

Recent Changes in Membership and Attendance in Mainline Protestant Denominations

November 2006

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Introduction

How much have the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and other U.S. mainline Protestant denominations shrunk in recent years, and how should we interpret that shrinkage? This question has concerned both mainline Protestants and religious researchers, as news about declining membership and worship attendance has filled the media.

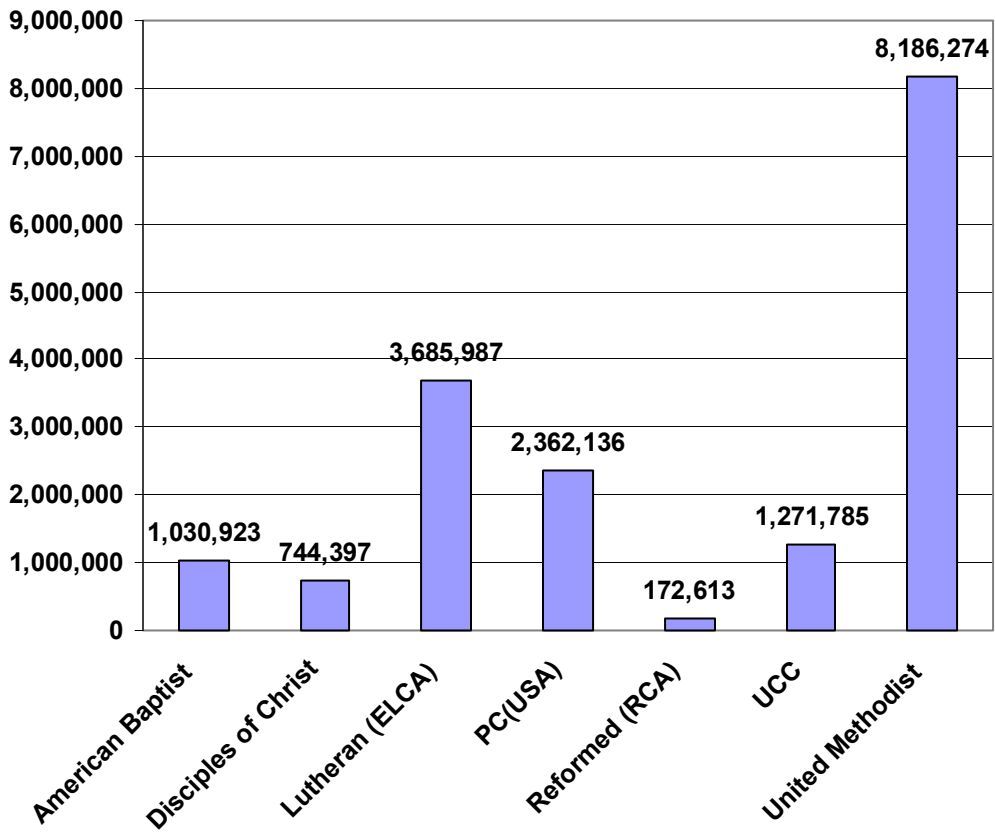
Comparing changes in membership and average weekly worship attendance for the PC(USA) with changes in membership and attendance for other denominations can place those changes in context. Traditionally, religious researchers have categorized the PC(USA) as a mainline Protestant denomination. Mainline Protestant denominations were the dominant U.S. Protestant denominations in the 1700s, 1800s, and early 1900s. Most are rooted in the U.S. North, and most have maintained moderate theologies that stress both social justice concerns, on the one hand, and personal salvation and evangelism, on the other hand.

In the following pages are comparisons of changes in membership and average weekly worship attendance for the PC(USA) and half a dozen other U.S. mainline Protestant denominations.

Membership

With more than 8 million members in 2004, the United Methodist Church is the largest U.S. mainline Protestant denomination. The second largest mainline denomination is the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), with approximately 3.7 million members. The PC(USA), with 2.4 million members, is the third largest mainline denomination.

