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The Metropolitan Distribution of the 17 Largest U.S. Religious Bodies

The Southern Baptist Convention is one of the least metropolitan denominations in the United States. Statistics for the 17 largest religious bodies indicate that the SBC ranks fifteenth in the percentage of adherents in metropolitan areas and sixteenth in the percentage of churches in metropolitan areas.

Over the past several years it has become possible to divide the SBC with considerable accuracy into three areas: the largest metropolitan areas (or Megas); smaller metropolitan areas (or Metros); and non-metropolitan areas. The Megas include the metropolitan areas which were selected for emphasis as part of the Mega Focus Cities process (a joint effort to provide special resources to SBC work in the major cities, initiated by the Home Mission Board, but now jointly sponsored by the HMB, the Sunday School Board and other SBC agencies).

Each metropolitan area in the United States has been defined as a Mega or a Metro by the Home Mission Board. Further, each metropolitan area consists of a county or several counties, as defined by the federal government. The division of the SBC into

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Mega, Metro, and non-metropolitan areas was done by combining metropolitan counties for all Mega areas and by combining metropolitan counties for all smaller metropolitan areas. Using this division it was possible to not only determine the present metropolitan distribution of the SBC, but to show to what degree the SBC has become more (or less) metropolitan. Several reports have now been issued dealing with SBC growth in the U.S. metropolitan system.

The same technology which allowed the clustering of SBC churches into Mega, Metro, and Non-Metro areas has been applied to the 1980 Churches and Church Membership Study. This study, which was sponsored in part by the Sunday School Board, is a listing of the churches, members, and adherents by religious body for each county in the United States. A total of 111 denominations participated in this study, representing 112.5 million adherents.

A list of the 111 religious bodies participating in the above study can be found in *Churches and Church Membership in the United States 1980* (Quinn et al., 1982). While very complete, the 111 religious bodies does not include independent

churches, the African Methodist Episcopal Church, the National Baptist Convention, USA, Inc., the National Baptist Convention of America, and numerous smaller religious groups.

The 17 denominations described in charts 1-4 are those with adherents of one million or more in 1980.* They represent 91.9 percent of the total adherents reported by the 111 religious bodies in the Churches and Church Membership study. Adherents are used because not all denominations report membership. Further, not all groups count members in the same way. Adherents include "all members, including full members, their children and the estimated number of other regular participants who are not considered as communicant, confirmed or full members" (Quinn et al., 1982). In other words, membership figures for Southern Baptists have been adjusted to include estimates of the children of members and an estimate of non-member participants. In this way the adherent total means the same thing for each religious body in the study.

Chart 1 shows the percent of adherents in Mega and Metro areas for each of the 17 largest religious bodies in the United States. The percent Mega is stacked on top of the percent Metro so that the length of the combined bar represents the percent in all metropolitan areas.

*Many of the denominations reported data for 1979, rather than 1980. Data for the Southern Baptist Convention is from 1979. For this reason the number of Mega and Metro churches reported in Table 1 for the SBC will not match 1980 figures reported in *SBC Growth in the U.S. Metropolitan System: 1987 Update* (Hadaway, 1988).

As can be seen in chart 1, the denominations with the largest percent of their adherents in metropolitan areas are the Catholic Church (86.0% metropolitan), the Episcopal Church (84.2% metropolitan), and the Lutheran Church in America (77.5% metropolitan).

All of the 17 denominations have at least half of their adherents in metropolitan areas, but the difference between the top three and the bottom three is quite large. The American Lutheran Church is the least metropolitan in adherents (52.9% metropolitan), followed by the Christian Churches and Churches of Christ (53.6% metropolitan), and the Southern Baptist Convention (57.6% metropolitan).

Chart 2 shows the percent of churches, rather than adherents, located in metropolitan areas for each of the 17 denominations. The rank ordering is similar, but not identical to Chart 1. The Catholic Church is replaced by the Lutheran Church in America as the most metropolitan denomination. It has 68.1 percent of its churches in Mega and Metros. The Episcopal Church and the United Church of Christ round out the top three denominations in percent of churches located in metropolitan areas.

