

THE
AMERICAN BELIEFS
STUDY
RELIGIOUS PREFERENCES & PRACTICES



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Engaging Our Communities

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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%.

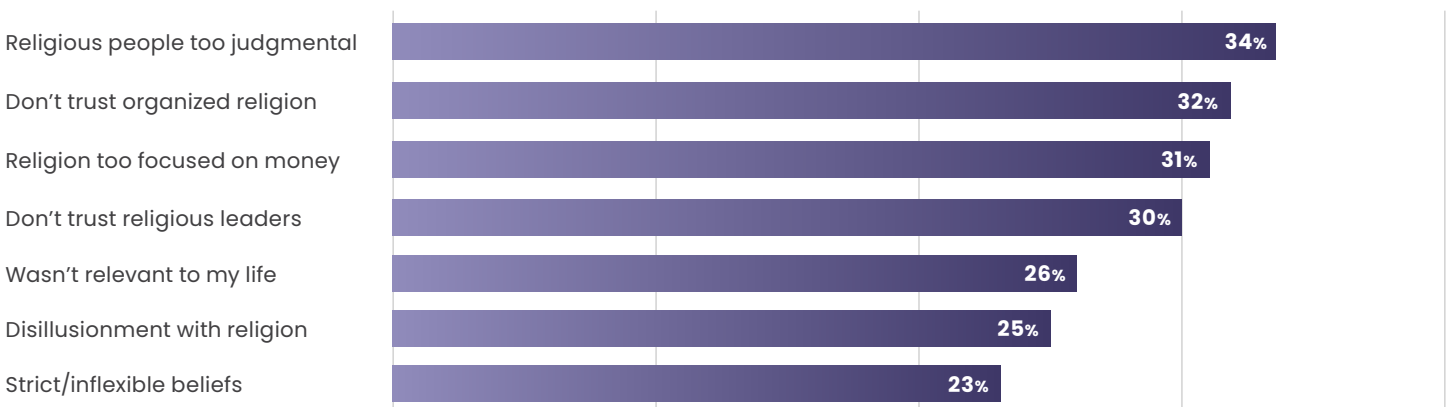
Slightly lower on the scale were people who said they were ‘disillusioned with religion,’ that religious beliefs were ‘strict or inflexible’ or that religion was just ‘boring.’

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

— 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

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.

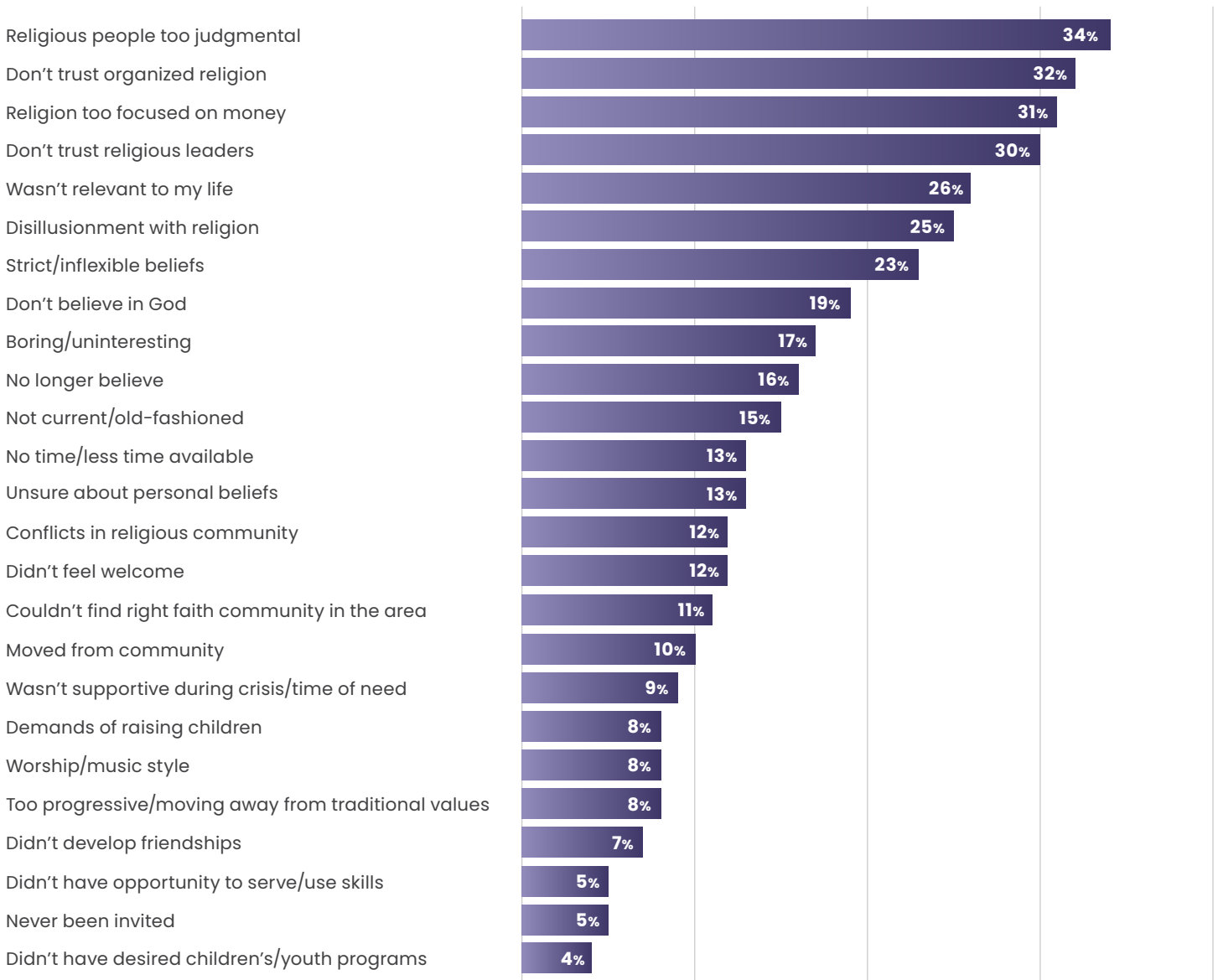
These results appear to indicate that it is possible for the church

