

INSTITUTIONAL EXPLANATIONS FOR THE DECLINE OF THE CONGREGAÇÃO CRISTÃ NO BRASIL

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Abstract

For the first time since its inception, the Congregação Cristã no Brasil (CCB) has lost members – two hundred thousand members in the last decade – while other traditional Pentecostal churches' membership continue to grow. Based on survey research data, this study explores the diverse views of church members and how institutional factors affect the growth of the church. Two opposing views among church members are identified: fundamentalism and progressivism. Besides providing empirical data, this work engages a wider debate on how the strict nature of the CCB leadership, based on a traditional authoritarian model, is unwilling to adapt to cultural and social changes, giving rise to discontent, tensions, and schisms.

Keywords: Congregação Cristã no Brasil, Pentecostalism, survey, institutional factors, Brazil.

Introduction

Pentecostalism appeared in Brazil with the advent of the Congregação Cristã no Brasil (Christian Congregation in Brazil; CCB) in 1910 and the Assembléia de Deus (Assembly of God) in 1911. Several studies have documented the unprecedented growth of Pentecostalism in Latin America, particularly that of traditional Pentecostal churches such as CCB (Léonard, 1952; Read, 1965; Nelson, 1979, 1984, 1993; Martin 1990,

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2001; Shaull and Cesar, 2000; Droogers *et al.*, 2006). Despite this growing trend, for the first time since its foundation, CCB is in decline. In the last decade alone the church lost about 200,000 members, in addition to the decrease in the number of new converts by way of baptism that, up to the late 1990s, had been on a steady growth (IBGE, 2000, 2010). Compounding to this situation are the unprecedented schisms that have emerged in the last decade. Thus: Why is membership declining while other traditional Pentecostal churches, such as the Assembly of God, are growing? Why is CCB becoming less attractive to its members? Hoge and Roozen's (1979) analysis of denominational growth and decline provides a framework suitable to analyze the current erosion of members at CCB. In pointing to the importance of institutional factors, they argue that denominations grow when harmony and cooperation are present, and when membership satisfaction levels are high. This paper shows that Hoge and Roozen's² arguments are valid and relevant in understanding the recent decline of CCB as a religious institution.

The underlying reasons for this decadence are important for several reasons. First, CCB is the second largest Pentecostal church in Brazil with more than 2.3 million members nationwide and 18,580 congregations that host religious services (IBGE, 2010; CCB, 2013). Nevertheless, the low profile maintained by the church makes researching it a challenging undertaking; there is a dearth of research on CCB, despite its significance in the history of Pentecostalism in Brazil. Second, all studies analyzing CCB were ethnographic field studies and all, without exception, mentioned the steady and continuous growth of this church (Léonard, 1952; Read, 1965; Nelson, 1979; Correa, 1989; Mariano and Pierucci, 1992; Miguel, 2008; Monteiro, 2010; Anderson *et al.*, 2010). This research leverages survey research to contribute, for the first time, with a vital and unique insight of members' opinions and satisfaction with church practices and traditions. The data are drawn from the first web survey ever administered to members of CCB to research their attitudes, perceptions, and characteristics.

The next section briefly reviews the church's history and its importance to the Pentecostal movement in Brazil. The following section applies Hoge

2. Other scholars have also emphasized the importance of institutional factors, or contextual factors, grounding their theoretical framework on Hoge and Roozen's (1979) work since it is considered one of the most important theories on church growth and decline. See for example, Finke and Stark (1992), Hoge *et al.* (1994), Yang (1998), and Sturgis (2008). Other relevant literature has also been published since 1979 (e.g. Roozen and Hadaway, 1993; Roozen, 2005).

and Roozen's (1979) theoretical framework to discuss why CCB is facing a decrease in the number of new converts, losing members, and experiencing an increase in the occurrences of schisms. Subsequent sections present the survey method and considers evidence that establishes a relationship between church decline and institutional factors. Using survey responses from 593 CCB members, I present members' opinions that clearly indicate a dichotomy among church members, in which fundamentalism³ antagonizes more progressive tendencies, suggesting conflicting views and growing dissatisfaction with the church and its ministry. After a discussion of the results, the final section of this paper draws together the main conclusions.

History

The CCB is the second largest and oldest Pentecostal church in Brazil. The church was established through the missionary work of Luigi Francescon, an Italian immigrant from Chicago, who was instrumental in the Pentecostal revival which marked the beginning of the twentieth century in the United States (Yuasa, 2001; Toppi, 2007). Raised as a Catholic, he converted to Presbyterianism, and later attended a Holiness church before converting to Pentecostalism. In 1910, he traveled to São Paulo and later to Santo Antônio da Platina in Paraná, Brazil, where the first converts were baptized.⁴ When Francescon returned to São Paulo, he preached at the Presbyterian Church at Brás regarding the baptism of the Holy Spirit with evidence of speaking in tongues, which provoked dissidence and culminated in the creation of CCB. Today, CCB is heavily concentrated in São Paulo and is the largest Pentecostal church in the state.⁵

Francescon maintained frequent contact with the brethren in Brazil, and from 1910 to 1948 he visited Brazil ten times, staying for

3. In this article, I use the term "fundamentalism" to denote the propensity to hold personal views adhering to the formal teachings or norms of a religious group – in this case, CCB. There are a number of alternative terms, such as "conservative," "traditional," and "sectarian," that are used interchangeably to refer to the same tendency. Conversely, the term "progressivism" is used to denote the propensity to hold personal views that are in critical opposition to formal teachings or norms. In the case of CCB, progressivism is used to describe the recent shift in members' support for authoritarian methods to critical opposition. Thus, progressivism is manifested in the idea of progress and change.

4. These converts would eventually be considered the first baptized members of CCB, after its institutionalization.

5. For more on the history of CCB, see Monteiro (2010).

more than a year in most trips (Yuasa, 2001). At the time of his death on September 7, 1964, Luigi Francescon was the senior elder of the Christian Congregation Church in Chicago.⁶ In 1980, Miguel Spina and Vittorio Angare, who were senior elders of CCB, visited the United States at the invitation of Joel Spina⁷ and participated in the Assembly that established the Christian Congregation in the United States through the unification of three churches: the Buffalo Christian Congregation, the Italian Christian Assembly of Alhambra, and the Christian Congregation in the United States in Chicago.⁸ CCB has expanded to countries in all continents⁹ as a result of the missionary work of many Brazilian members. This expansion created an international fellowship of congregations sharing the same faith, doctrine, and liturgy. The CCB headquarter is located at Brás,¹⁰ São Paulo, and oversees the ministry of all Christian Congregations abroad.

