

Appendix F: Orthodox Christian Groups

Definitions

Congregation: Parish, mission parish, mission station (i.e., all local places of regular worship services which are lead by an ordained clergyman)

Number of adherents: Total number of people participating in the life of a congregation, counting adults and children, regular and occasional attendees, paid stewards, and persons who do not contribute financially to a congregation

Number of attendees: Average number of persons (including children) who attend Liturgy (main Orthodox Christian worship service) on a typical (not festive) Sunday.

Religious Bodies Included in the Study

Structurally, Orthodox Christianity in the United States consists of more than twenty national Church bodies. They have diverse ethnic and historic origins and belong to two distinct ecclesiological families: the Eastern Orthodox Churches (sometimes referred to as Byzantine Orthodox Churches) and the Oriental Orthodox Churches. The Churches within each family share the same theology and are “in full communion” with one another: they recognize each other’s sacraments, ordination to priesthood, etc.

The following Orthodox Christian Churches were included in the 2020 U.S. Religion Census.

Eastern Orthodox Churches

1. Albanian Orthodox Diocese in America
2. American Carpatho-Russian Orthodox Diocese of the USA
3. Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese of North America
4. Belarusan Autocephalous Orthodox Church
5. Bulgarian Eastern Orthodox Diocese of the USA, Canada and Australia
6. Church of the Genuine Orthodox Christians
7. Georgian Apostolic Orthodox Church in North America
8. Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America (GOA)
9. Holy Orthodox Church in North America
10. Macedonian Orthodox Diocese of the USA and Canada
11. Orthodox Church in America (OCA)
12. Romanian Orthodox Metropolia of the Americas
13. Patriarchal Parishes of the Russian Orthodox Church
14. Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia
15. Serbian Orthodox Church in North, Central and South America
16. Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the USA

Oriental Orthodox Churches

17. Armenian Church of America (Catholicossate Echmiadzin)
18. Armenian Apostolic Church of America (Catholicossate Cilicia)
19. Coptic Orthodox Church

20. Eritrean Orthodox Tewahedo Church
21. Ethiopian Orthodox Church
22. Knanaya Churches in the USA
23. Malankara Archdiocese of the Syrian Orthodox Church
24. Malankara Syriac Orthodox Church
25. Syrian (Syriac) Orthodox Church of Antioch

Problems in Collecting Membership Data on Orthodox Christian Church Bodies

The first problem in obtaining Orthodox Christian Church statistics is there is no single “universal” definition of “membership” that would be used by the various American Orthodox Christian Churches. That is, the criteria of “being a member” and the ways of counting members vary greatly from one Orthodox Church to the other. Some count only individual adults as members, some include children in membership statistics, while others count their members by “family units” or “households” (e.g. a single person, a family of two, or a three-generation family living in one household would be equally counted as one “family unit”). Furthermore, many American Orthodox Christian Churches do not maintain membership statistics at all.

Another problem in counting Orthodox Church members is that typically the “full members” category (regardless of how it is defined) includes only a narrow core group of membership. A significant number of persons who attend—at least occasionally—worship services and participate in congregational life are left outside of the formal “full members” category.

These challenges in obtaining reliable and comparable church membership data are further aggravated by the fact that many American Orthodox Christian Churches tend to be religious communities which are “closed to outsiders.” That is, for several reasons, many U.S. Orthodox congregations are reluctant to share their membership (or any other) data.

Finally, some Orthodox Christian Church bodies are relatively new to the United States. This is especially true for Oriental Orthodox Churches (e.g., Eritrean, Ethiopian, Coptic, Malankara-Indian). Their continuing dynamic growth and ongoing changes in administrative systems make it difficult to track fast-changing numbers on congregations and members. In fact, many newly established and, sometimes, sizeable congregations serve all faithful living in certain geographic areas, but they do not yet own any church buildings nor have they established a permanent geographic location. Their worship services are held in different places depending on circumstances.

Procedures Used in Collection of Data on Membership and Worship Attendance

As noted previously, the absence of comparable—and sometimes any—membership statistics in U.S. Orthodox Christian Churches required development of a standard procedure for enumerating Church members.

For the 2020 Religion Census, we asked each local congregation:

- How many individual persons in total are involved in the life of your parish? Include in this number adults and children, regular and occasional attendees, paid stewards and persons who do not contribute financially.
- Approximately how many persons—including both adults and children—attend liturgy in your parish on a typical (not festive) Sunday?

