



A Lewis Center Report on
Disaffiliating Churches through June 2023:
Similarities and Differences Compared to
Other United Methodist Churches

August 1, 2023

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Introduction

In March 2023, the Lewis Center issued a preliminary report on the approximately 2,000 churches that had disaffiliated from the United Methodist Church by the end of 2022, following the passing of special disaffiliation legislation in 2019. We acknowledged that more churches would exercise this option by the end of 2023 when the disaffiliation legislation expires. The 2019 legislation made it possible for a church to disaffiliate and keep its property after fulfilling certain financial obligations.

This updated report covers churches that have disaffiliated through June 2023. It identifies the churches approved for disaffiliation through special annual conference sessions as well as the regular annual conference sessions held in May and June. This report includes more than 6,100 churches approved for disaffiliation between 2019 and June 2023.

As with the initial report, this report seeks to examine in what ways the departing churches are similar to or different from the profile of United Methodist churches as a whole.

Our method is to use 2019 as the comparison year since disaffiliations occurred primarily after 2019. We compare the characteristics that disaffiliating and non-disaffiliating churches had in 2019, before the disaffiliations occurred. For this report, we were able to identify the names for 6,155 of the disaffiliating churches. In 2019, there were 30,541 total United Methodist churches in the United States. There are limitations to this approach, but we believe it serves to compare the two sets of churches at a time when we have sufficient data for almost all the churches (the total and those disaffiliating) and before the skewing of statistics that may have occurred during the heart of the pandemic.

Differences and Similarities

With the addition of 4,000 churches since the earlier report, the patterns seen in the first group of disaffiliating churches tend to continue as more churches join their ranks. As we reported before, there are more similarities than differences in comparing the cohort of disaffiliating churches with the total pool of all United Methodist churches. After highlighting the areas of difference, we will name some of the similarities between these two pools of churches.

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Distinguished Professor of Church Leadership Emeritus
Wesley Theological Seminary

Differences

Regions

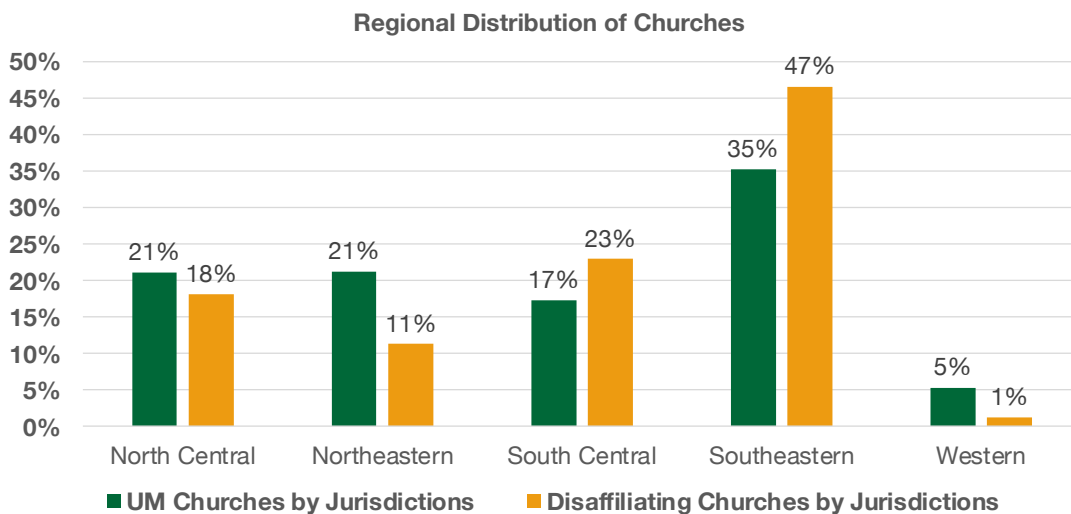
Disaffiliating churches and members are disproportionately Southern.

The two Southern jurisdictions (South Central and Southeastern) at the beginning of the disaffiliation process had **9 percent more churches** than the other three jurisdictions (North Central, Northeastern, and Western). However, there are **56 percent more disaffiliating churches** from the SCJ and SEJ than from the other three jurisdictions combined.

