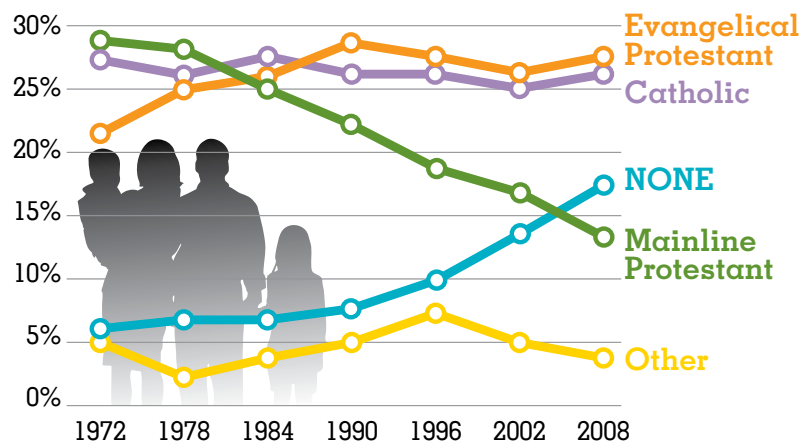


Religious ‘nones’

The changing face of U.S. religious affiliation



The Catholic Church may have fewer nuns than in the past, but American society has a lot more “nones”—people who express no religious preference. Here are some findings about this group*:

- **Religious nones were 3 percent of the population in 1957 but are 15 percent today**, having risen from 8 percent in the early 1990s.
- **There are more nones than mainline Protestants** (13 percent of the population).
- **The percentage of nones is greatest among young adults** (22 percent).
- **Six in 10 nones are men, four in 10 are women.**
- **Two-thirds of nones have become so since childhood**—only 32 percent of current nones report they were nones at age 12.
- **Nones are a higher share of the population in New England and states on the West Coast** (one in five in both locations).
- **Nones do not differ from the rest of the population in education or income.**

* These numbers are from the 2008 American Religious Identification Survey, but similar findings emerge from the Pew Religious Landscape Survey (2007) and the General Social Survey (2008). Graph adapted from Figures 1 and 2 in “Continuity and Change in American Religion, 1972–2006,” by Mark Chaves and Shawna Anderson, in *Social Trends in the United States, 1972–2006: Evidence from the General Social Survey* (Princeton University Press) and is used with permission of the authors.

» Other findings
www.pcusa.org/research

What the research shows

Clearly there is a secularizing trend in American society, but it may not be as dramatic as it first appears.

Nones may share a lack of affiliation, but they are otherwise quite diverse when it comes to religion. On a different survey only 10 percent of the unaffiliated persons describe themselves as atheists, while more than three times that many (36 percent) indicate that religion is either “very important” or “somewhat important” in their lives.

Even more interesting, more than half of those who were unaffiliated with a church as a child now are attending one.

Robert Putnam of Harvard (and *Bowling Alone* fame) has a particularly hopeful take on religious nones. He links their increasing numbers in the 1990s to the rise of the religious right, with young adults, especially, being turned off by the politicization of religion. But he doesn’t think most of these people are committed secularists. Rather, he believes that, given a more moderate option, nones might return to organized religion.

As *Washington Post* columnist Michael Gerson summarized Putnam’s view, “In the diverse, fluid market of American religion there may be a demand . . . for grace, hope and reconciliation—for a message of compassion and healing that appeals to people of every political background.”

That sounds like something Presbyterian congregations are already doing. As discouraging as the increasing number of nones may be, perhaps there is opportunity as well in this trend.

Jack Marcum is coordinator of Research Services for the General Assembly Mission Council of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).