The answer to the first question gives information on the number of all adherents. This is the most inclusive category of membership and reflects the total number of persons involved—some regularly and some occasionally—in the life of the local parish community. The answer to the second question indicates the number of regular attendees, the number of parishioners who participate in the life of a parish on a regular weekly basis.

The data collection was completed either by communicating directly with the local congregations or by asking dioceses (judicatories) to obtain answers to these questions from their respective congregations.

For 23 of the 25 Orthodox Christian Churches, we were able to obtain information on all or nearly all parishes (missing one or two in some cases). To supplement partially missing data for the remaining two, the Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese and the Eritrean Orthodox Church, we undertook two special procedures. In the case of the Antiochian Archdiocese, 85 percent of parishes provided information; for the remainder, we used data from the 2010 Religion Census. For the Eritrean Orthodox Church, 60 percent of the parishes responded. For the remainder, we extrapolated information from reporting parishes.

Orthodox Churches and Principal findings

- In 2020, the total number of adherents (regular attendees plus occasional and marginal participants, adults plus children) was 675,765 in all Eastern Orthodox Churches of the United States and 491,413 in all Oriental Orthodox Churches. The number of regular attendees was 183,020 in the Eastern 171,045 in the Oriental Orthodox Churches.
- Between 2010 and 2020, Eastern Orthodox Churches saw a 17 percent decrease in total adherents and a 14 percent decrease in regular attendees. In contrast, Oriental Orthodox Churches saw a 67 percent increase in adherents and a 59 percent increase in regular attendees (+59%). These trends were more nuanced by individual churches in each group.
- U.S. Orthodox Churches vary greatly in terms of how many of their parishioners attend church regularly (i.e., percentage of adherents who are regular attendees). Among the Eastern Orthodox Churches, the best “church-goers” are in the Holy Orthodox Church in North America, 57 percent of whose adherents attend regularly, and the American Carpatho-Russian Orthodox Diocese. 51 percent of whose adherents attend regularly. On the opposite extreme are Albanian Orthodox Diocese, Serbian Orthodox Church, Patriarchal Parishes of Moscow Patriarchate, and Macedonian Orthodox Diocese: no more than one-fifth of parishioners worship in their churches regularly. Among Oriental Orthodox, 71 percent of adherents in the Knanaya Churches attend regularly. At the other extreme, fewer than one-tenth of adherents in the Armenian Apostolic Church (both Catholicosate Cilicia and Etchmiadzin), only about one-tenth of adherents come to church regularly.
- The 2020 U.S. Religion Census counted 2,014 Eastern Orthodox and 895 Oriental Orthodox parishes (congregations). Among Oriental Orthodox parishes, 35 percent were established since

2010, compared to only 10 percent newly formed parishes in Eastern Orthodox Churches. Among Oriental Orthodox Churches, three have especially high percentage of parishes newly formed since 2010: the Ethiopian Orthodox Church (49%), Coptic Orthodox Church (43%), and Eritrean Orthodox Church (36%). Four Eastern Orthodox Churches also stand out for having a high share of new parishes added since 2010: the Church of the Genuine Orthodox Christians (72%), Georgian Orthodox Church (50%), Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia (32%), and Bulgarian Orthodox Diocese (29%).

- As of 2020, nearly half of all U.S. Eastern Orthodox Church adherents (47.9%) lived in six states: California (10.9%), New York (10.7%), Illinois (7.6%), Florida (6.4%), New Jersey (6.2%), and Pennsylvania (6.1%). In comparison, we note that only 34.8% of the total U.S. population lives in these six states.
- The adherents of U.S. Oriental Orthodox Churches are even more geographically concentrated than the followers of the Eastern Orthodox Churches. In 2020, more than half (52.8%) of all U.S. Oriental Orthodox adherents were in just four states: California (30.1%), New Jersey (7.7%), New York (7.4%), and Illinois (7.6%). In comparison, only 24% of the general U.S. population live in these four states.
- Measured by both adherents and parishes, among U.S. cities, New York is the major U.S. center of Eastern Orthodox Churches, while Chicago is their second “capital.” For Oriental Orthodox Churches, there are two equally important “U.S. capitals”: New York and Los Angeles.
- Between 2010 and 2020, the geography of American Eastern Orthodox Churches did not change significantly. That of Oriental Orthodox Church adherents, however, shifted noticeably by region. Among most noticeable changes are declining percentage of Oriental Orthodox adherents residing in the state of California, versus growing percentage living in the state of New York

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