

# Working Paper – Presbyterian Church in Canada Statistics

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## Introduction

Denominational statistics are an important source of data that keeps track of various forms of religious behavior and expression, but in Canada this data has not been extensively studied. Since we began working together in 2003, we recognized the value of this data and have attempted to compile and analyze that data for various religious bodies. In compiling this information, we have used the data generated by churches themselves as recorded in their archives or denominational publications, and we have not relied upon data in the *Yearbook of American and Canadian Churches*.

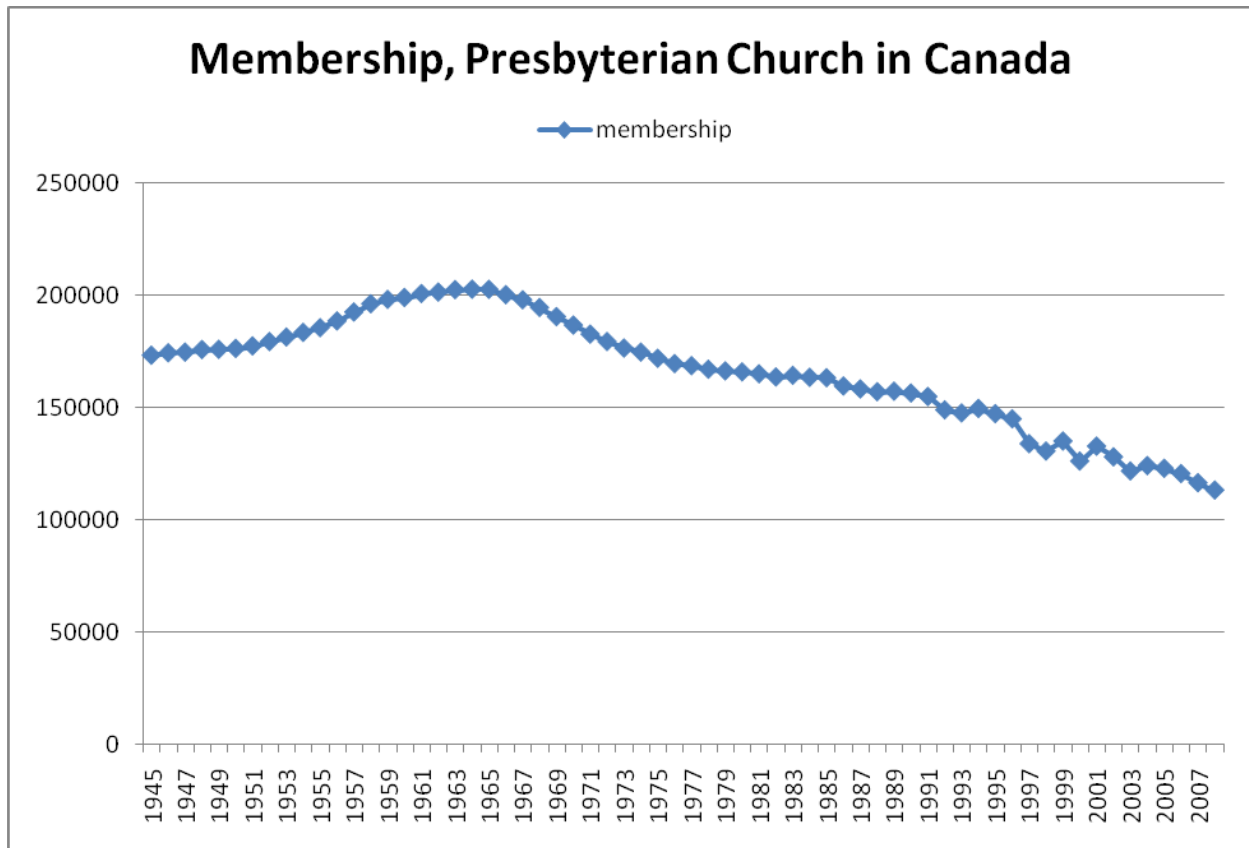
We appreciate that some of these statistics may offer a more “realistic” picture than other sets of statistics. For example, we recognize that the number of “members” in a denomination often offers an optimistic picture. If a denomination’s membership is in decline, membership is often a lagging indicator as members remain on the books long after they have ceased participating in a congregation. However, this optimism is usually consistent, and thus comparisons over time do allow us to see real trends. We also recognize that statistics on other aspects of religious behaviour are more likely to offer an accurate picture. Churches are, for example, unlikely to record baptisms that didn’t happen. In sum, we believe that when we compare statistics on multiple aspects of religious involvement - such as membership, baptism, marriage and so on - a picture emerges that indicates how a denomination is doing and we need to take that picture seriously.

The purpose of these working papers is to make our findings available quickly and conveniently, and we welcome comments and feedback. Our main concern is how religious behavior has changed in Canada since World War II. We believe that the data from religious denominations will help us to understand the nature of this change, how it affected particular denominations, and, when looked at comparatively, this data will help us to understand the broader changes relating to religion itself and its place in Canadian society. The papers are intended to be primarily descriptive. Electronic dissemination allows us to share much more of the data that we have uncovered than would be possible in an academic journal article or book published in hard copy.

Discussion on the Presbyterian Church in Canada and the information in the Canadian Census can be found in an article in *Studies in Religion* which is scheduled for publication in 2011.

