

Proposed Districting Plan | March 2026 Districting Strategy Team Video Script

Carlisle Jones: Greetings. The team you see on the screen today was tasked with an important job a year and a half ago. We were asked to research and recommend a redistricting configuration for the Tennessee-Western Kentucky Conference.

We came from varied backgrounds and brought different skills and gifts to this task. Our team represents you – we are clergy and laity, from the east and the west, from large churches and small churches, we are staff and are volunteers – all faithful followers of Christ who have taken this responsibility seriously.

The annual conference will vote this June on redistricting. A change is necessary because our current district structure is not sustainable or financially feasible.

The vote will be on how many districts to affirm. The cabinet and bishop are responsible for drawing the district lines and appointing clergy to lead those districts. Our cabinet asked the conference's Connectional Table leadership team to assist by proposing a viable plan and the Districting Strategy team was begun.

Today, we will share that plan. It includes a new **number** of districts, and if the annual conference affirms that number, this plan will be used to implement our new district structure.

I am Carlisle Jones, co-chair of this Districting Strategy Team. I am an ordained deacon who serves at Franklin First UMC in Franklin, TN, and I also serve as the chair of the Justice and Mercy Strategy Area for the TWK and serve on the Connectional Table. Today, we will be telling you a story about the work of a Spirit-filled group of hard-working and passionate people who approached this mission with prayer and patience.

Janice McCallen: And I am Janice McCallen, and I currently serve as your conference Lay Leader and the other co-chair of this team. I also serve on the conference Connectional Table.

When Carlisle and I first began our work on this team in November 2024, we received a report which was an assessment of the TWK conference done by Mike Bonem, a consultant who was brought in to evaluate and provide feedback on the effectiveness of our Conference. One of the most important points he made was that the TWK would need to redistrict.

There were two key reasons he saw this need: 1) the decrease in churches given the season of disaffiliation, and 2) the need to district in a way that is more financially sustainable.

Carlisle Jones: We expected this work would take a few months, truly about 4 months, with the goal of providing you with a new district plan at Annual Conference in June of 2025. But then God stepped in and the Spirit made some things very clear to us. We realized that we were not in a rush because of a financial crisis. We had to be financially responsible but not panicked. We also realized, when we began research into our current districts and district staffing, that we couldn't just draw new lines and expect the current ways things work to continue to work effectively.

But most importantly, we saw the Holy Spirit begin to open doors and show us that our work was much bigger than just drawing lines. We were invited into a much longer season of discernment, and while the work was longer than we anticipated and not without challenges, it was also exciting work and a joy to witness the Gospel truth that God really has plans far greater than anything we humans could ask or imagine on our own.

Janice McCallen: So, we modified our timeline and gathered the team. This has been an incredible team to work with. They are creative, Spirit-led and Spirit-filled. They love Jesus. They are committed to the United Methodist Church. They are passionate about our theology AND our polity. They are willing to sacrifice their time. They do what is asked of them and do it in a timely manner. They were willing to donate their already precious mental space and capacity to another project added to their plates. They believe this work matters, and they trusted God would show us the way forward.

From our very first Zoom meeting, we filled our time together with breath prayers to keep us centered on the fact that this was not work of human creativity but of humbly receiving from the Lord. We prayed:

Come Holy Spirit, Come.

Do not be anxious, this is the work of the Kingdom.

God, We do not have answers but we trust that You do.

Tend the soil in each of us and in the TWK.

Lord, order our steps.

Diantha McLeod: Then we got to work! Even before our first meeting, we had homework. We researched and researched and researched some more. We asked “What does the Book of Discipline say is required of the DS? What can or cannot be delegated? What takes up the most time of the DS? What is the role of the district? What are other conferences doing? What is our current districting structure and staffing? What about our map lines? What’s working and what isn’t?”

