

# In-Depth Report

## Anatomy of a Movement: California, 1849–2025

By Dr. Stanley E. Granberg, President



### INTRODUCTION

History provides the information necessary for insight. History is the starting point for understanding trends formed by the past, present, and future. Mac Lynn's pioneering *Missions Bulletin* (1977–1987) provided an early view of Churches of Christ state by state. In each issue Lynn gave a short history of the Churches of Christ for each state, then a directory listing all its known congre-



### A CALIFORNIA LEGEND

The origins of this report go back to the 2004 Pepperdine Bible Lectureships and Firestone Fieldhouse. I and some volunteers handed out small white lapel pins with CPNW—Church Planting Northwest—stenciled in green while inviting people to a class about a new church planting initiative. The idea that began as CPNW was challenged to become something more—Kairos Church Planting.

At one of the evening lectures, a new friend, an older gentleman, mostly confined to a wheelchair, motioned me to his wheelchair. Getting down on a knee so we could talk face to face, brother **W.L. Fletcher** made this request of me, “Stan, as you cross the country encouraging churches to plant new churches again, would you remind them of the story of California. We planted hundreds of churches in my lifetime. But I fear that one day our southern brethren may lift their heads, look westwards, and ask, “Didn’t we used to have churches in California?”

Fletcher was one of the last of the powerhouse figures of San Diego County and Southern California who had energized California Churches of Christ during the middle years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Throughout his life, Fletcher had witnessed—and helped lead—the greatest era of church planting in California Churches of Christ history. His concern was not nostalgia; it was that an entire movement might forget what God had once done.

gations. This work eventually resulted in *Churches of Christ in the United States* (1991). Along the way, Lynn identified regions where new churches were most needed, advice that motivated a surprising number of domestic missionaries into the US mission field.

This report uses these earlier collections to examine California Churches of Christ as a study in movement ecology—a living fellowship whose vitality depends upon the continual reproduction of churches, leaders, and mission across generations. The report has three objectives. First, it traces the historical development of California Churches of Christ. Second, it examines the condition of the Movement using historical and statistical data. Third, it interprets those findings to help leaders think strategically about the future.

History provides perspective. It explains how today's realities emerged and moves us from isolated facts to informed insight. Although this study focuses on California, the questions it raises about movement health, reproduction, and renewal are relevant to churches and movements in general.

One of the central questions of missiology, and this report, has been, "What are the factors that sometimes turn individual believers and churches into a movement?" This report approaches that question through the history of California Churches of Christ. Here, a movement is understood as a living fellowship of autonomous congregations, sharing a common identity and mission, whose collective vitality is expressed through church planting, leadership development, geographic expansion, congregational health, and the transmission of faith across generations (McGavran 1990; Hirsch 2016).

Healthy movements regularly examine themselves. Just as individuals benefit from honest reflection, church movements need trustworthy historical and demographic perspective if they are to steward the future faithfully. With history, we can recognize trajectories and trends, causes and results, that shed light on the future. My intention is to provide a report that is historically grounded, that helps our Movement be more self-aware and better equipped to make faithful decisions for the future.

## Why California Matters

Churches of Christ emerged out of the Stone-Campbell Disciples Movement. Historically, Churches of Christ have been concentrated within the South and lower Midwest, the American Bible Belt. California stands as a principal exception (Table 1). For much of the twentieth century, California possessed one of the largest concentrations of Churches of Christ outside its traditional heartland, making it a valuable case study for understanding how this branch of the Restoration Movement developed in a very different cultural setting.

Because of its western location, this concentration of churches also gives it significant influence on the western side of the United States. As one of the world's leading centers of technology, media, and economic innovation, California exerts disproportionate influence on American and global culture. Trends that occur in California frequently spread elsewhere, making its religious history worthy of careful attention.

The history of California Churches of Christ illustrates the ecology and life cycle of a movement whose vitality depends upon reproduction across generations.

### MOVEMENT:

**A living fellowship of autonomous congregations, sharing a common identity and mission, whose collective vitality is expressed through church planting, leadership development, geographic expansion, congregational health, and the transmission of faith across generations.**

**Table 1: COC in the U.S. by State, 2000**  
States ranked by number of congregations.

| State                    | Congregations | Members | Adherents | Attendance |
|--------------------------|---------------|---------|-----------|------------|
| 1. Texas                 | 2,188         | 289,840 | 374,266   | 270,665    |
| 2. Tennessee             | 1,472         | 168,356 | 217,966   | 174,409    |
| 3. Alabama               | 893           | 92,096  | 118,865   | 94,086     |
| 4. Arkansas              | 753           | 67,042  | 86,177    | 68,114     |
| 5. California            | 687           | 64,057  | 83,230    | 62,465     |
| 6. Kentucky              | 622           | 45,546  | 58,578    | 46,720     |
| 7. Oklahoma              | 603           | 63,838  | 83,047    | 63,391     |
| 8. Florida               | 511           | 55,779  | 72,595    | 53,069     |
| 9. Missouri              | 455           | 33,841  | 43,441    | 34,934     |
| 10. Ohio                 | 428           | 35,974  | 47,472    | 35,949     |
| 11. Georgia              | 403           | 36,240  | 48,181    | 36,244     |
| 12. Mississippi          | 378           | 32,898  | 43,396    | 31,020     |
| 13. Indiana              | 346           | 27,509  | 36,034    | 28,372     |
| 14. West Virginia        | 295           | 18,903  | 24,141    | 19,424     |
| 15. Illinois             | 294           | 22,146  | 29,295    | 21,671     |
| 16. Louisiana            | 229           | 19,303  | 25,899    | 18,309     |
| 17. Michigan             | 193           | 22,296  | 28,872    | 21,613     |
| 18. North Carolina       | 188           | 16,187  | 21,487    | 16,004     |
| 19. Kansas               | 178           | 14,261  | 18,929    | 14,330     |
| 20. New Mexico           | 170           | 14,699  | 19,019    | 13,934     |
| 21. Virginia             | 163           | 12,422  | 16,306    | 13,307     |
| 22. Colorado             | 150           | 12,384  | 16,336    | 13,224     |
| 23. Arizona              | 137           | 11,356  | 14,451    | 11,375     |
| 24. Pennsylvania         | 137           | 7,464   | 10,062    | 7,849      |
| 25. Washington           | 130           | 10,719  | 14,778    | 11,706     |
| 26. Oregon               | 120           | 8,614   | 11,524    | 9,276      |
| 27. South Carolina       | 118           | 10,022  | 13,091    | 9,780      |
| 28. New York             | 96            | 7,305   | 9,714     | 7,550      |
| 29. Iowa                 | 72            | 3,124   | 4,229     | 3,377      |
| 30. Wisconsin            | 68            | 3,442   | 4,940     | 3,911      |
| 31. Maryland             | 53            | 6,899   | 8,806     | 6,619      |
| 32. Nebraska             | 51            | 3,252   | 4,409     | 3,546      |
| 33. Montana              | 50            | 1,973   | 2,688     | 2,249      |
| 34. Idaho                | 43            | 2,353   | 3,399     | 2,692      |
| 35. Minnesota            | 42            | 2,075   | 2,975     | 2,333      |
| 36. New Jersey           | 38            | 3,730   | 4,703     | 3,800      |
| 37. Wyoming              | 32            | 1,654   | 2,206     | 1,859      |
| 38. Massachusetts        | 27            | 1,761   | 2,507     | 2,003      |
| 39. Connecticut          | 25            | 1,668   | 2,410     | 1,795      |
| 40. Alaska               | 24            | 1,668   | 2,283     | 1,824      |
| 41. Nevada               | 24            | 1,647   | 2,266     | 1,689      |
| 42. South Dakota         | 24            | 943     | 1,328     | 1,135      |
| 43. Maine                | 22            | 741     | 1,064     | 831        |
| 44. Utah                 | 17            | 709     | 1,022     | 824        |
| 45. New Hampshire        | 14            | 795     | 1,202     | 932        |
| 46. Hawaii               | 13            | 765     | 1,012     | 895        |
| 47. Delaware             | 10            | 900     | 1,156     | 808        |
| 48. Vermont              | 10            | 527     | 741       | 599        |
| 49. North Dakota         | 6             | 365     | 532       | 410        |
| 50. Rhode Island         | 6             | 257     | 382       | 307        |
| 51. District of Columbia | 4             | 491     | 630       | 473        |

Source: Carl H. Royster, ed., *Churches of Christ in the United States, 2000*.

## California Churches of Christ

The history of the Restoration Movement and California Churches of Christ can be divided into three historical periods. The first period covers the 19<sup>th</sup>

century, 1849-1900, under the auspices of the Disciples of Christ. These congregations generally identified as the Disciples, or simply "Christians."

The separate identity of Churches of Christ emerged following the Civil War and was ultimately recognized in the 1906 US census. 1900 is the starting point for the second historical period which culminates with Lynn's 1980 *Missions Bulletin*. The final period covers 1980-2025, which is recorded by the work of Lynn (1980) and Carl Royster through the editions of *The Churches of Christ in the United States* (2000-2018).

## DISCIPLES BEGINNINGS: 1849-1900

The expansion of the Restoration Movement into California began with the discovery of gold in the American River Valley. Thousands of Forty-Niners were drawn to Northern California by the prospect of earthy wealth. From 1849-1854, immigrants flowed into California from Restoration strongholds in Ohio, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Kentucky, and Missouri. Early Disciples pioneers settled in Northern California around Stockton, the Sacramento Valley, and the Sonoma region. They brought their religion with them (Ware 1916).

## Northern California

Among the earliest Disciples pioneers was Thomas Thompson (1797-1872). Thompson was a missionary by nature and a gifted organizer. Born July 7, 1797, in Kentucky, Thompson's family soon moved to the "Platt Purchase," later named Missouri. Here, while still a teen, Thomas was introduced to the Stone-Campbell Movement (Ware 1916).

With his own family in tow, Thompson made the trek to Gold Run, Placer County, in September 1849, where he immediately began preaching among the miners. He preached the first known sermon of the Disciples to a group of miners standing silently in front of his tent, hats in hand and



**Thomas Thompson and wife**

Source: Ware 1916.

heads bowed. The following year he relocated to Coloma, where he continued evangelizing in nearby camps and at his own Miners' Home tavern. Here he baptized Marcus Wills and his nephew J.N.B. Wyatt, the first recorded converts to the Disciples in California.

