Church Dropouts: Reasons Young Adults Stay or Go between ages 18-22

Survey of 2,002 Young Adults Who Attended a Protestant Church Regularly in High School
Methodology

- A demographically balanced online panel was used for interviewing American adults between the ages of 23 and 30 years old
- The study was sponsored by LifeWay Students
- The survey was conducted September 15 – October 13, 2017
- Slight weights were used to balance gender, ethnicity, education, and region
- The sample was screened to only include those who attended a Protestant church regularly (twice a month or more) for at least a year in high school
- The completed sample is 2,002 surveys
- The sample provides 95% confidence that the sampling error from the online panel does not exceed ±2.4% (This margin of error accounts for the effect of weighting)
- Margins of error are higher in sub-groups
“Did you stop attending church regularly (twice a month or more) for at least a year between the ages of 18 and 22?”

S7: “Did you stop attending church regularly (twice a month or more) for at least a year between the ages of 18 and 22?”
Current church attendance among all young adults who attended a Protestant church regularly 1+ years in high school

S8: “Which of the following best describes your CURRENT church attendance? (Select One)”
Current overall faith preference

- Catholic/Roman Catholic: 10%
- Protestant: 49%
- Non-denominational Christian: 21%
- Christian Scientist: 2%
- Atheist: 3%
- Agnostic: 4%
- No preference: 4%
- Other: 2%

Receiving 1% or less: Orthodox Christian (Russian, Armenian, Greek), Jewish, Mormon/Latter Day Saints, Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, Jehovah’s Witness, Unitarian, Unity/Unity Church

S9: “Which of the following best describes your overall faith preference? (Select One)”
Q1: “At which of the following ages did you regularly attend church (by “regularly attend,” we mean attend at least twice a month for three or more months)? SELECT ALL THAT APPLY”
Regularly attended ages 18-22

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Q1: “At which of the following ages did you regularly attend church (by “regularly attend,” we mean attend at least twice a month for three or more months)? SELECT ALL THAT APPLY" Base: Current Age >= Age asked about (n ranges from =1855 at age 24 to =314 at age 30)
“How many different churches did you regularly attend at one time or another between grades 6-12?”

Q2: “How many different churches did you regularly attend at one time or another between grades 6-12? Please don’t count a church that is the same congregation but a different campus as a “different church.” (Select One)”
Reasons Young Adults Dropped Out of Church
Reasons young adults stop attending church

• Young adults who stopped attending church regularly between ages 18 and 22 for at least a year were asked what contributed to this decision
• 55 specific reasons were listed in the following four categories

Percent of church dropouts specifying one or more reasons within a category

- **Life changes/situations**: 96%
- **Church/pastor-related reasons**: 73%
- **Religious, ethical or political beliefs**: 70%
- **Student/Youth Ministry reasons**: 63%

Q3a: “Which of the following contributed to your decision to stop attending church regularly between the ages of 18 and 22 or earlier? (Select all that apply)” n=1,323
Top reasons church dropouts say they stopped attending church

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reason</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I moved to college and stopped attending church*</td>
<td>34%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Church members seemed judgmental or hypocritical</td>
<td>32%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I didn’t feel connected to people in my church</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I disagreed with the church’s stance on political/social issues</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My work responsibilities prevented me from attending</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I never connected with students in the student ministry</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I simply wanted a break from church</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I was only going to church to please others</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I moved too far away from the church to continue attending</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Asked of those with at least some college, n=1,109. 47% of this group selected this option

Q3a: “Which of the following ... contributed to your decision to stop attending church regularly between the ages of 18 and 22 or earlier? (Select all that apply)” n=1,323
I became too busy, though I still wanted to attend

It was now my choice instead of my parents’

I moved too far away from the church to continue attending

My work responsibilities prevented me from attending

I simply wanted a break from church

I moved to college and stopped attending church*

*Asked of those with at least some college, n=1,109. 47% of this group selected this option

