

An aerial photograph of a city skyline, likely New York City, with the Empire State Building prominently visible on the left. The image is overlaid with a semi-transparent blue filter. The text is centered and reads:

CHURCHES OF CHRIST
LOSING OUR HOPE
SEEKING A FUTURE

**NEW STUDY
REVEALS
DRASTIC
DECLINE**

PREPARED BY

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Inside This Report

PAGE 3-4

Churches of Christ
A Look At Trends &
Outlook for 2050



PAGE 5-8

Four Factors
Affecting Our Future

Factor #1 (p. 4)

The Graying of
Our Members

Factor #2 (p. 5)

Loss of Younger
Generational Groups

Factor #3 (p.6)

Evangelistic Laryngitis

Factor #4 (p. 7)

Failure to Plant Churches



Tim Woodroof
Interim Ministry Partners
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Pepperdine Special

Opportunity

Tim Woodroof is making himself available during the Pepperdine Harbor Event to meet with church leaders (on campus Starbucks) to discuss the need for your church to **plan now** for the future ahead.

IMP partners with churches in transition to provide pulpit continuity, experienced leadership, and a proven search process. We help lead for a season, equipping you to lead into a vibrant future.

Email: Tim@TeamIMP.com to connect during Pepperdine Harbor, 2019

Losing Our Hope - Searching for A Future

CHURCHES OF CHRIST IN 2050

Membership in Churches of Christ is in decline and has been since at least 1990. Recent reports indicate that we have lost 930 members a month for the past 18 years. Over the past three years, we have experienced a 5% decrease in members representing a loss of over 2000 people a month. (See Table 1.)

Congregations are also dying. Over the last 18 years, five congregations have dissolved every month. In the past three years, nine congregations closed their doors each month.

Those that survive are small (91% of all CofC attendees belong to churches of less than 250 members. 55% of our congregations have an average attendance of 34 people. Where will our fellowship be in thirty years? Here is a peek into our probable future.

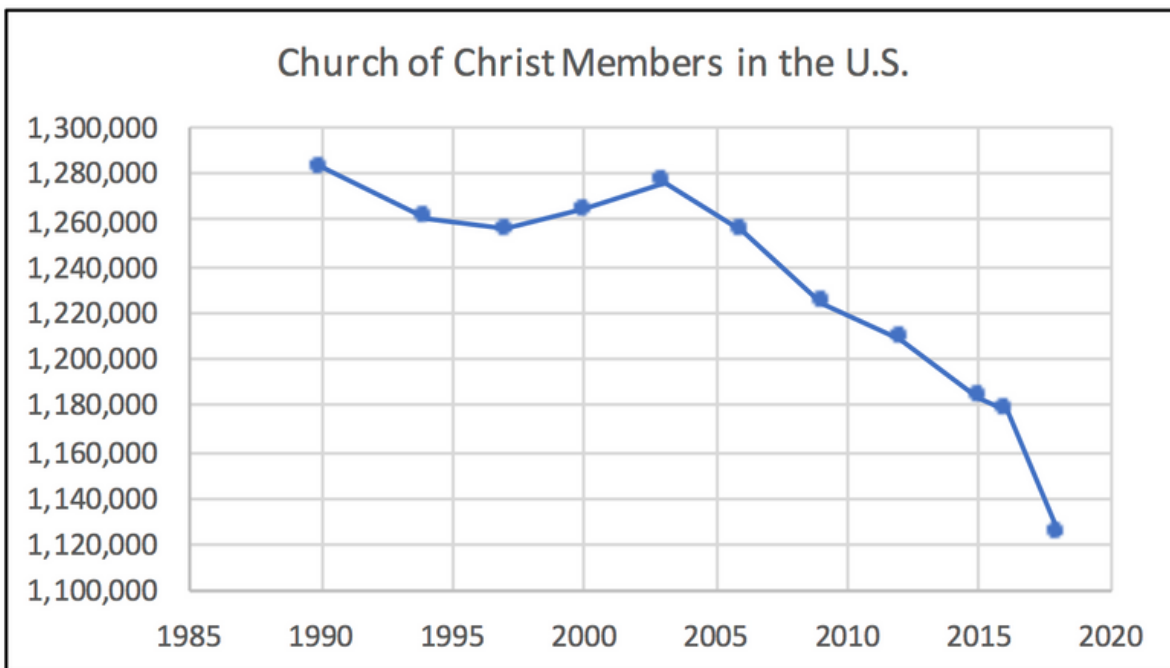


Table 1: Decline rate in membership since 1990.

