

LONG-TERM STATISTICAL TRENDS



**Making
Disciples
for Life**



LCMS Long-Term Statistical Trends

Based on Lutheran Annual data for years 1970-2018

LCMS Research Services
Data and Commentary Updated: February 2020

Findings from the 1970-2018 Data

Overview of the Trends

- * Though the number of LCMS congregations has declined in recent years, there are more member congregations today than in 1970.
- * Despite this increase in congregations, there has been a steady loss of membership since the early 2000s, both in baptized and confirmed — a trend that has been experienced by most Protestant denominations.
- * Within the decreasing membership numbers, another concerning pattern is visible. The gap between baptized and confirmed membership is closing. This is concerning because that gap is an indication of the number of young baptized children in the Synod.
- * While membership has been declining, giving to congregations has been increasing for most of the past 40 years — and this holds true even when adjusting dollar amounts for inflation. What this means is that giving has increased by nearly 10% per communicant member (after adjusting for inflation). It is not just that the members who have remained in the church are the ones who give, it is that the ones who remained have also started giving more.
- * While giving peaked in the year 2000, it has maintained very high levels through the early 2000s, despite the rapid decrease in membership. The average giving per communicant member also continues to grow.

A High Degree of Similarity among Districts

- * Most districts follow the same pattern as the LCMS as a whole, especially in terms of increasing in congregations while decreasing in membership.
- * There are some noteworthy exceptions to this pattern, and it may be worthwhile to look into what happened to make these districts different.

Where Certain Districts Have Bucked the Trends

- * Districts in the southern United States (Florida-Georgia, Texas, Mid-South and Southeastern) saw big gains in membership in the '70s, '80s, and '90s. However, since 2000, they have mostly followed the normal trend of losing members while still increasing in congregations.
- * Several districts in the Midwest, including Missouri, Southern Illinois, Kansas, Oklahoma, Indiana and North Wisconsin, have been remarkably stable over 40 years. Whereas most districts average near or above a 1% change (positive or negative) in members and congregations each year, these districts average under 0.15% (gain or loss). Though these districts have been declining in members in recent years, these declines are less severe than in other districts.
- * Texas and Florida-Georgia have seen the most growth in giving over the past 40 years, with donations actually doubling (when adjusted for inflation) since 1970, although Florida-Georgia's donations have declined sharply since 2005.
- * Over the past few decades, almost every district had fewer parish pastors than congregations. While that gap has been shrinking nationally, there are now a handful of districts that have more pastors in congregations than they have congregations.

Major Events

- * In 1977 there is a noticeable loss in all statistics. This is related to the controversy and denomination split at that time. While this was a drop for the Synod nationwide, certain districts (especially those in the Northeast United States) seem to have been more affected than others.
- * In 2008, when the U.S. entered a recession, there was a noticeable drop in giving.
- * Individual districts have other events (most notably the Atlantic District splitting into three districts in 1973) that have impacted district trends over the years.

What Does It All Mean?

- * While certain events, such as the recent recession and the controversy in the 1970s, may have impacted the LCMS statistically, even those major events are relatively minor compared to the overall trends.
- * Membership is decreasing, and that decrease is accelerating. Despite this overall trend, there are districts that have managed to slow that loss and a couple that may have reversed it.
- * While membership has declined, giving has not been dramatically affected. This may say a great deal about the quality of members that have remained committed to the LCMS when others have left.

Next Steps

It may be helpful to ask the 35 districts to provide timelines that may provide further insights into local fluctuations in data.

- Was there an economic factor in part of their area that impacted congregation growth?
- Were there controversies or conflicts within the district that may have led to members, pastors or even whole congregations leaving the district?
- Were there major changes to the structure or focus of the district that may have had a long-term impact on growth over subsequent years?

Gathering this kind of information may help to better explain individual fluctuations from year to year, and it may provide insight to help evaluate the long-term impact that district decisions and changes may have had on congregations.

LCMS Long-Term Statistical Trends:

Part I - Synod Totals

Data compiled from Lutheran Annuals 1970-2018

LCMS Totals

Chart A - Congregations and Total Membership

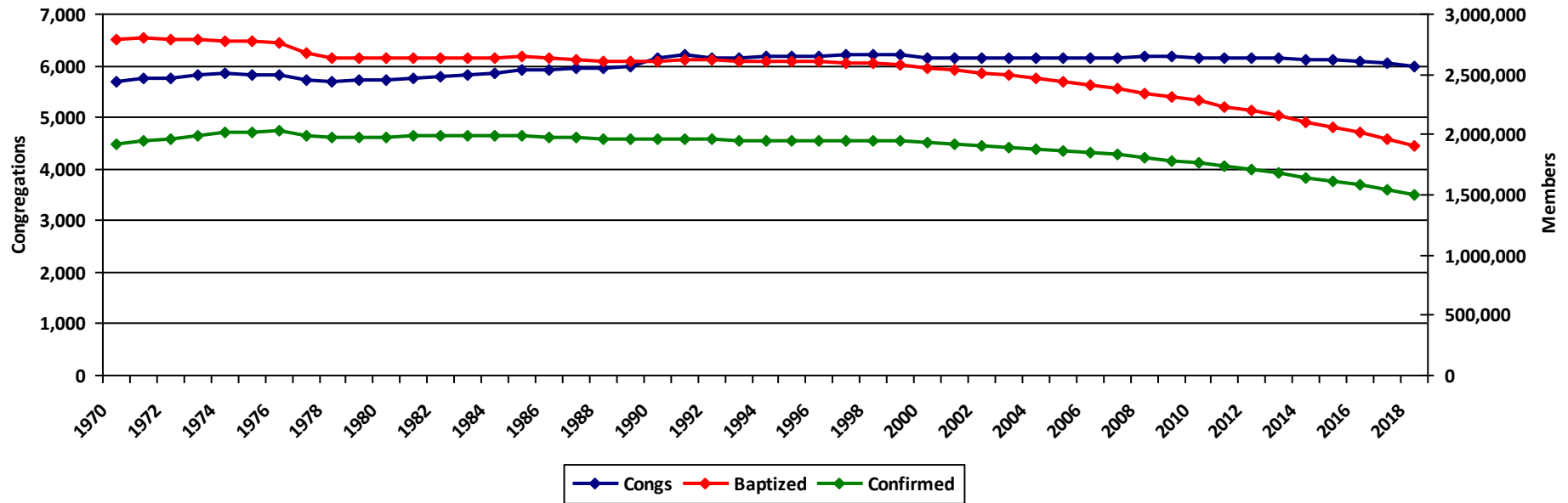
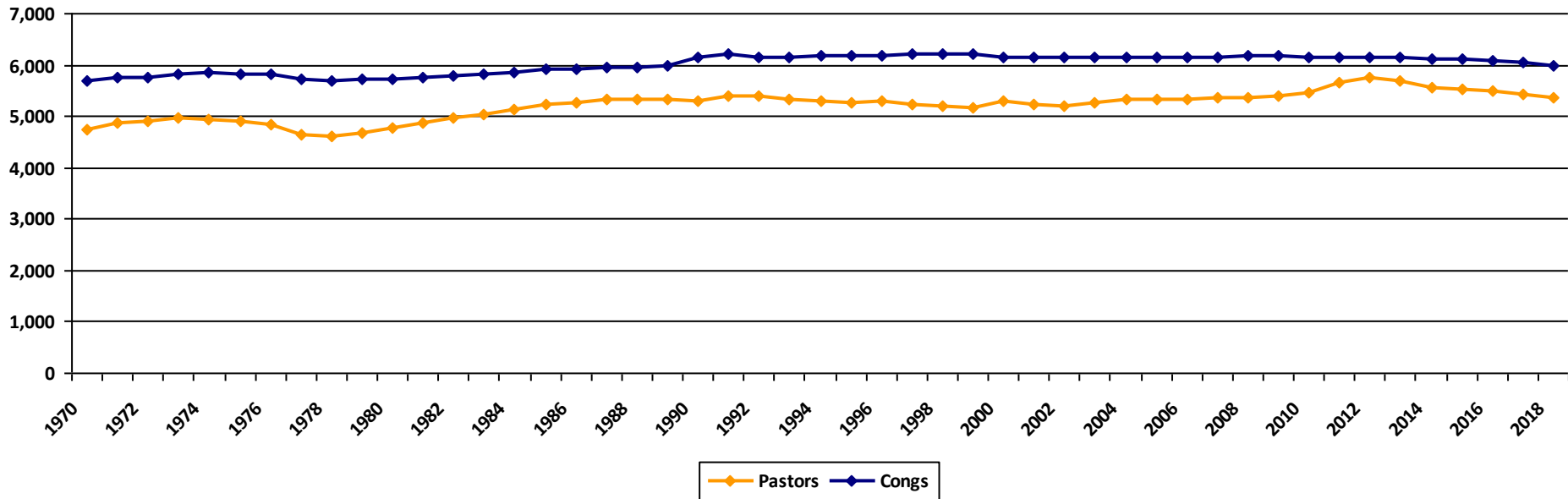
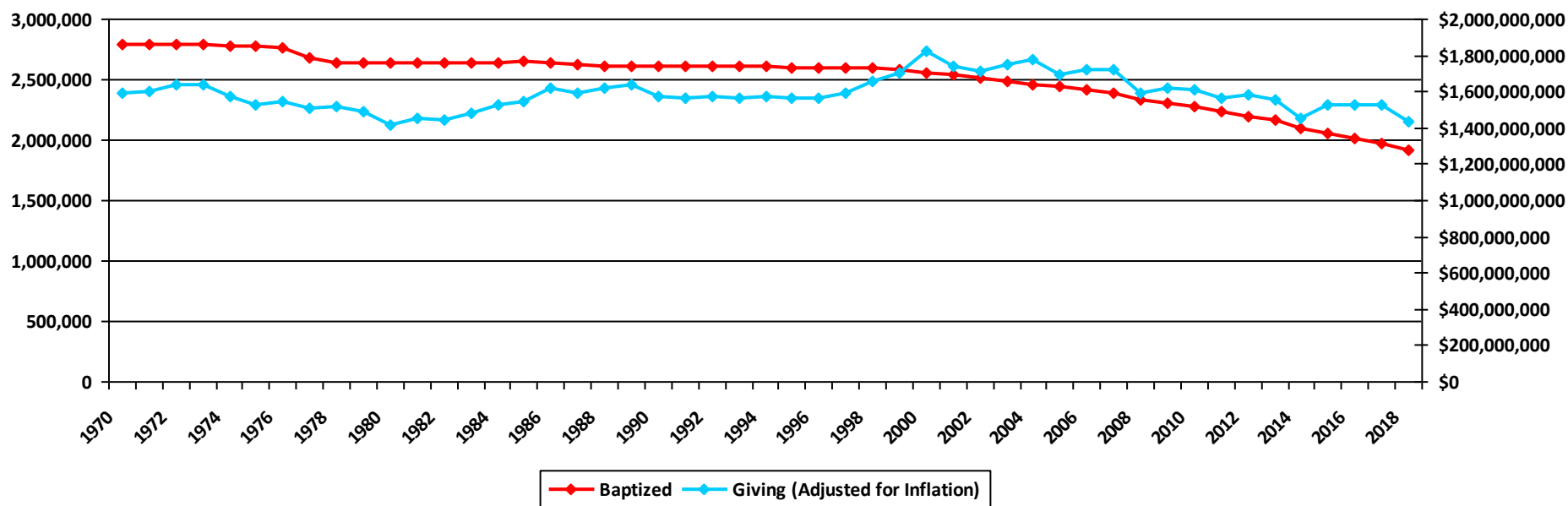


Chart B - Congregations and Number of Parish Pastors



LCMS Totals
Chart C - Membership and Giving



Analysis of the Charts

- * Chart A – Baptized and confirmed membership numbers in the Synod have been slowly declining since the 1970s. The rate of decline has increased in the past decade and is more noticeable in baptized membership.
- * Chart A – During the '90s and early 2000s, the total number of congregations remained fairly stable, around the 6000 mark. However, in the last few years, that number has begun to decline. This decline is slow, but it is noticeable. The number is still higher than it was in 1970, prior to the controversy and before several Canadian churches left to join the Lutheran Church Canada.
- * Chart A – There is a noticeable drop in all statistics around 1977, most likely due to the controversy and church split. However, this drop was not as extreme as the long-term drop in membership visible since 2000.
- * Chart B – Over the past few decades, the number of parish pastors has remained closely tied with the number of congregations. There was a brief period in the early 2010s where the number of pastors started to increase. Though the number is now declining, the total number of pastors today is comparable to what it was 10 years and even 30 years ago.
- * Chart C – Even when adjusting for inflation, giving was not decreasing from 1970 – 2000, despite the loss of members. However, in the past decade, giving has started to decline, roughly following the membership line. The fluctuations beginning in the 2000s reflect changes in congregations' reporting habits, but the downward trend is still clear.

All 35 Districts
Chart A - Congregations

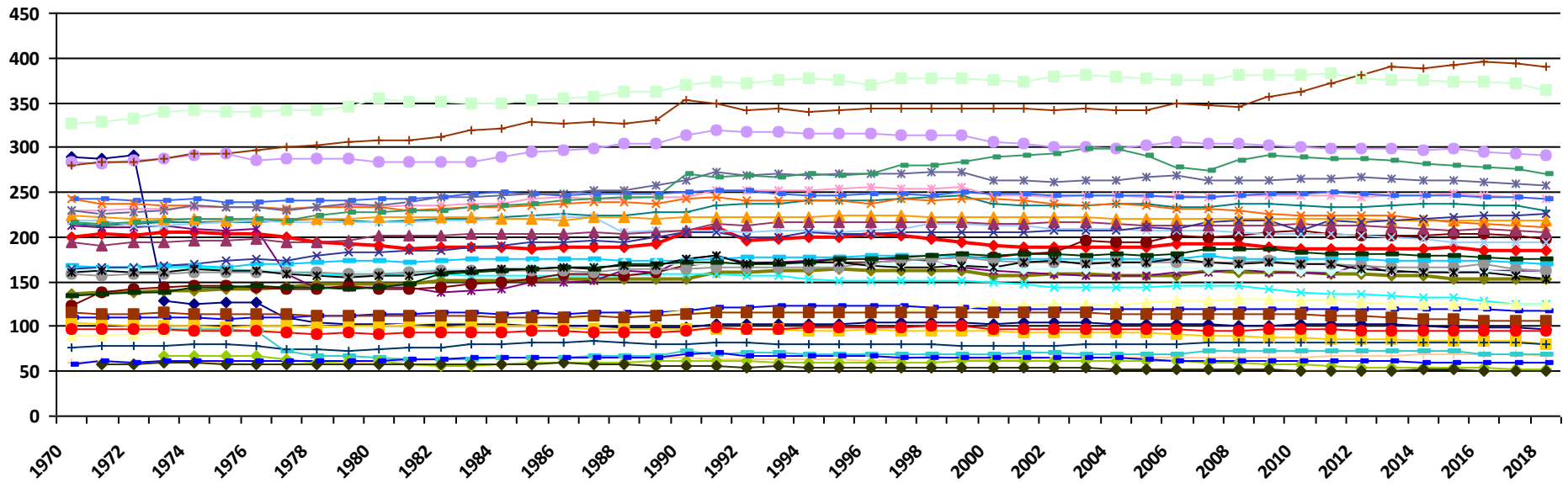
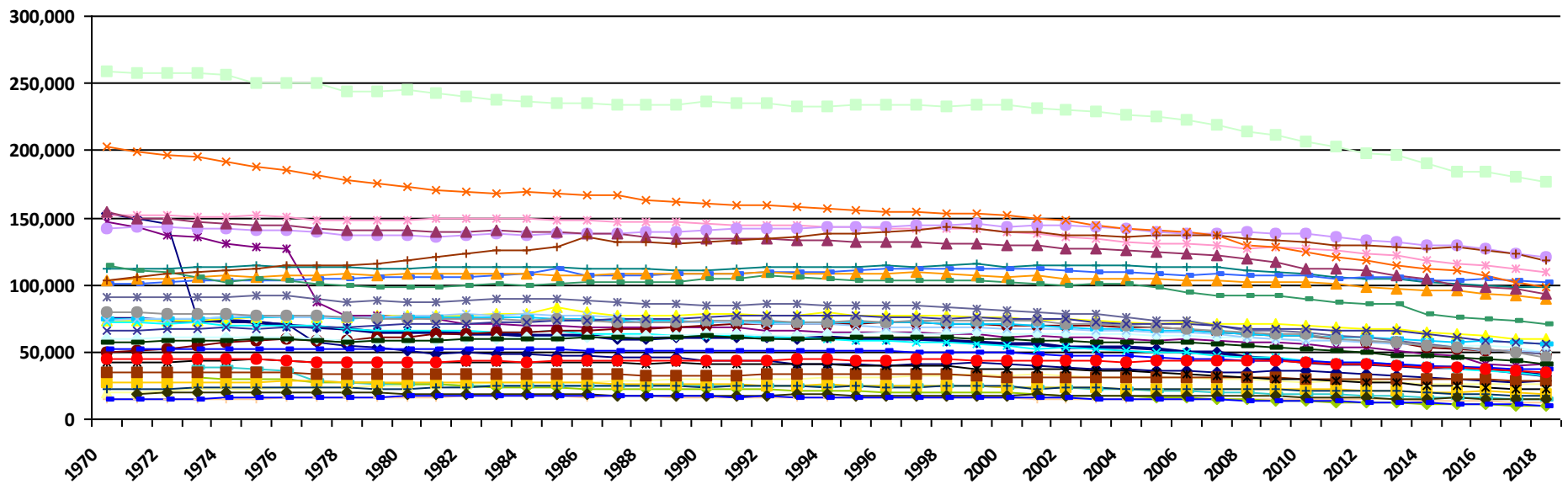
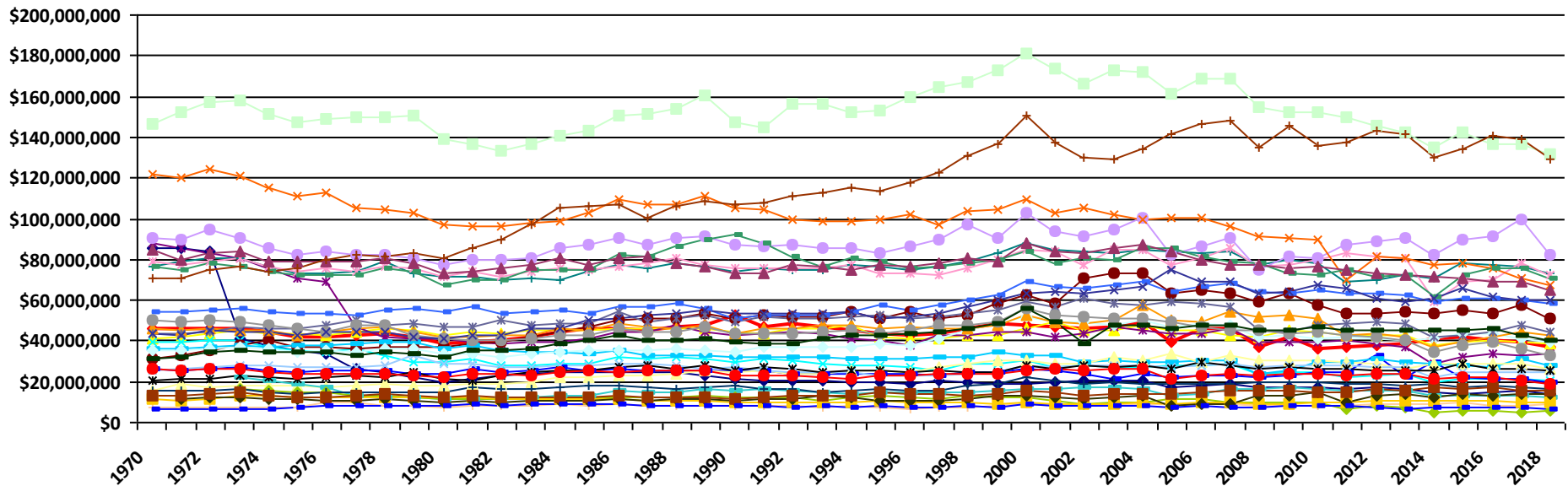


Chart B - Baptized Membership



All 35 Districts

Chart C - Giving



Analysis of the Charts

* All Charts – The purpose of these graphs is not to see information on individual districts, but to understand the level of diversity and uniformity between districts. There is a great deal of uniformity in membership and total congregations (Charts A and B) but not with congregational giving (Chart C).