The American Lutheran Church, the Southern Baptist Convention, and the United Methodist Church share the distinction of having the smallest percentages of churches in metropolitan areas. They have 41.3%, 41.7%, and 42.8%, respectively, in metropolitan areas.

It is interesting to note that the Lutheran Church in America, which is a very metropolitan denomination, has recently merged with the American Lutheran Church, which

is the least metropolitan body of the 17 listed. The resulting denomination will fall in the middle since the two groups are of a similar size.

It should be noted that a great deal of variation exists among the denominations in the proportion of adherents and churches located in **Mega** areas as opposed to **Metro** areas. Some groups, such as Catholics, have many more adherents in Mega areas than they do in Metro areas. In other denominations the proportions are similar. Southern Baptists have the distinction of being the only denomination of the 17 which has a larger proportion of its adherents in Metro areas than it does in Mega areas (see Chart 3).

No single factor can explain the wide differences in metropolitan distribution among the denominations considered here. For Catholics, and Lutherans the metropolitan concentration can be traced to immigration patterns. For Southern Baptists and United Methodists, other factors, such as rapid growth during frontier revivals must be considered.

Whatever the reason for this diversity in metropolitan concentration, the patterns seen in these tables reflect rather large differences among the constituencies in other areas. These differences in regional distribution, social outlook, status, education, values, and attitudes will undoubtedly influence the direction of the denominations

in the future and the degree to which change is possible.

For Southern Baptists, the fact that we are one of the most non-metropolitan denominations in America makes our efforts to reach the cities much more difficult. Not only do we have less of a presence in major cities of this nation (and thus more ground to make up), but it is likely that our traditional methods of "doing church" are more geared to town and small city life and may not work as well in the Mega city context. New strategies and methodologies may be necessary.

In 1991 or 1992 it should be possible to replicate this study using 1990 data from these same 17 denominations (adjusting for several mergers). We will then know to what extent these groups have changed in their metropolitan concentration over the decade of the 1980s.

References

- Hadaway, C. Kirk
1988 *SBC Growth in the U.S. Metropolitan System: 1987 Update*. Nashville: Sunday School Board.
- Quinn, Bernard, Herman Anderson, Martin Bradley, Paul Goetting, and Peggy Shriver
1982 *Churches and Church Membership in the United States 1980*. Atlanta: Glenmary Research Center.

Chart 1

Percent of Adherents in Mega and Metro Areas by Denomination (17 Largest)

