

Church Attendance Again: “How many are going to church these days?”

By Bob Young

We do not receive the *Parade Magazine* weekly with a Sunday newspaper, but last Sunday (October 4, 2009) was different because of our travel schedule, so I happened to see the survey results that were that published in *Parade Magazine*.

The survey questions generally related to spirituality, but the results of greatest interest to me concerned religion and religious attendance. Comparing survey results is difficult, helpful, and interesting because of the way questions are asked and because of the potential for different participants (even in random surveys). The *Parade* survey results seem to differ from results obtained by the Barna organization or Pew research. Why? An example of how survey results can differ relates to the question about religious attendance (as opposed to church attendance) which may include some who practice their religion in mosques or in non-Christian religious contexts. The results of the *Parade* survey revealed the following:

- Twenty-seven percent (27%) are irreligious, that is, they do not practice any kind of religion.
- Fifty percent (50%) said they rarely or never attend religious services.
- Twenty percent (20%) said they attend religious services sporadically (once a month or less).
- Thirty percent (30%) said they attend religious services once or more in a given week.

These results reflect a continuing trend away from religious activity and church attendance. Over 30 years ago, a survey characterized 1/3 of the U.S. population as unchurched, 1/3 as minimally churched (attend once a month or less), and 1/3 churched (attend church more than once a month). In parallel, these results suggest 50% are unchurched and 20% minimally churched. The claim that 30% attend religious services weekly needs further study. The truth is that even “regular” church attendees may be absent a significant number of times each year for a variety of reasons. (One study I did showed the average absentee rate among regular attendees to be near 30%). This would mean that only 70% of the 30% who claim regular attendance are present on any given Sunday—thus a “real” attendance rate of 21%.

This number—21%--is likely closer to the truth. Some are suggesting that as few as 15% of the U.S. population attends a church service on a given Sunday. One way to estimate how many go to church is by simple observation—look at the non-church traffic as you are on the way to church, check out the number of homes where other activities are occurring (yard work, etc.), observe those homes where the cars in the driveway indicate that the family is still at home. The sad truth is that in our nation, most are not in church.

How should the church respond to such information? When we come face to face with what many already knew or suspected—that not many people in our nation or our local communities are religious or attend church, what is an appropriate response?

- 1- Remember that we are responsible for our own community and neighborhoods. We are not going to see many “missionaries” sent to those places where the church already exists.
- 2- Pray about our community and its needs.

-3- Develop creative outreach efforts that help the church be an influence in the community. Remember Jesus' descriptions of his followers—salt and light. These efforts might include improving the public perception of the church, building bridges through friendship, ministry, and conversations, and hosting various “come and see” and service events.

-4- Make certain the message of the church is focused on Jesus Christ and the saving gospel.

-5- Make certain the activities of the church (including worship assemblies) are founded on spiritual realities rather than non-spiritual appeals.

-6- Diligently work to assimilate and retain the existing Christian community. The truth is that many of those who do not attend church formerly did. We must be concerned about those who no longer attend and work to bring them back to Christ. We must study the “back door” and why people leave the church.