

Most Tennesseans pray, but many say they never get an answer

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By BOB SMIETANA | Staff Writer

Seventy percent of Tennesseans pray at least once a day, according to a survey on religion in America, and more than 90% say they pray at least a few times a month, but that doesn't mean they get an answer.

Some 38% of Tennesseans surveyed say they seldom or never receive an answer to their prayers, and they are not alone. Nationwide, more than half of Americans say their higher power rarely answers prayer, according to the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life.

Even though answers may be scarce, 58% of Americans - from differing religions and denominations - say they pray once a day.

Pew's U.S. Religious Landscape Survey questioned 35,556 Americans, nearly three in 10 of whom profess no religious identity but sometimes attend church. The latest Pew installment focuses on questions about spiritual experiences, views on society and politics, and religious beliefs and practices.

Mainline Protestants (such as Methodists and Presbyterians), Catholics and Jews are among the least likely to pray or to believe that their prayers will be answered, according to the survey.

But Ken Locke, pastor of Nashville's Downtown Presbyterian Church, wonders if the Pew survey took too narrow a view of prayer. Prayer isn't just about asking for things, he said; it's more like a marriage.

"If the only time I talked to my wife was when I wanted something," he said, "what kind of relationship would we have?"

Instead, Locke says that prayer is a matter of listening to God.

"I like what the old Baptist preachers used to say," he said. "Prayer is not me talking to God. It is me tuning my receiver into God's frequency."

The Rev. Joe McMahon of St. Joseph Catholic Church in Madison says that he often tells his parishioners to heed the word of country star Garth Brooks when it comes to prayer. In fact, the pastor often quotes Brooks' song "Unanswered Prayers" in his sermons.

"If I don't think that God is answering my prayers," said McMahon, "perhaps I'm not open to hearing the answer God is giving me."

The groups who reported praying the most - Muslims, evangelicals and Jehovah's Witnesses - also reported the most answered prayers.

Kamel Daouk, treasurer of Olive Tree Education, an organization that schedules classes on Islam, says that the regular schedule of Muslim prayers provides an anchor for his life. According to the Pew survey, 71% of Muslims report praying daily.

Devout Muslims, like Daouk, pray five times a day, facing Mecca. Daouk goes to Friday prayers with other Muslims at the Islamic Society of Nashville. Other days, he prays in the office or at home. During those times, he offers thanks and praise to God, and asks for strength to live up to the tenets of his faith.

"It's part of our belief to ask God for help in every situation," he said.

Prayers remind Daouk there is more to life than the everyday grind. And no prayer, he believes, goes unanswered. "It may be a big change or it may be in small, subtle ways," he said.

Rabbi Yitzchok Tiechtel of the Center for Jewish Awareness in Nashville often encourages Jews and non-Jews alike to begin their days with prayer. "It can be as simple as saying, 'Thank you for another day of life.' "

Tiechtel said, "No prayer, if said with a sincere heart, goes unanswered."

That's what Jennifer Tillman believes she's been doing - sincerely praying for a child.

The Springfield woman, who has attended Cedar Hill Methodist Church for most of her life, says her prayers for a child have not been answered with a pregnancy of her own.

"We have spent all of our money on fertility doctors, ovulation kits and negative pregnancy kits," she said.

She still believes her dreams will be realized.

"My mother told me never to pray for material things ? you shouldn't pray for winning the lottery," she said. "I was taught to pray for strength or for insight on how to handle problems."

Recently, she and her husband learned they may be able to adopt a child. When she met the birth mother, Tillman felt that her long wait may be coming to an end.

"I realized that day that the problem I have had with prayers is that I expected instant gratification," Tillman said. "We all have to step back and realize that all prayers are answered in his time and in his way."