A Portrait of Immigration, Race, and Religious Congregations and their Adherents in the United States

Allison L. Norton

Immigration has been a significant factor in religious change across the history of the United States. Varying waves of immigrants have contributed to the assortment of American religious life, cultivating religious pluralism both through the inclusion of non-Christian traditions and in the diversification of Christianity itself. Of course, even before the first European immigrants arrived, a central feature of American religion is what Catherine Albanese has called "manyness," as Native Americans were organized as separate nations with distinctive religions.1 As the subsequent groups immigrated, Protestants, Catholics, Jews, Muslims, and people of many (or no) faiths have contributed to this manyness. That the United States is recognizably multi-faith is largely the result of immigration. Religious immigrants of many faiths have shifted Americans away from norms that have defined religion in primarily Protestant terms when their beliefs and practices have not fit neatly into a Protestant mold.2 Furthermore, because immigration from portions of the world populated predominantly with Muslims, Buddhists, and Hindus is likely to continue in the coming decade, the continual growth of these religions in the United States is expected.

This chapter explores the contours of the impact of immigration on religious congregations and adherents in the United States, a story not simply of preservation but of transformation as immigrants have adapted to their new contexts and contributed toward a more complex religious America. The analysis highlights the integration of immigration, religion, and race. While noting the vital role of immigration in the growth of the United States’ religious pluralism and the rise of Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu, Sikh, Bahá’í, and others traditions across the landscape, this chapter focuses mainly on the diversification of the Christian population. See the chapter on non-Christian faith traditions for further information on how these groups have influenced religious diversity in the United States. Additionally, my experiences as a White, American-born, Pentecostal who lived as an immigrant in Ghana in early adulthood have shaped how I interpret and understand the significance of immigrants and their descendants for religious life in the United States. I have a deep appreciation for the vibrant spiritual life, sacrificial community, and earnest evangelistic impulses of the predominantly immigrant (and Christian) religious communities I have known and worshipped with.

Finally, I note a key limitation of the U.S. Religion Census data concerning immigrants and their congregational life. Although this 2020 census is the most inclusive to date, with 372 participating bodies, there are gaps in the data that disproportionately represent immigrant-led congregations that are non-denominational or affiliated with religious bodies headquartered outside of the United States. At a time when religious commitment in the United States is generally waning, many of these immigrant-led congregations are thriving. These highly transnational religious spaces are largely missing from this picture of American organizational religious life, yet they represent a vibrant and uncounted portion of immigrant-led religious communities. Some of these predominate immigrant congregations share space with other houses of worship; the 2018-19 National Congregations Study indicates that 9.3% of congregations share their building with another worshipping group, nearly half of which are comprised primarily of recent immigrants.3 Others exist as tiny house churches, or within storefronts, or use houses of worship previously occupied by a different religious body. They also appear as megachurches. The Nigerian-headquartered Redeemed Christian Church of God, which has planted over 800 parishes, created a Redemption Camp in Floyd, Texas that serves as its hub of missionary activity across the region and includes a worship center that seats 10,000.4 Since many of these immigrant congregations are not participating bodies, much of this religious diversity remains hidden.

Enduring Legacies: Histories of Immigration and Current Religious Bodies

The first major wave of U.S. immigration, from 1820-1880, included over ten million arrivals predominantly from northwestern Europe. Starting after the 1830s, millions of Irish and German immigrants came in response to potato famines and economic depressions, leading to an influx of Catholics and a violently anti-Catholic, anti-immigrant nativist reaction. Also, during this era, the border of the United States also “migrated” when the United States annexed nearly half of Mexico’s territory at the conclusion of the war between the United States and Mexico (1846-1848). As a result,

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local Mexicans in the area suddenly become U.S. residents overnight; they did not move, but the border did.

