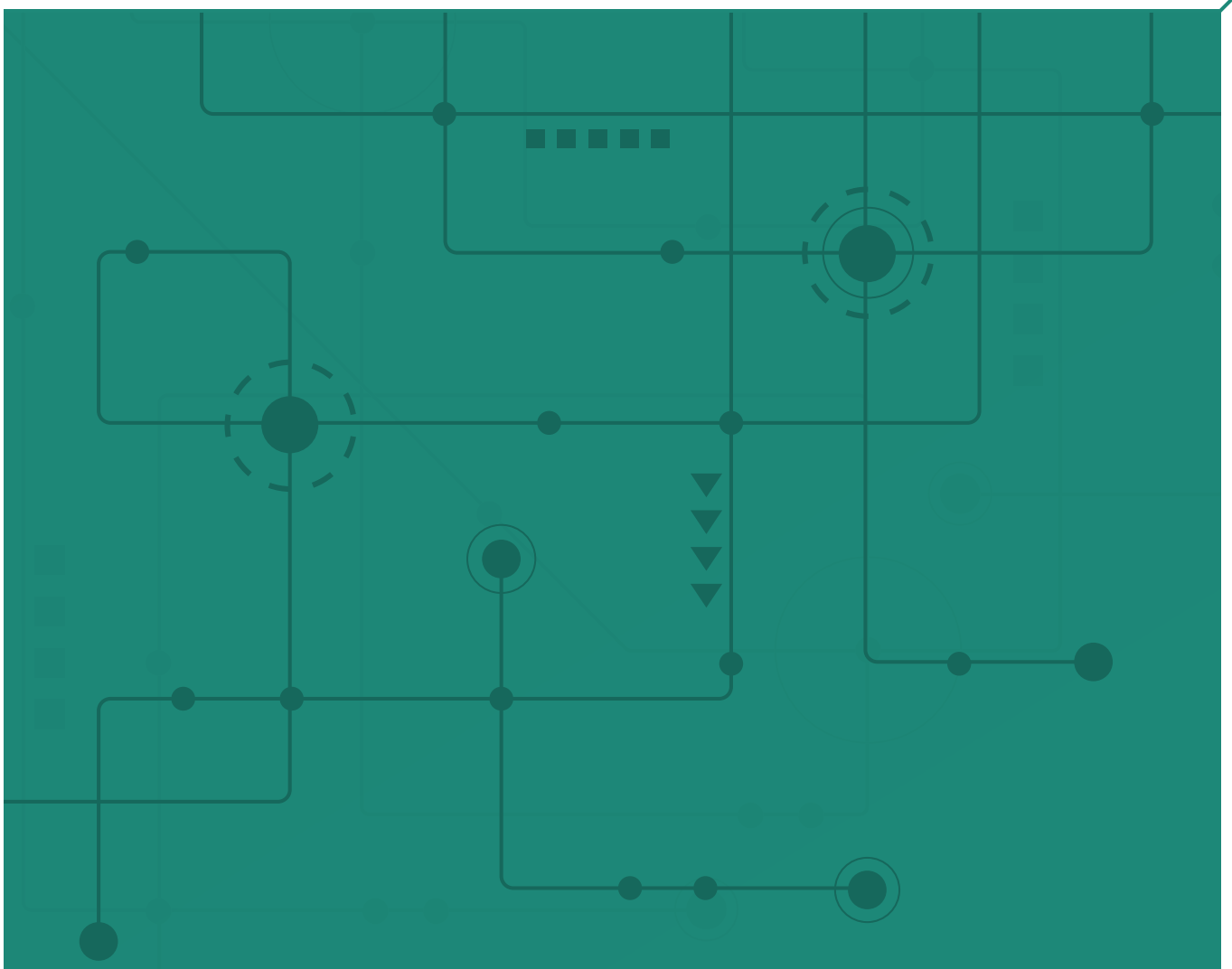

Stability in Churches Served by **Shared Pastors and Retired Pastors**

By Lovett H. Weems Jr.

