

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



January 2023

# Changing Behaviors within Communities of Faith

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## 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

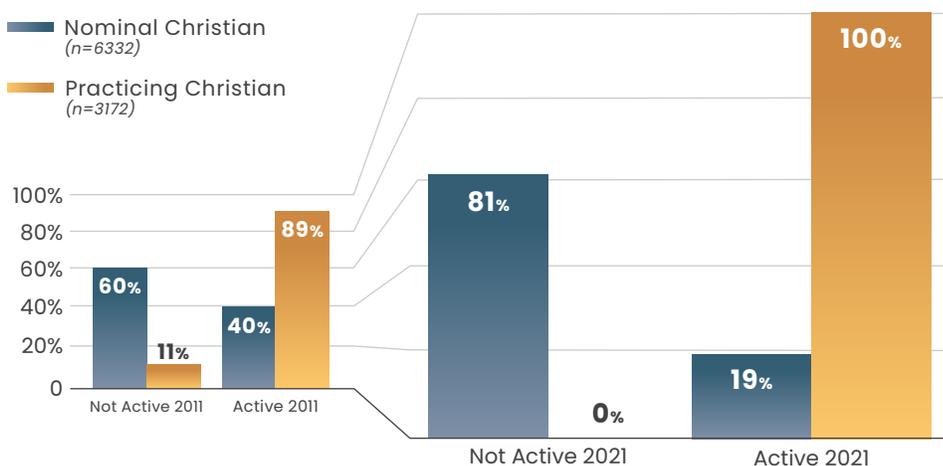
from attending church. Still, the researchers wondered “If they set such a high value on their faith, why didn’t that translate into regular attendance in church?” For some self-identified Christians, there might be a disconnect between their desire for a relationship with God, and how they see attending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

“Are you currently active in a religious congregation or other religious community? How about 10 years ago?”



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.

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

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

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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 a 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

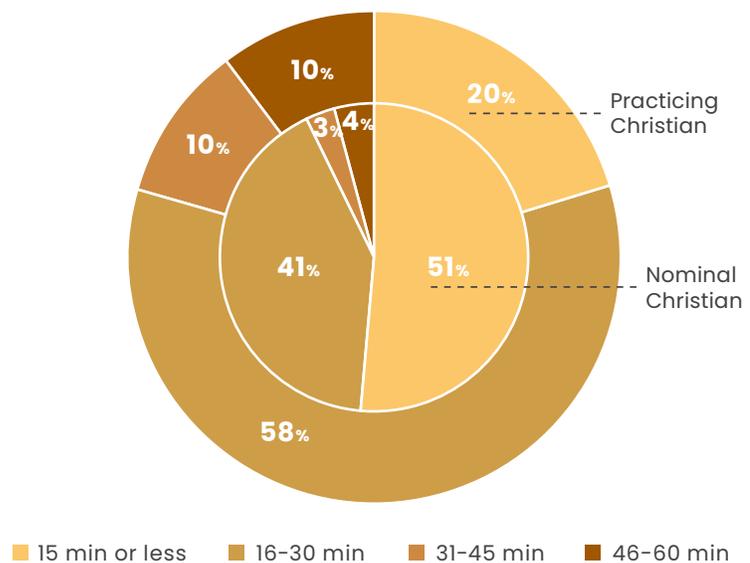
The comparative willingness of Nominal and Practicing Christians to drive any distance to church is also compelling: clear differences exist. Just one in five Practicing

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.

