



Clergy Age Trends Across Christian Traditions

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Religious Workforce Project

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**Religious
Workforce
Project**





About the Religious Workforce Project

Building on previous research, the Religious Workforce Project is an effort to understand the nation's religious workforce in a comprehensive way. The Project includes a national meta-analysis and a qualitative study in the Washington, DC, metro area. Funding for the project is generously provided by The Lilly Endowment, Inc. This project seeks to answer the following questions: Given today's changing religious landscape, how are leaders of U.S. congregations adapting? How do these changes shape the staffing, financial models, priorities, and the work of U.S. congregations? And what is the state of the religious workforce today?



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Introduction

A significant concern within many faith communities and denominations in recent years has been the increasing age of clergy in the United States. Research indicates that clergy age in the United States has been increasing since as early as the 1980s.¹ There are multiple reasons suggested for this phenomenon. During the 1980s and 1990s, the average age of seminary students rose as the proportion of “second-career” clergy increased. Later entry into seminary led to a rise in the age at ordination for several traditions.² Also, there has been a growing trend of young seminary graduates who choose to enter a career in non-parish ministry.³ One factor identified as perhaps a primary reason for the rising clergy age is the aging of the entire U.S. population. In recent decades, the aging of the population came primarily from the aging of the baby boom generation (born between 1946 and 1964). Baby boom aging makes a major population impact since the baby boom generation was the largest generational cohort prior to 2019 when millennials surpassed baby boomers.

There are denominational leaders who point to positive aspects of the aging clergy trend. Some note that one reason that the average age of clergy has been increasing is there has been an increase in the number of people choosing to become pastors as a second career.⁴ These clergy bring the life experience and secular work backgrounds to their ministries. Others point to the larger pool of clergy old enough to retire officially but continuing to serve in part-time, interim, and supply roles.⁵ They note that for congregations with limited resources, hiring a retired pastor on a part-time basis may be a cost-effective option since the congregations do not have to pay them a full-time salary with benefits.

On the other hand, more church leaders view the clergy aging trend with alarm. They fear there will be a clergy shortage as more clergy approach retirement age.⁶

Baby boom aging makes a major population impact since the baby boom generation was the largest generational cohort prior to 2019 when millennials surpassed baby boomers.

1 Lovett H. Weems, Jr. and Ann A. Michel, *The Crisis of Younger Clergy* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2008), 1-5.

2 Nesbitt, “First and Second-Career Clergy,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 34 no. 2 (June 1995): 154.

3 Weems and Michel, *The Crisis of Younger Clergy*, 6.

4 Chaves, *American Religion: Contemporary Trends*, 2nd ed., 79-81; Nesbitt, “First and Second-Career Clergy: Influences of Age and Gender on the Career-Stage Paradigm,” 152.

5 Nesbitt, “First and Second-Career Clergy,” 169.

6 Kenneth Crow, et al., “The Corps of Pastors in the USA/Canada Region Church of the Nazarene” (Lenexa, Kansas: Research Services, Church of the Nazarene Global Ministry Center, 2017); Golden, “The Future is Here.”



Others note the shorter number of years of ministry provided by second-career clergy. With traditions showing dramatic declines in clergy under the age of 35, there is a smaller pool of clergy for churches that previously had sought a pastor with at least ten years of experience and at least ten more years to serve before retirement. The concern exceeding all others is the worry that there may be a growing gap between the age of clergy and the age of laity and, even more importantly, between the age of clergy and the general population the church seeks to reach.

In [Section 1](#) of this report, we analyze National Congregations Study data to describe clergy age trends across four broad Christian traditions: Black Protestant, evangelical Protestant, mainline Protestant, and Roman Catholic.

In [Section 2](#), we look at clergy age trends across denominations. These include denominations for which we were able to gather detailed age data for the 2000-2019 period under review. We first look at the median ages of pastors in each of these denominations, and then we examine the share of pastors who are in four age ranges.

In [Section 3](#) we compare clergy age trends to age trends in the general U.S. population and consider different explanations for why clergy tend to be older than the overall U.S. population.



Section 1.

Clergy age trends across Christian religious traditions

The National Congregations Study (NCS) is a multi-year, nationally representative survey of congregations across the United States. It covers a wide range of topics, including religious tradition of congregations, congregational size, staffing configurations and demographic characteristics of pastors and other ministerial staff.⁷ We draw upon all four waves of NCS from 1998, 2006, 2012, and 2018 regarding changes in clergy age.

Clergy have been getting older in recent decades. Mark Chaves, leader of the National Congregations Study, noted that as of the NCS Wave 3 survey (2012), only 35 percent of U.S. “congregations are led by someone who is less than fifty years old, down from 48 percent in 1998.”⁸ Among lead pastors of all congregations in the United States, the median age increased from 49 years to 57 years in this same time period, an increase in age of eight years.⁹ Faith Communities Today (FACT) found the same median age of 57 in their 2020 survey.¹⁰ All these figures represent declines in the pool of the youngest clergy (those younger than 35) from before the 1980s when baby boomers began aging out of this younger clergy age group. The higher percentages of younger clergy were also common before the baby boom generation.¹¹

7 Mark Chaves, Joseph Roso, Anna Holleman, and Mary Hawkins, *Congregations in 21st Century America* (Durham, NC: Duke University, Department of Sociology, 2021).

8 Mark Chaves, *American Religion: Contemporary Trends*, 2nd ed. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017), 79.

9 Mark Chaves, *National Congregations Study Cumulative Dataset (1998, 2006-2007, 2012, 2018-2019)*.

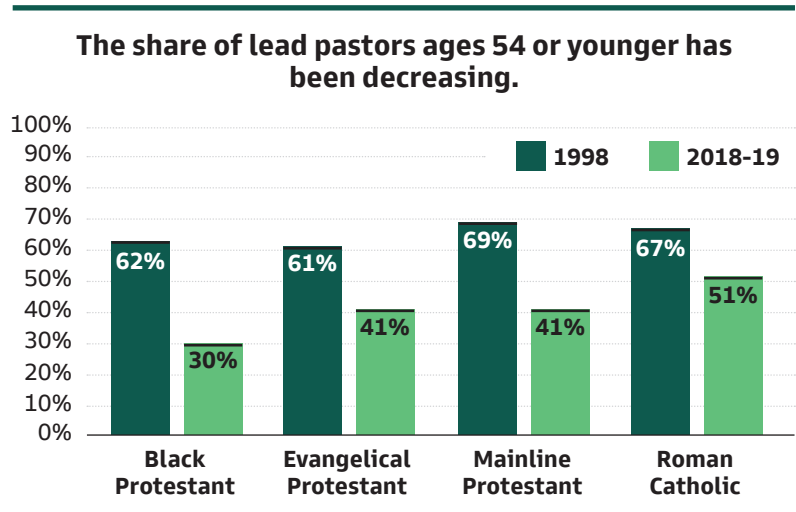
10 *Twenty Years of Congregational Change: The 2020 Faith Communities Today Overview*, 2021, 8.

11 For example, in the United Methodist Church and predecessor churches, higher than current percentages of under 25 clergy were routine. Younger clergy represented 20 percent of all clergy in 1920, 13 percent during World War II (1943), and 25 percent in 1956 when veterans completed their education and entered ministry. The young clergy percentage was 23 percent in 1978 as the first of the baby boomers were entering ministry. Sources include Murray H. Leiffer, *A Study of Retirement and Recruitment in the Methodist Ministry* (Chicago, IL: The Methodist Publishing House, 1944). The Commission on Ministerial Training, *The Methodist Ministry in 1948* (Chicago, IL: The Methodist Publishing House, 1948). Committee to Study the Methodist Ministry, *The Methodist Ministry in 1956* (Chicago, IL: The Methodist Publishing House, 1956).



The National Congregations Study (NCS) includes statistics showing the proportionate decline of solo or senior clergy ages 54 or younger between 1998 and 2018-19. Figure 1 below uses NCS data to track four Christian traditions showing major declines in such clergy with the greatest decline in under-54 clergy coming among Black Protestants and the least decline among Roman Catholics.

How many senior or solo clergy are near the beginning of their pastoral careers and how many are getting close to retirement? How has the average age of clergy changed over the past two decades? Does the average age of clergy who serve smaller churches differ from the average age of clergy who serve larger churches? To investigate the answers to these questions, we measure clergy age in two ways. We measure clergy age as age ranges: Clergy who are younger than 35 years old, 35 to 54 years, 55 to 72 years, and older than 72 years of age. We also measure age as a continuous, numerical variable to determine changes in median clergy age over time. We examine the proportion of senior and solo clergy in each of these age ranges and how these proportions have shifted over the past twenty years. In some cases, we have specific denominational information to illustrate trends.



