

Changes in Church and Clergy Membership

The United Methodist Church

2000 - 2005

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Introduction

The primary mission of the Division of Ordained Ministry of the General Board of Higher Education and Ministry is to invite, equip, and support faithful leaders of The United Methodist Church. To achieve this, information about the makeup of that leadership and changes to the makeup are necessary. Annually, the General Council of Finance and Administration publishes aggregate information for each annual conference as a reference tool. Using that information, this paper examines change from 2000 to 2005 in The United Methodist Church with particular focus on the change in numbers of clergy. To set the context, information about changes in church membership and attendance are discussed first. Comparing 2000 to 2005 provides a clearer picture of change that might otherwise be obscured in a year-to-year analysis.

Membership in The United Methodist Church continues to decline, but not across all jurisdictions. The number of districts and organized churches has declined, but the number of pastoral charges has increased during this time period. The total clergy population has increased at least in part because of the increase in local pastors and deacons. Over this time period, the number of probationers has increased, most dramatically for probationary deacons. New leaders are indeed being developed - the increase in the numbers of deacons and probationers illustrates this.

Church Membership

The Methodist church family is one of the largest Protestant groups in the United States. According to a 2001 Barna survey, 24.5% of the U.S. population identified as Catholic, 16.3% as Baptist and 6.8% as Methodist (www.adherents.com). While Methodist Church membership remains at the top, membership has been declining since approximately 1850 (Finke and Stark 1992). Even after the 1968 merger of The Methodist Church and The Evangelical United Brethren Church to form The United Methodist Church, membership in the church continued to decline, from about 9.9 million members in 1974 to 8.54 million members 20 years later in 1994 (General Council on Finance and Administration, April 2006). Between 1999 and 2004, membership in The United Methodist Church again decreased overall by 3.5%, meaning there were 291,855 fewer members in 2004 compared to 1999. In 2005¹, membership figures suggested a continued decline, dipping just below 8 million members (7.98).

The decline in membership is not consistent across the country or across years. Fairly large differences exist by jurisdiction (Table 1). The Southeastern Jurisdiction is the only jurisdiction to experience a small *increase* in membership between 1999 and 2004. The four jurisdictions, total membership, excluding the Southeastern Jurisdiction, decreased by 317,852. When including the Southeastern increase, the difference in membership from 1999 to 2004 is 291,855.

The Northern and Western jurisdictions experienced large percentage changes, more than 8% decline in their memberships between 1999 and 2004. Meanwhile, the jurisdictions in the South experienced very small percentage changes in membership, less than a 1% increase in the Southeastern and less than 1% decrease in South Central church membership.

¹ Data for church membership are used from those printed in the following year. In 2004, church membership numbers are provided. The updated 2004 numbers are printed in 2005.

For those jurisdictions experiencing a membership decline, 44% (139,829) of the decrease is from the North Central Jurisdiction and 40% (126,116) in the Northeastern Jurisdiction. The Western Jurisdiction represents 12% (38,599) of the total membership decrease and the South Central 4% (13,308).

Table 1. Difference in Church Membership
1999 compared to 2004 by Jurisdiction

	Change 1999-2004	% Change Jurisdiction	% of Total Decrease
North Central	(139,829)	(8.62%)	43.91%
Northeastern	(126,116)	(7.98%)	39.68%
South Central	(13,308)	(0.74%)	4.19%
Southeastern	25,997	0.89%	
Western	(38,599)	(8.70%)	12.14%
Total decrease	(317,852)		100%
Total Increase	25,997		
TOTAL Change	(291,855)	(3.49%)	

Comparing the annual percentage change between 1999 and 2003, annual membership decrease was less than 1%. In 2004, the decrease from the previous year was 1.6%. Fortunately, this greater percentage decrease did not continue into the year 2005. Between 2004 and 2005, the annual decrease was 1%.

Some, but certainly not all, of the change in membership across jurisdictions may reflect the overall demographic patterns of the United States. Domestic net migration² patterns illustrate net out-migration (loss) in the Northeast and Midwest regions and domestic in-migration (increase) both in the Southern and the Western regions over the 14 year period 1990 through 2004 (U.S. Census Bureau, Perry 2006). Migration may help to explain the extremely small changes in the two Southern jurisdictions. Another factor

² Domestic net migration represents movement (migration) within the United States only. This does not include immigration, international migration or exchanges between the US and other countries, U.S. territory possessions or the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico. In migration is movement of people into an area while out migration is movement out of an area.

in the decrease in membership is through death. Annually, more than 100,000 members are removed from membership rolls due to death. However, there are greater numbers who are received on confession of faith or restored than are deceased. The larger concern is for those members who left The United Methodist Church entirely.

