

**Sermons, Systems and Strategies:  
The Geographic Strategies of the Methodist Episcopal Church in its  
Expansion into New York State, 1788 - 1810**

by

**Michael G. Nickerson**

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## **Abstract of Dissertation**

Institutions develop geographic strategies in order to diffuse their ideas and organizations. These strategies may be either or both explicit and implicit and involve the generation of organizational structures, the examination of problems and possibilities and the deployment of resources. American Protestant religious institutions expand territorially and numerically by establishing new congregations. Founding methods, operational relationships between judicatories and existing congregations, and deployment processes of six denominations (Dutch Reformed, Episcopal, Presbyterian, Congregational, Baptist and Methodist) in upstate New York before 1810 are explored, with special emphasis on the Methodist Episcopal Church which showed the most successful expansion during that period. A series of maps and charts have been assembled to indicate the diffusion patterns of these six religious institutions. The various time periods examined, 1788 and before, 1789-1793, 1794-1798, 1799-1803, 1804-1810, correspond with significant growth and realignments of Methodist districts. The results of this study show that geographic strategies have directly affected the success and failure of denominational expansion.

## Preface

This dissertation represents a combination of two separate academic fields I had pursued before coming to Syracuse. Having received a Masters of Divinity at United Theological Seminary, and worked as a local church pastor for several years, I returned to school to complete a Masters in Urban Geography at Miami University under James Rubenstein. My introductory course on the History of Geography as a discipline introduced me to the field of Geography of Religion and David Sopher's book of the same title.<sup>1</sup> These prompted me to enter the Ph.D. program at Syracuse University.

American denominational history is unique. Denominations as we know them are primarily an American invention and to study them from a geographic viewpoint has brought me a great deal of new insight and personal satisfaction.

The genesis of this particular topic flows from comments in two books that have made a strong influence on historical and geographic scholarship. Wilbur Zelinsky's Cultural Geography of the United States,<sup>2</sup> notes that regional historical geographic studies can give us much insight into America. Specific note is made about religious studies and their potential for regional historical geography.

In the introduction of his book, The Burned Over District, Whitney Cross states that "evidence concerning the development of the Burned-Over District churches before 1825 is unreliable, but it suffices to indicate similar patterns of growth among several denominations."<sup>3</sup> By looking at later denominational patterns of upstate New York it was clear that the denominational growth patterns were different rather than similar and I believed there was evidence available to describe those differences. Such a challenge is the heart of research. While sources may not

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<sup>1</sup>David Sopher, Geography of Religions (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1967).

<sup>2</sup>Wilbur Zelinsky, The Cultural Geography of the United States, (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1973).

<sup>3</sup>Whitney Cross, The Burned Over District; the Social and Intellectual History of Enthusiastic Religion in Western New York, 1800-1850 (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1950), p. 9.

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always be consistent or comprehensive, the Minutes and Journals of religious organizations provide extant information to generate an historical geographic understanding of the process of denominational diffusion in New York state.

From my abiding interest in geography and church history, and the challenges presented by Sopher, Zelinsky and Cross, the topic of this dissertation began to be formulated and is now presented.

Michael G. Nickerson  
Phoenix, Arizona  
September, 1988

## **Acknowledgement to the Dissertation**

This dissertation is an aggregation of many people's thoughts, efforts and activities.

First, I would like to gratefully acknowledge the counsel and encouragement offered by the late David Sopher in the early stages of this project. His office was the scene of many an interesting dialogue during which pertinent questions for discussion in this dissertation were explored.

I would also like to acknowledge my continuing invaluable exchange with Donald Meinig in the preparation of this manuscript. I thank him for his subtle pushes, and allowance for my development so that this study could be intellectually satisfying for me.

This dissertation would have never been completed without the emotional support and encouragement of Ti Nickerson. While that support was by far her most valuable contribution, I acknowledge her endless hours of typing and assistance in countless other preparatory activities as being most pivotal to the completion of this manuscript.