* Chart A – In 1970, the districts appear in clusters with noticeable gaps between each group (see 110-125, 130-150, 200-225). Today, the districts are (with a few obvious exceptions) more closely grouped (less white space). However (again with a few exceptions), most districts are roughly comparable with their numbers from 1970.

* Chart A – The notable exceptions are the three districts that had over 200 congregations in 1970, and most noticeably is the Atlantic District (blue line). The major drop in 1973 was not a loss to Synod because the Atlantic District split and formed the New England and New Jersey districts. A similar drop is present in all three charts because of the new districts.

* Chart B – While it is difficult to see individual details for most districts, what this chart makes clear is that most districts are heading downward in terms of membership. The district that begins with over 250,000 (lime green line) is Michigan, and the next largest (orange line) is Northern Illinois.

* Chart C – While the other charts showed a high degree of uniformity in districts, this chart shows that giving has been very different from district to district. In many districts, giving has become more erratic in the past decade. The district that has seen giving increase most rapidly (brown line) is Texas, but even it has seen its giving level out and decline some in recent years.

LCMS Long-Term Statistical Trends:

Part II - Comparison Over Time of Districts Grouped By Their Current Size

Data compiled from Lutheran Annuals from 1970-2018

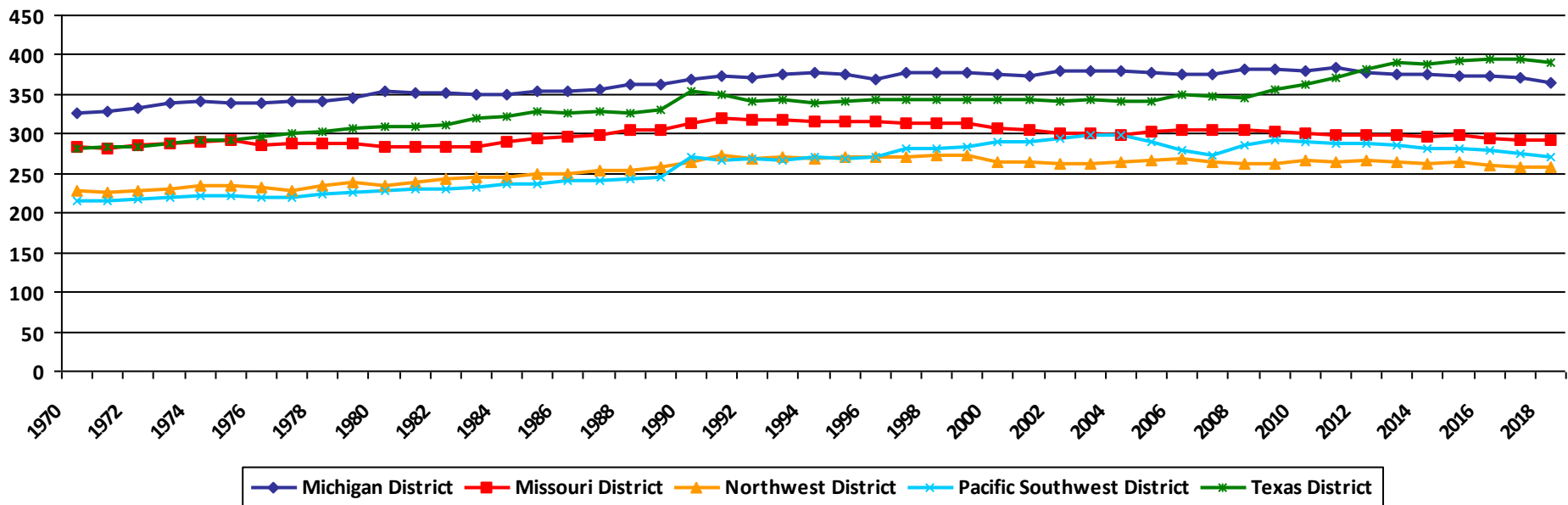
Size Group 1 - Largest Districts

Analysis of the Charts

- * Chart A – Most of the five largest LCMS districts in 2011 have been steadily increasing in the number of total congregations over the past 40 years.
- * Chart B – On the other hand, membership levels in most of these districts have followed the national trend of a gradual, steady decrease.
- * Chart B – Texas has actually experienced an increase in the total membership since 1970, and the Missouri District has managed to mostly hold steady. But both have declined in the last decade.
- * Chart C – Giving in these districts has also followed the national trend. While there has been much change in giving from year to year (reaching a peak in 2001), over 40 years giving remains largely unchanged when adjusted for inflation.
- * Chart C – The exception, again, is Texas, which has beaten the trend with a dramatic and steady increase in giving (and average gift) since 1970.

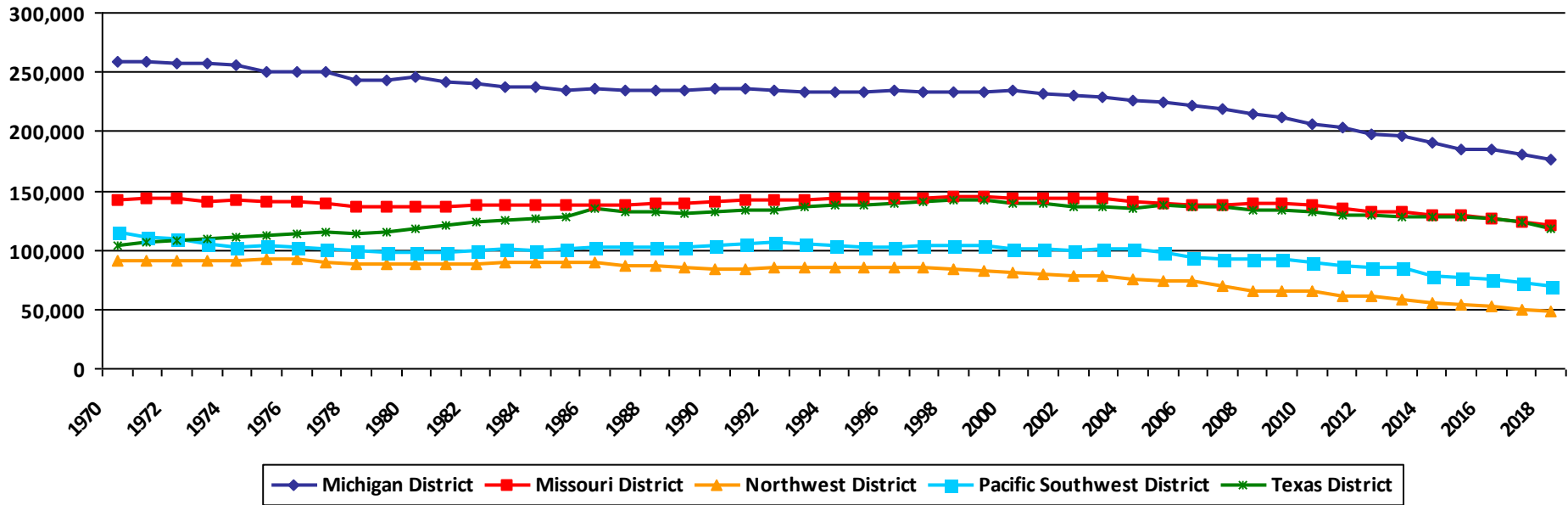
CHARTS A - C: TRENDLINE DATA

A - Total Congregations

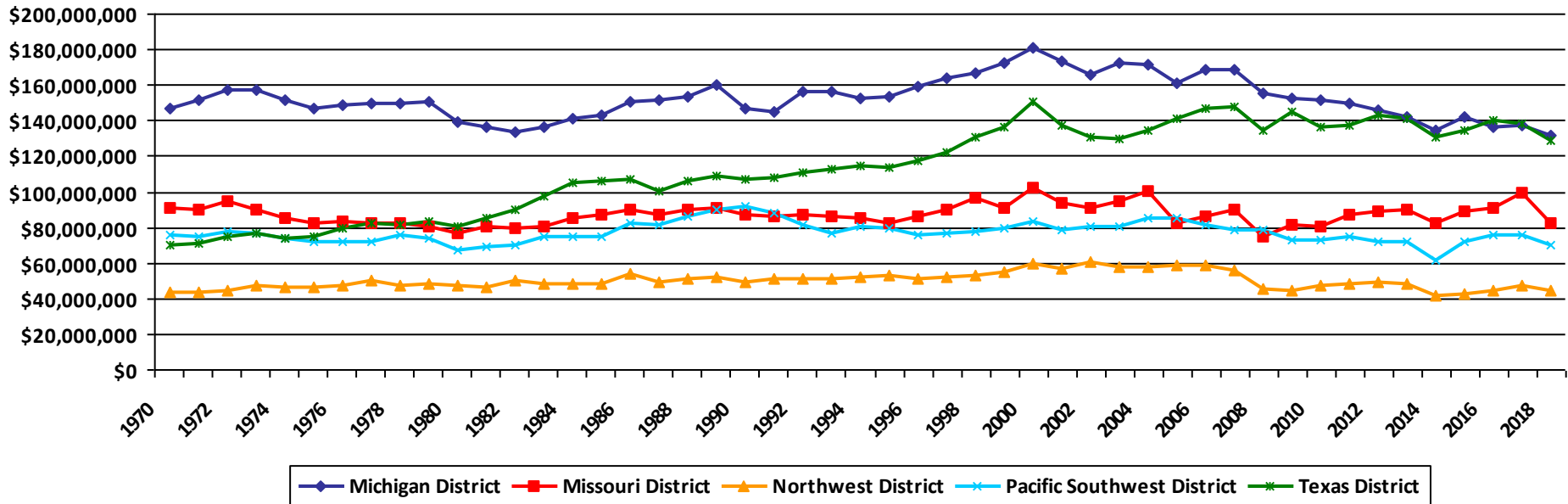


Size Group 1 - Largest Districts

B - Total Baptized Members



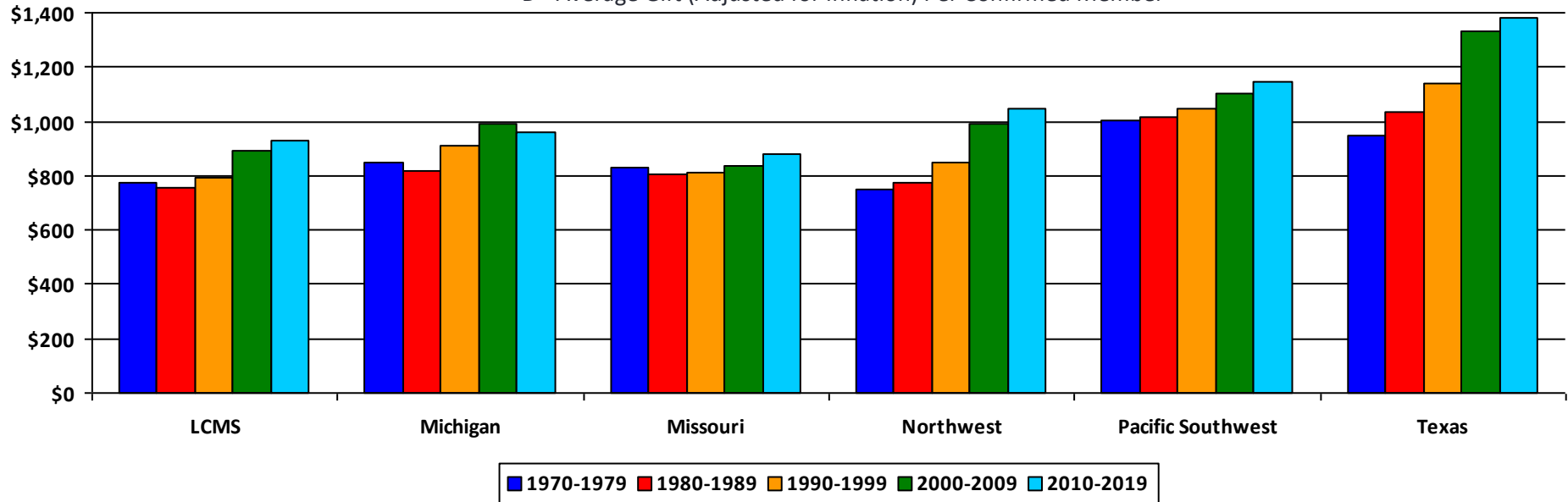
C - Total Regular Giving (Adjusted for Inflation)



Size Group 1 - Largest Districts

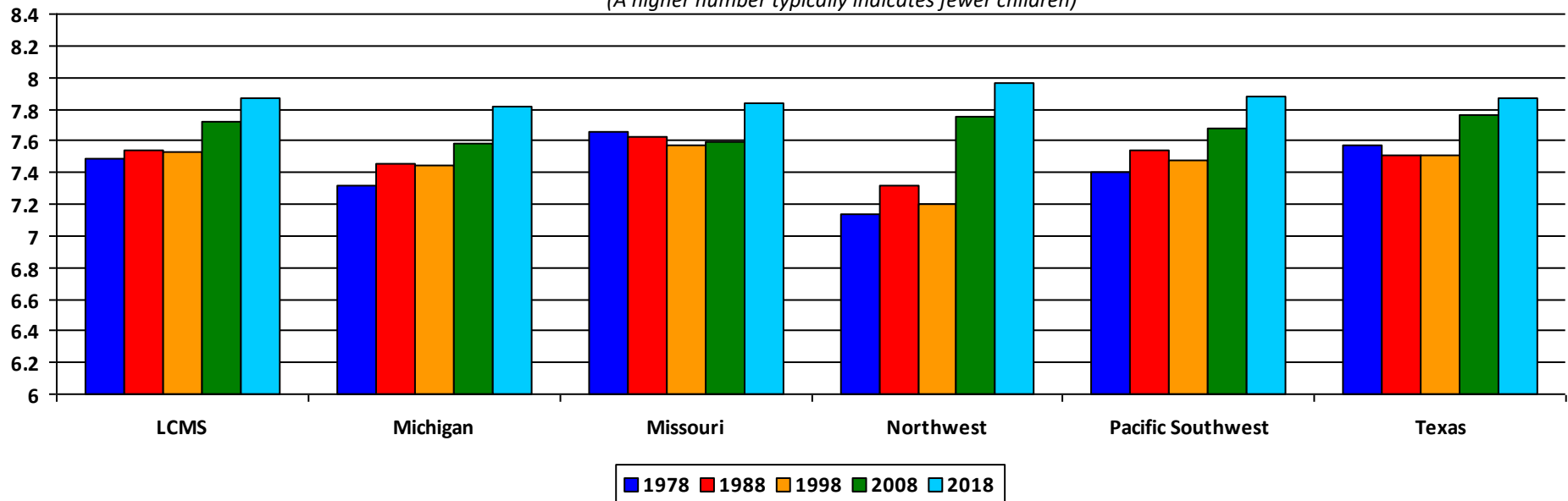
CHARTS D - G: COMPARATIVE DATA

D - Average Gift (Adjusted for Inflation) Per Confirmed Member



E - Number of Confirmed Members for Every 10 Baptized Members

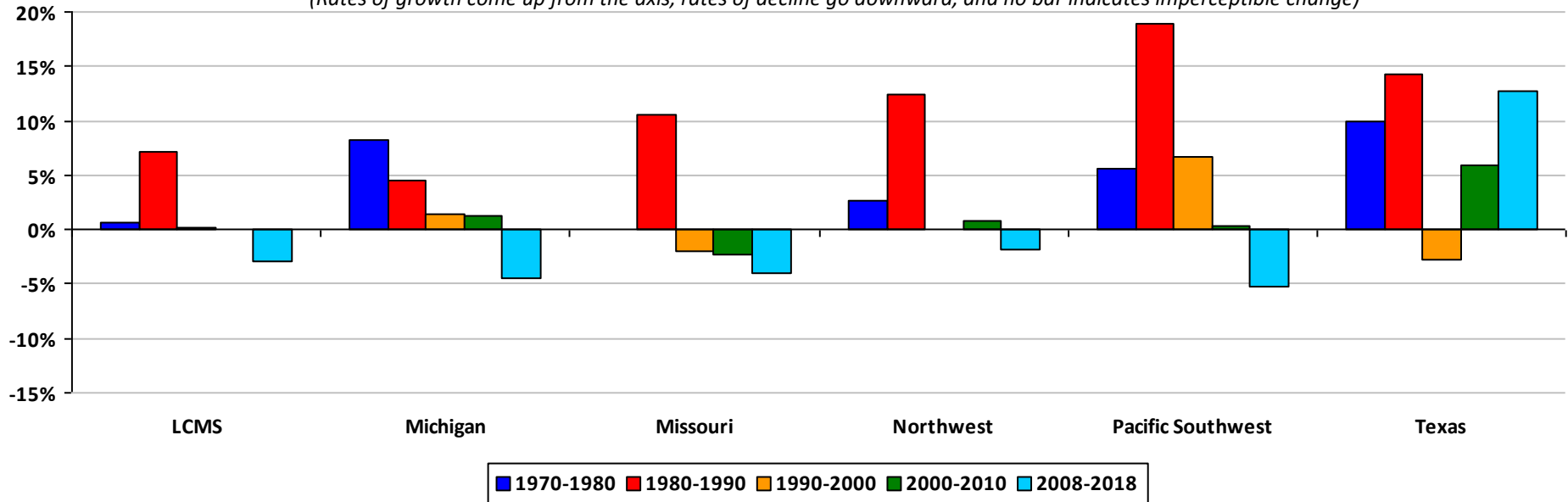
(A higher number typically indicates fewer children)



