

Pockets of “Youthfulness” in an Aging Denomination

**Comparison of Membership and General Population Death Rates within
United Methodist Annual Conferences**



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Pockets of “Youthfulness” in an Aging Denomination
by Lovett H. Weems, Jr.

The aging membership of mainline denominations has been a continuing concern for many years and for good reason. In the 1960s, when these denominations were growing, their membership was younger than the general U.S. population. But it appears that since at least the 1970s, the trend has been toward serving a membership older than the general population.

Since denominations do not track the ages of all their members, it is impossible to make an accurate comparison between the age of a denomination’s membership and the age of the general population. There are, however, clues that indicate a denomination’s membership may be getting older. Some representative samples and surveys have demonstrated a general aging trend, and experience and perceptions also give rise to the concern. People look around at many congregations and church gatherings and notice the stark absence of younger people.

The Lewis Center for Church Leadership of Wesley Theological Seminary has researched age trends in the United Methodist Church in the United States by examining one key indicator -- *death rates*. At first, it may seem peculiar to focus on death rates. But the discussion that follows will indicate both the rationale for this approach and significant insights and implications for the church. For example, reviewing death rate comparisons within regional units known as “annual conferences” reveals a mixed pattern across the denomination. There are areas of relative “youthfulness” within a denomination that is aging overall.

Methodology

The Lewis Center set out to compare the death rates of each annual conference with the death rates of those 15 and older for the geographic area served by the annual conference. (This age adjustment makes the figures more comparable with church death rates, since church membership generally begins around age 15.) The death rates, while not exact indicators of age, do help show *patterns* that should correspond generally to age. This is because 75 percent of deaths in recent years occurred among people aged 65 and older. Acknowledging that the connection between death rates and aging is not perfect, it does show some significant patterns across the United States.

For the annual conferences, death rates (deaths per 1,000 people) are based on the ratio of reported deaths to reported membership each year. The figures are calculated from data provided by the General Council on Finance and Administration of the United Methodist Church. (More detailed information about methodology can be found below.)

Findings

The findings point to a mixed pattern of age trends across the denomination, including areas of relative “youthfulness” within a denomination that is generally aging. Several exceptions to the general pattern of aging are noteworthy.

- **Three conferences report death rates that are 30 percent or more *lower* than the general population in their areas.** These conferences are the Alaska Missionary, North Georgia, and Oklahoma Conferences. They represent 7 percent of 2007 membership in the United Methodist Church in the U.S. (UMC) and 6 percent of attendance. These conferences stand out because of the relative “youthfulness” of their members based on death rates compared to other conferences.
- **Six conferences report death rates from 19 percent to 8 percent lower than their general population.** These conferences are the Central Texas, North Texas, Louisiana, Mississippi, Rio Grande, and Alabama-West Florida Conferences. They represent 10 percent of 2007 UMC membership and 9 percent of attendance. These six conferences can be thought of as “younger than expected.”
- **Five conferences report death rates that generally match those of their general populations.** In the Kentucky, Missouri, New York, Tennessee, and Texas Conferences, death rates fall within 5 percent of the state rates (from 5 percent below to 5 percent above). These conferences represent 11 percent of 2007 UMC membership and 10 percent of attendance.
- **There are also fourteen conferences that appear to be older than the general population, but not by much.** These conferences report death rates at least 6 percent higher than their general population but no more than 19 percent higher. Interestingly, the majority of the conferences in this category are in the Southeastern and Northeastern Jurisdictions with many forming a contiguous corridor from southeast to northeast, much of it found along Interstate Highway 95 from South Georgia to New England. These conferences represent 31 percent of 2007 UMC membership and 30 percent of attendance.

These findings show there is no monolithic picture of an “aging church” across the entire United Methodist Church. Nevertheless, there are significant regions of the United States that confirm the general perception of a church that is much older than the surrounding population. These are the thirty-four conferences reporting death rates 20 percent or higher than their general population. These conferences represent 41 percent of 2007 U.S. membership of the UMC and 45 percent of attendance. All the annual conferences in the Western and North Central Jurisdictions, with the exception of one conference in each jurisdiction, are found in this category. However, such conferences are found in every Jurisdiction.

Looking at death rate comparisons nationally, one can observe some slight improvement in the United Methodist death rates, but they are still much higher than the national average, reflected in the chart below and by the figures above showing that the older areas tend to dominate where United Methodists are.

