

WHAT DOES AN UNCHURCHED AMERICAN LOOK LIKE?

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As Southern Baptists adopt a well-rounded approach to evangelism, it would be helpful to know the values and beliefs of the unchurched population we are trying to reach. Once those values are understood, evangelistic strategies can be created that will be more effective in meeting needs.

A national religious survey of the adult population conducted by the Gallup Organization casts some light on the topic. Two criteria were used to classify people as church or unchurched—church membership and frequency of church attendance.

The church were those who were

members of a church and had attended in the previous six months apart from weddings, funerals, or religious holidays such as Christmas or Easter. Everyone else, for the purposes of this study, were classified as unchurched. This includes

church members who had not attended church within the past six months and all adults who were not members of a church—

regardless of whether they had attended in the previous six months.

Based on this classification, 56 percent of the adults in the United States were classified as church while 44 percent were unchurched. The unchurched are projected to be 78 million people.

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Great diversity exists within the ranks of the unchurched. However, this survey did show a remarkable similarity to Christians. A few generalizations can be made in contrast to the churching population.

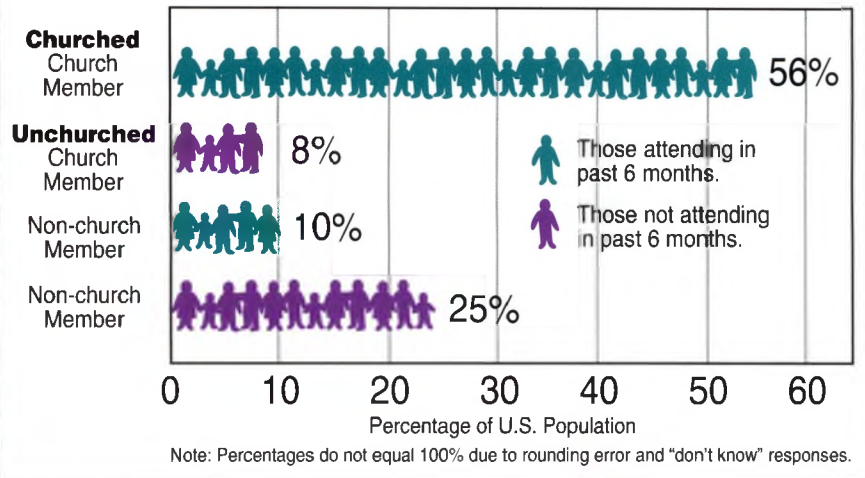
The adult unchurched are more likely to be male, to be young, to live in the West, and to be single. On the other hand, the churching are more likely to be female, to be over 50 years old, to live in the South, to be married, and to have married someone of the same religious preference. There seems to be little difference between the unchurched and churching concerning race, education, presence of children, or income.

By and large, the unchurched have the same traditional values as the churching. Nine of 10 unchurched Americans would welcome more emphasis on traditional family ties. Eight of 10 would welcome more respect for authority, compared with nine of 10 churching. Seven of 10 would not like to see less emphasis placed on working hard and would like to see less emphasis on money.

Only in the area of sexual morality do the churching and unchurched differ significantly. The unchurched are more likely to welcome sexual freedom and less likely to believe premarital sex is wrong.

Most of the unchurched also have traditional religious beliefs and backgrounds. However, they do not exhibit these beliefs and backgrounds as strongly as the churching. Seven of every 10 unchurched adults believe that Jesus is

CLASSIFICATIONS OF THE CHURCHED AND UNCHURCHED



God or the Son of God. Although they may have never made a commitment (as viewed by Southern Baptists), in general, there is fertile ground in which faith can grow.

Indeed, six of every 10 unchurched adults attended church or Sunday School once a week as a child; eight of 10 attended at least once a month. Eight of 10 cite a religious preference. Six of 10 believe the Bible was inspired by God. Approximately eight of 10 unchurched people say they sometimes pray to God.

One of the major findings from the study is that we as the churching are not working in a hostile environment as we reach out to the unchurched.

WHY DON'T THEY ATTEND CHURCH?

Why, with this openness and receptivity to religion, aren't the unchurched churching?

