


# Theology Matters: Comparing the Traits of Growing and Declining Mainline Protestant Church Attendees and Clergy

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**Abstract** Using surveys, this study gathered and examined demographic and religious characteristics of attendees and clergy of a group of growing mainline Protestant churches in Canada and compared them to those from declining mainline Protestant churches from the same geographical region and group of denominations. In total, 2255 attendees from 22 churches (13 declining and 9 growing) participated along with their church's clergy ( $N = 29$ ). Several notable differences between the characteristics of growing and declining churches were identified. When other factors were controlled for in multivariate analysis, the theological conservatism of both attendees and clergy emerged as important factors in predicting church growth.

**Keywords** Mainline Protestantism · Church growth · Theological conservatism · Canada

## Introduction

This study compares the demographic and religious characteristics of attendees and clergy of growing mainline Protestant churches in southern Ontario with the characteristics of declining mainline Protestant churches from the same area and the same group of denominations, to identify significant differences that may be predictors of growth or decline. Since there is an association between theological conservatism and church growth that has been supported by some researchers but

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disputed by others, this study specifically investigates the relationship between the degree of theological conservatism of clergy and congregants, on the one hand, with church growth, on the other, in this group of denominationally-similar churches.

## Literature Review

Canadian research on Protestant churches over the past several decades has documented the sustained numerical decline of mainline Protestant denominations and their congregations since the 1960s, which is often contrasted with the relative growth or stability of conservative Protestant or evangelical<sup>1</sup> denominations and congregations in the same period (e.g. Bibby 1993: 41; Burkinshaw 1995: 5; Bowen 2004: 276–277, 278–279; Flatt 2013: 229–249). Since the conservative Protestant denominations in Canada tend to be substantially more theologically conservative than mainline Protestant denominations, which are often described as theologically liberal, some have pointed to these theological differences as a partial explanation for the markedly different numerical fortunes of these groups (e.g. Burkinshaw 1995: 251–257; Flatt 2013: 245–246; Reimer and Wilkinson 2015: 62), while others have disputed the connection between theological orientation and growth or concluded that its role is minimal when compared with other factors (e.g. Bibby 1987: 25, 29–30).

The Canadian debate has taken place in the context of American church research, which has also been wrestling with this question since at least the 1970s. In his book *Why Conservative Churches are Growing*, Kelley (1972) famously highlighted the link between conservatism and growth, but his “strictness thesis” argued that this link existed because of the high demands conservative churches placed on their members, and not primarily because of their theological positioning. Iannaccone’s “Why Strict Churches are Strong” (1994) provided partial support for Kelley’s thesis, along with further theoretical development, emphasizing the role of strictness in eliminating “free riders” in favour of committed members who produce the greatest rewards and benefits for the group. In the two decades since the publication of Iannaccone’s version of the strictness thesis, several studies have lent support to its major tenets (e.g., Iannaccone et al. 1995; Finke et al. 2006; Scheitle and Finke 2008) while findings from other research have questioned its absolute validity (e.g., Tamney 2005; Tamney and Johnson 1997, 1998). Still other recent research has emphasized that strictness is just one factor among many (e.g., fertility, evangelical theology, retention of youth) that contribute to congregation growth (Hout et al. 2001; Olson and Perl 2001, 2005; Tamney et al. 2003; Thomas and Olson 2010; cf. Bibby and

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<sup>1</sup> Among North American Protestants there is a high degree of overlap between the categories “conservative Protestant” and “evangelical,” and Canadian researchers often use them as rough equivalents (e.g. Bibby 1987: 26; Reimer 2003: 6; Bowen 2004: 24). In this article we use “conservative theology” or “theologically conservative” to refer to a set of beliefs and dispositions that are typical of conservative Protestants and evangelicals, but that may be held by those who do not belong to conservative Protestant or evangelical denominations or who would not self-identify as such.

Brinkerhoff 1983, 1994; Bouma 1979; Hadaway and Roozen 1993a, b; Hoge and Roozen 1979; McKinney and Hoge 1983; Perry and Hoge 1981).

A significant modification to the strictness thesis was made by Stark and Finke (2000) who incorporated the strictness thesis into a larger theory of religious growth and decline in *Acts of Faith: Exploring the Human Side of Religion*. In this and related works, Stark and Finke argue that not only the right level of strictness of religious groups, but also their innovativeness in presenting their message, and their belief in a God who is active in the life of their members, are important determinants of growth (Stark and Finke 2000; Finke and Stark 2001, 2005). They ultimately argue that adherence to conservative theology is the root cause of growth, because it underlies these other growth-producing characteristics. In their historical survey of church membership in the United States, *The Churching of America, 1776–2005* (1992; rev. ed. 2005), Finke and Stark further attempted to concisely explain the overall growth of conservative Protestant churches and the decline in mainline Protestant churches in the US by appealing to the presence or absence of conservative theological orientation and the three characteristics (listed above) linked to that orientation (Finke and Stark 2005: 248–253). Citing research that they and others have conducted, they argue that mainline Protestant congregations that believe and practice conservative theology grow even while the vast majority of others within their denomination decline (Finke and Stark 2005: 277–278; c.f., Finke and Stark 2001; McKinney and Finke 2002; Stark and Finke 2000).

While the related factors of strictness and conservatism have been the focus of much church growth research in the US, some studies have explored other determinants of growth. Several of these studies are of particular relevance to the current study as they too focus primarily on internal factors including the religious characteristics of congregants.

Analyzing survey data from a nationally representative sample of America's five largest mainline Protestant denominations, Donahue and Benson (1993: 225) sought to determine the extent to which "beliefs and attitudes held by [church] members" influence church growth or decline. Unlike our study where entire congregations completed questionnaires, here the surveys were completed by pastors and select lay leaders within the church. Donahue and Benson's (1993) main finding was there is little proof that style or content of belief is linked to growth or decline; "[c]hurches with theologically and/or socially liberal members are as likely to grow as congregations with a more conservative orientation" (239).

Looking specifically at evangelization efforts, Roof, Hoge, Dyble and Hadaway (1979 as cited in Hadaway 1993) surveyed clergy within United Presbyterian Church in the USA and found a positive but weak relationship between recruitment activity and church growth. Conversely, in two later studies, Hadaway (1991, 1993) found strong evidence that higher levels of evangelistic outreach/recruitment activity are associated with higher rates of membership growth at the congregational level. In his first study of Southern Baptist congregations whose growth had flattened he concluded that "Goal setting [regarding number of new members sought] and evangelism are the two most important actions a church can take to grow off a plateau" (Hadaway 1991: 191). Without elaboration, he also noted that "Greater congregational conservatism may create an environment which is more

receptive to the actions to break off the plateau” (Hadaway 1991: 190). In his second study, he surveyed Southern Baptist congregations in states of decline, plateau, and growth about evangelism (Hadaway 1993). He determined that “even when controlling for the influence of context, age, and location of church... *evangelism appears to be the only programmatic activity that retains a meaningful relationship with church growth when statistical controls are in effect*” (Hadaway 1993: 185).

