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**A Report on the Current Status and Future Prospects of
Four United Methodist Church Congregations in the
Amherst/Williamsville New York Area**

Asbury UMC Getzville, N.Y.

Christ UMC Amherst, N.Y.

Trinity UMC Amherst, N.Y.

Williamsville UMC Williamsville, N.Y.

Report by John Wimberly
Congregational Consultant
November 2025

I. The Work and Process

John Wimberly is a congregational consultant (after a forty-year career as a pastor) who has worked with over 100 congregations since 2012 and eight United Methodist Conferences. He was asked by leadership in the Christ and Williamsville UMC congregations to help them discern whether there are more efficient and effective ways for nearby congregations to work together to advance the mission of the church versus continuing to work individually. In the 21st Century, each of the four congregations (Christ, Williamsville, Asbury, and Trinity) involved in this process have experienced significant decline in membership, finances, children and youth ministry and other areas of ministry. That said, all four feel Methodism has an important role to play in the Amherst-Williamsville area.

The consultant held nine focus groups with members of the four congregations. Each focus group had participants consisting of members of an individual congregation, with the exception of one which had members from both Asbury and Trinity. The participants were asked two key questions: 1) What do you love about your congregation? and 2) Where do you think your congregation will/should be in five years?

II. Summaries of Focus Groups with members of Asbury, Christ Church, Trinity, and Williamsville.

Summary of Focus Group with Members from Asbury and Trinity UMC congregations

The consultant held two groups where members from both Asbury and Trinity participated together. He then held one focus group each for Trinity and Asbury members to participate apart from the other congregation. There were 13 participants in the combined conversations, equally split between the two congregations. There were seven and three participants in the groups with only one congregation. The conversations were filled with 1) love for their congregations and 2) deep concern for the future of the congregations.

The things people love about their congregation:

- Members are loving, giving, inclusive, family
- There is a strong community ministry, helping people in need
- Four people grew up in their congregation
- Kids are able to participate fully in worship and the life of the congregation
- Congregation Care group does a good job

The things folks said about the future:

- Need to build relationships with the other congregations if there is to be increased collaboration.
- “The reality is that there are too many churches in this area with not enough resources to sustain them all.”
- “Shot gun weddings don’t work. It is better to have these conversations when no one feels forced to do anything.”
- “Either we combine or we die.”
- “People love their church buildings rather than loving their missions. But a merger needs to happen.”
- “This process needs to slow down.”
- Multiple buildings allow the churches to address the different demographics and issues in different neighborhoods.
- We need strong pastoral leadership for this process.

- How do we survive another five years? “Our numbers are dwindling.”
- Need to merge with someone to survive.
- Need to reach out more aggressively in the community to share the benefits of their community and ministry.
- “It is 50/50 that we’ll be here in five years.”
- We need to be more experimental in ministry approaches.
- We need a sense of real urgency.
- Trinity and Asbury need to start doing joint things NOW.
- “In five years, we won’t be here. We should merge with Trinity.”
- Need more small groups to attract/integrate new people.
- There are three school districts in their area which presents opportunities.
- “Trinity has a better location than we do.”

Summary of Focus Group Discussions with Christ Church Members

What people love about Christ Church UMC:

- The people This manifested itself with various descriptions (people are real, not pretentious, warm, supportive, inclusive, etc.)
- The congregation’s stance on inclusion is extremely important
- People enjoy the worship, especially preaching
- The Pastor was uniformly praised for his leadership and pastoral care
- Music program
- Outreach to the community
- Numerous people have grown up in the faith which, in the consultant’s experience, is relatively rare these days. They said it gives everyone a sense of history.

Where people think the congregation needs to be in 5 or more years:

- “I don’t see us being in this big building in ten years.”
- Focus on being a community center
- Just hang on and adapt as things around us evolve

- The congregation will have more “easy entry” places for younger folks who are skeptical about institutional religion
- We’ll have enough young people to have a confirmation class
- Worship will be less intimidating to the unchurched
- Engaging community youth through service and fun projects
- The school will be more incorporated into the life of the congregation
- Get past a Sunday-centric model, especially when it comes to education for children, youth, and adults

Summary of Williamsville UMC Congregational Focus Groups

There were four lively focus groups. The members at Williamsville seem less anxious about the future than, certainly, Asbury or Trinity churches and a bit less anxious than at Christ Church. That said, there were a few involved leaders on the call who are more cognizant of the challenges ahead if trend lines don’t change fairly quickly.