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

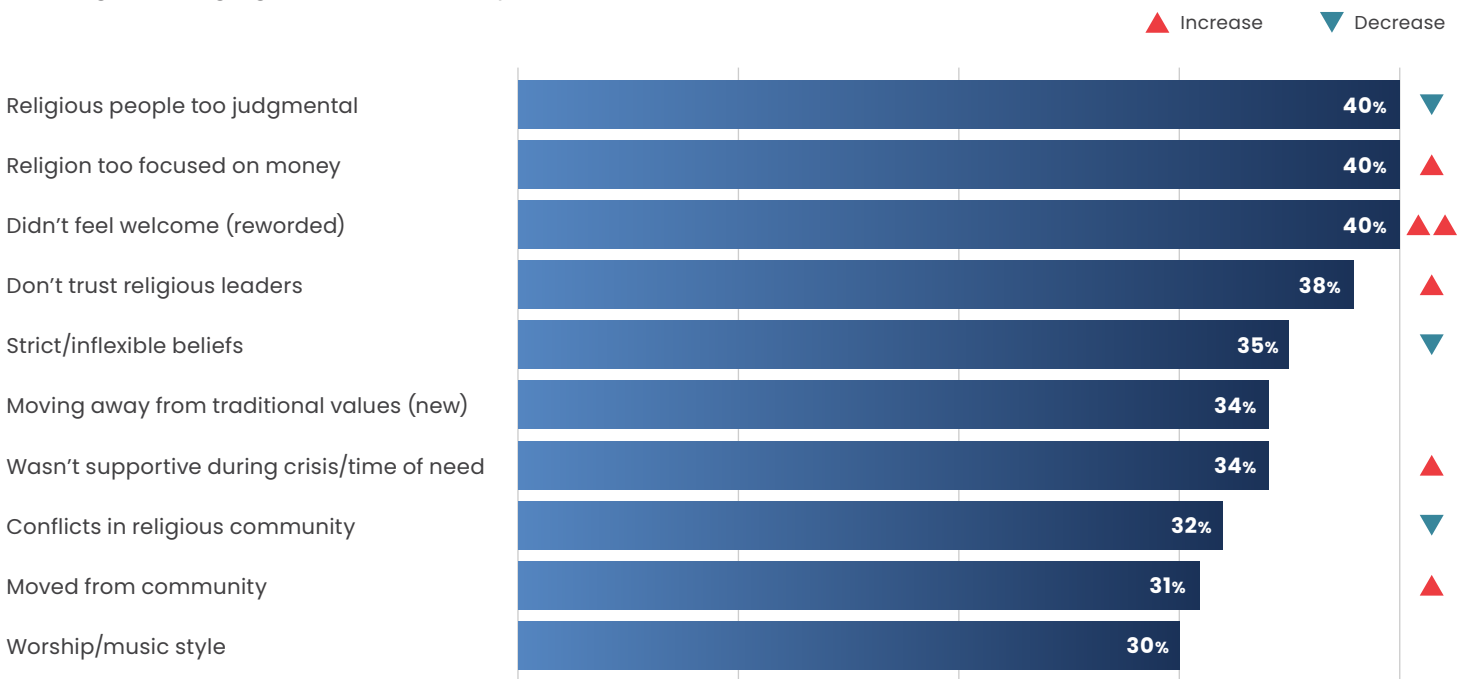
25 reasons offered to them, and only four of those 25 reasons saw an increase. [See Figure 3.4]