Church Growth and Decline

Contextual and institutional factors are important determinants of church growth and decline (Hoge and Roozen, 1979). Contextual factors are those external to the denomination and pertain to the community, society, and the culture in which the church exists, while institutional factors are forces within denominations, such as patterns of organization and structure, strictness of a group's belief, and church programs. The central focus of this case study is on institutional factors, mainly motivated by the growing discontent observed in recent years between CCB lay members and the church's leadership.¹¹ As a respondent to the web survey said, "I wish that CCB would pay attention to the

6. The Christian Congregation Church in Chicago remains independent and did not join the Christian Congregation in the US.

7. Joel Spina organized this Assembly. He was the elder of the Christian Congregation in the United States in Chicago and is the nephew of the late Miguel Spina.

8. These three churches have roots in the "Unorganized Italian Christian Church of North America," which Francescon helped establish in 1927 (General Council, 1977). For more on the Italian Pentecostal Movement in the US, see DeCaro (1977).

9. Except Antarctica.

10. When referring to "Brás," this implies both the local congregation and the upper-tier organizational structure (i.e., the council of senior elders and the administration apparatus).

11. This became evident through participant observation by the author.

contemporary needs of the church; the Congregation stopped in time, it's an archaic and authoritarian church of the 60s or 70s. The church should change, because time has changed." According to Roof *et al.* (1979: 212), "churches that grow are those able to generate high levels of membership satisfaction." Likewise, within congregations, congregational harmony, cooperation, and general laity satisfaction with worship and program are very important for growth (*ibid.*; McKinney and Hoge, 1983). Thus, examining members' opinions is important in understanding the current state of CCB.

In the past, many researchers praised CCB's cohesiveness and organizational structure. For example, Nelson (1979: 2) wrote that "social control and homogeneity of belief is impressively high throughout the whole church. To date, no significant splinter groups have broken away from the CCB despite great schisms which have occurred in other branches of Brazilian and Latin American Pentecostalism." A decade later, Nelson (1988: 325) noted that "the *Congregação Cristã no Brasil*, which has a minimum of differentiated structure, and does not depend on personalistic leadership, grows rapidly, has simple but uniform doctrine, and does not suffer schisms or serious internal conflict." Likewise, Monteiro (2010: 123) wrote, "an analysis of its growth provides an interesting study case, because it happened uninterruptedly, [the church] kept its unity, and there is no record of any existent fragmentation or dissident." Indeed, CCB is a highly centralized church which works fastidiously to assure that church practices are the same everywhere.¹² There is no variation in the format and content of services to accommodate cultural or social differences. Likewise, the ministry affirms that "the same principles of faith, moral, and spiritual values, as well as the simple form of organization and administration, have stayed the same up to the present" (*Congregação Cristã no Brasil*, 2003). According to Correa (1989) and Goes (1988), what has kept CCB together is precisely its discourse of sameness and unity.

However, in the last decade, once social media and higher educational possibilities became widespread in Brazil, the CCB ministry's coherent worldview and its discourse weakened. With the spread and availability

12. On April 19, 2003, in compliance with the annual general ministerial meeting of CCB in São Paulo, an International Convention of the Christian Congregation was held for the representative elders of nineteen different countries. All of them signed a document entitled "International Convention of Christian Congregations." This document shows that CCB aims to keep the same church organization, structure, and order of service throughout the world.

of the Internet, members of CCB started to interact with members abroad, particularly in the United States, and inconsistencies were discovered (e.g., many members abroad were not rebaptized when joining the Christian Congregation) and unknown facts revealed (e.g., at its infancy, CCB had Sunday school). Likewise, knowledge about CCB's history gained popularity, indicating that early leaders had completely different attitudes towards practices and customs regarding Bible study, rebaptism, and fellowship with other Christian churches. Many debates emerged questioning the motivations to discontinue customs that were practiced in the church's early years. The survey responses will help determine if these discussions have influenced members' opinions and generated internal tensions that could explain CCB's decline.

Contextual factors also affect membership decline, although conversely CCB is a very exclusive sect in the Weberian sense. The church has kept itself aside from religious, cultural, and social dynamics, which has influenced nearly all contemporary religious groups in Brazil, especially other Pentecostal churches. As a result, CCB continues to be described by scholars as attesting a Pentecostalism *sui generis* and sectarian, with little susceptibility to external influences (Foerster, 2006; Mariano, 1999; Nelson, 1989). In fact, CCB lacks flexibility, an important typifying characteristic displayed by other Pentecostal churches. According to Anderson *et al.*, Pentecostal churches, in general, have adapted to the world's cultural heterogeneity while remaining loyal to its identity, representing "a laboratory in which globalization processes can be observed in concrete practice. ... Accordingly, it has produced a rich variety of manifestations, not only in its organization, but also in its strategies and uses of communication technology" (Anderson *et al.*, 2010: 3). In the case of CCB, the opposite is observed¹³ – its ideology vigorously repudiates modernization. This is exemplified by the church's rigid and conservative morality, dress code, isolationism from other churches, opposition to the use of mass media and modern communications, and strict teachings discouraging members from owning and watching TV, going to movie theaters, going to swimming pools, drinking, dancing, gambling, and dressing like "the world."¹⁴ This insulation from the world, or *mundus*

13. See Foerster (2006) and Mariano (1999).

14. These teachings state that clothing must be conservative and not revealing. Women can only wear skirts and dresses. Likewise, men are taught not to wear shorts or sleeveless shirts. Women are admonished not to cut their hair, while men are supposed to shave their beards daily. This dressing code varies from region to region. Lately, especially in large cities, middle-class sisters can be found using pants, cutting

immundus, creates a deep separation that has kept the church almost intact to cultural and social changes. Belief in predestination, acquired by Francescon in the Presbyterian Church contributes to this pattern as members believe God will bring into their midst the chosen ones. This credence affects CCB's relationship to modernity as it releases the church from pressures to constantly adapt to social changes and technological advances in the name of evangelistic efficacy (Freston, 1995). Likewise, CCB's complete apolitical stance has isolated the church from recent democratization processes in Brazil, as members are effectively banned from participating in politics and even in civil protests.