Size Group 1 - Largest Districts

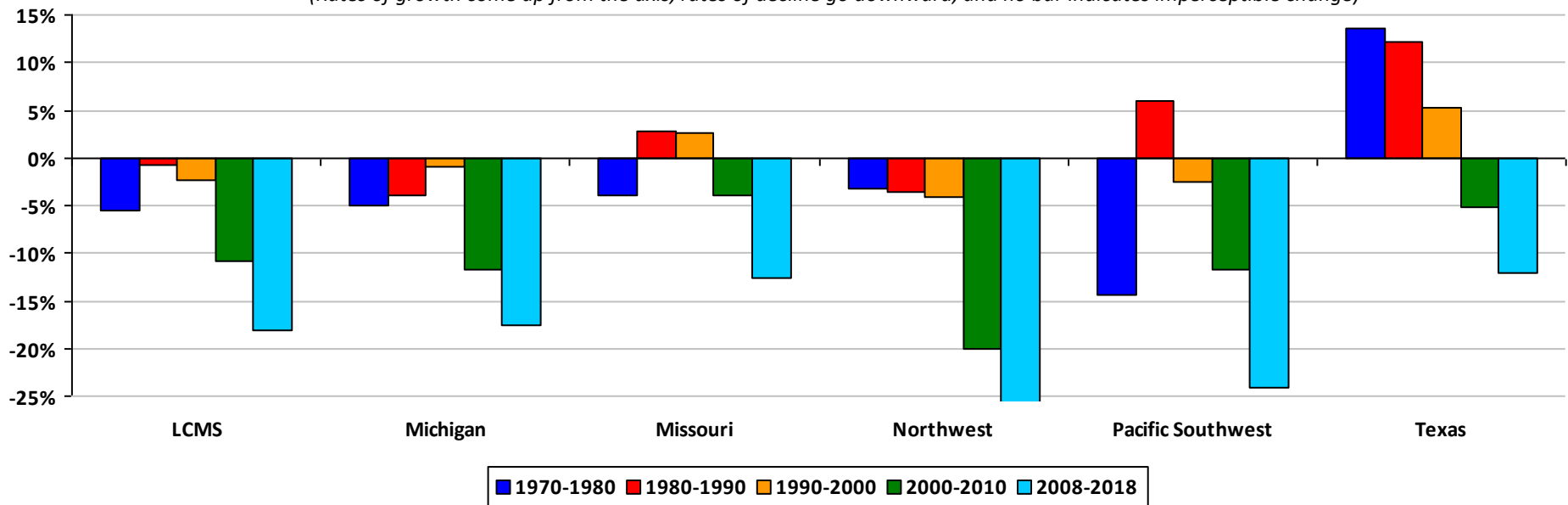
F - Ten-Year Rates of Change in Congregations

(Rates of growth come up from the axis, rates of decline go downward, and no bar indicates imperceptible change)



G - Ten-Year Rates of Change in Baptized Members

(Rates of growth come up from the axis, rates of decline go downward, and no bar indicates imperceptible change)



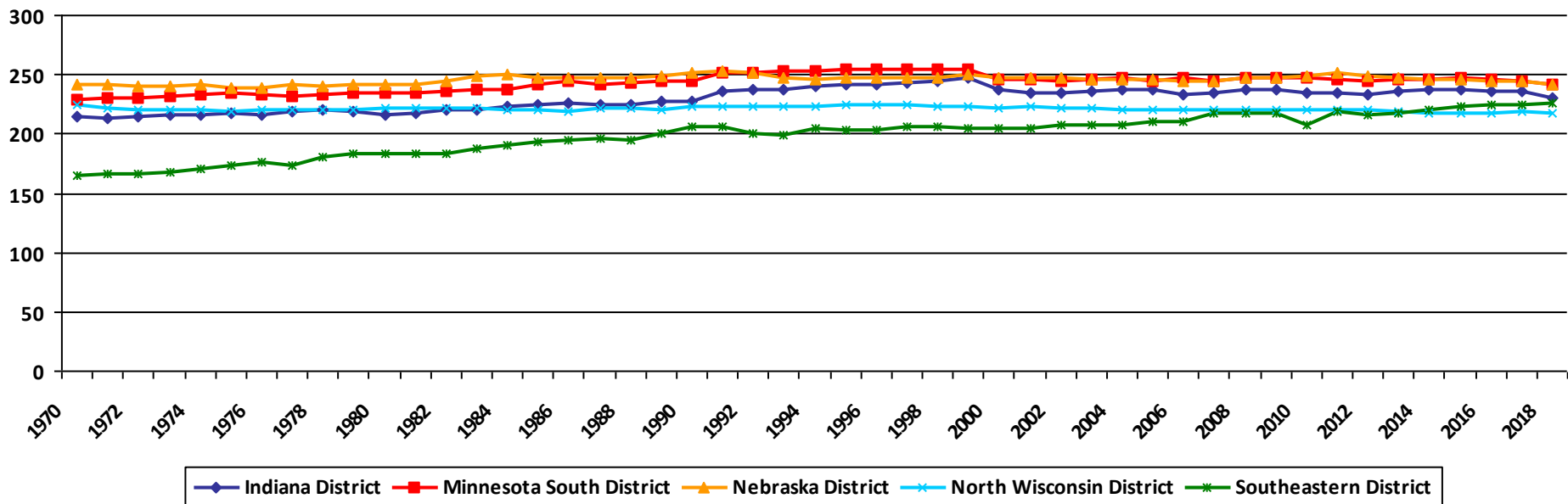
Size Group 2 - Large Districts

Analysis of the Charts

- * Chart A – In previous reports, the Southeastern District was in Size Group 3, but its steady increase in total congregations has moved it into this group.
- * Chart A – The remaining districts in this group have been fairly stable in their total number of congregations over the decades.
- * Chart B – Likewise, until the mid-2000s there was not much of a dramatic change in the number of baptized members in this group. However, the past 15 years has been a period of decline.
- * Chart C – While North Wisconsin and Indiana had little change in giving, Minnesota South and Nebraska saw a gradual increase in recent years.
- * Chart C – The Southeastern District, likely from the increases in congregations, has seen the most growth, though that has leveled off in the last 10 years.

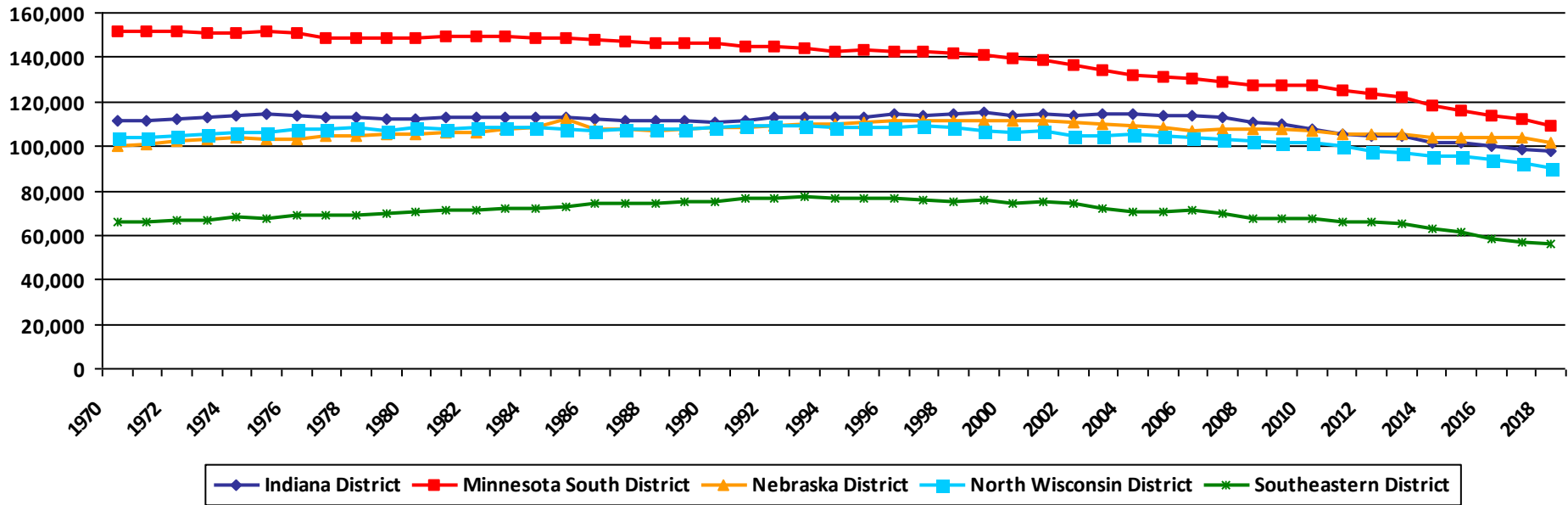
CHARTS A - C: TRENDLINE DATA

A - Total Congregations

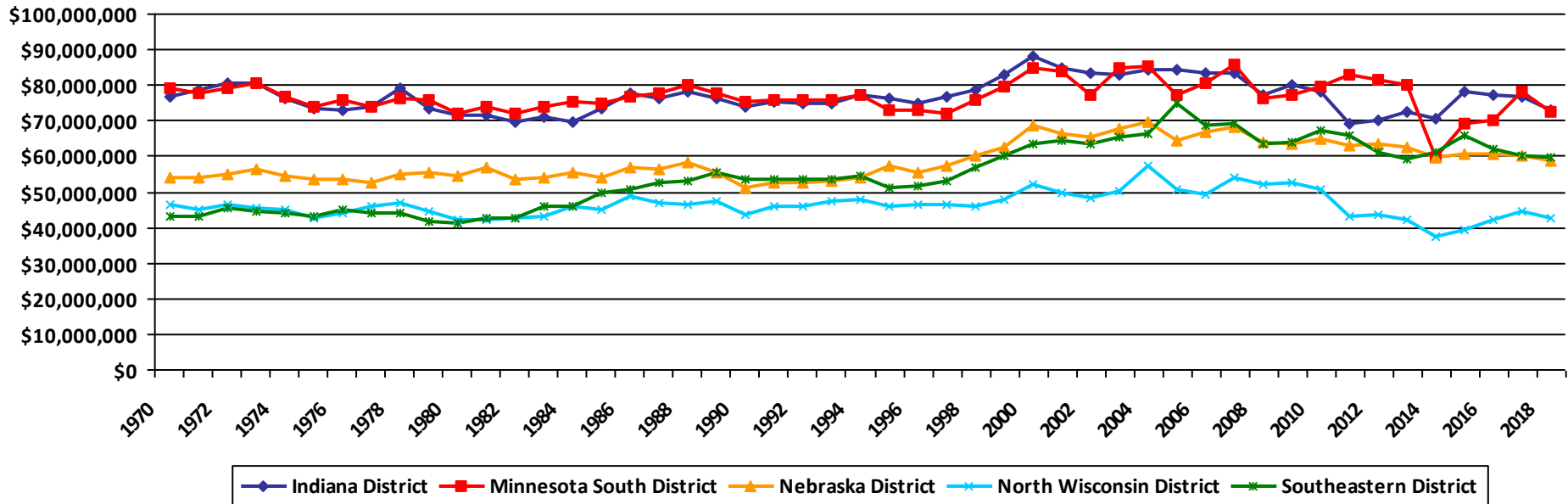


Size Group 2 - Large Districts

B - Total Baptized Members



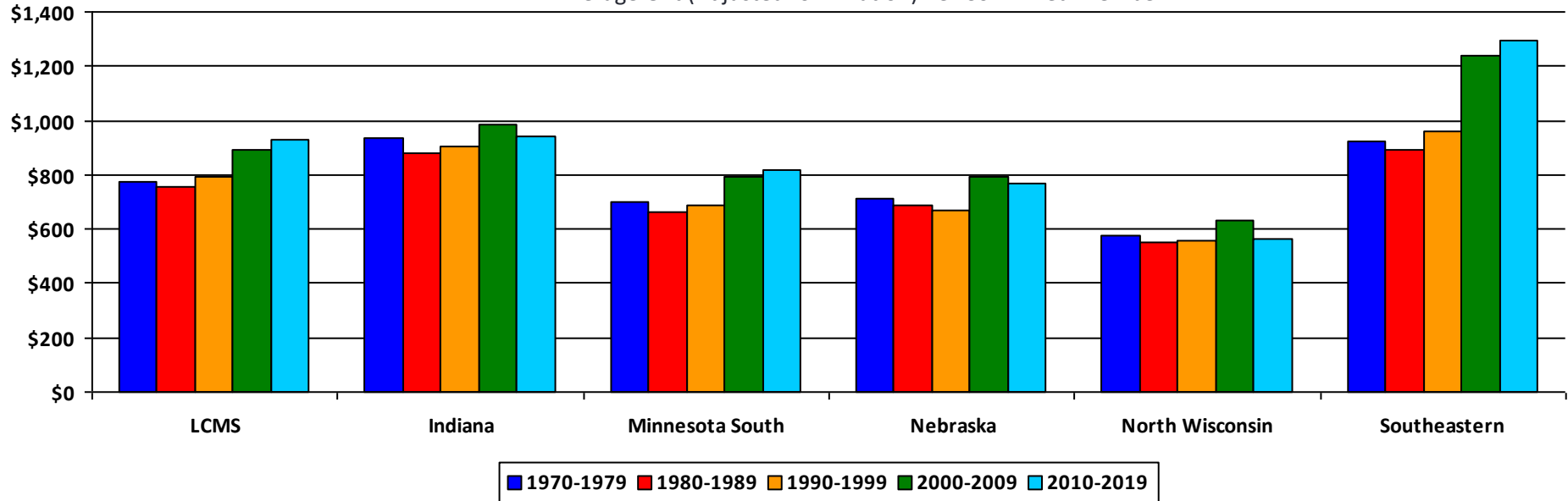
C - Total Regular Giving (Adjusted for Inflation)



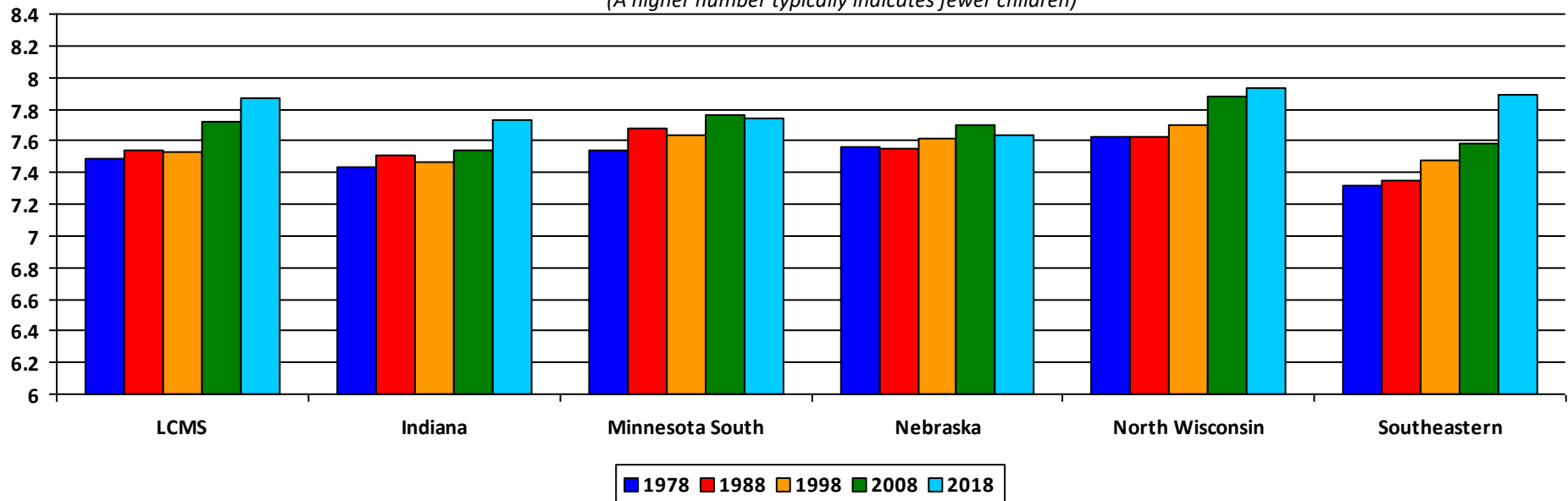
Size Group 2 - Large Districts

CHARTS D - G: COMPARATIVE DATA

D - Average Gift (Adjusted for Inflation) Per Confirmed Member



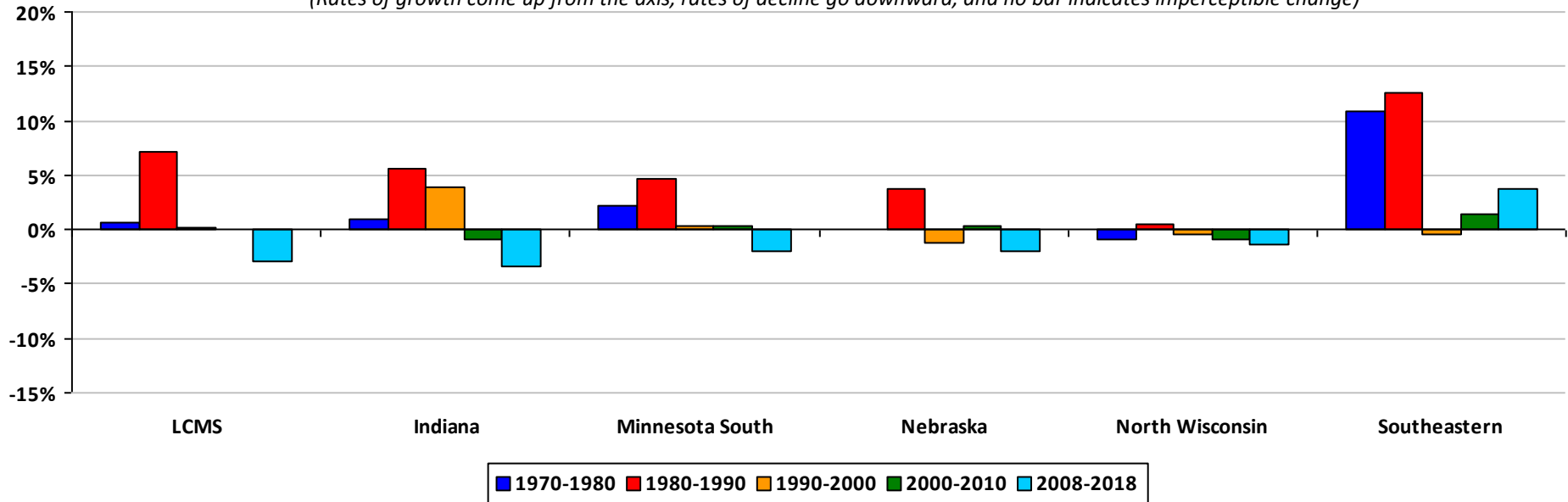
E - Number of Confirmed Members for Every 10 Baptized Members
(A higher number typically indicates fewer children)



Size Group 2 - Large Districts

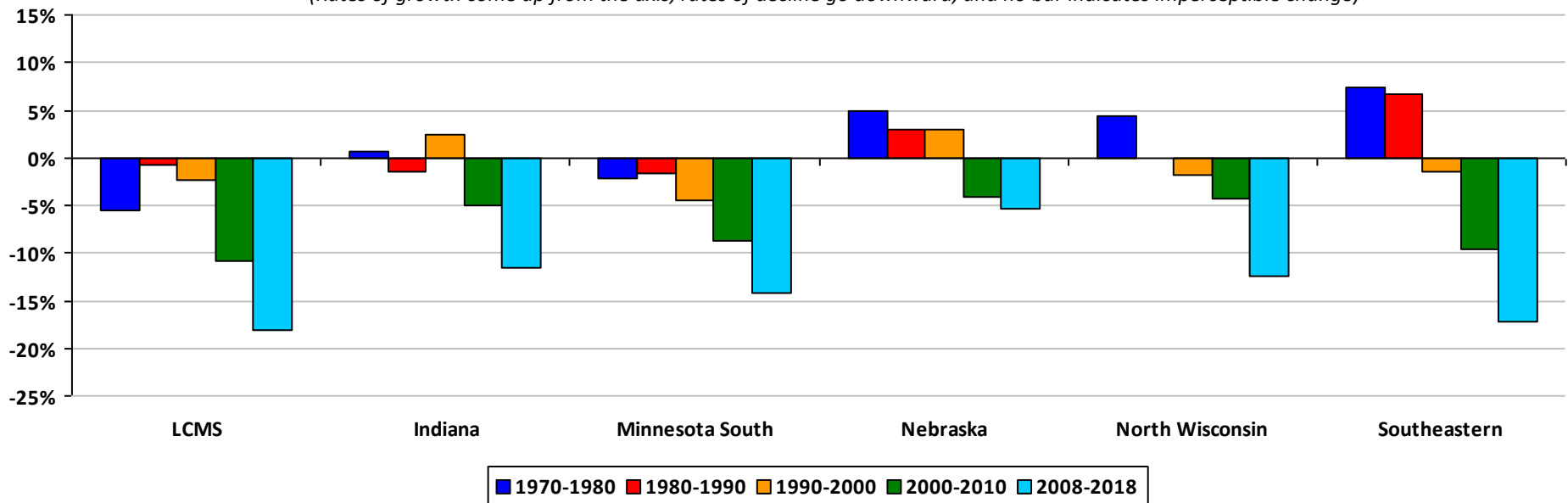
F - Ten-Year Rates of Change in Congregations

(Rates of growth come up from the axis, rates of decline go downward, and no bar indicates imperceptible change)



G - Ten-Year Rates of Change in Baptized Members

(Rates of growth come up from the axis, rates of decline go downward, and no bar indicates imperceptible change)



Size Group 3 - Large Mid-Sized Districts

Analysis of the Charts

* Chart A – In terms of the number of total congregations, most of the districts in this group remained stable in the number of congregations until the mid-2000s brought declines. The exception is Florida-Georgia, which has had steady growth.