Thompson's gathering skills bore fruit during the early winter of 1850 in nearby Stockton. Here, he organized a

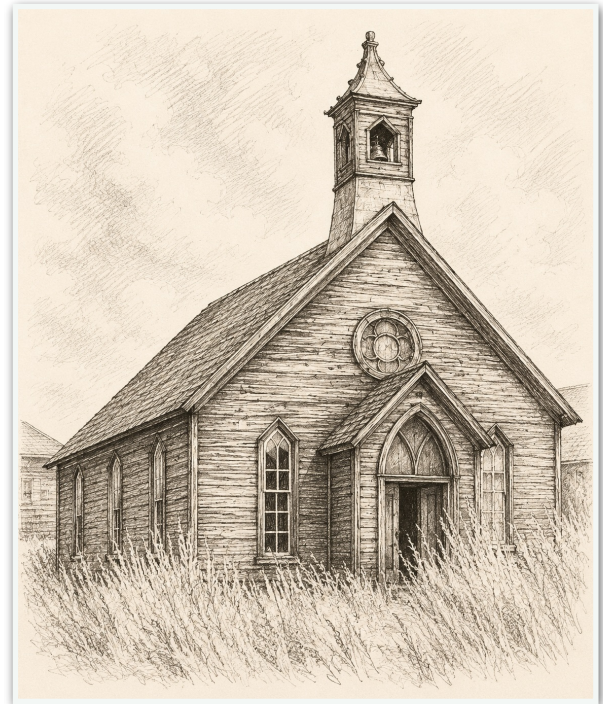
group of Disciples into the first Disciples church in the state. In the spring of 1851 Thompson sold his Miners' Home tavern in Coloma, left the mines, and settled in the Santa Clara Valley. Again, he gathered up scattered Disciples settlers, organizing them into the Santa Clara Christian Church. In a 1853 letter to Dr. W.W. Stevenson, Thompson wrote, *"We are the only two preachers of the Disciples in the State, you at Stockton, the first church and I at Santa Clara, the second (Ware 1916:85)."*

Within just six years, Thompson had worked to transform isolated settlers into a cooperative network, spurring growth across Northern California. In 1853, churches were planted in Sebastopol and Santa Rosa. The Vaca Valley and Gilroy churches followed in 1854. The first known Disciples meeting house was built in Gilroy in 1857. This church was known for its two front doors, one for the men and one for the women, who then seated themselves on their segregated sides of the house (Ware 1916:86-87).

By 1855 there were enough congregations to spur Thompson to propose a plan of co-operation

through an organized state meeting, a common event among Disciples back east. This first state meeting convened in Stockton the fall of 1855. In a small upper room in the business section of town, *"the little company of Disciples met and began the work of State cooperation. There they prayed, they sang and exhorted one another to good works; there they began to plan for the organized work of planting churches and preaching the Gospel throughout the State of California (Ware 1916:92-93)."*

Thompson's lasting contribution was not simply preaching. He gathered scattered disciples into organized congregations then connected those congregations into a cooperative movement. Even in



**Image of a Gold Rush era church house**

these earliest years, three missional characteristics were present: church planting preachers, organization of new congregations, and cooperation among churches.

The Disciples continued to grow and plant churches in Northern California. By 1860 their churches numbered 27 with a membership of 1,223 (Cole 1915:34). The 1860 state meeting attracted thou-



#### PIONEER PREACHERS

Left to Right, Seated—Nathan Porter, G. O. Burnett, Thomas Thompson, Joshua Lawson, Byrum Lewis, J. N. Pendegast. Standing—J. P. Rose, Frank Aldridge, B. F. Standefer, H. C. Hining, A. W. DeWitt, A. V. McCarty, J. W. Craycroft, S. K. Hallum, J. P. McCorkle

#### Pioneer Preachers of California

Source: Ware, *History of the Disciples of Christ in California*, 1916:131.

sands and saw more than 100 baptisms. In 1863, at the height of the Civil War, the Vacaville state meeting had Sunday attendance estimated at 5,000. The next year attendance topped 7,000 with 23 preachers identified in 17 congregations. Alexander Campbell died in 1866, having lived long enough to see the Movement which bore his name stretch from the Atlantic to the Pacific coasts.

Buildings followed in the wake of the expanding Disciples Movement, providing a declaration of presence and permanence. The First Christian Church of Fresno met for the first time in its building October 12, 1885. In San Francisco, a small band of Disciples dedicated their building, the first in the city, on Sunday, January 2, 1887, at 12<sup>th</sup> Street between Mission and Howard. It was the culmination of thirty years of work.

#### Southern California Expansion

Work in the ten “cow counties” of Southern California did not begin until the 1870s when the completion of the transcontinental Pacific Railway offered an easier journey to this healthy destination climate. The first church planting attempt by Disciples occurred in San Bernadino but did not last long. The next attempt by B.F. Standefer resulted in the Downey church, established about 1872. It grew to 40 or 50 members by 1874 (Cole 1959).

In the summer of 1874, W.J.A. Smith and G.W. Linton conducted a canvass of Los Angeles, with its population of more than 7,000. They identified about 25 people with Disciples background. In October 1874, 14 of them met in the Court House near Spring Street and Sixth where they organized a Sunday School of 30 pupils and teachers. On February

28, 1875, this group “covenanted together to form a congregation of Disciples of Christ, called Christians, and constituted a church, accepting the Bible as its only rule of faith and practice (Cole 1959:40).” Twenty-six people signed the charter membership roll, with G.R. Hand, from Downey, as the officiating minister.

Within a decade of the work at Downy, at the State Meeting of 1882, 13 southern California churches were reported in Santa Maria, Lompoc, Los Angeles, Santa Ana, Artesia, Downey, Orange, Glendale, El Monte, San Bernardino, San Luis Rey, Bear Valley, and Moressetta; the last three in San Diego County. Their aggregate membership was about 700.

From 1850-1900, over 170 Disciples Churches had been planted in Southern California, of which over 100 were still meeting. The 1906 Census, the census which officially separated the Churches of Christ from the Disciples, reported 140 organizations of Disciples in California with 134 church edifices and a membership of 19,630 (U.S. Census 1906:241). For Churches of Christ, this census reported 23 organizations with nine edifices and 761 members (U.S. Census 1906:243). These numbers show how few congregations of the California Disciples followed the North/South split back east, where the Disciples were predominant in the North and Churches of Christ in the South.

By 1900 the foundations of a movement had been laid. The Disciples had established congregations throughout Northern California, expanded into Southern California, created mechanisms for cooperation, and developed a missionary impulse that would continue to influence Churches of Christ. Although only a small minority of churches ultimately identified with Churches of Christ after the 1906 separation, the movement mindset they inherited had already exhibited a remarkable ecology for movement making.

## CHURCHES OF CHRIST: 1900–1980

Churches of Christ inherited a missionary DNA from the Disciples. At 1906 with only 23 congregations, a new movement effectively began. Like their Disciples forebears, the planting and growing impetus of this new movement was fueled by church planting preachers, organization of new congregations, and cooperation among churches. The result would be an extraordinary period of expansion.

### A Movement is Planted

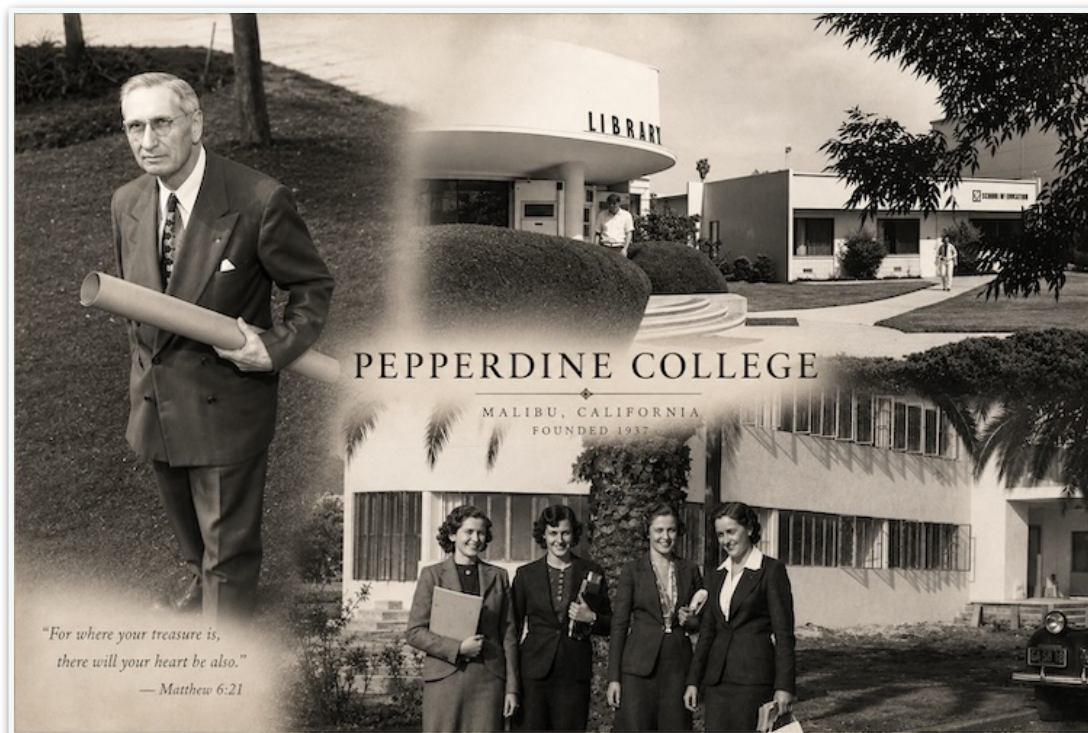
One of the earliest records of this remarkable expansion was reported in the 1915 issues of the *Gospel Advocate*. Reporting from Los Angeles, G.W. Riggs in the special issue, “*The Work in the Cities*,” reported the population of Los Angeles at 600,000, with one congregation, the Sichel Church of Christ. While the work was slow and hard, the church “kept a man in the field most of the time, and by so doing has succeeded in establishing



**Sichel Street Church of Christ, 1910**

Source: *History of the Restoration Movement*.

churches at Santa Ana, San Diego, Downy, Dinuba, Riverside, and Placentia.” News shorts in the May 27 *Gospel Advocate* reported that Riggs, one of the “Nashville Bible School boys,” had established almost every church then in Southern California, including a new congregation in Whittier and another



**George Pepperdine, Watts campus, and Coeds, 1938**

Source: Pepperdine University.

about to start in Huntington Park (*Gospel Advocate* 1915:176, 524).

