

Fastest growing group in religious circles? The 'Nones'

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Marz Haney grew up faithfully attending an Evangelical church every weekend with her family. These days, the 21-year-old skips Sunday morning worship, often drinking coffee with her roommate at Bob's Java Hut in Minneapolis instead.

"I wouldn't call myself an atheist, but I'm not interested in being part of a church," said Haney, who stopped going to church in college. "I had some doubts all along. I was sort of in continual doubt about my personal salvation."

With her deep reservations about organized religion, Haney is part of a rapidly growing group of Americans not claiming any faith. They're called the "nones." They have toppled the nation's Protestant majority for the first time in U.S. history and are forcing religious leaders to do some soul-searching.

The unprecedented findings by the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life show that about 20 percent of adults -- about 46 million -- have no religious affiliation, up from about 15 percent just five years ago.

"That's quite significant," said Scott Thumma, a researcher at the Hartford Institute for Religious Research in Connecticut. "It has to do with the erosion of it being the acceptable practice to go to church on Sunday. If you don't break that cycle, there's going to come a time in not too many generations when 60, 70 percent of people are going to say, 'This is completely irrelevant. It's not something that adds any sense of meaning to my life.'"

'Not looking for a religion'

The "nones" include more than 13 million atheists and agnostics and some 33 million adults who say they have no religious affiliation. About a third of U.S. adults under age 30 are unaffiliated.

"Nones" are "not looking for a religion that would be right for them. Overwhelmingly, they think that religious organizations are too concerned with money and power, too focused on rules and too involved in politics," the study states. Many believe in God and say they're "spiritual," but not "religious."

For Haney, her evangelical faith, which she describes as "fundamentalist," felt repressive.

She began questioning her religion partly because of a "secular neighborhood friend, who my mother did not like me hanging out with. But I spent a lot of time at their house. I enjoyed them a lot more than my own family. According to my religion, they were supposed to be incapable of real love or real joy. This was just so clearly not true."

Daniel Gamache, 46, of Plymouth, is a "none" who stopped going to Catholic church about five years ago. He left because he disagreed with leadership's handling of the clergy sex abuse scandal and its stance on birth control, gay marriage and women's ordination. But that provoked "a complicated evolution."



August Berkshire, president of Minnesota Atheists, signed copies with other essay writers from the book "Atheist Voices of Minnesota" in Roseville last week.

Carlos Gonzalez, Star Tribune



Marz Haney was raised in an Evangelical church but now says, "I wouldn't call myself an atheist, but I'm not interested in being part of a church."

Glen Stubbe, Star Tribune

"I would say I still consider myself a Christian in that the teachings of Jesus provide the ethical model I try and follow," he said. "I would rather take a walk around my lake. I find myself much closer to God looking at the water and the ducks and the turtles than I would reciting some prayers in a building."

Protestant numbers waning

While the Pew study did not break down data by state, a 2010 religious census counted nearly 1.1 million Catholics in Minnesota, about 975,000 mainline Protestants and about 745,000 Evangelical Protestants. But it also counted nearly 2.3 million Minnesotans as "unclaimed," or not adherents of the 236 groups included. The census was released in May by the Association of Statisticians of American Religious Bodies.

Though Protestants remain the largest faith group in the U.S. with 48 percent of the population, their numbers have dwindled in recent decades. The Pew study finds them dropping "significantly below" the 50 percent mark for the first time.

That's an unwelcome trend for religious leaders like Carl Nelson, president of Transform Minnesota, a network of nearly 160 evangelical churches in the state.

"Certainly it raises the concern for Evangelical leaders, that we're not doing a very good job of continuing to reach particularly the next generation of Americans," Nelson said. "It used to be ... as people grew up they kind of inherited or adopted their parents' faith. Today that's not as much the case."

Bill Lehto, editor of the new book "Atheist Voices of Minnesota," said there's less stigma now for people who are not part of a religious community. "There's been such bad publicity on institutionalized religion that even people who still have some kind of spiritual beliefs just want to do more of their own thing."

Larger forces at work

Thumma, who researches church attendance, traces the rise of the "nones" to delayed childbearing and other larger social changes.

"There was a time when Sunday was the sacred time, and the vast majority of Americans were Christian," Thumma said. "And now, malls are open, you can buy liquor, all the kids have soccer and baseball. What it means is church has to compete with all of these other activities for meaning for the family."

The decline in churchgoing is cause for concern -- and not just for churches, Thumma said. It could mean a decrease in charitable activities -- "like voting, like giving to charities, walking old ladies across the street."

The Rev. Peg Chamberlin, executive director of the Minnesota Council of Churches, sees those forces at work. To counteract them, she said, the faithful need to be "talking about our faith, our questions about our faith with each other more. That'll be the place of evangelization with [the nones]."

"For mainline Protestants, we haven't had to do that. We didn't have to do that in the '50s because everybody sort of knew who we were," she said.

"That's no longer true."

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