Source: Chaves, M. (2021) National Congregations Study Cumulative Dataset (1998, 2006-2007, 2012, 2018-19)

Figure 1. Change in share of lead pastors under age 55 across religious traditions, 1998 and 2018



All Lead Pastors

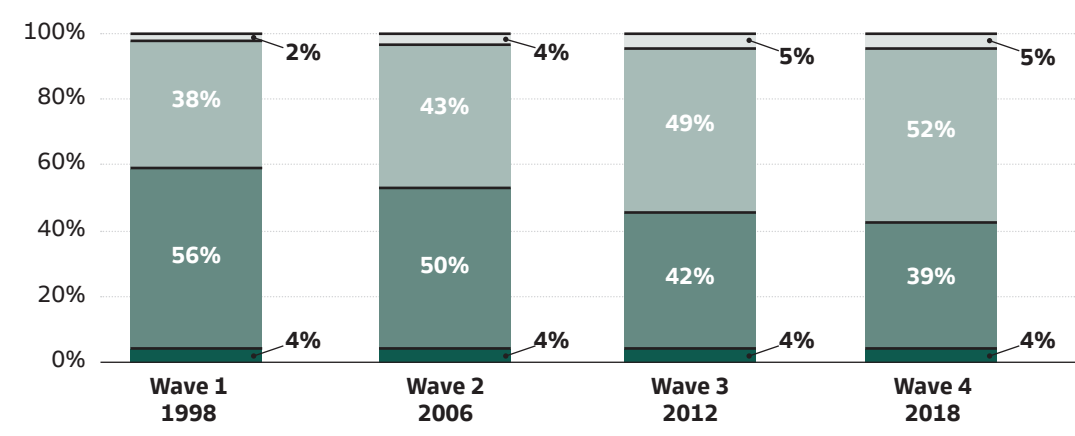
An analysis of the NCS data shows that lead pastors are getting older (table 1). The proportion of clergy aged 35 to 54 years declined between 1998 and 2018, while the proportion of clergy aged 55 to 72 increased. There is a low, 4 percent, and consistent proportion of under 35 clergy between 1998 and 2018 (figure 2). There is also an increase in the percentage of lead pastors older than 72, from 2 percent to 5 percent.

Table 1. Lead pastors have been aging.

All Lead Pastors	Years	Younger than 35	35 to 54	55 to 72	Older than 72	Total	Median Age
Wave 1	1998	4%	56%	38%	2%	100%	51
Wave 2	2006	4%	50%	43%	4%	100%	54
Wave 3	2012	4%	42%	49%	5%	100%	55
Wave 4	2018	4%	39%	52%	5%	100%	56

Source: Chaves, M. (2021) National Congregations Study Cumulative Dataset (1998, 2006-2007, 2012, 2018-2019)

The share of lead pastors ages 35 to 54 decreased, while the share of those ages 55 to 72 increased.



Source: Chaves, M. (2021) National Congregations Study Cumulative Dataset (1998, 2006-2007, 2012, 2018-2019)



Figure 2. Change in share of all lead pastors by age range, 1998-2018



Black Protestant

We first looked at changes in the share of lead pastors in each average worship attendance range. An analysis of National Congregations Study (NCS) data reveals that the proportion of clergy ages 35 to 54 and those ages 55 to 72 changed significantly between 1998 and 2018. The percentage of lead pastors ages 55 to 72 increased from 34 percent in 1998 to 62 percent in 2018 (figure 3). This is an increase of 28 percentage points. Lead pastors ages 35 to 54 declined 23 percentage points, from 53 percent in

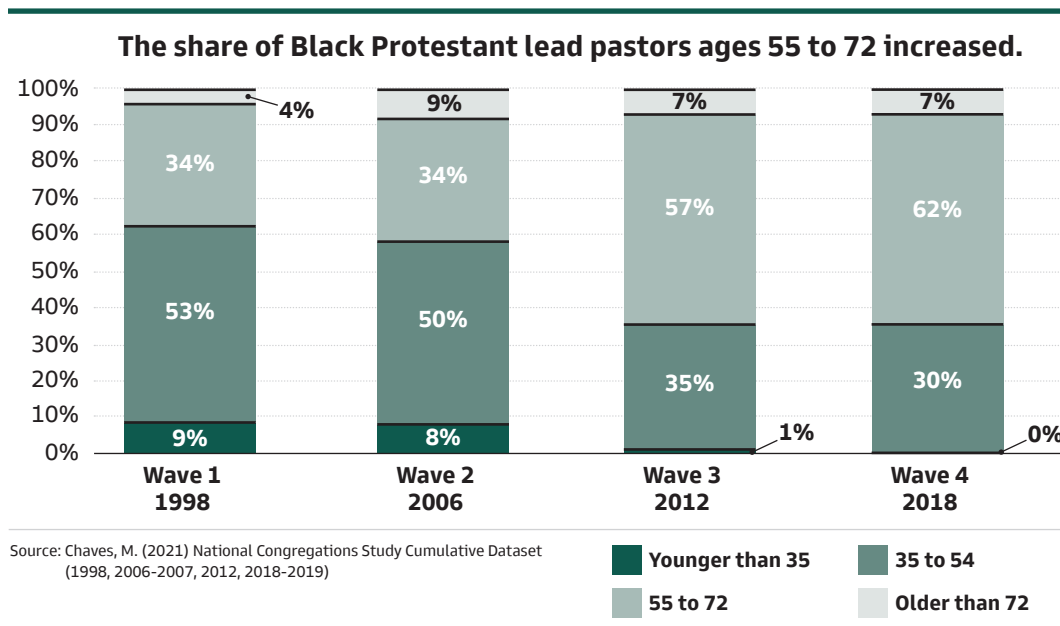


Figure 3. Change in share of Black Protestant lead pastors by age range, 1998-2018



Section 1. Clergy age trends across Christian religious traditions

Table 2. Black Protestant lead pastors have been aging.

NCS - Black Protestant	Years	Younger than 35	35 to 54	55 to 72	Older than 72	Total	Median Age
Wave 1	1998	9%	53%	34%	4%	100%	49
Wave 2	2006	8%	50%	34%	9%	101%	57
Wave 3	2012	1%	35%	57%	7%	100%	58
Wave 4	2018	0%	30%	62%	7%	99%	58

Source: Chaves, M. (2021) National Congregations Study Cumulative Dataset (1998, 2006-2007, 2012, 2018-2019)

1998 to 30 percent in 2018-2019. Likewise, lead pastors younger than 35 declined from 9 percent to less than 1 percent in the same period. Lead pastors older than 72 increased from 4 percent in 1998 to 7 percent in 2018-2019.¹²

Among lead pastors of Black Protestant churches, median age increased from 49 years in 1998 to 58 years in 2018-2019 (table 2).¹³

12 Chaves, National Congregations Study Cumulative Dataset

13 Ibid.



Evangelical Protestant

We now turn to examining age trends among clergy in the evangelical Protestant tradition. An analysis of National Congregations Study (NCS) data reveals that in 1998, the largest share of lead pastors (56 percent) of pastors leading Evangelical Protestant churches were between the ages of 35 and 54 years, and 28 percent were 55 to 72 years of age (figure 4). The share of all Evangelical Protestant pastors who were younger than 35 or older than 72 years were 5 percent for each.¹⁴

By the 2018–2019 NCS survey, those percentages had changed significantly. The major increase came in the percentage of churches served by lead pastors ages 55 to 72, which rose from 35 percent in 1998 to 56 percent in 2018. Those ages 35 to 54 declined from 56 percent in 1998 to 37 percent over this time period. The share of pastors younger than 35 and those older than 72 remained almost the same between 1998 and 2018.

