

A Lewis Center Report

Disaffiliating United Methodist Churches, 2019-2023: Final Report

January 16, 2024

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Introduction

In 2019, legislation approved by a special session of the United Methodist General Conference made it possible for a church to disaffiliate for reasons of conscience around issues of human sexuality and keep its property after fulfilling certain financial obligations. Disaffiliations in the United Methodist Church ended on December 31, 2023, by legislation passed by the 2019 Special General Conference.

This is a final report on disaffiliating churches. The Lewis Center for Church Leadership issued two preliminary reports. In March 2023, the Lewis Center issued a report on the approximately 2,000 churches that had disaffiliated from the United Methodist Church by the end of 2022. The second report covered churches that disaffiliated through June 2023. It identified the churches approved for disaffiliation through special annual conference sessions as well as the regular annual conference sessions held in May and June. The second report included more than 6,100 churches approved for disaffiliation between 2019 and June 2023.

This last report covers 7,631 churches the Lewis Center identified as approved by annual conferences for disaffiliation before the window for disaffiliations closed on December 31, 2023. The precise number varies slightly according to different public tallies. For most conferences, our numbers match the lists of others, and where this is not the case, the difference is normally one or two churches. A complete list of disaffiliations by jurisdictions and conferences is in the appendix.

It is remarkable how the characteristics of disaffiliating churches compared to all United Methodist U.S. churches changed little as more churches disaffiliated. Patterns seen in the earliest disaffiliations tended to continue almost identically throughout the process. In addition, while there are some important differences that characterize seceding churches from staying churches, they are few. There are far more similarities than differences.

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. 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.

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Assessing the Scope and Impact of Disaffiliation

Twenty-Five Percent of Churches Disaffiliated

The 25 percent of churches disaffiliating between 2019 and 2023 represented 24 percent of the denomination’s membership in the United States.

No one knew what to expect when disaffiliations began, certainly not how many churches would leave. For those expecting limited disaffiliations, the percentage of under 10 percent would have represented the comparable losses of churches and members in other similar denominations experiencing division in recent years such as the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). On the other hand, the 1844 division of Methodism over slavery, the break that served as a model for many proposing this denominational split, resulted in a 40 percent membership loss to the Methodist Episcopal Church when the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, was formed.

The Southeastern Jurisdiction Accounted for 50 Percent of Disaffiliations

From the earliest disaffiliations, churches in the Southeastern Jurisdiction showed the most interest in disaffiliating. In 2019, 35 percent of United Methodist churches in the United States were in the Southeastern Jurisdiction. However, 50 percent of disaffiliating churches were in that jurisdiction. The other jurisdiction with disproportionately more disaffiliations is the South Central Jurisdiction. In 2019, 17 percent of churches were in the South Central Jurisdiction, whereas 21 percent of disaffiliations were in that jurisdiction. Another significant block of conferences with higher than average rates of disaffiliations includes Ohio, Indiana, and Pennsylvania.

Figure 1 shows the percentage of churches in each jurisdiction before disaffiliations began, the percentage of disaffiliating churches from each jurisdiction, and the percentage of churches remaining from each jurisdiction.

