

Hello? Church callers stay unconnected: Which churches are hard to reach

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Many Protestant congregations schedule special music programs and added services before Christmas in hopes of attracting churchgoers and visitors. But a national telephone survey last Advent encountered a less than hospitable response: repeated calls to 3,400 randomly selected Protestant churches revealed that 55 percent of those congregations either answered via machine or made no response whatsoever.

Actual responses by people were most likely at mainline churches (63 percent), including American Baptist, UCC, Episcopal, Evangelical Lutheran and Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) congregations, reported the Barna Research Group of Ventura, California. The United Methodist churches topped the responsive list at 64 percent, followed by the historic black National Baptist churches (62 percent) and congregations aligned with the large Southern Baptist Convention (61 percent).

Every church sampled over two weeks in December was called a minimum of five times during business hours, with one call made each day at different hours, according to George Barna, director of the survey. At 19 percent of the churches, "the phone simply rang without any response in each of the five separate attempts," he said.

"These statistics suggest that much of the hard work that churches put into reaching people during the holiday season may be negated by people's inability to establish contact with someone at the church within a reasonable time frame," Barna commented in a news release.

The congregations least likely to have someone covering the phones were Baptist churches (other than Southern, National or American Baptist) at 65 percent. Close to them, with a 62 percent nonhuman response, were holiness churches such as the Nazarene, Christian and Missionary Alliance, Free Methodist and Church of God

(Anderson, Indiana). Next were Church of God in Christ churches and Churches of Christ or independent Christian churches, all at 56 percent.

Researchers found that churches in the mountain and West Coast states—a region with typically the highest percentages of “unchurched” residents—were the most responsive at 65 percent. “The toughest area in which to make personal contact was the South (36 percent),” the Barna release said. About half of the churches in the Midwest and Northeast had people taking calls.

With cell phones, pagers, e-mail messaging and other high-tech ways to communicate so much in use, said Barna, “organizations that seemingly defy people to penetrate their fortress quickly become an after-thought in people’s lives.”