

# THE PARISH PAPER

## IDEAS AND INSIGHTS FOR ACTIVE CONGREGATIONS

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### Where Are the Unchurched?

About half of all Americans are affiliated with a church or congregation.<sup>1</sup> However, some parts of the country—like the Northeast, New Mexico, and Texas—with high percentages of Catholics, boast high affiliation rates. In these places, a congregation of some kind claims almost 59 percent of the population. Some upper Midwestern states—Nebraska, the Dakotas, Minnesota, Iowa, and Wisconsin—are also highly churched. Western states typically show the lowest affiliation rates.

American congregational geography reveals a church landscape marked by dispersion and concentration. Churches affiliated with the largest U.S. denominations are *not* uniformly spread across the country.

*Dispersion:* Of 236 major U.S. religious organizations, only twenty-one denominational groups report adherents in all fifty states and the District of Columbia.

*Concentration:* Yet many of these twenty-one denominational groups' adherents are also extremely concentrated geographically. All twenty-one groups report that at least half of their adherents live in just ten states. Here are some of the major differences in denominational dispersion and concentration patterns.

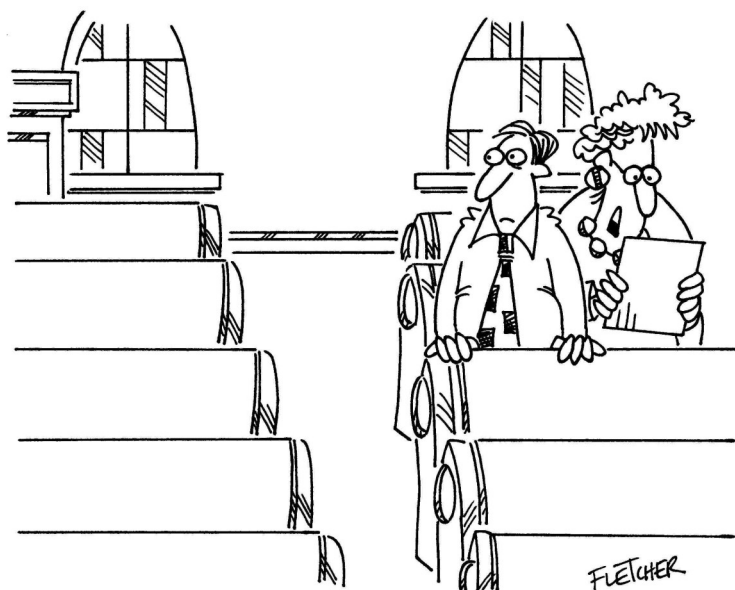
- United Methodists and Unitarian/Universalists are the *least* concentrated geographically (55% and 54% of their adherents, respectively, reside in just ten states).
- Other groups are slightly more concentrated, such as the Salvation Army and Presbyterians (58% of adherents reside in just ten states).
- Much more concentrated than other groups are Churches of Christ and Southern Baptists (72% and 75% of adherents, respectively, reside in just ten states).
- Muslims are *most* concentrated (86% of adherents reside in just ten states), with Mormons following not far behind (76% of adherents reside in just ten states). One in three Mormons resides in Utah.

The dispersion and concentration of religious groups affects how their members feel. Worshipers in low-concentration regions of their denomination may feel like outsiders or an overlooked minority. At the same time, holding a unique religious status in the community can fuel a cohesive, congregational identity and a strong sense of belonging among members.

The dispersion-concentration factor influences what effective congregations *do* as well. What works in one church setting will not necessarily work in another community with a different religious geography.<sup>2</sup>

#### Updating the Religion Atlas

In 1952, religious demographers began collecting information on congregations and adherents for every state and county. The Religion Census replicated that effort in 1971, 1980, 1990, 2000, and 2010. Their most recent census identifies 344,984 congregations with a total of just over 150 million adherents.



