

How We Believe: Religions in Arkansas

The extent of religious practice in Arkansas has traditionally been assumed to be high and predominantly Christian in its orientation, yet surveying its true extent is made difficult by several factors. Chief among these is the discontinuation in 1936 of the U.S. Government's Census of Religious Bodies. Various scholarly surveys and compilations of denomination-supplied statistics make possible, however, an approximation of Arkansans' religious habits. These include: Glenmary Research Center. *Churches & Church Membership in U.S.*, (1990), and Kosmin, B. & S. Lachman. *One Nation Under God: Religion in Contemporary American Society*; Harmony Books: New York (1993).

In the Glenmary 1990 survey, 89.8 percent of surveyed Arkansans identified themselves as "Christian," members of 21 denominational groups. Another study from the same year revealed that 1,423,000 people or 60.5% of the population were "**adherents**" or members of Christian church congregations, including Roman Catholic, Latter-Day Saint and Jehovah's Witnesses.

Of the Christian denominations, the largest membership is in the various Baptist churches: 1990 figures indicated almost 849,000 Baptists, including Free-Will, Missionary and Primitive congregations. Other faiths with large memberships include Methodism (202,808, including A.M.E. and other Methodist branches, 1990), Church of Christ (86,502 in 1990), Roman Catholic (85,992 in 1996) Assemblies of God (55,438 in 1990), Presbyterian (28,947 in 1990) and Episcopal (13,845 in 1990).

Since 1990, Arkansas has seen the growth of so-called "megachurches," often non-denominational but based in evangelical or Pentecostal traditions, as well as the steady growth of Church of Jesus Christ Latter-Day Saints, or Mormon, congregations: in 1990, LDS membership was estimated at 10,446 but in 1997, the church claimed 19,000 adherents. Another Christian confession with a growing Arkansas presence is the Eastern Orthodox Church which in 1990 had only one unit established here but which has since expanded. Despite the absence of reservations or organized tribal governments, the Native American Church was estimated to have almost 13,000 Arkansas members in 1990.

Significant numbers of non-Christians make Arkansas their home. Several Islamic centers are scattered throughout the state, serving members of the Nation of Islam ("Black Muslims") as well as orthodox Muslims. In 1990 the Jewish population of Arkansas was reckoned at 2,389, while Arkansas' "neo-pagans" numbered 400. Other non-Christian faiths found in Arkansas include Hinduism, Baha'i and Buddhism. Perhaps significantly, in 1990 only 0.20% of Arkansans described themselves as agnostic, and 5.8% as nonreligious.