

Quick Answers to Important Questions from the U.S. Religion Census

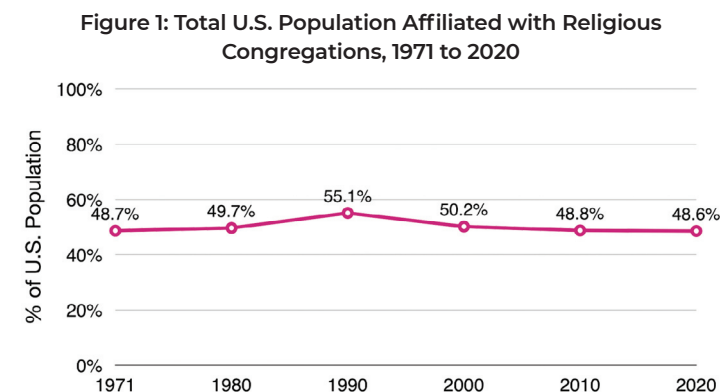
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1. Which religious body has the strongest presence in the United States?

The answer to this question depends on how “presence” is understood and measured. If judged by the number of adherents, the Catholic Church is the largest religious body. With 61,858,137 adherents, it accounts for 38.4% of all U.S. religious adherents (161,224,088). But if we consider the number of congregations, then the Southern Baptist Convention is the largest religious body. It has 51,379 congregations, which is 14.4% of all U.S. religious congregations (356,642). Finally, if we think about geography, the United Methodist Church is the most widespread religious body. Of the 3,143 counties in the United States, it has congregations in 2,989 of them (i.e., in 95% of all U.S. counties or county equivalents). So, all three of these religious bodies can claim to have the strongest presence in America.

2. Is it true that religion is “dying” in the United States and – as time goes by – fewer and fewer people are participating in religious congregations?

Looking at the data from U.S. Religion Census collected over the past several decades, the answer to this question is: “Not really.” Figure 1 shows the number of adherents of various religious congregations as a percentage of the total U.S. population in a given year. Both fifty years ago and in 2020, about half of all Americans participated in the lives of local congregations.



3. Which U.S. states can be seen as the most religious and which are most “unchurched”?

Clearly, there are many manifestations of religiosity, and many different ways to measure it. One possible approach is to think about the percentage of people in each state’s total population who participate in local religious congregations. Nationwide, 48.6% of Americans are adherents of various congregations. However, this percentage varies considerably from state to state.

Based on the U.S. Religion Census, the following five states come out on top in terms of the percentage of their total population that is involved in religious congregations: Utah (76.1%), Alabama (63.6%), Louisiana (63.3%), Oklahoma (61.2%), and Mississippi (59.4%). On the opposite end, these are the five states with the lowest rates of involvement in religious congregations: New Hampshire (27.2%), Maine (30.8%), Oregon (33.2%), Montana (34.8%), and Alaska (35.2%).

Map 1 shows that the entire Southeast portion of the country (except Florida) forms one solid macro-region where a majority of the population participates in congregations. In contrast, the American West and Northwest (except Idaho) form another macro-region in which less than half of the population is involved in local religious communities.

4. Which U.S. states have the best “religious infrastructures” that give residents the easiest access to congregations?

To answer this question, we need to assess the geographic proximity of religious congregations: that is, in which states do people have to travel the least distance to get to places of worship?

Table 1 helps to examine this issue. Looking at the entire country, on average America has about 9 congregations per 100 square miles. But there are vast differences among the states in terms of the geographic “density” of congregations and, therefore, the distances between them.

The following five states offer their residents the best possibility to live close to a religious congregation: New Jersey (69.6 congregations per 100 sq. mi.), Connecticut (52.1), Maryland (46.1), Rhode Island (45.8), and Massachusetts (41.3).

In contrast, the five states with the lowest concentration of congregations are: Alaska (0.2 per 100 sq. mi.), Wyoming (1.0), Montana (1.2), Nevada (1.4), New Mexico (2.0), and North Dakota (2.1). Map 2 helps to visualize how uneven the geographic distribution of religious congregations throughout the United States really is.

