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# Will the ELCA Will be Gone in 30 Years?

 DWIGHT ZSCHEILE /  SEPTEMBER 5, 2019 /

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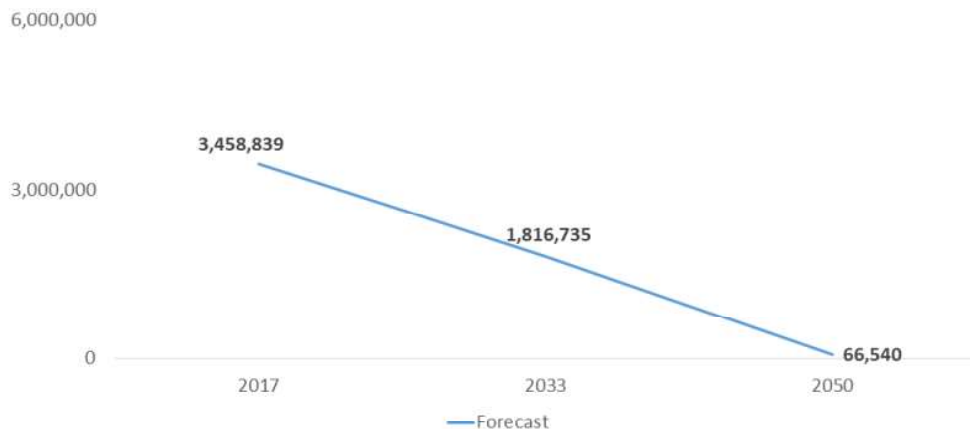


New projections forecast just 16,000 in worship across the entire ELCA by 2041. Why is this happening and what can be done?

According to projections from the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America's (ELCA) Office of Research and Evaluation, the whole denomination will have fewer than 67,000 members in 2050, with fewer than 16,000 in worship on an average Sunday by 2041.

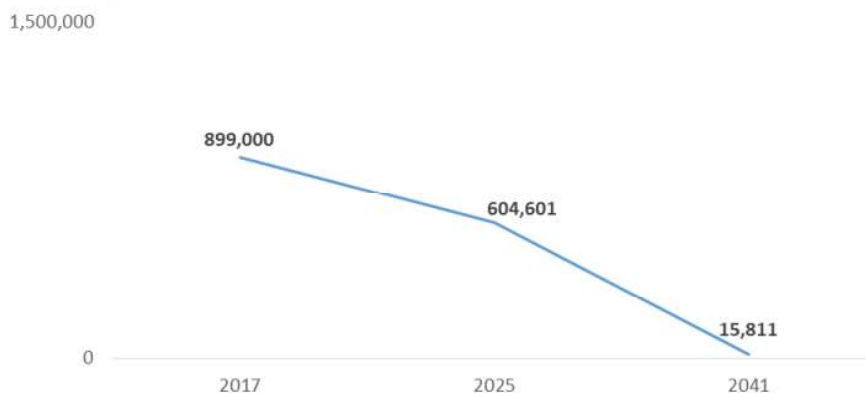
That's right: according to current trends, the church will basically cease to exist within the next generation.

## Baptized Membership in the ELCA 2017-2050 Projections



Source: ELCA Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation

## Average Weekly Worship Attendance 2017-2041 Projections



Source: ELCA Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation

In some ways, this is old news. Mainline decline has been a reality for over half a century, and the trends are well established. Yet consider how rapidly this future is arriving—well within most of our lifetimes. The ELCA had over five million members when it was launched in 1988. It has only declined since, and the decline has been accelerating.

For all the energy spent on trying to turn things around over the past 40 years, there is little to show. That is because the cultural shifts underpinning this decline are largely beyond our control. To the extent to which we've tried to fix the church, we've failed. I know a lot of really smart, faithful leaders who have poured their lives into this effort. It's not their fault. The forces dismantling the established congregational and denominational system are much bigger. Something deeper is at stake.

My colleague Michael Binder and I have three ways of naming the root cause:

1) We live in a culture that makes it hard for people to imagine and be led by God.

In the modern West God isn't necessary to live a good life. Divine presence and agency seem implausible for many people, even as we are haunted by echoes of transcendence. We're all supposed to discover our own meaning, purpose, identity, and community. Faith might help with that for some people, but it's assumed to be optional, and there are endless options before us.