In the second major immigration wave (1880-1920) the United States received nearly 23.5 million immigrants. In 1890, immigrants made up 14.8% of the total population, the peak in recorded history. Mostly from Southern, Central, and Eastern Europe, these immigrants again increased the religious manyness of the nation as Italian and Polish Catholics, Greek and Eastern Orthodox, and Eastern European Jewish immigrants practiced their religions in a new land. Capturing the importance of immigration in the congregational life of the time, the U.S. Census of Religious Bodies for 1906 shows that among the 186 denominations included, fully a quarter of American congregants worshipped in a language other than English. Since 1890, the number of denominations in the United States had increased by 41 and the denominational families had grown by nine, reflecting the new religious initiatives in this massive wave of immigrants. This increase in ethnic and religious diversity ignited another xenophobic response that culminated in three successful restrictive immigration laws (passed in 1921, 1924, and 1929), which enacted national-origin quotas that severely curtailed the influx of these newer immigrants.

The third wave, 1920-1950, had only 5.5 million newcomers and represented a dramatic drop in the total number of new immigrants. Shifting back to earlier patterns as a result of these new restrictions, the religious lives of these immigrants largely reflected the more traditional Protestantism of Northwestern Europe. However, the latter part of this era also resulted in an increase in the numbers of Catholics from Mexico, Central, and South America. During the fourth wave, 1950-1985, more than 10 million immigrated to the United States, with half originating from the Western Hemisphere. The immigrant population had reached a record low of 4.7% in 1970.

However, following the 1965 Hart-Cellar Immigration Act, which ended the quota system and bans against Asian immigrants, a new wave of immigrants expanded the religious diversity of the nation yet again. These new immigrants are predominately from Asia, Latin America, and the Caribbean and are strikingly more racially, religiously, and linguistically diverse compared with prior immigrant streams.

What is the legacy of these immigrants and their religious bodies? The clusters of major religious families that clearly emerge in the 2020 map — the prevalence of Lutherans in the upper Midwest, Baptists in the Southeast, Catholics in large cities and across the Northeast and Southwest, Latter-Day Saints in Utah and Idaho — all have legacies rooted in the distinct waves and patterns of migration over the last several centuries (see Map 1).

During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, English immigrants formed the largest group emigrating to the North American British colonies. From the period of 1628-1640, several thousand Puritans emigrated to New England with an intently religious purpose, migrating together as families and starting congregations in the new land with the conviction that they were chosen by God to be “as a city upon a hill.” The legacy of these colonial Puritans can be seen in the continued clustering of United Church of Christ

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State</th>
<th>Total UCC Congregations</th>
<th>UCC Adherents as % of Total Adherents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Vermont</td>
<td>129</td>
<td>4.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Hampshire</td>
<td>132</td>
<td>4.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maine</td>
<td>145</td>
<td>3.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connecticut</td>
<td>230</td>
<td>3.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pennsylvania</td>
<td>566</td>
<td>2.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Massachusetts</td>
<td>338</td>
<td>1.9%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(created in 1957 after a series of mergers) congregations in present-day New England (Table 1). In the period after the Revolutionary War until 1819, about 125,000 people emigrated to the United States, predominately Protestants from the British Isles and northern Europe.

### Immigrants and Their Religions Today

The United States is the largest recipient of immigrants globally, and they represented 13.6% of the total population in 2021. Immigrants, together with their children, makeup over a quarter of the U.S. population. Based on projections, they could reach 37% of the population by 2050. Although immigrants are disbursed throughout the country, they compose the largest share of the total population in the states of California (26.6%), New Jersey (23%), New York (22.3%), Florida (21.2%), Hawaii (18.8%) and Nevada (18.4%).

Ten countries combined make up 56% of all U.S. immigrants. In 2021, Mexican-origin immigrants represented the largest group (24% of the total), but their numbers have declined from the previous two decades: they represented 30% of the total immigrant population in 2000. India (6%) and China (5%) are the next largest countries of origin, followed by the Philippines (4%), El Salvador, Vietnam, Cuba, and the Dominican Republic (at 3% each), Korea and Guatemala (2% each).

