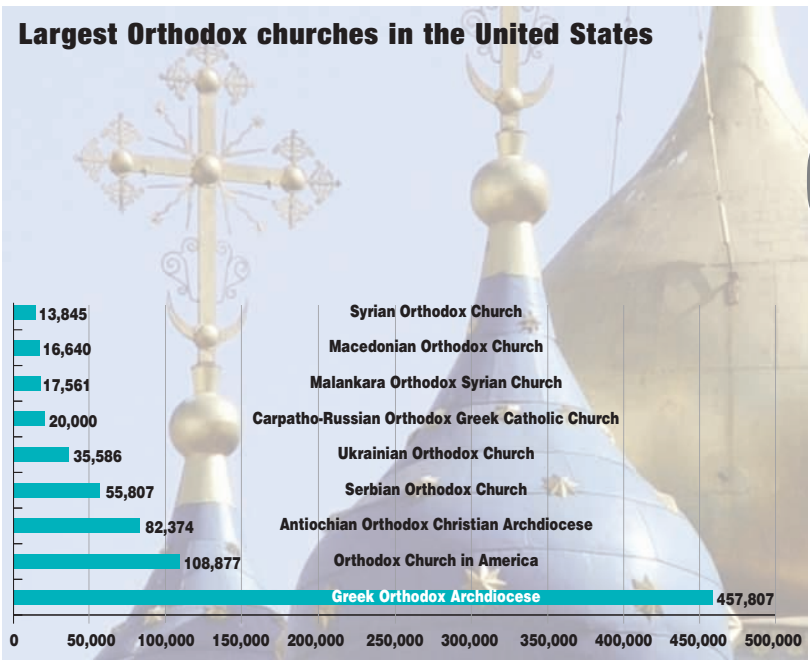


# GO FIGURE

JACK MARCUM



GRAPHICS BY KATE ANYAMISTOCK PHOTO

## What the research shows

This brief overview can only hint at the number and complexity of Orthodox churches and Orthodox Christians in the United States. (Imagine if someone tried to describe Presbyterians in a few paragraphs!) Still, a couple of points seem especially relevant for Presbyterians.

First, Orthodox numbers are growing, driven by both immigration and conversions. The opportunity for Presbyterians to interact with Eastern Christians will increase as a result, especially in those parts of the country (California, Florida, the Northeast, Chicago) where Orthodox adherents are concentrated.

Second, the extent of ecumenical relations will be affected by the wide diversity in the Orthodox community. One might expect relations to develop more easily with larger and more assimilated bodies, such as the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese or the Orthodox Church in America, and less with those dominated by ethnic concerns. But other dimensions will play a role, including a tendency among many of the Orthodox to reject religious pluralism and view their own tradition as the “true religion.”

Finally, Presbyterian efforts to turn around the long term downward trend in membership numbers might benefit from study of a group that has made substantial gains in total adherents through conversions.

## U.S. Orthodoxy: A growing presence

When people talk about increasing religious diversity in the United States, they likely have in mind growth among Muslims, Hindus and other non-Christian groups. But diversity among Christians is also on the rise in the form of Eastern Christian, or Orthodox, churches. Using data furnished by my colleague Alexey Krindatch of the Patriarch Athenagoras Institute in Berkeley, Calif., let’s look at this ancient tradition that is becoming a larger presence in our society.

U.S. Orthodox Christians number around 1.2 million adherents, spread over 2,300 parishes and 20 major jurisdictions (denominations). Growth has been concentrated in the South (especially Florida) and the West (especially California), and is fueled both by immigration and conversions. At the three major Orthodox seminaries, almost half of M.Div. students are converts.

The ethnic dimension in Orthodox life varies considerably according to jurisdiction. The Orthodox Church in America (OCA), which traces its roots to an 18th-century Russian settlement in Alaska, puts little emphasis on

maintaining ethnic culture. On one survey, only 3 percent of OCA congregations reported that “our parish has a strong ethnic heritage that we are trying to preserve,” compared to a majority of those in the Syrian Orthodox Church (79 percent). Indeed, the first parishes of the Syrian Orthodox Church here were not organized until 1971.

The largest Orthodox jurisdictions are the Greek Archdiocese, with almost 600 parishes and 457,000 adherents; the OCA, with 560 parishes and 108,000 adherents; and the Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese, with 240 parishes and 83,000 adherents. At the other extreme, the Albanian Diocese has only 500 adherents in two parishes.

Orthodox bodies fall into three ecclesial families (Assyrian, Byzantine and Non-Chalcedonian/Oriental), with no Communion (and little communication) across these categories. Krindatch points out that the differences between ecclesial families in the Orthodox community are large—as great as those between Orthodox and Catholics, or between Orthodox and Protestants. □

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