

US Says Visas From Gay Spouses Will Get Equal Treatment

U.S. officials paved the way on Friday for same-sex spouses to visit or live in the United States, announcing the State Department will give equal treatment to visa applications of gays and lesbians who want to travel with their partner.

Secretary of State John Kerry, announcing the measure at the U.S. embassy in London, said the shift will allow the department to start processing requests from married gay couples the same way it handles those from heterosexual spouses.

“As long as a marriage has been performed in the jurisdiction that recognizes it, then that marriage is valid under U.S. immigration laws. Every married couple will be treated exactly the same, and that is what we believe is appropriate,” Kerry said.

The move, which follows similar action last month by U.S. immigration officials, would help U.S. citizens live and travel with their same-sex spouse in the United State as well as allow married couples from other countries to visit the United States.

It will mostly affect married gay couples overseas, gay rights advocates said. For example, if one spouse has a visa to travel to the Unites States for work or study, their spouse can apply to come along.

It would also help gay Americans living in other countries bring their spouse to the United States, they said.

“This is exciting news for couples who are living abroad,”

said Victoria Neilson, legal director for the advocacy group Immigration Equality.

The move comes after the Obama administration urged all U.S. agencies to review their policies after the U.S. Supreme Court in June struck down a key part of the federal law that defined marriage as between a man and a woman.

U.S. immigration law requires visa travel documents for those who want to live in the United States permanently or to stay temporarily.

In July, the Department of Homeland Security said its U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) would begin reviewing petitions filed on behalf of same-sex spouses the same way as those for spouses in heterosexual marriages.

Friday's announcement by the State Department gives U.S. embassies and consulates around the world the same power to do so on applications filed overseas.

"If you are the spouse of a U.S. citizen, your visa application will be treated equally. If you are the spouse of a non-citizen, your visa application will be treated equally. If you are in a country that doesn't recognize your same-sex marriage, then your visa application will still be treated equally at every single one of our 222 visa processing centers around the world," Kerry said.

Fifteen countries outside the United States recognize same-sex marriage, according to Immigration Equality.

© 2013 Thomson Reuters. All rights reserved.

Martin Chernoff: The Father of 20th Century Messianic Judaism

Any student of Israel knows that Theodore Herzl is the father of modern Zionism. His book, *The Jewish State*, called for the creation of a Jewish homeland as the only safe haven for the Jewish people.

Eliezer Ben Yehuda is considered the father of Modern Hebrew, a dead, unspoken language in 1880, now spoken by over 10 million people.

But equally impressive as the rebirth of the Jewish nation and the language of Hebrew is the rebirth of the Messianic Jew—the Jew who professes faith in Yeshua, and, like the first believers, continues to live as a Jew. There are many men and woman who were influential in the Messianic revival.

Moishe Rosen birthed *Jews for Jesus* and raised up an army of Jewish emissaries. Joseph Rabinowitz started the First Assembly of the Israelites of the New Covenant in 1885. Our own Ari and Shira pioneered spirit-filled Messianic Judaism in Israel with their first house congregation in 1977 and then by birthing the first Hebrew only spirit-filled congregation in 1995. As far back as 1959, Victor Smadja started *Keren Ahava Mishihit* in Jerusalem. My spiritual father, Dan Juster has also played a major role in shaping Messianic Jewish expression through the Tikkun Network and the UMJC.

Martin Chernoff

However, if there is one figure who stands out as the father of Modern Messianic Judaism it would have to be Martin Chernoff. His father, Solomon, fled the Russian army in the early 1900s in order to give his family a better life in

America. But, after arriving in Amsterdam, he was broke. For three years he worked and saved in order to buy tickets to cross the Atlantic. However, thinking he had arrived in New York, he was shocked to find himself in Argentina!

After another three years, he and his family took a train through South America to New York City. However, when he got off at the last stop he was in Toronto, Canada, missing New York for the third time! This time, Solomon settled his family in Toronto, as there were already 4,000 Russian Jewish immigrants living there, and continued his trade as a tailor.

