

Exploring the Religious Landscape of the United States

In this guided exercise you will utilize interactive maps and membership reports to help you better understand the religious composition of your neighborhood, state, and the entire nation.

If you find yourself lost at any point, look to the instructions on the right.

Open your web browser and go to the homepage for the Association of Religion Data Archives (www.theARDA.com).

You may be surprised to hear that the U.S. Census Bureau does not collect data on religious congregations or membership (trivia: they did do so until 1936). However, there are a few other data sources you can turn to when trying to figure out the religious composition of a particular geographic area.

The ARDA has two sources of data that you can use for this purpose. The Religious Congregations and Membership Study (RCMS) is conducted every 10 years by asking denominations to submit counts of members and congregations for every county in the United States. Let us begin by first exploring these data.

Let's first get an idea of the religious environment of your hometown using the RCMS data.

1. What is the name of the county and state that you grew up in?

Let's look at the RCMS membership report from your home county.

2. Which religious category (i.e. Evangelical, Mainline, Orthodox, Catholic, Other) had the most members in your home county? **Do not count the "Unclaimed" population.**

Note: The "Unclaimed" population represents the total for all the denominations participating in the RCMS subtracted from the total population. This does not necessarily mean that these people do not have a religious identity or affiliation. They may belong to a group that did not submit numbers to the RCMS or they may not actively participate in a religious congregation and therefore were not counted by one of the RCMS groups.

Open your web browser.

Go to
www.theARDA.com

Click on the "U.S. Congregational Membership" tab in the toolbar.

Select your home state and county, or enter your zip code.



3. In 2010, which individual group or denomination claimed the most members? Hint: look in the “Adherents column” in the 2010 section of the report below the bar graphs.

4. Into what religious tradition and religious family does this group or denomination fall?

Because many groups participated in previous editions of the RCMS, you can see how they have grown or declined in membership over time.

5. In percentage change, what group or denomination saw the largest growth in membership from 2000 to 2010?

6. In percentage change, how much did this group grow from 2000 to 2010?

7. Into what religious tradition and religious family does this group or denomination fall?

8. In percentage change, what group saw the largest decline in membership from 2000 to 2010?

9. In percentage change, how much did this group decline from 2000 to 2010?

Under the bar graph, click the “2000-2010 Change” tab.

10. Into what religious tradition and religious family does this group or denomination fall?

You should have a good sense of the RCMS and how to generate reports from it on the ARDA

An organization called Data Axle also collects geographic-level data on congregations, but in a somewhat different manner than the RCMS. Data Axle uses sources like Yellow and White pages to collect basic information and supplements this with denominational directories and web research.

Let us explore this data source.

Go back to the ARDA's homepage.

In the main menu you will see an option for GIS Maps. GIS stands for "Geographic Information Systems," which is a tool for interactively producing and exploring information in maps.

Click on the GIS Maps link. You will see two options on this page. You can click to see a map of the United States, or you can enter a zip code, a city and state, or a complete address to look at a more specific area.

Once you click to see the entire United States or a more localized area, a new window should appear with a map. If the map is zoomed in enough, small diamonds will appear where religious congregations are located.

Once you are zeroed in on your community, you can produce a profile that will tell you about its religious and demographic composition. To do so, follow these steps.

1. If you have not done so yet, enter a zip code or a city/state at the top of the map and click "Go."
2. Enter the radius (in miles) that you would like to examine.
3. Click on the map to select the center point for the radius.
4. Click "Profile" to view information about this area.

Go to
www.theARDA.com

**In the main menu,
click on "GIS
Maps."**

Once the report comes up, you can use the tabs to find information on different topics.

Using these tabs, please answer the following questions:

11. What religious groups are growing and declining the most in the community you selected?

12. What percentage of people are at or near the poverty level in this community?

13. What percentage of people do not have a high school diploma? Has this increased or decreased since between 2012 and 2015? What about people with a college or graduate degree? (Hint: Education.)

14. What racial groups are the largest in this community? What racial groups are growing the fastest?

If you would like more guidance on how to use this Community Profile, please download our [Community Profile Builder Guide](#).

You now know how to produce reports showing the religious composition of geographic areas using two different data sources on the ARDA. You also know how to create and interact with GIS maps. Congratulations! Now, go do some more exploring on your own!