Analyzing the Membership of the People's Independent Church of Christ in the 1940s

By Michael Cheng and Ben Dreier using data from Cori Tucker-Price

The People's Independent Church of Christ was a prominent mega-church in 1940s Los Angeles. The non-denominational church united African-Americans of all religious denomination in faith, but stands out because many of its members were African-American migrants to LA. There is very little research on African-American religious institutions on the West Coast, so analyzing this church can help us understand the role of religion for African-American migrants to the West Coast. Cori Tucker-Price, a Harvard PhD Candidate in Religion, asked us to analyze a dataset on the members of this church for her upcoming dissertation and book, and ultimately paid us for our work.

This dataset contains the name, hometown, prior church, and address of 3,053 of the church's members between 1938 and 1940. The total church population was about 7,500, but information is missing for many members. Considering that LA's African-American population was about 77,000 in 1940, about 10% of all African-Americans in LA in 1940 were members of this mega-church. Since the dataset did not contain any numeric columns, we wrote a Python script to extract the distance of each individual's hometown to Los Angeles and the population of each individual's home state, thereby creating numeric columns to analyze. This poster summarizes key findings.

There Was a Diverse Array of Denominations at the People's Independent Church of Christ

We made several plots analyzing the denominational makeup of the Church. The left plot analyzes the raw number of individuals of each denomination, the middle plot depicts the average distance traveled to Los Angeles by denomination (a migrant with a hometown of LA is considered to have traveled 0 kilometers), and the right plot depicts the average home state population by denomination. The church contains members of many different denominations, although a plurality of members were Baptist.
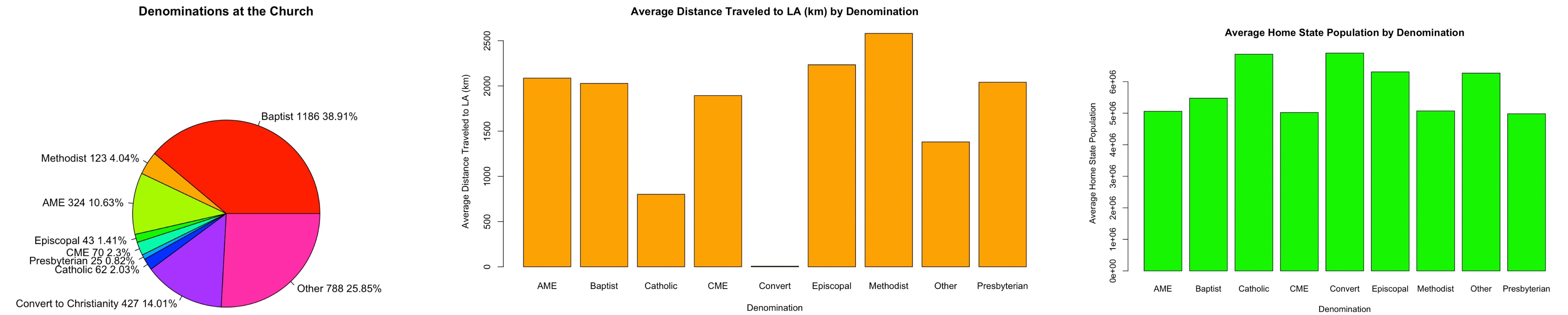

Almost All Converts to Christianity were LA Locals

We also found an interesting relationship between being a Convert to Christianity and having a Hometown of LA. 424 of the Church's 427 Converts were born in LA, despite the fact that 59.4% of the Church's members were migrants to LA. 1/3 of the Church's members who were originally from LA did were Converts, but less than 0.2% of the Church's members who moved from out of town were. After conducting a permutation test, I found that the odds that this discrepancy happened by chance were 0%; in other words, this is statistically significant. Practically of all the migrants who traveled to LA were already religious, potentially reflecting how faith and social networks sustained African-Americans who migrated to California. The following pie charts also illustrate this interesting finding.
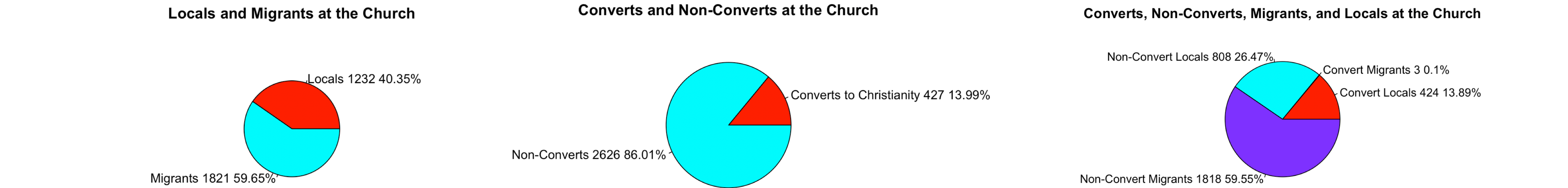
Top Home States for Church Members: California, Texas, Illinois, and Louisiana

