

Church Dropouts: How Many Leave Church between ages 18-22 and Why?



Spring 2007

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Methodology

- Survey of Young Adults ages 18-30 in April-May 2007
- Sample size of 1,023 provides 95% confidence that sampling error does not exceed $\pm 3.1\%$
- Eligible respondents attended a Protestant church regularly (twice a month or more) for at least a year in high school
- The web survey utilized a representative national panel of Americans
 - Panels have been utilized by research firms such as the Gallup Organization and National Family Opinion (NFO) for over 60 years
 - Online panels have been heavily utilized by Gallup, NFO, Harris Interactive and others for over 10 years
 - Panels facilitate accurate sampling and high response rates and ensure that emerging generations without telephone landlines are included
- Church “Dropouts” are defined as those who “stopped attending church regularly for at least a year between the ages of 18 and 22”

Key Findings

How many leave church between ages 18-22?

Among those who attended a Protestant church twice a month or more for at least a year in high school:

70 percent of 23-30 year olds stopped attending church regularly for at least a year between ages 18-22*

– 35% of these dropouts eventually returned and are attending church twice a month

*Throughout this report, those who “stopped attending church regularly for at least a year between the ages of 18 and 22” are referred to as church “dropouts”

Key Findings

Why do young people drop out of church?

- Life changes or situations are the top category of reasons – 97% of those who dropped out of church indicate at least one of 19 reasons

Life changes/situation examples:

- “Simply wanted a break from church” (27%)
- “Moved to college and stopped attending church” (25%)
- “Work responsibilities prevented me from attending” (23%)

- Church or Pastor related reasons are the second category – 58% of those who dropped out indicate at least one item among these 14 reasons

Church/Pastor-related examples:

- “Church members seemed judgmental or hypocritical” (26%)
- “Didn’t feel connected to the people in my church” (20%)

- Religious, ethical or political beliefs are the third category – 52% of those who dropped out indicate at least one item among these 12 reasons

How Many are Church Dropouts?

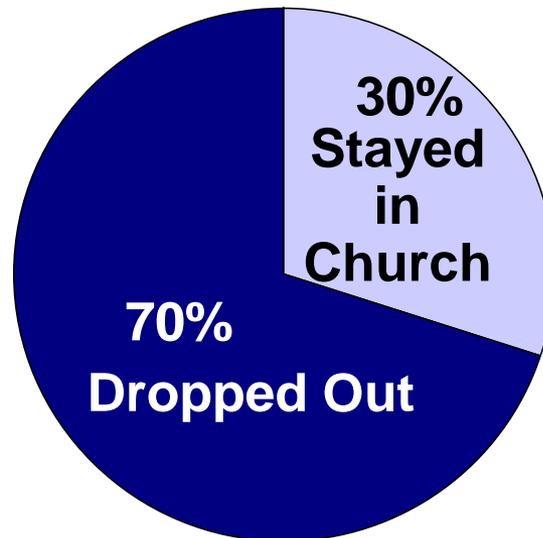
Percentage who leave between ages 18-22

The Dropout Rate

Among those who attended a Protestant church twice a month or more for at least a year in high school:

70 percent of young adults ages 23-30 stopped attending church regularly for at least a year between ages 18-22

23 - 30 Year Olds



Those who stayed in church attended with varying levels of frequency

S3. Did you stop attending church **regularly** for at least a year between the ages of 18 and 22?

Base: Attended a Protestant church for at least a year in high school.

18-30 year olds (n=1,557), 23-30 year olds (n=732)

Note: This study includes 18-30 year olds. The dropout rate for 18-30 year olds, including 18-22 year olds who may still drop out, is 65%

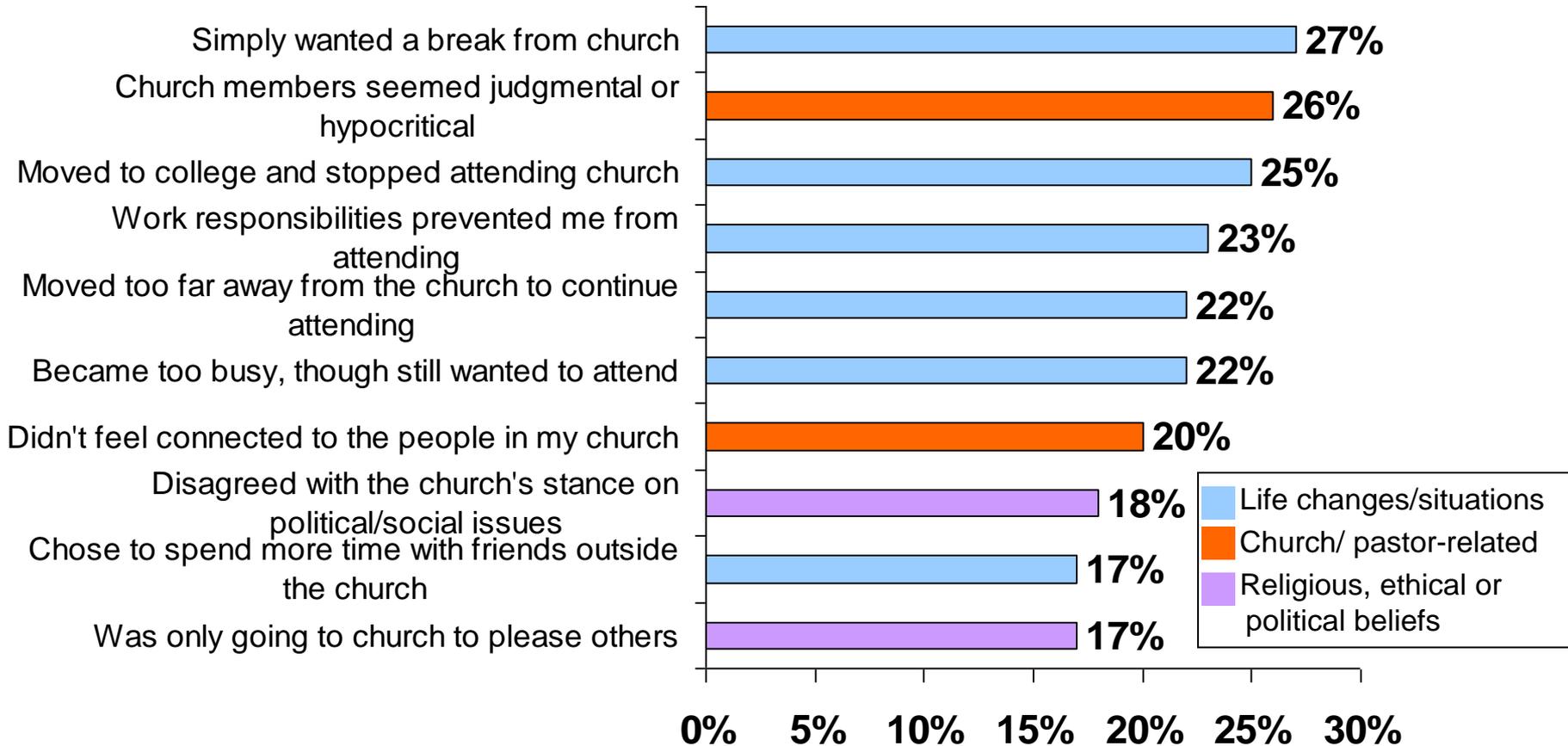
Why do Dropouts Leave?

Dropouts indicate the factors that contributed to their decision

Why dropouts stop attending church

- 45 specific reasons were listed in three categories and an opportunity was provided to specify other reasons within each category
 - 19 reasons were listed in the category **life changes/situations**,
 - 14 reasons were listed in the category **church/pastor-related**, and
 - 12 reasons were listed in the category **religious, ethical or political beliefs**
- Almost every church dropout indicated a change in their life or their life situation contributed to their decision to stop attending church regularly
- Half indicated a specific reason in the other two categories
- Six of the top 10 specific reasons indicated are life changes/situations

Top 10 reasons church dropouts indicate they stopped attending church

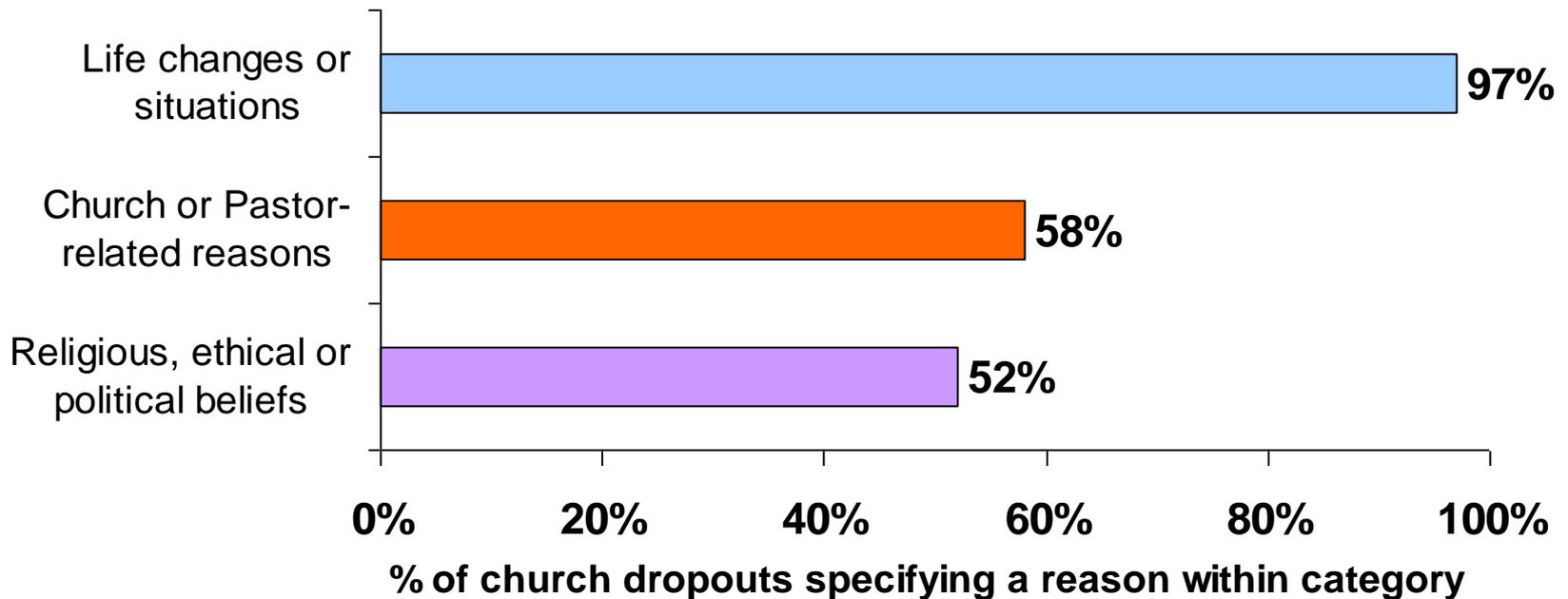


Q2a. Which of the following factors contributed to your decision to stop attending church regularly between the ages of 18 and 22?

