

EDITORIAL: So, what about these religion trends?

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Horror novelist Stephen King doesn't have anything on the American Religious Information Survey. Scary reading.

The survey polled more than 54,000 Americans regarding their religious identity, beliefs and behavior. You can [read about it](#) in this edition of the *Standard*, but here are some facts that go bump in the night of the American soul:

- *The percentage of American adults who identify themselves as Christians has fallen 10 points since 1990—from 86 percent to 76 percent.*
- *The segment who claim no religious affiliation increased by 20 million and now represent 15 percent of the population.*

Editor Marv Knox

- *Only 70 percent of respondents said they believe in a personal God. The remaining 30 percent are either atheist/agnostic (12 percent), believe in a “higher power” but not a personal God (12 percent) or refused to answer (6 percent).*
- *Twenty-seven percent do not expect to have a religious funeral, indicating strong skepticism about heaven and hell.*

Ethicist David Gushee of Mercer University has written an insightful essay, [“The future of American Christianity,”](#) based on the survey. I commend it to you.

Right now, I want us to think beyond our Baptist brand and consider the larger cause of Christ. Let's ask the "So, what?" implications of the survey: So, what does this survey mean? So, what happens if these trends continue? So, what should we do about it?

This survey means U.S. Christians have done a lousy job of evangelism. If we truly helped people see the story of Christ is "good news" for their lives, then the percentage of the population who are Christ-followers would be multiplying, not dwindling.

Of course, one reason we stink at evangelism is because so few Christians actually practice it. Unbelievers can't be expected to develop a relationship with Jesus unless Christians tell and show them how. But a major reason we have failed at evangelism is because so many Christians practice the wrong kind of evangelism. Much of what passes for evangelism sounds like "bad news" to unbelievers. No matter how it is intended, it comes off as confrontational, arrogant, judgmental and mean-spirited. Too often, Christians sound like Rush Limbaugh talking about Barack Obama, as if we hope they fail.

If these trends continue, Christianity will drift to the periphery of American life. The impact of Christianity on society will be lost. Worse, lives will be lost.

Fortunately, Christians, of all people, have hope. The "center" of Christianity is moving to the Southern Hemisphere, where Christians have only a fraction of the resources held by their sisters and brothers in America. If we get past our cultural captivity and trust the power of the Holy Spirit as they do, we can see a revival and a reversal of declining U.S. Christianity. In this task, we must engage our:

- **Souls.** *It's a pity this sounds so trite, but we need to pray more for America. If you track the movement of God anywhere in the world, you*

discover people of prayer.

- **Bodies.** *We must get out among unbelievers and help them. Not surprisingly, externally focused churches are growing. These congregations expect of themselves nothing less than full-out service to others. For them, faith is about relationships and meeting needs.*

- **Minds.** *America's culture wars have dumbed-down faith, just as they have turned up its volume. Our nation needs intelligent honesty from Christians. We can't expect others to take us seriously unless we engage them respectfully and with intellectual integrity. We're not likely to argue others into the kingdom of God, but we owe it to a secular world to see God's realm embraces the mind as well as the heart.*