

UNITED METHODIST COMMUNICATIONS RETHINK CHURCH/SEEKER RESEARCH 2009

Summary of Findings

Note: This is an overview of a multi-faceted study – a much more detailed report is available from United Methodist Communications upon request.

RESEARCH

Online interviews with 839 “seekers” ages 18 to 34¹ were conducted to gain insight into their attitudes and spiritual needs and their perceptions and expectations of churches.

The research was conducted on behalf of United Methodist Communications by The Barna Group in conjunction with BOHAN Advertising|Marketing.

GOALS

- Primary: assess how to design the new United Methodist campaign for young seekers
 - Explore spiritual and social "doorways" that potentially open for young adults to get involved in a new experience or expression of church
- Additionally, explore profile and characteristics of the target audience:
 - Demographic and theolographic background
 - Perceptions of churches and prospective churches

TARGET SIZE

Based on screening measures (see full report for details), about one in every three 18-34 year-olds qualify as a "seeker" as defined by UMCom. It should be noted that this excludes young people that are most committed to their faith and to their church, and also screens out those who are aggressively skeptical of churches.

Projected nationally, this would account for 20-25 million Americans, or about one-tenth of the population.

¹ National, random and representative sample of young adults across the country, drawn from an online panel. Individuals on the panel were screened to identify people who met the definition of a seeker. Results for the total sample are accurate to within plus or minus 3.5 percentage points, at the 95% confidence level. Conducted February 25, 2009 - March 5, 2009.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

SELF IDENTITY

The research explored the ways young seekers view themselves. The most commonly embraced was the desire to make a difference with their life (96% of the target).

Other widely used descriptors included:

- excited about the future (67%)
- having a passion for social justice (67%)
- searching for meaning and purpose (66%)
- being a spiritual person (62%)
- having emotional pain or frustration they would like to resolve (62%)
- feeling like something is missing from their life (61%)
- contributing to the common good of their community (60%)
- seeking something better spiritually in life (50%)

CHURCH BACKGROUND

The seeker audience (as defined for the purposes of the UMC campaign) includes people across the spectrum of church experiences.

Among those who are active churchgoers, 70% said they would be willing to try a new church sometime; 39% said they are looking for a better church or a different faith experience.

Among those who are marginally churched and non-churched, we discovered that 71% of marginally churched seekers and 27% of non-churched seekers said they might consider attending a church more frequently someday.

When asked if they feel a church is likely to help them find personal fulfillment, half of the marginally churched segment (51%) and one-seventh of non-churched young adults (14%) agreed.

When asked if they are looking for a church where they can participate, 55% of marginally churched seekers and 11% of non-churched seekers answered in the affirmative.

The primary barriers they have for not visiting a church, the most common response is that people are hypocritical and judgmental (38%). Other frequent replies include:

- do not feel they need to go (31%)
- do not know anyone (31%)
- do not know what church to visit (24%)
- do not know the beliefs (24%)

- do not have the time to go (20%)
- not familiar with the worship style (20%)

What is missing from the typical church these days? The most common thing Respondents said was being accepted for you who are (51%). Other major complaints include:

- honesty and transparency (36%)
- truth (32%)
- trust (31%)
- being too focused on money (31%)
- authenticity (30%)
- sincerity (28%)
- helping people think about real-life issues (28%)

LIFESTYLES

The survey asked what brings people the most satisfaction in life. The most common elements were relationship oriented – including friends (68%), family (67%), and a spouse or partner (49%).

The sample of young seekers evaluated 20 different lifestyle elements according to the perceived importance in the next year. The most important lifestyle outcome was succeeding at their job or career (54% mentioned this as “very important”).

This was followed by:

- getting out of debt (48%)
- improving diet or exercise in a major way (39%)
- figuring out their calling or purpose in life (38%)
- working on completing a college or grad degree (36%)
- getting more training for their future (35%).

In other words, their “launch” into life is a major priority to them.

SPIRITUALITY

What activities do seekers consider to be spiritual? The most common behaviors labeled spiritual included:

- being with family (45% had done this “spiritual activity” in the last two months)
- praying (43%)
- doing good for others (43%)

What are the top spiritual problems facing young seekers? The most common four, selected from a list of 15 different possibilities, included struggling with the hypocrisy of religious people (12%), finding their purpose (11%), dealing with anger and emotions (11%), and attending church regularly (10%).

When asked to identify where they would turn for spiritual assistance, the most common was family and parents (53%), followed by friends and co-workers (42%),

and God and prayer (42%).

What are the types of events in a person's life that catalyzes spiritual searching? Overall, nearly two out of three young seekers (62%) said they have faced times in the last few years when they were more likely to search for spiritual answers.

Among those who have had such a personal catalyst, the most common included:

- hard times (59%)
- bad or lost relationships (44%)
- family struggles (43%)
- loneliness (43%)
- illness or death of a loved one (42%)

DOORS

The survey explored 40 different “doors” to church involvement across eight distinct categories – sports, global health, community, relationships, education & learning, social justice, environment, and spirituality.

As a category, the spiritual doors were the most appealing in terms of top-box scores, providing a helpful reminder that the Rethink Church campaign cannot miss the obvious connecting points even as it seeks to open other unconventional “doors” to church involvement.

MESSAGING

What type of messaging about churches is likely to appeal to young seekers? Four of the statements assessed pertain to new initiatives being used by The United Methodist Church. The reactions to three of the four statements were moderately strong: 29% found “addressing the needs of the poor and disadvantaged” to be definitely appealing; the same percentage (29%) found the statement “improving conditions for health around the world” equally motivating. One out of five respondents responded to the concept of “helping to develop the next generation of leaders” (21%). The least appealing initiative of the four we assessed is “helping to start new churches and communities of faith” – just 10% gave this strong endorsement.

The research study also examined nine other elements that could be woven into future messaging. Of those, the best rated was “helping you connect with God,” which garnered the strongest support out of all 13 statements (39%).

Others included:

- “creating real solutions for other people's lives” (31%)
- “learning more personal skills for living well” (30%)
- “proving what you believe with the way you live” (29%)
- “being part of a faith community that cares deeply about you” (28%)
- “finding pathways and tools to develop a deeper faith” (26%)
- “learning more about how God has designed you and get coaching to live out your purpose” (24%)

- “learning about the world or another culture” (21%).

The least appealing of the 13 statements was “choosing from a menu of spiritual adventures” (13%).

Seekers prefer an established church to a new church (37% versus 20%, respectively). However, nearly half of the respondents said they were not sure (44%), which suggests that even those who expressed a preference do not have strong feelings on the matter. In fact, just 11% of respondents said they strongly prefer an established church, while only 5% firmly gravitated toward a new church setting. Implication: this is a category of thinking for those of us who are “insiders.” People who are not actively involved in a church do not think much about the differences or relative pros and cons.

Finding an open mind and common understanding (28%) is the most common attraction about becoming involved with a group of people who are just beginning a new community to explore faith together. Other perceived advantages include sharing something in common (13%), being part of starting something (12%), finding new views and ideas (11%), the opportunity to shape the church and the group dynamics (10%), the intimate community (8%), and the diversity (7%).

What if a church met in a gymnasium or coffee shop? Just 4% of young seekers said they would be interested in this type of setting, while another 25% expressed moderate interest. In total, 46% of young seekers were not interested or unsure. When asked to evaluate nine different potential “unconventional” places specifically, the most likely places were short-term service trips, in a discussion-based class, and a group in someone’s home. The least attractive place was in their workplace.