



## **The Census Counts: A Sermon in Honor of the Reverend W.H.G. Carter**

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Last month the Avondale clergy were approached by the United States Census and asked to assist with an accurate count of Avondale residents. In less than a month census forms will begin to arrive in United States households. I am fairly certain that 90% of our members will accurately complete and return their census forms. It is our Constitutional obligation, and given our fifth principle on the use of the democratic process, I think most of us will fall in line on this one.

The census is taken every ten years and is perhaps the most important demographic snapshot of America. This year the form has ten questions for each person residing in the household on April 1, 2010 (the date we are supposed to fill out our census forms). That's it, ten questions per person: how many people are in your house, do you own or rent, what is your gender, date of birth, and race. Place it in the pre-paid envelope and you are done. If you live alone, the entire process, including opening your door and placing the envelope in the mailbox should take less than five minutes. If you are a family of four, I give it fifteen minutes, max.

I know you. Your eyes are glazing over. You are wondering why this is a Carter Sunday sermon. May I remind you, that sometimes the most bureaucratically boring items are also the most relevant because they deal with numbers that lead to dollars? Two years ago on Carter Sunday I preached about a potential financial crisis that could develop based on then current rates of home foreclosures. After the sermon, several of you asked me why this was a relevant topic and what it had to do with the legacy of the Reverend W. H. G. Carter. Perhaps I was not compelling in my sermon but I think at this point, you may have a better idea what I was getting at two years ago.

America has undergone an equal opportunity recession in the last two years, but again, if you look at the numbers, you will see overall, which groups have suffered the most. Proportionately African Americans have lost more homes, and have a harder time finding employment today than two years ago. The poor have become poorer. Today one in eight Americans relies on food stamps. One in eight. One in four children relies on food stamps. One in four. A quarter of the children residing in the so-called “richest” country in the world rely on food stamps. Numbers and dollars can be boring, but they count, particularly in under-resourced areas which are so vulnerable. This was the very population (families, children, African Americans, and the poor) W. H. G. Carter cared about and ministered to during his lifetime.

Carter was an unrecognized (at least by the AUA and local Unitarian congregations) black, Unitarian minister in Cincinnati during the 1920’s and 1930’s. During his lifetime he passionately and tenaciously advocated for the disenfranchised and vulnerable. Local Unitarians were dismayed by the poverty, blackness, and evangelical nature of Carter and his congregants. Ten years ago today, on behalf of the UUA and local Unitarian congregations, we at First Church, officially apologized to the descendants of the Reverend W. H. G. Carter during a heart-rending, tumultuous, grace-filled and awe-inspiring service. We did this because it was right and because we realized that Carter had his eyes on the prize. He had been living our UU principles of inherent worth and dignity, justice and equity. In the last ten years his legacy has been a constant reminder that we must do better now that we know better. Since that time we have pledged to continue the vision of W.H. G. Carter by raising money for the Carter Fund, and becoming more engaged with issues in Avondale (a neighborhood that contains the very demographic he cared about).

We also feel a commitment and bond, responsibility to his descendants. We promised them we would do better in the future, and on that day ten years ago the Carter family under the leadership of descendants Leslie Edwards and Starita Smith told us “We accept your apology.” We made a promise, we gave our word of honor, and this is why the census counts today.

There is no evidence to back up my next point, because all we have are the numbers we collected in 2000, but most people in local government believe that Avondale and other poor, urban Cincinnati neighborhoods were undercounted in the 2000 census. Here are some reasons why. Historically poor neighborhoods have a lower response rate. Residents feel disenfranchised (poverty can have that affect) and do not return forms. In addition, residents have a distrust of the government and law enforcement even though the Census Bureau cannot share information with any federal agencies or law enforcement offices. Residents of poor neighborhoods are more likely to not speak English, and cannot understand the forms which generally come in English

(though the form is available in many other languages). Neighborhoods with low rates of home ownership (like Avondale) have renters that frequently move so people and addresses get lost in the shuffle. Finally, census forms are mailed to households, yet the census is supposed to get an accurate count of everyone living in the United States, including the homeless and illegal immigrants (two groups that regularly avoid or don't receive census forms).