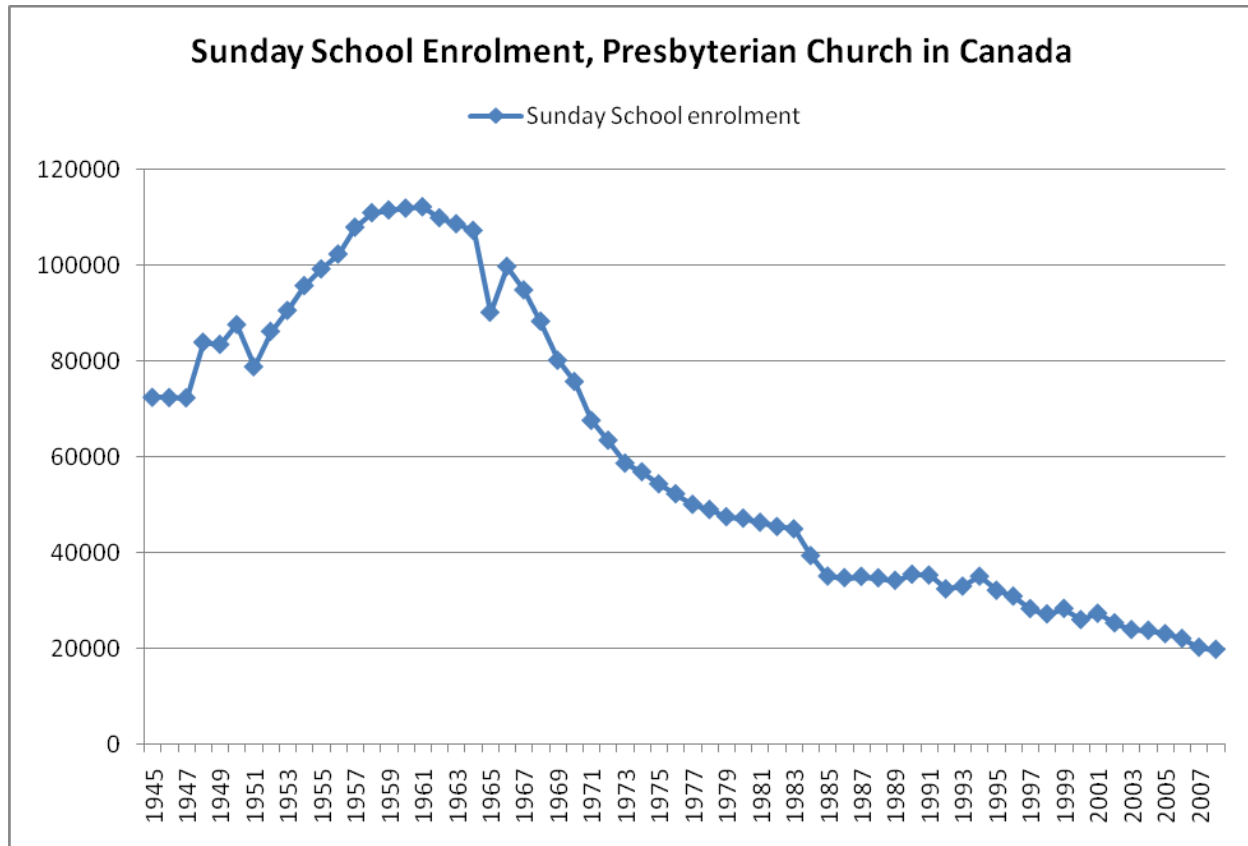
## Denominational Numbers

### Membership



**Figure 1 – Membership, Presbyterian Church in Canada, 1945–2008**

The Presbyterian Church in Canada had a membership of 173,152 in 1945 (Figure 1). This grew steadily through the late 1940s and 1950s, breaking the 200,000 mark in 1961. Membership continued to increase reaching 202,566 in 1964, the highest recorded membership. This fell gradually the next year to 202,498 (1965) but the trend had been established, and by 1975 the membership fell below the starting point in 1945, standing at only 171,791. Slow decline followed, with the membership falling below 150,000 in 1992 (148,831). In 2008 the membership stood at 113,104, approximately one third lower than in 1945 and 45 % off its 1964 peak.

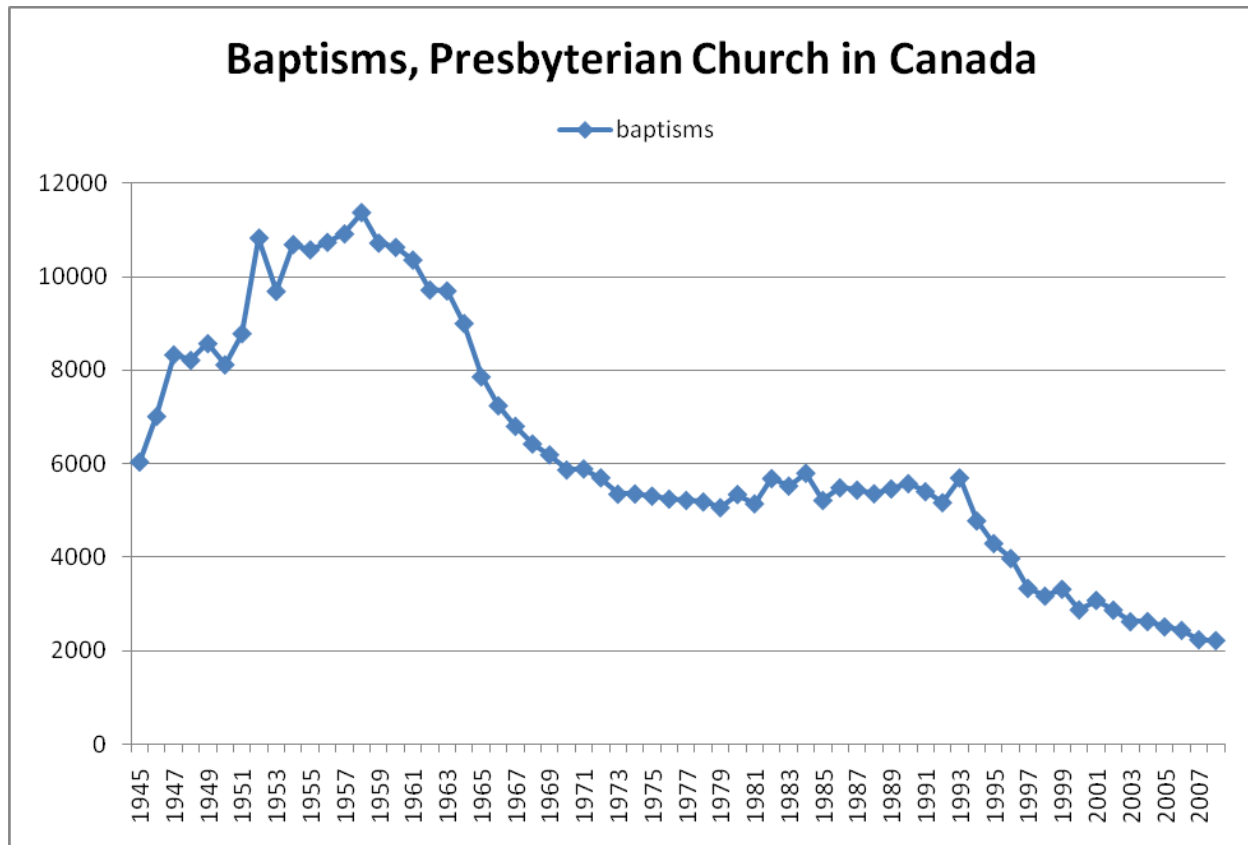
**Sunday School enrolment****Figure 2 – Sunday School Enrolment, Presbyterian Church in Canada, 1945–2008**

Sunday School enrolment (Figure 2) both grew and declined even more dramatically than church membership. Sunday school enrolment started in 1945 at 72,337 and fell slightly over the next few years, before beginning a pattern of growth (with a few ups and downs in early years). By 1956 Sunday School enrolment had moved up to over 100,000 (102,285 that year) and continued to grow, reaching a peak of 109,864 in 1962. The next year, 1963, saw a decline to 108,826, and the decline continued, with a dramatic drop occurring in 1965 (90,092) followed by a recovery in 1966 (99,695). After that Sunday School enrolment settled into a pattern of marked decline. (One can't help but wonder if there was an error of some kind in reporting in 1965.)

By 1969 Sunday school membership stood at 80,080 and fell below the 80,000 threshold the next year (75,461 in 1970). In other words, by the end of the 1960s, Sunday School enrolment had dropped by a third from its peak enrolment in 1962. Three years later Sunday school enrolment fell below 60,000, standing at only 58,589 in 1973. The dramatic losses between 1966 and 1973 are worth noting. In this period the Sunday school membership plunged by 40,000 young people, a drop of 40% from the 1966 enrolment figure. It took another 11 years before the enrolment dipped below the 40,000 threshold, standing at 39,270 in 1984. In just over a decade, the church's Sunday School enrolment has fallen by about one third. In 2008,

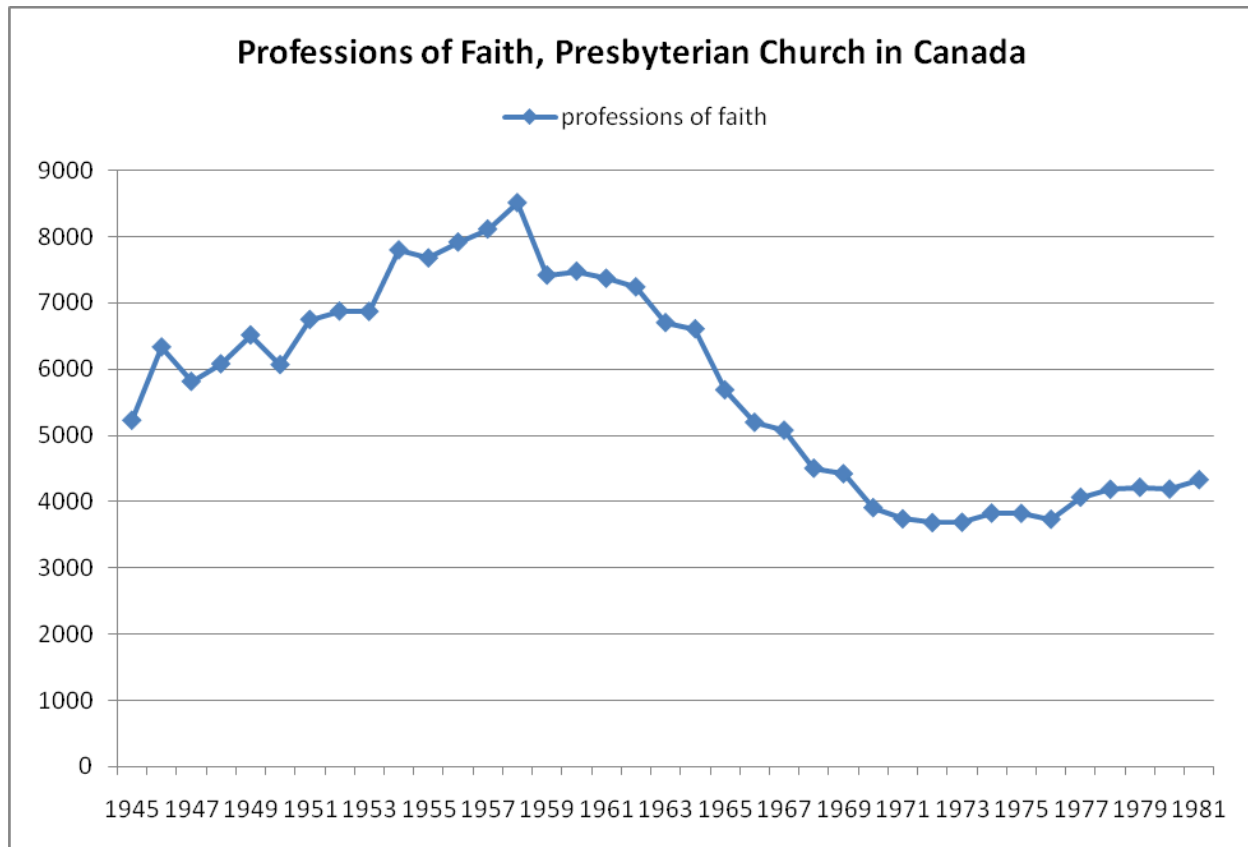
the last year for which we have statistics, the Sunday School enrolment fell below 20,000 for the first time, standing at 19,670 or fifth the size of the church's peak enrolment in 1962.

