

Catholic Church in U.S., Canada among religious bodies gaining members

WASHINGTON - In the United States and Canada, membership numbers have gone up for the Catholic Church, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and the Assemblies of God, among others, according to the 2010 edition of a yearbook published by the National Council of Churches.

The 78th annual edition of the "Yearbook of American & Canadian Churches" also reported a continuing decline in membership of nearly all mainline Protestant denominations including the Southern Baptist Convention, which reported a loss of members for the second year in a row. With more than 16 million members, it is still the nation's second largest denomination.

The Catholic Church - the country's largest denomination with more than 68 million members - reported a slight membership decline in the 2009 yearbook, but it rebounded this year with a 1.49 percent growth.

The Latter-day Saints grew 1.71 percent to almost 6 million members and the Assemblies of God grew 1.27 percent to about 2.9 million members.

The Rev. Eileen Lindner, editor of the yearbook since 1988 and NCC deputy general secretary for research and planning, said in a statement that observers have attributed the membership decline in some churches to "an increasing secularization of American postmodern society and its disproportionate impact on liberal religious groups."

But Rev. Lindner, a Presbyterian minister, urged caution in interpreting the data and added: "American society as a whole has not experienced the kind and rate of secularization so clearly demonstrated during the last quarter-century in Western Europe."

The yearbook also looks at trends in church membership and the 2010 edition

includes an essay on immigrants in the church, noting that most U.S. immigrants in the past 50 years have been Christian.

The essay, "The New Immigrant Church," written by Rev. Lindner, described immigration's impact on the religious landscape of the United States and Canada. She said the increasing religious pluralism stemming from immigration may alter the views of faith communities on a variety of public issues.

"With the racial, ethnic and cultural diversity of the immigrant communities, more diverse and nuanced views of matters ranging from abortion to aid and trade policy as well as immigration policy may find voice as these churches enter into civic engagement in their new culture," Rev. Lindner wrote. "As they do, a new fault line in Christian theology and practice may open within the American religious landscape."

The 440-page yearbook is an annual publication of the New York-based National Council of Churches. It lists U.S. and Canadian church bodies, giving a brief description of each and a listing of national headquarters, officers, periodicals and major agencies or boards.

The yearbook also includes directories of U.S. and Canadian seminaries, religious periodicals, ecumenical organizations, cooperative religious organizations, institutions engaged in religious research and a selective directory of non-Christian religious organizations.

Because it relies on data collected by the church bodies, the 2010 yearbook covers 2008 data gathered by the churches in 2009. The yearbook reports what year the figures come from, since not all churches collect new data every year.

The yearbook's description of church membership data also points out that the numbers may not reflect those in their 20s and 30s who might participate in church life but not be listed as members.

Sixty-four churches contributed data to the yearbook's section on church financial reporting. The members of those churches, roughly 45 million people, contributed almost \$36 billion to churches in 2008.

The 2010 yearbook noted that churches themselves, “at least in this sample,” did not match the charitable giving of their members, which it said would be seen at the local level in “less support for church-sponsored day care, fewer soup kitchen meals, less emergency help to persons with medical problems, or reduced transportation to the elderly, even as the needs increase.”