



Fewer New Adherents

By Lovett H. Weems Jr.

Religious Workforce Project

Lewis Center for Church Leadership

Wesley Theological Seminary



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Project**



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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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Religious movements depend on both retention of current adherents and the addition of new people who commit to their beliefs and practices. Denominations use different terms for these new adherents. Profession of faith, affirmation of faith, confession of faith, confirmation, and conversions are some terms used. Baptism is often used for new adherents in traditions that limit baptism to believers-only baptism. We will typically use “professions of faith” when referring to all first-time faith commitments. Churches obviously receive new members in ways other than those who make a first-time religious commitment such as those who are already believers who transfer their membership from a church of one tradition to a church of another tradition.

There is no standard way of tracking the relative strength of Christian groups in reaching new followers who are making their faith commitments for the first time. One can examine the total first-time faith commitments to track positive or negative trends. One can also calculate ratios of professions of faith to membership or average worship attendance. We will use the latter, worship attendance, since membership numbers are often not the best indicator of current participation in a congregation. For example, a newer congregation will often have attendance larger than membership while a long-established congregation will tend to have far more members on its rolls than worship attendance. As we examine different denominations, we will review their trends in the ratio of average worship attendance (AWA) to professions of faith. For example, a church averaging 100 in worship with 10 professions of faith will have a ratio of 10:1, average worship attendance divided by professions of faith.

Evangelical Protestant

Figures for four Evangelical Protestant denominations are shown Table 1. Of these four, the Assemblies of God and the Wesleyan Church show similar patterns over recent years. Attendance grew for both, and total professions of faith grew in the Wesleyan Church. Their worship attendance to professions of faith ratios are impressive (low numbers are good since they reflect how many worshipers there are for each



profession of faith). The change in new adherents compared to attendance stayed consistent for the Wesleyan Church. While the ratio of worshipers to new adherents increased for the Assemblies of God, the change is because attendance went up significantly while the number of professions of faith remained about the same.

The other two denominations, Church of the Nazarene and the Southern Baptist Convention, also share similar trends over recent years. Their effectiveness in reaching new adherents falls between the Assemblies of God and the Wesleyan Church patterns and those of Mainline Protestant denominations we will examine next. The Nazarene and Southern Baptist attendance and new adherents declined for the years shown in the table. Likewise, the ratio of worshipers to new adherents increased in recent years meaning there were fewer new adherents per worshiper than before. The change in Southern Baptist baptisms in relation to worship attendance numbers was the largest of the four Evangelical Protestant denominations reviewed.

Declines in new adherents somehow does not seem to fit with the evangelical designation. The recent history of Southern Baptist churches is illustrative of a denomination that has moved, as other evangelical churches have, into the cultural mainstream and now show trends like other large and long-established denominations. The historic focus of Southern Baptists has been on evangelism and conversions. Pastoral success is often viewed in terms of “additions” and membership growth.

Table 1. Change in number of attenders, professions of faith, and AWA/professions of faith ratio in four Evangelical Protestant denominations between 2000 and 2019

Denomination	Attendance			Professions of Faith			AWA/Prof. of Faith Ratio		
	2000	2019	Percent Change	2000	2019	Percent Change	2000	2019	Percent Change
Assemblies of God	1,637,665	1,993,370	22%	486,339	487,322	0%	3.37	4.09	21%
Nazarene	501,922	424,633	-15%	29,258	18,631	-36%	17.16	22.79	33%
Southern Baptist	6,024,289	5,250,230	-13%	387,947	235,748	-39%	15.53	22.27	43%
Wesleyan	204,245	233,581	14%	26,697	29,775	12%	7.65	7.84	2%

Sources: General Secretary's Office, Statistics, AG USA; Research Services, Church of the Nazarene; Lifeway Research; and The Wesleyan Church



Membership tends to be a lagging indicator. Membership changes are the result of many other factors that have been present for a while. For Southern Baptists, declining baptism rates over many decades signaled an impending downturn in membership. The decline in baptisms in 2019 was the tenth year of losses in the past twelve years.