### ***Baptisms and Professions of faith***



**Figure 3 - Baptisms, Presbyterian Church in Canada, 1945-2008**

Baptisms grew in the years immediately following WWII (Figure 3). In 1945 ministers performed 6,040 baptisms in the Presbyterian Church in Canada (5,339 infants, 641 adults), and this number grew relatively consistently reaching a peak of 11,380 in 1958, an astounding 88% increase over a period of 13 years. (Unfortunately the PCC only recorded adult and infant baptisms separately up to 1950.) In 1959 baptisms fell to 10,726, and after that the number of baptisms continued to decline, falling below 8,000 in 1965 (7,862 baptisms). Five years later baptisms fell below both 6,000 and the starting point in 1945, standing at only 5,868 baptisms in 1970. By the time the 1960s were over, the church was baptising children at half the level of its peak year in 1958. The next period is one of relative stability, and even some recovery (5,801 baptisms in 1984), but that ended in 1993, a year which saw 5,698 baptisms. The period after this has seen another dramatic decline, falling to 4,779 in 1994, to 3,974 in 1996 (a decline of -30% in three years), and standing at only 2,217 baptisms in 2008 (a decline of -44% in twelve years).



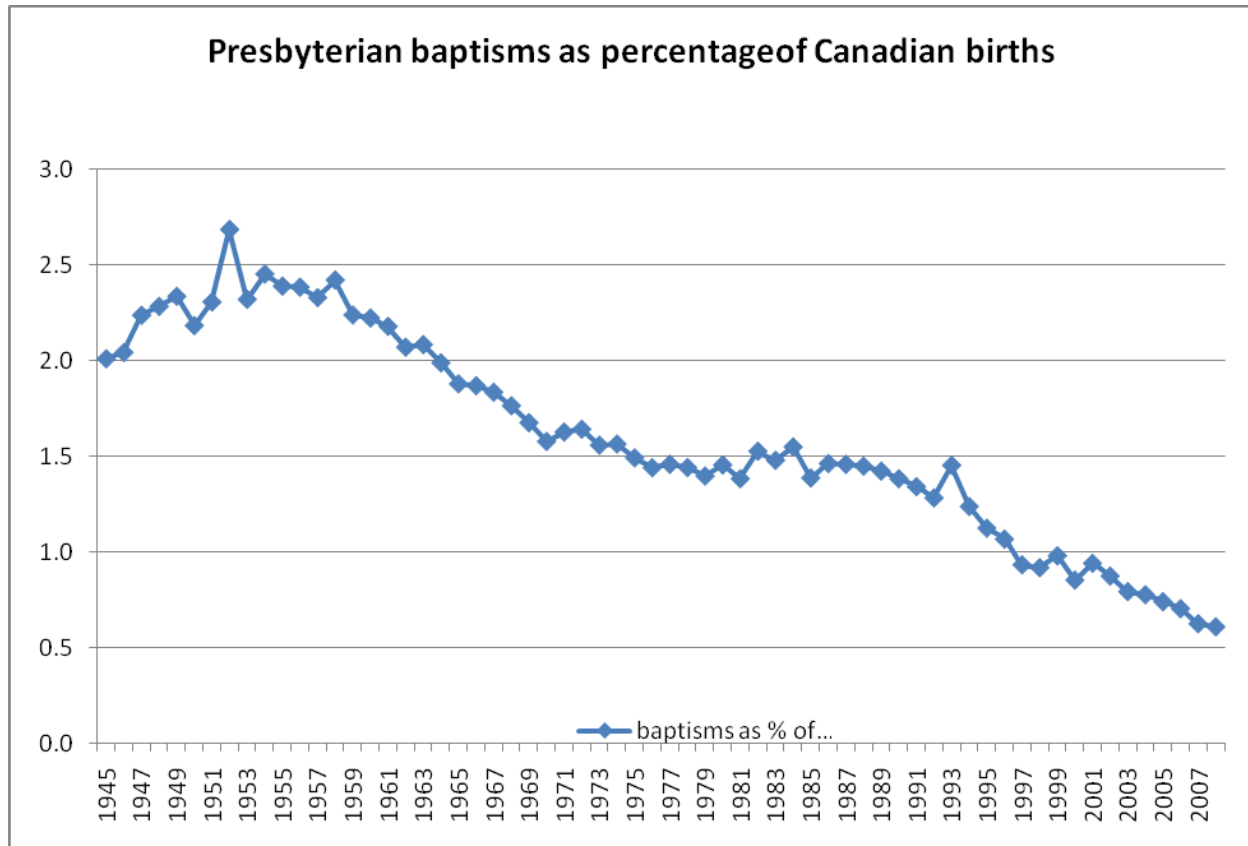
**Figure 4 - Professions of faith, Presbyterian Church in Canada, 1945-1981**

Professions of faith (Figure 4) followed a similar trend: starting from 5,225 in 1945, professions of faith grew to 8,506 by 1958, the highest ever recorded number. The dramatic decline the next year (1959) to 7,414, was followed by continual decline over the next years, falling to 4,502 in 1968, then falling below 4000 for the first time in 1970 (3,738). From the peak year of 1958 though to end the 1960s professions of faith declined by one half. In the early 1970's we see some stability in the number of professions of faith, and even a recovery in the later part of the 70s, which lasted until 1981, the final year this statistic was reported, when professions of faith stood at 4,328, up 15% from the opening of the decade.