Overwhelmingly, the largest share of immigrants to the United States have been Christians, although their share has decreased in recent decades. In 2012, 61% of immigrants granted legal residence in the United States were Christian. The growth of immigration from Asia has also contributed to the 25% of immigrants from other religious traditions: 10% Muslim, 7% Hindu, 6% Buddhist. Additionally,

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refugees over the past decade are increasingly contributing to the growth of Muslim communities in the nation, making up 34% of refugees admitted between 2010 through 2022. Although the contribution of immigrants to non-Christian traditions cannot be overstated, migration is bringing in more Christians than people of other faiths. This has led R. Stephen Warner to stress the impact of post-1965 Christian immigrants — coming from the Caribbean and Africa; Latin, Central, and South America; and Asia — on the “de-Europeanization” of American Christianity.

Immigrants and Their Congregations in the United States

Today, immigrants remain vital to sustaining and growing faith traditions across the United States. Research on the religious life of immigrants has shown that the process of immigration and the making of a new life in a foreign land has often increased the religious participation of immigrants. They have contributed to the revitalization and creation of congregations and denominations, and these religious spaces often serve as key sites fostering community, the exercise of agency, and hope.

According to the Pew Religious Landscape Study conducted in 2014, 68% of all immigrants in the United States were Christians. They represent various denominational families: by far the largest group is affiliated with Catholicism (39%), followed by 15% Evangelical, 7% Mainline Protestant, and 3% historically Black Protestant. While Orthodox Christians makeup only 1% of the immigrant population, nearly 60% of Orthodox Christians in the United States are immigrants. In other words, while newer immigrants are still majority Christian, they are no longer majority Protestant and even less likely to be affiliated with Mainline denominations. Twelve percent are affiliated with other faith traditions, including Muslim (4%), Jewish (1%), Buddhist (1%) and other religions (2%), while 20% are religiously unaffiliated.

Over generations, immigrant communities and their descendants have increased the racial and ethnic diversity of American religion. Currently, Catholics in America are about 60% White, 35% Latino, 10% Black, and 5% Asian, while the share of White Protestants has declined from 43% in 1972 to 25% today, and the share of Mainline Protestants has fallen from 21% in 1972 to 12% today.

Map 1: Major Religious Families by Counties of the United States, 2020

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with Black, Asian, and other racial groups making up the remaining 5%. Mainline Protestants, Jews, Mormons, and Orthodox Christians are largely White (more than 80%), and about 75% of Evangelicals are also White. Historically Black Protestants (94% Black) and Hindus (91% Asian) are the only two religious groups with nonwhite majorities. Also of note, multiracial congregations are on the rise across the county: predominantly White congregations are less White than they were previously, and in 2020 a full 25% of congregations were considered multiracial, up from only 12% in 2000.14 This growing de-Europeanization of American Christianity is reflected in some of the nine bodies in the United States with the largest shares of adherents in the 2020 U.S. Religion Census. These groups, ranked by size, include the 1) Catholic Church, 2) non-denomina-
tional Christian Churches, 3) Southern Baptist Convention, 4) United Methodist Church, 5) Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, 6) Muslim, 7) Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, 8) Assemblies of God, and 9) Jehovah’s Witnesses.

The changing ethnic and geographical shifts among American Catholicism represents perhaps the most visible reconfiguration of American religious life in relation to immigration.15 The Catholic Church has been the single-largest religious body in the United States for over a century and accounts for almost 40% of adherents in the 2020 U.S. Religion Census. Catholicism has a long history in the United States: In 1598, eight members of the Franciscan order established the first Catholic foundations in what is present-day El Paso, Texas.16 The 2020 U.S. Religion Census reflects the first year that the most Catholics did not reside in the Northeast and Midwest. Since the mid-nineteenth century, New England represented, by far, the most Catholic region in the nation. Catholic affiliation in the Northeast, associated with earlier waves of immigrants from Ireland, Italy, and Germany that contributed to the region’s Catholic influence in the 1840s, has been in decline. In 1971, 41% of Catholics were located in the Northeast, compared to only 27% in 2020. In contrast, Catholic affiliation in the Southwest has achieved rapid growth. There are now more Catholics located in the South compared to other regions and the Southwest now rivals New England in terms of Catholic presence, particularly in light of the increasing rise of religious disaffiliation in the nation’s notoriously least religious states of New Hampshire, Vermont, and Maine (see Table 2). Catholics are most concentrated in counties in New Mexico and along the Rio Grande in Texas.

