

Trends in US Religion Census Adherents Data, 2010-2020

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One of the features of the U.S. Religion Census data collection is that it allows for the comparison of trends in adherents over time. This enables researchers to measure, in a relatively consistent way, what congregational involvement looks like across religious bodies despite definitions of membership that may vary widely and patterns of worship attendance that may only partially encompass congregational involvement. As such, an “adherent” in this study is intended to measure the most complete count of individuals involved in a congregation and includes members, children of members, and other attendees who are not members. Adherent numbers are provided either directly from a religious body or are estimated.¹

The parameters of measuring adherence are important to note. As noted elsewhere in this volume, the data are gathered on a congregational level and not at an individual level, so they do not account for people’s personal identification or beliefs. A 2020 Pew estimate found that 30% of the U.S. population is unaffiliated with a religious group²; one might look at that figure and attempt to reconcile it with the 51.4% of the U.S. population that the 2020 U.S. Religion Census was unable to account for in their religious figures. In reality, these numbers are not directly comparable – individuals may identify with a religious group but not be an adherent of a particular congregation; moreover, an individual could be counted among the adherents of a particular congregation without necessarily personally identifying with that group.³ Ultimately, the figures from the U.S. Religion Census capture organizational rather than personal affiliation and data should be interpreted through this lens.

Other limitations to note include that individuals may be involved with more than one congregation; while some religious groups may have a way of counting an individual only once who is involved with more than one congregation within a particular religious group, few religious groups likely capture this information reliably and there is no way to capture this if someone is involved with multiple congregations across religious groups. Also, close observers of the data may see that some counties have overall adherence rates that are higher than the county population; this is a result of congregations being counted within the county it resides while the actual adherents may travel from counties outside the

congregation’s county in order to participate. Therefore, the adherents are counted in the county of the congregation and not the counties in which they reside, resulting in adherent totals in some cases that are not aligned with a county’s population. These phenomena also likely occur on a state level when congregations are near a state border, though these instances would not be detectable on the scale of a state in the same way that they are detectable on a county scale. In addition, estimation errors and/or reporting errors from religious bodies may further contribute to instances where adherence rates exceed the county population.

This chapter will examine patterns of religious adherence in the United States at the national and state levels, focusing particularly on the states with the most and fewest adherents, adherent growth and decline, and the most notable changes in adherence rates between 2010 and 2020. While the analyses provided in this chapter are certainly not exhaustive, they will provide an overview of adherence trends between 2010 and 2020 and may indicate potential directions for further research.

National Trends in Adherents

In comparing population and adherence trends nationally between 2010 and 2020, the overarching story for both is numerical growth.^{4 5} Both the U.S. population and the number of adherents claimed by religious congregations has grown since 2010, and at relatively comparable rates. See Table 1 for specific numbers. As a result, the adherents as a percentage of the population in the United States is virtually unchanged in the decade between 2010 and 2020: across the United States, in 2010 religious congregations claimed 48.8% of the population; the same figure was 48.6% in 2020. While

Table 1: National Trends in Population and Adherence Patterns, 2010 and 2020

	2010	2020
U.S. Population	308,745,538	331,449,281
U.S. Adherents	150,596,762	161,224,088
Adherents as a % of Population	48.8%	48.6%

¹ Details on estimation procedures are available at the study’s website, <https://www.usreligioncensus.org/node/1638>.

² <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2022/09/13/modeling-the-future-of-religion-in-america/>

³ Adherent data is unavailable for 84 of 236 participating religious bodies in 2010 and for 156 of 373 reporting religious bodies in 2020.

⁴ Note that the data discussed in this chapter includes state totals for 2010 and 2020 regardless of which religious bodies reported in those years.

