

## Chapter Five Religion in Little Dixie Gary Farley

In this chapter I will focus on five counties in central Missouri—Lafayette, Saline, Cooper, Howard, and Callaway which comprise the heart of the *Little Dixie* region of the state. R. Douglas Hurt in his book, *Agriculture and Slavery in Little Dixie*, also includes Clay and Boone Counties. But I have not included them for this study because these two counties have become essentially urban. We will draw upon the data from our study and from the Religious Congregations and Membership study.

In this chapter and the three that follow it, I will look at sets of counties across the state which have similar demographics and/or economies. Our goal will be to discover what has happened in each of the settings, religiously, across the past half century. I will draw not only on the data generated by the **Missouri Rural Church Study (MRCS)** but also the data from the recently published **Religious Congregations & Membership, 2000 (RCMS)**. We will be looking at how change has impacted Christian religious institutions both in terms of church growth or decline and church planting and closing. As we deal with these regions of the state of Missouri you will also want to go on line and make use of the excellent demographic pages provided by MERIC, Missouri Economic Research and Information Center. Look at [www.ded.mo.gov/research/regional/census](http://www.ded.mo.gov/research/regional/census). The regions used by this agency do not match the divisions we are using for this study, however.

For the reader who is not familiar with the material provided by the RCMS research project, a few lines of explanation are in order. Beginning in 1950 many of the denominations in the United States have cooperated in gathering data, at the end of each decade (except 1960), concerning the number of congregations and adherents each denomination reported in every one of the about 3,200 counties of the nation. This data was coordinated and compared with the Census Bureau's population data for the same decades. This makes it possible for an interested person to look at the population, the number of congregations and the number of adherents to these congregations in each county in the nation over the past half century, noting changes that have occurred. One can see which groups have grown and which have declined county by county, state by state, and across the nation. (To access some of this data, perhaps to look at what is there about your county or your denomination, go to [www.thearda.com](http://www.thearda.com).) One can see which have grown faster than the population and which denominations have not. Following the practice of Roger Finke and Rodney Stark in **The Churching of America 1776-1990** one can talk about gains and losses in "market share".

From the beginning many groups have cooperated in the data gathering process. These include American Baptists, Assembly of God, Catholic, Christian Church (Disciples), Episcopal, Lutherans, Presbyterians, Nazarenes, Southern Baptist, United Church of Christ, United Methodists, and several others. Some denominations, most notably the predominately African American ones, and most of the independent congregations generally have not participated in the studies. They either have not gathered this kind of data from their member congregations, or there is no mechanism in place to gather the data, as in the case of independent congregations.

So, in reality, the data normally "under-reports" the total number of congregations and adherents in a county or a state. In addition, because many local congregations and denominations do not keep their membership roles well-pruned, the number of adherents for

those participating are often far too high. Even with these limitations it is the best information available about what is really happening, numerically, at the congregational level, to religion in America. One of the helpful features of the 2000 edition is that several of the denominations have reported the average attendance at their primary weekly worship service. When taken together with the adherents totals, one gets a more realistic picture of the impact of a denominational family on a county, a state, and the nation.

The Missouri Rural Church Studies have gathered similar data for smaller political entities, townships. We hope that by looking at both sets of data that we can get a clearer picture of what has happened to rural churches in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The Little Dixie area is the core of early settlement in Missouri by persons who brought slavery and plantation agriculture from the Old South to the western frontier. Beginning about 1810 families came from Kentucky, Tennessee and Virginia to this set of counties which lie along the Missouri River and sought to duplicate the life they had known, or aspired to, before. The most famous of these was the family of Daniel Boone.

Certainly, some of these families had participated in the Frontier Revival, also often called the Second Great Awakening, in the previous decade. It was ignited at Cane Ridge, near Paris, Kentucky. So they brought with them a passion for the Christian faith and evangelism.

