



Proposal to Reduce the Number of Districts

A Report from the Cabinet

2024 Session of the Arkansas Annual Conference

Considering rapid changes in the Arkansas Annual Conference and the larger culture, Bishop Laura Merrill requested that the Cabinet, Extended Cabinet, conference staff, and the Conference Council on Finance and Administration study the current reality and recommend how many districts are needed in the Arkansas Conference to address these trends and to best position Conference laity and clergy to live into our shared vision and mission. This proposal is a rightsizing and an adjustment based on our experience of losing over a

quarter of our churches due to disaffiliation over the last two years and an affirmation of our approach to the work of the annual conference to “make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world by equipping its local churches and by providing a connection for ministry beyond the local churches, all for the glory of God” (§601, *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church* 2016).

¶415.4 of *The Book of Discipline* states that the bishop and district superintendents will “form the districts, after the number of the same has been determined by vote of the Annual Conference.” According to the Book of Discipline, the Annual Conference is the body that decides the number of districts, while the Cabinet is assigned the responsibility of mapping out the district lines.

Therefore, the Arkansas Conference Cabinet recommends that the Arkansas Conference adopt a proposal to have four districts, effective July 1, 2024.

In this proposal, the Council on Finance and Administration, the Cabinet, and Bishop Merrill have worked together to place the needs of local churches and ministries first. The four-district plan encourages a healthy ministry of presence by District Superintendents, allows the district offices to best offer resources and support, and fulfills the equipping and connecting mission of the annual conference in a financially sustainable manner.

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A Recent History of Districts in Arkansas United Methodism

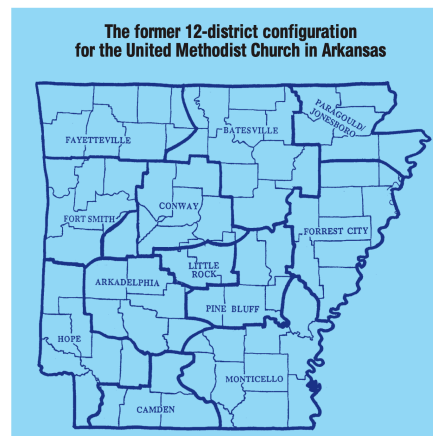
Historically, district lines have been shifted based on new approaches to the work of district superintendents, highways and new interstates that changed travel patterns, demographic changes in the state, and district apportionments.

For example, after the 2003 union of the North Arkansas and Little Rock Conferences, the 2004 newly merged Arkansas Conference reduced the number of districts from 12 to 9. Later, in 2011, the conference decided to reduce further to five districts.

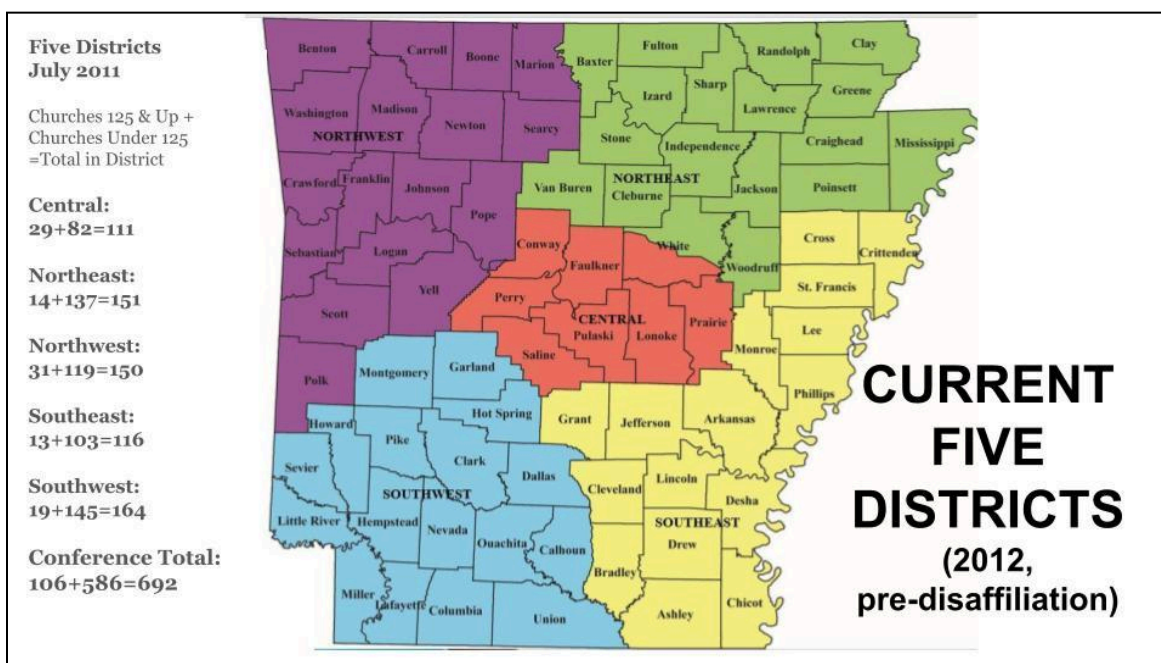
Past redistricting meant more churches per district office and DS. Furthermore all previous district maps were highly impacted by the need to have similar aggregate district apportionments in order to fund offices.