Q3a: “Which of the following life changes/situations contributed to your decision to stop attending church regularly between the ages of 18 and 22 or earlier? (Select all that apply)” n=1,323
Life Changes/Situations – Continued
contributed to decision to stop attending

Among those who stopped attending between ages 18-22

- My school responsibilities prevented me from attending: 14%
- I chose to spend more time with friends outside the church: 14%
- I wanted to make life decisions that were not accepted by the church: 14%
- My family/home responsibilities prevented me from attending: 9%
- I lost touch with my church-going friends: 9%
- Other activities/scheduling conflicts prevented me from attending: 8%
- I felt too guilty about my lifestyle to attend church: 8%

Q3a: “Which of the following life changes/situations contributed to your decision to stop attending church regularly between the ages of 18 and 22 or earlier? (Select all that apply)” n=1,323
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- My parents divorced/separated: 7%
- My desire to attend church was not embraced by my group of friends: 6%
- My sports activities were on Sunday: 5%
- My friends stopped attending: 4%
- I got married: 4%
- Other life change: 9%
- None of these: 4%
The church was not helping me to develop spiritually
The sermons did not capture my attention
Church members were unfriendly/unwelcoming/cliquish
I didn't feel connected to people in my church
Church members seemed judgmental or hypocritical

Q3b: “Which of the following church/pastor-related reasons contributed to your decision to stop attending church regularly between the ages of 18 and 22 or earlier? (Select all that apply)” n=1,323
Church/Pastor-Related Reasons – Continued

Among those who stopped attending between ages 18-22

- The pastor I like left the church 14%
- Church members were too different from me 14%
- Church did not offer programs of interest 13%
- The worship style was unappealing 13%
- I didn't feel involved in meaningful work in the church 12%
- The sermons were not relevant to my life 10%

Q3b: "Which of the following church/pastor-related reasons contributed to your decision to stop attending church regularly between the ages of 18 and 22 or earlier? (Select all that apply)" n=1,323
Church/Pastor-Related Reasons – Continued
contributed to decision to stop attending

Among those who stopped attending between ages 18-22

- The pastor was not a good preacher: 9%
- The church expected too much of me (time, money, etc.): 9%
- The student minister/leader I like left the church: 5%
- Other church/pastor-related reason: 4%
- None of these: 27%

Q3b: “Which of the following church/pastor-related reasons contributed to your decision to stop attending church regularly between the ages of 18 and 22 or earlier? (Select all that apply)” n=1,323
Student/Youth Ministry Reasons contributed to decision to stop attending

Among those who stopped attending between ages 18-22

- I never connected with students in the student ministry 23%
- Students seemed judgmental or hypocritical 20%
- Students were unfriendly/unwelcoming/cliquish 17%
- My experience attending a small group or Sunday School class turned me off 12%
- I moved to the next age group and didn’t connect with the group 10%
- I didn’t get along with certain individuals in the student ministry 9%

Q3c: “Which of the following student/youth ministry reasons contributed to your decision to stop attending church regularly between the ages of 18 and 22 or earlier? (Select all that apply)” n=1,323
Among those who stopped attending between ages 18-22

- I went through a significant life event and no one at church cared: 9%
- I went through a significant life event and no one at church had answers: 9%
- Adult volunteer(s) I liked left the church/stopped volunteering: 7%
- I didn’t feel like I understood the message of the Bible: 7%
- Other churches I visited were not like the student ministry I was in: 4%
- Other student/youth ministry reason: 3%
- None of these: 37%

Q3c: “Which of the following student/youth ministry reasons contributed to your decision to stop attending church regularly between the ages of 18 and 22 or earlier? (Select all that apply)” n=1,323
Religious, Ethical, or Political Beliefs contributed to decision to stop attending

I disagreed with the church’s stance on political/social issues
- 25%

I was only going to church to please others
- 22%

I went through a challenge in life that caused me to question my faith
- 21%

I disagreed with the church’s moral/ethical guidelines for everyday living
- 20%

I no longer wanted to identify with church/organized religion
- 19%

I was unsure of the reasons behind my faith
- 17%

I was only going to church out of habit
- 17%

Q3d: “Which of the following religious, ethical, or political beliefs contributed to your decision to stop attending church regularly between the ages of 18 and 22 or earlier? (Select all that apply)” n=1,323