Bill Wyckoff and Craig Colten have lent listening ears and much constructive feedback to this project. I'm sure they heard enough about New York religious denominations to last them for quite awhile!

I am ever grateful to Bob Conn who offered his friendship and writing and philosophical experience. Our many brainstorming sessions contributed significantly to the organization, clarity of communication and flow of this dissertation.

My thanks also goes to F. Thomas Trotter whose encouragement and support to finish the dissertation while I worked for the Board of Higher Education and Ministry kept the project going during difficult times. My various secretaries, Peggy Hayes, Jenny Stockard and Betty Ray have also contributed their typing and other skills to several stages of this project. Many thanks for their willing and helpful spirits.

I would like to also thank Mark Weiner of the Syracuse Rare Book Library for his diligent help, especially in those initial stages of gathering resources. Also during the data-gathering phases of this study, Ken Rowe of Drew University and William Beal of the General Commission on Archives and History of the United Methodist Church greatly assisted in tracking down Methodist resources. By far the most complete denominational archival records for upstate New York were the

Minutes of the Associations of the Baptist Church Archives at Colgate-Rochester-Bexley Hall. I appreciate the staff's help in allowing me to have access to the Minutes both published and handwritten during my several visits. I'd also like to thank the Presbyterian Historical Society in Philadelphia whose microfilm collection was very helpful in determining founding dates and sizes of Presbyterian churches.

A special thank you goes to William Phinney of Stanford, New York, whose personal manuscripts and records from that area immensely increased my understanding of the Albany and Delaware Circuits. Robert Rowe's work on the Colbert typescript helped clear up many questions on Colbert's routes and hosts.

To these people and many others who provided assistance, I am truly thankful. This dissertation represents not only the synthesis of one person's work, but the generous contributions of many.

I thank the General Commission on Archives and History of the United Methodist Church for bestowing their Jesse Lee Award that made possible the publishing of this work.



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## **Chapter One: Introduction**

### ***Introduction***

The founding of the Methodist Episcopal Church in December of 1784 closely followed the official recognition of the United States as a new and sovereign state. As the young nation grew, so did this fledgling religious institution, and by 1860 the Methodist Episcopal Church in its northern and southern branches had become the central church of many communities, the largest church in many towns and cities, the most common church over large regions, and the most national church in distribution throughout the United States.

With its small concentration on the Delmarva peninsula and in the Tidewater areas of Virginia and Maryland--with outliers in Philadelphia and New York City--the Methodist movement of 1776 would appear to have had a poor chance for success as it became a separate church in 1784 with 14,988 members. A quarter of a century later, Methodist circuit riders, lay preachers and leaders, societies and classes could be found throughout the United States, Upper and Lower Canada, Nova Scotia, and the British West Indies. By 1810, a fully articulated institution with 174,560 members had evolved from a movement that consisted primarily of small groups that met in private residences. Although residential meetings remained the mainstay of the church, they eventually became connected to a regionalized organizational structure that had greatly expanded in membership as well as geographic area.

This tremendous growth continued for several decades. By 1860 Methodists had over 7,500 more churches in the United States than any other denominational family, and also more members (Charts 1 and 2). Methodism was found in all the parts of the United States that had been settled by Europeans giving it one of the most national geographical distributions of any denomination (Figures 1, 2, and 3).

Today, studies show that Methodism, while not being the largest membership denominational family, is the most nationally distributed group in America. The largest Methodist denomination, the United Methodist Church, has more than 38,000 congregations that are spread throughout most cities and small towns in the United States, while many more congregations dot the open countryside. Other Methodist denominations such as African Methodist Episcopal, African Methodist Episcopal Zion, Wesleyan Church, Free Methodist, and Christian Methodist Episcopal, make up several thousand more congregations whose roots are based in the original Methodist Episcopal Church. The present extent of the Methodist

