

# More Churches Served Part Time

By Lovett H. Weems Jr.

Religious Workforce Project

Lewis Center for Church Leadership

Wesley Theological Seminary



**Religious  
Workforce  
Project**



[www.religiousworkforce.com](http://www.religiousworkforce.com)



---

## About the Religious Workforce Project

Building on previous research, the Religious Workforce Project is an effort to understand the nation's religious workforce in a comprehensive way. The Project includes a national meta-analysis and a qualitative study in the Washington, DC, metro area. Funding for the project is generously provided by The Lilly Endowment, Inc. This project seeks to answer the following questions: Given today's changing religious landscape, how are leaders of U.S. congregations adapting? How do these changes shape the staffing, financial models, priorities, and the work of U.S. congregations? And what is the state of the religious workforce today?



# More Churches Served Part Time

By Lovett H. Weems, Jr.

## Can You Help Us Disband?

G. Jeffrey MacDonald tells the story of First Parish Church (United Church of Christ) in Newbury, Massachusetts, in his book *Part-time is Plenty: Thriving Without Full-time Clergy*.<sup>1</sup> The congregation's current meeting house was built following a fire in 1868 that destroyed the existing church building. Some current members trace their ancestry to the first settlers. By 2012, all looked well to the casual observer. A small group gathered every Sunday morning, a preschool met in the downstairs hall on weekdays, and area residents tended organic gardens out back. But there were troubling signs. In addition to deferred maintenance, the church was "hemorrhaging money for one main reason: it couldn't afford its full-time pastor."<sup>2</sup> Having depleted their endowment funds in less than four years, they had nothing left to spend. The pastor resigned. Saddened and despondent, they asked MacDonald, a noted journalist and part-time United Church of Christ pastor, to lead a few final worship services.

Within a few weeks, the church changed its mind about disbanding. Continuing would require radical changes, especially the shape of their workforce. They would need a part-time pastor serving 10 hours a week. Fewer clergy hours and no support staff meant that laity would have to take on many tasks for the first time. This transition would not be easy for a church that had long relied on a pastor and staff to do much of the work of the church. In this case and in many more that MacDonald discovered in his later research, not only did the church survive, but it also thrived. While this is not always the case, countless churches each year are facing the dilemma that changed First Parish Church in 2012.

---

1 G. Jeffrey MacDonald, *Part-time is Plenty: Thriving Without Full-time Clergy* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2020),

1-3. The church's history is on the [church website](#).

2 Ibid., 1.



## Growth in Part-time Pastoral Leadership

We will see that the pattern of churches served on a part-time basis is a growing occurrence across U.S. congregations. Churches can be served part time in one of two ways. In one scenario, the pastor is a part-time pastor serving one church. This part-time pastor may be retired or multi-vocational and spends less than full time, sometimes described as 25 or fewer hours per week, as a pastor. The other scenario is that the pastor serves as a full-time pastor but serves more than one congregation. Thus, each of the churches this pastor serves is “served part time.”

Calculating the number and percentage of churches served part time has many challenges. Researchers approach the subject with a variety of questions in order to ascertain the extent of part-time pastoring. Usually, multiple questions are required to identify the total number of churches served part-time. For example, when MacDonald began his research, the National Congregations Study provided the author with preliminary results from 2018-2019 that defined full-time clergy as pastors who work full time in one local setting and do not serve in other churches or work other jobs. Using this standard, “about 43 percent of U.S. mainline congregations have no full-time paid clergy.”<sup>3</sup> MacDonald also cites research from Cyrus Schleifer’s analysis of U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics data showing that “U.S. clergy employed fewer than thirty-five hours a week has gradually and steadily doubled from eight percent in 1976 to 16 percent in 2018.”<sup>4</sup>

**The evidence** for an increasing number of congregations being served part time is not unanimous.

The evidence for an increasing number of congregations being served part time is not unanimous. Among churches reporting through the National Congregations Study, those reporting “no full time pastor” decreased for all churches, from 37 percent in 2006 to 30 percent in 2018, and among Black Protestant churches, from 23 percent in 2006 to 16 percent in 2018. However, NCS does find increasing percentages of other traditions without a full-time pastor. Those increases between 2006 and 2018 were for Roman Catholic from 39 to 43 percent, Evangelical Protestant from 5 to 14 percent, and Mainline Protestant from 17 to 23 percent.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 19.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 19-20.

<sup>5</sup> National Congregations Study, 2006, 2012, 2018.



