

The 18% Decline of Mainstream Protestant Churches Membership from 2001 to 2008 in the Face of 16% Increase in Other Christian Denominations (-6.4 Million vs +20.3 Million)

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At times, I would be with a gathering of mainstream Protestants who were lamenting their falling membership. Often, I would ask what was wrong with the denomination's marketing, as there were many storefront churches cropping up and other Christian sects showing substantial growth. It was apparent that the message of Jesus Christ was being presented in palatable and unpalatable ways.

My inquiry would start a short discussion in which people offered opinions that were not tested and led nowhere. An underlying belief was that all traditional churches were faced with the same problems. It seemed younger people wanted rock music, charismatic leadership, personal spirituality, or a host of other new age programs.

Until recently, I was unaware of data that could focus the argument. A report surfaced, available on the Internet, "[American Religious Identification Survey](#)¹ [ARIS 2008]" (© 2009) that provided data (p. 5) for the attached table; Appendix A (p. 23) describes the taxonomy or groupings used to classify different religious traditions. The numbers in parentheses identify the 13 main groups and significant related sub-groups; the major categories are in boldface type. You will need to go to the Web site to access the referenced material because it is copyrighted, but freely accessible.

My modification compares data from 2001 and 2008. I excluded 1990 from the table because the decade seemed to be a transition from the social upheavals that occurred in the decades following World War II and the 21st Century. If you disagree, another spreadsheet can be created and sorted to illustrate your points. The analysis uses a process called "Data Unearthing" (p. 5) outlined in my article: "[Predicting Leadership: West Point's Civil War Legacy](#)."² It consists of five process steps:

1. Recognition that a dataset exists.
2. Organization of the data into a usable form.
3. Generation of elucidating descriptive statistics.
4. Mathematical support for observations.
5. Relating observations to a useful theory or hypothesis.

The first step is easy because a table was provided. The second step just extracted raw population data from Table 3 (p. 5) of the ARIS report. Step 3 created a percentage change between the 2001 and 2008 numbers, based upon the earlier figure. Then, the rows were sorted by percentage growth to decline. The non-Christian religious traditions were separated from the Christian. For the fourth step, simple arithmetic provides totals to contrast mainline Christians to other Christian traditions. The final step is up to groups of interested parties to discuss and consider why there is this split.

At this point in an essay it is customary for the author to offer a conclusion summarizing findings, with hypotheses or theories, and ideas for future work. I will just propose that interested church groups consider the data and discuss the question: ***Why are Mainline Protestant churches declining in membership when overall interest in Christianity is increasing?*** It would be useful to note that traditional Baptist, Catholic, and Mormon religions are growing their membership.

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¹http://livinginliminality.files.wordpress.com/2009/03/ari_report_2008.pdfhttp://livinginliminality.files.wordpress.com/2009/03/aris_report_2008.pdf

²<http://www.houd.info/lanning.pdf>

GROWTH AND DECLINE OF RELIGIOUS TRADITIONS FROM 2001-2008

<u>RELIGIOUS TRADITION</u>	<u>2001 Pop.</u>	<u>2008 Pop.</u>	<u>Pct. Change</u>
Non-Denominational Christian (4)	2,489,000	8,032,000	222.70%
Evangelical/Born Again (4)	1,080,000	2,154,000	99.44%
Christian Generic (4)*	22,546,000	32,441,000	43.89%
Jehovah's Witness (6)	1,331,000	1,914,000	43.80%
Seventh Day Adventist (6)	724,000	938,000	29.56%
Pentecostal Unspecified (5)	4,407,000	5,416,000	22.90%
Protestant Denominations (6)*	5,949,000	7,131,000	19.87%
Churches of Christ (6)	2,593,000	1,921,000	19.87%
Christian Unspecified (4)	14,190,000	16,834,000	18.63%
Mormon/Latter Day Saints (7)*	2,697,000	3,158,000	17.09%
Catholic (1)*	50,873,000	57,199,000	12.43%
Protestant Unspecified (4)	4,647,000	5,187,000	11.62%
Baptist (3)*	33,820,000	36,148,000	6.88%
Pentecostal/Charismatic (5)*	7,831,000	7,948,000	1.49%
TOTAL*	123,716,000	144,025,000	16.42%
Lutheran (2)	9,580,000	8,674,000	-9.46%
Presbyterian (2)	5,596,000	4,723,000	-15.60%
Mainline Christian (2)**	35,788,000	29,375,000	-17.92%
Methodist (2)	14,039,000	11,366,000	-19.04%
Assemblies of God (5)	1,105,000	810,000	-26.70%
Church of God (5)	943,000	663,000	-29.69%
Episcopalian/Anglican (2)	3,451,000	2,405,000	-30.31%
United Church of Christ (2)	1,378,000	736,000	-46.59%
TOTAL**	35,788,000	29,375,000	-17.92%
CHRISTIAN TOTAL	159,504,000	173,400,000	8.71%
Agnostic (12)	991,000	1,985,000	100.30%
Atheist (12)	902,000	1,621,000	79.71%
NRMs & Other Religions (11)	1,770,000	2,804,000	58.42%
Muslim/Islam (10)	1,104,000	1,349,000	22.19%
Nones/No Religion (12)	29,481,000	34,169,000	15.90%
Buddhist (9)	1,082,000	1,189,000	9.89%
DK/Refused (13)	11,300,000	11,815,000	4.56%
Eastern Religions (9)	2,020,000	1,961,000	-2.92%
Jewish (8)	2,837,000	2,680,000	-5.53%