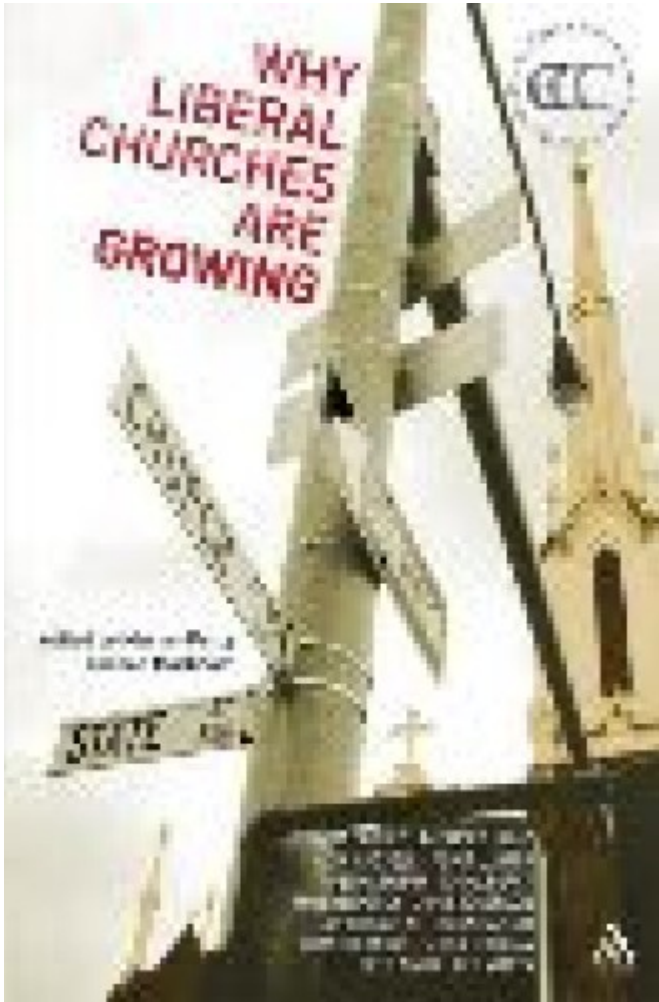


Why Liberal Churches Are Growing

reviewed by [Martha Grace Reese](#) in the [March 11, 2008](#) issue

In Review



Why Liberal Churches Are Growing

Martyn Percy and Ian Markham, eds.

T & T Clark

This volume of essays explores evangelistic growth where it is coupled with liberal or progressive theology. The strongest chapters outline new sociological data or paint

panoramic views of discrete segments of the church. The editors' diagnostic reflections on the nature of liberal churches are wonderful.

Among the contributors, Benjamin Watts presents a fascinating look at social justice and church growth in current and historical African-American churches; Terasa Cooley gives us a statistical analysis of the overall growth in Unitarian Universalism; and Scott Thumma suggests that an "open and affirming" approach to gays has no correlation—positive or negative—with congregational growth. Adair Lummis reflects thoughtfully on aspects of theological congruence between pastor and congregation in liberal congregations, and David Roozen incisively analyzes pockets of vitality within old-line Protestantism. Martyn Percy uses James Hopewell's *Congregation: Stories and Structures* to discuss one diocese's "tragic" stories; his piece may inspire you to dig out your old copy of Hopewell.

Cooley offers the shortest description of liberal church vibrancy—one that can be understood prescriptively:

Large and growing congregations have a "dynamic energy," their worship is "joyful," "exciting," "reverent," and there is a "sense of expectancy" as well as a "sense of God's presence." These are congregations in which people actually enjoy themselves! At the same time, this almost visceral sense of pleasure does not seem to be about self-satisfaction or selfishness. . . . There is a great degree of attention given to the larger community and the experience of a larger reality.

Pete Ward's chapter on youth work is particularly resonant. He builds a convincing case that a commitment to building long-term relationships with young people and to encouraging them to develop as Christian leaders transformed the charismatic/evangelical movement within the Church of England from a small, "somewhat ineffectual" group in the 1930s into the thriving section of the church that it is today. Ward's argument synchronizes with Cynthia Woolever and Deborah Bruce's finding, based on the U.S. Congregations Study, that one of three critical elements for congregational growth is work with children and youth.

Liberal congregations can flourish. They can grow in authentic, healthy ways. Mainline/liberal Christians bear an open, deeply spiritual faith that is passionately concerned with justice and vibrantly alive. If we take up Ward's challenge and make the nurture of youth and the development of young leaders our priority, we can reverse what Roozen calls a "continuing stream of decline," and the light of the

open, just, living gospel of Christ will blaze into the future.