Among lead pastors of Evangelical Protestant churches, median age increased from 49 years in 1998 to 56 years in 2018–2019 (table 3).¹⁵

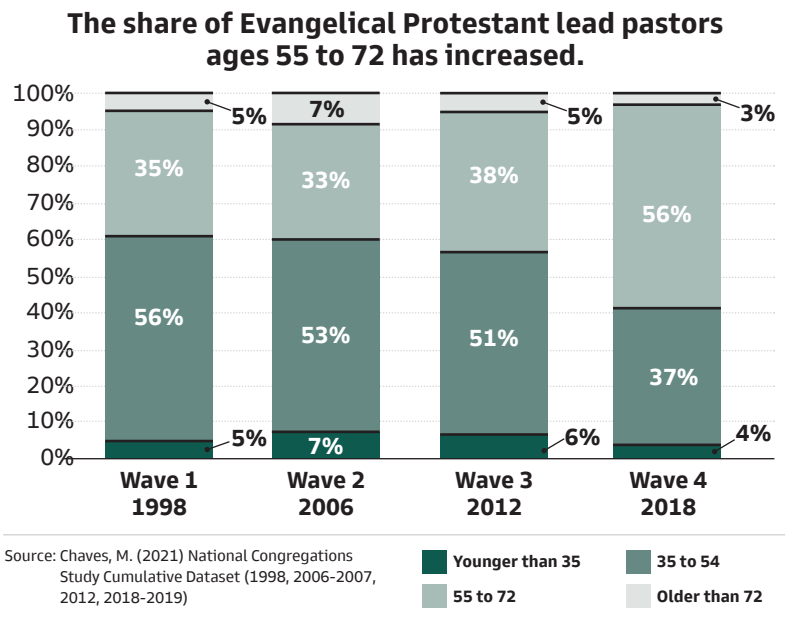


Figure 4. Change in share of Evangelical Protestant lead pastors by age range, 1998–2018

Table 3. Evangelical Protestant lead pastors have been aging.

NCS - Evangelical	Years	Younger than 35	35 to 54	55 to 72	Older than 72	Total	Median Age
Wave 1	1998	5%	56%	35%	5%	101%	49
Wave 2	2006	7%	53%	33%	7%	101%	51
Wave 3	2012	6%	51%	38%	5%	101%	52
Wave 4	2018	4%	37%	56%	3%	100%	56

Source: Chaves, M. (2021) National Congregations Study Cumulative Dataset (1998, 2006–2007, 2012, 2018–2019)

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.



Mainline Protestant

Once we examined age trends among clergy of evangelical Protestant congregations, we looked at clergy age trends in the mainline Protestant tradition. In 1998, about 58 percent of pastors leading Mainline Protestant churches were between the ages of 35 and 54 years, and almost a third (31 percent) were 55 to 72 years of age (figure 5). The share of all Mainline Protestant pastors who were younger than 35 was 11 percent and those older than 72 years were less than 1 percent of lead pastors.¹⁶

By the 2018-2019 NCS survey, the percentages of clergy in the 35 to 54 age and in the 55 to 72 age range had changed significantly. The major increase came in the percentage of churches served by lead pastors ages 55 to 72, which grew from 31 percent in 1998 to 54 percent twenty years later. Lead pastors ages 35 to 54 declined from 58 percent in 1998 to 35 percent in 2018-2019. Likewise, lead pastors younger than 35 declined from 11 percent to less than 6 percent in the same period. Lead pastors older than 72 increased from less than 1 percent in 1998 to 5 percent in 2018-2019.

The proportional changes between 1998 and 2006 for the age cohorts of 35 to 54 and 55 to 72 are more dramatic for Mainline Protestant and Roman Catholic than for Black Protestant and Evangelical Protestant. This could reflect a higher presence of baby boom generation clergy among the Mainline and Catholic. The first of the baby boom clergy would have been in the 35 to 54 group in 1998 and in the 55 to 72 group by 2006.

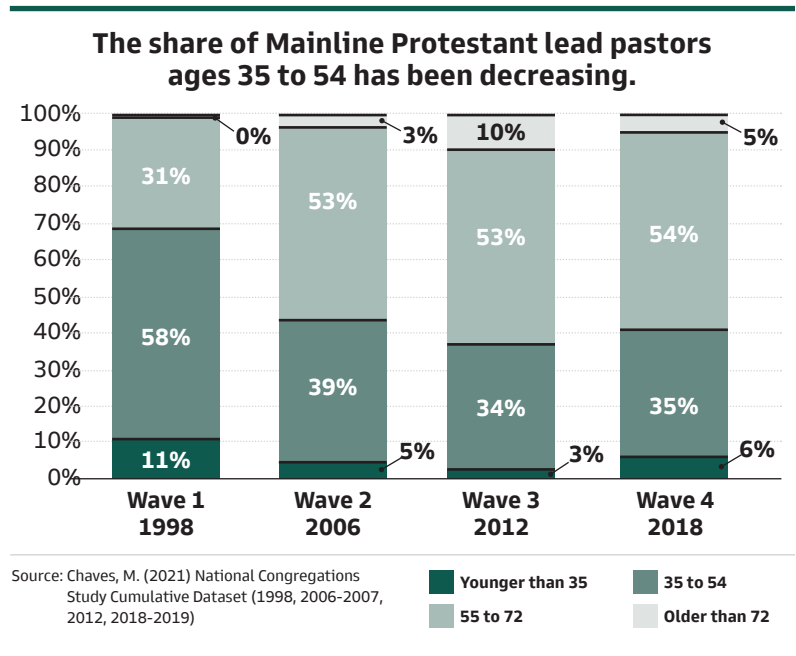


Figure 5. Change in share of Mainline Protestant lead pastors by age range, 1998-2018

¹⁶ Ibid.



Among lead pastors of Mainline Protestant churches, median age increased from 48 years in 1998 to 58 years in 2018-2019 (table 4).¹⁷

Table 4. Mainline Protestant lead pastors have been aging.

NCS - Evangelical	Years	Younger than 35	35 to 54	55 to 72	Older than 72	Total	Median Age
Wave 1	1998	11%	58%	31%	0%	101%	48
Wave 2	2006	5%	39%	53%	3%	100%	57
Wave 3	2012	3%	34%	53%	10%	101%	58
Wave 4	2018	6%	35%	54%	5%	100%	58

Source: Chaves, M. (2021) National Congregations Study Cumulative Dataset (1998, 2006-2007, 2012, 2018-2019)

Roman Catholic

Similar to clergy in Protestant traditions, priests in the Roman Catholic tradition have also been aging over the past several decades. Citing prior research, Charles Zech, et al., report that the average age of priests in the United States in the 1970s was mid-30s; in the 1990s it was mid-50s; and by the 2000s it was mid-60s.¹⁸ One study showed the percentage of priests over the age of 55 to be as high as 65 percent in the early 2000s.¹⁹ A 2012 study captured the aging dilemma among priests pointedly:

By far the most striking trend to come from these data, and probably the one trend that is having the most immediate impact on priestly life in the United States, is the aging of the priesthood. The average age of priests in the United States has been increasing steadily over the last forty years, in large part because the total number of priests in the United States reached its peak in 1969.²⁰

The NCS historical findings for 1998 to 2012 match those reported above. In 1998, about 63 percent of priests leading Roman Catholic churches were between the ages of 35

17 Ibid.

18 Charles E. Zech, Mary L. Gautier, Mark M. Gray, Jonathan L. Wiggins, and Thomas P. Gault, *Catholic Parishes of the 21st Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 23-25. For a chart reporting similar average priest ages, see Mary L. Gautier, Paul M. Perl, and Stephen J. Fichter, *Same Call, Different Men: The Evolution of the Priesthood since Vatican II* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2012), 3.

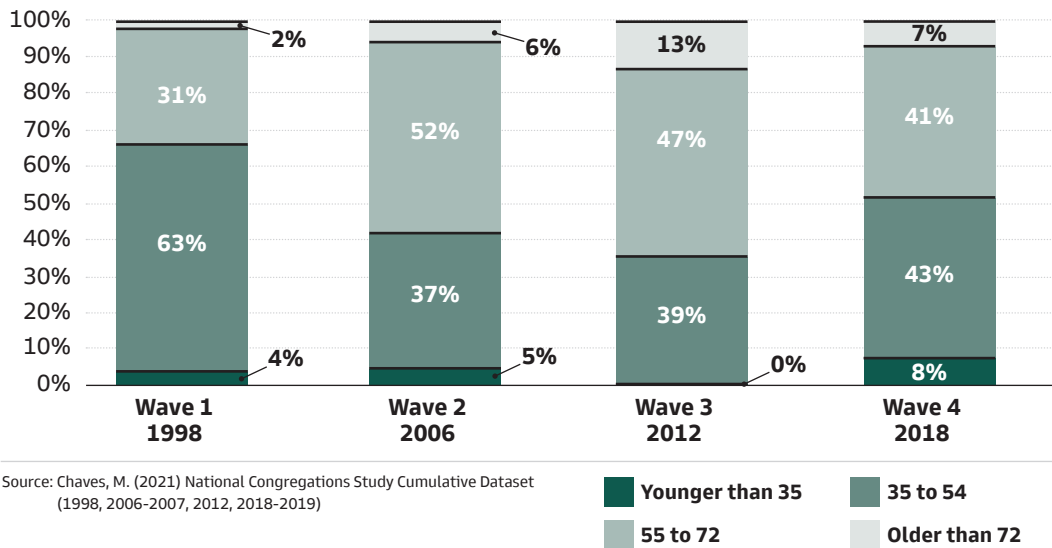
19 Dean R. Hoge and Jacqueline E. Wenger, *Evolving Visions of the Priesthood* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2003), 200.