Religious Workforce Project

Lewis Center for Church Leadership

Wesley Theological Seminary

Religious Workforce Project

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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?

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Churches Sharing a Pastor

One model of pastoral leadership for congregations is to have one pastor serve as the primary pastor for two or more congregations at the same time. The most prominent example of such shared pastoral oversight in American history is perhaps the itinerant system for clergy implemented in early U.S. Methodism by Bishop Francis Asbury, who learned this approach in England from John Wesley. It worked even more effectively in America than it had in England, according to historian John Wigger.[1] The preachers, known as circuit riders, did not serve a single congregation but multiple congregations across a wide geographical area. Wigger says the "typical American itinerant rode a predominantly rural circuit 200 to 500 miles in circumference, typically twenty-five to thirty preaching appointments per round."[2] The system was grueling and not sustainable in that form. But it "worked well for reaching post-revolutionary America's rapidly expanding population" that was overwhelmingly rural, becoming "the largest and most dynamic popular religious movement in America between the Revolution and the Civil War."[3] While the circuit rider system did not last, the concept of clergy serving more than one church, often referred to as a "circuit," continues to this day within Methodist traditions with an episcopal polity such as the African Methodist Episcopal Church; African Methodist Episcopal Church, Zion; Christian Methodist Episcopal Church; and United Methodist Church.

1 John Wigger, *American Saint: Francis Asbury and the Methodists* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 8.

2 Ibid., 9.

3 Ibid., 9-10.

Few other religious traditions followed this pattern for clergy deployment. While present in most denominational families, the use of shared-pastor arrangements has been generally limited by groups other than Methodists until recent times. A pattern among rural white and Black Baptist churches quite common from the late nineteenth century well into the twentieth century was for churches to meet monthly or twice a month.[4] In those cases, a pastor could be called by more than one church so long as the meeting Sundays did not conflict. While there existed no formal relationship between or among the churches as is often the case when sharing a pastor, the result of this model resembled other shared pastor arrangements. Today the Roman Catholic Church appears to have more parishes served by priests who also serve another parish or parishes than even the Methodist bodies.

In examining the practice of congregations across different traditions sharing pastors, we see modest increases since 2000. There is, however, not nearly as much growth as one might expect given the rapid increase in the number of very small congregations, such as those averaging 25 or fewer in average worship attendance. Interviews with denominational officials indicate that while there are shared pastor arrangements in most churches, they are not common among most denominational families despite the financial challenges of many congregations and, in some cases, the active encouragement of judicatory officials.[5]

There are multiple variables that limit the use of shared-pastor arrangements even in the presence of increasingly large numbers of churches that one would assume would benefit from such an arrangement, particularly those with limited numbers of participants and resources in their congregations. One major factor appears to be that to make shared-pastor usage widespread, there needs to be a hierarchical deployment authority such as is the case in the Roman Catholic Church and the Methodist denominations with episcopal polities. Congregations on their own do not appear to look first to a shared-pastor solution when they no longer can afford a full-time pastor of their own. In addition, churches in more congregational polities must themselves identify both another pastor and congregation willing to explore such an arrangement.

4 Paul Harvey, *Redeeming the South: Religious Cultures and Racial Identities Among Southern Baptists 1865-1925* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 2,80, 162, 173, 238. The author's use of "Southern" in the title is used in the lowercase in the text to refer to a region and encompasses all Baptists. He uses uppercase when referring to churches associated with the Southern Baptist Convention.

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

In some of these traditions with a more connectional polity, their judiciary leader or staff may assist in locating possible partners but typically will not have the authority to enact unilaterally a shared-pastor plan.

While not the focus of this particular research project, it appears from reviewing some shared-pastor situations outside the Roman Catholic and episcopal Methodist systems, there may be somewhat of a paradox: Even though those "clusters" or "parishes" are harder to establish, they may have more cohesion and durability given that all parties must establish the terms and approve the arrangements.