THESE NEW STATISTICS SAY OUR CHURCH  
IS REALLY POPULAR WITH PEOPLE  
WHO BELIEVE BUT DON'T BELONG.

The Religion Census shows that Mormons (Latter-day Saints), Muslims, and nondenominational Christians are on the rise across the country. In fact, the Mormon denomination is the fastest growing group in about one-third of the states. The Muslim population is growing at a faster rate than the general population, which grew about 10 percent between 2000 and 2010. Other faith groups experiencing significant growth include Pentecostals, Evangelicals, and Unitarian Universalists. Both Buddhists and Hindus have temples in most states now—adding to greater religious diversity in the western states and northern New England.

The new census also brings to light the impressive size of the nondenominational movement. Nondenominational and independent churches are now the third largest faith group, with more than 12 million adherents, claiming 4 percent of the U.S. population.<sup>3</sup> In 48 states, nondenominational churches rank in the top five religious groups.

### **Americans Are Spiritual but Unchurched**

This news challenges any prevailing myth that there is no one for churches to reach in their community. The past decade of change often hinders church leaders from a current feel for how many of their neighbors are unchurched. Members can also lose track of who really lives around the church.

Many people identify themselves as Christian, Protestant, Catholic, Jewish, Muslim, or something else, yet do not affiliate with a specific church, parish, temple, or mosque.<sup>4</sup> The rising tide of unaffiliated Americans is not evidence of increasing secularism because polls consistently show that most adults still believe in a personal God (seven out of ten adults). Why people continue to believe but decline to belong is an important question for all faith communities. This new information leads us to ask the right kinds of questions about the people in our community and can direct our focus outward. The essential jump is from this new information to action.

### **Map the Unchurched in Your Community**

The Religion Census website provides information for every county in the U.S., and allows users to chart religious trends in their community. The website also displays national maps that show the geographic concentration of all major denominations.

First, go to [www.thearda.com/rcms2010/](http://www.thearda.com/rcms2010/) and select the county where your church is located. Next, make a list of the ten largest denominational groups in your county based on the number of adherents in 2010.

Also record the number of adherents for each of these top ten denominations and the percentage of the county population the number represents.<sup>5</sup> (The website displays this information.) Finally, discuss with your leadership group:

- How does the unaffiliated percentage in our county compare to the national average of 49 percent unaffiliated?
- Compare the 2010 report to the report from 2000 on the website. Are the county's *largest* faith groups growing or declining in number of adherents? Is our congregation in one of the largest denominations?
- What implications does this growth or decline have for our congregation?
- In what ways does the religious makeup of our region influence how worshipers feel about their affiliation with our congregation?
- In what other ways does the religious profile of our county shape our congregation's ministries?

### **The Bottom Line**

Each congregation's ministry occupies a niche within a specific religious landscape. Every church location holds the potential to be "a holy place because the reign of God can come anywhere. For Jesus, the holiness of a place is dependent . . . on whether the signs of the kingdom's presence are there."<sup>6</sup> Is your congregation called to be a local expression of the kingdom of God? What is God's intention for your congregation in this place?

1. Information in this article is from *2010 U.S. Religion Census: The Religious Congregations and Membership Study* (Association of Statisticians of American Religious Bodies: 2012), [www.thearda.com/rcms2010/](http://www.thearda.com/rcms2010/).
2. Cynthia Woolever and Deborah Bruce, *Places of Promise: Finding Strength in Your Congregation's Location* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 27.
3. In comparison, the United Methodist Church membership claims about 3 percent of the U.S. population.
4. Robert C. Fuller, *Spiritual, but not Religious: Understanding Unchurched America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).
5. Trey Hammond's "Leader Guide for Places of Promise" provides a worksheet for this exercise (<http://www.uscongregations.org/pdf/leaderguide.pdf>), 22-24. The guide has other sessions to help groups develop a local theology of place.
6. Robert M. Hamma, *Landscapes of the Soul: A Spirituality of Place* (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 1999), 84.