

Disaffiliation from the United Methodist Church in North Carolina:

Key Findings from the Duke Religion and Social Change Lab

After a historic exodus of conservative pastors and congregations, remaining churches in the two Annual Conferences of the North Carolina United Methodist Church (UMC) have become more rather than less politically diverse, according to a new report from the Duke Religion and Social Change Lab. With partisan conflict at an all-time high, the findings suggest a timely opportunity for the denomination to embrace its “Big Tent” roots and seed communities where plurality without division can thrive—but success may hinge on making additional investments in the mental health of its remaining clergy.

Here are the report’s key findings:

1

DISAFFILIATING CLERGY ARE MUCH MORE POLITICALLY AND THEOLOGICALLY CONSERVATIVE THAN REMAINING CLERGY.*

A large majority (85%) of clergy leaving the denomination at least slightly disagree with the notion that “all religious leadership positions should be open to people in same-sex relationships.” However, not all clergy with conservative views on this issue are departing. **Just under a quarter (24%) of clergy remaining in the denomination disagree with allowing gay and lesbian people to hold religious leadership positions.**



2

REMAINING CLERGY ARE TYPICALLY MORE POLITICALLY LIBERAL THAN THEIR CONGREGANTS AND OVERSEE MORE DIVIDED CONGREGATIONS.

Over half (59%) of pastors staying in the UMC say they are at least somewhat more politically liberal than most people within their congregation, and only 28% say they are politically about the same. **Based on clergy’s assessments of their own congregations, 57% of remaining congregations were purple,** 25% were red, and 18% were blue.** Disaffiliating congregations, instead, were much more politically uniform.



*While congregations can disaffiliate, technically clergy cannot. We use this term throughout the report to refer to clergy who withdrew or were removed from the denomination.

**A purple congregation is defined as one where less than 2/3rds of the congregants supported either Trump or Biden in the 2020 presidential election.



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3**WHILE DISAFFILIATING CONGREGATIONS ARE SLIGHTLY SMALLER AND MORE RURAL OVERALL, CONGREGATIONS OF ALL SIZES AND LOCATIONS ARE DISAFFILIATING.**

The median congregation remaining with the denomination has about 123 members and a regular attendance of 32. The median congregation leaving the UMC is slightly smaller, with 116 members and 30 regular attendees. While disaffiliating congregations tended to be smaller, many medium-to-large congregations have left, too. **About 10% of congregations that left the denomination have 100 or more regular attendees compared to 18% of churches remaining with the UMC.**

**4****DISAFFILIATING CLERGY ALMOST EXCLUSIVELY IDENTIFY AS WHITE, ARE MOSTLY MEN, AND ARE MORE LIKELY TO BE LICENSED LOCAL PASTORS RATHER THAN ELDERS.**

Fully 80% of disaffiliating clergy are men, a percentage that is not only higher than the rest of the UMC, but also higher than the 68% of mainline Protestant clergy nationwide who are men. Departing clergy are even more uniform in terms of race; 94% of them identify as white and non-Hispanic. Disaffiliating clergy also differ from remaining clergy in their employment situations. Just over a quarter (26%) of the licensed local pastors in the two conferences are departing, compared to 14% of ordained clergy.

**5****COMPARED TO DISAFFILIATING CLERGY, REMAINING CLERGY REPORT MORE SYMPTOMS CONSISTENT WITH DEPRESSION, ANXIETY, BURNOUT, AND OCCUPATIONAL STRESS.**

Six percent of disaffiliating clergy exhibit elevated symptoms of depression, while 14% of clergy remaining with the denomination do. The story is similar for anxiety. Twelve percent of disaffiliating clergy exhibit symptoms of elevated anxiety, while 18% of clergy remaining with the denomination do. **Nearly half (49%) of all clergy remaining with the denomination report high levels of emotional exhaustion and over a third (36%) report high levels of depersonalization, i.e. cynicism.**



Going forward, supporting clergy in caring for themselves while managing conflict in their congregations will remain an important challenge for the denomination. It is also vital for seminaries to train younger clergy, who are more often progressive on political and social issues, in the skills necessary for pastoring ideologically mixed congregations. Amidst such needs, this report points to a hopeful opportunity. Even after the schism, United Methodist churches may be some of the few institutions in American society where one can still form friendships across fault lines.