The Frontier Revival spun off two new religious movements, the Disciples of Christ and the Cumberland Presbyterians. Both were effective in planting new congregations in Little Dixie. Alexander Campbell, a key figure in the Disciples movement, came to the region on several occasions in the mid-1800s. Finis Ewing, one of the founders of the Cumberlands, settled in the region and opened a seminary at New Lebanon in Cooper County to train ministers for the work on the frontier.

The Methodists also came to Little Dixie in large numbers, as did the Baptists. Both groups evangelized and planted congregations aggressively. All four of these denominations founded colleges in Little Dixie before the Civil War. The region became the center of Protestantism in the west, even as St. Louis was the center for Roman Catholicism.

Little Dixie culture was not limited to the seven counties included in Hurt's study. It was present back to the east and north toward Hannibal and on west for 50 miles or so either side of the Missouri River toward Independence.

Upheavals in the Germanic states of Europe brought non-slave holding settlers to the Little Dixie region during the 1850s, swelling the population and impacting its religious makeup. Consequently, Catholic, Lutheran and Reformed communities sprang up. Concordia in Lafayette County became a center of Lutheran life. Early Civil War battles occurred at Boonville and at Lexington, Little Dixie towns. The Germans comprised significant portions of the Federal troops. The massacre of Germans by Confederate soldiers is commemorated by an historical plaque on the main street in Concordia.

During the 19<sup>th</sup> century, it was common for many communities in Little Dixie to have congregations of the four basic English speaking Protestant churches, what we have identified as the Frontier Four—Baptist, Disciples, Methodist, and Presbyterian. Sometimes they shared a common building and a union Sunday School, but rotated which group would hold the worship service week by week. But they were also competitive. Each denomination contended that its understanding of theology and form of church organizational life was the correct one. Of particular interest in this vane was the Disciples because this movement melded elements of “restorationism” and of “anti-denominationalism.” Interesting patterns of cooperation and conflict developed.

After the Civil War many African American congregations were founded in Little Dixie by former slaves who had been members of the churches of the basic four frontier Protestant denominations. Although, there has been significant out-migration of African Americans from Little Dixie, particularly since World War II, many congregations remain, particularly in the towns and cities.

At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century the four frontier Protestant faith families might be ranked in terms of membership in the following order: Methodists, Baptists, Disciples and Cumberland Presbyterians. Over the course of the century each has been impacted by changes in the religious landscape. Most of the Cumberlands reunited with the larger United Presbyterian denomination. Many of the Disciples were lost to the Churches of Christ and to the Independent Christian Church movement. The rising Holiness and Pentecostal movements drew many adherents from the Methodists. The Baptists were able to stay together until more recently when conflict between the Fundamentalist and Moderate wings of the denomination became ugly and hurtful. Today, white Baptist churches in the region may belong to one of two competing state denominational bodies, or conventions.

Population of Five Little Dixie Counties

County	1950	2000
Saline	26,694	23,756
Lafayette	25,272	32,960
Howard	11,857	10,212
Cooper	16,608	16,670
Callaway	23,316	40,766

Lafayette and Callaway Counties have experienced some population growth due to the fact that they adjoin metropolitan counties. Cooper has been plateaued. Saline and Howard have experienced a slight decline. As we look at the fortunes of the seven denominations that have the larger representations in these Little Dixie counties, we will be interested to learn who has gained and who has lost market share; to see if these changes are connected to population shifts; and to consider what might be done to address the changes that we find.

Southern Baptists

County	1950 Cong	1950 Memb.	2000 Cong	2000 Adh/Att.
Saline	18	3,971	17	4,341/1,030
Lafayette	14	3,587	15	6,395/1,387
Howard	12	1,263	8	2,151/450
Cooper	12	2,267	14	2,632/653
Callaway	13	3,224	19	6,296/1,569
Totals	69	14,312	73	21,815/5,089

In the 20<sup>th</sup> Century the congregations connected with the Missouri Baptist and Southern Baptist Conventions emerged as the largest denominational presence in Little Dixie. (This is true, even when Boone and Clay Counties are included.) From 1950 to 2000 these Baptists added a net four congregations and gained adherents more rapidly than the growth in population. However, closer observation suggests a decline in both numbers during the 1990s in the Little Dixie region. Further, less than 25% of the adherents attend worship on a typical Sunday. This seems to suggest that either the adherent numbers are inflated, or there is a declining level of commitment to the churches.