The most comprehensive record from this period comes from the historical directory, *West Coast Christian, Special California Edition*, published by James "Jimmy" Lovell in 1942. Lovell's introduction states, "This special edition includes a brief history of the growth of the Church in California, historical sketches of individual congregations, directories of congregations and preachers in the state, pictures of many of the preachers, other pictures of historical interest, and features on three California institutions offering Christian training to youth (Lovell 1942:1)." One of those institutions was George Pepperdine College. Pepperdine College was inaugurated in 1937, in part, as a move to strengthen the home-grown talent of preachers and members through "building in the student a Christ-like life, a love for the church, and a passion for the souls of mankind (Clark and Bates 1959)."

In his 24-page document Lovell provided short, descriptive paragraphs on 139 churches with two

pages of pictures of preachers. At the end, Lovell listed 138 preachers and 156 churches in 32 of the state's 58 counties. Table 2 shows age details for the 129 churches for which Lovell provided Date Begun information.

With at least 156 churches planted by 1942 with an average age of 13 years, the Churches of Christ were not merely adding churches, they were planting the first generation of a movement of churches. Seventy-nine, 61%, of the

**Table 2: COC in 1942**

*Churches by their Year Begun dates.*

| Statistic | Value              |
|-----------|--------------------|
| Count     | 129                |
| Oldest    | 1873 — Forestville |
| Mean      | 1929               |
| Median    | 1935               |
| Mode      | 1938 (13)          |

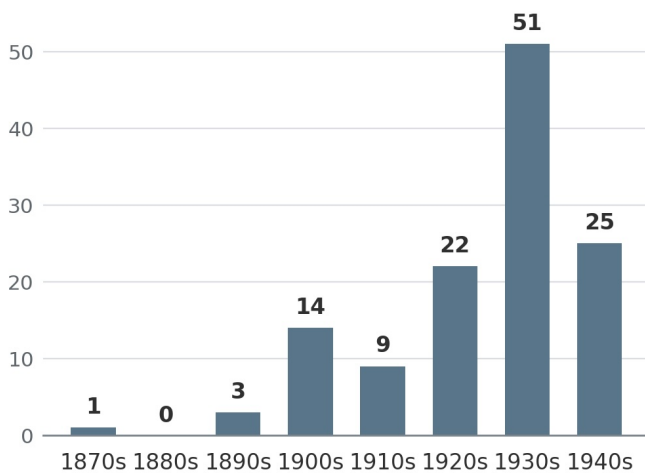
Source: Lovell, "West Coast Christian," 1942.

129 churches above had been planted in just the 12 years preceding Lovell's publication. Figure 1 plots the years these first churches began by decades from the 1870s to 1942.

These churches were planted by an active corps of preachers who were leading their churches to grow and multiply. Some of the better known men Lovell

**Figure 1: COC Churches Planted, 1870-1942**

*Churches planted by decade.*



Source: Lovell 1942.

featured included James D. Bales (1915-1995), author and future professor at Harding University; A.L. Cassius (1890-1982), a founder of the Black Churches of Christ in Los Angeles; T.B. Larimore (1843-1929), one of the most widely known and successful evangelists among Disciples and Churches of Christ; and Ira Y. Rice Jr. (1917-2001), missionary and founder of the journal *Contending for the Faith*. These men were powerhouse preachers hard at work to plant and grow churches in California. The results were evident.

## The Movement Expands

Lovell published a second historical edition titled *History of the Churches of Christ in California*, in 1959. This edition recorded six decades of accelerated growth. Figure 2 illustrates the geographic saturation of the Movement across the first six decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century as Lovell recorded it in 1959. The figure provides a general picture of how churches became established in 56 of the 58 California counties via church planting. Lovell

listed 420 churches in 1959. He provided the Year Begun for 357 of them. Forty-eight churches were listed as having begun since 1942 but without a specific year. These churches were added to the total churches begun in the 1940s. Lovell listed the names of 15 churches without any year begun details. These 15 were added to the 1950s totals for representation into the dataset. While these additions are not absolutely accurate, their inclusion is part of the accelerated growth of the Movement in California in the 1940s and 1950s. What began as 23 isolated congregations in 1906 became a statewide movement covering 56 of California's 58 counties by 1959.

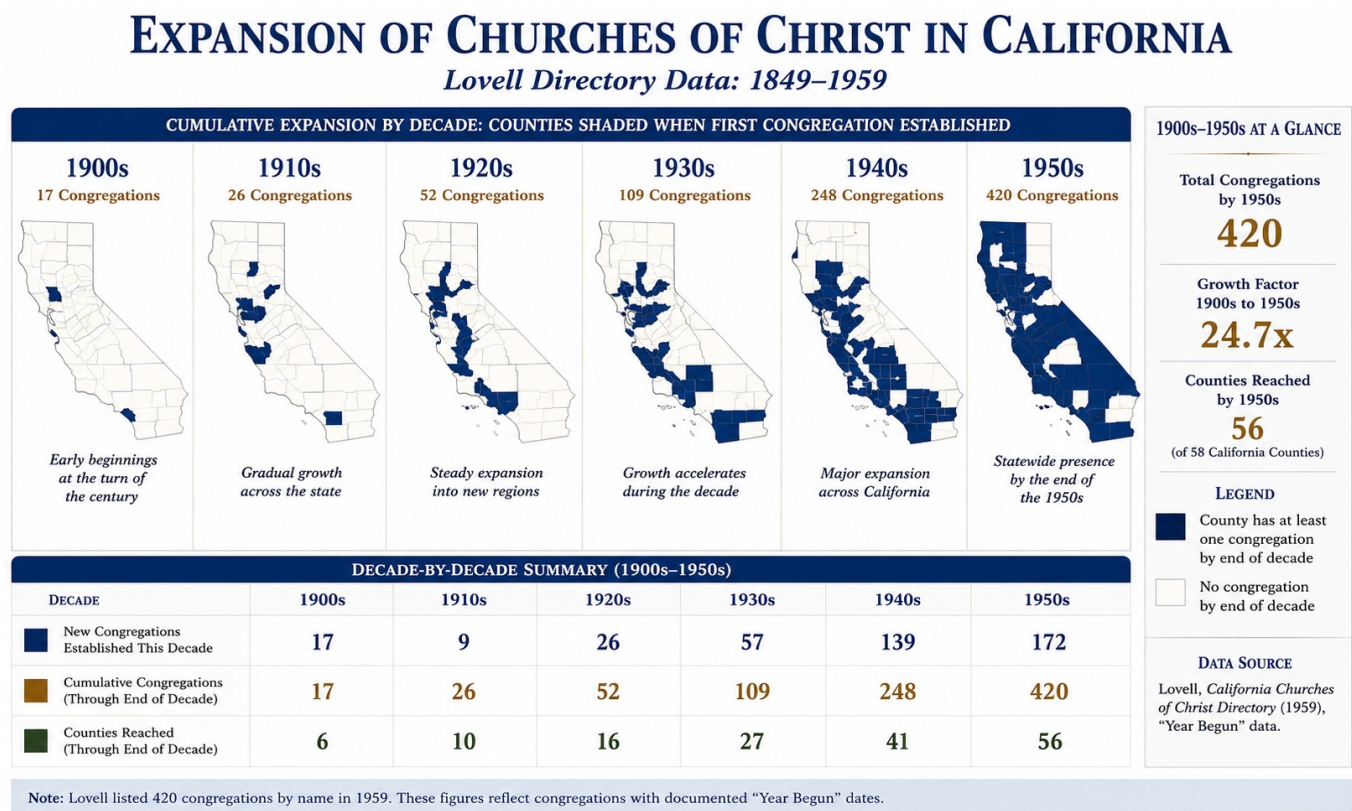
California church planting was in high gear. Of the 420 churches Lovell identified in 1959, 311 of them,



## California Preachers, 1942

Source: Lovell 1942.

**Figure 2. Growth of COC in California, 1873-1959**  
Church expansion across counties via planting of new churches.



Source: Lovell, "History of the Churches of Christ in California," 1959.

74%, had been planted in the preceding two decades, the second generation of churches. To place this growth into standard church growth metrics, from 1942-1959, the total number of churches increased from 109 to 420. The unadjusted percentage change over this 17-year period was 202%. The standardized Adjusted Decadal Growth Rate (DGR) was 92%. This was extraordinary growth.

## The Movement Matures

This amazing period of hyper-accelerated growth was followed by a cooling off period. Growth continued, but at a decelerating pace. Lynn's January

Note: Adjusted Decadal Growth Rate (DGR) is the accepted standard in church growth research as it allows like to like comparisons.

1980 *Missions Bulletin* reported how the California churches fared during this cool down (Table 3).

From 1960 (Lovell, 1959) to 1980 (Lynn), the number of reported congregations increased by 255. Most of this growth occurred in the counties with major cities. Los Angeles County added the most churches with 29. San Diego County added 18 churches, Or-

**Table 3. California Stats for 1980**

*Summarizing the state of the Movement 1980.*

| Measure       | Value  |
|---------------|--------|
| Congregations | 675    |
| Members       | 68,942 |
| Adherents     | 88,565 |
| Average size  | 102    |
| Counties      | 54     |

Source: Mac Lynn Mission Bulletin, January 1980.

ange County (Anaheim) 16, Kern County (Bakersfield) 14, Sacramento County 13, Fresno County 13, and Tulare County (Visalia) 11 churches. Churches of Christ were adding bulk.