* Chart B – While most of these districts show a decline in total membership, Florida-Georgia experienced an increase in membership for a while after 1970, though declines since 2000 have brought it back to the 1970 level.

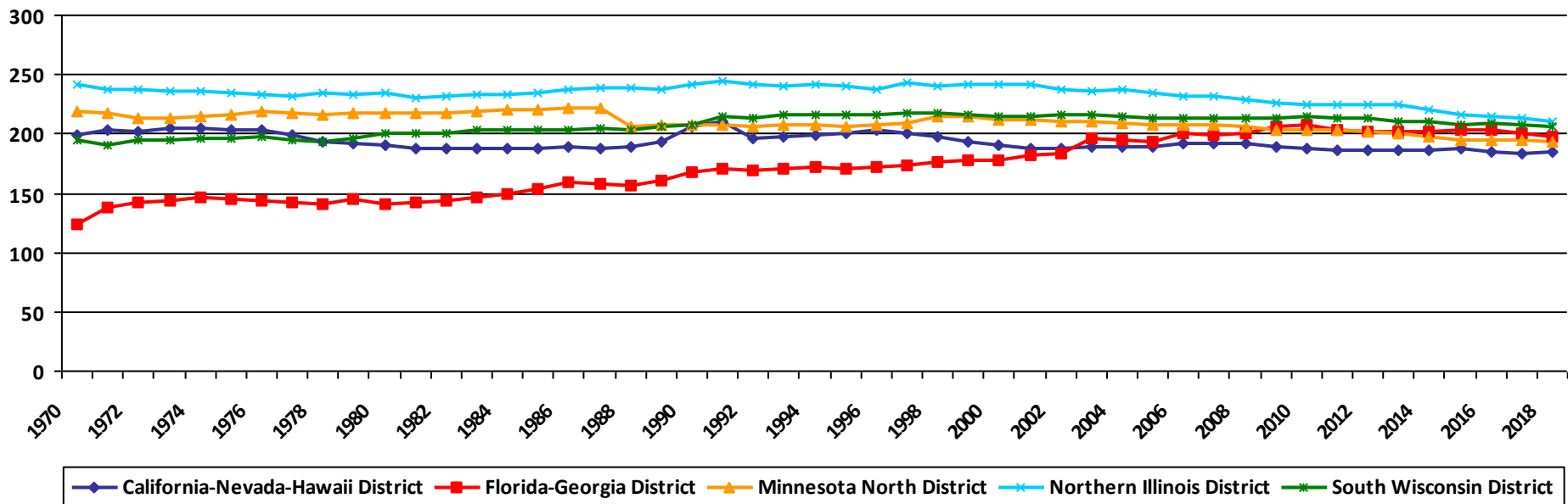
* Chart B – Northern Illinois and California-Nevada-Hawaii experienced the most dramatic decreases in baptized membership (both down close to 50% from 1970).

* Chart B – South Wisconsin and Northern Illinois have twice as many members as any other district in this group, despite having roughly the same number of congregations. This sets them apart, both in total members as well as giving.

* Chart C – While giving in these districts has closely followed membership trends, Minnesota North has remained fairly consistent in total giving over the decades.

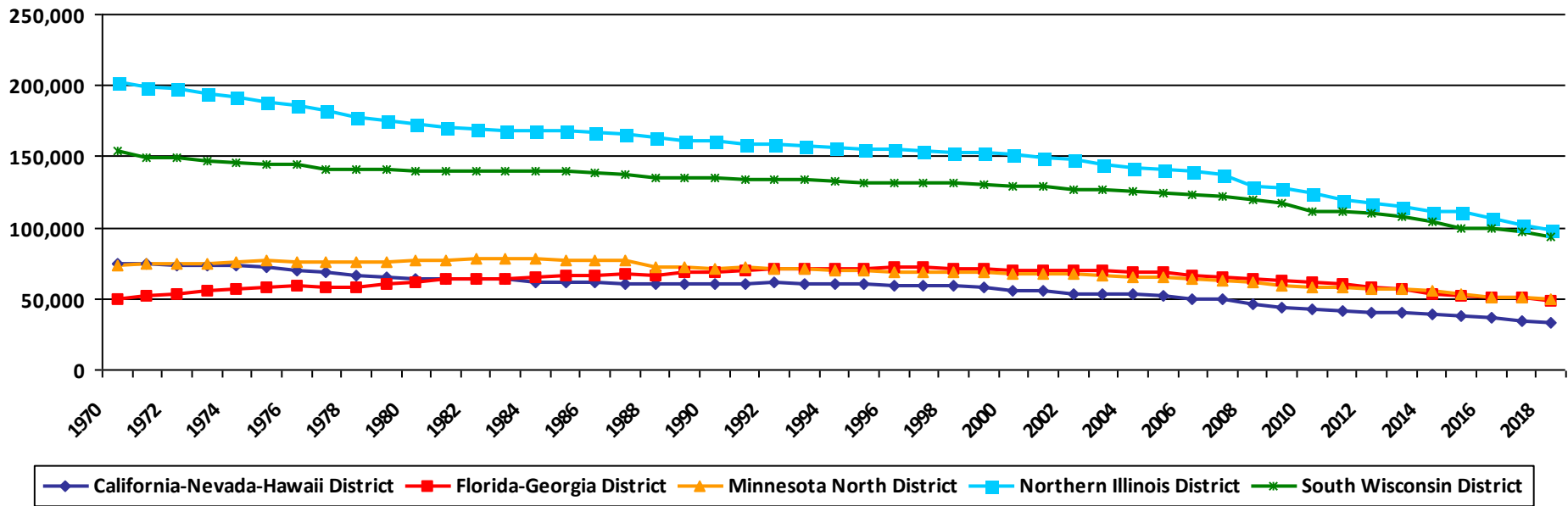
CHARTS A - C: TRENDLINE DATA

A - Total Congregations

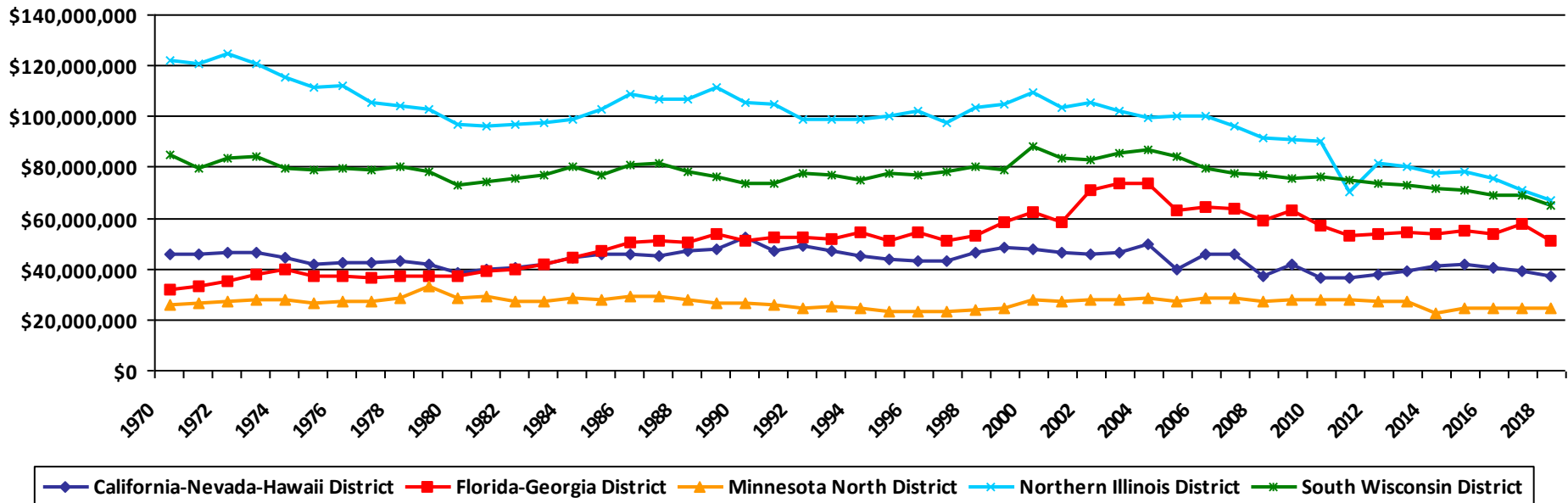


Size Group 3 - Large Mid-Sized Districts

B - Total Baptized Members



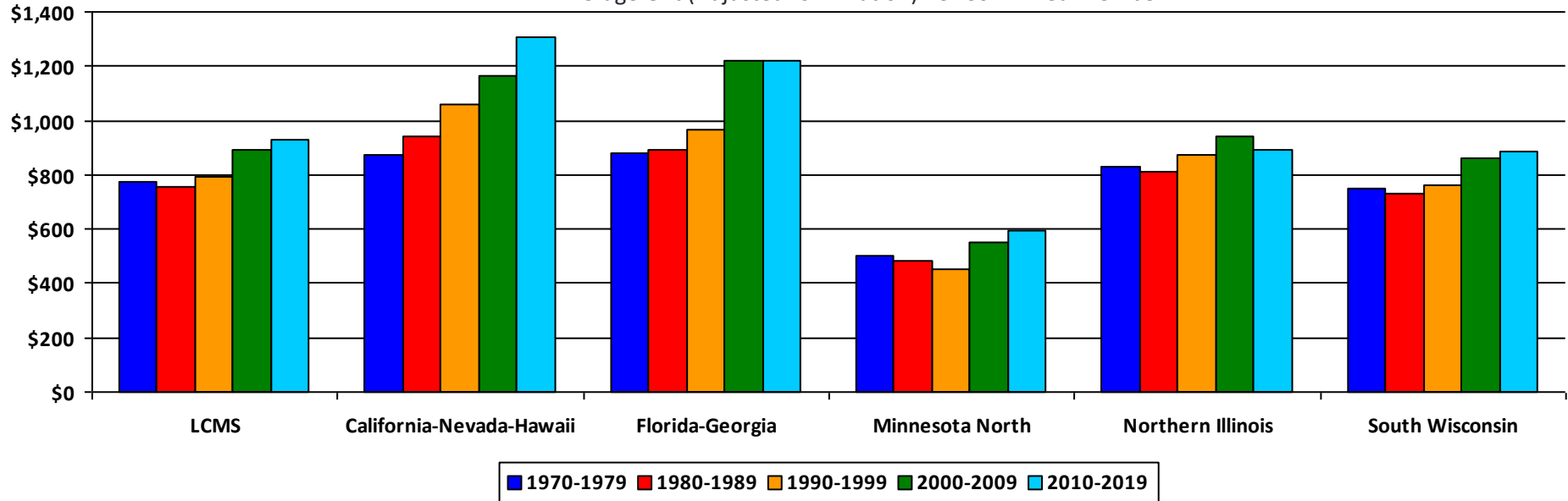
C - Total Regular Giving (Adjusted for Inflation)



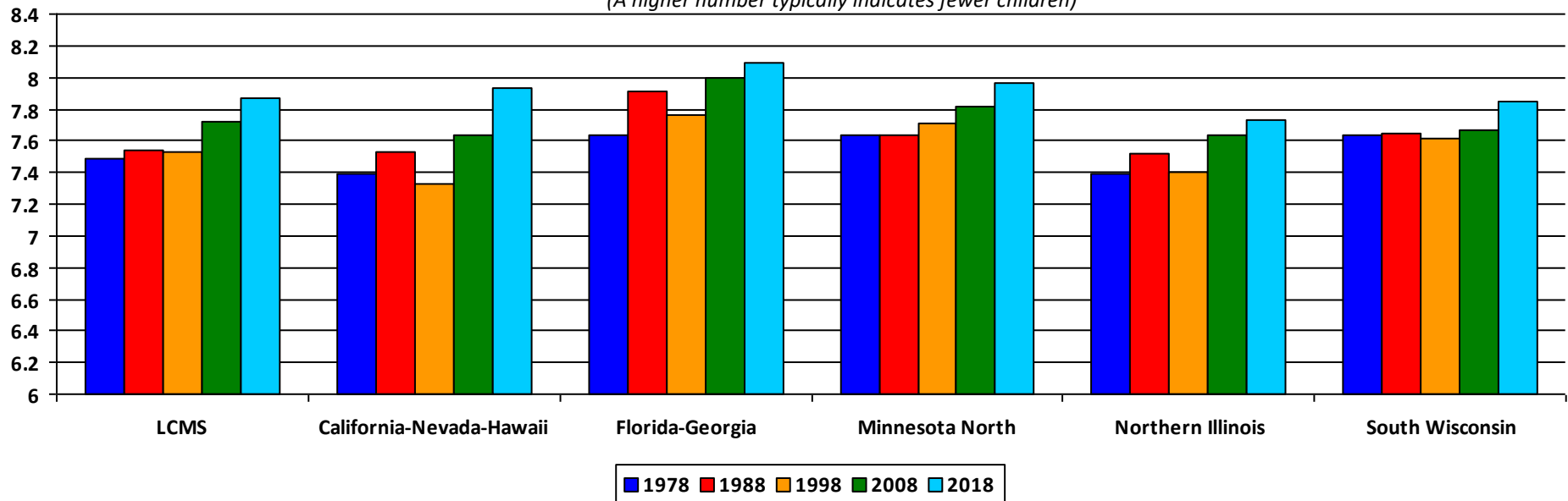
Size Group 3 - Large Mid-Sized Districts

CHARTS D - G: COMPARATIVE DATA

D - Average Gift (Adjusted for Inflation) Per Confirmed Member



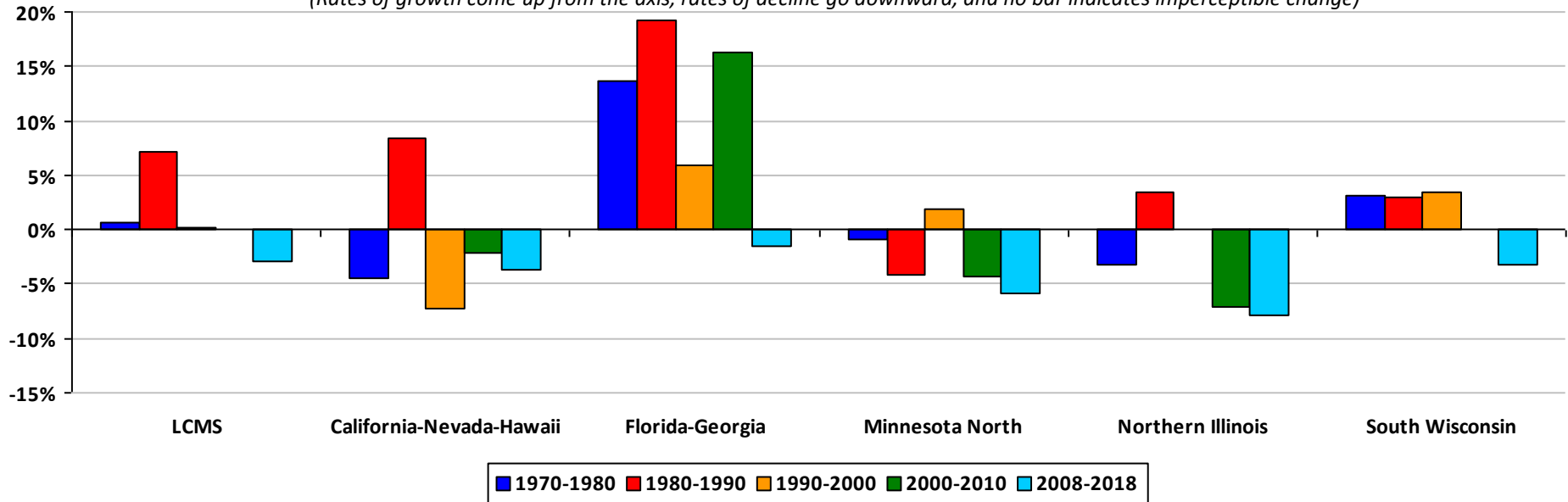
E - Number of Confirmed Members for Every 10 Baptized Members
(A higher number typically indicates fewer children)



Size Group 3 - Large Mid-Sized Districts

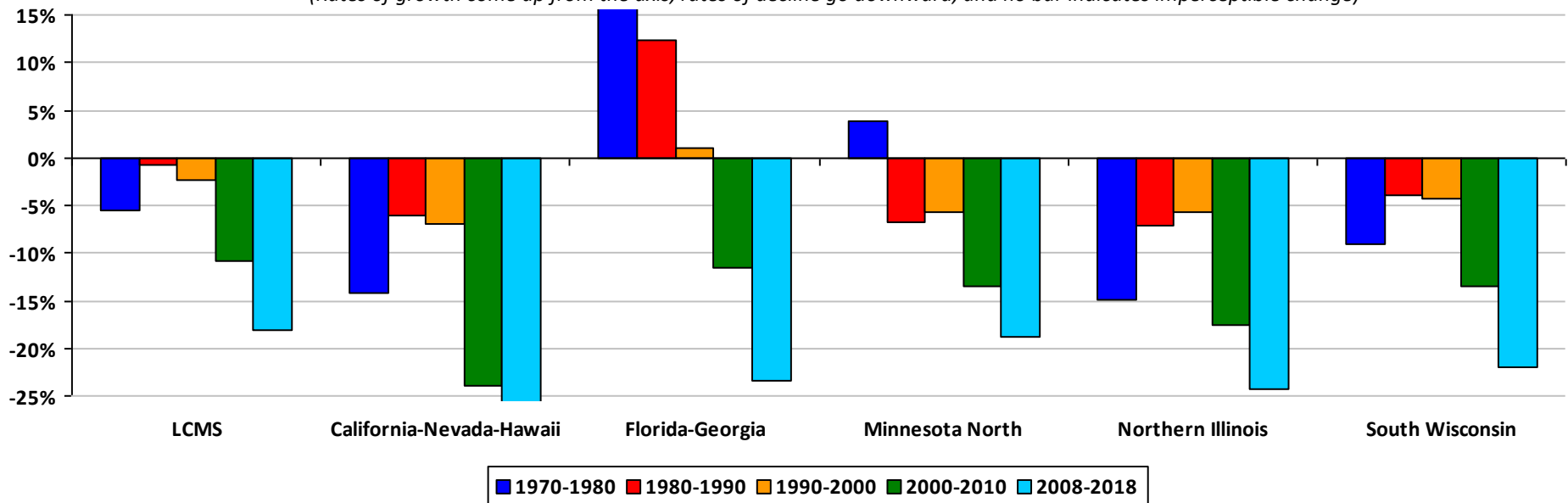
F - Ten-Year Rates of Change in Congregations

(Rates of growth come up from the axis, rates of decline go downward, and no bar indicates imperceptible change)



G - Ten-Year Rates of Change in Baptized Members

(Rates of growth come up from the axis, rates of decline go downward, and no bar indicates imperceptible change)



Size Group 4 - Mid-Sized Districts

Analysis of the Charts

* Chart A – This group of districts all experienced gradual increases in the total number of congregations in the '80s and '90s, but have been in decline in recent years.

