

## **A Report on the 2010 National Profile of U.S. Nondenominational and Independent Churches**

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For decades the press has reported that the independent and nondenominational church segment of the US religious landscape is growing. Dozens of new networks of these churches have sprung up and a plethora of parachurch resource organizations now exist to service their needs. However, almost no serious academic effort has been made to track or explore this “supposed” growing phenomenon. This project attempts to begin that task - to locate and then survey these churches that do not have an explicit denominational affiliation and include their voices in the national religious profile. The results of this exploration demonstrate just how significant this independent and nondenominational church trend is in contemporary American religion.

If the nation’s independent and nondenominational churches were combined into a single group they would represent the third largest cluster of religious adherents in the country, following the Roman Catholic Church and the Southern Baptist Convention; second largest in the number of churches – following the Southern Baptist. Overall, this research found over 35,000 churches representing more than 12,200,000 adherents. In total, four percent of the US population worships in an independent or nondenominational church.

And the phenomenon is on the rise. Our study identifies a larger number of people engaged in nondenominational churches than Barry Kosmin found in the [American Religious Identification Survey](#) in 2008 where they estimated 8 million Americans identified as nondenominational Christians. In their studies, this count was up significantly from only 0.1% or 194,000 in 1990. According to the [General Social Survey](#), the percent of Protestants claiming “no denomination or non-denominational” has risen from roughly four percent in the 1970s to fifteen percent in 2006. ([The Ties that Bind: Network Overlap among Independent Congregations](#) Christopher D. Bader Christopher P. Scheitle and Buster Smith).

[Pew’s Religious Landscape Study](#) also found significant numbers of Americans affiliate with independent and nondenominational churches, although the exact number and percent is not entirely clear given how they divided their labeling. It is absolutely clear, as [Kosmin said recently](#), that “The rise of non-denominational Christianity is probably one of the strongest trends in the last two decades.... It is nearly as sharp an increase as the no-religion response.” Additionally, the [Baylor Survey of Religion report](#) claims non-denominational churches are the [fastest growing Protestant churches](#) in America and in 2006, as it is now, they are the second largest Protestant group just behind the Southern Baptist Convention.

Nondenominational churches are present in every state and in 2,663 out of the total of 3,033 counties in the country, or 88% of the total. They are the most dominant religious reality in 46 counties around the country. This collection of nonaffiliated churches, seen as a single entity, is among the top five religious groups in 48 of the 50 states and the District of Columbia.

- In 9 states, nondenominational churches are the second largest religious group in terms of the number of adherents.

- In 23 states, they are the third largest religious group.
- In 11 states, they are the fourth largest religious group and
- In 5 states, they are the fifth largest group.

These congregations should be seen as a separate and distinctive religious reality. If we begin to think of them as not just individual aberrant outliers or lone isolated congregations but rather as a unique religious phenomenon – as a distinctive religious market segment – then we can begin to address the question of why they have become so popular in the past few decades. As a group, they are a significant reality – one that demands consideration, study and reflection on why they are so prevalent currently.

First, a few words about methodology and definitions. These churches labeled themselves with many names – independent, non or inter-denominational, or unaffiliated but the decisive distinction was that they did not claim a singular connection with a formal denomination. Exactly what a denomination is, however, can be a gray area given the rise of countless loose networks, affiliations and fellowships of churches and the multiple affiliations of even the staunchest denominationally tied church (See the 1999 article [What God Makes Free is Free Indeed: Nondenominational Church Identity and its Networks of Support](#) by Scott Thumma).

This idea of what denominational affiliation really means should be explored further but for purposes of this census effort, nondenominational means that they claimed no connection with an organized denomination nor were they counted in the networks of churches such as the Vineyard Fellowship or Calvary Chapel Association which were already claimed in the Religion Census.

We are sure this is the best listing of independent and nondenominational churches in the U.S., but it is also true that this current listing is not entirely accurate. Accounting for all the independent churches in the country is an impossible task. The independent status or exact size of many churches could not be confirmed. Nondenominational and independent congregations are a very fluid grouping of churches. Within the time span of verifying the entire dataset, we found congregations that had closed in during the 18 months of the study.

Our methodology also favored larger and more established congregations. If a church does not have a phone listing, a web presence, or a permanent physical location it was likely to be overlooked. Additionally, some of the nondenominational churches listed may well be affiliated with a denomination but did not indicate it on their website, in their published material or possibly even identify this affiliation once we contacted them.

### **The National Picture of Nondenominational Churches**

The overall national profile of these congregations shows several interesting patterns, and perhaps clues as to why this phenomenon seems to be growing (although let me stress that we do not have the data in this study to confirm conclusively that is a fact).