The structure of CCB, legitimized by traditional authority, is based on an organizational model of kinship and gerontocracy that makes changes and adaptability challenging (Foerster, 2006).¹⁵ CCB's genesis among the Italian community largely contributed to its organizational style and structural framework (Nelson, 1988). Until about 1940, most services were conducted in Italian and members were predominantly of Italian origin. It was only in the eve of World War II that CCB started to scatter out of the cultural and linguistic boundaries of Italian colonies in São Paulo and Paraná (Campos, 2011). The hierarchical system of organization strictly centralized at Brás still reflects the Italian communal kinship traditions. This organizational structure has contributed to maintaining the church intact to religious, cultural, and social changes that have impacted most Pentecostal groups.

Method

To capture how institutional factors have related to the cascade of membership decline, I reviewed selected doctrinal issues with the intention of showing the state of internal coherence at CCB: Bible study, rebaptism, and the "Grace of God." These issues are the subjects of disagreements between views held by early and current ministers of the church, fostering discussion and dividing members' opinions.

The responses were drawn from an online survey I created using Qualtrics survey software. Church members were recruited via announcements posted on several online social networking groups (e.g., Facebook, Twitter), email, and blogs that are frequently accessed by members

hair, wearing make-up and jewelry, indicating that the clergy has lost authority to enforce many of these behavioral standards.

15. For further details on how CCB's structure and organizational model hampers changes and transformations, see Foerster (2006).

(Fernando, 2012; Marques, 2012; Neto, 2012). People interviewed were asked to send the survey link to others who might be interested in participating, creating a snowball sample. Many questions on the survey were open-ended, allowing respondents to add comments. The method of data collection excludes members who do not have access to the Internet or to social networking sites, and sites where the survey was advertised. Subjects were not offered any type of remuneration and the survey was conducted in English and in Portuguese.¹⁶ For the purpose of this paper, only answers to the aforementioned points are included.

In order to collect a greater sample size, the survey was made available online from April 5 to October 5, 2012¹⁷ and 1,020 respondents accessed it; of those, 593 respondents completed the entire survey. The results presented here are for the completed report containing responses for these 593 church members. Respondents ranged in age from 14 to 74, with an average age of 44. There were 324 men and 269 women who responded to the survey. Among respondents, 166 had completed high school, 110 had some college, 123 had bachelor's degrees, and 81 had graduate degrees. The remaining had either technical training (26 respondents) or lower levels of education (87 respondents). The majority of respondents earned a monthly salary between 1,244 and 3,110 reais.¹⁸ São Paulo has the highest gross domestic product of any Brazilian city, thus respondents from São Paulo were economically better off than those from other parts of the country. In regards to leadership positions, 280 respondents said they had a ministerial position of some kind. There were three elders, nine cooperators, one youth cooperator, one deacon, one sister of piety, and 152 officialized musicians.

The survey was received with skepticism by some. A few respondents inquired about what the "real purpose" behind this survey was. Some expressed concern that I would use the survey to "speak evil against the church." A respondent wrote me, "we should not study the work of God, by doing so you are exposing the church to the world." Another said, "Is there any report of a survey ever conducted among the members of the churches in the scriptures? Answer: To my knowledge there is not," implying that members of CCB should not conduct surveys on the premise of lack of biblical support.

16. Respondents had the chance to select the language they preferred, either English or Portuguese, as some Brazilian respondents live in the United States.

17. For more on survey research see Corbin and Strauss (2007).

18. *Real* is the Brazilian currency. These amounts range approximately from 550 to 1370 US dollars as of the time of this research.

It is important to point out that CCB does not conduct any survey of its own and discourages members, especially those of the ministry, from taking surveys about the church.¹⁹ In addition, the church has no membership records, no operating manuals or similar documents. The only data containing statistics from the church is an annual directory, known as *Relatório*, in which one can find the number of people baptized per year, the number of churches, schedule of services, and addresses of each church in Brazil and abroad.

Results

Bible Study and Theological Education

Records indicate that Francescon's wife, Rosina Francescon, was the director of the Bible school in the church of Chicago (Toppi, 2003). The present-day young people's service at CCB was intended to be a Sunday school like the one in Chicago.²⁰ Yet, in the 1940s and 1950s, CCB dismissed Sunday Bible schools. Today, services for the young people follow the same format as regular services, except for the addition of recitals – a recitation of Bible portions by the children and youth – and the fact that the majority of people in attendance tend to be young and single.

Since there is no official effort on a Bible study initiative, one would expect members to rarely read or study the Bible on their own, as exemplified by the fact that ordained preachers (elders, deacons, and cooperators) are not required to have a theology degree.²¹ However, as the survey results indicate, the majority of members read the Bible very often outside of church (Figure 1), although only a minority uses material for theological learning (Figure 2). This reluctance towards using theological material is largely rooted in the fact that the church founders had no academic theological training and, despite this fact, CCB grew tremendously. Hence, many argue that studying theology is not necessary for the

19. This is reflected by a ministerial teaching stating: "Brothers from the ministry, administration and doorkeepers, who receive surveys about the Congregation (unless from Governmental Institutions), should not answer it" (Congregação Cristã no Brasil, 2004).

20. As stated in CCB Convention of 1936 regarding Bible school, the ministry believed that, "It is necessary for our children to learn the Word of God, and we hope that He will give them this opportunity through the beginning of these services. Those that teach should be certain that the Lord prepared them for this task and use of love in everything" (Congregação Cristã no Brasil, 1936).

21. CCB has no paid clergy.

ministry or members since, “the Holy Spirit reveals everything needed in a service and in a believer’s life.” This rhetoric is commonly used and reinforced during services largely to justify the ministry’s position and discouragement of theological study. When asked, “Do you believe the ministry should receive instructions on the Bible before they become official ministers?” 64.92 percent said no. Yet, when asked, “Would you favor the implementation of Bible study at CCB?” 45 percent agreed, 23.27 percent were undecided, and 31.53 percent disagreed. The majority in favor expressed concern that CCB does not have an established Bible school and that noticeable mistakes are made during preaching due to the preacher’s lack of knowledge of the Bible. As a respondent said:

Even the Lord Jesus said: ‘You are in error because you do not know the Scriptures or the power of God’ (Mt. 29.22). If we had a Bible study at church, it would be a way for us to grow in knowledge and understanding of the will of God in our lives.

