

# Aging Church Membership

By Lovett H. Weems Jr.

Religious Workforce Project

Lewis Center for Church Leadership

Wesley Theological Seminary



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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?



# Aging Church Membership

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Mark Chaves and others have documented the over-representation of older people in U.S. congregations. While this reality is not new, the aging trend has become more pronounced. While people are living longer and the overall U.S. population has grown older in the last 50 years, these trends do not account for the degree of aging among frequent worshippers.<sup>1</sup> The most recent National Congregations Study confirms the work of other observers in noting the two age-related trends that together result in the declining religious participation in the United States: First, active participants are getting older and, as they do, participate in decreasing numbers due to health and death. Second, younger generations, always less active in religious life, are participating at significantly lower levels than the young at comparable ages did in the past.<sup>2</sup>

According to NCS, in 2018-19, 43 percent of the adults in the average congregation were over 60 years old, up from 29 percent in 1998. And 24 percent of the adults in the average congregation in 2018-19 were younger than 35, down from 30 percent twenty years earlier.<sup>3</sup> Faith Communities Today found in their 2020 study that, on average, 33 percent of congregational participants are 65 or older compared to representing only 17 percent of the general population.<sup>4</sup> While the trend toward more older people and fewer younger people appears across all traditions, these groups vary in the degree of change. NCS finds that in 2018-2019, the proportion of those over 60 years of age was 57 percent for Mainline Protestant, 51 percent for Roman Catholic, 39 percent for Black Protestant, and 32 percent for Evangelical Protestant.<sup>5</sup>

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1 Mark Chaves, *American Religion: Contemporary Trends* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017), 66-67.

2 Mark Chaves, Joseph Roso, Anna Holleman, and Mary Hawkins, *Congregations in 21st Century America* (Durham, NC: Duke University, Department of Sociology, 2021), 42.

3 Ibid.

4 Scott Thumma, *Twenty Years of Congregational Change: The 2020 Faith Communities Today Overview* (Hartford, CT: Faith Communities Today, 2021), 17.

5 Chaves, *Congregations in 21st Century America*, 42.



## Religious Traditions

The Pew Research Center issued their Religious Landscape Study in 2016 using data collected for 2014. They provided helpful comparisons across religious traditions shown in table 1.<sup>6</sup>

**Table 1. In 2014, Mainline Protestant members were older than members of other Christian traditions.**

Religious tradition	18-29	30-49	50-64	65+	Median Age
Catholic	17%	33%	29%	20%	49
Evangelical Protestant	17%	33%	29%	20%	49
Historically Black Protestant	20%	36%	29%	15%	46
Mainline Protestant	16%	29%	29%	26%	52
All U.S. Adults	22%	34%	26%	18%	46
Unaffiliated (religious "nones")	35%	37%	19%	9%	36

These patterns continue to be seen in the more recent research. Mainline Protestants tend to be the oldest of these four traditions. Catholic and Evangelical Protestants are somewhat younger. Historically Black Protestants are the youngest, though they tend to be older than the overall makeup of the U.S. adult population. Furthermore, those claiming no religious affiliation are even younger.

<sup>6</sup> Pew Research Center, "America's Changing Religious Landscape," (May 12, 2015), 125, <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/religious-landscape-study/age-distribution/>.



## Denominations

The same Pew Research Center report provided comparable age information for the adherents of various denominations.<sup>7</sup> Some are included in the table below.