### ***Baptisms and Births: A Comparative Analysis***

When we consider the number of baptisms, the obvious question we ask is how does this relate to the overall number of births? Put simply, denominations that practice infant baptism are highly responsive to changes in the birth rate for the number of children presented for baptism in any given year. We see this relationship in the Presbyterian church in Canada. We don't have the number of births specifically for Presbyterian parents, but the overall trend is clear enough. The peak year for births in Canada was 1959 (479,275), while the peak year for baptisms in the PCC was 1958. The best way to consider the relationship between the number of baptisms in the PCC and the number of babies being born nationally is to consider the former as percentage of the number of births in Canada. We can then determine to what extent the decline has been

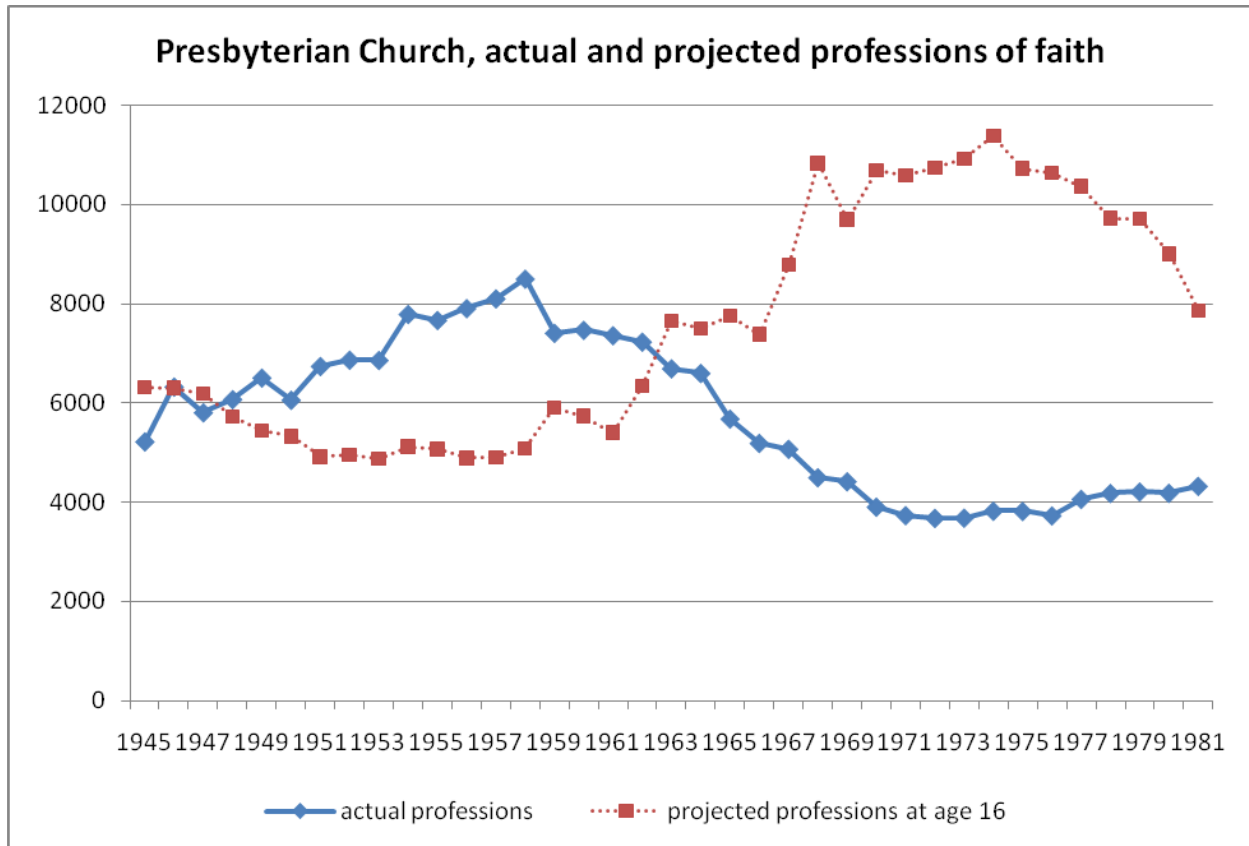
related to the simple decline in the number of babies being born and to what extent other factors are at play.



**Figure 5 - Baptisms in the Presbyterian Church in Canada as a percentage of Canadian births, 1945-2008**

What is clear from this comparison (Figure 5) is that the decline in the number of baptisms in the PCC was not related simply to the number of births. Even as a percentage, this has changed. We would suggest we see a few trends here. In the early period (1945-1963) Presbyterian baptisms are consistently above 2% of Canadian births. There is even growth in this period, with a spike in 1952 (2.7%). The fall from 2.4% in 1958 over the next few years is worth recognizing. It wasn't just that there were fewer baptisms in Presbyterian churches – there were also fewer baptisms as a percentage of Canadian births. The period from 1963 through 1975 saw a dramatic decline, until by 1975 Presbyterian baptisms stood at only 1.5% of the Canadian births. After this we see some stability, even a recovery, until 1993. From this point, baptisms as a percentage of Canadian births fell dramatically, falling below 1% in 2000 (0.9%) and continuing to decline to only 0.6% in 2008.

**Professions of faith: Expected and Actual**



**Figure 6 – Presbyterian Church in Canada, actual professions of faith compared to projected Professions of faith (age 16)**

We have already noted the decline in the number of professions of faith in the PCC. What needs to be stressed is that this is not what one would have expected, given the growth of baptisms in the immediate post-war period. Based on those baptisms one would have expected significant growth in professions of faith in the early 1960s – not a decline.

We have tried to represent this scenerio (Figure 6) by assuming that those who were baptized should appear in the church sixteen years later to make their profession of faith. While we would never expect to see all of these children reappear, one would anticipate that a significant number would, indeed, rappear to make their profession of faith. As can be seen in the above graph, this was indeed what happened (with others also joining the church through profession) in the 1950s. But, the situation changed significantly in the early 1960s.

Another way to consider this scerio is to note the gap between those who made a profession of faith compared to those that one might reasonably anticipate would have made a profession of faith in the normal course of a life cycle. In the late 1960s and early 1970s this gap consistently stands at between 2000 and 4000. While this is only a projection of trend lines, we believe this projection makes a significant point – those presented for baptism did not reappear in the numbers one would have anticipated in the early 1960s and the gap only becomes even bigger

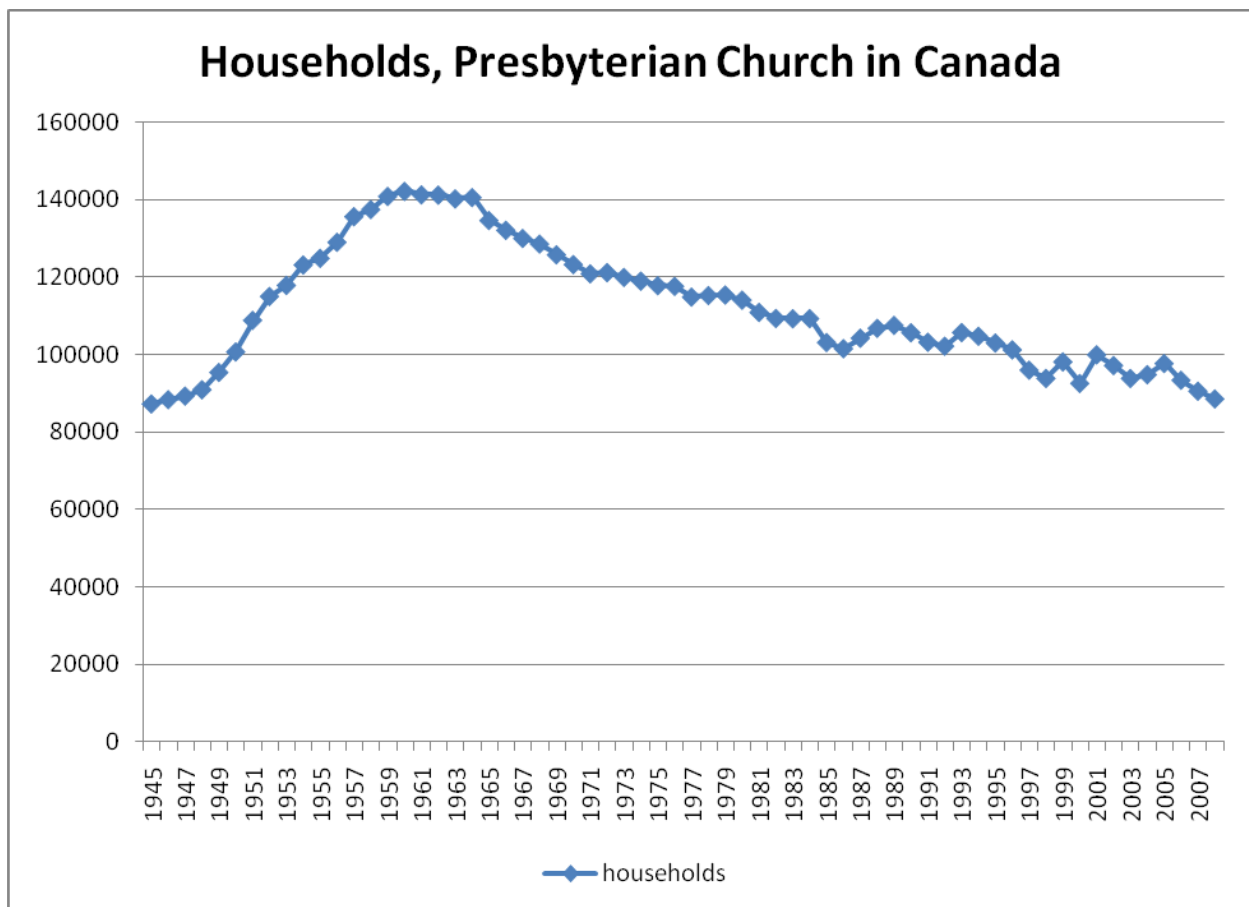
over the next years, increasing from approximately 900 fewer per year in 1962 and 1963 to over 6,000 fewer per year by 1969 until reaching a peak of 7,555 fewer than anticipated in 1974. Indeed, whereas the Presbyterian Church should have, based upon those baptized in the 1950s, seen 11,380 professions of faith in 1974, in reality the church witnessed only 3,825 professions, or one third of what would have been anticipated.

