Who’s counting? Doing the numbers on membership: Doing the numbers on membership

by John Dart in the May 8, 2002 issue

Journalists covering religion regularly cite membership figures for the various religious organizations. They want to give readers an idea of how many people might be affected by developments in a particular group or tradition.

Some religious bodies are attentive to statistics, and their data inspire some degree of confidence. But when the figures seem to be raw estimates in very round and rather high numbers, I am reminded of the big-church pastor who when asked about membership would answer, “Well, evange-statistically speaking . . .”

Religious groups associated with racial or ethnic minorities have often erred on the side of rounding their figures upwards, and have been largely forgiven for the exaggeration because—it is thought—they lack the means and motivation to be precise about the figures. But when vague self-estimates get into print—usually uncontested—it only misleads the public about the relative influence of faith groups.

New research has deflated membership balloons of Eastern Orthodox churches in the U.S., following other studies finding that estimates used by some non-Christian groups were exaggerated, notably the 6-8 million figure often cited for U.S. Muslims. But if Orthodox and Muslim estimates were overstated, an inquiry by the Century also found that the United Methodist Church understates its total membership, erring on the side of caution but as a result skewing comparisons with other Protestant bodies.

A recent, little-noticed study of Eastern Orthodox churches in the U.S. depicts a significant numbers gap for its two largest groups. The Greek Orthodox Archdiocese has about 440,000 adherents, rather than the typically claimed 2 million. And the Orthodox Church in America has 115,000 followers, not the 1 million usually reported.

Overall, the study of Orthodox churches calculates that there are only 1.2 million adults and children in the 22 major U.S. jurisdictions of Eastern Orthodoxy. With the exception of the Antiochian Orthodox Church, the research found most membership figures lower than those reported in recent editions of the *Yearbook of American & Canadian Churches*, the standard reference book compiled by the National Council of Churches.

“The greatest disproportion between ‘claimed’ and actual memberships were found in the two largest Orthodox jurisdictions,” said Alexei D. Krindatch of the Institute of Geography in Moscow. The researcher said he obtained data through personal visits to the headquarters or diocesan offices of Orthodox jurisdictions and by e-mail correspondence with bishops and chancellors.

“The most likely reason for this discrepancy is the common practice of equating church membership with the total number of representatives of a corresponding ethnic group, including second and third generations of the original immigrants, independent of these persons’ actual relationship to the Orthodox Church,” wrote Krindatch. He summarized his findings on the Web site of the Hartford Institute for Religion Research. His analysis and tables will appear as part of the Glenmary Research Center’s “Religious Congregations Membership Study 2000,” a once-every-ten-years report expected to be released at the end of July. In conjunction with researchers for the Church of the Nazarene, the Catholic order’s center in Nashville has collected data from 144 religious bodies.

Greek Orthodox and OCA spokespersons, who were unaware of Krindatch’s findings, both said they have lately lowered the numbers they cite for their churches. Greek Orthodox press officer Nikki Stephanopolous said the most recent figure she sent to the *Yearbook* was 1,500,000 to replace the seemingly precise 1,954,500 in the 2001 edition. “I think 1.5 million is justified inasmuch as we don’t have an actual census of membership,” she said.

For the Orthodox Church in America, media director John Matusiak said he calculates that the denomination has “around 750,000 adults and children.” Problems in gathering good numbers include parishes’ varying definitions of “member” and the fact that “only half of the dioceses pay an assessment” based on membership, said Matusiak, who divides his time between a Wheaton, Illinois, parish and OCA headquarters in Syosset, New York.

Nevertheless, Krindatch said his consultations with church officials have elicited realistic numbers. The Russian researcher said that one of several ways to judge membership, however loosely defined, is to look at national circulations of the newspapers published by the Greek Archdiocese (*Orthodox Observer*: 140,000) and by OCA (*Orthodox Church*: 50,000). “The circulations reflect largely the number of homes that are on the churches’ mailing lists (i.e., those people who are somehow known to the church, although they may visit church very infrequently),” he said. “Multiply those circulations by two or three (the average size of households, given a big proportion of single old people), and you’ll get a rough estimate of the number of people.”

New estimates of U.S. Muslim numbers have been disputed by some professors of Islamic studies and partisan groups. But most observers note that, in the long run, the importance of Islam’s 1 billion followers worldwide and its impact on global—and now domestic—politics add great importance to the relatively small U.S. Muslim populace. And relatively small it is. Two studies released last fall placed the total American Muslim population, adults and children, between 1.8 and 1.9 million (see “Muslim numbers disputed,” Century, November 14). That number sharply contradicted estimates that run as high as 8 million U.S. Muslims—figures commonly used by Islamic groups representing Muslim concerns in Washington, D.C.

Buddhists and Hindus, less vocal at the national level and not facing the same level of discrimination as Muslims, are in fact not much smaller in numbers than the Muslims, according to Tom W. Smith, director of the General Social Survey of Chicago’s National Opinion Research Center. Smith puts the Buddhist total at about 1.4 million, compared with an average estimate of 2.3 million from two dozen published studies in recent years. He believes that the U.S. Hindu population falls between 844,000 and 1,126,000—very near the average estimate of 1.1 million that has been cited in other studies.

