



Increasing Numbers of Smaller Churches **among Protestants**

By Lovett H. Weems Jr.

Religious Workforce Project

Lewis Center for Church Leadership

Wesley Theological Seminary



**Religious
Workforce
Project**



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?



Increasing Numbers of Smaller Churches among Protestants

By Lovett H. Weems, Jr.

Introduction

“Most congregations are small, but most people are in large congregations.”¹ This statement by Mark Chaves captures the dominant trends in church size and attendance patterns over several decades. According to the National Congregations Study (NCS), the median congregation had 70 regular participants, counting both adults and children, in 2018-19. However, the average attendee worshiped in a congregation with 360 regular participants. Put another way, the 9 percent of churches with 360 or more participants have half of worshipers. Likewise, the 91 percent of congregations with fewer than 360 participants have the other half of worshipers.² It is important to note that this trend of more small churches with fewer participants alongside larger churches in which worshipers are concentrated is occurring among both growing and declining denominations.³

It is this two-fold dynamic of the rapid decline in smaller congregations and the increased consolidation of attendees in larger congregations that Scott Thumma says, “both vexes congregational life and poses a challenge for the future of the religious landscape.”⁴ Chaves admits that this dynamic is easier to identify than explain.⁵

The growth of the largest churches can give the impression of a resurgence in religious participation that is deceptive. Large churches are more effective in reaching persons

1 Chaves, Mark, Joseph Roso, Anna Holleman, and Mary Hawkins. *Congregations in 21st Century America* (Durham, NC: Duke University, Department of Sociology, 2021), 10.

2 Ibid.

3 Mark Chaves, *American Religion: Contemporary Trends*, 2nd ed. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017), 70.

4 Scott L. Thumma, “Exploring the Dynamics and Challenges of Congregational Size,” *Theology Today* 78, no. 3 (2021): 285, 293.

5 Chaves, *American Religion*, 73. Chaves’s examination of some of the possible causes of the increased concentration of worshipers in larger churches since 1970 is Mark Chaves, “All Creatures Great and Small: Megachurches in Context,” *Review of Religious Research* 47, no. 4 (June 2006): 329-346, .



who have not been active in church recently but not so effective in reaching enough of them to counter the more dominant pattern of declining church attendance. Therefore, the overall picture continues to be one of declining numbers of active church participants. These participants, though, are now found in relatively few larger churches with virtually all churches with fewer than 1,000 worshipers having smaller constituencies today than in the past.⁶

While the largest churches are where most worshipers attend, the probability that an individual will attend services weekly does not increase with the size of the congregation according to research by David Eagle. He found a small negative association, though not statistically significant, between size and attendance for White Conservative Protestants. For White Mainline and Black Protestants, he found a strong, negative relationship exists between size and the probability of attendance. For Catholics the model indicates a modest positive relationship initially, which then turns negative for congregations with more than 500 participants.⁷ This research confirms that while smaller churches are limited in many ways, there is often stronger participation and per capita giving. Such dedication by members is one reason many churches remain open with few people and resources.

Decreasing Median Worship Attendance

Scott Thumma reports on a consistently declining median worship attendance documented in *Faith Communities Today* (FACT) surveys from 2000 to 2020. The median worship attendance of U.S. congregations in their study was 130 in 2000 but declined by half to 65 by 2020.⁸

One can see the faster rate of declines in the median worship attendance in the more recent years. See also the

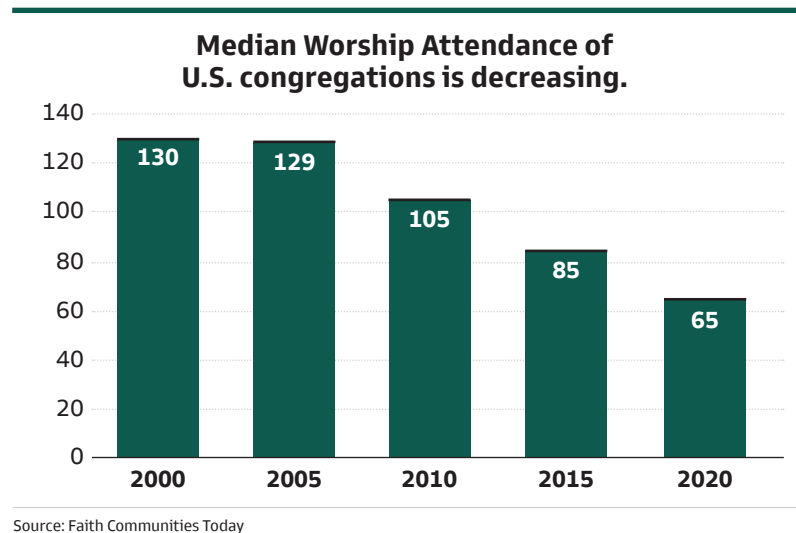


Figure 1. Median Worship Attendance, 2000-2020, FACT

6 Chaves, et al., *Congregations in 21st Century America*, 11.

7 David Eagle, "The Negative Relationship between Size and the Probability of Weekly Attendance in Churches in the United States," *Socius: Sociological Research for a Dynamic World* 2 (2016): 7. DOI: 10.1177/2378023115617168