In the mid-2000s, Wenger and Reese (2006; cf. Reese 2008), canvassed America’s largest mainline denominations and identified 150 congregations with sustained membership growth over a 3-year period. Clergy and select new members of those growing congregations completed questionnaires and were interviewed. Significantly, most clergy and lay respondents from these growing churches appeared to give answers indicative of conservative theological beliefs. For example, among pastors of growing congregations, 94 % believed in the literal, physical resurrection of Jesus, 89 % disagreed that “all major religions are equally good ways of helping a person find ultimate truth” and two-thirds concurred that “when a mishap occurred it could be spiritual warfare” (Wenger and Reese 2006: 22). However, in their discussion and conclusions, Wenger and Reese did not posit a link between conservative theology and growth.

The remaining US study to inform our research theoretically and methodologically is Hadaway’s (2011) *FACTs on Growth: 2010* report. Via questionnaire, he determined the collective profile of 7403 congregations—a sample representative of all American congregations. A single key informant (usually the pastor) completed the survey. After identifying those congregations that had experienced the greatest growth in attendance from 2005 to 2010, he categorized the traits that these growing congregations held in common. In terms of theological positioning, he found that “the proportion of congregations growing is highest on the two end points: very conservative congregations and very liberal congregations” (Hadaway 2011: 7). However, in terms of the entire sample, congregations belonging to the conservative/evangelical family were more likely to grow than others and the “difference was significant and fairly strong, even when controls for other factors were in place” (Hadaway 2011: 21). And while conservative congregations were most apt to grow, further analysis showed “very little relationship between growth and theological orientation” with only a small “positive correlation between congregational conservatism and growth” (Hadaway 2011: 7). Instead, Hadaway (2011) concluded that the single greatest factor in mainline decline and conservative Protestant growth is their respective positions on mission and purpose; evangelical churches, he found, tended to have the clearest mission and purpose (2011: 8).

Outside the US, in early 2014 the Church of England released the findings of an 18-month research programme into numerical church growth among Anglican churches in the UK. Along with other statistical data gathered, the study employed an online church profiling survey completed by key informants, typically clergy, in just over 1700 churches, and follow-up telephone interviews with 30 clergy from select churches. The surveys were completed by key informants, typically clergy, in just over 1700 churches and follow-up telephone interviews were done with 30 clergy from select churches (Voas and Watt 2014: 67–68; Church Growth Research

Programme 2014). Researchers found a strong correlation between growth and those clergy who prioritise numerical growth (reaching those outside the church) over nurturing those already attending the church. Respondents who said that their congregation had a clear mission and purpose were also far more likely to report growth as were those who had a congregation open to change (Voas and Watt 2014; Church Growth Research Programme 2014). While “a number of respondents” to the survey suggested “growth is associated with evangelical and conservative as well as charismatic tendencies” the study’s authors concluded that theological orientation can be reduced to insignificance “by controlling for other characteristics” (Voas and Watt 2014: 52; cf. Church Growth Research Programme 2014).

In sum, the role of theological conservatism in church growth is hotly disputed, with strong *prima facie* sociological and historical evidence, supported by well developed theories, positing a strong connection, while other high-quality studies controlling for multiple factors downplay the connection or call it into question. Our current study is, to our knowledge, the first one to compare growing and declining Canadian mainline Protestant churches from the same denominations and geographical region to determine what differences exist between these two groups that may be explanatory factors. Among other things, this comparison allows us to test the “conservatism predicts growth” hypothesis for this group of churches while controlling for other significant differences between these churches. Formulated more precisely, our hypotheses are:

**H1** Theological conservatism of clergy is positively associated with church growth in this group of churches.

**H2** Theological conservatism of congregants is positively associated with church growth in this group of churches.

## Methods

To compare the traits of growing and declining mainline Protestant churches, we sought to recruit growing and declining churches from the four largest mainline Protestant denominations in Canada: the Anglican Church of Canada, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada, the Presbyterian Church in Canada, and the United Church of Canada.<sup>2</sup> Geographically, we focused our search on southern Ontario, the most highly populated and demographically, politically, industrially, and religiously diverse area of English-speaking Canada (Haskell et al. 2008). For sheer number of churches to study, it is unparalleled. For example, the city of Toronto alone holds over 140 United churches, about 5 % of all United churches in

<sup>2</sup> Thus, we considered congregations to be “mainline Protestant” based on their denominational affiliation. Canadian researchers consistently classify these four denominations as mainline Protestant denominations and distinguish them from conservative Protestant denominations (e.g. Bibby 1993: 8; Bowen 2004: 24; Reimer and Wilkinson 2015: 218). The Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada uses the term “Evangelical” in the same way it has traditionally been used in Germany, that is, to refer to all Protestant churches in the tradition of the Reformation, rather than in the typical North American sense connoting a type of conservative Protestantism (c.f. Bowen 2004: 25 note 3).

Canada (Yellow Pages Group 2016; United Church of Canada 2016). To clearly distinguish between growing and declining churches (and avoid ambiguous cases), we defined growing churches as those with average annual growth in Sunday service attendance of 2 % or more over the preceding ten years (to 2013), and declining churches as those with average annual decline in attendance of 2 % or more during the same period. The following formula was used to calculate the percent increase/decrease in attendance for each year and these calculations were averaged over the 10 years (2003 to 2013):

$$\text{Annual percent increase/decrease} = \frac{(\text{given year attendance} - \text{previous year attendance})}{\text{previous year attendance}} \times 100$$

Congregations that had grown through an amalgamation with another church in this period were excluded from the study.

Finding declining churches for our study was not difficult, since these denominations have been undergoing sustained numerical decline for decades (Bibby 1993: 6, 8, 2011; Flatt 2013: 241) and the large majority of their congregations are shrinking. Conversely, finding growing churches in these denominations presents a special challenge given their rarity. Indeed, a random sampling approach was not an option for this study, because even a large random sample would have been unlikely to turn up many—if any—growing churches. The task of assembling a sample was further complicated by the lack of complete published congregation-level attendance statistics for these four denominations and the inability of some regional denominational offices we contacted to identify any growing congregations in their region. Thus, to recruit churches we ultimately employed what may be termed a “critical case sample” (Patton 1990: 174) approach, in which we specifically searched for a number of both declining and growing churches using a combination of referrals from regional denominational offices, a cold-call campaign, and further referrals from recruited churches. We comment on the uses and limitations of this kind of sample in the discussion section below.

Using this approach, we recruited 13 declining churches (3 Anglican, 3 Lutheran, 4 Presbyterian, and 2 United) and 9 growing churches (2 Anglican, 1 Lutheran, 4 Presbyterian, and 2 United) which met our criteria. The participating churches of both types were of various ages and locations. About a third of them were constructed in the mid to late-1800s, another third were built in the early to mid-1900s, and the rest were built between 1950 and early 2000s. About half of the growing and half of the declining churches were located in the core of a larger city while one or two others in each group were located in each of the following settings: a rural setting, a small city/large town, an older residential area in a larger city, or a new suburban development around a larger city.

We had a staff member, typically the lead pastor, at each of the 22 participating churches complete an extensive *church profile survey* covering a wide range of information about the church. The questionnaire asked about the age and history of the church and its facilities, pastoral and other staffing, membership and attendance figures for the preceding 10 years, programs and services provided by the church,

features of the worship service(s), past conflicts experienced by the congregation, and the church's recruitment activities.