Year	US Death Rate 15 & older per 1,000	US Pop Deaths	UMC Mem in US	UMC Deaths in US	UM Death Rate (DR) per 1,000	UM DR as % of US DR
2001	11.2	2,403,000	8,249,579	119,890	14.53	130%
2002	10.5	2,416,000	8,210,220	118,246	14.40	137%
2003	10.9	2,443,000	8,186,274	116,009	14.17	130%
2004	10.4	2,444,000	8,075,010	111,500	13.81	133%
2005	10.4	2,434,000	7,995,429	111,235	13.91	134%

What Might This Mean?

These findings suggest that reaching people whose age is representative of the general population in one's area is a goal that appears to be well within reach for many annual conferences. Indeed, some conferences have already shown that it can be done. Moreover, these data suggest that it is possible to reach people at least close to the age of the general population in regions where many church indicators have not been particularly encouraging recently—for example, in part of the Northeastern Jurisdiction. Finally, they suggest that it is possible to reach people a bit younger than the general population even where most churches are small if there is a balance within the area of larger, growing churches. This is the case in Mississippi where the median worship attendance is 35.

What are some things that annual conferences can do to seek and maintain a membership that is the same age as the general population or younger?

- Reach new populations, which tend to be younger and more diverse than traditional United Methodist constituents. The younger population of the United States is considerably more diverse racially and ethnically than the older population.
- Help existing congregations increase their worship attendance. The higher the worship attendance of a congregation, the more likely it is to reach younger populations.
- Begin new congregations, which generally reach new populations and younger populations at a higher rate than existing churches.
- Monitor what is happening to mid-size and large congregations as a percentage of annual conference churches. Most annual conferences are doing well at increasing the number of small membership churches, particularly as formerly large churches become small, but a healthy age balance is more likely when there are strong and stable cohorts of churches of all sizes.

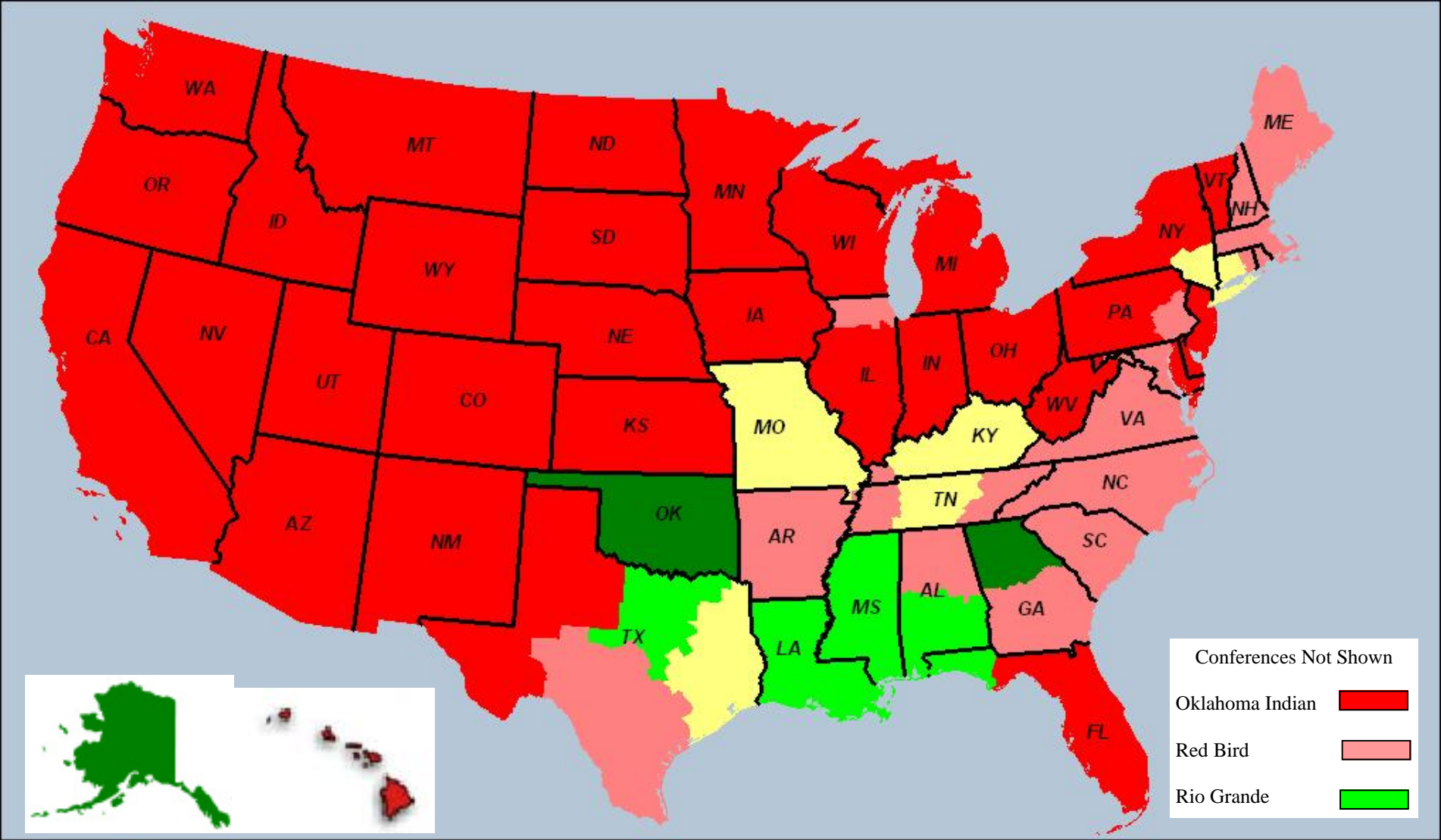
Lovett H. Weems, Jr., is distinguished professor of church leadership and director of the Lewis Center for Church Leadership of Wesley Theological Seminary in Washington, DC.

