

## Exploring Denominations in the United States

With hundreds of religious denominations in the United States and the frequency of mergers, schisms, and name changes, it can be a challenge to trace the history of any one denomination. This learning module will walk you through some tools created by the Association of Religion Data Archives to help you track the past and present of a denomination.

If you find yourself lost at any point, look to the instructions on the right.

Open your web browser and go to the homepage of the Association of Religion Data Archives.

Go to the American Denominations feature.

Note that the American Denominations feature has four sections, each under its own tab: Denominational Family Trees, Denominational Profiles, Data Sources, and Search American Denominations. This learning module will introduce you to each of these resources, as well as other resources on the ARDA website.

To familiarize you with the American Denominations feature, let us begin by assuming you are interested in finding out more information about a specific denomination. We'll use the United Methodist Church as an example (in this learning module, sometimes the acronym "UMC" will be used to refer to the United Methodist Church). Go to the "Denominational Profiles" section. You will see a list of religious "families" below. These are groupings of denominations that share theological and/or historical ties. You may know what family the United Methodist Church belongs to, but let's assume that you do not.

Start by searching for the United Methodist Church. Go to the "Search American Denominations" feature. Search for "United Methodist Church". Note that the search results will list all the denominations that have any of the words you type into the search field. Select the United Methodist Church from the list.

You will see a diagram showing what denominations merged to create the United Methodist Church.

1. List the names of these denominations:

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**Open your web browser.**

**Go to [www.thearda.com](http://www.thearda.com)**

**Click on "Denominations" in the main toolbar.**

**Click on the "Denominational Profiles" tab.**

**Click on the "Search American Denominations" tab.**

**Type in "United Methodist Church" and click on "Go!"**

**Find and click on "United Methodist Church".**

2. When did this merger occur? Here's a hint – look for a date beside the name of the United Methodist Church.

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Below the historical diagram, you will see a brief description of the United Methodist Church.

3. What is something you learned from the description that you didn't know before?

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Below the description, you will see data on the number of members, churches, and clergy that make up the United Methodist Church. These data come from the National Council of Churches' annual *Yearbook of American and Canadian Churches*.

4. Describe any trends you see in the data.

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You can use the historical diagrams to trace the history of a denomination even further by clicking on one of the denominations related to it. For example, click on one of the denominations that formed the United Methodist Church.

5. Which denomination did you select?

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6. Describe the history of this denomination. Hint: You may find that denominations split off from this denomination before it merged to form the United Methodist Church or that the merger caused a schism in the denomination.

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Another way to explore the history of denominations in the United States using the American Denominations feature is to look at the Denominational Family Trees. Go to the “Denominational Family Trees” section. Go to the Methodist Family tree. Find the United Methodist Church. Scroll over its name with your mouse. Notice that the pop-up box contains the description you read earlier, the most recent data the ARDA has, and a link to the profile you saw earlier. Spend some time exploring this diagram. Try to find the denominations you identified earlier that merged to form the United Methodist Church.

Now that we have explored its historical origins and seen some general data on the UMC, let’s take a look at its current geographical profile in the United States. Go to the ARDA’s Maps & Reports feature. Go to the “Maps” section

**In the “History” box, click on the name of a denomination that helped form the UMC.**

**Click on the “Denominational Family Trees” tab.**

**Click on “Methodist Family”.**

**Find and scroll over “United Methodist Church”.**

and then to “U.S. Maps.” Select “Individual Denominations” and then select the United Methodist Church from the list.

Take a look at how the UMC’s congregations are distributed across the United States.

7. Generally speaking, what region(s) have the highest number of UMC congregations?

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If you scroll down you will see a listing of states ranked by the number of UMC congregations they each have.

8. Which state has the most UMC congregations? Which has the least?

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You now have a good idea of how to explore both the history and present of a denomination using ARDA website tools. Now choose another denomination to explore using the website. It can be one that you already have in mind, or one that you find while browsing the lists of denominations organized by family.

9. What denomination are you exploring?

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10. Describe this denomination’s history (including founding year, mergers, schisms, name changes) and any trends in its membership data:

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11. Describe this denomination’s current geographical profile in the United States. Is it mainly concentrated in a particular region, or is it well distributed across the country? How many adherents/congregations are located in your state and/or county?

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Finally, have you wondered where all this data comes from and how the ARDA compiled it? In the American Denominations feature, go the “Data Sources” section to read about the sources and methods ARDA research associates used to create this website feature.

Hopefully this learning module was helpful in introducing you to the resources that the ARDA has for exploring the history and present of denominations in the United States. If you have any questions or comments, please send them to [arda@pop.psu.edu](mailto:arda@pop.psu.edu).

**In American Denominations, click on the “Data Sources” tab.**