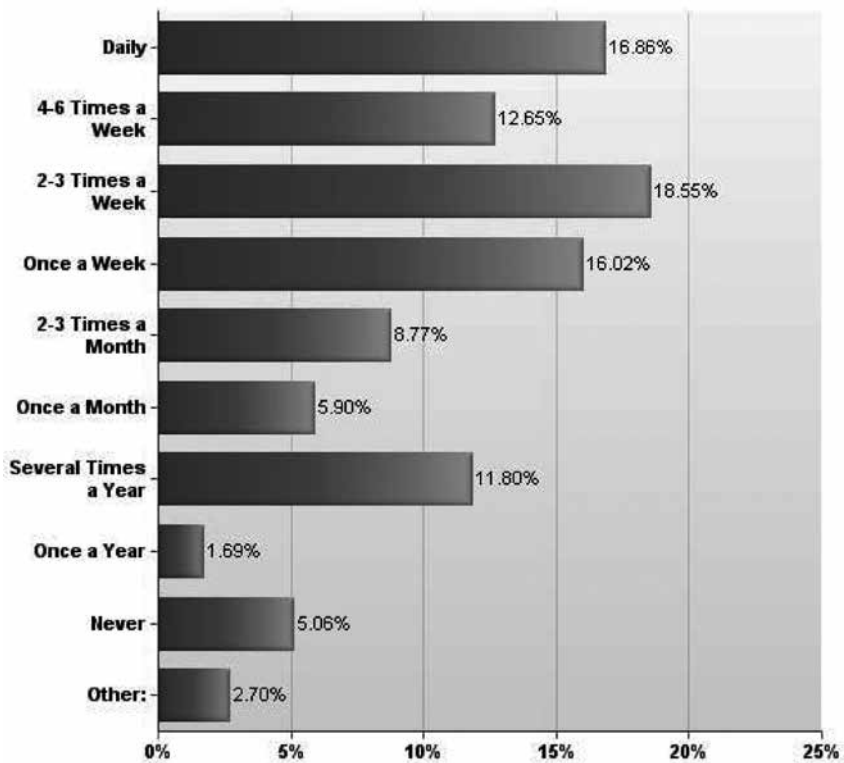


Figure 1. How often do you read the Bible outside of church?

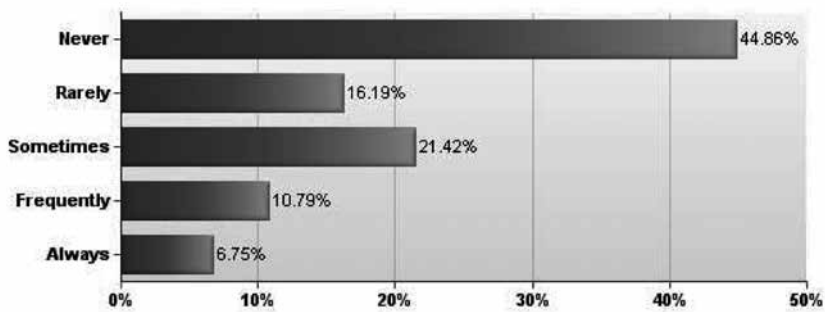


Figure 2. Have you ever used theological material such as books, articles or dictionaries to study the Bible?

Respondents who replied *maybe* to implementing a Bible school said that they would be in favor only if “other doctrines were not taught,” “as long as it is guided by the Holy Spirit and God,” and contingent upon how the Bible school would be implemented, what materials would be used, and who would be teaching. The dissenting minority argued that a Bible study is not necessary since “the Bible is not a textbook,” and because

the Bible is not to be studied; a Christian who is a real Christian, moved by the Holy Spirit, hears the preaching at the Congregation and keeps that in his/her heart and meditates on the preaching of the Word, so that God can work. The Bible in my opinion is NOT TO BE STUDIED [*sic*], but to be REVEALED [*sic*] according to the will of God.

Pentecostalism is based on the inerrancy of the Bible and everyone’s ability to read it, yet, theological education has never been a strong point of Pentecostalism. In large extent, this can be explained by the fact that its followers are driven by emotion rather than reflection, and are more given to experiences and feelings than to understanding the Biblical text (Anderson, 1979; Blumhofer, 1993; Wacker, 2003). As Spina stated, “the Christian Congregation always had a problem with studying the scriptures. The impression has always been that if the ministry and the people get to really ‘examine’ (the word study is a taboo) the Bible – the Word of God – we will take the place of the Holy Spirit” (Spina, 2008: 2).

Attitudes that members have towards studying the Bible are shown in Figure 3. Some 35.75 percent believe that because the Holy Spirit guides CCB in all things, members should not study the Bible, while 55.81 percent agree that members should not question the Bible. This indicates

reluctance towards theological learning. Concomitantly, many believe that going to a university to pursue higher education is not necessary. It is common²² for church ministers to use Biblical quotes to support their opposition towards pursuing higher education. These include, “studying is a weariness to the flesh (Eccl. 12.12), believers do not need to study,”

