Spring 2004

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MAPPING CHANGES IN DENOMINATIONAL MEMBERSHIP IN THE GREAT PLAINS, 1952-2000

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ABSTRACT - The religious heritage of the Great Plains is illustrated in distinct denominational regions. Mapping county-level data on major denominations reveals that Catholics and Lutherans are strongest in the Northern Plains, Methodists in the Central Plains, and Baptists in the Southern Plains. Counties that are increasing in population and closest to metropolitan and interstate areas experience the most diversity. During the last fifty years, Lutherans and Methodists have lost members, while Catholics and Baptists gained. The Central Plains is experiencing the most dynamism.

Key Words: denominational regions, isolation, metropolitan-non-metropolitan, migration, religious membership

Introduction

Geographers have a solid record of recent research on religion in America, much of it traced to Zelinsky’s pioneering cartographic analysis (1961) of county membership patterns of 26 denominations using data from the National Council of Churches (1956-58). Zelinsky’s study stimulated other cultural, historical, and social geographers to examine individual denominational membership patterns. These include Shortridge’s articles and chapters on religions regions in the United States and Catholic membership concentrations (1976, 1977, 1978, 1988, 1992) and Heatwole’s study on
regional patterns of Presbyterianism (1977) and delimiting the Bible Belt (1978). Brunn and Webster edited an issue of the Southeastern Geographer (2000) that included articles on the worldviews of southern seminaries (Brunn and Long 2000), the changing rural and urban religious landscapes in Georgia from 1970 to 1990 (Webster 2000), and declines in Jewish membership in rural, small southern towns (Sheskin 2000). Additional contributions by geographers that have a bearing on the study of religious groups have focused on ethnicity (Meyer 1975; Allen and Turner 1988; Kory 1997; Zeigler and Brunn 2000; Brewer and Suchan 2001; Zelinsky 2001), cemeteries and sacred spaces (Jordan 1982; Foote 1997), symbols and nationalism (Zelinsky 1988), treaty monuments (Campbell and Brunn 2004), and how missionaries informed the American public about foreign places (Brunn and Leppman 2003).

In a region as large and varied as the Great Plains, some new features of the region’s religious geographies have emerged during the past 50 years, while others have disappeared. Even though the Great Plains is often considered to have similar physical environments, those who study, travel through, and investigate its human and environmental geographies recognize both discernible and subtle differences between the Northern, Central, and Southern Plains and between its eastern and western margins. Denominational membership and religious architecture are among those variations. The denominational uniformity and diversity that exist today are products of earlier east-west migrations, improved transportation systems, declining rural and corresponding growing urban economies, and some new layers of cultures and ethnicity alongside traditional mixes of earlier settlement. Zelinsky (1973, 97) identifies several “major religious regions” in the Plains, including Upper Middle West (Nebraska, the Dakotas, and eastern Montana), Midland (Kansas, northern Oklahoma, Wyoming, and eastern Colorado), and Southern (parts of the Texas panhandle, eastern New Mexico, and central and the Oklahoma panhandle).

Religion, ethnicity, and regionalism remain important themes in examining America’s religious heritage, including mapping the distribution and diffusion of denominations. Valuable historical maps are provided in Fry (1930), Paullin and Wright (1932), Gaustad (1962), Halvorson and Newman (1994), and Gaustad and Barlow (2001). Gaustad and Barlow (2001) is especially useful as it provides county membership patterns in 1890 of Methodists, Baptists, Catholics, Presbyterians, Lutherans, Presbyterians, and other denominations that played crucial roles in developing the current religious landscapes in the Plains.
An examination of the contents of *Great Plains Quarterly* and *Great Plains Research* for articles on religion reveals an interest in a variety of historical and cultural topics. Examples include the preservation of Pawnee sacred spaces (Parks and Wedel 1985); Catholic sisters in the rural Northern Plains in the late 1800s (Peterson 1985); early-twentieth-century Jewish homesteading in North Dakota (Schulte 1990); North Dakota’s Anti-Garb Law (what women could wear while teaching) (Grathwohl 1993); property and legal issues relating to Native American religious freedom (Forbes-Boye 1999); local political issues in elementary school instruction in rural Catholic areas of Saskatchewan (White 1997); and gender, ethnicity, and religious issues in frontier Kansas (Cohurn 1998). Articles, including maps, on the history of individual denominations or the contemporary “mix” of denominations have not appeared.