The greatest growth for these Baptists was in the two counties that experienced population growth. There were actually slight losses in total membership in Saline and Cooper counties. (Note: the adherent figures are used for comparison in the effort to adjust for the differences in how the various denominations report membership.)

### United Methodists

<u>County</u>	<u>1950 Cong</u>	<u>1950 Mem</u>	<u>2000 Cong</u>	<u>2000 Adh/Att</u>
Saline	20	3,053	12	1,901/499
Lafayette	13	2,786	11	2,189/687
Howard	13	2,138	7	1,059/343
Cooper	8	1,292	6	1,047/280
Callaway	18	2,340	16	1,838/753
Total	72	11,609	52	8,034/2,562

The United Methodists began the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century with more churches but 2,700 fewer members than the Southern Baptists in these five Little Dixie counties. They ended the period with 21 fewer churches and far fewer adherents. (In 2000 the UMC reported 6,533 members in the five Little Dixie counties. This is a loss in the 40 percent range.) Yet, on a given Sunday the Methodists have about half as many persons in worship as do the Southern Baptists. Further, the Methodists lost market share. Why this happened, while the Baptists gained, is a question that may have multiple answers including: denominational focus or purpose; patterns of out-migration; patterns of staffing of pastoral leadership; and nature of congregational governance.

In 1950 the Methodists denomination was the primary or largest one in 16 rural Missouri counties. In 2000 this had dropped to two. These are Atchison and Holt in the Northwest tip . Was this because the Methodists went into a “survival” mode, moving away from their traditional emphasis on evangelism and church planting? This is a question that denominational leaders and local church ones too should consider answering.

### The Christian Church

In 1968 many of the Christian churches elected to create a more centralized form of denominational connectionalism; however, some did not follow this course and retained their autonomy. So, there was a rather amiable division in this movement. In Little Dixie many of the Christian churches went with the new arrangement and now use the denominational name,

Christian Church (Disciples). Most of those who did not accept the more centralized, denominational arrangement, use a label such as Christian, Church of Christ, or Independent Christian. (These Churches of Christ are not to be confused with an earlier splint of the movement, the “non-instrumental” Churches of Christ. This variety is most often found in South Missouri and on southwestward into Texas and Arkansas.) In order to get a accurate picture of what has happened to the Christian Church movement in Little Dixie since 1950, I have combined the Disciples and Independent Christian church and membership figures for the 2000 data reported below.

Counties	1950 Cong	1950 Mem	2000 Cong	2000Adh
Saline	13	2,153	5	1,319
Lafayette	10	1,495	5	1,310
Howard	9	1,831	4	782
Cooper	6	538	2	413
Callaway	17	1393	9	1,446
Totals	55	7410	27	5270

As with the Methodists, the Christians Churches experienced decline in Little Dixie during the past half century. Only in Callaway County, where there has been population growth, was there a small gain in the 1990s. Again, the question comes as to why. Some possibilities might include a scarcity of ministers, denominational focus on the suburbs, failure to start new congregations, and/or failed vision and purpose. Did the movement become identified with the business and professional people in the towns and become separated from the common folk? Were some important elements lost with the departure of some congregations? Do the overlapping of names cause confusion?

My thought is that the founding purposes of restoration and reform withered in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Its ecumenical goals were coopted by the National Council of Churches. However, on the broader stage of contemporary American Christianity, many of the mega churches that are developing across the nation are connected to the Independent Christian Churches.