8 Scott L. Thumma, "Exploring the Dynamics and Challenges of Congregational Size," *Theology Today* 78, no. 3 (2021): 287.



accelerated decline in median attendance in the United Methodist Church (table 1) between 2000 and 2019 compared to 1975 to 2000. The United Methodist median worship attendance changed from 60 in 1975 to 53 in 2000 and to 38 in 2019. The percentage negative change in the last two decades was more than double that of the previous 25 years.

Table 1. Median worship attendance of United Methodist Church congregations declined between 1975 and 2019.

1975 Median Attendance	2000 Median Attendance	Percent Change (1975-2000)	2000 Median Attendance	2019 Median Attendance	Percent Change (2000-2019)
60	53	-12%	53	38	-28%

Source: UMC General Council on Finance and Administration

Median worship attendance changes between 2000-2019 for other denominations for which we have data are in table 2 and show similar declines.⁹

Table 2: Median worship attendance in other denominations has declined between 2000 and 2019.

Denomination	2000 Median Attendance	2019 Median Attendance	Percent Change
Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)	83	50	40%
Church of the Nazarene	63	45	29%
Episcopal Church	80	51	36%
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America	100	60	40%
United Church of Christ	81	34	58%

⁹ Sources for denominational data are: Statistical Report of Congregations in the United States and Canada; Research Services, Church of the Nazarene; General Convention of The Episcopal Church; Research and Evaluation, ELCA; and UMC General Council on Finance and Administration.

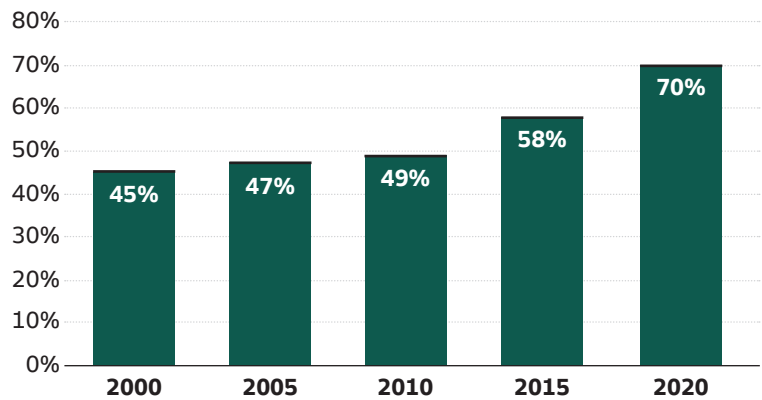


Fewer Churches Large Enough to Afford a Full-Time Pastor

Attendance declines mean that denominations have increasing numbers of smaller churches each year. The quickening pace of worship declines is producing significant increases in the number of the very smallest churches, including those with as few as 25 worshipers on average. And despite the presence of more very large churches, there are fewer churches each year with 101 or more attendance, i.e., churches more likely to have a full-time pastor than smaller churches. This is not a new trend.¹⁰ For example, in 1975 the United Methodist Church had 11,402 churches with 101 or more worshipers representing 29 percent of all churches. By 2000, there were only 9,553 churches of this size representing 27 percent of all churches. In 2019, there were 5,553 churches with 101 or more worshipers, representing 18 percent of all churches. The Southern Baptist Convention reports that in 2022 only 27 percent of their churches had average worship attendance of 100 or more. Forty-six percent of Southern Baptist congregations had fewer than 50 in attendance. The percentage with fewer than 50 was 36 percent as recently as 2017.¹¹

Thumma reports (figure 2) that the percentage of U.S. churches with attendance of fewer than 100 increased from 45 percent of congregations in 2000 to 70 percent in 2020 in the FACT studies.¹²

The percent of churches with fewer than 100 worshipers increased between 2000 and 2020.



Source: Faith Communities Today

Figure 2. Percentage of churches with fewer than 100 in worship, 2000-2020

¹⁰ Some find this trend much earlier than the 1970s. For example, Donald Luidens reports that in the Reformed Church in America, the percentage of churches with fewer than 100 members increased between 1950 to 1990 from 20 percent of all churches to 40 percent. Donald A. Luidens, "National Engagement with Localism: The Last Gasp of the Corporate Denomination?" in *Church, Identity, and Change: Theology and Denominational Structures in Unsettled Times*, eds. David A. Roozen and James R. Nieman (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005), 416.