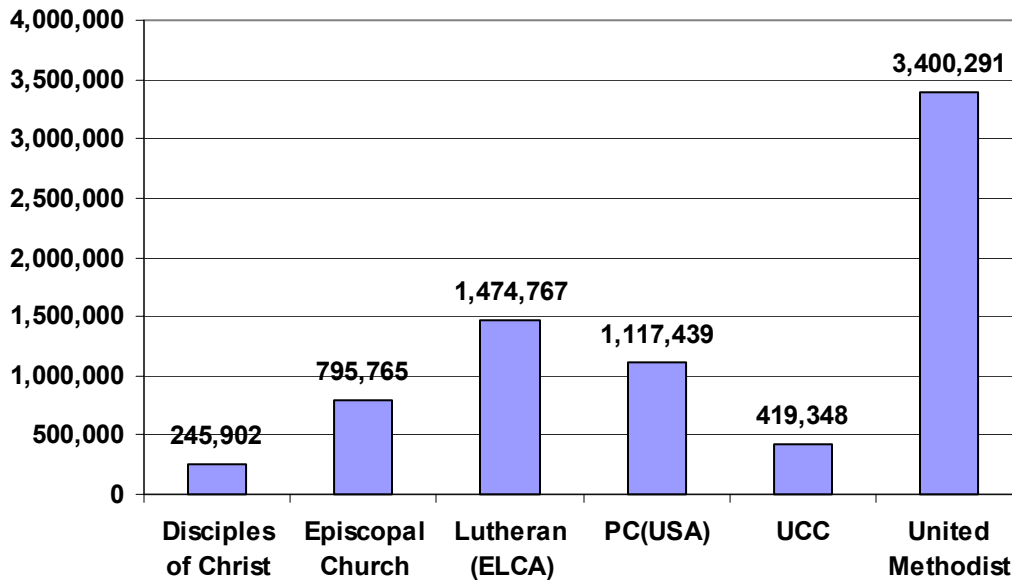
2004 Membership



Average Weekly Worship Attendance

Patterns across denominations for average weekly worship attendance parallel those for membership. In 2004 a total of 1.1 million worshipers attended Sunday services (on average) at PC(USA) congregations. This means that, among mainline Protestant denominations, the PC(USA) lags in average attendance behind only the United Methodist Church and Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