Mainline Protestant

Figures for six Mainline Protestant denominations are shown in Table 2. They include the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), Episcopal Church, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), United Church of Christ, and United Methodist Church. All six show similar patterns regarding attendance and new adherents, though there is variation in the extent of these changes. All showed attendance decreases (from 32 percent for the UMC to 53 percent for the PCUSA). All declined in the number of professions of faith (from 55 percent for the ELCA and UMC to 69 percent for the UCC).

Table 2. Change in number of attenders, professions of faith, and AWA/professions of faith ratio in six Mainline Protestant denominations between 2000 and 2019.

Denomination	Attendance			Professions of Faith			AWA/Prof. of Faith Ratio		
	2000	2019	Percent Change	2000	2019	Percent Change	2000	2019	Percent Change
Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)	459,480	251,520	-45%	19,130	6,694	-65%	24.02	37.57	56%
Episcopal Church	856,579	518,411	39%	34,623	14,448	-58%	24.74	35.88	45%
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America	1,567,139	831,520	-47%	71,987	32,288	-55%	21.77	25.75	18%
Presbyterian (U.S.A.) Church	1,190,801	560,103	-53%	90,481	30,431	-66%	13.16	18.41	40%
United Church of Christ	443,719	297,076	-33%	24,880	7,763	-69%	17.83	38.27	115%
United Methodist Church	3,487,441	2,366,427	-32%	174,233	78,756	-55%	20.02	30.05	50%

Sources: Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) Annual Statistical Reports; General Convention, Episcopal Church; Evangelical Lutheran Church in America Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation; Comparative Statistics of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.); Center for Analytics, Research & Development, and Data (CARDD) of the United Church of Christ; and United Methodist Church General Council on Finance and Administration



Regarding the effectiveness of adding new adherents in comparison to their worship attendance, two denominations in 2000 had ratios like some of the Evangelical Protestant denominations. The attendance to profession of faith ratios of the PCUSA and UCC in 2000 (13.16 and 17.83 respectively) were about the same as for Nazarenes and Southern Baptists. The PCUSA, while experiencing a 40 percent increase in its ratio by 2019 (to 18.41), was still better than the 2019 ratios for Nazarenes and Southern Baptists.

However, the larger story among Mainline Protestant denominations is of significant losses in professions of faith. Despite major attendance declines, the reduction in professions of faith was greater, thus resulting in much higher ratios of attendees to new adherents.

New Adherents by Congregational Size

Does the size of a congregation matter when examining its effectiveness in adding new adherents? The answer seems to be yes, but some of those patterns have changed between 2000 and 2019.

In looking at the differences in the ability of churches to reach new adherents based on the average worship attendance size of the congregations, three size cohorts emerged that seem to have similar performance during these years. Of the seven attendance tiers we normally use, the three groupings with common profession patterns appear to be large church (the two tiers capturing churches with attendance of 501 or more, midsize (the two tiers composed of churches with attendance between 101 and 500), and small (the three tiers of churches where attendance is 100 or fewer).

In 2000, there was a distinct pattern of relative effectiveness in reaching new adherents in relationship to the size of the congregation measured by attendance (table 3). Large churches had lower AWA:PF ratios meaning they received a higher number of professions of faith per worshiper. Midsize churches did less well than large churches but better than small churches. Small churches were least effective in reaching new adherents. This staircase pattern of lowest AWA:PF ratios for large churches to the highest AWA:PF ratios for small churches is seen perfectly in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), Episcopal Church, United Church of Christ, and United Methodist Church. A less pronounced but consistent pattern is found for the Evangelical Lutheran Church in American and the Wesleyan Church. Each of these two denominations has two church size groups that are virtually the same. However, in 2000 there is one



major exception to the pattern of large churches being more effective in reaching new believers and small churches less effective. The Church of the Nazarene shows AWA:PF ratios that indicate that smaller churches are most effective in reaching new adherents, followed by midsize churches and then large churches.

Table 3. In 2000, large churches had lower average worship attendance to professions of faith ratios than small churches in six out of seven Protestant denominations.

Size tiers – 2000	DOC	NAZ	ELCA	EPIS	UCC	UMC	WES
Large (501+ AWA)	18	23	22	19	15	16	7
Midsize (101-500 AWA)	25	17	21	25	18	19	9
Small (100 or fewer AWA)	26	15	33	30	24	27	9

By 2019 some patterns remain like 2000 while others have changed. The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and the Wesleyan Church maintain figures like those from 2000 (table 4). The United Methodist Church is the only denomination to maintain the distinctive movement from lower AWA:PF ratios from the largest to the smallest congregations so common across many denominations in 2000. The Church of the Nazarene also keeps its pattern of an opposite movement in which larger churches have higher AWA:PF ratios.