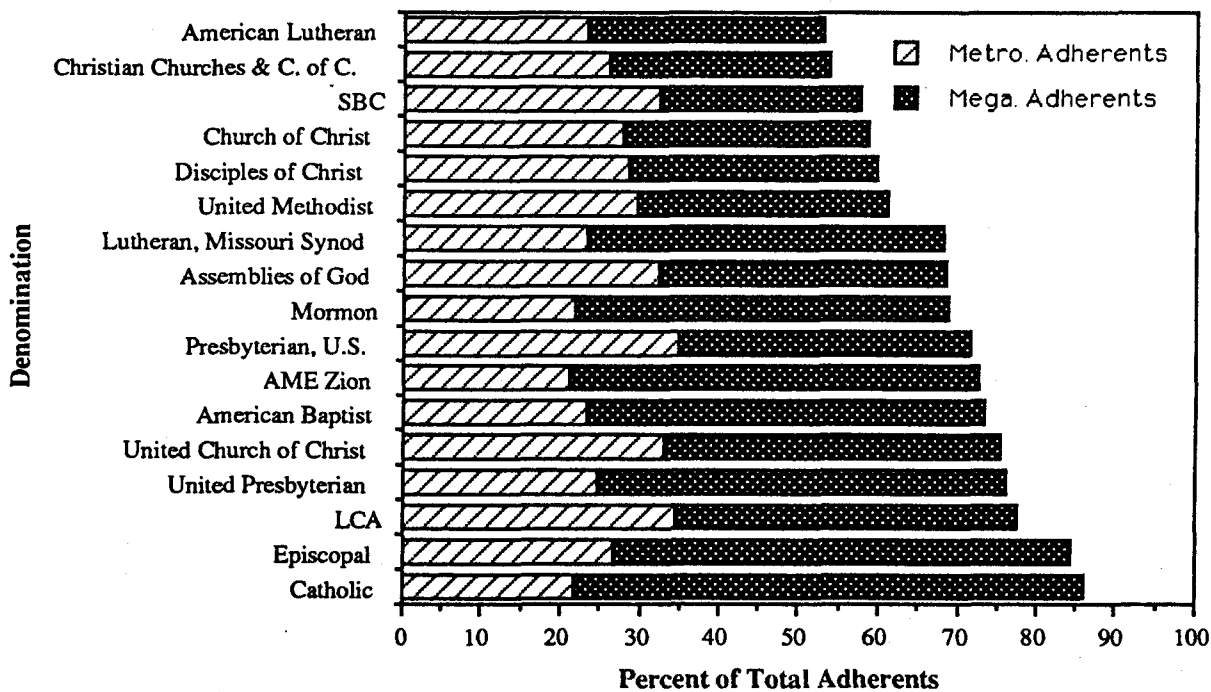


Chart 2

Percent of Churches in Mega and Metro Areas by Denomination (17 Largest)

