

Introduction

Since Pennsylvania's founding as a colony dedicated to religious freedom, religious gathering spaces have spread throughout the Commonwealth and remain important community spaces and providers of a wide variety of social services. With the release of the 2020 U.S. Religion Census, the Center for Rural Pennsylvania analyzed changes in the landscape of religious observance across the state, with a few notable findings:

- The number of religious groups in Pennsylvania is declining overall.
- While the largest religious groups across the Commonwealth are largely losing congregations, several groups have seen their congregations increase significantly over the past decade.
- Congregations in rural counties are declining more quickly than those in urban counties.

The U.S. Religion Census is a project of the Association of Statisticians of American Religious Bodies, which collects information from faith traditions of all kinds. It is not associated with the U.S. Census Bureau or any of its associated products. When possible, it differentiates between religious groups within the same tradition, such as Mennonite or Baptist denominations, though some groups without central governing authorities are aggregated, such as nondenominational Christian churches. The census collects data on the number of congregations (groups of adherents) and adherents by county across the United States. However, methodological changes between census years and constantly evolving religious communities make consistent data difficult to maintain. Due to the wide variety of faith communities and inconsistencies in how different organizations track membership, adherent numbers are not suitable for statistical analysis. This analysis will focus on changes in religious groups, particularly the number and concentration of groups of adherents, which this report will refer to as "congregations."¹

Pennsylvania Compared to Other States

In 2020, 372 religious groups participated in the U.S. Religion Census, representing many Christian denominations as well as religious groups of Judaism, Hinduism, and other religious traditions. Those groups were spread across 356,642 congregations across the United States. The total number of congregations is closely related to population: Pennsylvania ranks fifth in both total population in 2020 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020 Decennial Census) and in the number of congregations. California, Texas, and Florida all have a greater population and number of congregations, while New York has a greater population than Pennsylvania but fewer congregations. North Carolina, which is ninth in terms of national population, surpasses Pennsylvania in the number of congregations with 16,200 compared with Pennsylvania's 15,135. However, when evaluating the number of groups per 100,000 population as seen in Figure 1, Pennsylvania ranks 27th in the nation with 116.4. This is less than half the density of groups in Arkansas and Mississippi, which are the states with the most religious congregations per capita (246.7 and 242.5 groups per 100,000 population, respectively).

¹ A note on terminology

The U.S. Religion Census uses the term "congregation" to represent a collection of worshippers. While the word is commonly associated with Christian and Jewish religious communities, it is not necessarily applicable to other faith traditions. The Center has chosen to use the language consistent with the U.S. Religion Census for clarity, but acknowledges the limitations that language has in representing all faith traditions equitably. For additional clarification on how the U.S. Religion Census applies "congregation" to various religious groups, see the appendices of the 2020 Census, *2020 Study Information, U.S. Religion Census, Religious Statistics & Demographics*, at usreligioncensus.org.

Pennsylvania contains congregations from 161 different religious groups, or 42 percent of all groups that participated in the U.S. Religion Census. The number of religious groups increased 8 percent from 145 in 2010.

Pennsylvania Congregation Trends

Pennsylvania data from the U.S. Religion Census show overall decreases in the number of congregations, from 17,534 reported in 2010 to 15,134 congregations reported in 2020 (a 14 percent decrease). However, differences in how congregations were categorized and measured between the 2010 and 2020 samples may account for some of that decline.

Among religious groups that were categorized the same way in both 2010 and 2020, the decline in groups was 4.4 percent, a smaller, but still significant, decline. Nearly one in three religious groups (48) saw no effective change in the number of congregations between 2010 and 2020, but half of all groups (77) experienced more than a 5 percent decline in the number of congregations statewide over the course of the decade.

