

Welcome to the Last Days of the United Church of Canada

OK, now that the shocking headline has captured your attention, let me explain why it is both true and not all the truth.

Those of us who can remember the United Church before 1990, are very aware that the church which expanded its number of congregations as well as its Conference and General Council staff, programs and policies during the 50's and into the 80's is already mostly gone. The structures of the United Church have been significantly cut back, and yet are still too costly of volunteer time, energy, and money. The way we used to "do" church is on its death bed. That is the truth of the headline.

But the rest of the truth about the United Church is that our particular hearing of the Gospel of Jesus Christ – and our calling to form communities of faith centred on that calling – are probably more needed now than ever. And so perhaps a more accurate headline might be:

Our Governance is Dead. Long Live the Gospel!

Or:

The Buildings Have Burned to the Ground. The Community Has Taken Off!

The charts that follow show the steady decades-long decline of the United Church. And that is the truth of the headline. But the rest of the truth is that actually the charts show how Canada has changed. Canadians just don't go to church like they used to. And not just the United Church – all churches. And actually all mosques, synagogues, and temples too. And actually all of the old volunteer community organizations too: Rotarians, Kiwanians, Shriners, Masons, etc.

This change in Canadian society is not our fault – and is not a problem that we can fix. But it is a situation that we can and must respond to. But in order to meet the challenges we are already facing, we are going to have to learn how to be much smaller, and much clearer about why and how the Gospel is at the centre of everything we do as a community – including why and how we believe face-to-face communities sustained-over-time are needed.

Think I'm exaggerating? Consider these key data about people and the United Church:

Year	Worship Attendance	Professions of Faith	Sun. School Membership	Child Baptisms	Marriages
1990	338,000	11,500	192,400	27,400	27,900
2013	151,000	3,300	52,400	7,100	5,900
Decline	187,000 (55%)	8,200 (70%)	140,000 (75%)	20,300 (75%)	22,000 (80%)
2025	34,000	0	0	160	0
Decline	117,000 (75%)	3,300 (100%)	52,400 (100%)	6,940 (98%)	22,000 (100%)

I haven't chosen these data because they are among the most startling, but because I think they are the figures that help us best understand how Canadians are interacting with the United Church. And the declines from 1990 to 2013, along with a forecast of where we might be at in 2025, are startling.

I realize the future will not unfold in a straight line, but the actual real declines in the past decades ought to be alerting us to the reality that significant change is already upon us – and more is needed for the future.

Can anyone seriously imagine continuing as we currently are?

My only real questions are:

Will the Comprehensive Review be radical enough?

Will the General Council in August, 2015 be courageous enough?

David Ewart,
www.davidewart.ca

United Church of Canada Trends - 2013

The following charts show the history up to 2013 of selected United Church of Canada data, and, based on the previous 10 years of data (2004-2013), projects what the data might be in 2025.

In all cases, the data declined from 2012 to 2013.

The chart below gives the actual data for 2011, 2012, and 2013, the year-to-year change, the 2025 forecasts based on the last 10 years, and a “best guess” 2025 forecast based on the past six forecasts.

	2011 Actual	2012 Actual	2013 Actual	Percentage Change			2025 Forecast Based on			2025 Best Guess Based on Past Forecasts
				2010-11	2011-12	2012-13	2002-11	2003-12	2004-13	
Pastoral Charges	2,206	2,233	2,172	-0.76%	1.22%	-0.03%	2,020	2,068	2,050	2,166
Preaching Places or Congregations	3,132	3,075	3,016	-2.00%	-1.82%	-1.92%	2,359	2,353	2,345	2,086
Membership	478,909	463,879	450,886	-3.21%	-3.14%	-2.80%	250,884	253,449	258,133	244,067
Resident Membership	369,327	357,698	347,911	-3.48%	-3.15%	-2.74%	180,389	184,457	190,689	198,367
Financially Supporting Households	235,942	227,490	218,790	-3.84%	-3.58%	-3.82%	115,394	113,695	112,587	74,383
Average Weekly Attendance	166,936	158,510	150,819	-4.42%	-5.05%	-4.85%	25,349	29,470	34,056	34,824
Received on Profession of Faith	3,952	3,516	3,285	2.72%	-11.03%	-6.57%	0	0	0	0
Baptisms (Children)	8,215	7,727	7,125	-6.94%	-5.94%	-7.79%	0	45	158	101
Baptisms (Adults)	883	898	738	-2.43%	1.70%	-17.82%	0	0	0	0
Baptisms (All Ages)	9,098	8,625	7,863	-6.52%	-5.20%	-8.83%	0	45	158	101
Marriages	7,174	6,730	5,880	-8.46%	-6.19%	-12.63%	0	0	0	0
Funerals	18,447	17,380	16,941	-2.45%	-5.78%	-2.53%	7,861	7,058	7,167	0
Sunday Schools	2,104	2,020	1,954	-3.84%	-3.99%	-3.27%	963	945	951	369
Sunday Schools Membership	60,638	55,552	52,440	-6.11%	-8.39%	-5.60%	0	0	0	0
Through-the-week Membership	127,259	123,495	122,769	-2.45%	-2.96%	-0.59%	74,416	76,556	82,399	93,275
Local Support	248,314	239,877	231,682	-3.68%	-3.40%	-3.42%	123,673	122,349	121,633	100,947
M&S Givers	110,027	104,357	98,867	-5.43%	-5.15%	-5.26%	29,192	30,863	31,894	27,791
UCW	54,547	51,694	49,036	-3.85%	-5.23%	-5.14%	14,163	15,057	15,472	30,970

United Church Pastoral Charges

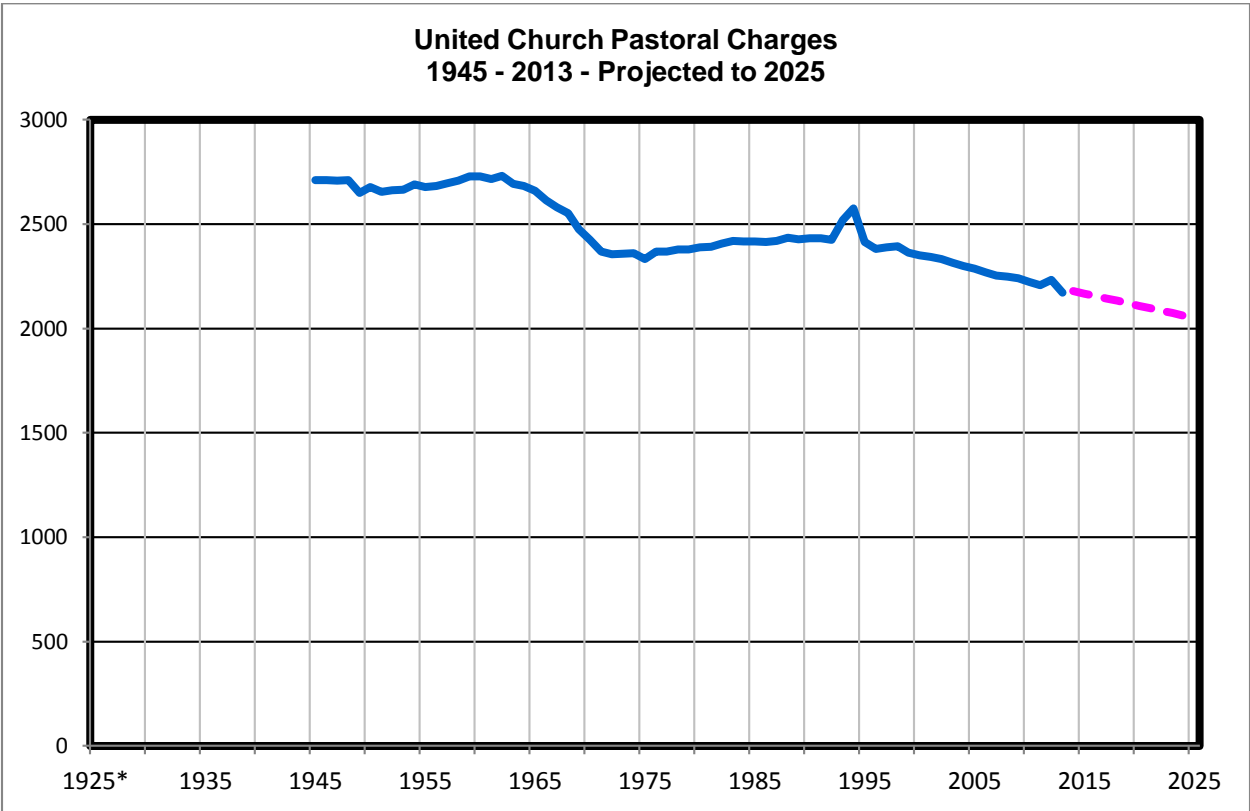
As of December 31, 2013 the number of United Church Pastoral Charges was 2,172.

If the trend for the past 10 years continues unchanged, the number of Pastoral Charges in 2025 will be 2,050.

This will be a loss of 122 or 6% of the number of Pastoral Charges in 2013.

Note: This data indicates the resilience of Pastoral Charges, especially when compared with the other data that follows. Urban and suburban areas where amalgamations are more feasible may experience higher rates of decline.

Note: I have only been able to record data for the number of Pastoral Charges beginning in 1945.



Note: Please read, *What Is A Trend?*, at the end for a discussion of how to understand and interpret these graphs.

