

THE  
**AMERICAN BELIEFS**  
STUDY  
RELIGIOUS PREFERENCES & PRACTICES



April 2022

# Understanding Our Communities

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# Understanding Our Communities

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What have American communities become in the past few years? It has been daunting and humbling to repeat the questions in this broad study of American faith. After all, this edition of our triennial launched in November 2020. That month was marked by a resurgent pandemic, bobbing along in the wake of fearsome social turmoil in the summer of that same year. The authors dared not guess what the answers might be. We were fairly certain the study wouldn't reprise 'Ozzie and Harriet' of the 1950's. At the same time, we prayed we wouldn't see the dystopian 2021 America of the sci-fi classic 'Bladerunner.'

Embedded within the lengthy questionnaire were simple questions on whether Americans worship, and if they do, how they define their faith. We also asked how things have changed in the past ten years, giving us data points for 2007 and 2011 in addition to 2017 and 2021. Some of the results were surprising. Thankfully, the country is nothing like 'Bladerunner' today. But it is clear there won't be a wholesale return to any memorable yesteryear, either.

## Involvement in Communities of Faith

The proportion of Americans participating in a religious congregation or community has slipped by two percentage points to 33% since 2017. (Among professing Christians, participation of any level was somewhat higher at 47%).

Over time, this represents a decline in religious community participation of 12 percentage points since 2007, when 45% of respondents said they were active in a faith community. Taken in real terms, this means that those active in a community of faith in America numbered about 136 million in 2007, and now numbers about 109 million, a loss of 27 million from both natural attrition and those who have fallen away. [See Figure 1.1]

This happened despite the nation's population growing by 30 million people to almost 332 million. Had the proportion of those active in faith remained constant since 2007, America's faith communities would now represent 150 million people.

At this point, 88% of Americans who claim a religion and identify with a faith fellowship participate in that community at least once per month. This is down five percent, from 93% in 2017.

It is quite likely that the pandemic impacted these statistics, despite heroic efforts among local churches to engage their flocks virtually. The biggest impact was among those active weekly or more, which dropped by 11 percent. Those active at least two to three times monthly increased by four percent. At the same time, the share of those active just once a month increased by one percent.

**The chief takeaway here is not only are fewer people active in communities of faith. Those who still engage do so less often than they used to.**

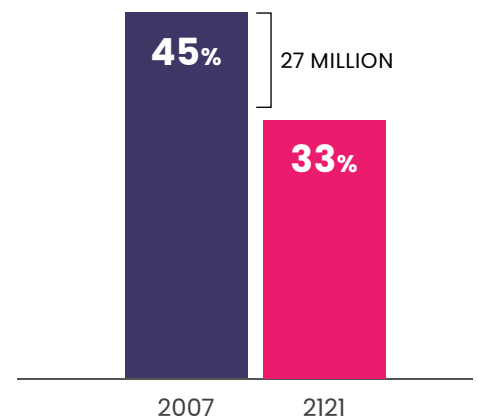
These trends for church affiliation were mirrored by America's overall embrace of belief.

Over the past 10 years, Americans have gravitated away from Christianity in all its forms, including Catholicism. More than two in three preferred Christianity 10 years ago (68% in 2011). Just 64% describe themselves as Christian now. During the same timeframe, the proportion having no religious

— FIGURE 1.1

### SHARE OF AMERICANS IN A RELIGIOUS COMMUNITY NOW AT 33%

27 million participants lost since 2007



Online survey of 14,942 American adults  
Source: 2021 American Beliefs Study

preference has risen from 22% to 26%. Other major world religions in America have experienced a slight growth, rising from 10.1% in 2011 to 10.4% this year. [See Figure 1.2]

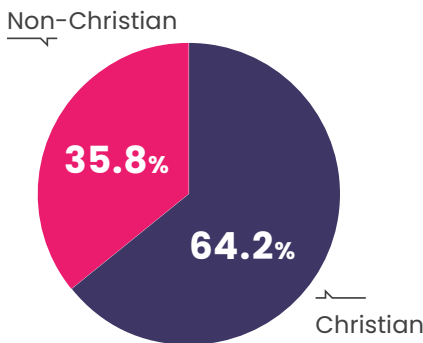
More than half of Americans see themselves as Christian. That's 213.0 million Christians out of a total national population of 331.8 million (mid-2021). That's a big number. America has well over 200 million Christians.