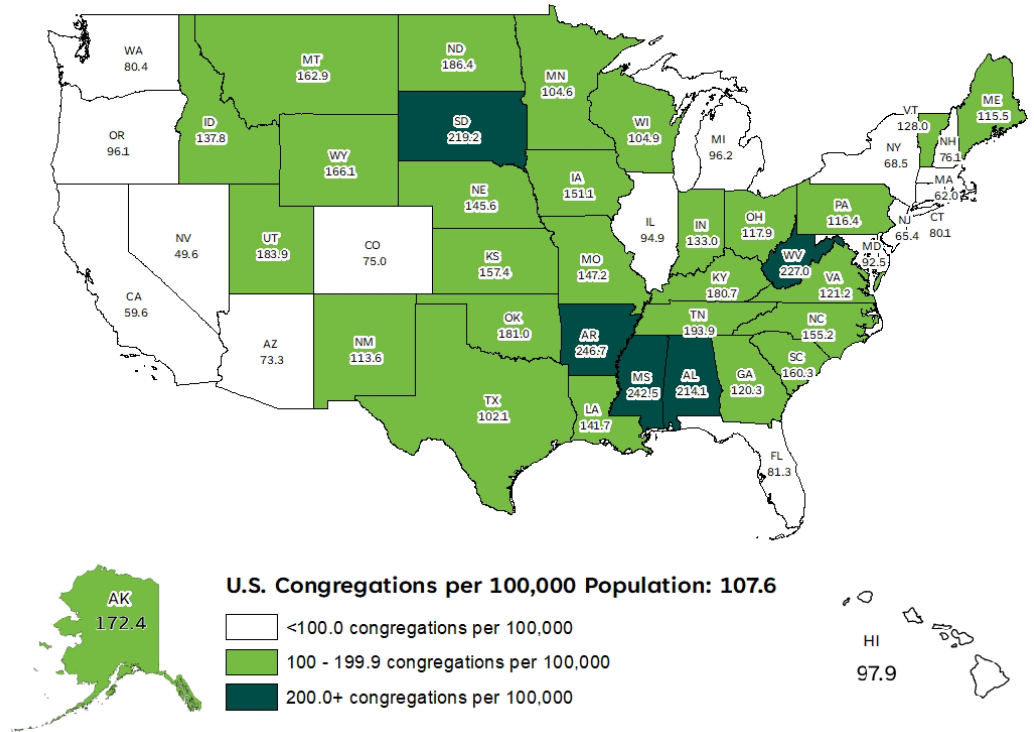
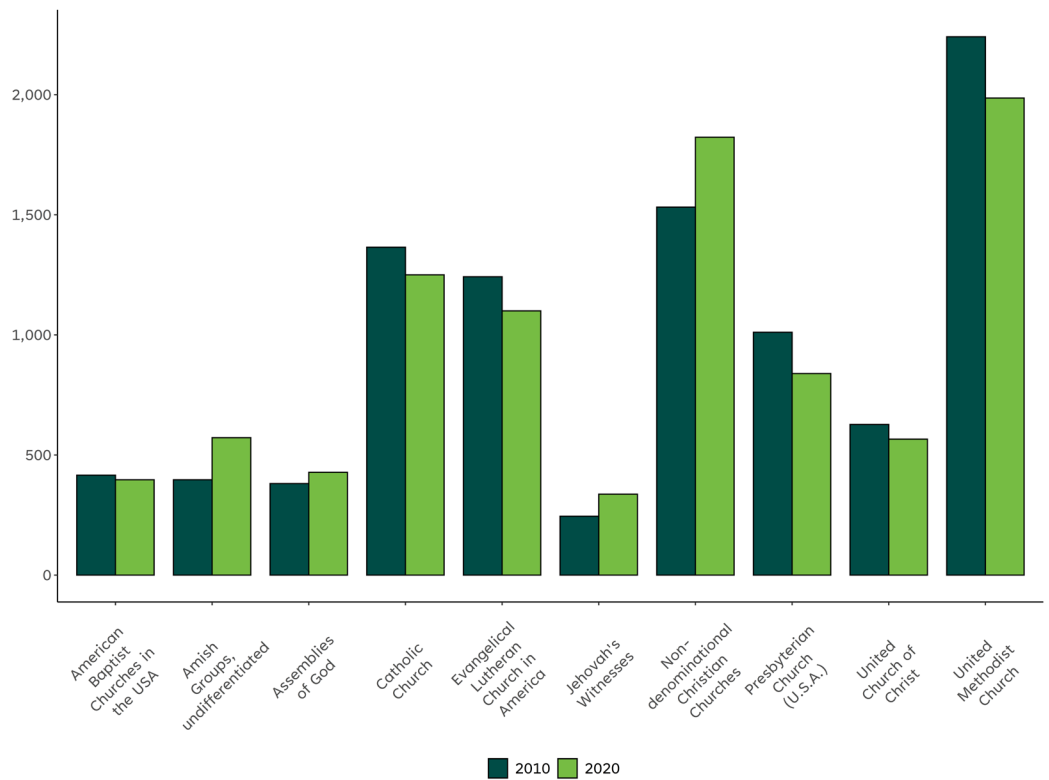
