

New Survey: Those with No Religion Fastest-Growing Group in US

By Bob Young

Late in 2009, I ran across a religious study that revealed that 15% of the US population defines themselves as belonging to no religion. Here is an excerpt from the "American Religious Identification Survey" conducted by the Program on Public Values at Trinity College.

"The percentage of Americans claiming no religion, which jumped from 8.2 in 1990 to 14.2 in 2001, has now increased to 15 percent. Given the estimated growth of the American adult population since the last census from 207 million to 228 million, that reflects an additional 4.7 million 'Nones.' Northern New England has now taken over from the Pacific Northwest as the least religious section of the country, with Vermont, at 34 percent 'Nones,' leading all other states by a full 9 points. Many people thought our 2001 finding was an anomaly. We now know it wasn't. The 'Nones' are the only group to have grown in every state of the Union."

In addition, every Christian group has decreased in terms of percentage of the US population, and most have declined in raw numbers as well. In regards to atheism, the study says:

"Only 1.6 percent of Americans call themselves atheist or agnostic. But based on stated beliefs, 12 percent are atheist (no God) or agnostic (unsure), while 12 percent more are deistic (believe in a higher power but not a personal God). The number of outright atheists has nearly doubled since 2001, from 900 thousand to 1.6 million."

In sum, the findings show or lead to the conclusions that:

- 1) Religion and Christianity are on the decline in the US;
- 2) Protestantism is doing worse than Catholicism due to Catholic immigrants;
- 3) Mormonism is keeping up with population growth, and Islam and New Age/Wicca are exceeding it;
- 4) Atheism, while still a small percentage of the population, is on the rise; and
- 5) "Spirituality"--or non-organized belief in God--is still vibrant in the US.

What implications does this have for the church in the US?

→ Attractional methods alone are less and less effective though they may reach some.

→ Not only theologically, but pragmatically, the church must become missional in nature with dramatic changes in how we allocate our resources. This might mean moving all "Bible studies" off site (coffee shops, Starbucks, homes, schools, etc.) to meet people where they are. With apathy and even antagonism towards religion, few show up at our building and activities because we have better programs. And those that do are mostly already Christians.

→ We must train our members in knowledge of other faiths and resurgent atheism, with methods to reach these adherents.

We must make dramatic changes. Sadly, most churches are doing almost nothing to respond to these cultural changes. Those churches that do respond do so minimally. With a shrinking pool of Christians, there is an increasing competition among churches for members. This puts more pressure on church leaders to revitalize "programs" to attract church members to reverse the decreasing member base. In the midst of this, it is unbelievable that many fellowships, including my own, are consumed with "doctrinal issues" while our nation is hopelessly lost. The resistance to making practical, methodological changes, such as replacing Sunday night worship or Wednesday night classes with outreach and service, moving "classes" off site, planting new churches, combining efforts, changing worship times, focusing our budgets outward (missional), etc., is quite simply, absurd.

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