This study continues these efforts by exploring denominational membership changes in the Great Plains during the past half century. The study area, as defined by the Center for Great Plains Studies at the University of Nebraska, includes 599 counties in 10 states. Our inquiry examines changes in the four leading denominations: Lutherans, Methodists, Baptists, and Catholics. The following questions aid in developing a denominational profile of the region: (1) What are their major patterns and concentrations; (2) What changes (growth and decline) have occurred since the 1950s; (3) Can we relate those changes to populations shifts, urbanization, isolation, and accessibility; and (4) What would a composite map of major denominational regions look like?

**Membership Patterns, Population Change, and Isolation in a Transit Region**

We begin our inquiry by considering the historical migrations that crossed the region and the religious traditions transplanted by these new migrants. The ethnic compositions of these migration streams, which vary in the Northern, Central, and Southern Plains, reflect different historical and cultural origins (from Europe and the eastern half of the United States) (Elazar 1966, 1972). Elazar commented that

the three great currents of American migration began on the east coast and moved westward after the colonial period. Each current moved, in the persons of westward migrants, from east to west, along more or less fixed paths, following lines of least resistance
which generally led them due west from the immediately previous area of settlement. (99)

These streams help us understand how settlers considered faith and religious issues and incorporated their beliefs into the evolving religious landscapes. Zelinsky (1973) commented in the same vein that “as the migrants of the three nodal regions [New England, Midland, and South] pushed westward, they also carried their religious identity with them” (98). The Northern Plains was populated by those originating in northern Europe, especially Scandinavia (Hart 2003), and Wisconsin, Minnesota, Iowa, New York, northern Pennsylvania, and Ohio. Nebraska and Kansas, on the other hand, were settled by central Europeans and Americans from Iowa, northern Illinois, and northern Missouri. Migrations into southern Kansas and Oklahoma originated in southern Indiana and Illinois and central and southern Missouri. The Southern Plains was settled by people from the southern Middle West, Deep South, and Border South states. Elazar’s cultural streams are similar to those nineteenth-century latitudinal migration streams across the Middle West that Hudson (1988) mapped. Visually comparing maps showing migration streams with those depicting ethnicity and religion help us understand the uniformity, diversity, and dynamics associated with church membership patterns in the Great Plains.

Two distinguishing features that are essential to understanding the region’s social institutions are population change and isolation (see Lonsdale and Holmes 1981; Hudson 2003). There are marked differences in population change, numbers, and density and in accessibility to cities and major transportation routes. In Figure 1 we depict variations in population change and isolation. The map clearly shows significant population growth along the edges of the region. Most of this growth is concentrated in several large metropolitan areas such as Denver, Dallas, and Kansas City in the southern half of the region. In the northern states, much less growth is evident.

Throughout the region, population growth is associated with the least isolated areas within 50 miles of interstate highways and metropolitan areas. The greatest population increases are in areas that are accessible (or less isolated), and conversely, the greatest declines are in more isolated areas. During the period 1950-2000, of the 599 counties, 373 lost population, some by as much as 50%-70%; the greatest declines were in isolated areas of the Texas panhandle and scattered areas of North Dakota. Many of these counties in the Northern Plains peaked in 1890-1900 and in the Central and Southern Plains in 1920-1930 (Zelinsky 1962). These losses were countered
Figure 1. Population change (1950-2000) and isolation in Great Plains counties.

Definitions:
No isolation = within 50 miles of both metropolitan area and interstate highway.
Limited isolation = at least 50 miles from either metro area or interstate highway.
Moderate isolation = 100-150 miles from either metro area or interstate highway.
Increased isolation = at least 50 miles from both metro area and interstate highway.
Maximum isolation = at least 100 miles from both metro area and interstate highway.
by another 30 counties that increased more than 200%. The sharpest increases were in the metropolitan Colorado Springs, Denver, and Boulder areas, amenity areas on the east face of the Rockies (Cromartie 1998) and in spotty “oases” settlements on the High Plains (White 1992, 1994; Rathage and Highman 1996).