As a movement grows larger, it takes increasingly more raw growth to maintain the same rate of percentage growth it had in its early years. A comparison of the census data from Lovell and Lynn shows a slowing of the Movement’s growth (Table 4).

While the 1942–1959 years were characterized by hyper-acceleration—expanding at the Adjusted DGR of 92%—the subsequent 1959–1980 period might be described as stabilization. When looking at raw numbers, 281 churches were added from

works, and promoted church cooperation to advance the gospel. Yet beneath that remarkable success, subtle changes were appearing. Churches continued adding numbers, but the pace of church planting had slowed. The Movement had gained size while quietly losing momentum. The Churches of Christ were adding bulk but losing velocity.

Factors for Growth

Growth of the Movement from 1900-1980 accelerated from minuscule beginnings in the early 1900s, through the booming years of the 1940s and 1950s, ultimately arriving into a mature movement.

Table 4. Growth Rate Comparisons: 1942-1980  
Showing how the number of churches grew across time and by percentages.

| Time Period | Elapsed Years | Beginning Count | Added Churches | Final Count | Raw Total Growth | Adjusted DGR |
|-------------|---------------|-----------------|----------------|-------------|------------------|--------------|
| 1942–1959   | 17            | 139             | 281            | 420         | 202%             | 92%          |
| 1959–1980   | 21            | 420             | 255            | 675         | 61%              | 25%          |
| 1942–1980   | 38            | 139             | 536            | 675         | 386%             | 52%          |

Sources: Lovell West Coast Christian, 1942 and 1959 and Mac Lynn Missions Bulletin, 1980.

1942-1959, slightly more than the 255 churches added between 1959 and 1980. However, the growth velocity declined dramatically. From 1960-1980, the Adjusted DGR fell from 92% to 25% —a decline of nearly three-quarters in the rate of growth.

By 1980 California Churches of Christ had completed their geographic expansion. The Movement had matured from 23 congregations to nearly 700 churches covering the state. The historical record demonstrates that this remarkable expansion was neither spontaneous nor inevitable. It was the result of a movement ecology that expected congregations to reproduce, supported preachers to pioneer new

Between 1960 and 1980 the actual momentum of growth in number of churches slowed by nearly three-quarters, from 92% to 25% Adjusted DGR.

Church growth historians look for reasons for growth (or decline) under two main categories: institutional factors, those items internal to the church, and contextual factors, those items that are external, part of the context in which the church is operating (Waymire and Wagner 1984). The California growth did not happen in a vacuum or by accident. There were identifiable factors that came together to produce such explosive growth.

Institutional Factors

Lovell’s historical vignettes told how new churches started in personal homes, rented halls (a music academy, Independent Order of Foresters, Boy

Scouts) in schools, and in other churches (Adventist, Baptist, Hispanic Baptist), and even the stockroom in a store building. Tent meetings and gospel meetings in new communities were favorite activities for starting new churches. What drove these activities for starting new churches were three sources: evangelizing preachers, churches planting churches, and a sense of identity that promoted cooperation.

**Evangelizing Preachers.** A migration of new people moved to California during, and immediately following, WWII, which brought members of Churches of Christ to California. These loosely affiliated members often looked for other Church of Christ transplants in their new communities or were gathered up by evangelizing preachers.

Many preachers were dynamic evangelists and church planters. Hugh Tiner (1908-1981) arrived in California in 1925 to become a leader and builder of Southern California churches and second president of George Pepperdine College (Lovell 1949). Lovell mentioned Tiner's efforts at Culver Palms, Huntington Park, Inglewood, Uptown in Long Beach, York Blvd and Vermont Avenue in Los Angeles, Pasadena, Santa Monica, and Upland.

Other notable preachers he mentioned were Batsell Barrett Baxter (1916-1982), first president of Pepperdine College, at Whittier, Los Angeles Central, York Blvd and North Long Beach, and James D. Bales at San Francisco, San Leandro, and Turlock.

Amos L. Cassius provides another example of a dynamic church planting preacher. Cassius arrived in Southern California from Iowa in 1923. He established the first Black Church of Christ in Southern California in Watts. He ultimately preached 35 years at the Compton Avenue Church of Christ. Along with his located work, Cassius established and strengthened other congregations in California—Figueora, West Adams Blvd, Normandie, Bakersfield and Riverside—as well as churches across the western U.S. His impact launched a fellowship of Black Churches of Christ. Cassius was honored by Pep-

perdine University in 1981 with its Distinguished Diploma of Honor. In announcing this honor, the *Firm Foundation* called Cassius "The Dean of West Coast Preachers" (Rushford 1981:532). Cassius's story exemplifies another important dimension of California's movement ecology: establishing the Movement as a multi-ethnic entity. The development of African American Churches of Christ and their leaders gave that part of the fellowship its own vitality and institutional presence.



Central Church of Christ, 12th and Hoover Streets, Los Angeles — Largest and finest Church of Christ building in California

### Central Church of Christ, Los Angeles

Source: Lovell, *West Coast Christian*, 1942.

**Churches Planting Churches.** Lovell's vignettes often describe the pride churches had in starting new churches by sending out their members and leaders. Sichel Street in Los Angeles started the Central church, whose members assisted planting Huntington Park, Hollywood, Vermont Avenue, Brawley, and a Japanese church. The Rheem & San Pablo church in Richmond was planted by 55 members sent from the 36<sup>th</sup> & Macdonald church. The Santa Ana church in Orange County started a second church in Santa Ana as well as churches in Fullerton, Orange, and Costa Mesa. The El Cajon church in San Diego was the originating church for many other churches planted in the county.

**Shared Identity and Cooperation.** As for identity and cooperation, Lovell made this statement in 1942:

*"Of especial interest is the fact that, so far as we know and can be reasonably sure, every congregation listed in the directory is in full fellowship with every other congregation. Every preacher in California is welcome in the pulpit of every other congregation. That is progress—and Christianity (Lovell 1942:3)."*

Lovell believed the Movement's unity was not merely theological; it expressed itself in practical cooperation for evangelism and church planting. He did not gloss over the division between the Disciples and Churches of Christ over instrumental music in worship and missionary societies. He also recognized that the mutual support of orphan's homes and other institutions had caused a rift. Yet the overarching tenor in his work, when viewed in its entirety, was that the churches acted with one mind and one heart to seek the lost and expand the church.

To this shared identity the Churches of Christ also presented a cohesive biblical message. They knew the truth they proclaimed and that message of truth answered well the cultural questions of the time.

### **Contextual Factors**

There are also contextual (external) factors that propelled the growth.

**A Growing Population.** First, California was growing. California experienced one of the most remarkable periods of population growth in America from 1900-1980; the state's population grew from about 1.5 million to more than 23.6 million—a sixteen-fold increase. Second, this raw growth was accompanied by the development of the American suburb, which was ripe to receive a new generation of churches. Post-WWII saw families burgeon as the Boomer generation was born—and these new families were looking for places to live: suburbia. California's growing population, moving into newly developing

suburbs, was comprised of families exploding with Boomer children. This set the table for growth. The Movement reaped heavily in its ripe harvest field.

**Positive Outlook.** Alongside these population based contextual factors was the fact that American society was coming out of WWII with a newly vetted sense of self and the future. Americans saw a bright future and were open to putting words to the truth that undergirded their experience. There was a general openness to biblical authority. The Restoration ideals, based on a firm sense of the truth, were heard well in suburbia. When this firm sense of truth was energized by dynamic preachers, active churches and a strong sense of identity, the Movement's message connected well with postwar America. With these institutional and contextual factors providing a strong, positive context, the California churches experienced four decades of high octane growth, ultimately becoming the fifth most densely populated state for the Churches of Christ, the only state not in the church's southern heartland.

## **GATHERING THE DATA**

Churches of Christ are a non-hierarchically structured fellowship with a strong sense of congregational autonomy. This means it lacks the organizational structure for collecting and reporting information about what is happening among local churches that can provide insight into what is happening in larger geographies. Along with this lack of reporting structure, there is also a somewhat inherent mistrust or hesitancy towards organized reporting efforts. Dale Jenkins reflects on these realities in a 2024 blog post, raising valid questions for data gatherers (Jenkins, 2024). The following information about the data used for this report is provided to help build trust in the process, the people, and the product. The goal of all those involved has been, and continues to be, to provide this fellowship with good information so better understandings can be gained.

Three datasets are used to look at this third period of California history: 1) the Churches of Christ in the United States (CCUSA) 2003, 2) CCUSA 2018 and 3) the 2025 survey conducted by the Church Research Council (CRC) in conjunction with 21<sup>st</sup> Century Christian. These three datasets provide the datapoints used to track the developing trajectory of California Churches of Christ.

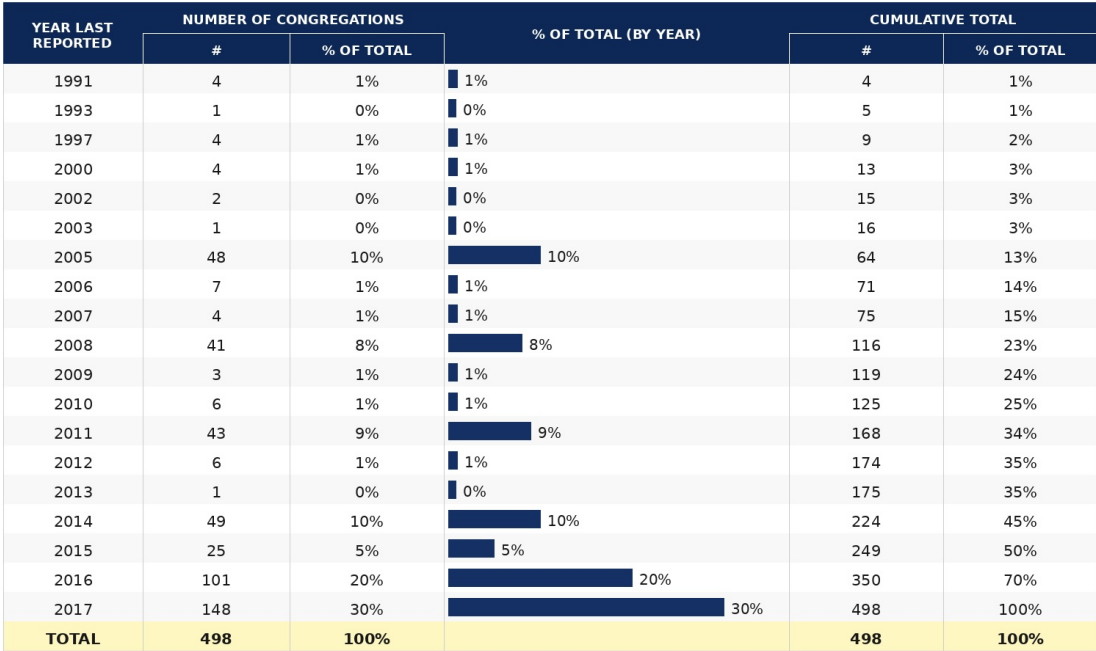
21<sup>st</sup> Century Christian published the CCUSA editions every three years from 1997-2018. To prepare each edition, churches were sent a hardcopy letter asking them to record updates on an information form identified with each church's specific ID number. Returned forms with updated information were entered into the database with the date of their return. Additional updates were gleaned from other publications, correspondence, and word of mouth. Carl Royster, the CCUSA editor, reports that the typical response rate for a new edition ran about 30%.

