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GENERAL INTRODUCTION

The census of religious bodies, as its name indicates, is a census of religious organizations rather than a census of population classified according to denominational affiliation. This census is taken once in 10 years in accordance with the provisions of the permanent census act approved March 6, 1902, and is confined to churches located in continental United States.

Reports are obtained by the Bureau of the Census from each of the congregations, churches, or other local organizations of each religious body. The census data are thus obtained directly from the local churches and are not in any sense a compilation of the statistics collected by the different denominations and published in their yearbooks. Lists of the local organizations for 1926 have been secured in most cases, however, from the denominational headquarters, and much additional assistance has been rendered by the officials of the various denominational organizations.

The statistics of expenditures relate either to the calendar year 1926 or to the church record year which closed at some time during 1926, and the figures for membership, value of property, etc., relate to the close of that year.

Number of churches.—In the reports of the Census of Religious Bodies for 1916 and 1906 the total number of churches or organizations shown for some denominations was slightly in excess of the number of churches reporting membership. Since membership figures have been obtained for all of the churches included in the reports for the current year, and for other reasons, it has seemed advisable to use for purposes of comparison with 1926 the number of churches reporting membership in 1916 and 1906. These figures are used, therefore, in the tables presenting comparative figures for earlier censuses.

Membership.—The members of a local church organization, and thus of the denomination to which the church belongs, are those persons who are recognized as constituent parts of the organization. The exact definition of membership depends upon the constitution and practice of the church or denomination under consideration. Each church was instructed to report the number of its members according to the definition of member used in that particular church or organization. In some religious bodies the term "member" is applied only to communicants, while in others it includes all baptized persons, and in still other bodies it covers all enrolled persons.

Separate figures are shown for members under 13 years of age and those 13 years of age and over. The membership 13 years of age and over usually affords a better basis for comparison between denominations reporting membership on a different basis.

Urban and rural churches.—Urban churches are those located in cities or other incorporated places which had 2,500 inhabitants or more on January 1, 1920, the date of the last Federal census. Rural churches, in accordance with the census definition, are those located in territory outside such incorporated places.

Church edifices.—A church edifice is a building used mainly for religious services and owned wholly or in part by the organization so using it.

Value of church property.—The term "value of church property" has been used in the reports of the Census of Religious Bodies, at least from 1890 to 1910, inclusive, in a very restricted sense, excluding (1) the value of investment property, (2) the value of parsonages or pastors' residences, and (3) the value of school