

Religion News Service
October 8, 2007 Monday 2:19 PM EDT
SECTION: LIFESTYLE

LENGTH: 713 words

HEADLINE: Study: Young People See Christians as Judgmental, Anti-Gay

BYLINE: By ADELLE M. BANKS

BODY:

Young people have graded Christianity, and so far, the report card doesn't look good.

Majorities of young people in America describe modern-day Christianity as judgmental, hypocritical and anti-gay. What's more, many Christians don't even want to call themselves "Christian" because of the baggage that accompanies the label.

A new book based on research by the California-based research firm The Barna Group found that church attitudes about people in general and gays in particular are driving a negative image of the Christian faith among people ages 16-29.

"The Christian community's ability to take the high road and help to deal with some of the challenges that this (anti-gay) perception represents may be the ... defining response of the Christian church in the next decade," said David Kinnaman, Barna Group president and author of the book, "UnChristian: What a New Generation Really Thinks About Christianity."

"The anti-homosexual perception has now become sort of the Geiger counter of Christians' ability to love and work with people."

The findings were based on surveys of a sample of 867 young people. From that total, researchers reported responses from 440 non-Christians and 305 active churchgoers.

The vast majority of non-Christians 91 percent said Christianity had an anti-gay image, followed by 87 percent who said it was judgmental and 85 percent who said it was hypocritical.

Such views were held by smaller percentages of the active churchgoers, but the faith still did not fare well: 80 percent agreed with the anti-gay label, 52 percent said Christianity is judgmental, and 47 percent declared it hypocritical.

Kinnaman said one of the biggest surprises for researchers was the extent to which respondents one in four non-Christians said that modern-day Christianity was no longer like Jesus.

"It started to become more clear to us that what they're experiencing related to Christianity is some of the very things that Jesus warned religious people about," he said. "Which is, avoiding removing the log from your own eye before trying to take the speck out of someone else's."

Kinnaman said some Christians including those in the entertainment industry preferred to call themselves "followers of Jesus" or "apprentices of Christ" because the word "Christian" could limit their ability to relate to people. Even Kinnaman, 33, described himself as "a committed Christ follower," though he has called himself a Christian in the past.

In addition to reporting on the negative statistics, Kinnaman used the book to also give advice

from himself and more than two dozen Christian leaders on new approaches.

"Our goal wasn't simply to say here's all the problems, but to hopefully point a way forward," Kinnaman said.

"When Jesus pursued people, he was much more critical of pride and much more critical of spiritual arrogance than he was of people who were sinful. And today's Christians, if you spend enough time looking at their attitudes and actions, really are not like Jesus when it comes to that."

Megachurch pastor and best-selling author Rick Warren of Saddleback Church in Lake Forest, Calif., used the book to say he hopes the church will become "known more by what it is for than what it is against."

"For some time now, the hands and feet of the body of Christ have been amputated, and we've been pretty much reduced to a big mouth," Warren wrote. "We talk more than we do. It's time to reattach the limbs and let the church be the church in the 21st century."

Andy Stanley, senior pastor of North Point Ministries in Atlanta, suggested that churches should not focus solely on converting people, as has been the emphasis for generations.

"If we were able to rewrite the script for the reputation of Christianity, I think we would put the emphasis on developing relationships with nonbelievers, serving them, loving them, and making them feel accepted," he wrote.

"Only then would we earn the right to share the gospel."

The research reported in "UnChristian" reflected larger Barna Group studies with about 1,000 respondents as well as the specific study of young people. The sample of 440 non-Christians had a margin of error of plus or minus 5 percentage points and the sample of 305 active churchgoers had a margin of error of plus or minus 6 percentage points.