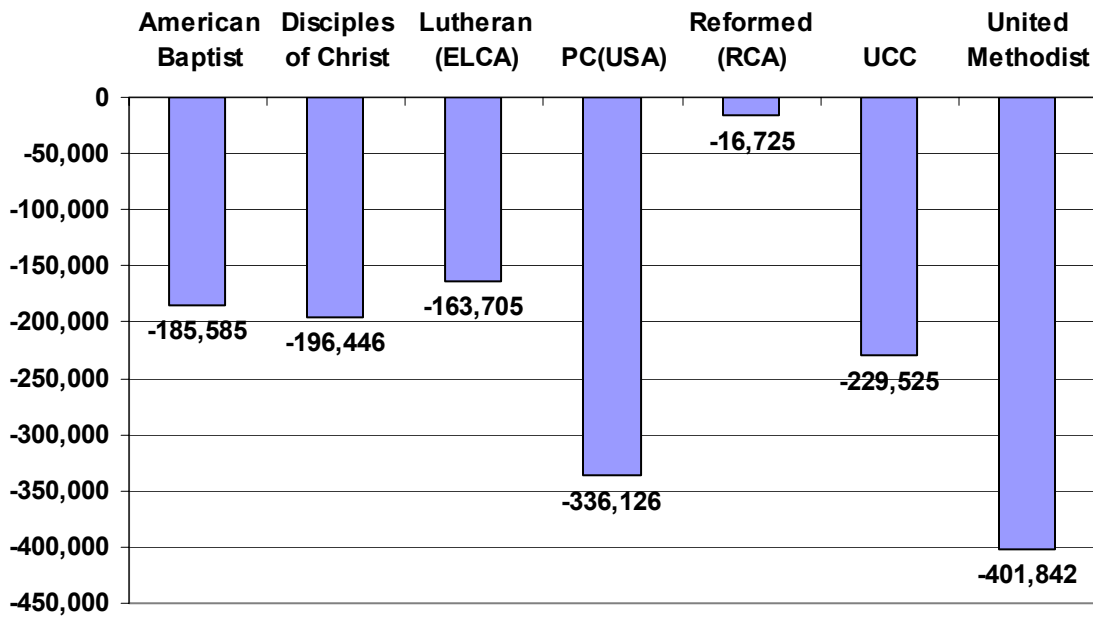
2004 Average Worship Attendance



Changes in Membership

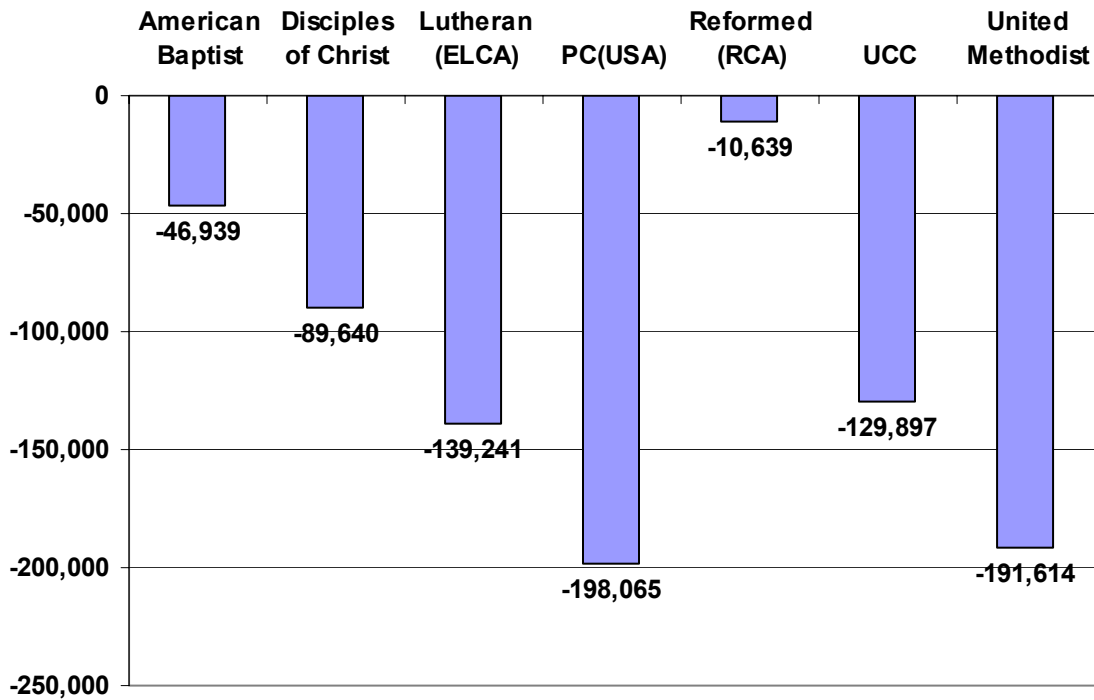
Over the past ten years, the largest mainline denomination, the United Methodist Church, has experienced the largest net numerical decline in membership. There were approximately 400,000 fewer United Methodists in 2004 than there were in 1994. The PC(USA) experienced a net decline of about 336,000 members during the same period, second behind the Methodists.