Map 1: Adherents of all Religious Congregations as Percent of Population, 2020

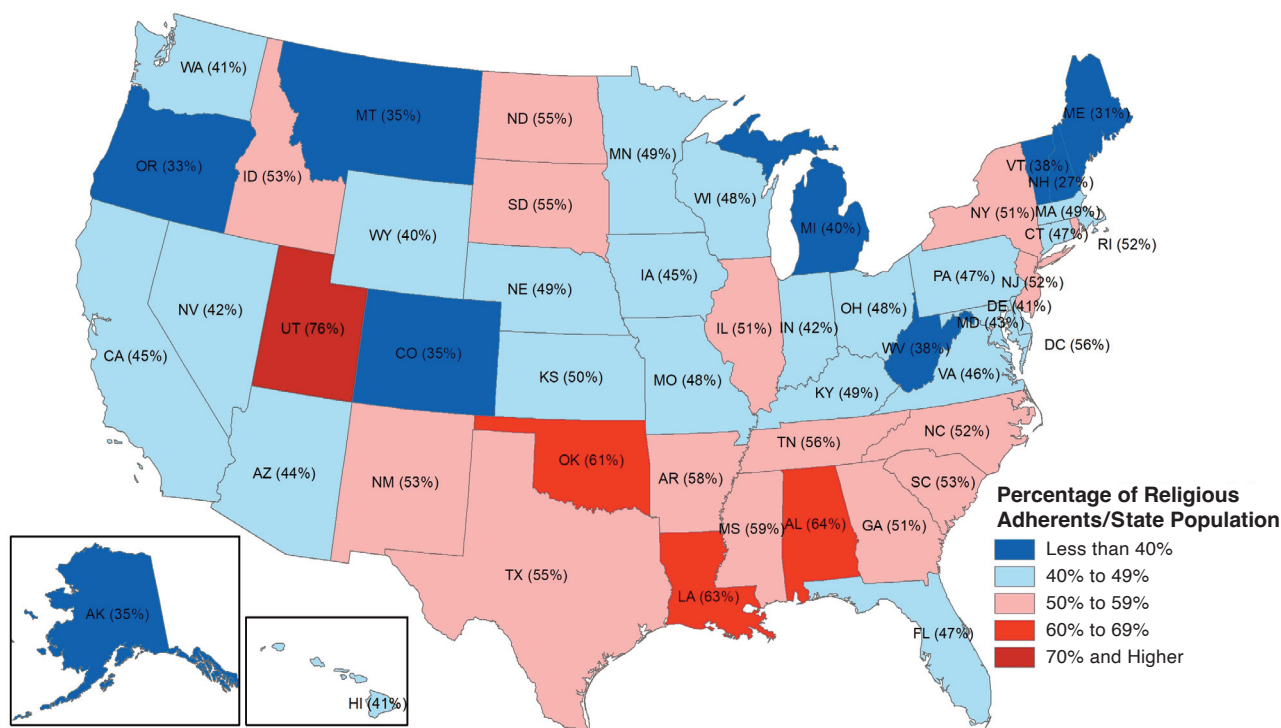


Table 1: State-by-State Geographic Density of Congregations
(Number of Congregations per 100 Square Miles)

State	Congregations per 100 Square Miles	State	Congregations per 100 Square Miles
Alabama	20.5	Nebraska	3.7
Alaska	0.2	Nevada	1.4
Arizona	4.6	New Hampshire	11.2
Arkansas	14.0	New Jersey	69.6
California	14.4	New Mexico	2.0
Colorado	4.2	New York	25.3
Connecticut	52.1	North Carolina	30.1
Delaware	38.8	North Dakota	2.1
Florida	26.6	Ohio	31.0
Georgia	21.7	Oklahoma	10.3
Hawaii	13.0	Oregon	4.1
Idaho	3.0	Pennsylvania	32.9
Illinois	20.9	Rhode Island	45.8
Indiana	24.8	South Carolina	25.6
Iowa	8.6	South Dakota	2.6
Kansas	5.6	Tennessee	31.8
Kentucky	20.2	Texas	11.1
Louisiana	12.6	Utah	7.1
Maine	4.4	Vermont	8.6
Maryland	46.1	Virginia	24.5
Massachusetts	41.3	Washington	8.7
Michigan	10.0	West Virginia	16.8
Minnesota	6.9	Wisconsin	9.4
Mississippi	14.8	Wyoming	1.0
Missouri	13.0		
Montana	1.2	USA Nationwide	9.4

Map 3 is another way to show the differences among the states in terms of the geographic concentration of various congregations. This map is called a cartogram. It resizes the territory of each state in proportion to the number of religious congregations situated in the state. For example, according to the 2020 U.S. Religion Census, Florida had 17,511 congregations, while Alaska had only 1,264. Therefore, on this map Florida is shown as 13.8 times larger than Alaska, although the geographic size of Alaska is about 10 times larger than Florida!

5. Which U.S. states can be seen as religiously most diverse?

There are two ways to answer this question. The first is to assess the variety of religious choices in each state. That is, in some American states, residents have access to religious congregations affiliated with a wide variety of religious bodies, while in other states they may have much less choice.