## Fluid Faith in America

— FIGURE 1.2

### NEARLY TWO IN THREE AMERICANS NAME CHRISTIANITY AS THEIR RELIGION

Overall percentage of Americans who self-described religion preference



Online survey of 14,942 American adults  
Source: 2021 American Beliefs Study

In religious demography, researchers talk about “conversions” and “defections.” Every year some people convert to Christianity from another religion or from no religion. Every year some people leave Christianity for another religion or no religion.

**The number of sheep leaving the fold is greater than the number of sheep coming into it.**

This is not just about people attending church less often, drifting away but still believing in Jesus,

and still considering Christianity to be their faith. This is about people saying, “I was a Christian ten years ago, but now I’m not.” In America today, there are more Christian defections than conversions.

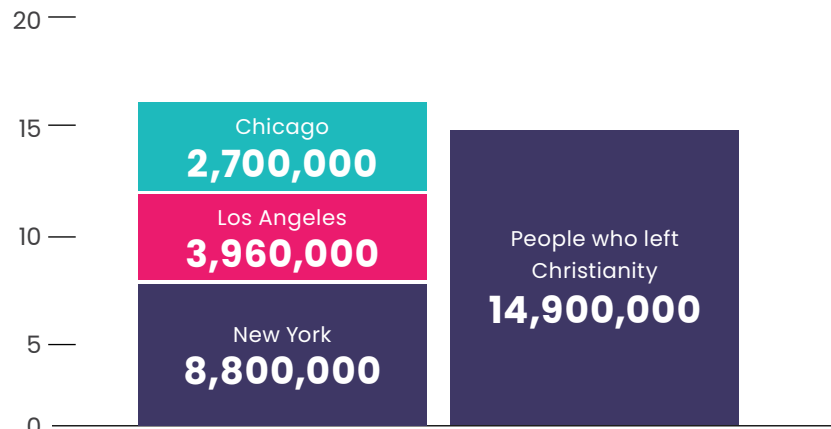
The American Beliefs Study shows if faith communities had stemmed the loss of those leaving the faith, the number of Christians would now be 15 million higher. That’s also a big number, when you think about what it means. Imagine if America’s three largest cities, New York, Los Angeles, and Chicago, combined, were 100%

Christian in 2011, but 0% Christian ten years later. Something like that has actually happened, though the people were spread all over the country, instead of concentrated in those three cities. [See Figure 1.3]

— FIGURE 1.3

### AMERICANS WHO HAVE LEFT CHRISTIANITY SINCE 2011 ROUGHLY EQUALS THE POPULATION OF ITS THREE LARGEST CITIES

Christian Faith Defections in 2011 and 2021 vs. 2020 Populations



Online survey of 14,942 American adults  
Sources: U.S. Census, 2021 American Beliefs Study

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## Faith Still Significant in American Life

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Among Americans as a whole, the share who recall defining their faith as having considerable or utmost significance ten years ago was 36%, compared to 38% who define it this way in 2021. Among self-identified Christians, 54% define their faith in their lives as having considerable or utmost significance. And the share of Christians involved in a faith community who say their faith is highly significant in their lives has grown from 67% to 76% in the past ten years.

These numbers aren't very surprising considering that Christianity and many of its traditional beliefs have been challenged on many fronts. The fact that Americans, especially younger Americans influenced by social media and most recently by academia, might disassociate themselves from Christianity as a

result was perhaps inevitable. (A deeper examination of faith migration habits within different age groups from this study is forthcoming).

The chief takeaway from this finding may be that the Christian church has few champions in American society except for itself. Unlike in the past when the church could count on support from the state, popular media and academic institutions, it is incumbent upon each Christian church to behave and engage their community in such a way as to overcome the negative stereotypes, establish their own, unique identity, and shape their local perception. This study reveals that churches, regardless of size, must present themselves as vibrant, energetic and alive, boldly proclaiming ideals such as truth, charity, salvation, and equality before God.

While proclamation is essential, it is not the only key to church vitality in play. The American Beliefs Study clearly indicates that warm, friendly, inviting and personal relationships are essential to finding, engaging and keeping believers involved in fellowship. This is true for those new to faith as well as long-time believers, older Americans and younger generations alike. While this bears mentioning here, the authors will dig deeper into these findings in coming reports.

## Increasing Independence

Even within Christianity, preferences in America over the past ten years have experienced quite a shift. As noted, the preference for Christian religious traditions has declined by just over four percent over the last decade, while preference for no religious tradition has increased by the same proportion.