10-Year Change in Membership: 1994-2004



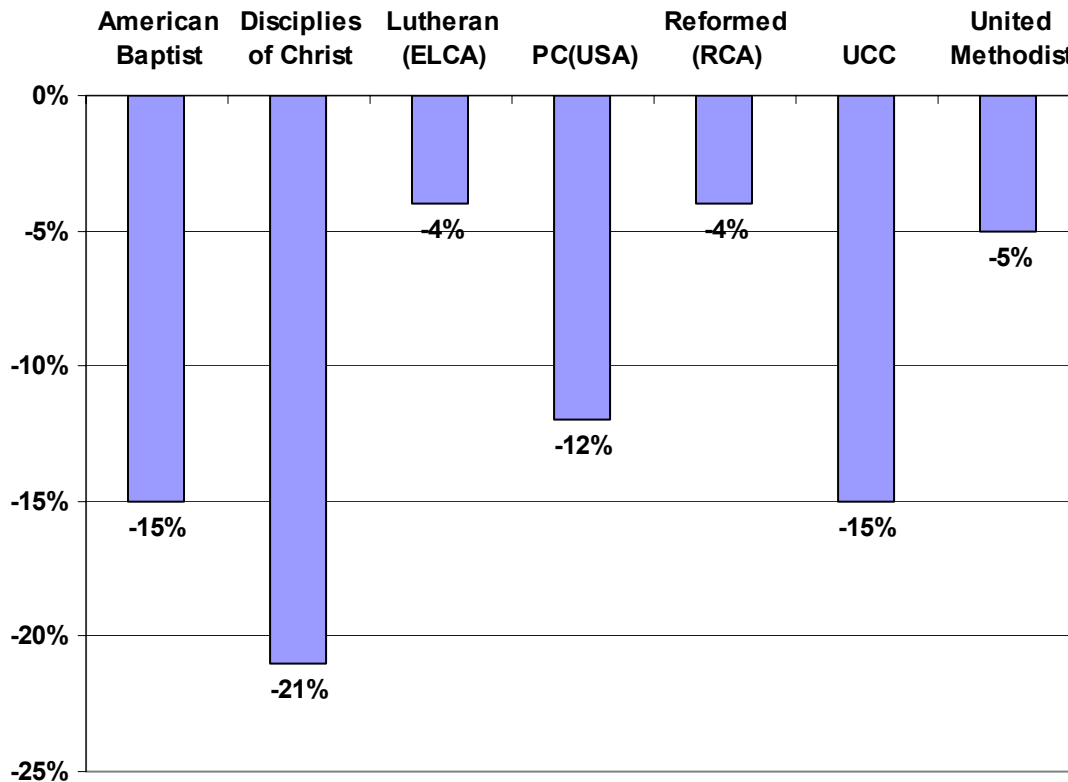
The PC(USA) has lost more members in the past five years than any other mainline Protestant denomination. Between 1999 and 2004, the PC(USA) experienced a net numerical decline of nearly 200,000 members. Close behind have been the United Methodists (down about 192,000), Lutherans (ELCA; down about 139,000), and United Church of Christ (down about 130,000).