A Secret to the Grave-Almost

One day Solomon heard a Jewish believer preaching. He sat down to listen and secretly professed faith in Yeshua. He knew this would send shockwaves through his orthodox Jewish family so he decided he would never tell a soul.

Many years later, their son Martin would make a similar decision, embracing Yeshua as His Messiah, but instead of keeping it to himself would seek to bring as many Jewish people as he could to faith in Yeshua. On his deathbed, his father confessed his secret faith to his son.

Assimilation vs. Jewish Identity

Martin and his wife, Yohanna, worked for many years for an organization seeking to bring Jewish people to faith. He was constantly at odds with them, as he began to realize the need for Jewish believers to have their own meetings in a Jewish context. The organization emphasized winning Jewish people to the faith and then funneling them into local churches to be discipled (where they would often lose their Jewish identity).

Martin was told he was not qualified to disciple "Hebrew Christians," as they were called then, and once, when he immersed several new Jewish believers in water at a conference, the leader of his organization saw red, as he

rebuked Martin, telling him again that it was beyond his scope of authority.

“The Jesus Revolution and the Jews’ is the biography that Martin’s wife, Yohanna, wrote.

In the midst of a prayer meeting in 1963, just after the assassination of President Kennedy, Martin had the second of three visions. He saw, in addition to scores of Jewish people coming to faith (as in his first vision) a group of unkept and shabby young people—dressed in rags. He had no idea that the coming years would usher in the hippy phenomenon and that God would use his wife, Yohanna and him to bring many of these young Jewish people to Yeshua.

In addition to ushering in the sexual revolution, psychedelic rock and popularizing LSD usage, the hippie movement revealed a deep spiritual hunger inside that generation. In April 1966, *Time Magazine* ran the headline: *Is God Dead?* However, only five years later, after this massive revival, their headline in June 1971 was, *The Jesus Revolution*.

Scores of young Jewish people came to faith in Cincinnati forming the nucleus of the Chernoff’s home congregation. Thousands more Jews embraced Yeshua all across the U.S. as God raised up a leadership for a new thing he was about to do.

From Hebrew Christianity to Messianic Judaism

In 1970 Martin had his third open vision. “*Two electrifying simple words stretched across the sky in the form of a banner.*” He saw the words: Messianic Judaism.

This vision would define the rest of Martin’s life and his legacy. The small group of Jewish believers in Cincinnati confessed:

“We are Jewish believers in Yeshua as our Messiah. We have our own destiny in the Lord. We will no longer be assimilated into

the church and pretend to be non-Jews. If Yeshua Himself, His followers and the early Jewish believers tenaciously maintained their Jewish lifestyles, why was it right for them, but wrong now? Gentile converts are not expected to forsake their families, culture, holidays and traditions; nor shall we do so."

No longer would they call themselves Hebrew Christians, but Messianic Jews.

Despite the fact they were seeing dozens of young Jewish people receive Yeshua, the leader of the organization who paid their salary gave them an ultimatum. They either must disband their congregation and hand over the names to the organization (so these Jews could be placed in churches), or leave.

Marty had a major decision to make: Stay with the organization, get paid, disband their congregation and funnel new believers to churches or resign his position, officially birth congregation Beth Messiah, and trust God to provide for their needs. Other than a few isolated cases, there was no example of a self-sustained, independent Messianic Congregation. It was virgin territory.

After a lengthy discussion between the leaders and the congregants, it was decided that disbanding was not an option. Martin would become their rabbi and they would support Yohanna and him. Congregation Beth Messiah was birthed.

National Influence

Soon Martin was elected to be president of the Hebrew Christian Alliance of America. More and more Jewish believers were calling themselves Messianic Jews instead of Hebrew Christians. The moniker *Hebrew Christian* emphasized that the believer was of Jewish background, while *Messianic Jew*, emphasized that the believers continued to live as Jews, after believing in Yeshua.