**Table 2. In 2014, religious “nones” were younger than those who were affiliated with a specific denomination.**

Tradition	Denomination	18-29	30-49	50-64	65+	Median age
Evangelical Protestant	Presbyterian Church in America	11%	18%	32%	39%	59
Mainline Protestant	Presbyterian Church (USA)	8%	24%	30%	38%	59
Mainline Protestant	United Church of Christ	10%	23%	36%	31%	59
Mainline Protestant	United Methodist Church	9%	29%	30%	32%	57
Evangelical Protestant	Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod	10%	32%	28%	30%	56
Mainline Protestant	Episcopal Church	9%	26%	31%	35%	56
Mainline Protestant	Evangelical Lutheran Church in America	12%	27%	30%	31%	55
Evangelical Protestant	Southern Baptist Convention	13%	28%	33%	27%	54
Evangelical Protestant	Church of the Nazarene	14%	29%	38%	19%	53
Evangelical Protestant	Church of God (Cleveland, Tennessee)	12%	32%	40%	16%	53
Historically Black Protestant	National Baptist Convention	11%	30%	36%	23%	53
Evangelical Protestant	Assemblies of God	14%	32%	31%	23%	52
Mainline Protestant	American Baptist Churches USA	21%	28%	32%	19%	50
Historically Black Protestant	African Methodist Episcopal Church	16%	33%	23%	27%	50
Catholic	Catholic	17%	33%	29%	20%	49
Evangelical Protestant	Churches of Christ	20%	32%	27%	21%	48
Historically Black Protestant	Church of God in Christ	23%	35%	29%	13%	47
	<b>All U.S. Adults</b>	22%	34%	26%	18%	46
	Unaffiliated (religious “nones”)	35%	37%	19%	9%	36

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 127.



While the denominations reflect the aging patterns seen in the four religious traditions, there is some variation within the traditions that may show a denomination with ages higher than those of a denomination from a tradition that tends to show lower ages, and vice versa. While some of these denominations come close to the overall U.S. adult population makeup, all are much older than those with no religious affiliation.

## Using Death Rates to Examine Further Membership Age Trends

Since denominations do not track the ages of members, it is impossible to make an accurate comparison between the age of a denomination's membership and the age of the general population using denominational data. Death rates can serve as a substitute indicator of changing age patterns.<sup>8</sup> Death rates, while not exact indicators of age, do help show patterns that correspond generally to age. This is because 75 percent of deaths in recent years occurred among people aged 65 and older.<sup>9</sup> While the connection between death rates and aging is not perfect, it shows trends that generally correspond to age. Death rates for the U.S. population are figured based on deaths per 1,000 population for those ages 13 or older and for denominations, as deaths per 1,000 members at the beginning of each year.<sup>10</sup>

### United Methodist Historical Death Rate Trends

We have data for a longer period for United Methodists than for other denominations, so we begin with showing their death rate changes relative to the death rates for the general population since 1969. Just prior to the formation of the United Methodist Church in 1968 through the union of the Methodist Church and the Evangelical United

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8 The source used for U.S. death rates is [United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Dynamics](#), accessed April 27, 2021.

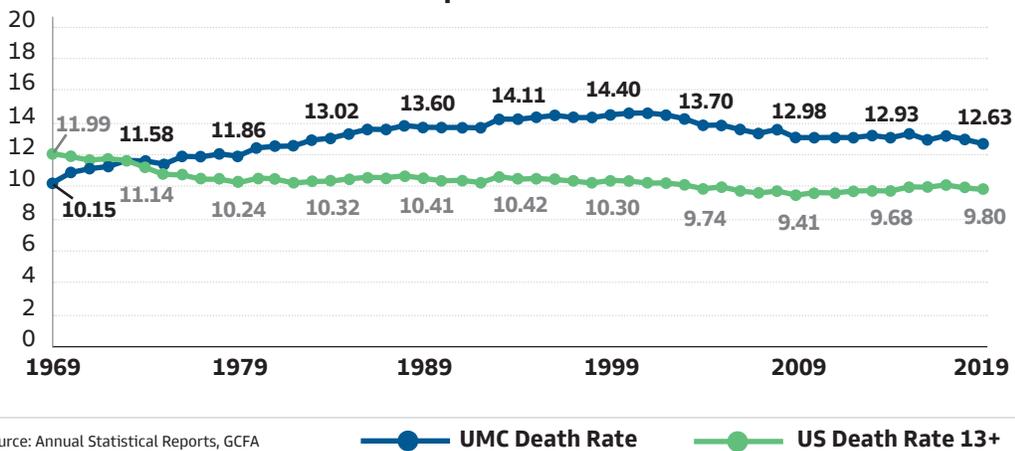
9 For example, in 2020, there were 3,358,814 total deaths in the United States of which 2,509,396 were of persons aged 65 or older (74.7 percent). Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Health Statistics. National Vital Statistics System, Mortality 1999-2020 on CDC WONDER Online Database, released in 2021. Data are from the Multiple Cause of Death Files, 1999-2020, as compiled from data provided by the 57 vital statistics jurisdictions through the Vital Statistics Cooperative Program. Accessed at <http://wonder.cdc.gov/ucd-icd10.html> on Dec 8, 2022. In 2019, the [percentage of over-65 deaths was just over 74 percent](#), accessed on April 23, 2021.