⁵ In comparing only religious bodies that reported both in 2010 and 2020, a growth pattern is also observed, though at a slight lower rate: across all religious bodies, the overall percent increase in adherents was 7.1%; among only those bodies that reported in both 2020, the percent increase was 5.1%.

the overall percentage of religious adherents in the United States has remained stable, the distribution of affiliation for these adherents among religious groups has changed. As other chapters will address in greater detail, these changes have largely been driven by the growth in independent, non-denominational Christian churches, the growth in non-Christian religious bodies, and the concurrent decline among many Christian denominations.

In comparing the adherent maps of 2010 (Map 1) and 2020 (Map 2), some areas have increased in density of adherents where others have decreased. The highest concentrations of adherents continue to be in the middle band of the country, but as the subsequent tables will show, areas of growth have not been limited to that part of the country.

State Trends in Adherents

While the overall story at the national level is one of proportional population and adherent growth, the story becomes more varied at the state level. Population growth and decline and adherent growth and decline were concentrated in particular areas.

Where the areas of most growth and decline by number and by percent can tell very different stories, these examinations begin to shed light on the complicated portrait of adherent trends in the United States. This section is divided into two parts, the first focusing on the states with the highest levels of adherents, adherent growth, and

highest adherence rates. The second section will focus on the lowest levels of adherents, adherent decline, and the lowest adherence rates.