I. Among All Congregations

The comprehensive National Congregations Study (NCS) has asked since 2006 whether the lead pastor of a congregation serves another congregation. Among all lead pastors, the percentage serving at least one other congregation has grown modestly, from 14 percent in 2006, to 15 percent in 2012, and to 18 percent in 2018 (table 1).[6]

Table 1. The percentage of churches sharing a pastor increased slightly from 2006 to 2018.

Year	Churches Sharing Pastor
2006	14%
2012	15%
2018	18%

Source: National Congregations Study, 2006, 2012, 2018

II. Among Four Religious Traditions

Black Protestant

The NCS findings for Black Protestant churches sharing a pastor show 16 percent in their 2018 survey (table 2). This is a decrease from previous surveys. The latest numbers seem in line with patterns among Evangelical Protestants and Mainline Protestants in terms of the extent of the shared-pastor practice, though different in that the frequency of its use appears to be declining. Within the Black Protestant group of religious traditions, there are both highly connectional polities in which deployment decisions are centralized in an episcopal office and more congregational polities.

Table 2. The percentage of Black Protestant churches sharing a pastor decreased from 2006 to 2018.

Year	Churches Sharing Pastor
2006	23%
2012	18%
2018	16%

Source: National Congregations Study, 2006, 2012, 2018

6 Mark Chaves, *National Congregations Study*, Waves 1-4, 1998, 2006, 2012, 2018.

Evangelical Protestant

In the NCS results for the Evangelical Protestant tradition, there appears to be an increase in the percentage of churches sharing a pastor with another church or churches since 2012 (table 3). The change is from 6 percent to 14 percent. While the practice is not widespread, it appears to be growing more common. We have noted the pattern of shared-pastor arrangements being less likely in congregational polities. If that pattern holds, then sharing pastors may not grow as a pastoral leadership strategy among evangelical churches even in the presence of increasing numbers of very small congregations.

The Church of the Nazarene, for which there are figures from 2000 to 2019, is an example of modest growth in the sharing of pastors across congregations (table 4). There is not an established tradition in the Church of the Nazarene of sharing pastors as a common mode of pastoral leadership. However, there is a consistent pattern of small gains in the use of the shared-pastor approach over the twenty years of statistics.

Table 3. The percentage of Evangelical Protestant churches sharing a pastor almost tripled between 2006 and 2018.

Year	Churches Sharing Pastor
2006	5%
2012	6%
2018	14%

Source: National Congregations Study, 2006, 2012, 2018

Table 4: The percentage of Nazarene churches sharing a pastor increased modestly between 2000 and 2019.

Year	Churches Sharing Pastor
2000	1%
2005	2%
2010	2%
2015	4%
2019	4%

Source: Research Services, Church of the Nazarene

Mainline Protestant

It appears from NCS results that in recent years, about a quarter of Mainline Protestant churches share a pastor with one or more other congregations (table 5).

Table 5. The percentage of Mainline Protestant churches sharing a pastor increased between 2006 and 2018.

Year	Churches Sharing Pastor
2006	17%
2012	25%
2018	23%

Source: National Congregations Study, 2006, 2012, 2018

Table 6: The percentage of UMC churches sharing a pastor remained stable between 2000 and 2019.

Year	Churches Sharing Pastor
2000	48%
2005	45%
2010	45%
2015	49%
2019	48%

Source: Annual Statistical Reports, GCFA

However, the patterns vary considerably across denominational families. As indicated previously, the United Methodist Church makes extensive use of pastors serving more than one congregation. That continues today, but the pattern of sharing pastors is not growing in the UMC with the increase in the number of very small congregations. For example, the number of churches with 25 or fewer average worship attendance increased by 2,000 churches between 2000 and 2019, while the percentage of churches sharing a pastor remained steady at 48 percent (table 6). One reason for this lack of percentage increase is that the very smallest of congregations do not always make likely candidates for a shared pastor situation. Traditionally, from two to four churches (sometimes more) would be linked as a "pastoral charge" or "circuit"[7] to provide sufficient financial resources to support a full-time resident pastor. With the explosion of churches with so few participants, there often are not churches with sufficient financial resources to provide such pastoral compensation without the number of churches required becoming unworkable. Often in those cases, various types of lay "supply" pastors may be utilized with each serving one of the congregations with minimal compensation. Retired clergy serve the same role in many cases, though the number of small churches goes well beyond the capacity of available retired clergy willing and able to serve in this way.

