



Declining Church Attendance

By Lovett H. Weems Jr.

Religious Workforce Project

Lewis Center for Church Leadership

Wesley Theological Seminary



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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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Changes in worship attendance patterns before and during the first two decades of the twentieth-first century make a difference in the makeup and deployment of the religious workforce. The 1990s did not prepare churches for what was to come after 2001. Mainline denominations, for example, had grown accustomed to annual membership declines since the mid-1960s.

But trends in attendance, usually considered a better indicator of current vitality, sometimes deviate from membership trends.

Despite consistent membership losses, the 1990s were a relatively stable time for many denominations. For example, the Episcopal Church reported higher attendance in 2000 than in any year since 1991, the year the denomination began recording attendance figures. The United Methodist Church reported worship attendance figures in 2000 that were higher than those in the mid-1980s. The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America had relatively flat attendance rates in the years before 2001, and the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) in the 1990s had several years showing modest gains in attendance. But these relatively strong attendance patterns did not continue after 2001. Figure 1 captures the changes for a few denominations.

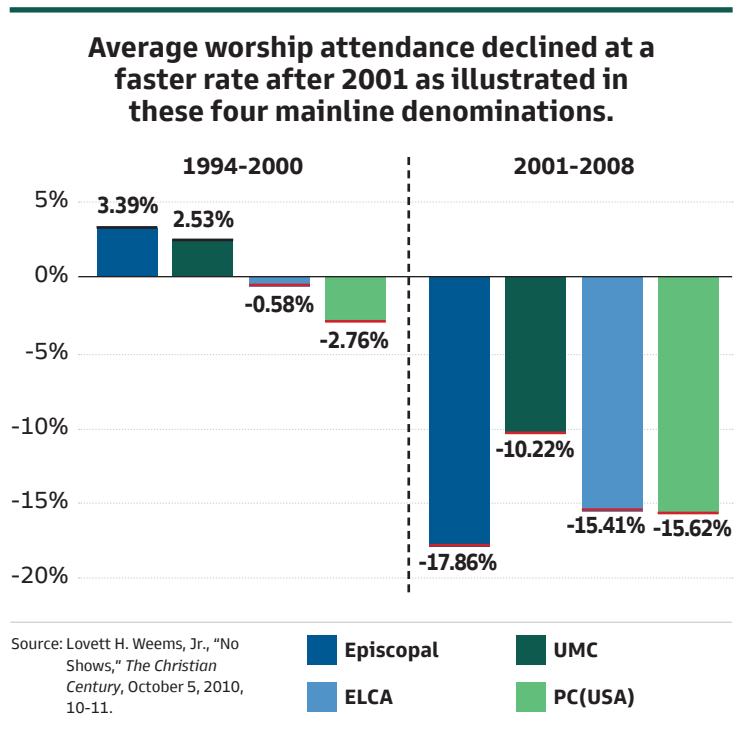


Figure 1. Percentage change in average worship attendance in four denominations during 1994-2000 and 2001-2008.



This change went beyond the mainline churches. Reporting on the findings of the 2008 Faith Communities Today survey of American congregations of all types, David A. Roozen points out that the “erosion of vitality” holds not only for “oldline” Protestants but also for evangelical Protestants, Catholics, Orthodox and other world religions. The new century has brought a “retreat for America’s congregations,” according to Roozen.¹ The Pew Research Center draws on surveys between 2007 and 2019 to report that the percentage of people attending worship weekly or once or twice a month declined and the percentage of those never attending increased during this period.²

The National Congregations Study found that the average congregation declined from 90 total attenders in 2006 to 68 in 2018.³ The 2020 Faith Communities Today survey reports a median worship attendance decline from 137 in 2000 to 65 in 2020.⁴ These declines may vary by Christian religious tradition but are consistent across all.⁵

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1 David A. Roozen, *American Congregations 2008* (Hartford, CT: Faith Communities Today, 2009), 5.
2 [“In U.S., Decline of Christianity Continues at Rapid Pace,”](#) Pew Research Center, October 17, 2019.
3 Mark Chaves, Joseph Roso, Anna Holleman, and Mary Hawkins, *Congregations in 21st Century America* (Durham, NC: Duke University, Department of Sociology, 2021), 11-12.
4 Scott Thumma, *Twenty Years of Congregational Change: The 2020 Faith Communities Today Overview* (Hartford, CT: Faith Communities Today, 2021), 11.
5 Ibid., 11. Yonat Shimron, [“Study: Attendance Hemorrhaging at Small and Midsize US Congregations,”](#) Religion News Service, October 14, 2021.