The Church Research Council is using the 2018 database as its base dataset. This is the most comprehensive dataset available. In preparing the CCUSA 2018 edition, 21<sup>st</sup> Century Christian followed its normal approach of sending an information request form to every congregation in America. The 2018 edition listed 580 California congregations, of which 498 had a date for when their data was last modified. Figure 3 shows the reporting dates of California churches included in the 2018 edition of the CCUSA. Of the 580 recorded churches, 249 (43%) responded in 2016-2017 for the

CCUSA 2018 edition, a remarkable percentage for a fellowship that has no reporting requirement or expectations.

The 2025 dataset was gathered by the Church Research Council. The national survey was created by a ten-person project team from various regions and identities within the national Movement, which

**Figure 3. Congregational Reporting of Data**  
*Years data was updated by California churches for the CCUSA 2018 edition.*



Source: CCUSA, 2018 edition by Carl Royster.

asked for the basic location, contact, and attendance information, like previous CCUSA editions. Additionally, we asked 26 questions about congregational identity, worship practices, discipleship activities, community engagement, and congregational leadership. We used a variety of communication avenues (letters, postcards, advertisements, presentations at events, and personal interaction by a team of over 50 informants) to connect with churches.

Three postal communications went to 573 California churches for which we had postal addresses. We eventually received survey information back from 111 California congregations, 19%. The national response rate was 23%; California churches were not

as responsive as the national average. Of those churches that responded, 94 provided usable attendance information.

### SHIFTING TIDES: 1980-2025

Those acquainted with the ocean shores are familiar with the calm that occurs as tides shift between incoming and outgoing. There is an interlude of quietness. Then, almost imperceptibly, the sea begins to retreat. California Churches of Christ experienced such a moment during the 1980s. Congregations remained numerous. Attendance was still substantial. Buildings were full. Yet beneath these outward signs, the Movement's forward momentum quietly ended. The Movement entered a period of deceleration during which institutional, demographic, and cultural forces slowly combined to reverse the extraordinary momentum of the previous generation.

Up to this point, the California history of Churches of Christ was largely the story of expansion. By the beginning of the 21st century, the story had changed. The Movement that had once established and expanded itself through sustained church planting was entering a different stage of the church/movement life cycle.

### Matured Churches: 1980-2003

As the California Movement entered the 20<sup>th</sup> century, they did so as a fellowship of mature, well-established churches. From 1980-2003 the number of churches increased nominally, from 675 in 1980 to the high water mark of 698 in 2003 (Table 5). The attendance of 61,884 receded from the record 68,942 reported members of 1980, a 13% lower attendance (-4.6% Adjusted DGR). Two churches tied for the largest attendance of 750: the Woodward Park and College churches in Fresno. The average attendance statewide was 89, almost 50 people less than the US average of 137 for churches in 2000 (Figure 4). The median attendance was 60 and the

**Table 5. Summary of California COC, 2003**  
*Summarizing the state of the Movement 2003.*

| Measure    | Value   |
|------------|---------|
| Count      | 698     |
| Attendance | 61,884  |
| Largest    | 750     |
| Mean       | 89      |
| Median     | 60      |
| Mode       | 20 (52) |

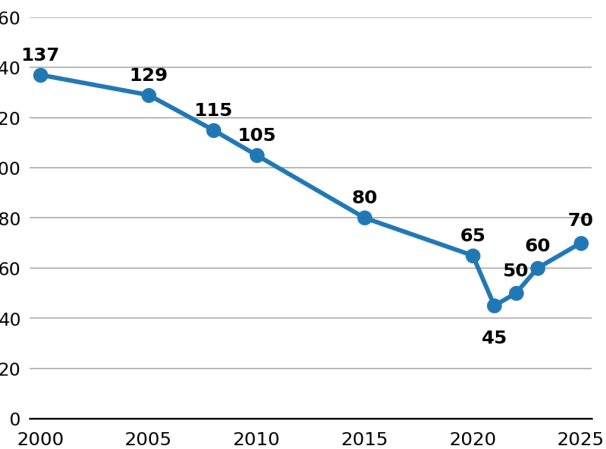
*Source: Carl H. Royster, ed., CCUSA 2003.*

mode, the attendance number most reported, was 20 with 52 churches (7%).

It is notable that while evangelical California witnessed the rapid emergence of megachurches during the 1980s and 1990s, Churches of Christ did not produce any megachurches. They largely remained a decentralized mix of small to medium-sized congregations. Whether this reflected theology, leadership culture, or organizational structure deserves future consideration.

What growth occurred was primarily in metropolitan regions in which Churches of Christ were already well established, rather than expanding into areas

**Figure 4. Median Worship Attendance, 2000-2025**  
*Attendance pattern of American churches.*



*Source: Hartford Institute for Religion Research, EPIC, and Faith Communities Today, Signs of Rebound Amid Uneven Recovery, 2026.*

with fewer churches. The counties with the most churches were Los Angeles 106, San Diego 52, San Bernardino 40, Kern 37, Orange 35, Riverside 33, and Fresno 30. Four counties in the Sierra mountain region of east-central California had no congregations: Alpine, Colusa, Sierra and Mono.

Year Begun information from 2003 was available for 572 churches (Table 6). This data reveals aging within the Movement. The average age of a California Church of Christ in 2003 was 46 years. The oldest church, the Forestville Church of Christ in Sonoma



**Forestville Church of Christ, constructed 1879**  
*Source: [History of the Forestville COC](#).*

County, remained. The average year in which churches were planted was 1957, with half planted before and half planted after 1955. Eighty-seven churches had been planted between 1980-2000. The year with the highest number of churches planted was 1990, with 20 new churches.

Collectively, these statistics on size and age portray a fellowship composed primarily of mature, small, and medium-sized congregations. The Movement lacked larger flagship churches, the type of churches most capable of producing a new trajectory of growth and influence into the dynamically changing California context.

**Table 6. Year Churches Began, 2003**  
*California COC by year planted.*

| Measure     | Value     |
|-------------|-----------|
| Data exists | 572       |
| Earliest    | 1873      |
| Mean        | 1957      |
| Median      | 1955      |
| Mode        | (29) 1990 |
| Average Age | 46        |

*Source: Carl H. Royster, ed., CCUSA 2003.*

### Church Lifecycles

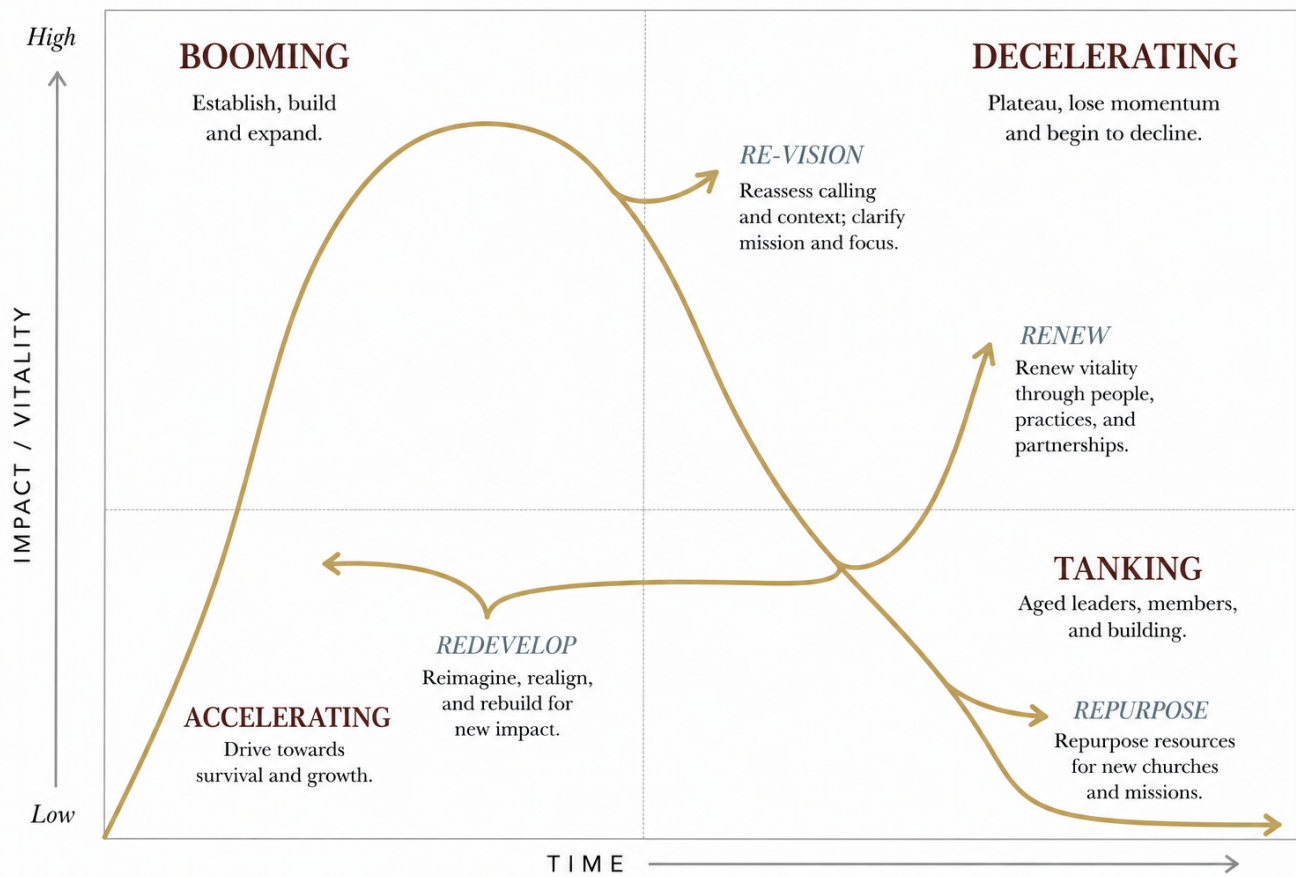
Churches mature through known lifecycle phases. Movements do as well. The average age of individual congregations in cumulation provides insight into the maturity of an entire movement. As churches age together, movements face many of the same lifecycle dynamics observed in individual congregations. The church/movement lifecycle presented in Figure 6 begins in the lower left quadrant

**Accelerating.** These first 10-25 years are defined by a clear sense of purpose that drives the church towards survival and growth. For the California Movement, the Accelerating years were 1900-1930.

