

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

**2021**

Comprehensive report of nine research commentaries  
by Dirk Rinker and Michael Jaffarian

---

# Introduction

---

## Why It Matters

After more than forty years in ministry, I've learned that one of the greatest challenges for any church is living out the Great Commandment in Matthew 22:36–40 — to love God and love our neighbors. Loving God is clear enough, but loving our neighbors requires that we know them.

There was a time when ministry leaders could simply knock on doors and talk to people on their porches. That time has largely passed. While personal connection is still vital, data can now help us understand the people around us more deeply — their needs, values, and how they connect with faith communities.

## A Brief History of the Origins of this Research Project

In 1987, the Percept Group, Inc. was formed to provide churches with demographic, psychographic, and behavioral data. The first national "Ethos Study" launched in 1991, followed by surveys in 1993 and 1998. These large-scale studies, each involving over 15,000 respondents, used Claritas lifestyle segmentation to reflect the character and diversity of local communities.

As America's population evolved, so did the methodology. Today, the study uses the Mosaic® Lifestyle Segmentation system — 19 groups and 71 household types — and U.S. Census boundaries to create a stratified random sample of roughly 15,000 adults.

## MissionInsite™ Carries the Research Forward

In 2007, several former Percept team members, including myself, founded MissionInsite™ to continue this vital work. Our goal was to conduct national faith and beliefs studies every four years, known as the "Quadrennium Project." MissionInsite™ became part of ACS Technologies® in 2019, and the research continues as the American Beliefs Study. Updated surveys in 2021 and 2025, conducted with Campbell Rinker, refined the questions to reflect cultural changes while maintaining the integrity of the Mosaic®-based sampling.

## The Heart of the Matter

The American Beliefs Study has a heartbeat — not literally, but spiritually. Each time we've reviewed survey questions, I've sensed God's presence guiding the process. These questions remind me to think deeply about my neighbors — their challenges, their search for meaning, and their hopes for community.

People have asked me why, for 25 of my 40 plus years of ministry, I was not a local church pastor. The answer is I was always looking for ways to assist the church to know and love their neighbors more completely. It's my prayer that through the use of the American Beliefs Study research, compiled in this book, the joy of knowing and loving your neighbor will grow in your heart as well.

Rev. Chuck Salter  
Co-Founder & President of  
MissionInsite™  
Vice President (Emeritus),  
MissionInsite™ & Ministry Advancement  
ACS Technologies®

---

# Table of Contents

Introduction	2
Table of Contents	3
Preface	6
Understanding Our Communities	7
Involvement in Communities of Faith	
Fluid Faith in America	
Faith Still Significant in American Life	
Increasing Independence	
Places of Worship in Community Life	
Trends in Daily Life	
Summary Highlights	
Meeting Community Needs	19
Social and Moral Issues	
The Significance of Faith	
Beliefs About God	
Beliefs About Jesus	
Summary Highlights	

---

Engaging Our Communities	34
Non-Involvement Influences, Distance, and Change	
Ministry Preferences among Seekers	
Social Media and the Pivot to Virtual Fellowship	
Summary Highlights and Tying It All Together	
The Facts of Christian Engagement	47
Differences in Engaged and Nominal Christian Responses	
Concern over Life Issues	
Practicing Christians Align Strongly with Traditional Beliefs	
Social Beliefs Differ Greatly by Generation and Urban Density	
Summary Highlights	
Changing Behaviors   A Closer Look at Different Levels of Christian Engagement	66
Nones, Nominals, and Practicing Christians	
Why Attending Christians Might Change or Leave a Church	
Reasons for Departure Vary from Practicing and Nominal Christians	
Practicing vs. Nominal Christians on What They Would Look for in a Church	
Summary Highlights	

---

What Do Americans Believe about God and Jesus?	86
Beliefs by Generations	
Beliefs within Cities, Suburbs, and Towns	
Beliefs Among Nominal Christians and Practicing Christians	
Summary Highlights	
Intro   Nones vs Practicing	105
Demographics of the Nones	
What Are the Nones Concerned About?	
How Do the Nones Feel About Issues in American Society?	
Summary Highlights	
Intro   Nones and Dones	122
Recent Dones	
Do the Nones Even Care About Religion? Why do they stay away?	
What Might Attract the Nones to Return?	
Summary Highlights	
Intro   The Nones	137
The Nones and God: Much Uncertainty	
The Jesus of the Nones is Not the Jesus of the New Testament	
Older Nones and Younger Nones on God and Jesus	
Summary Highlights	
A Brief Methodology	152

# Preface

“It’s old information! Why should I bother reading that?! Didn’t you just update the research in 2025? Where’s the new stuff?”

Maybe these thoughts cross your mind as you ponder whether to keep reading this compilation of research commentaries. After all, the research was conducted in late 2020 and early 2021. Could it possibly provide new direction or relevant revelations for ministry in 2025 and beyond?

I get it. I want to look forward, not back. I’m always searching for new ideas. Maybe you are, too. Here’s the thing. Context matters. Historical perspective matters. Tracking responses over time – that matters, too.

That’s what you will find in the pages that follow. You’ll read meaningful insights into important trends in American religious life, collected over more than a decade. Understanding the context of late 2020–2021 (COVID-19, anyone?) and people’s responses back then will enable you to consider what has changed since.

Heart. Passion. Insight. Years of research work and data interpretation from respected professionals. You’ll find them, too. Dirk Rinker and Michael Jaffarian have taken a deep dive into data to mine some important nuggets from the national trends. If you want to hit just the highlights, look for the summary of key points at the end of each section.

Please read with an open mind, considering what still holds true today and what bears further investigation for tomorrow. When you’re ready for the updates from 2025, and want to localize the findings to your area, contact [MissionInsite@acst.com](mailto:MissionInsite@acst.com). That’s what we do.

Thanks for reading this far.  
Enjoy the rest of the book!

Emily Reece, Strategic Consultant  
MissionInsite™ &  
Ministry Advancement  
ACS Technologies®

## A Note about the Authors

**Dirk Rinker** is president and CEO of Campbell Rinker, which has been a leading market research firm for nonprofits since the early 1990s. He has designed and implemented research projects for hundreds of ministries, charities, universities, and museums in the U.S. and internationally—helping clients understand and act on the attitudes, motivations, and perceptions of their valuable constituencies.

**Michael Jaffarian** is a researcher, writer, and consultant to nonprofits. He and his wife were missionaries for 33 years, serving in Singapore, Virginia, Los Angeles, and England. Most of his ministry has been in global mission research. He has studied, and written on, growth trends among tens of thousands of Christian denominations, globally.

---

# Understanding Our Communities

---

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 research 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.**

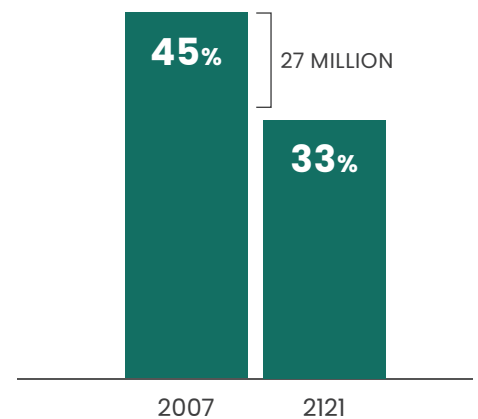
These trends for church affiliation were mirrored by America's overall embrace of belief.

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 preference has

— 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

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.

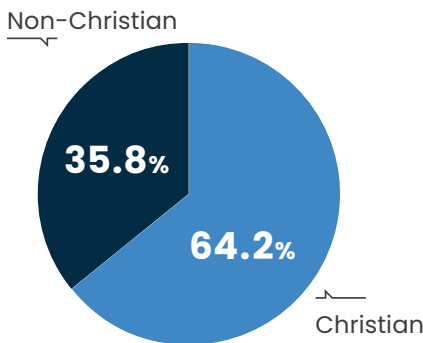
More than half of Americans see themselves as Christian. That's 213.0 million Christians out of a total national population of 331.8 million (mid-2021). That's a big number. America has well over 200 million Christians. [See Figure 1.2]



## 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,

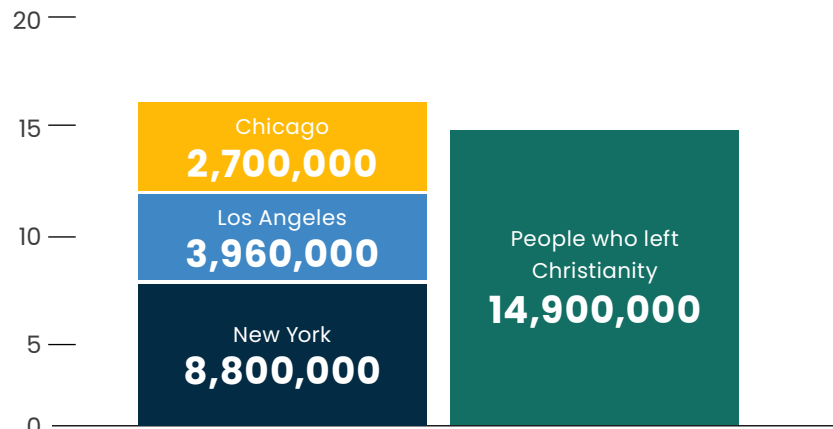
and still considering Christianity to be their faith. This is about people saying, “I was a Christian ten years ago, but now I’m not.” In America today, there are more Christian defections than conversions.

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

## Faith Still Significant in American Life

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




---

### accepting marriage as more than only one man to one woman:

up 7% 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.

## Increasing Independence

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 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.

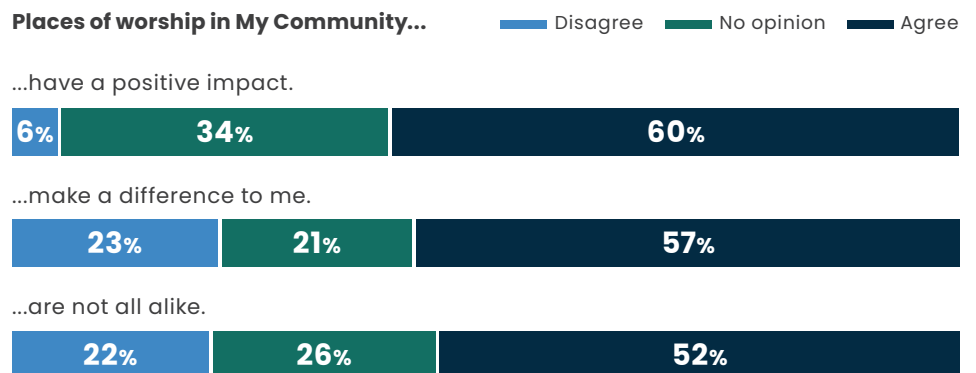
Elsewhere in this study we see that Americans come out strongly favoring tolerance, diversity and justice. They

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.

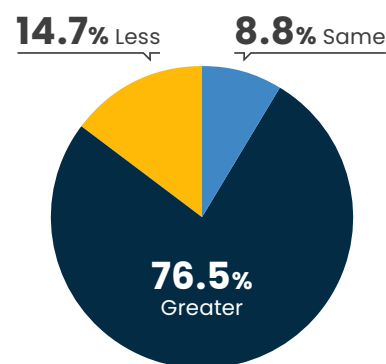
Rating these issues on a scale of 'No Concern' and 'Slight Concern' to 'Escalating' and 'High Concern,' no issues actually reached the threshold of an escalating concern. This suggests that at the time of the survey fielding in late 2020 and early 2021, public anxiety over COVID-19 was subsiding. Still, 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).

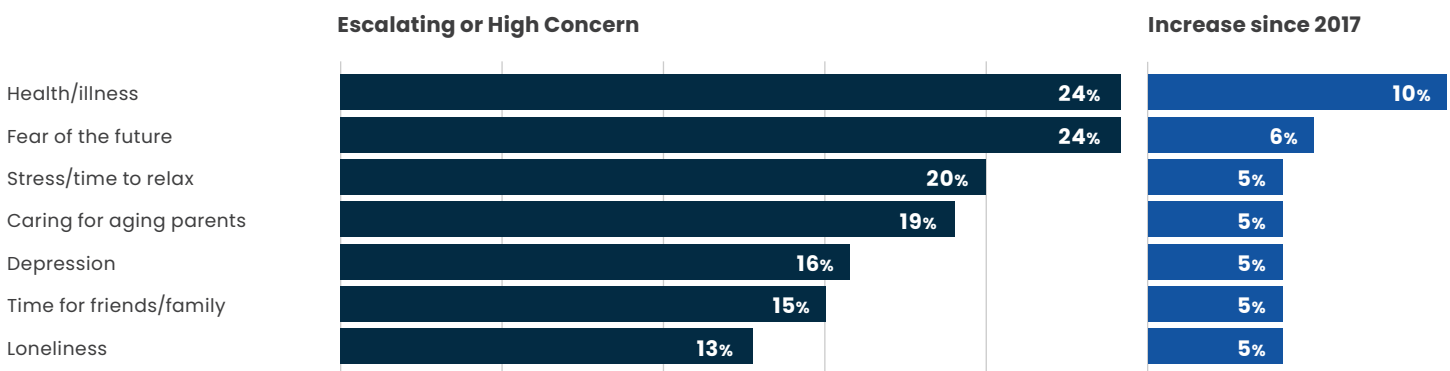
**This study also measured 10 areas of concern not rated in previous studies; these new areas ran the gamut from most concerning (e.g., COVID, social tension and racism) to least concerning (struggling with sexual orientation).**

**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).’**

— 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

## Trends in Daily Life

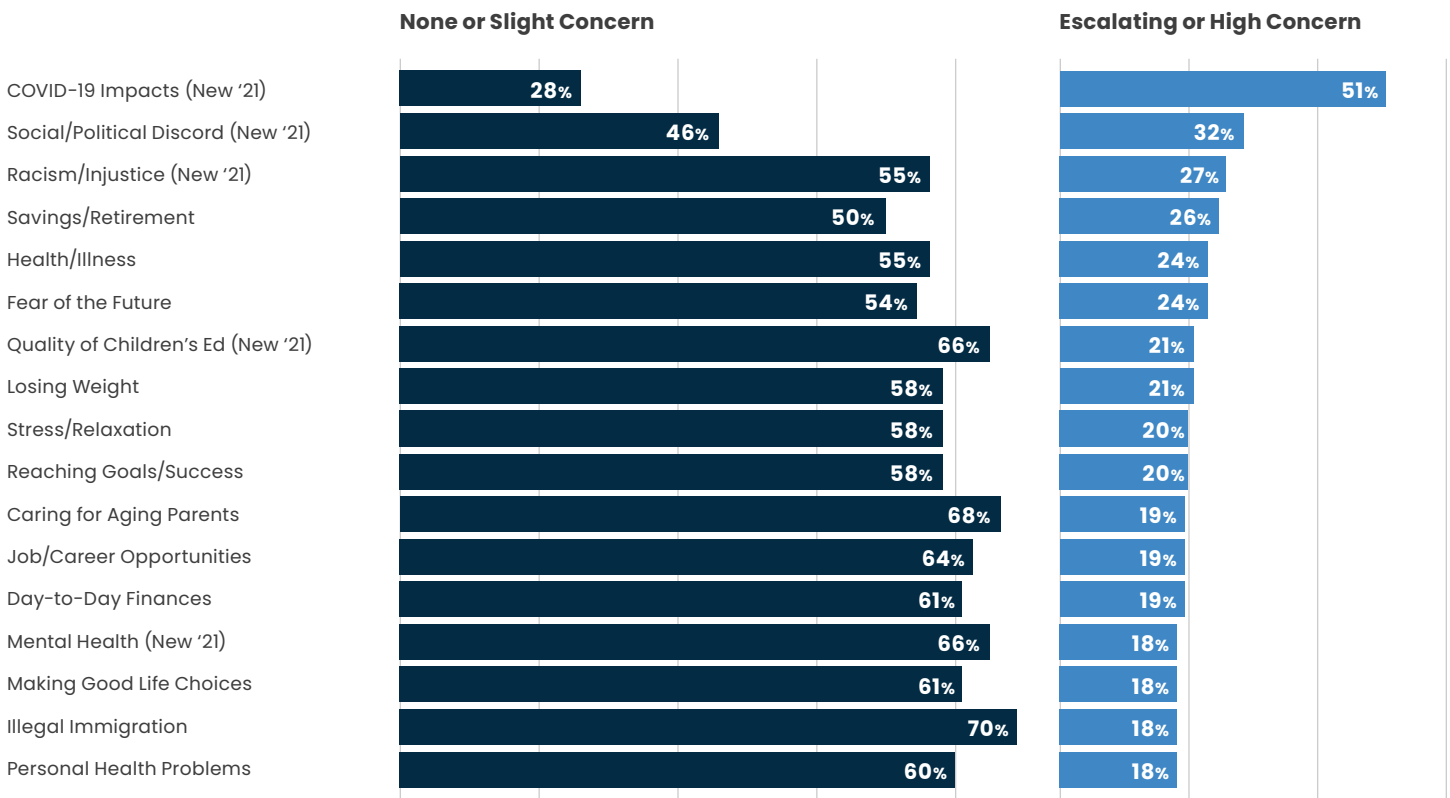
Broad societal issues tended to emerge as greater concerns than home issues. For example, concern over ‘Divorce’ was negligible, despite reports of attorneys being inundated with divorce petitions

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. [See Figure 1.7]

— 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



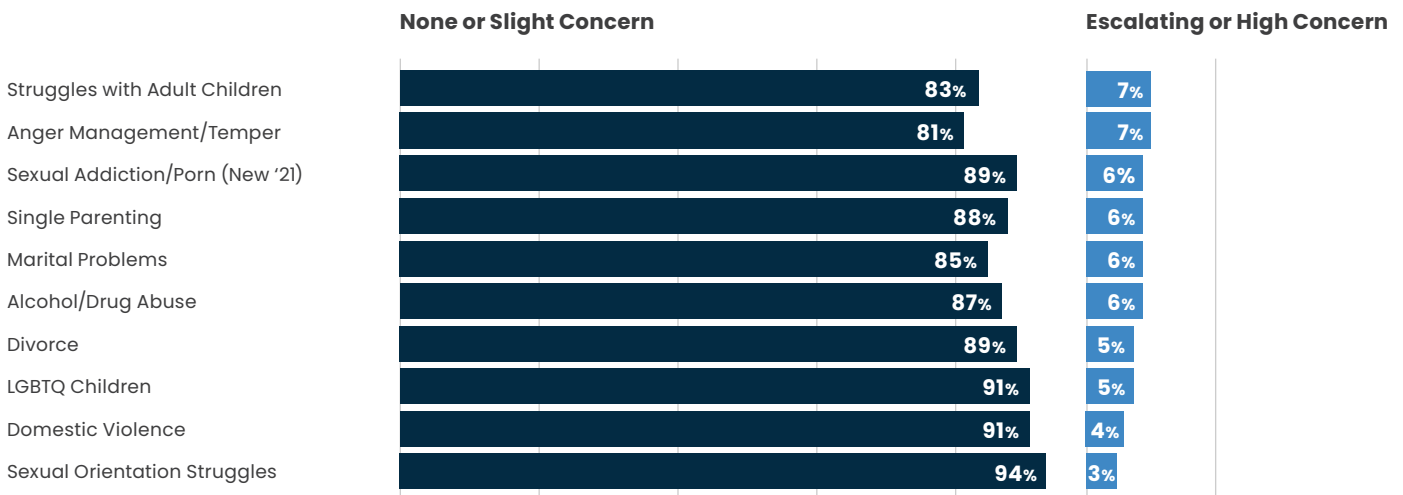
## Trends in Daily Life

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. [See Figure 1.8]

— 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

---

## Summary Highlights | Understanding Our Communities

---

- 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.

---

# Meeting Community Needs

---

The first paper in this series dipped into the findings of the American Beliefs Study that help us understand recent trends in faith in our communities. This paper focuses on the needs that people in American communities say they feel most acutely now.

The period of time between 2017 and 2021 has been a wrenching time in the country on so many levels. The results of this study in the area of community needs, and the sentiment among American Christians for specific needs, has been widely anticipated.

How has American opinion moved on pivotal issues in our society today? Where do communities stand on issues we have wrestled with for decades and those that have emerged more recently?

What do Americans believe about God, and Jesus?

And more importantly, how can local churches large and small meet the social needs in their communities in a loving way, in context with their own beliefs and sensibilities?

The authors seek to explore these concepts in this section and address the varied ways in which the American Church might respond.

## Social and Moral Issues

Americans have shifted their stance on 25 social and moral issues over the past few years – in some ways quite significantly. [See Figure 2.1]

A rising share of Americans feel the United States has a moral

responsibility to be a force for good in the world (69% agree, up by 4% since 2017). Our fellow citizens also see America’s standing on the world stage waning (67% agree, up from 65%).

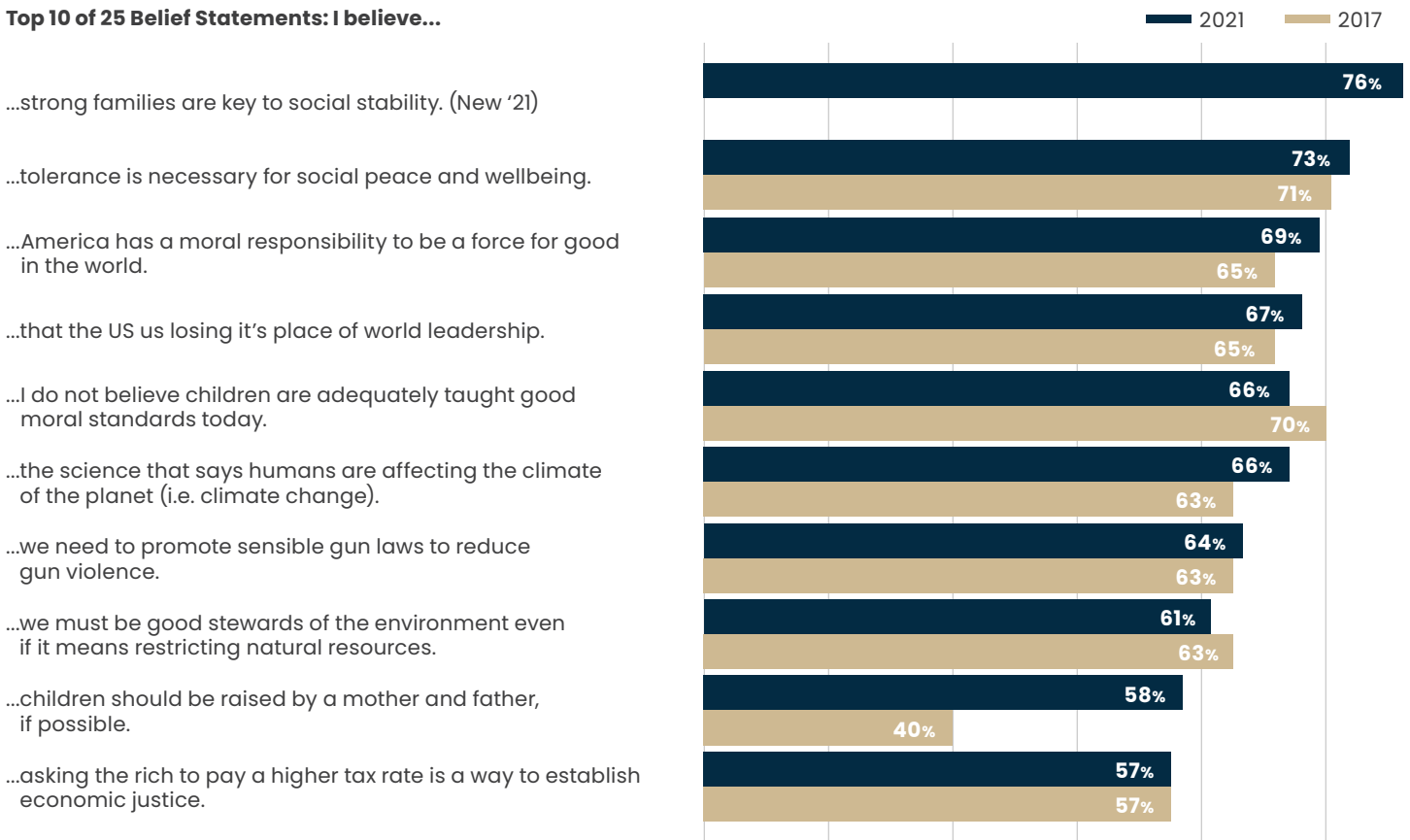
Yet a consistent theme in these results is confusion over what is moral, that is, what qualities U.S. morality should project. As time passes, American opinions on what constitutes morality differ from the tenets taught by faiths based in the Bible.

— FIGURE 2.1

### AMERICANS AGREE MOST ON THE US POSITION IN WORLD AFFAIRS

US world influence shapes opinions on three of the top four social and moral issues rated

#### Top 10 of 25 Belief Statements: I believe...



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

## Social and Moral Issues

### Over time, American moral opinions have diverged from historical biblical teaching.

For instance, a supermajority 66% of Americans believe that U.S. children do not receive good moral instruction (down from 70% in 2017). Yet in a new 2021 question, 53% express no concern over the state of U.S.

education, suggesting most people believe the state should not be responsible for moral training.

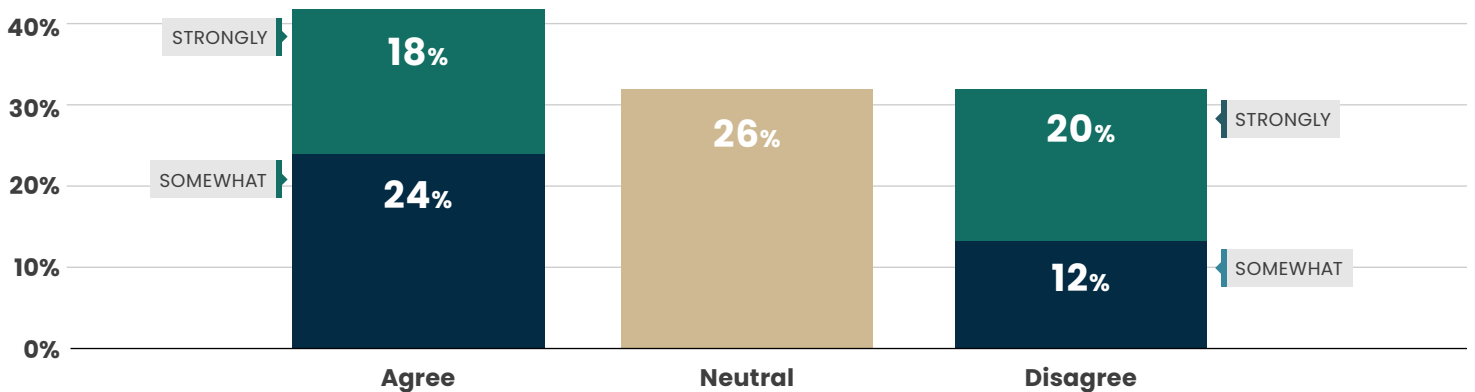
At the same time, the proportion who believe religion should play a primary role in shaping American social morality has declined by one percent since 2017 to 42%, a significant shift given our 15,000 respondents. [See Figure 2.2]

This begs the question: If religion is not responsible for shaping the morality of American society, and the state does not bear this responsibility, from where does that morality come?

— FIGURE 2.2

### AMERICAN OPINIONS SLIGHTLY FAVOR RELIGION AS THE BASIS FOR MORALITY

Americans rate the statement, “I believe religion must play a primary role in shaping social morality”



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

## Social and Moral Issues

Paradoxically, the strongest movement in these results affirms the centrality of the family in American society. The highest proportion agree that strong families are key to social stability (76% agree). This also appeared in terms of rising agreement that a mother and father should raise children together (up 18% since 2017,

likely due to new wording in 2021) and that traditional marriage is not obsolete (up 2% to 30% since 2017). [See Figure 2.3]

Despite these affirmations of family and marriage, U.S. opinion has clearly changed on what marriage means. Even though the share of Americans who say traditional

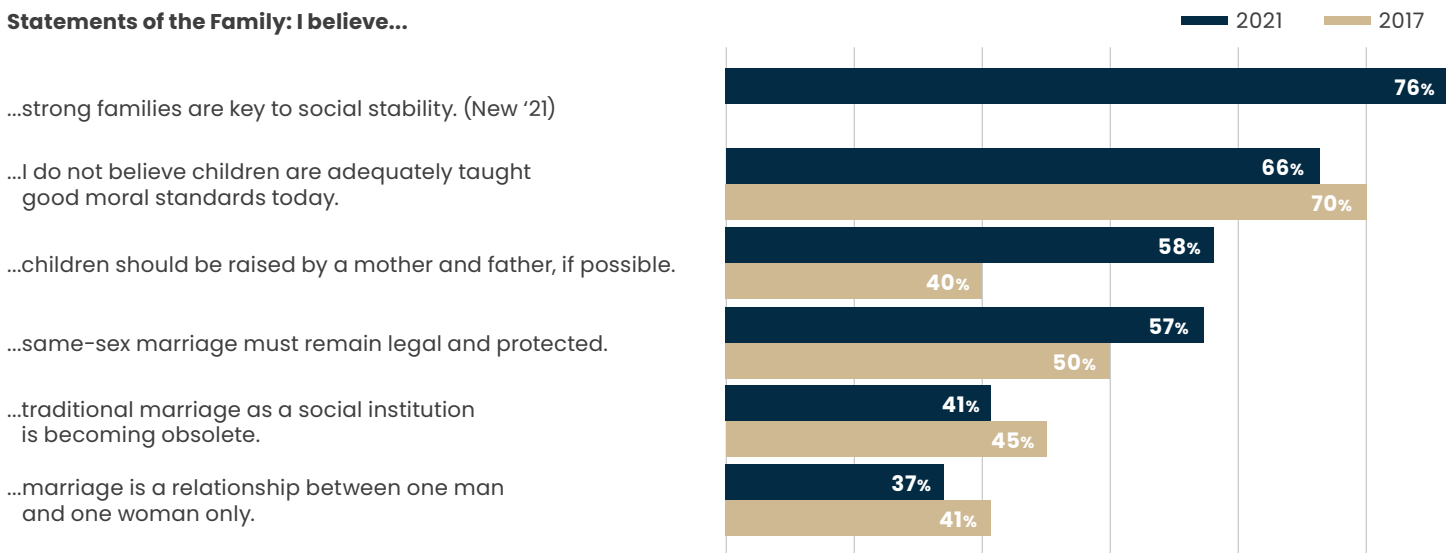
marriage is not obsolete has risen, a much higher share now say legal same-sex marriage must remain protected (up 7% to 57%), and less certain about marriage as a relationship between one man and one woman only (down 4% to 37%).

— FIGURE 2.3

### OPINIONS TEND TOWARD STRONG SUPPORT OF 'THE FAMILY'

Statements on the centrality of the family become more resonant to Americans

#### Statements of the Family: I believe...



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

## Social and Moral Issues

The latest American Beliefs Study show that US opinions have also strongly shifted toward statements supporting tolerance, diversity and justice. The country has moved from agreeing to disagreeing that race and racial issues receive too much attention in the country (41% agree now, down from 50%). This is unsurprising given the timing of the

study – in late 2020 after many US cities saw social upheaval.

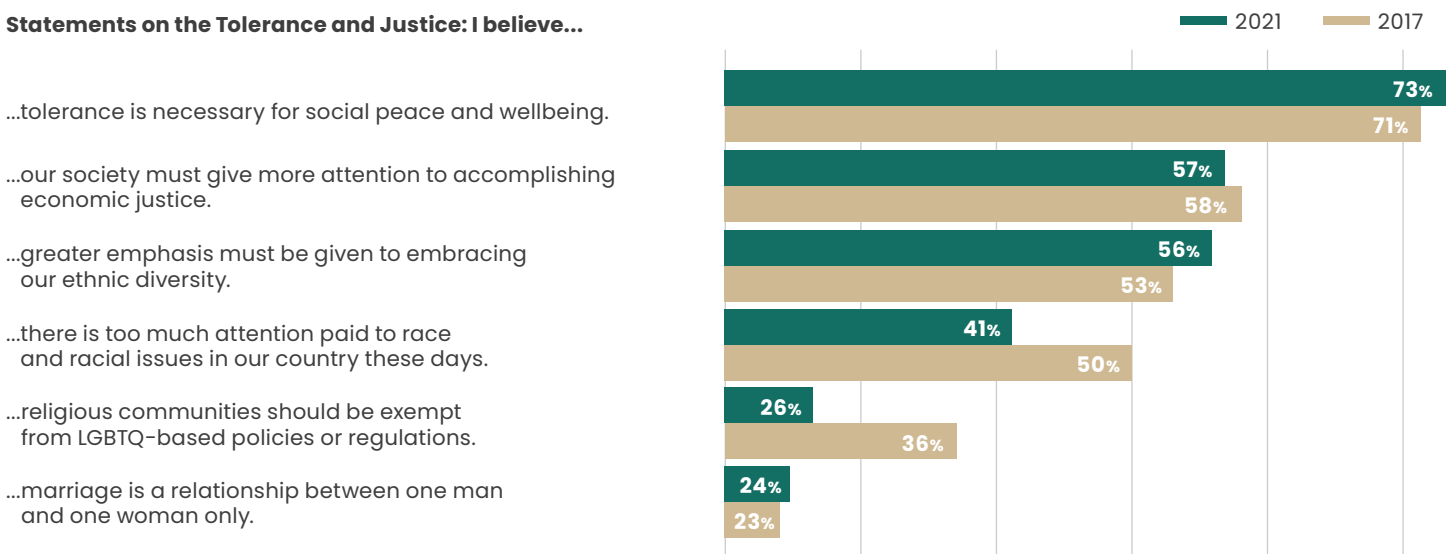
As before, only a quarter of Americans agree that race relations in the US are generally good (24%). We agree more now that tolerance is needed for social peace and that embracing America’s ethnic diversity needs more emphasis

(+3% since 2017). Most of us agree that society should work harder on achieving economic justice (57%). A stable 57% majority agrees with asking the rich to pay higher taxes toward establishing economic justice. [See Figure 2.4]

— FIGURE 2.4  
**AMERICAN SENTIMENT RISES TOWARD TOLERANCE AND JUSTICE**

Half of Americans now believe racial issues need more attention

### Statements on the Tolerance and Justice: I believe...



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

---

## Social and Moral Issues

---

On the subject of tolerance, U.S. opinions strongly shifted away from exempting religious communities from LGBTQ-based regulations (36% favored exemptions in 2017, vs. 26% now). Conversely, the share supporting government policies telling churches how to act on LGBTQ issues rose by five points (from 36% in 2017 to 41% in 2021). There are certainly complex issues of the separation of church and state underlying this question, which the instant answers provided by modern survey respondents may well fail to fully contemplate.

**Shifting public sentiment against exempting faith communities from regulations over LGBTQ rights suggests a tipping point has passed.**

A stable 26% of Americans say abortion should become illegal, in line with other recent polling on the issue.

Respondents agree that America should try to stop illegal immigration (56%, up 2% from 2017), at the same time agreeing even more that residents who live and work in America illegally should receive some form of amnesty (56%, up 4% from 2017).

These results suggest that America is at a crossroads, with its citizens conflicted over whether historical biblical morality (e.g., what marriage is, homosexuality, not regulating churches), is the best path forward.

This also suggests the American church faces a crossroads – a tipping point over whether to adhere to traditional stances on these issues or adapt to match changing cultural beliefs. Regardless of stance, it is imperative for churches to understand the ongoing shifts and determine how they can engage with their communities in the midst of them.



## Social and Moral Issues

### Changing Sentiment on Social Issues

The listing below shows all 25 social belief statements and their 2021 response. These are listed in order of the change that appears in public sentiment, from highest to lowest agreement among the 15,000 study respondents. When presented to respondents, the items below were randomized.

- I believe strong families are key to social stability (new, 76%)
- I believe children should be raised by a mother and father, if possible. (up 18%)
- I believe same-sex marriage must remain legal and protected. (up 7%)
- I believe some form of amnesty program for illegal immigrants who have worked and lived in the US (up 4%)
- I believe America has a moral responsibility to be a force for good in the world. (up 4%)
- I believe greater emphasis must be given to embracing our ethnic diversity. (up 3%)
- I believe the science that says humans are affecting the climate of the planet (i.e., climate change). (up 3%)
- I believe tolerance is necessary for social peace and wellbeing. (up 2%)
- I believe that the US is losing its place of world leadership. (up 2%)
- I believe the US should pursue avenues to stop illegal immigration. (up 2%)
- I believe we need to promote sensible gun laws to reduce gun violence. (up 1%)
- I believe race relations in the United States are generally good. (up 1%)
- I believe asking the rich to pay a higher tax rate is a way to establish economic justice. (No change)
- I have great hope for the future of my own community (i.e., neighborhood, village, town). (No change)
- I believe abortion should become illegal. (No change)
- I believe our society must give more attention to accomplishing economic justice. (down 1%)
- I believe religion must play a primary role in shaping social morality. (down 1%)
- I do not believe the government should be deeply involved in solving poverty. (down 1%)
- I believe globalization is a threat to our nation's economic future. (down 2%)
- I believe we must be good stewards of the environment even if it means restricting natural resource (down 2%)
- I believe marriage is a relationship between one man and one woman only. (down 4%)
- I do not believe children are adequately taught good moral standards today. (down 4%)
- I believe traditional marriage as a social institution is becoming obsolete. (down 4%)
- I believe there is too much attention paid to race and racial issues in our country these days. (down 9%)
- I believe religious communities should be exempt from LGBTQ-based policies or regulations. (down 10%)

## The Significance of Faith

The proportion of Americans who say faith has been of considerable or utmost significance in their lives has stayed the same since 2017 at 38%. However, this share of Americans represents a two percent increase over the 36% who felt the same in 2011.

The proportion of Americans who say faith is of minor significance or less in their life has actually declined in the past few years, from 42% in 2017 to 41% in 2021. The proportion saying that faith is highly significant stayed the same. The share who said faith is of moderate significance increased slightly (20% in 2017 to 21% now).

Though slight, the shift in the significance of faith – from little significance to moderate significance – could be partly due to the COVID-19 pandemic. People with already strong faith would not have their faith shaken by such an event. People with moderate faith would likely stay at that level. Only people who felt no spiritual ties at all might be moved to a more moderate faith.

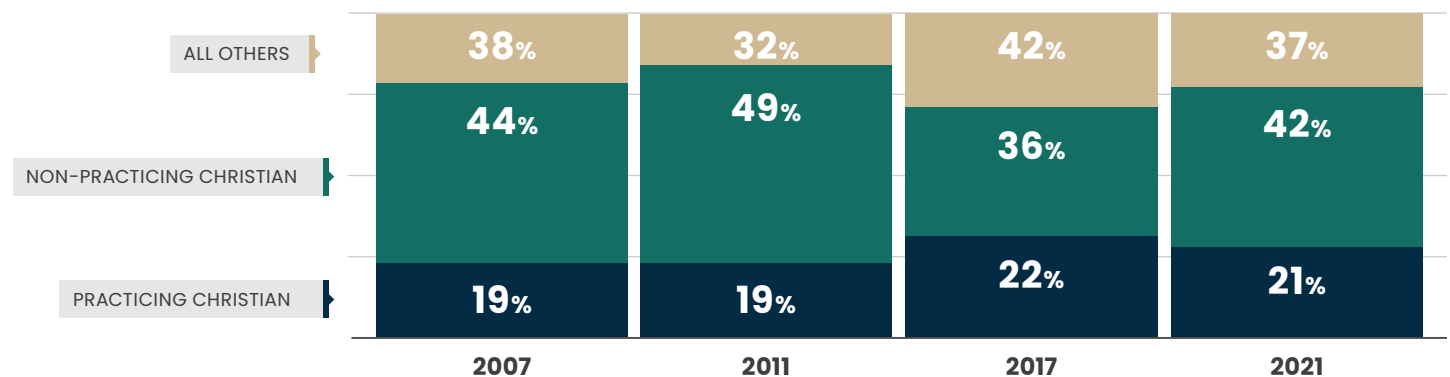
What is compelling is that these results don't suggest a swell of Christian conversion in the face of the threat to life and health from the COVID-19 pandemic. The answers from the American Beliefs Study allowed the researchers to define

a 'practicing Christian' as one who identifies as Christian, attends a fellowship at least monthly and says faith has considerable or utmost impact on their lives. Respondents answered these questions for now and 10 years ago in the 2021 and 2017 studies, providing four points of reference. By this metric, the share of practicing Christians has grown by two percent, from 19% to 21% since 2007. [See Figure 2.5]

— FIGURE 2.5

### THE SHARE OF PRACTICING CHRISTIANS IN AMERICAN SINCE 2007

About one in five Americans might be considered practicing Christians



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

## The Significance of Faith

The study also shows that the share of people who prefer Christian traditions over others has fallen by four percent in the same ten years. Sadly, while facing a worldwide pandemic when many people could benefit from spiritual counsel, many US states and health authorities responded by limited access to gathering in faith communities.

In such an environment, it is vital to joyfully welcome newcomers to the spiritual comfort that fellowship in a faith community provides. This does not necessarily mean sitting back and waiting for seekers to come to the Church.

Before the pandemic, only a minority of faith communities were streaming their services online – now it is rare to find churches that are not.

The opportunity at this point in time is not to reset back to a pre-pandemic model of an exclusive, ‘come to us’ format. To welcome people in the modern era, it is increasingly evident that the Church must go to where the people are. The American Beliefs Study clearly shows that people are migrating. As Americans, we are increasingly concerned about more aspects of life. We are often conflicted about what constitutes a moral path. America is now in a more spiritually needy place.

**Americans are increasingly concerned about more aspects of life, conflicted about morality, and more spiritually needy.**

For these reasons, every church that can must consider using the tools they honed during the pandemic to welcome and reach further and deeper into their communities. Whether digitally (social media, websites, streaming), on campus, or through small groups, events, in homes or micro-churches – the duty to engage communities begins within churches. There is ample reason to suggest that the potential way forward is a blended ecology of engagement and faith expression, utilizing the most effective tools at hand alongside the valued expressions of more traditional gatherings. We are clearly in a world where the future is NOT one size or expression of faith will fit everyone.

## Beliefs About God

How does faith manifest itself among American Christian beliefs? Despite the fact that fewer Americans in 2021 call themselves Christian vs. 2011, three percent more of us now agree that we have a ‘relationship with one living God’ (54% now vs. 51% in 2017, although this rise may have been due to adjusted question wording in 2021).

Most Americans also agree that ‘God is love and invites the world into a loving relationship’ (up by 6% to 56% since 2017) and that ‘God created a literal heaven and hell’ (41%, not asked in 2017) – both of which are concepts central to Christianity. [See Figure 2.6]

Along similar lines, fewer Americans now agree with non-Christian tenets such as ‘The forces of nature and the spirits within the creation are God for me’ (down nine percent since 2017 to 31% now), ‘God is the full realization of human potential’ (down three percent since 2017 to 33%), and ‘God is a higher state of consciousness that people may achieve’ (falling four percent in 2017 to 30% now).

Given this shift away from non-Christian tenets, it is odd to see an increase in agreement with the pantheistic ‘There are many gods.’ This rose from nine percent to 15 percent in the past few years.

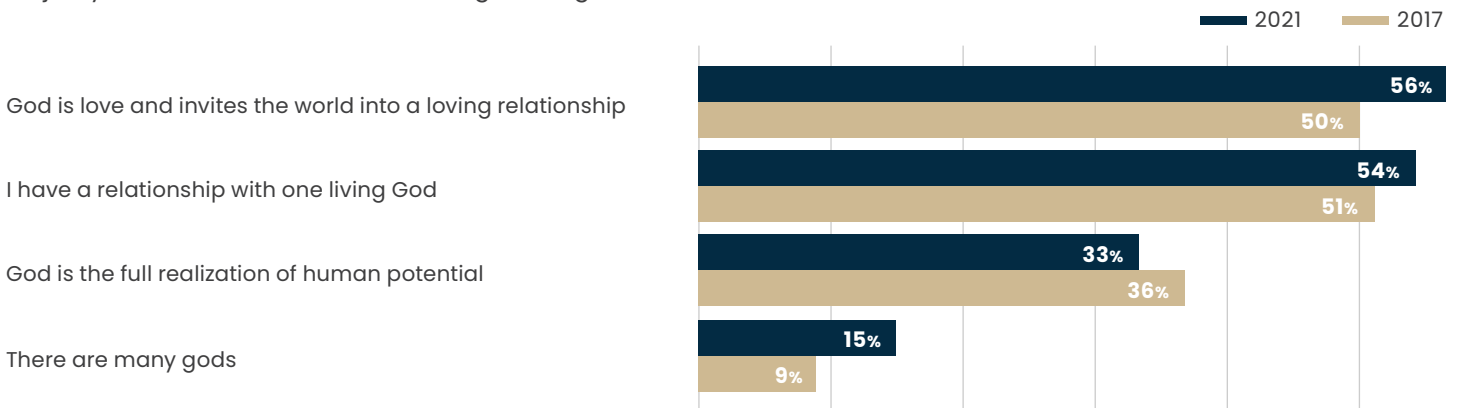
The proportion of people who were unsure about the existence of a god and who deny the existence of a god – traits respectively associated with agnosticism and atheism – remained unchanged.

These results support the conclusion that American society is at something of a spiritual crossroads, with a majority believing in a single, living God and a vocal minority disputing this central, biblical tenet in any number of ways.

– FIGURE 2.6

### BELIEF AMONG AMERICANS GROWS FOR BOTH ONE GOD AND MANY GODS

Majority still holds to the idea of a loving, inviting God



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

## Beliefs About Jesus

While belief in and feelings of connection with a loving God have grown since 2017, beliefs about Jesus have grown more diverse in that span. This trend points toward syncretism, a set of religious beliefs untethered to any specific creed. [See Figure 2.7]

Was Jesus both divine and human? Most Americans said “yes;” only 15% would say “no.” Did he rise from the

dead? Half of the country would say, “yes;” only 20% would disagree.

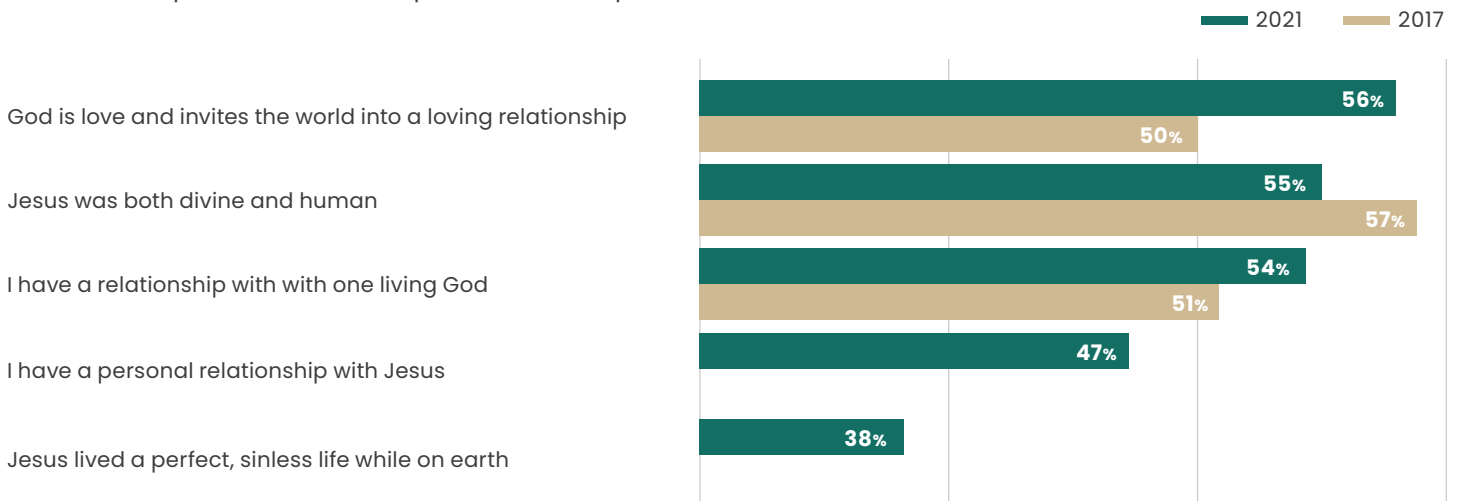
However, it is notable that while 54% of Americans say they have a relationship with one living God, 47% say they have a personal relationship with Jesus. This suggests that these two statements are not equal to them despite the fact that 55% agree that Jesus was both human and divine. And even

though a majority believes in Jesus’ divinity, just 38% agree that Jesus lived a perfect, sinless life on earth. The disparity here suggests that millions of Americans feel they have a personal relationship with a divine Jesus who was a flawed sinner.