Further details regarding methodology

Since the death rate in any one year may be skewed, a three-year average (2005-2007) was used. These are the most recent years for which figures are available. This three-year average includes two years beyond the 2005 figures used for the death rate of the general population. But since those years have shown a slight reduction in United Methodist death rates, they should not tilt conferences “older.”

The 2005 state figures are used because they are the latest age-adjusted (15 and over) death rates available. Overall population death rates are reported by states. Since annual conference boundaries are not always synonymous with state boundaries, the comparisons are not always exact. When an annual conference is within one state, but does not include the entire state, the death rate for the entire state had to be used. When conferences cross state lines, the death rates for the states were prorated based on the percentage of the conference’s members living in each state. For the Oklahoma Indian Missionary Conference, the general population death rate was calculated using the Native American age-adjusted death rate in Oklahoma. For the Rio Grande Conference, the general population death rate was calculated using the Hispanic age-adjusted death rate in Texas.

Comparison of Membership and General Population Death Rates within United Methodist Annual Conferences



Mem. Death Rate (DR) 20% or more lower than Pop. DR

Mem. DR 20% or more higher than Pop. DR

Mem. DR is 6% to 19% lower than Pop. DR

Mem. DR 6% to 19% higher than Pop. DR

Mem. DR is within +/- 5% of Pop. DR

Death Rate Statistics by United Methodist Annual Conference

Annual Conference (AC)	Membership Death Rate per 1,000 within the AC (average of 2005-2007)	Total Population Death Rate (age 15 and over) per 1,000 within Bounds of the AC (2005)	AC Death Rate Lower or Higher than Death Rate of General Population
Alabama-West Florida	11.09	11.96	8% lower
Alaska Missionary	5.35	9.58	79% lower
Arkansas	14.40	11.96	17% higher
Baltimore-Washington	12.75	11.96	6% higher
California-Nevada	14.20	9.42	33% higher
California-Pacific	18.26	9.22	50% higher
Central Pennsylvania	16.45	10.50	36% higher
Central Texas	9.25	10.96	19% lower
Dakotas	17.34	9.45	46% higher
Desert Southwest	20.00	10.14	49% higher
Detroit	15.59	8.09	48% higher
East Ohio	15.08	11.04	27% higher
Eastern Pennsylvania	12.37	10.50	15% higher
Florida	14.02	9.72	31% higher
Greater New Jersey	14.84	9.83	34% higher
Holston	14.21	11.96	16% higher
Illinois Great Rivers	17.24	10.37	40% higher
Indiana	17.11	11.05	35% higher
Iowa	16.09	9.79	39% higher
Kansas East	15.53	10.54	32% higher
Kansas West	18.02	10.54	42% higher
Kentucky	11.90	12.45	5% lower
Louisiana	11.50	13.17	14% lower
Memphis	13.68	12.41	9% higher
Minnesota	15.73	9.20	42% higher
Mississippi	11.74	13.22	13% lower
Missouri	15.49	16.12	4% lower
Nebraska	17.65	10.13	43% higher
New England	14.22	11.96	16% higher
New Mexico	16.53	10.64	36% higher
New York	9.91	9.43	5% higher
North Alabama	14.01	12.92	8% higher
North Carolina	12.35	11.31	8% higher
North Central New York	13.35	9.53	29% higher
North Georgia	8.32	11.64	40% lower
North Texas	9.45	10.96	16% lower
Northern Illinois	12.44	10.37	17% higher
Northwest Texas	14.12	10.96	22% higher
Oklahoma	9.76	12.81	31% lower
Oklahoma Indian	11.95	8.23	31% higher
Oregon-Idaho	22.56	10.07	55% higher
Pacific Northwest	16.09	9.55	41% higher
Peninsula-Delaware	14.42	10.41	28% higher
Red Bird	16.10	12.35	23% higher