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).

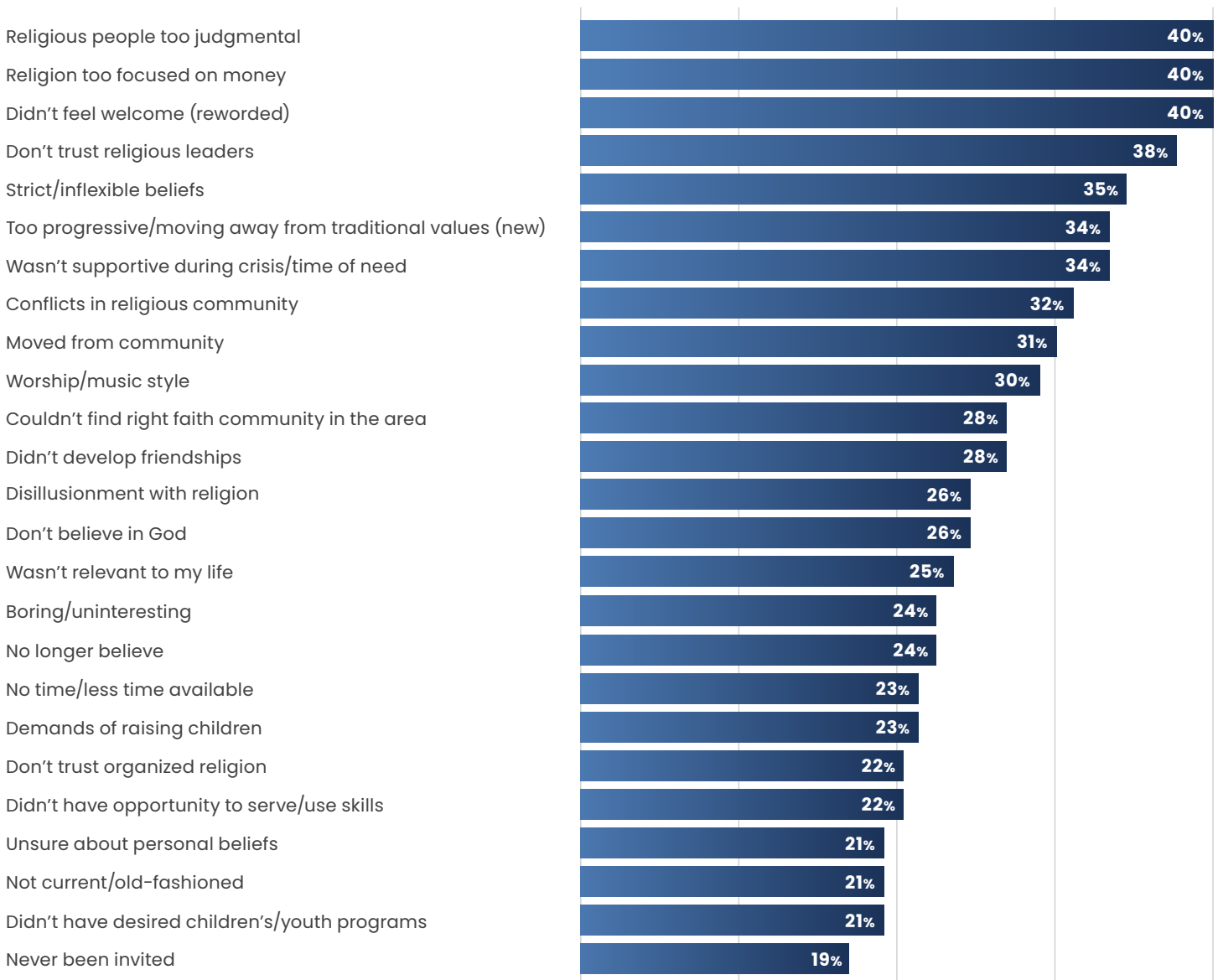
These findings suggest that churches (of all sizes) need to

