

Membership Change in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.): Trends in Gains and Losses¹

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Even casual observers of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) are likely aware that the membership of the denomination has decreased steadily for quite some time. Less attention has been given, however, to the specifics behind that drop. Typically we see a chart showing total membership over a period of years. Indirectly, such a chart tells us the net membership change from one year to the next, but less often is that net change shown directly. Similarly, the actual numbers of gains and losses are infrequently shown, much less the components of those categories. By presenting in detail the factors that, together, produce the annual membership totals, this brief essay seeks to help Presbyterians better understand how their denomination got to its present situation.

Overall Trends in Gains and Losses

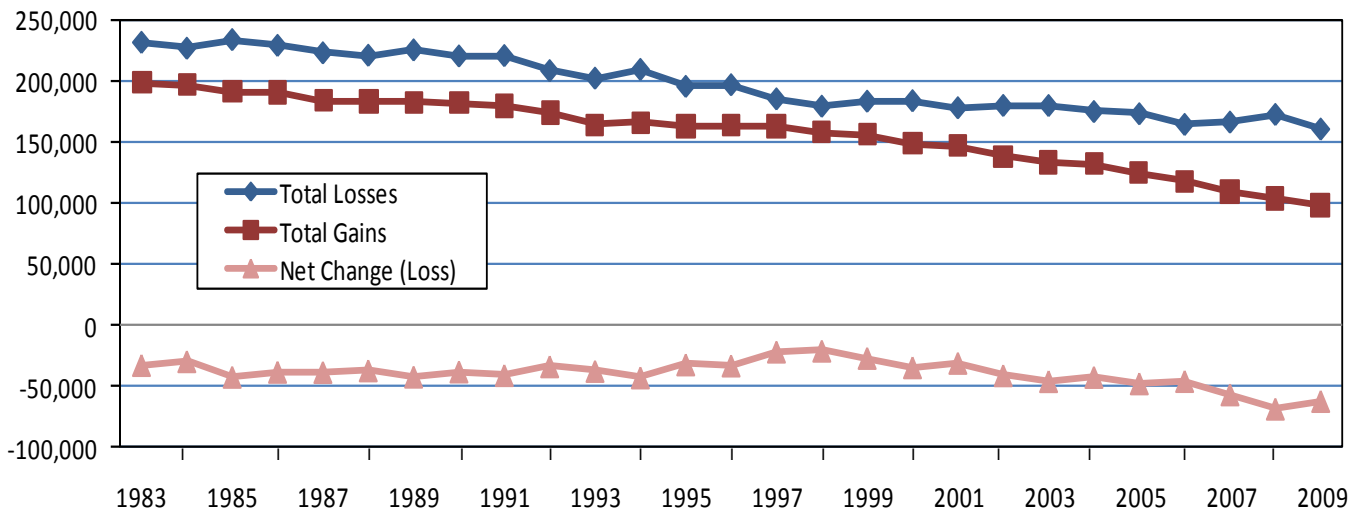
Figure 1 shows the total gains, total losses, and net change every year since the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) was created in 1983. From then until 2009, annual gains fell from 198,753 to 97,830, a drop of 51%, while annual losses fell from 232,095 to 160,857, a decline of 31%. The average annual net loss has been 1.5%, with year-to-year declines ranging from 0.8% (in both 1997 and 1998) to 3.1% (2008). The net loss rate began to accelerate in 1999; the largest percentage losses, all 2% or more, happened over the 2005 to 2009 period. Sharper declines in the number of gains relative to the number of losses are responsible for the greater rate of net loss.

The PC(USA) has lost more members than it has gained in every year since 1983.

In recent years, gains have fallen more sharply than before, even as losses have stayed relatively stable.

The net membership loss in 2008 was 3.1%; in 2009, 2.9%.

Figure 1. Total Gains and Losses, 1983 to 2009



¹ The opinions and interpretations presented in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of other church staff or elected representatives.

