

SUMMARY

TWO SURVEYS OF THE UNCHURCHED

STUDIES DESIGNED TO LEARN WHAT MIGHT BRING INACTIVE CHRISTIANS BACK TO CHURCH

During 1991, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) sponsored two surveys among the unchurched in the United States. While the membership decline that has characterized Presbyterian and other mainstream Protestant denominations in the last few decades has been an important focus of scholarly research, our two surveys were undertaken for much more practical reasons: to gather information that might help in bringing inactive members back to church.

INFORMATION GATHERED BY TELEPHONE INTERVIEWS

Both surveys were coordinated by an independent consulting firm, The Daniels Group, in consultation with the Evangelism and Church Development Ministry Unit and the office of Research Services (part of the Stewardship and Communication Ministry Unit). The interviews themselves were conducted over the telephone by trained interviewers at the Public Opinion Resources Laboratory of Texas A&M University.

The first survey, taken in early 1991, used random processes to select a national sample of 200 people, aged 18 or over, all of whom indicated that they were Christians but who had worshipped less than once a month in any church during the prior year. The second, conducted during the summer of 1991, consisted of 155 completed telephone interviews with inactive Presbyterians, whose names were acquired through a random sample of 300 Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) congregations. For convenience, we'll refer to the first survey as the "US Inactive Study," and the second as the "Presbyterian Inactive Study," with the respondents known, respectively, as the "US inactives" and the "Presbyterian (or PCUSA) inactives."

All interviews were conducted using the "telefocus method," by which interviewers follow a general set of questions but encourage respondents to offer additional comments and otherwise free-associate on any topic.

OTHER COMMITMENTS LIKE WORK, SCHOOL KEEP MANY FROM CHURCH

While a few of the inactives in either sample seem hostile to the church--as reflected in comments like "too many hypocrites" and "always asking for money" when asked "*What would you say is the main reason you don't attend church more often?*"--most seem to have merely drifted from the church to other commitments and interests. While the order differs, the three most common sets of responses in both samples are the same:

	US <u>Inactives</u>	PCUSA <u>Inactives</u>
Work/school commitments	24%	16%
Just a habit/Lazy/Just don't	20%	26%
No time	17%	22%

Stated reasons aside, the overall sense from the broad scattering of reasons provided is that many respondents just don't want to attend church, but aren't quite bold enough to say so directly.

WHAT WOULD BRING INACTIVES BACK TO CHURCH?

As a follow-up question, both surveys asked respondents what the church could do: "*for instance, what services could they provide, what changes could they make--in order to encourage you to attend more often?*" Responses were varied, with the most common answer--given by 14% of the US inactives and 10% of PCUSA inactives--to offer more flexible hours, such as weekday or Saturday night services. Other responses given by at least a few respondents range from restructuring ("get rid of all the phonies") to providing more member activities ("offer family dances"; "more activities for young people").

MANY INACTIVES ARE WILLING TO CONSIDER A RETURN TO CHURCH

Next, we called their bluff. That is, we asked: "Okay, then, suppose the church took you up on your suggestions and made these changes. How likely is it that you would consider attending more frequently?" Fully a fourth of the US inactives

responded "don't know," although 27% indicated it was "very likely" and another 34% "somewhat likely" that they would consider attending more frequently. The Presbyterian inactives were even more positive: only 7% responded "don't know," while 40% reported it "very likely" and another 42% "somewhat likely" that they would consider attending church more frequently.

One does not have to take all of these positive responses literally to recognize the strong potential for many inactives to return to church, under the right circumstances. For the most part, these inactives are not "hard cases" who have completely given up on the church.

This "willingness to reconsider" is evident in responses to another question, asked only of the PCUSA inactives: "If a good friend asked you to go along to church one Sunday, how likely would you be to go with your friend?" Almost four in 10 responded "very likely," and another 46% responded "somewhat likely."

MAJORITY VIEW THE CHURCH AS HAVING MORE THAN A SPIRITUAL FUNCTION

Several additional questions in both surveys asked respondents to think about the role of the church in the lives of its members. The US actives were asked,

Some people believe the church should limit its activities to meeting the spiritual needs of its members, while others feel the church should provide various services for members. How do you feel about this, do you think the church should attend only to spiritual needs or should it also perform other services for members?

