

Oldline Protestant churches feeling their age: FACT survey results

by [John Dart](#) in the [October 6, 2009](#) issue

Amid their “slow but general retreat” this decade in terms of financial health and membership, the oldline Protestant churches are especially hampered by the aging of their memberships, a new study says.

Pastors of some six out of ten mainline Protestant churches last year said that a quarter or more of their members were 65 or older. Only 24 percent of evangelical Protestant congregations reported the same in the Faith Communities Today (FACT) survey last year of more than 2,500 congregations.

Further illustrating that contrast, 22 percent of mainline churches surveyed reported that at least half of their members were over 65, whereas only 6 percent of evangelical and Roman Catholic churches reported the same.

“The more seniors, the lower a congregation’s spiritual vitality on average, the poorer its financial health, the less clarity about purpose, the less openness to change and the more conflict,” said David Roozen, director of the Hartford Institute for Religion Research.

There are exceptions, said Roozen, a sociologist who teaches at Hartford Seminary in Connecticut. “There are vital congregations with a predominance of senior adults,” but he added that the challenges facing them are consistently strong.

“One wonders, therefore, why this remains one of the least discussed but most practically significant aspects of congregational life and identity, especially within oldline Protestantism,” said Roozen. (FACT researchers prefer the term *oldline* over *mainline*.)

The FACT survey series began in 2000 with questionnaires completed by 14,301 local churches, synagogues, temples and mosques. Smaller surveys in 2005 and 2008 will be followed in 2010 by another “mega survey” timed to coincide with the U.S. Census. The initial FACT 2008 report was released September 9.

Questionnaires returned by the congregations' lead clergy revealed persistent downward trends in several areas of ministry:

- Though 31 percent of the clergy respondents described their congregation as being in "excellent financial health" in 2000, only 24 percent did so in 2005 and 19 percent in 2008. Since last year's survey predated the stock market collapse, researchers can only guess at the subsequent downslide.
- The number of congregations that could boast of at least 2 percent growth in worship attendance in the previous five years dropped from 58 percent in the 2005 survey to 48 percent last year.
- Whereas 42 percent of the clergy saw their congregations as "spiritually vital and alive" in 2005, only 35 percent said that in 2008.

Some "pockets of vitality" suggest the potential for moving forward, said Roozen in a news release. Some positive notes were related to changes made in worship styles, including more use of contemporary services.

The survey also determined that three steps taken by clergy leaders led to higher congregational vitality—irrespective of the congregation's denominational family. They were: promoting a vision and purpose for the congregation, making special efforts in evangelism and recruitment, and recruiting and training lay leaders. The more time pastoral leaders spent in such leadership, the higher the congregation's vitality, according to researchers.

Roozen particularly emphasized the importance of "the care and feeding of lay volunteers," who he said are the primary labor force for the great majority of congregations. The survey asked whether congregations have regular training for volunteers and whether the volunteers regularly receive recognition for their service.

It's "starkly clear," he said, that "congregations that regularly do both are significantly more likely to be spiritually vital" than those that spend little or no time cultivating lay volunteers.