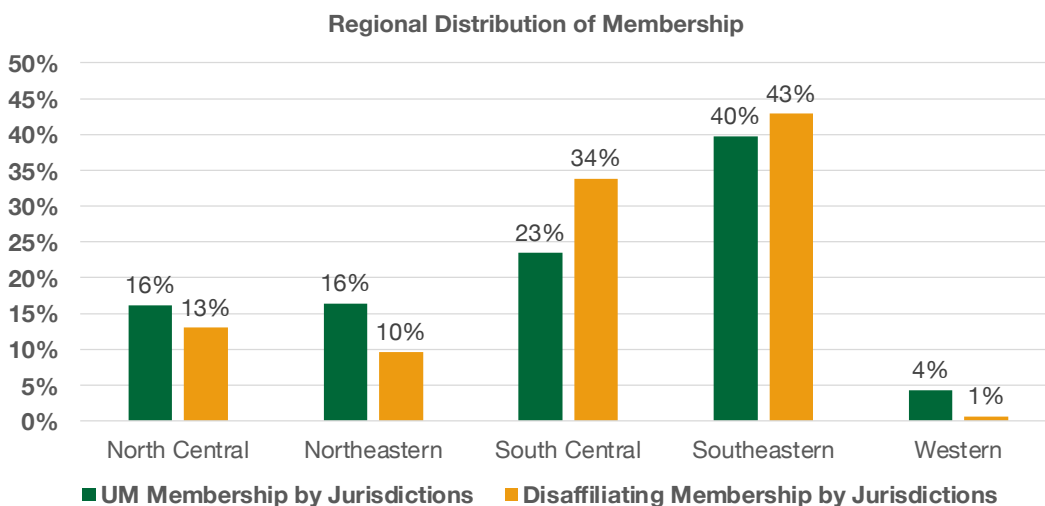
In terms of membership, at the beginning of the disaffiliation process, the SCJ and SEJ had **42 percent more members** than the NCJ, NEJ, and WJ. There are **70 percent more members** among disaffiliating churches from the SCJ and SEJ than from the other three jurisdictions combined.

The makeup of disaffiliating churches is less Southern after the additional 4,000 disaffiliations approved between January and June 2023 as the range of conferences approving disaffiliations expanded. These charts show the breakdowns by jurisdictions.

Churches



Membership

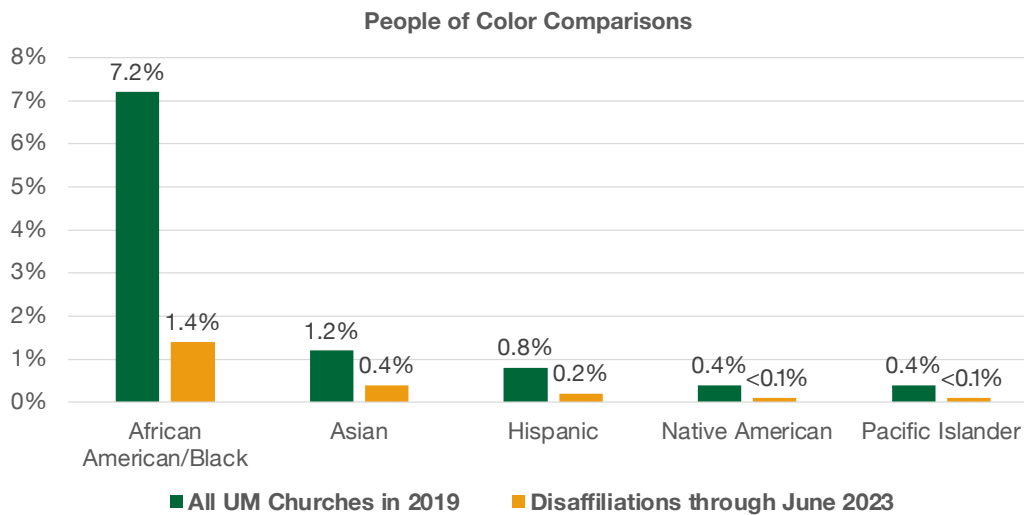
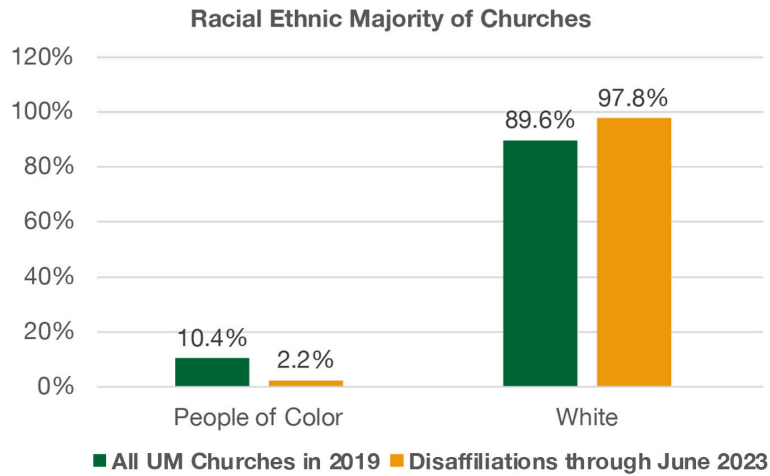