One reason is that they don't view church participation as essential.

Most of the unchurched—two of three—believe they don't have to belong to

ALMOST 90 PERCENT OF UNCHURCHED ADULTS—AND TWO-THIRDS OF CHURCHED PEOPLE—BELIEVE A PERSON CAN BE A GOOD CHRISTIAN WITHOUT ATTENDING CHURCH.

organized religion as long as they live a good life.

Almost nine of 10 unchurched adults believe that a person can be a good Christian without attending church.

What is surprising is that two of three church people polled believe the same way. So, there must be other factors at work, as well.

A second reason is that the unchurched place much less importance on religion in their lives than the church. While 97 percent of the church say religion is at least fairly important in their lives, only 69 percent of the unchurched make that statement. Furthermore, the unchurched are much less likely to say religion is very important and much more likely to say that religion is not important. Three of ten unchurched adults indicate that religion is not important in their lives. This degree of importance placed on religion in personal life tends to be one of the biggest differences between church and unchurched.

A third reason is that the unchurched did not have the same level of participation in church as a child as did the church. While most unchurched

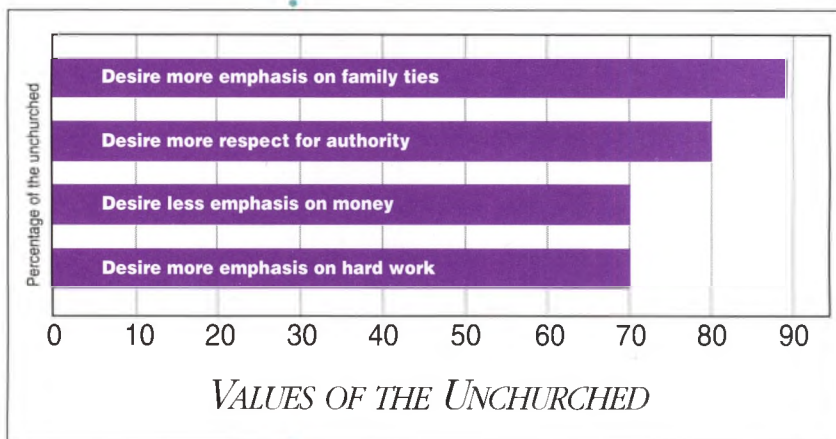
people attended church or Sunday School as a child and had some religious training, they were less likely than the church to have attended church as frequently and less likely to have received religious instruction.

A fourth reason for people not to be church is the “life-cycle effect.”

We’ve already noted that there is evidence of some level of church participation in the childhood of most unchurched people. Upon reaching their teenage years, they began dropping out. This trend continued as these people moved into their twenties.

Interestingly, one-fourth of the church also had a period of two or more years when they dropped out of church. This, too, largely occurred during the teenage years and the early twenties. They returned to church; the unchurched didn’t. While some of the now church were dropping out in their early twenties, others began returning in their early twenties. Seventy percent had returned by the time they were 40 years old.

Why did these young people drop out of church? They found other activi-



ties; they started making their own decisions; they moved to new communities; their work schedules conflicted with church. Some blame was also placed on the church. One of four who is still unchurched had specific problems with church. One of seven didn't find church to be helpful, while a similar number found the church to be incompatible with his or her lifestyle.

Why are the unchurched still unchurched? A variety of reasons exists. Some don't see church participation as essential. For some, religion is not very important in their lives. Some had minimal religious training as a child. Some simply dropped out, never to return. A small minority of the unchurched have not had any exposure to church and probably don't want any.