Finally, we created maps analyzing the geographic makeup of members and migrants to the People's Independent Church of Christ. The map, which uses ggplot and ggmaps, demonstrates how the top states where members came from were California, Texas, Illinois, and Louisiana. Our proctor plans to use this map and our other findings to inform her analysis of the church's membership. One notable finding is that most migration came from the Midwest and Middle South, as opposed to the Deep South where most African-Americans lived in the 1940s.
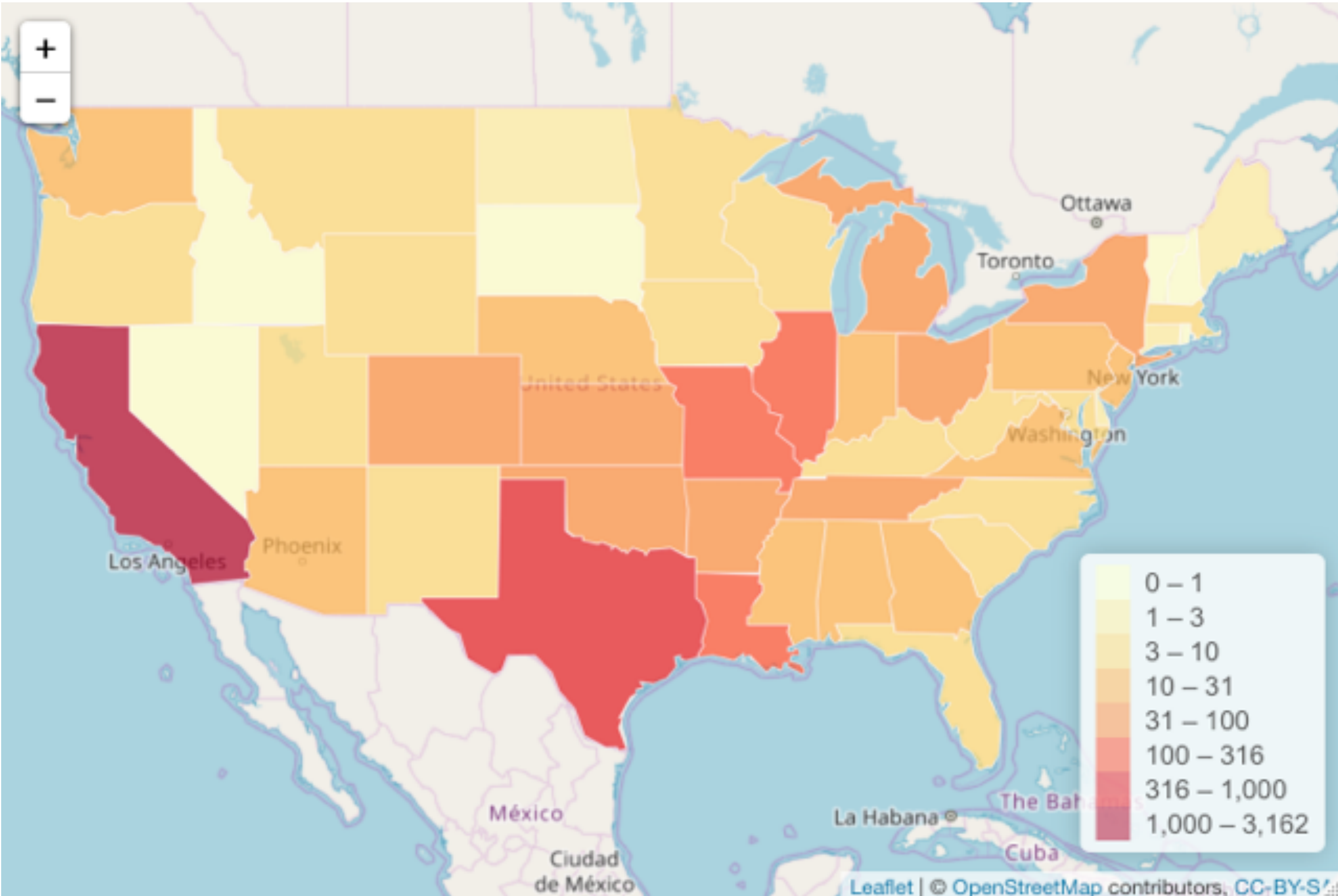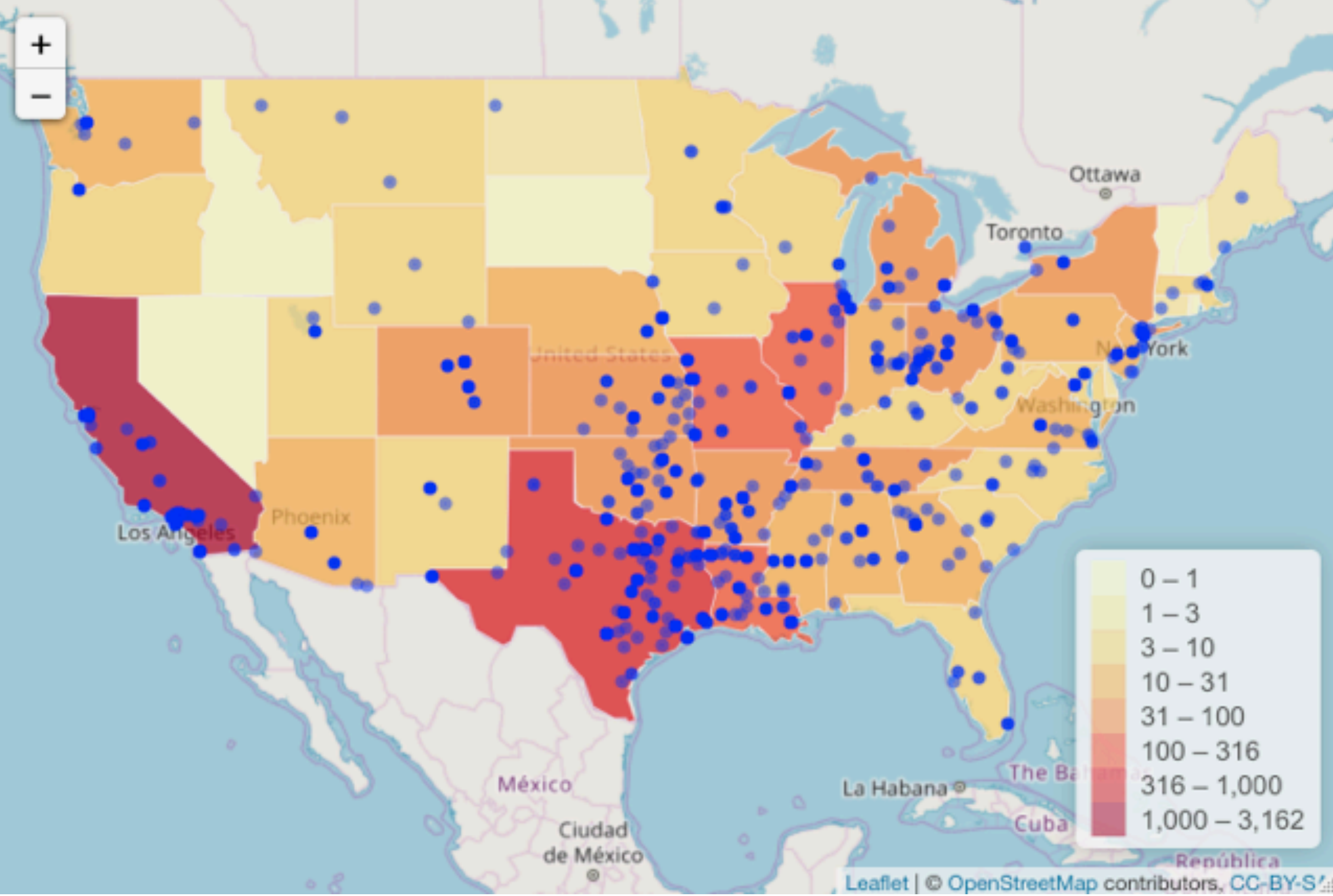
State	Number of Members
1. California	1,364 *(1,232 from LA)*
2. Texas	501
3. Illinois	159
4. Louisiana	131
5. Missouri	115
6. New York	78
7. Ohio	73
8. Oklahoma	72
9. Kansas	54
10. Colorado	53
All other states	*460*