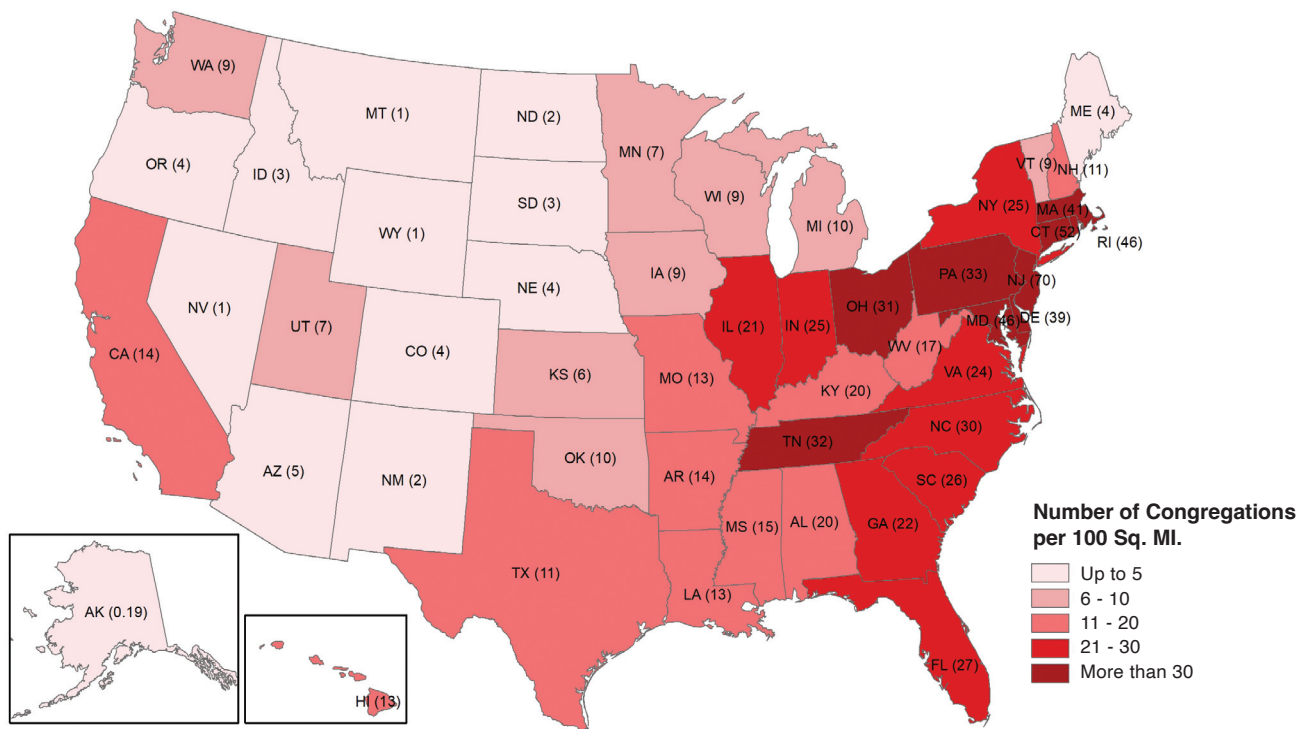
The state-by-state religious diversity of congregations can be measured by Simpson's diversity index.¹ The values of this index can range from "0" (no diversity at all) to "1" (maximum diversity).² Higher values of the index mean that:

- Congregations in such states represent a greater variety of religious bodies

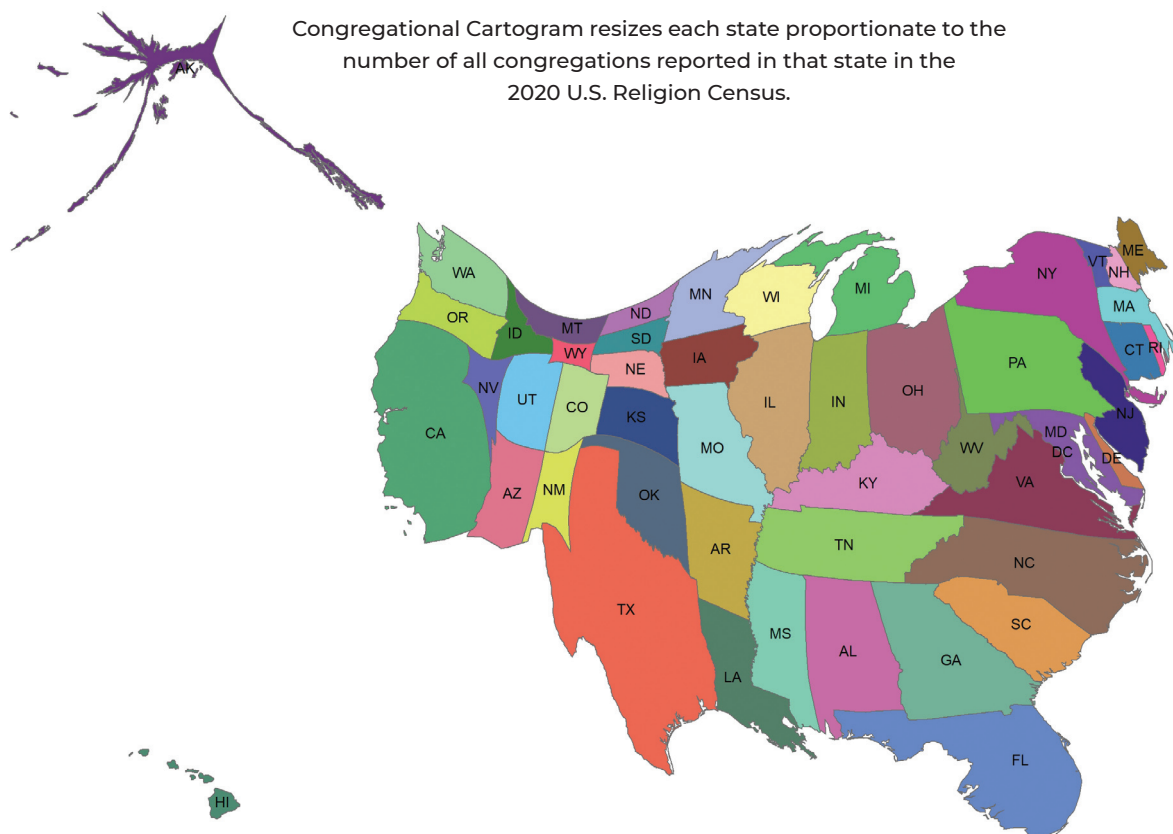
¹ For more information on Simpson's diversity index see: <http://www.statistics.howto.com/simpsons-diversity-index/>