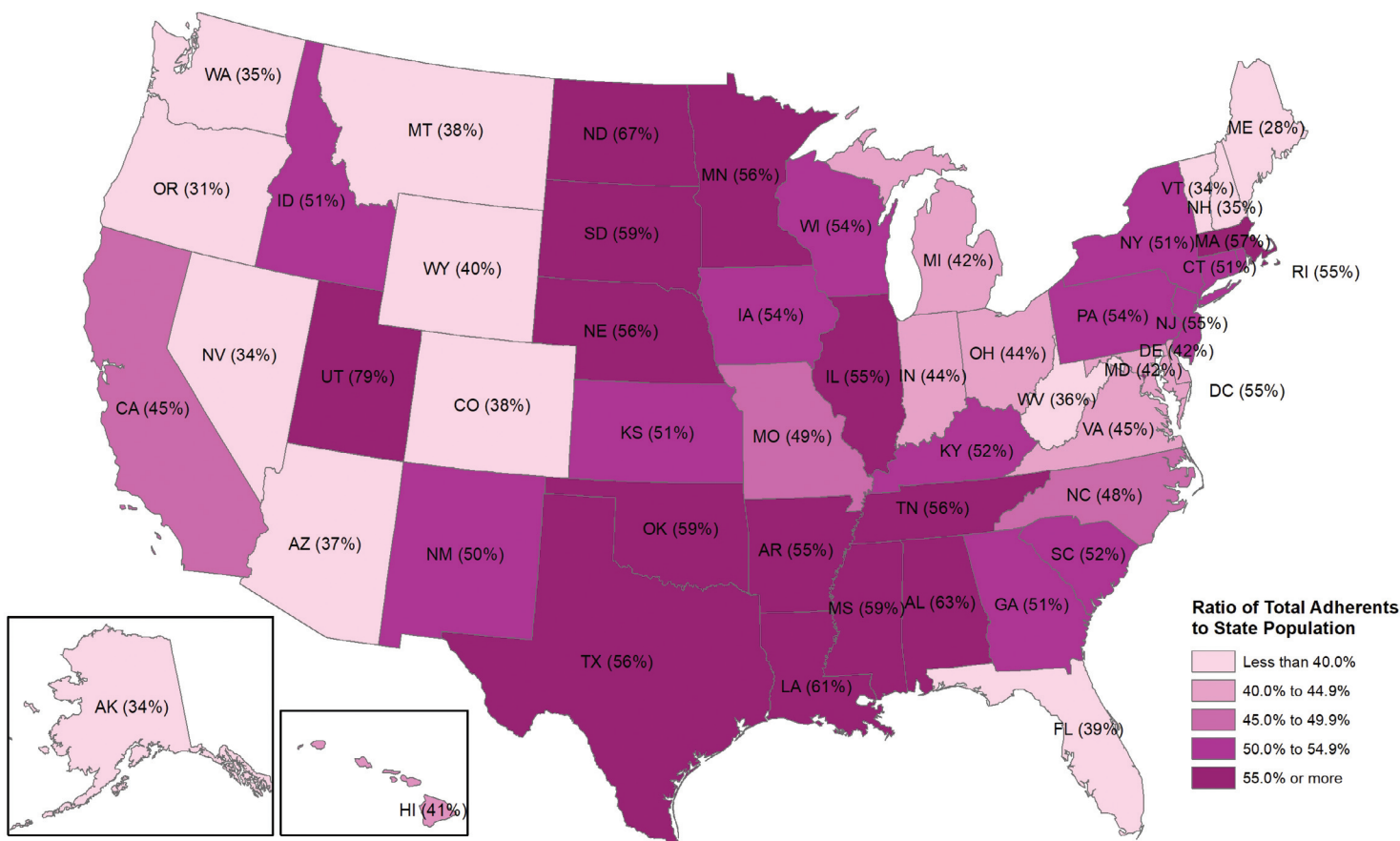
Growth in Adherents and Adherence Rates

Understanding the shifts in adherents as a percentage of population at a state level benefits from some context in both population and adherent counts and changes over the past decade. First, a look at the population extremes among states. The 10 states with the highest populations in 2010 and 2020 are shown in Table 2.

What is particularly notable from this table is the population of the biggest state, California, is nearly four times that of the tenth state on this list, Michigan; the 2020 population of Michigan is also approximately the population difference between California and the second most populous state in 2020, Texas. Overall, the most highly populated states are extremely so, even in comparison with other highly populated states. In addition, the list of states with the most population in 2010 are the same as those in 2020, though with a slightly different order.

In Table 3, the states with the most adherents is nearly identical in 2010 and 2020 and nearly identical to the population rankings, but with New Jersey appearing only in the adherent top 10 and Michigan appearing only in the population top 10. California and Texas continue to dominate the top two spots, while the gulf between

Map 1: Religious Adherents as a Percentage of State Population, 2010



Based on total adherents reported in 2010 U.S. Religion Census.

Table 2: States with the Highest Populations, 2010 and 2020

Rank	State 2010	Population 2010	State 2020	Population 2020
1	California	37,253,956	California	39,538,223
2	Texas	25,145,561	Texas	29,145,505
3	New York	19,378,102	Florida	21,538,187
4	Florida	18,801,310	New York	20,201,249
5	Illinois	12,830,632	Pennsylvania	13,002,700
6	Pennsylvania	12,702,379	Illinois	12,812,508
7	Ohio	11,536,504	Ohio	11,799,448
8	Michigan	9,883,640	Georgia	10,711,908
9	Georgia	9,687,653	North Carolina	10,439,388
10	North Carolina	9,535,483	Michigan	10,077,331