Base: S3 = "Yes" (n=615)

Church dropouts are most likely to indicate they stopped attending church because of life changes or situations

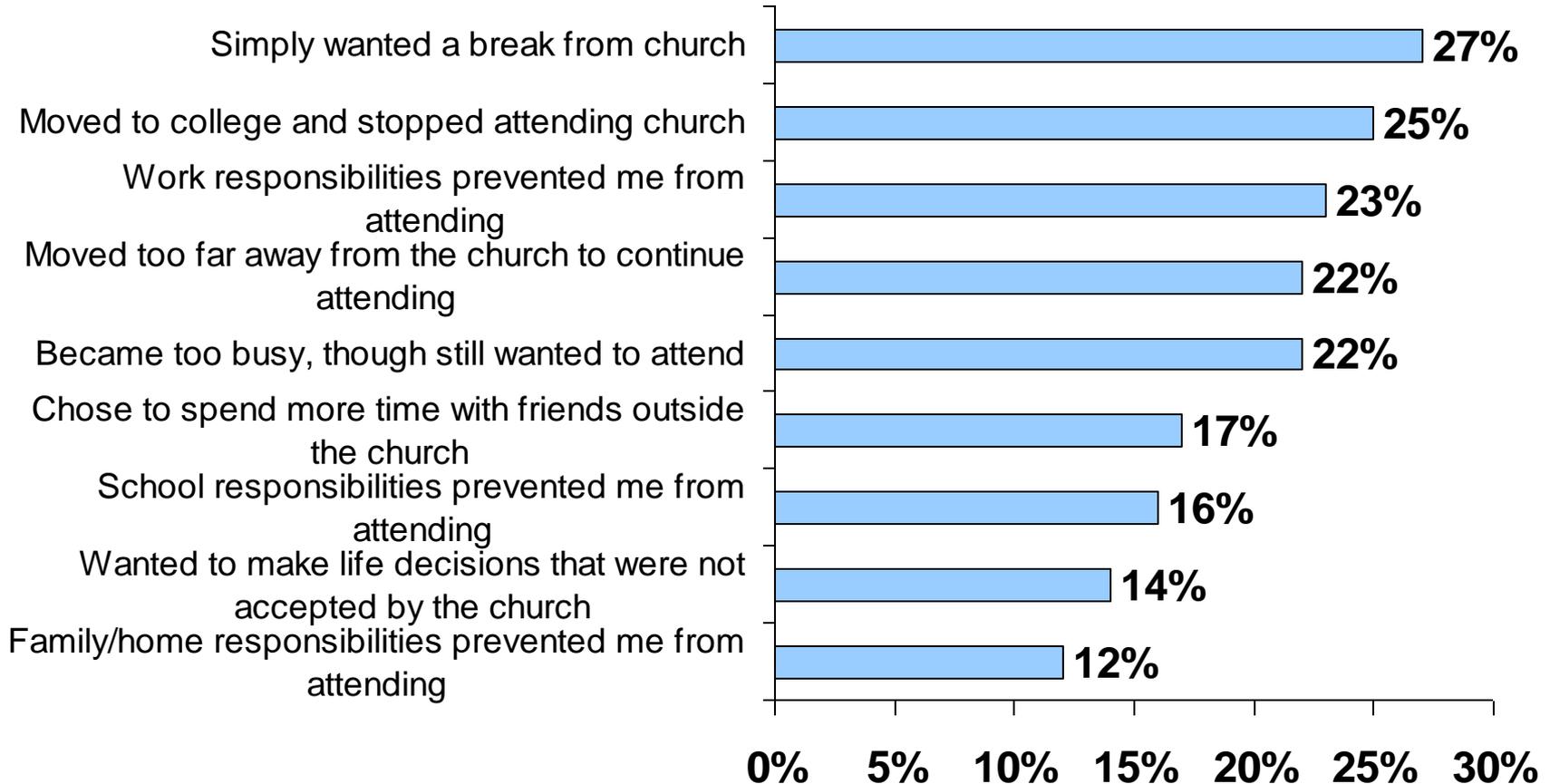
Categories of specific reasons for stopping church attendance



Q2a. Which of the following factors contributed to your decision to stop attending church regularly between the ages of 18 and 22?

Base: S3 = "Yes" (n=615)

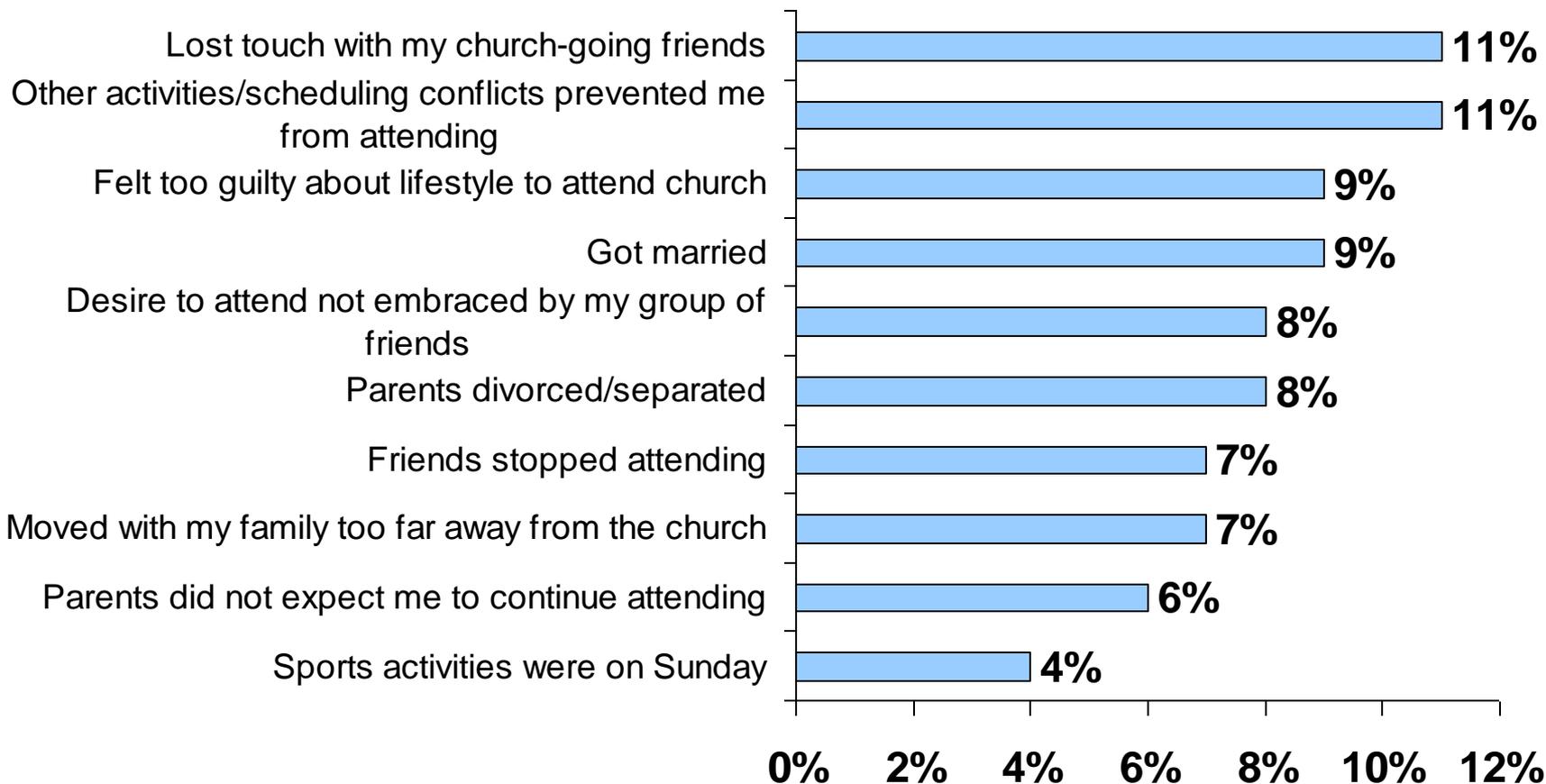
Life changes/situations dropouts indicate contributed to the stop in church attendance



Q2a. Which of the following factors contributed to your decision to stop attending church regularly between the ages of 18 and 22?

