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## DEPOPULATION AND RURAL CHURCHES IN KANSAS, 1950-1980

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**ABSTRACT**—Discussions of religion in the rural Great Plains present two radically different images: one of declining and abandoned churches, the other of surprising congregational vitality. Both images purport to describe how rural churches are adapting to declining population, but neither view has been examined very systematically. Kansas provides a natural laboratory in which to examine the relationships between religion and rural depopulation. From 1950 to 1980 Kansas experienced the sharpest decline in number of farms in the state's history. Yet population change in rural counties varied widely. I compare 39 rural counties that experienced the greatest depopulation with 30 rural counties that experienced only modest depopulation and 31 rural counties in which population grew. I first use demographic and economic data to describe the different trajectories of these counties. I then examine county-level statistics on church membership and numbers of churches to determine how religious change was related to depopulation. Finally, I compare the changes that occurred within selected denominations. The results suggest that churches, church membership, and average church size remained relatively robust in the face of severe depopulation. I consider several alternative explanations for this robustness.

**Key Words:** churches, depopulation, Methodists, religion, rural, evangelicalism

### Introduction

According to a recent article in the *New York Times* (Brown 2002), rural depopulation across the Great Plains is wreaking havoc on established churches. Hundreds of churches have been forced to close their doors for the last time, leaving abandoned buildings to disintegrate. In her widely read book *Dakota: A Spiritual Geography*, Kathleen Norris (1993) painted a rather different picture of rural religion in the Great Plains. Noting the tragic psychological ramifications of depopulation, Norris nevertheless concluded

that the result was more often one of religious vitality than decay. In the dogged resistance to change which she found so frustrating among the residents of Lemmon, South Dakota, she observed a resilient asceticism, a “stability of place,” and a “surprisingly wide generosity” that kept church life brimming with involvement.

Which of these images is correct? Has the declining population of the rural Great Plains been accompanied by a sizable loss of church members resulting in significant numbers of church closings? Or has the kind of religious vitality Norris described among the people she observed been evident on a wider scale?

The fate of rural churches has been a topic of recurring interest among social scientists (Brunner 1969; Wilkinson 1971; Thomas 1989; Goreham 1990; Farley 2000). Yet no study to my knowledge has actually examined the effects of *depopulation* as opposed to simply considering the effects of being located in a rural area. Indeed, sociologists have paid hardly any attention to depopulation at all in recent decades, and what little attention has been paid has focused on metropolitan rather than rural contexts (Frey 1987; Ammerman 1997; Morenoff and Sampson 1997).

This paper compares rural counties that have undergone significant depopulation with rural counties that have either grown or decreased only marginally in population. It considers the possible ways in which religious organizations might have been affected by population loss and then examines empirical evidence to see whether or not these consequences actually happened. In addition, it compares the experiences of kinds of religious organizations in an effort to determine which of several more general ways of understanding the relationships between religious groups and their social contexts make the most sense.

The competing scenarios imagined by the *New York Times* writer and by Kathleen Norris suggest the range of ways in which religious organizations might be affected by depopulation. Neither writer probably imagined that he or she was posing a hypothesis that would hold up under close empirical investigation. But both scenarios make intuitive sense, both can be supported with anecdotal evidence, and for these reasons both merit further consideration. The idea of rural churches closing their doors in response to declining population reflects the assumption that it is simply impossible to maintain as many churches in a given locality if fewer people live there. Yet we can imagine several different ways in which rural churches might adapt to depopulation. One is for members (or church administrators) to opt for consolidation. In this scenario, the number of churches might decline as rapidly (or even more rapidly) than population, leaving many

buildings standing empty, but average membership in surviving congregations would remain at respectable levels. Another scenario posits local resistance to church closings such that the number of churches remains relatively stable, but average church size dwindles to the point that many churches are weak, struggling, and in danger of eventually having to close.

We can also entertain several scenarios in which church membership and numbers of churches may not decline in the face of depopulation as much as we would otherwise expect. One hypothesis comes out of the "religious economies" literature. It suggests that small, theologically strict religious organizations—perhaps those identified as "fundamentalist" churches, for instance—tend to grow more rapidly than other religious organizations (Kelley 1986; Iannaccone 1994). This is because strict churches demand more of their members—in terms of time and money or conformity to distinctive moral teachings—and thus keep their resources "in house," as it were. Even when resources (such as potential members) are declining, then, a strict church has an advantage over a less strict church because its members remain loyal, contribute more generously to paying the preacher's salary and maintaining the building, and probably encourage their children to stay in the congregation as well. Thus far, though, researchers have tested this hypothesis only in contexts in which the overall population has been expanding. But if the religious economies argument is correct, these "strict" churches should grow relative to other organizations under conditions of depopulation as well. The reason is that people naturally gravitate toward religious organizations that require more of them and thus provide higher levels of spiritual gratification for the effort involved. A variant on this argument also suggests that when faced with competition these strict churches do better at retaining their members and protecting other scarce resources. This hypothesis is consistent with one of Norris's South Dakota observations, which is reminiscent of arguments advanced in the sociological literature about religious responses to oppression and deprivation, namely, that when economic conditions fare badly, people will be attracted to fundamentalist religious orientations that provide a sense of security and hope for a better life in the world to come (Glock and Stark 1965). Whatever the reasons, the relative growth and tenacity of strict churches might be a factor capable of preventing the overall religious vitality of a depopulating community from diminishing. However, for strict churches to maintain their own or to grow in communities with declining population, large-scale switching from liberal churches to strict ones would need to happen or a whole congregation would need to switch denominational affiliations. Some anecdotal evidence of such changes can be found,