What do you love about your congregation?

- A warm, friendly, welcoming congregation
- The pastors, especially appreciate that they are younger with kids
- The message we get from the pulpit speaks to issues in our daily lives
- We are a supportive family for one another
- The choir and music, in general
- Outreach programs, mission focus, lots of projects to support
- Like the way children and youth are treated like meaningful members of the church---participation in worship, etc.
- Plenty of small groups where one can help
- We try to live what we believe
- Comfortable style of worship that is inspiring
- Columbarium (What happens to it if we move out of our building?)

- There are multiple generations in the membership
- Modern music in one of the worship services
- Nursery school and other community uses of the building
- Our history
- We have a great location in terms of visibility to traffic but limited parking

Where do we think we will be in five years?

- Unless something changes dramatically within or outside the church, we may not be here.
- Unless something changes, we will probably be able to afford only a part-time pastor
- A church that is more connected to the community around us
- Things will pretty much be the same as today (a number of people said this)
- We will be here but smaller and even more financially challenged
- We will be more of a place where the community as a whole gathers
- We will be gasping for air because of building expenses
- Still in need of a critical mass of members
- More mission oriented
- Younger leadership

III. Consultant's Comments on the Issues Raised in the Focus Groups

The consultant was deeply moved by the deep love the members have for each of these congregations. Clearly, each of the congregations is serving the needs of its members. While the members expressed appreciation and gratitude for the ministry of their pastors, it is also clear that the members are engaged in powerful ministry to and with each other. Each of the congregations is a tightly knit, loving community.

Three areas drew the most comment from the focus group participants. First, the people love each other---the support they receive from other members, the depth of their friendships, often times over decades, and the joy they experience within the community. People expressed gratitude for the openness and welcoming spirit of the congregations to each other and newcomers alike.

Second, members of each congregation feel positive about the mission outreach programs they have. They are also happy that the congregations have an open, welcoming approach to the LGBTQ+ community.

Third, Christ Church and Williamsville members, in particular, expressed strong appreciation for their pastors, pastoral care, worship experiences, and music programs.

Fourth, all the congregations wish they had more children and youth involved. However, they love that the children and youth they do have are treated like full members, active and visible in worship and the ministry.

The commonality of what all the members love about their congregations is a strong building block for any type of unification of the ministries into a new configuration for ministry in the future. In whatever manifestation of church comes next, the members and the members' love for each other will remain present. Reminding people of this will be essential to overcome the grief of seeing the familiar replaced by something new.

The conversations about the future of the congregations were rooted in both this love for their community and their profound apprehension for what the future will bring. Members are keenly aware that their numbers have dwindled. Those familiar with the finances of each congregation expressed grave concerns about the sustainability of the congregation in the near or mid term future.

A term that kept coming up was “critical mass.” There is a powerful awareness that none of the congregations has the critical mass needed to do what God is calling Methodists to do in their communities or attract new members. Several times, the conversation moved to a vision of what a larger critical mass might do, in God’s name, in the Amherst/Williamsville area.

There was also agreement that a larger critical mass might help make a congregation more appealing to the young people and families in the community. Larger numbers would make youth ministry easier and more powerful, generate a larger number of people to participate in small group ministry, have more resources (people and financial) to do community ministry, enable larger attendance at worship to be more inspiring to newcomers, create a stronger financial base to maintain a physical building.

Discussion around the future of each congregation’s building was realistic and drenched in sadness. Members understand that they don’t or won’t have the financial resources to maintain their buildings, especially as more and more members move away or move on. The consultant discouraged participants from getting into specifics about which buildings might be best used in the future. However, a recommendation is contained in this report about buildings. Key was the fact that the consultant did not hear “It is our building or nothing” comments that he has experienced elsewhere in these types of conversations.