Attendance

While membership in The United Methodist Church has been decreasing, in their report “This is our story. This is the story of our church in our time,” the General Council on Finance and Administration (2007) illustrates that attendance has not decreased at the same rate. Attendance at United Methodist churches has remained fairly stable, decreasing only slightly between 1975 and 2005. The percentage of members who attend church has actually increased from 36% in 1974 to nearly 42% in 2005. So, more members attend services than attended in 1974; however, fewer than half of church members actually attend. Meanwhile, attendance by persons who are not baptized or professing members has increased.

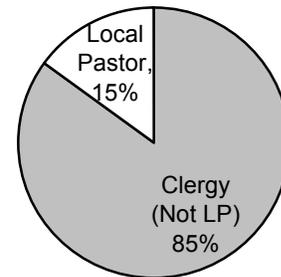
Churches

In 2005, there were 1,250 fewer organized churches than in 2000, a decrease of 3.5%. All jurisdictions experienced a decrease in the number of churches between 2000 and 2005. The greatest decrease is in the North Central Jurisdiction with 399 (5.2%) fewer churches in 2005 compared to 2000. The smallest decrease is 30 (1.7%) fewer churches in the Western Jurisdiction. The Southeastern Jurisdiction continues to have the greatest number of churches across years, but experienced a 2.3% (276) decrease from 2000 to 2005. Examining the numbers of churches in the aggregate provides a summary, but does not show the many separate changes occurring during the course of the year. The data reflect differences in totals and not the number of church start-ups versus church closings within the jurisdiction. A good source for data on churches and new church growth is John Southwick at the General Board of Global Ministries (<http://new.gb-gm-umc.org/about/us/ecg/research/>).

Clergy Membership

While the number of churches and the number of church members decreased, the number of clergy increased during the time period 2000-2005. Total annual conference clergy membership increased from 44,118 in 2000 to 45,148 in 2005, an increase of 1,030 (2.3%). Figure 1 illustrates the composition of total annual conference clergy membership in 2005. Nearly 15% (6,660) of the total annual conference clergy membership are local pastors (full and part-time) and 85% (38,488) are all other clergy (not including local pastors).

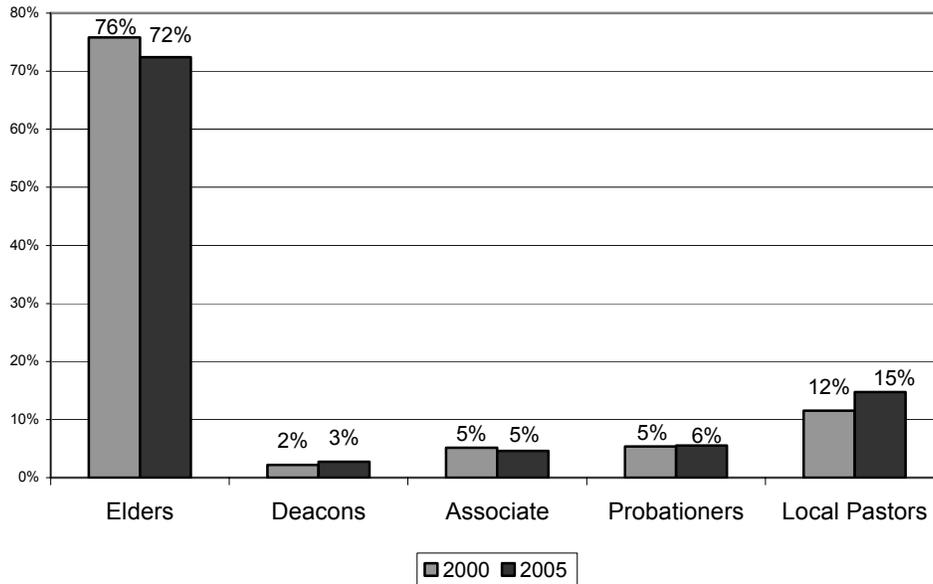
Figure 1. Total Annual Conference Clergy Membership: 2005



The percentage of full-time and part-time local pastors increased from 11.5% (5,088) in 2000 to 14.8% (6,660) in 2005, a 31% increase. The percentage of the total annual conference membership of other clergy, excluding local pastors, decreased from 88.5% (39,030) in 2000 to 85.3% (38,488) in 2005.

The other clergy membership, excluding local pastors, is composed of elders, deacons, associate and affiliate members, probationary deacons, and probationary elders. Figure 2 compares the 2000 to the 2005 percentages of the total annual conference membership composed by each. In the following sections, changes within groups over this five-year period are discussed.

