

The Decline of the ELCA Over Time by Dancing to the Oligarchy's Choreography

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The graph below plots the membership in the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America (ELCA) since its inception. The group was formed in 1987 by combining three synods. The plot covers its first 27 years, through 2013.

While the right-hand half of the graph, below, shows an accelerated decline in recent years, there had been a steady decline, except for the fourth and fifth years (1990 & 1991), that showed a slight (.04 & .08%) increase. This illustrates that the basis of declining membership was set in motion during its formational years. It would be useful to look at the nature of the organization that occurred by forming the ELCA and laid the stage for more recent decline.

The ELCA is not unique in its [decline among mainline Protestant denominations](#). I single them out because I attend their services when in New York City. Their publications indicate a desire for growth and a commitment to good works. As the years went on, declining membership and donations constrained resources needed to perform charitable and missionary services.

Hierarchies might adopt policies, procedures, and attitudes that have run contrary to the expectations of its membership. Some can do this and prosper, such as entrenched closed-shop unions. In the case of a church, however, congregants can vote with their feet — and have! They took with them human resources and operating funds.

I think a contributing insight into the ELCA's decline was an article written a decade before its founding. J. Craig Jenkins wrote "Radical Transformation of Organization Goals," © by *Administrative Science Quarterly*, December 1977 (vol.22). It draws upon Robert Michels' *Political Parties: A Sociological Study of the Oligarchical Tendencies of Modern Democracy* that was written in 1911. Jenkins agreed with Michels' "iron rule of oligarchy" that states "who says organization says oligarchy." Oligarchies changed between 1911 and 1977. Earlier, they limited social initiatives, to stabilize the organization; later they took on aggressive secular social and political initiatives.

Within churches that were members of the National Council of Churches (NCC), their oligarchies moved from promoting a social gospel to social advocacy. Educated elites took over and [professionalized reform](#) movements. Boosted by foundation and government funding, they hired staff of a like mind and advocated programs without regard to the less "erudite" rank-and-file communicants. As time went on, membership declined, outside funds dried up, churches closed, and headquarter's staff had to be reduced. The remaining "leadership" blamed the decline on sociological changes and increased their efforts for more diversity to reverse the tide. So far, it has not worked.

The [Christian denominations that are growing](#) operate within the same Zeitgeist, so attention might be paid toward their origination and not society at large. Mainline churches need to find ways to reconcile the relationship between its clergy and congregation to have resources for good works.