Denominations for which we have the annual attendance figures between 2000 and 2019 generally fall within the range of declines reported by NCS and FACT. Table 1 gives some examples:⁶

No one knows the reason for the overall attendance drop, but some contributing factors are often named. These factors are listed below.

- **Impact of 9/11.** People in the United States flocked to houses of worship in unusually high numbers following the September 11, 2001, attacks. While not all denominations showed an annual attendance increase in 2001 as a result, many did. Some say this attendance surge lasted about five weeks. However long it was, it did not result in long-term attendance gains. The opposite happened among many denominations. Attendance has been more likely to decrease instead of increase for most U.S. churches since 2002.⁷ Was the surge in attendance due to the national crisis with subsequent declines unrelated? Or did people flock to houses of worship only to be disappointed in what they found? Or perhaps the trauma of 9/11 was such that it made a major difference in attendance patterns in the years afterward.
- **Aging constituencies.** Churches have a disproportionate number of members aged 65 and older. This proportion will only grow more pronounced as the first of the baby boomers turned 74 in 2020 and as the youngest baby boomers turned 56. Many older members may not be attending as often for health or other reasons. At the same time,

Table 1: The median attendance of churches in seven denominations declined between 2000 and 2019.

Denomination	2000 Median Attendance	2019 Median Attendance	Percent Change
American Baptist Churches	77	49	-36%
Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)	65	35	-46%
Church of the Nazarene	63	45	-29%
Episcopal Church	80	51	-36%
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America	100	60	-40%
Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)	75	(2021) 35	-53%
United Church of Christ	81	47	-42%
United Methodist Church	53	38	-28%

⁶ Sources for denominational data are: American Baptist Churches Information Systems; Statistical Report of Congregations in the United States and Canada; Research Services, Church of the Nazarene; General Convention of The Episcopal Church; Research and Evaluation, ELCA; Comparative Statistics of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.); Center for Analytics, Research & Development, and Data (CARDD) of the United Church of Christ; and UMC General Council on Finance and Administration.

⁷ David T. Olson, *The American Church Crisis* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2008), chapter 3.



churches appear to reach younger persons in much smaller numbers compared to their presence in the population. This lower presence of younger people is especially true for the large number of congregations that are small.

- **Growth of the “Nones.”** “Nones” are those claiming no religious affiliation. While tracked over the years, it was in the 1990s that their percentage of the population began a steady increase. Their impact on declining attendance figures continues to make a difference. The percentage of those whose response to the question of religious affiliation is “none” remained unchanged at about 5 to 7 percent from the 1960s to the early 1990s. Then the percentages grew to 29 percent reported by Pew in 2021.⁸ Robert D. Putnam and David E. Campbell join others in connecting these changes to generational cohorts. The pre-boomer generations accounted for the low percentage of “nones” for many years, with each subsequent generational group showing markedly higher percentages claiming “none” when asked about their religious preference. Putnam and Campbell see no appreciable changes in low religious affiliation among the younger generations as they become older.⁹

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accounted for the low percentage of “nones” for many years, with each subsequent generational group showing markedly higher percentages claiming “none” when asked about their religious preference.

Frequency of Attendance

In addition to these factors, there may be an even more direct reason for the declines in worship attendance in the last two decades. In a 2010 article, I offered the frequency of attendance option as one of several that might explain the downward attendance trend, which by that time was well-established.¹⁰ Since that time, the practice of less frequent attendance than before by the same members has emerged as the most accepted reason, at least among pastors and consultants.

Some say the definition of “regular church attendance” has changed. Pastors have observed that many church members identify themselves as regular churchgoers even though they may attend only twice a month or less. In earlier times, being a regular churchgoer meant coming to worship almost every Sunday. Evangelical church observers name this same phenomenon. In 2013, Carey Nieuwhof, pastor and author,

8 Gregory A. Smith, [“About Three-in-Ten U.S. Adults Are Now Religiously Unaffiliated,”](#) Pew Research Center, December 14, 2021.

9 Robert D. Putnam and David E. Campbell, *American Grace How Religion Divides and Unites Us* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2010), 122-123.

10 Weems, “No Shows.”



said everywhere he goes he hears the same thing: “People who attend church are attending less often.”¹¹ A bit later, Thom Rainer, an influential Southern Baptist writer, called this trend the “number one reason for the decline in church attendance.”¹² Consultant Will Mancini called this pattern “the most important trend of church trends in 2015.”¹³

Table 2 shows some denominations for which we have both membership and attendance annual figures for 2000-2019.¹⁴ The dominant trend among these groups is that worship attendance declined more sharply than did membership during these years. However, the trend is not universal among this sample group. Three denominations (Assemblies of God, United Church of Christ, and Wesleyan Church) report different membership and attendance change patterns. Still the magnitude of the attendance declines relative to membership among the others show why declining participation among the membership is cited as a prevailing factor in church life in recent decades.