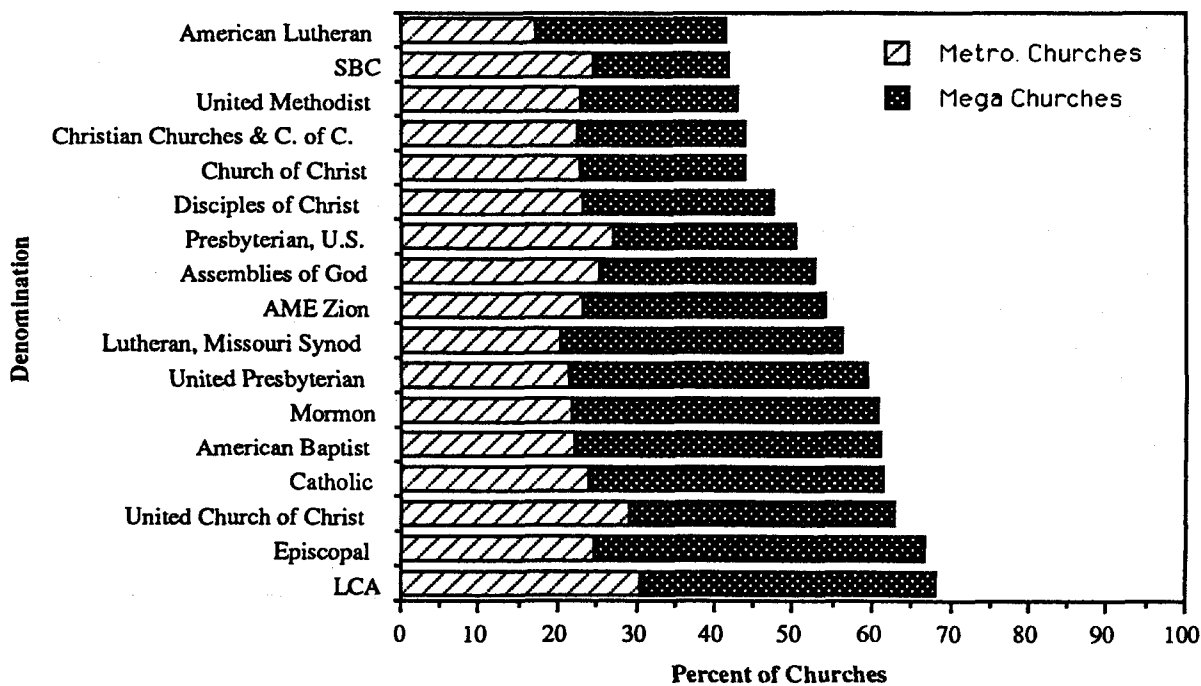


Chart 3

Percent of Adherents in Mega Areas by Denomination

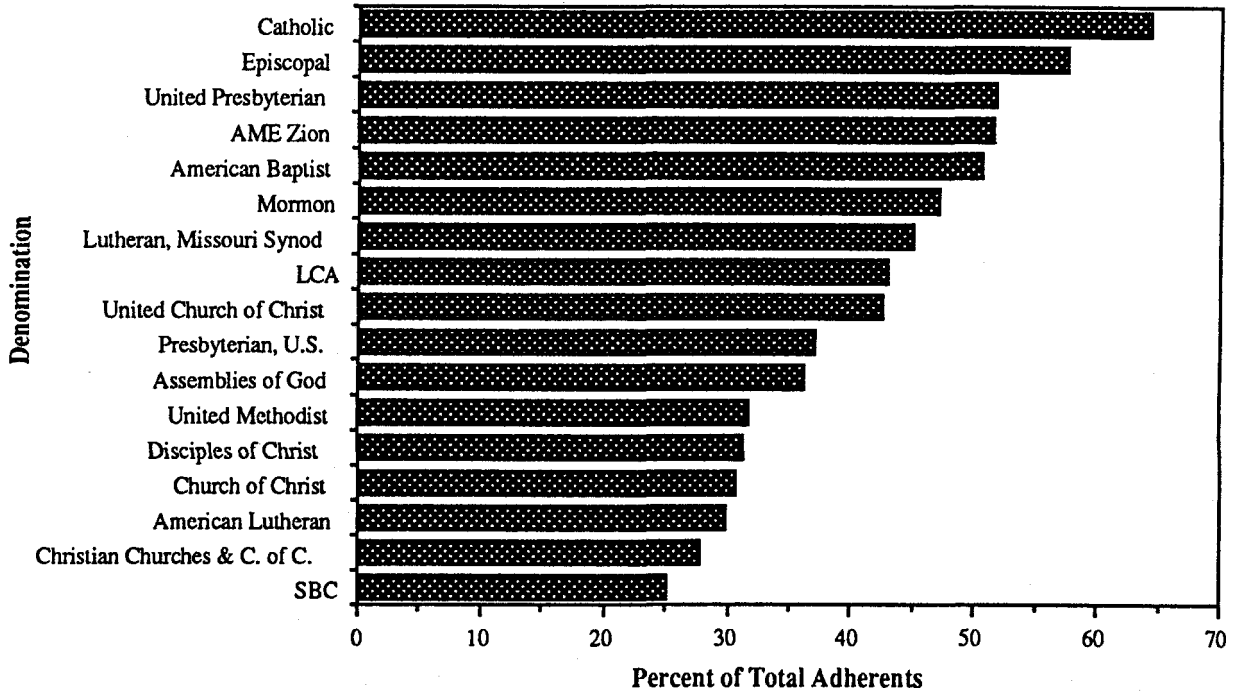


Chart 4

Percent of Churches in Mega Areas by Denomination

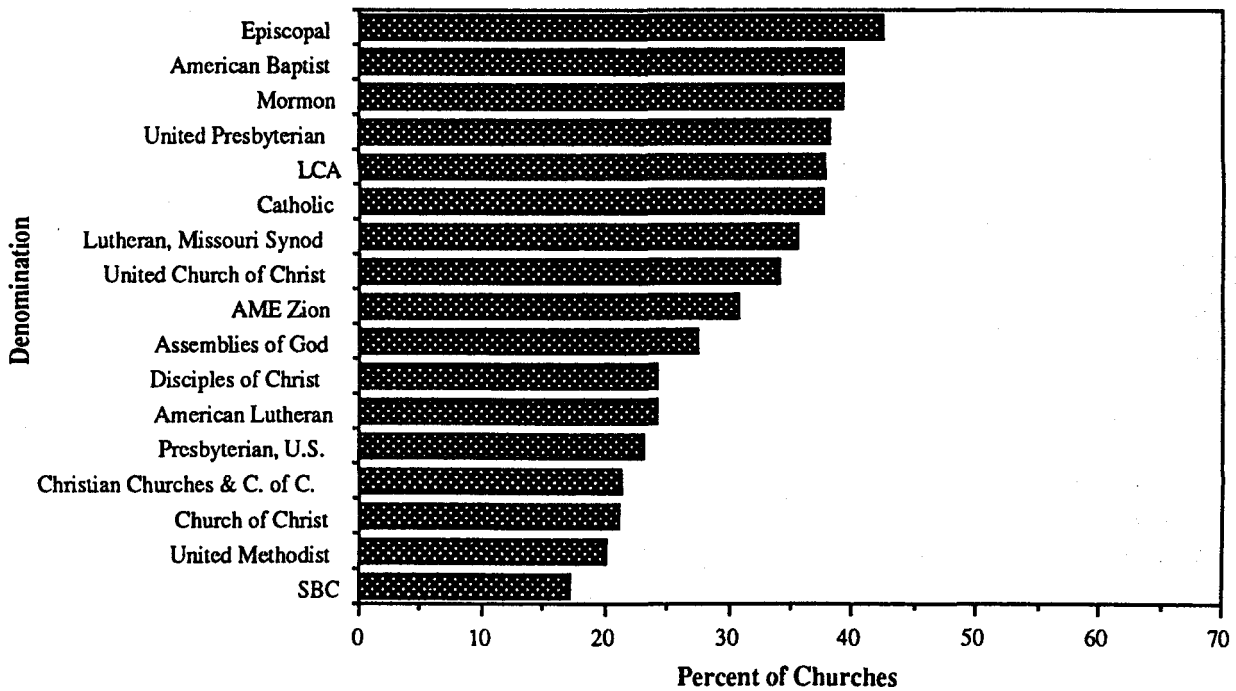


Table 1—Mega, Metro, and Non-Metro Distribution of 17 Denominations

DENOMINATION	% MEGA (ADHERENTS)	% METRO (ADHERENTS)	% NON- METROPOLITAN (ADHERENTS)	% ALL METROPOLITAN (ADHERENTS)
Catholic Church	64.2%	21.9%	14.0%	86.0%
Episcopal Church	57.5%	26.8%	15.8%	84.2%
Lutheran Ch. in America	43.0%	34.5%	22.5%	77.5%
United Presby. Ch., U.S.A	51.7%	24.5%	23.8%	76.2%
United Church of Christ	42.5%	32.9%	24.6%	75.4%
Amer. Bapt. USA	50.5%	23.0%	26.4%	73.6%
AME Zion	51.6%	21.2%	27.2%	72.8%
Presby. Ch. in the U. S.	37.1%	34.6%	28.4%	71.6%
L.D.S.	47.0%	21.7%	31.3%	68.7%
Assemblies of God	36.2%	32.3%	31.5%	68.5%
Lutheran Ch., Missouri Syn.	45.0%	23.1%	32.0%	68.0%
United Methodist Church	31.8%	29.4%	38.8%	61.2%
Christian Ch. (Disciples)	31.3%	28.4%	40.3%	59.7%
Churches of Christ	30.7%	27.8%	41.5%	58.5%