Chapter One: Introduction

Chart 1  
Number of Churches in 1820 and 1860

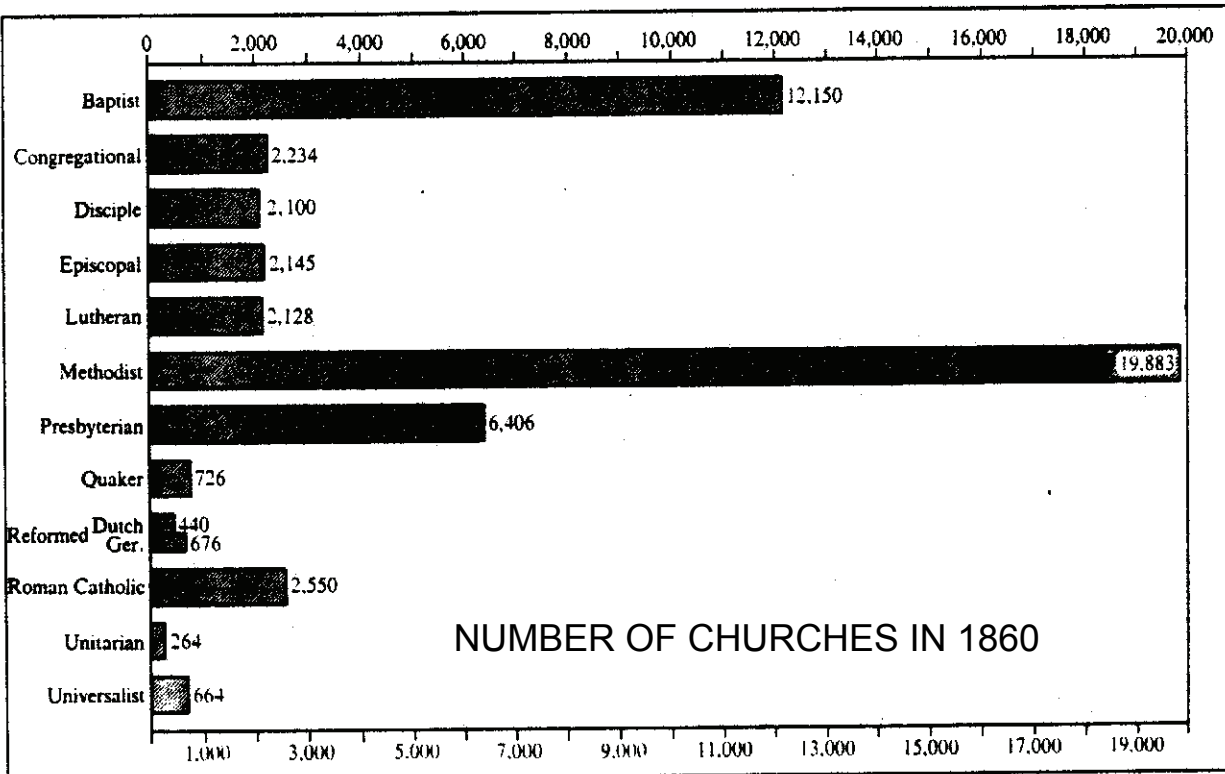