**Booming.** If the church survives, it moves into the Booming years, where it makes the shift from surviving to thriving. Churches in their Booming years are typically 25-50 years old. These are the years when the hard work of Accelerating pays off. Attracting new people is easier as many of the programs needed to keep and mature them have developed. Existing leaders have gained confidence and new leaders have often stepped forward. The future looks bright. The California Movement looked to be in its Booming years from 1940-1980. Churches were planted, new members were added, and growth seemed to be easy and everywhere.

**Figure 5. Church/Movement Lifecycle**

Lifecycle stages with options available in each stage.



Source: Granberg, Empty Church, 2022:49.

**Decelerating.** The third quadrant, upper right, is the Decelerating quadrant. This is an interesting quadrant because, for many churches, the early years of Decelerating are often viewed as “the Golden Years.” At the beginning of this phase things feel good. For church leaders these are often the best years. Members are stable, finances are strong, buildings have been built, and all feels well. But slowly, age creeps in, activities slow down, and people begin to wonder what’s happening. As a church (or movement) falls deeper into Deceleration the cry often is heard to, “return to the things we used to do!” People can only do what they know to do, and since they often have experienced few other models, they fall back onto their past.

**Tanking.** The final stage is Tanking, not a kind word, but accurate. At this stage the church is in full sur-

vival mode. Its focus is trying to keep the pieces together to serve a dwindling, aging membership. The programs that served families and children now get consolidated or closed as those constituents disappear. The leaders themselves have often grown old or have left as they entered new life stages. The remaining members are older too; they are tired and their main desire is for someone to take care of things. As resources of energy and ability are lost, finances also lessen. The once full building has grown old by the Tanking stage. Deferred maintenance piles up and renting space to other entities is often seen as the answer to keep the church solvent when, in reality, the church has already lost its life. The Tanking stage can be a long, drawn-out affair.

From 1980-2003 the California Churches of Christ look to have crossed over the top of the curve into

the Deceleration stage. This was the time for the Movement to Revision for a new season of life, to create a new upward trajectory, while its people, resources, and opportunities were numerous, strong and engaged.

## Revisioning Impulses

There were two revisioning impulses that occurred in the context of Pepperdine University. The first was the Pepperdine Bible Lectureships. Under the direction of Jerry Rushford, this annual Bible Lectureship attracted thousands of people to the Malibu campus each spring for a week of Bible teaching, worship, encouragement, and fellowship. Keynote speakers from across the country gave new vision and direction for church leaders and their congregations. The lectureship was a high energy, high motivation event designed to encourage the work at the local church level.

The second impulse came through the short teaching stint of Evertt W. Huffard in Pepperdine's Religion Division from 1984 to 1987. Huffard taught courses in leadership, missions, and intercultural studies while completing his doctoral work at Fuller Theological Seminary. He gathered a cadre of twelve young men preparing for the ministry of preaching in Southern California, his "amazing dozen." Huffard's influence on these men was profound. For the next thirty years and forty years these men filled the pulpits of many of the significant congregations in California. I have known many of these men; their pastoral work has been outstanding.

The effect of these two revisioning impulses might be best described as flattening and extending the top of the lifecycle curve, a significant feat for a movement. However, the historical evidence is that these two impulses were not sufficient to create the vision, direction, and energy needed to launch a re-

visioning inflection point for new vitality and growth among the California churches as a movement.

The 1980-2003 numbers, with few new churches planted and a 13% lower attendance (-4.6% Adjusted DGR), confirmed the historical trend line of California churches had shifted from growth to loss. As the 20<sup>th</sup> century concluded, the Movement no longer planted new churches as its primary growth strategy. Instead, it increasingly depended on existing congregations to hold their own and stay alive.

## The Movement Stopped Reproducing: 2003-2018

As the twenty-first century dawned, California experienced profound cultural, demographic, technological, and economic change. These changes altered patterns of authority, community, communication, and religious participation, creating a more challenging environment for congregational life. At the same time, California's churches were no longer a young movement working to expand. They had grown into an established religious presence. Now, they were increasingly confronting not merely the societal challenges restricting church growth, but those of movement succession—passing on vision, leadership,

and mission from one generation to the next. The question before them was not whether they could plant churches, but whether they could renew themselves in the light of culture transforming shifts.

Comparing the summary data on California churches in 2018 with 2003 displays the Movement's changing trajectory (Table 7). There were 580 churches reported in the database, a loss of 118 churches in less than 20 years. The attendance also fell from 61,884 to 48,105 a loss of 13,779 persons. The largest church, Woodward Park Church of Christ in Fresno, reported attendance of 750. The average

**From 2003 the California Churches of Christ trend line shifted from growth to loss. The question was no longer could they plant churches, but whether they could renew themselves.**

**Table 7. California Stats 2003-2018**

Summarizing the state of the Movement 2003-2018.

| Measure    | 2003   | 2018   | Change   | Adjusted DGR |
|------------|--------|--------|----------|--------------|
| Churches   | 698    | 580    | (118)    | (12%)        |
| Attendance | 61,884 | 48,105 | (13,779) | (15%)        |
| Largest    | 750    | 750    | —        | —            |
| Mean       | 89     | 83     | (6)      | —            |
| Median     | 60     | 54     | (6)      | —            |
| Mode       | 20     | 50     | 30       | —            |

Source: Carl H. Royster, ed., CCUSA 2003, 2018

church size was 83, slightly above the national average which had fallen to 80. Fifty-four was the median size. The most reported size (mode) was 50, reported by 43 churches. The counties with the most churches in them were Los Angeles 92, San Diego 41, San Bernardino 34, Orange 29 and Riverside 28.

Without new churches, the church base continued to age (Table 8). The Forestville Church of Christ remained as the oldest church. The youngest church had been planted in 2016. The average church was now 62 years old, the median was 63 and the mode of 71 was reported by 18 churches. Historically, when churches reach these older ages, unless they have undergone successful revisioning or renewal processes, they seldom are able to start new

**Table 8. Year Begun dates, 2018**

California COC by year planted.

| Measure  | Value     |
|----------|-----------|
| Count    | 498       |
| Oldest   | 1873      |
| Youngest | 2016      |
| Mean     | 1956      |
| Median   | 1955      |
| Mode     | 1947 (18) |

Source: Carl H. Royster, ed., CCUSA 2018.

churches. The Movement's trajectory was shifting from growth to decline.

## The Need for New Churches

Looking at churches nationally, statistician Flavil Yeakley Jr. argued that the number of congregations—not simply the number of members—best predicts a movement's future. Flavil wrote in 2008:

***"All other things being equal, change in number of congregations is the best indication of church growth over the next generation. (Yeakley 2008:27)."***

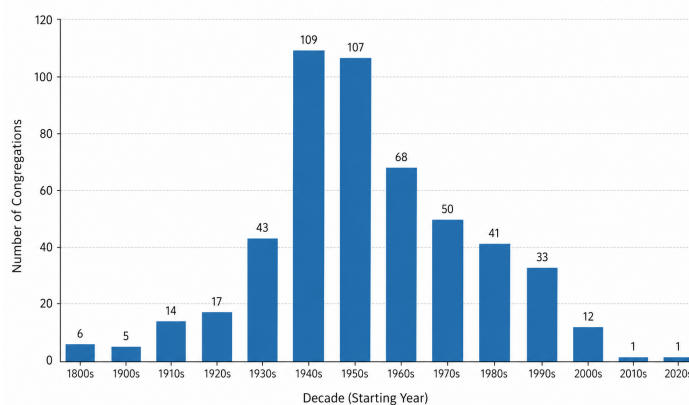
What Flavil meant is that the clearest predictor of future growth is the planting of new churches. The California data of Figure 6 illustrates Yeakley's observation almost perfectly.

Figure 6 tracks the decades in which all California churches with known Years Begun were planted. The majority were planted in the 1940s through the 1960s, the years documented by Lovell (1942, 1959). By the 1970s church planting began to dwindle. As the graph illustrates, almost no church planting has occurred in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Following Yeakley's observation, without a significant, intentional and cooperative movement to plant

**Figure 6. Churches planted by decade**

Known Year Begun dates of COC congregations.



Source: Carl H. Royster, ed., CCUSA 2003, 2018: CRC 2025.

new churches, the most reasonable expectation for California’s churches is a continuing, steady decline.

While church planting is the visible expression of reproduction, beneath it lies a deeper reality. Healthy movements reproduce leaders, vision, ministry practices, and missionary imagination. When these reproductive forces slow, church planting slows, and eventually, the movement declines. The issue was not simply that the churches became older; it was that the Movement had ceased replacing itself.