Southern Baptist Convention	25.2%	32.4%	42.4%	57.6%
Christ. Ch. & Ch. of Christ	27.8%	25.8%	46.4%	53.6%
Am. Lutheran Ch.	29.8%	23.1%	47.1%	52.9%

DENOMINATION	% MEGA (CHURCHES)	% METRO (CHURCHES)	% NON- METROPOLITAN (CHURCHES)	% ALL METROPOLITAN (CHURCHES)
Lutheran Ch. in America	37.6%	30.5%	31.9%	68.1%
Episcopal Church	42.4%	24.4%	33.2%	66.8%
United Church of Christ	33.9%	29.0%	37.1%	62.9%
Catholic Church	37.4%	23.9%	38.6%	61.4%
Amer. Bapt. USA	39.0%	22.2%	38.8%	61.2%
L.D. S.	39.0%	21.7%	39.3%	60.7%
United Presby. Ch., U.S.A	38.1%	21.3%	40.6%	59.4%
Lutheran Ch., Missouri Syn.	35.5%	20.5%	44.0%	56.0%
AME Zion	30.6%	23.2%	46.2%	53.8%
Assemblies of God	27.5%	25.2%	47.4%	52.6%
Presby. Ch. in the U. S.	23.2%	26.9%	49.9%	50.1%
Christian Ch. (Disciples)	24.1%	23.1%	52.8%	47.2%
Churches of Christ	21.0%	22.8%	56.2%	43.8%
Christ. Ch. & Ch. of Christ	21.3%	22.4%	56.3%	43.7%
United Methodist Church	20.0%	22.7%	57.2%	42.8%
Southern Baptist Convention	17.2%	24.5%	58.3%	41.7%
Am. Lutheran Ch.	24.1%	17.2%	58.7%	41.3%