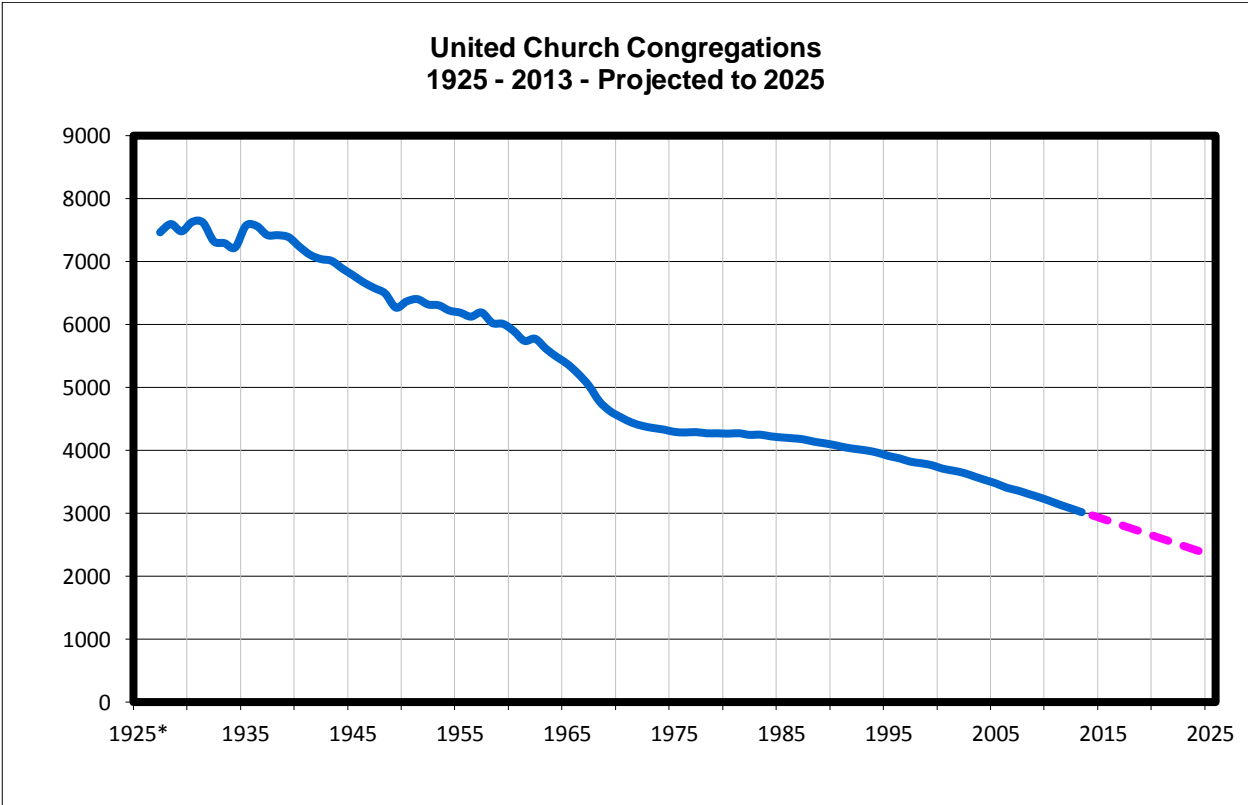
United Church Congregations

As of December 31, 2013 the number of United Church Congregations (or Preaching Places) was 3,016.

If the trend for the past 10 years continues unchanged, the number of Congregations in 2025 will be 2,068.

This will be a loss of 948 or 31% of the number Congregations in 2013.

Note: The rate of decline of Congregations is much higher than that for Pastoral Charges. The result is that more Pastoral Charges have fewer Congregations, and more Pastoral Charges have part-time Ministers.



Note: Please read, *What Is A Trend?*, at the end for a discussion of how to understand and interpret these graphs.

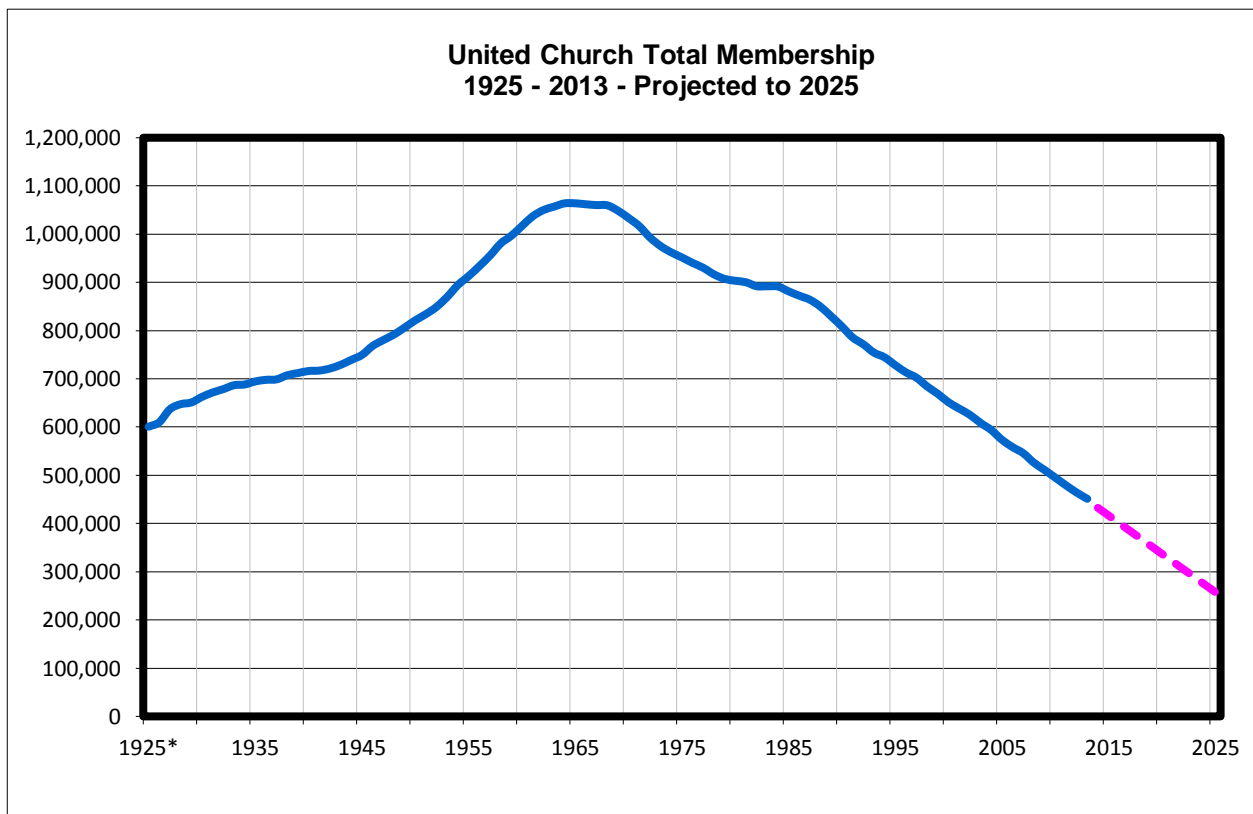
United Church Membership

As of December 31, 2013 United Church Total Membership (Resident and Non-Resident) was 450,886.

If the trend for the past 10 years continues unchanged, Membership in 2025 will be 258,133.

This will be a loss of 192,753 or 43% of the number of Members in 2013.

Note: The decline of Membership is much higher than the decline of Pastoral Charges and Congregations. This results in many Congregations having significantly fewer Members.



Note: Please read, *What Is A Trend?*, at the end for a discussion of how to understand and interpret these graphs.

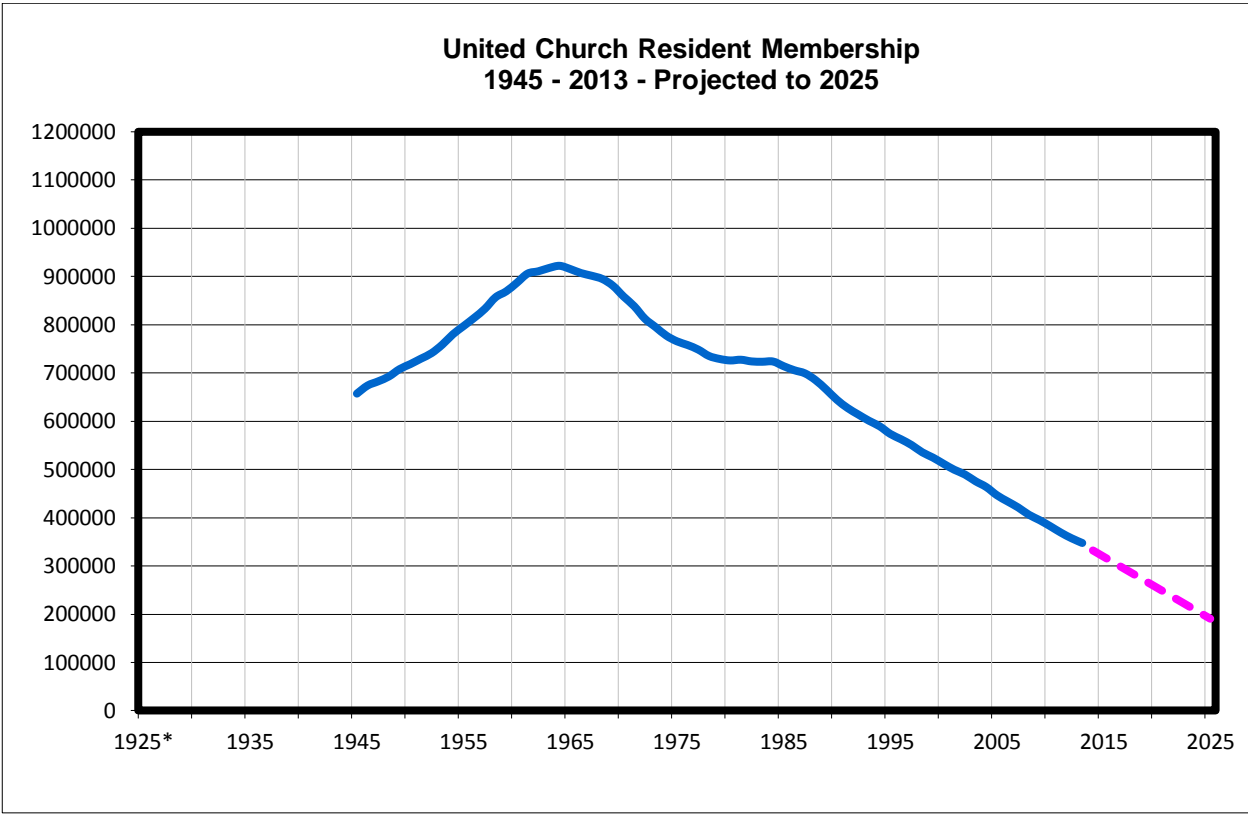
United Church Resident Membership

As of December 31, 2013 United Church Total Resident Membership (i.e., not counting Non-Resident Members) was 347,911.

