

U.S. ‘nones’ open to wide range of Christian denominations

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NASHVILLE, Tenn.—Even Americans who supposedly are turned off to religion have a surprising openness to Christian churches, a new survey finds.

No matter which denomination is in a church’s name, fewer than half the nonreligious say, “It’s not for me.” Their views are more favorable than unfavorable toward a wide range of Christian groups—Catholic, Methodist, Baptist, Lutheran, Assemblies of God and nondenominational.

These findings, based on a survey of denominational opinions by [LifeWay Research](#), may come as a surprise to those who’ve seen recent headlines. Growing numbers of people who don’t identify with any church have gathered considerable media attention. But LifeWay Research Vice President Scott McConnell insists many of these “nones” aren’t as closed to church as many assume.

“Just because someone has no religious preference does not mean they have closed the door to the Christian church or a denomination as being something that can meet needs in their lives,” McConnell said.

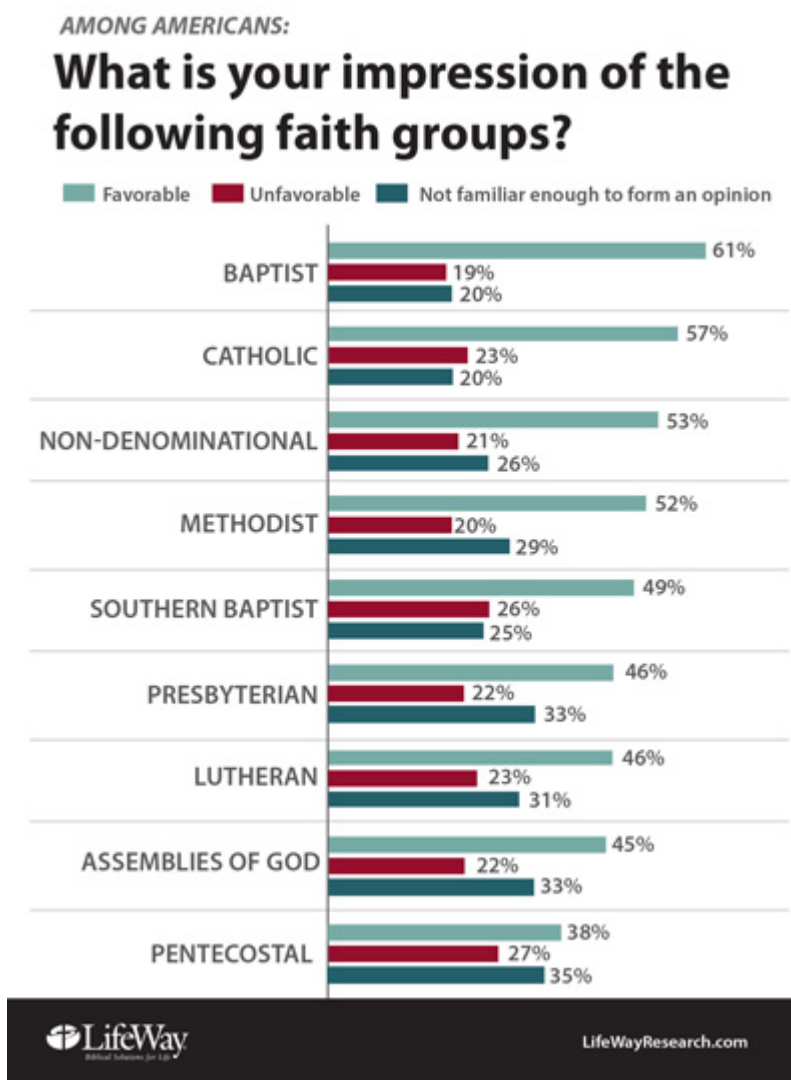
The recent nationwide telephone survey of 1,000 adults of varying ages, backgrounds, and beliefs posed two types of questions. In addition to asking whether nine denominations or faiths are for them, researchers sought to determine whether Americans’ image of each group is favorable or unfavorable.