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

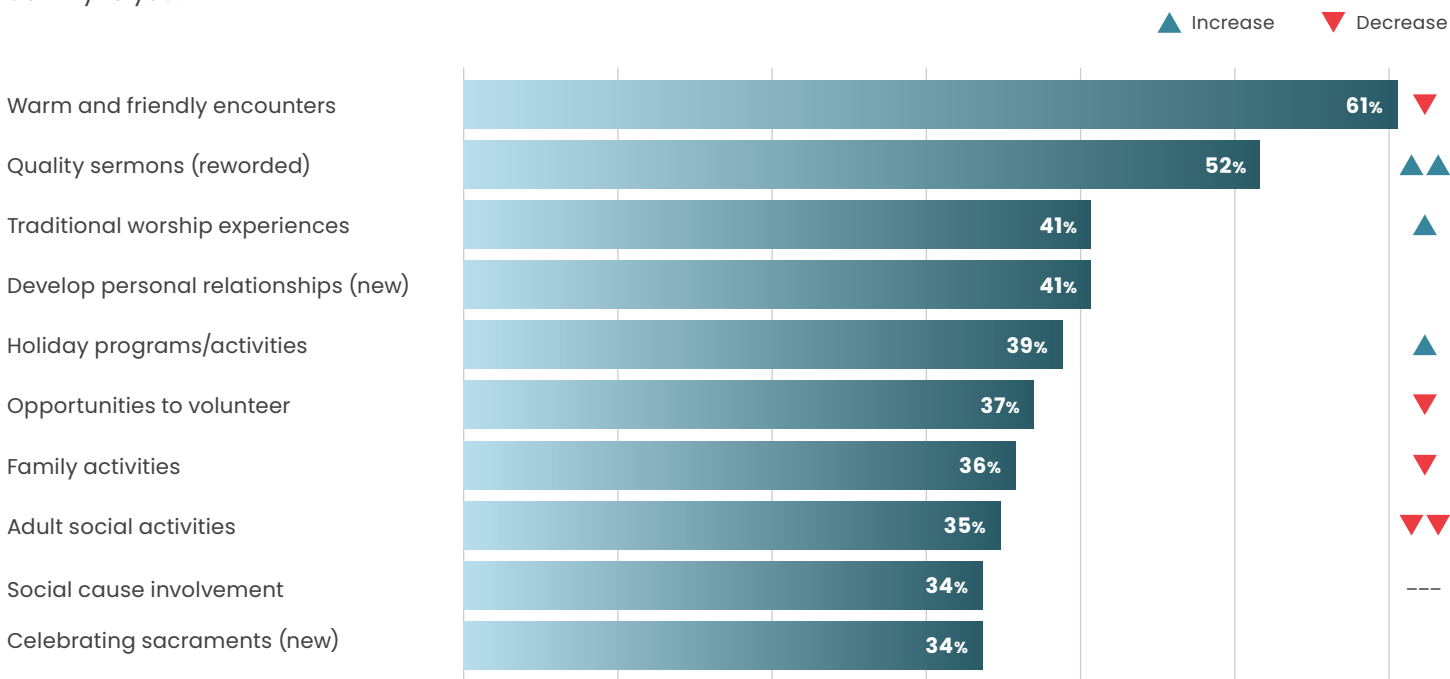
friendly welcome. This was cited by 61% of potential movers as somewhat or very important to them.

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.