20 Gautier, Perl, and Fichter, *Same Call, Different Men*, 1.



and 54 years, and 31 percent were 55 to 72 years of age (figure 6). The share of all Roman Catholic priests who were younger than 35 was 4 percent and those older than 72 years were 2 percent of lead priests.²¹

The share of Roman Catholic lead pastors ages 35 to 54 decreased and then increased.



Source: Chaves, M. (2021) National Congregations Study Cumulative Dataset (1998, 2006-2007, 2012, 2018-2019)

Figure 6. Change in share of Roman Catholic lead pastors by age range, 1998-2018

The 2018-2019 NCS results show major changes in the age distribution of priests leading parishes in the United States. Increases came in three age categories: younger than 35 increased from 4 percent in 1998 to 8 percent in 2018-2019, priests ages 55 to 72 increased from 31 percent to 41 percent, and priests older than 72 increased from 2 percent to 7 percent in this period. The only age group to decline in percentage of total priests leading parishes was those ages 35 to 54 going from 63 percent in 1998 to 43 percent in 2018-2019.

21 Chaves, National Congregations Study Cumulative Dataset



Mary L. Gautier, one of the authors of the 2012 study cited previously, sees factors that may contribute to the younger ages reported by NCS.

There has been a steady stream of younger clergy being ordained each year (around 450-550 each year) as well as a large number of priests from other countries who have come to the U.S. for ministry (whose average age is mid-forties). At the same time, the large proportion of elderly priests that we noted in *Same Call, Different Men* have mostly retired or died, as that large cohort was what was left of the men who had been ordained in the fifties and sixties. The net number of priests continues to decline, however, as the total number of Catholics continues to grow, which is the essence of the dilemma that we reported in our study.²²

As noted above, one factor that has impacted the reversal of the aging clergy trend is the increased number of international priests serving in the United States. There has especially been an influx of Hispanic priests, and they are also younger than Roman Catholic priests as a whole. Timothy Matovina reports in 2011 that more than half of Latino priests are under age 45.²³ An analysis of NCS data reveals that the share of Hispanic clergy leading Catholic parishes expanded from only 2 percent in 1998 to almost one-third of all Roman Catholic priests in 2018.²⁴

An analysis of NCS data

reveals that the share of Hispanic clergy leading Catholic parishes expanded from only 2 percent in 1998 to almost one-third of all Roman Catholic priests in 2018.

²² Personal correspondence with Mary L. Gautier, Ph.D., February 18, 2022.

²³ Timothy Matovina, *Transformation in America's Largest Church* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011), 136.

²⁴ Chaves, National Congregations Study Cumulative Dataset



Section 1. Clergy age trends across Christian religious traditions

Among priests leading Roman Catholic parishes, median age increased from 52 years in 1998 to 53 years in 2018-2019 (table 5).²⁵ In 1998, the Catholic median age of priests was the highest of the four traditions. By 2018-2019, their median age of 53 was the youngest of the four groups.

Table 5. The aging trend of Roman Catholic priests reversed by 2018.

NCS - Catholic	Years	Younger than 35	35 to 54	55 to 72	Older than 72	Total	Median Age
Wave 1	1998	4%	63%	31%	2%	99%	52
Wave 2	2006	5%	37%	52%	6%	100%	57
Wave 3	2012	0%	39%	47%	13%	99%	58
Wave 4	2018	8%	43%	41%	7%	99%	53

Source: Chaves, M. (2021) National Congregations Study Cumulative Dataset (1998, 2006-2007, 2012, 2018-2019)

25 Chaves, National Congregations Study Cumulative Dataset



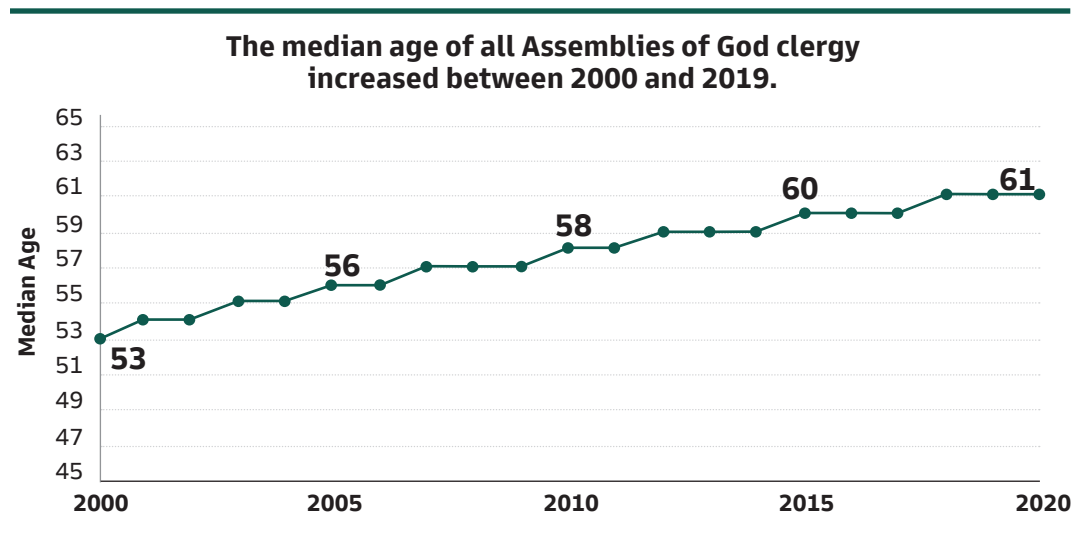
Section 2:

Age Trends Across Denominations

In Section 2, we first examine the median ages of pastors in four denominations. We then move on to looking at the percentage of pastors who are in four age ranges, just as we did with the NCS data.

Median ages

We can show changes in median ages of pastors from 2000-2019 for two evangelical Protestant (Assemblies of God and Church of the Nazarene) and two mainline Protestant denominations (Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and United Methodist Church). Data for clergy in Assemblies of God includes all clergy, regardless of whether they are serving as senior or solo pastors, serving in other ministerial roles, or retired (figure 7). Clergy data for Church of the Nazarene is for those serving as senior or solo pastors and are not retired.



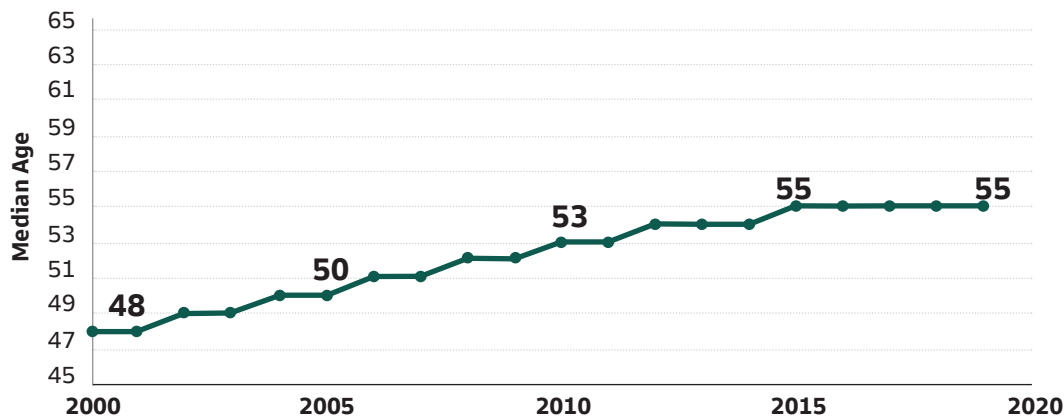
Source: Statistics, AG USA, <https://ag.org/>

Figure 7. Change in median age of all Assemblies of God clergy, 2000-2019



When we examined the change in median age of Nazarene clergy, we found that it was similar to the change we saw for lead clergy of Evangelical Protestant churches in the NCS data. The median age of Nazarene pastors increased from 48 in 2000 to 56 in 2019 (figure 8). This is close to the change in age of pastors leading evangelical Protestant congregations, which increased from 49 in 1998 to 56 in 2018. The Assemblies of God median ages are higher, probably because their pool includes all pastors, including retired pastors.