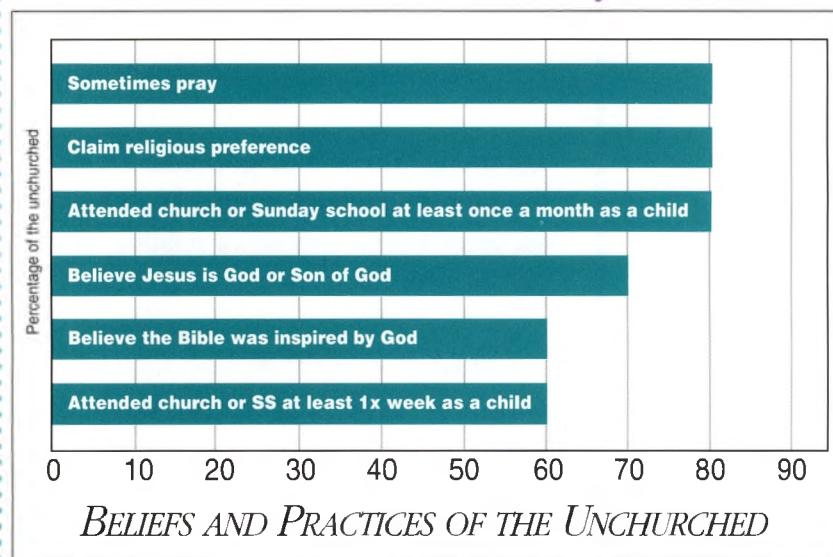
COULD THE UNCHURCHED BECOME CHURCHED?

What are the prospects for reaching the unchurched and bringing them into communities of faith?

Fairly good.

About one third of the unchurched who at one time was more active in church says he or she could probably become active again. Another third thinks it is a possibility. The other third thinks probably not.

Those who might return to the church were asked to suggest circumstances that might precipitate a return. One in five says a change in family situation. A similar number mentions finding



a pastor with whom he or she could openly discuss spiritual needs. Another 20 percent also suggests finding a church with a good religious program for youth.

Other frequent answers given are finding a church that is serious about working for a better society, finding a church with good preaching, and finding a pastor with whom they can openly discuss religious doubts. One in six could envision a crisis situation when a church demonstrates genuine interest. One in seven would be open to returning if invited by a member and if he or she liked the people.

We can also look at the one of the four churched persons who was unchurched for two or more years to see what motivated him or her to return to church. Two of three say they felt an inner need. For most, it was a nonspecific need. For the remainder, it was an inner need to rediscover their religious faith. Nearly a fourth states he or she returned to church for their child to receive religious training.

Other slightly less frequently reported reasons were they felt guilty about

not going and as they got older they thought more about eternal life. One of six went with a spouse or relative, and one of seven was invited to church.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE CHURCH

Given the diversity of the unchurched—which, to some extent, was necessarily glossed over in this report—Southern

THERE IS A SEGMENT OF THE AMERICAN POPULATION THAT IS JUST WAITING TO BE ASKED.

Baptists will need to take multiple approaches to reach the unchurched. This will call for greater diversity

among churches in the modes of worship, programs, activities, and emphases.

Even with this greater diversity, Southern Baptists cannot effectively reach all unchurched people. We should cooperate with and be supportive of the efforts of other Christian groups.

▲ **We should give greater attention to children's and youth programs.** Some of the unchurched will return to the church for quality religious training for their children. Such training may deter some of the natural church dropout that occurs during teenage years or compel them to return if they do drop out.

▲ **We should put more emphasis on the doctrine of the church.** Most people, even church members, don't view the church as essential. We should help people see that churches are more than organizations that are concerned only about "buildings, bucks and bodies"

and are more than social institutions. More than half of all adults think churches today are too concerned with organizational, as opposed to theological or spiritual, issues.

▲ **We have to be ministry-oriented in our outreach.** Too often, we want to incorporate people into church and have them adapt to our programs. Rather, we should adapt our programs to meeting their needs.

As mentioned above, the unchurched tend to view the church as nonessential. It, therefore, becomes necessary to demonstrate that church can be helpful in meeting social and psychological needs.

It also becomes necessary for us to educate people to the reality of a spiritual dimension of life and demonstrate our ability to help persons in their spiritual development. We must take seriously our role in helping people find meaning and purpose in life. To do that, we should be open to listening to their doubts, fears and feelings—and accept them at their present level of spiritual development.

▲ **We must also encourage individual churches to emphasize outreach.** Some of the unchurched would return if an invitation were extended by a friend or relative. About a fourth would not feel positively about this invitation, but the rest would not mind. There is a segment of the American population that is just waiting to be asked. ▲