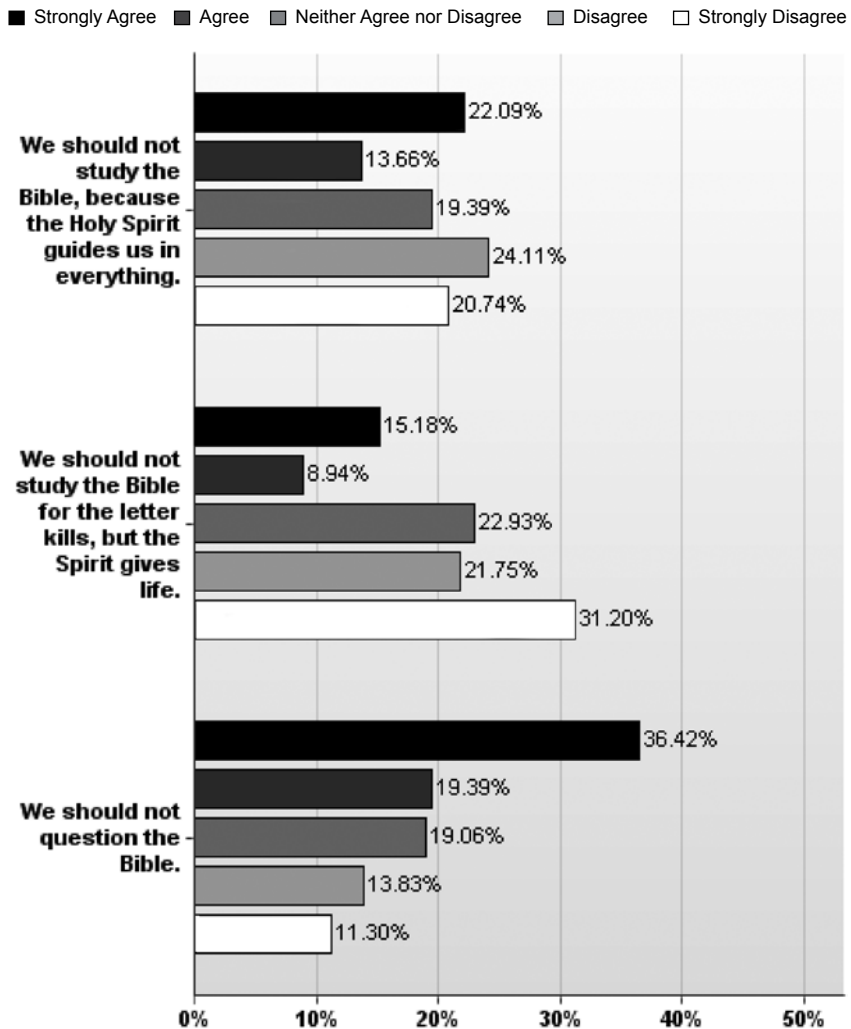


Figure 3. Opinions toward bible study.

22. The author has witnessed this frequently during the preaching or testimonies.

and “Paul was a very educated man, he studied with Gamaliel, spoke at least two languages, yet he considered everything he learned garbage (Phil. 3.8), because we need to be filled with the knowledge that comes from above, not from this world.”

Rebaptism

Nowadays, even if someone is baptized in another Pentecostal church such as the Assembly of God, which has no substantial disagreements in regards to points of doctrine and articles of faith,²³ this person is not accepted by CCB as a member until rebaptized. This has become a point of dispute, because in the beginning of the church in Chicago, anyone who had previously been baptized in a Christian church did not have to be rebaptized in order to become a member. This is evident from a teaching in 1932 which said:

A position was requested regarding those baptized in waters coming from Protestant churches, if they should be rebaptized before being allowed to become our member. We believe that if they were baptized in accordance to the Word and with Faith, it is not necessary; because we must respect other churches in Christ and have [them as] sister churches due to their sincere knowledge of the Scriptures. (Unorganized Italian Christian Church, 1932)

The CCB’s ministry followed this teaching set by the founding elders until about the 1970s.²⁴ However, many elders²⁵ in the United States were not rebaptized when they joined the Christian Congregation in the United States. In fact, the late Arno Scoccia, who was the president elder of the church until his death in 2009, was baptized at the Christian

23. Many Pentecostal churches that originated from the Italian Pentecostal Movement in the United States use the Twelve Articles of Faith, as the foundation for their beliefs and doctrine (cf. Palma, 1987). Recently, CCB has changed two articles of faith: in Article 1 the words “is the Word of God” were changed to “contain the Word of God” and Article 2 removed the reference of the Trinity as “three distinct persons.”

24. Sometime around 1975 when a Chilean group from the Igreja Cristã Universal united with the Congregação Cristã no Brasil, Miguel Spina, the president elder in Brazil at the time, said that rebaptism was not necessary in order for them to become members of the church (Congregacion Cristiana en Chile, 2013).

25. Sam Calabrese was baptized at the Melrose Park Italian Church, Bruno DeAngelis was baptized at the Italian Pentecostal Church of Canada, P. Mannarino and V. Caputo were baptized at the Christian Church of North America, Alfonso Settecase was baptized at the Asamblea Cristiana (Sta Fe) of Argentina, and Jim Amodeo was baptized at the Christian Congregation Church in Chicago.

Assembly of Ellwood, a member church of the International Fellowship of Christian Assemblies, formerly the Unorganized Italian Christian Church of North America. According to Spina, the church “teaches that no Christian should participate in its communion (Holy Supper), or take active part in its services or organization, unless that person has been specifically baptized in the Christian Congregation. Yet, several elders who insist in maintaining this erroneous, exclusive creed were not baptized, much less ordained as ministers in the Christian Congregation” (Spina, 2008: 3–4).

The results of the survey indicate that a slight majority of members, 52.11 percent, is in favor of rebaptism for members of other Christian churches who want to join CCB, as shown in Figure 4. Those in favor of rebaptism said that, “I know many people previously baptized in other churches who received the Holy Spirit at the moment of their baptism at CCB, speaking in other tongues, and this makes me believe they didn’t have the Holy Spirit before,” another said, “If the person feels communion with God, she should be rebaptized, since previous baptisms without communion were just showers.” Others said, “Yes, because we all have to be baptized in the true baptism,” and “the only and true baptism is the one at the Congregation.” Others claimed that this was a matter of doctrine, not conversion, saying for example, “the baptism is a celebration, a sacred rite, an agreement with the doctrine one is embracing. So, I don’t see any problem in rebaptism, since the person will be accepting the terms of doctrine of CCB.”

Most who said *maybe* to rebaptism, argued that its justification “depends on what kind of baptism they had, if by immersion or not, what kind of doctrine they followed,” and that, “not all denominations that claim to be Christians are really Christians. Roman Catholics for instance are not really Christians, and I don’t see how someone who is baptized in idolatry, which violates several Biblical precepts, can be a Christian. In these cases, rebaptism is necessary.”