The median age of Church of the Nazarene lead pastors increased between 2000 and 2019.



Source: Research Services, Church of the Nazarene

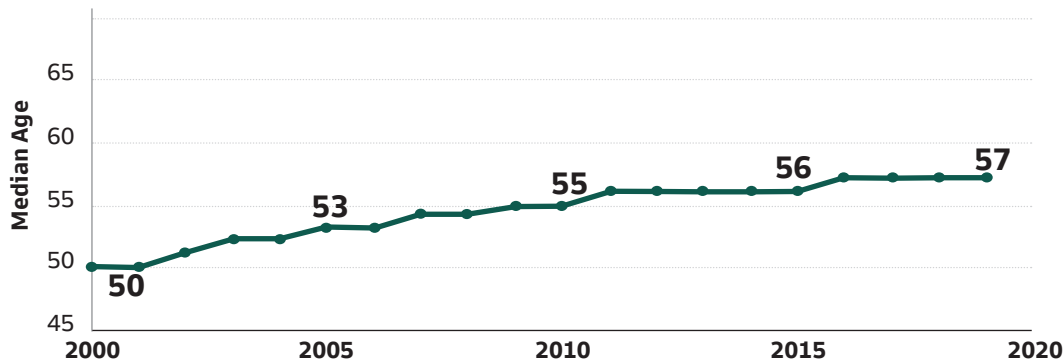
Figure 8. Change in median age of Church of the Nazarene lead pastors, 2000-2019

After examining the age trends among Nazarene and Assemblies of God clergy, we looked at changes in median age of ELCA and UMC pastors. We found that in both ELCA and UMC, the change in median ages of pastors were similar to age trends of pastors



leading mainline Protestant congregations as a whole (figures 9 and 10). The median age of pastors in the ELCA rose from 50 in 2000 to 57 in 2019. Pastors in the UMC tended to be a bit older, with a median age that rose from 51 in 2000 to 60 by 2019. The NCS median age changes for pastors of Mainline Protestant churches for a similar period increased from 48 in 1998 to 58 in 2018 (Section 1, table 4).

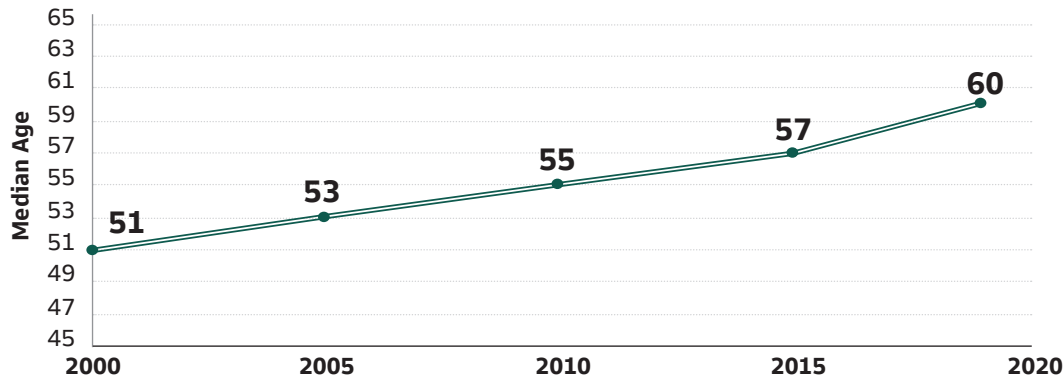
The median age of active ELCA Word and Sacrament pastors increased between 2000 and 2019.



Source: Research and Evaluation, ELCA

Figure 9. Change in median age of ELCA Ministers of Word and Sacrament, 2000-2019

The median age of all active United Methodist pastors steadily increased from 2000 to 2019.



Source: Lewis Center for Church Leadership

Figure 10. Change in median age of UMC Elders, 2000-2019



There are two other Mainline Protestant denominations for which we have data for a shorter range of years. The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) median age actually declined somewhat from 58 in 2015 to 56 in 2021. The United Church of Christ median age increased from 59 in 2015 to 60 in 2019.²⁶

Age Ranges

We have data that permit us to show 2019 comparisons across two Evangelical Protestant denominations for clergy in four age ranges (figure 11). The ranges show a somewhat different pattern than merely looking at median ages. For example, the median age of Nazarene pastors is comparable to that of all pastors leading Evangelical Protestant churches as reported by NCS. However, Nazarene clergy in the 35-54 and 55-72 age ranges are more balanced than across all Evangelical Protestant churches as well as other denominations reviewed.

They have maintained a substantial cohort of 35-54 clergy despite major proportionate losses in this age group for other denominations. The proportion of Assemblies of God clergy over age 72 may be larger than among Nazarene clergy or evangelical Protestant clergy because the Assemblies of God figures include retired clergy even if they are not serving congregations. For some other denominations in this report, retired clergy are only included if they are still serving as pastors, while in other denominations they are not included at all.

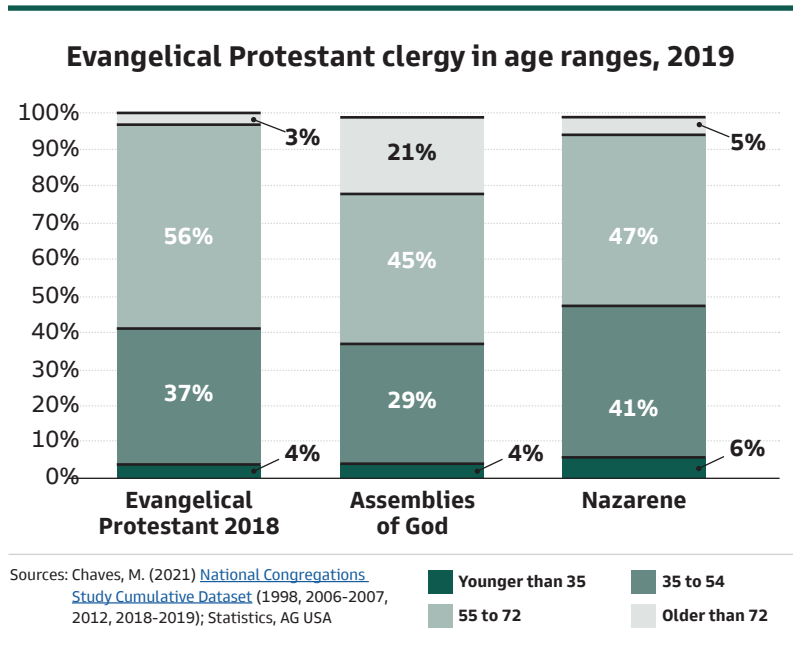


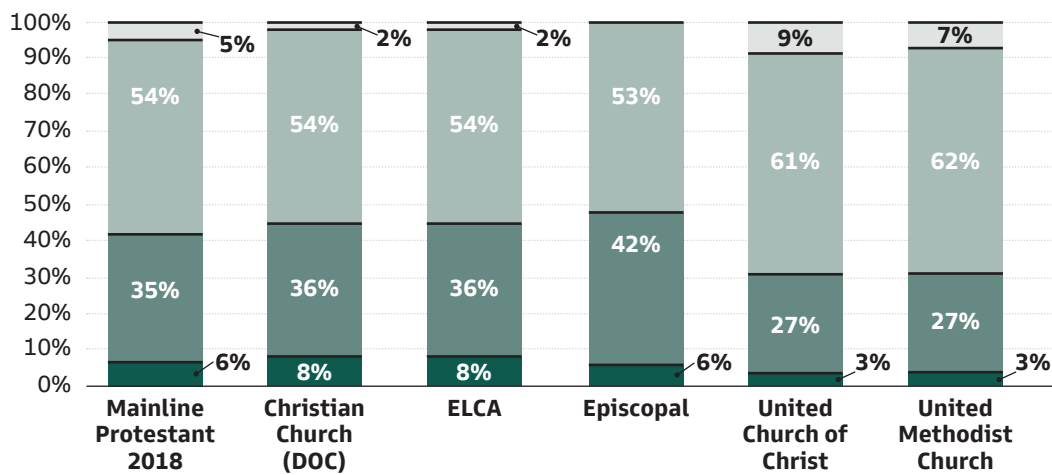
Figure 11. Share of Evangelical Protestant lead pastors (2018), all Assemblies of God pastors (2019), and Church of the Nazarene lead pastors (2019) by age range

26 Pension Fund of the Christian Church; CARDD, United Church of Christ.



We also have data that permits us to show 2019 comparisons for clergy in four age ranges across five Mainline Protestant denominations (figure 12). The ranges shown among the denominations are close to the overall mainline ages reported by NCS for three of the denominations: Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, and Episcopal Church. In these three denominations, over 50 percent of clergy are between 55 and 72 years old. The Episcopal Church has a larger representation of clergy ages 35-54 than the other mainline denominations.²⁷ Two denominations, United Church of Christ and United Methodist Church, trend older with lower percentages of clergy in the two younger age ranges and higher percentages in the two older age ranges. Over 60 percent of clergy in these two denominations are between 55 and 72 years old, and just over a quarter are between 35 and 54 years of age.