Base: S3 = "Yes" (n=615)

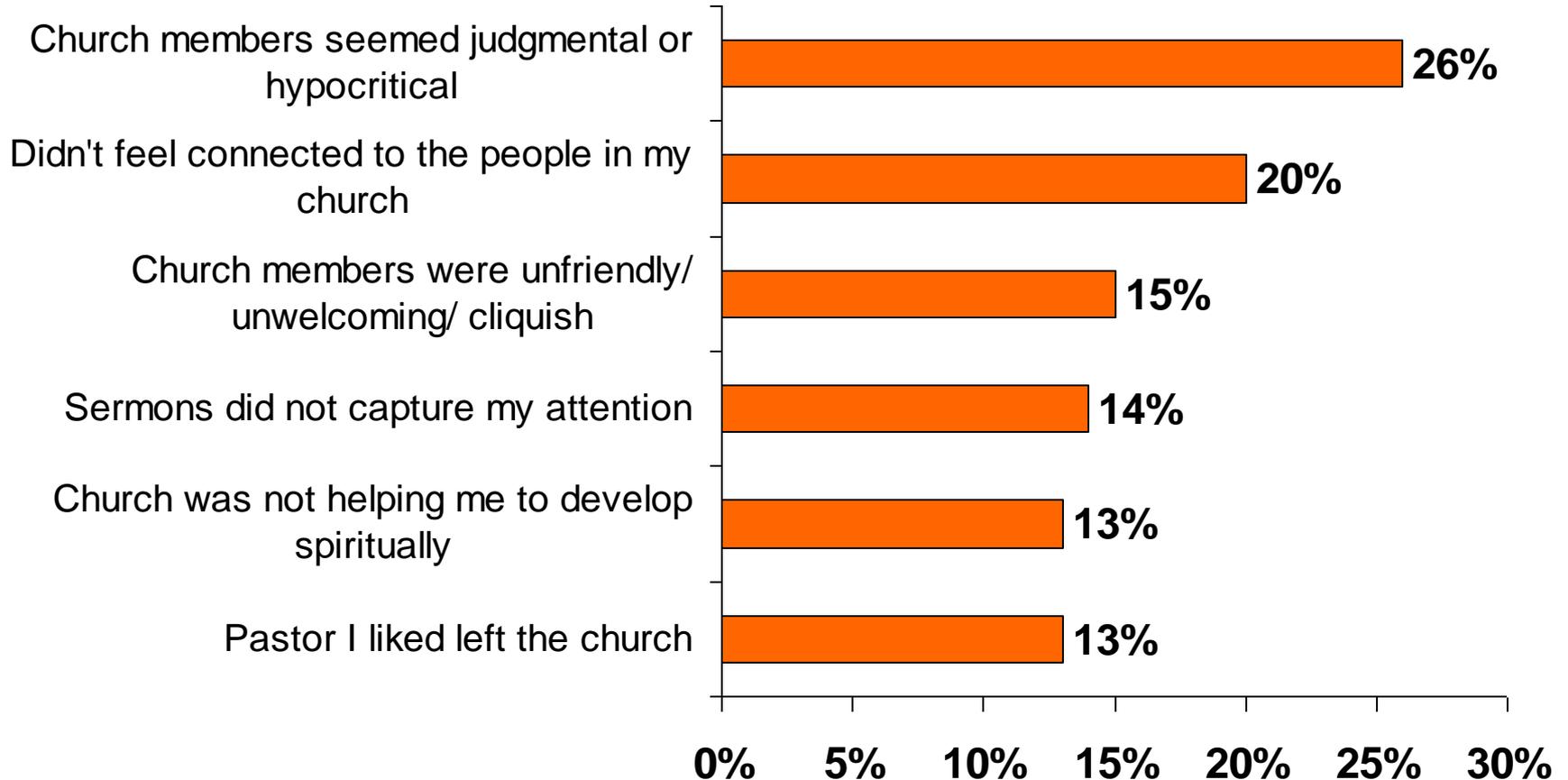
Life changes/situations dropouts indicate contributed to the stop in church attendance -- continued



Q2a. Which of the following factors contributed to your decision to stop attending church regularly between the ages of 18 and 22?

Base: S3 = "Yes" (n=615)

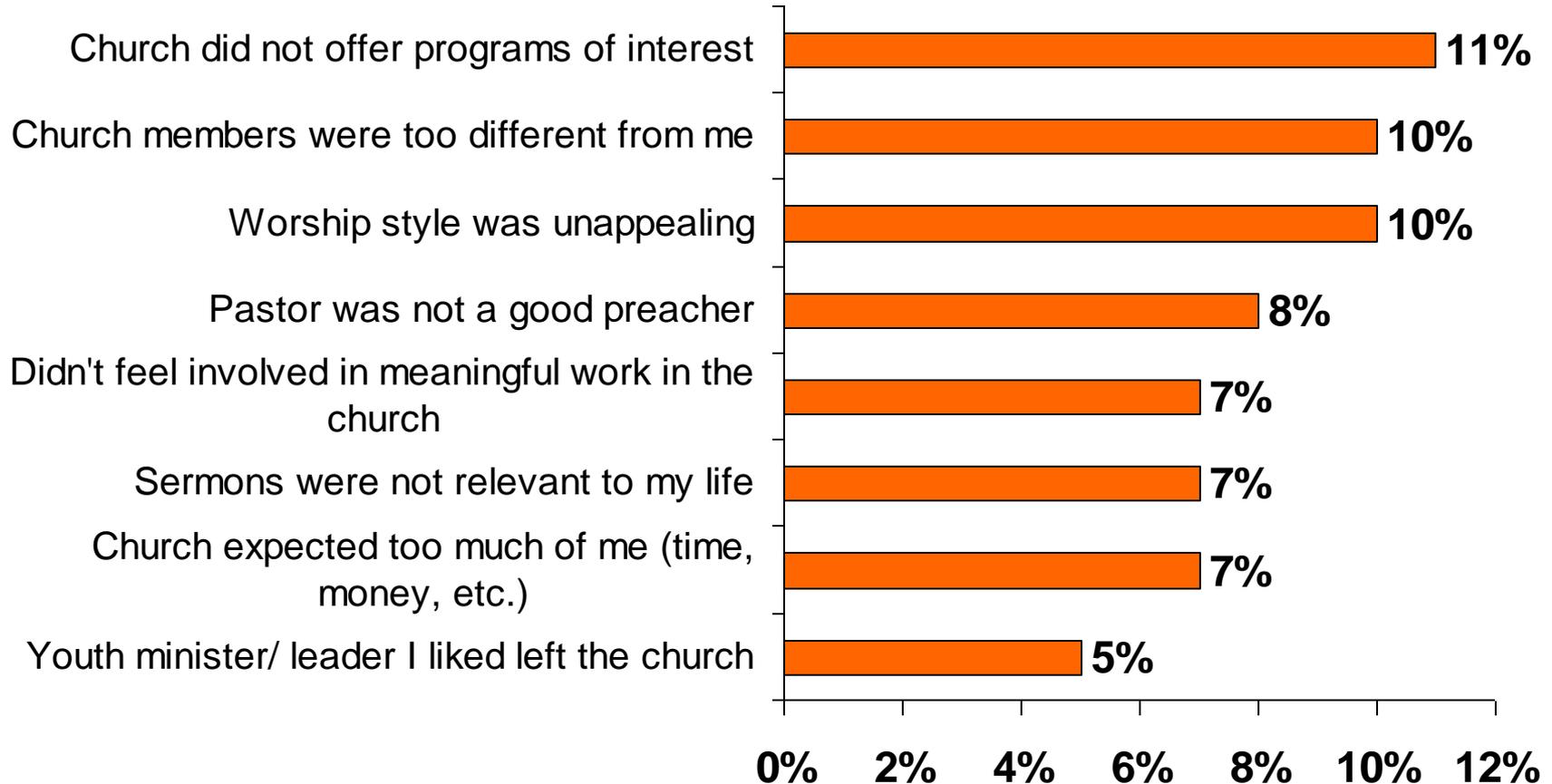
Church/pastor-related reasons dropouts indicate contributed to the stop in church attendance



Q2a. Which of the following factors contributed to your decision to stop attending church regularly between the ages of 18 and 22?

Base: S3 = "Yes" (n=615)

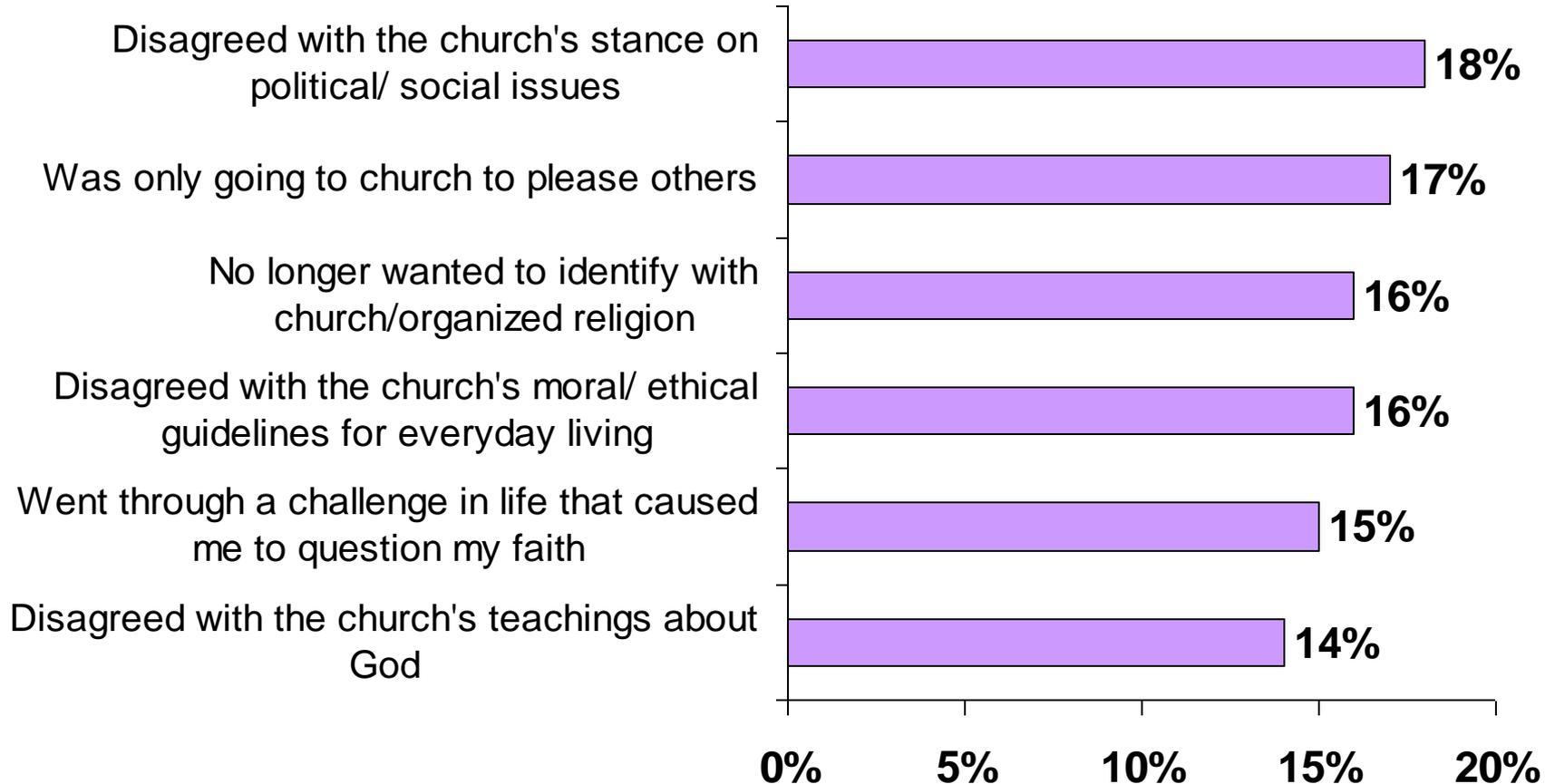
Church/pastor-related reasons dropouts indicate contributed to the stop in church attendance -- continued