— FIGURE 2.7

### A MAJORITY OF AMERICANS BELIEVES JESUS WAS DIVINE

Fewer have a personal relationship or believe Him perfect



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

## Beliefs About Jesus

Figure 2.8 demonstrates how American beliefs about Jesus are changing. For every statement in our list that appeared in both the 2017 and 2021 surveys, the percentage of those who agree has fallen.

Therein lies a conundrum. At the same time that those who affirm traditional biblical beliefs about God has risen, the share of Americans who hold to traditional Christian beliefs about Jesus is in decline.

An earlier report in this series reported that 64.2% of Americans name Christianity as their religion. There is a significant gap between the number of people who say they are Christians and the number who agree with historic Christian teaching about Jesus. When extrapolated against the American population, this disparity works out to an astonishing 47.1 million doubting believers.

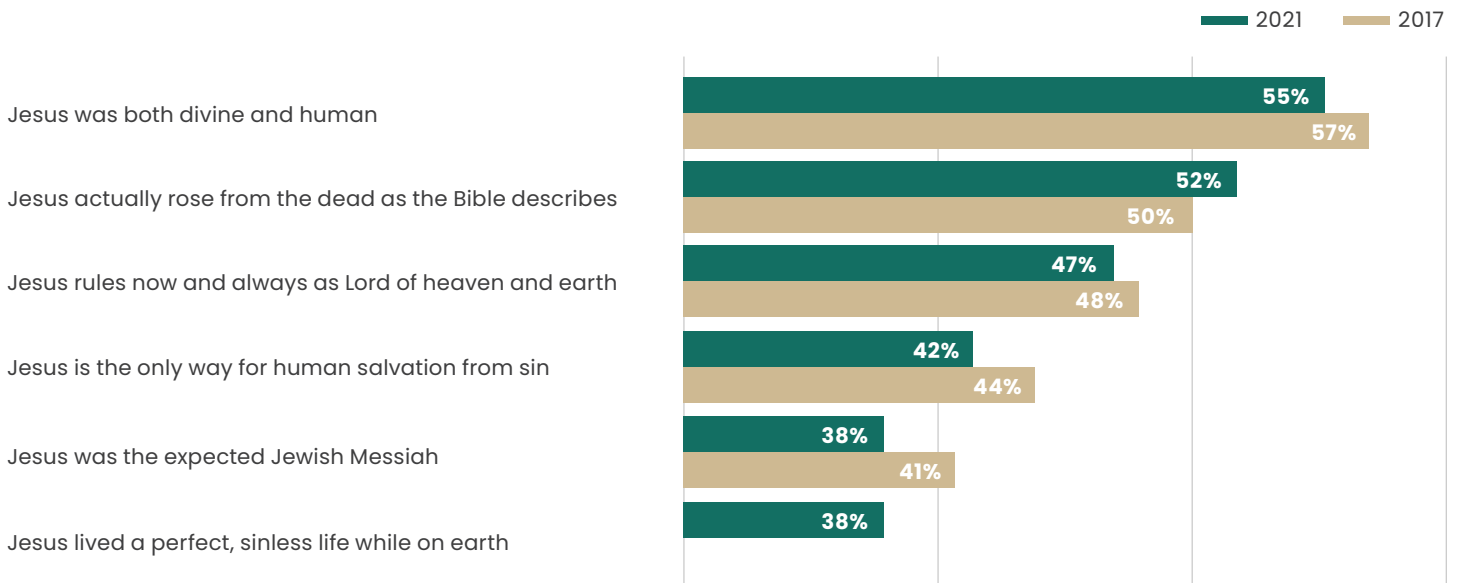
**47 million American Christians don't fully agree that Jesus rose from the dead.**

To be sure, the American religious landscape is diverse. It includes churches that do not teach the physical, bodily resurrection of Christ.

— FIGURE 2.8

### FEWER AMERICANS AGREE WITH CHRISTIAN TEACHING ABOUT JESUS

Millions fewer now agree that Jesus is a Savior vs. 2017



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

## Beliefs About Jesus

Still, membership in these types of churches is not a strong percentage of the national Christian population, and their numbers are in decline. These churches are not large enough to account for the 47.1 million people we are considering here, not the mention the millions more who do not affirm the other statements in the list. This means there are millions of Americans from orthodox or relatively-traditional church background who do not believe, or maybe do not understand, basic Christian doctrine about Jesus Christ.

The largest shift in statements about Jesus over the past few years comes from fewer agreeing with statements on church affiliation. Americans are more likely now to distance themselves from corporate worship by saying that ‘believing in Jesus does not require participating in a church’ (63% now vs. 50% in 2017) and that ‘people in the church don’t behave as Jesus would have’, (61% vs. 32% in 2017). [See Figure 2.9]

This result belies a fast-growing sentiment among all Americans that church members are not truly living up to their faith. Sadly, the perception that Christians are judgmental is even higher among

people attending a faith community than it is among non-attenders. Perhaps by not associating themselves with other believers, unchurched Christian believers avoid such an aspirational struggle.

### A fast-growing majority of Americans think it’s OK to believe in Jesus but not go to church.

The American Beliefs Study clearly shows that the things Americans believe about Jesus are slowly separating from historic Christian tenets. Also, the traditional mindset that linked faith in Jesus with church

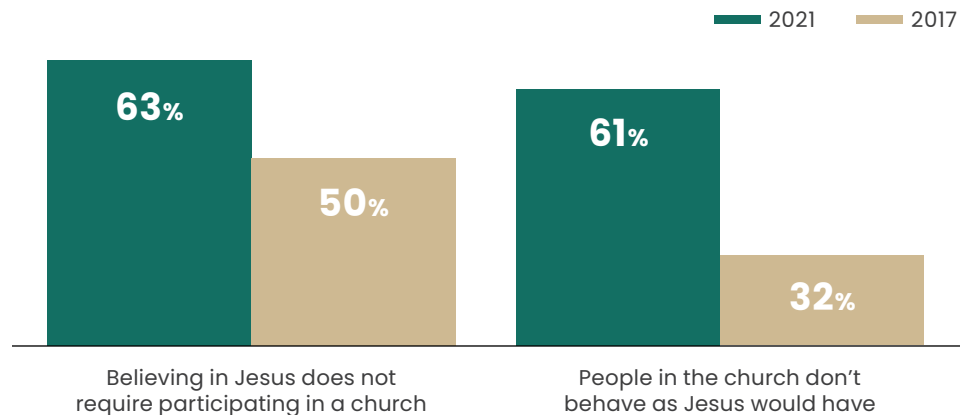
attendance has eroded recently. This change is rapid. And finally, the share of Americans in 2021 who believe people in the church don’t behave as Jesus would have has, incredibly, nearly doubled to 61% in just four short years.

As for the ballooning perception of Christians not acting like Jesus would have, the Study also shows the main reason people give for not getting involved with a church is a belief that church members act in ways counter to the character of Christ – whatever they perceive that character to be.

— FIGURE 2.9

### GROWING MAJORITY OF AMERICANS ISOLATES FROM CHURCH

Six in ten say churchgoing is irrelevant and Christians are hypocritical



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

---

## Beliefs About Jesus

---

The responsibility for modeling the character of Christ invariably falls upon Christians. Writings from the early Christian church show how an indelible impact grows between mentors who live and act out an example of Christ and those just beginning on their faith journey. Have Christians acted out their faith toward their non-believing friends and neighbors? Have mature Christians exemplified Christ and mentored the many non-Christians in their lives? Personal engagement is just one path toward correcting perceptions of hypocrisy.

Such engagement could also help to re-align beliefs about Jesus with history and counter the view

that faith in Jesus can exist without fellowship. The question becomes, do fewer agree with biblical teachings about Jesus because they're hearing about them and rejecting the teaching? Or do fewer agree with these Christian tenets because they're not hearing them as often. Certainly, being coached on truths about Jesus by a more mature Christian was a crucial aspect of early church expansion. Likewise, hearing Christian tenets affirmed in fellowship settings, through teaching and discussion, can help to grow belief and inspire greater agreement on who Jesus was and what it means to have faith in Him.



---

## Summary Highlights | Meeting Community Needs

---

- American attitudes are broadly conflicted over what morality means and what moral guidance should set the standard for American society.
- A stronger majority of Americans now say they have a 'relationship with one living God.
- A growing share of Americans say faith is significant in their lives.
- Most Americans agree with tenets central to Christian belief, and fewer now hold with non-Christian beliefs.
- Beliefs about Jesus are now more diverse. People are now less likely to acknowledge Jesus' deity.
- American churchgoers are more often seen as hypocritical than not.

- A fast-growing share of Americans feel that believing in Jesus does not require participating in a church fellowship.

Church leaders need to be aware of these trends and prepare to address them clearly, with grace and truth.

These results also point toward neighborhoods and communities that are hurting, both physically and spiritually. Churches must be their own best advocates. Church leaders have an opportunity to bless their members and build authentic relationships with their neighbors with Christlike humility, acceptance, fellowship and healing.

---

# Engaging Our Communities

---

The American Beliefs Study shows that the face of American society is undeniably changing. American Christianity is changing as well. Our faith fellowships are now home to tens of millions of fewer congregants than they were a decade ago. Americans are more conflicted than ever about what morality means.

To be sure, many long-held Christian beliefs remain. Yet the modern American Christian is more apt than ever before to adopt some beliefs and disregard others.

At the very least, the fabric of our American social morality is fraying at the edges. Adding further strain, the COVID-19 pandemic ushered in new rules for American communities of faith. Chief among these were new ways of engaging with our neighbors, and radically different ways of attending church.

During the last four years, mobility among Americans has seemed to accelerate. The northeast and north central regions have seen significant migration to warmer states and regions, spurred on in no small part by Baby Boomers seeking a way out of shoveling snow in retirement. More recently, the impact of COVID-19 on telecommuting as well as the corresponding growth of “Zoom towns” are two more factors leading to this phenomenon.

When mobility affects towns, cities and states, it affects the Church. Congregations which had been stable and vibrant for decades have seen a third of their membership migrate to new pastures.

Why do members of a community seek out a church? What factors keep them from considering such a choice even as an inner voice tells them there must be something more fulfilling in life?

And, what causes people happy with their church family to leave? What do they look for in choosing a new congregation for fellowship?

This report on findings from the American Beliefs Study attempts to address questions like these along with a broad overview of impacts. In future reports, we expect to offer more specific, targeted solutions for church communities – ways they might survive departures and capitalize on the migration already underway.

## Non-Involvement Influences

The recent American Beliefs Study shows that two-thirds of Americans were not involved with any faith community. Reasons for staying away were largely static or had even diminished in impact recently. On a scale of ‘not at all’ to ‘very much,’ 11 of 21 reasons cited in both 2017 and 2021 stayed the same, while nine diminished. This means most of the repeated factors kept people from exercising their faith just as much as before, or less.

Six of the strongest reasons for staying away from church

suggested that respondents had been in situations where they felt uncomfortable or had heard messages reinforcing their negative perceptions. The top reasons for staying away were ‘Religious people are too judgmental,’ ‘Religion is too focused on money,’ that they ‘Don’t trust organized religion’ or they didn’t ‘trust religious leaders.’ [See Figure 3.3]

While ‘being too judgmental’ is still the leading factor for not engaging with a church, Christians have apparently made headway

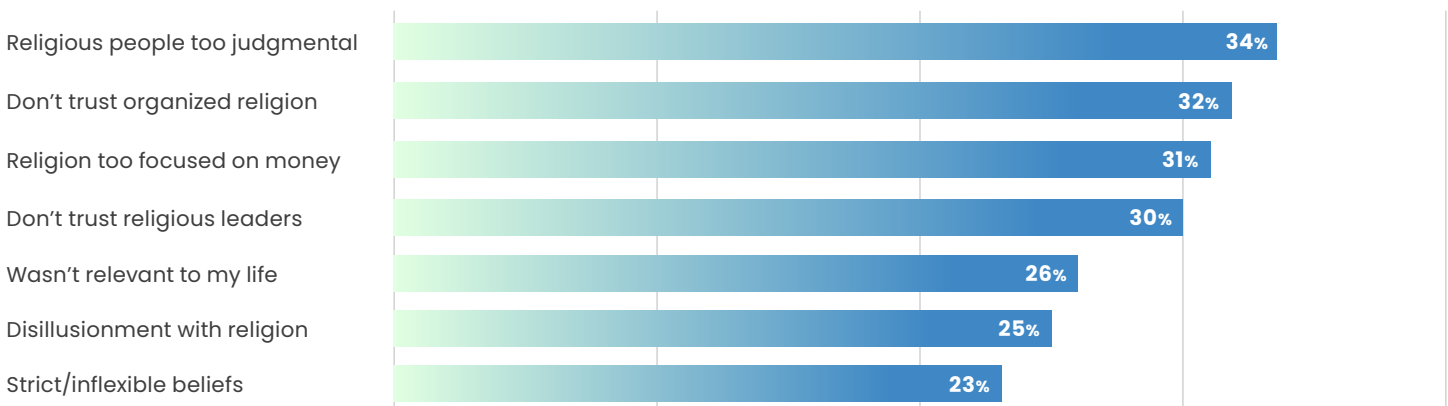
in reducing this perception. Of the leading factors for shying away from church fellowships, being judgmental was the only one in which fewer people agreed since 2017, and it dropped by a significant 10%.

Slightly lower on the scale were people who said they were ‘disillusioned with religion,’ that religious beliefs were ‘strict or inflexible’ or that religion was just ‘boring.’

— FIGURE 3.3

### AMERICANS SHUN RELIGIOUS LIFE DUE TO THE PEOPLE, THE LEADERS, AND THE RELIGION

Top responses to “How much did each of these items influence your reasons for not participating in a religious congregation or religious community?”



Percent of positive responses from 14,942 American adults  
American Beliefs Study, 2021

## Non-Involvement Influences

It's also noteworthy that even for these main reasons, the average rating placed each of them between 'very little' and 'somewhat' influential. This means that any one of these individual factors were likely not enough to cause non-engagement. It is far more likely that a combination of many perceptions were needed to dissuade people from engaging in a religious community.

Other reasons that ranked between 'very little' and 'somewhat' were that religion wasn't 'Relevant to my life' or that the respondent 'didn't believe in God.' These mid-level reasons did not reflect so much of an experiential dissatisfaction with faith communities as they did a long-held position.

The only reason that saw agreement increase recently was they 'couldn't find the right faith community' to attend in their area.

All new reasons added to the list for 2021 scored in the lower range of the scale, between 'not at all' and 'very little.' These included 'didn't develop friendships,' 'too progressive,' 'didn't have opportunity to serve' and 'didn't have desired children's or youth programs.'

These responses describe an unchurched population that feels an ache but doesn't go to the dentist because they had a bad visit a long time ago. Over time, minor individual experiences or perceptions gel together into a larger, even subconscious, resistance to religious communities.

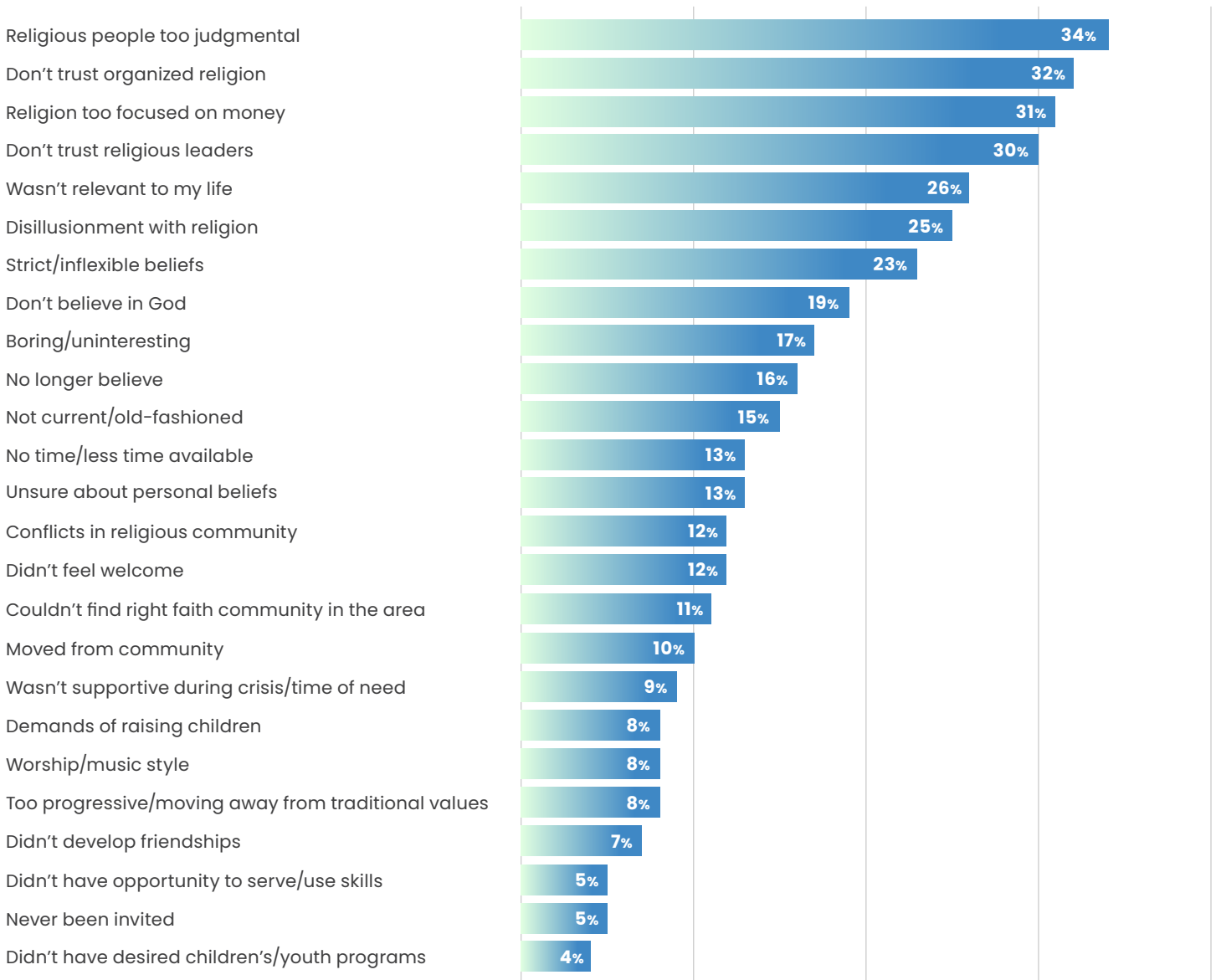
What is the church to do faced with these consistent negative perceptions? Again, local churches in America have an opportunity – and even a responsibility – to engage their communities in grace, truth, and love.

These results appear to indicate that it is possible for the church to overcome the reasons people decide not to be involved. Like Aesop's unbreakable bundle of sticks, it may be easier to snap these perceptions individually.

Of course, communities of faith must identify and do their best to avoid the off-putting habits and practices that deter engagement. Be loving, friendly and welcoming. Be authentic and humble. Generous and kind. By actively living out their faith in grace, truth and love, Christians in local churches can help change perceptions one at a time and create opportunities for engagement and inclusion.

## Non-Involvement Influences

The following list includes the “top-two” scores for every reason Americans gave for not being involved in a faith community:



Percent of positive responses from 14,942 American adults  
American Beliefs Study, 2021

## Distance to a Faith Community

Americans prefer not to travel more than 20 minutes to reach their place of worship, with a majority saying they'd rather worship at a place that's less than 15 minutes away.

People in more rural areas accept that they might need to travel further to attend a faith gathering, while urban respondents were less willing to travel.

For the largest churches, this means that growth is best achieved by situating the campus in an area with higher population density and the potential for growth.

On the other hand, medium, small and micro-churches might see themselves in a great position to engage, adapt, and respond to local communities and their unique needs.

The preferred traveling time to attend a congregation also functions as strong advice for churches that seek to pursue outreach. While a third of churchgoers may come from further away, it makes sense to identify 15 to 20 minutes' drive time from your location to help concentrate your outreach (online tools are available to help identify this periphery). Some evidence even suggests that the younger your surrounding population is, the less willing they are to travel even this far. Visits from people beyond 15-20 minutes distance are most likely to happen because of personal invitations.



## Changing to a New Faith Community

More than one in six respondents (18%) had thought about leaving or changing their congregation in the past year, slightly higher than the 16% saying this in 2017. The share who said they had considered this frequently or occasionally rose over 2017 by one percent each, while the percentage who had thought about

it only rarely stayed the same at nine percent.

However, when asked for a reason why they would consider leaving or moving, wavering churchgoers were hard-pressed to arrive at a consensus. Compared to 2017, fewer respondents picked ten out of the

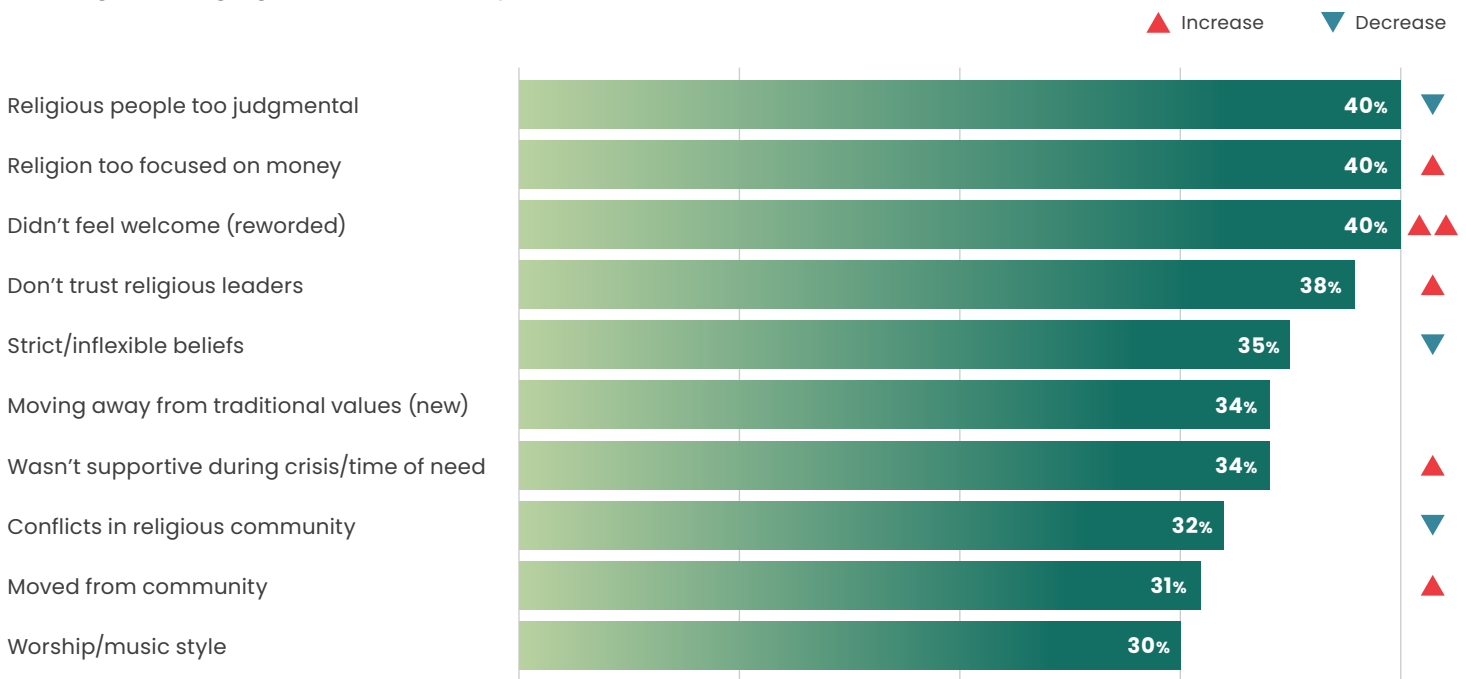
25 reasons offered to them, and only four of those 25 reasons saw an increase. [See Figure 3.4]

Strikingly, dissatisfied churchgoers were significantly more likely to agree with every statement about their church compared to unchurched respondents, except

— FIGURE 3.4

### DISSATISFIED CHURCHGOERS FEEL MORE DEEPLY THAN OUTSIDERS DO

Top responses to “How much would each of these items influence your thinking about considering non-participation in a religious congregation or community?”



Percent of positive responses from 14,942 American adults  
American Beliefs Study, 2021

---

## Changing to a New Faith Community

---

that they were more apt to trust organized religion. They were much more likely than the unchurched to say that religious people are too judgmental, that religion is too focused on money, that they didn't feel welcomed and that the beliefs were strict or inflexible. They were much more likely to reference conflicts in the religious community.

The factor that saw the biggest increase was among dissatisfied churchgoers was feeling unwelcome in their current communities (40% top two, up 8% from 2017). The study also saw an increase in churchgoers who felt they couldn't trust religious leaders (up 3%).

These factors again suggest that relationships are key and underscore the importance of churches being hospitable – for members as well as visitors. Leaders and church members alike must ask themselves the hard question of whether we truly foster an environment of safety, trust, vulnerability and authenticity

within our halls. If the answer is not affirmative, perhaps we reflect on how a sovereign God would have us treat each other.

Another – perhaps related – churchgoing group that has trended upward since 2017 were those who felt their community failed to support them during a time of crisis or need (34% now vs. 30% then). These results were pre-pandemic, and crisis skills have undoubtedly been tested since the onset of COVID. Still, leaders might need to consider augmenting their counseling abilities in response. Some may even consider coaching members on how to listen and respond appropriately to fellow churchgoers who are in crisis.

An increase also emerged among those who had moved away from the community and couldn't find a comparable new church home (28% top two now vs. 25% in 2017).

These findings suggest that churches (of all sizes) need to

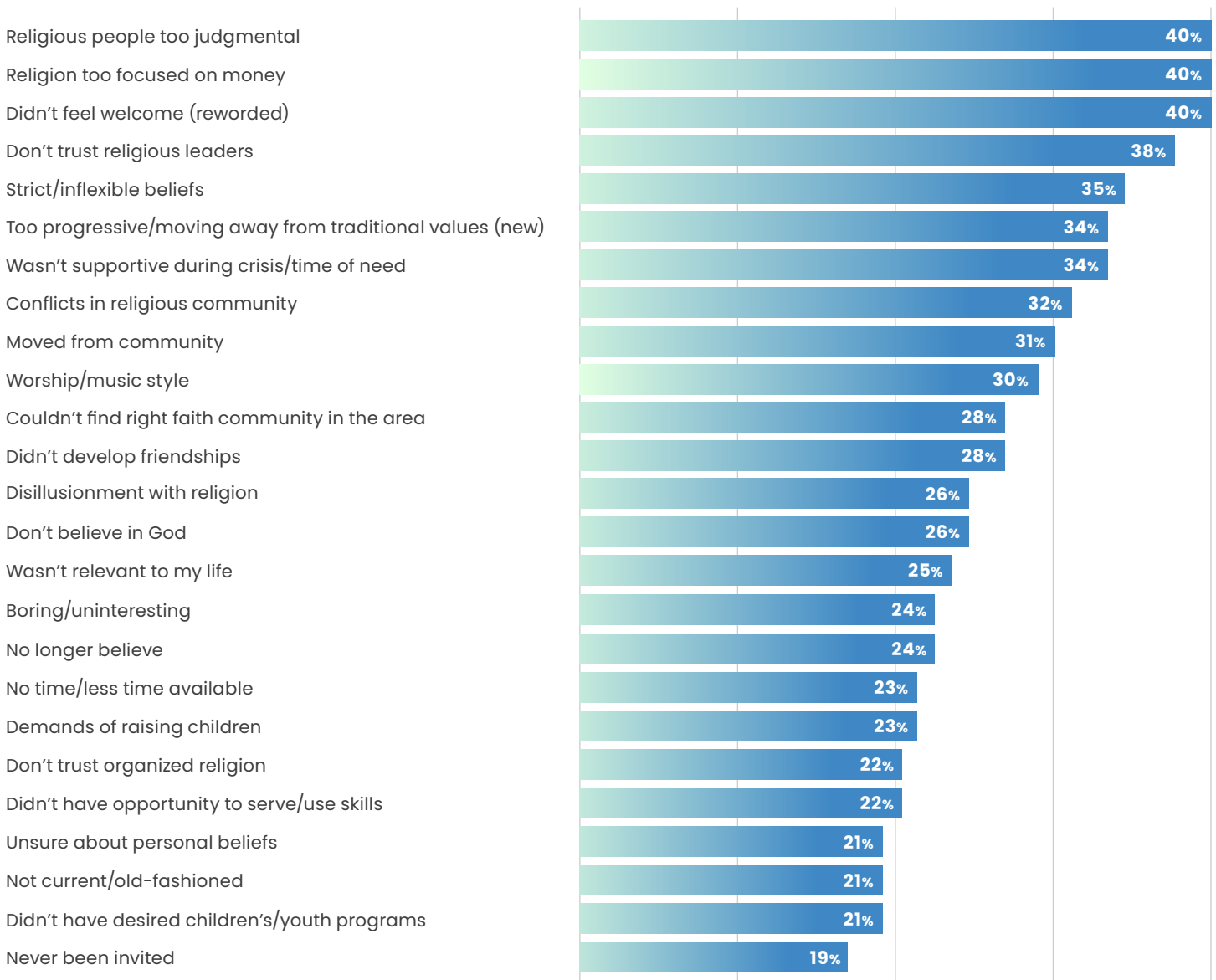
understand they have hurting congregants in their midst. In a good number of cases, the hurt seems to stem from past interactions *within the Church*. In addition to engaging the broader community, leaders and members must not neglect strong, personal connections with brothers and sisters in the faith.

Many churches have worked to forge stronger personal connections through regular, anonymous congregant-focused assessments and feedback mechanisms. These methods allow the church to identify ministry needs and begin to break down walls, encourage sharing and grow spiritually.



## Changing to a New Faith Community

The following list includes the “top-two” agreement scores for every reason churchgoers might consider leaving a faith community:



Percent of positive responses from 14,942 American adults  
American Beliefs Study, 2021

## Ministry Preferences among Seekers

Out of 33 different factors presented to respondents, welcome and teaching led all others among people who might seek out a new faith community. Following these as sought-after qualities were traditional worship and personal relationships. Together, these factors suggest that churches will retain more visitors when

they offer a comfortable and comforting environment, teach the congregation in a compelling way, affirm traditions and foster personal relationships. [See Figure 3.5]

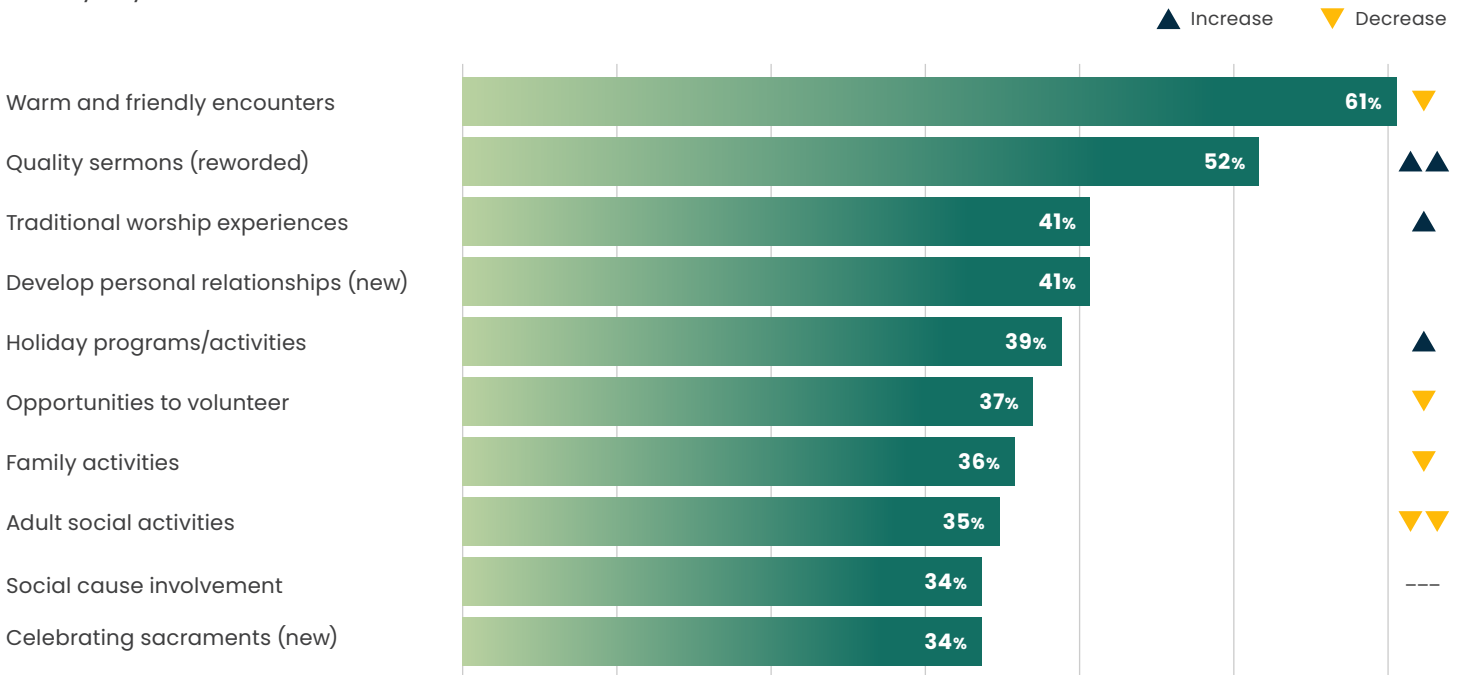
Echoing the sentiment of wavering churchgoers about reasons to leave, the most critical aspect of receiving seekers by far was a warm and

friendly welcome. This was cited by 61% of potential movers as somewhat or very important to them.

After this, 52% of seekers said they looked to hear a message that made sense to them, meaning that a majority are hungry for meaningful lessons, sermons or homilies.

— FIGURE 3.5  
**SEEKERS ALSO DESIRE WELCOME, TEACHING AND CONNECTION**

Top responses to “If you moved and were looking for a religious congregation, please assign the importance of each activity to you.”



Percent of positive responses from 14,942 American adults  
American Beliefs Study, 2021

## Ministry Preferences among Seekers

While many congregations focus on contemporary worship experiences as a gateway activity, traditional worship forms were actually cited as most attractive to seekers, with 41% of them saying this was somewhat or very important to them. This compares to just 28% who say contemporary worship would be somewhat or very important. It is vital to note that the question was generic and did not refer to music specifically.

Does this result affirm a heart desire for varied forms of worship in services, such as community prayer or spoken liturgy in addition to hymns and contemporary songs? The question was not specific on this point. This may be true for some congregations and not others. We have noted the migration away from churches with an emphasis

on liturgy. But considering the proportion of modern, self-identified Christians who don't agree on what the Bible says, perhaps asking the church body to affirm a common creed occasionally isn't a bad idea.

Just as important as the stated desire for traditional worship was the opportunity to develop personal relationships. This makes sense as a natural outgrowth of warm and friendly encounters, yet to a sizeable segment this phrase appears to convey a yearning to achieve a deeper level of connection within their faith community. While some people might refer to even casual acquaintances as 'friends,' others use the term friend to describe only lasting, heart-to-heart relationships. At least four in ten visitors seem to be searching for the latter.

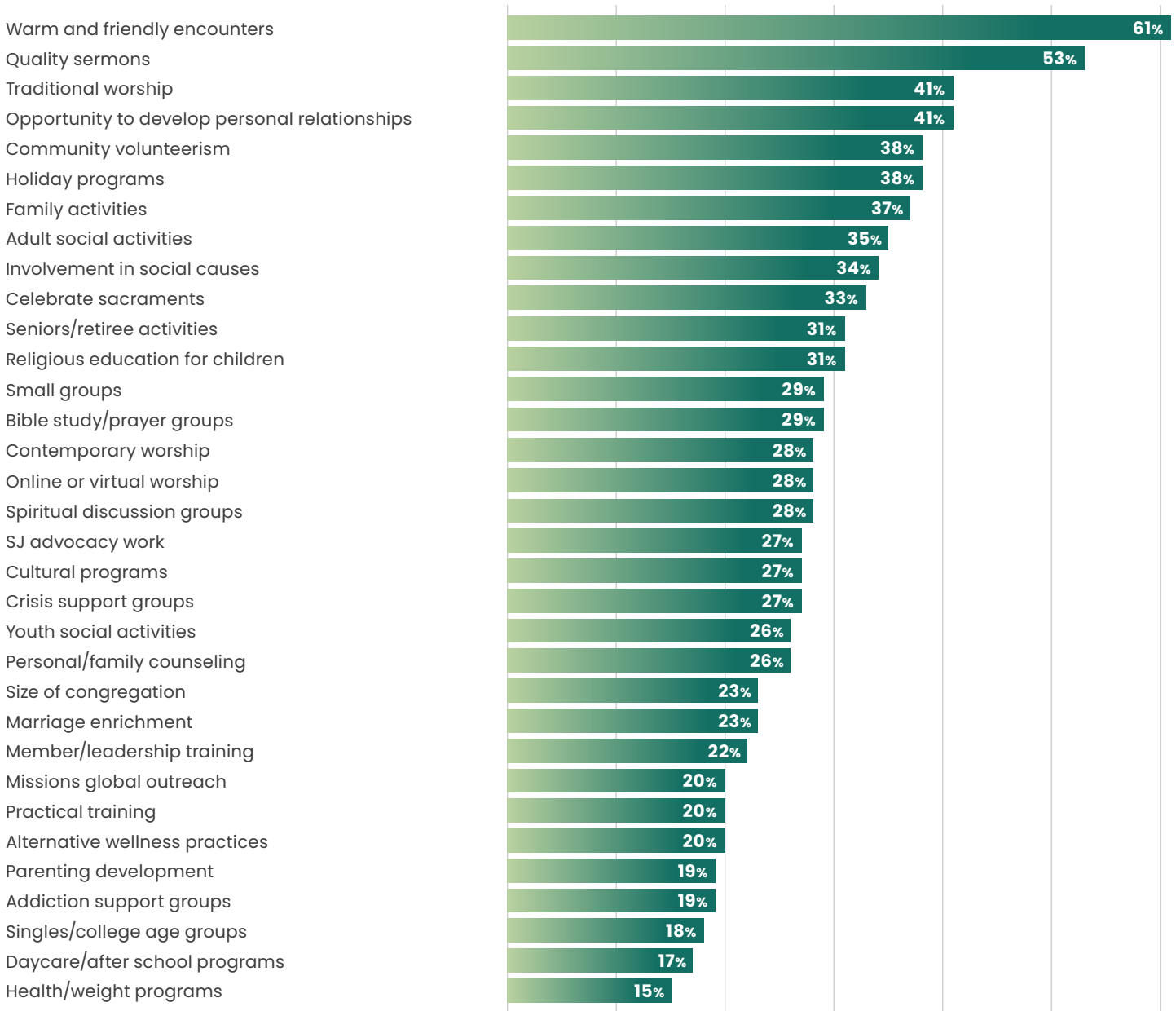
Family activities, holiday programs and community volunteerism are slightly less important than relationships and traditional worship to potential movers, with adult social activities nearly as important.

Notably, forms of traditional and contemporary worship cited earlier is separate from celebrating the sacraments, which are important to a third of seekers. This suggests that in some ways, people want churches to be a place that is set apart from everyday life, that does not shy away from special opportunities to experience God through eucharist or communion, baptisms, self-reflection or other aspirational behaviors.



## Ministry Preferences among Seekers

The following list includes the “top-two” agreement scores for every reason to consider leaving a faith community:



Percent of positive responses from 14,942 American adults  
American Beliefs Study, 2021

## Social Media and the Pivot to Virtual Fellowship

2020 forced many more churches to journey into a new, virtual world – adapting almost overnight to engage their own congregations in completely new ways. Those who were already webcasting worship services, livestreaming events or encouraging small groups meet via Zoom were ahead of the game in many ways. They had practiced with the technology. They had worked to polish their presentation for a virtual audience. And they had often invited and engaged with new audiences through social media.

According to this study, while Facebook still leads in users for all social media entries, it has lost some frequency of utilization. The big gainers – though still not used as much as Facebook – were YouTube, Instagram, Pinterest and Snapchat. Twitter and LinkedIn held their own in the middle of the pack, behind rising Pinterest and above surging Snapchat.

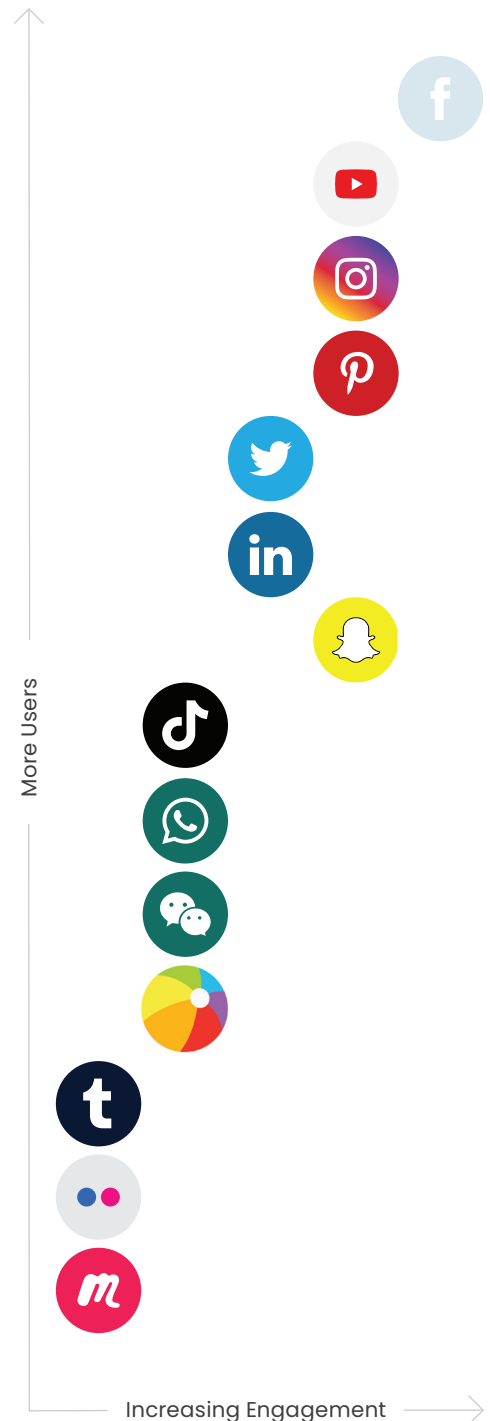
New entries such as TikTok, WhatsApp, WeChat and Marco-Polo trailed the leaders significantly – which is understandable as the market for these is almost completely focused on Millennials and their younger GenZ counterparts.

Tumblr, Flickr and Meetup all saw their usage drop.

What does this mean for church communications? The fact that Facebook is still the dominant social media channel suggests that any church without a presence on Facebook might consider this. Those with a Facebook page can reach audiences both near and far by livestreaming and posting on that channel more than any others.

Posting sermons on a church’s own YouTube channel is also an intuitive, natural choice. Other than this, linking the church services you stream to these channels in other ways could increase reach.

Social media is fast becoming a critical channel for reaching younger Millennials and GenZ generations. There is ample reason for churches – especially larger churches with more resources – to consider creating unique pages or content profiles directed at these groups, streaming special messages for them or other specific, targetable groups on appropriate platforms.



---

## Summary Highlights | Engaging Our Communities

---

- Most Americans do not engage in a faith community. The opportunity to reach them is vast.
- Christians are seen by those outside the church as judgmental, untrustworthy, over-promising, strict, money-hungry, and boring.
- A welcoming attitude, strong teaching, traditional 'worship' and personal relationships led 29 other needs among seekers.
- Taking 'church' to the masses is fast becoming the new norm.
- The likelihood of the church in America returning completely to pre-pandemic models of church engagement are slim.

It used to be that only televangelists had the means and technology to pursue broadcast ministry. Now every pastor can, and to some degree must, become a "digivangelist." Churches that successfully pivoted to live-streaming, social media and other technologies during the pandemic are leading the pack in expanding and engaging their flocks in whole new ways.

The essential qualities here, as with in-person churches, are welcoming, teaching, worshiping with and connecting with people on a deeper level. What does that even look like online? How do those things translate?

Transferring the talent for welcoming people in person to welcoming them online is critical. Being appealing and relaxed online is a unique skill that many church leaders may discover they need to hone and develop.

A talent for teaching is possibly even more vital via streaming than it is in the pulpit. It's much easier to simply switch off the stream than it is to stand up and walk out of the pew. The empathy, transparency, humility, honesty, gentleness and love that comes through in person are especially vital online.

Every church needs to weigh how to build engagement through welcoming, teaching, worship and friendliness – for those on devices as well as those in the pews.

## The Facts of Christian Engagement

You see it nearly every Sunday. Some of your members and visitors are engaged, interactive and fully involved. Others hang back, reluctant to fully be a part of the community and commit to fellowship. A big part of the American Beliefs Study is a mandate to delve into the attitudes, perceptions and beliefs among Christians who engage at different levels. The goal is to help pastors and leaders relate on a personal level with people they meet – both inside and outside the walls of the church.

This report from the American Beliefs Study focuses on the differences in attitudes among Americans who self-identify as Christian. Using their responses to the Study, our researchers took the step of defining two groups: practicing and nominal Christians

Undoubtedly, there might be many more criteria which could serve to define these two groups. However, these criteria were the only ones measured in the American Beliefs Study that permitted differentiation.

Here are some of the most telling findings from this analysis...

- Regardless of age, practicing Christians exist across rural, suburban and urban areas. But they are more evident in rural settings, and in lower and middle class households. They generally have less education. And they're more likely to be found working in service sector, blue-collar and industrial jobs.
- Practicing Christians tend to feel greater concern than nominal Christians for a dozen life issues.
- Nominal Christians are nearly five times more likely than practicing Christians to view the impact of churches on their communities neutrally.
- Younger Christians (both practicing and nominal) are far more concerned than their elders for life issues like managing anger, sexual orientation, marital issues, depression, anxiety, loneliness and guilt.
- Likewise, younger Christians are far more likely to hold beliefs that minimize the value of the family and diminish tenets of biblical marriage.

**Based on the questions in the study, we have defined Practicing Christians as someone who identifies as Christian, attended some type of faith fellowship at least once a month and said that their faith had 'high' or 'utmost' significance in their lives.**

**In contrast, Nominal Christians identify as Christian but attend a fellowship less than once a month or say that faith has moderate or lower significance in their lives. If faith was not important in a respondent's life but they attended often, they were coded as Nominal. The same was true for those who said faith was very important to them but they do not attend frequently.**

## Christian Engagement Rises with Age

As noted earlier in this series of reports from the American Beliefs Study, roughly two in three Americans describe themselves as Christians (64.2%). Among just the 9,500 Study participants who identified as Christian, the level of engagement varies greatly by generation. The fast-waning Silent generation has the highest share of practicing Christians at 47%, compared to 53% who express attitudes that define them as nominals.

