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John B. Weaver Dr
Abilene Christian University

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ATLA as Community of Faith: Surveying Members' Relationship to Religious Faith and ATLA

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Dr. John B. Weaver
Abilene Christian University

In May 2015, I composed an online survey, entitled "ATLA as a Community of Faith" (hereafter "Community Survey") and distributed it to ATLA's 519 members using contact information from the access-restricted membership directory on the ATLA website. This included 359 individual members, 88 lifetime members, and 72 student members. 220 respondents participated in the Community Survey (n=220), for a 61% response rate. These numbers are approximately the same as the number of members who were surveyed with a different instrument: the official ATLA Membership survey in 2015 (hereafter "Membership Survey"). The ATLA staff provided the results of the Membership Survey for purposes of this presentation.

When compared to the Membership Survey, the Community Survey reflects a similar profile of the personal qualities of the ATLA membership. This comparison is useful for demonstrating that the Community Survey is a relatively accurate representation of the membership. For example, according to both surveys, the ATLA membership has slightly more women than men (~54% female, ~46% men). The majority of the membership is 55 years or older (~55% in in both surveys). Younger decades of 45-54 and 35-44 both have approximately 18% of the membership, with 25-34 year olds making up 9-11% of the membership, according to both surveys. In both the Membership Survey and the Community Survey, participation among members under 25 was one-half of one percent (0.5%). What these numbers indicated is that the ATLA membership is still predominantly populated by the baby boomer generation, with over half the membership eligible to receive Social Security benefits within the next five years.

Respondents to the Community Survey were 93.8% white. 2.4% were Asian or Pacific Islander. 1.4% were Black or African American. 2.4% were Hispanic. 0% were Native American or Alaska Native. 0% were other. These numbers are all similar to the results in the 2015 Membership survey: 89.8% whites, 3.9% Asian or Pacific Islander, 1.9% Hispanic/Latino, 2.9% Black or African American, 0% Native American or Alaska Native, 0% Other.

A significant majority of respondents identified as theological librarians in both the Membership Survey (68%) and the Community Survey (73%). In both surveys,

academic/university/college librarians were 15% of the population, with approximately 4% reporting as students in both surveys.

In both surveys, approximately one-third of respondents had been members of ATLA for 20 or more years; 1/3 were members for 5-20 years; and 1/3 were members for less than 5 years. This distribution of tenure could be interpreted in a number of ways, but seems to signal a fairly even distribution of membership tenure, with highest concentration at the beginning and ending years of membership.

The Community Survey then proceeded asked a set of questions that focused on the ATLA member’s “personal relationship to faith.”

As a membership identifying with particular religions and denominations, 10% of the membership did not identify with a specific religion or denomination, with 3.5% identifying with a non-Christian religion, the remaining 86.5% of respondents identifying with a specific Christian denomination. The membership of ATLA remains overwhelmingly Christian in self-identification.

What is your religion/denomination, if any?		
	Response Percent	Response Count
Non/Unaffiliated	10.0%	20
Anglican/Episcopalian	16.4%	33
Baptist	10.0%	20
Brethren	0.5%	1
Christian and Missionary Alliance	1.5%	3
Church of the Nazarene	1.5%	3
Churches of Christ - Christian Churches	4.0%	8
Interdenominational/multidenominational	3.5%	7
Lutheran	10.0%	20
Mennonite	2.5%	5
Methodist	10.0%	20
Nondenominational	5.0%	10
Orthodox	1.5%	3
Pentecostal	0.5%	1
Presbyterian	9.5%	19
Reformed	2.0%	4
Roman Catholic	10.9%	22
Seventh-day Adventist	1.0%	2
Unitarian Universalist	0.5%	1
United Church of Canada	1.0%	2
United Church of Christ	0.5%	1
Mormon/Latter Day Saints	0.5%	1
Buddhist	1.5%	3
Jewish	0.5%	1
Hindu	0.5%	1
Muslim	0.0%	0
New Religious Movements	0.5%	1
Uniting Church	0.5%	1
Mixed Jewish/Protestant	0.5%	1
Evangelical Free Church of America	0.5%	1
Congregational NACCC	0.5%	1
Missionary Church	0.5%	1
Atheist	0.5%	1

The first unique question in the Community Survey mirrors a question asked in the 2013 American Religious Identification Survey (ARIS),¹ which surveyed 1,873 college-age students from different regions, and asked the following question: “In general would you describe yourself more as a religious, spiritual or secular person?” This provides for a comparison of the ATLA membership to one recent survey of college students, who are broadly identified as members of the millennial generation. The results indicate that ATLA membership is more than twice as “religious” (67.3% vs. 31.8%) as the college-aged respondents, and one-quarter as “secular” (7.1% vs. 28.2%). Significantly fewer ATLA members identified as “spiritual” (22.% vs 32.4%) and “uncertain” (3.3% vs 7.7%) in comparison to the ARIS survey. A significant majority, therefore, of ATLA membership is religious, and three-quarters identify as religious or spiritual. Correspondingly, the ATLA membership is significantly less “secular” than the college population addressed in the ARIS survey.