Differences

Race and Ethnicity

Disaffiliating churches are disproportionately white.

Among disaffiliating churches, 97.8 percent report memberships that are majority white compared to 89.6 percent of United Methodist churches as a whole that are majority white.



Note: Figures do not add up to 10.4% and 2.2% respectively due to rounding.

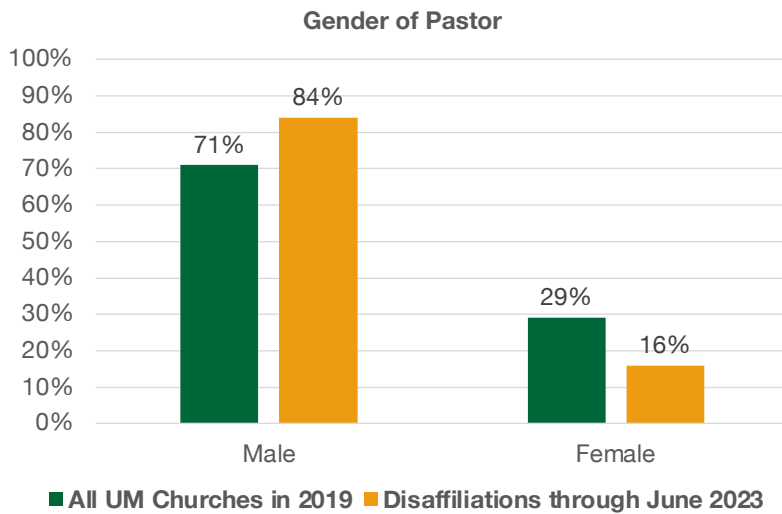
Differences

Clergy Gender

Disaffiliating churches are more likely to have a male pastor.

Only 16 percent of disaffiliating churches have a woman as lead pastor at the time of disaffiliation compared to 29 percent of United Methodist congregations as a whole who have a clergywoman as lead pastor.

This does not represent the proportion of pastors who are disaffiliating or remaining United Methodist. The pastor's decision to remain a United Methodist pastor or to disaffiliate is a separate decision made by the pastors.