If the trend for the past 10 years continues unchanged, Resident Membership in 2025 will be 190,689.

This will be a loss of 157,222 or 45% of the number of Resident Members in 2013.

Note: The decline of Resident Membership is much higher than the decline of Pastoral Charges and Congregations. This results in many Congregations having significantly fewer Resident Members.



Note: Please read, *What Is A Trend?*, at the end for a discussion of how to understand and interpret these graphs.

United Church Average Weekly Attendance

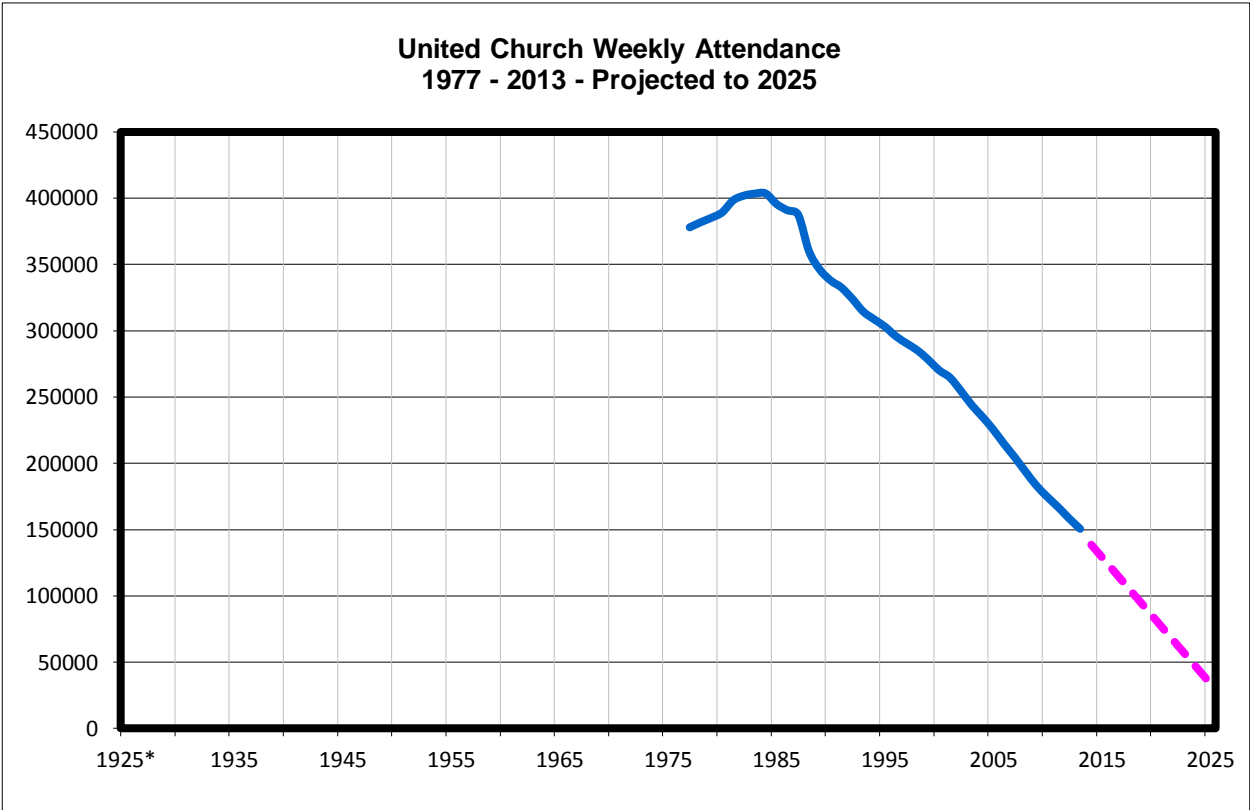
As of December 31, 2013, the Average Weekly Attendance was 150,819.

If the trend for the past 10 years continues unchanged, Attendance in 2025 will be 34,056.

This will be a loss of 116,763 or 77% of the number attending church in 2013.

Note: Average Weekly Attendance is declining much faster than the number of Congregations. This results in many Congregations having significantly lower Attendance.

Note: The Average Weekly Attendance was nationally recorded beginning in 1977.



Note: Please read, *What Is A Trend?*, at the end for a discussion of how to understand and interpret these graphs.

United Church Financially Supporting Households

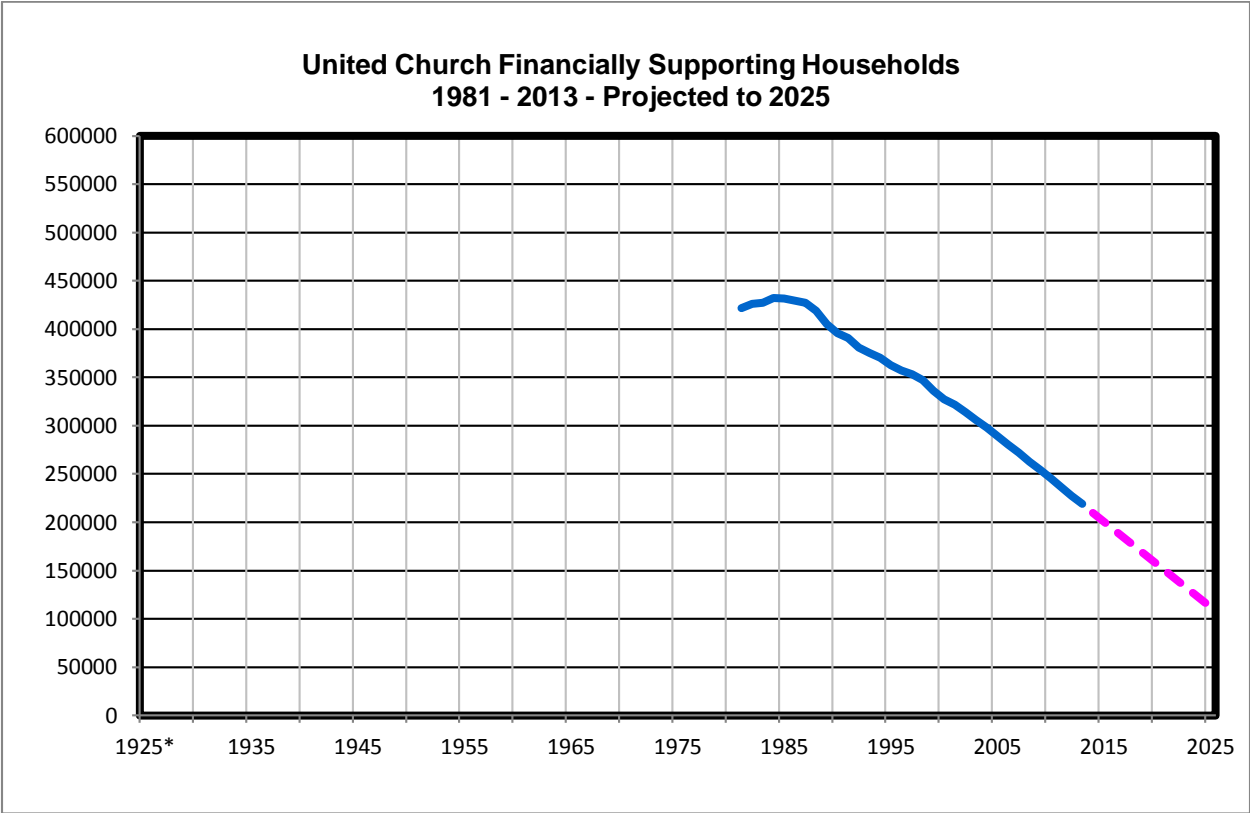
As of December 31, 2013, the number of Financially Supporting Households was 218,790.

If the trend for the past 10 years continues unchanged, the number of Supporting Households in 2025 will be 112,587.

This will be a loss of 106,203 or 49% of the number of Supporting Households in 2013.

Note: The number of Financially Supporting Households is declining much faster than the number of Congregations. This results in Congregations having significantly lower Supporting Households.

Note: The number of Financially Supporting Households was nationally recorded beginning in 1981.



Note: Please read, *What Is A Trend?*, at the end for a discussion of how to understand and interpret these graphs.