We quickly saw how much of our lines and coverage were born out of the trauma of Rev. Dr. Autura Eason Williams’ death and unexpected changes in leadership. We knew the Cabinet had led effectively through this but we wanted to undo the patchwork survival system we had been under. We asked how many churches are realistic for a DS to oversee. What really is the role of the District Administrator? What is and isn’t working about the cohort system?

We learned a lot through this research. But along with the research, research, research, we also prayed, prayed, and prayed some more.

Rickey Wade: In August of 2025, we had our first *in-person* gathering, a day retreat focused solely on this work. We had no plan formed yet; we began with “What has God put on your heart?” and “What is the Spirit bringing to your attention as you have prepared for the day?” After we offered what God had been speaking to us, we worked to create a list of our desired outcomes. We can think of this as our highest priorities, knowing we couldn’t accomplish everything at once, but what will guide us?

We called these our BIG ROCKS as they are the 4 desired outcomes that grounded all our conversation and you will soon see their impact upon the proposed plan. They are to develop a plan that is:

- Mission Forward;
- Excellent in Function;
- Clearly Organized and Communicated; and
- Designed to Strengthen Connection.

When we say Mission Forward, we refer to the mission of the UMC to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. This is most effectively done in the local church. We asked ourselves, “Does our districting strategy proposal set up the TWK to support the local churches in making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world?” We believe it does. We also believe that being mission-forward means this structure will support the discipleship priorities we have identified as a conference.

We want this system to Function with Excellence. The functions include but are not limited to the setting of appointments, providing a robust DCOM that encourages a culture of call (which is one of our conference’s discipleship priorities), and managing buildings and Charge Conferences. This proposal seeks to balance both the spiritual and temporal leadership needed from District leadership.

While the Cabinet has found ways to work in the current districting layout, it is not always clear to the local church who to call and when. This strategy aims to create easier access to the resources of the district and the conference and therefore a plan that creates Clear Lines of Communication and Organization.

And finally, we want our plan to strengthen the sense of connection and relationships among clergy and laity in the TWK. Our Connection is part of what makes us unique, and this team hopes the proposed strategy keeps this in the forefront of organization and leadership.

Vona Wilson: After we spoke these desired outcomes out loud, we had an initial proposal for a new system. We discussed it briefly, but decided to stop all our dissecting and instead chose to center. We had lunch followed by a lengthy time of silent prayer. When we came back, we shared what we felt the Spirit lay upon our hearts, and for us, it was clear, God said to us YES, Go with this. Though our final plan is not exactly the plan given to us in August of 2025, what has remained the same that God spoke on that day is this:

The new structure should be 3 DISTRICTS, and led with a TEAM APPROACH.

This iteration of the plan involved multiple layers of leadership per district and utilizing additional Elders as volunteer leaders focused on discipleship. We were excited about this plan and brought it to both the Cabinet and Connectional Table. It was met with appreciation and enthusiasm by both groups, including the Bishop. But after much prayer and discernment by the Cabinet, their response was that we do not have the capacity for this kind of structure, while still allowing us to provide adequate leadership to the local church. Our team learned of this at our next gathering in December of 2025.

Chris Grosson: Back to the drawing board, but not starting from scratch. Same desired outcomes, still with 3 districts and a team approach. The Cabinet posed a question to our team

that shows you the sense of humility with which they lead in the TWK. What if a DS wasn't full-time and we had multiple DSEs per district? And we loved this idea. We worked that day to keep thinking about things like who covers disaster response, who handles buildings, and what about the supervision of the DAs? We received this, we prayed, we thought, and we felt good about it, once again excited. It was a plan that met our 4 desired outcomes and felt really innovative and creative, and definitely very new.

But then God gave us the gift we needed that didn't really feel like a gift at the time. In January of this year, we learned that the Judicial Council, way back in the 1970s, ruled the idea of multiple DSEs per district as unconstitutional. We were lucky this was caught at this time before we had developed the plan more fully.