This formation of new geographic centers for U.S. Catholicism is due in large part to the rise of Hispanic Catholics and the fast-growing Asian American population. Immigrants and their descendants who trace their origins to Mexico, other Central and South American nations, as well as Latinos from former Spanish colonies are the main contributors to growth in American Catholicism, accounting for 71% of the church’s growth since 1960.17 These Hispanic immigrants and future generations bring their versions of Catholicism into parishes across the nation that regularly conduct masses in Spanish. As this example suggests, it is difficult to explore contemporary immigration in the United States without also including religion and race.

Southern Baptists, currently the largest Protestant group in the United States (almost 11% of total adherents) also trace their roots to the colonial era, from Baptists who settled in the American colonies in the 17th century. They remain heavily concentrated in the South, due to their formation in 1845 when they split with Northern Baptists over slavery. They are less racially diverse (85% White) than the general Evangelical Protestants and other Protestants generally.18 The third largest religious group is the United Methodist Church (5%), whose own geographic spread reflects the historical migratory patterns of circuit rider preachers and nation-wide expansion via the Second Great Awakening revivals (1790-1840), resulting in congregations spread far and wide so that now there is hardly a county in the nation without a Methodist congregation. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (fourth largest, at 4.2% of total adherents), persist in high numbers in Utah and Idaho, reflecting their westward trek in 1844 following mob violence and the murder of their founder Joseph Smith. Over the next two decades, thousands of Latter-day Saints from New York, Ohio, and Missouri followed that journey, fleeing anti-Mormon violence. By the time Utah achieved statehood, there were already more than 250,000 Latter-day Saints in residence. The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America’s...
(sixth largest, at 2% of total adherents) current adherents remain predominantly of European descent and their high numbers in the North and upper Midwest reflect the settlement of Germans, Swedes, and Norwegians in those regions.

Compared with these predominately White groups, the other religious bodies with the highest percent of adherents in the nation are strikingly more racially diverse and contain higher percentages of recent immigrants and their children. The U.S. Muslim community (fifth largest, 2.8%) is heavily made up of immigrants and their children. Although not newcomers to this land — an estimated one-third of enslaved Africans transported to the New World were likely Muslim and Black Muslims continue to represent 20% of the community — almost three-quarters of U.S. Muslims are immigrants and their children.20 As such, it is not surprising to see that the counties with 35 or more Muslim congregations correspond with counties with the highest numbers of immigrants in the nation (see Table 3); of the 10 counties with the highest numbers of Muslim congregations, seven are in the top ten counties in the nation in terms of total number of foreign-born residents.21

The Assemblies of God (1.9%), a classical Pentecostal tradition, is among the most racially diverse religious groups in the nation. Those affiliated are 25% Hispanic, 5% Asian, 3% Black, and 66% White. Even more striking, the Jehovah’s Witnesses (1.9%) exhibit high racial diversity within the American religious landscape, with Hispanic representing 32% of their religious group, Asian Americans 6%, Black Americans 27%, and White Americans representing 36%.22

The Rise of Asian, Hispanic, and Black Christianities in the United States: Immigration, Race, and Religious Groups

As these general portraits portray, some religious traditions within these groupings are more racially diverse and more significantly impacted by recent immigration flows than others. In this section, I highlight several of these traditions and the impact that Asian, African and Caribbean, and Hispanic immigrants and their descendants are having on the changing dynamics within Catholic and Protestant traditions.

The Catholic Church, Immigrants, and Their Descendants

Forty-eight percent of Hispanics in the United States are Catholic. Of course, they are not all immigrants, as the majority of the Hispanic community (68%) were born in the United States. Hispanic Catholicism has a long history in this nation, with origins of Mexican-descent Catholicism originating during the Spanish colonial period.