Among the overall findings:

- No denomination is ruled out by a majority. People are most skeptical about Pentecostal churches, but even then only 45 percent declare, “It’s not for me.”
- Impressions of each denomination are more favorable than unfavorable.
- However, many people don’t understand denominational differences. For each Christian denomination, 20 percent to 35 percent say they are not familiar enough to form an opinion. This group almost always outranks those with unfavorable views.

One in five say they are not familiar with Catholic or Baptist faiths. Even more—about one in three—are unfamiliar with Lutheran, Presbyterian, Assemblies of God or Pentecostal.

Although they may be puzzled about what a denomination teaches, many Americans are receptive to church, the survey shows. While 40 percent to 48 percent of the nonreligious—atheists, agnostics and those with no religious preference—assume such groups as Catholics, Baptists and Pentecostals are “not for me,” a majority don’t automatically exclude them.



In addition, anywhere from one-third to half of those from non-Christian religions do not assume the nine denominations named in the study are “not for me.”

“One might assume that when someone makes a conscious decision in favor of a certain religious preference, that means ‘no’ to everything else,” McConnell said. “While many are not open, to see half of the ‘nones’ and a third of those in other religions indicate they are not closed to Christian churches makes us rethink that.”

In addition, the research shows a trend in recent years to omit

denominational identity from a church's name may not help attract nonmembers.

"It would depend on who you're trying to reach," McConnell said. "But some denominational groups have as much 'brand equity' as nondenominational churches, which have been growing the fastest."

Name recognition

The best-known faiths garner the most approval. Baptists and Catholics—which have the highest rate of familiarity and the highest number of adherents—top the survey for favorable impressions, with 61 percent for Baptists and 57 percent for Catholics. Most respondents also look favorably on nondenominational churches (53 percent) and Methodists (52 percent).

Conversely, only 38 percent hold a favorable view of Pentecostals, while 35 percent say they aren't familiar enough to form an opinion. Fewer than half also report favorable impressions of Southern Baptists, 49 percent; Lutherans, 46 percent; Presbyterians, 46 percent; and Assemblies of God, 45 percent.

"It's not necessarily a negative to include the denomination's name," McConnell said. "But in looking at the overall totals, there are problems with preconceived notions with any name signaling where you are, theologically or historically. It also appears the Assemblies of God is probably pulling up the Pentecostal perception, and Southern Baptists are negatively impacting the Baptist brand."

People are most open to Baptist and nondenominational churches, the study found, with "not for me" chosen by only 36 percent for Baptist churches, 37 percent for nondenominational churches and 39 percent for Southern Baptists. No faith group is ruled out by more than half of those surveyed, but 41 percent say the Lutheran church is not for them, and 40

percent feel that way about the Assemblies of God, Methodists and Presbyterians.

Although most Americans report favorable opinions of Catholicism, 42 percent say the Catholic faith is not for them. An even higher share, 45 percent, feels that way about attending a Pentecostal church.

Education influences perceptions

Education also influences perceptions. For example, those with a graduate degree are more likely to assume groups like Baptists and Pentecostals are not for them than people with a bachelor's degree or less education.

When it comes to the church's future, McConnell points to one finding that should concern each denominational group tested. More than four in 10 young adults ages 18 to 24 indicate various denominations are not for them.

"While young adults are often testing their views as they enter their 20s, about half do not perceive Catholic, Methodist, Presbyterian, Pentecostal, Lutheran or nondenominational churches as places for them as they explore," McConnell said.

Study methodology

The phone survey of Americans was conducted Sept. 26-Oct. 5, 2014, using Random Digit Dialing. Sixty percent of completes were among landlines, and 40 percent were among cell phones. Analysts used maximum quotas and slight weights for gender, region, age, ethnicity and education to reflect the population more accurately. The completed sample is 1,000 surveys. The sample provides 95 percent confidence the sampling error does not exceed plus or minus 3.5 percent. Margins of error are higher in sub-groups.