5-Year Change in Membership: 1999-2004



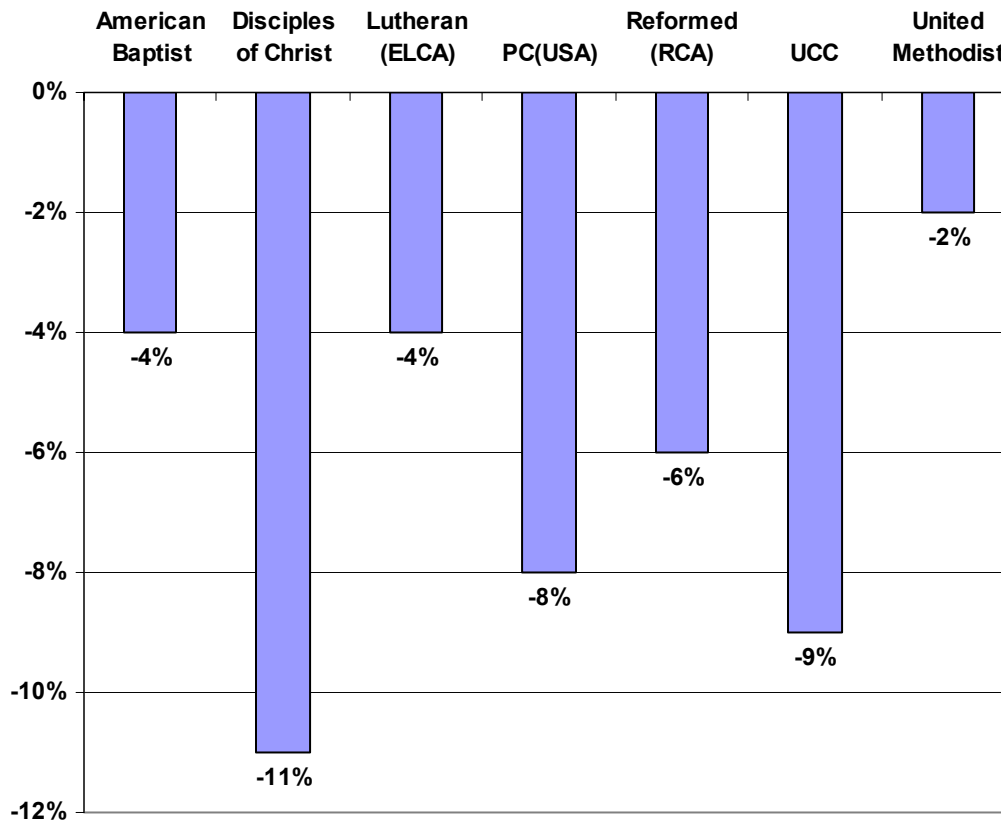
In the past ten years, three small mainline Protestant denominations have experienced large net percentage declines in membership. Leading the way—with a 21% net membership decline between 1994 and 2004—was the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). The American Baptist Churches U.S.A. and United Church of Christ (UCC) each declined 15% in membership. The PC(USA) experienced a 12% net membership decline.

10-Year % Change in Membership: 1994-2004



In the past five years, two small mainline Protestant denominations have experienced large net percentage membership declines. The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) was 11% smaller in 2004 than in 1999. The United Church of Christ was 9% smaller. Also shrinking was the PC(USA), which was 8% smaller, and the Reformed Church in America, which was 6% smaller. Rebounding was the American Baptist Churches U.S.A., whose late 1990s membership decline leveled off between 1999 and 2004.

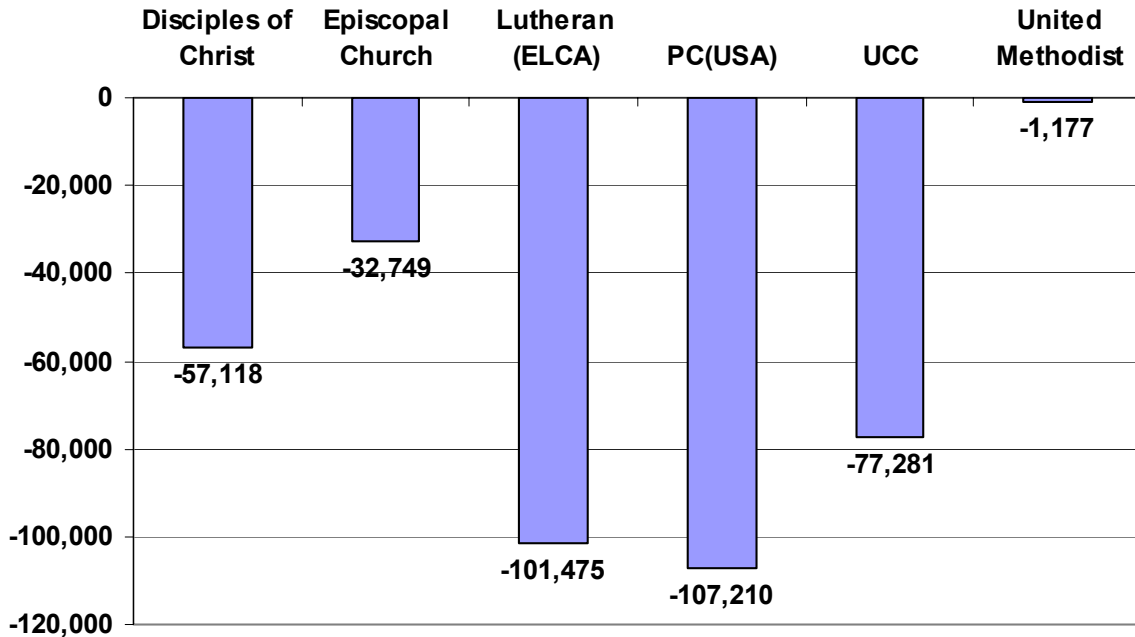
5-Year % Change in Membership: 1999-2004