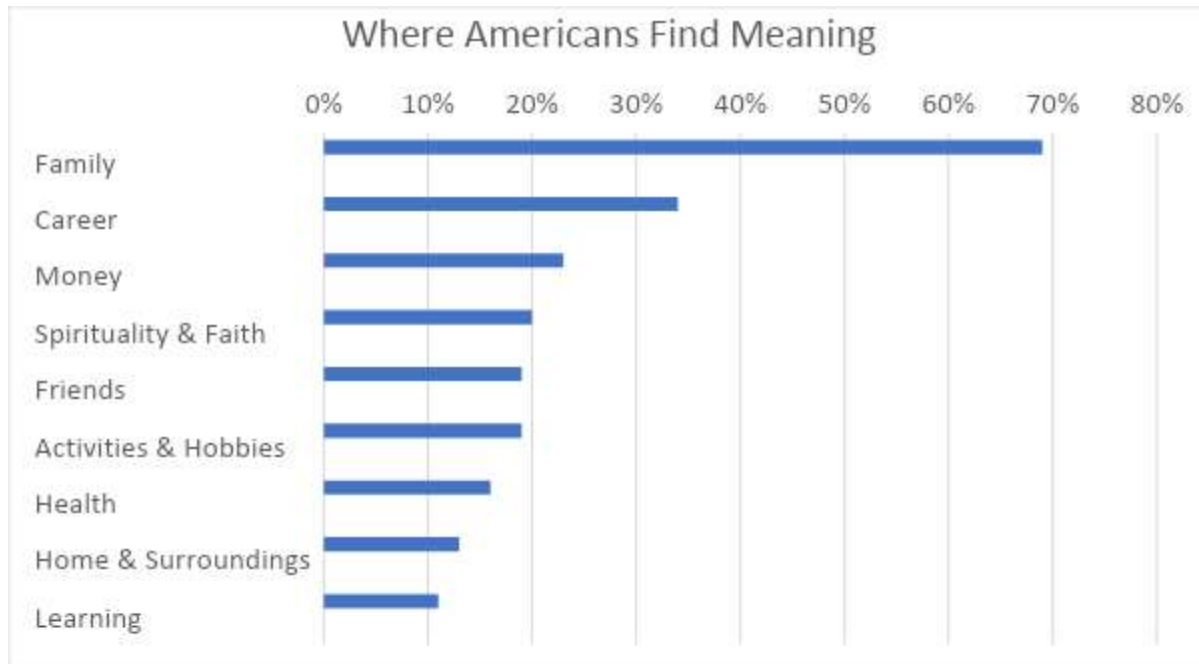
2) We aren't clear about what's distinctive about being Christian.

For a long time, the church has been out of practice at telling a story to its own members and to its neighbors that sets it apart from other organizations. If the point of church is being a social, cultural, or community service organization, people have a lot of other ways of meeting those needs that are far more accessible. It isn't clear in many local churches what the church's theological identity or core story really is and how its practices make a distinct difference in people's lives.

3) For these reasons, church isn't helping many people make meaning of their lives.

A recent study from the Pew Research Center

(<https://www.pewforum.org/2018/11/20/where-americans-find-meaning-in-life/>), shows that spirituality and faith fall fourth in the list of sources of meaning for Americans, after family (69%), career (34%), and money (23%). People are turning elsewhere to find meaning, purpose, identity, and community. Faith might be a helpful thing for some to have, but it isn't the center of life for very many.



Source: Pew Research Center

## So what can we do about this?

The institutional shape of the Lutheran and other mainline witness in the U.S. in the future will undoubtedly look quite different than today. Amidst the disintegration and decline, the church has an opportunity to rediscover its identity. Here are some steps to take:

1) Go back to basics.

Too many churches are cluttered with all sorts of programs and activities that aren't really designed to form Christian identity and practice. Many of these are holdovers from previous eras. They may be meaningful to legacy members but not transferable to newer generations or diverse neighbors. We need to rediscover and reclaim the simple practices that Christians have always

done—prayer, scripture study, service, reconciliation, Sabbath, hospitality, etc.—and make these the center of congregational life. Such disciplines must be expressed in forms ordinary members can practice in daily life throughout the week as they discern and join God’s leading in their neighborhoods and spheres of influence.

## 2) Shift from performative to participatory spirituality.

Faith cannot be primarily something performed by clergy or staff for people to watch or consume; it must be something that everyone is equipped to practice in daily life. This means creating pathways for simple, accessible spiritual habits and disciplines that can be adopted by everyone.

## 3) Listen.

The church needs to learn how to listen to its own members’ spiritual stories and experiences in order to help connect them with the stories of scripture and the theological tradition. This begins with finding out what keeps people up at night and helping them discover how the Gospel of Jesus makes meaning out of their experience, particularly their suffering.

## 4) Translate.

Most mainline churches’ language and cultural forms are inaccessible to most people in their neighborhoods. The Reformation involved a lot of vernacular translation. Somehow that got lost along the way. We need to reclaim it.

## 5) Experiment.

Everything listed above involves innovation, which is simply the adoption of new practices in a community. We don’t know what will work ahead of time. There is so much that needs to be discovered at the grass roots through local

experimentation. We need to try a lot of things, learn from failure, and create an environment in which we can take risks together for the sake of the Gospel.

## 6) Share.

We need to take this journey together, not in isolation. Too many church leaders are lonely today. Most of our inherited church structures aren't designed for peer sharing and mutual support. We need to figure out how to learn and discern together.

# Claiming the Promise

The dismantling of the inherited congregational and denominational structures may be the work of the Holy Spirit, the work of the devil, or just the byproduct of the end of the Age of Mobilization (when Americans organized themselves into voluntary societies to get things done) and the rise of the Age of Authenticity (when Americans looked inward to discover and express their true self). Trying to reverse it is pointless. It is better to get clear on what God's promises in Christ are for us and for our neighbors and find simple ways to make those promises come alive for ordinary people in ways they can understand and embody.

## About the Author

Dwight Zscheile is vice president of innovation and associate professor of congregational mission and leadership at Luther Seminary. His most recent books are *Participating in God's Mission: A Theological Missiology for the Church in America* (with Craig Van Gelder) and *The Agile Church: Spirit-Led Innovation in an Uncertain Age*.

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