Components of Gains

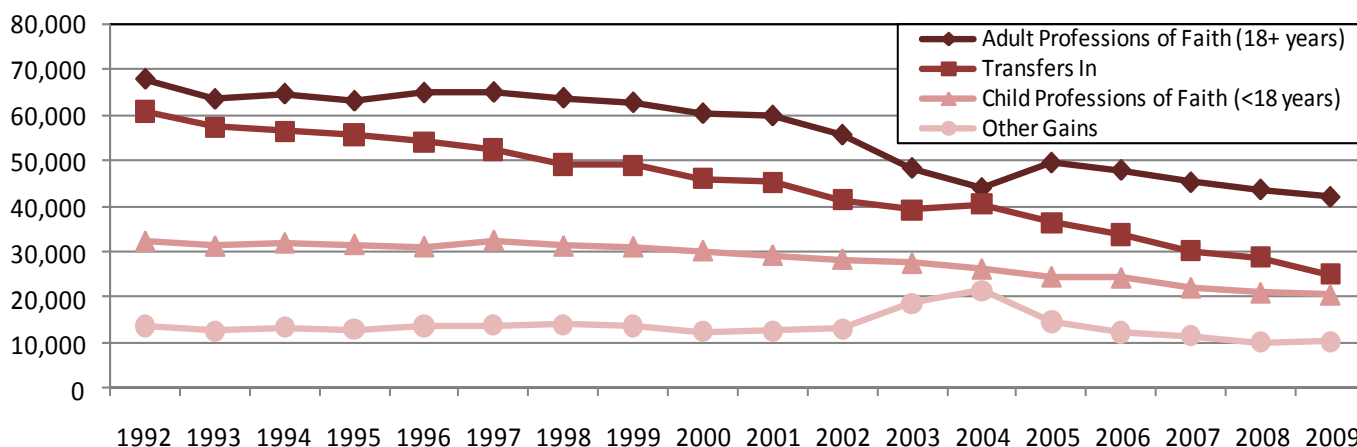
The PC(USA) asks each congregation to report member gains using three categories:

- *Professions of faith:* This category includes people who join by publicly professing their faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, by reaffirming their faith (unchurched but baptized Christians who reaffirm their faith in Jesus), or by having their active membership restored from the inactive roll. Since 1992, professions of faith are reported for two subcategories based on age: 17 and younger, and 18 and older.
- *Transfers in:* This category includes people who belonged to another Christian congregation, whether PC(USA) or not, whose membership was officially moved from that congregation via a certificate of transfer.
- *Other gains:* This is a residual category; it primarily contains error corrections and omissions from earlier years rather than actual gains in the year in question.

Figure 2 disaggregates professions of faith by age, transfers in, and other gains back to 1992. (Category definitions were changed then, so prior data are not comparable.) All four categories show declines over this period, but the magnitude and pattern differ for each one.

Adults who join by profession of faith are the largest component of membership gains.

Figure 2. Components of Membership Gains, 1992 to 2009



The largest drop over the 1992-2009 period is among transfers from other congregations, whose numbers have fallen by 35,787, or 59%. Next largest is the drop of 25,701 in adult professions of faith (38%), followed by the 11,725 drop (36%) in child professions of faith; together, professions of faith fell 37% over the 17-year period. The fall in adult professions of faith has been steady, dropping in every year but one (2005). Child professions of faith remained fairly stable through 1999 before beginning a series of small but regular annual declines.

The number of new members joining by letter of transfer fell by more than half from 1992 to 2009.

Other gains fell by 3,391 (25%) over the 17 years, but were relatively stable for most of the period, save for a two-year spike that peaked in 2004 at 21,385. After that, other gains dropped sharply to 12,269 by 2007, and reached 10,294 in 2009.²

The result of these differential patterns has been a slow change in the relative contributions of the various components to total membership gains. Transfers in fell from 35% of all gains in 1992 to 26% in 2009, while the relative contribution of the other three all grew: adult professions of faith, from 39% to 43%; child professions of faith, from 18% to 21%; and other gains, from 8% to 11%.

Professions of faith have dropped by more than one-third over the same period.

² For a number that had not shifted by as much as 10% over any two-year period during the previous decade to jump so dramatically—by 63% in just two years—and then, just as quickly, drop back, is very puzzling. A change of this magnitude seems unlikely to result from random fluctuations, but a careful review of individual congregational reports has yielded no apparent explanation.