Surprisingly though, Americans are more likely now to agree that they have a relationship with the “one living God.” They are now also more likely to agree with statements that support Biblical teachings, for instance that Jesus was a great prophet only (now 14% instead of 17% in 2017), that Jesus was no more than a good and wise moral teacher (now 18%, down from 21% in 2017). Paradoxically as a society, we are now more likely now to agree with positions counter to traditional Biblical teaching, such as the rightful legality of same-sex marriage (up 7% since 2017) and accepting marriage as more than only one man to one woman (up 4% since 2017).

Participation in major non-Christian religions such as Judaism, Islam, Buddhism and other eastern religions has also declined, but by just 0.3%.

Preference among Americans for minor non-Christian religions (e.g., Sikh, New Age, etc.) has increased by a half percent overall, from 2.2% to 2.7%. In fact, the greatest increase in this category comes from those who follow their own muse and practice a self-prescribed spirituality (from 26% of adherents to minor non-Christian groups in 2011 to 31% today, including a two percent increase in those belonging to Wicca). Underscoring this shift, Americans are now more likely to agree than in 2017 that there are many gods.

**Americans are now more likely to agree than in 2017 that there are many gods.**

Through it all, Americans who continue to profess Christianity clearly favor a less-structured experience. This is evident in how they increasingly affiliate with non-denominational and independent churches over mainline and minor denominations. Mainline and minor Christian denominations saw a 3.2% decline in preference for their tradition over the past 10 years, while Independent and non-denominational churches have seen a 3.2% increase. Currently, 21% of Christians affiliate with

a non-denominational church, compared to 18% ten years ago.

Why does this matter? Plainly, the American Christians who remain in the pews are likely less tied to historical Christianity than their forebears. Other results in this study suggest that they still seek out some level of traditionalism in their new church homes. But the increase in independent, non-denominational worship venues is evidence of a waning sense of historical identity among American Christians. They are more likely now to see themselves as simply Christians and less likely as Lutherans, Catholics, Baptists or Presbyterians.

Despite this shift, churchgoers still express a latent desire for touchstones and traditions in their worship experience. This suggests that independent churches have an opportunity to root and nurture their own unique “identity” to tap into this desire, much as mainline denominations did centuries ago. Beyond this, from a mindset of Christian solidarity, there are certainly strong positives to be found in independent Christian churches cultivating a larger sense of tradition, Christian purpose, a shared hope centered

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## Increasing Independence

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on the truth, certainty and peace found in God's Word.

For mainline denominations, historical touchstones such as St. Augustine, Calvin, Luther and Wesley that tended to draw people together appear to be losing some of their hold on Christian affiliation. Could established denominational traditions recapture the "heart" of their early theological focus on transforming lives? Doing so would fill an expressed need among the Christian populace. It would demonstrate that relationships are more important to the Church than institutional structures, polity or buildings. Over time, perhaps this could happen. If it does, the results of this study indicate that the Church in America would be stronger as a result.

**Relationships are more important to churchgoers than institutional structures, polity or buildings.**

Working toward this sensibility would address emerging concerns evident in this survey among Americans, including Stress, making good Choices, Time for Friends and Family, Depression, feelings of Guilt and Loneliness, and Spiritual issues.



## Places of Worship in Community Life

The trends in spiritual identification and church attendance in this survey suggest that the venerable position of the church in American society has waned. Moral beliefs that were once universally accepted as true are being questioned in large numbers.

But other data in the study indicate that if the positive perception of the church is waning, it is happening slowly. A majority six in ten Americans (60%) describe the impact places of worship on their local community as positive. In a ten-to-one ratio, only six percent say that churches have a negative impact on the local community.

In another new question, Americans also agree that they value having places of worship in their communities. Nearly six in ten (57%) say having churches in their community makes a difference to them, while 23% say that it would make no difference to them if churches disappeared.

Americans also suggest they see diversity in the places of worship that exist in their communities, with 51% saying their community’s churches aren’t ‘all alike’ and just 22% saying they are. (No trending exists for these questions, asked in 2021 for the first time). [See Figure 1.4]

The fact that a third of Americans hold a neutral opinion of whether churches are positive for their community underscores the point that churches have a tremendous opportunity to help shape opinion within their communities. They could do this on their own, by demonstrating how they improve local life through service, pursuing community improvements and publicizing their involvement, cultivating personal relationships between their leadership and local media and involving church leaders within local governance.