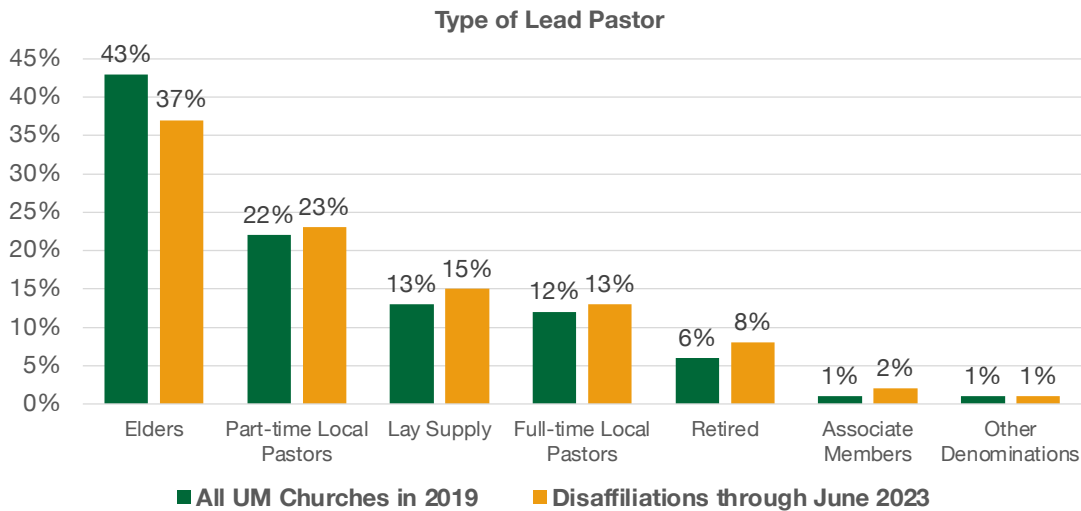
Differences

Clergy Status

Disaffiliating churches are less likely to have an elder as pastor.

Compared to all United Methodist churches, disaffiliating churches have pastors who are less likely to be an active elder.

Only 37 percent of disaffiliating churches were served by an active elder compared to 43 percent for all United Methodist churches. The difference for disaffiliating churches is made up by local pastors and lay supply pastors.



Note: Figures may not add to 100% due to rounding.

Similarities

Church Size

Disaffiliating churches are the same size as all United Methodist churches.

From the beginning of the disaffiliation process, the sizes of churches disaffiliating and those remaining have been nearly the same.

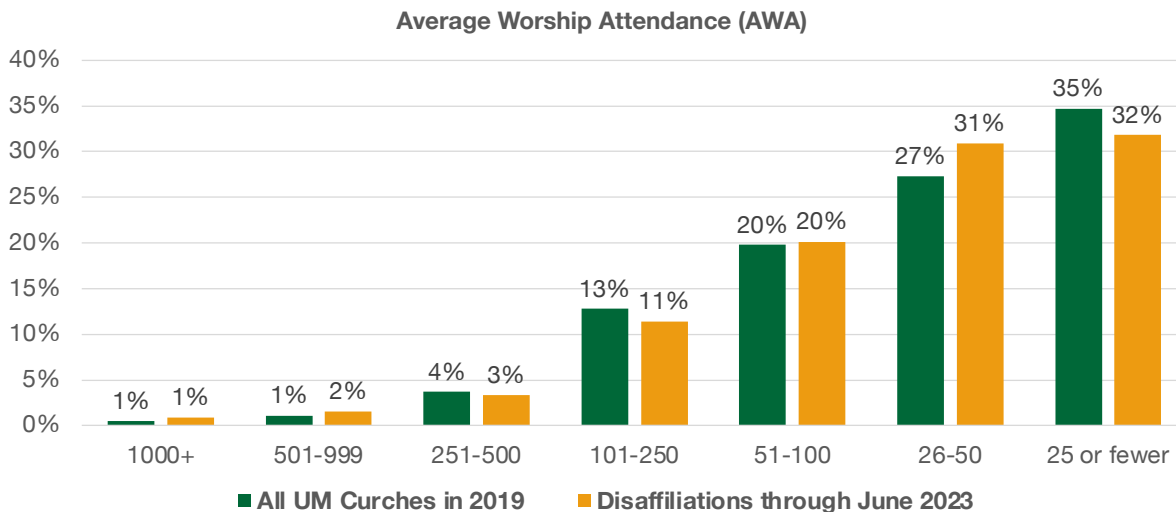
Median Worship Attendance (half larger, half smaller)

For all United Methodist churches — 38

For disaffiliating churches through June 2023 — 38

Church Groupings by Attendance Size

Disaffiliating churches and all United Methodist churches tend to match in the sizes of congregations based on worship attendance cohorts. The percentages are not exactly the same in every size group but always very close to each other.