Q2a. Which of the following factors contributed to your decision to stop attending church regularly between the ages of 18 and 22?

Base: S3 = "Yes" (n=615)

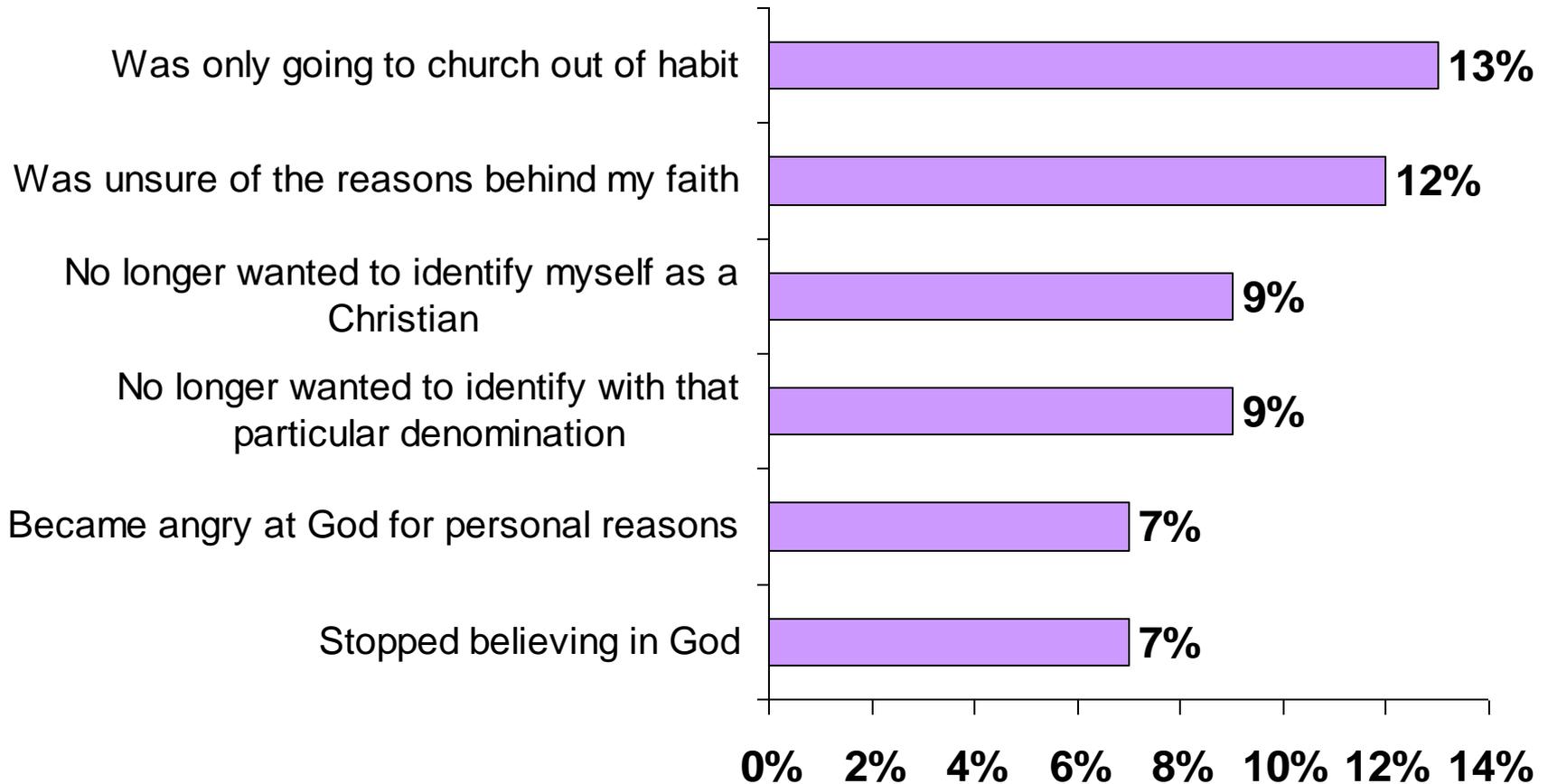
Religious, ethical or political reasons dropouts indicate contributed to the stop in church attendance



Q2a. Which of the following factors contributed to your decision to stop attending church regularly between the ages of 18 and 22?

Base: S3 = "Yes" (n=615)

Religious, ethical or political reasons dropouts indicate contributed to stopping -- continued



Q2a. Which of the following factors contributed to your decision to stop attending church regularly between the ages of 18 and 22?

Base: S3 = "Yes" (n=615)

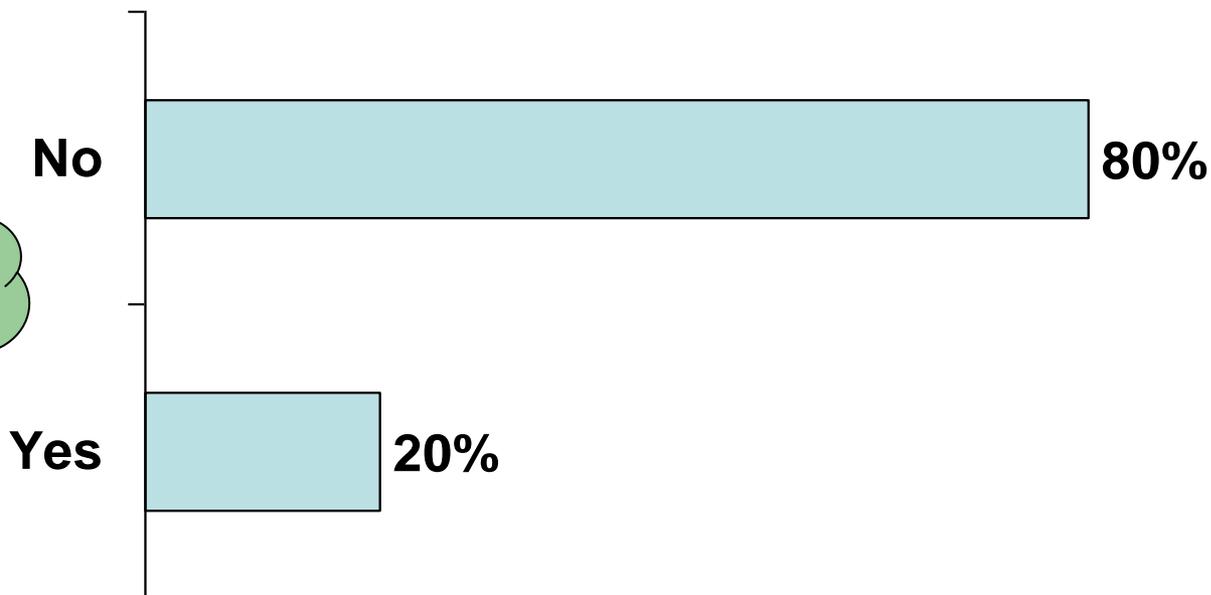
While attending regularly only 20% of church dropouts planned to leave church after high school



After high school, I'm leaving church!



Church dropouts who during high school already planned to leave church



Q5. 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?

Base: S3 = "Yes" (n=615)

Few dropouts who plan to leave church, tell anyone of their plans



After high school, I'm leaving church!

Among 101 church dropouts surveyed who planned to leave church after high school:

26 Told someone about their desire

“Mother,” “friends,” and “parents” were the most common person they told

75 Did not tell anyone

“I kept my feelings secret for fear of losing my friends”

“Not really, I just told my parents I didn’t like it”

“No, there was no one I knew that would support my decision to reject God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit.”

Q5a. Did you talk to anyone about your desire to leave church? If so, who did you talk to?