Changes in Average Weekly Worship Attendance

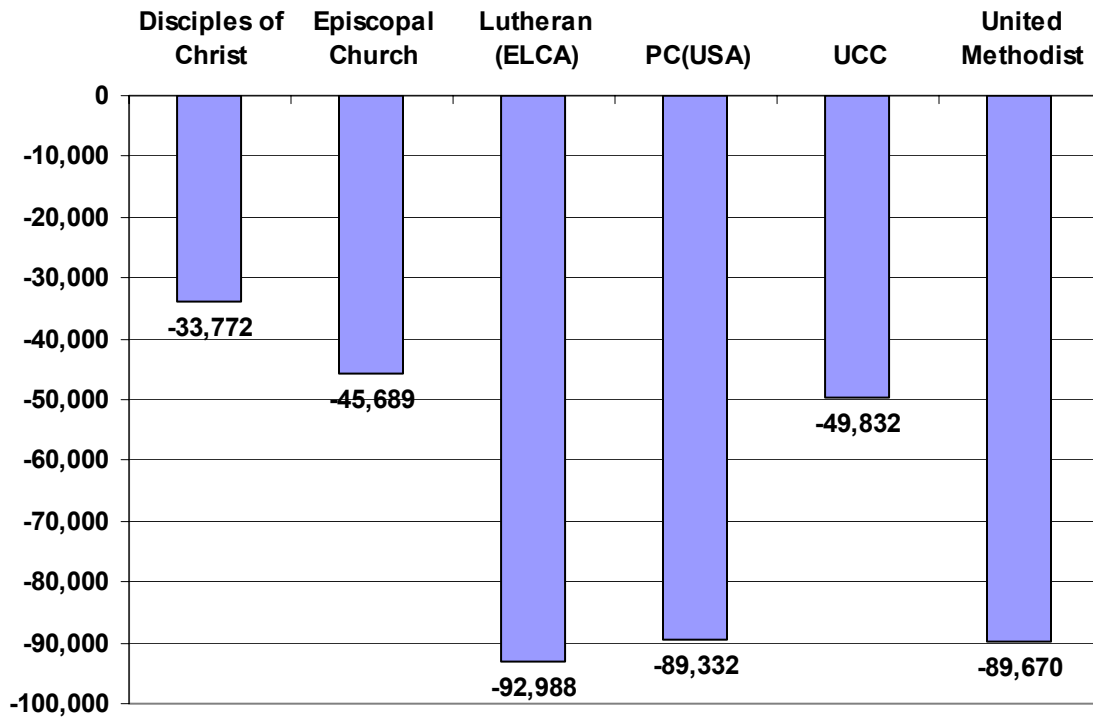
In the past ten years the PC(USA) experienced a decline in average weekly worship attendance that was larger than the declines that other mainline Protestant denominations experienced. About 107,000 fewer worshippers filled pews in PC(USA) congregations in 2004 than had in 1994. The ELCA (down about 101,000 worshippers) and UCC (down about 77,000) also experienced large attendance declines. United Methodist congregations experienced almost no change in average weekly worship attendance between 1994 and 2004.