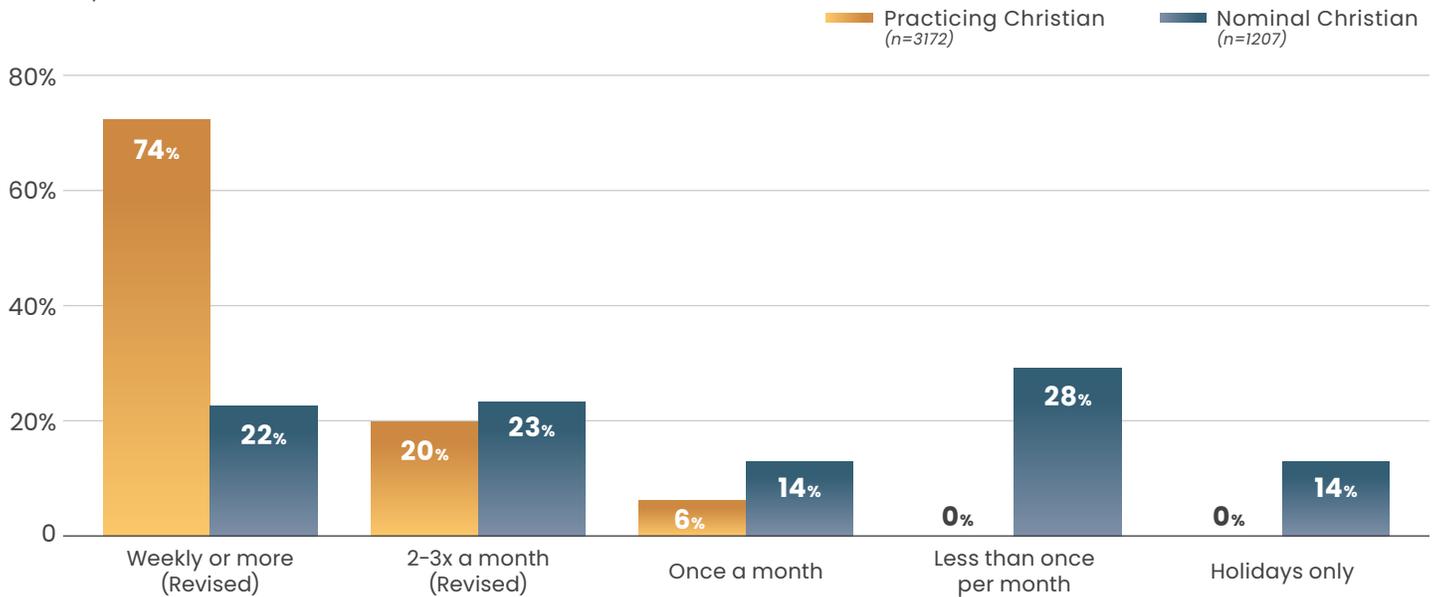
Let’s look at the difference in attendance patterns between Practicing and Nominal Christians, as we’ve defined them. Just because Practicing Christians needed to attend their faith fellowship at least once a month to earn this title, it doesn’t mean they are all every-

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

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## How Often Do Christians Worship?

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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.