How Our Analysis Helped Our Proctor with Her New Book

This population analysis bolstered our proctor's new book significantly by providing quantitative analysis. The fact that Texas was the largest state where migrants came from, and that most of the migrants came from states in the Middle South and Midwest, as opposed to the Deep South, is significant considering that over 75% of African-Americans in 1940 lived in the Deep South. This analysis clearly disrupts the most prominent hypothesis that African-American migration in the 1940s was a linear path from the Deep South to the West Coast. Additionally, the fact that so many African-American migrants came from Texas (nearly one-third) may have influenced how African-Americans handled race relations in Los Angeles considering that Texas had a substantial Mexican-American population and race was not black and white there, as opposed to in the Deep South and Northwest where race divided on black/white lines.

The fact that almost all of the migrants were already Christian could potentially suggest that faith and social networks sustained African-Americans who migrated to California. Moreover, the fact that about one-thirds of the church's members who were born in LA were Converts to Christianity illustrates how the Church had something unique to offer to Converts.

The fact that this nondenominational church attracted members of such a broad array of denominations (although Baptists were the largest group, they were far from a majority) bolsters my proctor's argument that the People Independent Church of Christ had something unique to offer migrants since it managed to bring together a large variety of denominations, even Protestants and some Catholics, at a time where denomination was a major dividing line in America.