but we would probably be surprised if changes of this kind were the norm in rural communities.

Another hypothesis we should consider is that depopulation has a distinct effect on the age distribution of a depopulating community, such that religious vitality stays relatively constant despite dwindling numbers of people in the community. This is a relatively straightforward hypothesis based on the fact that in nearly all studies of religious involvement, older people are more actively involved than younger people (Gallup and Lindsay 1999). This difference may be the result of people becoming more interested in religion as they grow older because religion offers comfort in the face of illness, bereavement, and death. Or it may be that, having raised their families and accomplished what they can financially, older people have more time to devote to religious organizations, and older people possibly find friendship and surrogate families in these organizations. It may also reflect differences in how people were socialized during their youth, at least if it can be assumed that people who grew up in earlier decades were more likely to be exposed to religious influences than people having come of age more recently. If there is evidence that rural depopulation results in a larger proportion of older people staying behind in these communities, then this may be reason enough to think that religious vitality might remain relatively undiminished.

Scholars of religion have suggested in other contexts that religious vitality flourishes more where there is competition among religious groups than when religious groups feel less pressure to compete for members and other scarce resources (Warner 1993). It has been difficult to test this hypothesis because of difficulty in determining objectively the amount of competition that may be present among religious groups. We might suppose, though, that if there is more religious diversity, then the competition will be stiffer. We might also suppose that if the pool of potential members is shrinking, then competition would also increase.

### **Data and Methods**

Kansas provides an ideal location in which to examine the relationships between depopulation and rural religion. The period from 1950 to 1980, which happens to coincide with the period for which the best data on religious organizations are available, witnessed the sharpest decline in total number of farms in the state's history: from 135,000 to 75,000, a loss of 60,000 farms, or 44.4 percent of the total within three decades. This was twice the loss that occurred during the period from 1920 to 1950, which

included the Great Depression and Dust Bowl era, and four times the annual rate of decline between 1980 and 2000 (Kansas Agricultural Statistics Service 2001). Several developments contributed to this high rate of decline: in real terms, family incomes in rural counties fell by more than a third between 1959 and 1979; also, mechanization and new methods of dryland farming greatly increased the amount of land that could be farmed by an individual farmer (Leffingwell 1993). Unlike during the Great Depression, people who experienced hardship in rural Kansas between 1950 and 1980 also had better opportunities to secure a living by moving elsewhere. Yet the effect of these developments on the population of rural counties in Kansas varied dramatically: from significant depopulation in some counties, to relatively little depopulation or a net increase in population in other counties. Comparing counties in which depopulation was substantial with counties in the same state in which depopulation was less substantial or absent is thus a way of determining how religious organizations were affected by depopulation.

I use data on religious organizations drawn from the 1952 and 1979-81 (hereafter 1980) national studies of churches and church membership that were conducted by the National Council of Churches (1956; Quinn et al. 1982). These data include membership figures and numbers of churches at the county level for 114 denominations and 111 other religious bodies, and are more complete and comparable than the studies of church membership that were conducted in 1971 and 1990. They probably miss small, independent churches that were unaffiliated with any denominations, but they provide the most comprehensive evidence available for denominationally affiliated churches for the period under consideration. I obtained machine-readable versions of the data from the American Religion Data Archive ([www.thearda.org](http://www.thearda.org)). In working with these data, I discovered that they required several adjustments. Because 1980 data for Roman Catholics were classified under "adherents" rather than "members," this figure was added to the membership data to make total membership figures for the two periods comparable. I also found that the 1980 data contained an error for Wichita County in western Kansas, resulting from an extraordinarily large number of members reported by the Congregational Holiness Church (which caused total membership to exceed total population). I corrected this error by substituting the average number of members per church for the five other counties in which the Congregational Holiness Church reported figures. The county-level variables I derived from these data sets include total church membership in 1952, total church membership in 1980, number of churches in 1952, number of churches in 1980, and mean change in total membership

