

Barna Survey Finds that Little Religious Change is Occurring in US Population

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A September 2010 Barna report says that despite a substantial expansion in the amount of public dialogue related to all kinds of issues, including religion, and even though Americans spend lots of time discussing and debating religious beliefs, very little religious change is evident in people's lives. Of the adults included in the random sample for the nationwide survey, just 7% said they could think of any religious beliefs, practices, or preferences they had altered during the past five years. Those most likely to have changed religious positions or practices included 13% of young adults (18 to 26 years old), 12% of voters registered as "independents", and 11% of adults who describe themselves as "mostly liberal" on social and political matters. Those least likely to have changed any of their religious standards included people 65 or older (3%), registered Republicans (4%), and socio-political conservatives (6%).

What is changing?

The specific shift in religious life identified by the 7% who acknowledged some change related to commitment to their faith. Less common changes related to political positions influenced by their faith interpretations; new insights into morality; and increased tolerance for other's views.

→Positively, about one-third of adults who experienced any change mentioned an increase in some aspect of their faith commitment: 14% said they had stepped up their commitment to the Christian faith; 12% cited an increase in their religious activity; and 9% indicated their commitment to God had increased.

→Negatively, 16% said they had moved away from Christianity; 11% noted that their feelings about or perceptions toward churches had deteriorated; and 8% admitted decreasing their religious activity. Another 8% claimed to have changed churches or denominations during the past five years. When the proportion of adults who made any religious changes in the past five years is computed among all adults – not just among the 7% who admitted to any change – none of the shifts described had been made by more than 1% of the total adult population.

Barna's Observations

That few adults are experiencing change in their religious life raises questions about the impact of church-related activity. Do current church activities encourage, facilitate and reinforce significant change? Barna notes that the results are consistent with past results that show most religious beliefs and behaviors have been developed and embraced by age 13.

The current study underscores how little movement occurs in people's religious thinking once they become adults. Results showed a balance in the nature of changes. The percentage that experienced increased commitments was nearly identical to the percentage that underwent a decrease in commitment. A possible conclusion is that religious leaders are not provoking people to think deeply and practically about the major issues of life and culture from a religious perspective.

Because more than two-thirds of adults say their religious faith is very important in their life, and a large majority regularly talks to others about matters of faith, the nature of their religious reflection and discussions may not be very substantive or thoughtful. People do not appear to be turning to religion for answers to troubling questions. Adults do not seem to spend much time pondering the relationship of their faith to current cultural challenges and developments.