### Presbyterian

County	1950 Cong	1950 Mem	2000 Cong	2000 Adh
Saline	8	872	7	565
Lafayette	5	766	4	320
Howard	2	279	1	27
Cooper	8	456	3	251
Callaway	8	804	5	761
Totals	31	3,177	18	1,924

The pattern of the Presbyterians in Little Dixie is much like that of the United Methodists and Christian Churches. Fewer churches seems to have resulted in fewer members. The Presbyterians seem to have been stressed in communities with declining population and church membership by the fact that there is an expectation that the pastor be fully supported by the congregation. When this is not possible, the church either closes or is yoked with another one. And the data from the Missouri Rural Church Study seems to support a conclusion that a church is more viable when it does not share a pastor with another congregation, even if the pastor is bivocational; that is, the pastor holds a secular job which provides most of the family income.

### Lutheran

County	1950 Cong	1950 Memb	2000 Cong	2000 Adh/Att
Saline	7	859	7	1,565/631
Lafayette	8	4,145	8	4,224/1,673
Howard	0	0	1	58/30
Cooper	5	964	5	953/402
Callaway	0	0	2	309/92
Totals	20	5,968	23	7,109/2,828

All of the Lutheran churches in these five Little Dixie Counties we are reporting on are connected to the Missouri Synod, a rather conservative denomination. Although it has lost some market share in most of the counties, it has done better than most of the denominations, actually gaining support in the area. The largest congregation in the Missouri Rural Church Study is St. Paul's in the Lafayette County town of Concordia. Its counts nearly 2,500 adherents. It seems that the Germanic culture is still strong, and the role of the parish as the center of community life seems to be of continuing significance. It should be noted that the ratio between adherents and attendees is much better for the Lutherans than for the Methodists and the Baptists.

### United Church of Christ

County	1950 Cong	1950 Memb	2000 Adh	2000 Ahd/Att.
Saline	4	488	4	441/165
Lafayette	7	1,998	6	2,105/607
Howard	1	238	1	246/60
Cooper	4	755	3	561/221
Callaway	1	115	1	87/39
Totals	17	3,594	15	3,440/1,092

All of these churches were Evangelical and Reform congregations in 1950. They became

United Church of Christ congregations after the merger with the Congregational Churches. These churches, for the most part, serve predominantly German communities that date back about 150 years. Like the Lutheran churches in Little Dixie they have been reasonably stable for the past 50 years. And like the Lutherans, participation in these churches which have a tradition of being the center of community life and to which the community is bonded in many ways, is considerably higher than that of the four other pioneering churches in Little Dixie, churches whose tradition is tied to the Second Great Awakening.

### Catholic

County	1950 Cong	1950 Adh	2000 Cong	2000 Adh
Saline	4	1,668	3	1,400
Lafayette	3	1,097	4	1,491
Howard	2	1,021	2	850
Cooper	4	1,934	4	2,930
Callaway	1	882	3	1,720
Total	14	6,602	16	8,891

The Catholic Church has gained both in real numbers and in market share over the past 50 years in Little Dixie. They passed the Methodists to become the second largest faith family in the region, next to the Baptists who are also growing, in fact more rapidly than the Catholics. But, as I noted earlier, the Baptist figures seem to be inflated, as indicated by the attendance report. Unfortunately, there is not comparable data from the Catholics in the RCMS. Lacking attendance figures for the Catholics, I cannot venture an opinion as to the validity of their adherents numbers.

The growth in Lafayette and Callaway Counties is probably attributable to the expanding metropolitan areas of Kansas City and Columbia. It is not clear to me why the Catholics grew by nearly 1,000 in Cooper County.

### Others

The seven denominations that were established in Little Dixie during the settlement period continue to be the primary religious bodies serving the area. However, there are congregations connected to other national religious bodies. Unfortunately, as noted earlier the RCMS studies does not have data regarding the independent and African American congregations in these five Little Dixie counties. The report does list growing Latter Day Saint congregations in three of the counties, as well, as Community of Christ, the new name for the old Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (Missouri Mormons) with three congregations. There are surprisingly few Assemblies of God in Little Dixie. The Pentecostal and Holiness denominations that cooperated with the RCMS also have but a handful of adherents in Little Dixie.

