

Religion Notes | Ari L. Goldman

■ Churchgoers switch allegiance ■ Rabbis back organ donors ■ New book in Cuba: the Bible.

Peripatetic Churchgoers

Nearly all surveys of American churchgoing habits show that roughly 40 percent of Americans attend church once a week. Despite slight blips at times of crises, like the Persian Gulf war, when church attendance rose, the number has hovered at 40 percent for decades.

How is it, then, that some churches and denominations report great new growth and crowded churches? Where do these people come from?

According to a new national survey by the Barna Research Group, marketing researchers in Glendale, Calif., the growth can be attributed to regular churchgoers' movement from one church to another, or even from one denomination to another.

Nearly a third of respondents — 31 percent — in the new survey said they had belonged to the same church for five years or less, with 10 percent of them belonging for a year or less. But the survey also shows that many people stick with a church for the long run. Thirty-four percent said they had belonged to the same church for 20 years or more.

The findings came in a sample of 1,005 adults conducted in January and February 1991. The margin of sampling error was plus or minus three percentage points.

George Barna, president of the research firm, said the large number of new church members reflected a changing religious environment. "It used to be that people who were baptized in one denomination probably would spend their whole lives in churches of that denomination," he said. "People are more open to changing churches today."

When people move to a new city, they may select a church on a variety of criteria, only one of them being denomination, Mr. Barna said. "The same is true for someone who is unhappy or unfulfilled in their current church," he said. "Today they're more likely to try the church across the street, or down the road, even if it's of a different denomination."

Ruling on Transplants

In its continuing effort to apply traditional Jewish teaching to modern life, the largest group of Orthodox rabbis in the world has formally endorsed the donation of organs from brain-dead patients.

The action was taken at the 55th anniversary convention of the group, the Rabbinical Council of America, which concluded Thursday in Spring Glen, N.Y. The position puts the 1,000-member group at odds with some other Orthodox authorities, who are opposed to organ transplants because

they do not accept the end of brain functioning as death.

The council's approval came in a key paragraph of a "health-care proxy" prepared by the Orthodox rabbis in response to new Federal guidelines, which take effect next December, that require every health-care provider to make available a health-care proxy to patients. The new proxy, prepared under the direction of Rabbi Moses Tendler of Yeshiva University, declares that organ transplant procedures are in full compliance with halacha, traditional Jewish law.

The proxy, a document that empowers survivors to make decisions for an incapacitated person, declares: "The saving of a life takes precedence over all but three halachic imperatives: murder, idolatry and adultery. Therefore, no halachic barriers exist to donation of the deceased if they are harvested in accord with the highest standards of dignity and propriety."

It continues: "Since organs that can be life-saving may be donated, the family is urged to do so. When human life can be saved, it must be saved. Cornea transplants that can restore sight to the blind are treated in halacha as life-saving surgery. The halacha therefore looks with great favor on those who facilitate the procurement of life-saving organ donations."

Bibles Return to Cuba

In a sign of increased religious tolerance in Cuba, Bibles are going on sale there for the first time in three decades.

The Cuban news agency Prensa Latina reported this week that 5,000 Bibles were handed over by Cuba's Ecumenical Council to the National Book Institute, a state organization responsible for the distribution of books. The Bibles, printed in Spanish, were donated by the United Bible Societies.

Bibles and religious literature had not been sold openly in Cuba's state bookshops virtually since the 1959 revolution that ended a right-wing dictatorship and eventually introduced Communism to the island.

Protestant and evangelical churches in Cuba grouped in the ecumenical council have recently enjoyed new access to Cuba's state-run news organizations as part of improved relations with the Communist Government. In the last six months, the state radio has broadcast Christmas and Easter services organized by Protestant churches. But relations between the Government and the Roman Catholic hierarchy remain cool.