**Other statistics**

The Presbyterian Church in Canada also reports on a variety of other statistics, both financial and personal. The PCC does not (unfortunately for our purposes) report on pastoral acts such as the number of marriages performed or the number of funerals conducted.

It is still helpful to consider several of these statistics to see how they related to those already discussed and the ways in which they support (or challenge) the picture presented so far through these denominational statistics.

*Households*

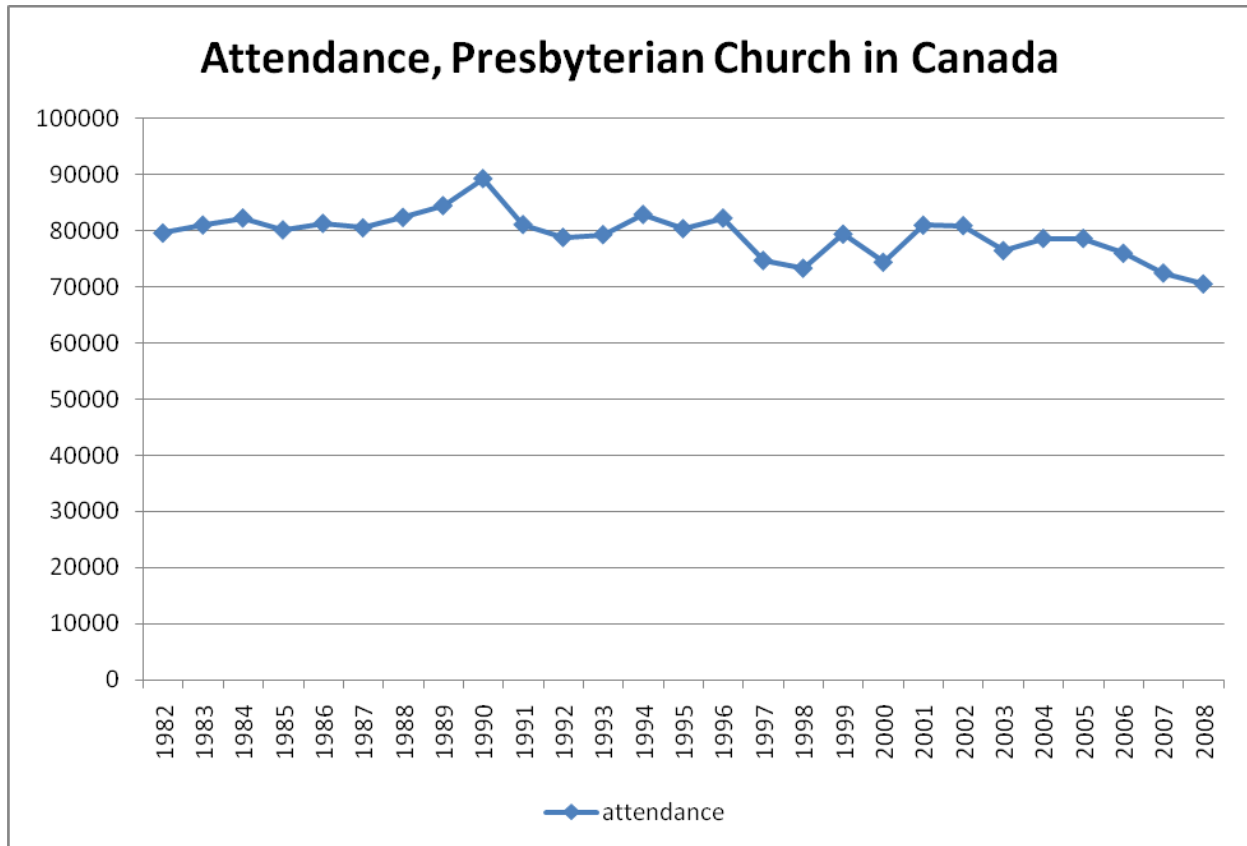


**Figure 7 – Number of households, Presbyterian Church in Canada, 1945-2008**



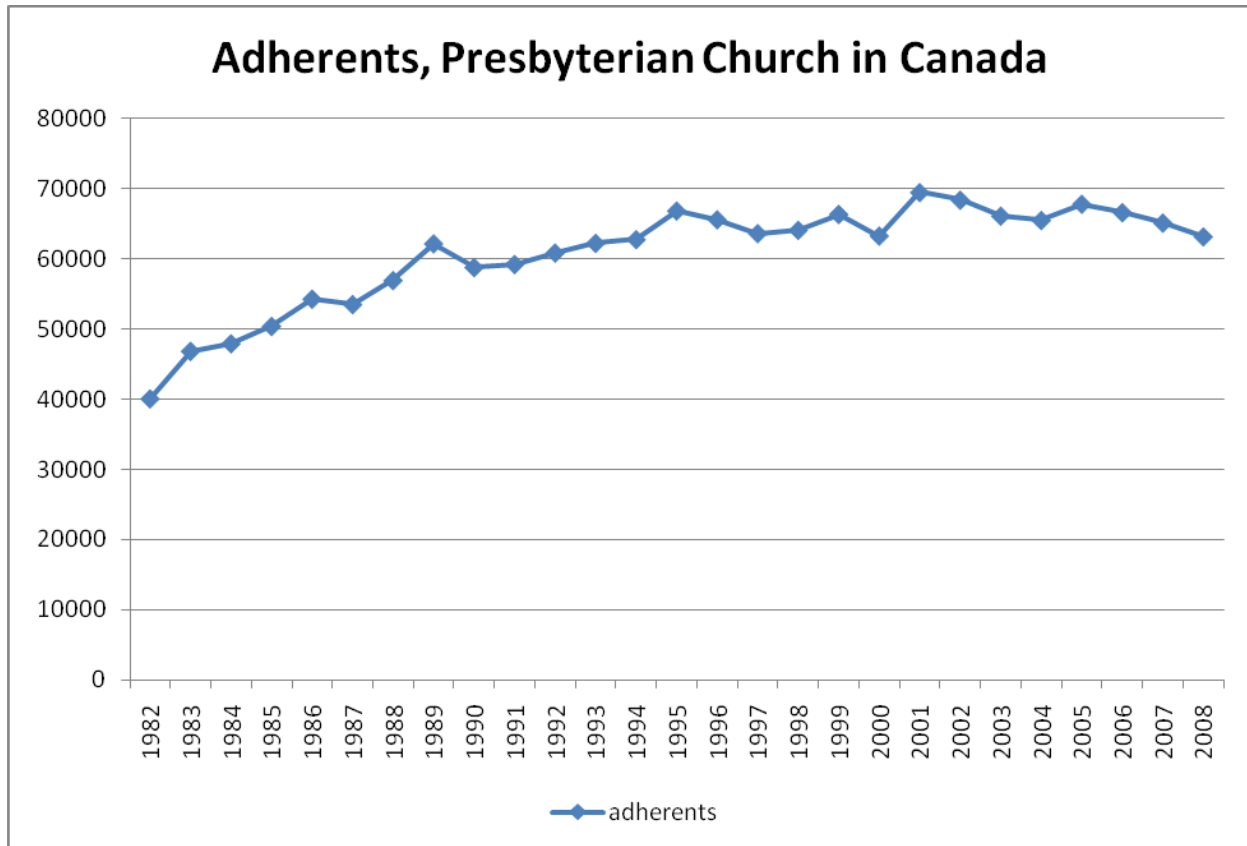
As well as counting the number of “members” the PCC also reports on the number of households (Figure 7). We see here a similar pattern of growth in the immediate post war period with a peak in the early 1960s (142,310 in 1960). Decline since then has been gradual, falling below 120,000 for the first time in 1974 (119,061) and below 100,000 for the first time in 1997 (96,006). In 2008 the PCC reported 88,551 households, slightly above the 1945 starting point of 87,244. So while the number of households on church rolls had dropped by well over a third from the 1960 peak, it was still well within the range established in pre-boomer times, something we have seen in any of the vital statistics we have looked at so far.