Base: Q5 = “Yes” (n=101)

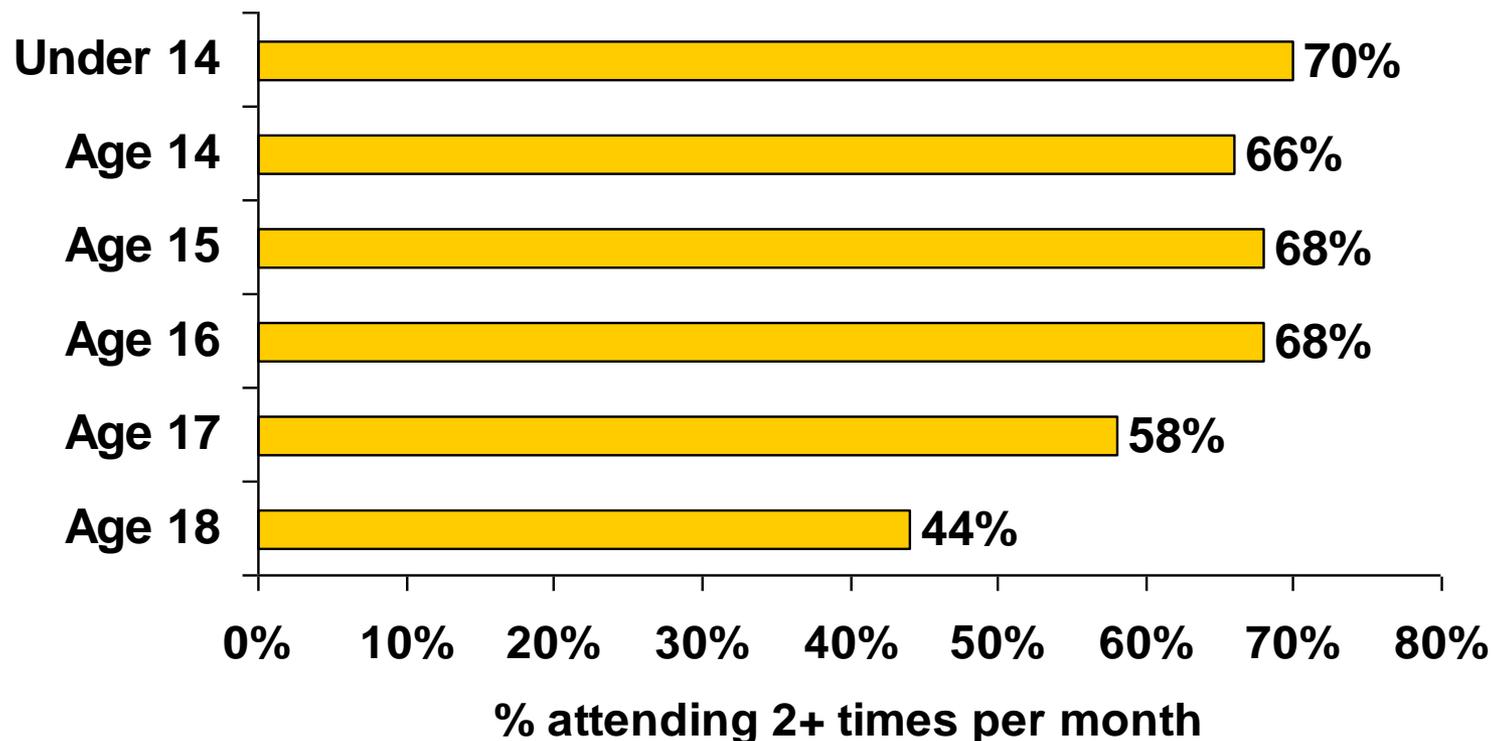
When do Dropouts Leave?

Church attendance is a revolving door

Who attends church is constantly changing, but the number drops sharply between ages 17-19

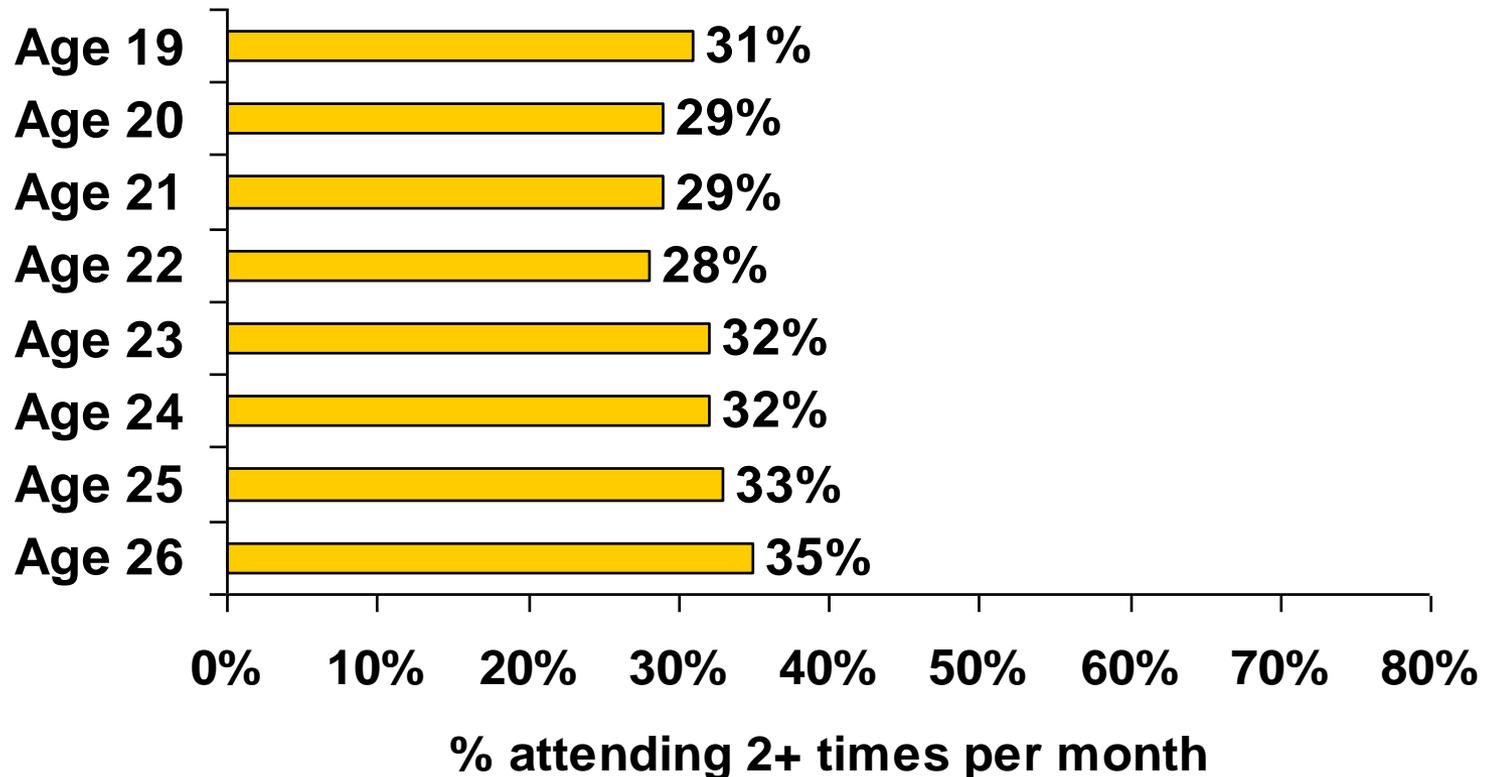
- Churn occurs at every age: some attendees are new or returning to church at the same time others are leaving
- About two-thirds attend twice a month or more at a given age under 14, 14, 15, and 16
- This is followed by fewer teens attending church twice a month at age 17, even fewer at age 18, and fewer still at age 19 – less than half the number compared to age 16
- The lowest twice-a-month attendance levels occur at age 22

Ages young people attended church at least twice a month



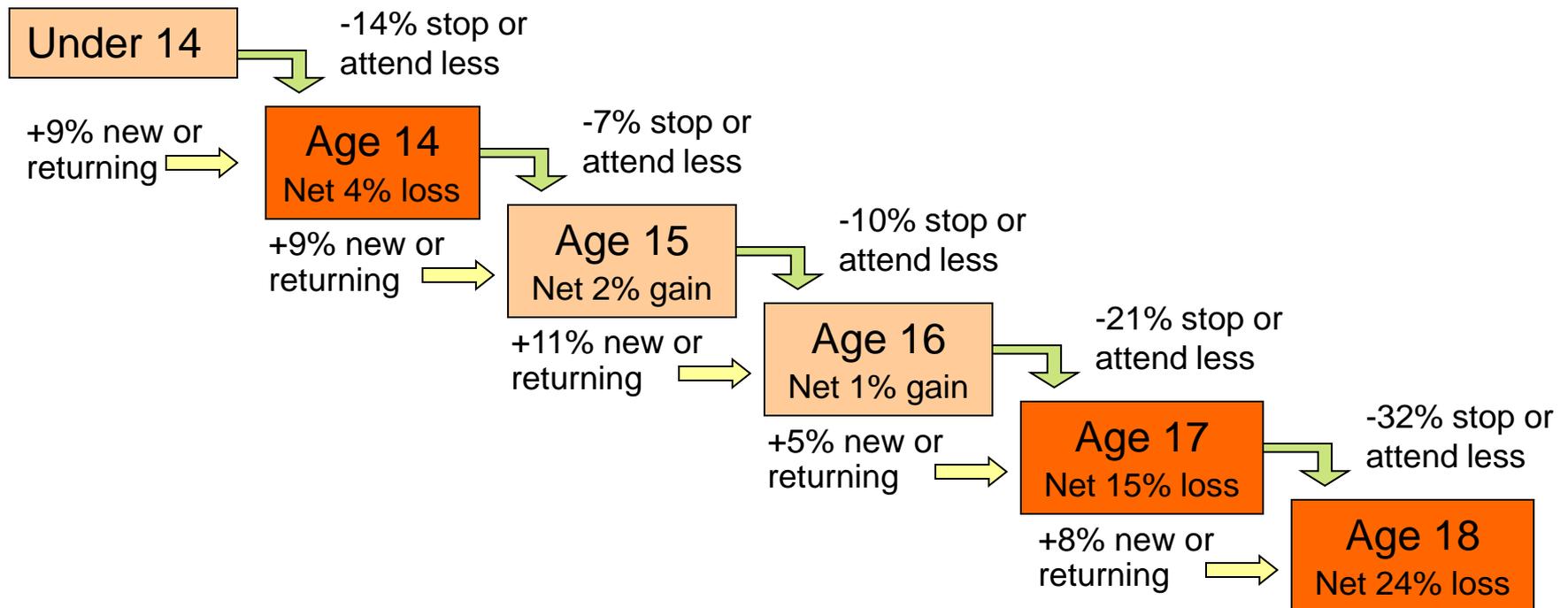
Q1a. At which of the following ages did you regularly attend church (by “regularly attend,” we mean attend at least twice a month for three or more months)? *Base: All (n=1,023 through age 18)*