Components of Losses

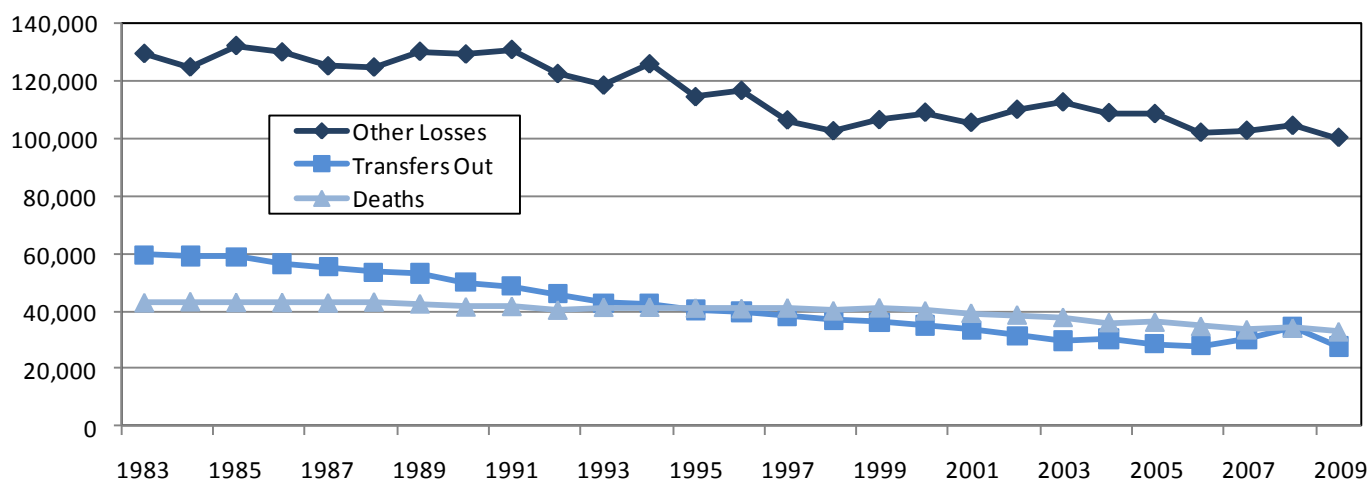
Total membership losses consist of three categories of members who have left:

- *Deaths*: This category consists of members who die.
- *Transfers out*: This category includes members who officially join other congregations, whether PC(USA) or other, via a letter of transfer.
- *Other losses*: This is a residual category for all other losses; most of these are removals from the active to the inactive roll, though some consist of corrections of errors and omissions from prior years.

Figure 3 shows the trends in losses by category since 1983. The general trend for all three components is downward: by 2009, the number of deaths was 10,071 fewer than in 1983 (down 23%); the number of other losses was 29,325 fewer (also down 23%); and the number of transfers out 31,842 fewer (down 53%). Most of the decline in deaths and other losses happened after 1994; before that, the number of each remained relatively stable from year to year.

All categories of loss show decreases, led by transfers out, which dropped by more than half from 1983 to 2009.

Figure 3. Components of Membership Losses, 1983 to 2009



The number of transfers out fell steadily from 1983 to 2006, then increased for two years (up 6,440, or 23%) before falling again to a new low of 27,777 in 2009 (down 6,563; 19%). The 2006-2008 increase was driven entirely by an unusual number of congregations dismissed to other denominations over that period: 12 in 2007, 25 in 2008, and 15 in 2009 (the annual average for 1995 to 2006 was 2.5).³ Some dismissed congregations had large memberships. Without those departures, the number of transfers out would have maintained the steady pattern of decline of earlier years.

The recent increase in transfers out, combined with continuing annual declines in transfers in, has reversed the longstanding pattern of more gains than losses from transfers. This would not have happened without the contribution from dismissed congregations, however.⁴ Nevertheless, without the dismissals the two trend lines would have continued to converge in recent years, suggesting such a reversal would have happened eventually, anyway.

Transfers in and out have fallen faster than other categories of gains and losses, becoming a diminishing share of each.