¹¹ *Analysis of the Southern Baptist Convention's Annual Church Profile (ACP)* by Lifeway Research, September 22, 2023.

¹² Thumma, "Exploring the Dynamics and Challenges of Congregational Size," 288.



Table 3 illustrates how the numbers of churches in seven average worship attendance (AWA) size groups changed between 2000 and 2019. The denominations included are the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), Church of the Nazarene, Episcopal Church, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, United Church of Christ, United Methodist Church, and Wesleyan Church. While changes may vary in traditions not included, among this sample, there were significantly more churches with 50 or fewer average attendance in 2019 than in 2000. Twenty years ago, churches with 50 or fewer attendance represented 41 percent of these denominational churches. By 2019, they comprised 57 percent of the churches.

Table 3: The share of congregations with 50 or fewer worshipers increased between 2000 and 2019 (combined data from seven denominations).¹³

Average worship attendance range	2000 churches	2019 churches	Absolute Change	Percent Change	Percent of 2000 churches	Percent of 2019 churches
1,000+	257	237	-20	-8%	0.4%	0.4%
501-999	1,135	619	-516	-45%	2%	1%
251-500	4,532	2,173	-2,359	-52%	7%	4%
101-250	16,139	8,852	-7,287	-45%	24%	15%
51-100	17,570	13,527	-4,043	-23%	27%	23%
26-50	14,358	15,477	1,119	8%	22%	27%
25 or fewer	12,286	17,133	4,847	39%	19%	30%

¹³ Sources for denominational data are: Statistical Report of Congregations in the United States and Canada; Research Services, Church of the Nazarene; General Convention of The Episcopal Church; Research and Evaluation, ELCA; Center for Analytics, Research & Development, and Data (CARDD) of the United Church of Christ; UMC General Council on Finance and Administration; and the Wesleyan Church North American General Conference.



Smaller Churches Are Less Likely to Grow

Thumma sees growth and decline trends closely associated with congregational size when examining attendance trends in the five years preceding their 2020 FACT survey. From the FACT findings (table 4), Thumma makes the following points about church size and the likelihood of growth or decline.¹⁴

Table 4. Over 70% of congregations with more than 1,500 worshipers grew in attendance over the past five years, while two-thirds of congregations with 50 or fewer worshipers became smaller.

Attendance Size Group	Growth by 5% or more	Maintain between ±4.9%	Decline by 5% or more
1-50	21%	14%	65%
51-100	43%	12%	45%
101-250	43%	14%	43%
251-500	47%	15%	38%
501-1,500	49%	15%	36%
1,501 or more	71%	12%	17%

Source: Faith Communities Today 2020

- No matter the size, relatively few congregations (12-15 percent) remain stable over five years (attendance change between ±4.9%).
- Small churches (50 or fewer attendance) – Most small churches are declining in attendance. Median rate of decline is negative 18.2 percent.
- Mid-size churches (51-250 attendance) – Mid-size churches have an equal chance of growing or declining.
- Large churches (251-500 and 501-1,500 attendance) – More large churches are growing than declining with median growth rates of 1.4 percent and 5.6 percent, respectively.
- Largest churches (1,500 or more attendance) – Most of the largest churches are growing (71 percent are growing. Five percent or more have a median growth rate of 19.6 percent).

¹⁴ Thumma, "Exploring the Dynamics and Challenges of Congregational Size," 288-289.




Workforce Implications

In the 1950s and 1960s it was common for new seminarians to come from smaller, often rural, congregations. They typically would begin their ministries in similar contexts before moving to leadership in larger settings. Today the patterns are different. Seminarians are far more likely to come from larger suburban and urban congregations. In today's world, they now are likely to serve in their early years and probably well beyond that time in small churches. The most recent National Congregations Study reports that about “70% of fulltime ministerial staff and about 80% of part-time ministerial staff are employed by congregations” the 91 percent of congregations with fewer than 360 people.¹⁵ And most of those churches are well below 360 participants with the very smallest attendance groups of churches becoming more numerous in the last twenty years.

