

THE GROWTH OF A CONGREGATION

- A PROFILE -

Senior Church History

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## THE PROBLEM

Isaiah and Jeremiah worked faithfully for years with little apparent success. Jonah worked for a brief period in Ninevah with the result that the entire city repented in sackcloth. At the preaching on Pentecost, some 3,000 souls were brought into God's kingdom. Before getting involved with the facts and figures of this paper, it must be emphasized that there is no "magical formula" to numerical church growth. We must say with Paul, "I planted, Apollos watered, but God was causing the growth." So then neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but God who causes the growth." (I Cor 3:6-7)

On the other hand, we have our Lord's directive, "Preach the Gospel to every creature," with God's own promise that "My word which goes forth from My mouth shall not return to Me empty (but will) accomplish what I desire, and (will) succeed in the matter for which I sent it."

We know that God's desire is that all men be saved and come to a knowledge of the truth. We know that both aspects of God's desire, to save as many as possible and to impart as great a knowledge of the truth as possible, are accomplished only by the Holy Spirit working thru the Means of Grace. The purpose of this paper is not to look at the second area, that of building up the saints, but the other area, that of numerical growth.

In this area, it is not my intent to deal with the methods or mechanics of church growth, such as house-to-house evangelization, vacation Bible school, or mass-media effectiveness. Instead, I would look at some truisms which I have heard, but regarding which I have seen no substantial data. The first truism is, IN THE LIFE OF A CONGREGATION, THERE IS INITIAL RAPID GROWTH FOR APPROXIMATELY TEN YEARS.

The second truism is, BETWEEN THE TENTH AND FIFTEENTH YEARS THERE IS LITTLE NUMERICAL GROWTH. The rationale for this is that the church is concentrating on building up the saints, of maturing in its concept of who it is and what is its purpose. The third truism is, AFTER ABOUT THE FIFTEENTH YEAR, THE CHURCH AGAIN GROWS NUMERICALLY, BUT AT A SLOWER RATE THAN THAT OF THE FIRST TEN YEARS.

There are basically three types of numerical growth. The first is biological growth. It is good growth. God commanded men to "be fruitful, and multiply, and fill the earth." But often it does not even keep up the normal increase in population, for while some become ardent Christians, others are lost to the world. The second type of growth is transfer. This occurs when an individual moves his membership from one congregation to another of like persuasion, as occurred for example when the WELS and the LC-MS severed fellowship ties, or as when an individual moves his place of residence. This is an important type of growth and every congregation should follow up its members and conserve as many of them as possible. But transfer growth does not extend the church of Christ for it is only a shifting rather than an adding of living stones.

The third type of numerical growth is conversion growth. Here, the dead come alive, those who once were not a people now become the people of God. This type of growth is the object of mission: to reach and bring the Good News to the uttermost parts of the earth. Whether that "uttermost part" is Palo Palo or Phoenix, Ceylon or Cedarburg is not important except perhaps as to method; the message remains the same. Thus, a fourth statement will be considered in this paper: THERE IS A HIGH RATE OF CONVERSION GROWTH DURING THE FIRST TEN YEARS OF THE LIFE

OF A LOCAL CONGREGATION. Evidence for this will be found in the rate of adult confirmations.

#### THE APPARATUS AND METHODS

The apparatus used is the information found in the Statistical Reports of the WELS during the years 1940-1979. Congregations which began their existences in the decade years, 1940, 1950, 1960, and 1970, were selected. Seven congregations began in 1940, eight in 1950, eight in 1960, and fifteen in 1970 (of which eight were selected). Baptized membership, communicant membership and number of adult confirmands were recorded. In the years 1941, 1943, 1945, 1947, 1949, 1951, 1953, and 1955, when no statistics were available, the years prior and following were averaged, and the results entered and used. Page "A" lists the congregations used and pages "A-1", "A-2", "A-3", and "A-4" list the raw information found in the Statistical Reports.

Page "B" is a reduction and composite of the raw numbers found in the above pages. When crossing 10-year marks, because there are numerical differences, the following factors were incorporated: between 1949 and 1950, 90%; between 1959 and 1960, 123%; and between 1969 and 1970, 158%. This is intended to equalize the numbers to the largest group, the first ten years, and so to give the most accurate projection.

The graphs are pictorial representations of the information found in pages "A" and "B". Their individual significance will be discussed in turn. Again, it must be emphasized that the purpose of this paper is not to praise or to criticize any individual congregations, but to reveal God's grace as evidenced in the growth of His church and to perhaps gain some insight as to how to proceed to most effectively make

FIRST 10 YEARS															
1940-49	60/21 -	68/25 -	89/54 -	99/58 -	94/51 -	101/59 -	108/64/2	120/72 -	127/73/2	137/83/2					
1950-59	63/30/21	93/45/2	113/57/4	120/64/3	146/71/2	162/79/2	179/87/2	186/95/3	202/101/2	215/111/3					
1960-69	92/43/1	96/49/2	127/63/1	145/72/1	177/91/3	193/101/3	214/116/2	232/132/2	253/146/2	280/166/3					
1970-79	37/23/0	49/32/1	60/40/1	83/54/2	89/59/0	101/65/2	123/76/3	125/81/2	125/85/2	127/86/2					
COMPOSITE	63/29/0	77/40/2	97/54/2	112/62/2	127/68/2	139/76/1/2	156/86/2	166/95/2	177/101/2	190/112/3					
SECOND 10 YEARS															
1940-49	138/84/3	147/87/3	148/86/3	149/86/2	150/86/1	145/85/2	141/86/2	150/88/3	156/95/1	167/102/2					
1950-59	216/115/3	221/119/2	224/123/3	225/124/2	236/134/3	233/141/4	249/151/3	242/154/3	251/164/3	263/177/1					
1960-69	303/183/3	324/199/3	341/215/3	364/230/3	367/243/2	371/253/2	397/277/3	422/295/3	444/312/2	459/323/3					
COMPOSITE	219/127/3	231/136/3	238/141/3	<del>246</del> /147/2	251/154/2	250/160/3	262/171/3	271/179/3	284/190/2	296/200/3					
THIRD 10 YEARS															
1940-49	159/99/2	173/105/1	174/108/2	180/116/2	174/111/1	177/112/1	179/120/2	172/116/1	177/120/1	178/120/3					
1950-59	271/178/2	280/182/3	277/181/3	269/192/2	271/195/4	278/201/3	278/205/2	269/199/3	269/203/2	278/211/2					
COMPOSITE	215/139/2	227/144/2	226/145/3	225/154/2	223/153/3	228/157/2	229/163/2	221/158/2	223/162/2	228/166/2					
FOURTH 10 YEARS															
1940-49	174/120/2	173/119/1	175/121/2	174/123/1	171/121/1	174/122/1	170/123/2	162/120/0	156/120/0	152/120/2					

