Religion Census Newsletter
June, 2018

Diversity: Where Are America’s Religions Most Mixed Together?

The Religion Census office received an interesting phone call a while ago: “Which metro area in the country is the most diverse religiously?”

Our data is the best source for an answer to that question. We aren’t aware of any other dataset that can give as complete a religious picture of every county and metro area as the Religion Census. But we’d never tried to define “diversity” until we got that question. Depending on how you define the term, the answer can range from New York City to Elkhart, Indiana.

In response to that query, one of our researchers explored how to compute religious diversity. The adherent counts from the religion census are totaled by group, and the ratio of the various groups within each county can determine diversity. But the trick is deciding which significant groups to compare.

If each of the 152 groups reporting adherents in the 2010 Religion Census is treated separately, Elkhart, Indiana is the most diverse metro area in the country.
Why is the lower Midwest such a diverse area? Because many small Protestant groups are represented in Illinois, Indiana, and Ohio, even if they have only minimal presence elsewhere in the country. If diversity is defined as separate religious groups, even if all of them are conservative Protestant, then Elkhart, Indiana is the most diverse metro area in the country.

But Elkhart has no reported Muslims, Jews, Buddhists, or Hindus. Perhaps giving equal weight to all groups is not the best measure of diversity.

If we instead look at the presence of seven major world religions in each metro area and county, a much different picture emerges. Now, the major metros of the east and west coasts are the most diverse, with New York City at the top of the list.

This is a reasonable definition and very defensible. But it does tend to blur some significant differences within America’s largest religion—Christianity.

Many people would regard the presence of both Latter-day Saints and Catholics as being a sign of diversity. Likewise, Orthodox Christians and Evangelical Protestants are scarcely uniform.

In the next map, five non-Christian groups and seven Christian subgroups are considered as measures of diversity. This leads to yet another different look at religious diversity. The large numbers of Catholics in
much of the Northeast makes those cities less diverse than places like Minneapolis. Under this scenario, Washington, DC, is the nation’s most diverse major metropolitan area. (Moscow, Idaho, is the only metropolitan area that is more diverse. This diversity is typical of many college towns.)

The online report explores other possible definitions of diversity, including treating “not claimed by any participating group” as another religious category. That changes the map again, so that areas with large numbers of unclaimed people, such as the Pacific Northwest, become much less diverse.

Then again, maybe the number of congregations would be a better measure of diversity rather than the number of people associated with them. After all, casual observers might judge by the variety of buildings, since they are more obvious than the adherence of the people.

Which definition makes the most sense to you? How would you categorize the groups for diversity? The data from the Religion Census makes it easy to define groups in many different ways. Feel free to contact our office for assistance if you need it.

All these comparisons depend on data supplied by individual groups. This is why we are counting on people like YOU to encourage your own religious group to take part in the 2020 study.
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.

Diversity can be calculated on a scale between 0 and 1, where 0 represents no diversity (everybody is in the same group). While 1 ought to represent total diversity, the formula makes that number unachievable. But the closer the number comes to 1, the more diversity is present. (See the research paper for a fuller explanation.)

Baha’i, Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, Jewish, Muslim, Zoroastrian. Adherent data was available for these groups in the 2010 Religion Census.

Buddhist, Hindu, Jewish, Muslim, Other Eastern Religions; Black Protestant, Catholic, Conservative Protestant, Latter-day Saints, Mainline Protestant, Orthodox, Other Christian.

Every decade the US Religion Census tries to include additional religious groups, making the US Religion Census increasingly accurate. The 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 6,000 people visited our website in May. 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.