What are “Religious Bodies?” Denominations, Non-denominations, and the Gray Areas in Between

Scott Thumma

The 2020 U.S. Religion Census (USRC) identifies 372 religious bodies in its 2020 count of congregations and adherents. But what exactly does that mean? The statement sounds straightforward, but many questions regarding definitions and distinctions lie beneath the surface of this declaration. Are these bodies distinctive entities that include all Christian denominational groups and the faith traditions outside the Christian tradition? Or do the boundaries between these various groups blur and overlap? Who gets included and are any groups left out? What about the nondenominational, independent, and inter-denominational congregations that get counted? And are networks of churches such as the Willow Creek Association, the Association of Related Churches, Catalyst, Exponential, and so many others counted as religious bodies? Likewise, many of the maps produced in this volume and on the website display “religious families” as if there are clearly identifiable and distinctive traditions within the assortment of diverse religious groups that make up the religious landscape of the United States. Any effort to count all faith communities and their participants raises these and many other questions about religious group distinctions, definitions, and boundaries. This chapter will attempt to address a few of these quandaries and explain a bit more about the challenges facing the U.S. Religion Census. But let me warn the reader: the deeper one gets into this topic the muddier these distinctions sometimes become.

Just because many hundreds of religious groups have distinctive names and official structures does not necessarily mean all these groups are functionally or organizationally equivalent, nor should they be understood as equivalent. While the USRC goes to great lengths to describe adherents, the project does not articulate an explicit definition of “religious body.” The “religious body” terms such as denomination, “groups of religious communities,” faith tradition, and even faith family, require some explanation and nuance. Mergers, schisms, new religious communities, transnational faiths, and virtual religious organizations have complicated this landscape even further. Perhaps the idea of a “denomination” was once a clear concept in our society when there were a few distinctive “brands” in the religious marketplace, but this is certainly no longer the case. Likely, this was never the case, but we have long assumed that “a formal denomination or religious group” is a clear and understandable concept that describes a discernable reality, when in fact it is not. Yet, the U.S. Religion Census must wrestle with this challenge every decade, “Who should we count as a distinctive religious body?” This effort is getting more challenging as time goes on.

What is a Denomination?

At its simplest, the verb “denominate” means to give a name to something or to designate it as distinctive. In this context, a “denomination” is a group of individual congregations that are identified by a particular name, based on a set of characteristics, be they theological, historical, covenental, or relational. Typically, and usually within the Christian (and mostly Protestant) tradition, these characteristics include a set of common beliefs and practices, a shared history and heritage, relational ties, and collaborative training, resourcing, and outreach. The ideal conception of a denomination is one defined as a distinctive and exclusive national organization with a name, structure, leadership, and rules which distinguish its adherent congregations from other denominational groups based on these and additional characteristics. But is the ideal actually the reality?

Size and Significance Play a Role

These distinctions are further complicated by the fact that a few very large religious bodies are home to most of the country’s faithful. The top five of the nation’s religious groups contain over 70% of all adherents. The 19 religious bodies with at least one million adherents (just 5% of all groups in the 2020 U.S. Religion Census) account for 90% of all the reported adherents. Another 39 groups (those with 100,000 to 999,999 adherents) account for an additional 9% of adherents. That means there are over 300 very small groups in the U.S. Religious Census that did not report adherents or had so few congregations or adherents that they account for less than 2% of the total. Many of these denominations and faith traditions have a handful of congregations and at most a few hundred followers. Added together, all these 300 denominational groups would equal fewer churches than those in the fourth largest group counted by the USRC – the United Methodist Church. And the adherents of these many very small denominations likely total less than all the adherents of the 11th largest group, the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod. Even given the 372 religious bodies we explored, some estimates suggest there are over 1,000 distinctive groups, more than double what the U.S. Religion Census captured. If this is the case, many of

these are either very small or maintain an extremely low profile or are not commonly understood to be considered a religious body, such as Scientology, Wicca, and others.