* Chart A – In the '70s and '80s, the Rocky Mountain District was one of the fastest-growing in terms of total congregations. Also in the '80s, the English District rebounded from the dramatic exit of many congregations in the 1970s controversy.

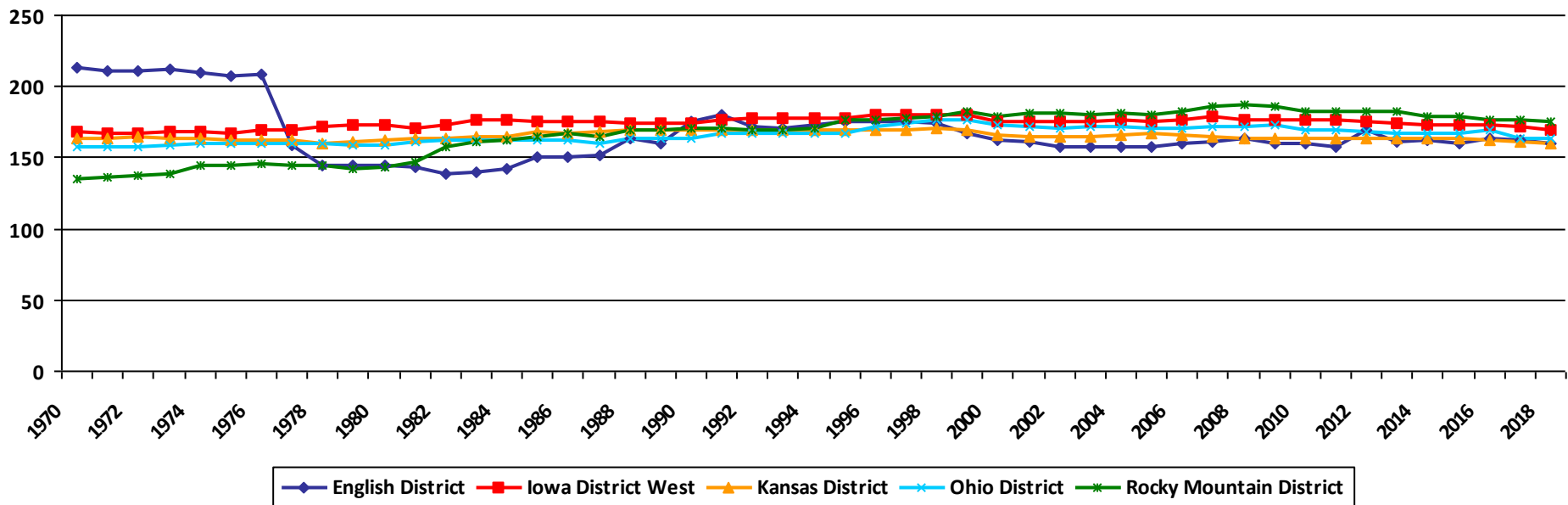
* Chart B – Like most of the LCMS, though they have increased the number of congregations, these districts have decreased in members. Only Kansas seems to have remained steady over the decades, though it, too, has recently been declining.

* Chart C – Despite the loss of members, giving remains up for most of these districts. The Kansas, Ohio and Rocky Mountain districts each experienced a boost in giving in the early 2000s, though they have been declining since.

* Chart C – The Iowa West, Ohio and English districts have each seen long-term declines in giving (when adjusting for inflation), which is not the case for most districts nationally.

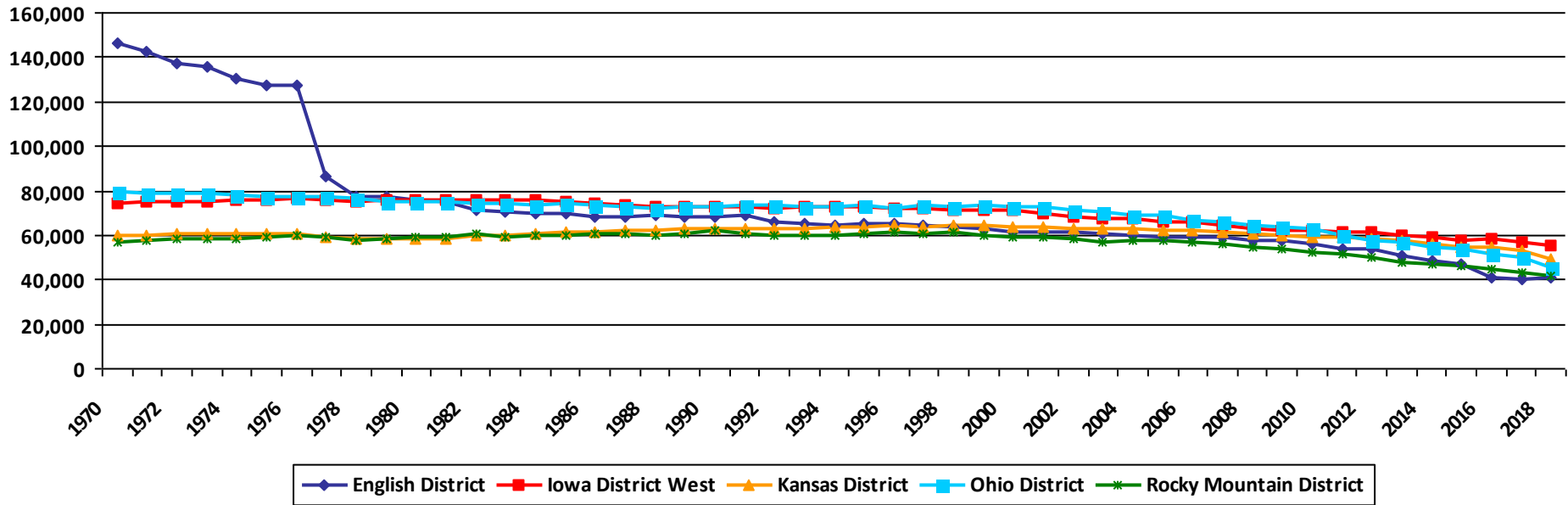
CHARTS A - C: TRENDLINE DATA

A - Total Congregations

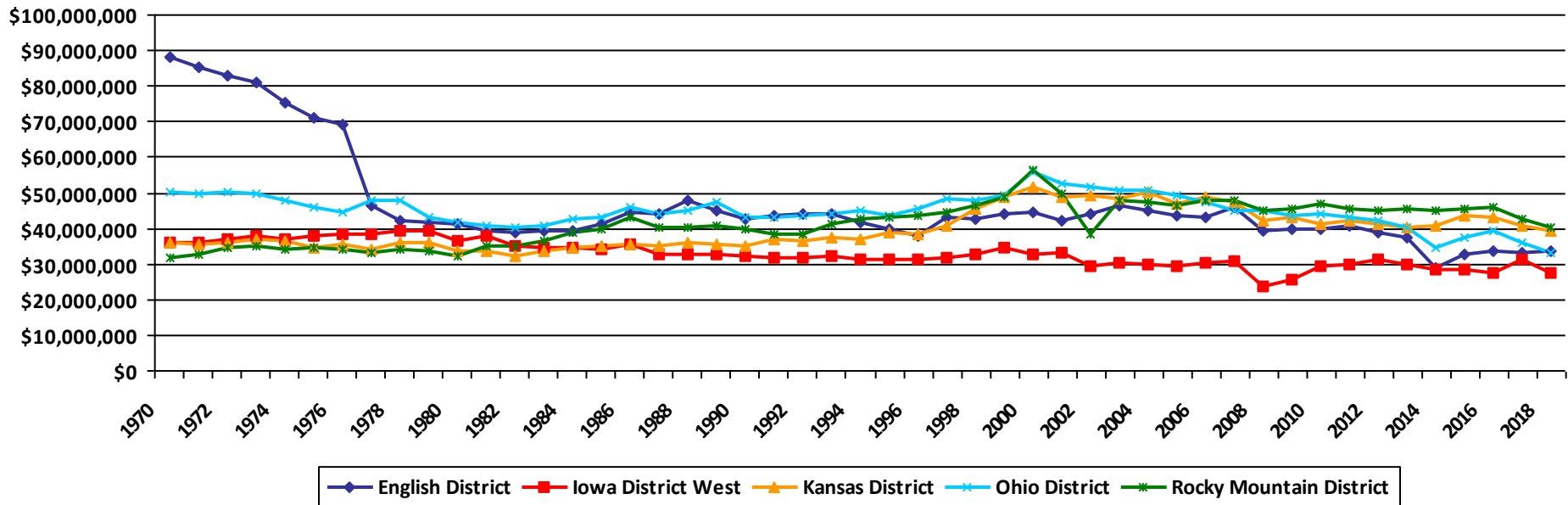


Size Group 4 - Mid-Sized Districts

B - Total Baptized Members



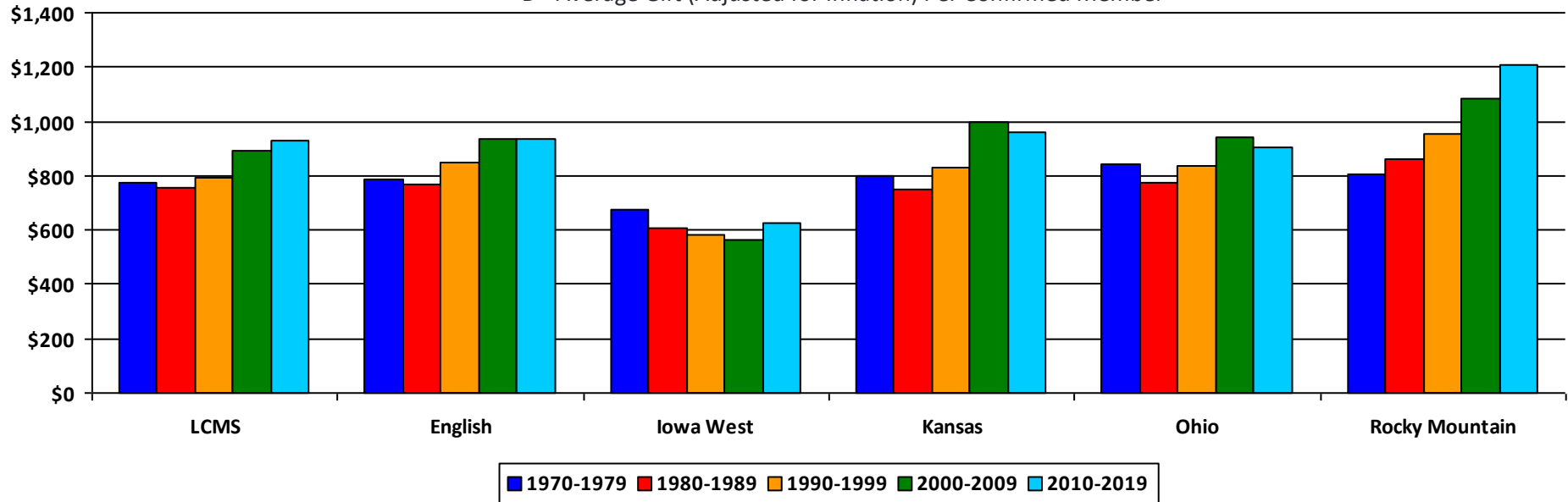
C - Total Regular Giving (Adjusted for Inflation)



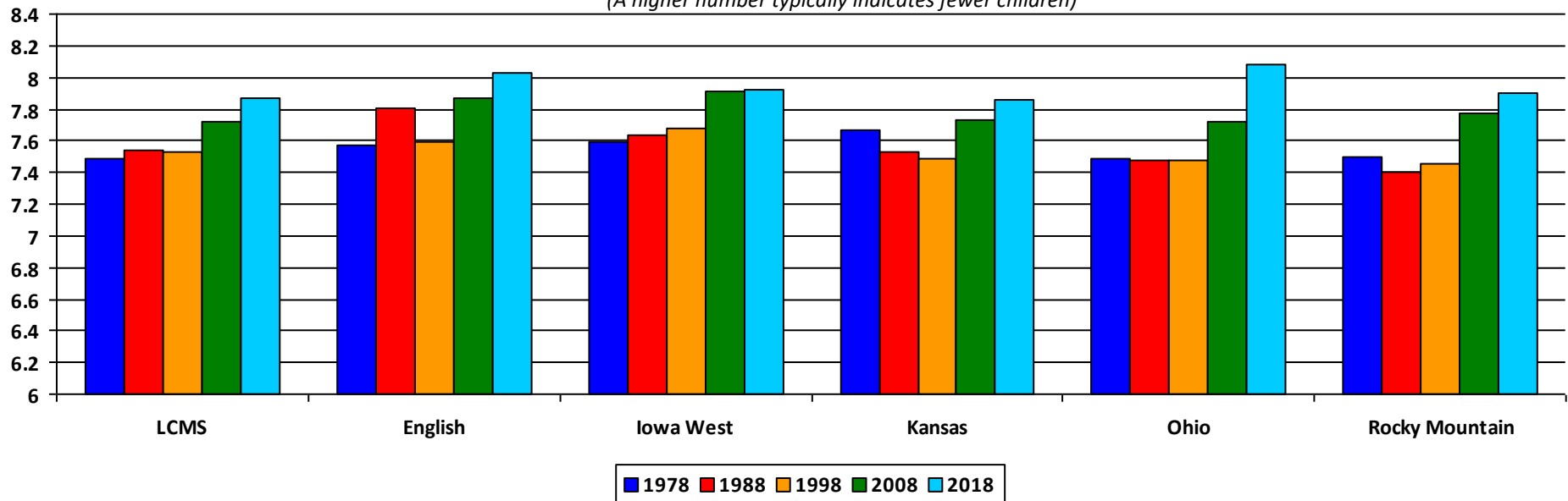
Size Group 4 - Mid-Sized Districts

CHARTS D - G: COMPARATIVE DATA

D - Average Gift (Adjusted for Inflation) Per Confirmed Member



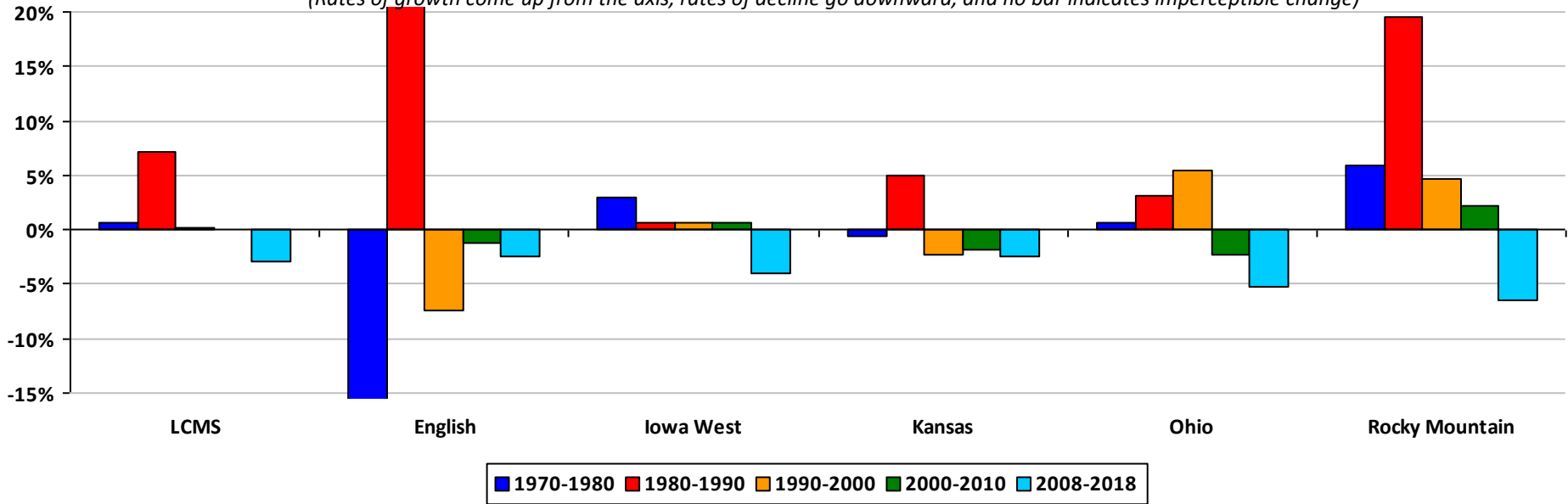
E - Number of Confirmed Members for Every 10 Baptized Members
(A higher number typically indicates fewer children)



