



# PROTESTANT DENOMINATIONS TRY NEW IDEAS AS THEY FACE DECLINES IN MEMBERS AND MONEY - ASSOCIATED PRESS

Posted on March 15, 2025 by PETER SMITH | ASSOCIATED PRESS



*The Rev. David Meredith, left, and the Rev. Austin Adkinson sing during a gathering of those in the LGBTQ community and their allies outside the Charlotte Convention Center, in Charlotte, N.C., Thursday, May 2, 2024.*

When the Episcopal Church recently announced cuts to its national staff, it was the latest in a long-running cycle among historic U.S. Protestant denominations — declines in members leading to declines in funding and thus in staff.

And it wasn't alone.

The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) also announced recent cuts to staff at its headquarters and in its global missions program. The United Methodist Church, after undergoing a major schism, has settled into a historically low budget, having cut its numbers of bishops and other positions.

While the circumstances vary from one denomination to another, there are some common threads. Several Protestant denominations are losing members, particularly the Episcopal, Presbyterian, Methodist and other historic mainline groups that have not only been aging and shrinking but have [suffered schisms as they moved in more progressive directions](#).

At the same time, the number of nondenominational churches has grown over the past decade, as have [the ranks of the religiously unaffiliated](#).

As a result, denominations have had to do less with less — not only cutting budgets to balance the bottom line, but making strategic changes and trying out new ideas.

## Widespread skepticism of institutions

Despite their different structures, “every one of these national bodies really have to deal with changing social contexts and ethos,” said Scott Thumma, co-director of the Hartford Institute for Religion Research. “A lot of that has to do with the skepticism around national organizations and institutions.”

In their heyday, denominational offices oversaw mission organizations that sent large numbers of church workers to far corners of the world. They put out officially sanctioned hymnals, devotional guides, magazines and Sunday School materials. They organized big national conventions that set — and fiercely debated — policy and doctrine. They set standards for how ministers were trained, credentialed and disciplined. They ran historical societies and pension funds for ministers.

The [Southern Baptist Convention](#) 's Cooperative Program, marking its 100th anniversary this year, is a testament to the traditional idea that it's more efficient to pool everyone's money and trust leaders to allocate it wisely. The convention still runs a large missions program. But its churches aren't sending as much as they used to. The SBC has also declined in membership. and it faces unique challenges such as litigation following a report on sexual misconduct. Its Executive Committee, which trimmed its staff in 2023, is putting its Nashville office up for sale.

Nowadays, not only has trust in centralized leadership faded, but there often are fewer church members to support programs and activities. Many denominational churches are acting more like nondenominational ones — downloading music or Sunday School lessons from independent rather than official sources.

## Episcopal Church cuts

Last month, the Episcopal Church announced the layoff of 14 workers, with another 16 retiring this year under an incentive program. Another 13 vacant positions are being eliminated. Other staffers are being trained to take on new roles, and the denomination projects it will have a net total of about 110 full-time workers by next year.

“Our goal was to meet the emerging financial reality but also to determine how we can continue to serve the church as it’s becoming something different than it was,” Episcopal Church [Presiding Bishop Sean Rowe](#) said in an interview.

“It’s creating networks on the ground,” he said. “It’s paying attention to what is new and working, and lifting that up.”

Some of the shift in strategy will involve looking at ways to support local dioceses and parishes, which are “better equipped to know what their needs are,” Rowe said.

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

The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) cut 12 positions from its central offices late last year. It also enacted a major change in its approach to global missions earlier this year, eliminating the position of mission co-worker, or those who worked directly in other countries in schools, churches or other ministries. The church will retain workers who will maintain regular contacts with Presbyterian and other churches overseas, as well as interfaith contacts, while also working with diaspora communities in the United States. The world mission staff reduced from 79 to 44, according to a church announcement last month.

The changes are difficult, acknowledged the Rev. Jihyun Oh, executive director of the PC (U.S.A.)'s Interim Unified Agency, a recently consolidated office overseeing a range of denominational work.

The denomination is roughly a third of its size when it took its current form in the 1980s, following a reunification of northern and southern branches. And while many members had increased their giving to missions over the past two decades, the net effect of fewer members was a decline in funds. It was important, Oh said, to reorganize now, before a financial crisis required a more drastic cut. Meanwhile, some of the countries where mission workers once were assigned now have well-established Presbyterian churches, she said.

"The church's witness and ministry is not coming to an end," she said. "There can be resurrection and renewal in a different sort of way." That renewal might be measured not so much by numbers but "in terms of impact, in terms of partnerships, in terms of other ways that we will actually be called to live out faith in this time."

She hopes church members understand that "God's not done with us."

## United Methodist Church cuts

In the United Methodist Church, giving to denomination-wide ministries fell by about 13% to \$91 million in 2024, according to its General Council on Finance and Administration. That didn't cause an immediate shock because the denomination has been preparing for such declines in recent years.

It underwent a years-long schism in which a quarter of its U.S. churches left by the end of 2023. Many joined a more conservative denomination before the UMC's General Conference in 2024 removed its longstanding bans on ordaining and marrying LGBTQ people, while continuing to allow church conferences in other countries to set their own rules.

United Methodist denominational agencies currently have 503 full-time employees, down 36% since 2016, according to the council.

Thumma said that even though "organized religion" gets a bad name these days, that's not the full story.

"You have people who are still interested in spirituality, some sort of gathering around something higher than themselves, but not in these particular forms," he said.

"There are a lot of religious and denominational leaders who realize that, but the question is what forms or structures are going to resonate with those folks."

---

Associated Press religion coverage receives support through the AP's [collaboration](#) with The Conversation US, with funding from Lilly Endowment Inc. The AP is solely responsible for this content.