Those against rebaptism argued that the Bible says that, “there is only one baptism; baptism is only a symbolic act, what is important is the person’s conversion and salvation by faith.” Others said that, “baptism is between the person and God, and not the person and the church’s name,” and that, “the public confession of faith is necessary only once. Jesus never said that this had to be a ceremonious act at a specific religious institution.”

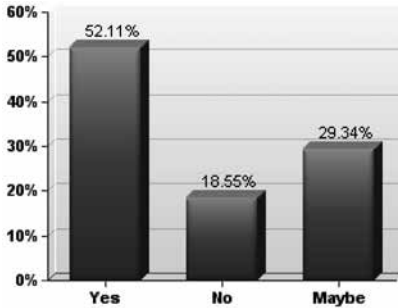


Figure 4. Should brothers and sisters already baptized in another Christian church be rebaptized before becoming members of CCB?

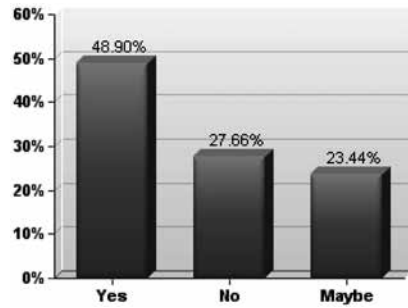


Figure 5. Do you believe that you need to follow the teachings of the church in order to be saved?

The answers given to the question of rebaptism indicate a lack of consensus on the meaning and significance of the ritual of baptism. Perhaps, the ideology of predestination and the lack of Biblical knowledge may explain why many respondents believe in the need of baptism at CCB. As illustrated in Figure 5, this is reflected in the common belief that CCB's teachings must be followed to ensure salvation.

The "Grace of God"

The CCB does not have fellowship with other religions or other Christian churches. The church is not affiliated with the United Pentecostal Church International, or the Pentecostal World Fellowship, as are other Pentecostal churches. This seclusion is partially due to the belief that CCB is the only true church. Thus, many members refer to the church as the "Grace of God." During testimonies and preaching, it is common to hear that, "this is the Grace of God,"²⁶ when one refers to the Christian Congregation, and some simply call CCB "the Grace." The results of this survey indicate that the majority of members believe that the church is actually the grace of God. When asked "Do you believe that the Christian Congregation is the Grace of God?," 54.13 percent said yes, 12.82 percent said maybe and a smaller (but significant) 33.05 percent of respondents disagreed. When asked to define the meaning of "Grace of God," some members defined it as being, "the sacrifice of Christ on the Cross," "the

26. The author witnessed a testimony at CCB in Campinas, São Paulo in 2012, of a former member of Assembly of God (AG) who said that she had belonged to AG for forty years, but she wanted to thank God for revealing His "true way" and for "calling her to His Grace."

act done by Jesus Christ, taking upon him our sins, and by Grace, giving us a place in heaven” and also, “the gift of salvation.” However, others answered that since “the CCB deals with holy things and is in conformity with the Christian doctrine, it is also part of the Grace of God.”

Opinions regarding the “Grace of God” are shown in Figure 6. The results indicate a strong belief that CCB is the “Grace of God” on earth. In fact, 52.62 percent of respondents agree or strongly agree with this statement. However, 41.32 percent disagree that CCB is the only church that follows the “true doctrine of Christ.” One noticeable fact shown in Figure 6 is that a significant number of members, 43.51 percent, strongly agree and agree that only the Christian Congregation baptizes correctly (i.e., according to the scriptures) and that a member of a Protestant church must be rebaptized in order to become a member of CCB. This is correlated to the belief that the church herself provides salvation and is the Grace of God, thus the need for rebaptism.

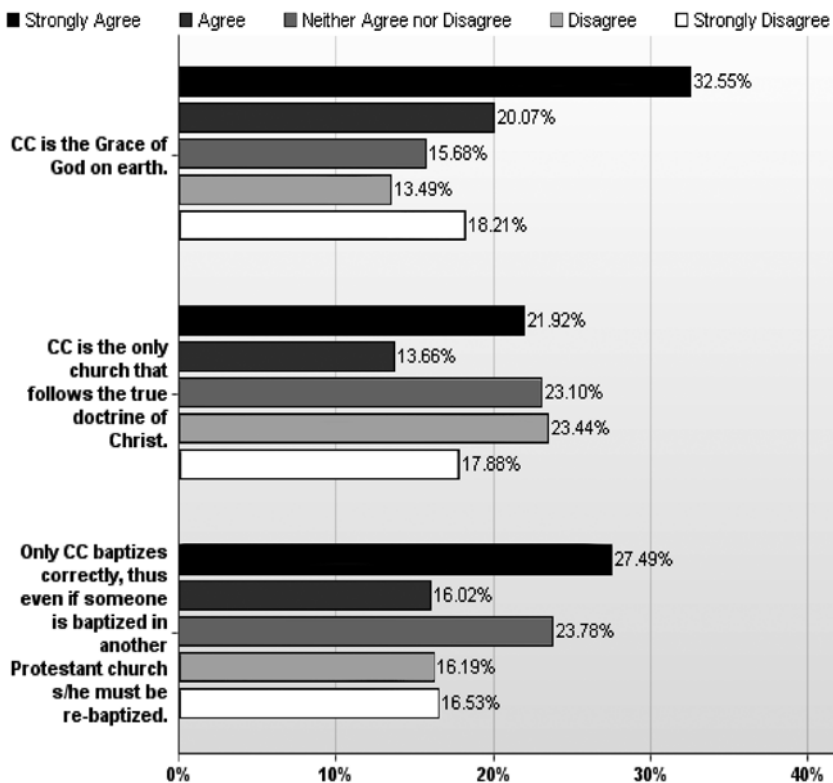


Figure 6. Opinions toward the “Grace of God.”

What do you wish was different at CCB?

To further analyze internal harmony, respondents were openly asked what, if anything, they wish was different at CCB. About 65 percent of respondents suggested improvements. Taking into consideration that many respondents were single and young, the majority said that the church needs to have programs for the young people and youth in general. One respondent said, “there needs to be services focusing on the youth, that are more dynamic, and more up to beat, like the young people.” Another said, “I wish there were programs for the youth and churches had more than one youth minister who was closer to the youth!” These comments reflect a disconnect between the ministry and younger generations. Given the hierarchical structure of the church, the council of elders is mostly composed by elderly ministers, who do not share the same interests, experiences, and needs of younger generations. The church continues, for example, to reject newer forms of communication, and the use of technology, which is widely used by younger members and lacks programs targeting young people. Thus, generational differences seem to contribute to internal tensions and members’ dissatisfaction with church programs, practices, and outdated teachings.

