

# Getting pious with a little help from our friends

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Friendships forged at church seem to play a major role in people's religious activities and beliefs — even when it comes to their views about how exclusive heaven is, according to a national study by a Baylor University sociology researcher.

"Although church-based friendship networks seem to bolster religiosity across the board, the effect of how enmeshed people are in congregational [friendships](#) is stronger on religious behavior than on beliefs. This makes sense — church-goers may not necessarily chat about the finer points of theological beliefs, such as the existence of demons, but they do seem to talk about things like prayer requests or upcoming [church](#) events, things that more directly lead to an effect on religious behavior," said Samuel Stroope, a doctoral candidate at Baylor. "Also, friends at church can see behavior. Beliefs are harder to monitor."

He wrote an article that was published online in the journal *Sociology of Religion* and will appear in print in the summer issue.

Stroope analyzed data from the Baylor Religion Survey, a random survey of more than 1,600 adults nationwide. The survey asked questions on topics ranging from belief in the supernatural to social and political attitudes. The survey, designed by Baylor scholars, was conducted by The Gallup Organization.

To tap people's immersion in friendships at church, the survey asked, "What proportion of your friends attend your place of worship?"

Responses included "none" (32 percent), "a few" (42 percent), "about half" (12 percent) "most" (13 percent) and "all" (2 percent). Participants also were questioned about their religious behaviors and beliefs. Stroope limited his analysis to American Christians who ever go to church. His study was the first to test the relationship between congregational friendship networks and a variety of religiosity indicators using a national sample of both.

Stroope found that the larger the proportion of friends a person has in his or her congregation, the more likely that the individual will be active in their religious behaviors. The study looked at two broad categories of religious behaviors. First, church activities were defined as activities such as choir participation, worship service attendance, Sunday school participation, going to church social events and doing church-related volunteer work. Second, devotional activities were defined as activities such as frequency of prayer, Bible reading, taking part in a Bible study and frequency of sharing faith with others.

The study uncovered variations by religious tradition. Although having more church friends was always linked to more participation in religious activities, there were differences between Catholics and Protestants but not differences among Protestant traditions such as evangelical and mainline Protestants. Stroope found that the effect of congregational friends on [religious activities](#) was weaker for Catholics than for Protestants.

"In other words, Catholic congregations received diminishing participation returns for the congregational friendships of their members in comparison to Protestant congregations," Stroope said.

He suggested that this pattern may in part reflect the fact that the contents of Protestant and Catholic congregational social networks have different norms. For example:

- Protestant friends encourage a person to view church as a kind of social hub where a person participates in committees, social events and seeks to find intimate community. For Protestants, the focus is that Christ is present "where two or three are gathered."
  - Catholic friends encourage a person to view church life as primarily centered on elements such as the Eucharist, baptism and liturgy. A big focus is that Christ is concretely present in the Eucharist, and a person goes to Mass to meet Christ there.
- Turning to devotional activities, the data showed no meaningful differences between religious traditions in how church friends bolstered individuals' devotional activities. Friendship networks in all religious traditions seem to similarly bolster the devotional behavior measured in this study.

The study also found a weaker but consistent link between church friends and various religious beliefs. People with no friends at church held fewer supernatural beliefs than people who reported that some or more of their friends attended their church. Having some as opposed to no friends at church was the important cutting point associated with affirming a significantly greater number of supernatural beliefs. Meanwhile, when it came to the view of the Bible, drawing a greater proportion of one's friends from church was associated with increased odds of affirming that the Bible "should be taken literally, word for word on all subjects," Stroope said.

And "regardless of where you go to church—to a Catholic, evangelical Protestant or mainline Protestant congregation—if you have more [friends](#) there, then on average you're more likely to hold an exclusive view of heaven and believe that non-Christians are excluded from heaven," he said. The study specifically looked at whether respondents believe that Muslims, Buddhists and non-religious persons do not go to heaven.

**More information:** The study publication may be viewed at:  
<http://socrel.oxfordjournals.org/content/early/2011/10/31/socrel.srr052.full.pdf+html>

Provided by Baylor University

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