An issue, of course, is how many buildings can realistically be maintained going forward. Members were very pragmatic in understanding that their ability to maintain each of these four buildings is stretched to the point of breaking. The burden of four buildings is undermining the joy and power of these communities. The consultant sees it as a burden that can be lifted with courageous planning.

In summary, the consultant heard a powerful, emotional love expressed for each of these four communities. It is the base upon the future must be built. No matter what decisions are made about new iterations of Methodism in Amherst/Williamsville, the people who love each other will still see and care for each other wherever they gather to worship and serve God.

The consultant also heard a wonderful consensus about what people value about their churches today and what they hope for in the future. A unified ministry built on inspiring worship and music, community service, supporting children and

youth as they grow spiritually, and providing strong support to those in the congregation who need it are the core things people want from their church. There is absolutely no reason this can't happen whether it be in one, two, three or four buildings.

IV. Recommendations

1) Plan for a single worshipping congregation

All things considered, the consultant believes that the four congregations should continue discussions with the explicit goal of, at some point in the near future, worshipping together in one building. The other buildings may be utilized for mission, e.g., a community center, a center for children and youth community ministry, etc. or sold (as is happening across the country with local congregations unable to sustain themselves). Anything short of that goal fails to acknowledge reality. Reality is that each of these congregations will cease to exist in the not-too-distant future, unless there is a new plan for them collectively. For some, the end will come relatively quickly; for others it will be a longer time but not that long.

2) Purpose Groups

The consultant takes seriously the small group of people who want to build relationships among the congregations immediately. However, he believes that relationships can be built while doing the work of building a new ministry, not just through social gatherings, joint mission projects, or bible study.

Therefore, the consultant recommends creating groups of twelve (sounds like something Jesus would do!) to discuss what the purpose would be of a redesigned Methodist presence in Amherst/Williamsville. Each group would contain three people from each of the four congregations. They could be facilitated by a consultant or by individuals trained by a consultant. Each group will come up with a purpose statement for the future.

After the groups meet, a planning team with representation from each of the congregations can get together, process what the groups came up with in the way of a purpose statement and create a consensus statement to be used for a planning process. The new purpose statement would be approved by the governing bodies of each congregation. With a purpose statement, a discussion can begin (by the planning team) as to how many buildings will be needed, how many staff, etc.

3) Deep Dive Building Analysis

While the purpose groups are meeting, each congregation should put together a detailed projection of expenses they will have for the next ten years if they stay in their current buildings. This can be done easily with a spreadsheet and the help of sub-contractors currently used by each congregation (plumber, electrician, roofer, etc.). The consultant can provide a template. It will show how much the congregation will most likely need to spend each year for the next ten years. It should also include utility expenses. This analysis will show how much money will be needed to sustain four buildings and how much money would be saved by having one or more buildings. While a decision on which facilities are used going forward as the worship center cannot be based solely on financial considerations, it would be foolish not to make them a key factor.

4) Strategic Planning

Working with Conference, District and congregational leaders, a planning process needs to take place that will lay out a clear plan forward. People do not deal well with hypotheticals. If the four congregations are given a clear, detailed picture of what the future will look like, they are far more likely to go along with the plan. Will they like everything they read? No. But the planning team will remind the memberships constantly about the alternative: short or mid-term death of their beloved congregation and the relationships within those congregations.

V. Conclusion

The consultant has attached some demographic data from the Amherst/Williamsville area. Looking at the data, one sees population growth, good numbers of younger folks and families, people with sufficient family incomes (as well as some who need significant help from the community), good numbers of children and youth, etc. These data points can drive this planning process. How do we minister to a community with these kinds of demographics?

The goal of this project cannot be to survive. It must be to thrive as we serve God and our community; to do together what we clearly cannot do alone. Will this be easy? No. But it will be rewarding, redemptive work. Such constructive work stands in stark contrast to each congregation trying to survive individually with ever diminishing numbers of members, children and youth, finances, costly buildings, etc. This project will create hope which the consultant heard very little of in the focus groups.

These four congregations have incredible histories that are deeply moving. They still have their destiny in their own hands. However, if they don't take the merger/collaboration process seriously, they will most likely lose control of their destiny in the relatively near future. The Conference will then need to decide if they can have pastors, remain in their buildings, etc. The consultant suggests a process that will give each congregation control of its destiny by coming together in a new entity.