Ages young people attended church at least twice a month -- continued



Q1a. 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)? *Base: Current Age >= Age asked about (n ranges from =964 at age 19 to 465 at age 26)*

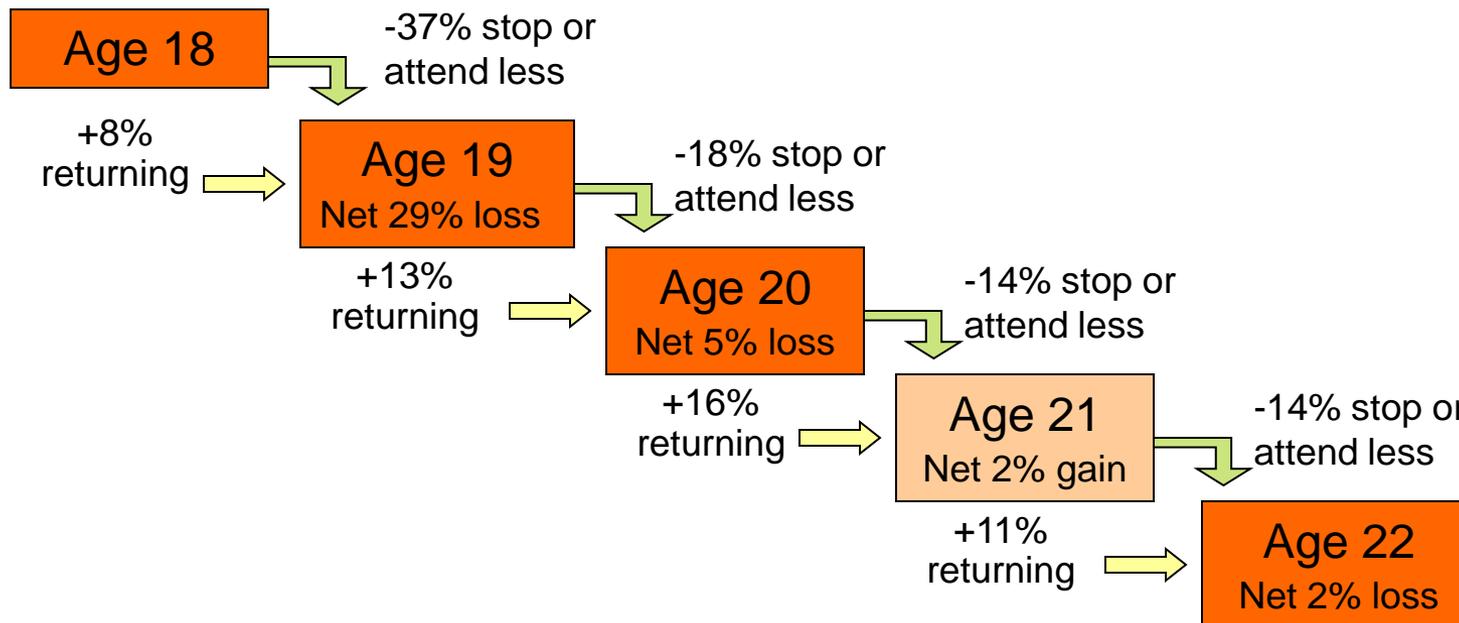
There is constant turnover in those who attended at one age compared to those who attended the following year



Note: “Net” percent may not equal “new/returning” minus “stop/attend less” due to rounding

Q1a. 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)? *Base: All (n=1,023 through age 18)*

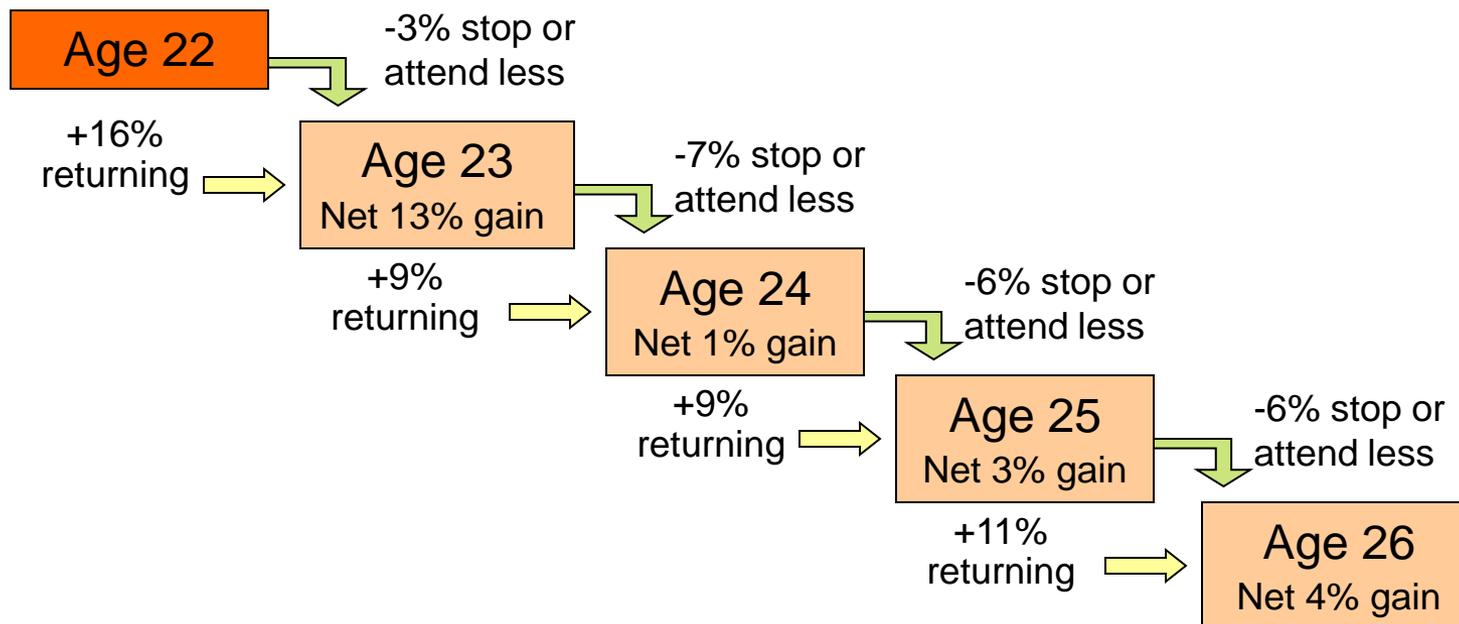
Churn among those who attended church at least twice a month is heavy through ages 18 to 22



Note: "Net" percent may not equal "new/returning" minus "stop/attend less" due to rounding

Q1a. 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)? *Base: All (n ranges from =964 at age 19 to 785 at age 22)*

Churn continues after age 22, but the number returning to twice-a-month attendance exceeds those leaving



Note: "Net" percent may not equal "new/returning" minus "stop/attend less" due to rounding

Q1a. 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)? *Base: All (n ranges from =785 at age 22 to 465 at age 26)*

This study only included those who attended a Protestant church regularly for at least a year in high school, but the religious background they indicated did vary

<u>Childhood Religious Background</u>	<u>Total</u>
Catholic	13%
Protestant or Christian (non-denominational)	68%
Mormon/ Jehovah's Witness/ Christian Science	5%
Secular/ Nonreligious/ Agnostic/ Atheist	2%
Other	7%
None of the above	4%

Q10. Please indicate which of the following religious preferences most closely match your own childhood religious background. *Base: All (n=1,023)*

S6. What is your current religious preference? *Base: All (n=1,023)*

This study only included those who attended a Protestant church regularly for at least a year in high school, but the current religious preference they indicated did vary

<u>Current Religious Preference</u>	<u>Total</u>
Catholic	14%
Protestant	59%
Mormon/ Jehovah's Witness/ Christian Science	7%
Secular/ Nonreligious/ Agnostic/ Atheist	5%
Other	2%
No preference	12%

Q10. Please indicate which of the following religious preferences most closely match your own childhood religious background. *Base: All (n=1,023)*

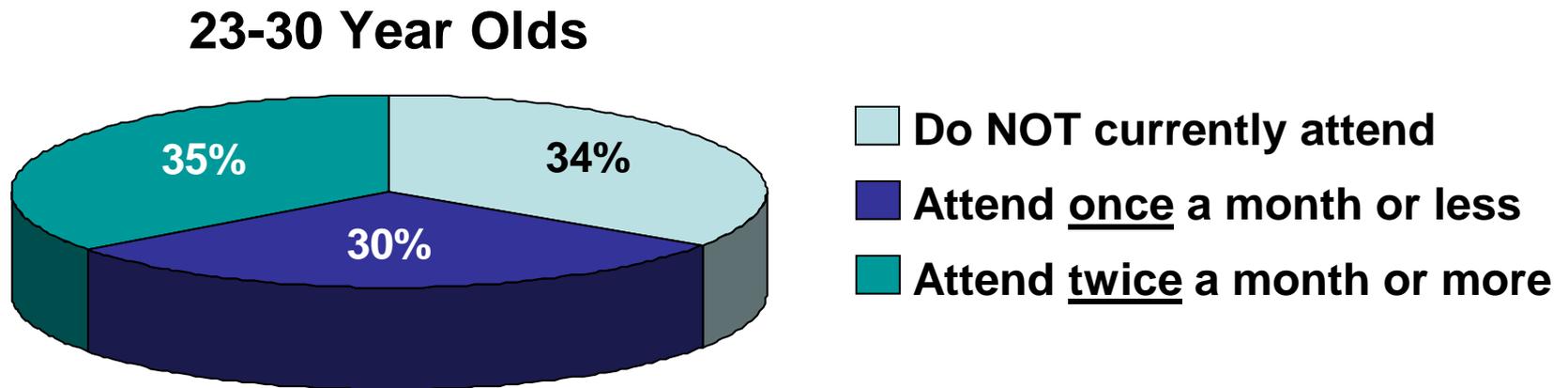
S6. What is your current religious preference? *Base: All (n=1,023)*

Why do Some Dropouts Return to Church?