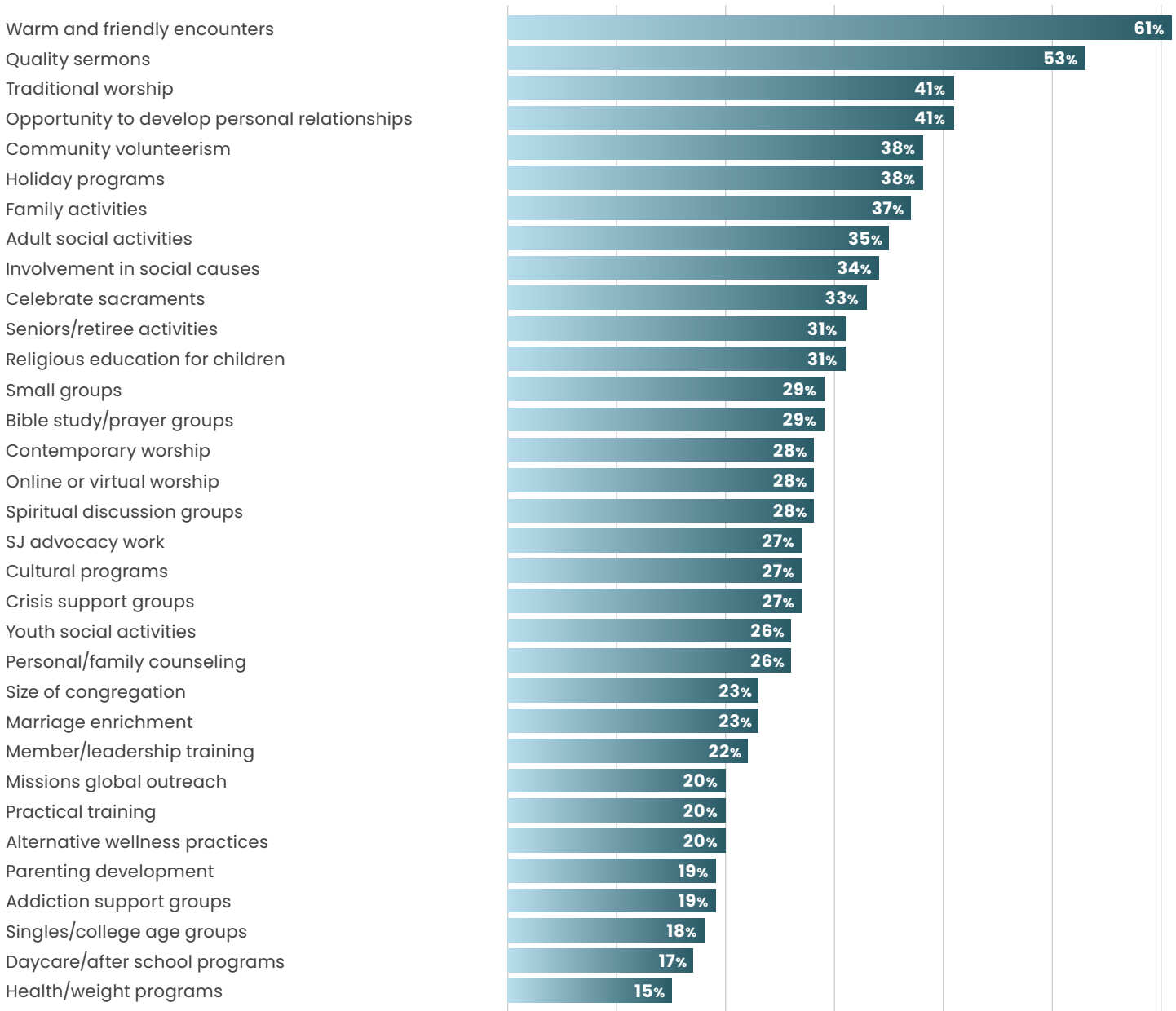
Just as important as the stated desire for traditional worship was the opportunity to develop personal relationships. This makes sense as a natural outgrowth of warm and friendly encounters, yet to a sizeable segment this phrase appears to convey a yearning to achieve a deeper level of connection within 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.