Or rather than luck, we can say, the Holy Spirit intervened on our behalf. However, this really took the wind out of our sails. There was disappointment and frustration. While we were fumbling on a Zoom call with what to do next, Diantha spoke up that she was in the midst of participating in a Bible study on the book of Nehemiah - how he led through change and his fervent prayers - and this led her to recommend that we read Nehemiah and we meet for weekly lunchtime prayers as a team.

Mark Hagedwood: So we stopped, we prayed, we prayed again. We continue to meet weekly for our lunchtime prayers. We looked at how Nehemiah led through change and realized a few things were still true. We HAD been discerning this whole time.

This setback (which felt like a setback and not the gift it really was) didn't reveal a lack of prayer or discerning wisdom, but it revealed to us that it was time to wave the flag of surrender to the Lord, to pray again - "we don't have the answers but you do." But it also helped us realize, maybe God was leading us back to this 3-district team approach, much like our first proposal all along. And when we said that, it was as if a collective sigh came over us.

It was as if God said, and we felt deep within ourselves - peace I give to you and I do not give peace as the world gives peace and we said, "Ok Lord we will be still and watch you work." And the Lord did work. We prayed and researched and came back together again in February and it was hands down our easiest time together yet, because God was showing us we were in the right place all along:

- Same 4 Desired Outcomes.
- Still, 3 Districts led with a Team approach.

Jefferson Furtado: The team once again brought a proposal back to the cabinet. The bones of this proposal were very similar to our first proposal, but incorporated the feedback that the full cabinet offered. The cabinet received this proposal and began to dig in to the work that was theirs to do: considering appointive leadership and geographical boundaries.

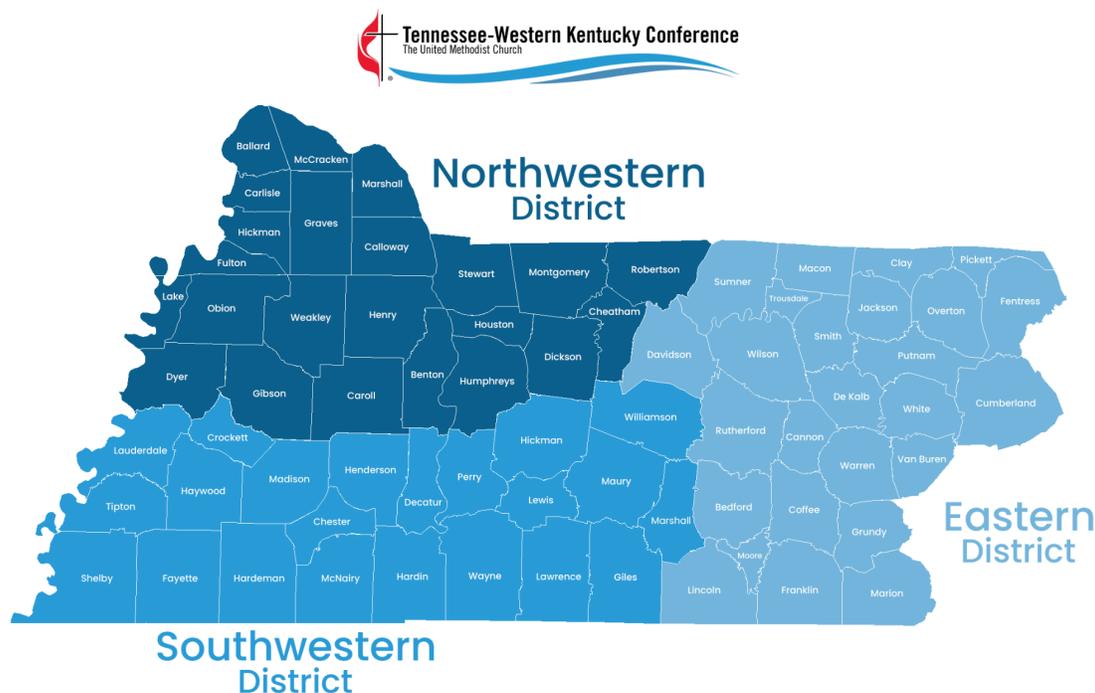
The Cabinet and Districting Teams were living fully into the practice of holy conferencing, with all of us remaining open to the Spirit's leading and staying in faithful conversation with one another.

