

Community Approaches for Advancing Faith in the Tri-State Region

A Christ-Centered Living White Paper



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Welborn Baptist
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Introduction

The Christian faith is built upon this truth: Jesus Christ, the Son of God was crucified and resurrected so that each of us may have eternal life through a personal relationship with Him. As a natural outgrowth of this relationship, believers desire to model Christ's character in practical ways. Communities benefit as more residents fully embrace this Christian gospel message and embody Christ's sacrificial love and generosity.

For more than 15 years, Welborn Baptist Foundation (the Foundation) has invested, in total, over \$10 million in Christian faith-based nonprofits across 14 counties. These nonprofits, along with many self-sacrificing staff and volunteers, have helped meet critical needs of residents in the Indiana, Illinois and Kentucky funding region.

The Foundation refined its grantmaking approach in March 2016 and has identified Christ-Centered Living as one of several key Community Impact areas for funding. The Foundation believes that investing in nonprofits that promote Christ-Centered Living will help create **community change** in the following ways:

- More people will hear and embrace salvation through a personal relationship with Jesus Christ
- More people will reorient their lives around Christ through discipleship
- More people will impact their environment as an outgrowth of their Christian faith

The Foundation supports the work of faith-based nonprofits through three main **priorities**:

Gospel Received

Increasing opportunities for evangelism; sharing the Christian message with all

Gospel Learned

Increasing opportunities for discipleship, learning and mentoring among Christians

Gospel Lived

Increasing coordinated opportunities to meet community needs through giving and service

This paper observes trends, both nationally and locally, that paint a picture of the current spiritual climate and underscore the tangible role that faith can play in the 14-county region the Foundation serves. In addition, it identifies faith-based initiatives and practices of organizations effectively meeting needs in their communities. By augmenting theological data with examples, this paper provides information to help community leaders and churches of various denominations come together, maximize their local impact and improve social issues.



The Local State of Faith

A strategy for Christ-centered living is informed by both an understanding of an area's critical needs, and its local faith identity. Studies of the region, such as the Foundation's 2015 Tri-State Health Survey, show that issues like mental health, substance abuse and weight-related chronic disease, among others, are region-wide concerns. In addition, available data suggests that there are impoverished and disadvantaged zones in particular neighborhoods and rural areas. ^[1]



In an effort to learn more about the local faith identity, the Foundation commissioned a study by the Barna Group. The religion research firm conducted 1,828 interviews among residents of Vanderburgh and Warrick Counties in Indiana, and Henderson County, Kentucky. This 2016 survey offers a custom portrait of both the demographics and theolographics (the spiritual beliefs and practices of a people group) of these three counties, which represent nearly 60 percent of the entire population of the 14 counties in which the Foundation focuses its investments.

Among other findings, the report reveals that religion is an important part of residents' lives. On several points, residents of these counties are more religious than U.S. adults overall. Just over six in 10 U.S. adults on average strongly agree that their religious faith is very important in their lives (62%), while roughly three in four residents from each of these three counties say the same. The proportion of residents who self-identify as Christian is on par with the national average (82%), though certain minority groups are even more likely to identify as Christian; close to 94 percent of the Tri-State's black residents specify this faith affiliation. More than seven in 10 of self-identified Christians say they are absolutely committed to Christianity, compared to just over five in 10 nationally. Similarly, local believers are less likely than average to classify as casual Christians (62% vs. 73% nationally) and are at least twice as likely as the average American to be captive Christians.

As this paper will explore in more detail, residents' religious engagement usually extends to church attendance and spiritual practice. More than four in 10 in the three counties attend church weekly, and of those with a denominational affiliation, most (70%) commit to one for the long-term. Four in five say they have prayed outside of church within the past seven days, and more than half have read the Bible in that timeframe. Although in many respects faith engagement is higher than average in these three counties, the proportions of those with an overall active faith are on par with or just slightly above the national average (33% vs 30% nationally).

Wide spiritual generational gaps remain. In contrast to the region's general religiosity, those under 40 are significantly more likely to be non-Christian than their over 40 counterparts (~31% vs. ~8%), a larger generational gap than the national average (26% vs. 14%). In turn, Millennials represent a higher proportion of the unchurched in these three counties than the national average.