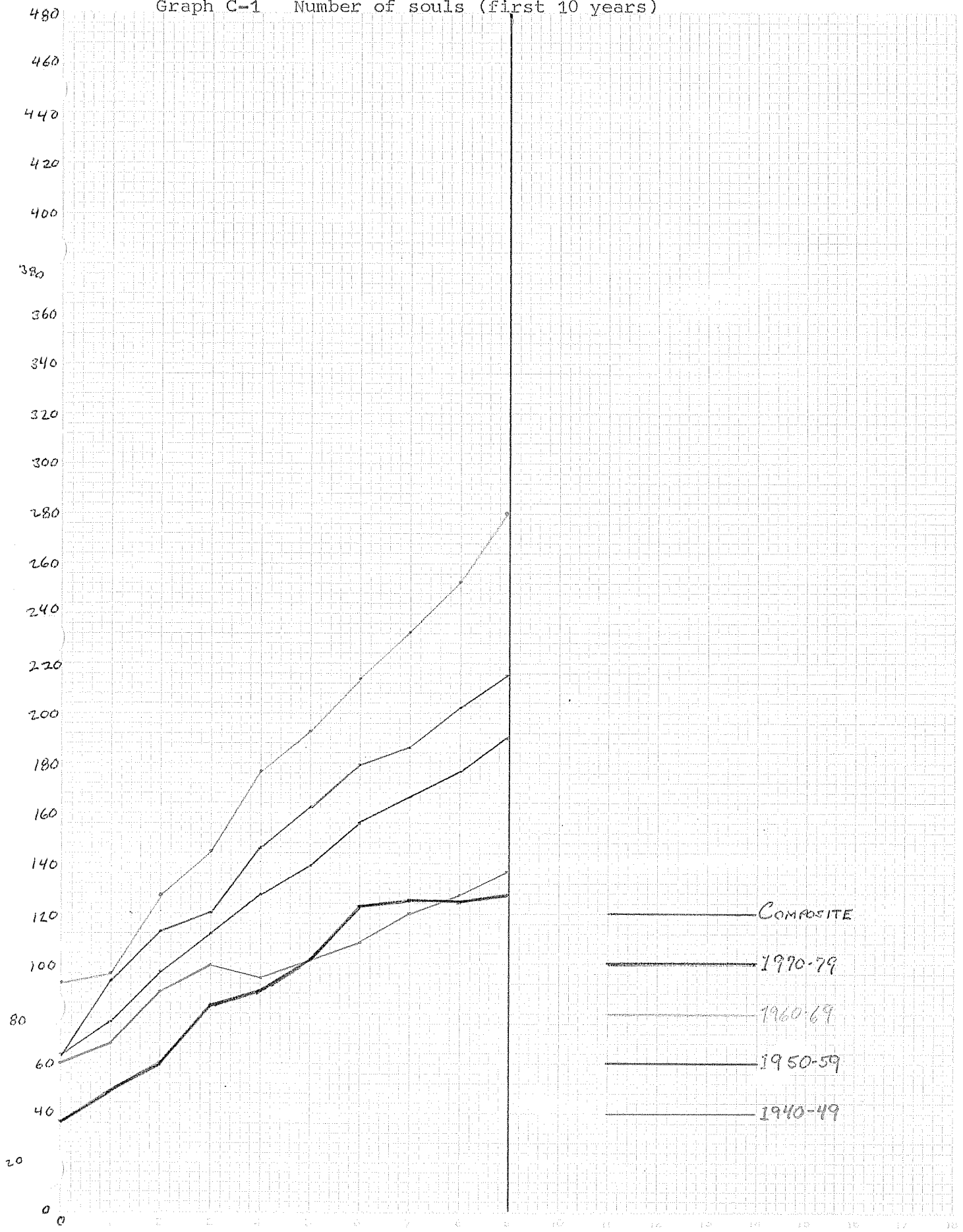
use of His blessings in the future.