Dropouts who returned indicate the influences that contributed to their decision to return

Church dropouts do not all leave for good – one third have resumed attending at least twice a month

Current church attendance among those who dropped out



S5. Which of the following best describes your CURRENT church attendance?

Base: S3 = "Yes" (23-30 year olds n=477)

Why young adults return to church after dropping out for a year or more

Dropouts who returned to church indicate they did so because of encouragement from family and friends, a desire to return or a life event

Encouragement from others

- 39 percent returned due to encouragement from parents or family members
- 21 percent returned through encouragement from friends or acquaintances
- 50 percent returned through encouragement from either family OR friends

Desire or calling

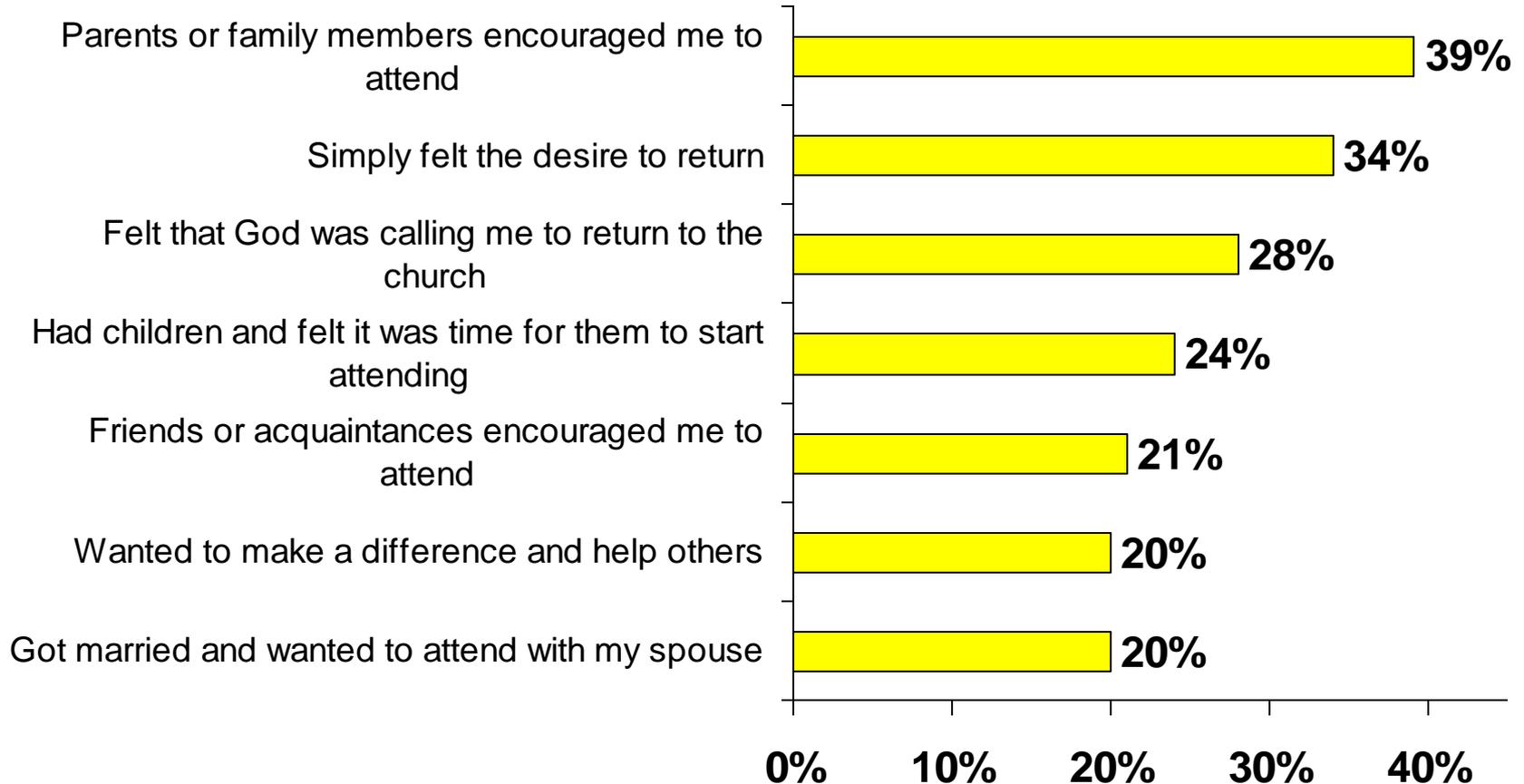
- 34 percent started attending again because of a simple desire to return – this was a significantly higher reason for women than men (41% vs. 22%)
- 28 percent felt that God was calling them to return to church – this was a significantly higher reason for women than men (34% vs. 18%)

Life events

- 24 percent had children and felt it was time for them to start attending – this was a significantly higher reason for women than men (31% vs. 13%)
- 20 percent got married and wanted to attend with their spouse

Why some dropouts return to church*

* Reasons indicated by young adults who returned to church after dropping out for at least a year



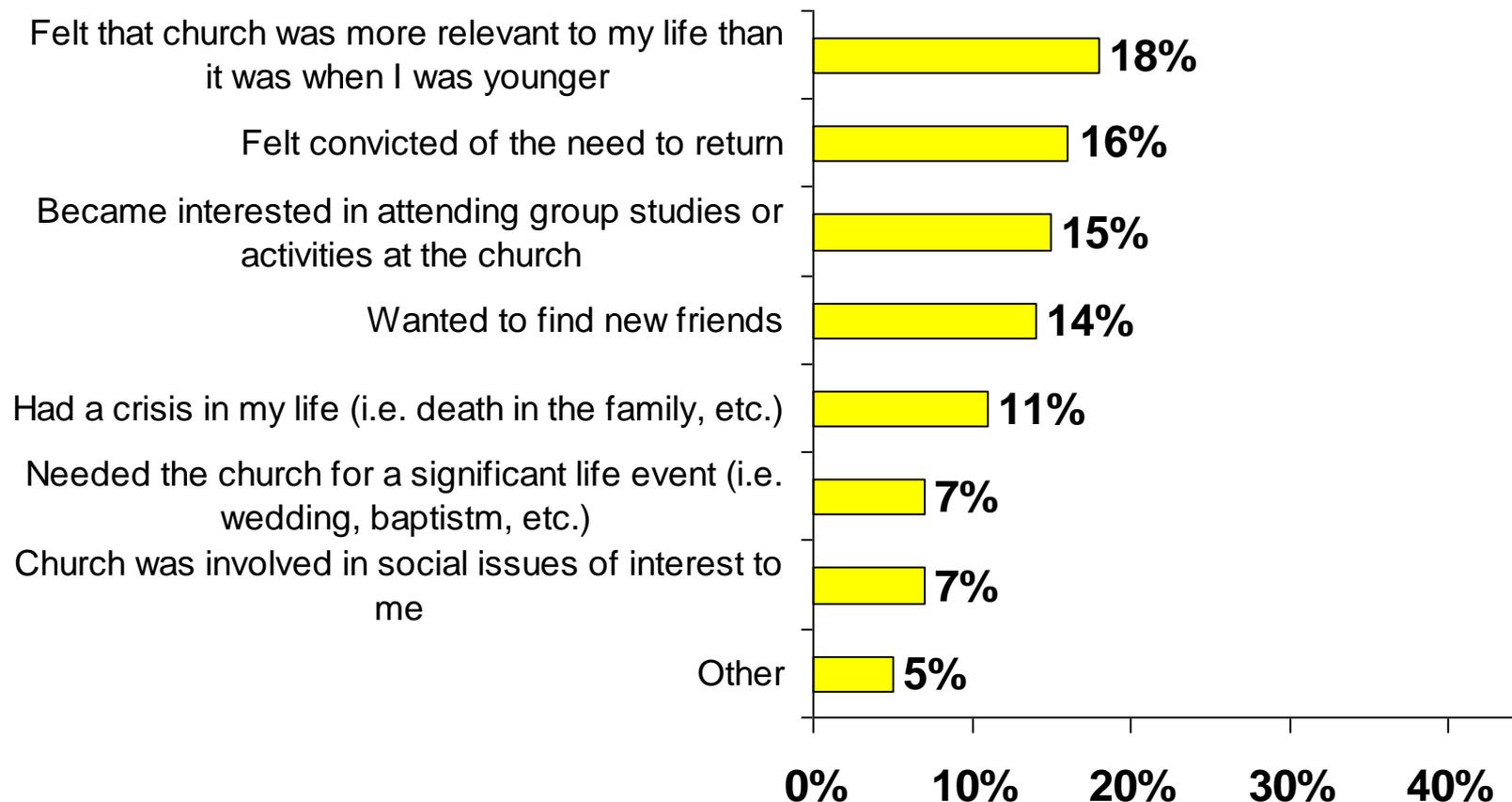
Q4. Which of the following situations or influences contributed to your decision to start attending church again?

Base: S5 = Attend and S3 = "Yes" (n=394)

Why some dropouts return to church*

-- continued

* Reasons indicated by young adults who returned to church after dropping out for at least a year



Q4. Which of the following situations or influences contributed to your decision to start attending church again?