### Attendance



**Figure 8 - Attendance, Presbyterian Church in Canada, 1982-2008**

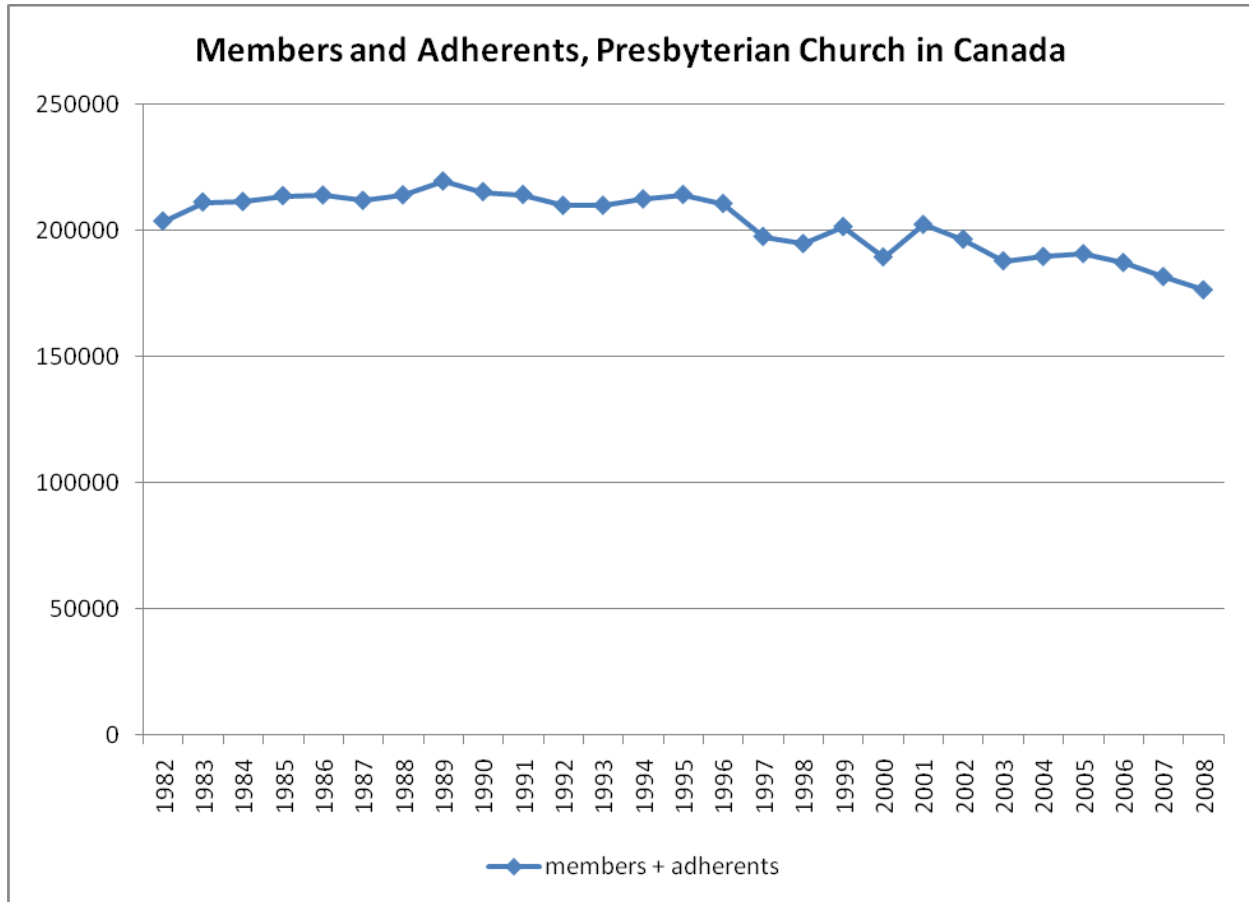
Beginning in 1982 the PCC began including a yearly number of those who had attended services on the average Sunday (Figure 8). (Originally the term used was “average communion attendance”, but the terminology subsequently changed.) What is interesting about attendance is that it is relatively stable throughout most of this period, generally moving on either side of 80,000 attendants. The peak year reported was 1990 (89,294). There was also a drop in the late 1990s, when attendants fell to 74,678 in 1997 and 73,258 in 1998 before a recovery so that in 2001 the number was reported as 80,982. In 2008, the PCC reported 70,476 attendants.

*Adherents*

**Figure 9 - Adherents, Presbyterian Church in Canada, 1982-2008**

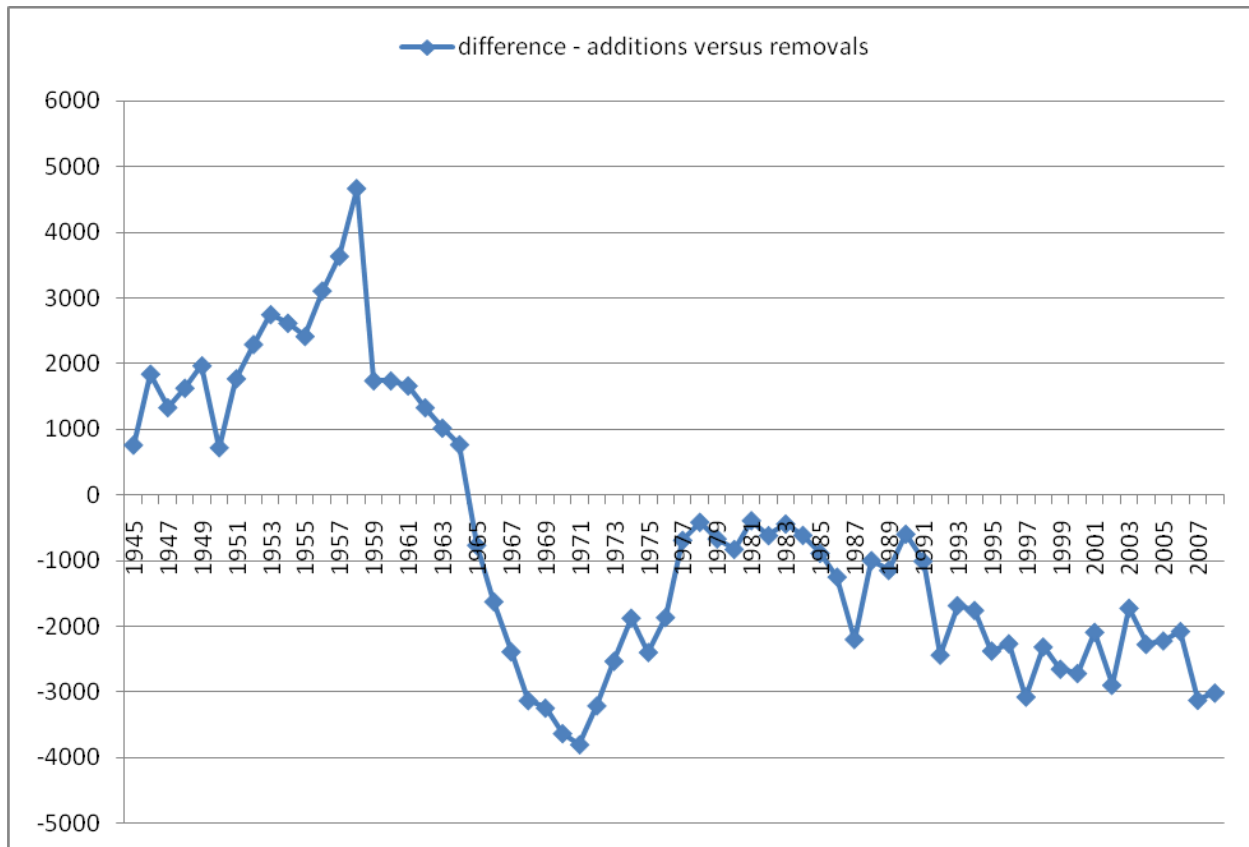
In 1982 the Presbyterian Church in Canada also began counting “adherents” – meaning those actively affiliated with a congregation who had not chosen the formal step of “joining” the church and becoming a member. This is one statistic which has show considerable growth over this period (Figure 9), rising from 40,029 in 1982 to 69,477 in 2001. In 2008 the PCC recorded 63,161 adherents. From 1982 to 2008, the number of adherents had increased by nearly three-fifths (57.8%). Of all the trends we have examined so far, the number of adherents is the only one where we see overall growth and significant growth at that.