Over half of Mainline Protestant clergy were 55 to 72 years of age in 2019.



Sources: Chaves, M. (2021) National Congregations Study Cumulative Dataset (1998, 2006-2007, 2012, 2018-2019); Pension Fund of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ); Research and Evaluation, ELCA; General Convention of The Episcopal Church; Center for Analytics, Research & Development, and Data (CARDD) of the United Church of Christ; and UMC General Council on Finance and Administration.

- Younger than 35
- 35 to 54
- 55 to 72
- Older than 72

Figure 12. Share of all Mainline Protestant lead pastors (2018) and share among selected denominations (2019) in four age ranges.

²⁷ Of these denominations, two have mandatory retirement ages of 72, the Episcopal Church and the United Methodist Church, though often retired clergy serve part-time after retirement.



Where Clergy Serve by Age and Church Size

We are interested to see if there are any statistically significant variations in the deployment of lead pastors related to age. Some findings emerge using NCS data across their four survey periods regarding age and the median number of regular participants there are in the congregations served. The differences in Roman Catholic data on the subject were not statistically significant, but there are findings to report for the other three traditions.

■ Evangelical Protestants and Mainline Protestants

In both traditions, lead pastors 54 or younger tend to serve larger congregations than pastors 55 or older. Among Evangelical Protestants, the median number of regular participants was 90 for churches served by lead pastors 54 or younger and 65 for churches served by lead pastors 55 or older (p value $\leq .001$). Among Mainline Protestants, the median number of regular participants was 93 for churches served by lead pastors 54 or younger and 70 for churches served by lead pastors 55 or older (p value $\leq .001$).

■ Black Protestants

While the numbers for Black Protestants are statistically significant, the difference is small. The median number of regular participants was 50 for churches served by lead pastors 54 or younger and 55 for churches served by lead pastors 55 or older (p value $\leq .001$). The small difference could be due to a trend reversing. It could mean that a shift may be taking place similar to the pattern found in Evangelical Protestant and Mainline Protestant, namely, a movement from older pastors having larger congregations to younger pastors having the larger ones.²⁸

■ Some Denominational Examples

Table 6 gives detailed breakdowns of the median ages of lead pastors serving three sizes of congregations in 2000 and 2019. The church size cohorts for these charts are based on average worship attendance (AWA). Churches are divided into three groups:

The differences in Roman Catholic data on the subject were not statistically significant, but there are findings to report for the other three traditions.

28 The analysis of Evangelical Protestant, Mainline Protestant, and Black Protestant pooled data across all four NCS waves.



501 or more AWA, 101-500 AWA, and 100 or fewer AWA. The three denominations for which we have sufficient data to report these ages by church sizes are Church of the Nazarene (Evangelical Protestant), Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (Mainline Protestant) and United Methodist Church (Mainline Protestant).

From 2000 to 2019, the median age of pastors of small churches increased by 8 years in Nazarene and ELCA, and by 9 years in the UMC (table 6). Among Nazarene churches, pastors of small churches tended to be older than pastors of mid-size and large churches in both 2000 and 2019. In the ELCA and in the UMC, pastors of small churches tended to be older than pastors of churches in the other size tiers only in 2019. For ELCA, in 2000 the youngest pastors served small churches while the oldest pastors served large churches, though the differences in ages are not great. ELCA pastors of churches with 501 or more attenders were slightly older than pastors of churches with 101-500 attenders in 2000, but by 2019 there was no difference in the median age of pastors of churches in these two AWA groups. Nazarene pastors tend to be younger than pastors of ELCA and UM churches of comparable size ranges. This is true both in 2000 and 2019.

Table 6. Change in median age of Nazarene, ELCA, and UMC pastors leading congregations in various average worship attendance ranges, 2000 and 2019

AWA range	Nazarene		ELCA		UMC	
	2000	2019	2000	2019	2000	2019
501 or more	47	51	52	56	52	56
101 to 500	47	54	50	56	50	57
100 or fewer	48	56	49	57	52	61

Sources: Research Services, Church of the Nazarene; Research and Evaluation, ELCA; and UMC General Council on Finance and Administration

By 2019, the median ages of ELCA pastors of all three church size groups are almost the same. While ELCA median ages of pastors leading congregations in all three AWA tiers increased from 2000 to 2019, they did not all increase the same amount. The median age of ELCA pastors leading large churches increased by four years, while the median age of pastors leading mid-size churches increased by six years. The median age of pastors leading small ELCA churches increased the most, rising by eight years during this time period. The UMC age figures tend to run higher than Nazarene and ELCA age figures. For United Methodists, there was minor difference in age in 2000 among



pastors of churches in the three size ranges. However, by 2019 the median ages of pastors serving churches in all three average worship attendance ranges had gone up. Also, by then the oldest clergy served small churches and younger clergy served the large and mid-size churches.

Once we looked at changes in median ages of clergy by congregations' average worship attendance ranges, we examined the percentage of clergy ages 55 or older serving small, mid-size, and large cohorts of churches for the three denominations (table 7).

Table 7. Change in share of Nazarene, ELCA, and UMC pastors aged 55 and older leading congregations in three attendance size ranges, 2000 and 2019

<i>AWA range</i>	Nazarene		ELCA		UMC	
	2000	2019	2000	2019	2000	2019
501 or more	33%	37%	34%	58%	35%	56%
101 to 500	24%	48%	27%	55%	31%	58%
100 or fewer	28%	55%	29%	58%	40%	72%

Sources: Research Services, Church of the Nazarene; Research and Evaluation, ELCA; and UMC General Council on Finance and Administration

In the small (100 or fewer in attendance) and mid-size (101-500 in attendance) churches, the shifting from younger clergy (54 or younger) to older (55 or older) reflects the shifts taking place in the clergy pool between 2000 and 2019 among all traditions.

In all three denominations, the proportion of clergy age 55 and older who served small churches increased from 2000 to 2019. Among Nazarene congregations with 100 or fewer in attendance, the share of lead pastors aged 55 or older rose from 28 percent in 2000 to 55 percent in 2019. Comparable increases in the proportion of older clergy serving small churches are seen in the ELCA (from 29 percent to 58 percent clergy 55 or older) and in the UMC (from 40 percent to 72 percent clergy 55 or older).



The share of lead pastors of Nazarene churches with 101-500 who were 55 years or older increased from 24 percent in 2000 to 48 percent in 2019. Comparable shifts from younger to older clergy serving mid-size congregations are seen in the ELCA (from 27 percent to 55 percent of clergy aged 55 or older) and the UMC (from 31 percent to 58 percent clergy aged 55 or older).

Lead pastors of churches with 501 or more in attendance show some divergence in their age patterns. While the large churches in the two mainline denominations, ELCA and UMC, followed changes similar to those found in smaller churches, the evangelical denomination, Church of the Nazarene, did not. The share of ELCA pastors who were 55 or older increased from 34 percent in 2000 to 58 percent in 2019, and the share of UMC pastors in this age range increased from 35 percent to 56 percent. On the other hand, the share of Nazarene lead pastors aged 55 or older changed very little between 2000 and 2019. Only 33 percent of large church lead pastors were 55 or older in 2000, and this percentage rose modestly to 37 percent by 2019.

Lead pastors of churches

with 501 or more in attendance show some divergence in their age patterns.



Section 3.

Clergy aging and population aging

As noted earlier, some see aging clergy primarily as a reflection of the overall aging of the U.S. population as the large baby boom generation has aged. If clergy aging is only a mirror of age trends in the larger population, it is then to be expected, and there are fewer options to change the trend. Similarly, if clergy ages match closely the larger population, there is no appreciable age gap between clergy and constituents about which to worry.

So, can the overall aging of the U.S. population explain the aging of the clergy population? The aging of the large baby boom generation (born between 1946 and 1964) is reflected in clergy age trends since 2000. But it cannot account for the *magnitude* of the increase in clergy ages. For example, Mark Chaves, NCS principal investigator, noted after an early NCS survey that from 1998 to 2012, the average age of the U.S. population 25 or older increased from 47 to 49 years. During this same period, the average age of solo or senior clergy increased from 50 to 55 years.²⁹

Table 8 shows how the clergy age distribution among four Christian traditions compare with the age of the total population of the United States, ages 25 through 72, in 2019.