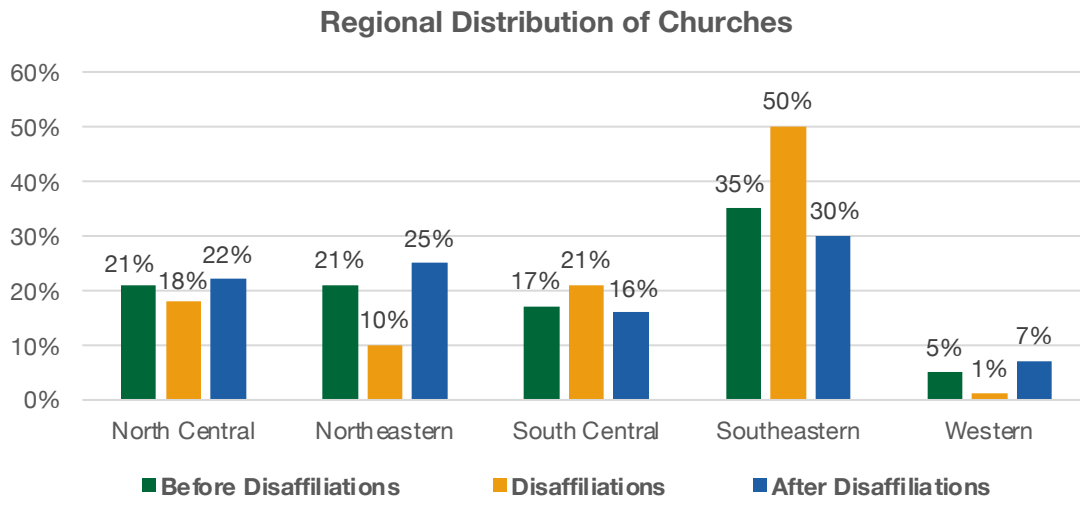


Figure 1.

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

Figure 2 shows the percentage of members in each jurisdiction before disaffiliations began, the percentage of members from disaffiliating churches in each jurisdiction, and the percentage of members in churches remaining from each jurisdiction. These figures are not exact because memberships often changed based on the disaffiliation decisions, with some transferring or changing their church membership in response to the action taken by churches.

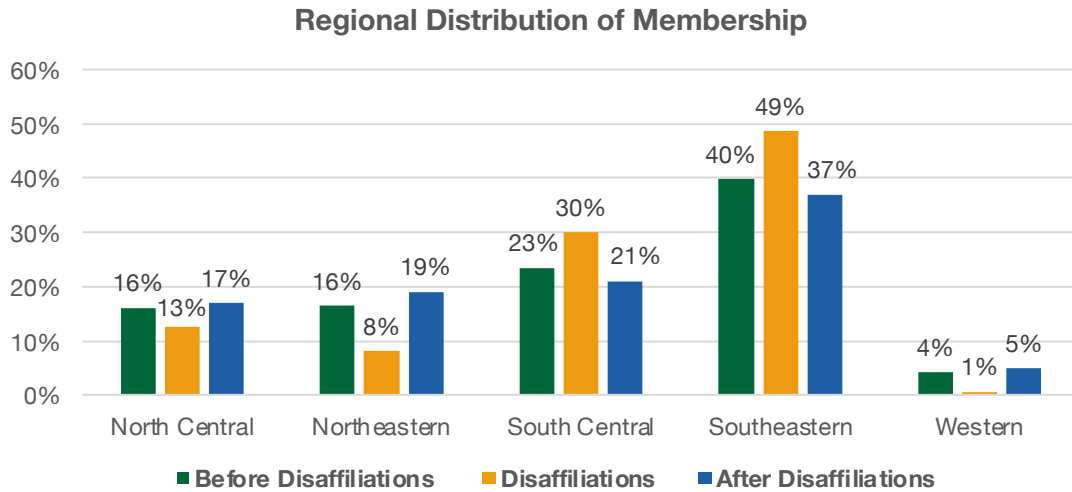


Figure 2.

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

Churches Seceding and Staying Were the Same Size

From the beginning of the disaffiliation process, the sizes of churches disaffiliating and those remaining have been similar. The median worship attendance for disaffiliating churches was 38, the same as the median attendance of all United Methodist churches.

Furthermore, disaffiliating churches and all United Methodist churches tend to match in the sizes of congregations based on worship attendance cohorts (table 1). The percentages are not exactly the same in every size group but always very close to each other.

Table 1.

Percentage of Churches by Average Worship Attendance (AWA)	Before Disaffiliations	Disaffiliating Churches
1000+ AWA	1%	1%
501-999 AWA	1%	1%
251-500 AWA	4%	3%
101-250 AWA	13%	12%
51-100 AWA	20%	20%
26-50 AWA	27%	31%
25 or fewer AWA	35%	32%

Notice the predominance of smaller churches in both groups. Churches with 50 or fewer in worship attendance constitute 62 percent before disaffiliation and 63 percent of disaffiliating churches. In fact, the current attendance of these churches is probably lower than these figures from 2019. Attendance numbers reported in

subsequent years have been much smaller for virtually all congregations. Chances are that the median attendance today is well below the 38 each group reported in 2019.

Disaffiliating Churches Are Disproportionately White

Disaffiliation had far greater appeal for churches with majority white memberships (figure 3). There were churches comprised of people of color that disaffiliated including some, it was reported, with much enthusiasm. However, in the end, relatively few did so (table 2).

