



# Lost Lutherans

Exit Narratives and  
Religious Perspectives

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# American Christianity

- No religious tradition is state-sponsored
  - separations clause/ separation of church and state
- Some international support in colonial days
  - Some European mother churches supported religions in colonial America
- Free church/voluntary association model
- National denominational organizations



# The American Mainline

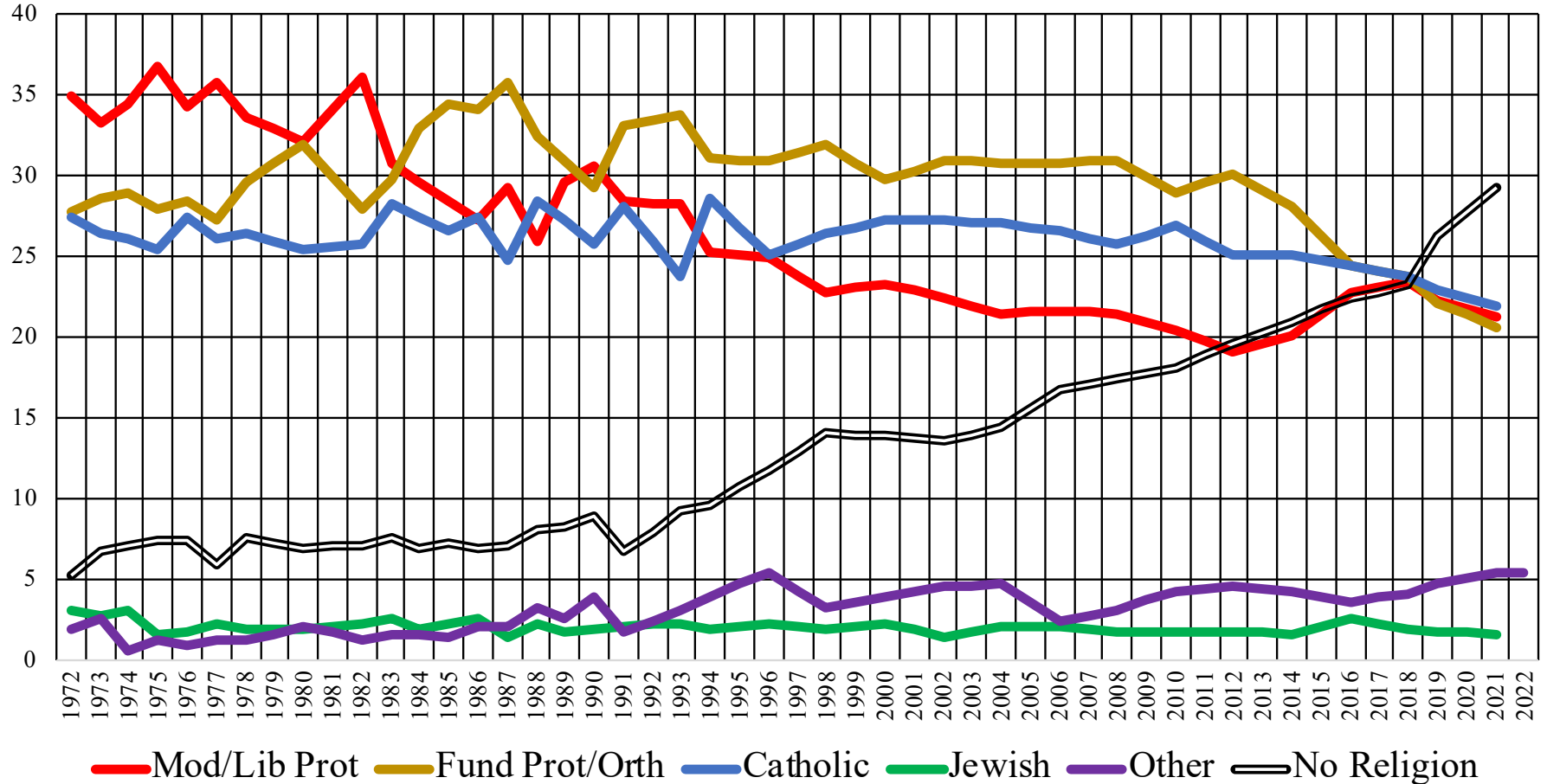
- Technical meaning
  - Federal Council of Churches (1908)
  - “Seven sisters” national denominational organizations
  - Pro-social causes
  - English-speaking with European roots
- General meaning
  - (1) Moderate/Liberal Protestants, or
  - (2) The most culturally influential group