The Great Plains has long been a region having few large metropolitan areas, most of which are located on the region’s peripheries. The lack of extensive urban infrastructure in the interior means that many areas in the region are unlikely to experience spillover effects of urban growth. Depicting counties by their degree of isolation may lend more explanation to religious change than simply metropolitan and nonmetropolitan designations. Isolation is defined as the distances from rural areas and towns to the nearest interstate highways and metropolitan centers (Brunn and Zeigler 1981). Using these measures we identified varying degrees of isolation; some portions—for example, Cherry County, NE, and Baca County, CO—are more than 100 miles from both a major metropolitan area and an interstate. As Figure 1 illustrates, the majority of population growth occurred in areas with limited or no isolation. In general, as isolation increases, nodes of population growth decline, with the two notable exceptions of southwestern Kansas and western Wyoming, which grew between 1950 and 2000 despite relatively high levels of isolation.

Data and Methodology

Denominational data came from the Religious Congregation and Membership Study (RCMS) by Glenmary Home Missioners (2000a) and from Churches and Church Membership in the United States (1956-58), a project undertaken by the National Council of Churches of Christ in 1952. The Churches project, which surveyed 53 religious groups, was the first study after 1936 to publish county-level religious affiliation data. Approximately 53 religious groups were surveyed. Subsequent editions, renamed RCMS, were sponsored by the Glenmary Research Center (established 1966) (Johnson et al. 1974; Quinn et al. 1982; Bradley et al. 1992; Jones et al. 2002). Data have been collected every 10 years since 1971 (1980, 1990, 2000). All religious bodies are encouraged to participate and must provide, at a minimum, the number of congregations per county. Additional data are desired on the number of churches (or equivalent), number of communicants, confirmed or full members, and adherents. The Association of Statisticians of American Religious Bodies conducted the 2000 survey with support
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from the Lilly Endowment, Inc. (Glenmary Home Missioners 2000b). The 2000 data include information on 149 of the 285 religious groups.

The RCMS data have four primary limitations. First, data represent the county location of the congregation rather than the residential location of members. This measure potentially results in denominational underrepresentation where members cross county lines to worship. The underrepresentation may be equally commonplace in large urban areas where people have many churches from which to choose, as well as in more isolated areas where members may need to travel long distances to worship. Second, the number of religious bodies surveyed changes each decade. While major groups always participate, smaller groups do not. Third, fourteen groups with memberships exceeding 100,000 were not included in the 2000 data; many are historically African American groups (Glenmary Home Missioners 2000c). Finally, data for Catholic groups are incomplete and not easily compared. For 1952 data are for members and congregations, but after 1952 only numbers of total adherents and congregations are listed. Members are those persons with full membership status in their respective religious body while adherents include both members and an estimate of other participants (Glenmary Home Missioners 2000b). Using adherents as a surrogate for Catholic membership could overestimate the size of this group in each county. We use Catholic adherents data for 2000, as they are the best estimate of participation. Despite these limitations, RCMS remains the most comprehensive and comparable data on membership and affiliation.

In order to analyze and visualize changes in denominational patterns in the Great Plains, memberships in religious bodies were aggregated using the denomination subfamily category provided in the database. For example, more than 20 different Baptist groups are aggregated into one “Baptist” category. This aggregation is necessary to capture variations across distinctly different religious bodies. We also used total membership of a denomination, as opposed to a denomination’s percentage of the total population. The aggregated data by county were mapped using ArcView 3.2 Geographical Information System software (ArcView 1999).

Patterns of Denominational Membership

Below we describe the salient membership patterns of the four leading denominations: Lutherans, Methodists, Baptists, and Catholics. When we examine the number of church members in 1952 and 2000, we note that the Baptists, Lutherans and Catholics (adherents) increased in number, while
TABLE 1

TOTAL CHURCHES AND CHURCH MEMBERSHIP

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Baptist</th>
<th>Lutheran</th>
<th>Methodist</th>
<th>Catholic</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total members</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1952</td>
<td>1,170,655</td>
<td>725,105</td>
<td>1,040,829</td>
<td>1,218,814</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990</td>
<td>1,193,574</td>
<td>763,909</td>
<td>1,022,704</td>
<td>2,371,655</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>2,225,351</td>
<td>771,508</td>
<td>970,139</td>
<td>3,263,621</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total churches</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1952</td>
<td>1,919</td>
<td>2,763</td>
<td>4,033</td>
<td>1,627</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990</td>
<td>4,480</td>
<td>2,864</td>
<td>3,393</td>
<td>2,291</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>5,374</td>
<td>2,736</td>
<td>3,226</td>
<td>2,185</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Glenmary Research Center (2002).