IN THE LIFE OF A CONGREGATION, THERE IS INITIAL RAPID GROWTH FOR  
APPROXIMATELY TEN YEARS

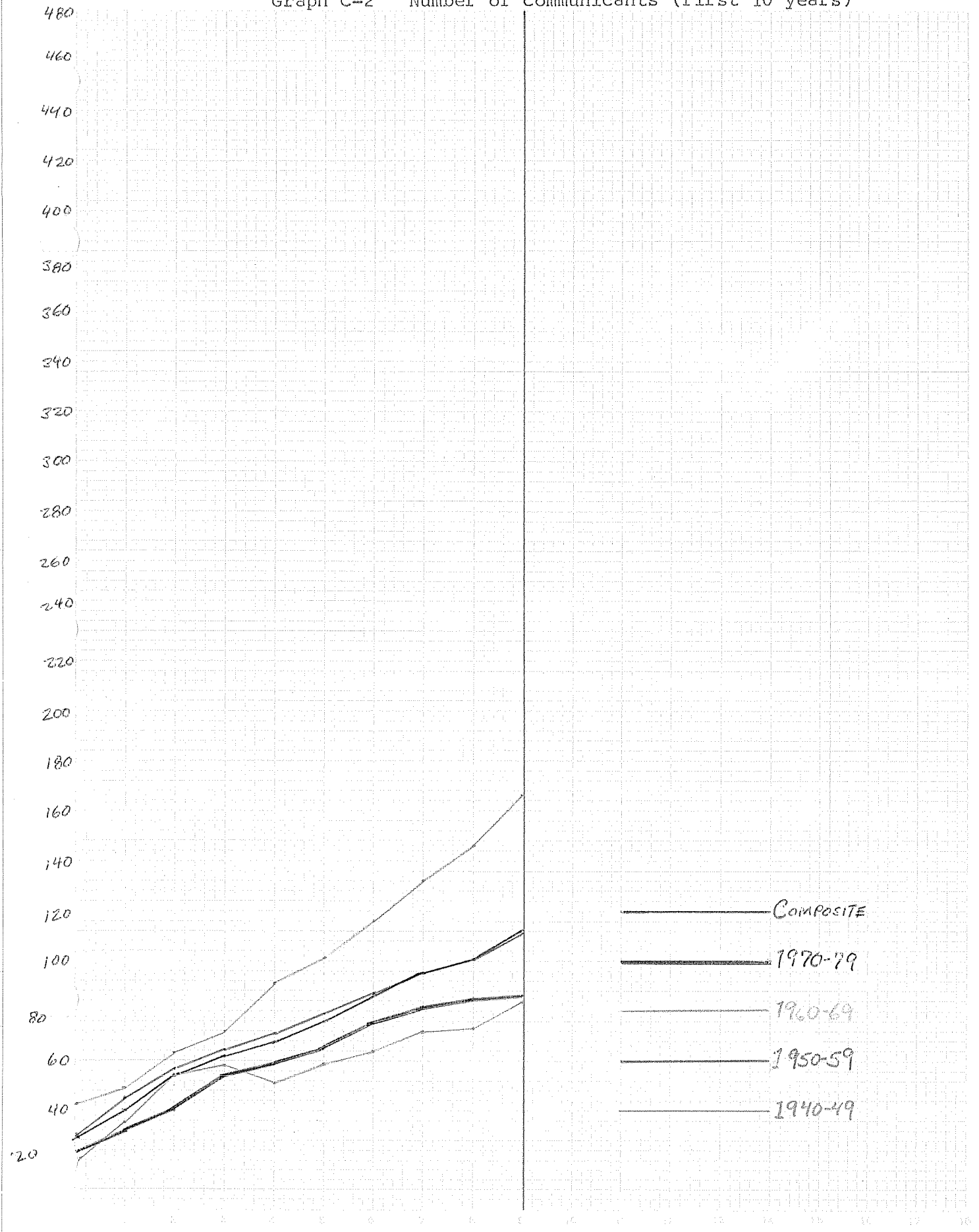
As is presented in graph "C-1", this fact is affirmed. While the projection for each 10-year group has variants, one may note for example the dip in the years 1943-45 and the levelling off in 1952-53, the composite shows a consistent growth pattern of approximately 13 souls per year. The sudden leveling during the years 1976-79 has no specific explanation of which I am aware. One may see also that the larger the initial size of the congregation, the more rapid the growth. In 1960, the average initial size was 92 souls and the average growth per year was 19. On the opposite extreme, in 1970, the average initial size was 37 souls and the average growth per year was 9 souls. Graph "C-2" indicates the same factors regarding communicant membership. The severity of World War II is especially prominent, and the fact that 1976-79 shows only a tapering might indicate the effects of a lower birth rate.

Therefore we may conclude that in the initial ten years of the life of a congregation, there is rapid and constant growth. We can see the value of beginning with a larger nucleus. However, we also see that the growth rate is linear rather than geometric. That is, it appears that the growth is due to one person, probably the pastor, rather than by the congregation. If thirty souls gain 13 others in a year, then sixty souls might gain 26 others, for example. But we see that regardless of the congregational size, the numbers of new members remain relatively constant.

Graph C-1 Number of souls (first 10 years)



Graph C-2 Number of communicants (first 10 years)





