

# Barna New Research on the State of Discipleship

December 2015

---

Two thousand years ago, Jesus approached twelve seemingly unsuspecting Galileans and bid them: “Come, follow me.” For the next three years, they walked alongside him as he disciplined them. Toward the end of his earthly ministry, Jesus commissioned his disciples to go and do the same—to take the Gospel message to the world and make disciples in all the nations.

The Great Commission is an audacious undertaking, all the more so given the fast and sweeping changes taking place in the broader culture. People are [lonelier](#), more distracted and [more tethered to their screens](#), and searching for [meaningful lives](#). As Christians bring the unchanging message of the Gospel to the world, effective approaches to discipleship become more important, especially in a world that is increasingly polarized around spiritual issues.

So what is the current state of discipleship in the U.S.? Is the church effective in its efforts? Are churchgoers involved in discipleship activities, and if so, which models do they prefer? And perhaps most importantly, do investments in discipleship actually affect spiritual growth? To answer these questions, Barna Group, commissioned by The [Navigators](#) and [NavPress](#), conducted a comprehensive, multi-phase research study among Christian adults, church leaders, exemplar discipleship ministries and Christian educators. Here’s what the research uncovered.

## What We Mean When We Say...

The research examined the language and terminology surrounding discipleship. We asked a random sample of Christians—including practicing and non-practicing Christians—what words or phrases they use to describe “the process of growing spiritually.” The most preferred term was “becoming more Christ-like” (selected by 43% of respondents), followed by “spiritual growth” (31%), and “spiritual journey” (28%).

The term “discipleship” ranked fourth on the list and was only selected by fewer than one in five Christians (18%). “Spiritual maturation” was next (16%). “Sanctification” (9%) and “spiritual formation” (5%) were relatively unused phrases among the general population of Christians.

Interestingly, the more active the person in spiritual activities, the more likely he or she is to use the phrase “becoming Christlike.” In contrast, the “spiritual journey” language is most preferred among non-practicing Christians.

Among those who did not select the term “discipleship,” we asked if the word still has relevance to their Christian experience. Surprisingly, only one-quarter of these respondents said “discipleship” is very relevant. The implication is that while spiritual growth is very important to tens of millions, the language and terminology surrounding discipleship seems to be undergoing a change, with other phrases coming to be used more frequently than the term “discipleship” itself.

## Effective Discipleship?

Christian adults believe their churches are doing well when it comes to discipleship: 52 percent of those who have attended church in the past six months say their church “definitely does a good job helping people grow spiritually” and another 40 percent say it “probably” does so. Additionally, two-thirds of

Christians who have attended church in the past six months and consider spiritual growth important say their church places “a lot” of emphasis on spiritual growth (67%); another 27 percent say their church gives “some” emphasis.

Church leaders, conversely, tend to believe the opposite is true. Only 1 percent say “today’s churches are doing very well at discipling new and young believers.” A sizable majority—six in 10—feels that churches are discipling “not too well” (60%). Looking at their own church, only 8 percent say they are doing “very well” and 56 percent “somewhat well at discipling new and young believers.” Thus, pastors give their own church higher marks than churches overall, but few believe churches—their own or in general—are excelling in discipleship.

Not surprisingly, emphasis on discipleship is correlated with higher faith engagement. Three-quarters of practicing Christians, who have attended church in the past month and consider their faith very important, say their church places “a lot” of emphasis on spiritual growth (73%), while only 40 percent of non-practicing Christians say the same.