7 Other terms used by Protestants for these arrangements are yoked churches, federation, extended ministry, and larger or cooperative parish. D. R. Hoge, J. W. Carroll, and F. K. Scheets, *Patterns of Parish Leadership: Cost and Effectiveness in Four Denominations* (Kansas City, MO: Sheed & Ward, 1988), 22-23.

We have denominational data from three other Mainline Protestant denominations for the 2000-2019 period or portions of the period. They show mixed patterns of the use of shared pastor arrangements. Denominational statistics on churches sharing pastors often is not as precise as some other data. While the Church of the Nazarene asks each year if the pastor serves another congregation, in other traditions the churches sharing pastors are not so easily identified. Usually, this information comes through tracking the same pastor listed as the lead pastor for more than one congregation. Since pastor data is not always complete, there are probably some churches that share pastors that are not identified.

The Episcopal Church shows a decline in the percentage of churches sharing a pastor from 13 percent in 2000 to 8 percent in 2019 (table 7). The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) (table 8) and the United Church of Christ (UCC) (table 9) remained steady in their use of sharing pastors across congregations during these years.

Table 7: The percentage of Episcopal churches sharing a pastor decreased between 2000 and 2019.

Year	Churches Sharing Pastor (Percent)	Churches Sharing Pastor (Number)	Total Churches
2010	13%	899	6,794
2015	14%	927	6,510
2019	8%	497	6,393

Source: General Convention, Episcopal Church

Table 8: The percentage of ELCA churches sharing a pastor remained stable from 2000 to 2019.

Year	Churches Sharing Pastor (Percent)	Churches Sharing Pastor (Number)	Total Churches
2000	18%	1,527	8,345
2005	19%	1,496	7,985
2010	19%	1,438	7,382
2015	18%	1,219	6,625
2019	17%	972	5,810

Source: Research and Evaluation, ELCA

The ELCA stayed in the 17 to 19 percent range through the two decades, and the UCC remained at 6 percent from 2015 through 2019, the years available for the UCC.

Table 9: The percentage of UCC churches sharing a pastor remained stable between 2015 and 2019.

Year	Churches Sharing Pastor (Percent)	Churches Sharing Pastor (Number)	Total Churches
2015	6%	304	5,055
2019	6%	309	4,918

Source: CARDD, United Church of Christ

Roman Catholic

The pattern of parishes sharing a priest is not new among U.S. Roman Catholics. However, the scale of the practice has changed dramatically as the factors of an increasing Catholic population, a decreasing number of priests, and the movement of people from rural areas changed the deployment picture for priests and parishes.[8] In 2000, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops issued a report on the impact of fewer priests. It identified five ways in which dioceses were responding: closing parishes, creating larger parishes, appointing parish life coordinators, enlisting foreign-born ministers, and assigning priests as pastors to multiple parishes.[9] It appears that the final practice noted by the USCCB is the fastest growing and most frequently implemented practice nationwide.[10] Today, Roman Catholics in the United States probably practice sharing pastors across parishes to a greater extent than any other religious tradition.

Table 10. The percentage of Catholic churches sharing a pastor increased between 2006 and 2018.

Year	Churches Sharing Pastor
2006	39%
2012	42%
2018	43%

Source: National Congregations Study, 2006, 2012, 2018

8 These sharing arrangements are called by a range of names including affiliated, clustered, combined, coupled, paired, twinned, yoked, linked parishes or sometimes as co-parishes. Mary L. Gautier, Paul M. Perl, and Stephen J. Fichter, *Same Call, Different Men: The Evolution of the Priesthood since Vatican II* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2012), 14. Katarina Schuth, *Priestly Ministry in Multiple Parishes* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2006), xvii.