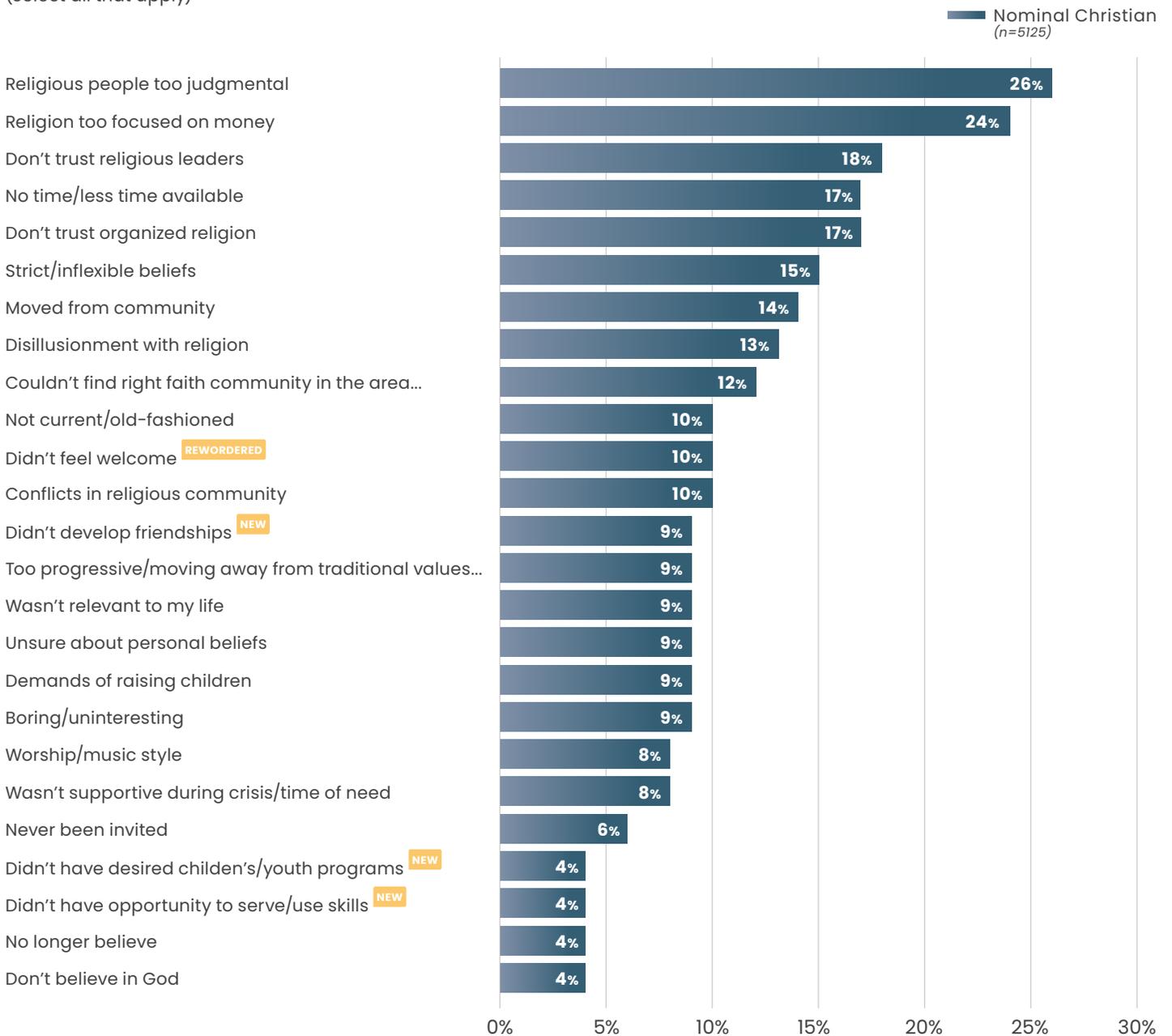
The top item was "Religious people [are] too judgmental." Whether this characterization is fair or not is less important than the fact that Nominal Christians see it as being true. This was the trait that the highest share of them agreed on when asked. Most certainly, this challenges pastors and leaders 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

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## Why Non-Attending Christians Avoid Fellowship

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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

**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.**

quite possible the results might have shifted.