² There is an entire chapter elsewhere in this volume that explains the various strengths and weaknesses of a variety of diversity measures, but the index employed here can be useful for a quick answer to this question.

Map 2: Number of Religious Congregations per 100 Square Miles, 2020



Map 3: Cartogram of Congregations (All Religious Groups), 2020



- These religious bodies have a more equally balanced number of congregations

In contrast, lower values of the index mean that such states offer a more limited choice of religious bodies and most congregations belong to only a few different denominations or faith traditions.

All religious bodies participating in the U.S. Religious Census can be divided into 13 “religious families”:

- Black Protestant (e.g., African Methodist Episcopal, Church of God in Christ, etc.)
- Buddhism
- Catholic
- Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints
- Conservative Protestant (e.g., Southern Baptists, Assemblies of God, Church of the Nazarene, etc.)
- Hinduism
- Islam
- Jehovah’s Witnesses
- Judaism
- Mainline Protestant (e.g., United Methodist Church, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), Episcopal Church)
- Orthodox Christian
- Other Christian (e.g., Unitarian-Universalist, Messianic Judaism)
- Other Eastern (e.g., Bahá’í, Zoroastrian)

Based on the number of congregations in each religious family, for each state we calculated its congregational diversity index. The

five states with the least congregational diversity are: Utah (diversity index of 0.24), Oklahoma (0.42), Kentucky (0.46), Tennessee (0.46), and Arkansas (0.47). In contrast, the states which offer the most diversity in congregations are: New Jersey (0.78), Massachusetts (0.77), New York (0.76), Rhode Island (0.76), and Connecticut (0.74).