### From the Missouri Rural Church Study

Five of the 99 township studied in 1952, 1967, 1982 and 1999 by the Missouri Rural

Church Study are located in three of the five rural counties of Little Dixie, Callaway, Howard, and Lafayette. (An additional one is found in Clay County.) Here are the totals:

Denomination	Congregations	Closed Churches
Christian	6	3
Southern Baptist	5	0
Lutheran	3	0
Catholic	1	0
Presbyterian, USA	1	0
United Methodist	3	1
UCC	1	0
AME	1	0
National Baptist	1	0
Non-Denom.	5	0
Indept. Baptist	1	1
Primitive Baptist	1	1
Total	28	6

First, note that there is more diversity in the stock of churches than one finds in the RCMS material. There are 8 churches here that did not appear in that data. Second, all of the townships had a Baptist church, and four of five had Disciples and Methodist churches. The Lutheran churches are in only one of the townships. Third, there is a possibility that the non-denominational churches are picking up the slack resulting from the shrinking and closure of the Mainline Protestant congregations.

### Concluding Observations

First, three of the four pioneering denominations on the Western Frontier are in decline in the Little Dixie Area. Of course, this follows national trends. Some of this decline can be explained in terms of shifting demographics. The communities that these churches were formed to serve have gone into decline. Some communities have even died. Consolidation of commerce and education has caused many of the persons that these denominations traditionally served to move away.

Second, there is the nagging question of why have the Baptists, the other member of the frontier four, continued to survive and even to gain market share in Little Dixie. There are probably many factors, some good and some bad. Let me just mention a few that are often suggested:

- \*larger families,
- \*more farmers than townspeople in the congregation,
- \*local ownership of the church,
- \*the “call system” for selecting pastoral leadership,
- \*flexibility on requirement for ordination,

\*ability to do church for less money, due to bivocational pastors which allayed some financial pressures,

\*strong national program to help town and country churches develop and adapt,

\*continued emphasis on church planting,

\*conservative stance on many social and moral issues,

\*continued emphasis on growth versus maintenance,

\*staffing with bivocational pastors who tended to be more available to a church,

\*each church has its own pastor,

\*the pastors typically are near local, rather than being imports,

\*the development of the denomination from being a regional to a national denomination during the period of this study helped Southern Baptists to maintain the same Great Commission emphasis which informed all four of the denominations during the 19<sup>th</sup> Century.

Whether or not the Southern Baptists can continue to sustain their growth and their market share in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century is open to question. Certainly, at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, Methodists were dominant in much of rural America. But they were not able to sustain themselves.

Third, the continuing sustainability of the Germanic “colony” congregations in Little Dixie is impressive. The Lutherans, UCC and Catholic denominations have done well. In the early days they retained their culture. They used their German language as a bond maker, and with the exception of the Catholics, for their worship. Many continue to operate their own schools. While inter-marriage is now more common, they have been able to sustain themselves in congregations that mix bonds of heritage with religious expression. We will revisit this in a later study of counties and churches in the German Ozarks.

Fourth, here and elsewhere in rural Missouri there is evidence of very good strategy for church extension on the part of the Catholics. Today there are only two small counties in Missouri without a Catholic parish. They have closed some of their “colony” parishes when the demographics no longer supported the expenditure of resources there. They have planted new congregations to gather up urban Catholics who have retired to rural retreats. We will see more about this in the chapter dealing with the Ozarks.

Fifth, it is interesting to note that the two denominations that have grown in Little Dixie and are the two largest in the state of Missouri have such very different ecclesiologies and denominational structures. Does this mean that there really is no “best way to do things”. There are some commonalities, however. Both plant new churches. Both are driven by a well defined mission. Both have good resources base. Both are generally conservative on social issues.

Sixth, the data from both the RCMS and the MRCS reports raises the possibility that Christianity is losing market share in rural America. Perhaps, more detailed studies that include the independents and the African Americans will prove that this is not the case. But, in the meanwhile, Christians need to be serious about the Great Commission. We need to work to *rechurch rural America*.