and in number of churches, computed as  $y = (x^{t2} - x^{t1})/x^{t1}$ , where  $t1$  means time 1 (1952) and  $t2$  means time 2 (1980). I constructed additional measures yielding comparable variables for Methodist churches and membership, other mainline churches and membership (a measure that combined figures for Presbyterians, Lutherans, American Baptists, Disciples of Christ, Congregationalists, and Episcopalians), and strict or what are often referred to in the literature as "sectarian" churches and membership (a measure that combined figures for 12 small, theologically strict denominations that reported information for both time periods: Seventh-day Adventist; Assemblies of God; Church of the Brethren; Church of God, Cleveland, TN; Church of God, Anderson, IN; Church of the Nazarene; North American Baptist General Conference; Apostolic Christian Church; Mission Church Association; Foursquare Gospel Association; Free Methodist; and Pentecostal Holiness).

I derived county-level demographic and economic variables for 1950 and 1980 from the US Census for each period. For 1950 I used the machine-readable data set included in *Historical, Demographic, Economic, and Social Data: The United States, 1790-1970*, which I obtained from the Interuniversity Consortium for Political and Social Research (ICPSR 2001). The 1980 data are from the online Kansas Data Archive provided by the Policy Research Institute at the University of Kansas ([www.ku.edu/pri](http://www.ku.edu/pri)). Analyzing the religious variables in relation to the demographic and economic data permits county-level comparisons similar to those made by Hammond (1979) in examining religion in New York and Ohio during the 1840s and by Thomas (1989) in examining the relationships between agricultural patterns and Methodists between 1870 and 1896.

To focus on *rural* counties, I excluded the five counties that had populations of more than 50,000 in 1950 (Wyandotte, Johnson, Sedgwick, Shawnee, and Reno). These five counties, with a total population of 609,865, included the four largest cities or towns in the state (Kansas City, Wichita, Topeka, and Hutchinson) and had an average urban population of 78.3% in 1950 (compared with 24.0% for the remainder of the state). There were thus 100 rural counties in 1950, averaging 12,954 in population and comprising 68% of the state's total population.

To examine the effects of depopulation, I calculated the growth or decline in population as a proportion of the 1950 population for each county and divided the counties into three groups accordingly: 39 counties experienced population decline of at least 20% between 1950 and 1980, 30 counties declined by less than 20% but had no population growth, and 31 counties experienced an increase in population. For the 39 counties thus classified as

“declining,” the average decline in population was 29.5%. For the 30 comparison counties, which for convenience I will refer to as relatively “stable,” there was a modest average decline in population of 12.5%. And for the 31 counties classified as “growing,” the average population increase was 29.9%. In the data analysis, I compare means for the three categories of counties and report F-tests and eta-statistics from analysis of variance. Figure 1 illustrates the geographic distribution of the three categories of counties: declining counties are shaded lightest, growing are shaded darkest (the five excluded counties are unshaded).

Descriptive statistics that are helpful for interpreting the religious variables for the three categories of counties are shown in Table 1. The data show that the depopulating counties had smaller populations in 1950 (8,595 on average) than counties in the other two categories (14,800 and 16,651, respectively), meaning that the least populated counties were the ones that lost the larger share of population between 1950 and 1980. In addition, these counties had already lost population between 1940 and 1950, whereas the others were relatively more stable or growing. The best clues as to why some counties experienced significant depopulation between 1950 and 1980 are from data on counties’ economic composition. The population of the declining counties was overwhelmingly concentrated on farms rather than in towns in 1950 and that concentration remained basically unchanged through 1980. In contrast, the stable counties were less rural to begin with and became slightly less rural by 1980. The growing counties were even less rural at the start and were about evenly split between farm and town population by 1980. At the start of the period, the economic structure of counties that would experience depopulation was less diversified than that of counties that would increase in population, as evidenced by a larger share of the male labor force being employed as farmers and a smaller proportion employed as private wage and salary workers. The differences in economic diversity are also evident in 1980 figures for the ratio of business establishments to farms. Although we might suppose that a reason for the greater economic diversity of the growing counties was lower productivity in the agricultural sector (encouraging workers to seek employment in towns), this does not appear to have been the case. Judging from the greater value of crops sold per farm (despite roughly comparable acres per farm), agriculture was actually more prosperous in the counties that grew in population than in those that experienced depopulation. In fact, the synergy between agricultural and nonagricultural conditions in rural counties probably meant that greater prosperity in agriculture provided more opportunities in non-agricultural occupations and therefore contributed to counties’ ability to



