

UMC membership down, but constituency expands: Worship attendance dips only slightly

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The number of professing adult United Methodist Church members has continued to decline—now to 7.93 million—though the last tabulated drop was less than a percentage point.

When the church considers the thousands of nonmember adults and children for whom local churches have “pastoral responsibility,” Methodist officials said last month, the denomination is holding its own and enjoying some growth.

The recently released figures for 2006 counted 7,931,733 professing members in the U.S., down from 7,995,429 in 2005. The 2006 worldwide figures for United Methodists are not expected to be tallied until late this year. That figure was 11.5 million in 2005.

When statisticians add more than 45,000 clergy members and some 870,000 baptized, nonprofessing members, the U.S. total rises well above 8 million. United Methodists typically report only the number of adult professing members, but that method has the effect of underplaying Methodist totals compared to churches reporting inclusive numbers.

In addition, according to the United Methodist News Service, another category—constituents—expanded during 2006 to more than 1.5 million, a 16 percent increase from a decade earlier.

“Constituents are the unbaptized children, youth and adults who are not members of the church, but for whom the church has pastoral responsibility,” said Scott Brewer, director of research for the United Methodist General Council on Finance and Administration.

“It’s a growing number, and it reflects that people aren’t so big into membership anymore,” Brewer added. He said the church should pay more attention to what he called a wide cultural trend against joining organizations.

Another researcher suggested that the constituent category should be considered a “soft number” whose significance could be overstated. Lovett Weems, director of the Lewis Center for Church Leadership at Wesley Theological Seminary, also noted that short-term projects, mission trips and special classes often are popular at churches even if the idea of becoming church members is not.

A better measure of church vitality, Weems said, is average worship attendance. Church attendance in 2006 was more than 3.3 million, down less than a percentage point from the previous year and down 4 percent from 1990.