In addition, all the pastors of participating churches completed *clergy profile surveys* focused on their basic demographic information, religious history, personal beliefs and devotional practices. Most of the belief questions were developed for and have been used in prior Canadian research (Rawlyk 1996; Bowen 2004; Hiemstra 2007, 2008; Flatt 2010). In total, 29 clergy across the 22 churches completed these surveys.

Finally, all adult attendees present at the worship service on a day agreed upon by the church and the research team (religious holidays and long weekends were avoided) were asked to complete a short *congregant profile survey* before leaving their pew/seat. It was extremely rare for an attendee of any of our participant churches not to complete the survey; fewer than 5 % of the surveys handed to congregants were left blank/unanswered. In total, 2255 attendees completed the survey; 1082 from the declining churches (419 Anglican; 216 Lutheran; 263 Presbyterian; 184 United) and 1173 from the growing (417 Anglican; 69 Lutheran; 437 Presbyterian; 250 United). The questionnaire included questions pertaining to attendees' demographic characteristics, devotional practices, religious beliefs/theological orientation, and perceptions of their congregation, including its mission or purpose. Several of the questions concerning religious practices and beliefs were identical to questions in the longer clergy profile survey.

Most questions on all three surveys were simple multiple response, fill-in-the-blank, or Likert-scale items, but the congregants' survey final question was an open-ended qualitative question regarding what they perceived as their church's mission or purpose. The responses to this question were coded into one of four categories by the research team. Category one, "Evangelism," included those responses that used explicitly religious terms and spoke of conversion, evangelization, or religious transformation of others outside their church as the purpose of their church (e.g., "tell others about Jesus"; "bring others to Christ"). Category two, "Sharing Divine Love," included responses that used explicitly religious terms and mentioned those outside their church, but did not directly suggest conversion, evangelization or religious transformation of others. Instead, in more general terms, they suggested extending some kind of religiously-oriented outreach and compassion to others (e.g., "share God's love with others"). Category three, "Nurture the Congregation," included responses that were internally focused, saying that the purpose of their church was to build attendees' faith or strengthen bonds within the congregation (e.g., "help church members grow in the faith"; "bring us together as a loving community"). Finally, category four, "Social Justice," included responses that explicitly spoke of helping or loving others as their church's mission but did so without reference to explicitly religious terms or ideas ("give comfort to the poor"; "fight injustice").

Response to this final, open-ended question was not as strong as responses to the simpler, forced-choice questions; about 20 % of attendees at growing churches and 35 % of declining church attendees, while completing the earlier sections of the survey, left this question blank. However, by comparing the demographic and religious characteristics of those who responded to this question and those who did



not, we found no significant differences in age, sex, marital status, ethnicity, educational attainment, religious history, practice or belief. As such, we believe that the results of this question were not significantly distorted by non-response bias.

The surveys were coded using a numbered list of possible responses or categories of responses and the data was analyzed using SPSS statistical software. Several types of statistical analysis were employed. Chi square analysis or Fischer's exact test (the latter when comparing clergy or whole churches due to the smaller sample size) were used for categorical data and *t* tests were used to compare mean scores of interval level data. To examine the relationship between various explanatory variables and church growth or decline, we used multilevel regression analysis, which takes into account both individual-level variables (in this case, variables at the level of the individual congregant) and group-level variables (in this case, variables at the level of the congregation as a whole, such as characteristics of the lead clergy person). Our multilevel regression approach is patterned on the approaches used by Martinez and Dougherty (2013) and McClure (2013) for situations that combine individual and congregational data. The variables chosen include major explanatory factors for church growth identified in the literature that were also measured in our study, plus additional control variables to allow for other potentially relevant factors such as the presence of recent major conflicts in the congregation.

We operationalized the concept of theological conservatism by constructing an index for clergy conservatism and an index for congregant conservatism using the answers to the applicable belief questions in the clergy and congregant surveys. In keeping with the approach commonly used by researchers, we interpret beliefs as "conservative" if they align with views typically held by conservative Protestants: a high view of the authority and reliability of the Bible, a literal belief in traditional Christian doctrines like the deity and resurrection of Christ, and an emphasis on the exclusivity of Christianity. Participants were deemed more theologically conservative if they evinced higher degrees of agreement with these beliefs. Conversely, some of the questions looked for disagreement with these conservative beliefs, or for alternative, characteristically "liberal" beliefs, such as openness to change in religious doctrines, a more flexible approach to the Bible, and belief in the equivalence of religions or non-exclusivity of Christianity. While we recognize that conservative and liberal theology each have their stand-alone characteristics, in our data, responses to these "liberal" items were strongly negatively correlated with responses to the "conservative" items. Therefore, we included the reverse-scored "liberal" items in the construction of our conservatism indices, which resulted in indices with a high degree of internal reliability as measured by Cronbach's alphas. The specific belief items used and the construction of the indices are detailed below.

## Results

Hypothesis tests for congregational, clergy and church profiles were performed at the 0.05 significance level.



## Congregants' Demographic Profile

Survey respondents were asked about their age, marital status, and ethnicity. Growing churches and declining churches were similar in their ethnic makeup (69.9 vs. 71.3 % Caucasian), but differed in terms of marital status and age profile (see Table 1). The declining churches were notably more elderly, with a mean age of 63, compared with 53 for the growing church participants ( $t = 13.40$ ;  $p < 0.0001$ ), and as a corollary had fewer singles and more widowed congregants.

## Congregants' Religious Practices

Survey respondents were asked to describe how often they read the Bible and how often they prayed choosing between: daily (rated 6); several times a week (5); once a week (4); several times a month (3); once a month (2) and less than once a month (1). A higher frequency of both practices was reported by congregants of growing churches. The mean scores for Bible reading frequency for growing and declining were 4.33 and 3.31 respectively ( $t = 6.53$ ,  $p < 0.0001$ ). There was also a significant difference between the growing church mean (4.82) and the declining church mean (4.44) for prayer frequency ( $t = 4.74$ ,  $p < 0.0001$ ).

## Congregants' Religious Beliefs

Eleven Likert-scale questions were used to gauge survey respondents' religious beliefs. The attendees were asked to rate each belief on a scale from 1 to 4, where 1 = strongly disagree and 4 = strongly agree. Table 2 displays the results comparing belief items 1 through 11 for growing and declining church attendees. For the construction of the Congregant Conservatism variable, beliefs 5 to 7 inclusive were reverse-scaled to match the other beliefs where a higher score represented a higher level of conservatism in belief. For every measure of religious belief, attendees of growing churches showed greater levels of theological conservatism than declining church congregants. In all cases the Chi square test results reveal a significant difference.