With these details in mind, here is the combined proposal of the Districting Team and Cabinet:

The TWK will consist of three districts:

- The Northwestern District,
- The Southwestern District, and
- The Eastern District

Using geographical names provides clarity that we all need. There is a balance in each district, not just in numbers of clergy and churches, but also types of churches: large membership and small membership, urban and rural. Consideration was given to factors such as population density and ease of travel, with access to major highways and interstates.



Nancy Johnston Varden: Each district will be led by a team that includes one full-time District Superintendent, 3 or 4 quarter-time Associates to the District Superintendent (A2Ds), and 2 full-time District Administrators. Each district staff team would be joined in leadership by a volunteer district lay leader.

Let me say that again. Each district will be led by a team that includes one full-time District Superintendent, 3 or 4 quarter-time Associates to the District Superintendent (A2D's), and 2 full-time District Administrators. Each district staff team would be joined in leadership by a volunteer district lay leader.

The full-time District Superintendent will retain all the responsibilities of a DS as you know them: they will maintain supervision and discipline of clergy, as well as serve on the district Committee on Ministry, District Board of Church Location and Building, and Committee on Superintendency. They will continue to handle any crises or unexpected events that can only be handled by a DS according to our Book of Discipline. There are tasks that a DS cannot delegate to others. These tasks are no small undertaking.

How could one DS do all of these things and still know and connect with pastors and local churches with three districts covering all our churches and areas? This is where God spoke the team approach into the plan.

Carlisle Jones: Each DS will have 3 or 4 quarter-time Associates to the District Superintendent to serve on their team. These Associates to the DS, or A2Ds, are elders, but they are not District Superintendents, much like Rev. Dr. Vona Wilson is our Assistant to the Bishop (A2B), but she is not a bishop. There can be, as we learned the hard way, only one D.S. per district. But there are a few vital responsibilities that can be delegated by the D.S., and spreading out this work is critical to strengthening our connection and supporting the local church in disciple-making.

The primary responsibility of the A2Ds is to be relationally present and supportive. The A2Ds are quarter-time because they serve a local church or extension ministry, but they also sit on the appointive cabinet. The A2Ds will work with the DS to develop a plan to support a selected group of churches and clergy. The A2Ds can and will be tasked with holding Charge Conferences. They will provide more diversity and representation on our Cabinet, because we know having diversity at the table is just one of many tools we have to disrupt and dismantle racism and discrimination. The A2Ds will also help to strengthen, extend, and even multiply the relational presence of the Bishop and Cabinet to you, the local churches, and clergy.

DISTRICT LEADERSHIP TEAM:

- 1 Full-Time District Superintendent
- 3-4 Quarter-Time Associates to the District Superintendent (A2Ds)
- 2 Full-Time District Administrators
- 1 Volunteer District Lay Leader

Our hope is that our A2Ds can develop discipleship groups among the clergy and lay leaders to strengthen connections and add an additional layer of peer support. This won't happen overnight, but it is the desire of this team that this hope will come to fruition.

Chris Grosson: But who do I call first? My DS or my A2D? One of the things God made very clear to us is that in order to provide clarity of communication and organization, we have to utilize our District Administrative Assistants. There will be 2 Full-Time District Admins per

district. When you have a need, we encourage you to call or email your District Admin. They can say, “This is a good time to connect with an A2D,” or “This is a time in which we need to bring the DS into the conversation.”

Janice McCallen: One of the things that won’t change is the important role of laity in our connection. Each district will have a district lay leader, whose responsibilities are outlined in our Book of Discipline and include things like fostering awareness of the laity’s role in local congregations and in ministries around the world; providing training for local church lay leaders; and relating and supporting organized lay groups in the district, like United Women in Faith and United Methodist Men.

