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America's Changing Religious Landscape

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A massive new study of the American religious landscape reveals big changes and powerful trends shaping the future. [The Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life](#) surveyed 35,000 Americans in one of the largest research projects yet undertaken.

The [U.S. Religious Landscape Survey](#) report is over 140 pages long, but the [Pew Center for Research](#) has provided a helpful [summary](#). Among the major findings:

- Most Americans (78.4%) identify themselves as Christians of some sort. This Christian majority seems to be a settled fact for some time to come, with trends such as Hispanic immigration bolstering these numbers.
- America's Protestant majority — a mainstay of American life from the colonial era to the present — is in decline and Protestant Christians will soon become a minority. The survey revealed that only 51.3% of Americans now identify as Protestants.
- Evangelicals are now the largest single group of American Christians (26.3%).
- Roman Catholics (23.9%) are the second-largest Christian grouping, though almost a third of those born into Catholic homes no longer consider themselves as Catholic. In all, almost 10% of all Americans are “former Catholics.”
- Mainline Protestant churches and denominations continue to lose membership and now represent only 18.1% of the population.
- Buddhists (0.7%) outnumber Muslims (0.6%).
- Mormons (1.7%) and Muslims report the largest families.
- Those identifying as “unaffiliated” represent a fast-growing segment of the population (16.1%), including atheists (1.6%), agnostics (2.4%) and “nothing in particular” (12.1%).
- At least 27% of families are interfaith to some extent. The percentage rises to 37% if spouses of different Protestant denominations are included.
- Among younger Americans (ages 18-29) almost a quarter claim no religious affiliation.
- The Midwest is the most representative region of the country, while Evangelicals are concentrated in the South.

Here is a particularly important section of the report:

More than one-quarter of American adults (28%) have left the faith in which they were raised in favor of another religion — or no religion at all. If change in affiliation from one type of Protestantism to another is included, roughly 44% of adults have either switched religious affiliation, moved from being unaffiliated with any religion to being affiliated with a particular faith, or dropped any connection to a specific religious tradition altogether.

The first wave of media reports pointed to this section of the report, while pointing to the larger issue of religious diversity and the growth of “nothing in particular” as a response. The “switching” phenomenon was a leading focus of the report summary, with Pew researchers arguing that “religious affiliation in the U.S. is both very diverse and extremely fluid.”

What are we to make of this? The report is a credible and extensive review of the American religious landscape. Taken as a whole, the data point to big changes on the horizon. The loss of a Protestant majority will lead to further adjustments in the cultural worldview. Clearly, America is more of a mission field than ever before.

There are some caveats about the research as well. These affiliations are self-reported, meaning that some of the individuals may have little affiliation, knowledge, or commitment behind these identifications. Nevertheless, that has always been a limitation on these surveys.

The issue of “switching” should attract a great deal of interest. In one sense, this is the inevitable product of religious liberty and religious diversity. But it also reveals that many Americans are looking for something they have not found in the tradition and affiliation of their childhood.

Even so, the research methodology probably understates this phenomenon. A member of a liberal Presbyterian church who switches to a conservative Presbyterian church is still a constant Presbyterian in the survey.

Evangelical Christians and churches should look at this report closely. There is a wealth of data here that helps to define the mission field we face in America. There are danger signs. Here are several points of concern:

- Our evangelism is not keeping pace with growth in the population. Evangelical churches are growing, but falling behind in the task of reaching Americans with the Gospel.
- We are losing many young people and many of those who switch from evangelical identity switch to “nothing in particular.”
- Evangelicals are accustomed to being part of a Protestant majority, but that majoritarian posture is about to be taken away (and already has been in some communities).

All this reminds us of the complexity of our context and the immensity of our challenge. We cannot look at this data with mere interest. These numbers represent real people who desperately need to hear the Gospel — and to see authentic Christianity made visible.

We discussed this report on Monday’s edition of *The Albert Mohler Program* [listen [here](#)].

Early coverage in the media:

The New York Times, *The Los Angeles Times*, *The Boston Globe*, *The Dallas Morning News*, *US News & World Report*, *USA Today*.

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