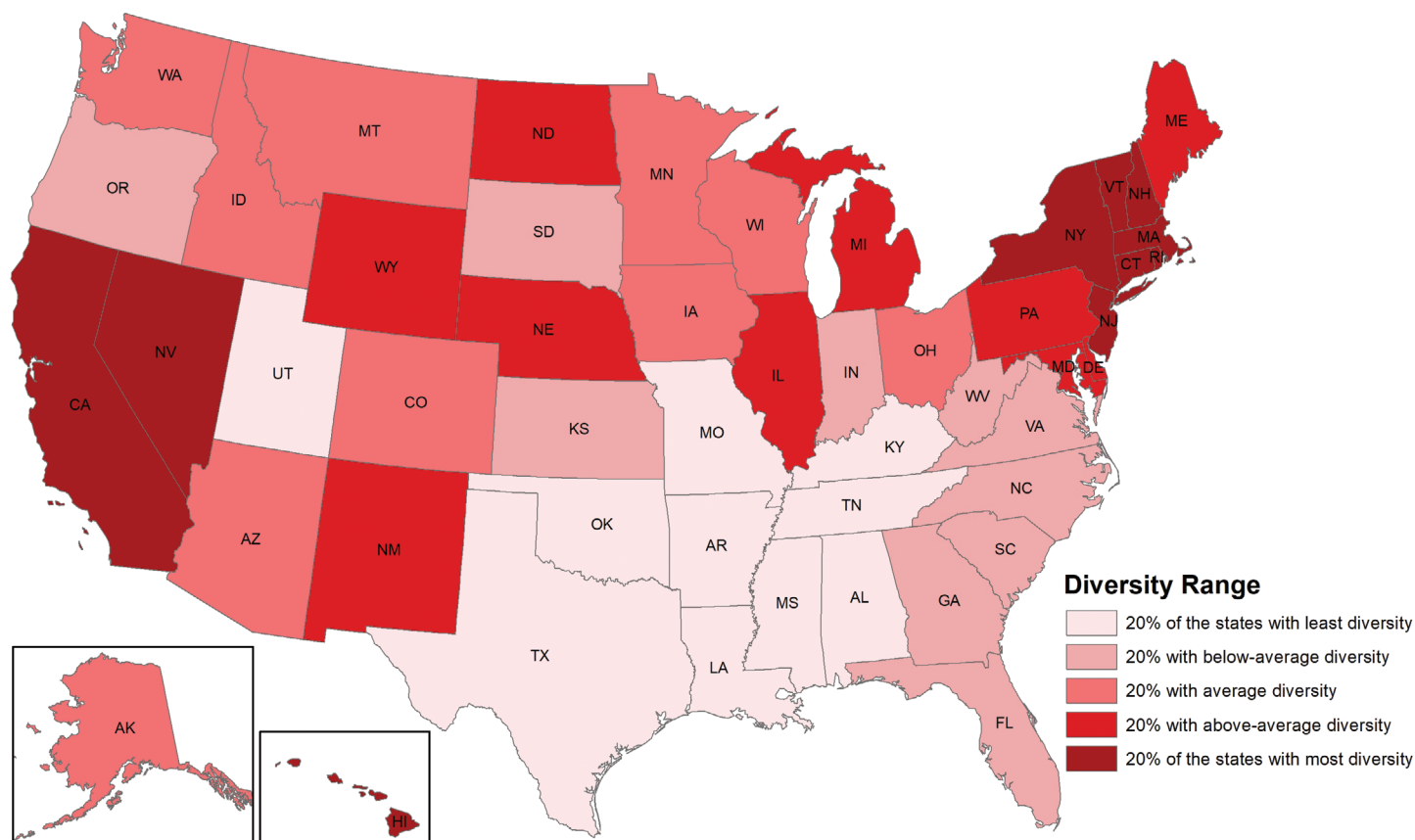
Map 4 offers a picture of this measure of congregational diversity in America. For this map, all states were first ranked by their diversity index score and then divided in five equal bodies (ten in each) representing their ranks. One can easily see that the Southeast has low diversity in congregations, while the Northeast is far more diverse.

However, measuring only diversity in congregations does not fully answer the question about the “religious diversity” of each state. Another, perhaps more important, aspect is whether some particular religious body accounts for most of the religious adherents in a state, or whether there is a fairly even distribution among a variety of groups.

Picture a town where all the 13 religious families listed above had one congregation each. This would create the highest level of congregational diversity: all religious traditions are present, and each has the same number of places to worship.

But then, as an example, imagine that among these thirteen congregations is one Catholic parish with 2,000 adherents, while the twelve other congregations from the other religious families each have 100 adherents. This means that out of 3,200 total religious adherents, the Catholics constitute the strong majority. As a result, while our imaginary town offers a great variety of congregations

Map 4: State by State Diversity in Religious Congregations, 2020
Simpson’s Diversity Index Applied to Congregations for 13 Categories of Religious Families



from which to choose, it actually “feels” less diverse when you consider where most people actually worship.

Similar to how we looked at congregations in the previous question, for each state, we calculated a diversity index among religious adherents.³ The five states that have lowest diversity in religious adherents are: New Hampshire, Maine, Utah, Oregon and Alaska. In contrast, the five most diverse states according to religious adherents are: Louisiana, South Dakota, Texas, North Dakota, and Idaho.

Comparing Map 5 (state-by-state diversity in adherents) and Map 4 (state-by-state diversity in congregations), one can see some striking differences. For example, the states in the South (Texas, Louisiana, and Alabama) are among the least diverse in terms of their congregations. However, the same states are among the most diverse when looking at their adherents. An opposite example would be Nevada, New Hampshire, and Vermont. While among the states with the highest diversity in congregations, these three are simultaneously among the states with the lowest diversity in adherents.

Hence, which American states are most religiously diverse *considering both congregational diversity and diversity in adherents*?

Considering the rank of each state for diversity in both their congregations and adherents, the five state that are most religiously diverse (starting from the top and in descending order): New Jersey, Illinois, New York, North Dakota, and Idaho. In contrast, the five

³ In addition to the 13 “religious families” listed in Question 4, the index of diversity in adherents also includes one more category: unaffiliated people – i.e. people who are not adherents of any religious group enumerated by the study.

states with the lowest religious diversity are (from bottom up): Utah, Oregon, West Virginia, Kentucky, and Montana.

6. Is there any U.S. state where adherents of one religious body constitute an absolute majority of the state’s total population?

Utah is the only U.S. state where adherents of a single religious body – the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints – constitutes nearly two-thirds of the state’s total population (65%).