BETWEEN THE TENTH AND FIFTEENTH YEARS THERE IS  
LITTLE NUMERICAL GROWTH

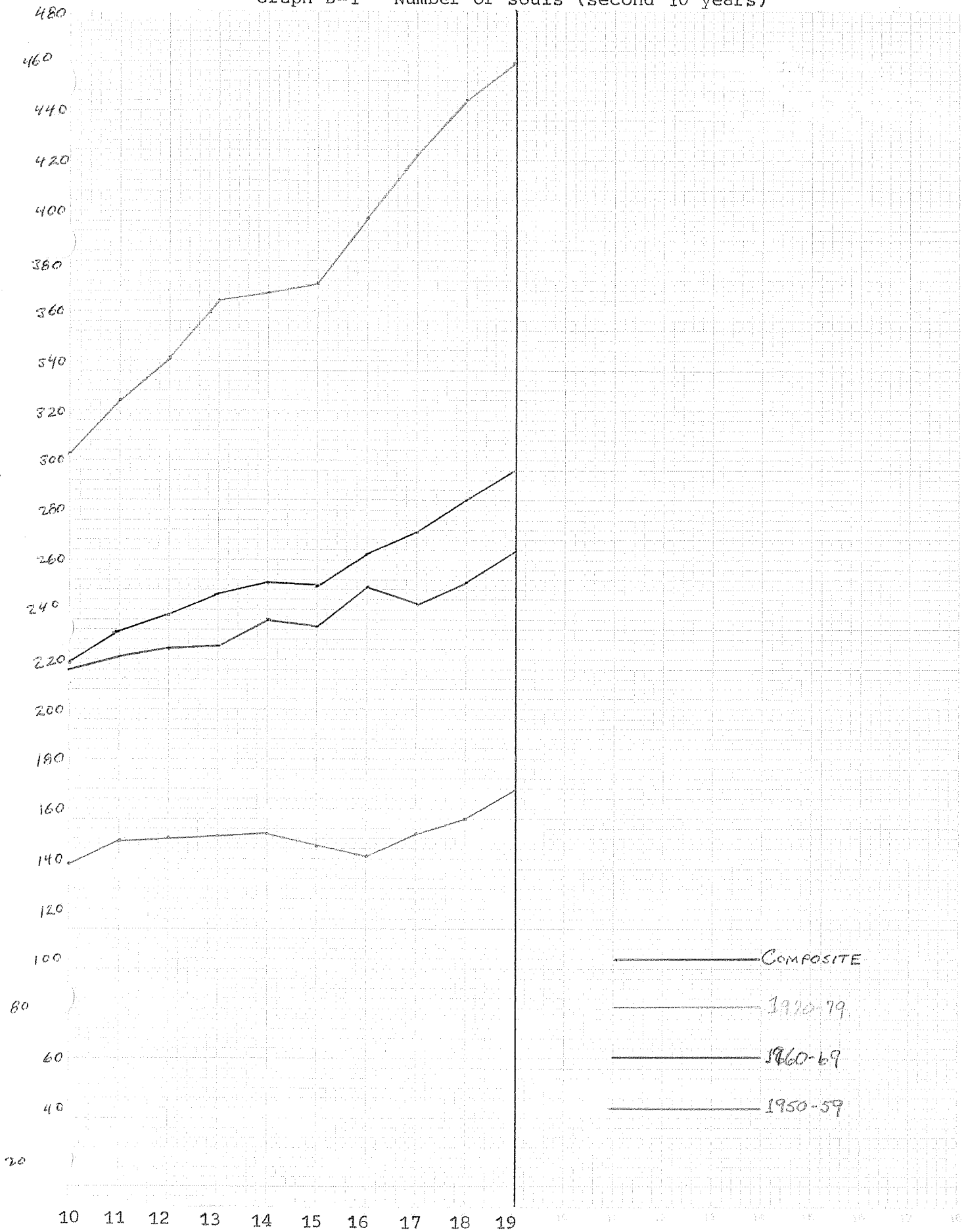
This statement is partially affirmed. As can be seen in graph "D-1", growth as measured by number of souls slows from the eleventh year and stops between the fourteenth and fifteenth years. However, on graph "D-2" we note continued steady, if somewhat slower, growth through this period. While communicant growth drops from 8.3 communicants to 7.2 communicants per year, soul growth drops from 12.7 souls to 7.7 souls per year (to 6.4 souls per year during the tenth thru fifteenth years). This would indicate that the given reason, that of training the saints, of internal growth rather than external growth, is valid. It would be interesting to determine whether congregations are begun primarily with newly married couples, for then this continued growth of confirmed members could be attributed to their children.

Again we note that congregations that began with larger initial size continue to grow at a faster pace and have a less severe pause in numerical growth during these years than those with a smaller initial size. However, since the sample size is so small, it might be that the smaller congregations are also in areas which are not so receptive to the Gospel as are the larger ones. This would account both for the difference in size as well as in the difference of the rate of growth.

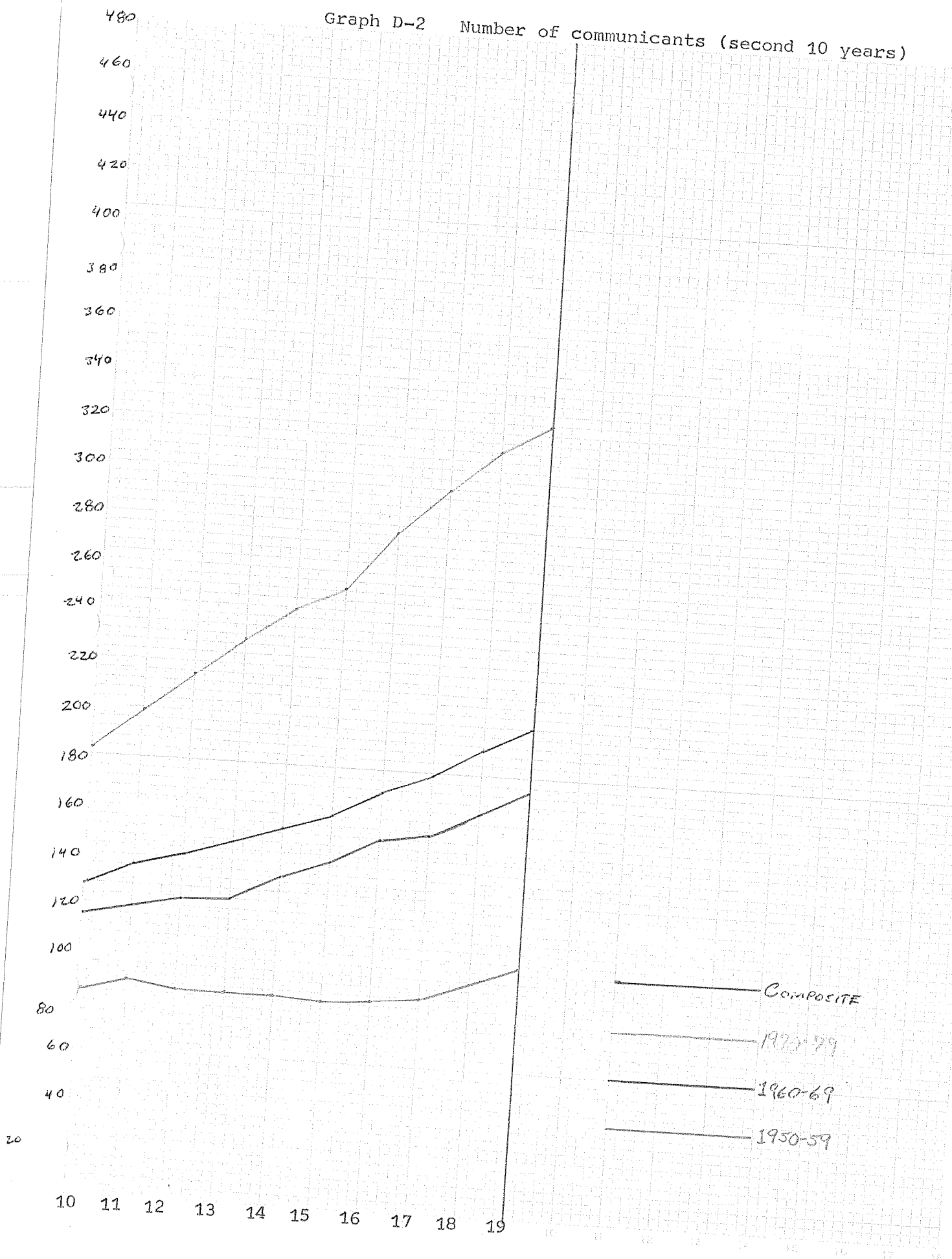
THERE IS A HIGH RATE OF CONVERSION GROWTH DURING THE FIRST TEN YEARS  
OF THE LIFE OF A LOCAL CHURCH