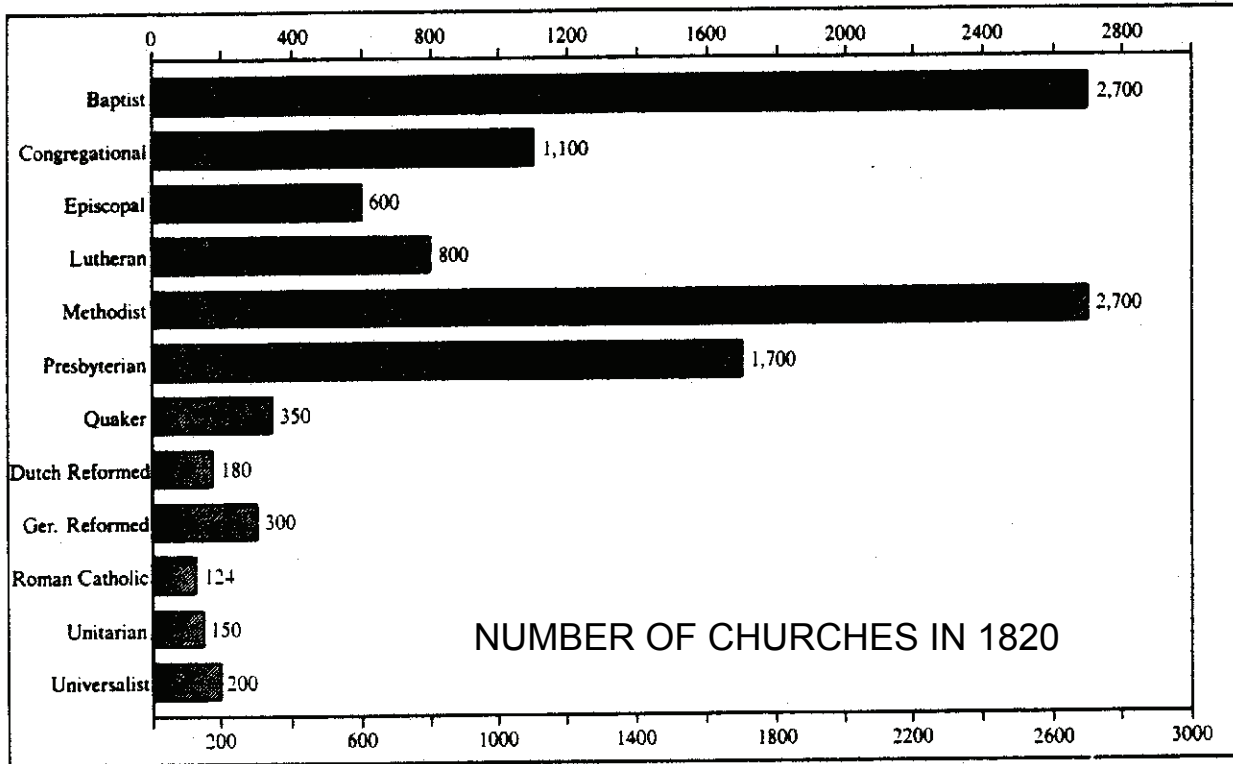
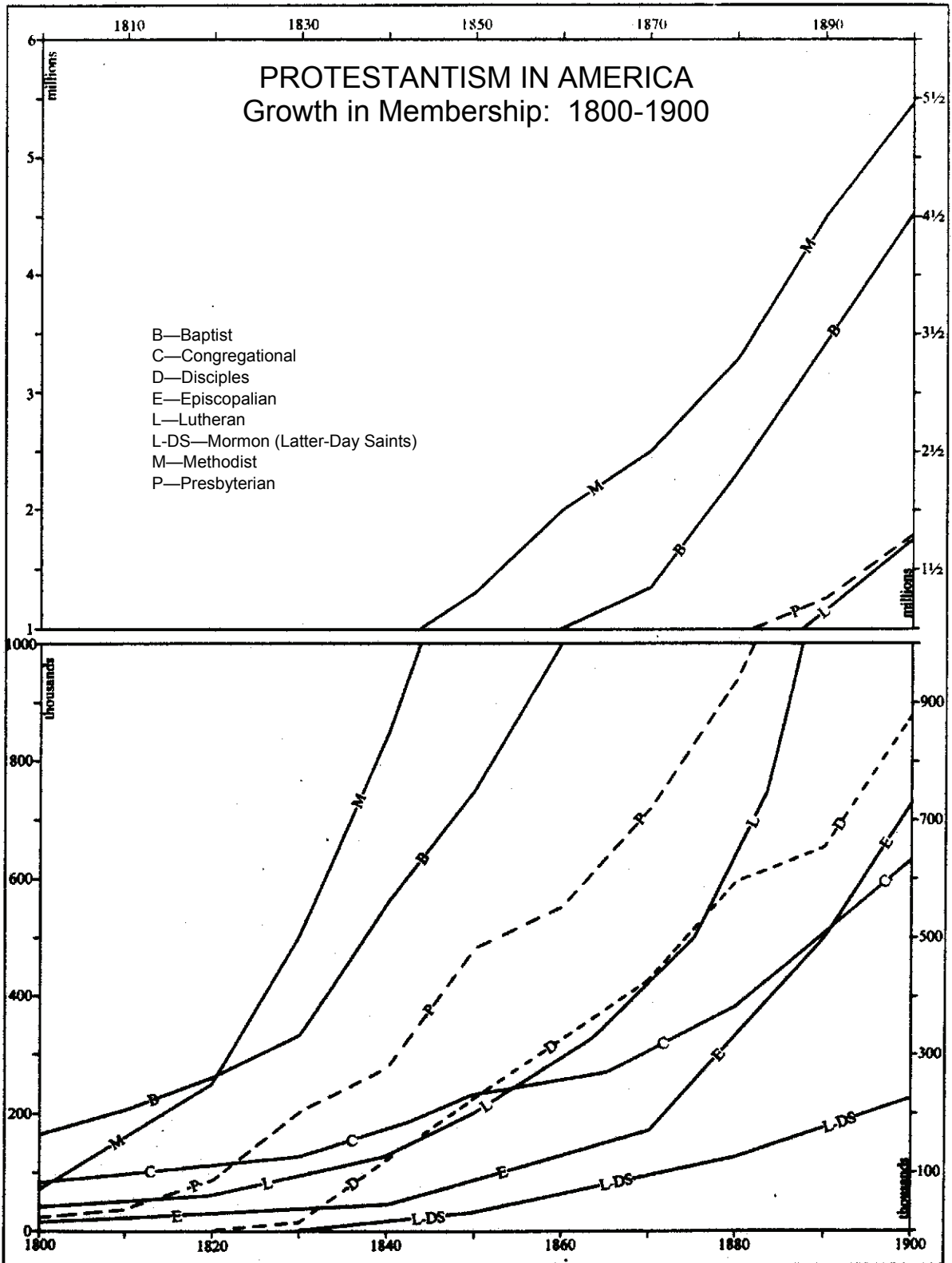
