

U.S. Orthodox churches have more converts than expected, study says: Mostly from Catholic and evangelical backgrounds

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A new survey of Orthodox Christians in America has found a larger-than-expected number of converts, mostly from Roman Catholic and evangelical Protestant backgrounds.

The report, released by the Patriarch Athenagoras Orthodox Institute in Berkeley, California, surveyed 1,000 members of Greek Orthodox and Orthodox Church in America congregations—two denominations, or jurisdictions, that represent about 60 percent of the estimated 1.2 million Orthodox Christians in the U.S.

Although historically Orthodox churches in the U.S. were formed and peopled by immigrants, the study found that nine out of ten parishioners are now American-born. Thousands of members converted to the faith as adults: 29 percent of members of the Greek Orthodox Church are converts, as are 51 percent of the OCA's members.

"I would not have expected this many," said Alexei Krindatch, the Orthodox Institute's research director. "My sense was that for the Greek Orthodox, it would be around 15 percent, and OCA maybe one-third."

The study also found unexpectedly high numbers of converts among clergy —56 percent in the OCA, 14 percent in the Greek Orthodox Church. In both cases, the higher OCA numbers reflect that group's use of English in its worship services, he added.

These findings could mean that Orthodox churches are growing in America, if there aren't equal or greater numbers of Orthodox Christians leaving for other faiths;

researchers won't know until they conduct a 2010 membership census. The findings, however, indicate that other Christians are increasingly seeking a more traditional worship experience, Krindatch said.

"In the case of Roman Catholics, those are mainly people who are not quite happy with the reforms of the Second Vatican Council; they are looking for the Catholic Church as it used to be in the past," he said. "In the case of evangelical Christians, those are people who have very strong personal beliefs, they know the Bible very well, they are frequent churchgoers, and eventually they want to join an established church with deep historical roots."

Compared to a 2005 study of American Catholics, the survey found more Orthodox Christians responding that they could not imagine belonging to another faith group, and fewer agreeing that how a person lives is more important than his or her religious affiliation.

"In all possible measures, belonging to a church is more important to Orthodox than to Catholics," Krindatch said.

The study's other findings showed a majority of Orthodox Christians are not in favor of female priests but would allow married bishops (traditionally in Orthodoxy, only single priests may be chosen as bishops).

A majority also want their clergy to work with Catholic and Protestant counterparts to coordinate a common date for Easter, which typically falls several weeks later for the Orthodox due to their use of an older liturgical calendar. *-Religion News Service*