However, changing the name of the HCAA would not be easy. Many old-timers strongly objected to the new Messianic theme and Jewish identity. They didn't like the dancing or the singing of Klezmer (Yiddish sounding) songs with Messianic lyrics. The first vote was defeated, but not without controversy. Rather than fighting, Martin wisely put the issue to rest, realizing that it was only a matter of time.

Two years later, the young *hippie* believers far outnumbered the old guard and the name was changed to the Messianic Jewish Alliance of America (MJAA).

Beth Yeshua in Philadelphia

Eventually the Chernoffs would move to Philadelphia and take over the "Fink Zoo"—a group of young Jewish believers who met in the home of Joe and Debbie Finklestein. They called their new congregation *Beth Yeshua*.

When I first heard of Messianic Jews in 1984, the orthodox community had declared war on Beth Yeshua and they were fighting for their survival. By 1985, they were calling for a nationwide protest—with the goal of destroying the Messianic Jewish movement. Jews from all over were bussed in to protest and Beth Yeshua was their target. If Beth Yeshua could be toppled, then maybe they could crush the whole movement.

I drove right by Philadelphia during Hurricane Gloria just before this mass demonstration, as my Long Island-based Bible School released us for our own safety.

The folks at Beth Yeshua were hoping that Gloria would ruin the planned protest. However, Pat Robertson rebuked the storm just before it hit his Virginia Beach-based CBN and Gloria headed out to sea. Pat was happy; the Messianics in Philadelphia were dismayed.

However, when Beth Yeshua took their worship team outside in the midst of the anti-Messianic demonstration, the entire

protest was diffused. Some protesters ended up actually dancing with the Beth Yeshua congregants. After a short time, leaders called off the protests and fled.

Legacy

So many leaders that lead congregations today were discipled by Martin Chernoff. His legacy lives on in these many men and women, not to mention his own children Joel, David and Hope, all leaders in the Messianic Movement today.

(All quotes are taken from Born a Jew, Die a Jew, the biography of Martin Chernoff, written by his wife, Yohanna.)

Ron Cantor is the director of Messiah's Mandate International in Israel, a Messianic ministry dedicated to taking the message of Jesus from Israel to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8). Cantor also travels internationally teaching on the Jewish roots of the New Testament. He serves on the pastoral team of Tiferet Yeshua, a Hebrew-speaking congregation in Tel Aviv. His newest book, Identity Theft, was released April 16. Follow him at @RonSCantor on Twitter.

For the original article, visit .

Did you enjoy this blog? Click here to receive it by email.

Woman Accused of Defacing National Cathedral Can Leave Jail

A woman accused of splashing green paint on parts of the National Cathedral in Washington, D.C., can be released to a halfway house to await trial on a property destruction charge,

a judge ruled on Friday.

Jia M. Tian, 58, is accused of dumping the paint on a pipe organ and on woodwork in two chapels at the cathedral. She carried a Chinese passport with an expired visa and has been jailed since her arrest on Monday.

Superior Court Judge Fredrick Sullivan ruled that she could be moved to a halfway house if she wears an ankle monitor, but she will not be allowed to see visitors or to leave the facility before her next court hearing on August 29.

Metropolitan Police Officer Christopher Carkeet testified that it could cost \$15,000 to \$18,000 to repair the cathedral.

Investigators said a witness had seen Tian sitting in the church after services ended and just before the vandalism occurred.

The property destruction charge carries a maximum penalty of 10 years in prison.

Police were still investigating whether Tian was involved in similar acts of vandalism at other Washington landmarks last week. Paint was splashed onto the Lincoln Memorial and used to put symbols on a statue outside the Smithsonian Institution.

A detective testified that a footprint found at the Lincoln Memorial after the splashing had a tread pattern matching that on Tian's shoes.

© 2013 Thomson Reuters. All rights reserved.