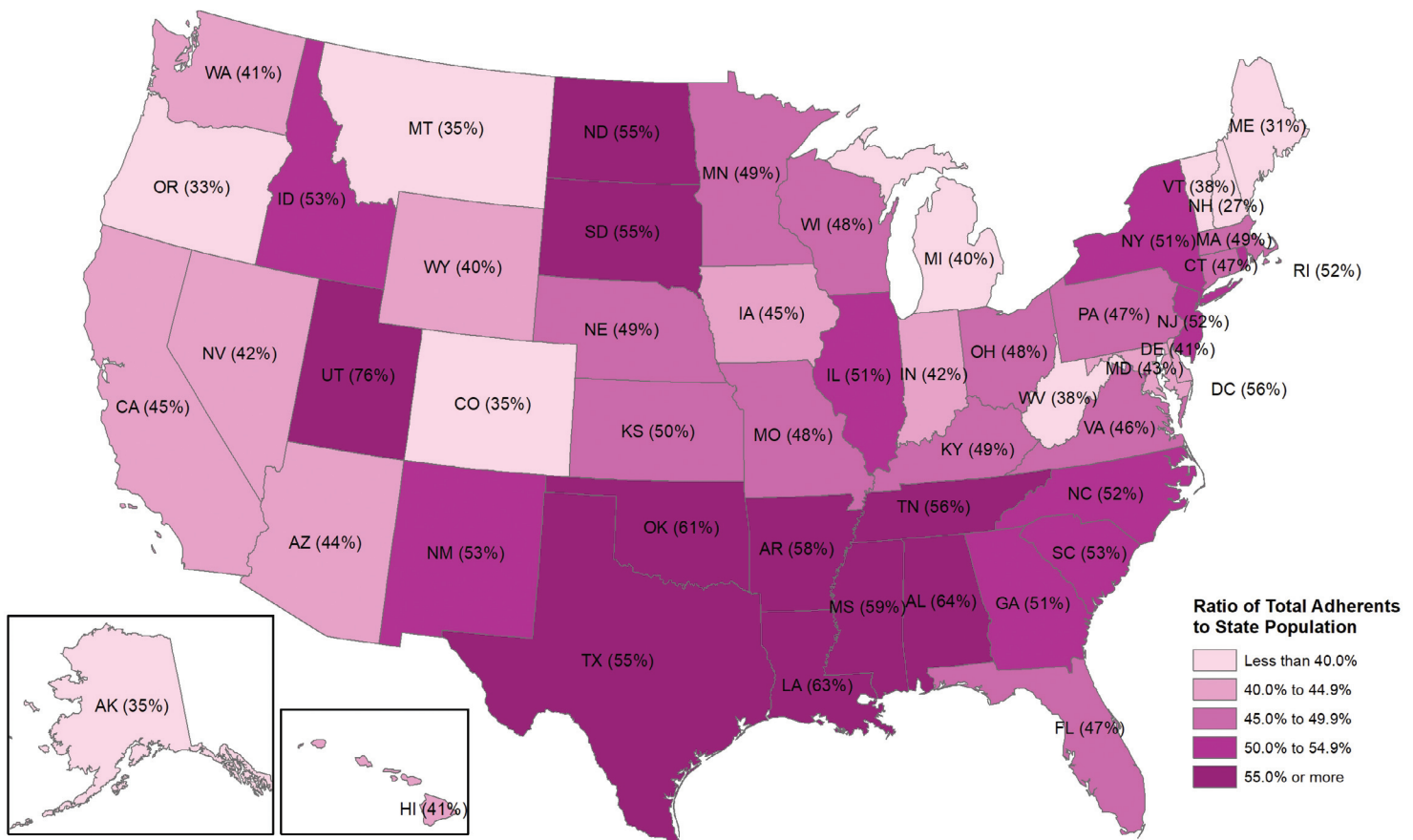
Table 3: States with the Most Adherents, 2010-2020

Rank	State 2010	Adherents 2010	State 2020	Adherents 2020
1	California	16,765,751	California	17,726,437
2	Texas	13,994,564	Texas	16,045,479
3	New York	9,923,512	New York	10,347,548
4	Florida	7,357,588	Florida	10,140,053
5	Illinois	7,094,832	Illinois	6,510,363
6	Pennsylvania	6,838,440	Pennsylvania	6,097,345
7	Ohio	5,071,684	Ohio	5,646,238
8	Georgia	4,924,376	North Carolina	5,443,737
9	New Jersey	4,809,520	Georgia	5,439,946
10	North Carolina	4,530,365	New Jersey	4,846,460

numbers is much narrower. As it was in Table 2 with population data, California's number of adherents is approaching four times that of the #10 ranked state. At this level, it appears that the largest states also had the most adherents and persisted in doing so between 2010 and 2020.