Most respondents expressed some form of discontentment, especially with the lack of Bible school, lack of love and fellowship within the church, and the unfavorable position and role of women. Many argued that women should be allowed in the orchestra, and also in other roles such as administration and preaching. Many wished that the church had “Sunday schools, social members activities, regular congregational meals and fellowship and fair organizational procedures.” Many said that they wished the church was less “exclusive and extremist,” and that “the church should stop saying that ‘only CCB saves,’ the church should stop discriminating against other denominations and should seriously interact with other Christian churches.” Others said that “they [CCB] should be more open to other churches and not treat them as inferior.” A respondent said, “the church is too conservative, too traditional. It holds on to details such as clothing, make-up, television, and the Internet. Perhaps it lacks spirituality.” Another said, “the CCB is extremely prejudice, many people choose a way of life and they want to impose that on everyone else, certain customs on other people. I think everyone should be free to follow whatever custom he or she wishes, and be respected by others, not judged.” These respondents seem to be very progressive in nature and favor a renewal in church practices and traditions that no longer apply to the reality of the church today.

Nevertheless, 35 percent of respondents said that they did not wish anything was different. Some respondents expressed that by answering “nothing”, “keep it as it is” and, “for me, it is perfect the way God has guided His servants.” While some members seem open to change, others simply accept the *status quo* and do not wish that anything would be different. Some are even critical of those who might inquire about possible changes. As a respondent stated in the survey, “I would like for those who are bothered by something to remove themselves from the church, instead of doing things like this joke” (referring to the survey). This clearly illustrates a more fundamentalist view that opposes any effort to modernize church practices and traditions.

Discussion

From the foregoing, it is reasonable to conclude that there are two polarizing views within CCB. There is a substantial group within CCB that favors Bible school, opposes rebaptism, does not believe that CCB is the grace of God, and wishes the church would change some practices and outdated teachings. This group seems to be antagonized by others who desire to keep the status quo. Likewise, the church’s leadership is in strong opposition to any progressive tendencies within the church. This clear dichotomy seems to have motivated the unprecedented departure of members, including elders, who disagreed with the council of elders. As a result, CCB is the only traditional or classic²⁷ Pentecostal church in Brazil to experience a decline, presently.²⁸

Table 1 provides the number of members for the main Pentecostal churches in Brazil. In 1991, CCB accounted for 20 percent of Pentecostals

27. “Classic Pentecostalism” refers to the first wave of Pentecostal churches established in Brazil between 1910 and 1950. This includes CCB (established 1910), Assembléia de Deus (established 1911), Igreja de Cristo no Brasil (established 1932), Missão Evangélica Pentecostal do Brasil (established 1939), and Igreja Evangélica Avivamento Bíblico (established 1946). However, the most influential churches of the first wave are the CCB and Assembléia de Deus mainly due to the large number of members belonging to both denominations. See Freston (1995) for a thorough discussion.

28. The number of Brazilians without religious affiliation, including agnostics and atheists, has also been growing from 12 million in 2000 to 15 million in 2010 (Pew Research, 2013). Nevertheless, the resulting trend indicates a positive growth of Brazilian Protestants from 26 million in 2000, to 42 million in 2010, particularly in Pentecostal churches (Pew Research, 2006, 2013).

in Brazil. Since then, this proportion has been decreasing rapidly. Although the Igreja Universal do Reino de Deus (Universal Church of the Kingdom of God; IURD) has also experienced membership decline in the past decade – losing about 230,000 members between 2000 and 2010 – it is classified as a NeoPentecostal church, thus not comparable with a Classic Pentecostal church like CCB.²⁹ An analysis of baptism trends correspondingly shows that CCB attracted new members until the end of the twentieth century, when the trend started to decline (Figure 7). This shows that the church is not only losing members, but also not gaining as many new members through baptism as it has gained in previous years.

The unwillingness of CCB's ministry to accommodate cultural conditions into a global modernizing context contributes to this trend by generating a high level of membership dissatisfaction. Most respondents, 65 percent, wished CCB would change or improve in some way. Church practices and doctrines are outdated and no longer reflect the social and cultural climate of Brazilian society. There are no programs directed to children or youth, no outreach programs to encourage fellowship, no

Table 1. Number of Pentecostal members by churches in Brazil.

<i>Pentecostal Churches</i>	<i>1991</i>		<i>2000</i>		<i>2010</i>	
	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>%</i>
Assembléia de Deus	2,439,770	29.8	8,418,154	47.5	12,314,410	48.5
Congregação Cristã no Brasil	1,635,985	20.0	2,489,079	14.0	2,289,634	9.0
Universal do Reino de Deus	268,955	3.3	2,101,884	11.9	1,873,243	7.4
Evangelho Quadrangular	303,267	3.7	1,318,812	7.4	1,808,389	7.1
Deus é Amor	169,343	2.1	774,827	4.4	845,383	3.3
Maranata	64,578	0.8	277,352	1.6	356,021	1.4
Others	3,297,768	40.3	2,353,369	13.3	5,883,404	23.2
Total	817,966	100.0	17,733,477	100.0	25,370,484	100.0

Source: IBGE (1991, 2000, 2010).

29. These two churches are so distinct that researchers have used them to illustrate the diversity in Pentecostalism in Brazil, placing CCB at one end of the spectrum and IURD at the other end (cf. Monteiro, 1995).

