

Study: Americans Have Mixed Impressions of Southern Baptists

The majority of Americans have a favorable impression of Southern Baptists, according to a recent LifeWay Research study. However, 40 percent of respondents have an unfavorable view of the denomination, more than a third strongly assume an SBC church is not for them, and the negativity is higher among the unchurched.

The study was conducted in September after the president of the Southern Baptist Convention appointed a task force to consider a possible name change for the 166 year-old convention. The study indicates a segment of Americans have unfavorable opinions of Southern Baptists in comparison to other faith groups. However, with 53 percent being favorable toward Southern Baptists (including 15 percent very favorable), both sides need to be considered, said Ed Stetzer, president of LifeWay Research.

“On one hand it does look like the SBC has higher negatives than other faith groups—and the unchurched numbers are particularly disconcerting,” Stetzer said. “But on the other, most people don’t seem to be concerned either way because there is a level of indifference to denominations or religion in general.”

In fact, two-thirds of Americans are without strong feelings in regards to all the Christian faith groups included in the survey with a third or less either very favorable or very unfavorable to them.

Respondents were shown the names of five “denominations or faith groups” and asked to “indicate if your impression is very favorable, somewhat favorable, somewhat unfavorable, very

unfavorable, or you are not familiar enough to form an opinion.” The study indicates 62 percent of Americans have a favorable view of Methodists compared to 59 percent for Catholics, 53 percent for Southern Baptists, 37 percent for Latter-Day Saints (Mormons), and 28 percent for Muslims.

The study sought to determine how the name might impact the interest or connection with a congregation. When asked their level of agreement with the statement, “When I see (fill in denominational affiliation) in the name of a church, I assume it is not for me,” 35 percent “strongly agree” a Southern Baptist church is not for them—higher than for Catholics (33 percent), Baptists (29 percent), Methodists (26 percent) and community or nondenominational churches (20 percent).

Significantly more respondents disagree with this statement for community or nondenominational churches, indicating they are considered as a possible fit compared to other Christian faith groups included in the survey—58 percent compared to Baptists, 44 percent; Catholics, 43 percent; Methodists, 42 percent; and Southern Baptists, 38 percent.

This positive reaction to community or nondenominational churches reflects other recent LifeWay Research analysis that showed growth among nondenominational churches while Southern Baptists are trending in a membership decline.

Respondents were also asked: “If you were considering visiting or joining a church, would knowing that the church was Southern Baptist impact your decision positively, negatively or have no impact?” Forty-four percent of Americans indicate that knowing a church is Southern Baptist would negatively impact their decision to visit or join the church, 36 percent say it would have no impact and 10 percent say it would positively impact their decision.

“The negative impact numbers concern me most,” Stetzer said. “Knowing a church is SBC would make four out of 10 Americans

less likely to visit and join – and many of those are the unchurched.

“The study did not explore why some respondents hold a negative view of Southern Baptists,” Stetzer said. “For instance, one reason may be because they disagree with positions Southern Baptists take on certain issues such as sanctity of life or the exclusivity of the gospel, and that is the only point of reference they have for Southern Baptists.”

Subgroups of Americans responded more or less favorably to Southern Baptists including:

- Americans who attend religious services weekly or more frequently and Protestants are more likely to have a “very favorable” opinion of Southern Baptists (30 percent and 22 percent respectively).
- Those groups more likely to have a “very unfavorable” opinion of Southern Baptists include those who never attend church (44 percent), Hispanics (29 percent), respondents who live in small cities (26 percent), and young adults ages 18-29 (25 percent).
- Those most likely to be unfamiliar with Southern Baptists include residents in the Northeast (15 percent) and West (13 percent), those who never attend worship (14 percent), as well as young adults (13 percent).

“An unbiased observer will conclude two things: a lot of the unchurched people assume certain denominations are not for them—and Baptists at the highest rate; and, that most of the unchurched don’t have strong opinions or awareness of denominations,” Stetzer noted. “This would be especially true in areas of the country such as the West where the concentration of Southern Baptist churches is considerably fewer than in the South.”

Stetzer said he has shared the study results with Jimmy

Draper, chairman of the name change study task force. "I am hopeful the results will be useful to the members as well as to all Southern Baptists seeking to be more effective in their witness by better understanding the culture in which their churches exist."

Stetzer also said LifeWay Research will conduct further research focusing on what Southern Baptist pastors think about the image issue.