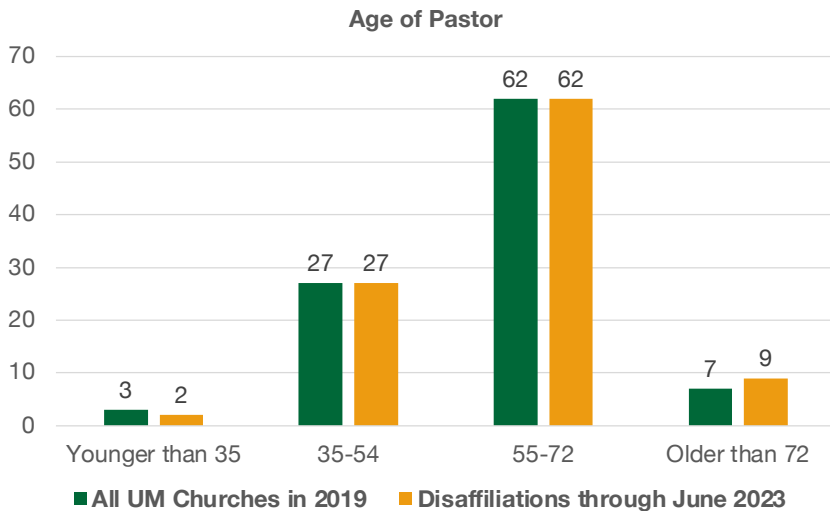


Similarities

Clergy Age

Pastors of disaffiliating churches are the same age as all United Methodist churches.

Disaffiliating churches and all United Methodist churches tend to have pastors of the same age distribution. While age statistics are not available for about two-thirds of the pastors identified, those for whom we do have data appear to be similar across both groups of churches.



Other Similarities

Age of Membership. While we do not have ages for church members, one way to compare relative ages of congregations is to compare their death rates. As one would expect, churches with younger constituencies have lower death rates, and those with older memberships have higher death rates. The death rates among disaffiliating churches and those remaining are the same.

Professions of Faith. Professions of faith are reported at about the same rates among disaffiliating and all United Methodist churches, including the discouraging statistic that 61 percent of both groups reported no professions of faith for the last reporting year that included all the churches.

Growth and Decline. The percentages of churches showing an increase in attendance are similar in the two groups with disaffiliating churches growing slightly more.

Apportionments. Apportionments are paid at about the same rates.

Conference and District Funds. Both groups of churches receive equitable compensation and other grants and subsidies at about the same rate.

Research Project

Church statistical data come from the reports that each congregation submits to its annual conference annually. They are collected and kept by the General Council on Finance and Administration (GCFA), with each church designated by a number. The GCFA makes this data available to denominational entities such as the Lewis Center for Church Leadership through an agreement regarding terms of usage. The data for both groups of churches comes from the 2019 reports since that is the year before disaffiliations began and thus there are same-year statistics for churches remaining and disaffiliating.

We are able to do this report because the Lewis Center already had the total United Methodist statistics on most of these topics as part of a multi-year [Religious Workforce Project](#) that includes the United Methodist Church and other Christian denominations in the United States.

Research Notes

Just over 6,000 churches disaffiliated by June 30, 2023. Our report covers 6,155 of them.

Type of Lead Pastor Notes

- Elders include full elders and provisional elders.
- Deacons typically do not serve as lead pastors but occasionally do.
- Retired includes all categories of clergy.
- Lay Supply includes certified lay ministers, but most in this group are categorized by annual conferences as lay supply, lay pastors, to be supplied, etc.

Racial Ethnic Majority of Churches

- There are many valid ways to measure the racial makeup of congregations. Here we are classifying based on the majority (51 percent or more) race reported for its membership.

Median Worship Attendance

- Half the churches have larger attendance, and half have smaller attendance than the median.

Clergy Gender

- The gender of the pastor reflects the pastor at the time of disaffiliation.

About the Lewis Center for Church Leadership

Established by Wesley Theological Seminary in 2003, the Lewis Center for Church Leadership helps the church address its current challenges. We are building a vision for church leadership grounded in faith, informed by knowledge, and exercised in effective action. We seek a holistic understanding of Christian leadership that brings together theology and management, scholarship and practice, research and application.

Committed to the broad goal of helping the church reach more people, younger people, and more diverse people, the Lewis Center focuses on improving leadership effectiveness and providing actionable insights and best practices to promote effective ministry. We seek to be a trusted resource for church leaders so that congregations increase in service, vitality, and growth. The Lewis Center staff, along with other researchers and consultants who assist with special projects, also draw on the expertise of the entire Wesley Theological Seminary faculty and a wide array of gifted practitioners.

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