While this is not a paid staff position, each district lay leader will work collaboratively with the District Superintendent, Associates to the District Superintendent, and District Administrators as that team guides the ministries of the district and supports local congregations in making disciples.

As we said earlier, a team approach to leadership in each district has been an unwavering conviction for us throughout this process. Each of the roles in this team - District Superintendent, Associate to the District Superintendent, District Administrator, and District Lay Leader - has a vital role to play. As the new districts are established, each staff team will make sure that every church understands where and with whom their connection lies.

Remember - clarity is one of the big rocks and is possible with this structure because there is clarity of roles. This team will be nurturing leadership, not only for each other, but for all the clergy and laity in each district. Here again, one of our discipleship priorities - “spiritual leadership development” - is central to how this structure should work.

Mark Hagewood: This plan, we are grateful to say, is in line with the Book of Discipline constitutionally. It is not a continuation of the current cohort system as we know it. It is not a project manager or mission strategist. The A2D is a new and innovative position. For the first time, we will have a District-paid position who is part of the appointive cabinet with a full emphasis on relationships and support.

This plan has us taking a big step from our current district lines and staffing, and it is our prayer that this means the TWK won’t have to continue to make small steps and continuous changes every few years, though we have to trust that nothing is permanent and God has greater plans than us. Though our plan did not have to be a panicked or forced plan to save money, it is a necessary cost savings for the TWK.

While budgets are still in process for 2027, early estimates show that this plan could save the conference over \$450,000 annually compared to our current district structure and staffing.

Rickey Wade: While the map lines and appointments are under the purview of the Bishop and the cabinet, it is the Annual Conference’s duty to vote on the number of districts. They will have the opportunity to do that by voting on a resolution from the cabinet and districting team in June.

Vona Wilson: Now that you’ve heard the plan: 3 Districts, led by a team approach, and have seen a map that shows us the big picture, the next question that may be on your mind is “Who?” “Who are the people that will be serving on these teams?” That answer connects to another unique part of our life together as a connection.

Every year, the Bishop and Cabinet enter the appointive process. The Bishop makes projections for pastoral appointments, and these are “set” or finalized at Annual Conference. As it relates to the districting teams, Bishop Graves will share projections for these appointments shortly after Easter. If the Annual Conference votes differently related to the number of districts, then appointment and budget adaptations will also need to be made.

We know, as you hear this proposal today and in the days and weeks to come, you may have questions we didn’t answer here. Please know that more information will be forthcoming; an FAQ resource is being developed and will soon be available on the conference website, more details will be shared in our communication channels, and further information will be available at the pre-conference district gatherings in May. In the meantime, you can email questions you have to redistricting.questions@twkumc.org.

Carlisle Jones: All change can be difficult. We can name for you that this is a change. It is new, but we hope that you hear that our team is excited for this change. For it is the Lord who says, “Behold I am doing a new thing, now it springs forth.” We believe it is God’s plan to see this change in the TWK. The context of the church universal and the United Methodist Church has changed, and God is meeting us where we are right now.

We are Connectional, we are United Methodist, and this is the proposal from your Tennessee-Western Kentucky Districting Strategy Team and TWK Cabinet. Thank you!

DISTRICTING STRATEGY TEAM MEMBERS

Rev. Carlisle Jones | Co-Chair (Justice & Mercy Guide Team Chair)

Janice McCallen | Co-Chair (Conference Lay Leader)

Rev. Dr. Jefferson Furtado (Conference Secretary)

Chris Grosson (District Administrative Assistant)

Mark Hagewood (Director of Administrative Services)

Rev. Diantha McLeod (Elder in Full Connection)

Rev. Dr. Vona Wilson (Assistant to the Bishop)

Rev. Rickey Wade (District Superintendent)

Rev. Nancy Johnston Varden (District Superintendent)