This statement is not substantiated by the data. The evidence for this statement should be seen in the number of adult confirmands. However, as is seen on page "B", the rate for adult confirmations re-

Graph D-1 Number of souls (second 10 years)



Graph D-2 Number of communicants (second 10 years)



COMPOSITE  
1920-29  
1960-69  
1950-59

mains a consistent two to three per year, perhaps dipping slightly after the thirtieth year. With the emphasis put on evangelism, mass media and the like recently, it will be interesting to see whether these statistics change in the future.

AFTER THE FIFTEENTH YEAR, THE CHURCH AGAIN GROWS NUMERICALLY,

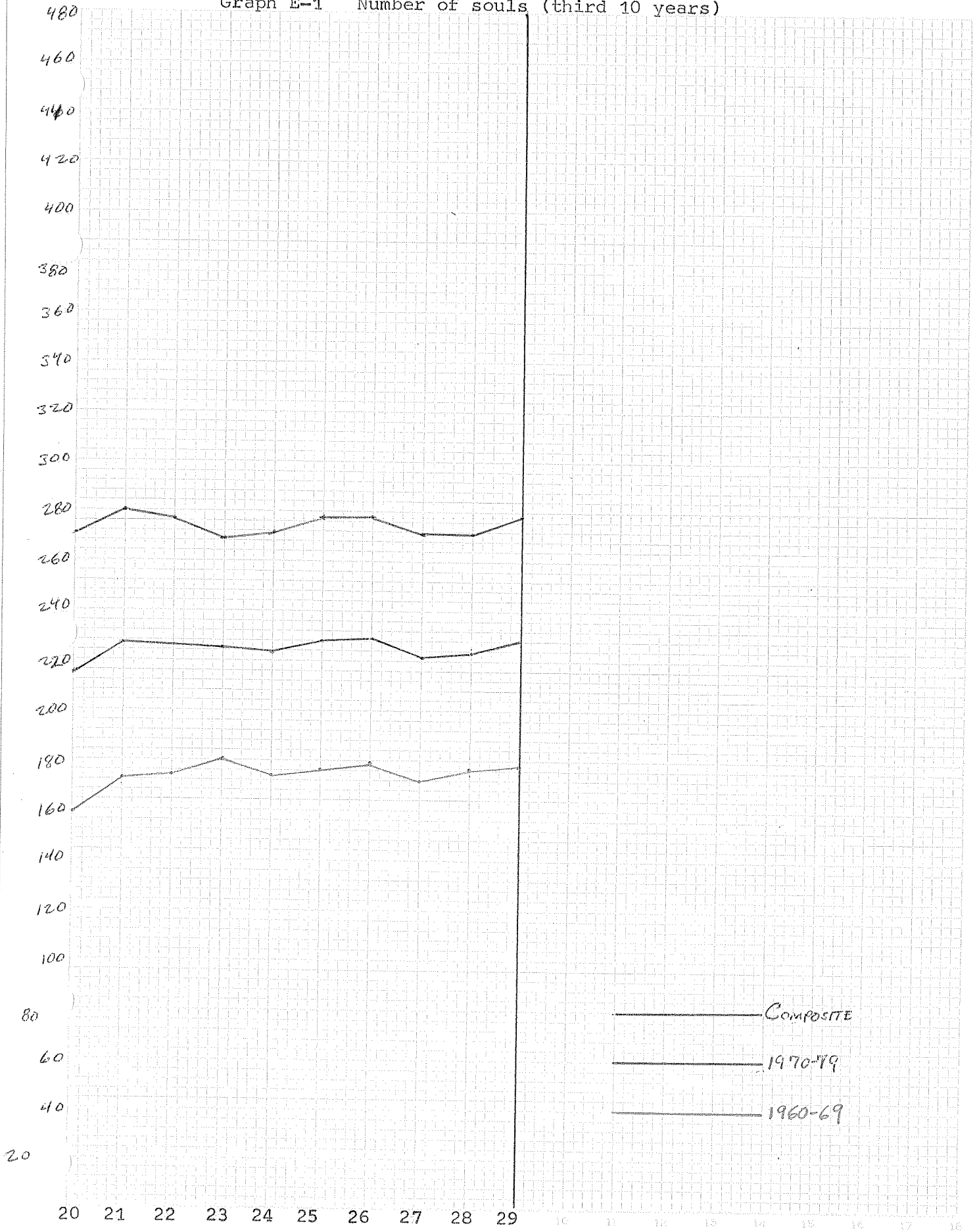
BUT AT A SLOWER RATE THAN THAT OF THE FIRST TEN YEARS

From graph D-1, we see that the average congregation will increase by about 9 souls per year between the fifteenth and nineteenth years. Likewise, in graph D-2, communicant membership increases by about 8 per year. However, after the twenty-first year, graph E-1 shows almost no growth in total membership and graph E-2 reveals only a growth of 2.2 communicants per year. One must keep in mind that the composite for the third decade is made up of only thirteen congregations, and therefore, due to the small sample, has a fairly wide margin for error. On the other hand, the two samples, taken a decade apart, are very similar and so are useful to at least indicate a pattern.