Kong Hee's Church Clarifies Pastor's 'Apology From God'

Pastor Kong Hee of City Harvest Church in Singapore sparked outrage online with a YouTube video in which he seemed to be saying God was apologizing for his struggles. But his church says it is just a misunderstanding.

"As anyone with a basic education in the English language ought to be able to tell that the use of 'I'm so sorry' here is not in the context of an apology, but a word of comfort, for example, 'I'm so sorry about your mother's suffering,' or 'I'm so sorry you need to go through chemotherapy,'" say Pastor Kong's spokesperson, whose statement was emailed via City Harvest Church's corporate communications department.

"It is in no way an apology or admission of guilt as has been suggested. The message God gave Pastor Kong was that it is necessary for Pastor to journey through this painful experience because it is a refiner's fire, meant to prepare him for the work God has in store for him and the church for the future," the statement continues.

Yahoo! News reports the sermon is most likely from the 2012 C3 Presence conference, held in Sydney last April. This would have been before the news broke last June that Kong and five other church leaders were being investigated for embezzlement. Kong is accused of criminal breach of trust and misappropriating church building funds.

"Father, Father, why, my God, my God, why have You forsaken me and thrown me to the dogs?" Hee asked in the YouTube video after talking about the experience Jesus Christ went through on the cross at His crucifixion and saying he identified with that kind of suffering.

"For the first time in eight months, God—I heard Him cry, and

He said, 'My son, Kong, thank you. Thank you for going through this. I need you to go through this alone so that you and City Harvest Church can be the man and the ministry I call it to be. I'm so sorry, but you need to go through this by yourself to bring a change to your generation,'" Kong continued.

Applause was heard from the audience, and he continued: "I hear God saying, for the first time in eight months, 'I love you, I love you, I love you.' Waves upon waves of God's love—the love of the Father just saturated me. ... And I knew everything was going to be all right. Everything is going to be all right."

The video has received widely negative reactions. Since its posting on Friday, it was thumbed down more than 3,300 times, compared to less than 200 thumbs up. It has also gotten more than 1,700 comments, many of them scathing.

When a Mass-Murdering Soldier of Allah Is Not a Terrorist

If someone looks like a Muslim terrorist, identifies as a soldier of Allah, is mentored by a Muslim terrorist and then slaughters Americans on a military base in cold blood in the name of Allah, that person is obviously a Muslim terrorist—unless, of course, that person is Nidal Malik Hasan, the accused Fort Hood mass murderer.

It is tragic enough that Hasan is charged with taking the lives of 13 innocent people and wounding 30 more. It adds salt to the wounds to realize he has received nearly \$300,000 in military pay since the Fort Hood shootings in 2009 while languishing in the hospital (after being shot) and in prison.

But it is utterly outrageous that our government still refuses to call him a terrorist—specifically, a Muslim terrorist. In fact, it is not just outrageous; it is hypocritical.

Consider that Hasan was inspired by the radical Islamic cleric Anwar al-Awlaki, a man considered so dangerous that he was killed in Yemen by an American drone attack September 30, 2011.

How can it be, then, that the teacher is a terrorist and the student, who murderously follows his teacher's tenets, is not a terrorist? What kind of sophistry is this?

It has been common knowledge for years that Hasan's colleagues noticed his increasing radicalization, that his co-workers at Walter Reed Medical Center were concerned about his behavior, and that he turned what was supposed to be a medical lecture into a radical Islamic screed in which he allegedly justified suicide bombings, reportedly stating that if you didn't believe in the Koran, "you are condemned to hell. Your head is cut off. You're set on fire. Burning oil is burned down your throat."

Finally, on November 5, 2009, witnesses state that Hasan sat quietly at a table with his head bowed for a few seconds, then jumped to his feet, shouting, "Allahu Akbar!" and started spraying people with bullets.

And the government has the gall to classify this as "workplace violence"?

Now, on the eve of his trial, Hasan has released documents in which he refers to himself as SoA, meaning "Soldier of Allah" (not "Sold-Out American"!). This same abbreviation was found on his business card at the time of his shooting—but he, of course, is not a Muslim terrorist.