Methodists declined (Table 1). The same denominations exhibited contrasts in members located in isolated areas. The majority of members of all four religious denominations are found in the least isolated areas, that is, in cities. Lutherans and Methodists, however, clearly have more members in the most isolated counties of the study area, whereas Baptists and Catholics could be considered the most urban and least rural denominations (Table 2).

Lutherans retained their regional strength in spite of membership losses (Figs. 2 and 3). The largest numbers and concentrations remain in its core areas, eastern North and South Dakota, and northeast Montana. The denomination was able to hold its members with some spotty increases in counties that lost population, especially in Wyoming, southern Montana, southwest South Dakota, central Nebraska, and central Kansas. Membership gains in counties that experienced population loss may reflect the consolidation of churches from several counties (Fig. 4). Large numbers of Lutherans live in the Denver region. Lutherans were never strong in the Southern Plains, although there is a strong and expanding node in eastern Texas. Overall, Lutheran membership growth occurred in the least isolated areas.

The Methodist pattern is one of overall decline with isolated “islands” of growth. The losses were mostly in its core, that is, central Kansas and the
TABLE 2
DISTRIBUTION OF CHURCH MEMBERS BY METROPOLITAN OR NONMETROPOLITAN STATUS AND DEGREE OF COUNTY ISOLATION

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Church membership</th>
<th>Baptist</th>
<th>Lutheran</th>
<th>Methodist</th>
<th>Catholic*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1952</td>
<td>1,170,655</td>
<td>725,105</td>
<td>1,040,829</td>
<td>1,218,814</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Metro (%)</td>
<td>36.6</td>
<td>15.2</td>
<td>29.4</td>
<td>33.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nonmetro (%)</td>
<td>63.4</td>
<td>84.8</td>
<td>70.6</td>
<td>66.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990</td>
<td>1,193,574</td>
<td>763,990</td>
<td>1,022,704</td>
<td>2,371,655</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Metro (%)</td>
<td>59.7</td>
<td>44.4</td>
<td>55.9</td>
<td>64.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nonmetro (%)</td>
<td>40.3</td>
<td>55.6</td>
<td>44.1</td>
<td>35.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>2,225,351</td>
<td>771,508</td>
<td>970,139</td>
<td>3,263,621</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Metro (%)</td>
<td>68.7</td>
<td>47.5</td>
<td>60.6</td>
<td>72.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nonmetro (%)</td>
<td>31.3</td>
<td>52.5</td>
<td>39.4</td>
<td>28.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Degree of Isolation 2000

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Isolation Type</th>
<th>Baptist</th>
<th>Lutheran</th>
<th>Methodist</th>
<th>Catholic*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No isolation (%)</td>
<td>92.1</td>
<td>86.2</td>
<td>88.5</td>
<td>88.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limited isolation (%)</td>
<td>6.0</td>
<td>8.4</td>
<td>7.6</td>
<td>7.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moderate isolation (%)</td>
<td>1.8</td>
<td>4.4</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>4.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increased isolation (%)</td>
<td>0.2</td>
<td>0.7</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>0.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maximum isolation (%)</td>
<td>0.00006</td>
<td>0.2</td>
<td>0.0002</td>
<td>0.00009</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Glenmary Research Center (2002).
*1990 and 2000 percentages based on total adherents.

Texas and Oklahoma panhandles (Figs. 5 and 6). These areas suffered sharp population losses. The growth "islands" are mostly in northeast Nebraska, northeast Wyoming, and western South Dakota (Fig. 7). The denomination was never prominent in the Northern Plains.

Baptists added both members and churches during the past half century (Figs. 8 and 9). Their pattern illustrates widespread and dramatic growth, especially in the Central Plains. Large clusters exist in and around Denver, in all of Oklahoma, and in west Texas. Baptist growth was sporadic in the Northern Plains (Fig. 10).