### Breaking Down Discipleship

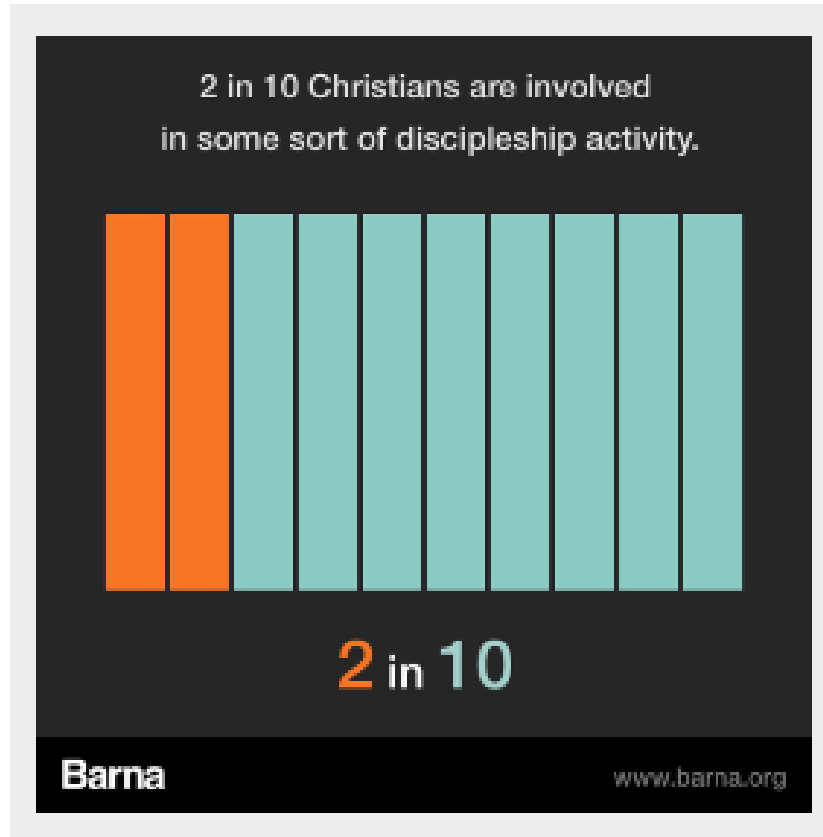
Despite believing their church emphasizes spiritual growth, engagement with the practices associated with discipleship leave much to be desired. For example, only 20 percent of Christian adults are involved in some sort of discipleship activity—and this includes a wide range of activities such as attending Sunday school or fellowship group, meeting with a spiritual mentor, studying the Bible with a group, or reading and discussing a Christian book with a group.

Practicing Christians are more likely to be involved in a variety of spiritual growth activities than are non-practicing Christians. (You can read a definition of practicing Christians below.) Yet, even among practicing Christians, fewer than half are engaged in these four types of spiritual development. Only 17 percent say they meet with a spiritual mentor as part of their discipleship efforts.

### PARTICIPATION IN DISCIPLESHIP ACTIVITIES

(% who say spiritual growth is at least somewhat important)





### To Grow or Not to Grow?

It is difficult for researchers to analyze accurately the degree to which people are changing spiritually. From the point of view of self-perception, most people *perceive* they are growing and say they want to develop spiritually. Yet, self-perceptions also show that Christians tend to be quite satisfied in their spirituality, perhaps edging toward complacency. Most Christians express satisfaction with their spiritual lives: Thirty-eight percent of Christian adults say they are “happy with where they are in their spiritual life” and another 36 percent are “almost to where they want to be.”

Some good news is that people firmly assert that they want to grow spiritually. This is not the case in [other contexts](#), and represents a continued bright spot within U.S. spirituality. Indeed, three-quarters of practicing Christians (77%) believe it is “very important to see growth in their spiritual life.” Even among non-practicing Christians—people who rarely or ever attend church and who are mostly inactive spiritually—37 percent say it is very important to grow spiritually.

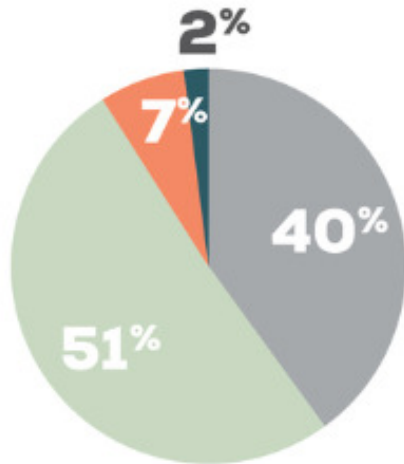
Yet, the research reveals little correlation between activity and perceived growth, further revealing the disconnect between how people think about their spirituality and what’s actually happening in their lives. For example, most practicing Christians feel they have made “a lot” (40%) or “some” (51%) progress in their personal spiritual growth in the past year. However, among respondents who are currently involved in at least one discipleship activity, their self-reported growth was not much higher than these levels. Even among non-practicing Christians, a majority believes they have made spiritual progress in the last year.

One of the implications of these findings is that church leaders must be diligent in finding tools that help people examine the reality of their spiritual growth, not merely how they perceive it.