In the only dated document (Oct. 8, 2012), Hasan writes, "I, Nidal Malik Hasan, am compelled to renounce any oaths of

allegiances that require me to support/defend [any] man made constitution [like the Constitution of the United States] over the commandments mandated in Islam. ... I therefore formally renounce my oath of office. ... This includes my oath of U.S. citizenship."

But he, of course, is not a Muslim terrorist.

In another document, he makes clear his beliefs that Sharia law and American democracy are incompatible, explaining, "There is an inherent and irreconcilable conflict. ... In an American Democracy 'we the people' govern according to what 'we the people' think is right or wrong; even if it specifically goes against what All-Mighty God commands."

But he, of course, is not a Muslim terrorist.

As for his relationship with Anwar al-Awlaki, Hasan wrote, "He [al-Awlaki] was my teacher, mentor and friend. I hold him in high esteem for trying to educate Muslims about their duties to our creator. May All-Mighty Allah accept his martyrdom."

But Hasan, of course, is not a Muslim terrorist.

According to Thomas Joscelyn, a senior fellow with the Foundation for Defense of Democracies and writer for the *Long War Journal*, "He's clearly saying that he's a homegrown extremist, that he's somebody who identifies with al-Qaida's ideology. He's somebody who definitely reached out to an al-Qaida cleric and who decided he was going to take up al-Qaida's cause here on American soil."

In other words, he's flat-out telling us he's a Muslim terrorist, in case we haven't put the pieces together, but we actually know him better than he knows himself, and he really is not a Muslim terrorist at all, and what happened at Fort Hood was just another example of workplace violence.

Staff Sgt. Shawn Manning, who was shot six times at Fort Hood,

told Fox News, “The government has tried to deny that this was an act of terrorism. I think that—I hope that if people hear the words from Hasan’s own mouth, that they will understand that this was an act of terrorism.”

I would certainly hope so—but why should facts matter now?

We can only imagine the sense of outrage and grief felt by the families of the dead, along with the surviving victims and their families, when our government continues to deny that the Fort Hood massacre was an act of Islamic terrorism, to the point of complete being delusional. The real question is, Why?

Let’s break the spell and help our government wake up to reality by saying it out loud together: “Nadal Malik Hasan is an Islamic terrorist.”

And while we understand that millions of Muslims are not Islamic terrorists, Nadal Hasan most certainly is.

Michael Brown is author of The Real Kosher Jesus and host of the nationally syndicated talk radio show The Line of Fire on the Salem Radio Network. He is also president of FIRE School of Ministry and director of the Coalition of Conscience. Follow him at AskDrBrown on Facebook or @drmichaellbrown on Twitter.

Spiritual Burnout: The Danger of Doing Good

Studies estimate more than 5 million Christians are working in full-time ministry. More than a million of them are taking the gospel message to non-Christian parts of the world, with some

risking their lives.

Now, Hope International President Peter Greer is sounding an alarm about a different danger in doing good: spiritual burnout.

Greer, a leader in the global fight against poverty, has spent his professional life doing good works in the mission field.

"I'm part of a generation that has grown up believing there are huge needs in the world and the church needs to respond," Greer told CBN News.

"We have thrown ourselves into causes of social justice," he said. "We have thrown ourselves into missions and we have been burned out as a result. And I think a lot of this burnout comes because we have forgotten why we serve."

Greer believes charity and service have a dark side, a message he addresses in his book, *The Spiritual Danger of Doing Good*.

"How do we run over our family or give our family our leftovers because we are too busy doing good work?" Greer challenged. "How is it that we forget who we are becoming in Christ because we don't have time? We are doing such great things that we don't have time to grow in a real relationship with Christ."

Greer says those at work in the mission field are usually aware of their sacrifices of time, money, and even safety.

