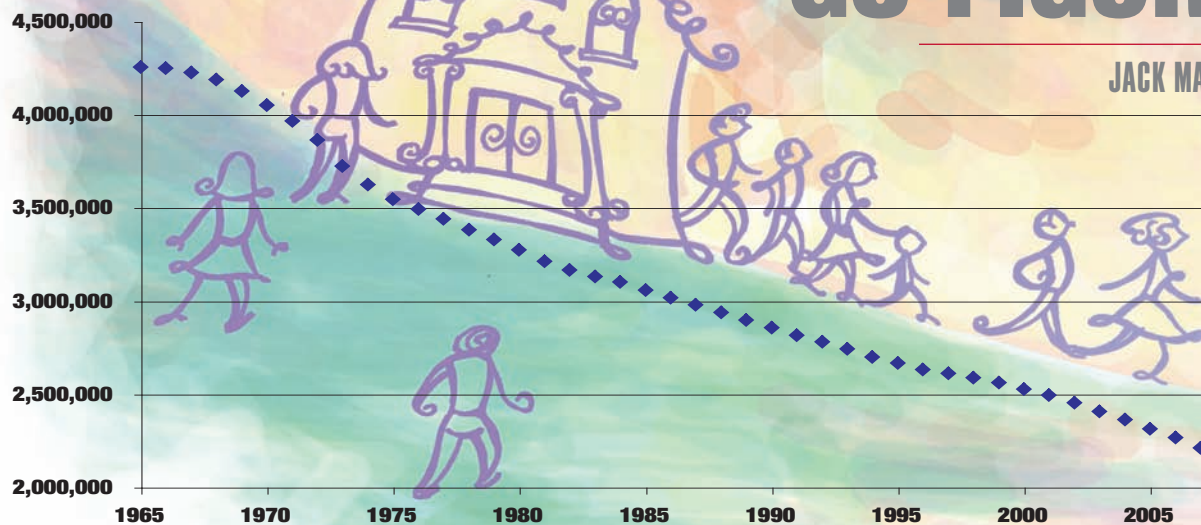


# GO FIGURE

JACK MARCUM

ILLUSTRATION BY ANITA DUFALLA



## The Shrinking Church

The 2007 statistics are out, so let's revisit the ongoing trend of membership loss:

- In 2007 the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) had a net loss of 57,572 members (2.5 percent).
- This drop was the largest percentage loss since 1974 (2.7 percent), and the largest numerical loss since 1981 (61,493).\*
- There have been 42 straight years of net losses, during which time the membership has dropped 48 percent (from 4,254,597 in 1965 to 2,209,546 in 2007).
- The average annual rate of net loss has accelerated in recent years to 1.9 percent (2000–2007), compared to 1.5 percent over the entire 42 years.
- A straight line extrapolation based on the 1965 to 2007 period yields a projected membership of 1,300,000 in 2025 and 100,000 in 2050.

\* Numbers prior to 1983 are for the combined memberships of the UPCUSA and the PCUS.

## What the research shows

The PC(USA) is in a long-term trend of net membership losses. As indicated previously here, the major reason is the low birthrate among Presbyterians, but another major factor is a drift away from the church: In 2007, the largest category of loss, 102,000, was “other”—primarily transfers to the inactive roll. By contrast, congregations reported many fewer deaths (33,535) or transfers out (30,329).

Total annual losses have actually dropped 10 percent since 2000 (from 184,148 to 166,578). But total annual gains dropped even more sharply (27 percent) over the same period, from 149,277 to 109,006. More specifically, the number of professions of faith among youth dropped 27 percent (30,182 to 22,054), and among adults, 25 percent (60,299 to 45,269).

Transfers into PC(USA) congregations dropped 34 percent (45,955 to 30,329). In short, net membership losses have grown largely because of accelerating declines in the numbers of persons joining Presbyterian congregations.

Evangelism is not generally considered a Presbyterian strength. These numbers suggest that we are becoming even less adept at it.

The 2008 General Assembly approved an evangelism emphasis, “Grow the Church Deep and Wide,” which may help. As a researcher I would be more confident if we first had a better fix on why so few new people are joining. But doing something is better than passively observing. We don't have another 42 years to watch and wait. □

Other findings at [www.pcusa.org/research](http://www.pcusa.org/research)

Jack Marcum is coordinator of Research Services for the General Assembly Council of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).