Table 8. Across all four Christian traditions, the share of clergy ages 55 to 72 was greater than the share of the total U.S. population in this age range in 2019.

Age range	U.S. Population	Black Protestant	Evangelical Protestant	Mainline Protestant	Roman Catholic
25-34	24%	0.4%*	4.0%	6.9%	8.7%*
35-54	42%	32.6%	38.3%	37.1%	46.4%
55-72	34%	66.9%	57.7%	56.0%	44.9%

Source for population: Population by Age and Sex, U.S. Census Bureau, 2019
Source for clergy ages: NCS, limiting the age range to 25-72
*The number of cases was not enough for the figures to be as meaningful as the others.

29 Chaves, *American Religion: Contemporary Trends*, 2nd ed., 79. The age of 25 is often used since it is a common age for beginning clergy who have gone directly to seminary following college. Not all clergy fit this pattern, but it provides a reasonable beginning point in comparing clergy ages with the general population.

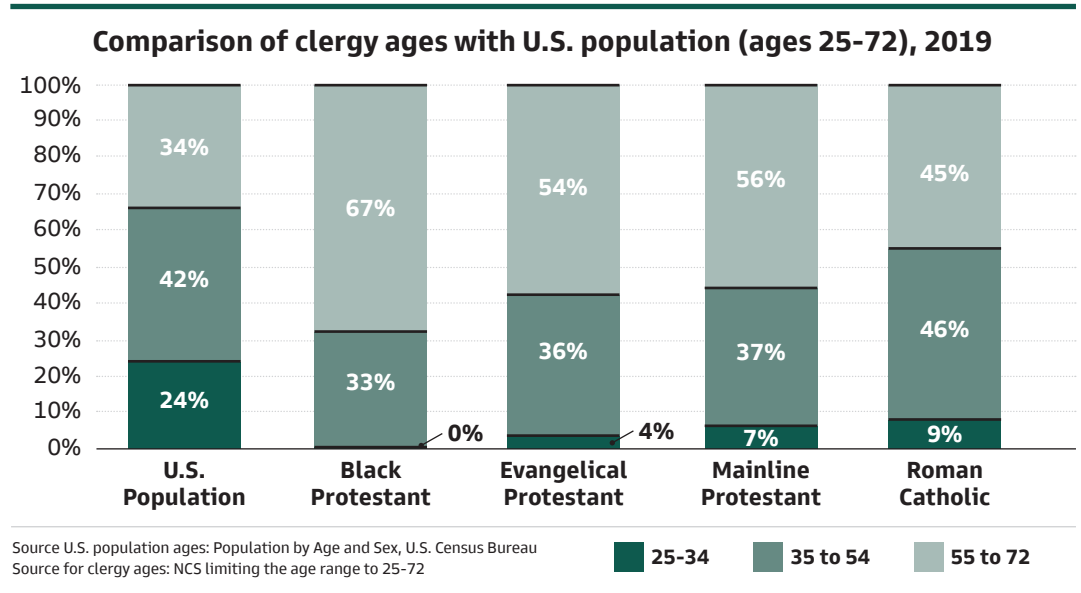


Figure 13. The share of lead pastors in four religious traditions (2018) by three age ranges compared to those ages among the U.S. population (2019) between 25-72

The younger age cohort (34 or younger) is least represented among clergy based on this age group’s 24 percent share of the general population ages 25-72 (figure 13). By 2018-19 Black Protestant younger clergy represented less than 1 percent of lead pastors. Evangelical Protestant had 4 percent, and Mainline Protestant and Roman Catholic showed 9 percent based on NCS findings.

The mid-age cohort (35-54) has declined as a percentage of clergy over the past two decades. It is still closer to mirroring the nation’s population of those between 35 and 54 than is the case for both younger and older (55-72) clergy age cohorts. This age group’s presence in the overall population in 2019 was 42 percent. Roman Catholic is the only tradition that had a higher proportion of clergy (46 percent) in this age range than the proportion of the overall U.S. population in this age group. Evangelical Protestant is the second closest to the national age makeup with 38 percent of lead pastors between 35 and 54. Mainline Protestant has 37 percent and Black Protestant has only 33 percent in the mid-age group.



Persons between 55 and 72 (the oldest age group included) represented 34 percent of the U.S. population in 2019. This age group included unprecedented proportions of clergy since 2000. Among the four traditions reviewed, the percentages for their clergy in this age group were 67 percent for Black Protestant, 58 percent for Evangelical Protestant, 56 percent for Mainline Protestant, and 45 percent for Roman Catholic.

In the general population since 2000, there were proportionately more younger persons (34 or younger) and older (55-72) in 2019. The proportional shrinking of the mid-age (35-54) population in these years came as the baby boom generation moved into the older category. Therefore, it is understandable that in 2019 clergy would be more present in the 55-72 age group than in the 35-54 group. However, there is not such a demographic explanation for the absence of clergy younger than 35. The challenge for all four traditions comes from the dramatic gap between those 25 to 34 in the overall U.S. population and the population of clergy of those ages. Both that large gap and the underrepresentation of clergy among the mid-age population are both captured in a skewing toward older clergy.

Church leaders may view the aging of clergy beyond that of the population as a coming supply and demand issue for congregations and denominations. That is certainly a legitimate concern. The larger implication may be the gap between church demographics of its pastoral leaders and the population the church seeks to serve.

One example pointed out by sociologist James D. Davidson

is the gap in the Roman Catholic church (mirrored in other traditions as we are seeing) between the age of laity and that of priests. He says that “the percentage of younger laity is seven times larger than the percentage of younger priests.”

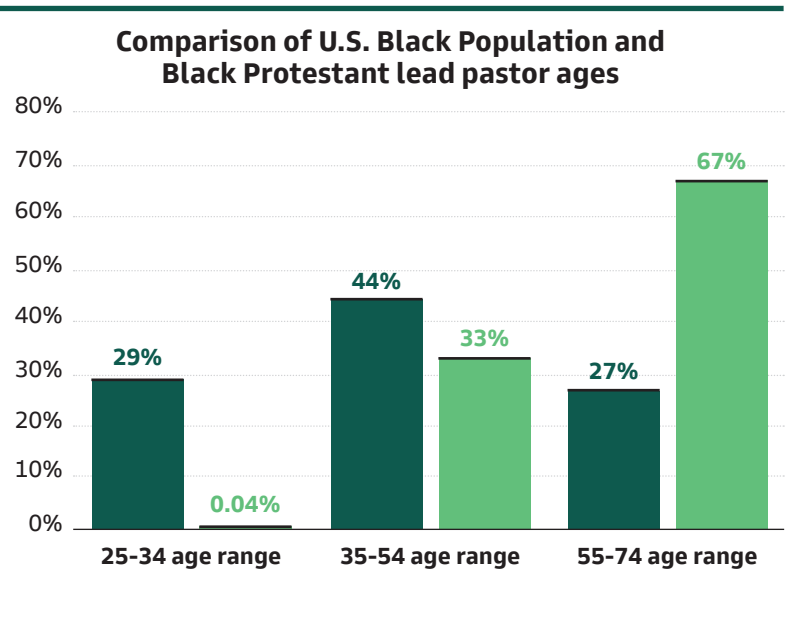


One example pointed out by sociologist James D. Davidson is the gap in the Roman Catholic church (mirrored in other traditions as we are seeing) between the age of laity and that of priests. He says that “the percentage of younger laity is seven times larger than the percentage of younger priests.”³⁰ Such an age gap between the community population the church is trying to reach and the pastoral leadership of congregations will increasingly hamper church attempts to expand their reach to new and younger constituents. When comparing the Black Protestant clergy with the Black and African American population figures reported by the U.S. Census Bureau, the differences remain (table 9).

Table 9. A greater share of Black Protestant lead pastors are 55-74 years than the share of the U.S. Black population in this age range in 2018-2019

Age range	U.S. Black Population	Black Protestant Clergy
25-34	29%	0.4%
35-54	44%	32.6%
55-74	27%	66.9%

Source for population: Population by Age and Sex, U.S. Census Bureau, 2019
Source for clergy ages: NCS, limiting the age range to 25-72
*The number of cases was not enough for the figures to be as meaningful as the others.