Some studies show the presence of part-time clergy remaining stable. The Faith Communities Today Study found the number of churches served part time remaining relatively flat at about one-quarter of churches between 2010 and 2020.<sup>6</sup> Church of the Nazarene, a denomination with a long tradition of bivocational clergy, showed a small increase in part-time pastors between 2000 (42 percent part-time) and 2019 (43 percent part-time).<sup>7</sup>

If part-time ministry is increasing, it is important to remember that such ministry is well rooted in scripture and history. As with bivocational ministry, increased practice today represents more a repeating of both ancient and global patterns of ministry than something new. But what is different today in the United States is that the role of part-time pastors is becoming more common within denominations for which full-time ministry has been the assumed standard for pastoral oversight, even if that standard was never totally achieved.

The reason for more part-time pastors, especially among older and more well-resourced denominations, is the same reason part-time ministry has been prevalent elsewhere: money. As early as 1989, researchers noted that for Protestants “there is no shortage of clergy. The most serious shortages are financial and organizational: there are not enough parishes able to support full-time ordained clergy adequately, not only financially but also of sufficient size to warrant a full-time resident pastor.” They foresaw the present situation when they observed that “Protestant denominations may not have reached their financial limits, but we suspect ... that a shrinking membership will begin to push those limits severely.” They concluded “that if parishes are to have adequate leadership, both Protestants and Catholics must find alternatives to full-time, resident, ordained clergy.”<sup>8</sup> As those declines in membership and attendance continue, fewer and fewer U.S. churches each year have the financial resources required to provide their members with a full-time pastor devoted only to one congregation. Many of the assumptions behind the full-time, seminary-educated, fully ordained and credentialed pastor are no longer holding up. Whether it is the supply of such pastors in some regions or the shrinking size of churches everywhere, the foundations upon which the full-time ideal is built are less present today.

---

6 Faith Communities Today, 2010, 2015, 2020

7 Research Services, Church of the Nazarene

8 Dean R. Hoge, Jackson W. Carroll, and Francis K. Scheets, *Patterns of Parish Leadership: Cost and Effectiveness in Four Denominations* (Kansas City, MO: Sheed & Ward, 1989), 14.



## Denominational Patterns

### Episcopal Church

There has been an increase in the percentage of Episcopal churches served part-time based on survey data through the Episcopal research office and Faith Communities Today. Table 1 shows a movement from 37 percent of churches without a full-time priest in 2008 to 46 percent without a full-time priest in 2015.<sup>9</sup>

**Table 1: The share of Episcopal churches served part time increased from 2008 to 2015.**

Year	Full-time clergy	Part-time clergy	No priest or volunteer
2008	63%	25%	12%
2010	63%	29%	8%
2014	56%	29%	15%
2015	54%	33%	13%

Table 2 shows figures from the annual reports of Episcopal churches.<sup>10</sup> They reflect a significant and relatively consistent proportion of churches served part time with an increase of part-time in 2019. There were more churches with missing data in 2019 than in previous years so that may be a reason for the change in percentages of churches served part time.

**Table 2: The number and percent of Episcopal full-time and part-time lead pastors fluctuated from 2010 to 2019.**

Year	Number Full-time	Number Part-time	Total	Percent Full-time	Percent Part-time	Total	Missing
2010	3,846	2,439	6,285	61%	39%	100%	186
2011	4,008	2,365	6,373	63%	37%	100%	214
2012	3,956	2,313	6,269	63%	37%	100%	390
2013	3,811	2,438	6,249	61%	39%	100%	334
2014	3,786	2,511	6,297	60%	40%	100%	293
2015	3,680	2,541	6,221	59%	41%	100%	323
2016	3,491	2,227	5,718	61%	39%	100%	205
2017	3,279	2,261	5,540	59%	41%	100%	180
2018	3,514	2,136	5,650	62%	38%	100%	342
2019	2,441	2,050	4,491	54%	46%	100%	797

<sup>9</sup> C. Kirk Hadaway, *Episcopal Overview: Findings from the Faith Communities Today Survey* (New York: Research Office, 2009, 2011, and 2015), 4. The 2015 figures come from an analysis by Hadaway, former Episcopal research officer, and reported in G. Jeffrey MacDonald, *Part-time is Plenty: Thriving Without Full-time Clergy* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2020), 15.

<sup>10</sup> General Convention, Episcopal Church.



Conversations with diocesan officials made clear the reliance of growing numbers of Episcopal parishes on part-time pastoral leaders. Parishes in rural areas have the most difficulty in securing part-time pastors just as they do full-time priests. Serving the needs of these parishes, increasingly, are laity with special training to serve locally.<sup>11</sup>

Molly F. James, deputy executive officer of the Episcopal General Convention, in a presentation at the *Society for the Scientific Study of Religion* in 2022, reported percentages for the employment status of Episcopal clergy to be 59 percent full-time and 41 percent part-time.<sup>12</sup> So it appears that just over 40 percent of churches are served part time in the Episcopal Church.