91% of all Church of Christ attendees belong to churches of less than 250 members. 55% of our congregations have an average attendance of 34 people.

The rate of decline is about to become much steeper. As our members continue to age, our death rate (physically) will far exceed our birth rate (spiritually)—a reality already evident in our churches.

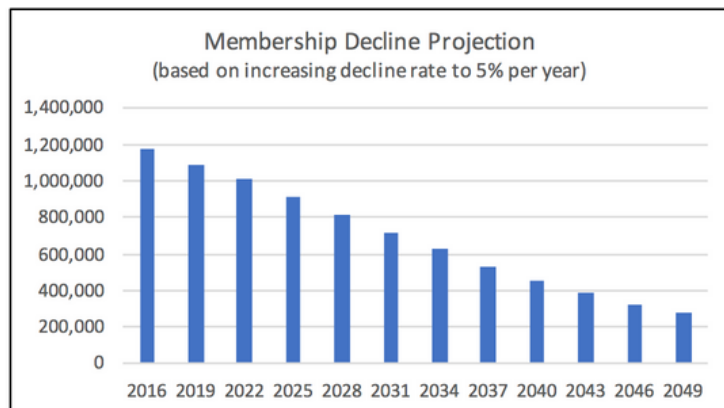


Table 2: Projected membership decline rate assuming rate increases to 5% annually by 2034.

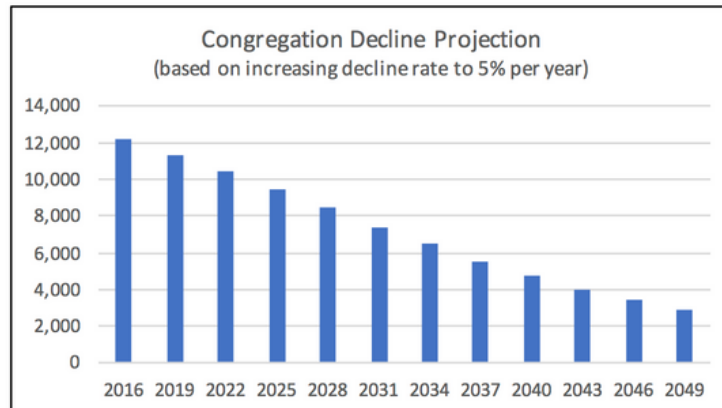


Table 3: Projected congregational decline rate assuming closings increase to 5% annually by 2034.

THE DECLINE BY 2050

By 2050, membership in churches associated with Churches of Christ will decline by over 50%. If the most recent trend (5% decline every three years) holds firm, we will drop from 1,177,783 members at present to 650,000 in 2050, and from 12,237 congregations to 6800 congregations in 2050. This represents a 45% decline over the next thirty years.

However, we do not anticipate a steady, linear decline. The rate of decline is about to become much steeper. As our members continue to age, our death rate (physically) will far exceed our birth rate (spiritually)—a reality already evident in our churches.

In the next thirty years, the Silent and Boomer generations—the largest segments of our churches presently—will die. This mortality rate—in combination with disillusioned members leaving, and few new members joining (due to ineffectual evangelistic efforts)—will lead to annual declines in Churches of Christ of 5%.

If the rate of decline increases gradually—from 5% every three years to 5% annually by 2034—and remains at that level until 2050, membership will drop from 1,177,783 in 2016 to just over 250,000 members in 2050. (See Table 2.) At that same rate, the number of Church of Christ congregations will drop from 12,237 to about 2800 in 2050. (See Table 3.)

Searching for A Future

FOUR FACTORS

Four factors will continue to erode the viability of Churches of Christ:

Factor #1

THE GRAYING OF OUR MEMBERS

A recent study of fifty congregations of the Churches of Christ analyzed the ages of members. 9484 respondents identified their age. (See Table 4.) Three-fifths (60.5%) were over 50 years old. The largest age cohort in the study were those >70.