**Table 1** Demographics of growing and declining congregations

	Growing (%)	Declining (%)
Marital status		
Married	62.6	64.1
Single, divorced/separated	20.0, 6.9	9.9, 6.2
Widowed	7.4	14.3
Common law	3.9	1.9
Age		
Under the age of 18 <sup>a</sup>	1.4	0.7
From 19 to 40	23.1	10.2
From 41 to 60	37.6	24.9
Over 60	34.8	59.8

<sup>a</sup> Although the research team explained that the survey was for adults only when distributing the questionnaires, a small number of 16 to 18-year-old attendees completed it anyway

**Table 2** Congregants' religious beliefs

Beliefs	Growing (%)	Declining (%)	Chi square
1. "God performs miracles in answer to prayer"			
Strongly disagree	2.8	6.0	$\chi^2 = 141.04$
Moderately disagree	4.3	10.0	$p < 0.0001$
Moderately agree	32.3	45.6	
Strongly agree	57.5	33.6	
2. "Through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, God provided a way for the forgiveness of my sins"			
Strongly disagree	2.0	4.2	$\chi^2 = 125.78$
Moderately disagree	1.7	4.5	$p < 0.0001$
Moderately agree	14.6	28.8	
Strongly agree	79.0	56.6	
3. "It is very important to encourage non-Christians to become Christians"			
Strongly disagree	7.9	18.8	$\chi^2 = 196.56$
Moderately disagree	10.8	19.2	$p < 0.0001$
Moderately agree	38.8	39.9	
Strongly agree	39.3	15.8	
4. "I have committed my life to Christ"			
Strongly disagree	2.3	3.1	$\chi^2 = 116.42$
Moderately disagree	4.6	7.6	$p < 0.0001$
Moderately agree	31.2	47.8	
Strongly agree	59.1	36.0	
5. "The beliefs of the Christian faith need to change over time to stay relevant"			
Strongly disagree	31.1	11.2	$\chi^2 = 174.57$
Moderately disagree	18.5	13.4	$p < 0.0001$
Moderately agree	27.5	38.4	
Strongly agree	18.6	30.7	
6. "All major religions are equally good and true"			
Strongly disagree	34.4	9.2	$\chi^2 = 250.80$
Moderately disagree	18.4	15.3	$p < 0.0001$
Moderately agree	30.4	45.3	
Strongly agree	12.6	25.0	
7. "The Bible is the product of human thinking about God, so some of its teachings are wrong or misguided"			
Strongly disagree	46.6	16.2	$\chi^2 = 261.46$
Moderately disagree	19.2	19.0	$p < 0.0001$
Moderately agree	23.3	40.9	
Strongly agree	6.9	15.2	
8. "Only those who believe in and follow Jesus Christ will receive eternal life"			
Strongly disagree	15.7	32.3	$\chi^2 = 241.06$
Moderately disagree	19.0	25.4	$p < 0.0001$
Moderately agree	19.6	2.4	
Strongly agree	40.1	12.8	

**Table 2** continued

Beliefs	Growing (%)	Declining (%)	Chi square
9. "Jesus rose from the dead with a real flesh and blood body, leaving behind an empty tomb"			
Strongly disagree	5.0	11.5	$\chi^2 = 177.68$
Moderately disagree	6.7	11.9	$p < 0.0001$
Moderately agree	17.1	30.0	
Strongly agree	65.9	37.4	
10. "Believing Christians have access to real, supernatural power in this life that is not available to non-believers"			
Strongly disagree	27.7	46.0	$\chi^2 = 195.78$
Moderately disagree	18.8	23.6	$p < 0.0001$
Moderately agree	23.3	13.5	
Strongly agree	22.1	5.9	

### Congregants' Perceptions of Their Congregation's Purpose and Mission

Congregants were presented with the statement "our congregation has a clear mission and purpose" and then asked to agree or disagree in the case of their specific congregation (using a scale where 1 = strongly disagree and 5 = strongly agree). Growing church attendees were significantly more likely to agree with this statement than declining church attendees, with the respective mean scores being 4.45 and 4.11 ( $t = 16.21$ ,  $p < 0.0001$ ).

As detailed in the Method section, the survey's final question was open-ended, asking participants to describe the purpose or mission of their church. Table 3 shows the distribution of answers over the four coding categories for both the growing and declining church attendees ( $\chi^2 = 120.11$ ,  $p < 0.0001$ ). Growing church congregants most often identified evangelism as the purpose of their church while those in declining churches most often cited acts of social justice as their church's purpose. While the responses of the former group were highly unified, reflecting a few similar ideas and phrases, the responses of the latter group were more diverse touching on a wide range of specific issues such as homosexual rights, environmental protection, political change, or fairer distribution of wealth and resources. More than a third (35 %) of declining church attendees left this question blank (their most common response) which may indicate they were unsure of their church's purpose. This possibility is consistent with the significantly weaker

**Table 3** Purpose/mission of church as reported by congregants

Purpose/mission	Growing (%)	Declining (%)
Evangelism	29.3	8.9
Share divine love	13.0	10.4
Nurture the congregation	14.2	14.4
Social justice	16.4	31.2
No answer	21.2	35.0

agreement among declining church attendees when responding to the earlier Likert-scale question asking if their congregation had “a clear mission and purpose.”

### **Clergy Demographic Profile**

The mean age of the growing church clergy was 48.8, compared with 54.8 for the declining church clergy ( $t = 1.8009$ ,  $p = 0.0829$ ). In terms of ethnicity, marital status, age, and education, while slightly more of the declining church clergy were Caucasian (100 vs. 92.3 %), unmarried (6.25 vs. 0 %), and educated past a Bachelor's degree level (100 vs. 84.6 %), the demographic profiles of growing and declining clergy were overall quite similar, with the large majority of both categories being Caucasian, married, and educated at a Master's or higher level.

### **Clergy Religious Practices**

As was the case with attendees, clergy of growing churches read their Bibles more frequently than clergy of declining churches (mean scores of 5.8 vs. 4.6, using the six point scale described for congregants;  $t = 2.93$ ,  $p = 0.0066$ ). Growing church clergy also reported praying slightly more frequently than declining church clergy, but this difference was not statistically significant (mean scores of 5.9 vs. 5.5;  $t = 1.73$ ,  $p = 0.0948$ ).

### **Clergy Religious Beliefs**

The clergy survey used a broader range of Likert-scale questions than the congregational survey about respondents' religious beliefs. Seventeen of these (listed in Table 4) were used to gauge theological conservatism, including the eleven questions used for the congregational survey. Across all of the questions, growing church clergy displayed greater theological conservatism than declining church clergy. Several of these differences were statistically significant, despite the small sample size, when total agreement (strongly and somewhat) and total disagreement (strongly and somewhat) were compared using the Fisher's exact test statistic (two-sided); multifactor Chi square analysis was not possible given the sample size.