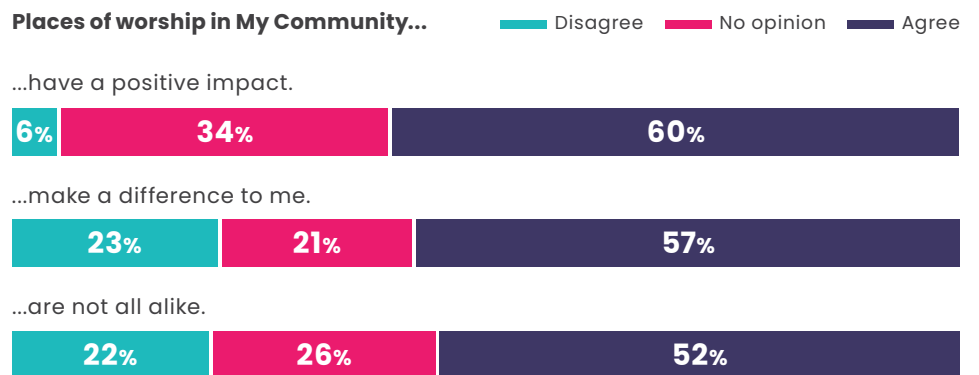
Elsewhere in this study we see that Americans come out strongly favoring tolerance, diversity and justice. They

believe society should work harder on achieving economic justice, that social peace requires tolerance and in embracing America’s ethnic diversity. These results underscore the importance of church leadership making an impression of tolerance, openness, transparency, authenticity and warmth when communicating with their communities. Reacting to these changes could be vitally important for churches in reaching new generations of churchgoers, and subsequent explorations of the study data will deeply examine these changes in societal views.

— FIGURE 1.4

### MOST AMERICANS FEEL CHURCHES ADD TO COMMUNITIES

Churches are diverse, make a difference, and have a positive impact



Source: 2021 American Beliefs Study

## Trends in Daily Life

### American Stability

Four in ten Americans have lived in their current residence for five years or less (39%). This suggests a strong rate of turnover in residential populations – a trend to which churches must strategically adapt. Only churches with a strategy for reaching out to new movers with support and inclusion will see growth from the biggest source of new visitors.

Furthermore, we're more likely now to be living with others. The share of people living alone has dropped from 25% in 2017 to 19% in 2021. The proportion of people living with others related to them has risen from 83% to 85%, while the proportion living with unrelated others has dropped commensurately. More people living in households with others means churches must focus on meeting needs among each member of a family unit in order to secure a lasting relationship with any one member.

Trends also show that married couples and partners are more often now comprised of people having different spiritual backgrounds than was previously the case. This is even further evidence that engaging one member of a household is less likely to engage all its members.

### Life Concerns

Though many changes were slight, Americans are more concerned now than they were in 2017 about 26 of 34 life impacts rated in both studies. Breaking this down to the least common denominator, this is basically three in four areas of concern. [See Figure 1.5]

The biggest concerns among Americans out of 44 options presented in 2021 are new: the 'Ongoing impact of COVID-19' and 'Social and political tensions/discord.' This is not surprising given the worldwide pandemic beginning in 2020 and the turmoil in many US cities in that same year.

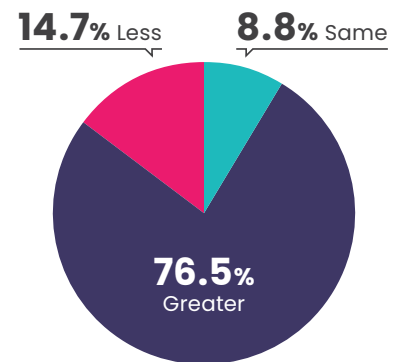
Rating these issues on a scale of 'No Concern' and 'Slight Concern' to 'Escalating' and 'High Concern,' no issues actually reached the threshold of an escalating concern. This suggests that at the time of the survey fielding in late 2020 and early 2021, public anxiety over COVID-19 was subsiding. Still, concern over the ongoing impacts of the pandemic outstripped all others, with over half of people (51%) citing an escalating or high concern.

In second place were Social and Political Tensions, also a new item in

— FIGURE 1.5

### AMERICANS FEEL GREATER CONCERN THAN FOUR YEARS AGO FOR THREE OUT OF FOUR AREAS IN THEIR LIVES

% of issues where Americans feel concern now vs. 2017



Online survey of 14,942 American adults  
American Beliefs Study, 2021

2021, cited by 32% as an escalating or high concern. Likely tied to the issue of tensions was Racism/Racial injustice, which 27% now name as a rising or high concern. None of these areas were rated in 2017.

