

Study reveals Protestants becoming minority religious group within U.S. 80904

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WASHINGTON (RNS)—Protestants could cease to be the majority religious group in the United States within the next year, and their numbers already may have dipped below 50 percent, a new study by the National Opinion Research Center says.

From 1972, when the University of Chicago-based NORC began its General Social Survey, until 1993, the Protestant share of the population remained constant, averaging 62.8 percent.

It then began to show a decline, reaching 52.4 percent in 2002.

The study attributed the decline to, among other things, the fact that fewer children were being raised in Protestant homes over the past four decades.

The share of people who said they were raised as Protestants dropped from 64.7 percent in 1972 to 55.7 percent in 2002.

Among people born after 1980, less than half said they were raised Protestant, suggesting the downward trend would continue.

The study found the retention rate for Protestants also fell over the years.

In the 20 years leading up to 1993, a steady 90 percent raised in Protestant households remained Protestants as adults.

That had dropped below 83 percent by the turn of the century.

But not all churches report a decline in their congregations.

Sherri Doty, statistician for the Assemblies of God, said between 1993 and 2003 the number of adherents grew 20 percent, as reported by local Assembly of God churches.

Increasing numbers of ethnic congregants contributed to the growth of the church, which had 2.7 million adherents in 2003, she said.

Immigration is another factor that has lowered the proportion of Protestants in the United States.

The study found that only 24.5 percent of immigrants are Protestant, but said, “while it helps to sustain the current decline, it cannot explain the start of the decline in the mid-1990s or its recent rapid rate.”

The NORC study conducted personal interviews with more than 2,650 respondents.

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