

## Unchurched Population Nears 100 Million in the U.S.

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(Ventura, CA) - Life in America has changed greatly since 1994, with massive changes in technology, global politics, lifestyle choices and family dynamics. But one constant has been the proportion of adults in the population who are unchurched. During that period there have been noteworthy shifts in religious behavior, but the percentage of adults who have steered clear of churches for at least the past six months has remained stable since 1994.

A new survey released by The Barna Group, which has been tracking America's religious behavior and beliefs since 1984, reveals that one out of every three adults (33%) is classified as unchurched - meaning they have not attended a religious service of any type during the past six months. While that figure is considerably higher than the one out of five who qualified as unchurched in the early Nineties, it is statistically unchanged since 36% were recorded as having avoided religious services in the company's 1994 study.

### Some Groups Avoid Churches

Some population segments are notorious church avoiders. For instance, 47% of political liberals are unchurched, more than twice the percentage found among political conservatives (19%). African Americans were less likely to be unchurched (25%) than were whites (32%) or Hispanics (34%). Asians, however, doubled the national average: 63% were unchurched! Single adults continued a historic pattern of being more likely than married adults to stay away from religious services (37% versus 29%, respectively).

Residents of the West (42%) and Northeast (39%) remain the most church resistant, while those in the South are the least prone to avoid religious services (26%). Sexual orientation is closely related to church status, too: while about one-third of heterosexuals are unchurched (31%), half of the homosexual public (49%) met the unchurched criteria.

Within the various faith communities residing in the U.S., Christians are the most consistent church goers. A majority of the adults (61%) who are associated with a faith other than Christianity had not attended any type of religious service in the past half-year. In fact, people aligned with a faith other than Christianity are two-and-a-half times as likely as self-designated Christians to be unchurched (61% versus 24%, respectively).

Looking at the distinctions within the Christian population, evangelicals are the most reliable church goers: just 1% is unchurched. Born again Christians who are not evangelical also had a pretty formidable attendance record: only one out of every six (16%) were unchurched. However, adults who call themselves Christian but are not born again were by far the least reliable church goers within the Christian realm (32% were unchurched).

Catholics have traditionally been more consistent in church attendance than Protestants. However, in the mid-nineties that trend reversed course, and Catholics have been more likely than Protestants to earn the unchurched label throughout the past decade. Currently the gap between the two segments of Christians is five percentage points, with a higher percentage among Catholics (25% are unchurched) than Protestants (20% are unchurched).

Within the Protestant community, people who typically attend a mainline church were nearly twice as likely as those who attend non-mainline Protestant congregations to be unchurched (26% versus 16%, respectively). Also, church size was related to attendance patterns: 24% of the people who attend small churches were unchurched, compared to 15% who usually go to a mid-sized congregation, and just 5% of those who affiliate with a large church (defined as attracting 500 or more adults on an average weekend).

### **Massive Numbers**

When these statistics are projected across the aggregate adult population, the numbers are staggering. An estimated 73 million adults are presently unchurched. When teens and children are added, the total swells to roughly 100 million Americans.

To put that figure in context, if the unchurched population of the United States were a nation of its own, that group would be the eleventh most populated nation on earth (trailing only China, India, the church portion of the United States, Brazil, Pakistan, Nigeria, Bangladesh, Russia, Japan and Mexico).

Included among the unchurched is an estimated 13 to 15 million born again adults and children.

### **Insights from a Unique Project**

These results coincide with a unique book released this week by Tyndale House Publishers, entitled *Jim and Casper Go to Church*. That book describes the experience of a former pastor and an avowed atheist who together visited a dozen significant churches across the nation. Jim Henderson, who has been a pastor of small and large churches, interviewed the atheist (Matt Casper) during and after each church service they attended to gain insights into what it's like for an outsider to attend such churches. Among the congregations visited were well-known ministries such as Willow Creek (pastored by Bill Hybels), Saddleback (led by Rick Warren), Lakeside (featuring Joel Osteen), and The Potter's House (home of T.D. Jakes).

Many of the insights drawn from the experiences of "Jim and Casper" parallel the findings of Barna Group studies among the unchurched. Some of the critical discoveries were the relative indifference of most church members to unchurched people; the overt emphasis upon a personal rather than communal faith journey; the tendency of congregations to perform rituals and exercise talents rather than invite and experience the presence of God; the absence of a compelling call to action given to those who attend; and the failure to listen to dissident voices and spiritual guidance to dig deeper in one's faith.

***For more information about the new book, *Jim & Casper Go To Church*, by Jim Henderson and Matt Casper, or to purchase a copy [click here](#)***

### **Research Details**

This report is based upon telephone interviews with a nationwide survey by The Barna Group with a random sample of 2006 adults, age 18 and older, conducted in January 2007. The maximum margin of sampling error associated with the aggregate sample is  $\pm 2.2$  percentage points at the 95% confidence level. The total number of unchurched adults interviewed was 661, which has a maximum sampling error of  $\pm 3.9$  percentage points at the 95% confidence interval. Statistical weighting was used to calibrate the sample to known population percentages in relation to demographic variables.

"Born again Christians" are defined as people who said they have made a personal commitment to Jesus Christ that is still important in their life today and who also indicated they believe that when they die they will go to Heaven because they had confessed their sins and had accepted Jesus Christ as their savior. Respondents are not asked to describe themselves as "born again."

"Evangelicals" are people who meet the born again criteria (described above) plus seven other conditions. Those include saying their faith is very important in their life today; believing they have a personal responsibility to share their religious beliefs about Christ with non-Christians; believing that Satan exists; believing that eternal salvation is possible only through grace, not works; believing that Jesus Christ lived a sinless life on earth; asserting that the Bible is accurate in all that it teaches; and describing God as the all-knowing, all-powerful, perfect deity who created the universe and still rules it today. Being classified as an evangelical is not dependent upon church attendance or the denominational affiliation of the church attended. Respondents were not asked to describe themselves as "evangelical."

The Barna Group, Ltd. (which includes its research division, The Barna Research Group) conducts primary research, produces media resources pertaining to spiritual development, and facilitates the healthy spiritual growth of leaders, children, families and Christian ministries. Located in Ventura, California, Barna has been conducting and analyzing primary research to understand cultural trends related to values, beliefs, attitudes and behaviors since 1984. If you would like to receive free e-mail notification of the release of each new, bi-monthly update on the latest research findings from The Barna Group, you may subscribe to this free service at the Barna website [www.barna.org](http://www.barna.org).