The different trends in loss components have changed their relative contributions to total membership loss. Transfers out fell from 26% of total losses in 1983 to 17% in 2009, while shares of the other components grew: deaths, from 18% to 20%, and other losses, from 56% to 62%.

More than 6 in 10 losses in 2009 were "other losses," a category consisting mainly of members moved to the inactive roll.

³ Members in dismissed congregations are counted as transfers out in the year in which the congregation was dismissed.

⁴ 4,555 members in dismissed congregations in 2007 (15% of all transfers out); 9,811 in 2008 (29%); and 6,216 in 2009 (22%).

Implications

The PC(USA) has half the members its predecessor denominations did in 1965, a net loss of almost 2.1 million members. The numbers presented here give no hint that this downward trend is abating; indeed, they indicate that in recent years the downward pattern has accelerated. One projection based on changes over the last decade would have the membership shrinking to zero in only 20 years.⁵

Presbyterian churches have half as many members as in 1965.

Such a “doomsday scenario” is much too pessimistic, but any prediction that the PC(USA) will make quick headway in reversing the downward trend is likewise unrealistic. Many societal forces work against such a reversal. For one thing, the downward trend in membership is not just a Presbyterian phenomenon, but has long characterized other mainline groups and, in recent years, some evangelical ones (e.g., Southern Baptists) as well. Low birth rates are a major reason, especially for Presbyterians, who long have had some of the lowest. Compounding the difficulty of generating growth via the reproductive route is, in recent years, the erosion of a longstanding pattern of Presbyterian congregations attracting more transfers than they lose. And the specter of aging baby boomers hovers over one of the more positive trends—a decline in deaths.

Other denominations are losing members, not just the PC(USA).

That’s not to say the PC(USA) should quit trying. The General Assembly isn’t doing so, having reaffirmed the important “Growing the Church Deep and Wide” initiative at its 2010 meeting. Understanding different components of gains and losses and how they contribute to the overall picture, as in this essay, can help the denomination target its efforts. It is one thing to know that net membership losses are growing; another that such changes mainly result from declining numbers of gains; and still another that a sharp dropoff of transfers of both types is the largest component of the accelerating decline. While the latter may reflect larger societal trends, such as declines in religious involvement and civic participation, it may also suggest the need for more emphasis on reaching out to newcomers and assisting those who move away to find a church in their new community. The denomination has a member referral service and, while not widely used,⁶ it could be more broadly publicized and its functions enhanced.

Knowing how separate components contribute to gains and losses can help target efforts to reverse trends.

Of course, ultimately people join or leave a congregation, not a denomination.⁷ The social context may make the task of slowing net membership loss more difficult, but the efforts of pastors, sessions, and individual members are key.

Figure 4 brings this point into focus, showing gains and losses by type in relation to total membership. In 2009, there was a net loss of 2.93 for every 100 members. Thus, any combination of more gains or fewer losses that totaled 2.93 per 100 members would have eliminated the net loss for that year. That is, one more gain or one fewer loss for every 34.1 members (100/2.93)

Figure 4. Change by Type Per 100 Members, 2009

	Per 100 Members
Gains	
Transfers in	1.17
Adult professions of faith....	1.97
Child professions of faith....	0.48
Other gains.....	0.48
Total.....	4.58
Losses	
Transfers out	-1.30
Deaths	-1.53
Other losses	-4.68
Total.....	-7.51
Net difference	-2.93

One more gain or one fewer loss for every 34 members would have completely eliminated the net loss in 2009.

would have reduced the net drop from more than 63,000 to zero. Presumably, many Presbyterians were working during 2009 to increase gains or reduce losses. If all were doing so, only an additional one in every 34 would have had to meet with a single success to have completely eliminated the net loss.

If only one in 68 more had so succeeded, the net loss would have been cut in half, and if only one in 341 had, it would have been reduced by 10%.

Makes you wonder, doesn’t it?

⁵ The result of fitting a second-order polynomial curve to the 1999-2009 membership trend.

⁶ In 2009, only 30 congregations—0.3%—participated. See oga.pcusa.org/mbr-referral-svc.htm for details on the program.

⁷ Despite the widespread conventional wisdom that controversial denominational actions or policies lead many people to leave its congregations, various research studies have shown otherwise.