Still, the region is ripe for spiritual development and compassion initiatives. Nearly all Christians in the region say they have a responsibility to help meet the needs of other people as a part of their faith (96%). Half of practicing Christians have volunteered at a church in the past week (50%, exceeding 46% of U.S. practicing Christians), and more than a quarter have done so at a nonprofit (27%). (In fact, volunteering is an activity practiced by numerous residents of these

* Terms for theolographics and faith segments appear in underlined text. Please refer to the glossary at the end of this paper for full definitions.



counties; for example, nearly one-third [31%] report giving of their time to a church in a given week, compared to almost one in five nationally [19%].)

Local Christians often give of their finances as well (85%, compared to 57% of non-Christians), and in significant amounts. When asked about their total donations to all churches, religious organizations and other nonprofit organizations during the previous year, the median amount reported among self-identified Christians was \$500—far greater than the median of \$30 given by non-Christians.

Beyond spreading charity, a majority of Christians in these counties also report explicitly spreading their faith. Together, these findings highlight opportunities for local organizations and churches to connect discipleship with meeting community needs. They also point to an engaged segment of local Christians who could readily support and be a part of those efforts.

The Church's Role in a Community

On a national scale, it should be encouraging that, in spite of cultural headwinds, a large majority of practicing Christians in the U.S.—93 percent, according to Barna—believe their faith is still a force for good. As evidenced by the data on volunteering and donating money, many are altruistically backing up that belief, nationally and locally. ^[2]

Christian generosity has a far-reaching economic impact as well. On a national level, one study estimates that congregations, charities, institutions and businesses in the religious sector contribute \$1.2 trillion (a conservative estimate, the study's authors say) each year. This amount exceeds the combined revenues of the country's top 10 technology companies, including brands like Apple and Google, and matches that of the 15th largest national economy in the world. ^[3]

It's clear that Christians are leading the charge in contributing to the flourishing of their communities, a fact reflected in the typically warm public perception of local churches. Half of U.S. adults say it's "very favorable" and another 30 percent say it's "somewhat favorable" to have a church in a community; that's eight out of 10 Americans who see churches as beneficial to their surrounding areas. The caveat, however, is that, for the most part, people prefer that a church focus on the physical needs of a community—such as providing food for the hungry, shelter for the homeless or activities for teens—rather than spiritual needs, like teaching the Bible or instilling morals and values.