10 Limiting the death counted to those 13 or older is to account for those who do not become formal members of churches at younger ages.



Brethren Church, these combined constituencies were growing with an average death rate about the same as the national population.<sup>11</sup> The death rate of the national population declined as the United Methodist death rate grew higher until recent years in which the denominational death rate has come somewhat closer to the national figures. The largest gap between the two death rates occurred in 2001.

**UMC death rates were higher than U.S. death rates for most of the period of 1969-2019.**



**Figure 1. United Methodist Church and U.S. death rates, 1969-2019**

<sup>11</sup> The first year that the combined memberships of the Methodist Church and the Evangelical United Brethren Church declined was 1966. The decline has continued ever since.



## Church of the Nazarene Death Rate Trends

The Church of the Nazarene shows consistent and relatively positive numbers throughout the 2000 to 2019 period. Their death rates are somewhat below the national death rates with the exception of one year in which they were the same. They have moved closer to the population death rate but with little discernable aging trend based on this indicator.

**Nazarene death rates were lower than U.S. death rates for most of 2000 to 2019.**

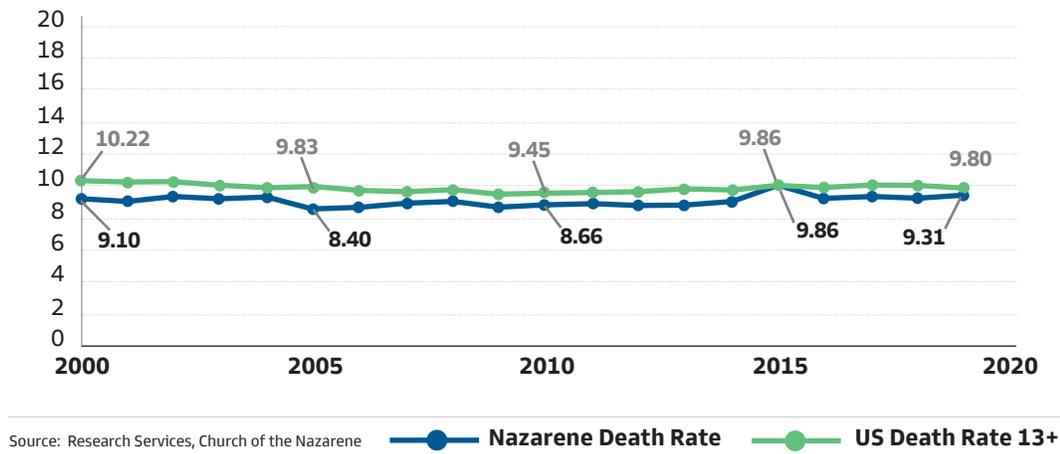


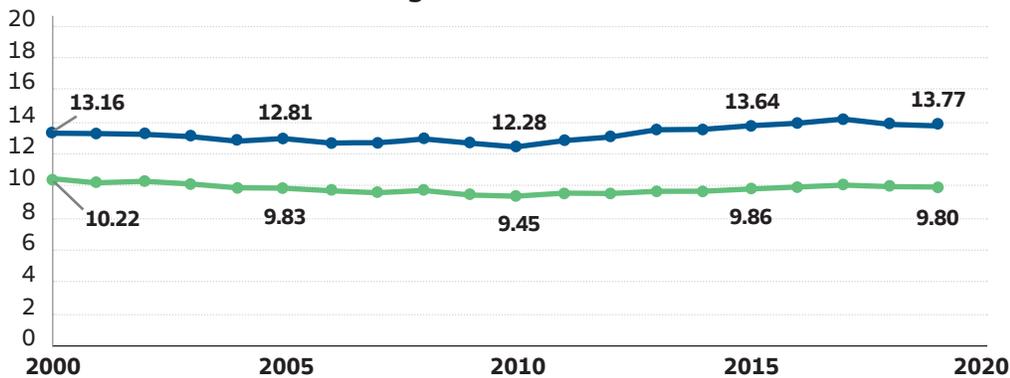
Figure 2. Nazarene and U.S. death rates, 2000-2019