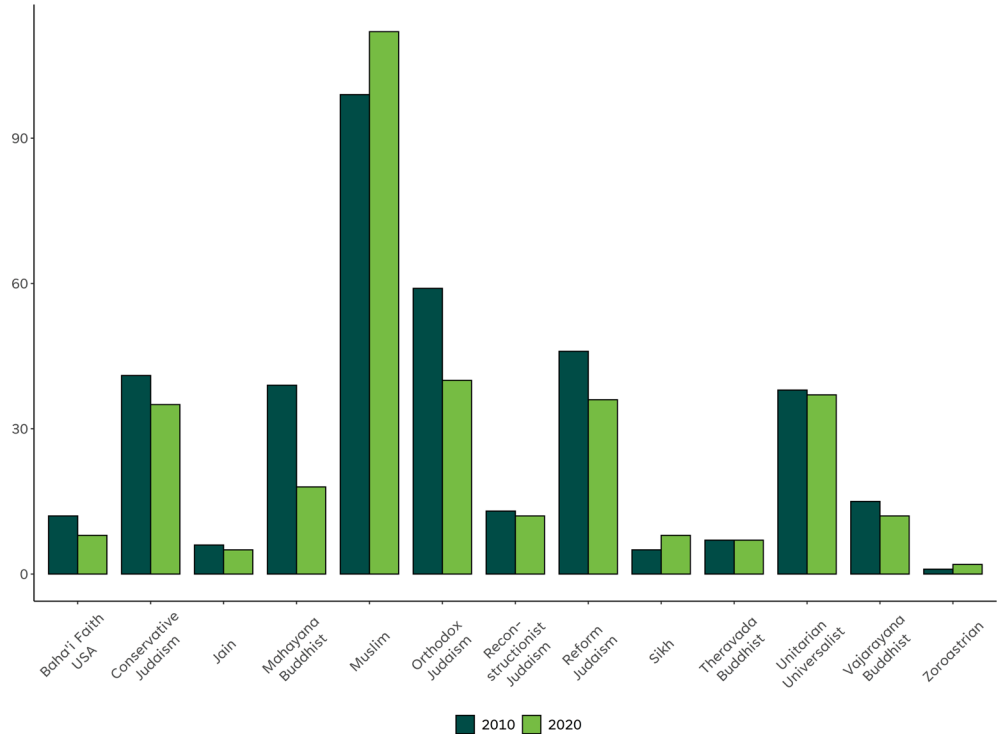


