in New Jersey, they should come in Albany as well. But the Reformed doctrine of divine sovereignty believed that God would gradually bring people into the kingdom through ordinary measures. The extraordinary times of refreshing were meant to be unusual, but people were restless when all they had was the ordinary. A revival might occur and spark a large number of confessions in a year, but the next year the church was considered a failure if it did not reach the same level. Every year's growth should be larger. This does not recognize the sovereignty of God in salvation, or God's freedom to act as God chooses.

A third aspect of this theological paradox is that the authors of the State of Religion Reports rarely reflected on the social and religious contexts that affected church life. They never mentioned Charles Finney, partly because so many disapproved of him, but also because to imply that revival came from a human agent seemed to challenge God's sovereignty. In 1837 and 1838 they mentioned that the financial panic had brought people back to the church. The Reports did not mention that the panic led to a Depression

that lasted for almost a decade.[22] This partially explains the diminished interest in religion in the 1840s. To have acknowledged that revival fever had encouraged religious interest would have suggested that there might be a cause other than God. To have acknowledged that social pressures diminished religious interest would have suggested that something might be more powerful than God. This the RCA was reluctant to do, which meant there were very few ways to explain revivals. Everything must be attributed to God, except for what appeared to be failure. And failure could not be attributed to social and cultural patterns, but only to human sinfulness and lack of effort.

The RCA maintained its Reformed and Calvinist beliefs throughout the nineteenth century, but clearly it was influenced by Finney and revivalism. Finney's emphasis on the human will, the power to choose, and the role of emotion and effort had reshaped much of American religion and affected the RCA as well. By the end of the nineteenth century, the RCA placed more emphasis on the need for children to be converted, rather than viewing them as part of God's covenant people who would grow into their faith without necessarily having a dramatic conversion experience.[23]

At least some members of the RCA clearly linked human effort with divine grace. In 1882, for example, the State of Religion Report noted that there are certain laws of spiritual advancement and church extension that are fixed, and "in our rigid conformity to those laws, lies our hope for the future." These laws included faith and prayer, family religion, and education of children. These measures may have differed from Finney's in some ways, but the linking of "rigid conformity to those laws" and "our hope for the future" showed that Arminianism had gained a foothold in

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[22] James D. Bratt, "The Reorientation of American Protestantism, 1835-1845," *Church History* 67, no. 1 (March 1998): 52-82.

[23] Fabend, chapter 7.

the RCA. God may still have been ultimately responsible for salvation, but a great deal of responsibility also rested upon church members and ministers.[24]

We move now to a second significant period in RCA history: the 1950s, a fascinating time in church life. The decade is held up as a gold standard for church membership, but some scholars argue that it was in fact a short-term blip in the statistics. In some ways, mainline Protestants have been ashamed for the last forty years because they could not sustain the energy of the 1950s. In reality it may have been as impossible to sustain church attendance at that level as it was to insist that the revival rains come every year without fail.

I was interim pastor of a church in New Jersey twenty years ago. They had a beautiful sanctuary, a gym, a large educational wing, and two bowling alleys, but they didn't have many people. On many occasions my parishioners told me, "If only you had been here in the 1950s when the place was full. Those were the good days for this church." And they were good days.

But reading the *Church Herald* for those years suggests that the mood of the '50s was decidedly mixed. People were afraid—of the Soviet Union, of nuclear war, of Communism infiltrating into American society. John R. Mulder, president of Western Seminary, wrote about flying into New York City and thinking about how vulnerable the city was to nuclear attack.[25]

In 1953 fifty-nine percent of Americans belonged to a church, but the editor of the *Church Herald,* Rev. Louis Benes, thought this was not enough. Sixty-eight million people did not belong to a church. Thirty-eight million who did belong were not Protestant, and many Protestants were

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[24] *Minutes of General Synod 1882, 68.*

[25] John R. Mulder to Otto Grundler, 11 October 1950. Mulder Correspondence, box 9, Joint Archives of Holland, Hope College, Holland, Mich.