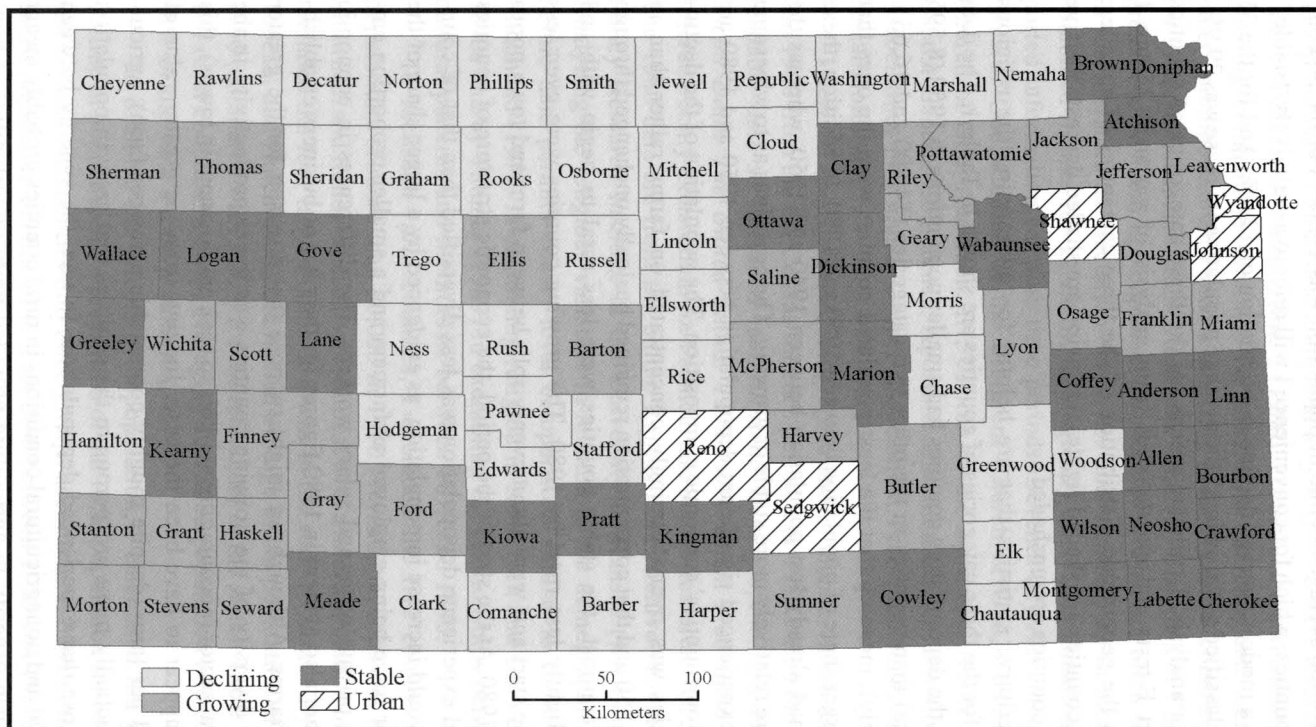


Figure 1. Kansas population change, 1950-1980.

TABLE 1  
DEMOGRAPHIC AND ECONOMIC CHARACTERISTICS OF RURAL  
KANSAS COUNTIES, 1950 AND 1980

Indicator <sup>1</sup>	Declining counties <sup>2</sup>	Stable counties <sup>3</sup>	Growing counties <sup>1</sup>	Total	F-test	Eta
Number of counties	39	30	31	100		
Population, 1950	8,595	14,800	16,651	12,954	7.491 <sup>***</sup>	.366
Population, 1980	6,099	13,170	22,635	13,346	17.107 <sup>***</sup>	.511
Change in population	-.295	-.125	.299	-.060	145.283 <sup>***</sup>	.866
Change in population, 1940-50	-.104	-.059	.191	.001	21.681 <sup>***</sup>	.556
Percentage rural, 1950	89.8	74.4	60.3	76.0	13.827 <sup>***</sup>	.471
Percentage rural, 1960	85.1	72.2	55.2	72.0	12.009 <sup>***</sup>	.446
Percentage rural, 1970	85.8	70.3	50.8	70.3	15.699 <sup>***</sup>	.495
Percentage rural, 1980	87.2	69.7	50.4	70.6	17.446 <sup>***</sup>	.514
Farmers as percentage of male civilian labor force, 1950	.409	.339	.275	.346	14.752 <sup>***</sup>	.483
Private wage or salary workers as percentage of male civilian labor force, 1950	34.7	42.8	47.6	41.1	15.714 <sup>***</sup>	.495
Business establishments per farm, 1980	.261	.383	.709	.436	15.968 <sup>***</sup>	.498
Value of crops sold per farm, 1950	3,116	3,226	5,519	3,894	4.246 <sup>**</sup>	.284
Acres per farm, 1950	552	484	604	548	.758	.124
Family income (\$), 1959	15,942	17,228	19,801	17,517	16.236 <sup>***</sup>	.505
Adjusted family income, 1969 <sup>5</sup>	17,107	18,036	20,433	18,417	29.233 <sup>***</sup>	.613
Adjusted family income, 1979 <sup>6</sup>	10,492	11,038	12,570	11,300	39.741 <sup>***</sup>	.671
Number of farms, 1950	1,095	1,367	1,190	1,206	1.745	.186
Number of farms, 1980	627	730	757	699	1.999	.199
Change in number of farms	-.404	-.388	-.284	-.362	5.308 <sup>**</sup>	.314
Median age, 1950	32.2	32.2	29.5	31.3	5.944 <sup>*</sup>	.330
Median age, 1960	35.2	34.1	28.8	32.9	21.797 <sup>***</sup>	.557
Median age, 1970	39.0	35.6	28.4	34.7	61.409 <sup>***</sup>	.747
Median age, 1980	38.8	34.0	29.1	34.3	97.687 <sup>***</sup>	.817