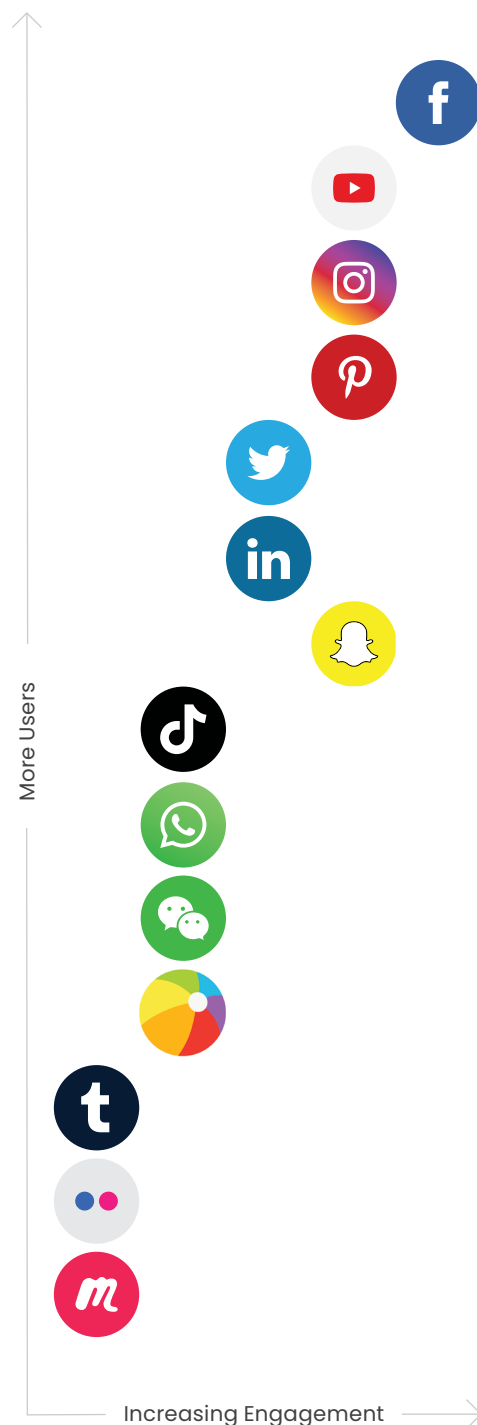
New entries such as TikTok, WhatsApp, WeChat and Marco-Polo trailed the leaders significantly – which is understandable as the market for these is almost completely focused on Millennials and their younger GenZ counterparts.

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

- 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.

Tying It All Together

In this report and its predecessors, we have discussed how the face of American society is undeniably changing. Yet, it's not just American society. American Christians are changing right alongside our neighbors. Our faith fellowships are home to tens of millions of fewer congregants than just ten short years ago.

Fewer Americans are tethered to any defining moral creed and are thereby more conflicted about how to even define morality. A majority agrees that America has a moral responsibility to be a force for good in the world. But many of us have difficulty knowing what 'good' means.

While some core Christian beliefs hang on tenaciously – such as the existence of a loving God – the modern Christian is more apt than ever before to adopt beliefs they prefer and disregard those they don't... like a visitor to the faith buffet at a Golden Corral.

Belief in Jesus as fully man and fully God, the fulfillment of the coming Jewish Messiah, is slipping. Still, more Americans now have no trouble saying that Christians are not acting as Jesus would have.

And as the social fabric of American society frayed further, the COVID-19

pandemic ushered in a whole new set of rules for our communities of faith. Chief among these are new ways of engaging with our neighbors, and models of 'going to church' that have shifted radically.

The following findings from this study appear paramount...

- American churches have answers to growing concerns among our citizens, such as fear, loneliness, grief, doubt, guilt and sin.
- Churches in America must consider how to absorb, understand and respond to the changing face of beliefs in our society while staying true to their foundations.
- Christian leaders and believers have a better chance of engaging non-believers when they are authentically open, tolerant, warm and genuine in their communities.
- Individual communities have shifted more than others. Each faith community must examine their own experience, identify its own greatest needs, and adapt to address them.
- The model for doing church in America for most of a century – congregations gathering together – is fading. Churches of the future are likely to virtually go to where people are and serve an on-site congregation at the same time. This dynamic requires a diverse array of talents and is far more complex to manage. Yet it still thrives around the central purposes of welcoming, teaching, worship and relationships.

A Brief Methodology

The Research

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

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

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

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

The Questions

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

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

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

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

The Respondents

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

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

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

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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.

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