How small can a faith group be to still be counted as a distinct entity? Can a denomination have just one affiliate church or two churches? Or can it be a virtual denomination of online congregations? For instance, is the Universal Life Church (www.ulc.org) a denomination because it ordains, trains, and resources clergy? Does a religious body have to be of a certain size or have a distinctive presence and significance to be considered countable? That has not been the practice of this effort. Early in its history, the U.S. Religion Census was just a count of the major Christian religious bodies, but with each passing decade the team has attempted to include a broader tabulation of ever smaller distinctive groups. There are five religious bodies in this 2020 census with just one congregation each.

What is in a Name?

Therefore, is it a unique name that identifies a separate religious body? Is it its history and heritage, its beliefs, the number of its affiliate congregations or churches, the functions it performs for those communities and adherents? Or is it still something else that distinguishes one denominational group from another?

In part, it is a distinctive name that brands and unifies a group of congregations around a common purpose and identity. This identity demarcates it as a discernable religious group with any number of possible characteristics including but not limited to:

- particular historical distinctives (heritage, tradition, historical roots)
- a set of beliefs (creeds, statement of beliefs, theological distinctions)
- an official membership listing (affiliation ties, exclusive or not)
- process of ordination of professional clergy
- member commitment ties (dues, covenant, building ownership, ordination status)
- an organizational reality (buildings, websites, 501c3 status, officers, board, by-laws)
- professional full-time staff
- associational functions (fellowship, annual meetings, network ties, newsletters)
- ethnic and/or racial heritage and identity
- a pension and/or retirement system
- an insurance plan (medical & life)
- publishing entities
- educational and training seminaries, schools, or systems
- missional/outreach/recruitment efforts
- social service efforts and aid services
- worship/music distinctives (prayer book, hymnal, sheet music, traditions, and style)

There are further distinctions between religious groups based on their governance structure or forms of polity. Traditionally, there are three polity types: 1) Episcopal, 2) Presbyterian, and 3) Congregational, with other possibilities such as Connectional, Ultra-congregational, Hierarchical, or Relational. These diverse governance models both describe the structure between faith communities and national organizational leadership and locate where the power and authority of the organization resides. Briefly, an Episcopal polity is one that has a hierarchical system of authority from Presiding Bishops or Archbishops to bishops in regional bodies or dioceses, through to the clergy and the lay members. Religious groups such as Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, The Episcopal Church, and Church of God in Christ follow this pattern of governance. Within Presbyterian polity, authority rests within legislative bodies such as courts and councils, synods, or presbyteries, with representatives from congregations participating in a democratic fashion. Denominations of the Reformed and Presbyterian churches have this form of government. Congregational polity locates religious authority within the individual congregation itself. Each church practices self-governance, though some congregational bodies participate collectively in national efforts or causes. Many denominations from the Baptist, Congregationalist, Pentecostal, and Non-denominational traditions embrace a congregational polity. Connectional polity can be seen as a derivational form of Episcopal polity and is embraced by Methodist denominations having both bishops and other bodies that tie congregations together at a more local and regional level. Likewise, a hierarchical polity is similar to Episcopal, with a centralized authority system, but rather than bishops it often has presidents or overseers. Relational or Ultra-congregational polity is really a version of congregational polity, with authority residing in the local church, but the association with other congregations may be informal and based on relational ties. In an Ultra-congregational polity, any ties to other congregations are nonexistent, and therefore, truly a non-denominational polity.

This ideal characterization of a denomination is formed out of a particular type of mainline Protestant, wealthy, usually Caucasian, and long-established organizational reality. It also usually tends to best describe the Episcopal and Presbyterian polity approaches. However, relatively few religious bodies within the U.S. Religion Census fully embody all these denominational characteristics. Rather, the idea of a religious body, a denomination, or a “religious community without a formal national headquarters” is best understood ideally on a continuum from a robust conceptualization of a religious body exhibiting all these characteristics to the far other end of the scale where it is at best a loose configuration of congregations around an idea, heritage, practice, or externally-imposed label that encompasses this grouping of faith communities into a category that can be counted. Usually the more robust the denominational/organizational entity, in terms of these characteristics, the more reliable and accurate the census findings and the easier to collect its data.