United Church Identified Givers to Local Expenses

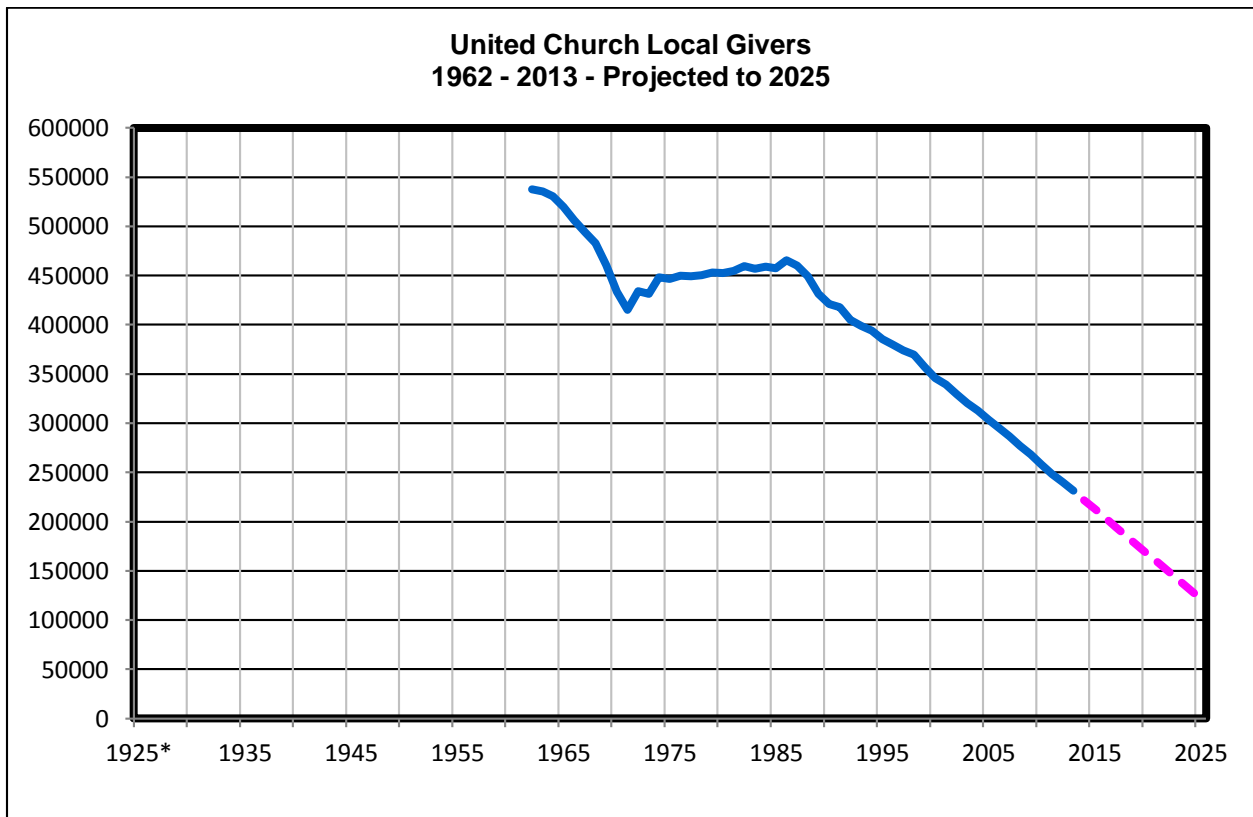
As of December 31, 2013, the number of Identified Givers to Local Expenses was 231,682.

If the trend for the past 10 years continues unchanged, the number of Local Givers in 2025 will be 121,633.

This will be a loss of 110,049 or 48% of the number of Local Givers in 2013.

Note: The number of Local Givers is declining much faster than the number of Congregations. This results in Congregations having significantly fewer Local Givers.

Note: The number of Identified Givers to Local Expenses was nationally recorded beginning in 1962.



Note: Please read, *What Is A Trend?*, at the end for a discussion of how to understand and interpret these graphs.

United Church Identified Givers to the M&S Fund

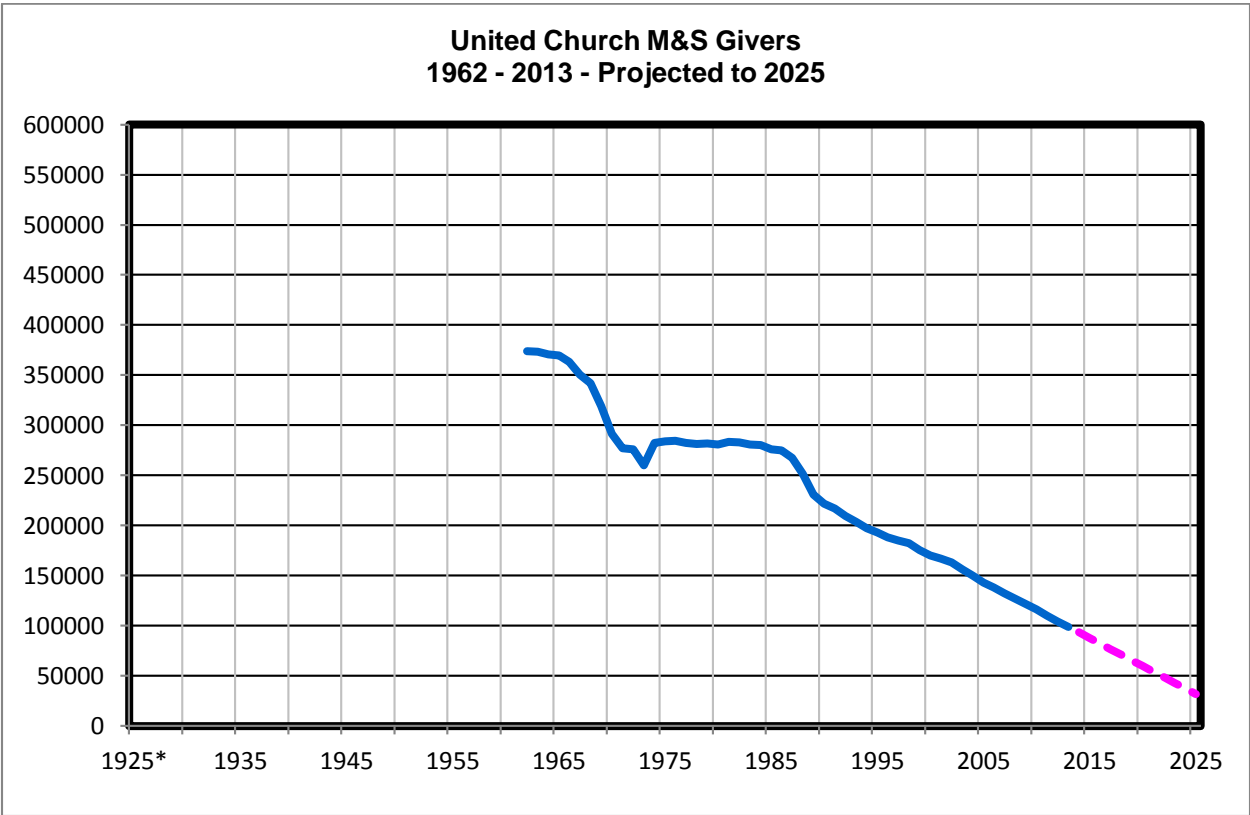
As of December 31, 2013, the number of Identified Givers to the M&S Fund was 98,867.

If the trend for the past 10 years continues unchanged, the number of M&S Givers in 2025 will be 31,894.

This will be a loss of 66,973 or 68% of the number of M&S Givers in 2013.

Note: The number of Identified Givers to the M&S Fund is declining much faster than the number of Congregations. This results in Congregations having significantly fewer M&S Givers.

Note: The number of Identified Givers to the M&S Fund was nationally recorded beginning in 1962.



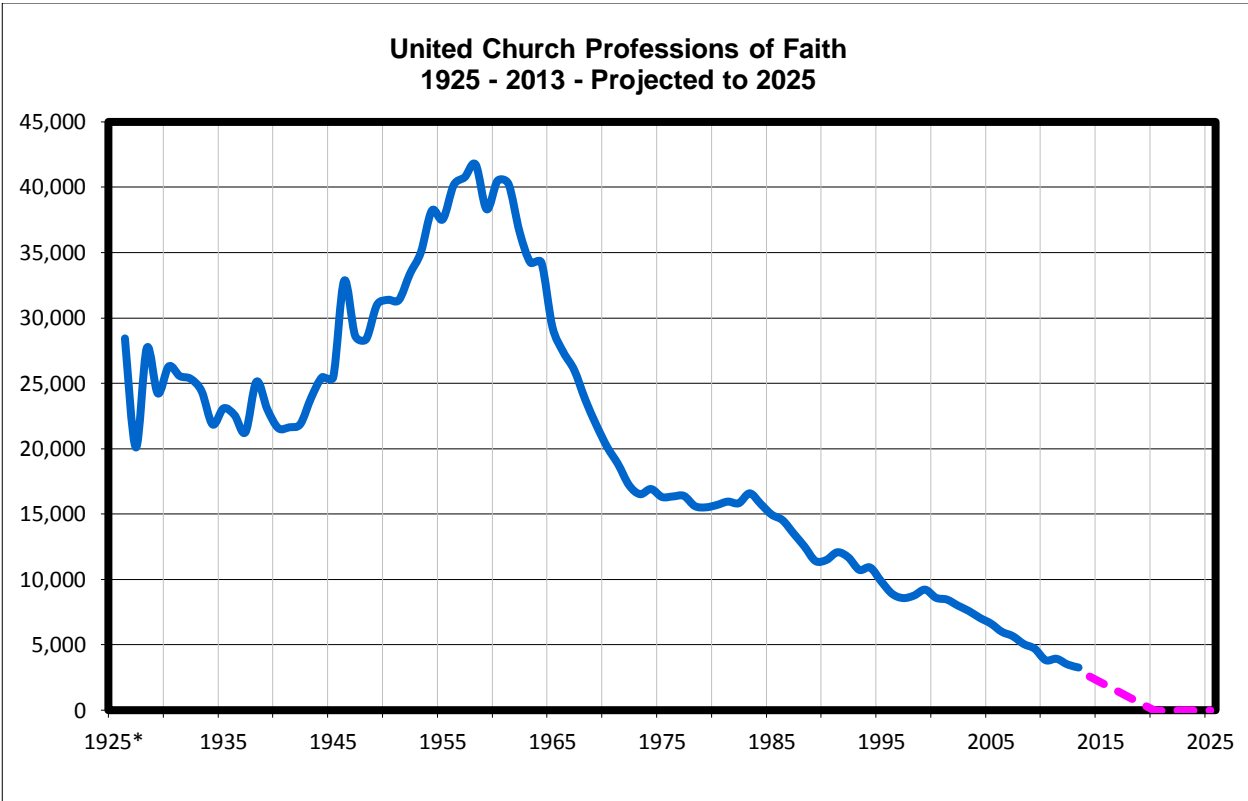
Note: Please read, *What Is A Trend?*, at the end for a discussion of how to understand and interpret these graphs.

United Church New Members Received by Profession of Faith

As of December 31, 2013, the total New Members received by Profession of Faith (that is, those who have never been members of any church before) was 3,285.