<sup>1</sup> Items are means unless otherwise indicated; <sup>\*\*\*</sup>  $p < .001$ , <sup>\*\*</sup>  $p < .01$ , <sup>\*</sup>  $p < .05$

<sup>2</sup> Barber, Chase, Chautauqua, Cheyenne, Clark, Cloud, Comanche, Decatur, Edwards, Elk, Ellsworth, Graham, Greenwood, Hamilton, Harper, Hodgeman, Jewell, Lincoln, Marshall, Mitchell, Morris, Nemaha, Ness, Norton, Osborne, Pawnee, Phillips, Rawlins, Republic, Rice, Rooks, Rush, Russell, Sheridan, Smith, Stafford, Trego, Washington, Woodson.

<sup>3</sup> Allen, Anderson, Atchison, Bourbon, Brown, Cherokee, Clay, Coffey, Cowley, Crawford, Dickinson, Doniphan, Gove, Greeley, Kearny, Kingman, Kiowa, Labette, Lane, Linn, Logan, Marion, Meade, Montgomery, Neosho, Ottawa, Pratt, Wabamsee, Wallace, Wilson.

<sup>4</sup> Barton, Butler, Douglas, Ellis, Finney, Ford, Franklin, Geary, Grant, Gray, Harvey, Haskell, Jackson, Jefferson, Leavenworth, Lyon, McPherson, Miami, Morton, Osage, Pottawatomie, Riley, Saline, Scott, Seward, Sherman, Stanton, Stevens, Sumner, Thomas, Wichita.

<sup>5</sup> Adjusted to 1959 dollars; F-test and eta are for unadjusted figures.

<sup>6</sup> Adjusted to 1959 dollars; F-test and eta are for unadjusted figures.

retain population. In contrast, data for the 1950s provide indications of economic disadvantage in the counties that would experience greater depopulation. In addition to crop value per farm being lower, median family incomes (1959 data) were lower and would remain lower in 1969 and 1979. Not surprisingly, the total number of farms in these counties decreased at a higher rate than in the other counties. While I have not been able to confirm it statistically, maps of Kansas land usage during this period also suggest that the counties in which population declined the most were wheat-growing regions of the state. These counties were particularly subject to fluctuating and declining wheat prices. The data in Table 1 also suggest that the depopulating counties lost young people in significantly larger numbers than the other counties, as suggested by the fact that median age in these counties rose by almost seven years, whereas it remained stable in the counties with growing populations.

### Results

The religious variables for the three sets of counties are shown in Table 2. The trend in total church membership closely resembles the pattern seen in Table 1 for trends in total population, with depopulating counties showing the greatest decline, the relatively stable counties also exhibiting relative stability in church membership, and the growing counties experiencing growth in church membership as well. However, the loss in total membership in the depopulating counties (-.149) is not as great as the loss in total population for these counties (-.295). The pattern for numbers of churches is similar, with the depopulating counties losing approximately four churches per county, the stable counties showing no loss or gain in numbers of churches, and the growing counties showing a net increase of approximately five churches per county. Again, the rate of loss in the depopulating counties (-.125) is smaller than the rate of loss in total population. In short, there appears to be relatively more stability in church membership figures and number of churches in the depopulating counties than would be expected on the basis of population change alone. The effect of this relative stability in the face of depopulation is evident in the figures for total membership as a *proportion* of total population, which are higher to begin with in the depopulating counties and which rise more in these counties (.211) than in counties with stable or growing populations (.106 and .100, respectively), although these differences are not statistically significant. The number of churches per 1,000 population also rises more in the depopulating counties (an increase of .250) than in the other counties (.167