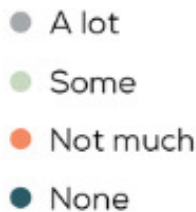
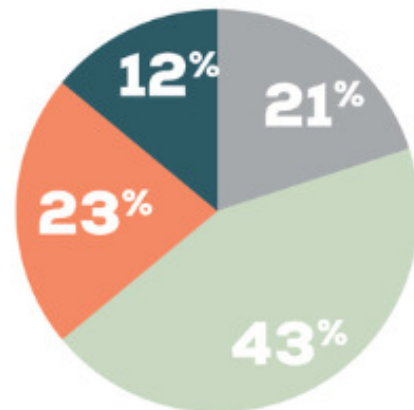
## PERSONAL SPIRITUAL PROGRESS: PAST 12 MONTHS

*% among Christians*

### Practicing Christians



### Non-practicing Christians



### Motivations for Discipleship

Even though people may not be fully in touch with their level of growth, what motivates people to grow in a spiritual manner? Practicing and non-practicing Christians report different motivations for seeking spiritual growth. Practicing Christians see discipleship as intimately tied with their faith, saying they are most motivated by “a general desire to know Jesus, or God, more” (46%); “a general desire to be more like Jesus” (41%); and because “the Bible instructs us to be more like Jesus” (34%).

Non-practicing Christians, on the other hand, see discipleship as a part of a broader bid for self-improvement, saying they “think it is important to be improving or growing in all things” (51%); “have been through a lot, and growing spiritually will help me” (41%); and “have a general desire to know Jesus, or God, more” (36%).

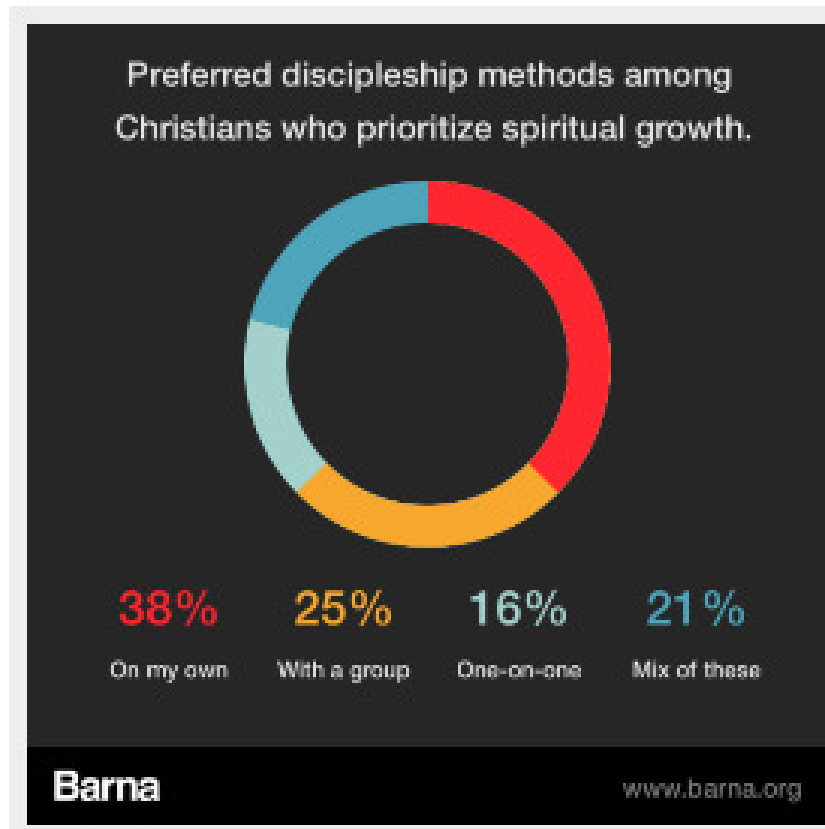
The research examines differences between various demographic segments, and many differences emerged based upon generation. For instance, when it came to motivations, Millennial Christians are more likely than average to be motivated to grow spiritually because “I have been through a lot and growing spiritually will help me” and “I am inspired by others and want to be more like them.” Younger believers are also more likely than average to say they grow in peer groups and when reading the Bible with others. Millennial Christians are less likely to say they “my church encourages spiritual growth.”

One of the implications of the research, then, is for churches to rethink what is working in connecting with today’s younger Christians, particularly when it comes to relational and mentoring forms of spiritual development.

### Discipleship as a Solo Activity?

Christian adults are split on their preferences when it comes to models of discipleship: small group, one-on-one or individual (solitary) format.

Among Christians who say spiritual growth is important, more than one-third say they prefer to pursue spiritual growth on their own (37%). Similarly, two in five of all Christian adults consider their spiritual life to be “entirely private” (41%). This is a greater proportion—though only slightly—than Christians who believe their faith, rather than being private, has an impact on relatives (37%), friends (36%) and their community (33%). In other words, one of the problems revealed by this research is that millions of Christians believe that discipleship is a solo affair, with only personal and private implications.