It thus seems advisable to consider how considering adherents as well as members since 1982 would change our understanding of the trend in affiliation with the PCC. (See Figure 10) When we put both members and adherents together the trend is still a clear one of decline; however, it is notable that the rate of decline is not nearly as dramatic as the decline in membership when looked at alone. The number of members and adherents remains over 200,000 up to 1996 (213,998), before falling below that threshold in 1997 (197,393). There is considerable fluctuation over the next few years, but since 2002 (196,308) the downward trend has been consistent. In 2008 the combined number of adherents and members stood at 176,265, down -9.4% from a decade earlier.



**Figure 10 - Members and adherents, Presbyterian Church in Canada, 1982-2008**

While, as already noted, Presbyterians do not report statistics on pastoral activities, they have over the years included different statistics related to the process of moving on or off the membership role. From 1945 through to 1981 the two ways people moved onto the communion roll were by profession of faith (which we’ve already considered) and by transfer of membership from another Christian congregation. The two ways in which individuals were removed from a communion roll would include death and transfer to another congregation. We also know that inactive members were also sometimes removed from communion rolls. These were included under the deaths – which was properly noted as “death or otherwise”. While it is possible to create distinct graphs showing gains and losses, the real story can be shown when we look at the differences between gains and losses (Figure 11).

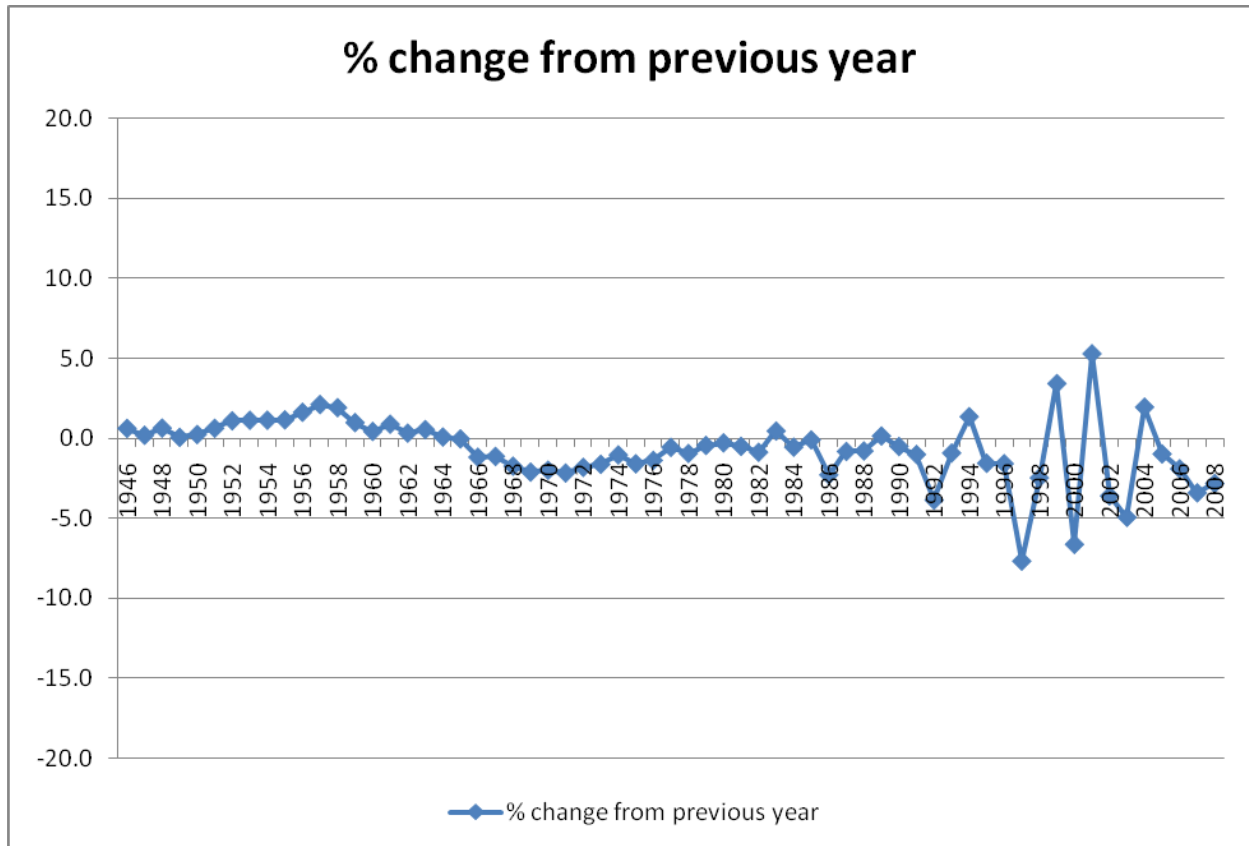


**Figure 11 - Difference, addition and removals from membership rolls of PCC, 1945-2008**

When we look at the difference between the additions (through professions of faith and transfer of membership) and the removals (deaths, transfers to another congregation or tradition, or removals from the roll) in Figure 11 we see a clear pattern of growth in the 1950s and a dramatic collapse after the early 1960s. There is a slight recovery in the late 1970s and into the 1980s, but the pattern since then has been one of growing decline. It is still worth noting the dramatic change between the early 1960s and the late 1960s.

