

Fudging: Do we lie about sitting in the pew?

by [Martin E. Marty](#) in the [October 17, 2006](#) issue

According to a recent Bloomberg News survey, researchers for the *Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine* asked people to answer two easy questions: How tall are you? How much do you weigh? After considering the responses, researchers concluded that people lie. Gender differences play a role: Women want to be lighter, and they lie about their weight. Men want to be taller, and they lie about their height.

It's true that we like to fudge when using the scale. Personally, I like to weigh myself after an hour in the Jacuzzi. That takes off two pounds, not to return until breakfast!

In some states, health officials find that estimates about the number of obesity cases are 50 percent too low. A public health official says discreetly, "There is some intentional bias, one can safely speculate."

That report led me to revisit the plaguing question of church attendance, a figure also generally based on self-reporting. Americans like to think that they are spiritual, religious and sometimes even churchgoing. One sometimes hears that more than half the citizenry is at church or synagogue in any given week.

Wrong. Since 1992 the Gallup survey people and their cohorts have asked: "Did you, yourself, happen to attend church or synagogue in the last seven days?"

"Happening" to attend, by the way, is not the most profound way to ask about a commitment—or it allows for a less profound commitment. The answer back in 1992 was that 40 percent happened to be happeners.

Sociologists C. Kirk Hadaway and P. L. Marler responded by doing something very radical. They actually counted churchgoers (they did their counting in presumably typically American counties in Ohio). Counters had trouble finding 30 percent of people in church. The real number may be closer to 20 percent.

Do we lie about sitting in the pew just as we do about height and weight? There is no reason to lie. We will not impress other nations by our churchgoing figures. There is no social pressure to respond: anonymous respondents will never meet the polltakers or, in turn, be recognized by them. So why do we lie?

Let's think the best of our fellows. Here's how it works: we want to think of ourselves as regular churchgoers. I would answer yes to the Gallup question, thinking: Sure, I attended. I am always there. I think. Every few weeks, however, I am necessarily traveling on Sunday morning, and the travel displaces worship. Or I may be trapped in a weekend conference where on Sunday morning a hymn is mumbled or a prayer whispered, which allows us to think we have been "at worship." Not.

Surely, one thinks, strongholds are strongholds. Think Chicago, think Catholic: this is a hugely Catholic city, and it's easy for anyone to get to church. Yet in one report only 22 percent of Catholics were where they belonged and where they claimed to be or thought that they were "last" Sunday. Not two-fifths but one-fifth of Catholics were there to be counted.

So the disparity does not always result from lying. If it were only that, we could all go to church, confess, be shriven and tell the truth. Instead, we are guilty of going easy on ourselves and on the truth. Thus we garner statistics with which to taunt ex-Christian Europe and convince God and anyone who cares that "In God We Trust." Our penny says so.