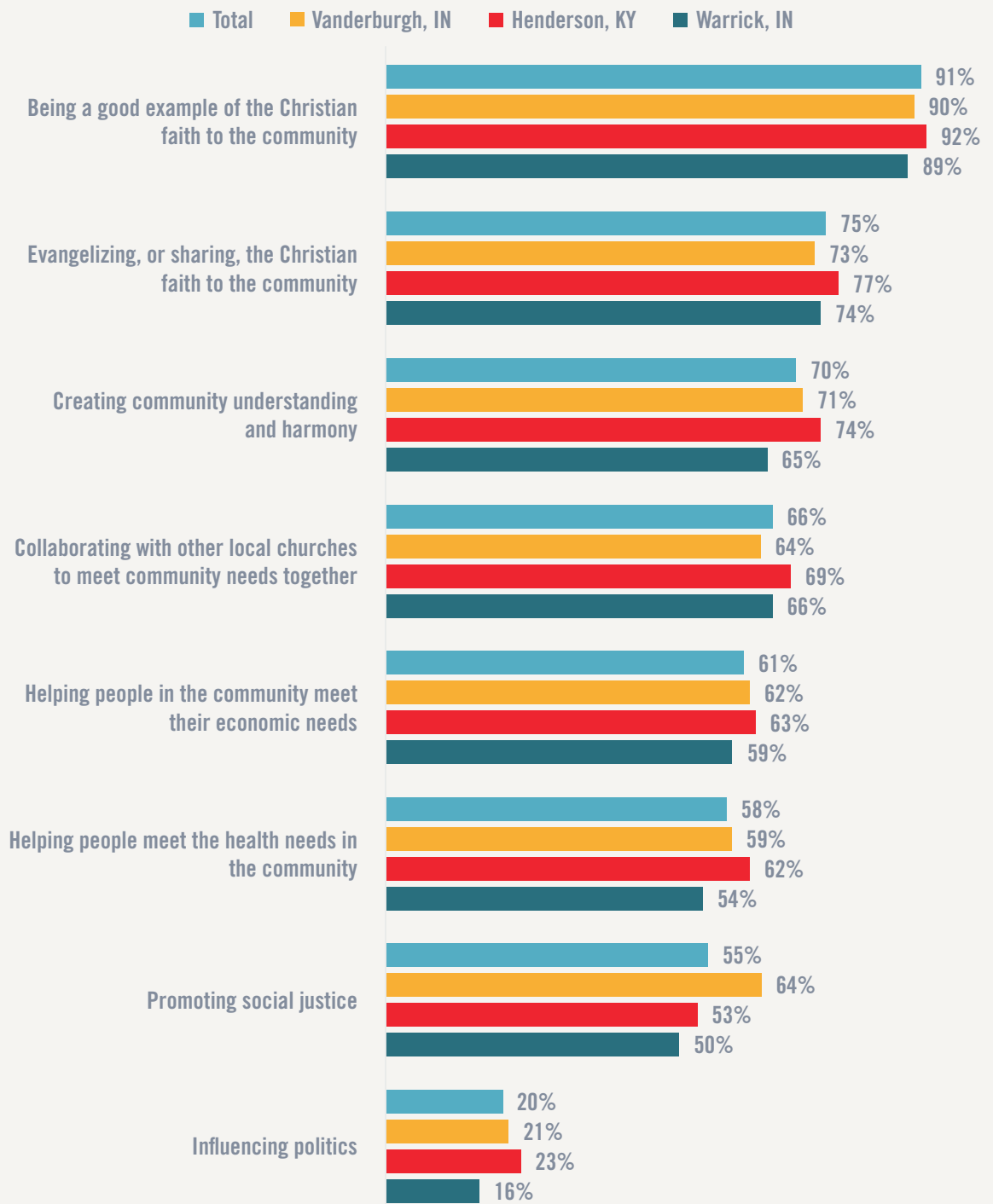
In the separate survey of Vanderburgh, Henderson and Warrick counties, the theolographics may indicate a little more openness to all that the church has to offer, both practically and spiritually—and active Christians feel that responsibility. Barna presented church members with a list of ways that Christian churches can influence their communities and asked them to indicate how important it was to them, personally, that their church take on these particular roles in the community. Across the board, church members believe it is most important for churches to be a good example of the Christian faith to the community. Nine in 10 say this is very important, and nearly all agree it is at least somewhat important (91% and 98% respectively). Other church roles that church members consider highly important include evangelizing, creating community understanding and harmony and collaborating with other local churches to meet community needs together.

Overall, church members in the three counties find it least important for the church they attend to play a role in promoting social justice (55%) or influencing politics (20%). Among minority populations, however, promoting social justice is of greater priority; 68 percent of church members black residents say that promoting social justice should be a very important role of the church they attend.



'VERY IMPORTANT' ROLES OF THE CHURCH IN THE COMMUNITY

Base: church adults



Christ-centered living is a welcome answer to a felt need of the counties reached by the Foundation, where many are open to being recipients of, or participants in, a full representation of the Christian faith. The following sections specifically explore what it looks like to receive, learn and live the gospel in this local context.

Gospel Received: Making a Pervasive Message Powerful

In the local Barna survey, those who see evangelism as a vital purpose of their local church also tend to take their individual witness seriously; 84 percent of this group say it is very important that they, too, share Christianity with their community. Interestingly, the percentage of Christian Millennials who feel this conviction is the highest of any generation (90%).

Even among the region's general population, more than two-thirds (67%) agree at least somewhat that they have a responsibility to tell other people about their religious beliefs—close to the percentage of Christians who actually report sharing their faith with a friend in the past week (64%). These endeavors less frequently extend beyond peer groups, however; just one-third witnessed to strangers in the same timeframe (34%), suggesting many need extra motivation or opportunities to reach beyond their existing social circles.

The data indicates that most local Christians were raised with their religious identity. Among self-identified Christians, just over one in seven say they changed their religious beliefs at some point during their lives and indicated there was a time when they did not identify as Christian (15%). Among those who identify as having a faith other than Christianity, however, it's more likely that they subscribed to this religion (or lack thereof) later; approximately three in five have changed their religious beliefs in the past (63%).