## Evangelical Lutheran Church in America Death Rate Trends

The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America shows death rates considerably higher than those of the general population; yet those rates remain generally consistent throughout the 2000 to 2019 period with some upward trends beginning in 2013.

**ELCA death rates were higher than U.S. death rates throughout 2000 to 2019.**



Source: Evangelical Lutheran Church in America  
Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation

● ELCA Death Rate

● US Death Rate 13+

**Figure 3. ELCA and U.S. death rates, 2000-2019**



## Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) Death Rate Trends

The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) shows death rates considerably higher than those of the general population; yet those rates remain relatively consistent through much of the 2000 to 2019 period with some upward trends beginning in 2014.

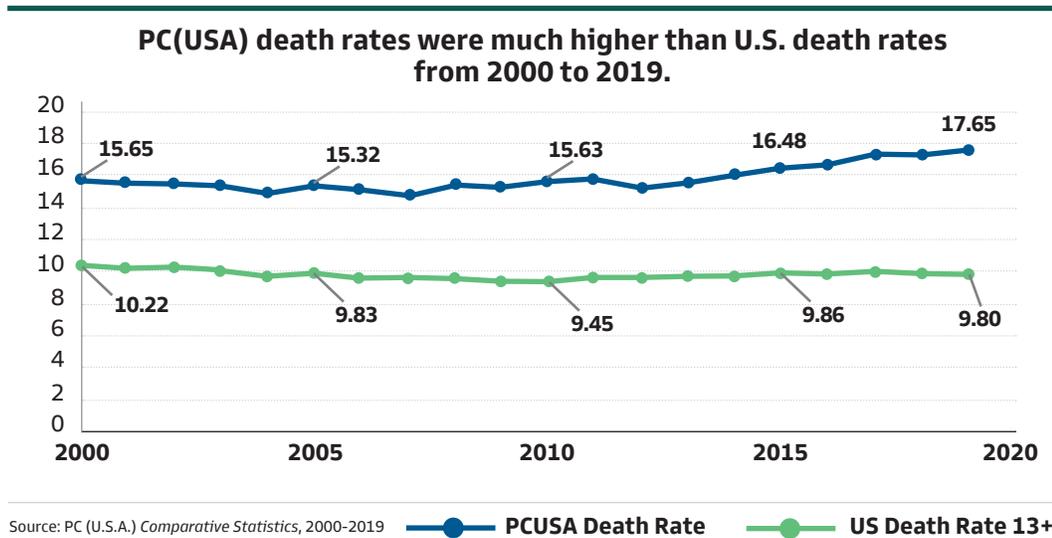


Figure 4. PC(USA) and U.S. death rates, 2000-2019

About midway through the period shown in figure 4, the PC (USA) director of research, Jack Marcum, noted research showing that Presbyterians were relatively older than the U.S. population, and there should be no surprise that the death rate is much higher than that of the country. He goes on to note something that probably applies to some other denominations. “It might easily be worse,” he says. When he compared the death rates of the general U.S. population and the PC(USA) death rates for specific age ranges, he discovered that the deaths of Presbyterians in 2008 were 29 percent lower than the overall U.S. death rates by age range. “The lower Presbyterian death rate likely results from more of us having characteristics associated with lower mortality—college degrees, higher incomes, white ethnicity,” he points out.<sup>12</sup>

12 Jack Marcum, “Go Figure,” *Presbyterians Today* (September 2009), 5.



## Death Rates by Congregational Size

### United Methodist Church

Among United Methodist churches, there is a strong correlation between the size of churches, measured by average worship attendance, and death rates. In 2000 and 2019, one can see the increase in death rates as churches get smaller (table 3). Churches with attendance of 501 or more have death rates lower than that of the general population. All smaller size churches exceed the national death rates in 2000 and 2019.