Among those who stopped attending between ages 18-22
Q3d: “Which of the following religious, ethical, or political beliefs contributed to your decision to stop attending church regularly between the ages of 18 and 22 or earlier? (Select all that apply)” n=1,323

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I disagreed with the church’s teachings about God</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I no longer wanted to identify with that particular denomination</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I no longer wanted to identify myself as a Christian</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I stopped believing in God</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I became angry at God for personal reasons</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other religious/ethical/political beliefs</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>None of these</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Stayed in Church
Factors contributing to continued regular attendance

Among those who continued attending between ages 18-22

Church was a vital part of my relationship with God
I wanted the church to help guide my decisions in everyday life
I wanted to follow a parent/family member’s example
Church activities were a big part of my life (i.e. youth group, church choir, etc.)
I felt that church was helping me become a better person
I was committed to the purpose and work of the church
Church was helping through a difficult time in my life
My friends were attending church at the time

Q5: “Which of the following factors contributed to your continued regular attendance between the ages of 18 and 22? (Select all that apply)” n=679
Factors contributing to continued regular attendance

Among those who continued attending between ages 18-22

- I mainly went to church out of habit: 21%
- I was afraid living a life without spiritual guidance: 19%
- The location of the church was convenient for me: 18%
- The time of the worship service(s) was convenient for me: 18%
- I attended a lot of missions trips/community service events run by the church: 17%
- I wanted to follow the example of someone I knew at church: 13%
- I attended church mainly to please others: 8%
- Other: 4%

Q5: “Which of the following factors contributed to your continued regular attendance between the ages of 18 and 22? (Select all that apply)” n=679
Occurred while attending church regularly during high school

Among those who continued attending between ages 18-22

- Students seemed judgmental or hypocritical: 21%
- Students were unfriendly/unwelcoming/cliquish: 18%
- I didn’t get along with certain individuals in the student ministry: 14%
- I never connected with students in the student ministry: 13%
- Adult volunteer(s) I liked left the church/stopped volunteering: 13%
- I moved to the next age group and didn’t connect with the group: 10%

Q6: “Which, if any, of the following occurred while you were attending church regularly during high school? (Select all that apply)” n=679
Occurred while attending church regularly during high school

Among those who continued attending between ages 18-22

- My experience attending a small group or Sunday School class turned me off: 9%
- Other churches I visited were not like the student ministry I was in: 7%
- I went through a significant life event and no one at church cared: 6%
- I didn’t feel like I understood the message of the Bible: 5%
- I went through a significant life event and no one at church had answers: 5%
- None of these: 43%

Q6: “Which, if any, of the following occurred while you were attending church regularly during high school? (Select all that apply)” n=679
Dropped Out and Returned to Church
Current church attendance among those who dropped out between ages 18-22

S8: “Which of the following best describes your CURRENT church attendance? (Select One)”
Q7: “Which of the following situations or influences contributed to your decision to start attending church again? (Select all that apply)” Asked of those who dropped out and currently attend at all. n=940
Contributed to decision to start attending church again

I became interested in attending group studies or activities at the church 14%
I had a crisis in my life (i.e. death in the family, etc.) 14%
I wanted to find new friends 13%
I felt convicted of the need to return 12%
I needed the church for a significant life event (i.e. wedding, baptism, etc.) 7%
The church was involved in social issues of interest to me 6%
Other 8%

Q7: “Which of the following situations or influences contributed to your decision to start attending church again? (Select all that apply)” Asked of those who dropped out and currently attend at all. n=940
Dropped Out of Church
Planned on a taking a break from church

Among those who stopped attending between ages 18-22

Q8: “Thinking back to your days of regular church attendance in high school, had you planned on taking a break from church once you finished high school?” n=1,323
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