

# New survey shows Protestants' loyalty flagging

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Phoenix, Jan 14, 2009 / 11:42 pm (CNA).- A new survey of denominational loyalty reports that churchgoing Catholics are significantly less likely than churchgoing Protestants to change denominations.

Six out of ten active Catholics would only consider attending a Catholic church, while about 30 percent would prefer attending a Catholic church but would consider others, the survey says. Eleven percent of churchgoing Catholics reportedly do not show a specific preference for attending a Catholic church.

By contrast, only 16 percent of Protestant churchgoers will only consider attending a church of their present denomination. About 51 percent express a preference for one denomination, while 33 percent do not have any preference for a specific denomination.

Phoenix-based Ellison Research released the results of the poll on Monday.

"The good news for the Catholic church is that six out of ten Catholics will not even consider attending church in any other denomination, which is far higher than for Protestants. The bad news, of course, is that four out of ten active Catholics would at least be open to another denomination, even though most would prefer to remain in the Catholic Church," commented Ron Sellers, president of Ellison Research.

The survey of a representative sample of 1,007 American adults included 471 respondents who regularly attend worship services at a church broadly considered to be in the Christian tradition, categorized into Protestant, Roman Catholic, Mormon, and Orthodox.

Respondents who attend worship services at least once a month were first asked the specific denomination of the church they attend most often. This distinguished "Southern Baptist" from "Free Will Baptist," for example.

The respondents were then asked what role that denomination would play if they could no longer attend their current church, in the case it closed or the respondent moved.

Sellers explained that there may be additional factors affecting the difference between Catholic and Protestant denominational loyalty.

"It's not as though there are two hundred different Roman Catholic denominations," he said. "On the Protestant side, there are scores of different denominations, with some of them fairly similar in practice and theology.

"The story of this research is that many Protestants may not see a lot of difference among some of these denominations," Sellers said.

For comparison, Ellison Research asked Americans about their loyalty to certain brands in more than 32 categories of products and services. Respondents expressed between about 10 to 20 percent exclusive loyalty to brands like automobiles or toothpaste, while between about 60 to 70 percent reported a brand preference.

Respondents were especially loyal to toothpaste, with 22 percent saying they use one brand exclusively.

"It may not be lack of loyalty so much as it is the presence of so many options that is causing Protestants to be about as loyal to a brand of toothpaste or bathroom tissue as they are to their church denomination," Sellers remarked.

Among all churchgoing respondents, three out of ten said they would only consider attending one denomination, while 44 percent said they have one preferred denomination but would also consider others. Eleven percent reported a small number of denominations they would consider.

According to the survey results, denominational loyalty does not vary significantly by gender, household income, age, or type of community. It does vary by race or ethnicity and by region of the United States.

Hispanic churchgoers, who are majority Catholic, are the most intensely loyal to their denomination. African-Americans reportedly have the least denominational loyalty.

Denominational loyalty is highest in the Northeast U.S., where Catholicism is more common than elsewhere in the country. Such loyalty is lowest in the South, where Catholicism is less common.

People who report attending a non-denominational church, the Ellison Research survey says, are actually more committed to remaining non-denominational than churchgoers in Protestant denominations are to staying within their denomination. About 29 percent of non-denominational churchgoers will only consider a non-denominational church, while 32 percent express a preference for a non-denominational

church.

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