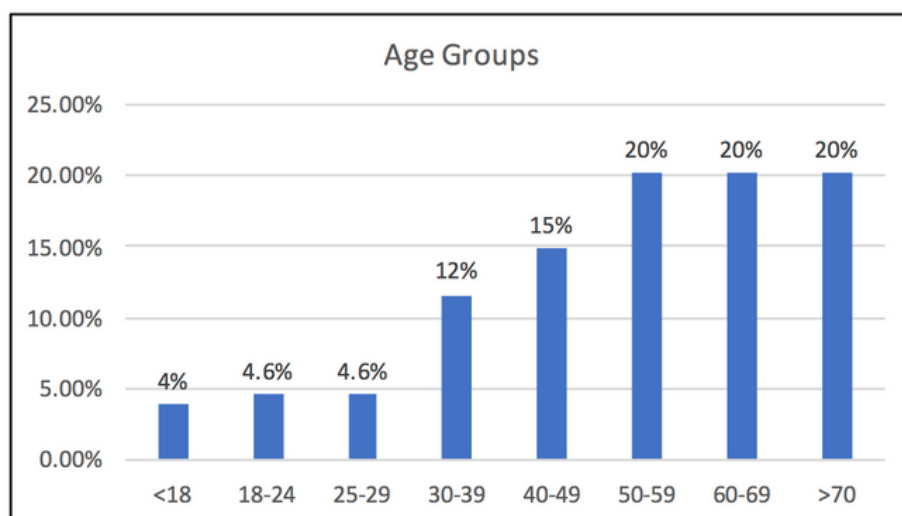


Table 4: Age groupings of 9,484 respondents in 50 congregations of the Churches of Christ

Factor #2

LOSS OF YOUNGER GENERATIONAL GROUPS

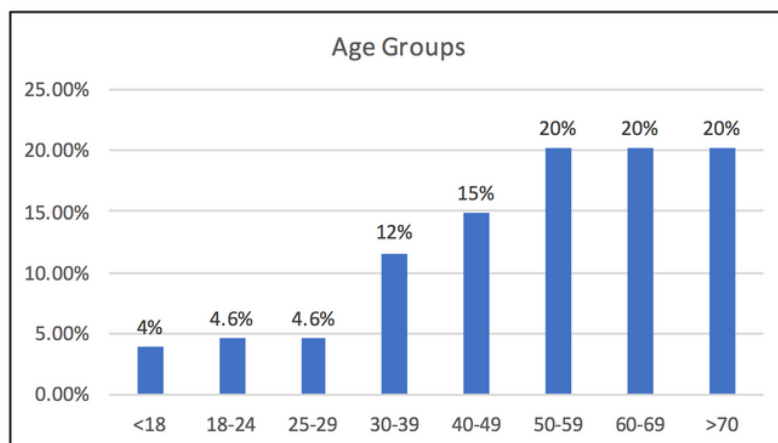


Table 4: Age groupings of 9,484 respondents in 50 congregations of the Churches of Christ



These same findings suggest that younger generational groups are absent from our churches.

Look again at Table 4.

Respondents in the <18 group account for just 4% of member population.

Those in the 18-29 age range account for 9%.

Respondents in the 30-39 age group make up 11.5% of the total.

Combined, those under the age of 40 in these congregations account for only 25% of respondents.

Factor #3

EVANGELISTIC LARYNGITIS

The same study suggests our lack of evangelistic effectiveness.

Almost 5000 people answered the question, “How long have you been a Christian?” (See Table 5.) Almost half said they had been Christians for over forty years.

Barely 15% had become Christians this century! Less than 3% had become Christians within the last 5 years.

