

The Reformed Institute is offering a series of essays over the summer months to consider the state of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).

Whither the PC(USA)?

The Presbyterian Church (USA) has been losing members at the rate of 1.3 percent every year since 1983, when the northern and southern churches merged to form the denomination we now know. Staff at the national headquarters in Louisville continues to shrink. Synods may be on their last legs. Some presbyteries are merging or reorganizing. The church has more seminaries than it needs or can support and some of them are without question doomed.

That said, the two Presbyterian congregations where I have been a member thrive and I experienced a vibrant, engaged, spiritually fulfilling body of Christ at the General Assembly last summer, which I attended as an elder commissioner from National Capital Presbytery. So which is the real church – the ones I have attended or those that continue to decline, along with the congregations of the other so-called mainline Protestant denominations?

My father was the senior pastor at the first of those churches, [First Presbyterian in Norman, Oklahoma](#), when I was growing up. I still visit that congregation occasionally and [its statistical report](#) shows that its membership has consistently hovered around 1,000 over the past decade. The [membership numbers](#) are slightly higher for the [Old Presbyterian Meeting House](#) in Alexandria, where I have been a member since 1973.

I have been trying to figure out what those two churches have in common, other than relative success and the word Presbyterian on their sign boards.

Norman and Alexandria are different places. Oklahoma is the only state in the union where every voting district went for John McCain in the last presidential election. Alexandria, on the other hand, has been described on the floor of the Virginia General Assembly as “the peoples’ republic.”

The Norman church is one block south of the main entrance to the University of Oklahoma. Church membership has always included substantial contingent of OU faculty members as well as civic and business leaders. The church building has been expanded at least four times and the church has a huge parking lot across the street.

The Meeting House membership includes a number of government or government-related employees, lobbyists and other business people. It is land-locked in Old Town in an ancient but revered sanctuary with historical charm, many posts and wretched sightlines. It has managed over the years to add two structures to meet its classroom and office needs, but the term “parking lot” is at best an exaggeration.

Both churches have well-educated, successful members who play important roles in their communities and congregations. Both churches also have long histories of outstanding preaching and active education programs for adults as well as children.

So what's going on in the denomination at large? I asked Cynthia (Cindy) Bolbach, the First Arlington elder who was elected moderator of General Assembly last summer and has been traveling the country visiting Presbyterian congregations.

She said, "When you look at the statistics as a denomination, to say something's wrong with us is not exactly right. Forty years ago people went to church because it was kind of the accepted thing to do. We wanted to do good, but now can do that through something like Habitat for Humanity.

"It's all part of the fact that the culture has changed. People don't go to church as a way to get ahead. [The people who are in church] want to be there because it's a way of following the gospel -- not an easy thing to do."

What has been the impact of the denomination's recent amendment to the Book of Order (the Presbyterian constitution) that permits presbyteries to ordain as ministers persons in same-sex relationships and congregations to elect elders and deacons in same-sex relationships?

She said that "a lot of people are upset and we've lost some congregations. I think we probably will lose some more. But some may come back." She emphasized that the approved amendment does not require a presbytery or congregation to ordain gays and lesbians. Both the Indian Nations presbytery, where the Norman church is located, and National Capital Presbytery, the home of the Meeting House, voted in favor of the amendment. But the issue puts the church in the center of the culture wars that are being fought in many other venues in the United States.

Cynthia Woolever and Deborah Bruce, who have done extensive national surveys on church membership and what brings people through the sanctuary doors, have developed a list of characteristics of successful churches, which includes providing spiritual growth, meaningful worship, a sense of belonging, good programs for children and youth, social service activities, and a welcoming attitude for new people.

While all these things help, the researchers have also discovered nationally that the average worshiper in 2008 was 54 years old; the average worshiper in 2001 was 50. That would suggest that younger people are staying away. That said, last year the Meeting House baptized 30 infants and the Norman church baptized 11 infants.

Both of these churches are urban. Norman was a relative village of 50,000 when my father took the pulpit there in 1948. It is now three times that and essentially a part of Oklahoma City. You have to be a native to know where the boundaries are; the visual cues are gone.

I can only speculate on why these two congregations continue to be successful, but I'm confident that part of it has to do with their locations. Proximity to a major university or the capital of the nation brings with it access to educated minds (current congressional behavior to the contrary notwithstanding), many of whom want to wrestle with the complicated questions and challenges of faith and are responsive to the Presbyterian insistence on an educated clergy and a belief in decency and good order.

But these churches are anomalies. Jack Marcum, the coordinator of research services for the PC(USA)'s General Assembly Mission Council, writes, "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. 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..." Marcum's complete report and many other useful links for those interested in studying the issues are [here](#).

I personally believe that a successful church must have strong preaching that at least occasionally afflicts the comfortable, programs that both teach and practice the faith, a commitment to service and a passionate desire to help their fellows and thus, to serve the Lord.

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