

67 Percent of Pastors Suggest Christians Tackle Halloween Like This

This Halloween, millions of Americans will carve pumpkins, dress up in costumes, decorate their yards and gobble down the candy they get while trick-or-treating.

America's preachers also hope they'll consider coming to church, according to a new phone survey of 1,000 Protestant senior pastors from Nashville-based LifeWay Research.

Two-thirds of Protestant pastors say they encourage church members to ask their neighbors to a church-related event like a fall fair or trunk-or-treat.

Half tell their church members to befriend those who trick-or-treat at their doors. Nearly 1 in 10 tell church members to skip Halloween altogether.

Most pastors see Halloween as an opportunity to reach out, says Scott McConnell, executive director of LifeWay Research.

"This is a time when your neighbors literally come to your doorstep," he says. "Pastors don't want their church members to waste that chance to make a connection or invite someone to church."

A Major Holiday

Halloween has become a major social and retail event in American culture. Seven out of 10 Americans (69 percent) plan to celebrate Halloween this year, according to the National Retail Federation (NRF). The average American consumer will spend about \$83 on candy, decorations and other goodies. That's up from \$74 in 2015.

LifeWay Research found most pastors want church members to take part in the season's activities as well.

Two-thirds (67 percent) encourage church members to invite friends and neighbors to a fall festival, trunk-or-treat or judgment house. Pastors at bigger churches (those with 250 or more in attendance) are most likely to ask church members to invite their neighbors (86 percent) to an event at the church. Those from small churches (50 or less in attendance) are least likely (48 percent).

Holiness (82 percent), Baptist (77 percent), Pentecostal (75 percent) and Methodist (73 percent) pastors are more likely to ask their members to invite friends to an event. Lutheran (56 percent) and Presbyterian/reformed pastors (55 percent) are less likely.

Little Enthusiasm for Gospel Tracts Instead of Candy

Only about a quarter of pastors encourage church members to hand out gospel tracts at Halloween, according to LifeWay Research.

In fact, pastors are twice as likely to encourage members to befriend neighbors who trick-or-treat (52 percent) than to tell members to hand out gospel tracts (26 percent). Pastors at larger churches (63 percent) are more likely to want their members to build relationships with trick-or-treaters. Pastors at smaller churches (42 percent) are less likely. Mainline pastors (15 percent) are less likely to ask church members to hand out tracts than evangelical pastors (32 percent). Baptist pastors (47 percent) are most likely to want church members to hand out gospel tracts.

Few pastors (8 percent) want church members to skip Halloween completely. Older pastors (those 65 and over) are more skeptical of Halloween (13 percent) than pastors under 45 (4 percent). African-American pastors (23 percent) are most likely to want church members to avoid Halloween. White

pastors (7 percent) are least likely.

Few Americans Spooked by Halloween

A 2015 LifeWay Research study found about 6 in 10 Americans say Halloween “is all in good fun.” But about a third say they either skip Halloween altogether (21 percent) or avoid its pagan elements (14 percent).

Self-identified evangelicals are mostly likely to either skip Halloween (28 percent) or skip its pagan elements (23 percent). Nones—those who claim no religious affiliation—are mostly likely to say Halloween is all in good fun (75 percent). Few Nones skip Halloween (11 percent.)

The more people go to church, the more skeptical they are of Halloween. Less than half (44 percent) of those who attend religious services at least once a week say Halloween is all in good fun. Most Americans who only go to church on religious holidays say Halloween is all in good fun (82 percent.)

Most Christians tend to embrace the fun side of Halloween—dressing up in costumes, handing out candy or carving pumpkins—while avoiding its darker elements. So it’s not surprising some churches have turned it into a chance to invite people to church, McConnell says.

With so many people celebrating Halloween, this one day has more interaction among neighbors across America than any other day,” says McConnell. “People actually want to see each other at their doors. So it’s only natural that pastors encourage their congregations to invest in these relationships.”