9 "The Study of the Impact of Fewer Priests on the Pastoral Ministry," Committee on Priestly Life and Ministry, United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, June 15, 2000.

10 Mark Mogilka and Kate Wiskus, *Pastoring Multiple Parishes* (Chicago: Loyola Press, 2009), 5.

It was not always this way. In 1965, there were only 3 percent of parishes without a resident priest.[11] That same percentage was reported in the 1987 Notre Dame study of Catholic life since Vatican II.[12] Forty years later, the picture was very different. In 2005, the practice of sharing priests across parishes that had previously been limited to rural areas now was "fast becoming normative" according to Katarina Schuth.[13] In 2005, she points out, the percentage of parishes being served by a priest with more than one parish stood at 44 percent, with 20 percent of active priests serving in such settings.[14] Schuth reports in a study published in 2019 that at least 55 percent of parishes now are part of a cluster parish, and 30 percent of parish priests serve multiple parishes.[15] The NCS findings below show the growth in parishes that share priests with percentages somewhat lower than those reported by Schuth, though her figures include missions as well as parishes and tend to be higher than when only parishes are counted.

Findings

- *Sharing pastors is a widespread practice in a few denominations.* Methodists have a long and consistent history of using this deployment method, with Roman Catholics now making use of the practice as widely if not more so.
- *Sharing pastors is not commonly practiced in most religious traditions in the United States.* The practice appears to have increased in recent years, but the percentages of churches involved remain modest for most denominations.
- *Structure and polity seem essential to widespread use of pastor sharing.* Sharing pastors across large numbers of congregations within a tradition appears to work best in a hierarchical system with the authority and power of deployment lodged in a single entity. The episcopal polity and governance within the several Methodist traditions and the Roman Catholic Church make this point. Churches with congregational polities make use of the sharing pastor option much less frequently.

11 "Frequently Requested Church Statistics," *The CARA Report*, 13, no 1 (Summer 2007): 6. Cited in Mogilka and Wiskus, *Pastoring Multiple Parishes,* 3.

12 Joseph Gremillion and Jim Castelli, *The Emerging Parish: The Notre Dame Study of Catholic Life Since Vatican II* (New York: Harper & Row, 1987), 56.

13 Katarina Schuth, "Who Pastors: The Priest, the Context, and the Ministry," in *The Future of Catholicism in America,* eds. Mark Silk and Patricia O'Connell Killen (New York: Columbia University Press), 169.

14 Katarina Schuth, *Priestly Ministry in Multiple Parishes,* 3.

15 Katarina Schuth, "Who Pastors: The Priest, the Context, and the Ministry," 170. Schuth includes parishes and missions in her figures.

- *Across all traditions, sharing pastors is not popular among congregational members.* This is seen in the Roman Catholic Church where parishes have typically resisted the increasing practice of sharing priests between and among parishes. On the other hand, when unable to have a full-time pastor, church members prefer the shared model to other alternatives.[16] The resistance appears to be their opposition to losing the full-time pastor.
- *Some current trends make sharing pastors more likely.* Factors today that may lead to increased use of shared pastors include increasing numbers of congregations with small numbers of participants and limited financial resources, denominational constituents remaining in more rural areas with declining populations, a shortage of available clergy, and clergy preferences to serve in locations other than where the very small congregations are located.
- *Despite a long history of use, shared pastor arrangements have generated little study.* One would think that there would be a body of research out of Methodism's long history with the practice of sharing pastors among congregations, but the prevalence of the practice has not translated into documented observations and results. The Roman Catholic Church, coming later to the widespread use of shared pastor deployment, has in recent years examined the subject theologically. Their study, however, has been primarily for seeking best practices to share with priests and parishes new to such deployment.[17]

Implications

- *Congregations sharing a pastor continues to be a viable option for denominations and congregations.* This approach is easier when the congregations' polity is conducive to the practice (hierarchical with appointment authority) but also possible where sufficient time is expended to facilitate such arrangements.
- *Sharing pastors will not become a primary practice among most congregations.* It will be one option available to address the increasing number of congregations unable to afford a full-time pastor. However, polity, resistance, and the availability of willing partner pastors and congregations will limit its usage beyond a few denominations.