Overall, more than three out of five residents qualify as *born again* Christians (62%), and of these, 85 percent say their religious beliefs have never changed. Notably, however, unchurched residents are much more likely than average to also qualify as *born again Christians*, rather than *notional Christians*—indicating that while many may feel and profess a continued devotion to Christ, it doesn't always manifest in their routines and behaviors for the long-term. A robust plan for personal and collective discipleship could deepen beliefs into disciplines, actions and, ultimately, community transformation.

Gospel Learned: Nurturing Relational Approaches to Discipleship

How do Christians want to be discipled? Which discipleship strategies and programs are effective? These are questions that must be answered by churches and faith groups seeking holistic, Christ-centered community change. These questions also shaped a 2015 nationwide study by Barna, conducted in partnership with The Navigators. The research revealed that most U.S. Christians are not involved in any sort of discipleship activity, and a primary hurdle is their schedule. Most church leaders—85 percent—identify busy lifestyles as a hindrance to spiritual growth, and one-quarter of practicing Christians (23%) agree, naming busyness as a significant barrier. This could be complicated by the fact that, of the nine in 10 Christians who feel spiritual growth is important, a plurality are not looking for outside support; 37 percent say that their preferred method of discipleship is on their own, as opposed to with a group (25%), one-on-one (16%) or a mixed approach (21%). One in four (23%) are being personally discipled, and just one in five (19%) are actively discipling someone else. This same sample also primarily considers their spiritual life as entirely private (41%). (A marked contrast to this siloed perspective emerges among black Christians, however, who are more likely than white Christians to practice and express discipleship in relationship.)^[4]



Meanwhile, church leaders in the U.S. favor a communal picture of discipleship; they name small groups as the most effective method (52%), followed by one-on-one discipleship (29%). Thus, those ministering to Christians in Vanderburgh, Henderson and Warrick counties should be encouraged that discipling through mentorship persists as a common option. Among local practicing Christians, more than half (54%) say they have provided discipleship to another Christian in the past week.

There are any number of ways that leaders can promote intentional, accountable discipleship. For example, Barna's research has shown that participation in a college ministry can be a catalyst for one-on-one mentorship, and connections with family members, church attendees or a Bible study / small group are some of the most impactful on individual spiritual journeys. Further, an organization's discipleship resources and activities shouldn't be confined to the church, but should reach into the workplace, neighborhoods, social media and beyond, in an effort to break through the hectic schedules and isolated routines that can distract from healthy, long-term spiritual growth.

Gospel Lived: Transforming Communities with Centered-Set Thinking

In his book *To Transform a City*, Eric Swanson offers a framework for Christ-centered living that holds evangelism and justice in tandem. "As we define community transformation, it is important that we recognize that this type of transformation involves the conversion of individuals, but it goes beyond that. ... Individual transformation is a partner to community transformation, not a substitute for it." This, Swanson explains, is true "Kingdom work."^[5]

Further, Swanson leans on Fuller Seminary missiologist Paul Hiebert's definitions of bounded-set and centered-set thinking to establish a model for effective community transformation. A bounded-set thinker partners only with those who share the same beliefs or doctrines. Meanwhile, a centered-set thinker partners with those who share the same causes and concerns. This opens the door for leaders in churches, governments, nonprofits and businesses to come alongside one another. Each critical need a community faces acts as a platform around which a centered-set initiative can be formed.

For example, the Foundation has historically been in favor of centered-set approaches to complex issues and has been a key driver in two platform areas. First, the Foundation was at the helm of an initiative to reduce obesity related chronic diseases, and is now one of many partners addressing health and well-being issues through a multi-sector group called the Healthy Communities Partnership. HCP works together with the goal of driving **healthy eating and active living** policy, systems and environmental changes in Vanderburgh County to address childhood obesity. Additionally, the Foundation has been an integral organization at the local and Indiana state level in the promotion of quality **early childhood learning** experiences. Due to the collective efforts of business leaders, schools, non-profits, state legislature and other advocacy organizations, as well as the Foundation CEO's investment as chair of the Indiana Early Learning Advisory Committee, Indiana has funded a pilot scholarship program in select locations. As a result, virtually all 4-year-olds in extreme poverty in Vanderburgh County (95%) are currently receiving high quality care.