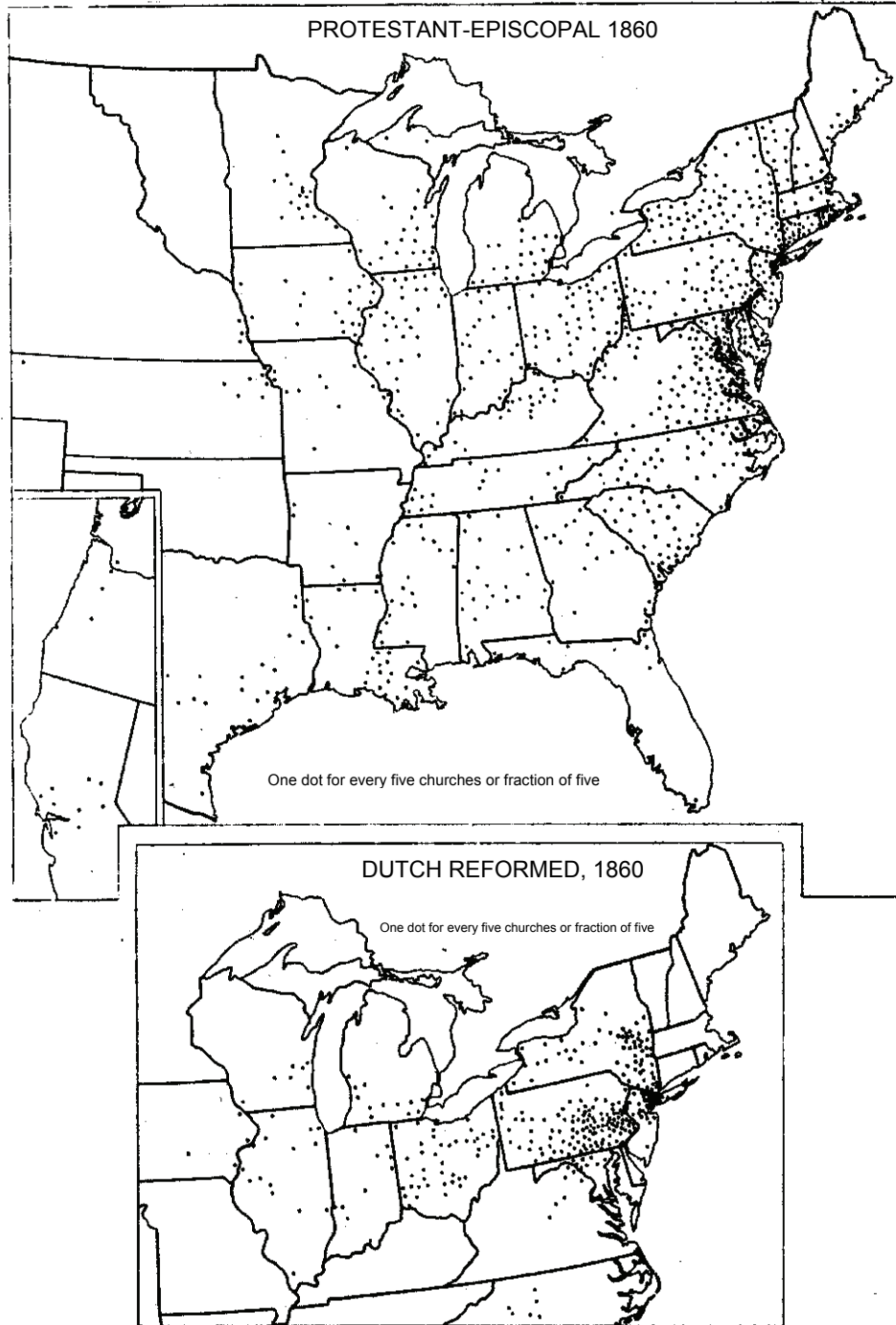


