

Leader's Insight: A Broad and Diverse Bloc

New research shows five kinds of Christians in America.

by Eric Reed, *Leadership* managing editor

A new report in the Fall issue of *Leadership* journal shows great disparity among people in the United States who call themselves "Christian." In fact, this nationwide survey of more than 1,000 self-identified adherents reveals five distinct types of practitioners with very different views on salvation, the Bible, morality, and the cultural impact of their faith.

For news reporters and news consumers, this diversity requires careful attention to the variety of opinion among people generally labeled "Christian." Not all Christians think alike on cultural issues, and the survey makes the reasons clearer.

For church leaders, the identification of five approaches to faith may make theological discussion and the faith-sharing common to evangelical believers more coherent. With this survey, the common ground among Christians becomes more evident, but so do the areas of disagreement.

The survey was conducted for Christianity Today International (publisher of *Leadership* journal) and Zondervan Publishers by the research firm Knowledge Networks. It is one step in the development of NationalChristianPoll.com, a new research database for surveying the opinions of Christians in the United States on a variety of issues.

Who Are my Christian Neighbors?

While between 70 and 80 percent of people in the United States identify themselves as Christian according to a number of studies, what those people mean by the term varies widely. Respondents to our new survey were almost evenly divided among five categories:

- **Active Christians** (19%): Committed churchgoers, often in positions of church leadership; believe salvation comes through Jesus Christ; Bible readers.
- **Professing Christians** (20%): Similar beliefs to Active Christians, but less committed to church attendance; focus more on personal relationship with God and Jesus, less on Bible reading or faith sharing.
- **Liturgical Christians** (24%): High level of spiritual activity; regular churchgoers, recognizing the authority of the church; predominantly Catholic and Lutheran.
- **Private Christians** (24%): Largest and youngest segment; believe in God and have spiritual interest, but not within the church context; only one-third attend church at all, almost none are church leaders.
- **Cultural Christians** (21%): God aware, but do not view Jesus as essential to salvation; affirm many ways to God; express little outward religious behavior.

Talking *their* Talk

The categorization used in this survey does not employ the commonly used terms "evangelical," "fundamentalist," or "mainline" because some Christians who are often defined by those terms landed in all five of our categories. What that may show us is that the traditional labels are losing their distinctiveness in today's shifting religious landscape.

Our categories are based on actions as well as professed beliefs. They also provide good starting points for faith-oriented discussions. Rather than the customary presentations of the gospel based on "roads" and "laws," a series of questions may be more effective openers for talks with Liturgical, Private, and Cultural Christians:

- How does your faith affect your behavior?

- How would our country be different if most people believed and behaved as you do?
- What is the role of the church in helping people grow to be more like Jesus Christ?
- And ultimately, What do you believe about Jesus?

We found that almost 9 in 10 Active and Professing Christians said "accepting Christ as Savior and Lord" is key to being a Christian, while Liturgical, Private, and Cultural Christians favored a more general "believing in God" as important to being a Christian. For half or more of the people in America who call themselves "Christian," Christ is not the defining figure in their faith.

Implications for Church Leaders

In her extended report for *Leadership* journal, Helen Lee draws several conclusions important to church leaders. Here are two of them:

- **The local church is no longer considered the only outlet for spiritual growth.**

In fact, only two types of Christians, Active and Liturgical, hold to a model for spiritual growth that is centered in church life. The others conduct much of their spiritual growth activities outside the church. Professing Christians have a spiritual growth ethic that is still Christ-centered, but the survey shows Private Christians and Cultural Christians identify many activities as means of personal spiritual development, including service and recreation, that are not connected to church, the Bible, or even to Christ.

- **Churches must develop relational- and community-oriented outreach.**

The accuracy of reports that church attendance in the U.S. has held steady since just after World War II is suspect when we factor the declining appreciation for the church, especially among younger people. The growing house-church movement and the increase in spirituality that is not based in church life are two indications that churches must find new ways to reach new congregants. Today's Christians place high value on relationships and personal community. These are the new frontiers for the church.

NationalChristianPoll.com

This survey of the nation's Christians was one step in development of a new research tool, NationalChristianPoll.com. By identifying the diversity among people who call themselves Christian, future surveys on "Christian opinion" can be more accurately analyzed and the religious, cultural, and political viewpoints better attributed to the proper demographic segments.

NationalChristianPoll.com is seeking a broad base of self-identified Christians to participate in regular online surveys on a range of topics. To participate, [visit the website](#) and sign up for the introductory questionnaire.

To read more of the *Leadership* report on [5 Kinds of Christians](#), visit LeadershipJournal.net.

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