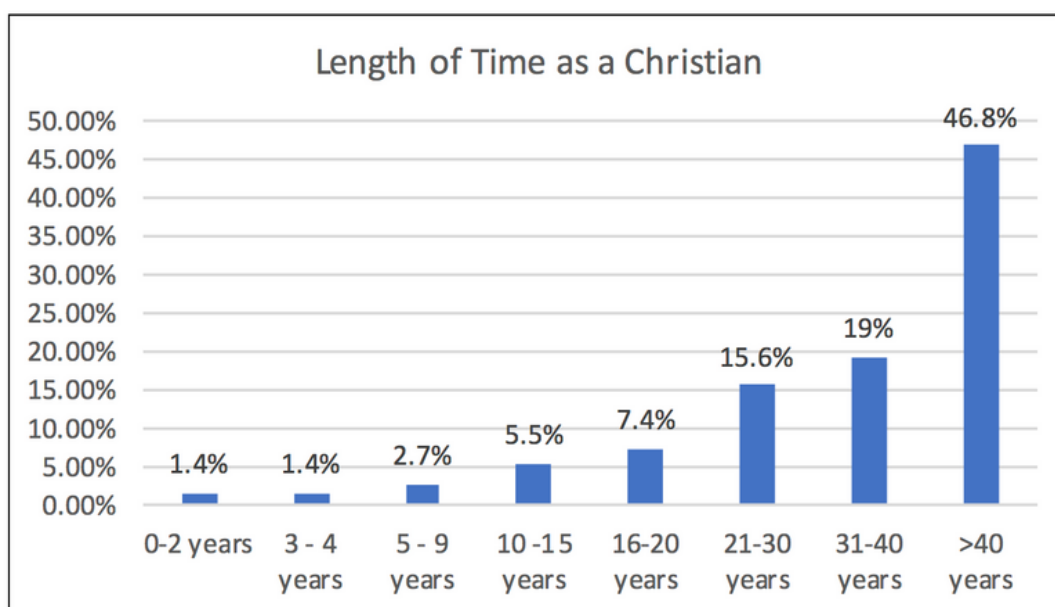


Table 5: Years as a Christian reported by 4,899 members in 50 congregations of Churches of Christ

Factor #4

FAILURE TO PLANT CHURCHES



Figure 6. New church planting, 1910-2016.



The past forty years of failing to plant new churches means that we became effectively sterile as a movement. (See Figure 6.)

It will take a corporate act of will to energize congregations and raise up a generation of effective, church-planting ministers.

Most knowledgeable participants within Churches of Christ are skeptical when asked whether we possess that kind of commitment and intentionality.

A Demographic Study of 50 Congregations of Churches of Christ. Tim Woodroof. [In press] The data underlying this study came from assessments conducted by Interim Ministry Partners, a group focused on helping churches renew vision and seek an effective minister for a vibrant future. IMP partners with churches during transition times to provide pulpit continuity, experienced leadership, and a proven search process.

Losing Our Hope - Searching for A Future

CONCLUSION

This paper is a summarization of a lengthier paper with much more discussion of results and implications of these results for the future of Churches of Christ.

The “Contributing Factors” section of this summary is given much deeper analysis in the full version. If you would like to read the full version of this paper, please [click here](#).

The careful reader will notice that this paper focuses more on the “Losing our Future” portion of the title. The results are rather bleak and deeply concerning. Upcoming papers, however, will address more fully the “Finding our Hope” portion of the title. Expect to see future articles on various possibilities for addressing these trends and projections. There is hope. But not if we try to achieve different results using the same methods.

The data underlying much of the present paper came from assessments conducted by Interim Ministry Partners. Fifty congregations of Churches of Christ were included in this study, with almost 9500 respondents participating. IMP is a ministry focused on helping churches renew vision and seek an effective minister for a vibrant future.

IMP partners with churches during transition times to provide pulpit continuity, experienced leadership, and a proven search process. [“A Demographic Study of Fifty Congregations of the Churches of Christ.” Tim Woodroof. 2019. In press. Also available on our website.]

Data on church planting comes from information gathered by Dr. Stanley E. Granberg, Kairos Church Planting, published as “A Case Study of Growth and Decline: The Churches of Christ, 2006-2016.” Great Commission Research Journal 10 (1):88-110, 2018.

Schedule an appointment to speak with Tim Woodroof during Pepperdine Harbor
Email: Tim@TeamIMP.com to connect during Pepperdine Harbor, 2019