

Research Results

Religion and Ethnicity in Detroit The Pluralism Project at the University of Michigan-Dearborn

The city of Detroit and its suburbs in Wayne, Oakland, and Macomb counties constitute one of the largest centers of population in the United States. Its 5.2 million residents (1990) are 56 percent of Michigan's people. A long association with the automotive industry and labor unions has shaped the area's culture, social life, ethnic composition, politics, and economy. While these factors have also influenced the religious landscape of the region, a growing diversity of religious traditions has helped, in turn, to mold Detroit.

The religious history of the area stretches back to the establishment of a French fort and post along the Detroit River in 1701. Two Roman Catholic priests, a Jesuit and a Franciscan, served as chaplains to the fort, laying the groundwork for Ste. Anne's parish, which still serves the community. Over the years since the founding of the fort, religion in the region has diversified greatly. To the Roman Catholics were added Protestants who in 1818 constructed their first permanent place of worship in the area, a Methodist chapel in the community of River Rouge. In that same year, the First Evangelical Society of Detroit began a Sunday school. To the French were added the whole spectrum of European immigrants, all of whom brought their own varieties of belief and ritual. As a terminus of the Underground Railroad, African Americans established a presence in Detroit in the 1830s and organized their first church, Second Baptist, in 1836. German Jews arrived in the 1840s, and in 1850 established their first congregation, Beth El.

The earliest Middle Eastern Christians began arriving in Detroit in the late-nineteenth century. Priests from the Middle East came after the turn of the century, and the first liturgies of the Syrian Orthodox and Armenian Apostolic churches were celebrated in 1913. St. George Syrian Orthodox Society was formally established in 1916, and the Armenian Apostolic church eventually established two parishes: St. John and St. Sarkis. Immigrants from what is now Iraq, the Chaldeans, began to settle in the area around 1910, but a priest did not arrive until 1947, when their first church, Mother of God, was officially founded. These Middle Eastern Christians would be joined by others throughout the twentieth century, including members of the Coptic, Maronite, Melkite, and Antiochean churches. All added to Eastern Christianity in Detroit, where over the years immigrants established Albanian, Bulgarian-Macedonian, Greek, Romanian, Russian, Serbian, Ukrainian and other Orthodox churches.

The earliest known Muslim to visit Detroit was in 1850. In the 1900s people from the Middle East, North Africa, and Asia began to settle in the area, eventually giving Metropolitan Detroit one of the largest Muslim populations in the United States. As early as 1910 plans were made to construct a mosque in the Detroit suburb of Highland Park, which at that time was the location of the Ford automotive plant and the center of the area's Muslim population. Since then the number of mosques and Islamic institutions in the area has increased significantly. African American Muslims in Detroit, where the Nation of Islam was founded in 1931, have a large number of mosques in the city. While some of these

centers remained affiliated with that organization, others have embraced mainstream Islam.

In addition to these religions, Metropolitan Detroit is home to Baha'is, Buddhists, Druze, Hindus, Jains, Mandaeans, Sikhs, and a host of other traditions, many of which sponsor educational, service, and cultural centers. The exact number of current religious centers in the area and their adherents is difficult, if not impossible, to obtain. Many new centers were established by immigrants after 1965, due to changes in the U.S. immigration laws.

Nevertheless, there are estimated to be more than 3,000 religious centers in southeastern Michigan. The area has also produced nationally known religious leaders. Despite the fact that Detroit has seen both religious and ethnic conflict in its 300 year history, the metropolitan area continues to have dynamic interfaith organizations, such as the National Conference for Community and Justice, that promote dialogue, cooperation, and the dignity of all people.

Metropolitan Detroit Demographic Patterns

During the first two decades of the twentieth century, only New York and Chicago received more immigrants than Detroit. The nation's immigration laws at that time favored Europeans, but changed so that during the second half of the twentieth century people from all parts of the world began to arrive. In the context of these new immigration patterns, southeastern Michigan's population became even more complex. Therefore, it remains one of the most ethnically diverse in America. While most of the ethnic diversity was formerly found within Detroit's city limits, this is no longer the case. The city's population is now almost entirely African American (75-80%), which makes the metropolitan region one of the nation's most segregated urban areas in terms of blacks and whites. The older immigrants have largely moved to the suburbs, and many of the new (post-1965) immigrants have joined them. These new immigrants live in communities that make an arc around the city, principally in Oakland and western Wayne counties. The arc begins northeast of Detroit in the communities of Warren, Sterling Heights, Madison Heights, Troy, Rochester, Rochester Hills, then heads west into Bloomfield Hills, West Bloomfield, Northville, Novi, and then turns south through Farmington Hills, Southfield, Oak Park, Plymouth, Canton, Dearborn, and Dearborn Heights. There are exceptions to this pattern, however, with the Hispanic population concentrated in southwest Detroit, some Chaldeans and Asians on the city's northeast side, and an increasing variety of groups in Hamtramck, a city surrounded by Detroit's east side neighborhoods and long associated with Polish immigrants. The pattern described above correlates with the distribution of religious centers in the Pluralism Project Directory of Religious Centers in Metropolitan Detroit as of February 9, 2002. Table I shows this distribution in terms of percentage of religious centers in the directory by county. It does not, however, indicate actual religious population distribution in each county.

Tradition	Wayne County	Oakland County	Macomb County
Baha'i	1%		
Buddhist	3%	11%	30%
Asian Christian	2%	14%	
Caribbean Christian	5%	2%	
Hispanic Christian	14%	2%	
Indian Christian		3%	
Middle East Christian	6%	20%	20%
Other Christian	6%	11%	30%
Hindu	3%	3%	
Islam	56%	27%	20%
Native American	2%		
Jain		2%	
Jewish		3%	
Sikh	1%	3%	
Total	100%	100%	100%

Table I

Distribution by County of Religious Centers in the Metropolitan Detroit Pluralism Project
Directory February 9, 2002