When the responses are sorted by gender, we observe that 75% of men and 60% of women identified as “religious.” 15% of men and 28% of women identified as “spiritual.”

The next two questions on the Community Survey inquired about past and present attendance at religious services. 88% of ATLA members reported that they regularly attended religious services as a child. 82% regularly attend religious services at the present time.

The next question asked, “Do you consider your work as a librarian to be very important to your religious service?” 70% responded “yes,” 15% responded “no,” 5% were “not sure,” and 10% considered the question “not applicable.” When responses are cross-referenced to the job role of the respondents, we find that 74% of theological librarians responding “yes” to this question. 60% of all women responded “yes.” 83% of all men responded “yes.”

When asked to explain their response, those responding “yes” frequently applied the word “vocation” to their understanding of their work as a librarian. One respondent observed, “ATLA is special in the way that it combines faith and librarianship.” Among those who responded “no,” multiple respondents stated that being a librarian is a job, and they either don’t do religious service, or their ministry is directed elsewhere.

A third set of questions asked about the ATLA Annual Conference.

“How regularly do you attend the annual ATLA conference?” 47% responded always or almost always; 19% responded “most years;” “21% responded “infrequently;” and 13% responded “never.” As this response indicates, most ATLA members have regular experience with the ATLA conference, with two-thirds of them attending the conference at least most years.

“How often have you attended the worship services at the ATLA conferences, when you have attended conference?” 21% responded “always;” 36% responded “often;” 18% responded “rarely;” and 25 responded “never.” This data suggests that attendees to the conference are more likely to always or often go to worship services at the conference (57%), but a significant minority (43%) never or rarely go to the worship services.

When we compare the respondents’ attendance at worship services in everyday life to their attendance at ATLA worship services, we find that 42% of those who do not regularly attend religious services in their everyday life *do* attend ATLA worship services either “always” or “often.” These same respondents who do not regularly attend worship services are, however, much more likely to never attend ATLA worship services (47.22%), in comparison to those who do regularly attend worship services in their everyday life (20%).

Participants in the Community Survey were also asked the following question: “Do you think ATLA should schedule worship services at its conferences as in past years?” 69% responded, “yes, in the same way,” 16% responded “yes, but in different way,” and 15% responded “no.” These responses suggest that an overwhelming majority of members (85%) think that ATLA should continue worship services at the conference.

When asked to explain their responses to this question, those who responded “yes, in the same way” made repeated reference to the value of experiencing other faith traditions, and the continuing appropriateness of having the sessions early in the morning on each day of the conference. Multiple respondents bemoaned the changes in this year’s (2015) conference worship services, arguing specifically for the importance of the memorial service. One respondent observed that we should keep the services the same, but observed that the services are more “liturgical tourism,” rather than genuine worship experiences.

Those who responded “yes, but in a different way,” often did not indicate how the sessions should be done different. Ideas for different approach included: 1) holding the services more regularly in chapels or churches, 2) more emphasis on the sessions as learning experiences taught by religious leaders, and 3) providing a greater variety of Christian and non-Christian traditions. A number of respondents indicated a preference for the approach being taken at the current conference in Denver.

Among those who responded “no” to this question, there was a repeated statement that ATLA is a “professional” association, that it is not “faith-based”, and that the conference should not include worship. Some respondents stated “no” because they felt the worship services were too much “spectator” events, or too “vague” in their religious identification to be meaningful. Some respondents suggested that ATLA should leave times open in the conference schedule for members to arrange worship times, apart from the official programming.

A third and final set of questions was asked about “the nature of ATLA.”

“As you understand it, what type of organization is ATLA?” 51% responded “Professional/Secular;” 49% responded “Theological/Religious.” The results seem to reflect a significant tension in the membership’s understanding regarding the type of organization that ATLA is.

It is noteworthy that responses to this question differed significantly according to the denominational affiliation of the respondent. Among the “non/unaffiliated,” 94% responded that ATLA was professional secular, whereas 85% of Baptists responded that ATLA was theological/religious. 70% of Anglicans said ATLA was professional/secular, whereas 72% of Presbyterians said ATLA was theological/religious. Methodists and Roman Catholics were fairly evenly split on the question.

