

Survey: Typical atheist is white son of religious parents

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WASHINGTON (RNS) The typical member of a fast-growing atheist association is a highly educated, married white male who grew up with religious parents.

The Freedom from Religion Foundation, which grew from 5,500 in 2004 to about 16,000 members this year, announced results of a survey of its members on Wednesday (Dec. 1).

The Wisconsin-based organization received nearly 4,000 responses to its survey, which was mailed to all its members in May. Respondents replied to the nonscientific survey by mail or online.

Asked about their primary reason for being "deconverted from religion to freethought," about a third of respondents said "religion doesn't make sense." Seventeen percent said religious hypocrisy or bigotry was the cause; 9 percent said reading skeptical authors; 5 percent cited reading the Bible.

Most respondents said the religious denomination they left behind was Protestant (42 percent), but 30 percent said they were raised Catholic and 27 percent were raised Jewish.

The overwhelming majority of atheist respondents -- 95 percent --

are white, but foundation officials hope that statistic will change.

"We've started to do more outreach to the African-American and freethought communities of color, and clearly, this is a great untapped source for new members who support reason and secularism in this country," said foundation co-president Annie Laurie Gaylor.

She said the group's membership grew by 1,000 within a few weeks of an April decision by a federal judge who sided with the foundation and declared the law creating the National Day of Prayer unconstitutional.

-- Other findings from survey respondents include:

-- 88 percent describe themselves as atheist, and 12 percent as agnostic

-- 43 percent are retired

-- 30 percent volunteer regularly

-- 24 percent are veterans

-- 11 percent are vegetarians

-- 9 percent are gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender.