A Century of Lutheran Growth

The U.S. Religion Census has been conducted six times by non-government coalitions since 1952, the last three by the Association of Statisticians of American Religious Bodies (ASARB). But between 1890 and 1936, five such counts were conducted by the U.S. census bureau. The 1916 edition is now available on our Lists & Rankings page. We have used its data to help commemorate the 500th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation, which gave rise to the Lutheran Church.

About the time of Protestantism’s 400th birthday, the United States Census of Religious Bodies for 1916 was released. Sixteen groups contained “Lutheran” as part of their census-listed names. Their information has been pulled together for this century-long look at Lutheran growth in the United States.

1916 Population Penetration by Lutheran Groups (16 Bodies)

As a group, Lutherans were present in just over half (51%) of all U.S. counties* a century ago. Their 2.3 million members accounted for at least one-fourth of the population in 32 counties.

In 1916, the names of the various groups revealed the immigrant nature of Lutheranism. Ten of the sixteen groups were identified as Norwegian (4 groups), Finnish (3), Danish (2), or Icelandic (1).

Only one of the sixteen groups was present in more than half the states: The Lutheran Synodical Conference, primarily composed of what we now call the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, had members in 32 states.

The map below makes it clear that Lutheranism was very fragmented in the United States last century. The Lutheran Synodical Conference was the largest Lutheran group in 42% of the counties with
Lutherans. They are the dark blue counties in the map below. The Lutheran General Council, dark purple below, were largest in 15%.

The latest nationwide count of Lutherans by county is in the 2010 U.S. Religion Census. None of the twelve reporting groups in 2010 identified itself as part of any European fellowship. Two of the groups are truly national in scope, with members reported in every state.
Nowadays, the religion census asks for a broader count than just members. However, the six Lutheran groups that reported adherents** by county also provided their membership figures, so a direct comparison can be made with the 1916 proportions within each county. Today, Lutherans make up at least one-quarter of the population in 117 counties, nearly four times as many as a century ago. And Lutherans are now reported in nearly three-quarters (73%) of all counties in the United States.

Further, the ethnic divisions have largely disappeared as well. Most of the ethnic denominations have become part of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), making it now the fifth largest religious group in the country. The counties where the ELCA is the largest Lutheran group are shown in dark purple below.

As Lutherans celebrate another century of ministry, they may find this historical review encouraging. But the same data source can be used by other groups as well.

ASARB is gearing up for the 2020 U.S. Religion Census. In addition to helping participating religious bodies understand their current impact across America, the data will help future researchers as they study today’s religiosity in light of future realities.

And the emphasis on gathering 2020 statistics will not prevent our data gatherers from adding the other censuses from the U.S. government to our website. We hope to have all the county-level reports from 1890 through 1936 on-line by the end of 2018.

*As in nearly all national research, “counties” is a broad term that includes the District of Columbia, Louisiana’s parishes, independent cities in several states, and boroughs and census divisions in Alaska. The more correct phrase is “counties or equivalents,” but many reports use the verbal shorthand of “counties.”*
**Adherents:** Every participating group is asked to provide an actual count or an estimate of the number of people associated with each local congregation. This number is termed “adherents.” Ideally, adherents include all regular participants and/or all those regarding that congregation as their spiritual home. This is done because religious traditions differ in whether they would include children and regular worshippers in their normal membership counts; and some traditions do not even have a membership category.

For specific adherent definitions for a particular group, see Appendix A on our Methods web page. For the general definition used when a group didn’t have a specific adherent figure, see page xvi of the introductory material.

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 6,600 people visited our website in September. 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.

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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 Census.** 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.**