**Table 3. Death rates among UMC churches with 500 or fewer worshippers were higher than the U.S. death rate in both 2000 and 2019.**

Average Worship Attendance	2000			2019		
	UMC Death Rate	U.S. Death Rate (ages 13+)	UMC DR as % of U.S. DR	UMC Death Rate	U.S. Death Rate (ages 13+)	UMC DR as % of U.S. DR
1,000+	6.31	10.22	62%	5.58	9.8	57%
501-999	9.99	10.22	98%	8.28	9.8	84%
251-500	12.49	10.22	122%	10.39	9.8	106%
101-250	15.21	10.22	149%	13.37	9.8	136%
51-100	17.23	10.22	169%	15.23	9.8	155%
26-50	18.85	10.22	184%	15.8	9.8	161%
25 or fewer	20.57	10.22	201%	16.4	9.8	167%

Source: Annual Statistical Reports, GCFA



## Church of the Nazarene

We see a similar pattern in the Church of the Nazarene with larger congregations having lower death rates and smaller congregations having higher death rates. However, the lower overall death rates of Nazarenes are low enough that many more congregations report death rates lower than those of the general population. For example, size cohorts composed of churches reporting attendance of 101 or more all have death rates lower than those of the total U.S. population. Smaller churches have death rates higher than the general population, especially churches with 50 or fewer in attendance.

**Table 4. Death rates among members of smaller Nazarene churches (50 or fewer worshipers) were higher than the U.S. death rate in both 2000 and 2019.**

Average Worship Attendance	2000			2019		
	Nazarene Death Rate	U.S. Death Rate (ages 13+)	Nazarene DR as % of U.S. DR	Nazarene Death Rate	U.S. Death Rate (ages 13+)	Nazarene DR as % of U.S. DR
1,000+	7.19	10.22	70%	7.27	9.8	74%
501-999	6.72	10.22	66%	6.61	9.8	67%
251-500	7.53	10.22	74%	7.53	9.8	77%
101-250	8.95	10.22	88%	8.85	9.8	90%
51-100	9.81	10.22	96%	10.65	9.8	109%
26-50	12.32	10.22	121%	12.12	9.8	124%
25 or fewer	13.15	10.22	129%	11.74	9.8	120%

Source: Research Services, Church of the Nazarene

## Death Rates by Population Density of Congregational Location

In addition to the size of the congregation, we look at how death rates differ between those located in densely populated counties compared to those found in sparsely populated counties. Two-thirds of the U.S. population lives in a relatively small number of counties. The other one-third of the population lives in a much larger cluster of counties covering a vast amount of geographic area. We examined two denominations,



the Church of the Nazarene and the United Methodist Church, to see if the death rates vary between congregations located in these two demographic clusters of population. Table 5 shows that for both denominations the death rates are higher among churches located in the more sparsely populated counties. The likelihood of the less populated counties having churches of smaller sizes and older constituencies may account for the differing rates.

**Table 5. Nazarene and UMC death rates among churches in densely populated counties were lower than death rates in sparsely populated counties in 2019.**