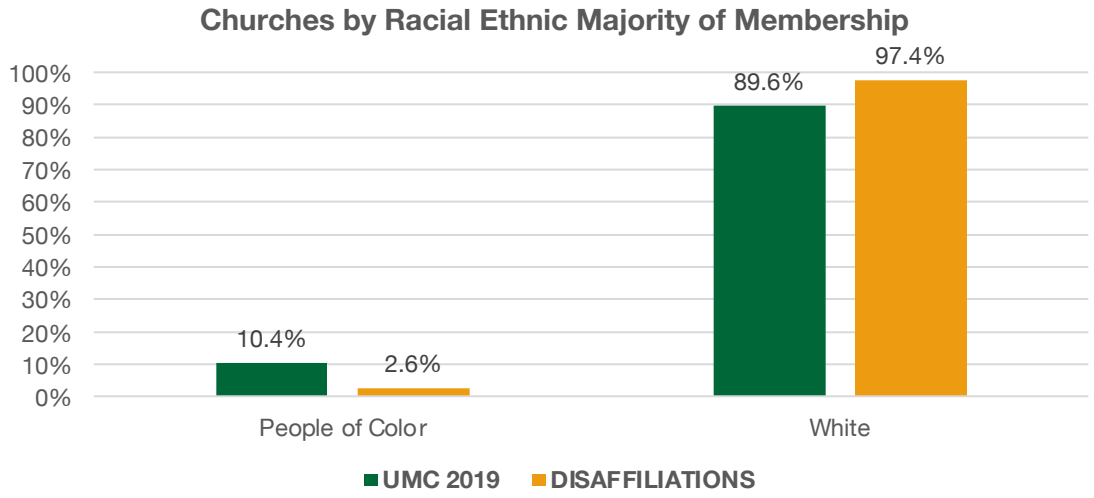


Figure 3.

Table 2.

Churches with People of Color Majorities	UMC 2019	Disaffiliations
Asian	1.2%	0.4%
African American/Black	7.2%	1.6%
Hispanic	0.8%	0.4%
Native American	0.4%	0.4%
Pacific Islander	0.2%	0.01%
No one group is majority	0.5%	0.01%

Disaffiliating Churches Were 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 (figure 4).

Type of Lead Pastor

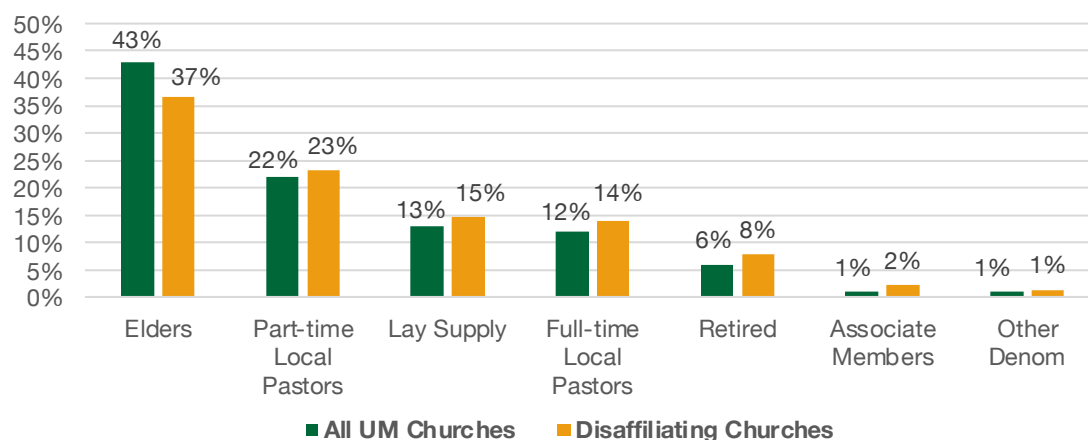


Figure 4.

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

Disaffiliating Churches Were More Likely to Have a Male Pastor

Only 19 percent of disaffiliating churches had a woman as lead pastor at the time of disaffiliation compared to 29 percent of United Methodist congregations as a whole who had a clergywoman as lead pastor (figure 5). This does not represent the proportion of pastors who are disaffiliating or remaining themselves. The pastor's decision to remain a United Methodist pastor or to disaffiliate is a separate decision made by the pastors.