Table 4. In 2019, midsize churches had lower average worship attendance to professions of faith ratios than either large churches or small churches in four out of seven Protestant denominations.

Size tiers - 2019	DOC	NAZ	ELCA	EPIS	UCC	UMC	WES
Large (501+ AWA)	64	35	25	32	69	27	6
Midsize (101-500 AWA)	32	23	24	31	30	28	9
Small (100 or fewer AWA)	38	19	33	56	51	40	9



However, except for the ELCA and Wesleyan Church, two characteristics are seen across most of the denominations for which we have sufficient data to make comparisons. First, the number of worshipers for each new profession of faith grows significantly from 2000 to 2019. Second, the most effective churches in reaching new adherents using the AWA:PF standard are midsize churches rather than larger churches. The smallest churches, except for the Church of the Nazarene, continue to do less well in reaching new adherents.

Proportions of New Adherents by Congregational Size

In 2000, about three-quarters of professions of faith came from churches with attendance of 101 or more with one-quarter coming from churches with attendance of 100 or fewer (figure 1). The largest share of new adherents are found in midsize churches with 101 to 500 attenders. The Wesleyan Church is excluded from these calculations. Their preponderance of new adherents coming from their largest churches is an outlier that should be noted but if included in the averages below would distort the picture of what is happening across the other denominations.

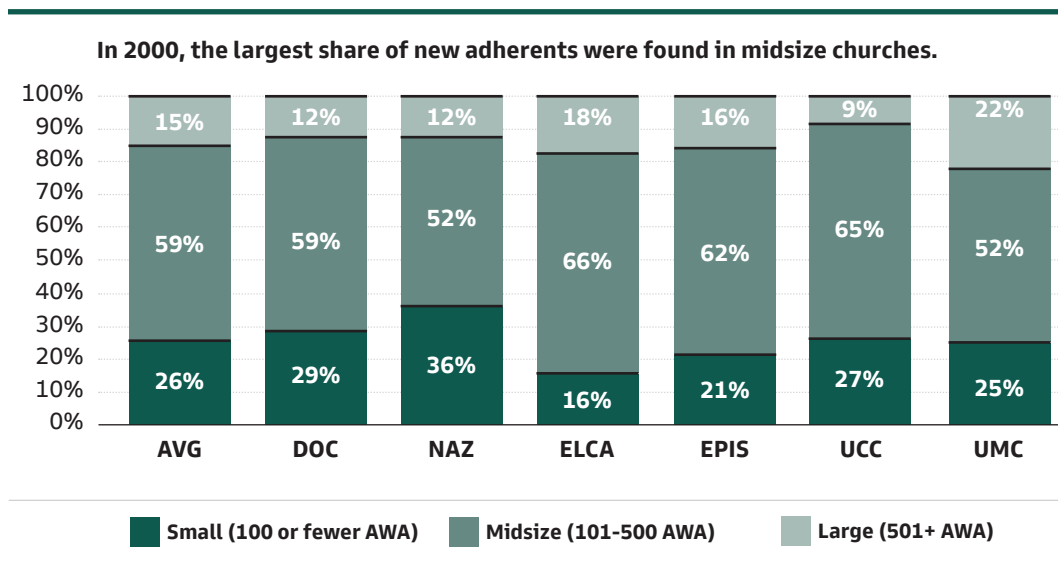


Figure 1. Percentage of new adherents in small, midsize, and large churches across seven Protestant denominations in 2000



In 2019, the proportions of new adherents coming from churches averaging 101 or more worship attendance and those with fewer in attendance changed. Now 61 percent of professions of faith were coming from churches with 101 or more attendance and 39 percent from smaller congregations (figure 2). There are a few factors leading to this change. First, there was a major shifting of church sizes caused by larger churches declining in attendance. The proportion of churches averaging 100 or fewer in attendance was higher in 2019 than in 2000. Second, while AWA:PF ratios increased in all size tiers between 2000 and 2019, the AWA:PF ratio for larger churches, particularly those with 501 or greater attendance, rose most of all as they received fewer new adherents as a proportion of worshippers. We do not have baptisms by size tiers for Southern Baptists in 2000, but in 2019 their comparable percentages were: Large churches (39 percent of baptisms), Midsize churches (36 percent of baptisms), and Small churches (25 percent of baptisms).