Annual Conference (AC)	Membership Death Rate per 1,000 within the AC (average of 2005-2007)	Total Population Death Rate (age 15 and over) per 1,000 within Bounds of the AC (2005)	AC Death Rate Lower or Higher than Death Rate of General Population
Rio Grande	8.26	9.34	13% lower
Rocky Mountain	14.84	10.04	32% higher
South Carolina	13.16	11.31	14% higher
South Georgia	13.09	11.64	11% higher
Southwest Texas	12.58	10.96	13% higher
Tennessee	12.34	12.40	0% lower
Texas	10.47	9.34	5% higher
Troy	13.97	9.65	31% higher
Virginia	12.41	10.43	16% higher
West Michigan	16.76	8.09	52% higher
West Ohio	16.47	11.04	34% higher
West Virginia	19.11	12.51	35% higher
Western New York	12.81	9.53	26% higher
Western North Carolina	12.77	11.31	11% higher
Western Pennsylvania	13.76	10.50	24% higher
Wisconsin	16.13	9.97	38% higher
Wyoming	12.93	10.09	22% higher
Yellowstone	19.93	10.48	47% higher

Detailed Death Rate Figures													
Annual Conference (AC)	Membership Death Rate per 1,000 within the AC				Total Population Death Rate (ages 15 & older) per 1,000 within Bounds of AC				Comparison of Annual Conference Death Rate and Their General Population Death Rate				
	2005	2006	2007	Three-year average	State(s) in AC	Death Rate by States 2005	% of Mems in State	Prorated Death Rate for Pop within AC	AC Death Rate	Population within AC Death Rate	Differ.	AC DR Lower or Higher Than DR of Their Gen Pop.	
Alabama-West Florida	11.23	11.17	10.88	11.09	AL	12.92	70	11.96	11.09	11.96	0.87	8% lower	
					FL	9.72	30						
Alaska Missionary	5.44	4.00	6.62	5.35	AK	9.58	100	9.58	5.35	9.58	4.23	79% lower	
Arkansas	15.23	13.62	14.34	14.40	AR	11.96	100	11.96	14.40	11.96	-2.44	17% higher	
Baltimore-Washington	13.19	12.71	12.35	12.75	MD	10.18	88	11.96	12.75	11.96	-0.79	6% higher	
					DC	11.87	6						
					WV	12.51	6						
California-Nevada	14.54	13.93	13.83	14.10	CA	9.32	95	9.42	14.10	9.42	-4.68	33% higher	
					NV	11.25	5						
California-Pacific	17.18	18.09	19.51	18.26	CA	9.32	93	9.22	18.26	9.22	-9.04	50% higher	
					HI	7.84	7						
Central PA	16.79	16.16	16.41	16.45	PA	10.50	100	10.50	16.45	10.50	-5.95	36% higher	
Central Texas	9.49	8.94	9.25	9.23	TX	10.96	100	10.96	9.23	10.96	1.73	19% lower	
Dakotas	17.90	16.80	17.33	17.34	ND	9.31	65	9.45	17.34	9.45	-7.89	46% higher	
					SD	9.70	35						
Desert Southwest	19.01	20.20	20.79	20.00	AZ	10.02	90	10.14	20.00	10.14	-9.86	49% higher	
					NV	11.25	10						
Detroit	15.97	15.62	15.18	15.59	MI	8.09	100	8.09	15.59	8.09	-7.50	48% higher	
East Ohio	15.65	14.88	14.70	15.08	OH	11.04	100	11.04	15.08	11.04	-4.04	27% higher	
Eastern PA	13.32	11.90	11.88	12.37	PA	10.50	100	10.50	12.37	10.50	-1.87	15% higher	
Florida	14.17	14.18	13.71	14.02	FL	9.72	100	9.72	14.02	9.72	-4.30	31% higher	
Greater NJ	14.73	14.71	15.08	14.84	NJ	9.83	100	9.83	14.84	9.83	-5.01	34% higher	
Holston	14.30	14.77	13.55	14.21	TN	12.40	75	11.96	14.21	11.96	-2.25	16% higher	
					VA	10.43	24						
					GA	11.64	1						
Illinois Great Rivers	18.19	17.11	16.41	17.24	IL	10.37	100	10.37	17.24	10.37	-6.87	40% higher	
Indiana	18.10	17.16	16.06	17.11	IN	11.05	100	11.05	17.11	11.05	-6.06	35% higher	
Iowa	16.19	16.23	15.85	16.09	IA	9.79	100	9.79	16.09	9.79	-6.30	39% higher	
Kansas East	15.13	15.68	15.78	15.53	KS	10.54	100	10.54	15.53	10.54	-4.99	32% higher	