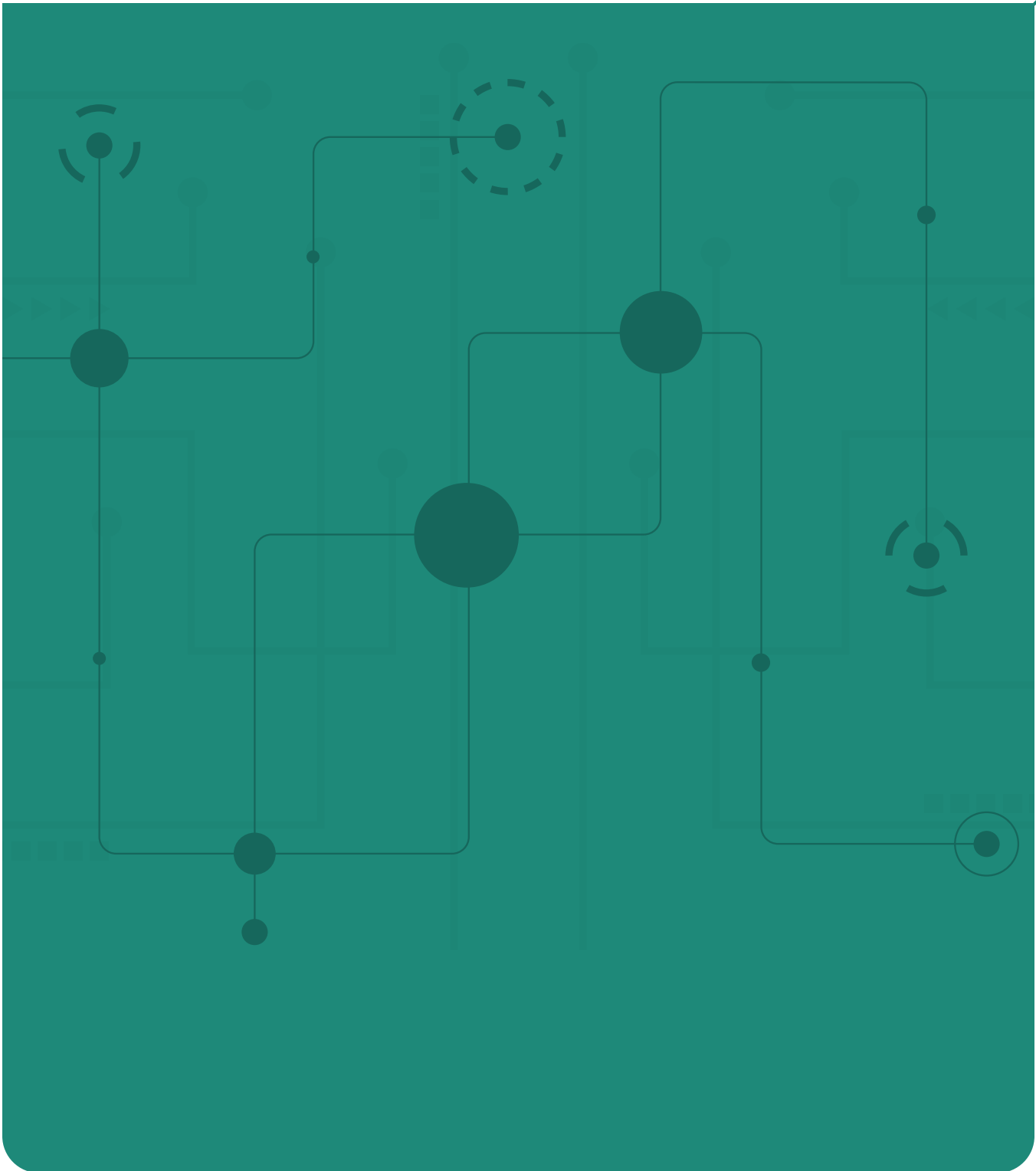
Certainly, the largest churches employ many clergy as lead pastors and various types of associate, executive, and specialized pastors. However, whereas smaller churches will spend the preponderance of their personnel budgets on their clergy, the very large churches employ far more lay ministry professionals to accomplish their missions. So future clergy face a church context in which most churches are getting smaller as those who continue to worship regularly do so in a relatively limited number of larger congregations.

Conclusion

We see not only that the majority of churches remains small, but they are also becoming much smaller than most denominational leaders have faced in their lifetimes. One might think that the death or merger of the smallest congregations would keep some type of balance to the size makeup of churches. Surely churches are closing, but churches typically do not close at high rates. Some are talking today about a rash of church closings considering the declines cited here and the impact of the pandemic. That may turn out to be the case. However, historian James Hudnut-Beumler notes that congregations “are hard to kill, given their extremely local and personal constituencies.”¹⁶ 

15 Mark Chaves, Joseph Roso, Anna Holleman, and Mary Hawkins, *Congregations in 21st Century America* (Durham, NC: Duke University Department of Sociology, 2021), 10.

16 James Hudnut-Beumler, “Introduction,” in *The Future of Mainline Protestantism in America*, ed. James Hudnut-Beumler and Mark Silk (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2018), 13. James Hudnut-Beumler, *Strangers and Friends at the Welcome Table: Contemporary Christianities in the American South* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2018), 175.



Lewis Center for Church Leadership | Wesley Theological Seminary

4500 Massachusetts Avenue, NW, Washington, DC 20016

www.wesleyseminary.edu