At 39%, Boomers are slightly less likely than Silents to be practicing Christians. 61% of the Boomer generation are nominal Christians.

Less than a third of Gen-X and Millennial Christians answered in ways that would define them as practicing Christians, at 32% and 28% respectively. This means that a strong majority of Christians under age 55 say that they attend a fellowship less than once a month and or consider faith to have low to moderate significance in their lives [See Figure 4.1]

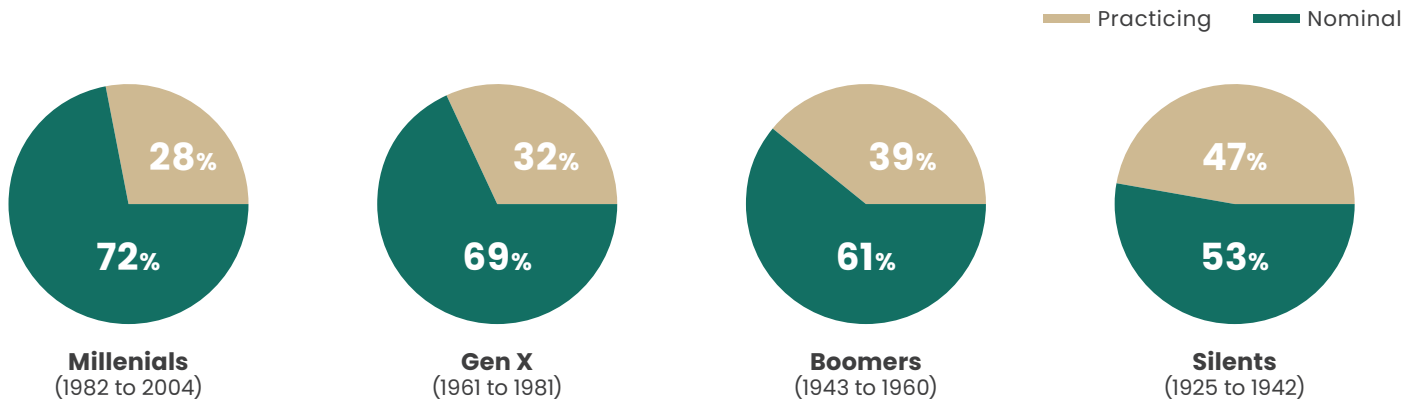
There are several possible explanations for this pattern of waning engagement among younger and younger generations. Maybe as Christians grow older, the Nominals in that generation become more active in their faith. Other data

from the American Beliefs Study suggests that Boomers, Gen-X's and Millennials tend to think differently about the place of faith in their lives.

The challenge in the pie charts for American Christian churches is how to effectively engage this majority of younger nominal Christians. As they age, it is imperative for the life and health of the church that they gravitate toward greater involvement in communities of faith. Other pathways could place the American church in great peril.

— FIGURE 4.1

### OLDER GENERATIONS FAR LIKELIER TO MEET PRACTICING CHRISTIAN CRITERIA



Responses from 9,504 self-identified Christians  
American Beliefs Study, 2021



## Christian Engagement is Stronger in Rural Populations

Depending on what part of the country you're in, the share of self-described Christians in your region might be ten percent higher or lower than the average 64%. Generally, the Western states have the lowest population of Christians, and the Southern states are highest.

Rural areas showed a significantly higher share of practicing Christians (26%) compared to suburban and urban areas (21%). Examining further, the share of nominal Christians remains stable at roughly 42% regardless of whether the area is urban, suburban or rural.

Again, 'practicing' refers to people who self-identify as Christian, attend a fellowship at least once a month, and say that their faith has either strong or utmost significance in their lives.

Why is this so? Perhaps there is something intrinsic about rural communities that deepens ones' faith engagement. There is certainly more opportunity to connect with the natural world in a rural setting. Perhaps just being around more people who engage with faith makes it acceptable. On the other hand, perhaps there is something innate about living in more dense populations that makes Christian engagement harder.

The proportion of Americans who said they were non-religious is significantly higher in urban and suburban areas (28% and 27%) compared to 22% in rural areas. It should be noted that just 11% of Americans live in rural areas, compared to 89% in urban and suburban locations.

Calculated against a population of 330 million, these stats tell us that ten million rural Americans are non-Christian, compared to 85 million suburbanites and 23 million urbanites. Three quarters of these non-Christians follow no religion at all.

In keeping with the findings on population density, the South and Midwest have the highest proportion of practicing Christians at 47% and 23%, respectively. This is significantly higher than the rate of practicing Christians in the West (17%) and the Northeast (13%). The population of nominal Christians in these regions follows a similar pattern.

Dividing the nation into four regions, 70% of practicing American Christians live in the South and Midwest, compared to just 30% in the West and Northeast.

## Mosaic® Groups Offer Clues about Christian Engagement

Mosaic® groups and clusters are part of a neighborhood-level typing system developed by Experian. This system drove the quotas to ensure the people who answered the American Beliefs Study accurately represent all Americans. There are 19 different Mosaic® Clusters in American society, each with a unique name. Figure 4.2 at right lists these clusters, their percent of the US population and the population density of each cluster.

The Federal Census does not distinguish between urban and suburban areas, which combined make up just three percent of the land. Upwards of 97% of the country's land is rural. Per the Mosaic® Cluster definitions from Experian, about 62 percent of Americans live in suburban settings, another 20 percent live in truly urban environments, and just 17.5 percent of Americans live in rural settings. [See Figure 4.2]

Nine of the Mosaic® clusters are 'older,' having an average age of 54 or greater. The ten 'younger' Mosaic® clusters had an average age of 52 or under. This age distinction emerges as a significant dividing line for faith expression.

— FIGURE 4.2

### OVER 60% OF AMERICANS LIVE IN SUBURBAN ENVIRONMENTS

Cluster Name	Population Density	Percent of US	Percent by Density
Pastoral Pride	Rural	7.3%	
Blue Sky Boomers	Rural	6.1%	17.0%
Families in Motion	Rural	3.6%	
Singles and Starters	Suburban	8.8%	
Golden Year Guardians	Suburban	7.3%	
Cultural Connections	Suburban	6.4%	
Middle-class Melting Pot	Suburban	5.8%	
Autumn Years	Suburban	5.6%	62.5%
Family Union	Suburban	5.4%	
Booming with Confidence	Suburban	5.3%	
Thriving Boomers	Suburban	5.1%	
Suburban Style	Suburban	5.0%	
Flourishing Families	Suburban	4.4%	
Promising Families	Suburban	3.4%	
Aspirational Fusion	Urban	2.9%	
Significant Singles	Urban	4.7%	
Struggling Societies	Urban	4.7%	20.5%
Power Elites	Urban	6.1%	
Young, City Solos	Urban	2.0%	

Share of US Population by Mosaic® Cluster  
Experian Corporation

## Mosaic® Groups Offer Clues about Christian Engagement

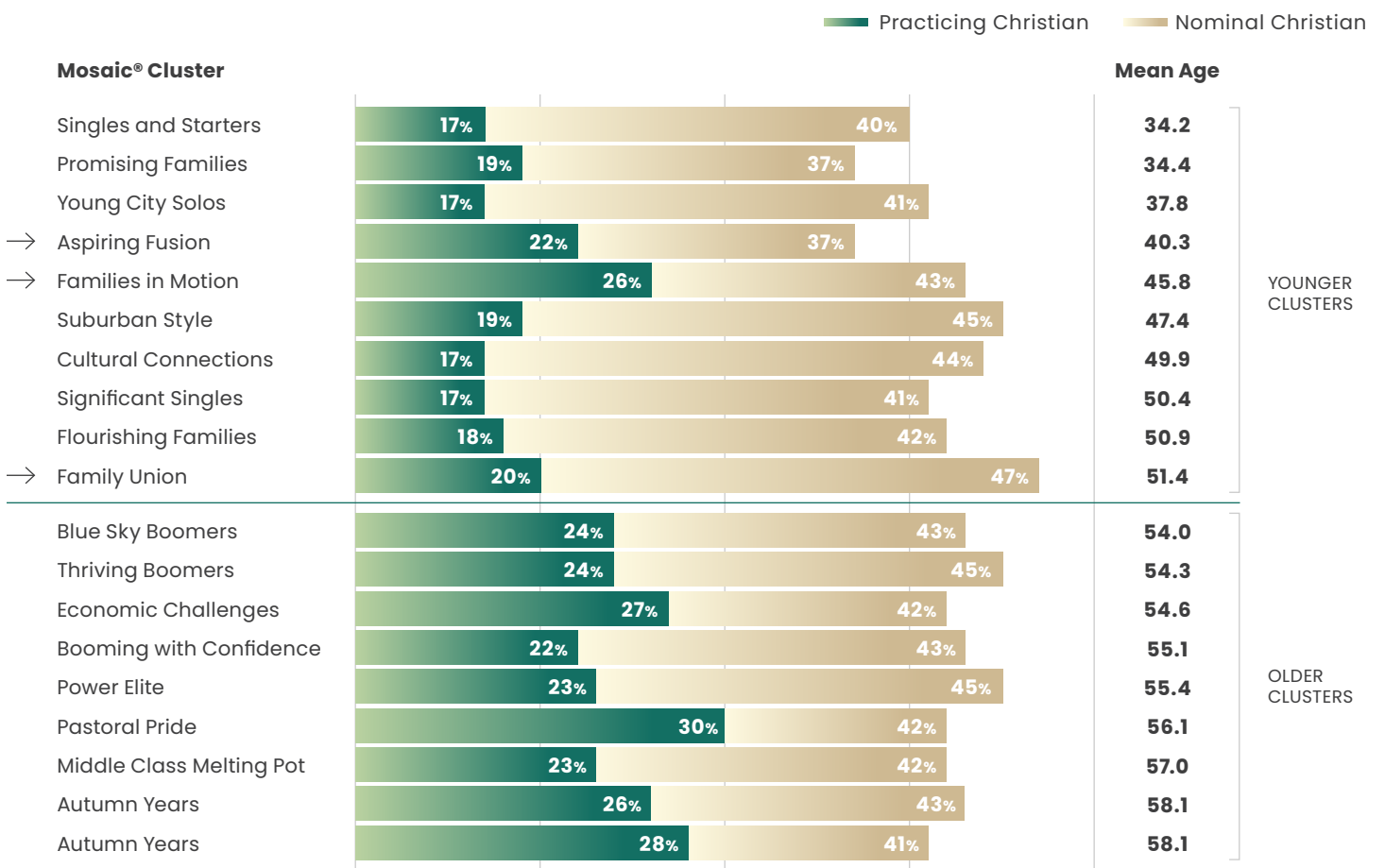
The average share of people identifying as Christian in the ten younger clusters was 61%, significantly lower than the 68% in older clusters. Two of these younger clusters saw a share of Christians

similar to older clusters - Families in Motion at 69% and Family Union at 67%. Together, these two segments comprise nine percent of the US population. Another three segments representing 17%

of Americans – Suburban Style, Cultural Connections and Flourishing Families – saw 61–64% of their members identifying as Christian. [See Figure 4.3]

— FIGURE 4.3

### ONLY THREE YOUNGER MOSAIC® CLUSTERS SHOW HIGHER SHARE OF CHRISTIANS



Share of responses among 9,504 American Christians  
American Beliefs Study, 2021

## Mosaic® Groups Offer Clues about Christian Engagement

The biggest disparity between older and younger Mosaic® clusters occurs in the proportion of practicing Christians. Members of younger clusters on the whole averaged 19% practicing Christians, compared to 25% practicing Christians in the nine older clusters – a six-point gap. In contrast, the share of people in younger Mosaic® clusters who could be categorized as nominal was just one percent below the average in older clusters (42% vs. 43%).

The Mosaic® cluster with the highest share of Christians is Pastoral Pride with 72%. At 30%, this cluster also has the highest proportion of practicing Christians.

Three of the younger groups saw a relatively stronger proportion of practicing Christians – Families in Motion (26%), Aspirational Fusion (22%) and Family Union (20%). What was similar about the three younger Mosaic® clusters that have the highest concentration of practicing Christians? What makes them look more like the older Mosaic® clusters that had a similar concentration? Getting at this answer requires digging into the descriptions of these clusters. The following descriptions are paraphrased.

- Families in Motion had the highest share of practicing Christians at 26%. This is a highly rural group. Its members tend to be married couples between 25–45, half with children, in quiet safe neighborhoods and modest homes. They typically work in the trades, manufacturing or in manual labor. This group is fairly settled in their eastern, small town communities and don't have big plans to go anywhere else.
- Aspirational Singles had 22% practicing Christians. These are younger, ethnically-mixed members in largely urban areas. They're a more transitory group in lower-income, industrial communities with below average housing values. Nearly two-thirds are single parents, and nine in ten are unmarried. Nearly half didn't finish high school, and just six percent have college degrees. If employed, they often work at service-sector and blue-collar jobs.
- The Family Union cluster had 20% practicing Christians, a group which notably also has 47% nominal Christians. This is a predominantly multi-ethnic suburban group made up of Whites and Hispanics living in modest

homes. They're often hard-working, multi-lingual, mixed-generation immigrant households. One-quarter of household heads didn't finish high school and just 15 percent hold college degrees. They earn mid-scale incomes from jobs in construction, manufacturing, transportation and food services.

These descriptions show that in contrast to other younger clusters, these young clusters with a higher share of practicing Christians shared traits like lower educational level, lower incomes and occupations in the trades, manufacturing and the service-sector. All three of these clusters were marked by living in relatively modest housing – regardless of their urban, suburban or rural population density. This was similar to older Mosaic® clusters that also exhibit the highest concentration of practicing Christians; groups like Pastoral Pride, Golden Year Guardians and Struggling Societies. Like the younger clusters, none of these older clusters were particularly well-off or well-educated either. And they also lived in lower middle-class housing regardless of population density.

## Christian Engagement Strongest among Certain Traditions

Protestant Christians were significantly more likely to describe themselves as practicing Christians

**37%**

compared to Catholics **28%** and those in Orthodox traditions **17%**.

Orthodox Christians were least likely to attend fellowship more than once a month or say that faith had high or utmost significance in their lives

**83%**

The same was true for **72%** of Catholics and **63%** of Protestants.

In writing this, ACST used the global standard for sorting Christian denominations and traditions used by the Center for the Study of Global Christianity and others, as well as the World Christian Encyclopaedia.

Among Protestants, adherents to Holiness denominations had the highest share of practicing Christians at

**58%** (Nazarene, C&MA) followed by Pentecostals

and Charismatics at

**54%** (Foursquare, Assemblies)

These two groups were followed by Baptists at

**46%** practicing (including both Southern and American Baptists)

Congregational at

**39%** (Evangelical Free and UCC)

and non-denominational churches at

**37%**

Denominational groups such as Adventist, Lutheran, Methodist, Presbyterian and Reformed saw

**30–35%**

practicing Christians

The denominational groups with the lowest share of practicing Christians were Restorationists at

**24%**

(Christian Church, Disciples of Christ)

and the Episcopal or Anglican Church at

**29%**

Do certain denominational groups inspire stronger personal Christian engagement? Perhaps not. This result might simply correlate to the types of churches that exist near people who desire more spiritual engagement. Or perhaps it means that people who desire stronger Christian engagement gravitate toward some denominations over others.

## Engaged and Nominal Christians Exhibit Differing Lifestyle Traits

**85%**

of Americans who live in multi-person households live with at least one other person related to them.

.....  
This rate is significantly higher for practicing Christians at **92%**. Nominal Christians come in at an average **86%** level.

.....  
The reverse of this is also true... nominal Christians in multi-person households were significantly more likely to live with someone unrelated to them

**14%**

.....  
compared to practicing Christians **8%**.

Another key lifestyle trait that is significantly different between practicing and nominal Christians is that practicing Christians tend to be more rooted than nominal Christians; they stay in one place longer. While it may not seem significant, practicing Christians reported living in one place for an average of 15 years, compared to nominal Christians with an average of 13 years.

These facts lead to some interesting questions. Does transience contribute to a diluted faith? Does a nominal faith connection make it easier for people to migrate? Is there a connection between a willingness to stay put and a desire for greater connections, or the reverse? These questions could not be answered using the responses to the American Beliefs Study.

Further, there might be unexpected implications of the pandemic on this trend. With more telecommuting and less need to migrate to advance one’s career, will Americans stay put longer? Could this have an impact on willingness among nominal Christians to begin engaging in faith communities? Hopefully, local churches in America can leverage this trend within their communities and see the benefit of membership growth as a result.

## Nominal Christians see Church Community Efforts as Weaker

Nine in ten practicing Christians see houses of worship having a positive impact on their communities (91%), compared to just 64% of nominal Christians. In contrast, nominal Christians are nearly five times more likely to be neutral about the community impact of churches compared to practicing Christians (33% vs. 7%). [See Figure 4.4]

Likewise, older American generations held a more positive view of

the impact of churches on their communities. They were also less likely than younger Americans to agree that it would make no difference to them if the churches near them disappeared.

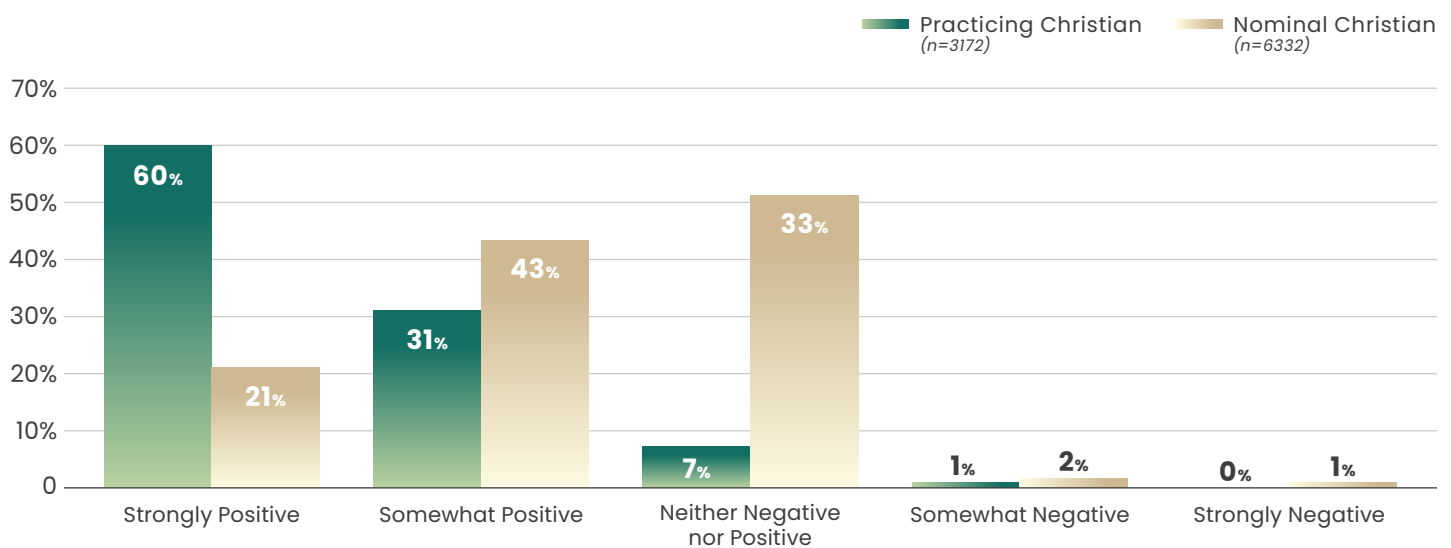
This result suggests that nominal Christians are either less aware or less taken by how local churches benefit their wider communities. Christians are warned in scripture not to ‘pray loudly on the street

corner,’ so this lack of awareness is understandable. Second, churches tend to be more insular than outgoing, serving their members far more effectively than they do their nominal cousins. And finally, these perceptions suggest that Christian churches have been far less successful than they want to be at communicating their positive message to less frequent attendees.

— FIGURE 4.4

### NOMINAL CHRISTIANS LESS POSITIVE THAN PRACTICING CHRISTIANS ABOUT LOCAL CHURCH IMPACT

“How would you describe the impact places of worship have on your local community?”



Percentages among 9,504 American Christians  
American Beliefs Study, 2021

## Practicing Christians Feel Greater Concern for a Dozen Life Issues

According to our Study, Americans feel varying levels of concern about 44 life issues. Perhaps by knowing which of these issues practicing and nominal Christians feel most concerned about, pastoral leadership can more readily tap into and serve those emotional needs.

While nominal Christians and practicing Christians felt the same level of concern about several life issues, no areas emerged where nominal Christians felt significantly more concerned than practicing Christians did.

On the other hand, practicing Christians expressed significantly greater concern than nominal Christians did in at least a dozen life issues. Generally, this suggests that the more engaged a Christian is with a church body, the more emotionally engaged they feel with regard to various life issues.

This seems counterintuitive. Wouldn't practicing Christians intuitively sense that their hope comes from beyond this world, and therefore have a greater sense of hope for the future than nominal Christians? Other responses to the American

Beliefs Study did not provide any indication of why this might be the case. The authors can only surmise that perhaps practicing Christians have more free time to observe and reflect on world events than nominal Christians do, and might express this concern not for themselves, but on behalf of coming generations.

Naturally, American concerns about COVID-19 dominated all others given the timeframe for fielding the study. Nearly half of all respondents expressed high or very high concern about the impacts of the pandemic, and this was the same regardless of engagement level within the church.

The next highest area of concern was in social tensions and political discord, cited as a top-two concern by more than a third of respondents. Practicing Christians were significantly more concerned about this life issue than nominal Christians were (37% vs. 34%). Practicing Christians were also more concerned about illegal immigration than nominal Christians (26% vs. 23%), though these two groups were equally concerned about racial injustice (25% vs. 24%). It may be

helpful to remember that practicing Christian Americans are more often older. Being older, perhaps this group feels a greater responsibility to safeguard or uphold traditional American values or mores. This suggests that both these groups concede that America could handle race relations better, but practicing Christians were slightly more concerned about the practical impacts of racism in society.

The widest life issue gap between practicing and nominal Christians was for 'spiritual or religious issues.' While one in five practicing Christians indicated this as a top two concern (20%), this was the case for only 12% of nominal Christians. Another wide gap appeared for Social Media and the Internet, which another 20% of practicing Christians cited as a top-two concern compared to 16% of nominal Christians.

By a smaller margin, practicing Christians were also more concerned about a range of other life issues compared to nominal Christians, as seen in Figure 4.5.

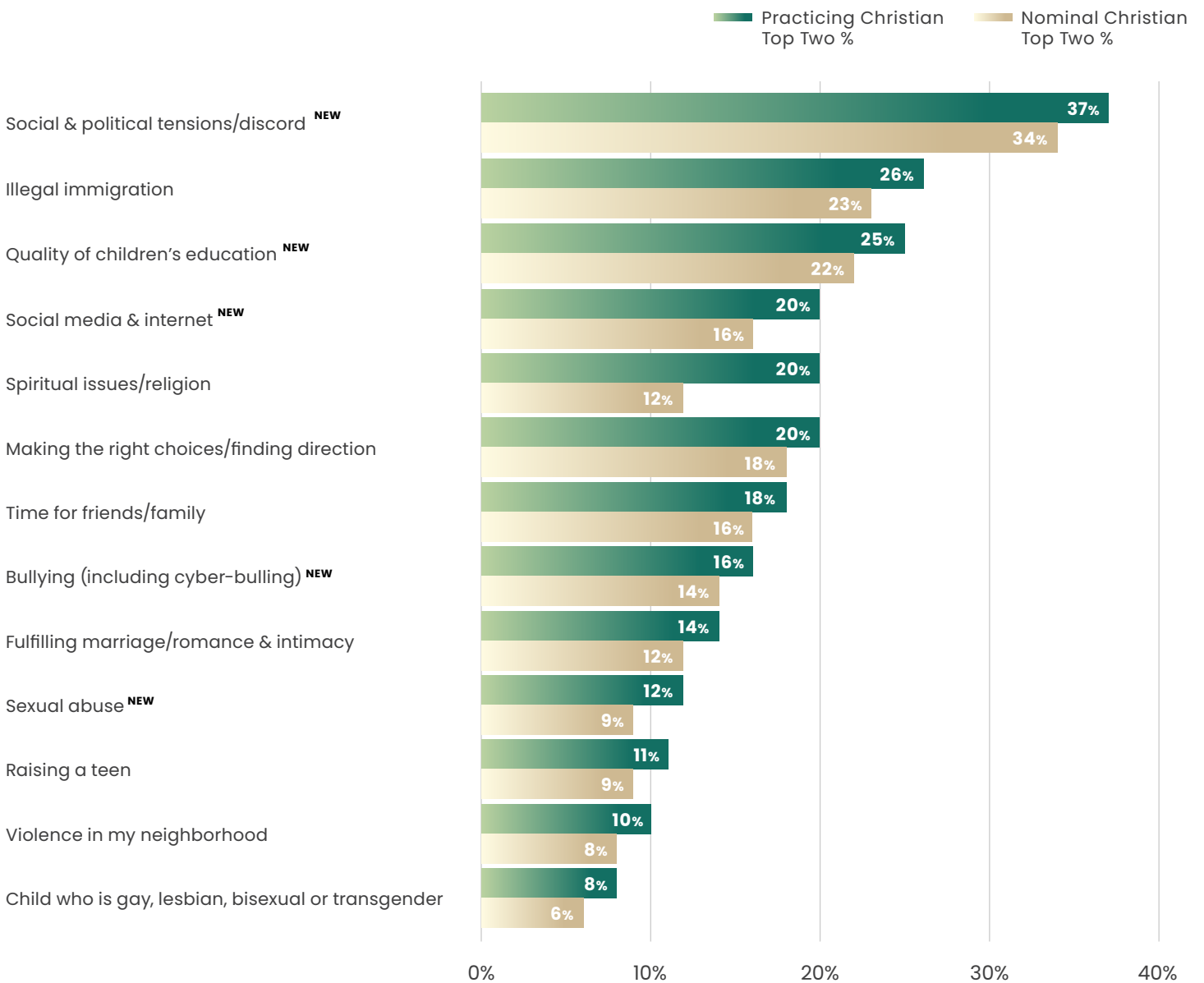


## Practicing Christians Feel Greater Concern for a Dozen Life Issues

— FIGURE 4.5

### PRACTICING CHRISTIANS FEEL GREATER CONCERN FOR MANY LIFE ISSUES VS. NOMINAL CHRISTIANS

“Indicate your level of concern, if any, for each item below?”



Ratings of ‘Escalating’ and ‘High’ Concern among 9,504 American Christians  
American Beliefs Study, 2021

## Concern over Life Issues Differs Greatly by Generation and Urban Density

Regardless of whether they were nominal or practicing Christians, Millennial and Gen-X generation respondents felt much greater concern on 33 of the 44 life issues compared to their elders. Specifically, their combined level of escalating or high concern for many life issues occurs at double, three times or even six times the rate of Boomers and Silent generation respondents. Some of these issues – such as having a satisfying job, reaching their goals, balancing their work and family lives or caring for aging parents – are obviously more often the domain of the young. These are to be expected.

And yet, ‘struggling with my sexual orientation’ was an issue for five times as many younger generation members as for older ones. Likewise, younger Americans cited anger management and marriage problems at more than 4x the rate of older Americans.

It is also very concerning that depression, loneliness, divorce and dealing with guilt, for instance, were concerns for Millennials and Gen-X respondents at roughly three times the rate of their elders. Similarly, it is striking that concerns with sexual addiction, domestic violence, arguing

too much, avoiding homelessness and drug or alcohol abuse are concerns for younger Americans at twice the rate of their elders.

These results are a clarion call to local ministers and counseling staff. These generations are pleading for understanding from the church, and solace from the pain these issues seemingly foster. The local church must take up the charge to engage with and relate to these younger generations with Christian teaching around these prominent issues. [See Figure 4.6]

**America’s younger Christian generations feel a visceral sense of unease about many serious life issues. They are pleading for help with significant issues like sexual orientation, anger management, depression, loneliness, guilt and addiction. The local church must take up the charge to help younger generations cope with the spiritual impact arising from these serious concerns among followers of Christ.**

The only issues where the Boomers and older respondents outrated these younger generations was with

concerns over social and political tensions (38% vs. 30%) and illegal immigration (24% vs. 15%).

Older and younger generations feel similarly about the impact of seven of these life issues, including health crisis or illness, personal health problems, social media and the Internet, bullying, sexual abuse, spiritual issues or religion, and planning a will or estate.

Urbanites tended to feel greater concern over being successful, balancing work and family, finding a mate and loneliness compared to rural dwellers. Conversely, rural residents were more concerned than those in other settings over issues of social and political discord and social media.

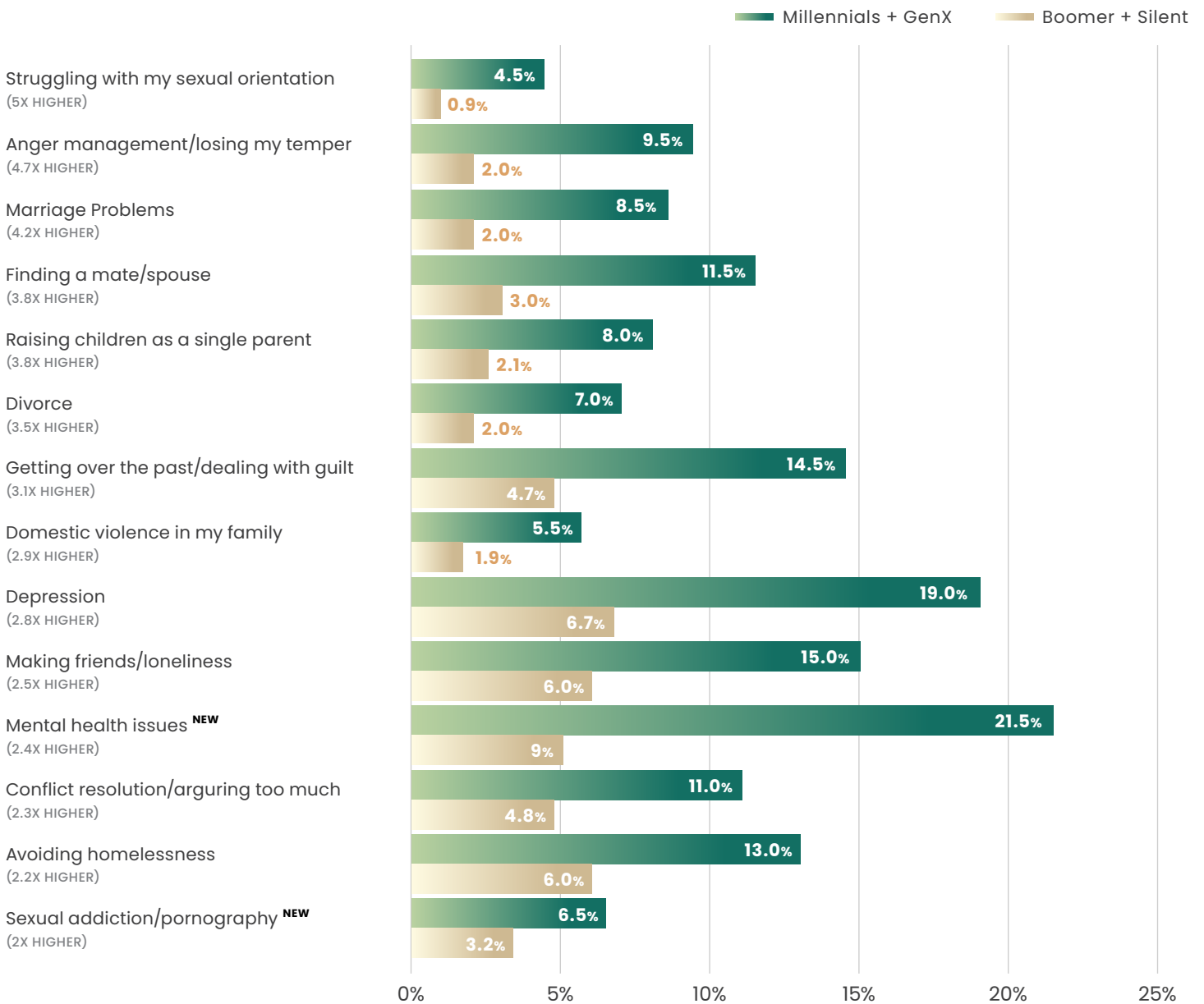
These results reveal that even younger generations who are being taught and ministered to in faith communities feel a visceral unease about many life issues. And while the messages that cause such worry might reverberate endlessly in the halls of government, education and the media, churches can offer respite. Church leaders have a responsibility to offer biblical solutions and ease these concerns wherever they exist.

## Concern over Life Issues Differs Greatly by Generation and Urban Density

— FIGURE 4.6

### YOUNGER CHRISTIANS FEEL FAR GREATER CONCERN FOR LIFE ISSUES THAN THEIR ELDERS

“Indicate your level of concern, if any, for each item below?”



Ratings of ‘Escalating’ and ‘High’ concern among 9,504 American Christians  
American Beliefs Study, 2021

---

## Practicing Christians Align Strongly with Traditional Beliefs

---

Practicing and nominal Christians diverge in their personal beliefs in significant ways.

Many of these differences centered on family and children, with practicing Christians far more likely to hold traditional beliefs. For instance, while 93% of practicing Christians agreed that strong families are key to social stability, just 67% of nominal Christians also agreed. And 82% of practicing Christians believed that children are best raised by both a mother and a father, compared to 55% of nominal Christians. Eight in ten practicing Christians disagreed that children currently receive adequate moral training (81%) compared to 67% of nominal Christians. Seven in ten practicing Christians believed marriage was a relationship between one man and one woman only (70%), compared to half as many nominal Christians (35%). Practicing Christians were more likely than nominal Christians to agree that traditional marriage

is becoming obsolete as a social institution (49% vs. 44%).

Conversely, half of nominal Christians agreed that same-sex marriage must remain legal and protected, compared to just 32% of practicing Christians.

Over eight in ten practicing Christians said religion must play a primary role in shaping social morality (83%), a stance held by just 48% of nominal Christians. Practicing Christians were also significantly more likely to agree that America has a moral responsibility to be a force for good in the world (80% vs. 69%). They were also more likely than nominal Christians to believe that the US should pursue avenues to stop illegal immigration (73% vs. 61%).

In areas where morality and social policy intersect, 55% of practicing Christians agreed that abortion should become illegal, and 51% agreed that religious communities should be exempt from LGBTQ-based policies or regulations,

compared to just 28% of nominal Christians on both of these.

Nominal Christians were significantly more likely than practicing Christians to believe the science that says humans are affecting the climate (64% vs. 55%), and that we must be good stewards of the environment even if it means restricting natural resources (59% vs. 55%).

[See Figure 4.7]

In areas related to social harmony, nominal Christians agree more often that tolerance is necessary for peace and wellbeing (73% vs. 70%) and that we need to promote sensible gun laws to reduce gun violence (64% vs. 60%). Half of nominal Christians agreed that asking the rich to pay higher tax rates was a way to establish economic justice, compared to 46% of practicing Christians. These two groups agree equally that American society must emphasize embracing our ethnic diversity (52% each) and that we must pay more attention

## Practicing Christians Align Strongly with Traditional Beliefs

to accomplishing economic justice (51% each). A majority of practicing Christians feel that America pays too much attention to race and racial issues (55% vs. 49% for nominal

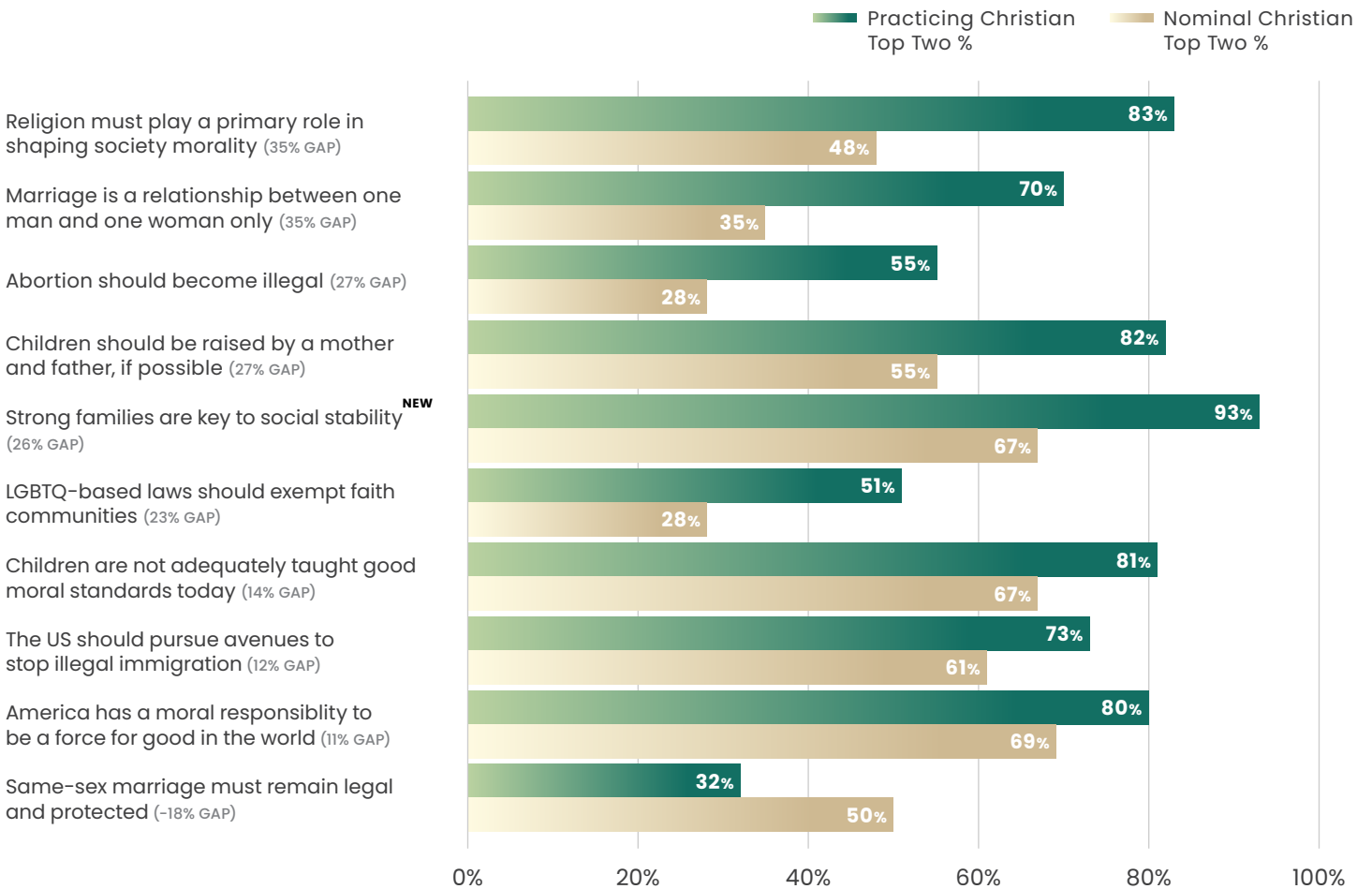
Christians). And while all Christians generally disagree, practicing Christians were more likely than nominal Christians to agree that US race relations were ‘generally good’

(36% vs. 32%), and that government should not be deeply involved in solving poverty (32% vs. 28%).

— FIGURE 4.7

### PRACTICING CHRISTIANS BELIEVE DIFFERENTLY THAN NOMINAL CHRISTIANS ON MANY TOPICS

“Please indicate your level of agreement or disagreement for the following statements of personal belief?”



Agreement Ratings among 9,504 American Christians  
American Beliefs Study, 2021

## Social Beliefs Differ Greatly by Generation and Urban Density

Older Americans in the Boomer and Silent generations were significantly more likely than younger Americans to agree on a host of ideas, including beliefs on what makes a family unit, what marriage is, on American greatness and even their sense of hopefulness. [See Figure 4.8]

Many of these beliefs with the widest gap – like valuing the family unit, marriage, American sovereignty and hope – might be characterized as more traditional values.

**Given these huge gaps in personal beliefs between generations, can it be any wonder that denominations are having to reconcile such polarized internal perspectives. The divide is sociological and generational.**

Interestingly, younger and older generations agreed that we must be good environmental stewards even if that means restricting resources

**60%**

we must give more attention to accomplishing economic justice

**57%**

and traditional marriage as a social institution is becoming obsolete

**40%**

**For their part, younger Americans were much more likely to agree that...**

The science that says humans are affecting the climate is true

**68% vs. 64%**

Same-sex marriage must remain legal and protected

**59% vs. 51%**

Asking the rich to pay a higher tax rate is a way to establish economic justice

**58% vs. 55%**

Greater emphasis must be given to embracing our ethnic diversity

**57% vs. 54%**

Urban and suburban residents were significantly more likely than rural Americans to affirm three beliefs, the science that says humans affect the climate of the planet

**67% vs. 63%**

same-sex marriage must remain legal and protected

**57% vs. 51%**

and that society must give more attention to accomplishing economic justice

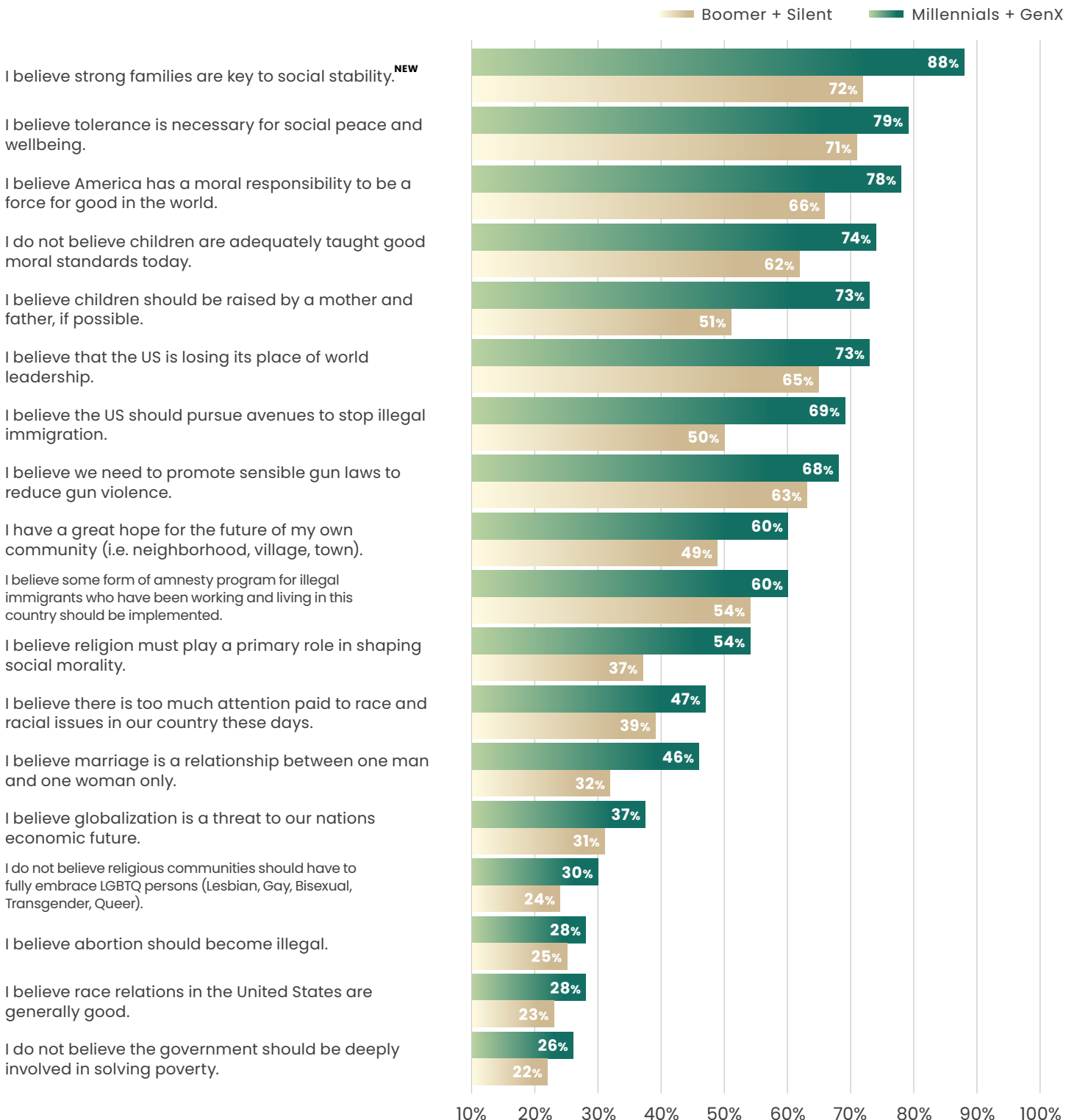
**57% vs. 54%**

Urban and suburban Americans agree slightly more (i.e., +2%) with two statements compared to their rural counterparts, first that Americans must put greater emphasis on embracing our ethnic diversity and that asking the rich to pay a higher tax rate is a way to establish economic justice.

— FIGURE 4.8

**BELIEFS AMONG OLDER CHRISTIANS DIVERGE STRONGLY VS. YOUNGER CHRISTIANS ON MANY TOPICS**

“Please indicate your level of agreement or disagreement for the following statements of personal belief?”



Agreement ratings among 9,504 American Christians  
American Beliefs Study, 2021

## Social Beliefs Differ Greatly by Generation and Urban Density

For their part, rural residents were significantly more likely to agree with nine areas of personal belief, including the following...

Strong families are key to social stability

**83% rurals agree vs. 76% for urban and suburban**

America has a moral responsibility to be a force for good in the world

**73% vs. 69%**

Children are not adequately taught good moral standards today

**69% vs. 66%**

The US should pursue avenues to stop illegal immigration

**63% vs. 55%**

Children should be raised by a mother and father, if possible

**63% vs. 57%**

Religion must play a primary role in shaping social morality

**49% vs. 41%**

There is now too much attention paid to race and racial issues in our country

**46% vs 41%**

Traditional marriage as a social institution is becoming obsolete

**43% vs. 40%**

Marriage is a relationship between one man and one woman only

**41% vs. 36%**

Religious communities should be exempt from LGBTQ-based policies or regulations

**30% vs. 25%**

Abortion should become illegal

**28% vs. 25%**

The government should not be deeply involved in solving poverty

**25% vs. 23%**



---

## Summary Highlights | Social and Moral Attitudes within Faith Communities

---

- Practicing Christians – both young and old – exist across rural, suburban and urban areas in specific groups. They are more evident in lower and middle class households, among Americans with moderate education and those who work in service sector, blue-collar and industrial employment settings.
- Nominal Christians are far less likely than practicing Christians to have a positive view of the impact churches have in their communities.
- For whatever reason, practicing Christians tend to feel concern for a wider array of life issues than nominal Christians do.
- Younger self-identified Christians voiced a far higher rate of concern than their elders did for life issues that are unrelated to their stage of life – issues such as anger management, sexual orientation, marital issues, depression, anxiety, loneliness and guilt. Church leaders must be aware of and ready to offer solid spiritual counsel on these rising concerns.
- Younger self-identified Christians are far more likely to hold non-traditional beliefs that minimize the value of the family unit, negate the sanctity of biblical marriage and deny hope.

## A Closer Look at Different Levels of Christian Engagement

Every Christian tradition, every denomination, and every local church or parish includes people who are more active and people who are less active. Some are strong in their faith and seriously engaged in the life and work of the church. Others, not so much. Church leaders do well to understand both, in order to serve both well. It's a mistake to give attention only to the more-engaged and dismiss the less-engaged. It's also a mistake to give so much attention to the less-engaged that the more-engaged are not served well.