If the trend for the past 10 years continues unchanged, the number of New Members in 2020 will be zero.

This will be a loss of 3,285 or 100% of the New Members Received in 2013.



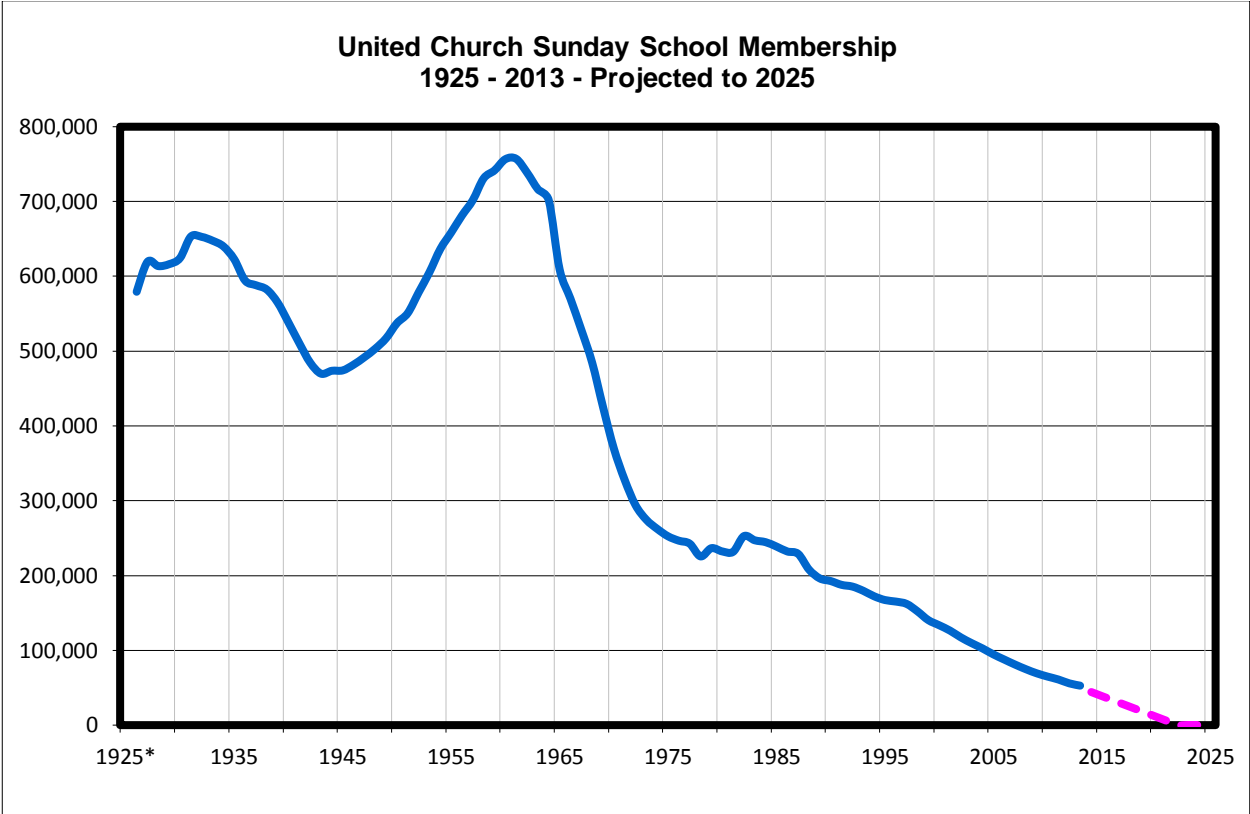
Note: Please read, *What Is A Trend?*, at the end for a discussion of how to understand and interpret these graphs.

United Church Sunday School Membership

As of December 31, 2013, United Church Sunday School Membership was 52,440.

If the trend for the past 10 years continues unchanged, Sunday School Membership in 2022 will be zero.

This will be a loss of 52,440 or 100% of the Sunday School Membership in 2013.



Note: Please read, *What Is A Trend?*, at the end for a discussion of how to understand and interpret these graphs.

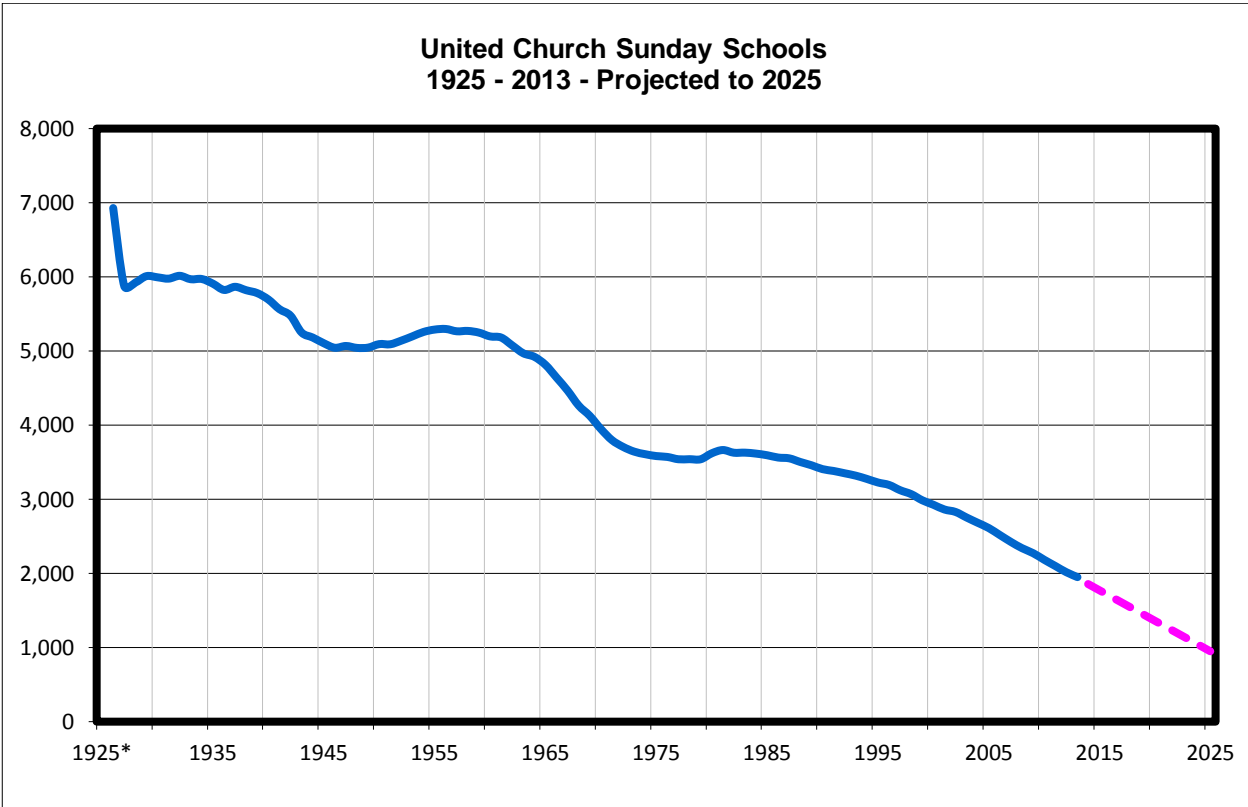
United Church Sunday Schools

As of December 31, 2013, the number of United Church Sunday Schools was 1,954.

If the trend for the past 10 years continues unchanged, the number of Sunday Schools in 2025 will be 951.

This will be a loss of 1,003 or 51% of the number of Sunday Schools in 2013.

Note: The rate of decline of Sunday School Membership is much higher than that for Sunday Schools. The result is Sunday Schools with significantly fewer members.



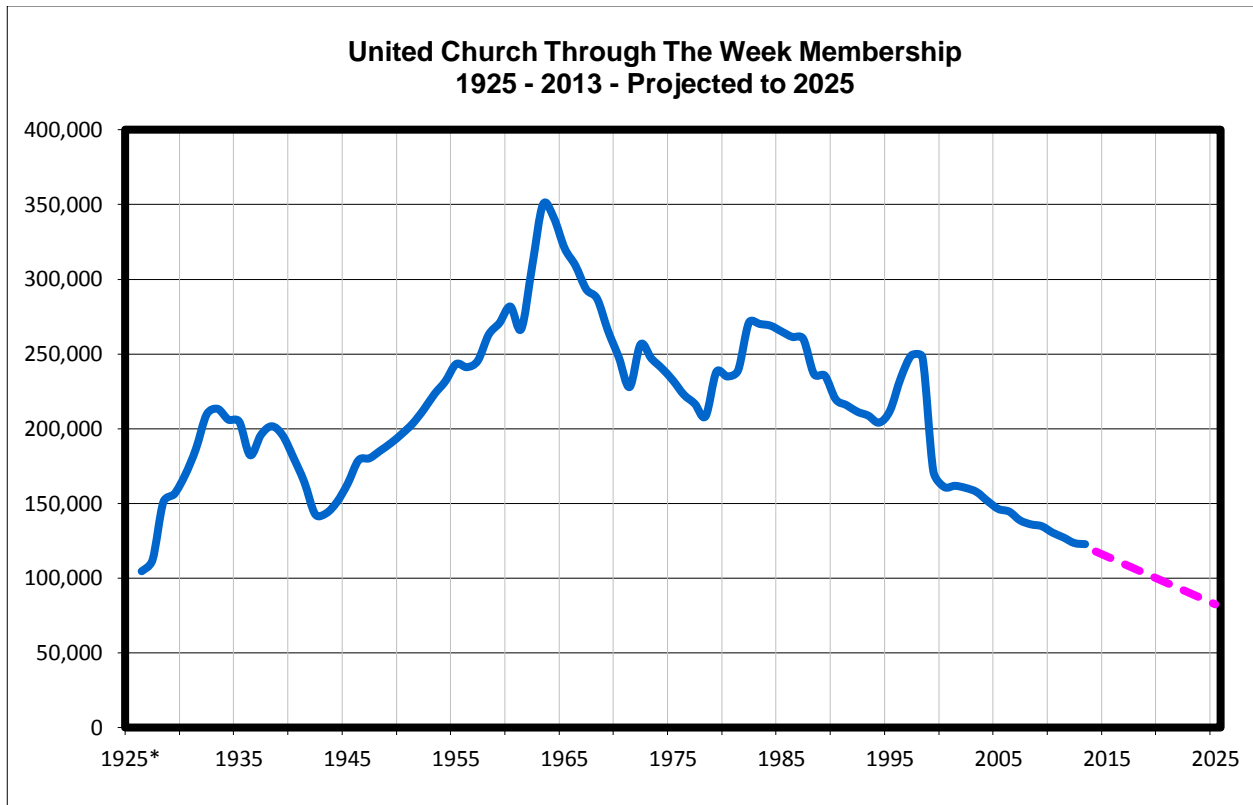
Note: Please read, *What Is A Trend?*, at the end for a discussion of how to understand and interpret these graphs.