## Rates of Change

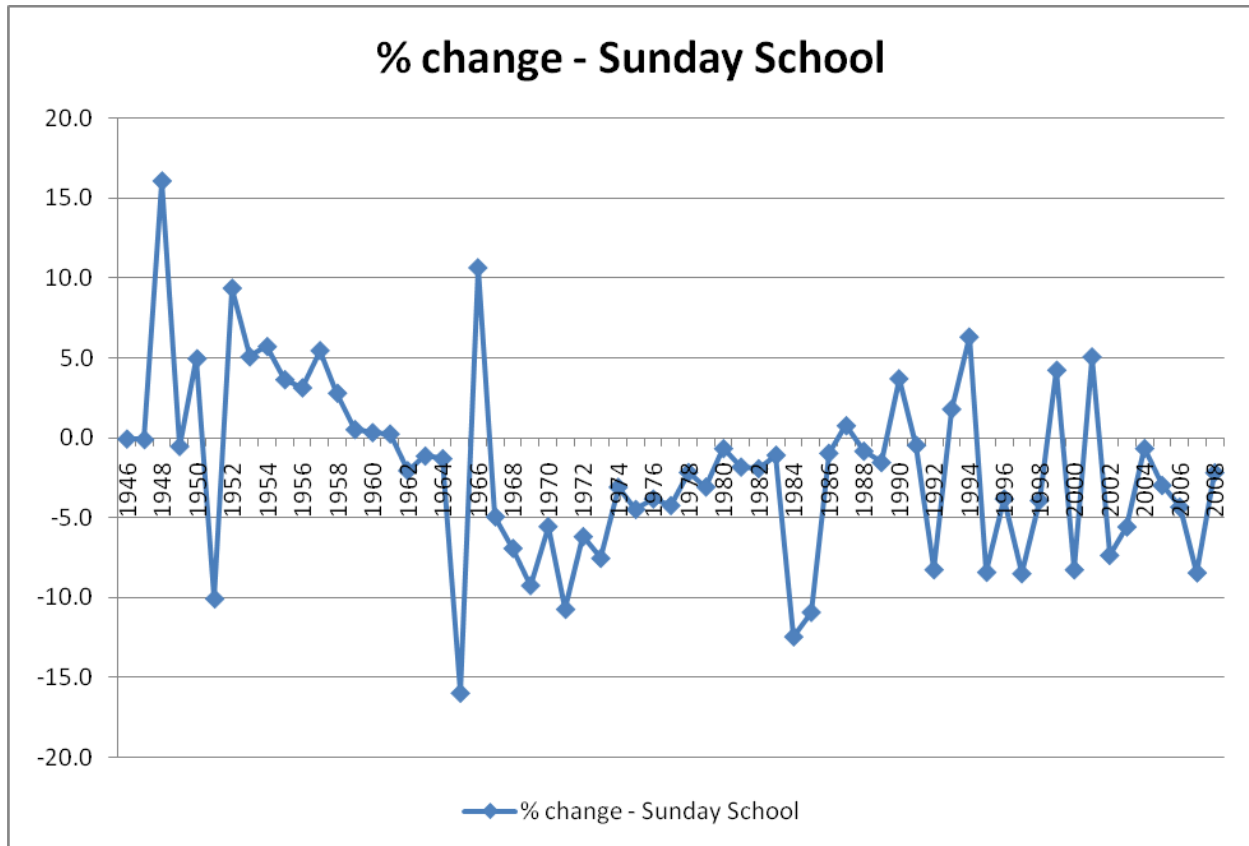
### Membership



**Figure 12 – Membership rate of change, Presbyterian Church in Canada, 1946-2008**

These rates of change confirm the growth pattern we observed for PCC membership during the 1950s. Growth in membership increased steadily and significantly until 1957, when the rate of growth started to ease off and then started to diminish. After 1965, membership rates entered negative territory. From 1965 to 1982, not one year saw a positive increase. Only after an 18 year hiatus did the church see a positive increase again. After 1983, rates of growth again turned negative till 1993. After that we see rates gyrate wildly, moving rapidly between positive and negative territories and hitting levels that are way above anything seen in the past. Moreover, we are unable to discern any identifiable trend.

**Sunday School**



**Figure 13 – Sunday School Enrollment rate of Change, Presbyterian Church in Canada, 1946-2008**

The immediate post-war period saw fairly wild fluctuations in rate of change in Sunday School enrolment, and generally these rates of change were much higher (nearly twice) than those for membership. Rates for Sunday School enrolment went negative earlier than general membership, starting here in 1962. 1965 and 1966 witnessed yet another wild fluctuation, with a 30 point gap in just two years. In 1967, rates of change again went negative and stayed there for 19 years before turning a low positive number (0.8%) in 1987. After that negative years outnumber positive years 16 to 5. While some might see grounds for optimism in those 5 positive years, it should be noted here that the underlying enrolment is a fraction of what it used to be, as we observed earlier on in this working paper.

***Rates of Change over decade intervals***

Another way to track change is look at change over a decade. To do this we have used certain key years – the years in which the Canadian census is also taken (1951, 1961, etc.). We have then compared the data in ten year blocks, comparing 1961 to 1951, 1971 to 1961, and so on. These particular intervals will allow us to compare census figures and denominational data in a larger study we are engaged in. We believe, more over, that this approach gives us a helpful

lens to look at change over time. One further comment. We will only look at those categories that we have for the entire period under review. The results are reflected in Table 1:

**Table 1 Change over decade**

	1951	1951 - 1961		1961-1971		1971- 1981		1981- 1991		1991- 2001	
		Change	%	Change	%	Change	%	Change	%	Change	%
Membership	177312	23328	13.2	-18081	-9.0	-17657	-9.7	-10120	-6.1	-22123	-14.3
Sunday School membership	78732	33425	42.5	-44626	-39.8	-21305	-31.5	-11027	-23.9	-7987	-22.7
Baptisms	8787	1577	17.9	-4473	-43.2	-746	-12.7	259	5.0	-2379	-44.0

When we look at the three categories we do have for the entire period, however, several things are clear. One is that membership has declined gradually, and only went into double digits in the period from 1991-2001. In contrast, we see a dramatic decline in Sunday school membership and baptisms, for both the 1960s and 1970s.

The remarkable decline in both Sunday School enrolment and baptisms underscores just how hard the 1960s (and its ethos of disillusionment with established institutions) hit the Presbyterian church. The massive decline in baptisms in the 1960s underscore that this disillusionment was not limited to youth. The other thing we see here is that Sunday School enrolment and baptisms were a leading indicator of church's weakening appeal. Or to put it another way, membership is a lagging indicator. In sum, members didn't leave in droves (although the nearly 10% drop seen in both the 1960s and 1970s is surely sizable). But then it also clear that much of a whole generation of youth left and never came back. And that's one of main reasons (death being the other) why the PCC has such a low membership base now.

We have also looked at rates of change by using 1951 as the baseline for comparison. The results are summarized in Table 2:

**Table 2 Change from base line (1951)**

	1951	1951 to 1961	1951 to 1971	1951 to 1981	1951 to 1991	1951 to 2001	1951	1951 to 1961	1951 to 1971	1951 to 1981	1951 to 1991	1951 to 2001
Membership	177312	23328	5247	-12410	-22530	-44653	0	13.2	3.0	-7.0	-12.7	-25.2
Sunday school membership	78732	33425	-11201	-32506	-43533	-51520	0	42.5	-14.2	-41.3	-55.3	-65.4
Baptisms	8787	1577	-2896	-3642	-3383	-5762	0	17.9	-33.0	-41.4	-38.5	-65.6

What Table 2 illustrates is not so much which decades saw the greatest change, but rather how significantly the vital statistics of the Presbyterian Church in Canada have changed over a half century. Again, we see that membership has declined less compared to 1951 than either Sunday School membership or baptisms. The fact that each of these latter two indicators had

declined by 65% from 1951 is worth noting. The rate of decline for both Sunday School enrolment and baptisms accelerates as we come closer to the present.

## Analysis

Our analysis at this point is not meant to be extensive, but it does seem helpful to draw a few conclusions from the data we have presented. We think several things are perfectly clear:

1. The Presbyterian Church in Canada witnessed growth in the immediate post-war period and into the mid 1950s.
2. This period of growth came to a dramatic end in the late 1950s and early 1960s. We note that baptisms, Sunday School enrolment, and membership entered into decline very closely to one another. First was baptisms, in 1959, followed by Sunday school membership in 1963, and lastly membership in 1965. We will note the significance of this cluster for future research in observation 5, below. For the moment, we note that in retrospect each of these years marked a tipping point. Each of these represented a beginning of new trend, one in which decline was marked and persistent.
3. The decline we have observed in membership, Sunday School enrolment and baptisms has continued from the 1960's on. There is, so far, no indication of a reversal. At the same time, we would note that some statistics – attendance and members plus adherents – do show staying power and, indeed, resilience.
4. Based on our research on other denominational statistics, we would make the initial observation that the Presbyterian Church in Canada's experience fits a pattern we have seen in several other denominations – the United Church of Canada, the Anglican Church of Canada, and the Maritime Baptists. This convergence in denominational trends would argue against any explanation that would see the fundamental cause of numerical decline in the Presbyterian church as a result of some decision(s) taken internally by the Presbyterian Church in Canada.
5. We would suggest that consideration of broad cultural changes that impacted the church should begin with an examination of the early years of what Arthur Marwick has termed 'the long sixties' – the years from 1958 to 1963. Why the Presbyterian Church was so affected by wider changes in Canadian culture is a question, we believe, that also needs to be addressed.



## Credits and Thanks

The authors would like to thank the following for their considerable help in this project. As always we are grateful to Anne Miller for her insight and assistance with data. We also want to acknowledge Jeremy Bellsmith, for sharing work he did on attendance data with us and Peter Coutts, who, on so many levels understand PCC statistics and their importance and has generously shared his own findings and data with us.

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