This redistricting project is different.

The season of disaffiliation has meant that approximately a quarter of our congregations have left the denomination. In response to this new reality, the district lines need to be redrawn, to better reflect our budget and the current locations of our congregations and ministries.



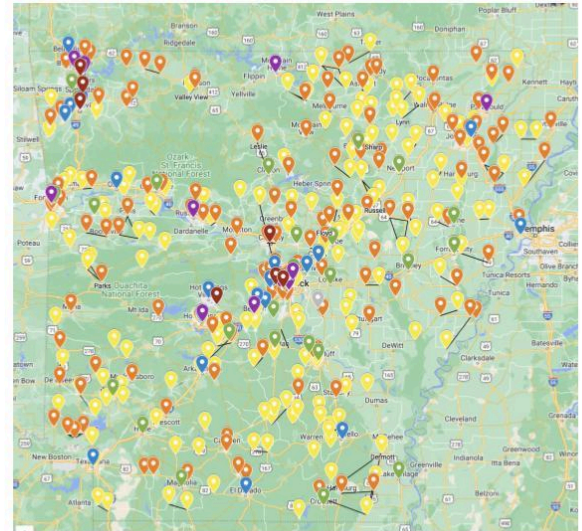
9-district plan, effective June 2004



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One of the factors that was examined was the sizes of our congregations. This allows us to consider how to best resource, equip and connect the congregations of the conference.

The Cabinet studied the post-pandemic active membership of our churches, and, with the assistance of the Center of Communications and the district offices, plotted our current congregations on a map:



Under the existing five districts defined in 2011, after the impact of disaffiliation, the 2023 data was as follows:

Central District:

77 Churches
61 Charges
47 Full-Time Pastors
36 Part-Time Pastors

Northwest District:

82 Churches
60 Charges
40 Full-Time Pastors
30 Part-Time Pastors

Northeast District:

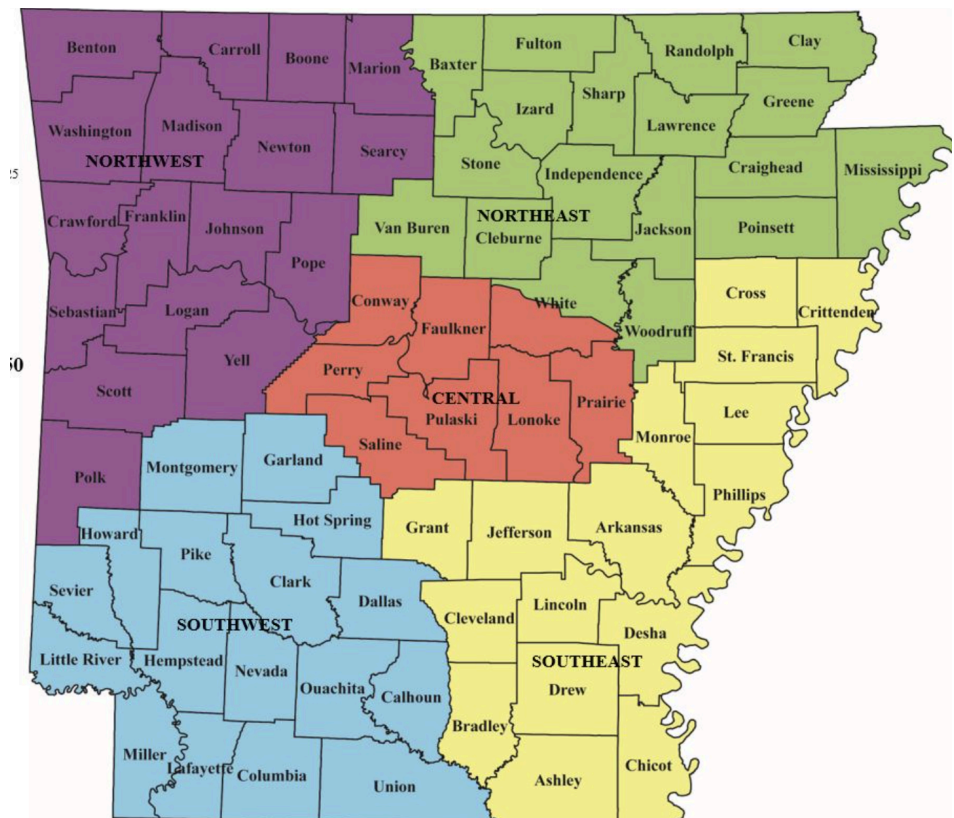
113 Churches
70 Charges
28 Full-Time Pastors
43 Part-Time Pastors

Southwest District:

77 Churches
53 Charges
24 Full-Time Pastors
32 Part-Time Pastors

Southeast District:

69 Churches
47 Charges
19 Full-Time Pastors
32 Part-Time Pastors



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Benefits & Impact of a Four-District Plan

- **Enhanced Support for Local Churches:** More engaged district superintendents can better equip and connect local churches for effective ministry.
- **Improved Resource Stewardship:** Efficient district structures optimize the use of people's time, gifts, and ministry resources.
- **Flexibility and Creativity:** The new model encourages innovative approaches to ministry, fostering collaboration and contextual ministry.

Redistricting will provide flexibility in our conference and district structures and best position us to be good stewards of people's time, gifts, and ministry resources. We are also already leaning into creative and collaborative approaches to ministry, with superintendents, conference staff, and neighbor churches working together in new ways that focus on contextual community-based approaches instead of a one-size-fits-all approach. Arkansas Conference lay leaders, pastors, congregations, and faith communities are encouraged to have flexibility in how resources can be used, inspiring us to be more creative and contextual. Superintending will be focused on encouraging and supporting this connectional and "church-to-church" collaborative approach to ministry. In a news release shared earlier this spring about the Cabinet's four-district proposal, Bishop Merrill stated, "I believe our proposed redistricting plan is one that will distribute and employ our resources well. Districts are one of the ways we organize ourselves, but the important thing will be the relationships and collaboration we develop with each other. I look forward to strong new district teams in the Arkansas Conference of the United Methodist Church, doing and living ministry together for the purposes of Christ."

What Would a Four-District map look like?

It is the responsibility of the Annual Conference to decide the number of districts, and ¶415.4 assigns the responsibility of mapping the districts to the Bishop and District Superintendents. As part of creating the four-district proposal, the Cabinet looked ahead to how the districts might be mapped out. The locations, complexity, and unique contexts of the congregations of the Arkansas Conference were considered, along with a host of other factors. As stated above, each district was historically mapped out based on an equalization of a district apportionment to fund the district's administrative and ministry budget. Due to using the Conference Tithe, by which the Arkansas Conference assigns each district an administrative budget as part of the larger Conference budget, we are now able to ignore the district apportionment system that previously drove much of the map-making in the past. Since District offices and District Superintendents. Instead, we can focus on a more missional approach that will include geographic proximity, regional affinities, the number of churches and charges, the number of full-time and part-time pastors, and travel times to district offices.