Shifting focus to the changes in population and adherents between 2010 and 2020 in Table 4, however, tells a different story. Only two states with the highest populations – Texas and Florida – were among the top ten in terms of the highest percent change in population growth in the country. Will some of these states eventually

Map 2: Religious Adherents as a Percentage of State Population, 2020



Based on total adherents reported in 2020 U.S. Religion Census.

supplant those on the list of states with the highest populations or adherents? Perhaps. One thing the previous tables demonstrate, though, is the sheer magnitude of size of the largest states. Utah may have had the most population growth proportionately in the decade between 2010 and 2020, but its 2020 population of 3,271,616 is only 8% of California's 2020 population. Moreover, California's gain in population in that time frame was 2,284,267, which is about two thirds of Utah's entire total population in 2020. What this perhaps illustrates, then, is that there are a lot of stories in these data and they can look very different depending on how the data is examined, given differences in size and scope of states.

In the adherents column, the states with the most growth in adherents are not entirely the same as the states with the most growth in population. North Carolina had a more sizable relative gain in adherents than population, with 9.48% population growth 2010-2020 compared to 20.16% growth in adherents, though the numeric changes were strikingly similar—a 903,905 person gain in population and a 913,372 person gain in adherents. Oregon and Vermont also had higher rates of growth in adherents than in population. Notably, Oregon and Vermont both still have relatively low rates of adherence (33.18% and 37.63%, respectively), so one should note that states appearing on this list may have grown in the relative proportion of their adherents as a proportion of their state population but are not necessarily those states with the most adherents overall – in fact, Oregon and Vermont are 49th and 45th in country for adherents as a percentage of population overall in 2020. Utah did not appear in the top 10 states for percent growth in adherents, but is number 12 overall, with slightly slower growth in adherents compared to population (13.87 % compared to 18.37%). The overall pattern suggests that some growth of religious adherents in these states may be tied to population growth, but not exclusively.

Examining adherents as a percentage of the population, in Table 5, shows that the overall adherence rates for the top ten states

are slightly lower in 2020 than they were in 2010, which is reflective of a slight overall decline in the mean and median adherence rates over that decade (48.47% and 50.83% in 2010 and 47.79% and 48.04% in 2020, respectively). Utah retained the highest percentage of adherents by population, though at a slightly lower proportion than in 2010, reflecting the higher rate of population increases compared to adherent increases in the state during that time frame. While the composition of the top ten states with the highest adherence rates in both years are similar, a few positions have changed. A few states have fallen off the top ten while others have been added to the list. North Dakota, for instance, was a top state for population growth, with a 15.83% increase between 2010 and 2020, but actually declined in its number of adherents, with 5.05% fewer in 2020 than 2010, suggesting that the population gains in North Dakota may be among groups that are not religious adherents, as is likely the case in states with similar patterns. In contrast, Texas was among the top 10 states for proportion of religious adherents by population in 2020, though with relatively similar rates of population and adherent growth – 15.91% and 14.66%, respectively – it appears that Texas' population growth may be accounting for much of its growth in adherents; or at least that those increasing Texas' population in 2020 are similar in terms of their religious adherence to those present in the state in 2010.

Finally, to conclude the analysis of adherent and adherence increases, the ten states with the greatest gains in adherents as percentage of population are examined – that is, the states with the biggest increase in the overall percentage of adherents as a proportion of the population in 2020 compared to 2010, which is in contrast to an increase in adherents numerically or by percent change. Florida had the biggest difference between 2010 and 2020, with the percentage of its population claimed by a religious congregation increasing from 39.13% to 47.08%. Notably, though, Florida's gains do not mean that it is among the highest states for adherents as a percent-

Table 4: States with the Highest Percentage Changes in Population and Adherents, 2010 and 2020

% Change in Population			% Change in Adherents		
Rank	State	% Change 2010-2020	Rank	State	% Change 2010-2020
1	Utah	18.37%	1	Nevada	39.21%
2	Idaho	17.32%	2	Florida	37.82%
3	Texas	15.91%	3	Washington	36.80%
4	North Dakota	15.83%	4	Arizona	32.41%
5	Nevada	14.96%	5	Idaho	20.99%
6	Colorado	14.80%	6	North Carolina	20.16%
7	District of Columbia	14.60%	7	Oregon	17.68%
8	Washington	14.58%	8	District of Columbia	17.12%
9	Florida	14.56%	9	Vermont	15.03%
10	Arizona	11.88%	10	Texas	14.66%

