

Decline and its complexities

By [Steve Thorngate](#)

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There's little for us mainliners to celebrate in [this new Pew study](#). We're losing people, and fast. I appreciate Heidi Haverkamp's realistic-yet-hopeful words [here](#) and Rob Rynders' [there](#). But, like them, I'm not interested in spinning an argument that the numbers are somehow lying.

The numbers are clearer, however, than the reasons for them—despite the predictable comments that the only mainline churches that are thriving are those “[resisting the denominational tide toward liberalization and conformity with the world](#).” A few things to keep in mind:

- **Our top story: People who used to feel cultural pressure to identify as Christian don't anymore.** Ed Stetzer's all over this: [the nominals are becoming nones](#). He refers to this in passing as a “[purifying bloodletting](#)”; Russell Moore [hits the point a good bit harder](#) (“Mayberry leads to hell just as surely as Gomorrah does”). I see this as a more complicated point, and a mixed blessing. Conflating the church with the culture was never really an asset to either. But if we believe the church is a good thing in people's lives, don't we want more people to be engaged with it, at whatever level? Showing up out of obligation on Christmas and Easter might not make you a disciple, but it's hardly a net negative.
- **Nominal is not a synonym for liberal or mainline.** Likewise, *convictional* (Stetzer's term) doesn't mean *conservative* or *evangelical*. Yes, there are correlations between nominal affiliation and mainline (or Catholic) identity, correlations that exist for a complex web of reasons. But when we reduce this complexity to a simple equation—defining conservatives as the convictional standard and others in the negative terms of how orthodox they aren't—we

erase not only [deeply invested liberals](#) but also people more nominally connected with conservative faith. Stetzer acknowledges this; he also defines *convictionalism* in [distinctly evangelical terms](#). As for Moore, he's [clearer](#) that the story is more complicated than liberal decline. After all, he's a Southern Baptist, and...

- **The primary trend is the decline of *denominational*—not *liberal*—Christianity.** Again, [I'm not saying anything Stetzer doesn't already know](#). The two Protestant denominations that have lost the most people since 2007 are the United Methodist Church and the Southern Baptist Convention. You might know these as the largest two; you might also know the UMC as less thoroughly liberal than some mainline bodies and the SBC as not a liberal denomination at all. According to Pew, a significant number of current evangelicals used to be Baptists but aren't anymore; the corresponding gains are in nondenominational churches. The latter are, of course, overwhelmingly evangelical in their theology and outlook. But that's not the only way they differ from the mainline, which is at least as marked by *institutionalism* as it is by *liberalism*. Pew includes data on Christians who are “nondenominational in the mainline tradition.” It's a small number; it's also growing.
- ***Evangelical* and *mainline* are overlapping categories.** (That's in addition to their shared status as woefully inadequate placeholder terms.) There are evangelical congregations in mainline denominations. There are evangelical individuals in mainline congregations (don't *Century* readers know it!). There are Christians and churches who don't readily fit either mold. According to Pew, the percentage of mainline churchgoers who self-identify as “born again” or “evangelical” is up since 2007. This points not just to the exit of the nominals but also to the fact that evangelicalism is a movement within all the churches, [not one side of a Protestant binary](#).
- **Racial and ethnic diversity is up among evangelicals, mainliners, and Catholics alike.** Meanwhile, the historically black churches are holding steady while the rest of us decline. This growing diversity is perhaps the Pew report's only unqualified good news for the overall church.

Again, I have little interest in whistling past the graveyard. The U.S. church is declining; now let's do less grasping for the next big thing that promises to reverse this and more [being faithful to the gospel](#). But I also think Jonathan Merritt's point is important: [the Pew study cannot be summarized as an indictment of mainline liberalism](#). What's happening to American religion is a lot more complicated than that.