The American Beliefs Study looked into beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors of religious and non-religious people. 64% of the respondents identified themselves as Christian. The Christian population can be divided by denomination (e.g., Baptist, Presbyterian, Lutheran), or by tradition (Protestant, Catholic, Orthodox, or Other). This Report, however, divides them in a different way: between Practicing Christians and Nominal Christians, despite their denomination or tradition (see sidebar).

The Study revealed that these two groups are different in some ways, but similar in other ways. This Report takes a closer look into such concrete, specific topics as how far people are willing to drive to attend a church, what factors influence their decisions toward less involvement, and what they look for when circumstances compel them to seek a new church home. The findings can help church leaders move from assumptions to facts, and thus to find better ways to serve all those within their spiritual communities.

**Practicing Christians** are defined as those who identified as Christian, attended a faith fellowship at least once a month and said that their faith had 'considerable' or 'utmost' significance in their lives.

**Nominal Christians** are defined as those who identified as Christian, attended a fellowship less than once a month, or said that faith has at the most a 'moderate' significance in their lives. Those who attended at least once a month but said that faith wasn't important in their lives were still defined as Nominal. Similarly, those who said faith had 'considerable' or 'utmost' significance in their lives but who attended less than once a month were still defined as Nominal.

These were the best traits available from the Study which allowed the researchers to distinguish these two groups.

## Nominal Christians Aren't Born That Way—They Change

The Study asked both Practicing and Nominal Christians, “Are you currently active in a religious congregation or other religious community?” It’s no surprise that 100% of Practicing Christians answered, “Yes.” It may be a bit of a surprise that 19% of Nominal Christians also answered “yes.” That means that nearly one in five Nominal Christians still saw themselves as active in their religious community even though they attended infrequently or didn’t consider their faith to be highly important in their lives. For this substantial group, their behavior and attitude labels them as Nominal, while they label themselves as ‘active.’ Why this discrepancy?

One possibility is that this group considers themselves ‘active’ in their religious community because of consistent attendance even if they don’t consider their faith to be very significant in their lives. In these cases, the fact they are still hearing the Word provides an opportunity for them to become convinced of the importance of their faith for life. Pastors and church leaders need to be aware that their congregations may include

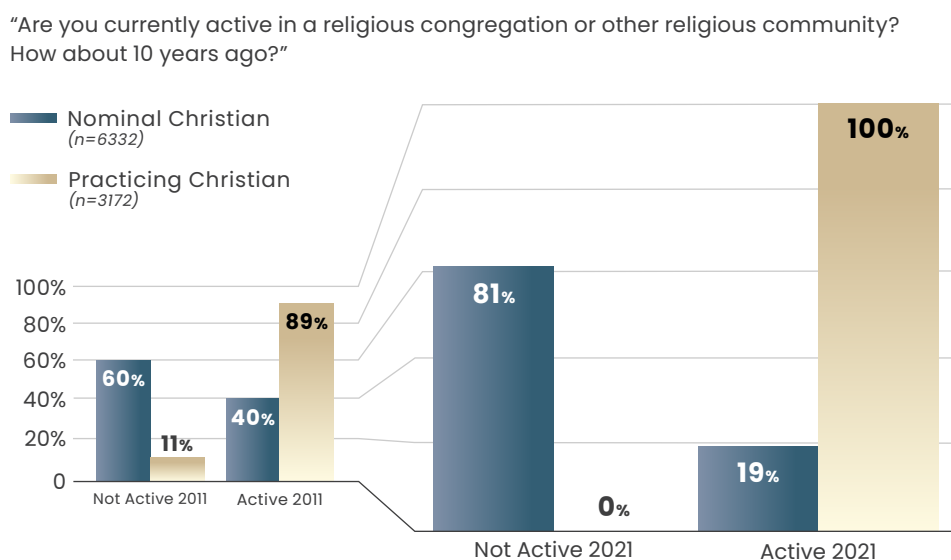
people who do not consider their faith significant in their lives, despite their regular attendance. Just because their bodies are present does not mean their hearts are engaged.

Alternately, they might call themselves ‘active’ in their religious community because they consider their faith to be significant in their lives even though they don’t attend regularly. Admittedly, there might be many reasons for this. People might be homebound. COVID-19 – still an impact while this study was fielding – may have kept them

from attending church. Still, the researchers wondered “If they set such a high value on their faith, why didn’t that translate into regular attendance in church?” For some self-identified Christians, there might be a disconnect between their desire for a relationship with God, and how they see attending church in helping make that relationship happen. [See Figure 5.1]

The data also show that people change from being active in their churches to being inactive, and vice-versa.

— FIGURE 5.1  
**SOME NOMINAL CHRISTIANS SEE THEMSELVES AS ACTIVE IN THEIR CHURCHES**



Percent of positive responses from American adults who self-identified as Christians  
American Beliefs Study, 2021

## Nominal Christians Aren't Born That Way—They Change

Among Practicing Christians,

# 11%

said they were not active in their churches ten years prior. That is encouraging. It's a reminder that people can move from inactive to active involvement.

Among Nominal Christians,

# 60%

said they were not active in their churches in 2011, which rose to 81% in 2021. The percentages of active Nominal Christians correspondingly fell from 40% in 2011 to 19% in 2021. This is far less encouraging. It suggests that about half the Nominal Christians attending in 2011 have shifted from active to inactive status since then.

Why was this the case? Well, COVID-19 may have been a reason simply due to the timeframe for the study. A separate study of attendance at 359 North American ACST client churches from 2019

through 2021 shows attendance falling by 60% at the peak of COVID-19 and not fully recovered even in early 2022.

But a deeper examination of the data suggests that the pandemic was a minor factor, at most. In the ABS study there were 992 Nominal Christians who kept attending from 2011 to 2021, and 1,530 who had stopped attending. Examining those two groups shows that nominal Christians who were most likely to have left the church in the past decade were more likely women under 30. Those most likely were either single or living with unrelated household members for less than five years in a residence. Those who stopped attending more often lived in the West South Central and Mountain regions. Denominationally, attendees at Baptist (both ABC and SBC) and non-denominational churches were most likely to have stopped attending.

On social issues, those who have fallen away tend to express slightly more progressive than traditional social positions (e.g., agreeing more with a progressive stand on abortion, justice, DEI, etc.) while staying more traditional on morality and family

structures (except for gay marriage). They tend to be less hopeful for their community than those who still attend.

Significantly, they were NOT more concerned about the impacts of COVID-19 or concerned about health more than those who kept attending. This suggests that leaving the church was not solely influenced by the pandemic.

They were more likely now – even after not attending a church – to strongly agree they have a relationship with one living God and that God is love and invites the world into a loving relationship. They are less likely to believe in more humanistic interpretations of God. They are more likely now than before to believe Jesus was both divine and human, that He rose from the dead, that they have a personal relationship with Him, that He rules as Lord of heaven and earth, that He was the expected Jewish Messiah and is the only path to salvation.

## Nominal Christians Aren't Born That Way—They Change

Despite this move toward higher agreement with traditional biblical beliefs, the share of them who said faith has utmost or considerable significance in their lives had declined from 55% ten years ago to 41% now. Nominal non-attenders were also now more likely to say that believing in Jesus does not require attending church, and that church Christians don't behave as Jesus would have.

With this evidence, it might easily be said that they have left the church, not necessarily left the faith.

What about the opposite group, those who stayed in church? Well, nominal Catholics were the most likely group to have kept attending.

And on a discouraging note, nominal attendees are now more likely than their non-attending peers to believe Jesus was simply a good and wise moral teacher, or no more than a great prophet.

**Churches have the “front door”—where new people come in, and the “back door”—where active members drift away, toward becoming not active anymore.**

Churches would do well to recognize both realities, and to work diligently on the ministry tasks that keep people from drifting away.

Given that a high proportion of those who fell away were younger, it suggests that ministry efforts geared to engaging young adults are critical in narrowing the exits. What would such ministries focus on? Well, if they were to attend again, nominal non-attenders say they would most like to see a church give them a warm and friendly welcome (up 12% for top two importance) and teach quality sermons (up 6% top two importance).

For other groups, a focus on building and maintaining personal relationships, pastoral and member-to-member care and encouraging more faithful discipleship could all be key as well.



## Driving Distance and Church Drawing Area

Nearly every church has at least some members who drive a long way to attend. It’s easy for church leaders to think of them and form an assumption along the lines of, “People come from all over to attend here; from near and far.” There is a difference between what the few are willing to do and what the many prefer. In the American Beliefs Study, six percent of Christians said they were willing to travel 46 to 60 minutes to attend church. Probably some of those respondents live in rural settings where they have no other options. Maybe others drive past many other churches to attend the one that they feel loyal to, for whatever reason.

Those are the exceptions. Here is the rule: 87% of self-identified Christians said they were not willing to drive more than 30 minutes to attend church, and 41% said they were only willing to drive 15 minutes or less. These findings can help churches understand the area from which they might reasonably draw attendees. [See Figure 5.2]

Practical applications might apply to such things as:

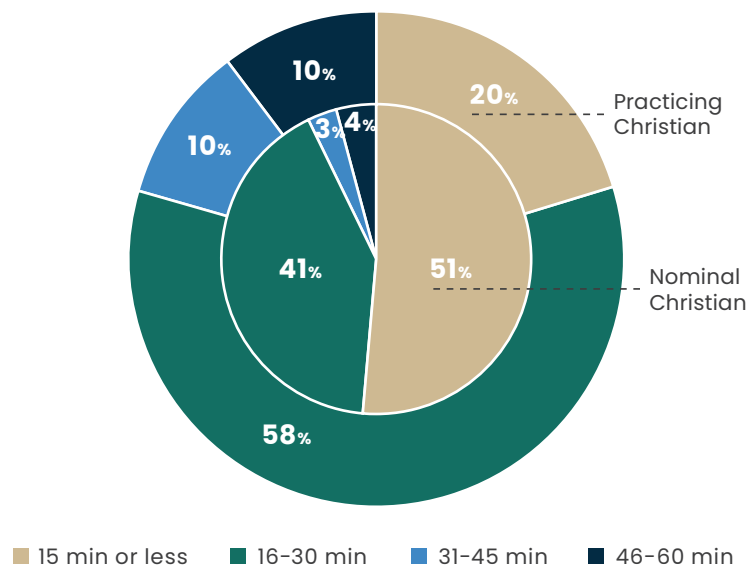
- | Visitation
- | Advertising
- | Location of home groups
- | Expansion
- | Relocation
- | New church planting

The comparative willingness of Nominal and Practicing Christians to drive any distance to church is also compelling: clear differences exist. Just one in five Practicing

Christians said they were willing to drive a relatively short 15 minutes or less to attend church, while that was 31 percentage points higher for Nominal Christian (51%). Only seven percent of Nominal Christians said they were willing to drive more than 30 minutes, while three times as many Practicing Christians were willing to drive that far (20%). The simple factor of driving distance can make it all the more difficult to attract Nominal Christians to deeper involvement and commitment.

— FIGURE 5.2  
**NOMINAL CHRISTIANS FAR LESS OPEN TO ATTEND A DISTANT CHURCH**

“How many minutes would you be willing to travel to attend a place of worship?”



Percentages among 9,504 American adults who self-identified as Christian  
American Beliefs Study, 2021

## How Often Do Christians Worship?

One in three self-identified American Christians attend a church or fellowship in 2021 (33%). This represents a drop of two percent from 2017 to 2021, down from 35%. Examining this one-third of American Christians in 2021, we find that 58% of them attended weekly, 20% attended 2-3 times per month, 17% went once a month or less, and five percent attended only on holidays. This reflects an 11% drop in monthly

attendance between 2017 and 2020. Notably, the study did not distinguish between live and virtual attendance.

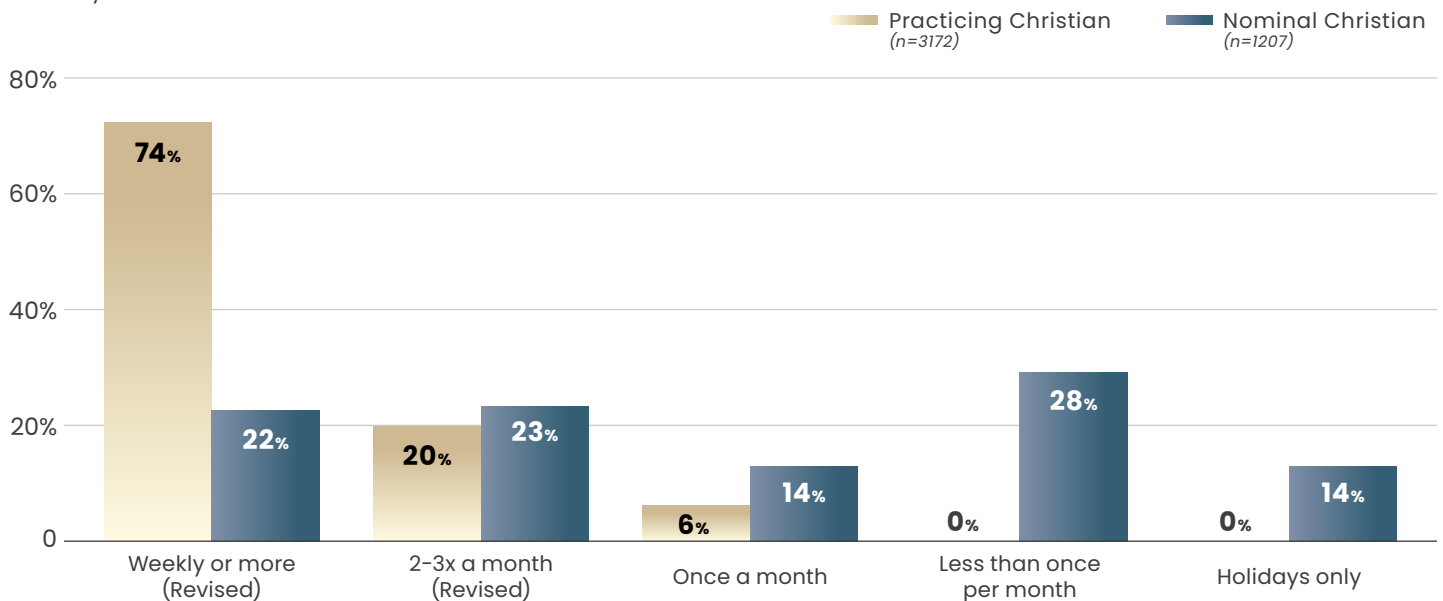
Let’s look at the difference in attendance patterns between Practicing and Nominal Christians, as we’ve defined them. Just because Practicing Christians needed to attend their faith fellowship at least once a month to earn this title, it doesn’t mean they are all every-

Sunday worshippers. Three in four Practicing Christians said they attended church at least once per week (74%), while 20% said they attended two-to-three times per month, and 6% said they attended only once per month. All in all, a quarter of Practicing Christians do not plan or expect to be in church every week. [See Figure 5.3]

— FIGURE 5.3

### MOST - BUT NOT ALL - PRACTICING CHRISTIANS ATTEND WEEKLY

“If you are active in a religious congregation or other religious community, which of the following best expresses your current level of activity?”



Percentages among 4,379 American adults who self-identified as Christians  
American Beliefs Study, 2021

## How Often Do Christians Worship?

Among Nominal Christians who considered themselves ‘active’ in a religious congregation, just 22% said they attended weekly or more. By this measure, Practicing Christians were more than three times more likely than Nominal Christians to be weekly attenders. Interestingly, about the same percentage of Nominal and Practicing Christians said they attended two-to-three times per month.

Some might think of ‘Nominal Christians’ as those who only attend on holidays, typically Easter and Christmas. In fact that represents only 14% of Nominal Christians (at least of those Nominal Christians who

consider themselves ‘active’). Twice that proportion (28%) say they attend less than once per month. Overall, less than half of Nominal Christians attend once per month or more often than that. Most of them attend infrequently, and many of them attend only very occasionally.

What can be taken from these comparisons? This is admittedly a very challenging topic. Attendance is governed by an array of factors including emerging health concerns, a pandemic-fueled rise in virtual worship, increased competition for Sunday time by other activities, and other situations.

Do pastors and church leaders react by changing how they preach or welcome people – two of the most significant drivers of engagement among seekers? Probably not. Perhaps being mindful that as many as one in four attendees was absent last week is the key. Knowing this could help leaders establish habits, practice and traditions that lend themselves to a more fluid ebb and flow of congregants.





## Why Non-Attending Christians Avoid Fellowship

Why do some who self-identify as Christians consider their faith as relatively unimportant in their lives, attend infrequently, or both? Why do some Practicing Christians drift away to Nominal status? The American Beliefs Study asked Nominal Christians to rate 25 possible reasons for not participating in a church. It's instructive to look at the findings from both directions, to consider both the reasons that ranked high and the reasons that ranked low in their responses. [See Figure 5.4]

Notably, over half of the items in the list of possible reasons received less than 10% agreement. This included factors such as "Too progressive," "Boring/uninteresting," "Worship/music style," "Didn't have desired children's/youth programs," and "Didn't have opportunity to serve/use skills."

In fact, two of the four items that received the lowest agreement percentage were similar in that they both dealt with the foundational question of unbelief. Just four percent of Nominal Christians indicated they now "No longer believe" or that they "Don't believe in God." This suggests that an overwhelming 96% of Nominal Christians feel their faith remains intact despite its low significance in their lives or their

infrequent worship attendance. This leads to the conclusion that most Nominal Christians haven't fallen away from fellowship with others due to a crisis of faith.

**Generally, Christians don't fall away from fellowship due to a crisis of faith.**

It's not that they no longer believe in God or in the Christian message. Nor do they drift away, in general, because of practical matters related to church life and programs.

Further, Christians did not become Nominal because no one has invited them to deeper faith or involvement. Only six percent agreed with that factor. This further underscores an earlier conclusion from this Study which disputes the popular notion that as Christians, "we just need to invite people to attend."

Similarly, only 14% said they became less involved because they "Moved from the community," and only 12% said they "Couldn't find the right faith community in the area." While these reasons might overlap to some degree, it still appears that no more than 25% of respondents cited moving as a reason for falling away.

The top two items on the list stand out. They are separated from the rest of the pack by six and eight percentage points. 24% of Nominal Christians said they limited their participation with a Christian fellowship because, "Religion [is] too focused on money." Some churches are aware of this perception and are deliberately de-emphasizing the offering, doing such things as providing offering boxes by the exits instead of passing the plate. Others are unapologetically holding firm on the idea of generosity as an essential element of Christian discipleship.

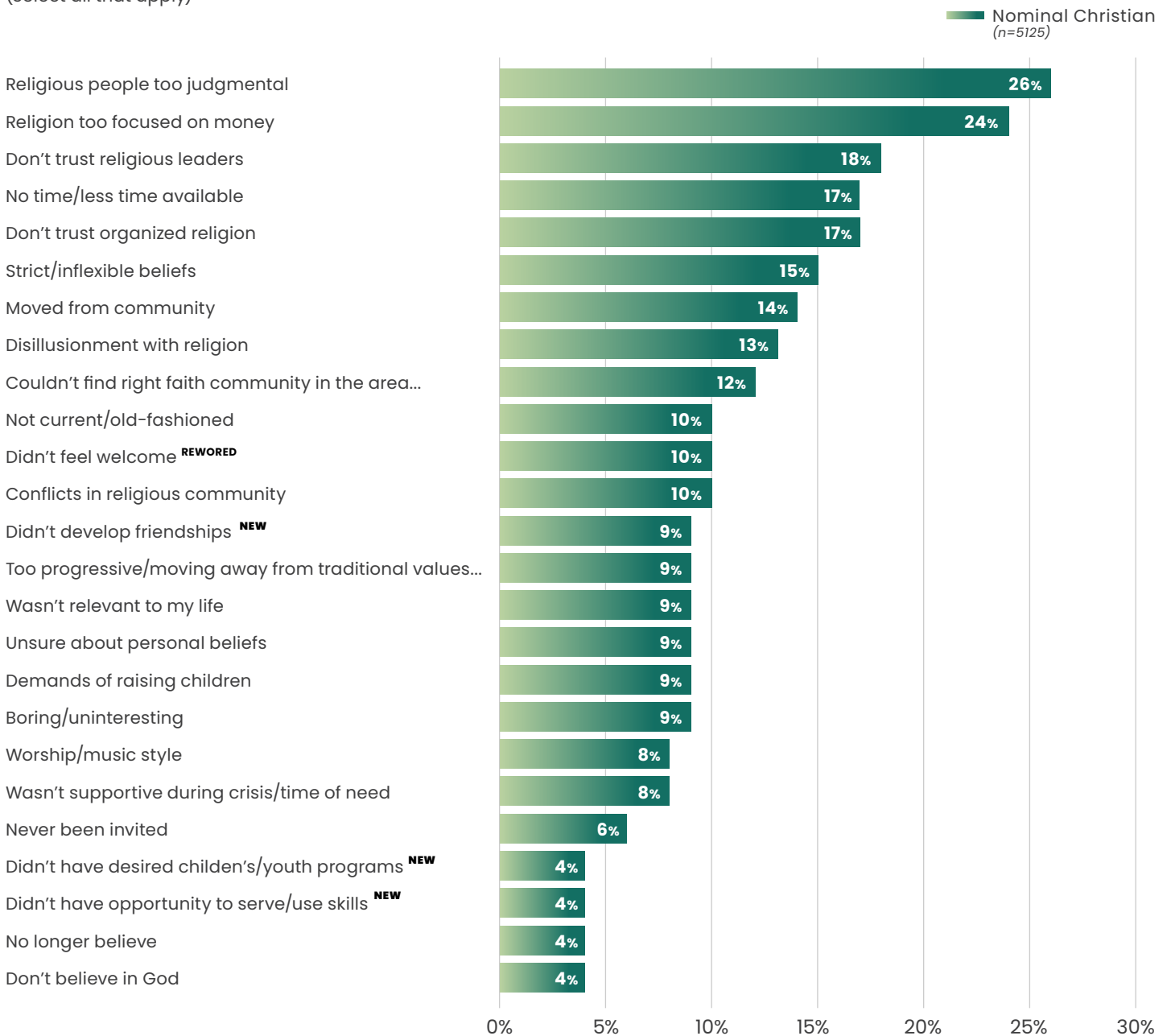
The top item was "Religious people [are] too judgmental." Whether this characterization is fair or not is less important than the fact that Nominal Christians see it as being true. This was the trait that the highest share of them agreed on when asked. Most certainly, this challenges pastors and leaders on how to set a loving and accepting atmosphere without compromising the Christian call to righteousness. Thankfully, Jesus himself provides the model for this attitude. Over and over, He held firm to what was right and true while at the same time welcoming and loving people who had been judged or rejected by others.

## Why Non-Attending Christians Avoid Fellowship

— FIGURE 5.4

### NON-ATTENDING NOMINAL CHRISTIANS MAY DISLIKE 'RELIGION' BUT STILL BELIEVE

“How much did each of these items influence your reasons for not participating in a religious congregation or religious community? (Select all that apply)”



Top-two agreement among 5,125 unchurched Nominal American Christian Adults  
American Beliefs Study, 2021

## Why Non-Attending Christians Avoid Fellowship

Furthermore, the apparent dislike for the word “religion” or “religious” in this Study is noteworthy. This word appears in the top three factors here and in five of the top eight. Nominal Christians “Don’t trust religious leaders,” “Don’t trust organized religion,” and tend to be disillusioned with “religion.” This suggests that Nominal Christians may have been turned off by the term “religion,” in

various forms. Language matters. If the items in the list had referenced ‘faith leaders’ or ‘Christianity,’ it is quite possible the results might have shifted.

**The word “Religion” appears in most of the leading reasons why Nominal Christians might not stay in a church. The word itself may carry negative connotations for them.**

In response, it seems that Christian leaders might examine the extent to which their teaching, counseling and other interactions with less active churchgoers includes the word ‘religion’ or its variations. In contrast, consider how to use gentler and more welcoming substitutes such as faith, belief, spirituality, community and fellowship.

## Why Attending Christians Might Change or Leave a Church

Most self-identified Christians (81%) who attend a fellowship – even infrequently – said they have not considered quitting or changing churches within the past year. By far, most Christians plan to stay put. Furthermore, Practicing Christians are ten percentage points more likely to stay put compared to Nominal Christians, with rates of 84% vs. 74% respectively.

Considering the flip side of this percentage, it’s not surprising that one in four attending Nominal Christians (26%) may have thought about dropping out of church in the past year. Their relationship to their faith, and to church attendance, is already tenuous. And the data shows that Nominal Christians think about this far more often than their Practicing Christian peers in church

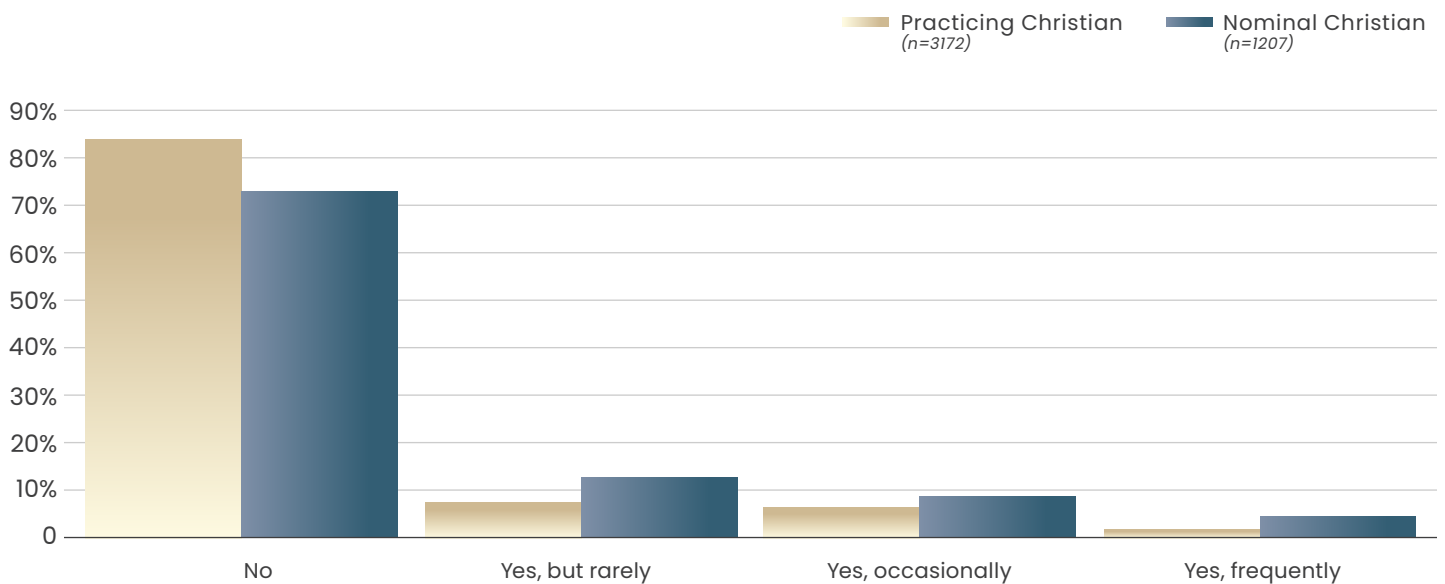
– sometimes twice as often. It’s a bit more surprising that 15% of Practicing Christians, or about one in seven, may have thought about taking this step. [See Figure 5.5]

The Study asked both groups why they might consider leaving a church fellowship. Figure 5.6 below shows answers to this question from self-identified Christians who said they

— FIGURE 5.5

### FEW CHRISTIANS HAVE THOUGHT OF LEAVING THEIR CHURCH

“In the past year, have you thought about dropping out of (or changing) your religious congregation or other religious community?”



Percentage of Attending Self-identified American Christian Adults  
American Beliefs Study, 2021

## Why Attending Christians Might Change or Leave a Church

attend and that they had considered leaving or changing churches in the past year. (This is different from the findings shown in the last section and in Figure 5.4, which reported on Nominal Christians who did not attend any church). [See Figure 5.6]

The top reasons churched Christians might consider leaving their church fellowship include not feeling welcome, religion being too focused on money, religious people being judgmental, a mistrust of leadership and strict or inflexible beliefs. At their

**Feeling judged, unwanted, pushed away, or neglected is a chief reason Christians might depart a fellowship. Mistrust in the institution and its leaders also factors strongly among Nominal attendees.**

core, these top seven reasons speak to being neglected as a member of the body and an erosion of trust in the church and its leadership.

In short, many attending Christians don't feel they are a part of a community of love. Again, whether

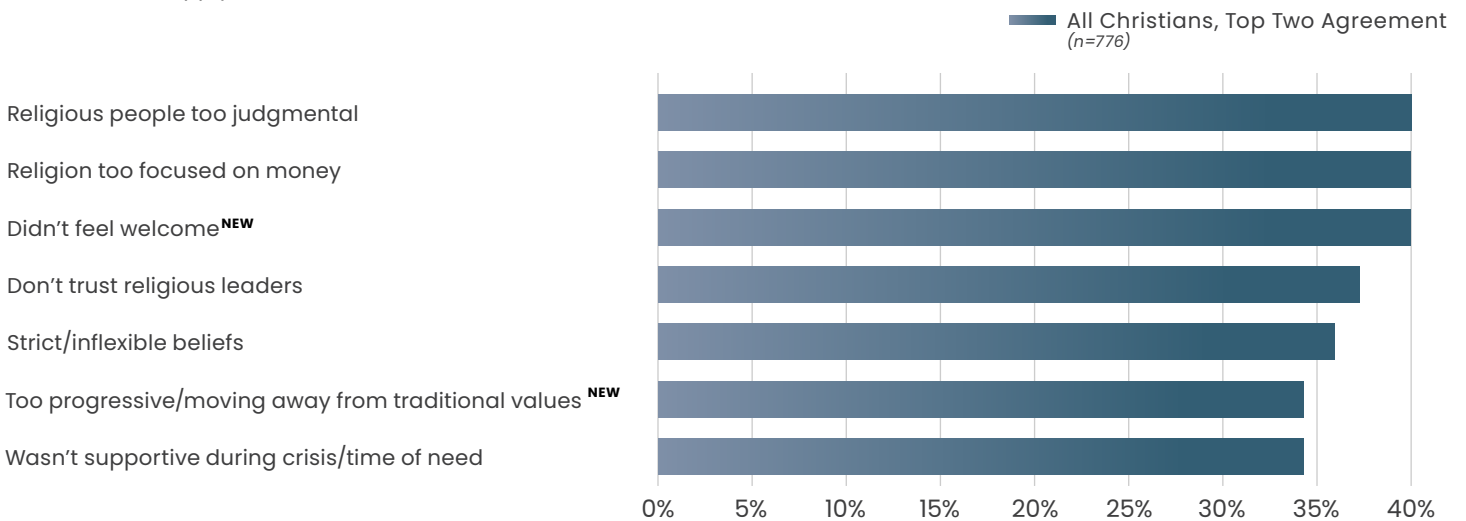
that's fair or not is moot; this is simply what people report.

The fact that no single reason reached more than 40% agreement suggests that departing a church might often be driven by a combination of factors – not simply one overriding reason. Repeated instances of feeling slighted by orthodoxy, by leaders or even by other members – all of whom might be seen as representing 'the Church' – might lead to people disengaging from active participation.

– FIGURE 5.6

### TOP REASONS FOR CONSIDERING A CHURCH DEPARTURE

"How much did each of these items influence your reasons for not participating in a religious congregation or religious community? (Select all that apply)"



Top-two agreement among 776 Attending American Christian Adults who had considered departing a church  
American Beliefs Study, 2021

## Reasons for Departure Vary from Practicing and Nominal Christians

Practicing Christians are much more involved in church. Those who had considered leaving named the reasons why they might leave or change churches. By definition, Nominal Christians already limit their participation or involvement in a church, but were asked the same question if they claimed to belong to a church or fellowship.

There were clear differences in the responses from the two groups. Figure 5.7 shows the items that

Practicing Christians scored significantly higher than Nominal Christians, and Figure 5.8 shows the items that Nominal Christians scored higher than Practicing Christians did.

For instance, Practicing Christians felt that their church had strayed from traditional values at a rate 12 percentage points higher than Nominal Christians. They also reported greater impact of feeling unwelcome (8% gap), that their church wasn't supportive during a

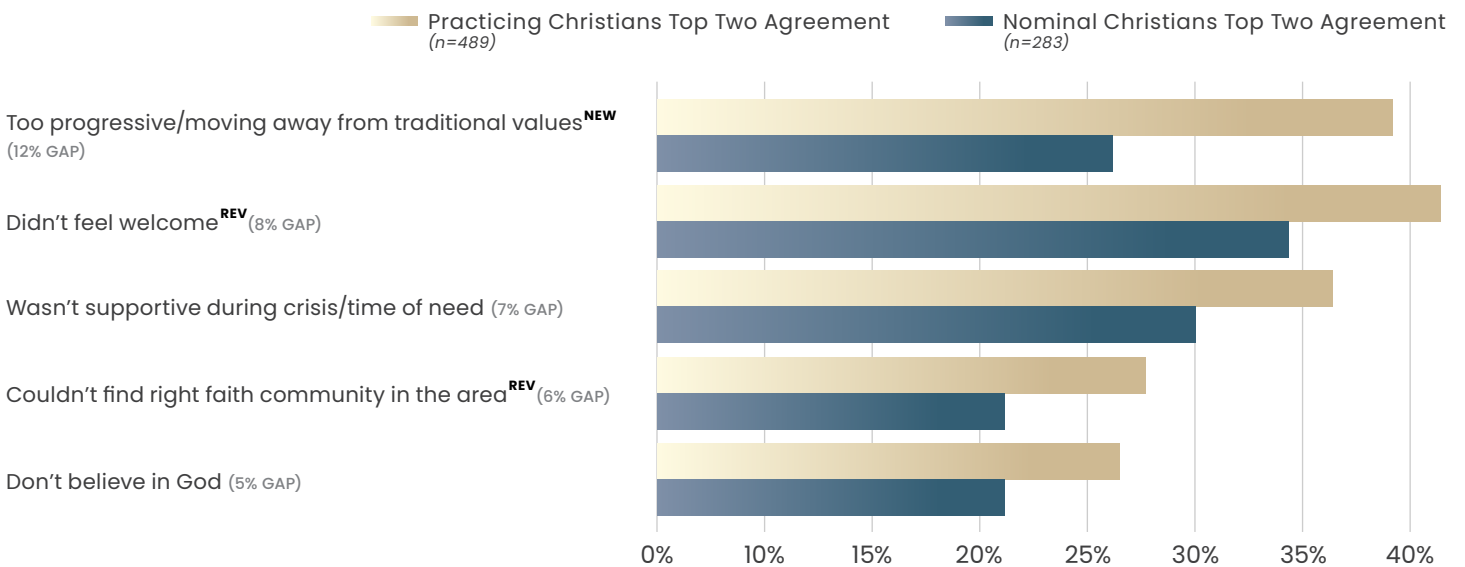
crisis or time of need (7% gap), that they couldn't find the right faith community near them (6% gap) or surprisingly, that they didn't believe in God (5% gap). [See Figure 5.7]

A larger percentage of Practicing Christians are uncomfortable, or unhappy, about their church "straying from traditional values" or becoming "too progressive." Nominal Christians are much less concerned about this; the gap between the two of 12 percentage points on this

— FIGURE 5.7

### NON-PARTICIPATION FACTORS HIGHER FOR PRACTICING CHRISTIANS

"How much did each of these items influence your reasons for not participating in a religious congregation or religious community? (Select all that apply)"



Top-two agreement among 776 Attending American Christian Adults who had considered departing a church  
American Beliefs Study, 2021

## Reasons for Departure Vary from Practicing and Nominal Christians

question is quite large. This disparity echoes other findings in this study that indicate Practicing Christians hold more traditional views than their Nominal peers, and it makes sense that Practicing Christians might more easily consider leaving a church for this reason.

The second two reasons that emerge strongly among Practicing Christians may be linked. At 42%, Practicing Christians were eight percentage points more likely than Nominal Christians to say feeling unwelcome is a reason for not participating. And at 35%, they were seven percent more likely to feel their church had not supported them during a time of crisis. In the first place, what better way to make a member feel unwelcome than to neglect them during a time of crisis? Secondly, the fact that these reasons emerge more among Practicing Christians makes sense, in that Nominal Christians might be less likely to seek out a welcome or comfort from the church during a crisis than Practicing Christians would.

The significant share of Practicing Christians who felt unsupported during a crisis shows that church leaders could do more to “step-up-to-the-plate” when it comes to

counseling and parishioner care. What are some of the possible reasons for this – not being equipped, not being trained, not being there? Working on stronger relationships with members and visitors is likely to help address the root of these feelings.

**One-third or more of Practicing Christians felt their church “Wasn’t supportive during a crisis or a time of need.”**

The last strong disparity between Practicing and Nominal Christians – that a full 27% of Practicing Christians said a reason to leave a church was that they don’t believe in God, at a rate 5% higher than Nominal Christians – suggests two possibilities. The first possibility is that Practicing Christians saw this question as a hypothetical, i.e., if I wasn’t a believer, not believing in God would be a plausible reason to stop attending. This perspective helps explain why fewer Nominal Christians might hold this view. Those who believe less and still attend might be less apt to consider nonbelief as a reason to leave.

The other, perhaps shocking, possibility is that one quarter of

Practicing Christians would truly have difficulty honestly repeating the first line in the Apostle’s Creed “I believe in God, the Father Almighty, maker of Heaven and earth.” Taking this result at face value suggests the need to reaffirm that God exists and why Christians believe that foundational, biblical tenet. It suggests that apologetics is vital to strengthening the faith of attendees, just as it is in making the case for belief among outsiders.

Still referencing the same question, Figure 5.8 shows the factors that Nominal Christians agreed with at a significantly higher level than Practicing Christians.

Churched Nominal Christians largely agree with their unchurched peers (seen in Figure 5.4) on some of the top factors influencing their attendance: religious judgmentalism, a focus on finances and mistrust of religious leadership.

However, when it comes to a decision to leave, Nominal Christians are far more likely than Practicing Christians to feel the impact of different factors. For instance, Nominal Christians are 17 points more likely to agree that a lack of time is key, that the demands of raising children interfere with

## Reasons for Departure Vary from Practicing and Nominal Christians

attending or that they felt judged (both an 11% gap), that conflicts in the religious community are harmful (10% gap), that churches are old-fashioned (7% gap) or that churches are inflexible (7% gap).

Are Nominal Christians more likely to drop out of church simply because they are too busy with other life

demands? This is factual based on their answers about not having enough time to attend and about the demands of raising children (which admittedly can require much time).

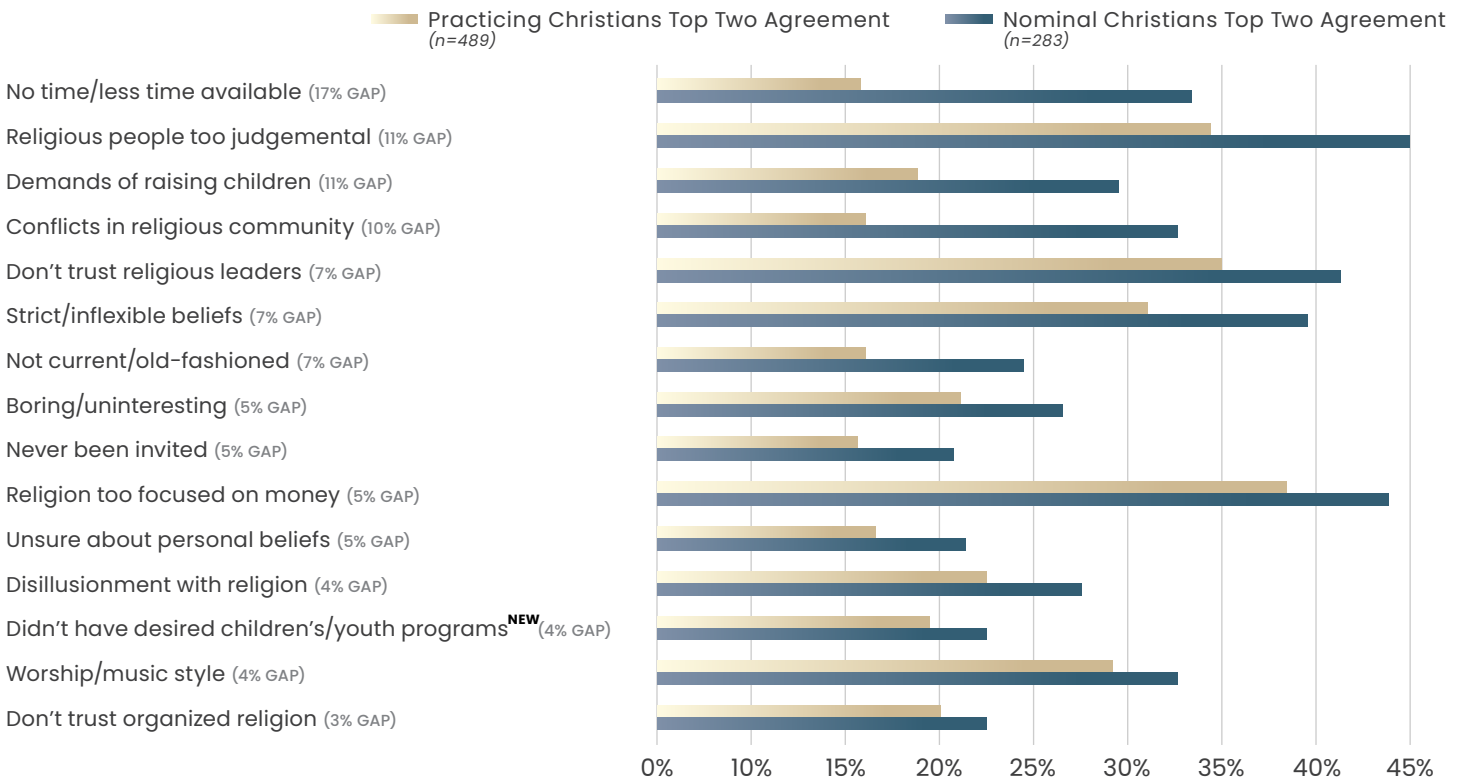
From a Nominal Christian's perspective, saying a church was rigid or old-fashioned could be another way to admit that they felt

judged, which would emphasize that dominant factor. To press the point, Nominal Christians are significantly more concerned about judgmentalism in churches, conflict in religious communities and mistrust of religious leaders than Practicing Christians.

— FIGURE 5.8

### NON-PARTICIPATION FACTORS HIGHER FOR NOMINAL CHRISTIANS

"How much did each of these items influence your reasons for not participating in a religious congregation or religious community? (Select all that apply)"



Top-two agreement among 283 attending American Nominal Christian Adults who had thought of leaving a church American Beliefs Study, 2021



## Practicing vs. Nominal Christians on What They Would Look for in a Church

The last few sections of this Report have dwelt on a negative theme: what factors are on the minds of Christians when they think of becoming less active in their church, dropping out, or leaving. This section turns to the positive side. What are the attractive features that Practicing and Nominal Christians seek in a church? What would draw them to join or become more involved in a fellowship? The Study asked participants to imagine a scenario they will likely face at some time in the future: moving to a new place and shopping for a new religious community. Figure 5.9 reports on the factors that were most important to Practicing Christians. [See Figure 5.9]

When Practicing Christians are checking out a possible new church home, the top thing they look for is quality sermons.

**If there was ever any doubt, the American Beliefs Study makes it clear that the sermon, or homily, continues to be highly important among Christians seeking a faith community.**

The item ranked in the No. 2 spot was “Warm and friendly encounters,” proving that Practicing Christians are looking for quality from the preacher as well as love from the people.

Their third priority was “Traditional worship experiences,” and the fourth, somewhat similar, was “Celebration of sacraments.” The sermon, worship, and sacraments were all in the top four items mentioned. Practicing Christians looking for a new church in a new place are especially thinking about the Sunday morning service, and not so much about peripheral activities such as “Health/weight loss programs,” “Alternative wellness practices,” “Daycare/after-school programs,” “Addiction support groups,” or “Practical training seminars,” which constituted the bottom five items in the list. They are looking for a place that meets their spiritual needs, not practical, life-management needs.

‘Warm and friendly encounters’ and ‘traditional worship’ can have vastly different meanings to different people. For this reason, ACST has determined to study these questions further toward offering practical

advice for churches and parishes on questions like this that the American Beliefs Study did not have the space to explore.

Figure 5.10 reports on the factors of seeking out a new church or parish that were most important to Nominal Christians.

Nominal Christians who decide to look for a new church sought out many of the same things that Practicing Christians did. Both groups listed the same three items as their top three, with a slight change in order. Both groups gave low ratings to practical, life-management offerings like “Health/weight loss programs,” “Parenting development,” “Daycare/after-school programs,” “Alternative wellness practices,” and “Addiction support groups.”

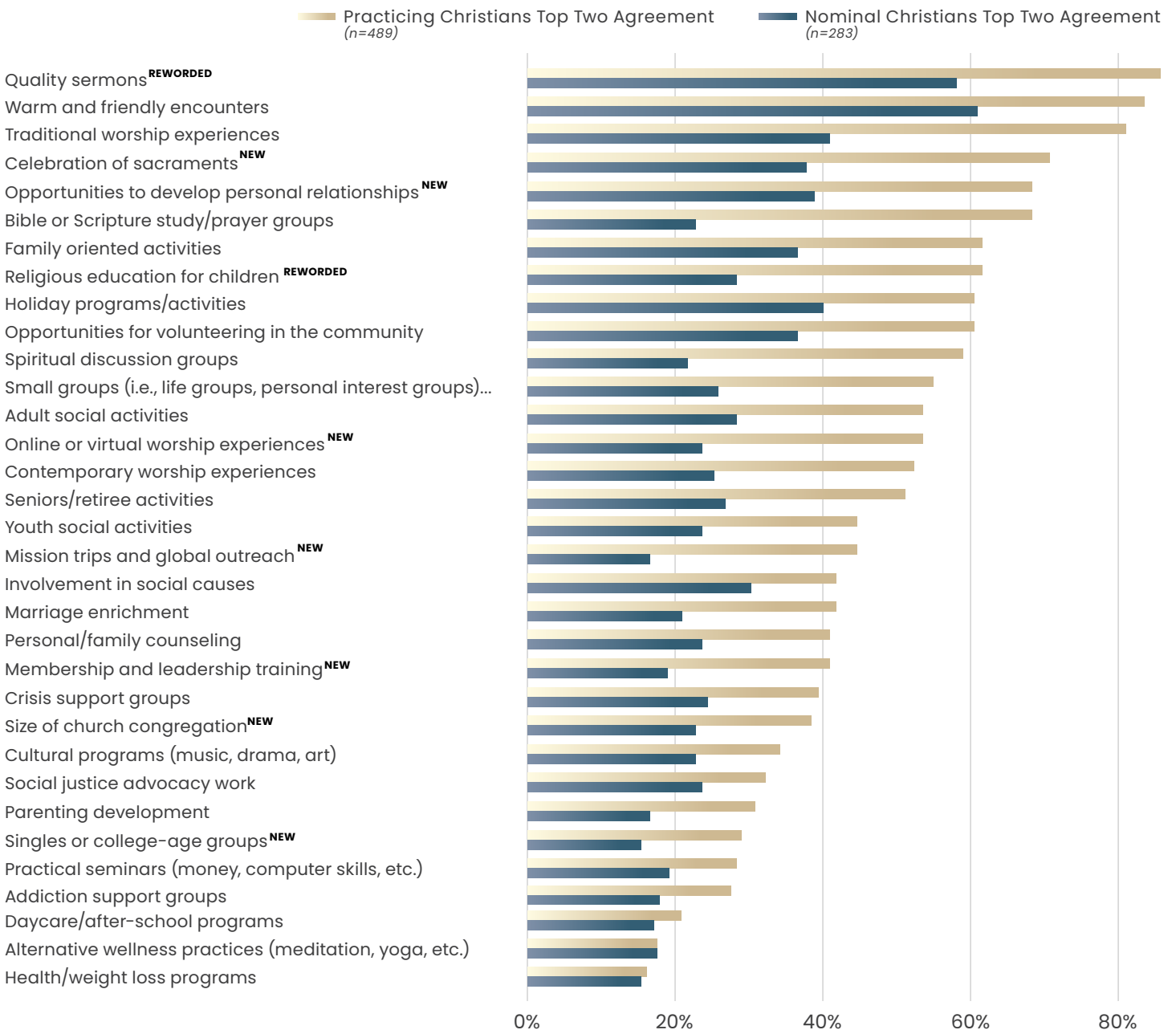
One consistent factor throughout these ratings was that Nominal Christians held nearly every element as less important to them than their Practicing Christian peers, usually by a significant margin. This makes sense for a group that sees faith and practice as having less influence in their lives.

