

Denominational Loyalty

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A long-standing rule of thumb concerning church attendance in the U.S. is that 1/3 are churched and attend church regularly (at least once a month), 1/3 are minimally churched and attend less than once a month, and 1/3 are unchurched and seldom or never attend. Of the total population, less than 20% are in church on any given Sunday. A recent study by Ellison Research discovered that, among people who attend church once a month or more, only 30% are completely loyal to the denomination or religious group they currently attend (meaning they would only consider attending church within that specific denomination). Another 44% prefer their current denomination, but would be willing to consider others.

Within the survey group (people who attend church once a month or more), 11% have a small number of religious groups they would consider but no particular favorite among them, 6% have no particular group they prefer but identify certain ones that they would not attend, and 9% say that group identification does not factor into their decision of which church to attend. There are relatively few demographic differences within the findings. Denominational loyalty does not vary significantly by gender, household income, age or community type (rural/small town, suburban or urban).

The results confirm the lack of denominational loyalty in our society among churched people, with over 2/3 of the churched population willing to consider a change. On the other hand, the probability of change is not high, as about ¾ of the population surveyed has either an unchangeable preference or a strong preference for their current denomination. The study does not address the attitudes of the minimally churched or the unchurched.

The implication for evangelism among churches of Christ is that we will find less and less fertile ground among our churched neighbors (a previously fertile ground during the post-war era of the 1950s and 1960s, when much of our 'growth' came from Bible studies with those in denominational groups who determined to change religious affiliations to more accurately align with the teachings of Scripture). Attracting churched people to our facilities for various activities is not likely to result in long-term results or growth. This is one reason the attractional model (they come) is being replaced by the missional model (we go) in much recent literature. The importance of reaching out to the unchurched or minimally churched population is obvious from the survey results. The challenge comes in that many members within our churches have few friends, acquaintances, or interactions with this segment of our population. With few natural bridges into this segment of the population, the need for bridge-building through meaningful ministry, counseling services, addiction recovery programs, self-help financial services and training, and other similar efforts is obvious.

An interesting contrast is provided when one considers that in much mission work, success still comes from contacts with churched people who are disgruntled with their current religious experience and are seeking change.

[You can see the survey results and other results at the Ellison research website:

<http://www.ellisonresearch.com/releases/20090112.htm>]