

Further findings on religious affiliation trends in ATS schools

By KRISTINA LIZARDY-HAJBI

This is the second of two articles exploring denominational and religious affiliations of students in ATS schools. The first article was featured in the Holiday 2019 issue of Colloquy Online.

It is no secret that the 278 ATS member schools are diverse denominationally and religiously. As of 2019, there were 112 different denominational designations for student, faculty/administration, and school affiliation. In an analysis of student affiliations from 2000 to 2019, five key findings highlight important trends for theological schools to consider.



1. The top 20 denominational affiliations by student enrollment show elements of both continuity and change over time.

Top 20 Denominations for Student Enrollments: 2000 and 2019

No.	Affiliation	2000	No.	Affiliation	2019	Affiliation % Change in Enrollment
1	Southern Baptist Convention	10,609	1	Other	14,371	48
2	Other	9,708	2	Southern Baptist Convention	11,461	8
3	Roman Catholic	7,544	3	Nondenominational	8,006	123
4	United Methodist Church	5,714	4	Roman Catholic	7,172	-5
5	Nondenominational	3,589	5	Baptist	4,252	106
6	Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)	3,472	6	United Methodist Church	3,732	-35
7	Evangelical Lutheran Church in America	2,457	7	Seventh-day Adventist	1,881	204
8	Episcopal Church	2,123	8	Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)	1,706	-51
9	Baptist	2,065	9	Presbyterian Church in America	1,560	11
10	United Church of Christ	1,425	10	Assemblies of God	1,321	7
11	Presbyterian Church in America	1,404	11	Evangelical Lutheran Church in America	1,314	-47
12	American Baptist Churches USA	1,248	12	Episcopal Church	1,238	-42
13	Assemblies of God	1,238	13	Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod	847	-20
14	Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod	1,064	14	Christian and Missionary Alliance	693	-16
15	Christian and Missionary Alliance	824	15	African Methodist Episcopal	673	9
16	Evangelical Free Church of America	787	16	Inter/Multi-denominational	664	*
17	National Baptist Convention	773	17	Korean American Presbyterian Church	621	*
18	Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)	685	18	United Church of Christ	578	-59
19	Canadian Baptist of Western Canada	645	19	Evangelical Free Church of America	565	-28
20	Church of the Nazarene	630	20	Churches of Christ	557	7
	All Other Denominations	12,061		All Other Denominations	13,556	
	Total	70,065		Total	76,768	
	% of Students in Top 20	83%		% of Students in Top 20	82%	

* NOTE: Category did not exist in 2000.

Fifteen out of 20 denominations remained on the top 20 lists for both 2000 and 2019. However, one-fifth of the denominations on the 2000 list dropped off of the 2019 list: American Baptist Churches USA, National Baptist Convention, Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), Canadian Baptist Churches of Western Canada, and Church of the Nazarene. Subsequently, the five affiliations that reached the top 20 in 2019 were: Seventh-day Adventist, African Methodist Episcopal, Korean American Presbyterian Church, Churches of Christ, and the broader affiliation category of Inter/Multi-denominational.

2. Several new denominations were added to ATS reporting categories between 2000 and 2019.

Student enrollment numbers for many of these traditions were modest; however, two categories that did not exist

in 2000—Inter/Multi-denominational and the Korean American Presbyterian Church—were among the top 20 in enrollment in 2019. The combined total for the 23 new denominational and religious categories was 3,714 (5% of total 2019 enrollment).

3. “Other” was the top denominational category for ATS enrollment, with 14,371 students reported in 2019.

This was also the case for 2018, with enrollment reported at 14,178. It remains unclear how schools are understanding and utilizing this category for reporting, though its number has continued to increase steadily over time.

New Denominational and Religious Affiliations Since 2000	
No.	Affiliation
	2019
1	Inter/Multi-denominational
2	Korean American Presbyterian Church
3	Anglican, Other
4	United Pentecostal Church International
5	Baptist General Convention of Texas
6	Presbyterian Church International
7	Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese of North America
8	Cooperative Baptist Fellowship
9	Buddhist
10	Korean Methodist Church in America
11	General Association of General Baptists
12	Korean Evangelical Holiness Church
13	Evangelical Free Church of Canada
14	Mennonite Church Canada
15	Friends, Quaker
16	Byzantine Catholic
17	Baptist General Association of Virginia
18	Canadian National Baptist Convention
19	Baptist State Convention of North Carolina
20	Canadian Reformed Churches
21	Fellowship of Grace Brethren Churches
22	Heritage Reformed Congregations (USA and Canada)
23	Conference of Mennonites
	Total
	3,714
	Total Enrollment
	76,768
	% of Students with New Affiliations
	5%

4. For the most part, Evangelical Protestant denominations in the top 20 list experienced growth in student enrollment from 2000 to 2019, while Mainline Protestant denominations experienced decline.

Seventh-day Adventist, Baptist, and Nondenominational enrollments increased by the greatest percentages. United Church of Christ, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, Episcopal Church, and United Methodist Church enrollments decreased significantly. These trends largely mirror membership trends within the denominations themselves, though there is some variation.

5. Beyond the top 20 list, other denominations and religious traditions experienced notable enrollment increases.

Student enrollment in the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod increased by 5,100%, by far the most significant, even though students constituted a fraction of total enrollment. In some cases, new theological schools may have affiliated with ATS after 2000, which could account for enrollment growth. In terms of non-Christian religious affiliation, Muslim student enrollment increased 434%.

Conclusions

The top 20 denominations for student enrollment contained 82% of all students in 2019. While this percentage has not changed much since 2000, the denominational affiliations of these students are shifting in significant ways. Just in the past 20 years, new traditions and expressions for both Christian and non-Christian faith have made their ways into theological schools through their students. With the rise of Other, Inter/Multi-denominational, and Nondenominational student enrollments, as well as increasing numbers of Evangelical Protestant and non-Christian students, many opportunities and challenges lie ahead for how schools will respond to these shifts. Some institutions have already developed best practices for student learning and formation amidst changing student affiliations, and these practices should be shared.

Only time will tell what the future holds, but there is no indication that these affiliation trends will diminish anytime soon. They are nested within larger trends facing theological education and should be factored into critical institutional conversations. Who we educate shapes how we educate, which has the potential to spark new insights and pathways for theological education.

Top 10 Denominations by Percent (%) Enrollment Growth: 2000 and 2019			
No.	Affiliation	2000	2019 % Change
1	Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod	3	156 5,100
2	National Association of Congregational Christian Churches	79	437 453
3	General Baptist State Convention of North Carolina	4	22 450
4	Muslim	38	203 434
5	Seventh-day Adventist *	619	1,881 204
6	Seventh Day Baptist General Conference	3	8 167
7	Orthodox Church in America	60	151 152
8	Evangelical Congregational Church	39	96 146
9	Nondenominational *	3,589	8,006 123
10	Baptist *	2,065	4,252 106

** Also listed in Top 20 Denominations for Student Enrollments: 2009 and 2019.*

Please note: Student enrollment numbers may vary slightly from other ATS published reports. Further information regarding denominational and religious affiliations is available in the Annual Data Tables and Fact Books on the ATS website. In addition, the new ATS Data Visualization Tool provides key demographic information by denomination.



Kristina Lizardy-Hajbi is Director of the Office of Professional Formation and Term Assistant Professor of Leadership and Formation at Iliff School of Theology in Denver, Colorado. She is the first religious researcher to request data from ATS using the new guidelines created by the special task force of the Board of Commissioners.