Still, they don't expect to feel their motivation starting to slip. It happened to him more than 12 years ago while distributing blankets to poor refugees left devastated after a volcano eruption.

"I remember at that moment as I was giving away blankets that one of my friends was not far away snapping pictures. And I was not thinking about the individual in front of me," Greer recalled.

“I was thinking about the pictures that were being taken and the reaction my friends were going to have back home when they saw these pictures of a masculine Mother Theresa giving away and serving the poor,” he continued.

“And I was so hit by my own hypocrisy that I was not loving the individual who was in front of me. I was play acting for someone very far away,” he said.

Greer warns those kinds of spiritual dangers don’t only happen on the mission field – they can hit right here at home.

“It doesn’t matter if you are giving in your local church or you are giving internationally. I think the principles and the underlying issues are the same. We give. We give. We give. We give. We give. And we burn out,” he said.

“And the question is why is that? I think part of it is because we buy into a lie that giving to God means we go without ever resting. It means we go without ever being refreshed ourselves and I don’t think that honors God,” he said.

Joel Osteen, Lakewood Church Support US Bill to End Sex Trafficking

Pastor Joel Osteen, of the 40,000-member Lakewood Church in Houston, and his congregation are supporting H.R. 2805, the “End Sex Trafficking Act of 2013.”

“The suffering associated with human trafficking resonates strongly within the Christian community, and we know of many

churches, like our own, whose compassion for its victims have moved them to act,” Joel and Victoria Osteen said in a statement emailed to Charisma News.

The bill, introduced by Rep. Ted Poe, R-Texas, “will help eliminate human trafficking rings by targeting the criminals who purchase sexual acts from these organizations and ensuring that they are prosecuted as human traffickers.”

Sex trafficking is prevalent in Texas, with Houston being known as a major hub. Children across the United States are being forced into sexual acts against their will, and lawmakers are demanding to end this tragedy by targeting the buyer, according to the *Houston Chronicle*.

“Our culture in this country needs to understand that when young girls are forced into prostitution against their will, especially minors, they are not prostitutes; they are victims of crime, and we should regard them as victims of crime,” Poe says. “This bill strengthens and clarifies federal law to ensure that buyers of sex from minors and other trafficked victims are arrested, prosecuted, and sentenced where they belong: jail.”

Inspiring Photo of Marine Accompanying Lost Boy in Race Goes Viral

A photo of a Marine running alongside a 9-year-old boy who lost his group at a 5K race has gone viral. The image, posted on the “Seal of Honor” Facebook page Monday, has been shared more than 56,000 times, has received more than 235,000

“likes,” and has received more than 11,000 comments.

“For the 5k at the Venetian Festival in Charlevoix, [Lance Cpl. Myles Kerr] opted to run the event wearing boots and utes and carrying a ruck sack,” Seal of Honor said of the photo. “Several minutes after the other Marines he was with had finished, Lcpl Kerr still had not crossed the line. They feared his extreme level of motivation may have caused him injury and/or fatigue resulting in him dropping out of the race.

“Moments before they ran back through the course to recover their fellow Marine, Lcpl Kerr came around the last turn along with this small boy. The boy had become separated from those who he had started the race with. He asked Lcpl Kerr, ‘Sir? Will you please run with me?’

“Throughout the course, Lcpl Kerr urged him on when the boy wanted to give up and ensured that the boy saw the course to completion where he was reunited with his party. By his unwavering commitment to help those in need through his ability to inspire others by his unequivocal level of motivation, Lcpl Kerr reflected great credit upon himself and was keeping in the highest traditions of the United States Marine Corps.”

Kerr has received an overwhelming amount of praise but responded on Twitter: “I was just doing what any man would do, but thank you!”

Atheist Coalition Targets

Church Tax-Exempt Status

The Secular Coalition for America, a self-described alliance of “atheists, agnostics, humanists, freethinkers and other nontheistic Americans,” is taking direct aim at churches in America. The group is pushing a legislative proposal that would bring about radical changes to churches’ long-held tax-exempt status, including the possible forced disclosure of donors.