only nominal members. Benes called the RCA to greater efforts toward making America Christian.[26]

Benes was unimpressed by most of American religion during the late 1940s and early '50s. Churches may bring in lots of new members, but were they really converted? Did sobriety, Sabbath observance, and stewardship increase along with the numbers? He believed that most mainline churches grew because they relaxed their standards and let everybody in. Most new members were not true Christians.[27]

Like his predecessors a century earlier, Benes was dubious about emotionalism and the use of gimmicks and pop culture to bring people into church. Those tactics might bring short-term growth but did not produce long-term Christians. Benes and many other Midwestern RCA ministers insisted that their conservative, traditional worship was exactly what God intended worship to be. If people did not like it, it was their fault for being sinful, stubborn, and resistant. They needed to change. The RCA needed to stay the same. It was better for the church not to grow than to compromise the gospel.[28]

Protestantism in the 1950s has often been accused of being culture-affirming. Benes was very critical of American culture in some ways, and yet it could be argued that as he adopted a rather sectarian stance toward American life, he very much affirmed the conservative ethnic culture of the RCA in the Midwest. But that's another lecture.

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[26] Louis H. Benes Jr., "America for Christ," *Church Herald,* 13 November 1953, 6.

[27] For examples see: Benes "Seasonal Religion," *Church Herald,* 9 April 1948, 6; "What Does Church Membership Mean?" *Church Herald,* 29 July 1949, 7; and "Church Membership in America," *Church Herald,* 7 July 1950, 4.

[28] Benes, "The Reformed Church—in America," *Church Herald,* 25 November 1949, 6-7.

A few quick observations about church growth patterns in the 1950s. The RCA grew during this period, but not nearly as much as other denominations did. Why not?

The RCA tended to follow its own people rather than to go into new areas where there was not already a Dutch Reformed presence. It was easier to start another new church in Holland, Michigan, for example, than it was in St. Louis. The RCA had a stunning success, however, in Levittown, Long Island, a community made up of a wide variety of ethnic groups. After only a couple of years they had one thousand children in Sunday School. Howard Hageman observed once that the RCA actually was much more successful in starting churches where there was no RCA presence.[29] There was less conflict and more growth. But the RCA did not do that very often. Some new church starts were very intentional about welcoming people of different denominations and ethnic groups. Some established churches seemed intent on preserving their ethnic and theological purity, an attitude that hampered growth.

The RCA did not do well in most urban areas. The story of the RCA in Chicago includes continual moves from the center of the city out to the suburbs.[30] If "our own people" left the area, the RCA tended to leave also. Not always, but often.

There was never enough money for church growth. A number of creative people started new churches that were quite successful, but the litany was always the same. We need money to build. The RCA generously supported world missions but gave less to domestic projects. Most RCA churches also spent quite a bit on themselves, usually about eighty percent for congregational purposes and twenty

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[29] *Minutes of General Synod 1960*, 226.

[30] Robert P. Swierenga, *Dutch Chicago: A History of the Hollanders in the Windy City*, Historical Series of the Reformed Church in America, no. 42, gen. ed. Donald J. Bruggink (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2002).

percent for benevolent giving. During the 1950s a picture of a new church building or educational wing appeared regularly on the cover of the *Church Herald.*

The RCA grew rapidly in the nineteenth century, but much of the growth came from babies and immigrants. The RCA grew in the 1950s, and this growth too resulted more from babies and immigrants than it did from creative evangelistic efforts. In 2004 there are no more Dutch immigrants, and the baby supply is far smaller. Is growth possible now? It is interesting that one place where the RCA is growing is among recent immigrants, not from Europe but from Asia and other parts of the world.