Figure 2. Percent of Total Annual Conference Membership



Local Pastors

The number of local pastors under appointment *increased* by 1,572, a nearly 31% increase over year 2000 (Table 2). All jurisdictions experienced an increase, but nearly half (46%, 730) were added to the Southeastern Jurisdiction. The South Central Jurisdiction received 22% (350) of the new local pastors, the North Central received 16% (250), and the Northeastern Jurisdiction received 13% (203). Less than 3% (2.48%, 39) of the total new local pastors were added to the Western Jurisdiction.

Data received from GCFA (6/07) indicate that the number of part-time local pastors increased dramatically compared to full-time local pastors between 2002 and 2005. The numbers of part-time local pastors increased 18% (638) while full-time local pastors increased 2% (59). There are more part-time than full-time local pastors and the percentage of the total local pastors continues to increase. In 2002, part-time pastors represented 58% of the total local pastors compared to 62% in 2005.

Table 2. Difference in Local Pastors and Other Clergy 2000 to 2005

	Local Pastors		Clergy (not LP)		Total AC Members	
	Change	% Change	Change	% Change	Change	% Change
North Central	250 (15.9%)	23.43%	- 331 (61.07%)	- 3.60%	- 82 (7.96%)	- 0.80%
Northeastern	203 (12.91%)	20.22%	- 132 (24.35%)	- 1.71%	72 (-6.99%)	0.83%
South Central	350 (22.26%)	36.53%	- 84 (15.5%)	- 1.19%	265 (-25.73%)	3.30%
Southeastern	730 (46.44%)	39.21%	33 (-6.09%)	0.28%	764 (-74.17%)	5.67%
Western	39 (2.48%)	19.80%	- 28 (5.17%)	- 0.82%	11 (-1.07%)	0.30%
Total Change	1,572 (100%)	30.90%	- 542 (100%)	- 1.39%	1,030 (100%)	2.33%

Meanwhile, little change is found in the number of pastoral charges, an increase of only 27 from 2000 compared to 2005. This small number, however, masks the relatively large changes during this five-year period. First, between 2000 and 2003, the number of pastoral charges was increased by 166 and then decreased 139 from 2003 (26,367) to 2005 (26,228). The final result is the small increase from 2000 compared to 2005.

As expected, the number of associate and affiliate members has been slowly decreasing until 2004, at which point this conference relationship was reinstated. Afterward, a modest increase of 26 associate/affiliate members is recorded between 2004 and 2005. The only jurisdiction that did not have a slight increase in associate/affiliate members is the North Central Jurisdiction.

Elders and Deacons

While there was a large increase in local pastors, other clergy members actually *decreased* by 1.4% (542) from 2000 to 2005 (Table 2). All jurisdictions experienced a small decrease in numbers of clergy who are not local pastors, except for the Southeastern Jurisdiction, which increased by 33. Of the clergy lost, the majority (61%, 331) were from the North Central Jurisdiction, nearly one quarter (24%, 132) from the Northeastern Jurisdiction and 16% (84) from the South Central Jurisdiction. The Western Jurisdiction lost the fewest 28 (5%) clergy. Within this large group of clergy, interesting changes in the numbers of elders and deacons appear.

The number of full connection elders *decreased* by 754 elders (2.25%) from 2000 (33,445) to 2005 (32,691). The greatest percentage decrease occurred between 2000 and 2001. In the following years, the change was less than one percent decrease or increase. On the other hand, the number of full connection deacons *increased* 28% (273) from 2000 (964) to 2005 (1,237). While there were greater than one quarter more deacons in 2005, this does not entirely offset the large decrease in elders.

The greatest loss of elders is in the North Central Jurisdiction, with 358 (4.4%) fewer elders. Northeastern (148) and South Central (132) both experienced a 2.2% decrease in full connection elders. The Southeastern (86) and Western jurisdictions (30) had the smallest decreases of less than 1% each. All jurisdictions increased the number of deacons. Interestingly, the North Central Jurisdiction experienced a 41% (62) increase in deacons from 2000 compared to 2005. The Northeastern Jurisdiction increased 31% (34), the South Central 26% (63), Southeastern 22% (78) and Western 34% (36).

