

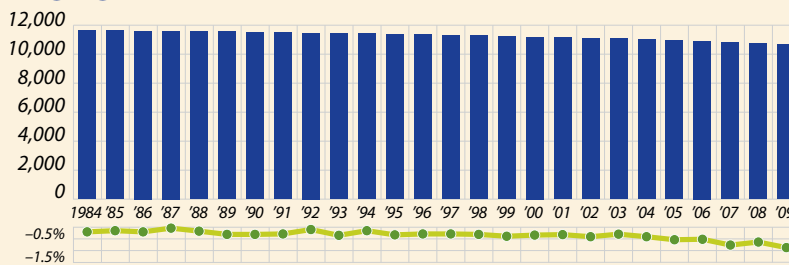
Fewer members = smaller congregations



Members



Congregations



What the research shows

The key difference in these trends is not direction but magnitude. The numbers of both congregations and members have fallen steadily since 1983, but members have dropped at almost four times the rate of congregations.

As a result, the typical congregation's size has dropped dramatically, from an average of 268 members and a median of 195 in 1983 to 152 and 97, respectively, in 2009. Over the same period, the share of congregations with 100 or fewer members increased from 36 percent to 51 percent.

Several consequences have ensued. Many congregations have larger facilities than they need and fewer resources for upkeep. Others can no longer afford a pastoral leader. More congregations in 2009 had no pastoral leadership of any sort (2,231) than was true just four years before (2,050).

Even so, when net membership losses began in the 1960s, no one set out to use this trend to reduce the size of most congregations. It just happened—the result of efforts, presbytery by presbytery and congregation by congregation, to keep the doors open.

The unintentional shift to smaller congregations requires an intentional response. The use of commissioned lay pastors is a major step already in place. More programs and resources tailored to the circumstances—and budgets—of smaller congregations would be another. After all, as the trend line of membership shows, there will likely be more rather than fewer such congregations in the near future.

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Both the number of members and the number of congregations in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) have decreased over time, but at very different rates:

- **In 2009 there were 10,657 congregations**, a net drop of 1,005 (9 percent) from the 11,662 in existence at the denomination's founding in 1983.
- **New congregations were added in each of the last 26 years**, but in every year more were lost; the annual net loss averages 36.
- **In relative terms, the average annual net loss in congregations has been 0.30 percent**, with a low of 0.04 percent (1987) and a high of 0.88 percent (2009).
- **Over the same period, more members were lost than gained in every year**, falling from 3,131,228 to 2,077,158, a decline of more than one million (34 percent).
- **The net loss in members averages 40,541 per year.**
- **In relative terms, membership has dropped an average of 1.5 percent annually**, ranging from 0.8 percent (1998) to 3.1 percent (2008).

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