Even more disturbing, this push calls for direct government intrusion into the affairs of churches, something the Constitution forbids. The Supreme Court has long recognized that our constitutional system of government “has secured religious liberty from the invasion of the civil authority.”

The American Center for Law and Justice (ACLJ) recently developed a legal memo laying out, in detail, the dangers of this proposal:

Such changes threaten the Free Exercise rights of every religious congregation in the Nation by the proposed precedential, unwarranted, and unbridled government intrusion into the religious affairs of churches. Specifically, putting the government in a position of authority over churches, by being able to grant or deny their tax exempt statuses, threatens the protections set forth in the Establishment Clause. Furthermore, such authority constitutes religious oppression because it places the government in the position to judge whether or not an institution’s beliefs constitute its claim as a church. To entertain such an inquiry into the internal affairs of a church would foster impermissible government entanglement with religion.

If that isn’t scary enough, the memo also states, “The Coalition’s recommendation ignores the line between church and State and violates the Establishment Clause by suggesting the

allowance of *severe government entanglement with religion through the IRS*" (emphasis added). The last thing we need right now is to give greater empowerment to the IRS to directly target churches.

The ACLJ is working with churches and members of Congress to ensure this dangerous and unconstitutional proposal is never passed into law or allowed to target and harass houses of worship in America.

You can read the full memo [here](#).

Survey: Non-Churchgoers Favor a More Religious America

According to a Gallup poll released in May, a whopping 75 percent of Americans think the U.S. would be a better place to live if more people were religious—even though many of those surveyed reported they don't attend church themselves.

One suggestion being offered to help? Come back to church.

A growing national movement is inviting all of America to come to church on Sunday, Sept. 15, for National Back to Church Sunday.

As of Wednesday, more than 16,000 churches across all 50 states have signed up to invite their communities to church on Sept. 15.

The online tally upticks continuously as churches discover the free project and commit to promote the day in their congregation and their community, moving toward this year's

goal of 20,000 churches across all denominations who are reaching out to the nation with special services on the same day.

The initiative—the largest nationwide effort at church outreach—draws on research indicating that although approximately 80 percent of Americans consider themselves Christians, only about 20 percent attend church. Yet about two-thirds of Americans would go to church if someone they knew asked them, according to a study by LifeWay Research and the North American Mission Board.

“It’s been revealing to us that Americans greatly value the role of religion in our society and to realize how many people would be open to trying church again if a friend or family member made it easy by inviting them,” says Eric Abel, vice president of Outreach, Inc., the nation’s leading provider of church communications resources that helped launch National Back to Church Sunday.

“Part of the idea for National Back to Church Sunday,” Abel adds, “is that by making this a day when entire church communities make a special effort to be welcoming, it is an easy time for someone to come back to church or come to church for the very first time.”

More than 95 percent of churches who participated in the event in 2012 indicated they would do so again, citing a 38 percent increase in attendance on National Back to Church Sunday and ongoing benefits of increased participation and enthusiasm.

“I really encourage pastors to do this next year,” reports Eric Evans, pastor of Walnut Grove Baptist Church in Hollister, N.C., in a survey comment. “Not only was it a great way to get visitors in, but it also forces you to examine your church to see how ready you are for them.”

There is no charge to participate in the event, and the

website at [www.backtochurch.org](#) offers a searchable roster of participating churches along with free publicity materials, tips for using social media to promote the event and information about using the Back to Church Facebook page and YouTube channel.

In addition, banners, printed invitations and other time-saving publicity helps are available, as well as a richly resourced Back to Church kit. The kit includes a planning guide, videos, posters, e-book, sermons, children's curriculum, samples of other printed resources and more than 60 digital resources, such as e-vites, web banners, PowerPoint presentations, logos and children's resources. The videos, intended for use on Sunday mornings and on church websites, include the innovative, light-hearted and viral "Pastor Rap" video.