Table 5: States with the Most Adherents as a Percentage of Population

Rank	State 2010	Adherents as a % of Population 2010	State 2020	Adherents as a % of Population 2020
1	Utah	79.11%	Utah	76.10%
2	North Dakota	67.12%	Alabama	63.60%
3	Alabama	62.92%	Louisiana	63.32%
4	Louisiana	60.59%	Oklahoma	61.17%
5	Oklahoma	59.35%	Mississippi	59.43%
6	Mississippi	58.74%	Arkansas	57.76%
7	South Dakota	58.57%	District of Columbia	56.45%
8	Massachusetts	57.24%	Tennessee	55.64%
9	Minnesota	56.31%	South Dakota	55.38%
10	Nebraska	55.66%	Texas	55.05%

Table 6: States with the Largest Increase in Adherents as a % of Population, 2010-2020

Rank	State	Adherents as a % of Population 2010	Adherents as a % of Population 2020	Net Difference Between 2010 and 2020
1	Florida	39.13%	47.08%	7.95%
2	Nevada	34.36%	41.61%	7.25%
3	Arizona	37.23%	44.07%	6.83%
4	Washington	34.62%	41.33%	6.71%
5	North Carolina	47.51%	52.15%	4.64%
6	Vermont	33.62%	37.63%	4.01%
7	Ohio	43.96%	47.85%	3.89%
8	Maine	27.63%	30.79%	3.16%
9	Louisiana	60.59%	63.32%	2.73%
10	New Mexico	50.08%	52.51%	2.44%

age of population – Florida was 40th overall on that measure in 2010 and moved up to 29th overall in 2020, which is still below the median value for 2020. Notably, these are all states that experienced growth in both population and adherents but a higher growth rate in adherents than in population, suggesting that these differences weren't driven by population growth alone and that other factors may have contributed to these states having notably higher rates of adherence in 2020 than in 2010.

Decline in Adherents and Adherence Rates

While the previous review of data showed where population, adherents, and adherence rates are increasing in the country, this analysis focuses on where these factors are the lowest or are most in decline. As suggested earlier, the states with the largest net gains in adherence between 2010 and 2020 or the highest adherent rates are not necessarily the states with the most adherents. Similar to the highest population states, the list of lowest population states is relatively unchanged other than a slight shuffling of order and the change between New Hampshire and Maine on the list. For a sense of scale, the 2020 population of Wyoming, the least populated state, is 1.5% of the population of California, the most populated state, which has approximately 67 times the population of Wyoming. Also, notably North Dakota and the District of Columbia were among the states with the highest percent increase in population, though they remain among the least populated states. Some of this is an artifact of calculating percentage change – that is, an equal sized increase in population in Wyoming and California will equate to a much bigger percentage increase in Wyoming than in California, even if the numeric increase is equal.

Vermont, despite having high percentage gains in adherents over the decadal period – 9th among states overall – only moved up one place from the last spot in the list of fewest adherents in that

Table 7: States with the Lowest Populations, 2010 and 2020

Rank	State 2010	Population 2010	State 2020	Population 2020
42	New Hampshire	1,316,470	Maine	1,362,359
43	Rhode Island	1,052,567	Rhode Island	1,097,379
44	Montana	989,415	Montana	1,084,225
45	Delaware	897,934	Delaware	989,948
46	South Dakota	814,180	South Dakota	886,667
47	Alaska	710,231	North Dakota	779,094
48	North Dakota	672,591	Alaska	733,391
49	Vermont	625,741	District of Columbia	689,545
50	District of Columbia	601,723	Vermont	643,077
51	Wyoming	563,626	Wyoming	576,851

Note – 51 states are ranked due to the inclusion of Washington, DC.

same time interval (see Table 8). Overall, the states with the fewest adherents remained the same between 2010 and 2020, with a slight reordering of states. The most notable change may be New Hampshire, which fell from 43rd to 48th on the list, having increased 4.64% in population but decreased 18.98% in adherents. North Dakota is the only other state on this list that lost adherents between 2010 and 2020, but nevertheless rose higher on the list, likely owing to robust population growth – the fourth-highest percentage overall for states in 2020 (see Table 4).

