

GO FIGURE

JACK MARCUM



U.S. population center and the U.S. geographical center are based on the population in the 50 states plus D.C. The membership center of the PCUSA is based on the 50 states, D.C., and Puerto Rico. **Hawaii, Alaska and Puerto Rico aren't shown in proper perspective/location.**

GRAPHICS BY KATE ANYAN

The Presbyterian center

You may be familiar with the “center of population” concept from the census, often used to show the westward (and more recently, southwestward) shift of the population over time. Think of it as the place where the distances to everyone residing in the 50 states and the District of Columbia add up to the smallest number.

The Presbyterian membership center is similar: the spot where the distances to every PCUSA member add up to the smallest total.

■ **The center of Presbyterian membership in 2005**—the most recent year for which we have data—was found in Southern Illinois, in the northwest corner of Franklin County (see the map).

■ **The center of population for the United States in 2000**, at the time of the last census, was in Phelps County, Missouri, to the west-southwest of the PCUSA center.

■ **The geographical center of the United States** is found in a rural area of Butte County, South Dakota, near the western edge of that state.

Next month I’ll look state-by-state at the distributions of Presbyterian members across the United States and Puerto Rico.

What the research shows

The Presbyterian membership center is located 150 miles northeast of the population center, indicating that Presbyterians are slightly more concentrated to the north and east of the overall United States population.

Why?

First, throughout recorded history, the West Coast has had relatively fewer church members than the rest of country. According to a year-2000 analysis of 149 denominations, their adherents comprise 43 percent of the West Coast population, but 52 percent of the population in the rest of the country.

Second, the southwestward movement of Presbyterian congregations has not kept

pace with the overall population movement. That’s because congregations don’t physically move from one region to another. Instead, the church creates new congregations in areas of population growth, and closes or merges them in areas of decline.

The former is expensive and not always successful, however, and the latter is often viewed as a last resort, so relatively few of either are accomplished in a given year, and church shifts tend to lag those of the country as a whole.

That noted, the similarity between the center of Presbyterian membership and the center of United States population is probably more noteworthy than the differential. □

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