

Most in U.S. not comfortable going back to worship services

June 26, 2020

WASHINGTON (RNS)—A new study examining Americans' response to COVID-19 shows that with the exception of white evangelicals, a majority of Americans are not comfortable returning to in-person religious services.

The results of the survey suggest that despite political pressure to re-open houses of worship—from President Donald Trump as well as some prominent conservative Christians and religious liberty advocates—Americans aren't quite ready to take a seat in a sanctuary.

The survey from the American Enterprise Institute showed 64 percent of Americans said they were “somewhat uncomfortable” or “very uncomfortable” attending in-person worship.

Even among those who reported their congregations offered in-person worship in the past week, 56 percent of respondents said they chose not to go.

“We're seeing among lay people a significant amount of discomfort in going back to formal in-person religious practices,” said Daniel Cox, a research fellow at AEI who led the study. “People are equivocating and uncertain about whether they feel comfortable attending.”

The study, conducted in late May and early June among 3,504 Americans, comes amid ongoing, politically charged campaigns to reopen. In May, the president demanded that states allow places of worship to reopen “right away” and said he would override state governors who refused.

However, stories of church outbreaks grow. In late June, a Pentecostal

church in northeastern Oregon was linked to the state's largest coronavirus outbreak to date—230 cases. The church held services in defiance of Oregon's stay-at-home order.

Race and politics a factor

The AEI study found sharp racial and partisan disparities in Americans' response to the crisis, with Democrats more concerned about contracting COVID-19 than Republicans. While 72 percent of Democrats said they are at least somewhat worried about a household member becoming infected, only 43 percent of Republicans said the same.

Those political differences drive religious views. The only religious group comfortable with church re-openings was white evangelicals—strong partisan supporters of the Republican Party and Trump.

Sixty-one percent of white evangelical respondents said they were “very comfortable” (34 percent) or “somewhat comfortable” (27 percent) with in-person worship services at their church. Among them, men were far more comfortable than women, with 71 percent of white evangelical men saying they would be at least somewhat comfortable attending in-person worship services, compared with 51 percent of white evangelical women.

By comparison, 36 percent of white mainline Protestants, 32 percent of Black Protestants and 39 percent of white Catholics said the same. Among major non-Christian religions, 26 percent said they would be comfortable returning to in-person worship services.

Broadly, a majority of respondents were taking a more cautious approach.

Back to normal?

More than half of Americans (54 percent) said life in the United States will not return to normal until 2021. They expressed hesitation not only with worship services, but also said they would be equally uncomfortable attending sporting events, eating out at a restaurant or going to a movie theater.

Only 45 percent said they would feel comfortable going to their polling place to vote.

In the South, where cases of coronavirus have surged in the past few weeks, that ambivalence about reopening is palpable.

“The ones going back are smaller churches where the gathering size is easy to control,” said Chris Turner, director of communications for the Tennessee Baptist Mission Board, which has about 3,200 affiliated churches, the state’s largest denomination.

Midsize churches that have reopened are providing added services and asking members to reserve seats for specific times, Turner said. The state’s biggest Baptist churches have largely remained online-only.

But Turner said even among those churches that have started to reopen, attendance has been spotty.

In Louisiana, where Gov. John Bel Edwards has paused the state’s Phase 3 reopening until July 24 after a spike in coronavirus cases, many churches transitioned to a hybrid, in-person and online model.

“There’s only so much you can do to alleviate a fear,” said John Kyle, communications director for Louisiana Baptists.

Louisiana’s Baptist convention is encouraging pastors to be supportive of

members who hesitate to return to in-person worship, Kyle said, adding, "If you don't feel comfortable coming back, we understand."

Baptist churches are autonomous; each can make its own decision on whether to re-open. But the reality is that many churchgoers are staying home.

Turner, the spokesman for Tennessee's Baptist Convention, acknowledged he personally falls into that category.

"In my heart, I'm there with you," Turner said of in-person church services. "I've been a longtime teacher in Sunday school. But at the same time, I'm going to let you work out the bugs before I come back."