Chart 2



Source: Gaustad, Historical Atlas of Religion in America

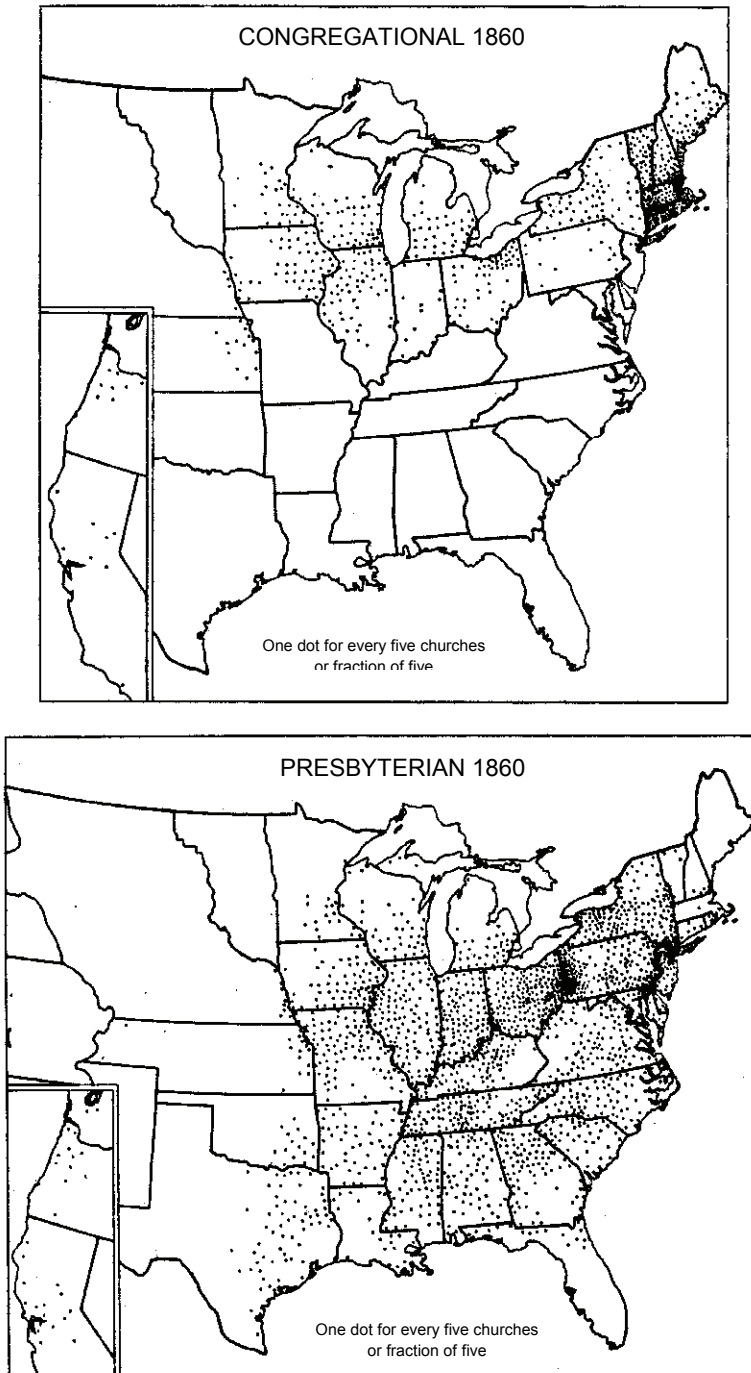
### Dutch Reformed and Protestant Episcopal Churches in 1860



Source: Paullin and Wright, Atlas of the Historical Geography of the United States