United Church Through-the-Week Membership

As of December 31, 2013, United Church Through-the-Week Organizations Membership was 122,769.

If the trend for the past 10 years continues unchanged, Through-the-Week Membership in 2025 will be 82,399.

This will be a loss of 40,370 or 33% of the Through-the-Week Membership in 2013.



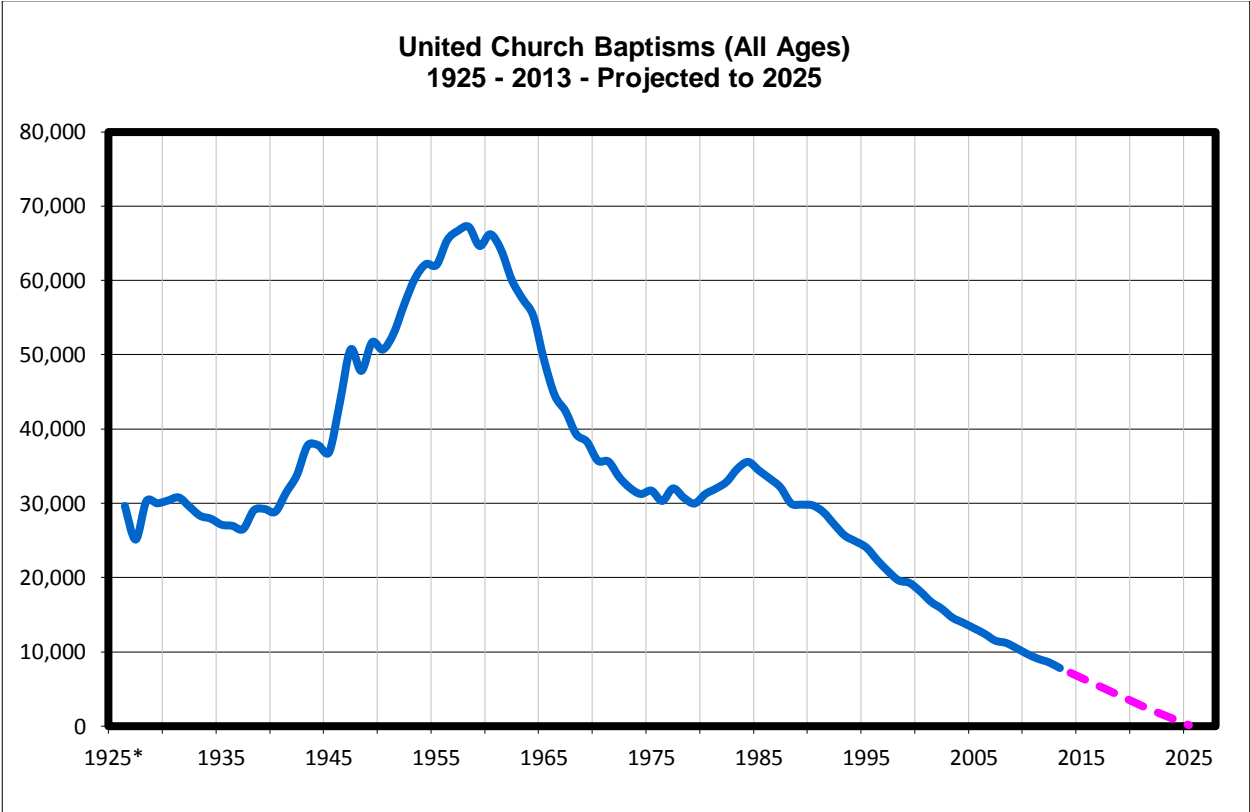
Note: Please read, *What Is A Trend?*, at the end for a discussion of how to understand and interpret these graphs.

United Church Baptisms (All Ages)

As of December 31, 2013, the total of all Baptisms was 7,863.

If the trend for the past 10 years continues unchanged, the total of all Baptisms in 2025 will be 158.

This will be a loss of 7,705 or 98% of the Baptisms (All Ages) in 2013.



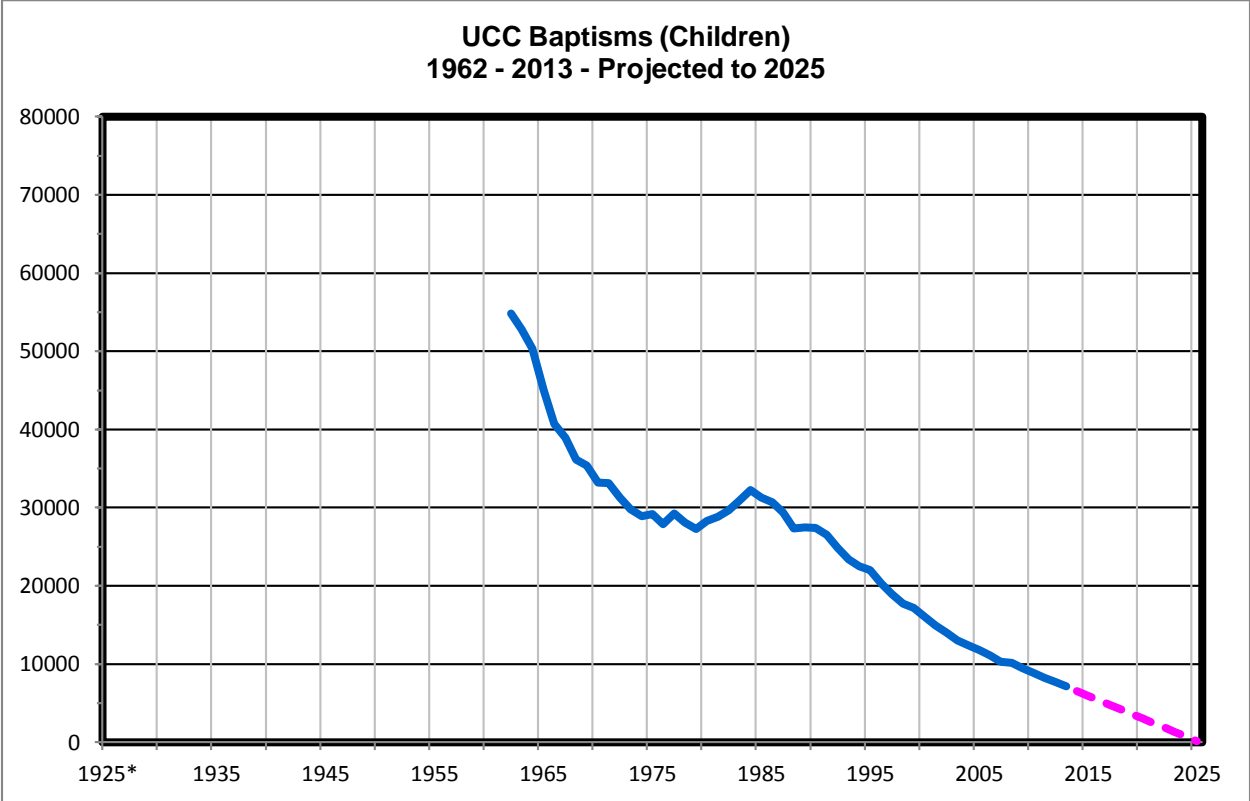
Note: Please read, *What Is A Trend?*, at the end for a discussion of how to understand and interpret these graphs.

United Church Baptisms (Children)

As of December 31, 2013, the total of all Baptisms (Children Under 12) was 7,125.

If the trend for the past 10 years continues unchanged, the number of Baptisms (Children) in 2025 will be 158.

This will be a loss of 6,967 or 98% of the Baptisms (Children) in 2013.