This difference of understanding is perhaps reflected in the subsequent question, which asked, “How important to the identity and mission of ATLA is the faith commitment of its members, individually or collectively?” 13% responded “most important,” 39% responded “very important,” 34% responded “somewhat important,” and 14% responded “unimportant.” In this way, 52% consider faith commitment most important or very important, while 48% consider it somewhat important or unimportant.

It is noteworthy that the denominational differences related to the question of faith and ATLA, noted above, also are evident in the responses to this question. For example, 85% of Baptists said faith commitment was most important or very important, whereas only 48% of Roman Catholics held this view.

Two other questions in the survey asked about what ATLA should do as an association. First, “Should ATLA actively seek to support graduate theological education, e.g., through databases developed for theological education?” 93% responded “yes,” with 2% responding “no,” and 5% responding “not sure.”

Second, “Should ATLA actively seek to support churches, synagogues, and other religious congregations, e.g., through databases developed for religious community and leadership?” 55% responded “yes;” 1% responded “no;” and 33% responded “not sure.” A comparison of these two questions indicates that the respondents are significantly more supportive of database development for theological education, in comparison to databases for religious communities and leadership, although a majority supports both.

Participants were asked. “What do you expect will be the impact of ongoing demographic changes in religious affiliation on the identity/composition of ATLA over the next ten years? (Choose all that apply).” Among the options provided, the greatest majority (75%) affirmed demographic changes would increase religious diversity of the membership. Only 3% believed that religious diversity would decrease. The second largest differential among responses was between the number that expected Christian participation in ATLA to decrease (21%), and the number that expected Christian participation in ATLA to increase (10%) The number that expected demographic changes to increase overall membership in ATLA (25%), was equivalent to the number that expected overall membership would decline (27%). Similarly, the number that expected

demographic changes to increase Evangelical participation in ATLA (16%), was approximately the same as expected a decrease in Evangelical participation (17%). Other than the expectation that religious diversity will increase, there was no clear consensus among survey participants about how demographic changes will affect the identity and composition of ATLA.

A final question asked, “What is of greater concern to you?” Among the three options, 44% responded, “ATLA will become too secular in its identity and mission.” 15% responded, “ATLA will become too religious or theological in its identity and mission.” 41% responded that “neither is a concern to me.” Responses indicate that, when members are concerned about the secular or religious identity of ACU (which is 59% of the membership), three times as many members are more concerned that ATLA will become too secular, in comparison to those that are concerned that it will become too religious.

When respondents to this final question are differentiated by year of ATLA membership, there is a statistically significant difference among those who have been in ATLA for fewer years (less than 10), and those who have been members longer (ten or more years). The longer-tenured members are approximately twice as likely to be concerned that ATLA will become too secular in its identity and membership. Correspondingly, those who have been in ATLA for two or fewer years are almost twice as concerned that ATLA will become too religious or theological its identity (~26%), when compared to those who have been in ATLA longer than 2 years (~13% average). This data suggests that there is a statistically significant correlation between length of membership in ATLA and tendency to have a concern that ATLA will become too secular.

In review and conclusion, the Community Survey has shown that members of ATLA have different religious beliefs, practices, including non-affiliation. This survey has also provided evidence that the vast majority of the members of ATLA are professing practitioners of the Christian faith.

Respondents to the survey repeatedly observed that ATLA has managed a tension between being both a professional association focused on secular concerns, and also a theological association rooted in the religious practices of our academic communities, or at least the religious communities that our academic communities support and/or study. There was a repeated statement of concern in the survey that ATLA continue to maintain its balance between both inclusivity towards different faiths, and support for the particular faith commitments and practices that are shared by most of the membership. This was described variously as a balance between practice of faith and study of faith, between professional and religious, between service to specific traditions and inclusion of all traditions, between providing opportunities for worship and forcing engagement in an event of worship.

A number of survey respondents stated that future surveys of this type, or other explorations of the religious identity of the ATLA membership, might be important to maintaining the theological balance of ATLA going forward.

Endnote:

1. Barry A Kosmin and Ariela Keysar, *American Religious Identification Survey. Religious, Spiritual and Secular: The emergence of three distinct worldviews among American college students*, September 2013, accessed September 5, 2015:
http://www.trincoll.edu/Academics/centers/issc/Documents/ARIS_2013_College%20Students_Sept_25_final_draft.pdf.