Comparing the percentage changes in population and adherents (Table 9), three states were among the lowest in both categories: Pennsylvania, Connecticut, and Illinois. Illinois was the only state between 2010-2020 that lost both population and religious adherents,

Table 8: States with the Fewest Adherents, 2010-2020

Rank	State 2010	Adherents 2010	State 2020	Adherents 2020
42	South Dakota	476,832	South Dakota	491,026
43	New Hampshire	462,772	North Dakota	428,647
44	North Dakota	451,456	Maine	419,523
45	Montana	376,976	Delaware	409,412
46	Delaware	374,917	District of Columbia	389,241
47	Maine	367,043	Montana	377,713
48	District of Columbia	332,342	New Hampshire	374,948
49	Alaska	240,833	Alaska	258,020
50	Wyoming	223,074	Vermont	242,017
51	Vermont	210,391	Wyoming	233,016

though the rate of adherent loss was much higher than population loss: 8.24% decline in adherents but a 0.14% decline in population. While this is a small percentage decrease in population, it still represents a net loss of 18,124 people. In terms of adherent loss, given the size of the state, the decrease is numerically substantial – a net loss of 584,469 adherents, which is greater than the entire 2020 population of Wyoming (576,851). Overall, more states had declines in adherents than declines in population – three states lost population (Illinois, Mississippi, and West Virginia) while 15 states lost adherents, three of which had percent decreases in the double digits (New Hampshire, Iowa, and Pennsylvania).

Considering the list of states that have the fewest adherents as a percentage of their population (Table 10), a few states with the lowest percentages in 2010 have since increased relative to other states (Arizona, Washington, and Nevada), while Wyoming, Michigan, and Montana are now among the ten states with the fewest adherents as a percentage of population. As noted earlier in this chapter, Nevada had the highest percentage increase in adherents among all states, which resulted in Nevada moving from 47th overall among states on this metric to 38th – a substantial gain, but still below the median. Interestingly, while the lowest proportion of adherents as a percentage of population among states has remained between 27 and 28 percent, the state at this lowest value has changed (Maine in 2010 and New Hampshire in 2020). Overall, the range of percentages represented here is slightly narrower between 2010 and 2020, which is reflected in the narrower standard deviation in 2020 than 2010 for percentage of population affiliated (10.28% in 2010 compared to 9.11% in 2020). While the lowest percentage has remained similar, the highest percentage has dropped slightly, as shown in Table 5 (79.11% in 2010 compared to 76.10% in 2020).

Finally, in looking at the biggest negative net differences in adherents as a percentage of the population (Table 11), North Dakota had the largest decrease and the only double-digit net difference

Table 10: States with the Fewest Adherents as a Percentage of Population

Rank	State 2010	Adherents as a % of Population 2010	State 2020	Adherents as a % of Population 2020
42	Colorado	37.82%	Wyoming	40.39%
43	Arizona	37.23%	Michigan	39.68%
44	West Virginia	35.53%	West Virginia	37.78%
45	New Hampshire	35.15%	Vermont	37.63%
46	Washington	34.62%	Colorado	35.41%
47	Nevada	34.36%	Alaska	35.18%
48	Alaska	33.91%	Montana	34.84%
49	Vermont	33.62%	Oregon	33.18%
50	Oregon	31.19%	Maine	30.79%
51	Maine	27.63%	New Hampshire	27.22%

between 2010 and 2020; as mentioned previously, this is likely the result of a combination of major population gains and adherent losses. Also notable on this table, the net differences here are larger than the net increases from earlier in this chapter (see Table 6); this perhaps not surprising given that while the national trend in adherents as a percentage of population was relatively consistent between 2010-2020, the overall percentage of adherents relative to total population did decline slightly and that is likely to manifest more discernably in individual states (and especially in individual counties). One other noteworthy feature of this final table is that about half of the states in this table have not appeared in the other