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

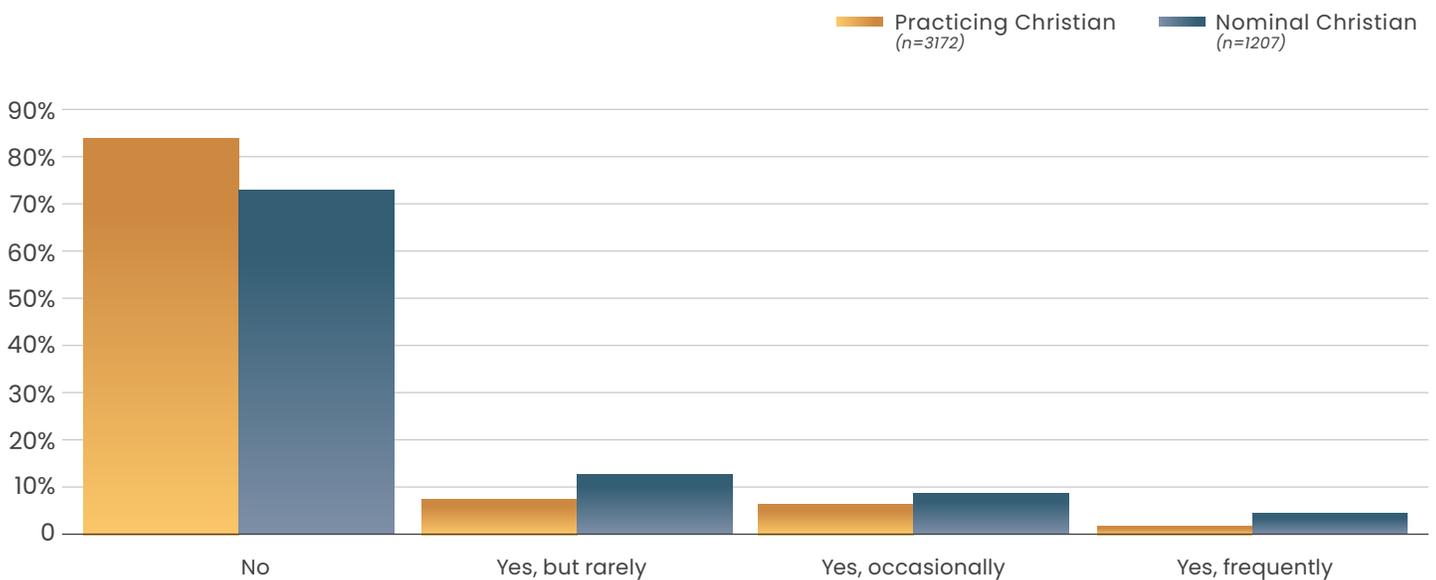
– sometimes twice as often. It’s a bit more surprising that 15% of Practicing Christians, or about one in seven, may have thought about taking this step. [See Figure 5.5]

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 churchgoing 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

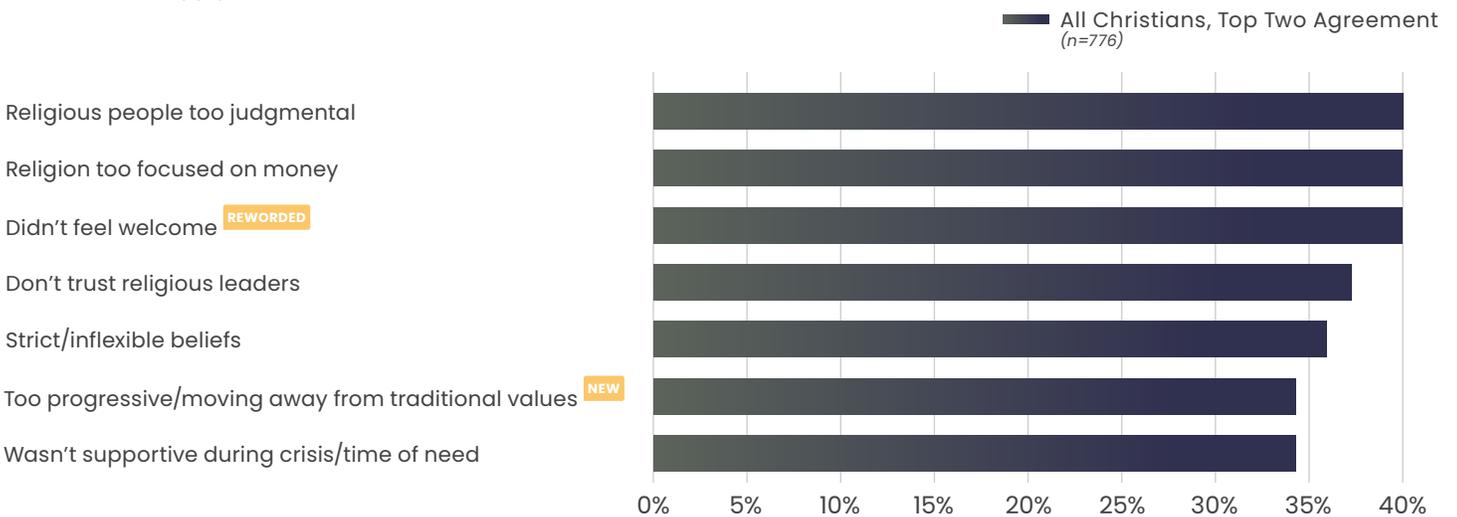
that's fair or not is moot; this is simply what people report.