Size Group 4 - Mid-Sized Districts

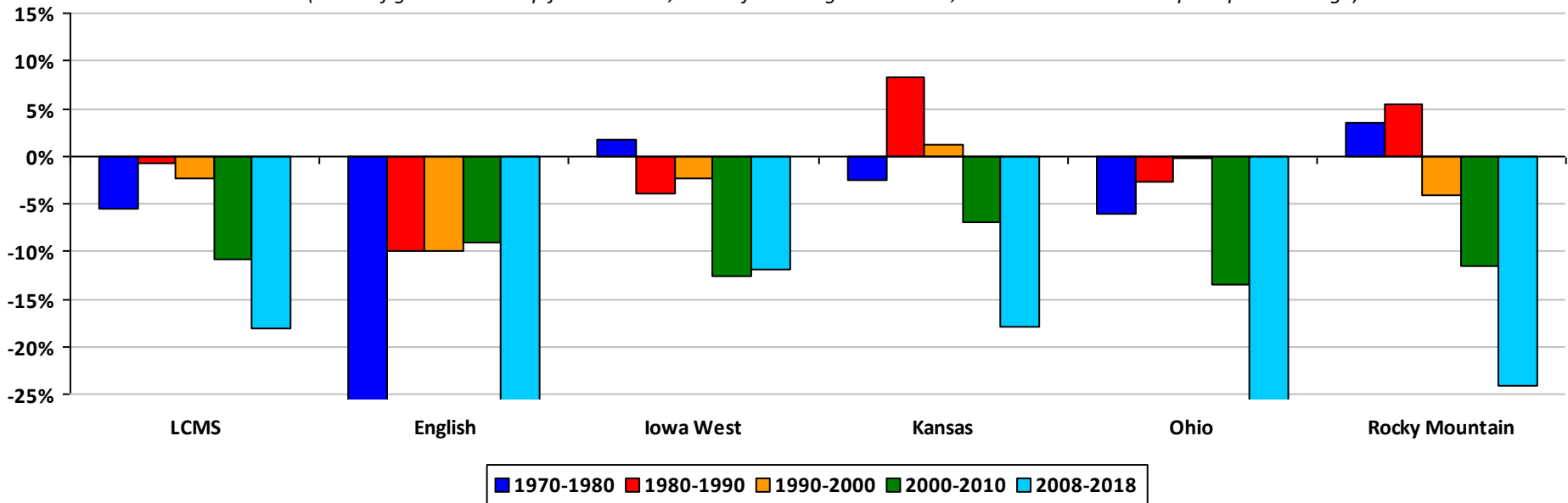
F - Ten-Year Rates of Change in Congregations

(Rates of growth come up from the axis, rates of decline go downward, and no bar indicates imperceptible change)



G - Ten-Year Rates of Change in Baptized Members

(Rates of growth come up from the axis, rates of decline go downward, and no bar indicates imperceptible change)



Size Group 5 - Small Mid-Sized Districts

Analysis of the Charts

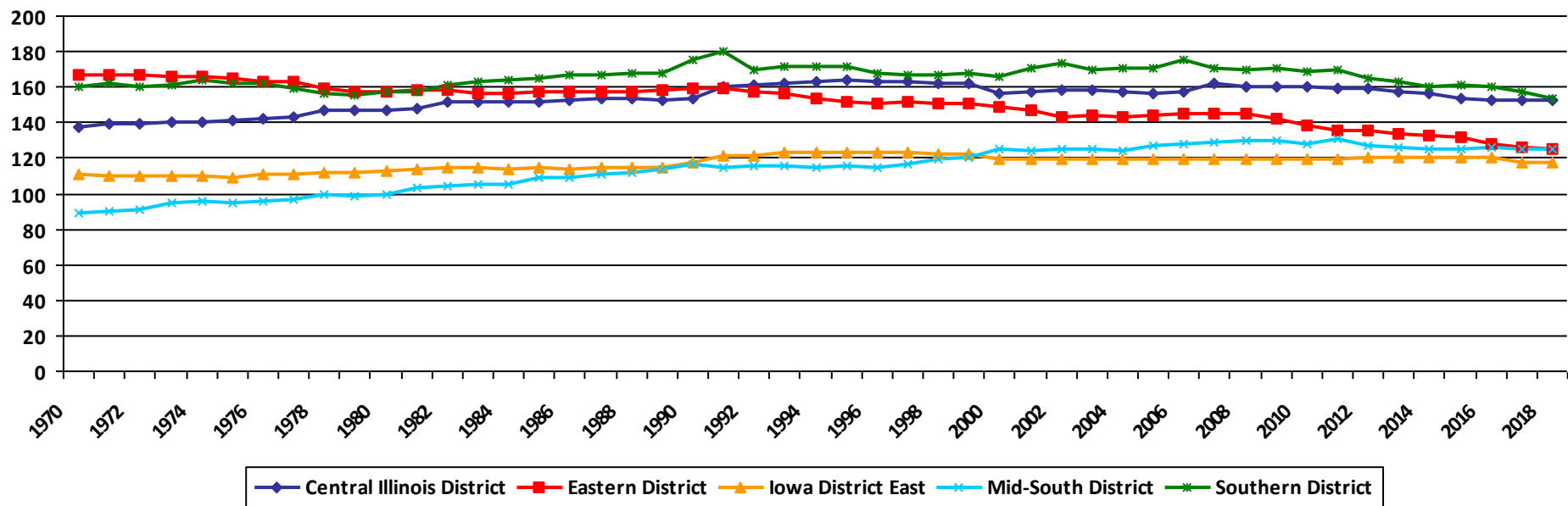
* Chart A – Mid-South, Central Illinois and, to a lesser extent, Iowa East have all increased in the number of congregations since 1970, whereas Eastern has decreased. Southern saw growth in the '80s and early '90s but has lately been in decline.

* Chart B – Most of these districts have lost a substantial portion of their members. The one exception is the Mid-South District, which has gained members over the decades, as it has increased in the number of congregations.

* Chart C – Giving in these districts roughly follows the trends for congregations. Central Illinois and Iowa East remained fairly stable, while Mid-South has shown an increase, and the Eastern District has shown decreases in giving.

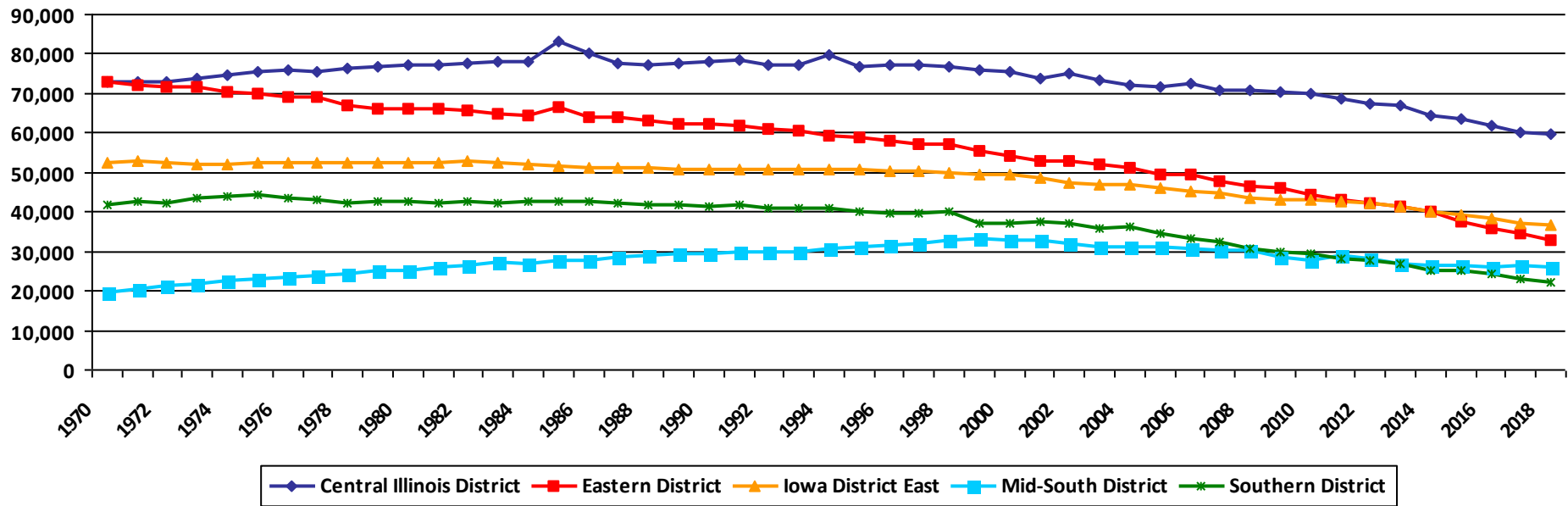
CHARTS A - C: TRENDLINE DATA

A - Total Congregations

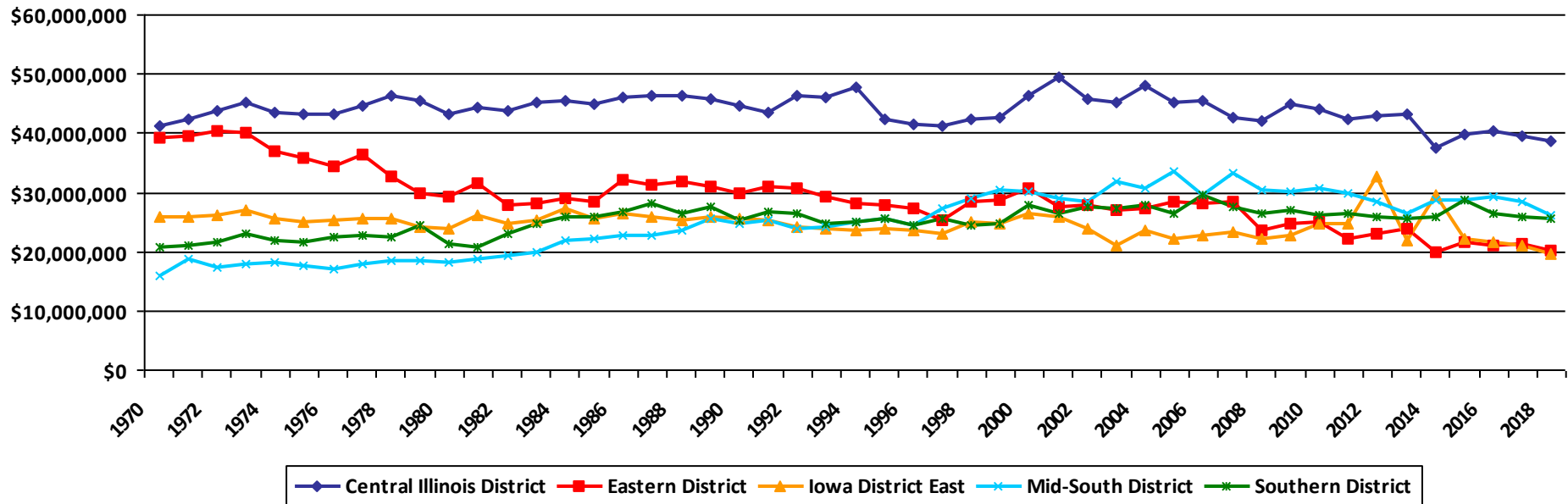


Size Group 5 - Small Mid-Sized Districts

B - Total Baptized Members



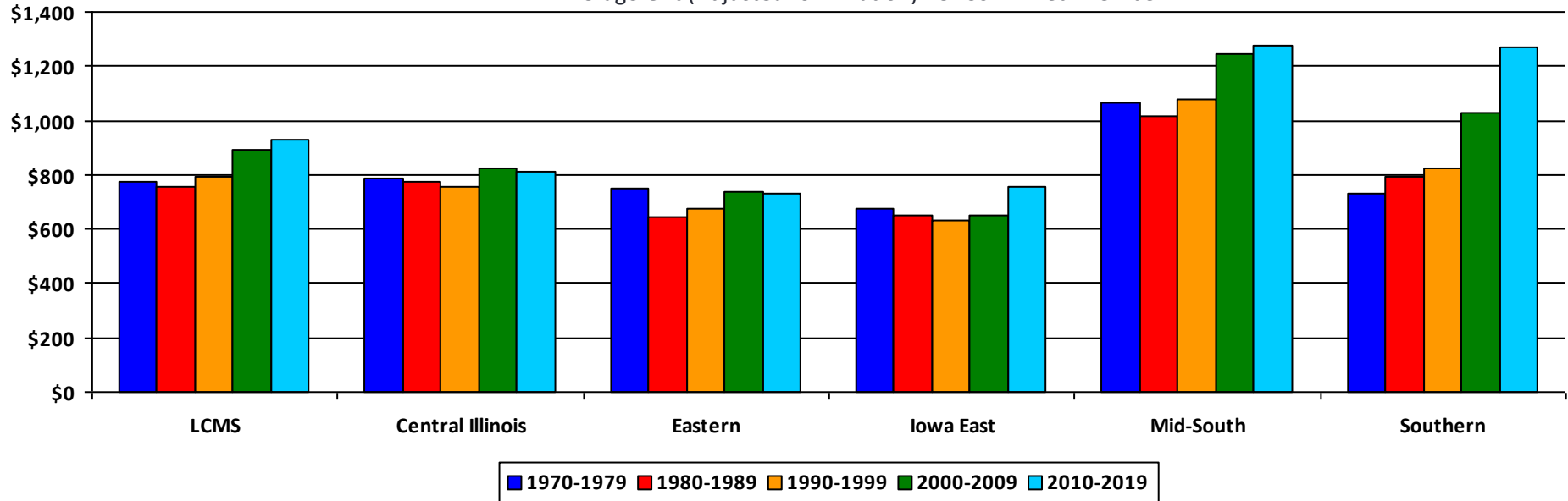
C - Total Regular Giving (Adjusted for Inflation)



Size Group 5 - Small Mid-Sized Districts

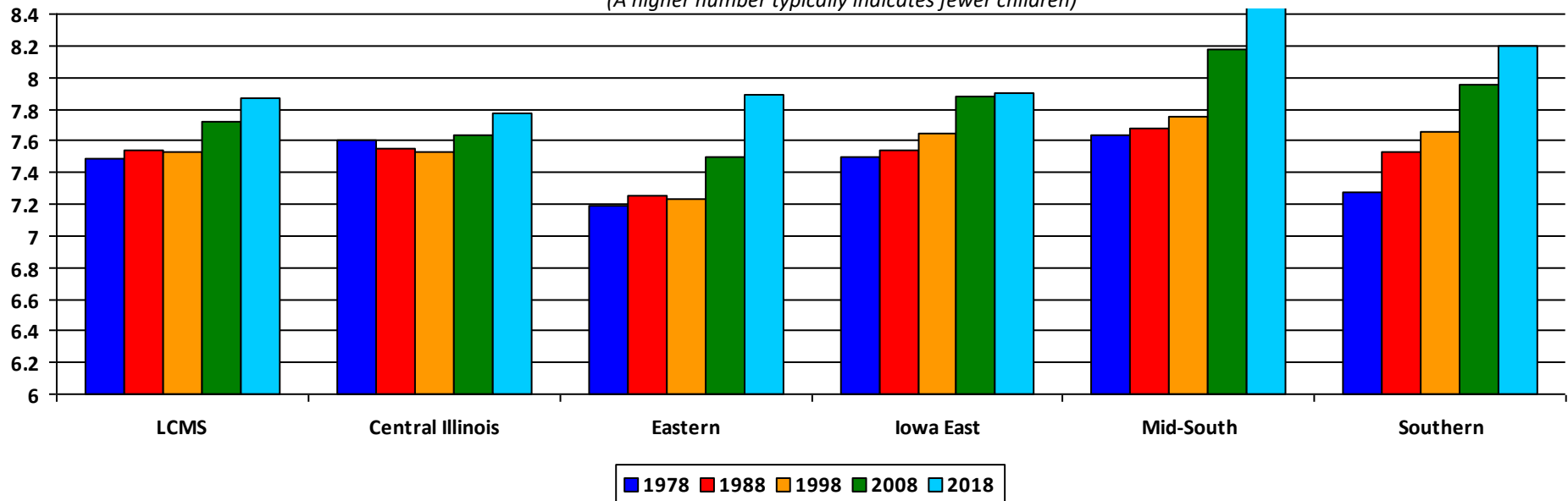
CHARTS D - G: COMPARATIVE DATA

D - Average Gift (Adjusted for Inflation) Per Confirmed Member



E - Number of Confirmed Members for Every 10 Baptized Members

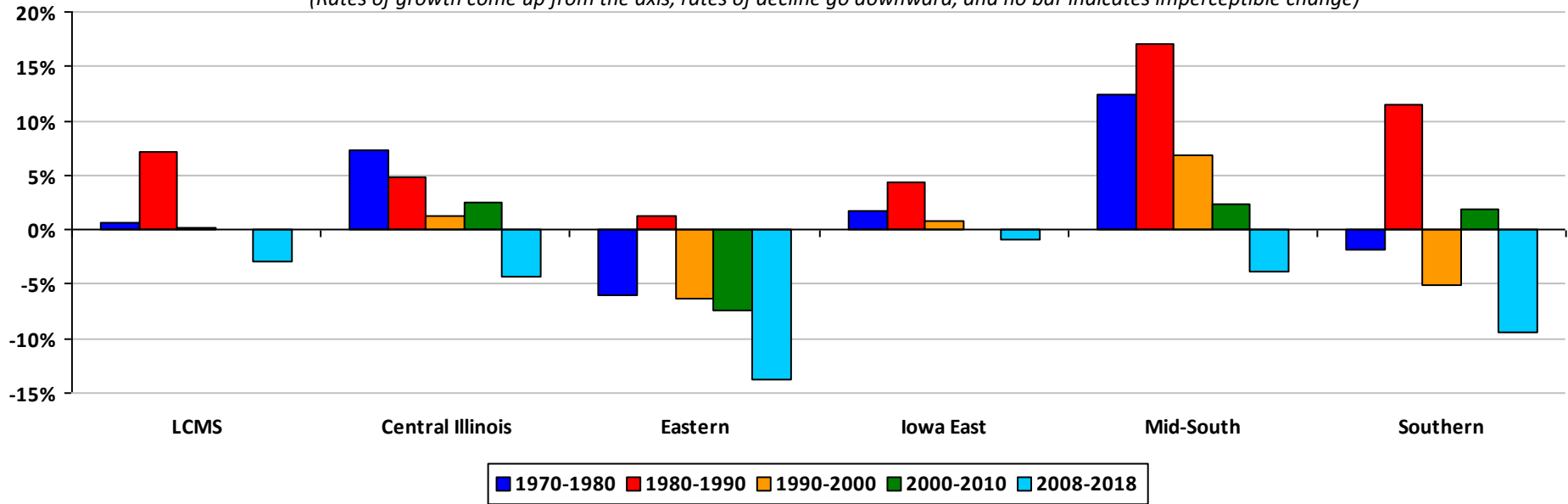
(A higher number typically indicates fewer children)