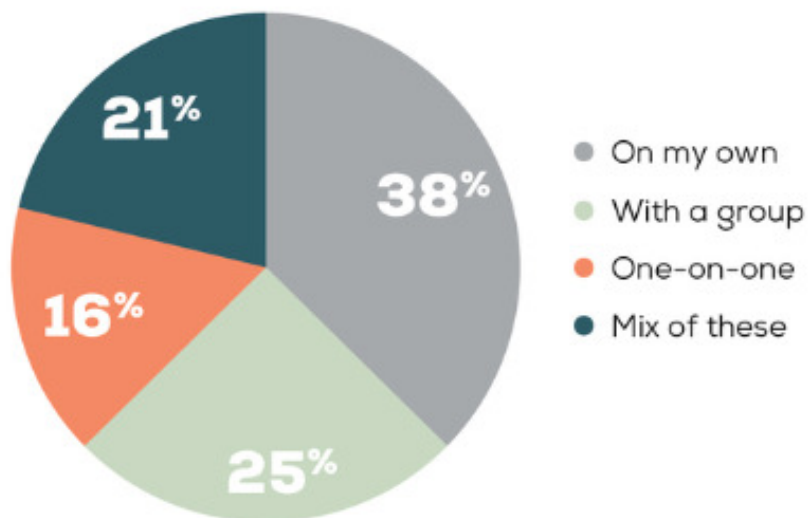


Even when it comes to what Christians are experiencing in the churches they attend, there does not seem to be much emphasis conveyed about the communal, relational nature of spiritual growth. Just one-third of Christian adults report that their church recommends meeting with a spiritual mentor; half of their churches publically endorse studying the Bible with a group; and half recommend studying the Bible independently.

Among Christian adults, one-quarter prefers a small-group setting for discipleship (25%). Another one in five prefers a combination of group and one-on-one discipleship (21%) and 16 percent prefer one-on-one only. Thus, in total, about one-third of those pursuing spiritual growth are including some element of one-on-one, person-to-person discipleship.

## PREFERRED METHOD OF DISCIPLESHIP

*% among Christians who say spiritual growth is very or somewhat important*

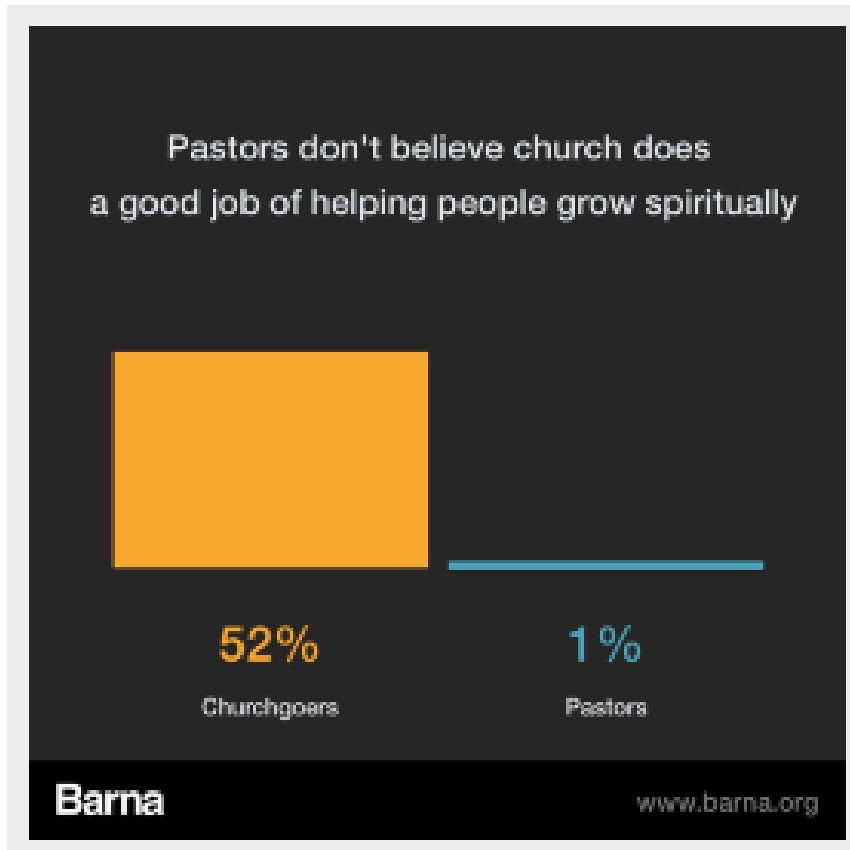


However, not all of those who prefer discipleship “pairs” are currently involved in a one-on-one discipleship relationship: less than one-quarter of Christians adults (23%) are currently being discipled by someone (29% of practicing vs. 12% of non-practicing Christians), and 19 percent are discipling someone else (25% of practicing vs. 9% of non-practicing Christians).