# Practicing vs. Nominal Christians on What They Would Look for in a Church

— FIGURE 5.9

## PRACTICING CHRISTIANS WANT GOOD PREACHING AND FRIENDLY CHURCHES

“If you moved to a new part of the country and were looking for a religious congregation or other religious community, please assign the related importance of each activity to you. (Answer even if not currently participating in a religious congregation or community.)”



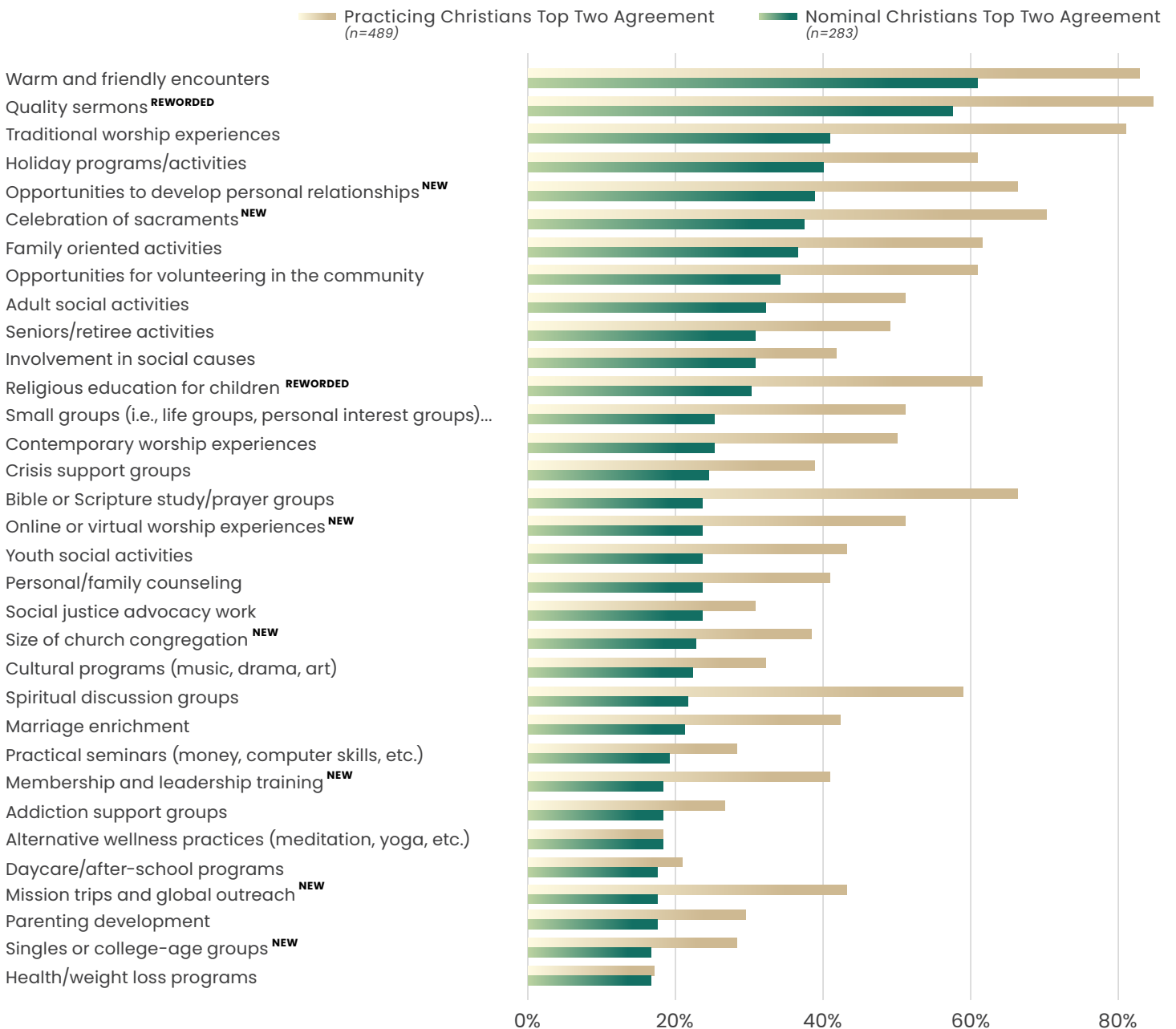
Top-two Importance among 9,504 American Christian Adults  
 American Beliefs Study, 2021

# Practicing vs. Nominal Christians on What They Would Look for in a Church

— FIGURE 5.10

## NOMINAL CHRISTIANS WANT FRIENDLY CHURCHES AND GOOD PREACHING

“If you moved to a new part of the country and were looking for a religious congregation or other religious community, please assign the related importance of each activity to you. (Answer even if not currently participating in a religious congregation or community.)”



Top-two Importance among 9,504 American Christian Adults  
American Beliefs Study, 2021

# Practicing vs. Nominal Christians on What They Would Look for in a Church

**A point of agreement: both Practicing and Nominal Christians say they prefer traditional worship styles over contemporary.**

In the survey, these two items were worded in a parallel way, thus allowing for a straight-across comparison. The one simply said, "Traditional worship experiences," while the other said, "Contemporary worship experiences."

For Practicing Christians,

**81%** wanted traditional

VS. ....

**52%** who wanted contemporary

a 29-percentage-point gap.

For Nominal Christians,

**42%** wanted traditional

VS. ....

**27%** who wanted contemporary

a 15-percentage-point gap.

The question remains, though... what do these audiences mean by 'traditional?' What constitutes 'contemporary?' The Study did not define worship as being specifically musical, liturgical or in any other way. Digging into the perceptions behind these terms among various Christian groups is why ACST will study these questions further and seek to offer practical advice for churches and parishes.

As noted earlier, Practicing Christians saw several of these attributes as significantly more important than Nominal Christians did. Many of these items were spiritual activities or programs, which might reasonably hold less importance for a Christian who says faith has less impact on their lives.

"Mission trips and global outreach"

**45% Practicing vs. 17% Nominal**

"Religious education for children"

**63% vs. 30%**

"Spiritual discussion groups"

**58% vs. 23%**

"Bible or Scripture study/  
prayer groups"

**68% vs. 25%**

Nominal Christians are not particularly attracted to small group ministries such as Bible studies, prayer groups, or spiritual discussion groups. For Practicing Christians, these are much more important. Both, however, are looking for "Warm and friendly encounters." For Nominal Christians this was their top item, with 61% marking it as "Somewhat important" or "Very important."

---

## Summary Highlights | Changing Behaviors within Communities of Faith

---

- | 40% of Nominal Christians said they were “active in a religious congregation or other religious community” ten years ago, compared to 19% today. Half of those who are Nominal Christians today were formerly more active, either in their Christian practice or faith. People drift away.
- | There is a significant difference between Practicing and Nominal Christians on how long they are willing to drive to attend church. While 80% of Practicing Christians are willing to drive 16 minutes or more to attend church, only 49% of Nominal Christians would say the same. On the other side, 20% of Practicing Christians are willing to drive 31 minutes or more, while only 7% of Nominal Christians would say the same.
- | The top two reasons Nominal Christians give for their limited participation in a religious congregation are (1) “Religious people are too judgmental,” and (2) “Religion is too focused on money.” Whether these statements are fair and accurate is not the point. Despite their merit, these statements reflect the actual perceptions of Nominal Christians.
- | Most Christians have not thought about dropping out or changing churches in the past year. 84% of Practicing and 74% of Nominal Christians plan to stay put.
- | Survey Participants were asked to consider, if they moved to a new part of the country and were looking for a church, what would be most important to them? For both Nominal and Practicing Christians, the top two things they named were “Quality sermons” and “Warm and friendly encounters.” For both groups, there was a clear gap between these two items and all the other options suggested.

## What Do Americans Believe about God and Jesus?

Most Americans would say they believe in God. But what do they mean when they say that? What kind of God (or god, or gods) do they believe in?

Likewise, most Americans have a positive view of Jesus, but how close to historic Christian teaching are their beliefs about him?

Report 2 in this series on the American Beliefs Study from ACST, “Meeting Community Needs,” presented general findings on what Americans believe about God and Jesus. This Report takes a closer look at how these beliefs vary among different population sectors.

The Study asked participants to rate their level of agreement with 11 statements about God, and another 11 statements about Jesus. Responses to the ‘God’ statements revealed not only who believed in God and who did not, but also their concept of God. These 15,000 participants revealed

the extent to which beliefs that are foreign to a Christian perspective, or even to a general Western-cultural perspective, have seeped into American understanding.

The statements about Jesus not only covered basic theological concepts from the Bible, but also explored how participants personally saw themselves in relation to Jesus.

Other questions in the Study allowed for a deep dive into how beliefs about God and Jesus differ across the American landscape. For instance...

- What do older Americans believe compared to younger Americans?
- Do rural churches and urban churches need to present the Gospel differently because of where their residents live?
- Just how different are beliefs among Practicing Christians compared to Nominal Christians?

These findings are valuable for any Christian who wants to speak, teach, preach, or witness in America today about the Creator God and his Son, Jesus Christ. It’s easy to say “God” and presume the listener interprets the word as the speaker does. Even self-identified Christians express a range of beliefs about who Jesus is. Effective communication requires a clear understanding of beliefs among listeners.

## Beliefs by Generations

Much social and religious research in America has found it useful to study differences among generational cohorts. All Americans are deeply affected by the historical and social contexts that we grew up in, and that we have lived our lives in. [See Figure 6.1]

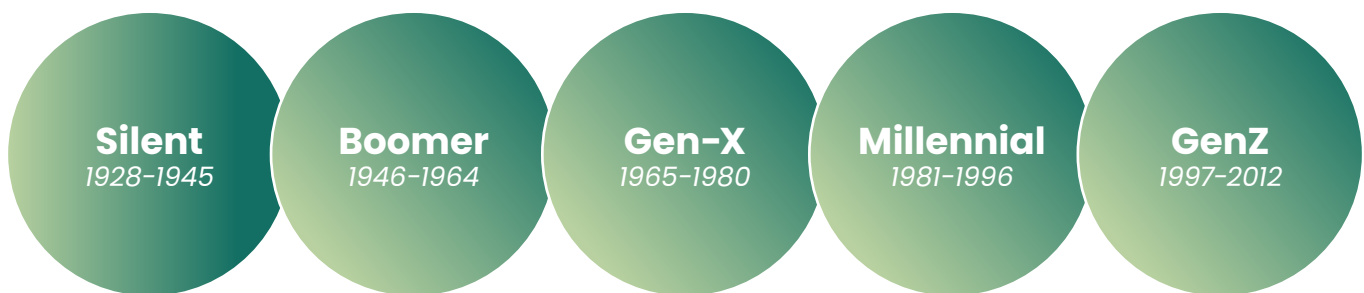
Members of the Silent generation were born into a world very different from that of members of the Millennial generation. This is true of all five age cohorts defined below. The widely-accepted generational framework in Figure 6.1 is adopted by the American Beliefs Study after the example set by Pew Research Center. Note that when this Study was

conducted, there were so few GenZ participants that they were added into the Millennial group.

From one generation to another, perspectives change in response to historical events and social trends. Furthermore, the pace of change has accelerated in recent decades. All these factors are reflected in what members of these cohorts believe about God and Jesus.

— FIGURE 6.1

### GENERATIONAL COHORTS



**Source:** <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2015/09/03/the-whys-and-hows-of-generations-research>

## Beliefs by Generations

### Beliefs about God

Some of the 11 statements about God presented in the Study were clearly aligned with Christian faith, some were clearly opposed to Christian teaching, and others could be interpreted more freely.

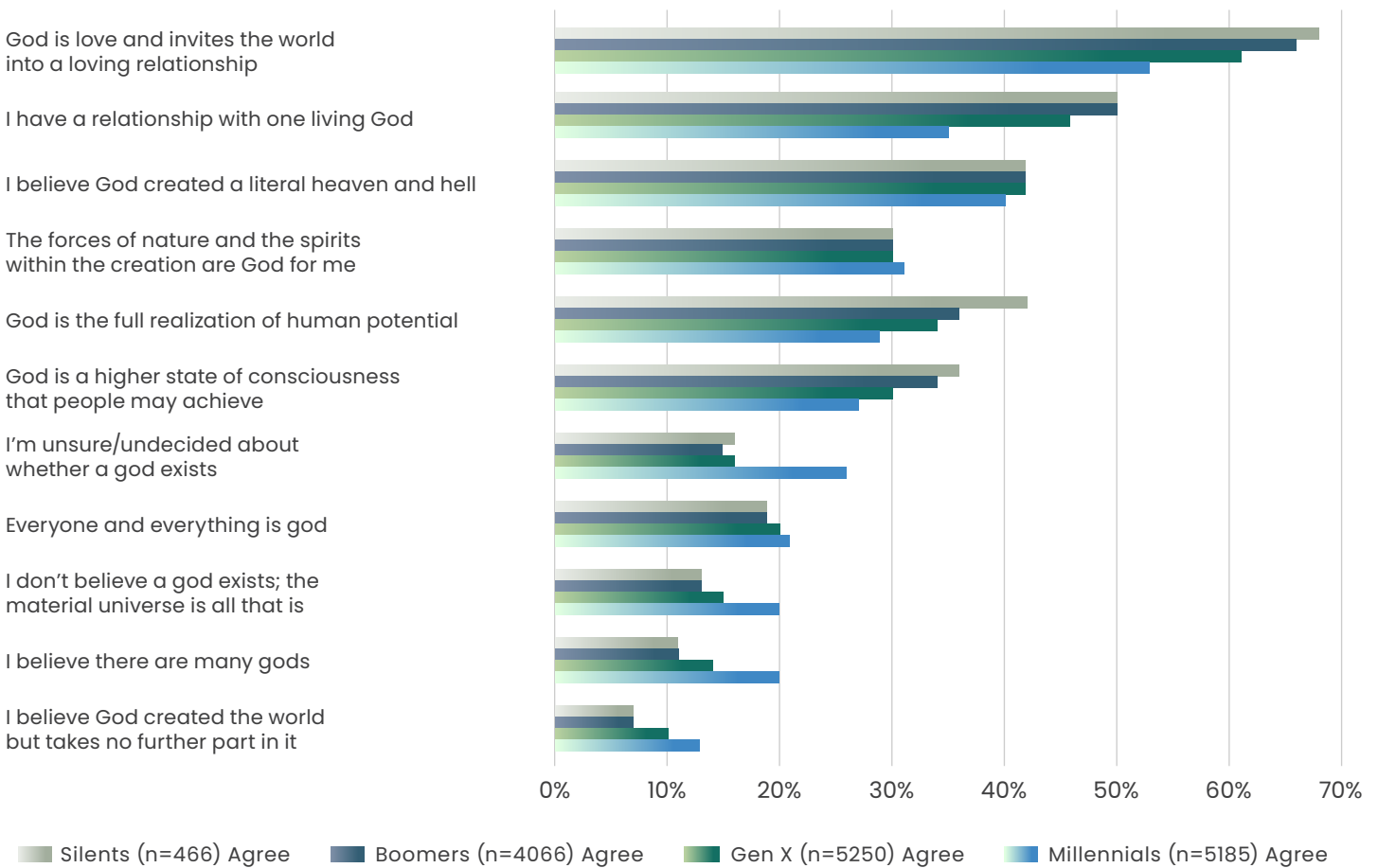
The Silent generation has the highest percentage of self-identified Christians, the Millennial generation the lowest, and the others between, in order. With older generations being raised in the era of Ozzie and Harriet, we might expect to see them agree more with Christian beliefs, and the

younger generations agree less. In fact, the findings did not always sort out as expected. [See Figure 6.2]

Above all, Americans like to think of God as a God of love. The statement, “God is love and invites the world into a loving relationship” received

— FIGURE 6.2

### BELIEFS ABOUT GOD RANGE WIDELY AMONG AMERICANS OF ALL GENERATIONS





---

## Beliefs by Generations

---

the highest agreement from all four generations. Responses to this statement sorted out as one might expect, with the highest agreement among Silents and the lowest (while still a majority) from the Millennials.

In light of their other views, it was surprising to see responses to this distinctive Christian teaching, “...God created a literal heaven and hell,” be so close from one generation to another. The three older cohorts all showed a 42% level of agreement, and the Millennials were not far off, at 40%. Given the era in which they grew up, it is somewhat surprising that older cohorts showed relatively low agreement with Christian teaching, and that younger cohorts showed such a high agreement.

Most Americans, of all generations, believe there is a God (or god or gods) of some kind out there. Millennials scored highest for atheism, with one in five agreeing with the statement, “I don’t believe a god exists; the material universe is all that is.” They also scored highest for uncertainty about God’s existence, with 26% affirming, “I’m unsure/undecided about whether a god exists.” In comparison, non-Millennials agreed much less with these two statements, at least

six percentage points less than Millennials on atheism and at least ten percentage points on the statement of uncertainty. At the very least, this rapid decline in theism from one generation to the next demands that Christian leaders redouble their efforts to reassure young seekers that God truly does exist.

While most Americans believe in God, a significantly higher percentage of Millennials do not. This leads to other questions. What do God-believing Millennials believe God to be? Is he (or it, or they) anything like the God of the Bible? Also, what do other generations believe in if not the God described in the Bible?

The Study found a relatively high level of agreement, among all generations, with statements that clearly depart from the Biblical view of God.

Perhaps the most surprising of these results came from two statements that each reflect a relationship between God and humanity that is inconsistent with the teaching of the Bible. Between 29% and 42% agreed with, “God is the full realization of human potential.” Between 27% and 36% agreed with, “God is a higher

state of consciousness that people may achieve.” The surprise is not that such relatively-high percentages hold to these beliefs, but that the highest level of agreement came from the Silent generation, and the lowest from the Millennial generation, on both items. The other generational cohorts ranged between these two extremes. Alongside the evidence presented above, these facts clearly signal that the marginalization of Christianity in American culture has clearly advanced and shows impact across generations – even the Silent generation.

What if the older generational cohorts interpreted these statements in a way more consistent with traditional Christian faith? Maybe they took the statement, “God is the full realization of human potential,” to mean something like, “God helps humans realize their full potential.” On the other hand, the statements in the Study are clear. It’s just as likely that even members of these older generations, to some extent, hold to an idea of God as some kind of positive force within the human experience, rather than as an outside being that would exist in glory even if humanity never existed.

## Beliefs by Generations

Christians believe the God of the Bible invites people to join his family and relate to him as his children. Christians might be encouraged, then, to see relatively high percentages state, “I have a relationship with one living God.” While Gen-Xers agree at 56%, agreement among Silents and Boomers was 60% while Millennials agreed at 45%, a rate lower by 15 percentage points. Any encouragement here, though, is tempered by seeing how many Americans’ view of God departs from the Christian understanding of God. Many who say they have a relationship with God likely see the God (or god or gods) they relate to as someone or something different from the God of the Bible. For example ...

- Across the generations, three in ten (30–31%), believe “The forces of nature and the spirits within the creation are God for me.” Nearly the same proportion in each of the four generations agree on this belief. In contrast, the Bible teaches that God created the natural world, not that God is only a part or aspect of the natural world.
- The Bible teaches there is only one God. Twenty percent of Millennials agreed with the statement, “there are many gods.” In contrast, only 11% of Silents and Boomers agreed with that statement, as did 14% of Gen Xers.
- The Bible teaches that God is everywhere, but not that everything is God. Again, Millennials led all other generations in agreeing with the statement, “Everyone and everything is god,” at 21%. Remarkably, however, the four generational cohorts scored closely on this item, with all within two percentage points. This means that one in five Americans agrees with a pantheist concept of god.

Clearly, some highly-influential belief systems have pulled Americans away from the concepts of God presented in the Bible. While they do not yet command anywhere near a majority in American society, these beliefs are obviously attractive to various generations in surprising ways. Seeing over a quarter of Silent-generation members agree with humanist or animist concepts of god is truly a surprise.

**While nowhere near a majority in American society, non-Christian belief systems such as humanism, animism, and polytheism are obviously attractive to various generations in surprising ways.**

The third section of this Report also presents the degree to which non-biblical beliefs about God have taken root even among Nominal Christians and Practicing Christians.

# Beliefs by Generations

## Beliefs about Jesus

Many religions teach about the existence of a supreme being. Christianity uniquely sets Jesus at the center of its faith and practice. Jesus himself asked, “Who do you say that I am?” (Matthew 16:15). In Christian

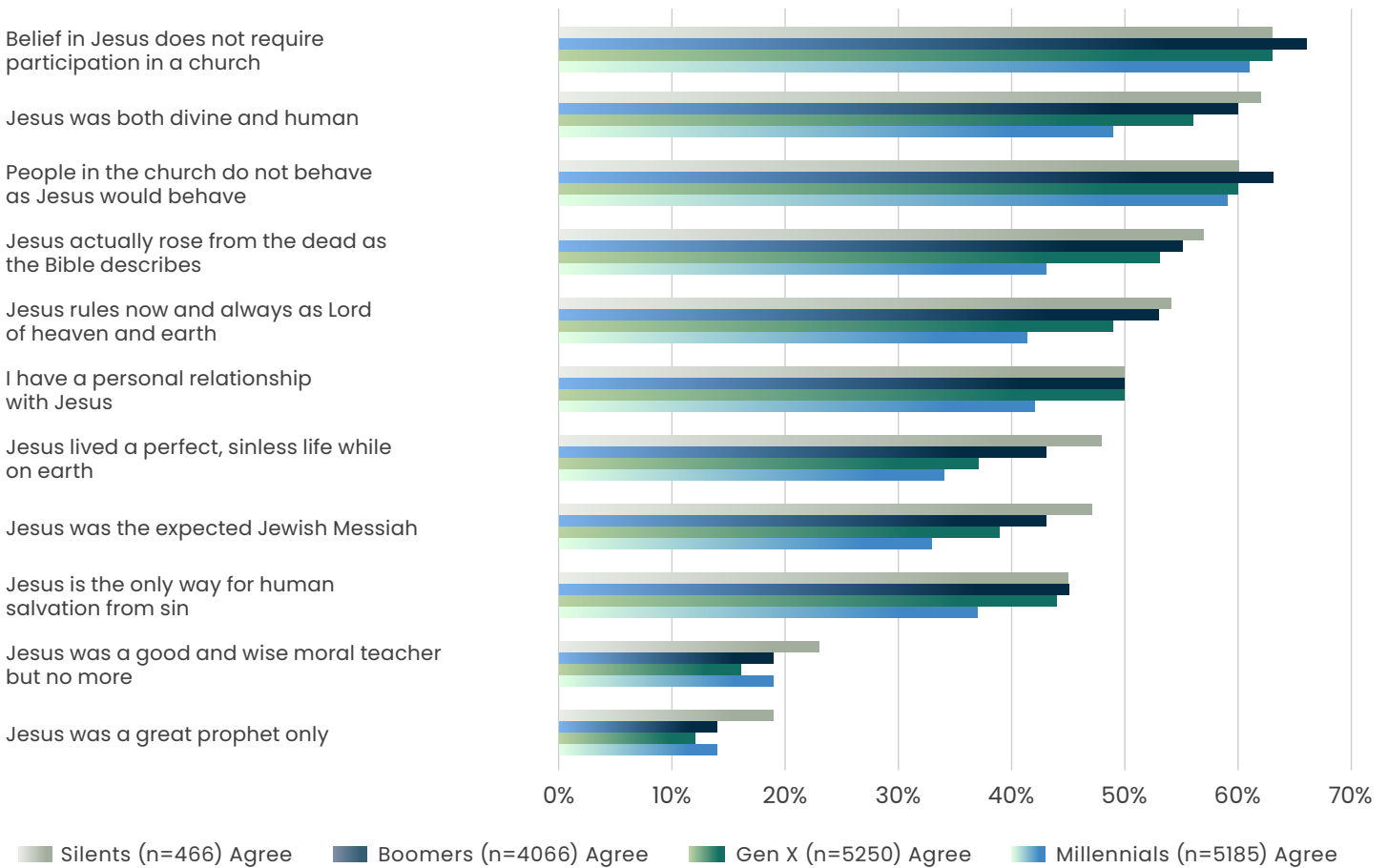
understanding, how people answer that question decides their spiritual destiny, both for this life and for the life to come.

The 11 statements presented to Study respondents cover a wide range of possible beliefs about Jesus, and a

range of possible responses to him. Again, we might expect older cohorts to hold beliefs closer to historic Christianity and younger cohorts to hold beliefs further from the faith. The Study found this to be true to some extent, but not always. [See Figure 6.3]

— FIGURE 6.3

### FEWER MILLENNIALS HOLD TRADITIONAL BELIEFS ABOUT JESUS



## Beliefs by Generations

The four generations hold far different beliefs on six specific statements. In each case, a significantly smaller percentage of Millennials agree with historic Christian teachings.

- “Jesus rules now and always as Lord of heaven and earth” —only 41% of Millennials agreed, as compared to 49%, 53%, and 54% of Gen X, Boomers, and Silents, respectively.
- “Jesus actually rose from the dead as the Bible describes” —Millennial agreement ranked 10 percentage points or more behind the other cohorts.
- “Jesus was the expected Jewish Messiah” —Millennial agreement was six points behind Gen X response, but ten and 14 points behind Boomer and Silents responses.
- “Jesus lived a perfect, sinless life while on earth” —Millennial agreement was three percentage points behind Gen X but nine and 14 percentage points behind Boomers and Silents.
- “Jesus was both divine and human” —Millennial agreement ranked at least seven percentage points behind the other generations.

- “Jesus is the only way for human salvation from sin” —the three older cohorts scored their agreement within one percentage point of each other, at 44% and 45%, while Millennials lagged behind at 37%.

For these beliefs in particular, the Millennial generation exhibits a clear departure from the traditional, Christian understanding of Jesus. And yet the reality is that even in the older cohorts, a majority disagree with core Christian beliefs, and that Christian teaching is essential for even the oldest generations.

Relatively few Americans believe Jesus was only human, that he was just a great teacher or prophet. For the three older age groups, 56% to 62% agreed that “Jesus was both divine and human.” Millennials, however, lagged behind at a significantly lower 49%, meaning that Millennials are evenly divided on the question of Jesus being God.

While those are not overwhelming numbers, agreement levels on more specific options for a human-only Jesus were relatively weak. Just 15% to 23% in any generation agreed that “Jesus was a good and wise moral teacher but no more.” Interestingly, the Silent generation showed the

highest level of agreement with this description, which helps explain their higher levels of acceptance for humanist and transcendental beliefs. Apparently, members of the Silent generation who decided Jesus was not God had also decided that “Jesus was a great prophet only.” One in five Silents (19%) agreed with this compared to just 12–14% of younger generations.

**Roughly one in five Silent Generation members agree Jesus was merely a prophet or a good, wise teacher – significantly more than any younger generation.**

So in general, what do most Americans believe about Jesus? These are the statements that most (more than 50%) of the Silents, Boomers, and Gen Xers agree with:

- “Belief in Jesus does not require participation in a church.”
- “Jesus was both divine and human.”
- “People in the church do not behave as Jesus would behave.”
- “Jesus actually rose from the dead as the Bible describes.”

## Beliefs by Generations

Most Americans of these age cohorts believe Jesus was both divine and human, and that he rose from the dead. On these important, central tenets, they agree with historic, Christian orthodoxy. But their high view of Jesus does not lead to a high view of his church. They believe in Jesus but do not love His church. This presents a great challenge for Christian ministry in this country. Convincing people of the truth of the gospel is one thing. Convincing them of the goodness and importance of his church is quite another.

For some of these statements, the Boomer generation stands in the lead. It had the highest level of agreement with, “Belief in Jesus does not require participation in a church,” and “People in the church do not behave as Jesus would behave.” Though the levels of agreement on these are fairly close across generations, Boomers are the cohort that is least positive about the church and its relationship to

Jesus. In this regard they are even more negative than Millennials

In light of other trends already noted, it is no surprise that only

# 42%

of Millennials claimed to “have a personal relationship with Jesus,” eight percentage points behind the other age groups. Just about exactly half of the Silents, Boomers, and Gen Xers claimed to have that relationship. The Study has found that

# 64.2%

of Americans self-identify as Christians, and that that percentage is higher in the three older cohorts. The difference between these two percentages says there is a

significant share of self-identified Christians who would not say they “have a personal relationship with Jesus.” Picture the person who would say, “Yes, I’m a Christian, but I wouldn’t say I have a ‘personal relationship’ with Christ.” While that does not represent a majority of self-identified American Christians, this finding certainly presents a challenge for discipleship.

## Beliefs within Cities, Suburbs, and Towns

How different from each other are urban, suburban, and rural Americans? The American Beliefs Study allows us to see whether beliefs about God and Jesus vary by population density. The findings can help urban, suburban, and rural churches understand the extent to which their communities require unique expressions of worship, teaching, and service.

### Beliefs about God

One might assume that rural Americans would tend to hold beliefs about God that are closer to traditional Christian faith. One might assume that most of the country's atheists are in the cities, along with most of those who hold to concepts of God influenced by

Eastern religious thought, Buddhism, or Hinduism. Maybe then the beliefs of suburbanites would fall somewhere in between. The reality is that rural, suburban, and urban respondents have quite similar beliefs about God. [See Figure 6.4]

— FIGURE 6.4

### URBANITES, SUBURBANITES, AND RURAL-DWELLERS HOLD SIMILAR BELIEFS ABOUT GOD

#### Beliefs about God by Population

God is love and invites the world into a loving relationship

I have a relationship with one God

I believe God created a literal heaven and hell

God is the full realization of human potential

The forces of nature and the spirits within the creation are God for me

God is a higher state of consciousness that people may achieve

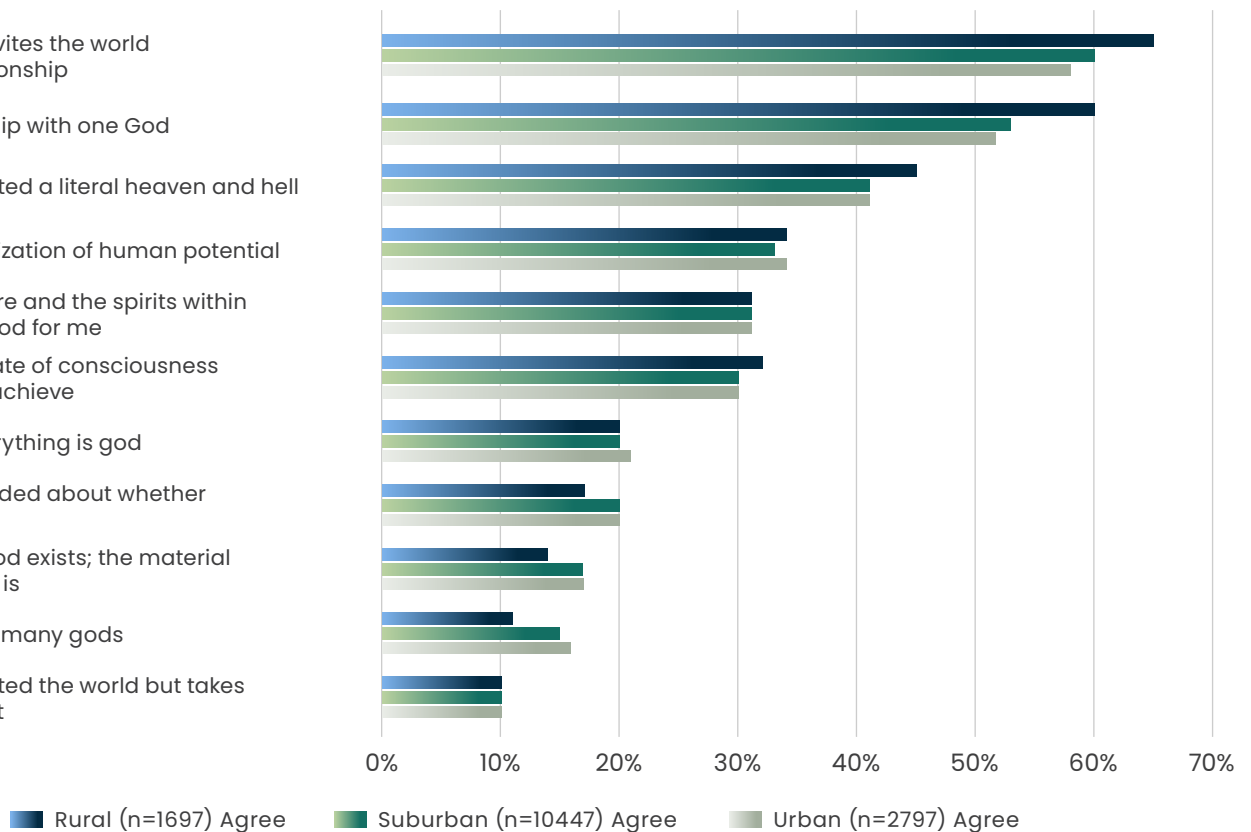
Everyone and everything is god

I'm unsure/undecided about whether a god exists

I don't believe a god exists; the material universe is all that is

I believe there are many gods

I believe God created the world but takes no further part in it



## Beliefs within Cities, Suburbs, and Towns

For their agreement with the 11 statements about God, responses from the three groups clustered fairly tightly. Only three of the statements produced a difference of five or more percentage points in responses from the three groups, and the largest gap was eight points. Two different statements even produced dead-heat ties between the three groups (when rounded to the nearest whole number, as in Figure 6.4).

These gap figures contrast strongly with the difference in beliefs about God between generational cohorts, as seen earlier in Figure 6.2. On the same statements, the groups showed two 15-point gaps alongside 10- and 13-percentage-point spreads. Overall, the average gap in responses to these statements from generation groups was 8.1 percentage points, as against 3.1 percentage points by population-density groups. The gap in opinions about God by generations is roughly two and a half times wider than the gap in opinions about God by population density.

To be sure, many cultural, social, economic, and political differences exist between urban, suburban, and rural Americans. But when it comes

to what they believe about God, the differences are slight.

Do American rural residents tend to believe in the God of the Bible? Yes and no. In their communities, rural church leaders will find:

- 31% think of God as “the forces of nature and the spirits within creation.”
- 20% believe “Everyone and everything is god.”
- 14% don’t believe a god exists.
- 11% believe there are many gods.

What about American urban residents? Do they tend toward unbelief? Again, yes and no. Of the people that urban churches seek to serve:

- 58% would say, “God is love and invites the world into a loving relationship.”
- 52% would say, “I have a relationship with one living God.”
- 41% believe “God created a literal heaven and hell.”

For Christian ministry, the teaching of basic theology and the work of apologetics need not be greatly

different in these three contexts to be effective. The mistake would be to assume that ideas about God from non-Christian theology don’t exist in the rural areas, or to assume that urban residents rarely hold views about God in line with Christian teaching. All three population-density sectors have a broad mix of believers and unbelievers.

**Rural Americans are more likely than those in denser environs to agree that they either have a relationship with God, or that God invites humankind into a relationship with him.**

The picture that emerges most clearly from these results is that rural Americans are more likely than those living elsewhere to say they have a relationship with God, or to feel God seeks a relationship with us.

Though the pattern of responses is quite similar for eight of the 11 statements, the way that responses from the three population-density groups differ is in line with what one might expect. For those eight statements, responses from rural respondents were in strongest agreement with Christian teaching,

## Beliefs within Cities, Suburbs, and Towns

responses from urban respondents were furthest from Christian teaching, and responses from suburban respondents were between the two. For example, with the statement “I believe there are many gods,” 16% of urban respondents agreed; 15% of suburban respondents agreed; and only 11% of rural respondents agreed.

### Beliefs about Jesus

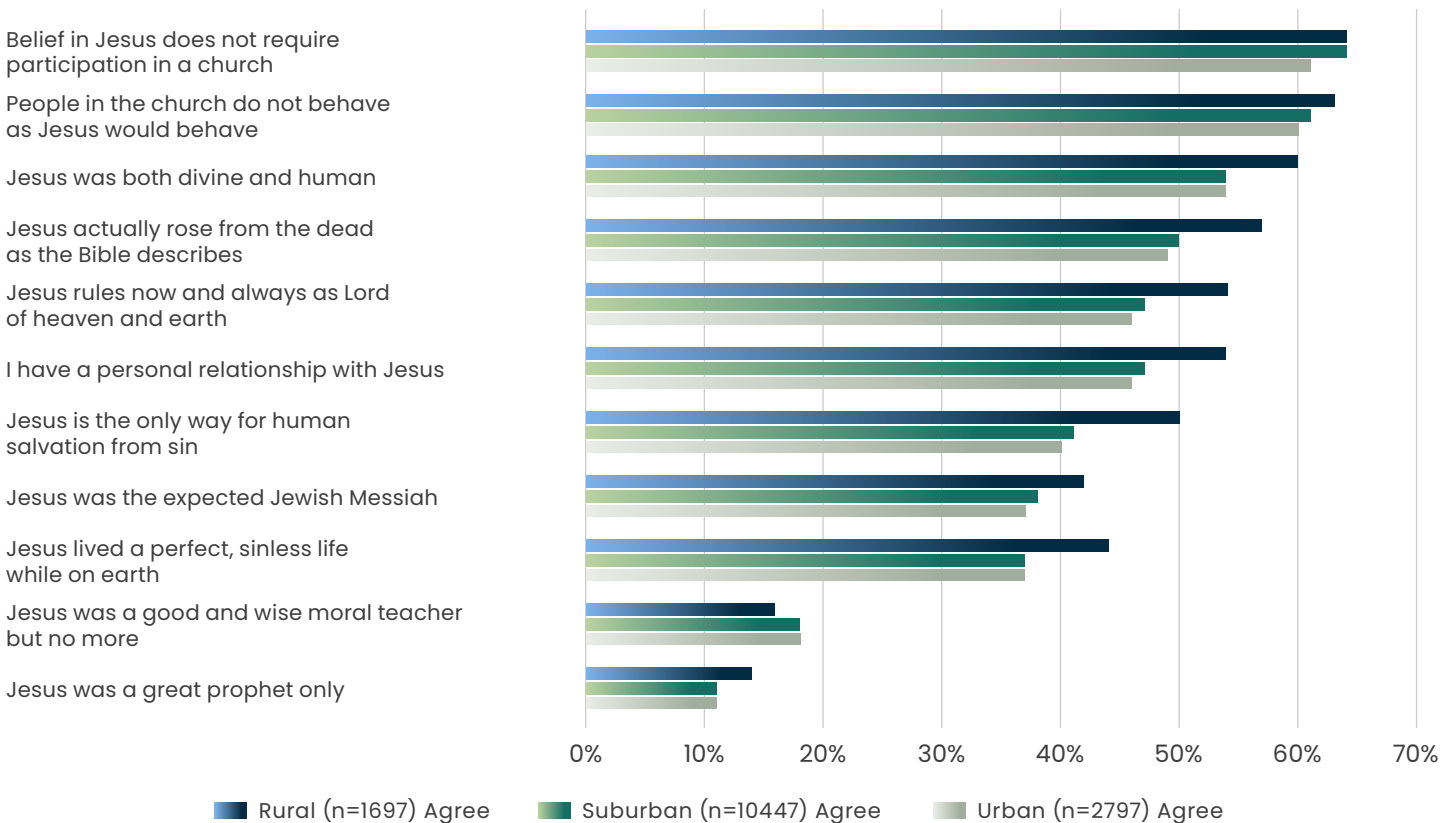
Response patterns change within population density groups when the subject is beliefs about Jesus. Rural respondents stand out much more from the other two groups here, with beliefs that tend to be closer to Christian teaching. Urbanites and suburbanites tend to believe quite

similar things about Jesus, and they differ from rural respondents in some significant, instructive ways. [See Figure 6.5]

The two statements that attracted the strongest agreement between all population groups speak to the relationship between the Jesus of history and the churches of today.

— FIGURE 6.5

### URBANITES, SUBURBANITES, AND RURAL-DWELLERS HOLD SIMILAR BELIEFS ABOUT GOD





## Beliefs within Cities, Suburbs, and Towns

For Christian ministry in our time, it's not an encouraging picture. Nearly two-thirds of Americans (61% to 64%) agreed that "belief in Jesus does not require participation in a church." Six in ten (60%-63%) agreed that "People in the church do not behave as Jesus would behave," noted earlier in the observations about Figure 6.3.

Across rural, suburban, and urban settings, respondents voted both similarly and strongly on these two statements. Of all the 11 statements, this is where they showed the highest level of agreement.

That kind of unity was absent for the other statements. Rural residents had a stronger level of agreement with historic Christian teaching about Jesus than urban or suburban residents. For instance, a gulf of nine percentage points exists between rural and non-rural residents who agree that "Jesus is the only way for human salvation from sin."

A seven-percentage-point gap exists between rural respondents and the other two groups on these three statements:

- "Jesus actually rose from the dead as the Bible describes."
- "Jesus rules now and always as Lord of heaven and earth."

- "Jesus lived a perfect, sinless life while on earth."

There is an even-greater gap, of nine percentage points, on this statement:

- "Jesus is the only way for human salvation from sin"

All four of the statements above align with Christian teaching, and all received a much-higher positive response from rural respondents. What rural Americans tend to believe about Jesus is much closer to historic Christian faith than what urban and suburban Americans tend to believe. It may be no surprise, then, that rural residents also agreed they "have a personal relationship with Jesus" at a rate seven percent higher than urbanites and suburbanites.

### The Intersection of Biblical and Unbiblical

Taken together, American beliefs about God and beliefs about Jesus present a paradox. A relatively high percentage agree with statements about God that are clearly non-Christian. At the same time, strong agreement also exists for statements about Jesus that are clearly Christian.

What is amazing is that these groups overlap as much as they do. Many American suburbanites (the largest

**Americans have apparently come to see faith as a buffet. They choose tempting spiritual entrees and sides with no concern for whether the dishes complement each other.**

population by far) believe in what the Bible teaches about Jesus while at the same time holding to a concept of God (or god or gods) that is very much unlike the God of the Bible.

Americans – both in small towns and big cities – have apparently come to regard faith as a sort of buffet. They choose spiritual entrees and sides that look tempting even if some of the dishes don't taste good together. Consider the following stats among all Americans:

- 54% believe "Jesus was both divine and human."
- 50% believe "Jesus actually rose from the dead as the Bible describes."
- 47% believe "Jesus rules now and always as Lord of heaven and earth."
- 41% believe "Jesus is the only way for human salvation from sin."
- 38% believe "Jesus was the expected Jewish Messiah."
- 38% believe "Jesus lived a perfect, sinless life while on earth."

## Beliefs within Cities, Suburbs, and Towns

Shockingly, nearly half (48%) of those who agree that “Jesus was both divine and human” also agree that “God is the full realization of human potential” and four in ten of them (39%) agree “God is a higher state of consciousness that people may achieve.” Both of these last statements obviously disagree with the Biblical concept of God.

And half of Americans believe “Jesus actually rose from the dead as the Bible describes.” But one in three of these resurrection believers (32%) also agree that “the forces of nature and

the spirits within the creation are God for me,” and a quarter of them (23%) say “everything and everyone is God to me.”

Finally, we see that 47% of Americans agree they “have a personal relationship with Jesus.” Amazingly, 42% of this group also says “God is the full realization of human potential” and a third of them (32%) believe “God is a higher state of consciousness that people may achieve.”

Christian churches need to teach, preach, and witness about Jesus,

who he was, and what he did for our salvation. But these findings reveal that in America today, it may be even more important to teach, preach, and witness about who God is, and to confront false ideas about God. It’s not good if people believe Jesus is the Son of God if they then think of God in a pantheistic, polytheistic, or animistic way.



## Beliefs Among Nominal Christians and Practicing Christians

The first two sections of this Report analyzed responses from across the religious spectrum in America, showing what Christians and non-Christians alike believe about God and Jesus. Each age cohort and each population density group included both Christian and non-Christian respondents. Those frames support an understanding of the complete context in which churches strive to serve and witness.

This section focuses on the Christian community alone, people who self-identify as “Christian.” One would hope that what these Christians

believe about God and Jesus would be consistent with the Bible and with historic Christian faith and teaching.

But what of any inconsistencies? Churches desire to faithfully shepherd their flock of Practicing Christians while also seeking to encourage Nominal Christians back into the fold. This section is most valuable for digging into the differences in beliefs between Practicing Christians and Nominal Christians. Understanding what each group believes can drive positive ministry outcomes for both.

**Practicing Christians** are defined as those who identify as Christian, attend a faith fellowship at least once a month, and say their faith has ‘considerable’ or ‘utmost’ significance in their lives.

**Nominal Christians** are defined as those who identify as Christian, attend a fellowship less than once a month, or say that their faith has at most a ‘moderate’ significance in their lives. Those who attend at least once a month but say that faith isn’t important in their lives are still defined as Nominal. Similarly, those who say faith has ‘considerable’ or ‘utmost’ significance in their lives but who attend less than once a month are still defined as Nominal.

These were the traits available from the Study that best allowed the researchers to distinguish between these two groups.