10-Year Change in Average Worship Attendance: 1994-2004



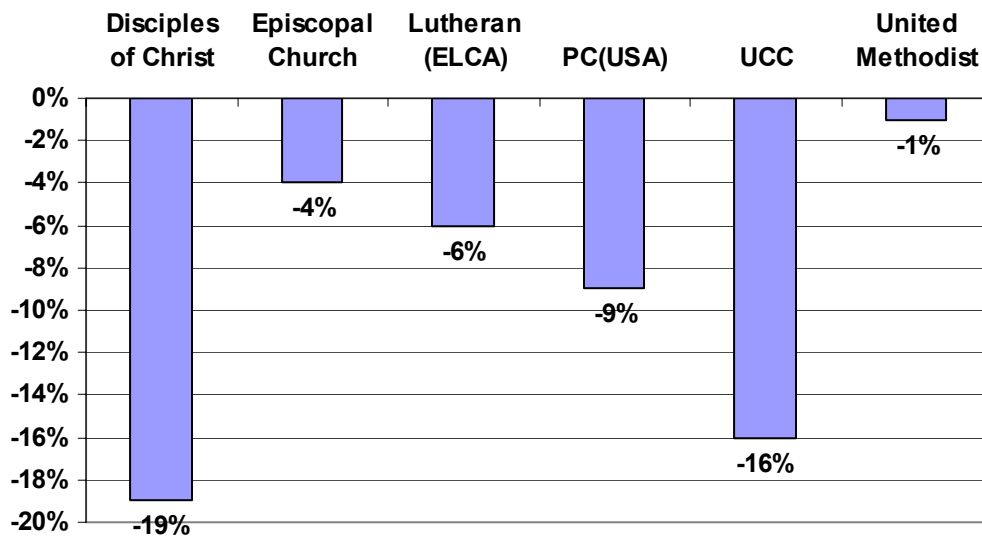
During the past five years the three largest mainline Protestant denominations—the ELCA, United Methodist Church, and PC(USA), in that order—have experienced the largest numerical declines in average weekly worship attendance. After gaining slightly in average attendance in the late 1990s, United Methodists saw attendance at their congregations plunge between 1999 and 2004.

5-Year Change in Average Worship Attendance: 1999-2004



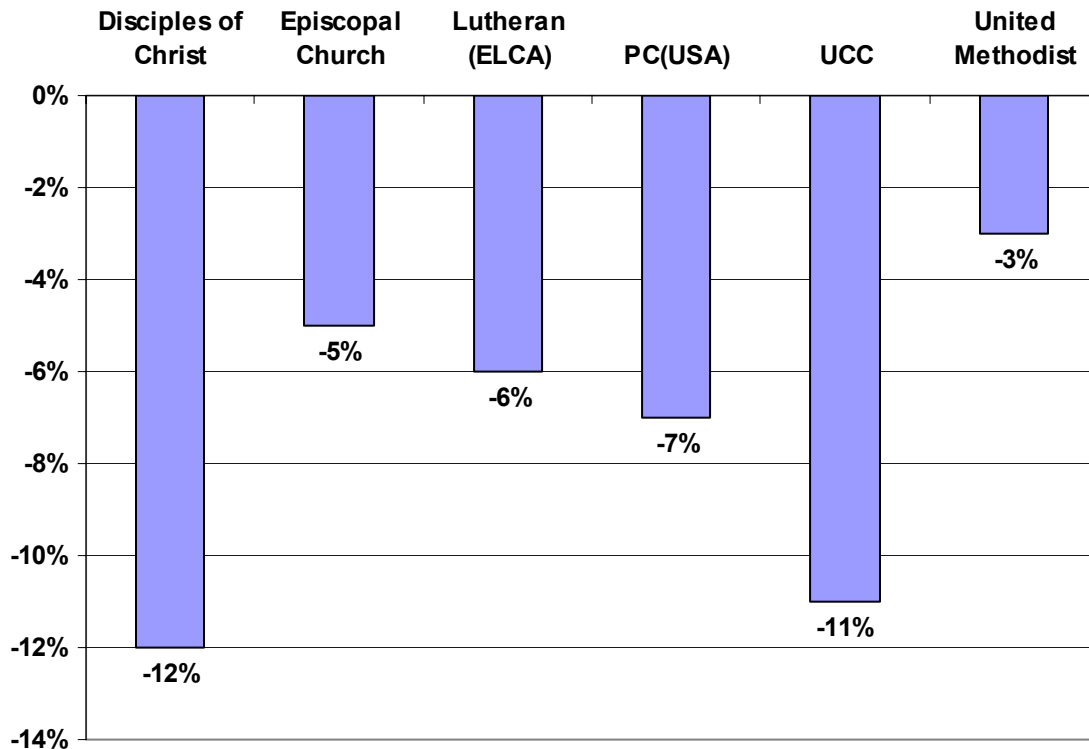
During the past ten years, two small mainline Protestant denominations—the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) and United Church of Christ—have experienced double-digit percentage declines in average weekly worship attendance. Average attendance in 2004 for the Disciples of Christ was 19% smaller than in 1994, and average attendance for the UCC was 16% smaller. Behind these two denominations was the PC(USA), with average attendance in 2004 9% smaller than that in 1994. The United Methodists suffered almost no percentage attendance decline between 1994 and 2004.

