

## **Americans Open to Exploring New Ways of Experiencing God**

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A recent Barna report documents and explains what many churches already know and are experiencing—finding and practicing religion through traditional churches is less and less popular. The report says that our society values individual personal exploration of “new approaches to marriage, communications, sexuality, education, and more,” including how people pursue their faith and how they relate to God and other people of faith.

### **What People Are Saying about Their Faith**

—>88% of American adults say that “my religious faith is very important in my life.” Any major decline in spirituality is overstated. Faith is not going away or diminishing significantly despite media releases that suggest the demise of traditional faith practices and beliefs. Nine out of ten adults say their faith plays a meaningful role in their life. Nothing suggests this is likely to change in the foreseeable future.

—>75% say they sense that “God is motivating people to stay connected with Him, but in different ways and through different types of experiences than in the past.” There is a growing distance from traditional religious practices in this country. People say they want more of God and less of the stuff that gets between them and their relationship with God. This “stuff” often includes traditional church experiences.

—>45% are “willing to try a new church.” Almost half of Americans are open to changing their church home, demonstrating a lack of connection with their present faith community and their desire for a more significant connection. This may reflect an increasing lack of loyalty to both organizations and personal relationships and a growing sense that there is always something better available if one can simply find it.

—>64% say they are “completely open to carrying out and pursuing your faith in an environment or structure different from a typical church.” Two out of three adults contend that they are not tied to a conventional church setting as they seek to experience and express their faith, but are willing to explore new contexts, processes and structures.

—>50% say “a number of people I know are tired of the usual type of church experience.” Respondents not only indicated their willingness to change churches or to consider different forms of church experience. Half of all adults said they are aware of a willingness to experiment on the part of others who are tired of the common church experience.

—>71% say they are “more likely to develop my religious beliefs on my own, rather than to accept an entire set of beliefs that a particular church teaches.” Levels of distrust toward churches, church leaders and organized Christianity have been growing over the past two decades. Such distrust, along with a heightened independence of Americans and the increased access to information that has characterized the past decade, may have contributed to the current situation where a large majority of adults feeling responsible for their own theological and spiritual development. Other studies have shown an inclination for people to view a local church as a supplier of useful guidance and support, but not necessarily a reliable source of a slate of beliefs that they must adopt.

### **Thinking about the Future**

Let me suggest some of what this may mean for traditional churches. (These are merely observations and possibilities which come to my mind as I contemplate the survey results.)

- Churches are not attracting many new adherents.
- Churches that are growing usually do so by attracting new members from other churches.
- Churches may need to face the fact that loyalty is no longer a major reason people attend a certain church.
- Few churches are having a significant impact on the unchurched segment of society.
- Churches are not going to grow significantly by doing church better.
- Churches may be able to grow by simplifying church life.
- Churches may have to consider parallel structures that are non-building focused, such as house churches, cell churches, and SIMPLE church structures.
- Churches may have to give up on integrating the parallel structures into the building-centered model.

- Churches may need to evaluate their typical church experience to see what is biblical and what is traditional.
- Churches may need to demand personal faith and faith development (personal responsibility for faith) rather than pushing dogmatic belief systems on unthinking folks.
- Churches may need to renew their emphasis on spirituality lived out in daily life.

The entire report is available at <[www.barna.org](http://www.barna.org)>.