## Beliefs Among Nominal Christians and Practicing Christians

### Beliefs about God

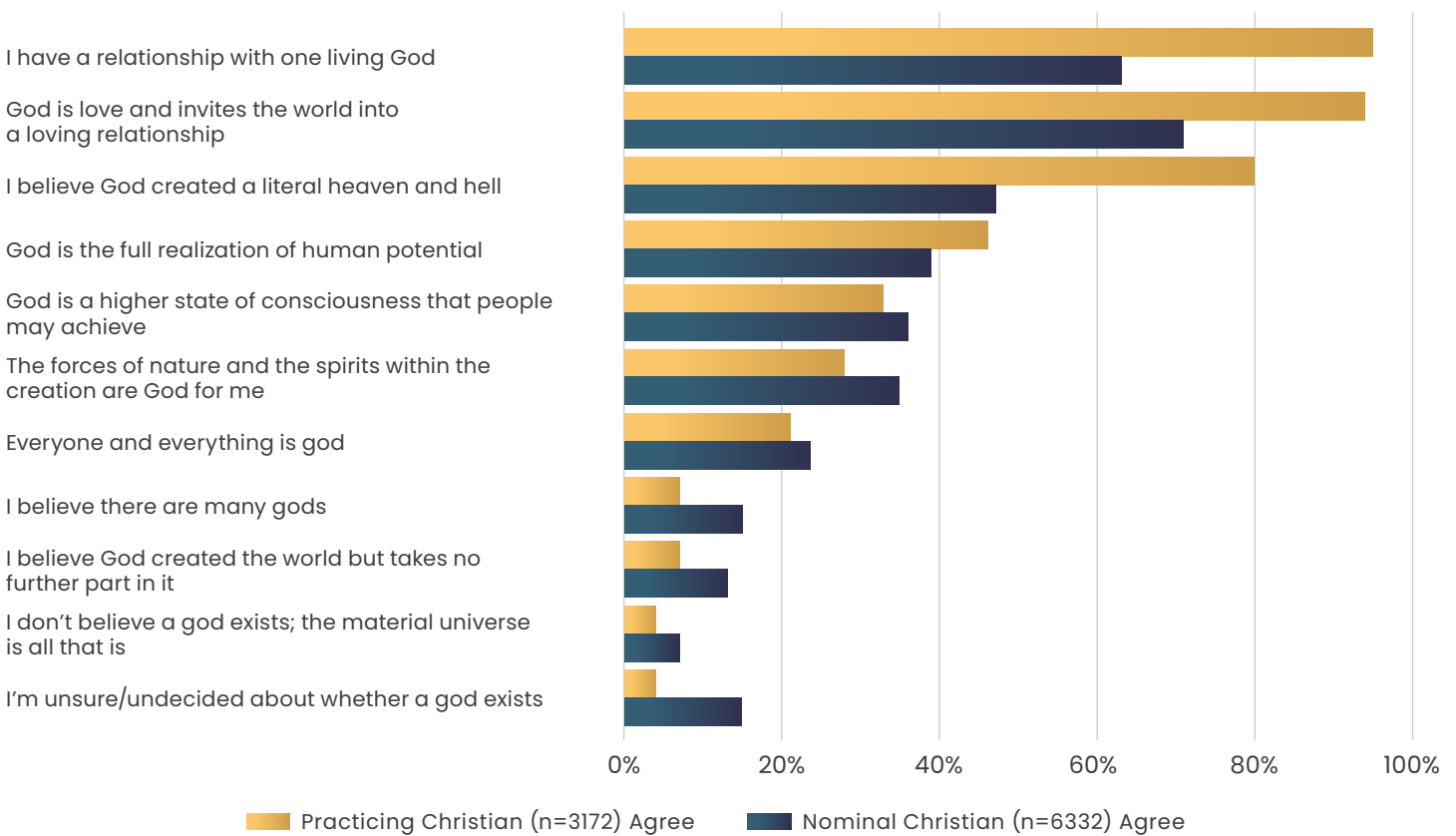
The first sentence of the Bible, “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth” (Genesis 1:1) establishes several important points of Christian theology about God. God is one thing and all of nature is another; they are not the same thing. It speaks of one Creator God,

not many. It says God existed before humanity, affirming His presence outside of human experience. At least since the 1960s, ideas about God that conflict with Biblical teaching have seeped into American culture, from Hinduism, Buddhism, Native American religions, and other sources. To what extent have they seeped into the church as well?

The Study was able to answer this question, with the added benefit of analysis between the beliefs of Practicing Christians and Nominal Christians. [See Figure 6.6]

— FIGURE 6.6

### MANY NOMINAL CHRISTIANS DO NOT AGREE WITH BASIC CHRISTIAN TEACHING ABOUT GOD



## Beliefs Among Nominal Christians and Practicing Christians

Nominal Christians, by definition, lag behind Practicing Christians in church attendance and in how important they consider faith to be in their lives. The findings of this Study show that they also lag behind in adherence to important, basic tenets of Christian belief. Of the 11 statements presented about God, Nominal Christian responses show a significant trend of departure from the faith.

- On every statement consistent with historic Christian teaching, fewer Nominal Christians than Practicing Christians agreed.
- On seven of eight statements not in harmony with historic Christian teaching, more Nominal Christians than Practicing Christians agreed.

These figures lead to the conclusion that consistent participation in a Christian faith community is at least one of the factors that influences stronger agreement on a number of traditional biblical beliefs. Other factors may contribute to this apparent correlation.

The largest gap was with the statement, “I believe God created a literal heaven and hell.” Eight in ten Practicing Christians agreed, while only 47% of Nominal Christians

agreed, a gap of 33 percentage points. In fact, 20% of Nominal Christians and 9% of Practicing Christians disagree with this point of Christian theology. (A full 34% of Nominal Christians and 11% of Practicing Christians expressed “No opinion”).

There was a similar, very-large gap with the statement “God is love and invites the world into a loving relationship.” While 94% of Practicing Christians agreed, only 71% of Nominal Christians agreed. The difference comes as no surprise. Even though 71% is a strong majority, the reality is that nearly three in ten self-identified Christians can’t bring themselves to admit God calls them to a loving relationship with him. These results echo the longing Nominal Christians expressed (as shown in Report 5 of this series) for greater acceptance and less judgement from the Church.

The Study revealed facts about the beliefs of Practicing Christians that are surprising, if not shocking. Substantial numbers even of Practicing Christians agreed with statements about God that clearly depart from Biblical teachings. This reveals the extent to which non-Christian ideas about God have

crept into the thinking even of faithful Christians. Among the most-faithful cohort of Practicing Christians:

- 46% believe “God is the full realization of human potential.”
- 33% believe “God is a higher state of consciousness that people may achieve.”
- 28% believe “The forces of nature and the spirits within the creation are God for me.”
- 21% believe “Everyone and everything is god.”

This again shows the need for more and better instruction in basic Christian theology. Preachers and teachers would do well to understand the non-Christian concepts that have seeped into the wider culture and also into the church. When it comes to basic concepts about God, Christianity does not agree with other religions, especially those with roots in South and East Asia. Church leaders might easily explain the differences.

**To a surprising degree, some decidedly non-Christian concepts about God have infiltrated the mindset of even the most devout Christians.**

## Beliefs Among Nominal Christians and Practicing Christians

Despite these somewhat-shocking discoveries, there is hope. Relatively few Nominal Christians have completely abandoned belief in God. Just one in seven self-identified Christians (15%) agreed they were “unsure/undecided about whether a god exists,” and only seven percent expressed a clear atheist position by saying they didn’t “believe a god exists.” Respondents could also indicate “No opinion” on any of these statements.

But on the side of continuing faith in God, 64% of Nominal Christians

disagreed with any uncertainty about God’s existence and 72% rejected the notion that there is no God. It is heartening to know that nearly three in four Nominal Christians still believe in God, and that nearly two in three confidently assert that God exists.

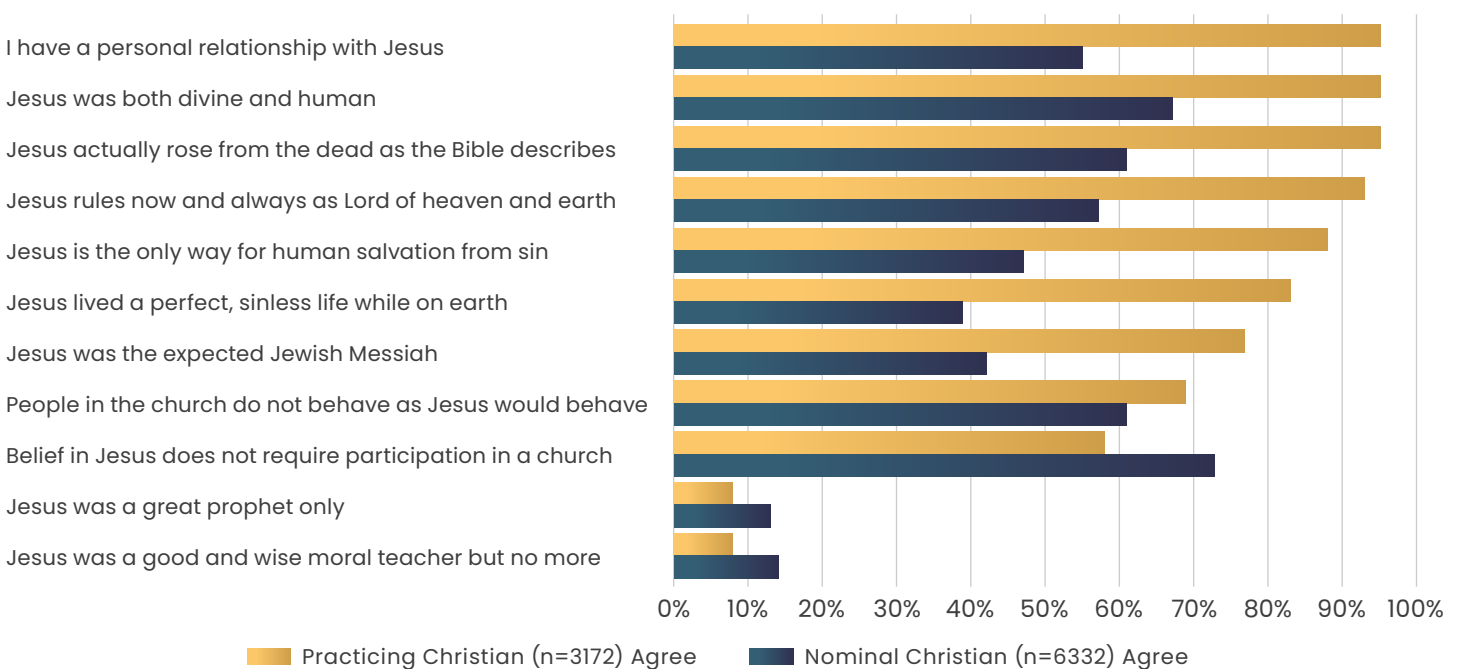
### Beliefs about Jesus

Ironically, the section of this Report on beliefs about Jesus among self-identified American Christians shows the widest gaps in beliefs between any two groups analyzed. One might have expected closer agreement.

Of the 11 statements about Jesus, the only one that showed a relatively close agreement between Nominal Christians and Practicing Christians was “People in the church do not behave as Jesus would behave” (61% and 69%, respectively). When it comes to beliefs about Jesus, these two groups of Christians are generally far apart, but they unite in believing that church people do not do well in following the example of Jesus – even surpassing the 56% of non-Christians who believe this. That is not encouraging. [See Figure 6.7]

— FIGURE 6.7

### NOMINAL CHRISTIANS AND PRACTICING CHRISTIANS DIFFER WIDELY IN BELIEFS ABOUT JESUS



## Beliefs Among Nominal Christians and Practicing Christians

Nineteen in 20 Practicing Christians say they “have a personal relationship with Jesus,” while only 55% of Nominal Christians say the same. This 40-point gap reveals an important point for understanding Nominal Christians: Nearly half of them couldn’t agree that they have a ‘personal relationship’ with Jesus, including 13% who simply disagreed and 32% who were neutral. Beyond not attending church, Nominal Christians also seem to feel out of fellowship with Jesus himself. Their sense of spiritual connection with Jesus erodes alongside their attendance record.

**Nearly all Practicing Christians affirm a personal relationship with Jesus, compared to just over half of Nominal Christians.**

Six of the 11 statements on this question affirm an important item of historic Christian teaching about Jesus Christ. On every one of these six statements a wide gap exists between what Practicing Christians and Nominal Christians believe.

The gap ranges between 28 and 44 percentage points, with an average gap of 35 percentage points. For example...

- 83% of Practicing Christians believe “Jesus lived a perfect, sinless life while on earth,” while only 39% of Nominal Christians agree.
- 88% of Practicing Christians believe “Jesus is the only way for human salvation from sin,” while only 47% of Nominal Christians agree.

So what do Nominal Christians believe about Jesus? Two-thirds (67%) continue to believe “Jesus was both human and divine.” Relatively few have accepted alternatives that depict Jesus as human only. Only 13% would say, “Jesus was a great prophet only,” and only 14% would say, “Jesus was a good and wise moral teacher but no more.”

This helps us understand Nominal Christians and the state of their faith. Maybe they never held strongly to what the Bible teaches about Jesus, or perhaps their beliefs about Jesus

eroded over time as they attended church less. It presents a chicken-and-egg question. Did they become Nominal Christians because they didn’t believe what their churches taught about Jesus, or did they drift into Nominal practices and, over time, find themselves believing less and less? The Study by itself cannot answer that question, but this much is clear: a very large percentage of Nominal Christians don’t agree with essential, basic Christian teachings about Jesus. Any attempt to win them back to deeper faith and greater faithfulness needs to bear that in mind.

---

## Summary Highlights | Beliefs About God

---

- | On what they believe about God, all four generational cohorts in the American Beliefs Study (Silents, Boomers, Gen X, and Millennials), ranked this statement highest: “God is love and invites the world into a loving relationship.” Above all, Americans see God as a God of love, and also see him reaching out to humanity, not remaining distant.
- | Millennials doubt the existence of God significantly more than the other age cohorts. 26% expressed doubt by agreeing with the statement, “I’m unsure/undecided about whether a god exists,” while 20% hold a clearly atheist position, saying, “I don’t believe a god exists; the material universe is all that is.”
- | 60% of Silents and Boomers say they “have a relationship with one living God.” In comparison, only 45% of Millennials would make the same claim.
- | Despite the different social, economic, and political contexts for rural, suburban, and urban Americans, residents of these different population sectors do not differ greatly in what they believe about God and Jesus.
- | A relatively-high percentage of Americans agree with historic Christian teaching about Jesus, but at the same time significant percentages hold to beliefs about God that are influenced by pantheist, polytheist, animist, or other non-Christian religious ideas.
- | Nominal Christians lag far behind Practicing Christians in the extent to which their beliefs about God and Jesus fit with what the Bible teaches. For example, 94% of Practicing Christians said, “I believe God created a literal heaven and hell,” while only 71% of Nominal Christians agreed.
- | Practicing Christians and Nominal Christians differ greatly on how they see their relationship with Jesus. 95% of Practicing Christians affirmed that they “have a personal relationship with Jesus,” while only 55% of Nominal Christians agreed.



---

## Intro | Nones vs. Practicing

---

What is the largest faith group in American society? Protestants? Catholics? Evangelicals? Or is it people who are not affiliated with any religion? In his watershed 2021 book, Ryan Burge labeled these Americans as “The Nones.” Because this title is so fitting, the researchers have adopted that name for this report as well. Who are the Nones? A few of them oppose religion or are adamant atheists, while others believe one or more biblical tenets, but most are simply indifferent. They might say, “I’m not a religious person,” or, “I just don’t follow any religion.”

The American Beliefs Study asked a carefully-designed, representative sample of 15,000 Americans about their religious beliefs and behaviors. From a list of 29 faith traditions within Christianity and many non-Christian religions – pretty much every religion that is present in the country – they selected the one that best described their beliefs. More than a quarter,

27%, checked the box for “None/No Religious Preference.”

**More than one in four Americans consider themselves to have no religion. They belong to the Nones.**

For broader context, Burge noted in his 2021 book on the Nones that they numbered just five percent of Americans in 1972. They’ve been growing ever since.

Now it’s official. “No religion” is now the largest “religion” in America. Catholicism is second at 21%. The Nones are now the largest faith category in the country by a gap of six percentage points. Not only that, but they continue to grow. Ten years ago, Catholicism was firmly in first place, but the Nones grew at a rate of 14% in the past ten years while Catholicism declined, by seven percent.

During that same decade, America’s national population grew by nine percent. At this point the Nones are growing more rapidly than the national population, so their percentage of the national population is increasing year by year as well.

Drawing from the data of the American Beliefs Study, this Report will fill out the picture of who the Nones are, what they count as important issues in their lives, and how they feel about various aspects of American society and culture.

## Where the Nones Live

Some regions of the country have a greater Christian presence than others. The same is true of the Nones. Churches in some regions will find themselves among many more Nones than in other regions, which has implications for ministry and outreach. [See Figure 7.1]

Every region in the country is at least 22% comprised of Nones. The South has the smallest proportion of Nones and the highest percentage of Practicing Christians. To clarify, for these Reports the researchers defined Practicing as those who identify as Christian, attend a faith fellowship at least once a month, and say their faith has ‘considerable’ or ‘utmost’ significance in their lives.

The Northeast and Midwest regions are very close to each other in the presence of the Nones, at 24% and 25% respectively. However, there is a wide gap between these two regions in the presence of Practicing Christians, with a significantly higher 24% share in the Midwest and just 17% in the Northeast.

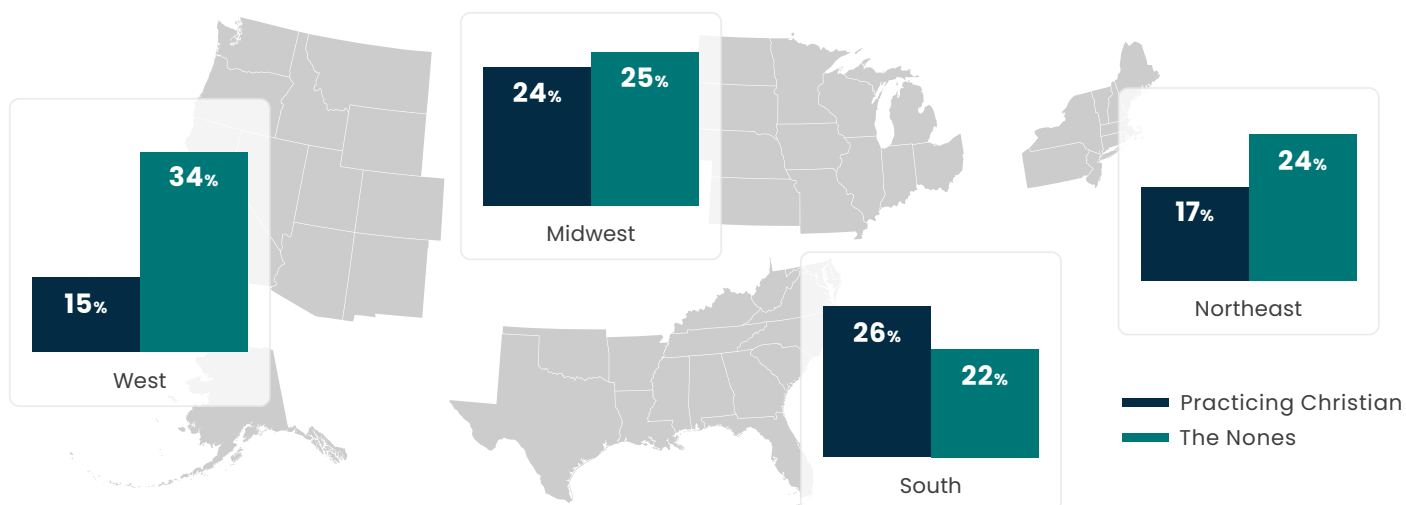
The region that stands out is the West. While 27% of Americans overall fit into the Nones category, more than a third of Western residents describe themselves as among the Nones. In a study where a difference of just two percentage points is significant, this seven-percentage-point gap is striking.

Another finding in this study of faith groups by region is worth noting. Even though this present Report focuses on the Nones, the researchers found that members of non-Christian religions made up an 11 percent slice of Americans overall. This too is unevenly distributed. The percentage of people believing in Other religions in the West and Northeast (15% and 13%) is twice that of the South and Midwest (8% and 6%, respectively).

The crucial point is this: Churches in every region serve in a context where many people have no religion, but this is especially true in the western states.

— FIGURE 7.1

### THE WEST HAS THE HIGHEST CONCENTRATION OF THE NONES



Percentage of 14,941 American adults  
American Beliefs Study, 2021

## The Nones by Generation

Just as the Nones are unevenly distributed across America’s regions, they are also unevenly distributed across America’s generations. The largest percentage of Christians overall, and of Practicing Christians in particular, is among the oldest and now tiniest living generation, the Silents. The smallest percentage of Christians exists in the youngest generation of this study, the Millennials. The share of Christians for the other two generations, Gen-X and Boomers, fall between these extremes. That’s where the Christians are. What about the Nones? [See Figure 7.2]

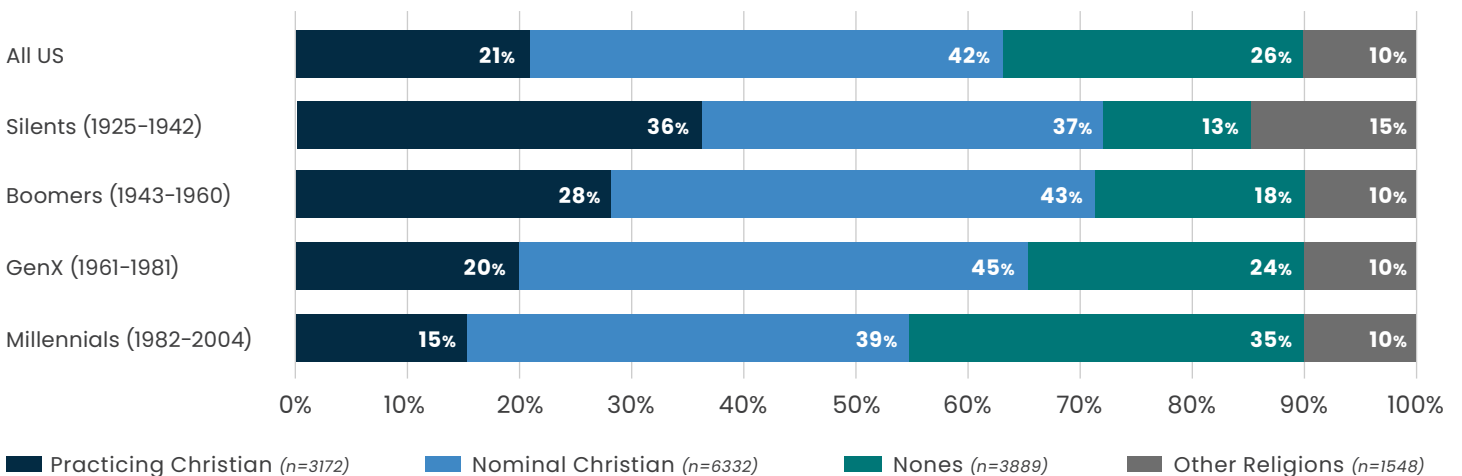
The Millennials have the largest proportion of Nones, followed by Gen X, the Boomers, and the Silents, in order. The three older cohorts have a percentage of Nones that is smaller than the national average.

Just as the West stands out when comparing the Nones by region, Millennials stand out when comparing the Nones by generations. About one in four Americans are Nones, but more than one in three Millennials are Nones (35%). The Millennial generation is rejecting religious faith and practice to a much greater extent than any prior generation.

To put it into even sharper contrast, while Practicing Christians outnumber the Nones by ratio of 3:1 among Silents, the Nones outnumber Practicing Christians by nearly a ratio of 3:1 among Millennials. American culture has steadily changed over the last century, and the pace of that change is accelerating in undeniable ways. Consider that it took nearly 50 years for television sets to reach into a majority of American homes, while it took only about six years for social media to reach the same level of penetration.

A large proportion of the Millennials are living lives where there’s no room

— FIGURE 7.2  
**PRESENCE OF NONES RISES WITH EACH YOUNGER GENERATION**



Share of Belief Groups by Generation among 14,941 American adults  
American Beliefs Study, 2021

## The Nones by Generation

for religion. As this generation grows in age and takes up more and more positions of cultural leadership, their non-religious way of thinking and living will become more and more influential. Unless other factors come into play in a big way, this large group of Millennial Nones is very likely to shift the national culture away from religion, any religion.

**Unless other factors intervene, America's Millennial Nones could shift the nation's culture away from religion far faster than any prior generation.**

Where are American Millennials finding any spiritual affirmation or solace? The simple answer is 'nowhere.' According to the American Beliefs Study, just 10% of Americans claimed affinity with any non-Christian faith in 2011. By 2021, that

share had barely nudged upward to 10.2%, hardly a groundswell migration into non-Christian faiths. As the proportion of Americans who are Christians declines, it is not an alternative religion that is winning the battle. It is indifference.

Still, it is not quite true to say the Nones believe nothing. On many of the questions about God and Jesus in the Study, many of the Nones would simply respond with a neutral answer instead of outright rejection. And somewhat surprisingly, the share of the Nones who agreed that "Jesus was both divine and human" rises with every younger generation. Three percent of the Nones among the Silent generation believe in the divinity of Jesus, which rises to seven percent among Gen-X, and then jumps, significantly, to 13% among Millennials.

This may represent something of a silver lining to the cloud of indifference surrounding modern views on faith. It might be easier to attract people to Christian faith who have no faith, than to attract people to Christian faith who are committed to a rival faith. The challenge with evangelization among the Nones is to cultivate personal relationships in order to introduce them to faith and worship, not to pull them away from a competing faith and worship.

**As the proportion of American Christians declines, it is not an alternative faith that is winning the battle. It is indifference.**

## The Nones by Gender

The general assumption is that women tend to be more religious than men. The findings of the American Beliefs Study do not support that assumption. The Study sorted out those who said they were “active in a religious congregation” by their level of activity, or how often they were involved in a church or other place of worship. There was no significant difference between men and women on the responses “Once a month,” or “Weekly or more.”

When it comes to self-identifying as one of the Nones, there is a tiny, one percent difference between the two genders. Women are as likely as men to be among the Nones, and men are as likely as women to be Practicing Christians. What this means practically is that churches seeking to reach out to the Nones don’t need to pursue any special emphasis on one gender.

Of course, there could be reason to apply different messaging for men and women based on the concerns and the life issues that matter most to them.

**Women are just as likely as men to be among the Nones, and men are just as likely as women to be Practicing Christians.**



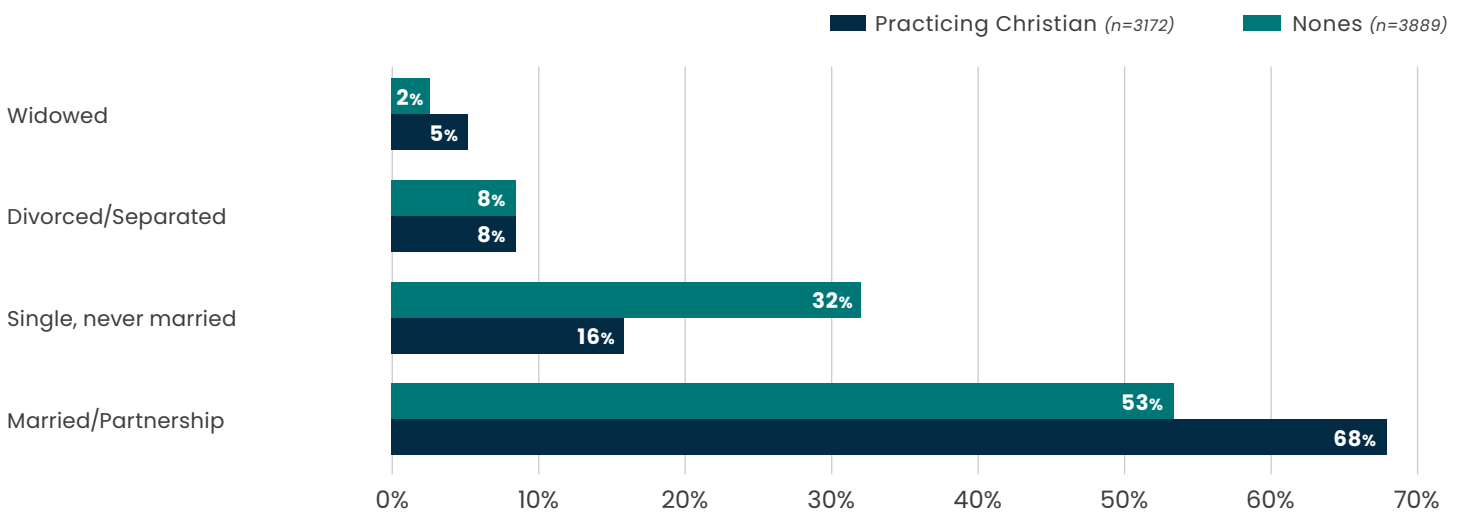
## Martial Status of the Nones

Fewer of the Nones are married or in long-term partner relationships. Nearly one-third of the Nones – twice as many Nones as Practicing Christians – are single and never married. This could mean the Nones may feel uncomfortable in churches

that are strongly oriented to married couples and families. On the other hand, this presents an opportunity: churches that do well in reaching out to single, never-married adults will likely find themselves in contact with many of the Nones. [See Figure 7.3]

— FIGURE 7.3

### THE NONES ARE TWICE AS LIKELY TO BE SINGLE



*Marital Status among the Nones and Practicing Christians  
American Beliefs Study, 2021*

## Household Status of the Nones

There is a difference between marital status and household status. Many unmarried people live in households with roommates or partners. For example, someone could be a one-person “family” in a multi-person household.

The Nones are far less likely to live with at least one other relative

**77% vs. 92%**

and nearly three times more likely to live with others unrelated to them compared to Practicing Christians

**23% vs. 8%**

The fact that 23% of the Nones who don’t live alone, live with a roommate or partner instead of with a related person, suggests that the Nones are less oriented to family, at least in terms of their living arrangements.

One in five of the Nones

**22%** live in one-person households

VS. ....

**16%** of Practicing Christians

And significantly fewer of the Nones live in two-person households

**41%** live in two-person households

VS. ....

**46%** of Practicing Christians



## The Nones by Race

Practicing Christians in America are

**86%** White

**8%** Black

**3%** Asian

**4%** Other

In contrast, the Nones include significantly fewer

**80%** White

Nones are

**5%** Black

which is significantly below the national figure of

**12%**

and also lower than the Practicing Christian figure of

**8%**

Both groups, Practicing Christians and the Nones, have a slightly larger percentage of Whites than the national figure of

**79%**

For one thing, these statistics suggest the Church is more central to African American culture than it is to White American culture.

The most significant breakout here is that the Nones are

**10%** Asian

seven percentage points higher than Practicing Christians and four percentage points over the national figure. This indicates that many younger Asians have quietly rejected the traditional religions of their parents and turned either to Christianity or to no religion.

Note that for the American Beliefs Study, Hispanics were sorted between the White and Black categories. "Hispanic" is an ethnic and cultural category, but technically not a racial category. Some surveys will ask questions of both race and ethnicity; this Study did not.



## The Nones by Level of Education

Despite assumptions to the contrary, there is hardly any difference in the level of educational attainment between the Nones and Practicing Christians. The chart below reflects the highest level of education among these respondent groups.

The only category with a significant difference was Master's degree, with a five-percentage-point gap between

the two groups, and Practicing Christians at the higher level.

It is simply not true that nonreligious people tend to be more highly educated than active Christians. It's not true that among the country's intellectuals (as measured by education) there are more people who forsake religion or who do not believe. Nor is it true that Christian faith is more

prevalent among the less-educated. Practicing Christians and Nones are distributed very evenly among all levels of educational attainment. If there is any slight exception, it favors Practicing Christians as being more highly-educated.

Educational Attainment	Nones	Practicing Christians
High school education only	13%	11%
Some college, university, or trade school	17%	16%
Associate's degree	9%	9%
Bachelor's degree	34%	34%
Master's degree	15%	20%
Doctoral or professional degree	5%	4%

## What Are the Nones Concerned About?

The Nones may not see religion as the answer to their problems, but that does not mean they don't have problems. They still have concerns in their lives. What is going on in the hearts and minds of people who don't affiliate with any faith? What are they thinking about, and what are they stressed about? These are important questions for any Christian ministry that wants to reach out and try to meet the Nones at their points of felt need.

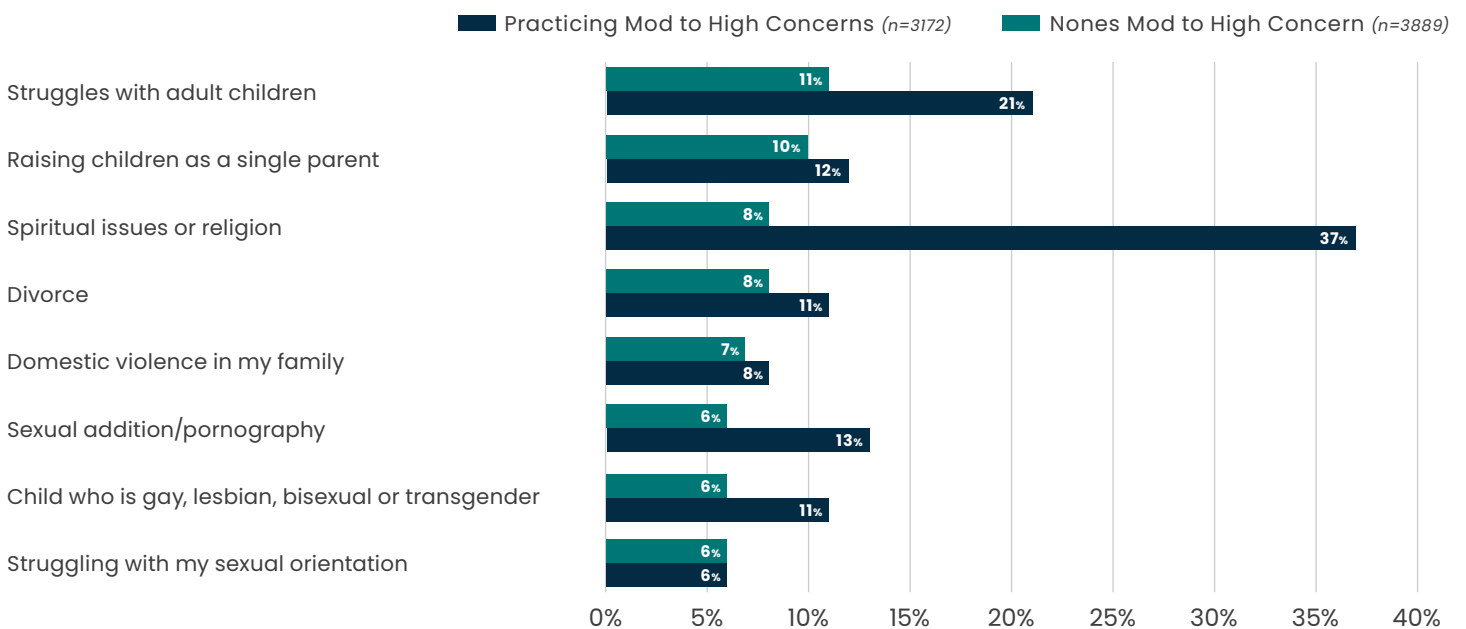
The American Beliefs Study provides helpful data on this. Participants rated their concern, or lack of it, about 44 life issues, on a five-point scale. [See Figure 7.4]

To the right are the eight items of least concern to the Nones. Fewer than one in eight of the Nones rated these areas as being of "Escalating Concern" or "Highest Concern."

- Struggles with adult children
- Raising children as a single parent
- Spiritual issues/religion
- Divorce
- Domestic violence in my family
- Sexual addiction/pornography
- Child who is gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender
- Struggling with my sexual orientation

— FIGURE 7.4

### THE NONES ARE LEAST CONCERNED IN AREAS OF FAMILY AND SEXUALITY



Percentage of the Nones and Practicing Christians expressing escalating or high concern American Beliefs Study, 2021

## What Are the Nones Concerned About?

The fact that non-believing Nones were unconcerned with spiritual issues or religion makes sense. All the other items of least concern were related to family or sexuality. Could it be that seven in eight Nones feel at peace about these areas in their lives? These findings suggest that few of the Nones feel conflicted over their sexual orientation, their use of pornography, their divorce, or other matters in these areas.

In Figure 7.4 above, it is striking that Practicing Christians are more concerned about most issues of family and sexuality than the Nones

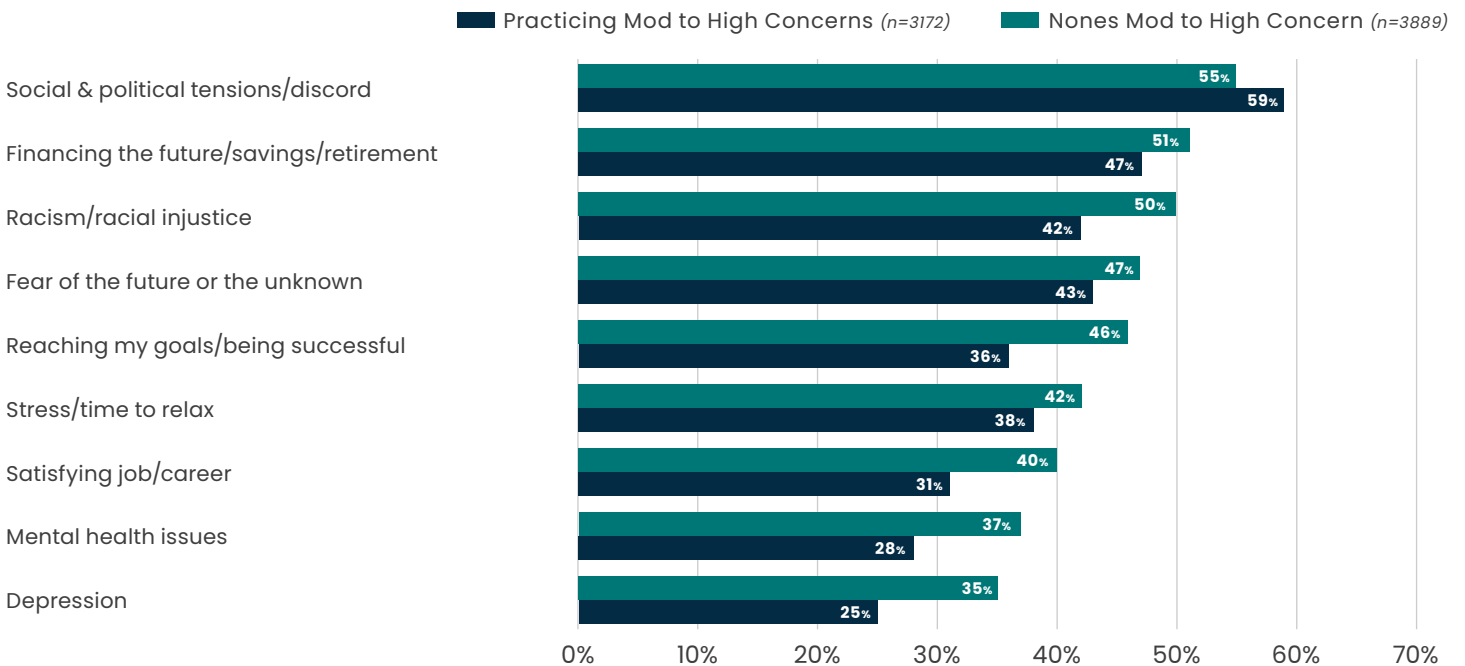
are. Does having a moral compass magnetized to biblical values heighten the concerns that Practicing Christians have in these areas? American society has plainly moved away from traditional biblical morality over the last half century. Untethered from those traditional values, it appears that the Nones are significantly less likely than Practicing Christians to feel concern in these areas. [See Figure 7.5]

In contrast, to the right are the seven items of greatest concern to the Nones. Over 40% of the Nones rated these as being of “Escalating Concern” or “Highest Concern.”

- Social & political tensions/discord
- Financing the future/savings/retirement
- Racism/racial injustice
- Fear of the future or the unknown
- Reaching my goals/being successful
- Stress/Time to relax
- Satisfying job/career
- Mental Health Issues
- Depression

— FIGURE 7.5

### THE NONES MORE CONCERNED ABOUT PERSONAL GOALS, MENTAL HEALTH



Percentage of the Nones and Practicing Christians expressing escalating or high concern American Beliefs Study, 2021

## What Are the Nones Concerned About?

Many of the Nones are concerned about social tensions, the future, success in life, stress, satisfying careers, mental health, and depression. These topics suggest outreach opportunities that might prove fruitful.

When it was fielding in 2021, the Study reflected a time of acute political polarization and strife. In that context it is unsurprising that both Practicing Christians and the Nones were burdened by social discord and racism or injustice. However, we do see the Nones as being significantly more concerned in this area than Practicing Christians.

While those results likely tie into the civil unrest of that time, many other top concerns among the Nones centered on personal fulfillment. This is not necessarily a disparaging observation. To some degree, most people 'look out for Number One.' But it is telling that Practicing Christians were typically far less concerned about the areas of personal fulfillment in life than the Nones.

Jesus' teachings offer the world a very different set of ideas about what a successful life looks like. It may be that this allows Christians to feel a greater measure of peace on this topic, though it was an area

of concern for both groups. Could this disparity between these groups reflect a greater sense of assurance about the future, and a greater focus on others over self, among Practicing Christians? We might hope so. Could the higher levels of concern in these areas expressed by the Nones show a higher tendency toward narcissism? It wouldn't be surprising, considering that American society is built on an archetype of individualism and personal freedom.

Another notable observation is that roughly four in ten Practicing Christians and the Nones alike feel concerned about stress and time to relax. This result comes at a time when Americans have more free time than ever before. Per Statista.com, the average U.S. employee on private, nonfarm payrolls now works 34.4 hours per week. And these two groups – Practicing Christians and Nones – are fairly close in their desire for less stress and more free time, despite the fact that a greater share of Practicing Christians are older and retired. The only conclusion is that more time for rest does not equal less stress for many Americans.

As for concerns over mental health issues and depression, this result does not suggest that any group

has a higher level of mental illness or depression than another. Certainly, there are many Christians, as well as many Nones, who suffer from mental illnesses, including depression. But the Study clearly shows that the Nones have a significantly higher level of concern about these areas than Practicing Christians do. The obvious implication from these findings is that Christian faith and practice makes a positive difference.

**From the Nones' perspective, one of the most attractive things the gospel might offer is a path to peace and contentment about the difficult things in life.**

There is a common thread in these results related to peace or contentment. More of the Nones rate the various stressful circumstances of life as of higher concern, compared to Practicing Christians. From the Christian perspective, there are many things the gospel has to offer the Nones, including salvation, forgiveness, and the truth of God. But from the Nones' perspective, one of the most attractive things the gospel might offer is a path to peace and contentment about the difficult things that all Americans face in life.

## How Do the Nones Feel About Issues in American Society?

Participants in the American Beliefs Study rated their level of agreement with a list of 25 statements about social and political issues. Figures 7.6 and 7.7 show the percentage of the Nones and Practicing Christians who ‘Somewhat’ or ‘Strongly’ agreed with each statement. Here is where Practicing Christians and Nones

show the greatest differences from each other.

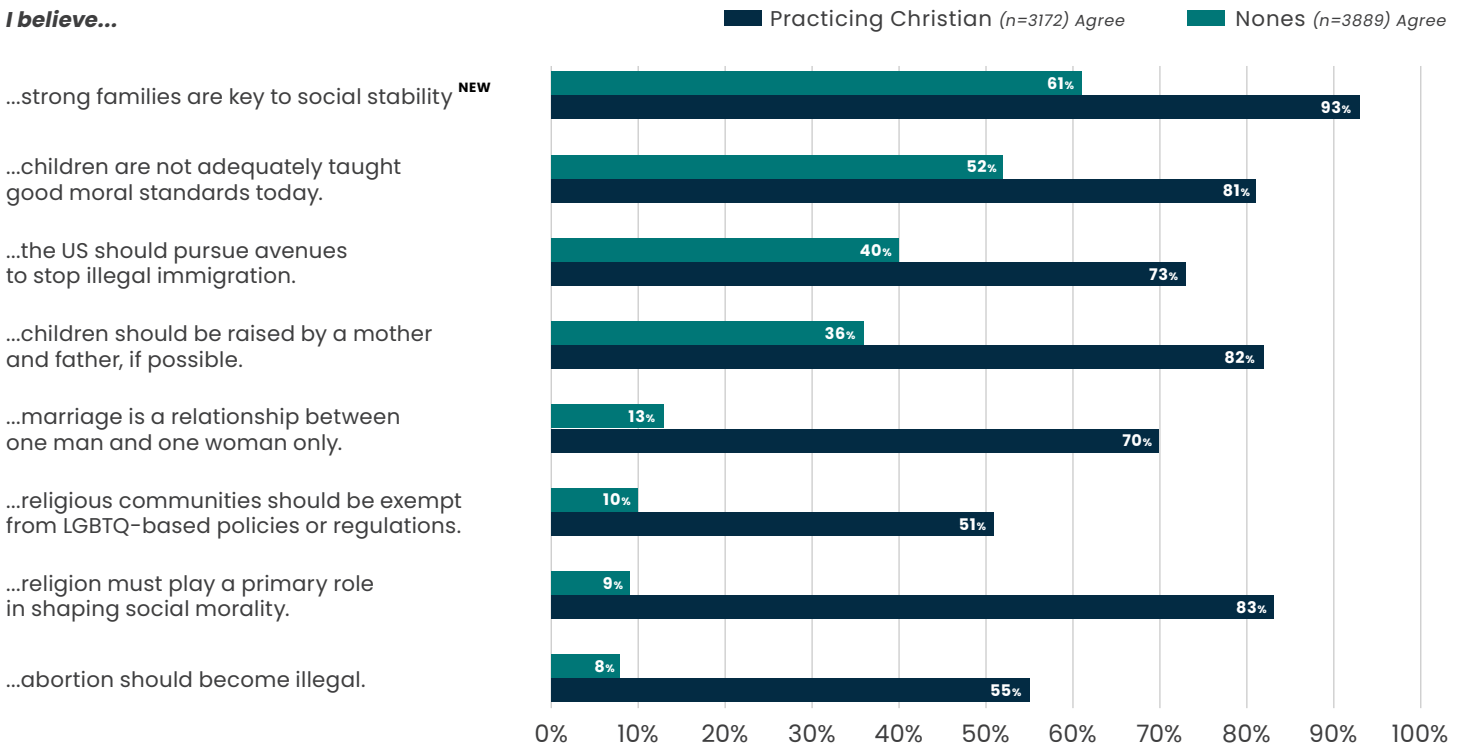
The largest gap between the two groups was with the statement, “I believe religion must play a primary role in shaping social morality.” 83% of Practicing Christians agreed vs. only 9% of the Nones, a yawning

gap of 74 percentage points. It might seem that by definition, if a person has no religion, they would not like to see religion play a role in shaping the morals of society. But the level of response could have leaned in a different direction. A small percentage (9%) of the Nones, though not religious themselves,

— FIGURE 7.6

### SOCIAL POSITIONS PRACTICING CHRISTIANS SUPPORT MUCH MORE STRONGLY THAN THE NONES

*I believe...*



Agreement among 3,172 Practicing Christians and 3,889 of the Nones. Statements edited for brevity. American Beliefs Study, 2021

## How Do the Nones Feel About Issues in American Society?

evidently saw religion as a positive and helpful force in society. 25% of the Nones were neutral on this statement, and more than two in three (67%) disagreed. This suggests that a large majority of the Nones pretty much want religion to stay out of the social/political discourse, or to stay away from influencing the social norms of American society.

**Many social issues that are highly important to Practicing Christians are less important to the Nones. And vice versa.**

Seven other statements show a huge gulf between Practicing Christians and the Nones. On these, Practicing Christians affirmed them at a level anywhere from 32 to 57 percentage points higher. This list includes several topics that are great social/political battlefields in America today.

- I believe marriage is a relationship between one man and one woman only. (57% gap)
- I believe children should be raised by a mother and father, if possible. (47% gap)
- I believe abortion should become illegal. (47% gap)

- I believe religious communities should be exempt from LGBTQ-based policies or regulations. (40% gap)
- I believe the US should pursue avenues to stop illegal immigration. (34% gap)
- I believe strong families are key to social stability. (32% gap)
- I believe children are not adequately taught good moral standards today. (29% gap)

On the opposite end of the spectrum are the issues below, where the level of agreement was much higher among the Nones than among Practicing Christians. Again, these tend to be hot topics in the national conversation.

- I believe same-sex marriage must remain legal and protected. (43% gap)
- I believe asking the rich to pay a higher tax rate is a way to establish economic justice. (23% gap)
- I believe the science that says humans are affecting the climate of the planet (i.e. climate change). (22% gap)

- I believe we must be good stewards of the environment even if it means restricting natural resource (16% gap)
- I believe our society must give more attention to accomplishing economic justice. (14% gap)
- I believe we need to promote sensible gun laws to reduce gun violence. (12% gap)
- I believe a form of amnesty is needed for illegal immigrants who have been living & working here (12% gap)
- I believe tolerance is necessary for social peace and wellbeing. (7% gap)

Among the 25 statements on social and political positions, only two scored an agreement gap of less than 10%. One was about the necessity of tolerance for peace and wellbeing in society. The other, with a relatively tiny (but still significant) gap, was about the US losing its place in world leadership. Interestingly, that second statement earned the most agreement and was the only one that the Nones and Practicing Christians came together on.