Figure 2: Change in Congregations Among Pennsylvania's Largest Religious Groups, 2010 and 2020



While many religious groups experienced some level of decline over this period, others experienced significant growth in number of congregations. Figure 2 shows the 10 groups with the highest number of congregations reported across Pennsylvania in 2020. Most experienced a decline in congregations over the past decade, but non-denominational Christian Churches, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Amish groups, and the Assemblies of God saw increased numbers of congregations since 2010.

Figure 3: Non-Christian Congregations in Pennsylvania, 2010 and 2020



While most religious groups among those in Pennsylvania are denominations of Christian traditions, data from the sample show a significant number are Muslim, Jewish, Sikh, Hindu, and other groups of diverse sacred traditions. Figure 3 shows the non-Christian congregations represented in the 2010 and 2020 U.S. Religion Census for Pennsylvania. Statewide, there are more than 330 congregations practicing the traditions of more than a dozen religious groups, approximately 2 percent of the congregations sampled for the U.S. Religion Census. The number of non-Christian congregations remained relatively steady from 2010 to 2020, with an increased number of congregations of Muslims, Sikhs, and Zoroastrians, and fewer Orthodox Jewish, Reformed Jewish, and Mahayana Buddhist congregations.

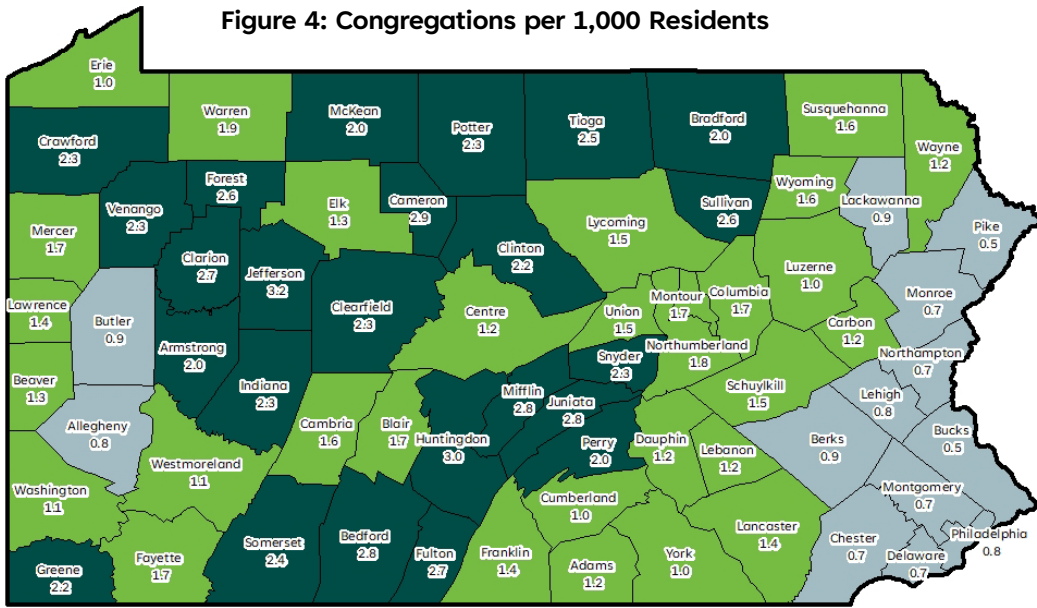
Rural and Urban Distinctions

Congregational decline is not consistent across rural and urban counties. Over the 10-year period, congregations in rural counties declined at a faster rate compared to urban counties. In 2010, there were 8,535 congregations in rural counties and in 2020, there were 6,141, a 28 percent decline. In urban counties, the numbers declined from 11,240 to 8,993 during this same time, for a 20 percent decline.

Despite the relative decline in rural county congregations, evaluations by population density show that rural counties still have greater concentrations of congregations overall. Figure 4 shows the number of congregations per 1,000 residents by county. Urban counties have 0.9 congregations per 1,000 residents, compared with 1.9 congregations per 1,000 residents in rural counties. This does not necessarily suggest that religious observance is less prevalent in urban areas; it could be that the groups in urban counties draw larger congregations than those in rural counties.

Among the 117 religious groups present in rural counties, the most prevalent were the United Methodist Church (1,223 groups), non-denominational Christian Churches (646), the Evangelical Lutheran Church in

America (472), the Roman Catholic Church (446), and the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A) (400). The non-denominational Christian Churches have 17 percent more groups across rural counties in 2020 than 2010. However, the other largest religious groups saw more than a 10 percent decline each in the number of congregations across rural Pennsylvania, amounting to more



than 360 fewer congregations among these four denominations in rural areas. These denominations are the five largest organizations in urban counties as well, where non-denominational Christian Churches are even more prevalent, with 1,177 congregations. Non-denominational Christian Churches are the most common type of congregations in urban counties, with 20 percent more congregations than were documented in 2010. Catholic Churches, the second most common group in urban counties, lost 6 percent of their congregations. Methodist, Lutheran, and Presbyterian congregations each declined more than 12 percent.

Conclusion

With more than 15,000 congregations and 161 religious groups represented in rural and urban counties, Pennsylvania remains one of the most populated and diverse states for religious observance. Regardless of the faith tradition, congregations can be valuable community resources that provide food pantries, clothing drives, childcare, and many other charitable services to adherents and their neighbors. Despite the decline in congregations and congregants, religious groups are prevalent and important institutions throughout the Commonwealth and are likely to remain anchors for community services and connections.

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