One-on-one discipleship relationships are established in various ways: Of those currently being discipled by another person, one-quarter say that person invited them (27%); one in five invited their mentor (20%); and about one-quarter were paired by the church (23%)—but the largest proportion, 28 percent, were matched “some other way.”

### **The View from the Pulpit**

The study shows how pastors and church leaders are thinking about discipleship. When asked to choose the single method of discipleship they believe is most effective, church leaders tend to select small group formats (52%) nearly two-to-one over discipleship pairs (29%). For good or bad, small groups are the disciple-making format preferred by most of today’s church leaders.



Do church leaders engage in discipleship themselves? Somewhat. Fully 94 percent are currently discipling at least one other Christian. However, only six in 10 are being disciplined themselves. Discipleship pastors (72%) are somewhat more likely than senior pastors (59%) to have a spiritual mentor.

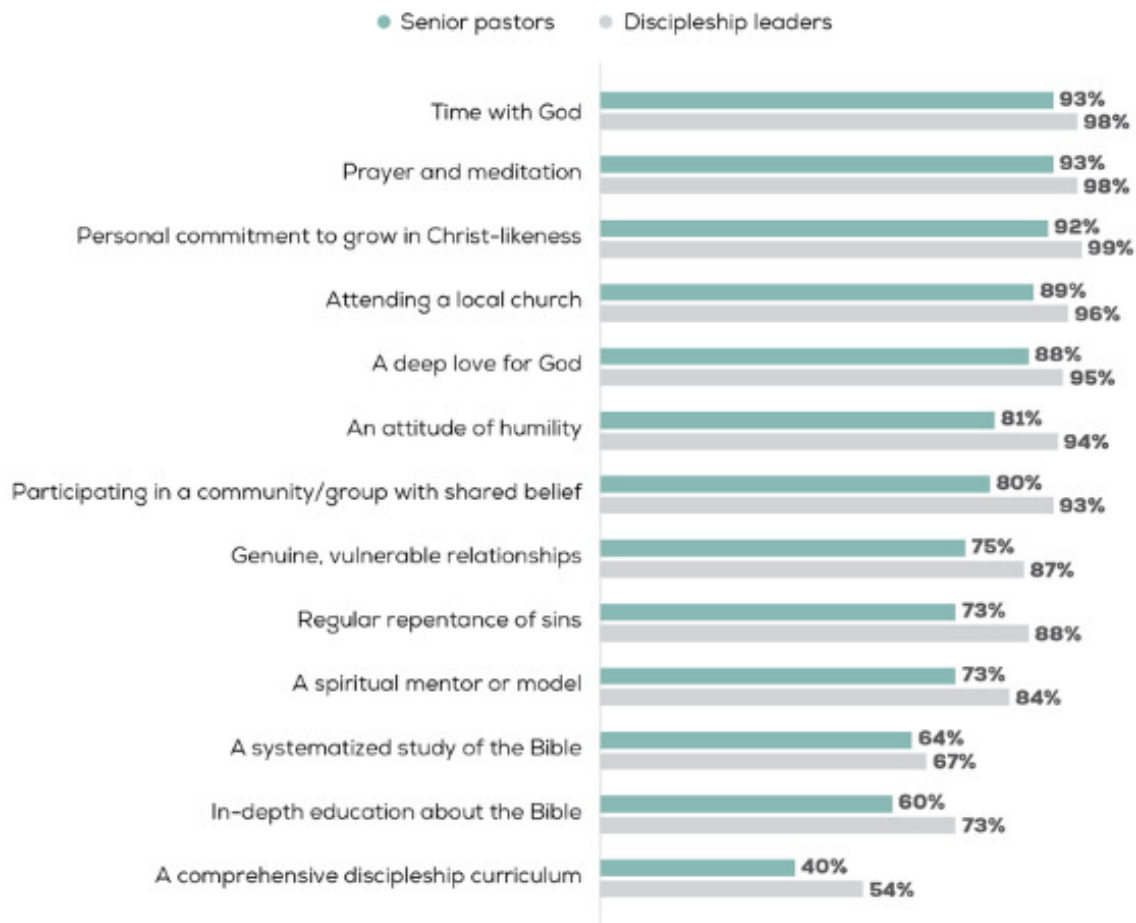
One of the compelling findings of the study is that developmental relationships are more common in larger churches: Eight out of 10 church leaders of 500+ member churches report being currently disciplined by someone else (78%), compared with 64 percent of those with 100 to 499 members and 55 percent of those who lead in churches with fewer than 100 members.