Annual Conference (AC)	2005	2006	2007	Three-year average	State(s) in AC	Death Rate by States 2005	% of Mem's in State	Prorated Death Rate for Pop within AC	AC Death Rate	Population within AC Death Rate	Differ.	AC DR Lower or Higher Than DR of Their Gen Pop.
Kansas West	17.99	17.89	18.19	18.02	KS	10.54	100	10.54	18.02	10.54	-7.48	42% higher
Kentucky	11.91	12.07	11.73	11.90	KY	12.45	100	12.45	11.90	12.45	0.55	5% lower
Louisiana	11.75	11.39	11.37	11.50	LA	13.17	100	13.17	11.50	13.17	1.67	14% lower
Memphis	13.30	14.51	13.23	13.68	TN	12.40	84	12.41	13.68	12.41	-1.27	9% higher
					KY	12.45	16					
Minnesota	15.80	15.92	15.46	15.73	MN	9.20	100	9.20	15.73	9.20	-6.53	42% higher
Mississippi	11.82	11.61	11.80	11.74	MS	13.22	100	13.22	11.74	13.22	1.48	13% lower
Missouri	15.91	15.10	15.47	15.49	MO	16.12	100	16.12	15.49	16.12	0.63	4% lower
Nebraska	17.16	17.70	18.08	17.65	NE	10.13	100	10.13	17.65	10.13	-7.52	43% higher
New England	14.30	13.35	15.02	14.22	MA	9.60	46	11.96	14.22	11.96	-2.26	16% higher
					ME	10.87	25					
					NH	9.98	15					
					CT	9.15	7					
					RI	9.79	7					
New Mexico	16.51	17.10	15.97	16.53	NM	10.54	77	10.64	16.53	10.64	-5.89	36% higher
					TX	10.96	23					
New York	10.24	9.44	10.06	9.91	NY	9.53	74	9.43	9.91	9.43	-0.48	5% higher
					CT	9.15	26					
North Alabama	13.63	14.52	13.89	14.01	AL	12.92	100	12.92	14.01	12.92	-1.09	8% higher
North Carolina	12.87	12.30	11.89	12.35	NC	11.31	100	11.31	12.35	11.31	-1.04	8% higher
North Central NY	13.73	13.13	13.19	13.35	NY	9.53	100	9.53	13.35	9.53	-3.82	29% higher
North Georgia	8.66	8.57	7.74	8.32	GA	11.64	100	11.64	8.32	11.64	3.32	40% lower
North Texas	9.35	9.43	9.56	9.45	TX	10.96	100	10.96	9.45	10.96	1.51	16% lower
Northern Illinois	12.18	12.40	12.73	12.44	IL	10.37	100	10.37	12.44	10.37	-2.07	17% higher
Northwest Texas	14.27	13.68	14.40	14.12	TX	10.96	100	10.96	14.12	10.96	-3.16	22% higher
Oklahoma	9.84	9.42	10.03	9.76	OK	12.81	100	12.81	9.76	12.81	3.05	31% lower
Oklahoma Indian	12.16	11.22	12.46	11.95	OK	see	96	8.23	11.95	8.23	-3.72	31% higher
					KS	note 4	4					
Oregon-Idaho	22.49	22.81	22.37	22.56	OR	10.04	71	10.07	22.56	10.07	-12.49	55% higher
					ID	10.13	29					
Pacific Northwest	15.25	16.85	16.16	16.09	WA	9.53	96	9.55	16.09	9.55	-6.54	41% higher
					ID	10.13	4					
Peninsula-Del.	14.86	14.15	14.26	14.42	MD	10.18	50	10.41	14.42	10.41	-4.01	28% higher
					DE	10.64	50					