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

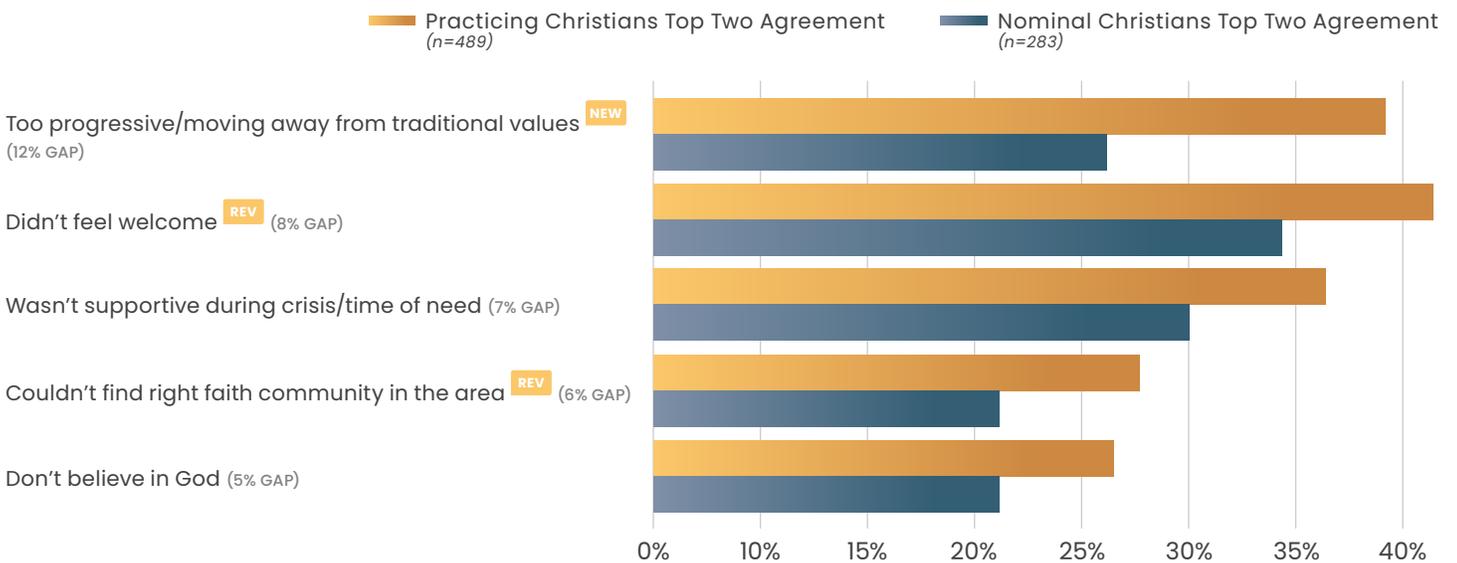
crisis or time of need (7% gap), that they couldn't find the right faith community near them (6% gap) or surprisingly, that they didn't believe in God (5% gap). [See Figure 5.7]

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).