### **Other Church Characteristics**

The Church Profile Survey also provided a variety of other data about the characteristics of churches in the study that was potentially relevant to our exploration of growth and decline. A combination of past research findings and theoretical considerations suggested that the presence of recent conflict in the congregation, the emphasis (or lack of emphasis) on programming for youth, and the worship style employed in the church's worship services were potentially important church characteristics for explaining growth/decline. Only some of the differences between the growing and declining churches in aggregate were statistically significant, but all three of these characteristics had significant effects

**Table 4** Clergy religious beliefs

Belief	Growing	Declining	Fisher's exact test <i>p</i> value (combining agreement and disagreement into a second category)
1. "God performs miracles in answer to prayer"			
Strongly disagree	0	12.5	<i>p</i> = 0.0012**
Moderately disagree	0	43.75	
Moderately agree	23.1	37.5	
Strongly agree	76.9	6.25	
2. "Speaking in tongues is a valid expression of worship for today"			
Strongly disagree	0	37.5	<i>p</i> = 0.0009***
Moderately disagree	0	25	
Moderately agree	38.5	31.25	
Strongly agree	53.9	6.25	
3. "Through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, God provided a way for the forgiveness of my sins"			
Strongly disagree	0	6.25	<i>p</i> = 0.4877
Moderately disagree	0	6.25	
Moderately agree	15.4	31.25	
Strongly agree	84.6	56.25	
4. "Jesus was <i>not</i> the divine Son of God"			
Strongly disagree	100	68.75	<i>p</i> = 0.4877
Moderately disagree	0	18/75	
Moderately agree	0	6.25	
Strongly agree	0	6.25	
5. "The Bible is the word of God and is reliable and trustworthy"			
Strongly disagree	0	6.25	<i>p</i> = 0.0084**
Moderately disagree	05	37.5	
Moderately agree	7.7	12.5	
Strongly agree	92.3	43.75	
6. "I have committed my life to Christ and consider myself to be a converted Christian"			
Strongly disagree	0	18.75	<i>p</i> = 0.0237*
Moderately disagree	0	18.75	
Moderately agree	7.7	25.5	
Strongly agree	84.6	37.5	
7. "It is very important to encourage non-Christians to become Christians"			
Strongly disagree	05	18.755	<i>p</i> = 0.0033**
Moderately disagree	05	31.25	
Moderately agree	23.1	50	
Strongly agree	76.9	0	
8. "Jesus was crucified, died and was buried but then he was resurrected to eternal life"			
Strongly disagree	0	0	<i>p</i> = 0.2315
Moderately disagree	0	18.75	

**Table 4** continued

Belief	Growing	Declining	Fisher's exact test <i>p</i> value (combining agreement into one category and disagreement into a second category)
Moderately agree	0	12.5	
Strongly agree	100	68.75	
9. "The beliefs of the Christian faith need to change over time to stay relevant"			
Strongly disagree	53.9	12.5	<i>p</i> = 0.0001***
Moderately disagree	46.2	18.75	
Moderately agree	0	37.5	
Strongly agree	0	31.25	
10. "All major religions are equally good and true"			
Strongly disagree	61.5	18.75	<i>p</i> = 0.3955
Moderately disagree	23.1	43.75	
Moderately agree	7.7	18.75	
Strongly agree	7.7	12.5	
11. "The Bible is the actual word of God and is to be taken literally"			
Strongly disagree	38.5	93.75	<i>p</i> = 0.0036**
Moderately disagree	15.4	6.25	
Moderately agree	23.1	0	
Strongly agree	23.1	0	
12. "The Bible is the product of human thinking about God, so some of its teachings are wrong or misguided"			
Strongly disagree	69.2	25	<i>p</i> = 0.0608
Moderately disagree	7.7	12.5	
Moderately agree	23.1	37.5	
Strongly agree	0	25	
13. "Those who die face a divine judgement where some will be punished eternally"			
Strongly disagree	0	31.25	<i>p</i> = 0.0001***
Moderately disagree	15.4	62.5	
Moderately agree	15.4	6.25	
Strongly agree	69.2	0	
14. "Only those who believe in and follow Jesus Christ will receive eternal life"			
Strongly disagree	7.7	43.75	<i>p</i> = 0.1144
Moderately disagree	7.7	43.75	
Moderately agree	30.8	6.25	
Strongly agree	46.2	0	
15. "Jesus Christ was a religious leader in the same manner as Buddha"			
Strongly disagree	92.3	43.75	<i>p</i> = 0.2215
Moderately disagree	7.7	37.5	
Moderately agree	0	18.75	
Strongly agree	0	0	

**Table 4** continued

Belief	Growing	Declining	Fisher’s exact test <i>p</i> value (combining agreement into one category and disagreement into a second category)
16. “Jesus rose from the dead with a real flesh and blood body, leaving behind an empty tomb”			
Strongly disagree	0	18.75	<i>p</i> = 0.0443*
Moderately disagree	7.7	25	
Moderately agree	7.7	18.75	
Strongly agree	84.6	37.5	
17. “Believing Christians have access to real, supernatural power in this life that is not available to non-believers”			
Strongly disagree	0	62.5	<i>p</i> = 0.0029**
Moderately disagree	23.1	18.75	
Moderately agree	38.5	18.75	
Strongly agree	38.5	0	

\*\*\* *p* ≤ 0.001; \*\* *p* ≤ 0.01; \* *p* ≤ 0.05

when explaining the growth of individual congregations in our regression analysis, as we demonstrate below.

Each church was asked whether it had experienced disagreements or conflict over a list of issues within the past 5 years. In aggregate, declining churches were slightly more likely to report conflict over finances, program priorities, denominational actions, leadership style, leader’s personal behavior, members’ personal behavior, and “other” matters, while growing churches were slightly more likely to report conflict over theology, conduct of worship, and use of facilities. None of these group differences were statistically significant, however.

We also asked church staff how much emphasis they placed on “youth (teen) activities and programs.” The results are summarized in Table 5. As a group, growing churches were significantly more likely to emphasize youth programs than were declining churches. Based on Fisher’s exact test, growing churches were significantly more likely to say that youth programs received “a lot of emphasis” or were “a key emphasis” of the congregation (*p* value = 0.04610).

Finally, the church profile survey asked churches about the musical and technological style of their worship services. Churches were asked whether they “never,” “seldom,” “sometimes,” “often,” or “always” used the items listed in

**Table 5** Emphasis on youth programs

	Growing (%)	Declining (%)
No youth programs	0	23.1
Some emphasis	0	23.1
A lot of emphasis	44	7.7
A key focus of the congregation	56	46.2

\*\*\* *p* ≤ 0.001; \*\* *p* ≤ 0.01;  
\* *p* ≤ 0.05



**Table 6** Musical style and technology use in worship services

Item	Growing (%)	Declining (%)	Fisher's exact test <i>p</i> value (comparing "never + seldom" and "often + always")
Traditional choir (vs. worship band)			
Never	22	0	<i>p</i> = 0.2848
Seldom	11	8	
Sometimes	0	0	
Often	22	8	
Always	44	69	
Organ			
Never	44	8	<i>p</i> = 0.1273
Seldom	0	0	
Sometimes	11	0	
Often	11	8	
Always	33	69	
Drums or other percussion instruments			
Never	0	8	<i>p</i> = 0.1588
Seldom	11	39	
Sometimes	11	39	
Often	11	0	
Always	67	8	
Electric guitar or bass			
Never	0	54	<i>p</i> = 0.0046**
Seldom	0	8	
Sometimes	11	23	
Often	11	0	
Always	78	8	
Visual projection equipment			
Never	0	23	<i>p</i> = 0.0186*
Seldom	0	23	
Sometimes	0	23	
Often	0	15	
Always	100	8	
Video clips			
Never	0	46	<i>p</i> = 0.0022**
Seldom	11	39	
Sometimes	11	8	
Often	44	0	
Always	33	0	

Totals may not equal 100 % due to rounding

\*\*\*  $p \leq 0.001$ ; \*\*  $p \leq 0.01$ ; \*  $p \leq 0.05$

Table 6 in their services. The results suggest that, in aggregate, growing churches tended to use more contemporary instrumentation and presentation technology and declining churches tended to be more traditional. Specifically, there were statistically significant differences in the use of electric guitar, visual projection, and video clips.