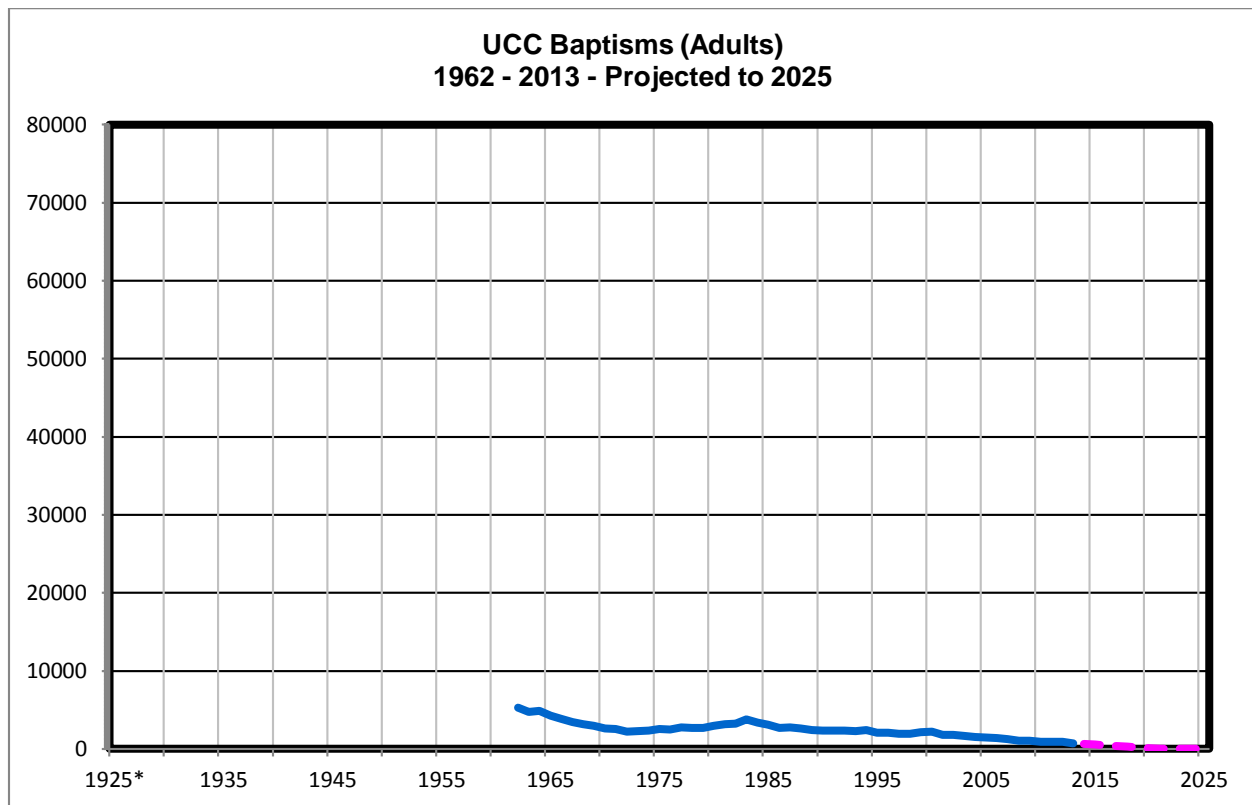
Note: Please read, *What Is A Trend?*, at the end for a discussion of how to understand and interpret these graphs.

United Church Baptisms (Adults)

As of December 31, 2013, the total of all Baptisms (Adults, 12 and Over) was 738.

If the trend for the past 10 years continues unchanged, the number of Baptisms (Adults) in 2022 will be zero.

This will be a loss of 738 or 100% of the Baptisms (Adults) in 2013.



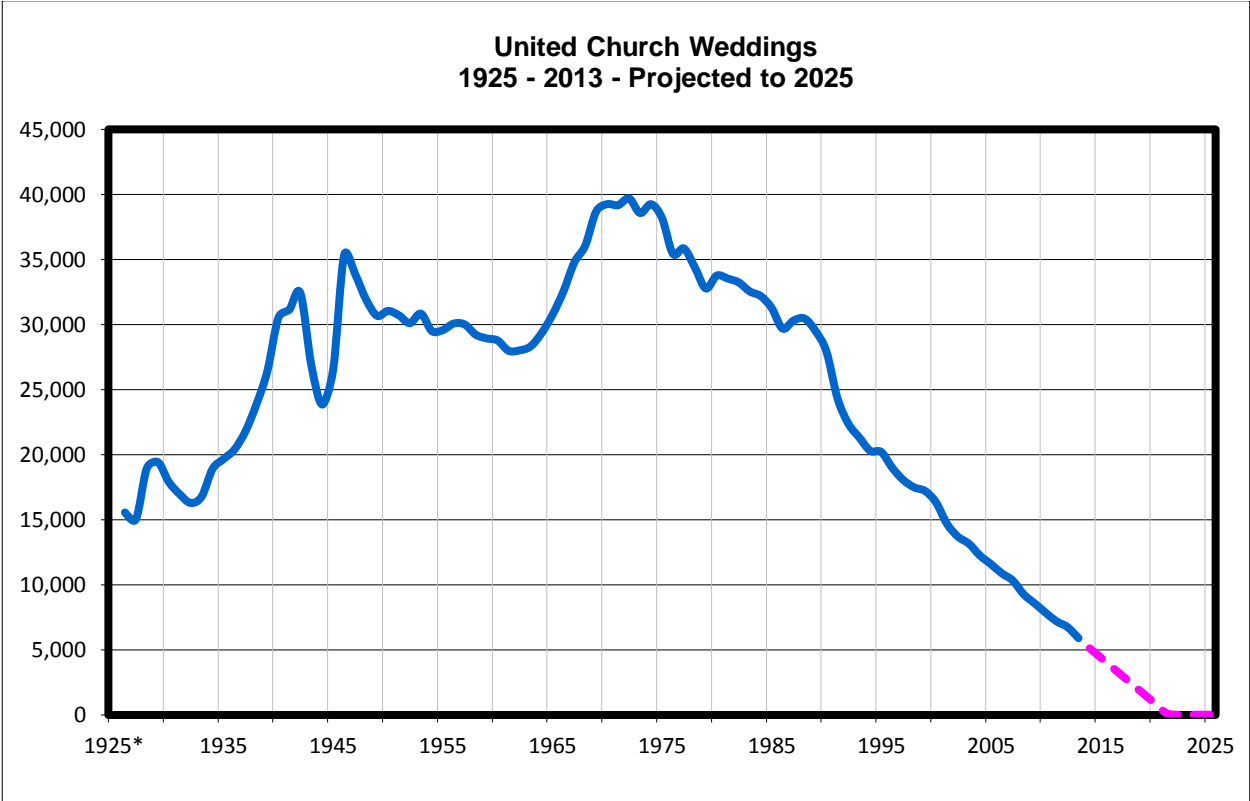
Note: Please read, *What Is A Trend?*, at the end for a discussion of how to understand and interpret these graphs.

United Church Weddings

As of December 31, 2013, the total number of United Church Weddings performed was 5,880.

If the trend for the past 10 years continues unchanged, the number of Weddings in 2022 will be zero.

This will be a loss of 5,880 or 100% of the Weddings in 2013.



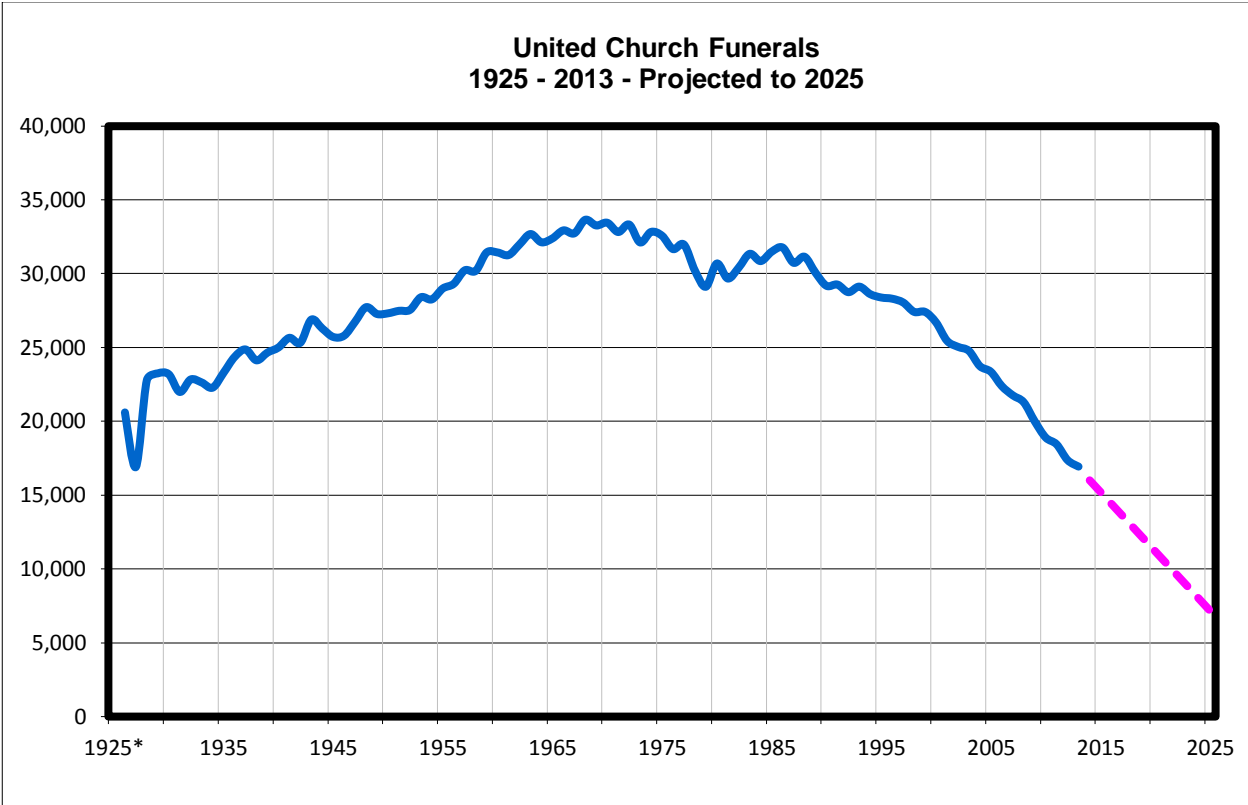
Note: Please read, *What Is A Trend?*, at the end for a discussion of how to understand and interpret these graphs.

United Church Funerals

As of December 31, 2013, the total number of United Church Funerals performed was 16,941.

If the trend for the past 10 years continues unchanged, the number of Funerals performed in 2025 will be 7,167.

This will be a decline of 9,774 or 58% of the number of Funerals in 2013.



