

# Why the Unchurched Will Talk About Faith and Not Church Attendance

Americans who don't go to church are happy to talk about religion and often think about the meaning of life.

They're open to taking part in community service events hosted at a church or going to a church concert.

But only about a third say they'd go to a worship service if invited by a friend. Few think about what happens after they die.

Those are among the findings of a new online survey of 2,000 unchurched Americans from Nashville-based LifeWay Research. The survey, conducted in partnership with the Wheaton, Illinois-based Billy Graham Center for Evangelism, found more than half of Americans who don't go to church identify as Christians.

But they are mostly indifferent to organized religion, says Scott McConnell, executive director of LifeWay Research.

"Unchurched Americans aren't hostile to faith," he says. "They just don't think church is for them."

## Talking About Faith Isn't Taboo

For this survey, "unchurched" means those who have not attended a worship service in the last six months, outside of a holiday or special occasion like a wedding.

Among their characteristics:

- Two-thirds (67 percent) are white
- Just over half (53 percent) are male

- About half (47 percent) have a high school diploma or less
- Almost two-thirds (62 percent) went to church regularly as a child
- About a third (32 percent) consider themselves nonreligious
- One in five identifies as Protestant; one in four as Catholic

Few are turned off by conversations about faith, says McConnell.

Almost half (47 percent) say they discuss religion freely if the topic comes up. A third (31 percent) say they listen without responding, while 11 percent change the subject.

Only about a third (35 percent) say someone has ever explained the benefits of being a Christian to them.

McConnell says Christians may be reluctant to talk about their faith out of fear of offending their friends. But the survey found that fear is unfounded.

“Unchurched folks are not being overwhelmed by Christians talking about their faith,” says McConnell. “If faith is important to you, then your friends will be interested in hearing about it.”

## **A Personal Touch Still Matters**

Researchers looked at the kinds of activities unchurched Americans might be interested in as well as methods for inviting them to church.

About two-thirds (62 percent) would attend a church meeting about neighborhood safety. Half would take part in a community service event (51 percent), concert (45 percent), sports or exercise program (46 percent) or neighborhood get-together (45 percent) at a church.

“Concerns for neighborhood safety and desire to express compassion to the under-resourced seem to be the biggest potential draws for the unchurched to get connected to a church,” noted Rick Richardson, professor of evangelism and leadership at Wheaton College and research fellow for the Billy Graham Center for Evangelism. “Invite unchurched people to those kinds of events, and many say they will attend.”

Fewer are interested in attending a worship service (35 percent), recovery group (25 percent) or seminar on a spiritual topic (24 percent) if invited.

When it comes to church invitations, a personal touch works better than a sales pitch.

Half (51 percent) of unchurched Americans say a personal invitation from a friend or family member would be effective in getting them to visit a church. Other methods, such as a church member knocking on the door (21 percent), a TV commercial (23 percent), postcard (23 percent) or Facebook ad (18 percent), are less effective.

### **Little Interest in Life After Death**

Researchers also asked unchurched Americans about the big questions of life.

About seven in 10 agree there's an ultimate plan and purpose for every person. One in five (19 percent) disagrees. One in nine (11 percent) isn't sure.

Almost six in 10 (57 percent) say it's important for them to find their deeper purpose in life. A third disagree (31 percent), while one in nine (12 percent) isn't sure.

Few wonder, at least on a regular basis, if they'll go to heaven when they die. Just under half (43 percent) say they never ponder that question. One in five (20 percent) isn't sure the last time that question came to mind. Three in 10 (29

percent) say they ask that question on at least a monthly basis.

This lack of interest in the afterlife can pose a problem for Christians who want to share their faith, says McConnell. Many have been trained to ask questions like, “If you died tonight, would you go to heaven?”

That tactic might not be as effective today, says McConnell.

“If the only benefit of being a Christian is that you get to go to heaven, most unchurched people don’t care,” McConnell says. “It can’t be the only way of talking about faith.”

Instead, McConnell suggests those who want to share their faith talk about how their relationship with Jesus affects them in day-to-day life and discuss the benefits of being part of a church.

And be proactive, he says.

“Don’t wait for unchurched people to bring up the topic of faith,” he said. “It’s probably not going to happen.” {eoa}

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