Table 9: States with the Lowest Percentage Changes in Population and Adherents, 2010 and 2020

% Change in Population			% Change in Adherents		
Rank	State	% Change 2010-2020	Rank	State	% Change 2010-2020
42	Louisiana	2.74%	42	North Dakota	-5.05%
43	Maine	2.56%	43	Minnesota	-5.43%
44	Pennsylvania	2.36%	44	Kansas	-6.38%
45	Wyoming	2.35%	45	Connecticut	-6.70%
46	Ohio	2.28%	46	Wisconsin	-7.08%
47	Michigan	1.96%	47	Illinois	-8.24%
48	Connecticut	0.89%	48	Massachusetts	-8.77%
49	Illinois	-0.14%	49	Pennsylvania	-10.84%
50	Mississippi	-0.20%	50	Iowa	-12.85%
51	West Virginia	-3.20%	51	New Hampshire	-18.98%

Table 11: States with the Largest Decrease in Adherents as a % of Population, 2010-2020

Rank	State	Adherents as a % of Population 2010	Adherents as a % of Population 2020	Net Difference Between 2010 and 2020
42	Illinois	55.30%	50.81%	-4.48%
43	Kansas	50.63%	46.03%	-4.60%
44	Wisconsin	53.59%	48.04%	-5.54%
45	Nebraska	55.66%	49.28%	-6.38%
46	Minnesota	56.31%	49.49%	-6.81%
47	Pennsylvania	53.84%	46.89%	-6.94%
48	New Hampshire	35.15%	27.22%	-7.93%
49	Massachusetts	57.24%	48.64%	-8.60%
50	Iowa	53.91%	44.86%	-9.05%
51	North Dakota	67.12%	55.02%	-12.10%

tables in this chapter. Most of these states are at or above the median adherence rate for 2020, suggesting that generally these states have not been extreme in other ways aside from declining overall adherence rates – and perhaps further signaling the variety of forces that may be at work that result in the trends that have been overviewed in this chapter. For example, Minnesota had a -6.81% net difference between the state's 2010 and 2020 adherence rates, which was among the highest for that time period. The population grew in Minnesota, however, by 7.37% in that time period, which was close to average across all states (7.02%); in addition, the state was close to the middle of all states in rank of adherents and population for 2020 (both 22nd) as well as rank of adherents as a % of population (21st, though 9th in 2010). Therefore, while Minnesota may not be notable on the aforementioned metrics, the state appears to be declining in adherents for reasons that may be separate from population change.

Conclusion

In conclusion, how does one begin to interpret the many, varying, and at times opposing changes that have been presented here? Clearly, how one views changes in adherents depends heavily on the perspective of the question being asked. For instance, questions of scale may note the massive numeric growth in population and adherents in California or the trends of Pennsylvania, also among the states with the most adherents, but where the population has increased slightly while adherents have declined in both absolute number (-741,095) and as a percentage of all adherents (10.84%). Questions of proportion may focus on less populated states with dramatic relative changes, such as Nevada's substantial gains in population and adherents or North Dakota's simultaneous and large relative increases in population and decreases in adherents. To truly understand these trends will require investigation into factors including sources of population growth, immigration, arrival of new religious movements, religious conversion, death rates among the religious adherents, and arrivals of the nonreligious, among many other considerations, some of which will be addressed at other places in this volume. While this chapter is by no means comprehensive in its evaluation of adherent trends, hopefully it has identified key areas of interest for the deep well of research that could be conducted from U.S. Religion Census data.