Figure 1

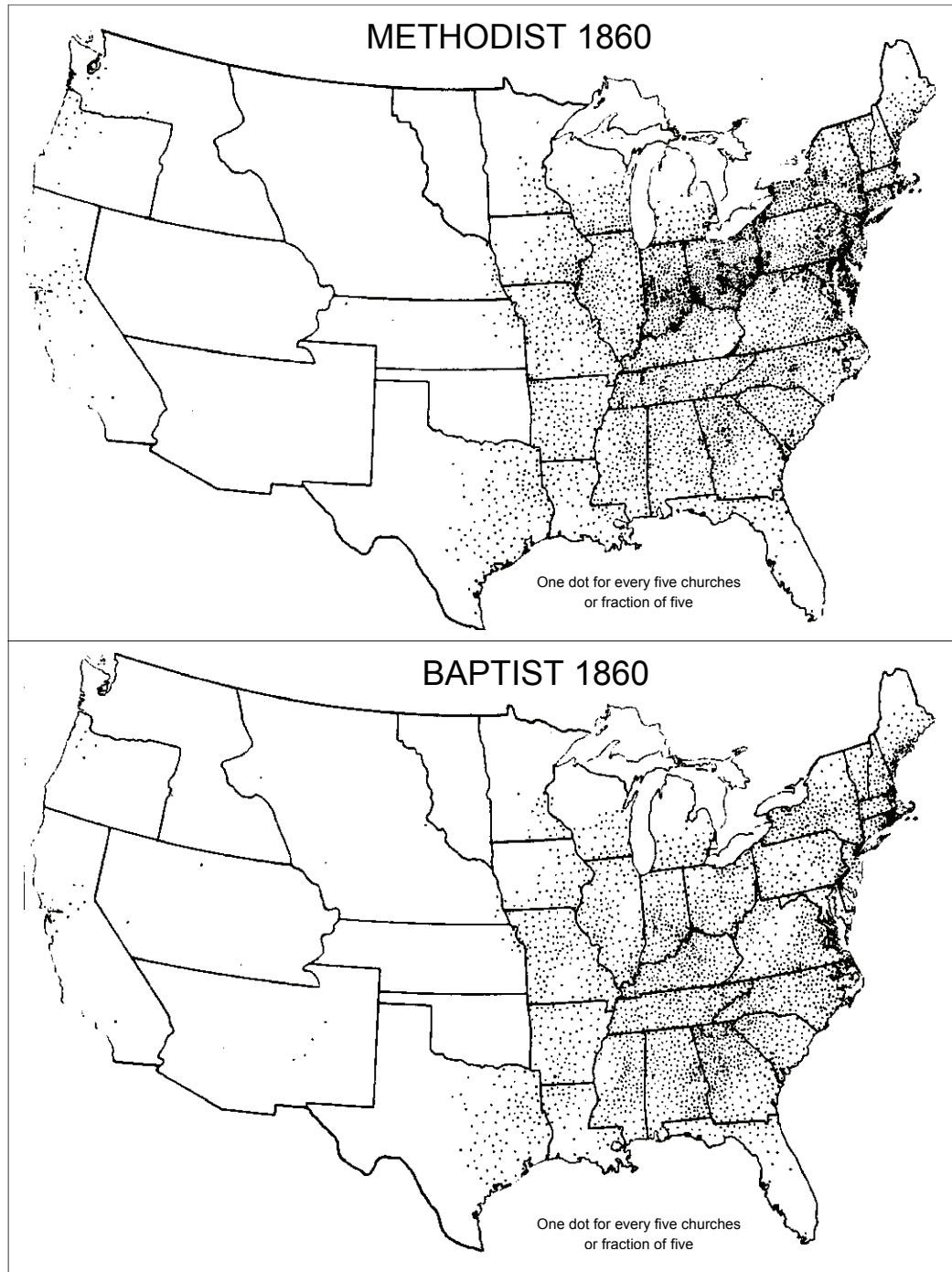
Congregational and Presbyterian Churches in 1860



Source: Paullin and Wright, Atlas of the Historical Geography of the United States

Figure 2

Methodist and Baptist Churches in 1860





movement compared to its humble origins makes American Methodism's strategies worthy of study.<sup>4</sup>

What decisions and actions accounted for its dramatic growth and generated its specific geographically structured church organization? This dissertation focuses on the strategies developed by the Methodist Episcopal Church between 1784 and 1810, the critical quarter century during which it grew to be one of the leading denominations in the new republic.

### ***Geographic Strategies***

Because the word "strategy" is a technical term often referred to in this dissertation, it will be necessary to clarify its meaning. Although often used as a synonym for "plans," the word strategy comes from the Greek, *strategikos* meaning "of or for a general."<sup>5</sup> It thus referred to the way a general positioned his troops spatially. It is in that sense of "spatial organization with a specific purpose" that the word strategy will be used in this study. Moreover, strategy will not refer only to explicitly chosen spatial arrangements. Actions affecting organizational structure, competition and cooperation, for example, may be *implicitly* strategic when they bear on the geographic distribution of persons and other resources of an organization. Implicit strategies will also be explored in this dissertation.

---

<sup>4</sup>Wilbur Zelinsky, "An Approach to the Religious Geography of the United States; Patterns of Church Membership in 1952," *Annals*, American Association of Geographers. 51:1 (March 1961), pp. 139-193.

James R. Shortridge, "Patterns of Religion in the United States," *Geographical Review*, 66:4, 1976, pp. 420-434.

Douglas W. Johnson, Paul R. Picard and Bernard Quinn, *Churches and Church Membership in the United States: an Enumeration by Region, State, and County: 1971* (Washington: Glenmary Research Center, 1974).

<sup>5</sup>*Webster's New International Dictionary of the English Language*, 2nd Edition Unabridged (Springfield, Massachusetts: G. and C. Merriam Company, 1961), p. 2491.