Size Group 5 - Small Mid-Sized Districts

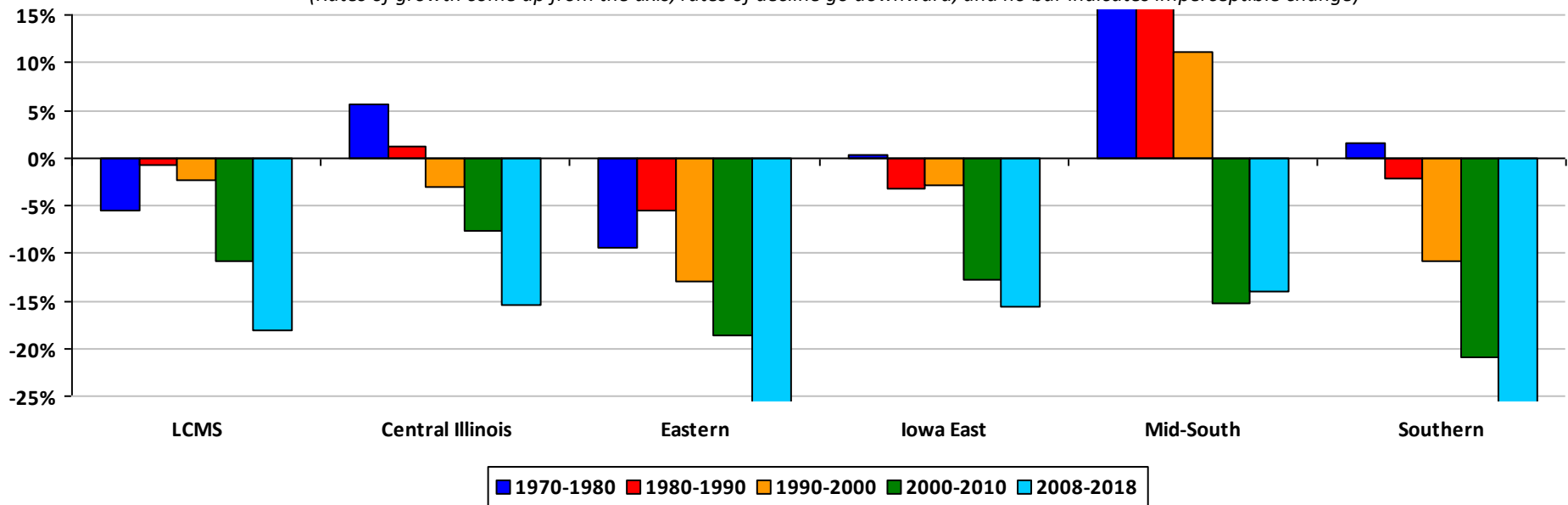
F - Ten-Year Rates of Change in Congregations

(Rates of growth come up from the axis, rates of decline go downward, and no bar indicates imperceptible change)



G - Ten-Year Rates of Change in Baptized Members

(Rates of growth come up from the axis, rates of decline go downward, and no bar indicates imperceptible change)



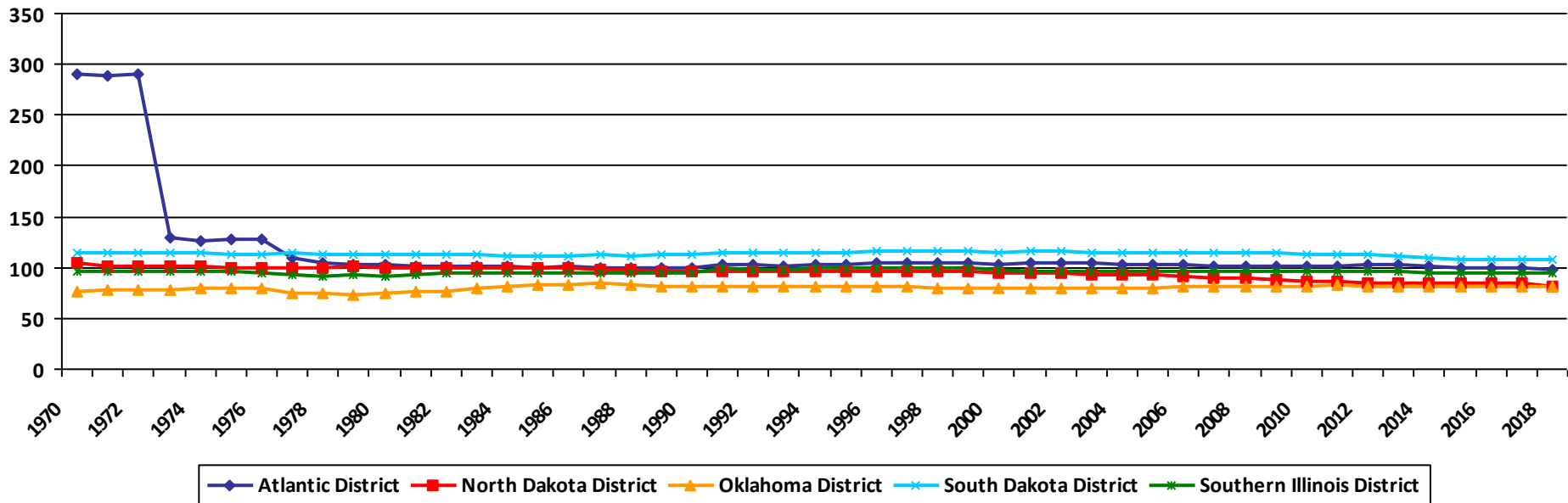
Group Size 6 - Smaller Districts

Analysis of the Charts

- * All Charts – In 1971, the New Jersey and New England districts were formed from congregations in the Atlantic District. The dramatic change seen in the Atlantic District in all three charts is due to the formation of these new districts.
- * All Charts – In addition to the splitting of the district, there is a second dip in the Atlantic District in 1977. This dip is seen in several other districts (most noticeable in the Northeast United States). It is likely due to the church controversy.
- * All Charts – Other than the changes to the Atlantic District, these districts show a fair degree of stability, neither increasing nor decreasing much in the total number of congregations, membership and giving.
- * Charts B & G – Despite relative stability long-term, the most recent decade has been a period of decline for these districts, especially in terms of membership.

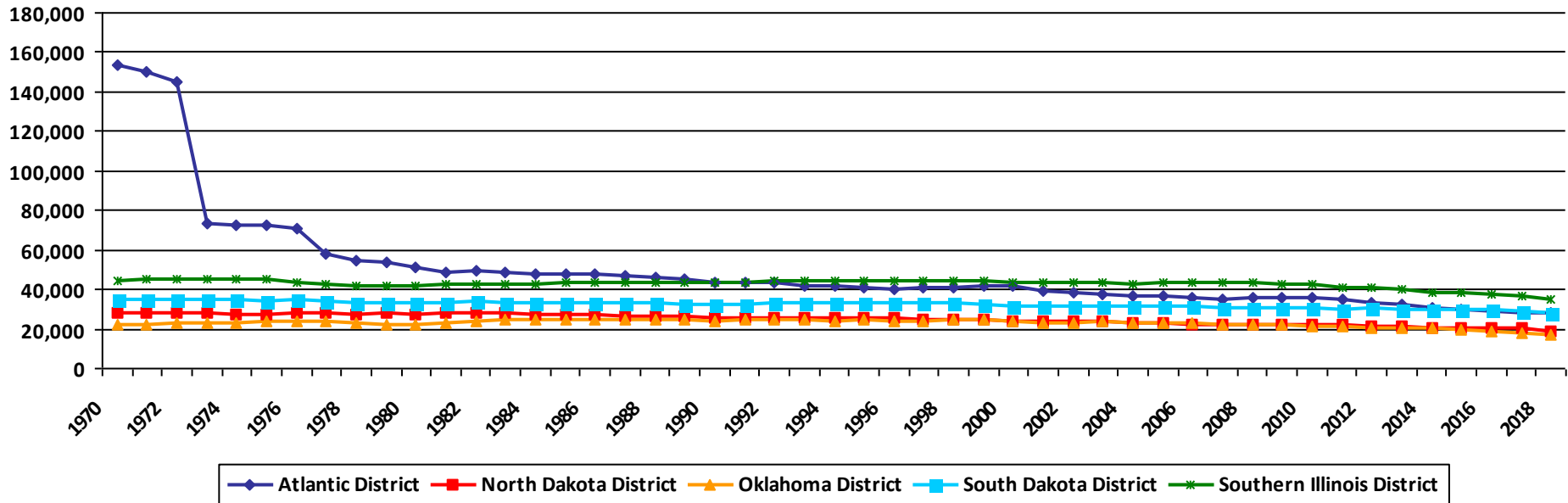
CHARTS A - C: TRENDLINE DATA

A - Total Congregations

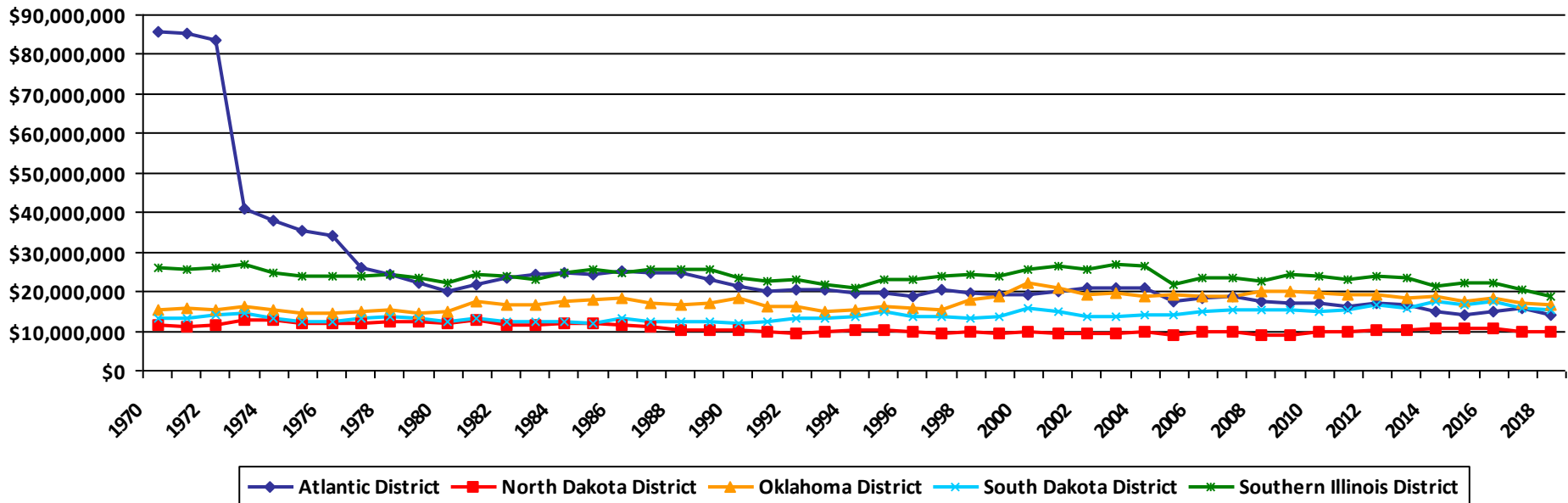


Group Size 6 - Smaller Districts

B - Total Baptized Members



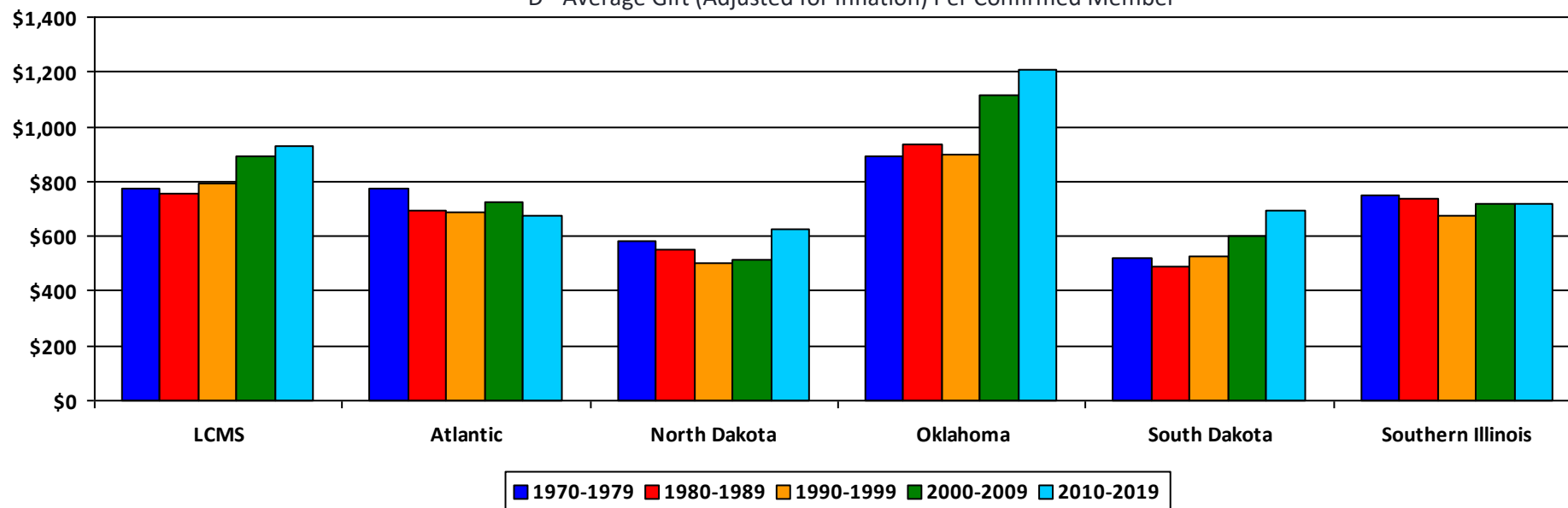
C - Total Regular Giving (Adjusted for Inflation)



Group Size 6 - Smaller Districts

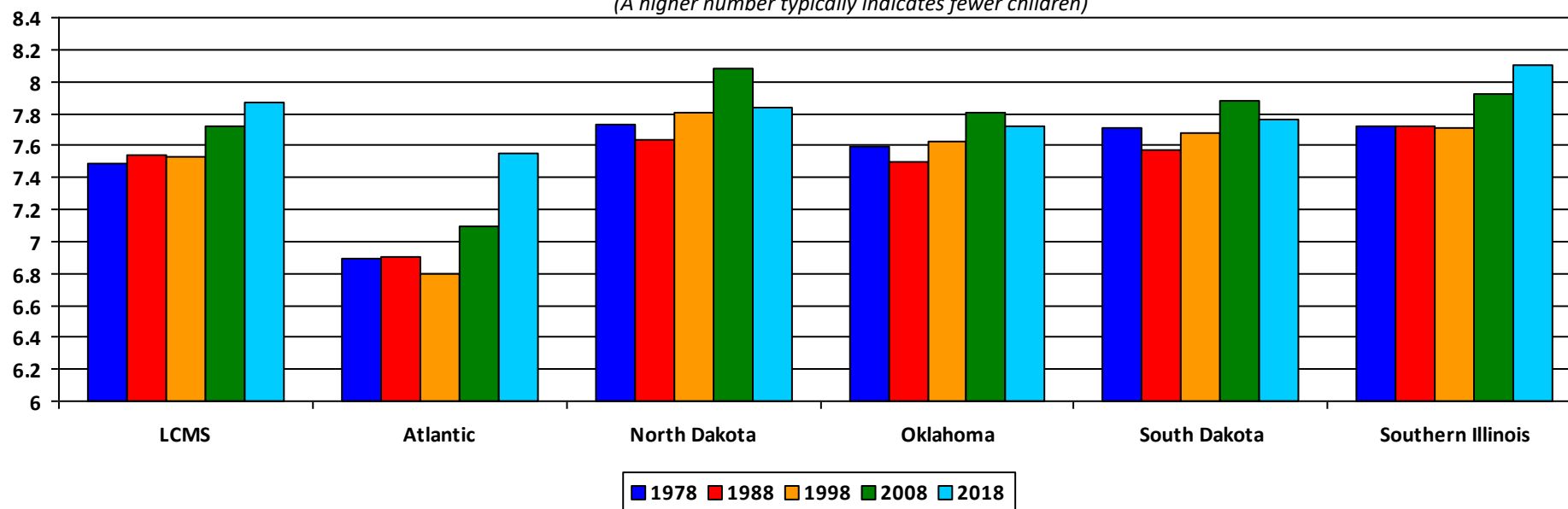
CHARTS D - G: COMPARATIVE DATA

D - Average Gift (Adjusted for Inflation) Per Confirmed Member



E - Number of Confirmed Members for Every 10 Baptized Members

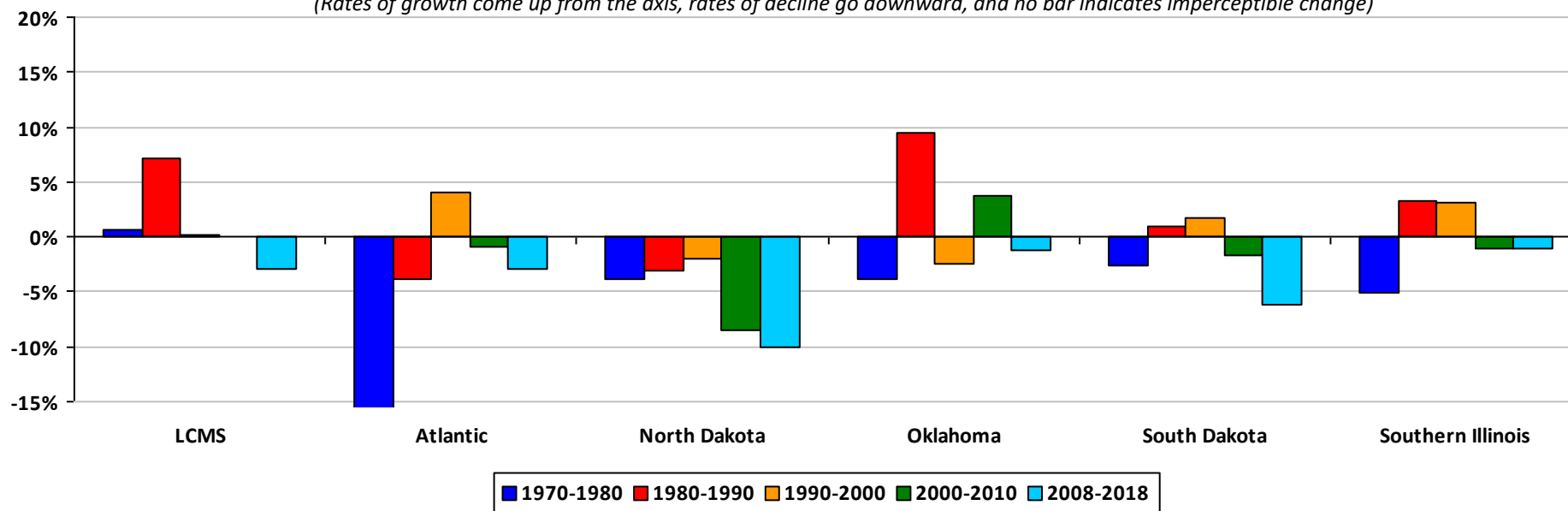
(A higher number typically indicates fewer children)