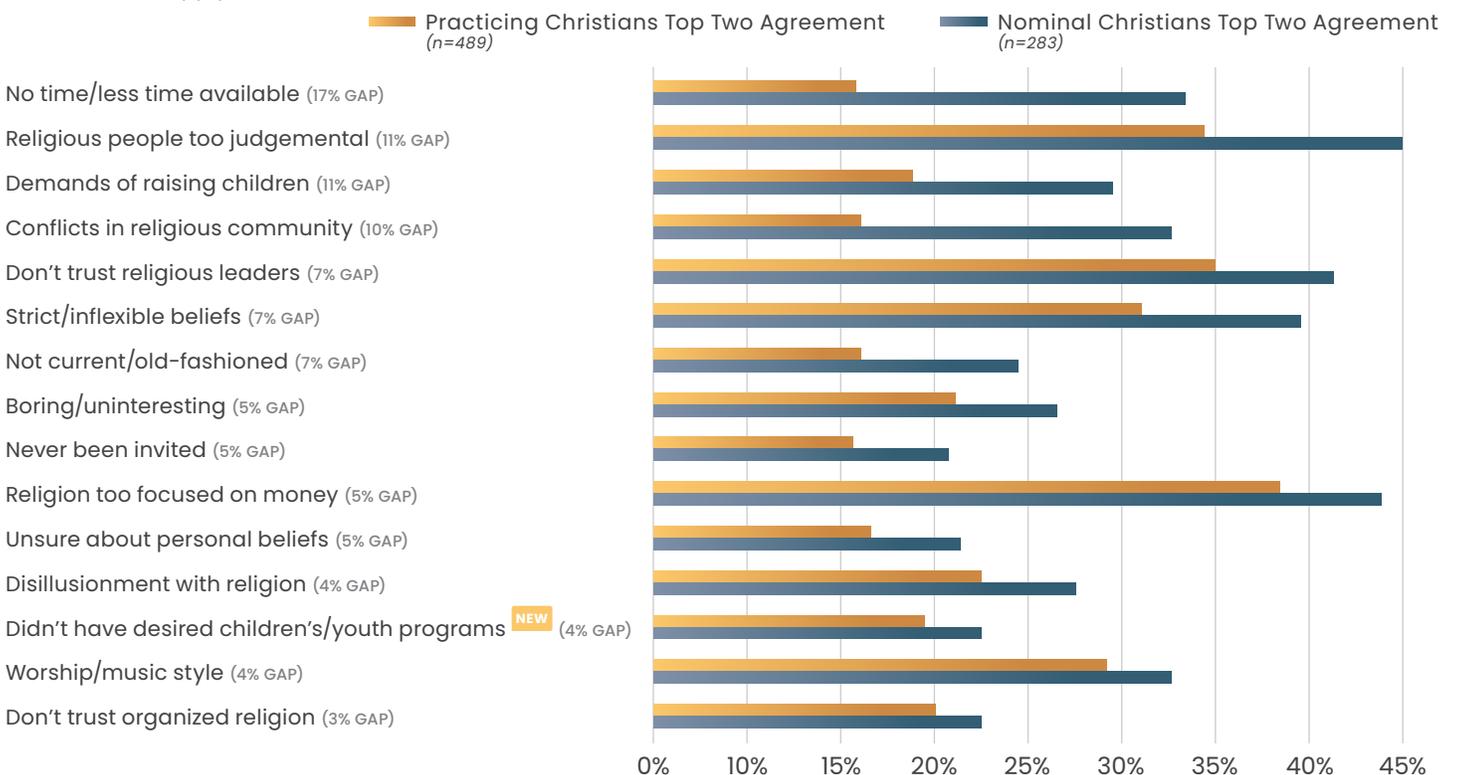
From a Nominal Christian’s perspective, saying a church was rigid or old-fashioned could be another way to admit that they felt

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.”