Perhaps the most compelling among these concerns are 'Social discord' and 'Racism/racial injustice.' On a number of levels, churches are in an ideal position to speak truth to power, relaying timeless Biblical messages of reconciliation, love, harmony and lovingkindness to an anxious population.

## Trends in Daily Life

Among items repeated from 2017, the greatest lift in concern comes for ‘Health crisis/illness,’ which rose by 10% for top-two ratings. Because ‘Personal health problems’ rose by just one percent for the top two choices, this ‘Health crisis’ response certainly seems related to the pandemic as an expression of concern for others instead of self. [See Figure 1.6]

Other areas, possibly pandemic-related, emerged as rising concerns as well. ‘Fear of the future or the

unknown’ rose by six percent in the top two ratings, followed by ‘Depression,’ which rose by five percent. Other issues rising by five percent and possibly related to the pandemic were ‘Making friends/loneliness,’ ‘Stress/time to relax,’ ‘Caring for aging parents,’ ‘Time for friends/family,’ and ‘Unemployment/losing my job.’

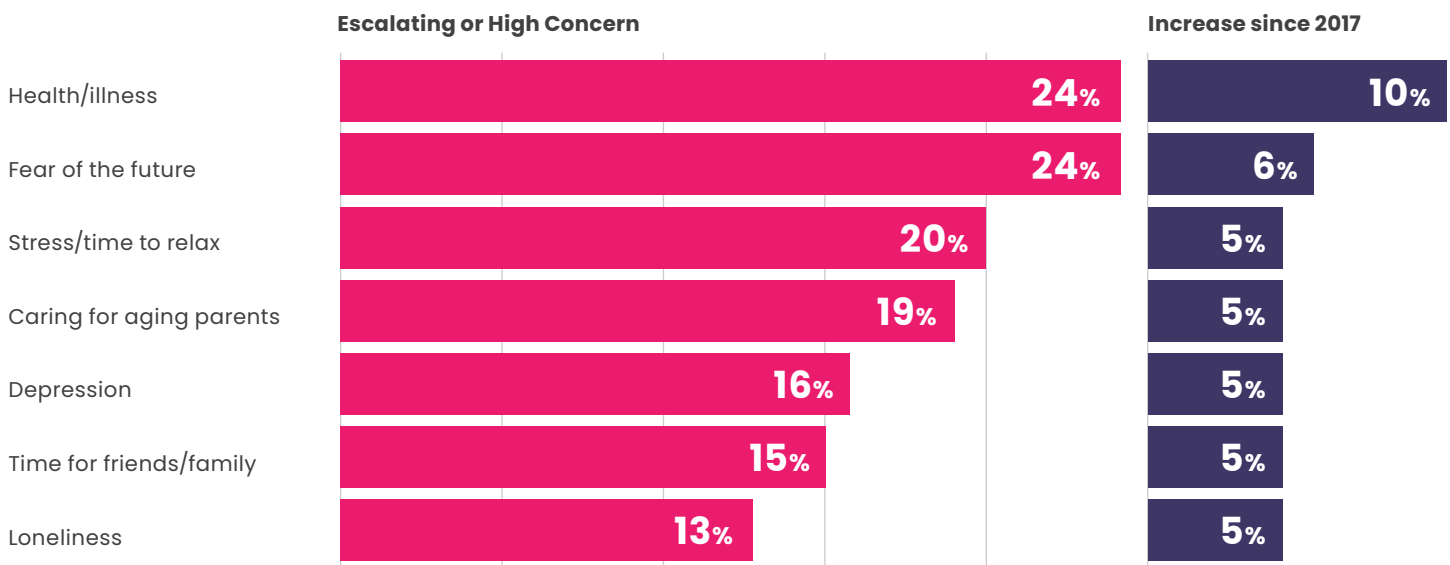
In short, there are plenty of opportunities for churches to engage Americans who are hungry for the

reassurance plainly available in God’s Word. People are now more afraid than before. They are more stressed. They worry more about making the wrong choices and spending too little time with friends and family. They feel guiltier and lonelier than before. They feel a greater concern about their spiritual and religious lives (spiritual issues rising by three percent).