## Regression Analysis

The congregation-wide level independent variables used in our regression analysis were *Clergy Conservatism*, *Contemporary Worship*, and *Youth Emphasis*. The variable *Clergy Conservatism* (Cronbach's alpha 0.734) was a composite variable created by adding the scores of Likert-scale belief questions from the clergy questionnaire that were indicative of theological conservatism (items 1, 2, 3, 5, 6, 7, 8, 11, 13, 14, 16, 17, and reverse-scaled items 4, 9, 10, 12, 15—see Table 4 above). *Contemporary Worship* (Cronbach's alpha 0.825) was created by adding the scores of the Likert-scale questions about the frequency of use of drums, electric guitar, projection equipment, and video clips in worship, plus reverse-scaled items about the frequency of use of choir and organ. *Youth Emphasis* was the church's score on the church profile survey question about the degree of emphasis placed on youth/teen programs.

At the level of the individual congregant, three variables were used: *Congregant Conservatism*, *Clarity of Purpose*, and as a control variable, *Age of Congregant*. *Congregant Conservatism* (Cronbach's alpha 0.836) was created in a similar fashion as *Clergy Conservatism* but with fewer items, since there were fewer belief questions in the shorter questionnaire used with congregants. The items used were 1, 2, 3, 4, 8, 9, 10, plus reverse-scaled items 5, 6, 7 (see Table 2). *Clarity of Purpose* was the attendee's response to the perception question asking the respondents' degree of agreement that their congregation "has a clear mission and purpose."

We had also intended to include in the regression analysis distinct variables measuring the importance placed on evangelism by clergy and congregants (based on the belief question "It is very important to encourage non-Christians to become Christians"), but initial analysis revealed that since these items were so highly correlated with our other theological conservatism belief items, they would introduce severe collinearity problems into the regression model if included as distinct variables. Ultimately, we decided to include the emphasis placed on evangelism by clergy and congregants as part of our theological conservatism measures rather than as separate variables. The significance of this result is explored in the Discussion section.

Finally, at the congregation-wide level we also used three control variables: *Age of Church*, the years the congregation had been in existence in years prior to 2012; *Age of Clergy*, the age of the lead clergyperson; and *Conflict*, a measure of the extent of intra-congregational conflict formed by a sum of the "yes" responses to the conflict question on the church profile survey. Table 7 shows the correlations among these explanatory variables and church growth. Other possible control factors in our study either appeared unrelated to church growth or decline (e.g. marital status of clergy), appeared to be an artefact or part of theological

Table 7 Correlations among variables used in the regression analysis

	Church growth	Age of church	Age of clergy	Age of congregant	Conflict	Clergy conservatism	Youth emphasis	Contemporary worship	Congregant conservatism	Clarity of purpose
Church growth	1	0.279**	-0.209**	-0.266**	-0.259	0.643**	0.499**	0.746**	0.465**	0.227**
Age of church	0.279**	1	-0.119**	0.009	-0.111**	0.061**	0.335**	0.228**	0.020	0.001
Age of clergy	-0.209**	-0.119**	1	-0.030	0.171**	0.071**	0.248*	-0.089**	0.003	0.025
Age of congregant	-0.266**	0.009	-0.030	1	0.047*	-0.262**	-0.223**	-0.225**	-0.120**	-0.037
Conflict	-0.259	-0.111**	0.171**	0.047*	1	-0.064**	-0.250**	-0.005	-0.073**	-0.018
Clergy conservatism	0.643**	0.061**	0.071**	-0.262**	-0.064**	1	0.476**	0.569**	0.512**	0.194**
Youth emphasis	0.499**	0.335**	0.248**	-0.223**	-0.250**	0.476**	1	0.363**	0.255**	0.216**
Contemporary worship	0.746**	0.228**	-0.089**	-0.225**	-0.005	0.569**	0.363**	1	0.383**	0.271**
Congregant conservatism	0.465**	0.020	0.003	-0.120**	-0.073**	0.512**	0.255**	0.383**	1	0.193**
Clarity of purpose	0.227**	0.001	0.025	-0.037	-0.018	0.194**	0.216**	0.271**	0.193**	1

\*\*\*  $p \leq 0.001$ ; \*\*  $p \leq 0.01$ ; \*  $p \leq 0.05$

**Table 8** Effects of control variables, theological conservatism, and other factors on church growth

	Model 1: Control variables only	Model 2: Theological conservatism added	Model 3: Youth emphasis, contemporary worship and clarity of purpose added
Constant	19.217***	-1.444	-2.493**
		Standardized coefficients (beta)	Standardized coefficients (beta)
			Standardized coefficients (beta)
Congregation-level variables			
Age of clergy		-0.247***	-0.259***
Age of church		-0.067**	-0.343***
Conflict		-0.232***	-0.293***
Clergy conservatism			0.584***
Contemporary worship			0.226***
Youth emphasis			0.353***
			0.318***
Individual-level variables			
Age of congregant		-0.255***	-0.121***
Congregant conservatism			0.202***
Clarity of purpose			0.125***
N (congregation) = 19			-0.006
N (individual) = 2354			
Adjusted R-square	0.185	0.563	0.728

\*\*\*  $p \leq 0.001$ ; \*\*  $p \leq 0.01$ ; \*  $p \leq 0.05$

conservatism (e.g. emphasis on evangelism), or appeared to be a consequence of a church's growth or decline (e.g. age profile of the congregation).

The three regression models using combinations of these variables in Table 8, below, predict the average annual percentage growth/decline of a congregation. Model 1 shows that when no other variables are included in the model, the age of the lead clergyperson, the age of the church, the presence of conflict in the congregation, and the age of congregants are significantly negatively associated with growth. Altogether, these four control variables and the constant are only able to explain a small percentage of the variation in church growth (adjusted R-square = 0.185), indicating that most of the growth or decline of the churches in our sample cannot be satisfactorily explained in terms of these factors.

Model 2 adds to these control variables two additional variables: Clergy Conservatism and Congregant Conservatism. Both have significant positive association with church growth in the presence of the controls, and the explanatory power of the model (adjusted R-square = 0.563) increases substantially compared to Model 1, indicating that a model including theological conservatism as well as clergy age, church age, and conflict has a much greater ability to predict church growth or decline than a model containing only the control variables. In this model, Clergy Conservatism has a much larger effect on growth than Congregant Conservatism, though both have a significant positive effect.

Finally, Model 3 includes additional variables sometimes theorized to have an effect on church growth either as a result of, or independently of, theological conservatism. Two of these variables, Contemporary Worship and Youth Emphasis, are significantly positively associated with church growth, while the third, Clarity of Purpose, does not have a significant association with growth. The addition of the new variables results in another substantial increase in explanatory power (adjusted R-square = 0.728) as compared to Model 2, though not as big as the jump from Model 1 to Model 2 where the theological conservatism variables were introduced. Model 3 is able to explain the large majority of variation in church growth in our sample. The sizes of the effects of Congregant Conservatism and Clergy Conservatism decrease notably in Model 3 compared to Model 2. This result suggests that in Model 2, the theological conservatism (particularly of clergy) was acting in part as a proxy for contemporary worship style and youth emphasis because these variables were not included in Model 2, but are correlated with theological conservatism. However, it is noteworthy that theological conservatism of congregants, and to a larger degree, theological conservatism of clergy, retain independent significant effects in Model 3. These results are consistent with H1 and H2. Age of church, age of clergy, recent conflict in the congregation, and age of congregants also retain their negative associations with growth in this model.

