

RESEARCH REPORT

A Publication of Research, North American Mission Board, SBC

Assessing the Nation's Religious Composition

Phillip B. Jones

The North American Mission Board estimates that 70 percent of the United States population, almost 200 million people, are lost; yet the Barna Research Group indicates that 85 percent of the population self-identify themselves as Christian—what gives? The truth of the matter is that there are a number of different measures of the religious composition of the United States, and it becomes necessary to understand the definitions and sources of the statistics being used.

Religious Preference

The 85 percent mentioned above is an example of religious preference data. This figure was derived by asking a large sample of adults “What is your religious preference?” The Gallup Organization collects similar statistics and estimates somewhere around 80 percent of adults consider themselves Christians. Religious preference does not mean actual membership, nor does it imply participation or commitment. It is a religious-climate indicator that suggests we are not working in an environment overtly hostile to Christianity. In a similar vein, Gallup reports that 95 percent of the population believe in God or a universal spirit, 92 percent state a specific religious preference, and 86 percent say religion is at least fairly important in their lives. So, it seems that most people are, to some extent, religious.

Membership

Not only are most people religious, it appears that the majority are members of a church. *The Yearbook of American & Canadian Churches, 2002*, reports an “inclusive” membership of 152 million church members in the United States—this translates into about 54 percent of the population. These numbers were collected directly from religious bodies. In contrast, it appears that the remainder is not a part of anybody’s church—we might refer to this segment as the unchurched.

The polling firms have slightly higher numbers for church members. Gallup reports that 64 percent of the adult population claim to be members of a church. Thus, even by this more generous measure of church membership, about a third of the population are not members. (Note that some people who assume they are church members may have been removed from church rolls due to lack of participation. Also, some people are part of independent churches or small religious groups that are never enumerated nationally.)

Attendance

Although 80 to 85 percent of the adult population claim to be Christian and 64 percent indicate they are members of a church, only 44 percent say they have attended church in the past 7 days according to Gallup. Likewise, Barna concludes that 43 percent of Americans attend church on a typical Sunday. Attendance is an indicator of religious participation.

The Unchurched

Both the Gallup Organization and the Barna Research Group have studied the unchurched populations, and both use very precise definitions of what they call “the unchurched.” The Gallup Organization defines the unchurched as those who are not members of a church or have not attended services in the previous six months other than for special religious holidays, weddings, and funerals. Recent Gallup studies peg the unchurched population at 47 percent. In contrast, Barna only uses the criteria of not attending a church within the past six months apart from special occasions for his definition. Thus, Barna estimates the unchurched population at only 31 percent. (A service provided by both Gallup and Barna is their effort to profile the unchurched, to gain insights as to why they are unchurched, and what might be done to bring them into the church.)

The Lost/Born Again

This brings us to the North American Mission Board’s estimate of the lost—70 percent. Figures this high assume that not only the entire unchurched are lost but some of the folks who are currently in churches are lost as well. These estimates are based on a reworking of the membership data provided by religious bodies. Here value judgments have been placed on the data based on a Baptist understanding of the salvation experience and how it is assumed to be understood in other religious traditions. This estimate is not to be considered precise; however, its value is that it indicates the magnitude of the task that we have, from a Baptist perspective, to share Christ. Similar kinds of measures are based on opinion surveys. The Barna Organization estimates that “born-again Christians” represent 41 percent of the adult population—conversely this would imply that 59 percent are lost or unsaved. Barna’s definition of the born-again includes those who say they have made a personal commitment to Jesus Christ that is still important in their life today and who say they know they will go to heaven after they die because they have confessed their sins and accepted Jesus Christ as their savior. While the Barna organization does not use the term “born-again” in its questions, Gallup uses the term and asks directly whether a person would describe himself or herself as born-again or evangelical. Gallup’s approach results in 46 percent being classified as born-again. (Note that Barna uses a very strict definition of the term “evangelical” and estimates that only 8 percent of the adult population are evangelical.) Whether the lost population is pegged as 54 or 59 or 70 percent, the figures all translate into a massive number of persons who need a saving relationship with Christ.

Putting the Pieces of the Puzzle Together

There is no one statistic that accurately and completely describes the religious composition of the nation. At best we begin to understand the nation by examining a wide variety of statistical measures and precisely how they have been defined.

In some ways, the climate in the United States is religious. Most folks identify themselves as Christian. However, there is much to suggest that there are still millions of people in America who do not have a personal saving relationship with Christ.