# The American Mainline

- Originally:
  - American Baptist Church
  - Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)
  - Episcopal Church
  - Evangelical Lutheran Church
  - Presbyterian Church
  - United Church of Christ
  - United Methodist Church
- Excluded:
  - Non-Christian, Non-White, Non-English Speaking, Evangelical/Fundamentalist
  - Especially Jewish organizations, Southern Baptist, AME, AMEZ, Catholic
- Hugely influential in 1950s
- Has been in numeric and cultural decline since mid-1960s

# GSS US Religious Preferences Since 1972





# American Lutheranism

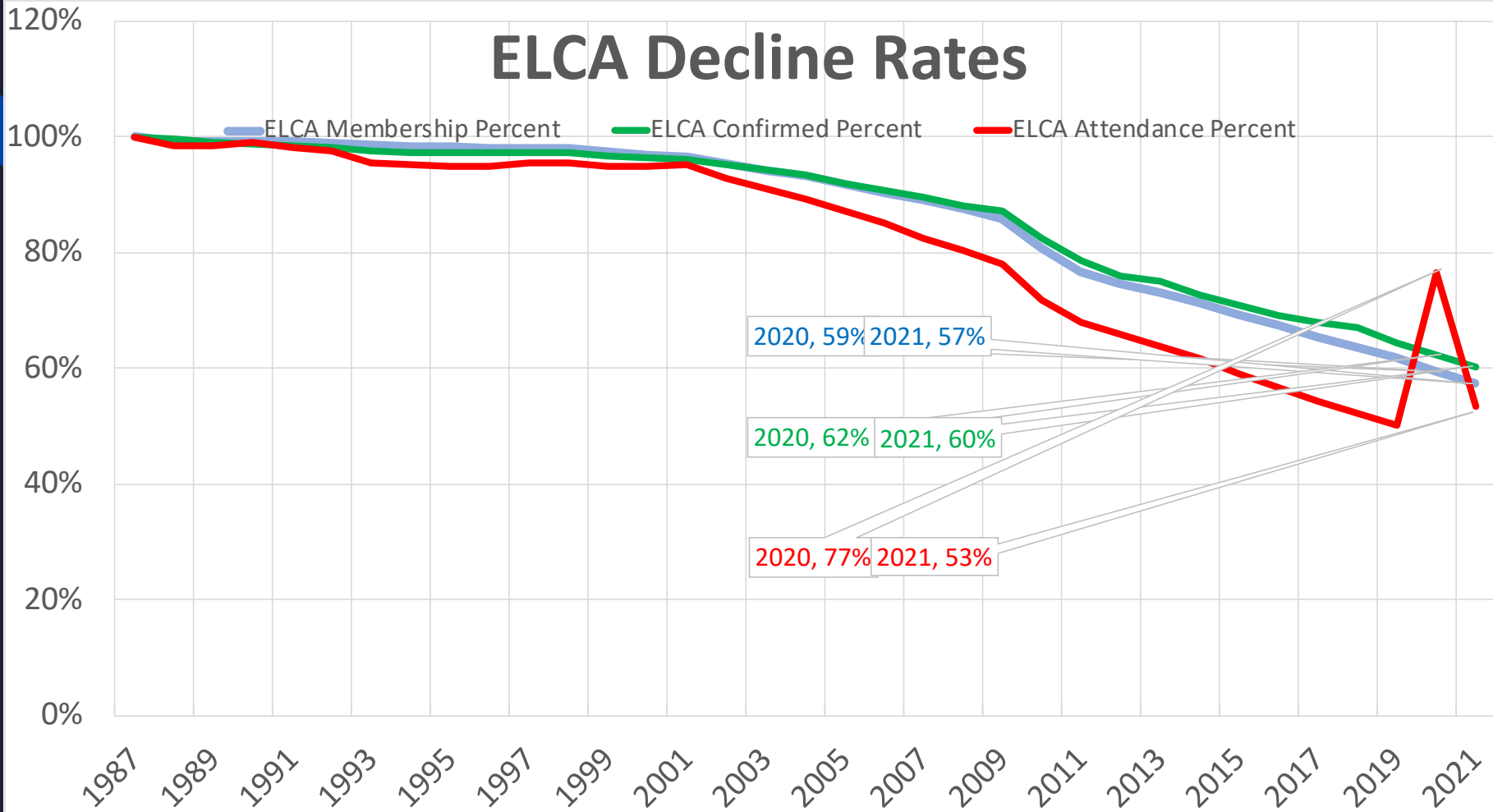
- No state sponsorship in colonial times
- Pioneers of free church/volunteer model
- Remained largely ethnic
  - Slow assimilation, especially German Lutherans
- One group included in Mainline (FCC, 1908) as a nod to immigrant communities
- All English after World War I
- Many mergers and splits