16 In one study, when offered various options including a part-time pastor or non-ordained or lay pastor, the shared pastor option as selected as the preferred alternative by Catholic, Episcopal, Lutheran, and Methodist congregants. Hoge, et al., *Patterns of Parish Leadership,* 103.

17 Schuth, *Priestly Ministry in Multiple Parishes,* and Mogilka and Wiskus, *Pastoring Multiple Parishes.*

- *Therefore, growth in shared pastor arrangements will probably increase but modestly, despite factors that appear to call for such shared solutions for pastoral leadership.*
- *Given the increases in the use of shared pastor deployment, much more research is needed to understand the possibilities, limitations, and consequences of churches sharing a pastor.*
- *Specialized training for pastors serving more than one congregation is needed, especially in those traditions that regularly use this deployment strategy.*
- The shared pastor phenomenon deserves attention from theological schools along with similar and related issues such as part-time and bivocational ministry.

Retired Clergy Serving Churches

One source of pastoral leadership for churches wanting a part-time pastor has historically been retired pastors. Many pastors after retiring, either voluntarily or by reaching mandatory retirement age in a few denominations, desire to continue working in ministry, even if not full-time. As one Northeastern judicatory official put it, "We would have a major crisis if we did not have retired clergy serving churches."[18] Our focus is on retired pastors serving as lead pastors of churches. However, most retired clergy continuing to serve in ministry may be found in a range of other roles including interim or transitional ministry, visitation, or pulpit supply in times of a pastor's illness, vacation, or sabbatical.

There are various contractual and financial arrangements for retired clergy. In one model, churches pay a set amount for the pastor to preach on Sundays, with no other pastoral responsibilities. In some cases, the retired pastor may have such an arrangement with more than one church, either for different Sundays of the month or different times on Sunday. In a different model, the retired pastor is paid a typical salary rate, though reduced because the arrangement is part time, and has full pastoral responsibilities. There are a multitude of variations that fall between these two models.

18 This section draws from interviews conducted by Amy Kubichek, Ph.D., with a range of denominational officials from different regions of the United States in 2023.

Geographic location matters a great deal in the availability of retired clergy and the need for them as lead pastors. Some urban areas report few retired clergy in their region due to the high cost of living. Another variable is reported by a denominational official in the Dakotas who said that clergy usually relocate to a warmer climate upon retirement. Church leaders report higher numbers of retired clergy available to serve churches in warmer climates, as well as in New England.

It seems clear from conversations with denominational leaders that fewer retired clergy are interested in serving churches after retirement, especially as the part-time lead pastor. More are willing to take on supply preaching or interim assignments. Several reasons are offered. Some clergy delayed retirement either because of the 2008 recession or the 2020 pandemic and, upon retirement, were not interested in continuing. For even more, the pandemic caused retired pastors currently serving churches to rethink the wisdom of such activity. It is common to hear reports of more retired clergy serving as pastors before the pandemic than after. As one official put it, "During and after the pandemic a lot of retired clergy decided they were done."

Beyond the pandemic, there appears to be less willingness by retired clergy to continue serving. The increased numbers of retired clergy means that the number serving as lead pastors can remain about the same even with a smaller percentage participating.

Beyond the pandemic, there appears to be less willingness by retired clergy to continue serving. The increased numbers of retired clergy means that the number serving as lead pastors can remain about the same even with a smaller percentage participating. For those who do lead congregations, many are staying to older ages than in the past since many remain in good health. Also, clergy in some traditions continue to serve in higher numbers beyond retirement. Some evangelical and other churches with a congregational polity report that lower clergy salaries and especially less generous pension programs often lead pastors to continue serving beyond retirement or at least beyond common retirement ages since there normally is not a mandatory retirement age.