Table 2: Both membership and attendance declined in eight denominations between 2000 and 2019.

Denomination	2000-2019 Membership Change	2000-2019 Attendance Change
American Baptist Churches*	-25%	-39%
Assemblies of God	28%	22%
Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)	-51%	-45%
Church of the Nazarene	-5%	-15%
Episcopal Church	-30%	-39%
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America	-33%	-47%
Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)	-48%	-53%
United Church of Christ	-42%	-33%
United Methodist Church	-22%	-32%
Wesleyan Church	-10%	14%

Source: Denominational data.
 *Due to a major drop in churches reporting in 2019, data from American Baptist churches was used only for those reporting both membership and attendance in 2000 and 2019. Source: Denominational data.

11 Carey Nieuwhof, “7 Ways to Respond as People Attend Church Less Often,” April 3, 2013.
 12 Thom S. Rainer, “The Number One Reason for the Decline in Church Attendance and Five Ways to Address It,” August 23, 2013.
 13 Will Mancini, “Attending Church Less Frequently: The Most Important Trend of Church Trends and What to Do About It,” January 1, 2015.
 14 Sources for denominational data are: American Baptist Churches Information Systems; Statistics, AG USA; Statistical Report of Congregations in the United States and Canada; Research Services, Church of the Nazarene; General Convention of The Episcopal Church; Research and Evaluation, ELCA; *Comparative Statistics of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)*; Center for Analytics, Research & Development, and Data (CARDD) of the United Church of Christ; UMC General Council on Finance and Administration; and the Wesleyan Church North American General Conference.



Considering the perceived decline in the frequency of attendance, some churches expanded their attendance monitoring. They continued tracking average weekly worship attendance while adding a monthly unique attendee count. For each month they recorded the number of people who attended at least once during the month.¹⁵ While no reliable statistical analysis is available, some churches that did this reported that their weekly attendance continued to decline while the number of people attending at least once during the month remained relatively stable. While not dependable as research, this metric gives churches another way to monitor levels of participation in worship.

There is an exception to the declining worship attendance trend. Larger churches continue to grow. The Faith Communities Today 2020 survey found that “it was not until worship attendance reached 1,500 or larger that a majority (71%) of congregations in that size grouping were growing” in the past five years.¹⁶ Despite increased attendance in the largest of churches, the rate of attendance based on membership continues to be stronger among smaller congregations.¹⁷ However, the continued movement of worshipers toward larger congregations permits the larger churches to grow even with lower participation rates. Churches showing the greatest declines are the smallest that average 50 or fewer in worship. There are more mixed patterns of growth and decline among churches with attendance between the smallest and largest congregations, though decline is more common than growth.

¹⁵ Based on personal conversations with various pastors.

¹⁶ Scott Thumma, *Twenty Years of Congregational Change: The 2020 Faith Communities Today Overview* (Hartford, CT: Faith Communities Today, 2021), 14.

¹⁷ David Eagle, “The Negative Relationship between Size and the Probability of Weekly Attendance in Churches in the United States,” *Socius* 2, (2016): 1-10.



Findings

- While the 1990s offered relative worship attendance stability in some mainline denominations, a pronounced decline in attendance began in 2002 that continues today.
- The declines in attendance most noticeable among mainline churches increasingly characterized Christian traditions overall even among some denominations that previously experienced sustained growth.
- The median attendance among U.S. congregations declined through the first two decades of the twenty-first century.
- The impact of 9/11, the continued aging of church constituencies, and the growth of those claiming no religious affiliation are offered as possible reasons for declining attendance.
- Some say the definition of “regular church attendance” has changed with the same members now attending less frequently than previously.
- Size makes a difference in attendance with the largest churches more likely to grow in attendance.
- Churches showing the greatest declines in attendance are the smallest that average 50 or fewer in worship.
- There are more mixed patterns of growth and decline among churches with attendance between the smallest and largest congregations, though decline is more common than growth.
- It is also possible that some congregations and denominations are approaching a tipping point with fewer and increasingly older members. This shrinking attendance will make many congregations unsustainable.


