

Demographic destiny?

By [David Heim](#)

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I knew that mainline congregants tend to be older than the general population. The average member is about 58, whereas the average American is age 38. The latest [survey](#) from Hartford Seminary fills in the picture with this piece of data: in more than half (52.7 percent) of mainline Protestant congregations, a third or more of the members are 65 years old or older.

When Hartford's veteran researcher David Roozen reported this figure recently, he added a kicker: given that life expectancy in the U.S. is 78, this means that these congregations are likely to see a third of their members die over the next 15 years.

Looking at similar data, Lovett Weems, a researcher at Wesley Theological Seminary, has been talking about a "[death tsunami](#)" beginning in 2018 that will deliver a crippling blow, in membership and finances, to mainline churches. (It also means that ministers will be doing lots of funerals.)

Data like this concentrate the mind. And foster desperate searches for the elusive magical formula that will reach young adults.

Weems at least offers a practical suggestion to churches looking at the demographic change ahead: Don't manage your finances year by year. Make a major downsizing effort now, save your resources and plan for a "smaller, more vital" future:

Acknowledge that things are not the same as in years past, and the previous financial

baseline is no longer realistic. . . . Make the difficult but ultimately life-saving decision to reduce the financial baseline to one that is more realistic for the new circumstances. It is from this new and more appropriate baseline that the church can begin to build strength for the future. One of the reasons churches tend to do better after such a financial recalibration is that energy previously sapped through maintaining financial survival now can be spent for outreach and ministry.

Sounds good, but how realistic is that? Wouldn't most congregations say that the money they are spending now on building, program and staff is devoted to outreach and ministry--precisely what is needed now and in the future?