— FIGURE 1.6

### SEVEN FASTEST-RISING AREAS OF CONCERN AMONG AMERICANS

Issues of “Escalating” or “High” concern, with percentage point increase 2017–2021



Online survey of 14,942 American adults  
American Beliefs Study, 2021

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## Trends in Daily Life

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**This study also measured 10 areas of concern not rated in previous studies; these new areas ran the gamut from most concerning (e.g., COVID, social tension and racism) to least concerning (struggling with sexual orientation).**

**As noted, concern over COVID-19, social tension and racism led all others. Yet, respondents had only slight concern about new topics such as 'Mental health issues,' the 'Quality of children's education,' 'Social media & the internet,' 'Will and estate planning' and 'Bullying (including cyber-bullying).'**

Broad societal issues tended to emerge as greater concerns than home issues. For example, concern over 'Divorce' was negligible, despite reports of attorneys being inundated with divorce petitions after couples had spent months together in lockdown. Concerns over 'Balancing work and family,' 'Fulfilling marriages and intimacy,' 'Raising children,' 'Anger,' 'Arguing,' 'Single parenting,' abusing alcohol, drugs or pornography, and 'Domestic violence in my family' were all slight or less. Furthermore, concern for these areas was largely consistent with levels seen in 2017.

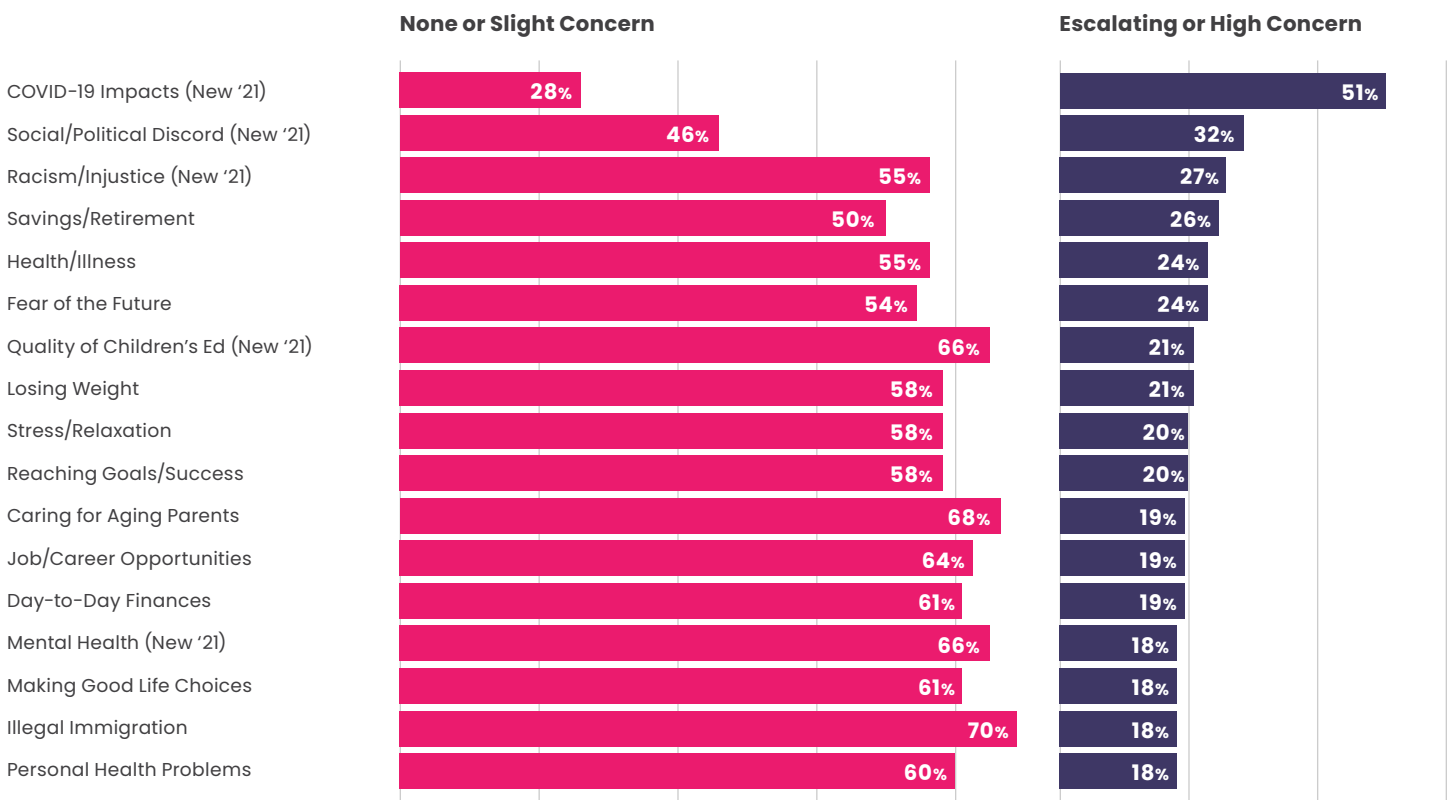
While respondents were not unconcerned with their finances, they were less burdened by financial concerns than in 2017 on issues such as 'Financing the future' and 'Day-to-day financial matters.' A tangential financial topic, 'Avoiding homelessness' actually rose closer to a slight concern. This has implications for churches: first, now