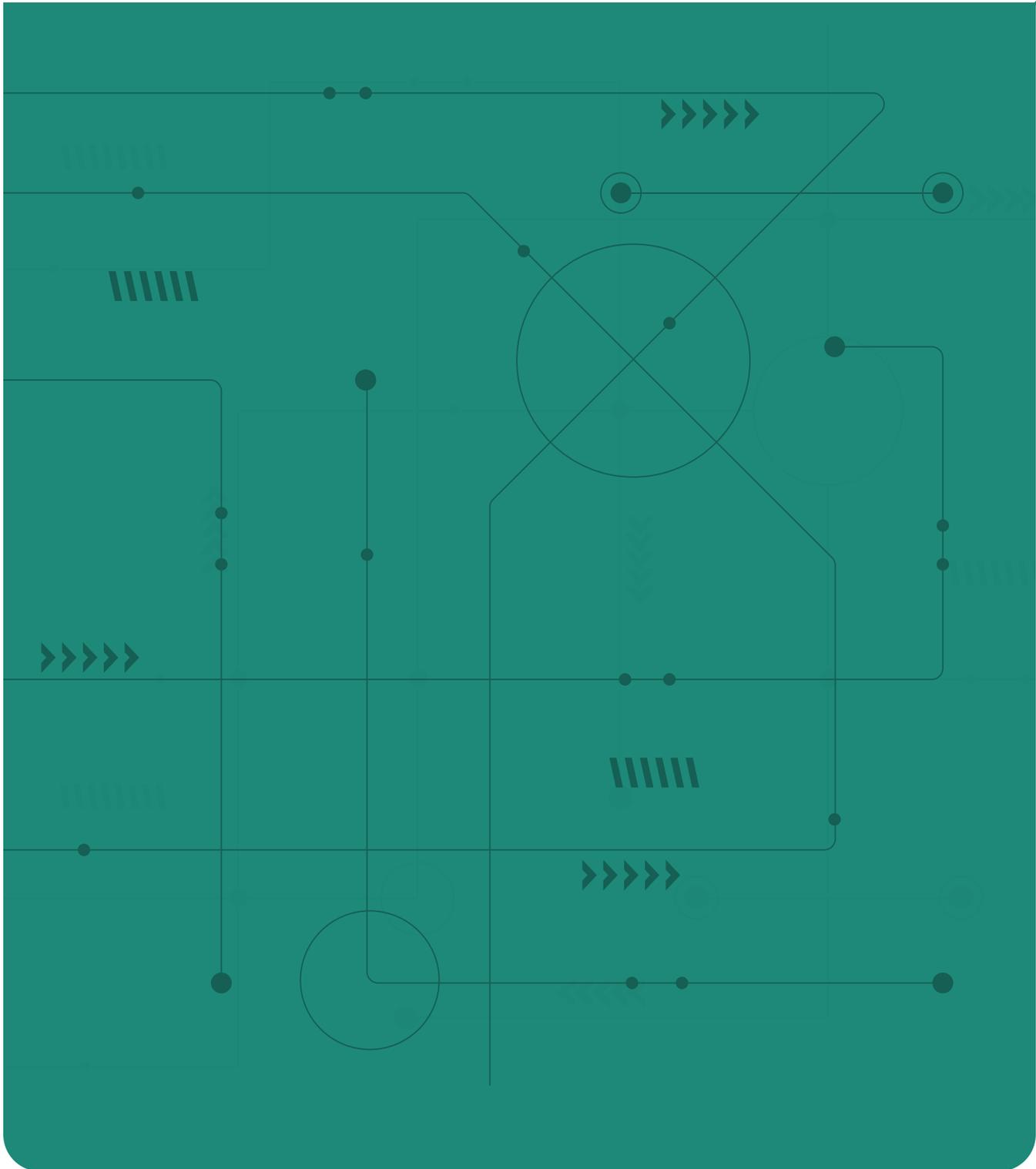
Population Density	Church of the Nazarene	United Methodist Church
Churches in Counties with 2/3 U.S. Population	7.70	10.70
Churches in Counties with 1/3 U.S. Population	11.11	14.50

Sources: Research Services, Church of the Nazarene; Annual Statistical Reports, GCFA

## Conclusion

Michael Lipka of the Pew Research Center describes the dramatic changes taking place in the U.S. religious landscape. He notes the importance of age, among demographic factors, to the prospects for various religious groups as well as those claiming no religious affiliation (a very young cohort). He notes that “religious groups whose members are younger may be more likely to grow, not only because those members will live longer, but also because more of them are still of childbearing age (and thus have a greater chance of passing on their religion to their descendants).”<sup>13</sup> 

13 Michael Lipka, [“Which U.S. Religious Groups Are Oldest and Youngest?”](#) July 11, 2016.



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4500 Massachusetts Avenue, NW, Washington, DC 20016

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