Sources: Annual Estimates of the Resident Population by Sex, Age, Race Alone or in Combination, and Hispanic Origin for the United States: April 1, 2010, to July 1, 2019 (NC-EST2019-ASR5H), U.S. Census Bureau, Population Division, Release Date: June 2020; Chaves, M. (2021) National Congregations Study Cumulative Dataset (1998, 2006-2007, 2012, 2018-2019)

Figure 14. The population of Black Protestant clergy is older than the U.S. Black population as a whole.

30 Cited in William D. Dingus, “Catholicism Today: Adrift and Adjusting,” Patricia O’Connell Killen and Mark Silk, eds. *The Future of Catholicism in America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019), 60.



Summary of Findings

Overall Clergy Age Trends

- The average age of clergy has been increasing since as early as the 1980s.
- The median age has gone from about 49 to 57 between 1998 and 2018.
- The population of clergy is aging faster than the U.S. population.

Black Protestant, Evangelical Protestant, Mainline Protestant, and Roman Catholic

- All four traditions have been aging faster than the U.S. population since 2000 and before.
- Percentages of older clergy (55-72) increased dramatically as the baby boom generation began reaching 55 and older in 2001 with Black Protestant showing the largest gains (increase of 28 percentage points) and Roman Catholic the lowest (increase of 10 percentage points).
- Comparable shifts took place for the presence of mid-age clergy (35-54) as baby boom clergy aged out of this cohort and fewer younger clergy entered with Black Protestant and Mainline Protestant showing the largest declines (23 percentage points for each).
- The percentages of young clergy (under 35 years of age) remain low ranging from less than 1 percent to 8 percent in 2019. All traditions showed declines in the presence of younger clergy except for Roman Catholic, growing from 4 percent to 8 percent.
- While the percentages remain small, all four traditions show increases in churches served by pastors older than 72.
- The median age of clergy increased in all four traditions with the greatest proportional increases coming among Black Protestants and Mainline Protestants, which also reported the highest median ages in 2019 of 58 for each, an increase of 9 years for Black Protestants and 10 years for Mainline Protestants.
- In Evangelical Protestant and Mainline Protestant lead pastors 54 or younger tend to serve congregations with more regular participants than clergy 55 or older. We also see a trend in this direction among Black Protestants.



Aging Baby Boomers Provide Only a Partial Answer

The overall aging of the U.S. population led by the aging of the baby boom generation is one factor in the significant aging of clergy in these ways:

- The percentage of younger (under 35) clergy began decreasing around 1981 as baby boomers began turning 35 and moving out of the younger clergy age cohort.
- The percentage of mid-age clergy (35-54) saw increases beginning in 1981 as baby boomers began turning 35 and entering this age group.
- The percentage of older clergy (55-72) began increasing in 2001 as baby boomers began turning 55 and aging out of the mid-age cohort and entering the older clergy group.

However, these demographic shifts alone do not account for the extent of the high proportion of older clergy and the low proportion of young clergy today.

What Might This Mean?

The dilemma of the aging of clergy leads to some critical questions for churches in the United States. The first is, “What difference does this make for the church?” The alarm as identified by many denominational leaders is the reality that clergy will increasingly be of an older generation than those in the population the church is trying to reach. Does that matter? Some suggest it matters a great deal when there may well be significant generational gaps in culture and perspectives.


Additional dimensions of age demographics may help explain the proportional overrepresentation of older clergy and underrepresentation of younger clergy today and point to action steps for the future. Those troubled by this disproportionate aging of clergy compared to the population might begin by examining the changing makeup of the total population.



People of color are far more represented among the youngest of the U.S. population today and whites among the oldest. Demographer William H. Frey notes that in 2019, the white median age was 43.7, compared to 29.8 for Latinos/Latinas/Hispanics, 34.6 for Black residents, 37.5 for Asian Americans, and 20.9 for persons identifying as two or more races.³¹ Pew Research shows that the most common age for whites in 2019 was 58. For people of color, it was 27.³²

Immigration has contributed a younger than average population to U.S. demographics in recent decades. The average age of newly arriving immigrants is 31, more than seven years younger than the national median age.³³

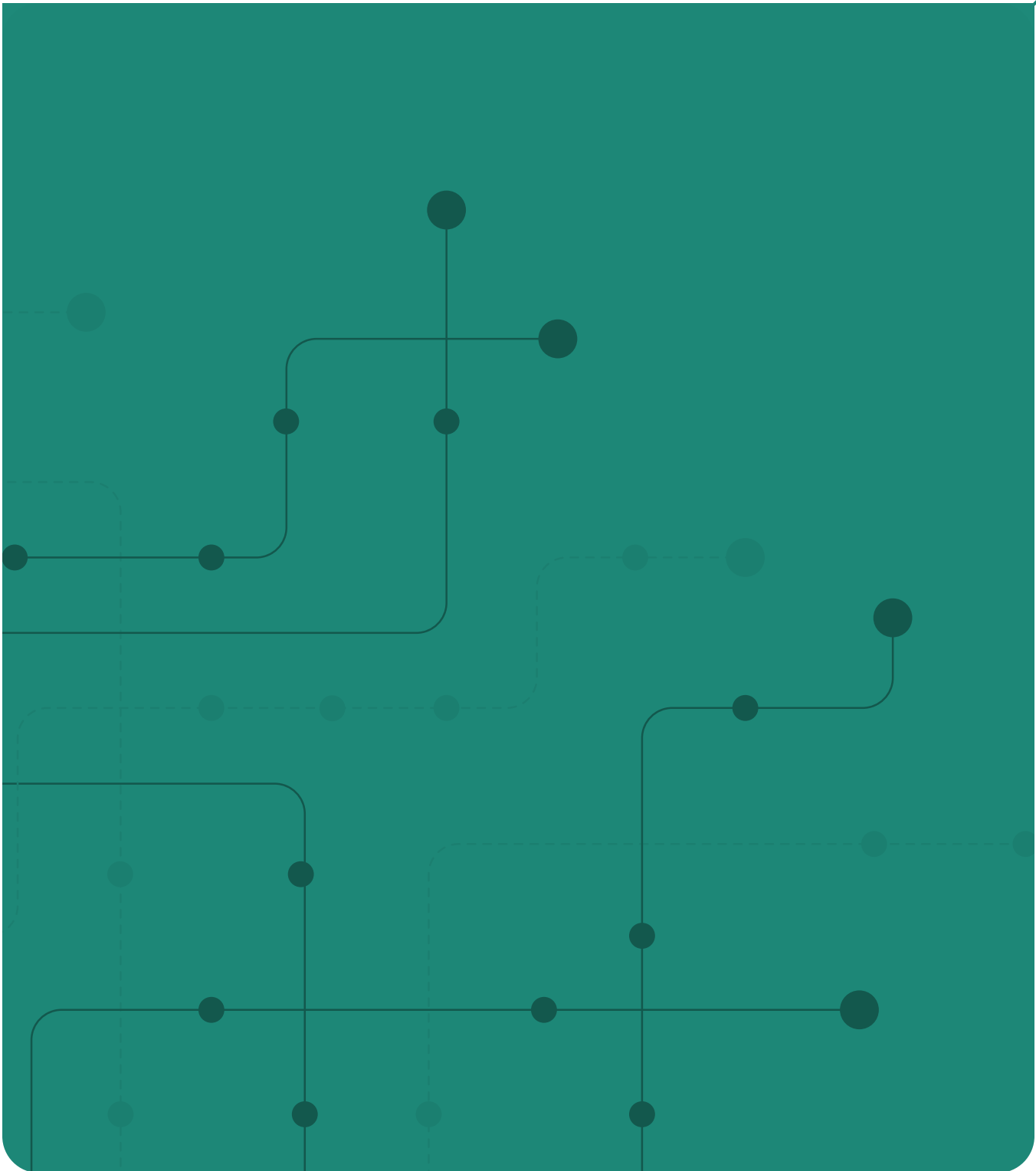
The extent to which the growing and younger cohorts of people of color and immigrants are included, or not included, among denominational clergy may help explain a part of denominational clergy age trends.

There are obviously many more factors than population dynamics. The disproportionate aging of clergy is a crucial challenge for most traditions. It must be explored, understood, and addressed if the work of the church is to be lived out faithfully. 

31 William H. Frey, "[The nation is diversifying even faster than predicted, according to new census data](#)," Brookings Institution, July 1, 2020.

32 Katherine Schaeffer, "[The most common age among whites in U.S. is 58 – more than double that of racial and ethnic minorities](#)," Pew Research Center, July 30, 2019.

33 Nicole Narea, "[The census shows the US needs to increase immigration — by a lot](#)," May 6, 2021.



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