Gender of Lead or Solo Pastor

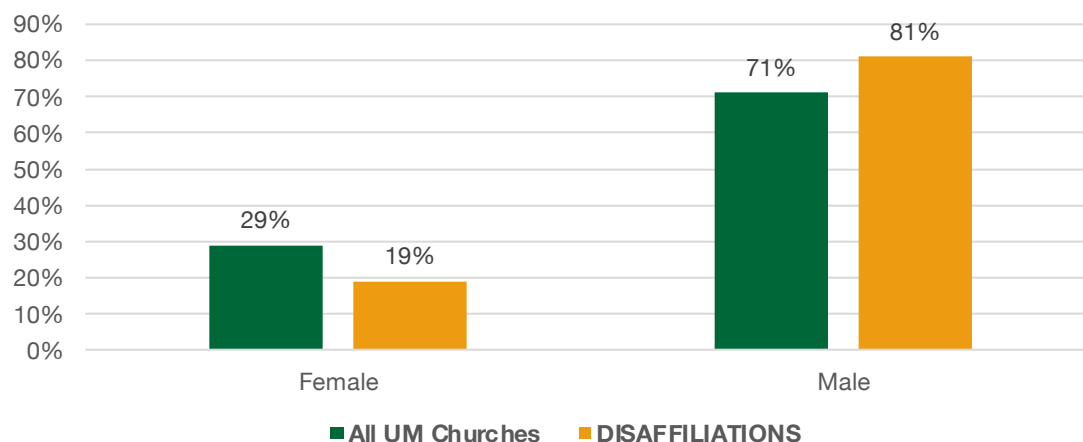


Figure 5.

In previous reports, we have identified a range of similarities and differences between churches staying and leaving. Each time we noted that the similarities far outnumbered the differences. One reason is that those things that differentiate churches are often a function of their size. For example, a church with 25 worshipers will be more similar to a church of the same size a thousand miles away than to a neighboring church that is much larger.

Annual Conferences Most Impacted by Disaffiliations

Most United Methodist annual conferences are currently adjusting their operations based on changes due to disaffiliations. The financial impact at the conference level is not part of this report's analysis, but it can be expected to vary with the percentage and size of congregations lost. Obviously, the impact is not felt equally across conferences. Some face minimal impact while others must make major realignments. Below is one way of looking at the degree of impact of disaffiliations on conferences considering only scope and location of disaffiliations (table 3). This list includes conferences with 30 percent or more churches disaffiliating. Keep in mind that overall 25 percent of churches disaffiliated.

Table 3.

Conferences with 30% or More Church Disaffiliations			
NORTHWEST TEXAS (1)	81%	WESTERN PENNSYLVANIA (1)	38%
NORTH ALABAMA	52%	TENNESSEE-WESTERN KENTUCKY	38%
TEXAS (1, 2)	50%	EAST OHIO	36%
SOUTH GEORGIA (1)	50%	LOUISIANA	36%
KENTUCKY (1)	49%	WEST OHIO	35%
CENTRAL TEXAS (2)	44%	FLORIDA (2)	34%
ALABAMA-WEST FLORIDA (1)	43%	WESTERN NORTH CAROLINA (1)	33%
NORTH CAROLINA	41%	HOLSTON	32%
NORTH GEORGIA	41%	NEW MEXICO	31%
MISSISSIPPI (1)	38%	INDIANA	30%

(1) = Median worship attendance of disaffiliating churches is 5 percent or higher than the overall conference median worship attendance.

(2) = Twenty percent or more of disaffiliating churches are located in highly populated counties in which two-thirds of the U.S. population resides.

Questions for Further Research

Researchers have much with which to work in answering the many questions raised by the experience of the United Methodist Church from 2019 through 2023. If past divisions are predictive, there will be a host of partisan narratives. What will be most needed are objective scholars who can go beyond statistical data to representative surveys and qualitative research to answer some of the questions presented below, as well as many others.

Did some congregations not fully embrace prior unifications?

The two regional jurisdictions having proportionately more disaffiliations than the denomination as a whole are the Southeastern and South Central Jurisdictions. Together these jurisdictions accounted for 71 percent of disaffiliating churches. Prior to disaffiliations, the two jurisdictions contained 52 percent of churches. The Southeastern Jurisdiction and the South Central Jurisdiction (minus Kansas and Nebraska) constitute the dominant territory encompassed by the former Methodist Episcopal Church, South, prior to denominational reunification in 1939.