TABLE 2  
RELIGIOUS CHARACTERISTICS OF RURAL KANSAS COUNTIES,  
1950 AND 1980

Indicator <sup>1</sup>	Declining counties <sup>2</sup>	Stable counties	Growing counties	Total	F-test	Eta
Total membership, 1952	4,411	6,979	7,540	6,162	5.113 <sup>***</sup>	.309
Total membership, 1980	3,681	6,242	9,668	6,305	14.490 <sup>***</sup>	.480
Change in membership	-.149	-.034	.403	.056	36.909 <sup>***</sup>	.432
Total number of churches, 1952	26.0	34.8	29.9	29.9	2.559 <sup>**</sup>	.224
Total number of churches, 1980	22.2	34.8	35.3	30.0	6.507 <sup>***</sup>	.344
Change in number of churches	-.125	.017	.233	.029	19.250 <sup>***</sup>	.533
Membership divided by population, 1950	.507	.472	.444	.477	3.567 <sup>†</sup>	.262
Membership divided by population, 1980	.605	.513	.481	.539	10.224 <sup>***</sup>	.417
Change in membership/population	.211	.106	.100	.145	2.170	.207
Churches per 1,000 population, 1952	3.1	2.7	2.1	2.7	16.730 <sup>***</sup>	.506
Churches per 1,000 population, 1980	3.9	3.0	2.0	3.0	40.253 <sup>***</sup>	.673
Changes in church/population	.250	.167	-.038	.126	12.573 <sup>***</sup>	.454
Average church size, 1952	168	190	236	196	8.414 <sup>***</sup>	.385
Average church size, 1980	166	176	262	198	20.252 <sup>***</sup>	.543
Change in church size	-.011	-.020	.167	.041	5.405 <sup>**</sup>	.317

<sup>1</sup> Items are means unless otherwise indicated; \*\*\*p < .001, \*\*p < .01, †p < .05

<sup>2</sup> County classification is same as in Table 1.

and -.038, respectively). Finally, average church size stays virtually constant at approximately 166 members per church in the declining counties, drops marginally in the stable counties (by 14 members), and increases by approximately 26 members per church in the growing counties.

Table 3 presents further evidence on religion variables that help to interpret why church attendance and number of churches appear to be more stable in counties that lost significant population than we might have anticipated. The hypothesis that theologically strict churches may be growing in these counties and thus reducing the overall amount of decline is tested with the variables for total membership and total numbers of churches in the 12 theologically conservative denominations for which there are data for the two time periods. The results give no support to the idea that overall religious vitality may have been sustained in depopulated counties by the growth or relative persistence of strict churches. In the counties with declining populations, the membership of theologically strict churches was quite small (less than 4% of total membership), and in these counties there was a

TABLE 3  
SELECTED RELIGIOUS GROUPS IN RURAL KANSAS COUNTIES,  
1950 AND 1980

Indicator <sup>1</sup>	Declining counties <sup>2</sup>	Stable counties	Growing counties	Total	F-test	Eta
Strict churches						
Membership, 1952	.169	.346	.315	.268	4.517 <sup>***</sup>	.292
Membership, 1980	.119	.368	.447	.295	11.362 <sup>***</sup>	.436
Change in membership	-.208	.159	.580	.146	16.422 <sup>***</sup>	.503
No. of churches, 1952	4.0	6.2	4.8	4.6	3.305	.253
No. of churches, 1980	2.9	5.5	5.5	4.3	5.826 <sup>**</sup>	.327
Change in no. of churches	-.217	-.111	.210	-.053	10.737 <sup>***</sup>	.426
Ratio of Christian and Churches of Christ to Disciples in 1980						
Members	1.32	.93	.42	.89	1.481	.210
Churches	1.09	1.39	.90	1.09	1.376	.203
Ratio of UPCNA to PCUSA, 1952 <sup>3</sup>						
Members	.05	.26	.09	.13	1.146	.172
Churches	.08	.10	.19	.12	1.013	.368
Ratio of LCMS to ELCA in 1980 <sup>4</sup>						
Members	1.93	3.27	1.78	2.23	.763	.172
Churches	.68	1.18	1.08	.95	1.564	.243
Diversity index, 1952	.686	.702	.681	.689	.449	.096
Methodists						
Membership, 1952	1273	1973	2016	1713	5.057 <sup>**</sup>	.307
Membership, 1980	1095	1617	2122	1569	10.073 <sup>***</sup>	.415
Change in membership	-.124	-.134	.286	.001	7.203 <sup>***</sup>	.360
No. of churches, 1952	6.1	8.6	6.7	7.0	3.370 <sup>†</sup>	.255
No. of churches, 1980	5.6	8.0	6.4	6.6	3.534 <sup>†</sup>	.261
Change in no. of churches	-.063	-.005	.085	.000	1.002	.142
Other mainline (non-Methodist)						
Membership, 1952	1,645	2,889	5,523	3,330	6.156 <sup>**</sup>	.328
Membership, 1980	1,050	1,804	5,266	2,711	7.235 <sup>***</sup>	.352
Change in membership	-.187	-.156	.431	.011	1.862	.194
No. of churches, 1952	10.0	12.1	15.9	12.6	3.237 <sup>†</sup>	.244
No. of churches, 1980	6.9	9.7	16.9	11.1	6.229 <sup>**</sup>	.330
Change in no. of churches	-.124	.033	.147	.006	7.306 <sup>***</sup>	.365