AGING CHURCHES, AN AGING MOVEMENT: 2018–2025

In 2024, after an 8-year, Covid-induced hiatus, the Church Research Council launched a new effort to understand the state of the U.S. Churches of Christ. Once the national responses were in hand, I worked through the entire 2018 California data set to verify contact information and to identify churches that had closed using Google searches and Google maps. I identified 110 churches as closed (see Note) The total number of California churches for 2025 is 471, down from the 2003 high of 698 (Table 9).

This table shows the Movement continued its downward trend from 2018-2025. The total of 471 churches is 109 churches fewer than were in the 2018. Attendance decreased from 48,105 in 2018 to

Note: A church was determined to be closed when:

1. Google identified it as permanently closed.
2. Google maps showed the building at the address had the name of a church other than Church of Christ.
3. An informant said the church was closed.
4. If there was still no determination, I called the listed phone number. If the number was no longer working, the church was considered closed.
5. Finally, if no identifiable evidence could be found indicating that the church was still meeting it was considered closed.

Table 9. Status comparison, 2003-2025  
Summarizing the state of the Movement 2003-2025.

| Measure    | 2003   | 2018   | 2025   | Change   | Adjusted DGR 2003–2025 |
|------------|--------|--------|--------|----------|------------------------|
| Churches   | 698    | 580    | 471    | (227)    | (16%)                  |
| Attendance | 61,884 | 48,105 | 37,833 | (24,051) | (20%)                  |
| Largest    | 750    | 750    | 650    | —        | —                      |
| Mean       | 89     | 83     | 80     | —        | —                      |
| Median     | 60     | 54     | 56     | —        | —                      |
| Mode       | 20     | 50     | 50     | 50 (32)  | —                      |

Sources: Carl H. Royster, ed., CCUSA 2003, 2018: CRC 2025.

37,833 in 2025, a loss of 10,272 attendees. From 2003-2025 the church Adjusted DGR is -16% and the attendance Adjusted DGR is -20%. One factor that may influence this attendance drop is that while in 2000 committed Christians attended worship almost weekly, in 2025 U.S. churching adults attend worship about two out of every five weekends (Barna Group 2025).

The largest church, Woodward Park, dropped 100 persons in attendance, from 750 to 650. The average attendance for all churches dropped slightly to 80 persons, which is somewhat higher than the 70 persons reported nationwide in 2025 (Figure 4). The median attendance is 56 and the mode of 50 was reported by 32 churches.

The counties (Table 10) with the largest concentration of churches are Los Angeles 77, San Diego 29, Riverside 28, Orange 26, and San Bernardino 25. While the loss of churches in a single county may not feel like much, when taken as a whole, those losses add up. The loss of 227 churches from 2003–2025 represents an overall decline of 33%. The picture is one of continuing loss.

The aging trend also continued (Table 11). For the 427 churches for which Year Begun information is available, the average church is now 70 years old, having been planted in 1955. The median age is 71

**Table 10. County comparison, 2003-2025**  
Churches known in each county.

| County                 | 2003       | 2018       | 2025       | Change       |
|------------------------|------------|------------|------------|--------------|
| Alameda County         | 23         | 18         | 15         | (8)          |
| Alpine County          | 0          | 0          | 0          | 0            |
| Amador County          | 2          | 3          | 3          | 1            |
| Butte County           | 7          | 7          | 5          | (2)          |
| Calaveras County       | 4          | 3          | 2          | (2)          |
| Colusa County          | 0          | 0          | 0          | 0            |
| Contra Costa County    | 21         | 20         | 12         | (9)          |
| Del Norte County       | 1          | 0          | 0          | (1)          |
| El Dorado County       | 4          | 5          | 5          | 1            |
| Fresno County          | 30         | 24         | 17         | (13)         |
| Glenn County           | 2          | 2          | 1          | (1)          |
| Humboldt County        | 4          | 4          | 2          | (2)          |
| Imperial County        | 9          | 6          | 5          | (4)          |
| Inyo County            | 1          | 1          | 1          | 0            |
| Kern County            | 37         | 26         | 22         | (15)         |
| Kings County           | 8          | 5          | 2          | (6)          |
| Lake County            | 3          | 4          | 3          | 0            |
| Lassen County          | 1          | 1          | 1          | 0            |
| Los Angeles County     | 106        | 92         | 77         | (29)         |
| Madera County          | 5          | 6          | 6          | 1            |
| Marin County           | 3          | 1          | 1          | (2)          |
| Mariposa County        | 3          | 2          | 2          | (1)          |
| Mendocino County       | 4          | 3          | 2          | (2)          |
| Merced County          | 10         | 7          | 7          | (3)          |
| Modoc County           | 2          | 2          | 1          | (1)          |
| Mono County            | 0          | 0          | 0          | 0            |
| Monterey County        | 10         | 9          | 8          | (2)          |
| Napa County            | 2          | 2          | 1          | (1)          |
| Nevada County          | 7          | 2          | 1          | (6)          |
| Orange County          | 35         | 29         | 26         | (9)          |
| Placer County          | 7          | 6          | 6          | (1)          |
| Plumas County          | 2          | 2          | 2          | 0            |
| Riverside County       | 33         | 28         | 28         | (5)          |
| Sacramento County      | 21         | 21         | 20         | (1)          |
| San Benito County      | 2          | 2          | 2          | 0            |
| San Bernardino County  | 40         | 34         | 25         | (15)         |
| San Diego County       | 52         | 41         | 30         | (22)         |
| San Francisco County   | 8          | 7          | 5          | (3)          |
| San Joaquin County     | 21         | 18         | 14         | (7)          |
| San Luis Obispo County | 9          | 8          | 7          | (2)          |
| San Mateo County       | 9          | 6          | 5          | (4)          |
| Santa Barbara County   | 10         | 7          | 5          | (5)          |
| Santa Clara County     | 15         | 14         | 11         | (4)          |
| Santa Cruz County      | 2          | 2          | 2          | 0            |
| Shasta County          | 9          | 5          | 5          | (4)          |
| Sierra County          | 0          | 0          | 0          | 0            |
| Siskiyou County        | 3          | 2          | 2          | (1)          |
| Solano County          | 8          | 13         | 13         | 5            |
| Sonoma County          | 12         | 10         | 9          | (3)          |
| Stanislaus County      | 20         | 18         | 15         | (5)          |
| Sutter County          | 4          | 3          | 3          | (1)          |
| Tehama County          | 4          | 2          | 1          | (3)          |
| Trinity County         | 2          | 1          | 0          | (2)          |
| Tulare County          | 25         | 19         | 15         | (10)         |
| Tuolumne County        | 4          | 2          | 2          | (2)          |
| Ventura County         | 19         | 16         | 11         | (8)          |
| Yolo County            | 6          | 6          | 4          | (2)          |
| Yuba County            | 7          | 3          | 1          | (6)          |
| <b>Total</b>           | <b>698</b> | <b>580</b> | <b>471</b> | <b>(227)</b> |

Sources: Carl H. Royster, ed., CCUSA 2003, 2018: CRC 2025.

**Table 11. Year Begun dates, 2025**  
California COC by year planted.

| Measure | 2025      |
|---------|-----------|
| Count   | 427       |
| Oldest  | 1833      |
| Mean    | 1955      |
| Median  | 1954      |
| Mode    | 1947 (15) |

Source: CRC 2025.

and the year that saw the most churches planted was 1947, almost 80 years ago. Only 14 churches were identified as having begun since 2000.

Two important observations deserve consideration from the age and size tables. First, the older age of most California Churches of Christ means there are few people in our midst who, like W.L. Fletcher, personally remember California's high growth years. The Movement gradually lost not only the institutional knowledge of how that growth happened, it also lost the collective emotional experience of what a reproducing movement actually looks and feels like. This makes it even harder for church leaders today to imagine any existence other than maintenance or decline.

Second, the experience of Heritage21 is that churches that are older than 50 years, have an attendance below 50, and an average age of 50 among its attenders are most at risk of closing (Granberg 2022: 56-57). Today, this includes almost half of all California Churches of Christ.

## Churches Reporting Survey Information

While we can extrapolate from history what California Churches of Christ are like today (Table 9), we do have data on how 110 of them changed from 2018-2025 (Table 12). As a group, these churches lost 4,379 in average attendance. Eighty-three churches (75%) lost attendees. The average church lost 40

**Table 12. Reporting Churches 2025**

*Status change reported by churches, 2018-2025.*

| Measure            | Change  |
|--------------------|---------|
| Count              | 110     |
| Attendance         | (4,379) |
| Growing Churches   | 5       |
| Declining Churches | 83      |
| Largest            | (305)   |
| Mean               | (40)    |
| Median             | (20)    |
| Mode               | 0 (22)  |

Source: CRC 2025.

people in their attendance with the median loss of 20. Only 5 churches reported any attendance growth, totaling 84 new people. Twenty-two churches, the mode, reported no attendance change. The largest loss of 305 was a drop from 525 attendees in 2018 to 220 in 2025. It should stagger us to see 83 churches losing 4,379 attenders and just five churches adding 84 new people—in seven years.

**Lifespan Insights.** Churches tend to live the length of a person's life span, 70-90 years, and their attention and capabilities track the human age phases as well, i.e. growing years, childbearing, building, maintaining, and declining.

Churches reproduce new churches most readily during years 10-25, the church childbearing years. From 30-50 years, the building years, the probability of planting other churches declines as the church's attention moves inward. After 50 years, unless the church has undergone a thorough generational metamorphosis, it moves into its maintenance and ultimately its declining years, where its ability to reproduce dries up as its attention turns toward legacy maintenance and an effort to minimize decline and extend life for the benefit of its remaining members. The planting of new churches by older churches is

rare unless there is an intentional decision to repurpose legacy resources for new church planting. This life process is illustrated in the California church history.

**Generational Insights.** Along with life span, there is

**Churches reproduce new churches most readily during years 10 to 25, the church childbearing years.**

also a generational aspect to churches. When churches are planted, they are imprinted with the characteristics of the generation that planted them—their needs, motives, and cultural stories. This DNA imprint of the planting generation can carry the church through its second generation (the children) and into the third generation (grandchildren). As the third generation comes of age, they often find the church no longer meets their needs, motives, and cultural stories. The third generation begins to leave. Like living ecosystems, church movements depend upon continual reproduction, leadership renewal, and the transmission of vision across generations.