These are ways that centered-set efforts can influence community change. Sharing common concerns and having similar passions can create tremendous rapport between residents of various beliefs and backgrounds. "This allows people of good faith and people of goodwill to work together," Swanson says.

Numerous examples of this kind of centered-set thinking with a core emphasis on the Christian faith are found in communities around the country. One such example is For Charlotte, a network in Charlotte, North Carolina. Their decentralized vision stemmed from the realization that



multiple churches in their city were attempting missional engagement, yet remained divided due to factors like denomination, doctrine or demographics. “Instead of competing with each other for people and resources, we asked the question, *What if we worked together to seek the good of our city?*” their website states.

They now invite churches to join networks built around neighborhoods or specific causes, which in turn collaborate with other local groups and leaders. For example, through For Charlotte, a church can choose to connect with other congregations concerned about the upward mobility crisis in Charlotte. Together, these churches cooperate with strategies of the Charlotte Mecklenburg Opportunity Task Force, a city-wide response to a Harvard University and U.C. Berkeley study of the upward mobility for children living in cities—a study in which Charlotte ranked 50th out of the 50 largest U.S. metropolitan areas. Church leaders with For Charlotte ensure the faith community will be an instrumental part of improving economic mobility of young people in their city.

As Barna president David Kinnaman and Q founder Gabe Lyons write in their book *Good Faith*, it is “disarmingly powerful when churches serve their communities in unexpected ways,” especially in contrast to the public ideas that modern Christianity is irrelevant. “Whether it’s throwing a prom for special-needs teens, providing practical and relational resources for homeless people, caring for children whose parents are struggling financially or emotionally, hosting weekend camps so high school students can hear the truth about Jesus, coaching immigrant students in English literacy, bringing diverse leaders together to stem the tide of racism in our communities, supporting moms-to-be who don’t have a husband or sharing our personal stories of salvation with friends and neighbors—these and countless others are the reconciling, proclaiming, restorative, outward-facing activities of a good faith church.”^[6]



COMMUNITY TRANSFORMATION EXAMPLES

CityServe Portland Portland, Oregon

Sparked by an overwhelming volunteer response following an evangelistic “season of service” in 2008, CityServe exists to connect churches to Portland’s most critical needs. Since then, its initiatives have become long-term and spread nationwide. With a deeply theological vision, CityServe Portland address seven key issues in the city: school partnerships, homelessness, health and wellness, foster care, hunger, human trafficking and street and gang violence.

City Unite Denver, Colorado

City Unite depends on the cross-sector partnership of church, business and government leaders. Individuals called “City Connectors” help organize, drive change and build relationships in defined geographic areas. These collaborations have resulted in programs covering neighborhood rehabilitation, block parties, crisis response teams, police chaplaincy and more. Volunteer days and community involvement coaching also help local entrepreneurs and employees integrate service into their professional life.

Focused Community Strategies Atlanta, Georgia

Since 1978, FCS has taken a neighborhood-focused approach to reaching under-resourced areas of Atlanta, with a current focus on Historic South Atlanta. Food co-ops, toy drives, affordable housing options and even a bike shop are just a few of the ways the organization empowers local neighborhoods to thrive. Through the Lupton Center, a training and consulting division, FSC passes on the knowledge it has gained in four decades of charity, offering seminars and resources to equip other practitioners for healthy community development.





Conclusion

Drawing from the data and anecdotes explored in this paper, the following action points and prompts may reveal local collaborative opportunities for Christ-centered living strategies:

Turn existing conviction into active evangelism.

The data indicates some disconnect between strongly held convictions and active sharing of faith. Consider “out of the box” approaches to evangelism, such as special consideration to under-reached groups (e.g., residents under 40). How might you reach out to those in such groups with an approach that addresses their life stage, needs and concerns?

Explore new models of community transformation.

How might a centered-set initiative ultimately serve your mission? What would it look like? Research critical needs that fall within your group’s interest or expertise. Then, identify other like-minded or like-committed advocates addressing that need. Whether or not they are already in your sphere of influence, or even your particular faith community, consider partnering with them on a passion project, participating in round tables, sharing resources or, at the least, inviting dialogue.

Meet residents where they are.