Most models of denominational connection assume that the tie to their particular organization is exclusive, but as we will see below that is not always the case. It should be noted that the defining characteristic of the Non-denominational Christian Churches religious body in the U.S. Religion Census is the independence of

---

these congregations. Many of these congregations are led by entrepreneurs who started the congregation. Some of these congregations have left a denomination because of disagreements with denominational leadership. Most of these congregations think a denominational connection carries a high financial cost without much benefit. Whatever their reason for maintaining their independence, the U.S. Religion Census made the effort to count them and has included them in the category of Non-denominational Christian Churches.

Religious (Faith) Traditions and Families – Birds of a Feather?

Additionally, certain groupings of religious communities without formal national headquarters are created and included within the U.S. Religion Census. Often these groupings include many of the religious faiths outside of Christianity. The U.S. Religion Census has increased its efforts over time to collect data on Islamic, Jewish, Baha’i, Hindu, Sikh, Buddhist and other non-Christian religious communities as if they were singular denominations. It has also sought to include groupings of broad Christian traditions that, while related historically, by theological tradition, or heritage, do not often consider themselves directly associated with each other in a single organizational reality. Groups such as non-denominational and independent churches fall into this category and are reflected in the USRC maps and counts often as a single tradition or family. In some sense, these clusters of congregations are artificially constructed religious bodies often without most of the characteristics of a “denomination.” Likewise, many of these groups would never think of themselves as a distinctive single entity except in a very general manner. This is also true for many of the maps produced where all Baptist, Methodist, Presbyterian, or Lutheran groups are merged into a single religious family for display purposes. This masks the fact that while perhaps having a common heritage or name, the denominations grouped together might vary widely in theology, organizational form, and even explicitly reject affiliation with the other similarly named bodies. It is important to remember that just because denominational groups share common DNA, a heritage or branch on the family tree doesn’t mean they would want to be at the same family reunion.

A Grouping of Independent Churches?

Another aspect of the U.S. Religion Census’s denominational accounting that needs further discussion is the previously mentioned grouping of non-denominational and independent congregations into a single entity. In a real sense, gathering together independent churches seems counter to their essence. Non-denominational is explicitly not denominational. Yet, the USRC combines these churches into a single body for several reasons. First, the numbers of these churches are increasing rapidly. The 2020 effort to count non-denominational congregations found an increase since 2010 of...
nearly 9,000 congregations and nearly 9 million adherents. Second, this cluster of congregations constitutes a significant proportion of the religious landscape. Non-denominational and independent churches constitute 13% of all U.S. congregations and their adherents and 6.4% of the U.S. population. This makes them the second largest “group” in terms of adherents after the Catholic Church, and the second largest in number of congregations after the Southern Baptist Convention. Third, other research suggests that most of these congregations are functionally and theologically similar to Protestant evangelical churches.4

When attempting to count these non-denominational and independent churches, a necessary first, and rather difficult, step is to determine what is a “non-denominational church.” Much confusion surrounds this label because it often is defined by what it is not. The approach used by the U.S. Religion Census to identify non-denominational churches is to allow the congregations to self-identify their denominational affiliation or lack thereof. Following this self-identification as non-denominational, considerable effort was made by a team of researchers to probe for any ties to quasi-denominational entities. This team found many congregations who used a generic label for their churches (like Valley Christian Church, Community Church of God, or Faith Fellowship) and whose pastors stated they were non-denominational but whom, after closer inspection, were found to have ties to an official religious organization and were dropped from the non-denominational listing.5

Protestant congregations that explicitly identify themselves as “non-denominational” (or one of the other similar titles, such as independent, inter-denominational, and most recently post-denominational) without ties to a larger network of churches that are separate entities in the U.S. Religion Census were labeled and counted as non-denominational or independent.

To say these congregations are independent is not to imply they lack any affiliation with other churches. There is a strong commitment, even among the most independent of these, not to be a “Lone-ranger Christian.” As one pastor of an independent church strongly asserted, “we are not alone, we certainly fellowship with other churches.”6


6 Thumma, Scott, October 1999.
Inter-congregationally, many of the non-denominational churches have ties to local clergy associations and other networks but do not think of themselves as part of an organized denomination.

