

Congregational Study Yields Baptist Figures

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Findings of the Religious Congregations Membership Study (RCMS) have recently been made public. About 140 denominational families cooperated in gathering information about congregations across the United States in 2000.

This data is compared with data gathered in 1990 and the census of population for counties and states in both of these years. Some very interesting maps were developed that show the strength of the denominations across the nation.

You can access much of this material by logging on to www.thearda.com. Below are some interesting facts about the Baptist movement.

First, in about half of the counties (1,620) Baptists are the largest Protestant denomination. Almost all of the rural counties in the old Southern Baptist Convention states are Baptist zions.

Second, this indication of effectiveness is also true across the South into Southern California and up into the mountain states as far as Montana. United Methodists are the largest Protestant group in 630 counties, mostly in the Northeast, Midwest and the Great Plains. The Lutherans dominate 528 counties, mostly in the upper Midwest.

Third, when all religious groups are mapped, Baptists are dominant in 1,222 counties, mostly in old convention states. Catholics dominate New England, the Gulf Coast and the West, except where the Mormons are dominant. Catholics are the largest group in 1,259 counties, a few more than Baptists. The Methodists dominate in 244, mostly in the Midwest. The Lutherans dominate the Upper Great Plains.

Fourth, few counties have no Baptist presence. Southern Baptists have congregations in 2,670 counties, and American Baptists are in 1,111. There is, of course, some overlapping. Methodists are in 3,003. Roman Catholic churches are found in 2,987. The Assemblies of God are in 2,626 counties and the Churches of Christ are in 2,429. The Mormons expanded their presence during the past decade and are now in more than 1,800 counties.

Fifth, the report finds more than half of the SBC churches are outside metropolitan areas, and more than one-third of the membership is also located outside the metro counties. This is explained by the fact that the Old South continues to be the area of greatest Baptist concentration, and also the greatest concentration of rural population in the nation. Further, much of the success of Baptist church extension in the West has been in rural areas.

Sixth, an alarming statistic from the report is that only about 20 to 25 percent of the adherents to the Baptist movement will be found in worship in a Baptist church on a given Sunday. This suggests that there is a lot of work to do within the congregations in the field of discipleship.

A fuller version of the RCMS report can be ordered from www.thearda.com. It includes a CD-ROM with data from the earlier studies. This makes it possible for a person to find data of a specific county, state or the whole nation and compare numbers of congregations, members or adherents, and population growth or decline from 1950 to 2000.

One can analyze how market share has shifted across the past half-century. I am in the process of doing this for rural counties in Missouri. I have been able to chronicle how mainline Protestant denominations have been in decline in most of the counties, even some that have gained population, for half a century. I have noted that Southern Baptists grew in most counties into the 1990s, but have slipped in several of them in the past decade.

I have three observations from data about Catholics in rural Missouri: lower membership numbers in declining rural counties; a loss of "market share" (their membership now is a smaller portion of the whole population than in the past); and the extension of new congregations into counties where there was no Catholic work in 1950.

Of particular interest is the growth of large Catholic parishes in rural counties that are growing from retirement and recreational development in the Ozarks. This seems to be the result of Catholics from the cities, such as St. Louis and Kansas City, retiring to lake communities.

Alarming, Mormons have extended into many rural counties in Missouri in the past decade, and claim 47 percent growth during the 1990s across the state.

Unfortunately, the data for most African American congregations and for independent congregations was not available to the researchers. In 1990 they attempted estimates, but these were not repeated in 2000. Consequently, in many counties, a very significant portion of these congregations and adherents are not reported. This is particularly true in the rural South and in many cities across the nation.

For example, Georgia's DeKalb County, which is mostly African American, reports only 35 percent of the population churched. This is clearly incorrect. Similarly, Alabama's Pickens County reports only 86 churches, but I find upward to 140 as I travel about there. And many counties in the coal mining regions of Appalachia have scores of independent churches, but their members are not reported. This gives the impression that the area is far less churched than it actually is.

Even with these limitations, this is the best data set available to us. It allows us to look at what has happened in the various counties and states over the past 50 years with regard to important dimensions of religious life.

Take a look at the area in which you live and ponder the data. If you do not find it to be on target, ask why. If it challenges you, do something about it.

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