Workforce Implications

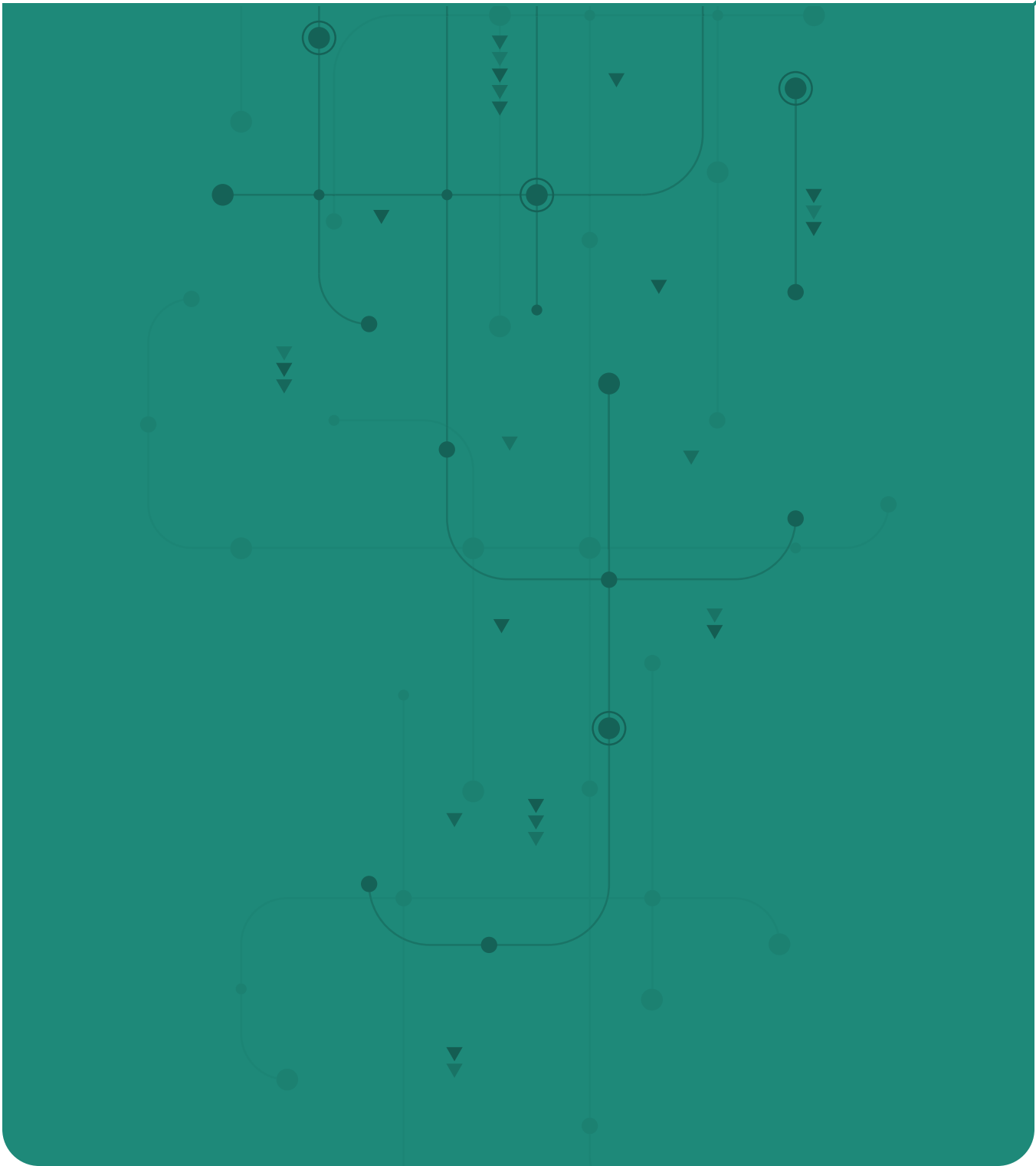
- A renewed interest in reaching beyond traditional racial, class, and age constituencies could lead to an increase in worshipers.
- There is little future for traditions that are unable to reach more people, younger people, and more diverse people.
- Falling median worship attendance figures may mean there will be fewer pastors who are full-time pastors and more that are part-time or in shared pastor arrangements.
- If the number of clergy with seminary degrees remains stable, many of them may need to be bivocational.

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9/11, the continued aging of church constituencies, and the growth of those claiming no religious affiliation are offered as possible reasons for declining attendance.



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- Various types of approved categories for pastors without a seminary education will probably develop including expanded use of laity in pastoral roles.
 - Growing large churches will continue to be the churches of choice for most who attend worship leading to needs for both clergy and lay professionals among their workforces.
 - Even as churches work hard to reach more people in worship, they must also come to grips with changing patterns that may call for strengthening other ways to connect with people and to foster those ties and relationships that lead to more active discipleship beyond worship.
 - As the 21st century progresses, Christian movements may face perhaps their greatest challenge since they faced the American frontier of the 19th century. 



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