The rapid growth of these congregations seems to indicate that religious individualism is at work at the congregational level. Congregations and their leadership are planting new churches or breaking away from existing denominations with the purpose of expressing their individuality and uniqueness in their identity and practices. This rise in Christian churches overtly asserting organizational independence is only the tip of the iceberg. This author contends that many denominationally affiliated churches are also defecting in place, or quietly quitting, and becoming functionally non-denominational. Increasingly, congregational decisions about the purchase of resources, literature, educational training materials, and worship music are being made at the local congregational level in many of these churches, without regard for their denomination’s options, opinions, or authority.

One sociologist, Steven Warner, noted this pattern several decades ago, describing it as “de facto congregationalism.” He suggested this “implies that congregations can chart their own religious course despite their denominational ties.” In the 2015 Faith Communities Today national survey of over 4,000 U.S. congregations, 2.3% reported they had become independent in the previous 10 years, and an additional 0.5% reporting that they had seriously considered it. Additionally, the survey asked how important the denominational identity and affiliation was to their church with 15% of respondents reporting it was not very important to their church.

This question only spoke of allegiance or loyalty – their importance – and not their actions and practices regarding how they affiliate, purchase resources, do missions, educate their members or how they participate with and support their denomination. This evidence may imply the same dynamics that have increased the number of non-denominational churches are continuing to erode denominational ties.

Networks, Associations, and Other Informal Relational Bodies

Another dramatic change in the religious landscape over the past 50 years further complicates what counts as a denomination or religious body for the U.S. Religion Census. This change is the proliferation of loose networks, associations, and other informal groupings of congregations.

Some of these more organizationally complex entities (such as Vineyard USA, Calvary Chapel Association, Vanguard Presbyterian, Full Gospel Baptist Fellowship, and Fellowship of Christian Assemblies) were included as denominational groups in the U.S. Religion Census. Other networks (e.g., Morning Star Ministries, Potter’s House Fellowship, Victory Outreach Network, Association of Related Churches, Catalyst, World Ministry Fellowship), because of their weak connectional ties and lack of denominational characteristics, were included in the non-denominational category. Likewise, many megachurches (Protestant churches with 2,000 or more average weekly attendees) often have both multiple satellite campuses and large but loose networks of associated churches within their orbit. These informal megachurch networks were not counted as separate religious bodies.

Many of these networks do not have denominational characteristics such as separate headquarters, staff, mission or service agencies, retirement, or clergy insurance plans. But more importantly, most of these networks have very weak accountability and informal authority structures. These networks and associations conceptualize authority and agency differently than more traditional denominations do. The dominant basis of authority functioning in these networks is relational – grounded in a unity of vision and purpose rather than a legal or even traditional organizational connection. If a network member’s direction of ministry changes, then, as a network leader hypothetically counseled, “we are not walking together down the same path. I still love you as a brother in Christ, but perhaps you should think about finding a different group as your primary fellowship.” Likewise, the agency structure of these networks appears to be relatively informal, minimal in the scope of functions performed, and, in the case of megachurch networks, highly centralized around a specific congregational style or its leader’s mission objectives. Finally, in nearly every case, the network does not function as the sole source of either religious authority or agency for the connected clergy member or the affiliated local church, nor is it seen as an exclusive relationship or solitary ground of the pastor’s or church’s identity.

The pastor of one such network commented on this connection, “We belong to a loose group of churches...very loosely structured. We don’t have any overseer. We do share a common statement of faith, although the individual practices within the churches might vary.” Another clergy described this relationship when asked what the fellowship connection offers him, “Not a lot. It provides the true fellowship of like-minded churches [that’s] what it is primarily for. It’s a national convention, a regional convention. Primarily it’s for fellowship. Some cooperation for missions.” A third religious leader described this essentially as relational congregationalism with the clergy connected to the group but not the church, “Being a part of the organization that I am, every church is independent. [The pastor is] part of an organization but [the congregation is] independent. So, we’re not being dictated to by the organization about what to do and how to do it and all. It just becomes a body where we are organized and have the strength, being strong for unity, for advice. We have counseling where we can get advice, but we cannot make the churches do anything... The individual churches own their own property. They have their own constitution.”