### United Methodist Church

The United Methodist Church has historically had a high percentage of their congregations served part time, primarily because of the widespread use of the circuit or pastoral charge deployment system in which one pastor serves two or more local churches. This practice has permitted many smaller churches to have a pastor who is full time in ministry yet, for purposes of the individual churches, part time. A centralized appointment system makes such groupings of churches into pastoral charges possible in ways far more difficult for traditions with more congregationally based polities.

Although high percentages of congregations served part time are common, the percentage of such churches has increased in the last twenty years. Table 3 and Figure 1 show that churches served part time were 57 percent of all churches in 2000, 58 percent in 2010, and 61 percent in

**Table 3: The share of UMC churches served full time decreased, while the share of churches served part time increased.**

Year	Pastor full time at church	Pastor part time at church	Pastor full time at church (percent)	Pastor part time at church (percent)	Total Churches
2000	15,241	20,537	43%	57%	35,778
2010	14,124	19,222	42%	58%	33,346
2019	12,031	18,514	39%	61%	30,545

Source: UMC General Council on Finance and Administration

11 Interviews conducted by Amy Kubichek, Ph.D., with denominational officials from different regions of the United States in 2023.

12 Molly F. James, "Hope and Possibility: Insights for The Episcopal Church from FACT and EPIC Survey Data," presentation at the *Society for the Scientific Study of Religion and Religious Research Association* Annual Meeting, November 11, 2022.



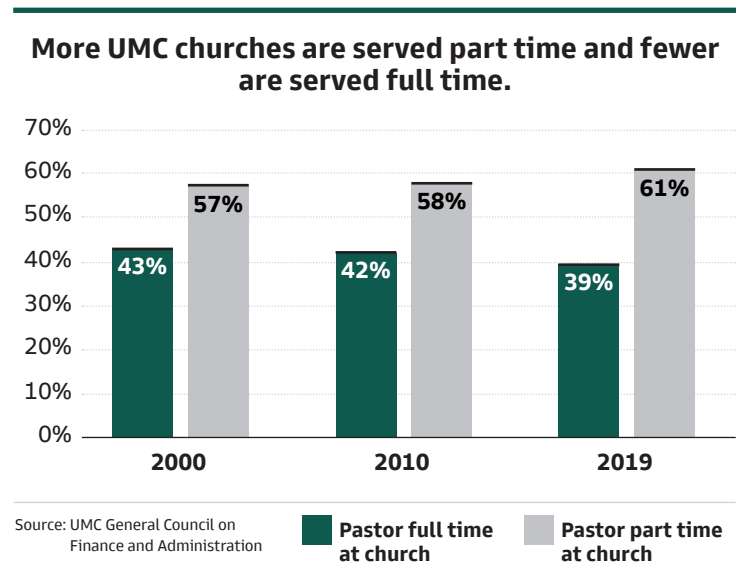
2019. Another way to view the figures in Table 3 is in the decline in the number of churches (since there are fewer each year) that continue to be served full time. The decline in such churches is from 15,241 in 2000 to 12,031 in 2019, or a decline of 22 percent.

### United Church of Christ

In a 2016 presentation on present and future trends for authorized ministry in the United Church of Christ, Kristina Lizardy-Hajbi, at the time director of the denomination’s Center for Analytics, Research and Data, reported, as noteworthy trends, decreasing numbers of full-time positions and increasing numbers of retired pastors serving congregations.<sup>13</sup>

### Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

While ELCA denominational data do not designate part-time status, Jeffrey MacDonald reports that in one ELCA synod, forty out of 180 congregations had part-time clergy in 2016, and the synod was expecting that number could jump to 140 within ten years.<sup>14</sup> From a survey of synods conducted for this project covering 2018, we were able to



**Figure 1. UMC churches served full time and part time, 2000, 2010, 2019**

<sup>13</sup> Kristina Lizardy-Hajbi, “Visions of Authorized Ministry: Present and Future,” PowerPoint presentation, December 1, 2016, Center for Analytics, Research and Data, United Church of Christ.


