

Methodist ranks drop for 36th straight year: Membership abroad increasing

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United Methodist Church membership and attendance are slightly down again in 2004, according to a new report.

Officials of the largest mainline denomination said that membership dropped .81 percent, to a little more than 8 million, and attendance fell .96 percent. It marked the 36th consecutive decline since the denomination merged in 1968 with the smaller Evangelical United Brethren Church.

“What I’m hoping that it’s causing us to do is look at ourselves denominationally and see if there are things we need to do differently and how to do those things differently, in order to be attractive to more folks,” said Terry Bradfield, deputy general secretary for the church’s General Council on Finance and Administration, which released the report April 21.

Church membership and attendance are up in some regions, including Texas, North Carolina, Oklahoma and Georgia. The same goes for Hispanic attendance, which rose 6.18 percent, for the eighth consecutive year of growth.

But a large majority of UMC conferences have lost members. The Troy Conference, covering Vermont and northeastern New York, and the Yellowstone Conference, which includes Montana, northern Wyoming and two towns in Idaho, had the steepest drops. Troy’s attendance declined by 17.39 percent, and Yellowstone’s membership dropped 4.33 percent.

Scott Brewer, a senior researcher, said one-fifth of the churches in the Troy region had not responded to questions about attendance figures, which could account for apparent substantial loss. A spokesperson for the Troy Conference declined to comment on the specifics.

The UMC is still the third-largest church body in the United States, behind the Catholic Church and the Southern Baptist Convention. And the UMC said its membership is rising dramatically abroad—by more than 68 percent since 1995—in Africa, Asia and Europe. The increase is consistent with the rising membership in other Christian denominations in those regions, Brewer said. *-Religion News Service*