However, if we look not at the state’s total population but just its religious adherents, then four states have a strong presence (more than 60% of all adherents) of a single religious body: Utah (the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints constitutes 85.4% of all religious adherents), Rhode Island (Catholics, 78.8%), Massachusetts (Catholics, 73.0%), and New Jersey (Catholics, 61.3%).

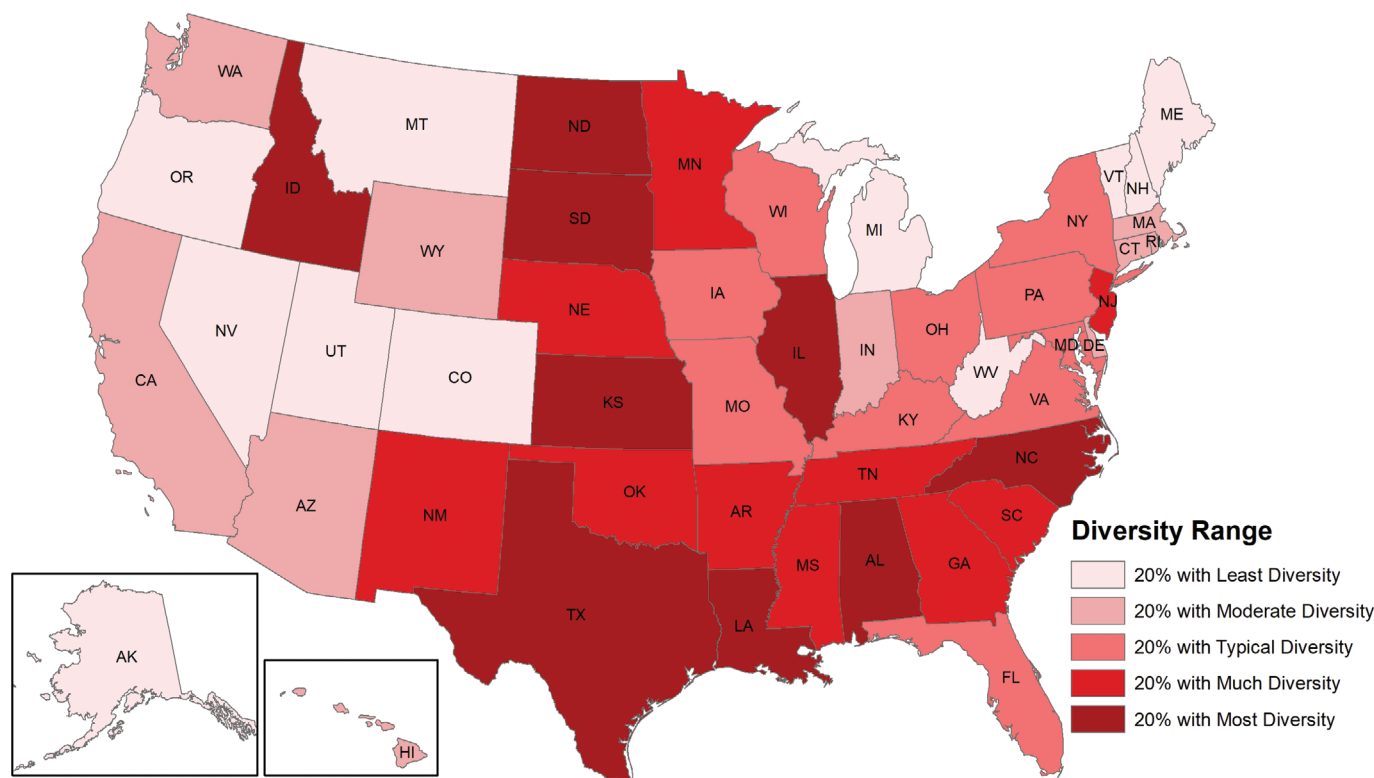
7. Are there any U.S. counties which are fully “religiously homogeneous:” that is, in which all their religious adherents belong to the same religious body?

The quick answer to this question is “yes.” There are seven U.S. counties or county equivalents where the U.S. Religion Census located only one religious body that reported at least one congregation. These seven fully “religiously homogeneous” counties include:

- Three counties in Utah: Daggett, Piute, and Rich (Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints)

Map 5: State by State Diversity in Religious Adherents, 2020

Simpson’s Diversity Index Applied to Adherents for 13 Categories of Religious Families and 1 Unaffiliated Category



- Two counties in Nebraska: Logan (Catholic Church) and Loup (Assemblies of God)
- Kenedy County, Texas (Catholic Church)
- Lake and Peninsula Borough, Alaska (Orthodox Church in America).

Notably, all of these counties, with the exception of Loup and Kenedy, contain multiple congregations that all belong to the same religious body.