The pool of retired pastors has been growing since at least 2011 when the first of the large baby boom generation of clergy reached the age of 65. However, in the two denominations for which we have statistics for retired clergy serving as lead pastors (Episcopal and United Methodist), the percentage of churches served by retired pastors has remained about the same since 2000. At the same time, the number of churches in these two denominations has declined. So even with the combination of more retired clergy and fewer churches, there has not been a significant change in the percentage of churches served by retired pastors. These two denominations are among the minority of denominations that have a mandatory retirement age (72 for both).

Table 11 shows that the Episcopal Church consistently has retired pastors serving as lead pastors in 17 or 18 percent of their churches between 2010 and 2019 until the percentage spiked in 2019. Given the high number of missing reports for this status from churches that year, it is hard to know if the 2019 figures accurately identify churches with a retired lead pastor.

Table 11. The percentage of Episcopal churches served by active and retired lead pastors remained stable from 2010 to 2018.

Year	Active (Number)	Retired (Number)	Total	Active (Percent)	Retired (Percent)	Missing
2010	5,239	1,046	6,285	83%	17%	186
2011	5,257	1,116	6,373	82%	18%	214
2012	5,216	1,053	6,269	83%	17%	390
2013	5,095	1,154	6,249	82%	18%	334
2014	5,148	1,149	6,297	82%	18%	293
2015	5,072	1,149	6,221	82%	18%	323
2016	4,700	1,018	5,718	82%	18%	205
2017	4,486	1,054	5,540	81%	19%	180
2018	4,616	1,034	5,650	82%	18%	342
2019	3,329	1,162	4,491	74%	26%	797

Source: General Convention, Episcopal Church

Table 12 shows that 8 percent of United Methodist churches had a retired lead pastor in 2000, but only 6 percent did in 2019.

Figure 1 shows where these United Methodist retired pastors served by identifying the worship attendance size of their congregations. Virtually all serve in churches with smaller attendance averages. The sizes of their churches are even smaller in 2019 than in 2000.

It is difficult to see clear trends in the limited data we have. We can say that there are more retired or over age 72 clergy available to serve now than in 2000 given the aging of clergy on the older end of the baby boom generation. There is a mixed picture about the increase in their use as lead pastors. There may be greater use in some denominations as more churches are unable to afford full-time pastors, but there is little indication that retired clergy are the primary source to cover the pastoral needs of these churches.

Table 12. The percentage of UMC churches served by retired lead pastors remained almost the same between 2000 and 2019.