According to pastors, the most critical elements of discipleship are matters of the heart rather than of structure. Aside from prayer and time with God, the top three spiritual disciplines pastors believe are essential to discipleship are “personal commitment to grow in Christlikeness” (94%), “attending a local church” (91%) and “a deep love for God” (90%). Having “a comprehensive discipleship curriculum” is by far the least-important element of effective discipleship according to pastors, 44 percent of whom select it as essential.

When asked how they want to improve in their discipleship programs, a plurality of church leaders says they would “develop a more clearly articulated plan or approach to discipleship” (27%). Additionally, churches need to develop assessment criteria to track the effectiveness of their discipleship efforts. Less than 1 percent of leaders report using a survey or other evaluation instrument to assess the results of their programs. This underscores one of the previous conclusions, that church leaders and congregants need better methods of thinking about and evaluating their discipleship efforts.

## ESSENTIAL ELEMENTS OF DISCIPLESHIP

% among church leaders



### About the Research

The data contained in this research report and in the full "[State of Discipleship](#)" monograph originated through a series of research studies conducted by Barna Group. The study was commissioned by [NavPress](#) for [The Navigators](#). You can also explore the [State of Discipleship case study](#) on our website.

The full project was completed in multiple stages. To begin, 36 educators from Protestant and Catholic seminaries and Bible colleges completed an online survey of open-ended questions during December 2014 and January 2015. These findings were used to revise and conduct an open-ended survey with exemplar churches and ministries.

Leaders of 30 churches and seven parachurch ministries that exemplify excellence in discipleship completed an open-ended, online survey February 3 to March 4, 2015. Respondents were recruited from a list developed by Navigators' staff as well as nominated by Protestant pastors from Barna's Pastor Panel.

Following these two qualitative studies, an online and telephone survey was conducted among 615 Protestant senior pastors and 218 discipleship pastors. Churches were contacted from a random list of



U.S. Protestant churches, with approximately 543 interviews conducted by phone and 290 online. The interviews were conducted between April 7 and May 30, 2015.

At the same time, a nationwide study of Christian adults ages 18 and older was conducted using an online panel and phone interviews (with a mix of 60% landline and 40% cell phone). Surveys for this portion of the research study were completed between March 26 and April 15, 2015. A total of 2,013 surveys were completed: 1,300 online and 703 via phone. The sample error on this survey is plus or minus 3.1 percent points at the 95-percent confidence level. Data were weighted by age, gender, etc., to be representative of all U.S. Christians ages 18 and older.

Survey calls were made at various times during the day (for churches) and evenings (for adults), so that every individual selected for inclusion was contacted up to five separate days, at different times of the day, to maximize the possibility of contact. This is a quality control procedure to ensure that individuals in the sampling frame have an equivalent probability of inclusion within the survey, thereby increasing the survey reliability. All of the interviews were conducted by experienced, trained interviewers who were supervised at all times; every interviewer was monitored during their performance on the project. The survey was conducted through the use of a CATI (Computer Assisted Telephone Interviewing) system. This system ensures that question skip patterns are properly administered by interviewers and that survey data are recorded accurately.

The online portion of the study was conducted among a representative random sample of adults and churches using a web-enabled consumer panel.

#### **\*Definitions**

**Practicing Christians** are self-identified Christians who say their faith is very important to their lives and who have attended a worship service, other than for a special occasion, one or more times during the past month.

**Non-practicing Christians** are self-identified Christians who do not qualify as “practicing” under the criteria above.

#### **About Barna Group**

Barna Group (which includes its research division, Barna Research Group) is a private, non-partisan, for-profit organization under the umbrella of the Issachar Companies. Located in Ventura, California, Barna Group has been conducting and analyzing primary research to understand cultural trends related to values, beliefs, attitudes and behaviors since 1984. If you would like to receive free e-mail notification of the release of each update on the latest research findings from Barna Group, you may subscribe to this free service at the Barna website

([www.barna.org](http://www.barna.org)).

© 2015, Barna Group.