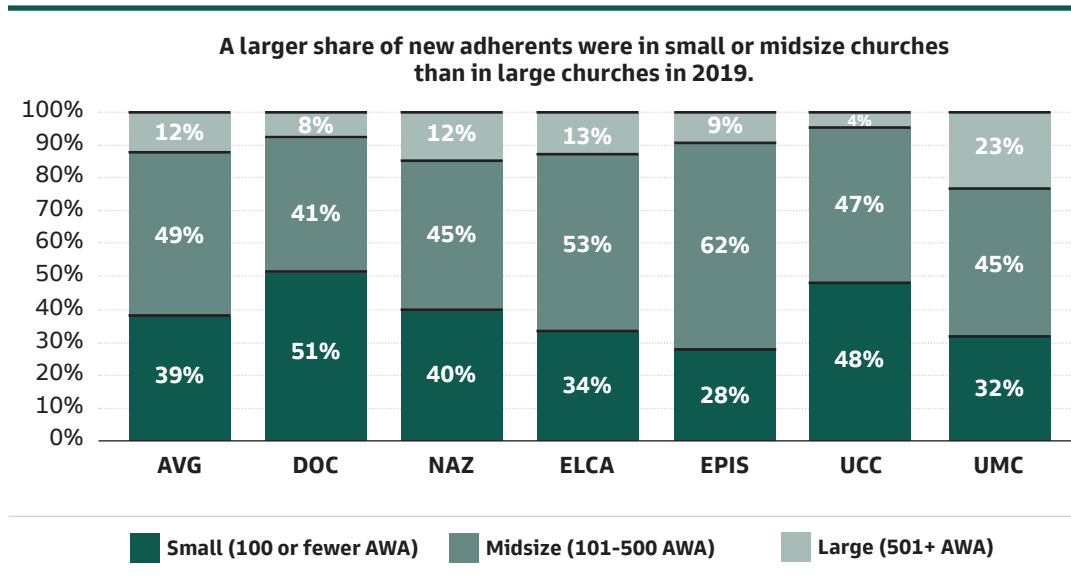


Figure 2. Percentage of new adherents in small, midsize, and large churches across seven Protestant denominations in 2019



Observations and Implications

When membership declines, the natural tendency is to explain it away. In 1998, when the Southern Baptists showed their first membership decline in seventy years, some blamed the loss on a new computer system, while others said it was a temporary downturn as churches “clean” their rolls. United Methodists have used the “cleaning the rolls” mantra to explain slow growth or no growth for over a century. Some attribute declines to formulas for denominational giving based on membership. Despite the imprecise nature of church rolls, membership decline should be seen as a lagging indicator that some other important things need attention. Changes in adherents merely capture the effectiveness of traditions to reach new people compared to their loss of people.

Some level of tension is always present in healthy and growing churches. However, severe conflict in congregations and denominations tends to take a toll on participation and membership. Several of the denominations whose data are presented in this report have undergone major bouts of conflict in the past two decades. Damage from conflict appears to happen across ideologies. For example, some mainline denominations have lost churches and members because of policies perceived as too liberal. On the other hand, Southern Baptists had their first membership loss in 1998, after the Convention passed a resolution about “wives submitting graciously to their husbands” building on a growing conservative stance overall. It appears that becoming more conservative does not correlate with more new adherents any more than becoming more liberal does. There are many other variables.