The layout of the new district map will eliminate one district, which will also mean that each of the four districts will have closer to the same number of churches and pastors as each of the five districts had in 2011 when the current five districts were originally drawn, albeit with larger geographic responsibility. Similar to the district maps in 2004 and 2011, the cabinet will use county lines as the primary markers of district lines.

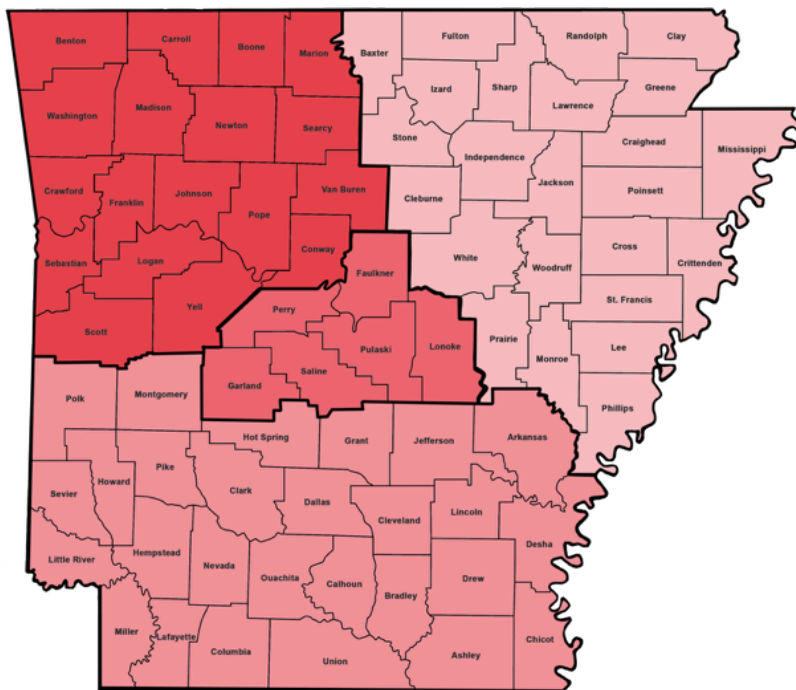
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The Cabinet will also be able to consider better population growth projections, highway access, and potential “sub-district” relationships in certain regions. This map will also encourage some District Superintendent specialization (such as metro or rural ministry).

In addition to these demographic and missional factors, the Cabinet greatly desired to minimize disruption to existing districts and vital relationships while rightsizing to our current post-disaffiliation and post-pandemic realities.

The NEW proposed four-district model will comprise the following data:

- **Central District :**
 - 79 Churches
 - 66 Charges
 - 52 Full-Time Pastors
 - 40 Part-Time Pastors
- **Northwest District:**
 - 86 Churches
 - 62 Charges
 - 42 Full-Time Pastors
 - 30 Part-Time Pastors
- **Northeast District:**
 - 134 Churches
 - 84 Charges
 - 35 Full-Time Pastors
 - 51 Part-Time Pastors
- **South District:**
 - 114 Churches
 - 75 Charges
 - 30 Full-Time Pastors
 - 47 Part-Time Pastors



Next Steps:

The 2024 Session of the Arkansas Annual Conference is being asked to consider this Cabinet Proposal for Four Districts. The Cabinet believes redistricting in this way will empower the Arkansas Conference to best utilize districts and conference resources to fulfill its mission of equipping and connecting the local church for our common mission of making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. This action will also impact the district budget proposal from CFA and the Nominations report, in which the Annual Conference will be asked to consider electing four District Committees on Ministry and four District Boards of Church Location and Building.



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Finally, in July or August 2024, the four districts will “Constituting” District Conferences to welcome new and old friends while also tending to business, such as electing members of the governing District Leadership Boards, considering any impacted endowment updates, and considering district second-mile missional giving that has historically been used to support ministries in the district, such as campus ministries.

Conclusion

This four-district model positions the Arkansas Conference to effectively equip and connect local churches in a changing environment. It fosters stronger relationships, optimizes resource allocation, and encourages innovative approaches to ministry, ultimately strengthening the conference's mission of making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.

Recommendation

The Arkansas Conference Cabinet recommends that the Annual Conference **adopt** the proposal to change the number of districts from five to four, effective July 1, 2024.