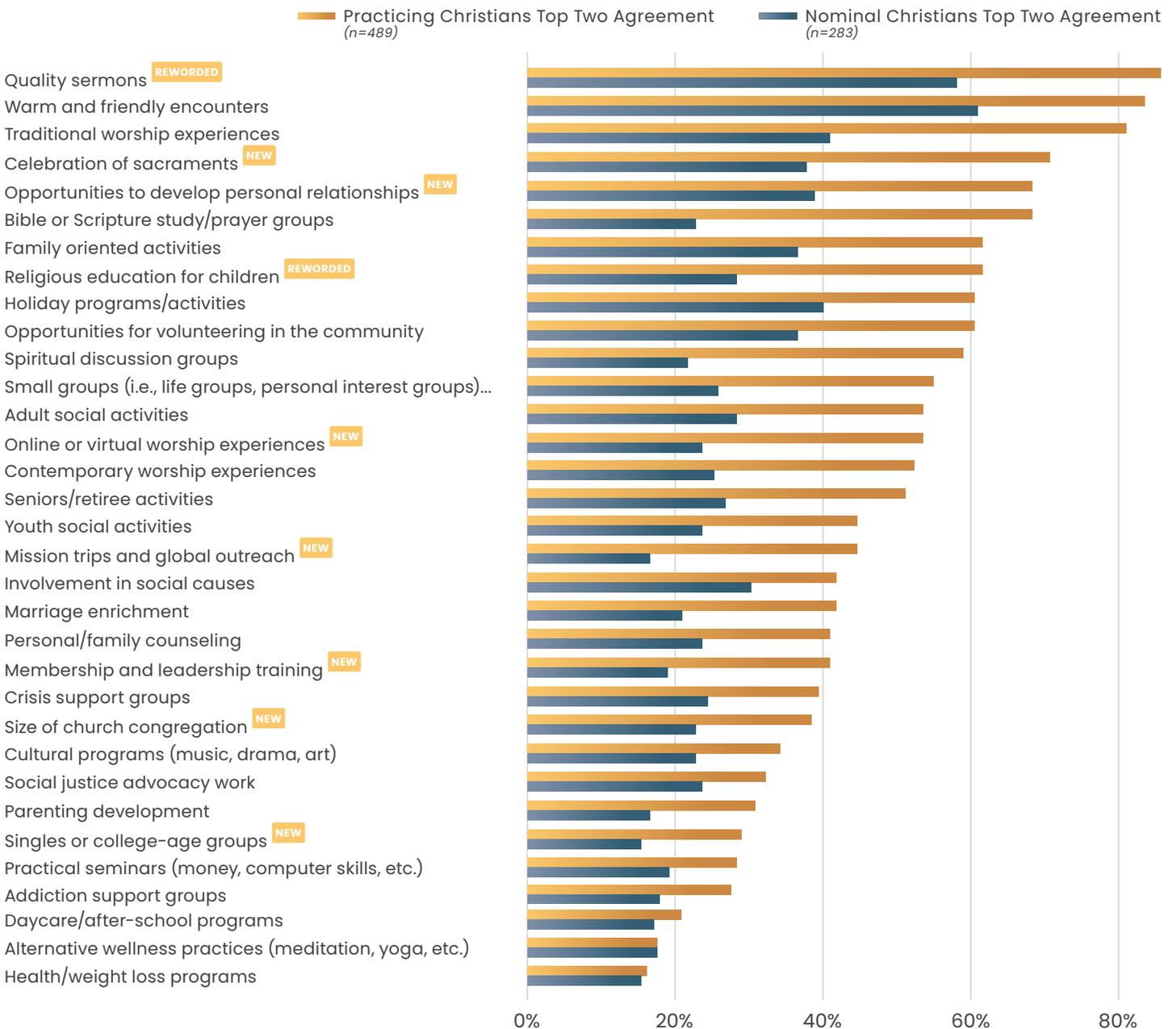
One consistent factor throughout these ratings was that Nominal Christians held nearly every element as less important to them than their Practicing Christian peers, usually by a significant margin. This makes sense for a group that sees faith and practice as having less influence in their lives.