## Discussion and Conclusion

This study provides a window into an understudied group of churches, growing mainline Protestant churches in southern Ontario, and compares them to declining churches from the same region and group of denominations. Given the rarity of these churches, we had to use a critical case sample approach (Patton 1990: 174) rather than a random sample in order to find enough growing churches for our study. Patton notes that “While studying one or a few critical cases does not technically permit broad generalizations to all possible cases, *logical generalizations* can often be made from the weight of evidence produced”; one should be able to conclude “if it happens there, it will happen anywhere,” or, vice versa, “if it doesn’t happen there, it won’t happen anywhere” (Patton 1990: 174). Thus, if there are any differences generally between growing and declining Canadian mainline Protestant churches, they should be apparent in this sample; likewise, if theological factors play a role in growth and decline, it should be apparent from this sample. On the other hand, because of this approach, our conclusions are not necessarily generalizable to the whole population of mainline Protestant churches in southern Ontario; ideally this study will be followed by larger studies that can corroborate on a larger scale the patterns in our sample. It is especially important to note that our data set as a whole does not—and is not intended to—mirror the larger population of mainline Protestant churches, since growing churches are greatly overrepresented in our sample. These caveats should be kept in mind in the following discussion. Nevertheless, we believe this study is valuable as the first detailed comparative study of growing and declining mainline Protestant churches in Canada, and due to its use of substantial qualitative and quantitative data from the congregations themselves.

Despite their common membership in mainline Protestant denominations, we find several notable differences between the growing and declining churches in our study. They clergy and congregants of growing churches are more theologically conservative and exhibit higher rates of Bible reading and prayer. Growing church congregants are more likely to agree that their congregation has a clear mission and purpose, and to identify evangelism as that purpose. Growing churches are more likely to emphasize youth programs and to use contemporary worship styles. They also tend to be younger, and to have younger congregants and slightly younger clergy. Most of these factors were included in our multivariate regression analysis, which attempted to disentangle these factors to find the distinct relationship of each of them to congregational attendance. In order of effect size in our most fully articulated model (model 3), the church's use of contemporary worship, the church's emphasis on youth programs, the theological conservatism of clergy, and the theological conservatism of congregants each had a significant positive effect on growth. On the other side of the ledger, the age of clergy, the age of the church, the presence of past conflict in the church, and the age of congregants each had a significant negative effect on growth. A church's clarity of mission and purpose as perceived by congregants, however, did not have a significant relationship with growth in our model. In what follows we comment on the significance of these findings.

In terms of the purpose of our study, the most notable result to emerge from our analysis is the importance of theological conservatism as a predictor for church growth among these mainline Protestant churches. Our data demonstrate that within our sample, theological differences do matter for church growth. Both clergy theological conservatism and congregant theological conservatism have statistically significant positive associations with church growth in our multivariate analysis, providing support for H1 and H2. These associations hold even when church age, clergy age, congregant age, and the presence of conflict in the congregation are controlled for and other variables related to growth (such as worship style, youth emphasis, and clarity of purpose) are held constant. Indeed, although these growing churches belong to mainline Protestant denominations, they bear a striking resemblance to conservative Protestant churches not only in their growth but also in their theological orientation.

While the results of our study show a clear link between conservative theology and church growth in this group of churches, as noted earlier some studies either overlook the link between conservative theology and growth (e.g. Wenger and Reese 2006; Reese 2008) or discount it, after other considerations, as statistically irrelevant (Church Growth Research Programme 2014; Donahue and Benson 1993; Hadaway 2011; Voas and Watt 2014). While we are not in a position to explore this discrepancy at length, it may be that asking a few key informants about their theological character or the character of their congregation, as some of these studies did, elicits less accurate results than when one surveys the entire congregation about their beliefs. In fact, Chaves (2004) concludes from his summary of the literature on the use of this technique that "key informants will not be very good at validly reporting the values, opinions, and beliefs of congregants." In Hadaway's (2011) study, however, theological orientation of a congregation was determined by a key

informant answering a single question about whether the majority of their church members or participants were very liberal, somewhat liberal, moderate, somewhat conservative, or very conservative. Likewise, in the UK's Church Growth Research Programme, clergy were asked to place themselves along three theological scales, including a "Liberal-Conservative" scale, and these results were used to determine whether there was a relationship between a congregation's theological orientation and growth. In addition to the shaky relationship between such informant reports and overall congregational values (Chaves 2004), these reports have an additional level of subjectivity derived from the informant's reference points. It may be that some clergy with highly liberal reference points (for example, in a highly liberal denomination, congregation, or geographical region) would come to identify themselves as "conservative" by comparison, when their *actual beliefs* are more liberal than clergy who self-identify as "liberal" because they have highly conservative reference points. (The reverse, of course, is also possible.) The approach of the current study, then, while also necessarily containing an element of subjectivity, is preferable because it asks clergy and congregants themselves about their beliefs and classifies them on the basis of those beliefs, rather than on the basis of their *perceptions* of how "liberal" or "conservative" those beliefs are.

The tactic of directly asking both clergy and congregants about their beliefs has another advantage because it allows us to compare the degree of theological conservatism across both clergy and congregants of growing and declining congregations. Unexpectedly, this comparison revealed a clear pattern which can be seen in the answers to most of the belief questions: growing church clergy are the most theologically conservative, followed by growing church congregants, followed by declining church congregants, with declining church clergy being the least theologically conservative group. One plausible explanation for the varying degree of theological conservatism that one sees when moving from the pastors of growing mainline churches, to growing church congregants, to declining church congregants, to declining church pastors, is that clergy, through their preaching and other kinds of influence, "pull" the congregation in the direction of their own theology, whether more or less conservative. It is also plausible that congregants join churches whose clergy agree with their own theological orientation, and leave churches whose clergy do not, with the result that a congregation's overall degree of theological conservatism aligns with its clergy's degree of theological conservatism over time. A third mechanism that may be involved in cases where the congregation can influence the hiring of its clergy; in such cases more conservative congregations may opt for more conservative clergy, and more liberal congregations for more liberal clergy. This third mechanism, however, would be unlikely by itself to account for why clergy tend to be more extreme (whether conservative or liberal) than their congregations. Further research on this question of the relationship between clergy and congregants' theological conservatism is needed.

Other differences between growing and declining churches in the sample emerged as well, some of which appear to be closely related to or partially driven by theological conservatism. In terms of devotional practices, growing church clergy and congregants exhibited higher frequency of prayer and, especially, Bible reading compared to their declining church counterparts. In the case of Bible reading, at



least, this difference is consistent with and possibly a result of the greater theological conservatism of growing churches, with its greater emphasis on the authority of the Bible as a guide for life. In terms of the purpose of the church, there was a wide range of responses among both growing and declining congregants, but growing church congregants were more likely to identify evangelism as the essential purpose of their church, a result which is again consistent with their greater theological conservatism, specifically their belief in Christian exclusivity (seen in their responses to belief questions about the importance of encouraging non-Christians to become Christians and the equivalence of world religions).