8. Are there any counties in the United States which do not have a single religious congregation?

The United States has many areas that are desolate and uninhabited. Yet, in the entire country (including Alaska), there are only two counties without a single religious congregation: Alpine County in California and Loving County in Texas. With respective populations of 1,204 and 64 people (as of the 2020 U.S. Census), Alpine County is the least populous county in California, while Loving County is the least populous county in all the 50-states in the United States.

An interesting fact about Alpine County is that 96% of its land is owned by the Federal government (the highest percentage in California).⁴ A partial explanation of this fact is that a significant part of the county is covered by three national forests: Eldorado, Stanislaus, and Humboldt-Toiyabe.

As to the lack of an active congregation in Loving County, due to its tiny population the county does not even have a cemetery. Also, during the COVID-19 pandemic, Loving County was the last county in the contiguous United States to confirm at least one case of COVID-19.⁵

9. Which county in the United States has the greatest number of religious congregations, and which has the greatest number of religious adherents?

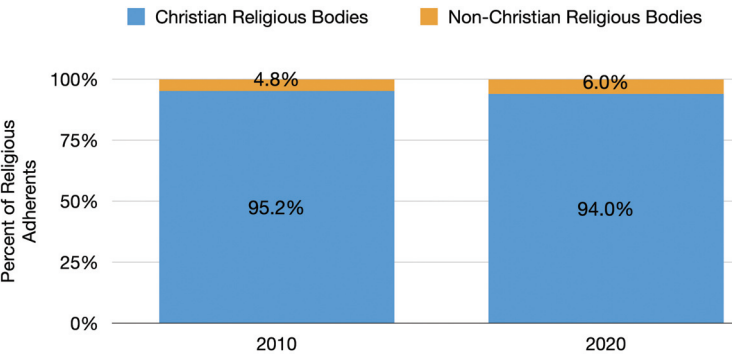
The answer to both questions is the same: Los Angeles County in California. It is home to 5,645 religious congregations (1.6% of all U.S. congregations) with 5,111,616 adherents participating in these congregations (3.2% of all U.S. religious adherents). Out of this county’s total population, the adherents of various religious congregations constitute 51%.

10. Is it true that various non-Christian religions are surging in the United States, and the country is rapidly becoming less “Christian?”

Looking at changes in the number of adherents among the religious bodies with reported data in both 2010 and 2020, the answer to this question is: “the adherents of non-Christian religious congregations are growing in numbers, but the changes are not as dramatic as some people may think.” Figure 2 shows that between 2010 and

2020, the share of Christian adherents declined only by 1.2% (from 95.2% to 94.0%), while the share of adherents participating in various non-Christian congregations rose from 4.8% to 6.0%.

Figure 2: Percentage of Christian and non-Christian Religious Bodies Among Total U.S. Religious Adherents



11. Which U.S. states have the strongest presence of adherents of various non-Christian religions?

The U.S. Religion Census offers data on a number of non-Christian faith communities. Among them, five have a relatively strong presence – both in terms of their number of adherents and in the attention they receive in literature, mass-media, etc. These five are: Bahá’í, Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, and Judaism. Hence, we will answer this question specifically for these five faith communities.

Nationwide, the combined percentage of their adherents in the U.S. total population is only 2.71%, including: 1.34% for Islam, 0.62% for Judaism, 0.38% for Hinduism, 0.32% for Buddhism, and 0.05% for Bahá’í. However, these figures vary considerably from state to state.

For these five faith communities combined and separately for each, Table 2 provides data on the three U.S. states which have the highest percentages of their adherents in these states’ total populations.

When looking at all five combined, New York has the strongest presence of adherents of these faith communities in its total population. For each faith community individually, Illinois has the most Muslims, New York is highest in Jewish adherents, Hawaii has the greatest percentage of Buddhist adherents, both New Jersey and Delaware are the top states for Hindu adherents, while South Carolina stands out by the presence of Bahá’í adherents.

Table 2: Top Three U.S. States with the Highest Percentage of Adherents in the Total Population for Five non-Christian Groups

Religious Body	State #1	State #2	State #3
All five non-Christian groups combined	New York: 8.4%	New Jersey: 7.1%	Maryland: 5.2%
Islam	Illinois: 3.7%	New York: 3.6%	New Jersey: 3.5%
Judaism	New York: 3.8%	New Jersey: 2.1%	Maryland: 1.3%
Buddhism	Hawaii: 3.8%	Washington: 1.0%	California: 0.8%
Hinduism	New Jersey: 1.3%	Delaware: 1.3%	New York & New Mexico: 0.7%
Bahá’í	South Carolina: 0.33%	New Mexico & Oregon: 0.13%	Arizona: 0.12%

⁴ Sabalow, Ryan; Kasler, Dale; Reese, Phillip (January 9, 2016). “Rural Californians sympathize with protesters’ goals in Oregon standoff.” *The Sacramento Bee*.
⁵ Goodman, David (November 17, 2020). “The county with no Coronavirus cases? No longer.” *The New York Times*.