Catholic missionaries, often Franciscan, accompanied Spanish expeditions in the region and later established missions in Mexico, Arizona, Texas, and California. Then, after the U.S. Civil War, the rapid increase in agriculture, mining, and railroad construction in the Southwest region further linked the region with Mexico, resulting in accelerating migration flows. After World War II, the Bracero Program (1942-1946) brought over 5 million guest workers from Mexico. Into the 20th century, significant numbers of Mexican immigrants moved beyond the borderland region, planting ethnic Mexican parishes across the Midwest, a trend that has continued to increase since the 1990s. Currently, Mexican-descent and other Spanish-speaking Catholics often worship in parishes that are majority Hispanic. Even in multicultural parishes, they express their Mexican-influenced Catholic identities through feast-day celebrations, parish organizations, renewal movements, and devotional practices.23 Given the xenophobia toward Hispanic migrants in particular, Mexican-descent Catholics, alongside the broader Hispanic community, have struggled for justice both within and outside of the church.

Nearly one million Cubans emigrated to the United States in the first 40 year period following the 1959 Cuban Revolution, and large numbers of Cuban Catholics arrived in Miami in the 1960s where the local Catholic diocese had just been established two years prior. These Catholic adherents arrived along with their clergy; during the month of September 1961, over one hundred priests and eighty religious sisters settled in Miami. The Catholic Church played a sizeable role in the resettlement process for Cuban Americans, resettling 70% of the 700,000 who migrated from 1961-1973.24 This legacy is still apparent today. In Miami-Dade County, which is nearly

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**Table 3: Counties with Over 35 Muslim Congregations, 2020**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>County</th>
<th>Number of Muslim Congregations</th>
<th>Percent of Population that is Foreign-Born</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Queens County, NY</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>50.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Los Angeles County, CA</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>34.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kings County, NY</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>36.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cook County, IL</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>21.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wayne County, MI</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>9.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harris County, TX</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>26.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bronx County, NY</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>34.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Philadelphia County, PA</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>14.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dallas County, TX</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>24.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alameda County, CA</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>33.4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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70% Hispanic, the Catholic Church adherents (58.5% of total adherents) far surpass other religious bodies.

The Catholic Church has also been on the forefront of offering aid to Central Americans, including Salvadoran, Guatemalan, and Honduran immigrants, providing resettlement assistance, championing legal change, and creating sanctuaries across the United States to protect from deportation. In comparative Hispanic studies, Central American Catholics are among the most religiously active and congregations have subsequently been more central to their communities than for other Latin American groups.25

While only about 3% of Catholics in the United States are Asian American, nearly 19% of Asian Americans identify as Catholic. Given the status of the Philippines within global Catholicism, representing the third largest Catholic nation, it is not surprising that Filipino immigrants are making their mark on American Catholicism. A full 65% of Filipino immigrants identify as Catholic. Additionally, more than 10 million Filipinos live outside of their birth nation, and they represent the fourth largest immigrant group in the United States.26 Vietnamese-origin Catholics are also present across the United States, predominantly in Los Angeles, Houston, and New Orleans and their surrounding counties and they are perhaps the most visible during their annual pilgrimage to the small town of Carthage, Missouri, when thousands of Vietnamese Catholics come together to celebrate Marian Days.

Recent Immigrants and U.S. Protestantism

Despite the large numbers of Hispanic Catholics, Hispanic growth among Protestant traditions is also important. As of 2022, 15% of Latinos in the United States are Evangelical Protestants and some estimates indicate that this may grow to 50% by 2030.27 This group is highly diverse, representing various national origins, immigrant timelines, and religious affiliations. By some assessments, Hispanic Protestants are nearly equally split across the Pentecostal, non-Pentecostal (Baptistic Evangelicals), and Mainline Protestant traditions.28