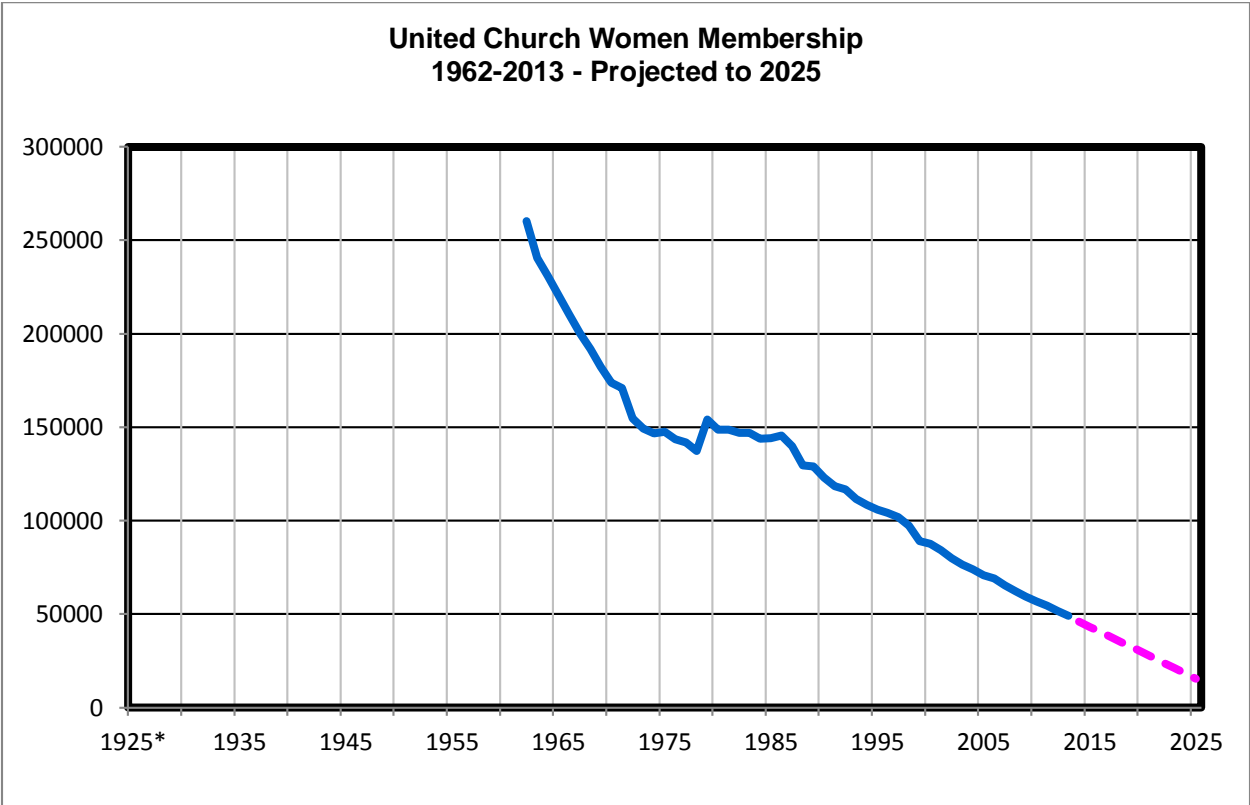
Note: Please read, *What Is A Trend?*, at the end for a discussion of how to understand and interpret these graphs.

United Church Women

As of December 31, 2013, the total membership of United Church women’s groups was 49,036.

If the trend for the past 10 years continues unchanged, the United Church women’s group membership in 2025 will be 15,472.

This will be a decline of 33,564 or 68% of the membership in 2013.



Note: Please read, *What Is A Trend?*, at the end for a discussion of how to understand and interpret these graphs.

What Is A Trend?

A “trend” is an indication of the general direction of change.

I use the Microsoft Excel TREND function. I do so because it does in fact give a good indication of the general direction of change, and because as a straight line it is easy to understand. Whatever the future holds, it will not unfold in a straight line, but a straight line is useful for clarifying the general direction we are headed.

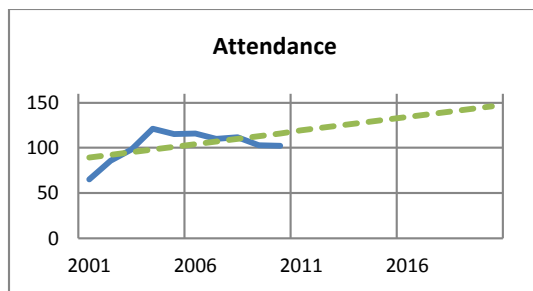
And it is important to understand what a trend is NOT.

A trend is NOT a single example. A trend looks at a history of events – the more the better – and summarizes the overall change.

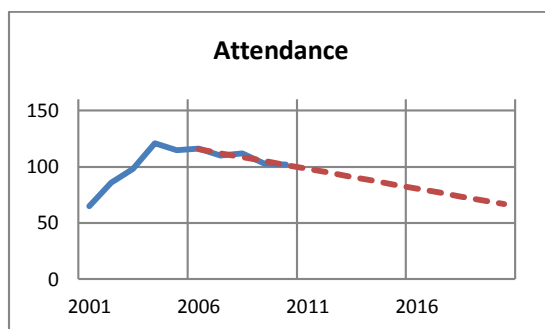
There will always be examples that contradict the overall trend. Because that is precisely what a summary is; it is roughly the average with examples that are better than the trend, and examples that are worse than the trend. And so, a trend is not proven false by examples that are “bucking the trend.”

A trend is NOT a prediction of the future. It is an analysis of the present and recent past.

For example, suppose that ten years ago, your congregation had set a goal to increase average worship attendance from 65 to 100. Suppose the results for those 10 years was, 65, 86, 98, 121, 115, 116, 110, 112, 103, 102. This is great news as the goal was achieved quickly and is still above 100 at the end of 10 years. And the overall trend, shown as the dotted green line, is quite promising.



But what is the trend of the past 5 years? Are we still tending in the general direction of achieving our goal? This trend, shown as the dotted red line, is more worrisome.



Both trends are correct as showing the overall direction of change for 10 and 5 years. Projecting them into the future helps give a sense of whether we are moving in a desired direction or not. But.

The question to ask about these two trends is not: Which is correct? The question to ask is: What factors created the overall trends? And.

When searching for factors that may have created the overall trend, it is crucial to look at factors OUTSIDE the church as well as inside. For example, it may very well be that a change of leadership in the church was a key turning point. Or perhaps this is a small town and a major employer has shut down.

Which leads to my third point about trends.

A trend is NOT just about the United Church. It is also about changes in Canadian society and our neighbourhoods.

It is my strong conviction that when we look at United Church charts and trends and only ask:

What did we do wrong?

We are asking the wrong question. And so end up trying to solve the wrong problems.

If we only ask about what we did wrong, we will spend fruitless time, energy, and money trying to fix ourselves: get a new minister; get an overhead projector; get a new choir director; get a new board structure; etc., etc. But these solutions don't work over the long term because they are trying to solve the wrong question. They are trying to solve only one half of the whole question.

The question we must also ask is:

How has Canadian society and our neighbourhood changed?

There is no single source to present graphs of all the ways Canadian society has changed over the decades. There are many sources. Too many for me to gather here. But here is my quick summary:

- There has been a huge population shift from rural to urban.
- There has been increased diversity of ethnicities and their languages, cultures, religions, and values.
- There has been increased secularization of the public realm, and privatization of religion as a personal opinion. Religion is no longer publically valued and is often characterized as problematic.
- There has been increased web-based social networking and decreased real-time face-to-face community-based networking.
- Initial gains of increased wealth across all sectors has shifted to concentration of wealth amongst the wealthiest and a decrease amongst the middle and lower classes. This results in more adults – and teens – working more and having less time and money for volunteer organizations.

- There has been a shift from volunteer participation to consumer purchasing of services. Membership in volunteer organizations of all types has declined and grown older, and organizations have increasingly relied less on volunteers and more on paid staff. Sunday School is one of the last remaining non-fee based organized children's programs.
- With the exception of congregations populated by recent immigrants, there has been an across the board decline in religious organizations of all faiths and theological spectrums. People are not being religious like they used to. They are not going to church / synagogue / mosque / temple like they used to – and this trend applies to second and third generation immigrant populations.

So when we look at these graphs and trends, the right questions to ask are:

- What are we doing wrong? What can we learn from congregations that are “bucking the trend?” From non-United Church sources such as Natural Church Development? Maybe we should get an overhead projector or Wi-Fi, or allow coffee in worship? Or maybe we should become more intentional about inviting ourselves, our friends, neighbours, and strangers to openly commit to Jesus and to following his way? Or maybe we should become spiritual but not religious? Or maybe we should sell the building and use the proceeds to ...? Or?
- Who are our neighbours now? What might be our ministry with and to them? What sustenance might we receive from them that will nurture the health of our faith community?
- Given the changes in Canadian society how might we expect those changes to impact the United Church? Does our experience confirm or question those expectations?
- Given that changes in Canadian society are not a problem that we can fix – and are not our fault – how can we best respond to them in ways that are faithful to the Gospel of Christ and also practically sustainable for the next generations? Some of the areas that come to mind where specific responses are needed are:
 - ❖ Given that people are just not going to church like they used to, what do we do with the over-capacity of our existing buildings?
 - ❖ Given that people are not volunteering like they used to, what forms of organization can we adopt to use less volunteer time more effectively and with greater pay off in service and satisfaction?
 - ❖ Given that people are not donating like they used to, what sustainable balance of revenue streams (donations, grants, bequests, rentals, investments, advertising, new monastic income sharing, etc.) and expenses will support life-changing, service-oriented, Gospel communities?
 - ❖ Given that people are using the internet to connect and communicate in new ways, how does the church change the ways we connect and communicate – including changing the qualities and locations of our face-to-face gatherings?

To re-cap. Remember what a trend is not:

1. **A trend is NOT a single example.** A trend looks at a history of events – the more the better – and summarizes the overall change.
2. **A trend is NOT a prediction of the future.** It is an analysis of the present and recent past.
3. **A trend is NOT just about the United Church.** It is also about changes in Canadian society and our neighbourhood.

Use these graphs to expand and sharpen the questions you are asking about your situation as a congregation. Without the right questions, you will try and solve the wrong problems.

And widen the conversation as far as possible. Within your own congregation, but also with as many neighbours and neighbouring congregations as will join in. Jesus has promised to be present when we gather in his name. I am sure that God is not done with us yet.

David Ewart,
www.davidewart.ca