“Religions outside of Judaism and Christianity make up a small, but growing, share of America’s religious mosaic,” said Smith. His report, published in January by the American Jewish Committee, is titled “Religious Diversity in America: The Emergence of Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus.” Smith does not stand alone in these assessments of U.S. Muslims, Buddhists and Hindus. Upon releasing his Muslim figures last fall, Smith said that “at most” the figure could be 2.8 million, but his most likely figure was 1.9 million—and that total was close to an estimate of 1.8 million reached independently by researchers Egon Mayer and Barry A. Kosmin at City University of

New York for the American Religious Identification Survey 2001, an enormous telephone poll of 50,000 adults. The studies also were close on estimates for Buddhists and Hindus.

Exact numbers are nearly impossible to acquire. For example, Jewish numbers are hard to determine, partly because of high intermarriage rates and also because many U.S. Jews do not call themselves religious. The *American Jewish Year Book 2001* puts the U.S. Jewish population in 2000 at 6.1 million. Coauthor James Schwartz said that estimate represents reports from Jewish community organizations. But Mayer and Kosmin's American Jewish Identity Survey 2001 concluded that all persons of Jewish origin totaled nearly 7.7 million, according to their Web site summary. The numbers go lower for adults only (5.5 million) and lower yet (about 2.4 million) for those who identify with a branch of Judaism.

Head counting is also troublesome in the case of some mainline Protestant denominations. Consider the membership totals usually given for the two largest mainline bodies, the 8.3-million-member United Methodist Church and the 5.1-million-member Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. The problem is that using those numbers is like comparing apples and pears. The 8,336,927 given for the UMC is for professing members age 19 and above; the 5,125,919 given for the ELCA is for baptized members, including children. The ELCA's "communicant" membership is 3,810,785. That number is provided in the 2002 *Yearbook*, but the larger figure is often used by news media and in ELCA press releases.

Were the United Methodists to count all people under their charge, the figure could be 11,080,781 for the year 2000, according to data from Beth Babbitt, director of statistics. "We refrain from giving the [extra] figures because we don't know how accurate they are," Babbitt said. The additional sums are 1,322,382 for "preparatory" members who are baptized but under 19 years of age and another 1,421,472 nonmembers on church rolls "under pastoral responsibility," she said.

If the United Methodist constituency is figured at 11 million people, the church is twice the size of the ELCA. (The UMC has three times as many congregations—35,600 churches vs. 10,850 for the ELCA.) And in that case the Methodists are not that far from matching the nation's largest Protestant body, the Southern Baptist Convention, which in April reported a 16.05 million membership, up from 15.96 million in the 2002 *Yearbook*. Those Southern Baptists are all baptized members—some as young as six, seven or eight years, though the usual age for

youth baptisms is nine to 11, said Cliff Tharp, the SBC church profile coordinator and current president of the Association of Statisticians of American Religious Bodies. If there is grousing about SBC numbers, it would be from researchers who object to including “nonresident” members who have moved away or do not attend.

Regarding slippery membership figures, Kirk Hadaway, a sociologist at the United Church of Christ research office, remarked: “The Southern Baptists’ nearly meaningless category of ‘nonresident’ member and the changing definitions of the ‘membership’ figures reported by the Assemblies of God are two of the most odious examples I have dealt with.” Hadaway added that he “essentially gave up trying to make sense out of the data” from the Church of God in Christ, the National Baptist groups and the Churches of Christ.

Some church numbers are notoriously unreliable, agreed Eileen Lindner, *Yearbook* editor. The National Baptist Convention of America, Inc., supposedly the seventh-largest U.S. church, is listed at 3.5 million, but that total dates back to 1987. The National Baptist Convention, U.S.A., Inc., had been using an 8.2-million membership figure since 1992, but court proceedings which led to a prison sentence for the denomination’s president revealed that the membership number was misrepresented. Lindner has dropped that church from the annual’s statistics tables until it can report credible figures.

The United Church of Christ reports only its confirmed members, which Hadaway said is now 1,359,105—down 18,215 members from the year 2000 figure published in the current *Yearbook*. The UCC numbers look even smaller if they are used in comparison with the baptized membership figures of other denominations, he said. “Unfortunately, we don’t have any way to estimate the numbers of nonconfirmed children,” he said, noting that church schools do not differentiate between confirmed and nonconfirmed youth in their enrollment statistics.

To compound the confusion, denomination spokespersons admit that tabulations vary at the local and regional levels on how and who to count. Some denominations, such as the United Methodist Church, determine a congregation’s voting rights and financial obligations by the numbers of professing adults—a method that makes the United Methodists confident about their figure for adult members but not so sure about the others.

Are membership figures, however defined, so important in measuring the strength of a denomination or congregation? What about average worship attendance? Most denominations collect those numbers, though they are not commonly made public. As a religion writer for the *Los Angeles Times*, I found during the 1980s and ’90s that evangelical and charismatic pastors cared little about membership numbers, but could readily cite their (often robust) attendance at weekend services.

A major goal of the Episcopal Church’s 20/20 project is to double average Sunday attendance by the year 2020. When project strategists met in January, they emphasized increasing diversity and attracting younger parishioners, suggesting that parish registers be amended to collect data on age, ethnicity and race, according to the Episcopal News Service. While not overly focused on numbers, “there was considerable agreement that an accurate method for collecting data was necessary” to avoid misreporting.

Quantifying the makeup of religious organizations by the numbers understandably upsets those who feel the quality of membership and participation is what counts most. Yet the question of “How’re we doing?” always comes up internally. And in ecumenical and interfaith relations, reasonably accurate numbers enhance a religious body’s credibility.