## How Do the Nones Feel About Issues in American Society?

**For many Nones, plugging into a church could seem to require not just a change in beliefs about God and spiritual reality, but defecting to an opposing social/political tribe.**

We live in a politically-polarized country. Most Practicing Christians land on the conservative side of the divide, and most of the Nones land

on the liberal side. This presents a big problem for churches that want to reach out to the Nones. Far too often, both conservatives and liberals see the other side as not just disagreeable, but also dangerous, hateful, and even evil.

How then must the Church respond? With Christ as an example, the response must be to love those

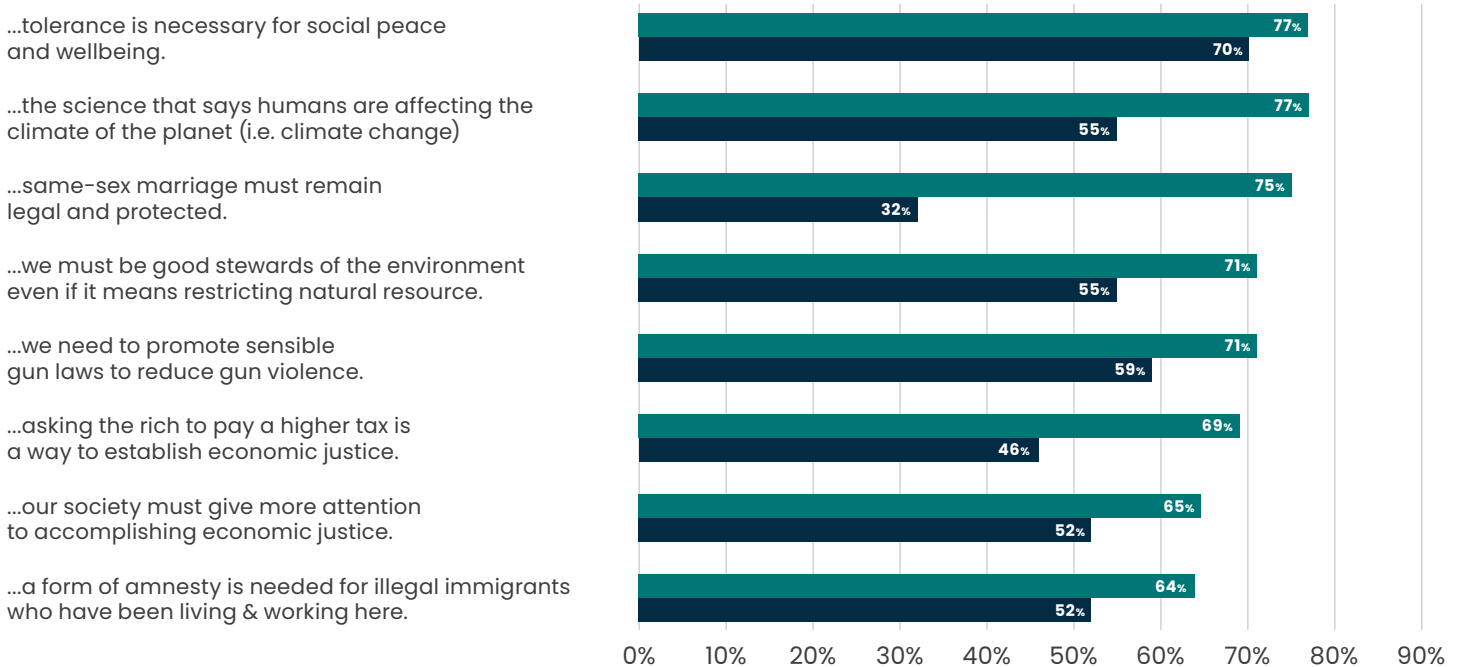
who persecute the Church ever more deeply, accepting that they do not know what they are doing. Some would say the best way to demonstrate that love is to carefully listen to and understand those who oppose the Church, which is the ultimate purpose of this report and subsequent reports in this series.

— FIGURE 7.7

### SOCIAL POSITIONS THE NONES SUPPORT MUCH MORE STRONGLY THAN PRACTICING CHRISTIANS

*I believe...*

■ Practicing Christian (n=3172) Agree ■ Nones (n=3889) Agree



Agreement among 3,172 Practicing Christians and 3,889 of the Nones. Statements edited for brevity. American Beliefs Study, 2021

## How Do the Nones Feel About Issues in American Society?

### Denominational Defection

Of the participants in the American Beliefs Study who said they have no religion, 81% of them said they were Nones ten years before as well. The other 19% were members of some other faith before, but at some time in the past decade – maybe suddenly, probably gradually – they left their religion for no religion. Where did they come from?

Again looking back to 2011, 69% of the American population

ten years ago self-identified as “Christian,” including Catholics, Protestants and Orthodox.

The American Beliefs Study asked all respondents if they identified with any faith ten years prior, and if so, what that faith was. Those who said they used to be Christian but now did not affiliate with any faith, are the ones who shifted into the Nones.

This line of questioning allowed the researchers to see which denominations contributed most

to the Nones. The following list presents the top 20 denominations that contributed to the Nones. Together they represent 93.6% of the Nones that defected from Christianity. Those toward the top of the list are among the largest denominations in America, so it makes sense that a larger proportion of Nones would come from them. [See chart below]

Denomination	Reported 10-yr Departure %	Current Share of US Christians	Departure Index
Roman Catholic Church	34.5%	32.3%	107
Non-denominational/Independent	12.5%	14.3%	87
Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)	8.1%	4.6%	176
United Methodist Church	7.7%	7.5%	103
All Others	6.4%	8.4%	76
American Baptist Churches/ USA	6.2%	5.9%	105
Southern Baptist Convention	4.3%	4.6%	93
Pentecostal/Charismatic	3.0%	1.9%	158
Lutheran Church, Missouri Synod	2.9%	3.8%	76
United Church of Christ	2.1%	2.3%	91
Presbyterian Church (USA)	1.9%	3.5%	54
Orthodox Christian	1.8%	1.6%	113

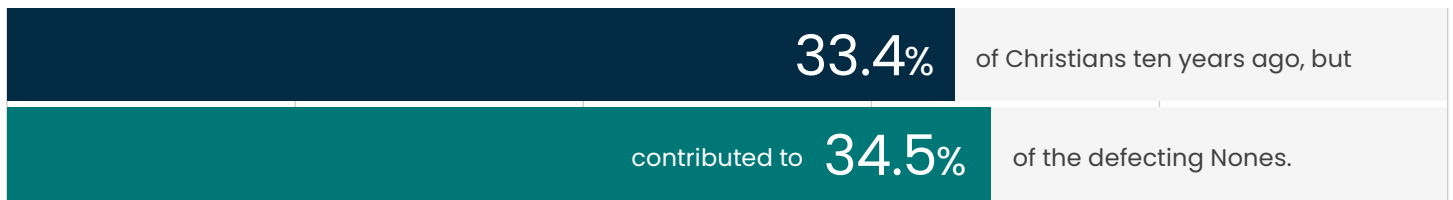


## How Do the Nones Feel About Issues in American Society?

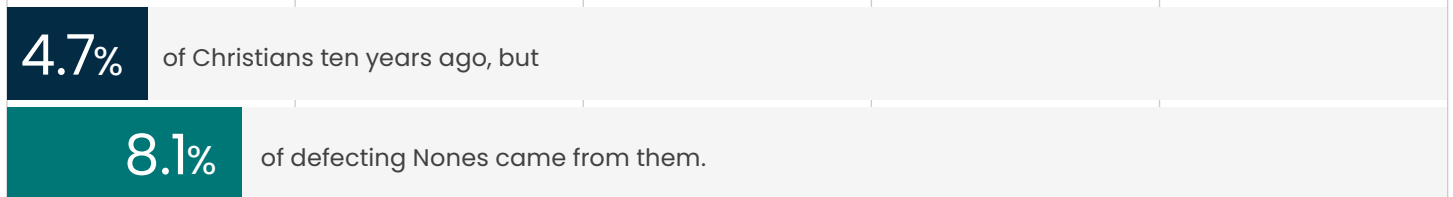
For the most part, each denomination's percentage of contribution to the Nones is close to their percentage of the national Christian population. There are, however, a few disproportionate contributions. [See chart below]

There is a slight trend that more-liberal denominations lost more to the Nones than more-conservative denominations, but it is only slight. Church members of all kinds, from all traditions, left their Christian faith for no faith.

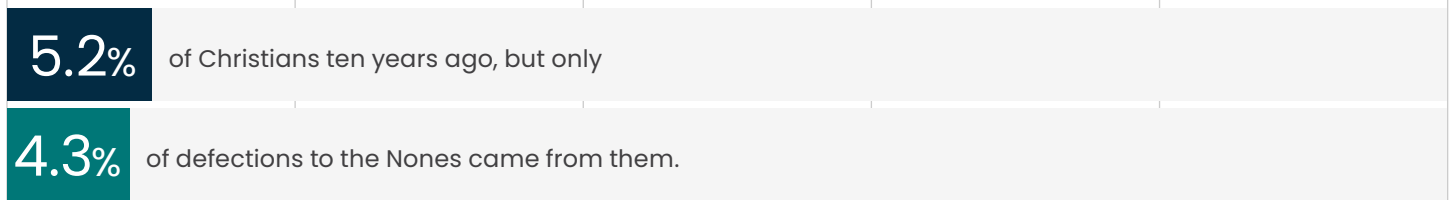
ROMAN CATHOLICS were



The CHRISTIAN CHURCH (Disciples of Christ) were



The SOUTHERN BAPTISTS were



## Intro | Nones and Dones

The Nones, those with no religious affiliation, are people who might say, “I’m just not a religious person,” or, “I don’t have a religion.” The American Beliefs Study, from a carefully-designed, representative sample of 15,000 Americans, found that 27% counted themselves as among the Nones. Specifically, when asked what they considered their religious tradition to be, they checked the box for “None/No Religious Preference.” This is a large and growing sector of the American religious landscape. Findings from the Study allow churches and Christian leaders to understand the Nones and suggest ways that might be wise and fruitful for inviting the Nones to church and faith.

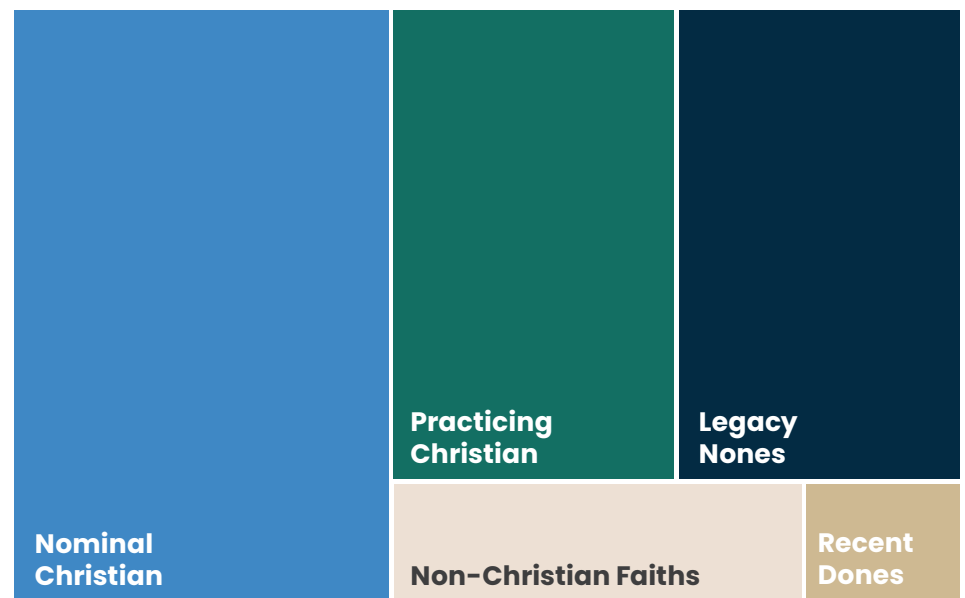
As early as 2015, Christianity Today published articles that split the Nones into two subgroups which they called **True Nones**, who never had experienced any faith relationship, and **Dones**, who had walked away from their religious communities.

The American Beliefs Study asked people if they were active in a religious community now, and if they were ten years ago. Our researchers have chosen to call anyone who left their faith community in the last ten years **Recent Dones**. What of those who have no religious faith now and who also had no religious faith ten years ago? Some of them left a faith community more than ten years ago – like 15, or 25, or 55 years ago; others had never experienced spiritual connection in their whole

lives. Our researchers have chosen to call this group **Legacy Nones**. *In this context, the Nones are made up of Legacy Nones and Recent Dones.*

Earlier Reports in this series have described the important distinction between Practicing Christians and Nominal Christians. Combining that perspective with the distinction between Recent Dones and Legacy Nones allows for a unique understanding of America’s religious populations, as shown in Figure 8.1.

— FIGURE 8.1  
**AMERICA’S FAITH LANDSCAPE**



Population proportions among 14,942 Americans  
American Beliefs Study, 2021

## Recent Dones

As noted, one question in the American Beliefs Study asked Americans whether they were active in a religious congregation or other religious community now, and also if they were active ten years ago. Figure 8.2 shows responses from both Practicing Christians and Nones. (See Figure 8.2)

About one in eight of the Nones answered they were active 10 years ago (13%), and two percent answered they were active presently. This two percent is interesting because it shows there are some people who see themselves as having no religion but who still participate in a religious community of some kind – likely for some non-spiritual reason. Beyond that very small two percent, most of the Nones are not active in a church or religious community of any kind.

The 13% who stopped attending a religious congregation in the past 10 years are Recent Dones. While many Nones have been Nones all their lives, and many have been Nones for a long time, this 13% made the shift from religion to non-religion in just the past 10 years. Given the COVID-19 pandemic, and other evidence of falling church attendance since fielding the Study,

it's extremely likely that this exodus from congregational attendance continues to happen today and may have accelerated.

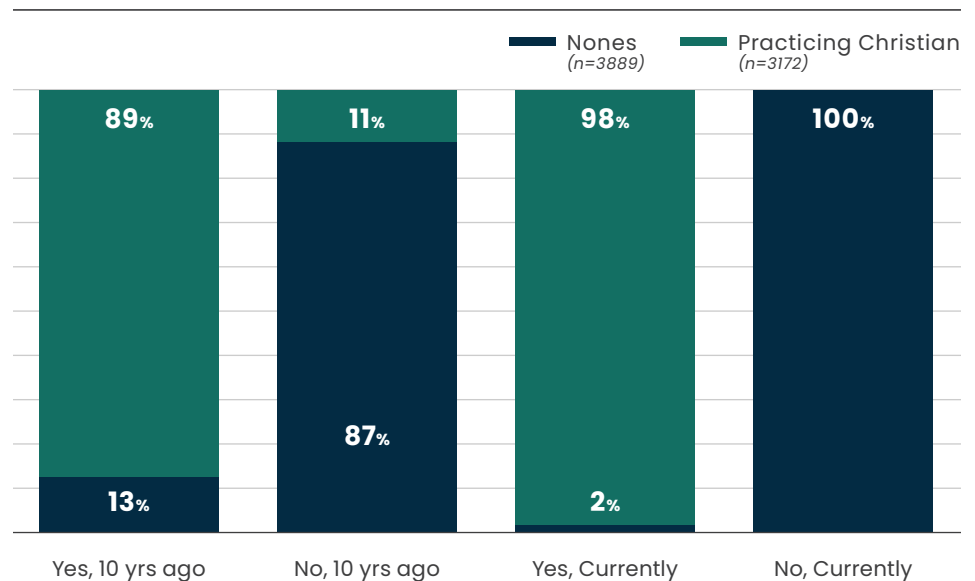
### The American exodus from religion is current and active.

It's also clear that a significant, though smaller, percentage of Practicing Christians (11%) began attending a religious congregation within the past 10 years. While some may have shifted from being Nominal Christians to Practicing Christians, it's likely that some were

converts from another religion or no religion. We live in a time in American religious history when people are on the move, both from religion to non-religion, and from inactive faith, another faith, or no faith to active Christian belief and practice. Though the strongest growth is toward the Nones, movement is happening in both directions.

— FIGURE 8.2

### TEN-YEAR MIGRATION INTO AND OUT OF THE CHURCH



Percent of responses to the question, "Are you currently active in a religious congregation or other religious community," and "Were you active ... 10 years ago?" American Beliefs Study, 2021

## Do the Nones Even Care About Religion?

Most don't, but nearly three in ten do. A question in the American Beliefs Study measured how significant, or important, participants considered religious faith to be in their lives. Christians tend to understand that all the most important questions of life have to do with the God who created us and how we relate to God. While about three in four of the Nones don't see life that way, there are 13% who say religious faith is moderately significant or better, and another 15% who recognize it has minor significance in their lives. It may be that they hold no religious affiliation, and do not participate in religious activities, but still think in religious ways about God, ultimate reality, and the big questions of life. They

see religion as at least somewhat important. They have no religion but it's still a topic they care about and count as personally significant. Nearly three in ten Nones are likely more open to discussing important life questions than many of their fellow Nones. (See Figure 8.3)

Notably, the Nones are generally moving further away from seeing religious faith as significant in their lives. The share of them who said it had "No significance" rose by 12 percentage points, from 61% ten years ago to 73% at the time of the survey. In line with that, 20% said religion had "Moderate," "Considerable," or "Utmost Significance" 10 years ago. That group shrank to 13% at the time of the survey.

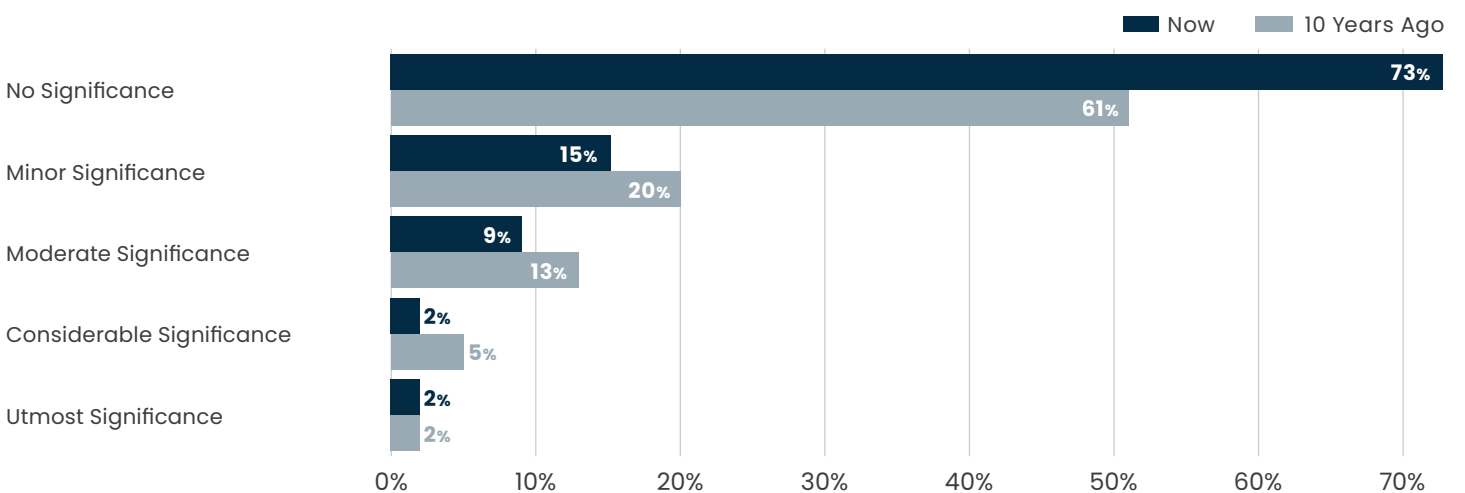
How Nones feel about the significance, relevance, or importance of religion in their lives is not static. In general they are moving away, caring less and less about religious faith over time.

The fact that most Nones see religious faith as being of "No significance" personally presents a great challenge to any church that believes the gospel of Jesus Christ is for everyone. What factors, if any, might lead the Nones to recognize that religion generally, and Christian faith specifically, is important, relevant, helpful, or even essential?

Thankfully, some of the answers from the American Beliefs Study help address this question.

— FIGURE 8.3

### SOME NONES STILL SEE RELIGIOUS FAITH AS HAVING SIGNIFICANCE



Percent of responses from 3,889 Nones to the question, "What role has religious faith played in your life? Please indicate the level of significance NOW and 10 years ago." American Beliefs Study, 2021

## Why the Nones Stay Away

As noted earlier, 98% of the Nones said they were not active in a religious congregation or community. This 98% then answered another question that basically asked, “Why?” These Nones rated 25 issues to indicate which had most influenced them to stay away from or leave a church or a religious community. Their responses give insight into how the Nones think and feel about church, and about various wedge issues in church life and ministry. (See Figure 8.4)

### Low-Scoring Areas Refute Common Misconceptions

Why do many Nones shy away from engaging in religious congregations? The Study findings dispel some misconceptions commonly held by Christian leaders.

- Only a few Nones felt the church “Wasn’t supportive during a crisis or time of need,” which is reassuring. Just nine percent of Nones overall (and 20% of Recent Dones) named this as a major factor. It would be discouraging if a higher share of Nones chose to leave church because of how the faith community failed them when they needed help.
- Most Nones didn’t get out of the habit of attending church or a religious community because they moved to a new area (only four percent marked this as very significant), or because they couldn’t find the right kind of faith community in their area (only nine percent marked that).
- Many churches and congregations, all over the country, have experienced disagreement and strife over the style of worship or music. How much have those problems driven people away, into the Nones category? Only seven percent of the Nones noted the “worship wars” as a significant factor for them. People may change churches over this issue, but not many leave church for good.
- Similarly, there may be many parishioners who become unhappy with their church or denomination shifting away from traditional values, standards, or norms, but it seems this factor is more likely to drive people from one church to another than to drive them away from church altogether. Only seven percent of the Nones in the Study marked this as a significant factor leading them to not participate in a church or religious congregation.
- Also scoring low: “Demands of raising children” (6%); “Didn’t develop friendships” (6%); “Didn’t have opportunity to serve/use skills” (5%); and “Didn’t have desired children’s/youth programs” (5%).
- Certainly it’s a good thing to invite people to church, but if someone says, “They don’t come because no one has ever invited them,” that’s a misconception, according to the findings of this Study. The Nones gave the lowest score of all (3%) to the factor, “Never been invited.”

### The Highest-Scoring Wedge Issue: Distrust

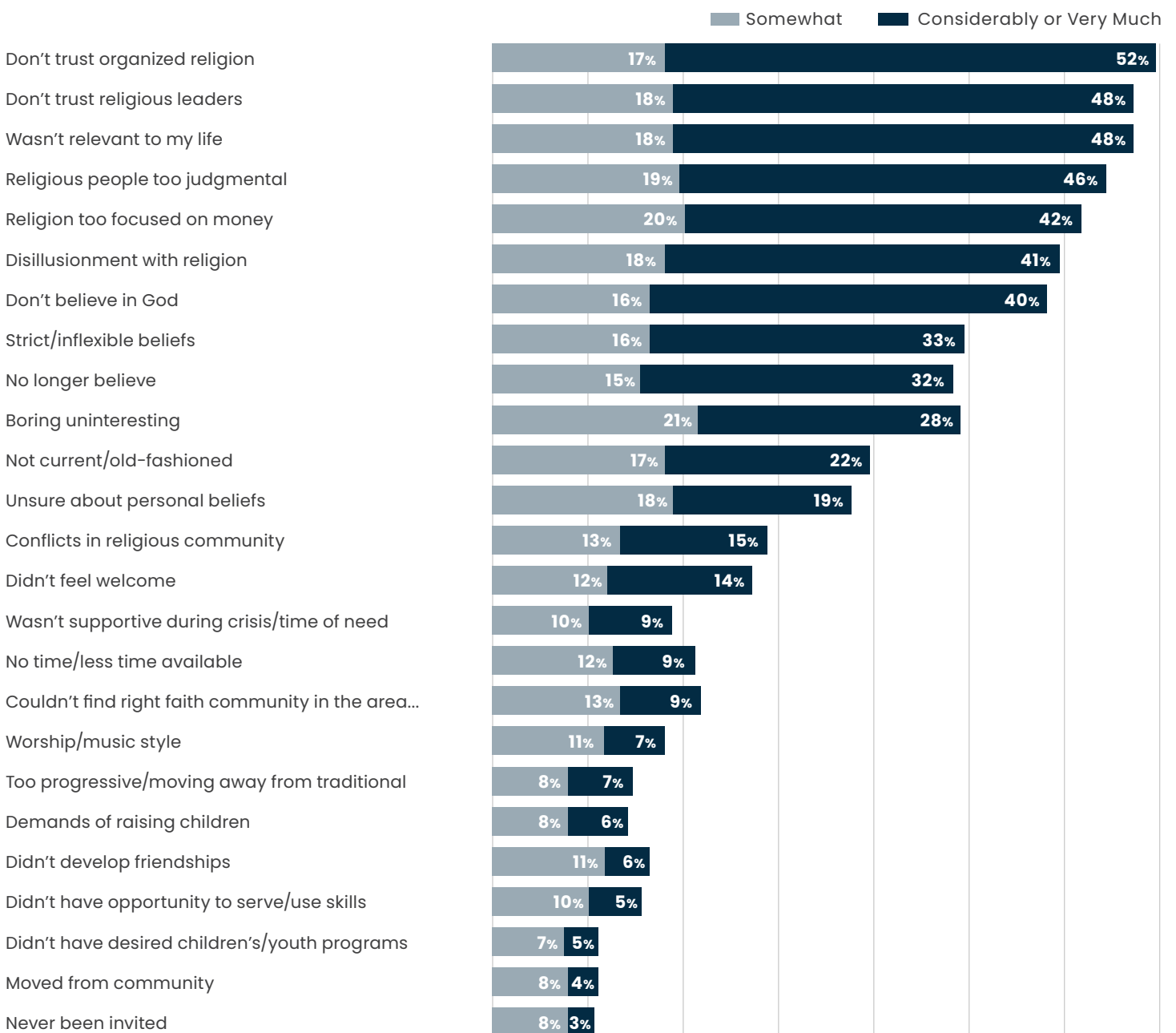
At the other end of the spectrum are the factors that stood out as the reasons most strongly driving decisions among the Nones’ to stay away from churches or religious communities.

For the Nones, the top item on the list, marked most often as “Considerably” or “Very much” influencing them to stay away from church, was “Don’t trust organized religion,” at 52%. More than half of the Nones singled out this from the 25 factors available. A similar theme holds true in the factor tied for second place at 48%, “Don’t trust religious leaders.”

## Why the Nones Stay Away

— FIGURE 8.4

### A KEY WEDGE ISSUE AMONG NONES: TRUST



Percent of top-two responses among 3,889 Nones to "How much did each of these items influence your reasons for not participating in a religious congregation or community?" American Beliefs Study, 2021

## Why the Nones Stay Away

It's hard to measure the extent to which this perception by the Nones is fair or not. Are the religious organizations they have encountered really deserving of such mistrust? Have the religious leaders they have known really earned such mistrust, through mean or thoughtless deeds or actions? It's very possible that these responses reflect broader cultural stereotypes more than specific, personal experiences. Either way, religious organizations and religious leaders face a real problem here.

**Whether deserved or not, half of the Nones see religious communities and their leadership as untrustworthy. It's the biggest single factor keeping them away, according to their own self-reporting.**

There is no easy solution for the problem of distrust, whether that's not trusting organized religion or not trusting religious leaders. One way to address this might be for Churches and religious leaders to try and send an alternative set of messages into the culture, or at least into their local communities.

They could attempt a frontal attack, by saying "You're wrong! Organized religion is good and valuable! It has

proven itself to be trustworthy for all these reasons...!" This is not likely to be effective, since the Nones' perceptions are likely just that—perceptions—rather than conclusions drawn from a responsible examination of facts. It's not a battle between one set of facts and another, in a reasoned discourse. Nor are the Nones likely to listen much to sources they already distrust.

Another way that many churches, and many American religious movements, have dealt with this problem is to try and distinguish themselves as different. They put out a message along the lines of, "We're not like those other churches. We're unique." Or they suggest that "Our minister is not like those others." So maybe the Nones distrust organized religion, but an individual congregation can try to position itself as separate from that larger, distrusted, group. But this could backfire by affirming the view that Christians are judgmental and prone to conflict within our communities. After all, if we're willing to turn on other Christians and judge them as being 'different,' what would keep us from doing the same to guests in our church or parish?

Jesus himself showed us ways to build trust in hostile situations.

Though he was one with the Father, a holy, all-knowing, and eternal God, he consistently showed humility, empathy, and understanding to the people he met. He told stories and asked questions, allowing people to discover the truth, gently guiding them to it, even though he had all the answers. Jesus led with love and built trust on a personal level.

**People of faith leading with love to build relationships with Nones and Dones is likely to be more effective than any other messaging strategy.**

### The Relevance Gap

Almost half of the respondents, 48%, said they saw religious faith not being "relevant to my life" as a wedge issue. This is consistent with the findings shown in Figure 8.3, where 73% of the Nones admitted religious faith had "no significance" in their lives. The concepts of religion as being relevant, significant, or important cluster together. *If people don't see religion as relevant, they won't engage with it in a way that allows it to become significant or important in their lives.*

## Why the Nones Stay Away

What might lead people to shift their perception of how relevant religious faith is for them personally? Some Christian teachers are particularly gifted in presenting practical, life-oriented messages that help people connect their life needs and heart desires with what Jesus and faith have to offer. That's one approach.

**Sometimes a shift in perceived relevance comes through genuine, dynamic spiritual experience.**

In some cases, a person who has been far from God has an experience that suddenly makes God very real to them. In other cases, a person who has been far from God hears a story of someone else's encounter with God that they can relate to and begins a gradual transition toward faith. It can be life-changing when a person hears the story of someone "just like me" whom God has transformed. Churches that find times and ways for the sharing of personal testimonies can find them powerful and effective.

### Those Who Don't Believe

Three items that scored in the top ten reasons for not engaging in church are similar: 41% cited their "Disillusionment with religion," 40% said they "Don't believe in God," and 32% said they "No longer believe." These descriptions are revealing because they help describe the state of mind among the Nones. It is important to note that Nones could select multiple items to reflect their views, meaning that any one person could have checked all three of these items.

- Responses to the item "Disillusionment with religion" reflect a broader attitude that may or may not relate to any respondent's personal, negative experiences. Responses would likely have been different if the item was worded in a more personal way, such as "Disillusionment with my religious community." Instead, as with the trends of mistrust noted above, this response could reflect anti-religious influences from the culture that a respondent has taken on as their own.

- The 32% who said they "No longer believe" together with the 41% disillusionment figure are compelling statistics. The phrase "No longer believe" belies the fact that anyone who selected it believed at some point before, including the 13% who became Recent Dones (in the past ten years). Those in this group could also fall into the disillusioned group. All this raises the question of retention, of how to encourage those who take part in church life as children or youth to persevere in faith through the transition to young adulthood and maturity.
- It's important to recognize that *only 40% of the Nones indicated they "Don't believe in God."* This is a smaller percentage than what might be expected. There is an opening here: Nones and atheists are not the same, and most Nones are not atheists. To ask a person, "Do you believe in God?" can be a starting place. A majority of the Nones are likely to answer, "Yes," and the conversation can progress from there.



## Why the Nones Stay Away

• Another top-ten wedge issue was “Religious people are too judgmental.” This is not the same as a respondent who says, “I’ve been judged,” but it’s close. Again, their answers may have come from personal experiences or from internalizing societal influences. In either case, nobody likes feeling judged. The ways for a church to heal hurts arising from this wedge are to show love, grace, and a welcoming heart.

### Driving the Dones Away

The Study shows that 13% of Nones are Recent Dones who have left their church or congregation in the past ten years. These respondents told the American Beliefs Study about their unique experiences with faith communities – experiences that may have influenced their departures. (See Figure 8.5)

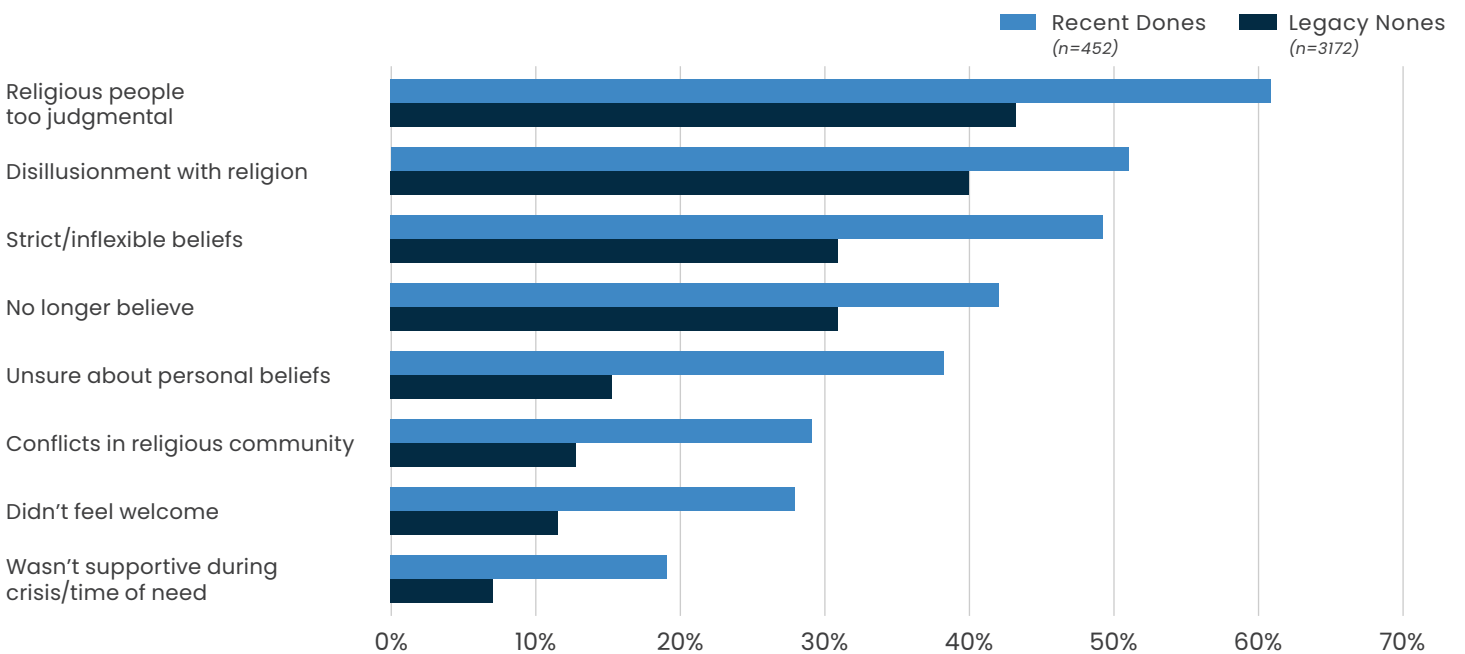
Sadly, many of the wedge issues that Recent Dones cited more than Legacy Nones suggest they felt pushed away from a community,

instead of drifting away. Taken together, the feelings that “religious people are too judgmental,” that there were “conflicts in the community,” that they “didn’t feel welcome” or that the community “wasn’t supportive during a crisis” lead to this possible conclusion.

Other than that, and perhaps even contributing to those feelings, Recent Dones more often felt disillusioned, no longer believed in God, felt unsure about what they believed, or felt that religious communities were strict or inflexible.

— FIGURE 8.5

### RECENT DONES FEEL STRONGER THAN LEGACY NONES ON SEVERAL WEDGE ISSUES



Percent of ‘considerably’ and ‘very much’ responses to the question, “How much did each of these items influence your reasons for not participating in a religious congregation or community?” American Beliefs Study, 2021

# Why the Nones Stay Away

## Wedge Factors by Generation

A large share of Nones would say that distrust, irrelevance and disillusion have kept them from a religious community. How does this vary by generation?

Nones in the **Silent generation** tended to say religion was not relevant to their lives

**55% vs. 48% overall** and that they didn't believe in God

**53% vs. 40% overall**

More than other generations, **Boomer** Nones saw these as wedge issues: mistrust for religious leaders

**52% vs. 48% overall** religious disillusionment

**51% vs. 41% overall** and churches' focus on money

**49% vs. 41% overall**

**Gen-X** Nones uniquely distanced themselves from religious communities because they mistrusted organized religion

**59% vs. 52% overall**

**Boomers and Millennials** were both more likely to not take part due to feeling that religious people are judgmental

**47% vs. 43%** or less from **Gen-X and Silents**

and by perceived conflicts within religious communities

**16% vs. 12-13%** for the other generations

Aside from the factors they share with Boomers listed above, **Millennials** felt driven away from taking part in communities of faith because they believed:

Religious communities held strict or inflexible beliefs

**35% vs. 33%** or less for older generations

Religious people were boring or uninteresting

**30% vs. 27%** or less for older generations

Religious communities were old-fashioned

**26% vs. 20%** or less for older generations

Unsure of their own beliefs

**25% vs. <15%** for older generations

Unwelcome in a religious community

**18% vs. 11%** for older generations

They didn't have the time

**12% vs. 8%** or less among their elders

## What Might Attract the Nones to Return?

The American Beliefs Study asked participants what they would look for in a new church or religious community if they were to move to a new town. Responses show what Americans want to see in a religious congregation, or what might attract them to one. This question gathered responses from everyone, not just from those who described themselves as active participants in a church or religious community. That allows for sorting out the Nones specifically, to see how they answered. The findings are both practical and hopeful, showing what in church life might be helpful, or not, in attracting Nones back to participation and to faith. (See Figure 8.6)

### Items of Little Interest to the Nones

From the list that was presented to survey participants, *two items tied for the lowest score by the Nones: "Celebration of sacraments" and "Bible or Scripture study/prayer groups," at 6% each.* These two items suggest two categories of responses, the first having to do with overtly-religious activities, and the second having to do with classes, groups, or programs that a church or religious community might offer.

Christians might see the celebration of the sacraments, or the Lord's Table, as the holiest moment in church life, the time of closest communion between the worshipper and God. Few of the Nones assigned value to it. Several other items that only a small percentage of the Nones marked are similar:

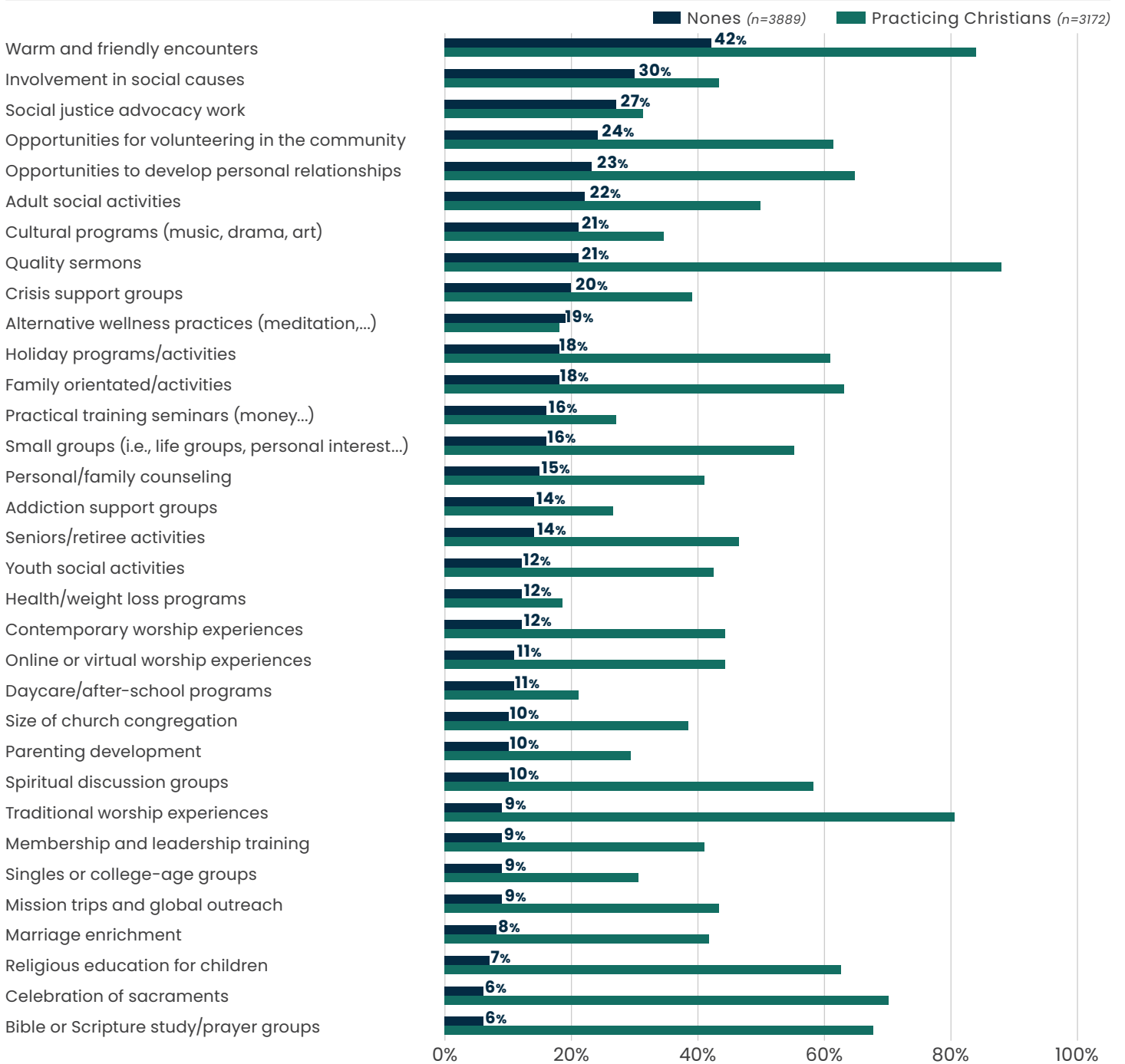


All these items, in one way or another, have to do with overtly spiritual or religious activities. The Nones expressed little interest in joining in the worship of God, whether that's traditional, contemporary, or online. They are not seeking small group experiences that center on studying the Bible, praying, or discussing spiritual truths. The Nones indicated they would not likely seek out a church or religious community because of a desire for their children to learn about religious faith. In general, if the Nones are interested in a religious congregation, they are not interested for the sake of religious faith itself. This is consistent with other results cited earlier, such as the finding that 73% of the Nones consider religious faith to be of "No significance" in their lives.

## What Might Attract the Nones to Return?

— FIGURE 8.6

### WHAT THE NONES WOULD LIKE TO SEE IN A CHURCH OR RELIGIOUS COMMUNITY



Percent of 'considerably' and 'very much' responses to the question, "How much did each of these items influence your reasons for not participating in a religious congregation or community?"  
 American Beliefs Study, 2021

## What Might Attract the Nones to Return?

### What the Nones Scored Most Highly

The highest score on this question was given to the response, “Warm and friendly encounters.” 42% of the Nones indicated this would be important to them if they were looking for a new church or religious community to join. It stands out, scoring 12 percentage points above the second-highest-scoring item. Two similar responses also scored in the top six: “Opportunities to develop personal relationships,” and “Adult social activities.”

*Most of the Nones are not looking for faith, but a large percentage of them are looking for community, for friendship, or for connection with other people. This provides a hopeful opportunity for churches or religious communities that want to serve and bless the Nones. To invite them to community and then introduce them to faith, would likely be a more effective approach than to invite them to faith and then introduce them to community.*

**The Nones are more likely to find community and then believe, than to believe and then find community.**

The three other items that scored in the top six are, “Involvement in social causes,” “Social justice advocacy work,” and “Opportunities for volunteering in the community.” *A church that is only internally-focused, only devoted to helping believers become better believers, is not likely to be attractive to most of the Nones.* The Study says that a church that devotes itself to making its community a better community, and the world a better world, is more likely to draw them in. Some churches already have a reputation for serving the homeless, or helping the disabled, or advocating for justice locally, nationally, or internationally. These churches would do well to recognize the opportunity they have to draw back to faith those who have abandoned it. Jesus said, “Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven” (Matthew 5:16 ESV). That could serve as a theme verse for religious communities that want to reach out effectively to the Nones. It seems the Nones respect deeds more than words.

### The Nones and Practicing Christians Are Looking for Different Things

Figure 8.6 shows responses from both the Nones and Practicing Christians. It’s organized according to the Nones’ responses, from the largest percentage of responses at the top to the lowest percentage at the bottom. Against this, the bars displaying results from Practicing Christians seem almost randomly scattered. The only clustering that is initially apparent is that the bottom three items for the Nones all scored quite high for Practicing Christians, all above 63%. In fact, the bottom three for the Nones were among the top seven for Practicing Christians. Practicing Christians put “Quality sermons” as their top item, with 89% indicating that is what they would look for when choosing a new church or religious community. In contrast, only 21% of the Nones chose that item, for a yawning gap of 68 percentage points.

From this, it would seem a church or religious community would have to decide whether to pursue the things that attract believers but repel unbelievers, or vice-versa. In fact, it’s not that stark.

## What Might Attract the Nones to Return?

These items ranked in the bottom 15 for both groups:

- Health/weight loss programs
- Daycare/after-school programs
- Size of church congregation
- Parenting development
- Membership and leadership training
- Singles or college-age groups
- Marriage enrichment

None of these are bad ideas, but the findings of this Study reveal that these sort of activities, programs, or factors are not what people are

especially looking for when they're considering a new church—and that's true both for Practicing Christians and the Nones.

These items ranked in the top 15 for both groups:

- Warm and friendly encounters
- Opportunities to develop personal relationships
- Adult social activities
- Quality sermons
- Holiday programs/activities
- Family oriented activities

“Warm and friendly encounters” deserves special mention. It was the second-highest-scoring item for

**Practicing Christians**

**85%**

**and the top item for the Nones**

**42%**

A welcoming, friendly, accepting atmosphere is attractive for both believers and unbelievers, for the faithful and those with no faith.