If churches, and movements, have a limited period in which they are most likely to reproduce, then a movement's long-term vitality depends on a continuing succession of churches entering that reproductive state. When a movement's ecological processes weaken, decline becomes increasingly difficult to reverse (Granberg 2018).

By 2003, the California churches had reached an age that required them both to revitalize and to plant the next generation of churches for the Movement to retain its growth vitality (Table 13). From 2018 to 2025, the Movement continued to drift deeper into Deceleration. It may enter the Tanking phase of the lifecycle in the next 10-15 years as the Boomer generation passes away and the churches they kept alive close (Ryan Burge 2026).

**Table 13. Churches by Age 2025**  
California COC by year planted.

| Measure | 2025      |
|---------|-----------|
| Count   | 427       |
| Oldest  | 1833      |
| Mean    | 1955      |
| Median  | 1954      |
| Mode    | 1947 (15) |

Source: CRC 2025.

## Closed churches

When we ask questions about churches that close, it is good to have data in hand. Our 2025 survey identified 110 churches as closed that were listed in the 2018 edition of the CCUSA (Table 14). The largest closed church had an average attendance of 325 in 2018; 6 churches had attendance between 200-300 and 9 between 100-200 in 2018. From 2018, the closed churches had a mean attendance of 54, a median of 33, and the mode was an attendance of 20 persons by 17 churches.

**Table 14. Summary of Closed Churches**  
Sizes of closed churches.

| Measure    | 2025    |
|------------|---------|
| Largest    | 325     |
| Mean       | 54      |
| Median     | 33      |
| Mode       | 20 (17) |
| Total Loss | (5,893) |

Source: CRC 2025.

While size is an important marker for risk of closure, age is another factor (Table 15). The oldest closed church, the Church of Christ at Pomona, was planted in 1898. The average and the median age of churches that closed was 63 years with a mode of 71

(6 churches). These numbers support the idea that churches most in danger of closing are older than 50 years of age and have attendance below 50.

**Table 15. Closed Churches by Age 2025**  
Closed churches by year planted.

| Measure | Year Begun | Age |
|---------|------------|-----|
| Oldest  | 1898       | 127 |
| Mean    | 1962       | 63  |
| Median  | 1962       | 63  |
| Mode    | 1954 (6)   | 71  |

Source: CRC 2025.

## Church Size for the Movement

Churches of Christ are a fellowship with a majority of small and medium sized churches. This is an important insight for movement growth, since it is the larger churches that most often generate growth. Table 16 compares church size across the years 2003, 2018, and 2025, the churches that were designated closed, and how Churches of Christ look across the U.S. The California churches are reasonably comparable in the House/Family size to our national percentage. They have run a bit larger than the US percentages in the Relational and Small Neighborhood churches. California has fewer of the larger size churches. In 2025 there are no churches with an average attendance of 750 or more. The observation was made earlier that California Churches of Christ produced no mega churches this century while California has the largest concentration of megachurches in the nation (Thumma and Bird). Given California has such a strong megachurch presence, future research should investigate why Churches of Christ did not produce any California megachurches.

As a state, California tracks with the Churches of Christ nationwide in that the smallest churches make up the largest percent. Because of their high volunteer orientation and the generalist nature of their

**Table 16. Size Comparisons from 2003-2025**  
*Size groupings for COC.*

| Church Sizes                | 2003        | 2018        | 2025        | US          |
|-----------------------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|
| <b>House/Family</b>         | 286         | 243         | 195         |             |
| (less than 50 attendees)    | 41.0%       | 41.9%       | 41.4%       | 45.4%       |
| <b>Relational</b>           | 144         | 123         | 103         |             |
| (50–79 attendees)           | 20.6%       | 21.2%       | 21.9%       | 17.4%       |
| <b>Small Neighborhood</b>   | 117         | 110         | 95          |             |
| (80–124 attendees)          | 16.8%       | 19.0%       | 20.2%       | 12.6%       |
| <b>Large Neighborhood</b>   | 111         | 70          | 53          |             |
| (125–249 attendees)         | 15.9%       | 12.1%       | 11.3%       | 13.8%       |
| <b>Large Program</b>        | 38          | 33          | 25          |             |
| (250–749 attendees)         | 5.4%        | 5.7%        | 5.3%        | 9.4%        |
| <b>Very Large Corporate</b> | 2           | 1           | 0           |             |
| (750–999 attendees)         | 0.3%        | 0.2%        | 0.0%        | 0.6%        |
| <b>Mega Church</b>          | 0           | 0           | 0           |             |
| (1000+ attendees)           | 0.0%        | 0.0%        | 0.0%        | 0.6%        |
| <b>Total Churches</b>       | <b>698</b>  | <b>580</b>  | <b>471</b>  |             |
| <b>Total %</b>              | <b>100%</b> | <b>100%</b> | <b>100%</b> | <b>100%</b> |

Sources: Carl H. Royster, ed., CCUSA 2003, 2018; CRC 2025.

ministers, small churches seldom generate movement making activity (Granberg January 2026).

When comparing the size of churches that closed with the size of churches historically, the closed churches were disproportionately smaller at 65% in the Below 50 size category compared to the 41% historically. This again supports the fact that the smaller the church the more at risk it becomes. The reasons for this are several. Small churches often operate at the limits of their financial capacity. The loss of one good giver to death, illness, or a move can push them to insolvency. Small churches also tend to have lost their better leaders. The experience of Heritage 21 is that churches below 50 seldom have capable, functional leaders. Those leaders have already left.

Also in the leadership category, these churches seldom have paid ministers. If they do pay a minister, it is usually someone who lives elsewhere and travels to preach for the church (and perhaps lead the song

service, prayers and communion, and teach the Bible class as well). This is a life support tactic used to sustain a diminishing church.

In the larger church categories, those 250 and above, California has only 5% of its congregations, while the Churches of Christ in the US have 10%. As was explained in the large church *Insight Report*, these largest churches are the churches that have generative capacity for movement making (Granberg April 2026). They are driven by a specific understanding of their mission and they have multiple ministers on staff that are able to work in specialty ministry areas, which allows them to develop specific programs. Larger churches also have a more substantial financial base that gives them capacity to fund projects and activities beyond themselves. With such a small minority of churches in the larger church sizes, expectation for future growth is minimal and geographic contraction is likely to occur as smaller churches begin closing at a more rapid rate.

## CONCLUSION

Church movements are complex entities. Social context, timing, leadership, and courage—along with the Spirit of God—are all part of the recipe in the growth ecology of a church movement. Such movements cannot be understood simply by counting congregations or measuring attendance. The questions of why movements emerge, how they flourish, and the causes for their renewal or gradual loss of vitality are the questions which this In-Depth Report has attempted to provide some insight.

The history of California Churches of Christ tells a larger story than the rise and decline of a collection of congregations. It illustrates the ecology and life cycle of a movement whose vitality depends upon reproduction across generations.

Churches of Christ grew into a movement in California because leaders multiplied, churches reproduced, and mission was passed from one generation of churches to the next. As the Movement aged, its

reproductive processes slowed until, in these last 25 years, it lost its reproductive capacity. If the California Movement continues on its present trajectory, by mid-century California Churches of Christ may be reduced to a diminished and increasingly marginal presence in the California religious landscape (for examples see Hayward 2015).

The California experience therefore raises a question for Churches of Christ beyond California: **What practices enable a movement of churches to renew itself across generations?** If the vitality of a movement depends upon the continual reproduction of churches, leaders, and mission, then renewal cannot be achieved merely by preserving existing churches. It requires recovering the capacity to reproduce them.

W.L. Fletcher's question, "*Didn't we used to have churches in California?*" now carries a different weight. The historical record suggests that the more important question is not whether California once had a Movement, but whether that Movement can learn to reproduce once again.

## What Might We Do?

Things do not have to stay as they are today. We have choices we can make that may alter, if not redirect the current decline trajectory. It is possible to address the current hard challenges with some bold strategies. Four strategic priorities emerge from this analysis.

### Strengthen Healthy Churches

First, the existing church body needs to strengthen and mobilize its remaining, healthy churches. Healthy churches provide the platform of resources, experience, and support from which successful church planting can best rise. As healthy churches engage in and learn from church planting, they have the opportunity to revision and renew themselves, creating a virtuous cycle of health and growth.

### Restore Apostolic Leadership

Second, restore the presence of apostolic leadership within our leadership system. Apostolic leaders are not apostles like the twelve. They are apostles like Barnabas (Acts 14:14), Timothy and Titus (2 Cor. 8:23 and 1 Th. 1:1 and 2:6), men entrusted with spreading the Gospel and sent into the mission fields of our nation and the rigors of starting new churches. Apostolic leaders are people who make new things happen. Early California preachers like Hugh Tiner, A.L. Cassius, and Batsell Baxter were such men. They and others energized the Movement in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, boldly proclaiming the Word of God, making disciples and starting churches. Somehow, in the transition years between 1980-2000, the role of the apostolic leader was lost. The diminution of the role of preachers to the state of hired staff has not served the Movement well.

### Create Collaborations

Third, organize and create collaborative processes to help renew existing churches and plant new churches in those counties and cities where the California populations are densest: Los Angeles, San Diego, and Bakersfield in the south; Fresno, Sacramento, and San Francisco in the north. Heritage21 has helped organize a pilot program for this called Common Call San Diego. Under this umbrella there has been training of church leaders and action plans for renewing churches. Each of the 6 cities above needs such an effort.

### Fund Church Planting

Finally, church planting needs to be funded. Much California church real estate is highly valued but inefficiently (and ineffectively) used. Since few of the existing churches have the resources to lead and finance church planting efforts, we look to those older, declining churches that will close to repurpose their real estate for the planting of the next generation of churches. If we believe Jesus was serious about stewardship in his Parable of the Talents (Mt.

25:14-30), we will not leave our Master's money buried in dirt. We will invest it in the next generation of churches so the name and fame of God will be spread.

**May the God of the Word lead us through the Word of God to creatively engage the World of God.**

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