# The ELCA

- Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (1987)
- Merger of progressive and conservative organizations
  - National organization
    - Social Statements
    - Clergy training/certification
  - Congregations
    - Strongly autonomous
    - Hire clergy
    - Own church buildings/facilities

# ELCA Decline Rates





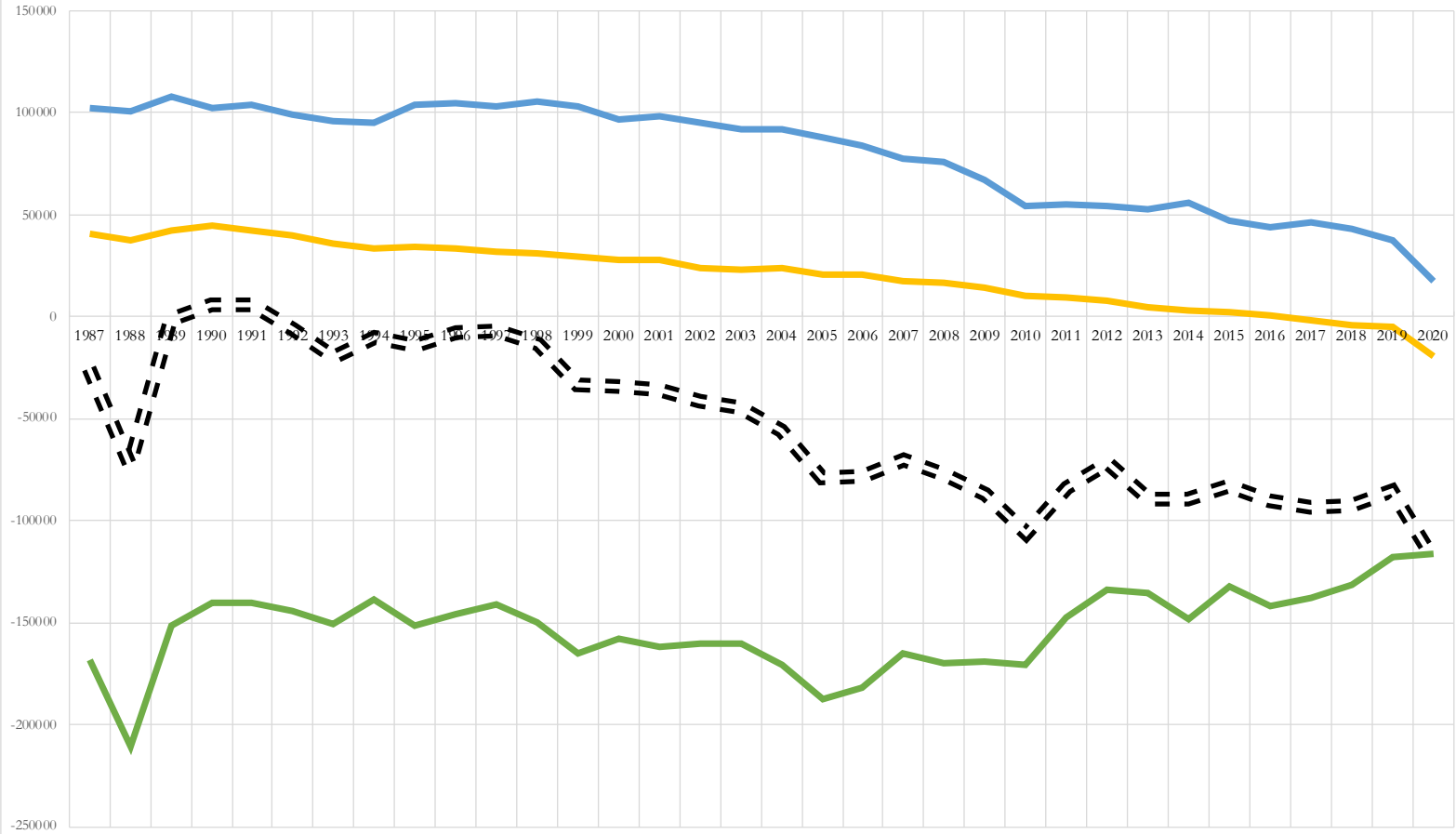


# ELCA Membership Change

- 1987: 5288471
- 2021: 3035615
- 43% decline (unadjusted for population)
- Where have they gone?

# Net Changes by Combined Factors

Net Generational Change   Net Switching   Net Other Change   Net Total Change





## ELCA Decline Measurements

Life Cycle	Positive until 2018
Switching	Consistently positive
Other	Massively negative

What is “Other”?



# Interviews

Goal of 25 interviews (27 total)

Initially Summer 2020

From single judicatory (synod)

## Topics

Religious Biography/ Upbringing

Current religious identity and practice

Belonging and the ELCA

The Bible

Overall Perception of Religion



# Interview Findings

- Common Traits
  - General lack of education in the tradition
  - Critical of perceived Christian hypocrisy and extremism (often portrayed in media)
  - The Church is responsible for its own decline
- Typology based on perception of what church is and their valuation (good or bad)...

# Initial Typology

	Church as Relational	Church as Ethical