Hispanic conversions to Protestantism largely began in the early 20th century through the dedicated efforts of Baptists, Disciples of Christ, Methodist, and Presbyterian denominations, which resulted in 2,378 Mexican-descent adults affiliating with Texas Protestant denominations in 1900. In California, the birth of the Azusa Street Revival in 1906 grew the number of Hispanic Protestants in the region. After 1965, Cuban refugees, Central American migrants, and the increase of Puerto Rican migrants also resulted in a steady increase of Hispanic Protestants since the 1980s. Because the Protestant population in each of the countries of Costa Rica, Honduras, the Dominican Republic, Brazil, Puerto Rico, Guatemala, and El Salvador is higher than in the United States, migrants from these countries have a high probability of being Protestant before they emigrate.29 Now, Hispanic Protestants tend to attend churches that worship in the Spanish language (80%) and they also tend to be in congregations pastored by Hispanic clergy (79%).30

It is clear that Hispanic Pentecostalism contributes significantly to the growth of new denominations as well as U.S.-based Pentecostal denominations. The explosive growth of Pentecostalism in Puerto Rico and Central America starting in the 1970s means that many migrants from those places have brought their churches and denominations with them. The Assemblies of God would likely be on a large downward growth trend, if not for the group’s revitalization from its one-quarter Hispanic attenders. In California, nearly half of Assemblies of God members are Hispanic, and the Latino district in Southern California has planted the most churches of any district in the nation.31 Some of the largest congregations in the Assemblies of God are predominately Hispanic, including the New Life Covenant Assemblies of God in Chicago and Temple Calvario in Santa Ana.32

African Christianity, in all of its forms, is also present in the United States. Around 55% are Protestant, 20% Catholic, 10% other Christian (including African Independent Churches), and 8% from other religious traditions. Starting in the 1990s, African immigration to the United States has steadily increased. While they are still a small portion of the total immigrant population, African immigrants are notoriously religious. The Black population in the United States is already more religious than those of other races, yet sub-Saharan African immigrants express even more active religious lives compared to Caribbean immigrant and U.S.-born Black adults.33

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Even though Asian Americans have the highest levels of religious diversity, Christians account for over 42%. This illustrates how Christianity is often overrepresented among the immigrant population. Christians are likewise overrepresented among immigrants from India and China. Like other immigrant groups, Asian immigrants and their children are also changing the face of American Protestantism. For many Korean immigrants, religion forms a key aspect of their experience. About 61% of Korean immigrants identify as Protestant, with only 10% Catholic and 6% Buddhist. Reflecting the Presbyterian and Methodist traditions prevalent in South Korea, many Korean immigrants are affiliated with these Mainline traditions post-migration. Nearly 5% of congregations within the Presbyterian Church (USA) are members of the National Council of Korean Presbyterian Churches, representing some 55,000 active members and the second largest racial ethnic caucus with a more than 40-year history within the denomination.

Finally, it is important to note that many of the new immigrants are influenced by global charismatic and Pentecostal movements. As Pentecostal Christianity has flourished in the Global South, immigrants from Central and South America, Africa, and Asia are often bringing Pentecostal and charismatic practices of faith into the U.S. context. As such, Pentecostal Christianity represents a greater share of American Christianity than previously, due in part to these patterns of migration.

Conclusion

In this rapidly changing religious landscape, immigrants not only contribute to the growth of religious pluralism in the United States, but also make a clear impact on Christian communities across the country. Following the current trajectory, it is likely that non-Christian religions will continue to grow, doubling in size by 2070. Christians will likely be increasingly non-White, and immigrants and the generations after them will follow in the footsteps of religious immigrants from early centuries, continuing to change the identities, theology, and practice of U.S. Christianity and the congregations they are affiliated with. In this context, Christianity in the nation is already becoming extraordinarily diverse in its theological, racial, and cultural makeup. Just as prior waves of religious immigrants have had a lasting legacy on the contours of U.S. religion, new immigrants and their descendants will also have a deep and sustained effect. Due to the transnational ties that link many predominately immigrant religious communities to nations across the globe, Americans will increasingly find themselves in situations of unprecedented opportunities for engagement with religious adherents whose experiences and lives are significantly different than their own.

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35 Directory of Korean American Organizations. 2023. Presbyterian Church, USA.