Group Size 6 - Smaller Districts

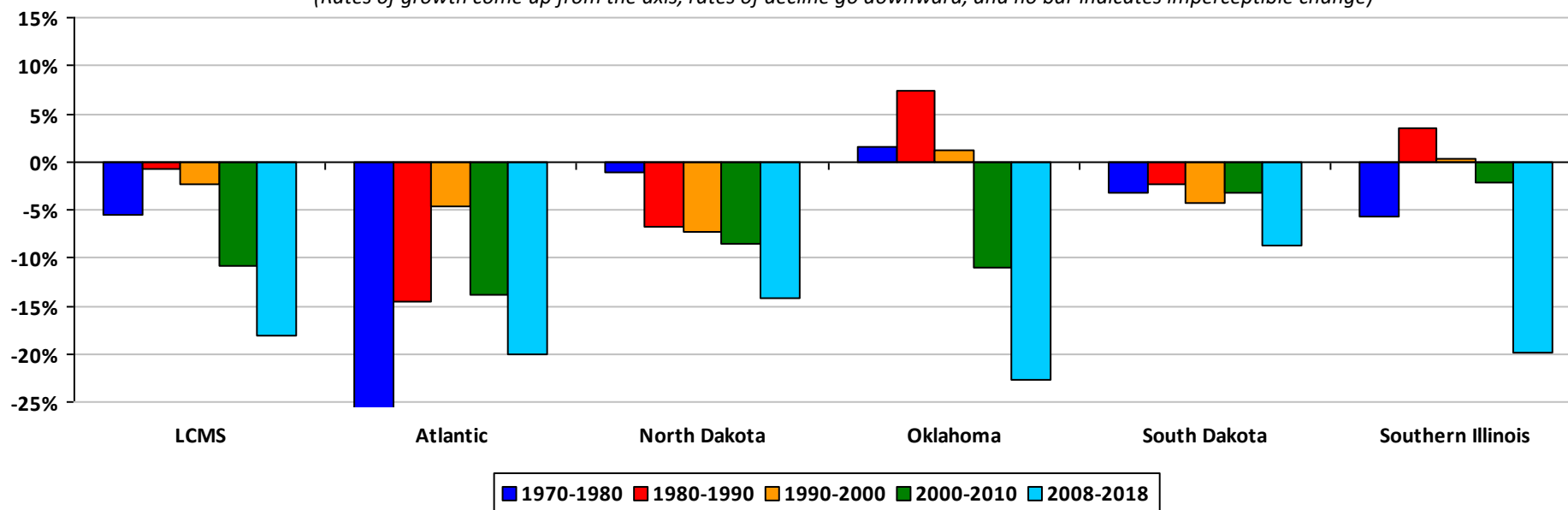
F - Ten-Year Rates of Change in Congregations

(Rates of growth come up from the axis, rates of decline go downward, and no bar indicates imperceptible change)



G - Ten-Year Rates of Change in Baptized Members

(Rates of growth come up from the axis, rates of decline go downward, and no bar indicates imperceptible change)



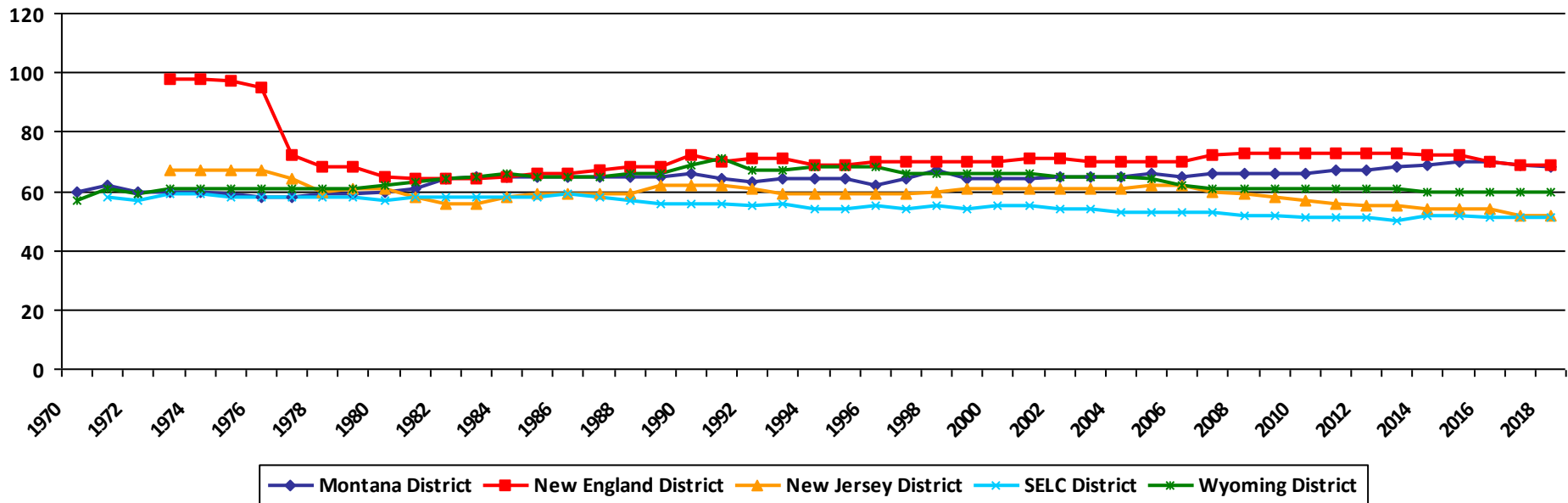
Size Group 7 - Very Small Districts

Analysis of the Charts

- * All Charts – In addition to being the smallest districts in 2011, this group also includes the youngest districts. The SELC District was formed in 1971, and the New England and New Jersey districts were formed in 1973 (out of the Atlantic District).
- * All Charts – Much like their parent district, New England and New Jersey had a noticeable loss of members in 1977. However, whereas New England has managed to maintain its size since then, New Jersey has continued to decline in total congregations.
- * Chart B – Each of these districts has lost members of the past few decades, though the losses in New England, New Jersey and SELC have been the most noticeable.
- * Chart C – Giving in Wyoming and Montana has remained constant when adjusted for inflation. While the three younger districts have shown dramatic fluctuation over the years, only New Jersey has seen giving decline from its level in the early '80s.

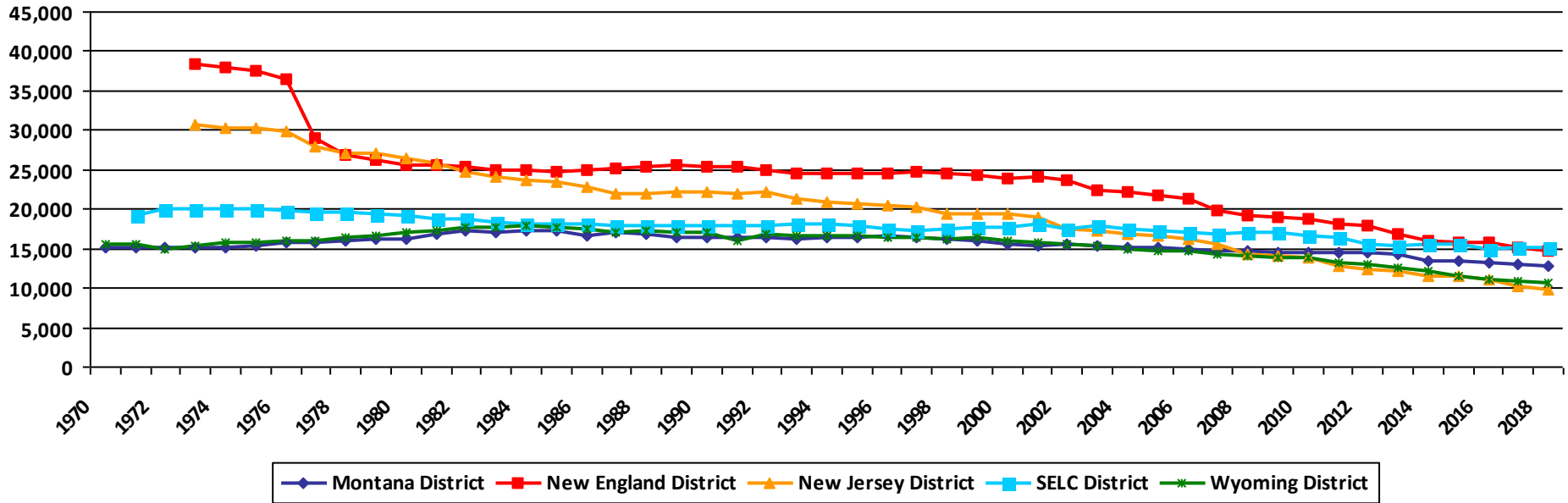
CHARTS A - C: TRENDLINE DATA

A - Total Congregations

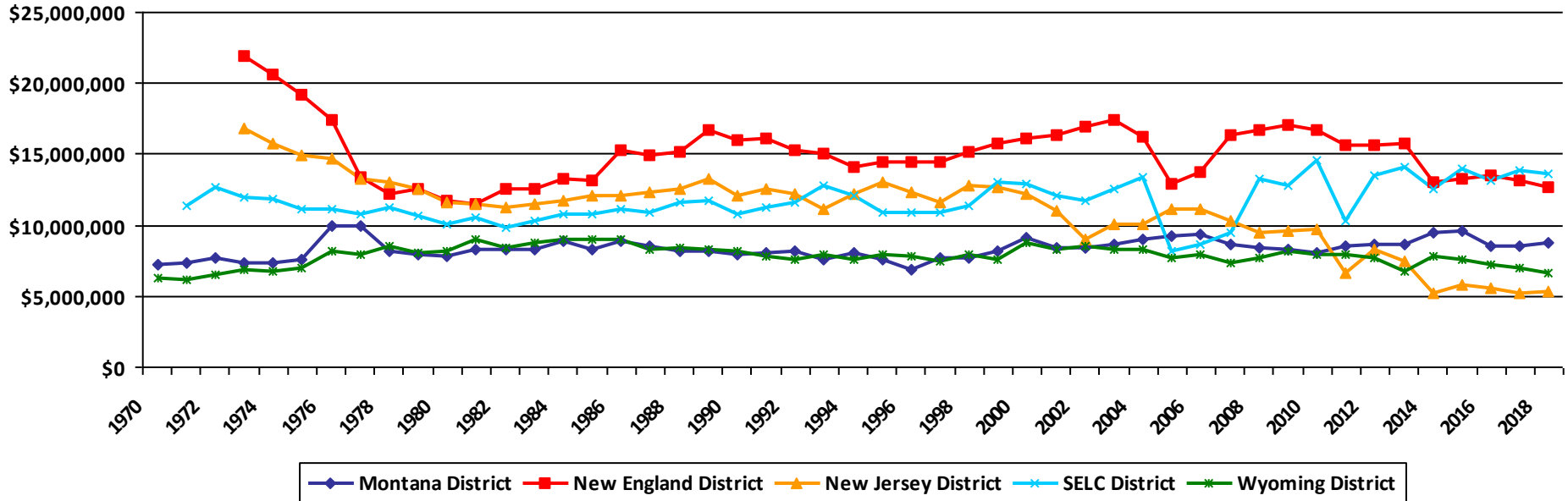


Size Group 7 - Very Small Districts

B - Total Baptized Members



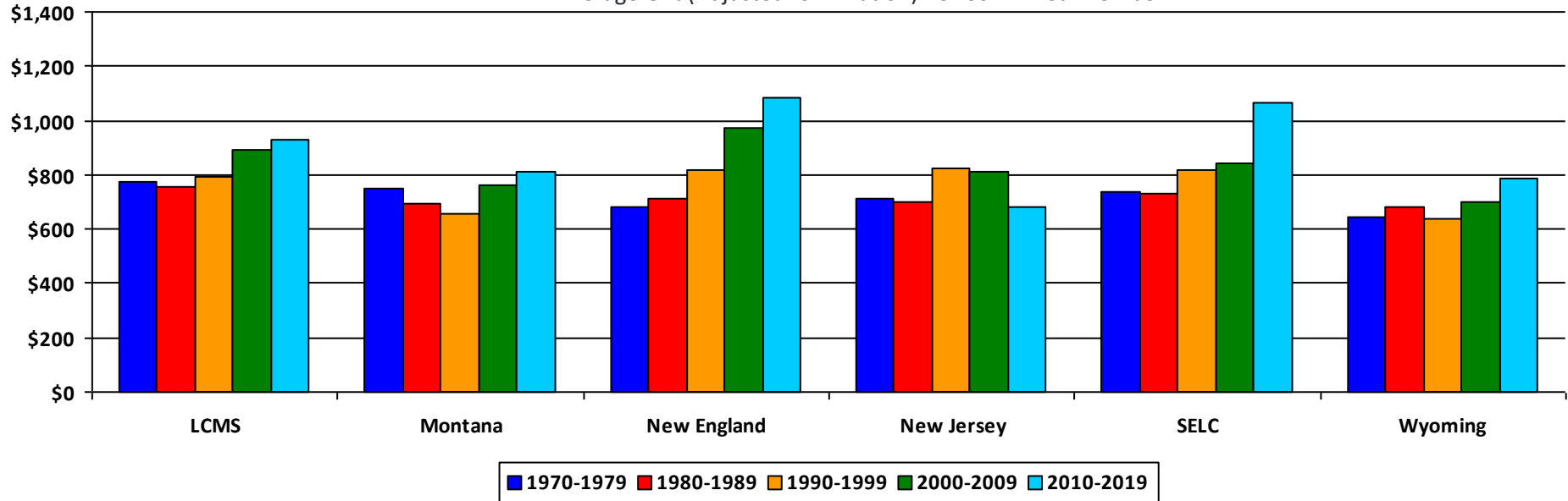
C - Total Regular Giving (Adjusted for Inflation)



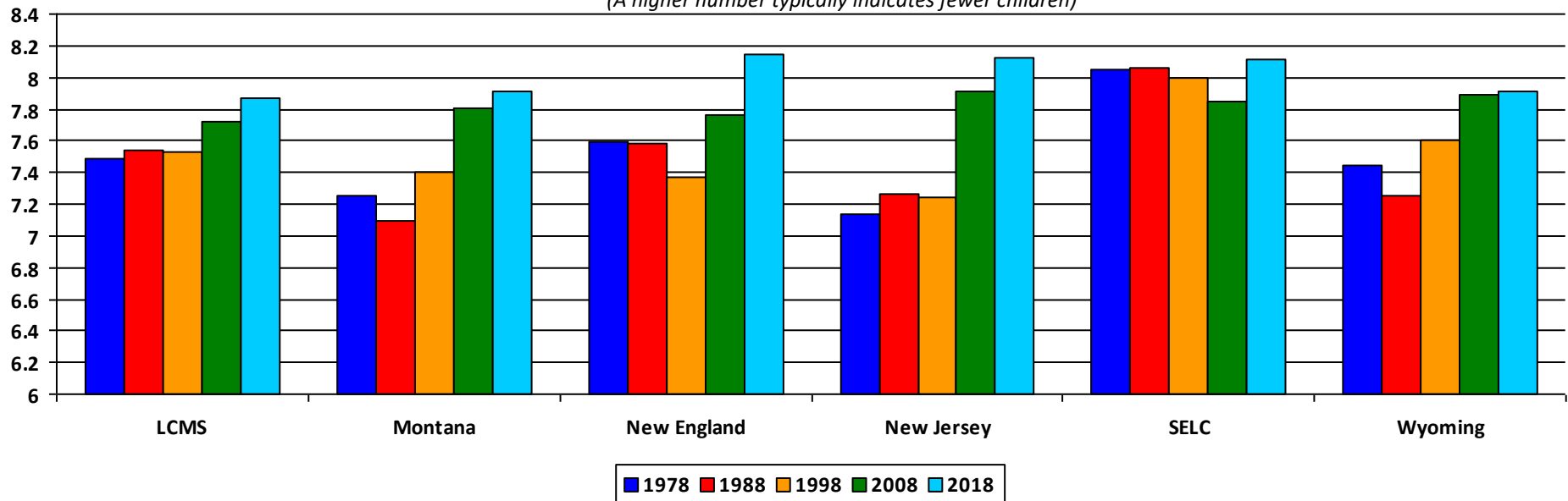
Size Group 7 - Very Small Districts

CHARTS D - G: COMPARATIVE DATA

D - Average Gift (Adjusted for Inflation) Per Confirmed Member



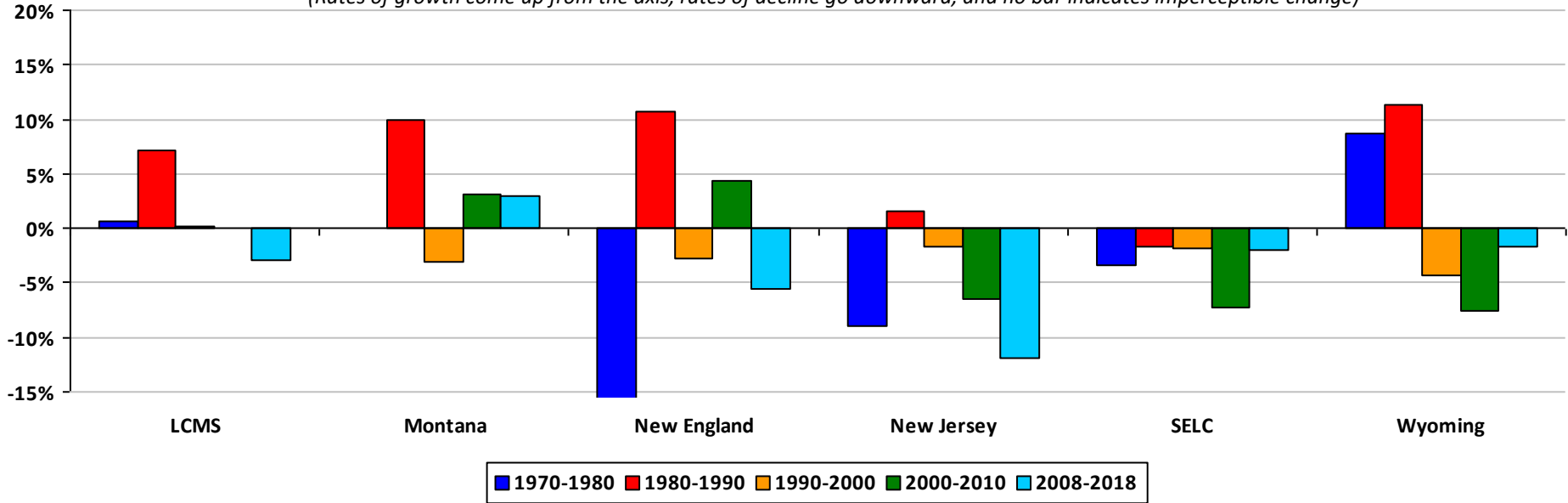
E - Number of Confirmed Members for Every 10 Baptized Members
(A higher number typically indicates fewer children)



Size Group 7 - Very Small Districts

F - Ten-Year Rates of Change in Congregations

(Rates of growth come up from the axis, rates of decline go downward, and no bar indicates imperceptible change)



G - Ten-Year Rates of Change in Baptized Members

(Rates of growth come up from the axis, rates of decline go downward, and no bar indicates imperceptible change)