<sup>1</sup> Items are means unless otherwise indicated; \*\*\*p < .001, \*\*p < .01, †p < .05

<sup>2</sup> County classification is same as in Table 1.

<sup>3</sup> UPCNA = United Presbyterian Church in North America; PCUSA = Presbyterian Church USA.

<sup>4</sup> LCMS = Lutheran Church Missouri Synod; ELCA = Evangelical Lutheran Church of America.

decline in both the membership and number of theologically strict churches. These strict churches fared slightly better in the counties with stable populations and did considerably better in the counties with growing populations. In the latter, membership actually increased at a higher rate than population.

The data provide several other interesting tests of the strictness hypothesis. In 1968 the Disciples of Christ (Christian) Church underwent a major restructuring, which resulted in a more centralized denomination and, in response, a large number of its more conservative congregations formed a separate denomination called the Christian Church and Churches of Christ (Melton 1989). Both groups are well represented in the Kansas data for 1980. If strictness were an important factor in the relative persistence of religion in depopulating counties, we would expect there to be a higher representation of the more conservative Christian Church and Churches of Christ in these counties relative to churches that remained part of the Disciples of Christ. This seems to be what the data show, at least for members. Although the differences are not statistically significant, the ratio of members of Christian Church and Churches of Christ to Disciples members was approximately 1.3 in the declining counties, compared with 0.9 in the stable counties, and 0.4 in the growing counties (the results for ratio of churches are more ambiguous). Thus, by this indication, the strictness hypothesis finds modest support.

Another test, in contrast, is less favorable to the strictness hypothesis. Among Presbyterians, data were reported separately for the United Presbyterian Church in North America and the Presbyterian Church USA in 1950 (the two merged in 1958), making it possible to see if the more conservative United Presbyterian branch might have had a stronger representation in counties where population had been declining since 1940 and would continue to decline over the next three decades. As the figures in Table 3 show, there is no indication that the more conservative branch was relatively more represented in depopulating counties than in other counties, either in membership or churches.

A similar test of the strictness hypothesis among Lutherans also fails to suggest that strict churches were more prevalent in the depopulating counties. This test is provided by comparing figures for the more conservative Lutheran Church Missouri Synod in 1980 with the more liberal Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (1980 data are reported for its constituent bodies even though the formal merger was not effected until 1988). Here, the ratio of the more conservative to the more liberal group in terms of both members and churches is highest in the stable counties and about the same

in the declining counties as in the growing counties. On the whole, therefore, the strictness hypothesis appears to find little support in these data.

The aging hypothesis, which suggests that depopulation did not result in as much loss of religious vitality as might have been expected because depopulation left older people behind, is harder to test directly with these data. As we saw in Table 1, median age in the declining counties did in fact increase, whereas it did not in the growing counties. This difference lends plausibility to the idea that the increase in age in declining counties may have partially offset the loss of churches and church membership. Controlling for population change between 1950 and 1980, there is a positive relationship (standardized regression coefficient of .334, significant at the .001 level) between change in median age between 1950 and 1980 and change in church membership between 1950 and 1980, suggesting that when median age increased more, church membership either increased more or decreased less. As further support for the aging hypothesis, I also examined survey data from the General Social Surveys ([www.norc.uchicago.edu](http://www.norc.uchicago.edu)) conducted between 1972 and 1982 for adults in the west north central region (there were too few cases to limit the analysis to one state) and found that in the more heavily rural counties (where average age was five years older than in less rural counties), 47% claimed to attend religious services nearly every week or more often, compared with 38% in less rural counties.

