

House of Worship

Finding spirituality at home.

By **Lisa Miller** | NEWSWEEK

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Seven percent of Americans say they "attend religious services in someone's home." This surprising little fact was buried in a recent survey by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, which showed that Americans are as loosey-goosey in their religious practices as many have long suspected. About a quarter of Americans, according to Pew, believe in astrology. And liberals are more than twice as likely as conservatives to believe in fortune tellers, but just as likely to believe in the evil eye. Go figure.

That 7 percent, though, is a pretty big number, especially for a practice that defies all mainstream conceptions of churchgoing. The number of atheists in America hovers around 6 percent. Jews account for less than 2 percent of the population. For so many Americans to be praying at home is more evidence not just of greater religious pluralism but of what so many Christians have been saying recently: the established ways of worship aren't working anymore. "What's going on is a kind of deinstitutionalization of religious life," says Gary Laderman, professor of American religious history at Emory University and author of *Sacred Matters*.

The first Christian church services were held in people's homes, of course, and living-room prayer meetings have long been staples of Western history and literature. More recently, though, American worship has become industrialized. In the 1980s, the mega-church—with its Wal-Mart approach to spirituality—became a fixture of the suburban landscape, and the megapastor a Christian CEO. Now, says David Kinnaman, president of the Barna research group, many Christians are expressing "disappointment that the congregational models have become so consumeristic." "House church"—also called home church, simple church, or organic church—is "the new expression of hippie Christianity," says Kinnaman. If the megachurch is Budweiser, the house church is a microbrew.

But as with microbrewers, church-goers endlessly dispute the ingredients that make up an authentic house church. Do friends who pray together at a breakfast meeting qualify? Does a house church have to have a liturgy, elders, protocols, a bulletin? Is attendance in addition to, or instead of, "regular" church? Steve Atkerson, formerly a Southern Baptist pastor who has helped found dozens of house churches in Tennessee and Georgia, believes that even microchurches need authority (elders) and discipline. What sets them apart is the family atmosphere: the potluck supper at which the bread and wine are served—and, above all, the expectation that every member contribute prayers, teachings, and songs. (Based in the heart of the Bible Belt, however, Atkerson's church disallows teaching by women.) People drawn to house churches, he says, are similar to those drawn to home schooling: they mistrust authority and institutional hierarchy.

A world away, in the cities of the intellectual elites, progressive Roman Catholics devoted to social justice

work are also starting home churches (for a full list, go to intentionaleucharisticcommunities.org). Still bruised by sex scandals and disenchanted with their bishops, these Catholics gather to celebrate the eucharist with the help of a priest. The dress is casual and participation is intense, says Catholic University professor William D'Antonio, who belongs to such a congregation in suburban Washington, D.C. "Everybody knows the mass. And while we're small, the singing is hearty. The thing you would notice most of all is the fact that it takes so long to complete the kiss of peace." In these communities, women are given crucial and visible roles.

I reached Robert Putnam, the Harvard Kennedy School professor, as he was busy finishing his new book, *American Grace*. Due out this fall, it explores the phenomenon of "the nones": the growing numbers of Americans—16 percent, by Pew's last count—who call themselves "unaffiliated." Putnam sees microchurches as smart marketing by people who want to pull the disillusioned back into the fold. "There's going to be a new set of religious entrepreneurs, leaders," he says. "I'll bet you my firstborn that [megapastor] Rick Warren is looking at the same numbers I am and trying to pull his church in this direction." What's happening to church has already happened not just to beer, but to food, magazines, and music. As people reject a one-size-fits-all approach, they're yearning for a church that's more homemade.

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