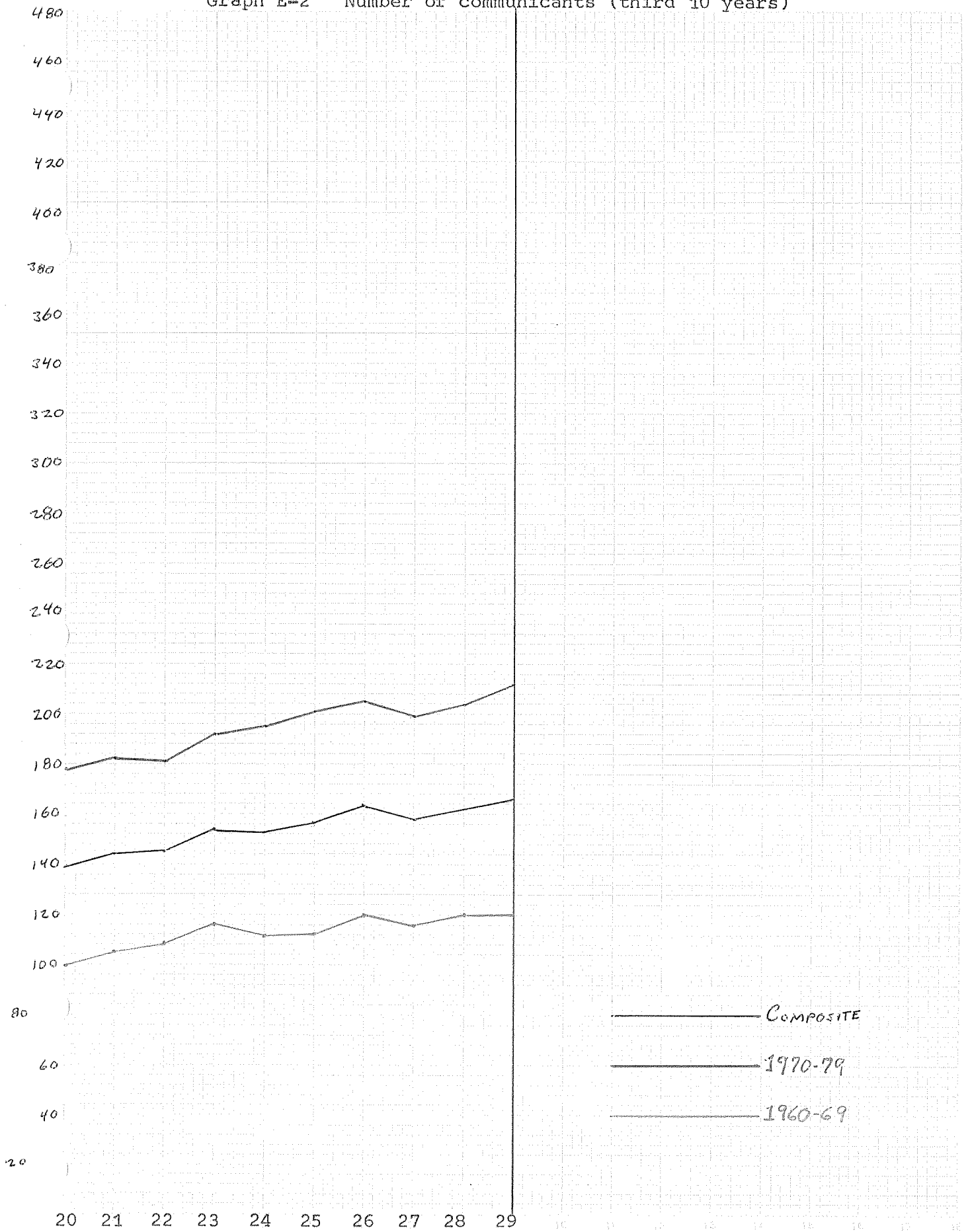
Therefore, if only a five or six year area is indicated after the pause, the statement appears to be correct. If, however, the future years in general are considered the mature years of the congregation, growth slows and, as can be seen more plainly in graph F, ceases. This is certainly not necessarily the course which all congregations follow. It is only the one which is the average or composite of the congregations studied.

Stopped churches (an euphemism for stagnating churches) are considered by some church growth writers, but often there is little information as to how to reverse the inertia of rest. It would seem that

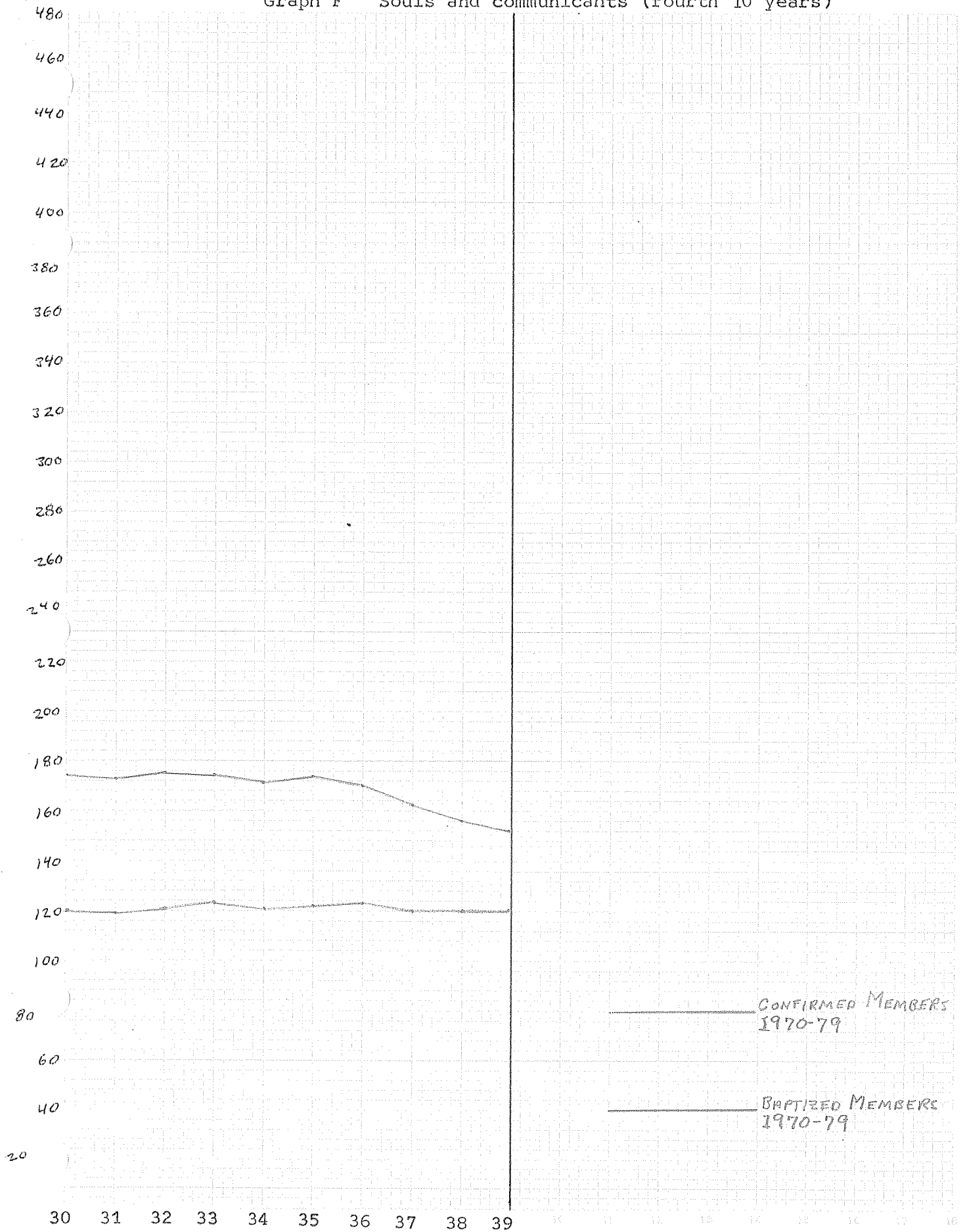
Graph E-1 Number of souls (third 10 years)