Catholics more than doubled in the past half century (Figs. 11 and 12). They are especially strong in the rural and urban Northern Plains, the western Plains, especially metropolitan Denver, eastern New Mexico, and
Figure 2. Lutheran church membership by county, 1952. (Data from Glenmary Research Center 2002.)
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Figure 3. Lutheran church membership by county, 2000. (Data from Glenmary Research Center 2002.)
Figure 4. Lutheran church membership change by county, 1952-2000. (Data from Glenmary Research Center 2002.)
Figure 5. Methodist church membership by county, 1952. (Data from Glenmary Research Center 2002.)
Figure 6. Methodist church membership by county, 2000. (Data from Glenmary Research Center 2002.)
Figure 7. Methodist church membership change by county, 1952-2000. (Data from Glenmary Research Center 2002.)
Figure 8. Baptist church membership by county, 1952. (Data from Glenmary Research Center 2002.)
Figure 9. Baptist church membership by county, 2000. (Data from Glenmary Research Center 2002.)
Figure 10. Baptist church membership change by county, 1952-2000. (Data from Glenmary Research Center 2002.)
Figure 11. Catholic church membership by county, 1952. (Data from Glenmary Research Center 2002.)
Figure 12. Catholic church adherents by county, 2000. (Data from Glenmary Research Center 2002.)
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metropolitan counties in central Kansas, Oklahoma, and the Texas panhandle. Much of the growth in the southwest is attributed to growing Hispanic populations in these areas. Differences in measuring Catholic membership preclude making comparable maps to measure change.

**Leading Denominations by County: 1952 and 2000**

Membership changes reflect both expanding and contracting areas of denominational strength. We mapped the denomination with the largest membership, although not necessarily the majority, in each county. The 1952 patterns illustrate several distinct regions, with Catholics dominating the Northern Plains but interspersed with Lutheran-led counties in North Dakota and Montana. Baptists are primarily clustered in Texas while Kansas and Oklahoma appear to be a transition zone with the most prominent leading denomination, Methodist, representing the majority of counties in these two states. In 2000 the pattern was much more complex. Catholic membership remained strong in the Northern Plains while Methodist-led counties increased significantly in the Southern Plains. The Central and Southern Plains witnessed the greatest shifts in denominational membership. The once almost entirely Baptist-dominated Texas counties diversified by 2000 to include more Methodists, Lutherans, Disciples of Christ, and Catholics. Kansas, Nebraska, and Colorado were mixes of Catholics, Lutherans, and Methodists in 1952, but by 2000 there were several counties with Baptist, Congregational Christian, and Disciples of Christ majorities.

The total number of counties in which a denomination has members also informs us about their geographical extent. Of the 599 counties in the Plains, in 1952 there were Catholics in 571, Methodists in 568, Lutherans in 466, and Baptists in 471. The figures for 2000 were Catholics in 578 counties, Methodists in 563, Lutherans in 488, and Baptists in 516. These numbers do not reveal changes such as the closing of small-town and rural churches and growth in regional centers and metropolitan areas.

Leading denominations do not necessarily represent the majority denomination. The relatively isolated Towner County, North Dakota, has seven denominations, the leading one in 2000 being the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) with 41%. Other main denominations in the county, all with smaller representations, were Catholic, Assembly of God, Presbyterian, and Methodist. In the Southern Plains, the leading denomination in Chaves County, New Mexico, was Catholic (32%), masking a diversity in the county indicated by the existence of 27 other denominations.
Denominational Changes

During this five-decade span there were more county declines for Lutherans and Methodists and fewer for Baptists. Of the 599 counties in the study area, Baptist membership increased in 250 counties and decreased in 149; in 200 counties Baptist membership was stable, with neither loss nor gain. Methodists experienced the most declines; the denomination lost members in 474 counties and gained them in only 100; in 25 counties membership was stable. Most declines were in areas distant from metropolitan areas and interstates, especially an "isolation strip" from South Dakota to the Oklahoma panhandle. Lutherans lost members in 290 counties, gained them in 210, and remained stable in 99. Despite overall growth in membership for Baptists, Lutherans, and Catholics at the regional level, county-level declines are common and generally represent a redistribution of members within the region.

Denominational Regions in the Plains

As noted above, Zelinksy (1973, 1992) identified three religious regions in the Great Plains. Though Mather (1972) did not map religious regions, he described the religious landscape of the Plains as Lutheran in the Northern Plains, Methodist in the Central Plains, and Baptist in the Southern Plains. Omitted from this generalization were concentrations of Catholics and the emergence of new groups and smaller groups, such as Presbyterians and Pentecostals, and the religious diversity in urban areas. To illustrate regional changes during the past five decades, we mapped the concentrations in 1952 and 2000 (Figs. 13 and 14). In 1952 Lutherans were mostly concentrated in North Dakota; Catholics were also strong in North Dakota as well as Montana. Methodists were mostly concentrated in the Central Plains, especially Kansas and Oklahoma, and Baptists were concentrated in the Southern Plains. Mormon congregations were mostly in the Central Plains, especially eastern Colorado, central and eastern Kansas, and central Oklahoma. There were very few Jewish concentrations in 1952.

