

New Research Refutes Common Perceptions of American Religion

The recently released Baylor University survey concluded surprising results about megachurches, atheist and how the American church reaches the community.



[] Baylor University's Institute for Studies on Religion (ISR) released a survey Thursday that concluded surprising results about the American religious landscape. In a follow-up to the school's 2005 survey on religion, which found that most Americans believe in God or a higher power, researchers sought to delve deeper into Americans' beliefs.

"Our mission with the Baylor Religion Survey [was] to ask deeper questions," said Christopher Bader, an associate professor of sociology at Baylor and one of the ISR researchers. "Lots of surveys ask: 'Do you pray and how often?' Very few surveys ask what you pray about. A lot of surveys ask: 'Do you believe in God?' But surveys have not asked who is God.

"The idea was to take every question you usually see on a religion survey and try to push it several levels."

Conducted by the Gallup Organization on 1,648 random American adults, the study found that contrary to common opinion, megachurches have more intimate relationships among congregants than do smaller congregations.

"None of the things we all believe about the megachurch is true," said

Rodney Stark, professor of social sciences at Baylor and co-director of the ISR.

Megachurch constituents tend to show more commitment to their churches by

attending Bible studies and weekly services, as well as tithing more

consistently, than their smaller counterparts. People attending churches with

more than 1,000 members are also involved outside the church—often active in

home Bible studies and inviting more friends and family to church.

"We think of [megachurches] as these great, huge, cold religious gatherings

with a symphony orchestra and a paid choir and a lot of hoopla and a lot of good

tidings but no bad tidings," Stark said. "It's not true that it's all happy

talk. These people are as interested in evil and sin as anybody in any of the

churches. Their levels of satisfaction are high, their volunteerism in community

service is very high and their outreach efforts are absolutely phenomenal."

Results from the study, which were announced in the nation's capital and is

published in *What Americans Really Believe* by Rodney Stark, found that

despite recent reports Americans have not become disenfranchised with organized

religion. An estimated 31 million people participate in community outreaches

such as neighborhood prayer meetings and Bible studies affiliated with a church.

“One of the things that you hear a lot of is that people are growing dissatisfied with organized religion, and because of this dissatisfaction, they don’t participate in religious activities,” said Byron Johnson, professor of sociology at Baylor and co-director of the ISR. “What we found [is] that people who do these outreach ministries all operate from the base of some organized church that they’re involved in. They’re really not out there frustrated with the organized church doing these other kinds of ministries and outreach that they have no church home of their own because they’re so dissatisfied. It’s not true.”

With the emergence of atheistic best-selling books such as *The God Delusion*, some have claimed atheism is on the rise in America. But the ISR report refutes this assertion. The research showed atheism has remained a steady 4 percent of the U.S. population since the mid-20th century and that atheists, as a group, tend to be avid readers, which might explain why recent atheistic books sold so well.

Other findings found that 55 percent of Americans have had specific spiritual experiences, including hearing God’s voice, feeling God’s directional leading, speaking or praying in tongues, being protected by an angel, and witnessing or receiving a miracle healing.

Forty-five percent of respondents said they’d had at least two religious experiences. Women, African-Americans and Republicans charted

the highest
numbers in this category.

Sixty-seven percent of Americans said heaven “absolutely”
exists and 73
percent said hell exists.

The study is the second of a series of religious research that
will
continue to be conducted every two years by the ISR until
2018.

“In the future we’ll be able to see a trend of what religion
is doing in
this country over the course of 20 years in a very deep
sense,” Bader concluded.

—**Felicia Mann**