Over eight in 10 indicated that the role of the church to its members extended beyond its obligations to spiritual needs. Similar results were obtained when the Presbyterian inactives were asked, "Do you think the church should attend only to spiritual needs, or should it also perform other services for members?"

When asked to rank the relative importance of services that congregations often provide for members, both samples responded similarly, giving higher ratings to ministry programs directed toward the needy within the congregation, and lower ratings to more educational and social programs.

	Average Rating*	
	US Inactives	PCUSA Inactives
Services		
Food assistance	3.77	3.68
Homeless programs	3.73	3.61
Groups for the elderly	3.72	3.63
Counseling	3.65	3.61
Youth education programs	3.59	3.53
Bible study groups	3.50	3.45
Nursery school	3.37	3.34
Programs for singles	3.02	3.23
Sports groups	2.68	2.59

* Ratings were calculated by assigning a "4" for the response "very important"; "3", for "important"; "2", for "not very important"; and "1", for "not at all important."

While the differences are small, it is nevertheless worth noting that programs designed to serve physical needs, such as food assistance, are rated higher in both samples than programs, such as Bible study groups, designed to serve spiritual needs.

INACTIVES SUPPORT MINISTRY TO LOCAL COMMUNITY

The inactives were also asked for opinions concerning the church's provision of services to the larger community, through this question:

How do you feel about the church providing services for the surrounding community? Do you think the church should focus on meeting the needs of its members, or should it also serve the local community?

A majority of the US inactives (59%) and near-majority of PCUSA inactives (48%) responded that the church should serve the community, and another quarter of both samples (28%) responded that the church should serve *both* the members and the larger community. Only 13% of the US inactives and 24% of the Presbyterian ones believed that the church's services should be limited to its own membership.

INACTIVES WANT THE CHURCH OUT OF OVERT POLITICAL MATTERS

A follow-up question asked about the kinds of services that congregations should provide. Over one-half of the responses from both samples concerned meeting the emergency or ongoing economic or physical needs of persons in the

community ("help homeless"; "help needy"; "people that are having a hard time and are hungry and need clothing, they need to help until they are on their feet").

More specifically, respondents were asked to rank the importance of each of six larger issues in which congregations might become involved. Again, the ratings are very similar for the two samples of inactives:

Issues	Average Rating*	
	US Inactives	PCUSA Inactives
World peace matters	3.11	2.94
Pornography issues	2.97	2.70
Abortion matters	2.65	2.23
Race and minority matters	2.63	2.27
Women's rights	2.54	2.32
Political matters	1.90	1.72

* Ratings were calculated by assigning a "4" for the response "very important"; "3", for "important"; "2", for "not very important"; and "1", for "not at all important."

If there is anything like a consensus in these findings, it is the view toward political matters. The message to the church concerning political involvement is a strong one: stay away. Large majorities in both samples say as much, and only a handful want any involvement. Even though each issue on this list has obvious political implications, when it comes to the specific notion of "political matters," the inactives overwhelmingly say that church participation is not appropriate.

SUPPORT AN ACTIVE ROLE FOR CHURCHES IN SOCIETY

Despite their opposition to overt political involvement, inactives nevertheless tend to support an active role for the church in American life. At least, that conclusion seems consistent with the responses of US inactives to a question on the church's influence in American life:

Some people believe churches have too much influence on American life, others believe churches should have greater influence on American life. How do you feel about this, do churches have too much influence already or should they have greater influence on American life?

In reply, 24% responded "too much influence already," compared to 56% who responded, "need more influence." Nineteen percent responded "don't know."

CHURCH ATTENDANCE NOT IMPORTANT, BUT SPIRITUALITY IS

To understand more about their individual faith and beliefs, inactives in both samples were asked to agree or disagree with each of several statements (see the table below; some were the same on both surveys, others different). Of particular interest are the responses to the two questions that concern church attendance. In both samples, there is almost a consensus of agreement that "A person does not need to attend church to lead a good, honest, wholesome life." Fully 84% of US inactives responded either "strongly agree" or "somewhat agree", as did 90% of Presbyterian inactives. Consistently, in the US inactives survey, only 15% agreed with the statement, "People should go to church because it is just the right thing do."