Table 3 shows the percentage change from the previous year for elders and deacons. The North Central Jurisdiction experienced a 1% decrease annually in elders and a 7% increase in deacons most years. The exceptions are 2003, when deacons increased only 2%, and 2002 when deacons increased nearly 12%, the largest percentage increase found in any jurisdictions, during this five-year period. During three of the five

years, the Northeastern Jurisdiction had a 7% to 8% increase in deacons, but only 4% for 2003 and 1% for 2005. The South Central Jurisdiction annually increased 3% to 4% except for 2002, when the increase was nearly 9% over 2001. In the Southeastern Jurisdiction, the percentage increase in deacons was quite varied, ranging from no change (0%) to 7%, but there was little fluctuation in the elders. Finally, the Western Jurisdiction increased of 5% to 8% of deacons annually except for the smaller increase of 3% in 2003.

Table 3. Percentage Change from Previous Year for Elder and Deacon by Jurisdiction

		2001	2002	2003	2004	2005
North Central	<i>Elders</i>	(0.8%)	(1.4%)	(0.8%)	(0.6%)	(0.9%)
	<i>Deacons</i>	7.3%	11.7%	2.2%	7.6%	7.0%
Northeastern	<i>Elders</i>	(0.5%)	(0.0%)	(0.4%)	(0.5%)	(0.9%)
	<i>Deacons</i>	8.3%	6.8%	4.0%	7.6%	1.4%
South Central	<i>Elders</i>	(0.0%)	(0.3%)	(0.8%)	(0.9%)	(0.2%)
	<i>Deacons</i>	3.3%	8.8%	4.0%	3.9%	3.7%
South Eastern	<i>Elders</i>	.1%	(0.0%)	(0.2%)	(0.2%)	(0.5%)
	<i>Deacons</i>	7.3%	3.7%	5.1%	4.3%	0.0%
Western	<i>Elders</i>	(0.2%)	(0.2%)	(0.1%)	(0.6%)	.2%
	<i>Deacons</i>	6.5%	7.9%	3.3%	5.5%	6.7%

The number of clergy received into full connection in 2005 is six more than in 2004. Interestingly, three jurisdictions experienced increases in the number received into full connection. Most impressively, the South Central Jurisdiction increased by 45 clergy, the Western by 12 and the North Central by two. These increases are offset by the large clergy decreases of 33 in the Northeastern and 20 in the Southeastern jurisdictions. The final result is six more clergy this year than last. Comparing 2000 to 2005, there were 161 fewer clergy received into full connection.

Beyond the Local Church or to Extension Ministries

In 2000, there were 3,450 appointments of deacons beyond the local church, and elders to extension ministries. That number slowly decreased annually to 3,361 in 2004 (89 fewer), but then increased to 3,387 in 2005. In 2005, there were 63 fewer appointments beyond the local church or to extension ministries than in 2000. The majority of the decrease was in North Central (37 fewer) and Northeastern (49 fewer). The Southeastern Jurisdiction increased by 21 appointments, the Western Jurisdiction increased six while the South Central decreased by four appointments beyond the local church.

Senior Pastors

As of December 2006³, there were 32,742 active clergy appointed to the local church, beyond the local church, or to extension ministries. The majority of those clergy are male (73%, 23,848), but 27% (8,892) are female. Of the active clergy, 89% (29,038) are appointed to a local church; 76% (24,930) as senior⁴ pastor and 13% (4,108) as associate. Nearly equal percentages of associate clergy are male (53%, 2163) compared to female (47%, 1945). The majority of senior pastor, however, are male (74%, 19,285) than are female 23% (5,643).

The 24,791 churches served by these pastors have membership's⁵ up to 16,488 members. Average membership is 298 (Std. 489.79). Only one-fourth of the churches have membership greater than 334 members. Churches with greater than 1,000 members represent less than 5% (1,154) of churches. Female senior pastors are more often appointed to the smaller membership churches than to the largest (Table 4). Only 15% (844) are appointed to churches with greater than 344 members. Further, only 1% (64) of all female senior pastors are appointed to churches with over 1,000 members, compared

³ Data obtained from GCFA February 2007.

⁴ Clergy are grouped by GCFA into the categories of Prime and Associate pastors. The grouping is based on the clergy position code. The prime pastor is identified in this paper as the senior pastor.

⁵ No data are available for 246 of the churches and 29 list membership numbers as 0.

to almost 6% (1068) of all male senior clergy. When both male and female pastors are senior pastors at the same church, they are most likely to be appointed to the two *largest* membership church groups; 69% of the dual female and male senior clergy are at the churches with membership greater than 165 members.