Similarly, the membership of the former Evangelical United Brethren Church, when they and The Methodist Church formed the United Methodist Church in 1968, was heavily concentrated in states where some conferences had disaffiliation rates higher than other conferences in their jurisdictions and higher than the denominational average. These conferences are East Ohio and West Ohio, Indiana, and Western Pennsylvania.

Further investigation is required to learn if there is more than coincidence with disaffiliation rates and prior affiliations of congregations. If a connection is found, the question becomes whether there are ways in which the distinctive cultures of those involved in a unification could have been maintained more effectively in the new entity. This devaluing of what were experienced as significant elements of the prior affiliations of congregation may well have contributed to some disaffiliations.

What issues motivated disaffiliations?

The paragraph through which churches could disaffiliate between 2019 and 2023 restricted the reason for leaving to the one issue of conscience regarding human sexuality. This was obviously the presenting issue facing congregations, though the factors behind each disaffiliation seem more complex than one issue. While it may be true that most disaffiliating churches were composed of members with similar views on homosexuality, that appears not to have always been the primary or only motivation behind formal disaffiliation. After all, churches staying often represented congregations in which views on sexuality and other controversial issues vary. Those involved in congregational conversations about disaffiliation report several motivating factors:

- Property ownership. “This is the last chance you will ever have to own your property,” was an argument suggested in some churches.
- Real estate value. As one lay person argued in a meeting, “Where can you get \$1.5 million in property for \$25,000?” (i.e., that congregation’s financial responsibility should they leave)
- Pastor’s preference. For some pastors the motivation was theological, while others wanted more control of the congregation and their own future. In a few cases, this became a way to avoid mandatory retirement at 72.

- Reliance on misinformation. A part of the disaffiliation movement was the distribution of misinformation by bodies that sought to benefit from this division.
- Polity. Some United Methodist churches surrounded by churches with congregational polities see greater independence as preferable to more connection.
- Disconnection with denomination. Through a variety of factors such as policy differences, feelings of neglect and poor pastor assignments, some churches have long since lost their loyalty to the denomination.
- Apportionments. Removing the annual expense of apportionments influenced some.

What difference did bishops make?

Bishops took different stances regarding disaffiliation. On the one hand, a few bishops appeared to use their office to encourage disaffiliations rather than supporting the unity of the United Methodist Church while still active bishops. On the other hand, a few bishops were seen by some as using their influence with pastors and conference policies to make disaffiliations more difficult. Most bishops were seen trying to maintain a strong United Methodist witness consistent with their episcopal office while fairly implementing the actions of General Conference.

What difference did pastors make?

Similarly, pastors took a range of positions regarding disaffiliation in principle and in relation to their congregation's decision making. The information or misinformation pastors provided to their congregations was often a significant factor, including the selection of resource persons to provide information to church members. It is also clear that some pastors viewed their own futures yoked to the outcome of the disaffiliation vote.

What role did retired pastors play in disaffiliation?

Some retired pastors were serving churches dealing with disaffiliation while others were participants in congregations and had many connections across their conferences. In some cases, retired pastors worked at odds with the pastor of the church they attended. One example is a retired pastor who handed out pro-disaffiliation literature as people left church in a congregation with little interest in disaffiliation. Another retired pastor began a new congregation for members dissenting from a church's decision to remain in the United Methodist Church. Some active and retired pastors who support the disaffiliation movement have kept their own clergy credentials within the United Methodist Church, causing some to question their intentions.

Why are so many disaffiliating churches not joining another denomination?

One stark difference seen between disaffiliating churches and similar departures from other mainline denominations is the decision of disaffiliating churches to remain independent of any denomination, at least for now. Most of those departing other mainline denominations joined another denomination immediately. Similarly, in the 1844 Methodist division, those leaving moved at once to another body, the Methodist Episcopal Church, South. It appears that only about half of disaffiliating churches are joining another denomination, but no one knows for sure.

Why did some conferences have virtually no disaffiliations?

Some conferences had no disaffiliations—or only a few. There are likely varied reasons. It is clear that both race and region mattered in the propensity of churches to disaffiliate. However, we know from public surveys that disagreements around human sexuality are present in varying degrees across most regions and races. Was it conference disaffiliation policies that made the difference? Or, had some conferences already experienced prior disaffiliation not by churches but by members because of conference policies on sexuality issues?