In conclusion I offer a few unscientific observations about the implications of this research:

1. The denomination and its congregations should not waste a lot of energy on hand-wringing and self-recrimination. There are things we haven't done well. We should learn to do these differently. But generally, lack of growth has not been a result of a lack of commitment to the gospel of God's people. People generally do the best they can with the light and resources they possess. But it is also true that sometimes we need to learn new strategies and approaches.
2. We should not assume we know what people want or that they all want the same thing. Baby Boomers may have sought anonymity, egalitarianism, and informality in religion. It appears to me that their children may have a greater desire for community and authority. Recent research suggests that they might be hungering for liturgy. Not everyone is looking for the same thing in religion. So we don't all have to be the same.
3. There is no magical solution that will grow churches. Not "Alpha." Not "Forty Days of

Purpose." Not a Ten-Year Goal.[31] We sometimes seem obsessed with finding exactly what people want. Maybe it would be more helpful to ask, what are they hungry for? How can we be helpful? Then it might be "Alpha." Or it might be a more open-ended discussion group called "More Questions than Answers." There are many good and faithful ways to be the church.

4. Sociologists might have some observations that are useful to the church. Their analyses and research may help us to make more sense of patterns of growth and decline.
5. How do we diagnose decline? If we are bad, unfaithful people, that implies one type of remedy. But if decline has primarily come from social and cultural factors beyond our control, then no amount of lament and self-criticism will change demographics. Fewer people are going to church. That's a reality. What can we offer that is meaningful to those who do want to come to church? Diana Eck, in a conversation after her lecture at Hope, suggested that recent immigrants were building mosques and temples and other worship structures because they wanted a place for community and a place where they could be reminded of home. That desire may be more pressing for recent immigrants, but it is a desire that many people share to some extent.
6. The RCA has at times been obsessed with structure with the hope that fixing the

[31] "Alpha" is an outreach program to non-Christians. "Forty Days of Purpose" is a program based on Rick Warren's book *The Purpose Driven Life*. The RCA's Ten-Year Goal is to multiply and revitalize churches.

denominational bureaucracy would help the church grow. Restructuring takes enormous amounts of time and energy, but makes relatively little difference in numbers.

7. Protestant churches cannot regain the cultural dominance they possessed in the 1950s. The sooner we realize that (if we haven't already) the better off we will be. That cultural dominance got us into a lot of trouble in the 1950s. We can no longer speak so blithely of a Christian America when about six percent of America is practicing another religion.[32] Protestants simply do not run the show anymore, and we should view this as a gift rather than as a tragedy.
8. To live in the paradox where God is sovereign and we are responsible is not easy. The survival of the church is not ultimately our task. It is God's church, and God will care for it. It is not about us and our efforts and strategies and goals. And yet God has given us amazing gifts and invites us to use those gifts as co-workers for the kingdom. The more fully we can live in that tension, avoiding both passivity and compulsion, the more faithful we might be.

The world needs rain. We can pray for it, we can beg for it, we can dance for it, we can develop elaborate irrigation systems to substitute for it. But the rain comes as it wills. So also with the grace of God. We can pray for it, we can work for it, we can plan for it, and we can strategize and develop goals, mission statements, and programs for it. But ultimately growth comes from God. We are not in control of God's church. God is. And that is a gift to us.

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[32]< www.pluralism.org/resources/statistics/tradition.php>.

Visiting Research Fellows Program
Applications Invited
For Academic Year 2005-2006

The Van Raalte Institute at Hope College invites applications from qualified scholars for a fellowship offered through the Visiting Research Fellows Program established in January 2003. Up to two people a year will be invited to spend up to ten weeks at the Van Raalte Institute (VRI).

Criteria for Selection: Proposals for support must demonstrate that the proposed research fits the Mission Statement of the Institute, that the scholar is qualified to conduct such research, and that the resources of both the Institute and the Joint Archives of Holland are essential to that research. A *curriculum vitae* should be submitted with the application.

Stipend: $250 per week, with a maximum stipend/grant of $2,500. The stipend would normally be used to offset travel and living expenses for the fellows. For a Hope faculty member appointed as a visiting research fellow, the Institute will expect to pay the replacement cost.

Application Deadline: Proposals are due no later than 15 January 2005.

Further Information can be obtained from:

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