This finding that growing churches place more emphasis on evangelism is consistent with the work of other researchers who have identified evangelism as a statistically significant factor in church growth (Bibby and Brinkerhoff 1973, 1983, Bibby and Brinkerhoff 1994; Bouma 1979; Hadaway 1978; Nelson and Bromley 1988; Donahue and Benson 1993). In two studies Hadaway (1991, 1993) states that higher levels of evangelistic/recruitment activity are associated with higher rates of growth at the congregational level, writing: “even when controlling for the influence of context, age, and location of church... *evangelism appears to be the only programmatic activity that retains a meaningful relationship with church growth when statistical controls are in effect*” (Hadaway 1993: 185). Elsewhere, Hadaway (1991: 190) makes the passing suggestion that “greater congregational conservatism may create an environment which is more receptive” to such actions. In our regression analysis we were not able to distinguish statistically between the independent effects of general theological conservatism and a commitment to evangelism, because these two were so closely related, and so our data are unable to untangle the precise relationship between evangelism, conservatism, and church growth. Nevertheless, conservative beliefs about biblical authority, the saving power of Christ, and the non-equivalence of religions provide conservative Christians with potent motivation to recruit family, friends and acquaintances into their faith and into their church (c.f. Wellman 2008).

Our data do not, however, fully agree with the finding of some recent studies from the US and UK that a congregation’s clarity of mission and purpose is a key factor in church growth (Hadaway 2011; Church Growth Research Programme 2014; Voas and Watt 2014). According to Hadaway (2011: 8) the extent to which a congregation has “a clear mission and purpose”—a sense of where it is going and what it wants to do—it grows. This relationship is plausible to us on a theoretical level, and we did find that the growing church congregants in our study were significantly more likely than their declining church counterparts to agree that their congregation has a clear mission and purpose. In our regression analysis, however, in the presence of other factors, clarity of mission and purpose did not have a significant association (positive or negative) with growth. As discussed above, our approach to identifying the theological orientation of churches—directly asking all clergy and congregants about their actual theological beliefs—was quite different than that used by these studies, which relied on single informants and their perceptions of their own or their congregants degree of conservatism or liberalism (Hadaway 2011; Voas and Watt 2014: 65). It is possible, therefore, that some of the growth effect attributed to theological conservatism in our study was instead

attributed to clarity of mission and purpose in these other studies, since as we note below, there is reason to believe that there is a relationship between theological conservatism and clarity of mission and purpose. Given these methodological differences, however, it is difficult to make direct comparisons, and further research is needed.

Our findings do align with Hadaway's (2011: 8) finding that Protestant congregations with a conservative theological orientation (i.e., evangelical churches) are "considerably more likely to 'strongly agree' that their congregation has a clear mission and purpose" when compared to churches with more liberal theology. When given the chance to express their thoughts in qualitative fashion, our growing church attendees were also more likely to articulate a purpose that was highly unified, reflecting just a few similar ideas and phrases and tending to focus on evangelism. It may be that the tendency other researchers have identified, that conservative or evangelical beliefs can promote unity by providing an "external locus of authority" (Reimer and Wilkinson 2015: 55–59), also translates into a greater likelihood of achieving unity regarding mission and purpose. This is not to say that theological conservatism is the only means by which a congregation can achieve unity of mission and purpose, however. While we did not see it in our study, in Hadaway's (2011) large national sample in the US some very liberal congregations also reported having "a clear mission and purpose."

Two further notable differences between growing and declining churches in our sample were that growing churches were significantly more likely to emphasize youth programs and to employ contemporary worship styles. To some extent, these characteristics may be driven by a desire to make the faith accessible to a wider community for evangelistic purposes, which is itself partly explainable in terms of theological conservatism. However, both youth emphasis and contemporary worship had strong positive associations with growth in our regression model independent of theological conservatism and also other relevant factors such as congregant and clergy age, suggesting that youth emphasis and contemporary worship play a distinct, important role in attracting or retaining attendees in these congregations. In fact, in our regression model both of these factors had a larger distinct positive effect on growth than theological conservatism of clergy or congregants. While our primary focus in this study was testing the role of theological conservatism, the apparent distinct importance of youth emphasis and contemporary worship for growth should not be overlooked.

Finally, we found a number of noteworthy demographic differences between growing and declining churches in our sample, namely that the declining churches tended to be older, and to have older clergy and congregants. Each of these factors retained an independent effect in our regression analysis. The relative age of congregants in declining churches is not surprising, both as a *cause* of decline (older congregants tend to have less energy for volunteering and are less likely to contribute to congregational growth through childbearing) and as a *consequence* of decline (a church that is not adding new members will gradually age with its current members, and in extreme cases, die with them). It is less clear why older churches, that is, churches that have been around for longer, would be more likely to decline; perhaps older churches have a harder time adapting to changing circumstances

because of accumulated institutional patterns and older facilities. Similarly, it is not immediately clear why declining churches tend to have older clergy. Other things being equal, older clergy may be less able to attract and retain members, or there may be some characteristic of declining churches that leads them to prefer older clergy and recruit them. Less mysterious is the negative impact of past conflicts in the congregation, since serious internal conflict often results in the departure of some congregants.

Returned to our original question, it is clear that theological conservatism plays a role in distinguishing growing from declining mainline Protestant churches. How might theological conservatism contribute to growth? It is beyond the scope of this study to resolve the theoretical questions involved, but a plausible account is offered by Reimer and Wilkinson (2015) in their recent national study of evangelical congregations in Canada. Reimer and Wilkinson fully acknowledge the role a range of factors play in congregational growth or decline, but argue that one of the reasons evangelical congregations are faring relatively well in a difficult social environment “is the type of religiosity they promote” (Reimer and Wilkinson, 2015: 62). Building on Christian Smith’s (1998) work on subcultural identity theory, Reimer and Wilkinson suggest that evangelical convictions—much like the theological conservatism in our study—contribute to the vitality of these congregations by helping them maintain a distinct identity vis-a-vis the larger culture, providing unity through “an external locus of authority” in the Bible, encouraging formative religious experiences, and prioritizing “the faith development of youth and children” (2015: 55–62). Unlike the congregations in Reimer and Wilkinson’s study, which belong to evangelical denominations, the growing churches in our study belong to mainline Protestant denominations. Nevertheless, the theologically conservative beliefs they share may play a similar role in their congregations.

Whatever the underlying explanation, theological conservatism of both clergy and congregants are significant predictors of growth in this sample of growing and declining mainline Protestant churches in southern Ontario, even after controlling for a wide range of other relevant church- and individual-level factors. This finding, based as it is on a detailed quantitative and qualitative examination of an understudied group of churches, clergy and congregants, represents a significant, if preliminary, contribution to research on religion in Canada. It is our hope that this pioneering study will stimulate further research into the determinants of growth and decline among mainline Protestant churches in Canada and elsewhere.

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