

1 in 3 Presbyterians Affirm Jesus as Only Way to Salvation

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The latest "Religious and Demographic Profile of Presbyterians" report, released by the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), shows that two in five (39 percent) members agree or strongly agree that "only followers of Jesus Christ can be saved." Fewer pastors (35 percent) agree or strongly agree. Meanwhile, 45 percent of elders at least agree.

Among members, only 43 percent disagree or strongly disagree that "all the world's religions are equally good ways of helping a person find ultimate truth."

At the same time, majorities of members (60 percent), elders (68 percent), and pastors (66 percent) at least agree that "the only absolute truth for humankind is in Jesus Christ."

The findings are from the initial survey of the 2009-2011 Presbyterian Panel. Questionnaires were sent to more than 5,000 Presbyterians in the PC(USA) in October and November 2008. Those who responded will serve on the panel for three years. The first panel was created in 1973 to collect information about the practices, beliefs, and opinions from both clergy and laity.

Results of the most recent survey come as the PC(USA) experiences continued losses in membership. A number of congregations have left over the past decade with some citing disagreement with the 2001 decision by the denomination's highest legislative body not to affirm the "singular" saving Lordship of Jesus Christ. Though in 2002 the General Assembly adopted the language, it left out a critical statement: "Although we do not know the limits of God's grace and pray for the salvation of those who may never come to know Christ, for us the assurance of salvation is found only in confessing Christ and trusting Him alone."

Although salvation through Jesus Christ is true for the Presbyterians, they can't say that it's true for everybody, the Rev. Dr. D. Dean Weaver, who leads a network of dissident Presbyterians, has noted.

Another issue that has rocked the PC(USA) is the ordination of partnered homosexuals.

The denomination's 173 presbyteries are considering a proposal to delete the requirement that clergy live in "fidelity within the covenant of marriage between a man and a woman, or chastity in singleness."

According to the Presbyterian Panel, nearly 40 percent of members and nearly half of pastors reject the proposal. A simple majority vote by presbyteries is needed to defeat the proposal and early poll numbers show the required majority has already been filled.

Other results from the PC(USA) survey show that one in six members and fewer ministers believe the Bible is to be taken literally, word for word. Forty-six percent of members and 61 percent of pastors say the Bible is the word of God, to be interpreted in the light of its historical and cultural context. Around one in three lay people and pastors say the Bible is the word of God, to be interpreted in the light of its historical context and Church teachings.

Notably, less than half of members (44 percent) say they had a "conversion experience," or when they experienced a turning point in their life by committing themselves to Christ.

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