# 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.)”



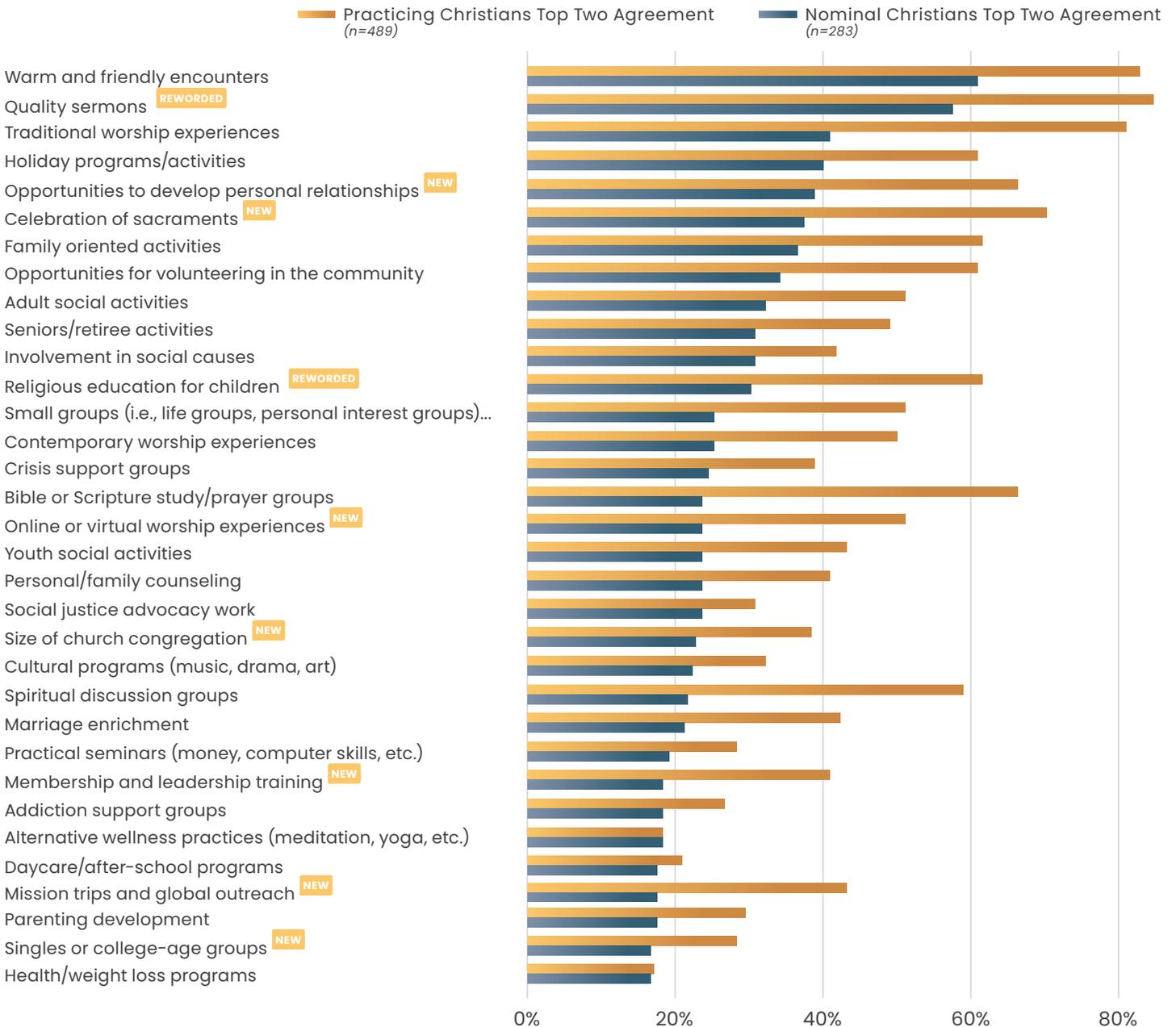
Top-two Importance among 9,504 American Christian Adults  
American Beliefs Study, 2021

# 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.”

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## Summary Highlights

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- | 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.

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# A Brief Methodology

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## 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 maximum margin of error of  $\pm 1.97\%$  at the 95% confidence level within any US Census Region. A comparative 2017 study involved the same size audience.

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

## The Questions

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

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

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

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

## The Respondents

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

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

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

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THE  
**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*

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## **MISSIONINSITE**

### **About MissionInsite**

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

*MissionInsite.com*

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## **ACS Technologies®**

### **About ACS Technologies®**

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

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