Why are disaffiliating churches so overwhelmingly white?

Among all racial and ethnic groups represented in the United Methodist Church, differences regarding human sexuality issues persist. In light of that reality, why would so few churches other than majority white churches disaffiliate?

Why did so many pastors of disaffiliating churches withdraw themselves from the United Methodist Church?

In the disaffiliating process, there is not a necessary connection between a congregation disaffiliating and a pastor leaving the denomination. In fact, some had assumed more pastors would stay and projected that more pastors would need appointments than there would be churches remaining in some conferences. There are likely many reasons pastors have left, some theological and others, personal, such as having more control over their futures. More study is needed to understand the factors.

Was there a reflection of the polarized society at play?

Some have speculated that the timing of disaffiliation could not have been worse given the polarized politics of the United States. Some argue that many people who traditionally would not have been attracted to a secession movement now could see disaffiliation as a natural next step to their support of a particular political direction.

Appendix

This is an unofficial list. It mirrors other public lists but not exactly. The differences tend to be no more than one or two churches per conference. A few conferences used paragraph 2549 (instead of the specific disaffiliation paragraph 2553) for some or all churches leaving. Departures from both paragraphs are included in these figures.

NORTH CENTRAL JURISDICTION	2019 Churches	Churches Leaving	% Leaving
DAKOTAS	235	57	24%
EAST OHIO	699	250	36%
ILLINOIS GREAT RIVERS	799	82	10%
INDIANA	1068	317	30%
IOWA	740	143	19%
MICHIGAN	755	128	17%
MINNESOTA	330	24	7%
NORTHERN ILLINOIS	347	8	2%
WEST OHIO	1005	348	35%
WISCONSIN	455	44	10%

NORTHEASTERN JURISDICTION	2019 Churches	Churches Leaving	% Leaving
BALTIMORE-WASHINGTON	614	25	4%
EASTERN PENNSYLVANIA	401	5	1%
GREATER NEW JERSEY	530	8	2%
NEW ENGLAND	587	18	3%
NEW YORK	429	6	1%
PENINSULA-DELAWARE	410	104	25%
SUSQUEHANNA	835	148	18%
UPPER NEW YORK	848	117	14%
WEST VIRGINIA	1039	23	2%
WESTERN PENNSYLVANIA	784	297	38%

SOUTH CENTRAL JURISDICTION	2019 Churches	Churches Leaving	% Leaving
ARKANSAS	634	167	26%
CENTRAL TEXAS	277	122	44%
GREAT PLAINS	1003	232	23%
LOUISIANA	464	165	36%
MISSOURI	726	111	15%
NEW MEXICO	135	42	31%
NORTH TEXAS	282	53	19%
NORTHWEST TEXAS	200	162	81%
OKLAHOMA	485	128	26%
OKLAHOMA INDIAN MISSIONARY	79	0	0%
RIO TEXAS	350	83	24%
TEXAS	631	318	50%

SOUTHEASTERN JURISDICTION	2019 Churches	Churches Leaving	% Leaving
ALABAMA-WEST FLORIDA	576	248	43%
CENTRAL APPALACHIAN (Red Bird)	22	0	0%
FLORIDA	570	192	34%
HOLSTON	862	279	32%
KENTUCKY	749	366	49%
MISSISSIPPI	1009	386	38%
NORTH ALABAMA	667	349	52%
NORTH CAROLINA	788	325	41%
NORTH GEORGIA	803	331	41%
SOUTH CAROLINA	974	113	12%
SOUTH GEORGIA	581	289	50%
TENNESSEE-WESTERN KENTUCKY	956	360	38%
VIRGINIA	1146	227	20%
WESTERN NORTH CAROLINA	1051	346	33%

WESTERN JURISDICTION	2019 Churches	Churches Leaving	% Leaving
ALASKA	30	1	3%
CALIFORNIA-NEVADA	343	6	2%
CALIFORNIA-PACIFIC	341	3	1%
DESERT SOUTHWEST	127	0	0%
MOUNTAIN SKY	369	48	13%
OREGON-IDAHO	174	11	6%
PACIFIC NORTHWEST	228	16	7%

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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