

The Reconquest of Mainline Protestantism

With denominations losing members, a youthful insurgency has been emerging.

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Operation Reconquista, they call it: a cohort of conservative Generation Z Christians working to steer America's Protestant mainline churches back to theological orthodoxy. They don't form a single organization but are unified by ideals shared across many denominations. This is what makes them interesting—they embody a sense that the old Protestant mainline, once

the spiritual backbone of America, is in desperate need of salvation.

The mainline is a collection of long-established Protestant denominations: the Episcopalians, United Methodists, Presbyterians and so on. These days the mainline is generally viewed as a bastion of progressive “social justice” theology. It is also dying.

Since the mid-20th century, these churches have seen attendance dwindle. The United Church of Christ has gone from roughly 8,000 churches and 2.25 million members in 1960 to 4,485 churches and 683,936 members—a 70% membership decline. Not every denomination is hemorrhaging, but they're all bleeding. The Presbyterian Church (USA) has lost more than 60% of its membership since 1984, the United Methodists 55% since 1967.

These declines happened while the churches were making doctrinal changes that carried them ever deeper into social activism and away from theological dogma. The connection is certain, and the pairing of congregational decline with theological fading seems to have opened the door to a new youth-driven demand for orthodoxy. Enter Operation Reconquista.

Its leader is Presbyterian seminarian Richard Ackerman, 23, known online as Redeemed Zoomer or RZ. He's gained some 700,000 followers since he began posting on his [YouTube](#) channel in 2022. He wants to begin “reclaiming” mainline institutions and congregations.

The idea is simple: Rapidly emptying pews and increasingly vacant pulpits (ordinations in the United Church of Christ have dropped 55% since 2013) leave congregations desperate and offer opportunities for young conservatives interested in leadership.

Many congregants seem to diverge ideologically from their social-activist leadership. There isn't precise data on theological orientation, but roughly 61% of clergy in the Presbyterian Church (USA) identify as ideologically liberal while only about 23% of churchgoers do. There are similarly drastic gaps in other denominations.

Given that the bulk of mainline members and leaders are elderly, a grassroots insurgency makes sense. All conservative Protestants need to do to regain control is join moderate mainline congregations, put their young people through seminary to fill pastoral vacancies, and wait out the aging progressives. The math, RZ argues, is "foolproof."

RZ wants to retake the mainline partly for institutional reasons: Over the past several decades, conservative Christians have broken off to form more-conservative evangelical churches while leaving behind their denomination's institutional power and heritage. RZ wants to take it back: "For centuries, wealthy Christians would donate their entire estates to these denominations not expecting their descendants to just abandon [the church] and let that money that was dedicated to God's Kingdom fall into the hands of liberals."

Operation Reconquista (sometimes called Operation Reformation) has a Discord chat group with more than 4,500 members, many of whom supposedly attend a mainline congregation. Presbyterians for the Kingdom, the most active denominational group, claims around 300 members, half of them active or prospective seminarians.

David Yancey, president of Presbyterians for the Kingdom, says the movement has become a serious actor within the denomination: "If the conservatives had social media 20 or 30 years ago, I think this would be game over."

Not every conservative Protestant is on board. Mark Tooley, president of the Institute on Religion and Democracy and longtime champion of mainline renewal, writes: "Reviving the denominations institutionally, barring supernatural intervention, is nearly impossible. The progressives who control them, who cannot plant new churches, or win new members, depend on these bureaucracies, funded by endowments, for their livelihoods."

Others point out that the movement is more moderate than conservative, considering that its proponents endorse women's ordination, a sticking point for many traditional Protestants.

Nevertheless, the Reconquista's proponents have one thing right: Progressive Christianity can't keep people in the pews. A Christianity that abandons belief in the divinity of Jesus, man's need for salvation and biblical sexual morals, only to conform to the latest cultural trend has nothing to offer people concerned for their souls.

That, combined with the demographics of the mainline, makes some success seem inevitable. The Reconquista's efforts signal a growing Protestant realization of the deeply rooted institutional power they once held and would like to hold again.