Research shows the communities of these counties have rich, enduring ties to Christianity, and sincere intentions to represent their faith well. What might keep people from deepening these convictions through church attendance, spiritual growth or community engagement? Consider how you can address barriers like busy schedules, rural locations, lack of education, limited finances, generational divides, biblical illiteracy and so on.

Point out direct ties between the practical and the spiritual.

In your church, organization or team, ground beliefs in actions and actions in beliefs. For every campaign or project undertaken, develop a Bible study or prayer list surrounding that topic. Consider making them available to the public or other partners. On the other hand, as faith leaders, aim to anchor scripture passages or Christian messaging with opportunities for tangible impact.

Equip eager believers and volunteers.

Half of local church adults (50%) think it’s very important that they assume a personal role in collaborating with other people or the church to meet community needs together. How can your organization keep in touch with and deploy these faithful individuals for the greater good of the region?

Among the prophecies in the Book of Isaiah is the image of “a new heavens and a new earth”—God’s ultimate goal. The passage describes a joyful people who know the security and blessing of long life, safe shelter, plentiful food and healthy families (Isaiah 65:17–25). Scripture also charges Christians to invite God’s will “on earth as it is in heaven” (Matthew 6:10), to act justly, love mercy and walk humbly (Micah 6:8) and to aspire to Christ’s final earthly command to share his gospel with all creation (Mark 16:15). As Jesus is quoted, “Freely you have received, freely give” (Matthew 10:8).

Evangelism, discipleship and putting faith into action—though each complex and consuming objectives—are best as interconnected aims, despite well-meaning attempts from within and outside the Church to separate them. Good works and “Good News” enhance one another as believers choose to confidently declare, relationally nourish and tangibly express the Christian faith.



Glossary

ACTIVE FAITH refers to respondents who report participating in *all* of the following in the past seven days: attending a church service, not including a special event such as a wedding or a funeral; praying to God; and reading from the Bible, not including at a church or synagogue

BORN AGAIN CHRISTIANS are self-identified Christians who have made a personal commitment to Jesus that is still important in their lives today and believe that, when they die, they will go to heaven because they have confessed their sins and accepted Jesus Christ as their savior.

CASUAL CHRISTIANS consider themselves Christian but do not meet the criteria for Captive Christian.

CAPTIVE CHRISTIANS consider themselves Christian, describe themselves as very committed to the Christian faith, read from the Bible outside of a church service in the past week, prayed to God within the past week, attended church within the past week, say their religious faith is very important in their life today, hold an orthodox view of God (“God is all powerful, all-knowing, perfect creator of the universe who rules the world today”), have made a personal commitment to Jesus Christ and believe they will go to heaven because they have confessed their sins and accepted Jesus as their savior.

CHURCHED ADULTS are those who have attended a church service in the past six months.

NO FAITH choose “atheist,” “agnostic,” or “none” from a list of religious affiliations.

NON–BORN AGAIN (OR NOTIONAL) CHRISTIANS are self-identified Christians who do not qualify as born again.

PRACTICING CHRISTIANS are self-identified Christians who say their faith is very important in their lives and have attended a worship service within the past month.

SELF-IDENTIFIED CHRISTIANS (sometimes called “all Christians” or just “Christians”) choose “Christian” from a list of religious affiliations.

UNCHURCHED ADULTS are those who have not attended a church service, other than a special event such as a wedding or funeral, in the past six months.

Methodology for 2016 Barna Community Faith Survey

Barna Group designed a survey to be conducted via phone interviews, including both landline and cell phone interviews, of adults living in Vanderburgh County, Indiana; Henderson County, Kentucky; and Warrick County, Indiana. In addition, the Foundation included a set of custom questions which are unique to the area. A total of 1,828 interviews were conducted from February 5 to March 4, 2016. Interviews were evenly split between the three counties: 612 were conducted in Vanderburgh County; 615 in Henderson County; and 601 in Warrick County. The sample error for each county is approximately +/- 4 percent points at the 95 percent confidence level. Minimal statistical weighting was applied based on known population percentages, according to the Census Bureau for the following: age, ethnicity, gender, education and county.





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Welborn Baptist Foundation

The Welborn Baptist Foundation offers support to nonprofits that share the Christian gospel message as part of their programs and services, as well as to faith-based centered-set initiatives pursuing community transformation through strategic collaboration. To learn more about the Foundation and its funding opportunities, visit www.welbornfdn.org.