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# PCUSA Projects Big Membership Losses — Any Lessons?

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The Presbyterian Church (USA), based in Louisville, Kentucky, now projects a loss of 85,000 members in 2006, after an estimated 65,000 loss in 2005. That adds up to a projected loss of over 2 million members since 1967.

*The Presbyterian Layman* reports: *Both the projected losses in members in 2005 and 2006 would be higher than any prior year's downturn since the reunion of the northern and southern streams of the mainline denomination in 1983. The projected 2006 loss would represent a single-year decline of 3.7 percent, the highest percentage loss in the denomination's 216-year history. If the projections become reality — or worse — they will have a devastating impact on both the per-capita and the mission budgets of the church. There has been some speculation that the 218th General Assembly, which is supposed to include about 200 more commissioners as the full effect of biennial assemblies begins in 2008, may not be able to pay for those additional seats.*

As groups like the Presbyterian Lay Committee have made clear, the embrace of theological liberalism has consequences — devastating consequences — for any denomination.

Just over a decade ago, researchers Dean R. Hoge, Benton Johnson, and Donald A. Luidens addressed this reality in their book, *Vanishing Boundaries: The Religion of Mainline Protestant Baby Boomers*.

As these researchers demonstrated, the embrace of what they called “lay liberalism” led massive numbers of persons to depart from the denomination and its churches. Why? Because the “vanishing boundaries” between belief and unbelief made church membership unnecessary and uninteresting. If the church has no distinctive doctrines, why belong? The coffee is better at Starbucks.

Hoge, Johnson, and Luidens pointed to one single doctrinal compromise as the best indicator of lay liberalism — the embrace of pluralism, inclusivism, or universalism in salvation. Lay liberalism is established in “a rejection of the orthodox teaching that Christianity is the only true religion,” they argued.

A move toward “openness” in all theological matters led to a breakdown in the total truth claim, and to massive changes in lifestyle as well.

Tellingly, the researchers suggested how this trend could be reversed:

*Stop sending children to non-religious, liberal colleges. Stop the historical criticism of the Bible. Stop encouraging cross-cultural learning. Discourage interfaith marriage. Raise barriers between the denominational faith community and other people in society.*

*Then people would know who is in and who is out, and boundaries would reappear. In sum, move the Protestant communities away from the center of the culture of higher education today, toward the encapsulated faith communities of the past.... We describe this option here to demonstrate how far-fetched it is. It calls for an about-face from a century of mainline Protestant creativity.*

Well, now all can see where a century of “mainline Protestant creativity” has led.

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