**10-Year % Change in Average Worship Attendance:
1994-2004**



The same mainline Protestant denominations that experienced the largest percentage declines in average weekly worship attendance during the past ten years—the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) and United Church of Christ—did so in the past five years also. Between 1999 and 2004 the large attendance declines that had already affected these smaller denominations spread to the larger denominations. Methodists, Lutherans (ELCA), Presbyterians, and Episcopalians experienced little change in average worship attendance between 1994 and 1999. Attendance at congregations of all four denominations, however, fell significantly between 1999 and 2004. Declining most rapidly among these four was attendance at PC(USA) congregations. PC(USA) average attendance was 7% smaller in 2004 than in 1999.

**5-Year % Change in Average Worship Attendance:
1999-2004**



Conclusion

Two small mainline Protestant denominations—the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) and United Church of Christ—have experienced larger **percentage** declines in membership and average weekly worship attendance than the other mainline denominations studied.

Nevertheless, declines in PC(USA) membership and worship attendance are noteworthy. Down nearly 200,000 members between 1999 and 2004, the PC(USA) has experienced a five-year net membership decline larger than any other mainline denomination. The PC(USA)'s five-year percentage decline in membership (8%) was at least double that of the other two large mainline denominations for which membership figures are available (ELCA, down 4%; United Methodist Church, down 2%).

Between 1994 and 2004, the PC(USA) experienced a ten-year decline in average weekly worship attendance larger than any other mainline denomination (a decline of more than 100,000 in attendance). The past five years (1999-2004) have essentially seen a dead heat in attendance decline, with the ELCA, PC(USA), and United Methodist Church all down about 90,000 in attendance. Of the larger mainline denominations, three—Episcopal Church, ELCA, and PC(USA)—all experienced percentage attendance declines of 5% or more. The PC(USA), down 7%, again led the way.

What might have caused the membership and attendance declines—differential fertility, the changing racial and ethnic composition of the U.S. population, social conflict, declining community involvement, changing worship styles, congregational consolidation, or other factors?—is a topic that merits further research and discussion. Researchers, Presbyterians, and other mainline Protestants ought to continue monitoring these trends. This is all the more so because it seems possible that this participation decline is unique to the PC(USA) and other mainline Protestant denominations (and is **not** found in non-mainline denominations).

For a thoughtful discussion of the PC(USA) participation decline, see Clifton Kirkpatrick, "A Wake-Up Call to the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)," in *Perspectives* (June 2005), accessible at:
<http://www.pcusa.org/oga/perspectives/jun05/wakeup.htm>

Notes

All membership and attendance data are as reported by local congregations to denominational staff. For all but the American Baptist Churches U.S.A., membership data include active, confirmed members only. The American Baptist Churches leave it entirely to congregations to define what constitutes church membership. Membership data for the Episcopal Church in the USA are not included because these data are not internally consistent (as definitions changed regularly) and the Episcopal Church does not currently use definitions that are consistent with those of other denominations (the denomination includes baptised members not confirmed, which includes many young children). No attendance data were available for the American Baptist Churches U.S.A. or the Reformed Church in America.

Sources of these data were:

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