may be the optimal time to teach about tithing and God's guidance on effective money management. When people feel their financial house is in order, they are less likely to seek outside advice. The Bible has more to say about money than just about any other topic, and the modern churchgoer may be less aware of God's timeless advice now than they were in the past.

## Trends in Daily Life

— FIGURE 1.7  
**EMERGING AND TOP CONCERNS AMONG AMERICANS IN 2021**

Concern level for issues of greatest concern



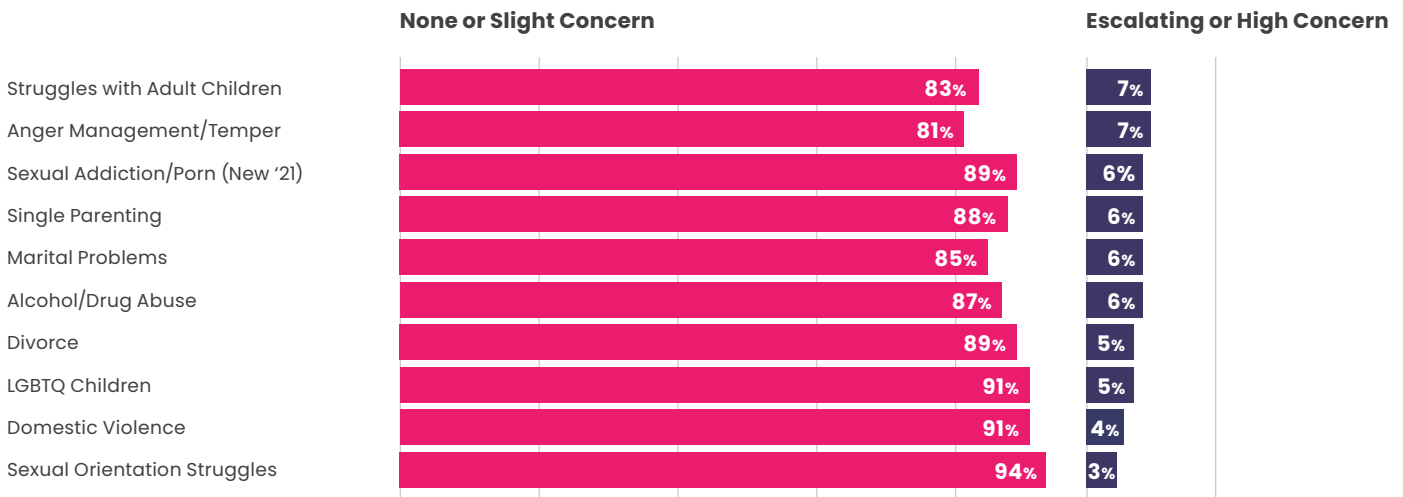
Online survey of 14,942 American adults  
 American Beliefs Study, 2021

## Trends in Daily Life

— FIGURE 1.8

### WANING CONCERNS AMONG AMERICANS IN 2021

Concern level for issues of least concern



Online survey of 14,942 American adults  
American Beliefs Study, 2021

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## Summary Highlights

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- Tens of millions of Americans have gravitated away from Christianity, either by falling away from their faith community or defecting.
- At the same time, the share who defines their faith as being very significant in their lives has ticked up.
- By an overwhelming margin, Americans affirm the positive impact of the church on their communities.
- Those still in the pews favor independent and non-denominational congregations.
- We are now more concerned about most life impacts: the pandemic, social unrest, health crises and injustice led the pack, with stress, depression, guilt, loneliness and spiritual issues following.