Annual Conference (AC)	2005	2006	2007	Three-year average	State(s) in AC	Death Rate by States 2005	% of Mems in State	Prorated Death Rate for Pop within AC	AC Death Rate	Population within AC Death Rate	Differ.	AC DR Lower or Higher Than DR of Their Gen Pop.
Red Bird	20.00	19.23	9.06	16.10	KY	12.35	100	12.35	16.10	12.35	-3.75	23% higher
Rio Grande	8.69	7.74	8.34	8.26	TX	see	95	9.34	8.26	9.34	1.08	13% lower
					NM	note 4	5					
Rocky Mountain	14.87	15.32	14.34	14.84	CO	10.01	86	10.04	14.84	10.04	-4.80	32% higher
					WY	10.49	8					
					UT	9.90	6					
South Carolina	13.88	12.97	12.63	13.16	SC	11.31	100	11.31	13.16	11.31	-1.85	14% higher
South Georgia	13.48	12.68	13.11	13.09	GA	11.64	100	11.64	13.09	11.64	-1.45	11% higher
Southwest Texas	12.56	12.22	12.95	12.58	TX	10.96	100	10.96	12.58	10.96	-1.62	13% higher
Tennessee	12.45	12.05	12.52	12.34	TN	12.40	100	12.40	12.34	12.40	0.06	0% lower
Texas	10.86	10.20	10.35	10.47	TX	10.96	100	10.96	10.47	10.96	0.49	5% higher
Troy	15.31	13.65	12.94	13.97	NY	9.53	73	9.65	13.97	9.65	-4.32	31% higher
					VT	9.98	27					
Virginia	12.62	12.50	12.12	12.41	VA	10.43	100	10.43	12.41	10.43	-1.98	16% higher
West Michigan	17.45	16.13	16.70	16.76	MI	8.09	100	8.09	16.76	8.09	-8.67	52% higher
West Ohio	16.61	16.76	16.03	16.47	OH	11.04	100	11.04	16.47	11.04	-5.43	34% higher
West Virginia	19.60	18.86	18.86	19.11	WV	12.51	100	12.51	19.11	12.51	-6.60	35% higher
Western New York	12.41	14.43	11.59	12.81	NY	9.53	100	9.53	12.81	9.53	-3.28	26% higher
Western NC	13.16	13.07	12.08	12.77	NC	11.31	100	11.31	12.77	11.31	-1.46	11% higher
Western PA	14.06	13.22	13.99	13.76	PA	10.50	100	10.50	13.76	10.50	-3.26	24% higher
Wisconsin	15.49	16.28	16.62	16.13	WI	9.97	100	9.97	16.13	9.97	-6.16	38% higher
Wyoming	13.75	12.51	12.53	12.93	PA	10.5	58	10.09	12.93	10.09	-2.84	22% higher
					NY	9.53	42					
Yellowstone	23.23	17.77	18.80	19.93	MT	10.48	85	10.48	19.93	10.48	-9.45	47% higher
					WY	10.49	15					

NOTES: 1) Age-adjusted death rates for persons 15 and older were calculated based on data from US Census Bureau, *Statistical Abstract of the US 2007*, p. 24, and the CDC/NCHS, *National Vital Statistics System, Mortality 2005* data released Jan. 23, 2008. The standard population for 2000 was used in the calculations. 2005 figures are the latest age-adjusted death rates available. The reason for using death rates only for the population age 15 or older is that the comparison being made is with UM "members" who are generally this age. 3) United Methodist death rates are calculated from data provided under arrangement with the General Council of Finance and Administration of the UMC. A three-year average of the most recent years for which figures are available (2005-2007) is used since any one year's death rate may be skewed, given the small size of some annual conferences. Using the three-year average does include two years beyond the census figures, but those years have shown a slight reduction in UM death rates. 3) Some annual conferences have one or two congregations in another state. Those states are not included in the calculations for those annual conferences. 4) For Oklahoma Indian Missionary Conference, the general population death rate was calculated using the Native American age-adjusted death rate in Oklahoma. For the Rio Grande Conference, the general population death rate was calculated using the Hispanic age-adjusted death rate in Texas.

Contributors

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