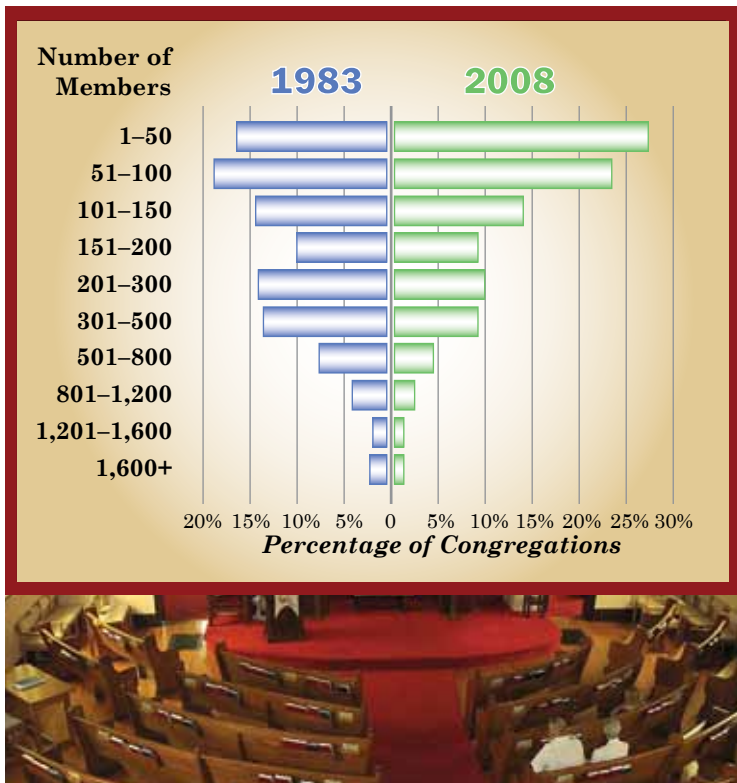


# GO FIGURE

JACK MARCUM



GRAPHIC BY JEFFREY LAWRENCE

## Fewer members, more small churches

The number of Presbyterians has been declining slowly but steadily in recent decades. Let's look at concurrent changes in the number and size of congregations.

- **The PC(USA) had fewer congregations in 2008 (10,751) than when the denomination was formed in 1983 (11,662),** a rate of loss much lower (-7.8 percent) than for members (-31.7 percent).
- **Most congregations are smaller today as a result,** with an average of 199 and a median of 100 members in 2008, compared to 268 and 152 in 1983.
- **Half of congregations (50.2 percent) had 100 or fewer members in 2008.** A quarter century earlier, only 35.6 percent were that size.
- **The percentage of congregations in all larger-size categories decreased,** with the largest declines in the 201-300 (-3.6 percentage points) and 301-500 (-4.2 percentage points) ranges.
- **Paralleling the increasing number of small congregations is an increase in the percentage of all members in such congregations.** In 1983, 7.1 percent were in congregations of 100 or fewer members; in 2008, it was 12.4 percent.
- **There has also been slight growth in the percentage of members in congregations with more than 1,200 members,** from 17.9 percent in 1983 to 18.1 percent today, even though the percentage of congregations of that size dropped slightly (-0.8 percentage points).

## What the research shows

It's one thing to look at net membership loss in the aggregate, another to see that loss distributed among congregations. We're not only becoming a smaller denomination, but also a denomination of small congregations.

Among other consequences, fewer congregations can afford a pastor. Only 28.8 percent of congregations with 100 or fewer members had installed pastors in 2008. While commissioned lay pastors, supply pastors and the like fill some of the gap, 1,898 (35.3 percent) of these small congregations had no pastoral leadership of any sort.

Despite these and other challenges, many such congregations prosper. In fact, 17.7 percent of congregations with 100 or fewer members in 1983 grew over the next 25 years. That may not sound like much, but this rate was the second-highest in the PC(USA) over that period (only congregations with more than 1,600 members were higher, at 22.7 percent).

Nevertheless, the vast majority of congregations lost members over the same period. What practical lessons can we learn and apply from the minority that grew, to prevent having the term "a denomination of small churches" become even more descriptive of the PC(USA)? □

**OTHER FINDINGS** [www.pcusa.org/research](http://www.pcusa.org/research)