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Faith leaders embrace new mission: 2020 census

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Sunday is not just for praying these days. Faith leaders across Michigan are calling on congregants to celebrate "Census Sundays" in "every corner of Michigan" to boost census participation on Sundays, which data show is the lowest-performing day of the week for responses.

Dion A. Williams, director of Gov. Gretchen Whitmer's Faith-Based Affairs Office, said ministers representing diverse religious communities throughout Michigan are voluntarily offering to use an array of creative tactics to encourage their congregations to complete the 2020 census.

"Pastors, priests, imams and rabbis from Baptist, Catholic, Methodist, Lutheran, Church of God in Christ, Islamic and Jewish congregations are stepping up to make their voice heard among their worshippers regarding the 2020 census, its significance and other information," Williams said.

"The goal is to ensure every Michigan resident knows it takes only 10 minutes to complete the census — but those 10 minutes can improve local communities in every corner of Michigan for the next 10 years."

The new emphasis on ministerial messaging comes as data from the U.S. Census Bureau show fewer Michiganders complete the census on Sundays than any other day of the week, with an average of 4,000 responding on Sundays in 2020.

Over a six-week span since April 19, a total of 24,000 census responses have come on Sundays compared with an average of more than 65,000 responses on other days, officials said.

Across the U.S. the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic has interrupted plans to get as many people as possible to participate in the count, which determines how much federal money goes to communities.

The outbreak and subsequent orders by states and cities to stay home and avoid gathering came as census workers were about to ramp up efforts to drive response rates.

Experts say connecting with trusted community leaders in person is the best way to reach people in hard-to-count groups that may be wary of the federal government.

“That’s why we’re so grateful that Michigan’s faith leaders are helping serve as trusted messengers who can dispel some of the myths that exist about the census and provide accurate information,” said Kerry Ebersole Singh, director of Michigan’s 2020 “Be Counted” campaign.

Several churches in the Christian community are hosting televised or online praise breaks every Tuesday, Wednesday and Saturday, as well as Bible study, to draw attention to the census, officials said.

“I’m urging the residents of my community to become involved by mentioning that the census brings vital resources that our community needs,” said the Rev. Carnel Richardson of New Prospect Missionary Baptist Church in Detroit.

For each uncounted person in the decennial census count, Detroit stands to lose an estimated \$5,500 per person, or \$55,000 over 10 years, in federal aid, according to city estimates. Detroit receives about \$3 billion in funding for federal programs each year, which range from Medicare and Medicaid to free school lunches.

The decennial census also determines how many seats in the House of Representatives each state receives.

Last week, Detroit Mayor Mike Duggan’s administration and Oakland County officials teamed up with Bishop Edgar Vann II of Second Ebenezer Church in Detroit, Bishop Charles Ellis III of Greater Grace Temple in Detroit and the Rev. John Tolbert of Trinity Missionary Baptist Church in Pontiac to include census information in more than 58,000 food boxes that were distributed from churches to Metro Detroit residents in need.

The Michigan Catholic Conference created a census awareness website with free resources for church bulletins and social media graphics for parishes to use at www.micatholic.org/2020Census/.

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