---

10 Thumma, Scott October 1999.
11 Thumma, Scott October 1999.
12 Thumma, Scott October 1999.
Recent years have also brought about a host of new networks or proto-denominations as a result of denominational schisms, often around same-sex marriage, the ordination of gay clergy, and allowing women in ministry. Many of these religious bodies are counted in the current U.S. Religion Census. However, some of these groups function more like the congregationalist networks described above than the robust denominations from which they separated. These groups include ECO: A Covenant Order of Presbyterians, North American Lutheran Church, Anglican Church in North America, the Global Methodist Church, and the Evangelical Association of Reformed and Congregational Christian Churches, which describes itself as “a new association to provide an orthodox, evangelical alternative for churches and clergy choosing to stay in the UCC as well as those leaving the United Church of Christ.” Further, it claims, “recognition in this Association is fully compatible with the participation in other denominations and associations.”

An Additional Blurring of the Categories

Trying to determine exactly how many religious bodies exist and understanding the significant differences between them is challenging for the U.S. Religion Census, but the picture becomes even more complicated when the question of how many groups a congregation belongs to is raised. As said previously, the assumption is that there is one denominational affiliation per congregation, but Appendix A of the U.S. Religion Census indicates that isn’t always the case. So then, just how big is the overlap?

Appendix A reports the religious groups’ response to what they consider to be the definition of their congregations and whether these congregations can be dually-affiliated under multiple denominational labels. Their answers make for interesting reading. As a result, dozens responded that their congregations do not have to be exclusively affiliated to their denominations. Several of the more organizationally complex denominations responded in the affirmative. The American Baptist Church allows for dual affiliation but gives no estimate of the cross-affiliation amount, though experience shows it to be considerable. The United Church of Christ also affirmed dual affiliation but claimed that less than 10% of their 4,793 churches (443 in total) had dual or federated relationship with another denomination, including Baptists (21%), Methodists (26%), Presbyterians (14%), and Disciples of Christ (9%). The United Methodist Church described several ways their churches could be in multiple denominations including federated, union, merged, and yoked but offered no indication of how many of these “ecumenical congregations” there were. At the other end of the theological spectrum, the Southern Baptist Convention said dual affiliation happens, though didn’t offer a number but suggested that the “most prevalent example would be African American Baptist denominational congregations.” Another Baptist

group, the Alliance of Baptists, stated that only 20% of its churches have a singular affiliation with them, while “approximately 48% of its congregational partners also have a relationship with the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship at the national level – and a few more at the local level. Approximately 25% of the 130 congregational partners also have a relationship with American Baptist Churches USA. Approximately 8% of the 130 congregational partners have a relationship with the United Church of Christ.”

These are obvious examples of the blurring of boundaries between well-established and highly organized denominational groups on the continuum. What would the picture look like considering those that didn’t respond or those religious bodies at the less-organized end of the spectrum? Likewise, what would including the networked associations previously discussed where many churches belong to multiple groups simultaneously do to increase the overlap?

To add yet another wrinkle to this complex task, what about the groups that have been missed? There are several recent and longstanding immigrant groups that have transplanted congregations of their home denominations for which there is no organizational presence in the United States, groups such as the Cherubim and Seraphim Movement Church, the Church of Pentecost, La Luz del Mundo, and many others. These groups aren’t counted as separate religious bodies but likely should be.

And Still We Count

It is clear that the actual reality facing the U.S. Religion Census is far from a clear-cut accounting of \(x\) number of denominations with \(y\) number of exclusive congregations and \(z\) number of adherents. But even given this muddy landscape, the nation’s religious reality is composed of many distinctive denominational groups. These religious bodies, of varying complexity, create a salient identity, affiliational community, and theological coherence for many congregations.

Nevertheless, it is also clear that this denominational reality is shifting to the point that some scholars talk of a post-denominational era. There is a diminishing salience to denominational identity and a declining affinity for congregations and individual members. Likewise, denominational labels are less helpful for researchers to explain behavioral differences. There can be as much diversity within some denominational groups as there is across different ones, but denominational groupings still have a major role to play in the U.S. religious landscape. Tracking them highlights the changes across the decades and helps to better understand the ebb and flow of the nation’s faith communities. Accounting for these congregational and denominational shifts with any degree of accuracy and comprehensiveness has never been easy and is getting ever more challenging. Yet this is the mission and challenge of the U.S. Religion Census.