12. How large are American religious congregations?

Considering all the religious bodies who reported both the number of their congregations and their adherents to the U.S. Religion Census, the average religious congregation in America has 490 people. At the same time, there is huge variation in the size of a typical congregation among America’s diverse faith communities. Table 3a shows the five religious bodies with the largest average congregations, while table 3b indicates the five religious bodies with the smallest average congregations.⁶

Table 3a: The Five Religious Bodies Having the Largest Congregations

Religious Body	Average (Mean) Number of Adherents Per Single Congregation
Catholic Church	3,188
Hindu Temples	1,920
Islam	1,607
Armenian Apostolic Church of America (Catholicosate of Cilicia)	1,111
Armenian Apostolic Church of America (Catholicosate of Etchmiadzin)	1,070

Table 3b: The Five Religious Bodies Having the Smallest Congregations

Religious Body	Average (Mean) Number of Adherents Per Single Congregation
Independent Yearly Meeting of Friends	37
Church of God General Conference	38
Indian Bottom Association of Old Regular Baptists	43
United Holy Church of America Inc.	51
Seventh Day Baptist General Conference, USA and Canada	57

13. Geographically, how widespread throughout the United States are various religious bodies enumerated by the U.S. Religion Census? Over time, are they establishing congregations in new places and expanding their geographic presence?

How widespread a religious body is depends, of course, on its overall size. Some religious groups have just a few congregations in a very limited number of places. But others are present through the entire country. With congregations in 2,989 out of 3,143 U.S. counties (i.e., in 95% of all U.S. counties), the United Methodist Church is the most geographically widespread group.

Table 4 offers information on the ten religious bodies whose congregations are present in the greatest number of counties.

The answer to the question about changes in geographic presence between 2010 and 2020 is that some religious bodies grew, while some shrank. A total of 212 religious bodies provided county-level data on the number of their congregations in both 2010 and 2020. Of these, 70 expanded their presence into more counties over the decade, 22 did not change, while 122 “shrank” in terms of their geographic coverage.

Table 5 lists the ten largest (by the total number of congregations in 2020) U.S. religious bodies that reported data on congregations in both 2010 and 2020. For each, it shows the actual decadal changes in number of congregations and counties present, as well as the percentage change in the number of counties present. Overall, for these ten largest religious bodies, the picture of geographic distribution of their congregations remains fairly stable.

Table 4: Ten Geographically Most Widespread Religious Bodies, by Number of Counties in Which Their Congregations Are Present

Religious Body	Number of Counties with Congregations	Percent of Counties with Congregations
United Methodist Church	2,989	95%
Catholic Church	2,961	94%
Non-Denominational Christian Churches	2,753	86%
Southern Baptist Convention	2,677	85%
Churches of Christ	2,391	76%
Presbyterian Church (USA)	2,224	71%
Jehovah’s Witnesses	2,166	69%
Episcopal Church	1,971	63%
Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints	1,918	61%
Seventh-Day Adventist Church	1,805	57%

14. Final, and perhaps most important question: Would you be willing to help us improve the next U.S. Religion Census in 2030?

If you are involved in any congregation, have a look at the full list of religious bodies which participated in the 2020 U.S. Religion Census (available at www.usreligioncensus.org): is your group present on this list? And if “no,” can you help us to engage it for the next U.S. Religion Census in 2030?

Over the past five decades, the U.S. Religion Census is increasingly comprehensive and inclusive. While in 1971 it enumerated only 53 religious bodies, as many as 372 have participated in the most recent 2020 Census. We will be grateful for any input which would result in even greater participation in 2030.

⁶ In order to assure that the “average” values are reasonably meaningful, only religious bodies reporting at least 30 congregations were included in the calculations.

Table 5: 2010-2020 Change in the Geographic Presence of Congregations

Ten Largest Religious Bodies by Number of Congregations in 2020	Congregations 2010 >> Congregations 2020	Counties present in 2010 >> Counties present in 2020	2010-2020 Percent Change in the Number of Counties Where Congregations are Present
Southern Baptist Convention	50,816 >> 51,379	2,702 >> 2,677	-1%
Non-Denominational Christian Churches	35,496 >> 44,319	2,665 >> 2,753	3%
United Methodist Church	33,323 >> 30,051	2,991 >> 2,989	0%
Catholic Church	20,589 >> 19,405	2,960 >> 2,961	0%
Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints	13,601 >> 14,567	1,873 >> 1,913	2%
Assemblies of God	12,258 >> 12,739	2,563 >> 2,510	-2%
Jehovah's Witnesses	5,769 >> 12,285	2,221 >> 2,166	-2%
Churches of Christ	12,584 >> 11,881	2,427 >> 2,391	-1%
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America	9,846 >> 8,857	1,739 >> 1,698	-1%
Presbyterian Church (USA)	10,487 >> 8,851	2,358 >> 2,224	-6%