Graph E-2 Number of communicants (third 10 years)



Graph F Souls and communicants (fourth 10 years)



the best cure is preventive medicine, that is, to involve the congregation in seeking the lost from the first years and to keep the need of the people who do not yet have release from the terror of their sins before the saints. Whether the problem is that the urgent need for saving lost souls becomes obscure in mature congregations, and what the cure might be if it has, is not part of the scope of this paper, but the findings do cause one to consider what the reasons behind the facts might be.

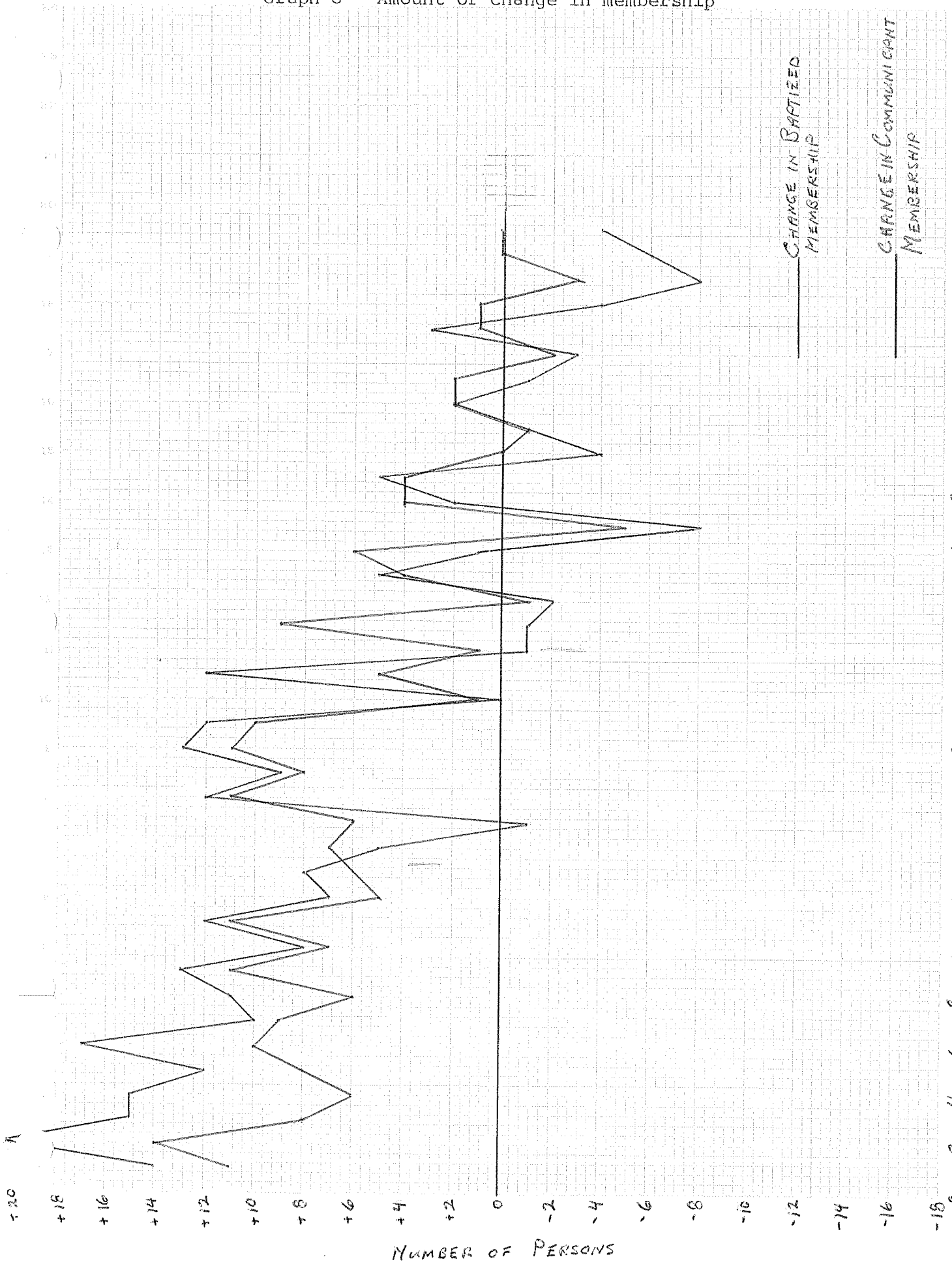
To attempt a clearer picture, I graphed the changes both in baptized and communicant membership (graph G). In it, several relationships appear. First, a congregation progresses from being very active to being very inactive as the years pass. Also, it appears that baptized membership increases more rapidly than communicant membership until the fourteenth year, then both continue about equally until about the twenty-second year, and after that there is more increase in communicant membership than in baptized membership. Finally, it appears that the churches in the study stopped growing at about the twenty-sixth year and that baptized membership began declining shortly after that.