Some of these denominational concentrations had changed by 2000. First, the Northern Plains continued to be dominated by Catholics; these concentrations were also noted by Shortridge (1978). The area of Lutheran concentration in 2000 is almost exactly the same as five decades earlier, that is, in eastern and central North Dakota and northeastern South Dakota. This is the only area in the Plains with a high concentration of Lutherans in both
Figure 13. Regions of religious concentration, 1952. (Data from Glenmary Research Center 2002.)
Figure 14. Regions of religious concentration, 2000. (Data from Glenmary Research Center 2002.)
rural and urban counties. Second, the Central Plains contains roughly equal numbers of three of the four leading denominations, the exception is the Catholics. It is the most diverse part of the Plains. Southern South Dakota, Nebraska, and southeast Colorado appear to be in transition, with more religious diversity in 2000 than in 1952. Around Denver, Catholics are “competing” with all other denominations, especially Methodists, to maintain numerical strength. Third, the Southern Plains is dominated by Baptists; Methodists are second in numbers but mostly in southeast New Mexico, central Oklahoma, and the Texas panhandle. Baptists have expanded their base, but at the same time the Southern Plains is becoming diverse. The fourth major pattern describes the Denver and Oklahoma metropolitan areas, the most diverse in the entire region.

In regard to religious bodies with smaller numbers, there are two noteworthy patterns. Pentecostals and Presbyterians are scattered fairly evenly in urban and semi-urban counties throughout the Plains. The Pentecostals are concentrated around Denver, Oklahoma City, Abilene, TX, and Billings, MT, and the Presbyterians are found in eastern Kansas, Denver and northeast Colorado, southeast New Mexico, Fargo, and western Wyoming and Montana. The regional clusters of Mormon congregations are similar to 1952; in absolute numbers the Mormons and Jewish adherents are highest around Denver and Oklahoma City.

Summary and Future Directions

On the basis of our inquiry into denominational membership changes in the Great Plains, we identify five questions that are worthy of continued investigation. First, how do the patterns of 1950-2000 compare with the concentrations of major denominational membership in the early 1900s? The Census of Religious Bodies 1916 (US Census of Population 1919) published county-level data on religious membership. Second, have the declines since 1950 occurred in areas of concentration or in areas where membership numbers were small? That is, did core areas become more Methodist or Baptist or Lutheran or did marginal areas become more mixed? Third, what processes led to the expansion of Baptist churches in the region? Are the new Baptists former Methodists or members of other denominations? Did the Baptist national denomination embark on membership and new building programs in the Central Plains especially? Fourth, is it possible to explain membership changes by using a variety of demographic, economic, and environmental data? For example, might one tease out the key
indicators using data on median age, hospital and school closures, outmigration, environmental risk (drought vulnerability), and economic uncertainty (farm foreclosures) through multiple regression and factor analytic models? Fifth, how have denominations with large and small memberships responded to membership changes (especially declines)? This assumes that the mainline denominations are aware of the geographic nature of those changes depicted on the maps. Are they engaged in cooperative efforts to serve diminishing numbers of members, perhaps training the equivalent of “21st-century circuit riders” who serve multiple congregations and multiple denominations on a rotating basis? Our hope is that scholars in the social sciences and humanities, in seminaries and denominational headquarters, will continue to address the meanings of place, region, and religion in the Great Plains.

References


Great Plains Research
A JOURNAL OF NATURAL AND SOCIAL SCIENCES

- a biannual multidisciplinary international journal.
- publishes original scholarly papers in the natural and social sciences.
- includes articles from symposia, information on upcoming conferences, and book reviews.

PUBLISHER:
Center for Great Plains Studies,
University of Nebraska
ISSN: 1052-5165

SUBSCRIPTION PRICES:
Single issues are $15 plus $1 shipping and handling [US].
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Upcoming issue for Fall 2004:

New Immigrants in the Great Plains: Strengths and Challenges

Guest editors:
Douglas A. Abbott,
Rochelle L. Dalla,
John Defrain, and
Julie Johnson

The editors have gathered articles significant in expanding the knowledge base of newcomers to the Great Plains in order to provide a broader understanding of the populations of new immigrants.