Table 4. Senior Pastor by Church Membership

	Male Clergy	Female Clergy	Male & Female	TOTAL
Less than 82 members	24% (4654)	28% (1532)	18% (7)	25% (6193)
82 thru 164 members	24% (4524)	30% (1668)	13% (5)	25% (6197)
165 thru 334 members	24% (4585)	27% (1519)	32% (12)	25% (6116)
335 and up	28% (5272)	15% (844)	37% (14)	25% (6130)
TOTAL	100% (19035)	100% (5563)	100% (38)	100% (24636)

Probationers

The number of probationers in 2005 increased 22% (124) from 2000. Similar to the full connection elders, however, the total probationary elders also decreased by 3% (74) from 2000 (2,278) to 2005 (2,204). Meanwhile, the number of probationary deacons increased dramatically from 81 in 2000 to 288 in 2005, a 256% increase.

The largest increase in total probationers is 65% (66) in the South Central Jurisdiction, increasing from 102 to 168 from 2000 to 2005. The North Central Jurisdiction decreased the number of probationers by 1% (1) from 2000 to 2005. The largest percentage decrease in probationary elders (21%, 44) is in the Western

Jurisdiction decreasing from 205 to 161. On the other hand, the Southeastern Jurisdiction increased probationary elders by 7% (55).

The number of probationary deacons at least doubled across all jurisdictions. The greatest increase is an additional 75 probationary deacons in the Southeastern Jurisdiction, changing from 28 in 2000 to 103 in 2005. The smallest change is in the Western Jurisdiction, which increased from 10 in 2000 to 24 probationary deacons in 2005, a 140% increase. Those increases are encouraging news.

Districts

The number of districts decreased in all jurisdictions. In 2000 there were 518 districts and 520 in 2002. Then, the number of districts declined to 488 in 2005, 32 fewer than in 2002. The largest decrease is 11.1% in the South Central Jurisdiction, a loss of 13 districts. The smallest loss is in the Western Jurisdiction (2.5%, 1). Overall, this means 32 fewer district superintendents in 2005 compared to 2000.

Losing 32 districts across all jurisdictions may not appear to be a serious issue until the dramatic changes at the annual conference level are examined. The Western Jurisdiction lost only one district, however, one annual conference moved into another area. Alaska Missionary Annual Conference with its one district moved from the Portland Area to the Seattle Area between 2003 and 2004. The Seattle Area, originally composed of California Pacific Annual Conference, received Alaska Missionary Annual Conference. The following year, the California Pacific Annual Conference lost one district. In other words, Seattle Area gained the one Alaska district, but also lost one of California Pacific's districts resulting in the same number of districts as the prior year.

The North Central Jurisdiction lost four districts in the same year (2004-2005), two in the Illinois Great Rivers Annual Conference, and two in the Dakotas Annual Conference. Both annual conferences decreased from 12 to 10 districts. The Southeastern Jurisdiction lost one district in the Alabama-West Florida Annual

Conference in 2003 to 2004. Then, in 2004-2005, the Florida Annual Conference lost five districts - the largest loss of districts in any annual conference during the 2000 to 2005 time period. Throughout Florida, there were six fewer district superintendents in 2005 than in 2003, a big change in a short period of time.

The South Central and the Northeastern jurisdictions had the most annual conferences affected by district changes. In the South Central Jurisdiction in 2002-2003, two separate mergers occurred. Missouri East and West merged into Missouri and lost four districts. Little Rock and North Arkansas merged into Arkansas and then lost three districts the following year (2003-2004). In 2003-2004, Louisiana Annual Conference lost one district. And, in 2004-2005, North Texas lost two and Kansas West lost one district. A great deal of change has been experienced in the South Central Jurisdiction with the loss of 13 district superintendents.

Similarly, in the Northeastern Jurisdiction there were numerous changes. In 2000-2001 Northern and Southern New Jersey merged into Greater New Jersey and actually added one district. Then in 2002-2003, New England lost two districts. In 2003-2004, four districts were lost, one each in the North Central New York, Western New York, Eastern Pennsylvania and Western Pennsylvania annual conferences. Finally, in 2004-2005 two districts were lost in New York Annual Conference.

Summary

Over this five-year period there have been a variety of changes to the ministry of The United Methodist Church. The number of United Methodist members and the number of organized churches continue a slow descent. This decline is found across jurisdictions, except for the Southeastern Jurisdiction, where the number of members actually increased, while the number of churches decreased. The number of elders continues to decline, but the decline is much slower than the 2000 to 2001 drop. Deacons, local pastors, and associate members increased over this time period. Additionally, the number of probationers has dramatically increased from 2000 to 2005.

In many annual conferences, districts have been removed. For some district superintendents this means taking on additional responsibility. Further research is needed to uncover the effects of the decreasing number of districts on the work of the remaining superintendents.

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