Appendix A Source: <https://censusreporter.org/profiles/06000US3602902000-amherst-town-erie-county-ny/> and Williamsville on the same site

Amherst Town Census Information

Age

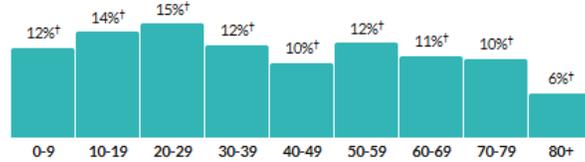
38.4

Median age

a little less than the figure in Erie County: 40.7

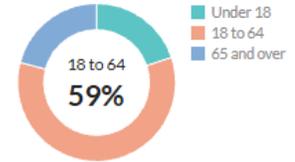
a little less than the figure in New York: 40.2

Population by age range



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Population by age category



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Income

\$46,842

Per capita income

about 20 percent higher than the amount in Erie County: \$40,601

a little less than the amount in New York: \$48,847

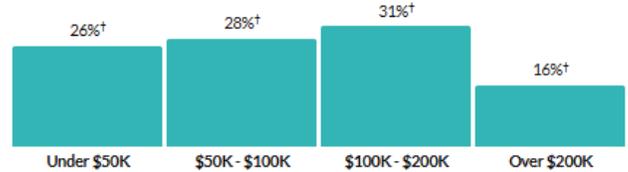
\$92,545

Median household income

about 1.3 times the amount in Erie County: \$70,492

about 10 percent higher than the amount in New York: \$82,095

Household income



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Poverty

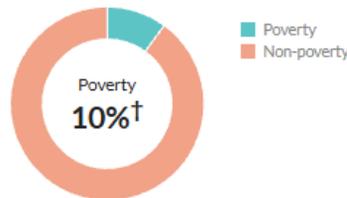
11.1%

Persons below poverty line

about 80 percent of the rate in Erie County: 14.1%

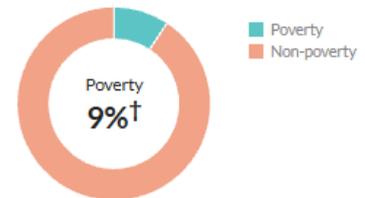
about 80 percent of the rate in New York: 14.2%

Children (Under 18)



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Seniors (65 and over)