Church leaders have the capacity and the mandate to speak truth and healing into all these concerns, relaying timeless Biblical messages of reconciliation, love, harmony and lovingkindness to an anxious population.

But tone is important as well, according to the results of this study among seekers and the unchurched. The American church has a better chance when its leaders and members are (highly relational), authentically open, tolerant, warm and genuine in their communities. Such attitudes are vital in reaching new generations and retaining existing members.

# A Brief Methodology

## The Research

This research study of American religious preferences, practices, beliefs and life concerns began in 1991. It has been fielded six times in total, with 2017 and 2021 being the latest editions. ACST is currently responsible for funding this research.

The goal of this study is to equip American Christian churches with hyper-local resources for understanding and reaching their communities. At its heart is a focus on the American religious landscape, especially across generational groups.

This online study among 14,942 American adults was conducted by Campbell Rinker for ACST from October 2020 through February 2021. Results were balanced by US region, 19 ‘Mosaic’ demographic clusters from Experian, and weighted by age to align with known population characteristics. The study carries a margin of error of  $\pm 0.8\%$  at the 99% confidence level. A comparative 2017 study involved the same size audience.

Note: Media outlets quoting from this paper are directed to use the summary paragraph above to describe the study in keeping with AP style.

## The Questions

Several denominational partners helped design the study questionnaire and the fielding methodology. The authors are deeply indebted to them for their commitment to this project.

Developing the questionnaire is a key step in any research effort. ‘Longitudinal’ studies such as this require even more care for several reasons – for instance, respondents, language and social issues change over time. Changes like this force adaptations in the questions as well.

Through the years, the questionnaire has retained its focus on these core topics:

- Beliefs About God
- Beliefs About Jesus
- Beliefs About Social and Moral Issues
- Faith Involvement or Non-Involvement
- Life Concerns
- Program and Ministry Preferences
- Religious Affiliations
- Religious Preferences

## The Respondents

The study obtained nearly 15,000 completed surveys from a panel of paid respondents. This panel was managed by Dynata, with fielding and analysis conducted by the research firm Campbell Rinker. ACST’s partners in this effort followed a rigorous stratified sampling plan carried over from earlier studies.

This plan ensured that the respondent sample accurately represented a distribution across 76 unique groups – 19 geodemographic Mosaic clusters as defined by Experian within each of the four United States Census Bureau regions.

Of course, the nature of surveying involves some level of error. The researchers took care to minimize any bias that might occur with the sampling plan and in framing the questions themselves, including weighting the final data by age to ensure it reflects known proportions in the US population. This weighting delivers a final data set of 14,942 respondents.



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THE  
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RELIGIOUS PREFERENCES & PRACTICES

### About The American Beliefs Study™

The American Beliefs Study: Religious Preferences & Practices is a national research initiative conducted by ACS Technologies of nearly 15,000 people across The United States of various beliefs and demographics with the goal of being the definitive single source for the best understanding of the religious preferences and practices of Americans.

*AmericanBeliefs.com*

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## MISSIONINSITE

### About MissionInsite

The American Beliefs Study is best utilized within MissionInsite as a comprehensive demographic and analysis tool that helps churches and organizations understand what is most important to their congregation and community. By combining multiple top data sources it helps leaders learn what people want in a church, their ministry preferences, income levels, church impressions and what will make them keep coming back. It helps discover what people really want in their church to prioritize what will help them the most. In turn, aiding churches in attracting new people locating prime areas of outreach knowing the activities most people are interested in and will respond to. It also helps ministry leaders know the accurate demographic makeup of a church for better church planning of events, giving, new locations and new ministries. Knowing your neighbor to key to loving your neighbor and MissionInsite helps turns these insights into ministry impact.

*MissionInsite.com*

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## ACS Technologies®

### About ACS Technologies®

Founded in 1978, ACS Technologies is a leading, ministry development company most known for its expertise in being a comprehensive provider of church ministry software and service solutions to nearly 50,000 churches, schools, and organizational offices. With the mission to enable everyone in the Church with a personalized ministry environment to make God-honoring decisions in actionable ways, ACS Technologies desires to build the Kingdom by being a trusted ministry partner in the daily life of every church. ACS Technologies stands apart by providing a whole church approach, meeting the needs of the pastor, staff, and congregant, with ministry development tools unique in value to each role and each ministry goal serving each type of church/parish, denominational office, and diocese. ACS Technologies is a privately held independent Christian family-led company based out of Florence, SC with remote team members and offices across the U.S.

*acst.com*