Positive Outlook	<u>Rosy Dreamer</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>•High youth involvement</li><li>•Identify as Lutheran or Christian</li><li>•<b>Left from drift and conflict</b></li><li>•<b>Many spiritual practices</b></li></ul>	<u>Moral Graduate</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>•Most youth involvement</li><li>•Identify as Christian or None</li><li>•<b>Left at adulthood</b></li><li>•<b>Ad hoc spirituality</b></li></ul>
Negative Outlook	<u>Jilted Exile</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>•High youth involvement</li><li>•Weak religious identity</li><li>•<b>Left from conflict</b></li><li>•<b>Occasional spiritual activities</b></li></ul>	<u>Aloof Escapee</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>•Regular youth involvement</li><li>•No religious identity</li><li>•<b>Left at adulthood</b></li><li>•<b>Rare spiritual activity</b></li></ul>



# Exit Dynamics

- Drift
  - Offering Envelopes at Confirmation
  - Friends disappearing/driving
  - College and lost connections
- Conflict
  - Someone treated poorly (self, children, uncle, pastor)
  - Forced to attend by family members with little explanation
  - Damnation, exogamous marriage prohibitions, intolerance
- Adulthood
  - Lifelong religious practice not modelled by parents or guardians
  - Felt equipped at Confirmation (Affirmation of Baptism/Adulthood)
  - No longer needs the church for moral formation




# Conclusions

- People who are leaving are going...nowhere
- Exit dynamics
  - Drift
  - Conflict
  - Adulthood
- Perceptions
  - Increasingly negative
  - Reinforced by media portrayals of extremism
  - Unlikely to “come back”

Religiosity and spirituality not disappearing,  
but transforming





**Dziękuję**  
**Thank you!**

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