Year	Retired (Percent)	Retired (Number)
2000	2,778	8%
2019	1,946	6%

Source: Annual Statistical Reports, GCFA

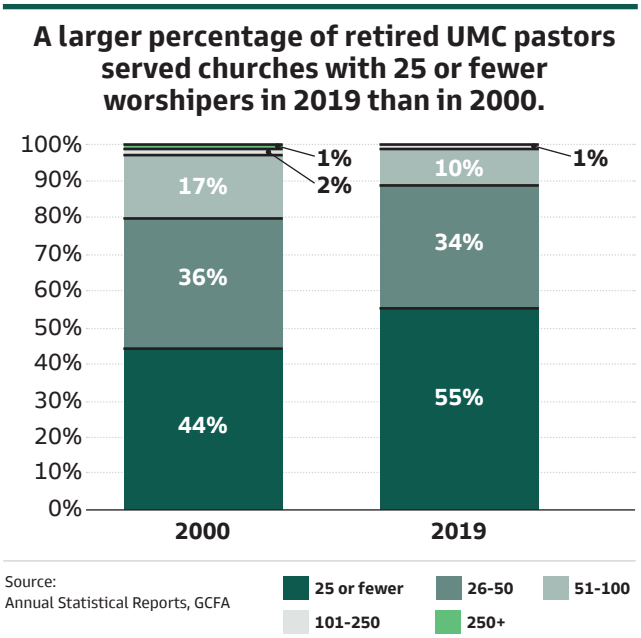
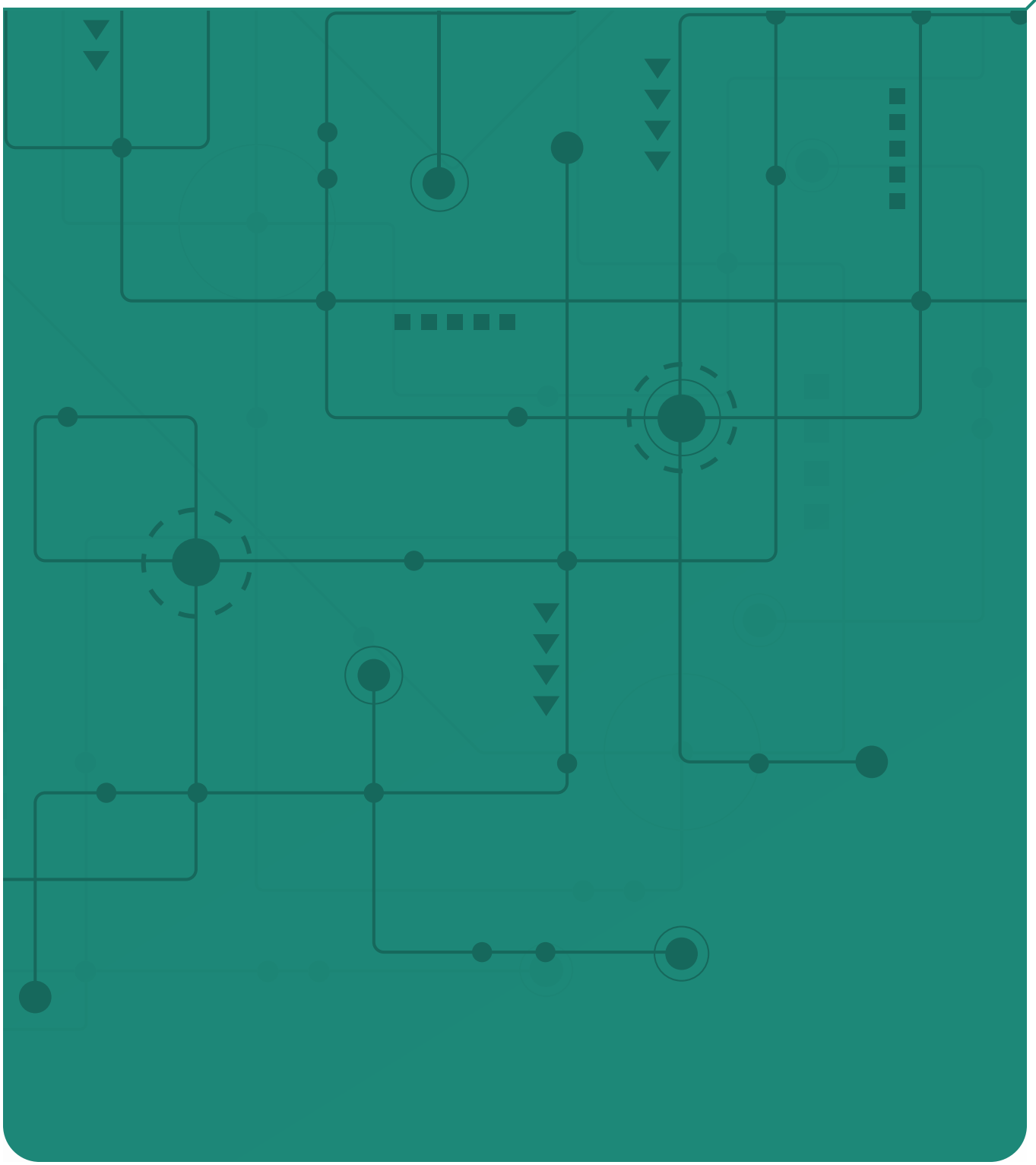


Figure 1. Percentage of UMC retired lead pastors by size of congregation served, 2000 and 2019



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