<sup>14</sup> MacDonald, *Part-time is Plenty: Thriving Without Full-Time Clergy*, 21.





identify that well over half of small (50 or fewer in attendance) ELCA churches appear to be served by a part-time lead pastor. These pastors may be retired, shared with another church, synodically authorized ministers, or lay volunteers.<sup>15</sup>

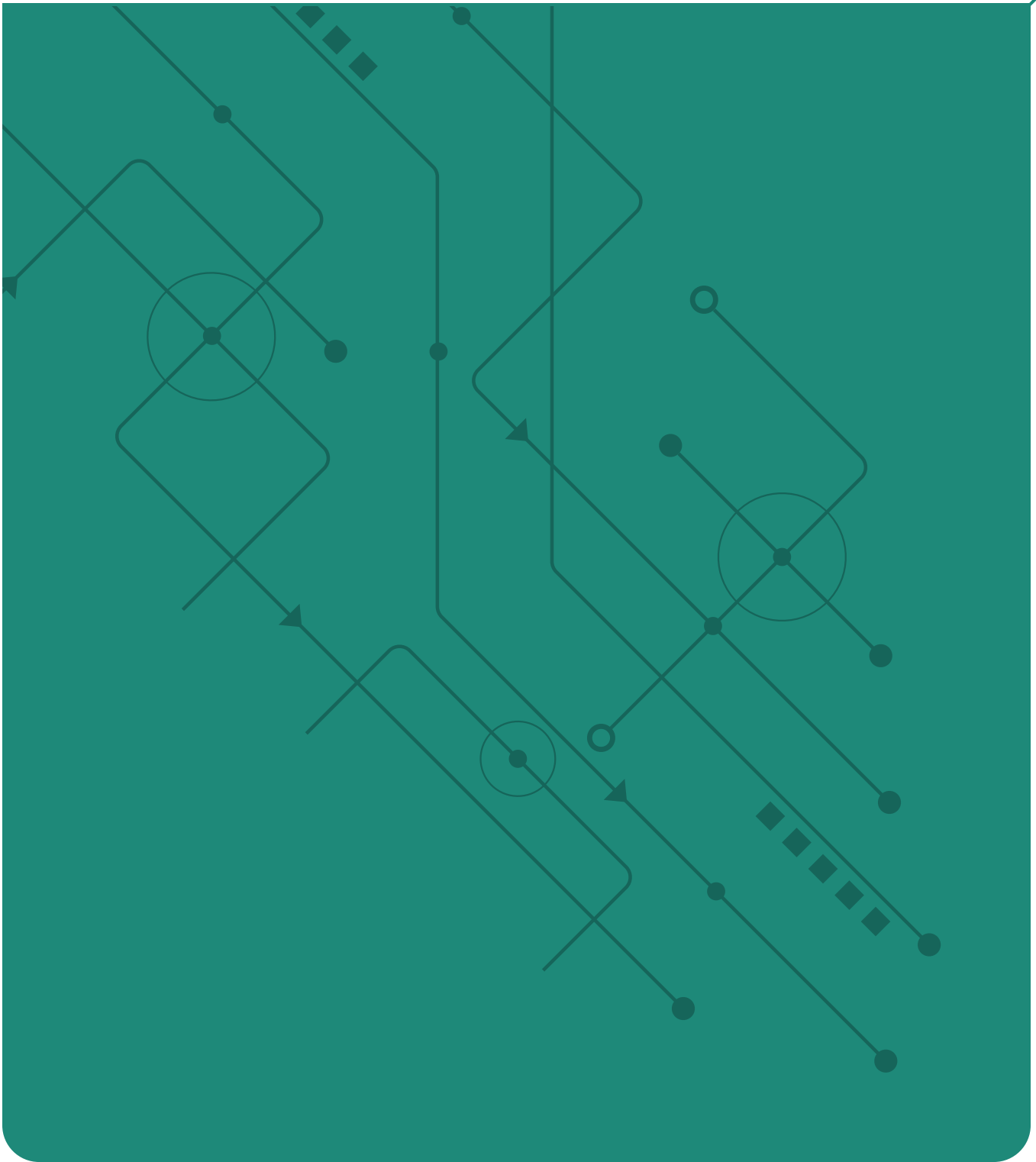
### **Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)**

Conversations with presbytery officials indicate a significant increase in churches served by part-time pastors in recent years. Proportions of churches served part-time were reported to range from ten percent to half of churches having some type of part-time pastor. As with other mainline denominations, the part-time pastoral leaders are a combination of retired ordained pastors, a commissioned lay pastor, or pulpit supply. And some of the smallest of congregations are on what one executive called the “perpetual pulpit supply plan,” where they depend on supply preachers each week. Some of these may be retired clergy who are willing to preach occasionally but do not want the ongoing weekly obligations or pastoral care responsibilities.<sup>16</sup> 

---

<sup>15</sup> “Pastoral Leadership in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America,” Phase One: Exploratory Data (Washington, DC: Lewis Center for Church Leadership, 2020).

<sup>16</sup> Interviews conducted by Amy Kubichek, Ph.D., with denominational officials from different regions of the United States in 2023.



**Lewis Center for Church Leadership | Wesley Theological Seminary**

4500 Massachusetts Avenue, NW, Washington, DC 20016

[www.wesleyseminary.edu](http://www.wesleyseminary.edu)