Time also appears to take its toll. Churches of any age can grow, but the likelihood that a church will grow decreases with age. Within a denomination, churches founded after 1990, for example, will grow annually at a higher percentage than churches founded

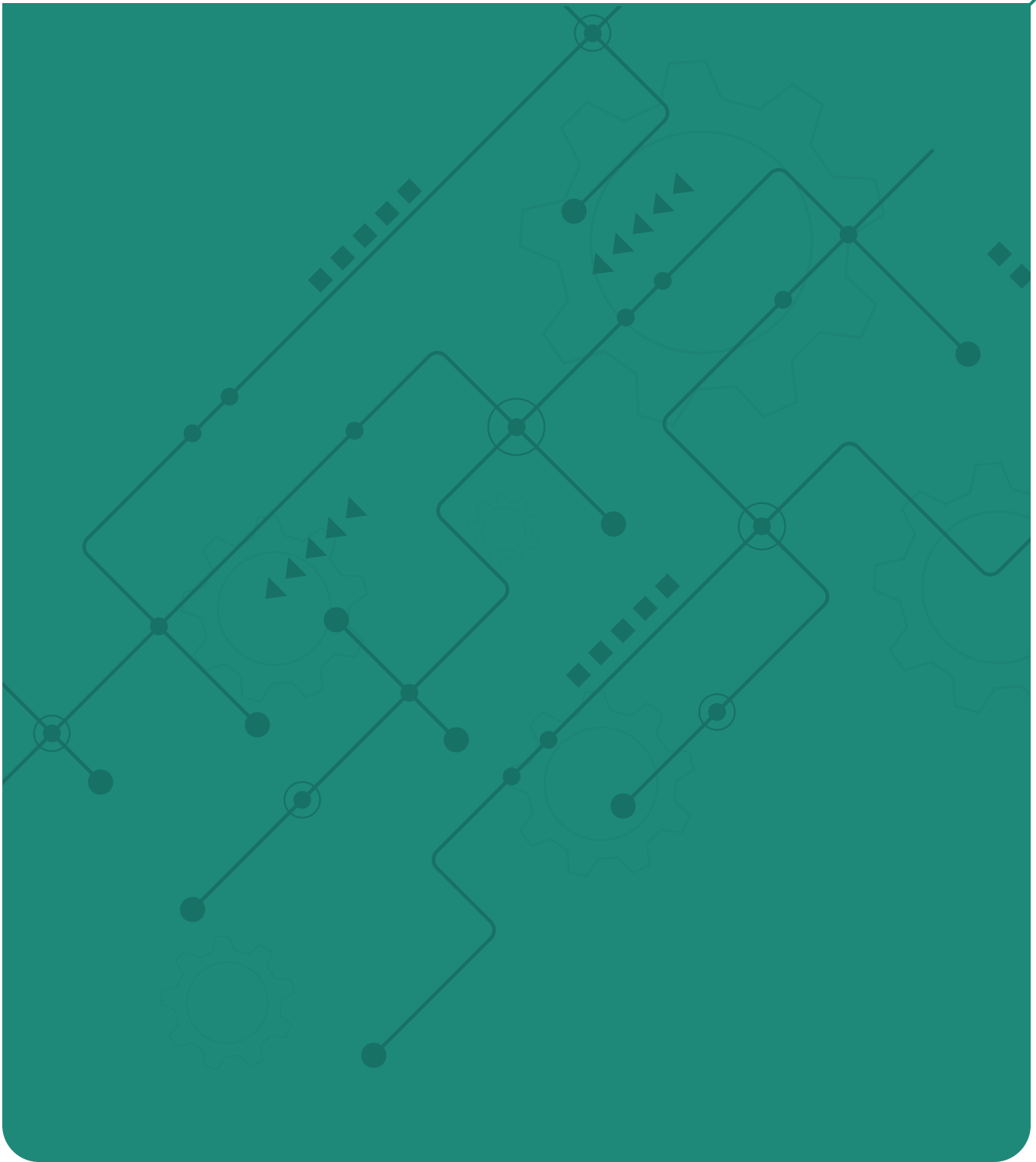
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before 1990. Many denominations in the United States have an abundance of churches that go back many decades and in some cases centuries.

Another impact of time is that as churches become successful, it often becomes harder and harder to maintain success. With maturity comes a level of organizational complexity that can be a barrier to growth. And as churches and their members prosper, there is a temptation to become removed from the practices that led to success in the first place. Today's Southern Baptists may be experiencing what Methodists did in the 19th century, namely that the spectacular growth that led to becoming the largest Protestant denominations in the country took place when they were often seen on the sidelines of religious life that was dominated by more established traditions. 



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