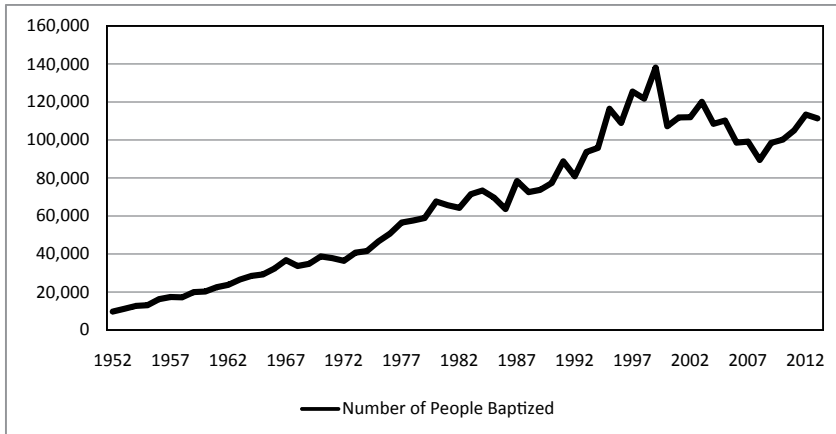


Figure 7. Trends in CCB baptisms 1952–2013.

Source: Relatório da Congregação Cristã no Brasil, no. 76, 2012–2013.

effort to reinstitute Bible study, and a void in the use of media, despite clear manifestation of members in favor of these practices. The analysis of the survey responses distinguishes two opposing views among the church's members – fundamentalism, displayed by those who emulate the ministry's position, and progressivism, displayed by those who are eager to renew church practices – resulting in internal disharmony and disagreements. This is evidenced by a number of frustrated members leaving the church and forming offshoot groups. For example, the last decade has seen an unprecedented number of schisms, including Congregação Cristã Apostólica (2001), Associação de Membros da Congregação Cristã no Brasil (2004), Igreja Congregação Cristã (2005), and Congregação Cristã Ministério Bragança (2011). The most significant splinter group is Congregação Cristã Ministério Jandira (2010) led by three former CCB elders: Samuel Trevisan, João Marcos de Oliveira, and Otoniel Ribeiro. In the process, they retained thousands of members and even congregational temples. Two years later, this group has more than 220 churches in Brazil and abroad.³⁰

In 2008, an influential elder, Joel Spina, also disaffiliated himself from the Christian Congregation. Spina and his family are significant in the history of the church.³¹ Born and raised at CCB, he immigrated to the United States and helped establish the Christian Congregation in the

30. Churches in Argentina, Paraguay, Italy and the United States.

31. His uncle, Miguel Spina, was the president elder from 1952 to 1991.

US in the 1980s. At the time of his exit, he was one of the senior elders in the United States and the prospective successor to the late president elder, Arno Scoccia. In an open letter, he stated that two reasons resulted in his departure: points of disagreements between him and the ministry (including the church's claims of being the Grace of God on Earth, maintenance of outdated commandments and teachings, and the church's opposition to studying the Bible), and the senior's ministry inert position (Spina, 2008: 2). This, he argues, has "transformed the Christian Congregation into one of the group of Christians that know the Scriptures the least, based on false beliefs and strictly on appearance" (*ibid.*). The state of the current annual ministry meetings reverberates this situation:

Instead of having the servants of God looking to the Lord to receive light and guidance in examining (the use of the word 'study' is practically forbidden) the Scriptures, most of the time is wasted in dealing with 'cases,' administrative situations, choosing the shape and color of Bibles and hymnbooks, more recently attending presentations for sign and lettering products for pulpits. I am sad to report that in most assembly meetings I attended (starting in 1980), except for the preaching of the Word, there was very little instruction and edification, if any, in those gatherings. I presented all of these points, and many others, to the senior ministry of the Christian Congregation – including elders from the U.S. and Brazil – in the assembly meetings, and their overall response was to silence me. (*Ibid.*: 3)

Spina's letter provides an important insight into the state of CCB's leadership, since ministry meetings are closed and kept under secrecy. His account shows that even when other elders propose modifications no actions are taken. This indicates that it is preferable to maintain the *status quo* than to correct inerrant practices and traditions.

In addition to institutional factors, it is important to note that the role of contextual factors cannot be ignored as they could be fatal if change is resisted (Inskeep, 1993). For example, the church's resistance to use media and the Internet for proselytizing is not without consequences. With the widespread use of the Internet, the church's online void is being filled with damaging content originated from internal and external groups opposing to the church's practices and doctrine. The absence of an official presence on the Internet³² may result in a negative marketing that can

32. The official church's website (www.congregacaoocrista.org.br) is simply a disclaimer stating that CCB does not use the Internet or media and does not authorize anyone to do so in its name.

be detrimental to the growth of the church. According to Walrath (1979: 269), denominations that “thrive amid change are generally those that are able to relate effectively to their context, maximizing the positive factors, minimizing negative factors, programming toward the context’s future rather than hanging on to a past that sooner or later is bound to vanish.” Although denominations cannot control their context, they can control how to relate to it and CCB has demonstrated a conservative approach to modernizing trends. By holding on to outdated traditions and resisting changes, CCB’s ministry is generating dissatisfaction among members, which is contributing to its decline.

Conclusion

This paper presented the results of a case study on the Congregação Cristã no Brasil, a significant Brazilian Pentecostal church undergoing substantial membership dwindling and declining number of new converts. Several factors were identified as probable contributors to this trend, particularly institutional factors as theorized by Hoge and Roozen (1979). These results should be interpreted with caution because the study is based on survey research and selection bias can be a potential limitation. Also, since CCB does not report any statistical data on members’ characteristics, representativeness cannot be easily determined. Nonetheless, based on my extended experience³³ with this church, I expected to find a much larger group of members with progressive views due to the fact that data was collected through social networking sites. Surprisingly, a large number of members who are highly educated and use social media displayed great support for the traditional norms of the church. While this study does not claim to generalize its findings, it achieves a significant degree of fit with patterns observed in other studies of CCB and is consistent with other researchers’ personal experiences with this religious group (Léonard, 1952; Read, 1965; Nelson, 1993, 1989, 1979; Correa, 1989; Mariano, 1999; Foerster, 2006). As this work constitutes a first step into understanding CCB’s declining trend, future research should play an important role in supporting the validity of these results. Future work will focus on the opinions of former members to determine the robustness of these findings.

33. Being a member of the CCB, the author also has first-hand experience with this group and can attest to the reliability of the information provided.

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to Frederico S. Araujo, Sarah R. Valente, Leonardo M. Alves, Brian J.L. Berry, and three anonymous reviewers for their comments on an earlier draft of the paper. Any errors and omissions are mine.

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