As seen from the maps of the individual congregations and the percent of concentration of nondenominational adherents in the US population, these churches are dispersed in modest proportions almost uniformly throughout the populated areas of the country. Likewise, the plotting of those counties where nondenominational churches are the most dominant religious body also

shows these counties are scattered throughout rather than having a single regional concentration although the Southern region accounts for almost half the churches.

A closer look at community size where these 35,000+ churches are located shows that they mostly parallel the distribution of the general population, except they adherents are more likely in metro areas above 250,000 and not as present in less populated counties. This is slightly different than the overall pattern of America’s congregations and concentration of all adherents.

**Location of Adherent Populations by Community Type**

Size of Area	U.S. Population	Nondenominational Adherents	Total Congregational Adherents
Metro of 5 million or more	24.6%	26%	26.4%
Metro of 1 – 4.9 million	29.5%	32%	27.8%
Metro 250,000 - .9 million	20.9%	22%	20.6%
Metro under 250,000	10.0%	9%	8.7%
Micropolitan 10,000 – 49,999	8.7%	8%	10.0%
Neither Metro or Micropolitan	6.3%	3%	6.5%

The location of nondenominational churches comes close to matching where the national population resides. This is in part due to the fact that as a growing phenomenon, nondenominational churches are newer and are more likely to be built when the U.S. population lives.

**Location of Congregations by Community Type**

Size of Area	U.S. Population	Nondenominational	Total Congregations
Metropolitan Counties	85%	78%	67%
Micropolitan Counties	8.7%	14%	17%
Neither Metro or Micro Counties	6.3%	8%	16%

In terms of the size of nondenominational congregations, the distribution resembles the national adherent profile quite well.

**Adherent Size Distribution**

Adherent Size	Nondenominational Adherents
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1 – 49	11%
50 – 99	18%
100 – 149	38%
150 – 349	21%
350 – 499	4%
500 – 999	4%
1000 – 1999	2%
2000 or more	2%

Megachurches often get associated with the nondenominational movement but in fact only about 35% of the Protestant churches over 2000 attenders are nondenominational. Nevertheless, roughly half of the nation’s largest and fastest growing Protestant churches, as determined by the most recent Outreach Magazine listing were nondenominational.

If you are interested in the specific characteristics of nondenominational churches, read the summary report of the Faith Communities Today Nondenominational Church Study. From the list of all nondenominational churches, we drew a sample of 4000 churches (roughly 11% of the total) to survey in-depth with a key informant questionnaire. Later, the overall national list was used to weight the survey sample by region and size. The survey response rate was 10.9 percent or a total of 437 churches. Even weighted, this subset survey should not be seen as truly representative of the entire nondenominational/independent phenomenon, nevertheless it, like the overall database, is the best picture of these churches that exist.

**EndNotes:**

The primary researcher’s interest in independent/nondenominational churches began many decades ago. Growing up in an independent Baptist church, attending several nondenominational churches, and then studying nondenominational megachurches, he has long been intrigued by them and their national patterns. His formal research on [independent/nondenominational churches in 1997/98](#) with Hartford Institute’s Organizing Religious Work project, and then followed with a [small study of independent churches for the 2000 Faith Communities Today effort](#). These studies offered a first glimpse into the phenomenon. In 2008, he was asked by RCMS leadership to propose a way to collect a listing of these elusive US churches. This effort coincided with the 2010 Faith Communities Today study and the two efforts dovetailed nicely.

Over the past several years, the primary researcher has been collecting nondenominational church lists found on the Internet. To this list were added eight additional listings of nondenominational congregations, house churches, megachurches, and independent networks of churches that were collected on the web and privately during 2009/10. Additionally, three purchased mailing lists of independent and nondenominational Christian congregations were added to the database. After all

these lists were merged together, the database was then screened for duplicates, incorrect entries, and non-church listings.

Following this effort, a team of four temporary staff persons spent over 1000 hours culling the web to attempt to verify the status of these congregations. Every church in the database was looked up on Google and in the online Yellow Pages to confirm if it existed and if it was independent/nondenominational. Every church was also emailed and/or called in order to confirm further their independent/nondenominational status, their membership and their attendance. Additionally, one of the staff members spoke Spanish and established contact with the obviously Hispanic/Latino churches in the listing. Approximately 30% responded to the request and verified their information. While engaged in this research, the staff deleted nearly a third of the original listing but also found additional church lists from the websites of newspapers, towns and counties that added new independent and nondenominational churches. They then attempted to confirm the information on these churches using the above method.

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