Religion Census Newsletter
April, 2017

Largest Religious Groups in America’s Largest Metropolitan Areas

In late March, the U.S. Census Bureau released its 2016 population updates for the nation’s metropolitan areas. Because these metropolitan areas are essentially defined by counties*, it is very easy to pull together Religion Census information for each one.

Christianity is the largest religious group within every metropolitan area of the country. Of the 53 metro areas with at least one million people, Protestants are the largest Christian tradition in just over half (28). Catholics are largest in 24 of the metros, and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS) in one.

The above map emphasizes the Catholic predominance in the industrial northeast and the Southwest. Protestants dominate most of the South and some of the less industrialized cities of the Midwest. St. Louis, with many similarities to the industrial northeast, and Phoenix, definitely part of the American Southwest, may surprise some readers with their Protestant pluralities.

Of course, Protestantism is not a monolithic group. Even the popular “Evangelical Protestant” group often cited in public opinion polls is composed of people associated with more than one hundred separate denominations and literally tens of thousands of individual congregations independent of any denomination.

In most of the United States, when the Protestants are counted only within their individual denominations, no single group is larger than the Catholic Church. Therefore, Catholics are actually the largest single group in forty of the major metros. Southern Baptists are largest in twelve, and the LDS is largest in Salt Lake City.
Acknowledging that Catholics are usually the largest single group, what is the largest Protestant group in each of the nation’s major metro areas? Southern Baptists are the largest group in more than half the nation’s major metros, 28 of the 53. United Methodists are largest in eleven, just over 20%.
But then, acknowledging that Christians are the largest in every area, what about the nation’s other religious groups? Judaism is the second-largest religion in the major metros of the Northeast. In the Midwest and most of the South, the second-largest is either Judaism or Islam. From Oklahoma City west, Buddhism and Hinduism are about as likely to be the second-largest religion.

*Occasionally, federal laws have added smaller territories to the official metropolitan definitions. For most users, including our Religion Census, these are ignored when making comparisons.*

Based on information available outside the Religion Census, no other congregation-based religion in America has close to the national population of these four. However, it is possible that other groups may have large concentrations in one or more of these major metropolitan areas. That is another reason that we try to include every religious group we can in these decennial studies.

Every decade the US Religion Census tries to include additional religious groups, making the US Religion Census increasingly accurate. The 236 groups that took part in 2010 are listed online. If you know of other faith groups that would like to participate and be included in this census effort, please send us the group’s contact information or contact person.

Meanwhile, over 7,500 people visited our website in March. Several have let us know how valuable this resource is, and how they are looking forward to the 2020 update. Naturally, we hope to include information from your group in the 2020 counts.
Published by the Association of Statisticians of American Religious Bodies, sponsor of the U.S. Religion Census

This newsletter is intended for the following audiences:

Groups that participated in the 2010 Religion Census. The newsletter is sent to the latest contact we have for the supplier of the statistics.

Groups that are eligible to participate in the upcoming 2020 Religion. The newsletter is sent to the latest contact we have for the supplier of the statistics.

Members of the sponsoring agency for the Religion Census, the Association of Statisticians of American Religious Bodies.

Those who requested to receive the newsletter through our website.