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Fertility

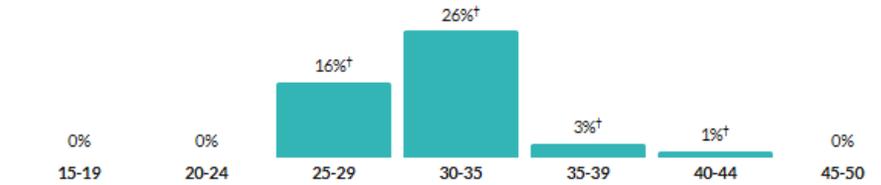
6.5%

Women 15-50 who gave birth during past year

about 25 percent higher than the rate in Erie County: 5.4% †

about 1.3 times the rate in New York: 4.9%

Women who gave birth during past year, by age group



* Universe: Women 15 to 50 years

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Place of birth

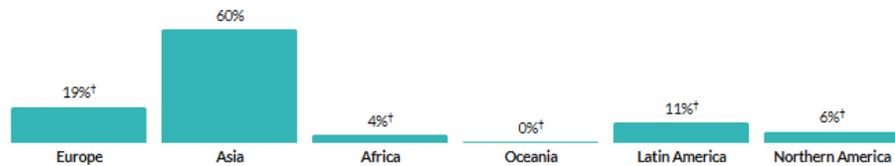
15.2%

Foreign-born population

about double the rate in Erie County: 7.4%

about two-thirds of the rate in New York: 23.1%

Place of birth for foreign-born population



Value

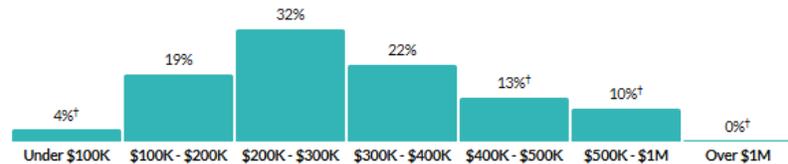
\$336,000

Median value of owner-occupied housing units

about 1.4 times the amount in Erie County: \$241,900

about 80 percent of the amount in New York: \$420,200

Value of owner-occupied housing units



* ACS 2023 5-year data

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Williamsville

Age

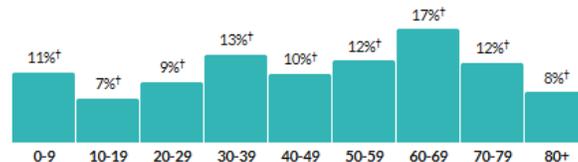
49.7

Median age

about 25 percent higher than the figure in the Buffalo-Cheektowaga, NY Metro Area: 40.7

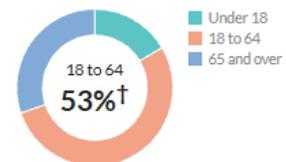
about 25 percent higher than the figure in New York: 39.6

Population by age range



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Population by age category



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Income

\$58,285
Per capita income

about 1.4 times the amount in the Buffalo-Cheektowaga, NY Metro Area: \$40,894

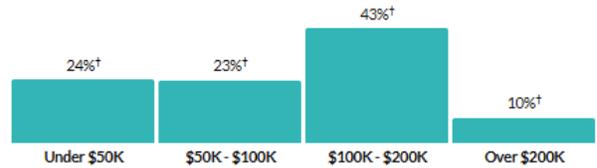
about 20 percent higher than the amount in New York: \$49,520

\$106,250
Median household income

about 1.5 times the amount in the Buffalo-Cheektowaga, NY Metro Area: \$70,572

about 25 percent higher than the amount in New York: \$84,578

Household income



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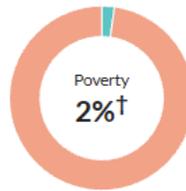
Poverty

5.5%
Persons below poverty line

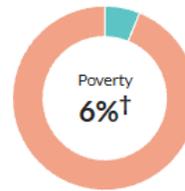
about two-fifths of the rate in the Buffalo-Cheektowaga, NY Metro Area: 13.8%

about two-fifths of the rate in New York: 13.7%

Children (Under 18)



Seniors (65 and over)



■ Poverty
■ Non-poverty

■ Poverty
■ Non-poverty

Fertility

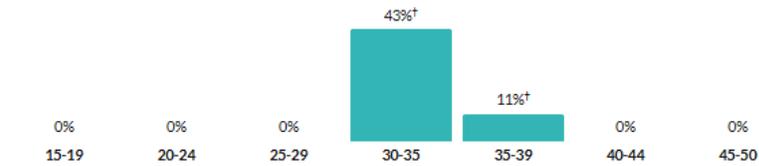
11.8%

Women 15-50 who gave birth during past year

more than double the rate in the Buffalo-Cheektowaga, NY Metro Area: 4.7%

more than double the rate in New York: 4.9%

Women who gave birth during past year, by age group



* Universe: Women 15 to 50 years

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Value

\$242,800

Median value of owner-occupied housing units

about 20 percent higher than the amount in the Buffalo-Cheektowaga, NY Metro Area: \$209,600

about three-fifths of the amount in New York: \$403,000

Value of owner-occupied housing units



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Place of birth

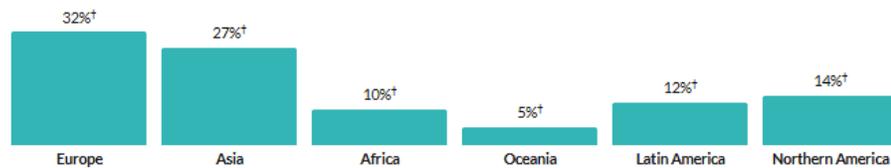
2.9%

Foreign-born population

about two-fifths of the rate in the Buffalo-Cheektowaga, NY Metro Area: 6.6%

less than a fifth of the rate in New York: 22.6%

Place of birth for foreign-born population



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