Base: S5 = Attend and S3 = "Yes" (n=394)

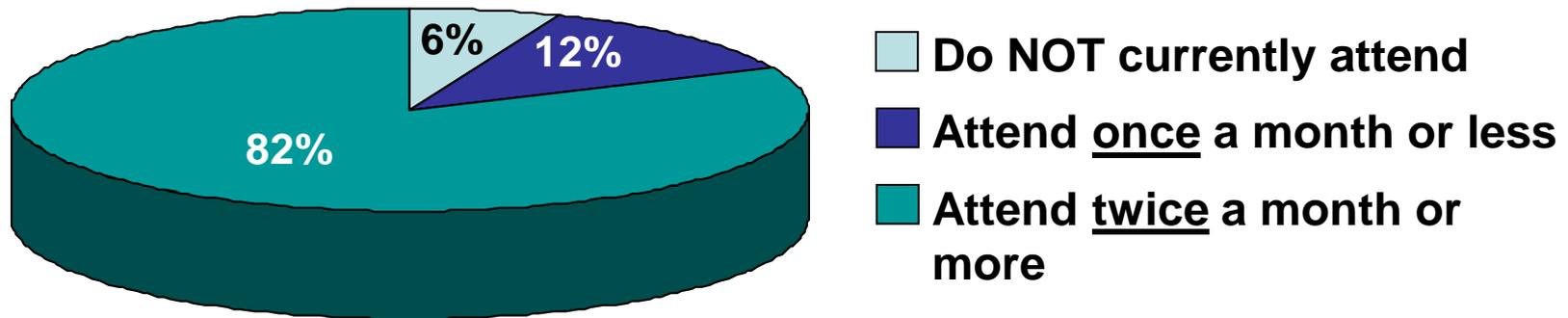
Why do Some Young Adults Stay in Church?

Young adults who stay in church indicate the factors that contributed to their continued attendance

Almost all young adults who stayed in church between ages 18-22 attend church today at least occasionally

Current church attendance among those who stayed in church between ages 18-22

23-30 Year Olds



S5. Which of the following best describes your CURRENT church attendance?

Base: S3 = "No" (23-30 year olds n=255)

Why some young church goers continue attending church

Church goers who stayed in church between ages 18 and 22, indicate they did so because they saw personal relevance (now and in the future) and were committed to the church's purpose

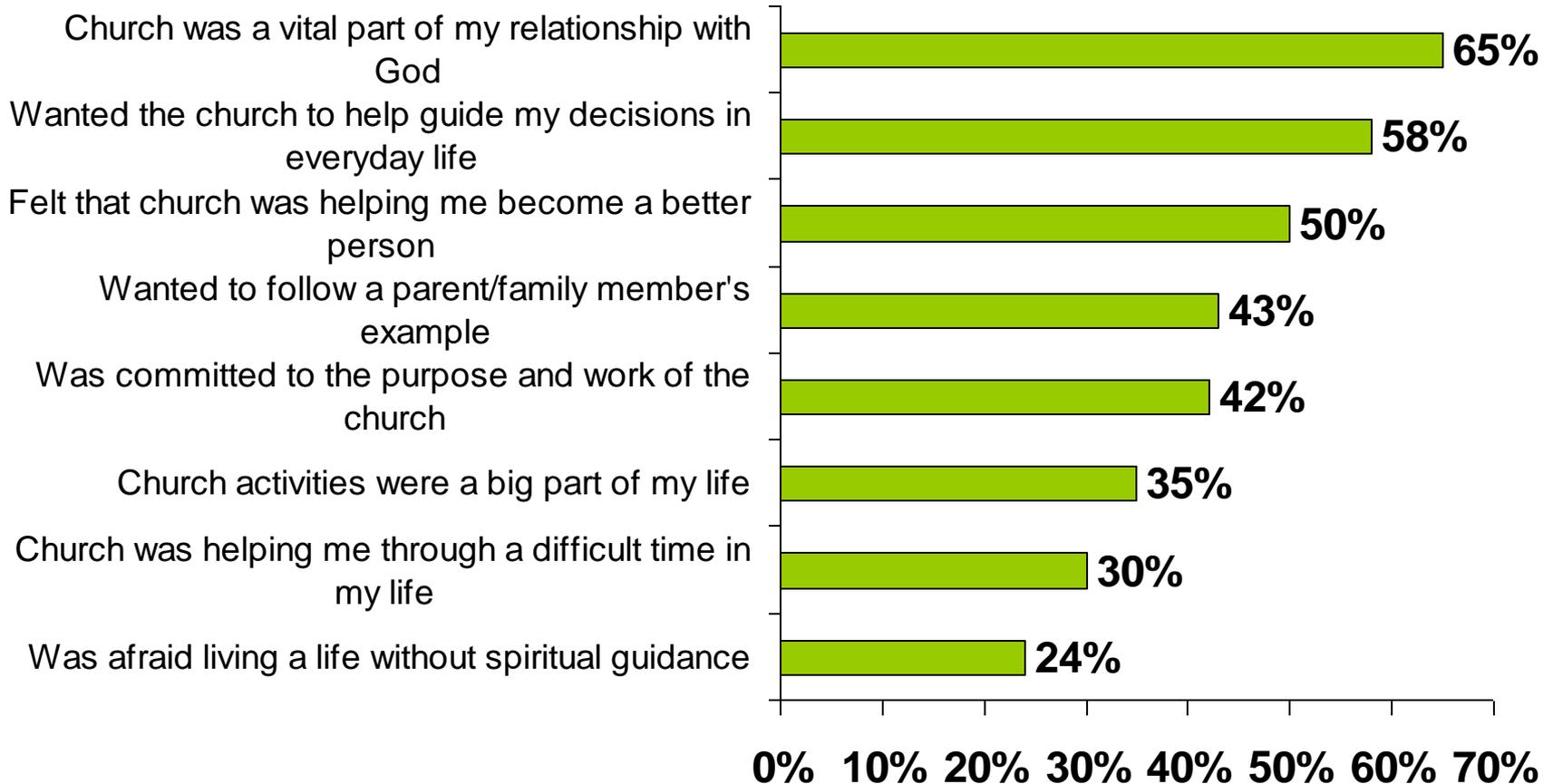
Personal relevance and commitment

- Two-thirds stayed in church because it was a vital part of their relationship with God (65%)
- 58 percent stayed to receive guidance from the church for everyday decisions
- 42 percent remained out of commitment to the purpose and work of the church

Perceived benefits

- Similarly, half of church goers saw church helping them become a better person (50%)
- Almost a third were drawing help from the church to get through a difficult time in their life (30%)
- 43 percent desired to follow the example of a parent or family member

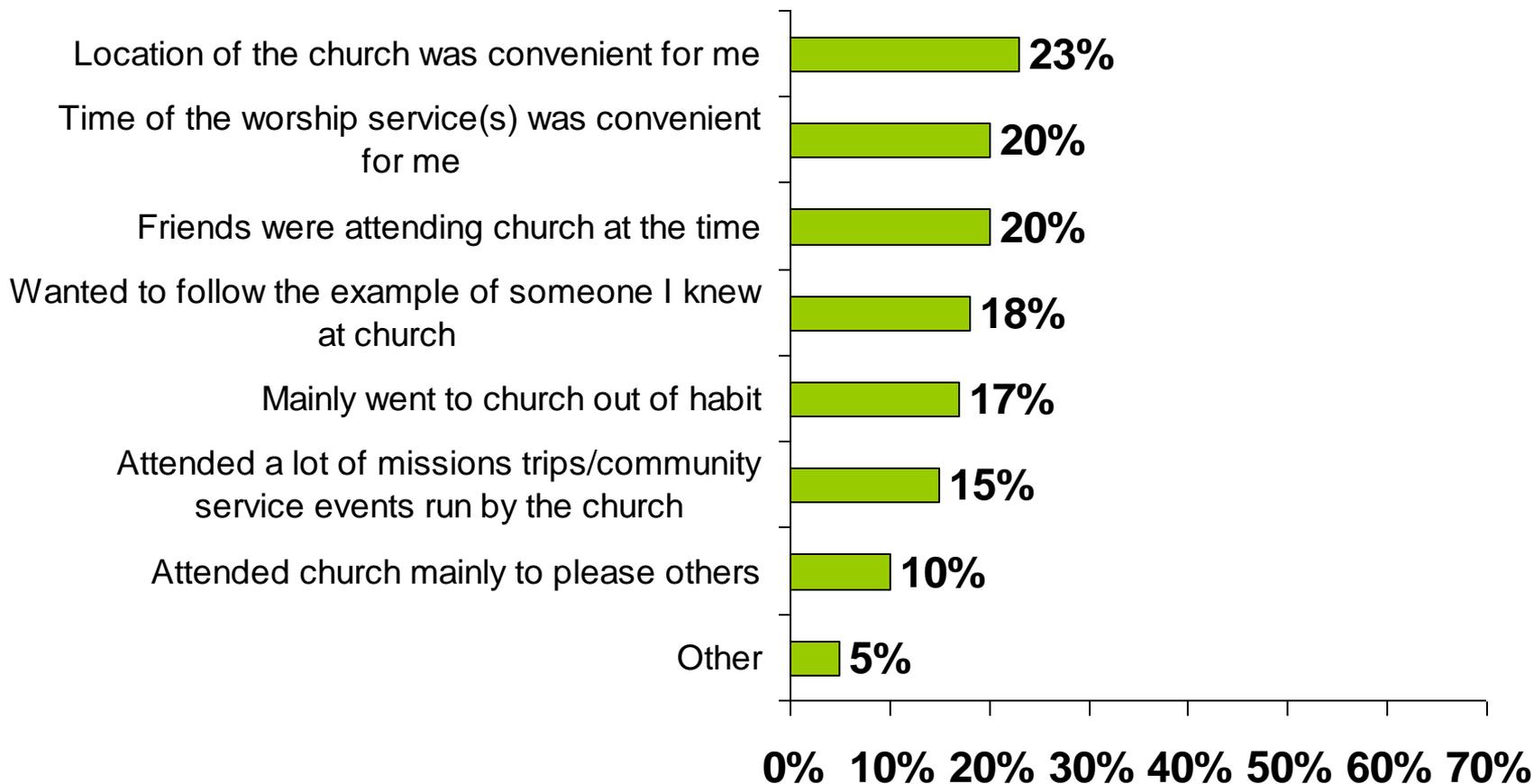
Reasons young adults who stayed in church indicate for continuing to attend regularly



Q3. Which of the following factors contributed to your continued regular attendance between the ages of 18 and 22?

Base: S3 = "No" (n=406)

More reasons young adults who stayed in church indicate for continuing to attend regularly



Q3. Which of the following factors contributed to your continued regular attendance between the ages of 18 and 22?

Base: S3 = "No" (n=406)