

# Many say they believe in God, not churches

Survey of unchurched adults finds most say they don't need organized religion to have faith

By Cathy Lynn Grossman

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A new survey of U.S. adults who don't go to church, even on holidays, finds 72 percent say "God, a higher or supreme being, actually exists." But just as many (72 percent) also say the church is "full of hypocrites."

Indeed, 44 percent agree with the statement "Christians get on my nerves."

LifeWay Research, the research arm of the Southern Baptist Convention, based in Nashville, conducted the survey of

1,402 "unchurched" adults last spring and summer. The margin of error is plus or minus 2.5 percentage points.

The survey defines "unchurched" as people who had not attended a religious service in a church, synagogue or mosque at any time in the past six months.

More than one in five Americans, 22 percent, say they never go to church, the highest ever recorded by the General Social Survey, conducted every two years by the National Opinion

Research Center at the University of Chicago. In 2004, the percentage was 17 percent.

LifeWay research director Ed Stetzer says nonchurchgoers "lean to a generic god that fits into every imaginable religious system, even when (systems) contradict one another."

"If you went back 100 years in North America, there would have been a consensus that God is the God in the Bible. We can't assume this any longer.

"We no longer have a home-field advantage as Christians in this culture."

Most of the unchurched (86 percent) say they believe they can have a "good relationship with God without belonging to a church."

"These outsiders are making a clear comment that churches are not getting through on the two greatest commandments," to love God and love your neighbor, says Scott McConnell, associate director of LifeWay Research.

Still, most of Christian belief has seeped into popular culture outside church walls and denominational tethers, says Philip Goff, a professor and director of the Center for the Study of Religion and American Culture at Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis.

New forms of community, such as Internet Bible study and prayer circles, also mean some people don't believe they need a church, Goff says.

"Is there a workshop for churches in being less annoying, less hypocritical?" asks Arthur Farnsley, administrator for the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion and a fellow at Goff's center.

"So much of American religion today is therapeutic in approach, focused on things you want to fix in your life," he says.

"The one-to-one approach is more attractive. People don't go to institutions to fix their problems.

"Most people have already heard the basic Christian message. The question for evangelism now is: Do you have a take that is authentic and engaging in a way that works for the unchurched?"