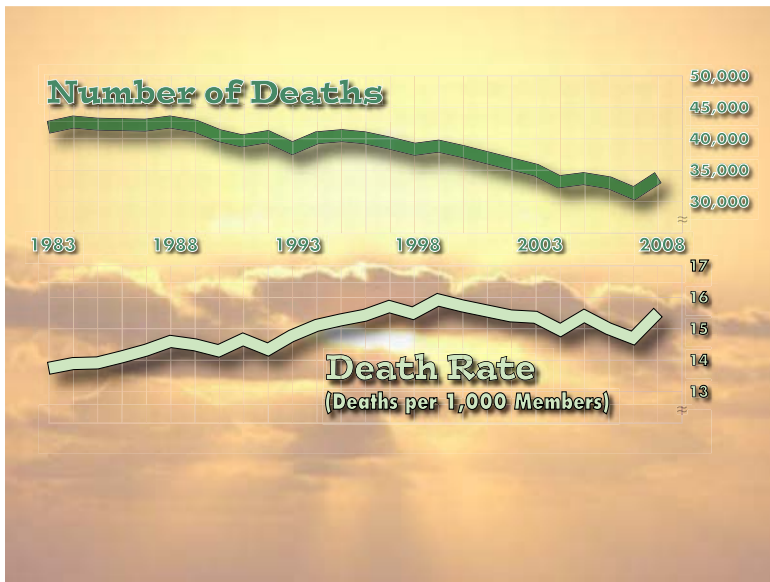


GO FIGURE

JACK MARCUM



GRAPHIC BY JEFFREY LAWRENCE

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What the research shows

Presbyterians are relatively older—the median age in 2008 was 60 years for both members and elders, compared to 42 years for the equivalent U.S. population—so we shouldn’t be surprised that the death rate is much higher than that of the country. It might easily be worse. Applying age-specific death rates for the U.S. population to the PC(USA) age distribution yields an estimated 44,144 deaths of Presbyterians in 2008, or about 29 percent higher than the actual number (34,101). The lower Presbyterian death rate likely results from more of us having characteristics associated with lower mortality—college degrees, higher incomes, white ethnicity.

Still, Presbyterian death rates will probably creep upward, if only because of increases in the average age of the denomination. But we’re unlikely to see a sharp increase for many years, not until most of the baby boomers (born 1946 to 1964) reach their 70s and 80s.

We can’t do much about deaths. But we might be able to do something about the three times as many members who drift away from our congregations annually. On All Saints Day, perhaps we could read the names not only of those who died in the prior year but also of those who dropped out. It would remind us that one way to honor the memory of the deceased is to work harder to minister to those in our congregations whose departure we might have the power to prevent. □

Mortality trends among Presbyterians

In a previous column I examined how births (and their absence) have affected membership size in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). It’s time to give the other end of the life cycle its due.

- **For 2008, congregations reported 34,101 member deaths**, a drop from 40,096 in 2000, and 43,270 in 1984 when the total peaked.
- **The member death rate climbed steadily from 13.8 per 1,000 members in 1984 to 15.9 in 1999.** It remained above 15.6 per 1,000 for the next five years, then began falling, reaching 14.8 in 2007, only to increase to 15.4 in 2008.
- **Deaths as a percentage of annual membership losses grew slightly and unevenly from the mid-1980s** (it was lowest, at 18.3 percent of all losses, in 1985) to 1999, when it peaked at 22.3 percent. It has since declined to 19.7 percent.
- **In 2006 the death rate in the United States for the equivalent population—those aged 13 or older*—was 9.7, or only about two-thirds of the PC(USA) rate.** It was 8.3 for the entire U.S. population.

*Those younger than 13 are excluded since individuals don’t usually become members of Presbyterian congregations until their early teen years.

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