	US Inactives (Percent who agree)	PCUSA Inactives
A person does not need to attend church to lead a good, honest, wholesome life.	84	90
When you get right down to it, one religious denomination is just about the same as another.	58	*
Churches today seem to be devoting too much attention to social problems and not enough attention to spiritual matters.	47	*
Churches these days give too much attention to getting money.	64	76
People often face problems because they have overlooked their spiritual needs.	64	68
People should go to church because it is just the right thing to do.	15	*
The family that prays together, stays together.	60	*
Spiritual issues are more matters of the heart than of the mind.	59	46
People need to interact with other people about spiritual matters in order to maintain their faith.	*	50

* This question not asked on this survey.

At first glance, these responses appear incongruous with those to another question, "People need to interact with other people about spiritual matters in order to maintain their faith." Fully half of the PCUSA inactives believe that interaction with others is necessary to keep the faith. A look at the follow-up comments to this question, however, indicates that most of these respondents meant something other than church attendance when they

agreed on the need to "interact with other people about spiritual matters."

Large majorities of inactives in both surveys appear to accept the importance of spirituality. For example, six in 10 of the US inactives believe in the efficacy of prayer, and two-thirds of both samples agree that a lack of attention to spirituality may lead to problems.

SERMONS ARE THE MOST IMPORTANT PART OF THE SUNDAY SERVICE

Both samples of inactives were asked to respond to this open-ended question:

Now I would like to learn about the kinds of things you feel are important in a Sunday morning worship service. If you could pick one feature of a service that is more important, what would that be?

For both US inactives (48%) and Presbyterian inactives (54%) the most frequent responses concerned preaching and sermons. Second in both surveys were comments concerning music (12% and 15%, respectively).

When the US inactives were further asked, "Would you tell me what you like least about a church service?" sermons was the most common category of response: 26% objected to "long sermons," while another 10% objected to the particular "content of a sermon."

Several additional questions on both surveys, all of the fixed-choice type, asked inactives about qualities they find important or unimportant in sermons. A consensus emerged that sermons should be relevant, and large majorities also want to be moved as well as called to action by a sermon.

	US Inactives	PCUSA Inactives
	(Percent very important/somewhat important)	
a moving, dramatic sermon	78	81
a sermon that relates Bible teachings to today's problems	96	97
a sermon that challenges you to get involved	88	89

A final question on sermons asked the inactives whether or not they prefer a more intellectual or a more emotional sermon: "Which do you prefer, a sermon that stirs your emotions or one that requires some thinking?" A majority in both samples

responded "thinking," but the majority was considerably larger among the Presbyterian inactives (see the table, below). Such a finding is consistent with a long-term Presbyterian emphasis on reason and intellect.

	US Inactives	PCUSA Inactives
Emotions	30%	18%
Thinking	55%	79%
Other (both; don't know)	15%	3%

INACTIVES PREFER INFORMAL MUSIC IN WORSHIP

We asked respondents about their preferences for music in worship through this question:

Would you tell me what you prefer in church music? Do you favor a more formal approach to choral and organ music, for instance, involving classical music, or do you prefer less formal singing or well-known gospel hymns?

Six in 10 US inactives, and exactly one-half of the Presbyterian inactives, selected the "informal" choice. The remaining responses in both samples were roughly split between the "formal" option, and a response of "both."

MOST INACTIVES WANT A FRIENDLY CONGREGATION

Three in four US inactives, and an even higher proportion of PCUSA inactives (79%), responded "very important" when asked, "How important is it to have a friendly congregation?" Similarly, over eight in 10 in both samples responded "friendly" when asked, "Do you prefer a church where people in the congregation try to be friendly with you or would you rather that they left you alone, and let you have privacy?"

MAJORITIES PREFER MEDIUM-SIZE CONGREGATION

When asked "Do you prefer a small, medium, or large church?" a majority of PCUSA inactives (62%) and a near-majority of US inactives (48%) selected "medium." "Small" was the second choice in both samples (26% and 41%, respectively). Very few inactives in either study prefer a "large" congregation (8% and 11%).

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