Finally, I test the hypothesis about religious competition, which suggests that depopulation may intensify competition among religious bodies and for this reason result in relatively more religious vitality than might be expected, by examining data for an index of religious diversity. Following previous research (Christiano 1987), I constructed an index based on the 1952 church membership data which gave each county a score between zero and one, indicating how much diversity there was when the proportions of total membership held by each of 10 major religious families or traditions were taken into account. The 10 groups included in the index were: Catholics, Methodists, Lutherans, Presbyterians, Disciples, Congregationalists, American Baptists, Episcopalians, "sects" (using the previously described summary measure), and "other" (treated as a single category). According to the diversity hypothesis, greater religious diversity at one time period should be associated with higher levels of religious involvement at a subsequent period (it has been shown that for statistical reasons these measures must involve more than one time period; Voas et al. 2002). Thus, if the diversity index operated this way in the present context, we would hypothesize that higher diversity in depopulating counties is a reason why these counties did

not lose membership at the same rate they lost population. But, as shown in Table 3, there is no significant variation in scores on the diversity index between the depopulating counties and the other counties. Further disconfirmation of the competition hypothesis is suggested by the fact that, when change in population is controlled, the standardized regression coefficient for the effect of diversity in 1952 on change in membership between 1952 and 1980 is negative (-.197, significant at the .01 level). This suggests that *lower* diversity was associated either with an increase or less decrease in church membership.

Why might this have been the case? The literature on religious competition has argued that “lazy monopolies” are bad for religion because religious groups do not compete as energetically and thus permit religious involvement to slide (Finke and Stark 1992). For depopulating counties in Kansas, it appears that just the opposite was the case. The presence of a lazy monopoly probably worked to the advantage of local churches, protecting their investment, providing members with security, and keeping members involved. We cannot test this supposition directly, of course. But it is interesting to look in greater detail at Methodists. If the adage that there were more Methodist churches at one time than US post offices is an exaggeration, it came very close to being true in Kansas. Methodists got there first, often before statehood, and established themselves as the dominant religious presence in local communities. In 1952 Methodists accounted for almost a third of all church members in rural counties and approximately a quarter of all churches, meaning that they had the largest congregations (averaging 263 members per congregation) and, county for county, generally had more members than any other denomination, including Catholics. Between 1950 and 1980 they did lose members, but the average loss for rural counties was negligible (Table 3). Both in membership and in numbers of churches, Methodists exhibited remarkable stability: they grew less in counties where population was increasing than they should have based on population alone, but they also declined less in counties where population was decreasing. Having established themselves as a kind of lazy monopoly, they were able to resist the effects of depopulation. And if Methodists enjoyed this kind of advantage, the data suggest that other mainline Protestant denominations, which were smaller and often in a weaker position, did not (see Table 3). They lost more members and churches in both the depopulating and stable counties than Methodists did. Only in the growing counties, where the religious market was expanding, did they grow, and at least in membership, grew more in these counties than Methodists did.



### Conclusions

Although statistical evidence like this is always limited, it tells us several interesting things about religious adaptation to rural depopulation that we did not know before: churches in the most depopulating areas of Kansas did lose membership between 1950 and 1980 and there was a net loss in numbers of churches; yet the decline was not as great as the decline in population would have suggested. Furthermore, the average size of congregations remained constant and the proportion of population who were church-going increased. This is not to discount the fact that real losses took place, but it contradicts the image of massive church closings and badly dwindling congregations. The reasons for this relative stability appear to have little to do with growth among theologically strict churches and more to do with greater religious intensity among an aging population and the special advantages of some churches (especially Methodists) that had established themselves firmly in local communities.

Since nearly all the literature on church growth and decline has been based on studies of populations in which growth was occurring, we also gain some broader insights from looking closely at a region in the Great Plains characterized by significant depopulation. With respect to the literature on strictness and church growth, the present data suggest that the following qualification should be considered. Strict churches seem to grow and even increase market share when the population is growing, but they do not seem to do as well in absolute or relative terms when population is shrinking. Thus, the argument that strictness alone is sufficient to give strict churches a competitive edge appears to be incorrect. Probably the important factor is not strictness but evangelism. In an expanding population, religious groups that evangelize do better because there are new people in the community to be evangelized. In a stagnant or declining religious market, strict religious groups have fewer opportunities to attract new recruits.

What I have suggested about aging and for Methodists has implications for how we think about the much-discussed decline of mainline denominations. Recent research suggests that this decline was largely a function of lower fertility rates and wider generational spacing among members of mainline churches than in the population at large (Hout et al. 2001). The implication is that mainline denominations declined because there were too few young people. Yet in the most depopulated areas of rural Kansas, young people were also relatively absent (they moved away), but Methodist churches remained relatively stable. They did so partly because the older population who stayed behind made up the loss. That may prove true in the

wider society as well. At least mainline memberships have begun to stabilize in recent years rather than continuing to decline.

Finally, these results raise questions about the validity of the thesis that lazy monopolies are bad for religion compared with the beneficial effects of intense competition. That thesis may pertain to some situations in which there is an expanding population, such as the American frontier during the 19th century. It does not appear to be a scientific law that also pertains to places in which population is shrinking. There, it may be more beneficial to have put down roots, gathered the faithful, and, as Methodists did, build brick buildings capable of withstanding the winds of change.

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