Finally, graph H is a profile of the typical congregation in the study projected over forty years. The relationships noted above are also reflected in the profile.

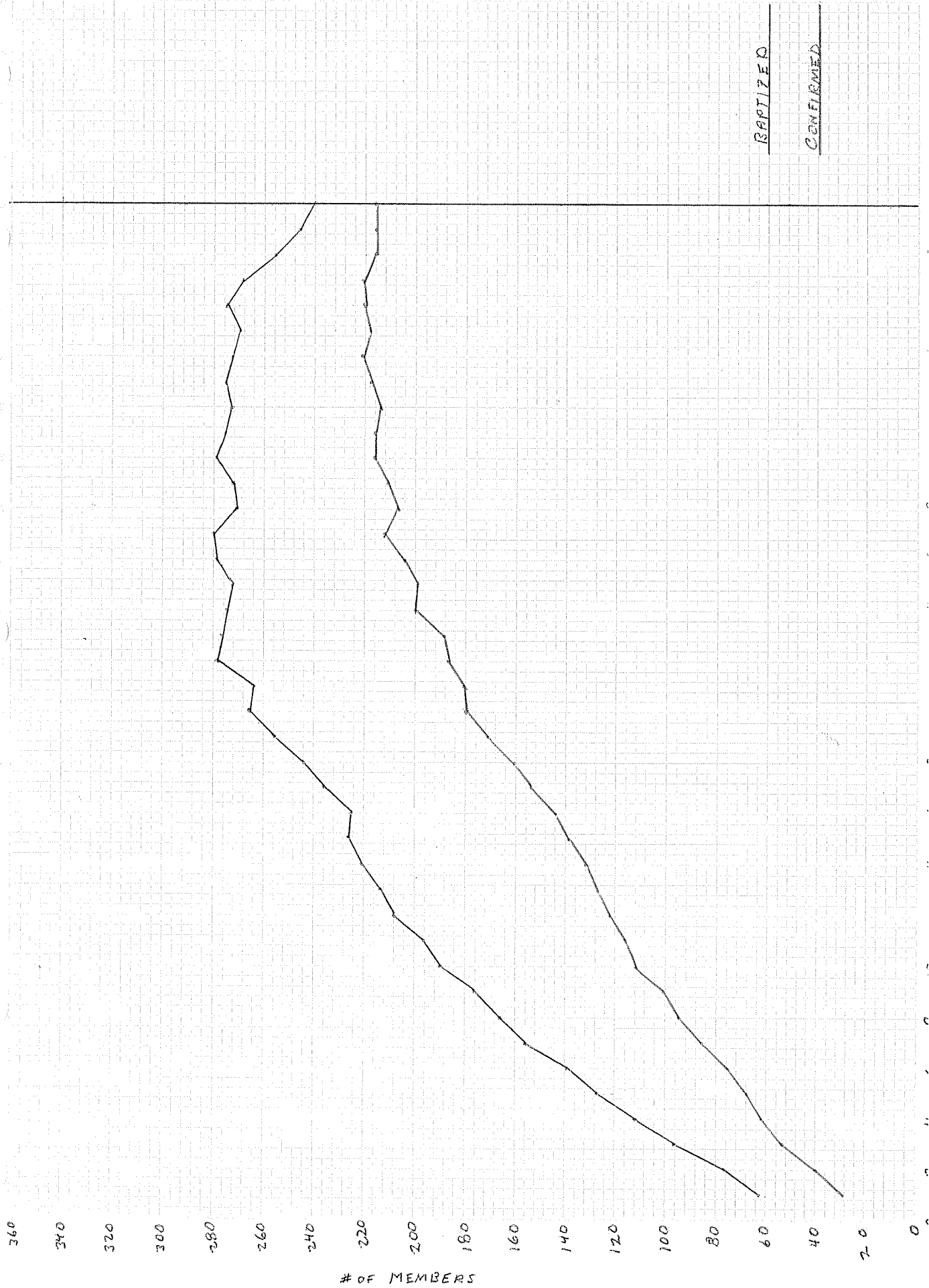
To conclude, then, there is factual evidence for the propositions. In the life of a congregation, there is initial rapid growth for some ten to fifteen years. Then follows a period of up to five years when there is little numerical growth, but a maturing of the congregation takes place. After this period there is another time of growth of per-



Graph G Amount of change in membership



Graph H A congregational profile



BAPTIZED

CONFIRMED

# OF MEMBERS

haps five to ten years, after which the church ceases to grow numerically. Again it must be noted that the sample was too small to affirm this final finding with any large degree of certainty. The secondary statement for consideration, that there is a high rate of conversion growth during the first ten years of the life of a local congregation was not affirmed. Rather, a constant rate of two to three conversions per year was seen. An unexpected finding which might bear further study is that congregations which begin with a larger nucleus tend to be more vigorous.

While this paper has attempted to define the "what" of church growth, and to some extent look at the extent of that growth, it was not intended to explore very greatly the "why" of church growth. It was felt that this was too broad an area with too many interrelated facets to do a thorough study. Also, there is the realization that the Spirit of God moves when and where it wills, granting greater growth in one location than in another. Since we know that He works through the Means of Grace, we could perhaps look at the rate of growth as related to communion attendance or to the presence or absence of a Christian day school. We might also relate growth to the amount of gifts brought to the Lord since we know that the one who gives is blessed. However, such areas of study shall be left to others more knowledgeable in church growth and more competent in statistical analysis. With this, the author shall close with the prayer that the information herein contained might be useful in more effectively extending the Church of God.