## What Might Attract the Nones to Return?

### Churches Have More Ways to Reach Millennial Nones

On average, Millennial Nones were 1.7 times more likely than Nones in older generations to say that a wide range of engagement areas could be important to them. These items appear in Figure 8.7, listed in descending order of top-two importance. (See Figure 8.7)

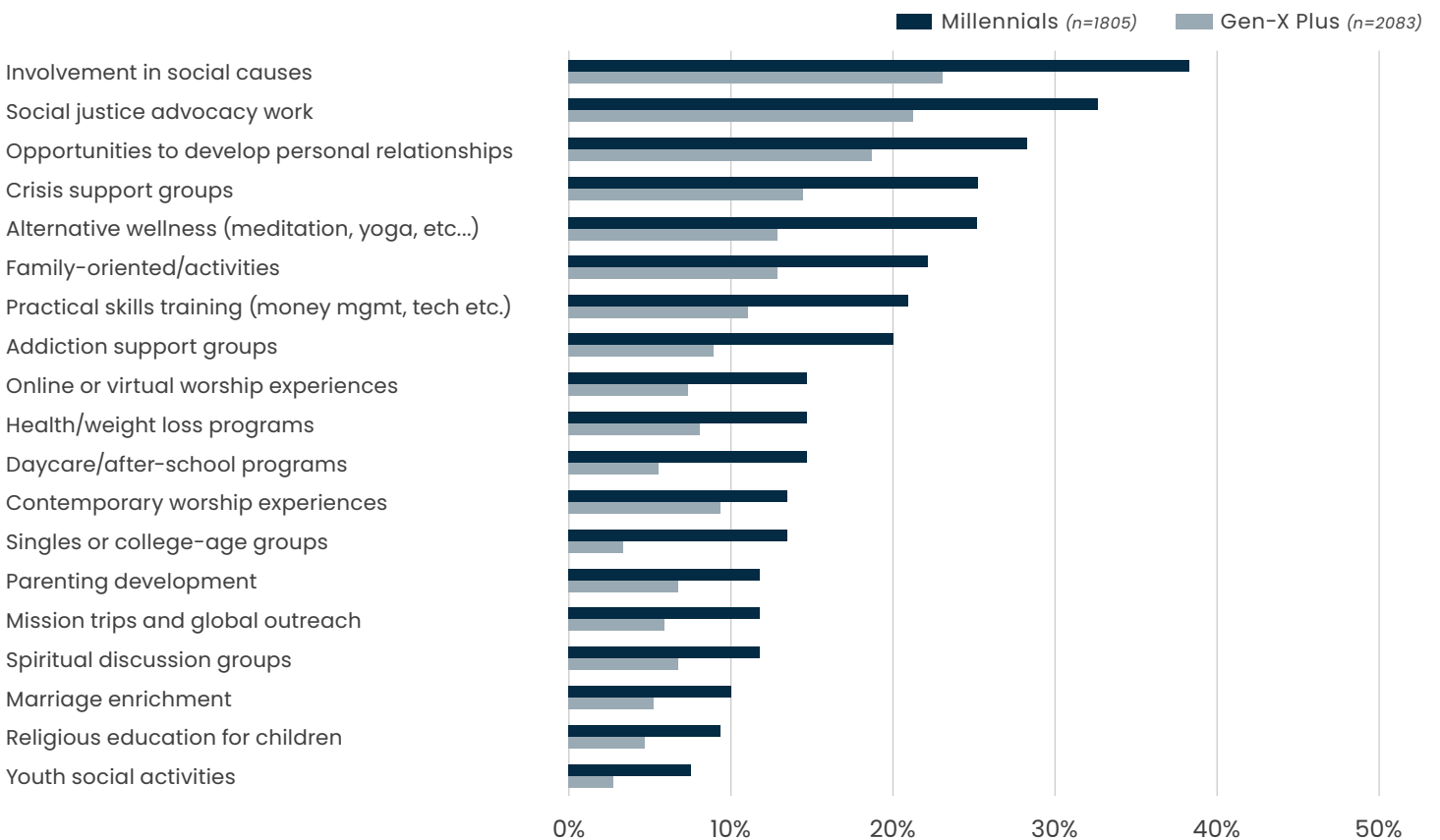
The only features of a religious community that Gen-X and older Americans considered to be more important or equally important compared to Millennials were:

- Seniors/retiree activities
- Traditional worship experiences
- Bible or Scripture study/prayer groups

This suggests that churches have an opportunity to engage with Millennial Nones in a far broader range of ways than might be possible for older Nones.

— FIGURE 8.7

### MILLENNIAL NONES SEE MANY REASONS FOR INVOLVEMENT AS MORE IMPORTANT THAN OLDER NONES



Percentage of "Somewhat" or "Very important" ratings to the question, "If you moved to a new part of the country and were looking for a religious congregation or community, please assign the related importance of each activity to you." American Beliefs Study, 2021

---

## Summary Highlights | Nones and Dones: a Crisis of Mistrust and Apathy

---

Many of the Nones have never had a religious faith, but 13% of them were active in a church or religious community 10 years ago. The exodus from faith is current.

Most of the Nones (73%) say that religious faith is of “No significance” to them. That is a high percentage, but it’s not 100%. Almost a third of Nones admit that matters of faith are at least somewhat interesting to them, and nearly six in ten admitted they still believe in God.

The top reason the Nones give for why they choose to not participate in a church or religious community is “Don’t trust organized religion.” A reason tied for second place is, “Don’t trust religious leaders.” Building trust is key to forming relationships. Relationships are key to aligning with a community of faith. Aligning with a religious community is key to belief and restoration.

The Nones who are willing to consider returning to participation in a church or religious community are especially looking for friendship and community, not for religious worship or instruction.

Though the Nones and Practicing Christians differ greatly in what they would look for in a new church or religious community, there are a number of things that both are interested in, and a number of things that both care little for. Many more opportunities exist for engaging younger unbelievers than exist for older Nones.



---

## Intro | The Nones

---

Everyone has religious beliefs. Even atheists have their opinions, or stake out their positions, on religious matters. Atheists believe there is no God, prayer is futile, there is no holy book, worship is senseless, and Jesus was just a man. Many Americans don't give a lot of thought to questions of spirituality or morality, or even consider them important. But even with that, to say, "Religion is not important," actually expresses a belief about religion.

The American Beliefs Study asked a carefully-designed, representative sample of 15,000 Americans about their beliefs and behaviors related to religion. The Study found that 27% of Americans count themselves among the Nones—people with no religious

affiliation—a large and growing sector of the society. In Report 7 of this series, we saw that the Nones are not all atheists. In fact a strong majority of the Nones can't put their finger on what they believe about a god or God.

Two questions in the Study asked all respondents, including the Nones, what they believed about God and Jesus. Their responses reveal important traits about the religious beliefs of the non-religious. This is helpful and useful for any church that cares about the spiritual condition of the Nones. The best way to know what the Nones believe is to ask them, and that's exactly what the American Beliefs Study did.

## The Nones and God: Much Uncertainty

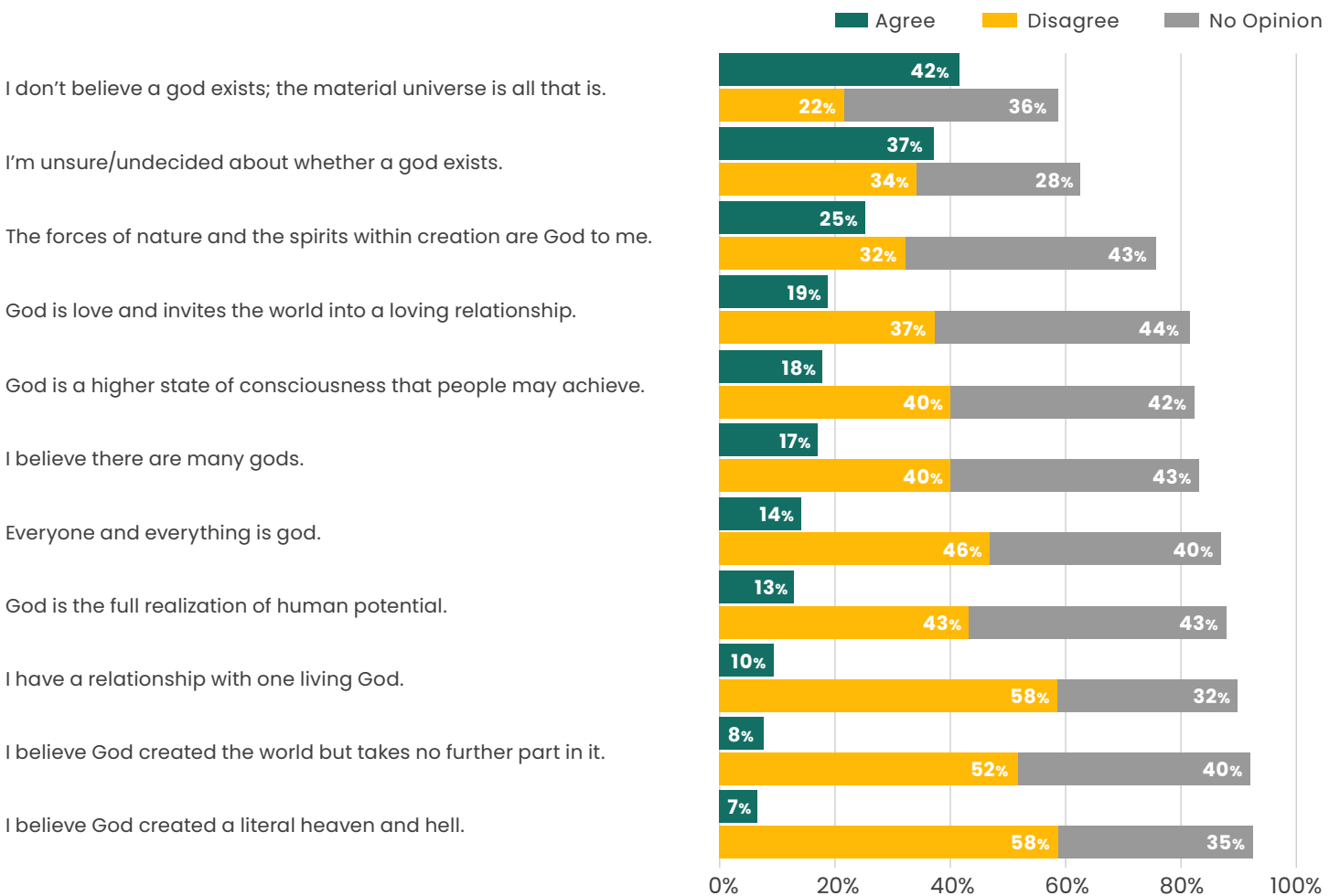
The Nones in this Study responded to 11 different statements about “the characteristics or existence of a god.” The statements did not just address whether or not there is a god, but about what that God or god

might be like. Respondents rated each statement for their agreement or disagreement on a five-point scale. The Nones who marked “Strongly agree” or “Somewhat agree” are combined on Figure 9.1

into “Agree.” Those who marked “Strongly disagree” or “Somewhat disagree” appear as “Disagree.” Respondents could also indicate a middle rating for “No opinion,” which turned out to be a significant option.

— FIGURE 9.1

### NONES DIVIDED ON WHO GOD IS - OR IS NOT



Percent of responses by 3,889 Nones to the question, “Many people have different views about the characteristics or existence of a god. Read the following statements and indicate your level of agreement or disagreement.” Certain items may not total 100% due to rounding. American Beliefs Study, 2021

## The Nones and God: Much Uncertainty

### The Existence of God – Or Not

Two of the statements in this list speak directly to the question, “Is there a God?” The first such statement is, “I don’t believe a god exists; the material universe is all that is.” 42% of the Nones agreed with this, and no other statement received a higher level of agreement. So it would seem settled: 42% of Nones are atheists and therefore 58% believe in God or some concept of a god. Actually, it’s not as simple as that. The 42% of “Agree” responses breaks down to 23% that chose “Strongly agree” and 19% that chose “Somewhat agree.” Those in the latter 19% lean toward atheism but hold on to some uncertainty about the question. Even more telling is the fact that more than a third of the Nones (36%) marked “No opinion.” **This broad middle ground of uncertainty, combining “Somewhat agree,” “Somewhat disagree,” and “No opinion,” covers nearly two in three of the Nones (65%).**

**Is God real? Nearly two in three of the Nones just aren’t sure.**

On the side of theism, 22% of the Nones disagree with the idea that there is no God, and of those, 12% marked, “Strongly disagree.” So while most of the Nones are unsure, a significant percentage clearly believe in the existence of God or a god, and another 10% (those who marked “Somewhat Disagree”) lean toward believing.

The second statement that most directly reveals how the Nones think about the existence of God is, “I’m unsure/undecided about whether a god exists.” 34% disagreed with this statement, so about one-third of the Nones feel at least fairly clear that there either is, or is not, a god—which leaves about two-thirds who are uncertain. Thirty-seven percent agreed with the statement, so are definitely “unsure/undecided,” while another 28% marked “No opinion,” expressing a kind of double uncertainty—they are unsure about whether they’re unsure. It’s probably fair to interpret this group of responses as apathy; these Nones seem to be saying, “Whether or not there’s a god is not something I think about,” or “The matter is not important to me.”

These findings allow the Church to get a better understanding of where dialogue with, or witness to, the Nones might begin. **For some of the Nones, it would be unhelpful to begin a conversation about spirituality by talking about God as if he exists, since they don’t accept that premise.** Some might say the fact that two-thirds of the Nones have no interest in the topic may be the most significant barrier to initiating a productive conversation with them about God.

But it could also be a conversation starter. For most of the Nones, such a conversation could begin by talking about the concept of God, since they either believe in God or are at a place of uncertainty that probably includes some measure of openness. **The key to a productive conversation appears to lie in discerning just how certain any individual non-believer is on the question of whether God exists.** Simply asking one of the Nones how they arrived at their position (or lack of a position) on God could help develop a relationship, and consistent experience shows that a relationship is the crucial pathway for deeper engagement on spiritual issues.

## The Nones and God: Much Uncertainty

### If There Is a God, What is He (or is She, or It, or They) Like?

Beyond the statements about God's existence, the Study offered six different options about who or what God might be, allowing respondents to agree or disagree on each one, despite any logical inconsistency that might result. As seen in Figure 9.1, these are as follows, in the order of the Nones' level of agreement with them.

1. "The forces of nature and the spirits within the creation are God for me." 25% of the Nones affirmed this animist viewpoint, 32% rejected it and 43% were unsure.
2. "God is love and invites the world into a loving relationship." One in five of the Nones (19%) agreed with this version of Christian theism. However, 37% disagreed and 44% were unsure.
3. "God is a higher state of consciousness that people may achieve." 18% of the Nones—again about one in five—agreed with this humanist viewpoint, while the others either rejected it (40%) or were unsure (42%).
4. "I believe there are many gods." While one in six of the Nones (17%) agreed with this polytheist view, more than four times as

many either rejected it (40%) or expressed uncertainty (43%).

5. "Everyone and everything is god." One in seven of the Nones accepted this pantheist statement (14%), while three times as many disagreed (46%) and 40% were unsure.
6. One in eight of the Nones (13%) agreed with another statement of humanism, "God is the full realization of human potential." The remaining Nones split on whether to disagree with this statement or claim uncertainty (43% each).

Some observations from this data:

- None of the god-affirming options received a strong response. The highest agreement was 25%, which is significant, but still far from a majority. **No clear, non-Christian, alternative concept of God has taken hold in a big way among the Nones.**
- Atheism holds a stronger place among the Nones than any of these alternatives, by a wide margin. As we have seen, 42% of the Nones agreed with the statement, "I don't believe a god exists; the material universe is all that is." The highest-scoring item on this list of six options for a concept of God, animism, scored at only 25%.

- None of these options received a tiny response. Even the lowest-scoring item on the list was affirmed by 13% of the Nones in the sample. Among the Nones, there are several, very different ideas about God at play, at least to some extent.
- These responses reflect the extent to which Hindu and Buddhist concepts (polytheism, pantheism), Enlightenment concepts (humanism), and concepts from indigenous peoples, like American Indians (animism) have found their way into the broader American culture. Again, none of these has taken a dominant position, but all are present and embraced by at least some of the Nones.
- The second-highest-scoring statement on this list, "God is love and invites the world into a loving relationship," is consistent with Christian theology. Not all the Nones have abandoned a Christian concept of God, even if they have abandoned religious affiliation.

## The Nones and God: Much Uncertainty

**About one in five of the Nones accept a Christian concept of God, at least to some extent. And the Nones seem to be more certain of what God is NOT, than what God is.**

The highest score on this list was given to the animist statement, “The forces of nature and the spirits within the creation are God for me.” This has come into American culture from neopaganism and other, various, earth-centered spiritualities, but the largest influence is probably from American Indian religions with their ties to ecological activism. The influence of the Enlightenment has evidently done more to drive people from belief in God (to atheism), than it has to shift peoples’ beliefs to a more human-centered concept of God (to various forms of humanism). Buddhist and Hindu ideas about God or a god (pantheism, polytheism) have come into the culture, but have not won over many Americans.

For Christian churches, whose purpose is to unveil the nature of God to man, realizing that the Nones have greater certainty about what God is NOT than what God IS will likely be difficult to reconcile. But again, within this statement lies the opportunity for Christian churches and Christians to demonstrate, relate, and reveal the truth of a loving God to an ambivalent subculture of the Nones.

### The Real Winner among God-Concepts: “No Opinion”

When the Nones looked at these six ideas about what God might be like, their favorite response was, “No opinion.” Interestingly, the percentages of that response clustered tightly, all between 40% and 44%.

1. “God is love and invites the world into a loving relationship.” 44% of the Nones responded “No opinion.”
2. “God is the full realization of human potential.” 43% of the Nones responded “No opinion.”
3. “I believe there are many gods.” 43% of the Nones responded “No opinion.”
4. “The forces of nature and the spirits within the creation are God for me.” 43% of the Nones responded “No opinion.”
5. “God is a higher state of consciousness that people may achieve.” 42% of the Nones responded “No opinion.”
6. “Everyone and everything is god.” 40% of the Nones responded “No opinion.”

**In general, it seems the Nones don’t care much about God, one way or the other.** The topic is not one of great interest to them, no matter what idea of God or god

they lean toward. Evidently, for a large percentage of them, it’s not something they think about much.

Churches who seek to reach out to the Nones are not likely to find among them a hunger for God. The Nones have needs—everyone does—but most of them have not become seekers after God

**Most of the Nones accept that God could be real, but don’t agree on who or what God is, and tend to be apathetic about the topic.**

in response to those needs. The message “God is the answer to your needs” is likely to miss the mark among the Nones, who are generally uncertain that God even exists. Instead, from other findings in the Study, – **offering acceptance, assistance and caring to the Nones without spiritual preconditions is likely the best way to establish trust, leading to relationships and a greater openness to deeper spiritual discussions.**

## The Nones and God: Much Uncertainty

### Where the Nones Disagree Strongly

Among the 11 statements rated by the Nones, three stand out, with the highest percentage of respondents indicating disagreement. These are the only ones where a majority disagreed—not that the Nones disagreed with each other, but that they disagreed with the statements; in fact, there was a fairly-strong unity among the Nones in dismissing these three items.

#### 1. **“I believe God created the world but takes no further part in it.”**

52% of the Nones disagreed with this statement and only 8% agreed. This idea, deism, was somewhat popular in the 18th century in both Europe and America. It served as a way to respond to the glories and complexities of nature while giving no space to religion or the Church. In contrast, this idea is not attractive to most of the Nones in the 21st century. There are not many deists among us anymore.

#### 2. **“I believe God created a literal**

**heaven and hell.”** 58% of the Nones disagreed with this statement and only 7% agreed, which was the lowest level of agreement in the list and tied for the highest level of disagreement. In contrast, 80% of Practicing Christians agreed with this statement and 9% disagreed. Though it comes directly from traditional Christian theology, the idea of hell in particular is known to be unpopular within American culture at large. This response serves to help answer the question, “To what extent do the Nones still hold to Christian teachings, despite their rejection of participation in the Church?” The answer is that there are definite limits on how much they retain Christian concepts. They don’t just drop participation; they drop the theology.

**It seems that the Nones – Nones who left a Christian community – don’t just drop participation; they drop the theology.**

#### 3. **“I have a relationship with one living God.”**

58% of the Nones disagreed with this statement and only 10% agreed. So is there a large slice of the American population who would say, “I’m not a religious person, but I’m a very spiritual person”? The Nones would all, by definition, say, “I’m not a religious person.” Most of them would at the same time say they don’t have a relationship with God, or at least with “one living God.” All the other statements in this set deal with what the respondents

**For the most part, even the Nones who believe in God or a god don’t see themselves as having a relationship with him (or she, or it, or them).**

might think or believe about God. This is the only one that deals with how the respondents see themselves relating to whatever God or god they might believe in, and the answer is that few of them see any relationship there.

## The Jesus of the Nones is Not the Jesus of the New Testament

Right after the question about God, the American Beliefs Study asked respondents to rate nine similar statements about Jesus, some consistent with Christian faith and others not. Again, the Nones could respond from a series of five options, from “Strongly Disagree” to “Strongly

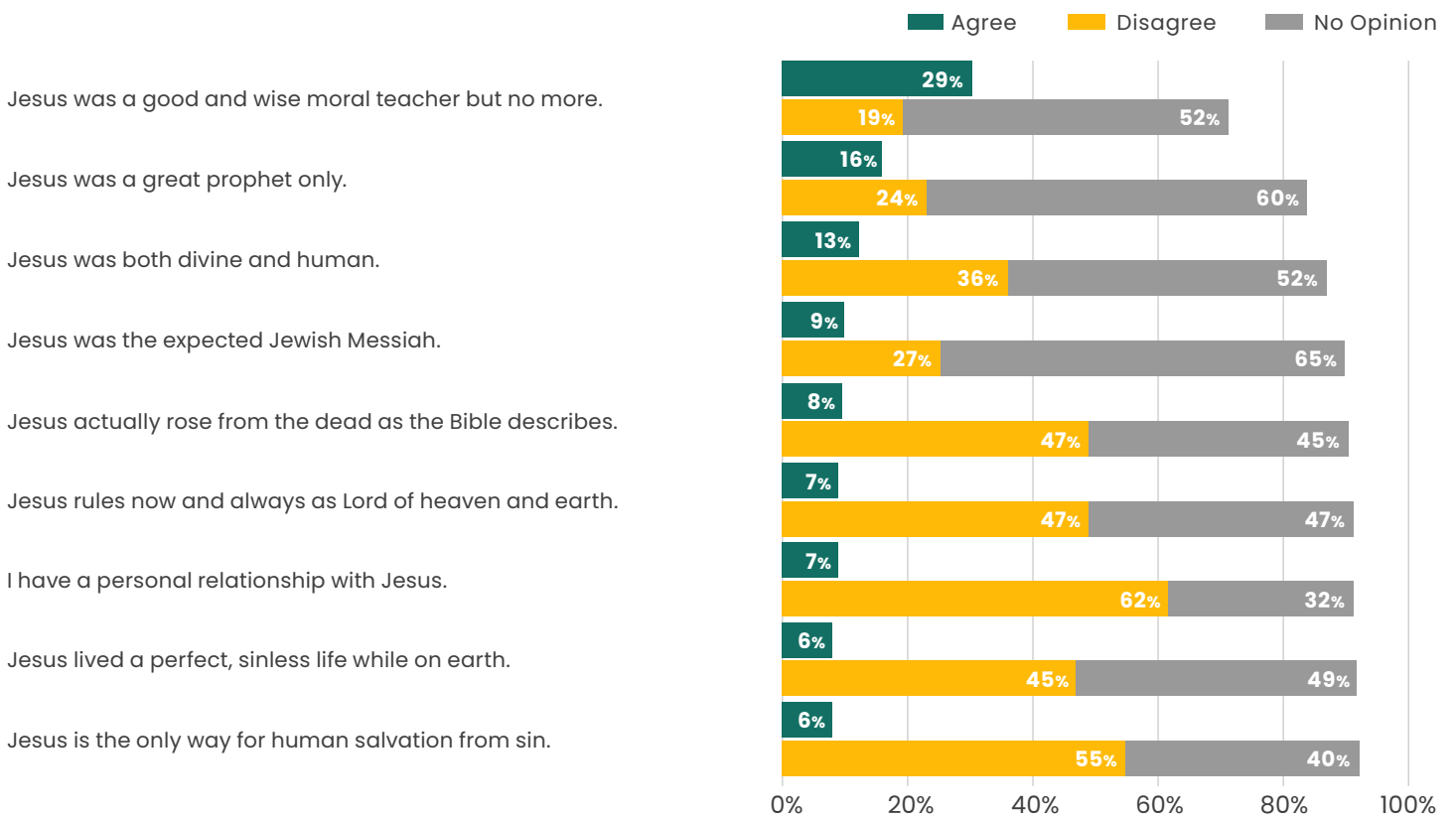
Agree,” with “No Opinion” in the middle. Figure 9.2 combines the two responses on each end of the scale into a total Agree and Disagree, and charts these alongside No Opinion.

The Nones’ responses to these statements help Christians see what we face in helping them to understand Jesus as the Bible presents him.

### The Nones Reject Historic Christology

— FIGURE 9.2

#### THE NONES HOLD FEW TRADITIONAL BELIEFS ABOUT JESUS



Percent of responses by 3,889 Nones to the question, “Many people have different views about the person Jesus. Read the following statements and indicate your level of agreement or not.” Certain items may not total 100% due to rounding  
 American Beliefs Study, 2021

## The Jesus of the Nones is Not the Jesus of the New Testament

Six of the nine statements about Jesus reflect New Testament teaching. On average, 43% of the Nones disagreed with them and only 8% agreed. Specifically:

- “Jesus is the only way for human salvation from sin.” 55% disagreed, 6% agreed.
- “Jesus rules now and always as Lord of heaven and earth.” 47% disagreed, 7% agreed.
- “Jesus actually rose from the dead as the Bible describes.” 47% disagreed, 8% agreed.
- “Jesus lived a perfect, sinless life while on earth.” 45% disagreed, 6% agreed.
- “Jesus was both divine and human.” 36% disagreed, 13% agreed.
- “Jesus was the expected Jewish Messiah.” 27% disagreed, 9% agreed.

The strongest disagreement was with the idea of Jesus as the only way for salvation. In comparison, the Nones were more open to the idea that Jesus was both divine and human, or that Jesus was the Messiah, than they were to the idea of him as the way to forgiveness and restoration. Likely some of the Nones reject the idea of Jesus as “the only way,” believing there are many valid

ways to relate to God or the ultimate questions of life. Likely others reject the Christian idea of wrongdoing, sin, and the need for redemption.

It’s also fascinating that there was more objection to the idea of Jesus living a perfect life than there was to the idea of Jesus being both divine and human.

These responses can inform apologetic approaches. A conversation that tries to begin with the fact of the resurrection, for example, won’t likely get far with the Nones, since only eight percent believe Jesus rose from the dead. Or an attempt to start with the sinless life of Jesus will quickly find that only a small percentage of the Nones (six percent) accept this initial premise as true.

**When Christians talk to the Nones about faith, we need to understand that their idea of Jesus is different from our idea of Jesus. Our witness must start with knowing the listener.**

This is not to say that believers should not try to talk to unbelievers about Jesus. The gospel message is all about Jesus; he is at the center

of Christian faith. It’s only to say that better witness comes from better understanding of where the listener is coming from.

### Who Do the Nones Say Jesus Was?

Do the Nones believe Jesus was “a great prophet only”? Not to any great extent. Only 16% agreed with that statement, and 24% disagreed.

Do the Nones believe he was “a good and wise moral teacher but no more”? This idea was only a bit more popular, with 29% agreeing and 19% disagreeing.

The Nones may largely reject the Christian teaching about Jesus, but there is no alternative explanation that has attracted a consensus. It’s much easier to identify who the Nones believe Jesus was not than to identify who the Nones believe he was. They reject one cornerstone (so to speak) without replacing it with another.

Actually, the largest vote by the Nones on both of those alternative ideas was, “No opinion.” On the idea of Jesus as only a great prophet, 60% of the Nones indicated, “No opinion.” On the idea of Jesus as only a great moral teacher, 52% of the Nones indicated, “No opinion.”



## The Jesus of the Nones is Not the Jesus of the New Testament

A majority (55%) disagreed with the idea of Jesus as the Savior from sin, but when it came to alternative ideas about who he was, the majority then fell to, “No opinion.”

Disinterest or apathy about the topic show up again. For five of the nine Jesus statements in the list, the highest percentage of responses landed on, “No opinion.” As one example, 27% agreed that “Jesus was the expected Jewish Messiah” and nine percent disagreed, but 65%, nearly two in three, indicated, “No opinion.” Seven of the nine statements earned “No opinion” scores at 40% or above. Even the item with the strongest percentage of disagreement, “Jesus is the only way for human salvation from sin,” where 55% disagreed, saw 40% indicate “No opinion.”

Who was Jesus? The question remains, and it’s a good one. Christians have a clear answer, and the Nones do not. Christians care deeply about the question, and the Nones do not. *When the topic of Jesus comes up, a few of the Nones will have their idea of who he was, more will affirm that whoever he was, he was not what Christians teach, and most will shrug in disinterest, or not consider it an important matter.*

**Despite the Nones’ apparent disinterest, the question of Jesus is still a powerful topic for conversations about faith.**

To those who consider the topic of Jesus unimportant, Christians can show why it’s of central importance to all of human history and all spiritual understanding. To those who

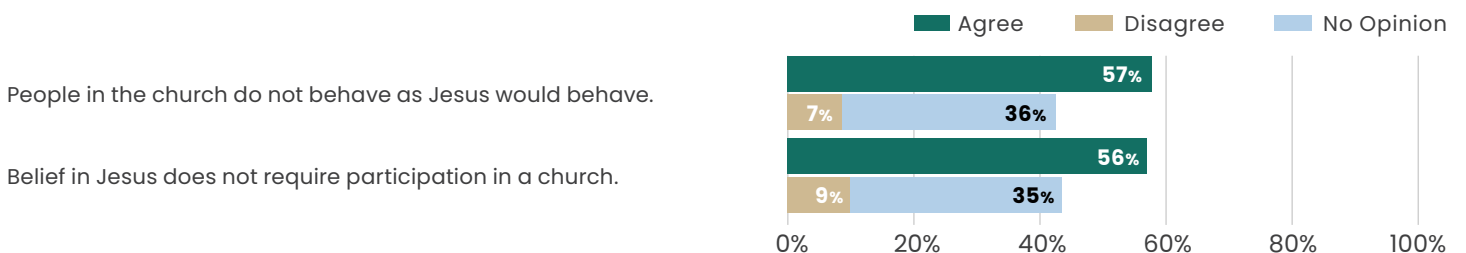
admit they don’t know who Jesus was, Christians have a coherent and compelling answer. Only 7% of the Nones indicated they had “a personal relationship with Jesus,” and 62% said they did not. This is both a challenge and an opportunity. It’s a challenge because of the need to overcome apathy or disinterest. It’s also a challenge because of the need to explain and defend the Christian understanding. But it’s an opportunity because this represents many people who need Christ and the abundant life he offers.

### The Nones, Modern Christians and the Christian Church

On two statements in the Study, a majority of the respondents agreed at 56% and 57%. This level of agreement is quite strong, 27 and 28 percentage points higher than the agreement on

— FIGURE 9.3

#### THE NONES HOLD MODERN CHRISTIANS AND THE CHRISTIAN CHURCH IN HIGH DISREGARD



Percent of responses by 3889 Nones to the question, “Many people have different views about the person Jesus. Read the following statements and indicate your level of agreement or not.” American Beliefs Study, 2021

## The Jesus of the Nones is Not the Jesus of the New Testament

any statement about the person of Jesus. Interestingly, these statements had to do with modern Christians and the Church of today.

Over half of the Nones agreed with the statement, “Belief in Jesus does not require participation in a church” (56%) and only nine percent disagreed. The Nones want to see Jesus as separate from his Church. According to them, belief in Jesus, or a positive opinion about him, is one thing; being part of a church that worships him is another thing, and the first thing need not lead to the second. This, of course, does not fit with New Testament Christianity, where belief, baptism, and participation in the Body of Christ are all tightly linked. But by separating the two, perhaps the Nones allow themselves to hold a positive opinion of Jesus and a negative opinion of the modern Church.

An even higher percentage of the Nones, 57%, agreed with the statement, “People in the church do not behave as Jesus would behave,” and an even lower percentage, seven

percent, disagreed. Here again, affirming that Jesus would behave better than the people in his church implies that the Nones approve of Jesus but not of his Church. This again points to a perceived disconnect. The earlier statement allows the Nones to separate their notions of Jesus from their ideas about his Church. This second statement asserts that modern Christians are out of synch with their own leader, Jesus Christ.

At this point, Christian leaders might object. What do the Nones know about Jesus and what it means to follow him? Who are they to stand as judge over Christians and their level of obedience? Furthermore, this is something of a moot point, as most Christians recognize the call of Christ simply to believe in him, accept his forgiveness, and through that reconciliation to act in ways which might emulate him, as we are able. This is something we can hardly expect non-believers to understand.

Furthermore, the Study shows in exquisite detail just how little the Nones know about the Jesus of the

Bible. And yet they expect Christians to better emulate Jesus, whom they admit they know little about?

As bizarre as it might be, the crux is this: the Nones feel that Christians don’t act how they have been led to believe Christians should.

**If church members acted more like Jesus, it would probably be easier for the Nones to believe.**

In two different ways these statements show that an evangelistic approach to the Nones requires several steps. Even if a non-religious person comes to the point of accepting that God is real and that Jesus is God, they must then be persuaded to accept Jesus and to accept his Church. It’s not enough to help the Nones see who Jesus really is. That is incomplete until they understand the inseparable connection between Jesus and his Church—as imperfect as his church and the believers in it might be.

## Older Nones and Younger Nones on God and Jesus

The Nones do not all think alike, probably on any topic, but certainly on what they believe about God and Jesus. To sort out their differing beliefs by generational cohorts is a helpful avenue of analysis. The American Beliefs Study uses the widely-accepted generational framework from the Pew Research

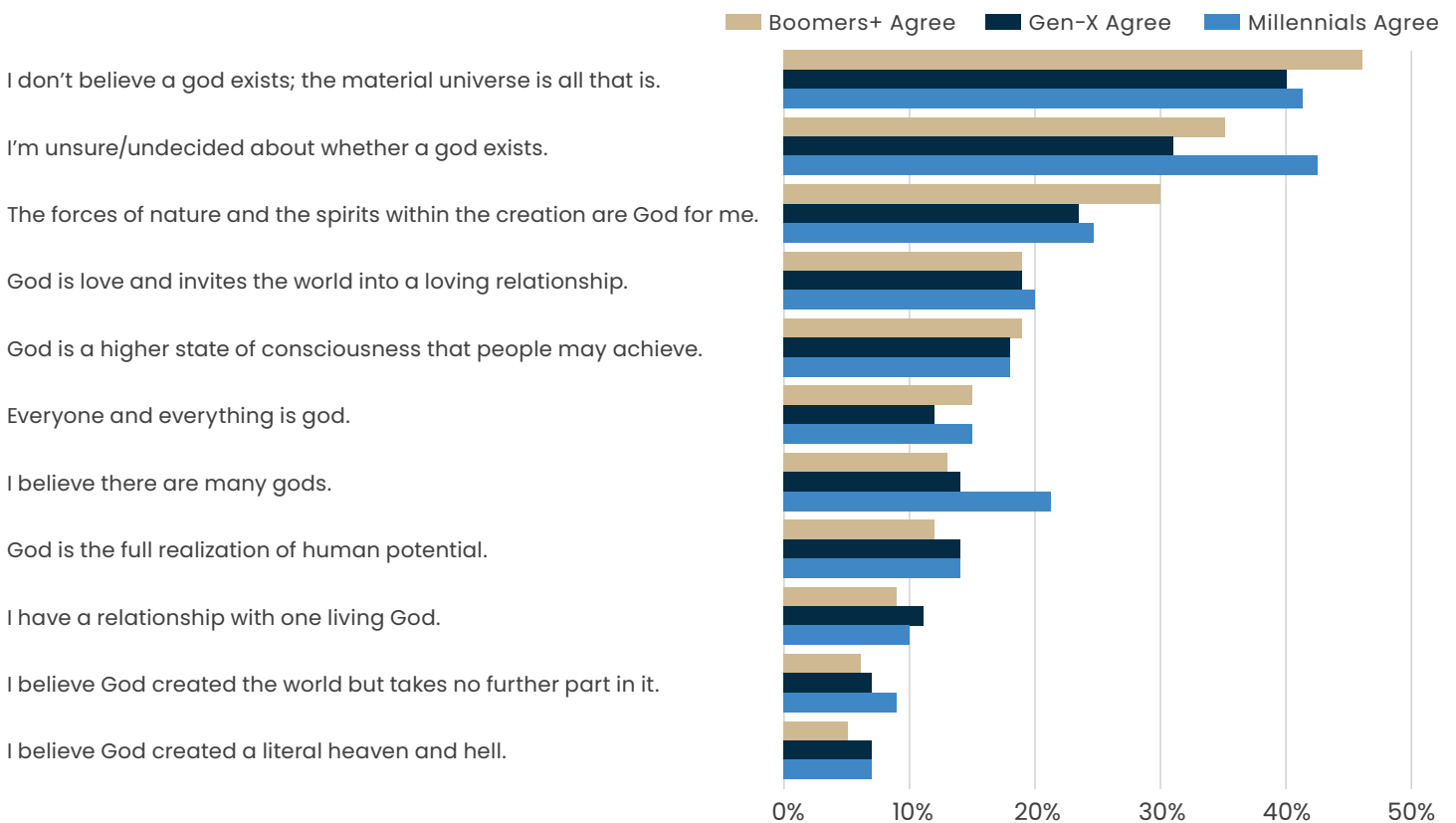
Center that sorts out members of the Silent, Boomer, Gen-X, Millennial, and GenZ generations by the years of their birth.

The following two charts show the percentages of Nones who indicated “Somewhat agree” or “Strongly agree” on the statements about

God and Jesus, by generation. The Study polled so few of the Nones among the Silent generation that their responses were combined in with Boomers’. Similarly, there were so few respondents from the Gen-Z generation that their answers were combined in with Millennials’.

— FIGURE 9.4

### AGREEMENT ABOUT GOD BY GENERATIONS OF NONES



Percent of responses from 3889 Nones to the question, “Many people have different views about the characteristics or existence of a god. Read the following statements and indicate your level of agreement or disagreement.” American Beliefs Study, 2021

## Older Nones and Younger Nones on God and Jesus

Some of what we learn from this set of responses:

1. The different generations of Nones tend to have similar levels of agreement on what they believe about God. For seven of the 11 statements, the level of agreement between the three age cohorts all fell within a range of three or fewer percentage points. As one example, for the statement, “God is a higher state of consciousness that people may achieve,” Millennials, Gen-Xers, and Boomers agreed at levels of 18%, 18%, and 19%, respectively. As another example, for the statement, “I believe God created the world but takes no further part in it,” they agreed at levels of nine, seven, and six percent. So when Nones think about God, they tend to think along the same lines, no matter their age—but there are a few points of exception.

2. The highest responses across all generations were to the two questions about atheism or uncertainty about the existence of a god.

- On the statement, “I don’t believe a god exists; the material universe is all that is,” 40% or more of all three cohorts of Nones agreed. It’s interesting that the highest level

of agreement, 46%, came from the oldest cohort, at five and six percentage points above the two younger cohorts. This may suggest that confident, determined atheism is in slight decline among the Nones in America. Alternatively, it may be that Nones become firmer in their atheist convictions as they get older; that younger Nones are more open.

- Though there are many atheists among the Nones, no generational cohort of the Nones are majority atheist.
- Millennials were significantly more likely to say they were uncertain about whether god exists, at 42%, compared to Gen-X and Boomer Nones at levels of 31% and 36%, respectively. This goes alongside the 41% of Millennial Nones who agreed they “don’t believe a god exists.”

**On the question of whether or not there is a god, More Millennials are “unsure/ undecided” than Gen-Xers or Boomers.**

3. The animist view of god is not very popular among the Nones overall, but it is most popular among Boomer Nones. Three in ten Boomer Nones (30%) agreed that “The forces

of nature and the spirits within the creation are God for me,” while just 24% of Millennials and only 23% of Gen-Xers agreed. The counter-cultural spiritual explorations of the 1960s and 1970s brought non-Western god-concepts—animism among them—into American culture. This affected beliefs among Boomers to a degree and there are still some old hippies among them, but not many at all among Gen-Xers or Millennials.

4. While few of the Nones in any generation agreed at a high level with the polytheist statement, “I believe there are many gods,” Millennial Nones were significantly more likely to agree than the Nones in any older Generation. To wit, 21% of Millennials agreed there are many gods, compared to just 14% of Gen-Xers and 13% of Boomers, showing a significant percentage gap between the generations. It could well be that there are more polytheists among Millennial Nones, but a more likely interpretation is that this was a vote for relativism. It seems likely that higher agreement among Millennial Nones was their way of saying, “I don’t believe there is one, true idea of God that is right for everyone.”

## Older Nones and Younger Nones on God and Jesus

### Generational Differences in the Nones' Beliefs about Jesus

As with their beliefs about God, the three generational groups of Nones tend to hold similar beliefs about Jesus, with only a couple of glaring outliers. For six of the nine statements on beliefs about Jesus, agreement levels between the three age cohorts fell within a range of

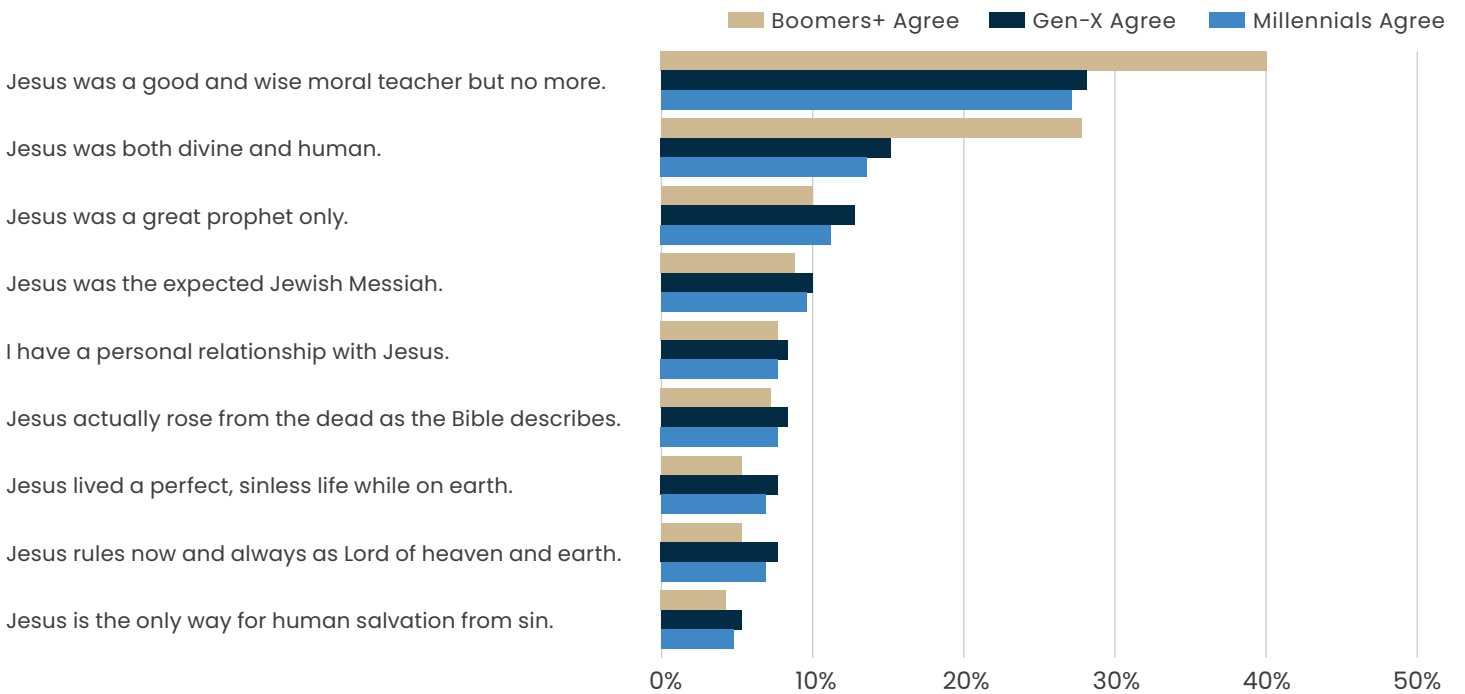
two or three percentage points. For one other statement, "Jesus was a great prophet only," the three groups agreed within a range of four percentage points.

For two of the statements in this set, Boomer Nones stand out. More than a quarter of them (26%) agreed that "Jesus was both divine and human," compared to only 14% of Millennial

Nones, and only 16% of Gen-Xer Nones. That is a significant difference, with gaps of 10 and 12 percentage points between generations. This is one of the statements about Jesus that fits with historic Christian teaching, so at least on this point, twice as many Boomer Nones still hold to a New Testament concept of Jesus compared to younger Nones.

— FIGURE 9.5

### BOOMER NONES WERE MOST CONFLICTED IN BELIEFS ABOUT JESUS



Percent of responses from 3,889 Nones to the question, "Many people have different views about the person Jesus. Read the following statements and indicate your level of agreement or not." American Beliefs Study, 2021

## Older Nones and Younger Nones on God and Jesus

Very few Boomer Nones agreed with other statements that speak to a Christian understanding of Jesus.

- Only 4% agreed with “Jesus is the only way for human salvation from sin.”
- Only 5% agreed that “Jesus lived a perfect, sinless life while on earth.”
- Only 5% agreed “Jesus rules now and always as Lord of heaven and earth.”
- Only 6% thought “Jesus actually rose from the dead as the Bible describes.”
- Only 8% agreed with the statement, “Jesus was the expected Jewish Messiah.”

So if Boomer Nones don’t believe in the Jesus of the New Testament, what Jesus do they believe in? A significant percentage (40%) see Jesus as a “good and wise moral teacher and no more.” The younger generational cohorts of Nones don’t tend to join in this (limited) consensus. This finding suggests that this alternative, non-Christian idea about Jesus is not growing in influence in the broader culture.

On the question of whether Jesus was no more than a good and wise teacher, there is a yawning gap of 13-to-15 percentage points between generations. 40% of Boomer Nones agreed, as against 27% of Gen-X Nones and 25% of Millennial Nones. We saw earlier in this Report that relatively few Nones agree with the Christian understanding of who Jesus was, but that they didn’t tend to land on any alternative explanation in a big way. Here, we see a significant alternative trend, at least among Boomer Nones, that could provide an inroad to thoughtful discussions with people in this group about the clear evidence for a divine Jesus.

**40% of Boomer Nones believe “Jesus was a good and wise moral teacher but no more.”**

Who was Jesus? Who *is* Jesus? Why is believing in him important? The Christian answer is consistent and compelling, but requires courage to face, faith to accept and surrender to embrace. Nones of all generations are generally not facing it. Most will admit they don’t know the answer. Beyond that, many don’t consider the question important to their lives.

These findings together show the challenge the Church faces in bringing Christ to the Nones and the Nones to Christ. Hebrews 11:6 says, “Whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him” (ESV). For the Nones in contemporary America, this means they need to be persuaded of at least these things:

- That God exists—and that the God who exists is the God of the Bible.
- That God rewards those who seek him—that the topics of God, Jesus, and faith are relevant, important, and worthwhile to explore.
- That Jesus is the Son of God, God incarnate, Savior, and Lord.
- That coming to Jesus is inseparably linked with coming to his Church.

Christians believe that this chain of persuasion can only happen through the work of the Holy Spirit, but also that God works through his people and his Church. For this work, may we be prepared with knowledge, insight, understanding, and love.

---

## Summary Highlights | The Nones: Uncertainty and Disinterest about God and Jesus

---

- | Nearly two in three of the Nones just aren't sure God is real. Without any common understanding of a real God, Christians must carefully approach this subject with the Nones. The first step could be to think about the possibility that God could be real and beneficial to them, and then to introduce them to Christian concepts of the loving God of Christianity.
- | Despite their apparent disinterest in matters of faith, the question of Jesus is still a powerful topic for conversations about faith and its relevance to all living people.
- | The Nones' idea of Jesus may be vastly different from ours as Christians. The Nones rarely have a cohesive concept of Jesus, and their perceptions are often biased by non-biblical influences. Christian outreach with Nones must start with understanding who they think Jesus Christ was. Such discussions will reveal to us how we may begin to introduce them to the historical Jesus Christ of the Bible.
- | Very few Nones have a clear notion of what Christians really believe. There is greater openness to understanding these beliefs among Millennials and Gen-Z Americans than there is among Boomers and Gen-X.
- | Approaching any member of the Nones on matters of faith will likely require several steps, all of which begin with a personal relationship, which may take a long time. A relationship precedes any openness to discussing spirituality (which often has little significance to them). Discussing spirituality allows conversations about who God is, His nature and that He desires a relationship with them. These preliminary steps may offer the opening to persuade the Nones that God asks us to accept Jesus Christ to establish our relationship with God.

# 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.



---

THE  
**AMERICAN BELIEFS**  
STUDY  
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*

---

## 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*

---

## 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*