This is how neighborhoods like Avondale get undercounted. And here is what at stake, dollars. Lots and lots of federal and state dollars – we are talking billions of dollars. How many you ask, well, census data is used to draw legislative districts as well as distribute \$300 billion in federal funds, and more than this in state funds for local colleges, schools, parks, hospitals, and clinics, plan transportation needs (like bus routes – more than half of Cincinnati's Metro Bus budget comes from federal funds – and the poor are more likely to take the bus, interstate interchanges, and street car lines), attract new businesses, plan for urban land use, create services for those living in poverty, design public safety strategies and facilities for the disabled and elderly, draw school district boundaries, establish fair market rents, and determine areas eligible for housing assistance and rehabilitation loans.<sup>1</sup>

According to the 2000 Census there were almost 18,000 residents within Avondale. Almost 5,000 residents were somehow disabled (10% higher than the US population as a whole), over 5,000 residents lived below the poverty level (20% higher than the US population as a whole), and both male and female adult residents were twice as likely to be single as the US population as a whole (leading to lower household incomes).

Now, those numbers are compelling and cry out for more local social services. What if there was a significant undercount due to all the reasons I listed? Then an already stressed area bears even greater social stresses without access to resources and the federal and state funds that could supply much needed assistance. It's the perfect storm to make everything worse, not for one year, but a decade – that's enough time for half a generation of local children to drop out of school.

What can we do? Actually, a lot, and so, so easily. First, please fill out your own census forms and return them in a timely fashion (by April 30th). You waste federal dollars if you don't, because several attempts will be made to re-contact every household that does not return a form.

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<sup>1</sup> Appendix A: 50 Ways Census Data Are Used, 2010 Census Complete Count Committee Guide.

If you do not receive a census form, or are in housing transition contact [www.census.gov/2010](http://www.census.gov/2010), [www.cincinnati-counts.org](http://www.cincinnati-counts.org), or call 1-866-872-6868. If you are looking for employment with the census, there are multiple temporary openings ranging from \$8.25 - \$19.00 hour. Check out [www.census.gov/detroit](http://www.census.gov/detroit) or call 1-866-861-2010. Applicants must complete a test, and we have practice copies available here for distribution.

Next, the United States Census asked for our help. They have asked if they can use our building as a Question Assistance Center from mid-March through the end of April (a six week period). They are looking for free use of a building 2-4 hours each day within each census track so that local residents can come and ask questions if they do not understand the form, lost their form, or need a form in another language. There are at least two census workers on site to answer questions. We have agreed to let the Census use the Fisher Room at times that do not conflict with other meetings and IHN (Interfaith Hospitality Network).

Based on calendar information from our Facilities Manager, John Hines, I submitted times to the Census when our building could be used, which is not every day. Most shifts were Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, or Friday from 6PM to 8PM (that is two hours), a couple of weekdays from 10AM-2PM, and some Saturdays from 10AM-2PM (four hours). There will be no Sunday hours. These hours have been submitted and now we wait for the Census to get back to us to find out which of these hours they need and if our space is still available by the time they confirm. John Hines will be taking this call (thankfully).

Here's how you can help. For every shift, we need at least one member to volunteer to open the door and offer directions. You will never be alone. There will always be census workers present. At other times other groups will be meeting or the staff will be here. Social justice will never get any easier than this. You can bring a book to read. By sitting here one time for two to hours, you make sure everyone counts.

If you volunteer you will live our mission and help our neighbors. You will get to meet some of our neighbors and you will help our federal government fulfill its responsibility and mission. But we cannot do any of this without you. If you would be willing to volunteer for one shift between mid March and April, please raise your hand. (Yeah!)

What I would like you to do after services is sign up at the "census table." We don't have specific times yet, but we know that we will be doing this from March 15 – April 30. Shifts will be evenings and Saturdays with a few weekday hours. If you are

interested, sign up (let us know which times work best for you) and we will start contacting you once the census gets back to us.

Social justice isn't a sprint. It is a marathon, and at every milepost, a cup of water helps. When you volunteer you will be helping the very people that the Reverend W. H. G. Carter cared about so many years ago; the poor, families, children, African Americans. Your quiet presence here, opening a door, opens a door so that local residents are represented in Congress, have enough bus routes, local medical care, disability and elderly services, positive urban redevelopment, housing assistance and rehabilitation loans, local colleges and parks to attend. This is how we turn the world around. This is how we stretch ourselves. This is how we find ourselves in others. This is how we live our UU values. This is how we create the beloved community here on earth, one door at a time. May it always be so.